

Zen Reflections of God:

A Guide to the Ancient Roots of Dr. Frederick Lenz' Teachings

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A New Kind of Teacher

In 2013 I came to Naropa University hoping to learn more about Tibetan Buddhism. As it turned out, I had no idea just how much I would change. My journey was one of opening my mind to the many traditions and teachers at Naropa. In my time at Naropa I have studied nearly every major religion and practiced them as well. I have had the unique opportunity to take classes like Non-Dualism in Theory and Practice, Zen Buddhism, and Contemplative Islam. Over time, it became clear to me that strict traditional Tibetan Buddhism could not offer me all that I yearned for. I searched for the poetic, the heart centered, the Godly in religion, as well as the exact and precise accounts of mind and meditation that can be found in Buddhism. Slowly the Bible began to open to me. I was entranced by magical accounts of transfiguration and miracles. I loved the simple and poetic language that was deeply resonant in my Western blood and culture. Over a few years I watched a hybridity being born. Eventually study in Christianity gave way into the Gnostic scriptures. And Tibetan Buddhism gave way into Zen Buddhism. I had found my home. The essay that follows is an auspicious union of my path and Rama's teachings. From different lives he and I both arrived at many of the same points and echoed many of the same ideas. This paper explores those ideas that will influence and inspire generations of American Buddhist hybrids like us.

Dr. Frederick P. Lenz, known as Rama to his students, is credited as one of the major founders of American Buddhism. Rama had the unique gift of teaching Buddhism to an audience very different than the Buddha's. Teachings were altered, tailored to

meet the needs of modern students. Some things were emphasized and others were innovated on the spot. All the while Rama never strayed from the four seals of dharma that certify a Buddhist teaching.¹ It is this blend of tradition and innovation that gives us the scent of an enlightened master who not only knows the doctrine but can speak on it from their own experience. This kind of teaching gives the first-hand taste of realization freshly and directly. Among Rama's many contributions, his most distinctive was the fusion of Christian Gnosticism and Zen teachings. Rama's vision simultaneously encourages one to strive with intense passion for an enlightenment that is innately present. Not only is this enlightenment our birthright, it is also wildly magical and luminous. In his book, *Insights: Tantric Buddhist Reflections on Life*, Rama writes,

The spirit seeks oblivion:
To dissolve in the white light of eternity,
To lose and find itself endlessly in
Oceans of shifting and shimmering light²

In the course of my research, it has become apparent to me that Rama's teachings are not only inspired by Buddhism, particularly Zen, but Rama's distinctive vision of enlightenment strongly echoes ancient Christian Gnostic teachings on self-knowledge, cosmology, and the divine. Rama's teachings also mirror the Zen teachings of the 13th century monk and polymath Ehei Dōgen. Dōgen's writing is uniquely beautiful and subtle in its poetry and world-view. His masterpiece, the *Shōbōgenzō*, stands in a league of its own among Japanese Buddhist literature. Dōgen's consistently

¹ The Four Seals of Dharma are: 1) All conditioned phenomena are impermanent. 2) All contaminated phenomena are suffering. 3) All phenomena are empty and selfless. 4) Nirvana is peace. Cite source?

² Frederick P. Lenz, *Insights: Tantric Buddhist Reflections on Life* (New York, New York: Interglobal Seminars, 1994), Back Cover.

argues for an Enlightenment that is not only innate, but already manifest. In light of our obvious suffering Dōgen's view is freshly inspiring and also paradoxical. Dōgen asks us to meditate to unravel the mystery. Like Rama, Dōgen's instructions for meditation are simple and difficult. It is in the realms of practice and fruition that we find Rama's strongest Zen analogs.

