

Nine Grades of Rebirth

from the Visualisation Sutra

(The most important chapter of the Visualisation Sutra for Pure Land practitioners)

The Highest Grade of Rebirth

(i) the Highest level of the Highest Grade

The Buddha said to Ananda and Vaidehi, "Sentient beings in the highest level of the highest grade of rebirth are those who vow to be reborn there. By awakening the three kinds of hearts they are reborn there. What are the three? The first is the utmost sincere heart, the second is the heart of deep faith, and the third is the heart which vows for rebirth by transferring merit. Those who possess these three hearts will definitely be reborn in that Land.

Also, there are three kinds of beings who will be reborn there. Who are the three? First are the compassionate ones who refrain from killing and observe the precepts; second are those who read and recite the Mahayana Vaipulya Sutras; and third are those who cultivate the six kinds of mindfulness. Transferring the merit for rebirth, they vow to be reborn in that land. With this merit, from one to seven days, they will immediately attain rebirth.

When being born, the aspirant is diligent and vigorous, and the Tathagata Amitabha appears along with Avalokitesvara, Mahasthamaprapta, **countless transformed Buddhas**, hundreds of thousands of bhikkhus and sravakas, countless heavenly beings and seven-jeweled palaces.

Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara holds a diamond platform, together with Bodhisattva Mahasthamaprapta, they approach the aspirant. Amitabha Buddha emits great light which illuminates the aspirant's body, and together with the Bodhisattvas, offers welcoming hands. Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta, along with countless other Bodhisattvas, then praise the aspirant and tell him to be more diligent. Upon seeing this the aspirant jumps with joy and bliss,

seeing himself seated atop the diamond platform, and following after the Buddha, is reborn into that Land in a snap of a finger.

Once reborn in that land, the aspirant sees the Buddha's body and the perfection of the Buddha's myriad characteristics. The perfection of the Bodhisattvas' physical characteristics is also seen. The light of the jeweled forests widely proclaims the wondrous Dharma, and having heard it, the aspirant will instantly realise the Dharma of No Birth.

Then, in an instant, the aspirant will visit and venerate all the Buddhas of the ten directions, and in the presence of all Buddhas receive a prediction of their future Buddhahood from each Buddha. Upon returning to the Land, they attain countless hundreds of thousands of Dharma gates of dharanis.

These are called sentient beings in the highest level of the highest grade of rebirth."

(ii) the Middle Level of the Highest Grade

"The sentient beings reborn in the middle level of the highest grade of rebirth, do not necessarily need to uphold, read and recite the Vaipulya Sutras. However, they can fully understand their meaning. Upon hearing the highest truth, their hearts are not perplexed or shaken, and deeply believing in the law of cause and effect, they do not slander the Mahayana. Transferring the merit, they vow to be born in the Land of Ultimate Bliss.

The practitioner of this practice, at the time of death, Amitabha Buddha, together with Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta, countless beings and family surrounding this person, holding the purple-gold platform and approaching him, praise him and said, 'Dharma son, you have practiced the Mahayana and have understood the highest truth. For this reason, we have now come to welcome you.' Amitabha Buddha and thousands of transformed Buddhas offer their welcoming hands.

The practitioner sees himself seated on the purple-gold platform, and with palms pressed together, praises the Buddhas. In one instant, he is immediately reborn in that Land. In the seven-jeweled lotus pond,

the purple-gold platform becomes a huge lotus, after one night, it opens.

The practitioner's body becomes the color of purple-gold, there is a seven-jewelled lotus under his feet, the Buddha and the Bodhisattvas emit light which illuminates the practitioner's body, his eyes immediately open, due to the merit from his past lives, he heard the most profound supreme truth proclaimed by many voices. Descending from the golden platform, with palms pressed together, he praises the World-Honored One.

After seven days have passed, the aspirant immediately attains annutara-samyak-sambodhi, to the stage of non-regression. Instantly he is capable of flying, to the ten directions, to revere all the Buddhas. He cultivates all kinds of *Samadhis* from all the Buddhas. After one small kalpa has passed, the aspirant attains the Dharma of No birth and Tolerance, and receives a prediction for his future Buddhahood.

These are called sentient beings in the middle level of the highest grade of rebirth."

(iii) the Lowest Level of the Highest Grade

"The sentient beings reborn in the lowest level of the highest grade of rebirth **also believe in the law of cause and effect, do not slander the Mahayana, generate the unsurpassed Bodhicitta**, transferring the merit and vow to be reborn in the Land of Ultimate Bliss.

