

Lanau Zen Centre, Zazen Day, 28 Feb 2021

- First zazen -

Following a question asked in Zoom-mondo by a member of the English sangha, I would like to come back to the meaning of the first of the four vows of the bodhisattva:

I vow to save all beings!

The bodhisattva's first vow seems to us to be idealistic and unrealistic. There are so many beings that we will never be able to know them all, or to share their existence. So it seems absurd to undertake such a vow and to think that we could save them. It's as if we want to swim across the ocean, without anyone to accompany us and without food. We are disarmed in the face of the immensity of this task, and even tempted to ignore it in order to take care only of ourselves; and finally to seek to enjoy the passing pleasures of life without bothering about others.

But something speaks to us in our hearts and tells us:

"This is not possible. Such a life would be meaningless! Surely there is something more than this incessant uncertainty, this continual frustration which chases after material - and even spiritual - possessions, and short-term satisfactions."

There is indeed a lasting happiness, a liberating knowledge of which we have the intuition, deep in our hearts. Yet this very questioning testifies to the blossoming of the mind of Awakening in our own Mind. The buddha-nature, our true face, is what gives expression to this desire for Awakening which is really felt and is expressed by the question:

"What can I do to help the world become better?"

This means that there is a real aspiration in us to find the truth that could solve the meaning of our existence. It also means that our own mind wants to recognise itself in its luminous Presence. Our own Mind seeks to free itself from illusions, to free itself from the trap of dreams and the tricks of language, even if we do not consciously formulate this desire. It aspires to put an end to the suffering caused by the idea of being separated from the original Source. The ocean wants to know its own immensity and to put an end to the false idea that it is only the movement of the waves on its own surface.

When the feeling arises that we're missing something, the mind of Awakening begins a search that is unlikely to succeed all the time we search erratically, with inappropriate means. The thinking mind, the discriminating mind, cannot understand the unlimited space in which it is no more than a fleeting wave. It is not, therefore, a matter of intelligence but rather one of wisdom.

Neither science nor words will ever be able to explain the impenetrable mystery of the universe; the emptiness with neither beginning nor end - constantly filled with phenomena, themselves ungraspable and empty. The Buddha opens our minds to the truth of suffering and the liberation of our fears and doubts.

"Like lightning tearing through the night, revealing with its brilliance what the darkness obscures, it happens just sometimes that, through the power of the Buddhas, a meritorious thought springs into the world for a few moments.

Good is fragile and evil so powerful that nothing can resist it. What virtue if not the mind of Awakening could overthrow it?

Those who want to put an end to the sufferings of existence and who want to put an end to the misfortunes of beings must never renounce the mind of Awakening."

Understand that it is not you who is practicing this morning. It is the mind of Awakening itself which, turning towards itself, engages in its own exploration to rediscover the landscape of its native land, its luminous nature. And when it finds it in the heart of *Shikantaza*, it fulfils the first of its wishes.

- 2nd zazen -

One day the mind of Awakening opens the door of the dojo. It sits its transitory body on a zafu, facing the wall and at last turns towards itself. What happens, in this solitude, facing the wall, is neither in the realm of intelligence, nor of interpretation. The discriminating mind can try to explain, but it will always remain on the surface because it cannot itself access the very space where it appears. Just as the wave cannot understand the immensity of the ocean, even though it's the same substance.

Seated and determined not to grasp anything, the mind of Awakening begins to strip itself naturally, unconsciously and automatically of its habits, of the addictive

mechanisms, the risky speculations and false attachments. The 'ignorant self' with which the mind of Awakening identifies is brought to light and little by little loses its significance.

It is indeed the 'me', this imaginary character to whom we have entrusted our lives because of our misguided conditioning. The 'me' begins to be seen as imaginary, fiction. And the more that is seen, the more the infinite space of the Mind is revealed, in which this 'me' appears without any lasting reality.

The revelation of what the practice of *Shikantaza* is does not dawn on everyone who sits facing the wall. We must firmly commit ourselves to the mind of Awakening by studying and practising the vows. We must allow ourselves to be led by the *paramitas*: vows and *paramitas* which are the very essence of the mind of Awakening in the world of beings and phenomena.

"In short," says Shantideva, "know that the mind of Awakening has two aspects. On the one hand, the desire for enlightenment and on the other hand, the commitment to Awakening."

