***Amida’s 48 Great Vows–Introduction, February 2021
Susthama Kim***

 *In my statement of intent to the Order as part of the election process, I wrote that I would follow Amida’s 48 great vows to guide me. I would like to take some time to look at all the vows, where they come from and what they mean.*

 *These vows are found in the Larger Pure Land Sutra which was told by the Buddha on Vulture’s Peak. One could say that his ministry work, often referred to as setting the wheel of Dharma in motion, started at the deer park when he gave his first teaching to the 5 ascetics. Roughly sixteen years later,  he is said to have taught a collection of sutras that include the Pure Land Sutras on vulture’s peak to an assembly of 5,000 monks, nuns, laity and innumerable other Bodhisattvas. Although his ministry grew and developed over time, from teaching the four noble truths to the teachings on Amida Buddha, from 5 ascetics to a fourfold community as well as Bodhisattvas from all the four quarters, the essence of his teachings remained the same.
           The Larger Pure Land Sutra is in many respects an allegory of his own life. He is prompted by Ananda to explain why he is looking so radiant and the story of a monk called Dharmakara unfolds. Dharmakara, like Siddartha, seeking answers to the problem of suffering, came across the Buddha of his day, who told Dharmakara that he himself would know exactly what to do. Dharmakara then vows to fulfil 48 great vows and when he achieves this he becomes Amida, the Buddha of the Western Pureland. What is also clear in this sutra, is just how wise Shakyamuni is because he predicts a future, long after he is gone, when people will be too busy, too deluded to practice the teachings and where the only thing that humans will be able to do is to chant the name. And even that will be too difficult for many.
This sutra, like any effective story, had a huge impact on people’s lives, like Tanluan, Shandao, and Honen, as well as many others. The power of a story is well documented in George Marshall’s book Don’t Even Think About It, mainly because our beliefs and values are held together in the form of stories. If we can piece together experiences, facts, and beliefs into a story that is understandable and hangs together then when we do encounter complex or contradictory messages we have a narrative that can help us to navigate through life. If something is not working, and we want to change, then perhaps we should start by understanding the stories that we are telling ourselves and change them.
          The Larger Pure Land Sutra is an effective story because it begins with an ordinary person who comes across a problem. The problem is the suffering that exists in the world which leads to seeking a solution. The solution comes to him after many aeons of struggling and he is rewarded for his efforts just as predicted by the Buddha Lokeshwara. After the struggle, he resolves to make 48 vows to answer the problem of suffering and he is successful. He creates a land in the West and becomes a Buddha. In each part of the story there is a direct connection between cause and effect, it all makes sense and hangs together nicely. More importantly, it ends with a positive and inspiring outcome that will benefit all sentient beings.
          The Buddhist tradition was originally an oral one. Teachings had to be learnt by heart. The process of learning often goes from feeling wooden and artificial to being on auto-pilot. Once the teachings sink to a deeper level, living them becomes second nature. If we modern Buddhists take the sutras only to study and become knowledgeable intellectually then our great tradition will die out. My attempt in using the 48 great vows as a guide is to see how to bring these vows to life for us.*