

Heavenly Messengers Home Study - September, 2015

Dear Friends,

Here is the home study assignment in preparation for our November retreat. This closing retreat will focus on Service: bringing the inner life of awareness as service to all sentient beings and our world.

There are a number of components to this assignment, some of which invite you to reflect and journal on your relationship to service, and others which ask you to contemplate the call to taking action in the world for all its inhabitants, as well as readings and practices.

*ONCE THERE IS SEEING, THERE MUST BE ACTING
WE MUST BE AWARE OF THE REAL PROBLEMS OF THE WORLD.
THEN, WITH MINDFULNESS, WE WILL KNOW WHAT TO DO
AND WHAT NOT TO DO, TO BE OF HELP.
THICH NHAT HANH*

1) Reflections on Service:

We would like you to reflect on and journal about the following questions as they relate to your service work.

1. How old were you when first realized that the needs of another living thing mattered to you, and you felt drawn to help them in some way? (a person, animal, insect, or a plant)
2. Briefly write down the story as you remember it and include as many details as possible. Did you tell anyone about your caring actions? How did they respond?
3. How do you think/feel/sense that this early experience shaped your current relationship to service?

2) Seva:

“Seva” is a Sanskrit word meaning “selfless service” or work performed without any thought of reward or repayment. In ancient India, **seva** was believed to help one’s spiritual growth and contribute to the improvement of a community.

Traditionally there are **five types of seva**.

- The first type is when you don’t recognize your service as seva because it is your very nature - you cannot but do it.
- The second type is action taken because it is needed in that situation.
- You do the third type of seva because it brings you joy.
- The fourth type is done out of your desire for merit - you do seva expecting some benefit in the future.

- And the fifth type is when you do seva just to improve your image or gain recognition. Such seva is depleting, while the first type doesn't generate any tiredness.

REFLECTION:

1. Between now and our next retreat, take time to reflect and journal about the service work you have done. As you consider the different kinds of service you've been involved with, reflect on what level of seva were you engaged in?
2. How were the different types of seva experienced?
3. What qualities characterized your motivation, heart and mind within each type?
4. How is your "seva" or selfless service a reflection of your spiritual practice?

3) Bodhisattva Vows

Two weeks after we left Yucca Valley, on May 14th, 2015, over one hundred leaders in the Buddhist community met at the White House for the first White House-U.S. Buddhist Leadership Conference. The aim was to voice concern for the issues that threaten the survival of the earth and its inhabitants. The following is edited from Hozan Alan Senauke's Clear View Project:

Buddhists Go to the White House Hozan Alan Senauke—16 May 2015

One hundred thirty Buddhist teachers, monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen, academics, and organizers met on Thursday, May 14 for the first "White House—U.S. Buddhist Leadership Conference"....

A remarkably diverse group of women and men were meeting to shape a common understanding of how to bring our various Buddhist practices into a troubled world. At the same time there was a unique opportunity to be in dialogue with White House and State Department staff interested in finding Buddhist allies to work on issues of climate change, racial justice, and peacebuilding...

Beginning with welcome and a short meditation, the morning program at George Washington University featured brief presentations on some broad and pressing concerns. A video from Mary Evelyn Tucker and a strong analysis by Bhikkhu Bodhi laid out the Four Noble Truths of Climate Change. Rev. Angel Kyodo Williams of the Center for Transformative Change made the compelling connection between climate justice and racial justice, saying, "We have in our hearts the willingness to degrade the planet because we are willing to degrade human beings."...

Four things stand out from the day. First, that we gathered in collective concern for compelling issues that threaten the survival of all sentient beings, not the interests of Buddhists alone. Second, the rich opportunity and frustrating brevity of

being with so many friends and allies. Third, that declarations and tinkering with policy will not bring about the change we need. Particularly in relation to the climate emergency, we cannot go forward on an implicit assumption that our quality of life and consumption can continue as is; that we just have to find cleaner sources of energy. This is not possible. Fourth, that in the “working White House” of the Eisenhower Executive Office Building, we were able, Buddhist practitioners and White House staff together, to chant the four Bodhisattva vows, beginning with:

Beings are numberless;
I vow to save them.
Now we must live those vows.

Leaving the White House grounds, twenty or thirty of us unfurled banners that had been hand-made by BPF friends in Oakland and that read:

The Karma of Slavery is Heavy—I vow to work for racial justice
U.S. Militarism Breeds Violence, Not Safety—I vow to work for peace and freedom
The Whole Earth Is My True Body—I vow to work for climate justice.

Here are other versions of the Bodhisattvas Vows:

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 unsurpassable, I vow to attain it.
Sixth Patriarch’s Platform Sutra

Creations are numberless, I vow to free them.
Delusions are inexhaustible, I vow to transform them.
Reality is boundless, I vow to perceive it.
The awakened way is unsurpassable, I vow to embody it.
Translation from Upaya Zen Center

I vow to listen to all others and to allow myself to be touched
by the joy and pain of life.
I vow to invite all hungry spirits into the circle of my practice
and raise the mind of compassion as my offering of the supreme meal.
I vow to commit my energy and my love for the healing of myself,
the earth, humanity and all creations.
Roshi Bernie Glassman

REFLECTIONS

Hozan Alan Senauke writes of chanting the Bodhisattva vows, he says: “Now we must live those vows”.

1. What does this statement, “Now we must live those vows” evoke for you?
2. Is there a recognition of your non-separateness - your interdependence?
3. Does compassion call you to service?
4. What would be an expression now for you of these great vows?

PRACTICES

Often, in the act of service we invoke something greater but also inclusive of ourselves.

1. Reflect on your service work as a calling. Is there a vow or a statement of personal commitment that expresses both this calling and your intention to be of service?
2. Write a 4 sentence vow/personal commitment statement expressing your calling to service.
3. For one week repeat/chant your vows when you sit in meditation to direct and dedicate your practice. Let them speak to your deepest dedication. Notice what effect they have on your sitting practice.
4. Choose to do one act a week that will benefit others. This can be a small act of kindness. Do it in a way that the recipient will not know that you are the giver.

Quote from Sensei Irene Kaigetsu Bakker:

“In the later Mahayana traditions, our own enlightenment came to be seen as “no big deal.” It is just a step, and once we reach that step – that openness, wisdom, and compassion – the real work begins of devoting our whole life to helping others. The four bodhisattva vows are more than promises but profound longings, heartfelt prayers, and total commitments to not cease practicing and serving until every single being is free from suffering. They represent an impossible, endless, task and yet, a bodhisattva enters into this impossible work wholeheartedly, lifetime after lifetime. In effect, a bodhisattva makes the impossible possible.”

4) Readings

1. Please read these two articles as a way to appreciate the practice of the Bodhisattva Vows in a contemporary way.

<http://buddhistchaplains.org/cmsms/index.php?page=compassion-and-the-bodhisattva-vows>

<http://www.lionsroar.com/the-bodhisattva/#>

2. Reference article: For additional background and further reading, consider this scholarly article by Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi "Arahants, Bodhisattvas, and Buddhas"
<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/arahantsbodhisattvas.html>

We are all looking forward to being together with you in November, taking up the practice of service and intentional compassion.

With Metta,
Heavenly Messenger Teaching Team