

The Four Boddhisattva Vows

Commentary by Chris Seiho Preist

Shi Gu Sei Gan

Shu jo muhen seigan do
Bonno mujin seigandan
Homon muryo seigangaku
Butsu do mujo seiganjo

The Four Boddhisattva Vows

Beings innumerable, I vow to save them all
Delusions inexhaustable, I vow to overcome them all
Dharma gates countless, I vow to pass through them all
Buddha way supreme, I vow to follow it

The four great vows of the Boddhisattva are a commitment to practise with compassion, awareness and determination.

Firstly, we vow to practice to save all beings; to see with an eye of compassion the suffering that we all create. Zen Master Hui Neng speaks of how we each have fundamental awakening already present in us. Through compassion, we can manifest this and give others the space to do the same, naturally unconsciously and automatically. We see that at the heart of each and every being is this untainted awareness, even if the other being is incredibly irritating to us or we are indifferent towards them. Not only it is in each and every one of these beings, but it is fundamentally the same as what is in us.

There is fundamentally no distinction, no barrier, no difference between the awareness in one of us and the awareness in others. It is the same awareness.

To see at a certain fundamental level there is nothing that separates us, gives us the compassion to express the awareness within us and also to give others the space and conditions to allow them to express the awareness within them. For some people, this may be through sharing the practice with them. But even in more mundane encounters – such as arguing with a salesperson about the return of a faulty product – can we act in a way that creates condition and space for openness as opposed to closedness, fixedness, rigidity and ego? Doing this is an expression of compassion, an expression of the untainted awareness within us.

Secondly, we vow to go beyond our delusions and desires. This is to see the desires arising within us as illusory in a certain sense of the word; they are constructed by our conceptualisation of reality. In a certain way they are real, but they are not as important as we like to make them out to be. There is something behind them, this untainted awareness, which is untouched by those desires. We can be untangled from them.

I personally don't believe that we can ever be free in the sense that they are never arising. I think there are some traditional Buddhists that still think it is possible, but it is not really the Mahayana way, Dogen's way. These desires still arise, but because we are aware of their fleetingness, their constructedness and the space in which they arise, they have less power over us. We are no longer puppets pulled by our desires. We don't suppress them, but become conscious of them and so their power over us is reduced. Zen teacher Guy Mercier has used the image of a darkened room full of furniture. We stumble around, bumping into things and hurting ourselves. But with the light of insight, we see the illusions. They don't vanish, but we no longer stub our toe on them so often!

Thirdly, we vow to pass through the countless dharma gates. At one level, this means to follow the teachings of the Buddha. But it is not about simply following a set of rules. It is to follow the inspiration of the Buddha in every instant of life and in each action that we take. Each instant of our life is a 'dharma gate' – a moment where action is inescapable. Can we pass through the gate with awareness and appropriateness, in harmony with the Buddha's teaching, or will we fall into illusion? Can we take action linked with the untainted awareness within us? Can we allow each moment to be an expression of untainted awareness?

Can we allow each moment of action to be less tangled up in our desires, our feelings, our thoughts, our personality? Can we allow each moment of action to be an expression of untainted awareness? If we can do that, then naturally, unconsciously, automatically we will be freer and those around us will be freer also. Doing this is both an act of wisdom and an act of compassion for ourselves and for others

Finally, we vow to follow the Buddha-way. For us in the Zen tradition, this means a commitment to practice zazen regularly. The practice of zazen creates the conditions in which we can make contact with this fundamentally untainted awareness behind everyday thoughts, everyday desires. By creating the conditions to make contact with it then we allow it to express itself not only in our zen practice but also in our actions. So following the Buddha way is to practice zazen wholeheartedly, and to be guided by the awareness that arises from this practice.

So the four vows are a call to practise and to be aware – to be aware of the suffering of others, to be aware of the play of illusions within us, and to be aware of our actions in each and every moment.



FuEko

FuEko

**Ne ga waku wa
Kono kudo kowo motte
Amani ku issai ni oyeboshi wareru to
Shujo tomina tomini
Butsudo wo chozen koto wo
Ji ho san shi i shi fu
Shi son bu sa mo ko sa
Mo ko ho jya ho ro mi**

Universal Dedication

**May the merit of this penetrate
into all things in all places
So that we and every sentient being together can
realise the Buddha Way.
Ten directions, three worlds, all Buddhas;
All venerable ones, Boddhisattvas, Mahasattvas;
The great Prajna Paramita
Gassho**

One of the key attitudes of Zen practice is Mushotoku: to practise letting go of personal gain. As an expression of this, we finish our practice and chanting with an Eko, a chant of dedication. This chant offers the benefits of our practice to something beyond ourselves.

Different Ekos can be used, offering the benefits to specific people – someone who is sick or suffering, someone who has recently died, or the lineage of teachers who have brought the practice to us. Most commonly, though, we chant the FuEko – the universal Eko – which asks to share the benefits of our practice with all beings, so that they may awaken to reality alongside us and become free of suffering.

The FuEko is an expression of the mind of compassion, and an aspiration that we may allow the mind of compassion to manifest through us. This is not an act of charity, seeing others as somehow less than us and in need of our help in a way that we know best; rather, it is to experience, at a fundamental level, that we are not different from others. To resolve the question of our own suffering requires a deep awareness of and connection with the suffering of others.

Awakening is not personal, it is universal, and can only be manifest when we abandon ourselves to the practice for the good of all.

