

3: Dharma Gates

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The First Great Vow, “All Beings without number I vow to liberate”, states our intention. The second, “Endless obsessions I vow to release”, reminds us of what we are going to do. The third, “Dharma Gates beyond measure I vow to penetrate”, again Teaches us, instructs us, as to what we will do.

“Dharma Gates beyond measure I vow to penetrate”.

When we are obsessed, when we are dominated by our thoughts and feelings in a cycle that is seemingly endless, we can feel as if we are sat upon, as if we are squashed by the weight of our obsessions. All we need to do is to sit up; to sit up straight in zazen.

Sitting up straight, Dharma Gates open everywhere; reality presents itself everywhere. Being sat down upon by obsession is like having a monkey on our back, but by just sitting up straight whatever tries to sit upon us just slides off. When we sit up straight in the posture of zazen, in balance point, everything slides off.

Following this thought, that thought, the body bows and sways with the disposition of attention. Coming back to where we are, right now, right here, we just sit up straight without trying to shrug anything off or put anything on. When we sit up straight richness presents itself; infinite opportunities of the moment present themselves; Dharma Gates. We recognize that how we understand and how we misunderstand are all opportunities to be entered into.

In “The Four Gates of Zen Practice”, Zen Master Anzan Hoshin defines “Dharma” in Sanskrit, “Dhamma” in Pali, and “Ho” in Japanese, as having many levels of meaning. When the “d” is in small case, “dharma”, “dhamma”, means “phenomena, mental events, things, experience”. When the “D” is capitalized, or the word Dharma is used in conjunction with the word Buddha, it means the Way, or the Teachings. The Sensei says, in “Before Thinking”, in the teisho entitled “Shamata and Vipashana”, that in Zen we are concerned with the essence of “Buddhadharma”. “Buddhadharma” means “The Way of Waking Up”. The way of experiencing directly what our life is, and the way of penetrating into what it is that is experiencing it. And so we sit up straight in zazen.

There are so many dharmas arising and falling, moment after moment, that there is no need to measure them or count them. That would be impossible. So, Dharma Gates beyond measure I vow to penetrate.

The tradition says that there are one thousand and eight Gates to reality. As the Sensei says, “One thousand and eight Dharma Gates: Why one thousand and eight? Picture one thing. Now picture two things; four things; eight things; sixteen things; thirty-two things. You can’t. One thousand and eight simply means numberless, infinite”. And so as we sit in the posture of zazen, these numberless, infinite Dharma Gates present themselves; colours, forms, sounds, thoughts, feelings, memories, sadness, anger, hope, fear, a pain in the knee.

This third of “The Four Great Vows” calls us to penetrate each dharma, each moment, and we penetrate, we pierce each dharma with this posture of zazen, with kinhin, with teisho. We practise penetrating this moment

with the needle of attention, penetrating this moment completely; the breath, sensations in the fingers and the toes, this moment, are all the tip of the needle. Penetrate; pierce so completely that there is no separation between body, mind and moment.

In the teisho "Needle in a Bag", Anzan roshi says: "If we pierce this moment of hope and fear with the needle of zazen, with the needle of mindfulness, we are also pierced to the heart".

He goes on to say: "As we stitch together these moments of our lives with the needle of Wakefulness, we will find more and more that everything is unbound".

The Dharma, the Teachings of Reality, show us over and over again that reality is so rich. We are provided with endless opportunities to take responsibility for the treasury of who we are, to allow us to express this richness.

"Dharma Gates Beyond Measure I Vow to Penetrate".

Next week, the fourth of the Great Vows, "Limitless Awakening I Vow To Unfold".

Thank you for listening.