

Learning the Buddha's Great Compassion –the Meditation Sutra (32)

“White Path”

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The Buddha said to Ananda and Vaidehi, "Those born in the Western Land are of nine grades. Those who attain birth on the highest level of the highest grade are sentient beings who resolve to be born in that land, awaken the three kinds of faith[mind] and so are born there. What are the three? They are, first, the sincere faith [mind]; second, the deep faith[mind]; and third, the faith[mind] that seeks birth there by transferring one's merit. Those who have these three kinds of faith[mind] will certainly be born there....." (translation by Hisao Inagaki [added by Rev. Nakagaki])

As a conclusion to our discussion on the “Three Minds,” namely sincere mind, deep mind and mind to aspiring the birth, I would like to introduce a famous parable by Shan-tao, Chinese Pure Land Master. In his commentary on the Meditation Sutra on the Pure Land, Shan-tao concludes the discussion of these “Three Minds” with the parable of the “white path and two rivers – the river of water and river of fire.” The parable intends to show that the essence of the Meditation Sutra on the Pure Land is expressed by the white path of the Nembutsu with a single mindful-heart(Three minds is equal to single mind). It reveals the two as aspects of the Deep Mind- knowing one's profound karma of from blind passion, and at the same time knowing the Amida's boundless wisdom and compassion. Many practitioners of the Nembutsu have been protected and encouraged to walk the path of the Pure Land by this parable. I quote from *Commentary on the Meditation Sutra on the Pure Land* by Master Shan-tao:

Suppose there is a traveler journeying one hundred thousand li toward the west, when suddenly, along the way, he comes upon two rivers [in a single channel] - one of fire, extending southward, and one of water, extending north. Each river is one hundred paces across, immeasurably deep, and endless to the north and south. Dividing the fire and water is a single white path four or five inches wide. This path, from the eastern bank to the western bank, is one hundred paces in length. Billows of water surge over the path and flames sweep up to scorch it. Water and fire thus alternate without a break. Now the traveler has already journeyed deep into the vast and solitary wilderness; there is no one to be seen. But bands of brigands and wild beasts lurk there, and seeing the traveler alone, they vie with each other to kill him. Fearing for his life, the traveler at once flees toward the west, when without warning the great river appears. He reflects, "I can see no end to this river either to north or south. In the middle is a white path, but it is exceedingly narrow. Although the two banks are but slightly separated, how is it possible to cross? Assuredly this day I shall die. If I turn back, brigands and wild beasts will press closer and closer upon me. If I run north or south, beasts and poisonous insects will contend with each other to attack me. If I venture on the path westward, surely I will plunge into the two currents of water and fire." There are no words to express the terror and despair that fill him at this point. He thinks further to himself: "If I turn back now, I die. If I remain here, I die. If I go forward, I die. There is no way for me to escape death. Therefore, I choose to go forth, venturing on this path. Since this path exists, it must be possible to cross the rivers." When this thought occurs to him, he suddenly hears the encouraging voice of someone on the eastern bank, "O traveler, just resolve to follow this path forward! You will certainly not encounter the grief of death. But if you stay where you are, you will surely die." Further, someone on the western bank calls to him, "O traveler, with mind that is single, with right-mindedness, come at once! I will protect you. Have no fear of plunging to grief in the water or fire." The traveler, having heard the exhortation on his side of the river and the call from the other, immediately acquires firm resolution in body and mind and decisively takes the path, advancing directly without entertaining any doubt or apprehension. When he has gone but one or two paces, the brigands on the eastern bank call out to him: "O traveler, come back! That path is treacherous and permits no crossing. You are certain to meet your death. None of us address you thus with evil intent." The traveler hears the voices calling him, but he gives no backward glance. Thinking only of the path, he advances directly forward with the mind that is single and forthwith reaches the western side, free forever of all afflictions. He meets his good friend, and his joy is boundless. This

is the parable.

Now

to apply the parable: The eastern bank is the burning house that is this Saha world. The western bank: the precious land of perfect bliss. The brigands and wild beasts calling with treacherous familiarity: a sentient being's six sense organs, the six forms of consciousness, the six kinds of objects, the five aggregates, and the four elements. The wilderness where no one is to be seen: one constantly joins with evil companions, without ever meeting a true teacher. The two currents of water and fire: sentient being's greed and desire are likened to water, their anger and hatred to fire. The white path in the middle, four or five inches wide: amidst sentient being's blind passions of greed and anger, a pure mind that aspires for birth in the Pure Land is awakened. Since the greed and anger are intense, they are like the water and fire. Since the good mind is slight, it is like the white path. Further, billows of water constantly surge over the path: desires arise incessantly to defile the good mind. Flames ceaselessly scorch the path: anger and hatred consume the dharma-treasure of virtue. The traveler follows the path and advances directly westward: turning away from all practices, he advances directly westward. He hears the voice of someone on the eastern bank encouraging and exhorting him, and following the path, advances directly westward: Sakyamuni has already entered nirvana and people of later times cannot meet him. His teachings still remain, however, and we can follow them. They are like that voice. When he has gone one or two paces, the brigands call him back: people of different understandings, different practices or false views, with their own misguided opinions, one after another seek to confuse him, claiming that he is committing evil and will fail. Someone on the western bank calls to him: this is the intent of Amida's Vow. The traveler forthwith reaches the western side; he meets his good friend, and his joy is boundless: sentient beings long sinking in birth-and-death and for innumerable kalpas lost in transmigration, being bound in delusion by their own karma, have no means of gaining emancipation for themselves. Reverently embracing Sakyamuni's teaching in his exhortations to advance westward and obeying Amida's call to us with his compassionate heart, the traveler accepts and accords with the mind of the two honored ones; never giving a thought to the two rivers of water and fire and taking the call of the honored ones to heart at every moment, he entrusts himself to the path of the power of the Vow. After his death, he attains birth in that land and meets the Buddha. How boundless is his joy! (by Shan-tao)

Where is the path that I need to follow?

Here I am living without directions -

I was born alone, live alone, breathe alone, dream alone and will die alone.

That realization has made me look for the truth, which

Even death cannot hurt.

Palms together to accept my entire life

Awakens me to the way of peace, happiness, security and balance in Amida-Dharma

That realization made me live in gratitude, where

Hatred and greed are also acknowledged.

(by Kenjitsu)