

Faith from Within and Without

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At Zen River, we often talk about Zen practice as a way to find one's specific function in life. According to the Mahayana tradition, we all have something to offer to this world, even though we may be confused about what that could be. Everyone has buddha-nature, which means that each one of us is endowed with excellent bodhisattva qualities. But those qualities are not always apparent or wisely used, and they can flourish only if we are willing to let go of the highly conditioned narratives we have of ourselves and others. This process involves challenging and unexpected yet enlightening transformations that over time allow for more flexibility, giving us a better sense of how to navigate life with wisdom and compassion. It's no wonder Buddhist practitioners are called 'Followers of The Way'.

The Western approach to Zen usually emphasizes individual responsibility: "Nobody is going to practice for me; I have to do it. I have to sit many hours a day, make bows, recite sutras, follow the precepts, and realize The Way for myself. Ultimately, it's all up to me." However true this may be, there is a lot of 'I' and 'me' in this approach, and that can become a hindrance in itself. Jodo Shinshu, a form of Pure Land Buddhism that is also known as Shin Buddhism, refers to this as *jiriki*, or 'self-power', and contrasts it to *tariki*, or other-power – meaning the reliance on Amida Buddha. It emphasizes the basic Mahayana tenet that, indeed, each one of us may someday experience enlightenment, but only if we are willing to ask for help. *Shin* means 'faith', and Shinran (1173-1263), the founder of Shin Buddhism, made faith the foundation of his teaching. According to him, we live in a degenerate age of the dharma, far removed from Shakyamuni's life, and are therefore unable to realize the Way all by ourselves. Fortunately, we can call upon Amida Buddha, who is happy to welcome us into his Western Paradise where conditions are much more beneficial for attaining realization. That is why Shin Buddhism has a strong devotional character and relying on *jiriki* is seen as a form of pride.

This approach has more in common with the Zen teaching of Dogen Zenji than most of us may be aware of. In *Genjo-koan*, he clearly states that the 'I' we usually identify with is not the one who can become enlightened; in fact, it is the one we are supposed to forget! What is required is a leap of faith into the unknown. Interestingly, Dogen was a contemporary of Shinran and both had a Tendai background. Some scholars even believe that they may have met.

It is indeed fruitful to compare the approaches of Zen and Shin Buddhism, as I have often noticed in conversation with Rev. Jerry Hirano, the head priest of the Shin Buddhist Temple in Salt Lake City. He became a close friend when Myoho Sensei and I lived there in the nineties, and since then we've maintained an ongoing discussion on exactly this topic. I saw him again last September after the inauguration of the new zendo of Senseis Musho and Mugaku in Southern Utah. Even though Rev. Jerry and I often talk about the same thing, it is always exciting because we approach it from very different, almost opposite, directions. I tend to emphasize the importance of *jiriki*, taking it as our individual responsibility to practice,

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while he relies more on *tariki*, and often expresses his faith in Amida Buddha. But we always end up finding a dynamic common ground that honors and clarifies the need for both aspects. Perhaps Zen is just for intense people; for those who are determined to try the impossible. We are encouraged to do everything we can to get enlightened – the *Sandokai* tells us not to waste any time by night or day – until the self is totally exhausted and gives up. That seems to be our policy. It may take a long time, but one day you simply run out of steam and throw in the towel. In a way, the 'I' destroys the 'I'. Yet, in my experience, if you follow through on the instructions of an experienced master, you don't end up feeling diminished or depressed, but actually fulfilled, as if you are suddenly blessed with immense grace, joy, and appreciation. In Shin Buddhism, those qualities are seen as coming directly from Amida Buddha. So we might ask, "Why not put all of one's faith in him from the very beginning? It would save a lot of trouble!" Rev. Jerry is one of the happiest and open-minded people I have ever met; and in terms of faith he is definitely my great example. But he is also very energetic and works hard for his community. He actually seems to have a lot of positive *jiriki*. So I always wonder how our practice can be inspired by faith from within *as well as* by faith from without. Where can we find Amida Buddha in Zen? He is said to radiate light that can be found in everything and everyone. The question is do we see it? Where is our *tariki*?

