

Good morning!

Is there anyone here who is here for the first time? Hi! Welcome. Glad you're here.

It's always such an adventure to come and visit and I love this place so much, and not just because my friends Kosho, Mako, and Graham are here but because this sangha is so warm and alive and deep. And I really appreciate your practice, so thank you very much for inviting me and including me and showing up.

So today I'm going to talk about "orientation as vow" -- it's funny, when Mako and I were setting this up I sort of thought oh that's a great title and sort of in line with what I'm practicing with, and then I got here and I realized between the title and the workshop I wonder if they think I'm going to talk about sexual orientation! That's going to be part of it, but that's not actually what I'm going to be talking about.

I'm going to start with a poem by Hafiz:

Leave the familiar for a while.
Let your senses and bodies stretch out

Like a welcomed season
Onto the meadow and shores and hills.

Open up to the Roof.
Make a new watermark on your excitement
And love.

Like a blooming night flower,
Bestow your vital fragrance of happiness
And giving
Upon this intimate assembly.

Change rooms in your mind for a day.

All the hemispheres in existence
Lie beside an equator
In your heart.

Greet Yourself
In your thousand other forms
As you mount the hidden tide and travel
Back home.

All the hemispheres in heaven

Are sitting around a fire
Chatting

While stitching themselves together
Into the Great Circle of
You.

I invite you to explore the rooms of your mind a little bit. As we look at vow, and how can we relate to vow in such a way that it becomes useful in our everyday life.

It's easy for us to think about all of these wonderful precepts that we hear and practice here when we are sitting together on the cushion or when we're together, but maybe more difficult when we are driving in our cars, facing our days at work, arguing with our partners, all of those things.

But if we use vow as an idea of how it is that I orient towards the world, how is it that I view the world? If I can let go of vow enough that it becomes not a prescription to solve some problem called "me" -- but really this view of how I perceive the world -- it's the pair of glasses that I can put on and look through.

So as we talk about this, one of the things we have to start with is: what is the world? What is it that we take in? And how can we understand this? In Buddhism, back in the ancient times, there was developed this idea of two truths or two views of the world. And you'll often hear it talked about in Zen circles as ultimate truth (or ultimate reality) and conventional truth. The ultimate truth is sort of that truth that we sink into when we are sitting zazen; that place where body and mind drop away, where separation between you and I and the rest of the world falls away from us. When there is no ground but there is also no need for ground. In this place there is not a whole lot of need for precepts. Because when we are not separate, when we are in that place of joining, these become unnecessary because it's said that in the mind of the bodhisattva, thoughts don't even arise to break the precepts. But that's not actually where we live, is it?

We live in this world where difference is really important! Ferguson, MO is showing us just how important difference is. We live in a world where I inhabit this body and you inhabit your body and we somehow need to come together and relate to each other hopefully in skillful ways that don't harm each other. And this is the land of vow. This is where we can use these vows and instructions to orient us to how to take in the world. Vow helps us find the impact of our intention. The Buddha sort of taught that intention is the creation of karma, that karma comes from our intention. I'm of the opinion that after intention comes impact -- what's the result of my activity? And how do I hold the impact of my activity? My teacher was really mean when he named me Daigan; Daigan means 'great vow'. And he set me up to spend my entire life thinking about what it

means to be and live a great vow. Part of that understanding is this impact. If I'm looking at the world from this vow, if we just look at the first three pure precepts, here you say them as:

- I vow refrain from all evil
- I vow make every effort to live in enlightenment
- I vow to live and be lived for the benefit of all beings

It's a really big undertaking, and we start from the understanding that we're not really going to "get there" -- that we can really only do our best -- but we're not going to "make it." So what does that mean? If I look at it as the way I orient myself towards the world, then it means that when I fall short, I now I have a way to relate to this because I understand how to hold the impact of my actions. So I once -- my partner in 1995, died -- and I thought the perfect solution to my grief was to get involved in a relationship with another couple, because why not? That's better than grieving. Through that activity I created a lot of suffering -- so much suffering that these two men split up after I realized I might want to deal with my grief instead of hiding from it. And they split up and didn't talk to me and I realized the impact of my activity; it's also the time I began to practice. And I realized, wow, I really created this mess and I'm responsible for it. So I go to them and I talk to them -- actually I didn't talk to them I sent them notes because they weren't talking to me -- and I apologized and I took responsibility for my actions and they still don't talk to me. We travel in similar circles so I see them regularly and they still don't talk to me.

My orientation towards the world says: I created suffering. I wasn't able to refrain from all evil and I created suffering in the lives of other beings. Can I hold this in a way that is skillful and useful?

