The sixth vow

[The Sixth Vow - Divine Eye] \* 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 the divine eye that enables one to perceive myriad other Pure Lands.

Buddhism is a philosophy, art, therapy, as well as being one of the top five major religions in the world. Globally, there are about 500 million Buddhists. When I stepped through the doors of the North London Buddhist centre almost 18 years ago, I knew next to nothing about Buddhism. I assumed that there was just one kind, and I was happy to be included as one of the 500 million. During my first week, I met English, Indian, and Dutch Buddhists and not at all practicing ‘one’ Buddhism. Anomadharshi was a Theravadan monk, Di liked Tibetan pujas, and Matthew spoke like a Zen philosopher, Leo, Willemien and Modgala were happy to chant the Nembutsu.

A year later, I was fortunate enough to tour the world with my teachers and every country we stopped in had three distinct forms; Theravada, Mahayana, and Vadrayana. Vancouver was one of the places where I discovered that there were 81 different Buddhist traditions. Canada is a unique place because it is made up of people from all over the world. It is a melting pot. In Vancouver, where the population is roughly 630,000 people, there are different groups of people from different countries. Within the Buddhism community, each of these different groups bring their own flavour and teachings of Buddhism. Instead of blending all the different kinds of Buddhist groups together into one big soup, each group of migrants had set up their own temple or centre that reflected their cultural style and practice. And here we were with another tradition to add to the mix. Other Buddhists met us with curiosity and interest. Instead of asking what we believed in they would ask about our practice and sometimes they would show us their practice and vice versa.

Back at home, however, was a different matter. I remember the tension and conflict caused by all the different practices while living under the same roof. The nembutsu practitioners were often outnumbered during my first year in residence by a slightly larger group of mixed Buddhists. There were disagreements on many levels. What worked for some didn’t work for others. For me, the Nembutsu was the best, and I had dutifully chosen it as Honen had encouraged people to do. I learned from my experience that even the most devout person would take offence if they didn’t share my opinion. I often wondered why we couldn’t have 81 best practices for 81 different people. What is best for me is best for me and what is best for you is best for you. Who said the best had to be the same for everyone?

I was on the council of faiths in Leicester for a while and found it uplifting to hear how the different religions accounted for the different faiths. One Sheik explained that God created everything so he must have created the different religions, and for Muslims like himself, it was his job to find a way to respect all of God's creation. There was a Hindu who used the parable of the 5 blind men to explain and justify all the different ways of understanding the same thing. He suggested that the Dharma is one big Dharma with different parts and in our ignorance we can only see the part that we are holding.  Some of us are holding one end while the others are holding another bit, but no matter, it is all the same thing and it is all one.

Oneness is also espoused in some Buddhist schools that also suggest that it is duality that separates us from the non-dual nature of all. Sometimes the concept of oneness, nothingness and emptiness are often blurred together and can be confusing. Sūnya and śūnyata are terms that are found in the Pali canon and mean zero.

Zero is such a tricky number. To make a sign for nothing just put your finger and thumb together and you get an eternal ring with a hole inside. You get everything and nothing in one hand. Historically, it was the Samarian culture that invented the ‘zero’. Samarian temples needed to keep track of all the offerings and invented a counting system about 5,000 years ago. To mark a column with nothing they started to use a pebble and they found that as soon as you take the pebble off the sandy ground it leaves a hollow which is how we come to have a circle to represent zero. It was used by traders and although there is very little evidence of it until the 5th century in India we know that it was a concept that was around the time of the Buddha because of the use of śūnya in the Pali Canon.

Sunya in ancient Indian culture is the concept of emptiness and nothingness as a potential for form. It acts as a kind of container that can take on shapes. For example, if you pour water into a solid pot then the water takes the form of it. But if you make the container out of a material that is pliable and soft then it takes on the shape of whatever is put into it and this is what is behind the concept of śūnyata. You have a potential that can become actual - and that can become actualised. Form is emptiness and emptiness is form.

The Buddha expounds and connects it to the concept of anatma or *non-self.*We may have a form but it is empty of self. This is best understood in the teachings of the three marks of existence:

* *sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā* — "all *[saṅkhāras](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sa%E1%B9%85kh%C4%81ra" \t "_blank)* (conditioned things) are impermanent"
* sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā — "all [saṅkhāras](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sa%E1%B9%85kh%C4%81ra" \t "_blank) are unsatisfactory (suffering)“
* *sabbe dhammā anattā* — "all [*dharmas*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dharma#Buddhism) are not self"

Anatma and dharmas are tricky in the same way that zero is tricky. Zeros do not work in the same way as whole numbers. Anything multiplied by zero is zero and you can’t divide by zero. If you have a number then you know what you are dealing with but when you have zero you don’t know - you can’t treat zero like any other number.

Not knowing what we are dealing with is what we are being taught in Buddhism. Awakening to the fact that we don’t know all the causes and conditions for the arising and passing of the very basic things to extremely complex systems is what the Buddha is inviting us to see every day, every moment. It is the realisation that we are a small piece of this complex reality. When we appreciate the morning star in the morning sky, we are open to mysteries in the universe. When we start from the empty centre, we can move out towards the infinite ring that embraces all things.

The Buddha was a human being like you and me. He wasn’t a divine being put on earth to save us. He was empty of self and fulfilled the greatest potential a human being could ever hope to achieve. If he can do it then so can we. In this vow, Amida is pointing out that there is another way of seeing things. There is a divine eye. The eye of the infinite. The eye that sees how śūnyata leads to a myriad of Pure Lands. From nothing comes everything. With a loving heart, an open mind, and a creative spirit, we can be the empty vessel ready to receive the Dharma and where there are dharmas there are pure lands.