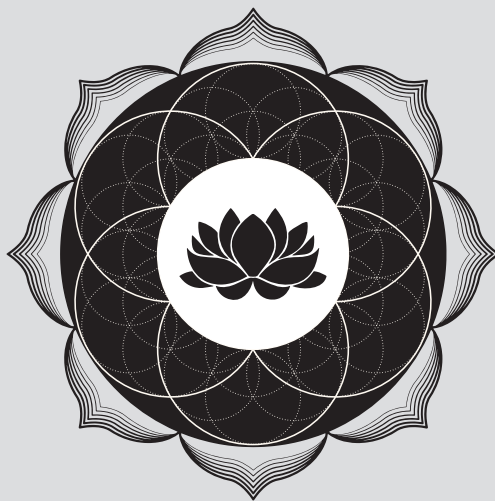


A General Guide to the Pure Land School

By Dharma Master Jingzong

English translation by Householder Jingtu and
the Pure Land School Translation Team





A General Guide to the Pure Land School

By Dharma Master Jingzong

English translation by Householder Jingtu and
the Pure Land School Translation Team

Published by Pure Land Buddhism Publishing Co.
41, Alley 22, Lane 150, Sec 5, Shin-Yi Road, Taipei 11059, Taiwan

Tel: 886-2-27580689

Fax: 886-2-87807050

E-mail: amt@plb.tw

Website: www.purelandbuddhism.org

Printed March 2022

(c) 2022 by Pure Land Buddhism Publishing Co.

This book is for free distribution; it is not for sale

Printed in Taiwan

CONTENTS

Foreword	by Dharma Master Huijing	xi
Preface	by Dharma Master Jingzong	xiii
Chapter 1	Defining the Pure Land School	1
Section 1.	Definition and Characteristics of the School	2
Section 2.	Shandao Establishes the School	3
Section 3.	Key Features of the School	5
Chapter 2	Dharma Classification and Interpretation	7
Section 1.	Significance of Dharma Classification and Interpretation	8
Section 2.	Classifications by Three Lineage Masters	10
	A. The Difficult Path and the Easy Path	10
	B. Schools of the Sacred Path and the Pure Land School	13
	C. The Two Canons and the Two Teachings	15
	D. The Path of Importance and the Path of the Great Vow	20
Chapter 3	Core Scriptures	25
Section 1.	Significance of the Core Scriptures	26
Section 2.	The Three Pure Land Sutras	27
	A. Infinite Life Sutra (2 Fascicles)	28

	B. Contemplation of Infinite Life Sutra (1 Fascicle) ————	31
	C. Amitabha Sutra (1 Fascicle) ————	35
Section 3.	Relationships Among the Three Sutras ————	38
Section 4.	Order of the Three Sutras ————	40
Chapter 4	Treatises and Commentaries of the Lineage ————	43
Section 1.	Significance of the Lineage Treatises and Commentaries ————	44
Section 2.	Canonical Treatises of the Lineage ————	46
	A. Chapter on the Easy Path (1 Fascicle) ————	46
	B. Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land (1 Fascicle) ————	47
Section 3.	Commentaries of the Lineage ————	50
	A. Commentary on the Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land (2 Fascicles) ———	50
	B. Gatha in Praise of Amitabha Buddha (1 Fascicle) ————	53
	C. Collection on the Land of Peace and Joy (2 Fascicles) ————	54
	D. Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra (4 Fascicles) ————	55
	E. Dharma School of Contemplation and Recitation (1 Fascicle) ————	60
	F. In Praise of Dharma Activities (2 Fascicles) ————	61
	G. In Praise of the Rite of Rebirth (1 Fascicle) ————	63
	H. In Praise of Pratyutpanna (1 Fascicle) ————	64
Chapter 5	Settling the Mind ————	67
Section 1.	Significance of Settling the Mind ————	68
Section 2.	General Settling of the Mind ————	70
	A. Bodhicitta (Mind of Enlightenment) ————	71
	B. Mind of Aversion and Delight ————	72
Section 3.	Specific Settling of the Mind ————	73
	A. Sincere Mind ————	74

B. Deep Mind ————	76
C. Mind of Merit-Dedication and Aspiration ————	79

Chapter 6	Starting Practice ————	87
Section 1.	The Significance of Starting Practice ————	88
Section 2.	Primary and Miscellaneous Practice ————	90
Section 3.	Five Kinds of Primary Practice ————	93
	A. Recitation of Scripture ————	93
	B. Reflection ————	93
	C. Reverential Acts ————	94
	D. Name-Recitation ————	94
	E. Praise and Offerings ————	94
Section 4.	Karma of Assurance and Supporting Karma ————	95
Section 5.	Advantages and Disadvantages of Primary and Miscellaneous Practice ————	99
	A. Five Kinds of Advantage and Disadvantage ————	99
	B. Thirteen Levels of Advantage and Disadvantage ————	102
Section 6.	Five Paths of Invocation ————	109
	A. Bodily Karma – The Path of Reverential Acts ————	109
	B. Verbal Karma – The Path of Acclamation ————	110
	C. Mental Karma – The Path of Reflection ————	110
	D. The Path of Aspiration ————	110
	E. The Path of Merit-Dedication ————	110
Chapter 7	Forms and Methods of Practice ————	113
Section 1.	The Significance of Forms and Methods ————	114
Section 2.	Four Cultivations ————	115
	A. Cultivation of Respectful Practice ————	115
	B. Cultivation of Unmixed Practice ————	116

	C. Cultivation of Uninterrupted Practice	116
	D. Cultivation of Sustained Practice	116
Section 3.	Three Forms of Practice	118
	A. Practice in Normal Times	118
	B. Practice on Special Occasions	119
	C. Practice as Death Approaches	120
Chapter 8	Name-Recitation According to the Fundamental Vow	123
Section 1.	Significance of the Fundamental Vow	124
Section 2.	Resolutions in the Causal Ground: The 48 Vows	126
	A. Origin of the Vows	126
	B. Categorization of the 48 Vows	127
	C. Accomplishment of the 48 Vows	131
Section 3.	Root (Fundamental) Resolution: The 18th Vow	133
Section 4.	Name-Recitation According to the Fundamental Vow	135
	A. The Significance of Name-Recitation According to the Fundamental Vow	135
	B. The Substance of Name-Recitation According to the Fundamental Vow	138
Section 5.	Choosing the Fundamental Vow	145
	A. The Superior and the Subordinate	146
	B. The Difficult and the Easy	147
Section 6.	The Cause of Rebirth in the Fundamental Vow	149
Section 7.	Relationships Among the Three Vows of Deliverance	151
Section 8.	Benefits of Amitabha-Recitation	158
	A. Embraced by Amitabha Buddha's Light	158
	B. Five Types of Augmentative Karma	161
	C. Merits and Benefits in the Present Life	163

Chapter 9	Rebirth of Ordinary Beings in the Pure Land's Realm of Rewards	171
Section 1.	Body and Realm of Rewards, or of Transformation?	172
Section 2.	Ordinary Beings Enter the Realm of Rewards	174
Section 3.	Rapid Achievement of Buddhahood	176
Section 4.	Womb-Birth and Transformational Birth	179
Section 5.	Tiers and Levels of Rebirth	182
	A. Do the Tiers and Levels Exist?	182
	B. Significance of the Tiers and Levels	185
	C. The Conditions and Principle Behind the Three Tiers	187
	D. The Three States of Mind and Practices Behind the Nine Levels	188
	E. Expanding and Contracting the Tiers and Levels	191
	F. The Three Meritorious Practices and Various Virtues	194
Section 6.	Rebirth Assured in the Present Lifetime	197
Section 7.	Non-Retrogression Achieved in This Lifetime	199
Chapter 10	Guiding Principles and Special Characteristics of the Pure Land School	201
Section 1.	Significance of the Guiding Principles and Special Characteristics	202
Section 2.	Guiding Principles: A Four-Line Gatha	203
Section 3.	Special Characteristics: Four Catchphrases	205
Appendix		211
	The Pure Land Charter	212

Foreword

By Dharma Master Huijing

This book is a “professional textbook” on the Pure Land School. As a “general guide,” it outlines the principles of Pure Land as a framework for Amitabha-reciters.

The arrangement of the chapters and sections, as well as the book’s division of content, is clear and tidy. From start to finish, the materials interlink, forming an organic whole. The text provides beginners with an overview and helps them browse and quickly grasp the origins and fundamentals of the Pure Land School. As the Preface says:

1) It uses Shandao’s teachings as its sole yardstick. Taking in the expositions of such lineage masters as Nagarjuna, Vasubandhu, Tanluan and Daochuo, it focuses on the foundations of Pure Land thought.

2) It strives to lay out the full scope of Pure Land teaching, so that practitioners can have a comprehensive understanding. It does not avoid the finer points.

The lineage of Master Shandao’s thought and teaching is complete and systematically rigorous, in terms of Dharma classification, aims of the school, its principles and forms of practice. That is clearly laid out in the ten chapters and 42 sections of the book.

Having read it once, from beginning to end, a beginner would have an overall map in his or her head. From the core teachings, the vista expands extensively. A second reading would pick up the details and their inherent logic as well as interconnections. The learner would gain a more multidimensional, dynamic understanding. “From this, one can cope with countless circumstances,” as the saying goes. We would not err when teaching or explaining the material to others.

The book takes a comprehensive, macro approach to the substance and the external circumstances relating to the Pure Land School. It does not drill down deeply into specialized topics. Besides facilitating self-study by beginners, the book helps longtime learners review what they know as well as gain new knowledge. It is a readable, convenient tool.

The karmic conditions have made possible this English translation and its circulation. After initial and secondary perusals, readers will hopefully have a comprehensive understanding of the Pure Land teachings. If they then believe in the deliverance of Amitabha Buddha and recite his name, they would certainly derive real benefits during this lifetime and the next.

Namo Amitabha Buddha!

Preface

The Chinese Pure Land School was founded by Master Shandao of the Tang Dynasty. He was the resident abbot of Wuzhen Monastery between the ages of 33 and 56. The period began in 645, when he returned to Wuzhen Monastery in the Zhongnan Mountains from Xuanzhong Monastery in Shanxi Province. It ended in 668, when he moved from Wuzhen to Shiji Monastery in the capital, Ch'ang'an.

After establishing the Pure Land School, Master Shandao often travelled between Wuzhen and the leading monasteries of the capital. He enthusiastically taught the Dharma, achieving great success. According to the records, he attracted countless followers, both male and female; “all families revered Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, everyone recited the name of Amitabha Buddha.” Butchers abandoned their work and the city experienced meat shortages. Master Shandao was honored as an incarnation of Amitabha Buddha and his teachings were considered the equivalent of Amitabha's.

In relation to Shandao's founding of the Pure Land School, his *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra* refers to itself as being “definitive for all ages,” “verified and supported by the various Buddhas” and “equivalent to the sutras.” It also says “not a single phrase or character should be added or deleted.” In other words, Shandao's work corrects the misunderstandings and misinterpretations by other masters down through the ages of the teachings

on Amitabha Buddha's Pure Land. It unfolds the pure, correct teaching, corroborated by the Buddhas, and sets benchmarks for the Pure Land School, defining its orthodox lineage. We can take any explication of Amitabha's Pure Land that accords with Master Shandao's as correct and reliable. Those that do not, are not.

Shandao's teacher was Master Daochuo (562-645), who inherited the lineage from Master Tanluan (476-542). Tanluan followed the teachings of Bodhisattvas Vasubandhu (c. 320-400) and Nagarjuna (c. 150-250) of India. That is the orthodox transmission of the Pure Land School of China.

The thought of the lineage has some special characteristics:

1. It provides the Pure Land School with a unified and comprehensive theoretical framework for the explication and classification of the Dharma;
2. It has an unbroken lineage of Dharma interpretation and transmission;
3. The school was founded on the basis of Amitabha Buddha's Fundamental Vow;
4. It interprets the Pure Land scriptures entirely from the perspective of Amitabha's Fundamental Vow, without mixing in any teachings from the various schools of the Sacred Path (i.e., non-Pure Land schools);
5. Its principles and forms of practice are complete, providing an orderly and rigorous structure for the Pure Land School.

No other explications of Amitabha's Pure Land contain all the above characteristics. Incorporating other schools' interpretations of Pure Land, those

explications certainly aren't explications of Pure Land according to Pure Land principles. They are only Pure Land teachings by other schools; they are not the Pure Land School. For example, there is Tiantai Pure Land, Huayan Pure Land, Yogacara Pure Land and Ch'an Pure Land – so-called “Tiantai teachings, Pure Land practice,” “Huayan teachings, Pure Land practice,” etc.

So we have compiled *A General Guide to the Pure Land School*, which draws only on the Pure Land thought of the Shandao lineage, not the others. If we wish to learn Tiantai, for example, we should rely solely on Master Zhizhe (the school's founder). If we want to learn Pure Land, we ought to depend exclusively on Master Shandao.

Key characteristics of the book:

1. It uses Shandao's teachings as its sole yardstick. Taking in the explications of such lineage masters as Nagarjuna, Vasubandhu, Tanluan and Daochuo, it focuses on the foundations of Pure Land thought.
2. It strives to lay out the full scope of Pure Land teaching, so that practitioners can have a comprehensive understanding. It does not avoid the finer points.
3. Its chapters function as a table of contents. The text proper has ten chapters. The first provides a summary, the rest discuss the specifics. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 focus on the teaching, while Chapters 5, 6 and 7 explain the practice. Chapter 9 examines realization, with Chapter 8 serving as a bridge to the preceding chapters. Three of the chapters are devoted to the teaching of the “Fundamental Vow,” and another three expound the practice of “name-recitation.” As a result of “name-recitation according to the Fundamental Vow,” there is “access by

ordinary beings to the Realm of Rewards” in the Pure Land. Chapter 10 summarizes the main points.

The structure may be compared to that of a person. Chapter 1 is the body, displaying the outline. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 are the head, showcasing the facial features. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 are like the flesh and blood, which enliven the body and allow it to function. Chapter 8 is the skeleton, which permits the body to stand up on its own. And Chapter 9 is the feet; they support the entire body and allow it to stand firmly.

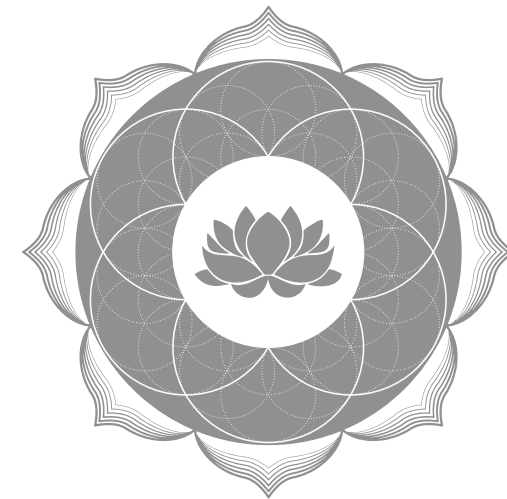
4. *The Pure Land Charter* is appended at the end of the book. It helps the reader quickly grasp the outline of the school.

*Dharma Master Jingzong,
Wuzhen Monastery, Zhongnan Mountains
October 15, 2012*

Chapter

1

Defining The Pure Land School



Section 1. Definition and Characteristics of the School

Zong, or school, means “esteemed,” “lofty,” “primary.” Its extended meanings include “uniquely honored,” “all-embracing,” “singular” and “surpassing.” In other words: Among all the Buddha’s teachings, to esteem a certain set above all others, to take it as primary; then to embrace within it the thought systems of all the other teachings. That is a school, or sect.

It follows that a school has the following special characteristics:

1. **Primary teaching.** It honors a single set of teachings as primary. No other schools can be its equal.
2. **Incorporation of other schools.** It integrates all the other schools into this primary teaching.
3. **A coherent system.** Within the school, the other teachings all take their place according to their substance, status, value and function, forming a complete and rigorous system.

Dharma schools came into being after Buddhism spread from India to China. A school with a complete and comprehensive doctrine must have its own name, classification and interpretation of the Dharma, core scriptures, and lineage. These are the key elements that constitute a school.

Section 2. Shandao Establishes the School

The Pure Land teachings of India were widely known and well developed, but there was no “Pure Land School” as such. After Buddhism was transmitted to China, the “eight Mahayana schools” took form during the Sui and Tang dynasties. The Pure Land School was one of them.

The Three Pure Land Sutras were taught by Shakyamuni Buddha, and India’s Bodhisattvas Nagarjuna and Vasubandhu composed commentaries on them and propagated them. During the Northern Wei Dynasty in China (386-534), Master Tanluan laid the theoretical foundation for the Pure Land School. He did so by interpreting its core principles in the context of the power of Amitabha Buddha’s Fundamental Vow. Master Daochuo inherited his teaching and passed it on to Master Shandao (613-681) of the Tang Dynasty, who completed the doctrinal framework of the Pure Land School and set down its forms of practice. The school was formally established. Master Shandao was honored as its synthesizer and founder.

The name of a school can derive from its core scripture. The Huayan School, for example, was named after the *Avatamsaka (Huayan) Sutra*. A school can also take its name from its founder – for instance, the Tiantai School. Other sources include a school’s practice (Ch’an School) and its Dharma classification (Esoteric School). Sometimes, a school has more than one name: Tiantai is

also known as the “*Fahua* (Dharma Flower, or *Lotus Sutra*) School,” while the esoteric lineage is called the “*Zhenyan* (True Words) School” as well.

The Pure Land School was named after its classification of the Dharma. If it were labeled according to its scriptures, it could be called the “Infinite Life School” or the “Amitabha School.” It has also been dubbed the “Lotus School” because of its belief in rebirth in the Pure Land in a lotus pod.

Section 3. Key Features of the School

Pure Land is a Buddhist school whose practitioners seek rebirth in the Western Land of Bliss through exclusive recitation of Amitabha Buddha’s name, or by dedicating merit from other virtuous acts. Established by Master Shandao of the Tang Dynasty, it takes as its core scriptures the *Infinite Life Sutra*, the *Contemplation of Infinite Life Sutra* and the *Amitabha Sutra*. Its lineage commentaries are Bodhisattva Nagarjuna’s *Chapter on the Easy Path*, Bodhisattva Vasubandhu’s *Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land*, Master Tanluan’s *Commentary on the Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land*, Master Daochuo’s *Collection on the Land of Peace and Joy*, and Master Shandao’s *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra*, *Dharma School of Contemplation and Recitation*, *In Praise of Dharma Activities*, *In Praise of the Rites of Rebirth* and *In Praise of Pratyutpanna* (“in the presence of the Buddhas”). In particular, Shandao’s *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra* is regarded as the school’s fundamental, founding text.

The Pure Land School is founded on Amitabha Buddha’s causal vows and accomplished name. Its axis is the 18th of Amitabha’s 48 Vows. From that is derived its classification of the Dharma into “the Difficult Path and the Easy Path,” “self-power and other-power,” “schools of the Sacred Path and the Pure Land School,” and “the Path of Importance and the Path of the Great Vow.” It establishes a framework of spiritual states and of practice consisting of the “Three States of Mind,” “Four Cultivations,” “Five Paths of Invocation,” “Primary and

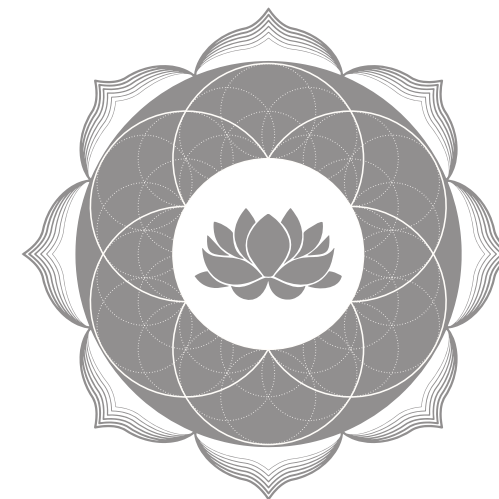
Miscellaneous Practices,” and “karma of assurance and supporting karma.”

The guiding principles of the Pure Land School are “faith in, and acceptance of, Amitabha’s deliverance; single-minded recitation of Amitabha’s name; aspiration to rebirth in Amitabha’s Pure Land; comprehensive deliverance of all sentient beings.” The school’s special characteristics: “recitation of Amitabha’s name, relying on his Fundamental Vow (the 18th); rebirth of ordinary beings in the Pure Land’s Realm of Rewards; rebirth assured in the present lifetime; non-retrogression achieved in this lifetime.”

Chapter

2

Dharma Classification And Interpretation



Section 1. Significance of Dharma Classification and Interpretation

To categorize and explicate the teachings that Shakyamuni Buddha gave during his lifetime is known as classification and interpretation of the Dharma. The process is also called categorizing, assessing or assimilating the Dharma. Its aim is to classify the teachings systematically, according to their form, method, order, content and meaning, so as to illuminate the Buddha's true intentions.

During his life the Buddha gave many teachings, with substantial variations in time, place and circumstances. They were aimed at people of different dispositions and capabilities, and there were disparities in their meaning. If we wish to know the purpose, karmic conditions and sequence of the teachings, we need to organize the scriptures and evaluate their value. Otherwise we would not be able to understand the Buddha's real intentions. It is this effort that gives rise to Dharma classification and interpretation.

For instance, the *Lotus Sutra* illustrates the difference between the Greater and the Lesser Vehicles, while the *Surangama Sutra* highlights the discrepancies between the "sudden" and the "gradual" paths to awakening. The *Avatamsaka Sutra* speaks of the "Three Illuminations," the *Nirvana Sutra* discusses the "Five Flavors" and the *Samdhinirmocana Sutra* (Explication of Profound Secrets Sutra) explains the "Three Periods." These are all examples of Dharma classification and interpretation during the establishment of a school.

In China, the scriptures weren't translated according to the chronological order in which they were written. Rather, renderings were produced simultaneously of texts from different periods and even with contradictory teachings. It is hard for novices to grasp their deeper meanings, which poses obstacles to their learning of the Dharma. To illustrate their viewpoints and the principles they espouse, as well as to instruct beginners, prominent, innovative teachers categorized and compared the diverse teachings in the scriptures. They also assessed the texts' value and explained them, constructing complete systems of thought and practice. Thus did the classification and interpretation of the Dharma flourish in China. Such endeavors facilitated the formation of the various schools.

The schools were essentially founded according to the substance of their Dharma categorization and interpretation.

Section 2. Classifications by Three Lineage Masters

There are three kinds of Dharma classification in the Pure Land School. They are the “classifications by three lineage masters”: 1) Master Tanluan’s “Easy Path and Difficult Path”; 2) Master Daochuo’s “Schools of the Sacred Path and the Pure Land School”; and 3) Master Shandao’s “Two Canons and Two Teachings.”

A. The Difficult Path and the Easy Path

A general classification of Shakyamuni Buddha’s innumerable teachings separates them into the “Difficult Path” and the “Easy Path.” This categorization comes from a passage in Bodhisattva Nagarjuna’s *Chapter on the Easy Path*, a part of his *Exposition of the Ten Stages*:

The Dharma contains countless teachings. Like the ways of the world, there are difficult ones and easy ones.

Travelling overland on foot is hard, but sailing on a ship is relaxing and enjoyable.

The way of the Bodhisattva is also like that: Some practice with great

diligence; others, with expedient faith, take the easy path and quickly attain non-retrogression.

Master Tanluan quotes and explains this passage at the very beginning of his *Commentary on the Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land*. It became the cornerstone of the Pure Land School’s Dharma classification.

i. The Difficult Path

In our iniquitous world of the Five Turbidities, lacking a Buddha, it is very hard to achieve non-retrogression and Buddhahood by relying on our own efforts and not the deliverance of Buddha-power. It is like walking overland to a faraway place. We encounter countless difficulties and dangers, and are hard-pressed to reach our destination.

ii. The Easy Path

With beings’ Amitabha-recitation as the internal cause and the power of Amitabha Buddha’s vow of deliverance as the external cause, the karmic convergence at once leads to rebirth in the Pure Land. Attaining non-retrogression and Buddhahood then becomes very easy. The process is like sailing on a ship. Carried along by the vessel’s power, we go straight to our destination, safely and happily.

The Easy Path is the teaching of Pure Land, grounded in deliverance by other-power. The Difficult Path is all the other teachings of the Buddha, based on one’s own efforts (self-power) to realize enlightenment. They include the so-called 84,000 Dharma schools, the Six Paramitas (perfection of generosity, precepts, forbearance, diligence, meditative concentration, wisdom) and myriad virtuous deeds.

The Difficult Path is considered arduous even by Bodhisattvas. Bodhisattva Nagarjuna said it was “heavier than lifting a great chiliocosm with our hands.” Its special characteristics are “miscellaneous, prolonged and [practitioners are] prone to descent.” That is to say, it entails undertaking the “miscellaneous difficult practices” of the Six Paramitas and myriad virtuous deeds. Enlightenment “requires a prolonged period” – three great *asamkhyeya-kalpas*. During that time, one may descend into the Lesser Vehicle, or “fall into the realms of Sravakas or Pratyekabuddhas,” losing all hope of gaining Buddhahood.

For thoroughgoing ordinary beings like ourselves, the Difficult Path is something we absolutely cannot hope to accomplish. But the Easy Path of deliverance through Buddha-power can be practiced and realized by everyone. Its special characteristics are “singular, quick and certain.” Practitioners recite the name of a single Buddha – Amitabha. They quickly achieve non-retrogression, in this very life, and their attainment of Buddhahood is certain. This path therefore gives great hope to iniquitous ordinary being like ourselves, functioning like a beacon.

The aim of categorization into the Difficult and Easy Paths is to induce ordinary beings in our turbid world, living in the Age of Dharma Decline, to forsake the hard for the easy and recite the name of Amitabha Buddha. That way, they can avail themselves of the power of Amitabha’s vow and be reborn in the Pure Land.

B. Schools of the Sacred Path and the Pure Land School

Master Daochuo inherited and developed the thought of Master Tanluan. In his *Collection on the Land of Peace and Joy*, Daochuo divided Shakyamuni Buddha’s teachings into two types: **“The first treads the Sacred Path, while the second seeks rebirth in the Pure Land.”** This is called the classification into the schools of the Sacred Path and the Pure Land School.

Whether they are of the Greater or Lesser vehicle, all teachings and practices that seek in this world to cultivate perfect wisdom, eliminate afflictions and realize enlightenment are known as schools of the Sacred Path. They follow this order of accomplishment: First, eradicate the 88 levels of delusions of view, removing the causes of rebirth in the Three Wretched Realms and thus ending such rebirth. Second, eliminate the 81 levels of delusions of thought, removing the causes of rebirth in the human and celestial realms and terminating such rebirth. Ultimately, one leaves the Three Domains altogether, bringing an end to the cycle of rebirth in the Six Realms.

