Live of Vow

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Good morning, everyone, and welcome.

When my son was in third grade, the first week, the teacher gave all the students a poem, or part of a poem, that they had to memorize for the year. Once a week, each student—I think there were twenty, thirty students in the class—would read their poem to the whole class. Or they would recite it. They were supposed to memorize it. I've asked my son, who's now twenty-eight, about that poem. He has no memory of it.

So maybe the poem was not meant for the kids. Maybe it was meant for their parents, because I remember it, and it was inspiring for me. It was two lines from a poem by May Sarton, and it goes something like, "Without light, nothing comes to birth." No, no. Without darkness—this is important—nothing comes to birth. Without light, nothing comes to flower.

So that's what he had to recite, and I thought that spoke to me very well and was very meaningful. Then, at some point, I looked up the poem, and it actually has another phrase that begins with a sentence. It goes something like, "Help us be gardeners of the spirit, knowing without darkness nothing comes to birth. Without light, nothing flowers."

So what is it in our life that grows unbeknownst to us? What are the conditions that allow something to grow and be born? And what is it that's being born that then needs the light of our awareness? Needs us to focus on?

I say this poem because, in looking back over my decades now of Buddhist practice, I look back at my early years when I was doing Zen practice. Maybe this is true all along, that I've heard a lot of teachings, Buddhist teachings. I've read a lot of Buddhist teachings. But maybe fortunately for me, I didn't really concern myself very much with them until I was ready, until something inside of me was ready to hear it.

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It became meaningful and significant not because it was coming from the outside in, but because it was kind of helping me recognize something that was happening from the inside out. Something that was being born. Something that was coming and growing. One of them, interestingly enough, in Zen, is the idea of vow.

Vow is very important in *Mahāyāna* Buddhism and in Zen, and so I blissfully ignored all the teachings about vow that I heard, all the importance of it. Until the day arose, or occurred, where something about vow got born inside of me, and I recognized, "Oh, there's something here that resonates with what they're talking about. There's something here that makes sense to me, that it becomes a vow."

There are a number of things like that, but I'll give you one example. As I was kind of growing in my Zen practice, I came to a point where compassion and love were growing in me. I could see that I could, occasionally, accidentally maybe, love everyone. There was a capacity of the heart to love everyone.

At some point, that capacity, that ability to love everyone regardless of the situation, who they were, what they'd done to me even, felt like a place that had some great value. It felt like a place of integrity, or it felt like a place of wholeness. It felt like it was a place that this is the deepest part of myself that I want to live by and be close to.

If I don't do that, I could feel that if I instead decided to hate someone, that would harm something. That would close something down. I would lose touch with something. Now I was coming from some place that I didn't want to stand behind, didn't want to stand on.

I wanted to live a life. I wanted to stay close to this place where I could love everyone. That was kind of—I wouldn't say I thought of it at that time as a vow—but that was my kind of commitment. This is how I want to live. It changed my life to understand that.

Related to that, and this is the classic vow in Zen, is the vow to save all beings. There's something called the *Bodhisattva Vow* that they chant every day in Zen sometimes, and it goes something like:

> "Beings, which includes you, beings are numberless. I vow to save them. Desires—or we might say, in our tradition here, clinging—are inexhaustible. I vow to end it all. *Dharma* gates, *Dharma* practice, *Dharma* teachings, *Dharma* gates to go through—*Dharma* gates are boundless. I vow to go through them all. Buddha's way is unsurpassable. The Buddha's path of practice is unsurpassable. I vow to become it."

It's kind of an interesting twist: "I vow to become it." Maybe it was Frank Sinatra who sang

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"The Impossible Dream." So it's kind of like this is the impossible dream that these people chant. I chanted it for many years without thinking about it much, just kind of what you're supposed to do if you were there: you chanted.

Then, at some point, it dawned on me that that's how I wanted to live my life. It wasn't so much that I wanted to live my life. That was even too separate, too, too, too much kind of disembodied almost. Rather, this is what was welling up inside of me.

