

Approaching Buddhism

Compiled by Householder Fo'en
English translation by Malcolm Valaitis
Edited and adapted by Householder Jingxing





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Preamble

Buddhism's source is distant and its flow is long, wide-ranging and profound.

Buddhism entered China more than two-thousand years ago, and has already melded with Chinese culture.

And yet, we are completely ignorant of Buddhism—to the degree that we have all kinds of misunderstandings and prejudices.

Do you know how Buddhism looks upon the world and life?

Do you know why there are so many Buddhist believers in the world?

Do you want to understand your own life and future?

Do you want to obtain life's true happiness and blessedness?

You certainly do not have to become a Buddhist, but you cannot not understand Buddhism!

Good, let us together

—— Approach Buddhism!

Foreword

In our superficial, distraction-ridden modern society, the fact that you can read an introductory book on Buddhism is uncommonly rare and really a cause for celebration.

Indeed, this world is brimming with enticements, leaving people dazzled and entranced. Who has time to pay attention to unfathomable spiritual questions? In this age of material abundance and philosophical skepticism, those who discuss faith and spiritual pursuits are most often sneered at.

Buddhist teaching has been handed down to us through various societies and cultures for the past 2500 years, and its message of wisdom and compassion has enlightened countless human lives. But today, the average person's knowledge of Buddhism is mostly limited to mythical stories and hearsay. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that many people wrongly associate Buddhism with fantasy and superstition.

In reality, Buddhism embraces an “all-rivers-run-to-the-sea” approach to spiritual growth, and can offer many different routes to this end: people who appreciate literature can survey its majestic literary classics; people who take pleasure in philosophy can study the profound systems of thought underpinning its teachings; and those who prize moral and ethical development can apply themselves to the elevated behavioral standards which define the Buddhist way of life...

But of even greater consequence is the fact that Buddhism has meaningfully probed the deepest mysteries of the mind, including the nature of existence itself, and has helped generations of students clearly distinguish between ignorance and wisdom, truth and falsehood. The Buddha's greatest wish is to remove the distress of all beings and to give them happiness. For those who seek truth, Buddhism is the fountainhead of happiness.

But our understanding is frequently the opposite. Many people think, "Buddhism promotes good works and the accumulation of merit; of course, there are certain good deeds which I can do, and it might even be an advantage for me to study a little and gain some wisdom. However, I shouldn't get too serious about it or become engrossed; giving up life's happiness to study Buddhism is definitely not worth it..."

The Buddha cannot and will not compel a single person to change. One must be freely willing. But change cannot occur until we renounce complacency and our rationalizations for it.

By engaging in study and practice, you can begin to calm your heart and observe your inner world. You may begin to find that your jittery, arrogant, cynical heart becomes lighter, eventually transforming into a tolerant, humble, joyful heart. Gradually, people and things around you may become venerable—even lovable! At this point, you are one who deeply knows for herself the Buddha's mercy and greatness, and your former prejudice towards Buddhism will naturally melt away like ice.

But of course, even the person who has long practiced the Dharma is beset by obstacles and disturbances. Living as we do in a tumultuous modern society, the Way-seeking heart can vanish in an instant as the undercurrent of greedy thoughts surge up violently. All too easily we succumb to an indulgent

lifestyle, and the act of giving up our selfish comforts can be intensely painful. Cultivating a peaceful, virtuous character is also difficult in the extreme, and our evil conduct leads to fearful karmic consequences that we dare not imagine. From the inconceivably distant past it seems we are bound hand and foot with chains of karma, and our eventual attainment of Buddhahood fades into an impossibly distant future. Do we still have any hope?

When at last you are brought by your karma to respectfully read the Pure Land scriptures and Master Shandao's commentaries, you will finally know from experience the true meaning of "the Buddha's kindness is vast and mighty." When you have reached this point, it is truly a spiritual milestone. The scriptures will not merely be empty words, but will become embedded in your lived experience. You will know beyond all doubt that no condition can obstruct the Buddhas' deliverance! The Buddhas' vows were made because of our ignorance and evil, and the Buddhas' mercy exists because of our suffering. If all beings turn their hearts to the Buddha, then in his boat of mercy they can cross the sea of birth-and-death and leave these shores of bitterness behind.

"Namo Amitabha Buddha! Truly, I lack nothing for salvation!"

Look around you: most people look as depressed as we once were; they are bewildered, unable to formulate the right questions, let alone find any answers! They suffer their karma without a way to break free; their spirits are crushed under the heavy load they bear. They are at a loss for what to do. They merely pass idly through life.

This precious human birth is truly hard to come by! Do not fail to listen to and heed the Dharma!

As for me, I wanted to compile teachings suited to the modern person, and so collected these chapters that everyone could spend just a little time reading each day and still understand Buddhism. It is my sincere hope that this book will help the reader reflect a little more on life, examine his heart and mind, and ultimately find the spirit's final destination.

Namo Amitabha Buddha!

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Chapter

1

Understanding Life



Humanity has long been sunk in confusion over wisdom and ignorance. Infinite, unknown domains surround us, concealed by the darkness of endless space, and despite the progress of civilization, humanity has not yet fully understood the riddles of the cosmos.

Of all these riddles, the most difficult, the most irritating, the most pressing—both for individuals and the society as a whole—are those pertaining to our own predicament:

“Who am I? What is life’s origin? How can one be at ease in life?”

“When people die, are they forever extinguished, or is there life after death?”

“If after death people no longer maintain any sort of ‘life’, then of what consequence are one’s good and evil actions?”

“If there is life before and after death, then where does life come from, and where does death lead to?”

...

1.1: Life, Death and Impermanence

The answer to the question of life and death is intimate and personal, for it speaks directly to our most fundamental desires and fears: we all are born and fated to die, and in the face of death all the world's happiness becomes cheap and tawdry decoration. When we calm our hearts and look at this one issue of impermanence, our lives seem to be caught in the middle of a bottomless blackness.

All of our fears in the world originate from the fear of dying. All people, whether they recognize it or not, necessarily have some intuition of this; from our fight-or-flight response in the face of danger, to the psychological fear of graveyards and corpses, everyone can observe this fear entrenched in the depths of his or her consciousness.

At different times in history and in different cultural contexts, wise men and women have pointed out to us that mankind's fear of death is a universal, eternal, and fundamental anxiety. From an evolutionary perspective, this has been purposeful: because our strongest instinctual desire is to stay alive, we have been a radically successful species. But the price of success has been consciousness of death. We all know that at the end, death comes to us all; when death comes, we are thrown into an unknown abyss.

Indeed, there may be nothing more frightening than the fact that we cannot know for certain what happens to us when we die!

We go through this life attached to a particular self-identity: my name, my status, my lifestyle, my family, my friends, my work, my property, my intelligence, my ability. . . We base our sense of security on these frail supports that, at the instant of death, are all completely swept away. When we confront ourselves honestly, we meet an utterly bare self, an unrecognizable self, a worrying stranger. Is it any wonder, then, that we cram each waking moment with trivia, distractions, and pointless tasks to ensure that we need not ever face this stranger?

From the first, we live under a fictitious identity in a world that is ultimately unreal as a fairy tale. In addition, we are continually intoxicated by our passions, a state which can be compared to haphazardly building a poorly planned and substandard house—on a foundation of sand, no less!

We meticulously guard ourselves, but no one can control every aspect of their lives. Still, toward this unattainable end, we pile care upon care until, one day, illness or catastrophe wakes us with a blow. Then the imminent approach of death shatters our delusion and forces us out of our hiding place.

The average person's attitude toward life is to maximize pleasure and to forget about death as much as possible. Death, however, does not forget about us and strikes abruptly, without warning.

Some people say: "We all must die; it is not some great, ponderous thing—it is, in fact, quite natural. I don't have any problem with it." Surveying death from a distance or talking about it in the abstract is not frightening. It's a bit like calmly looking at a tiger in a cage at the zoo where it cannot hurt us. But if we were in the mountains and suddenly encountered a tiger, would we have the same composure and detachment? When we are genuinely confronted with our own death—when we finally meet the tiger on the mountain—just one look and

both legs go weak.

Whether from natural disasters, war, robbery, accident or disease, every day we hear news of death. Shakyamuni Buddha tells us:

Human life is the space of a single breath.

The meaning of this is that each person's life is brief and frail; if inhaled breath does not follow exhaled breath, it means the end of life. This is the most important example of what the Buddha frequently mentions in the sutras: *impermanence*.

The Buddha once asked his disciples, "How long is a human life?"

One disciple replied, "Human life is the space of a day."

The Buddha shook his head and said, "You do not understand."

A second disciple replied, "Human life is the space of a meal."

The Buddha again shook his head and said, "You also do not understand."

A third disciple replied, "Human life is the space of a breath."

The Buddha said, "Excellent, excellent! You understand!"

One hundred years is thirty-six thousand, five hundred days;

In the blink of an eye, each and every one is swept away.

1.2: The World After Death

In this world, we are born onto a path that leads inexorably towards death. But caught up in the illusion of self-identity and the dramas of worldly conflict, we hurriedly rush to and fro searching for wealth and fame. In the end, we find ourselves weary to the depths of our spirit, grieving our lack of any notable accomplishment. Perhaps there is no crisis more severe: crushed by striving and desire, we at last come to sense the fleeting and precious nature of life. But we can neither prevent its slipping into oblivion, nor extend it into eternity. Thus we pass our days in a fog of confusion and despair.

In the midst of such confusion, many people begin to explore the concept of a life after death as they seek to understand the why of existence and whether or not death is really the end. Certainly, if we are as practical as we say we are, we should seriously ask ourselves: what is the future state toward which I am traveling?

Though many of us shun such questions or equivocate about their importance, they inevitably hover in the back of our consciousness. If we are honest, we will see that the answers are vital compared with the solutions to worldly problems. We may discover how to raise the world's standard of living, or how to speedily advance scientific and technological progress, but answering the problem of death is immeasurably more important because it determines the quality of our approach to life, and the sorts of values we adopt.

From time immemorial, the answer to the riddle of death has been the purview of religion. Looking at humanity's vast array of spiritual traditions, there seems to be a single point of agreement: death is not the end! Surely, such commonly held insight can bestow on life a holy and ultimate significance, and move people to embrace a deeper vision of the future.

But following the bold advances made by the sciences—especially evolutionary biology, astronomy and physics—many people have come to believe that a comprehensive, final understanding of life and death, the universe and existence itself, is soon within our grasp. Because of this, the insights of religion are devalued and displaced by a materialistic view of life. It's no surprise, then, that those who believe death to be our ultimate destination are growing in conviction and numbers.

The fact, however, is that the reach of science has exceeded its grasp. For as “close” as scientific inquiry has brought us to understanding life and death, the creed of materialism is ultimately faith-based. From a limited and sometimes poorly interpreted body of evidence, scientists have made a philosophical inference about the nature of reality—and then proceeded to “confirm” it with the same limited body of evidence! Observations and data which do not conform to the established dogma are either ignored or discredited.

In the grand sweep of history, it was not so long ago that we believed the heavens to be comprised of nested spheres, and the sun to revolve around the earth. These models of reality were eventually corrected and surpassed; isn't it arrogance to think that our current models will not be? It may be time for science to regain a sense of humility and realize that our comprehension of the universe is still superficial.

There are many dimensions to human experience which lie beyond our current understanding. Among those which pose the most direct challenge to the materialist paradigm are cases involving spirits, hauntings, near-death experiences, out-of-body experiences, and all varieties of psychic phenomena, including past life regressions and memories. They are found throughout history, in all corners of the world, and transcend differences in culture, religion and technological development.

Even today, in spite of widespread rational skepticism, such phenomena have not abated. Human beings seem to regularly have experiences which, as of yet, science cannot explain. Could it be that there is something about the riddle of existence being revealed to us in these mysteries?

But it is not only the physical sciences that have given us a partial and imperfect view of reality; philosophy has also failed to provide us with an understanding equal to our situation. When faced with the pressing reality of death, the most profound thinkers on earth are no different than the rest of us.

Arthur Schopenhauer, a German philosopher who had steadfastly denied that there is an afterlife, was said to have called out as he approached his end, "Ah! God, my God!"

The doctor looking after him asked, "Sir, does your philosophy include God?"

He replied, "Although my philosophy has done away with God, I myself am helpless in the face of crisis. My sufferings torment me, and philosophy is of no avail. If my illness could be healed completely, then I would certainly engage in an entirely different branch of study." This exchange allegedly took place shortly before he died.

France's most famous atheist, Voltaire, when approaching his end with much pain and struggle, fixed his eyes on a certain spot in the room and said: "Look! There is a demon come to take me! Ah, I see hell; how terrifying! Somebody, anybody, help me!" Desperately shouting in this way, he died.

Friedrich Nietzsche, born in 1844, was a German philosopher who preached the maxim "God is dead." In his philosophy, traditional morality was rendered meaningless by the impersonal forces of natural selection, competition, and evolution. The person who emerged as the fittest survivor, and who broke free from values based on mystical other-worldliness, was, in Nietzsche's view, a "superman." The superman's will-to-power was superior to that of his fellows and would allow him to be the forger of a new ethics. Only by breaking the fetters of religion could one finally accomplish nature's purpose, as Nietzsche believed religion to be an enfeebling force leading to nature's deselection of the meek and mild.

Nietzsche's occupation was as a teacher, and he was made a professor at Basel University when he was only twenty-five years old. However, he was later troubled by schizophrenia and suffered all kinds of mental torments. In the year 1900, after a nervous breakdown and a series of strokes, he died.

It may be easy for some of us to point fingers at these men and deride their efforts as foolishness. But we are all in the very same boat; we are all subject to endless delusions. Many of us believe that death is the end of suffering, or that there is no life after death. But when approaching life's end, the heart's darkness expands; and many are the men and women of science and philosophy who have perceived within that darkness the fires of hell.

At that moment, our cleverness and intelligence are worth nothing. Our bravery is blown away like a thread of smoke, and our hearts can only issue a mournful wail.



1.3: Confronting Death

Death is obscure to us because we do not know when we will die or what comes after death. But one thing is certain: wherever we are, death can and will find us. In spite of this, we mistakenly believe death to be remote even though we regularly hear news of others who suddenly and unexpectedly pass away. They were the same as we, regarding their lives—their tomorrows—as a given.

But the reality is grim: death pursues us constantly, whether from illness or accident. Ponder for a moment that we need not be sick to die. Indeed, death knows no shortage of variation in its art. We use willful ignorance of death's proximity as a means to put off squarely facing death. But the more we coddle ignorance and cultivate distraction, the longer the shadow death casts through our minds.

If we wish to throw off death's dominion, we must absolutely reject a stance of avoidance. The consequences of shirking a decisive confrontation with death are stark: it will stalk us for endless *kalpas* (i.e., cosmic ages), destroying us in this life and in every life to come. We will end trapped, shackled to our ignorance and vain desires, unable to do anything but live and die again, *ad infinitum*.

A great number of people only begin to value their lives as they reach life's end. What a sorrowful thing this is! But even more regrettable is that they have never looked ahead to their final moments, always believing that they have

an abundance of time. Then, when the hour is suddenly upon them, they are unprepared and must exit the world at the mercy of their karma, full of fear and uncertainty. At such a harrowing moment, isn't it already too late?

At this time, let us clear our minds and solemnly ask ourselves:

“If I died tonight, what would happen to me?”

One oft-deployed tactic for dealing with impermanence is to try to live fully in the present moment. Believing that the “now” represents the only reality of any consequence, one seeks to truly savor life's myriad experiences through a narrowing of temporal attention and focus.

While this can be a useful tool in certain forms of Buddhist practice, the creed of “present moment-ism” often leads away from an understanding of what Shakyamuni Buddha called “the three times”—past, present and future—and how they interpenetrate to create good or evil conditions in our lives. Neglecting the chain of causation in this way will only speed up our consumption of good karma and lead us to a tragic end.

Another strategy for dealing with impermanence is to adopt a superficial and optimistic spirituality, embracing sentiments like “though flesh may wither and die, the spirit is never extinguished.” This view suggests that postmortem spiritual beatitude is a given—a natural outcome of bodily death. This “all-is-well” mode of belief causes people to become sidetracked in religious endeavor by focusing on such non-essentials as the arts of longevity, ancestor-worship, or certain New Age preoccupations common in Western countries. While such philosophies often promote virtue and serenity, they unfortunately do nothing to solve the problem of cyclical birth-and-death.

We've already seen how the "religion" of science believes that rationalism and the scientific method will one day solve every riddle of the cosmos. It's not surprising, then, that many educated people see materialism as the only rational response to the reality of impermanence. Indeed, the belief that death is the end of life is ubiquitous in the scientific community. Society at large has imbibed this view, and modern people no longer seek to understand death or the mysteries of existence.

Nevertheless, the boundary of death is a perpetual concern for *human* beings. Some anthropologists believe that the artistic endeavors of our primitive ancestors were actually a bid at spiritually transcending death. And other researchers have noted that the ways in which we now use science and technology as a means of conquering nature may, in fact, be an unconscious strategy aimed at conquering human nature—that is, the impermanence of the body!

It cannot be denied that the achievements of science are significant: we've mapped the human genome, made human embryos in test tubes, mastered organ transplants and cloned living things. But death remains a veil beyond which our most sensitive instruments may not pass.

Perhaps sensing our presently impoverished state when it comes to such questions, many countries have established institutes for the investigation of phenomena such as reincarnation, near-death experiences and parapsychology. The goal of such research, while often formulated in occult scientific jargon, is actually very simple: scientific evidence of an afterlife may relieve our modern death-angst and offer the same transformed life perspective that religion once did.

While hard scientific data has not been forthcoming, there is fascinating

anecdotal evidence which, ironically, points us back towards a spiritual understanding of death. Some who have had near-death experiences say that, in the wake of their brush with mortality, their fear of death has radically decreased and has been supplanted by humble acceptance. They also report a loss of interest in material pursuits, while their engagement with spiritual questions has become more pronounced. For them, death is a natural continuation of life, and they more readily have faith in an afterlife.

In due course, we all experience the loss of neighbors or acquaintances, which can easily spark anxiety over the future deaths of our own beloved elders. From this, it naturally follows that we will come to reflect upon the inevitability of our own end and ponder the significance of human life.

But even prior to this, there is another way to know the real truth of impermanence: *it is to live with awareness*. This is the first step in seeking liberation.

According to the Buddha's wisdom, we can use life to prepare for death; we do not have to wait for the onset of terminal illness to take stock of our lives, nor do we have to wait for the final moment to confront the unknown. Here and now, we can begin to seek life's meaning and significance. With a steady heart and calm spirit, we can learn to see every second as an opportunity to prepare for death. In this way, it is possible to confront it directly, to lift its mysterious veil and become familiar with death. At every moment, we can learn to practice awareness of our mortality, just as a Buddhist master once said:

Since we do not know where death lies in wait for us, we should lie in wait everywhere for death.

Kosi Gotama was the young wife of a wealthy merchant. Once, when the Buddha was staying in the vicinity of her village, her infant son died from a sudden illness, and she was beside herself with grief. Clutching the tiny corpse in the middle of the road, she asked all whom she encountered if anyone could make her son live again. Most people were shocked and repulsed; some thought she had gone mad. Finally, a wise man told her that, in the whole world, the Buddha is the only one who can perform miracles.

She immediately went to find the Buddha, placed her son's corpse in front of him, and told him everything.

The Buddha listened to her story with deep empathy, and said in a gentle voice, "In order to treat this child, we will need mustard. Go to the village and get four or five seeds and come back. However, these mustard seeds must be obtained from one whose house has never known death."

Kosi Gotama promptly left for the village, still clutching her son's body. To the first stranger she saw, she said, "The Buddha requires someone who has never known the death of a relative to give him some mustard."

"I am sorry, but I have lost many kin from this world," the person answered.

She then went to a second person and received the same answer. She then went to a third person, and a fourth person—eventually asking everyone in the village for mustard.

At last she understood that the Buddha's request was impossible.

Then, as if waking from a dream, she carried her son's body to the

cremation grounds, said her final goodbyes, and then returned to the Buddha.

“Did you bring the mustard?” the Buddha asked.

“I did not,” she said. “I have begun to understand your teaching. Sorrow seems to have blinded me. I believed I was the only one who had endured the torment of a loved one’s death. Please reveal to me the truth about death and what comes after. Is there any aspect of a person which does not die?”

The Buddha looked compassionately at Kosi Gotama and said, “If you hope to understand the true meaning of life and death, you must frequently reflect upon this: the cosmos only has one eternal and unchanging law, and that is that everything must change. Everything is impermanent. Your son’s death now helps you understand that all lives on earth are endured in a sea of pain and bitterness. Breaking out from the cycle of birth-and-death is the only way to liberation.”

Kosi Gotama bowed at the Buddha’s feet, and for the rest of her life was a devoted follower.

Chapter

2

The Ultimate Essence of Life



The Buddhist sutras are full of allegories that vividly illustrate our actual situation. One of these runs as follows.

One autumn evening in a vast wilderness, a traveler had lost his way and was carelessly hurrying along a mountain path. Suddenly, he noticed that the path was scattered with small white objects, and upon closer inspection, realized they were pieces of human bone. As he was puzzling over this, there suddenly came an astonishing roar and a tiger leapt from the trees and was instantly closing in on him.

Seeing the tiger, the traveler immediately understood the bones; he turned on his heel and began to flee as fast as his legs would take him. Having completely lost the path, he ran blindly, stopping just in time to avoid plummeting from the edge of a high precipice. At this, his hope of escape completely vanished.

But then he saw a pine tree growing from the edge of the cliff, and from the tree a heavy vine dangled into the abyss, its end concealed by a heavy mist ascending from the valley. Without any hesitation, the traveler grabbed the vine and began to lower himself down the cliff face. The tiger, seeing that its meal had escaped, stood at the cliff-edge and roared ferociously.

“Thank goodness! Because of this sturdy vine, my life is spared!” For a moment, the traveler was at ease. But as he continued his descent, he thought he heard a strange noise below him. Suddenly, through the fog he saw the roiling surface of a dark and angry sea, and the noise was of waves breaking on the jagged rocks below. He cried out in despair. The water pitched and heaved, and riding on a large wave directly below him were three giant sea-serpents, each with its poisonous mouth agape waiting for his fall. Terrified beyond words, the traveler began to shake with horror.

As if this was not enough, he saw far above him two mice—one white and one black—clinging to the vine and gnawing away at its precious fibers! The traveler shook the vine, hoping to drive away the mice, but they only began to chew faster through the plant.

As the traveler shook the vine, a beehive at the top of the pine tree dislodged and began to drip its honey into the chasm. Seeing this, the traveler managed to catch several drops of the honey in his mouth. He was filled with instant bliss: “How intoxicating!”

At that moment, in spite of everything, he forgot his dire circumstances.

2.1: Lonely Spirit

What is the meaning of this allegory? Shakyamuni Buddha told us this traveler's tale in order to elucidate the truth of human life. What follows is the "key" to understanding the allegory, and hopefully will help the reader reflect more deeply on the story.

The traveler: The traveler is each one of us; he or she is the ordinary human being making his or her pilgrimage from birth to death.

The wilderness: The vast wilderness is a metaphor for our lives in which we are ultimately alone. Though we may live surrounded by friends and loved ones, no one can accompany us on the final journey into death.

From the moment we are born we become a traveler, and our lives become the wilderness we journey through. Since we are travelers, we necessarily have a destination, though we may have lost the way. If we have lost the way, whether through ignorance or carelessness, can we really say that we are any wiser than the traveler in our tale?

The autumn evening: The dusk of an autumn day represents the impermanence of life, as well as its melancholic, bittersweet flavor.

Why do our lives so resemble an autumn evening? It is because we travel

the world alone. And though we may not be lonely, consider for a moment that no matter how near to us in sympathy and friendship another may be, they cannot understand our feelings and perceptions *from the inside!*

In our unenlightened state, each individual mind is a country with a population of one. Locked within our own subjectivity, we are utterly alone. In this sense, we can never fully unburden ourselves to another, or truly understand another's spirit. Even husbands and wives cannot fully grasp the things in each other's heart.

This is the ultimate loneliness. Have you never felt this terrible isolation?

The bones: The bones on the path indicate all the times in life when we encounter the death of a loved one or friend.

We have lived up until the present and have probably seen many "bones" in our lives. What sort of thoughts do we have? What emotions? Have we never stopped to ponder the approach of the "tiger of impermanence"?

The tiger: The hungry tiger is a metaphor for the coming of death.

In this world all things are impermanent; hence, we cannot avoid death. From the perspective of the ordinary person, death is the most terrifying thing we know.

Right now, this tiger of impermanence is rapidly closing in on us. However, when by chance we perceive the tiger, we turn away; it is too terrifying to confront directly, so we bolt down the path in an effort to escape. We run blindly, even forgetting what it is that we flee so as to completely avoid the issue.

Like the traveler, we instinctively resist death. As soon as we get sick, we go to the hospital to do battle with death and extend our lives. But ultimately, death is unstoppable; our lives are in death's hands.

When we hear that Buddhism frequently mentions the issue of death, we might grow suspicious, or even feel revulsion for the Buddha-Dharma. Why would anyone want to embrace a way of life that constantly reminds us of death? But in fact, this is a complete misunderstanding of Buddhism, for it is the Dharma alone that can teach us how to solve the problem of birth-and-death.

Only when we directly face death, will we ultimately find the answer and be able to attain absolute joy.

2.2: Fragile Life

The pine tree: The pine tree on the cliff represents money, property, reputation, status, etc. While these things are considered the hallmarks of a successful life, in the face of death they are powerless and without meaning. This insight was realized by the illustrious Chinese emperors Qin Shi Huang and Han Gaozu: when their end came, they could not help but sigh, “Ah, life is but a dream within a dream!” Thus, they quietly left the world.

Can we cling to our money, property, reputation, and status, as well as greet death with a smile on our face? That is impossible, because when death comes none of it can come with us.

The vine: The vine is a metaphor for the habitual ways we unconsciously cling to life. If we are young or middle-aged, we automatically assume that we have twenty, thirty, even forty more years of life. But should we have this much time or even more, what of it? Think about it: Like a dream, the past 20 or 30 years have gone by in the time it takes to say “impermanence.” And it will be the same for the days and years ahead.

The mice: The white mouse and black mouse indicate day and night. Bit by bit, they do away with our lifespan. As they say: one day more is one day less. Whether we are hurrying or resting, active or idle, the clock is always ticking the moments of our lives away.

Ultimately, the vine is bound to be nibbled away, and then—death.

A wily fox looked into a vineyard and saw endless clusters of plump, delicious grapes on the vines and immediately began to anticipate a delicious meal. But the fox was too fat and could not fit between the slats of the fence. Thus, for three days and three nights it neither drank nor ate so that its body grew thin.

At last it was able to enter! The fox stuffed itself with grapes and was perfectly contented, but upon trying to exit the vineyard, was again too fat to get through the slats of the fence.

With no other option for escape, the fox was forced to use the same trick, and for three days and three nights it neither drank nor ate.

As a result, the fox was just as thin and hungry when it left as when it entered.

How is this any different from human life? We are born naked and die alone. No one can take with them even an hour's worth of bitterly won property or fame.

2.3: The True Significance of the Afterlife

In life everyone is a guest; the interval of a hundred years is no more than the passing of a dream.

Nothing can be taken with you when you leave this earthly life; with empty hands you go to meet Yama, the Lord of Death.

Like the traveler, we do not see the sea serpents and the deep dark sea until we fall in. It is then that one learns the true significance of the afterlife.

Continuing with our parable:

The deep dark sea: The sea is a metaphor for the underworld. In the underworld, one must bear “eighty-thousand calamities of great torment.” This is certainly the true significance of the afterlife.

Once in the underworld, one does not emerge again for eighty-thousand *kalpas*. And how long after that will it take for one to attain human form once more?

The poison serpents: The three poison serpents represent our heart’s greed, anger, and ignorance. These three serpents are the authors of hell’s miseries.

As a result of our greed, we have accumulated the evil karma associated with unethical wealth, sex and fame, including all thoughts and acts of killing, theft and improper sexual conduct that we have committed in this and past lives.

As a result of our anger, we have accumulated the evil karma associated with wishing misfortune upon others, including all thoughts and acts of slander, mental murder, verbal and physical abuse we have committed in this and past lives.

As a result of ignorance, we have accumulated the evil karma associated with resentment of our own misfortune and jealousy over the fortunes of others, including all thoughts and acts of gossip and complaining committed in this and past lives.

Our heart is a fearful heart. How so? It is because that, deep down, we understand that good causes beget good effects, evil causes beget evil effects, and one's own causes beget one's own effects. Karmic law cannot make even the slightest error. It follows, then, that our own incessant proclivity towards selfishness and evil gives birth to hell, and finally that is where we will sink.

What teaches us the true significance of the afterlife is the Buddha-Dharma.

Like the traveler, we forget that we will inevitably face the consequences of our karmic evil when this life ends. But instead of facing these consequences, we allow our hearts to be wholly snatched away by the honey.

The honey: the honey indicates people's five desires—desire for wealth, sexual gratification, fame, food, and sleep. Day after day, we incessantly seek the means and conditions to satisfy these five desires. But by licking the honey—by unconsciously grasping our desires and spiraling deeper into karmic evil—we are ignorantly sowing the seeds of future pain and suffering.

Are we not, one and all, the very image of this foolish traveler? Shakyamuni Buddha, in this parable, showed us the true nature of life and also pointed toward the solution.

Do not let death catch you by surprise. Wake up! Face the fact of your inevitable demise with full awareness!

Only when the problem of death is resolved can we truly appreciate the joys of life.

Open the door to the Buddha's wisdom; it alone can enlighten us to truth.

To receive human form is a rare and precious event; today we have already received it. To hear the Dharma is likewise rare and precious; today we have already heard it. If we do not obtain liberation in this present life, when can we expect to obtain it?

There was once a hateful person who, at the end of his life, sank into hell.

The ruler of hell asked him, "Were you not summoned here by three angels?"

The hateful person answered, "I have never seen an angel."

The ruler of hell said, "You mean you have never seen a wrinkled old person? Did you never stop to think that you too would grow old? And what about the sick person? Did you never consider that you too would become sick? And then there is the lifeless corpse. Did you never ponder on the fact that you too would meet the same fate?"

The sinner answered, "I have seen all of these, but I arrogantly ignored them and did not properly consider this issue."

The ruler of hell said, "Now you understand: in life, you were selfish and hateful according to your whim. Now you alone must bear the retribution for these acts, without help or hope of escape!"

Thus was the wretched sinner led away into hell.



Old age, sickness and death are the most painful experiences of this life, and not even the study of Buddhism will enable us to avoid them. But within this difficulty there is hope. It may seem that old age, sickness and death are demons lying in wait for us. But from the enlightened perspective of Buddha Shakyamuni, these are in fact our most venerable teachers. Thus did King Yama, lord of hell, call them angels.

Chapter

3

The Saha World



Looking at space, the expanse of the three dimensional universe is without limit.

Looking at time, the chain of becoming is without beginning and without end.

The Buddha said that the Milky Way is but a small world-system, and that one thousand small world-systems make up a small thousand-world-system; and a thousand small thousand-world-systems make up a middle thousand-world-system; and a thousand middle-thousand-world-systems make up a large thousand-world-system; and a large thousand-world-system is referred to as a “trichiliocosm,” or “three thousand-fold world-system”.

