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| ***The Seventeenth Vow February 2024***  ***\* Oh Blessed One, may I not come to the complete awakening if, when I have done so, one cannot hear all the Buddhas throughout the cosmos praising and glorifying the Name.***  One of the ways to forget the self is to worship something much greater than oneself. When we focus the mind on a wholesome and loving object like a Buddha, and we chant the Name with great effort, we can enter into a state of mind where we are no longer in the grip of the three poisons; greed, hate and delusion.    Paradoxically, even our love and surrender to something as unconditionally loving as Amida Buddha can activate the three poisons.  The practice of the Nembutsu was popularised in China by a 6th century monk called Shan Dao and then again in Japan by a 12th century monk called Honen. Both monks sought to give hope and salvation to all human beings by teaching them that Amida Buddha has promised to save anyone who sincerely longed to be reborn in a land of bliss, no matter your background, your sex, gender, age or status.  Honen became very popular amongst the priesthood and the common people for two very different reasons. The first one is because common people were excluded from the Buddhist religion and the simple practice of calling to Amida Buddha gave them hope. The second reason was because many of Honen’s followers were using the Nembutsu to disparage and denigrate other teachings and practices.  Honen was aware of the criticisms that might arise with his teachings but I’m not sure he foresaw the full extent of the problems when he wrote the Senchakushu, ‘The Passages on the Selection of the Nembutsu in the Original Vow.’  One of the philosophical problems in religious circles is the claim of truth of each tradition. If Honen’s teaching is true, then logically all others must be false. By extension, if the Nembutsu is to be selected as the primary practice then logically all other teachings and practices must be inferior and secondary. This is what some of Honen’s followers believed and felt.    The greed to be seen to be ‘the best’, the hatred of all the other practices, and the delusion that their path was the correct or ‘best’ one, led Honen to write a pledge against certain behaviours.  This pledge was known as the ‘Seven Pledge Article’:  *1. Refrain from denigrating other Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and from attacking Shingon and Tendai, for you are not versed in any of their teachings.*  *2. In your state of ignorance, refrain from indulging in disputes with men of wisdom or when encountering people with other religious practices.*  *3. Toward people of other persuasions or practices, refrain from saying, with your mind ignorant and biased, that they should abandon their practice. Refrain from wanton ridicule of them.*  *4. Refrain from saying that there is no observance of the clerical precepts in the nembutsu path, from avidly encouraging sexual indulgences, liquor, or meat eating, from occasionally calling those who adhere to the precepts men of indiscriminate practice, and from teaching that those who believe in Amida's original vow have no reason to be afraid when committing evil deeds (zoaku muge).*  *5. As an ignorant being who is unable to distinguish between right and wrong, you should refrain from deviations from the scriptural teachings, from what is not the teachings of your master, from arbitrarily putting forward your own doctrines, from needlessly seeking out disputes, from being laughed at by the wise, and from leading the ignorant astray.*  *6. In your state of ignorance, refrain from delighting so much in rhetoric, since you know nothing of the true teachings, from expounding various heresies (jaho), and from converting ignorant priests and lay people to the various heresies.*  *7. Refrain from expounding heresies which are not the Buddhist teachings, and from regarding them as true teachings. Refrain from the deception of calling them the teachings of your master.*  *November, the First Year of Genkyu (1204)*  163 of Honen’s disciples signed this pledge. It is a great example of how Buddhism and especially this vow is about demonstrating an alternative.  There is a Sutra in the Majjhima Nikaya called, ‘The Kinti Sutra - or - What do you think about me?’ in which the Buddha asks the monks if they think the Buddha teaches the Dhamma for the sake of robes, almsfood, a resting place, or for the sake of some better state of being.  The monks answer negatively and answer that he teaches the dharma because he is compassionate and seeks their welfare. The Buddha then goes on to list all the teachings and urges them to train in concord, with mutual appreciation, and without disputing. A monk neither exalts himself nor disparages others.  This is a teaching that extends to everyone, not just members of one’s own sangha.  I was taught not long after I joined the Buddhist House community that a Buddha is defined by what they do. Buddhas see Buddhas everywhere and Buddhas spend their time praising other Buddhas. Equally, we are what we do, and not what we think. When we rejoice and glorify the name then we are the same as all Buddhas.  This vow is the first in this set of 48 to promote, validate, and rejoice in multiple faiths and traditions. Although the object of love and surrender may differ depending on the tradition, the rapture and joy that is felt is the same.  As Albert Einstein said, *‘The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead; his eyes are closed.’*  Pastoral Letter  Susthama Kim \_.\_,\_.\_,\_ |

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