

The Dragon Who Never Sleeps: Verses for Zen Buddhist Practice

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THE POEMS IN this collection set forth occasions for religious practice. Though I made them for modern students, I was inspired by antique antecedents, back to the historical Buddha. My purpose in this essay is to present the ideas and forms of those antecedents.

The Buddha's original teaching is essentially a matter of four points—the Four Noble Truths:

1. Anguish is everywhere.

2. We desire permanent existence for ourselves and for our loved ones, and we desire to prove ourselves independent of others and superior to them. These desires conflict with the way things are: nothing abides, and everything and everyone depends upon everything and everyone else. This conflict causes our anguish, and we project this anguish on those we meet.

3. Release from anguish comes with the personal acknowledgment and resolve: we are here together very briefly, so let us accept reality fully and take care of one another while we can.

4. This acknowledgment and resolve are realized by following the Eightfold Path: Right Views, Right Thinking, Right Speech, Right Conduct, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Recollection, and Right Meditation. Here "Right" means "correct" or "accurate"—in keeping with the reality of impermanence and interdependence.¹

* Selections from a book with this title to be published later this year by Larkspur Press, Monterey, Kentucky.

¹ Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (New York: Grove Press, 1974), pp. 16–50.

The Four Noble Truths are called "noble" because they present the vocation of wisdom and compassion. They are the foundation of all Buddhism, and form the heart of modern-day Theravada, the Buddhism of South and Southeast Asia.

Mahayana, a later tradition that became the Buddhism of East Asia, produced quite radical changes in the way those basic ideas were interpreted and expressed. For example, early emphasis was upon demonstrating the insubstantial nature of the self, but in the Mahayana that insubstantial essence itself is given attention;

It shines everywhere in the daily activities of everyone, appearing in everything. Though you try to grasp it, you cannot get it; though you try to abandon it, it always remains. It is vast and unobstructed, utterly empty.²

As to interdependence, the Mahayana Buddhist finds that relationships are not just the ordinary activity of giving and receiving support, but in every situation the other person, animal, plant, or thing is experienced as oneself. This is "interbeing," to use Thich Nhat Hanh's felicitous term, and is presented vividly in a multitude of expansive and profound metaphors in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, translated into Chinese as the *Hua-yen ching*, the last great chronicle of the Mahayana. Central among these metaphors in "The Net of Indra": a multi-dimensional net of all beings (including inanimate things), with each point, each knot, a jewel that perfectly reflects, and indeed contains, all other points.³ This cosmic, yet intimate perspective is offered again and throughout the sutra. Thomas Cleary, scholar of Hua-yen philosophy, writes:

All things [are interdependent, and] therefore imply in their individual being the simultaneous being of all other things. Thus it is said that the existence of each element of the universe includes the existence of the whole universe and hence is as extensive as the universe itself.⁴

² Christopher Cleary, trans., *Swampland Flowers: The Letters and Lectures of the Zen Master Ta Hui* (New York: Grove Press, 1977), p. 34.

³ Thomas Cleary, *Entry into the Inconceivable: An Introduction to Hua-yen Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983), p. 37.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

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This is philosophy at its grandest, and the Buddhist is left with the task of making it personal. Religions with Near Eastern antecedents permit a personal relationship with God, and while many of the metaphysical figures in the *Hua-yen ching* could be called deities, there is no single God ruling all. The Buddha's followers cannot pray, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done" but instead they have made such formal promises as, "I will awaken my mind to the teachings of the Buddha for the benefit of all beings." Such vows are found in the very earliest Buddhist writings, and continue to be of primary importance as a way of personalizing the practice in all forms of the religion today.⁵

In addition to vows, another way to personalize the Buddha's teaching has been to repeat gathas, four-line verses that sum up important points. Gathas too are found in the earliest Buddhist writings, and commonly have been memorized and used for Right Recollection—guideposts on the Buddha's path. The *Dhammapada*, an anthology drawn from early Buddhist texts, consists entirely of gathas, some of them probably dating from the Buddha's own time. Here is one that is known throughout the various streams of Buddhism today:

Renounce all evil;
practice all good;
keep your mind pure;
thus all the Buddhas taught.⁶

As Buddhism evolved, we find gathas and vows evolving as well. Early followers vowed to practice wisdom and compassion so that everyone and everything could thereby be freed from anguish. Their successors also vow to engage in wisdom and compassion, but *with*, rather than *for*, everyone and everything. This is called the way of the Bodhisattva, "The Enlightening Being."⁷

Certain traditional Bodhisattvas like Kuan-yin are venerated and even worshiped for the power of the vows they have taken to save

⁵ Har Dayal, *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature* (London: Kegan Paul, 1931), p. 65.

