



One Earth Sangha

Session Eight: The Practice of Vows

Transcript of EcoSattva Training 2023-24 Video

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Session Profile

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Speakers in this video

- Kristin Barker - director and co-founder, One Earth Sangha
- Myokei Caine-Barrett

Transcript

Every Action Matters

Kristin:

Well, welcome everyone to the vows segment of session eight. Here we are at the culmination, and I am honored and delighted to invite my friend Myokei to be here with us from Houston, Texas. The Sangha that you hold there is precious, and our friendship has been precious to me over the years. I wish we had more time to hang out, but it's really, really great to have you join us in this final session of the EcoSattva Training, again. You did it for us before and we're coming back and we're doing it again. So much gratitude and some excitement about what we're going to do today, and we're just going to see how it all unfolds. So welcome Myokei.



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Myokei:

Thank you, Kristin. It's great to be here with you. I've missed our hanging out, as you say. Yeah, because it's been quite a while, I think. What was the film we saw last?

Kristin:

We watched *Get Out* together.

Myokei:

Yes.

Kristin:

We did.

Myokei:

I remember that.

Kristin:

Screaming on the couch.

Myokei:

That's what we're saying today. Get out, get out.

Kristin:

Yeah, yeah. In some ways, right,

Myokei:

Exactly.

Kristin:

So the participants have made it through this journey that you are aware of, and is there anything that you want to say here to those who have arrived at this moment, where we're going to talk about vows.

Myokei:

We really have to consider the vows that we make. I recall a book, *The Four Agreements* by Don Miguel Ruiz, and the one thing that really stuck with me was to be impeccable



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with your word. And I've thought about that over the years because it was, oh gosh, 20 years ago or so when I first read that book. But the thing about the vows has always stuck with me because I think for the most part, we tend to forget or not even consider the true meaning of a vow because a vow means to promise, to commit. And so we say when we get married, I do, and we're saying, I do whatever comes with the traditional ceremony and the rituals that go into it. But are we really thinking about what that means and how it impacts our words? Our words impact our bodies, our hearts, our minds, even down to the cells.

I've been thinking about this for a long time because there's a concept in Nichiren and Tendai Buddhism that comes out of the Lotus Sutra called Ichinen Sanzen, and it's 3000 realms in a single moment, and there's a whole lot that goes into that. But ultimately what it comes down to is that 3000 realms are just a number, that there are infinite realms and they are consisting of ourselves and the factors of such things as how we look, how we behave, and also in connection with the land in which we live and all the sentient and insentient beings. Essentially really pointing out that we are part of the universe and the universe is us, part of us or with us, in us, however we want to imagine it. So that a simple spoken word can have far reaching impact. It's like, we think about if nobody hears a tree falling in the forest, did it really happen?

But that energy, that vibration of that sound of that tree falling is traveling. Sound waves, when you look at sound waves, they continue. We don't know when they end, and maybe I sound like a hippie from back in the sixties or something. But just the idea that we can speak a word into a canyon and have it echo and continue to echo and we have no idea where it goes. So if we can imagine that a vow that we make penetrates our very cells, penetrates our hearts, our minds, then we have to be very careful about the vows that we're making. And again, to be impeccable with our words, to really honor and trust that the words we're saying are intentional and we understand their impact. Because a lot of times we don't and we say things and walk away from it as if it never happened.

And I think, how do we feel when someone says to us, I love you. Your entire body responds, your heart responds. Your mind just takes all of that in, and it becomes a moment, an event, that sticks with you in the same way that the trauma of all of those *isms* that exist in our world today impacted even a small child. The most heinous thing I can think of was that 6-year-old Palestinian boy who was stabbed to death 26 times. And when I heard that, I just cried because it was so painful to imagine a child and all the love and trust that children come into this world with and share it with us and that someone



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would destroy a child. And I thought that was a vow unfulfilled. The idea that we set up a safe place for children, that we introduce them to a world that's going to be there someday, but then we don't take care. Just as that little boy wasn't taken care of, that his blood is spilled for what? Not to aid, not to expand anything, but just in terms of hatred. But that trauma was experienced around the world. And all the images we had in recent times of how much we despise each other, how we're separate from each other, how we have forgotten that we are part of the same thing, we are the same. And that's such a deep principle in Buddhism that we are one. And so what happens to you happens to me, and I just simply know that we all have to be very careful about what we're doing and what we're saying, and so our vows have to mean something.