Rama was fond of using "God" and other theistic language as an expression of divinity and Enlightenment. Some Buddhists might happily gloss over these areas, interpreting them as "skillful means" to reach a western audience. But they should not be so quickly dismissed. Even more intriguingly, Rama consistently used Gnostic imagery and cosmology in a significant portion of his work. Rama never worried about the "party lines" of truth. He regularly used descriptions reminiscent of Gnosticism with terms like, "body of light", "realms of light", and "God" amid Buddhist descriptions of practice and world view.³ It is clear that Rama was not afraid to invoke language that described his experience, regardless of its classical description. This liberated use of language puts Rama's work in a unique position among American Buddhist teachings that is highly accessible and especially relevant to dual-belonging Buddhist-Christians, of which there are more and more. It is to those people unafraid of interreligious sharing that I write this essay. I hope it brings clarity and illumination to ancient sources of knowledge that are reflected in the teachings of Rama. This essay can also be used by practitioners as a guide for future study of not only Rama's work but of the Gnostic and Zen roots that are so appealing to those interested in the deep similarities of ancient

³ Frederick P. Lenz, *Insights: Tantric Buddhist Reflections on Life* (New York, New York: Interglobal Seminars, 1994), 41 and 48.

forms of Buddhism and Christianity that inform and inspire many American Buddhists today.

Rama's Gnostic Enlightenment

To understand the teachings we must first attempt to understand the experience of the teacher. Rama was unique in many ways. This section focuses on his unique experience of realization and to suggest its traditional links to Gnostic literature. Rama's unique experience of enlightenment seemed to flow from a place that has ancient roots that stretch across thousands of miles and thousands of years. This essay uncovers some of those sources that reflect Rama's teaching. I have thoroughly examined Rama's "*Zen Tapes*" and his books, *Insights* and *Snowboarding to Nirvana*. I was trying to get an idea of what Enlightenment is and how Rama experienced it. It became immediately apparent to me that Rama had a vision of a unique kind of enlightenment. Rama's vision not only was a life beyond suffering and clinging, it was also full of bodies of light, God, and cities and worlds we have never imagined. Rama's is unique indeed among Buddhists for including these elements as a description of enlightenment. But he would be right at home among the ancient Christians known as "Gnostics" who began writing accounts of "self-knowledge" and "bodies of light" as early as 140 C.E.⁴ This link was startling and revealing to me. At once it confirmed that Rama was not alone in his experience and also that his use of theistic imagery may not just be a clever playing with definitions. When Rama says, "God is within your mind. God is within all things"⁵

⁴ Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc, 1987), 15.

⁵ Frederick P. Lenz, *Insights: Tantric Buddhist Reflections on Life* (New York, New York: Interglobal Seminars, 1994), 41.

we must take him seriously and recognize this may not just be a figure of speech when we compare this to "It is I who existed before the entirety...I am incomprehensible, existing within the incomprehensible and moving within every creature"⁶ In the ancient Gnostic scripture known as "The Reality of the Rulers" a description is given of the human who attains eternal life through being acquainted with "knowledge".⁷

The text reads as follows, "...that being [God or truth] will teach them about everything. And will anoint them with the anointment of eternal life...they will be freed of blind thought. And they will trample under foot death...and they will ascend into the limitless light"⁸. Notice the elements of limitless light, eternal life and freedom from blind thought (thought without wisdom).

Rama's poem on meditation reads,

By practicing meditation you will come to see
that the nature of the real you,
The body of light,
is everlasting bliss!
So push past sorrow and pain
because within you is ecstatic
Life everlasting!⁹

⁶ Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc, 1987), 89.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁹ Dr. Frederick P. Lenz, *Insights: Tantric Buddhist Reflections on Life* (New York, New York: Interglobal Seminars, 1994), 4.

The parallels here are striking. By looking into these Gnostic texts we are given a rare glimpse into the experience of one who attains self-knowledge. Of interest here is the emphasis on everlasting life and the body of light. These images come up over and over in Gnostic literature as well as the synoptic Gospels themselves. The most well known is The Transfiguration of Jesus upon the mountain. Jesus is said to become "radiant" and "like the sun"¹⁰. It is indeed this radiant body that becomes one of the physical markers of acquaintance with God in Gnostic writings. It signifies not only Jesus, but all those who return to God.¹¹ In the *Secret Gospel of John*, Forethought (a being similar to God) says, "...it is I who am the riches of the light...coming into the beings of light...I who am the light that exists within the light"¹²

But what is particularly unique in Rama's teaching is that these Gnostic elements are seamlessly joined with a Buddhist view that incorporates traditional Zen ideas and practices. To be sure, Christian Gnosticism and Zen Buddhism are culturally and philosophically distinct in many ways.¹³ Rama's fusion of these two is not only innovative, but it maintains the integrity of each without compromising for "watered down" descriptions of their central ideas.

