

The Renewal of Vows Ceremony

a talk by John Daido Looi, Sensei

Zen Mountain Monastery

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[This is a transcription of a Dharma talk given by the abbot of Zen Mountain Monastery, Mt. Tremper, New York, at the conclusion of Rohatsu Sesshin.]

Usually, this part of the Fusatsu ceremony is used to address some part of the teachings of the Precepts, the moral and ethical teachings of the Buddha. Every once in a while I speak of the ceremony itself, the Renewal of Vows Ceremony. Tonight seems to be a good time to talk about the ceremony itself, since many of you are doing it for the first time. It's nice to know a little bit about what's going on.

We begin this ceremony like we begin most of our [Fusatsu] ceremonies, and that is with the Gatha of Atonement, or at-one-ment, and we chant, "all evil karma ever committed by me since of old." The Precepts are designed to function in the world of this and that, in the world of good and evil. They're based on the realization of the Buddha. They are fundamentally the definition of the way a Buddha, a realized being, lives a life in the world of differences.

Karma is basically, in its simplest way of describing it, cause and effect. For every cause, there's an effect. And that effect becomes the next cause, and it creates an effect, and that effect becomes the next cause, and on and on. And the one characteristic of karma is the force to propagate itself, to continue. Karma means "action." And so here we're addressing the evil karma that we've committed in times past.

And next we chant, "on account of my beginningless greed, anger, and ignorance." Greed, anger, and ignorance are what we call in Buddhism the Three Poisons. They're based on separation. They're based on the illusion that things are separate from ourselves. When you turn them around, when you turn it to the other side, these Three Poisons become the Three Virtues. The virtue of compassion, the virtue of wisdom, and the virtue of enlightenment. Ignorance means having no light; having no light, not knowing what's real. Not knowing what's real is not having realized for oneself the unity of all things, the

interdependence and mutual causality of the entire phenomenal universe. That's the basis of the Buddha's realization, and that's the basis of the Precepts.

The next line we chant, "born of my body, mouth, and thought." And these are the ways that we create evil karma. We create evil karma by what we do with our bodies; by what we do with our words, our mouth; and by what we do with our thoughts, what we think. And thought is the one that's usually the most difficult to comprehend. We can understand how we create evil karma by what we do with our body. If you hit someone, you've definitely created karma; there are going to be consequences, effects. If you say to someone, "I would like to hit you," that also clearly would create consequences and effects. But we should realize that we equally create evil karma when we think, I'd like to punch you in the nose, even if we have a smile on our face. It communicates. There's no question about it. So how we use our mind creates karma. And we'll talk a little more about it as we get deeper into this.

So "all evil karma ever committed by me since of old, on account of my beginningless greed, anger, and ignorance, born of my body, mouth, and thought, I now atone for it all." I'm now at one with it all. Basically what that means is recognizing the fact that what you do and what happens to you are the same thing, that cause and effect are one, not two. And when you realize_not understand, not believe, but realize_that what you do and what happens to you are the same thing, there's no way to avoid taking responsibility for your life. There's no longer any way you can conceivably say, "He made me angry," because you know that only you can make you angry. And when that fact really comes home, you empower yourself to do something about anger. So long as he made you angry, you will continue to be a victim.

But when you make that responsibility your own you empower yourself to do something about it. Not only about anger, but anything. That responsibility, that sense of responsibility, encompasses the whole universe, because it's based on the realization that we're not separate from the universe. What happens to the ten thousand things happens to me. What's going on in Somalia is going on right here. In the jungles of South America. In the Ozone layer. Whatever affects this great universe affects this body and this mind. That's the realization of the Buddha, and that's the realization that these Precepts are based on.

When you atone, become at one with it all, when you take responsibility for it, you return to that oneness. Nothing outside of it. The Gatha of at-one-ment creates the space for the ceremony to happen. And then we chant the names of the Buddhas. We chant:

"Namu past seven Buddhas.

Namu Shakyamuni Buddha

Namu Manjushri Bodhisattva

Namu Samantabhadra Bodhisattva

Namu Avalokiteshvarara Bodhisattva"

and so on.

Namu means being one with, being one with the past seven Buddhas. Being one with Shakyamuni Buddha. But how do you be one with something? You students who are working with the breath, or with Mu, several of you have asked about that, this Sesshin. What does it mean to be one with something? It's about intimacy, being one with something. It's not an idea. It's about no separation, being one with something. It means whole body and mind unity. Every thought, every breath, every cell in your body, unified. Being one with something is very similar to invoking something. To invoke means to call forth by incantation, to conjure. To put into effect or operation. To bring about. To cause is to invoke.

