

Notes and Quotes for February 19, 2023 *Dharma Reflections*:

What's On the Path?

Part Three: Preference, Intention, and Vow

So here we are, caught up in a fundamentally unsatisfactory mode of existence, experiencing and causing pain, having decided to do something about it. Perhaps for most of us, like others with a Mahayana bent of mind, we find the prospect of traversing the bodhisattva path enticing; maybe, even though we see it but dimly, it looks like our best possible option. What now?

We're told that "bodhi" means wisdom, the prajna-sort of wisdom that clearly discerns the way things exist, free of conditioning or distortion. "Sattva" is a being. So we want to develop as "wisdom beings." Let's take this part first. How do we discover, or uncover, or get in communion with, this innate wisdom and clarity that we're told is the nature of Mind (and of our mind)?

Clearly, just wanting to do so won't suffice. Since we don't (yet) have the spiritual background or momentum of Prince Siddhartha, we just as clearly won't be able to get on track or stay on track on our own. We're going to need to find and enter into an active relationship with a reliable guide—one who in Zen is called a "teacher." We'll talk about this process (finding and working with a teacher) in this session.

Concurrent with the search for and with the initial stages of working with a teacher, we will find ourselves making commitments and taking vows and undertaking to observe certain precepts. We're going to explore, in general, why formally adopting such guidelines is not only helpful, but essential.

“Until one is committed there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness. Concerning all acts of initiative (and creation), there is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in one’s favor all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance, which no man could have dreamt would have come his way.

“I have learned a deep respect for one of Goethe’s couplets:

*Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it.
Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it.”*

- W.H. Murray, *The Scottish Himalaya Expedition*

“Once you have a clear understanding of what is possible, once you have learned how to develop the skills and capabilities you need, and once you have learned how to recognize and meet your internal material, then you can make use of your training to meet the questions and yearnings you hold in your heart. In doing so, you set out on a path. I say *a path* rather than *the path* because there are many paths—84,000 according to tradition. And I say *a path* rather than *your path* because there is no sense of specialness or ownership here, no sense of fate or destiny. You travel a path, but the path you travel does not belong to you, nor to anyone else. It is simply the path you travel.

“Once you have experienced some kind of awakening, the tenor of practice changes. The metaphor of a flower unfolding becomes just as important as the metaphor of traveling a path. The key to unfolding is to rest deeply inside and let movements—whether sensory, thoughts, or feeling—arise and resolve themselves.”

- *The Magic of Vajrayana*, Ken McLeod, Unfettered Mind Media, 2023, pp. 168-169.

“QUESTIONER: What can a roshi give you?

“ROSHI: He can’t give you anything you don’t already have, but he can take away much that is foreign to your True-nature: the sticky beliefs, chesty opinions, petty rationalizations, illusory ideals, and deluded thoughts, all of which imprison you as in a cocoon. And when your mind is ripe the roshi can, through words or actions, nudge that mind into awakening. At that point he is like a hen that pecks on the shell of the egg when the chick is ready to hatch.

“A roshi gives you himself, which is a great deal and at the same time nothing. An outstanding Zen monk once said, ‘Empty handed I went to my teacher and empty-handed I returned.’ When

another was asked by a master, 'What have you brought with you?' he replied, 'That which had never been lost even before I went to my old teacher.'

"If that is the case, why did you go to him at all?"

"If I had not gone to him, how could I realize that it had never been lost?"

"So you need a teacher to learn that there is nothing to learn.... Nonetheless a roshi is essential. Even the Buddha had teachers. A fully developed roshi personifies openness, compassion, and wisdom, qualities you hope to actualize in yourself. Remember, too, he has struggled through the pain, frustration, and despair you feel.... the roshi can give you an infusion of courage and turn you once more in the direction of the sun.

"Another of his vital roles is to test you when you think you have come to awakeing.... For nothing can be more harmful than to think you have awakened when you have merely experienced ecstasy, visions, trances, or hallucinations.... And even when the enlightenment is genuine a teacher is necessary to dispel the subtle pride that arises....

