

Learning the Buddha's Great Compassion – The Amida Sutra (8)

"Amida" – Going Beyond our Conventional Thinking

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For what reason, Shariputra, do you think that Buddha is called 'Amida'? Shariputra, the Buddha's light shines boundlessly and without hindrance over all the worlds of the ten quarters. It is for this reason that he is called 'Amida' (Amitabha). Again, Shariputra, the lives of the Buddha and the people of his land last for immeasurable, unlimited and incalculable kalpas. It is for this reason that the Buddha is called 'Amida' (Amitayus).

(Amida Sutra translated by Hisao Inagaki)

When people start to learn Pure Land Buddhism, their first question is “Who is Amida?” or “What is Amida?” The above quotation from the Amida Sutra deals with this initial and essential question. The Shakyamuni Buddha asked Shariputra this very question, **“For what reason, Shariputra, do you think that Buddha is called 'Amida'?”** Simply put, “What is Amida?” and “Why Amida?”

What is Amida? Amida is a compound of the words Amitabha and Amitayus: The first of these, Amitabha, consists of the two words “amita” and “abha.” “Abha” means light, representing wisdom. The second, Amitayus, consists of the two words “amita” and “ayus.” “Ayus” means life, representing compassion. In Amida itself, “A” is negation, while “mida (mita)” is measurement. We measure things based on our knowledge, experience, etc. Amida can be defined literally as the world which negates our conventional measurement, therefore, the “immeasurable” world. It is the world of Enlightenment, which cannot be understood by our conventional dualistic views. Because the quality of wisdom and compassion is impossible to measure, this Buddha is called Amida - immeasurable.

Why Amida? If you think about it for a moment, Amida is a very interesting word. We cannot measure, grasp, or describe the Buddha, yet we call it Amida. A word is a conventional tool. We use this conventional tool, the word Amida, because it lets us go beyond conventional thoughts. But once we say that we understand Amida, it is not Amida anymore. Then how do we experience Amida? We enter the world of “letting go.” Instead of trying to pick up water from the ocean, we let ourselves go into the ocean. The ocean is huge and we cannot grasp and understand it with our limited understanding, but we can feel the ocean and learn from it. We will be embraced by the ocean and gain wisdom from our experience of it.

Shakyamuni Buddha's answer to his own question is unique. He not only defined Amida literally, but also added meaning. For Amitabha, he added the phrase **“without hindrance”** and for Amitayus, he added the phrase **“the people of his land.”** Both additional phrases bring attention from the Buddha to each of us, simply saying, “from someone else to me.” They mean that the Amida's Enlightenment is never separated from our freedom and enlightenment out of suffering and delusion. Amitabha, immeasurable wisdom, reaches all of us and transforms the blind passion (greed, anger and ignorance) that hinders us into virtue; Amitayus, immeasurable compassion, embraces us and gives us a different quality of life in oneness with Amida.

No wonder Shariputra did not answer or could not answer the question. Because Amida is unanswerable!

Answering without (beyond) answers,
Measuring without (beyond) measurement
Illustrate the Pure Land Path.

Don't try to catch it, just let go!

Adrift in the ocean, find yourself joyfully swimming! (by Shaku Kenjitsu)