

Amida Versus Shakyamuni Buddha?

By Rev. Don Castro

February is the month we commemorate the death of Shakyamuni Buddha in India over 2,500 years ago. At Seattle Betsuin, we will observe Nirvana Day a few days early on Sunday, February 12th (the traditional date is the 15th). In his final instructions to his disciples in the Mahaparinirvana Sutra, the Buddha says,

“Those who, either now or after I am dead, shall be a lamp unto themselves,
relying upon themselves only and not relying upon any external help, but holding fast to
the Truth (Dharma) as their lamp, and seeking their salvation in the Truth alone, shall
not look for assistance to any one besides themselves, it is they, Ananda, among my
bhikshus (monk disciples) who shall reach the very topmost height!”

For adherents of Other Power Buddhism, there is often confusion about this passage. It seems that the Buddha is contradicting the basic teaching of Jodo Shinshu regarding the power of Amida Buddha to bring about our enlightenment. This confusion is really a semantic issue. It seems that the Buddha is telling us to rely upon ourselves alone and Shinran Shonin is telling us **not** to rely on ourselves alone but to rely on the other power of Amida Buddha. Looking more deeply, however, we need to understand that self power for the Buddha means, “seeking their salvation in the Truth (Dharma) alone” not looking to an “external power.” For Shinran Shonin, other power is **not** external power. Rather, it is the power other than the deluded ego that is touched by self interest in everything it does. Other power in Jodo Shinshu means a power other than the power that keeps us running around in circles; the vicious wheel of samsara (birth-and-death).

Elsewhere in his final instructions, the Buddha told his disciples not to be attached to his physical appearance but to look to the Dharma as their guide. To see the Dharma is to see the Buddha. Amida Buddha is living dynamic Dharma, especially as experienced by those beings who are bound to the vicious circle of self power. We should note and emphasize here that one of the core teachings of Buddhism is the truth of nonself (anatman) meaning that there is no permanent, substantial core of self (soul) to cling onto. Thus, Other Power Buddhism accords completely with the fundamental teaching of the Buddha about the nature of self.

Amida Buddha is living dynamic Dharma. The light of the Dharma is the light of Amida Buddha as it is alive in all of us. Being universal, the power of Amida Buddha is non-dualistic and breaks down the delusions of internal and external, self and other. The sense of a relationship with Amida Buddha only results from our standing apart. Yet, even while standing apart, Amida Buddha is encompassing, embracing and liberating us. We only need to awaken to this Truth and “Awakened One” is what the word Buddha literally means.