

## **FOUR IMPOSSIBLE THINGS BEFORE BREAKFAST**

A Sermon by The Rev. Wayne B. Arnason  
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Every morning after I do my Zen meditation practice, I vow to do four impossible things before going on to exercise and breakfast. The four impossible things include saving all beings, extinguishing all desires, mastering all opportunities to realize Buddhist teachings, and attaining enlightenment. The way I make these promises is through chanting the Great Vows, which in different languages and in different translations within different languages are chanted around the world in Buddhist communities and monasteries at least once in every day.

In the version used at my sangha at Zen Mountain Monastery in New York, they are chanted at the end of each day in the monotone style that is part of Japanese Zen liturgy. They sound like this: “Sentient beings are numberless, I vow to save them,

“Desires are inexhaustible, I vow to put an end to them,

“The dharmas are boundless, I vow to master them,

“The Buddha Way is unattainable, I vow to attain it.”

Now, is this goofy or what??

What is this clean cut Icelandic Canadian boy doing, sitting cross legged and chanting in a Japanese monotone about four impossible things before breakfast? Is this spiritual? Is it more spiritual than walking in the woods enjoying the spring weather, or is it less spiritual than having a born-again experience and giving your life over to Jesus.

My hope today is to offer some personal perspectives on why chanting these vows every day makes sense to me and what I gain from chanting them. As I said a few

moments ago, I don't pretend to be any kind of authority. I know what I know because of my teacher, my reading, and my own experience, but not because I claim any authority to be able to teach you about Buddhism. But in the course of sharing what little understanding I may have, I hope that you might come away with a better understanding of some of the things that are attracting Unitarian Universalists and people from many other traditions in the West to practicing Buddhism in some form.

I want to give you the punch line to this sermon right away at the beginning, rather than leave you in suspense. That way, if you get really bored, you can leave and still go away knowing the punch line and perhaps remembering it as your life goes on. That's how Buddhist study seems to work. They tell you the punch line right away, like comedian Johnny Carson's character The Amazing Karnak. Your challenge is to figure out what the question really is in order to complete the joke. If you do, we all get to laugh, and that's the reward. No heaven. No hell. Just a good laugh, and maybe a nod of the head that says "I get it."

So here's the punch line: All of these impossible things that I vow to do are impossible because they are already done. All things are interconnected and interdependent. That's why sentient beings are already saved. That's why desires have ended. That's why the dharmas are mastered. That's why the Buddha Way has already been attained. So if that's the punch line, what's the question? The question is: How do I realize the reality of this??

Let me spend a little time with this word "realize". In conventional speaking, we tend to use this word synonymously with the word "understand", as in the sentence "I had trouble following the sermon at first but then I realized what it was all about". You could

just as easily say “but then I understood what it was all about”. But the word “realize” as used in Buddhist teaching means more than just intellectual understanding, or following a line of argument, or learning something new. It very literally means what the word itself implies. It means “to make real”. Ideas about enlightenment, about how the world works, about what spiritual practice is supposed to do are ultimately just ideas and they are only one component of what we need to live our lives with joy, equanimity, and integrity, aware of our interdependence. When you make a teaching “real”, it means that you have consumed it, absorbed it, made it part of your whole body and mind. Realizing the teaching is “being the teaching”, not just understanding the teaching and being able to recite it back to yourself or to a congregation the way I am doing now. I think Margery Williams, the author of *The Velveteen Rabbit* had herself a decent Buddhist definition of “real” when she had the Rabbit ask the Skin Horse:

*“What is REAL?”*

*“Real isn’t how you are made,” said the Skin Horse. “It’s a thing that happens to you.”*

*“Does it hurt?” asked the Rabbit.*

*“Sometimes,” said the Skin Horse. “When you are Real you don’t mind being hurt....It doesn’t happen all at once.”*

Making real, or realizing the Great Vows, doesn’t happen all at once either, and it doesn’t happen in the same way, at the same pace, or even through the same process for everyone who gets involved in Buddhist practice. Despite the fact that the central teachings of Buddhism are the same all over the world, it’s a religion that happens in many diverse forms, and each person who practices it follows a different path. This is particularly true in the Zen school, which holds that enlightenment is realizing the mind of the Buddha, as something available to and inherent in everybody, that is passed on

outside the formal learning represented by the scriptures. The word “transmission” is used to describe what can be a very short or a very long process of making real the inherent Buddha nature that is within you.

