

VOW AND REPENTANCE

Before we talk about vow and repentance it is necessary to say a few words about the two aspects of “self” according to Buddhism: *conditioned self* or *karmic self* and original self or Buddha nature. In Tibetan Buddhism, these two aspects of reality are called the Relative and the Absolute. In another tradition, these two parts of ourselves are called “personality” and “essence.”

The conditioned self is what we usually think of as “I.” It is our sense of who we are that develops through the course of our lives. It is conditioned by our parents, our education, our friends, our national identities and so on. It is something that did not exist before we were born and will disappear after we die. That is, it depends on external circumstances. We may define ourselves as a father or mother, a son or daughter, a boss or an employee, an American or a Canadian, and so on.

Because external circumstances constantly change, it is easy to see how impermanent and changeable this sense of self is. And because this sense of “I” is so transitory and impermanent we spend most of our energy protecting it. We spend our energy trying to fulfill as many desires as we can and stay from as many unpleasant situations as we can. This is our ego centered life. No matter how adept our ego is at manipulating the circumstances of our lives it constantly feels threatened and is ultimately doomed to failure.

The ego uses the brain to fabricate illusions and delusions about everything; about who we are and about the world around us. Buddhism teaches us that these fabrications of the mind make us ignorant of our original nature. In this light it’s interesting to note that several of the early Christian Fathers, such as Clement of Alexandria, said that ignorance is our Original Sin!

Our ignorance makes us assume that our conditioned self, our sense of “I” is our True Self. In fact, our True Self only appears when we peel away the delusions of our conditioned self. Many of these delusions are discriminations made by our discursive intellects. We constantly interpret things as good or bad, without seeing them as they are. During the first year of my Zen practice I was given Case 23 from the Mumonkan, which is called “Think Neither Good Nor Evil.” In this koan, the 6th Patriarch, Hui Neng asks a monk, “Think neither good nor evil. At such a moment,

what is the True Self of Monk Myo!” The Monk was instantly enlightened, but he had one more question for Hui Neng. He asked, “Besides these secret words and meanings is there something of further significance?” Hui Neng responded, “What I have told you is not secret. If you realize your True Self, what is secret is in you-yourself.”

That is, when we let go of our thoughts, when we stop grasping at external things, our True Self appears. In the *Suttaniupata*, the earliest Buddhist scripture, the Buddha says, “Live in the world relying on the Self alone as a foundation, be freed from all things, depending on nothing.” It is not some special, mystical state; it is not something external to get or develop. It is already here. When we take our seats in meditation and let go of everything that arises, we are left with our True Self. And this Self, is not something independent; it is not our own. It is the life force of the universe itself. As one Zen master put it, the force that animates our lives is the force that moves the wind.

We are this True Self and we cannot be separated from it. But we are also our conditioned selves. We have to find a way to be relation to these two aspects of ourselves. This is our life as Zen students. And the way we do this is by vow and repentance.

From the point of view of conditioned self, our True self is the direction towards which we must aim. This is our vow. We have to live that vow. We have to see our life *as a vow*. If you find that “vow” has too many moralistic connotations, you might substitute the word, “wish.” In my daily practice I recite the Four Bodhisattva Vows before my sittings as a way of setting my intention. It is a way for me to see my life from a different point of view than the way I usually see it. Often I just recite the first vow: *Beings are numberless. I vow to save them.* From the point of view of conditioned self that vow is impossible. But Buddhism asks us, demands of us, that we do the impossible.

How are we to live the vow to save all beings? We need to experience the part of ourselves that doesn’t distinguish subject and object, self and other. As we said before, the True Self is the life force of the universe. We need to experience that everything we encounter in our daily lives is our Self: the person sitting across from us at breakfast, the strangers on the street, the birds in the trees, and so on. In Buddhism, we call this the *interconnectedness* of all things. It is the one reality. When he

became fully enlightened, the Buddha is supposed to have said, “I attained the Way simultaneously with the whole world and sentient beings. Everything—mountains, rivers, trees, grasses—all attained Buddhahood.”

After we practice for a while, and make a connection with our True Self we often get a deep sense of regret for our failings. There is an old repentance verse that begins lay and priest ordination ceremonies:

All my ancient twisted karma
From beginningless greed, hate and delusion
Born through body speech and mind
I now fully avow.

This verse illustrates how we view our conditioned self from the point of view of our True Self. We see our lack; we see how we constantly fail. We see how our karmic conditioning has prevented us from living the life we were meant to live. We see that we are not what we should be. This insight leads to a feeling of remorse and repentance.

My first spiritual teacher told me, “Why do you think that you will like what you see when you wake up after sleepwalking through your whole life?” I would say that “remorse” is a holy feeling that motivates to keep on working on ourselves. It is what motivates Buddhas to keep on becoming Buddhas.

During the first couple of days of my first week-long Zen retreat I had a very hard time with pain in my legs and my undisciplined mind. In fact, I was on the verge of giving up. On the third day, during the first sitting, the first line of the repentance verse appeared. I say, “appeared” because I “saw” it as you would see a road sign when you are lost on a long trip. As the words filled my body, or as Dogen would say, as the Dharma filled my body, I felt one tear running down my right cheek. Following the sensation of the warm tear I began to get a sense of, well, it’s hard to say exactly what it was. I can only say that I felt totally at ease and ready to really begin my practice. I think that this was my first connection to a deeper intelligence in myself. An intelligence that saw how I had been living and was already living the life I had only read about in books. Something in me already understood what I had been trying to get through years of study and meditation. This experience gave me the confidence—in myself and in the practice—to go on.

So, it is a mistake to see our lives from only point of view. We live in two worlds to which we must find a relationship. In a sense, we become that relationship. The attitudes of vow and repentance are essential if we are to reconcile our two natures into one life.