

Learning the Buddha's Great Compassion—the Meditation Sutra (35)

“Middle Grade”

High Birth and Middle Birth of Middle Grade

by Rev. T. Kenjitsu Nakagaki

The Buddha said to Ananda and Vaidehi, "Those who attain birth on the highest level of the middle grade are the sentient beings who keep the five precepts, observe the eight abstinences, practice in compliance with various precepts, and abstain from committing the five gravest offenses and other transgressions. They transfer the merit acquired to the Western Land of Utmost Bliss, aspiring to be born there. When such a person is about to die, Amitayus [Amida] appears before him, surrounded by a host of monks and radiating a golden light. He then expounds the truth of suffering, emptiness, impermanence and no-self, and praises renunciation of the world as the way to escape from suffering. Seeing this, the aspirant greatly rejoices and finds himself seated upon a lotus-flower. He kneels down, joins his palms and worships the Buddha. Before he raises his head, he attains birth in the Land of Utmost Bliss, where his lotus-bud soon opens. When the flower opens, he hears various sounds and voices extolling the Four Noble Truths. He immediately attains Arhatship, acquires the three kinds of transcendent knowledge and the six supernatural powers, and realizes the eight samadhis of emancipation. Such a person is called one who attains birth on the highest level of the middle grade."

"Those who attain birth on the middle level of the middle grade are the sentient beings who observe for at least a day and night the eight abstinences, the precepts for a novice or the complete precepts of a monk or a nun, and do not violate any of the rules of conduct. They transfer the merit acquired to the Land of Utmost Bliss, aspiring to be born there. When such an aspirant, perfumed by the virtue of observing the precepts, is about to die, he sees Amitayus[Amida] coming towards him with his attendants, radiating a golden light and carrying a seven-jewelled lotus-flower. He hears a voice in the sky above praising him, saying 'Man of good deeds, since you are virtuous and have followed the teachings of the Buddhas of the three periods, I have come to welcome you.' The aspirant finds himself seated upon the lotus-flower. The flower having closed, the aspirant is born on a jewelled pond of the Western Land of Utmost Bliss. After seven days the lotus-bud unfolds, and then he opens his eyes. With joined palms he pays homage to the World-Honored One, rejoices at hearing the Dharma and reaches the Stage of a Stream-Winner. After half a kalpa, he becomes an Arhat. Such a person is called one who attains birth on the middle level of the middle grade." (translation by Hisao Inagaki [annotation by TK Nakagaki])

The people of High Birth and Middle Birth of Middle Grade are the ones who practice their own liberation by keeping the precepts. The precepts teach them how to control themselves physically as they live their daily lives. They are practitioners of Theravada Buddhism. Five precepts are kept by lay people in their daily life. 1) Do not kill 2) Do not steal 3) Do not do adultery 4) Do not lie and 5) Do not drink alcohol.

Eight Abstinences are precepts that lay people keep for one entire day. They are the five precepts and three more: 6) Do not show off (dress up, use make-up) without entertainment, 7) Do not sleep on a high and relaxing bed, and 8) Do not eat anything in the afternoon.

Three essential learnings of Buddhism are precepts, meditation and wisdom. Controlling our physical condition (precepts) and mental condition (meditation) can provide a wholesome condition for gaining true liberation (wisdom). Let us try to control our conduct and create a healthy daily life.

Maintaining precepts

In our daily life, is like

Driving our car with safety features.

Do you try to maintain them?

Learning from experience is essential

Even though you may not succeed. (by Kenjitsu)