

Section from *Song of the Grass-Roof Hermitage*
by Shitou (700-790), tr. Taigen Leighton and Kazuaki Tanahashi

Turn around the light to shine within, then just return.
The vast inconceivable source can't be face or turned away from.
Meet the ancestral teachers, be familiar with their instruction,
Bind grasses to build a hut, and don't give up.

Section from *inside the Grass Hut: Living Shitou's Classic Zen Poem*, by Ben Connelly
Chapter entitled "Buddhism is Meditation and Kindness"

There are seven characters in each line of this poem, and in this line four of them include the meaning "return" or "come back." Come back home to this hut, to this moment, this place, just this, return. Two of the other characters carry the meaning "shine." Remember that old gospel song, the one that went "this little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine"? Let it shine here; return to the now and illuminate the moment with simple, radiant awareness. The remaining character means "with ease" or "calmly." Come back, let your light shine here, return to here, take it easy, come home. This is the most essential element of Buddhist practice. We keep coming back to this message because the mind keeps trying to take us elsewhere, which makes us feel cut off from what is, from our lives, which are actually here, at home, in this moment. Just return, and let the calm, wordless mind of awareness illuminate.

In his earliest teachings, Buddha points back again and again – he returns – to the first teaching he delivered: suffering and the alleviation of suffering through the practice of wisdom, kindness, and meditation....

These two practices, kindness and meditation, are intimately related. In one sense, we can understand this line of the poem by saying that to meditate is to shine the light within and to practice kindness is to return. We retreat through meditation and we engage through loving-kindness.... Like so much of Shitou's poem this line is a prism, however, for we can also understand shining the light through kind action and just returning through meditation.

In meditation, we turn around the light to shine within in the sense that by finding some space between thoughts we shed a little light on our own consciousness....

In the practice of kindness, our most basic ethic, we also turn around the light. If we take a moment to look within, we are able to see thoughts and emotions come up in the mind and we can see if they are motivating us to do something kind or unkind. When my son is late, if I don't shine the light within myself, I may just chew him out when he finally arrives. If I do turn around the light, I can see that I feel hurt, I can see how badgering him will not help either of us, and I may calmly tell him how I feel and ask him to please be on time in the future. We also just return in our practice of kindness, since our kindness is rooted in being present, in really seeing and relating to what is here – not being half-hearted or prejudiced, but open and fully engaged in just this.