The cosmos is made up of countless three thousand-fold world-systems, and all of these fluctuate constantly in a process of genesis, growth, stagnation, decay and destruction. The cycle repeats endlessly, without a moment of stillness.

Every trichiliocosm has had, now has, or will have a Buddha, who teaches the Dharma to the living beings of that world.

The trichiliocosm we inhabit is known as “Saha,” the world of patient endurance.

3.1: The Materialist Inundation

The West's post-sixteenth century scientific revolution led to a drastic trivialization of religious belief. After several thousand years as the sole arbiter of truth, the doctrines of religion were displaced by the scientific method as the preferred paradigm for understanding reality.

As our understanding of the physical world grew by leaps and bounds, and our ability to make observations and interpret evidence grew ever more sophisticated, we soon put our scientific knowledge to the task of increasing material wealth. Naturally, competition for resources became a perennial source of conflict between individuals and nations, and the world grew accustomed to wars of increasing ferocity fought on an ever more global scale.

Of course, we cannot fail to recognize that, for the past few hundred years, armed with the new science and its resulting technologies, the human race indeed profited from competition and conflict. Productivity increased rapidly, humanity's collective standard of living improved, and we gained the ability to shield ourselves from many of nature's most common threats.

At the same time, however, people lost respect for the balance of natural ecosystems. As we slowly became nature's masters, we began to influence the environment directly through large-scale industrial activity and pollution. But the ever-increasing flow of goods into the marketplace incentivized society to ignore the environmental costs of economic growth.

Conscientious persons called for protection of the environment, reminding us that we have only one earth. But society was caught in a cycle of runaway consumption and did not pay heed to such warnings. Before long, humanity had depleted many of its natural resources, polluted air and waterways, turned fertile, green expanses into desert, and forced great numbers of animals into extinction.

Today, driven by economic gain, expediency is the rule at all levels of the development and production of goods. As a result, artificiality permeates almost every domain of human life—from the clothing we wear to the foods we eat to the medicines we use. But the unintended consequences of such expediency are profound: fertilizers, pesticides, artificial pigments, preservatives, growth hormones, antibiotics and industrial chemicals and waste are now slowly poisoning us with their ubiquitous presence in our lives.

In our excessive dependence on modern medicine, we are gradually forfeiting our body's natural defenses and innate resiliency. In the 1980s, medical science optimistically declared that, before the dawn of the 21st century, humanity will have eliminated all contagious disease. But stagnation in the research and development of new antibiotics—driven by low profit margins in the field—has led to the emergence of strains of bacteria (so-called “superbugs”) that are increasingly resistant to our current arsenal of antibiotics. If this trend continues, there could one day be infections that no medicine can cure. Over-reliance on antibiotics has left us with deficient natural immunity in the face of a new generation of germs which medical science may be unable to subdue.

Just as worrying is the fact that older diseases such as cholera, diphtheria, plague and dengue fever are now resurgent, and newer forms of pestilence such as AIDS, Lyme disease, Legionnaires' disease, Latah and Lassa fever are

advancing in many parts of the world. Far from becoming disease-free, the world is being battered by a violent storm of sickness and disease. Consider the following:

On June 6, 1980, after eight homosexuals died from a new kind of infectious skin cancer, the United States government announced this strange disease's official name: Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. AIDS quickly became a global epidemic, and by 2005 the infection had spread to 40,300,000 people, of whom 25,000,000 have died. Every day, approximately 8,000 people die from AIDS. According to current projections, within twenty-five years there will have been nearly two hundred million deaths from AIDS.

Malaria is the world's most common infectious disease. Every year there are 500 million cases globally, causing more than a million deaths. As the World Health Organization points out, every thirty seconds malaria kills one child aged five or younger.

Dengue fever is only second to malaria as the largest infectious disease, and in two-hundred years has caused several million deaths. Annually, there are approximately 50,000,000 individual cases of dengue fever—twenty to forty thousand of which are deadly—and approximately two billion people suffer the threat of dengue infection.

And none of the above has taken into account the new crop of infectious diseases that has emerged in recent years: mad cow disease, bird flu, SARS...

3.2: The Spirit's Untended-ness

Modern society is infatuated with wealth, power and youth; it advocates cleverness without wisdom and glorifies the superficial, the superfluous, and the coarse. It exploits human vice and turns it into virtue, and assaults us with ceaseless advertising which promotes a culture of indulgence. When lived with a mind steeped in the toxins of sensuality and pride, life becomes a hollow shell, empty of meaning and significance. Is it any wonder that people are angry?

Although venting our frustration on others through incessant yelling and capricious acts may give us satisfaction in the short term, it utterly blocks us from the path of true joy. The thrall of materialism and competition robs us of our inner peace, and leads us to cherish attachments as we become ensnared in the net of greed. As our covetousness becomes more and more difficult to satisfy, we are in the end reduced to slaves of money, becoming mere machines of consumption.

Amid the confusion of illusory hopes and ambitions, we dream of finding happiness. But in reality, we are consumed by pride, hatred, jealousy, fear and anxiety. Although pestered by a vague feeling of dis-ease, we cling—at the expense of elegance and serenity—to our hectic and selfish “modern” way of life. By day, we project ease and confidence as we strive to compete and win; but at night, when we are alone, our hearts are often unbearably dark and distressed.

We are externalists, believing that the answer to our disquiet is to be found in the world around us, if only we could manipulate people and events to our liking. Thus, we have become unable to observe our inner world, or touch the ground of our being. We shun the spirit's quiet call and dismiss all talk of the eternal or sacred. Indeed, society almost unanimously confirms such bias: from academia to the entertainment industry, it is taken for granted that nothing is real beyond what we can experience through our five senses.

There is a gap between delusion and reality which, if seen clearly, signals the degree to which people have lost their way. To say that human civilization itself is imperiled by our delusions would not be an overstatement. Everywhere in the world, drug use, excessive drinking, sexual promiscuity, violence, fraud, and youth crime are becoming grave societal problems. One needs only to glance at the evening news to see this is true.

As much as we rue the loss of public morals and private virtue, we perhaps detest more our existential solitude. On the deepest level our hearts are untranslatable, forever locked in dungeons of radical skepticism. Warped by our loneliness, we are suspicious of those around us and incessantly work to shore up our personal psychological defenses. We are frustrated by our lack of access to the levers of power in society, but neither do we have the motivation to create change ourselves or to help other people. If only life does not confound us with obstacles, we are satisfied.

It is like we are crawling in an endless desert, nearly dead from hunger and thirst. Modern civilization is given to us like a cup of cool, refreshing water, but it is really salt water. Our hearts are so consumed with chaos that we do not even believe truth really exists.

We are bewildered by our suffering and scared of our deepest feelings. Thus

we are lost, endlessly churning in the cycle of rebirth.

When John D. Rockefeller was forty-three years old he founded Standard Oil Company, and became king of the budding oil industry. After ten years, the stressful work and long hours had broken his health and “he looked like a mummy,” according to his biography.

He suffered from a strange digestive sickness, lost all of his hair and was forced to start wearing a hairpiece. His shoulders drooped, his feet shuffled, and his back slumped like a dying old man.

Every week he made a million dollars, but doctors only allowed him to eat biscuits and drink yogurt, for which a few dollars was certainly enough.

Through his whole life he was obsessed by money, even to the extent of being neurotic. When he was fifty-three, he once collapsed in a panic because he had wasted a one hundred-and-fifty-dollar insurance fee. His doctor told him that he must choose between an early death and retirement.

At this juncture, with his life hanging in the balance, he finally managed to come to his senses and gave up his obsession with money. It had not brought him happiness, but rather had wasted precious years of his life. In a single bound, he leapt free from the snare of greed and finally took a look inside himself.

He began a life of philanthropy, donating life-saving funds to a school that was about to close, creating a black college fund, supporting the medical research of a PhD, and setting up the International Rockefeller Fund which is

devoted to eliminating sickness and illiteracy worldwide.

Rockefeller transformed himself and became a genuinely happy and contented man. Even when his institutions suffered setbacks, the former neurotic who once had broken down over the loss of less than two hundred dollars was able to sleep peacefully.

He lived in good health to ninety-eight years.

3.3: All Sensations Lead to Suffering

When a person is born, worry is born with him or her. In this world of pain and fleeting joy, all things are impermanent and deceptive: the ultimate satisfaction one imagines from the attainment of fame, wealth and success is illusory. In truth, suffering, like a shadow, accompanies each moment of happiness.

Shakyamuni Buddha named this world “Saha World.” Saha is “to endure [堪忍]”, which is to say that the world’s sufferings and troubles are endless, yet living things somehow refuse to give in.

The Buddha also named this realm the Saha World because of “The Five Turbidities” with which life on earth is tainted. The Five Turbidities are the world’s frequent disasters, rampant evil, unchecked superstition, ubiquitous worries, and the brevity of life.

Living in this world, we try to attain a happiness that is permanent and unchanging—which, in our unenlightened state, means the perpetual satisfaction of the ego. Thus are we greedy in acquisition, lustful in our sexual relations, selfish in fame, intemperate in eating and drinking, and slothful in rest. But no matter how well one tends these five passions—for wealth, sex, fame, food, and sleep—their cultivation never yields a harvest of happiness. It is like scratching a welt: the itch feels immediately better. . . but then comes the pain.

The Buddhist sutras say that avid desire is self-destructive. It is like holding a fiery torch to the wind: one is bound to burn oneself.

The sutras also have an analogy: clinging to mundane desires is like an ignorant child hankering after honey on the blade of a knife. A negligible meal—at what a cost!

Life's Eight Pains

The pain of birth – The suffering, physical and mental, at the time of birth

The pain of old age – The suffering of an aging, fragile body

The pain of sickness – The suffering, physical and mental, of illness

The pain of death – The suffering, physical and mental, at the time of death

The pain of separation – The suffering of separation from loved ones

The pain of hatred – The suffering of proximity to enemies

The pain of non-attainment – The suffering of not acquiring wants and needs

The pain of the five aggregates – The suffering of worry over fame and fortune, and of obscuring one's true nature

In our world of impermanence, these eight pains plague all living beings

through the round of birth-and-death, in all states of existence. While the majority of these pains are self-explanatory, the pain of the five aggregates is perhaps the most subtle and difficult to understand at first glance. The five aggregates (or “skandhas”) are the aspects which make up a sentient being: matter, sensation, perception, mental formations and consciousness. These aggregates, or bundles, are not fixed and do not constitute a static identity; they are constantly in flux, and thus have the ability to obscure our true nature, which leaves us ignorant—and vulnerable to the endless worries and pains of life. This, in turn, binds us to the cycle of rebirth in samsara. Certainly, this is life’s greatest suffering.

It follows from this, then, that the goal and destination of human life is to attain the liberating wisdom of the Buddhas so as to escape the cycle of rebirth, and realize omniscience and perfect freedom.

However, because of our evil karma, we are constantly sinking in the ocean of birth-and-death, ignorant of how we ourselves create the sufferings and torments we endure. In the midst of this, we wonder if it is possible to attain freedom from suffering and a higher, more exalted state of being. But in the end we only shake our heads and sigh, accepting our lot as the work of fate or the will of some god.

But isn’t this wondering actually the stirring of something in the deepest recesses of our hearts? Is there something there, obscured yet present, yearning for an outlet and a means of expression? In spite of this, most people believe that external forces control their destiny. If they are even aware of that quiet stirring deep within, they hastily conclude that suffering is unavoidable, or is in the hands of a higher power, and they set the question of freedom from suffering aside.

There was once a householder who lived a tranquil life. One day, a beautiful and sumptuously dressed woman came unexpectedly to pay a visit, and the master of the house enquired who she was.

The beauty answered, "I am a spirit that bestows riches and honor."

The master of the house excitedly invited her in and eagerly began to wait on her.

A little while later came a knock at the door. When the master answered, he met a foul-smelling, ugly woman dressed in rags. She said, "I am the spirit that inflicts poverty." The master was utterly repulsed and began to turn her away.

The ugly woman told him, "The good spirit whom you are now entertaining is my older sister, and we sisters are never apart. If you turn me away, my older sister will also leave."

Sure enough, when the old hag was at last driven off, the good and beautiful spirit went too.

Where there is life there is death; where there is happiness there is grief. People only know how to seek happiness, but do not understand the pain hidden behind happiness.

Chapter

4

Understanding Buddhism



For one to survive in this world is not easy: life's pressures are everywhere, disaster strikes without warning, and society's moral fiber is unravelling...it seems there is no choice but to go with the flow.

But then there are moments when any thinking person must ask, "Must it really always be this way? Is it possible to break free from suffering? How can one find the light?"

If we are sensitive and curious, these questions will drive us to investigate life's meaning, to escape from suffering, and to transcend ourselves.

When we come to see the need for spiritual refuge in a deceitful and merciless world, we may at last turn towards Buddhism.

4.1: The Buddha's Appearance in the World

A long time ago, the Buddha Kassapa taught the living beings of this world. There was one among his disciples who, throughout many lifetimes, had pursued the Bodhisattva path. He bemoaned the fate of the universe and pitied humankind; and through myriad lifetimes of dedicated practice he perfected the powers and virtues of a Bodhisattva to a supernal degree.

This Bodhisattva observed the world and its sufferings: its old age, sickness and death; the hardships of competition and survival; the pains which sentient beings visited on one another in an unending spiral of revenge. On and on it went, without relief. So he made a great vow that in his next life he would, for the sake of all living beings, become a Buddha.

The Bodhisattva was reborn in Kapilavastu, with the name Siddhartha Gautama. As the son of the king and queen of the realm, Prince Siddhartha was raised in the palace and enjoyed all manner of earthly pleasures.

After he had grown to adulthood, the prince again observed the old age, sickness and death of all living things and lamented the world's suffering. Thus did he give rise to a heart of profound mercy. He would often sit beneath a tree and ponder the reality of suffering, attempting to uncover the mysteries of life and death.

In order to find a way to transcend the pains of the world, the prince, at the age of nineteen, left his family's palace to pursue the life of a homeless seeker of truth. He first sought out the most distinguished spiritual teachers of the age, mastering their techniques and methods, but he found that they were unable to guide him towards final liberation. Finally, he resolved to rely on his own will and intuition and to seek enlightenment on his own.

At this time, the prince retreated to the bank of a river at the present site of Bodh Gaya to meditate under a lush bo tree. Seated on a cushion of grass and facing east, he proclaimed: "Until I attain enlightenment, I will not leave this seat!"

The prince fixed himself on meditation, and using his fortitude and compassionate awareness he subdued the devilish tormentors sent by Mara, the evil one. Through the long night he never flagged nor wavered in his quest, and as he witnessed the rising of the morning star his mind was flooded with light. In a flash he became fully awake, a consummate Buddha. From that point on, the prince was known as Sakyamuni Buddha, the World-Honored One, Tathagata, world-renowned teacher of gods and men.

The World-Honored One observed the sufferings of the world and woefully lamented:

How strange, how strange!

All living things have the wisdom and virtue of a Buddha,

But they are vainly attached and cannot awaken.

The meaning of this verse is that all the beings of the world are, in their original nature, intrinsically perfect, each possessing a Buddha's wisdom and morality. It is only because they cling to their delusional beliefs that they cannot

uncover their true selves.

The World-Honored One's teaching plumbed the deepest secrets of existence, and then surpassed them. This is Tathagata's essence, the origin of the entire Dharma and the twelve divisions of the canon of scripture. Every Buddhist school takes the Buddha's omniscience as fundamental, and all are derived from it.

The World-Honored One spoke publicly for forty-nine years. It is difficult to say just how many beings listened to his teachings, realized liberation from suffering, and attained everlasting joy.

He died at the age of eighty, seeing that his karma had been fulfilled and his teachings were complete. Thus he gave up his mortal body in a grove outside of the city where he had attained nirvana and returned to a state without birth or death, an everlasting, joyous, and peaceful realm.

4.2: A Teaching for the Ages

Since the founding of Buddhism, more than 2,500 years have passed, and it has had a defining influence on the spirituality and cultures of Asia. Buddhism touches on philosophy, science, literature, art, pedagogy, psychology and logic, and has profoundly influenced Chinese culture in particular. China's classical masterpieces, such as *Journey to the West* and *Dream of Red Mansions*, are all rooted in the ground of Buddhism. Phrases such as “不可思議 [bù kě sī yì: inconceivable]”, “皆大歡喜 [jiē dà huān xǐ: to everyone's delight and satisfaction]” and many others, originate from the ancient Buddhist texts. The Bodhisattva Guanshiyin, symbol of happiness and good fortune, is revered in many households. Upon entering a Buddhist temple, all Chinese can participate in the stately ceremonies, even if they are not believers. These are but a few examples of how far Buddhism has penetrated into the everyday culture of China.

Still, even Chinese do not necessarily understand Buddhism. We might ask:

Isn't burning incense and worshipping the Buddha only about praying for safety? Isn't Buddhist faith just a way to entrust our spirit to a higher power? The Buddha taught many inconceivable concepts; we do not necessarily oppose them, but what relationship do they have to daily life?

In short, very few people truly grasp the meaning of Buddhism. One reason is the oft-distorted portrayal of Buddhism in works of Chinese literature

and art. For instance: Xuanzang's cowardice and pedantic-ness; Fahai's unreasonableness; and Jia Baoyu, who because of his family's decline, took refuge in the life of a monk.

The Contemporary Chinese Dictionary gives the following definition for religion:

“A type of social ideology that regards the objective world as illusory, requiring people to place faith in god, spirits, the soul, and karmic retribution; to entrust themselves to a paradisaical life after death; and to surrender their moral agency through the adoption of such beliefs. In a class-based society, the exploiting class utilizes religion to anesthetize the people and maintain their own rule.”

These ideas have shaped a whole generation's impressions of Buddhism: passive, ignorant, weird, and unsuited to modern times.

When we break through these prejudices, transition from confusion to certainty, and enthusiastically declare our knowledge to our friends, some may believe we have been misled into an extreme form of escapism. In most cases, they do not understand anything about Buddhism—although they may voice many “knowledgeable” opinions, such as:

“In light of today's developments in science and technology, Buddhism is an outdated superstitious ideology; only pessimistic escapists still take refuge in religion.”

“Buddhism harps on about abstruse theories which can't connect with everyday people's lives; it's just a lot of idle chatter.”

“There are good people who receive no reward, while many evil people have both happiness and longevity. Therefore, karmic retribution cannot be trusted; its character is fatalistic, and it just encourages people to be good and that’s it.”

“If death extinguishes life, then life is, by definition, finished: reincarnation is impossible, heaven and hell are impossible, paradise is unattainable. Furthermore, what comes before life and after death is unknowable. Enjoying life in the present is most important.”

In short, misunderstandings of Buddhism are profound and widespread. For most people, their knowledge of the subject never surpasses the word “superstition”.

The focus of most people’s superstitions is one or more deities, and because Buddhism does not deny the existence of gods, this quite naturally allows the “Buddhism as superstition” paradigm to become an accepted judgment.

The Buddha tells us that the birth, growth and change of everything in the cosmos necessarily follow a natural law, known as dependent arising: all events must have suitable causes (intrinsic factors) corresponding to suitable karma (extrinsic conditions), giving rise to all kinds of different patterns. In accordance with karma, all things have their own rate of birth, growth, change, and finally decay. Karma collects, and brings things into being; karma disperses, and effects endings. All objects and events interpenetrate with their surroundings; there is mutual influence, mutual dependence, and nothing can break away from its context into an independent existence. Everything within the cosmos affects everything else; this is cause and effect—not the work of an omniscient, omnipotent god.

The Buddha also tells us that every person possesses Buddha-nature, and is fully equipped to become a Buddha—not because they are saints of high attainment, or because they are ordinary beings and lacking in virtue; but only because they have the capacity to practice. Again, this is cause and effect. The Buddha does not rule the cosmos as some kind of deity who saves and damns sentient beings on a whim; the Buddha just tells us how to break free.

When the World-Honored One resided in this world, he warned his followers against harboring superstition:

**Do not engage in practices outside the Way: do not revere heaven,
do not worship gods and spirits, do not regard the sun as great.**

Buddhism certainly does not deny the existence of gods, but it denies the gods' omnipotence, regarding them as just another variety of living being, even if highly exalted. And today, even many Western academics share Buddhism's disregard of theism. Indeed, even Einstein is supposed to have said: "If there is one religion that could cope with modern scientific needs, it would be Buddhism." [Possibly misattributed.]

Buddhism is the teaching of the World-Honored One. Belief in Buddhism is belief in the truth of the Buddha's teaching, the taking of refuge in the Buddha, and reliance on his example and his store of karmic merits. Finally, belief in Buddhism means becoming as he is: a perfect, all-wise, all-compassionate, consummate Buddha.

Belief in Buddhism can allow us to do away with confusion, and walk a true path. Only those who have truly entered the Way can have personal experience of this. If one's understanding of Buddhism is informed only by hearsay and rumor, then one necessarily arrives at false conclusions. This is like trying to

understand the nature of the sky by viewing it from the bottom of a well.

The Dharma is the direct expression of the World-Honored One's great compassion and wisdom; like the pure emptiness of space, it remains untainted and unchanged by the objects of attachment that arise through various causes and conditions.

The Dharma's purpose is to ease the hardships of all living beings, and to establish itself as the true understanding of reality. It is universally applicable in all Dharma Realms (that is, in any and all states of existence) and to every kind of living being, without prejudice. Among human beings, the noble are further ennobled by the Dharma, and the evil are purified and transformed by the Dharma.

To put it simply, the Dharma explains the following:

- 1) How all life manifests and decays.**
- 2) How to break free from the sources of suffering.**
- 3) How to obtain happiness through practice.**
- 4) How Buddhas and Bodhisattvas save all beings from evil destinies.**

In recent years, there have arisen various "world-renowned sects," spiritual paths or breath-based practices claiming connections to Buddhism, but these are actually heterodox Buddhist cults. They fly the flag of Buddhism, but gravely distort the Buddha's teachings and thus damage the reputation of Buddhism. These cults can be socially disruptive and have yet to demonstrate any real benefit to society. Many common, decent people become ensnared in these groups; in response to various social or mental pressures, they lose their way

and finally are unable to extricate themselves from these pseudo-Buddhist sects.

So, at the very least, understanding Buddhism provides a degree of self-protection against false teachings—especially if one lives in a culturally Buddhist community. For a multitude of reasons, ignorance of the Dharma is truly a great pity.

4.3: The Tripitaka: Ancient Records

The World-Honored One's disciples faithfully passed on his forty-nine years of preaching the Dharma, and these are the Buddhist scriptures we see today.

The earliest collation of these scriptures, the Three Collections (Tripitaka), explains the dependently-arisen nature of everything in the cosmos, and delineate the fundamental path of Buddhist practice.

The Three Collections are composed of sutras, monastic discipline, and commentary. The sutras include the Buddha's spoken teachings, while the section on monastic discipline contains Buddhism's precepts, and the commentative writings collect the explications of successive lineage masters. Later, portions of these and other teachings were gathered into a Chinese edition called "The Great Collection Sutra," which is composed of more than twenty thousand scrolls—a truly massive work, and a continual object of study for Buddhist scholars.

The Chinese Buddhist scriptures that we see today were translated primarily from the Sanskrit. China's translation work began in the Eastern Han, and continued through the Sui and Tang dynasties. Government specialists established a translation bureau, with a staff of no less than a thousand. There were dozens of different positions, including translation managers, linguists, editors, calligraphers, brush-holders, writers, advisers, publishers, and experts

in Sanskrit—with other responsibilities including basic translation, reading, proofreading, copying and controlling for grammar and syntax. Every classic in the process of translation went through several checks and revisions, as scholars weighed the effect of even one character's alteration.

From the above, we can conclude that the work on the ancient Chinese scriptures was extremely rigorous; for this reason, we can be certain of the Chinese Buddhist canon's quality.

4.4: The Dharma's Spread

At the time of the World-Honored One's passing, Buddhism spread primarily within India's Ganges River valley.

In the time of India's Maurya Dynasty, the brutal emperor Ashoka, in the course of a bloody military campaign, encountered a Buddhist monk preaching the Dharma. Deeply moved, Ashoka repented of his life of violent conquest, took the Triple Refuge, and established Buddhism as the state religion of his empire. He constructed many stupas, and even directed his energies to spreading Buddhism beyond his borders: east to Myanmar, south to Sri Lanka, and west to such places as Syria and Egypt. Because of Ashoka, Buddhism gradually became a world religion.

In Asia, the routes of transmission can be roughly divided into north and south. In the south, Buddhism first spread to Sri Lanka, then spread to such countries as Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos. In the north, it spread to China by way of the Pamir plateau (between Xinjiang and Tajikistan), then to countries such as Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. Southern Buddhism practiced the teachings of the Small Vehicle, whereas northern Buddhism attached importance to the teachings of the Great Vehicle.

The term "vehicle" is descriptive. "Small Vehicle" refers to religious practice in accord with the Buddha's earliest teachings, which concentrate on self-liberation. "Great Vehicle" refers to the Bodhisattva Way, a method of

practice devoted to the liberation of all sentient beings. The Great Vehicle can be likened to a large ship carrying vast numbers of beings across the sea of suffering to the other shore.

In the nineteenth century, the Western world began to have an interest in Eastern religions, and knowledge of Buddhism was widely disseminated in Europe, North America, and Oceania.

In its long course of transmission through many different countries and cultures, Buddhism won people's hearts as a peaceful way of life and brought enrichment to society as a voluntary ethical and religious system, not as a forced and punitive set of beliefs. Today, Buddhism benefits such wide-ranging domains as medical science, philosophy, and psychology. Seeking to benefit all of humankind, Buddhism has never compelled conversion from members of other religions, but has respected the freedom of each individual to discover joy and spiritual meaning in his or her own way.

One day, a sea frog went to pay a visit to an old frog that, in its whole life, had never left the water of the well where it lived.

"Where do you come from?" the old well frog asked.

"I come from the great sea," the sea frog replied.

"How large is your sea?"

"Very large."

"Would you say it is one-fourth as large as my well?"

"Larger."

"Larger? Would you say it is half as large as my well?"

"No! Larger."

“ Then...the same size as my well?”

“You cannot compare them.”

“Cannot compare them?! I must personally go see such a thing.”

Together they went out.

When the old frog saw the great sea, he was so surprised that his heart seized and stopped beating!

We make our lives into dark and narrow containers, but such confines cannot be compared with the whole of the universe. We are trapped in a conceptual box, and very few people can conceive of their actual smallness in the immensity of the cosmos. In the same way, there are very few people who first hear the inconceivable Dharma and aren't skeptical.

Chapter

5

Outline of the Dharma



The “Three Time Frames” are past, present, and future; “Karma” is cause leading to consequence. “Karma” is also known as “deeds causing effects”—“deeds” meaning actions.

If one wanted to know and understand all the various realms of existence, one must first understand life’s actions—that is, volitional deeds. Deeds, though they may look very minute, are actually the deciding factor in determining the state of existence for all living beings.

Our habits and encounters in this life are all manifestations of past karma; at the same time, we are continually creating new karma as the seeds of future consequences are planted. Life is just this kind of living and dying: the cyclical and unceasing continuity of deeds and their results.

5.1: Karma of the Three Time Frames

5.1.1: Deeds and Deed-Force

The meaning of the Chinese character for “deed” is “make/build.” Thus, deeds encompass all activities of body and mind, including action (physical deeds), speech (verbal deeds), and thought (mental deeds).

When considering the consequences of these activities, deeds can be divided into:

Individual deeds;

Communal deeds: shared deeds, such as the deeds of families, deeds of countries, deeds of humanity.

If many beings share similar deeds, they may have a communal effect on the world and are known as the “effect of deeds”. For instance, humanity has fundamental shared deeds in that we are all born and partake of a common humanity. People living in the same country, the same city and even the same family, also share communal deeds.

But even though they may grow up in the same family, each person has their respective habits, thought patterns and lifestyle because they have been shaped by different life experiences. In addition, every person lives in a unique

experiential world which has been co-created by their individual deeds.

What beings are actually aware of is the influence of the deeds of self. We are only able to perceive our own universe from a subjective point of view, in the same way that a bug might regard a stone as a tall mountain.

Deeds can be divided into four kinds:

Virtuous deeds: benefitting self and others; actions leading to virtuous results.

Evil deeds: causing harm to the self and others; actions leading to evil results.

Neutral deeds: actions devoid of either virtue or vice.

Liberating deeds: transcending the duality of good and evil; actions leading to liberation from birth-and-death.

We come into this world seemingly by chance, and at the end, we take with us neither wealth nor fame, but only the transcript of our deeds. As it is said:

When impermanence comes, then the dreamer knows:

Nothing can be taken along—only one's deeds.

Any deed, also known as a karmic cause, has the power to bring about future consequences. Virtuous deeds have the power to give rise to happy results, and evil deeds have the power to give rise to bitter results. This continuum of cause and effect is known as karma, the force of our deeds.

Under usual circumstances, our deeds' karmic consequences do not necessarily manifest right away. This causes people to deny karma's existence, neglect good works and indulge in evil without any misgivings. The habitual

practice of evil will create, over the long term, truly sobering and fearful consequences. The scriptures say:

**The force of our deeds is extremely great: it can match Mount Sumeru,
It can submerge enormous seas, it can hinder the Sagely Path.**

(Mount Sumeru: according to Buddhist cosmology, the central and highest mountain of each world-system.)

In fact, even a small deed can have tremendous influence and make the difference between life and death. It is like a tiny seed planted in the ground which grows into a tree that touches the sky. A lineage master's *gatha* (an ode, a verse recounting the Dharma's significance) says:

**A moment of idle discrimination creates our deeds—
Enough to bind us to the Six Realms and Three Domains.**

(Six Realms: hells, hungry ghosts, animals, asuras, humans, heavens)

The verse says that we inadvertently create our deeds, and their power is sufficient to draw us into continual rebirth. Furthermore, they more often than not detain us in the three painful realms of hell, hungry ghosts, and animals—the Three Evil Destinies. Hence, all beings must reap the fruits of their deeds through countless lifetimes until the force of their deeds is spent.

A wealthy old man took four wives. The oldest wife's beauty had diminished, and the old man was indifferent to her. The old man's favorite was the young and beautiful fourth wife; indeed, he gave her every possible consideration, and the two were as inseparable as form and shadow.

Inevitably, tremendous wealth was not able to protect the old man from the grim reaper and the hand of disease. When the end was near, he called his four wives to his side, and asked: "I am dying, and the road to the Yellow Springs will be quite lonely. Who among you is willing to accompany me?"

The fourth wife answered: "I am still young, and life is waiting for me to enjoy it."

The third wife answered: "I am also still young; I can re-marry."

The second wife answered: "I can only give you some company and then see you to the cemetery; the house has many issues to handle, and your young children still need rearing."

The oldest wife answered: "Although you have been unloving and unjust, I am still willing to go hand in hand with you." Thereupon she and the old man embraced and together passed away.

The World-Honored One used this allegory to tell us how every person throughout life embraces four "wives":

The fourth wife is youth. We all desire to hold onto youth, but like a bird it vanishes, and never returns.

The third wife is property. All our possessions will finally "re-marry" another, and grasping and hoarding is of no avail.

