

The Importance of *Tariki* in American Buddhism:

Discovering 'Other-Power' in the Life and Work of Frederick P. Lenz

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Introduction

Dr. Frederick P. Lenz, or ‘Zen Master Rama’, was an American Buddhist teacher who taught a comprehensive range of topics that include career, computer science, spiritual enlightenment, success, love, and power. His teaching on these diverse subjects were in service to his ultimate goal of helping others experience spiritual enlightenment and to advance the development of a uniquely ‘American Buddhism’. This is reflected in his namesake foundation, the ‘Frederick P. Lenz Foundation for American Buddhism’, founded posthumously by his students. Among his most central and recurrent teachings were teachings on power. Commonly a taboo subject for Buddhists. Lenz taught that power was different from spiritual enlightenment, but that you need power to realize enlightenment.¹ In this paper, I explore Lenz’s teachings on power and suggest that his view on power is important to the landscape of American Buddhism. In order to present and utilize Lenz’s view on power, I will briefly contextualize the conversation of power within Japanese Buddhist ideas of ‘self-power’, or *jiriki*, and ‘other-power’, or *tariki*. In looking at traditional dialogue around power in my own tradition, Sōtō Zen Buddhism, and the Japanese Pure Land schools of Buddhism, I hope to express the need for a view of ‘other-power’ in American Buddhism that can be found in the teachings of Dr. Lenz. By developing pedagogy around and appreciation for ‘other-power’ in the context of American Buddhism, I argue that we can be more skilled in turning towards that which is ‘other’ to us. Other-power unveils a spiritual approach that supports multiplicity, skillfulness with difference, and the enjoyment of life.

Context of Other Power

In Japanese Buddhism, different teachings and schools of Buddhism are considered to be on a spectrum of *jiriki* and *tariki*; or, self-power and other-power. This distinction has largely

¹ Frederick Lenz, *Zen Tapes With Master Rama: Personal Power*, Recorded in 1986, Frederick P Lenz Foundation for American Buddhism, online audio recording, 26:06. <https://www.ramameditationsociety.org/zen-tapes-talkset>

been shaped by the Japanese ‘Pure land’ schools of Buddhism, whose main spiritual practice is to chant the name of Amida Buddha, the Buddha of Infinite Light, in hopes to be reborn into their Pure Land of enlightenment. Reverend Mark Unno, a professor at the University of Oregon and a Jōdō-Shū Buddhist priest, writes

“Chanting “Namu Amida Butsu,” which translates as “I entrust myself to the Buddha of Infinite Light and Life,” is not a form of petitionary prayer or mantra. It is a means of communication between a relative being or consciousness and the Buddha deep within... In Shin Buddhism we distinguish between “self-power” (jiriki) and “other power” (tariki). Other power is more intimate to ourselves than self-power, because self-power is based on a self of our projection, of who we think we are or who we think we should be. When we speak of other power, we mean that it is other than the false ego. For that reason, other power is the most intimate reality. The Shin poet Saichi wrote, “In other power, there is neither self-power nor other power. Only other power.”²

One effect of other-power practice is the release of one’s conceptions *about* reality. This allows reality to be revealed to us beyond our own presumptions. Rev. Unno suggests that when we face ‘the Other’ of Amida Buddha, their infinite light is revealed in our willingness to let go of our disappointment in life for not fulfilling our expectations, hopes, and dreams. Writer and Pure Land practitioner Hiroyuki Itsuki writes that “Amitabha is the light of truth that illuminates the entire world without exception.”³ In a later chapter, Itsuki elaborates on this thought, writing, “true Pure Land teaching, then, is not to gain birth in the Pure Land by chanting the Buddha’s name (that would be Self-Power, after all) but realizing, from the bottom of one’s being, that one is already enlightened.”⁴ One comes to meet oneself as the ‘other’, as Amida Buddha, through Pure Land practice. These Pure-Land Buddhist writers share a teaching that we find in Zen Buddhism as well as in the work of Dr. Lenz. When we can release our ideas about ourselves and the world, then the world and ourselves are shown to us beyond our own imagining. The world expresses itself through life force. A creative-power that transcends self and other. Frederick

² Mark Unno, “The Buddha of Infinite Light and Life,” *Tricycle*, Spring, 2009, <https://tricycle.org/magazine/buddha-infinite-light-and-life/>.

