

Learning of the Buddha's Great Compassion – The Amida Sutra

“Sukhavati” - the Ultimate Bliss

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“*Shariputra, why is that land called 'Utmost Bliss?'*”

“*The beings in that land suffer no pain but only enjoy pleasures of various kinds. For this reason, that land is called 'Utmost Bliss.'*”

(Amida Sutra translated by Hisao Inagaki)

In the Amida Sutra, the Buddha asks four questions to Shariputra. Shariputra does not answer any of them. The first question is related to the Sanskrit title of the Sutra, “Sukhavati-vyuha Sutra:”

“*Why do you call that land (of Amida) 'Sukhavati?'*”

Simply put, Buddhism is the religion which brings ultimate “sukha” or happiness to our lives. The word “Sukhavati” is translated in many ways - ultimate happiness, utmost bliss, peaceful joy, etc. The word expresses a world that is free from physical and psychological suffering (“dukha”). Generally we call Sukhavati “Pure Land.” Tan-luan, one of the Chinese Pure Land masters, distinguished among three kinds of “sukha” or happiness. He said, “There are three kinds of happiness. The first is happiness from outside. It comes from the five senses (eyes, ears, nose, tongue and body). The second is happiness from inside. It comes from the mind of the first, second and third stages of meditation in the world of form. The third is happiness from rejoicing in the Dharma. It comes from wisdom, which is brought by rejoicing in the virtues of the Buddha.”

“Sukhavati” here means the third kind of happiness, the one that comes from the Wisdom of Amida Buddha. So the content of this happiness is the Dharma, or universal truth and reality. Tan-luan also says, “If one does not raise the mind to seek Enlightenment (Bodhi Mind), but wishes to be born in the Buddha Land only to fulfill his selfish desire to gain happiness, he will never be born into the Buddha Land.” Sukhavati is happiness without attachment or selfish desire rather than the secular desire for happiness. In other words, the Pure Land is not a place that we can enjoy for our selfish pleasure. It is a “placeless” place where the virtues of the true wisdom and compassion of the Buddha are fulfilled and dynamically expressed.

When we encounter the essence of Sukhavati, or Pure Land, we experience the true happiness that is rooted in the universal Dharma. Once we see the depth of the Pure Land, various surfaces and forms are recognized as compassionate acts of the Dharma, deeply grounded in the wisdom of the Buddha. Shinran Shonin says in his poem Wasan, “The adornments of the Pure Land of Peace /Are perceived only through the wisdom shared by the Buddha. /That land is infinite, like space, /Vast and without bound.”

Have we encountered true “Sukhavati,” or happiness?

Shining light from the Pure Land
Universal truth and reality
Knocks down egocentric happiness, and
Heals my mind and body of suffering and anguish.
Amitabha, infinite wisdom,
Vertically transforms me.
Amitayus, infinite compassion,
Timely, embraces me.
I am grateful for the force of Amida's Vow.

by Shaku Kenjitsu