Kristin:

Yeah. It's like I am hearing just the importance of our words and our deeds and to not underestimate their impact. So it feels like that invitation to take ourselves lightly and our vows very seriously, to make our commitments, to really allow the full weight of that. I really love that invitation to, can I really allow and really come to terms with how important, Buddhism teaches every action matters.

Myokei:

Exactly.

Kristin:

Can I be, again, take the self lightly, but take my words and deeds very seriously? I really love that.

Myokei:

Our parents grew up in an era where it said your word was your bond and your name was critical, that you did nothing to disgrace your name because that carries. And we seem to have forgotten that in light of all of the other stuff we've got going on in the world. But I always remember that it's so important to keep your name clean, which means to keep your vows, to keep your words in line with your values. And we've forgotten, it seems that we've forgotten that. So if I say I'm committed to understanding climate and the world and changing the way I interact with the world, we have to mean that. We have to be an example.

Kristin:



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And the interesting ways in which that integrity can free up is itself liberating to some degree, the way that it frees up energy that's not caught in conflict with ourselves and our values. Yeah, beautiful. Go ahead.

Myokei:

When we practice that way, when we utilize our practice to ground that kind of thinking in our lives, then it becomes our nature because it's intertwined with who we are as our true selves and not the one that we show the world when we want to be loved or liked. Because coming in contact with our true selves, we love our true selves because it feels really, really good to be your true self.

Embodying Our Vows

Kristin:

So maybe some of the practitioners here are very familiar with a vow practice, and some of them will have never heard of it before, and some of it may have kind of like, yeah, once in a while or I've heard of it before, but I think the question is what vows do I take? Do I take those that my teacher took? If I don't have a teacher that I really follow, do I take those that are connected to the particular tradition or maybe I don't have a tradition or I'm practicing secular mindfulness, so how do I choose what vows to take and should I craft my own? What guidance would you give there?

Myokei:

I would start first, I think from The Four Great Vows that the Buddha left behind. That sentient beings are innumerable, I vow to save them all. And the Buddhist's teachings are immeasurable, I vow to know them all and that the way of the Buddha is unexcelled and I vow to follow the path sublime. I'm missing one, but those very basic vows. But then also to look at the EcoSattva vows because they're in tune with those. They're aligned perfectly with those Four Great Vows, but they're saying them in a way that expands our understanding of what those vows are.

Kristin:

Yeah, I mean the Great Vows are great. They have that really deep sense of eternity and unattainability, kind of non contextual in their devotion, and that really feels like what it's about from my perspective, is devotion, a certain kind of the surrender of the Bodhisattva. So what might it look like to take vows? What does that look like in maybe on a continuum of very ceremonial, very formal, to maybe more pedestrian, more



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day-to-day way of being in relationship with vows so that we're very much inviting that impact, as you were saying before, at the cellular level.

Myokei:

Well, part of our practice is we have a service every morning and every evening that we're chanting the sutra and the sacred title, the *Odaimoku Namu myoho renge kyo*. At the end of every service, we are saying The Four Great Vows. And it's just a reminder, no matter what kind of ritual or tradition you have, is to pay attention to those vows instead of just rattling them off. I do this every day, so here are The Four Great Vows, dah, dah, dah. And to really get in touch with that, to look at that, see how it feels to say sentient beings are innumerable, I vow to save them all. What does that mean when you go out in the street, when you encounter somebody that just looks like you don't want to even talk to that person? Or I spend time with incarcerated folks and previously I used to think, oh, I don't want to deal with these kinds of people or those kinds of people, and how did I meet all of these and those kinds of people. And fortunately I did not know what they had done so I could learn to love them for who they showed up as right now.

And so that's a very different kind of thing I learned about myself that I could ignore that and I could see, yeah, we're connected. We're the same people. We've made the same mistakes. Of course I didn't make the ones they did, but I've made mistakes. And I'm just lucky that back in the day when I was doing things that were illegal at the time, I did not get caught and other people did. And so there's a purpose in the fact that I didn't get caught. That's what I have to remember. The purpose is I understand. I can speak to what's happening with them because I've been there, done that, and there's a reason that my path took me there.

Kristin:

A certain kind of charge to that isn't there? Here you are with your relative freedom and then what you understand from those experiences. So again, I am wondering if you can speak to, so your community in the morning, in the evening chant the vows, is that what you would invite practitioners to do to find the vows that resonate for them? And maybe it's The Four Great Vows. I have it here. Beings are innumerable, I vow to save them. Delusions are inexhaustible, I vow to end them. Dharma gates are boundless, I vow to enter them. The Buddha way is unattainable, I vow to attain it. I love the impossibility and the obligation, the call, the kind of call to direction and focus and that sense of dedication that's in that.



