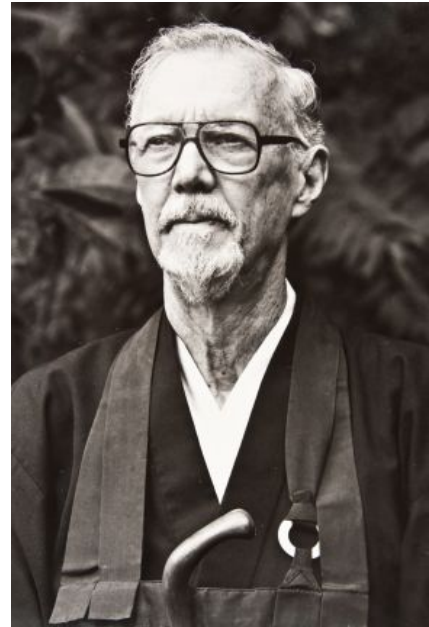


The Dragon Who Never Sleeps

Robert Aitken

THE POEMS THAT FOLLOW set forth occasions for religious practice. Though I made them for modern students, I was inspired by antique antecedents, back to the historical Buddha. My purpose in this essay is to present the ideas and forms of those antecedents. The Buddha's original teaching is essentially a matter of four points—the Four Noble Truths:



1. Anguish is everywhere.
2. We desire permanent existence for ourselves and for our loved ones, and we desire to prove ourselves independent of others and superior to them. These desires conflict with the way things are: nothing abides, and everything and everyone depends upon everything and everyone else. This conflict causes our anguish, and we project this anguish on those we meet.
3. Release from anguish comes with the personal acknowledgment and resolve: we are here together very briefly, so let us accept reality fully and take care of one another while we can.
4. This acknowledgment and resolve are realized by following the Eightfold Path: Right Views, Right Thinking, Right Speech, Right Conduct, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Recollection, and Right Meditation. Here "Right" means "correct" or "accurate"—in keeping with the reality of impermanence and interdependence.¹

The Four Noble Truths are called "noble" because they present the vocation of wisdom and compassion. They are the foundation of all Buddhism, and form the heart of modern-day Theravada, the Buddhism of South and Southeast Asia. Mahayana, a later tradition that became the Buddhism of East Asia, produced quite radical changes in the way those basic ideas were interpreted and expressed. For example, early emphasis was upon demonstrating the insubstantial nature of the self but in the Mahayana that insubstantial essence itself is given attention:

It shines everywhere in the daily activities of everyone, appearing in everything. Though you try to grasp it you cannot get it; though you try to abandon it, it always remains. It is vast and unobstructed, utterly empty.²

As to interdependence, the Mahayana Buddhist finds that relationships are not just the ordinary activity of giving and receiving support, but in every situation the other person, animal, plant, or thing is experienced as oneself. This is "interbeing," to use Thich Nhat Hanh's felicitous term, and is presented vividly in a multitude of expansive and profound metaphors in *The Avatamsaka Sutra*, translated into Chinese as the *Hua-yen ching*, the last great chronicle of the Mahayana. Central among these metaphors is "The Net of Indra": a multi-dimensional net of all beings (including inanimate things), with each point, each knot, a jewel that perfectly reflects, and indeed contains, all other

¹ Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (New York: Grove Press, 1974), pp. 16-50.

² Christopher Cleary, trans., *Swampland Flowers: The Letters and Lectures of the Zen Master Ta Hui* (New York: Grove Press, 1977), p. 34.

points.³ This cosmic, yet intimate perspective is offered again and again throughout the sutra. Thomas Cleary, scholar of Hua-yen philosophy, writes:

All things [are interdependent, and] therefore imply in their individual being the simultaneous being of all other things. Thus it is said that the existence of each element of the universe includes the existence of the whole universe and hence is as extensive as the universe itself.⁴

This is philosophy at its grandest, and the Buddhist is left with the task of making it personal. Religions with Near Eastern antecedents permit a personal relationship with God, and while many of the metaphorical figures in the *Hua-yen ching* could be called deities, there is no single God ruling all. The Buddha's followers cannot pray, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done" but instead they have made such formal promises as, "I will awaken my mind to the teachings of the Buddha for the benefit of all beings." Such vows are found in the very earliest Buddhist writings, and continue to be of primary importance as a way of personalizing the practice in all forms of the religion today.⁵ In addition to vows, another way to personalize the Buddha's teaching has been to repeat gathas, four-line verses that sum up important points. Gathas too are found in the earliest Buddhist writings, and commonly have been memorized and used for Right Recollection-guideposts on the Buddha's path. *The Dhammapada*, an anthology drawn from early Buddhist texts, consists entirely of gathas, some of them probably dating from the Buddha's own time. Here is one that is known throughout the various streams of Buddhism today:

