Compassion and the Bodhisattva Vows
Adapted from a talk by Gil Fronsdal

Nineteen years ago I ordained as a Zen Priest in this very room, the Buddha Hall of the San Francisco Zen Center. In taking ordination I dedicated myself to the bodhisattva path, the path to attaining the full awakening of a Buddha. We undertake it with the express aim of helping others, especially to reach the realization of awakening for themselves. Fueling this intention is a sense of compassion for the suffering in the world and the wish to respond to that suffering.

A bodhisattva’s devotion to the liberation of oneself and others is expressed in the Four Bodhisattva Vows, which give expression to the bodhisattva’s compassion. In the Mahayana sutras, different bodhisattvas are often depicted as each choosing their own unique vows. Usually these vows are to be fulfilled upon attaining Buddhahood. At Zen Center, however, they are understood as characterizing our ongoing practice, and we continue a long tradition of committing ourselves to a standardized and universal set called the Four Bodhisattva Vows. They are chanted on numerous occasions such as during the full moon Bodhisattva ceremony, during sesshins, and at the end of dharma talks. In English these vows are:

Beings are numberless, I vow to save them.
Delusions are inexhaustible, I vow to end them.
Dharma gates are boundless, I vow to enter them.
Buddha’s way is unsurpassable, I vow to become it.

On first hearing these vows they can appear quite daunting, perhaps even unattainable. Taking vows to save the numberless beings might seem preposterous or presumptuous. Why would anyone take on such an immense burden?

We can begin to address this question through a koan from the Blue Cliff Records about the bodhisattva of compassion. This bodhisattva, known as Avalokiteshvara in India, Quan Yin in China, and Kannon in Japan, is sometimes depicted with many hands; in some paintings the bodhisattva has thousands of hands. Each of these hands contains an eye in its palm and many of the hands are holding different implements. Buddhist monks in East Asia know that Avalokiteshvara has all these hands, eyes, and implements in order to be infinitely useful to all the beings of the world. No matter what danger a being is in, the bodhisattva has the eyes to notice and the tool to help.

In the koan, one monk asks another “What is like for the great bodhisattva of compassion to have so many hands?” By asking this question, the monk is asking, “What is it like to act with compassion?” The second monk responds, “It is like groping in the dark at night for your pillow.” At first glance, this might seem as an unusual answer, perhaps even a non-sequitur.

“Groping at night for the pillow” describes the situation of being in bed at night half-asleep when your head or neck has become uncomfortable, perhaps because the position of the pillow is not quite right. Without any thought, your hand reaches up to arrange the
pillow to make your head more comfortable. The idea behind this image is to describe a situation where we take care of something without any self-consciousness; perhaps even without any thought. In arranging a pillow at night, we may not be making any distinction between the pillow and ourselves. The response to the discomfort is so automatic and easy that it does not require pre-meditation. The effort appears effortless.

This unselfconscious way of responding to one’s discomfort at night can also occur in our response to the needs of others.

An example of this comes from my home life. My two-year-old son sleeps on a futon right next to my wife and me. Sometimes, at night, when his blankets come off, I reach over and pull them over him again. At times, I do this without any apparent pre-meditation. I do it without considering that he needs help. It doesn’t occur to me that my sleep is being disturbed or that making the effort is a burden. At these times, I am not operating on the notion that he is out there and I am here. Nor is there any sense of obligation. Self-reflective thoughts do not occur, nor do I have the idea that compassion is being expressed. The young boy needs to be kept warm and I reach over to put the blanket over him as if he is not separate from me.

Covering one’s child at night may be understood simply as parental instinct. However, the Buddha encouraged us to love everyone as if they are our children, or as the Metta Sutta says, “as a mother protecting her only child.” For Avalokiteshvara, responding to the suffering of the world is more intimate than the relationship of a mother and child, and it is more intimate than any self-conscious relationship we have to ourselves. The bodhisattva of compassion responds to the world as easily as we might fix a pillow at night.

