

## Learning the Buddha's Great Compassion –The Forty-eight Vows (1)

### **“Forty-eight Vows”**

#### **–Amida's vows to liberate all beings–**

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What is Jodo Shinshu Buddhism? There are many ways to answer this question. It is the Buddhism founded by Shinran Shonin in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century; it is the Buddhism to liberate all beings through Namu-Amidabutsu; it is the Buddhism focusing on ordinary people; it is the ultimate form of Mahayana Buddhism developed in Japan; etc.

How do you answer? I would say that it is the Buddhism based upon the “hon-g(w)an,” the Primal Vow of Amida Buddha. Because the Primal Vow of Amida is the essence of Jodoshinshu Buddhism. The “Nembutsu” is the practice that was selected and promised in the Primal Vow, and “Shinjin” is the mind that was planted and nurtured by the Primal Vow. “Primal Vow” can mean both the 18<sup>th</sup> of Amida Buddha's 48 Vows and the entire set of 48 Vows.

Knowing the 48 Vows means understanding what Amida Buddha is and what we should vow to attain in our lives. One of the very reasons that Shinran Shonin considered the Larger Sukhavativyuha Sutra as the most important sutra is that the Larger Sutra has a section with the 48 Vows that realize for us the true freedom of Enlightenment.

In our alter shrine, we have different images of Amida Buddha. Sometimes you see a statue standing Amida Buddha, another time you see a scroll of the six characters of NaMoAMiDaBu, and other time you see a scroll of the figure of Amida Buddha with many lights in the background. Have you counted how many lights Amida Buddha has in the background. As you might guess, it has 48 lights.

The 48 lights that represent 48 Vows can guide you in darkness and make your eyes open to the path to Amida Buddha. Each vow illuminates our life and gives us a sense of direction and of the meaning of life. May each vow open our eyes as we read the 48 Vows together.

One thing that I need to note here is that the literal translation of the 48 Vows sounds weak. This is because of the nature of language. All the vows start with “If, when I attain Buddhahood, .....,” and end with, “may I not attain Perfect Enlightenment.” It does not sound strong in English, but in Chinese or Japanese, it is actually a promise. “Unless I do ....., I won't be qualified as the Buddha” means that “I will definitely do.....” or “No matter what, I will do....”

So my suggestion is to consider each vow to be like the famous speech “I have a dream” by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered at the Lincoln Memorial in August, 1963. It clearly showed his determination to make this dream reality together. In a way, the 48 Vows are the freedom speech by the Dharmakara Bodhisattva to free all beings from suffering and pain with wisdom and compassion. (The Dharmakara Bodhisattva is Amida in the causal stage, before becoming a Buddha.)

Let me quote some parts from Dr. King's Speech: “And so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still HAVE A DREAM. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I HAVE A DREAM that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal. I HAVE A DREAM that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I HAVE A DREAM that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of

oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. I HAVE A DREAM that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character....”

Repeating “I have a dream” sounds to me like “If, when I attain Buddhahood” in the 48 Vows. Let us hear what is the dreams of Dharmakara Bodhisattva are, and let them be our dream as well.

**For** the true freedom of all beings,  
**The** Bodhisattva Dharmakara shared his DREAMS that  
**You** and I can and should have; the  
**Eighteenth** Vow is the key among Amida’s great DREAMS! (by Kenjitsu)