

Winter Retreat 2018: Cultivating the Five Super Powers of Avalokiteshvara
Dharma Post #2-B Grounding Ourselves in the Present Moment

Dear Thay, dear brother Jerry, dear friends on the path,

Apparition of the Jeweled Stupa¹—Historical Encounters With the Ultimate

Thay explains that the Lotus Sutra speaks to both the historical and ultimate dimensions, and is written in such a way that we can see the messages from each. The historical dimension of the Sutra shows the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, through our ordinary way of perception—what happened in the Buddha's lifetime. It connects us to the human Buddha whose search for truth and whose practice and path we can emulate. The ultimate dimension of the Sutra shows us the existence of the Buddha on a different plane, beyond our ordinary perceptions of space and time. It reveals the eternal meaning of the Buddha's teachings, the essence of the Dharma that is beyond space and time.

While studying the Lotus Sutra we can determine in what dimension the Sutra is operating. According to Thay, whenever anyone's eyes are fixed on the earth—looking at the trees, plants, hills, mountains, or each other—we know that we are in the historical dimension. But when everyone's eyes look into space, then we have entered the ultimate dimension. This explanation by Thay has been very helpful to me as I study the Lotus Sutra, and other Mahayana Sutras as well!

One of my favorite chapters from the Lotus Sutra is called "Apparition of the Jeweled Stupa."² Although there are many wonderful teachings in this chapter, there are several that have touched me most deeply. The first is that the **ultimate dimension is everywhere**. The second is that **we can touch the ultimate dimension with mindfulness and concentration in our physical practice**. The third, well, that's a surprise 😊

The Ultimate Dimension is Everywhere

In this chapter, Shakyamunibuddha had just finished teaching the Lotus Sutra, affirming potential Buddhahood for all beings, when a beautiful jeweled stupa wells up from the earth and rests in mid-air above Shakyamuni and the four-fold sangha. Music fills the air and from inside the stupa the mighty voice of Thus Come One³ Many Jewels issues forth, "Wonderful Shakyamunibuddha, wonderful! You are teaching the Lotus Sutra, how wonderful!"

¹ A *stupa* (Sanskrit: "heap") is a mound-like or hemispherical structure containing relics (typically the remains of Buddhist monks or nuns) that is used as a place of meditation.

² For a deeper reading of this chapter of the Lotus Sutra, you may wish to refer to Thay's chapter in **Peaceful Action, Open Heart**, or the **Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma** by Hurvitz

³ Thus Come One is another name for a Buddha of the Ultimate Dimension

This image symbolizes the appearance of the ultimate dimension in the saha world (that is, the world of birth and death in the historical dimension). In fact, the ultimate dimension is always within us. When I was in second grade attending catechism (Catholic Sunday school on Monday) I asked my teacher, “where is God?” and she told me that God is everywhere. That answer was a great puzzle. On one hand everywhere is everywhere. But what did that really mean? That question has been with me most of my life, and various realizations have arisen over time. From a Buddhist perspective, one might say that God is another term for the ultimate dimension. However, when I came across this particular passage in the Lotus Sutra I had a visceral response to that image of welling up. The welling up of God from the earth, welling up from within my own human body, welling up from every speck of dust and all of space within the entire body of the phenomenal world. Thay has said that as our mindfulness develops and becomes stable, the ultimate dimension of reality will appear more and more clearly to us, right here and now in the historical dimension.

This welling up is my mindfulness, following my breath all the way in and all the way out, wholly touching the earth with my foot as I take a step, or drinking my cup of tea in the early morning. I recently watched the documentary, “Walk With Me,” about Thay and the Plum Village monastics. There is one particular scene in which a young brother puts tea leaves into a small pot, pours steaming water over the leaves, and then pours tea into small glass cups for another brother and himself. The camera focuses on each one as he picks up his steaming cup of tea, holds it gently in his hands, and takes slow sips in perfect attention to the present moment. “This cup of tea in my two hands, mindfulness held perfectly (or uprightly). Body and mind dwell in the very here and now,” is a gatha we recite when we drink tea. This practice is the welling up of the ultimate dimension in us through our mindfulness and concentration in the present moment.

Touching the Ultimate Dimension

Thus Come One Many Jewels vow was that wherever the Lotus Sutra was being taught, his stupa would well up from the ground and he would present himself, uttering words of praise. The assembly was excited to see this, something they had never known before. Up until this time they thought that there was only one Buddha, the historical manifestation of Shakyamunibuddha. They asked Shakyamuni if he could open the door to the stupa so they could see the Buddha of the Ultimate Dimension.

After Shakyamuni’s emanation bodies from throughout space and time had gathered together with the sangha, Shakyamuni rose from his seat and rested in mid-air. With his right finger he opened the door of the jeweled stupa, which made a great sound, “as of a bar being pushed aside to open the gate of a walled city.” Thay likened it to an electric shock.