Committing yourself means that the mind of Awakening sits before the wall and turns its gaze towards its own Source. It reveals itself to *Itself* in its original clarity. It becomes aware of its unlimited nature by seeing itself in the incessant impermanence of the aggregates (the bodily form, the sensations, the perceptions, the mental formations) and little by little - sometimes suddenly - it stops taking itself for a limited, separate 'me'.

When we understand the illusion that makes up our individual 'me', we realise what the emptiness of phenomena is - and the fact that at the heart of impermanence lies something

that is not affected by the continual play of the waves of phenomena.

That something is Nothing, and that Nothing is our timeless and omni-present nature, our true identity. The mind of Awakening awakens to itself and - like the Buddha under the bodhi tree - it then becomes clear to us that all beings are One. Where, then, could we find a separate being? How could there exist a wave that could separate itself from the ocean?

By committing ourselves firmly to the mind of Awakening, we achieve unity with all beings and fulfil the first of the bodhisattva's vows: to save all beings. Our discriminating mind cannot penetrate this truth.

All the vows of human scale to which we aspire are nothing other than fabrications of the mind, fleeting mirages. The only truth is this wish to awaken with all beings.

The Bodhisattva's first vow is the most realistic of vows because it is the true expression of Reality, the fruit of the tree of the mind of Awakening.

- 3rd zazen - Silence and mondo

- 4th zazen -

When we think that this first vow of the bodhisattva cannot be realised, it's because we haven't yet recognized our bodhisattva nature.

A bodhisattva who has realised their true nature can declare:

*"And now, as long as space lasts, as long as there are beings,
May I too remain in the world to dispel suffering.*

Our true nature is not this perishable bodily form, these fleeting sensations and perceptions. Nor is it the continual flow of our thoughts, our illusions, our expectations. All this is impermanent, and we must accept that one day all of this will disappear. All our thoughts, our desires and expectations are like waves on the surface of the Mind. And our Mind is like space and the ocean - without limit, without dependence on time or duration. This is heartening!

It is, therefore, the understanding and then the realisation of what our own Mind *is* that is Awakening. This is what guides us towards our original humanity and what gives full meaning to the bodhisattva's commitment.

The commitment that the bodhisattva makes, whether before the Sangha, in a large assembly, or in the solitude of their own heart, requires a courage that arises out of liberation from the weight of the ego, of the fictitious 'me'.

The dropping of the ego and all sense of personal significance means that those who seek awakening no longer differentiate between themselves and all other beings. They breathe the perfume of the Oneness of beings, and the suffering of beings is their own suffering. *Vimalakirti*, the layman whose realisation exceeds even that of the Buddha's direct disciples, is the true example of the realisation of bodhisattva nature. He is sick because *beings* are sick.

Of course, wanting to save all beings is an inconceivable wish for an individual who feels separate, because their number is far greater

than our conditioned mind can even imagine. And what we can do as a human being living a limited life? But by sincerely developing such an aspiration, the complicated mind questions itself and in front of the wall, is pushed to the limit of its capabilities towards something immense, infinite. Faced with the perception of an inconceivable and indescribable immensity, the mind is brought to capitulate and to abandon the very idea of a result. Then, no longer hidden by illusions, the light of our mind illuminates itself and shines naturally.

This insight arises in the heart of zazen. This is the work and the realisation of the mind of Awakening when it looks inwards upon itself.

We understand, then, that to realise the first wish is simply to open our heart to nature, to all those we meet, and to smile at them, to accept unconditionally what is and to manifest the benevolence which is inherent to us. Love guides our intentions and our actions. This is the primary intention of the mind of Awakening and this is how we meet ourselves in our luminous and benevolent nature.

True happiness, then, consists in rediscovering our bodhisattva nature, our true identity, our native land. When bodhisattvas gain access to this inextinguishable happiness, they have only one desire: that of sharing it with all beings. This is what the Buddhas and the Masters have accomplished and what they strive to teach. Let us listen to them; let us follow them without fear.

The necessary condition is to start doing the work oneself as the Buddha himself recommends, relying on the vows and the *paramitas*:

"Your work consists in discovering what your work is and then putting your whole heart into it."

Otherwise life passes like smoke, "without its being understood," says Shantideva, "that the appearance of this jewel of the Mind, as precious as it is extraordinary, is an inconceivable wonder."

It is the bodhisattva's practice that reveals what our humanity is and gives full meaning to existence. If we do not return to our true abode and if we do not understand this vow to save all beings, this is not true realisation because it remains individual. It can only find its true dimension in a love for all beings.
