

Learning the Buddha's Great Compassion – The Amida Sutra (9)

"From the Infinite Past"

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Shariputra, ten kalpas have passed since Amida Buddha attained Enlightenment. Moreover, Shariputra, he has an immeasurable and unlimited number of shravaka disciples, all of them arhats, whose number cannot be reckoned by any means. His assembly of bodhisattvas is similarly vast. Shariputra, that Buddha-land is filled with such splendid adornments. (Amida Sutra, translated by Hisao Inagaki)

What does it mean that Amida Buddha attained the Enlightenment ten kalpas ago? Is there a time limit, then? Is Amida Buddha not Infinite Life? Of course, one kalpa is a “*lo-o-ng* time.” It is described as the time you would need to take away all the poppy seeds in a ten-mile square city if you took away just one seed every three years. Ten kalpas is, then, a very, very long time, but mathematically speaking, it is not infinite.

Master Shinran said, “It is taught that ten kalpas have now passed / Since Amida attained Buddhahood, / But the Buddha seems more ancient / Than kalpas countless as particles.” (Collected Works of Shinran, p. 340) He also said, “Amida, who attained Buddhahood in the infinite past, / Full of compassion for foolish beings of five defilements, / Took the form of Shakyamuni Buddha / And appeared in Gaya (India).” (CWS, p. 349) How did Shinran Shonin understand the concept of ten kalpas?

The sutras were taught by the Buddha to provide a way for us to grasp the world of Enlightenment beyond our ordinary senses. As we read the Amida Sutra, we can understand that “ten kalpas” is used with the same meaning as “infinite.” But we can also take the expression “ten kalpas” as an explanation of cause (the practice of Dharmakara Bikhu) and effect (becoming Amida Buddha) so that we are able to understand the underlying concept logically. Amida Buddha is the Buddha from the infinite past. Amida Buddha in its original nature is the Buddhahood itself. It is called Dharma-kaya (Dharma-body), and takes the form described in the Larger Sutra which talks about the bodhisattva Dharmakara who became Amida Buddha ten kalpas ago and who, moreover, took the form of Shakyamuni Buddha as the physical representation (*rupa-kaya*) of Amida Buddha.

Therefore, in the language of the sutras, ten kalpas are equal to infinite, and infinite is equal to ten kalpas. The limited form of ten kalpas leads us to unlimited or infinite Buddhahood, and unlimited Buddhahood becomes limited form with skillful means or the kindness of the Buddha. Here we see the inseparable relationship between Shakyamuni Buddha (limited form) and Amida Buddha (Infinite Light and Life).

Though we are limited as human beings, burdened with the blind passions of greed, anger and ignorance, when we encounter Amida's Vow we become a part of the Infinite Light and Life in the Nembutsu, or, to say it another way, the infinite Amida becomes a part of us even as we keep the limited quality of human beings.

Immeasurable Life Buddha

Necessarily takes measurable form with compassion,

Floating naturally from the high to the low.

Immeasurable Light Buddha

Necessarily brings awareness to the unlimited cosmos

Illuminating silently like the full moon at night.

Though I am limited,

Encountering the Amida's Vow

Puts on me the infinite clothes of the Dharma.

As Amida embraces me,

Still I have greed, anger and selfishness, but

That's perfectly fine with me now! (by Shaku Kenjitsu)