⁶ Cf. Irving Babbitt, trans., *The Dhammapada* (New York: New Directions, 1965), p. 30

⁷ Thomas Cleary, trans., *The Flower Adornment Scripture: A Translation of the Avatamsaka Sutra*, 3 vols. (Boulder and London: Shambhala, 1984-87), II: 16-17.

everyone and everything. However, Mahayana teachers are clear that the Bodhisattva is an archetype rather than a deity. When I take the noble path of the Buddha, the Bodhisattva is no other than my selfless self. The Bodhisattva-vows are my own.⁸

In the Mahayana the two forms of vows and gathas often converge. The *Hua-yen ching* includes a chapter called "Purifying Practice," consisting of 139 gatha-vows, and I have followed their form in composing the poems in this book. The first line establishes the occasion, the second line presents the act of vowing, and the last two lines follow through with the specific conduct that one promises to undertake in these circumstances.

For example, here is a gatha from the "Purifying Practice" chapter:

When I see flowing water
 I vow with all beings
 to develop a wholesome will
 and wash away the stains of delusion.⁹

As always, translation is problematic. Word-for-word the Chinese original reads:

If see flow water
 then vow all beings
 gain good intention desire
 cleanse dispel delusion dirt.¹⁰

The second line is the same in all the *Hua-yen* gathas, and its wording is crucial. The translator must choose a pronoun to indicate who is vowing, and also a word to connect "vow" with the rest of the poem. Cleary translates the line, "They should wish that all beings. . ."¹¹ "They" are Bodhisattvas, a reference back to the introductory part of the chapter, where Manjushri is asked an elaborate, lengthy question

⁸ The monk Nyogen Senzaki used to address his American students, "Bodhisattvas," the way speakers of his time would begin their talks, "Ladies and Gentlemen." See also *ibid.*, I, 312 ff.

⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, I, 321.

¹⁰ For the original Chinese see *Flower Adornment Sutra*, ed. by Hsüan Hua, multiple vols. in process, *Chapter 11: Pure Conduct*, trans. by Heng Tsai et al. (Talmage, Calif.: Dharma Realm Buddhist University, 1982). p. 171.

¹¹ Cleary, *The Flower Ornament Scripture*, I, 321.

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about how Bodhisattvas can attain to wisdom and compassion. He replies with the 139 gathas that set forth occasions to follow the Buddha Way.¹²

We ourselves are Bodhisattvas, so we make these gathas our own. The translation, "They should vow that all beings / develop a wholesome will" becomes "I vow with all beings / to develop a wholesome will." I myself follow the Eightfold Path and I join everyone and everything in turning the Wheel of the Dharma toward universal understanding. I vow to use the many events of my day as opportunities to fulfill the task I share with all people, animals, plants, and things. Such vows take ahimsa, or non-harming, to the most profound level of personal responsibility. I might not realize them completely, but I do the best I can.

Making the vows my own is in keeping with the innermost purpose of Mahayana practice, especially Zen practice. I make the reality of the Buddha's teaching my own. We are here only briefly and we depend on each other—this reality is my own. Even more personally: "This very body is the Buddha," as Hakuin Zenji declared.¹³ This is my truth, told of my own body, spoken for me. Everything is affected each time I make a move, here in the grand net of the universe, and as I rediscover my own Buddha nature, my vows are naturally the vows of the Buddha that all beings be freed from their anguish.

"I vow with all beings" is my compassionate vow: "I vow, and I yearn that all beings might vow with me." It is my invitation that we enter the noble way together. It is also my affirmation of the Buddha's wise teaching of harmony: "I vow, and with universal affinities uniting everyone and everything, all beings are joining me as I vow." Compassion and wisdom thus blend and are one as I repeat, "I vow with all beings."

It is a noble, yet everyday-life practice. Events set forth in *Hua-yen* gathas follow the routine of T'ang period monks and nuns. Each act in the monastery: washing up, putting on clothes, entering the Buddha Hall, sitting down for meditation, getting up from meditation, receives its Dharma poem. Events on pilgrimage: encountering a tree, a river, a

¹² Ibid., p. 312 ff.

¹³ Hakuin Ekaku, *Zazen Wasan* ("Song of Zazen"), Robert Aitken, trans., *Taking the Path of Zen* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1982), p. 113.

bridge, a dignitary, a mendicant—likewise offer entries into the truth. My purpose in this book is similar: to show how ordinary occurrences in our modern lay life are in fact the Buddha's own teachings, and also to show how we can involve ourselves accordingly in the practice of wisdom and compassion with family and friends—with everyone and everything.

Of course, monks and nuns of the T'ang period had no gathas for noticing a billboard advertising Jim Beam Kentucky Sour Mash Whiskey. As lay Western Buddhists, however, we pick our way daily through an agglomeration of compelling reminders to pamper ourselves and serve no one else. Our task is harder, it seems, than the one that faced our ancestors. Somehow we must cultivate methods, perhaps including gathas, to follow the noble path of the Buddha as fellow citizens of Jim Beam and his acquisitive cohorts.