Responding to the suffering of the world, and in myself, was most what this heart was about. This is what had been born, the being that had been born, and maybe hadn't flowered yet. But this was the being that I was, and what made the most sense to me was to stay true to that. What made the most sense to me was to live with that.

There was something about this impossible vow of Zen: beings are numberless; I vow to save them all. I never took it literally—that I was going to manage that. But what I took literally was the desire to live that way. I'll do what I can.

If I live long enough, a few billion years, maybe I'll have some hope to do it. But that's not the point. Being successful wasn't the point. That was not what it was about.

It was to step forward into the world that way, not because it was like a promise, or because it was some duty that I had to fulfill, but rather because this is what made my heart sing. This is what made my heart kind of beautiful or wonderful, and so I wanted to stay true to that. So this idea of vow for me was not a promise exactly, and it wasn't that it came from outside.

I was ordained as a Zen monk at some point, a Zen priest. The heart of that is to—they would normally say maybe the heart of that is to take the *Bodhisattva Vows*. Like, "Oh, now you take means, like, you're good now. Like, you're promising, you're committing, like this is what you're going to do, and now you're obligated because you made this commitment."

Well, fortunately for my unusual mind, I think it was very fortunate, I never saw it that way. Maybe my teacher would have been upset with me to hear that. But how I saw it was, I was acknowledging what was already in me. I was acknowledging, this is how I wanted to find a way to live from this place.

Commitment is a kind of heavy word, but a love for this, a dedication to this, a devotion to this—this is what's important. I think that made a difference for me. Now it's been almost forty-five years ago that I was ordained, and thinking about this *Bodhisattva Vow*, I feel like it's still in me. It's still what kind of is at the center of my life.

I feel my dedication, and I don't feel like it's at odds with—it's kind of a *Mahāyāna* thing, non-

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Theravāda thing—but I don't see it any differently. Because the movement in *Theravāda* Buddhism also is a movement toward responding to suffering wholeheartedly and completely wherever it might be, wherever it's encountered. If it's encountered in yourself, well, that's where we address it.

As we address it in ourselves, then sooner or later you're going to bump into someone else's suffering. It happens occasionally. Then, rather than pull away or shut down or say, "Well, that's your problem," it's not my problem either, but it is something to respond to. It is something to care for. It is something to want to foster peace and foster freedom from suffering.

So this vow has been a very important part of my life. In our tradition, the *Theravāda* tradition, there is something that is like a vow. There are four of them, just like the four *Bodhisattva Vows*, that are kind of not emphasized too often. The word for them in the ancient language is *adhiṭṭhāna*.

Don't try to memorize it, but *adhi* means "higher," which is a prefix, and *ṭhāna* is a very ordinary word: "to stand." So, the higher stand. Some translators have rendered it as "foundation," the foundation on which we stand.

There are four of them, so that works very well. It's the four foundation stones for the temple. What's the temple? You. Or, if you don't like temples, the monastery, or the meditation center, or foundations for freedom, foundation for life.

These are the four foundation stones that you build this wonderful *Dharma* realm on. Or it's the four standing stones on which you stand tall. This is where I—so in English we say "taking a stand." It can mean to be committed to something.

That it's a higher stand is not the same thing as standing your ground, which maybe isn't always so good. There are four of these things, and sometimes, rather than calling them foundations, they are called resolves. Sometimes they're called aspirations. Sometimes they're called—I think—resolves, aspirations. I think that's what comes to mind when I think of how translators have rendered it.

But I offer you these different possibilities: foundation, aspiration, resolve, orientation, something, so that you can find your own word. Part of the art of being a good Buddhist student is this personal side of it. What is it? What does it touch in you?

Sometimes you have to retranslate it for yourself. Give it a different word to really make it, "Oh, well, this way it works for me, not that way." A foundation stone of a house? Give me a break.

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So there are four of these foundations, or resolves, or vows maybe. As you listen to them, because of the way I've talked already, maybe don't listen to them as out there. "The Buddha said this 2,500 years ago, that there are these things out there that all you have to believe or accept or react to or reject or protect yourself from," or something. No.

