

THE IMPORTANCE OF OUR VOWS

A Dharma talk by Venerable Wei Chueh

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Our vows steer the direction of our lives. If the direction of our vows is incorrect, our life will be filled with darkness. But if our vows are correct, there will be brightness everywhere. Most people do not thoroughly realize that the power of our vows is truly inconceivable. If we do not make vows and do not have a goal, we will not be able to generate any power in our daily life, our speech, and our actions. Therefore, vows are extremely important.

Being Compassionate Toward All Sentient Beings; Vowing that All May Attain Buddhahood

In cultivating the Way, we must resolve to make vows because they are based on a compassionate mind and the four immeasurable states of mind, viewing that all sentient beings are connected by the causality of the three periods of time, and that we are all one family, as well as friends and relatives of past lives; we wish to liberate them because we cannot bear to see them suffer. This is the first reason for making vows. The second reason is because all sentient beings possess Buddha nature; therefore, we wish that all sentient beings will be enlightened and attain buddhahood.

The Confucians say, “I look in awe at the lofty peaks, I strive to follow virtuous deeds; though they seem to be unattainable, the mind can aspire to them.” If the goal of our cultivation is to become a Buddha, we should make efforts toward that goal. However, if we cannot attain buddhahood, we can still become bodhisattvas. If we make the bodhisattva vow, and do not become a bodhisattva, we can at least attain the fruit of arhatship. If our vow to attain arhatship does not materialize, we can at least maintain our human body. If our aim is just to become a human being, that is belittling and undermining ourselves.

Everyone can forgive themselves for being somewhat slothful. If our wish is just to become a human being, we cannot even establish good character in the end. Why? If we do not uphold the five precepts, we cannot perfect our character; even if we wish to be a human being, we may finally plunge into the three evil realms. Therefore we should make great vows. With great vows and proper conduct, we can achieve our goal. If we make superior vows, we will attain mediocre results. If we make mediocre vows, we will attain inferior results. If we make inferior vows, we will not attain anything. Therefore, in cultivating the way, it is essential to make [great] vows, aspire to attain buddhahood. We should at least have this mindset.

The Vow of the Calf; The Buddha's Prophecy

Once, the Buddha had a cold and asked Ananda to go to a Brahmin's home to beg for a bowl of milk. The Venerable Ananda went to the Brahmin's home with his alms bowl and said to him: "Here is a great opportunity for you to practice dana. Shakyamuni Buddha has a cold; please take this opportunity and donate a bowl of milk to offer to the World Honored One." When the Brahmin heard this, he said, "All my cows are in the stable, please go and milk the cow yourself."

The Venerable Ananda then went to the stable and said to a [mother] cow, "Cow, being born in the animal realm entails great suffering. If you wish to avert suffering and obtain happiness, you must bring forth the bodhi mind, make a great resolve, and offer your milk to the World Honored One. This will increase your merits and blessings so that you will attain liberation in the future." When the old cow heard this, it suddenly came to a realization, clearly saw that it had committed many offences in its past lives, causing it to be reborn as a cow in its past 500 existences. It realized that being a cow entails great suffering. It said to Ananda, "I am very happy that I can offer my milk to Shakyamuni Buddha. I hope this will help me to achieve liberation very soon." It then added, "I have just given birth to a new calf, it still needs to drink milk, so please leave a little for my calf and you can offer the rest to the World Honored One." At that time, the little calf clearly heard the conversation and said, "Being a cow is indeed great suffering, I'd rather give up

drinking milk for one day, so instead of leaving any milk for me, please take all of it to offer to the World Honored One.” Therefore, Ananda took all the milk from the cow to offer to Shakyamuni Buddha.

Shakyamuni Buddha said to the Venerable Ananda, “Ananda, when you went to beg for the milk, did you hear what the calf and its mother said?” Ananda answered, “Yes, I heard. The old cow was very happy to offer its milk to the World Honored One, hoping, by doing so, it would soon be liberated and no longer be reborn as a cow. The young calf, however, made a great vow, hoping that it could attain the Buddha’s wisdom in the future and help liberate all sentient beings, therefore it wished to dedicate the merits gained from donating the milk toward attaining supreme enlightenment.”

