
Wisdom and compassion are not separated

Teisho by Marc ChiGen Estéban - La Gendronnière, August 2020

"During this teisho, I am going to talk about wisdom and compassion, but above all I will try to show you, through some examples taken from traditional texts, that one does not go without the other, and this since the first teaching of Buddha Shakyamuni. I have therefore extracted a few points from these texts, which highlight this relationship and sometimes also the risk of considering one while neglecting too much the other.

Above all, I hope that this *teisho* will make you want to study these texts and will encourage you in your practice of zazen, the source of these teachings.

The Enigma of Hannya Shingyo

First of all, I would like to tell you about an "enigma" that you may have already noticed.

We all know the *Hannya Shingyo*, the "Heart of Great Wisdom Sutra", which we sing in the morning in the dojo. What is Great Wisdom? The Great Wisdom of the buddhas is to perceive the ultimate nature of things. And also perceiving the ultimate nature of what we are.

This ultimate nature of things is, in reality, emptiness. Emptiness, not in the sense of nothingness, but in the sense of the impermanence of all things: impermanence of phenomena and more generally of the 5 *skandhas* which constitute us.

The essence of *Hannya Shingyo's* teaching is emptiness.

Hannya Shingyo, if one reads it without taking a step back, is in a way a provocative sutra, since it teaches "that there are neither senses, nor sense organs", and that the Four Noble Truths, which are the first teaching of the Buddha, "don't exist", etc. This seems like a "negation of everything", but it is in fact not a negation in the sense of nothingness, but a negation in the sense that things do not exist by themselves, that they do not exist permanently. Indeed, all phenomena are conditioned and impermanent, they appear and disappear according to the combination of conditions.

The Great Wisdom of the buddhas is the understanding of this point. Understanding with the intellect certainly, but above all understanding with body and mind in unity, which arises from the practice of zazen. This is what is sometimes called "actualization" of this reality of impermanence.

On the other hand, you know that in Buddhism (and more particularly in the Great Vehicle, the branch to which Zen belongs), there is the "completely accomplished" Buddha, who is omniscient and who has all perfections, then there are Bodhisattvas who are some "incarnations", symbolizations also of some of the qualities of an accomplished Buddha.

Among these Bodhisattvas, the two most "famous", if I may say so, the two most revered, are *Kannon* (or *Avalokitésvara*), the Bodhisattva of compassion, and *Manjushri*, the Bodhisattva of wisdom.

Manjushri is always depicted with a sword in his hand. This sword is in fact Wisdom, which slices through our illusions. In other words, it is the understanding of emptiness, of the ultimate nature of all things, and this understanding prevents us from falling into delusion.

Kannon has many representations. He is sometimes portrayed with one hand behind his ear as someone who listens attentively. This symbolizes the ability of compassionate beings to hear the suffering of beings. Sometimes he is depicted with many arms, symbolizing the ability to use many 'skillful means' adapted to different people. Sometimes he is depicted with a bottle of ointment in his hand, ointment that he pours on the suffering beings, to heal their wounds and help them.

So, each of these Bodhisattvas represents in a way a major quality of the Buddha.

To come back now to the *Hannya Shingyo*, *Hannya Shingyo* is a teaching about the Great Wisdom of the buddhas. It would be logical that the teaching about wisdom would be given by the Bodhisattva of wisdom, by "the specialist" of the matter. Logically, one could therefore imagine that it should be *Manjushri* who teaches beings, and therefore us, what the wisdom of the buddhas is.

However, the teaching of *Hannya Shingyo* is not given by *Manjushri*, but by *Kannon*, the Bodhisattva of compassion! It is therefore the Bodhisattva of compassion who teaches about ultimate wisdom.

As I have, basically, rather a rational and logical mind, this point often raised questions for me at the beginning of my practice. This is what I called at the beginning of this *teisho* "the enigma of *Hannya Shingyo*".

The practice of Bodhisattvas in the *Vimalakirti Sutra*

In order to continue this reflection, I am now going to talk to you about *Vimalakirti*.

In the *Vimalakirti Sutra* (or "Unthinkable Freedom Sutra"), in the chapter on Bodhisattva practice, Bodhisattvas from another world come to visit Shakyamuni Buddha.

To give you the context, the Bodhisattvas from another world (called "the world of perfumes") have heard about our world and Shakyamuni Buddha. Our world is known to them as "the world of endurance", because the beings who inhabit it are thickheaded, stubborn, often deluded and difficult to convince. It is really us! But the Bodhisattvas of the world of perfumes have also heard of Shakyamuni Buddha and of Bodhisattvas who live and are reborn in this world, to help all beings relentlessly. They are impressed by such compassion and therefore come to ask Shakyamuni about the activity of these Bodhisattvas.

