

Notes and Quotes for February 18, 2024 *Dharma Reflections*:

What's On the Path?

Part Ten:

Bodhichitta

For this editor/moderator, it was a significant turning point (and a relief!) to discover that Zen practice had always been (and is, going forward) for the benefit of *everyone*. I first came to sit, it seemed to me then, because *I* was in pain, and because *I* wanted to get that cool-sounding thing called awakening. So, my self-centered, needy, ambitious energy got turned back on itself, and was directed (metaphorically) to examine (investigate, study) the self that was in pain and that wanted to be free—in other words, my teacher assigned me a practice that he found to be fitting for where I was coming from.

So I started straining and huffing and puffing trying to get what was so tantalizingly elusive. Concurrently, though, at the conclusion of every block of sitting, and five or six times a day during sesshin, I would join everyone in reciting The Four Vows. Over the years and decades, the combination of: a.) finding, at bottom, no permanent identifiable *self* anywhere, and b.) vowing, over and over (whether or not I appreciated the import of doing so) to save all the beings, slowly led me to understand that the practice I was doing was being done on a much grander scale, and for much more humble reasons.

Let's explore, together, the reason for (and ultimate result of) doing spiritual work for all.

THE FOUR BODHISATTVIC VOWS

- Rochester Zen Center

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.

GREAT VOWS FOR ALL

-Endless Path Zendo

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.

“How could anyone accomplish such things—free or save all beings; become free oneself of all ignorance, greed, and hatred; see life and its difficulties as a source of endless opportunity for greater personal insight and depth; and finally, attain what can’t be attained? Master Hakuin’s great disciple, Torei Enji, formulated an especially personal and heart-felt Bodhisattva Vow that goes like this:

I am only a simple disciple, but I offer these respectful words.

When I regard the true nature of the many dharmas, I find them all to be sacred forms of the Tathagata’s never-failing essence. Each particle of matter, each moment, is no other than the Tathagata’s inexpressible radiance.

With this realization, our virtuous ancestors gave tender care to beasts and birds with compassionate minds and hearts. Among us, in our own daily lives, who is not reverently grateful for the protections of life: food, drink, and clothing! Though they are inanimate things, they are nonetheless the warm flesh and blood, the merciful incarnations of Buddha.

All the more, we can be especially sympathetic and affectionate with foolish people, particularly with someone who becomes a sworn enemy and persecutes us with abusive language. That very abuse conveys the Buddha’s boundless loving-kindness. It is a compassionate device to liberate us entirely from the mean-spirited delusions we have built up with our wrongful conduct from the beginningless past.

With our open response to such abuse we completely relinquish ourselves, and the most profound and pure faith arises. At the peak of each thought a lotus flower opens, and on each flower there is revealed a Buddha. Everywhere is the Pure Land in its beauty. We see fully the Tathagata’s radiant light right where we are.

May we retain this mind and extend it throughout the world so that we and all beings become mature in Buddha’s wisdom.”

- *A Zen Life of Bodhisattvas*, Rafe Martin, The Sumeru Press, 2023, Pp. 23-24.

“All bodhisattvas make four great vows. They vow to help all sentient beings, to remove all obstructions and vexations, to master endless approaches to Dharma, and to attain supreme enlightenment. It is important that people who decide to follow the Bodhisattva Path take these four vows. It may seem that the vows are impossible to fulfill, but we must remember that before we have firmly generated the bodhi mind we are like seeds that have yet to sprout. We may not be able to carry out the vows; we may not be aware of the full meaning of the vows; we may not realize the necessity of following the Bodhisattva Path toward Buddhahood. Nonetheless we should take the four great vows.

“Most people are not confident in themselves. They will not set goals that are too high because they feel they will be unable to reach them. Instead, they will set small goals and try to accomplish things one step at a time. As they reach each step, they will re-evaluate their progress and decide whether or not to set another goal. A person who is unsure of his or her intelligence and ability to do well in school, for example, may vow to graduate from high school. Having completed that stage, he or she may decide to try college and then graduate school.

“Taking such measured steps is normal and good. After all, a person’s life span, abilities, and merit (accumulated from previous karma) are limited. One may not be able to accomplish everything one sets out to do. However, taking one step at a time, it is difficult to gauge how far someone will go. One may reach a certain level and then stop, satisfied with where one is or too tired to go on. In general, those with good karmic foundations will have the confidence to set high goals right from the beginning.

“It is unrealistic to assume that everyone will achieve the goals they set for themselves. There can only be so many presidents or billionaires. Human life is short and the obstacles are many. In making goals of this nature, it is probably better to take a step-by-step approach. However, one should not take the same approach when following the Bodhisattva Path and studying Buddhadharma. Deciding to go a little way and then figuring out what to do from there is the incorrect attitude when it comes to practice. Your worldly desires are limited to this lifetime, but the practice of Buddhadharma is endless. It spans countless lives. Thus we are not limited by time or our present conditions and situations. There are no obstructions or difficulties that cannot eventually be overcome. Some may reach Buddhahood quickly. Others may take numberless eons. Since there is an endless amount of time in which to practice, however, we can have complete confidence that each and every one of us can reach the highest level.”

