

Midwest Sangha Weekend: Talks on the Four Vows

Dharma talks given in Kansas, at the Kwan Um Midwest Sangha Weekend, April 12–14, 2019

Sangha in unison: Sentient beings are numberless; we vow to save them all. Delusions are endless; we vow to cut through them all. The teachings are infinite; we vow to learn them all. The Buddha Way is inconceivable; we vow to attain it.

Zen Master Jok Um (Ken Kessel): Thank you for four mistakes. When it works from the outside in, it provides a useful architecture, but it's not yours. It's something that holds you up. When it springs from the inside out, it doesn't matter how you say it, it's how we live it.

I'm supposed to talk about the first vow, but I can't explain it because it's not something you understand. And I can't give instructions because I don't think it's something we do. Maybe it has something to do with how we live in the space that we are currently in. So that doesn't belong to me, other than for me. And it belongs to you, for you. To the degree that we completely own that, then the vows are complete. And to the degree that we're borrowing that, if we borrow it wisely, it's good external architecture to give some space for it to spring from the inside.

The translation we use—"Sentient beings are numberless; we vow to save them all"—sounds like we're doing something for somebody or doing something to somebody or doing something at somebody or even doing something. And of course, we're always doing something, but maybe we're doing too much.

We translate *jung saeng* as "sentient beings," but apparently it just means "many beings." *Mu byon* means "endless," and *so won do* is about helping you cross to the other side. Baker Roshi at San Francisco Zen Center mentioned a translation

that said, "Being is without end; I vow to be with it."

The vows sound beautiful. And they are in some way, but what's more beautiful is when it springs from you.

Here are a couple of things about how I approach it, because I think that's all I'm qualified to say. One aspect is that I'm starting to learn how to receive others as my teacher. And so that makes me a student. And if I'm a student, then in that mindset there's some quality of generosity and gratitude and receptiveness and kindness and engagement and listening and receiving and giving, because that lives in the mind of a student. That would make everybody else my teacher. If you're my teacher, then you save me, and if you're the person who saves me then you're a bodhisattva. So if I live in a way that allows other people to be bodhisattvas for me then I've already saved all beings. Does it really work like that?

Somebody once asked me, "Sentient beings are numberless: what does that mean?" I asked "Why do you make sentient beings suffer?" If we don't make sentient beings suffer, then we're saving them from us. And that's kind of all I have the power to do. If I do it at all, that's because I have a little bit more authority over that than over you.

Hui-Neng once said that this vow doesn't mean that "I, Hui-Neng, save you, sentient beings." It means "The sentient beings in my mind of their own accord return to their fundamental nature." If you splash water and it goes up, then it goes down by itself. It never wasn't water, and it does return to its waterness.

Whatever we create in our mind has life; we just gave it life. There are countless sentient beings in my immediate world that I'm creating and participating with, and now they have life. If I allow those to express and return to fundamental nature, then they're already saved.

So I practice relating in that way, letting my mind already be on the other shore. And maybe that's a gift. And maybe that's all I have the power to give. Because then if Stan teaches me Stan, and Judy teaches me Judy, and Thom teaches me Thom, I have some capacity to relate to them as they are, because they're helping me learn what that is.

All we have is how we live and occupy this moment. If we

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embrace that with the full depth of its meaning, then that vow takes care of itself.

Zen Master Hae Kwang (Stan Lombardo): Zen Master Jok Um just brought up Hui-Neng’s “own nature” teaching—the sentient beings that are my own nature, we vow to save. We actually have that phrase in one of our chants, the Thousand Eyes and Hands Sutra. Toward the end of sutra there are the four great vows: *Jung-saeng mu-byon so-won-do. Bon-ne mu-jin so-won-dan. Bom-mun mu-ryang so-won-hak. Bul-to mu-sang so-won-song.* Then the vows are repeated with the addition of *ja song*: *Ja-song jung-saeng so-won-do. Ja-song bon-ne so-won-dan. Ja-song bom-mun so-won-hak. Ja-song bul-to so-won-song.* The phrase *ja song* means “own nature.” So Hui-Neng’s teaching became incorporated into our practice: everything in the four great vows—sentient beings, delusions, teachings, Buddha nature itself—all this is our own nature; it is our own nature that we’re dealing with in the vows.