Often when we want to help others, we have a strong sense of a person out there we need to help and a sense of ourselves as a helper. This separation leads easily to a barrier of ideas or feelings that solidifies the sense of self and other. It can come with a great motivation to help, but the motivation comes from the idea that it is “me” doing the work. Acting from this kind of motivation is often exhausting, especially if we do a lot of it. If the motivation is mixed with a sense of obligation, the exhaustion is compounded, and we might experience “compassion fatigue.” Trying to fulfill the bodhisattva vows from this sense of separation, we will be exhausted within a few days—there is no end to the work that needs to be done.

Can the bodhisattva vows be undertaken in a way that is not exhausting? What follows is an attempt to offer a way.

The Four Bodhisattva Vows are said to have their genesis in the Four Noble Truths, which are the core teaching of the Buddha. When I was a new student of Buddhism, I knew the teachings of the Four Noble Truths, but I thought they were elementary Buddhism, taught to kids in Buddhist Sunday school. I was more interested in the philosophy of emptiness. But the longer I practice the more amazed I am at the depth of these simple truths. All other Buddhist teachings, including the Four Bodhisattva Vows,
can be seen as an elaboration on them.

In the Pali canon, the Buddha’s first discourse is recorded in the sutra called “Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dharma.” In this sutra, the Buddha describes the Four Noble Truths. But he does not state them as truths that should simply be accepted. For each truth, the Buddha encourages us to take an action to bring the truth directly into our lives. I would like to explore how the four vows are related to these actions.

The First Noble Truth is the truth of suffering. This truth does not say that life is suffering, but rather it simply acknowledges that there is suffering in this world. The first vow corresponds to this Truth, which the Buddha enjoined us to understand. In understanding the suffering of the world, the bodhisattva vows to do something to end it, to save the numberless beings from their suffering. In particular, the bodhisattva is oriented to the roots of human suffering, such as the clinging to self.

The Second Noble Truth describes the cause of suffering, which the Buddha called *tanha*. The basis of *tanha* is the delusion that the objects of desire can provide lasting happiness. While *tanha* is often translated into English as “desire”, it literally means ‘thirst,’ and has a narrower, stronger meaning than desire. I like to translate it as compulsion or “drivenness”. When we are driven there is no freedom. When desire or aversion is compulsive, action is reactive and often habit-driven. The Buddha taught that we should let go of the cause of suffering. The second of the Four Vows is a response to that teaching: It is a vow to bring the cause of suffering to an end.

The Third Noble Truth affirms that there is an end of suffering; there is the possibility of living without compulsion, of living in freedom. While on the surface this is consistent with the American ideal of freedom, the Buddhist notion of freedom is quite distinct from a popular American way of understanding it. Often Americans want freedom to do, to have free reign in our actions and acquisitions. We often want freedom to act on our compulsions and to be unrestricted in individual expression. In contrast, the freedom of Buddhism is a freedom from compulsion, habit, and self-preoccupation. If we are acting on our compulsions we are not free, rather we are enslaved by them.

The Buddha said that the Third Noble Truth is to be realized. In the wording of the Four Vows this translates to committing oneself to entering the “boundless Dharma gates.” For a Zen student, the boundlessness of the Dharma gates means we cultivate the realization of release from suffering over and over again in each and every moment. There is no end to the work of releasing the suffering of the world.

The Fourth Noble Truth states that there is a path leading to the end of suffering. Letting go of the *tanha* and bringing an end to suffering is far from easy. For this reason, the Buddha taught the Eight-Fold Path, and urged us to cultivate it. Or in the wording of the Four Vows: “Buddha’s way is unsurpassable, I vow to become it.”

