

Winter Retreat 2018: Cultivating the Five Super Powers of Avalokiteshvara
Dharma Post #1-A Introduction

Dear Thay,¹ dear brother Jerry, dear friends on the path,

The Five Super Powers of Avalokiteshvara²

My entry into this study happened some years ago when I photocopied and began studying and memorizing the “Discourse of the Lotus of the Wonderful Dharma³: Universal Door Chapter” in the Plum Village chanting and practice book.⁴ It was during a particularly turbulent time in my own life. I took deep comfort in physically resting my body and mind in the compassionate arms of Avalokita.⁵ Whenever I found myself caught in raging storms or pits of fire, threatened by monsters deep within my own psyche, attacked by unkind people, or bound in chains of my own making I would wrap my own arms around myself—holding my suffering gently. The sutra assured me that by looking to Avalokita, and her commitment of responding to the cries of the world, I could overcome my suffering. Invoking her strength I found that the raging storms within and without really could pass, with sunlight and calm appearing in their place.

Practicing with this one chapter of the Lotus Sutra for quite some time, I was able to cultivate some compassion and stability, and touch them more easily. The words of the sutra itself were beautiful and healing:

*With mindfulness, free from doubts,
in moments of danger and affliction,
our faith in the purity of Avalokita
is where we go for refuge.*

*We bow in gratitude to the one
who has all the virtues,
regarding the world with compassionate eyes,
an Ocean of Well-being beyond measure.*

I also found out that Avalokita hung out in many places, and had many faces. Because I was paying attention, family members, friends, sangha friends, even people with kind eyes or joyful smiles became manifestations of Avalokita! Recognizing and accepting their kindness, compassion and joy was powerful as well. Over time the world, and my own life, became a safer, less dangerous place for me.

¹ “Thay” is the affectionate term Thich Nhat Hanh’s student call him. The term means teacher.

² Not to be confused with the Five Powers taught by the Buddha: faith, diligence, mindfulness, concentration, and insight

³ More commonly known by its shortened name, the Lotus Sutra

⁴ **Chanting from the Heart: Buddhist Ceremonies and Daily Practices**, Thich Nhat Hanh and the Monks and Nuns of Plum Village

⁵ A shortened name of Avalokiteshvara

This summer I ran across notes from my earlier study of the Universal Door chapter, as well as an initial exploration of the Lotus Sutra, and felt called to pick up Thay's lessons from the Lotus Sutra⁶ as well as the full text of the sutra by Hurvitz.⁷ I wanted to study and practice with them slowly, over time.

Of course, I first turned to the chapters in Thay's book on Avalokiteshvara and was immediately struck by Thay's attention to one verse from the Universal Door chapter:

Hurvitz's translation

*O you of the true gaze, of the pure gaze,
Of the gaze of broad and great wisdom,
Of the compassionate gaze and the gaze of
goodwill!
We constantly desire, we constantly look up to..*

Thay's translation

*Look of truth, look of purity,
look of boundless understanding,
look of love, look of compassion—
the look to be always honored and
practiced.*

Why were these five gazes or looks so important to Thay that he encouraged his students to contemplate them? From this question emerged the theme for this winter study and practice period—a deep dive into the contemplations on those five looks:

- *Satya*—truth
- *Visuddhi vimala*—purity
- *Mahaprajna*—great wisdom
- *Karuna*—compassion
- *Maitri*—good will/ loving kindness

I encourage you to memorize either one of these short verses and play with it during this practice period. Looking **with the practice eyes** of truth or purity, etc., what do I see? What arises? What is the power of this particular look? In my own life? I know of a group that has already formed to study, practice and share what they learn from this winter retreat period, and they plan to ask a couple of questions at the end of every one of their gatherings. **Questions are good!** A chance to go deeper into our own practice and allow insights to arise.

The Lotus Sutra⁸ as a Backdrop

⁶ **Peaceful Action, Open Heart: Lessons from the Lotus Sutra** (formerly titled *Karuna*—compassion *Karuna*—compassion **Opening the Heart of the Cosmos**), by Thich Nhat Hanh

⁷ **Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma (The Lotus Sutra)**, by Leon Hurvitz (Thay based his book on this translation, there are other translations as well)

⁸ Thay's Introduction chapter in **Peaceful Action, Open Heart** is useful in understanding the historical context of the Lotus Sutra, as well as how to read, appreciate and practice with it.

