The Touchstone 16: Manjusri

presented by Ven. Jinmyo Renge sensei
Dainen-ji, November 21st, 2015

This morning we began the sitting with chanting practice, and we recited the *Ten Proclamations* which included the names of Bodhisattvas — legendary figures that are symbols for different aspects of Awakened activity. The Sanskrit word "bodhisattva" is sometimes translated as "one who is unfolding wisdom" or "one who is learning wisdom".

A bodhisattva is actually not just a certain kind of person, it is an activity. In fact, Anzan Hoshin roshi points to how a bodhisattva is not really a noun but a verb, a description of activity, by translating bodhisattva as "being open to Openness." This activity has the sense of one taking a journey on the Path and there are different stages that are taught about deepening this recognition.

In the last Dharma Talk in this series I spoke for some time about the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara who, for us, represents the energy of unborn compassion, or that which hears the suffering of all beings. Today I will speak a little about Manjusri Bodhisattva, who is a traditional and fictional character, a device or symbol representing aspects of what is true about who and what we all are.

Essentially, Manjusri a set of instructions. This is true of all of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas that appear in the Teachings of our Lineage of Dogen's Zen. That is why we make use of these mythological figures. For us, Manjusri represents the richness and freshness of Knowing expressing itself as finely detailed and nuanced and coherent knowns. Another way of expressing that might be to say that Manjusri is the brightness and freshness of open intelligence, princely, ever youthful and very precise. He is portrayed as youthful because whatever arises is always fresh and an understanding that can meet experiences clearly must be freshly renewed moment after moment.

Manjusri is reputed to be the oldest and most significant bodhisattva in Mahayana literature. He first appears in the early Mahayana sutras. Because he is associated with the Prajnaparamita sutras he symbolizes the embodiment of prajna or transcendent wisdom. In Vajrayana Buddhism, Manjusri is considered to be a fully enlightened Buddha. In the Shingon School of Buddhism, he is one of Thirteen Buddhas. He figures extensively in many esoteric texts such as the *Manjusri-mula-kalpa* and the *Manjusrinamasamgiti* which Anzan Hoshin roshi has translated.

He is the Bodhisattva of Wisdom. He questions directly into the nature of reality. He is depicted as a prince because he has recognized and unfolded the inherent dignity and richness of experiencing and of experiences. And he is sometimes depicted holding a sword. The two-edged sword is the sword of insight which cuts both self and other simultaneously.

His other hand holds a lotus blossom, on top of which lies the Prajnaparamita Teachings. He is sometimes shown riding on a lion, which signifies wisdom, courage and power, or sitting on a lotus pedestal which represents purity. In Chinese and Japanese Buddhist art, Manjusri's sword is sometimes replaced with a ruyi scepter or a lotus blossom with a long stem curved like a ruyi.

I will read a passage from the teisho series, *The Secret Life of Manjusri* , presented by Anzan Hoshin roshi, as it speaks of both Avalokitesvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion and Manjusri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom.

It provides an example of how they are different from each other.

> *Manjusri appears in the 700 Line Prajnaparamita sutra , the Vimalarkirti Nirdesa sutra , and throughout the literature of the Prajnaparamita. He is ubiquitous; one encounters him everywhere. But although Manjusri is the representation, the poster boy, for Prajnaparamita, somehow he was never quite as popular as Avalokitesvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. Perhaps this is because with a figure such as Avalokitesvara one could at least hope for some sympathy. You could say "Avalokitesvara, I am so lonely." and Avalokitesvara would say "Oh dear, that's terrible. Oh dear. What can I do for you? Maybe I can fix you up with someone."*
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> *Manjusri, on the other hand, of course, would simply look at you and say "What's wrong with you? What is it that you believe about yourself and the world that this state makes any sense at all to you? This state is a symptom of your sickness. Face-to-face with the claustrophobia, the constipation of self-image, you want to get away from it. You want to seek comfort, but you yourself are the cause of your own sickness. Look into this. Prajnaparamita!"*

The qualities that Manjusri represents of radical questioning opening into wisdom and compassion are practised every time you really sit up straight and actually do zazen and release habitual states and storylines. There may be times when you are experiencing a lot of sinking or wandering mind, or discursiveness, but you can cut through these by coming back to the touchstone of the breath at the diaphragm and tanden, by opening attention to whole-bodily sensation, to seeing and hearing. When you use the forms to cut through sinking mind, you are using the sword of Manjusri . When you choose to release thoughts by simply not completing the sentence, you are choosing wisdom over entertainment. Each time you are able to recognize something about how your attention is arranged and choose to open it if it is closed, or open it further if it seems open to you, you are practising the wisdom of Manjusri.