The Four Noble Truths are simple phrases stated without pronouns. They do not explicitly refer to “my” suffering, “your” suffering, or that of others. From one perspective, this encourages us to be interested in suffering and its causes regardless who
it occurs to. Our concern is not limited only to oneself or only to others. From a different and more fundamental perspective, it means that suffering, its cause, its end, and the path are not to be personalized, identified with, or objectified.

Much of our suffering arises from objectifying the world. Our desires usually have an object: we want some thing or we want to get rid of some thing. And that “thing” is treated as an object separate from “oneself”.

I’ll give you an example. Once I had a cold for five or six days. I was a bit out of sorts, not so much from the illness, but from restlessness and boredom. One day, while I was still sick, a UPS driver delivered a big box—an unexpected gift for my son from a distant relative. It was an outdoor play structure that needed assembly. The box claimed it could be put together in ten minutes. I was bored and restless, and my first reaction was: “Great, a project!” I ignored the fact that it was drizzling outside. I went to work, and it took a lot more than ten minutes! When I finally finished, I relaxed enough to notice the bigger picture of the situation. I had been so focused on assembling the play structure that I had not noticed what was happening to me. I was surprised to discover that I was really exhausted. I then thought, “Oh, I shouldn’t have done this—I needed to rest, not tire myself out.” Next, I did what we commonly do when we suffer: I immediately blamed someone else. In this case I blamed UPS. “How could the driver have brought this package on a rainy day!” Luckily, I saw this momentary thought and let it go—I knew better than to grab on to it. So the thought passed and I smiled.

We are often quite quick to latch onto objects outside of ourselves, either as a solution to our discomfort or to blame for our discomfort. I was uncomfortable with boredom and restlessness before the UPS delivery came. Propelled by these feelings I latched on to a desire, assembling the play structure. When I noticed the tiredness that resulted I then, luckily only momentarily, focused on blaming UPS, another external object.

An alternative to latching on to these external things would have been simply to feel what was going on inside of me. This would have meant being present for my discomfort without being carried away by the desire or blame. If I had done this, I believe I would have found some ease in the midst of discomfort. By not being caught up in the external world of the play structure, I might have had the wisdom to realize I needed to rest.

We can also be caught by what is within us. We can treat ourselves, or part of ourselves as an object, which is a common source of suffering. For example, when I was 13, in the spring of 1967, I went to live in a town in Italy. I had the longest hair of anyone there and I was the only person wearing blue jeans. This was proof that I was the coolest kid in town. As a result I felt great! The sense of being special energized me with self-satisfaction. At the end of the summer I came back to Los Angeles. A lot had happened in California during the summer of 1967 and I didn’t have the longest hair in town anymore. I did have blue jeans, but everyone else had faded and patched blue jeans! I was no longer cool. I was almost out of fashion. My energy level dropped and sense of well being faded. The important thing that had changed when I flew across the Atlantic from Italy to the United States was whom I compared myself to. I was treating myself as an object and comparing that object to other people; in comparison I felt either energetic
or depressed—both in unhealthy ways.

How much of our suffering arises from how we compare ourselves to others or to ideals of how to be? Is there an alternative? Try this:

Take all the ideas of who you are based on what you’ve done in the past and throw them away. Take all the ideas of what you hope you might be in the future and throw them away too. Then take all the current ideas that other people have about who you are and throw them away. Take all the tendencies you have to compare yourself to other people or to any ideals and throw them away. What are you then left with? Who are you then? This exercise can show us how pervasive the tendency is to objectify ourselves, and the relief that can come from letting go of it.

Instead of treating ourselves as objects, we can, in a sense, treat ourselves as a subject. Not as a subject separate from anything else, but by focusing on the immediate subjective way that our life is experienced. Prior to interpretation and self-consciousness, we can experience things without any sense of objects. When everything is experienced subjectively, we are not even looking at ourselves as an object.

If I had stayed with the subjective experience when UPS delivered the play structure, I would have simply felt uncomfortable and bored; I would not have latched on to assembling the play structure. When I realized that I had exhausted myself, remaining with the subjective experience would have meant just staying with the exhaustion without assigning blame.

