



# mahayana mind and the four vows

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I'm going to speak a little about the origins of Mahayana Buddhism -how it relates to our practice and Dogen's thinking. I'm going to focus on the ideas that are most relevant to us. There are many ideas in Mahayana that may not be such a central part of Zen, but some of them have informed Dogen and informed our practice over the years as well.

The first thing is that Mahayana was very much and still is an attitude of mind rather than a separate school of Buddhism. There came a time when monks and nuns in India looked back on the life of Buddha and drew inspiration from his actions in life - up to then they had been inspired primarily by his teachings. When they looked back on his life they saw that he had chosen even at his time of awakening to go out into the world and share his understanding with others - to help others connect with their understanding and to help others move beyond their suffering. They looked back at this act of compassion and drew inspiration from it - someone who had basically sorted themselves out chose to go out and help others rather than just sitting around having a pleasant life for the rest of their days. They saw that as a greater ideal than simply sorting oneself out, which is how up to then his teachings had mostly been interpreted.

It was attitude of mind and arose within many schools in India at that time rather than being a separate school. There had already been separations and schisms in the Indian Buddhist community - but this change occurred in a different way. One of the interesting things regarding how things happen in Buddhism when you look back is that Buddhists tend to argue more over the details of practice and life rather than philosophy. For example, in our Sangha there will be people with different views about Dogen's teaching - some more mystical, some more practical, but we can live with that. But if someone starts wearing a pink kesa, they will probably be expelled from the Sangha. It was the same back then. So people had different views but provided they agreed on the nature of practice they were accepted within the school (Vinaya). So Mahayana was not a separate school in India but something that was present in many schools. Individuals with Mahayana mind adopted the attitude that the goal of practice was not to save oneself but to save all beings. They practiced alongside their non-Mahayana kin.

That changed outside India. I suspect this is because most or all of the missionaries who left India and went to Tibet and China had taken on the Mahayana mind and spirit. The schools that grew out of their teaching had Mahayana as fundamental in them as opposed to an attitude within a school. So one of the first things I want to say about Mahayana comes from one of those missionaries, one who went to Tibet from India, Atisha. His teachings are very helpful for us to think about the nature of Mahayana. He spoke about three attitudes of practice, three minds of practice, three ways in which we engage in spirituality.

The first is the mind of Samsara, which means the worldly mind. We can engage in spiritual practice with a worldly mind and if we do this then it tangles us up in the world

even more. This reminded me of something Jean Baby said in a sesshin at Gaunts House many years ago, he said: 'Ambition is not a good thing and spiritual ambition is one of the worst forms of ambition to have'. Basically we can engage in spiritual practice in a way that is worldly; we can think about power. Zen is hardly a money spinner in this country, but some people could engage in religion with a view to getting money, with a view to getting status, to getting power or authority. That is a worldly way - the way of Samsara.

The next way is the way of Hinayana. Notice that he's not talking about a school here but about an attitude of mind. He says that this Hinayana mind is someone who practices primarily thinking about their own benefit and neglects others in the process. They think in terms of their own spiritual achievement, their own personal liberation and freedom, their own personal well-being

Finally, there is the Mahayana mind that is summed up very well in the fueko we chant (ne gawa kuwa etc.). It says that we wish to share the benefits of the practice that we take on with all beings so that all beings may become free. So those are the three attitudes.

It's easy to say we are the Mahayana school so we're sorted, we're the best. But what Atisha was saying was that everyone experiences all three of these attitudes in their practice, so we're not free of Hinayana mind, we're not free of Samsara mind. We must think of these as things that arise in us. We're complicated beings. Even if we say fundamentally we want to practise for the benefit of all beings, we must be aware of the

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arising of illusions in our mind which trap us in the world - illusions arising about our personal practice and also about the benefits we might get in our everyday life.

It's a call to awareness. Bringing about Mahayana mind, bringing about Boddhichitta, the mind of awakening, is not something that we just sign up to and it's sorted. It's something that

we need to be constantly aware of and revisit as illusions arise. All of us are subject to worldly thoughts about our practice and also selfish spiritual thoughts about our practice. We must observe and be aware of this.

As a result of this change in attitude of mind there came a change in a view about the purpose of practice. Up to then the idea of Nirvana was escaping from the wheel of rebirth, escaping the suffering of the world by no longer being reborn into it. Going beyond it by seeing the illusory nature of our lives and no longer being tangled up into the world.

But the Mahayana spirit said that if we look at the Buddhas, this is not what Buddha did. The Buddha, even though he was awakened chose to remain in the world. So in Mahayana they talk about a non-abiding Nirvana. Non-abiding Nirvana means you are neither caught up in the tangle of the world nor do you rest outside in some non-worldly place. We don't rest on ground or float off into the sky. For the Mahayana thinkers, those before them who wanted to go to Nirvana wanted to float off into the sky. And so they said come back to the world, be present in the world, but always be

taking support from the sky.