- *Complete Enlightenment—Translation and Commentary on The Sutra of Complete Enlightenment*, Ch’an Master Sheng-yen, Dharma Drum Publications, 1997, Pp. 214-215.

“Why is bodhicitta so important? It brings our minds vastness as well as courage. With such a mind we can overcome our powerful habit of sustaining a pervasive sense of me-ness, of holding onto self. This erroneous holding is the taproot for all our afflictions and pain. Bodhicitta banishes them. Bodhicitta is necessary at all times, regardless of our activity. Bodhicitta destabilizes the very ground of our grasping at ‘me.’ When that grasping dissolves, our heart easily embraces all living beings. Let our every action be motivated by the intention to benefit everyone. Indeed, the aim of all our practice, of all our training... is the flourishing of our bodhicitta, our awakened mind.

“We awaken through our pure intention to benefit others. Our first focus is on the needs of living beings. For their sake, we have a second focus, our own awakening into the complete om-

niscience of Buddhahood. This makes it possible for us to address their suffering. We are not separate from other living beings! As Maitreya said, developing bodhicitta is the ultimate purpose of all our practice and training.”

- *Being a Buddha and a Human Too—Longchenpa’s Sevenfold Mind Training for a Sunlit Sky*, Anne Carolyn Klein, Lama Rigzin Drolma, Wisdom, 2023, P. 38.

“Everything depends upon your vow. How alive, how vital is your aim—the aim with which you vow to live your life? If you’re living your life with the vow to attain realization, all is lively. Your vow is clear; your purpose is clear. Of course, this vow has to include all beings. Your promise is not a stingy one. There is no such thing as realization for one’s personal benefit. As long as you are considering your own personal well-being first and foremost, how small, how lonely, how weak and ineffectual you are. But once you’ve made the commitment to attain realization, which necessarily includes all beings, your foundation is no longer self-centered. You no longer grasp this *I, me, mine* as you reason for being. Your vow is together with all beings.

“Here, right from the start, we find the conclusion of our journey, which is oneness with all beings. Without the *I* there is no all beings. Without all beings, no *I*. There is no division, no separation, no duality in truth.”

- *Throw Yourself Into the House of Buddha—The Life & Zen Teachings of Tangen Harada Roshi*, Translated by Belenda Attaway Yamakawa, Shambhala, 2023, Pp. 55-56.

“Bodhicitta is the quintessential sap of the three turnings of the wheel of the Dharma. It is, in other words, the purest essence of the Buddha’s words. It is like the creamy butter, rich and full, that comes from churning the abundant milk of the Dharma, of which it is the refined essence...”

“The numberless beings that live in the six realms are like wayfarers traveling upon the paths of existence, from the Peak of Existence down to the Hell of Unrelenting Pain. To help those who wish to enjoy the pleasure of a temporary and ultimate respite from the sorrows that they suffer, the Bodhisattvas are reborn in samsara through the power of their bodhicitta, and they remain with beings, staying close to them, in order to bring them to the undying state of supreme bliss referred to previously. They are like the people who pitch refreshment tents for the pilgrims traveling through Tsari. Bodhisattvas bring to beings whatever happiness they desire. Thus they satisfy these ceaseless wanderers who are constantly moving toward their deaths without a moment’s respite, never finding a place of permanent repose. All this is thanks to bodhicitta.”

- *The Nectar of Manjushri’s Speech—A Detailed Commentary on Shantideva’s Way of the Bodhisattva*, Kunzang Pelden, Shambhala, 2007, P. 136.

“According to the *Ornament of True Realization*,

The arousing of bodhichitta is the wish,
for others’ benefit,
To attain perfect Buddhahood.

“It is the wish to attain perfect enlightenment in order to establish all sentient beings on the level of Buddhahood. Its causes is threefold: faith in the Buddha, compassion for sentient beings, and learning of the benefits of bodhichitta. The contributory factor that helps bring about bodhichitta is having the courage and superior motivation to take upon oneself alone the great burden of the welfare of all beings, without exception. In essence it is the wish to be capable of liberating all beings by attaining perfect enlightenment....

“Bodhichitta can be classified in various ways, with four categories based on the different levels of the path, from the ordinary individual’s level of earnest aspiration up to Buddhahood, twenty-two categories indicated by similes, and so on. However, the most widely known and easily understood are the two categories based on their characteristics. These are:

- Bodhichitta in aspiration, which is the wish to attain Buddhahood and is analogous to wanting to go somewhere; and
- Bodhichitta in action, which is diligence in the two aspects of bodhichitta, being the means for accomplishing Buddhahood, and is analogous to actually going....

“Arousing bodhichitta embodies aspiration and action, combining the mind turned toward enlightenment with the compassion that supports it.

