

Reflections on the Samantabhadra Retreat

By Beth Kaminaka

We celebrated the Festival of Samantabhadra with a three-day retreat at the temple in February. Samantabhadra, “He who is All-pervadingly Good”, “He Whose Beneficence is Everywhere”, he who urged the Buddha to teach and to turn the Wheel of the Dharma. At the beginning of the retreat, on Friday morning, Rev. Phoebe asked us to sit in meditation as if we were a pebble cast into a stream with water flowing around us: Cool and continually moving water around us while sitting on the bottom of the stream bed. Before our first meditation period, the statue of Samantabhadra was placed on the altar to remind us of the topic of the retreat: the Love of the great and wise one. Friday was a good day with a wonderful Dharma talk, a discussion about the different aspects and meaning of spiritual love, and periods of meditation.

Saturday morning dawned bright and beautiful as we sat down for early morning meditation. Rev. Phoebe placed a stick of incense on the altar that morning as she made the dedication. As the gong rang, I noticed a bar of bright sunshine on the wall in front of me and outlined in it the shadow of the stick incense playing on the wall with its smoke. For the next few minutes I could not help but watch as the shadow moved across the wall caught in that beam of light until finally the sun had moved far enough to where I could no longer see the incense stick, and only the shadow of wisps of smoke told me it was still burning right where Rev. Phoebe had placed it. Meanwhile, Samantabhadra sat on his lotus. And I said to myself – and WHAT is this?

I found myself on the bottom of that stream feeling the movement of the water of ephemeral life. Life is more shadow than substance. It is a brief time in a bright stream of light, which moves on without hindrance and finally dies and leaves just a hint of smoke remaining in the memory of those who knew us. Smoke is transitory and always in motion; a stream is transitory and in motion; and life is transitory and always in motion even when we are not aware of it. And, Samantabhadra sits on his lotus. His wise love permeates the pebble, the stream, the shadow, the smoke and me. And WHAT is this I say?

In an instant I see my mistake. I was to present on Sunday, the next day, at the Festival of Samantabhadra. This particular offertory is difficult. Coming into the retreat, after practicing a few perfunctory times, I had convinced myself that I could not possibly learn it so I was not going to sing it but would recite it instead. Now, sitting there on the bottom of the stream remembering the shadow of the smoke, all that I could think of was: Delusion. I had mistaken the shadow for the real. Not only had I deluded myself and deprived myself of an offering but also I was depriving the Sangha of the offertory as it had been written. The difficulty was unreal, deluded, a creation of my body, speech and mind. And Samantabhadra sits on his lotus watching and still loving.

I spent the next hours practicing the offertory, despairing of learning it and knowing I had left it till too late, knowing it was my own doing, created by myself. I also realized, belatedly, that it was truly a beautiful piece of music. While on the surface it seemed overly difficult, it somehow had completeness about it. Until the very hour of the service I practiced: sometimes getting it close to right and sometimes not getting it at all. When the time for ceremony came I met Rev. Phoebe in the vestibule and told her the offertory was rough. I did not tell her what I had done. There would be time for that later. I asked what would be good to do—recite it or sing it—and she responded, “What do you want to do?” “I want to try and sing it” I heard myself saying. And to that she replied, “Don’t try. Just sing it with all of your heart.” And I did. And Samantabhadra sat on his lotus watching and still loving. I sang with my heart and forgot about my head. And you know, it wasn’t perfect but His love filled me that morning and it was better than any time I had sung it before. Samantabhadra, sitting on his lotus, taught me that love is in the heart and not the mind. If we see beyond the shadow into the true self we transcend delusion, and then all beings benefit. “Delusive thought, if lost, abandoned, will all satisfaction bring.”

One more step on the path. What a great retreat.