

Inner Light and Infinite Light

A Dharma Talk for
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First, I want to thank Reverend Umitani and the community here at Mō'ili'ili Hongwanji for inviting me to speak to you today. It is an honor to come to this beautiful temple and be welcomed by the sangha, and it is wonderful to see so many of the friends my family and I have made since we came to Hawai'i and joined the staff at Pacific Buddhist Academy.

When I met with Reverend Umitani to ask about what he would like me to talk about today, he made two suggestions:

First, he said, I could talk about how I came to embrace Shin Buddhism, since my path to becoming a temple member is a little different from most people's experience.

Second, he said, people might be curious about what it is like for me as a Buddhist to be married to someone from a different faith tradition.

You see, my husband Rüdiger is a Quaker—a member of the Religious Society of Friends—and a Christian. So it is fair to think that there might sometimes be tension in our home over values, beliefs, and practices.

In reality, though, there isn't, or at least, not very much. In fact, our family's split between Buddhism and Quakerism doesn't create much tension at all—nothing like what we had to deal with a few weeks ago when we backed different candidates in the primary election!

As anyone can tell you who attended the Peace Walk on August 9—an event sponsored by the Hawai'i Betsuin, the Honolulu Friends Meeting, and the Roman Catholic Church—Shin Buddhists and Quakers agree on a lot. Both are committed to peace and social justice, and both have a fundamental belief that all people are, and ought to be, equal, and equally valued in our society.

This is not to say that we agree on everything, though.

For instance, Rüdiger identifies not just as a Quaker, but as a Plain Quaker, which for him means dressing simply and making minimal use of technology.

I, on the other hand, love my aloha shirts—and, back on the mainland, my collection of wild Celtic neckties—and like a lot of my high school students, I have a hard time putting down my smartphone.

Meeting for worship—the Quaker equivalent of a temple service—consists of people sitting in silence for up to an hour, with the silence broken only when someone in the meeting feels the ‘Inner Light’ moves him or her to speak. Sometimes it may happen that no one says anything at all! Rüdiger has always been a very spiritual person, and in the simplicity and silence of Quaker practice I think he finds it much easier to hear the voice of God.

I, on the other hand, grew up outside of organized religion, but I realized early on that I liked my religious ceremonies the most when they included plenty of incense, gold leaf, and chanting in ancient languages.

This contrast also extends to our home life: Rüdiger likes to keep things neat and tidy, and always wishes we would “downsize” and “simplify.” He talks about joining the tiny house movement.

Most of the time, when friends come over, I just close the door to my office, so they won’t see the stacks of books, papers, and magazines that are piled up all over my desk—and on the floor next to my desk.

Maybe some of the other couples here today can relate to this—and I bet a lot of people will come up to Rüdiger after the service and offer their sympathy!

Usually, we don’t bring religion into this ongoing... debate... about how to make the best use of our living space. But there is one exception that may also sound a bit familiar to some of you.

In our house, when it gets dark out, I go around turning lights on, and then forgetting about them when I leave the room. My husband comes along a few minutes later and turns them off, one by one, to save electricity. Whenever he does so, he likes to say, “We’re *Quakers*.”

One time, I asked him what he meant by this, expecting him to remind me that we all need to use Earth’s resources wisely, or to explain how, as a plain Quaker, he opposes using too much electricity.

What he actually said was, “We don’t need to use electric lights. We’re Quakers, so we can rely on *inner light*.”

To which I replied, “Well, I’m a Buddhist, and I believe in the Buddha of unlimited light and life!”

Of course, that argument cuts no ice when the electric bill shows up!

Which brings me to the other topic Reverend Umitani suggested for my talk today: How did I become a Buddhist? Certainly, I wasn’t brought up as one, and it wasn’t part of my family background.

Where I grew up—just south of Milwaukee, Wisconsin—there were hardly any Buddhists at all. I learned about Buddhism along with other major world religions in school. And although I found what I learned about Sakyamuni Buddha, nirvana, and the Eightfold Path interesting, there was no “Aha!” moment when I thought, “This is the teaching I want to follow!”

When I came to Hawai‘i in 2014, I was not a Buddhist—did not, in fact, identify myself with any religion—and while I was deeply impressed by Pacific Buddhist Academy’s principles of peace-based education, I knew nothing about Jōdo Shinshū teachings or Shin Buddhism. I had never even heard the name Amida!