The second wife is friends and family. On the day that we say goodbye to this world, family and friends can accompany us to the cemetery and shed a few sentimental tears, but then must return to the business of their daily lives.

The oldest wife is the force of our deeds. “Nothing can be taken along—only one’s deeds.” All the seeds of good and evil planted in this life will unfailingly follow us into the next.

5.1.2: Karmic Consequences

All of our physical, verbal, and mental behaviors produce corresponding karmic consequences. In fact, even the minutest thought produces its natural karmic result. In accord with karma’s nature and gravity, every action is certain to produce corresponding outcomes in the end: good actions produce good results, and evil actions produce evil results. As the saying goes, “plant melons, harvest melons; plant beans, harvest beans.” Cause and effect are always in agreement, and never do they exist in isolation. Like two sides of a coin, they are different aspects of a single reality. The sutras say:

The wealthy practiced *dana* [Buddhist practice of giving] in former lives,

While the poor practiced stinginess.

The long-lived practiced mercy,

While the short-lived cut short the lives of others.

The law of karmic consequences is inexorable, and is more than just an abstract theory. We need only look at our own lives to see clearly the consequences of our actions. When we are cruel towards others, not only do we karmically create identical suffering for ourselves (whether in this or future lives), but we must also live with the painful memories generated by the encounter. Through means and channels we cannot comprehend, karma always

returns to its source. We ourselves must necessarily experience every injury that we have visited on others.

If we can sufficiently reflect on our own behavior, we will certainly discover a pattern: whenever we do something selfish or hurtful, this inevitably brings about suffering; whenever we do something compassionate and loving, this creates joy. Whenever we injure others, we are harming ourselves; whenever we bring others joy, it generates happiness in our own lives.

The Law of Karma has one other characteristic: every karmic seed we plant cannot wither with time and age. In the time before we receive our karmic consequences, their power is undiminished. As it is said:

**All beings perform deeds
That do not disappear through a hundred calamities.
When karmic cause and conditions together appear
We naturally bear the karmic consequences.**

Karmic causes do not necessarily immediately manifest karmic consequences. Only with suitable external circumstances will they finally ripen.

Karmic laws exist objectively; they are not the Buddha's creation. The Buddha simply points them out, nothing more. Whether we believe in them or not, we all exist within the framework of karmic laws.

Once there were five people who practiced Buddhism in a forest not far from a town. Among them was an old teacher who could know his previous lives, and his disciple, a seven-year-old novice monk.

This old master knew that the boy monk only had seven days left to live, and mercifully said to him: “Your parents miss you very much, so you should return home to visit them, and after seven days come back.” The novice excitedly took his leave of the old man.

As the young monk walked down the road, it suddenly began to rain heavily. Seeing that a flash flood was about to destroy a large anthill, he hastily piled up earth to block the water, allowing the ants to narrowly escape disaster.

Early in the morning of the eighth day, the young novice monk returned to his teacher. Seeing that the youngster had safely returned, the teacher was amazed; he entered a state of meditation and understood that, because the novice had saved the ants, he had extended his life.

5.1.3: The Three Time Frames of Karma

Each affair is a complicated mass of karma that is ripening and combining with other karma. Most often, we do not understand the connection between the outcomes we experience in the present, and their karmic causes in the sometimes-distant past. Thus, it can appear as if all events arise by chance. When we see good people suffering calamity, and evil people reaping good fortune, it is easy to be skeptical of the Law of Karma. This is caused by a lack of understanding of the Triple-Linked Time Frames of Karma principle.

Our behavior can often have delayed karmic consequences, even into the next lifetime. For this reason, the manifestations of karmic consequences are divided into three categories:

Instant results: results received in this lifetime.

Life results: results received in the next lifetime.

Later results: results received in the third to the hundred-millionth life to come.

The virtuous ancients said, “Good and evil have their consequences; it is only a question of whether they come early or late.”

Why does an evil person reap good fortune? It is because in his past lives he cultivated deep virtuous roots, which were destined to ripen in this lifetime. This is why he enjoys fortunate conditions. If in this life he had not practiced evil, his fortunate conditions would be even greater in lives to come. As for this life’s bad karma, he cannot eliminate it at will; at the predestined time of karmic ripening, he will surely suffer the evil consequences of his actions.

Conversely, a good person suffers evil consequences because of the previous wrongs he committed. In this life, the karma generated by these past sins was destined to ripen, and he must endure his unfortunate conditions. If he were not good in this life, the evil conditions of his future would be even heavier.

All of our circumstances are the manifesting consequences of past karma; and our present physical, verbal and mental karma will inevitably bring deserved consequences in the future, without any degree of inaccuracy.

The Buddha said, “The present ‘you’ is created by the past you. The future you is created by the present you.”

In previous lives dwell the causes; in this life, one is the bearer.

In future lives dwell the results; in this life, one is the maker.

If we want to explore the karma of our previous lives, we need only to observe our present circumstances. If we want to predict our prospects for future lives, we only need to observe our present behavior.

From this, we can see: the favorable and unfavorable conditions of a single human life—and the economic and political fortunes of a vast empire—are brought about by karma. As the Buddha said:

What one does, one receives; what all do, all receive.

Without the theory of karmic consequences, it is difficult to universally explain the inequalities between people in a satisfactory manner. Due to similarities in our past deeds, we are born in the same world, the same country, and the same city; and due to differences in our past deeds, we have different characters, interests, talents, and fates—even if we share a similar environment.

Modern society does not accept the Three Time Frames of Karma argument, and if people openly discuss karmic consequences in future lives, they are disregarded as superstitious. Those who only have eyes for ill-gotten gains in the present cannot imagine the true extent of their deeds' consequences. They mistakenly believe that life's evil acts are only punishable if they are caught by civic authorities, and that death ends both their consciousness and culpability. Thus, they frantically pursue material benefits in the present life, and never stop to consider the effects of their actions.

More seriously, the influence of this sort of behavior does not stop at the individual level; it extends to the entire world, producing a highly destructive materialism. Our vision almost never extends beyond the horizon of this life, and we are all sometimes guilty of entertaining a selfishness that is never satisfied, even to the detriment of our common future. We can already see, in

spite of our scientific progress and increased prosperity, widespread moral decay and environmental pollution.

As one environmentalist said, “We are currently eradicating, poisoning, and destroying the world’s entire ecosystem. We are over-drafting a check that our descendants cannot possibly repay, behaving as if we were the world’s last generation.”

When Shakyamuni Buddha was in the world, a merchant entering a city was killed by a cow. The cow’s master worried that it would bring more trouble, and hastily sold it.

The person who bought the cow led it back to his house, and along the way gave the cow a drink at the bank of a river. Out of nowhere, it suddenly became vicious and brutally killed its new master. His family, in a fit of grief, rage and fear, killed the cow and carried it to the market to sell.

A farmer bought the cow’s head and tied rope to the cow’s horns to carry it home. Along the way, he sat at the foot of a tree to rest and hung the cow’s head on the tree. Out of nowhere, the rope tied to the cow’s horns suddenly snapped, the head fell, and the poor farmer was impaled and killed by the cow’s horns on the spot.

One cow, in one day, had unexpectedly caused the deaths of three people! The entire city excitedly discussed this extraordinary occurrence.

When the news reached the country’s king, he also found it unbelievable, and went to consult the Buddha.

The Buddha revealed the hidden karmic causes of the events: Years ago, three merchants had agreed to do peddle their wares together in another town. In order to save money, they decided not to lodge at the town's local inn but at an old woman's house, and agreed to pay her a fixed sum. But on the third day, the three merchants tricked the old woman by leaving without payment of the rent. The old woman returned home to find her tenants had packed up and left. Becoming extremely indignant, she went after them to demand her money. The three merchants, seeing that the old woman was aged and weak, not only did not pay her back, but also mocked and insulted her terribly. The old woman, having no other recourse, angrily cursed them and said:

“You scoundrels, bullying lonely old me! One day, I will have satisfaction! I cannot deal with you now, but I vow to exact justice in my next life!”

The vicious cow was the old woman's next life, and the three people killed were the three merchants who bullied her.

5.1.4: Transfer of Karmic Consequences

What we often call “fate” is, in fact, karmic consequence.

Our bodies are a kind of consequence, called the “result body.” Beauty or ugliness, longevity or brevity of life, good and evil circumstances are classified as actual results; wealth or poverty and the status of one's family are classified as dependent results. These are karmic manifestations from our past lives, and are not the result of external forces: all are self-made and self-received.

Karmic law vivaciously runs through all things; it is dynamic and changeable, not an ironclad system of fate. Our present conditions are the result of the past, and, at the same time, are the future's cause. Since our actions change all the time, consequences also change ceaselessly. This is a cause for hope. We can rely on the force of our own moral efforts, or on the force of the Bodhisattvas' great compassion, to make up for inborn deficiencies. With diligent practice of the Dharma, one can minimize—even to the point of elimination—karma's evil results.

1) According to karmic law's "results require many destinies" principle, there are many possible destinies from the past's cause to the present's result. If there is no multiplicity of destinies, karmic consequences simply cannot manifest in accord with the ever-changing nature of reality. By keeping one's distance from evil actions and accumulating good actions, one can aid in the creation of positive outcomes, and minimize or negate the effects of one's past evil karma.

2) According to the Dharma's wise perspective, when all is said and done, deeds rely on many destinies to arise, but have no essential nature. Like illusions, their form is impermanent and empty, as are their results. There is no unchanging doer of deeds, receiver of deeds, deed-cause and deed-result.

3) Deeds are created by the innermost intentions of the heart, and can be altered by the heart. Deed power is great, but not as great as the heart's power. The heart possesses the miraculous ability to create and dissolve deeds and their effects. The Dharma offers many methods for dealing with negative karmic retribution: rites for worshipping the Buddha, making offerings to the Buddha, repentance, contemplating emptiness, making images of the Buddha, and reading and reciting the scriptures. If one is deeply repentant, true practice

confirms the absolution of our misdeeds.

4) Long-practicing Bodhisattvas have gathered measureless stores of virtue that can eliminate evil karma. All living things can rely on faith in the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas to assist in shifting and eliminating previously created evil karma and its consequences. The *Contemplation of Infinite Life Sutra* [Amitayurdhvana-sutra] says: “If evil people earnestly recite the name of Amitabha, they eliminate eighty billion *kalpas*’ worth of evil karma with each recitation.”

To put it briefly, karma and its results can be transformed; the force of our deeds can be cast off. This is the true essence of the Dharma.

With this understanding, we can rest on a foundation of wisdom and peace, select an appropriate method of practice, energetically exert ourselves, and transform our fate. When all is said and done, we are the final arbiters of our karmic destiny.

Yuan Liaofan was a man of the Ming Dynasty. In his youth, Yuan visited a practitioner of divination to learn his life’s fortune. The reading was clear: he would successfully pass the imperial exams, become the county’s head magistrate for three-and-a-half years, live to age fifty-three, and leave no heir. In addition, he would receive a government granary (that is, he would have responsibility for distributing food allowances from a public grain store)—a great honor for any official. All of this was foretold by the fortune teller.

Twenty years later, after ranking in the imperial examination, becoming magistrate and receiving a government granary, Mr. Yuan was indeed

convinced: destiny is pre-determined and fixed. To seek to change one's fate is pointless.

Once, Mr. Yuan happened to pay a visit to Monk Yun'gu of Nanjing's Xixia Mountain, and sat with him for three days and three nights. He listened to the monk's instruction and came to understand that fate is created by will and action. Through a change of will, action can be altered, and karmic results can be transformed. In this way, the future is also changed. From this teaching, Mr. Yuan was inspired to correct his mistaken view, and to devote himself to helping the world and perfecting his own virtue. He also came to understand that, because of his own change of will and action, the fortune teller's prophecy no longer was valid: indeed, he did not die childless at fifty-three, but had many prosperous offspring and lived in good health to age sixty-nine.

Mr. Yuan wrote about his life in *The Four Lessons of Liaofan*, and became a moral guide for later generations. His work is ranked among the classics of Chinese literature.

5.2: Six Realms of Rebirth

The existence of living things is a karma-fueled process of near-limitless proportions. From previous lives to future lives, from the heavens above to the hells below, sentient beings are always reaping the consequences of their actions and finding rebirth in accordant conditions. Seen from a distance, this process is just an endless repetition of the sufferings of birth, sickness, old-age and death; at the same time, however, it is just as insubstantial and impermanent as a dream.

5.2.1: The Mind’s Unending Knowledge

Shenshi, or “mind knowledge,” is also known as spirit, natural spirit or spirit consciousness. It is a non-biological force that maintains life and shapes awareness. It utilizes our brains, eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body for perceiving the things of the external world and for doing all kinds of physical and mental actions. These include making choices, thinking, remembering, experiencing emotion, building the ego, and amassing karma. Furthermore, it provides the foundation for an individual’s psychological makeup, as well as their personal inclination towards good and evil behaviors.

Mind knowledge—the spirit—not only assigns emotions to the physical

body, but also unceasingly preserves an individual's distinct form and characteristics.

Mind knowledge is the true source of life; life depends on its presence and activity. At the moment of death, cellular respiration stops and the body begins to deteriorate. But the body's vitality is still present for a time because mind knowledge cannot break down and fade away like the body. Like all forms of energy, it cannot be destroyed, so that which animated the physical form is never lost. Eventually, it simply exits the dead receptacle to manifest elsewhere and form an entirely new body in accordance with the individual's karma.

From this, it follows that bodily death does not signal the end of life; on the contrary, it is actually a continuation.

At the time of rebirth, according to each individual's physical, vocal, and mental behavior, they are cast into evil realms to receive the effects of the suffering they have sown, or they ascend into good realms to meet an even richer, more fortunate state of existence.

Thus, death is an indispensable part of the continuing process of life; it is the seed of life's beginning, and is life itself. Everything in the cosmos participates in the process of living and dying, and is thus utterly dependent on death for its continuation.

In America, the story of *Mary's Blue Shoe* is very widespread; it is a classic example of an NDE, or near-death experience.

In 1975, while visiting a friend in Seattle, Mary's heart disease flared up. In the process of treatment, her condition suddenly worsened and she went into cardiac arrest. After the medical crew resuscitated her, she told a social worker, Ms. Sharpe, about her strange near-death experience.

Mary pointed to the ceiling and said her awareness gathered there and observed the medical staff working to resuscitate her. In vivid detail, she accurately reported on the different people in the room at the time, including where they stood, what they did, and what they said.

Afterwards, Mary floated outside the ward and drifted along the outside walls of the hospital. Somewhere on a third floor window ledge, she saw a well-worn blue tennis shoe with a hole at the big toe. The shoe, while a seemingly random and odd detail, captured her attention long enough that she was later able to report it to Ms. Sharpe.

Ms. Sharpe herself had experienced an NDE some years past, and decided to investigate the veracity of Mary's claim. In a room on the third floor, she peered through the windowpane to the ledge below. She saw a tennis shoe: deep blue and well-worn. However, she could not see if the shoe had a hole at the toe, as that end was facing away from the window. Such a detail could only be observed by someone viewing the shoe from outside the hospital—three storeys off the ground! When at last Ms. Sharpe retrieved the shoe, she discovered that Mary's description was entirely accurate.

When Mary left the hospital, she gave this shoe to Ms. Sharpe to remember.

5.2.2: Good and Evil

Every living thing's existence is determined by the good and evil of their actions. So what is good, and what is evil?

In Buddhism, evil deeds are generally summed up as ten kinds: killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, deceit, gossip, foul language, excessive speech, greed, anger, and ignorance are the ten prominent evil deeds. Refraining from these actions and cultivating their opposite virtues are considered good deeds.

Killing – to murder living things

Stealing – to steal, to gain from corrupt dealings, to defraud, to rob

Sexual Misconduct – to violate society's ethics of sexual relations

Deceit – to lie in order to cheat others

Gossip – to sow dissension

Foul Language – to engage in coarse words and malicious talk

Excessive Speech – to engage in dishonesty, falseness, immoral talk, creating a loud disturbance, speaking ignorantly

Greed – to entertain insatiable desire

Anger – to entertain wrath, hatefulness

Ignorance – to lack faith in karma and rebirth, or to grasp at illusions and

pursue evil visions

Of the ten evil deeds, killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct are physical evil; deceit, gossip, foul language, and excessive speech are verbal evil; greed, anger, and ignorance are mental evil.

It is important to note that verbal and physical evils are born of mental evils. For instance, we have no doubt experienced this kind of thought at one time or another: “Mr. X is so repulsive to me I could kill him!” In a fleeting and momentary thought, the evil deed of killing is manifest, if only in seed-form.

This is why Buddhist doctrine particularly emphasizes tranquility of mental deeds. Because anger, greed and ignorance are the mental roots of evil, they can poison our life and karmic destiny, and so are called “the three poisons.” To harbor greed, anger and ignorance can trigger behaviors like murder, thievery, and sexual misconduct—and such verbal evils as deceit, vulgarity, inciting disharmony, and slander. These behaviors, rooted in the domain of mental evil, undoubtedly bring harm to other people; and while indulging in evil thoughts may seem inconsequential in the near-term, the future karmic penalty they generate means the greatest victim of injury is oneself.

The three poisons of greed, anger, and ignorance are the origin of such worldwide problems as ethnic conflict, religious clashes, resource exploitation, and corruption. The prevalence of greed leads to the hoarding of resources and scarcity; anger triggers violence and unending war; and ignorance uses false beliefs and political ideologies to prop up the other two poisons of greed and anger.

The one domain where all of the world's problems can be effectively managed is our innermost being—a place we all have direct access to.

There once was a warrior who doubted the existence of heaven and hell. To resolve his doubt, he called on Monk Bai Yin and asked, "Is there really a heaven and a hell?"

Monk Bai Yin asked, "What do you do?"

"I am a famous warrior," the warrior proudly answered.

"A famous warrior?!" Monk Bai Yin exclaimed. "What sort of army would have you as a hanger-on? Look at your face! You look like a beggar!"

The warrior heard this and became extremely angry; grabbing his sword by the hilt, he drew himself up.

"Oh, you may have a sword, but it's probably too dull to cut hair, let alone chop off my head," said Monk Bai Yin with a dismissive wave of his hand.

The warrior quickly drew his sword, his eyes flaming with rage.

"Thus is hell's gate opened," said the monk solemnly.

The warrior's heart jolted, and suddenly he understood. Slowly, he placed his sword back in its sheath and bowed deeply to Monk Bai Yin.

"Thus is heaven's gate opened," said Monk Bai Yin with a knowing smile.

5.2.3: Six Realms of Rebirth

Because of death's arrival, life does not fade away, but rather is pulled by the force of one's past deeds and causes one to be reborn in such realms as hell, the domain of hungry ghosts, the animal realm, the domain of asuras, the human realm, or in the heavens. In this way the cycle continues, like a revolving wheel that turns unceasingly. These are the "Six Realms of Rebirth" described in Buddhism.

All the world's living things are obstructed because of delusion (that is, from a lack of knowledge, and not understanding the truths of the Dharma). From a deluded heart flow the ten evils; but as we have seen, this delusion can be minimized by learning honesty, adopting moral behavior and performing the ten good deeds. All the causes of good and evil are concealed in the heart, and the heart's knowledge will unfailingly bring the good and evil of past actions into one's next life.

The good and evil conditions one encounters in life are determined by one's mental and physical efforts.

Karma created through courageous efforts and strength: this is superior grade. Karma created through mediocre exertions and an ambivalent attitude: this is middle grade. Karma created through slothful and indolent habits: this is inferior grade.

Overall, based on the grade of one's good or evil efforts, one incurs the bitter and joyful fates of the Six Realms:

Superior grade: the ten good deeds lead to the heavenly realm. Middle grade: the ten good deeds lead to the human realm. Inferior grade: the ten good

deeds lead to the asura realm. These three are termed the three good realms.

The “highest” degree of the ten evils leads to the animal realm; the middle degree leads to the hungry ghost realm, while the lowest degree of the ten evils leads to the hell realm. These three are termed the Three Wretched Realms.

1) The Heavenly Realm: life is free of suffering; one’s lifespan is incalculable; clothing, food, and palatial accommodations are naturally obtained; one enjoys clairvoyance (able to perceive all things and to see one’s next life), clairaudience (able to hear all sounds and understand all languages), telepathy (able to know all beings’ inner thoughts and their good or evil moral conduct), powers (manifesting different forms at will, teleportation, not being subject to the impediments of space-time) and karmic power (able to know one’s own past lives); one is able to do as one pleases, and is free and unfettered.

Causes of rebirth in the Heavenly Realm: diligent practice of the ten good deeds, piety towards one’s parents, practicing charity, spreading great happiness; converting others to the true Dharma, believing in Buddhism, giving alms to monks, making offerings to the Buddha (providing incense, flowers and fruit), constructing and repairing temples and pagodas, preaching the Great Vehicle, and respecting Buddha images.

2) The Human Realm: there is much suffering and little joy; daily life is full of trouble; one is hampered by complicated thought processes, but is innovative and adept at invention; one has relatively strong willpower, is able to create good or evil karma, and can realize the innermost desire to seek liberation.

Causes of rebirth in the Human Realm: piety towards parents, just behavior, revering the Three Gems (the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha), and strictly

observing the five prohibitions (refraining from killing, stealing, lying, sexual misconduct and intoxicants).

3) The Asura Realm: one enjoys Heaven's favor and unrestrained magical abilities, but is very corrupt, arrogant, lazy, angry and jealous; one is susceptible to engaging in vain competitions; one's appearance is grotesque; in order to gain advantage over others, one engages in endless toil without rest.

Causes of rebirth in the Asura Realm: cultivating the ten good deeds with an impure heart, unable to tolerate insult, hyper-competitiveness and a habitual disposal towards anger.

4) The Animal Realm: one is naturally slow-witted and often fearful; compulsion dominates one's activities, and life is a constant struggle against hunger.

Causes of rebirth in the Animal Realm: gluttony and pleasure seeking; owing and not repaying; stealing, and swindling others; angrily harming living beings; financially ruining and insulting other people; a disposal towards lust and ignorance; being resistant to change.

5) The Hungry Ghost Realm: one must depend on others to eat; compelled by an overriding hunger in all one's actions; one is vile and evil in appearance, and suffers from timidity, loneliness, bitterness and unending confusion.

Causes of rebirth in the Hungry Ghost Realm: stinginess and greed; deceptiveness; flattery; turning away from others in need; mooching; self-involvement.

6) The Hell Realm: one's body is subjected to extreme punishment while the mind is tormented with paralyzing fear and a crushing desire for escape.

Punishments include: incineration, freezing, dismemberment with various implements, disemboweling, cauterization of the innards, live boiling, all possible forms of violent and agonizing death, any and all forms of torture... One is killed, only to be instantly reborn and killed again—all in an environment of fear-induced panic and hysteria.

Causes of rebirth in the Hell Realm: disbelief in karma, murdering living beings; following evil cults, poisoning the will of the people; committing the Ten Evils, slandering the true Dharma, and committing the Five Gravest Offenses. (The Five Gravest Offenses are: patricide, matricide, killing an Arhat, shedding the blood of a Buddha, and fomenting schism in the Sangha.)

5.2.4: The Evidence of Reincarnation

We generally maintain an ambiguous attitude towards life after death and refuse to investigate the matter thoroughly. Perhaps we feel justified in this stance, as we have never encountered satisfactory or convincing evidence for an afterlife. We may say: “If there are previous lives, why don’t we remember them?”

It must be conceded that what occurred in our previous lives is impossible to remember. But events that happened before we were three years old are lost to memory, and we may even forget things that happened yesterday. There are experiences and impressions in life that seem so vivid we believe we will never forget them—whether it be a loved one’s face or a life-changing event. But eventually the memory fades, and it is as though we never experienced it at all. If we can forget the experiences of a few days ago, or the peak experiences

of a lifetime, is it possible we have had previous lives that are irretrievable to memory?

Even in the absence of ironclad proof, we might ask ourselves: why is it that hundreds of millions of people, including many great sages and geniuses, believe in reincarnation? Could it be they are all fools? Even if one is not fully convinced, isn't it wiser to maintain a respectful agnosticism on the subject without ruling out the possibility? And if by chance we discover some incontrovertible evidence for reincarnation, it will still be possible to doubt. Indeed, before heliocentrism was the proven model of the solar system, there were only a few individuals who were sympathetic to Galileo's views. After it was widely accepted as scientific fact, there were still many in the Catholic Church who rejected Galileo as a heretic.

We state that "seeing is believing," but how do we know what we actually see? In fact, it is our karma that filters what the eyes perceive, and shapes our responses to it. This is not to say there is no objective reality; it's just that we project portions of our unconscious mind onto anything we observe. (Minimizing this kind of subjectivity was one of the reasons for the development of the scientific method.) When studying the physical world, the evidence of our senses is paramount, but this kind of strict empiricism is not a useful tool when investigating the metaphysical reality in which the material world exists.

Fortunately, circumstantial evidence for the phenomenon of reincarnation is not unknown. Humanity has accumulated great quantities of documents that discuss the testimony of those who claim to be able to remember their past lives. All cultures have records of near-death experiences, and the overwhelming majority of humans alive today believe that life continues after death in some form. For practitioners of Buddhism, the testimony of the Buddha himself,

as well as the testimony of reincarnated sages and teachers throughout the centuries, is evidence enough.

In 1956 in Adana, Turkey, a boy named Ismail was born who could remember episodes from a previous lifetime, causing a worldwide sensation. One day, when Ismail was still a young child, he broke into the voice of an adult and said to his parents, “I do not want to live in this house any longer; I want to return home and reunite with my children.” He claimed that, two years previous, he had been murdered, and that he was a fifty-year-old man named Abi who had lived a kilometer away. He spoke of Abi’s first and second wives, the hard circumstances of his life, and his two children—a boy and a girl. He repeatedly begged to return to his children’s side. Ismail’s father angrily scolded him and did not let him go. From then on, whenever his parents called him “Ismail”, he would not answer. Only when he was called “Abi” would he respond.

Ismail displayed Abi’s penchant for alcohol, often sneaking sips of “spicy” liquor from his parents. Once, he ran into his uncle, Mohammed, who reprimanded the young boy for this habit. Ismail said: “Young fellow, while I was gardening in my orchard, you once pilfered sips of my spicy liquor. I found you out, but kept silent. Now you forget such favors and dare to scold me—you who are no better than an animal!” Mohammed’s secret was uncovered, and in the end, he was convinced.

One day, Ismail saw an ice cream vendor, and greeted him in an adult’s voice. He told his parents that the man had previously sold watermelon and vegetables, and claimed that Abi had been circumcised by him decades before. The ice cream vendor was dumbstruck, for it was all true. In the end, he had no

choice but to concede that the boy was Abi returned.

Ismail's yearning for Abi's family increased daily; often, when he talked in his sleep, he would call out the names of Abi's children. When he ate something tasty, he would ask his parents to send some of it to Abi's family.

When Ismail was a little older, his parents at last brought him to Abi's house. Ismail had never been there, but led the way. As a test, his parents deliberately pointed him down the wrong street, but Ismail paid no attention and followed the correct route to Abi's home. On seeing Abi's wife, he shouted her name, hugged her, and cried. (This event was photographed.) He paid his respects to Abi's family one by one, and led them to the barn where Abi was killed, and the cemetery where he was buried. He said things that only Abi himself could have known, things others could not have told him: he was even able to say who owed Abi money. When he walked, he wrapped himself in a scarf (uncustomary of local people), this being Abi's personal clothing preference.

In 1962, when Ismail was six, an Indian university professor and eminent psychologist H. N. Banerjee went to Adana to investigate the circumstances of Abi's reincarnation, and published an investigative report.

5.2.5: Hell as an Aspect of Inevitable Degeneration

The *Contemplation Sutra* says:

**“By the committing of evil deeds, one falls into hell;
At the moment the life of desire ends, hell's scorching flames arrive.”**

This means, “the fiery vehicle is coming.” All beings are bound to fall into hell at some point. As they approach their end, they can clearly see hell’s demonic hordes bearing down on them. The fiery vehicle and the hellish suffering afterward all follow from the force of living beings’ deeds. As it is said:

**Even without a builder, they fashion a fiery vehicle:
Fashioned by one’s self, ridden by one’s self.**

When we use Buddhism’s moral criteria to assess our own behavior, we can’t help but be startled into a cold sweat. The past holds so much arrogant behavior, and all of it is evil. Each day of our life we need to eat, and this causes countless living things—from mammals to micro-organisms—to pay with their lives; this is the sin of killing. Because we misunderstood our parents’ discipline when we were young, we certainly felt hatred for them from time to time; this is one of the Five Gravest Offenses. Because we once misunderstood the profundity of the Dharma, we recklessly misrepresented it to others; this is the sin of slandering the Dharma. We have certainly used common property selfishly at one time or another; this is the sin of stealing. And who among us has never lied or embellished the facts in order to secure some advantage? This is the sin of deceit... If you look into the wild disarray of your own mind, can you find even a single moment that has passed without the stain of greed, anger, or ignorance?

The Bodhisattva of the Great Vow once said:

“When I observe the beings of the Saha world, I perceive nothing but sin in their hearts.”

We often neglect to notice that we constantly commit many small evils—

small evils that, *in toto*, could fill the void of space.

Prior to such reflection, we likely held the opinion of ourselves that most people do: *I am a good (enough) person*. But upon reflection, do you have to go very far to find a person of the five prohibitions and the ten evils? No; they are staring at you in the mirror. Beneath the lofty lens of the Dharma, we are truly shameful beings. You can see that, if you do not wake up in this lifetime, the bitter end of hell is hard to escape.

The World-Honored One reminds us in a sutra:

“All living things must fall to ceaselessness.”

“Ceaselessness” means suffering hardship without intermission. The ceaseless hell is also called Avici; it is the cruelest underworld, with torments that cannot be adequately described with language.

But Avici is only one of many hells. For example, what degree of suffering does the Middle Hell offer? To disciples asking for guidance on this matter, the World-Honored One said: “Morning, noon, and night, one endures the pain of one hundred stabbing spears; by the end, one’s flesh is shredded from the bone. What do you all think of such a fate?”

The disciples answered: “Even the pain of one stabbing spear is hard to imagine.”

The World-Honored One picked up a stone, and told them: “The pain of three hundred stabbing spears a day is like this small stone, but the true pain of hell is as great as the Himalayas.”

Horribly, the great majority of living beings fall into hell where they endure

extreme suffering on account of their evil karma. Once there, they finally regret that they never paid attention to the words of the Dharma. It is just as the writings of Master Shandao (the founder of the Pure Land school of Buddhism) state:

**“On entering hell and enduring its long suffering,
They begin to recollect the human world’s benevolent knowledge.”**

(Benevolent knowledge: that which guides beings to the Bodhisattva path.)

After the Buddha’s disciple Ananda left home to pursue the Dharma, he still had thoughts of returning home to meet his beloved wife. Thus, the Buddha gave him a vision of heaven. Just seeing the women of heaven purified and illuminated him.

The Buddha asked, “Can your wife compare with the beauty and virtue of these heavenly women?”

Ananda answered, “She cannot.”

The Buddha took Ananda all around heaven, and they happened upon a palace with many heavenly women but no emperor. Ananda asked, “Why is this palace without an emperor?”