In this context, people on the Sravaka path practice the Four Noble Truths and achieve Arhathood after a period ranging from three lifetimes to 60 *kalpas*. Those of the Pratyekabuddha vehicle cultivate the Twelve Links of Dependent Arising and become Pratyekabuddhas within four lifetimes to 100 *kalpas*. Those following the Bodhisattva way practice the Six Paramitas and myriad virtuous acts, achieving the supreme, perfect fruit of Buddhahood after three great *asamkhyeya-kalpas*. All these are teachings and practices of the Sacred Path, which rely on self-power to achieve enlightenment.

Alternatively, practitioners can, even though they haven't eliminated any of their ignorance or afflictions, depend on the power of Amitabha Buddha's Great Vow to gain rebirth in the Land of Bliss. They would forever leave behind rebirth in the Three Domains, achieve nirvana and realize the nature of reality. This is Pure Land teaching and practice, based on deliverance by other-power.

In the our Age of Dharma Decline, the Sacred Path is hard to practice and to realize. Pure Land is easy to practice and rebirth is easy to achieve. Practitioners are therefore urged to abandon the Sacred Path and take refuge in Pure Land. That is the conclusion arising from the Dharma classification into the schools of the Sacred Path and the Pure Land School.

The Difficult and Easy Paths, the schools of the Sacred Path and the Pure Land School. The terminology may be different but the meaning is the same. The Sacred Path is the difficult way, relying on self-power. Pure Land is the easy path, dependent on other-power.

A summary:

- ***The Sacred Path – Teaches practice by our own efforts and requires that we maintain human form over countless rebirths in the Six Realms, practicing and realizing the Six Paramitas and myriad good actions. Only achievable by saints, and therefore difficult***
- ***The Pure Land School – Teaches deliverance through other-power. In this very lifetime, we recite Amitabha's name exclusively and gain rebirth in the Pure Land, there to achieve Buddhahood. Attainable even by ordinary beings, and thus easy.***
- * **The Sacred Path – Saintly beings. Self-power practice. Six Paramitas and myriad virtuous practices. Realization is uncertain.**

- * **The Easy Path – Ordinary beings. Deliverance by other-power. Name-recitation alone. Rebirth in the Pure Land is certain.**

C. The Two Canons and the Two Teachings

In the “Section on the Underlying Meaning” of his *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra*, Master Shandao discusses Dharma classification:

QUESTION: Which of the Two Canons contains this sutra? In which of the Two Teachings does it belong?

ANSWER: The *Contemplation Sutra* is contained in the Bodhisattva Canon and belongs in the Sudden Teaching.

“The Two Canons”: The Sravaka Canon and the Bodhisattva Canon – that is, the Lesser Vehicle and the Greater Vehicle.

“The Two Teachings”: The Gradual Teaching and the Sudden Teaching.

The categorization of the Buddha's teachings into the Two Canons and the Two Teachings is common to all the Dharma schools. Master Shandao's classification of Pure Land under the Mahayana Bodhisattva Canon and the Sudden Teaching uses the common terminology but has a distinctive meaning.

The schools of the Sacred Path – Ch'an, esoteric, Tiantai, Huayan, etc. – are also Mahayana. But their place in the Greater Vehicle stems from their adherents' resolve to attain *bodhicitta* (gaining enlightenment to save others) and their practice according to the Bodhisattva path. None of the schools can be called Mahayana in the absence of the great vow (*bodhicitta*) and the great practices (Six Paramitas and myriad virtuous deeds).

The Greater Vehicle schools of the Sacred Path are therefore a Mahayana of selected capabilities, of self-power and of the Difficult Path. In other words, they are a relative Mahayana, based on adherents' Bodhisattva vows and practices in the causal ground.

As for the Pure Land School, practitioners undertake neither the great vow nor the great practices. Nonetheless, they gain assured access to the Land of Bliss through the power of Amitabha's vow so long as they aspire to rebirth there and recite that Buddha's name. Once there, they naturally undertake the great vow and become Buddhas. In terms of practitioners' capabilities, Pure Land may bear some resemblance to the Lesser Vehicle of the human and celestial realms. But the benefits from its teachings and practice place it within the Greater Vehicle.

Pure Land is thus a Mahayana school without selected capabilities, one of other-power and of the Easy Path. It is an absolute form of Mahayana, based on Buddhahood in the accomplishment ground – the true One Buddha-Vehicle in the realm of ultimate reality. In his *Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land*, Bodhisattva Vasubandhu calls it the “gateway to the Greater Vehicle.” In *Commentary on the Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land*, Master Tanluan proclaims it “the summit of the Mahayana, the unswerving vessel of non-retrogression.” And Master Shandao terms it “sea of the One Buddha-Vehicle” and “convergence point of the Five Vehicles.”

The Gradual Teaching refers to doctrines aimed at a gradual progression towards Buddhahood. Accomplishment requires a long time – many *kalpas* – and advancement through numerous levels. The Sudden Teaching indicates rapid attainment of Buddhahood, without a lengthy passage through time or stages of achievement.

Pure Land is a Sudden Teaching. As the *Infinite Life Sutra* says, Amitabha Buddha's 48 vows allow us to **“transcend the practices of the standard Bodhisattva stages and forthwith cultivate the universal virtues.”** Pure Land practice, notes Bodhisattva Vasubandhu in his *Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land*, **“quickly leads to Anuttara-samyak-sambodhi [supreme enlightenment]”** and **“rapidly fills the great, precious sea of merit.”**

Ch'an, esoteric, Tiantai and Huayan doctrines are all called Sudden Teachings. Because they seek the elimination of delusions and realization of the noumenal, however, they are still Gradual Teachings. As the saying goes, “Sudden in principle, Gradual in terms of practice.” The Pure Land School alone asserts that ordinary beings who haven't yet eradicated delusion can exit the Three Domains and achieve non-retrogression on the road to Buddhahood. Thus it is the Sudden Teaching among Sudden Teachings.

In a looser sense, there are Sudden Teachings among the Sacred Path schools. But in a stricter context, the schools of the Sacred Path are all Gradual Teachings and only Pure Land is a Sudden Teaching.

Says *In Praise of Pratyutpanna*:

**Explications of the human and celestial vehicles,
Discourses on the causes of Bodhisattvahood and nirvana,
Gradual or Sudden Teachings illuminating
emptiness and permanence –
These can eliminate the twin obstructions of
self and the external world.
Beings with superior capabilities will all benefit,
But the slow ones with no wisdom are hard put to awaken.
The *Precious Necklace Sutra* speaks of the Gradual Teaching:**

Ten thousand *kalpas* of practice leads to non-retrogression.

The *Contemplation* and *Amitabha* sutras

Unveil a Sudden Teaching of the Bodhisattva Canon.

One to seven days exclusively reciting Amitabha's name –

And death leads straight to rebirth in the Land of Peace and Joy.

Once inside Amitabha's realm of nirvana,

We achieve non-retrogression and the end of birth and death.

The passage explains the Five Vehicles of the Dharma, and makes clear that the Greater Vehicle contains both Gradual and Sudden teachings. Because sentient beings cannot accomplish them, even Sudden Teachings become Gradual Teachings. The excerpt then notes that Pure Land's Sudden Teaching of the Bodhisattva Canon can be practiced and quickly realized by everyone. It is therefore an absolute Sudden Teaching.

The text further says:

Each of the 84,000 schools is different,

But all seek to eliminate ignorance and negative karma.

A sharp sword is the name of Amitabha Buddha:

A single recitation cuts away all karmic offenses.

The different schools are all Gradual Teachings,

Requiring 10,000 *kalpas* of hard practice to realize non-retrogression.

If we recite his name exclusively throughout our lives,

Amitabha arrives to welcome us as soon as we breathe our last.

All the 84,000 Dharma schools are termed Gradual Teachings; alone, the exclusive recitation of Amitabha's name is considered a Sudden Teaching. Because a single recitation is sufficient to eliminate all manner of karmic

transgressions, the practice is compared to a sharp sword. Since the other teachings are neither complete nor sudden, they are like a blunt blade, not a sharp one.

In the three lineage masters' Dharma classifications above, Master Tanluan used an adherent's practices in the causal ground as his yardstick: the Six Paramitas and myriad good practices constituted the Difficult Path, and the single practice of name-recitation was the Easy Path. He urged practitioners to abandon the Difficult Path and adopt the Easy Path. Therefore the division of the Dharma into the Difficult and Easy paths is "classification according to practice."

Master Daochuo took as his benchmark what practitioners wanted to achieve. Accordingly, those who wished to realize sacred status in this world belonged in the schools of the Sacred Path, while those who sought rebirth in the Pure Land to become Buddhas were of the Pure Land School. So Dharma categorization into the Sacred Path and the Pure Land Schools is "classification according to realization."

Master Shandao worked directly from the Pure Land teachings themselves to determine status within the Greater or Lesser Vehicles and placement among the Gradual or Sudden Teachings. Hence the Two Canons and the Two Teachings constitute "classification according to teaching."

Teachings explicate, and practice is the object of explication. Teachings and practices are causes to be realized, and accomplishment is the effect. From the tripartite classification and explication of teaching, practice and realization, a Dharma school's main principles take clear shape. Pure Land became a separate and independent school.

Of the Dharma classifications by the three masters, Pure Land mainly uses the separation into schools of the Sacred Path and the Pure Land School. Going by the meaning of the names, “sacred” means perfect, sacred wisdom, while “path” refers to a passageway. By cultivating flawless, sacred wisdom, the practitioner realizes nirvana – hence “the Sacred Path.” “Pure Land” denotes aspiration to rebirth in the Pure Land. “Sacred Path” and “Pure Land” are clear and unmistakable, with acknowledgement by each of the other. By contrast, interpretations of “Difficult” and “Easy,” as well as “Gradual” and “Sudden,” vary according to practitioners’ karma, habits, and likes and dislikes. They lead to disputes and easily cause confusion.

A summary:

- **3 Masters’ Classifications:**
 1. ***Tanluan’s Two Paths: The Difficult Path, the Easy Path***
 2. ***Daochuo’s Two Types of School: Sacred Path schools, Pure Land School***
 3. ***Shandao’s Two Canons and Two Teachings: Two Canons (Greater Vehicle and Lesser Vehicle), Two Teachings (Gradual and Sudden)***

D. The Path of Importance and the Path of the Great Vow

The foregoing classifications by the three lineage masters – the “Difficult and Easy Paths,” the “Sacred Path and Pure Land Schools” and the “Two

Canons and Two Teachings” – are categorizations of the entire Dharma from the Pure Land perspective. In the “Section on the Underlying Meaning” of his *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra*, Master Shandao makes a further classification within the Pure Land School:

Responding to [Queen Vaidehi’s] request, the deliverer of the Saha world immediately unveiled the Path of Importance to the Pure Land; the powerful being of the Land of Peace and Joy made manifest the different meaning of the Great Vow.

The “Path of Importance” refers to the meditative and non-meditative virtues in the *Contemplation Sutra*. Meditative virtues are practices that still anxiety and concentrate the mind. Non-meditative virtues are those that avert evil and nurture good. The practitioner dedicates the merit from these two practices towards rebirth in the Pure Land.

As for the “Great Vow,” the *Longer Sutra* says that of all the good and evil ordinary beings reborn in the Pure Land, there are none who do not rely on the power of Amitabha Buddha’s Great Vow as an augmentative cause.

This is the classification into the Path of Importance and the Path of the Great Vow.

The final conclusion of the “Meaning of the Non-Meditative Practices” section in the *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra*:

Though preceding passages spoke of the merits of the meditative and non-meditative virtues, the Buddha’s underlying wish is that sentient beings recite Amitabha’s name single-mindedly.

That is a call to “discard the Path of Importance and choose the Great Vow.” “Discard” and “choose” here means “abandon” and “adopt,” respectively.

Master Shandao further divided the Pure Land School into the paths of Importance and of the Great Vow. He took as the Path of Importance the “dedication of merit from the meditative and non-meditative virtues towards rebirth” in the Pure Land, as stated in the *Contemplation Sutra*. And he identified as the Path of the Great Vow the admonition in the *Longer Sutra* to “recite the name of Amitabha Buddha consistently and exclusively.”

Though the meditative and non-meditative practices of the Path of Importance were initially discussed, they were later abandoned and the Great Vow practice of Amitabha-recitation alone was adopted. We should therefore know that the Path of Importance was an expedient teaching, and the Great Vow the ultimate one. Shakyamuni Buddha’s aim in speaking of the meditative and non-meditative virtues was to use the Path of Importance to guide people of various dispositions towards exclusive Amitabha-recitation.

The meditative and non-meditative virtues encompass the Six Paramitas and myriad good actions. By themselves, they are the difficult, self-power practices of the Sacred Path schools. But if their resulting merit is dedicated towards rebirth in Amitabha’s Land of Bliss, they become practices of the Pure Land School’s Path of Importance. To transform them further into the Great Vow Path, exclusive Amitabha-recitation is necessary.

The classification of the meditative and non-meditative virtues serves a twofold purpose: On one hand, it facilitates entry into the Pure Land School by practitioners of the Sacred Path schools; on the other, it expediently allows adherents of the Path of Importance to turn to the exclusive Amitabha-recitation of the Great Vow Path.

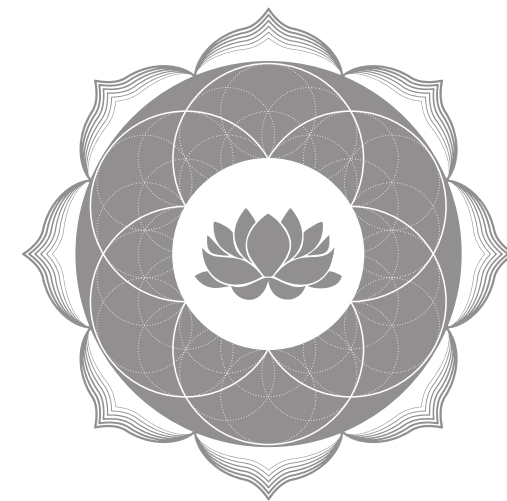
It is possible for practitioners of the Sacred Path to gain Buddhahood this lifetime, and in this world. But that is the Difficult Path. If they dedicate the merit from their practices towards rebirth in the Pure Land, they will naturally become Buddhas. This is the Easy Path. Though the goal of Buddhahood and the methods of practice are the same, the attendant difficulty or ease is different. To forsake the hard and adopt the easy, an adherent can switch to Pure Land practice (Path of Importance).

Those who wish to be reborn in the Pure Land should know that it is a realm of nirvana. The flawed merit and virtues of ordinary beings do not allow birth there. They must recite the name of Amitabha Buddha and depend on the power of his vow to gain rebirth. So they turn once more to the focused practice of the Great Vow Path. By exclusively reciting the Name of a Myriad Virtues from Amitabha’s accomplishment ground, practitioners encompass the Six Paramitas and countless good actions associated with all causal grounds. This is to abandon the inferior for the superior.

Chapter

3

Core Scriptures



Section 1. Significance of the Core Scriptures

The texts on which a Dharma school's teachings are based are known as the core scriptures.

“Core” denotes purity and focus, as well as that which forms the basis of something. It contrasts with “secondary.” Among all the Buddha's teachings, a school necessarily chooses some to rely on, forgoing the others. And among the chosen texts, some are primary and others are secondary. The primary texts constitute the core scriptures, while the supplementary ones are the secondary texts.

The core scriptures have precedence over the secondary ones. Where other scriptures differ from the core texts, we use the latter as the benchmark.

Section 2. The Three Pure Land Scriptures

The Pure Land School has three core scriptures, known as the Three Pure Land Sutras. They are:

- ***Infinite Life Sutra, as Spoken by the Buddha*** (abbreviated to *Infinite Life Sutra*, or *Longer Sutra*)
- ***Contemplation of Infinite Life Sutra, as Spoken by the Buddha*** (abbreviated to *Contemplation of Infinite Life Sutra*, or *Contemplation Sutra*)
- ***Amitabha Sutra, as Spoken by the Buddha*** (abbreviated to *Amitabha Sutra*, or *Shorter Sutra*)

The three sutras focus specially and entirely on matters relating to rebirth in Amitabha Buddha's Pure Land of Bliss, without mixing in other elements. They therefore constitute the core scriptures of the Pure Land School. Master Shandao calls them the “sutras of primary practice, exclusive reliance and rebirth” in the Pure Land.

Many other scriptures speak of Amitabha's Pure Land. They are all secondary texts. They include the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, the *Lotus Sutra* and the *Surangama Sutra*. Master Shandao's *Dharma School of Contemplation and Recitation* also refers to “six sutras on rebirth.”

A. Infinite Life Sutra (2 fascicles)

There have been 12 translations of the *Infinite Life Sutra*. Five have survived, while seven were lost – thus the term “the five surviving and seven missing” texts. The one used today is the third translation. That is the *Infinite Life Sutra*, translated by Tripitaka Master Samghavarman in 252, during the Cao-Wei period in China (*Historical Records of the Three Gems*). The other translations are titled the *Longer Amitabha Sutra*, the *Sutra of Awakening to Infinite Purity and Equality*, the *Splendors of Infinite Life Sutra*, and the *Assembly of the Tathagata of Infinite Life – Maharatnakuta Sutra*. There is also the sutra’s Sanskrit version, and a Tibetan translation.

The sutra mainly tells how Amitabha Buddha, as Bhikkhu Dharmakara in the causal ground, undertook his 48 Vows, practiced accordingly and achieved Buddhahood. It also describes the splendors of his Pure Land and the sacred assembly there. The first fascicle speaks of the causes and effects relating to Amitabha’s attainment of Buddhahood, and the second relates those involving sentient beings’ rebirth in the Pure Land.

Essence of the sutra: It describes the 48 Vows and embraces sentient beings; beings who recite Amitabha’s name will assuredly be reborn in the Pure Land.

The sutra’s outline and highlights are as follows:

i. The Basic Intention of Shakyamuni Buddha

As the World-Honored One was about to speak this sutra, he manifested many auspicious features. Ven. Ananda noticed them and asked the Buddha to explain. The Buddha made explicit his basic intention in appearing in this world, which was to save all suffering beings and to bring them genuine benefits.

ii. The 48 Vows

The sutra then focuses on introducing the cause of Amitabha Buddha’s vows and the meritorious effect of his accomplishment. It makes clear how Amitabha Buddha, in the causal ground, was the Bhikkhu Dharmakara, who lived in the time of Lokeshvararaja Buddha. Choosing the best features of 21 billion Buddha realms, he formulated his 48 Vows. He swore that he would use his name, after accomplishing Buddhahood, to deliver all sentient beings, whether they be good or evil, wise or deluded. They would gain rebirth in his Pure Land and rapidly achieve Buddhahood there. If there remained a single being whose rebirth he could not enable, despite that being’s having recited his name and aspired to rebirth, he would not become a Buddha.

iii. Dharmakara Achieves Buddhahood

Having made his 48 Vows, Bhikkhu Dharmakara practiced for inconceivable, countless eons and accomplished his great vows. He gained Buddhahood in the Western Land of Bliss ten *kalpas* ago and is known as Amitabha Buddha. For ten *kalpas*, Amitabha Buddha has continually called out to us to be reborn in his realm of nirvana – the Land of Bliss.

iv. Rebirth Through Amitabha-Recitation

The sutra goes on to tell how the Buddhas of the ten directions acclaimed the unfathomable merit of Amitabha Buddha’s name. Sentient beings who hear his name and recite it, wishing to be reborn there, will gain such rebirth without exception. They will attain the state of non-retrogression.

v. The Three Tiers and Exclusive Recitation

The sutra explains that sentient beings have different abilities and

inclinations, which can be divided into the superior, average and subordinate tiers. Whatever their innate qualities, Shakyamuni Buddha urged them to “recite Amitabha Buddha’s name single-mindedly and exclusively.” They would then all be reborn in the Pure Land.

vi. *The Splendid Fruit of Rebirth*

Relying on the power of Amitabha’s vows, those who are so reborn will transcend the standard practices of all realms. They at once cultivate the universal virtues and achieve the status of being one lifetime removed from Buddhahood. They make offerings to all Buddhas and comprehensively deliver all beings.

vii. *Shakyamuni Buddha’s Exhortation*

The World-Honored One compassionately urges headstrong beings of the Saha world, who are hard to change, to abandon evil and do good. They should wish to be reborn in the Land of Bliss, so as to leave behind forever the pain of the Three Poisons, Five Evil Acts, Five Sufferings and Five Fiery Agonies.

viii. *Two Kinds of Rebirth*

There are two types of rebirth in the Pure Land: Those who trust in the All-Inclusive Wisdom of the Tathagatas will be born spontaneously, by transformation. Instantly their physical appearance, aura, wisdom and virtue will be equal to those of the Bodhisattvas. Their accomplishment will be complete. However, those who doubt Buddha-wisdom will be womb-born, enclosed in lotus palaces. They will not be able to see the Three Gems for 500 years.

Practitioners are advised to believe unwaveringly in the Wisdom of the Tathagatas, practice Amitabha-recitation exclusively, and avoid doubt.

ix. *An Enjoinder to Amitabha-Recitation*

Just before the end of the sutra, the Buddha tells Ananda: Those who hear and have faith in the name of Amitabha Buddha, and delight in reciting it, will gain great, genuine benefits. They will possess unsurpassed merit and virtue.

The basic intention of Shakyamuni Buddha would thus be fulfilled.

x. *This Sutra to Be Specially Retained and Preserved*

Finally, the World-Honored One predicts that sentient beings of the future will become entirely wicked, devoid of all good. Because beings will be unable to practice them, all Dharma teachings based on self-power will perish naturally. But given the Buddha’s compassion, this *Infinite Life Sutra* will be specially retained and preserved in the world to save beings. At that time, sentient beings who recite the name of Amitabha Buddha will all gain rebirth in the Pure Land, according to their wish.

B. *Contemplation of Infinite Life Sutra* (1 fascicle)

The *Contemplation of Infinite Life Sutra* was translated by Tripitaka Master Kalayashas in 424.

The sutra contains two discourses on the Dharma, one given in the royal palace and the other on Vulture Peak. It is therefore called the “correct exposition in two locations.” Inside the king’s palace in Rajgir, the World-Honored One spoke to Queen Vaidehi and Ven. Ananda about focusing the mind and contemplating the splendors of the Land of Bliss (the 13 meditative states, or meditative virtues). There, he also discussed the three meritorious actions and

nine levels of rebirth associated with the random practice of various good deeds (non-meditative virtues), and dedicating their merit towards rebirth in the Pure Land. This is known as the “discourse in the palace.”

From the palace Ananda returned to Vulture Peak. The Buddha sat there teaching, and proceeded to repeat the exposition given in the palace before the assembly of sacred and ordinary beings, which included Bodhisattva Manjusri. This is the “discourse on Vulture Peak.”

The scripture was circulated as the *Contemplation of Infinite Life Sutra*. In his explications, Master Shandao referred to it as the *Contemplation Sutra* of Infinite Life, abbreviated as *Contemplation Sutra*.

Essence of the sutra: It describes the meditative and non-meditative virtues, thereby drawing in audiences of different abilities and proclivities, inducing them to recite the name of Amitabha Buddha.

The sutra’s outline and highlights are as follows:

i. Queen Vaidehi Loathes Her Own Suffering

The World-Honored One was on Vulture Peak, together with Manjusri and other great Bodhisattvas. At this time, a tragedy occurred in Rajgir. Prince Ajatasatru, eager to become king, imprisoned his father with the intention of killing him. Queen Vaidehi was also incarcerated. Suffering mentally and physically, she thought of the Buddha. The World-Honored One used his special powers to appear before her in the palace. Vaidehi loathed her dire circumstances and wished to be reborn in a Buddha realm where there was no suffering.

ii. Aspiring to Rebirth in the Land of Bliss

Emitting light, the World-Honored One assembled all the pure Buddha-lands on an illuminated platform atop his head, so Vaidehi could see them all. Assisted by Buddha-power, she chose to be reborn in the Land of Bliss and asked the Buddha to explain the methods of *contemplation* relating to meditative virtues. The World-Honored One considered the circumstances and, on his own initiative, expounded the three meritorious practices. He also demonstrated an alternative, expedient *contemplation* – rebirth through Buddha-power.

iii. Thirteen Meditative States

Responding to Queen Vaidehi’s request, the Buddha systematically described 13 methods of contemplating the splendid beings and environment in the Land of Bliss. If sentient beings were able to accomplish each of these meditations in succession, they would be reborn in the Pure Land. Reaching the 7th *Contemplation* (of the Flowery Seat), the World-Honored One wanted to make clear “the method of eradicating suffering.” At once Amitabha Buddha appeared, suspended in the sky. Vaidehi saw him and paid her respects. Joyfully, she achieved the conditions for assured birth in the Pure Land. The 9th *Contemplation* (of the True Body) describes the light from the 84,000 features of Amitabha Buddha. Each ray of light embraces only beings who recite Amitabha’s name, enfolding them forever.

iv. Dedicating Merit From the Three Virtuous Practices

After the 13 *contemplations*, for the sake of those unable to perform meditative contemplation, the Buddha explained the dedication of merit towards rebirth in the Pure Land from the practice of non-meditative virtues. That refers to people in the upper six of the nine levels of rebirth, who undertake the

three meritorious practices: cultivation of good, observance of precepts, and worldly virtues. They may observe one, two or all three of these practices, with each person doing so according to his or her own ability and inclination. By dedicating the merit therefrom, they will be reborn in the Pure Land.

v. *Gaining Rebirth Through Amitabha-Recitation*

Though the World-Honored One spoke of the 13 contemplations (meditative virtues) and the three meritorious practices (non-meditative virtues), he especially pitied those wicked beings who, lacking all virtues, have no connection with wholesome practices. For them he expounded the great, compassionate Fundamental Vow of Amitabha Buddha, hoping that all good and evil ordinary beings would rely on the deliverance of Amitabha's Fundamental Vow and gain rebirth in his Pure Land by reciting his name.

Therefore Shakyamuni Buddha deliberately placed in the lowest three levels of rebirth three representative types of beings: those who undertake the Ten Evil Actions, break the precepts, or commit the Five Gravest Karmic Offenses, and only encounter the teaching of Amitabha's deliverance when they are about to die. By reciting Amitabha's name one to ten times, they are splendidly reborn in the Land of Bliss. This unequivocally underscores the absolute deliverance of Amitabha Buddha.

vi. *Praise Only for Amitabha-Reciters*

The Buddha spoke of three ways to gain rebirth in the Pure Land: through practice of meditative virtues, practice of non-meditative virtues, and Amitabha-recitation. But he praised only Amitabha-reciters as "*pundarika* (white lotus) flowers among humankind," adding that "Bodhisattvas Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta become their close friends."

vii. *An Admonition to Recite Amitabha's Name*

Because name-recitation accords with Amitabha Buddha's Fundamental Vow and is the easiest and most surpassing practice, the World-Honored One, at the sutra's conclusion, urged Ananda uniquely to "recite the name of the Buddha of Infinite Life [Amitabha]."