"QUESTIONER: How does a serious seeker distinguish a genuine teacher from a charlatan?"

"ROSHI: ...no matter what superior qualities a guru may possess, if he is obviously seeking name and fame, is after money, or is carrying on with his female students, these impurities would corrupt his teaching; a prospective student would therefore do well to avoid him.

"QUESTIONER: Suppose a roshi has none of these failings. If you are a beginner, how can you be sure he is enlightened and spiritually developed?"

"ROSHI: Unless you've had long spiritual training yourself, you can't be certain. The only thing you can be sure of is whether you have a rapport with him or her.... You may have to rely on the advice of knowledgeable friends.

"... you shouldn't hesitate to ask a teacher who his teacher was and how long he trained under him. Read his books if he has written any. If you like what he has written and what you sense between the lines, arrange to meet him. Ask him questions, intuit his spirit, savor his silences.

"... A roshi may be deeply enlightened, and yet be the wrong teacher for you. Why? Because if he fails to arouse in you feelings of confidence and devotion so that you can willingly bow down before him and, childlike, receive his teaching. You must be able to say with conviction, 'He is the teacher for me—the one I've been searching for!' And yet it is also true that the moment you spontaneously cry out, 'Oh help me! I need help!' you open yourself up to the teacher right for you."

- *Zen—Merging of East and West*, Roshi Philip Kapleau, Anchor Doubleday, 1980, pp. 32-34.

“The three pure precepts are derived from verse 183 in the *Dhammapada*, a collection of sayings attributed to Gautama Siddhartha, the Buddha of history. The verse goes: “Renounce all evil; practice all good; keep your mind pure—thus all the Buddhas taught.”

“There we clearly see the first two of the pure precepts, ceasing from evil, and doing good.

“The third line is rewritten and the fourth is dropped. I suggest that fourth line is unnecessary in the framing of the pure precepts, although its heart is retained as the precepts writ large. Critically that third line is shifted as part of the whole Mahayana project. The great way, of which Zen is a part.

“After ceasing from evil. Or trying to understand and finding actions to match that understanding. After doing good. Or trying to understand and finding actions to match that understanding. Here we come to a critical turning. Our teacher Aitken Roshi suggests the rewriting of that line is a ‘shift from the ideal of personal perfection to the ideal of oneness with all beings.’

“Taking them all together. The Zen teacher Daido Looi tells us that this new formulation is very significant. ‘Not creating evil,’ ‘practicing good,’ and ‘actualizing good for others’ he writes, are the foundation ‘upon which all of the moral teachings of the Buddha are based. The life of each one of us.’ I think this is true. It is, I find, the summation of the ethical or moral container of our way.

“But three pure precepts doesn’t stop there. It is an invitation into something profound. While ‘cease from evil’ is an invitation to turn our lives in a direction, and the ‘do good’ is an expression of the harmonies of a realized life, that third line opens us into the dynamics of this mysterious life.

“The most straightforward presentation of this third pure precept is ‘do good for others.’ I’m also fond of the version ‘save the many beings.’ Although we have to unpack that save part a little to fully appreciate the nuancing. Shunryu Suzuki’s version of the line is ‘I vow to live and be lived for the benefit of all beings’ reveals the wonderful messiness of our way. Another friend suggests the line can be rendered simply “awaken.” I agree. But again, that begs a lot of unpacking.

“At its heart this third of the pure precepts is about the heart of the Mahayana, a turn from a spirituality based in my own saving, a singular project. And by the bye, one I do not disdain, it is something wonderful. But in our way, that turning is into a profound realization we’re all in this together. Our loss. And our gain. Yours and mine, they cannot in any final analysis be unraveled.

“The word for this sense, this call, ultimately this vow, is Bodhisattva. Bodhisattva is the expression of not precisely two, but not exactly one. It opens us to the dynamic of our understanding of that ancient human intuition which is expressed in the dharmic traditions as nonduality. And

which modern spiritual scholars have seen is clearly found in all the great religions. As well as among people without any particular religion.