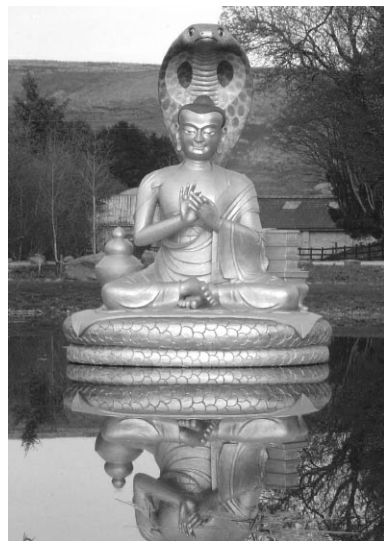
So it's a non-dual attitude. It's saying that the world is not separate from the place of awakening. The world and the place of awakening are one and the same. And though this came out of nuns and monks in India, it was a teaching that easily linked to those who engaged in a lay life, those who had a family and responsibilities in the world. That's why later Mahayana teachings often feature a lay person teaching the monks and nuns, making the monks and nuns aware of the fact that lay life still is a place of awakening. One of the most famous of those is Vimalakirti. In the sutra, Vimalakirti was a lay merchant who preaches to Buddha's earliest disciples who had achieved Nirvana but had not brought it back into the world. Vimalakirti said: bring it back into the world, find ways to bring Nirvana back into the world; hang out with prostitutes, help those around you. So he was basically saying don't flee the world.

That is the core idea of Mahayana: bringing awakening into the world and finding it always present there. What is the nature of this awakening? When we chant the list of Patriarchs, we chant many many names who have inspired teachings over the time and I want to take a couple of important ones and consider their perspective on this question.

The first is Nagarjuna, who was considered the greatest philosopher of Mahayana as Mahayana emerged. Nagarjuna said that the nature of suffering that we experience is because we believe that we are the centre of the universe. And he is following the Buddha in this. This belief that we are the centre of the universe is fundamentally rooted in our very being, and we suffer because of this. Of course, as soon as we think about it rationally, it is false. But, nonetheless, we are still tangled up in it. What Nagarjuna said is that if we look at the way the world is, we see that the way we interact with the whole world is completely constructed by the way our mind plays with the world, the way our mind creates concepts and categories. Nagarjuna said that these concepts and categories might be helpful for us in our everyday lives but they tangle us up in the world more. So we need to find a way to step outside these concepts and categories.

Nagarjuna used two techniques, both of which are relevant to Zen but one of which, if you like, was more fundamental to us. The first was that Nagarjuna was very much an analytical philosopher. He would think deeply about the concepts and categories that we have, and play with them and show that, in the end, they don't make sense. So he would be using thought processes to show that thinking was inadequate. That's not a core part of Zen but, nonetheless, when you read some of Dogen's writings you see he has been very much inspired by this. Dogen's writings have this same characteristic of playing with ideas and showing how the non-dual must go beyond the different ways of expressing ideas.

But more fundamental to us, Nagarjuna also said that we must find a non-conceptual abiding through our



Statue of Nagarjuna (Nagaharajuna Daisho) at Samye Ling Monastery in Tibet

practice. We mustn't hang on to, but must let go of, the concepts that arise in our mind. We must find a place that is beyond those concepts.

So that is what Nagarjuna brought. He said that the constructed, conceptual world that makes us believe that we are the centre of it is not the way reality really is and we must let go of those concepts that come up.

Later on the list of Patriarchs is Vasubandu. For Nagarjuna there was nothing that we could rely on, nothing we could take support from. But Vasubandu and others

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in the school he was part of said there is one thing we can rely on: untainted awareness, what we sometimes call in Zen, the Big Mind, the mind beyond thought, that we can be aware of through practice when the concepts fall away. This is the ground of reality. This is a fundamental level of untainted awareness within which thoughts arise, which we can always return to and find from moment to moment. And this untainted

awareness, according to Vasubandu is something we can find support from and bring that support into everyday life.

He probably went further than Dogen would have wanted because Vasubandu said fundamentally there is no reality beyond the flow of experiences. All of the world is illusion, there is no physical reality. Whereas for Dogen there is a value in the concreteness, in the concrete world. So Vasubandu maybe was too formal, maybe floated off into the sky a bit and didn't take support from the ground.

