

Living By Vow Talk for Red Cedar Zen November 27 2022  
By Tracey Pickup (True Fragrant Field)

Blessings, Dear friends, dear Sangha, dear Thay,

Today is November 27 2022 and I am speaking to you from Calgary, Alberta Canada on Treaty 7 territory, the traditional territories of the Blackfoot Confederacy, including the Siksika, Piikani and Kainai Nations; the Stoney-Nakoda, including the Chiniki, Bearspaw and Wesley Nations; and the Tsuut'ina Nation. Southern Alberta is also home to the Métis Nation of Alberta, Region 3  
Today I will share about the vows that come to us and through us from every living thing.

- How do the birds and trees live by vow?
- How does the beaver who cuts down trees with his very own teeth live by vow?
- How does a wolf leaping through the forest after a jackrabbit live by vow?
- How does the black bear hibernating in his den live by vow?
- How does the magpie picking up a seed in it's beak live by vow?

It is said that the Buddha way and the precepts exist in each moment, in all time and time beyond time. Indeed, they live in the stones, mountains, rivers and clouds and in all life because we all have an awakened nature. And our awakened nature rises together.

Personally I find it encouraging to think of the Buddhist life in this way because not only do the vows not belong just to me, indeed they do not just belong to this human realm. Our vows belong to the enormity of life, in timeless time.

If our vows only belonged to the human realm then there is no way for humans to integrate into the beyond human living world. And if that were so we would always remain separated, isolated from nature. The humans on one side and all other beings in an entirely other realm.

How could we keep even a single vow if this were so? We eat, sleep and breathe in togetherness, don't we?

The earth herself calls us to wake up because, of course, we are the living earth calling on each other to wake up. Each mindful step reverberates the soil, the worms, the beetles, the microscopic organisms, earth bound and shaken by even the most gentle steps.

Do we think that they are not involved in our vows? Do we not think that they are involved in our taking of vows and how they are fulfilled?

The Buddha vows do not belong to us, either individually nor to our species. Just as all living beings desire life, they are always calling on us to reconsider the need for violence, for destruction, excessive desire and greed.

Yes, the squirrel and magpie steal each other's stash of seeds and nuts in the winter but do they hoard for this and every other season? They are careful and attentive and know the value of food, the

nourishment of their body. They are careful, attentive ever watchful because there is no other place for them to be. We as humans think there is another realm to be, we hide indoors when the wind blows and the weather gets cold. We cloud our minds and escape to other realms when if we paid attention we would see that the freshness of being alive is right before us. Always returning us to the healing of this present moment.

When I am tired of my vows, when I am tired of not knowing the way and can not figure out how to do the right thing or have been reprimanded and set aside, I send off my burdens to the earth who knows better than me. I walk through forests, set my feet on solid mountain stones. I breathe the cold air and touch the snow. I listen, watch the sky, take steps on crunchy leaves and touch the rough bark of trees.

And when I do this answers come, both more forthright and more full of compassion than I know how to imagine. It straightens my spine and keeps me upright, though it also comes with the price of not knowing and of not understanding intellectually where the answer comes from or what it means. I only know that it comes from listening and paying attention to the earth. I don't know that it is mine or that it is correct. But when do we know this? And when did we expect this of manifesting our vows? Except when we think only of me and mine.

And so I find it helpful to think about how a beaver who cuts down trees with his teeth lives by vow?

Of course the beaver just does what beavers do. For the beaver, the tree is not a tool or even simply a building material. It is a part of the whole being of a beaver. It "uses" many parts of the tree to eat, to build, to clear the forest, to sharpen his teeth. It also leaves the tree to decompose and lets it be where it lies sometimes and we would call it waste.

The interesting thing about what a beaver does is that it must do this work with its mouth, its very own teeth which it senses and feels and is altered by the work it does. There's no separation from being a beaver and cutting a tree. It is so close. They go along together. Can we be like this with our living of our vows?

We think we can keep our vows without getting messy, without being altered by our living of those vows. The vows of right speech and right mindfulness seem so clean and pure that we think we must be pure and clean to live up to them.

We make a vow and repeat it over and over in community, in the venue of zazen. What happens next is a mystery and sometimes it is a burning mystery. It is not clear and pure. It is not without the mess of all of life and it is not without the use of our life force.

When I listened to women's stories of violence as a domestic violence counselor I enacted compassion in my listening but also a was burned by the listening. I was moved, I was affected, I was involved in that listening. It did not happen outside of me- it was my whole body/mind. It was my life for that time.

Just as the beaver must use his teeth to cut down a tree, a good counselor uses her eyes, ears, heart and mind to listen to the cries of the world. They are not two things.

The body is involved in the act of hearing that suffering.

The body is fully engaged and fully enters into the world of the person with whom I sat with. In fact, we have never been apart. A great mystery of conditions brings us into the same space. It is not a service from one entity to another. It is not a giving and receiving. It is wholeness of conditions and living of togetherness where we swim together, curiously rising up and falling away.

So how could I somehow separate myself out with equanimity?

Listening is always like this. The vow of right speech involves all beings.

How do we maintain this kind of awareness when we sit with our beloved ones? To give to the forefront in every human encounter, not the words said, not the actions planned but the living bodies swimming in togetherness?

For me this is the name of love- a hidden force behind all human togetherness.

The more I practice, the more I realize that I can not protect myself from my what happens when I enact the vows. That might seem obvious but maybe we think we can practice without diving into the mud of life. As if we choose to be a noble Buddha rising high above the complexities of life, totally unstained by it. But then we would not be like our noble magpie companions fully engaged in being alive. Or the beaver who cuts down the tree with his very own teeth.

We think, I will only say good, kind and loving words and when we don't then it is our failing rather than notice how both the act of speaking and the act of listening are fully involved in the mud of the world. To hold the world full compassion is to hold both right speech and wrong speech together in the heart.

It has taken me a while to not turn away and think- that is wrong when I hear discouraging and harmful words both in myself and others. My new practice is to try to hold them both together. And when I can not hold them both together with compassion at least I know how to hold it with doubt and uncertainty- a kind of lightness that goes beyond right and wrong. To notice the thoughts and feelings in my mind as a flickering shadow without any real substance- that has kept me and always keeps me from outright hatred regardless of who or what or when - whether politics or interpersonal relationships. It is no different.

I have tried very hard to maintain my practice with all the knowledge, heart and skill I can muster and yet I am found wanting. How do we maintain a heart full of practice even when we are turned away from? Even when we are doing our best?

To keep a vow means to accept the consequences of keeping a vow for the world for all beings. Vows can never be broken and can never be kept. We are inextricably intertwined but to not make the effort means we do not show up in life at all.

Let ourselves be used by all living beings to enact our vows, to be burned and turned and used up by life so that the vow can be manifested through us and for all living beings for all time and time beyond time. This is wholehearted practice.

So, as it says in the Sutra on the Eight Realizations of Great Beings: Take the Great vow to help all beings, to suffer with all beings and to guide all beings to the realm of great joy! It comes through time, practice and patience and so did it for all our ancestors and for all future generations. May your practice bring joy and peace in great and subtle ways.

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