

### **The Third Vow**

***Oh Blessed One, may I not come to the complete awakening if, when I have done so, beings born in my land should not all be of one colour, the colour of gold.***

Not long after my father passed away, I went to South Korea to learn about my ancestral roots. I knew that it was a mountainous country but I didn't realise how the mountain peaks would be home to Buddhist temples. I used to go hiking in the mountains with friends without realising that many Koreans go hiking not just to get away from the hustle and bustle of city life, but to make offerings and reconnect with their ancestral religion. We would arrive at the top of the mountain, enter through a very old gate, be greeted by a row of Buddhist statues, and then enter a compound with a place for people to make prostrations and light incense. Some temples were grand and others were modest, but they all had the quality of being a museum. Rich with artefacts and visited by many people including tourists like myself. My friends explained that they built the temples at the tops of the mountains because it is symbolic of spiritual purity. One was far away from material distractions found in the worldly realm below. The temples are in and of themselves a Pure Land. It is easy to see why we place spiritual cultivation on the vertical axis and the materialistic one on the horizontal one. If worldly attachments are the cause of suffering, then liberation might be found somewhere far away from the dazzling lights and material madness of the city centres. To climb a mountain requires a bit of shedding – any extra weight would make it exhausting work.

The third vow, however, challenges the spiritual notion of going up. It is saying that Amida's light embraces everything, not only those at the top of the mountain but those half way there and especially those stuck at the foot of the mountains. Instead of the spiritual path being on the vertical axis it is on the horizontal one. The word Amida can be broken down to "A" which means *without* in Sanskrit and "mida" which is close to the word *metre*, so Amida means without measure. Amida Buddha doesn't measure and is measureless. Human beings on the other hand, spend most of their time comparing and measuring. We set targets, we ensure that the best science is measurable and evidence based. All good, except perhaps, when we don't live up to our own standards. We are the ones who measure and judge. We are constantly comparing ourselves with others. I remember seeing a picture of business men and women climbing to the top of the tree. This is what it is like for many of us living in a competitive world. The caption said, "To get to the top you have to step on others and kiss the ass of the one in front."

The spiritual path is one that is flat – maybe there are those more experienced in front and we lag behind, but no matter where we are, are all equal in Amida Buddha's eyes. The Buddha's dharma is the foundation on which we can build our spiritual lives. It is below us and it is supporting us while Amida's light shines down on us with this glorious, radiant light, like facing the sunset during the golden hour before it disappears below the horizon. Sinking down into the Dharma realm.

If we want to go to Amida's Pure Land, if we want to keep the Buddha in mind, if we want to walk that narrow white path then we can do that, and not because of our own efforts but by a mixture of calling out for help and creating conditions that might help. When Saint Honen asked his disciples whose Nembutsu was better, his or the newcomer, everyone had no doubt that Honen's was because of his spiritual progress, but Honen rejected that straight away and said that even if a person was new and said it just once, there is no difference between his Nembutsu and the novice's.

Amida is associated with the setting sun, so part of our practice is about turning to the West, and if we are indoors, then to visualise the sun setting. If we are lost or confused and not sure which direction to go in life, then there are some practical things that we can do. We can stop and turn to the setting sun. You look around and everything is golden in colour. Whether it is a broken fence, a run down house, rusty bicycle chain everything's as if it is transformed into gold.

Just like Shinran's verse in **The Essentials of Faith Alone**:  
"That Buddha in the causal stage, made the Universal Vow:

*When beings hear my Name and think on me,  
I will come to welcome each of them,  
Solely making beings turn about and abundantly say the Nembutsu,  
I can make bits of rubble turn to gold."*

When we are transformed into gold then whatever we do will be beautiful.