Moving on from that idea of untainted awareness is an idea that is very, very key to Dogen's thinking and in thinking throughout Asia. This is the idea of Tatathagarba: the Buddha nature, Buddha heart. The Buddha nature teaching said that, in fact, we always already are Buddha at a fundamental level. This untainted awareness, is already Buddha. This is our original face; the space within us which is beyond our mental constructions, beyond dualisms. So this place, this naked unadorned heart, is something within us which we can take support from. It always already is Buddha; it is the opposite of the concept of original sin. It is in some sense, the only real aspect of ourselves. All else is constructed on top of it, everything else is a fleeting construction which passes. Some last one second, some last a whole life, but nonetheless they are all fleeting, ephemeral things. This was deeply inspirational for Dogen.

From this perspective, non-abiding Nirvana is simply the expression of this Buddha nature: allowing this untainted awareness to express itself in the world naturally, unconsciously, automatically. Through practice we create conditions that allow this to express itself



Buddha footprint showing dharma wheel and three treasure symbols

in the world without effort. This idea of effortlessness, of allowing things to express themselves, instead of forcing things to be expressed, becomes increasingly important as the teachings travelled into China and drew inspiration from Taoism.

This is exactly what we do through practice by sitting, creating space, letting go of thoughts as they arrive. The untainted awareness can naturally, unconsciously, automatically express itself.

In our everyday lives, by being aware of thoughts as they arise, by being aware of the illusions they bring about, this untainted awareness can naturally and unconsciously express itself.

**“at the heart of each and every being is this untainted awareness, even if the other being is incredibly irritating”**

So we have looked at some of the ideas that grow out of Mahayana that played a key part for Dogen: The idea that our thinking process and how we construct reality hides another perspective on the way things are. Behind those thinking patterns is some untainted, pure, naked awareness in our mind, which we can take support on. And this untainted awareness is Buddha nature. Simply allowing it to express in the world is to manifest enlightenment in each and every moment, awakening in each and every moment, without trying to think of being enlightened. It's something which happens naturally, unconsciously and automatically.

Let's finish by saying a little about the four vows of the Bodhisattva that bring these ideas into focus.

The first vow: Innumerable beings, I vow to save them all: Seeing that at the heart of each and every being is this untainted awareness, even if the other being is incredibly irritating to us or we are indifferent towards them. Not only it is in each and every one of these beings, but it is fundamentally the same as what is in us. There is fundamentally no distinction, no barrier, no difference between the awareness in one of us and the awareness in others. It is the same awareness.

To see at a certain fundamental level there is nothing that separates us, gives us the compassion to express the awareness within us and also to give others the space and conditions to allow them to express the awareness within them. For some people, this may be through sharing the practice with them. But even in more mundane encounters - such as arguing with a salesperson about the return of a faulty product - can we act in a

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way that creates condition and space for openness as opposed to closedness, fixedness, rigidity and ego. Doing this is an expression of compassion, an expression of the untainted awareness within us.

The second vow: Inexhaustible desires within me, I vow to overcome them all. This is to see the desires arising within us as illusory in a certain

sense of the word; they are constructed by our conceptualisation of reality. In a certain way they are real, but they are not as important as we like to make them out to be. There is something behind them, this untainted awareness, which is untouched by those desires. We can be untangled from them. I personally don't believe that we can ever be free in the sense that they are never arising. I think there are some traditional Buddhists



that still think it is possible, but it is not really the Mahayana way, Dogen's way. These desires still arise, but because we are aware of their fleetingness, their constructedness and the space in which they arise, they have less power over us. We are no longer puppets pulled by our desires; that's the second vow: Inexhaustible desires, I vow to overcome them all.

The third vow: Countless Dharma gates, I vow to pass through them: This is to follow the inspiration of the Buddha in every instant of life and in each action that we take. Every moment of our lives, we cannot escape acting. Even if we are practising Zazen, Zazen is action in a certain sense. Every moment is a moment of action.

The question is : Can we take action linked with the untainted awareness within us? Can we allow each moment to be an expression of untainted awareness? Can we allow each moment of action to be less tangled up in our desires, our feelings, our thoughts, our personality? Can we allow each moment of action to be an expression of untainted awareness? If we can do that , then naturally, unconsciously, automatically we will be freer and those around us will be freer also. Doing this is both an act of wisdom and an act of compassion for ourselves and for others.

The final vow: The Supreme Buddha way, I vow to follow it : For us in the Zen tradition, this means a commitment to practice zazen regularly. The practice of zazen creates the conditions in which we can make contact with this fundamentally untainted awareness behind everyday thoughts, everyday desires. By creating the conditions to make contact with it then we allow it to express itself not only in our zen practice but also in our actions. So following the Buddha way is to practice zazen wholeheartedly, and to be guided by the awareness that arises from this practice.

So these are the four vows of the Bodhisattva: I vow to save all beings, I vow to overcome all desires, I vow to pass through every dharma gate of every moment, and I vow to follow the way of the Buddha.



Japanese garden and bonsai nursery in Cornwall