

S_{AVE} A_{LL} S_{ENTIANT} B_{EINGS}

THE FOUR BODHISATTVA VOWS

*Sentient beings are numberless, I vow to save them;
Desires are inexhaustible, I vow to put an end to them;
The dharmas are boundless, I vow to master them;
The Buddha Way is unsurpassable, I vow to attain it.*

WHEN I REFLECT UPON THE VOW of saving all sentient beings, I am actually reflecting about saving myself. Saving oneself is the fulfillment of the vow to save all sentient beings. *Oneself* has a double implication. The first refers to this limited self, this individual life; the second refers to Oneself, this whole life as One. This expresses the very basic premise of Buddha's teaching: one is all, all is one. One Mind is all dharma, everything. This One Mind, body and mind, is anything, everything.

We usually divide our life into two. There is usually me and my life, and then there is some other life that is separate from me, or not-me. But in fact, this is not so; there is no other life that is separate from you. When you live your life in this separate way, the vow to save all sentient beings becomes nonsense.

How can I save all sentient beings? The bodhisattva is one with the Way, one with bodhi. *Sattva* is "person" and *bodhi* is "enlightenment," or realization of the Way. So to some degree the bodhisattva is the one who truly realizes and understands what the Way is, what life is, and then just lives that life.

We have another general definition of bodhisattva as the one who, instead of taking care of herself, does something for others. For the bodhisattva, self and other are the same. In doing for others, the bodhisattva knows that he is doing for himself, too.

How do we save all sentient beings? We say that the bodhisattva's job is selling water by the river. Isn't this unnecessary? There is plenty of water in the river for everyone. In fact, we are the water itself, true nature itself! No one needs to buy it. But we don't believe that our life is the *Way just as it is*.

We also have a saying: In order to take care of poison, use poison. A bodhisattva uses everything, including intellectual ideas and discriminative thinking, in order to save all sentient beings from their attachment to their ideas and discriminative thinking.

The bodhisattva does all these things in order to take care of certain situations. In a sense, you live in a dualistic way because you are confused and do not trust yourself, and for this reason the bodhisattva has to sell water by the river. But duality itself is also absolute. So are the bodhisattva's actions. We talk about things as if one thing is relative and another is absolute, but in fact, there is no such thing as absolute or relative. Such distinctions exist only in our thoughts.

So when we have pain or struggles, our suffering itself is absolute. All our actions are absolute. But when we *talk* about something as being absolute, then it is relative to something else. This is not the absolute; it is just an idea. Ideas are always relative, dualistic in subject and object, in opposition to this *I, my, me*.

Who is the bodhisattva? Each of us is the bodhisattva. And each moment of our life includes all sentient beings. This was the starting point for Shakyamuni Buddha. When he attained Buddhahood, he exclaimed, "I and the great earth, all beings, have simultaneously attained the *Way*." Can you see the relationship between Shakyamuni's *I* and *all beings*? Does *I* attain the *Way* simultaneously with all beings, or do all beings simultaneously attain the *Way* with *I*? The bodhisattva's vow to save all beings is vowing to realize what this *I* is. This is our practice. Regardless of whether we realize it or not, our life is this *one is all, all is one*. Realization is nothing other than becoming aware of this fact.

So this general vow of the bodhisattva can be examined literally as well as from different perspectives. We should closely examine who the bodhisattva is and what bodhi is. What is meant by all beings and by *I*? This *I* is always the key point. "I and the great earth, all beings." Are these separate or one? And how do we all accomplish the Way simultaneously? This is the task of the bodhisattva; this is our vow.

The next vow is: *Desires are inexhaustible, I vow to put an end to them.* Dharmas, all phenomena, are also inexhaustible, so in a sense, desires and dharmas are not much different. As a matter of fact, these desires also include the bodhisattva's desires to save all beings, and in doing so, he himself or she herself is saved. This is a greedy desire. Usually we think that we should not have desires, that they are somehow bad. *Bon no*, which we translate as "desires," is also "caring." We care about all sorts of things, and there are different kinds of caring.

On a commonsense level, if your caring is right caring, then do it. If it is wrong caring, then stop it. What makes it right or wrong caring? We come back to separation, duality. If we do not see things as one, we fall into the dichotomy that creates the relative world, the right and wrong, the good and bad. Then caring is no longer true caring. When our caring is creating the problem, it should be cut off. So in other words, in seeing the whole, in seeing everything as one life, we eliminate the desires or the causes for our troubles; we eliminate the deluded life.

We have all kinds of dharma principles. In koan study the Five Ranks of Master Tozan¹ express the state of oneness from five different perspectives. In the Ten Ox-Herding Pictures,² our life is seen from ten perspectives. In other words, this one life is appreciated from many different perspectives. This leads to the third vow: *The dharmas are boundless, I vow to master them.* It is always one dharma, and this one dharma is boundless. Indeed it is! It is not one, three, or ten, but literally anything, everything. It is the life of each of us! How do we master these dharmas? The way to master them is to truly see what this life is. The Buddha Way, the enlightened Way, or the life of the bodhisattva is the best way. *The*

Buddha Way is unsurpassable, I vow to attain it. So let us realize the Way together. This is the fourth vow.

Our life is the Way to begin with. So who is the bodhisattva? Having abundant water as your life, who needs to buy water? Just be yourself as the Way itself. This is the best way to be a bodhisattva, living this seemingly small individual life in relationship to all surroundings as the mutual exchange of energy, as a whole, as one life.

One of you said to me, "I know my life is wrong." When I heard this, I thought that this person must have a very clear understanding! Usually we do not realize that our life is not quite right. And this person said further, "I know my life is wrong because I am so selfish." So he knows the reason, too! This is a wonderful place to start. He knows that discriminating between *I* and *other* creates problems. Unfortunately, we all do this and so we invite the problems of separation. It is easy to talk about this, but how do we actually take care of it?

I quite often recall the koan "Zuigan's Master." My father also loved this koan. I believe it was a guideline for him. When I was very little, I vividly remember my father speaking to my brothers and me about this koan. It was a good lesson. Master Zuigan calls to himself, "Is the master in? Is the master in?" And Zuigan answers himself, "Yes, I am." And Zuigan asks further, "Are you really awake?" Then he answers himself, "Yes, I am." Then Zuigan says, "Do not be deceived by others." Zuigan replies, "No, I won't."

This is a marvelous koan. My father asked us, "Who are the others?" From time to time we complain about all kinds of things about other people, and we feel that we are being deceived. My father told us that these others are not living outside ourselves. The more I reflect on this teaching, it has double, even triple meanings. Just an amazing thing, those others inside myself. How true it is!

There should not be divisions. Everything is always happening now. We may feel that something happens in the future, but in fact, each moment is now. We may realize certain things more distinctly in certain moments, but it is always *now*. When we do not see this, when we create divisions, we are this much deluded.

Please really appreciate yourself! This life of each of us is most precious. If you disagree, you are the one who must buy water by the river. This is a very clear-cut, straightforward issue. How can we realize this fact of our life and live it?

[1](#). The teachings of Master Tozan, or Tung Shan, the cofounder of Soto Zen in China in the tenth century—Eds.

[2](#). A series of ten pictures originally created by a twelfth-century Chinese Zen master depicting the various stages of Zen practice and realization—Eds.