

The Four Wisdoms: Foundations of Social Harmony Rev. Oswin Hollenbeck, Prior

The Four Wisdoms, charity, tenderness, benevolence and sympathy, are the means we have of helping others and represent the Bodhisattva's aspirations. Great Master Dogen, Shushogi

As we contemplate strengthening sangha, the Buddhist community, it is good to turn for guidance to the teachings of the great masters of our Serene Reflection tradition. The Four Wisdoms in Great Master Dogen's *Shushogi* provide a very clear way to promote peace and harmony in our temple and in our world. One scriptural source for these qualities is *The Vimalakirti Nirveda Scripture*, in which they are used to describe a Buddha's Pure Land. Another source is the Pali *Sigalovada Scripture*, where these four attributes are called the "foundations of social unity." (Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*, pp. 109-110). In keeping with the emphasis in Mahayana Buddhism on the Bodhisattva vow to save all beings, Dogen takes a teaching from the older Pali scriptures on how to create a unified society and expands it into a way to bring liberation to the whole universe. These four wisdoms not only show us a practical way to develop a harmonious and peaceful community, they are the quintessential expression of the meditative compassionate mind of training.

With the Four Wisdoms we train four aspects of ourselves—*dana* (charity) for the mind, tenderness for our speech, benevolence for our bodily actions, and sympathy/empathy for our Buddha Nature. When we bring forth these qualities which we all inherently possess, we harmonize body, speech and mind with Buddha Nature—both our own and that of all existence. In reality these four are all one, but we look at each individually in order to cultivate that particular aspect of the Eternal.

The first of the Four Wisdoms is *dana*. This Sanskrit and Pali word means giving or generosity. Traditionally *dana* is illustrated by the almsbowl of the homeless monastic as he or she invites with empty bowl a food offering from the lay practitioner in order to sustain his or her body. The mendicant monk in turn offers the donor a bowl full of the Life-giving Dharma. This attitude of mind and heart cultivated in our sangha relationships doesn't stop there. It orients our whole being toward liberality in all our relationships and encompasses all sorts of gifts: time, service, patience, kindness, to name just a few. *Dana* is giving with generosity of spirit, without coveting or desiring any reward or recognition for our giving. We give selflessly and simply because it is good to give. The mind of *dana* gives with the joy of benefiting others, of creating merit, of acting in accordance with the inherent generous nature of the Unborn Itself. Through practicing *dana*, we transform our minds into that of Buddha.

The second Wisdom is tenderness, also translated as kind speech or loving words. We address others with the "parental mind" of love which Dogen in his *Tenzo-kyokun* instructs the monastery's chief cook to develop (see *Zen is Eternal Life*). To quote *Shushogi*, "One must speak to others whilst thinking that one loves all living things as if they were one's own children." Such speech is neither sentimental indulgence nor patronizing, but the true expression of love which concerns itself with the long-term welfare of the recipient. The Buddha Himself gave some good advice on right speech, recommending that before speaking we should consider if our words are true, kind, and appropriate or helpful for the circumstance. Imagine a community, a society, a world where everyone spoke in such a way!

Benevolence is the third Wisdom and means good or kind-hearted action. Dogen teaches in the *Shobogenzo* chapter from which this portion of the *Shushogi* is excerpted, "*Bodaisatta Shishobo*," that benevolence "means that we take care of every kind of person, no matter whether of high or low position, for this gives our life merit. We should think about people's present and future and about taking care of them so that they will develop merit." We create merit for ourselves by affording others the opportunity to do so. Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett emphasized once that competition is absolutely foreign to Buddhism. Instead, we cooperate and wish and work to make everyone a success. It is a natural and universal law that helping others helps ourselves. Benevolence is actually enlightened self-interest, so long as we do not help with the expectation of receiving that benefit! Like the other three Wisdoms, we apply benevolence with pure meditation, without expectation of reward. Another pitfall common to Westerners is becoming "do-gooders." We avoid this by acting selflessly, doing what is truly good as viewed with meditative wise discernment, rather than acting because we want to be well thought of or to feel better about ourselves or the situation. This takes practice, of course, but better by far to try and to learn than to continue in the same old karmic pattern creating suffering.

The fourth Wisdom is identification with others—sympathy or empathy. We feel and cultivate knowing what it feels like to be in the other person’s shoes and understand that we are all basically the same. Buddha Nature is not our personal possession—It flows through all things. Dogen teaches in “Bodaisatta Shishobo,” “*Doji* means not to differentiate self from others.” We recognize on a feeling and intuitive level that we are all in the same boat. We all experience the life and suffering, joys and sorrows, of human existence. Out of this recognition of our common humanity and shared Buddha Nature, we treat others as we would like to be treated, for indeed we are all one. “All waters may gather and form only one sea.” (*Shushogi*)

These four ways of practice were originally taught as guidelines for a unified or harmonious society—ways of relating socially with others. “Harmonious” reminds us that the aim is not to make us all exactly alike but to harmonize with each other and thus create a more beautiful and greater whole than any one of us could do alone. Each is valued and contributes to the whole. And, to continue the music analogy, we all play in the same key and follow the conductor! We cultivate the “one mind” which Rev. Master Jiyu stressed so often in community training. We relinquish our personal selfish wants and desires in order to make all a success. This “success” is the liberation of all sentient beings, including ourselves—the aim of the Bodhisattva’s practice. In Mahayana Buddhism we regard these four qualities as *bodaisatta shishobo*—“the four ways a Bodhisattva acts to benefit human beings” or “the four ways of leading sentient beings to emancipation.” These are truly the ways of Wisdom, the Heart of the Unborn.

In all respects and wishes, the Bodhisattva practices in order to save [liberate] sentient beings. What is most necessary is that we face everything with an open and flexible mind [the mind of pure meditation].
Great Master Dogen, “Bodaisatta Shishobo”

Note: Quotations from *Shushogi* are taken from Jiyu-Kennett, *Zen Is Eternal Life*; “Bodaisatta Shishobo” quotations are from Nishiyama, et al. translation of *Shobogenzo [The Eye and Treasury of the True Law]*, Volume 3 pp. 124-128.