Several years ago I was on a retreat at Mountain Lamp at the foot of Mt. Baker in Washington State. Roshi Jack Duffy was offering a *teisho* (Zen term for dharma talk), and spoke about our moment-by-moment practice—focusing on this moment, this moment, this moment. He said when we open a door we pay attention to opening the door all the way through—like following our in-breath all the way through. For some reason that image struck me deeply, and I practiced opening and closing doors throughout much of the remainder of the retreat. One time as I was practicing opening a door time seemed to slow down, I could feel everything about the door, my hand, the feeling of turning the knob. Thoughts fell away and there was just an intimate experience with that moment. It was like a sudden electric shock of waking up. Thay has said that from the world of relative phenomena we are able to touch the absolute, and this recognition brings about a powerful vibration, something like an electric shock. “Those who have learned the art of mindfulness are finely tuned and are able to receive this vibration. The ultimate goal of our practice and studies is to be able to touch the true nature of reality with our mindfulness.” The capacity to open up to the present moment in such an intimate and powerful way is represented by the moment Shakyamunibuddha opened the door of the jeweled stupa. All we do is open this door in this moment, fully present with our mindfulness and concentration.

Surprise

At the moment when the stupa opened, the entire assembled multitude saw Thus Come One Many Jewels in the jeweled stupa, sitting on a lion’s throne, his body whole and undecayed. Thus Come One Many Jewels then invited Shakyamuni to sit on the seat beside him—the Buddhas of the historical and ultimate dimensions sitting side-by side on the same lion’s throne! The noumenal and phenomenal worlds are together—Buddhas everywhere throughout space and time, teaching and receiving the Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma for the benefit and transformation of all beings.

With this image I had a deep realization: not only is God everywhere, Buddhas are everywhere as well. Shakyamunibuddha is here, now, in my physical heart. Thus Come One Many Jewels is here as well. “As our mindfulness develops and becomes stable, the ultimate dimension of reality will appear more and more clearly to us.” The Lotus Sutra talks about spiritual intuition that guides buddhas and bodhisattvas along the path. It reminds me of Carl Jung’s studies and writings about synchronicity.⁴ Somehow just what we need appears at just the right time. Not always easy, joyful, or what we wanted, but there it is nevertheless. We may feel guided, but not know how. I have explained it as the workings of the universe, for lack of a better way to describe such things, but this realization made it more personal for me—the Buddhas inside myself, and I wrote a verse:

⁴ Which he defined as an “acausal connecting (togetherness) principle,” “meaningful coincidence”, and “acausal parallelism.”

Inside me there is an
enlightening Buddha
manifesting in
mysterious ways
Outside of space and time
And yet
right within space and time.
My heart is
the one who
cries out in
the dark night
And the One
who listens and knows.
suffering and joy manifest together
in heart, body, mind
The breath of Compassion
blows gently
Holding all in Infinite Love

Years ago, I remember reading something that Thomas Merton wrote about his practice of Catholicism, comparing it to Thay's practice of Buddhism. The one thing Buddhism was missing, according to Merton, was an intimate connection to God. And then much later Thay wrote the poem, "Let the Buddha breathe, let the Buddha walk. I don't have to breathe, I don't have to walk." I like to believe he was talking about the Buddha inside of himself. Perhaps if Thomas Merton and Thay could have had more time together, Thomas Merton may have seen God in the Buddha and the Buddha in God.

Stopping

The first two verses of the 14 Verses of Meditation:

1. Like the two wings of a bird,
the practices of stopping (Shamatha)
and looking deeply (vipashyana)
rely upon each other
and belong together, side by side.
2. The practice of shamatha is to stop,
so that I may recognize and touch,
nourish and heal,
settle down and concentrate.

Last post, I shared Sister Dang Nghiem's introduction to guided meditation, which mentioned the first verse, "meditation is a bird with two wings..." In sitting meditation, she said, we always start with stopping.

With verse 2, Thay shares with us the reason why it is important for us to stop. In our tradition we practice stopping when we hear the sound of the bell. We have been taught that we can stop when we hear the telephone ring, or at the sound of a doorbell. But in our daily life, outside of a retreat, how often do we really stop?

Sister D., in her book, “Mindfulness as Medicine,” shared a story of a retreat for long-term practitioners in the Plum Village tradition. A woman was asking how to maintain stability when one has so much suffering. Sister D turned to the audience and asked how many people actually practiced stopping when they heard the phone ringing in their daily life. She said that less than five people raised their hands. She reminded the group that Thay has talked about the practice of stopping with the sound of the bell and of the phone at every orientation session and many dharma talks over the last thirty years. “Yet few of us actually practice it when we aren’t at the monastery.”

As she says, this practice of stopping trains us to be aware of and let go of thoughts and feelings that arise throughout the day. “If we can’t do this with these small daily sounds, then we’ll have no chance to master and release a strong emotion when it surges as a gigantic wave. ...The capacity to stop the chattering mind so it can dwell fully in the present moment determines our capacity to let go of suffering and to touch joy and happiness.”

Sister D also shared that in the monastic practice, our sisters and brothers train themselves to pay attention to every transition as part of their mindful manners. “...before we enter the restroom, we knock three times, slowly and clearly. ...Before I enter a room from outside, I also stop at the threshold and breathe. When I enter the meditation hall, I pause to acknowledge that I am entering a sacred space...”