C. Amitabha Sutra (I fascicle)

There are four translations of this sutra. The one used today was done by Tripitaka Master Kumarajiva in 402, during the Yao-Qin period. The scripture tells how ordinary beings in our world of Five Turbidities can be reborn in the Land of Bliss by exclusively reciting Amitabha Buddha's name. The teaching is corroborated and supported by Buddhas of the six directions, innumerable as grains of sand in the Ganges River.

Shakyamuni Buddha spoke the sutra without being asked. Addressing Ven. Sariputra, he delivered it on his own initiative. Because it is the simplest and most succinct of the Three Pure Land Sutras, it is also known as the *Shorter Sutra*. There is an alternative translation, titled *Sutra in Praise of the Pure Land, Supported and Taught by All Buddhas*. It was done in 650 by Tripitaka Master Xuanzang. There is also the sutra's Sanskrit version, and a Tibetan translation.

Essence of the sutra: It describes clearly the Realm of Rewards in the Land of Bliss. Sentient beings cannot gain rebirth there through their own effort, or by having few virtuous roots. They can only do so by reciting the name of Amitabha Buddha exclusively.

The sutra's outline and highlights are as follows:

i. Praising the Beings and Environment in the Land of Bliss

The World-Honored One begins by praising the environment in the Pure Land: All suffering is absent; there is only a multitude of joys. It was accomplished by Amitabha Buddha for the deliverance of sentient beings through rebirth there. He then commends the beings there: Amitabha, who possesses infinite light and life, and encounters no obstructions whatsoever; he delivers beings by enabling them to be reborn in the Pure Land. Shakyamuni Buddha proceeds to praise the sacred assembly in the Land of Bliss. Their numbers cannot be calculated, and they have all achieved non-retrogression, being a single lifetime removed from Buddhahood. This illustrates the benefits of birth in the Pure Land.

ii. Beings Should Aspire to Rebirth There

Since there are so many virtues and benefits, sentient beings are urged to aspire to rebirth.

iii. Rebirth Cannot Be Achieved With Few Virtuous Roots

The text makes clear that everything apart from Amitabha-recitation contains few virtuous roots – and cannot enable rebirth in the Land of Bliss.

iv. Making It Clear That Amitabha-Recitation Assures Rebirth

Only the exclusive recitation of Amitabha's name produces abundant virtuous roots. Recitation over a lifetime, or for one to seven days, ensures rebirth in the Pure Land.

v. Highlighting Corroboration and Confirmation by All Buddhas

Those with few virtuous roots cannot be born in that exalted, marvelous realm, while name-reciters attain rebirth at once. Since sentient beings find that hard to believe, innumerable Buddhas come forward to confirm it with their long, broad tongues.

vi. Conclusion: An Admonition to Believe That Which Is Hard to Believe

The World-Honored One and the other Buddhas affirm approvingly that “to expound this teaching, which is hard to believe, to sentient beings in the world of Five Turbidities is surpassingly difficult!” They conclude by urging us to believe deeply in it.

Section 3. Relationships Among the Three Sutras

The Three Sutras are the core scriptures of the Pure Land School. They all have Amitabha Buddha's name as their substance, exclusive recitation of the name as their essence, and rebirth in the Pure Land's Realm of Rewards as their ultimate function. In order to teach beings expediently, however, they have different emphases.

The *Longer Sutra* focuses on explicating the principles behind rebirth in the Pure Land. It stresses the causes behind Amitabha's 48 Vows and the meritorious effects of his accomplishing them. By relying on the power of his resolutions, beings will certainly attain rebirth. This is a teaching common to the Three Sutras, but is spelled out in the *Longer Sutra*.

The *Contemplation Sutra* concentrates on the types and qualities of people who are reborn. They include those capable of practicing meditative and non-meditative virtues, and those who are good or evil, as described in the nine levels of rebirth. All can be born in the Land of Bliss, which makes beings happy and appreciative. These conditions for deliverance are the same in all Three Sutras, but are made explicit in the *Contemplation Sutra*.

The *Shorter Sutra* emphasizes the methods and great benefits of gaining rebirth in the Land of Bliss. By exclusively reciting the name of Amitabha

Buddha, ordinary beings attain rebirth in the Pure Land's Realm of Rewards, a domain of nirvana. Their position will be equal – one lifetime away from Buddhahood. These methods and benefits are also common to all Three Sutras, but are stated in the *Shorter Sutra*.

Section 4. Order of the Three Sutras

There are two aspects to the order of the Three Sutras – their teachings, and the timing of their delivery.

In terms of the teachings, the *Longer Sutra* speaks of the 48 Vows, which are the root; it therefore comes first. The *Contemplation Sutra* expounds the 16 contemplations, based on the meditative and non-meditative virtues. It develops the teachings, so it comes next. The *Shorter Sutra* explicates the exclusive recitation of Amitabha’s name; it is hence the summary, or conclusion.

In terms of timing the *Shorter Sutra* definitely comes last, while the order of the *Longer Sutra* and *Contemplation Sutra* can be deduced from their content. In the first fascicle of the *Longer Sutra* Ananda asks, **“Has the Bodhisattva Dharmakara already gained Buddhahood and entered into nirvana? Or has he not attained Buddhahood? Where is he today?”**

In the second fascicle, **“Ananda asked the Buddha, ‘What are the names of those two Bodhisattvas?’ The Buddha replied, ‘One is called Avalokitesvara and the other Mahasthamaprapta.’ ”** If the *Contemplation Sutra* had already been delivered, Ananda should not have asked these questions. We can therefore conclude that the *Larger Sutra* came first.

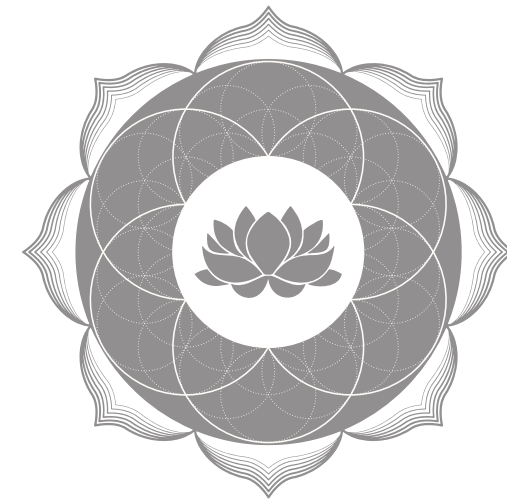
Moreover, the *Contemplation Sutra* refers to **“what Bhikkhu Dharmakara accomplished through the power of his vows”** during the part on the

Contemplation of the Flowery Seat. And while discussing the Lower Level of the Middle Tier of rebirth, it mentions **“the 48 Vows of Bhikkhu Dharmakara.”** From such references we know that the *Contemplation Sutra* was delivered after the *Longer Sutra*.

Chapter

4

**Treatises And Commentaries
Of The Lineage**



Section 1. Significance of the Lineage Treatises and Commentaries

“Lineage” is also known as Dharma transmission or tradition. It refers to the passing on and inheritance of a Dharma school’s teachings. Like blood circulating through a living body, it has a common origin and substance, and is consistent from beginning to end.

“Treatises” were written by Bodhisattvas, while “commentaries” were composed by the lineage masters. Together, they explain the core scriptures.

Though there are the Three Pure Land Sutras, their interpretations have varied greatly. Some said they were intended for sacred beings, others countered they were meant for ordinary beings. Some opined that rebirth was in the Realm of Rewards, others cited the Realm of Transformation. And some emphasized Amitabha-contemplation, while others stressed Amitabha-recitation. Without a lineage, learners would be at a loss for direction. We must rely on our lineage to establish the school’s orthodoxy.

A lineage generally consists of two aspects. The first is the human lineage – the line of transmission via lineage masters. The second is the Dharma lineage, formed by the relevant writings of the lineage masters.

Individuals propagate the Dharma, and the meaning of the Dharma is made clear by individuals. Each is inseparable from the other.

The Pure Land School was founded on the tradition formed by the treatises and commentaries of five lineage masters: Bodhisattvas Nagarjuna and Vasubandhu of India, and Masters Tanluan, Daochuo and Shandao of China. In doctrinal terms, there is no lineage connection with the commonly known tradition of 13 Chinese Pure Land patriarchs, whose designations were based on “lofty merit and abundant virtues.”

Section 2. Canonical Treatises of the Lineage

A. Chapter on the Easy Path (1 fascicle)

Chapter on the Easy Path is the ninth section of Nagarjuna's *Exposition of the Ten Stages*. The work was translated by Tripitaka Master Kumarajiva in 412.

The main intention of the *Chapter on the Easy Path* was to induce general Mahayana practitioners to forsake the difficult way for the easy one and recite the name of Amitabha Buddha according to his Fundamental Vow. Its goal was achievement of the Bodhisattva path's "non-retrogression in the present lifetime," and the method was "reciting and holding fast to" Amitabha's name.

The *Chapter* comprises two sets of questions and answers. In the first, certain easy practices are identified from among the innumerable Dharma teachings. The second series singles out Amitabha's Easy Path from among the easy practices of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

Chapter on the Easy Path is the first scripture to be esteemed by the Pure Land School, and its contributions to the lineage are fundamental and directional. They consist of two elements:

1. Classification into the Difficult and Easy paths: This is the basis of Dharma-categorization by the Pure Land School in subsequent eras;
2. Explication of name-recitation according to Amitabha Buddha's Fundamental Vow: It provides a brief explanation of Amitabha's 18th Vow.

Amitabha Buddha's Fundamental Vow is like this: If someone recites my name and takes refuge in me, this person at once attains the karma of assurance and will achieve supreme enlightenment (*Anuttara-samyak-sambodhi*). One should therefore recite often.

This explanatory *gatha* indicates that the core of Pure Land teaching lies in the 18th Vow of Amitabha Buddha, and calls it the "Fundamental Vow." Its promise is accomplished through "name-recitation." As a result, "name-recitation according to Amitabha's Fundamental Vow" became the basic springboard for the development of Pure Land thought. Without name-recitation according to Amitabha's Fundamental Vow, there would be no Pure Land teaching – and no Pure Land School.

Master Nagarjuna also wrote *The Twelve Rites*, in a single fascicle. Consisting of seven-character *gathas*, it focuses entirely on the ritual veneration of Amitabha Buddha and is much loved by Pure Land practitioners.

B. Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land (1 fascicle)

Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land was composed by Bodhisattva Vasubandhu. Its full name is *Gatha on the Aspiration to Rebirth and Treatise on*

the Infinite Life Sutra. It is also known as *Treatise on the Pure Land and Treatise on the Infinite Life Sutra*. It was translated by Tripitaka Master Bodhiruci in 529.

The main intent of the *Treatise* is to set a personal example regarding the Five Paths of Invocation, and to urge all sentient beings to be reborn together in Amitabha's Buddha-realm.

The Five Paths of Invocation are those of reverential acts, acclamation, reflection, aspiration and merit-dedication.

The work consists of two parts: the "acclamatory *gatha*," followed by a "commentary" that explicates the *gatha*. Focused mainly on the *Infinite Life Sutra*, it covers key principles from all Three Pure Land Sutras. Indeed, it is a discourse that links the three scriptures.

The *Treatise* makes two important contributions towards the formation of the Pure Land School:

1. It establishes the goal of practitioners – aspiring to rebirth in Amitabha's Pure Land and rapidly gaining Buddhahood;
2. It sets down methods for achieving such rebirth – the Five Paths of Invocation.

The path of reflection – focusing on 29 resplendent features of the Pure Land, Amitabha Buddha and Bodhisattvas – gives rise to faith. The path of aspiration constitutes the wish for rebirth in Amitabha's realm. And the path of acclamation is the practice of name-recitation. Thus the Five Paths of Invocation cover "faith, aspiration and practice."

The key point, in terms of interpretation, is "to reflect on the power of [Amitabha] Buddha's Fundamental Vow," which is a part of the path of reflection. In terms of practice, it is "recitation of that Tathagata's [Amitabha's] name," contained in the path of acclamation. Therefore the Five Paths of Invocation can be abbreviated as "name-recitation according to the Fundamental Vow."

We can see that *Treatise on Rebirth* inherits the essence of the *Chapter on the Easy Path*: name-recitation according to Amitabha Buddha's Fundamental Vow. And it expands the goal of standard Mahayana Buddhism – non-retrogression in this world – to rebirth in Amitabha's realm and the rapid attainment of Buddhahood there.

In terms of method, *Treatise on Rebirth* systematically provides a theoretical basis for the single practice of name-recitation, enriching and enlarging it into the Five Paths of Invocation. "Aspiration to rebirth" is an outwardly oriented statement of purpose, while "the Five Paths" are the inwardly directed specification of practice. In this way, the Pure Land teaching separates itself distinctively from the regular Mahayana doctrines of *bodhicitta* (goal) and the Six Paramitas and myriad virtuous practices, and transcends them.

Section 3. Commentaries of the Lineage

A. Commentary on the Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land (2 fascicles)

The *Commentary on the Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land* is known in shortened form as *Commentary on the Treatise* or *Treatise Commentary*. Composed by Master Tanluan of the Northern Wei period, it is a work that explicates Bodhisattva Vasubandhu's *Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land*.

The main intention of *Commentary on the Treatise* is to make known the augmentative karma that is the power of Amitabha's Fundamental Vow. It advises and guides all sentient beings to depend on the power of Amitabha's vow to gain rebirth in the Pure Land.

The first of the work's two fascicles explains the acclamatory *gatha* and makes clear its Five Paths of Invocation. The second explicates the main commentary, which has ten sections. It opens with "the classification into self-power and other-power," and ends by "seeking verification of its basic interpretation." The "power of [Amitabha] Buddha's Fundamental Vow" is a theme that runs through the entire *Commentary*, from start to finish.

The great importance of *Commentary on the Treatise* to the development of the Pure Land School lies in the text's comprehensive and systematic exposition of "the power of Amitabha's Fundamental Vow." *Commentary on the Treatise* firmly established a theoretical foundation for the Pure Land teachings. The work's ultimate conclusion:

QUESTION: Why is it said that one attains supreme enlightenment (*Anuttara-samyak-sambodhi*) "quickly"?

ANSWER: Because the *Treatise [on Rebirth]* says the Five Paths of Invocation are accomplished through benefitting self as well as others.

Even so, the underlying reason is that Amitabha Buddha constitutes the augmentative karma.

...

All births in the Pure Land, and all the acts of Bodhisattvas as well as celestial and human beings there, result from the power of Amitabha Buddha's Fundamental Vow.

Why do we say this? If not for Buddha-power, the 48 Vows would have been made in vain.

We now use three vows to prove what we mean.

Amitabha Buddha's 18th, 11th and 22nd Vows are then cited to demonstrate the following: Because of Amitabha Buddha's power, we can gain rebirth in the Pure Land by reciting his name ten times (first proof). Having attained the karma of assurance, we will certainly achieve nirvana, avoiding the sundry pitfalls of retrogression (second proof). And we transcend the standard practices

of all realms and at once cultivate the virtues of the highest Bodhisattvas (third proof). As a result, we rise horizontally above the Three Domains (of rebirth), gain Buddhahood quickly and deliver sentient beings comprehensively.

This is the well-known “proof by three vows,” highlighting the Pure Land School’s assurance of rebirth in this world (the 18th Vow), Buddhahood in Amitabha’s realm (the 11th Vow) and return to deliver beings (the 22nd Vow). Ordinary or sacred beings, cause or effect, rebirth or return, benefitting self or others – all are entirely dependent on the power of Amitabha Buddha’s Fundamental Vow.

In terms of the development of Pure Land thought, *Commentary on the Treatise on Rebirth* combines Nagarjuna’s “name-recitation and Easy Path” with Vasubandhu’s “rebirth through the Five Paths of Invocation,” merging them into a single entity. It probes for their basic, underlying principle – and finds it in the power of Amitabha Buddha’s Fundamental Vow. To sum up: For those who rely on the power of Amitabha’s Fundamental Vow, rebirth in the Pure Land is easy through name-recitation.

Putting it simply, the *Chapter on the Easy Path* first explains “name-recitation,” addressing the question of “What?” This is the form of the Easy Path; the work is a discourse on method. *Treatise on Rebirth* then explicates the “rapid attainment of Buddhahood after rebirth,” answering the query, “How?” Focusing on the function of the Easy Path, it is a discourse on objective. And *Commentary on the Treatise on Rebirth* makes clear “the power of [Amitabha] Buddha’s Fundamental Vow,” addressing the question of “Why?” It discusses the structure of the Easy Path, and is a discourse on substance. The three works embrace and accommodate one another, merging into one.

Through *Commentary on the Treatise on Rebirth*, the Pure Land thought of India and of China are all of a sudden connected, forged into one entity. Pure Land’s Dharma classification and interpretation, core scriptures, and lineage treatises and commentaries now leave little uncovered. The Pure Land School has begun to take form.

B. Gatha in Praise of Amitabha Buddha (I fascicle)

The *Gatha in Praise of Amitabha Buddha* is a work by Master Tanluan. Based on the *Infinite Life Sutra*, it uses the form of the seven-character *gatha* to praise the virtues of Amitabha’s achievement in terms of persons and environment (i.e., the beings and features of the Land of Bliss). It also states the meaning of rebirth in the Pure Land through name-recitation.

The entire *gatha* is prefaced by the six characters, “Namo Amitabha Buddha.” It consists of 50 stanzas, totaling 390 phrases, and 51 veneration. It is an acclamatory work specially modeled on Nagarjuna’s *The Twelve Rites* and Vasubandhu’s *Gatha on the Aspiration to Rebirth*.

The *Commentary on the Treatise on Rebirth* focuses on explicating the lineage treatises and urging people to be reborn in the Pure Land. Its language and content are highly distinguished, and its farsighted wisdom is boundless. This acclamatory *gatha* encompasses the substance of the scriptures and evokes the self-discipline inherent in single-minded devotion and aspiration to rebirth. Its character is lofty, its expression beautiful and its sentiments moving.

C. Collection on the Land of Peace and Joy (2 fascicles)

The *Collection on the Land of Peace and Joy* was written by Master Daochuo. Consisting of 12 Great Teachings, it lays out the *Contemplation Sutra*'s main points, collects commentaries on the sutras, and admonishes people to seek rebirth in the Land of Peace and Joy (Land of Bliss).

The work “weighs the era and the circumstances, and urges beings to seek rebirth in the Pure Land.” Mindful of the Age of Dharma Decline, when people are prone to karmic offenses, it advises them to believe in and accept Amitabha's deliverance and aspire to rebirth in his Pure Land.

Collection's major contribution to Pure Land thought is its classification of the Dharma into the schools of the Sacred Path and the Pure Land School.

Accommodating itself to the era and its prevailing conditions, this categorization notes that in the iniquitous Age of Dharma Decline, “only Pure Land provides a way” to achieve liberation. It highlights the advantageous timeliness of the Pure Land teachings, the inevitability of their arising according to circumstances, and their sustainability. Indeed, it heralds the formal establishment of the Pure Land School.

In terms of Pure Land teaching, this text inherits and extends the basic principle since Nagarjuna's time of “name-recitation according to [Amitabha's] Fundamental Vow, and rebirth [in the Land of Bliss] and achievement of Buddhahood.”

D. Commentary on the *Contemplation Sutra* (4 fascicles)

Master Shandao bequeathed five works to posterity, totaling nine fascicles. One of them, the four-fascicle *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra*, contains the core principles on which the Pure Land School was founded. It is known as the “main commentary,” or the “part on interpretation”; it concerns itself with teachings.

The remaining four works in five fascicles – *Dharma School of Contemplation and Recitation*, *In Praise of Dharma Activities*, *In Praise of the Rites of Rebirth* and *In Praise of Pratyutpanna* (“in the presence of the Buddhas”) – complement the main commentary. They set out the practices of the Pure Land School and are called the “supplementary commentaries” or the “part on rites”; their focus is on practice.

Hence the main commentary is centered on the teachings and puts the mind at ease, while the supplementary texts describe the forms of practice. The two portions support and complement each other. Both teachings and practices are now complete, and nothing is lacking in terms of settling the mind and beginning practice. Pure Land is firmly established as a school.

Regarding the five kinds of Primary Practices, *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra* speaks mainly of the karma of assurance – recitation of Amitabha Buddha's name. (“Karma of assurance” is also known as “karma of assured rebirth.”) *In Praise of Dharma Activities* is concerned with the Primary Practice of scripture recitation, *Dharma School of Contemplation and Recitation* with that of contemplation, *In Praise of the Rites of Rebirth* with reverential actions, and *In Praise of Pratyutpanna* with praise and offerings.

Master Shandao's *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra* is the founding text of the Pure Land School. The work, which explains the *Contemplation Sutra* in detail, is generally called the *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra, in Four Fascicles*. It is also known variously as *Commentary on the Contemplation of Infinite Life Sutra*, the *Definitive Commentary* and the *Commentary of Verification*. Other names include *Meaning of the Contemplation Sutra*, *Essence of the Contemplation Sutra* and *Commentary on the Meaning of the Contemplation Sutra*. From the profusion of names, we can see that the text was often cited and highly esteemed.

Its general title is *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra*. Its four parts are respectively called "Fascicle 1: Section on the Underlying Meaning of the *Contemplation Sutra*," "Fascicle 2: Meaning of the Introduction to the *Contemplation Sutra*," "Fascicle 3: Meaning of Meditative Practices in the Main Part of the *Contemplation Sutra*," and "Fascicle 4: Meaning of Non-Meditative Practices in the Main Part of the *Contemplation Sutra*." In short form, they are "Section on the Underlying Meaning," "Meaning of the Introduction," "Meaning of Meditative Virtues" and "Meaning of Non-Meditative Virtues."

The "Section on the Underlying Meaning" precedes the textual explication of the *Contemplation Sutra*. It makes known the basic principles of the sutra as a whole. The other three fascicles provide a detailed interpretation of the text. "Meaning of the Introduction" explains the substance of the sutra's introductory section. "Meaning of Meditative Virtues" illuminates the 13 contemplations described in the main part of the sutra. And "Meaning of the Non-Meditative Virtues" explicates the nine levels of rebirth in the main part, as well as the circulation part.

The chief purpose of the *Commentary* is to rectify the misunderstandings, past and present, of the *Contemplation Sutra*. It opens up the Pure Land teachings extensively, enabling all five Dharma vehicles to converge in the Pure Land's Realm of Rewards. Its method is "initially to explain the two, and ultimately to merge them into the one." That is, it begins with a "classification into the Path of Importance and the Path of the Great Vow," and ends by "abandoning the Path of Importance and adopting the Path of the Great Vow." This process is a thread that runs throughout the *Commentary*.

In other words, the two teachings of the two Buddhas, Shakyamuni and Amitabha, finally converge in the single teaching of Amitabha Buddha. The paths of Importance and of the Great Vow, eventually merge into the Great Vow. The two schools of recitation and contemplation fuse into Amitabha-recitation. The Primary Practices and the Miscellaneous Practices end up with the Primary Practices. And the karma of assurance and supporting karma culminate in the karma of assurance.

The *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra* makes four key contributions to the establishment of the Pure Land School:

i. Classification into the Path of Importance and the Path of the Great Vow

The Pure Land School is divided into the Path of Importance, in which adherents dedicate the merit from their meditative and non-meditative practices towards rebirth in the Land of Bliss, and the Path of the Great Vow, where practitioners achieve rebirth directly by reciting Amitabha Buddha's name exclusively. The Path of Importance is seen as an expedient means of inducing beings to tread the Path of the Great Vow.

This classification opens a channel through which practitioners of the Sacred Path and of worldly virtues can enter into Amitabha-recitation according to Amitabha's Fundamental Vow. It completes the structure of Pure Land teaching and extends the inclusive capabilities of the Pure Land School.

ii. Classification into the Primary Practices and the Miscellaneous Practices

Undertakings that are directly related to Amitabha Buddha's Pure Land are called the Primary Practices. There are five categories: exclusive reading and recitation of the Three Pure Land Sutras (Primary Practice of scripture recitation), exclusive reflection on of the splendors of the Land of Bliss (Primary Practice of reflection), exclusive veneration of Amitabha Buddha (Primary Practice of reverential actions), exclusive recitation of Amitabha's name (Primary Practice of name-recitation), and exclusive acclamation of, and offerings to, Amitabha Buddha (Primary Practice of praise and offerings).

All other practices, by themselves, are unrelated to Amitabha's Pure Land. Only if their merit is dedicated towards rebirth is a connection established. Therefore they are known as "Miscellaneous Practices."

The Primary Practices ensure rebirth, which is uncertain with the Miscellaneous Practices.

This categorization into the Primary and Miscellaneous undertakings is a yardstick for Pure Land practice, a golden rule.

iii. Classification into the Karma of Assurance and Supporting Karma

Of the five Primary Practices, it is the fourth – name-recitation – that is the decisive karma (action) for rebirth in the Land of Bliss. It is called the "karma of assurance" because it accords with the vow of Amitabha Buddha. The other four Primary Practices are "supporting karma."

As a result of the classifications into the Primary and Miscellaneous practices and into the karma of assurance and supporting karma, Amitabha-recitation according to the Fundamental Vow becomes the transcendent practice within the entire Dharma. For a Pure Land practitioner, "single-minded, exclusive recitation" is the ultimate benchmark.

iv. The Principle of Ordinary Beings Entering the Realm of Rewards

Amitabha is classified as a *sambhogakaya* (reward-body) Buddha, and his Land of Bliss is a Realm of Rewards. By reciting his name, ordinary beings are carried by the power of his Fundamental Vow directly to the Realm of Rewards.

This doctrine is absent in all other Dharma schools; it is exclusive to Pure Land.

The "classification into the Path of Importance and the Path of the Great Vow" places the Pure Land teachings within Amitabha's Great Vow, or Fundamental Vow. The categorizations into the "Primary and Miscellaneous practices" and the "karma of assurance and supporting karma" determine that Pure Land practice is name-recitation. And the "principle of ordinary beings entering the Realm of Rewards" affirms that Pure Land teaching and practice

are aimed at beings with ordinary capabilities, with their benefit being direct entry into the Realm of Rewards.

The *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra* therefore makes clear the targets, teachings, practice and benefits of an entire school. It establishes the central principle of the Pure Land School: “Name-recitation according to Amitabha’s Fundamental Vow, and the rebirth of ordinary beings in the Pure Land’s Realm of Rewards.”

E. Dharma School of Contemplation and Recitation (1 fascicle)

The full name of the scripture is *Dharma School that Contemplates and Recites the Boundless Samadhi Virtues of Amitabha Buddha’s Characteristics*. It means that the virtues of Amitabha’s attributes are as vast as the ocean, without limit. Whether we contemplate or recite them, we gain immeasurable merit. The text’s abbreviated name is *Dharma School of Contemplation and Recitation*.

