

Learning the Buddha's Great Compassion –Meditation Sutra (1)
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“Tragedy at Rajagriha”-1

Jodoshinshu (Shin) Buddhism is based on three Pure Land Sutras, namely, the Larger Sukhavativyuha Sutra, the Meditation Sutra on the Pure Land, and the Amida Sutra. Many sutras were delivered in a rather peaceful situation when disciples asked questions and the Buddha answered. However the Meditation Sutra on the Pure Land is uniquely different from other sutras because it was taught in an urgent situation known as the “Tragedy at Rajagriha.” The Buddha gave the discourse to Queen Vaidehi, who had been confined by her son, prince Ajatasatru, and cried out in desperate need. Here we see that Pure Land Buddhism (Nembutsu teaching) is for those in the society who are in suffering and pain. This is the teaching offered for the liberation of ordinary people.

Here is the story of the Tragedy at Rajagriha as it appears at the very beginning of the Meditation Sutra on the Pure Land:

“Thus have I heard. At one time the Buddha was staying on the Vulture Peak in Rajagriha with a large assembly of twelve hundred and fifty monks. He was also accompanied by thirty-two thousand bodhisattvas led by Manjushri, the Dharma Prince.

At that time in the great city of Rajagriha there was a prince named Ajatashatru. Instigated by his wicked friend, Devadatta, he seized his father, King Bimbisara, confined him in a room with seven-fold walls, and forbade all the court officials to visit the king. Vaidehi, the king's consort, was devoted to him. After having bathed and cleansed herself, she spread over her body ghee and honey mixed to a paste with wheat flour, filled her ornaments with grape juice, and secretly offered this food and drink to the king. He ate the flour paste and drank the juice and then asked for water. Having rinsed his mouth, he joined his palms in reverence and, facing the Vulture Peak, worshipped the World-Honored One from afar and said, "Mahamaudgalyayana is my close friend. I beseech you to have pity on me and send him here to give me the eight precepts." Then Mahamaudgalyayana flew as swift as a hawk to the king. Day after day he came like this to give him the eight precepts. The World-Honored One also sent the Venerable Purna likewise to the palace to expound the Dharma to the king. Three weeks passed in this way. Because he had eaten the flour-paste and heard the Dharma, he appeared peaceful and contented.

Then Ajatashatru asked the guard, "Is my father still alive?" The guard replied, "Great king, his consort spreads flour paste over her body and fills her ornaments with grape juice and offers these to the king. The monks Mahamaudgalyayana and Purna come here through the air to expound the Dharma to him. It is impossible to stop them." Hearing this, Ajatashatru became furious with his mother and said, "Because you are an accomplice to that enemy, mother, you too are an enemy. Those monks are evil, for with their delusive magic they have kept this wicked king alive for many days." So saying, he drew his sharp sword, intending to kill her. At that time the king had a minister named Candraprabha who was intelligent and wise. Together with Jivaka he made obeisances to the king and said, "Great King, according to a certain Vedic scripture, since the beginning of this cosmic period, there have been eighteen thousand wicked kings who have killed their fathers out of their desire to usurp the throne, but we have never heard of anyone who has committed the outrage of killing his mother. Your Majesty, if you commit such an outrage, you will bring disgrace upon the ksatriya class. As your ministers, we cannot bear to hear what people will say. As this would be the act of an outcaste, we could no longer remain here." Having spoken these words, the two ministers grasped their swords and stepped back. Agitated and frightened, Ajatashatru said to Jivaka, "Are you not on my side?" Jivaka replied, "Your Majesty, please restrain yourself and do not kill your mother." Hearing this, the king repented and begged their forgiveness. Having thrown away his sword, he stopped short of killing his mother and, instead, ordered the court officials to lock her in an inner chamber and not to allow her to leave.” (“Kanmuryoju-kyo’ translated by Hisao Inagaki

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