Rama and Zen

Rama's vision of one who has attained self-knowledge involves coming into contact with our enlightened nature. If we did not have a fundamental part of ourselves that was capable of enlightenment there would really be no hope for the attainment of

¹⁰ *The Holy Bible*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Inc., 2001), Matthew 17: 1-9.

¹¹ Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc, 1987), 89.

¹² *Ibid.*, 50.

¹³ Christian Gnosticism is based upon the idea of a creator God involved in an elaborate mythology not shared with Buddhism. This split is often described as marking Buddhism as distinctly atheist. But as we have seen above, the four seals of dharma do not deny or affirm the existence of God.

nirvāṇa.¹⁴ Unlike the Gnostics who believe there are a group of God's chosen people¹⁵ who will attain self-knowledge, Rama believed that anyone could achieve *nirvāṇa*

. But what is so Zen about Rama? The echoes of Zen teachings can be found in three main areas of Rama's teachings: 1) Rama's emphasis on the limits of the conceptual mind. 2) Rama's teachings on utter impermanence, even of enlightenment. 3) Rama's teaching that there is a deep unity between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. Let's approach these in this order.

The Limits of the Conceptual Mind

Zen kōans are famous for pointing out the limits of conceptual thought. Many even paint the student who asks overly philosophical questions as an example of those farthest from realization¹⁶. An example given in kōan from the *Genji Shobobenzo*,

A student asks the teacher: If a worm is cut in half and both halves are still alive and moving, which half has the Buddha nature?

The Master responds: Don't have illusions.

The master's intention is not to deny questions or to be strictly dogmatic. Rather his intention was to plunge the student into the reality of the moment that is actually present rather than the mental representation floating off in the clouds. This sentiment is paralleled in the traditional Zen instructions for meditation. The instruction is to "just sit",

¹⁴ Nirvana is the Buddhist notion of the extinction of suffering. It is described as a candle blowing out or simply "stopping".

¹⁵ That said, there are of course many interpretations of "chosen people". It may be a way to inspire those who would otherwise think of themselves as unworthy.

¹⁶ Eihei Dōgen, Trans Gudo Wafu Nishijima. *The Shinji Shobogenz: 301 Koan Stories* (Guildford, Surrey: Windbell Publications 2003).

which is precisely what *zazen*¹⁷ means. But there is more to this instruction than it appears. “Just sitting” implies a very strong confidence in the human being’s natural ability to achieve enlightenment. No special instructions or methods are given to the Zen student. She just sits. If our fundamental nature is Buddha nature¹⁸ then all that is needed is to clear away the obscurations that inhibit us from expressing our Buddha nature. Rama writes,

Sit in meditation until your mind becomes empty;
Sit in meditation without thought
...By practicing meditation you will gradually
Change the limited view you have of yourself;
This misunderstanding of who and what you are
Is the cause of all of your pain.¹⁹

We get the same Zen confidence in humanity from Rama’s words as we get from Zen Master Eihei Dōgen some 8 centuries earlier. In a parallel reflection Dōgen writes,

Realization, neither general nor particular
Is effort without desire.
Clear water all the way to the bottom.
A fish swims like a fish.
Vast sky transparent throughout;
A bird flies like a bird.²⁰

¹⁷ *Zazen* is meditation in Japanese Zen Buddhism. Interestingly it is also the name of Rama’s music group that he produced and which released 13 records over a decade.

¹⁸ Buddha nature is the idea that either all of us or a part of us is already enlightened. It makes the path into a kind of un-endarkening rather than an enlightening.

