

Is Some Part of What I am Like What Amida Is?

Rev. Jundo Gregory Gibbs

As free of dogma as the Buddhist religion is we can still get bogged down. Questions like “(forget the dog) Do I have Buddha-nature?” challenge our presuppositions. I have claimed elsewhere that we have Buddha-nature interdependently with the realm of Enlightenment through the compassion of Amida Buddha. (You, me, the dog, anybody you can name.) But are we necessarily helpless and passive as we stumble toward Awakening?

Sometimes a new definition helps to break through encrustations that surround organized religiosity, sometimes new images help. I find Mark Blum’s translation of “tariki” (usually rendered “other power”) to be such an illuminating redefinition. Professor Blum translates tariki as “a spiritual power beyond the known self.” This is consistent with the main stream of Mahayana thought on the matter over the past thousand years or so. If my composure in this life and Enlightenment at its end are realized through “a spiritual power beyond the known self” we can still say it is not accomplished by my ego or through my own conscious efforts. This should be enough to satisfy the more traditional in the Jodo Shinshu camp. The very vagueness of the definition still leaves a door open to those who find the utter passivity of some Shinshu approaches to be stultifying. Maybe the liberating power is both from beyond my own resources and from deeper and broader aspects of myself of which I am not clearly aware.

If we say what is most distinctive about Amida Buddha as we look at him in terms of the ultimate concerns of other religions it must surely be his absolute forgiveness. “Amida Buddha” is the name for a reality which accepts us no matter what our failings and errors. Tojo, the military leader of wartime Japan, appealed to the Nembutsu teaching on death row and it would be a natural assumption that Amida welcomed him into the Pure Realm of his influence the moment Tojo died. Some of us might not feel like being so forgiving.

There is, however, an aspect of all of us which just observes, . . . just notices events without judgment. This aspect is what Buddhists call mindfulness. Mindfulness, or peaceful abiding, observes what is going on in the body, the mind and in the surroundings. This simple observing is intrinsically wholesome and healing. This does not mean it is Enlightened Mind. Peaceful abiding is still a conditioned phenomenon. It is powerful when we are well rested and have been eating well. Mindfulness is less potent when we are very tired or intoxicated. Much like, perhaps identical to, the “ordinary mind” discussed in chapter nineteen of The Gateless Barrier peaceful abiding is our consciousness but the aspect of it we cannot manhandle.

Amida Buddha is infinitely forgiving and endlessly accepting. Could that part of our mind that just notices be like Amida in a small way? Perhaps peaceful abiding or mindfulness provides a microcosmic glimpse of who and what Amida Buddha is on the vast level we call the realm of Enlightenment.