The heavenly women answered, “Because the Buddha’s disciple Ananda renounced home to seek the Dharma, his karma has produced this heavenly palace in which he will one day reign as emperor. We are awaiting his arrival.”

Seeing the splendors of heaven, Ananda had no more regret about leaving

behind the joys of householder life on earth. At once, he wholeheartedly resolved to embrace Buddhist practice and to seek rebirth in heaven.

But the Buddha, in order to induce Ananda to leave the six paths altogether, then gave him a vision of hell. They entered a level in which people were being boiled alive in giant cooking pots. Their skins sloughed from their flesh in the bubbling soup as they hysterically shrieked in pain. It was a spectacle too horrible to endure. But there was one pot of boiling broth that was empty. Ananda was curious and asked the guard about it.

The guard answered, “Because the Buddha’s disciple Ananda left home to seek the Dharma, he has earned a place in heaven. But because he clings to the Five Desires, he will fall into this hell after exhausting his good karma. On that day, this boiling pot will be waiting for him.”

Ananda then understood: birth-and-death does not end, and there is no place in the six paths where one can find a permanent refuge. Upon this realization, he appealed to Buddha for mercy and assistance.

5.2.6: The Rarity of Human Birth

It goes without saying: the Heavenly path offers infinitely more happiness than the Human path. But as the Buddha tells us, the value of a person’s life is unlimited.

Why? Unlike heavenly beings, hell beings, ghosts, animals and asuras, people possess the full potential to be liberated from birth-and-death. We possess awareness and intelligence, and at the same time, suffer the pains of

human life which can encourage us to advance on the spiritual path. Every kind of pain, sorrow, loss and setback has a vitally important purpose: to wake us to the truth and compel us to transcend the round of rebirth.

If one misses this life's opportunity, one must pass through an inconceivably long time before recovering human form. Buddhism illustrates the rarity of human birth with the analogy of "a blind turtle and a piece of driftwood."

Imagine an ocean vast as the earth itself, with a piece of wood "drifting on the waves, a windborne thing." Every one-hundred years, a blind turtle swims up from the ocean deeps to the surface. The Buddha tells us that receiving human birth is as rare as that turtle touching the piece of driftwood when he surfaces.

Human form is hard to come by, and the Dharma is difficult to encounter. But in this life you have received human form, and have now encountered the Dharma. This fateful meeting may not happen again for uncountable *kalpas*. If you miss it now, it would be cause for great regret.

Thus, persons who cherish themselves should learn to protect themselves. When young, in their prime or elderly, they should awaken to the question of birth and death.

One day the Buddha stopped by the edge of a lotus pond, and, fixing his gaze on the clear water, saw a hellish scene: a large number of beings were thrashing about and drowning in an ocean of blood. They let out terrible cries.

The Buddha could not help but pity their ignorance and sinful deeds, and sighed compassionately.

He especially noticed a person who was suffering horribly. In past lives, this person had murdered and harmed countless living beings, and committed every sort of immoral act. In order to rescue him from hell, the Buddha began to examine the person's karma, but could not find any good deeds. Finally, after an exhaustive search, he discovered one tiny good action.

Many *kalpas* earlier, before his most ancient misdeeds, as the victim walked through a forest, a tiny spider began to cross his path. He originally thought to crush the spider, but as he lifted his foot, his heart suddenly leapt with emotion. "The spider does not offend me; what has it done to deserve death?" he thought. "It would be better to let it live."

Thus, one compassionate feeling arose, and a tiny spider fled from under his foot.

After the Buddha observed this good deed, he took up a silver spider thread and gently lowered it into hell.

From the darkened depths of hell, the sufferer raised his head and saw the finest thread of light descending slowly towards him. As if gaining the world's most precious treasure, he hurriedly grabbed the spider's thread and began to climb. While taking a rest midway, he discovered that below him were a large number of hell-beings also climbing the spider's thread.

Suddenly his heart brimmed with anger and he shouted: "Hey! I discovered this spider's thread; it belongs to me! You are all much too heavy. What if the thread breaks? Everyone, get down!"

As these biting words filled the air, the spider's thread suddenly snapped above the sufferer's hand, and he fell backward into hell.

5.3: Liberation from Birth-and-Death

All beings drift in a sea of suffering—living and dying, dying and living, unable to find a lasting place of peace and happiness.

For this reason, the Buddha repeatedly reminded us: if we wish to achieve a state of true freedom and joy, we must break free from birth-and-death.

The phrase “knowing how to break free from death” has the dual meaning of “understanding life and death’s true face,” and, “ending the passivity of the birth-and-death cycle.”

5.3.1: The Four Noble Truths

The Four Noble Truths are the theoretical foundation for the entire structure of Buddhist teaching:

1) The Truth of Suffering: this Saha world is brimming with suffering in the forms of birth, sickness, old age and death. But there are innumerable subsets of these four primary kinds of suffering: seeking and not finding is suffering; separation from what is loved is suffering; proximity to what is hated is suffering; distress is suffering; disgrace is suffering; a life of attachment is full of suffering. If we are unaware of our plight, we will not reflect on how to

ameliorate it or even free ourselves from it. We are like sick persons: if they are not conscious of their condition, they cannot be cured.

2) The Truth of Suffering's Origins: desire is the seed from which all suffering grows. Reality seldom conforms to the whims of the ego, and the alterations we would make to Reality to suit our preferences and wishes are truly infinite. However, even the richest and most powerful ruler cannot affect her will on all aspects of Reality; there will always be things in the world unsuited to her wants. Desires are endless, and to live as a slave to desire results in an existential thirst that can never be quenched. Desire itself is synonymous with the arising of greed, anger, and ignorance; to take the Three Poisons as our sustenance means we will gather afflictions and reap the bitter fruits of suffering.

3) The Truth of Extinguishing Suffering: all suffering can be ended; this is the Buddha's fundamental insight. Because suffering has a cause, it must necessarily know cessation. Like all conditioned realities, suffering is impermanent and subject to the conditions that perpetuate its existence. Remove those conditions, and one is suddenly able to transcend the Six Realms of Rebirth, and dwell in a state of supramundane happiness. If any being can eliminate her moral taints, give up all attachments and realize wisdom, she certainly can, like a Buddha, Bodhisattva, or Arhat, extinguish life's suffering, and earn the unending peace of nirvana—a state that transcends all categories of being.

4) The Truth of the Way to Extinguish Suffering: wishing to eliminate suffering, one must practice the Dharma, the way of Buddhism. "The Way" is summed up by the Buddha as the "Noble Eightfold Path": right view, right resolution, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right meditation. Notice that the Noble Eightfold Path is not a set

of moral injunctions, but practical ways to achieve the end of suffering. “Right” is contrasted with “wrong,” in the sense that right speech (for example) does not give rise to the Three Poisons, while wrong speech does. Thus, the Way of the Noble Eightfold Path is “the way that works,” and following the Way is the only means to achieve the final liberation of nirvana. Those who would undertake to end suffering must exert themselves to the utmost in walking this sacred path.

During Shakyamuni Buddha’s time at Sravasti, he and four novice monks sat beneath a tree and discussed a topic.

The Buddha asked, “Of the earth’s ten-thousand things, which are joyful?”

One said, “In the middle of spring when hundreds of flowers bloom, one can frolic in the open meadows blanketed with multi-colored blossoms. This is the most joyful.”

Another said, “At large family gatherings, there is music and dancing and feasting, and the shared affections of kin and clan. This is the most joyful.”

The third said, “When one has many chariots and horses, fine clothing, precious adornments, nobility and rank, he will be venerated by all the common people of the land. This is the most joyful.”

The fourth said: “An adorable and loving wife, fragrant and fresh: this is the most joyful.”

The Buddha listened to their answers then mercifully exhorted them: “O monks, of all your ideas, not one is the way to everlasting peace and happiness. The spring warmth passes into the scorching heat of summer, and the blossoms

wither and fall. Joyous family gatherings foster bonds of attachment that are painfully severed by separation and death. Property, possessions and power are snares that bind, and invite envy and usurpation. A wife's loveliness is fleeting, and easily gives rise to feelings of lust and jealousy in oneself and others. O monks, again I say to you, of all your ideas, not one is the way to everlasting peace and happiness!"

As the four new monks listened to this teaching, their hearts opened to the Dharma; they shamefully repented, abandoned desire, and wholeheartedly sought the Way.

5.3.2: Being Mindful of Impermanence

The Noble Truth of Suffering shows that the very essence of human life is suffering. Why is this? In all things, there is no unchanging core of identity.

Human history offers countless examples of impermanence. In the next ten-thousand years, untold numbers of civilizations will rise and fall; great men and women will make their mark on history and fade into oblivion; the metaphysical upheavals of new philosophies, religions and political movements will shake humanity to its foundations. All of this will come to pass, and then will pass into histories that may or may not be remembered. At this time, however, it seems that such changes are mere daydreams.

When we are deeply mindful, we can discover there is not a single thing that is constant and unchanging; even the most miniscule hair changes.

Scientists tell us that the entire universe is nothing but a dynamic process

of change. In the subatomic world, particles constantly arise and expire in a seething foam of quantum flux. Mass becomes energy, energy becomes mass, and the universe continues to expand in a blur of ceaseless motion and change.

What about our immediate surroundings? The light in the room, the leaves outside the window, the pedestrians passing on the road, seasons, weather, time... Which of these is not right now in the process of change?

And what about ourselves? Everything we have done in the past, even earlier today, is like a dream. We look back on our lives through the dusty lens of memory, and even our memories are inconstant and changeable. Even the cells of our body are constantly replacing themselves, such that, in seven years, not a single cell that composes your body today will be left. “You” will have been replaced by completely new organic material! When looked at in this way, one can rightly ponder how many bodies we go through in a single lifetime.

If we look to our innermost minds and hearts for refuge from the incessant drumbeat of change, we find that they, too, are impermanent. They are as empty and brief as a dream. Look at our thoughts: we have discarded past ideas, and future ideas have yet to arise. But the very moment we think them, they immediately slip away into the past. In the end, a thought is nothing but an ungraspable moment of time. The heart is no better. Its affections may last a little while, but they are ultimately fickle, subject to the siren-song of desire—and we have already seen how desires are endless. So much for the constancy of the heart.

From this, we discover the fundamental characteristic of existence: everything is impermanent. The whole mass of *being* that is the cosmos is nothing but a constant process of change, meaning that all things are “self-less” and without a fixed core of identity. This is what the Buddha called emptiness.

Whatever forms we believe to be stable, firm and changeless are indeed empty. They are nothing more than temporary manifestations that, on the macro-scale of cosmic time, pass with the brevity of a spark. This is not just theory, but observable fact.

Why is everything impermanent? Because all things are supported by external causes and conditions for their existence. This seems simple and obvious enough, but consider that all causes and conditions interpenetrate endlessly with one another. This means that every discreet thing is inextricably enmeshed with every other thing in the universe (what the Buddha called “dependent arising”). If all causes and conditions are in a state of constant flux, then each thing that depends on causes and conditions for its existence must also change. To use an analogy: the universe is nothing but a sea of ripples and waves that endlessly recombine and play off one another, constantly changing the entire surface of reality.

As we are caught in the middle of the cycle of birth-and-death, plagued with suffering and confusion, it is not surprising that we neglect the truth of impermanence. Consciously or not, we long for security and stability. Our innermost being chafes against the flux and flow of the universe, and we grasp at illusions of permanence on which to found our joy. Given the evidence we have seen for the law of constant change, is it any wonder that we are miserable? Our refusal to conform to reality is just desire blindly asserting itself, which inevitably leads to suffering.

In order to awaken the spiritually unconscious people he met on his journeys, the Buddha taught the truth of nirvana, explained that death is an inescapable fact of life, and roused his audience to confront the reality of impermanence.

Every time we hear the sound of wind on the mountain or in the valley, the ebb and flow of the tides, or the whispering of our own breath, it is as though we are hearing the sound of impermanence. This is the relentless pulse of impermanence, urging us to put away attachment and return to the truth!

This is a true and wonderful preparation for death. Life may be brimming with suffering and problems, but these all are opportunities for growth, and can help us to emotionally accept impermanence. If our minds cannot accept the constant changes in life, we are unable to learn from those changes.

Experiencing impermanence can allow us to slowly break free from false perception and blind attachment. The motivation of attachment is rooted in a desire for happiness, and this is not fundamentally in error. But attachment to impermanent things will invariably create confusion and suffering. If we put attachments gently aside and develop moderation in our thinking, we will discover a steadiness of mind and clarity of vision that allows us to take life as it comes, without clinging to good fortune or despairing at ill fortune. Meanwhile, confidence, joy, and mercy will slowly begin to arise from the spirit's depths.

When we take a step further and begin meditating on the empty nature of all things, then detachment from loss and gain will become a great source of joy and strength. It will rouse our merciful hearts, and enable us to have more and more charity for all living things. We will no longer need to protect ourselves from anguish or show an artificial façade to the world.

Once we have established a deep and lasting friendship with impermanence and emptiness, we can let go of all worries, and our lives become more and more natural and easy. In this way, our wisdom grows more profound, and our unconscious habits have less and less control over our behavior.

When we discover that we are capable of letting go of past patterns, our horizons will be exponentially broadened, and an unspeakable happiness will naturally arise. At that moment, we are no longer captives to the Three Poisons, and desire can no longer rob us of the joy of being alive.

There was a man who raised a thousand cows, and every day killed one to sell. Though he had already slaughtered five-hundred, the remaining cows did not know that their death was near at hand, and still frolicked and romped through the pasture from dawn to dusk.

The Buddha happened to pass by this place, and felt great compassion for the cows, and said to his disciples, “These cows are truly ignorant; great disaster is imminent, and still they jump and play!”

After watching them for a while, the Buddha sighed. “Not only cows are like this; so, too, are people. Cows led to the slaughterhouse approach death step-by-step. People live in ignorance from day to day, each moment drawing nearer to death until they finally arrive. Why don’t they wake up and realize their situation before it is too late?”

5.3.3: Liberation From Birth-and-Death

All beings live and die, and life and death are impermanent. Although the life of the Heavenly Path is happy and carefree, when the karmic merit of that life is exhausted, one cannot avoid falling again to lower paths. Thus, if we cannot break free from birth-and-death regardless of the path we are on, it would seem that no one can escape the suffering of impermanence.

Impermanence shows us that all things are without truth, and fleeting; it rouses our fear, and prompts us to ask these kinds of questions:

If everything can change, then is anything true?

Is there any aspect of a person that continues after death?

How does one break free from the pains of life and death?

When we advance in our contemplation of impermanence and gradually let go of attachment, we will discover a paradox: once we cease grasping at permanence, we find we are being held in the midst of an indescribable “something.” Suddenly, we glimpse the vast implication hidden behind impermanence, and we encounter a new understanding that we cannot explain concretely or rationally. We begin to accept: we indeed possess some indestructible, undying “thing.”

It is the innate Buddha-nature we all possess.

As we know, when Shakyamuni Buddha attained enlightenment beneath the Bodhi tree, the first thing he said was, “All living beings possess the wisdom and virtue of a Buddha, but due to their vain attachments, cannot manifest it.”

Buddha-nature is an innate part of the consciousness of every living thing.

We possess this natural awareness, and that itself is the potential to become a Buddha.

Buddha-nature is the heart of our being: it is beyond change, and forever eludes the touch of death. It is the essence of all living things. It is luminous spaciousness—unhindered, uncontaminated and unconditioned; thus, it transcends all categories of permanence or impermanence. It is utterly ungraspable. No matter which of the Six Realms we tread, we possess Buddha-nature. We do not have to seek for it, nor is it something we must strive to attain. Our Buddha-nature and every Buddha's nature is the same, always consummate and perfect. Our ignorance cannot pollute it, and neither can it be perfected beyond what it already is.

Buddha-nature is inconceivable, so any of our descriptors will fall hopelessly short of the mark. But sometimes, we can glimpse a shadow of it: when we watch the sun rise majestically in the East; when we serenely linger over the wonders of the natural world; or when we relish the pathos of a superb piece of music. All of these allow us to intuit the existence of Buddha-nature. These moments liberate us from our prison of subjectivity and allow us to experience the tiniest fraction of a Buddha's universal perspective. Often, such moments rank among the most unforgettable of one's life.

Shakyamuni Buddha tells us that Buddha-nature is inherent in every living thing. All living things can become a Buddha. But although our own Buddha-nature is identical with the Buddha's, we may never see it manifest as it is concealed in the shell of our hearts, just as the sun is hidden by clouds.

As the Buddha says, the heart is a swirling mass of “vain attachments”. Vanity is manufactured through ignorance of self-nature, and attachments arise from affection and revulsion.

Originally, the things of the world exist in a state of unity and equality. But because all sentient beings use their conditioned subjectivity to discriminate among—and give preference to—certain objects and experiences, we become ensnared in dualistic thinking. This gives rise to such opposing concepts as big and small, tall and short, long and brief, good and bad, beautiful and ugly. Indeed, in the conditioned Saha world, it cannot be otherwise; we depend on such conceptual constructs to survive. But this situation contains within it the seed of perpetual conflict: those beings at the low end of the preference spectrum constantly vie with others for advantage, while those of higher rank struggle to retain their position.

Attachment is part and parcel of physical existence. Our “embodied” situation produces the concepts of “me” and “mine”, as well as craving for the five desires (wealth, sex, fame, food, sleep). These five desires confuse the heart, obstruct the original light of Buddha-nature, and render us totally blind to our actual situation. Thus do we vainly suffer the round of endless reincarnation.

This highlights the duality of our own mind: Buddha-nature on the one hand; foolish being on the other. Left in its natural state, the mind will produce only more confusion and suffering, miring us further in the cycle of birth-and-death. If tended and trained, however, the mind becomes the clear mirror in which the light of Buddha-nature shines.

How elastic the human mind! If given proper training, it can do anything.

In fact, it has been “well-trained” for a long time: in the realm of reincarnation, our mind has learned to be greedy, jealous, fearful and desperate. It worries too much, is bustling and confused, and cannot maintain even a brief moment of tranquility. When confronted with annoyance, it flies into a rage. It has been finely calibrated to respond to all negative stimuli with stress. Over

countless *kalpas* of training, defensiveness and irritability have become second nature—our default stance toward the world.

Everything is an issue of training. If one dedicates one's will to liberation, exerts the necessary patience and discipline, and utilizes the proper methods of training, the mind will undo its own knots over time and become natural, soft, and tolerant. In this way, we can restore its original joy and clarity.

If we can only awaken from ignorance, eliminate vain attachment, comprehend Buddha-nature, and open our own vast stores of wisdom, then we, too, can become Buddhas. A tall order, indeed.



Milarepa is considered Tibet's greatest poet and sage, and his biography is full of instructive tales.

The young Milarepa received training in black magic, and his vengeful heart drove him to use his occult powers to kill many people. After his repentance, Milarepa's Buddhist master gave him many harsh tests as a way for him to prove that he had purified himself of all evil. Milarepa continued with his Buddhist practice and finally realized the fruit of Buddha-nature. He has become a spiritual beacon for millions of people since.

Tibetans say, "Bad action has one good attribute: it can be purified."

For this reason, there is always hope.

Chapter

6

Practicing the Dharma



Buddhism has spread throughout the world, and its fundamental objective is to assist all living beings, giving them the ability to obtain true benefit. If one separates Buddhism from practice, talks at length about abstract doctrines, but does not show living beings the way to attain liberation, then the Dharma becomes nothing but a dead letter, a dusty relic, idle talk.

6.1: Sweeping Away Pre-Conceived Ideas

6.1.1: The Objective of Learning Buddhism

As we come to this earth, to what objective should we cleave? Masters tell us the same thing: understand and escape from the round of birth-and-death, and attain the realm of true and consummate life. If we come to this earth and accomplish a thousand great deeds, but do not attain the objectives of the Dharma, then our journey was in vain. If life is spent pursuing the satisfaction of endless desires and not seeking to transcend the world, then this is what the Buddha called “the shame of good people.” Such a life is little different from that of animals. As the saying goes, “Beastly life is like death; the self is cast into darkness”.

Buddhist teachings often say, “The matter of life and death is grave.” We should indeed consider this most important question, and realize that how we choose to answer it represents the difference between lasting happiness and myriad *kalpas* of suffering.

In this Saha world, we are compelled by suffering, death and reincarnation. It is written in the *Infinite Life Sutra*: “We are born alone and die alone; we go alone, and come alone.” We endlessly drift in the sea of suffering, lonely, sad, and frightened. Even if we can claim worldly accomplishments and satisfaction,

it is impossible to avoid being crushed by the iron wheel of impermanence. Still, we cling to that which is fleeting, believing it has the power to make us happy. This is an extremely lamentable thing.

Some turn to religion as a way of enhancing worldly life. Of course, we can pray to the Buddha for various favors, and this, too, is meritorious. But if we pray only for earthly benefits, or the realization of special powers or abilities, the results may surprise us: whether or not the Buddha answers our prayers in the desired fashion, exposure to the Buddha Dharma will plant seeds in our Alaya consciousness that will eventually draw us toward the truth. Even superficial forms of Buddhism can be the first step on the road to Buddhahood.

Strictly speaking, the Dharma is not for the purpose of enhancing mundane life, neither is it just a theoretical discussion divorced from practice. The primary objective in studying Buddhism should be to understand and break free from the misery of birth-and-death. Of equal importance is the desire to help all living things escape the boundless sea of suffering. Put simply: the study of Buddhism is for the purpose of becoming a Buddha. Invoke the Buddha and become a Buddha. Improbable as it may seem, this simple formula helps other living beings to encounter the Buddha-Dharma. They, too, will invoke the Buddha and become Buddhas, and thereby assist countless living beings in countless states of existence.

If those who study Buddhism set aside the larger matter of life and death, then their study is a deviation from the truth.

6.1.2: Studying Buddhism is Not a Passive Escape from the World

Though the purpose of the Dharma is for transcending the world, we must not confuse this with indifference to the world. Nursing a sense of disillusionment with life and wishing to escape reality are decidedly not the way of studying Buddhism. If practicing and studying the Dharma should come to mean abandoning the suffering masses and forsaking society, then the Buddha's original intention would be lost. Our fundamental distress arises from within, so there is no situation in which it does not manifest. If we attempt to escape our suffering by fleeing from the world, we will only take it with us.

This can seem a tricky balance, but really it is quite simple. Those who study Buddhism recognize the fickleness and illusory nature of the world. At the same time, they find the Buddha's light in their innermost being, experience a measure of freedom and stability, and can throw themselves into the travails of life while peacefully treading the path to liberation.

Those who study Buddhism forsake sensual pleasures and reject aggression and self-seeking. This can make the average person wonder if Buddhism is incompatible with a competitive modern society. But in fact, being of service to all living beings represents the fundamental spirit of Buddhism.

The World-Honored One once said: "If I do not enter hell, then who enters hell instead of me? Not only will I enter hell for him, but live for long *kalpas* in hell; and not only live for long *kalpas* in hell, but dwell in deepest Avici Hell." The sutras tell how the Bodhisattva of the Great Vow (Ksitigarbha) swore an oath: "Until all living things have attained enlightenment and the cauldrons of hell are empty, I vow not to attain Buddhahood." These are just two examples

of how Buddhism urges us to seek peace not merely for oneself, but for all suffering beings. The spirit of the Dharma is one of profound engagement with the world. The Buddha's disciples follow the Buddha's teachings, serve living beings with a grateful heart, and build up society by their good conduct and altruism.

In contrast, those who live by the spirit of the world seek little beyond fame, profit, and the pleasures of the moment. Who among them would think to sacrifice their desires and undertake the work of delivering sentient beings?

6.1.3: Any Person Can Find a Suitable Method

In modern society, people are busy earning a livelihood, raising their families and managing their affairs, and few find the time or interest for the spiritual quest. Even those who admire the Dharma may harbor doubts and misgivings, for example:

“Virtuous monks of old devoted themselves wholeheartedly to their practice and realized actual attainments; am I able to do the same?”

“The study of Buddhism requires a pure heart and few desires; what if I am unable to let go of my attachments and ambitions?”

But in fact, Buddhism excludes no one: virtuous, capable people can study the Dharma, as can those who are vexed by worldly desires. Some methods were created for those capable of monastic practice, and some methods were created for those unable to cast off the distress of the world. Of the eighty-four thousand methods (it is said that living beings have eighty-four thousand afflictions,

so the Buddha taught eighty-four thousand remedies), some are difficult and arduous, while others are accessible and easy.

Moreover, we do not begin to study Buddhism only after we have made ourselves good and morally upstanding; we start precisely where we are. This is called “walking the path while staying home.” Any set of circumstances, no matter how defiled or problematic, can become the starting point for the study of Buddhism.

Faith in Buddhism flows and develops naturally. We do not need to force it. It does not require a grand conversion or sublime mystical experiences. It only requires sincerity, a modest investment of time, and a willingness to learn.

6.2: Dispelling Doubt and Giving Rise to Faith

“If people are basically good, then doubt cannot take root; Those with tranquil confidence will truly see the Buddha.”

Doubt is a divisive poison. It separates us from our Buddha-nature and prevents us from awakening to the most profound truths.

Faith, on the other hand, is a helpful companion; it is a necessary resource for the journey. It can annihilate lust, arrogance, and fear, and can awaken a person to mindfulness of the Buddha’s embrace. When we know the mind of faith, the Buddha is our guide through life and we enjoy his parental care and protection. Our oneness with the Buddha becomes a lived reality.

In modern life, we have become more and more complex in our thinking, so much so that doubt is treated as a kind of virtue. For modern people, nothing can be believed in, no promise offers any real hope, and no principle can be wholeheartedly followed. We blindly doubt the articles of religious faith and relish the admiration of people who think us wise. We are eager to point out what is wrong with religion, but never do we ask what is right. Believing in our superior knowledge and wisdom, we sneer at spiritual philosophies that have guided people towards meaning and benevolence for thousands of years.

In this way, error habitually becomes truth, and if ever we are confronted with spiritual teachings we reflexively notate them with a question mark. How could we not be aware that humanity's knowledge is negligible, that for all our advancement, we are but an infinitesimal speck in the vastness of the cosmos?

The Dharma is the fundamental truth for all living beings. It wasn't created by the Buddha; the Buddha simply revealed it through practice. Anyone can practice and confirm what the Buddha taught. Like the natural laws of science, it can be duplicated and verified.

The Buddha said:

I speak the truth, but only with belief can one enter.

What is belief? Belief means accepting the Buddha's wisdom, and not believing in one's own shallow knowledge. If one believes in what the Buddha taught, then one can enter the Dharma.

The Dharma is magnificently profound; no ordinary intelligence can fathom it. We first must listen, and from that listening, obtain faith.

For those who listen to the Buddha's teachings and believe deeply, a joyous heart naturally arises.

From that moment on, the confusion of the world is no longer an obstruction.

6.3: A Good Beginning

6.3.1: Enlightening Oneself

Studying Buddhism is the only path to enlightenment. It is a rigorous discipline that necessitates piety, respect, and strictness.

But seen from another perspective, studying Buddhism also resembles an art. We should avail ourselves of various skillful means to realize enlightenment and embrace a peaceful, joyous state of mind.

For example, we can glean inspiration from the natural world: the rising sun, the babbling waters, the boundless skies, the tranquil moonlight, the caressing breeze... The beauty of nature can offer a profound glimpse of the interpenetration of all life.

Such moments of transcendence can also be experienced in the fine arts. Well-wrought pieces of music have the capacity to lift our spirits and open our minds, while poetry can likewise transport us into a state of oneness with life and rouse us to make beautiful changes in our relationships and environs.

Buddhism itself utilizes aesthetics and simple rituals to help us tap into this spirit of transpersonal awareness. We can light a stick of incense and pause to remember the Buddha, listen to a recording of Buddhist chant, arrange flowers for offering at the altar, or perform a consecration of a Buddha image for home

worship. Through such simple actions, even the most humble dwelling can become radiant and divine. These are but a few of the skillful means through which we can cultivate a relationship with the Buddha, and joyously merge with the Dharma. But this is just the beginning.

6.3.2: Simple Ritual Procedure

For those wishing to practice in a more focused manner, these are some basic guidelines that help us to cultivate our discipline and attain mindfulness of the Dharma.

Buddha Hall: select a clean room, enshrine a Buddha image, and perform worship there regularly and often. On a table or shelf before the Buddha image, place a cup of clean water and change it daily. If you do not have a Buddha image or space for a Buddha Hall, you can direct offerings and worship to a book of Buddhist scriptures set up on a shelf or table.

Buddha Image: for Pure Land Buddhists wishing to be reborn in the Land of Bliss, offerings and worship should be directed to Amitabha Buddha alone. Day and night, look upon Amitabha, recite his name constantly, and worship him with reverent devotion. Take joy and comfort in offering him your life, and invite him into the intimate confines of your heart. This is how we experience the gratitude of one whose rebirth in the Pure Land is assured in this very life.

Truly devout disciples of the Buddha do not worship other deities such as the Jade Emperor, the God of Wealth, or other great immortals. The gods are just like us in that they are beings of the Six Realms. Trapped in the round of Samsara, they, too, require the Buddha's assistance to attain liberation.

Recitation Beads: as you finger each bead, recite the Buddha's name once or several times. They allow us to count our recitations and maintain them uninterrupted. (We can also use electronic counting devices.)

Prostration: also known as *vandana*, or the rite of "receiving the Buddha's feet with our heads and faces." Heavy are the evil deeds of living beings, who need Amitabha Buddha's compassionate deliverance.

During prostration, five parts of the body (elbows, knees, and forehead) are on the ground, while the hands are raised, palms up, on either side of the head. Raising the hands during prostration is a symbolic act of receiving the Buddha's feet (which symbolize the Buddha's meritorious fortune and wisdom).

This is how to perform prostrations:

1) Join the hands (fingers together, with a small space between the palms, held at chest level).

2) Bow from the waist. Begin to lower yourself into a squatting position, and, with the left hand still held at chest level, place the right hand down in the middle of the prayer mat for support. Kneel, and place both hands, palms down, at shoulder-width on the mat (forearms and elbows should be on the ground at this point). Gently touch your forehead to the mat between your hands.

3) Turn both hands over so that the palms face upward to receive the Buddha's feet. Pause for a brief moment.

4) Curl the fingers inward to a soft fist (not over the thumbs), and then return them to the palms-down position. Raise your head and body using the right hand, again placed in the middle of the prayer mat, for support. Place the left hand in prayer position at chest level, stand up, and join the hands.

5) Repeat the steps above a minimum of two more times. When the ritual is complete, place the hands together at chest level and bow deeply from the waist, thus sealing the rite.

At all times, movement should be gentle and relaxed.

It is also possible to do prostrations while reciting “Namo Amitabha Buddha.”

