

Julie Nelson

*Taking Vows, Attaining Nothing: A Zen Perspective on Personal and Social Projects*

Week Three: “Non-Attainment and Social Change”

July 16, 2018



I didn't grow up practicing Buddhism. I actually grew up in a family with a Lutheran minister father, and I went to a Lutheran college. That upbringing has shaped my life in many ways. My family had an ethos of service—we believed that we were all called to be of service to the world.

In my twenties, I hit a real crisis where I realized that helping the world didn't just mean helping other people get the kind of lifestyle I had, because that was actually not possible. At that time, a lot of the writings were about population issues. It was really the beginning of environmental awareness and awareness of the real, vast global injustices, global inequalities, and persistent poverty of the world. When you have an awareness of these issues, this service orientation creates a real felt need to address the suffering of the world.

There are parts of Buddhist practice that also fit into this. I practice Zen which is in the Mahayana tradition. In this tradition, the goal is not just to become personally enlightened, to become an arhat [one who has attained enlightenment], or to become accomplished in meditation. In the Mahayana and Zen traditions we take the bodhisattva vows, which include a vow to stay around in samsara and to keep working until all beings are freed, until all beings are saved. “I vow to save all beings”—we're nothing if not ambitious! But there's this idea of service there.

In Buddhism, we also have the image of Kannon, Avalokiteshvara, or Kuan Yin [the bodhisattva of compassion]. The name differs depending on the tradition. This bodhisattva is the symbol or embodiment of compassion—the bodhisattva who hears the cries of the world, who hears the suffering. So how do we save all beings? How do we free all beings? How do we listen to and respond to the cries of the world?

My first two talks in this series were all about non-attainment and doing nothing. Yet these vows we make and the cries that we hear seem to call out for action. Shouldn't we make it our project

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to try to make things better? Shouldn't we try to liberate beings and ease suffering? It looks like quite a contradiction. How do we do nothing and live out our vows at the same time? I think this is a puzzle I'll be working on for the rest of my life. But I've got an inkling that this mind of non-attainment actually makes our efforts much more powerful. Our efforts are much better if we come to them from a mind of non-attaining and non-“*project-ing*”—of not making it into a project with goals. Our efforts are more effective without a constant need to filter things according to those goals or to monitor our progress.

Often when I'm in my do-good project mode, I notice there's an awful lot of me in there—an awful lot of “selfing.” I've noticed that I don't just want to hear and respond to the cries of the world, I have other demands I put on the universe when I turn this into a project. I think the universe should make it so that my efforts are effective. Isn't that a reasonable thing to ask of the universe, that I be productive and effective in what I do? I want the universe to make it clear to me and everybody else that I'm in the right. I want to be sure that's true, to know that my goal is worthy, and to be justified in thinking that my actions are pointed in the right direction. But most of all, I want to find the goodness of my efforts confirmed by success.

That's a lot about me and the goals I want to get to in my response to the world! When these demands I put on the universe are not met and I'm frustrated in achieving my goals, then I feel like I'm on one side and the universe is on the other. I think, “I'm going to get the universe, I'm going to do things my way because I know that I'm right.” But what would it be like to respond to the cries of the world without making it all about me, without making it a struggle between two sides? The feeling that I'm on one side and the universe I'm struggling against is on the other gave me a new meaning to the phrase “Being one with the universe.”

We often hear this phrase in Zen practice and meditation—“Being one with the universe”—and for me it usually brings to mind an image of someone walking through the stars. Then one time

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when I was feeling this tussle with the universe, I realized that being one with the universe means giving up the idea of, “If only the universe would just do things my way.” Making this a project is what sets me apart from the universe.

Can we still respond to the world if we loosen up and take a position of uncertainty, of “don’t-know mind”, about even our most cherished goals and means? Will we still respond if we have no assurance that our response is going to be effective? I think we can, and the mindset of non-attainment when we act is helpful. If we’re not attached to being either right or wrong, if we’re not attached to achieving a particular outcome, that’s actually helpful.

There are a couple of old Buddhist stories that illustrate this, you may or may not have heard them before. One is an old Chinese story about a farmer who had one horse, and the horse ran away. The farmer’s neighbor said, “What bad luck!” But the farmer replied, “Who knows? We shall see.” The next day, the horse returned and brought with it three wild horses. The neighbor said, “How wonderful!” The farmer said, “Who knows? We shall see.” The day after that the farmer’s son tried to ride one of the wild horses and fell off and broke his leg. The neighbor said, “Oh, what bad luck.” The farmer said, “Who knows? We shall see.” The next day, the military came by and conscripted all the young men in the town except the farmer’s son because he had a broken leg. The neighbor said, “What luck!” And on and on.