¹⁹ Dr. Frederick P. Lenz, *Insights: Tantric Buddhist Reflections on Life* (New York, New York: Interglobal Seminars, 1994), 4.

In the above quotation we see Dōgen's emphasis on the clear nature of the mind in realization. We see that there is a kind of effort without desire that allows one to glimpse into a world that is, "clear all the way to the bottom." In this place a fish swims like a fish and a bird flies like a bird. Dōgen is inspiring us to recognize that things, just as they are, are not so far from enlightenment at all. We also see the emphasis on the non-conceptual nature of the mind where Dōgen writes "realization, neither general nor particular." This short line denies the notion that realization is of some one specific thing and also denies that it is some kind of general meta-narrative like "the secret of life" that will only turn out to fall apart under the pressure and diversity of real life. In the above teachings Dōgen and Rama both steer away from such absolutes or particulars in favor of offering an invitation to the meditator to see for herself. Commenting upon the way to become a Buddha Dōgen writes, "...with no designing thoughts or worries, you will be called a Buddha. Do not seek anything else."²¹

Utter Impermanence

There are teachings in Buddhism that argue for Buddha nature's permanence.²² These teachings argue that there is a central unchanging element that gives us the perpetual nature to be and become Buddhas. Rama and Dōgen both deny the doctrine of permanence. For Dōgen "impermanence itself is Buddha nature"²³. Permanence for Dōgen is equated with non-existence and is the antithesis of Dharma. Everything is in a

²⁰ Eihei Dōgen, *Moon in a Dewdrop* (New York, New York: Northpoint Press, 1985), 20.

²¹ Eihei Dōgen, Trans. Kazuaki Tanahashi and Arnold Kotler, *Moon in a Dewdrop* (New York, New York: Northpoint Press, 1985), 75.

²² See: Trans. Rosemarie Fuchs and Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso, *Uttaratantra Shastra and Commentary*, (Snow Lion Publications, 2000)

²³ Trans. Kazuaki Tanahashi, *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*, (Shambhala Publication, 2010)

constant state of change. Even enlightenment itself fluxes and morphs as the world around us changes. In this vein Rama writes in a poem titled “Completion”,

“There is no such thing as completion;

These are only stages in an endless progression.

There are no final outcomes or decisions,

Since nothing ever stays the same...”²⁴

There is no Buddhist school I am aware of that argues that enlightenment is reversible. Once you become enlightened you will continue without suffering on a kind of endless fusion reaction fueled by your collections of merit and wisdom. But this does not mean the experience is not changing. As the enlightened person views the shifting leaves in light, they shift and change before her eyes. She is with this change. From Dōgen’s perspective this impermanence *is* her Buddha nature.

Rama echoes this view in his audio recordings titled *Zen Tapes*. He says, “enlightenment is always changing it is as changing as we are.”²⁵ Is it not our search for permanence that is the cause of much of our suffering. We assume there is something we can find that will give us a substantial sense of security and provide a permanent base upon which we can stand. But Rama teaches that the ground is falling out from under us. The rug is being pulled out, constantly. So where is the peace? If we can come into a recognition of the changing nature of reality we can relax. Maybe we do not

²⁴ Dr. Frederick P. Lenz, *Insights: Tantric Buddhist Reflections on Life* (New York, New York: Interglobal Seminars, 1994), 71.

²⁵ Rama, *Zen Tapes, Developing Willpower*, 1986.

have to always have a grip. Maybe if we let go we will see we can float along the river without reaching for the shore. For the suffering person impermanence is a blessing. Rama and Dōgen's teachings seem to be directed more at the person who experiences the immense bliss of high states of realization. For this person impermanence is a nagging concern. Impermanence threatens to take away the beautiful day of the changing leaves. Rama argues that if we look closely, the leaves are always changing. Rama and Dōgen tell us this is ok. Enlightenment is beautiful and changing. The paradox is subtle but unavoidable for the long term traveler on the path. Furthermore, the changing nature of enlightenment points to an even deeper unity. Let us look into the very heart of the issue, *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*.