³ Hiroyuki Itsuki, *Tariki: Embracing Despair, Discovering Peace* (New York: Kodansha Ltd, 2002), 78.

⁴ Itsuki, *Tariki*, 88-89.

Lenz's description of enlightenment frequently included these qualities of illumination and creative life-energy, similar to the imagery of other-power Pure Land schools of Buddhism.⁵

This experience of revelation is important because it disrupts our limited understanding with a more inclusive and compassionate view.

Although Zen Buddhism is commonly thought of as more self-power than other-power, there is a strong argument for congruencies within the writing of Dōgen Zenji, the founder of Japanese Soto Zen Buddhism, and the other-power of the Pure Land school. This is perhaps most famously exhibited in Dōgen's statement, "To carry the self forward and illuminate myriad things is delusion. That myriad things come forth and illuminate the self is awakening."⁶ This renowned line illustrates the Sōtō Zen view that carrying our own ideas, our own self forward to compartmentalize life is delusional. It is only by releasing our own ideas that we can, through our senses, become illuminated by the world showing itself clearly to and through us. Other power was clearly an essential part of the Buddhist view of Dōgen Zenji, warning us to not try and become enlightened by our own ideas and efforts. The third patriarch of Dōgen's Sōtō Zen lineage, Jianzhi Sengcan, similarly wrote in his 'Verses of Faith Mind,' "using mind to cultivate mind, is this not a great mistake?"⁷ Again we see the Zen ancestor's caution against using our self-power to achieve enlightenment. Zen Buddhism values "not-knowing" as a state of mind in which we aren't operating solely off of our conceptuality. Not-knowing invites understanding and experience that is outside of our self-understanding. An experience 'other' to our limited

⁵ Throughout Lenz's work there are references to seeing a living enlightened persons golden light body. Throughout his most seminal work, *Surfing in the Himalayas*, there are references to the illumination from spiritual enlightenment.

⁶ Dōgen, "Actualizing the Fundamental Point," in *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*, ed. Kazuaki Tanahashi. (Boston: Shambala Publications, 2010.), 29.

⁷ Buddha Eye Zen Temple Chant Book (unpublished manuscript, May 22nd, 2021), 29.

sense of knowing. This is an essential expression of interdependence found in Zen Buddhism that is dependent on other-power.

Taigen Dan Leighton, American Zen Buddhist priest and scholar, writes,

“Other Power” for Dōgen is the world itself, seen as a buddha-field providing nourishment for practitioners in a mutual interconnected relationship. Dōgen’s worldview or cosmology sees the phenomenal world as an agent for awakened awareness, a dynamic, living force supporting the soteriological unfolding of the buddha-nature. This worldview is rooted in the teachings of the bodhisattva path, the sutras and commentaries of Mahāyāna Buddhism”⁸

Taigen skillfully expresses an underlying theme throughout Dōgen’s work of ‘other-power’ as the entire world. Phenomena themselves are other-power. Phenomena are mirrors which reflect how we see the world and ourselves. The appreciation for other-power found in Zen is related to interdependence of ourselves with all phenomena. Taigen goes on to write that “It may well be that American Buddhism will not become fulfilled until the value of ‘Other Power’ is recognized...it will be an indication of American Buddhism’s maturity when American Zen students appreciate the subtle teachings and perspective of Shinran.”⁹¹⁰ In parallel with Taigen, I want to suggest that the maturing of American Zen and American Buddhism can be seen in its appreciation for ‘other-power.’ It is my argument that ‘other-power’ as an American Buddhist value can help a new generation of Buddhists understand and appreciate difference. In appreciation for ‘the other,’ American Buddhists, particularly those in highly privileged social locations, will be more equipped to engage suffering related to oppression, patriarchy, and misuses of power. The appreciation for the ‘other,’ for what we don’t know, and for difference, is something we can find throughout the life and work of Dr. Lenz. In exploring his uniquely ‘American Buddhist’ teachings, I will clarify how other-power is important for the development and maturation of American Buddhism.

