

Learning the Buddha's Great Compassion— The Meditation Sutra (9)

## Meditating on the Sun

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*The Buddha said to Vaidehi, "You and other sentient beings should concentrate and, with one-pointed attention, turn your thoughts westward. How do you contemplate? All sentient beings except those born blind--that is, all those with the faculty of sight--should look at the setting sun. Sit in the proper posture, facing west. Clearly gaze at the sun, with mind firmly fixed on it; concentrate your sight and do not let it wander from the setting sun, which is like a drum suspended above the horizon. Having done so, you should then be able to visualize it clearly, whether your eyes are open or closed. This is the visualizing of the sun and is known as the first contemplation."*

(“Kanmuryoju-kyo” translated by Hisao Inagaki)

Here the Buddha begins to teach how to meditate on the Pure Land of Amida Buddha. The Buddha explains two types of religious practice in this sutra, namely, meditative good and non-meditative good. Pure Land master Shan-tao (613-681) in China defined these two goods. “Meditative good is to settle the thought and concentrate the mind; and non-meditative good is to abolish evil and practice good.”

The Pure Land, or Buddha Land, is the world that can only be seen by the mind of enlightenment. Meditative practice is a way to open the mind of enlightenment. Meditation or meditative practice includes *samatha* (concentrating the mind and calming oneself, stopping various thoughts) and *vipasyana* (seeing the world of the Buddha by wisdom as a result of samatha). You can think of it this way: When the wind stops, the wave of a pond stops (samatha); then, when the water of the pond becomes calm, all the scenery can be seen clearly reflected on the water (vipasyana). This seeing is called “meditative good” in the Meditation Sutra, which describes thirteen steps that lead to seeing the Buddha Land.

The first step toward meditative good is to concentrate on the sun setting in the west. I still clearly remember the dramatic but tranquil sunsets in India. It is hard to describe them in words. That big red sun was beautiful and mysterious and provided me with a peaceful, soft, and spiritual space. I felt as if time had stopped. It is hard for ordinary people like us to see the true Enlightenment Land immediately. So Buddha skillfully directs us to concentrate on a single spot of sunset to begin with. Why not try to follow the Buddha’s instructions as described above, “You and other sentient beings should concentrate, and with one-pointed attention, turn your thoughts westward . . . This is the visualization of the sun and is the first contemplation.”

What is the proper posture? Master Shan-tao, in his book Exposition of the Method of Contemplation on Amida Buddha says “aspirants, when you sit in meditation, you should first sit in the full cross-legged posture. Place your left foot on the right thigh, with the sole in harmony with the contours of the body; then, place your right foot on the left thigh, with the sole in harmony with the contours of the body. Rest your right hand on the palm of the left hand, and touch the soft tip of one thumb with that of the other. Keep your body upright and close your mouth. Close your eyes in a manner in which they appear open but not exactly open, appear closed but not exactly closed.”

Why meditate on the sun? First, because one watches the setting sun in the west and recognizes the Pure Land of Amida (Amitabha). Second, one may also recognize one’s own blind passions, which are symbolized by the clouds covering the sun. Third, The brilliant light of the sun may lead one to think of Amida’s light.

Sky shining with orange color westward -  
 Ultimate Truth and Reality may be available there.  
 Now is the time to follow the steps of the Sutra. (by Kenjitsu)