It is interesting to notice how being pure subject works in a conversation with someone else. If I am quite present for the conversation, a usual sense of boundary between us disappears. Yet, while I am mindful of the person I am conversing with, I am also mindful of the reactions and responses going on inside of me.

If I only pay attention to the other person, it creates a sense of separation. The other person may initially feel happy that I am listening attentively, but listening well also includes being aware of my own thought and feelings. This way, when it is my turn to speak, I am aware of the motivations and emotions behind what I say.

If I only pay attention to my own feelings and thoughts, it also creates a sense of separation. In this case I can easily lose touch with the other person, and what I have to say may have little relevance to him or her.

In addition, I try not to define or hold a fixed identity for either the other person or myself. This seems to dissolve some of the boundaries between us. And because I am aware of the reactions and responses of both of us, it seems quite safe to be in conversation without the usual personal boundaries we tend to live by.

I try to treat self and other as equal in the conversation. Rather, in this Big Mind, in this mind that holds everything as subjective, there is little sense of separation and no objectifying any one or anything.
This is similar to zazen practice where we drop the tendency to treat anything as an object separate from our true self. Sitting as pure subject, we don’t treat self as object, zazen as object, our body as object, or even Buddhism as an object. We stay present without pre-occupation with the past, the future and what can be attained in the future. Concern with attainment is objectifying.

When we begin tasting this pure subject, compassion arises when we contact the suffering of the world. Suffering, like joy, is everywhere. What happens inside us if we encounter suffering that is not objectified? The heart quivers and aches in empathy for the suffering, and is energized with the wish for an end to that suffering.

Compassion only arises through contact with suffering. We can’t feel compassion in the abstract. If we treat suffering as an object or ourselves as an object, we can easily feel separate from the suffering. This is turn easily leads to feeling of anxiety or even horror. It can also lead to responses that are condescending, such as pity or feelings of superiority being one who to help or protect the other.

When we encounter suffering in the world from the subjective state, the motivation to help arises out of a simple, almost impersonal sense of compassion. It arises from the totality of the situation, not through the filter of self-identity or ideals. The wish to help arises in the same way the wish to adjust the pillow at night arises.

The response to the world that arises out of pure subject is what the dedication to the Four Bodhisattva Vows is about.

Maybe mythically, taking the Four Vows does mean I am dedicated to saving all beings. But more practically, it means that whenever I encounter suffering, I vow to try to save that situation, to save the person suffering and to save myself. This means allowing the entire situation to rest within the Big Mind of pure subject, and to trust the response arising out of that mind.

Most commonly, I am not resting in Big Mind. At these times, the Four Vows have their greatest meaning. They are an inspiration and reminder to return to the subjective mode of experience. If I suffer, if I struggle, or if I find I cannot return to pure subject, they fuel my commitment to understand how I am living in a world of objectification and “thirst.” It points back to my practice.

So the vow to save all beings begins by returning to pure subject. Perhaps this is why the sixth patriarch, Hui Neng, said that the Four Vows are fulfilled in our own mind. It might be why one Zen Center translates the first vow as “Beings are numberless, I vow to awaken with them.” Fulfilling the Four Vows has an intimate and satisfying quality. They are about how we meet the next moment, not about having burdensome abstract or lofty ideals about saving the whole world. In Zen practice we always start right here where we are. We are concerned with letting our whole response to the world arise out of being rooted in the present, without an objective me in the middle, and without an objective other out there.
When someone lives by the Four Vows, he or she is inspired by the possibility of meeting the world from the mind of pure subject: to remain open without shutting down in the face of suffering. Living by the Four Vows is like being Avalokiteshvara, the great bodhisattva of compassion, who with 84,000 arms, who does her work effortlessly, acting in the world as if she is just puffing up her pillow in the middle of the night.