***9 August 2021 The Ninth Vow***

***Oh Blessed One, may I not come to the complete awakening if, when I have done so, beings in my Pure Land should lack limitless ability to put themselves in other vantage points and perspectives, to instantly stand in any Pure Land and even to travel beyond it.***

In this lifetime, the main destination for Pure Land practitioners is to be reborn in Amida’s Pure Land. When Shakyamuni Buddha told the story of Dharmakara, there were already numerous other Pure Lands that had other Buddhas presiding over them. Not all of them were open to everyone though, and one of the things that Dharmakara did was to visit each and every Buddha land and take all the good things from them. He wanted a place that was open to everyone, not just those who were already close to reaching a pure mind.

There is a ritual of how to put our robe on that I was taught when I was ordained. We start by knowing which direction we are facing and then to turn and face the Western direction for that is where Amida’s Buddha land is. We then close our eyes and visualise seeing Amida Buddha presiding in the land of utmost bliss with our mind's eye. Then we place our robe on our head and recite, ‘How great and wondrous are the clothes of enlightenment, formless yet embracing every treasure. I wish to unfold the Buddha’s teaching so that they may help all living things.’ We imagine that we have Amida’s blessing. Whatever happens, good or bad, wherever we may be, lost or found, we know that we are held and accepted by this infinite love. This love is not finite, it is capable of loving every aspect of us. Then we place the robe on our left shoulder and let it fall down over us and we wrap it around us. This symbolises a bringing together of our heart and mind and we finish by hooking the hook over the button that holds the robe together. The hook being our self-power and resting it on an other-power. We need both the hook and the button.

In the Pali canon, the Buddha talks about a field of merit. Buddhist training is based on the concept of non-self, so when one trains one is creating conditions, similar to a farmer. In order for farmers to grow wheat, they need to get the ground ready. If there are other plants growing there already, then quite a bit of work will be needed to remove them. Once the plants and roots are removed, and the soil has been worked; the stones removed, clumps of hard earth pounded and softened, then the ground is ready. A buddha field is one where seeds of enlightenment are sown and one can then enjoy the fruits of the spiritual life. In the same way, we can work on ourselves, removing old habits, and creating space for something new to grow, however, if there is no seed, then there is nothing to grow.

The seed that the Buddha discovered on the night of his enlightenment was the Dharma. It was something that had existed and been around long before Siddhartha Gautama was born. Even after his death, the Dharma remains and is still here to this day.

We can trust that the Dharma is still with us today and that with the space that we’ve made, it will start to grow.

The way that it grows in us is a mystery. Although we remove old weeds and plants and work the soil to prepare the ground, we still have remnants of our past that can grow into something similar but different.

Take the example of a group in the United States of America called The Violence Interrupters. They are a group of ex-gang members working to promote peace in target communities all over the States. Generally speaking, they grew up in the roughest parts of town. Drugs, alcohol, guns, and violence were the staple ingredients of their childhood diet. They would often join a gang as a child and they were part of a community that would rely on each other for financial, psychological and emotional support. They saw conflict on a regular basis. They saw aggressive behaviour and violent outbreaks as normal.

These are gang members turned into Bodhisattvas. Their experience taught them that violence and aggression are infectious. In neighbourhoods with two or more gangs they saw, first hand, just how easy hate begets hate - for they once were driven by the same hate. They understood the dynamics underpinning one gang pitted against another; first it’s fear, then hatred, and eventually, when one member dies, the other gang is blamed. Revenge mentality is rife and the killings don’t stop after a death is avenged.

After witnessing many young men trapped in a cycle of violent aggressive conflicts and then arrested and released back into the same environment these ‘Bodhisattvas’ learned that the way to turn the tide of killings is to actively work with the gangs. The longing for peace was enough for them to want to stop this violent contagion by deliberately interrupting it. Once they heard about an attack or death they would go and talk to families involved. They would listen and they start a dialogue with those who were entrenched in a pattern of hate and revenge. They could draw on their own lived experience and show compassion that no one without that shared background could do.

Compassion is the heart of Buddhism. Like the Dharma it has always existed.

The ninth vow rests on a longing for peace. If we can open our eyes, and really see the suffering, and feel the impact in our hearts, it leads to a wish, a thirst, a craving for relief, for a break, for an interruption of whatever it is that is causing the pain.

To long for a Pure Land is noble. To create a Pure Land is what Bodhisattvas do. We can start a peace initiative right here in our relationships, in our homes, and in our communities. If we follow the example of the Violence Interrupters then it starts by putting oneself in the other person’s shoes and to see things the way that they do.

It doesn’t end there. The Pure Land, like peace and love, is not a state but a process. It is to be willing to put ourselves in our enemies’ shoes, and to walk a mile in them, and then once our destination is reached, to continue beyond that.

Always going beyond awakening! Svaha!