The second vow as we recite it now is not how we always recited it in our school. We now recite the second vow as “Delusions are endless; we vow to cut through them all.” Up until 1992, in the Kwan Um School of Zen, it went differently. Until then the first word of the second vow—*bon-nae*—wasn’t translated as “delusions” but rather “passions.” So the vow began, “Passions are endless.” And then it continued: “We vow to extinguish them all.” Now we say, “Delusions are endless; we vow to cut through them all.” I don’t know where that original translation came from, but in 1992 we reexamined it. Actually, I brought up the issue that “passions” is not the best translation of *kleshas*, the Sanskrit word that the Chinese translated as *bon-nae*, the first word in the second vow.

Klesha is a Sanskrit word that is often translated as “afflictions,” in the sense of emotional and mental obstacles to our practice and our lives, to functioning clearly, to realizing our own nature, to helping all beings. The early Chinese Buddhists’ translation of *kleshas* as *bon-nae* is formed of two characters meaning “fire” and “head,” so “passions” is not a bad translation of *bon-nae*, but it highlights the emotional side of the *kleshas* and leaves out the mental side.

So I pointed this out at a teachers’ meeting in 1992, and Zen Master Barbara Rhodes said she too had a problem with the word “passions” in our translation. I remember her saying something like, “Yeah, extinguishing passions, that’s not so good because people might think that we’re vowing not to be passionate about our practice. And we are passionate about our practice, we care a lot about it.” Language is a tricky thing.

We considered many possible alternate translations of *bon-nae* and finally settled on “delusions.” “Ignorance” was a close second. In early Buddhist teaching ignorance is one of the three poisons—desire, anger and ignorance—that are the source of suffering. The Sanskrit

original for ignorance is *avidya*, literally “not seeing,” and is in Buddhism (and classical Yoga) the number one *klesha*. But we didn’t want to use “ignorance” in the second vow because we thought it might sound like, “Well, you’re just stupid.” Not that you’re not seeing clearly but that you’re just uneducated, stupid and ignorant. So we went with “delusions” to replace “passions.”

And so delusions are endless, and we vow to cut through them all. We changed “extinguish” to “cut.” You extinguish passions, but you cut through delusions. And that’s just what the Chinese word *dan* means: “cut, cut off, cut through.” A deluded mind is like a house of horrors, full of cobwebs and imaginary, spooky things entangling you every which way. You’d never get out of this mess that is your mind but for your sword of wisdom, your prajna sword, and with that you can cut through all the delusions and find your way out into the world of freedom and light.

You could go on retranslating this vow, and all the other vows, forever. It doesn’t matter really quite what the language is, as long as you understand the direction. There are many lists of *kleshas* in the sutras. I did a count once and I came up with thirty seven, many admittedly synonyms. Some were emotional, and some were cognitive, or mental. I made my own personal list once and came up with nine emotional and mental afflictions I am particularly subject to. You might want to make your own list.

The *kleshas* arise and cause us problems not only when we’re trying to meditate—they are always arising in our lives, and they cause our minds to become clouded. *Avidya*, this not-seeing-clearly our own nature, produces all of our anxiety, negative emotions, distractions, delusions and whatnot. And all of this anxiety and whatnot clouds our minds even further and deepens our *avidya*, blinding us further to this world and all the beings in it. So it’s a feedback loop, a vicious cycle. And that’s what we really have to cut through.

Zen Master Ji Haeng (Thom Pastor): I feel in a way blessed that I got this particular of the four vows, the third one. “The teachings are infinite; I vow to learn them all.” Already it’s set up with a hook in it about learning something, like “Well, which book should I buy?” And it’s quite taking us in the opposite direction from where we want to go with it.

Zen Master Bon Hae sent me an email that said, “Even compassion is not anything to aim for, if it’s a feeling. If it’s an action, maybe you feel the feeling of compassion, maybe you don’t. It doesn’t matter. What are you doing in this world? What is the direction of your life? What is the purpose of your life? Is it only for you? If it is, then you have a problem.”

Moment by moment, things appear for us that are the teachings. We don’t have to go searching for anything. It all is presented uniquely for us in each moment. Zen Master Seung Sahn used to say, “What is your

correct function and relationship to each situation as it appears?” This is a flow. It’s not something that’s chiseled in any kind of granite setting of teachings that we need to encompass. If you sit, you have to give your mind a job. It’s not enough to just sit in the correct form and then let your mind meander around like in this big mental movie. As things appear, that’s cutting through the delusions of all this. Encased in that are the infinite teachings that are available to us.