The aim of the work is to guide practitioners who enjoy contemplating or reciting Amitabha’s name with a meditative mind, towards name-recitation according to the Fundamental Vow. Its content deals with an occasional practice. Of the Five Primary Practices, it specially explains the practice of reflection, or meditation, helping people enter into the karma of assurance (name-recitation).

The book can be divided into three main parts. The first is the “Section on *Samadhi* Practices,” which explains the methods of practicing to achieve *samadhi* (perfect concentration) of Amitabha-contemplation and *samadhi* of Amitabha-recitation. Then comes the “Section on the Merit and Virtues of Five Kinds of Karma.” It explains that Amitabha-recitation contains the merit and

benefits of five types of augmentative karma: elimination of karmic offenses, support and protection by sacred beings, the ability to see Amitabha Buddha, coverage by his rebirth vow, and realization of rebirth in the Pure Land. It ends by urging practitioners to recite Amitabha’s name exclusively.

Within the “Section on the Merit and Virtues of Five Kinds of Karma,” the most important part, in doctrinal terms, is titled “Illuminating the Meaning of Five Kinds of Augmentative Karma, According to the Sutras,” especially its “embrace of sentient beings” sub-section.

Moreover, the work discusses the methods of supportive recitation as someone approaches death. It also makes clear the benefits in this life of Amitabha-recitation, such as eradication of negative karma, support and protection by sacred beings, longevity and preservation from unexpected harm. It has great influence on Pure Land practitioners.

F. In Praise of Dharma Activities (2 fascicles)

In Praise of Dharma Activities has three sub-titles. In Fascicle 1, the opening sub-title is “In Praise of the Dharma Practices of Sutra-Transmission, Following the Path and Aspiring to Rebirth in the Pure Land,” and the closing one is “*In Praise of Dharma Activities* of the Western Pure Land.” In Fascicle 2, both the opening and closing sub-titles are called “In Praise of the Dharma Practices of Contentedly Following the Path, Sutra-Transmission and Aspiring to Rebirth in the Pure Land.”

In abbreviated form, the work is titled *In Praise of Dharma Activities*, or *In Praise of Pure Land Dharma Practices*. It provides guidance on reading or reciting the *Amitabha Sutra* and spells out the norms relating to Amitabha-

recitation during circumambulation; adherents can seek rebirth on the basis of these Dharma practices.

The text teaches an interim practice. Of the five Primary Practices, it focuses on the practice of scripture recitation, thereby facilitating entry into the karma of assurance (name-recitation).

In Praise of Dharma Activities consists of three parts. They are the opening section on practice, the main section on sutra-transmission, and the concluding section on practice. With the main section on sutra-transmission as its core, the work divides the *Amitabha Sutra* into 17 segments and appends some laudatory text to each, thus explicating the sutra. It has always been highly valued.

For example, in explaining the “Passage on the Causes of Rebirth” the work says:

The Land of Bliss is a realm of unconditioned nirvana;

It’s hard to be reborn there by practicing assorted virtues according to circumstances.

The Tathagata selects the key method –

He teaches us to recite Amitabha’s name with two-fold exclusivity.

This is the well-known “*Gatha* on Rebirth in the Realm of Rewards Through Name-Recitation.” As the Land of Bliss is a domain of unconditioned nirvana, it is a Realm of Rewards. The work explains “having few virtuous roots and meritorious blessings” as “practicing assorted virtues according to circumstances” (i.e., the meditative and non-meditative practices in the *Contemplation Sutra*). And it interprets “holding fast to his [Amitabha’s] name,

single-mindedly and without deviation” as “reciting Amitabha’s name with two-fold exclusivity.”

At the end there is a *dharani* of invocation, stating that at the special behest of patrons, the assembly should undertake sutra-reading and Amitabha-recitation together, and conferring blessings upon them. These are Dharma activities that draw the assembly of believers together in collective practice.

G. In Praise of the Rite of Rebirth (2 fascicles)

The full name of the work is *Gatha in Praise of the Rites of Rebirth*. Its shortened form is *In Praise of the Rites of Rebirth*, or *In Praise of the Rites*; it is also known as *In Praise of the Rites of the Six Periods*. The book’s aim is to persuade all sentient beings to seek rebirth in the Land of Bliss. Its content divides a day into six periods – morning, mid-day, afternoon, early-night, mid-night and late-night – and teaches the rites of acclamatory chanting and penitence appropriate to the periods.

The work expounds a regular practice. Of the five Primary Practices, it concentrates particularly on the practice of reverential actions, thereby facilitating access to the karma of assurance (name-recitation).

The text comprises three sections – the introduction, main acclamation and epilogue. The introduction and epilogue explain the aspiration to rebirth. The main acclamation describes the rituals and regulations of proper practice.

Specifically, the introduction speaks of the Pure Land School’s “settling of the mind,” “starting practice” and “forms and methods of practice.” It stresses that name-recitation according to Amitabha’s Fundamental Vow leads to easy

rebirth in the Pure Land, and it outlines the advantages and deficiencies of exclusive and mixed practice. Other highlights include Master Shandao's own "Gatha of Veneration and Praise" in the main acclamation, and the "48-character explication of the Fundamental Vow" in the epilogue.

Finally, to promote continuity of Amitabha-recitation for Pure Land practitioners, the work mentions the contemplative practice at bedtime of ten recitations of Amitabha Buddha's name, noting its great efficacy.

H. *In Praise of Pratyutpanna* (I fascicle)

The full name of the work is *In Praise of the Explication According to the Contemplation Sutra and Other Texts of the Practice Towards Rebirth of Pratyutpanna Samadhi*.

Pratyutpanna *samadhi* (perfect concentration in the presence of the Buddhas) is also called "samadhi of constant practice" or "samadhi in which Buddhas appear." It is one of the meditative practices described in the *Pratyutpanna Samadhi Sutra*. For seven to 90 days, an adherent constantly practices not sitting, not staying still and not lying down, until words, actions and thoughts converge. A state of perfect mind is achieved and the realm of Buddhas manifests, delighting both body and mind. This is also known as "seeing the Buddhas amid meditative concentration."

This text does not teach readers how to cultivate *pratyutpanna samadhi*. Rather, its aim is to explain, through such texts as the *Contemplation Sutra*, *Longer Sutra*, *Shorter Sutra* and *Pratyutpanna Samadhi Sutra*, that the significance of *pratyutpanna samadhi* lies in gaining rebirth in the Pure Land through name-recitation. Its intent is to induce practitioners of the Sacred Path

to adopt the practice of Amitabha-recitation.

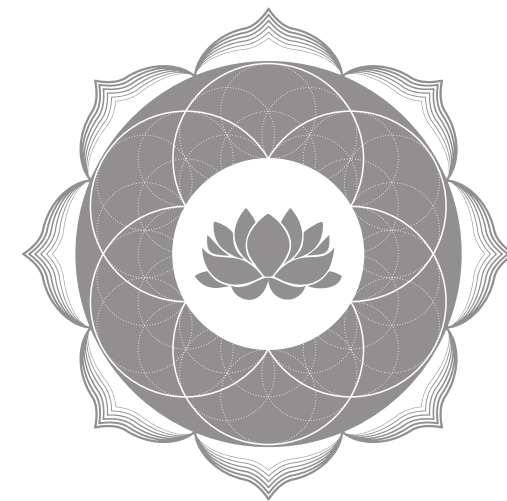
The entire text consists of an introduction and an epilogue, plus 1,126 stanzas of seven-character acclamatory *gathas*. It does not specify special methods or rites of practice, but merely praises the splendors of the beings in the Pure Land and of the environment there. By doing so, it stimulates aspiration to rebirth among practitioners, who would gain immeasurable Dharma joy. The book expounds an interim practice. Of the five Primary Practices, it specially explains the practice of praise and offerings, helping people enter into the karma of assurance (name-recitation).

In Praise of Pratyutpanna uses *gatha* form to explain the principles of the Three Pure Land Sutras, especially the *Contemplation Sutra*. It adheres generally to the order of the sutra's underlying meaning section, the 13 meditative contemplations, the nine levels of rebirth, benefits section and circulation section. So it can be compared and contrasted with the *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra*. It is thus an important work to those who study the teachings of the *Contemplation Sutra*.

Chapter

5

Settling The Mind



Section 1. Significance of Settling the Mind

A settled mind is the psychological state of Pure Land practitioners. “Settling” means to put at ease, to anchor in contentment. “Mind” refers to thoughts, or mental condition. To “settle the mind” is to anchor our minds in a secure place.

The wholesome and unwholesome actions of sentient beings, and their consequent happiness or suffering, are all induced and determined by their states of mind. If their mental condition is wholesome, their deeds will be virtuous and the consequences felicitous. If their psychological state is unwholesome, their actions will be malevolent and the effects distressing. Therefore our mental condition is the root of all our actions; it is of utmost importance to practitioners.

There are many levels of settling the mind:

- Among all things, there are the wholesome and the unwholesome. We rest our minds on the wholesome;
- Among wholesome things, there is worldly good and extra-worldly good. We fix our minds on extra-worldly virtues;
- Among extra-worldly virtues, there is the Greater Vehicle and the Lesser Vehicle. We secure our minds in the Greater Vehicle (Mahayana);

- Within the Greater Vehicle, there is non-retrogression in the defiled realm and non-retrogression in a Pure Land. We settle our minds on non-retrogression in a Pure Land;
- We can be reborn in a Pure Land of the ten directions, or the Western Pure Land. We rest our minds on the Western Pure Land;
- Among the practices towards rebirth, there are the myriad virtuous practices and there is recitation of Amitabha Buddha’s name. We set our minds on Amitabha-recitation;
- In Amitabha-recitation, there is the kind that relies on the power of Amitabha Buddha’s Fundamental Vow and the sort that depends on the power of self-cultivation. We settle our minds on a reliance on the power of Amitabha’s Fundamental Vow.

To sum up, we rest our minds on the deliverance of Amitabha Buddha according to his Fundamental Vow, consistently reciting his name and aspiring to rebirth in his Pure Land. In other words we “have faith in, and accept, Amitabha’s deliverance; recite Amitabha’s name single-mindedly; and aspire to rebirth in Amitabha’s Pure Land.” This settles the minds of Pure Land practitioners, putting them at ease.

Section 2. General Settling of the Mind

In the Pure Land School, there are two ways to settle the mind – generally and specifically.

General settling of the mind arises from putting one’s faith generally in Amitabha Buddha and admiring the Land of Bliss. It hasn’t yet led to a specific practice.

If such faith is accompanied by practice – hence completing the three elements of faith, aspiration and practice – the result is specific settling of the mind.

When a settled mind goes hand in hand with practice, the settling is specific. It comprises “Sincere Mind,” “Deep Mind” and “Mind of Merit-Dedication Towards Rebirth” – the Three States of Mind.

There are two aspects to general settling of the mind. The first is *bodhicitta* (Mind of Enlightenment) and the second is the Mind of Aversion.

A. Bodhicitta

Bodhicitta is the mind that seeks Buddhahood. Its full name is “*Anuttara-samyak-sambodhi bodhicitta*,” or a resolution to seek supreme enlightenment. It can be divided into “*bodhicitta* aspiration” and “*bodhicitta* practices.” *Bodhicitta* aspiration consists of the Four Great Vows – to deliver innumerable sentient beings, to terminate the endless afflictions, to learn the countless Dharma teachings, and to accomplish the supreme path of the Buddha. The *bodhicitta* practices are the Six Paramitas and myriad virtues relating to generosity, observance of precepts, forbearance, diligence, meditation and wisdom.

The Pure Land teachings and practice are aimed at ordinary beings. The Six Paramitas and myriad virtuous actions have always constituted the Difficult Path. They are beyond the capabilities of ordinary beings, who therefore seek rebirth in the Pure Land, hoping after rebirth to practice at once the universal virtues. Thus the *bodhicitta* of Pure Land is “*bodhicitta* aspiration,” or the determination to leave our defiled realm together with all beings, to be reborn together in the Pure Land, to learn Dharma teachings together, and to achieve Buddhahood together. These are the Four Great Vows of the Pure Land School.

By itself, *bodhicitta* could refer either to settling of the mind or to practice. In the *Contemplation Sutra*, for example, the Dharma undertakings of those who achieve the Lower Level of the Upper Tier of rebirth are *bodhicitta* practice. The *bodhicitta* we now speak of aspires to rebirth in the Pure Land in the short term and Buddhahood in the long run. It settles the mind, and is known as general settling of the mind.

B. The Mind of Aversion and Delight

This is a mental condition that loathes our despoiled realm and eagerly seeks the Pure Land. It is repelled by the many deficiencies and the illusory nature of the actual world and delights in the real, pure character of the Land of Bliss. Thus the mind of aversion and delight is the basis for the Three States of Mind as well as *bodhicitta*. The Three States fully contain the mind of aversion and delight, but the latter does not necessarily encompass the former. The scope of the Three States of Mind is narrow, while that of the mind of aversion and delight is broad. Because delighting in the Pure Land may still contain elements of delusion, doubt and non-dedication of merit, the mind of aversion and delight does not transcend the general settling of the mind.

Aversion and delight must be present simultaneously. When we row a boat, for example, we must loosen the mooring rope and then start paddling. If we have delight but not aversion, it is like pulling the oars without first untying the boat. To have aversion but not delight is like unmooring the vessel, then just looking on and not rowing. If either factor is absent, the task cannot be accomplished.

The mind of aversion and delight is truly the bedrock of the Three States of Mind. As with erecting an edifice, we must lay a solid foundation (the mind of aversion and delight) if we want our Three States to be unwavering.

Section 3. Specific Settling of the Mind

Specific settling of the mind is none other than the Three States of Mind. The three: Sincere Mind, Deep Mind, and the Mind of Merit-Dedication and Aspiration.

The Three States are of utmost importance to Pure Land practitioners. Whether we can be reborn in the Land of Bliss depends entirely on whether we fully possess the Three States of Mind. Those who do will certainly achieve rebirth. If a single State of Mind were absent, we would not be reborn in the Pure Land.

The situation is different than with *bodhicitta*. Less capable practitioners who do not resolve to achieve *bodhicitta* can still gain rebirth. Not so with the Three States of Mind. Whether their abilities are superior or inferior, practitioners must have all Three States. Otherwise, it does not matter how diligently they perform the myriad virtuous deeds; their efforts will be in vain. Thus the Three States of Mind are the most important, indispensable condition for rebirth in the Land of Bliss.

A. Sincere Mind

Sincere Mind means a genuine, true mind. It has two aspects: 1) formations of mind, and 2) nature of mind.

i. Formations of Mind

Ordinary beings habitually incline towards the false and insubstantial, not the true and substantive. What they say diverges from what they think. Their words and thoughts are not genuine; they are empty, false. Truth arises when thoughts are consistent with deeds, and the internal is aligned with the external.

The ordinary mind is false about many things, but genuineness towards rebirth in the Pure Land is necessary to achieve it. If we (internally) aspire to rebirth and (externally) practice with diligence in terms of words, deeds and thoughts, that is to have Sincere Mind. Our minds are also genuine if we focus our thoughts on Amitabha's Pure Land, recite his name and venerate him with actions such as pressing palms together. We aim our words, deeds and thoughts only at rebirth, the internal resonating with the external. We would then attain rebirth in the Pure Land. But if our thoughts are fixed on fame and fortune, our minds would be false even if we appear wise and good outwardly. Rebirth would escape us.

ii. Nature of Mind

Ordinary beings lack truthfulness. They are full of greed, anger, deviousness and hypocrisy, and their iniquitous nature is hard to penetrate. They may make positive efforts in terms of words, deeds and thoughts, but these are known as contaminated acts of virtue. They are also called empty, false deeds, not genuine, truthful actions.

By contrast, Amitabha Buddha is absolutely pure and truthful. While he was practicing the Bodhisattva path in the causal ground, his every thought at each moment, and his every action, was genuine. Everything he did, and all his aspirations, were of a truthful nature.

Not so those who act with the mind of an ordinary being. Because they are by nature greedy and angry, their painstaking, urgent mental and physical efforts to do good produce only tainted acts of merit. If they dedicate such flawed virtues towards rebirth in Amitabha Buddha's Pure Land, they will certainly not achieve it.

But if they let go of themselves and rely on Amitabha, forsaking the false for the true, and believe in his deliverance and recite his name exclusively, their rebirth is assured.

In everyday life, it is hard to tell from appearances alone if a person possesses a true mind. Only at the point of death does it become clear whether he or she is made of gold or rubble. People with true minds certainly achieve rebirth. Those who have false, contaminated minds will not.

It is to remedy the false mind that we speak of the true mind. Practitioners who aspire to rebirth in the Pure Land must forsake themselves and depend on Amitabha; their internal and external characteristics must be consistent. That is to have a true mind.

There are two aspects to true mind: the truth of benefitting ourselves and the truth of benefitting others. For a practitioner to develop Sincere Mind is the truth of benefitting the self; to help others achieve true mind is the truth of benefitting others. All practitioners who want rebirth must have a true mind of benefitting themselves. That is not so with the true mind of benefitting others. Whether one

has it depends on his or her circumstances; some do and others don't.

B. Deep Mind

Deep Mind is a mind with deep faith.

There are two dimensions to that faith: 1) with reference to the aptitude of sentient beings, and 2) with reference to the deliverance of Amitabha Buddha. This is known as the “two kinds of deep faith.”

i. Faith With Reference to the Aptitude of Sentient Beings

This is to believe deeply that we are iniquitous ordinary beings subject to endless rebirth, and that since time immemorial we have died and been reincarnated, with no hope of leaving the cycle of rebirth.

This is a special kind of faith within Pure Land teaching. Because of a belief in our own powerlessness, we can let go completely. We are able thoroughly to rely on, and believe profoundly in, the power of Amitabha Buddha's vows.

ii. Faith With Reference to the Deliverance of Amitabha Buddha

This is to believe deeply that Amitabha Buddha's 48 Vows have been accomplished; for us iniquitous ordinary beings, who otherwise would be unable to leave the rebirth cycle, they specially create the powerful karma that enables us to do so. As a result, we gain rebirth in the Pure Land, without doubt or anxiety, by depending on the strength of Amitabha's vows. Since we attain rebirth by relying on Buddha-power, we place our faith in the unfathomable power of Amitabha Buddha's vows.

The abilities and inclinations of sentient beings vary enormously. As their faces are different, so is the depth of their faith. What is the benchmark for Deep Mind? In his *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra*, Master Shandao speaks of four kinds of people who test and impair the Pure Land teachings. If our faith in rebirth remains intact despite encountering these “four kinds of detractors,” we would be firm in our Deep Mind. If our conviction is shaken, our Deep Mind would be insufficient. This is the yardstick for the depth of our faith.

The first kind of detractor is people with other, different interpretations of the Dharma, as well as practices. These are practitioners of the Sacred Path schools, who can test and dent our faith. They include people who do not believe that Amitabha-recitation in this life can lead to rebirth in the Pure Land, and who make all kinds of criticism.

The second type of detractor is Greater Vehicle adherents in the three virtuous stages just before the ten levels of Bodhisattva achievement, as well as sacred beings of the Lesser Vehicle such as Arhats and Pratyekabuddhas.

The third kind comes from the ranks of advanced Bodhisattvas of the Greater Vehicle, from the first to the tenth levels.

The fourth category is the perfectly awakened ones – *Sambhogakaya* (Reward Body) and *Nirmanakaya* (Emanation Body) Buddhas.

In other words, if one should hear ordinary beings, Sravakas and Pratyekabuddhas, senior Bodhisattvas and even Buddhas say “ordinary beings, full of afflictions and negative karma, cannot be reborn in the real, pure Land of Rewards simply by reciting Amitabha's name,” one's faith that such flawed beings can assuredly gain rebirth remains unshaken, and even becomes stronger. Such a person would fully possess Deep Mind. If, under such circumstances,

faith wavers and doubts multiply about rebirth, one has not entirely developed Deep Mind.

However, the second, third and fourth kinds of detractor do not actually exist. They are hypothetically listed so as to strengthen faith and combat doubt.

Doubt consists of skepticism about the Dharma as well as self-doubt. The former means doubting that Amitabha-recitation can lead to rebirth in the Pure Land. A doubter might say, “Recitation involves only six characters [*Namo Amitabha Buddha*]. Even a three-year-old can do it. How can such a simple act allow ordinary beings to achieve such a grand design as rebirth in the lofty, marvelous Land of Bliss?”

Those who doubt themselves question neither the teaching of Amitabha-recitation nor the Fundamental Vow of Amitabha Buddha. But they consider themselves wicked, inconsequential ordinary beings who, despite reciting Amitabha’s name, aren’t likely to gain rebirth in the Pure Land.

It is to overcome doubt about self and the Dharma that we speak of the two kinds of deep faith – with reference to the aptitude of sentient beings, and to the deliverance of Amitabha Buddha.

How is deep faith obtained? There are two ways: it can be established in the context of persons, and in the context of practice.

i. Establishing Faith in the Context of Persons

“Iniquitous ordinary beings will be reborn [in the Pure Land] by reciting [Amitabha’s] name.” This was stated not by any person but by Shakyamuni, the supremely enlightened and surpassingly compassionate one. And Shakyamuni

wasn’t the only Buddha who said so; the teaching was spoken and corroborated by all Buddhas.

Because it was taught by the Buddhas, it cannot be impaired by whatever people say. It can implant in our minds an unwavering faith.

ii. Establishing Faith in the Context of Practice

There are many types of practice relating to rebirth in the Pure Land – miscellaneous practices, primary practices, Amitabha-recitation. We can gain rebirth by dedicating their resultant merit. The practice of Amitabha-recitation is the karma (action) of assurance, being the one cited in Amitabha Buddha’s Fundamental Vow. By reciting the name of Amitabha exclusively, we are assured of rebirth in the Pure Land by the power of his Fundamental Vow. It is, in fact, the ultimate practice, transcending all doubt.

C. Mind of Merit-Dedication and Aspiration

To dedicate, with genuine and deep faith, all past and present virtuous roots of our own making and from delighting in those of others, towards rebirth in the Pure Land – that is to have the Mind of Merit-Dedication and Aspiration.

Our virtuous actions and cultivation of wholesome roots all have their individual karmic effects. Now we dedicate them collectively towards rebirth in the Land of Bliss. This is the Mind of Merit-Dedication and Aspiration.

In general, to carry along wholesome roots while seeking rebirth in the Pure Land is known as the Mind of Merit-Dedication. To aspire directly to rebirth is called the Mind of Aspiration. The Five Paths of Invocation put them under the

path of aspiration and the path of merit-dedication. Combined, they are known as a single Mind of Merit-Dedication and Aspiration.

However, those who practice Amitabha-recitation exclusively do not dedicate merit from miscellaneous practices other than such recitation. Rather, they dedicate the virtuous roots nurtured before they began exclusively reciting the name of Amitabha Buddha. Since they now recite exclusively, their assorted good deeds are folded into Amitabha-recitation, becoming one entity. That's because apart from Amitabha-recitation, they do not consciously focus on the miscellaneous virtues.

Moreover, we dedicate not only virtuous roots of our own making, but also those planted by others that we took delight in. The latter do not mean good deeds we could have performed, but didn't out of laziness, or donations we failed to make because of our stinginess. They refer to situations where the conditions weren't there for us to do good, but we were deeply delighted by such acts of others as if they were our own. When we rejoice in the actions of others, it is the same as nurturing the virtuous roots ourselves.

Merit-dedication also takes on the forms of "departure" and "return" (details in the next chapter, "Five Paths of Invocation"). When we cultivate merit and dedicate it towards our own rebirth in the Pure Land, that is called merit-dedication of departure. Merit-dedication of return is when we resolve to come back to defiled realms to deliver karmically connected beings after being reborn in the Land of Bliss.

To sum up, the Mind of Merit-Dedication and Return is a mental state of yearning for rebirth in the Pure Land, with no retrogression.

Though the scriptures speak of Three States of Mind, it doesn't mean there

are actually three separate and independent mental states. The three are merely descriptions from different perspectives of the same mentality of relying on Amitabha Buddha and aspiring to rebirth in his Pure Land. It is to stress the genuine nature of this aspiration to rebirth that the texts talk about Sincere Mind. And they refer to Deep Mind only to highlight the unwavering character of such an aspiration.

To achieve anything, our minds must first be genuine, not false. So we speak first of Sincere Mind. Our minds may be genuine, but if others can make us waver or confused, we still wouldn't be able to attain our goal. The next topic is Deep Mind and its underlying resolve. How is this genuine and resolute mind inclined? The following issue is the Mind of Merit-Dedication and Aspiration.

In other words, the first thought is to let go of ourselves and rely on Amitabha Buddha, establishing a resonance between the internal and the external. That is Sincere Mind. When this genuine mind becomes firm and unshakable, its name transforms into Deep Mind. If this sincere and unwavering mind then turns towards the Pure Land, it is called the Mind of Merit-Dedication and Aspiration. The *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra* says, "**with a resolute and genuine mind (Deep Mind and Sincere Mind), we dedicate merit and aspire**" to rebirth in the Land of Bliss (Mind of Merit-Dedication and Aspiration). So the Three States of Mind are really a single condition of mind – to rely on Amitabha Buddha and aspire to rebirth in his Pure Land. The former leads to the latter, while the latter embraces the former.

The substance of this single-minded dependence on Amitabha and aspiration is sincere and without falsehood; it is called genuine mind. In terms of form, it is resolute and immovable, and known as Deep Mind. As for function, it aspires consistently to rebirth, throughout a lifetime. This is termed the Mind of Merit-Dedication and Aspiration.

To counter insincerity, we speak of genuine mind. To mitigate doubt, we explain Deep Mind. And to correct a lack of dedication and aspiration, we expound the Mind of Merit-Dedication and Aspiration.

Each of the three states of mind can be discussed from the perspective of Amitabha Buddha, as well as the viewpoint of sentient beings. For his part, Amitabha genuinely, resolutely dedicates his virtues and merit to iniquitous ordinary beings, wishing to deliver them all through rebirth in his Pure Land. As ordinary beings return to Amitabha, their minds become the same as the Buddha's. Hence we speak of Sincere Mind, Deep Mind and the Mind of Merit-Dedication and Aspiration.

From the standpoint of ordinary beings, there are the horizontal Three States of Mind and the vertical Three States of Mind. "Horizontal" means there is no sequencing, as the three states are present simultaneously. "Vertical" admits to sequencing – in the order of Sincere Mind, Deep Mind and the Mind of Merit-Dedication and Aspiration.

Moreover, there are the Three States of Mind relating to wisdom and the Three States of Mind relating to practice. To understand the meaning of the three states through texts and aspire to achieve them is known as the Three States of Mind relating to wisdom. If we know neither the relevant texts nor the meaning of the three states, yet recite Amitabha Buddha's name consistently, we would attain the three states naturally. This is called the Three States of Mind relating to practice.

