

Onderstaande tekst heb ik in 2024 geschreven als waardering voor de Boeddhistische traditie en mijn leraar op deze weg, Jeff Shore. Het is geplaatst als een klein onderdeel in zijn boek 'Backwater Reeds'.

Fred van den Bos (The Netherlands)

Numberless beings – set free.

This is the first of the four vows we recite at the beginning and the end of each day during a Zen Buddhist retreat. "Numberless beings – set free" is Jeff Shore's easy to recite translation of the first Bodhisattva vow, "Beings are numberless, I vow to save them all."

I remember well in the first couple of retreats I attended with Jeff in 2006, I found this vow so overwhelming I could not really recite it. How am I able to live up to that!?! It is not stated as a hope or a wish. It is a vow, a promise. In that way, it clearly shows the uncompromising way of Zen Buddhist practice. Can I genuinely make the promise to do this? Can I recite with my whole heart that I will save all beings? This was the start of a new era, after practicing mostly alone for 15 years. What a journey it has been. And still is.

Out of necessity, I started practice at 19 years of age. Regular sitting was not something I did out of curiosity or for fun. I found life to be very hard, was severely depressed and had no clue what to do. Sitting was honestly a way to try to get out of it. A way to experience a bit of rest from all the things I hated in life. A way to live up to life itself and the overwhelming severity of it.

The Buddhist way is the way to end suffering. That is what struck me. I wanted my suffering to end. One way or another it needed to end. In the years that followed, my practice slowly changed from an attempt to flee out of life, into a path of real living. This took, and still takes, time, patience and a lot of practice. And it took the patient, loving guidance of Jeff Shore.

To have a reliable guide along a genuine Zen Buddhist path is an indescribable gift. Jeff is such a guide, with his attention, wisdom and the way he pulls you in. Being kind and supportive at times. Being an impenetrable rock at other times. Confronting. Caring. Yelling.

Jeff is not only a teacher, but a friend. A friend who is there when you need him. Always ending his e-mails with the same sentence – "Here for you." Always responding to questions and doubts. Fast, brief and to the point. Jeff's lectures during retreat have inspired me, such that it feels as if I hear my own heart speaking from depths I cannot reach myself. It inspires me to give all I have. Not only for myself, but for all living beings. On the cushion and in daily life. Regardless of how little it may be and how often I may fail.

The first couple of years I felt I made improvements in my practice. After that, it stopped. Nothing happened anymore. I just sat there in retreats and at home. Struggling, hoping for something. Peace, rest, enlightenment. It never came. Sharing

my struggle with Jeff, his answer was simple – “Your practice is maturing.” What do you mean maturing!?! It is dead, nothing happens, it hurts, it is tiring – and yet I continued, and still continue.

I now realize there is nothing that needs to be done. There is nothing to reach out for. There is nothing to attain. I am no longer practicing to get somewhere, but to be here. Not to change myself, but to be myself. So easy. And yet so difficult. I am no longer practicing for the end of my suffering alone. Of course, oh yes, how dearly I still want to be released from suffering. But I now know it is not enough. Indeed, the end of suffering of all living beings is what is needed.

The ways of Zen masters are not always easy to understand. We often see them as perfect enlightened human beings that do not struggle with anything anymore. We expect them to be perfect. Jeff is not. He can be demanding. He has a very strong will. And the way he handles human relationships is not always perfect. He is human and he has his ways. This can be difficult for people. It has made me doubt also. Over the long term this has been and continues to be helpful to me. The masters of old and the masters of now are human beings. Enlightenment does not make you less human. It makes you more human. And that humanity shows the living truth. In the beautiful and in the rough edges.

In the end there is nothing that needs to be achieved or changed. It comes down to really being who you are, in this moment. Uncompromising, loving, caring. At times, there are no boundaries anymore. At times, completely stuck, you yourself are the biggest boundary. And as Jeff would say, “And then see what is there.” From there we practice. It is from there that true compassion arises, is cultivated and works in the world. It is from there that the saving of all living beings is done.

For me, I may have stopped trying to get somewhere. I still practice to learn to be here. With deep gratitude and appreciation for Jeff Shore’s guidance to nowhere.

May all living beings be free from suffering.
May all living beings be happy.