There is no story in Buddhism that provides a stronger reminder of how each person must find their own realization, their own way to enlightenment, to making the teachings and the vows real within them, than the story of Guatama Buddha’s two most famous disciples, Mahakayashapa and Ananda. Mahakayashapa was a relative novice when he first encountered the Buddha, but there was apparently a powerful connection between them. When they first met, and made eye contact, Buddha moved over to make room for Mahakayashapa on his cushion. Tradition says that in eight days of study Mahakayashapa attained his first enlightenment experience. Around this time, Buddha was preaching from the top of a small mountain called Vulture Peak just outside the ancient city Rajgir, India. It was there, sixteen years after his own Enlightenment experience, that Buddha set forth what became the essential collection of his teachings to an assembly which tradition says consisted of 5,000 monks, nuns and laity. At one point in his sermon, Buddha held up a Lotus Flower and twirled it in his hand to illustrate a point. He looked towards Mahakayashapa who was in the crowd that day and their eyes met. Buddha blinked. Mahakayashapa gave back an almost imperceptible smile. What happened in that moment? I don’t really know, but a few weeks ago here in church we were talking about tipping points, certain moments of equilibrium that are reached and then passed where there is enough energy, enough will, enough openness, enough courage for a community or a country or an individual to step into a new way of being. Mahakayashapa had done just that. Buddha saw it, and came over to Mahakayashapa and

to the surprise of all present gave him his own robe and bowl, saying: this “wonderful Dharma door that establishes no texts and is a special transmission outside the scriptures, I entrust to Mahakayashapa.” Essentially, what he had done is designated Mahakayashapa as his successor teacher, because he recognized that he had the same mind, that he had realized his true nature. Mahakayashapa was so recognized by the assembly and since then has been called The First Ancestor.

Now if you were Ananda, you might imagine that this would be hard to take. Ananda was actually a cousin of Buddha’s. He was born on the same day that Buddha attained enlightenment. His name means “happiness and joy”. When he was of appropriate age, he became a student of Buddha’s and was his attendant. He spent the most time of anyone with Buddha. He was a brilliant man, with an amazing mind and a photographic memory. He listened to every word that the Buddha said over twenty years and he committed his sermons to memory. Buddha described him as foremost in learning and gave him much approval and respect. If there was anyone that people expected would be Buddha’s successor as teacher of the Assembly after his death, it was bound to be Ananda. Ananada was there in the crowd when Buddha twirled his flower, and blinked. But Ananda didn’t get it. Whatever was recognized or made real in that moment was something that didn’t happen for Ananada.

Ananda continued in his service to Buddha and when Buddha died, he attended Mahakayashapa for twenty more years. Mahakayashapa asked him to help communicate the teachings. He would often ask Ananda to recite to the Assembly what the Buddha had said, and everyone agreed that he could do so impeccably. But the transmission of the

light, that tipping point, where the teachings all came together and were realized within and without you, had never happened for Ananda.

Finally, one day after these twenty years of learning and service with Mahakayashapa, Ananda felt compelled to ask him a question that had been nagging at him: “Master”, he said, “When Buddha gave you the robe and bowl, did he give you anything else?” Mahakayashapa looked at him, and replied : “Ananada”.

“Yes, master.”

“TAKE DOWN THE FLAGPOLE AT THE GATE”.

In that moment, Ananda reached his tipping point. He was ready to be the Second Ancestor, and is so recognized by Buddhists today. The flagpole at the gate was used in monastic communities as a sign that the teacher was giving a talk, was expounding the dharma. When the flag was lowered, the talk was over. Mahakayashapa said to Ananada, “Take down the flagpole”. Not only is the teaching over, you need no flagpole to raise any more flags ever again.

I’ve always felt more akin to Ananda than to Mahakayashapa. I think I’m one of those plodders who is really good at absorbing the teachings and giving them back, but slow and steady in making them real. That’s why I wanted to become a formal Buddhist student, receive the Buddhist precepts, and recite the vows. It’s like raising the flag every morning. It’s a reminder that there is teaching about to take place as the day unfolds that can help me realize some things I know intellectually to be true, but that I haven’t absorbed into my whole body and mind quite yet.