This suggestion to pay attention to transitions is another method we can use to stop and bring our attention back to the present moment. This practice is versatile and can be applied to many situations in our life. Sister D says it can be applied when we put on or take off our shoes, open the door, go into a car, leave the car, walk into our office, or enter our home.

An easy way to practice stopping is to notice the natural pause between your in breath and out breath, between your out breath and in breath. Noticing the pause, the space, is a form of stopping. Another way I discovered on retreat was to “walk leisurely.” This is a practice to notice and interrupt the habit of hurrying. Try walking in such a way that there is space in your walking—you notice the energy of wanting to get somewhere and you also notice the energy of relaxing in your body into your hips, legs and feet as you walk. It can be a very pleasant and revealing practice.

How do you bring the practice of stopping into your daily life? Is there a stopping practice you would like to try out? Maybe it is just stopping between each step as

you walk from one room in your house to another at the end of the day. Or noticing the stop that naturally occurs as you breathe in and breathe out and breathe in again. Be creative, and find what works best for you.

Our practice of stopping supports our practice of mindfulness and concentration, whether standing, walking, sitting or lying down. In every moment our stopping helps us to recognize and transform strong habit energies, interrupt Radio Non-Stop Thinking (as Thay calls the chattering mind), and allows us to recognize and touch the ultimate dimension in the here and now.

Expedient Devices for Grounding

Grounding ourselves in the present moment is critical to our practice of healing suffering and realizing the deepest truths about our true nature. Bringing mindful attention of our breath to each moment—even wonderful moments like watching a beautiful sunset—keeps us safe from getting lost in forgetfulness or caught unaware when we are triggered by strong emotions, thoughts, body sensations, or stories we tell ourselves.

In our tradition, mindful breathing, mindful walking meditation, and deep relaxation are a few practices we use to keep us grounded in the present moment. We teach and use many other practices as well.

In **guided pebble meditation** we set four pebbles in front of us. As we breathe in we see our selves as a flower and breathing out we feel fresh. With the next pebble we see ourselves as a mountain on the in breath and feel our solidity on the out breath. With the third pebble we see ourselves as still, clear water on the in breath and reflect things as they really are on the out breath. With the final pebble we see ourselves as space and feel our freedom on the out breath. We can practice each meditation for three breaths or more, and this is often practiced with children. With this and any other **guided meditation**, we connect a phrase to our in breath and out breath. Once we are settled and stable in our body as we sit in meditation, guided meditations help us focus our attention and look deeply. By looking deeply, we have a chance to realize something we may never have known before, and that is insight.

I have a variety of **objects in my meditation room that I use while meditating** (but not all at the same time!):

- I have an app on my phone called “Insight Timer” that I use not only to time my meditation, but also to allow bells to chime throughout as a reminder to come back to my breath and the present moment.
- I use stones of varying sizes, shapes and weights that I place in the palm of my left hand to ground me to my body and the present moment as I meditate. Sometimes I carry a stone around in my pocket that I can use to

ground myself as I walk throughout the day, or when I am in various types of meetings at work.

- I use a 108-bead mala⁵ during meditation to anchor me to my breath. I move my left hand along the string of wooden beads—one bead for each in breath and out breath. Or sometimes I just hold the large center bead with the tassel in the palm of my hand, and this works for me similar to a rock or a stone. Sometimes I even practice with my mother's and grandmother's rosaries, using them in a similar way to a mala. I begin with the crucifix, and pause to allow any intentions for my meditation or my day to arise. When I arrive at the small metal icon of the Virgin Mary, I pause and cultivate the energy of Avalokiteshvara.
- Recently I began meditating with a small knot of wood that was fashioned in the shape of a wandering mendicant monk. I look straight into his eyes as I begin my meditation—whose eyes are those looking at me? And hold him in the palm of my hand similar to a rock or stone. I have also used a porcelain statue of Jizo Bodhisattva and a ceramic statue of Wisdom Woman.

The point of using such objects for mindfulness and meditation is not to get caught up in the object itself or our stories about it. The point is to help us stay grounded in our practice—whether it is sitting meditation, walking meditation, guided meditation, or any other mindfulness practice.

Keeping our practice fresh is important, as is recognizing the nature of our dissatisfied, wandering mind. *The Sutra on the Eight Realizations of the Great Beings* says that the human mind is always searching outside of itself and never feels fulfilled. It is a balance between keeping engaged with practice and jumping from one thing to the next without ever really settling down. Thus, I suggest that if you pick up a practice try staying with it for awhile—maybe a bit beyond your comfort with it, and see what happens. Just notice what arises, including any resistance, internal mental bickering, body fidgeting, etc., take a breath, and try letting it be. You may realize something you have never known before.

⁵ A mala is a bead or a set of beads commonly used by Hindus and Buddhists for keeping count while reciting, chanting, or mentally repeating a mantra or the name or names of a deity. We do not typically use malas for such purposes in our tradition.