

Saturday 20 February 2021

Mondo with the English sangha

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Question: Sometimes I feel uneasy chanting the four vows, especially the first line:

Beings are numberless. I vow to save them.

Isn't this a totally unrealistic goal? Isn't the first truth life is suffering? And it seems like there is a lot of that at the moment in the pandemic. I would say that it's an empty vow and something that we won't ever achieve. I wonder what you think is a 'better' attitude towards this vow.

Answer: The Bodhisattva's first vow is not unrealistic; it's the most realistic vow.

It means that we find within ourselves the greatness and light of our own spirit, our true nature, our true essence. It is that of the Mind itself, which knows no limits, like space or like the ocean. And this is what we all want, whether we are aware of it or not.

So, when we say that this wish is unfeasible, it is because we have not yet recognised our bodhisattva nature.

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

The bodhisattva who has realised his 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 dissipate suffering."

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

The commitment that the bodhisattva pronounces, whether in front of the Sangha, in front of a large assembly, or in the solitude of his own heart, requires a courage that is born of the liberation from the weight of the ego.

The abandonment of the ego and of any feeling of personal importance means that this aspirant to enlightenment no longer sees any difference between himself and all other beings. He breathes the perfume of the Oneness of beings and the suffering of beings is his own suffering. Vimalakirti, the layman whose realisation exceeds even that of the direct disciples of Buddha is sick because the beings are sick.

We must first restore confidence in ourselves, that is to say, understand that our original nature is not perishable. The Buddha says: "Confidence is the best thing that humans can possess."

For if we do not even wish true happiness for ourselves, how can we conceive of it for others?

Thanks to this confidence in his own heart of Awakening, the bodhisattva knows that he can fulfil the first of his wishes - to save or liberate all beings - because nothing is impossible to the one who has given up any idea of succeeding or achieving a result and who knows the unity of all things (i.e. who really understands: *Ku soku ze shiki*). Time is not an obstacle either because the bodhisattva has accomplished and realised all the virtues (the *paramitas*) including patience.

Of course, wanting to save all beings is an inconceivable vow 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 is pushed to the limit of its capacities, to something immense, infinite.

Faced with the perception of an inconceivable and indescribable immensity, the mind is led to capitulate and abandon the idea of a result. This perception arises in the heart of zazen.

We then understand that simply opening our heart to all those we meet, and smiling at them, is also the primordial intention because this is how we meet ourselves in our luminous nature.

True happiness consists in finding our own nature, our true identity, our homeland. When the bodhisattva reaches this inextinguishable happiness, he has only one desire, that of sharing it with all beings. This is what the Buddhas and the Masters have actualised and what they strive to teach; let us listen to them.

The necessary condition is to start doing the work yourself as the Buddha himself recommends:

"Your work consists in discovering what your work is, and then putting yourself into it with all your heart."

Otherwise life passes like smoke.

"Without its being understood," says Shantideva, "that the appearance of this precious and extraordinary jewel of the Mind is an inconceivable wonder."

This is the practice of the bodhisattva. If one does not return to one's true home and if one does not understand this vow to save all beings, it is not the true realization because it has not found its true dimension.

Question: If you find yourself at a place in your life where you can't bear to be present in the present moment because the pain of being in the present moment is so great that it constantly threatens to overwhelm and break you and you find the only way you can keep going and live through another day is through constant distraction from the present

moment, can it be that during these times that zazen is actually harmful rather than helpful?

Answer: The fear of the present moment does not come from the present moment itself but from our difficulty in living the circumstances and situations of our life, those that come to us.

The present moment is elusive, that's why we talk about Presence. This means that we cannot do anything else than live this present, whatever its content. The present moment is our home and we must devote all our attention to it no matter what it contains, even the worst.

Fear is a product of the mind. It is born out of ignorance of our true identity. It is what prevents us from experiencing the joy and peace that are our rightful possession.

The mind goes round and round in circles and is incapable of extracting itself from what it is constantly constructing, negative feelings, unattainable dreams, insatiable desires. It is an incessant movement of waves and storms. This is what we call Samsara, this continual suffering that clings to the convolutions of the mind. This is what is happening today, with the fear of this invisible virus that seems to strike beings everywhere.

To put an end to this addiction to the attraction of thoughts, to the need for purity or to the negation of ourselves, we must trust in something that allows us to get out of it, even momentarily. And when we have opened the door, all we have to do is go home!

In Zen Buddhism, the key to this door is zazen. But we have to accept everything that comes into our mind, without moving, without sorting, without grasping anything, without rejecting anything. These are only phantasmagorical creations of the mind, our discriminating mind. It is up to us to clarify the world of our experiences, whether they are pleasant, unpleasant or neutral.

The work consists in seeing the unreality of what the mind constructs. Exercise your perceptive mind. Who sees the confusion of

thoughts? Who becomes aware of distractions and thought sequences?

"*Studying oneself*" is the recommendation of all masters: what is the nature of my suffering, and what is the path to end it, which also means "*Study the teachings of the Noble Truths and take refuge in the Three Treasures.*"

During zazen, if our mind is caught in a storm of waves, we must see this movement as natural, it is the unconditional acceptance of the present moment.

