

Learning the Buddha's Great Compassion—the Meditation Sutra (24) “Mahathamaprapta (Seishi)—Bodhisattva of Wisdom”

By Rev. T. Kenjitsu Nakagaki

The Buddha said to Ananda and Vaidehi, “Next visualize the Bodhisattva Mahasthamaprapta. The dimensions of this bodhisattva are the same as those of Avalokiteshvara. His aureole, two hundred and twenty-five yojanas in diameter, shines to a distance of two hundred and fifty yojanas. The light emanating from his entire body illuminates the worlds of the ten quarters, making them shine like purple-gold. This light can be seen by anyone who has a close karmic relationship with him. Even if one sees the light emanating from only one pore of his skin, one can perceive the pure and glorious lights of the innumerable Buddhas of the ten quarters. This is why this bodhisattva is called Boundless Light. Furthermore, he has great power to illumine all beings with the light of wisdom in order to deliver them from the three evil realms. It is for this reason that he is also called Possessed of Great Power.

“The heavenly crown of this bodhisattva is adorned with five hundred jeweled lotus-flowers, each having five hundred jeweled pedestals. On each pedestal appear the pure and resplendent lands of the Buddhas in the ten quarters with all their boundless and glorious features.

“The mound on his head, shaped like a lotus-bud, has a jeweled vase in front. This is suffused with various lights that reveal all the activities of the Buddha. The rest of the characteristics of his body are [344b] exactly the same as Avalokiteshvara's. When this bodhisattva walks, all the worlds in the ten quarters shake. Wherever the earth trembles, five hundred kotis of jeweled flowers appear, each as beautiful and brilliant as a flower in the Land of Utmost Bliss. When this bodhisattva sits down, all the seven-jeweled lands, from that of the Buddha Golden Light in the nadir to that of the Buddha King of Light in the zenith, tremble simultaneously. From between these, manifested bodies of Amitayus, Avalokiteshvara, and Mahasthamaprapta, as innumerable as particles of dust, all assemble like clouds in the Land of Utmost Bliss, filling the entire sky. Sitting on lotus-seats, they expound the wonderful Dharma to save suffering beings. To visualize thus is known as the contemplation of Mahasthamaprapta Bodhisattva, and is also called the contemplation of Mahasthamaprapta's physical characteristics. To visualize that bodhisattva in this way is known as the eleventh contemplation. It extinguishes the evil karma that one has committed during immeasurable and uncountable kalpas of Samsara. Those who practice this contemplation will no longer be subject to birth from the womb. They can journey to the pure and exquisite lands of the Buddhas. These contemplations are called the complete contemplations of Avalokiteshvara and Mahasthamaprapta. To practice in this way is called the correct contemplation, and to practice otherwise is incorrect.” (Translation by Hisao Inagaki)

Here, the Buddha Shakyamuni instructs us to visualize the Bodhisattva Mahasthamaprapta, or Seishi Bosatsu in Japanese. As the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara represents the compassion of Amida Buddha, Mahasthamaprapta represents the wisdom of Amida Buddha.

How does Shinran Shonin (1173-1262) understand Bodhisattva Mahasthamaprapta? He sees Honen (Genku) Shonin, his teacher, as the incarnation of Mahasthamaprapta. After 20 years of practice and learning on Mt. Hiei, Shinran encountered his lifetime teacher Honen Shonin through the guidance of Prince Shotoku in his dream. It was Master Honen who made young Shinran a Nembutsu practitioner of Amida's Benefiting-Others Power. Shinran Shonin describes Bodhisattva Mahasthamaprapta as “the original state of Master Genku (Honen)” in Wasan on Pure Land, the section “Hymns to Mahasthamaprapta.” (The Collected Works of Shinran, p. 357) In another part of the Wasan, he wrote, “Genku appeared as Mahasthamaprapta, And also as Amida. Emperors and ministers venerated him, And ordinary people in the capital and countryside revered him.” (CWS, page 388)

In fact, Honen Shonin is THE teacher for Shinran and living entity of Mahasthamaprapta and Amida as well. Shinran Shonin said in Tannisho (CWS, p. 662), “As for me, Shinran, I simply accept and entrust myself to what my reverend teacher (Honen) told me, ‘Just say the Nembutsu and be saved by Amida’; nothing else is involved.” And also said “Should I have been deceived by Master Honen and, saying the Nembutsu, were to fall into hell, even then I would have no regret.” Though the founder of Jodoshinshu (Shin) Buddhism is considered to be Shinran Shonin, for Shinran, Jodoshinshu Buddhism was founded by Master Honen. Jodoshinshu means true (shin) meaning of Pure Land Buddhism (Jodoshu), as founded by Master Honen. Shinran Shonin did not intend to start a new school of Buddhism. In his Wasan, he says, “Our teacher Genku appeared, Through the power of the Light of Wisdom, And revealing the true Pure Land way (Jodoshinshu), He taught the selected Primal Vow.” (CWS, p. 387)

Shinran Shonin was very fortunate to have encountered such a great teacher who was also a living Bodhisattva.

Show me the Way to be truly free!

Entering the world of the Nembutsu

I have found the answer for me.

Shakyamuni Buddha and Amida Tathagata

Honen Bodhisattva and Shinran Bodhisattva

I am very lucky and happy. (By Kenjitsu) 🍀