***The Thirteenth Vow - Infinite Lifespan
Oh Blessed One, may I not come to the complete awakening if,
when I have done so, my lifespan should have a limit.***
(Susthama, October 2021)

There is a Tibetan saying that when we are born we cry and the world rejoices, and when we die the world cries but our spirit rejoices. Our ability to understand the full extent of our spiritual life beyond this physical body is extremely limited.

In Buddhism, Karma is a concept that includes and implies that we are more than just this physical body. There is  a sense of a spiritual essence that has a history that is longer than we’ve lived in this present body. There is an implication that our spiritual energy and impulses go back a long time. Instead of our bodies being born first and then our spiritual or ethereal body appearing afterwards, it is the other way around. The spirit is waiting in the universe to be born to a particular person or couple, and then once they have chosen to whom and where they want to be born, they come into this world.

You could say that there are two different types of spirits. One is completely liberated like that of the Tathagatha and the other is not. To be reborn as a human is considered to be very precious because of the possibility to be free during this lifetime. However, if we don’t manage to achieve nirvana then at the point of death, our body dies and decays, but our spirit moves on and is reborn again.

Our outlook and attitude in modern western cultures has been largely shaped by science. The physical world that we can observe gives us evidence of objects existing, and so we tend to think that everything emanates from the physical body. Ultimately, in science, everything boils down to particles and waves. That which is measureless, like Amida, the spirit, the mind, or subtle energy is secondary.

This was not the case for Siddartha Gautama. He lived in a culture where Brahma, the ultimate reality, was real and the physical world emanated from the spiritual. The early Buddhists had a different understanding of the universe. What was real was spiritual, and one could transcend the material world, and tap into streams of consciousness that have existed for eternity, by meditating. There was a sense of the universe being eternal and everywhere. Instead of us being in the universe, the universe was in us. What causes great confusion and suffering is this sense of self as an entity that is real, fixed, and separate from the universe.

There are several accounts of the Buddha seeing and knowing his past lives up until he achieved nirvana. Even Honen Shonin laments about not being there when the Buddha is giving his discourses to the great throng of monks and nuns. Who knows how many lifetimes we’ve lived before this one. The theory of karma and rebirth into a new life includes this idea that we were something before, even if we can’t remember what or who we were. If we can live more than one lifetime, then this vow is there to reassure us that Amida’s love and compassion will be there for us, for as long as it takes us to enter nirvana. And, for those who have doubts about the practice of the nembutsu then not to worry, there will always be another chance.