



Entering the Gates

I've realized recently that I have not been fully appreciating the meaning of the various chants that we use in our daily and weekly practice. Therefore, in this article I would like to address the Four Great Vows that we chant each Saturday after our study class.

These vows, in the translation that we use, are:

Beings are numberless, I vow to free them.

Delusions are inexhaustible, I vow to end them.

Dharma gates are boundless, I vow to enter them.

The Buddha Way is unsurpassable, I vow to realize it.

Although, as with any vow worth its salt, these vows cannot easily be fulfilled, they pull us forward through our lives with the pull of powerful commitment. As I look at them, it seems to me that perhaps we should make these vows in reverse order. The true beginning may be the vow to realize the Buddha Way. This is the rousing of *bodhicitta*, the state of mind of a

bodhisattva. According to the Oxford Dictionary of Buddhism, two aspects of this state of mind are recognized: the relative aspect or the mind of a bodhisattva directed towards enlightenment, and the absolute aspect, the mind whose intrinsic nature is enlightenment.

Our vow to realize the Buddha Way is the first stirring of the relative aspect, which is two-fold: the *bodhicitta* of aspiration, when one announces one's intention to pursue the Bodhisattva Path, and the *bodhicitta* of application, by which one engages in the path.

When we learn that there is a path to awakening, to tranquility, to harmony with all things in the universe, we develop a yearning to head in that direction, drawn by a vision of what reality may be. And so we engage in the path, often only dimly perceiving what that engagement may mean. At first, we may see the path as merely the pacifying of our personal struggles, but

as we proceed a deeper understanding grows of the depth and wonder of the Way. We learn that it is not about "me", but about a magnificent "us" that encompasses the whole universe. Thus the enormity of our vow is revealed. How, we wonder, can we ever realize the Way?

Yet as we vow to do so, the path slowly reveals itself to us. At first we think that certain practices and certain study are all we need, but eventually the Buddha's teaching reaches our understanding. To know the Dharma fully is to deeply encounter **all things**. And so the next vow comes to the fore: *Dharma gates are boundless, I vow to enter them.*

For me, this is the central vow. It says that in my lifetime I will encounter a thousand doors of opportunity for understanding and participation in the life of this universe. The huge question is: will I recognize them and have the courage to enter them? In the famous short story, **The Lady**

and the Tiger, we are left wondering which door the protagonist will open, the one to delight or the one to terror. This presupposes that one choice is more valuable than the other. But our vow says, *Dharma gates are boundless, I vow to enter them*. The truth lies both in delight and in terror, and to experience life fully we must be ready to engage with what our minds find abhorrent as readily as with what our minds judge pleasing.

The word dharma has a number of different meanings, among which is "the truth" and "a thing, object or occurrence." Our vow says that to realize the Buddha Way we will enter all doors of experience, that each is an opening to our understanding of the truth of how things function in this universe. It implies that we will seek to deeply understand what lies behind the boundless dharma gates found in each and every moment of our life.

Dharma gates may be boundless, but this does not mean that there are

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PILGRIMAGE TO CHINA

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no barriers to passing through them. Our ego, our sense of pride, our anger, our easily wounded feelings, our desire to strike back at perceived insults, our desire to fix people and our surroundings so they accord with our wishes...all these throw up iron bars across the gates to the dharma. Thus our vow to enter dharma gates is a vow to reduce the strength of these factors in our daily

lives. We vow to have more patience and clearer vision to see beyond what irritates or frightens us. The doors are there, but can we open them not knowing whether behind them we will find a lady or a tiger?

And so, remembering that we have vowed to realize the Buddha Way, we set about a task that will last for our lifetime: *Delusions are inexhaustible, I vow to end them.* Delusions are imbedded in our very way of thinking. The very fabric of our life is delusion, for it is by organizing and categorizing and describing the world we encounter that we make sense of it. In making sense of it we both distort and diminish it, forcing it into conformity with our desires and our preconceptions. Therefore, we make this vow in the full knowledge that it requires endless vigilance, a boundless willingness to test the clarity of our views, and an ever-present openness to the possibility that we may be wrong. We will not end myriad delusions at one stroke, but we vow to end them one by one, as they arise in a never-ending stream. We vow to learn from our delusions and thereby not to repeat them, to remove at least a few from the flood.

Finally, *Beings are numberless, I vow to free them.*

We wish to share our release from the chains of ego with others. To free them means to free them from their self-delusion, but how can we do this? Having ourselves gone through a process of seeking a better Way, the realization that everything that crosses our path is an opportunity for awakening, and knowing that awakening comes with the clearing away of delusion, we see that we don't free beings by proselytizing, by preaching, by exhortation. We do as the Buddha did, we offer them the example of our own life's awakening and say, as the Buddha did, "You can do it, too."

Looking back on what I've written, I can see that perhaps the Four Great Vows are in the correct order after all, for they begin with an aspiration to free all beings. This can be done only through realizing the Buddha Way.

As we enter the New Year, let us keep these vows in our heart.

Beings are numberless, I vow to free them.

