

BOUNDLESS WAY ZEN

Dharma talks, sermons
and teishos

REFLECTIONS ON SAVING ALL BEINGS by Josh Bartok

The four bodhisattva vows, the great vows for all, have always been a deeply important aspect of my practice. At Roshi's request, I have reflected on these in detail and endeavored to commit some of my reflections to paper. This essay addresses only the first vow.

"Beings are numberless, I vow to free them"

This one vow is some ways the very essence of the awakened path of the Zen school.

At some point in our practice, perhaps after we have achieved some degree of insight or alleviated the most acutely painful aspects of our own suffering, we have to reconsider why it is that we continue to practice. We may imagine, "I'm happy, and that's good enough." But that's not quite true. Our own suffering is intimately and interdependently bound up with the suffering of others and the well-being of the world. And, as we become more deeply aware of our own suffering and the ways in which we bring it upon ourselves, we see that that is true of suffering in others as well. Also, as a direct result of our own insight, we feel the suffering of others more deeply, more personally. And so we vow to free all beings from suffering.

Yet where are these beings? Are they completely separate from myself? Totally identical? In one translation of writings of the sixth great Chinese ancestor of Zen, Huineng, this vow is presented as follows: "Sentient beings *in my own mind* are numberless, I vow to free them." Is that the entire story? Or just one side? The Pacific Zen Institute's phrasing--"All beings one body"--also points to this question.

Everyone I have met who has ever sat a sesshin, and I'd venture to guess that this phenomenon is universal among Zen practitioners, has at some point experienced the arising of the thought, "Why on God's earth am I doing this to myself? I'd so much rather be [fishing/sailing/reading a book/painting/sleeping/working for the Green party/doing any damn thing but this!]." So why do we continue?

Sometimes our selfish motivation is simply not enough, even for ourselves. During one sesshin with another of my teachers, Chozen Bays, her encouraging words during zazen were these: "If you're having trouble being motivated to sit this period, sit for the other people in the zendo. Practice for the sake of the people sitting next to you." We are all connected. Our practice affects each other deeply. This is what we acknowledge as we gassho to each other before taking our place on the zafu. This is why we encourage stillness in the zendo-to support each other, to help each other sit more deeply, to free each other. We can see this connection in the way that a wave of movement, or shifting, or swallowing, can sweep through the otherwise still zendo. This connection, this oneness, is the 'esoteric' significance of the palm-to-palm gesture we use so often in Zen to express acknowledgment and gratitude-the many that are

yet one; you and I are not different.

Living the practice of freeing *all* beings can also be a valuable lesson in nonjudging, in not picking and choosing. (The famous poem *Affirming Faith in Mind* begins: "The great way is not difficult; it only avoids picking and choosing.") How often do we consciously or unconsciously play mental games by thinking, "Well, of course I value compassion and want to free the many beings... but *that guy* is just a jerk." And when we see people suffer at the hands of other people, we identify easily and immediately with the victim; our good heart goes out to them, and wishes to alleviate their pain. What about the people causing others to suffer, the aggressors? Are we mentally exempting them from "all beings" when we make our vows? And sometimes the obverse is true: we may imagine all beings-except ourselves-are worthy of compassion.

Truly, the vow is to free *all beings throughout space and time*. How do we save the beings who will inhabit our shared planet seven times seven generations into the future? How do we free the child who is being violently abused by her father right now and how do we free her father? How do we save the beings who perished in the Shoah?

The renowned American educator Henry Adams wrote, "A teacher affects eternity. He can never tell where his influence stops." This is true for all of us, in all of our endeavors and actions. We can never tell where our influence stops-or starts, for that matter. This points to what is perhaps the most foundational teaching of Buddhism: the law of karma. For me, this law comes down to a simple formulation: What you do matters. And the degree to which it matters is truly and mysteriously unknowable-literally unimaginable.

On the eve of one Rohatsu, the sesshin commemorating the Buddha's enlightenment, one teacher pointed to an aspect of this truth with startling directness: 2,500 years ago, he said, the man we call Buddha had an experience so profound that all of us are feeling its effects even now.

But we don't have to live Shakyamuni's life in order to save all beings; mindfully and compassionately living our own life is sufficient—more than sufficient, it is overflowing with potential. The Buddha left us detailed instructions about how to transform all our actions into universally liberating karma, and these have come down to us as the precepts. Engaging the precepts, honestly and wholeheartedly, we save all beings.

Only very recently during a sesshin did I even begin to grasp the depth of the precepts' teaching and the magnitude of their practice.

I was overcome with an image of the universe as the surface of a vast, bottomless and borderless ocean, and myself—this body, this mind—as a rock falling into it. For the briefest moment this rock meets the ocean's surface, for the briefest moment I exist. And in the very next moment, the rock is lost in the bottomless sea of non-being. But on the ocean's surface, emanating *precisely* from the place the stone entered the sea, are wavelike circles, ever widening, ever diminishing, and ultimately—perhaps in the Kalpa fire, perhaps before—vanishing.

I realized that in receiving the precepts from my first teacher, I made direct and intimate contact with the karma of Shakyamuni himself—as well as my teacher's teachers and Vipashyin Buddha, the Buddha who existed in the universe that preceded

our own. And in practicing the precepts, I create waves that are experienced by Maitreya, the Buddha not yet born.

Building upon the foundation that what one does matters, Zen adds an additional twist that is this teaching: Cause does not precede effect, nor does effect follow cause. Zen's most subtle teachings can often sound like slick nonsense--but they are nonetheless direct pointings at crucial points of Dharma. Cause does not precede effect, nor does effect follow cause--it's essential we realize the truth of this for ourselves. And beyond realizing that truth, we must actualize it.