If you had asked me back then about whether I thought I would ever become a Buddhist, I would have replied:

Well,

- I’m not really that into meditation,
- I’m not willing to become a vegetarian,
- I find the idea of endless cycles of reincarnation kind of depressing,
- And—as you may remember from how I described my home life—I’m kind of a materialist.

So, no... probably not.

Then I started working at PBA. And my husband encouraged me to sign our daughter up for Dharma School at the Betsuin as a way to meet other kids and families. So I started going to services once—or even twice—a week.

I soon found that Jōdo Shinshū was very different from what I had been taught to expect Buddhism was about:

- Nobody was meditating.
- Nobody was talking about reincarnation. In fact, nobody was expecting to have to do any reincarnating, as far as I could tell.

- And there was spam musubi in the Betsuin social hall after services, so it was pretty clear that you didn't have to be a vegetarian.

What we did do was recite the *Golden Chain of Love*, which from the beginning really struck a chord with me. It was a simple message about interconnectedness and respect for all life that I loved for our daughter to be hearing, but I also felt it was a good set of values for adults to live by, too.

In 2015, less than a year after I moved to Hawai'i, I wound up in the hospital following a pretty serious stroke. At age 41, suddenly I was confronted with my own mortality in a way I never had been before. While I regained most or all of what I lost in the stroke, it changed my outlook on life completely. It didn't make me more religious—rather the opposite, in fact!—but while it brought new challenges into my life, this “close call” made it a lot easier for me to regard each new day and its experiences as a gift, a bonus, something to be grateful for.

Living through that stroke didn't make me a Buddhist, but it was, as Reverend Umitani might say, one of the “causes and conditions” that laid the foundation for me to convert to Shin Buddhism two years later.

There were a lot of factors that contributed to that decision:

- I had become more and more involved in the temple community through Dharma School and Scouts and had begun to see myself as part of the sangha.
- I had been teaching a course on “World Religions” at PBA that got me thinking more and more about my own beliefs.
- My “close encounter” with mortality in 2015 had taught me something that I came to recognize as a core value of Jōdo Shinshū: that I could not just ‘will’ things to happen because I wanted to achieve them—what Shinran Shonin calls “self-power”—but rather that I needed to be open to something else—some “other power”—that was bigger than my own limited world.
- Perhaps most importantly, I discovered the great joy that is chanting *Shōshinge*. But that is a dharma talk for another time!

I made up my mind to apply for the confirmation rite during the Gomonshu's visit to Hawai'i—which, in itself, was another one of those factors, those “causes and conditions” that brought me to Buddhism, and brought Buddhism to me, at exactly that place and time.

But there were also “Aha!” moments along the way that made it clear to me I had made the right spiritual decision for myself. One of those “Aha!” moments is an image that came to me while thinking about how Jōdo Shinshū proposes to bring people—all people, all “sentient

beings,” as the sutras say—out of darkness and into enlightenment. I want to share that image with you today.

As I picture it, it’s as if we’re all at the bottom of a well, and looking up, seeking for the light. The light may be so far above us that we can’t even see it, but many who believe it is there will try their hardest to climb up to reach it. But it is very far away, and the walls are slippery, so those of us who do try often struggle to climb a few feet and then fall back down again.

Buddhism teaches that very few people can ever reach enlightenment through self-power, by figuring out a way to climb out of that well through our own strength, intelligence, and persistence. In fact, this feat is so rare that anyone who can accomplish it is called a Buddha, or “enlightened one.” The sutras have some incredibly big numbers to talk about how many millions and billions of years may pass between individuals who have what it takes to become a Buddha. (*Wasan 54*)

But imagine for a moment that you are one of those rare beings who can, by the strength of your mind alone, climb that long and dangerous path up to enlightenment—climb out of that deep, dark well, and reach the light and warmth and safety at the top. What do you do next?

Jōdo Shinshū gives us a great example for us to follow: Amida Buddha.

Amida does not climb out of that well, dust off his hands, and say, “Well, I got my enlightenment. Off to bigger and better things!” Instead, as soon as Amida has reached his goal, he finds a way to lower a rope down to pull other people out—to help people who couldn’t possibly climb up on their own.

We call this “Amida’s compassion,” since it shows a concern for all the beings that still need to be rescued. It is a very different attitude from what we so often encounter in our own world: “I was here first, I’ve got mine, I’m off to enjoy what I earned through my hard work. Good luck getting there on your own!” Instead, it is a kind of *dana*, selfless giving, with the aim of helping everyone to enjoy the same benefits and success you have attained yourself.