⁸ Taigen Daniel Leighton, “Dōgen’s Zazen as Other Power Practice”, (Pacific World 7, Fall 2005, 23–32), 27.

⁹ Taigen, “Dōgen’s Zazen as Other Power Practice”, 30.

¹⁰ *Shinran* is the founder of the Pure Land school of Buddhism.

Power and Other Power in the Work of Dr. Lenz

Power was a central concern and teaching focus of Dr. Lenz. Power was fundamental to his understanding of the spiritual path as well as his encouragement to focus on career and his advocacy for the empowerment of women. Lenz felt it was necessary to feel empowered in all aspects of one's life, especially in one's spiritual practice. Lenz endorsed the idea that personal power is necessary to attain enlightenment, but this does not necessarily correlate with the Japanese Buddhist idea of 'self-power'. We can clarify what Lenz means by "personal power" in his first talk in the 'Zen Tapes' lecture series. Lenz says,

"Personal power is not necessarily visible. We can see its effects but not power itself. In the same way that the wind blows. We can see the effects of the wind. . . . we can feel the wind against our bodies and our hair. But we can't actually see the wind, we see its effects. . . . power is like the wind, it comes and goes, no one really owns it. Some people are foolish enough to think they possess power. You don't possess power, power possess you. Power uses you."¹¹

It is immediately apparent that what Lenz means by 'personal-power' is not the 'self-power' we find in spiritual practices aimed towards achievement. Lenz is advocating for a kind of power that 'uses you,' rather than power that we 'own,' or with which we wield over others. It is important to point out that Lenz compares this kind of power to the wind, which we cannot see. This power he speaks about is 'the other.' It is that which is not known to one's self and is not visible to what we can see or 'know.' This power isn't pre-constructed by our thoughts. For Lenz, personal power is rooted in recognition of 'the other'.

In this same lecture, Lenz warns students against the kind of power that people use to "destroy anyone or anything who doesn't agree with their point of view."¹² The power that we use to oppress others in order to promote our own view is not the kind of 'personal-power' that Lenz is speaking about. Personal power is found in the inclusion of all experience, of all parts of

¹¹ Frederick Lenz, *Zen Tapes With Master Rama: Personal Power*, 4:35.

¹² Frederick Lenz, *Zen Tapes With Master Rama: Personal Power*, 27:30.

our life. The reason that this power is termed ‘personal’ is that we must discover it through self-inquiry into the nature of who and what we are.¹³ Studying ourselves and our varying tendencies to dominate others with our thoughts, judgements, words, or actions is essential for the next generation of American Buddhists. In Lenz’s view of Zen, which he titles ‘Tantric Zen,’ he often refrains the need for one to be ‘broad minded’.¹⁴ When one is broad minded, they can practice Tantric Zen because they can include paradox. Tantric Zen practitioners can include parts of themselves and of life that seem strange and unusual because they appreciate the diversity of experience. In the *Myth of Freedom*, Chogyam Trungpa says that the practices of tantra requires us to have the “willingness to open [ones]self to the phenomenal world, rather than merely being involved with a strategy of how to relate with it. Strategy becomes irrelevant and the actual perception of energy becomes more important.”¹⁵ We can find parallels with Trungpa Rinpoche’s understanding of Tantra with the perception of energy with Lenz’s view of Tantric Zen and the necessity of personal-power. In our cultivation of personal power through the practice of being broad minded and expanding our awareness, we are more prone to experience the most central aspect of Lenz’s teaching, enlightenment.