Once we have established the Three States of Mind, we will no longer regress on the path to Buddhahood. The reasons: Amitabha's compassionate dedication of merit, his potent support, the embrace of his light, the merging of Amitabha and the sentient being, and the protection and assistance of all

the Buddhas. In the words of Master Shandao, **"those who are embraced by [Amitabha's] light will not retrogress"** and **"their minds are like diamonds."** If someone retreats, we can be sure that he or she has not attained the Three States of Mind.

Master Shandao explains *"Namo Amitabha Buddha"* as follows:

To say "Namo" is to entrust our lives; it also means to dedicate merit and aspire to rebirth.

To say "Amitabha Buddha" is to express such sentiments through practice.

The significance is that we will certainly attain rebirth.

"To entrust our lives" is Sincere Mind and Deep Mind, while "dedicate merit and aspire to rebirth" is the Mind of Merit-Dedication and Rebirth. The subject of the entrusting and aspiration is represented by *"Namo,"* while their object is *"Amitabha Buddha."* A merger of subject and object, the name *Namo Amitabha Buddha* fully contains the Three States of Mind. That being so, the scriptures say **"those who attain the Three States of Mind are assured of rebirth in [Amitabha's] realm."**

A person who consistently recites Amitabha Buddha's name will naturally have all Three States. When we speak of "establishing faith in the context of practice," we mean Amitabha-recitation, not the other practices. The faith that is established is faith in the certainty of rebirth in the Pure Land.

Benefitting both self and others, the Three States of Mind are part of the Mahayana mentality. They include Amitabha-recitation as well as the various

virtuous deeds. Even so, Amitabha-recitation is the practice mentioned in the Fundamental Vow of Amitabha Buddha. His six-character name, genuine and pure, is uncontaminated by the greed and anger of ordinary beings. As a result, its recitation assures rebirth.

The other practices aren't cited in the Fundamental Vow and are sullied by beings' greed and anger. They are tainted virtues, false and insubstantial practices. Normally, they wouldn't enable practitioners to gain rebirth in the real, pure Realm of Rewards in the Land of Bliss. But if their practice is accompanied by the Three States of Mind, they will achieve such rebirth.

When the Three States of Mind are anchored in Amitabha-recitation, they constitute the mind of recitation. In this way, the Three States draw the various virtuous practices into the orbit of Amitabha-recitation. Small, contaminated virtues are transformed into great, pure merit, ensuring rebirth. Consider a river that's nearly dry from prolonged drought. If a single drop of its water enters the ocean, it would take on the depth and vastness of the latter.

We should thus know that rebirth through the various virtuous practices stems not from the merits of such actions themselves, but from the Three States of Mind being rooted in Amitabha-recitation, hence taking on the virtues and merit of the six-character name. As Master Shandao explains:

Of all the good and evil ordinary beings reborn in the Pure Land, there are none who do not rely on the power of Amitabha Buddha's Great Vow as an augmentative cause [of rebirth]...

The passages on meditative and non-meditative virtues in this sutra [the *Contemplation Sutra*] underscore only that exclusive name-recitation leads to rebirth ...

Though preceding passages spoke of the merits of the meditative and non-meditative virtues, the Buddha's underlying wish is that sentient beings recite Amitabha's name single-mindedly.

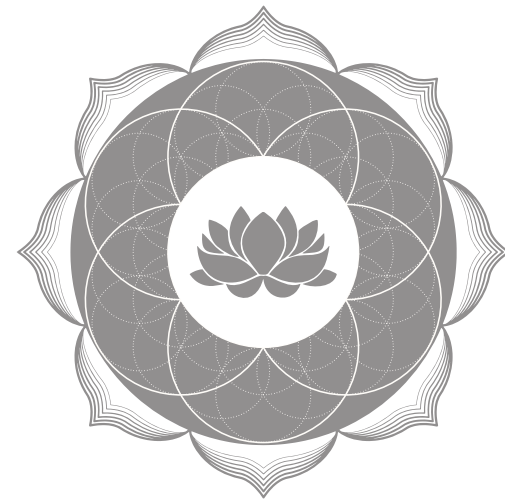
Therefore we should realize that the Three States of Mind are the secret key to rebirth, and that name-recitation is a magical elixir that purges us of poisons.

In essence, to reflect on Amitabha Buddha's deliverance and to recite his name is to possess the Three States. The great task of rebirth in the Pure Land would be accomplished.

Chapter

6

Starting Practice



Section 1. The Significance of Starting Practice

Having settled our minds, we take action by means of thoughts, words and deeds. This is called starting practice.

A settled mind arises from an acknowledgement of faith, and practice is the action we take to implement it. “Settling the mind” and “starting practice” are synonymous with “undertaking a resolution” and “self-cultivation.”

The Three States of Mind discussed in the previous chapter constitute settling of the mind. Now, as we prepare for practice, we focus on the primary and miscellaneous practices, and the karma of assurance and supporting karma.

With either a settled mind or practice alone, we could not achieve our goal. Only when both are present can we attain the great benefit of rebirth in the Pure Land. A settled mind and practice are like the eyes and the feet respectively of a practitioner. If our walking is guided by a discerning perspective, we will reach a cool, refreshing place.

A settled mind can support and safeguard practice, and vice versa. The two are neither one nor separate – like a pearl and its sheen. Without the pearl, there is no luster; if the shine is absent, there is no pearl.

Even so, because beings have disparate capabilities and inclinations, there are temporal differences relating to settling the mind and practice. Those with the horizontal Three States of Mind settle their minds and practice simultaneously. Those with the vertical Three States of Mind settle their minds first, then start practice.

Section 2. Primary and Miscellaneous Practice

Practice can generally be divided into primary and miscellaneous practices.

“Primary” and “miscellaneous” are with reference to the goal of rebirth in the Land of Bliss. “Primary” means pure and direct. Practices that relate purely to Amitabha Buddha and the Land of Bliss, and have a direct connection with them, are called primary practices. There are five types. Known as the Five Kinds of Primary Practice, they are described below.

“Miscellaneous” means impure, not primary. They carry the twin connotations of “mixed” and “diluted.” In terms of karmic consequences, such practices cover everything from the three human and celestial vehicles to the pure lands of the ten directions. So they are considered mixed. In the context of causes, they include all practices except those aimed at rebirth in the Western Pure Land. Therefore they are diluted. To sum up, outside the Five Kinds of Primary Practice, the various virtues and myriad practices are all miscellaneous practice.

In the Three Pure Land Sutras, primary practice is the Amitabha-recitation described in the *Longer Sutra*’s passage on the Three Tiers of rebirth: **“Consistently and exclusively recite the name of the Buddha of Infinite Life [Amitabha Buddha].”** All other practices – such as taking monastic

vows, making resolutions, creating Buddha images, building stupas – are miscellaneous practices. In the *Contemplation Sutra*, primary practice is the Amitabha-recitation mentioned in its circulation section: **“Recite the name of the Buddha of Infinite Life.”** All the other meditative and non-meditative virtues are miscellaneous practices. The *Amitabha Sutra* speaks only of one to seven days of Amitabha-recitation, no other practice. Thus the *Amitabha Sutra* discusses primary practice alone and does not mention miscellaneous practice.

Further, “primary and mixed practice” and “exclusive and mixed practice” are more alike than different. The former focuses on the physical aspects of practice, while the latter emphasizes the psychological dimensions. The two overlap, however. Primary practices require exclusivity, so each of the Five Kinds of Primary Practice is described as “single-minded and exclusive.” Exclusive practice always involves primary practices. If the practice is miscellaneous, it is only called mixed practice.

There is a slight difference between “exclusive practice” and “focused and exclusive practice.” The former term can be applied to all Five Kinds of Primary Practice, to distinguish them from miscellaneous practices. “Focused,” however, can only refer to name-recitation and the karma of assurance, to differentiate it from supporting karma.

There are various interpretations of whether miscellaneous and mixed practice can lead to rebirth in the Pure Land:

One assessment says no. The reason is that the virtuous practices of ordinary beings, who are full of greed, anger and delusion, do not resonate with a realm of nirvana.

Another opinion is that's not always the case with miscellaneous practice. If the Three States of Mind are absent, rebirth is not possible. But if they are, it is possible. Even so, since the substance of miscellaneous practice is unrelated to Amitabha Buddha, it contravenes the principle of practice arising from an easy mind. Therefore it is hard to develop the Three States of Mind. With primary practice, the substance is at one with Amitabha Buddha, so it is easy to nurture the Three States. According to this explanation, rebirth is difficult through miscellaneous practice and easy from primary practice.

A third interpretation focuses on those who gain rebirth by practicing miscellaneously but with the Three States of Mind. The Three States are the same as the mind of Amitabha-recitation. Hence rebirth from this kind of miscellaneous practice results not from the merit of such practice, but from the embrace of Amitabha-recitation through the Three States of Mind.

For example, if a person cannot accomplish something by his own efforts and switches to a reliance on the King's power, he would easily complete the task. In terms of form, we could say that it is the person who finished the job. But in substance, the result stems entirely from the power of the King. According to this explication, in terms of appearances, both miscellaneous practice and Amitabha-recitation can lead to rebirth. But when we consider substance, only recitation results in rebirth.

The first interpretation is straightforward and easy to understand. The second is accommodative. The third explanation alone advocates Amitabha-recitation, while skilfully embracing the other practices.

Section 3. Five Kinds of Primary Practice

A. Recitation of Scripture

This means to read and recite the Three Pure Land Sutras. To hear others reading, reciting or explicating the Three Sutras or the treatises and commentaries of the Pure Land lineage also comes under the primary practice of scripture-recitation.

B. Reflection

This is to reflect on the splendor of the beings and the environment in the Pure Land. The beings refer to the five-*skandha* bodies of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, or main effects (of previous causes). The environment is the features of the Land of Bliss, such as the bejeweled ground, ponds, trees, buildings and palaces. Collectively they are what the bodies of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas rely on – and are thus known as dependent effects.

Reflection means to “think about” or to “observe.” It can be either of a meditative or a non-meditative nature. For example, to practice the 13 meditative contemplations with a focused mind, or to reflect on, visualize, admire and recall the splendors of the Land of Bliss with an unfocused mind –

both are considered primary practice of reflection. Ordinary beings have inferior capabilities, so unfocused reflection is more common.

C. Reverential Acts

They consist of actions venerating Amitabha Buddha.

D. Name-Recitation

This is to recite the name “Namo Amitabha Buddha.”

E. Praise and Offerings

To praise and make offerings to Amitabha Buddha. “Praise” means to express the highest acclaim for the virtues and merit of Amitabha Buddha. “To make offerings” implies doing so from a lower position to a higher one – a transfer from a humble party to an esteemed one.

While praise is limited to words, offerings involve thoughts, words and deeds. Offerings of flowers and lights, for example, are physical actions, while reciting the words “with flowers in hand, we regularly make offerings” is a verbal act. To think of making a gift of flowers is a mental offering.

If praise and offerings are considered two separate practices, they expand to become the Six Primary Practices. Yet the two are generally considered as one, so we refer to Five Kinds of Primary Practice.

Section 4. Karma of Assurance and Supporting Karma

The Five Kinds of Primary Practice can be further classified into the karma of assurance and supporting karma. The fourth, the primary practice of name-recitation, is the karma of assurance, while the other four are supporting karma.

“Karma of assurance” comes from the “Meaning of the Non-Meditative Practices” section of Master Shandao’s *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra*:

To recite Amitabha’s name single-mindedly and without variation, whether walking, standing, sitting or lying down, whether for long or short periods – that is the karma of assurance. It is so because it accords with Amitabha Buddha’s vow.

Karma of assurance contrasts with supporting karma.

“Assurance” carries the twin connotations of “chosen” and “decisive.” “Chosen” derives from a choice made by Amitabha Buddha, when he was Bhikkhu Dharmakara in the causal ground. From vows made by 21 billion Buddhas, he uniquely selected the practice of name-recitation for ordinary beings as the primary cause of rebirth in his Pure Land. Moreover, he made his vow of rebirth through Amitabha-recitation – the 18th, or Fundamental, Vow. So name-recitation is the practice chosen by Amitabha for rebirth. As for “decisive,”

since name-recitation is the practice Amitabha Buddha chose in his Fundamental Vow, it decides and ensures rebirth.

With regards to Amitabha, the operative meaning is “chosen”; for sentient beings, it is “decisive.” Because the practice of Amitabha-recitation was chosen in the Fundamental Vow, it assures rebirth. And because it is karma (action) that makes rebirth certain, it was selected in the Fundamental Vow. In this way the two meanings become one.

Supporting karma can help practitioners turn their minds towards name-recitation according to the Fundamental Vow. That’s why they are called supporting karma. In a broader sense, there are more than four kinds of primary supporting practices. There is supporting karma of the same category, and supporting karma of different categories.

Supporting karma of the same category refers to the four kinds of primary practice, other than name-recitation. In character, these four, like the Amitabha-recitation they support, are practices in which practitioners entrust themselves entirely to Amitabha Buddha. They are therefore supporting karma of the same category.

Practitioners who are consistently diligent in reciting Amitabha’s name exclusively, whether silently or out loud, have no need of supporting karma. Those who are lazy and are bored by the pure and simple act of repeated Amitabha-recitation, need to practice supporting karma, which encourages them towards the karma of assurance.

Consider the reading and recitation of the Three Pure Land Sutras. The practitioner will see that they explain the virtues of “being embraced by [Amitabha’s] light,” or the benefits of “eliminating karmic offenses and being

reborn” in the Pure Land. Everywhere the Three Sutras praise the effects of Amitabha-recitation. This naturally fortifies the practitioner’s determination to recite. Thus the reading and recitation of texts helps a person enter into Amitabha-recitation.

When practitioners reflect on the beings and environment of the Land of Bliss, their minds will tune in to the splendors of that realm. The characteristics and light of Amitabha Buddha permeate all worlds in the ten directions, embracing only beings who recite his name and never letting go. As practitioners think about this, their slackness will naturally fall away and they will recite diligently.

When engaging in acts of veneration, we gaze upon the dignified visage of Amitabha Buddha. We reflect on the majesty of his myriad virtues – all with the sole purpose of delivering us. Our wish to be reborn in the Pure Land will strengthen and become more earnest. Since no practice surpasses Amitabha-recitation in terms of achieving rebirth, a stronger aspiration for the latter will boost our efforts at the former.

Praising the virtues of Amitabha Buddha naturally reinforces our wish to see him. That in turn enhances our resolve to recite his name.

Supporting karma of different categories include practices mentioned in the *Longer Sutra*’s description of the Three Tiers of rebirth – taking monastic vows, making resolutions, creating Buddha images and building stupas. They also include the three meritorious actions in the *Contemplation Sutra*. Though these are actually miscellaneous practices, they are called supporting karma insofar as they help lead practitioners towards Amitabha-recitation. Because their character differs from that of Amitabha-linked practices, they are known as supporting karma of different categories.

Preoccupied with work and personal matters, lay practitioners may encounter many obstacles and find it hard to undertake Amitabha-recitation with a tranquil mind. Monastics, who can find ease of mind amid serene natural surroundings, can do so more readily. Therefore taking vows is karma that supports Amitabha-recitation.

Further, the bustle and clamor of a worldly environment are not conducive to practice and recitation becomes slack. But if we go to a Dharma center, the images there inspire reverence, facilitating focused recitation. That is how creation of stupas and images helps Amitabha-recitation.

If we do not undertake resolutions and fail to reflect on our own suffering and that of others, we will tire easily in our recitation. But if we vow to help ourselves and others, compassionately aware of suffering, we naturally recite with enthusiasm. In this way, resolving to achieve *bodhicitta* assists Amitabha-recitation.

We should also be aware how the other practices support recitation.

Section 5. Advantages and Disadvantages of Primary and Miscellaneous Practices

The advantages and disadvantages of primary and miscellaneous practice, as well as of exclusive and mixed practice, stem from their substance, not from the capabilities or diligence of practitioners.

With respect to primary and miscellaneous practice, there are five kinds of advantage and deficiency. Regarding exclusive and mixed practice, there are thirteen levels.

A. Five Kinds of Advantage and Disadvantage

In the “Meaning of the Non-Meditative Practices” section of his *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra*, Master Shandao explains that there are five advantages to primary practice and five disadvantages to miscellaneous practice. They are known as the “five types of advantages and deficiencies” or “five levels of comparison.”

i. Intimacy vs. Remoteness

One who undertakes the primary practices is very close to Amitabha

Buddha. Hence they are known as intimate practices.

On the other hand, a person who chooses miscellaneous practices is detached from Amitabha Buddha. So those are called remote practices.

ii. Proximity vs. Distance

One who undertakes the primary practices is very near Amitabha Buddha. They are therefore known as proximate practices.

Somebody who chooses miscellaneous practices is far away from Amitabha Buddha. They are thus called distant practices.

At first glance, it seems that there is little to distinguish within the pairings “intimacy and proximity,” and “remoteness and distance.” But in the “Meaning of the Meditative Practices” section of his *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra*, Master Shandao defines “intimacy” and “proximity” to indicate the differences between them.

“Intimacy” is with reference to the mind, to psychology. Though our world is 10 trillion Buddha-realms away from the Land of Bliss, Amitabha and the practitioner constantly think of, and never forsake, each other. Therefore they are intimate. “Proximity” means close by and refers to physical location. Amitabha Buddha comes often to protect and support the practitioner, like a shadow following its form. They are in the same place and do not leave each other for a moment. This is how “intimacy” differs from “proximity.”

iii. Continuity vs. Discontinuity

“Continuity” means without interruption or separation. The thoughts of one who performs the primary practices are always entwined with those of Amitabha

Buddha. That’s why such practices are called continual.

On the other hand, the thoughts of someone who undertakes miscellaneous practices are often disconnected from those of Amitabha Buddha. Such practices are termed discontinuous.

iv. Non-Dedication of Merit vs. Dedication of Merit

Since the substance of the primary practices incline inherently towards the Western Pure Land, they do not require merit-dedication to become karma that leads to rebirth there. So they are known as practices characterized by non-dedication of merit – though that doesn’t mean they absolutely cannot be dedicated.

As for people who undertake miscellaneous practices, the settling of their minds and their practice are not aligned with each other. If the resulting merit isn’t specially dedicated, they cannot constitute a cause for rebirth in the Land of Bliss. They become that only after such dedication. Hence they are called practices of merit-dedication.

v. Purity vs. Dilution

The primary practices are “pure,” while miscellaneous practice is “diluted.” The former lead purely to rebirth in the Land of Bliss. The latter, however, do not. They encompass the human and celestial vehicles, as well as the three sacred vehicles, and cover the Pure Lands in all directions. They are therefore “diluted.”

B. Thirteen Levels of Advantage and Disadvantage

Of those who undertake primary practices exclusively, ten out of ten, a hundred out of a hundred, will be reborn in the Pure Land. This benefit of certain rebirth is the “advantage.” Since the substance of miscellaneous practice does not resonate with Amitabha Buddha, very few such practitioners achieve the Three States of Mind. As a result, not one in a thousand gains rebirth.

That’s not to say all those who undertake miscellaneous, mixed practices will fail to attain the Three States. A looser assessment would be “of a hundred, perhaps one or two will be reborn.” But a stricter appraisal is “not one in a thousand can achieve rebirth.”

In his *In Praise of the Rite of Rebirth*, Master Shandao counts four advantages in exclusive practice and 13 disadvantages in mixed practice. But if we practice exclusively according to the levels of comparison between exclusive and mixed practice, the former would also bring 13 advantages. The following are the 13 disadvantages of miscellaneous practice (their opposites are the 13 advantages of primary practices):

i. Disoriented by assorted circumstances, the correct concept is lost

Mixed practitioners undertake miscellaneous practices and receive teachings relating to such practices. They are close to other mixed practitioners and they go to places for miscellaneous practice. Because they are disoriented by four assorted circumstances – practice, teaching, people and places – they lose the correct concept of Amitabha-recitation.

ii. No alignment with Amitabha Buddha’s Fundamental Vow

Mixed practice is not what is described in Amitabha Buddha’s Fundamental Vow, so it is not aligned with the Vow. Thus only one or two out of a hundred achieve rebirth in the Pure Land. With primary practices, a hundred of a hundred are reborn. The difference is huge.

iii. At odds with Shakyamuni Buddha’s teaching

Though the *Contemplation Sutra* speaks first of the meditative and non-meditative practices, in the end it advocates only Amitabha-recitation. From this we know that such recitation is the World-Honored One’s basic intention. Miscellaneous practice is not, so it is at odds with the Buddha’s teaching.

iv. Does not follow the words of the Buddhas

In the *Amitabha Sutra*, the Buddhas of the six directions confirm solely that sincere rebirth in the Pure Land through Amitabha-recitation is not false. Miscellaneous practice lacks such affirmation by the Buddhas. Since it does not follow the words of the Buddhas, rebirth is rare.

v. Minds neither connected nor consistent

Because the primary practices are at one with Amitabha Buddha, practitioners’ recitation is naturally consistent, without variation, and their minds are linked with the Land of Bliss. Miscellaneous practice has no direct relationship with Amitabha Buddha. Its practitioners’ minds aren’t tied to the Pure Land. So perhaps only one or two of a hundred, or even none in a thousand, gain rebirth there.

vi. Interrupted thoughts

The minds of those who undertake exclusive practice rest in the environment of the Pure Land and their thoughts are uninterrupted. Since the substance of miscellaneous practice lead in other directions, not towards the Land of Bliss, that is a disadvantage.

The fifth and sixth deficiencies seem similar but are different. “Consistent, connected recitation” is a kind of joyful seeking, which puts the mind at ease. “Thoughts” are a product of our consciousness.

vii. Dedication and aspiration neither earnest nor genuine

Though we can be reborn by dedicating the merit from miscellaneous practice, such dedication and aspiration to rebirth must be done in a resolute, genuine state of mind. If our dedication and aspiration are insufficiently genuine, deficient in Deep Mind and Sincere Mind, rebirth is not possible. This is a disadvantage.

There are two aspects. The first concerns the mind that makes the dedication. Exclusive, primary practice is intimately connected with Amitabha Buddha. Easing of the mind and practice are fully in resonance, so dedication and aspiration are earnest and genuine. Mixed practice, however, is not related to Amitabha Buddha. Thus easing of the mind and practice contradict each other. Dedication and aspiration are neither earnest nor genuine.

The second aspect relates to the practices whose merit is dedicated. Exclusive, primary practice is at one with Amitabha Buddha. Because Amitabha’s resolve to save sentient beings is earnest and genuine, practitioners take on real merit. But miscellaneous practice has nothing to do with Amitabha.

And because it is accomplished through the conditioned minds of ordinary beings, it is illusory and false, lacking real merit. The accompanying dedication and aspiration are neither earnest nor genuine.

viii. Unsettled by afflictions of greed and anger, and of various views

There are two dimensions to this. The first is that Amitabha-recitation is not contaminated by afflictions. Like a lotus flower arising from the mud, it is not sullied by the sediment. Miscellaneous practice is tainted by the sundry afflictions. Though such vexations arise in both primary and miscellaneous practice, one is contaminated and the other is not. The discrepancy is great.

The second dimension is that “greed and anger” fall within the Turbidity of Afflictions among the Five Turbidities – that is, the Five Lower Passions. The “various views” are the Five Higher Passions in the Turbidity of Views. The views are detrimental to the Four Noble Truths and their 16 associated practices, while greed and anger spoil good deeds such as offerings and the erection of stupas and images.

In mixed practice the various views arise when one is meditating, while greed and anger intrude during the performance of positive deeds. With Amitabha-recitation, the views are absent as the practice does not involve meditation. And since recitation is not the performance of deeds, so are greed and anger. Hence Amitabha-recitation does not give rise to greed, anger or the various views, while mixed practice does. The former is advantageous and the latter disadvantageous.

ix. Lacking a sense of shame and penitence

“Shame and penitence” lead us to rectify our past wrongdoings, with a sincere, aching heart.

Since afflictions arise during mixed practice, confusion follows. We are unable to focus on finer details. Because we do not know where our faults lie, we have no sense of shame or penitence. This situation stems from the eighth disadvantage. Further, those with a skewed view of emptiness and deny the law of cause and effect, have no sense of shame and penitence either. This mistake is rooted in a focus on principle; it is also a deficiency in practice.

If we adopt the primary practices, our deep faith with reference to the (inferior) aptitude of ordinary beings will lead us to “repent frequently, with every recitation of [Amitabha’s] name.”

x. Failing to recall and repay consistently the grace of the Buddhas

“The grace of the Buddhas” refers to the immense grace bestowed upon us by Amitabha Buddha and his deliverance, as well as by Shakyamuni Buddha and his admonition that we practice exclusively. If we recite the former’s name consistently in the manner of primary practice, we would be going along with Amitabha’s Fundamental Vow and proclaiming Shakyamuni Buddha’s basic intention. That is to recall and repay gratefully the great grace of the two Buddhas.

Those who undertake mixed practice do not understand the intention of the Buddhas and are in the dark about their grace. They neither recall nor repay such grace.

xi. As pridefulness swells, practice becomes entwined with fame and profit

Primary practice instills in us the conviction that we are iniquitous ordinary beings with no outstanding traits. We rely entirely on Amitabha’s deliverance for liberation from the cycle of rebirth. Pridefulness does not arise, and we do not chase after fame or fortune.

Because of deficiencies in practice, mixed practitioners may believe “I am able to learn and cultivate the precepts, meditation and wisdom,” or that “sentient beings and Buddhas are equal.” As they elevate themselves to the level of Buddhas, pridefulness swells in their hearts and they become tangled in fame and profit. This is a disadvantage.

xii. Distinctions between self and others, remoteness from fellow practitioners and Dharma friends

Those who are “full of distinctions between self and others” believe they are better than other people. Pride envelops their hearts and minds. “Fellow practitioners” share ideas and beliefs, as well as practices to end the rebirth cycle. There are three kinds of “Dharma friends”: external protectors, co-practitioners and teachers. In the present context, the term refers to teachers. The preceding “fellow practitioners” means Dharma friends who share the same practice.

Because of deficiencies in practice, mixed practitioners experience a swelling in pride. They think they are more capable than others and look down upon them. They take no delight in getting close to those who practice Amitabha-recitation exclusively.

xiii. Fondness for mixed circumstances obstructs self and others from

primary practices leading to rebirth

Mixed practitioners are inspired naturally to enjoy doing miscellaneous practice, hearing miscellaneous teachings, getting together with other miscellaneous practitioners and frequenting places for miscellaneous practice. Such fondness leads them to ingratiate themselves into mixed circumstances. This blocks them, and those they influence, from the primary practices that lead to rebirth in the Pure Land.