The Unity of *Saṃsāra* and *Nirvāṇa*

Saṃsāra, or the cycle of suffering, is the wheel of pain that continues because of our ignorance of the way things are. *Nirvāṇa* is normally taken to be the opposite. *Nirvāṇa* is unending peace, the absence of suffering. Ok, Heaven and Earth, one is good one is bad. But it's not so easy. If we are in *saṃsāra* how could we possibly bridge to *nirvāṇa*? There must be some kind of link between the two; otherwise they are forever locked in their separate realms. In other words, if there is a traveling to the "other shore", then what is the river? What is the link between these two seemingly disparate worlds? Rama and Dōgen both argue that in the deepest vision of reality these two are not really two. They are *non-dual*. In a poem Rama wrote,

Truth is who you see in the mirror.

Illusion is who you see in the mirror.²⁶

Is this just a word play or is there something truly deeply similar about illusion and reality? Dōgen writes,

To study the way with the body means to study the way with your own body. It is the study of the way using this lump of red flesh. The body comes forth from the study of the way. Everything which comes forth from the study of the way is the true human body. The entire world of the ten directions is nothing but the true human body. The coming and going of birth and death is the true human body.²⁷

The above quotation brings together Dōgen's notion of impermanence and realization as well as the deep non-dual nature of the human body and the "true" human body. What is the true human body? It is the human body. What is the human body? It is the true human body. So does this mean we are already enlightened? Yes and no. Rama writes,

All praise to the inner Buddha!

The enlightened part of our nature!

It is the wisdom of existence in incarnate form!

²⁶ Dr. Frederick P. Lenz, *Insights: Tantric Buddhist Reflections on Life* (New York, New York: Interglobal Seminars, 1994), 37.

²⁷ Eihei Dōgen, Trans. Kazuaki Tanahashi and Arnold Kotler, *Moon in a Dewdrop* (New York, New York: Northpoint Press, 1985), 91.

And it deserves your immediate attention!²⁸

As we can see from this teaching there is a part of us that chooses to ignore what it really is. It is this ignorance from which we wake when we become enlightened. We see clearly, without stains on our eyes. Dōgen suggests that there is a way to see ourselves that is simple and direct. From this direct and simple view, we are actually looking to the full depth of reality that is always around us. So when we look in the mirror it *is* illusion and truth that we see. Can truth really be limited to only its own domain? If ultimate reality was sitting right in front of us, would we recognize it? Rama and Dōgen argue that truth permeates literally everything, even this red lump of flesh. It is our task to use these human eyes to see our own enlightenment.

Rama's Zen Reflections of God

Even after a wealth of parallel connections, Rama's teachings and Dōgen's Zen are different teachings. It would be a mistake to think of them as total analogs. Rama's enlightenment is not just the clear and vast expanse where a fish swims like a fish and a bird flies like a bird, as it is for Dōgen. Rama's enlightenment is full of streaming beams of light, radiant beings with miraculous powers and intention. It is for this reason that a strictly Zen account of Rama's teachings would completely leave out many important themes and ideas that are central to his vision of path

²⁸ Dr. Frederick P. Lenz, *Insights: Tantric Buddhist Reflections on Life* (New York, New York: Interglobal Seminars, 1994), 13.

and fruition. This is why the inclusion of Gnostic sources is integral to anyone looking for a traditional framework in which to place Rama's teachings. We cannot forget that Rama was an *American* Buddhist. His teachings are distinctly directed toward, received, and practiced by Americans. Elements of the divine and the luminous bodies of holy beings and angels are not foreign to American minds. Many of us grew up familiar with the story of Jesus' transfiguration into light upon a mountain. The story is one of the miraculous and esoteric elements that made it into the New Testament. A treasury of similar imagery and supporting philosophy survives today in the Gnostic texts that have only recently been translated. For the serious student of Rama, a knowledge of both Dōgen's Zen writings and many Christian Gnostic texts is invaluable for a deeper and more penetrating understanding of this landmark teacher of American Buddhism.

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