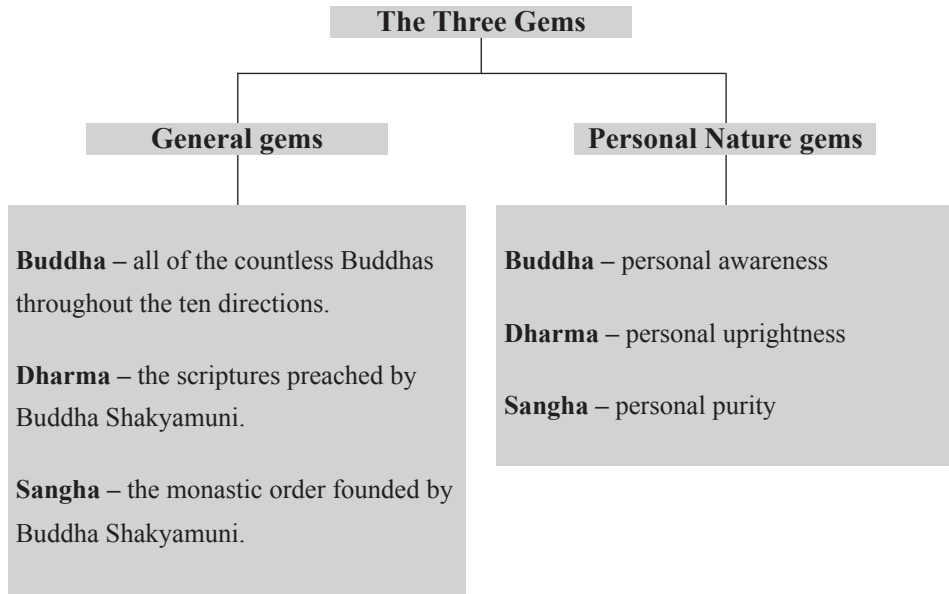
If one is unable to perform the above ritual, any sincere act of devotion or recitation will do.

6.3.3: The Triple Refuge

The first step to becoming a disciple of the Buddha is accepting the Three Gems, also known as taking the triple refuge.

The “Three Gems” are the gem of the Buddha, the gem of the Dharma, and the gem of the Sangha. They are jewels because they are rare and priceless. They are refuges because they are true shelters from the sufferings of the Three Domains and Six Realms.

The Buddha has revealed the fundamental truths of reality; he is the teacher of all beings, and is therefore considered a gem. The Dharma allows us to leave suffering behind and attain everlasting happiness, and is therefore considered a gem. The Sangha embodies the virtue of leaving home and devoting ourselves to the Buddha (including the “home” of our fixed views) and the Dharma, and is therefore considered a gem.



Taking refuge can be compared to a person being rescued from a turbulent, stormy sea. On the verge of drowning, they suddenly see a great ship, cry out frantically for help and are saved.

If worldly persons, weighed down by suffering and distress, set their hearts on accepting the Three Gems, they can be plucked from the sea of suffering and the cycle of rebirth.

After choosing Buddhist practice and the life of faith, one can ask a Dharma master to preside over a refuge-taking ceremony. This solemn ritual can strengthen our confidence, affirm our aspiration, and solidify our integrity.

There was once a son of the Trayastrimsha Heaven (the second level of heaven), who indulged himself fully in all of the transcendental ecstasies that were to be had there. However, due to some evil karma from his past, his life-span in that heaven was a mere seven days, after which he died. The exquisite happiness he had known left him instantly as he was reborn in a lower realm. Beautiful heavenly maidens no longer mingled with him, his once-luminous body was now wrinkled and pock-marked, his breath and underarms stank, and he was unbearably sweaty and dirty.

After he had been abused and thrown into hog filth by some evil passers-by, the son of Heaven, who once knew pleasures undreamt of by beings in lower realms, lay face-down in the slime, wailed and choked on his bitter tears.

The deity of that place saw the former son of Heaven's wretched state, and took pity on him. Appearing in a halo of light, he urged him to sincerely accept the Three Gems, and taught him to recite:

Accept the Buddha: revere his feet.

Accept the Dharma: revere the abandonment of desire.

Accept the Sangha: revere all things.

The son of Heaven followed the deity's instructions, and accepted the Three Gems. After another seven days had passed, he died once more. The deity wished very much to know where he had been reborn, and searched all the heavens and the earth, but could not find his whereabouts. Thus he went to ask the Buddha.

The Buddha told him, “You celestial beings can only see the realms below your own; you cannot see those above you. That son of Heaven, because he accepted the Three Gems, went from agony to bliss and has been reborn in the Tusita Heaven [the fourth level of heaven and present abode of Maitreya Buddha].”

6.3.4: The Five Precepts

The Five Precepts are the fundamental moral principles of Buddhism, and are the first of the monastic vows. They are: not to kill; not to steal; not to engage in sexual misconduct; not to lie; and not to take alcohol.

The Five Precepts:

- 1) **Do not kill** – do not murder sentient beings
- 2) **Do not steal** – do not steal another’s property
- 3) **Do not engage in sexual misconduct** – do not violate the social norms of sexual relations
- 4) **Do not lie** - do not bear false witness or conceal the truth
- 5) **Do not take alcohol** – do not indulge in mind-altering substances

All beings cherish their own lives. Depriving beings of their right to life is vicious and merciless behavior. Moreover, all living things suffer enormous pain and agony when their lives are prematurely extinguished, and their relations also suffer grievously. Those who commit murder face unspeakable retributions in hell. According to karmic law, murder generates the karma of suffering physical violence, an early death at the hands of others, and familial mourning;

so maintain the precept of not killing.

Stealing is disgraceful behavior of the highest order. People labor to gather resources to support their families and their own lives; the act of theft is deceitful and injures the prosperity and security of not only the person stolen from, but also their dependents. In addition, the thief is indulging a budding narcissism that allows him to place his own needs and desires above and beyond those of others. According to karmic law, stealing generates the karma of an indigent future, physical and mental ailments, and of being targeted for theft; so maintain the precept of not stealing.

Sexual misconduct, which is motivated by lust, is highly contrary to the social and moral orders. Not only does it defile harmonious relationships with carnal desire, but it corrodes human dignity and can irreparably damage the reputations of those involved. Initiating non-consensual sexual activity is especially egregious and carries with it fearful karmic penalties. According to karmic law, sexual misconduct generates the karma of personal disgrace, an unchaste family, and the distress of sexual victimization; so maintain the precept of avoiding sexual misconduct.

Duplicitousness and deception eat away at the foundations of human society. Not only does the liar suffer loss of trust, but his treachery spreads suspicion and doubt, and poisons the goodwill between honest persons far and wide. The liar habitually forfeits a long term benefit for a short term gain, and his fortunes suffer accordingly. According to karmic law, lying generates the karma of suffering mouth and tongue disorders, and of being swindled, defrauded and deceived; so maintain the precept of not lying.

Drinking alcohol or using drugs clouds a person's perception of reality and leads to warped and disgraceful behavior. Moreover, these substances often

catalyze addictions from which one is powerless to escape. The one who flees reality through mind-altering substances will be harshly chastened by reality. According to karmic law, deluding the mind with drugs generates the karma of ignorance, stupidity, and repetitive, self-destructive behaviors; so maintain the precept of not drinking alcohol or taking drugs.

The World-Honored One urged us to take these precepts as our teachers. As we live in the world of the Five-Turbidities, our bodies are given to wicked actions, our mouths to wicked speech, and our minds to wicked thoughts. We are mostly unconscious of these tendencies, and the Buddha knew we needed a framework within which to sharpen our moral awareness. But most people go through life giving heed to their desires and piling up wickedness upon wickedness. How pitiful!

The Five Precepts can help to subdue our selfish nature, increase our empathy, reduce our stress, and improve our relationships. They are realistic, practical, and invite the respect and admiration of others.

However, taking vows to maintain the Precepts requires the utmost seriousness. After taking vows, the Precepts must be strictly upheld. If one fears it is too difficult to maintain all five, one can vow to maintain some of them while omitting the others.

6.3.5: Entering Through a Single Gate

After exploring the various practices and methods that Buddhism offers, one should select a specific method and stick to it. Do not succumb to being a “shopper” in the spiritual marketplace. Hopping from one teaching to another,

or from one teacher to another, means that you will end up not truly practicing at all. If you select a location for a well and begin digging, but then constantly change locations after digging only a few feet, you will never hit water. Of course, people are such that the “grass always looks greener” elsewhere, but in spiritual cultivation this is a gross error. One becomes a religious tourist, always seeking the next teaching and the next spiritual “buzz,” but without realizing the least bit of achievement.

Devotedly practicing a single method is not limiting oneself; rather, it is a necessity of religious practice. Though all methods lead to the city of nirvana, a practitioner cannot enter through many gates simultaneously. To enter the city, she must choose one gate. This entails a careful evaluation of our own preferences, interests and karmic tendencies. It’s a big decision, so we should choose carefully. Once we have chosen, we should have complete physical and mental commitment to the teaching we’ve selected, but at the same time have an open and respectful attitude toward the methods and teachings of other schools.

The flying squirrel has five abilities: it can fly, it can run, it can swim, it can dig, and it can climb trees.

This seems impressive at first. But though it can fly, it cannot fly high; though it can run, it cannot run fast; though it can swim, it cannot swim far; though it can dig, it cannot dig deep; and though it can climb trees, it cannot climb to the highest branches.

The flying squirrel: jack of all trades, master of none.

6.4: Selecting a Doctrine

Sakyamuni Buddha expounded teachings for forty-nine years. The methods and doctrines he taught were vast in range and scope, and were often tailored specifically to the needs of a given audience. There is the sage's vehicle, the lesser vehicle, the greater vehicle, and the diamond vehicle; there are methods of self-power and methods of Buddha-centered power; there are methods of monastic discipline, and methods of faith and devotion. All told, it is said the World-Honored One taught eighty-four thousand methods of practice for the benefit of eighty-four thousand kinds of living beings.

The ancient masters, in order to simplify this vast array of teachings and help living beings enter the Dharma, esteemed certain scriptures and commentaries over others according to the capacities of their students, and their own. They created comprehensive outlines of the many sects and methods of practice, and classified the Buddha's teachings into various categories such as "expedient" and "ultimate." All of this was in a bid to help students choose the method that would most effectively help them cross the ocean of suffering and reach the far shore of liberation.

Throughout history, every sect has experienced prosperity, decline, and change. The Mahayana sects which remain vigorous and active today are the Ch'an (Zen), Tantric, and Pure Land schools. The Ch'an and Tantric schools rely on self-power (or rigorous self-discipline) to uphold the moral precepts, purify

the mind and attain enlightenment. These schools are classified as the “Sagely Path.” Pure Land Buddhism, on the other hand, relies on Buddha-centered power (or faith and devotion) to attain rebirth in the Pure Land of Amitabha Buddha. Once there, the practitioner attains enlightenment with ease in an environment perfectly suited to spiritual practice. Because of its accessibility to those of lower capacities, the Pure Land method is known as the “Easy Path.”

1. The Two Methods

- A. The Easy Path:** Pure Land method. Through the practice of reciting Amitabha Buddha’s name with faith in his Fundamental Vow, one relies on the Buddha’s power for the attainment of rebirth in the Pure Land in the life to come.
- B. Sagely Path:** Self-power method. By upholding the precepts, accumulating wisdom through study, and practicing various forms of meditation, one breaks through ignorance and attains the initial stage of enlightenment. Within this basic framework, there is a wide variety of practice regimens depending on the school.

Because people differ widely in their inclinations and capacities, the Buddha taught the Two Methods, and, within the Sagely Path, almost countless forms of practice. This demonstrates that the Dharma truly has the power to liberate anyone. But against all this variety, how should one go about choosing?

Apart from a scriptural basis in the Buddhist sutras and a lineage of practitioners and masters reaching back to the Buddha himself, a school of

practice should also accord with the times in which people live. For example, it is not realistic for the majority of modern people to abandon life in society and practice meditation under the guidance of a realized master. If this were the only method offered by the Dharma, then few people indeed would attain liberation! No matter how wonderful and sublime the teachings, if they can only be realized by sagely beings, then they do not accord with the times or capacities of ordinary people. A sutra says:

**The water the cow drinks becomes milk;
The water the snake drinks becomes poison.
Skillful practice leads to nirvana;
Ignorant practice perpetuates death.**

Because of the various constraints on modern people, it can be argued that they require a path that eschews demanding practices, complex metaphysics, and esoteric empowerments that can only be transmitted by a master of high attainment. Instead, the ideal teaching should be simple enough for anyone to understand, and can be practiced in daily life under any circumstance.

6.4.1: Modern Karmic Causes

Before selecting a method, we should first understand the age and environment in which we actually live.

(1) Times

As all things in this conditioned world are impermanent, the World-Honored One foretold that the Dharma, too, would decline and eventually disappear. In

various sutras, he explained it would happen in a sequence of three periods: the Age of Correct Dharma, the Age of Semblance Dharma, and the Age of Dharma Decline.

Age of Correct Dharma: for five hundred years after the Buddha attains enlightenment, there is teaching, there is practice, and there is attainment.

Age of Semblance Dharma: for one thousand years after the Age of Correct Dharma, there is teaching, there is practice, but there is no attainment.

Age of Dharma Decline: for ten-thousand years after the Age of Semblance Dharma, there is teaching, but there is neither practice nor attainment.

We have already been in the Age of Dharma Decline for a thousand years; Shakyamuni has long ago entered nirvana, and the self-power methods of the Sagely Path cannot now be practiced so as to bring sentient beings to liberation. In short, the Dharma is already in a critical state of decline in our world system.

(2) Situation

We live in the Saha world, which is rooted in impermanence, wrong views and suffering. But we also live in the Age of Dharma Decline, and so are subject to the karma of living in a world system where the Dharma is decaying. We can see the resulting chaos all around. Nations are fragile, and international wars and crises frequently arise; people are driven by greed, hatred, and ignorance, and society no longer seeks to encourage virtue and harmonious relations between individuals and between governments; the young are filled with worry, and the old are dying of weariness and despair. Only a small number of people even think of setting foot on the spiritual path. Seeking the Dharma and finding pure-hearted fellow practitioners is never easy; but in our current situation, it's as rare

as the blossoming of the Udumbara flower, which is said to bloom once every 3,000 years. Even the Bodhisattvas here are in constant peril of regressing to inferior states; so what chance do foolish, ordinary beings have? It would seem that the gates of self-power practice have been shut and bolted long ago.

(3) Capacities

Those living in the Age of Dharma Decline are beings of limited, inferior capacities, especially when compared to the sages of eras past. The vast majority of us are weak-willed, lacking the fortitude to persevere in our practice at all costs. Even the sutras say: “Master Sakyamuni lived in the Saha world for eighty years; since that time, many beings who sought to become Buddhas have abandoned the Way due to malignant karmic causes [...] They pulled up their good roots, distanced themselves from Dharma mentors, and gave themselves over to rage [...] They embraced wicked intentions and wicked deeds. Such beings aren’t received in any of the Buddha Realms, being abandoned by fourteen hundred Buddhas. Thus sentient beings are said to be plagued by severe afflictions.

Those living in the Age of Dharma Decline are oppressed by destructive habits like an encircling mountain range. Their emotions are unbridled, their determination is weak, and their capacity for self-discipline is nil. As a sutra says, self-power practice for such beings is like bearing “the weight of a three-thousand, great-thousand-fold world system.”

At the time that Sakyamuni Buddha was alive, people were simpler and (relative to ourselves) innately pure and honest. They lived in a world free of digital distractions and runaway lusts. If ten people practiced Buddhism, nine would realize some level of attainment. Later, as retributive karma built up in the Sangha and the world, the capacities of people gradually became dull.

During the Sui and Tang dynasties, there were still those who could utilize self-power practices to escape birth-and-death, but now there are none.

6.4.2: The Difficulty of Attainment on the Sagely Path

The Sagely Path is the way of attaining enlightenment on this earth. Highly capable beings hear the true Dharma, develop the aspiration to leave the Six Realms of Rebirth, and endeavor to tread the Sagely Path to liberation. Let us consider for a moment what that entails. They must seek to abandon egocentric views, block the rising of all desire, cultivate their practice and develop wisdom through deep study. They must extinguish greed, hatred and ignorance, steer clear of passion and confusion, adhere to their monastic vows and perfect the practice of virtue. They must steadfastly dedicate the merits of their practice, become an adept at various *samadhis* (i.e. meditative attainments), and cease from forming attachments to the persons, places and things of this world. They must labor to extinguish the karma of rebirth on the Six Paths, sever the root of suffering with the sword of wisdom, enter the gates of truth freely and without hindrance, and finally cast off the fetter of the body and achieve the peace of nirvana.

The Sagely Path's most fundamental principles are the three studies of upholding the precepts, purifying the mind, and cultivating wisdom:

Upholding the precepts: to scrupulously abide by every monastic discipline formulated by the Buddha, and to see even small offenses as major obstacles and causes for repentance.

Purifying the mind: to unify and cleanse the mind through *samadhi*. This also entails shunning affections, desires, and any behavior that could disrupt the stability of one's concentration.

Cultivating wisdom: to understand, comply with and embody the Three Refuges, the Three Seals of Existence, the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, the Twelve Links of Dependent Arising, the Four Bodhisattva Vows, the Five Spiritual Faculties, the Six Paramitas (perfections), the Ten Bhumi (stages) of the Bodhisattva, and many other teachings that guide one on the path to liberation.

Needless to say, the way of self-power practice is difficult in the extreme. In the sutras, there is an analogy: A practitioner is like an ox bearing a heavy load through a swamp. Although it is very tired, it does not dare to look about or rest for even a moment. The ox must incessantly strive until, at long last, it has exited the swamp; only then can it rest easy.

The Sagely Path's eighty-four thousand methods are based on the Buddha's own practice and teaching. Each relies on the practitioner's ability, and if there is even a single trace of ignorance or delusion that is not severed, reentering the round of birth-and-death is inevitable. But in addition to one's ability, the accumulation of merit is essential. Without it, one might be hindered or even dissuaded from the Way by conditions stemming from past evil karma, such as an ignorant teacher, privation, illness, demonic attack, and insincere or treacherous fellow practitioners.

There are other hindrances. If an accumulation of good karma should cause one to exit the human realm and attain rebirth as a god, it becomes difficult to advance in one's practice; life in the heavens is most often too pleasurable and long for the devas to seriously seek liberation. On the other hand, should

one's evil karma blossom and cause rebirth on one of the Three Wretched Realms, then one must pass through an unimaginably long period of time before the karmic evil is expunged and reentry into the human realm is once again possible.

And if one manages to maintain a sufficiently pure practice so as to secure a human rebirth, then one can look forward to many *kalpas* of such dedicated practice before finally achieving Buddhahood. As a wise monk said: "Do not desire enlightenment; just practice Buddhism for this lifetime." (The implication, of course, is that this saying bears repetition over countless lifetimes!) To a Bodhisattva with an iron will and high attainments, such a saying is Dharma nectar; but to the ordinary person, it can bring doubt, fear, and despair.

The overwhelming majority of Buddhist practitioners have not cut the root of their own suffering—and yet they wish, in the world of the Five Turbidities, to save sentient beings. To have aroused the Bodhi mind like this is rare and commendable, but realizing such an aspiration is nevertheless a distant dream.

Monk Tao Shui was famous for his virtue and instructed people in the practice of Buddhism throughout the nation. In the monastery where he was abbot, there were often students who could not bear the difficult course of study and gave up. Nonetheless, Monk Tao Shui's fame continued to spread, and the monastery attracted more and more students.

Before long, the Dharma halls were full to capacity and the temple was flush with patrons and support. But Monk Tao Shui was displeased with this turn of events and one day resigned his abbotship, bade his students farewell

and disappeared without a trace.

Three years later, a student found him sitting beneath a bridge living with beggars, and immediately begged him to teach.

“If you can pass two or three days with me beneath this bridge, then perhaps I can teach you,” Monk Tao Shui said.

So the student dressed in rags and began to live the life of a beggar with his former master.

The next day, a member of the group of beggars died suddenly. At midnight, Monk Tao Shui and the student moved the body to a nearby mountain for burial. After conducting the rite, they returned once more to the bridge.

Monk Tao Shui collapsed from exhaustion and fell into a deep slumber, but the student could not sleep. At daybreak, the master awoke and said, “Today we do not need to go beg for food; our dead comrade left behind something to eat.”

Repulsed at the idea of eating a dead man’s rancid leftovers, the student refused to take one bite, at which Monk Tao Shui said, “I suspected you were incapable of studying with me.”

The student was silent. After a moment, Monk Tao Shui waved his hand and said, “Go! Stop wasting my time!”

Defeated by his own lack of determination, the student had no choice but to leave in shame.

6.4.3: The Ease of the Pure Land Path

The Pure Land way is the unsurpassable method taught by the World-Honored One for ordinary, foolish beings. Through faith in Amitabha Buddha's Fundamental Vow, and the recitation of his name, one can realize profound benefits in this very lifetime. Even if those who invoke the Buddha have not yet cut the root of their suffering, as long as they trust in Amitabha and recite his name, they will be received and welcomed by the Buddha at the end of this life, be reborn in the Pure Land, and once there, speedily attain Buddhahood.

Reciting the name of Amitabha Buddha is the gist of the Pure Land method, and over many generations has become the most widespread teaching of the Mahayana. The three sutras of Pure Land Buddhism explain the matter of invoking the Buddha's name to attain rebirth in the Land of Bliss:

1) The *Infinite Life Sutra* contains the Fundamental Vow which Amitabha swore when practicing as a Bodhisattva. It unequivocally states that if those who “recite my name, even ten times, should fail to be born [in the Pure Land], may I not attain perfect enlightenment.”

2) The *Contemplation Sutra* ends with Shakyamuni Buddha exhorting his audience to “bear these words well in mind”; he then goes on to say that bearing these words in mind means “reciting the name of Amitabha Buddha.”

3) The *Amitabha Sutra* summarizes the teachings of the previous two sutras and instructs us to “recite the name [of Amitabha Buddha] single-mindedly, without deviation.” It also explains how all the Buddhas of the six directions especially endorse and protect this teaching.

Reciting the name of Amitabha Buddha is never in vain, and no one is unable to practice it. No matter if one is female or male, rich or poor, learned or ignorant, wise or foolish, all can understand and practice this teaching. The World-Honored One himself revealed that a Buddha hears all prayers that are sincere. In the Age of Dharma Decline, those who practice self-power methods of liberation will attain but meager results; only by depending on Amitabha's power can one with certainty escape the thrall of birth-and-death. The *Infinite Life Sutra* says: "In times to come, the sutras and the Dharma will perish. But out of pity and compassion, I will retain and preserve this Sutra for a hundred years more. Those sentient beings that encounter it can attain deliverance as they wish."

Those with great capacities and wisdom can study any method and derive some benefit; those who are foolish and ordinary should devote themselves wholeheartedly to the Pure Land method.

We have seen how, at the time of the Buddha's enlightenment, people lived simpler lives and were less distracted than they are in a modern, technological society. They found it easier to hear the Dharma, and self-power practice was readily accomplished under the direction of the Buddha and the first generations of his capable disciples. Two-thousand, five-hundred years after the Buddha's nirvana, we cannot see the Buddha or receive his teachings directly; our perception of the world has been fundamentally changed by the digital revolution and new forms of media, and our minds have become quick and nimble so as to navigate the complexity of modern life.

Thus, it is not so easy for us moderns to begin "digging a well" (in the spiritual sense) and keep digging until we hit water. We are easily bored and hungry for constant stimulation. The focused and unstinting self-discipline

required by self-power methods of liberation are too demanding for most people in the 21st century. If we wish to transcend the world, then most of us must certainly rely on the Buddha-centered power of the Pure Land method.

As we observe our actual situation, it becomes clear why it is said that spiritual attainments through dependence on the Sagely Path are as rare as phoenix feathers or unicorn horns. By contrast, seeking rebirth in the Pure Land through reliance on Buddha-centered power is commonplace—in fact, it is so common in the Chinese cultural sphere that most Buddhists greet one another with an invocation of Amitabha’s name, whether or not they are Pure Land Buddhists.

In the Age of Dharma Decline, it is best to have a realistic assessment of the degree to which we can rely on our abilities for spiritual advancement. We should not overestimate our own capacities, nor scorn the Pure Land method out of prejudice.

Master Yinguang said: “Buddhist methods are indeed immeasurable; no matter the lineage, they all utilize precepts, *samadhi* and wisdom to block the action of the Three Poisons, eliminate doubt, and transcend birth-and-death. Unfortunately, this is as difficult as climbing to heaven unassisted, and the ordinary person can scarcely hope to accomplish it. But if they have faith and aspiration, and recite [Amitabha] Buddha’s name to attain rebirth in the Land of Bliss, they can utterly depend on the Buddha’s compassionate deliverance—no matter if their aptitude is profound or shallow, or their virtue great or small. This is like taking a steamboat across the ocean: only by boarding the boat and availing oneself of the boat’s power can the other shore be reached; a person’s own strength is irrelevant. It is the same with faith, aspiration and reciting the Buddha’s name to enter the Pure Land; it is entirely a question of the Buddha’s

power, not one's own. Once reborn in that land, birth-and-death is ended and distress does not arise.”

Organized Pure Land belief in China was first recorded in the Western Jin Dynasty when Master Huiyuan (334-416 CE) founded the White Lotus Society at Mt. Lushan's Eastern Forest Temple. Membership included monks, intellectuals and prominent literati of the day, and their practice centered around the teachings contained in the *Infinite Life* and *Amitabha* sutras, which certainly included some form of invocation of Amitabha Buddha. This was the first Pure Land study group in Chinese Buddhism, and it would come to exert a profound influence on later Pure Land schools and methods.

The founder of the Pure Land school was **Master Shandao** of the Tang Dynasty (613-681). (A native of Linzi in today's Shandong Province, he established a complete system of thought for the school with his *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra*, *In Praise of the Rite of Rebirth*, *In Praise of Dharma Practices*, *Dharma School of Contemplation and Recitation*, and *In Praise of Pratyutpanna*.) He inherited the lineage from **Nagarjuna** (born in southern India seven centuries after Shakyamuni Buddha's nirvana, recognized as a lineage master by all eight schools of Chinese Mahayana Buddhism), **Vasubandhu** (born nine centuries after the Buddha's nirvana in northern India, whose *Treatise on Rebirth* is a primary text of the Pure Land lineage), **Tanluan** (476-554, native of Yanmen during the Northern Wei Dynasty, whose *Commentary on the Treatise on Rebirth* was a seminal work of the Chinese Pure Land school), and **Daochuo** (562-645, native of Wenshui during the Sui-Tang period, private student of Master Tanluan and personal teacher to Master Shandao; he classified Buddhism

into the Scared Path and Pure Land schools, and wrote *Collection on the Land of Peace and Joy* to propagate Pure Land teaching.)

Master Shandao merged the other-power-based Pure Land teachings of these masters with his own practice, and formulated the core Pure Land thought system grounded in **“Other-Power”** and Amitabha’s **“Fundamental Vow.”** He became the synthesizer of the Pure Land teachings. His thought was both down to earth and transcendent. It brought highbrow “Temple Buddhism” down to the level of popular society, allowing ordinary men and women to benefit in their daily lives. The byproducts of Pure Land faith -- such universal and personal values as integrity, humility, repayment of kindness, pursuit of the Way amid modest circumstances, and a sense of optimism -- had a far-reaching influence on the spiritual life of the Chinese people. And they greatly enhanced social well-being and stability. More importantly, Master Shandao’s teaching that **“through Amitabha-recitation, ordinary beings can be reborn in the Pure Land and gain Buddhahood,”** powerfully encouraged the mass of believers. Indeed, in the Chang’an of the time, “every family knew Amitabha Buddha and each household was acquainted with Bodhisattva Guanyin.”

Dharma paths aren’t inherently superior or inferior; whichever resonates with a practitioner’s abilities and karmic affinities is a good one. It’s like the case with medicines; whichever one cures the patient is an appropriate one. Even so, we live in the Saha world and the Age of Dharma Decline, when people have weak capacities, and are ignorant and inclined to evil. Of the 84,000 Dharma paths taught by the Buddha, the only one that meets the challenges of such times and conditions is that of Amitabha-recitation.

Vinaya Master Yuanzhao, a senior monk during the Song Dynasty and specialist on the *Lotus Sutra* and the monastic disciplines of the Zhongnan mountains, made a solemn vow to be reborn as a teacher of Dharma in the Saha world until all beings embarked on the Sagely Path and sought liberation.

Not long after this, he happened upon a passage concerning Monk Hui Bu in the collection *Biographies of Eminent Monks*. Monk Hui Bu said, “Though the Western Land of Bliss is peaceful, and I would seek rebirth there, I dare not linger over such a wish. If I am reborn in a lotus in the Pure Land, then I have abandoned suffering sentient beings!”

Yuanzhao was impressed with this sentiment, and it further cemented his way of thinking. Thus, for a long time after that, he had not the least bit of interest in the Pure Land method. Not only that, but he would heap slander and scorn on others who sought rebirth in the Land of Bliss through Amitabha-recitation.

Then it happened that he contracted a serious illness which, over time, became chronic and degenerative. His mind was always dull, he felt great pain in his limbs, and he finally had to accept that fulfilling his vow was utterly beyond him. His capacities had been decimated, and he feared he was not long for this world. Day and night he mourned his karmic evil, blaming himself bitterly.

One day, on the verge of despair, he picked up and read Master Zhizhe’s *Treatise on Ten Doubts About the Pure Land*, which said: “First, set about to awaken the Bodhi-mind; but if it does not arise, then cling to the Buddha, never leaving him for a moment.” He also read the *Treatise on the Great Perfection*

of Wisdom, which said: “Bearing the sufferings of a common person, sustaining the torment of a grieving heart, and yet hoping to be reborn in this wicked world to save all beings: there is no advantage in this. Such a one is feeble like an infant, unable to feed and clothe himself; he is like a young bird that cannot soar to the heavens, but can only hop from branch to branch.”

Having read these passages, Vinaya Master Yuanzhao quickly repented of his arrogance and abandoned the teachings he had studied his whole life. From that moment on, he focused exclusively on the Pure Land Way. He lived another twenty years and never deviated from this path.

A passage that particularly struck him was from Master Shandao’s “On the Advantages and Disadvantages of Exclusive and Mixed Practice”:

With reference to the Way, different quarters have different interpretations and practices; the exclusive and the mixed are not alike.

Ten out of ten who practice single-mindedly achieve rebirth in the Pure Land.

Among those who adopt mixed practices with unfocused minds, not one in a thousand does so.

From then on, he devoted himself solely to the Six-Character Name and dedicated his life to Amitabha Buddha. He also passed on the Pure Land teachings. He taught and transformed sentient beings, inducing them to practice Amitabha-recitation exclusively and become reborn together in the Land of Bliss.

**We should vow to be reborn in the Pure Land,
Leaving others to pine for the landscape of this temporary place.
If only we wished to return home --
Who would compete with us for its splendors?**

Chapter

7

The Pure Land Path



7.1: The Transcendent Vow

The suffering of all beings is formidable, and collectively we bear sinful karma as timeless and commanding as a mountain range. Because we persist in indulging our delusions, the jewel of our Buddha-nature is warped. We flounder interminably in the sea of birth-and-death, and continue to stumble on the path of liberation.

Seeing our lamentable condition, Amitabha grieved for us and pitied all suffering and fearful sentient beings. Long ago he set out on the Bodhisattva path, and made a profound and solemn vow.

In the remote past, Amitabha Buddha had been a king. This was when the Buddha Lokeshvararaja was in the world. One day, the king listened to the Buddha's discourse on the unsurpassable Dharma and was moved to abdicate his kingship and become a monk. He took the name Dharmakara (Treasury of Dharma).

