

Learning the Buddha's Great Compassion—the Meditation Sutra (40)

“Realization of Evil Nature”

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])

Let me continue the discussion on low birth of low grade. Why did the Buddha talk about meditative practices and non-meditative practices? The Buddha showed them in order for people to understand how difficult those practices are, to make them aware of the limitation of self-oriented practices, and to help them realize their true nature of selfish evil.

Traditionally, the Larger Sukhavativyuha Sutra reveals the truth of the Dharma world of Amida Buddha, while the Meditation Sutra on the Pure Land reveals the truth of “myself” filled with blind passions such as greed, anger, and ignorance. When the room is dark, we don't see much of the dust in the room, but when the room becomes bright, we can see it clearly. The light of the Buddha makes us aware of how much dust-like blind passion is in our minds.

We tend to seek our own benefit, and forget about others. As long as we are OK, it does not matter how others may suffer. Especially when we face crisis, we tend to become selfish and narrow and even frustrated and angry. In fact, when we judge things such as good, bad, nice, ugly, successful, failed, like, dislike etc, we see them based upon our own convenience. We never see things as they are, but only through our filter of self-centeredness.

Shinran Shonin's words in “Tannisho” Lamenting Differences describes how he saw himself, illumined by the light of Amida's Vow.

“As for me, I simply accept and entrust myself to what my revered teacher Honen told me, ‘Just say the Nembutsu and be saved by Amida’; nothing else is involved. I have no idea whether the Nembutsu is truly the seed for my being born in the Pure Land or whether it is the karmic act for which I must fall into hell. Should I have been deceived by Master Honen and, saying the Nembutsu, were to fall into hell, even then I would have no regrets. The reason is, if I could attain Buddhahood by endeavoring in other practices, but said the Nembutsu and so fell into hell, then I would feel regret at having been deceived. But I am incapable of any other practice, so hell is decidedly my abode whatever I do.”

In another part of Tannisho, Shinran says “Even a good person attains birth in the Pure Land, so it goes without saying that an evil person will.” Here the evil person is the one who realizes the selfish and evil nature of himself/herself through Amida's Universal Vow. In this way, Shinran sees himself in the lowest birth of the lowest grade, which is the special concern of the Buddha's Compassion.

Encountering the pure light of wisdom,

Vast and deep beyond my calculation

I realize my small, shallow and selfish existence,

Living with gratitude to the Nembutsu-dharma. (by Kenjitsu) 