

The Touchstone 18: Vastness

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In this series of Talks I have spoken a little about Avalokitesvara, Manjusri, and Samantabhadra and how these Bodhisattvas are touchstones that represent for us specific sets of instruction for our practice. During the previous Talk I spoke about two aspects of Samantabhadra - opportunity and richness. Today I will go into some detail about a third aspect — Vastness.

Most of us use smartphones quite a bit and they really are astonishingly useful little devices. You might be looking down at that tiny screen - perhaps googling something or messaging with someone - and then you look up from the cluster of details you've been immersed in and all of a sudden everything is WIDE SCREEN! If you're outside, this extends as far as visibility permits, all the way down to the ground and all the way up to the sky. And the space is filled with shapes and colours and textures and sounds. And you are part of the shapes and colours and textures within the space. If you're inside a building, even in a very small room there is space all around you and the field of seeing is rich and wide.

Outside of and all around whatever attention is focussed on, the whole world presents itself as colours and forms and sounds and sensations. Whether it's your cell phone or your thoughts and feelings, whatever attention narrows and focuses on, is always occurring within a larger context.

Vastness is never hidden away or roped off from ordinary life. Ordinary life is always vast. Right now, sitting here in the Hatto, you are sitting within vastness, and you and the zafu you are sitting on are part of that vastness. But whether you experience it that way, or your attention is so compromised that it seems to be limited to the same old claustrophobic stuff you tend to experience most of the time, will depend on what you are actually doing while you are sitting on that zafu. And how willing you are to give up what you usually do. How willing you are to stop limiting yourself to usualness.

When you hear the word vastness, a range of different associations may come to mind. You might think of the vastness of space in which this tiny beautiful planet is floating. In this vast space, there is no up or down, no north or south. It is not a place, or a state of mind or a feeling about things. It is so vast that really there is nothing we can think about it that can help us in any way to really understand it. We just know that it is beyond the limits of anything we have been able to explore or understand.

But vastness doesn't just apply to how far things seem to extend away from us. Everything we experience is made up of details, including the bodymind itself, and within those details there are details. Anything you look at or see or hear or smell or touch or taste is made up of an infinite range of details and those details are enfolded within vast space and unfold as vast space in this moment. You sit here right now looking at the wall, but how are you seeing it, and what is the wall?

Here is something that Anzan Hoshin roshi had to say while commenting on Bodhidharma's Two Entries and Four Practices:

Each time that we realize that we are here, we begin to recognize an inexpressible freshness, a vividness; nothing extraordinary, but something beyond price, something beyond boundary. We begin to sense being alive. We begin to come into contact with this livingness, this being. And yet even this is not enough. We

must go yet further into our own hearts, into our own minds and bodies, further into this moment, to find what this living is. Not what this living “means”, but what this living is, what this wall is, what this body is, what this mind is.

Bodhidharma advises each and every one of you to practise biguan, wall-gazing, to sit like a wall, like a blank wall. Not to make your mind a blank, but to just sit with the thoroughness of a wall. A wall does not isolate itself from anything. A wall supports the ceiling. A wall extends. A wall doesn't need to move in order to be so useful. It's just [strike] there. So sit here, facing this wall, feeling this breath, hearing this sound, for the very first time, and again and again for the very first time. Sit.

This practice of zazen is beyond measure, beyond understanding, beyond concept, beyond strategy. This zazen is the manifestation of the mind of the Buddhas. Realizing this posture of zazen, this posture of body and mind, this posture of wall, of floor, this posture of Zendo, perhaps we can hear the posture of the bird's song, the presentation of bird as bird, song as song, and hearing as hearing. What is it that presents itself to us in this way? What is this presenting? Birds cry out in this warm January morning. No matter how you are this day, sit like a wall, see how you are, without reactivity, without hiding, without pretenses of holiness, or pretences of profanity. Each and every one of you thinks that you are the best and the worst here, but you're not fooling anyone. So let's stop all this and sit.

So as we sit here in the Hatto, you are seeing the wall in front of you and there are other people sitting alongside you. You can feel the sensations of the bodymind sitting, feeling the touchstone of the breath, the weight and balance of the bodymind, feeling the feet and legs, the set of the spine and head, the hands in the mudra. You can feel that there is space all around the bodymind and that there is space between you and the wall.

You can see the wall in front of you and you can see details to the left and right at the same time. And you can be aware of listening, not just to the sound of my voice, but to the quality of the listening, to how you are listening, how attention is. And all of this is going on at the same time, a vast richness of detail, and yet none of these details obstruct one another. Seeing does not obstruct hearing, does not obstruct feeling sensations. They all arise together as experiences within the vastness of experiencing. And if we allow each detail to stand out as what it is, just as it is, we realize we don't have to push or pull at experiencing to make some space for ourselves or any particular way of experiencing. We can just allow things to be as they are.

Each moment rises and falls as the vast intimacy of All-Pervasive Richness. Whatever you look at, whatever you touch, it arises within your experience. Experiencing has a quality of spaciousness, of vast openness. Whatever appears to be experienced is the activity of vastness arising within Knowing. Anything that you experience - a sound, a colour, another person, anything you look at, anything you touch - is arising within experience. And by thoroughly practising with this as it really is, there is room for everything. This is true for you, and it is true for everyone else and is always available. This is why this is called the Mahayana or the “Vast Path”.

But we tend to shrink from the vastness of experiencing. Sometimes that shrinking takes the form of wanting to look at vastness from a certain perspective, from a vantage point. As soon as we do that, all other ways of knowing are closed off. Sometimes we're just really invested in proving to ourselves that ‘something is wrong’, even though that ‘some thing wrong’ is just a feeling of dilemma and difficulty that keeps

propagating itself.

And here is something that Anzan roshi said while commenting on the Astasahasrika Prajnaparamita Sutra, the 8,000 Line Prajnaparamita Sutra. He said:

This practise is as simple as this moment. And it is as rich as this moment. In this moment, there is nothing other than just this. But “just this” is not a narrowing or flattening. It is not “merely this.” This moment of Suchness is the activity of Reality, the presencing of Aware Space. The more completely that we release attention into the presencing of just this moment, the more that we begin to experience the boundlessness of experiencing. Literally, there is no boundary around experiencing. It cannot be contained. Whatever is experienced arises within it. It is only by fixating upon small clusters of experiences and turning away from the vastness of experiencing into the gestures of locatedness and directionality that boundaries occur. But all around those boundaries, the space of experiencing is still open and luminously free. Each experience points all around itself to the space of experiencing it arises within. Each way of experiencing points all around itself to the space of experiencing it arises within. Each moment points all around and all through itself to the infinite infinities of reality. Like radiance dancing on the face of waving water, colours, sounds, sensations all shimmer and leap forth and fall away as spaces moving within spaces.

Now, when you are sitting, you do not need to think about vastness, or try to feel vastness, or try to conjure up a notion of vastness. The idea of vastness can never get a hold on the fact of vastness. All that you need to do is to pay attention to the details of things as they actually are, and the space that they arise within, and allow your practice to unfold. This is “opening to Openness”, this what being a bodhisattva is.

So, being a bodhisattva is what practising zazen truly is. When we sit up straight with the body and mind open to each other and as each other, we can open to the whole moment. When we stand up, step forth, pick up and put down, talk and hear, with the whole bodymind with open attention to the space of experience, the touchstone of Samantabhadra bodhisattva mahasattva invites us to go yet further into the openness of reality.