Zen repeatedly emphasizes that just attaining deep samadhi, or even significant insight into the cause, arising, and cessation of suffering, is not enough unless that wisdom is given life through our life. A koan in the *Mumonkan* asks, "How do you take a step off the hundred foot flagpole?" We must leave the heights of our own small comfort, and function in the world. Maezumi Roshi says its not enough to realize our own inherent purity and just revel in that awareness--sometimes, in order to be of use to others, we need to get knee-deep in the mud that suffering beings are mired in. That's the only way we can serve them.

But what does that mean? What does it mean to free all beings? Is "freeing" identical with "saving"? How do we do it? Perhaps that's what Layman Pang's daughter was doing when, seeing her father trip and fall, she threw herself down as well; when asked what she was doing, she replied serenely, "I'm helping." But there are countless ways we can help--we mustn't be confined to simply sharing a situation, no matter how intimate that sharing is.

I remember seeing a certain Dharma Combat with

my first Dharma teacher, Daido Looi. The event took place during the war in the Balkans. The exchange went something like this:

A student asked the teacher, "I've just finished this sesshin. Every night I've vowed to save all sentient beings--yet many people are suffering-dying!--in Bosnia. I feel selfish."

The teacher said, "Many people are dying in Bosnia. What are you going to do about it?"

The student replied with a blood-curdling scream of suffering, of death.

The teacher asked, "Did that help?"

The student replied, "No."

The teacher repeated, "Many people are dying in Bosnia. What are you going to do about it?"

The student's first response was perhaps right on, and so the teacher probed further. But the student's second answer revealed he was just faking it.

"What are you going to do about it?" is a very important question, and an equally important teaching. As we become increasingly aware of the suffering of others, we become increasingly unable to shirk our responsibility to serve them. "Take responsibility for the whole catastrophe" that same teacher would often say.

At Zen Mountain Monastery, Daido Roshi didn't always sit with us in the zendo, even when he wasn't giving dokusan. In one of my more peevish moments while living there, I became mentally indignant that I didn't see my teacher practicing more. But then I realized I did see him. The

more. But then I realized I *did* see him. The monastery itself was the manifestation of his practice. The monastic coffee I was sipping while berating him was a manifestation of his practice. My practice was a manifestation of his practice. My practice was itself his practice. Even in his bodily absence, I could see his own response to the catastrophe, his own answer to the burning question that his student had put forward.

But we should not conclude too quickly that we know what exactly taking responsibility entails. Sometimes it might be "being one with" the situation at hand, or it might be working for peace in the secular world; sometimes it might be throwing oneself down in the mud to help, and sometimes it might be sitting zazen. Sometimes it is comforting words and sometimes it is noble silence.

We must be careful too about how we understand "saving beings" or "freeing beings." It's not necessarily the case that the compassionate thing to do (which is synonymous with the *appropriate* thing to do) is proselytize, or rattle off some words about "no self," or tell them they are the cause of their own suffering and they should just "let it go." We must be careful. But still, we must act; we must step off the hundred-foot flagpole. And we can't afford the luxury of waiting until we are "completely enlightened" (whatever we may imagine that to be) before we act. We must act now, in the situation in which we find ourselves presently. Truly, if not now when? What are you going to do about it? There are myriad responses--but each of us must choose one. And whether we think about it consciously or not, we are already choosing. Our lives are the full expression of our accumulated and often unconsidered choices. Through zazen, we become able to choose more freely, more appropriately,

more compassionately.

So is sitting necessarily selfish? Not if it awakens us to the suffering of others, and not if it provides us with the wisdom and equanimity to act compassionately in the world. It may be we find the problems of the world too overwhelming to even approach without our zazen. Or it may be that our own suffering occludes our vision of others, or that it incapacitates us with depressed paralysis. In those cases, it may be that the best--and perhaps only--way we can start to free all being is by starting to free ourselves.

Dogen Zenji says that when one person sits zazen, the whole world sits zazen. How do we understand that?

As with everything from Dogen, that statement functions on many levels of reality. But we can think of one level here as having to do with Indra's net, of which every node reflects holographically every other node. This is the interdependent net of reality in which we are caught but also which we ourselves comprise. Acting anywhere is acting everywhere. Freeing ourselves functions to free all beings. On another level, we ourselves are precisely identical with the world, so our zazen *is* the world's zazen.

And yet, whatever we do, there is still suffering. The world is not purged of evil, nor do wars cease, nor are the starving fed. The numberless beings are clearly *not* all freed from suffering.

On the other hand, as the Buddha said upon his own awakening, they are--perfectly and completely, right now.

Yet we must not rest on the laurels of what we imagine to be our own insight into oneness or our

own compassionate activity, or the solace we may passingly find in our moments on the cushion. Whatever we do is not enough. And so we must continually and unceasingly act to free all beings without exception in each moment, in every moment-over and over and over. And still, it's not enough. It's never enough.

And yet, in this very moment, right now, right here, we *can* free them. This moment, right now, is enough. How can it not be?

Josh Bartok began his practice under the guidance of John Daido Looi, and lived for eighteen months as a monastic Zen practitioner at Zen Mountain Monastery. He was James Ford's first shoken student in Boston, and also currently studies with Jan Chozen Bays at Great Vow Zen Monastery. He works as an editor at Wisdom Publications, and serves as practice leader (tanto) at the ZCB affiliate Spring Hill Zen in Somerville.

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