I recently met a retired Zen teacher who moved to the desert where I live, and we chatted a little. One thing she emphasized was the importance of meeting people where they are. This struck me as a very ordinary statement as a summation of many years of teaching, but it stayed with me, and I began to see the wisdom of it in my chaplaincy practice especially. It’s not dissimilar to Ummon’s oft-quoted answer when asked what the lifetime teachings of the Buddha were — “one teaching in response”.

Manjusri was not able to meet the woman where she was. All attempts at communication with her, of trying to find ways to reach her, failed. As chaplains, we’re taught to pay attention to small but important things, such as where to be with a patient to make them feel comfortable. Often I need to stand as a patient can’t easily turn their head or look down. But it does feel like I am looming over them at times. Sitting with someone at the same physical level feels more relaxed, indicating that we have time to spend together. And this is great when physically possible. I try and pay attention to each patient and how they are — whether I need to get closer as they can’t hear me so well; or if they seem comfortable or uncomfortable with my presence. I am trying to learn to pick up subtle cues from patients, their families, and the staff in the hospital so I can better see the context in which they are and which I’m entering.

In this story, Manjusri wants to bring the woman out of samadhi so he can ask her a question. He doesn’t seem to be attuned to the woman’s experience, or necessarily care too much about it. She might be having a great time in deep samadhi next to the Buddha! But Manjusri wants to know why she gets to sit there, and he doesn’t, and this is a pressing question for him. As the bodhisattva of wisdom, he probably assumes he knows the nature of samadhi more than almost any other being, so rousing her should be simple enough. He figures he knows well enough the context of the woman’s experience. Yet try as he might, he simply can’t reach her.

As a koan, this story points to the fact that Manjusri can’t sit beside the Buddha as he doesn’t see the world in terms of distinctions. There is no sitting beside. There is only sitting as. Manjusri sees unity — he’s not concerned with discerning differences. He sees wholeness, yet somehow he doesn’t see the whole picture. In Zen we sometimes refer to this as being “stuck in the absolute” — of seeing the world in terms of equality only, of not seeing or valuing the distinctions that separate this from that. And this perspective is also important in chaplaincy, of seeing our shared humanity, of not being blinded by our relative health or prosperity in relation to those whom we aim to serve, but acknowledging that we are all ultimately in the same boat, afflicted (or blessed) by sickness, old age, and death. And as chaplains, it feels important to hold both perspectives without leaning too much in either direction for too long. There is a sense of freedom, possibility, space,
and timelessness in the boundless nature of our lives. But the risk of focusing solely here is becoming distanced from the constantly shifting details as our lives unfold. And when contemplating the conditional aspect of our lives, appreciation, wonder, and joy exist alongside pain and sadness. And too much attention on this side can lead to a sense of overwhelm and claustrophobia.

Manjusri and the woman are on totally different wavelengths. Manjusri can't wake the woman as she sees things from a different perspective — she perceives herself and the Buddha as separate, samadhi as something you go in and out of. Manjusri's perspective resembles Dogen's expression, “by sitting upright in samadhi, the whole phenomenal world becomes the Buddha's seal, and the entire sky turns into enlightenment.” There is no place where the Buddha does not sit, so where would one go to sit next to him?

Whereas Manjusri cuts through delusion with his flaming sword, “Wisdom about Delusion” dwells “below”, immersed in delusion, knowing it fully. The relationship is stark: Manjusri represents overcoming delusion, of stripping it bare, cutting it away, of seeing clearly. In the koan, as it appears in the Gateless Gate, “Wisdom about delusion” is known as Momyo. I always pictured Momyo as being like a mole. She’s blind where Manjusri sees, small and dark where Manjusri is great and bright. But moles are expert at digging through the muck. It’s their natural habitat. Whereas Manjusri would simply see through the dirt, the grass, the whole thing and penetrate the emptiness of it all, perhaps Momyo is skilled at finding her way through the muck, making a home there, knowing it well. We’re not given much information about Momyo. Still, I imagine her happy being as is, abiding simply, without the need to “cut away with the sword of wisdom” or “penetrate directly.”

Not many women appear in the major collection of Zen koans. The nameless, faceless woman in this koan gets to play the part of the “unenlightened” practitioner, the person who puts Manjusri’s nose out of joint as not only does she get to hang out with the Buddha, but she does so even though she’s in female form. Leaving aside the history of sexism in Zen and Buddhism, the purpose of it being a woman in the story is to add insult to injury for Manjusri, as women — at the time — were considered inferior. So perhaps another reason for his inability to reach her is that (ironically) he can’t see past her differentiated gender and sees her in a fixed way. In the commentary for this koan, Mumon refers to the story as a crude “country play” in that many parts don’t add up — it’s clumsy. But then, perhaps Manjusri is much closer to a human embodiment of wisdom in this case rather than an archetype. As a mixed bag of wisdom and delusion, he sees what he sees and doesn’t see what he doesn’t see — at least partially unaware of his blind spots. He sees the absolute unity of all things but is also caught on why someone other than him gets to sit next to the teacher. In this story, Manjusri represents being stuck in one way of seeing things. The aspect of discernment, which is a function of wisdom, is not displayed by Manjusri here.
Wisdom has different faces. Sometimes wisdom is seeing how and why we hold onto fixed views of ourselves and the world around us and finding ways to let go deeply. Sometimes wisdom is knowing when to put the kettle on because someone could use a cup of tea. Manjusri may be the go-to guy for those seeking enlightenment. Still, I wonder if Avaloketesvara might not rather team up with “Wisdom about Delusion” to help relieve a lot of the nuts and bolts suffering that goes on in the world. I would rather place my life in the hands of a doctor who knows a scalpel from a stethoscope and uses each appropriately and skillfully, for example, than one who doesn’t care to make arbitrary distinctions between what they perceive as ultimately empty phenomena.

Caring about the subtleties and differences between people and their experiences is important in responding appropriately to where they’re at. We’ve learned about cultural humility in this course, of seeing that our own perspective is inherently limited and colored by the life we have led. In this instance, I like the idea of humility, accepting my limitations, and not feeling like I have to know it all or pretend to know it all. But at the same time, to respect things I don’t know rather than treating my ignorance of them as telling of their value. Since I started volunteering in the hospital, I’ve felt a growing respect for people’s religious views — I’ve mainly encountered people of the Christian faith so far — as I’ve seen how it can buoy them during difficult times and how it leads some people (mainly my fellow chaplains) toward a path of loving action. I’ve noticed that patients often have their own idiosyncratic way of relating to God, and their sense of what/who that is. I wouldn’t know this through reading but by listening to and talking with the patient. So in that sense, I am always a beginner, in the early stages, like Momyo, being open to the twelve hundred million lands/perspectives I may encounter.

Momyo can’t do what Manjusri does, and Manjusri can’t do what Momyo does. Each of us has our own strengths and weaknesses and way of seeing things, and this can be celebrated and appreciated, and it can also be let go of or seen through when it gets in the way. Seeing the two bodhisattvas as aspects of each of us, we can both appreciate, learn from, and try to work with differences skillfully; and see each moment’s clarity, depth, and fullness just as it is. By embodying both Manjusri and Momyo, we don’t have to stay stuck in just one way of being, just one way of seeing and living our life, or just one way of seeing and relating to others.