

The Touchstone 19: Fudo Myo-o Part 1

presented by Ven. Jinmyo Renge sensei
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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. Today I will touch on another set of instructions, some of which are part of the Mikkyo or “self-secret” Teachings associated with our Lineage. These are represented by a Bodhisattva who is known as “Acala Vidyaraja” in Sanskrit or Fudo Myo-o in Japanese. And of course you will recognize his name as it is one of the names that appears in the “Ten Proclamations” which we chanted this morning.

In preparing for this Dharma Talk I had a look around the internet for information. What little I found bore no relationship to how we understand and use the figure of Fudo Myo-o. However Fudo Myo-o has been of great historical importance. Originating with Indian Buddhist tantra, it was brought to China and from there to Japan where many of the Vajrayana practices of the Shingon and Tendai schools involve Fudo. Eihei Dogen zenji, who is the Founding Ancestor of our Zen Lineage in Japan, was originally a Tendai monk.

The Teachings associated with Acala Vidyaraja are primarily advanced monastic practices and so there are areas of this I really can't go into. This is not because these Teachings are secrets, but because you'll do just about anything to keep them a secret, to not hear them, to not allow yourself to recognize that you already understand. But there are some aspects of Acala practice that I can go into, though this may require several Dharma Talks. We will see.

But before I begin, I must remind you again, that we are not talking about a ‘person’ or an ‘entity’. Which is good because Fudo Myo-o is a pretty strange looking, perhaps scary to some although Anzan Hoshin roshi often refers to Acala as “goofy”.

Fudo Myo-o is often depicted as male, although the categories of male or female really don't apply here. Language being what it is, insists that I choose, so I'll just switch back and forth between male and female to speak about him/her.

You will have already seen various images of Fudo Myo-o. There is one on the Butsudan in the second-floor Sensei-ryo daisan area and there is a small scroll depicting him on the wall, just inside the door. And there is another painting of Fudo Myo-o in the O-sensei-ryo on the first floor.

She is depicted as standing or seated, chained to the top of a very large rock. She is blue black in colour, and not pretty; sometimes shown as having one tooth that curves up over her upper lip and another that curves down over her lower lip, almost like boar teeth. She has a furrowed brow and an expression on her face that makes it clear she is not to be trifled with. She's very fierce. She has a braid over her left shoulder and in her left hand, she holds a mala. Her right hand holds an upraised sword. And she sits, immovable, in a sea of flames extending in all directions.

So we have a solitary figure engulfed in flames, standing on top of a huge craggy stone, and he is chained to the stone. If you are in any way thinking that this might be similar to the Christian doctrine about hell fires and brimstone, forget it. You are completely off the mark. This has nothing to do with god or heaven or hell or punishment. In fact it's the complete opposite.

The fire expresses many things.

Self-image needs to abstract itself from bodily feeling, from seeing, from hearing, it needs to fragment these in order to propagate itself. It takes the capacity to think and feel, fragments, distorts and compresses these into thoughts which occur in terms of language, imagery and feeling-tones, It superimposes this over what is seen and heard, and felt and tasted, and makes this its primary set of meanings. It's like a carbon-copy world made up of illusory images, with constructed "eyes" that seem to follow the thoughts and an internalized set of "ears" that listen to the thoughts.

To some extent we're able to recognize that this internalized "world" and all of its meanings are fabrications, and that may prompt us to want to find a way out of its stale nest of views, but unless we are really practising with that recognition, we will tend to just fabricate other kinds of states that seem to be slightly better than the habitual ones. But they are still fabrications.

We are asleep and we toss and turn in the dreams and nightmares we create and propagate. The energies of bodymind are used to feed our delusions and instead of being used to bring benefit for ourselves and those around us we create and often lose ourselves in dense states of contraction and confusion. The dynamic energies of bodymind burn brightly like flickering flames, in the sea of flames which are the blazing of each moment of present experience.

The flames surrounding Fudo Myo-o represent the dynamic activity of experiencing. Everything dances as the flames of experiencing. Each thing that is experienced, each person, each state, each situation is the dancing of the flames of experiencing, dynamic, bright, You are the dancing of the flames. All life on Earth, even the atoms of our bodies created in the furnace of now-long-dead stars burn brightly now as the life that lives as all lives. Each moment arises as the flickering of the flames, burns brightly and vanishes into the flames. All colours, forms, sounds, are the dynamic exertion of the flames of experiencing.

Anzan Hoshin Roshi said in the teisho, "The Fire: Acala Vidyaraja",

The world is on fire in each moment. There is the fire of passion, aggression and stupidity, whose heat drives us ahead of it. We avoid being caught directly in its flames. We avoid seeing it clearly, because we are busy being driven towards the objects of passion, aggression and stupidity. We are too busy focusing on what we are angry about to actually recognize what the anger is like and its effect upon our lives and the lives of others. We are too busy trying to attain and grasp and have the object of our desire to ever see the mind of such grasping and its pettiness. We are too driven by our stupidity, too blinded by the glare, to see how fresh, how clear each moment stands.

In the midst of these flames, standing in the heart of this moment and in the heart of all beings, from the centre of the bliss of emptiness and the release of confusion, the energy of insight arises as Fudo Myo-o, Acala Vidyaraja, the immovable and unshakeable Lord of Luminosity. This is traditionally the symbol of the mind of our Lineage of transmission. It is the Sambhogakaya form of the realization of this practice. It is the symbol of the Teachers of this Lineage. Fudo Myo-o stands enveloped by the flames of passion, aggression and stupidity. He or she (it's hard to tell) stands chained to a stone in the midst of these flames, chained by the vows that he has made to liberate all beings who dwell in this hell realm of confusion and grasping.

The rock to which Fudo Myo-o has voluntarily chained himself represents the ground of reality. His vow is to stand immovable on the ground of reality in order to liberate beings in the midst of their various forms of contraction. The rock is reality and no matter how wildly the flames of passion, aggression and stupidity burn he has chosen to chain himself to the rock. This is why the first instruction beginning students of Zen receive is to begin to learn to open to reality, to use the touchstone of the breath as a means of distinguishing between what is true and what is false.

So now let us sit and breathe this breath in this moment.