

Learning the Buddha's Great Compassion—the Meditation Sutra (27)

Nine Categories of Births “Meritorious Goods (Non-Meditative Practices)”

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The Buddha said to Ananda and Vaidehi, “Those born in the Western Land are of nine grades. Those who attain birth on the highest level of the highest grade are sentient beings who resolve to be born in that land, awaken the three kinds of faith and so are born there. What are the three? They are, first, the sincere faith; second, the deep faith; and third, the faith that seeks birth there by transferring one’s merit. Those who have these three kinds of faith will certainly be born there.” (Translation by Hisao Inagaki)

The main discourse of the Meditation Sutra on the Pure Land has two parts: One is on meditative goods or meditative practices, and describes thirteen different methods of visualization; the other is on non-meditative goods or practices and describes nine grades of birth based upon the karma of practitioners. Shan-tao, one of the Chinese Pure Land Masters, explained that the purpose of meditative practice is “to stop various thoughts, and focus one’s mind,” while that of non-meditative practice is “to abandon evil/bad and practice good.” Up to this point, I have been discussing meditative goods/practices in my *Kokoro* articles. From this section forward, I will discuss how Sakyamuni Buddha began to teach non-meditative goods/practices. Notice that the first thirteen meditative practices were taught to respond to the request of Queen Vaidehi. She said, “I wish to be born in the Land of Utmost Bliss of Amida. I beseech you, World-Honored One (Sakyamuni Buddha), to teach me how to contemplate that land and attain Samadhi.”

According to Master Shan-tao, after responding to Vaidehi’s request, Sakyamuni Buddha taught non-meditative practices with his own intention of embracing those who may not be able to complete meditative practices. In fact, many ordinary lay followers, including Vaidehi, are out of luck if they want to gain enlightenment through difficult meditative practices. Therefore, Sakyamuni Buddha, with the compassionate intention of opening the path for common people, continued to teach three kinds of meritorious acts that bring happiness and peace to yourself and others.

The first one is “meritorious practices,” which means to follow Mahayana practice to attain Enlightenment, by raising Bodhi-seeking mind, reciting and practicing Mahayana sutras, and encouraging others to the path as well.

The second one is “meritorious precepts,” which means to follow the precepts like Theravada Buddhism to purify one’s life-style.

The third one is “meritorious secular goods,” which means to exercise filial piety and learn to be compassionate, righteous, respectful, wise, and faithful.

The teachings of nine grades of Birth divide people who practice the above three kinds of meritorious goods into nine categories from high level of high birth to low level of low birth. By transferring the level of meritorious virtue from practice, one will attain birth accordingly.

There are high level-high birth, high level-mid birth, high level-low birth, mid level-high birth, mid level-mid birth, mid level-low birth, low level-high birth, low level-mid birth, low level-low birth.

Although I will talk about them in detail later, I would like to draw attention now to something about the low level categories. All three low levels are for those who have done evil and anti-meritorious acts. In fact, the Nembutsu practice is designed to liberate those evil dwellers to attain birth in the true Buddha Land. So the most important purpose of the Meditation Sutra is, with the profound compassion of the Buddha, to open the path to those who are struggling because of evil/bad karma. Master Shan-tao really challenged the other Buddhist teachers at that time, who understood that both the meditative practices and the non-meditative meritorious practices in the Meditation Sutra are practices for sages, not ordinary beings.

As we go through the nine categories, let us feel the compassion of the Buddha.

Not being requested by Vaidehi, the Buddha teaches meritorious goods.

It is the Buddha’s intention to teach the path for all people with compassion.

Nobody should suffer from the world of birth-and-death;

Even those who have committed grave evils should have a chance. (By Kenjitsu) 🌸