Formal meditation for twenty-five minutes or so per day, meditation meetings once or twice a week, and periodic retreats—all are helpful methods. Most of us do not, however, live in temples, with their moment-to-moment invitations to religious practice. We are caught up in the accelerating tempo of earning a living, and Right Recollection tends to disappear except during times of formal meditation.

Moreover, we in the modern Western world are children of Freud as well as of the Buddha. Classical gathas do not deal with human relationships or emotions, just as the Japanese haiku form of poetry leaves that side of life alone. I find myself wanting gathas that show the way to practice and realize interbeing when I am angry with someone. I want gathas of impermanence when my plans don't work out. What do I do if I am made to wait for someone? How should I respond to an offer of meaningless sex?

Accordingly, I find that many of my gathas are rather like "senryu," the Japanese poetical form that uses the same syllabic count and line arrangement as haiku. Senryu deal with parents, spouses, children, in-laws, neighbors, work supervisors, economics, and politics. The metaphors are as complex as the situations, full of irony and satire.¹⁴ This is human life, which I want my gathas to address.

Finally, gathas must be reckoned as poetry, and in this respect the

¹⁴ R.H. Blyth, "Haiku and Senryu" in *Senryu: Japanese Satirical Verses* (Tokyo: Hokuseidō Press, 1949), pp. 12–47.

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classical gathas are rather thin. I don't find much ambiguity, irony, paradox, doubt, humor, playfulness, chance, absurdity, frustration, or mystery in them. However, they inspire my practice (including my writing), and for the devotional occasions of stepping into the meditation hall, bowing, reciting sutras, and settling down for zazen, I hope that my gathas will tend for the most part to be as straightforward and simple-hearted as my models.

Waking up in the morning
I vow with all beings
to be ready for sparks of the Dharma
from flowers or children or birds.

Watching the sky before dawn
I vow with all beings
to open those flawless eyes
that welcomed the Morning Star.

Offering rice to the Buddha
I vow with all beings
to honor your gentle injunction
that we keep our sustenance plain.

Turning for refuge in Sangha
I vow with all beings
to open myself to the geckos
and the strange behavior of friends.

AITKEN

Sitting alone in zazen
I vow with all beings
to remember I'm sitting together
with mountains, children, and whales.

When someone rolls up in a wheelchair
I vow with all beings,
to welcome this cogent teacher
of life created from death.

When women say I am sexist
I vow with all beings
to ask for specific examples
and give them a chance to sink in.

When I'm worried about my attachments
I vow with all beings
to remember interdependence:
if I weren't attached I'd be dead.

When the dentist takes up his drill
I vow with all beings
to welcome the pain and discomfort
as doors to a steady mind.

Watching my body get older
I vow with all beings
to be absolute for dying
and rejoice in my family and friends.

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When I turn into somebody nasty
I vow with all beings
to reflect on how it all happened
and uncover my long-hidden tail.

When beset by personal problems
I vow with all beings
to settle myself in zazen
and trust the path to come clear.

When beset by personal problems
I bow with all beings
to recall the Perfection of Patience:
the ease of stars and the moon.

Whenever I feel nothing matters
I vow with all beings
to look in at my sleeping children
and murmur my vows again.

When I'm frazzled with anticipation
I vow with all beings
to enjoy a long hot bath
and a record of Josquin des Prés.

When amused by thoughts in zazen
I vow with all beings
to wave them through with a smile
and not follow them out the door.

AITKEN

When the point of my koan eludes me
I vow with all beings
to remember how linnets appear
when I fill up their feeder and wait.

Whenever I'm feeling discouraged
I vow with all beings
to remember how Ling-yun saw peach trees
bloom after thirty hard years.

On the shore of the ocean at sunrise
I vow with all beings
to rejoin this enormous power
that rises and falls in great peace.

When I stroll around in the mountains
I vow with all beings
to watch for the many announcements
of my kinship with bushes and deer.

Watching ants clean up the kitchen
I vow with all beings
to clean up the waste on my desk
and the leftover crumbs in my head.

When green leaves turn in the wind
I vow with all beings
to enjoy the forces that turn me
face up, face down on my stem.

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On reading scholarly comments
I vow with all beings
to open my mouth for potatoes
and let the thrushes explain.

Hearing talk of expedient means
I vow with all beings
to explore the matter more fully
and learn what expedient means.

With tropical forests in danger
I vow with all beings
to raise hell with the people responsible
and slash my consumption of trees.

With resources scarcer and scarcer
I vow with all beings
to reduce my gear in proportion
even to candles and carts.

When I read about levels of insight
I vow with all beings
to return the book to the bookcase.
“Oh bosh,” as Grandma would say.

Meeting somebody clear about karma
I bow with all beings
to drop my chatter and scribble—
my long-sought teacher has come.