

## The Brilliance

The experience under investigation is described quite plainly in certain Zen texts. After a series of Zen exercises, one disciple found that he was "astonished that unnoticeably the Zen hall and myself were radiant in an absolute light.' All this time he experienced an unspeakable feeling of happiness."<sup>1</sup> Another Zen text describes the experience poetically, hinting that the inward self, fully realized, reaches cosmic proportions:

*The mind mirror illumines all ingenuously.  
Its penetrating, limitless rays reach  
everywhere in the universe.  
Without exception everything is reflected  
in this mirror  
The whole universe is a gem of light  
beyond the terms of in and out.*<sup>2</sup>

Zen and like-minded schools of Buddhism do not recognize the concept of God as such, so the examples above are attempts to describe pure experience. However, most other Buddhist schools and texts that refer to a Divine Light do so in reference to a cosmic, God-like Buddha. The *Dhammapada*, dating as far back as the 6th century BC, tells us that "the sun shines by day, the moon shines by night; continually, day and night, does the luminous Buddha shine."<sup>3</sup> Other texts tell us that "the brilliance of Buddha's light is measureless."<sup>4</sup> Buddha, "the Great Enlightened," is "brilliant... highly bright."<sup>5</sup> The "Enlightened Teacher Buddha" has "illuminated all nations with the bright light of the doctrine... thinking in the brightness."<sup>6</sup> Buddha, the "World Honoured One," is "Light Brightness."<sup>7</sup> In a very famous passage from the *Lotus Sutra*, written around the 3rd century CE, we read that

*The Buddha emitted a light from  
between his eyebrows,  
manifesting signs that are rarely seen.  
This light illumined the eastern direction,  
eighteen thousand Buddha lands...  
One could see how these Buddha lands  
adorned with numerous jewels,  
shone with hues of lapis lazuli and crystals,  
was due to the illumination of Buddha's light.*<sup>8</sup>

The brilliance of the Buddha's light is often said to be indescribable. In the Sutra of the Contemplation on the Buddha of Immeasurable Life, written in various versions between the 5th and 13th centuries CE, we read that "no words can fully describe [the brilliance] of this light." That having been said, the author(s) go on to say that "the Buddha of Immeasurable Life is a billion times as [bright as] the jambunada gold of the Yama heavens." Further,

*The Buddha of Immeasurable Life  
has eighty-four thousand features;  
each feature has eighty-four thousand  
secondary attributes;  
each secondary attribute sends forth  
eighty-four thousand rays of light;  
each ray of light shines out over  
the world of the ten quarters;  
and those sentient beings  
who are mindful of the Buddha  
are embraced [by that light],  
never to be abandoned.<sup>9</sup>*

In the 8th century texts of the *Mahayana* -- a branch of Buddhism meaning the "Greater Vehicle" -- the light of Buddha is said to be "beautiful," "extremely powerful," "incomparable," of "infinite splendour" and "infinite brilliance."<sup>10</sup> The body of Buddha issues forth "brilliant rays," and is called the "King of Light."<sup>11</sup> These images were applied to a mythological account of the Buddha's birth. When the newborn Buddha was first "gazed at, though of such surpassing brightness, he attracted all eyes like the moon. With the radiant splendour of his limbs, he extinguished like the sun the splendour of the lamps; with his beautiful hue as of precious gold he illumined all the quarters of space."<sup>12</sup>

The *Flower Ornament Scripture*, written between 359 and 710 CE, contains an overwhelming number of references to the Buddha as a Divine Light. Most of the references are in verse. To quote just a few examples:

*The Buddha's great light of knowledge  
Illumines all lands in ten directions...*

*The Buddha-body is peerless, it has no compare;  
Its light shines throughout ten directions...*

*Traversing all realms of existence for countless ages,  
His light is everywhere as pure as space...*

*Emanating inconceivable nets of lights,  
Everywhere purifying all conscious beings...*

*All the lights in the world  
Cannot match the light of a single pore of the Buddha --  
This is how inconceivable the Buddha's light is...<sup>13</sup>*

*The great ocean of worlds has no bounds;  
Its circumference of jewels  
is pure and multicolored...*

*Made of masses of diamonds,  
Also raining beautiful jewels,  
Their jewel atmospheres  
are unique and different,  
Radiating pure light beautifying everywhere.<sup>14</sup>*

*Buddha emanates a great light...  
That light touches all with its glow,  
Pervading the whole cosmos.<sup>15</sup>*

*The Buddha sits on the site of enlightenment  
Pure and clear is his great radiant light,  
Like a thousand suns emerging  
Illuminating all over space...*

*Illuminating the world  
With light that has no end.*

*Behold the Buddha's body  
With webs of light so pure...  
Filling the ten directions.<sup>16</sup>*

*I see the great pure light  
Of Buddha's ocean of worlds  
Calmly realizing enlightenment  
Pervading the whole cosmos.*

*The Buddha's body emanates great light  
With physical forms boundless and totally pure,  
Filling all lands like clouds...*

*From each hair pore appear clouds of light  
Filling all space, emitting great sound:  
All dark places are illumined,  
Causing the pains of hells to disappear.<sup>17</sup>*

*One light illumines boundlessly  
Filling all lands in the ten directions,  
Causing all worlds  
to gain great brightness...*<sup>18</sup>

The scripture goes on to say that the "Buddha is a boundless treasury of light." A great assembly "all saw the Buddha's body emit a hundred trillion infinities of inconceivable great lights."<sup>19</sup>

Many other Buddhist texts also identify the Buddha as a super- brilliant being of light. In the *Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma*, we find that the "Buddha's radiance none shall be able to succeed."<sup>20</sup> The Buddha's body is said to be of a "wonderful brightness."<sup>21</sup> The "brilliance of a trillion suns, moons and pearls" are "outshone by the pure lights emanating from the mouth of Sakyamuni Buddha."<sup>22</sup> Similarly,

*The lights of the World-Honoured One  
Illuminate all the countless Buddha-lands  
Throughout the ten directions.  
The brilliance of the sun, [and] the moon...  
Cannot bear comparison  
With the brilliance of the Tathagata (Buddha).*<sup>23</sup>

Very interesting in the context of near-death experiences is the Tibetan *Book of the Dead*, written sometime in the 8th century CE. After we die, we are told, we can expect to encounter the "Clear Light of Reality." When we do, we are advised to "try to abide in that state." The "radiance of the Clear Light of Pure Reality" is "naturally void... the All-Good."<sup>24</sup> The Tibetan text tells us that "in that state... being experienced by thee,"

*in an unbearable intensity,  
Voidness and Brightness inseparable, --  
The Voidness bright by nature  
and the Brightness by nature void...  
The Brightness [is] inseparable  
from the Voidness.*<sup>25</sup>

Further, we are told that

*Thine own consciousness,  
shining, void and inseparable  
from the Great Body of Radiance,  
hath no birth, nor death,  
and is the Immutable Light  
-- Amitabha Buddha...*

*Recognizing the voidness of thine  
own intellect to be Buddhahood,  
and looking upon it as being thine  
own consciousness, is to keep thyself  
in the divine mind of the Buddha.*<sup>26</sup>

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