



The Four Great Vows

by Dorothy LaFara, Dharma Teacher in Training

In Buddhist temples, Zen Centers and in homes of Buddhist practitioners around the world, each day starts with the recitation of the Four Great Vows. The first one says:

Sentient beings are numberless; we vow to save them all.

This is a statement of the primary focus for practice in Mahayana Buddhism and Zen Buddhism. I know for myself, that upon first hearing this vow it didn't mean much. I dismissed it as fathomless and unattainable. Most of us come to this practice with less lofty goals. Maybe the world seems too chaotic, so we meditate to escape the confusion. Perhaps we are overstressed by the demands from family and work and see practice as an island of calm. For some a need to explain the ills of the world is found in the concepts of karma and reincarnation. Ultimately, it doesn't really matter what the initial motivation is, because practice is a rudder for steering in the sea of life. Just doing the practice is what's most important.

The other Great Vows give us direction. The second one is:

Delusions are endless; we vow to cut through them all.

The Buddha taught that all suffering is made by the mind; that everything originates in the mind. These delusions are a great wall separating us from our true selves and the clarity needed to function correctly. We think the world is chaotic and it is. Stress appears when we don't want to let our family down, when we see ourselves as good workers, and when we do not want to fail. As long as we cling to labels and expectations, suffering arises.

The world is a mysterious place with ways of working that we don't understand. The mind grasps for explanations. But having a reason for something doesn't change anything, except in our minds. Our minds by their very nature create thoughts. That's its job. With regular practice, including bowing, chanting, meditation and kong-ans, we become more aware of thought patterns. We no longer see thoughts as precious gems, but rather as tools for the job at hand. With a sincere and dedicated practice the wisdom of our original nature will guide us beyond thoughts, beyond delusions.

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Heart Kyol Che One-Day Retreat

On Saturday, February 16, the Indianapolis Zen Center will host a one-day Heart Kyol Che retreat to coincide with the mid-point of the 3-month Winter Kyol Che in Providence, Rhode Island. **There is no fee for this retreat.** This Heart Kyol Che will also include consulting interviews with Senior Dharma Teacher Robert Blender. Attendance is limited to twenty participants, so please register by Sunday, February 10 using the form at www.indyzen.org or by e-mail to director@indyzen.org. The retreat starts at 9 am (with optional longer sitting beginning at 6:00 am) and lasts until approximately 4:00 pm. A four-bowl meal is included.

For more information – 317-921-9902 or www.indyzen.org

Abbot's letter

Robert Blender

Why do we practice? Our answer to this question seems to change if we continue over a long period of time. At first, practice may be an attempt to assuage our own suffering. Hui Kuo's initial question to his teacher, Boddhidharma, was: How do I stop MY mind? We may also have come to Zen practice with a personal Great Question: What am I? How do I live a good life? An individual may have a particularly difficult experience and seek a spiritual outlet to help to get through suffering. Alleviating our own suffering or addressing our own Great Questions motivates people to practice—especially in the beginning.

But, as we continue, we encounter indications that our own suffering is not the only reason to practice. We start each day by vowing, "Sentient beings are numberless, we vow to save them all." In our school, when a student presents an understanding of practice that reflects a ME focus, a teacher may ask, "Only for you?" The Great Bodhisattva Way and the Mahayana tradition widen the focus of practice from the enlightenment of the individual to compassionate attention to suffering in this world—our own and that of others.

Zen is identified with a "special transmission outside of words and letters"; and, the widening focus from individual enlightenment occurs organically through our practice. In addition to admonitions from teachers, the texts of chants, and sutras, there is daily practice that slowly helps us to see our true job. Beyond coping with our own suffering, we begin to see the suffering of others as a motivation for practice. This change is subtle and slow. It is not a cognitive exercise. Suzuki Roshi described it as walking along in a fine mist, and, at some point, realizing that you are soaked through. Exactly when that happens is impossible to determine, but, slowly, "What's in it for me?" fades.

How does this change manifest itself? It is possible to glibly answer the question, "Why do you practice?" by saying, "For you" or "For all sentient beings." But, those words are very easy. Manifesting the Bodhisattva Way moment to moment is about paying attention and about acting according to the situation. Correct Situation, Correct Relationship, Correct Function. The simplest expression of this type of action: "Hungry person comes, give them food; thirsty person comes, give them water." Doing this—and being aware enough to know that it needs to be done—goes beyond glib statements about our motivations for practice.

Opportunities to manifest the Bodhisattva Way are present in each moment. And, these opportunities don't necessarily require focusing on grand world problems. Simply showing up for a practice period so that there is a strong feeling of sangha is a way of acting for others. Just keeping the doors of the Zen Center open in order to provide this practice is a manifestation of compassionate mind. In the context of the four-bowl meal, students can be observed shifting from viewing themselves as someone who is served (partaking) to someone who also has the responsibility to serve (participating). The simple, silent meal can be a chance to pay attention and to help.