The 13 advantages and disadvantages apply generally to exclusive and mixed practice. All 13 may not pertain to each and every practice. At a finer level, all 13 advantages always apply to the fourth exclusive practice, name-recitation – the karma of assurance. With the other three primary practices, some advantages apply while others do not. That is also the case with the disadvantages of mixed practice: For certain practices all 13 are relevant; for others, some are not.

Pure Land practitioners need to be clear about the advantages and deficiencies of exclusive and mixed practice. They should abandon miscellaneous practice and adopt exclusive Amitabha-recitation, so as to accomplish the great task of rebirth in the Pure Land.

Section 6. Five Paths of Invocation

The Five Paths of Invocation are practices relating to rebirth in the Land of Bliss. They originate in Bodhisattva Vasubandhu's *Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land*, and Master Shandao explicates them in his *In Praise of the Rite of Rebirth*. The explanations of the Five Paths in the two works are broadly similar, though there are discrepancies in the details. Here we will discuss the Five Paths according to Master Shandao's interpretation.

The Five Paths of Invocation are the practices of reverential acts, acclamation, aspiration, reflection and merit-dedication. "Invocation" implies easing of the mind, while "path" means a route to a destination. Each of these five practices puts the mind at ease and leads to rebirth in the Pure Land. As the *Treatise on Rebirth* says, **"If good men and women accomplish the Five Paths of Invocation, they ultimately will be reborn in the Land of Peace and Joy, and see Amitabha Buddha."**

The Five Paths:

A. Bodily Karma – The Path of Reverential Acts

Single-mindedly, with palms pressed respectfully together and offerings of fragrant flowers, we venerate Amitabha Buddha. Throughout our lives, we pay respects to Amitabha alone, without mixing in other venerations. This is called the path of reverential acts.

B. Verbal Karma – The Path of Acclamation

Single-mindedly, we praise the luminous form and features of Amitabha Buddha and all sacred beings, as well as the radiant splendor of their realm.

C. Mental Karma – The Path of Reflection

Single-mindedly, we recall and reflect on the radiance of Amitabha and the sacred assembly, as well the magnificence of their land.

D. The Path of Aspiration

Everywhere and at all times, we single-mindedly and genuinely aspire to rebirth in the Pure Land while accumulating merit through our thoughts, words and deeds, whether we are walking, standing still, sitting or lying down.

E. The Path of Merit-Dedication

There are two kinds of dedication – of going forth and of returning.

Single-mindedly, we dedicate towards rebirth our own virtuous roots, as well as those we delight in of ordinary and sacred beings, sharing them with all sentient beings. This is the dedication of going forth.

If we haven't yet attained the six special powers or apprehension of no-birth and no-death, we cannot teach beings with a free and easy mind. So we aspire to be reborn in the Pure Land and, through the power of Amitabha's Fundamental

Vow, rapidly achieve the six powers and apprehension of no-birth and no-death. Then we return to this defiled realm and forevermore instruct and transform sentient beings. This is the dedication of returning.

Further, the *Treatise on Rebirth* speaks of the paths of proximity, the great assembly, home, house and the garden playground. Known as the Five Paths of Merit, they have a cause-and-effect relationship with the Five Paths of Invocation. The latter are practiced in this realm, the causal ground. They lead to the benefits deriving from rebirth in Amitabha Buddha's Pure Land. These are the Five Paths of Merit, which are consequences.

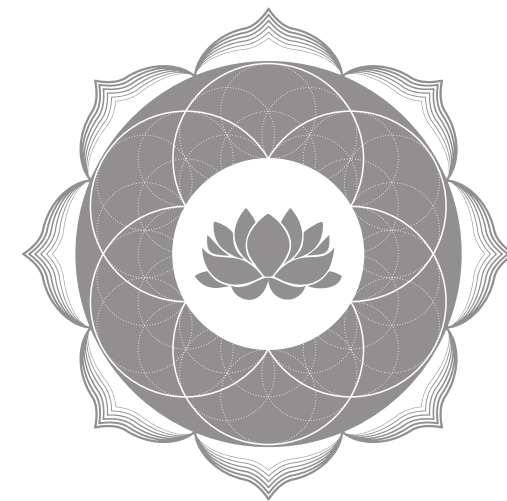
The Five Paths of Invocation are not entirely unlike the five primary practices. They intersect, but only in part. In the practices of reverential acts, acclamation (praise and offerings) and contemplation, the Five Paths of Invocation and the five primary practices are identical. The Five Paths lack recitation of scripture and name-recitation, while the primary practices do not include aspiration and merit-dedication.

If the two sets are combined, they need to be aligned in terms of thoughts, words and deeds. For example, the primary practices of scripture- and name-recitation involve verbal action, they can be merged with the path of acclamation. The paths of aspiration and of merit-dedication consist of mental acts, and can be combined with the primary practice of reflection.

Chapter

7

Forms And Methods Of Practice



Section 1. The Significance of Forms and Methods

The forms and methods are those used to practice Amitabha-recitation (the karma of assurance) and the supporting karma of the primary practices.

Rebirth in the Land of Bliss can only be accomplished when all three aspects are present: a settled mind, preparations to begin practice, and practice itself. We have already discussed the relationship and differences between settling the mind and starting practice. Now we will elaborate on the connections among the three aspects.

Practice is two-fold: It consists of the Four Cultivations and the Three Forms of Practice.

Section 2. Four Cultivations

The term “Four Cultivations” comes from the treatises section of the Tripitaka. It describes how Bodhisattvas practice in the schools of the Sacred Path. In his *In Praise of the Rite of Rebirth*, Master Shandao calls them practices necessary to the Pure Land School, explaining them as cultivations to be undertaken by ordinary beings.

The Four Cultivations are compatible with the five primary practices. For example, the latter requires all the Three States of Mind to be present simultaneously. It is the same with the former – not a single cultivation can be absent. The four are the Cultivations of Respectful Practice, Unmixed Practice, Uninterrupted Practice and Sustained Practice.

A. Cultivation of Respectful Practice

According to Master Shandao’s *In Praise of the Rite of Rebirth*, when undertaking the five primary practices and the Five Paths of Invocation, we should venerate Amitabha Buddha and his sacred assembly.

To be respectful is a mental activity, while veneration is a physical act that expresses respect. Cultivation of Respectful Practice is to show respect through mind and body.

B. Cultivation of Unmixed Practice

Not to undertake any miscellaneous practices, other than exclusive Amitabha-recitation and the other primary practices – that is the Cultivation of Unmixed Practice.

C. Cultivation of Uninterrupted Practice

“Interrupted” means “separated by.” Cultivation of Uninterrupted Practice is continually to undertake the five primary practices, uninterrupted by various other practices. It is also to avoid disruption by afflictions such as greed, anger and delusion. Yet ordinary beings cannot free themselves entirely from such vexations. If they arise, we should be aware of them and repent forthwith, purifying ourselves. In other words, we should “show penitence as soon as transgressions occur.”

D. Cultivation of Sustained Practice

“Sustained” does not necessarily mean from month to month, year to year. Cultivation of Sustained Practice is to undertake, consistently and exclusively, the five primary practices and the Five Paths of Invocation, from our initial resolution to the day we die, without cessation.

Some people make their resolutions early, others late. Even if we do so today and pass away before the day is over, it is still sustained practice so long as we do not lose our resolve in the interim.

Sustained practice applies also to the other three cultivations. We would not gain rebirth in the Pure Land if we failed to sustain our respectful, unmixed and uninterrupted practices. So we speak of sustained practice with reference to the previous three cultivations. Says Master Shandao after discussing each of those three practices, **“to do so all life long without stopping – that is Cultivation of Sustained Practice.”**

Section 3. Three Forms of Practice

The above Four Cultivations are applicable to the five primary practices and the Five Paths of Invocation. The Three Forms of Practice pertain only to the primary practice of Amitabha-recitation, not the undertakings of supporting karma. The Three Forms are Practice in Normal Times, Practice on Special Occasions and Practice as Death Approaches. We will explain them according to Master Shandao's *Dharma School of Contemplation and Recitation* and Master Genshin's *Essentials of Rebirth in the Pure Land*.

A. Practice in Normal Times

This refers to our regular recitation of Amitabha Buddha's name. It is not necessary to go into a Dharma center, wear robes or set a time period. It doesn't matter whether we recite walking, standing still, sitting or lying down, or what the circumstances – such as time and place – are. Normal practice is the daily Amitabha-recitation of monastics and laypeople, male and female, whether it is done 10,000, 30,000 or 60,000 times.

There are many variations. Several major categories:

1) In terms of sound, there are four varieties. They are recitation out loud, soft recitation, *vajra* recitation and silent recitation. Recitation out loud can be heard by others, while soft recitation resides in the space between the mouth and

the ears. In *vajra* recitation, the lips move but no sound is emitted. With silent recitation, both lips and tongue are still and the act is performed mentally. *Vajra* recitation is most easily sustainable and detailed, and least susceptible to fatigue or slippage.

2) In terms of mental approach, there is focused, exclusive recitation and scattered recitation. Focused recitation is when we leave behind our regular cares and concentrate our minds; we hear the sound of our recitation or, if it is silent, follow it with our minds. Scattered recitation is when we recite casually or habitually, while we are walking, riding transportation or doing other things that don't require close attention.

3) In terms of quantity, we can set a numerical target and recite open-endedly. Beginners are advised to do a specific number of recitations, according to their ability. The goal could range from hundreds or thousands to more than 10,000. Reciters should discipline themselves to complete them.

Practitioners should fine-tune the foregoing elements according to circumstances. They would then accomplish the karma of assurance.

B. Practice on Special Occasions

First determine a time and place. The duration could be from one to seven days, 21 days or 49 days. We should adorn the chosen Dharma center, make offerings of fragrant flowers and wear robes. Once inside the center, we should not speak, only recite the name of Amitabha Buddha. We must not converse furtively, and need not regularly perform reverential acts, recite scriptures or count beads. All we need do is recite Amitabha's name consistently and in a focused manner, our minds and our voices in resonance. With every thought,

we aspire to see Amitabha Buddha. This can be done once or thrice a year, or monthly or twice a month. It is generally known as Practice on Special Occasions; nowadays, it is often called a seven-day recitation retreat.

C. Practice as Death Approaches

This is similar in substance to Practice on Special Occasions. The latter, however, is for ordinary times, while Practice as Death Approaches occurs when someone passes away. Because of the special requirements of such an occasion, the practice takes a somewhat different form.

An image of Amitabha Buddha should be placed in a westerly direction, circumstances permitting. The dying person should face the image, so he or she can see it and visualize Amitabha's arrival: "By following Amitabha Buddha, I will assuredly be reborn in the Pure Land." The person recites Amitabha's name, together with Dharma friends. He is instructed and encouraged, and repents his remaining karmic offenses. Comforted, she develops correct, positive thoughts. This is known as assisted recitation as death approaches.

The point of death has an important influence on rebirth. Someone who possesses the Three States of Mind, has been diligent in Amitabha-recitation and whose rebirth has been assured in the present lifetime, has nothing to worry about. He or she will freely follow Amitabha Buddha to the Land of Bliss. If Dharma friends are present to help recite and provide comfort, it only adds to the joy as everyone is encouraged and inspired.

People who don't yet have faith in Amitabha Buddha, undertake mixed practice or are unable to develop the Three States of Mind may suffer from illness as they die. Delusions and severe confusion may arise as they are plagued

by negative karma, remain attached to their worldly assets or cling to their spouses.

At this perilous moment, they must rely wholly on knowledgeable Dharma friends to turn things around. We should stand beside the dying person and observe his emotional ups and downs and assess his state of mind. We should comfort him with expedient means, urging him to be weary of the suffering in the Three Realms and seek the joys of the Land of Bliss. We praise the virtues of Amitabha Buddha and explain the benefits of Amitabha-recitation. If the mind of aspiration is ignited in the person, she will forthwith follow Amitabha Buddha to the Pure Land.

According to Master Shandao, of the Three Forms of Practice, the primary one is Amitabha-recitation in normal times. In accordance with the basic tenets of the Pure Land School, it is distinguished by its easiness. For recitation during regular times requires no special rituals. Since it can be done walking, standing still, sitting or lying down, and at all times and under all circumstances, it is suitable for everyone because of its great ease. All who do not retrogress during a lifetime will certainly be reborn in the Land of Bliss.

Because of its special requirements, Practice on Special Occasions is a little more difficult. It may not suit all people, as it is organized to help those who prefer more rigorous discipline enter into Amitabha-recitation. Besides, it is not a precondition for rebirth in the Pure Land.

Practice as Death Approaches is a safety net for ordinary people at the last stage of life. However, we should not downplay the importance of developing faith and aspiration during our lifetime and over-rely on assisted recitation by others at the end.

For Amitabha-reciters, the emphasis is on fully cultivating the Three States of Mind during their regular days, practice exclusively at all times and vow not to retrogress for the rest of their lives. To do so would accord with the vows of Amitabha Buddha. Practitioners' rebirths would be assured in the present lifetime, without having to wait till death.

Many practitioners recite at specific times in the morning and evening, which constitutes Practice on Special Occasions amid Normal Times. The recitation is daily, thus Normal Times. Since it is done at pre-determined periods and a set location, it also comes under Special Occasions.

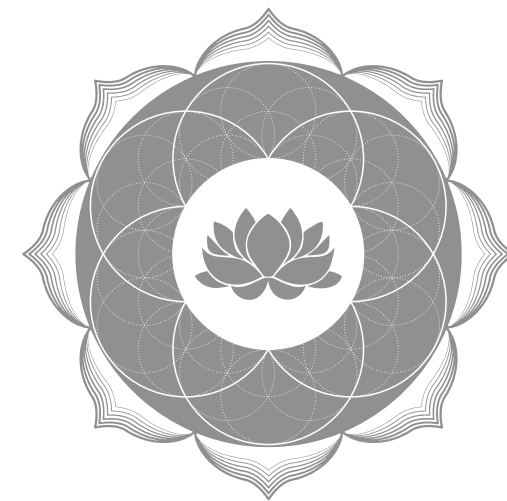
By the way, the popular practice in monasteries of morning and evening recitation sessions was established during the Ming Dynasty. Its substance is extremely diverse, and is much different from Master Shandao's advocacy of exclusive Amitabha-recitation. Practitioners of exclusive recitation do not need to adopt the ritual.

Though silent and verbalized recitation are both Amitabha-recitation, the Pure Land School favors the latter as the main practice (*details in Chapter 8*).

Chapter

8

Name-Recitation According To The Fundamental Vow



Section 1. Significance of the Fundamental Vow

The word “Fundamental” in “Fundamental Vow” has two meanings: fundamental in “cause” and in the “root.”

Fundamental in terms of “cause” refers to the resolutions undertaken by a practitioner in the causal ground. These are also known as “fundamental great vows,” “basic resolutions” or “longstanding aspirations.” They are the vows undertaken in the past by Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, before they achieved enlightenment, to save sentient beings. Because these resolutions from the causal ground have been realized, they are known in the attainment ground as “fundamental vow (or vows).”

Fundamental in the sense of “root” means the essential, underlying vow or vows. Though the minds of Bodhisattvas are expansive and their resolutions unlimited, it is this root vow that underpins them all.

“Vow” is divided into “general vow” and “specific vow.”

“General vow” refers to the resolutions common to all Bodhisattvas. They are the Four Great Vows: “I vow to deliver the innumerable sentient beings,” “I vow to terminate the endless afflictions,” “I vow to learn the countless Dharma teachings” and “I vow to accomplish the supreme path of the Buddhas.” The

first represents the aspiration to save sentient beings, while the other three signify the wish to achieve *bodhicitta* (gaining Buddhahood to deliver beings).

“Specific vow” means resolutions undertaken by Bodhisattvas according to their individual wishes. They are all different and therefore specific to each sacred being. Examples include the 48 Vows of Amitabha Buddha and the 500 Great Vows of Shakyamuni Buddha.

So there are two meanings to Amitabha Buddha’s Fundamental Vow(s) in the Pure Land School:

1. In terms of cause, they refer generally to the 48 Vows, each of which is a Fundamental Vow.
2. With reference to the root, it specifically means the 18th Vow – the “Vow of Rebirth in the Pure Land Through Amitabha-Recitation.” It is also called the First Among Fundamental Vows or the Supreme Fundamental Vow.

Section 2. Resolutions in the Causal Ground: The 48 Vows

A. Origin of the Vows

According to the *Infinite Life Sutra*, there was a king who lived in the time of Lokeshvararaja Buddha. As the monarch heard the Buddha teach the Dharma, his heart was filled with joy. At once the king resolved to achieve supreme enlightenment. He abandoned his kingdom and became a monk, and was known as Bhikkhu Dharmakara. Exceedingly talented, brave and wise, he had no equal in the world.

Bhikkhu Dharmakara went to Lokeshvararaja Buddha, knelt respectfully with pressed palms and acclaimed the Buddha. He expressed his wish to attain a luminous Buddha-body and bring forth a peerless Pure Land. He wanted to deliver all sentient beings through rebirth in his realm. Finished with his praises, he asked Lokeshvararaja Buddha to explain in detail the practices that could accomplish the various Pure Lands, so he could undertake them and fulfil his aspirations.

Aware of the depth and breadth of Dharmakara's resolve, Lokeshvararaja Buddha told the Bhikkhu about both superior and inferior aspects of 21 billion Buddha realms. One by one, the Buddha manifested those realms so Bhikkhu

Dharmakara could see them.

Dharmakara listened to Lokeshvararaja and witnessed the diverse features of 21 billion Buddha realms. He chose the superior characteristics and forsook the inferior. After five *kalpas* of reflection, he formulated his 48 Great Vows. He then described each of them to Lokeshvararaja Buddha, concluding with an acclamatory, **“I undertook transcendent vows.”** That makes clear that the 48 Vows comprise the best among the innumerable resolutions of all the Buddhas, and surpasses the specific vows of those Buddhas. Thus the description “transcendent vows.”

B. Characterization of the 48 Vows

There are some discrepancies in the sutras about the number of Amitabha's specific vows. Two alternative translations of the *Longer Sutra*, the *Longer Amitabha Sutra* and the *Sutra of Awakening to Infinite Purity and Equality*, speak of 24 vows while another, the *Splendors of Infinite Life Sutra*, mentions 36. The *Assembly of the Tathagata of Infinite Life – Maharatnakuta Sutra* refers to 48 vows, the *White Lotus of Compassion Sutra* to 52, the Sanskrit *Infinite Life Sutra* to 46, and the *Infinite Life Sutra* in Tibetan translation to 49.

Since ancient times, Dharma teachers have taken Samghavarman's translation of the *Infinite Life Sutra* as the benchmark – and it refers to 48 vows. Moreover, in its passage on the Lower Level of the Middle Tier of rebirth, the *Contemplation Sutra* refers to “Bhikkhu Dharmakara's 48 vows.” That converges with the Samghavarman text.

The 48 vows can be divided into three broad categories:

i. Vows relating to the Dharmakaya (Truth Body)

These are also known as vows relating to the Buddha-body (which is the same as the *Dharmakaya*). In them Bhikkhu Dharmakara resolved that when he gained Buddhahood, his body would have infinite light and life, and would be praised by all Buddhas. They include the 12th Vow (Infinite Light), the 13th Vow (Infinite Life) and the 17th Vow (Acclamation by All Buddhas).

ii. Vows relating to the Pure Land

Bhikkhu Dharmakara swore that when he became a Buddha, his realm would be free of all afflictions, pure and serene, and splendid in every way. These resolutions, which surpass all worldly ones, include the 31st Vow (a Pure Realm) and the 32nd Vow (an Adorned Land).

iii. Vows relating to the deliverance of sentient beings

Bhikkhu Dharmakara vowed that upon his attainment of Buddhahood, beings in all worlds – Bodhisattvas, Sravakas, Pratyekabuddhas, humans and celestial beings as well as denizens of the Three Wretched Realms – would be reborn in his land to be instructed and become Buddhas. These are the remaining 43 vows, apart from the foregoing five.

The vows relating to sentient beings can be sub-divided into five kinds:

1) *Vows regarding human and celestial beings in this realm.* There are 17 such vows: the first eleven and the 15th, 16th, 21st, 27th, 38th and 39th Vows. “This realm” indicates Amitabha Buddha’s Pure Land, while “other realms” refer to all other lands. When the sutras speak of “human and celestial beings in the

land,” they mean this realm. When they mention “worlds in the ten directions,” “sentient beings of the ten directions” or “Buddha-lands elsewhere,” they mean other realms.

2) *Vow regarding Sravakas.* This is the 14th Vow, of Innumerable Sravakas. The text of the resolution refers to Sravakas and Pratyekabuddhas. This is the basic vow that covers beings of the two vehicles.

3) *Vows regarding Bodhisattvas in this realm.* There are altogether nine such resolutions: the 23rd, 24th, 25th, 26th, 28th, 29th, 30th, 40th and 46th Vows.

4) *Vows regarding ordinary beings in other realms.* There are seven: the 18th, 19th, 20th, 33rd, 34th, 35th and 37th Vows.

5) *Vows regarding Bodhisattvas in other realms.* Nine in all: the 22nd, 36th, 41st, 42nd, 43rd, 44th, 45th, 47th and 48th Vows.

In sum, all these can be put into two groups: Vows relating to sentient beings in this realm (27), and those regarding beings in other realms (16).

The former are aimed at benefiting beings in the Land of Bliss. Though the beings are divided into human and celestial individuals, Sravakas, and Bodhisattvas, the Pure Land is “a realm of wholesome Mahayana roots.” It is purely an environment of the Greater Vehicle, where human and celestial beings are not in fact human and celestial beings, and Sravakas aren’t truly Sravakas. They are only called such in accordance with customs in other places. That is, those who experience joy are called human or celestial beings and those who attain nirvana are termed Sravakas. Beings who seek Buddhahood to save others are called Bodhisattvas.

For human and celestial beings in this realm, the 1st, 2nd and 16th Vows are to extricate them from suffering, while the other relevant resolutions are to bring them joy. This is especially so with the 11th Vow, of Assured Attainment of Nirvana. It pledges that all who are reborn in the Pure Land will become Buddhas.

As for the vows regarding beings in other realms, the 18th, 19th, 20th, 22nd and 35th deliver them to the Land of Bliss so they can enjoy the benefits there. The other 11 vows in this category allow the beings to benefit in other realms. Sravakas have not been specifically cited because they are covered by the 14th Vow, or included among beings of the ten directions.

Generally speaking, sentient beings refer mainly to ordinary beings. Coverage by the vows extends from the ordinary to the sacred, showing that beings of all five vehicles can be reborn in the Pure Land. Bodhisattvas have abundant virtue. Among them, the sacred predominate, and coverage extends from sacred beings to ordinary beings. This highlights the strength of their aspiration to enlightenment.

As the for method of covering sentient beings in other realms, the 33rd Vow mentions light while the other 15 relevant resolutions all point to the name of Amitabha Buddha. Even so, light and name are inseparable: The latter is the substance and the former the function; the name is the karmic cause, while the light is the karmic result.

In his *In Praise of the Rite of Rebirth*, Master Shandao says, **“Amitabha Buddha made a deep and weighty vow – to embrace beings in all directions with his light and his name, and to induce them to recite with faith in their hearts.”**

We will not explain each vow in detail. However, the next section will elucidate those resolutions closely connected with the rebirth of ordinary beings in the Pure Land.

C. Accomplishment of the 48 Vows

The vow is like a driver and practice a cart. The former can drive the latter, while the latter can carry the former. If the two support each other, the task will be accomplished. A vow without practice (action) is an empty resolution, while practice without a vow is isolated action. Neither situation leads to accomplishment.

After making his 48 Great Vows following five *kalpas* of reflection, Bhikkhu Dharmakara accumulated incalculable Bodhisattva virtues over inconceivable, countless eons. Ten *kalpas* ago, he became a Buddha in the Western Land of Bliss, with the name Amitabha, and **“is today teaching the Dharma.”**

The causal part of every vow states, “If certain circumstances do not come to pass, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.” Since Amitabha has indeed achieved Buddhahood, we know that each of his 48 Vows has been achieved. In other words, the aspiration in the causal portion of each vow has been realized, becoming unalterable reality.

When any sutra praises the splendid virtues of the beings and environment of the Land of Bliss, the passages are fulfillment texts of the 48 Vows. For example, a reference to the absence in the Pure Land of beings from the Three Wretched Realms constitutes fulfillment of the 1st Vow. A description of infinite light emanating from Amitabha Buddha’s body represents realization of the 12th

Vow, while a citation of Amitabha’s infinite lifetime is fulfillment of the 13th Vow. When the various Buddhas commend the powers and virtues of Amitabha Buddha, they verify achievement of the 17th Vow. And mentions of Amitabha-recitation leading to rebirth in the Pure Land corroborate the accomplishment of the 18th Vow. Because this vow was fulfilled, recitation assuredly results in rebirth.

Says the *Commentary on the Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land*, “**The unrestricted powers of Amitabha Buddha today derive from the 48 Vows of Bodhisattva Dharmakara. The vows produced the powers, and the powers accord with the vows. The vows were not in vain and the powers are not without substance. The powers match the vows; there are no discrepancies between them. We therefore speak of accomplishment.**”

Yet the “causation texts” and the “fulfillment texts” aren’t alike in every case, with some being more detailed and others less so. According to the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, every Bodhisattva has countless specific vows; when the Bodhisattvas gain Buddhahood, they realize innumerable splendid virtues. So the causation and fulfillment texts of the 48 Vows are explained only generally to karmically connected beings in the Saha world. If they were to be described at length, even Shakyamuni Buddha couldn’t praise them enough over a *kalpa*.

Section 3. Root (Fundamental) Resolution: The 18th Vow

The 48 Vows are an interconnected whole. Yet some are of greater significance than others. The 18th Vow is their root.

Like the root of a tree, it can sprout and support branches, leaves and fruit. Since there is a root, there are also branches and tips. To induce all beings to recite Amitabha’s name and be reborn in his realm, Bhikkhu Dharmakara vowed that his land would have no beings from the Three Wretched Realms, and be pure and resplendent. He also resolved that after becoming a Buddha, he would possess infinite light and life, and be acclaimed by all Buddhas. All of these resolutions stem from the 18th Vow. If the 18th Vow – gaining rebirth through Amitabha-recitation – did not exist, all the others would be meaningless. There are sentient beings who cannot read and do not know even one of the vows. Yet they can achieve rebirth by reciting Amitabha’s name – and spontaneously obtain all the virtues and benefits of the 48 Vows.

Because Amitabha’s specific vows surpass those of other Buddhas, they are called “transcendent vows.” If we view them individually, however, not every one exceeds other Buddhas’ vows. Those on being pure and resplendent, having no beings from the Three Wretched Realms and never again falling into the Wretched Realms apply to the Pure Lands of all Buddhas. The transcendence is because ordinary beings can, by reciting Amitabha’s name, be reborn in such a

pure and splendid realm – that is, because of the 18th Vow. This is also why all Buddhas commend it. As a *gatha* in the *Longer Sutra* says, **“When I achieve Buddhahood, the sound of my name will everywhere be surpassing.”** Because this vow is transcendent, so are all the others.