Rev. Jerry visited Zen River with his wife Carmela last summer on the day of Hossenshiki for Joost Fushin Blom. He told me after the ceremony that he was very impressed and deeply moved by not only the sincerity of Fushin's presentation, but also by the wholehearted support he received from the sangha. He called that support a good example of *tariki*. Perhaps Zen indeed has more in common with Shin Buddhism than we may have thought. Obviously, our environment has great influence on our practice; the place and the people around us can be an inspiration or a turn-off. Each place has its own character, too. Buildings and rooms are like faces; they can be hospitable or forbidding. Ideally speaking, a zendo is designed so that you really feel invited to sit down. And in the zendo of Zen River, you are actually never alone. Even if you would enter just by yourself, the beautiful statue of Manjushri happily welcomes you in. It has a strong presence, and is full of secrets. The statue is hollow, with a small opening and a lid on the bottom. Hojo-san (Junyu Kuroda Roshi) donated this Manjushri at the inauguration of our zendo in 2012. He, and the two Chinese masters who conducted the Eye-Opening ceremony, brought tightly-rolled little scrolls inscribed with special messages in calligraphy. These were inserted into the statue beforehand. This may explain some of the magic that one can feel upon entering our zendo. We are reminded that we are not the first ones, nor the only ones, who sit down and turn our light inward. All the buddhas and bodhisattvas are there to support us.

The *Sutra on the Buddha of Infinite Life* tells the story of a king who, upon hearing the teachings of the buddha of his time, renounced his throne and became a monk named 'Dharmakara'. As an aspiring bodhisattva he made forty-eight vows which he pursued arduously

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over many lifetimes. Eventually he became a Buddha called 'Amida'. The most striking of his vows is the eighteenth, known as the 'primal' vow:

If, when I attain Buddhahood, sentient beings in the lands of the ten quarters who sincerely and joyfully entrust themselves to me, desire to be born in my land and call my Name even ten times, should not be born there, may I not attain perfect Enlightenment. Excluded, however, are those who commit the five grave offenses and abuse the right dharma.¹

So whoever has faith in Amida Buddha and recites, “*Namu Amida Butsu*”, will be welcomed into his Western Paradise – where it is apparently much easier to attain enlightenment than in the sinful saha world where ordinary mortals like you and me reside. Many devotees believe, however, that Amida Buddha's paradise is located light years away and can only be entered after one has passed away. But in the *Breakthrough Sermon*, Bodhidharma, who is considered to be the founder of the Zen school, claims that there is no reason to wait. According to him, the practice of invoking Amida Buddha's name can have the very same effect as the practice of introspection -- which he repeatedly recommends in this sermon. He even states:

If you can simply concentrate your mind's inner light, and behold its outer illumination, you'll dispel the three poisons and drive away the six thieves once and for all. And without effort you'll gain possession of an infinite number of virtues, perfections, and doors to the truth. Seeing through the mundane and witnessing the sublime is less than an eye-blink away. Realization is now.²

This view implies that the Western Paradise is right here, right now, so we can enter it any time. Bodhidharma emphasizes, however, that there is a vast difference between blindly reciting Amida Buddha's name and really invoking him.

As you may know, *Namu* can be translated in different ways. It is a Sanskrit term that is phonetically represented by two Chinese characters, and is usually translated as: to take refuge in, to be intimate with, or to be one with. So, to invoke is not simply a matter of reciting words; it is an invitation to do something, to radically entrust ourselves to Amida Buddha. The question is, then, what does that mean? We do not know what or who he is. We are asked to take a leap of faith and rely on something we don't know. In the Zen tradition, too, we are urged to surrender to the unknown, and some resistance or trepidation might come up. But if we really do submit, it is extremely liberating; isn't it exactly the one we know that gives us so much trouble? To paraphrase Dogen Zenji, when we really forget the self, we are enlightened by all things. It is not *me* who becomes enlightened; *all things* light up. The world starts to