Delusions are inexhaustible, I vow to end them.

Dharma gates are boundless, I vow to enter them.

The Buddha Way is unsurpassable, I vow to realize it.

— Tonen O'Connor

Milwaukee Zen Center – Schedule

January

- 20 All-day sitting,
6:15 a.m. – 8:50 p.m.
Dharma Talk, 10:20 a.m.
- 21 All-day sitting,
6:15 a.m. – 4:40 p.m.

February

- 4 Movie night, special showing
Monks at Bat see information
on page 3
- 7 Introduction to Zen, 6:30 p.m.
- 10 Priest ordination ceremony,
10:30 a.m. NO study class
- 17 All-day sitting,
6:15 a.m. – 8:50 p.m.
Dharma Talk, 10:20 a.m.
- 18 All-day sitting,
6:15 a.m. – 4:40 p.m.

March

- 7 Introduction to Zen, 6:30 p.m.
- 18 All-day sitting,
6:15 a.m. – 8:50 p.m.
Dharma Talk, 10:20 a.m.
- 24 All-day sitting,
6:15 a.m. – 4:40 p.m.

To see the entire 2007 Schedule and more information on Two-day sitting, visit our web site at www.milwaukeezencenter.org

Happenings

November and December were busy months at the Zen Center. Tonen and Tojun made several presentations:

Tonen: an interfaith panel at Rogers Memorial Hospital and a talk on Buddhism and nature at the Schlitz Audubon Society

Tojun: at the Prairie School in Racine and two sections of a class on Comparative Religion at Pius XI H.S.

Tonen, Tojun and Lisa Marr attended an interfaith dinner and program at the Islamic Society of Milwaukee Zen Center and Tonen attended the quarterly meeting of the Department of Corrections Religious Practices Advisory Committee.

And, of course, in December we celebrated the Buddha's Enlightenment with a well-attended three-day Rohatsu Sesshin at the MZC, during which Tonen gave dharma talks based on the meal chants which accompany formal oryoki meals. An all-day retreat was also held at the Oshkosh Correctional Institution and an extra hour of practice was added at Green Bay Correctional Institution.

While Tonen was visiting family in Los Angeles, she had the opportunity to sit with Brad and Yuka Warner's zazen group, which she enjoyed very much.

New Year's Eve we held our annual candle-lighting and renewal of precepts ceremony, this year graced with the ringing of a bell 108 times in the traditional manner. And this year it was our turn to host the annual New Year's Day Celebration of Peace for members of the six local Buddhist groups who are members of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship.

Our thanks to Chester Sheard, who contributed two pieces of stained glass art to the Zen Center. His representations of a seated monk and of the Buddha's footprint now grace the windows above the stairs to the second floor.

Thanks also to Tozen Akiyama for donating a considerable number of Buddhist books to our library and to Peter Johnson, who worked with Tonen to catalogue and shelve them.

Thermal windows were installed on the second floor front and third floor, something we've long wished to do. They are

not only better insulation against the cold, but will open more successfully to capture cross breezes in the summer.

SAVE THE DATE: at 10:30 a.m. on Saturday, February 10, Lisa Marr will receive ordination from Tonen as a priest-in-training, joining Tojun Cobb as an assistant priest for our Center. Everyone is cordially invited to attend this joyous event, and to bring a dish for the potluck lunch following.

Monks at Bat

Private showing of a documentary film by Bob Purman featuring the monks of Gampo Abbey. Sunday, Feb. 4, 4:00 p.m. at the film maker's office: True North, 2163 N. Farwell
RSVP: Tonen at 963-0526

When talking about the moon, we sometimes say it looks happy, sometimes we say it looks sad; sometimes we enjoy ourselves drinking saké while looking at it. Each moon that is seen by a human being corresponds to his karma and none of them are real.

-Kodo Sawaki Roshi



Monks' meditation hall at Koshoji near Kyoto.

milwaukee zen center

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Wed., Thurs., Fri.

6:15 am Zazen
(Zen sitting)
6:55 am Kinhin
(Zen walking)
7:05 am Zazen
7:45 am Service
8:00 end of practice

6:30 pm Zazen
7:10 pm Kinhin
7:20 pm Zazen

Saturday

6:15 am Zazen
6:55 am Kinhin
7:05 am Zazen
7:45 am Service
8:00 breakfast, oryoki
8:25 work period
9:15 break, coffee & tea
9:30 study class*
10:30 end of practice
**except on all-day sitting days*

Introduction to Zen

An informal presentation on Buddhism and Zen, followed by instruction in zen sitting, tea and discussion.
6:30-8:30 p.m.—first Wednesday each month.

Zen sitting instruction and private interview available by appointment. Call 963-0526.

MZC Contact Information

For messages: **Phone:** (414) 963-0526
Fax: (414) 963-0517 **E-mail:** kokyo-an@earthlink.net
For information and schedules: www.milwaukeezencenters.org

Useful Websites:

Soto Zen Buddhism: <http://global.sotozen-net.or.jp/>
Soto Zen in America: <http://www.szba.org>

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