“In the third pure precept we come to Bodhisattva mind and the Bodhisattva vow.

- “Zen’s Shorthand for the Bodhisattva Vow” – A Talk Delivered at Empty Moon Zen’s Saturday morning Zoom Gathering by James Ishmael Ford
<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/monkeymind/2023/02/third-pure-precept-zens-shorthand-for-the-bodhisattva-vow.html>

“All beings, without number, I vow to liberate.
Endless blind passions, I vow to uproot.
Dharma gates, beyond measure, I vow to penetrate.
The Great Way of Buddha, I vow to attain.”

- (*The Four Vows*—RZC version)

“The many beings are numberless, I vow to free them all.
Greed, hatred and ignorance rise endlessly, I vow to abandon them all.
Dharma gates are countless, I vow to wake to them all.
Buddha’s way is unattainable, I vow to embody it all.”

- (*Great Vows for All*—Diamond Sangha version)

“A key aspect of bodhisattva practice is the commitment of dedication to the way of awakening, and to carrying out this commitment and practice for the benefit of all. The aspiration to care for and to awaken all beings (in Sanskrit *bodhicitta*, literally ‘enlightening mind’) is considered mysterious and auspicious. This heartfelt care for suffering beings and fundamental questioning into the meaning of our lives arises unaccountably amid the multitude of psychological conditionings in our experience, known and unknown. The Buddhist scriptures give various detailed descriptions of the course of the bodhisattva’s personal development of character and deepening of capacity, from this first impulse until the fulfillment of Buddhahood. But although bodhisattva qualities may unfold over great stretches of time, the initial aspiration of beginners seeking the Way is said to be identical in nature and value to that of an advanced bodhisattva.”

- *Faces of Compassion—Classic Bodhisattva Archetypes and Their Modern Expression*, Taigen Dan Leighton, Wisdom, 2012, p. 32.

“When you are well practiced
In the four unbounded attitudes,
Meditate upon the twofold bodhichitta, root of all the Dharma.
For this will bring you freedom from defilement,
And save you from the ocean of existence.
Bodhichitta drives away all fear, all pain, and every evil deed;
It vanquishes both karma and the sources of your suffering;
And from the circle of existence will bring beings into peace....

“Small are the fruits of other virtues, and they wear away.
But virtue joined with such a precious state of mind
Increases and will never be exhausted....

“Bodhichitta is the wish to gain
Sublime enlightenment for countless beings’ sake.
It is of two kinds: intentional and active.
Intention is the wish and action the pursuit
Of this attainment.
It is like the wish to go and actually setting out.”

- *Finding Rest in the Nature of the Mind*, Longchenpa, trans. Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala, 2020, pp. 85-86.

“Contemplation of the advantages of the altruistic intention is meant to arouse faith and interest in it and in the practices of the Great Vehicle. Where there is faith, aspiration naturally follows and this leads to effort. Faith in the teachings leads to faith in the Buddha as their source and in the spiritual community who provide an example of how to practice them.”

- *The Bodhisattva Vow*, Geshe Sonam Rinchen, Snow Lion, 2000, p. 20.

“One may have a deep, valid understanding of emptiness, and one may even have attained freedom from cyclic existence; however, as long as one lacks bodhichitta, one is not a bodhisattva. In order to generate this bodhichitta, it is not adequate to merely wish compassionately that other sentient beings be happy and free of suffering. It is necessary to have a deep sense of commitment that *I myself* will take up the responsibility to free all other beings from suffering. In order to generate such powerful compassion, one first needs to develop a sense of intimacy and empathy with other sentient beings; without true intimacy, genuine bodhichitta cannot arise.”

- *Essence of the Heart Sutra*, The Dala Lama’s Heart of Wisdom Teachings, translated and edited by Geshe Thupten Jinpa, Wisdom, p. 140.