When the life of such an aspirant is about to end, Amitabha Buddha together with Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta and other Bodhisattvas, carrying a golden lotus, manifest into **five hundred transformed Buddhas** to welcome this person. These five hundred transformed Buddhas extend their hands to the person, praising, 'Dharma son, you are now pure, having generated the unsurpassed Bodhicitta, and so we have come to receive you.'

Having seen these things, the aspirant sees himself seated on a golden lotus which then closes, following the World-Honored One, immediately attains birth in the seven-jeweled lotus pond. After one day and one night, the lotus opens, then within seven days, the aspirant can see the Buddha. Although he can see the Buddha body,

he does not understand all the great signs in his mind, but after three weeks he then understands clearly. Upon hearing all the voices, proclaiming the wondrous Dharma, the aspirant can travel to the ten directions and make offerings to all the Buddhas, and in front of all the Buddhas he hears the most profound Dharma. After three small kalpas have passed, the aspirant attains a hundred wisdom Dharma gates and dwells in the Stage of Joy.

These are called sentient beings in the lowest level of the highest grade of rebirth. This is called the fourteenth visualization.”

The Middle Grade of Rebirth

(i) Highest Level of the Middle Grade

The Buddha said to Ananda and Vaidehi, "The sentient beings reborn in the highest level of the middle grade are those who have upheld the five precepts, upheld the eight precepts, upheld all the precepts, have not committed the five grave offenses and are free from all faults. With all these virtuous roots, transferring the merits and vowing to seek rebirth, they will be reborn in the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss.

When their lives are about to end, Amitabha Buddha and other Bhikkhus, and other family members surround this person. Amitabha Buddha emits golden light and approaches this person, expounding the teachings of suffering, emptiness, impermanence and non-self, praising the monastic life which enables one to be free from suffering.

Upon seeing this, the aspirant's heart is filled with bliss, and sees himself seated on a lotus platform. Kneeling down with hands together, bowing to the Buddha, and even before his head is raised, he instantly attains rebirth in the Land of Ultimate Bliss.

The lotus opens, and the aspirant hears many voices praising the Four Noble Truths. Instantly the aspirant attains the stage of an *Arhat*, acquires the three kinds of transcendental wisdom and the six supernatural powers, and realizes the eight *samadh*is of liberation.

These are called the sentient beings in the highest level of the middle grade of rebirth.

(ii) Middle Level of the Middle Grade

"The sentient beings reborn in the middle level of the middle grade of rebirth are those who, for at least one day and one night uphold the eight precepts; or for one day and one night uphold the *samanera* precepts; or for one day and one night uphold the complete monastic precepts, with no lack of dignified behaviour. Transferring the merit towards seeking rebirth in the Land of Ultimate Bliss.

Permeated with the fragrance of these precepts, such a practitioner, when his life is about to end, sees Amitabha Buddha and other family members, emitting golden light, and holding a seven-jeweled lotus, approaching the practitioner. The practitioner hears a voice from the sky, praising, 'Good man! As a virtuous person like you, who has followed the teachings of the Buddhas of the three ages, I have come to welcome you.' The practitioner then sees himself sitting on a lotus, the lotus then closes, and he attains rebirth in the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss.

In the jewelled pond, after seven days have passed, the lotus opens. When the lotus is fully open, the practitioner opens his eyes, presses his hands together and praises the World-Honored One. Hearing the Dharma, he is filled with joy and attains the stage of a Stream-enterer. Then after half a kalpa, attains the stage of *Arhat*.

These are called the sentient beings of the middle level of the middle grade of rebirth.

(iii) Lowest Level of the Middle Grade

"The sentient beings reborn in the lowest level of the middle grade of rebirth are those good men or good women who attend dutifully to their parents and do benevolent deeds in the world.

When the life of such a person is about to end, he encounters a good advisor who explains about Amitabha Buddha and the Land of Ultimate Bliss, and also speaks about the Forty-eight Great Vows of Bhikkhu Dharmakara.

Upon hearing these things, he soon comes to the end of his life. And like a strong man who bends and extends an arm, he is immediately reborn in the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss.

Seven days after his rebirth, he encounters Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta. Hearing the Dharma, he is filled with joy and attains the stage of Stream-enterer; then after one small kalpa, he attains the stage of *Arhat*.

These are called the sentient beings of the lowest level of the middle grade of rebirth. This is called the fifteenth visualization.”

