

Four Universal Vows

(shi gu sei gan mon 四弘誓願文)

Beings are numberless; I vow to save them.

(shu jō mu hen sei gan do 衆生無邊誓願度)

Afflictions are inexhaustible; I vow to end them.

(bon-nō mu jin sei gan dan 煩惱無盡誓願斷)

Dharma gates are boundless; I vow to enter them.

(hō mon mu ryō sei gan gaku 法門無量誓願學)

Buddha's Way is unsurpassable; I vow to become it.

(butsu dō mu jō sei gan jō 佛道無上誓願成)

“The earliest reference to these Four Universal Vows is in Chih-i's *Tz'u-ti ch'an-men (Graduated Dharma Gates Explicating Dhyana Paramita)*, and perhaps is his formulation... Chih-i (538-597) is the earliest writer to discuss these four vows in this form, though it is difficult to say whether or not he coined the terms himself.” (notes from Paul L. Swanson in “The Great Cessation-and-Contemplation”)

The first Zen reference is in the Platform Sutra of the Sixth Ancestor (translated below by Red Pine)
(Earliest extant version of the *Platform Sutra* was written around the year 780)

Section 21:

Good friends, having taken refuge in the three-bodied buddha, let us now make Four Boundless Vows.

Good friends, recite after me:

‘I vow to save all beings, no matter how numberless.

I vow to end all afflictions, no matter how countless.

I vow to master all teachings, no matter how limitless.

I vow to attain buddhahood, no matter how transcendent.’

Now recite this three times.

Good friends, as for ‘I vow to save all beings, no matter how numberless,’ it isn't Huineng who does the saving. Good friends, every being you can think of saves themselves with their own nature in their own bodies. What does it mean ‘they save themselves with their own nature’? The wrong views and afflictions, the ignorance and delusions in their own material bodies already possess the nature of original enlightenment. It is just this nature of original enlightenment that saves them with right views. Once they realize the prajna wisdom of right views, they dispel their ignorance and delusion, and each being saves themselves. The false are saved with truth. The deluded are saved with awareness. The ignorant are saved with wisdom. The bad are saved with goodness. And the afflicted are saved with enlightenment. Those who are saved like this are truly saved. As for ‘I vow to end all afflictions, no matter how countless,’ this means to get rid of the delusions of your own mind. And ‘I vow to master all teachings, no matter how limitless’ means to study the true, unexcelled Dharma. And ‘I vow to attain buddhahood, no matter how transcendent’ means always to practice with humility, to respect all beings, to avoid attachments, to give rise to prajna from your own awareness, and to put an end to delusions. It is through self-realization that buddhahood is attained. This is the power of making vows.