The Lotus Sutra has four key messages that I consider essential in helping us explore the Five Super Powers of Avalokiteshvara, and they will be woven throughout the dharma posts. They are:

- that each of us has Buddha nature and can become a Buddha
- discovering what we never knew before—faith in the practice, and allowing insights to arise
- using expedient (skillful) means—matching the teaching or practice to the inclinations of the practitioner (including ourselves)
- the play between the historical, ultimate and action dimensions

Becoming a Buddha

The primary message of the Lotus Sutra, one of the most beloved sutras in the Mahayana collection of Buddhist teachings, is that **each of us has Buddha nature and can become a Buddha**. This was a revolutionary message for practitioners back in the first and second centuries C.E., and it remains a powerful message today.

The original Theravada school taught that there was only one bohisattva, Siddhartha, who became the Buddha. The best one could do was to become an arhat, and only after practicing for many lifetimes. Mahayana teachings said that practicing to become an arhat was a good beginning, but it was not the end. Because the Buddha taught that there were many Buddhas, so there must be many bodhisattvas. What Siddhartha achieved, we also can achieve.

As Thay said, “We all have the capacity to become a fully enlightened Buddha. And while on the path to becoming a fully enlightened Buddha, we are all bodhisattvas. Our daily practice, and our practice with the Five and Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings put us on that path.

Discovering What We Never Knew Before

Thay said that while the early Mahayana teachings were critical of the earlier schools of Buddhism, the Lotus Sutra was the first Mahayana sutra to use loving speech and the first to accept all schools and tendencies of Buddhism. The inclusivity and reconciliation of the Lotus Sutra is the same inclusivity and reconciliation of our very own practice. We **all** can become Buddhas! Not a single being is left out.

When the Buddha predicted Buddhahood for Shariputra and all of his direct students, as well as Manjushri, innumerable retinues of kings, bodhisattvas, men, women, and others, they received something they had never heard before. Those who were ready to receive the prediction for themselves were delighted and began practicing wholeheartedly. This phrase, **“We have heard something we never heard before!”** is repeated throughout the sutra and the Buddha prophesizes

Buddhahood for innumerable groups of people. A realization of the prediction is the outcome of hearing the Lotus Sutra being taught time and time again. Those who heard the Buddha's encouraging words ("even if you recite only one phrase, one line from the Lotus Sutra, you can become a Buddha") and prophesy found a renewed faith in their practice. In hearing something they had never heard before, they received insight!

The same is true for each of us. **When we have faith in our practice, it becomes easier. And as we generate the energies of mindfulness and concentration from our daily practice, insight naturally arises.** The Buddha knew this. He knew how to encourage practitioners along the path, and in the Lotus Sutra he demonstrates many methods to help them.

Expedient Devices (Skillful Means)

Sometimes we are not ready to receive and practice a teaching. When the Buddha began teaching the Lotus Sutra in front of a large gathering, his message of the universal way to Buddhahood could not be accepted by many people, and so they got up and left. In one chapter of the sutra, the Buddha describes bodhisattvas who, throughout immeasurable periods of time, practice methods in order to share the Buddha's message in a way such people can understand—right where they are. **The bodhisattvas used expedient devices to reach everyone, no matter their level of understanding or practice.**

There is an entire chapter in the Lotus Sutra devoted to expedient devices (*upaya*). The Buddha in the Lotus Sutra taught that it is through expedient devices that practitioners can be encouraged in their practice.

Upaya is one of the four principles that form the foundation for the Order of Interbeing. The Order of Interbeing is the Buddhist community in the Plum Village (Thich Nhat Hanh tradition) whose aim is to actualize Buddhism by studying, experimenting with, and applying Buddhism in modern life with a special emphasis on the bodhisattva ideal. According to the charter of the Order of Interbeing, ***upaya* (skillful means) consist of images and methods created by intelligent teachers to show Buddha's Way and guide people in their efforts to practice the Way in their own particular circumstances.** These means are called Dharma doors, and it is taught that there are over 84,000 dharma doors—in other words, dharma doors are innumerable.

The expedient devices described in the Lotus Sutra are teachings in prose, teachings in verse, short verses (gathas), tales of the Buddha's former lives, miracle tales, teachings of causes and conditions, parables, quotes, or dialogues. These means were used to teach people of different sensibilities or levels of understanding. They use a variety of expedient means to make the teachings accessible to many modern-day practitioners.