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Myokei:

Because they're not easy vows to keep when you think about them. To say our delusions, we say our defilements are immeasurable, innumerable, I vow to quench them. And how good are we at that in a capitalist society? I mean, we're encouraged to have unlimited desire because that makes somebody rich down the road. And so we're constantly encouraged to buy buy buy. And it's all the messages you hear about how is our financial system doing? Not how our human system is doing. We're not talking about that. It's all transactional and capitalistic. So I think that if we are saying these words about delusions, defilements, however, that we do want to tame those things, we do want to understand with our lives the depth of the teachings that we're following and how we use them in our lives. And it takes work. It's not like you can just go out and read a book and say, okay, I got this and run around, because I think Buddhist practice is relational and how you relate to others is critical. And if you're able to do it in accordance with those vows, then there's a huge return to you, that you do come to be in touch with your true self. And that's so important for anyone to be in touch with that.

Kristin:

I really hear the way the practice of the vow can work us, shape our minds, shape our hearts, and actually increase that dedication like you just said, to understand even the possibility of understanding the depth of the Buddhist teaching. That's a whole life. That's just endless. That goes so deep. The more I know, the more I love it and the more I know I don't know. And yet it becomes less about a kind of mental knowing for me and more a kind of way of perceiving and sort of sensing this awareness, this life. It feels like it's happening for me more and more at the kind of body beyond the mental, more heart, body kind of, all of it. And I just find it a beautiful and very promising journey. But that anchoring in the vow and the power that can have, I feel like, yeah, like you're saying, it's so underappreciated. The implicit vows that we're taking, I vow to attain all material things or all great success or to be the richest person in the world or to be admired by all these people, or even I vow to get this promotion. Those are implicit vows that sometimes we could argue we're kind of taking.

Myokei:

Yeah. And what we're really trying to do, I think as practitioners, is to embody what we're learning from the Buddhist teachings so that when we walk out into the world that we are not just Kristin or Myokei, we are the Buddha's emissaries. We are showing up for the Buddha, as Buddha, part of Buddha so that when we encounter other folks, they are touched by the truth of those teachings.



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Kristin:

What a prayer is that? I love that prayer. I love that aspiration. Okay, so let's do a practice together. Myokei, if you would lead us in this practice, I would be so grateful. Thank you.

Ceremony: The Four Great Vows

Myokei:

You're welcome. And thank you. These are The Four Great Vows done in Shindoku, which I will do and Kristin will do the English. It's a standard Four Great Vows, but done in the way that we do it in Nichiren Shu. And we'll end with chanting the Odaimoku three times. And the Odaimoku simply means sacred title. And the title we are chanting is *Namu myoho renge kyo*, which is devotion. *Namu* means devotion. *Myoho renge kyo* is the title of the Lotus Sutra. And what we're saying is Devotion to the sutra of the lotus flower of the wonderful Dharma. That's a literal translation.

Kristin:

Beautiful. Beautiful.

Myokei:

Much easier to say in Shindoku.

Kristin:

Yeah. Oh, and this is not my home tradition, so I'm really honored to do this with you. Thank you for inviting me to do this with you, Myokei.

Myokei and Kristin:

Shu jo muhen seigan do. Sentient beings are innumerable, I vow to save them all.

Bonno mu shu seigan dan. Our defilements are inexhaustible, I vow to quench them all.

Homon mujin seigan chi. The Buddha's teachings are immeasurable, I vow to know them all.

Butsu do mujo seigan jo. The way of the Buddha is unexcelled, I vow to attain the path sublime.

Myokei:

Namu myoho renge kyo

Namu myoho renge kyo



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Namu myoho renge kyo

Thank you.

Kristin:

Thank you Myokei. Thank you for joining me for this and for offering those sacred vows from your tradition. It's really powerful. And I just encourage everyone here to explore the practice of vows and really, as we were saying at the top, find a way that resonates for you and you can let it work you. Take it seriously even as we take ourselves more and more lightly. Thank you again Myokei.

Myokei:

Thank you Kristin.

Kristin:

I appreciate you.

Myokei:

Great talking with you today.

Kristin:

Always. Always my friend.

Dana

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