The Buddha begins by defining what is the "composed" and the "uncomposed". The composed is the set of phenomena that appear when the causes and conditions are met for a

phenomenon to appear. It is called "composed" because a certain number of causes combine to make the phenomenon appear. We ourselves are composed phenomena.

Thus, the Buddha distinguishes the composed from the uncomposed. But what is then the "uncomposed"? It is the ultimate essence of all things, that is to say emptiness.

First of all, the Buddha says that a Bodhisattva must not seek to destroy the composed, i.e. phenomena. For to help beings in delusion, one must live with them in the midst of phenomena. And one must try to use phenomena, delusions, as opportunities to observe oneself, to awaken and help the others.

At the beginning of this summer camp, Roland spoke to us about the constraints imposed by the protection against the Coronavirus pandemic (wearing a mask, social distancing, disinfection measures at the entrance to the premises, etc.) and encouraged us to observe ourselves, to observe how these constraints - sometimes experienced with some difficulty - influence our minds. So, they are numerous opportunities to observe ourselves and to let go, using the phenomena to progress on the Way.

The Buddha therefore explained to the Bodhisattvas who visited him *"that one should not seek to destroy the composed, the phenomena"*. But he also adds *"that one must not freeze, or fix oneself in the uncomposed"*.

And he tells his visitors, among other things: *"What is, for the Bodhisattva, not to fix oneself in the uncomposed? ... Not to fix oneself in the uncomposed is to study and practice emptiness without emptiness being the object of its realization"*, that is to say without being the object of one's Awakening, without limiting one's Awakening to this understanding.

A little further on, he adds: *"It is to contemplate emptiness and nothingness without renouncing compassion »*.

In his answer, we can feel that Shakyamuni Buddha identifies a risk. His response sounds like a warning. Somehow, he identifies the risk that, by focusing too much on emptiness, one gives up or turns away from compassion.

I think this is one of the reasons why the teaching of *Hannya Shingyo*, the teaching of the Great Wisdom, is given by the Bodhisattva of compassion. It is to avoid that, when studying *Hannya Shingyo*, when understanding emptiness, we forget one of the fundamental dimensions of the practice of the Bodhisattvas, one of the fundamental dimensions of the teaching of the Buddha (and of the Great Vehicle of which Zen is a part), which is compassion.

When I say that the Buddha is warning us about the risk of identifying too much with emptiness, I think there are in fact two risks:

The first risk - which is a serious one - would be not to understand emptiness, that is, to assimilate emptiness to nothingness. This would be a serious mistake on the Way for ourselves and for others, because it could push us towards a nihilistic, negative posture, even to despair. In other words: *"There is nothing! What's the point of making efforts if there is nothing at all? »*. This is an extreme position that could lead us to think that there is no point in worrying about

our thoughts, our words or our actions, because in the end "there is nothing". But this is not at all the Buddha's teaching or practice.

In order to understand and not fall into this trap, we must understand and keep in mind that the Buddha never said that "there is nothing", but that "**there is nothing permanent**", which is very different. So, many things that are called phenomena, but they are not permanent in nature.

When we do zazen, we directly experience emptiness by observing our thoughts. A thought arises, we observe it for an instant without judging it, then we go back to the concentration on the posture and the breathing, and the thought which appeared disappears. We clearly experience directly the impermanence of our thoughts. When we do zazen, we have a strong and intimate experience of emptiness.

We must therefore understand the meaning of emptiness and not assimilate it to complete nothingness. If we assimilate it to nothingness, we make a mistake and we leave the Buddha Way. And this is the first risk: becoming nihilistic.

The second risk is to consider wisdom without compassion, or to consider compassion without wisdom. The second case is certainly less serious, but it can lead us to an erroneous or incomplete perception of the Bodhisattva Way as taught by the Buddha and as he teaches it in the *Vimalakirti Sutra*. This is certainly why he draws our attention to this matter.

In the first case, if we are very focused on wisdom, on the perception of emptiness and impermanence of things, but not much on compassion. This can lead us to a slightly more selfish, more personal practice, that is to say, a practice that will be in conformity with the Buddha's teaching, which will also be a practice of liberation from our sufferings.

Because by understanding the emptiness of things, we free ourselves - at least partially - from our own sufferings. We can stick to that, but it is going to be a practice that risks being really centered on ourselves. We are going to relieve our own pain, improve our own personal *karma*, and we may have hope for a better rebirth, but for all that, it remains a practice that is centered on ourselves only.

So, the second dimension in Bodhisattva practice is compassion, that is, putting this understanding of emptiness at the service of others, instead of putting it at our own service. That is compassion.

