

The Quest

by M.V.

The activity of ego begins by judging the world as being somehow inadequate or incomplete as-it-is. It defines its health by its ability to correct these perceived flaws, requiring all sorts of mental calculation: speculation, summation, imagination, etc. We often complain that life is a challenge, but maneuvering through it all and negotiating a winning strategy for ourselves gives a sense of purpose. As an extreme example, one famous mountaineer viewed Mount Everest as a challenge to be "conquered." The explanation as to why one would risk their life to ascend the world's highest peak came in one brief statement: "Because it's there." He may well have said, "the world exists as my personal challenge, therefore I am."

For millennia, spiritual seekers have known the futility of moving the mountain that stands in the way of enlightenment. It drove Shinran to leave his monastery in defeat. Today it's common for modern seekers to hop from one path to the next, one guru to another, always seeming to land in eventual failure. But if, as mentioned above, ego-health is determined by meeting problems and struggling with them, a strenuous spiritual practice could also do the job of helping ego feel vital to itself, even while expressing frustration with the practice.

I wonder if Sir Edmund Hillary must have faced the let down we all face after temporarily winning a battle, when there's nothing arising to conquer anymore.* Once you've beaten the odds on a treacherous peak, it's all downhill after that. But struggling to move the mountain of Enlightenment produces one summit after another, each one seemingly higher than the last. Some of the saddest faces in the world are from people who've experienced "awakenings" and then "lost" them. When this happens, even a past awakening becomes part of the problem-puzzle framework and "letting-go" becomes another chore rising to challenge the seeker. Not only can religion supply vast terrains in the form of challenge and frustration, but the very struggle can also be imagined as a "holy" one, unlike most worldly endeavors.

I doubt if there could be a better activity for ego to indulge in than a religious "quest." If you asked a self-striving Buddhist grappling with some practice or another why it's so difficult, they'd probably answer that it's because they're not enlightened. If you asked why, the logical response would be because they haven't struggled long enough. But to Buddhists, the ceaseless struggle (grasping and clutching for security in things even as they're changing) is the cause of suffering. So here, struggle itself is both problem and solution, moving in an endless circle. No wonder Enlightenment is often spoken of as something achieved after many lifetimes of effort!

I walked up a small hill today but I didn't tell my body it needed to break down carbohydrates and protein in order to supply fuel to the muscles; nor did I inform my arms and legs that they needed to move spontaneously to keep my balance. Moving upward was only possible because of the incline on the Earth's surface. Without it there would have been no view of the mountains to the West. To say that "I" walked up the hill is more of a social convention than truth. Is the result the same if I take note that I've walked various spiritual paths for thirty years? Who really does these things? The answer that makes sense to me is that if whatever I'm doing seems forced or phony, it's my foolish self getting in the way of what could otherwise be the effortless and most appropriate action possible, which is when Amida Buddha informs this mind and body. I can get in the way, I can slave away, I can have regrets and even gloat over imagined victories, but I cannot force the utterance of the nembutsu with True Entrusting; no matter how hard I try (and because I try).

What seems even more of a contradiction to self-effort-ego is that this True Entrusting in Amida Buddha arrives on it's own schedule, in it's own time, and no amount of struggle, worry, bartering or petition can hurry it along. But I know that this is best. All things that arrive by personal willpower are already in transition and will someday fade from memory. True Faith or True Entrusting is given freely by an unimaginable force known as Amida to Shin Buddhists. Such a faith cannot be developed by the activities of the strategizing ego. A limited, compulsory faith, no matter how strong, cannot extend beyond the ego boundary; even a very strong, sincere and devoted ego at that. Such activities are often directed by personal fear and reward.

Ultimately, a certain falling apart, uncertainty and hopelessness are called for but these aren't things that can be part of a salvation strategy. Shinjin as True Entrusting is given not at the end of a personal quest but at the beginning of a marvelous journey.

Namu Amida Butsu!

*Perhaps having exhausted his ego, Hillary now devotes his energies to environmental causes and to humanitarian efforts on behalf of the Nepalese people. Was Amida waiting for him on that isolated summit?