

Where Can We Find Happiness?

by Sosan Theresa Flynn

As Zen Buddhists, what can we learn from the Buddhists who put their faith in a “Pure Land” or heaven that is far away from this world? What can we learn from the many religions in which the idea of a Pure Land or heaven is found? Isn't imagining a “better” place the opposite of what we are taught to do in Zen practice?

Calling to mind a land of happiness is a way that human beings can continue to go forward in the midst of despair. If we feel overwhelmed by current difficult circumstances, it may help to remember that a land of happiness exists. In Zen practice, we might frame this as meditating on impermanence, reminding ourselves, “this despair is impermanent - it will not last.” Our meditation on the impermanence of time (this will not last) is really the same as the Pure Land Buddhist meditating on the impermanence of space (there is another place besides this one).

And yet, if we do not experience the Pure Land in this present life and present moment, it is unlikely that we will find it at a future time or in another place far away. This is the beauty of deep Zen practice, but this wisdom is also found in deep Pure Land practice and in many other faiths as well. All religions have both surface and deep ways of understanding the teachings. Even Christianity, which some may see as emphasizing the “going to heaven after death” idea, has teachings on the here and now. For example, in the gospel of Luke, we find the passage, “neither will they say, 'Look, here!' or, 'Look, there!' for behold, the Kingdom of God is within you.”

Do we experience this Pure Land in the here and now? Do we see the Kingdom of God within us? Many times, we only see a polluted spiritual landscape. It helps to consider the causes of this pollution: being too busy, not taking the time to study and learn the practice, not looking after our families and our community members, getting caught up in looking for money and/or prestige, or getting caught in jealousy, anger and fear. These things that pollute our spiritual landscape are within our own minds, hearts and bodies. They are behaviors that we have the capability of changing.

Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh writes, “Our mindful footsteps have the power of making the pure land manifest wherever we are.” We can do this by taking the time to cultivate the wholesome.

1. Take time to listen to the music of wind in the trees, birds, children laughing, train bells, meditation bells, even the sound of traffic. If we listen closely, we can hear music in everything.
2. Find a community where people know how to walk, stand, lie down and sit in mindfulness. Spend time with the people in that community, so that we can benefit from their practice.
3. Take time to do practices like longer periods of meditation and/or retreats in order to immerse ourselves in deep silence.
4. Practice generosity through rituals such as offering incense or bowing, giving alms to the poor, greeting others mindfully, and practicing small kindnesses for our loved ones.
5. Express the dharma with our voices by practicing chanting or singing.
6. Take time to refresh ourselves by going outside, or looking out the window, looking at beautiful images, or even imagining beautiful images.

In *Finding our True Home: Living in the Pure Land Here and Now*, Thich Nhat Hanh writes:

*If we can live peacefully
and joyfully as free people,
if we have time to listen carefully
to the sound of the wind in the trees
and the songs of the birds,
if we have time to pick flowers to offer
and time to eat in mindfulness
and practice walking meditation,
then we are contributing
to establishing the Pure Land.
We do not have to do anything else.*