1: All Beings

by Ven. Shikai Zuiko O-sensei
Dainen-ji, October 18th, 1997

[Following three strikes of the gong, the Godo chants “The Four Great Vows” in Japanese and then in English]:

Shi Gu Sei Gan
SHU JO MU HEN SEI GAN DO
BON NO MU JIN SEI GAN DAN
HO MON MU RYO SEI GAN GAKU
BUTSUDO MU JO SEI GAN JO

[One gong strike]

All beings without number I vow to liberate.
Endless obsessions I vow to release.
Dharma Gates beyond measure I vow to penetrate.
Limitless awakening I vow to unfold.

[Three gong strikes]

The “Shi Gu Sei Gan: The Four Great Vows”, is chanted in this monastery and in many, if not all, other Zen monasteries to end formal sittings. Here at Dainen-ji, we chant this at the end of the formal sitting in the morning and we chant it at the end of the formal sitting in the evening. We chant “The Four Great Vows” during sesshin, at the end of oryoki. Some of you have attended the formal sittings and some of you have heard “The Four Great Vows” chanted before. And some of you have chanted “The Four Great Vows” yourself or with the Sangha. For example “The Four Great Vows” are chanted by students doing retreats.

Chanting, of course, is a form of practice and, as with any of the forms, chanting is an opportunity to align body, breath, speech and mind with the Teacher and the Teachings, the Lineage, and with this moment. This Saturday morning we are in the Hatto at Dainen-ji. The Hatto is completely full today; every zabuton and zafu is occupied and we are sitting zazen.

Now if zazen were all that there were to practise then that would be convenient. Zazen is essential to practice but it is not the only form. As associate students and general students, you are already familiar with other forms of practice: you are familiar with kinhin, practise whilst walking or walking practice; you bow in gassho monjin at the entrance to the Hatto, yet another opportunity to see how you are. Chanting practice is a bit different in that what we’re doing is making sounds and although Anzan Hoshin roshi has said that we could chant the phone book and still make very good use of that form of practice, we actually chant, particularly in the case of “The Four Great Vows”, words which actually show us what it is we are doing when we are practicing, actually instruct us in how to practise.

Our topic is “The Four Great Vows”. I hope that it will be useful to start by explaining what “The Four Great

Vows" are not. "The Four Great Vows" are not a creed, they are not a dogma, they are not an article of faith, nor are they prayers or hymns. This is a vow and a vow is a solemn promise to do something. In the case of this practice, each time we chant or hear "The Four Great Vows" we are vowing to practise and Wake Up to who and what this is, to who and what this life that is living us all is.

"The Four Great Vows" provide us with instruction and a reminder of that instruction, a reminder of what we are doing. Now, what we understand of "The Four Great Vows", of course, will depend on what we understand of practice. Zen Master Anzan Hoshin's understanding and practice and expression of "The Four Great Vows" will necessarily be vaster than yours. Next year or perhaps if you become a general student or a probationary formal student or formal student or take lay monk's vows, you will be doing this because your understanding of the vows is deeper and therefore your understanding of your practice is deeper. And because your practice is deeper, your understanding of what is being spoken of each time you hear "The Four Great Vows", is deeper and different and vaster. Something that I believe to be the case is that each one of us sitting here has come to practice, has sought instruction because there was a realization of the truth of "The Four Great Vows". We may not have known what the words were but there was something that we knew, that when we hear "The Four Great Vows" makes us perhaps go "Yes! Yes! That's it!"

It would be useful at this point if we were all to have a look at "The Four Great Vows". So if you direct your eyes down to your right knee, you will see your chanting text. Please notice how the chanting text is placed so that you can return it to exactly the same place so that you do not cause anyone else, the next person to come along any entanglement because of how you have had a lapse of attention. Now lift the text up and turn to page 15.

[Students pick up texts]

So we will just read through this. I will read and you can follow along just with your eyes.

Shi Gu Sei Gan: The Four Great Vows
SHU JO MU HEN SEI GAN DO
BON NO MU JIN SEI GAN DAN
HO MON MU RYO SEI GAN GAKU
BUTSUDO MU JO SEI GAN JO

And in English,

All beings without number I vow to liberate.
Endless obsessions I vow to release.
Dharma Gates beyond measure I vow to penetrate.
Limitless awakening I vow to unfold.

So now you can put your text down and should you attend a formal sitting you will know how to pick up the text. You will know that the text should be placed so that the cover without the printing on it is facing out and you will know that page 15 is the page upon which "The Four Great Vows" is printed.

As you also know from reading "Before Thinking" and in particular Anzan roshi's teisho, "The Five Styles of

Zen", the fourth mode of Zen practice is "Daijo Zen" which is the practice of the "Mahayana" or the "Great and Open Way ". As Anzan roshi says,

> *"This way embraces everything that is arising for us and is not simply concerned with our own liberation but recognizes that the liberation of all beings is inseparable from our own because we are inseparable from all beings and work for that liberation".*

The whole of the Mahayana is embodied in the "Shi Gu Sei Gan: The Four Great Vows". But you don't just memorize them then spout them forth. As the Sensei says, we embody them. We are those vows; that is what we do.