Of the 48 Vows, Master Shandao always took the 18th as the core that encompasses all the others.

In the “Section on the Underlying Meaning” of his *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra*, he concluded:

The 48 Vows all say this: If, when I achieve Buddhahood, sentient beings of the ten directions who wish to be reborn in my land and recite my name, even only ten times, should fail to be born there, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

Moreover, the “Meaning of Meditative Practices” section of the *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra* says:

The 48 Vows explain only that exclusive recitation of Amitabha Buddha’s name leads to rebirth in the Land of Bliss.

Says In Praise of Dharma Practices:

Of Amitabha’s 48 Great Vows, the one on name-recitation alone is most intimate.

Section 4. Name-Recitation According to the Fundamental Vow

A. The Significance of Name-Recitation According to the Fundamental Vow

“Fundamental Vow” means the root vow among the 48 – that is, the 18th “Vow of Rebirth in the Pure Land Through Amitabha-Recitation.” “Recitation” refers to verbal invocation, while “name” is the six-character name, *Namo Amitabha Buddha*.

Amitabha established his Fundamental Vow during the causal period, when he was practicing to fulfil his resolutions. He chose the practice of name-recitation as the cause of rebirth for all sentient beings. So our recitation today corresponds with his Fundamental Vow. By acting in accordance with Amitabha’s Fundamental Vow and relying on its power, we are assured of rebirth in the Pure Land. This is name-recitation according to the Fundamental Vow.

The Fundamental Vow resides in name-recitation, and name-recitation correlates with the Fundamental Vow. Name-recitation certainly leads to rebirth because it depends on Amitabha’s Fundamental Vow.

The Fundamental Vow is the cause and the name is the consequence. Both are matters for Amitabha Buddha, while recitation is the business of sentient beings. Hence name recitation according to the Fundamental Vow represents the intersection of cause and effect; it is also the practice that merges Amitabha Buddha and sentient beings into a single entity. That is, the enlightenment in the achievement ground (producing the name) becomes the chief element (for rebirth) in the causal ground. The cause contains the consequence, and the consequence permeates the cause.

There are three levels of distinction in name-recitation according to the Fundamental Vow:

i. Among the Buddhas

The names of all Buddhas and Bodhisattvas contain immeasurable merit and virtue, and reciting them erases karmic offenses and augments good fortune. That's why name-recitation was originally a practice applicable to all Buddhas, not just Amitabha. But none of the other Buddhas made a fundamental vow enabling ordinary beings to be reborn in a lofty, marvelous Pure Land of Rewards by reciting their names. So when we now speak of "name-recitation according to the Fundamental Vow," we refer to Amitabha Buddha alone.

It may be that other Buddhas have a basic vow covering ordinary beings. But because Amitabha has particularly close karmic ties with the beings of our world, Shakyamuni Buddha spoke only of Amitabha's Fundamental Vow and its embrace of ordinary beings. The Pure Land School takes as correct the interpretation in the previous paragraph.

ii. Among the practices

Practices leading to rebirth in the Land of Bliss are not restricted to Amitabha-recitation. By dedicating the merit from the Six Paramitas and myriad good actions as well as worldly and extra-worldly virtues, one can also be reborn there. Nonetheless, Amitabha Buddha did not select the other practices in his Fundamental Vow, only name-recitation. It is to highlight this fact that we speak of "name-recitation according to the Fundamental Vow."

iii. Among the Dharma masters

At the time of Master Shandao, other Dharma masters' explications of Pure Land teaching were limited by the doctrines of the Sacred Path schools. Some said name-recitation led to "deferred rebirth" – that is, not in the next lifetime. Others opined that name-recitation was a "shallow practice," inferior to such wondrous practices as invocation at the level of absolute reality or meditative invocation. In later times some considered name-recitation a means to awakening, or emphasized the capabilities of practitioners in name-recitation. Still others stressed that name-recitation must be accompanied by the dedication of merit from other good deeds. None understood the meaning of deliverance in Amitabha Buddha's Fundamental Vow.

We clarify here that in name-recitation according to Amitabha's Fundamental Vow, the great vows and deeds of that Buddha are transferred to sentient beings, becoming their vows and deeds. These are neither meditative nor non-meditative virtues, but transcend them both. Indeed, they encompass all merit and virtues. Spontaneously pulled along by the power of the Fundamental Vow, reciters are assuredly reborn in the Pure Land of Rewards. Hence we talk about "name-recitation according to the Fundamental Vow."

B. The Substance of Name-Recitation According to the Fundamental Vow

“Name-recitation according to the Fundamental Vow” is the core principle of the Pure Land School. Its basis is the 18th Vow in the *Infinite Life Sutra*. The 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.

This resolution is the root, the core of the 48 Vows – and of all the teachings of the Pure Land School. It is also the root and core of all the teachings in the Tripitaka. In this vow is the life of Amitabha Buddha, and the reason Shakyamuni Buddha appeared in this world. Moreover, it is the basic intention declared by all Buddhas and the only way out for sentient beings. So its interpretation must not be muddled at will; we must refer to the true words of Shakyamuni Buddha.

In the “fulfilment text” that explains the vow, the Buddha said:

All sentient beings who, having heard his [Amitabha’s] name, rejoice in faith, recite his name even once and sincerely dedicate the merit of virtuous practices to that land, aspiring to be born there, will immediately attain birth and achieve non-retrogression. Excepted are those who commit the five gravest transgressions or slander the correct Dharma.

And in the “fulfilment *gatha*”:

***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.***

There are various interpretations of the reference in the text of the vow to “recite ... even ten times.” But the fulfilment text and *gatha* both speak of hearing Amitabha’s “name” – as do those among the 48 Vows that apply to beings in realms other than the Land of Bliss. From this we know that “recite” means to recite the name of Amitabha Buddha, not anything else.

Although recitation can be either silent or out loud, the passage in the *Contemplation Sutra* on the Lower Level of the Lower Tier of rebirth says, **“if he continuously voices ten recitations of Namō Amitabha Buddha ...”** Thus we know that “ten recitations” means “ten voiced recitations.”

Bodhisattva Nagarjuna gives a brief explanation of this vow in his *Chapter on the Easy Path*:

Amitabha Buddha’s Fundamental Vow is like this: If someone recites my name and takes refuge in me, this person at once attains the karma of assurance and will achieve supreme enlightenment (*Anuttara-samyak-sambodhi*).

The earliest reference to “name-recitation according to the Fundamental Vow,” the passage makes clear that non-retrogression is achieved in this very lifetime.

Bodhisattva Vasubandhu explicates name-recitation according to the Fundamental Vow as follows:

Those who encounter the power of Amitabha’s Fundamental Vow never come up empty-handed.

Quickly, it fulfills their aspiration for rebirth and gives them perfect merit and virtues, as vast and as deep as the ocean ...

To recite that Buddha’s [Amitabha’s] name is akin to assuming his light and wisdom, and the meaning of his name. This is because recitation correlates with the wish for genuine practice.

Master Tanluan’s interpretation is that “the name is the Dharma” – the name *Namo Amitabha Buddha* is the Truth Body and the Deliverance Body. Ten recitations of Amitabha’s name are superior to karma-accumulation from time immemorial, as the power of the Buddha’s vow leads to rebirth in the Pure Land. Moreover, “ten recitations” are not limited to the number ten, underscoring that the causative karma is accomplished and Amitabha-recitation ensures rebirth.

Master Daochuo inserts in the text of the 18th Vow the Lower Level of the Lower Tier of rebirth from the *Contemplation Sutra*, explaining:

If sentient beings, even if they have done evil all their lives, recite my name continuously ten times as death approaches and fail to be born [in the Pure Land], may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

Master Shandao makes the most extensive explications of name-recitation according to the Fundamental Vow. A few examples:

If, when I achieve Buddhahood, sentient beings of the ten directions who recite my name, even ten times, and wish to be reborn in my land should fail to be born there, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

(“Section on the Underlying Meaning,” *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra*)

If, when I gain Buddhahood, sentient beings of the ten directions who wish to be reborn in my land, recite my name, even ten times, and rely on the power of my vow should fail to be born there, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

(*Dharma School of Contemplation and Recitation*)

If, when I achieve Buddhahood, sentient beings of the ten directions who 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.

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.

(*In Praise of the Rite of Rebirth*)

To recite Amitabha’s name single-mindedly and without variation, whether walking, standing, sitting or lying down, whether for long or short periods – that is the karma of assurance. It is so because it accords with Amitabha Buddha’s vow.

(“Meaning of the Non-Meditative Practices,”
Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra)

Amitabha Buddha made a profound, weighty vow to embrace all beings with his light and transform them with his name, asking only that they have faith, aspire to rebirth in the Pure Land and recite his name. Whether one recites an entire lifetime, or merely ten times or even just once, rebirth is easy because of the power of Amitabha’s vow.

(In Praise of the Rite of Rebirth)

Only those who recite the name of Amitabha are embraced by his light; we should know that his Fundamental Vow is most powerful.

(In Praise of the Rite of Rebirth)

Though preceding passages spoke of the merits of the meditative and non-meditative virtues, the Buddha’s underlying wish is that sentient beings recite Amitabha’s name single-mindedly.

(“Meaning of the Non-Meditative Practices,”
Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra)

To go by the text of the vow, the words of Shakyamuni Buddha and interpretations by the lineage masters, “name-recitation according to the Fundamental Vow” has the following characteristics:

1. It is the causative practice of rebirth for sentient beings selected in Amitabha’s Fundamental Vow. The meaning of the selection and cause of rebirth will be discussed further on.
2. It enables rebirth in the Pure Land. Those who have faith and recite Amitabha’s name will certainly be reborn; that’s the sole meaning.
3. It is extremely easy to practice. Consisting only of verbal invocation,

which all beings are capable of, it is unaffected by the purity or contamination of reciters, or whether meditative or non-meditative practices are undertaken.

4. It should be consistent and exclusive, without mixing in other elements.
5. It should be practiced for the rest of our lives, without retrogression.
6. It should correlate with true, genuine practice.
7. Reciters are embraced by the light of Amitabha Buddha.
8. It is equivalent to the meaning of Amitabha’s name.
9. It corresponds to Amitabha’s vow.
10. It relies on the power of Amitabha’s vow.
11. Reciters are assured of rebirth, followed by quick attainment of Buddhahood.
12. It is the basic intent of Shakyamuni Buddha, and surpasses all meditative and non-meditative practices.

So with “name-recitation according to the Fundamental Vow,” it matters not if a person has good or bad karma, or is pure or impure of heart and mind. Also irrelevant is one’s deportment, as well as the duration, frequency and skill of recitation. So long as recitation is consistent and exclusive, it correlates with Amitabha’s vow and reciters will be reborn without exception.

“Consistent and exclusive name-recitation” is the essence of Amitabha Buddha’s Fundamental Vow. It is also the ultimate benchmark for Pure Land

practitioners and the summation of Pure Land teaching.

The last part of the 18th Vow says, “Excepted are those who commit the five gravest transgressions or slander the correct Dharma.” It means that “people who commit the five gravest transgressions or slander the Dharma will not be reborn” in the Land of Bliss. Even so, Master Shandao explains the “excepted-are-those” stipulation as a “deterrent teaching.” He does so by citing the example of the Lower Level of the Lower Tier from the *Contemplation Sutra*, where a person with the five gravest offenses obtains rebirth.

The five transgressions and slander of the Dharma are extremely serious, and offenders are sure to suffer in Avici Hell. To prevent sentient beings from committing these offenses, the Buddha uses the deterrent of “no rebirth” to warn those who have not yet done so. Yet a Buddha cannot forever abandon beings who have already committed the offenses, leaving them trapped in the rebirth cycle. So he exercises his infinite compassion once more and allows them to be reborn in the Pure Land by reciting Amitabha’s name. This is to embrace such beings.

Says In *Praise of Dharma Practices*: **“Because of the power of [Amitabha] Buddha’s vow, those who committed the five gravest transgressions or the ten evil actions can have their offenses eliminated and gain rebirth in the Pure Land. Even slanderers of the Dharma and *icchantika* can be reborn if they undergo a change of heart.”**

Therefore the deterrent is for the sake of the embrace. The deterrence is temporary, but the embrace is forever. We can also see that name-recitation according to the Fundamental Vow is intended chiefly to save evil-prone beings with mediocre capabilities.

Section 5. Choosing the Fundamental Vow

“Choosing” comes from a passage from the *Longer Amitabha Sutra* – “choosing the desired resolution.”

With Lokeshvararaja Buddha’s help in the causal ground, Bhikkhu Dharmakara saw with celestial vision 21 billion Buddha lands. He also observed how good or evil their inhabitants were, and how splendid or otherwise the realms were. He then chose what to include in his vows.

Among the 21 billion Buddha realms, some had generosity as the practice for rebirth, while others required observation of the precepts, filial behavior or exclusive recitation of the presiding Buddha’s name. When making his 48 Vows, Bhikkhu Dharmakara chose not to make generosity, precepts or filial conduct the primary cause of rebirth. Rather, he selected the practice of exclusive name-recitation. Thus “name-recitation” is “name-recitation according to the Fundamental Vow,” which in turn is to “choose name-recitation according to the Fundamental Vow.”

Why did he pass over the myriad virtuous deeds and practices to pick name-recitation as the principal cause of rebirth? A Buddha’s wisdom is hard to fathom. Master Shandao offers two kinds of explanation: “the superior and the subordinate” and “the difficult and the easy.”

A. The Superior and the Subordinate

Amitabha-recitation was chosen over the other practices because its merit and virtue are superior, and those of the latter are subordinate.

The myriad virtuous practices converge in the name of Amitabha Buddha. Amitabha's internal virtues – such as his three bodies, four kinds of wisdom, ten powers and four types of fearlessness – and external virtues – his physical characteristics and light, and his ability to teach the Dharma and benefit beings – are all contained in the name. Its merit and virtue are especially wondrous – the reason it is known as the “Great Name of a Myriad Virtues.”

Not so with the other practices, which are limited in scope and produce a single type of merit. None of them can embrace all virtues. Hence they are subordinate.

For example, a “house” includes all beams, rafters and columns, but a “beam” or a “rafter” cannot contain everything. Because the merit and virtue of Amitabha's name exceeds all other kinds of merit and virtue, the superior is chosen over the subordinate, and name-recitation alone is selected in the Fundamental Vow as the practice that leads to rebirth.

In Praise of Dharma Practices says:

**The Land of Bliss is a realm of unconditioned nirvana;
It's hard to be reborn there by practicing assorted virtues
according to circumstances.
The Tathagata selects the key method –
He teaches us to recite Amitabha's name with two-fold exclusivity.**

Because the Land of Bliss is a lofty, marvelous realm of unconditioned nirvana, we cannot be reborn there by undertaking the other practices, which contain little virtue and few blessings. We can only gain rebirth through the merit and virtue of Amitabha's name. So Amitabha Buddha, in the causal ground, chooses name-recitation as the sole practice for rebirth. Aware of his intention and selecting name-recitation over the other practices as the key method, Shakyamuni Buddha teaches us to recite Amitabha's name “with two-fold exclusivity.”

B. The Difficult and the Easy

Amitabha-recitation is easy to practice, while the other practices are difficult. *In Praise of the Rite of Rebirth* says:

**Sentient beings have heavy karmic obstructions;
Their coarse minds and limited mental scope
make it hard for them to succeed in meditation.
Taking pity on them, the Great Saint [Shakyamuni]
directly urges them to recite [Amitabha's] name exclusively.
That's because name-recitation is easy –
Continual recitation leads straightaway to rebirth.**

Says Master Genshin's *Essentials of Rebirth in the Pure Land*:

**By recommending Amitabha-recitation,
we don't mean to obscure the other marvelous practices.
It's because recitation is easy – for men and women, rich and poor,
whether walking, standing still, sitting or lying down,
irrespective of time, place and circumstance.**

**As we approach death and aspire to rebirth in the Pure Land,
Nothing is more convenient than Amitabha-recitation.**

Recitation is easy to practice and is suitable for people of all capabilities. The other practices are difficult and unrealizable for some. If forging Buddha images and building stupas were made the causative practice for rebirth, the poor and destitute will lose all hope. Yet the rich are few and the poor many. If upholding the precepts and monastic discipline were chosen as the precondition, those who break the precepts or fail in discipline cannot be reborn. But people who succeed will be far fewer than those who fail.

To sum up, except name-recitation, no practice designated in the Fundamental Vow as the cause of rebirth can suit every type of person; those who can perform it will be few and those who cannot, many. To deliver all beings compassionately and on an equal basis, Amitabha Buddha set aside the other practices – such as building images and stupas – and chose name-recitation in his Fundamental Vow as the causative action for rebirth. This way, everyone can practice it and be reborn in the Pure Land.

Because Amitabha-recitation is both “easy” and “superior,” encompassing all virtues and suiting people of every capability, it was selected in the Fundamental Vow as the practice for rebirth.

It is the “superior” characteristic of recitation that most readily puts the minds of practitioners at ease, giving it the steadiness of a boulder. Because name-recitation is very easy, many people believe its merit is shallow; they become skeptical and seek higher, more splendid teachings and practices. Now Master Shandao has stated that “the practice of Amitabha-recitation is the loftiest” and pronounced it to be the “karma of assurance,” surpassing all meditative and non-meditative virtues. He eliminates all concerns about inferiority and restless searching.

Section 6. The Cause of Rebirth in the Fundamental Vow

“Cause of rebirth” means the practice that leads to rebirth in the Land of Bliss. Though the 48 Vows are extensive in scope, only the 18th Vow pledges that all sentient beings can be reborn if they recite Amitabha Buddha’s name:

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.

This vow specifies that the causative practice for the rebirth of sentient beings in the Pure Land is “three states of mind and ten recitations.” The “three states of mind” are to “be sincere,” “joyfully entrust” and “wish for rebirth.” They are equivalent to “Sincere Mind, Deep Mind and the Mind of Merit-Dedication” in the *Contemplation Sutra*, as described in Chapter 5, “Settling the Mind.”

“Ten recitations” means reciting Amitabha’s name, “even ten times” (up to a lifetime’s recitation, in the context of a regular lifetime, or just ten recitations, in the case of a person near death). The terms refers to the start of practice, as well as practice itself – see Chapters 6, 7 and 8.

The “three states of mind and ten recitations” are extremely simple and easy. That they can be the cause of rebirth in the Pure Land is due to the pledge in the 18th Vow, “should [practitioners] fail to be born there, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.” Of the 48 Vows, only this one fuses Amitabha’s achievement of Buddhahood and our rebirth into a single entity. It promises that even though Amitabha could attain supreme enlightenment, he would not do so unless he were able to bring beings who recite his name into his land. Only if they could thus be reborn would he gain Buddhahood.

Therefore the 18th Vow is known as the Fundamental Vow that makes the aptitude (of sentient beings) at one with the teaching (of Amitabha Buddha). “*Namo Amitabha Buddha*” is the name that does the same. Because the aptitude is aligned with the teaching, the merit and virtues of Amitabha Buddha wholly become the cause of rebirth for sentient beings. So we speak of the cause of rebirth in the Fundamental Vow.

The other 47 Vows are vows of admiration, as the esteem they inspire towards the virtues and splendors of Amitabha’s realm make beings aspire to rebirth through recitation. As Master Shandao says in the “Meaning of Meditative Virtues” section of his *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra*:

The 48 Vows explain only that exclusive recitation of Amitabha Buddha’s name leads to rebirth in the Land of Bliss.

Section 7. Relationships Among the Three Vows of Deliverance

Master Shandao’s *Dharma School of Contemplation and Recitation* describes the 18th, 19th and 20th Vows as the “augmentative causes of deliverance.” That means the augmentative function of these three vows can embrace all sentient beings, causing them ultimately to be reborn in the Land of Bliss. Hence they are called the “Three Vows of Deliverance.”

There are many interpretations of the relationships among the three resolutions. We will go by the explication of Master Shandao. The 18th Vow (rebirth through Amitabha-recitation) constitutes the essence, while the other two are functional in nature. Sequential and inter-related, they together enable sentient beings to be reborn in the Pure Land.

The Buddhas and Bodhisattvas teach beings according to circumstances. There are two categories: the “circumstantially appropriate” and those who “form a karmic connection.” The former are beings whose past karma has ripened; they encounter the Dharma and obtain deliverance in the present lifetime. The latter have feeble roots of virtue. Though they cannot gain deliverance despite encountering the Dharma in this life, they can consolidate the karmic seed and wait for their virtuous roots to grow in future lifetimes. Ultimately, they will be delivered.

Of the Three Vows of Deliverance, the 18th and 19th are “circumstantially appropriate” vows, leading sequentially to rebirth in the Pure Land. That is, their adherents undertake such causative practices as Amitabha-recitation in this life and gain rebirth in the very next one (after death). The 20th Vow is one that “forms a karmic connection.” Adherents are reborn later. They perform causative karma in this life, but the consequence of rebirth occurs only in the third lifetime or afterwards.

The teachings of the Buddhas can be divided into the expedient and the ultimate. Ultimate teachings encompass expedient teachings, and beings are guided from the latter towards the former. In this context the 18th Vow (Amitabha-recitation) is the ultimate teaching, and the 19th Vow (virtuous deeds) is the expedient instruction.

There are three aspects to ultimate, or genuine, teachings:

1. The predispositions of their recipients are ultimate. They have clear faith in the wisdom of the Buddhas and rely completely on Buddha-power.
2. The teaching is ultimate. Reference is made solely to Amitabha-recitation, making no use of expedient means.
3. The benefits are ultimate. Practitioners are directly, transformationally reborn in the Pure Land, bypassing lotus-wombs.

Expedient teachings also have three characteristics:

1. The predispositions of their recipients are expedient. They have doubts about Buddha-wisdom and mix self-power into their practice.

2. The teaching is expedient. The various virtuous practices are also taught, along with sundry inducements.
3. The benefits are expedient. Practitioners might proceed to the ultimate and undertake exclusive Amitabha-recitation, or they might stay with the expedient and be reborn in a lotus-womb (see next chapter, “Access by Ordinary Being to the Realm of Rewards”).

The *Longer Sutra* and the *Contemplation Sutra* present both ultimate and expedient teachings. The *Longer Sutra’s* passage on the Three Tiers of Rebirth incorporates the expedient into the ultimate, while the scripture’s section on transformation within the lotus-womb abandons the expedient in favor of the ultimate. The 16 contemplations in the *Contemplation Sutra* steer practitioners from the expedient towards the ultimate, and the sutra’s Passage of Exhortation and Circulation forsakes the expedient for the ultimate. The *Shorter Sutra* expounds only the ultimate teaching.

As for the relationship between Amitabha-recitation and Amitabha’s arrival to lead us to the Pure Land, the latter assuredly results from the former, as the essence must have its function. And since the function stems from the essence, Amitabha’s arrival via the path of virtuous practices is attributable to Amitabha-recitation. Amitabha appears because the merit from the virtuous practices was dedicated towards rebirth in the Pure Land. If there were no such dedication, how could he come?

Moreover, the Mind of Merit-Dedication and Aspiration means the wish to recite Amitabha’s name is present to some extent. It’s just that the various practices aren’t closely related to Amitabha Buddha, and the recitation isn’t exclusive. Even so, Amitabha arrives to guide such practitioners to the Pure Land; how much more so in the case of exclusive reciters. Hence we know

the main benefit of Amitabha's appearance results from name-recitation and secondarily applies to the virtuous practices.

Yet the 18th Vow does not mention the arrival of sacred beings at the point of death. There are four reasons:

1. The Fundamental Vow is a weighty one: If reciters should fail to be reborn there, may I not attain perfect enlightenment. The issue is a matter of course.
2. Amitabha's name and body are one and the same. The three karmic causes (faith, aspiration and recitation) are complete, and recitation brings forth Amitabha Buddha. That is the nature of things.
3. Reciters are encompassed by the light of Amitabha, who appears in response to their recitations. He regularly protects and supports them, and not only when they are dying.
4. Allowing practitioners of the various virtues to know that Amitabha appears to welcome them puts joy into their hearts and helps guide them towards Amitabha-recitation.

The first three are points that do not need to be specially spelled out, while the last one is left deliberately unsaid. Nonetheless, practitioners of the sundry virtues have no inherent inclination towards the Fundamental Vow and are alien to the principle of Amitabha's name and body being a single entity. Nor do they benefit from the embrace of Amitabha's light or his support and protection. If there were no promise of an appearance to welcome them as death approached, they would lose all hope of rebirth in the Pure Land. In his great compassion, Amitabha Buddha specially makes this pledge to put at ease those not disposed

towards his Fundamental Vow, and to draw them towards Amitabha-recitation.

Yet there are beings who, having heard Amitabha's name, aspire to fortunate rebirths in the human or celestial realms, rather than in the Pure Land. Or their aspiration towards the Pure Land is weak and they lack the Three States of Mind. Others may want rebirth and recite Amitabha's name, but retrogress at some point. None of them will be reborn sequentially, following this lifetime. They miss out on the 18th and 19th Vows, and only make a karmic connection with Amitabha's deliverance.

Taking pity on such beings as they remain in the rebirth cycle, Bhikkhu Dharmakara made the 20th Vow to save them, hoping they can be reborn in the Pure Land as soon as possible. Despite their feeble faith after hearing Amitabha's name, they are like fish that have a hook in their mouth – they won't remain in the water much longer. Because of the force of this vow, such beings will not have to wait many lifetimes before they are reborn in Amitabha's land. Hence the 20th Vow is known as the "Vow of Assured Rebirth Through Consistent Recollection," as well as the "Vow of Fulfillment in Three Lifetimes."

The "Three Lifetimes" refer to past, present and future lifetimes. There are the "Path of the Past and the Present" and the "Path of the Present and the Future." The former means that one nurtures virtuous roots in the first lifetime (past), makes a sincere dedication in the second (present), and in the third (future) is reborn in the Pure Land. That is the underlying import of the 5th Vow in the *Longer Amitabha Sutra*.

With the latter path, one cultivates virtue in the first life (present), makes an earnest dedication in the second (future), and gains rebirth in the third (future). This is the meaning of the 20th Vow in the *Infinite Life Sutra*. The two paths may

be different, but they lead similarly to rebirth in the Land of Bliss.

The 20th Vow works like this: In the first lifetime, practitioners make a karmic connection. In the second the seed matures, and rebirth is accomplished in the third life.

