
The first of the Great Vows of the Bodhisattva

Teisho by Roland Yuno Rech - Maredsous, July 2007

The first of the four vows of the bodhisattva is *Shujo muhen seigando*:
« however innumerable sentient beings are, I vow to save them all ».

Shujo : sentient beings are all beings which transmigrate in the six worlds of transmigration. According to Buddhist cosmology that means beings which live in hell, scrawny spirits - gakis to whom we offer bread at the midday meal - animals, human beings, the asuras – fighting gods - and devas, divinities who have an impermanent existence and are in samsara. All beings who live in these six worlds find themselves there through their karma and for a limited time.

In Buddhism, when we speak about saving beings, that means saving them from the need to be reborn in one of these six worlds, thus helping them to realize nirvana, being the extinction of causes for rebirth in samsara, the world of birth, illness, old age, death, and all sorts of suffering and dissatisfaction linked to the impermanent and limited nature of existence. By taking this vow, the bodhisattva obliges himself to remain in samsara in order to stay with sentient beings until all stop transmigrating in these six worlds. This seems to mean that the bodhisattva renounces their own awakening, or at least their liberation from samsara, likely being for a infinitely long time. This vow resembles a renouncement. But it's a vow of compassion for all beings and renouncement of the egotistical vow to be saved as quickly as possible. And in fact, deeply taking this vow and accepting it implies already being awakened and liberated.

You may be asking yourself if you are able to pronounce these bodhisattva vows at the end of the sesshin, because some of you are planning on doing it ! However, when we look deeply into ourselves, we obviously see that we don't have this infinite compassion. Unfortunately, our compassion is limited...

You must distinguish between bodhisattva ordination and an accomplished bodhisattva. Bodhisattva ordination, as it is called, means pronouncing our vows as the meaning of our practice. This means having faith and confidence in the meaning of this practice and in the direction in which we want to commit ourselves to practicing, within the limits of our actual state.

If we think about our vow, we have no regrets, no feeling of sacrifice, we are already in the state of mind of an awakened and liberated being, even if our karma, our ordinary conditioning, takes hold of us in daily life and we realize that we are not always « good enough » for this vow. But if we sincerely take it, it is nevertheless the expression of awakening and liberation. The bodhisattva has no attachment to samsara because of the wisdom which enables them to see the limits of it and the urgency to liberate themselves from it. Through wisdom, - wisdom and compassion being equally important for the bodhisattva,- they realize the need to liberate themselves from samsara, and through compassion, they agree to dwell in it to help all beings.

Master Dogen thought this bodhisattva ideal and practice were not a step on the path to becoming a Buddha. Traditionally in Buddhism, the career of a bodhisattva is described in ten levels and the last step, the ultimate point of their evolution in the « Ten Lands », is the state

of samyaku sambodai : a perfect Buddha, with all knowing vision. But in Master Dogen's teachings, taking this vow is already the realization of perfect awakening, it is not a temporary step. It is the expression of our Buddha nature. If we can pronounce this vow, it is because we have already realized our Buddha nature, Buddha nature is not an ideal to be reached in the distant future, it's the base itself of our existence in total interdependence with all beings, at each moment of our lives. That is the Buddha nature. This implies feeling unified with all beings with whom we are totally interdependent ; which may not always seem so easy. It is however the true nature of our existence, and understanding this is fundamental wisdom.

Harmonizing oneself with this vision, by taking the vow of universal compassion, implies a conversion of the mind to harmonize oneself with what we have understood in terms of the essence of our real existence : our Buddha nature. To do this, you study different bodhisattva practices in workshops on the six paramitas. All Buddha dharma practice consists of getting us in harmony with what we really are, especially through the practices of giving, patience, the precepts, energy, meditation and wisdom. They are the expression of the Buddha nature as well as concrete ways to actualize it. This is an important point because if they are not means, then we function only through effort and duality, but if we take these practices as the expression of what we are, it becomes faith in Buddha nature, something more obvious and natural, which then becomes deeper and easier to practice.

