

Learning the Buddha's Great Compassion—the Meditation Sutra (38)

“Meaning to Be a Priest”

Middle Birth of Low Grade

by Rev. T. Kenjitsu Nakagaki

...The Buddha said to Ananda and Vaidehi, "Those who attain birth on the middle level of the lowest grade are the sentient beings who violate the five precepts, the eight precepts or the complete precepts of a monk or a nun. A foolish person such as these steals from the Sangha or takes the personal belongings of monks, or preaches the Dharma with impure motives but feels no remorse. Thus he defiles himself by evil karma, and because of this he will fall into hell. When he is about to die and the flames of hell suddenly close in on him, he may meet a good teacher, who compassionately explains to him the ten supernal powers of Amitayus [Amida], fully describing the majestic power of the light of that Buddha, his virtues in the observance of the precepts, meditation, wisdom, emancipation and knowledge of emancipation. When he has heard this, the evil karma which he has committed during eighty kotis of kalpas of Samsara are extinguished; thus, the fierce flames of hell turn into cool and refreshing breezes, wafting heavenly flowers. On each flower is a transformed Buddha accompanied by bodhisattvas welcoming him. In an instant, he attains birth within a lotus-bud on a seven-jewelled pond. After six kalpas the lotus-bud opens, and then Avalokiteshvara and Mahasthamaprapta comfort him with their noble voices and teach him profound Mahayana sutras. Upon hearing these, he immediately awakens aspiration for the highest Enlightenment. Such a person is called one who attains birth on the middle level of the lowest grade." ... (translation by Hisao Inagaki [annotation by TK Nakagaki])

This section on birth on the middle level of the lowest grade basically talks about three karmic evils that Buddhist priests in particular may commit. It is a section that I can relate to myself very well, needless to say. I believe it is a good lesson for all priests and ministers.

The first evil is “to break the precepts.” Though it may be difficult to keep the precepts, we must do our best to keep them. It is a matter of self-discipline. I must be responsible for my own actions, which also means being responsible for the dharma.

The second evil of “stealing from the sangha” reminds me not to selfishly carry out temple activities for the sake of my own fame or my personal gain instead of public gain. Whatever I do should benefit people who come to the temple and the public in general. The temple is for everyone; it doesn't belong to priests, board members, and individual members. It is nice to feel this is my temple but for others as well. So it is OUR temple, beyond you and me. The temple is a space open for all to learn the path of the Buddha-Dharma.

The last evil is “to teach the dharma with impure motives.” This means to give the dharma for the sake of money and/or fame and to confuse people by telling of a false experience as though one knows enlightenment. The dharma message should guide people to the truth and reality. I was told by my senior minister in Japan, “if your talk only makes people feel happy and enjoy themselves, you are not a dharma-giver, but just an entertainer.”

An especially important phrase for me is “feel no remorse.” We may commit these karmic evils unconsciously and therefore without feeling bad. The evil that one makes unconsciously could be more dangerous than the evil one does consciously. It is important for me to try to listen to other people who may be able to see me better than I see myself.

Practice the Dharma and be
Responsible for the Dharma!
I, my, me come last, and the
Enlightenment should be my central concern.
Seek the benefit for the public, and be
Thoughtful and mindful of my own actions. (by Kenjitsu)☸