Lao-Tzu said “If you are depressed you are living in the past. If you are anxious you are living in the future. If you are at peace, you are living in the present.” And allow me one more quote, from a friend of mine, a qigong teacher, Lam Kam Chuen:

Your body is a field of energy. If you were to place it under a huge magnifying glass, you would see it in its entirety and stunning clarity. If you increase the magnification to the power of an ordinary microscope, nothing would seem solid. You would start to see the minute particles of which solid matter seems to be composed. Aha! If you are able to place your body under the world’s most powerful electron microscope, it would have seemed to have dissolved. You would only glimpse the traces left by subatomic impulses. Seen as a whole, your body would resemble a matrix of fluctuating signals forming a standing wave pattern in space. From this perception, a web of interpenetrating energies is our existence.

It sounds pretty awesome, to put things in those kind of terms, but really, what we consider a construct of an “I, my, me”—this body sitting here tonight, your ears listening, my mouth moving right now—is phenomena. And all phenomena are changing, changing, changing infinitely. There’s nowhere to grasp. Nothing to hold on to. The wisdom of this practice is to let go and take this single step off the hundred-foot flagpole, as they say. This free fall into the next moment, trusting that the energy, the precision and intelligence that is each moment—not that we give to each moment, not that we present through our intellect, but the precision and intelligence that is this moment—will always afford us whatever it is that we need to have to address that moment outside of a separate I, my, me; a separate ego entity, a separate clinging, and a separate consciousness.

Compassion is not something that we can aspire to. That sounds contrary, doesn’t it? Compassion actually is our original nature. Compassion is what appears when we let go of all these constructs of I, my, me. Then all the teachings, the infinite teachings, become apparent. We’re there, this moment [*claps his hands*] just that sound, is the dharma. Thank you.

Zen Master Bon Hae (Judy Roitman): One thing no one has mentioned is the grammatical structure. All the vows begin with some kind of noun phrase: (1) many be-

ings, (2) *kleshas*, (3) teachings, and (4) Buddha Way. And then *mu* something. *Mu* means “no.” In the fourth vow, it’s *mu sang*, which means “no above” or “nothing higher.” And then all the vows have *so won* which means “vow vow.” The repetition is emphatic—we’re really vowing this! Actually, we’re not sure who’s vowing it, because there’s no pronoun. In English, you need a pronoun. But in Chinese, apparently you don’t. In most Buddhist groups, they say “I vow.” But we say “we vow.” This is very interesting. “We” is this Mahayana vision where you are not alone. I am not separate. You are not separate. Everything we do is together with all beings. This giant “we” permeates our chants.

And the last word in this fourth vow is *do*—“tao,” or way.

The word-for-word translation of the fourth vow is “Buddha way nothing higher vow vow way.”

So *mu sang* means “nothing higher.” Generally “nothing higher” is translated as “unsurpassable.” “Way” is a little strange—in English it’s a noun, not a verb. But here it’s a verb, usually translated as we do, “attain.”

But we don’t say unsurpassable or none higher or nothing higher. We say “inconceivable,” and that is a total mistranslation. It’s not there in the Chinese. But it’s a wonderful mistranslation because, just as Thom was talking about and just as Ken was talking about, if you have an idea, then you can’t touch reality. If you have an idea, that’s cutting you off from reality. So the Buddha Way is inconceivable. That means we can’t conceive it. That means thinking about it won’t help. And that’s why we can attain it! If we could think about it, we couldn’t attain it. We’d be thinking about it. We’d have an idea about it. And we’d be relating to that idea, or our idea of that idea would be relating to that idea. And there we’d be, with all these ideas. So we couldn’t attain it. Instead, just [*hits the floor*].

You can only attain things when you’re not thinking about them. “The Buddha way is inconceivable; we vow to attain it.” That’s why we can attain it.

It’s not like an asymptote, like in mathematics. It’s not like there’s nothing higher and you’re going to approach it and approach it and approach it. It’s not even like there’s nothing higher, and you’re going to somehow hit it. Thinking is not going to help you; that’s why you can attain it. I just love that.

That’s the serendipitous mistranslation in the fourth of the four great vows.

I want to end with something about the first vow. When I first started practicing a millennium or so ago, all the dharma talks would end in “and save all beings from suffering.” And I said to Dyan Eagles, who’s a very tiny woman, “I don’t get it. How can you save all beings? You know you can’t.” And she just stood on her tip toe and patted me on the head and said, “You’ll get it.” I hope we all do. ♦