When it comes to the immensity of the bodhisattva vow, it is important to understand that in reality there is no one to be saved. This is the very profound teaching of the Diamond sutra. There are paradoxical notions in Buddhist teachings, but these paradoxes have a liberating effect. If one doesn't understand that there is no one to be saved, one can feel infinitely guilty, which can disturb our equanimity. The great and nearly endless task of saving all beings is a source of suffering for the bodhisattva. Bodhisattva don't suffer because of their ego, they suffer because of compassion. The bodhisattva is somewhat in need of wisdom in order to relieve this sympathetic suffering. They remind themselves that because of non-ego, vacuity, there is no being, no ego to be saved. All beings are already saved or liberated because they are vacuity, they are egoless.

The last point of this great bodhisattva vow is that we really can't save anyone. It's the second paradox, which is as liberating as the first one. This is because beings can only be liberated through their own Buddha nature and through their own practice, which puts them in contact with this same Buddha nature. The vow to save all beings therefore is not a grandiose and all mighty vow consisting of wanting to save everyone. It's the vow to lead all beings on the right path to be saved by their own Buddha nature and by all skillful means we have.

Other points are interesting too. For example, bodhisattva must be able to appear in all aspects to accomplish their great vow; to appear or act as necessary in order to encounter the type of people who they are lead to help at a given present moment.

This is the story of Kannon disguised as a fish monger. One day, a pretty young woman came to a village to sell fish. The men of the village courted her and she promised to marry the one who could memorize the Hannya Shingyo by the next day. Ten of them learned it by the next day. So then she promised to marry the one who learned the Diamond Sutra by the next day. Two or three of them learned it by heart. So she promised to marry the one who learned the Lotus

Sutra by heart. The next day, one young man had learned it and she married him. Then she got sick, and her husband promised her that he would never forget her. She then died. The following night, she appeared in a dream to her frightened husband and revealed to him that she was Kannon, the Bodhisattva of compassion. She said to him : « If you really want to remember me, as you promised to do so, since you have learned the sutras, preach the Dharma now and help beings with the teachings of Buddha. » This is a classic example of the faculty a bodhisattva has in appearing in different forms including in the form of a pretty, seductive woman who makes villagers learn the sutras through skillful means. Think about this !

Going back to the first bodhisattva vow, I would like to refer to shin jin datsu raku : "body and mind drop off" (stripping away all egotistical attachment during zazen). Keizan said : « It's revealing your original face , revealing the aspects of one's original condition : body and mind rejected, stripped away, free, whether sitting, lying down, or in any other posture ». We often say that in Zen, we don't speak a lot about love or compassion. Some people wonder about that. I think that compassion is fundamental to our practice. If we are not animated by the spirit of compassion and benevolence for all beings, our meditation practice could become dangerous, because it could reinforce our egotistical power and distort the meaning of our practice. For example, those who practice martial arts want to meditate in order to become stronger, to have better concentration and to perform better against their adversaries ; this is an extreme case, but there are people who practice zazen for that. Sometimes even in our sangha we encounter people who have a tendency to harden themselves in zazen. I think that in that case, there's an error in the practice. For example, that might mean that someone is confusing detachment with indifference.

