

# The Bodhisattvas and the Three Tenets

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A bodhisattva, literally an awake (bodhi) being (sattva), is an ideal in Mahayana Buddhism. Having intimately experienced the interconnection of all life, a bodhisattva vows to work for the awakening of all and not just for oneself alone.

Many years ago, I found a used copy of a book by Zen pioneer Nyogen Senzaki Sensei at the Bodhi Tree Bookstore. Senzaki Sensei had inscribed a dedication which read: “Your gladness is my gladness, I have no other gladness than this.” When you are not happy, I cannot be happy. We simply cannot ignore each other, because fundamentally we are all the same nature. In recognition of this fact, a bodhisattva works tirelessly for the welfare of all. This is not approached with a sense of an overbearing responsibility, but rather a sense of joy. In the midst of suffering, the bodhisattva connects with the profound joy of serving others.

In Buddhism, there are several major bodhisattvas: Great Wisdom Manjusri, Great Compassion Avalokitesvara, Great Activity Samantabhadra, and Great Vow Kshitigarbha. The bodhisattvas are not historical people, but archetypal energies common to each and everyone of us. As Zen ancestor Tenkei Denson Zenji would often say “Avalokitesvara is your name.” These are our names—we practice to awaken these energies and qualities within ourselves. We simply keep enlarging our capacity to embody these energies and unique characteristics of serving.

How can we work with these energies in a very practical way and embody them on the spot? To explore this question, let us look at the Three Tenets: not-knowing, bearing witness, and loving or healing action. These Three Tenets are a recasting of the Three Pure Precepts, which are part of the Sixteen Bodhisattva Precepts. The first Pure Precept, do not do evil, is recast as not-knowing; the second, do good, as bearing witness; and the third, do good for others, as loving action.

When practicing with the first Tenet, not-knowing, we awaken the wisdom energy of Manjusri Bodhisattva. Manjusri, the central figure of the zendo, is depicted holding a sword that cuts through delusion. So the practice of wielding Manjusri’s sword is to STOP—stop all knowing.

This is the first step. We release all our knowing, setting knowing aside, so that we remain open to all that is arising. The sword cuts through and we empty out completely. There is no hesitation here—it is simply a flash of openness; a moment of not fixing any person, any idea, any position. We simply stop. In doing so, we realign ourselves with the essential nature of life: no position, no self.

We practice this instantaneously, in the snap of our fingers or the blink of an eyelash.

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What happens when we stop? From experience we know that when we stop, we become receptive. We have released everything and can actually take in whatever is happening. It only takes a moment to arouse Manjusri's wisdom. Now we have a chance to understand each other, to connect with the joy and suffering of another and come into oneness or harmony with another person or situation.

Having stopped, the second tenet manifests: bearing witness. In bearing witness, Avalokitesvara's Great Compassion is awakened through the practice of deep listening. The bottom line here is caring—caring enough to listen completely to what is manifesting: pain, fear, despair, sadness, joy, confusion, serenity. This is full-body listening: we listen with our eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, mind. Bearing witness recognizes our intimate life-connectedness, and so we practice listening without judgment. The key quality here is non-judging—we do not evaluate or pick and choose or give in to our fixed positions, but rather we are open and learning. In each moment, we are actively stopping, and accepting without judgment, whatever is arising. We acknowledge and deeply accept the multitude of facets of any given situation. In this way, we are in intimate relationship to the joys and suffering of another.

The quality of bearing witness or non-judging has two important characteristics. These characteristics are embodied in Kanzeon and Kanjizai, the Japanese names for Avalokitesvara (Sanskrit). As Kanzeon, the "One who Hears the Cries of the World," we practice connecting and staying close to the suffering of others. As Kanjizai, "One who settles in the Self," we remain grounded in not-knowing.

In bearing witness, we identify completely with another. Your suffering is my suffering; my suffering is your suffering—in this way, little by little, we enlarge our capacity to attend to the needs of the world. Here we are not speaking of a self-centered concern, for it is obvious that one cannot fit something so vast into the small container of self-concern. Rather, here we have some experience of forgetting the self—something vast is being awakened in us. We are getting out of the way and settling into the situation.

Action naturally arises from not-knowing and bearing witness. This is the action of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva. We call it a loving or healing action because not-knowing and bearing witness without bias lead to love. We have identified with another. Bearing witness breaks the heart open to love, and when we love, we act. We simply must do something. We cannot know what this action will be by simply thinking about what to do in a given situation. We must plunge into the whole messy situation at hand.

Kshitigarbha Bodhisattva (J. Jizo) is the energy of never turning away. The practice here is to develop stability—don't wobble! When we practice the Three Tenets, our capacity to remain present in suffering expands. And in remaining present, the recognition grows that we are needed and are, in fact, indispensable to others. This is not a self-centered activity, but rather a giving over of oneself to the Great Vows of the bodhisattvas. The vows fulfill us; the vows awaken us; the vows save us.