BODHICHITTA IN ASPIRATION

“From our own experience, which is that we do not want to suffer in any way and that we very much want to be happy, we can infer that those who have been our parents—that is, all the beings in the six realms—are no different in having the same desires. It is therefore up to us, and us alone, to bring about their physical and mental well-being and help them create the merit that leads to happiness, and to make sure they are free from suffering and from the actions and afflictive emotions that lead to suffering. For this we arouse bodhichitta in aspiration by means of two pledges:

- a pledge to the cause, focusing with the four following attitudes on all beings filling space: *love*—the desire to take responsibility for them when we recognize that all beings have been our mothers; *compassion*—on account of which we cannot bear to abandon them, knowing that they are suffering on the road of existence; *joy*—the delight we feel when they achieve the happiness of higher rebirth and ultimate excellence; and *impartiality*—the absence of attachment to those close to us and aversion to those who are not;

- a pledge to the result, the intention to bring them all to Buddhahood.

“These four attitudes are called boundless because they focus on all the realms of beings filling the furthest reaches of space, with no distinctions and no limit to their number.

BODHICITTA IN ACTION

“Bodhicitta in action comprises the *intention* to strive for perfect Buddhahood oneself, in order to bring beings who fill the whole of space to Buddhahood, and the *execution* of that intention by training in the six transcendent perfections.”

- *A Torch Lighting the Way to Freedom—Complete Instructions on the Preliminary Practices*, Dudjom Rinpoche, Jigdel Yeshe Dorje, Shambhala, 2011, Pp. 169-172.

“We may not yet be bodhisattvas, but we can certainly engage in the same activities they do. In the process, we can continually expand and boost the intensity of our love and compassion.

“Bodhisattvas train in bodhicitta for eons, so do not think that having one intense feeling of bodhicitta or reciting the words of aspiring bodhicitta is all there is to it. In *Engaging in the Bodhisattva’s Deeds [Ed.: The Way of the Bodhisattva, or Bodhicaryāvatāra]*, the first two chapters lead us in cultivating bodhicitta, and the third chapter contains the method for taking the bodhisattva vow. The other seven chapters describe the practices of bodhisattvas, training in the six perfections. Although these bear the names of familiar activities—generosity, ethical conduct, and so forth—they are now called ‘perfections’ because they are done with the motivation of bodhicitta that aims at Buddhahood, the state of complete and perfect wisdom and compassion.

“As you progress through the bodhisattva paths and grounds, you will deepen and expand your bodhicitta continuously, as indicated in the twenty-two types of bodhicitta mentioned in the *Ornament of Clear Realizations*. With joy make effort to understand bodhicitta and the bodhisattva path, and endeavor to transform your mind into these. Avoid conceit and cutting corners; in spiritual practice there is no way to ignore important points and still gain realizations. Cultivate fortitude, courage, and the determination to be willing to fulfill the two collections of merit and wisdom over many years, lifetimes, and eons. The result of Buddhahood will be more than you can conceive of at this moment.”

- *Courageous Compassion*, The Dalai Lama and Thubten Chodren (Volume 6 of The Library of Wisdom and Compassion), Wisdom, 2021, P. 7.

“As soon as a bodhisattva has generated enlightenment mind, he or she becomes one who has entered into the unsurpassed Great Vehicle [that leads to] enlightenment and also is counted among those who are referred to as bodhisattvas, according to the conventions of everyday usage. Therefore, the act of generating [enlightenment] mind is considered to represent the point of entry. Once a bodhisattva has generated this mind, he or she will eventually attain unsurpassed true and complete enlightenment; this is not the case for anyone who has not generated [enlightenment mind]. Therefore, the act of generating enlightenment mind is the root of unsurpassed true and complete enlightenment.

“It is through feeling compassion toward suffering beings and developing the intention to save them that a bodhisattva generates [enlightenment] mind. Therefore, the act of generating [enlightenment] mind is a natural outcome of compassion. Moreover, it is by depending upon and relying upon this [enlightenment] mind that a bodhisattva applies him- or herself to the bodhisattva training, [which consists of acquiring] the spiritual qualities that are conducive to enlightenment and [carrying out] the activities that are beneficial to sentient beings. Therefore, the act of generating the [enlightenment] mind serves as the support for the bodhisattva training.”

- *The Bodhisattva Path to Unsurpassed Enlightenment—A Complete Translation of the Bodhisattvabhūmi*, Ārya Asaṅga, Translated by A. B. Engel, Snow Lion, 2016, Pp. 23-24.

Possible Discussion Points:

1. When you first became aware that you were on a spiritual path, what was your motivation to pursue it? Has your sense of goal or purpose changed?
2. What do you think of Ch’an Master Sheng Yen’s admonition (pp. 2-3 above), in spiritual matters, to dream big?
3. Longchenpa (p. 3) and Jigdreel Yeshe Dorje (p. 5) mention courage as being an important element of bodhichitta. How do you muster courage? Or, is courage indwelling, waiting to be discovered?
4. Have you been aware of specific experiences or events that engaged you in such a way that compassion came forth? How are wisdom and compassion related?
5. Would it be possible to realize the Great Vows if their expression wasn’t already present?