



Beings are numberless;
I vow to free them.
Delusions are inexhaustible,
I vow to end them.
Dharma gates are boundless;
I vow to enter them.
The Buddha Way is unsurpassable,
I vow to attain it.

We free all beings by freeing ourselves **Zuiko Redding** explains.

It's natural to wonder what it means to free all beings in this vast universe. This looks huge—an infinite, never-ending task. One might worry, “How did I go about saving an unending number of beings?” “Should I maybe find a religion that’s a bit more manageable?”

If we remain Buddhist, we have to ask what it means to free a being. The Japanese word that’s translated as “free” means “to cross over.” This makes things complicated because I can cross over a mountain or stream, but I can’t cross you over. I can carry you over, but you have to cross over on your own. Since all beings have to cross over on their own, doing it for them is really impossible. By now you’re probably thinking, “Maybe I can just give up and go take a nap.” Wait. There’s more.

In Buddhist thought “to cross over” refers to crossing from the shore of delusion to the shore of realization. To cross to the shore of realization means to give up our judgments and egoistic preferences and wholeheartedly be right here with the world just as it is. To free beings is to create conditions where clinging to ideas and judgments can stop. We make it possible for others just to be present with their lives, being comfortable with themselves and acting in their lives and their circumstances with wisdom and compassion. How to do this?

When Shakyamuni Buddha attained realization he said, “I and all beings together simultaneously attain realization.” Putting aside our egoistic thoughts and ideas, we free all beings by freeing ourselves. This is zazen. Our zazen expresses the Buddha’s wisdom, and it permeates our whole lives. We begin to feel awareness and peace wherever we go and whatever happens. When we find peace others find peace also, just like the Buddha said.

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Through our own peace we create conditions for others to cross over. For instance, from our own peace, we can resolve to be kind and respectful to others no matter what happens to us. At first, our resolution is mostly intellectual and mechanical. We have to remember on each occasion and often when we are hurried or overwhelmed we forget. We answer another person's question curtly, sending the message, "Don't bother me with such trivia." Then we remember and feel sad at our failure. Gradually, as we gain experience we remember before we speak or act and the strength of our vow guides us.

When we do this, others naturally feel peace, too. They can relax, if even for a moment, and give up their ideas and judgments. They have crossed over. We haven't told them about the Buddha, they aren't Buddhist, but our peace created the circumstances for their peace.

We can create these conditions even when our words or actions might sting. Perhaps it's necessary to tell a family member that their actions are

hurtful, or perhaps we have to tell a friend of a choice we've made that will disappoint them. When we act from our own calm center, we can do it graciously. Though the other person may feel embarrassment or anger, it dissipates quickly. They naturally see our warm heart, and can hear and consider our words with greater wisdom and openness. Dropping off pride and denial, they cross over.

These four vows are called the Bodhisattva Vow—vows to see that all other beings have crossed over before we ourselves cross over. To be a bodhisattva is to cultivate our practice, not as a self-help project, but because it benefits all beings. It is being aware in our lives without worrying about realization. Realization is, after all, just another of our infinite ideas. Best not to cling to ideas. Just doing the next thing simply because it's the next thing to do with no thought of crossing over creates the conditions for all beings, including ourselves, to cross over simultaneously.

Zuiko Redding is the resident teacher of Cedar Rapids Zen Center in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. She grew up in Texas where she encountered Zen as a university student, later practicing in Milwaukee with Rev. Tozen Akiyama and in Minneapolis with Dainin Katagiri Roshi. In 1992 she was ordained in Japan by Rev. Tsugen Narasaki, practicing under his direction at Zuioji Monastery and its mountain training center, Shogoji, where she received teaching transmission in 1996. She is a member of the American Zen Teachers' Association and one of Rightview Online's guiding teachers.