2: Endless Obsessions

by Ven. Shikai Zuiko O-sensei
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Welcome. You've come back! And for the same reason you came to practice in the first place. There was recognition of the truth of the Teachings, the truth that is made explicit by "The Four Great Vows".

As you walked through the nippy October air there may have been thoughts about what you'd rather be doing, perhaps there might have been an occasional thought about how inconvenient it is to come on a Saturday morning to practise. As I mentioned last week, it would be "convenient" if the only form of practice was zazen. Then, of course, we would only practise when we were sitting. It would be "convenient" if we could isolate practice to something fixed. Anzan Hoshin roshi says that "in order for our practice to be the embodiment of reality, we must release our divisions between self and other, this and that, formal and informal practice".

The forms of practice are forms for the practice of reality: Chanting is speaking, kinhin is walking, oryoki is eating, zazen is sitting. The forms are a means to embody reality. "The Four Great Vows" speak of how we embody the open formless space of who we are.

[Following three strikes on the gong the Godo chants]:

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.

[Two gong strikes]

As we discovered last week one way of looking at "The Four Great Vows" is to see that each vow speaks of the same thing but in a different way. After last week's examination of the first Great Vow, "All beings without number I vow to liberate", a student remarked that perhaps the first vow should be the last because only after releasing obsessions, penetrating Dharma Gates and unfolding limitless Awakenings are we able to practise the first Great Vow to liberate all beings. In discussing this Zen Master Anzan Hoshin said that another way of looking at this matter of "The Four Great Vows" is that the first vow is the fundamental vow to realize who we and all beings are and the next three vows speak of how we do this.

Practice is the practice of our life as it arises moment-to-moment. As the Sensei says in "Before Thinking: Beyond Convenience", "Our life is very simple, very direct, very beautiful, very vast and very terrifying, but it is not at all convenient."

Your life inconveniently presents itself and practice inconveniently presents itself when you are walking, working, in the bathroom, talking to someone, watching television; not just when you're sitting zazen. But zazen is the form that allows us to look into this moment-to-moment arising that shows us how we are. Because our life is so vast and so terrifying, one of the things that self-image will do is to try to make experiencing controllable in the mistaken belief that it is possible to control our life; one thing that self

image will do is to occupy itself with obsessions and obsessions are numberless.

As the vow states, the second of the great vows: “Endless obsessions I vow to release.” Now, obsession is the act of obsessing or the state of being obsessed. Obsessed is to be preoccupied, haunted, to fill the mind continually, to take control of, to torment, dominate, grip, possess, hold, plague. An obsession is a persistent idea or thought dominating a person’s mind. Interestingly, the word “obsess”, which means “beset” or as a “besieging force”, is from the Latin “obsedare” which means “to sit down before.” So it is as though we have no choice but to sit down before these thoughts or rather to have these obsessions sit upon us, making us incapable of doing anything else. We human beings will obsess about anything: body parts, illness, dirt, germs, animal, hoarding, saving, repetition, counting, sexual fantasies, violence to self or other, horrifying images, a sense of unworthiness, a sense of poverty, a sense of superiority, doing things right. These are all thoughts, just as colours, sounds, music, names, titles, numbers, phrases, memories, unpleasant images, impulses to hurt, to harm, saying or not saying certain things, obsessing over needing to remember, over losing things, over the way the person next to us is breathing, are thoughts.

Practice, all the forms of practice, and especially when you are establishing mindfulness practice…zazen asks you to recognize that the reality of the presencing of these thoughts and provide you instruction on what to do. Zazen sits you down in front of what you believe to be uncontrollable, that which you believe has sat you down or sat down on you and immobilized you. By following instruction, by paying attention, you start to know a thought as a thought, a story as a story, an obsession as a thought with a story, and you start to understand because you can know this thought, this obsession. You start to understand, maybe just a little bit and maybe not all the time, what Anzan roshi means when he says “There is nothing that knowing can be because only knowing is”.

You are not that thought or obsession about who or what you are or what the world is. You remember to practise from time to time when you notice the presencing of a favourite obsession because you know you are not that. You feel the breath moving the body in and out, you see the seeing, hear the hearing, know other bodily sensation and that obsessions is released into the vast expanse of Knowing. You have embodied the second of “The Four Great Vows”: “Endless obsessions I vow to release”.

“Endless obsession” – Endless! Now “endless” can seem to present a daunting and a formidable, impossible task. But what it really means is: Don’t try to put an end to them otherwise you have a story about what you would be, what you would be like, without those obsessions. As Anzan roshi says “When obsessions cease we don’t even notice because we’re not obsessed with defining ourselves in any way”.

Next week the third of the great vows: “Dharma Gates without number I vow to penetrate”.

Thank you for listening.

[Following two strikes on the gong, the Godo chants]:

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