Renounce all evil;
practice all good;
keep your mind pure;
thus all the Buddhas taught.⁶

As Buddhism evolved, we find gathas and vows evolving as well. Early followers vowed to practice wisdom and compassion so that everyone and everything could thereby be freed from anguish. Their successors also vow to engage in wisdom and compassion, but with, rather than for, everyone and everything. This is called the way of the Bodhisattva, "The Enlightening Being."⁷

Certain traditional Bodhisattvas like Kuan-yin are venerated and even worshipped for the power of the vows they have taken to save everyone and everything. However, Mahayana teachers are clear that the Bodhisattva is an archetype rather than a deity. When I take the noble path of the Buddha, the Bodhisattva is no other than my selfless self. The Bodhisattva-vows are my own.⁸

³ Thomas Cleary, *Entry into the Inconceivable: An Introduction to Hua-yen Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983), p. 37.

⁴ Ibid., P.7.

⁵ Har Dayal, *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature* (London: Kegan Paul, 1931), p. 65.

⁶ Cf. Irving Babbitt, trans., *The Dhammapada* (New York: New Directions, 1965), p. 30.

⁷ Thomas Cleary, trans., *The Flower Ornament Scripture: A Translation of the Avatamsaka Sutra*, 3 vols. (Boulder and London: Shambhala, 1984-87), II: 16-17.

⁸ The monk Nyogen Senzaki used to address his American students, "Bodhisattvas," the way speakers of his time would begin their talks, "Ladies and Gentlemen." See also *ibid.*, I: 312-313.

In the Mahayana the two forms of vows and gathas often converge. The *Hua-yen ching* includes a chapter called "Purifying Practice," consisting of 139 gatha-vows, and I have followed their form in composing the poems in this chapter. The first line establishes the occasion, the second line presents the act of vowing, and the last two lines follow through with the specific conduct that one promises to undertake in these circumstances.

For example, here is a gatha from the "Purifying Practice" chapter:

When I see flowing water
I vow with all beings
to develop a wholesome will
and wash away the stains of delusion.⁹

As always, translation is problematic. Word-for-word the Chinese original reads:

If see flow water
then vow all beings
gain good intention desire
cleanse dispel delusion dirt.¹⁰

The second line is the same in all the *Hua-yen* gathas, and its wording is crucial. The translator must choose a pronoun to indicate who is vowing, and also a word to connect "vow" with the rest of the poem. Cleary translates the line, "They should wish that all beings."¹¹ "They" are Bodhisattvas, a reference back to the introductory part of the chapter, where Manjushri is asked an elaborate, lengthy question about how Bodhisattvas can attain to wisdom and compassion. He replies with the 139 gathas that set forth occasions to follow the Buddha Way.¹²

We ourselves are Bodhisattvas, so we make these gathas our own. The translation, "They should vow that all beings / develop a wholesome will" becomes "I vow with all beings to develop a wholesome will." I myself follow the Eightfold Path and I join everyone and everything in turning the wheel of the Dharma toward universal understanding. I vow to use the many events of my day as opportunities to fulfill the task I share with all people, animals, plants, and things. Such vows take *ahimsa*, or non-harming, to the most profound level of personal responsibility. I might not realize them completely, but I do the best I can.

Making the vows my own is in keeping with the innermost purpose of Mahayana practice, especially Zen practice. I make the reality of the Buddha's teaching my own. We are here only briefly and we depend on each other—this reality is my own. Even more personally: "This very body is the Buddha," as Hakuin Zenji declared.¹³ This is my truth, told of my own body, spoken for me. Everything is affected each time I make a move, here in the grand net of the universe, and as I

⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, I: 321.

¹⁰ For the original Chinese see *Flower Adornment Sutra*, ed. by Hsiian Hua, multiple vols. in process, *Chapter II: Pure Conduct*, trans. by Heng Tsai et al. (Talmage, Calif.: Dharma Realm Buddhist University, 1982), p.171.

¹¹ Cleary, *The Flower Ornament Scripture*: I, 321.

¹² *Ibid.*, I: 313-329.

¹³ Hakuin Ekaku, *Zazen Wasan* (Song of Zazen), Robert Aitken, trans., *Taking the Path of Zen* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1982), p. 113.

rediscover my own Buddha nature, my vows are naturally the vows of the Buddha that all beings be freed from their anguish.

"I vow with all beings" is my compassionate vow: "I vow, and I yearn that all beings might vow with me." It is my invitation that we enter the noble way together. It is also my affirmation of the Buddha's wise teaching of harmony: "I vow, and with universal affinities uniting everyone and everything, all beings are joining me as I vow." Compassion and wisdom thus blend and are one as I repeat, "I vow with all beings."