What it does is that it teaches me to think about turning towards my feelings and not using other people. Tells me something about communicating with other people as I end relationships; I should say that when I ended I didn't tell them anything, I just left. So can I communicate, can I use this as an opportunity to learn? Instead of holding myself to some rule and thinking oh I failed, I didn't live for the benefit of all beings, can I recognize that I can pick this up again? That my view of the world can change?

I never intended to hurt them, but the impact of my activity was hurtful. One of the other things about that was is that I learned not to lie to myself. See in this orientation towards the world when we take the precepts and we look at all of our vows, what we're vowing to do, it becomes more and more difficult as we sink deeper and deeper into them to lie to ourselves in the ways about which we're not living them out. We have this really lovely one: I vow not to foster delusion. This idea of harboring anger and ill will -- and so as I sink deeper and deeper into it, I notice all of the places in which that plays out. Every Friday morning I drive 31 miles to Green Gulch farm which is the farm that SFZC

has, to pick up bread for the community in the city. I don't know if you've driven across the Golden Gate bridge, but it's a major tourist route. And there are a lot of people that don't actually know where they're going. And when I first started this practice I would drive and I would get really angry and by the time I got to Green Gulch I would be so tense that I would be mean to everyone and the bread baker, this really great guy, would just sort of laugh at me. Then I'd get back home and it'd be the same thing. Lots of swearing, lots of, well, I'm sure you know.

So at some point I realized that I was really relishing in this anger; there's some way in which I was really indulging in it. It fed something in me. Part of it is that I like to be right. And when you're in the car alone, it's really easy to be right! They are wrong! If they drove the way I think they should, then I would be much happier. I'm sure none of you have ever had this problem.

So I started to look at this and started to pull it apart and I would watch the arising of the anger and make choices about how I wanted to engage with it. I started to watch the ways in which my personal karmic consciousness is constructed, so that I could notice what landed there. I orient myself to my vow, but I don't say "Oh, I'm just not going to be angry" -- if you know me that's kind of impossible. What I say is -- I'm going to try to let it inform me. Soften me. Enlighten me. In Zen we're really lucky because we're blessed with the opportunity to practice within our own karmic constructions. These vows are our response to them. We're not looking for people to practice in some sort of perfect situation; "and then I can finally practice" -- once I can really sit zazen well. Once I can not move for the whole period. Or not fall asleep. Then I can really start to practice.

Or you could just start to practice now. When you're driving in your car.

If we look at vow as a renunciation -- but it's a renunciation in the sense that everything is already gone. My security in having those people drive the way I want them to drive is already gone. So I can begin to let go. Live in renunciation. The other interesting thing is that, when we can do that -- when we can give up everything -- an interesting thing happens. Everything becomes precious. Everything becomes important.

So there's this old Zen guy who had this very special cup that was given to him by the emperor. Made from the finest mud, all the artsy-fartsy stuff, and he drank tea from it every day. And one of his students said such a valuable gift, shouldn't you hold it and use it only for special occasions? Aren't you afraid you'll break it if you use it too much? And the Zen guy said it's already broken!

Can I renounce everything to orient myself in such a way that the world offers itself to me?

Can I orient myself in such a way that my karmic constructions, all of those things that I think are breaking, all of those things that I think make me less than perfect, all of those things that give me an opportunity to look at how I am engaging with the world. Can I let go of my ideas about them so I can see them not so much as problems, as the mud of my life, but as the ground of awakening? This is the stuff that brings us to freedom and liberation.

I'm going to end with a small quote from Tricycle back in Spring 2005, it's an article written by Mark Epstein called "In Defense of Desire":

There's more to desire than just suffering; there is a yearning in desire that is as spiritual as it is sensual. Even when it degenerates into addiction there is salvageable from the original impulse that can only be described as sacred. Something in the person wants to be free and it seeks its freedom any way it can. As the well-known contemporary Indian teacher Sri Nisargadatta, famous for sitting on a street corner selling Indian cigarettes, once commented, "The problem is not desire -- it's that your desires are too small." The left-handed path means opening to desire so that it becomes more than just a craving for whatever the culture has conditioned us to want. Desire is a teacher when we immerse ourselves without guilt, shame, or clinging, it can show us something special about our own minds that allows us to embrace life fully.

Can I not be afraid of those things? Can I turn towards them, and open up and allow them to free me? To bring me into relationships that are intimate, engaging, and fulfilling my vow? And I'm not just talking about our sex life and our sexuality, as we live in this constructed and conventional world that we have complete control over, because we get to decide how I'm going to allow that into my life. We get to decide how our perceptions engage with it. And the more you practice, the more you sit zazen, the more that you practice in your life, those ideas start to expand.

