

## Learning the Buddha's Great Compassion-Amida Sutra-

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**"Let us join the Buddha's Assembly"**

*Thus have I heard. At one time the Buddha was staying in the Jeta Grove monastery of Anathapindada's Garden at Shravasti, together with a large assembly of twelve hundred and fifty monks, who were all great arhats, well-known to the people. Among them were great disciples such as the Elders Shariputra, Mahamaudgalyayana, Mahakashyapa, Mahakatyayana, Mahakausthila, Revata, Shuddhipanthaka, Nanda, Ananda, Rahula, Gavampati, Pindola-Bharadvaja, Kalodayin, Mahakapphina, Vakkula and Aniruddha. He was also accompanied by many bodhisattvas, mahasattvas, such as the Dharma Prince, Manjushri, the Bodhisattva Ajita, the Bodhisattva Sweet-smelling Elephant, and the Bodhisattva Constant Endeavor, and by innumerable devas, including Shakra, lord of the gods, and many others.*

(Amida Sutra translated by Hisao Inagaki)

Here is a segment of the beginning of the Amida-Sutra, or Smaller (Sukhavativyuha) Sutra. This is one of the essential Three Pure Land Sutras which Jodoshinshu Buddhist teaching is based on. The Amida-Sutra is one of the most frequently chanted sutras among Mahayana Buddhists in Asian; and, as popular as the Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra. In both the Amida-sutra and Heart sutra, Shakyamuni Buddha speaks to Shariputra. We can say that the Heart Sutra emphasizes the Wisdom side of the Buddha, v.s. The Amida Sutra which emphasizes the Compassion side of the Buddha.

One of the interesting aspects of the Amida-Sutra is the style of discourse by the Buddha. Many sutras begin with questions from disciples and the Buddha responds with his great insight of Enlightenment, but this sutra originates from Shakyamuni Buddha himself. Thus, it signifies the intent of the Buddha on this aspect. Since the Buddha began with his own intention, this sutra is considered a very important sutra in revealing the true intention of the Buddha's appearance in this world. Also this sutra is very unique in that Shakyamuni Buddha calls the name of Shariputra many times (38 times), but Shariputra, who is one of the ten great disciples of the Buddha and well-known for his profound wisdom, never answers the Buddha, never uttering a single word. The world of Enlightenment of Amida Buddha is beyond ordinary words, even wise Shariputra cannot say a word.

I remember that my teacher said "whenever you chant or read the Amida-Sutra, you should replace the name of Shariputra with your own name. This is a sutra where the Buddha talks to you directly, even kindly calling your name 38 times." It creates a very different feeling whenever I chant the Amida-sutra, it is as if the Buddha is sitting right in front of me and giving me the teaching of the Nembutsu-Dharma. I feel that I am really participating in the assembly of the Buddha right here, right now, transcending time.

When we learn Buddhism at school, we tend to objectively understand the teachings. When we learn the Dharma at the temple, we need to understand it subjectively, not separating it from our own lives. In other words, instead of the head (intellectual) understanding, the body understanding is essential. So, we begin with "thus I hear", which leads to "thus I understand" related to our own lives, and then "thus I practice" based on hearing and the understanding of the teachings. So, welcome to the Buddha's Assembly!

**Although the Buddha lived a long time ago,  
Still we can meet the Buddha here and this moment.  
Sutras are living words of the Buddha.  
Even though the Buddha lived long ago,  
Many of us can receive true benefits out of Enlightenment.  
Buddha's words open the path of freedom.  
Learning the sutra with mind and body  
You and I are always sitting right in front of the Buddha, together with his great disciples.**

(by Shaku Kenjitsu)