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The Second Vow: No Unfortunate Rebirth

Oh Blessed One, may I not come to the complete awakening if, when I have done so, beings born into my Pure Land should be liable to die from there and thereafter be reborn in hellish, bestial, tormented or warring realms.

This vow is about what will happen to us after we have been reborn in the Pure Land. Dharmakara wishes to ensure that we continue to have a good rebirths. In Buddhism there is a theory of rebirth. It isn't the same as reincarnation as in Christianity because what passes on from this life to the next one isn't a fixed soul. Instead it is a spirit that is always changing.

I remember feeling lost and confused, as well as obsessed with death, when I came across Buddhism. When I was little, I believed that we would go to God up in heaven. It was a glorious white fluffy place, always situated up in the clouds. In my teens, after having rejected Christianity, I adopted the atheistic position of believing that nothing happened after one dies. Like Kurt Vonnegut's existential purple light and a hum. All that mattered is living a fun, pleasurable life now. I was definitely hedonistic and on the surface it looked like a lot of fun but I still couldn't shake off wondering whether I would see my deceased parents after I died. My idea of heaven never went away and I liked the idea of reuniting with loved ones after I died.

At my lowest point, when I no longer found any reason to live, I thought about what might happen afterwards. That was when I found Buddhism. I learned about the 4 noble truths, karma, and rebirth in the first week of my new Buddhist life. The message that I was taught was the common version of 1. there is suffering 2. the cause of suffering is desire and craving, and 3. the end of suffering is by extinguishing craving and finally 4. we do step 3 by following the 8-fold noble path. Easy. It made sense. If we crave something and we don't get it then we will suffer. If we crave and get it we will suffer. Like the Chinese curse "May your dreams come true." Craving was to root of all suffering and must be rooted out.

The way that I understood it was simple. Everything is connected in a linear way, one thing leads to another. I could see where I went wrong in the past. I craved a fun life with my friends. We partied, danced, laughed, and drank, sometimes too much and while drunk did foolish things that a drunk person would. I would wake up the following morning with a hangover. I would follow good advice on what to eat to cure a hangover but I would never think about stopping myself from hanging out with my friends, and never thought about not getting drunk in the first place.

Even though Buddhism made things much clearer I was still pretty depressed. I felt guilty about all the hurt I had caused my good friends. I was worried that I would hurt other people. All I could think about was ending everything. My life stank and I was a petty person. What stopped me was the idea of being reborn into another life based on my present state of mind. If the theory of rebirth

meant that I would carry over my feelings of guilt and worry then I might end up in an even worse place but with the same awful feelings. This idea of karma and rebirth left me with no choice but to stay put and to do everything possible to liberate myself in order to break free from this horrible cycle of samsaric worlds.

I moved from being an atheist to a Buddhist nun in two weeks. I went from thinking there was one Buddhism to understanding that there are as many denominations in Buddhism as there are in Christianity. I found myself in a tradition that is popular in the far east and very rare in the west. Most of all, I learned that it was impossible not to crave. I met friends in the Theravadan tradition who told me stories about craving a new robe, or a new bowl, or better food. I met other Buddhists from other traditions who told me that they went on retreat to eliminate their attachments and as soon as they came out of retreat would go to Macdonald's or eat bars of chocolate. I met others who told me stories of Zen retreats that would finish with a celebration of drinking alcohol to demonstrate that they were not attached to non-attachment itself.

Could we ever achieve the pure bright mind that would ensure a good rebirth? For many of us, the answer is no. Unless we accept that we cannot do this alone. Amida's second vow is the key to attaining enlightenment. So long as we keep the Buddha in mind, and sincerely call out his name, then we will die well and therefore have a good rebirth. What's more, it is because we are selfish, self-centred, and awful that Amida will come to our aid so that we are reborn in a field of merit; an abode of loving-kindness; joy; compassion, a true refuge. From Amida's land of utmost bliss, we will be liberated and enlightened. In Japanese Pureland Buddhism there is a theory of how beings born into a Pure Land then become Bodhisattvas. Once enlightened, one feels for the suffering of others, one forsakes enlightenment in order to return to this world to help. In effect, we want to be like the Buddhas in the bubbles in each of the 6 realms of samsara, assisting the afflicted, demonstrating an alternative, and showing a way out as depicted in the Wheel of Life. There is only one problem. When we are reborn in this life we forget where we have come from. We grow up adapting and reacting as we have learned from our parents, friends, relatives, and educators. We forget that we are Bodhisattvas. We grow up wondering what is our purpose?

We may see small acts of kindness every now and then that just so happens to move us. We may feel angry at injustices around us. Perhaps, we have a spiritual experience that leaves us with a feeling of some sort of familiarity like an old song long forgotten. When eventually, we come across the Pureland teachings and we feel a sense of relief. We are ok just as we are. The practice is both simple and hard. Just say "Namo Amida Bu" and have faith that you will be reborn in Amida's Pure Land. Once there, one experiences enlightenment, sees through the eyes of the tathagatha and then vows to come back to the human realm to help sentient beings and so the cycle goes for these Bodhisattvas. When I found myself living in a Pureland tradition, I didn't have much confidence in myself, or in others, or in religion. I found myself chanting

because that was what the group did. It didn't make much sense to me back then but I did it anyway. I was told, 'Fake it til you make it.' So I did. I was relieved to know that I am acceptable just as I am. Even with my dull and unsteady mind, I can still trust something greater than myself, and in that spirit, I can make someone a cup of tea and show that person kindness just as I was shown kindness.