

Learning the Buddha's Great Compassion – Meditation Sutra (5)

“Smile of the Buddha”

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(Sutra text continued from May.) *Vaidehi then said to the Buddha, "O World-Honored One, these Buddha-lands are pure and free of defilement, and all of them are resplendent. But I wish to be born in the Land of Utmost Bliss of Amitayus. I beseech you, World-Honored One, to teach me how to contemplate that land and attain Samadhi."*

The World-Honored One smiled, and from his mouth came five-colored rays of light, each shining on King Bimbisara's head. Although the old king was confined, with his unhindered mind's eye he saw the World-Honored One in the distance. He knelt down in homage to the Buddha and effortlessly made spiritual progress until he reached the Stage of a Non-returner.

Then the World-Honored One said to Vaidehi, "Do you know that Amitayus is not far away? Fix your thoughts upon and contemplate that Buddha-land, then you will accomplish the pure acts. I shall describe it to you in detail with various illustrations, so that all ordinary people in the future who wish to practice the pure karma may also be born in that Western Land of Utmost Bliss. ...

(“Kanmuryoju-kyo” translated by Hisao Inagaki)

Hearing Queen Vaidehi’s sincere request for help in seeking the path of Enlightenment, the Buddha smiled. You may think that to smile is not a big deal, but Zen tradition finds profound and important meaning in Buddha’s smile. When the Buddha held a piece of lotus flower and smiled, most of the sangha members of monks and nuns failed to get what he meant, only Mahakasyapa nodded with enlightened mind. This transmission from mind to mind is the beginning of the Zen tradition.

The Buddha’s smile in the Meditation Sutra also has important and profound meaning. Because of Queen Vaidehi’s request, the Primal Vow of Amida Buddha was about to be revealed as the source of liberation from suffering and pain. The Buddha must be ready to describe the essential practice and teaching of the Pure Land Way for those who suffered like Queen Vaidehi.

I don’t know if Vaidehi understood the deep meaning of Shakyamuni’s smile -maybe not. However, King Bimbisara understood its meaning, as he was a very devote Buddhist who learned and practiced the Buddha’s teachings. The sutra says that King Bimbisara reached the stage of non-returner (*anagamin*), cutting blind passion in the world of desire and never returning to illusion.

Does the Buddha smile at you? When does the Buddha smile at you? Freedom and liberation in Buddhism can be realized when one encounters the real smile of the Buddha. As practitioners of Shin Buddhism, we see the smiles of the Buddha Amida, Shakyamuni, and all other Buddhas and Bodhisattvas whenever we say the Nembutsu and think of the Nembutsu.

To relate this sutra to present times, I think the Buddha's smile has been missing in the world since 9-11. We have more anger, worry, doubt, selfishness and coldness than before. In order to recover our awareness of the smile, we need to develop and cultivate more compassion, love, trust, kindness and warmth for all living beings. I hope the Buddha’s smiling will reach out until it is seen by everyone.

Shining light-like, Dharma nurtures our seeds of wisdom and compassion,
 Millions of lives receive the benefits.
 Insecurity, fear, anger are transformed into virtues.
 Life is precious in the eyes of the Buddha
 Each life is shining with its own uniqueness, its full potentiality to be enlightened.

(by Kenjitsu)