

**Learning the Buddha's Great Compassion—the Meditation Sutra (33)
Amida's Welcoming: The Highest Level of the Highest Birth**

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“There are three other kinds of sentient beings who also attain birth. Who are the three? They are, first, those who have a compassionate heart, abstain from killing and observe the precepts; second, those who chant the Mahayana sutras of greater scope; and third, those who practice the six forms of mindfulness. They aspire to be born in that Buddha-land by transferring there the merit of practice. With the merit acquired from doing these acts for one to seven days, they attain birth.

“When an aspirant is about to be born in that land through dedicated and undaunted practices, the Tathagata Amitayus [Amida] arrives together with Avalokiteshvara, Mahasthamaprapta, innumerable transformed Buddhas, a great assembly of a hundred thousand monks and shravakas and innumerable devas in seven-jeweled palaces. The Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, carrying a vajra-seat, together with the Bodhisattva Mahasthamaprapta, approaches the aspirant. Amitayus [Amida] releases a great flood of light which illuminates the aspirant's body and, along with the bodhisattvas, extends his hands in welcome. Avalokiteshvara and Mahasthamaprapta, together with innumerable bodhisattvas, praise and encourage the aspirant. Seeing this, the aspirant rejoices so greatly as to dance. Then he sees himself sitting on the vajra-seat, and following the Buddha, is born into that land in the time it takes to snap one's fingers.

“After being born in that land, he sees the Buddha's body complete with all its physical characteristics and also the bodies of the bodhisattvas equally complete with all their physical characteristics. Hearing the discourse on the wonderful Dharma sent forth by the light and the jeweled trees, he then reaches the insight into the non-arising of all dharma. In a single moment, he visits and worships all the Buddhas of the ten quarters and receives from each of them the prediction of his future Buddhahood. Returning to the Pure Land, he is endowed with innumerable hundreds of thousands of dharani. Such a person is called one who attains birth on the highest level of the highest grade.” (translation by Hisao Inagaki [added by Rev. Nakagaki])

Let us discuss the nine grades of birth one by one. The nine grades of birth are categorized based on meritorious practices, precepts and secular goods. First is the highest level and the highest birth. There are three kinds of beings of this grade, namely, those who have the mind of compassion to others without harming others and have kept various precepts; those who have recited the Mahayana Sutras that reveal the universal truth, embracing all beings equally; and those who have practiced the six forms of mindfulness that are the practice of lay people—mindfulness to the Buddha, to the Dharma, to the Sangha, to the precepts, to virtues of generosity and to heavenly beings. These three kinds of people are Mahayana practitioners who practice meritorious goods.

Then, based on the goods that they practice, Amida Buddha welcomes them together with Avalokiteshvara and Mahasthamaprapta and provisional buddhas, thousands of monks, sangha, and devas. It is a very big group that alongside Amida welcomes the beings of the highest level. By the way, Amida's welcoming “raigo” is a famous theme of paintings. Here you see the connection to the 19th Vow, which says, “If, when I attain Buddhahood, the sentient beings of the ten quarters—awakening the mind of enlightenment and performing meritorious acts—should aspire with sincere mind and desire to be born in my land, and yet I should not appear before them at the moment of death surrounded by a host of sages, may I not attain the supreme enlightenment.”

Shinran Shonin's description of Amida's welcoming is for those who practice self-benefiting power, and True Nembutsu practitioners do not need to wait for Amida's welcoming, because our mind is settled when we encounter Amida's benefiting-others power. Master Shinran says, “The idea of Amida's welcoming at the moment of death is for those who seek to gain birth in the Pure Land by doing various practices, for they are practitioners of self-power. The moment of death is of central concern to such people, for they have not yet attained true shinjin... The practitioner of true shinjin, however, abides in the stage of the truly settled, for he or she has already been grasped, never to be abandoned. There is no need to wait in anticipation for the moment of death, no need to rely on Amida's welcoming. At the time shinjin becomes settled, birth too becomes settled... Without awaiting Amida's welcoming, the practitioner of self-power will not attain birth even into the borderland, or the womblike birth, or the realm of indolence. For this reason Amida created the Nineteenth Vow, vowing to appear at the moment of death to welcome people who wish to attain birth by directing the merit of their accumulated good toward the Pure Land...”

When is my attainment of Buddhahood settled?

“Embracing all the beings”

“Letting nobody be left behind”

Can I hear the calling voices of Amida Buddha, reaching into my mindful heart?

Our selfish voices may be too loud to hear the calling.

Many of us are too busy even to die.

Everybody, in fact, dies 100%, so isn't this time to meet the Buddha NOW?

(by Kenjitsu)