**25 March 2021
The Fifth Vow*****Oh Blessed One, may I not come to the complete awakening if, when I have done so, beings in my Pure Land do not have full recall of previous lives.***

There were many different beliefs and schools of thought around the Ganges during the time of Siddhartha Gotama. Concepts such as samsara, karma, moksha, nirvana, and Buddha are not exclusively Buddhist. They were concepts that he worked with and which helped shape his understanding and thinking. He would often take the concept and give it a twist which would make it more meaningful and relevant to one’s life.

In order to get an idea of why this vow is important we need to understand some of those beliefs that were held at the time of the Buddha. Many of the ancient Indian religions used concepts such as samsara to explain our existence in this world and the transmigration from one life to another. Samsara is the Sanskrit word for *the cycle of death and rebirth* or the *karmic cycle*. Our existence in this world is simply part of a cycle of mundane existence, where we aimlessly wander or drift, unless we experience liberation (*moksha*). There is a sense of it being a permanent and endless cycle.

Coming into this world, and this life, is probably the most confusing and bewildering experience I have ever had. I am often left feeling a little bit confused about why we do the things that we do, and why don’t we do other things? It’s like being gifted a complex organism in a complex society, that is familiar, and alien at the same time, without an operating guide. I feel both at home here, and at the same time like a guest passing through. What are we supposed to do in this life? Some people act as if they know and some are happy to make it up as they go along, but for others, it can be a source of dukkha. We long to know things like, ‘Who am I?’ and, ‘am I doing what I was put on earth to do?’

I tend to think that Siddhartha Gotama was in the last category. As a young man, he enjoyed a life of luxury and yet he was still unhappy and dissatisfied. He could have stayed in the palace and ruled his land. But he didn’t. He had the nagging feeling that something wasn’t right, and so he left his palace, and his family behind in search for the truth. We don’t really hear about his family and their reaction but you could imagine that this is not a peaceful moment in his life.

His life as a young prince had been pleasurable but meaningless. I too often wondered as a young woman if there was any meaning to my life. Life up to a certain point was ok but lacking. I don’t think I even thought very much about meaning because I was convinced by what I was doing at the time. Go to school, finish your degree, and get a job. It wasn’t long after I worked at a place where I spent all day analysing data that I found myself looking at the clock every minute. I had arrived. I ticked all the boxes and yet my life held no meaning. There were some aspects that were fun and great but there was also a longing for something more, as well as an irritating voice nagging at me. I used to ask myself, ‘Is this really what I was meant to do?’ or, ‘have a missed something?’ or, ‘why am I not happy when I have everything that I need?’

Samsara and karma are useful concepts to help us understand some of this disquiet.  The Buddha taught that there is no I, me, or mine so that frees us up to be anything and anybody we want to be. Karma, which means *action* or *deed,*suggests that once we have done something for the first time, we create seeds that then make it easier to repeat that action.

The principle of karma, on one level, is simple and easy to understand in that whatever we do will have consequences. For example, if we drink too much wine then we will get drunk. And once we start one glass it’s easy to reach for another. Easy right? Except that it doesn’t stop there. Once drunk we will behave in ways that we wouldn’t when sober, and those actions will have consequences. Abstaining from taking mind altering substances is one of the 5 common precepts in Buddhism, not because drinking is in and of itself a sin, but because we know that if we are not in the right frame of mind we might break the first 4 precepts; not killing, not stealing, not cheating sexually, and not lying. If we did go on and commit one of those acts then there will be karma-phala. In other words, we will have to bear the fruit of our karma; pleasant or unpleasant.

The Buddha extended the meaning of karma to another level, to include our thoughts and our feelings and not simply the act or deed alone. This idea leads to a notion that what we feel will lead to thinking a certain way, and once we have thought it, and can see it in our mind’s eye, then it is easy to act upon. If we intend to harm then it’s more probable that we will. In other words, we are what we intend to do. We are noble if we act with noble intention. We are vile if we act with a harmful intention.

The intention behind our action is like an energy that pushes forward, moment by moment, until we die. As we approach death, and we take our last breath, it may seem as if that is the end, but the principle of karma continues to apply. That energy goes on and enters a new life. One life is like a candle, and the energy is like the flame. As soon as the candle dies down, we can take the flame from that candle to light a new candle and so on. So long as there is a flame we will always find a new candle to light. Karma is this flame.

From Buddhist texts, the impression is that we have been going around samsara for an immense period of time. It would be impossible to fathom how many lives we have lived. It is also said that it takes an equally immense period of time to be reborn as a human which, is why Buddhists like to emphasise how precious birth as a human is. The only problem is that humans are fallible, ignorant, vile creatures. We tend to take something simple and make it complex. And yet, the Buddha was a human and attained enlightenment so it also in the human realm that altruism, compassion, and love are manifested and made real.

As humans, we can look ahead and plan, and if we know where we want to go then we can cultivate conditions that might just bring about those outcomes. One of the conditions that we can cultivate is our state of mind. We can learn to cultivate a good mind. We may not be able to choose what we feel but we can do something about what we do with those feelings that arise.

If we can hold those feelings in check. If we can be with our own pain then we are practicing compassion. Buddhism is a religion with compassion and wisdom at the heart of it. Compassion can be broken down into two words ‘com’which means *with* and ‘passion’which means *suffering*. Etymologically then, compassion means *with suffering*. To practice compassion is to be with suffering. And what better way than to have experienced it oneself.

If we could remember all our experiences of suffering from all our different past lives, then we might be able to be with another person’s suffering when we are confronted with it by sheer power of having lived through it ourselves. We would have a better idea of what that person is going through. In that place of fellow-feeling we might be able to communicate that we understand how they feel and they might then feel less alone in their pain. It doesn’t take it away but it softens the hard edges of isolation and loneliness.

If we think about all the different types of roles, functions, personalities, etc. that we have played and manifested in this life and then imagine that we also lived and played different roles in our past lives then maybe we will have more compassion to a wider range of people in our life. If we can imagine that we were once all those people who we can’t seem to muster up a tiny bit of compassion towards, a tyrant, a dictator, a member of a royal family, a political leader, a CEO, a billionaire, or a farmer, a tramp, a prostitute, a vagrant, a pirate, a thief, a nobody, or anyone else who can imagine then maybe we would be able to be with that person’s suffering.

We have no idea how long we have been going around samsara. On one hand, it doesn’t matter. In understanding that our future depends on our intentions then we can keep our hearts and minds good to help us create a future which will be free of suffering. This is a practice that will stand us in good stead from the moment we start right to the moment we die and thereafter.

And thank goodness Amida has made this vow. For those of us who fail to keep our intentions pure there is hope. The practice is to simply call out to Amida Buddha who will ensure that we go straight to the Pure Land when we die. Once reborn there we will recall all our past lives which will help us to be more compassionate to ourselves and to others around us.