¹ *Call of the Infinite, the Way of Shin Buddhism*, John Paraskevopoulos, Sofia Perennis, p. 45-461

² *The Zen Teaching of Bodhidharma*, translated by Red Pine, North Point Press, p. 112/113

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shine in its true colors. The Chinese T'ang master Huang Po speaks of experiencing all-pervading spotless beauty.³

We could say that Amida Buddha is a symbol for that beauty. He is the Buddha of Light, and he radiates through everything and everyone – whether you can see it or not. The power of beauty is not to be underestimated. In order to realize the Buddha Way and find our true function in life, we need not only inner inspiration, but also a stimulating environment. This is a real koan: do I find Buddha, or does Buddha find me? I suppose that it would be best if *jiriki* and *tariki* were acknowledged as two sides of the same coin. They can't be separated. Even if I only sit zazen and focus entirely on my faith from within, I still entrust myself to the posture of the Buddha. Similarly, following a teacher, studying scriptures, and connecting with a sangha, can all be seen as forms of *tariki*. In fact, in Zen ceremonies such as *Fusatsu* and *Jukai*, the term *Namu* is repeatedly recited to explicitly express our reliance on the Three Treasures for realizing The Way.

Personally, I have a strong sense that Amida Buddha wishes to express the Western Paradise in the world we live in, but it is up to us to prepare the ground for him. One of my major efforts of the last fifteen years has been to help make Zen River so beautiful that it welcomes all the Buddhas and bodhisattvas. The more the temple can be seen as the Western Paradise manifested, the more Amida's light can shine through every little detail. Of course, the entire universe is already the Western Paradise, but to really experience that for oneself is not easy. So it is wise to start small, by practicing together, cleaning the zendo, organizing the zabutons, setting up an altar, arranging fresh flowers, and learning to make elegant bows. In these ways we create an environment that continuously reminds us of practice, making it easier to attain realization. We may be quicker to surrender if it is to something beautiful. At some point, of course, we can extend this beautiful and inspiring environment to wherever we happen to live. I fondly remember the old days when I cleared out the attic of my house, transformed it into a zendo, and invited friends to sit with me.

Apparently, transformation works both ways: as we change, the environment changes – and vice versa. When Van Gogh moved to the South of France, he obviously went through a major shift. But it seems as if his subject matter -- people, trees, fields, clouds -- did as well; they look so refreshed in his paintings! Even the grass vibrates, happy to be seen and recognized in its full potential. And, to my surprise, since the day I saw that grass jumping off the canvas so jubilantly, the simple lawn outside my house started to look different as well. Or, had something deep inside of me turned around?

I think that it can work the same way around a Zen teacher. While I was living with Genpo Roshi, it did not always feel that he was teaching as such. He seemed, rather, to create

³ *The Zen Teaching of Huang Po*, translated by John Blofeld, Grove Press, p. 93

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a situation in which each member of the community could find their own role; and it was obvious that we, in turn, affected him and his functioning. As another example, when we established Zen River, the building seemed to welcome us in, as if it was aching for a new function. So, we cleaned and got to work renovating the rooms, the kitchen, the hallways, the toilets and showers, the attic and basement, and of course the extensive garden. We found alternative ways of using the various parts of the property. Yet it always felt as if the building itself was telling us what to do; it's really been a great teacher from the very beginning. Now, after fifteen years, every square inch has been examined and given a specific role in our practice program; and it has become obvious that we have been transformed in the process as well. Zen River started with a strong little team but we didn't necessarily plan everything beforehand. Over time, surprising talents surfaced in different sangha members: some were happy to work in the office, others in the kitchen, the maintenance and electric departments, the sewing room or the garden. This development continues organically; it is almost as if the various functions arise as new members join. We have faith in our project, but the project also seems to have faith in us!

Perhaps we are living in a degenerate age; the news channels of today certainly paint a very dark picture. In response, we not only need to muster all the faith we can find within, we may also need to muster all the faith we can find without in order to discover our true functioning. After turning my own light inward during morning zazen, I am happy to start service and take refuge in all the buddhas and bodhisattvas.