

## “The Illusion of “I” (From *Subtle Sound: The Zen Teaching of Maureen Stuart*)

Every day we chant the Four Great Vows. In chanting them, we are reminded again and again of what our work is. It is an impossible task. How can we sincerely vow to do what we cannot do? These vows are Buddhist vows, and in Buddhism there is the understanding that the “I” of “I vow,” this intentional “I,” is an illusion. So, the first realization with these vows is that “I” cannot undertake anything. And with this, the first step in our path is actualized. “I” is the obstacle; we get rid of it.

So now we put our palms together with a different attitude: not “I” vowing, but giving myself up to the carrying out of the vow. If this attitude of giving ourselves wholeheartedly and completely is truly practiced in whatever we are doing, the touchiness of “I,” the stiffness of the ego, is softened. Just as we experience in sesshin, there is no thought of “I” doing anything. And in this softening, our suffering is decreased.

This softening is also the preparation for the working through of our passions, which we all have. Our emotional reactions, great or small, are aptly called in Buddhism “the fires” – the fire of sadness, the fire of loneliness, the fire of anger. With the attitude of giving ourselves, we can also give ourselves to the fires, rather than avoiding or refusing them or being carried away by them. Usually we refuse to come into contact with those fires, or we give in and are carried away by them, swept away. We are not willing to suffer their irrational force, and so it remains wild, and in need of humanizing. Neither refusing nor letting it rip: this is compassion for ourselves. Giving ourselves into the fires again, again, and again. They will consume “me” which is a real purification. They will consume the ego. With the absence of that ego, the fuel is gone, and the fires revert to what they have ever been: our own true Buddha-nature.

The central core of Buddhist practice is *anatta*: no “I.” with this illusion of “I” gone, everything can be seen as it really is”: different, but not separate. There is no clinging, no alienation; just a warm connection with what is. Buddha’s teaching began with suffering and the way out of suffering. And he taught us through his own life, his birth, his awakening, and his death, the way out of loneliness, separation, and the fear of death. If there is no “I,” if the shell of “I” is cracked, the liberation of the heart naturally shines forth, and acts in peace and joy for all beings.

This path, so clearly shown to us, is a way out of the illusion of “I,” a way out of loneliness, separation, and fear of death. Only “I” can fear. Without “I,” there is no fear. It says in the *Heart Sutra*, “No hindrance in the mind, therefore no fear.” When that ego-shell is cracked, the wonderful warmth of the human heart is released. It is liberated; it shines, flows, acts. True Buddhist compassion warms and inspires us on the Way. True Buddhist wisdom lights our dark places and helps us out of our suffering; it helps us to feel peace and joy for all beings. At the end of the Bodhisattva’s Vow, we chant, “May we extend this mind over the whole universe, so that we and all beings together may attain maturity in Buddha’s wisdom.” what is our Zen practice, if not this?