And then turn our minds to That which looks and is aware of the storm. The mind that looks, perceives, contemplates is our nature looking at itself in the endless play of the waves or storms that are stirring on the surface of the ocean.

We are the ocean in its immensity, not the movement of the waves on the surface.

If we understand this, fear fades away and there is no more dualism of good and evil: Everything is the ocean, even the waves. And this leads us to peace.

Question: I have always found the role of bodhisattvas beautiful, in that they are resolved to return to this earthly coil of Samsara in order to liberate all living beings. When you consider this role it would seem that a Buddha must be a bodhisattva, but in the literature, bodhisattva's such as Kanzeon, Mujinni, Jiji Bosatsu don't seem to have the same status. They don't appear in the ancestral line, but they are considered to be liberated / enlightened beings, the same as the Buddha.

It seems to me that the ancestral line might be made up of the same four or five bodhisattvas, "*Going, going, going on, always becoming Buddha, hail, hail, hail.*" Aren't we all 'old monks'?

Answer: The nature of all beings is that of the bodhisattva, the being of awakening.

One of the names given to the historical Buddha himself in his past lives was "the Bodhisattva".

In fact, we are all Bodhisattvas, but it is according to our spiritual maturity that we act according to the nature and vows of the Bodhisattva.

History has created many kinds of bodhisattvas to help beings remember what our own qualities are. They are transcendental bodhisattvas who have already realised the ideal of the bodhisattva and practised the paramitas, the virtues of perfection.

There is the Bodhisattva of Great Wisdom, the Bodhisattva of compassion, the Bodhisattva of kindness, the Bodhisattva who cares for children, the Bodhisattva who brings the need for liberation into the hearts of beings

All qualities are represented by bodhisattvas and concern an aspect of the life of beings. Their unlimited number allows each being to make his choice of the bodhisattva whom he asks for help, or finds a source of comfort.

It is not necessary to connect all these bodhisattvas by an ancestral line. They all symbolise the energy that leads us to the '*unsurpassable, supreme awakening*' that Shakyamuni achieved, which is why he is called the Buddha. He is said to have achieved total deliverance and is no longer subject to rebirth.

The Buddhas of the past whom we quote in our dedication of the Zen ceremony trace this aspiration to the awakening at the origin of humanity, to signify that the destiny of beings is this unsurpassable Awakening and that no being will be forgotten on the edge of the path.

We ourselves do not know very well where our own aspiration to Awakening comes from. Is it the fruit of our past lives, or is it pure chance? It doesn't matter! With the multitude of bodhisattvas who have already done the work and realised the truth. We are not alone.

Question: If you are sitting zazen and you are

too distracted with thoughts of excitement or anxiety to concentrate on your posture or your breath, or much else, what should you do? What attitude should you take towards the mind that says, "*I should be doing better, I should be doing better*"?

Answer: Distractions and agitated thoughts, during zazen, there is nothing to do with them. They are what they are, mental fog.

Simply observe their playfulness, their illusory and fleeting character. Like the play of the waves on the surface of consciousness. The consciousness observes this movement and is not affected by it in its fullness.

And as soon as you become aware of it, you move away from it. You understand that the play of the waves is not the ocean.

Furthermore, you must not think that all this is wrong, bad, or disturbing. That's the way it is. You have to accept that this is so because you don't have the power to change what comes spontaneously to you. Just don't get attached to yourself. Wanting to change the movement of the waves is a manipulation of the ego that aspires to a purity and an imaginary tranquillity. It is just another illusion.

Judging that this distracting or restless thought play should not be, is like denying yourself. To judge as bad what is going on in us is to deny a part of ourselves. Darkness exists in light and light exists in darkness, don't see only one side.

What attitude should we adopt? Acceptance!

It is not your pure Mind that says, "*I should do better*", for [your pure Mind] hasn't any special desire. It is the mind, the illusory 'me', that claims that purity is your goal.

It is like a wave that wants to separate itself from the ocean.

You are the ocean and not some frustrations or some fleeting and elusive desires.

Ask yourself the question: "*Who notices this, this distracting and restless game of thoughts?*"

Return constantly to That which, in you, sees, listens, perceives, contemplates the appearance and disappearance of things.

Question: How do we open to love with someone when we already know that everything, including love, including the person, is impermanent?

Answer: How do we open to love?

First find and understand that your own nature is Love. Love is not outside of you. It is not subject to impermanence. Realizing this causes opening.

Human love is perhaps impermanent and sometimes complicated and is only a reflection of the Love which is our true nature without beginning or end.

You will see Love emerge in yourself if you take care of others with benevolence, of those who are not able to do so, who have been less fortunate than you, who have little either as money or as intelligence and who wander in ignorance of a path of Awakening.

You will see Love emerge in your meditation without object and without goal because it is the very definition of what Love is: a total unconditionality for all that *is*, forms or phenomena. Love sees everything as its own substance, the moment you understand that you yourself and the universe are a single reality.

In the *Prajnaparamita*, the Buddha teaches:

"Awaken your will, supreme and magnificent. Practice love. Give joy and protection;

Let your gift be like space, without discrimination, without limit.

Act well, not for yourselves but for all beings in the universe;

Protect and set free everyone you meet, Help them to attain the wisdom of the Way."
