

Resolve Week 3: Vows

This week we look at the Bodhisattva Vow. This is a central expression of what it means to be on the Buddhist Path from the Mahayana tradition (which includes Zen, David's original Dharma home). It's chanted daily all over the world by followers of those traditions and many others.

The Bodhisattva Vow, From David:

The Bodhisattva Vow is:

Sentient beings are numberless, I vow to save them.

Delusions are inexhaustible, I vow to end them.

Dharma gates are endless, I vow to enter them.

Buddha's way is unsurpassable, I vow to attain it.

Delusions are inexhaustible, I vow to end them: It is impossible to stop the endless tide of conceptions that flow through the mind. However, it is possible to abide in the big sky mind of awareness, and from this boundless lens to notice fearful thoughts, anxious thoughts, angry thoughts, how could this happen to me thoughts, what I want thoughts, to notice all the deceptions of the mind as harmless clouds that float through the sky of the mind. When we step back into awareness we do not identify with the disturbances of the mind. He said this, she thinks that, I might lose all my money, and peace is all around us. We can be calm and wise, seeing the passing show of impermanence within us and outside of us.

The news on our tv's, computers and smartphones are full of news about this virus that is raging through the world, and there is a lot of fear in the air. It is easy for us to pick up on this, particularly as human beings have a negativity or fear bias inherited from human beings long ago who lived in times that were much more dangerous. Of course it is important that we are wise and skillful, that we do everything we can to protect ourselves, our families, and others. We can also settle down into our practice, remain centered, and be a calm witness to what is going on within and without. Keeping in touch with our inherent calmness, regardless of what is disturbing us, we can be grounded and free from inner and outer adversities.

We can put our palms together and express our devotion to awareness. Awareness is our refuge from the storms of conceptions. Big calm mind is an oasis within. From this vantage point we can be skillful with our minds and with our lives. We cannot end the cascade of concepts, but we can trust the imperturbability of our inner calm and continue to witness whatever arises. In this way, we end delusions, by ending our reactivity to them. We cannot purify our minds, but we don't need to. Awareness is already pure, stainless, and pristine.

Sentient beings are numberless, I vow to save them: When our minds are not consumed with hopes and fears around other people, money, and safety, our heart is free to blossom into its natural state, our loving compassionate generous nature. When

not consumed with the lesser version of ourselves, enmeshed in desire, aversion and the darkness of ignorance, the better part of ourselves naturally comes forth. As Bodhisattvas we welcome this greatness in ourselves, shining our compassion, altruism and dignity on all of the troubles of the world. This is an effortless manifestation of our good hearts, to love and care for others, and it is the true fulfillment of our lives.

Our open good hearts welcome and love the world. We appreciate sacred beauty everywhere. Yet life is often messy. Pain, suffering and stress are all a part of this life. Research shows it is painful to be born, it can be painful to be ill, and it can be painful to die. This is not the first crisis that has occurred in human history. Our teachings revolve around dukkha. Half of Europe died painful deaths during the Bubonic Plague. Invasions by conquerors throughout history have wreaked terrible catastrophes on civilizations. History calls out to us to be Bodhisattvas, to help each other in times of distress. In Britain during World War 2, there were posters, "Keep Calm and Carry On." This is what gives life its meaning, its richness. How empty would a life be that is totally devoted to oneself. This is enlightened self interest, the fulfillment of our good hearts. Think about what you do for others, and how that makes you feel.

Dharma gates are endless, I vow to enter them: Abiding in awareness within and without we see clearly and distinctly the truth of arising and passing away. This is opening and then entering the dharma gate, where we can taste the carefree, mystic sacred nature of freedom, in the evanescence of arising and passing. The more fully we enter this gate the freer we feel. The Buddha said, "It is better to live a single day seeing the momentary arising and passing of all phenomena than to live 100 years without seeing it." Like the prow of a boat going forward leaving delusions and distractions in its wake, we enter and re enter and re enter, endlessly seeing and feeling truth, and leave behind flimsy concepts. Defilements like "Dust on the Royal Mirror" dissolve and fade away as we move toward truth and freedom. The Buddha said, "Ehispassiko, The Gates to the Deathless are open. Come and see" It may feel risky, but all that we lose is our suffering. Every moment there is a dharma gate in front of us that we can enter, with the help of our wise commitment and our many practices. When we are closed in by delusions, we take a look---there is a dharma gate, present moment awareness, I choose to enter that. Breaking the spell of deceptions with what we know to be true, with confidence, we can be at ease everywhere, allowing conditions to dissolve into silence, into warm hearted awareness of Anicca.

Buddha's way is unsurpassable, I vow to attain it: There is nothing in life worth clinging to, and there is nothing better in life than a liberated heart. Buddha's way is unsurpassable, I vow to attain it. This is a vow worth living by.

Reflection: These vows might sound rather ambitious or abstract. But what about right here, right now, one step at a time, not leaving anyone or anything out of your heart? *This* being right here in front of me, *this* delusion I seem to be struggling under or clinging to, *this* situation viewed as a Dharma Gate or opportunity to deepen our wisdom and compassion, *this* moment of feeling tempted by the Way of Going Back to Sleep? How might taking these vows support you in such moments?

Here is another translation from the Upaya Zen Center in Santa Fe, where Jennifer has studied chaplaincy. Consider what wording or expression of these vows or the spirit behind them might be most meaningful to you.

Creations are numberless, I vow to free them.

Delusions are inexhaustible, I vow to transform them.

Reality is boundless, I vow to perceive it.

The awakened way is unsurpassable, I vow to embody it.