There is a second series of questions : some people totally agree to let go of their attachments during zazen but don't agree to do the same thing in daily life. Zazen should not be a moment in life put on hold : « ok during zazen, but afterwards, no ! ». Master Nyojo, who was Dogen's master, spoke about certain followers of Buddhism who practiced sitting meditation, zazen, but whose level of compassion was weak. « They do not penetrate the true character of all things with deep understanding thus, they are just bettering themselves and they are breaking the lineage of Buddhas ». So their zazen is not the true zazen of Buddha. He insists by saying : « What I mean is, starting from their first inhalations, the Buddhas and patriarchs, sit in zazen with the vow to bring together all qualities of awakening and even the state of Buddhahood, but in their zazen, they don't forget sentient beings : they always have loving thoughts and compassion for all beings, not just human beings , even for insects. And so they take the vow to save them all ; and no matter what the merits of their practice are, they dedicate these merits to all beings. » So, as Master Dogen quotes Master Nyojo's teachings, and since Dogen is the one who inspires the practice we follow, I wanted to quote him as a sort of authority to confirm the fundamental importance of compassion in our practice. This doesn't mean if we practice zazen we are naturally compassionate, because there are all sorts of obstacles blocking the expression of this compassion in our karma and our existence. But at least, if we vow to be compassionate and if we consider that it is the standard for right practice, then we can observe ourselves and detect the inner obstacles which prevent us from expressing this compassion. When this happens, when we don't feel very compassionate we can ask ourselves why it is like that at that given moment, like a koan ; not to create guilty feelings, but just as a signal to ourselves, that at that moment, something is happening and we should just be attentive to what is happening.

I wanted to speak about ways to stimulate compassionate and benevolent spirit. I think that humans are fundamentally compassionate and benevolent. Not because I am a great idealist, but because if we didn't have this empathy - the ability to imagine oneself in someone else's place, thus avoiding to make them suffer - humankind would have disappeared a long time ago. If humanity continues to flourish, even now with overpopulation, even if there are conflicts wars, massacres ; we can't say that these conflicts are increasing: in the recent decade, they might have even decreased a bit. In any event, if humanity continues to develop, it's because deep down, humans have this empathetic capacity. If not, we would have killed each other a long time ago. So, how does one develop or improve this empathy, at least to the point of fundamentally changing human relations ?

Why wouldn't it seem obvious that we are fundamentally benevolent and compassionate beings ? Why doesn't the Buddha nature in all of us inspire us more ? I think it's because we are suffering from a blunder, a mistake. I have already spoken about this several times, we identify ourselves with a false idea of ourselves. We identify ourselves with our little ego, our own history, our preferences, and we end up saying « me, I'm someone like this or like that ». We end up believing it. We build a certain personal identity and become attached to it. We eventually make a shield out of it, armor; we consider that anything which could harm the image we have of ourselves could be dangerous, like an enemy and that we have to defend ourselves against that which can threaten this image. Inversely, we become greedy for everything which enables us to develop the image we have of ourselves ; to increase its power, its prestige, its importance, etc. So that's why when Dogen, after Nyojo and then Keizan, speak about stripping away, letting go, abandoning the attachment to body and mind during zazen (meaning a certain representation or idea we have of our body and mind, influenced by our karma, ideas one makes of oneself, which make us end up realizing that we are limited beings), well then, in order to abandon all that, the practice of zazen is an extremely powerful practice ; as long as one has the sincere conviction that it is a good thing to abandon the ego, the ego being like an error, a limited idea of oneself.

The best thing to do is to try and see. For example, when we are in a group, if we take a stand, stick to our position, very often we notice that everyone else around us tightens up, becomes aggressive, and starts becoming competitive. Each person's mental coagulations become stronger and in opposition. Then when someone changes their position and completely lets go, you can see how everyone else is surprised and someone wonders: « yeah, why not, why not drop it? ».

I strongly believe in the virtue of beginning by daring to let go. Not only in zazen, but also in daily life. But in order to do this, one must understand that letting go is neither a weakness, nor a sacrifice. Concerning that point, something must be said about desires: in the teachings of the Buddha, we often speak about abandoning desires. But desire is life, we wouldn't exist without desire. So we are a little suspicious when we hear that we should abandon desires. For example, when Master Nyojo explains to Dogen "dropping off mind and body" in zazen, he means abandoning the five desires and obstacles. Obviously this is a question of abandoning the obstacles to meditation. Traditionally the Five Obstacles to meditation are desires, hatred, torpor, agitation (or remorse) and doubt. For example, if during zazen one is sexually obsessed, if we have ideas running through our heads, fantasies, if we impatiently wait for the end of zazen in order to be with the person we desire, it makes the practice very, very difficult. It is a real obstacle. In the same way, it's like during zazen, if we are angry for having been criticized