“Bodhicitta is closely related to the bodhisattva vow. The activity of the bodhisattva is to develop bodhicitta. The person who does this is a bodhisattva, or one who has the courage to live bodhicitta.

“Unique to the Mahayana, this activity of developing bodhicitta doesn’t deal merely with a rule of conduct, as in the Hinayana, but with a state of mind, a motivation, an inner attitude. The essence of the bodhisattva vow is to renounce self-cherishing attitudes in order to engage in an attitude that is firmly directed toward others. This is compassion.

“To embark upon the bodhisattva path is to be involved in exchanging oneself for others, or putting others before oneself, regarding them as just as important as and, ultimately, more important than oneself.”

- *Luminous Mind—The Way of the Buddha*, Kalu Rinpoche, Wisdom, 1997, p. 128.

“Bodhisattvas vow to enter the wisdom of the buddhas and to help other beings to enter wisdom. Bodhisattvas don’t necessarily think their actions are helpful, but they definitely *want* their actions to be helpful. Our vows help us to make this effort even though we know that we cannot understand exactly how this works until the vow flowers into perfect wisdom. The process of perfect wisdom begins with our aspiration to carry all beings beyond suffering into a life of peace and freedom. When we commit to this aspiration, it becomes the bodhisattva vow.

“There are many levels of vows we can take to protect our mind and make our life so fruitful, but without guarding our mind to ensure we keep those vows, what is the use of having so many vows and practices? We can change our external conduct and act as a pure and devoted Dharma practitioner, but it is our inner conduct we need to change. That is exactly why we have vows and practices in Buddhism. Sitting rigid for hours, clicking the beads on a mala, shaving our head—none of these outer manifestations can dig out the root of suffering; they cannot remove the cause of samsara. Only protecting the mind can do that.”

- *Bodhicitta—Practice For a Meaningful Life*, Lama Zopa Rinpoche, Wisdom, 2019, p. 46.

“Once you have taken on the discipline of the bodhisattva vows for the sake of enlightenment, whatever virtue of body and speech you accumulate is, in brief, the discipline of gathering virtue. Why is that?

“The *Bodhisattvabhumi* states:

Depend upon and abide within the discipline of a bodhisattva. Strive joyfully only in listening, contemplating, and meditating. Attend and honor gurus. Attend the sick and nurse them. Proclaim others' excellent generosity and qualities. Delight in the merit of others and have patience with their contempt. Dedicate virtue toward enlightenment and make aspirations. Make offerings to the three jewels and engage in diligence. Maintain heedfulness. Remember the trainings. With attentiveness, guard your mind. Guard the gates of the sense faculties and take food in moderation. In the first and last parts of the night, do not sleep but diligently engage in yogic practices. Rely on holy beings and spiritual friends. Having examined your own confusion, confess and relinquish it. Accomplishing such dharma activities, guard them and make them increase extensively. Understand this to be the discipline of gathering virtue.

“Accordingly, if virtuous dharma, such as the six paramitas, has not arisen in your mind stream, give rise to it. Once it has been embraced, do not let it diminish, but strive to make it increase.”

- *A Guide to the Thirty-Seven Practices of a Bodhisattva*, Dzatrul Ngawang Tenzin Norbu, Snow Lion, 2020, p. 138.

Possible Discussion Points:

1. Later in the talk (partially quoted on pp. 5-6 above), Roshi Ford says, “To address each other as ‘bodhisattvas’ is at once an expression of realization and an invitation—like a koan.” What do you think about considering those around you as bodhisattvas?
2. What qualities do you think a spiritual teacher should embody?
3. Have you experienced the magical qualities that making a commitment (W.H. Murray quote at top of p. 2) seems to attract?
4. When you chant the “Four Vows” at the end of a block of sitting at the RZC, how seriously do you take them?
5. Looked at in a certain way, to even have heard about bodhicitta, let alone to have “tried it on,” is a marker that we have accumulated vast stores of merit. Are you excited about the prospect of feeding that fire with the fuel of your attention and practice?