

# The Touchstone 17: Samantabhadra

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Dainen-ji, January 23rd, 2016

For as long as you are alive, the touchstone of the breath will be available to you in each moment. No matter how difficult or confusing or frightening life might seem; no matter how joyful and exciting and energetic it might seem, you are always right here, right now, and the bodymind is always breathing. There is space in your life for you to feel the touchstone of the breath and use this touchstone as a place from which you can begin to open to Openness. And when you do this, you are beginning to do the practise of the Bodhisattva. "Bodhisattva" is sometimes translated as "one who is unfolding wisdom" or "one who is learning wisdom".

Just a reminder, though, that when you hear the names of Bodhisattvas such as "Avalokitesvara" and "Manjusri" and "Samantabhadra", in a Dharma Talk or a teisho, it's important to understand that we are not referring to people. What is being spoken of, is 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.

In the last Dharma Talk I presented, I spoke about Manjusri Bodhisattva and the teachings associated with him: how in practising the forms, in sitting zazen, in caring for each detail with open attention, we can open to Openness as Manjusri. Manjusri is a touchstone for opening to the details and richness of expansive intelligence. In today's Dharma Talk I will speak a little about Samantabhadra Bodhisattva.

"Samantabhadra" is his Sanskrit name. In Japan he is called "Fugen". In China he is known as Puxian in Tibet he is Kun-tu bzang-poin Mongol Qamugha Sainand in Vietnamese, Pho-hien

However he is known, his name has commonly been translated as "Universal Sage", or "Universal Virtue", "Universal Worthy" and "Universal Good". Another is "All Pervading Benefit." Ven. Anzan Hoshin roshi has looked into the root meanings of the Sanskrit terms and the tone of the texts associated with Samantabhadra and so translated the name as "All-Pervasive Richness".

As the Roshi explains in the teisho series, *Oceans of Realms* , which contains Teachings on Samantabhadra:

*Samantabhadra represents one who has completed the bodhisattva path. Although there no signposts on the path itself there are various ways of speaking of it and the Indian Buddhists developed numerous sets of numbers about it. There are the six paramitas, the ten grounds, the fifty-three stages. Samantabhadra has done all of the numbers. He or she is the culmination of the path.*

*And yet it is said that by practising as Samantabhadra did, by making and fulfilling her vows and aspirations, even the beginning bodhisattva becomes Samantabhadra through living as All-Pervasive Richness. And so Samantabhadra represents the beginning and end of the path.*

Samantabhadra is primarily associated with the *Avatamsaka sutra, the Flower Garland Discourse* . He is usually depicted as a youthful noble. His hands may be held palm-to-palm, or he may be holding a flower, a sutra, a jewel, or in some instances a sword. He is riding an elephant which represents sovereignty, majesty, power, grace, thoroughness, and patience. The elephant has six tusks representing the six paramitas. There is a text called *The Sutra of the Practices of Samantabhadra* associated with the *Lotus sutra* , in which the

elephant has seven limbs representing the cessation of hypocrisy, lying, slander, wrong language, killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct. The elephant also holds a flower in its trunk and the six tusks have six wading pools on top of them. And, according to legend, the elephant never touches the ground, but instead hovers in the air. There is a lot more about the elephant we could go into but enough about that. We have far more interesting topics to consider.

What we are concerned with today, is how the Teachings associated with Samantabhadra weave through and are an integral part of the practice of basic mindfulness and how you can recognize and practise them more clearly.

The Roshi also said in the teisho series, *Oceans of Realms* :

*A Teaching of the Huayan school is that the first stage of the path contains the last stage and the last stage contains the first. The beginning of the path contains the end of the path. This does not make too much sense to you when you are at the beginning of the path. When you have completed the path, it's not of much interest because it is so obvious. But after one has been practising deeply for a number of years it can be a useful point. Let me put it this way. At the beginning, you have to open up to what is in between and all around your states of contraction and tendency. The end of the path is that openness itself. All through the path of practice you are moment by moment unfolding your recognition of that openness by releasing contraction. As things seem to open more and more it can also seem that contractions are darker and tighter because you know the difference between open and closed more and more. But then you realize that what I have been telling you all along is true: that all along, it has always already been open. The more that you realize this, the more that you open to Openness and can see how you could have done that right from the beginning.*

To put it into very simplified terms: When we first begin practising, our first task is to learn how to recognize and then open around states of contraction. The recognition of the suffering that comes about through contraction and making the choice to end suffering by releasing contraction could be represented by the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, the Bodhisattva of compassion. It is that aspect of our true nature that has always been available to us, but has tended to be obscured by contraction, that helps us to recognize the possibility of being compassionate towards ourselves and in turn, towards those we encounter. That is the flicker of recognition and insight that prompts us to practice at all.