“Sentient beings are numberless. I vow to save them.” is how I start. Save them from what? How? If they are numberless, infinite, how can I save them all? Intellectually,

the answer is that I am saving them from greed anger and ignorance, the roots of our suffering, and that to do so, I need to recognize that there is no barrier, no difference between me and the rest of the world that comprises all sentient beings. I can never save any of them, if I cannot save myself from greed, anger and ignorance. So I start with myself. The first and greatest contribution and maybe even the only contribution I can make to saving all beings from their suffering is to realize and act on the causes of suffering in myself.

“Desires are inexhaustible, I vow to put an end to them”. Fat chance, huh? Pass the cookies. Sure, I’ll have another drink! Maybe if I could just get one more page of this sermon written before... Why me? What did I do to deserve this? Desires really are inexhaustible, and for me at least, I expect that ending all desire is going to take something drastic, like death, so I need to approach this impossible task in a different way. Intellectually, I understand the question to this answer to be “Can you end one desire at a time?” If everything is interconnected and interdependent, and if the present moment contains the whole universe, then dealing with the desire that is in my head right now is really all I can do anyway. If my desire is to preach a good sermon and have you say nice things to me about it afterwards, I need to deal with that. When the next desire comes up, then that will be the one to deal with, but not now.

Ending desire connects with the simple practice that is involved in meditation, which is doing just one thing at one time. Mostly what comes up in meditation can be characterized as desires, thoughts about past, future, how much your knees or ankles hurt, anything but the simple act of being aware of what’s right in front of you rather than the picture show in your head. In one of the other translations of the Great Vows, the word

that's used is "abandoning" desires. I like that. It reminds me desires hold us like a burning luxury ship that will never make it to the other side of the ocean. Realizing that all you really need is that little lifeboat that represents doing one thing at one time, allows you to abandon the ship of desire for the lifeboat of the present moment.

"Dharmas are boundless, I vow to master them." Another translation says "Dharma gates" which is perhaps more helpful, because that word dharma means two things at the same time. "Dharma" is the teaching of the Buddha, but "dharma" is also the opportunity that exists in every moment to apply the teachings to the present moment of experience – so every moment is a gateway to realizing the teachings. When I wake up to this possibility, I can see that there is no need to worry about mastering all the teachings of Buddhism or behaving in some enlightened way in some future moment. There is only this moment to be in and to realize how greed anger and ignorance get in the way of experiencing it without any separation or barriers between me and what is in front of me. If I can engage with this moment without attachments, the teachings that are the dharma take care of themselves, and all the dharma gates open at the same time.

Finally, the last of the Great Vows says, "The Buddha Way is unattainable, I vow to attain it." The contradictory and stark nature of this translation seems less than helpful to some translators, and they have chosen words which make this vow easier to accept: for example "The Buddha 's Way is unsurpassed. I vow the embody it fully." Now that's understandable, and the word "embody" does address what it means to realize the teachings with the whole body and mind. But I still like paradox of vowing what seems impossible, because it points to a key issue in Buddhist practice that is represented by this word "attain." Here we return to punch line I gave you at the beginning of the sermon.

All things are connected and interdependent. The Buddha way is in fact unattainable because there's nothing to attain. You already have everything you need. You just don't know it or can't see it. That's why practicing together with others and having a relationship with a teacher is so important --- because through and with others you increasingly begin to see what realization looks like in practice, and you begin to recognize the places in yourself where your experience and behavior is different because you are embodying the Buddha way. Whether it happens quickly, as with Mahakayashapa, or slowly, as with Ananada, is not as important as the fact that it does happen, and it will happen, as you remain committed to the practice.

In a sermon that he preached on Ananda's enlightenment, Master Keizan included the comment: "The Buddha's robe spontaneously entered Ananda's head." Although Buddha gave his first disciple something tangible, his very robe, to represent the transmission of the dharma, Ananda received no such thing. The robe of liberation is passed on in Buddhism, not hand to hand but mind to mind. My teacher, Daido Roshi, represents the 88th generation of Zen Buddhist teachers in a line that reached back to Buddha, mind to mind. He describes the four impossible things in words that are much easier to grasp:

"Let's manifest the wisdom and compassion that is the life of the Buddha, that is the life of Ananada and Mayakashyapa, the life of the countless men and women who have preceded us, and who have passed on this dharma so that we have the opportunity to practice it in our own lives. There is only one way to repay their kindness, and that is to awaken, not to squander our own lives. To keep it alive... and make it possible for other generations to follow."