In his book *Surfing the Himalayas*, Lenz writes that enlightenment is “the complete awareness of life without any mental modifications. It is the experience of everything - every dimensional plane, world, and reality.”¹⁶ If we recall Dōgen’s emphasis on the phenomenal world as other-power, we can see a similar sentiment in Lenz’s teaching on the “experience of everything.” We can observe more parallels when Lenz says “everything aids everything because

¹³ Frederick Lenz, *Zen Tapes With Master Rama: Tantric Zen*, Recorded in 1986, Frederick P Lenz Foundation for American Buddhism, online audio recording, 40:55. <https://www.ramameditationsociety.org/zen-tapes-talkset>.

¹⁴ Frederick Lenz, *Zen Tapes With Master Rama: Tantric Zen*, 10:30

¹⁵ Chōgyam Trungpa, *The Myth of Freedom* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2002), 153.

¹⁶ Frederick Lenz, “Surfing the Himalayas: A Spiritual Adventure,” (New York: St. Martins Press, 1995), 30.

all things are a reflection of the buddha mind or the mind of enlightenment.”¹⁷ The primary obstacle to our ability to see and encounter other-power and enlightenment is our habit of conceptualizing the phenomenal world, rather than experiencing it directly outside of our biases.

In his *Zen Tapes*, Lenz describes the relationship our conceptualizing has with phenomena;

“Most people when they see a tree, don’t see a tree at all. What they see is an idea that they have developed throughout the course of their life of what a tree is. Only when they were very young did they see. Only at that time they were aware what a tree looked like . . . or what a tree felt like.”¹⁸

Children experience the world freshly through the senses because the world is new to them. They lack the years of mental and linguistic training that adults require to participate in society.

Children are naturally open to other-power and to experiencing life outside of preconceived ideas of it. Primarily because they lack years of habitually abstracting their direct experience of life and the world. The spiritual insight of enlightenment, for Lenz, is a shift of perception.

Perceiving the world differently than before.¹⁹ This perceptual shift is “beyond the power of your thoughts and ability to understand.”²⁰ At the core of these teachings, is the embrace of other-power. The embrace of that which we cannot ‘know’ but what is the foundation of everything.

Multiplicity, Diversity, and the ‘Other’

In *Surfing the Himalayas*, Lenz writes,

Human beings usually train their young to run away from things that they don’t understand. It is an old bad habit. They teach their children to hide from, rationalize, and be unduly afraid of death, the immensity of life and the experiences of the spirit. When human beings live this way, they shut out both the high and low frequencies in their lives.²¹

¹⁷ Frederick Lenz, *Zen Tapes With Master Rama: Tantric Zen*, 41:30.

¹⁸ Frederick Lenz, *Zen Tapes With Master Rama: Zazen Meditation and Concentration*, Recorded in 1986, Frederick P Lenz Foundation for American Buddhism, online audio recording, 12:10.
<https://www.ramameditationsociety.org/zen-tapes-talkset>.

¹⁹ Frederick Lenz, “Surfing the Himalayas”, 74.

²⁰ Frederick Lenz, “Surfing the Himalayas”, 74.

²¹ Frederick Lenz, “Surfing the Himalayas”, 149.

Lenz wrote clearly on the unintended side effects of our habitual rationalization and ideating. In our efforts to find safety in our self-knowing, we become afraid and limit the possibility of being impacted by different people, experiences, and points of view. We not only limit the perceived negative possibilities but the positive ones as well. One must let go of this habit of over-rationalizing in order to experience life fully. This takes curiosity, trust, and a willingness to be impacted by something outside of ourselves. Curiosity and our ability to be impacted by the other was vital to Lenz's teaching. In his own words, "all life is holy."²² This was not an abstract teaching for Lenz, and it can be seen in his efforts towards women's empowerment and the enlightenment of women. Lenz spoke specifically on the oppression of women as 'other' to men. He writes,