The precision and attention to detail required to actually practise with contraction — that's Manjusri waving his sword over your head, insisting that you pay attention. He makes it clear to you that you cannot afford to waste time and space out. Follow the instructions, stay with basic mindfulness practice.

The Openness between and around your states of contraction, the Openness you open to — that's Samantabhadra, "All-Pervading Richness". The practice of living as All-Pervasive Richness is opening to the transparency, expansiveness, and the Luminosity of our experience as it actually is. Samantabhadra represents the culmination of all of the realizations and practices of Avalokitesvara and Manjusri. And as our practice opens further and further, we begin to understand that the vastness and intimacy and richness of experience pervades everywhere.

In the Teisho series *Oceans of Realms* , the Roshi says,

*Our world is a vast interweaving of realms. There is a realm of colours and forms, a realm of sounds and songs, a realm of fragrances, a realm of flavours, a realm of sensations, a realm of perceptions and cognitions.*

All of the different ways in which we know - seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking and feeling, provide us with different kinds of information about ourselves and the world. Although we might talk about these knowns as though they were separate, they are all aspects of the same "Knowing" (capital K "Knowing") of the Dharmadhatu or the Total Field of All Possibilities. This is why, in our practice, we must learn to open attention to all of the sense fields simultaneously instead of shuttling attention from one thing to the next to the next. Seeing occurs together with hearing, occurs along with sensations, occurs intimately with smelling and tasting. They are not separate. They don't happen sequentially. If it seems that they are sequential it is because you are only allowing attention to open to fragments of experiencing.

Self-image is convinced of and addicted to a sense of poverty. We squint at the world and our vision becomes thin and small and uncertain, clouded by storylines and states. We know we're not seeing clearly. But through sitting zazen, we learn to allow the eye gaze to fall open so that we can actually see the wall. And not only that, but we can see that the wall isn't just one colour - white - it's many shades of white and white is many colours. We can see that there is a depth of space between us and the wall and that can be seen. There is a richness and fullness and depth to seeing that is wonderful. So rich, so nuanced. And as attention continues to open, we begin to release the drone of storylines and our ears can actually hear!

I'll quote a passage about the sense field of hearing from the teisho series, *The Flowering of the Senses*, teisho 3. The Roshi says,

*Each sound rolls within a sea of waves of sounds. Each sound has a shape, a contour. Each sound strikes the space of hearing like a match and lights up something of the qualities of that space.*

*Each sound shows in its presencing, in its rising which is a falling away, in its coming which is already a going, the truth of impermanence, of ungraspability, of tracelessness, of selflessness, of intimacy.*

Sitting here right now, there are so many sensations that you could be noticing. You might have sat in this same room countless times before, and everything around you might seem to be as it usually is. But is it? You have never experienced this moment of experiencing before. This is ALL new. What does it feel like to be sitting here? I mean bodily? What sensations are you noticing? Your hands rest in the Dharmadhatu mudra, thumbs touching. Feel your hands. There are 48 named nerves in each hand, which includes 3 major nerves, 24 named sensory branches and 21 named muscular branches. That's a LOT of nerves and they're all working, all relaying information, moment after moment. And that's just one range of sensation. There are others.

You might sometimes think that it's easier for you to experience the 'benefits' of practice in your informal practice. That's because things are more on your terms when you are not sitting. When you are sitting, you will often tend to get bored; you'll want to propagate storylines and states just to have something to lose yourself in. Or you'll want to try to attain some sort of 'special state' to make yourself feel better, so that you can feel as though something is happening. There's nothing in any of that. This is what happens when you allow yourself to follow that basic sense of poverty that I referred to earlier.

When you are sitting on the zafu, open attention to the richness of experiencing presented by Samantabhadra. You have never been here. You have never breathed this breath or heard these sounds or felt these sensations. The beginning and the end of the Path meet at the touchstone of this moment of this breath, so feel the breath, and use the touchstone as a place from which to open to the richness and wholeness of experiencing.

We will end for today and in the next Dharma Talk we will look into another aspect of Samantabhadra, that of Vastness.