Then Dharmakara, in order that all living beings might escape the bitter sea of birth-and-death, told Buddha Lokeshvararaja of his great aspiration to establish a Pure Land. Responding to Dharmakara's wish, Buddha Lokeshvararaja instructed him on the all various pure lands in existence, advising him on their constituent natures and the living beings inhabiting them.

Dharmakara listened carefully to the Buddha, and contemplated for five full

kalpas. He then issued his unsurpassable forty-eight vows.

Among the forty-eight vows, the greatest and most relevant to us is the eighteenth, also known as the Fundamental Vow:

“If, when I achieve Buddhahood, sentient beings of the ten directions who sincerely and joyfully entrust themselves to me, wish to be reborn in my land and recite my name, even ten times, should fail to be born there, may I not attain perfect enlightenment. Excepted are those who commit the five gravest transgressions or slander the correct Dharma.”

The meaning of this vow is profound and deserves our close attention. Were Dharmakara himself to explain its meaning, he might have said something like this:

“I solemnly vow that when I, Bodhisattva Dharmakara, become a Buddha, any of the world’s living beings who desire to be reborn in my Pure Land can realize this aspiration without fail, so long as they sincerely and joyfully entrust their lives and karma to my care, and recite my name: ‘*Namo Amitabha Buddha*.’ Even those evildoers who, in the last moments of their lives, hear of my deliverance and believe, can be reborn by reciting my name only ten times. Through the power of my Fundamental Vow, I will certainly appear at the moment of death before all who entrust themselves in the manner just described, and guide them to the Pure Land. Should I fail to do so, I swear to not accept perfect enlightenment and Buddhahood!”

According to the formulation of the Fundamental Vow in the *Infinite Life Sutra*, there is an exclusion clause at the end of the vow: “Excepted are those who commit the five gravest transgressions or slander the correct Dharma.” The five gravest transgressions are:

- 1) Murdering one's father
- 2) Murdering one's mother
- 3) Murdering an Arhat
- 4) Shedding the blood of a Buddha
- 5) Fomenting a schism in the Sangha

Slandering the correct Dharma means to smear and defame the teachings of the Buddhas.

This seems to imply that there are some people who cannot be saved by the Fundamental Vow. How are we to understand this, especially when the Buddha's compassion is said to be unconditional?

The exclusion clause serves as an exhortation to practitioners to avoid such evil deeds. Who among us can say that, at no point from the beginningless past, have we ever committed one of the five gravest transgressions or slandered the correct Dharma? Were the Buddha to search our individual karma for evidence of these evils, then none of us would qualify for Pure Land rebirth! Through innumerable lifetimes, we have committed these and other sins beyond counting, and we would all be excluded from the Land of Bliss.

As such a standard would render the Fundamental Vow null and void—clearly contradicting the intention of Amitabha Buddha—we should take the exclusion clause as kind, but firm, instruction: though good and evil beings who aspire to rebirth and recite the Buddha's name are all saved on a basis of equality, practitioners should nonetheless exert themselves to shun evil under all circumstances. This is the conduct of a true Buddhist disciple.

The Fundamental Vow is the living core of the forty-eight vows; it is Amitabha's dynamic masterpiece, never resting for a moment from ripening

the karma of sentient beings that they may encounter and accept the Buddha's deliverance. It is unconditional in its activity, not discriminating amongst men and women, monks and nuns, renunciants and laity, rich and poor, wise and foolish, virtuous and wicked, learned and ignorant. In ten recitations of the Six-Character Name, the roots of our karma are severed so that we leave behind forever the sufferings of the Three Domains and Six Realms. And if we can call the Buddha's name but a single time, our rebirth in the Pure Land is still assured; we will attain rebirth upon brilliantly-colored lotuses, and shine like the sun as we take our places beside Bodhisattvas Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta, ready to assist in the work of delivering sentient beings.

Elderly Dharma Master Dixian had lived in Jinshan for many years, and one day received a visitor from his home village who had been his childhood playmate. This man was an artisan, a "leaky pot craftsman" who repaired cracked and broken porcelain. Much to Master Di's surprise, his friend, who had never shown the least bit of interest in Buddhism, said that he wanted to ordain and become a monk.

Master Di exclaimed, "You? You won't do! For one thing, you are past forty and have never read a single book; how do you expect to study and understand the sutras? And at your age, you can forget about tackling the rigors of ascetic practice! It sounds to me like you're looking for trouble."

They went back and forth for some time, with Master Di urging him to reconsider, but his friend was adamant. He insisted on becoming a monk.

Finally, seeing that his friend would not be dissuaded, Master Di said, "Ok, if you're determined to become a monk, I will ordain you. But only on the

condition you receive my instructions and follow exactly what I say!”

“Of course!” said his friend. “You’re an accomplished master; if you instruct me, I will certainly listen.”

Old Di said, “You’re already old, so there’s no point in trying to teach you the sutras. If you would hope to make any headway, you should devote yourself fully to practice. I will find a temple where you can stay, and a virtuous donor who will see to your meals. Once there, you must not leave the temple. Just sincerely and diligently recite ‘Namo Amitabha Buddha’ all day long. When you grow tired, take a rest. When you are refreshed, continue your recitation. Keep on like this no matter what. I will come to check on you from time to time.”

Master Di arranged everything just as he said. His friend was able to take up residence at a small temple in the south, and twice a day an old woman came to cook his meals. The newly ordained monk had gratefully received Master Di’s instructions, and thought to himself, “This must certainly be a good way to practice; no doubt I will realize some benefit!” In his simplicity, he had no idea what that benefit might be.

True to his promise, the monk never left the temple. Everyday upon waking, he began to recite the Buddha’s name. In his previous occupation, he was accustomed to carrying heavy loads, and his legs were strong; so he would often circumambulate a statue of the Buddha or stroll the temple courtyard as he practiced. When he grew tired, he would sit down and continue his recitation. Day and night, without the least complication, he devoted himself to reciting “Namo Amitabha Buddha.”

He continued in this fashion for several years. Dharma Master Di, while impressed with his friend’s dedication, could not be sure of his progress, and

did not know what would come of his practice.

One morning, the monk told the old woman who cooked for him, “No need to prepare the midday meal today.” He explained that two old friends were visiting from out of town, and had invited him out. As he had not left the temple even once in three years, she thought this a strange turn of events.

When he returned that evening, he sent word to the old woman: “You can stay home tomorrow morning; I won’t be eating breakfast, either.” Again, she thought it strange, but could only conclude that he had received another invitation.

The next day, the old woman went to the temple to cook for the monk’s noon meal. The temple was poor and occasioned no fear of burglars, so the gate was always unlocked. She let herself in and called out, “Master, have you returned?” but there was no response. Thinking he was still out, she decided to begin preparing his food so as to have it ready when he came back. As she passed by his room on her way to the kitchen, she saw him standing at the foot of the bed, his face turned to the window, a string of prayer beads in his hands.

“Master?” she called. When he didn’t respond, she approached him to see if everything was alright—only to discover that he was dead! The monk had died standing, in the midst of reciting the Buddha’s name. Upon closer examination, it was clear that his passing had been easy; his face was radiant, free of all discomfort. There was no doubt he had been reborn in the Pure Land.

Suddenly, she understood the events of the previous days: he had known the hour of his death was near at hand, and so went to bid farewell to his friends from out of town. The old woman was deeply moved, for she knew this

was all due to the virtue of his practice.

Once Old Di got the news he rushed to the temple. The deceased monk was still standing when he arrived, and many of the locals had gathered to behold this holy marvel for themselves.

“Not bad!” said Master Di. “You, an ignorant monk who didn’t know a single Sutra, have surpassed the virtue of many great Dharma masters and abbots. You certainly wasted no time. For a mender of pots to take his leave in such a way! Few, indeed, can match your accomplishment.” Thus did he shower praise on his old friend, whose body remained standing for two more days.

This shows that Amitabha-recitation can be practiced by anyone. It doesn’t require study, wisdom, or even a thorough understanding of the teaching; yet its virtues and merits are unmatched by any other Dharma method. So long as one is sincere and recites with his whole heart, the Land of Bliss is within easy reach.

(Recounted by Dharma Master Tanxu)

7.2: Splendor of the Environment and Its Inhabitants

After making his transcendent vows before Buddha Lokeshvararaja, Bodhisattva Dharmakara spent countless eons of successive lifetimes cultivating the necessary practices. He was single-mindedly diligent, and dedicated all his practices to sentient beings of the ten directions, so they could partake of their merits.

Ten *kalpas* ago, having achieved on behalf of us sentient beings all the merit and virtues we need to be born in the Pure Land, Bodhisattva Dharmakara accomplished his aspiration. He realized Buddhahood, and brought into being the Great Name of a Myriad Virtues and the resplendent Land of Bliss.

The *Amitabha Sutra* says:

**“If you travel west, passing through ten-trillion Buddha lands,
You will come to a land called ‘Ultimate Bliss’
Where there is a Buddha named Amitabha.
Even now, he is living there, preaching the Dharma.”**

Here, “west” refers to the direction of return. Both the sun and moon set in the west; thus, the Pure Land is likened to life’s final destination.

The Western Land of Bliss is a realm composed of the merits and virtues

derived from the power of Amitabha Buddha's compassionate vows. It is a place beyond the illusion of birth-and-death, and is untainted by self-referential acts of calculation. The three Pure Land sutras -- *Infinite Life Sutra (Longer Sutra)*, *Contemplation of Infinite Life Sutra (Contemplation Sutra)* and *Amitabha Sutra (Shorter Sutra)* -- contain detailed descriptions of the Land of Bliss:

The realm itself is without limit, and every vista in that land is unimaginably vast and magnificent. The terrain is level, and the ground is made of gold. Everything is adorned with jewels and precious stones, and the interplays of light and color among the land's self-illuminated features are singularly beautiful.

There is a moderate climate, without changing seasons or the extremes of cold and heat; and the gentle, fragrant breezes are cool and refreshing, fostering tranquility of heart and mind.

Everywhere, one can see palaces, monasteries, lecture halls, and residences. These are likewise adorned with precious substances of every kind, and the decorative details of these structures are endless. Even the nettings that cover the trees and sky are decked with pearls, moonstones and other-worldly jewels that flash sublime arrays of multi-colored light.

Throughout that land there are beautiful Seven Jewel ponds, some as large as lakes. The bottoms of these ponds are blanketed in grains of gold, and the banks are composed of stairs made of jewels. The water itself is fragrant, nectar-like, and possessed of the Eight Good Qualities. On the surface of the ponds float great lotus flowers, as large as carriages and of deep, penetrating colors. If, in this world, one recites Amitabha Buddha's name, a lotus flower begins to grow in one of the ponds of the Land of Bliss. At the end of the reciter's lifetime, she will be reborn into the Pure Land from inside the lotus that sprang

forth from her recitations. As the flower opens, she will be seated there with perfect poise and dignity, like a deva or Bodhisattva, and there will be much joy as she is personally welcomed by Amitabha Buddha and his retinue.

Encircling the ponds are rows of fragrant and self-illuminated jewel trees that are naturally composed of the Seven Precious Substances. All the vistas of that Buddha land can be seen reflected in the trees, as clearly and distinctly as in a mirror. As the boughs laden with gem-leaves and mystical fruits are moved by the breeze, a sound like the delicate harmonies of musical instruments issues forth, causing one to spontaneously contemplate the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha.

Among the trees nest many different kinds of dazzling and multi-colored birds. The *Amitabha Sutra* tells us that, as the Three Wretched Realms do not exist in the Pure Land, these birds are manifested by Amitabha so that their musical voices might spread the sounds of Dharma throughout the realm, causing people to joyfully remember the Three Gems.

Often one hears a soft music in the air, peaceful and elegant. When people hear this splendid music, they naturally give rise to the unsurpassable heart of a Bodhisattva.

Twice a day at regular intervals, other-worldly flowers gently rain down from the sky. Colorful, fragrant and shimmering with light, they delight the senses and inspire practice of a myriad virtues. Every morning, people collect these flowers in the hem of their garments, and, in an instant, travel to other realms and use them to make offerings to the Buddha of that place.

The Land of Bliss is a world far from darkness. The trees, the buildings, the flowers, the living beings, even the ground itself, radiate light from within,

making a sun and moon unnecessary. All things are pure and clean. The bodies of the beings in the Pure Land are incorruptible and do not produce waste or foul odors. As the *Infinite Life Sutra* says: “The beings there are all endowed with bodies of naturalness, emptiness and infinity.” Their form is like that of Amitabha Buddha’s, with a golden body that is strong and flawless. They enjoy immeasurable lifespans, immeasurable radiance, clear wisdom, unhindered eloquence, and can, like the Buddha, “hold the world in the palm of one’s hand.”

Beneath the Bodhi tree in the center of the Pure Land, there is a vast assembly area where Amitabha Buddha, Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva (Guanyin), and Mahasthamaprapta Bodhisattva sit upon dazzling lotus thrones and preach the Dharma for the beings of the Land of Bliss. Their voices can be heard by everyone, who delight in being able personally to hear the teachings.

The Land of Bliss is not only without evil deeds, but evil words and thoughts cannot even manifest. The names of the Three Wretched Realms do not exist there. The denizens of that land are all of one mind and heart; together with the great Bodhisattvas, and with measureless tranquility and joy, they work tirelessly to liberate all beings from suffering.

In the Pure Land, the power of thought is tantamount to physical action. One may control the environment as one wishes, hear the Dharma as one wishes, perceive other world systems as one wishes, and spread the Dharma throughout the ten directions as one wishes. Clothing, food, and all necessities manifest spontaneously, according to one’s thoughts. If one wishes for clothing, then “from the Dharma’s abundance, clothing can be naturally had”; if one wishes to eat a meal, then “foods of a hundred flavors” naturally appear.

In spite of this ease and luxury, the Pure Land is not a heaven of sensual indulgence. The supreme excellence of that realm is a manifestation of the

Buddha's merits, and the beings there are unattached to its felicities. Thus, they enjoy pure and perfect happiness. This is why the Pure Land is pure.

In the summer of 1994, Qiu Yongzhang and his wife brought their six-year-old grandson Xinzhang to their neighbor's house for a session of Amitabha-recitation. In spite of his young age, Xinzhang recited earnestly in a very loud voice. His sincerity touched all those who were present.

After a while, Xinzhang tugged at his grandmother's sleeve and said, "Grandma, I saw Amitabha Buddha sitting in a golden house explaining the scriptures."

His grandmother admonished him: "Child, don't lie."

"Grandma, I'm not lying," said Xinzhang. "I really saw Amitabha Buddha!"

After they returned home, Xinzhang again told his grandmother, "When we recited the Buddha's name, I saw Amitabha Buddha in a golden house explaining the scriptures. Amitabha Buddha's lotus flower was very large; Guanyin's and Dashizhi's [Mahasthamaprapta's] lotuses were a little smaller. Then I saw golden birds and trees, and the buildings were also golden. There was no dirt in that place, and even the ground was made of gold. Rays of golden light were shining everywhere. It was so pretty!"

Because Xinzhang's grandmother was a new student of Buddhism and had not read the scriptures, she didn't recognize the signs. But after hearing Xinzhang speak about it again with such seriousness, she decided to ask a fellow practitioner, Householder Qiu.

“Our Xinzhang says that when he was reciting the Buddha Name, he saw the Land of Bliss and the Three Sages preaching the Dharma. He also said that the buildings, trees, and birds of that place are all golden. Is this true?”

Householder Qiu answered, “The *Amitabha Sutra* says: ‘In that land, the ground is made of gold, and the palaces and pavilions are adorned with the seven jewels. All the trees are made of the Seven Precious Substances and are neatly arranged. The birdsong is soft and pleasing to the ear, expounding the marvelous Dharma.’”

After hearing Householder Qiu’s explanation, Xinzhang’s grandmother was deeply moved and came to believe the truth of what her grandson experienced.

7.3: Significance of the Name

In the *Contemplation Sutra*, beings of the Five Gravest Transgressions and Ten Evil Deeds are said to create only destructive karma, and lack any store of merit or virtue. As they lie dying, they can feel the fires of hell beginning to singe their feet. But at the very end, they encounter a teacher of Dharma who instructs them in mindfulness of the Buddha. Yet in their death-struggle, they cannot concentrate; so the teacher urges them to repeat “Namo Amitabha Buddha” ten times. From this alone, the evil person takes a seat upon on a golden lotus and is reborn in the Land of Bliss.

A wicked person, who has never practiced virtue or cultivated the Dharma, can be reborn in the Pure Land and become a Buddha by only reciting the name of Amitabha ten times? How is this possible? Throughout the centuries, many virtuous teachers of Dharma have exerted themselves to answer this sometimes difficult question: the “rebirth of the evil person.”

Most people reasonably assume that Pure Land rebirth is determined by the height of one’s virtue, and/or the depth of one’s practice. In fact, the determining factor has nothing to do with sentient beings. All the merit and virtue required for rebirth is contained in the Six-Character Name (“Namo Amitabha Buddha” consists of six Chinese characters). “Namo Amitabha Buddha” is the living core of Buddha-centered power. Clearing away previous misunderstandings, Master Shandao explained “Namo Amitabha Buddha” as follows:

“ ‘Namo’ means to entrust our lives, as well as to dedicate merit towards rebirth [in the Pure Land]. [Reciting] ‘Amitabha Buddha’ is the practice. That is why rebirth is certain.”

“Entrust our lives”: this means to heed the teachings of the Two Honored Ones, Shakyamuni and Amitabha; and, with a sincere heart, to seek rebirth in the Pure Land with singleness of mind.

“That is why rebirth is certain”: all beings of the Ten Directions attain the karma of assurance (for Pure Land rebirth) through the practice of [reciting] Amitabha Buddha’s name.

As the name of Amitabha Buddha is the fruit of his countless *kalpas* of practice on our behalf, the phrase “Namo Amitabha Buddha” clearly contains sufficient entrusting, dedication of merit, and practice for sentient beings to be reborn in the Land of Bliss. Thus, to recite “Namo Amitabha Buddha” is to accord with the Buddha’s Fundamental Vow. To accord with the Fundamental Vow is to receive all the merits and virtues of Amitabha. Possessed of a Buddha’s merits and virtues, what past evil, or karmic debtor, can ever deter us from entering the Pure Land? That is why rebirth is a certainty for all who accord with the Fundamental Vow. This includes evil persons.

To board the ship of the Fundamental Vow is “entrusting one’s life.” Once it has set sail, the passengers rely on the other-power (i.e. Buddha-centered power) of the ship to take them to their destination. “That is why rebirth is certain.” Those who expend their bodies and lives reciting “Namo Amitabha Buddha” are all riding on the vessel of Amitabha’s Vow to deliver all beings, and will safely and smoothly reach the other shore. The *Contemplation Sutra* says:

**“The Buddha Amitabha possesses eighty-four thousand physical characteristics [···]
 Each one emits eighty-four thousand rays of light;
 This light shines universally upon the lands of the ten directions,
 Embracing and not forsaking those who keep the Buddha in mind
 [i.e. recite his name].”**

If one hears of Amitabha Buddha’s inconceivable virtue, is filled with delight and rejoicing, recites the Buddha’s name wholeheartedly while believing with an adamant faith, then one receives incomparable joy—even while dwelling in this Saha world.

If one deeply believes this teaching and recites *Namo Amitabha Buddha*, then Amitabha will position himself above the reciter’s head, and, together with countless Bodhisattvas, deities, and the Buddhas of the Ten Directions, protect him until he attains Buddhahood—never parting from him for even a moment.

Reciting *Namo Amitabha Buddha* can eliminate countless lifetimes of sin. Even if one has been born into this life deaf, blind or crippled due to the karmic retributions of former lives, he can, by reciting *Namo Amitabha Buddha*, eliminate myriad *kalpas* of evil deeds and attain liberation.

If any person recites *Namo Amitabha Buddha* with a serene faith in the Buddha’s deliverance, she will, in the final moments of her life, see Amitabha Buddha and the host of sages appear before her in welcome. Her heart will not be troubled, her mind will be clearly cognizant of the Buddha—even if her body is comatose or suffering great pain—and in the space of time it takes to cut a hair, she will be reborn in splendor in the Land of Bliss.

In this world, there is nothing that provides greater benefit to a person than

reciting *Namo Amitabha Buddha*. Even just hearing “*Namo Amitabha Buddha*” can give rise to faith, joy, and the desire for rebirth. Actually reciting the name, then, can bestow unsurpassable benefit.

If someone at the very end of life hears of Amitabha’s deliverance, sets his heart on rebirth, but can recite the name only once—he, too, will certainly be reborn! According to Master Shandao, reciting the Buddha’s name with the aspiration for rebirth is “the karma of assurance,” be it once, ten times, or millions of times.

Amitabha Buddha’s name contains immeasurable, infinite, inconceivable, unsurpassable virtue. In the three syllables “*Amituo*” (*Amita*), there exists every Buddha of the Ten Directions, every Bodhisattva, every Arhat and all the sutras. By itself, the Name embodies the whole of the immeasurable Dharma. As a gatha says:

**“A” is all Buddhas of the Ten Directions;
 “mi” is the great assembly of Bodhisattvas;
 “tuo” is the eighty-four thousand sagely teachings,
 In three syllables: abundance!**

Though there are eighty-four thousand Dharma methods, the great Six-Character Name embraces and transcends them all. When we recite *Namo Amitabha Buddha*, we invoke all Buddhas of the Ten Directions, all the great Bodhisattvas, and simultaneously practice all the schools of Dharma. There is no need to invoke other Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, or to supplement the merit of *nianfo* with other practices.

In fact, true sincerity of heart, true single-mindedness, is to rely exclusively on the Buddha's Fundamental Vow. To rely exclusively means to practice Namó Amitabha Buddha alone. When we understand that there is nothing else to rely upon, we have attained the "karma of assurance," and our rebirth in the Pure Land becomes a certainty guaranteed by the Buddha himself.

Han Youcai was a middle school teacher living in the eastern village of Fengshan, Gaochun county, in Jiangsu Province. His mother and younger brother were both disciples of the Three Gems. While Han Youcai himself did not believe in Buddhism, he did not slander or defame it.

In 1991, when he was 41, Han Youcai was diagnosed with terminal stomach cancer, and quickly woke up to reality.

His friend Lian urged him to recite Amitabha Buddha's name, and Han Youcai accepted this advice, observing, "Whether or not one believes is beside the point." Thereafter, he concentrated exclusively on reciting Namó Amitabha Buddha.

On the twelfth hour of the twelfth day of the twelfth month of the lunar calendar, the bedridden Han Youcai abruptly stood up. When his family rushed to his side to see what was wrong, he said, "The Buddha is now present; lying down is disrespectful." He then asked, "Do you not see him?"

Five minutes later, Han Youcai peacefully made his transition to the Pure Land.

7.4: Deeply Believing that the Self Is Iniquitous and Ordinary

Master Shandao—founder of the Pure Land school, and incarnation of Amitabha Buddha—explained in his *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra* the two kinds of deep faith that should guide those who aspire to the Pure Land:

“The first kind of deep faith: I am an iniquitous ordinary being subject to endless rebirth. Since time immemorial I have died and been reincarnated, without hope of leaving the cycle of rebirth.”

Since time immemorial, we have wandered the Three Domains and Six Realms according to the dictates of our karma. Though we think of ourselves as “good people,” no better or worse than our fellows, the truth is that our self-proclaimed goodness is either a bromide for an uneasy conscience, or a lie we have repeated so often we now take it for the truth. On the level of Buddha-nature, however, we know what we are. Time passes, and our evil passions become more and more ingrained. Through countless lifetimes, we have certainly encountered many Buddhas, and yet we still have not attained liberation. Truly, as the Sutra says, we are iniquitous, ordinary beings who are “difficult to save.”

Now consider that Master Shandao was scrupulous in his observance of the precepts and practice of virtue. He led a simple life, preferring to beg for his

food, and never utilizing the separate sleeping quarters reserved for an abbot; in all things, he held himself to the same standard as his trainee monks. When distributing donations, he would send the best food to the central kitchen for the whole community, keeping only the coarsest food for himself. He never indulged in gossip or idle talk, and refused to travel with a retinue of attendants lest he be distracted from his cultivation. He slept little, washed his own bowls, did his own mending, and never removed his robe except to bathe. In addition, the Master was a spiritual adept of profound attainments (he achieved *nianfo samadhi* in his twenties), and a beloved teacher who guided vast numbers of people to the practice of the Way.

Clearly, Master Shandao was a person of extraordinary virtue by any standard, in any age. However, the Master wrote the passage concerning the first kind of deep faith *about himself!* He knew that, he, too, was an iniquitous, ordinary being possessed of evil passions and foolishness. He, too, had failed to escape the cycle of rebirth despite the tutelage of many Buddhas through countless lifetimes. He, too, could only depend on the compassionate vows of Amitabha for liberation. In the *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra*, he reflects:

“[One’s] evil nature, difficult to eradicate, is like snakes and scorpions. Even if we practice the mental, verbal and bodily virtues, these are all said to be ‘virtue mixed with poison.’ [...] Even if we settle ourselves and commence our practice, earnestly and diligently endeavoring with body and mind, striving without a moment’s rest as if our heads had caught fire, it is still called ‘virtue mixed with poison.’ If we wished to dedicate such practice mixed with poison in aspiration for the Pure Land, it would certainly be impossible [to be reborn].”

If such a paragon of virtue as Master Shandao would regard himself thus, then the rest of us should well take heed! Without understanding our actual situation, there is no way to truly realize faith in Amitabha Buddha's compassionate deliverance.

There once was a rich married woman who conducted herself amiably, was virtuous and modest, and received no small amount of admiration from everyone she met.

At home she had a clever and capable maid. One day, the maid thought to herself, "My mistress is a deeply respected person. She seems kind-hearted and sympathetic, but are these virtues only the result of agreeable circumstances? What would happen, I wonder, if her virtue was tested?"

So she decided to try something. The next day, the maid was late to get out of bed and did not show her face until almost noon. Her mistress angrily reprimanded her, "Why were you so late to get up?"

On the second day, after again sleeping late, the maid received an even sharper rebuke.

On the third day, the maid slept late as before. When she finally appeared to begin her duties, her mistress flew into a rage, grabbed a stick and began to savagely beat her.

This affair became widely known throughout the city, and the married woman lost her former reputation.

7.5: Deeply Believing in Amitabha's Vow of Deliverance

If we ourselves lack the merit and virtue necessary for attaining rebirth in the Pure Land, then we must turn our gaze to Amitabha Buddha. In the *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra*, Master Shandao writes about the second kind of deep faith:

“The second kind of deep faith: Amitabha Buddha embraces and receives all sentient beings with his 48 Vows. Without doubt or fear, we are certain of rebirth in the Pure Land by relying on the power of his vows.”

When we consider what it means to “rely on the power” of Amitabha, it is clear that his Fundamental Vow—the 18th of his 48 vows—is the means through which rebirth in the Land of Bliss becomes a certainty. How do we know this? There are three reasons.

First, to reveal the Fundamental Vow is the reason for all the Buddhas manifesting in the worlds of the Ten Directions. So says Shakyamuni Buddha in the *Infinite Life Sutra*:

“With infinite great compassion, the Tathagata commiserates with the beings of the Three Domains. Therefore, he appears in the world

to teach and enlighten them. He wishes to save the multitudes by endowing them with real benefits.”

“Real benefits” means liberation from the cycle of birth-and-death—and that is most easily and widely accomplished through the Fundamental Vow of Amitabha Buddha. Of course, the Buddhas give many teachings for different kinds of spiritual afflictions, but their fundamental intent is always to reveal the 18th vow. Why? Reciting *Namo Amitabha Buddha* can be practiced by anyone, including the “multitudes”—including iniquitous, ordinary beings. It is a simple act of refuge that *everyone, without exception*, can accomplish. It opens wide the doors of liberation to all who practice it.

Second, we know from the *Infinite Life Sutra* that Amitabha Buddha’s Fundamental Vow *has already been fulfilled!* Recall that the formulation of the Fundamental Vow contains the following words:

“Should [reciters of my name] fail to be born [in the Pure Land], may I not attain perfect enlightenment.”

Master Shandao commented on these words in his work, *In Praise of the Rite of Rebirth*:

“Today Amitabha is before us, having achieved Buddhahood. We should know that his Fundamental Vow has been unequivocally fulfilled. If sentient beings recite his name, they will certainly be reborn in the Land of Bliss.”

The implication here is profound. Without fulfillment of the Fundamental Vow, Dharmakara Bodhisattva would never have accepted Buddhahood. Without his acceptance of Buddhahood, neither the words “*Namo Amitabha*

Buddha” nor the Pure Land would exist. Because there is a Buddha-name to recite, and a Pure Land towards which we can aspire, we can be certain that the Fundamental Vow has been unequivocally fulfilled.

Amitabha absolutely will deliver reciters of his name to the Land of Bliss, lest the Pure Land and his own perfect enlightenment crumble and decay. If name reciters could not be reborn, then Amitabha would not have—indeed, could not have!—become a Buddha. He would have refused perfect enlightenment and continued his practice until every last being throughout the Ten Directions could be reborn in the Land of Bliss by invoking his name.

The third reason we know that the Fundamental Vow is the certain means of rebirth is that Shakyamuni praises the benefits of entrusting to the Vow in many sutras. Here are just two examples from the *Infinite Life Sutra*:

“The Buddha told Maitreya, ‘Those who hear the name of that Buddha [Amitabha] and rejoice and recite his name even once shall receive the utmost benefit, which is to possess unsurpassed merit and virtue.’ ”

“Utmost benefit” is similar to “real benefits” from earlier in the Sutra. Here, it refers to rebirth in the Pure Land, and one is reborn there by receiving the Buddha’s “unsurpassed merit and virtue.” By describing the real benefits of taking refuge in the Fundamental Vow, Shakyamuni is confirming that it is indeed operative and active. Later in the Sutra, he says:

**“By the power of that Buddha’s Fundamental Vow,
Those who hear his name and wish to be reborn
Will all reach his land.
They will naturally attain a state of non-retrogression.”**

When one is reborn in the Land of Bliss, there is no danger of slipping back to inferior states or realms; one has attained “non-retrogression” on the path to Buddhahood. Here again, Shakyamuni describes the real benefits of taking refuge in the Fundamental Vow, confirming its actuality.

A Buddha cannot speak falsely. Just as we can utterly rely on Shakyamuni’s testimony in the *Infinite Life Sutra* and other sutras, we can also rely on the endorsement of *countless* Buddhas in the *Amitabha Sutra*, who all extend their tongues and urge sentient beings to have faith in the teaching of Amitabha-recitation.

It’s important to note that, when we rely exclusively upon Amitabha Buddha for deliverance, our rebirth in the Pure Land is assured in this very lifetime. So long as we never lose our desire for rebirth in the Land of Bliss, and embrace Amitabha-recitation as our exclusive practice, we are already members of the Pure Land’s Dharma assembly. Thus, rebirth is determined not at the moment of death, but at the moment faith arises and we joyfully entrust ourselves through *Namo Amitabha Buddha*.

Householder An Fengguang was a devout Buddhist for many years, though he was not especially focused on the Pure Land tradition. But in 1997, after hearing a Dharma talk by Master Jingzong, he switched his focus to Amitabha-recitation.