So I like to leave time for questions. So, please. I promise I won't bite.

Student: Can you talk about the way that anger has helped enlighten you?

Daigan: When I orient myself in such a way that anger is no longer the problem, but that the problem is in how I hold it -- am I clinging to it or am I allowing it to have its full expression without necessarily acting out of it? So that I can see the ways it engages with my particular karmic construction. I let it inform me about myself. So when I'm driving and anger arises and I notice how it lands, I notice that I get to self-righteous; I notice that I like to flip people off. I notice all of these things and the ways in which it pulls me -- because I'm watching those thoughts. And I'm not necessarily engaging them -- so I'm not flipping people off -- but I'm watching that desire arise, watching that anger land in places and then I'm discovering what those places are. And

that informs me about myself, and that information then allows me to strengthen my orientation to the world and stop creating suffering.

It gives me benefit to not act out of anger. Dogen says that to study the Buddha Way is to study the self, to study the self is to forget the self, and to forget the self is to be awakened by myriad things. It's this process of studying which then allows us to let go of our constructed ideas about who I am and who I need to be in the world. Once those start to fall away then the world presents itself to us and that's enlightenment. Enlightenment is simply acting in accord with what's coming at us. Dogen also says that enlightenment is just an appropriate response. That's it. So when I have an appropriate response to anger, that's enlightenment!

Student: In this discussion between your karmic tendencies, karmic identity, and vow, there seems to be this tension between "naturalness" - or sort of what is naturally arising - and intention. In the loving-kindness sutra, we say "strenuous, upright, and sincere." What is this tension between strenuous and sincere? My question is: sometimes, especially when practice starts to deepen, sincerity tends to direct itself in ways that seem to contradict one's vows -- one's emotional life becomes larger and harder to be aligned with vows without strenuous effort. For me it's often this weird negotiation with what's sincere here and what is aligning with vow.

Daigan: Don't confuse habit formations with sincerity. They are usually constructed by socialization, nurturing, all kinds of things. Sometimes they are just stuff we come with. That's not sincerity! Sincerity is when I can move beyond that and respond from my deepest intention. Habit formations are just habit formations. And they usually will get us in trouble, but we tell ourselves "that's the natural me" -- that's "who I am." That's not who you are, because "who you are" doesn't exist -- who you are is beyond that, to some other deeper place. So start looking at it as habit formations, not so much about some natural instinct. You know, I was raised in such a way that misogyny and racism were a pretty strong factor in my life until I was probably 16 or so. The habit formations of my mind still play out. But that's not the natural me. The natural me is the person who cries at the stuff that is happening with Ferguson, who cried when the Hobby Lobby decision came down from the supreme court. That's the "natural me", that's my sincere response.

Student: Where does the effort come from when the habits are very strong? Where does the skillful effort come from?

Daigan: The skillful effort is knowing the habit formations well. Seeing them, and making the decision to not let that be you. It takes a LOT of work. It's hard work. A lot of what we're going to do in the class today is that exact thing; it's advanced practice and it takes effort; it takes effort to go, you know I'm not going to flip that guy off. I'm just gonna lower my window and enjoy the eucalyptus. That's the effort. And we get that through sitting zazen,

we get that energy from -- at least I do -- the engagement with my body in zazen allows me to have the energy to engage those things.

Student: You talked about "falling short" -- is there really a thing to fall short of?

Daigan: No. That's the short answer -- no. There's no there there, there's no "you" there to ever "land on." Because as soon as you land it'll change. One of those old Zen guys said that if you look for it you're gonna miss it. But in some way there is, because there is this intention, there's this place in my heart that just...brings me to the appropriate response to the situation that presented itself to me. I don't know what that is, I can't land there, there's no there there, but it arises.

Student: You mentioned a couple of times, used the term "karmic constructions" in zazen -- I don't exactly understand what that means? Can you may just elaborate a bit so I can grasp that?

Daigan: Thank you for asking that question. Karmic constructions are those behaviors and places and habits of mind and thoughts and ways that we engage with the world that are constructed of all of my ancient, twisted karma. The stuff that I was born with, the stuff that I created as I go through my world, the stuff that I still create, it's all karmic construction. And it serves the purpose of -- my mind likes to create a self -- likes to say this is who you are! And it's usually I'm either a hero or victim in my life. So that's karmic construction, and it plays out in habits of mind and in how we engage with the world. My premise today is that we can change that by changing our orientation to it. Taking these vows, we change our orientation to it. So that can take those constructions and enlighten us. So another way to think about it is the stories we tell ourselves. 3am, I wake up, my first thought is usually "Oh my God, I'm all alone and nobody loves me." Karmic construction. I can orient in that way in which I'm all alone in the world and nobody loves me and nobody ever will, or I could orient in such a way that that enlightens me. It tells me something about how I relate to the world.