Rather, might it be that these four things, in some way or other, already live in you, already are there? If they're already there, if you recognize them in yourself, what happens to you? What changes in you? What orientation do you have?

Can you imagine yourself, "Yes, this is something to stand on. This is something to orient myself to. This—this, yes—this would be a good foundation to come from. Let me stand on these wherever I go."

So the first one is wisdom. Wisdom is not a bunch of knowledge you read in a Buddhist book and then memorize, and then go around and live your life by that knowledge. Wisdom is an activity, an action in the moment of seeing clearly. Some people translate the word *prajñā*, here translated as wisdom, as discernment.

So it's really to be discerning in the moment. What is happening here? What's really going on here? How do I really understand or see or recognize what's going on? How do I take the time to be discerning, to see?

I sometimes like to translate the Pāli word of wisdom, *paññā*, not as wisdom, because wisdom is too complicated. I like to translate it as insight, for the same reason: that we are seeing into something and seeing it very clearly. What the tradition most emphasizes that insight is about—there are two major things—but the one that I want to highlight right now is to clearly discern, clearly know for yourself, "This is healthy, and this is not healthy."

Healthy emotionally, psychologically, spiritually. The Pāli word, ancient word, is better rendered as wholesome. This is wholesome. This is unwholesome. This is helpful. This is unhelpful.

To have wisdom is to have the discernment to see that distinction clearly for yourself. To see that, if it's snowing outside and you go out in your T-shirt and it's twenty degrees below, that's probably not very helpful or healthy for you. You have the discernment to put on some warmer clothes.

The mail carrier brings the mail at 6:30 in the evening when it's dark, and you don't want to go up to your mailbox, and you yell at the mail carrier, "How could you? Don't you realize that I need to have my mail earlier? I have to go out. It's very inconvenient that you're doing this." Have the discernment before you say it: this is not a good thing to do.

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There's no need to. It has no real purpose. I'm just venting my frustration. Maybe there's a better way to vent my frustration. Maybe I should meditate.

Maybe that would be better, and then I'll have a better relationship with my mail carrier. Next time I see them, we'll just kind of be more friendly. But if I yell and curse at them, I don't think next time is going to go very well.

So the ability to see can be as simple in meditation. Sit quietly in meditation and see that, in meditation, your mind begins going into something as simple as what you want for dinner. That's innocent enough. But then you find your mind locking in and getting tight and getting busy and getting upset because you didn't buy the right things yesterday at the grocery store.

Isn't it a drag you have to go back now in order to fulfill this desire? Your mind is going, you know, is taking off. But you're sitting quietly, more quietly than usual. So you notice that the mind is beginning to go that way, and there's a bit of discernment that says, "You know, this isn't what I really want to do. This is not really good and helpful for me."

This was pretty special for me, that I was sitting and meditating, and I was actually calmer and more peaceful than I'd maybe ever been. I could feel that that calm is just so right here, still here. I think I should stop thinking about dinner. There's a discernment. There's a decision. There's a seeing, a choice, and we choose the healthy one over the unhealthy one, or the beneficial one over the unbeneficial one.

So in this tradition of ours, that's what wisdom is: staying close, staying on the foundation, staying grounded on this idea. Stay and look carefully. Look carefully and discern. Look carefully and see and recognize, not what you want, because wanting is overrated, and wanting isn't always the best thing for you.

Not what you don't want—that also can be overrated, and might not be the best thing for you. So not what you want and don't want, not what you prefer, like, or don't like, but what is healthy, what is wholesome. What is beneficial for you and for others? This is what wisdom is.

This then leads to the second foundation, and the second foundation, the resolve, is truth. No, no, yeah, truth. Truth is kind of like, now we're getting into something more exalted, more special. A lot of people say they want to be committed to truth and be truthful. People often say it more than they are.