In 2001, due to overwork and generally subpar health, Householder An was hospitalized with a malignant brain tumor. By May 2002, his condition had deteriorated further, and he had a heart attack.

During his illness, Householder An frequently listened to Dharma discourses on the Pure Land tradition of Master Shandao. Because of this, he developed a profound sense of his own karmic evil and proclivity to sin. Likewise, he also grew more and more aware of Amitabha Buddha's great compassion for reprobates like himself—as well as Amitabha's tremendous grief for those evildoers who might miss the chance of rebirth and fall into hell.

Spurred on by these realizations, Householder An intensified his practice, always focusing his attention on *Namo Amitabha Buddha*. Whether walking, standing, sitting or lying down, he never ceased repeating the great Six-Character Name and seeking the Buddha's merciful assistance. Over time, his joy was such that he could not stop reciting, even during mealtimes. Even when sleeping, his lips would move to the Buddha-name.

Householder An often counseled his wife, "Good circumstances do not last long, just as fresh flowers quickly wilt and die. Is not a person's life in this Saha world the same? Whether I am to recover or pass on, I must always recite the Buddha's name so that one day I can return home!"

Towards the end, he said to his wife, "The Western Land of Bliss is my true home, and I will certainly go there with Amitabha Buddha. Through single-minded recitation, this ailing life of mine becomes preparation for the life to come! Each day I recite, and Amitabha Buddha knows it all."

On his wall at home, Householder An hung an image of Amitabha Buddha. Beneath it was written the passage, "The Buddha's light shines universally upon the lands of the ten directions, / embracing and not forsaking those who recite the Buddha's name," as well as the text of the Fundamental Vow. Householder An frequently sat on the sofa facing the Buddha image while reciting, and often read the sutras, tearfully saying to himself, "My heart does believe in Amitabha

Buddha! I am saved; my spirit is at peace. Though I am tormented by these ailments, the chains of my karma are broken.” Once, while shedding tears of repentance, he said, “When Amitabha Buddha calls me home, I shall go at once!”

From the onset of his illness, Householder An never parted from the Buddha’s name, and the Buddha’s name did not leave his heart. His family had to spoon-feed him his meals, and after each swallow he would recite Namō Amitabha Buddha before taking another bite. His physical deterioration was such that speech was exceedingly difficult for him; each recitation took tremendous effort, and his pronunciation was unclear.

His wife said, “Please do not strain yourself like this. It’s the same if you recite in your heart while you eat.”

But Householder An was resolute: “If I cannot recite out loud, I will not eat.” Moved by his devotion, his wife began to recite along with him throughout his meals, which often took longer than an hour.

At 5:30pm on May 6th, Householder An, surrounded by the sound of Namō Amitabha Buddha, and with eyes fixed on the Buddha image in his home, passed from this world and was reborn in the Western Land of Bliss.

7.6: Amitabha's Great Compassion for Sufferers

Master Shandao's two kinds of deep faith are the gold standard of Pure Land Buddhism. If one realizes these two kinds of deep faith, then one's heart and practice is in accord with Amitabha's Fundamental Vow.

But if one believes, "I am virtuous and spiritually adept; through my own efforts, I will break free from ignorance and endless rebirth;" or if one thinks, "I am a Bodhisattva engaged in the work of saving all sentient beings," then the truth of the first kind of deep faith has yet to be realized, and the import of the Fundamental Vow is lost. In this way, one's lack of right faith will block liberation via the Pure Land gate.

Conversely, one may believe, "My evil karma runs deep and my obstructions are heavy; my heart is disorderly and impure, and I cannot maintain a single precept. How can mere recitation of Amitabha's name assure my rebirth in the Pure Land?" If the Pure Land gate is bypassed because of such doubts, then one hasn't begun to understand the mercy and compassion of Amitabha Buddha. Again, entry into the Pure Land is obstructed by a lack of right faith.

We should remember that Dharmakara Bodhisattva contemplated for five *kalpas* before making his great vow. Then, through *kalpas* and lifetimes beyond counting, he conducted his Bodhisattva practice on behalf of us: desirous,

hateful, ignorant beings. In the *Contemplation Sutra*, even those who have committed the Five Gravest Transgressions and the Ten Evils are able to obtain rebirth with just ten recitations of Namo Amitabha Buddha. Are we worse than they? Isn't the belief that we are beyond saving just a twisted form of pride?

An ancient worthy said, "It's mistaken to think that our hearts must be tranquil and pure before we can recite the Buddha-name. To the contrary, we should recite the Name often and thereby eradicate our evil deeds. Born in this Saha world as foolish, ordinary beings, how can our hearts not be disordered? Some say, 'After we achieve tranquility of heart, we can recite,' but this is unreasonable. Though our hearts are disordered and impure, we can nonetheless recite the name of Amitabha and attain assurance or rebirth. This truly embodies the compassionate intention of the Buddha."

No matter what sort of person we are, rebirth in the Land of Bliss does not require calculation on our part, just the name of Amitabha Buddha. Some say, "Why bother with daily practice? I'll just recite the Buddha-name at the end of my life and attain rebirth." But why wait until the end of life when conditions for practice are uncertain? Practice now and the Pure Land is attained now, while you are still alive!

The Buddha's mercy is unconditional; all beings who entrust through Namo Amitabha Buddha are rescued without discrimination. Likewise, Amitabha's great heartache for the wicked and evil, the apathetic and lazy, the ignorant and foolish, is beyond understanding or analogy. Not only does the Buddha not abandon them, he feels even greater love for them and continually ripens their karma in preparation for a decisive encounter with the Fundamental Vow. Master Shandao said:

The Buddha's great mercy is, firstly, for the afflicted; those drowning in the ocean of suffering are the primary objects of the Buddha's compassion.

Just as drowning people urgently need rescue, wicked beings without Amitabha's deliverance will undoubtedly find an abode in hell.

Amitabha Buddha knows well our defiled hearts. He shoulders the burden of our wicked deeds, and unconditionally bestows his virtue on us through the power of his name. Like a mother grieving over her wayward child, he never abandons us but always seeks to save and protect us. To this end, he stopped at nothing to accomplish the easiest and most splendid method for our salvation. With Amitabha's name as our vessel, we effortlessly sail onto the radiant sea of his vow.

Do not doubt the Buddha's power to save us from ourselves; the evil we have accumulated through untold lifetimes of suffering—enough to fill the entire cosmos!—is but a dust mote floating through the rays of Amitabha Buddha's infinite light. But without the Buddha's help, the karma that caused us to take rebirth in the Saha world of the Five Turbidities (where we have blindly enacted even more evil) will blossom terribly, dooming us to long *kalpas* in the Three Wretched Realms.

Why not instead entrust ourselves to the Buddha and find true peace and happiness? To spend the remainder of our lives immersed in *Namo Amitabha Buddha* is the only way to know love, tranquility, joy and safety.

So let us now resolve: in good times, *Namo Amitabha Buddha*; in difficult times, *Namo Amitabha Buddha*. When the heart is pure, *Namo Amitabha Buddha*; when the heart is impure, *Namo Amitabha Buddha*... Though we are

ordinary, foolish beings, the great Six-Character Name we recite at all times is like a perfect, unstained lotus flower blossoming from the mud.

The following was narrated by Dr. Guo Huizhen:

Once I was on night-duty in the intensive care unit (ICU)—this was in the first year of my practice as a medical doctor—and the emergency room admitted a man who was having a heart attack. His breathing had stopped, he was unconscious, his face and tongue were a dark purple, and the electrocardiogram and blood test showed that his heart was already seriously damaged. Based on his experience, the chief doctor knew that revival would be unlikely, so he advised the patient’s family to prepare for the worst.

Given the circumstances, I recited the Buddha’s name as I administered first aid. But even after administering medicine, the man’s blood pressure was totally unreadable; he was still unconscious, and unable to breathe on his own.

The patient’s wife was inconsolable. “They say the lord of heaven loves simple-minded people; why doesn’t the lord of heaven love me? Doctor, please do everything you can. Even if my husband becomes a vegetable, I will still take care of him!”

I was touched by her sincerity, and advised her, “People in the midst of catastrophe should make a great vow and recite *Namo Amitabha Buddha*; only then can they make it through.”

“How does one make a great vow?” she asked.

“With a sincere heart,” I said.

Without hesitation, she declared, “From now on, we will devote ourselves to the Buddha and always recite his name! My husband is a teacher, and when he recovers he can work to promote the Dharma.”

I gave her and each of her children a string of prayer beads and said, “Don’t just hover outside the ICU and worry. Each of you, calm your hearts and do 10,000 recitations, and dedicate the merit to your father. Pray for the unfathomable blessings of Amitabha Buddha. We will do everything we can, but if he doesn’t pull through, know that he will be reborn in the Land of Bliss.”

Through the night, myself and two other doctors monitored the electrocardiogram and adjusted the man’s medication. This went on from seven in the evening to just past three in the morning. Fatigued and frustrated, one of my colleagues began to grumble, “What’s the use? We’ve stood watch all night over a man without a pulse!”

But then, at around four in the morning, the patient’s blood pressure inexplicably returned, and the man awoke from his coma. I hastily rushed out of the ICU to tell his wife and children, and when I burst through the doors, the whole family was together reciting *Namo Amitabha Buddha*. Their earnestness and sincerity moved me to tears.

For three days afterward, he had to rely on a respirator to breathe, but he nonetheless found the energy to recite the Buddha’s name. In addition to the heart attack, he was also suffering a severe case of tuberculosis, but against all odds he walked out of the hospital alive. Every doctor who subsequently reviewed the case found this man’s recovery incredible.

7.7: Amitabha-Recitation With Peace of Mind

Some people mistakenly believe that practicing Amitabha-recitation is only for the sake of the afterlife; they think that if one wishes to eliminate karmic retribution, seek wisdom, heal illness and avert disaster, they must rely on other methods.

They do not know that the Six-Character Name contains all of Amitabha Buddha's merits and virtues. If one wishes to extinguish the effects of evil karma and increase good fortune, nothing is better than recitation of the Buddha's name. As it is said:

One recitation of the Buddha's name and evil is swept away like silt in a river;

One prostration before the Buddha and good fortune increases immeasurably.

The benefits of reciting the Buddha-name are truly beyond reckoning. Through sustained practice, one's heart grows increasingly joyful, the evil conditions one encounters in life are minimized or eliminated, and virtuous inclinations begin to naturally arise. All Buddhas praise it; Bodhisattvas and benevolent deities protect it; and even demons and hell-beings are subdued and delivered through its power. The name extinguishes the effects of wrongdoing

and eliminates evil karma. It can rescue our ancestors and deceased relatives. It can protect one from disaster and transform misfortune into blessing. Devoted recitation can heal illness and extend life; it promotes calmness of mind and ease of body. It can dispel ignorance, fear and hatred, and allows one to approach death with a peaceful, untroubled heart.

One recitation of the Buddha's name is sufficient to gain Buddhahood—and worldly benefits and protection besides. All the mundane concerns of ordinary people living in the world, such as the wellbeing of family and children, relationships, health and healing, protection from sudden disasters, job security, financial security, and meeting death with dignity and peace, can be addressed through reciting the Buddha's name. There is no need to mix in other practices or methods in order to secure one's worldly life. Amitabha Buddha seeks our wellbeing in all things, and though we will inevitably suffer some fruits of our past evil karma, we can be certain that the effects have been mitigated through the Buddha's compassion.

In all of this, we should remember that we need not anxiously petition the Buddha for our worldly needs; nor should we make demands. Amitabha knows the myriad details of our life situation more intimately than we do, and acts to benefit us accordingly. When we are moved to specially ask for the Buddha's blessing, it is enough to make a simple transfer of merit (if we seek benefit for another), or to remember our special intention during recitation. Even if our prayers are not answered to our liking, we can rest assured that the Buddha, who sees our individual karmic tapestries in all of their complexity and fullness, always acts for our greatest benefit. Like a good parent, he will give us what we need—especially when what we want is not in our own best interests.

Let us also remember not to grow too attached to the conditions of this life. Whatever happens, let our first and fondest aspiration always be rebirth in the

Pure Land! As Master Yinguang said:

“Truly invoking the Buddha means to not seek earthly karmic reward. But in not seeking, you will certainly receive: perhaps a long life without illness, harmonious family relations, flourishing descendants, fortunate circumstances, and all manner of auspicious things. But if you mainly seek for worldly benefits, you will lose your aspiration for the Pure Land, and the blessings thus obtained will be inferior. Moreover, one’s destiny in the next life becomes tenuous in the extreme.”

Reciting the name of the Buddha is the most informal method of practice in the Dharma. One can practice regardless of time, place and circumstances, and distractions are not an issue. If conditions allow, then practice focused recitation (i.e. the mind closely following the words *Namo Amitabha Buddha*); if not, then it is acceptable to practice scattered recitation (i.e. the mind allowing for intrusive thoughts, such as when engaged at one’s occupation). While both focused and scattered recitation lead to rebirth in the Land of Bliss, it is desirable that a practitioner make time each day for at least one period of focused recitation.

That said, it is vital to understand that it is *not* necessary to achieve one-pointed concentration in one’s practice. Many modern teachers of the Pure Land way teach that unless one achieves at least the initial stage of meditative concentration (*samadhi*), then rebirth is impossible. This is an unequivocal deviation from the teachings of Master Shandao and Amitabha Buddha. Unfortunately, such mistaken beliefs are widespread in some quarters, and it creates a formidable and unnecessary barrier between sentient beings and Amitabha Buddha.

How did this happen? Around the turn of the second millennium CE, due to wars and anit-Buddhist persecutions, the writings of the early Pure Land patriarchs (including Master Shandao) were lost in China. Sundered from its foundation, Pure Land practice eventually became mixed with the teachings of other schools, and the easy path gradually began to resemble the difficult path of self-power practitioners. For example, the necessity of achieving *samadhi* as a condition for rebirth shows the clear influence of the Ch’an (Zen) school.

However, Amitabha Buddha did not set any such pre-condition in the Fundamental Vow, and Master Shandao—though he wrote extensively about his own practice of visualization and *nianfo samadhi*—was exceedingly clear that “*all* [emphasis added] who recite the name will be reborn in the Land of Bliss.”

By design, the Pure Land way is a teaching accessible to ordinary, foolish beings with the lowest capacities. So we should not trouble ourselves by turning the wonderful teaching of Buddha-centered power into a hopeless exercise of self-power. Just recite the name in all simplicity and sincerity. Whether walking, standing, sitting or lying down, let your heart rest in the arms of the Buddha. If you cannot recite loudly, recite quietly. If it is inappropriate to recite aloud, recite silently. In all times and places, let your mind harken to the Buddha’s name.

Those who are new to practice will often overreach, setting goals and failing to reach them. They may reproach themselves, as the habit of recitation is difficult to acquire and they are often forgetful. But however faltering our practice may be in the beginning, persistence will yield results. Especially if one commits to daily periods of focused recitation, the heart and mind will eventually learn to cleave to the name of Amitabha. A simple ceremonial may look like the following:

1) Every morning and evening, after freshening yourself up, light incense and prostrate before a Buddha image. (If circumstances do not permit this, simply placing one's palms together and bowing towards the west will also do.)

2) Recite "Namo to the greatly merciful and compassionate Amitabha Buddha of the Western Land of Bliss." Follow this with recitations of "Namo Amitabha Buddha"—maybe ten thousand times, maybe one thousand times, maybe one hundred times, maybe for one stick of incense, or maybe for ten breaths (one recitation per breath). Circumambulatory movement, or standing, kneeling and sitting postures are all acceptable.

3) Prostration and withdrawing. (Or joining palms, bowing and withdrawing.)

If this seems excessively simple, you can add a reading of the *Amitabha Sutra*, or recite the verse "Praise to Amitabha Buddha":

**Amitabha Buddha's body is the color of pure gold;
The splendor of his marks has no peer.
The light of his brow illuminates a hundred worlds;
Vast as oceans, his eyes shine with purest light.
In Amitabha's brilliant realm, all beings are transformed
Into Buddhas and Bodhisattvas without number.
His forty-eight vows will be our liberation;
In Nine Lotus-stages we reach the other shore.
Homage to the Buddha of the Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss,
The great compassionate Amitabha Buddha!**

Finally, you can add a dedication of merit:

May the resulting merit [of this practice] be distributed everywhere without discrimination. May we all aspire to perfect enlightenment for the sake of other beings, and be reborn in the Land of Peace and Joy.

Lay Practitioner Luo Fo'en, from Chengdu, in September of 2001 traveled to Johannesburg, South Africa, for work. He was twenty-seven years old.

Before leaving home, his Buddhist mother gave him a small Amitabha Buddha card and urged him to carry it with him wherever he went. Each evening, his mother told him, he should respectfully place it on the table so that, through the Buddha's presence, she could connect with him when she performed her evening recitations. In addition, the image of the Buddha would ensure his safety and protection.

Out of respect for his mother, Luo Fo'en did as she instructed, though he himself had no personal commitment to Buddhism. Each day, he would put the Buddha card into his wallet, and every night he would set it up on a wooden trunk at the head of his bed. Every time he opened his wallet and saw the card, he would remember his mother's words and recite "Namo Amitabha Buddha" three times.

On December 25 of that year, during the Christmas break, Luo Fo'en's friends had grown restless and wanted to go traveling. Luo Fo'en decided to accompany them, not wanting to return to China without having seen the grandeur of South Africa. So fifteen people crammed themselves into a passenger van built for eight, and they went speeding through the countryside.

But on a long downhill section of road, the driver decided to give his passengers a thrill. As the van picked up speed, the passengers in front excitedly called out the reading from the speedometer: “170, 180, 200, 205...!” It was then that disaster struck. The driver lost control, and the van flipped on its side and rolled for three hundred meters. As the dust cleared from the wreck, all of the passengers were dead—except Luo Fo’en, who miraculously walked away without a scratch.

Afterward he recalled the scene: “Everything happened so quickly. When I was a child, I would sometimes tie a stone to a cotton string and swing it in faster and faster circles above my head until the string broke and the stone went flying, leaving me in a state of reverie. That’s what it was like. I remember calling out ‘Mother!’ then being held suspended in a golden light. I felt weightless, without any fear at all...”

Given the seriousness of the crash, there should have been no survivors. Why was Luo Fo’en exempted from death or injury? The case was widely discussed, and many came to believe it was the protection of Amitabha Buddha that had saved him. Afterward, many of the Chinese living in South Africa obtained Amitabha Buddha cards and began to carry them on their person.

Today, Lay Practitioner Luo is a devout Buddhist. Whenever he returns to South Africa, he volunteers at a Chinese Buddhist temple there; and every time he meets an ethnic Chinese person, he always gives them a Buddha card and relates the story of his escape from calamity.

7.8: Time Does Not Wait

“I don’t have time now; after I retire I can recite the Buddha-name.” Such is the thinking of many people who mistakenly believe they have all the time in the world.

But we should remember that reciting the Buddha’s name does not require quiet or even peaceful circumstances. The important thing is one’s attitude. All situations are opportunities for practice, with or without formality. Indeed, name recitation isn’t hindered by anything.

Ultimately, everything we do in this world is an attempt to abandon suffering and obtain happiness. But have we been liberated from suffering? Is our happiness more than a fleeting emotion?

The nature of all things is illusory and fleeting; surrounded thus by phantoms, how can we ever find everlasting happiness in this world?

News of impermanence should also jar us awake: life is but the space of a breath. At any time, karmic retributions can appear, and we risk losing this human form and the unsurpassable opportunity of practicing the Dharma. That would surely be life’s greatest regret.

The function of the Dharma does not lie in changing our beliefs, but rather in turning us toward a path of truth, happiness, and serenity. As Shakyamuni

Buddha said in the *Infinite Life Sutra*, its purpose is to endow us with true benefit.

Those who practice the Dharma by reciting Amitabha Buddha's name are capable of transforming distress into happiness, exchanging fetters for freedom, and experiencing a deep sense of refreshment and peace.

It's also true that all those who invoke Amitabha Buddha wish that they had encountered the Dharma earlier. They cannot help but feel a deep sense of remorse regarding their previous conduct, and recognize how many past errors could have been avoided through the application of Buddhist teaching.

Those who have not yet put the Dharma into practice—who believe they still have time to kill—should well consider: time waits for no one. If you are reading these words and are still on the fence, rejoice that your karma has led you to this moment. For ten *kalpas*, Amitabha Buddha has prepared you for an encounter with the Fundamental Vow.

Huang Datie (Iron Forger Huang), a man of Tanzhou during the Song Dynasty, forged ironware for a living. Despite the heat, sweat and toil of his occupation, he never failed to recite the Buddha's name while at the forge.

One day his wife said, "Forging iron is onerous enough, and yet you also recite the Buddha's name. Isn't that just an additional burden?"

Huang answered, "No, it really is an excellent method. When the furnace is at peak blaze, Namo Amitabha Buddha shields me from the heat; when my arms ache from hammering at the forge, Namo Amitabha Buddha relieves the pain."

One day, a respectful neighbor wrote an ode for Huang Datie:

Ding, ding, dong, dong:
The hammered smelt turns to steel.
Forged by Namo Amitabha Buddha,
I go to the Western Pure Land.

Chapter

8

Living Life Well



The Dharma naturally opens our hearts and changes our system of values.
This gives us an entirely new concept of life.

8.1: Proper Interpersonal Relations

What does daily life look like for a faithful Amitabha-reciter who has taken refuge in the Three Gems?

As ordinary people, we must first of all be mindful of our own behavior. We are all subject to blind, irrational passions to varying degrees; and if we truly understand ourselves to be ordinary and foolish, we will try to grow more conscious of our destructive impulses so as to contain and minimize them. In addition, we must take responsibility for ourselves in all of our choices. We know that we are free moral agents because we accrue karma. Thus, responsibility means being scrupulous with ourselves: even noble actions can be cover for selfish ends. For example, if our study of Buddhism interferes with our responsibilities to family and society, then our study of Buddhism has already failed.

Master Yinguang reminds us again and again:

One who studies Buddhism engages in proper interpersonal relations.

Our lives in this world are supported by countless causal factors: the labor of others makes all of our clothing and food; the sacrifices of our forefathers and ancestors laid the foundations of society and made our lives possible; countless hours of selfless love from parents, relatives, teachers, mentors and friends have enriched our lives and given us purpose; even the earth itself, from the sunshine

to the air to the water, sustains us at every moment. Indeed, when we consider fully the web of interdependence, everything in existence supports us to a profound and humbling degree.

We owe the world much, and if we cannot repay the world's kindness, we become a debtor. Because of this, the Buddha instructs us to practice "Repaying the Four Important Kindnesses." The Four Important Kindnesses are: kindness from country, kindness from parents, kindness from all beings, and kindness from the Three Gems. Loving ardently your nation, supporting your parents in a filial manner, helping all living things, and revering the Three Gems are the marks of a genuine Buddhist disciple.

"Love of country, love of Dharma" is a lesser-known but important Buddhist tradition. If social conditions are unstable and freedom of religion is lacking, Buddhism is unlikely to put down roots and flourish. For this reason, disciples should take practical action to render service to their country. First and foremost, we should be upstanding citizens: obeying the laws, becoming productive members of society, maintaining peaceful households and neighborly relations, and working to solve social problems. In addition, it is desirable to participate in disaster relief, or giving assistance to the poor, so as to develop empathy in oneself, to set an example for others, and to repay our debt to the country that sustains our life—and our practice of the Dharma.

Likewise, we should show filial piety towards our parents. Throughout our lives, our parents have sacrificed themselves in untold ways for our benefit. They have toiled for us, worried for us, defended us, cared for us, fed and clothed us, loved us. Few indeed are the parents who would not sacrifice their own lives for that of their child! They invested years in our upbringing, often deferring their own dreams and desires for our sake, and did not shirk the endless responsibilities of parenthood: the sleepless nights with a sick baby;

the extra shifts at work to save for an education; the discipline carried out with firmness and love. While we should be ever-willing to assist them in whatever ways possible, we must be mindful of the fact that, in truth, nothing we do could ever repay them. As the Buddha said:

**Though you pass through a *kalpa*,
Thrice-daily cutting your flesh
To support your parents,
You cannot repay even a day's kindness.**

All beings are our great benefactors, and the continuance of our lives relies on them. As ordinary people, we often do not see the larger picture of how our choices impact other beings. Some ways are obvious: meat-eating promotes the slaughter of animals on our behalf, and industrial pollution poisons the environment to the detriment of all. Other ways are less obvious: even the water we boil to cook our vegetables kills millions of micro-organisms. Obviously, there is no such thing as a life that enacts no harm; humans cannot (nor should we) devolve in order to minimize the effects of our existence. But neither should we neglect the consequences of our actions for the wider ecosystem—especially those actions that only serve our preferences and vanity. With Amitabha Buddha's merciful assistance, a disciple will reflect deeply on his own choices and work to benefit all beings.

We have been fortunate enough to step onto the path of liberation; it goes without saying that we should be profoundly grateful to the Three Gems. The Dharma has been passed down to us through the perseverance of nearly eighty generations of Dharma-heirs, many of whom have given their lives for this teaching. With wholeness of heart, we should support the Sangha with donations of resources, time and labor; we should work to spread the Dharma throughout the society in which we live; and we should revere the Buddha at all times. If

we attract even one other person to the Buddhist path by our example, then this is true recompense to the Three Gems.

8.2: Suffering and Joy, According to Circumstances

Living in this Saha world, one must sooner or later face the fact that suffering is unavoidable. It follows like our own shadow for the length of our lives.

Everything that happens to us reflects the quality of our previous deeds. If we can acknowledge this point, then, whenever we meet with suffering and difficulty, we cannot regard them as random, unjust occurrences, or as punishments meted out by an angry deity. In fact, they are merely the completion of past deeds. They are the “chickens coming home to roost.” The good news is that, if we can endure suffering with equanimity, we put an end to the evil karma that produced it. As a Tibetan proverb says, “Suffering is the broom that sweeps away all evil deeds.”

All of life’s predicaments are really teaching us the principle of impermanence, which allows us to approach the truth. When we stumble and fall, we inevitably land upon the ground of truth. The Dharma helps us to understand that this is not something lamentable, but an opportunity and a discovery.

Difficulties and obstacles, if understood for what they are, can become fountainheads of great power. Just a cursory glance at the biographies of

ancient masters will show us that difficulties and obstacles are often spurs to greatness. A life without difficulty is a life of mediocrity. Without the incentive to transcend hardship, we will most likely fritter away our lives on trifles.

For us Amitabha-reciters, misery and hardship are precisely what give rise to a heart that yearns to transcend the world and find safe haven in the Land of Bliss. So rather than resentfully bemoaning our sufferings, let us use them to energize our aspiration and practice for the Pure Land. As ordinary people, we may never arrive at greatness in this Saha world; but as aspirants to the Land of Bliss, the greatness of Buddhahood awaits. A life spent basking in the light of Amitabha is never wasted.

We come to this world a traveler, and nothing more. We temporarily take up residence in this body, and borrow all of our possessions from others. Seen from this perspective, the “luggage” of one’s life is actually very light and easy to handle. But if we immerse ourselves in the pursuit of wealth, fame and pleasure, never seeking a deeper meaning to existence, then we add lead weights to our luggage. In a situation of impermanence, desire does not create permanence—only needless difficulty. Who checks into a hotel for the night, and then proceeds to renovate the room because it doesn’t suit their taste?

Compared with the Dharma’s true benefits, the world’s glory and splendor are but an illusion. Those who recite Amitabha’s name and seek the Pure Land accept the blessings and protection of all Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and thus harbor no envy of anyone. They patiently endure life’s troubles, joyfully anticipate their liberation, and do what they can to serve society and benefit others. But whatever life conditions we encounter, under the gentle regime of the Fundamental Vow even dull days are happy, and plain tea and coarse food are sweet.

Once, the educator Xia Mianzun dined with the renowned Dharma Master, Hongyi. Mr. Xia noticed that the master only ate a mixture of salted vegetables and politely asked, “Isn’t such fare too salty to the palate?”

Master Hongyi said, “Salty vegetables have salty flavor.”

After the meal, Mr. Xia watched as the master the proceeded to drink a cup of plain boiled water. Mr. Xia wrinkled his brow and said, “Don’t tell me you have no tea leaves! Does the Great Master really drink dull, boiled water?”

Master Hongyi laughed and said, “Dull, boiled water has dull flavor!”



8.3: Remembering Amitabha's Grace

For countless *kalpas*, we have not been able to hear the true Dharma and have been ensnared in confusion. Through this confusion, we have created karma and plunged ourselves into the painful sea of birth-and-death.

It is the greatest fortune, then, that the compassionate and long-suffering Amitabha Buddha has not abandoned us, but made his Great Vow: “If I cannot help you, I swear to not become a Buddha!” He furthermore stored the merits and virtues of his vast *kalpas* of practice in his name and turned it over to us, allowing us to easily recite it and attain liberation.

For ten *kalpas*, Amitabha Buddha has continuously stood on the other shore of enlightenment and called to us. But snared as we are in confusion, how could we recognize the Buddha’s voice that comes to us as though through a fog? Thus, the Buddha personally descends onto the sea of suffering and reaches out his hand, trying to assist us.

The Buddha’s mercy and compassion are unconditional, and all beings of the Ten Directions are the objects of his salvation. The Buddha’s grief over our sufferings is so great that he himself takes part in our hardships. The Buddha will not abandon or punish sentient beings, no matter how great their evil. Even if a person doubts and slanders the Buddha, Amitabha pities him all the more and tries to assist and liberate him. Our karmic evil is vast and bottomless, but the Buddha’s mercy is also endlessly deep and wide. The Buddha said, “Your

distress is my distress; your happiness is my happiness.”

The Buddha is a compassionate father to all sentient beings. He loves us as one would love an only son or daughter. He never parts from us for a moment, and always seeks to nurture and assist us. As an infant needs its parents, so we must depend on the Buddha’s mercy. Without the Buddha’s mercy, we cannot be saved.

The radiance of the Buddha’s wisdom fills the vastness of the universe; it is eternal and undying. If sentient beings have faith in the Buddha, he enters their hearts, giving illumination and wisdom. By relying on the Buddha’s wisdom alone, suffering beings can put an end to birth-and-death. If we wish to obtain enlightenment, then reliance on Buddha-centered power is the only way.

There is no good action better than invoking the Buddha’s name. We should, of course, exert ourselves to uphold the Five Precepts and treat all beings with kindness, but the merit of these acts is insufficient to bring us to enlightenment. Though one learns and practices all the teachings of the twelve divisions of the scriptural canon, this still does not compare to the merit of a single, sincere utterance of *Namo Amitabha Buddha*. By invoking the Buddha, all our aspirations for peace and happiness will be fulfilled. As our attachments to our suffering begin to fall away, we come to understand that “the world is empty and false; only the Buddha is real.”

Those who invoke the Buddha bathe in the Buddha’s radiance, and this radiance is not obstructed by any condition. Thus, we can live in the world and fulfill our duties because reciting the name does not hinder our work, and neither does our work hinder the name.

Practitioners are no longer fearful towards death. Because of the Buddha’s

Vow, contemplating the impermanence of life immediately turns to the joy of returning home. “If I died tonight, I will certainly awaken in the Land of Bliss! Namo Amitabha Buddha, Namo Amitabha Buddha...” Reciting the name is the karma of assurance, and the person who understands this can relax at the thought of death, reciting Amitabha’s name to their heart’s content.