Bodhidharma, in his teaching, spoke about invocation and what it's about. He says,

"Buddha means awareness, the awareness of the body and of the mind, that prevents evil from arising in either. To invoke means to call to mind, to call constantly to mind the rules of discipline, the Precepts, and to follow them with all your might. This is what's meant by invoking. Invoking has to do with thought, and not with language. To invoke you have to understand the dharma of invoking. If it's not present in your mind, your mouth chants an empty name. As long as you're troubled by the Three Poisons, greed, anger, and ignorance, or by thoughts of yourself, your deluded mind will keep you from seeing the Buddha, and you'll only waste your effort.

"Chanting and invoking are worlds apart. Chanting is done with the mouth. Invoking is done with the mind. And because invoking comes from the mind it's the door to awareness. Chanting is centered in the mouth and appears as sound. If you cling to appearances while searching for meaning, you won't find a thing. Thus the sages of the past cultivated introspection and not speech.

"This mind is the source of all virtues And this mind is the chief of all powers. The eternal bliss of Nirvana comes from the mind at rest. Birth in the Three Realms also comes from the mind. The mind is the door to every world, and the mind is the

ford to the other shore. Those who know where the door is don't worry about reaching it. Those who knows where the ford is don't worry about crossing it."

Keep in mind this was written around the year 500.

"The people I meet nowadays are superficial. They think of merit as something that has form. They squander their wealth and butcher creatures of land and sea. They foolishly concern themselves with erecting statues and stupas, telling people to pile up lumber and bricks, and to paint this blue and that green. They strain body and mind, injure themselves, and mislead others. They don't know enough to be ashamed. How will they ever come to realize it? They see something tangible and instantly become attached. If you talk to them about formlessness, they sit there dumb and confused. Greedy for the small mercies of this world, they remain blind to the great suffering.

"Such disciples wear themselves out in vain. Turning from the true to the false, they talk about nothing but future blessings. If you can simply concentrate your minds' inner light and behold its outer illumination, you'll dispel the Three Poisons, drive away the Six Thieves. Once and for all and without effort, you'll gain possession to an infinite number of virtues, perfections, and doors to truth. Seeing through the mundane and witnessing the sublime is less than an eyeblink away. Realization is now; why worry about gray hair? But the true door is hidden, and can't be revealed. I have only touched upon the beholding mind."

That beholding mind is the mind that unifies us with these Buddhas that we chant. That beholding mind is the mind that can invoke the presence of all Buddhas and ancestors.

"Namu Past Seven Buddhas." The past seven Buddhas are the six Buddhas that preceded Shakyamuni and Shakyamuni.

"Namu Shakyamuni Buddha," the historical Buddha, who after his own realization, stayed in the world and taught for forty-seven years. It's because of that teaching that it was transmitted mind to mind, from generation to generation. and has come down to us to this time, this place, this mountain. We're unified with the historical Buddha.

"Namu Manjushri Bodhisattva. Namu Samantabhadra Bodhisattva." Of these two Bodhisattvas, Manjushri is the Bodhisattva of Wisdom. Samantabhadra is the Bodhisattva of Compassion. In the Buddha Hall, one sits on one side of the Buddha and the other sits on

the other side of the Buddha. Manjushri rides a lion; Samantabhadra, an elephant. They represent the two aspects of Buddha, Wisdom and Compassion.

"Namu Manjushri Bodhisattva" means being one with the wisdom of Manjushri. "Namu Samantabhadra Bodhisattva" means being one with the compassion of Samanabhadra. "Namu Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva." Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva is the Hearer of the Cries of the World. And one of the characteristics of Avalokiteshvara is that she manifests herself in accord with the circumstances. So she always presents herself in a form that's appropriate to what's going on. In the bowery, she manifests as a bum. Tonight, in barrooms across the country, she'll manifest as a drunk. Or as a motorist on the highway, or as a fireman, or a physician. Always responding in accord with the circumstances, in a form appropriate to the circumstances. How is that?

Every time there's a stranded vehicle on the side of the road and a motorist stops to help Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva has manifested herself. Those characteristics of wisdom and compassion are the characteristics of all beings. All Buddhas. We all have that potential. It's just a matter of awakening it. You awaken it by realizing there's no separation between self and other.

"Namu Maitreya Buddha," the Buddha of the future, to be born in future generations. And "Namu Successive Daioshos." Daiosho means "great priest." The Successive Daioshos are the succession of ancestors who transmitted the Dharma from Shakyamuni Buddha to Mahakashyapa, from Mahakashyapa to Ananda, and so on through 28 generations in India, through 28* generations in China, in Japan, and now to this country. Mind to mind. It's not the scriptures that were transmitted, it's not institutions that were transmitted, it's not ideas that were transmitted, it's not beliefs that were transmitted. It was the Buddha Mind that was transmitted. It's the Buddha Mind that these teachings are a manifestation of.

And then we chant, when we return to the ceremony, the Four Vows:

Sentient beings are numberless; I vow to save them.

Desires are inexhaustible; I vow to put an end to them.

The dharmas are boundless; I vow to master them.

The Buddha way is unattainable; I vow to attain it.