One of the really important areas of truth in the *Dharma* is telling yourself the truth. There's all these—once you start talking about this philosophy or ethics of truth, people will come

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and say, “What about when the ICE officers come to your door and say, ‘Do you have any illegal immigrants in your house?’” Well, you kind of do. What do you say? We have to tell the truth, right?

So what do you do? People want to debate this and discuss this. So that is an interesting, very important topic to discuss. I’m not going to diminish how we find our way with that. Maybe there’s a time not to say the truth, maybe.

But the one place in Buddhism where it’s never okay to avoid the truth is when you’re speaking to yourself. The mythology of Buddhism says that the Buddha lived for many, many lifetimes before he became a Buddha, and he had a lot of adventures, a lot of things he did. Apparently, he broke the precepts in his previous lifetimes. Part of maybe his growing up and being ready to become who he was, he had to make a lot of mistakes.

Some of us do that too. But the one mistake he never made in the mythology is he never lied. So it’s that important: the idea, for the spiritual life, to not lie to yourself. That can be a hard thing to do because we don’t even know we’re doing it.

But to be truthful, to stay close to the truth—what truth do we stay close to? The truth of what wisdom has shown us. This is helpful. This is not helpful. This is wholesome. This is not wholesome.

That’s the truth. It’s a pragmatic truth. It’s a functional truth. It’s a truth that is not some abstraction, but a truth for how we can live our life. I’ll stay true to that.

The third foundation, resolve maybe, is a very interesting one, because the Pāli word is *cāga*, and it has two meanings. No one really knows which one we’re supposed to use for these four resolves. Maybe you’ll hear both meanings, and you can decide which one it should be for you.

Or there’s another option: maybe both meanings should be understood to work together. Maybe they’re partnered. Maybe there’s a compound word with a hyphen between them. The word *cāga*, one meaning of it, is generosity.

To base your life, take a higher stand, on being generous. You see that over and over again in the teachings of the Buddha and early Buddhism. It’s almost as if generosity is the beginning of the path of practice. You see, even to this day in Asia, that many laypeople don’t meditate, but what they practice is generosity.

I had a friend who had a tremendous amount of psychological challenges that needed years of psychotherapy. But when she went to her Buddhist teacher for some support or help, what

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he encouraged her to do was to be generous. That made a world of difference for her. That was something she could do.

It was hard for her to meditate. It was hard for her to understand the teachings. But at least she could do some of that in a modest way, in a small way. That was like the opening that allowed her to find her way and start the psychotherapy and find her healing.

What I like about generosity as foundational to Buddhism is that it puts our Buddhist practice in the world of relationships with other people. A lot of people in the West begin their Buddhist practice by meditation, where they sit down and close their eyes, forget about those people out there, and it's a little very personal in a sense. But that's not the classic way of understanding what practice is. Practice is relational, deeply relational.

Buddhist teaching was so relational that the heart of Buddhism, all the way to enlightenment, could be understood as being an ethical teaching. This idea that to do what's helpful and avoid what's unhelpful, do what's wholesome and avoid what's unwholesome, has to do with how we live our lives, the activity, the actions we do. You could almost say that what it means is to know the difference between what's ethical and not ethical. It's that.

So to be generous establishes our practice, our mindfulness, our awareness in the field of our relationships. In doing so, we have a chance to begin to clean them up. To discover what it's like to have those relationships be healthy and good. Generosity is not always an easy thing to practice, and it raises all kinds of inner concerns, interpersonal concerns.

But to practice generosity is where we can look at those and work with them, and find our way with them, and find what is healthy and unhealthy, find what is beneficial and not beneficial. So one meaning of *cāga* is generosity. The other meaning of *cāga* is relinquishment, or renunciation, letting go. It kind of works together in that it's hard to give something away without letting go of it.

Sometimes it's hard to give because I'm not ready to let go. So we get to look at our fear. We get to look at our resistance, our clinging, our holding on for dear life to some of it. It's very valuable to look at where we don't want to let go, where we don't want to give.

But also, letting go is a beautiful act. It's supposed to be beautiful. In Buddhism, there's a lot of emphasis on letting go, but you have not really let go unless you feel some joy in letting go. Maybe you shouldn't let go if you're not going to feel joy.