Those who recite the Buddha’s name might still have worries and vexing thoughts, but these, too, become catalysts for remembering the Buddha’s compassion. In the midst of our worries, we can recall Amitabha’s five *kalpas* of contemplation, and countless *kalpas* of practice, on our behalf. No matter how scattered, unruly or fearful our thinking, the Buddha has the remedy for it. No anxiety can separate us from his deliverance, or prevent our rebirth in the Pure Land. So long as we desire rebirth and hold fast to the name, our worries, fears and doubts are as inconsequential as dust blown by the wind.

All distress in this life is “self-caused and self-received.” For countless *kalpas*, we have constructed a prison for ourselves where we abide in self-made chains. Thus, our attachments to this world are fierce. If we had to rely upon ourselves to break free from birth-and-death, we would certainly have no hope. Happily, the Buddha Amitabha is loath to leave even a single person behind. All beings abide under the purview of the Fundamental Vow, and the Buddha will not rest until each one has crossed the sea of suffering and reached the far shore of liberation.

We know that indulging in evil acts can satisfy a moment’s craving; but they also make us forget the Buddha’s compassion and the bitterness of the Six Realms. Whenever we remember Amitabha’s kindness, let us feel shame at our self-indulgence and laziness; let us dare to side with virtue and purity, and let us devote ourselves to unstinting recitation of Namo Amitabha Buddha.

Chapter

9

Final Care



Too many bewildering conditions obscure our own progression towards death. Though we mourn the decline and passing of family and loved ones, this is the great teaching which only the dying can truly give: we are all mortal.

When thus awakened, we may experience a profound feeling of bitterness, a heartbreaking realization that each moment, and every relationship, is precious.

9.1: Approaching the End

For us disciples of the Pure Land way, we have been fortunate enough to encounter the Dharma before the end of our lives; we have been able to walk the path of Amitabha-recitation, and cast off the fear of life’s final transition. We have been able to enjoy a life full of purpose and meaning.

But there are still many people, such as our parents and siblings, neighbors and friends, who have never had the chance to hear the Dharma. Even if they have had some contact with it, faith has not arisen and time is passing them by. It may be that, at the end of their lives, it will fall to us to compassionately instruct them on the Buddha’s kindness, and help them obtain rebirth in the Land of Bliss.

Although it may seem an uncomfortable and daunting task, it provides us the opportunity to transmit our knowledge of the Dharma—the most precious gift we have received in this life—and to offer ultimate assistance to another person by helping them escape the round of samsara.

9.1.1: Life’s Conclusion

At the time of death, one’s body goes through the “Dissolution of the Four Elements.” (The four elements are earth, water, fire, and wind.) This is

the physical aspect of dying, which is most often accompanied by distressing and sometimes painful conditions: extreme heaviness of the limbs, foggy consciousness, twitching of the extremities, cold and hot flashes, labored breathing, dry mouth and exhaustion. In addition, those present might notice fading complexion, as well as decreasing response to physical, visual and audible stimuli. In extreme cases, the dying person might feel as if the elements of his body are being violently and painfully wrenched apart.

Psychologically speaking, the process of dying is multi-layered and complex. One usually experiences a panoramic life-review, in which one sees the events of life played out chronologically. Often, this includes a “god’s-eye view” of the consequences brought about by one’s choices and behavior.

When those approaching the end experience the life-review, they often struggle with similar questions:

What have I accomplished in this life?

What benefit have I brought to other people?

What harm have I caused others?

Death is the moment of face-to-face contact with the self. At the time of death, one cannot escape the self’s true identity.

At this moment, those who have done good deeds are often comforted by the memory of the joy they have spread to others, and are usually able to pass on peacefully. But those who have done evil may feel tormented by the pain they have caused; they may grow bitter and resentful, angrily condemning friend and foe alike. According to their mind-state, they may feel the fires of hell scorching their limbs, or see demonic visions and hear grotesque voices.

9.1.2: Care for the Dying

The ordeal of dying is indeed fearful: it is fearful to leave behind family and loved ones, and to suffer the pain of entering death alone. It is fearful to know that one's life will eventually perish from the memory of the living. We may fear that our life has passed in vain, devoid of any significance for future generations. Or we may fear the unknown aspects of death itself: what will it feel like to transition into the next existence? Will it be painful? At the moment of death, we lose all control and must give ourselves up to a process we cannot begin to understand. This creates an opening for fears to swarm about our heads like a great cloud of flies. And perhaps the greatest fear is of fear itself; the more we try to escape it, the more formidable it becomes.

One approaching death is in the process of losing everything: his familial ties, his property, his body, his very heart. All the losses we might have experienced in life are, at the moment of death, all collected and bound into one.

In light of this, how can one approaching the end not be mournful, afraid and angry? Those providing spiritual care to the dying person will want to reassure him again and again that, no matter what he feels, no matter how frustrated and disappointed he is, it is all normal.

As spiritual caregivers, it is helpful to place ourselves in the position of the one approaching death. Imagine we are the ones on our deathbed; what do we want most? What do we most hope that friends and relatives will give us?

We will discover that what the one approaching the end actually wants is exactly what we would want: to be truly loved and accepted.

Someone who is dying wishes to be acknowledged by others and to have

loving contact with them. To touch his hand, look into his eyes, softly massage him, or synchronize our breathing with his, can give enormous comfort.

One should not be afraid to speak openly and humanely with the dying person about the fact that he is getting close to death. Of course, he intuitively knows his time is not long, but it is vitally important for his caregivers to openly acknowledge the reality of the situation. If no one speaks of it, the dying person may believe that his loved ones are incapable of facing the facts, and this will only increase his sense of isolation and anxiety.

Make space for the dying to voice his feelings or fears. Listen respectfully, and always offer reassurance and love. This sort of candidness and honesty is extraordinarily significant, and can help one approaching the end to transform his state of mind and peacefully face death.

The dying person is often troubled by his moral imperfections and cannot let go of past mistakes. We must do our best to remind him that he can only address the past by finding peace in the present. If he is unable to let go, he may cling to his life and painfully draw out the dying process.

It is important that friends and relatives are able to lovingly let go of one approaching the end. Mourning and clinging can give rise to strong love-attachments for the dying, which manifest as a piercing headache and make it difficult for him to pass away serenely.

Likewise, it is very helpful for the dying person to hear two things from his loved ones: first, he is allowed to pass away. Second, they will be fine in spite of his passing; there is no need for him to worry. With a gentle tone tell him:

“You are going to pass away, and death is a normal part of life. We wish

you could remain with us, but we don't want you to suffer any more pain. We will always cherish the memory of our days together. Now please, let go; we give you permission to pass away.”

Some families refuse to let their relatives leave, believing that this is a sign of love. Let us imagine that we are the one on the brink of death. Imagine that we are standing on the deck of a ship casting off for a long voyage. All of our relatives are gathered on the shore waving goodbye, and the vessel has already left the dock. We have no choice but to depart with the ship. At such a moment, how would we want our loved ones to bid us farewell?

Spare no effort in helping the dying to free themselves from all attachments to belongings and loved ones. If his will is not in order, let him clearly explain the distribution of his estate. Help facilitate the speedy resolution of any issues regarding his property and relationships. In this way, he will be able to truly let go at the end.

The final thought of one approaching the end is a significant factor in determining where the dying will take rebirth. At the moment of death, the heart is completely defenseless and open; it is very easy for it to be influenced by the state of the mind. The final thought or mood is often magnified in the death struggle, and can drown out rational or self-directed cognition. Also, people lacking religious faith often have difficulty avoiding anger, clinging and fear, which can lead to rebirth in the Three Wretched Realms.

It should go without saying that the dying person's surrounding environment is extraordinarily important. It must be tranquil, harmonious and free of clutter. Whenever possible, let them pass away at home where they can see a Buddha image. In hospital, one is more limited when it comes to arranging the environment, but hang a Buddha image where the dying person can see it,

arrange fresh flowers, and softly play a recording of the *nianfo*.

Friends and relatives should speak in soft tones with love, mercy and respect, and let go of anger, sadness and attachment. Suffering and sorrow will destroy an auspicious and peaceful atmosphere, causing those approaching the end to lose tranquility at the moment of death. Communicate openly and without artifice. Let the dying person feel your genuine care and acceptance. Remind him of his successes and virtues, and draw his attention to the ways in which his life was constructive and happy.

When we helplessly look on as our loved ones depart, trying to suppress feelings of grief and sadness is very difficult. It is desirable that friends and relatives deal with overwhelming emotions together in private. Sobbing and other expressions of grief are natural and healthy for those losing a loved one, but it is important to maintain decorum at the bedside lest the dying person himself be overwhelmed by attachment.

At the moment of death, do not burst into an extravagant display of sorrow. The consciousness of the deceased is still present, and the frantic sobs of friends and relatives at the bedside will fall on him like thunder and hail.

An old Scottish woman, Maggie, arrived at the hospital with her husband who had lost consciousness and was close to death. She was grief-stricken because she had not the opportunity to say goodbye to him and felt it was too late.

But the nurses encouraged her to speak to him anyway, saying it was possible he could still hear what she said. Maggie accepted the suggestion, and

told her husband all of her fine recollections of their life together. She told him how much she missed him, how much she loved him.

Finally, she said to him, “Without you, I will be very sad, but I do not want to see you suffer this way; you should let go now.”

As soon as she finished this sentence, her husband let out a deep sigh and serenely passed away.

9.1.3: Supportive Recitation

When we are assisting the dying, there are times when they are clearly experiencing dreadful suffering, and we are unable to offer any real aid. Sometimes, the dying person cannot communicate, and we are unable to discern what they might want, let alone what might be truly helpful. At such moments, we should open our hearts to Amitabha Buddha’s sacred power, and on behalf of the dying recite the great Six-Character Name, Namo Amitabha Buddha.

Amitabha Buddha will mercifully look on him with compassion, embrace him with his light, purify his past wicked deeds, and lighten his current suffering.

Remind the one approaching the end of Amitabha Buddha’s immeasurable vow-power, and of the peace and beauty of the Land of Bliss. Entreat him to have faith in Amitabha’s deliverance and tell him, “The Saha world is like a house on fire; impermanent and illusory, it bears no fond remembrance. But if you recite Amitabha Buddha’s name with sincerity and aspire for rebirth in the Pure Land, then he will appear before you, present you with a lotus seat and

personally welcome you to the Land of Bliss. Though previously you committed many sins, each recitation of Amitabha's name obliterates eighty-billion *kalpas* of evil. Because of his great Fundamental Vow, the Buddha will not abandon you. As long as you wholeheartedly recite his name, you will certainly be reborn in the Pure Land."

Divide the assembled friends and family into recitation teams, and have them recite *Namo Amitabha Buddha* in shifts along with the dying person. According to his preference and capacity, the chant may be shortened to "Amitabha Buddha," "Amita," or simply "Buddha." If even "Buddha" cannot be recited, then let his faithful heart suffice. In the sutras it says, "One approaching the end who cannot recite but has faith in the Buddha will reach the Pure Land." The recitation teams should continue chanting in shifts until the dying person has passed away.

Afterward, do not disturb the body, but let his consciousness (which is still present) rest in the tranquility of his passing. Continue with supportive recitation until eight hours after breathing stops.

It may be that the one approaching the end worries that his effort at name-recitation will be insufficient to guarantee a correct mind-state at the moment of death. Amitabha Buddha, wishing to set his mind at ease, mercifully appears before him, then reaches out a hand to guide and assist his passing. Upon seeing the Buddha, the dying person spontaneously attains the correct state of mind. He is illuminated by the Buddha's light, and his body and mind attain stability and ease, as if he were entering a deep state of meditation. He sees himself seated upon a golden lotus flower, and then attains rebirth from the same flower in one of the Seven Gem ponds of the Land of Bliss.

Amitabha's main concern at these times is always to ease the passing of his

devotees by instilling them with joy and confidence.

While many people die in a state of unconsciousness, they are still aware of what is happening around them. Thus, their minds can clearly perceive the Buddha's appearance, and the correct mind state arises for them just as it would if they were conscious. The Buddha's power is truly inconceivable, and for one who has practiced Amitabha-recitation in aspiration for the Pure Land, they will attain rebirth no matter what their condition at the moment of death. Not even a coma can obstruct the Buddha's compassion, and supportive recitation can be especially helpful in easing the passage of those who are unconscious.

"A person approaching the end caught sight of hell, but because he himself recited Amitabha Buddha's name along with everyone present, hell was extinguished and he obtained rebirth in the Pure Land. This is the true story of my old friend's younger brother.

"This friend of mine was surnamed Wang, and he was a famous doctor of Chinese medicine in Jiangsu, and also a very devout Buddhist. His younger brother was wealthy, and, after years of wanton living, fell ill while still quite young. As he lay dying, scenes of hell suddenly appeared before him, and his heart shrank back in terror. Desperate for relief, he entreated his older brother for help.

"Older brother said, 'Without delay, recite Amitabha Buddha's name! Ask everyone present to recite! You doubtfully recited the Buddha-name at the deathbed of our mother; now, after seeing hell with your own eyes, can you still disbelieve? In a flash, that head in the boiling pot of oil will be your own! So invoke the Buddha now with all sincerity!'

“After younger brother had recited for a time, he said, ‘Hell has now retreated and the Buddha has come to welcome me.’ With that, he peacefully died.

“This is a true story from twenty or thirty years ago.”

(Huang Nianzu, “Great Collection of Stories in the Vernacular”)

9.2: Helping the Deceased

Due to a lack of understanding, we may believe that, once the consciousness has left the body, we cannot offer any assistance to our beloved dead. But this mistaken notion will only deepen our suffering and loneliness. In actuality, for the consciousness of the deceased, there is no clear demarcation between “life” and “death;” and the warmth and power of our merciful hearts can exert influence in any realm.

9.2.1: The Yin Form (Bardo)

Approximately eight hours after the dead have stopped breathing, the body completely cools off, and the mind knowledge (spirit) escapes the body. For those who have taken refuge in the Fundamental Vow and recited the Buddha-name, they are immediately welcomed by Amitabha Buddha and reborn in the Land of Bliss. Likewise, those who have lived lives of heroic virtue or extreme evil usually take immediate rebirth in either the heavens or the hells, according to their karma.

But what of those others who are not destined for the Pure Land, the heavens or the hells? How are they reborn? What follows is a description, based on the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha, and thousands of years of Buddhist experience, of what often transpires after physical death.

For the deceased, shedding the physical body feels like relief from a heavy burden. But after a while, the feeling of lightness dissipates and the consciousness grows murky and bewildered. Within three-and-a-half days there can arise an intense awareness of being helpless and alone: not understanding that he is already dead, the deceased may call out family members' names and frantically seek for their help. Perhaps he finds a family member and tries to get their attention, but he cannot communicate over the hazy, dreamlike abyss that separates them. Seeing his loved ones turn a blind eye to his suffering, he may feel aggrieved and indignant, "suffering like a fish in hot sand."

When at last he discovers that he casts no reflection in any mirror, and leaves no footprint in sand or snow, he realizes that he has indeed passed away. He may recoil in horror, and even experience the equivalent of a "black-out," or temporary loss of conscious awareness.

Three-and-a-half days later, the spirit of the deceased manifests a form that usually resembles his previous body. This is called a Yin Form, and is a temporary body that only takes shape in the Bardo, or the phase between death and rebirth. The Yin Form is about as tall as a child, takes smells and aromas as food, and, because it exists in a subtle form, is invisible to the human eye.

When the mind knowledge manifests a Yin Form, it acquires certain abilities such as knowledge of other people's thoughts, perfect recollection, and piercing logical reasoning. It can relive past experiences at will. The Yin Form's senses are almost god-like in their keenness; it can clearly perceive sights and sounds at unimaginable distances. It has telepathic powers, and can traverse three-dimensional spaces instantaneously. Neither do physical barriers present an obstacle, as the subtle body of the Yin Form can pass through sunlight or stone with equal ease.

Yin Forms commonly display one of two psychological tendencies:

- 1) Aimless drifting, suffering loneliness and psychic pain.
- 2) Compulsively seeking to enact former habits, or satisfy past desires.

Because of its impeccable memory, razor-sharp reasoning and psychic faculties, the Yin Form can clearly see how its past misdeeds propagated evil in the world, and the consequences that held for other beings. Thus, the Yin Form commonly struggles to forgive itself. An inner conflict ensues in which the Yin Form's past virtuous acts manifest as a protector deity defending the self, while its past evil acts manifest as a wrathful deity condemning the self. The evidence and arguments presented by these archetypal "barristers" are both compelling and terrifying to the hyper-rational mind of the Yin Form, and cause it intense suffering. On and on the trial goes, without a conclusive resolution.

Every seven days, the Yin Form spontaneously relives the suffering experienced at the time of death. This takes place at high speed and with an intensity that often leaves the Yin Form in a dissociative, chaotic state. But contained within this trauma is a precious opportunity. Seven days after death, two kinds of lights appear. One is the brightly colored light of the Buddha, the other is the dim, murky light of the Six Realms.

The Buddha-light is the light of unconditional love, penetrating wisdom, and final liberation. Should the Yin Form move toward this light, it will attain rebirth in a Buddha-realm (often the Western Pure Land of Amitabha) and leave behind the course of samsaric rebirth forever. The problem is that the Yin Form most often experiences the Buddha-light as glaring, even harsh, and fears exposure of its past sins and evils. It has never cultivated a deep relationship with the Buddha, and so cannot respond to this show of unconditional love. The

murky light of the Six Realms, however, feels warm and inviting.

When the winds of its past karma begin to blow, the Yin Form will experience phantasmagoric apparitions and voices, usually of those living beings it killed in its previous lifetime come to demand restitution. As it tries to flee from these terrifying visions, the greed, hatred, and ignorance of its past misdeeds manifest as three abysses—one white, one red and one black—that block its escape. As these torments escalate over time, the Yin Form grows harried and exhausted and seeks refuge everywhere, anywhere.

Thus, the light of the Six Realms grows more and more attractive. Drawn by its karma, and driven by the angry mob of karmic debtors, wrathful deities and inner demons, the Yin Form rushes in headlong, choiceless haste down the dimly-lit corridor of the Six Realms, towards a door that ushers it out of the Bardo and into its next rebirth. In this way, another samsaric round is completed, and the cycle begins anew. In most cases, this takes place exactly forty-nine days after the spirit departed its previous body.

Lai Chaohe was born in 1956 in Nantou county, Xinyi township, Taiwan. In 1977, while serving in the military on the Matsu Islands, he held the post of ammunitions officer and so spent his days in the company of artillery shells. Once, while taking inventory, a sulfur round malfunctioned and exploded in his near vicinity. Following his training, he immediately fell to the floor and rolled as his comrades hastily doused him in water. He was delivered to the emergency room with his face, torso and limbs covered in third-degree burns.

The pain of Lai Chaohe's injuries was extremely difficult to bear, and he soon slipped into a coma. Before long, his mind knowledge exited through an

opening, floated above his body and witnessed the medical personnel tending his wounds and wrapping his body in bandages like a mummy.

At that moment, he felt no pain or distress; neither did he feel any upset or worry about his condition. Everything seemed distant; that mummy on the table seemed not to have the slightest relation to himself. Yet he clearly recognized every individual who came to see him. His consciousness came and went freely, without impediment. He could see through tabletops, walls, and could even see the doctors in the next operating theater performing surgery on a patient. He could perceive things not in his direct line of sight, or even in his vicinity: whenever the camp officials so much as discussed his condition, he was immediately present and could hear every detail of what they said. Each day, the medical personnel caring for him alternated, and he saw it all with his own eyes.

The island's hospital facilities were simple and crude, and there was a medical officer who suggested sending him back to Taiwan for treatment. But someone else raised objections to the idea, believing his condition could not be kept stable in transit. Each time the hospital officials discussed a treatment plan, he was always present, and clearly understood the outcomes of their discussions.

After a week, hospital administration decided that he be sent back to Taipei to the Tri-Service General Hospital for treatment. Though Taipei and Matsu are separated by over 200 km, Lai Chaohe was immediately present if the officers at Matsu even spoke his name. To him, it was as if there was no distance. Once, as his Matsu comrades wrapped rice rolls, a fellow soldier said, "These are nicely wrapped; we should send a few for Lai Chaohe to eat." This incident was witnessed with the "eyes" of his mind knowledge.

During this period, an unfamiliar doctor visited the hospital to consult with Lai Chaohe's doctors on the comatose soldier's injuries. Lai Chaohe was present for the consultation—he simply was unable to voice his opinion. Later, after he regained consciousness, he was able to give the exact name of every doctor who participated in his treatment.

There were two or three times when he experienced being suspended in the midst of a void, his eyes gazing on a vast, unfathomable emptiness as he rested there without the burden of a physical body. This gave him a feeling of unspeakable comfort and freedom, and was an experience he would never forget.

Another time, he unexpectedly smelled a sublime fragrance which lasted for three days and seemed to pervade all of space.

Twenty-odd days later, his spirit suddenly re-entered his body; slowly, he regained bodily perception and began to feel the pain of his injuries. His recovery was slow, but after repeated rounds of plastic surgery, Lai Chaohe eventually recovered a natural appearance.

During accidents, the military often withholds information from the public, but a mother and child have linked hearts. Lai Chaohe's mother was inexplicably aware that something terrible had happened to her son; her heart felt cut and twisted. So she asked her older son, Lai Mingxi, to ask around for news of his younger brother. She also sought out their uncle, who had become a monk in his early years.

He told her, "No matter what has happened, go home and recite Amitabha Buddha's name; in this way, you can turn misfortune into blessing." After returning home with this advice, Lai Chaohe's mother simply and devoutly

recited Namó Amitabha Buddha and appealed to the Buddha to save her son.

Because Lai Chaohe did not want his family to worry, he did not communicate with them during his recovery, or return home afterward. Indeed, the process his older brother went through to contact him was difficult and layered. When trying to get in touch the first time, the army had already moved him back to Taipei; and later, after Lai Chaohe left the hospital, he returned to his army post on Matsu without first visiting home. It felt as if it had been a lifetime since the brothers last had seen each other.

Eventually, the family was reunited; and in the process of recounting his remarkable story, Lai Chaohe came to find out that the fragrance he had smelled for three consecutive days was the sandalwood incense his mother had offered as she recited Amitabha Buddha's name.

(Dharma Master Huijing's Collected Lectures)

9.2.2: Transcendent Offering

As the preceding narrative shows, a family member's prayers and transfers of merit are especially efficacious when a deceased loved one is in the Bardo. Due to their keen spiritual sensitivity, the Yin Form can perceive the aid of the living as benevolent manifestations, and as guidance towards a more fortunate rebirth (such as in the Pure Land). In fact, their preternatural abilities make them particularly willing targets of our goodwill and spiritual help, so we should not underestimate the benefit that our prayers can bestow.

The most auspicious time period for helping the deceased is within the first

forty-nine days after death, especially the first twenty-one days. In the first three weeks the Yin Form's karmic link to its previous life is still quite strong, and so can readily receive the aid of living family members.

The most effective way of helping the deceased is to recite Namó Amitabha Buddha. In this way, we marshal the power of unconditional love in our prayers. As we transfer the merit of our recitations on their behalf, it is as if they themselves had recited. Under these conditions, the Fundamental Vow is engaged; and just as fire burns and water moistens, so will Amitabha Buddha naturally appear before them and bring them to deliverance.

When the sound of Namó Amitabha Buddha rings out across the Bardo, Amitabha radiates a brilliant light that illuminates the Yin Form's body and mind. This light purifies him and breaks the Bardo's spell of confusion and suffering. Healed and consoled by the Buddha's mercy, he is then guided and welcomed to the Land of Bliss. So whenever we think of our loved ones who have passed away—whenever we hear their names—we should radiate compassion from our hearts and recite Namó Amitabha Buddha.

Another way of assisting the dead is to teach them the Dharma. The mind knowledge of the deceased is capable of clearly perceiving any words we address to them; even a difference of language presents no barrier. Thus, it is important that the person who teaches the Dharma—by reading a sutra, for example—should concentrate his mind, arouse his sincerity, and not just give a wooden reading of the text. The deceased, in their Yin Form, inhabits a realm where words and ideas have concrete manifestations and creative power. When we direct spiritual teachings to them, they literally *experience* the Dharma in ways we cannot comprehend. Compared to us, they are even more capable of perceiving the truth.

Aiding the deceased is certainly not limited to the first forty-nine days after death. The Buddha's love is not limited by the illusion of time, and neither is ours. Even those who have been deceased for one hundred years or more can still benefit from our aid. For them, the assistance we offer is received while they were in the Bardo, irrespective of our temporal relationship to their death.

“My mother received a traditional Confucian education and was a materialist. Her whole life, she rejected the notion of a life after death, and of course never expressed any sort of religious conviction.

“After I had studied Buddhism and became aware that death is not the end—that people follow their karma through the Three Domains and Six Realms of rebirth—I very much wanted my mother to have faith in Amitabha Buddha, recite his name and forever shed the pain of birth-and-death. But each time my mother sensed that I wished to speak to her about spiritual things, she immediately waved her hand and said, ‘Confucius did not speak of strange powers or random gods!’

“My mother was approaching eighty-five years of age, and had long suffered from hemiplegia (paralysis on one side of the body), as well as many other ailments. Certainly, the issue of life and death was pressing in on her from all sides, but her views were still firm and I could do nothing but privately resolve: ‘I must be at Mother's side at the very end; when her spirit leaves the body, I can once more explain the Dharma to her.’

“In September of 1996, I had planned to go on vacation. I was at Beijing Airport and had my ticket confirmed; but at the gate, a small issue with my passport compelled me to postpone my travels and return to the registry office

in Guiyang to have my passport re-certified. Because of this causal coincidence, I was able to be at my mother's side when she passed and fulfill my resolution.

"On the evening of the second day after returning to Guiyang, my mother suffered congestive heart failure. She was gasping for breath, and her limbs would periodically spasm as she struggled for air: her face was swollen, her lips protruded, and it seemed as if her eyeballs would bulge out of her head. The emergency room doctors labored to stabilize her condition, but the prognosis was not good. My older sister, younger brother and myself stayed at her bedside and watched helplessly as she suffered through the night and into the next morning.

"I knelt at my mother's side, now and again using my fingers to feel for her pulse. Just when I could no longer detect one, I suddenly heard an almost inaudible moan, 'Where am I?'

"I hurriedly said to her, 'Mom! Do you see yourself lying on the bed? Do you understand now? Death is not the end!'

"I continued: 'You are currently experiencing a body called the Yin Form; this is your last chance to be saved. Though you have never believed in spiritual realities, you are now in the Bardo, heading towards an uncertain rebirth of struggle and suffering. But Amitabha Buddha has made his Land of Bliss as a refuge for everyone who wants to escape pain and find peace. By relying on his Great Vow, you, too, can attain rebirth in the Land of Bliss and become a Buddha, forever escaping the torment of endless birth-and-death. The Pure Land is your true home, so let go of your former life! Once you arrive there, you can obtain transcendent wisdom and power to help each of us reunite with you. Though we must pass through decades before seeing you again, for you it will only be a split second. Please, Mom, when you see his light, go with

Amitabha Buddha!

“I asked a Buddhist friend who was present to hold up an image of Amitabha, and together we recited the Buddha’s name. My mother, who had long since breathed her last, seemed to have understood what I said. Though her face had been a mask of pain throughout the death-struggle, it now began to slowly change aspect and become utterly serene, as if she were peacefully dreaming.

“At home, I had a copy of *Methods of Assisting the Yin Form*. As I made ready to go back and get it, I explained to my family that they must not move mother’s body, as her mind knowledge was still present. But by the time I returned, they had already dressed her in good clothes (according to local folk custom), delivered her to the funeral parlor and allowed her to be put into the deep freeze to wait for overseas friends and relatives who would travel home for the funeral.

“Despite these disturbances, mother’s face was still very serene; only her brow was ever so slightly furrowed, whereas earlier her face had been fully relaxed. Five days later, when they reopened her coffin for the cremation ceremony, her remains were as soft as an infant’s.

“Due to my lack of understanding of the truth of Amitabha Buddha’s deliverance, I never felt certain that she had made it to the Pure Land; in order to put my mind at ease, I chose to believe that she had been reborn in one of the heavens. Later I read that, in the second when the mind knowledge leaves the body, the Buddha, who has been waiting nearby, radiates a brilliant light to attract the deceased to himself. It seems that the Buddhas are quite eager to liberate us!

“After encountering Master Shandao’s Pure Land teachings, I finally understood that rebirth in the Land of Bliss is the result of Amitabha Buddha’s fulfillment of his Fundamental Vow ten *kalpas* ago. Whether we believe it or not, the deliverance of all beings is an accomplished fact. It is only when our karma is finally ripe that we understand and accept the truth of our deliverance.

“Throughout my mother’s life, she did not believe in the Buddha or recite his name. It was only after death that she first heard the Dharma, and in this way attained rebirth in the Pure Land.

“As I write this, I know that my mother and Amitabha Buddha are together. Before long, when I myself am reborn in the Land of Bliss, I can once again reunite with her, never to separate again. Truly, this is a profound and powerful consolation!

”Namo Amitabha Buddha!”

(recounted by Wang Tongjiu, Guiyang; December 2000)

Master Yinguang said:

**Accomplishing the rebirth of all sentient beings in the Pure Land
Is accomplishing the Buddhahood of all living things;
Such achievement and virtue—how can it be conceived of?**

 **Afterword**

Thank you for reading through this small book. If you and the Buddha were brought together by karmic circumstance, you can certainly admit that Amitabha Buddha's achievement of the great Six-Character Name "Namo Amitabha Buddha" on your behalf is a jewel without peer, and become a joyous person who recites Amitabha's name.

In the scriptures it is explained, one who recites Amitabha's name is a "*pundarika* (white lotus) flower among people." Master Shandao praises them as "wonderful-beyond-good people." They can in this life encounter the Dharma, believe in Amitabha Buddha and recite his name. This is an extraordinarily fortunate matter. Master Tanluan said:

**All reciters follow the same path,
Across the four seas all men are brothers.**

We would be very happy to have one more sibling in Amitabha-recitation. If you can benefit from this book, please recommend it to your friends and relatives, colleagues and other people brought together by karmic circumstance. Let them share in the benefits of the Dharma. Master Shandao said:

**Believe and teach others to believe;
Difficult as it may be,
Transmitting broadly his great compassion
Is the way to repay the grace of the Buddha.**

As ordinary beings, we can only recite Amitabha's name and encourage others to do so, in order to repay Amitabha Buddha's great kindness in delivering us. Perhaps your karma isn't yet ripe, and you are unable at the moment to understand the contents of this book. But perhaps Buddhism's perspectives on impermanence and reincarnation have given you a few insights. Please remember always: The Buddhas do not lie, and karma and reincarnation are true.

When all worldly methods have failed to resolve the problems you encounter, you might try reciting "Namo Amitabha Buddha." Ask Amitabha for help, especially at critical moments involving ourselves or our relatives.

The sea of bitterness is without bounds, but turn your head and you will see the shore.

With great compassion, Amitabha Buddha is eternally ready to lend you a hand!

Please recite often :

Namo Amitabha Buddha!