***5 September 2021***

***[The Eleventh Vow - Irreversibility]***
***Oh Blessed One, may I not come to the complete awakening if, when I have done so, beings in my Pure Land should not all be those for whom all is completely assured. They will definitely attain nirvana.***

In the *Summary of Faith and Practice,*a text based on Honen Shonin’s one sheet testament which can be read in our Nien Fo service book, you will find the following paragraph:

*If you can perform the practice in this simple minded way, Amida will receive you and you may fear for nothing since all is completely assured. Dwelling in this settled faith you may then use your secondary faculties, your knowledge and skills and accumulated experience, as tools for helping all sentient beings.*

The practice that we are to perform is the act of reciting *Namo Amida Bu*. We call this the *Nembutsu*which is Japanese for keeping the Buddha in mind and the simplest way to do this is to call the Buddha’s name. If we are fleeing from danger, then all we would need to do is call out to Amida Buddha. In return, Amida throws us a lifeline and provides a lotus palace to anyone who practices the nembutsu.

When I encountered Buddhism, I was swimming in a cesspool of despair. My desperation wasn’t to flee my country but myself. My life up until then had been a series of hoops to go through, each one with a goal at the end, whether it was a qualification, a diploma, or a promotion. At the end of each phase was a document, which I hoped to be the evidence I needed that I was bonafide. I gradually became disillusioned.

I seemed to be on this never-ending conveyor belt of targets to achieve, boxes to tick, vainly hoping that by the end of it, I would finally feel okay. Instead, I felt like a fraud and was more convinced of being a failure.

So I decided to step off the conveyor belt, and not long after, I discovered Buddhism. I wanted to know everything there was to learn about suffering. I learned about Honen’s *senchaku* which means ‘selecting and choosing’ the nembutsu. Given what felt like a lifetime of failing, I gave myself over to chanting the nembutsu. In return, deep down, something changed. It was like Amida Buddha saying, “Congratulations Susthama - *here is* *your* *diploma*. You are officially a bombu, ‘a foolish being’ who needs saving so here is a safe lotus flower for you. You’re not ok, but rest assured that all will be well. Now go, stop worrying about yourself and do what you can to live a good life.”

After a while, to my dismay, I found that I was still on the conveyor belt. Even though I was learning about accepting my bombu nature, and doing this very simple practice, the conveyor belt didn’t stop. There were still hoops to jump through but with a slight twist. Having received the assurance that a lotus flower is guaranteed, I could then tick all the boxes, not because I needed to, but because I wanted to. If I didn’t tick any boxes then that would be fine too, but I found it impossible to stop finding boxes to tick. This universe seems to be full of things to become.

This simple practice of saying, ‘Namo Amida Bu’ has far reaching consequences. Instead of working hard to obtain and collect evidence to prove that we aren’t vulnerable and fallible, we start from a position of accepting that the Buddhas enlightenment enlightens us even though they know that we are bombu.

We are reassured that all will be well, so much so, that it can help loosen our narrative. Instead of starting with a question or a problem for the self to solve, we start with being given the solution and the answer to remove the obsession of the self.

What would we want to do with our lives if we were no longer preoccupied by how we are doing?

The Buddha often talks about the unborn and the unconditioned.

In the Nibbāna Sutta, Unbinding (3):

*…the Blessed One on that occasion exclaimed:*

*There is, monks, an unborn*[*[1]*](https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/ud/ud.8.03.than.html#fn-1)*— unbecome — unmade — unfabricated. If there were not that unborn — unbecome — unmade — unfabricated, there would not be the case that escape from the born — become — made — fabricated would be discerned. But precisely because there is an unborn — unbecome — unmade — unfabricated, escape from the born — become — made — fabricated is discerned.*

The Buddha teaches that what is made are stories that the self likes to fabricate in order to feel real and true.

With the concept of Amida’s help, we are reassured that all will be well. Our narrative can then start with, ‘I’m vulnerable, and that’s okay,’ which stops the preoccupation with, ‘How do I look? or How am I doing?’ If we are no longer busy with that question then the rest of the story is unborn, and unmade.

The story of becoming is detailed in the Buddha’s teaching of the five skandhas: rupa (perceived object), vedana (reaction), samjna (entrancement), samskara (confection), and vijnana (conscious outlook/attitude). The advice is to get rid of them.

These five skandhas are discrete parts of a cycle or a process. It often starts with rupa, which then leads to vedana, which leads to samjna, which leads to samskara, which leads to vijnana and then back to rupa. When we understand this as a process, then we can see how our experience in a particular role, within a network of relationships, is a process of the self becoming obsessed about how they are doing.

The skandha process can happen in a matter of seconds. Without even realising that we are in a kind of autopilot mode. Like driving a car, a red light means we stop and green light means we go. We don’t need to think about driving anymore, we just react to the traffic lights and carry on. When we stop questioning or thinking about what we are doing, we are in ‘samjna’ or a *trance*.

Being in a trance leads to samskara. Skara means *to confect*or *elaborate*by creating stories. Stories that tell us who we are, and why we are this way, take shape based on our experience, and include a whole raft of elements. From facts and figures to values and feelings, stories are able to contain and make sense of the complexities found in our own life. Without our stories we would be lost. We would be unable to process all the different phenomena to which we are exposed, not making head nor tail of it.

Every time we find situations that can somehow be incorporated into a story of the self, we are creating an even stronger narrative. And every time we repeat them, even with variations and embellishments, we reinforce our sense of who we are, and our identity and the self starts to feel more real and true. It doesn’t take long for the skandha cycle to become well established. The Buddha described this process as the unawakened state in which we start to design and create sets and scenes, props and people, all around us to make our stories continue to feel real and justified. Even if it is a story of victimhood or integrity, so long as the story makes sense we feel a level of satisfaction and comfort by having it, even if it really isn’t comfortable.

The Buddha said to get rid of the skandhas. To give up our story of selfhood is to be willing to die. The ultimate goal in Buddhism is to appreciate the unborn, the unmade and to never give birth to an identity in the first place. However, while that may be possible for some, Amida Buddha is saying, “It is ok, here’s your identity, now stop worrying about it and start seeing others for what they are and not as props to your own story.”

Amida’s story accepts everyone’s stories. When we see and respect others for who and what they are in their own right, we may become aware of what is needed, and then we can act appropriately and compassionately. Actions depend on roles, and with a role we start to become and create an identity. But, why stop at one? If each role has a uniform and a set of tools, then it can be a matter of putting on one uniform, and then taking it off and changing into another, in order to perform a different function. In doing so, we can then use our skills and qualifications, not to prop up our own story, but fit into a greater story.