Or maybe, if you don't feel joy in letting go of something, giving something away, whether it's your attachments, your anger, whatever you let go of, be very careful. What I found for

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myself is that I did a lot of letting go. In some ways, I got good at it. But then, at some point, I found out that if I just felt neutral after letting go, it would come back and bite me.

I hadn't really let go. I had to have some light feeling, feel lighter and uplifted and happy to let go. But this is part of the movement of Buddhism: the value of letting go, the value of not clinging, the value of not holding. Why? Because you know for yourself, you have the wisdom to recognize that clinging, grasping, is not healthy, is not wholesome.

If you think it's wholesome, you think it's helpful, beneficial, don't let go. Maybe it is. Maybe the alternative is worse for you. For now, it's better to hold on tight until you're ready to let go of this as well.

So the two *cāga* can be two things: it's either generosity or letting go, or it's both. It's generous letting go, letting go with generosity. Or it's letting go generously. Or whatever combination you want to look at it.

So that's three. The fourth of these resolves that hopefully you're finding in yourself—that's the exercise here—is peace. To be resolved on peace, to base your life on peace, to stand on peace. To have a vow for peace. And why?

You should answer that, not me. But I can say that, for me, my answer for that is that to get agitated, to be hostile, to be mean, to be restless, to be all these ways that are when we're not peaceful, I have the discernment. I have the insight to see that I'm harming myself when that happens. Why would I harm myself?

Why do I harm myself so that I diminish my wisdom, diminish myself to stay true, diminish my ability to stay in this wonderful, generous letting go where there's peace? That letting go brings peace, brings joy, brings something beautiful. It doesn't diminish us. It doesn't limit us.

This is how to live an unlimited life in Buddhism. The Buddha talked about greed, hatred, and delusion. Conceit, being caught up in self-definition, limits us. To let go of self-definition, to let go of conceit, to let go of greed, hate, and delusion, because it's the wise, beneficial thing to do, it's the true thing to do.

That is how we care for ourselves. That's how the best in us. That's how we live an unlimited life, or an unrestricted heart. So these four resolves are different than the four *Bodhisattva Vows*, the great vows of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism. But maybe there's a way of understanding that they're the same.

The behavior, the way we move through the world, maybe can be the same. The way we

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practice with it can be the same. It doesn't have to be something that you do out of a duty or because it's a good Buddhist thing to do. My hope is that maybe growing in the dark for you, being born in the dark, is something beautiful and profound and meaningful.

That one day, it flowers in you as a desire, maybe more than a desire, maybe a resolve to base your life, orient your life around these four: wisdom, truth, generosity and letting go, and peace.

So those are my—if I'm allowed to do this, if you allow me to do this—this is my challenge to you: to reflect on this and think about this. How is this for you? And what do you—if you don't base your life on this, if you're really honest, if you really take the time, maybe you need a week to really, really take time to really reflect deeply—what do you base your life on, if not these four?

If anthropologists from Mars came to study you, and all they saw was your behavior, all the screen time you do, what would they? They'd go back to Mars and say, "Oh, these people, they're really committed to Netflix. It must be their god. It's the most important thing." So, what do you base your life on? What is the most important thing?

So, I've had my turn here. Thank you. But now we have time before the official ending, and because there's tea today, at a minimum, it's nice that you have a chance to say hello to each other, introduce yourself to each other. Some of you might be new here.

You're also welcome then to go, but also, if you want to stay a little bit longer, maybe take a few minutes to—or you're also welcome to sit silently. It's really nice to be silent meditating when everyone's talking. So that's an option. But for those of you who want to talk and say hello, maybe share something about this talk with your friend that's not too personal, but something that was maybe provocative, or maybe, in a good way, evocative, or useful or interesting for you.

Then, in about maybe seven or eight minutes, I'll ring the bell so we can stop and finish and go to tea. So please look to either side. Make sure everyone is connected to someone to talk to. No one's left alone.

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