

## Learning the Buddha's Great Compassion – The Meditation Sutra (19) *“Image of the Buddha”*

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“...When you visualize the Buddha, you should first form his image. Whether your eyes are open or closed, perceive a jeweled image of him, who is the color of gold from the Jambu River, sitting on that flower-throne. When you have perceived a seated image of the Buddha, your mind's eye will open and you will clearly and distinctly see the seven-jeweled glorious objects of the Land of Utmost Bliss, including the seven-jeweled ground, the jeweled ponds, the rows of jeweled trees covered with heavenly-jeweled curtains and jeweled nets spreading over the sky. Perceive these as clearly and distinctly as if you were seeing an object in the palm of your hand. After you have seen this image, visualize on the Buddha's left a large lotus-flower, which is exactly the same as the one described above, and then another large one on his right. Visualize an image of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara sitting on the flower-seat on his left, sending forth a golden light just like the Buddha image described above, and then an image of the Bodhisattva Mahasthamaprapta sitting on the flower-seat on his right.

“When you have attained this vision, you will see these images of the Buddha and bodhisattvas sending forth golden rays, which illuminate the jeweled trees. Under each tree there are also three lotus-flowers with images of a Buddha and two Bodhisattvas sitting on them, so that the land is completely filled with such images.

When you have attained this vision, you will perceive the streams, rays of light, jeweled trees, ducks, geese, male and female mandarin ducks, and so forth, all expounding the wonderful Dharma. Whether in meditation or not, you will always hear the wonderful Dharma. When you rise from meditation, you should remember what you have heard, not forget it, and confirm it with the sutras. If it does not agree with the sutras, it should be called an illusion, but if it does agree, it is called the attainment of the general perception of the Land of Utmost Bliss. This is the visualizing of the Buddha-image, and is known as the eighth contemplation. If you have attained this, the evil karma which you have committed during innumerable kotis of kalpas of Samsara will be extinguished and, while in this life, you will attain the Buddha-Recollection Samadhi. To practice in this way is called the correct contemplation, and to practice otherwise is incorrect.” (translation by Hisao Inagaki)

Before meditating on the actual Buddha Land, Shakyamuni Buddha taught, we should begin by visualizing the sun and the water (first & second meditation), which are easier for ordinary people to relate to. Here, the Buddha teaches the eighth meditation, seeing the image of Amida Buddha, as a prelude to visualizing the true Buddha (ninth meditation). The image used in this meditation could be a statue or a painting of Amida Buddha. Such images are symbols of formless forms or forms of kindness to guide us to the world of Enlightenment.

Statues of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas have been made in various Buddhist countries for many centuries. Making Buddha statues requires special training and practice with a mind of utmost respect and gratitude. Thirty-two distinctive features of the Buddha are carved on the statues. The sense of carving the Buddha helps the Buddha appear out of the wood. Buddha statues are not considered an art form, so carvers never put their name or signature on them. Though the statues may have been created by the artist's hands, he does his work on behalf of the Buddha.

Master Shan-tao, a Chinese Pure Land master, encouraged us to visualize each part of the Buddha's body, from head to toe and then from toe to head, including the lotus petals where the Buddha sits. Buddha-Tathagata has appeared in forms to communicate with us. We encounter the Buddha-Dharma through contemplating the Amida statues. I wonder how many of us really pay attention to all the details of the Buddha statue.

Illuminating my space as well as my mindful heart,  
 Magnificent figures of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas  
 Are simply sitting or standing quietly.  
 Gazing at their peaceful face and posture, I  
 Enter the world beyond the forms. ☸