Because Jōdo Shinshū thinks of enlightenment in this way, Shin Buddhists believe that it must be equally open to all—“evil” or “misguided” people as well as “good.” In fact, Shinran Shonin says:

“Even the good person attains birth in the Pure Land, how much more so the evil person.”
(*Tannisho III*)

This is one of those things in Buddhist teaching that make you go, “Wait, what? Why would it be easier for Amida to save the evil person than the good person?”

But in Shinran's terms it makes perfect sense.

If you are a good person, you may be able to climb partway to enlightenment by yourself, especially if you are convinced that there is something wonderful waiting for you at the top. You may find yourself holding on tight to a few precarious finger- and toe-holds, and you may be reluctant to loosen your grip—and give up the progress you've made through your own strength and cleverness—to reach for a rope that's held out for you. What if you slip and fall back? Maybe if you keep going just a little bit further, you can make it on your own! And if you've succeeded in making it this far on your own, it's hard to place your trust completely in other-power, which is why Shinran describes this entrusting as “the most difficult of all difficulties.” (*Wasan 70*)

But if you're what Shinran calls an “evil person”—a flawed person, an imperfect person who makes mistakes and bad or selfish decisions—you know you're stuck at the bottom of the well. And if you're literally at ‘rock bottom,’ it's easy to understand that grabbing the rope is your only real opportunity to get out.

And what do we do when we get out?

Well, if we were not transformed by the experience of being rescued, we might say, “Thanks a lot, Amida. Hey, this Pure Land sure is nice. I'm going to enjoy it here!”

But for Shin Buddhists, it's clear that part of Amida's attaining enlightenment—becoming a Buddha—means feeling boundless compassion, a wish to “save all sentient beings” and share this great discovery with everyone possible.

Having boundless, infinite compassion means valuing all beings equally, and treating each one as if it is the most precious thing in the universe.

Shinran speaks of this in one of his *wasan*, or hymns:

“When a person realizes the mind of nondiscrimination,
That attainment is the ‘state of regarding each being as one's only child.’
This is none other than Buddha-nature;
We will awaken to it on reaching the land of peace.” (*Wasan 92*)

“Buddha-nature” is a level of empathy and compassion that we as imperfect human beings cannot hope to attain. Humans are selfish, self-centered, focused on our own families, our own children, our own lives and goals.

But upon reaching enlightenment, we become like Amida. And like Amida, our first instinct after emerging from that well of darkness is to lower a rope and pull others out.

We “realize the mind of nondiscrimination,” and we are able to regard every sentient being like the most precious thing in our lives.

No matter who they are or what mistakes they’ve made.

In my story about the well, if we picture Amida lowering a rope to rescue others we don’t imagine him asking any questions about who is grasping that rope at the other end. After all, a rescue worker doesn’t say, “Okay, I’ll pull you out, but only if you meet the qualifications.” Amida’s compassion is equally provided to all. (*Ekōku*)

Which brings me back to the first question: what about all those differences between Quakerism and Buddhism? They wear plain dress, we wear *monto shikisho* and carry *onenju*. They have simple benches in a quiet room, we have a beautifully decorated *onajin*. They sit silently, we chant sutras and offer incense. Yet we often end up believing the same things and working for the same causes, like peace, equality, and nondiscrimination.

Perhaps it has to do with that ‘inner light’ that Quakers seek during silent worship. We chant, “When I call Amida’s name, it’s Amida calling me” (*Gassho to Amida*). Our faith and practice, our *shinjin*, lies in the recognition that there is a higher power than our own that is there to nurture and support us. Our chanting or our recitation of the *nembutsu* is a response to that call, an expression of gratitude, of our trust in other-power, not self-power, to reach enlightenment.

When a Quaker speaks out of silence in meeting, it is not because he or she has thought up something really important to say. It’s not about showing off one’s own ideas or insights. Rather, it is something that comes from the inspiration, or the enlightenment, that is provided by other-power, by light from within—a voice that may be easier to hear when you sit in silence.

One thing I’ve reflected upon after moving halfway around the world from Europe to Iowa to Hawai‘i is this: If two people start in one place and one travels due west, and the other due east, sooner or later, they’ll meet up again.

And how much more so, when each is moving with the same purpose, the same inspiration, the same inner—or infinite—light.

Namo Amida Butsu