Today we're looking at the first line, the first vow: "All beings without number I vow to liberate." And that raises questions. It shows that in the Mahayana, the Great and Open Way , practice is not just for your own benefit but it is for the benefit of all beings. Now we do understand that how we are – how you are – affects everybody else and the way everybody else is affects us – affects you – and there is no clear line separating us from everything else. There couldn't be. Someone twitches in the Hatto and we feel it. We might twitch as well. Someone breathes next to us and we find ourselves affected by it. We notice a presencing of experiencing, a movement of knowing. Perhaps we notice ourselves becoming edgy or irritated. Our attention starts to move towards that and we find ourselves becoming something or something coming into being; something that's irritated.

The first great vow reminds us that "All beings without number I vow to liberate". At the moment of noticing that becoming, that coming into being of a separate self, a self that is separate from everyone and everything else (which of course is impossible; each thing does make everything else what it is)…at the moment of noticing that becoming, that coming into being, we have noticed something about our experiencing and we practise mindfulness of breath in that moment, As attention ceases to move towards that being, that becoming, that being is liberated, it is released. All other beings in the Hatto are of course liberated from the possible effects of that irritated being. Moment after moment we practise "The Four Great Vows" for just as all the Mahayana is contained in "The Four Great Vows", all of practice is spoken of in each Great Vow and each Great Vow speaks of the other three. They are all talking about Awakening, about Waking Up, about recognizing that you are Buddha in this moment and this moment and the next.

Continuing our investigation of the first of "The Four Great Vows": "All beings without number"? Wow! Is that even possible? Now hold on! What exactly is a being? OK, I can understand the movement of attention into becoming something that is irritated at the person next to me…"

But that's not all it is. It can also mean recognizing when someone else is stuck and offering our help, knowing that perhaps they have other things to do which you can't do and doing what you can do, can help free them, can help them do something else that will be of benefit to someone else. So it reminds us to pay attention to those around. But it also means paying attention to anything, any presencing, any moment of knowing – colours, forms, sounds – they come into being and then are gone. We can't hang onto them. By noticing we can only liberate. By noticing and practising we can notice that there is more and more available to us.

Practice is also about taking responsibility. Taking responsibility means looking at what we do and how we do it and looking at how we are. There are many facets to this taking responsibility and to this liberating of

beings; it's not as simple as it sounds. In the newspapers recently there have been a number of articles about laboratory animals. Now, liberating beings doesn't mean storming a lab and releasing the lab animals and indeed, when we think about it, we can recognize very clearly that that can cause more suffering for the very creatures whose suffering we wish to ease. By releasing animals into a world of which they have no knowledge we perhaps are putting them at greater danger.

There is a story that I heard some time ago and it was about a chimpanzee. This is when there was a lot of money available in the United States in particular for interspecies study and the study of the communication between species. There were chimps who had been taught to sign.

One particular chimp, Lucy, had been, since she was very young, in a lab with her person. And this person was like a mother to her, had raised her, cared for her, and taught her language. Well, the money ran out and the experiment came to an end and the people and the person who had raised and cared for and taught Lucy decided after a great deal of thought, because they were certainly not uncaring people, that the best thing for all concerned was to send Lucy to a retirement camp, a camp specifically for chimpanzee who had been retired from labs and from zoos and other human endeavors really, in her country of origin which was in Africa. Lucy had a very difficult time and the reports were that although the other animals were of her own species, they were strangers to her. They were savages and, by her standards, illiterate. So she took to hanging about the periphery, near the fence, spending most of her time alone. And she was there for about six years.

The people, particularly the person who had cared for her, came to that country to visit and they went to see Lucy. Lucy saw them and recognized the woman who had cared for her immediately and she went over to the fence and looked at her with pleading eyes and signed to her: "HELP – HOME".

We must be very careful of everything that we do. We need to understand what our practice is because as Anzan roshi says "If we do not understand our practice we will practise our misunderstanding." With the first great vow: "All beings without number I vow to liberate" you have a template; you have something that you can use during this coming week to look at how you are, how beings are, to notice interactions that you may previously have not noticed.

"The Four Great Vows" are useful for what they are not because what they are not, teaches us. "The Four Great Vows" are not rules, they are not there to help you generate a feeling tone about being a person who liberates beings; they are not a strategy of how to be. They are instruction. Each of the Great Vows is talking about the same thing; releasing colours, forms, sounds, thoughts, feelings, all beings, into liberation. Practice is growing up, taking responsibility for being a real human being.

The Sensei says in Five Styles of Zen "Being human means dignity, compassion; realizing that one's life is the life of all beings".

Next week we'll look at the second of "The Four Great Vows": "Endless obsessions I vow to release."

Thank you for listening.

[With three strikes of the gong, the Godo chants]:

All beings without number I vow to liberate.

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Limitless awakening I vow to unfold.