

THE FOUR VOWS

— 四つの願い —

May All Be Happy

Many people go to Hatusmode, or make their first visit of the year to a shrine, during the New Year's holiday. Each and everyone have their own wishes. A variety of wishes are made, such as family safety, prosperous business, and physical health.

Furthermore, people write their wishes on strips of paper and tie them to bamboo branches during Tanabata, or star festival. Various wishes are also made during Tanabata. Last summer, since it was so hot in Engakuji temple, we set up a shelf near the gate and decorated it with many wind chimes. We asked people to each write a wish on a strip of paper on the wind chime. Various wishes, such as wishing a grandmother to get well or asking to pass an examination, were written. On occasions, people make various wishes.

Many years ago, I read the following contribution in a newspaper's readers column. Every year at Tanabata, the contributor wrote a wish and decorated it on a bamboo branch at a shrine. Each time, she was not sure what to ask for. She had made various wishes; however, she now asks for a healthy life in smiles.

One day, while walking along a shopping street in the neighborhood, she noticed, at a storefront, a strip of paper on a bamboo branch written with the words "May everyone be happy". She, being taken aback, wrote in the contribution that "I reflected that I had always thought only of myself." While most of us wish for ourselves, it is truly noble to wish for the happiness of all, as did the person who wrote the wish on the strip of paper. It can be said that this is the mind of a Bodhisattva.

Vows of Buddha

People wish for many things. It can be said that we can live because of our wishes. Buddhism also values wishes, or vows. Each Bodhisattva who has a vow becomes a Buddha by fulfilling that vow.

There was a Bodhisattva who made a vow that if everyone wished to be born in the Bodhisattva's country and chanted the Bodhisattva's name ten times, the Bodhisattva would ensure that they would be born in the Bodhisattva's country. The Bodhisattva would not become enlightened if they could not be born in the Bodhisattva's country.

The Bodhisattva said that by chanting the name ten times, everyone would be born in a peaceful world devoid of suffering. It is Amida, or Amitabha, who made such a vow and became a Buddha. Consequently, many people began to chant Amida's name, which is "*Namu Amidabutsu*". The number of people who have believed in this Buddha's vow and chanted the prayer to Amida is uncountable.

Kannon, or Avalokiteshvara, made ten vows. Kannon made a vow to surely save all who chants Kannon's name from misfortunes, namely, the seven misfortunes such as being in a fire, drowning in water, falling from a high cliff, and being cut by a sword. Believing in this vow, we chant Kannon's gracious name. We chant, "*Namu Kannon Bosatsu*."

The Buddhas have their own respective vows. On the other hand, there are vows that are common to all Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, furthermore, to all those who learn the Way of the Buddha. These are the four vows, namely, the four great vows.

The first vow is to save all sentient beings from their unlimited worries and sufferings. The second vow is to extinguish, although inexhaustible, poisonous desires which are the cause of suffering. The third vow is to master, although immeasurable, the Buddha's teachings. The fourth vow is to attain, although unsurpassable, the Way of the Buddha. These four vows are the vows that everyone learning the Way of the Buddha should have.

In our Zen Buddhist training, the four great vows are the most frequently chanted sutra. We chant the four great vows when we chant the sutras every morning and in front of each house where we beg for alms. It can be said that the four great vows themselves are the basis and are the entirety of the Way of the Buddha.

The Origin of the Four Great Vows

The origin of the four great vows is said to be the work of a Chinese Tendai Daishi, or Master Tiantai, named Chigi, or Zhiyi. Tendai Daishi preached these four wishes based on the Four Noble Truths, which are the foundation of the teachings of Shakyamuni, or Buddha.

The first Noble Truth is the truth of suffering. The truth is that this world is suffering. There are the four sufferings, namely, the sufferings of birth, aging, sickness, and death. The truth has further sufferings, such as the suffering of being apart from the loved ones, the suffering of being together with those one detests, the suffering of not getting what one wants, and the suffering of the flourishing of the five Skandhas, in which the functions of the mind and body are sufferings.

Contemplation on the truth that the world is suffering brings forth a wish to save people from suffering. The word “sentient beings” denote all living things. It is a vow to save all sufferings of the sentient beings.

The truth of suffering is followed by the truth of the cause of suffering. The cause of suffering is the desire of each individual. In other words, it is a strong passion or craving. It is also a poisonous desire. Recognizing the existence of the self, one becomes attached to one’s possessions and desires for more. If not obtained, one becomes offensive. This poisonous desire is the root of suffering. Therefore, in order to save people from suffering, a vow to extinguish each other’s poisonous desire arises.

The third of the Four Noble Truths is the truth of the cessation of suffering. The fourth is the truth of the path to the cessation of suffering, which is the path to rid suffering. Tendai Daishi first preached the truth of the path to the cessation of suffering, and then preached that, in order to address that, one should learn the unlimited teachings of Buddhism. He preached that the ultimate of the Way of the Buddha is the cessation of suffering and, accordingly, preached the vow to achieve the Way of the Buddha.