Student: So there's not a need to change the karmic constructions?

Daigan: You never can change them. Hopefully you can stop acting them out, a little bit. In my life they've never gone away, they just get subtler and subtler, they get quieter and the voice sneaks in other ways. I lie to myself so much. The more I learn how much I lie to myself, I lie to myself in subtler ways. So I don't know that they ever go away.

Student: It's kind of what Shogaku Shunryu said in his book, he mentioned I never really attained enlightenment in this body.

Teacher: He also says be careful about enlightenment, you might not like it when

you get there. So, really, all we can do is change our orientation to them, change our relationship to all of these constructions, stop being pulled by them, but let them enlighten us.

Student: So the teacup is already broken -- like, broken in our minds already, or...? That is intriguing to me.

Daigan: "Everything that you are, everything that you think of as yours, is only lent to you" -- that's a line from W.S. Merwin, a lovely Buddhist poet. The understanding that everything goes away! The first Noble Truth is: everything that you have and hold precious and dear is GONE! You will lose it all. Can I live in such a way that I understand that so deeply that I know it's already gone, so I can treat it precious now, but not worry about it? I don't have to protect it from something that's inevitable.

Student: How did you find out that you were a victim or a hero? I feel like someone from the outside was going to have to let me know that.

Daigan: I watched it happen; if you watch your karmic constructions, they will tell you who you are. Our job is to find out when to believe what they tell us; believe them in the sense that they are true, but that they tell us the nature of our stories about ourselves. What's the self that I keep trying to construct? What's that self that I think that I am that I'm trying to pour concrete over? That's what they tell us. So when we watch these things in our life, when we watch these places where we fall short of our vow, and we watch these karmic constructions happen, they tell us something about who we are and how we are habitually trained to relate to the world. If you watch your "hooks" -- and see where they pull you -- and so zazen is a great way to do that. You sit sesshin, so many wonderful thoughts come up; it's a lovely opportunity to really see yourself in all your naked glory. If you can love that about yourself, you can go -- oh, it's like that voice again -- I recognize you; come on in, tell me more. Somehow we start to change; we're not so convinced by the story and we begin to have appropriate responses.

Student: Has outside guidance been part of that?

Daigan: Oh yeah. I mean, I have a therapist and a teacher. Teachers are so vitally important. My teacher is so good at pointing out: look at what you are really doing here. Pay attention. That's their job, that's the only thing they do. They get to know you so intimately so that they can point out to you when you are not seeing something. And we have to trust them. But yeah, therapy and teachers are great, but it's not the only thing.

Student: At times my self-observation or awareness of the karmic constructions that are coming up slips into a self-criticism. Especially when I'm in the world and busy and having a lot of interactions. And not just self-criticism, but a sort of terror of possible impacts and judgments. I was wondering if you could

say something about that kind of tension between observing what's happening in an objective way or even a loving way, and then on the other hand sometimes sort of being self-damning.

Daigan: I don't know anybody at all that is self-critical! (laughter) Actually I think that's how we are. I don't know anyone who's not self-critical, and I think it's the hardest part of this practice. Letting go of this idea that "I am THIS thing", that "THIS THING IS ME" -- because that's when compassion can arise; when it's not me, when it's not my construction, then that judgment goes away. When it's just a karmic arising, it's harder to judge it than when it's me. So can I not let it be me? That's one step -- and the other is to start to love them. There's a really great Zen saying, "Feed the demons cake!" We all have these demons -- rather than trying to force them away, rather than trying to tell them to stop being what they are, just welcome them and recognize that this is what enlightenment is. This is how we are enlightened. Not by cutting these things off, but by allowing them to arise and teach us something. So that's how I deal with that. And sometimes I get caught in it, you know, and that's what teachers and therapists are great at. Look at you being so self-critical! How's that working for you?

Student: I'm self-critical about being self-critical.

Daigan: Oh yeah! Absolutely! And you can turn that into another story, right? An event happens, we have our feelings about it, and then our feelings about our feelings, and this is how we move through the world. That's how karma pulls us along. And can I interrupt that process in some way, and just stop it from dragging me so far? Sometimes I'm lucky enough that I actually get in front of it and I can deconstruct the whole thing. Lots of practice.

So we're out of time and I wanted to express my deep gratitude to you all, and say that these times together -- we co-create them -- they don't happen without you, and I don't get to practice as deeply without you. There's a great trick about being on this seat is that it's all about my practice. You awaken my practice, so thank you very much.