***Amida's Fifteenth Vow***

 ***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 infinite lifespan except insofar as they choose to manifest in a mortal state in fulfilment of their holy vows.***

**Susthama Kim, January 2024**

Up until the *Buddha* died *Buddhism* was an oral tradition. The *Buddha* was a great teacher because he knew how to get people’s attention through the use of metaphors, similes, long lists, and parables as well as practising what he taught. The *Dharma* is a living thing, like an energy, that transcends the material world, but at the same time needs culture and stories to make it meaningful.

*Shakyamuni* spread the *Dharma* in conversation with someone else, often in groups, and through the local language that those who were listening could understand and memorise by heart. Once understood by heart, that person could be as flexible as the *Buddha* was in conveying the teachings because they understood the meaning behind the words, but more importantly, he behaved in ways that matched the purity of the teachings. Once the student got the spirit of it, they could teach it by modelling and by using their own words.

When *Shakyamuni* died, the enlightened monastic community feared that his *Dharma* might die out with him, so not long after his death, a council of all the enlightened monks was convened to record all the teachings into what is now named the *Pali Canon*. They were also told by the dying *Shakyamuni* to keep only the important rules on conduct and to forget about the rest, but they were unsure which ones were the important ones so they kept all the rules.

About 100 years later, a second council was convened between two very distinct groups of *Buddhists*, one being the ‘*Sthaviravada*’ or *Elders* who followed the *Buddha’s* footsteps and stuck very closely to the ‘*Vinaya*’ or ‘monastic rules’, and the other being the ‘*Mahasanghika’* or ‘*Great Congregation*’.

The *Elders* wanted to add more rigid and unnecessary rules to the monastic code and the *Great Congregation* disagreed. They were more interested in the spirit and nature of the *Buddha*. Instead of emulating *Shakyamuni*, the *Mahasanghika* created a man worth worshipping by making him into something universal and timeless.

The differences that had been steadily growing over the years since the death of the *Buddha* had brought them to a sharp point of disagreement, which led to the first great split in the *Buddhist* *Sangha*.

After this schism, the *Mahayana,* in which the Pure Land is part, emerged from the *Mahasanghika* and eventually became more prominent. The *Mahayana* or *Great Vehicle* set out to carry all to enlightenment and developed ideas like the *Buddha* was not just a mortal human being, but someone transcendent who could appear in any form in order to bring sentient beings to salvation.

*Shakyamuni* would sometimes refer to himself as the *Tathagatha*, a being with infinite lifespan, who is free to come and go, who is unconditioned, unborn, and therefore, deathless.

*Tathagatha* can be translated in two ways, one who has gone forth to enlightenment, or one who has come from enlightenment. In other words, the *Tathagatha* is free of all boundedness, conditions, and ego.

A *Buddha* who sees through the eyes of the *Tathagatha* has no need to become anything. They are free from conditions, unlike so many of us that are bound and conditioned to think, feel and worry about how we look, and to wonder how other people judge us.

We have been conditioned from such a young age that we never saw how or when our values and beliefs about who we are had been planted in us and grown in relation to others around us. We have been blind to the seed, and unaware of the fertile ground of a self.

In the teachings of ‘*Dependent Origination*’ (SN 12.2, Paticca-samuppada-vibhanga Sutta: Analysis of Dependent Co-arising) there are twelve links, all connected to each other, and the one that explains our blindness to our views is called ‘*avidya*’ where ‘*a*’ means ‘*without*’, and ‘*vidya*’ means ‘*knowledge*’. We have no knowledge of where or when the values that make up a core part of who we are were planted. Often we do not know that we can change them until something happens that causes us to question why we think a certain way, but when that happens it can feel upsetting. It can shake us to our very core, as if we have been conned or betrayed. However, only then, can we do something about the views and beliefs that govern the direction of our lives.

Once we have the knowledge that we can change our minds, then we might be better able to let go of our attachment to these self-perpetuating views. And then, perhaps, we can tap into the qualities of the *Tathagatha* including ‘*The four paramitas*’; ‘*karuna*’ (compassion), ‘*maitri*’ (loving-kindness), ‘*mudita*’ (sympathetic joy), and ‘*upeksha*’ (equanimity) and in that way experience the timeless universal limitless lifespan of the *Tathagatha*.

This vow gives everybody infinite chances to change. For so long as the *Tathagatha* is limitless and boundless then our chances to get the self out of the way are also limitless and boundless.  If we have made mistakes in our life then we will get a chance to get it right the second time, or third, or however many times it takes us.

It is not surprising that we would be ready to accept our mortality and die once we have satisfied our sense of getting it right, because by then we would have let go of the need to become anything. The only thing left would be to live a holy life.

Love,

Susthama