The metaphor of host and guest is one that recurs in the Zen tradition. The roles are interdependent—one is not possible without the other. And, depending on the situation, we are always exchanging these roles among us. During the four-bowl meal this exchange is easy to see: at times, a person is served, and, at other times, that same person is serving. Our motivations for practice are like this. Often, we arrive to practice as a guest whose individual needs are being met; as we continue, we begin to try on the role of host who pays attention to the needs of others. Awareness of this interdependence develops through practice—slowly, organically helping us to see our true jobs.

Calendar of Events

February 6

Open House

6:00 PM

February 16

One-day Retreat

9 AM to 4 PM

lunch provided

March 5

Open House

6:00 PM

March 8

Introduction to

Zen Class

11 AM to 4:30 PM

lunch provided

March 13

Public Dharma

Talk 7:30 PM with

Linc Rhodes, JDPSN

March 14,15,16

3-Day Retreat with

Linc Rhodes, JDPSN

April 2

Open House

6:00 PM

April 5

Buddha's Birthday

Celebration

4:00 PM

Disclaimer: All events are subject to change. Please contact the Zen Center at 317-921-9902 before coming to an event. All events take place at the Indianapolis Zen Center, unless otherwise noted.

The Four Great Vows (Continued from page 1)

The third Great Vow states:

The teachings are infinite; we vow to learn them all.

The teachings go well beyond what the Buddha or the myriad teachers have taught. Just look at life from moment-to-moment and all the lessons there to be learned. Just look around at the world, at all the varied situations for the uncountable beings. Each individual has the opportunity to learn in every moment, but we most often fail to take advantage of the teaching. When our attention wanders we miss out on the lessons in life.

When practice moves from the Dharma Room and is incorporated into daily living, the teachings come to life. Instead of merely having text book knowledge, we attain real understanding. Being mindful as we do daily chores hones a sharp and raw awareness. When we let go of our attachment to emotions, anything from anger to ecstasy, our heart opens to unimagined possibilities. Staying in the moment paves the way for learning the lessons at hand.

The fourth Great Vow reads:

The Buddha way is inconceivable; we vow to attain it.

How can we talk about something inconceivable?

How do we attain the Buddha way?

It is said, we can attain it immediately, in an instant, through complete trust and faith in the Three Treasures of Buddha, dharma and sangha. That is easy to say, but not so easy to do. Another means of attainment is through a strong and unwavering commitment to practice. Daily practice cultivates our center and opens our heart, then attaining the Buddha way is possible.

If we truly listen, the Four Great Vows can be a daily reminder of why we do Zen practice.

Retreat Schedule 2008

Four multi-day retreats are scheduled for 2008, all lead by our guiding teacher, Linc Rhodes, JDPSN. The weekend retreats include an optional third day on Friday and the December retreat is a full week, Monday through Sunday, with additional entry points for those not able to sit the entire week. All retreats include meals and overnight accommodations are available.



March 14, 15 and 16—Dharma talk Thursday, March 13 at 7:30 pm

June 6, 7 and 8—Dharma talk Thursday, June 5 at 7:30 pm

September 12, 13 and 14—Dharma talk Thursday, Sept 11 at 7:30 pm

December 1st through 7th—Monday through Sunday

Sitting schedule

Monday

6:30 p.m.

Special chanting

7:00 p.m.-8:00 p.m.

Evening bell, chanting, sitting

Wednesday

6:30 p.m.

Orientation to practice

7:00 p.m.-8:00 p.m.

Evening bell, chanting, sitting

Saturday

6:00 a.m.-8:30 a.m.

Sitting & walking meditation

9:00 a.m.-10:45 a.m.

108 bows, Morning bell, chanting, sitting

Sunday

8:30 a.m.

Orientation to practice

9:00 a.m.-11:00 a.m.

108 bows, Morning bell, chanting, sitting, Dharma talk, discussion and socializing



*Kwan Seum
Bosal
at Indianapolis
Zen Center*

Also known as
Avalokitesvara in
Sanskrit,
the bodhisattva of
compassion

About the Zen Center

The Indianapolis Zen Center is a member of the Kwan Um School of Zen. Membership is \$25/month for individuals and \$35/month for families. Becoming a member supports both the center and Zen practice in the community. Members receive a monthly calendar, the local and Kwan Um newsletters, discounts on retreat fees, and have the right to vote at the annual meeting. For more information on us and our programs, call 1-317-921-9902, or access our Web site at www.indyzen.org

