Bodhisattva Vows, the Buddha Activity of Ultimate Reality

I find that when living with a sutra or teaching over the course of many years, particular sentences will from time to time stand out, seeming to call attention to themselves. It has been this way for me in regard to one of the lines in Dogen's Fukanzazengi, his instructions on sitting zazen.

In the closing paragraph, Dogen says: Devote your energies in a way that directly indicates the absolute. I wonder, what does a life look like when its energies are devoted to directly indicating the absolute?

This evening I would like to spend our time together looking at the precepts, the paramitas and the Bodhisattva Vow to better understand how they might be instructions for devoting our energies in a way that directly indicates the absolute. Before we begin our examination of these Buddhist teachings, I want to take a moment to think about the Buddhist view of relative and ultimate reality.

According to Buddhist teachings, there are two kinds of reality or truth, the relative or worldly truth and ultimate or absolute truth.

Relative truth is the world we regularly function in to take care of our everyday concerns, responsibilities and commitments. It's the schedule oriented, time and material aspects of simply getting on with our lives. There is nothing wrong with taking

care and directing our attention to the relative truth of our lives. In fact, it is through and only through the relative truth that we can know the absolute truth. Both aspects of reality are playing out together, just as form and emptiness play out together.

Ultimate truth is available to us any time we are present in and act in the relative world with the perspective and realization of our interdependent nature, our co-origination with all beings. We can spend our entire lives living responsibly in the relative world taking care of our commitments, being dutiful and respectful. We might develop a little truth, a personal interest or talent such as being a healer, a teacher, a parent, which can be of help to others. But we tend to use such talents and skills with an eye toward developing our own credentials. Don't get me wrong. Dedicating one's adult, professional life to taking care of others, to serving others who are in need, to making a positive difference in the world, is important work. It builds and strengthens our families and communities. It creates a civil society. These are all important relative concerns. When we dedicate ourselves to these tasks we may do so with the aim of being viewed as a good person, it may be a central element of how we wish to identify ourselves in the world. Again, not necessarily a bad thing at all. But does it constitute devoting our lives in a way that directly indicates the absolute? Put another way, does its energy come from a profound realization of our interdependent co-origination? Or yet again, is it a spiritual path?

During our years of studying the Dharma together, we have focused on the precepts, their meaning and practice, especially

during the time previous to several of our members receiving lay ordination. During the lay ordination ceremony called Jukai, the ordainees vow to uphold the Ten Grave Prohibitory Precepts:

Not taking life
Not stealing
Not indulging in sexual greed
Not speaking falsehood
Not indulging in intoxicants
Not discussing the faults of others
Not praising self or slandering others
Not begrudging the bestowal of Dharma to anyone
Not indulging in anger
Not disparaging the Triple Treasure

These precepts instruct the follower of the Buddha Way in how not to behave. Most of the Ten Grave Precepts sound vaguely familiar to us; they may resemble the commandments of our Judeo-Christian upbringing.

Last year we spent our time together reading Norman Fischer's book "The World Could Be Otherwise" which is a study of what in Buddhism are called the Six Paramitas. The word "paramita" means "crossing over to the other shore." The six paramitas, also called the six perfections, constitute the qualities that when cultivated, take us from the shore of samsara, or suffering, to the shore of liberation and the end of suffering. The Six Paramitas are: generosity, virtue or ethical conduct, patience, joyful effort, meditation and right understanding. While the precepts may be understood to be guides for the kind of

behaviors we should avoid, the paramitas direct us toward the qualities that bring us joy when cultivated. The paramitas liberate us from suffering.

If we examine the practice of the precepts, the guidelines for what constitutes unwholesome behavior, we can see how we might practice them from either the relative or ultimate perspective of truth. We can determine that we will not kill, steal, lie and so on, because it is not socially responsible to do so, because we will be ostracized from our community for such behavior, or because we wish to be seen by others as someone who plays by the rules. This is following the precepts according to the relative truth. This is not all bad by any means. Getting along in a world, a nation, a community or a family depends on our recognizing some common and shared understandings of unexceptable behavior. The precepts set boundaries on our actions. Human cultures across the globe have independently developed remarkably similar codes of appropriate conduct, often stated as commandments, prohibiting particular kinds of behaviors so that a civil society might emerge.