The Four Great Vows of Hakuin Zenji

Hakuin Zenji, or zen master Hakuin, a Zen monk of the Edo period, also valued the four great vows.

Hakuin Zenji first taught that in order to preach the Dharma, one must wish to learn not only Buddhism but all teachings. After the teachings have been learnt, one vows to preach the teachings to save those who are suffering. Only by devoting oneself to the service of others in such a way, the poisonous desire allowing self-centeredness is eliminated. One can realize the Way of the Buddha, or the ultimate path of enlightenment, through this practice.

Hakuin Zenji affectionately preaches about the oracle of the god of Kasuga given to Gedatsu Shonin, or saint Gedatsu. A long time ago, Myoe Shonin, or saint Myoe, and Gedatsu Shonin visited Kasugataisha Shrine. The god of Kasuga opened the door of the inner sanctuary to Myoe Shonin, faced him, and spoke to him in a friendly manner. However, the god of Kasuga only opened the door to Gedatsu Shonin and did not face him nor talk to him. The story goes that god of Kasuga said to Gedatsu Shonin, who was wondering why, “I allowed my back to be seen by you because of your excellent scholarship; however, it is so regrettable that you do not have bodhicitta.” In the distant past, since the time of the Buddha, it has been said that those without bodhicitta will fall into the evil path.

Now, regarding what bodhicitta is, Hakuin Zenji preached that one should “whip the wheels of the four great vows and do only the work of helping others” (“Obabadono no Konahiki Uta”). Bodhicitta is to devote oneself to the service of others by whipping, or encouraging, these four great vows.

The cause of human suffering is the selfish self-centeredness. It begins with distinguishing and comparing oneself with others. It is to love oneself above others. This is the root of poisonous desire. Hakuin Zenji taught that the key to ceasing the poisonous desire is not to seek enlightenment for one’s own sake, but rather to devote oneself to the service of others.

Because if one is obsessed with enlightenment, even if the training seems to be going excellently, the self-centered thought will not disappear. The root of the poisonous desire persists. It is only when we devote ourselves to the service of others wholeheartedly that our selfishness disappears. Hakuin Zenji, therefore, spent his entire life preaching the Dharma. He wrote many Bokuseki, or calligraphies, and gave them to many people. Hakuin’s calligraphies and paintings became a mental support for the people of the time.

A Vow Saves One from Discouragement

Tōrei Osho, or Buddhist priest Tōrei, who was Hakuin Zenji's disciple, preached that if one's vow is strong, no matter what obstacles are encountered, one will not be discouraged. Whether it is a Buddhist training or any other path, something will always come in the way when one works on something with great devotion.

It can come from the outside, or it can come from within one's own mind. Obstacles coming from the outside could be an unexpected disaster or an interference from others. Obstacles coming from within could be losing confidence in oneself or becoming weary of oneself. If one's vow is weak, one will become discouraged when such obstacles are encountered.

However, Tōrei Osho preached that if one's vow is strong, one will not be discouraged by any kind of obstacles. The vow should not be a vow only for oneself; the mindset of devoting oneself to serve others is important.

A self-centered mind will narrow one's view and hinder great achievements. Tōrei Osho likens this to business. He said that those who think only of their own profits in doing business will not be able to do big business. They become satisfied with a small income. However, if one vows to serve the world at large, one will not be satisfied with a small profit and, as a result, will be able to accomplish great work.

Therefore, the Four Great Vows begin with "However innumerable sentient beings are, I vow to save them all", which is a significant vow to save all sentient beings from suffering and distress. One reveals the true nature of oneself and extinguishes the root of the poisonous desires with that significant vow and vows to learn the limitless teachings. It is through this that the Way of Buddha is accomplished.

The Whole World Becoming Happy

With the same mindset, Kenji Miyazawa states "There will be no individual happiness unless the entire world becomes happy" ("*Nomin Geijyutsu Gairon Kouyou*").

Daisetz T. Suzuki also wrote that "However innumerable sentient beings are, I vow to save them all" being the first among the four vows has a significant meaning. He

even wrote that it "represents the ultimate purpose of human existence". He further stated that "true peace of mind is found in being at peace with the vow. There will be no personal peace of mind outside of this" ("*Suzuki Daisetz Zenshu* (Revised and expanded edition)", Vol. 36; January 21, 1901).

The vow "However innumerable sentient beings are, I vow to save them all" is in plain words, a vow for the happiness of all. Accordingly, it is a vow to depart from the self-centered selfishness. Furthermore, it is a vow to broadly and abundantly learn how everyone can become happy. Ultimately, it is a vow for the accomplishment of the path to happiness for the entire world.

These four vows are the vows that we should practice.

However innumerable sentient beings are, I vow to save them all.

However inexhaustible desires are, I vow to extinguish them all.

However immeasurable the Dharmas are, I vow to master them all.

However unsurpassable the Way of Buddha is, I vow to attain it.

