

# Does the Buddha Have a Primal Instinct?

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The Primal Vow of Amida Buddha is the foundation for Jodo Shinshu. I will proceed here by asking a few questions and giving preliminary answers and then asking and re-asking some questions which I would like you to try to answer.

**1. What is the Primal Vow of Amida Buddha?** A: It is, in my opinion, a mistake to simply say it is the 18<sup>th</sup> Vow\*. The vow numbered 18 in the text of the Dai Mu Ryo Ju Kyo is a conceptualization of the intent of the Bodhisattva which matured into the "Primal Vow". In fact it is something more like a primal instinct, bad movies of similar titles notwithstanding. The Primal Vow/Instinct of Awoken persons is to lead others out of pain and delusion and into freedom and contentment.

**2. Is "Primal Vow" the only name for it?** A: No. It is also called, "Fundamental Vow," "Central Vow" etc. I often call it "The Fundamental Commitment to Universal Liberation." "Fundamental Vow" is probably the best term for it.

**3. Whose Vow is it?** A: This is actually a difficult question. If we say it is the Buddha's Vow this throws us back on the question of who and what Amida Buddha is. I think we are committed to some model of a person for Amida if he is the author of and fulfiller of the vow(s). (Vows don't grow on trees, not even in Pure Lands) As suggested above, the vow numbered eighteen in the most important of the canonical texts is the recollection of long-deceased monks of a presentation of the not-yet-Enlightened bodhisattva Dharmakara's formulation of a vow to liberate as many suffering and deluded beings as possible\*. Did the vow change a bit as he became wiser? In its fulfillment by Amida Buddha is it identical to the version in the text? (How would that fit with Shinran's caution that the Vow is inconceivable?) Rev. Eidmann used to point out that when it is called Hon Gan (the Fundamental Vow) it is always the Buddha who is said to be its author and not the bodhisattva Dharmakara.

**4. How does Amida's Fundamental Vow compare to the vows of other Buddhas and bodhisattvas?** A: Amida's fundamental commitment to Universal Liberation is the underlying source for the four vows of all bodhisattvas – a. Although Enlightenment is incomparable I vow to attain it. b. Although deluding passions are endless I vow to be free of them. c. Although the Dharma is infinite I vow to learn it all. d. Although deluded

and suffering beings are numberless I vow to deliver them all to Awakening. The forty-eight vows attributed to Dharmakara bodhisattva are more concrete elaborations of how these four great vows are to be fulfilled. Whether four vows or forty-eight they are elaborations of the Primal intent to carry along all suffering beings to the Realm of Awakening.

**5. What do our experts say about this issue?** A: The Translation Committee of the Shin Buddhist Translation Series tell us that the Primal Vow is, "The working of Amida Buddha (dharma-body as compassionate means) issuing forth as the profound desire, wish or prayer from the deepest source of life itself, dharma-body as suchness, to free all beings from the weight of karmic evil in the ocean of birth and death....The Sanskrit original, *purva-pranidhana*, implies that the Primal Vow, as the manifestation in time, from ten kalpas ago, of that which is timeless, existed prior to (*purva*) the earliest being, and that it is the basis and foundation of each being, leading it to its self-awareness from the bottomless depths of life. (CWS VII, STS, page 201)

Looking at this passage does the concept of timelessness make sense to you? On Mahayana principles "timeless" really means beyond the distinction of temporal and non-temporal. How does such a foundational status for the Vow of Amida compare to the notion of a transcendent God?

Please discuss these questions: I. What is my deepest wish? II. What is the noblest aspiration you can imagine? III. Can wishing for something to happen be the beginning of its coming true? IV. Can you think of another way of naming the "Primal Vow"? V. What is the relationship between imagining and knowing? VI. If millions of people have the same intention does this create a real force in the world? VII. Shinran tells us it was a great joy to plant his feet in the soil of Amida's Primal Vow. Have you so planted your feet? What do you think it would feel like to do so? VIII. With coming to faith, or Shinjin, we attain non-retrogression in terms of our ultimate destiny. What about day to day events, - are we changed persons? IX. In a bad moment (Shakespeare's) Richard the Second remarks, "I forgot myself." Do you ever feel "I forgot the Fundamental Vow of Amida"? X. Is holding the Nembutsu in your heart and mind remembering the Vow? XI. When you feel grounded in Amida's Fundamental Promise how do you see other religions? Are most of them also true? As true as the Buddha's Vow? Are some of them still false or destructive? XII. If you could be a Buddha or a god or a superhero, what powers would you have and what would you do? (Don't laugh. This is a serious question)

\*If when I attain Buddhahood, the sentient beings of the ten quarters with sincere mind entrusting themselves, aspiring to be born in my land, and

saying my name perhaps even ten times, should not be born there, may I not attain the supreme enlightenment. Excluded are those who commit the five grave offences and those who slander the right dharma.