

Learning the Buddha's Great Compassion-Amida Sutra-

by Rev. T. Kenjitsu Nakagaki (Sensei)

"West" - the direction of the Pure Land-

The Buddha then said to the Elder Shariputra: "If you travel westward from here, passing a hundred thousand kotis of Buddha-lands, you come to the land called 'Utmost Bliss,' where there is a Buddha named 'Amida.' He is living there now, teaching the Dharma. (Amida Sutra translated by Hisao Inagaki)

We encounter many symbols when we study the Pure Land Buddhist scriptures. Here you find that it says Amida Buddha's Land exists a very far distance to the west. Some may say how you can prove such a place to exist; Who can believe such a fairy tale statement. Instead of making such a statement, it is important for us to understand the meanings or messages behind the statement. So, we try to ask the questions "why is the Amida Land located in the west, not east or south?" or "Does the west have a special importance?" or "what do you mean by the far distance of a hundred thousand kotis ?" We should use our creativity to understand the meaning of the symbols.

Let us see why the Pure Land is westward. What is the quality of the directions? In fact, Sadapralapa Bodhisattva in the Prajna Sutra travels eastward to seek enlightenment. The east represents wisdom breaking through the darkness like a sun-rise breaking through the dark night. In the Avatamsaka Sutra, Sudhana travels south to meet fifty-three teachers. The south represents heading directly to the sun thus meaning one heads directly toward enlightenment.

Now, why the west? For many of us, the direction of the west is associated with the sunset. So, we need to think about the qualities of the sunset.

The sunset reminds us of the end of our work day and everybody goes home, so the Pure Land is like our home where returning to after our living in this world. It represents ultimate enlightenment that all need to reach. In this sense, our everyday life is a step toward the Pure Land or enlightenment. It gives a clear direction to the life of those who practice the Nembutsu-Dharma.

As the sunset brings us the feeling of peace and settlement with its beautiful red-colored sky, the Pure Land brings us true contentment and peace, rooted from the Dharma. The Pure Land is the state of Nirvana, calming the fire of greed, anger and delusion. Having the Pure Land in our lives, we find peace and joy in the Nembutsu, even if we have difficulties and pain due to anguish. This may also be related to the description of Shakyamuni Buddha -passing away into Pari-nirvana-; laid down underneath the Sala trees with his head toward the north and his face toward the west.

Pure Land Buddhist Master Tan-luan of China explains that the Buddha showed us the direction of the west with his deep compassion and kindness, so that ignorant ordinary beings like us can easily relate to our everyday life. So, as we see the sunset in the west, it reminds us of the Pure Land of Amida Buddha. This point is also related to the statement "passing a hundred thousand kotis of Buddha-lands." It means that knowing the true meaning of the Pure Land is far beyond our comprehension rooted by unenlightened view. Although we cannot conceive it completely, we find it as a source of energy which produces unlimited wisdom and compassion to our lives.

May the sunset bring you the awareness of the Pure Land teaching, and may you find the Pure Land in your life.

Where is the Buddha Land, where is the enlightenment?

Everywhere and nowhere, no where but everywhere.

Sitting, walking, standing and laying, whatever I do,

Time is now, the place is here, saying the Nembutsu.

(by Shaku Kenjitsu)