I'll give you a small example of the activity of Manjusri in everyday life. I think we have all had the experience of standing in a high place, perhaps a balcony or a bridge, looking down. And because we are high off the ground, looking down, the possibility of falling might occur to us. We might back away from the edge, or grip the railing a little tighter in response to that. If the reaction to this is strong, just in the looking down, one might experience a sensation somewhat like falling. This, of course is not what's happening, yet the sensation is there. This can also happen when you look up – for example, looking up to view an interesting cloud formation. You might experience a moment of vertigo and feel as though you were about to fall up. It's a very strange sensation. But if you feel your feet on the ground, come back to the touchstone of the breath and the sensations of the bodymind, you can clarify this condition — you know that you are not falling, that everything is alright. And so this is the wisdom sword of Manjusri cutting through delusion by opening to the details of present experience to give the sensation context.

The sharp edge of the sword of Manjusri that cuts through confusion doesn't cut one thing away from another thing. The sharp edge is all directions. It is finely detailed and nuanced and coherent knowns. In any moment that you notice how your attention is arranged into states and stances and storylines – echoing back to yourself what you already know as thoughts and feelings – and choose to open around them by opening attention to the ten directions, you are practising the wisdom of Manjusri. No thought or feeling can be what you are or what the world is. Cut through obsessive and deluded views by allowing yourself to see clearly and hear, smell taste, touch and feel the world as it actually is.

There is a text called the *700 Line Sutra* attributed to Manjusri, which begins with Manjusri waking up one morning and deciding he wanted to go sit in front of the Buddha, just to be in the presence of the Buddha. Anzan Roshi tells the story in this way in a series of classes on the *Astasahasrika Prajnaparamita sutra* or the *8,000 Line Prajnaparamita sutra* :

> *And so he went and sat outside the Buddha's hermitage, contemplating the Buddha and other monks saw him and thought, "Oh, well that's a pious and good thing to do", so they all sort of grouped there and so on.*
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> *So the Buddha felt all of these people outside of his door so he just sort of peeked out and said, "What the hell are you doing? What are you doing there?"*
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> *So they said, "Well, we've come to contemplate the Buddha."*
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> *He said "Well, who actually started this? Who had the first idea for it?"*
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> *They said, "Manjusri".*
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> *He said "Oh, well that's all right then." And then he asked Manjusri what he was doing in order to point out to the rest of the Sangha the way to meet the Teacher — and that consisted of Manjusri saying that contemplating the presence of the Buddha isn't contemplating the Buddha's body, isn't contemplating the Buddha's face or his fingers or his toes or his deeds or anything of that nature but simply what the Buddha is and that the Buddha's body and form and so on is simply the presencing of those Teachings. So then if one looks at, if one understands the Dharma, then one meets the Buddha; if one meets the Buddha, one meets the Dharma.*

The wisdom of Manjusri cuts through the distortion created by the imaginary concepts about "I" or "mine", of "self" and "other". As Anzan Hoshin roshi says in the teisho series, *The Secret Life of Manjusri* :

> *Whenever anyone attempts to turn the process of realized practice, of embodying what is true about who and what we are into merely another set of stances, another set of doctrines, Manjusri will not be far behind twirling that sword of his over his head.*

We experience a world of 'things' when our attention becomes narrowed and compressed and it can seem to us as though we don't have time to meet the moment as it is. But the practice of mindfulness, the forms, listening to teisho, our interactions with Dharma Teachers and practice advisors, shows us how to stop rushing past our experience.

The two-edged sword of Manjusri is the rising and falling of each moment and all of the details that present themselves in each moment present the Teachings of the Prajnaparamita sutras. That which is represented by Manjusri is present as this body and mind, as this moment.

Being a Bodhisattva, or "one who is unfolding wisdom" is not about being 'clever' and it is important to make the distinction'. Prajna or wisdom is not a matter of accumulating understandings. Prajna is living as that which is true. The Bodhisattva practises wisdom by paying attention openly, unfolding this further and

further, This, of course, requires looking into and recognizing just what this means about you and the world without taking up a stance. If you fall into priding yourself on your cleverness, on how “open” your practice is, and so on, you’ve truly misunderstood. if attention is modified in any kind of way, if any structure of mind comes up and is taken seriously, you’ve lost your way.

You don’t need to try to be clever. You don’t need to rehearse what you are going to say before coming to daisan or a practice interview. You don’t need to come up with a list of clever questions scribbled on a piece of paper. Just do the practice as you have been instructed.

Manjusri is an embodied representation of the instructions. In the Sodo or Monks’ Hall of traditional Soto Zen training temples the rupa on the Butsudan or platform of Awakening is Monju, which is Japanese for Manjusri. There he is represented simply as a monk practising zazen. In practising the forms, in doing zazen, in caring for each detail with open attention, we each can open to Openness as Manjusri. Manjusri is a touchstone for opening to the details and richness of expansive intelligence.

So, when you chant and hear the name Manjusri during the chants before a sitting, remember what Manjusri is there to remind you of: The wisdom of precise and vast mindfulness and insight.