

Learning the Buddha's Great Compassion—the Meditation Sutra (39)

“Implicit Meaning of Meditation Sutra”

Low Birth of Low Grade

by Rev. T. Kenjitsu Nakagaki

...The Buddha said to Ananda and Vaidehi, "Those who attain birth on the lowest level of the lowest grade are the sentient beings who commit such evils as the five gravest offenses, the ten evil acts and all kinds of immorality. Owing to such evil karma, the fool like this will fall into evil realms and suffer endless agony for many kalpas. When he is about to die, he may meet a good teacher, who consoles him in various ways, teaching him the wonderful Dharma and urging him to be mindful of the Buddha; but he is too tormented by pain to do so. The good teacher then advises him, 'If you cannot concentrate on the Buddha, then you should say instead, Homage to Amitayus[Amida] Buddha.' In this way, he sincerely and continuously says 'Homage to Amitayus[Amida] Buddha' [Na-mo-a-mi-da-bu] ten times. Because he calls the Buddha's Name, with each repetition, the evil karma which he has committed during eighty kotis of kalpas of Samsara is extinguished. When he comes to die, he sees before him a golden lotus-flower like the disk of the sun, and in an instant he is born within a lotus-bud in the Land of Utmost Bliss. After twelve great kalpas the lotus-bud opens. When the flower opens, Avalokiteshvara and Mahasthamaprapta teach him with voices of great compassion the method of extinguishing evil karma through the realization of Suchness of all dharmas. Hearing this, he rejoices and immediately awakens aspiration for Enlightenment. Such a person is called one who attains birth on the lowest level of the lowest grade. These three together are known as the contemplation of the lowest grade of aspirants and the sixteenth contemplation."

...(translation by Hisao Inagaki [annotation by TK Nakagaki])

This is the last contemplation of the sixteen contemplations of the Meditation Sutra on Amida Buddha. This section on birth on the lowest level of the lowest grade basically talks about the worst people. They are so called “evil persons.” As the Sutra says, “They commit the five gravest offenses, the ten evil acts and all kinds of immorality. Owing to such evil karma, the fool like this will fall into evil realms and suffer endless agony for many kalpas.”

In the conclusion of the Meditation Sutra on the Pure Land, the Buddha says to Ananda, "Bear these words well in mind. To bear these words in mind means to hold fast to the Name of the Buddha of Immeasurable Life." From the beginning of the Sutra, the Buddha has talked about Meditative practices and Non-meditative practices, and in the end, instead, the Buddha teaches that saying the Name (Namo-amidabu) is essential. This section on low birth of the low grade is where the sutra says 'to hold fast to the Name' that is, 'If you cannot concentrate on the Buddha, then you should say instead, Homage to Amitayus[Amida] Buddha.'

What is going on here? A person who reads the Meditation Sutra might normally understand that saying the Name is an easy practice that even powerless evil people can do, and Nembutsu-practice may be seen as insignificant and low practice. However, Master Shan-tao understood that the true reason to teach Meditation Sutra is to focus on liberating evil people through the Nembutsu practice. In other words, Shan-tao read this Sutra from the standpoint of the boundless compassion of the Buddha, and saw that the Nembutsu is the most virtuous and meritorious practice to liberate all beings from suffering and agony. In this sense, various meditative and non-meditative practices guide people to the Nembutsu practice.

Shan-tao pointed out that Meditation Sutra has an explicit meaning and implicit meaning. He said, "... 'Explicit' refers to presenting the meditative and nonmeditative good acts and setting forth the three levels of practitioners and the three minds. The two forms of good and the three types of meritorious acts, however, are not the true cause of birth in the fulfilled land. "Implicit" refers to disclosing the Tathagata's universal vow and revealing the mind that is single, to which practitioners of the three minds are led through Amida's benefiting of others...."

IMmeasurable Light and Life (Amida)

PLays the major role behind the scene

I-Centered practices were introduced one by one, step by step, and then the

I-Transforming practice of the Nembutsu appeared at the very last as a big surprise!

(by Kenjitsu) 