Here is an example that is often used, even if it is caricatural. Let's imagine someone who passes over a bridge and can't swim. This person sees someone else drowning. Misunderstood wisdom, or worse, nihilism, pushes this passer-by to say: "Everything being impermanent, birth and death are illusions, so there is no need to intervene, because sooner or later everyone has to go through this illusion!" Of course, it's caricatural. In any case, it is far from the Buddha's teaching!

The other extreme is compassion without wisdom. The person drowns, and carried away by great compassion the passer-by - forgetting that he can't swim - jumps into the water. In the current, the drowned person clings to him and... both end up drowned! It is the expression of

compassion without wisdom. It is certainly better than no compassion at all, but the end result is still not satisfactory.

The Buddha's path is compassion and wisdom at the same time.

So, when someone is drowning, if you can't swim, you call for help, you call the fire brigade, you look for a rope, a branch, a buoy to throw to him or a buoy to reach him ... These are the thousand arms of *Kannon*, and only as a last resort, if no other solution is found, you jump to try to save the drowning person.

Since the first teaching of the Buddha, both wisdom and compassion have been present...

The Buddha's teaching is therefore based on wisdom and compassion from the beginning. This is why I like to think that the teaching on Great Wisdom in the *Hannya Shingyo* is given by the Bodhisattva of compassion. In any case, it is a reference for me.

I think that there is also something else that must be understood in the fact that the teaching of *Hannya Shingyo* is given by *Kannon*: it is the fact that the practice of zazen and the teaching of the Dharma are in themselves the highest expression of compassion, because we practice, study and teach the Dharma to help other beings to liberate themselves. This is the definition of the "*MUSHOTOKU*" practice, the practice where one does not seek any personal benefit, but where one offers one's own energy for the good of all beings. Therefore, we teach the Great Wisdom to help beings to alleviate their suffering.

And this message is present from the very beginning in the first teaching of the Buddha, the Four Noble Truths. Indeed, the Buddha teaches in a very concrete way the reality of emptiness, impermanence, and therefore Great Wisdom, through the existence of suffering and the possibility of making suffering stop. He then teaches the means to end suffering and the Noble Eightfold Path, thus expressing his deep compassion for all beings.

Advice from Master Dogen

To conclude, I would like to make the link with our Zen practice and Master Dogen's teaching. One might sometimes think that Zen and Master Dogen take little account of the teaching of compassion and insist more on impermanence and Great Wisdom.

The heart of the teaching of Zen is zazen. As Roland said yesterday: "If your life and your activity are anchored in a sincere and strong daily practice of zazen, you will gradually - unconsciously, naturally and automatically - transform yourself and become more available, in a way more 'helping' and 'loving' for others, and therefore wiser and more compassionate".

The question now is: "Should we be satisfied with that? Should we be satisfied with doing zazen on a daily basis?"

My personal answer is: it may be enough, but the veil of our illusions is often thick and therefore the risk of deluding ourselves often remains high. So be careful! Anchor your existence in the practice of zazen and continue to observe yourself in daily life, don't hesitate to make conscious efforts, so that your life becomes the permanent *gyoji*. We human beings are

incredibly lucky: our mind is malleable. The anchoring of our daily life in the practice of zazen and conscious efforts in daily life combine and contribute to making us better people.

And here again, I would like to quote two teachings of Master Dogen which I advise you to study to enlighten your daily life.

The first is the *Bodaisatta Shishobo* which is a chapter of the *Shobogenzo* where Master Dogen expresses the four major actions of a Bodhisattva. They are:

- The *fuse*, or "the gift". Dogen says: "Even a few pennies, or a bit of grass if you have nothing, but give! »
- *Aigo*, that is to say "the kind words". Language is our main means of communication. The attention we pay to the words we use is therefore of great help to others.
- *Rigyo*, "beneficial actions", actions for the good of beings.
- And finally, *doji*, which means "to be one with others, not to be different from others", or which is also sometimes translated as "collaboration for the good of all". It means working collectively for a work that is beyond our little person: that's what we are doing here during this camp. We collaborate for the good of the participants and of all beings.

And finally, I would like to quote another piece of advice from Master Dogen which he expresses in the *Tenzo Kyokun*, a collection of instructions for the temple's cook. These instructions in fact apply to all of us.

Dogen tells us, among other things: "that the cook must cultivate a broad mind, a joyful mind and the "spirit of the grandmother" or "spirit of benevolence"". What is the spirit of the grandmother? The grandmother is the one who bakes cakes for tea and watches with a smile as children play carefree in the garden.

The spirit of the grandmother is the spirit of the one who does good and whose best reward is the happiness of others. It is the spirit of the *samu*, of the *gyoji* in the temple where each one carries out his or her task in the best possible way, rejoicing inwardly to participate in the harmony of the temple and to create the conditions for a strong and sincere practice of zazen ...

Thank you for your attention".