It's an incredibly powerful way to close out the old year and enter the new. Vowing to save all sentient beings. But they're

numberless! That means there's no end to the number of them. And yet you vow to save them. Impossible! It can't be done. But you vow to save them. And by the way, if you intend to save all sentient beings, you'd better be prepared to be saved by all sentient beings. It goes both ways. Cause and effect goes both ways. Effect doesn't follow cause, nor does cause precede effect. They're one, and they move forward in time and they move backward in time.

"Desires are inexhaustible; I vow to put an end to them." By definition they're inexhaustible. How can you possibly put an end to them? "I vow to put an end to them. The dharmas are boundless; I vow to master them." Boundless means having no edges. To master them means to put a frame around them. It can't be done. "I vow to master them." "The Buddha Way is unattainable; I vow to attain it." It can't be done. "I vow to attain it."

[* not sure of number]

To me, the impossibility of these vows is the essence of this practice. We call it "filling the well with snow," carrying shovels full of snow down from the mountain peak and throwing it in the well. The sages do it all the time, and they get other sages to help them do it. Of course, you can't fill a well that way. But that doesn't seem to bother them. They're not concerned with the goal; it's the process that they're involved in. Practice and enlightenment are one. It's not the goal of getting all sentient beings saved, it's the practice of saving all sentient beings. Of putting an end to desires, of mastering the dharmas. Of attaining the Way.

And then we chant the Three Treasures:

Being one with the Buddha; with all sentient beings,

Raise the Bodhi mind! Let the supreme way be realized.

"Raise the bodhi mind" is the aspiration for enlightenment. Being one with the dharma, with all sentient beings, penetrate all sutras, let wisdom be like the ocean. Being one with the sangha, with all sentient beings, lead the people, let harmony pervade everywhere. Buddha, dharma, sangha. Buddha, the historical Buddha, and at once all sentient beings. Buddha means enlightened one. Dharma, the teachings of the Buddha, but at once, the whole phenomenal universe. Sangha, the community of practitioners of the Buddha's dharma, and at once the whole phenomenal universe, all sentient beings. So Buddha, dharma, and sangha is at once the individual and the whole universe.

And then finally we bring the whole thing to a conclusion by

giving it away. the whole ceremony of the precepts. The Eno chants, "May the merits of maintaining the Precepts permeate the dharma world, and may our sincere vows to accomplish the Buddha Way be realized together." May the merits pervade the dharma world, the whole universe, the whole universe of things; may the merit of this ceremony reach everywhere. It means to give it away. And it's in that giving, giving away of ourselves, giving our life, giving our practice, that we unify with the ten thousand things. When we give thanks, when we express gratitude in our services, we give back to the Buddhas and ancestors that which we receive. If we didn't give back like that, it would makes us thieves, we would just be taking. That's the same dynamic in the teacher-student relationship. The teacher gives, the student receives; the student gives, the teacher receives. It works both ways. Otherwise you feel inadequate, you don't feel right about it, you don't really make it your own.

At the beginning of the month we did a Rohatsu Sesshin at Greenhaven Prison we have a Sangha there and did a Precepts Ceremony during that time. And usually when I do the precepts ceremonies I have a little envelope that I keep the materials for the ceremony in. And when I finished I just took that and put it in one of the side rooms, and we went on with the other things that needed to be done. I didn't look at it until this evening, as I was preparing to come here to give a Fusatsu talk. And when I opened it a little note fell out. I saw it for the first time 45 minutes ago.

It's handwritten. And it says,

"You answer so many questions that I have glanced at from time to time. They seem not at all that important so I shove them to the side. They are not important until answered. Then they become overpowering. And mostly they're just everyday question that any new student might come across.

"Smoking is not a good thing for your body, medically speaking. But when I saw a man smoking it was sort of a statement saying, 'Hey, look, my friend, I'm human just like you. I have traveled far and I have far to travel.' I see the young lady hoping and wondering, hovering in the background at mealtime, making sure everything is all right; and when it's not, running to make things right. I hear a woman talking in such a way as to explain without explaining things as if to an idiot, making you feel safe in exploration of different chanting methods. I saw a lady introducing herself and asking the inmates their names, not caring there's a number attached, making an inmate feel like a person. Now that's something special. A man sits on the sidelines yet in the middle, quietly but confidently showing a way by example to people not quite as knowledgeable, but trying and willing to learn, if they could have a teacher such as this. You cannot buy happiness, but when it's given from the heart, take it and cherish it. And then give it to someone who needs it more. This always will be someone other than yourself. For indescribable gifts given so freely by a few, thank you."

It's signed, A Person

There isn't any Buddha that could make it more complete. Dana. Giving, receiving. And that's what this new year should be for us. To give ourselves to the teaching, to the dharmas, to the ten thousands things. To whoever needs us, whenever they need us. There can be no finer vow, it's the vow of all Buddhas and ancestors. And it's because of that vow that we're fortunate enough to have this incredible Buddha Dharma here, in this country, to practice, to stay.