The Lowest Grade of Rebirth

(i) Highest Level of the Lowest Grade

The Buddha said to Ananda and Vaidehi, "The sentient beings in the highest level of the lowest grade of rebirth are those who have committed many evil acts. Although they do not slander the *Vaipulya* sutras, such foolish person performs many evil deeds, yet feels no remorse.

When his life is about to end, he encounters a good advisor who tells him the names and titles of the twelve categories of the Mahayana sutras. By hearing the names of these sutras, the heavy and evil karma of a thousand kalpa is eliminated. The wise advisor also teaches him to bring his hands together and recite 'Namo Amitabha Buddha.' Due to the recitation of the Buddha's name, the evil karma binding him for five hundred million kalpas is eliminated.

At that time, the Buddha sends a transformed Buddha, a transformed Avalokitesvara and a transformed Mahasthamaprapta, who appear before the aspirant and praise him, 'Good man! Because you have recited the Buddha's name, your evil karma has been eliminated. We have come to welcome you.' After these words are spoken, the aspirant immediately sees the light of the transformed Buddha which permeates the room. Having seen this, the aspirant is filled with joy and his life then comes to an end. Riding atop a jeweled lotus, he

follows behind the transformed Buddha and is reborn in the jeweled pond. After seven weeks, the lotus opens.

When this flower opens, the great compassionate Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara and Bodhisattva Mahasthamaprapta emit great bright light, standing before the aspirant, expounding the profound sutras of the twelve categories. Upon hearing this, the aspirant believes and understands it, and generates the unsurpassed Bodhicitta. After ten small kalpas, the aspirant attains a hundred wisdom Dharma gates and enters into the First Stage of Ground.

These are called the sentient beings in the highest level of the lowest grade of rebirth.

(ii) Middle Level of the Lowest Grade

The Buddha said to Ananda and Vaidehi, "The sentient beings in the middle level of the lowest grade of rebirth are those who violate the five precepts, the eight precepts, and the complete monastic precepts. Such a foolish person steals the property of the Sangha, takes the personal belongings of the monks, preaches the Dharma with impure intent, feels no remorse, and prides(adorns) himself on all these evil deeds. Such an evil person shall fall into hell due to his evil karma. At the time of near death, the fires of hell simultaneously appear before him.

He encounters a good advisor who with great compassion, immediately praises and explains to him the ten powers and the majesty of Amitabha Buddha, praising fully the Buddha for his light and transcendental powers, and further praises the precepts, meditation, wisdom, liberation, and the knowledge of liberation. When this person has heard these, the evil karma which binds him from birth to death for eight hundred million kalpas is eliminated. The fires in hell are transformed into a cool breeze, the wind blows the heavenly flowers. On top of the flowers sit transformed Buddhas and Bodhisattvas who come to welcome this person.

In a single moment of thought, he attains birth in the seven-jeweled lotus pond, being inside in the lotus, after six kalpas, the lotus then opens.

Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta with the Brahma sound, comfort that person, and expound the profound Mahayana Sutras. Upon hearing this Dharma, this person instantly generates the unsurpassed Bodhicitta.

These are called the sentient beings of the middle level of the lowest grade of rebirth.

(iii) Lowest Level of the Lowest Grade

The Buddha said to Ananda and Vaidehi, "The sentient beings in the lowest level of the lowest grade of rebirth are those who commit evil karma, the five grave offenses and the ten evil deeds, and are possessed with all kinds of evil. Such a foolish person, due to his evil karma, shall fall into evil realms for many kalpas and endure endless suffering.

Such a foolish person, at the time of death, he encounters a good advisor, who comforts him in various ways, expounds the wonderful Dharma, teaches him to be mindful of the Buddha. That person is too tormented by suffering and is unable to be mindful of the Buddha. The good friend tells him, 'If you can't be mindful of the Buddha, you should recite the name of the Buddha of Infinite Life, with a sincere heart and without ceasing, and recite Namō Amitabha Buddha for ten times.' Because this person recites the Buddha's name, with every recitation, the evil karma binding him from birth to death for eight million kalpas is eliminated.

At the time of death, this person sees a golden lotus, like the sun, which appears in front of him. In one instant, he immediately attains rebirth in the Land of Ultimate Bliss.

After twelve great kalpas, the lotus opens. When the flower opens, Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta, using the Brahma sound, expound for this person the truth of all dharmas, to eliminate his evil karma. Upon hearing this, the person is filled with joy, and instantly generates the heart of Bodhicitta.

These are called the sentient beings of the lowest level of the lowest grade of rebirth. This is called the sixteenth visualization."