

The Power of Vows

„Anyone who wants to attain the Way of enlightenment must drive forward the wheel of the Four Great Vows“ (Hakuin Zenji)

Having examined our existence and, perhaps, felt the stirrings of doubt and inquiry, there is still something more required for a truly profound motivation sufficient to walk the Zen path. This is because in our lives as human beings we exist in relationship with others. Here I do not refer to the web of things and conditions we discussed in the last chapter. Rather, I simply mean that there are seemingly many other beings (again, let us put aside for now concepts of “real” or “unreal”) that wander through this interesting, inexplicable existence along with us. For that reason, when we reflect upon the angst and suffering we may experience within this impermanent, unstable, wondrous life, naturally we also see that there are others who likewise struggle.

At any moment of day or night, it is appropriate for us to remember the incalculable numbers and varieties of other beings who right now also live and experience as we do. They are present all around us, these fellow wanderers, as boundless and yet as deluded as we are – not only other people but all the many creatures everywhere.

As Torei writes:

“When closely observing sentient beings, it appears that they always throw away the origin and chase after end-states; thus, much attached to all kinds of karma-producing activities, dying here and being born there, they revolve through the various stages of the Wheel of Becoming. The Five Signs of Decay of heavenly beings, the Eight Hardships of men, the states of hungry ghosts and of animals, the excruciating pains of the hells – just try with all your might to imagine these and feel them in your own heart”.

Torei here mentions various classes of beings in realms of existence other than our own. But leaving this aside, his primary point is that there are many other wanderers like us. Let us here do the wonderful practice he suggests and try to imagine some of those beings and what

suffering they experience. Many of them are not in distant realms at all but very nearby where we may easily see them:

There are those dying painfully in a nearby hospital, those a few blocks or miles away who are hungry and do not know how or when their next meal will come, those grieving everywhere, the billions who grind their lives away in mindless toil.

There are those who, somewhere in the world at this very moment, experience horrific torture. There are the imprisoned and those imprisoned within mazes of mental illness, addiction, loneliness and depression. There are shivering and lost stray animals, the fear-stricken creatures in slaughterhouses, and all the living things within ravaged forests and poisoned waters during this time environmental degradation.

In winter, sitting in warm homes, we may remember the people and many smaller creatures who starve and freeze, silently and unnoticed, just outside our windows. When we eat, we may give thought to the uncounted lives, large and small, that are extinguished even in the process of growing our vegetables, let alone to bring meat or fish to the table. We may ponder what actual cost in lives, great and small, was paid so that we may wear a garment or flip a switch to light a room. We may, each of us, recognize that even in the act of walking about, myriad small creatures are killed simply by our footsteps.

These are just some of the suffering beings who exist very nearby. Though it seems impossible to comprehend, still we may try to ponder and feel with our hearts as Torei advises: in how many places and ways throughout the universe do beings exist right now, arising and passing away, living and dying, again and again? ...

... In Buddhist teaching, it is said that from beginningless time we have each, due to our delusion and fixation on an illusory self, been reborn again and again in uncounted forms. This is samsara*, the "wheel of becoming" that Torei mentions. But at the moment when the factors summarized above coalesce into an actual determination to practice Zen – an aspiration to realize wisdom not only for ourselves but for others – then we utterly cease to be

common beings. The course of all our future existence irrevocably changes. We have given rise to *bodaishin**, the “mind of awaking”. We have become fledgling bodhisattvas.

What will sustain us now is our ceaseless vow to save others along with ourselves. As we experience our own suffering and challenges, and recognizing our kinship with others, we encompass all together with deeply compassionate regard. All our activities become focused on the path of awakening together with all beings. No matter how difficult the conditions in whatever situation we find ourselves, we will never stop practicing. Even if the world should shake itself apart with war and famine, we will bravely work to help others. Even if we should find ourselves in a hellish realm filled with great suffering, we will immediately set about working to help the beings there. Even if we should find ourselves reborn again and again without cessation over endless eons, wherever we arise we will work to help the beings we encounter with a buoyant, courageous spirit. No matter where we go, the power of our vows carries us.

Certainly, there is still a long path to walk. We must ourselves awaken and through training gain the very tools by which these profound vows may be accomplished. But with this new direction our path itself is now a radically different one. All beings walk side by side with us, and we will never again feel alone. This is a path, finally, leading home.

*Samsara: (Skt.: Jpn., *rinne*). Literally, „wandering through“. The cycle of existence; the endless round of rebirth experienced by beings entangled in delusion.

*Bodaishin: (Jpn.; Skt., *bodhicitta*). The aspiration to attain liberation for oneself and others. The arising of such aspiration marks the beginning of the bodhisattva path.

Source: “The Rinzai Zen Way” by Meido Moore Roshi, excerpt from chapter 5.