We don’t really know. We don’t know whether our actions, goals, or the events around us are ultimately good or bad. The second story comes from the life of Siddhartha Gautama—the person who became the historical Buddha. I was surprised by this one because I have a fantasy of what life was like in the Buddha’s time. I tend to think of it as rural, peaceful, green, and simple. Certainly nothing like being in a city these days with nuclear armaments, tanks, wars, politics, media, internet, and all of these complicated things. He was just out in this rural area of what is now Nepal, things must have been so much simpler back then.

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But this story woke me up. The Buddha's father was king of the Shakyas, a large clan in what is now Nepal in the 6th-century BCE. At one point, the Shakyas tricked a neighboring group, the people of Kosala. The Kosalans had asked for one of the royal women from the Shakyas to become a bride to their prince. The Shakyas tricked them by sending the daughter of a slave woman instead of a princess. We never found out what the daughter thought about all of this—that's left out of the old stories, the women's side. But this young daughter of a slave woman was sent to become the wife of a prince, and that prince later became the king, named Virudhaka.

When King Virudhaka found out about this trick he was mad and decided to take revenge on the Shakyas. He rounded up his army and marched on the Shakyas' main city with the intention of slaughtering them. At this time, the Buddha was already established and teaching, living with his community elsewhere. But he heard about this army advancing on his people, his family, and his relatives, so he went out on the road to meet the army and stop them. He did achieve some temporary delays, but he ultimately failed. The Shakyas were slaughtered, their city was burned to the ground, and their territory was annexed by the Kosalans.

The Buddha himself failed. The Buddha was trying to make peace and it didn't work out. That must have been terribly painful. But Buddhism, meditation, and Zen are not magic beans that create a tidy path to success for all things healthy and good. Whatever good they do us—and study and practice do a lot of good—they can't be used as an escape from the very real problems of our world.

I share the farmer story with you because it illustrates the concept of don't-know. The story about the Buddha not being able to stop the slaughter of his own people, that's a story of non-attainment. Why are not-knowing and non-attainment important? In my earlier talks I talked

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about how when we're “*project-ing*”—when we're making a project of doing good in the world—we often fail to take into account or even perceive information that doesn't serve our plan. I can feel in my own body that when I get caught up in projects I get an energy of moving and pushing that doesn't want to be stopped. I don't want to be challenged about my beliefs, attitudes, or actions when I'm caught up in a project. Because I don't want to be challenged and I'm selectively seeing the world, it's very easy for me to get caught up in thinking there's an “us” who are good, and a “them” with bad beliefs and attitudes out there. I can get caught up in thinking that “those people out there” are bad.

The Buddha's way is very radically different from that mindset. One of the sutras in the *Dhammapada* is said to have been spoken by the Buddha shortly after the slaughter of the Shakyas. Part of it goes as follows: “That person insulted me, hit me, beat me, robbed me. For those who brood on this, hostility isn't stilled. That person insulted me, hit me, beat me, robbed me. For those who don't brood on this, hostility is stilled.” Then comes a famous line, “For hate is not conquered by hate. Hate is conquered by love. This is a law eternal. [*Dhammapada* verses 3-6]. That person who insulted me, hit me, beat me, robbed me, slaughtered all of my relatives, burned my hometown to the ground—for those who don't brood on this, hostility is stilled.

You may have heard that last line—“Hate is conquered by love”—in a more recent version: Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous formulation, “Hate cannot drive out hate. Only love can do that.” It's the same idea, brought into a more contemporary and complicated world.

In my first talk in this series, I quoted Shohaku Okumura about non-attainment, about how without trying to be a buddha, we do our practice. He continues on the theme, “So what good is this practice for the world?” Okumura goes on to say, “Practicing in this way helps us understand that our map of the world is biased and incomplete, and this understanding allows us to be flexible. Practicing in this way broadens our view, and this broadened view allows us to be better at working in harmony with others.”

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We do need to urgently act out of compassion with this suffering world. So go out and sit on the road and try to stop those slaughtering armies, or climate change, or racism. By all means, go out and do it. But if we turn this into our project where we think the goal is out there, where we are pretty righteous that we know the means, and where we need to stamp out the bad, we're probably going to cause more suffering and division. Our work is transformative only when we act in compassionate response, unattached to our own success or failure, and unattached to any goal of personal righteousness.

My vow to save all beings first and foremost involves deeply seeing all beings as myself. When we divide the world into good and bad and put ourselves on the good side, we tend to externalize the three poisons of greed, anger, and ignorance. We tend to think that it's “their problem over there,” and we forget that it's our problem right here. We will be a lot less annoyingly self-righteous, and a lot more open-minded, flexible, and committed to staying in for the long haul if we release our desire to be good. We'll also be much more likely to respond from who we really are. We really are beings who are never anything other than one with the universe.