**16 April 2021
The Seventh Vow - The Divine Ear**

***Oh Blessed One, may I not come to the complete awakening if, when I have done so, beings in my Pure Land should not have the divine ear that enables one to hear the Dharma simultaneously being taught in a myriad ways by myriads of Buddhas in myriads of Pure Lands, and if they should not have the ability to retain and comprehend those great teachings.***

The ear picks up sounds. At any given time, there may be any number of different things making a noise but how many do our ears pick up? I had an ear infection a few years ago and I couldn’t hear a thing from my right ear for about a year. The doctors couldn’t see any blockage so they gave me antibiotics to rule out a bacterial infection, but after finishing the course I was still no better off. I didn’t know how long I would be unable to hear things with that ear but that didn’t prevent me from hearing things. It was one of those strange experiences of listening to something but that something wasn’t coming through my ears.

The first time I experienced listening to something that wasn’t coming from my external surroundings was when I sat down to meditate for the first time ever back when I was in my 20s. I naively thought that meditation was a matter of sitting as still as possible without moving nor talking nor falling asleep. I had my clock on the floor in front of me and I thought I would start by sitting for 30 minutes. The room I was in was quiet and peaceful. No noise. No sounds. What I had experienced for the first time was hearing my own voice inside my head. It was a deafening mixture of self doubt and ridicule. I thought I would enjoy the peace and quiet of that room but it was far from peaceful. All my worldly problems filled my head and were screaming at me loud and clear. There was nothing new about my problems, the only difference then was that I had nothing to distract me from them.

The Sanskrit word for bombu is puttajjana. In the Pali Canon, the Buddha contrasts *ariyas* or 'noble ones' with *puttanjjanas* or 'worldlings'. A worldling is someone who is limited by the three fetters of the world which are personality-belief, sceptical doubt, and attachment to mere rule and ritual. Ariyas are liberated from these fetters. This was a radical departure from the caste system in place at the time of the Buddha which meant that only those born into the Ariyan caste were born with nobility. He was creating a system where worldlings can be noble and Ariyans can be bombu.

Bhikkhus and Bhikkhunis from any background may have started off as worldlings but they were transformed into Ariyas. They became noble by accepting the truth of Dukkha and instead of craving for sense pleasure or for being or for non-being, they observed the feelings arising and used the energy for craving to stay with the pain, to not run away, but instead to engage in life with right view, right resolve, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right samadhi.

Several hundred years after the Buddha died a group of Bhikkhus started writing these observations down in what is now the first psychology textbook called the Abhidharma.

The Abhidharma is a thorough and detailed analysis of the mental processes. We get a complete understanding of how the mind works. It all starts with Dukkha. Once we experience pain, we get Dukkha *samudaya. Samudaya*can be broken down into three smaller words; *sam*means ‘with’, *ud*means ‘up’, and *aya* means ‘to come’. What usually comes up with pain happens in a split second. We don’t even know that we are going through a process because it happens so quickly. This group of Bhikkhus were able to notice these fast connections happening in their minds and from that we see how longing is triggered when we encounter Dukkha. The Buddha called this Dukkha samudaya which leads to *trishna* or ‘thirst’.

Many Buddhists have translated the second noble truth as: The reason we suffer is because of craving. This is not quite true because the first noble truth is that Dukkha happens whether we crave or not. Life includes all manner of existential suffering. We will meet pain and loss just like Siddhartha Gotama did after he became the Buddha because we are alive, not because of craving.

In the Pali Canon, the Buddha explains two ways of responding to Dukkha. One is the path for noble ones and the other one is the path for worldlings. Worldlings are born into this world and are of this world. We tend to go around in circles and in doing so we create additional suffering that in all intents and purposes is unnecessary. Out of our craving to avoid pain we respond to Dukkha samudaya in three ways. The first thing that we tend to do is to distract ourselves with sense pleasures. Secondly, we crave being someone and so we form an identity. Finally, when those two levels of escape fail, we despair, withdraw, and give up.

Each of the different levels of escape from pain are rooted in the three poisons and at the heart of it all is ignorance. Ignorance is not a passive state of not knowing, it is a deliberate choice to not hear and to not see, and it is fueled by greed and hate.

The three responses to dukkha samudaya are:

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|  | **GREED (attraction)** | **HATE (aversion)** | **DELUSION (ignorance)** |
| **Sensory Distraction** | Pleasurable activities. For example, drinking, erotic sex. | Painful activities. For example, self-harm, masochism. | Through sensory distraction there is a sensual and temporary relief from the original source of pain. |
| **Creation of Being** | Longing to belong and to be  somebody. | Rejecting others who are not like us in order to be different from them. | Attaching and identifying with views and values that feel permanent and real. Unconsciously we create a self-defence mechanism. We hold opinions and a particular set of attitudes to issues, relationships, and people. |
| **Despair of Being** | Feeling dejected, we long to be alone. We find comfort in feeling numb and attach ourselves to feelings of isolation. | We reject our friends, family, ourselves, and the world. We push people away and withdraw from society. | We no longer see or hear the reality for other people. We also pretend that we aren’t in pain. Even when everyone around us can see how much pain we are in, we continue to deny and dilute the pain. The truth that we are hurting is too much for us to admit to ourselves. |

Most of us function well within the first and second levels of escape. If we have a strong sense of who we are and what we like, and if we don’t have a series of traumatic events in our life that break down our defences then we can sail through life in a state of bliss. Hence the saying, ‘ignorance is bliss.’ Very occasional however, some of us may see ourselves as the cause of pain and suffering, or find no peace and solace in ourselves that we seek self destruction and death. We come to a point where we know that we need to change and that we need help.

Even though these escape mechanisms differ hugely, the Buddha teaches that at any moment, no matter how deaf we are to the Dharma, we can experience awakening. The sound of the Dharma can break through to us whether we are blissfully ignorant or in an echo chamber deep in our own self-made prison.

For me, the Dharma reverberated inside my whole being for the first time ever when I was at the bottom of the barrel. I heard it from some of the members at the North London Buddhist centre which was run by the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (now called Triratna). For some, it might be heard in Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Pagan, or any of the other religious groups in the world. For others, it might be heard in humanitarian, atheist, or agnostic groups.

This vow is about the myriad ways it can be heard. Wherever it is heard, then we can be reassured that there is a Buddha teaching it in a Pure Land. It may not be filled with people wearing red and chanting the Nembutsu but all the same it is a manifestation of a heartfelt engagement with life.