Forms of practice can also be used as skillful means for encouraging and enlivening our practice, and we will explore many of those throughout the dharma posts. They will be offered as the second part of each dharma post.

The Historical and Ultimate Dimensions

The sutra teaches in three dimensions: **the historical dimension, the ultimate dimension, and the dimension of action.**

The historical dimension is the material realm, the realm of appearances, the realm of phenomena, the realm of the conditioned. In the historical dimension we are subject to past, present and future. There is birth and death, coming and going, increasing and decreasing, arising and fading away.

The ultimate dimension is the realm of the ultimate nature of reality where there is no time or space, the realm of the unconditioned. It is also called the noumenal dimension, the Pure Land, the Kingdom of God.

We can easily experience the historical dimension, right? We live immersed in the world of phenomena. Right? But how often do we truly experience the historical dimension? If our minds are lost in thought or we are rushing from here to there, are we really present to the historical dimension? Thay teaches that the only moment we have is the present moment. If we are lost in the past or future, or in our emotional reactions in the present, then we are not truly present to the historical dimension.

So, is it difficult to experience the ultimate dimension? Yes? No, not really. Every time we take a step and know we are taking a step, every time we stop and notice what is going on in or around us, every time we see clearly into the eyes of a loved one or hold a difficult emotion tenderly we experience the ultimate dimension. In the 40 Tenets of Plum Village Buddhism, Thay said that in the historical dimension, every dharma (every phenomena) is a conditioned dharma. In the ultimate dimension, every dharma is an unconditioned dharma. In the historical dimension the wave is born, lives for a time and dies. In the ultimate dimension, the realm of water, the wave is always there. Our mindfulness practice allows us to touch the historical and ultimate dimensions, wave and water, simultaneously.

The dimension of action is the dimension of bodhisattvas. The bodhisattvas found in the Lotus Sutra are quite interesting characters. Their action energies are varied—from compassion to actions that are universally good, to never disparaging, to listening to fine sounds, to devotion and gratitude. They each have unique gifts to offer us.

The one thing these bodhisattvas have in common is their aspiration and dedication to helping all beings attain Buddhahood. Their healing energies can help us connect with our most intimate, authentic selves, the place from which right action naturally

arises. In addition to Avalokiteshvara, some of the bodhisattvas from the Lotus Sutra may appear at times in these dharma posts to encourage us along the path of healing and transformation.

Sometimes when we practice with a bodhisattva we become intimately close with them. Taking refuge in Avalokita and the teachings of the universal dharma door of great compassion when I was struggling led to a deep realization within me:

I believe we can solve the many problems of the world - war, poverty, environmental destruction, abuses against women and children, the ideological divides - if we can heal the wounds of humanity. We need the Healing Woman, who is within and around us always, to help us create and live fully vibrant, healthy lives. Who is this Healing Woman? She is the soft voice that whispers our original name; the piercing eyes that look deeply into our own and see the burning fire that is our desire to be truly alive; the ever-present Mother who wraps her great warm arms about us, embracing us tenderly, and, with loving strokes from her fingers, softly brushes away the tears of our suffering. She puts us in touch with our innate nature, which is always mysterious, always moving in the direction of healing and transformation. Bathed in her love we heal ourselves and, as we transform, we heal humanity.

Summary

The prophesy of the Lotus Sutra is that we can become a Buddha. As a Buddha we continue to be a human being. They taught that The Lotus Sutra has given us a very great gift, and we can best use it by becoming the arms of the Buddha through our practice in daily life, in Sangha building, and in our work in the world. The Sutra connects us with many bodhisattvas, including Avalokiteshvara, who can help us realize the Sutra's deepest teachings.

For this winter retreat period we will explore expedient devices to help us practice looking through the eyes of Avalokiteshvara: focusing our attention on her five great powers (understanding the true nature of reality, purity, great wisdom, compassion, and good will) shared in the Universal Door (Gateway to Everywhere) chapter of the Lotus Sutra. As we cultivate these powers through study, practice and action, we manifest as both a Buddha and a human being— we experience the ultimate and historical dimensions alive together right here and now. With open hearts and faith in our practice, may we discover things we never knew before!