The precepts are most often practiced from the perspective of relative truth. If, however, we practice the same precepts from the perspective of ultimate truth, that realization that we are intimately interconnected at all times and in all ways, we will notice a shift in our intention and in our hearts. We may choose not to kill, steal or lie because that's the rule, that's how we get along with one another. But when we realize a world of intimate connection, killing, stealing and lying are simply not even a possibility in either our minds or our actions.

Many of the qualities we find in the paramitas can be practiced in the same way. We can choose to cultivate the positive qualities of generosity, ethical living, patience, joyful effort and even meditation from either a relative or an ultimate perspective.

Say we are sending someone a birthday gift, a generous act. We can arrange for the gift, package it and put it in the mail because our smartphone alerts us to the date and this is what family and friends do. It's a responsibility, and we can check it off our to-do list. This is the relative perspective. Or we can perform the same set of actions from the perspective of ultimate reality, seeking to bring joy and happiness to another because of our interconnected nature. We enter more deeply into the activity, sensing a shift in our heart that changes the quality of the action so that it is a reflection of our shared connection.

The same might be true of meditation. We may choose to meditate because it helps us stay focused during the day. Maybe it helps us be a bit kinder. Perhaps at the end of the day, it calms us so that we can sleep better. Again, not bad things at all. But we can also ask what the experience of meditation might be if we practiced it with a realization of ultimate reality. Then we sit not for ourselves but for all beings. Again, we sense that subtle but significant shift in our intention and heart.

When we practice qualities such as generosity, virtue and patience from the relative view, we are not practicing them as paramitas, as qualities that lead to an end to suffering. Only

when practiced from a realization of ultimate reality can the paramitas be liberating. The last of the paramitas, understanding or wisdom, cannot be practiced from a relative view, because understanding is another way of saying ultimate view.

Only when the paramita of wisdom, of our impermanent, empty, interdependent nature, permeates the practice of the other parameters can we find liberation in the cultivation of their qualities.

Norman Fisher says:

> The perfection of understanding is the most important of all the perfections. As I have been saying all along, the other five perfections depend on it. It pervades them all, and it's what transforms them from ordinary practices into "perfections." As I explained in the chapter on generosity, ordinary generosity isn't the perfection of generosity unless it's pervaded by the perfection of understanding. The same is true of the other four perfections - they are all perfumed by , suffused with, the perfection of understanding.
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> The tradition puts this another way: there is only one perfection, the perfection of understanding. But since the perfection of understanding is so elusive… it doesn't have any characteristics of its own. So it comes out as the perfections of generosity, ethical conduct, patience, joyful effort and meditation, none of which actually exist except as manifestations of the perfection of understanding, which doesn't exist otherwise.

Perhaps another way to phrase this is that the first five paramitas are to form what understanding is to emptiness. Form does not differ from emptiness, emptiness does not differ from form. Form does not arise except within and by emptiness. Emptiness does not arise except within and by form. The paramitas do not arise except within and by understanding. Understanding does not arise except within and by the paramitas.

This brings us to the ultimate expression of Buddha activity: the Bodhisattva Vow. The word “Bodhisattva” has two parts. “Bodhi” means awakened, and “sattva” refers to someone who strives to attain awakening for the sake of all sentient beings. The Bodhisattva vows to experience liberation from suffering only when all beings are able to experience liberation from suffering. Liberation is no longer merely a personal matter. Liberation is an endless activity, always sitting on the furthest horizon, imagined but never attained. It is a spiritual path.

The Bodhisattva Vow cannot be practiced from a relative perspective of truth. When seen from a relative view, the vow is nonsensical, impossible. The Bodhisattva Vow is a crazy flight of fantasy, merely imagination.

We have spent time together as a sangha thinking about and working with the precepts and the paramitas. I would like to spend our coming weeks together studying the Bodhisattva Vow. To dedicate one’s life to the wish to attain awakening only

when all beings attain awakening, is to shift your intention, shift your heart toward ultimate truth. It is to devote your energies to a way that directly indicates the absolute.