Shakyamuni Buddha then said to Ananda, “These are both similar events, but each giver’s resolve was different, therefore the merits, wisdom, and retribution gained are totally different. The old cow gave of its milk with the hope of being liberated, therefore at the end of its life as a cow, it would be reborn as a human being, leave the home-life to cultivate the Way, and attain the fruit of arhatship. But the young calf, due to its vast and sincere vow, after suffering the retribution of this life, would, in the future, practice the bodhisattva way, life after life, attain the fruit of buddhahood, and become the Milk-Radiance Tathagata.”

Making Great Vows and Attaining Enlightenment

The four great vows are:

I vow to liberate countless sentient beings;

I vow to eradicate endless vexations;

I vow to learn the measureless Dharmas;

I vow to attain the supreme Buddha Way.

What does it mean to attain buddhahood? It means that our mind transcends from the relative to the absolute, from a defiled mind to a pure mind, from a mind of vexations to a

mind of tranquil extinction (nirvana). When our mind achieves this state, we will be fully liberated, transcend from the ordinary person to sainthood, and attain the state of nirvana; this is known as attaining the Buddha Way.

The four great vows are collective vows. All past and present Buddhas as well as future cultivators should make these four great vows. Besides these collective vows, we can also make individual vows. When we have attained wisdom and samadhi power, we can also make our own individual vows, such as the forty-eight vows of Amitabha, the twelve great vows of the Medicine Buddha, and even the vows of Bodhisattva Avalokistevara, Ksitigarbha, and Samantabhadra—these are all individual vows. All bodhisattvas have their individual vows; these vows all arise from the mind of compassion, and because of their compassionate minds, these vows are genuine. Therefore the *Lotus Sutra* says, “Because all Buddhas have the great compassionate mind, all sentient beings also give rise to great compassion; great compassion gives rise to the bodhi mind; the bodhi mind gives rise to supreme enlightenment.”

Give Rise to the Bodhi Mind; Transcend from the Ordinary to Sainthood

Why should we give rise to the bodhi mind? It is because we wish to transcend from an ordinary being to sainthood. To transcend from an ordinary being to sainthood, we must first have the bodhi mind. Sainthood also has several levels. The highest level is buddhahood. Beneath that is the stage of the bodhisattva. The bodhisattva state also has three saintly levels and ten stages. All these can only be attained by giving rise to the bodhi mind. By giving rise to the bodhi mind, we sow the seed and obtain a direction for our cultivation; that is the truest principle.

How do we give rise to the bodhi mind? First, we must give rise to the bodhi mind through practice; that is, we must first make great vows. Among the four great Bodhisattvas, Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha represents great vow; Bodhisattva Manjushri represents great wisdom; Bodhisattva Samantabhadra represents great conduct; Bodhisattva Avalokistevara represents great compassion. In our daily lives, we should have the great

vow of Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha, the great wisdom of Bodhisattva Manjushri, the great conduct of Bodhisattva Samantabhadra. What is great conduct? It is to practice all virtue, extinguish all evil, liberate all beings, make great vows for the rest of our lives. We must not only make vows to liberate sentient beings in this human realm, but also vow to go and liberate the sentient beings in hell. This is like the vow of Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha, “I vow never to attain Buddhahood until all the hells are empty; I vow not to attain bodhi until all sentient beings have been liberated.” After we have made our vows, based on our compassion, wisdom, and conduct, and [preliminary](#) expedient means, we will give rise to the bodhi mind. If we do not make these vows, our bodhi mind will not be realized. When we have made these vows, our bodhi mind will not retrogress. When our vows are great, when our resolve is great, our bodhi mind will also be great and we will attain great enlightenment. This is the great vow: to give rise to the bodhi mind through practice.

Cultivating the bodhisattva way benefits self and others by propagating the Buddha Dharma, attaining the Buddha Way, and achieving the Buddha’s wisdom. Making these great vows is the most important key in our cultivation. When we are replete with great vows and great conduct, we will never regress our bodhi mind. If we can make great vows with the utmost sincerity, and incorporate them in our daily practice, we will truly attain the bodhi mind.