

Learning the Buddha's Great Compassion—The Forty-Eight Vows (2)

“Pure Land”—A Vow to Be Free from the Three Poisons

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This is my first vow to be fulfilled when I become a Buddha; I will make my world free from hell (anger), hungry spirits (greed) and domesticated animals (ignorance). [freely translated by Rev. T. Kenjitsu Nakagaki]

(If, when I attain Buddhahood, there should be in my land a hell, a realm of hungry spirits or a realm of animals, may I not attain perfect Enlightenment [translated by Dr. Hisao Inagaki])

We all look for happiness in our lives, yet we may not be always happy. Nobody wants to suffer, yet we may go through difficulties and experience sufferings. In fact, the first of the four noble truths that Sakyamuni Buddha talked about is the truth that “life is dukha (suffering).”

Once we are born, we experience getting old, getting sick and eventually dying. Also, we cannot always get what we want. We want to be always together with the person we love, but eventually it ends and we become separated. In our daily lives, we experience having problems with our friends, with co-workers, with a boss, with our neighbor etc. We may get upset, angry, jealous, arrogant, doubtful, and selfish. Those are all part of our lives and we cannot escape from them.

Dharmakara is conscious of the world of “dukha” and declares to those who live in the world of three evil realms - hell, hungry ghosts and domesticated animals - that there is a world of “sukha (happiness) where there are no three evil realms/courses. The three evil courses are associated with three poisons – anger, greed and ignorance. Hell is the realm created by anger and hatred; Hungry Ghosts is the realm created by greed and desire.; Domesticated Animals is the realm created by ignorance and self-centeredness. Attachment to greed, anger and ignorance is considered the source of our suffering and pains in this world.

Indeed Bodhisattva Dharmakara is an interesting name. “Dharma” means the truth or teachings that reveal the truth, and “akara” means storage. So the Dharmakara is the storage of the teachings where we can find and experience the truth. The 48 Vows are the expression of the universal truth, obtained by opening the door of the storage of the dharma (dharmakara), with great compassion for the sentient beings who are in the three realms of suffering. The first vow promised to establish the land without suffering from greed, anger and ignorance.

This land is called “Pure Land” in contrast to the realms of hell, hungry ghosts and domesticated animals. This first vow describes what Pure Land means. “Pure” means to be free from anger, greed and ignorance. “Land” is a state of enlightened mind, or simply the world of Enlightenment. This is a Dharmakara’s declaration to the universe that there is a Pure Land for all beings who suffer from blind passions such as greed, anger and ignorance.

Praying for the happiness and peace the

Universal truth is about to reveal.

Rare is it to truly hear the Buddha’s original Vows,

Embracing all beings who are suffering and in pain

Like the parent’s love for the child.

All sentient beings are within the Buddha’s boundless compassion

No matter what they are – good or evil, happy or miserable -

Dharmakara Bodhisattva opens the door of the dharma-storage for all. (by Kenjitsu) 🌀