or hurt for example, and we really want to get back at the person who did it. If we are really scathing, if we think about being vengeful, this will obviously be a real poison. It will eat away at us during the practice, and that's why it is considered to be an obstacle. We can easily experience this. Same for torpor, agitation and remorse. Being remorseful leads to having personal regrets, thus loathing oneself. Having doubts is not doubting one's own ego (sometimes it's good to doubt oneself, to challenge oneself) it's having doubts about the practice and the teachings. If we are doing something and have doubts about it at the same time, we can't fully commit ourselves to it.

These Five Obstacles are obviously true obstacles to the practice of meditation, so letting go of them is highly recommended. However, at the same time, if we think about it, we can see that they are also obstacles to compassion and benevolence. For example if we always think about sex, another person, or our partner tends to become an object of satisfaction for us. At best, this satisfaction could be shared, which would be a good thing, but generally, there is a greedy side to sexual obsession tending to reduce the other person to just an object of our satisfaction. For example, when the other partner says: « I have a headache, not today, let's do it another time », we might get angry and won't be happy because we're frustrated with this desire. In this case, we can start to ask ourselves if we truly "love", or if we just want our partner to satisfy our desire. It is the same way for the other obstacles: anger is obviously goes against compassion. Moreover, one of the best remedies for anger is making a feeling of empathy arise in our mind when we become angry. We are angry with someone and stand our ground - what the other person does is unacceptable. But if we try to put ourselves in the other's shoes, that might calm the anger. At that moment, with the anger having died down, we might be able to find skillful means to solve the situation which brought on the anger. But anger can also be justified: because of injustice or if someone has done something wrong. In any event, as long as we are in the clutches of anger, we cannot correctly solve an issue.

It is obviously a little different in daily life than in zazen. The recommendations for monks made by Buddha and by Nyojo were addressed to beings who had vowed to abandon everything to go and live in a monastery, and who therefore also abandoned all sexual relations. Obviously for monks who made the vow of chastity, not bothering the mind by fueling sexual desires is fundamental. But in Zen Buddhism for one and a half centuries, this vow is no longer being made, leading to a different interpretation of this issue. The question is : how can one experience sexual desire so that it does not create suffering around us, and how can it even contribute to an awakened mind? This is totally possible. It leads to a greater dimension in sexuality – something more than just satisfaction of the basic impulses which we have. That means linking desire we feel for someone to the desire to contribute to one's spiritual ascension, to one's awakening. Those who say « OK, I want to abandon my desires, but only during zazen », generally think about the aspect of sexuality. But one needs to know that in zen, the meaning of our practice in daily life is to let go of the negative nature of our desires. That means the part of our desires which lead to suffering. The goal is to try to make our desires contribute to *bodai shin*, an awakened mind. This obviously requires a great deal of wisdom, and learning how to know ourselves well enough so that our empathy towards others develops ; because a fundamental aspect of compassion is treating others as we wish to be treated by others. This requires developing our own sensitivity, understanding how we would hope to be treated and avoiding always standing one's ground, being able to easily go back and forth between our position and someone else's. I believe that by practicing letting things go by,

letting go, not remaining obsessed about something, zazen makes our mind more flexible and more apt for the exercise of going beyond one's own position, understanding someone else's, and being able to go back and forth. There are standard exercises in tantric Buddhism for imagining oneself in someone else's position. And I think that among the skillful means in Buddhism, these are very interesting means. And even if we don't do this during zazen, it's a good thing to do in daily life. It's very simple: you're sitting in a bar talking to someone, and you think what they're telling you is strange, you don't agree, etc. Then all of a sudden you say « well, okay, I'll let go of my point of view, and I'll try to see their position ». Try it and see. In this case a bar becomes a great place for practicing; meaning a place where we freely meet people without standing on ceremony, without any defined roles or special positions – except for the barman who makes people pay for their drinks. We are just there with others like us, equal, and we can really try to practice this exchange.