"In a fallen world, in a world of fear and darkness, men have reacted very negatively to the power that is inherent in women. Rather than realizing that that power is also indigenous to themselves, that they have the same power, only it manifests in other ways, they have rejected that power and sought to convince women of the exact opposite, that they are powerless. They have done this through sexual repression, economic repression, political repression, social repression, ideological repression and spiritual repression."²³

Lenz claimed that women were more innately suited for power and spiritual realization than men, and intentionally asked women to take leadership in his organization. Lenz can be used as an example for how we can more specifically embrace diversity through a felt sense of other-power. We should directly work with difference and give a platform to those with a different experience and voice than ourselves. This is incredibly important for the next generation of Buddhist teachers and communities. We should not only think about difference, but "consciously

²² Frederick Lenz, "Surfing the Himalayas", 141.

²³ Rama Meditation Society, "Rama and Women's Enlightenment", Women and Enlightenment, Accessed May 18th 2021. <https://www.ramameditationsociety.org/women-and-enlightenment>

join with and become part of the power that is in everything around [us].”²⁴ Appreciating difference in this way is the essence of Lenz’s American Buddhism.

In America particularly, we are reckoning with centuries of violence that is systemically tied in with power and privilege in all of our social relationships. This bloody karma does not get left at the door when you enter a Buddhist center. American Buddhists are undeniably entangled with the harm fashioned from misuses of power. Therefore, it is crucial that American Buddhists look deeply into their relationship with power. Teachings on ‘other-power’ that we find in Pure Land Buddhism, in Dōgen, and the Tantric Zen of Dr. Lenz are wonderful gateways for us to explore how we interact with difference, how we appreciate what is other to us, and how we respond to views that contradict our own. An embrace of the phenomenal world in all of its difficulties and differences is exactly where the dharma can be planted and bear fruit.

Before the colonization of Turtle Island, or North America, by Europeans, the environment was respected as wild, as abundant, and as a home to a vast multiplicity of life. The deeper colonization has set into this land, the more sterile and industrial our landscape has become. Instead of finding abundance everywhere, natural areas are designated as separate from our industrialized cities and human-friendly landscapes. This is a systematic misunderstanding of “all life is holy,” or that all of life is manifestation of the Buddha. Our very landscape represents our tendency to shut-out and control rather than include diversity, or biodiversity. Turning towards difference and wildness imbues us with other-power and allows us to meet the world more skillfully.

Conclusion

Every morning at the Zen Temple at which I train, we chant the names of each ancestor in our lineage, going back to the time of the historical Buddha, Sākyamuni Buddha. In this list

²⁴ Frederick Lenz, “Surfing the Himalayas”, 132.

are the names of people from various parts of India, China, and Japan. I am not familiar with the lives of most of the people on this list, but I benefit from their efforts in preserving the Buddhist teaching that is being passed down to me in modern day America. Many of these people are completely unknown to me, completely other to me. At the same time, these people are absolutely crucial to the spiritual tradition I find myself in. I find myself totally dependent on their efforts to transmit wisdom that they uncovered and received. This personal example is how our entire world operates. Our lives appear in the total interpenetration of self and other. The teaching on interdependent origination is fundamental to Buddhism, and yet we still find ourselves investing enormous amounts of our energy into self-power, our self-view. Today's American Buddhists need other-power teachings to help us turn toward what we don't understand and what is different to us. In welcoming the other into our life, we can deeply appreciate our unique circumstance and the difficulties we face in our time and place. As a Buddhist, studying to become a spiritual care provider, I believe it is of the utmost significance to gain familiarity with being humbled by the life, mind, and heart of another. Only through our ability to appreciate other power can we learn to encounter difference and allow for healing. It is my sincere wish that through the work of American Buddhists, people grow in their ability to not only be kind to each other, but to cultivate deep reverence for the 'other' in all phenomenon, sentient or non-sentient.

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