It is a noble, yet everyday-life practice. Events set forth in *Hua-yen* gathas follow the routine of T'ang period monks and nuns. Each act in the monastery: washing up, putting on clothes, entering the Buddha hall, sitting down for meditation, getting up from meditation, receives its Dharma poem. Events on pilgrimage: encountering a tree, a river, a bridge, a dignitary, a mendicant-like offer entries into the truth. My purpose in this chapter is similar: to show how ordinary occurrences in our modern lay life are in fact the Buddha's own teachings, and also to show how we can involve ourselves accordingly in the practice of wisdom and compassion with family and friends—with everyone and everything.

Of course, monks and nuns of the T'ang period had no gathas for noticing a billboard advertising Jim Beam Kentucky Sour Mash Whiskey. As lay Western Buddhists, however, we pick our way daily through an agglomeration of compelling reminders to pamper ourselves and serve no one else. Our task is harder, it seems, than the one that faced our ancestors. Somehow we must cultivate methods, perhaps including gathas, to follow the noble path of the Buddha as fellow citizens of Jim Beam and his acquisitive cohorts.

Formal meditation for twenty-five minutes or so per day, meditation meetings once or twice a week, and periodic retreats—all are helpful methods. Most of us do not, however, live in temples, with their moment-to-moment invitations to religious practice. We are caught up in the accelerating tempo of earning a living, and Right Recollection tends to disappear except during times of formal meditation.

Moreover, we in the modern Western world are children of Freud as well as of the Buddha. Classical gathas do not deal with human relationships or emotions, just as the Japanese haiku form of poetry leaves that side of life alone. I find myself wanting gathas that show the way to practice and realize interbeing when I am angry with someone. I want gathas of impermanence when my plans don't work out. What do I do if I am made to wait for someone? How should I respond to an offer of meaningless sex?

Accordingly, I find that many of my gathas are rather like *senryu*, the Japanese poetical form that uses the same syllabic count and line arrangement as haiku. Senryu verses deal with parents, spouses, children, in-laws, neighbors, work supervisors, economies, and politics. The metaphors are as complex as the situations, full of irony and satire.¹⁴ This is human life, which I want my gathas to address.

Finally, gathas must be reckoned as poetry, and in this respect the classical gathas are rather thin. I don't find much ambiguity, irony, paradox, doubt, humor, playfulness, chance, absurdity, frustration, or mystery in them. However, they inspire my practice (including my writing), and for the devotional occasions of stepping into the meditation hall, bowing, reciting sutras, and settling down for zazen, I hope that my gathas will tend for the most part to be as straightforward and simple-hearted as my models.

¹⁴ R. H. Blyth, "Haiku and Senryu" in *Senryu: Japanese Satirical Verses* (Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1949), pp. 12-47.

Waking up in the morning
I vow with all beings
to be ready for sparks of the Dharma
from flowers or children or birds.

Sounding a bell at the temple
I vow with all beings
to ring as true in each moment:
mellow, steady, and clear.

When I bow at the end of zazen
I vow with all beings
to practice this intimate lightness
with family and friends and myself.

When people show anger and malice
I vow with all beings
to listen for truth in the message,
ignoring the way it is said.

Facing my imminent death
I vow with all beings
to go with the natural process,
at peace with whatever comes.

When my efforts are clearly outclassed
I vow with all beings
to face my own limitations
and bring forth my original self.

When things fall apart on the job
I vow with all beings
to use this regretful energy
and pick up the pieces with care.

When thoughts form an endless procession,
I vow with all beings
to notice the spaces between them
and give the thrushes a chance.

In agony over my koan
I vow with all beings
to give up and refer it along
to the dragon who never sleeps.

When anger or sadness arises
I vow with all beings
to accept my emotional nature—
it's how I embody the Tao.

When I'm left with nothing to say
I vow with all beings
to rest content in the knowledge
there is really nothing to say.

Hearing the crickets at night
I vow with all beings
to find my place in the harmony
crickets enjoy with the stars.

On the shore of the ocean at sunrise
I vow with all beings
to rejoin this enormous power
that rises and falls in great peace.

When green leaves turn in the wind
I vow with all beings
to enjoy the forces that turn me
face up, face down on my stem.

When a train rattles by at the crossing
I vow with all beings
to remember my mother and father
and imagine their thoughts in the night.

When the table is spread for a meal
I vow with all beings
to accept each dish as an offering
that honors my ancient path.

When someone is late for a meeting
I vow with all beings
to give up the past and the future
and relax where nothing begins.

When offered meaningless sex
I vow with all beings
to draw on my store of affection
and grace as I turn it down.

With resources scarcer and scarcer
I vow with all beings
to consider the law of proportion:
my have is another's have-not.

Watching the stars after midnight
I vow with all beings
to remember the point of existence
has no dimension at all.

When roosters crow before dawn
I vow with all beings
to acknowledge each voice in the chorus,
there you are, there you are, friend.

* * *

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