In making the karmic link, one plants what is called an indestructible *vajra* (diamond) seed. **“All sentient beings who, having heard [Amitabha’s] name”** signifies the planting of the seed of Buddhahood. Since the Dharma seed of Amitabha Buddha’s name naturally inclines towards the Land of Bliss, **“think consistently of my land”** constitutes a general karmic connection to rebirth there. Though some people seek worldly fortune after hearing Amitabha’s name, they nonetheless retain all the functions of the Dharma seed. Because of the power of this seed from Amitabha’s name, virtue can take root very gradually – thus the reference to **“nurture the roots of various virtues.”** That is the same as to “cultivate sundry meritorious roots.” Separated from Amitabha’s name, worldly virtues are empty and false. They dissipate and cannot form roots of goodness. It’s Amitabha’s name that is the substance of virtuous roots.

As the karmic seed matures, the practitioner, with every thought, incrementally nurtures meritorious roots, relying on the power of the Fundamental Vow from Buddhahood, the force of sustained support from the Dharma seed of Amitabha’s name, and the energy of maturation from infinite light. He or she achieves the Three States of Mind and urgently aspires to rebirth in the Pure Land. So the person **“sincerely dedicates merit from the virtuous practices, aspiring to rebirth in my land.”**

We will only summarize the practices leading to rebirth. To go by the wishes of Amitabha Buddha, the chief practice would be recitation of his name. Following their own inclinations or capabilities, however, sentient beings might

choose the various virtuous deeds. Whether name-recitation or meritorious practices, the condition of “think consistently of my land” must be satisfied. Practitioners would then be reborn in the Pure Land: **“If they should fail to fulfil their aspiration, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.”**

At bottom, all this is to realize Amitabha’s Fundamental Vow of enabling all sentient beings to be born in the Land of Bliss eventually. As the *Infinite Life Sutra* says, **“When I achieve Buddhahood, the sound of my name will travel beyond the ten directions. If it cannot be heard everywhere, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.”** Says the *Sutra of Infinite Life and Splendor*: **“When I gain perfect enlightenment, my name shall be Infinite Life. Sentient beings who hear this name will all enter my realm.”**

Section 8. Benefits of Amitabha-Recitation

A. Embraced by Amitabha Buddha's Light

In name-recitation according to the Fundamental Vow, the mental state, deeds and karma of sentient beings are the internal cause, while the power of Amitabha's resolution is the external condition. The practice confers such virtues and benefits as good fortune and happiness in this life, as well as rebirth in the Pure Land followed by Buddhahood.

External condition is the same as augmentative cause. It means a powerful influence from other entities. The formation, or accomplishment, of all things requires augmentative causes. For example, the soil facilitates the growth of rice and wheat. The teachings relating to Amitabha-recitation are founded on the cause of Amitabha Buddha's Fundamental Vow. The effects of the augmentative cause stemming from his Buddha-power are even more evident, perhaps decisive. As Master Shandao says, **"Of all the good and evil ordinary beings reborn in the Pure Land, there are none who do not rely on the power of Amitabha Buddha's Great Vow as an augmentative cause."**

According to the *Contemplation Sutra*, sentient beings who recite the name of Amitabha Buddha are always embraced by his light. The radiance of

a Buddha is the external manifestation of the wisdom and virtue associated with his deliverance of beings. It is divided into light of the body and light of the mind. Amitabha's light of the body shines on all things. On top of that is a special intention to protect and support, known as light of the mind. It falls constantly on those who practice Amitabha-recitation, encompassing, safeguarding and helping them. This is to be "embraced by the light."

In the 9th Contemplation, Amitabha Buddha illuminates all worlds with his light of the body. Specifically, his light of the mind shines on beings who recite his name, and never abandons them. In *Dharma School of Contemplation and Recitation*, Master Shandao says, **"Amitabha's light of the mind regularly falls only on sentient beings who recite that Buddha's name exclusively, embracing and protecting them always. It neither illuminates nor embraces those who practice miscellaneous karma."**

Why shine solely on reciters and not mixed practitioners? There are three factors:

i. Equality

Because Amitabha Buddha practices equality and great compassion, his light encompasses only those who recite his name. The reason is that recitation can be performed by everyone equally, whether they are wise or foolish, capable or dull.

With all other schools, there are sentient beings who cannot practice their teachings. They are unable to share the resulting benefits equally.

ii. The Fundamental Vow

The other practices aren't mentioned in Amitabha Buddha's Fundamental

Vow. So the light of Amitabha does not fall on and encompass those who perform them.

Name-recitation is the practice cited in the Fundamental Vow, which is why the light illuminates and embraces reciters. In his *In Praise of the Rite of Rebirth*, Master Shandao says, “**Only those who recite the name of Amitabha are embraced by his light; we should know that his Fundamental Vow is most powerful.**”

iii. The Three Kinds of Karma

In the “Meaning of Meditative Virtues” section of his *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra*, Master Shandao explains that name-reciters and Amitabha Buddha are linked by the karma of intimacy, the karma of closeness and augmentative karma (cause). Reciters are hence embraced by Amitabha’s light.

Those who undertake mixed practice lack these three kinds of karma, so they aren’t encompassed by the light.

1) Karma of intimacy: Amitabha-recitation applies to verbal, physical and mental actions. When a practitioner invokes Amitabha’s name verbally, the Buddha hears the recitations. If someone performs a physical act of reverence towards Amitabha, the latter sees it. When a sentient being bears Amitabha Buddha in mind, Amitabha reciprocates in kind. In these three types of activity, the one is inseparable from the other: Amitabha and being are therefore intimate with each other. This is the karma of intimacy.

2) Karma of closeness: If a sentient being wishes to see Amitabha, the Buddha appears before him or her. That is the karma of closeness. Karma of closeness applies during one’s regular lifetime and with the approach of death.

When beings recite the name of Amitabha Buddha, he manifests in countless forms and goes where they are, along with such Bodhisattvas as Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta. This happens during regular lifetimes.

As a reciter is about to die, Amitabha Buddha and the sacred assembly appear before him or her. That occurs when death is imminent.

Whether during life or near death, Amitabha Buddha regularly comes, watches over and protects those who recite his name; he also welcomes them to his Pure Land. Hence reciters and Amitabha are very close.

The karma of intimacy and the karma of closeness seem similar, yet they are different. Mind-to-mind connections constitute intimacy, while a lack of spatial separation is closeness.

3) Augmentative karma: External karma relating to Amitabha Buddha is generally known as augmentative karma (cause). Specifically, it means that when name-reciters die, Amitabha Buddha and the sacred assembly will appear to welcome them to the Pure Land. The karmic obstructions of reciters will be eliminated and they will be reborn serenely. There are also five kinds of augmentative karma, as explained below.

B. Five Types of Augmentative Karma

Master Shandao’s *Dharma School of Contemplation and Recitation* clearly lists five kinds of augmentative karma. Though they include four primary practices such as reflection (supporting karma), these are inherently different in strength and depth. Moreover, according to the Buddha’s intention, augmentative karma should be understood as virtues embodied in the primary

practice of Amitabha-recitation (karma of assurance).

i. Augmentative Karma of the Elimination of Offenses

By reciting Amitabha's name, sentient beings can erase bad karma of many *kalpas*. In describing the Upper Level of the Lower Tier of rebirth, the *Contemplation Sutra* says that a single recitation eradicates five billion *kalpas* of mortal offenses. The passage on the Lower Level of the Lower Tier refers to a recitation removing 8 billion *kalpas* of offenses.

ii. Augmentative Karma of Protection and Support

Buddhas and Bodhisattvas regularly accompany Amitabha-reciters, like shadows following their forms, safeguarding and assisting them. As the *Contemplation Sutra* says, **“Beings who recite the name of Amitabha are embraced by his light, never to be abandoned”** and **“Bodhisattvas Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta become close friends to Amitabha-reciters.”**

iii. Augmentative Karma of Seeing Amitabha Buddha

By dint of recitation *samadhi* (perfect concentration), a practitioner is able to see Amitabha Buddha. This is similar to seeing Amitabha as a result of the karma of closeness, as described above.

iv. Augmentative Karma of Being Embraced

“Embraced” means that when practitioners who want to be reborn in the Pure Land are dying, Amitabha Buddha and the sacred assembly arrive to welcome them. Embraced by the power of Amitabha's vow, they achieve such rebirth. The relevant resolutions are primarily the 18th Vow and, secondarily, the 19th, 20th and 35th Vows.

v. Augmentative Karma of Verifying Rebirth

“Verifying rebirth” is to show that the rebirth of sentient beings is real. The verifiers include Shakyamuni Buddha and Amitabha Buddha. As the *Amitabha Sutra* states, countless Buddhas in all directions loosen their broad, long tongues to confirm that people who recite Amitabha's name exclusively, though they are ordinary beings, are reborn in the Pure Land, their karmic offenses eliminated.

The five types of augmentative karma confer benefits in this life and the next. In this life the benefits are elimination of offenses, protection and support by sacred beings, and seeing Amitabha Buddha. In the next, they are coverage by Amitabha's vows, and the realization and verification of rebirth in the Land of Bliss.

Moreover, the “five types of augmentative karma” overlap with the “three kinds of karma.” Eliminating karmic offenses and being encompassed by Amitabha's vows constitute the augmentative karma among the three kinds of karma. Being protected and supported is equivalent to the karma of intimacy, and seeing Amitabha corresponds to the karma of closeness. The three kinds of karma apply to ordinary beings. The beings' rebirth in the Pure Land is the augmentative karma of verifying rebirth among the five types of augmentative karma.

C. Merits and Benefits in the Present Life

We have generally explained the benefits of Amitabha-recitation. Now we will elaborate on the merits and benefits of recitation in the present life.

To a reciter who seeks only rebirth in the Pure Land, benefits in this life do

not conflict with the lofty aspiration to rebirth in the next. On the contrary, the two go hand in hand, for the “twin benefits of the present and the future” are inherent in Amitabha-recitation. Indeed, recitation’s merits and benefits in this life are clearly explained in Master Shandao’s *Dharma School of Contemplation and Recitation* and afterword to *In Praise of the Rite of Rebirth*.

In our own era, Master Yinguang has said, **“If we can genuinely recite, without seeking worldly rewards, such rewards will come spontaneously. They include longevity, freedom from illness, safe and peaceful families, prosperous descendants, agreeable circumstances and auspicious endeavors. But if we seek worldly blessings and neglect to dedicate merit towards rebirth in the Pure Land, such mundane rewards would actually be mediocre. And because our minds aren’t focused, it would be harder to achieve certain rebirth.”**

The basic purpose of exclusive Amitabha-recitation is to achieve the great goal of rebirth in the Land of Bliss. In addition, recitation brings a variety of benefits in the present life:

“Facilitation of good karma”: Because of Amitabha-recitation, negative karma and circumstances turn positive. For example, troubled families become pacified and serene, and disrespectful descendants become filial.

“Extension of lifespan”: We are protected and supported by Buddha-power, and our longevity is extended.

“Light retribution for heavy offenses”: Instead of suffering greatly for karmic offenses, we suffer slightly.

The 15 types of benefit from Amitabha-recitation are as follows:

In the Present Life: Amitabha is present above our heads; Buddha-light protects our bodies; the Buddhas watch over us; Bodhisattvas follow us; beings in the netherworld support us; karmic obstructions are eliminated; wisdom and good fortune grow; calamities are averted; we have health and longevity; we pass away propitiously; we obtain the karma of assurance (karma of assured rebirth).

After Rebirth: Reincarnation ends; we are reborn in the Pure Land; we attain Buddhahood; we widely deliver sentient beings.

And here are the benefits in this life of Amitabha-recitation, as mentioned in the Three Pure Land Sutras.

Of the 48 Vows in the *Infinite Life Sutra*, the following relate to benefits in this lifetime:

The 12th “Vow of Infinite Light.” With his light, Amitabha Buddha makes karmic connections with sentient beings, helping and delivering them. This is a benefit of the mind (psychological benefit).

The 13th “Vow of Infinite Life.” It enables Amitabha-reciters to have their lifespans extended in this life, so it contains a present benefit.

The 18th “Vow of Rebirth Through Amitabha-Recitation.” This allows us to be delivered by Amitabha, setting our hearts at ease. It is a benefit of the mind.

The 19th “Vow of Arrival and Welcome.” As we are about to die, we are free from suffering and fear; we experience great comfort. A benefit of the mind.

The 20th “Vow of Assured Rebirth Through Consistent Recollection.” This is a present benefit in terms of its reassurance of deliverance. Its realization,

however, is a benefit of the future.

The 33rd “Vow of Softness Upon Being Touched by the [Amitabha’s] Light.” It is a benefit of the mind.

The 34th “Vow of Bodhisattva Insights Upon Hearing the [i.e., Amitabha’s] Name.” This refers to non-retrogression on the path of Buddhahood in the present lifetime. A benefit of the mind.

The 37th “Vow of Respect From Human and Celestial Beings.” Honored and loved by human and heavenly beings, Amitabha-reciters are happy in both body and mind, unimpeded by obstacles on the path to Buddhahood. The vow provides both physical and psychological benefits.

The “*Gatha of the Three Vows*” in the *Infinite Life Sutra* says, **“Unless I can become a great benefactor who can provide succor to the needy and the suffering, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.”** The *Splendors of Infinite Life Sutra*, an alternative translation of the sutra, notes: **“I make offerings of precious treasures to the needy and the suffering.”** Yet another rendering of the sutra, *Assembly of the Tathagata of Infinite Life*, says, **“I help the poor and relieve them from suffering; I benefit the world’s beings and bring them peace and happiness.”**

To help the poor and the needy, and to bring them peace and joy, are physical and psychological benefits of the present lifetime. We can see that because of Amitabha’s unseen assistance, name-reciters receive material benefits in this life without having to ask for them. They needn’t worry about their livelihoods; nor will they lack for clothing or food.

Moreover, the *Infinite Life Sutra* says, **“I will remove the murk of the three contaminations and relieve the distress and difficulties of the multitudes. I will open their eyes of wisdom and eliminate their confusion and ignorance. I will block the paths to the Wretched Realms and open the gates to the Fortunate Realms.”** This points to the benefit of removing karmic offenses and rebirth in good realms.

The sutra also states, **“If sentient beings encounter this [Amitabha’s] light, their three contaminations will be removed and their bodies and minds will soften. They will be joyous and enthusiastic, and positive thoughts will arise.”** The dual benefits of body and mind are highlighted.

There are more than 20 passages in the *Longer Sutra* that mention benefits in the present lifetime.

While describing the 8th Contemplation, the *Contemplation Sutra* says, **“Those who undertake this contemplation will expunge countless kalpas of mortal offenses and attain Amitabha-recitation samadhi in this lifetime.”** This is a benefit of eliminating karmic offenses and nurturing virtue.

The 9th Contemplation – **“The light [of Amitabha Buddha] permeates all worlds in the ten directions, embracing only beings who recite his name and never letting go”** – confers benefits in the present life, as mentioned previously. Towards the end, the sutra says, **“You should know that those who recite Amitabha’s name are like white lotus flowers among humankind. Bodhisattvas Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta become their close friends. They will sit in the place of enlightenment and be born into the family of Buddhas.”** This spotlights the benefit of being protected and supported by the two Bodhisattvas.

There are also 20-odd places in the *Contemplation Sutra* that refer to reciters receiving psychological benefits in this life.

In the *Amitabha Sutra*, two passages mention present-life benefits of Amitabha-recitation. One is: **“When [a reciter] approaches the point of death, Amitabha Buddha and the sacred assembly will appear before him. When death comes, his mind will not be severely confused. He will at once gain rebirth in Amitabha Buddha’s Land of Bliss.”** This benefit occurs at the end of the present lifetime.

The second passage: Amitabha-reciters are **“protected and supported by all Buddhas and attain the state of non-retrogression.”** Because of the Buddhas’ protection and assistance, they receive the benefit of strengthened faith.

The above outlines the benefits of Amitabha-recitation in this life, as spelled out in the Three Pure Land Sutras.

We now use three kinds of light to illustrate the current benefits of recitation. When we sincerely and exclusively recite his name, Amitabha Buddha emits the pure light of virtue without greed, extinguishing our impure karma of avarice and lust. This makes us the same as those who observe the precepts in a pure manner. Amitabha also radiates the joyful light of virtue without anger, which eradicates our karmic obstructions stemming from hatred. We resemble those who curb their anger and practice forbearance. Finally, Amitabha transmits the light of wisdom from virtue without delusion, expunging our karmic offenses from ignorance. We are the same as wise people.

Pure light makes our minds clean, beautiful and greedless. Joyful light makes them soft, harmonious and without anger. And the light of wisdom makes

our minds perceptive, forthright and without delusion. Thus the references to “I will remove the murk of the three contaminations” and “their three contaminations will be removed and their bodies and minds will soften ... positive thoughts will arise.”

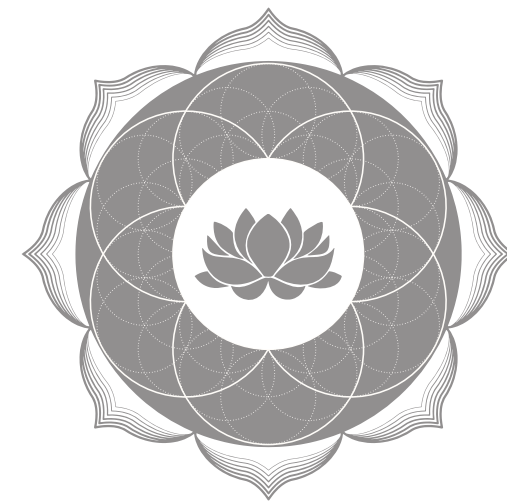
Moreover, infinite light can transcend finite limitations and boundless light rises above boundaries imposed by attachment. Unimpeded light clears away all obstructions, incomparable light extinguishes resentment and hatred, and continuous light makes the mind steadfast.

The benefits of Amitabha-recitation are innumerable and unlimited. Those who truly believe should rejoice and practice it gratefully!

Chapter

9

**Rebirth Of Ordinary Beings In The
Pure Land's Realm Of Rewards**



Section 1. Body and Realm -- Rewards or Transformation?

The goal of the Pure Land School is rebirth in Amitabha Buddha's Pure Land. So the kind of Pure Land we are reborn in and the qualifications needed for rebirth are supremely important.

There are many interpretations of Buddha-lands and Buddha-bodies. In general, they can be grouped under the notion of “the Three Bodies (*Trikaya*) and the Three Lands.” That is, a Buddha has three bodies that dwell in three realms: The Dharma Body (*Dharmakaya*) is in the Dharma Land, the Reward Body (*Sambhogakaya*) in the Realm of Rewards, and the Transformation Body (*Nirmanakaya*) in the Transformation Realm.

The noumenal Buddha of the Dharma Body is omnipresent. The Dharmature is in a state of unconditioned nirvana. It cannot be described, so we shall omit it.

“Reward” means recompense. It is the splendid Pure Land of a myriad virtues that's the consequential reward of Amitabha's pure vows and practices in the causal ground. The Realm of Rewards is where the Buddha dwells. It is also called the “Truth Realm” or the “True Realm of Rewards.” A part of ultimate reality, this realm is permanent and unchanging.

“Transform” is to change. The Transformation Realm is where a Buddha expediently manifests as a human being, Sravaka and Pratyekabuddha, before becoming a Bodhisattva of the First Stage. It is also known as the “Manifestation Realm” or the “Realm of Expedient Transformation.” It is not a Buddha's environment. It can be either pure or contaminated, varying according to the karmic conditions of sentient beings.

In the *Longer Sutra*, the Land of Bliss is called “Peace and Joy” or “Happily Restful.” The *Contemplation Sutra* and *Shorter Sutra* term it “Bliss.” *Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land* uses “Realm of the Lotus Treasure.”

Citing the *Mahāyānābhisamaya Sutra*, the *Longer Sutra* and the *Contemplation Sutra*, Master Shandao determines in the “Section on the Underlying Meaning” of his *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra*: **“that Land is not a Transformation Realm.”** He calls it a “Realm of Unconditioned Nirvana” and “Nirvana City.”

In his *Collection on the Land of Peace and Joy*, Master Daochuo also states clearly that the Land of Bliss is a Realm of Rewards. *Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land* and *Commentary on the Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land* did not specify Reward or Transformation Realm. But their clear references to **“features of a marvellous realm of ultimate reality”** and **“three achievements from a splendid aspiration”** point to a True Realm of Rewards.

Section 2. Ordinary Beings Enter the Realm of Rewards

If one had to rely on the self-power realization of the standard schools, only advanced Bodhisattvas would qualify for rebirth in the various Pure Lands of Rewards. Not even saintly beings such as Sravakas, Pratyekabuddhas and pre-Bodhisattvas could be reborn, much less ordinary beings. The views of Sacred-Path masters on rebirth in the Pure Land generally fall under four categories:

1. The Land of Bliss is a marvellous Realm of Rewards, but ordinary beings cannot be reborn there;
2. Ordinary beings can be reborn, but the Land of Bliss is a only coarse Transformation Realm;
3. The Land of Bliss is both a Realm of Rewards and a Transformation Realm, with advanced Bodhisattvas being reborn in the former, and first-stage Bodhisattvas and ordinary beings in the latter;
4. The Land of Bliss has four realms, but ordinary beings can only be reborn in the lowest one -- the Realm of Co-Habitation for Ordinary and Sacred Beings.

To sum up, ordinary beings aren't eligible for rebirth in the Realm of Rewards.

Alone, Master Shandao took the other-power viewpoint of Amitabha Buddha's Fundamental Vow. He judged Amitabha to be a Reward Buddha and the Land of Bliss a Realm of Rewards. He also explained that the nine levels of rebirth in the *Contemplation Sutra* all involved ordinary beings, underscoring the "rebirth of ordinary beings in the Pure Land's Realm of Rewards." That is, by reciting the name of Amitabha Buddha, ordinary beings could be reborn in his Pure Land's Realm of Rewards. Says the "Section on the Underlying Meaning" in *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra*:

Question: Since that Buddha and his realm are of Reward nature, even lesser saints are hard put to access it. How can ordinary beings, with their unclean hindrances, do so?

Answer: Quite so, if we consider the impure afflictions of ordinary beings. But by relying on the powerful karma of Amitabha's vows, all Five Vehicles would be reborn.

That's to say, the potent karma of Amitabha's vows enables the humblest beings with severe confusion and heavy obstructions to be reborn in the Realm of Rewards, on an equal basis with advanced Bodhisattvas who have eliminated ignorance. That is the primary principle behind the establishment of the Pure Land School. It is also the root of countless Pure Land teachings and practices.

Section 3. Rapid Achievement of Buddhahood

Some believe that ordinary beings retain their status after rebirth in the Pure Land, and their cultivation is facilitated by the tranquil environment. Since they have infinite life, the practitioners would make incremental achievements until they attain Buddhahood. Such thinking is based on an assumption that ordinary beings are reborn in a Transformation Realm or the Realm of Co-Habitation for Ordinary and Sacred Beings.

But Master Shandao already determined that ordinary beings are “reborn in the Realm of Rewards” and that “all Five Vehicles” are thus reborn too. So once they achieve rebirth, even ordinary beings of the Saha world would make quick progress and rapidly become Buddhas. Here are a few of the many scriptural passages that attest to this:

1) The *Infinite Life Sutra* says of the 22nd Vow: Those in the Pure Land **“transcend the standard practices of various Bodhisattva stages and forthwith cultivate the virtues of Samantabhadra”**;

2) The *Infinite Life Sutra* says: **“Sravakas, Bodhisattvas, celestial beings and humans there have lofty and brilliant wisdom, and are masters of supernatural powers. They are of one form, with no difference. But they are called ‘celestial beings’ and ‘humans’ simply with reference to such**

states elsewhere.” Says the *Assembly of Tatagathas of Infinite Life*: **“All the sentient beings in the Land of Bliss have the same appearance. They are called ‘heavenly beings’ and ‘humans’ only according to the practice elsewhere.”**

3) The *Infinite Life Sutra* says: **“They are naturally and transformationally born inside seven-jewelled flowers, sitting in the lotus position. In an instant, their bodies emit light and they achieve fully the wisdom and virtues of sundry Bodhisattvas.”**

4) The *Contemplation Sutra* says: **“Bodhisattvas Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta become close friends of those who recite Amitabha Buddha’s name. They will sit in the place of enlightenment and be born into the family of the Buddhas.”**

5) The *Amitabha Sutra* says: **“Sentient beings born in the Land of Bliss all achieve non-retrogression. Many attain the state of being one lifetime removed from Buddhahood.”**

6) The *Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land* says: **“The power of Amitabha’s Fundamental Vow enables [beings] quickly to fill the Great Sea of Meritorious Treasures.”** They will **“rapidly achieve Anuttara-samyak-sambodhi (supreme enlightenment).”**

Moreover, they all have golden bodies and similar appearance, and possess the six supernatural powers and 32 marks of a Buddha. They attain such perfections speedily, not incrementally. So after rebirth, ordinary beings rapidly attain Buddhahood.

Though they become Buddhas and take on the virtues and characters of Buddhas, they are not called Buddhas. They follow the practice elsewhere and assume names under the Five Vehicles. Undertaking the practices of Samantabhadra, they deliver and help sentient beings throughout the ten directions. These are consequential Samantabhadra practices, not those in the causal ground.

According to Master Tanluan, such beings “do not progress from one phase to the next.” Master Shandao adds that they “realize the permanent joy of the Dharma-Nature,” and that “the aspirations and practices of all 10 Bodhisattva phases manifest naturally.” This results entirely from the vow power of Amitabha Buddha.

Even so, such great benefits accrue only to those who recite Amitabha's name exclusively. Mixed practitioners suffer the impediment of the womb-born (next section).

Section 4. Womb-Birth and Transformational Birth

The Land of Bliss is a Realm of Rewards. But there are two kinds of rebirth: by transformation and via a womb. Even so, they are in fact transformational births (fully formed, by metamorphosis). That's unlike in this world, where births are determined by different karma and take place in a womb, an egg, a fluid or transformationally. Instead, births in the Pure Land are by transformation, in pure lotus flowers. As the *Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land* puts it, “**transformational birth in flowers of enlightenment.**”

But to distinguish between the two types of rebirth and their relative merits, those who after rebirth immediately see Amitabha Buddha, without having to remain within the lotus for some time, are said to have undergone transformational birth. Those who must stay in the flower-pod a while before emerging in the Buddha's presence are said to be womb-born. The descriptions borrow a metaphor from this world: a baby growing within its mother's womb before making its appearance.

According to the *Longer Sutra*, those who have faith in Buddha-wisdom would undergo natural, transformational births within seven-jeweled flowers. In an instant, their bodies emit light and their wisdom and virtues become like those of Bodhisattvas. Those who doubt Buddha-wisdom, however, would be reborn in palaces, unable to see the Three Gems for 500 years. They could

neither make offerings to Buddhas nor know the ways of Bodhisattvas, or even cultivate merit. This is known as womb-birth.

The *Longer Sutra* also says: **“Those who are transformationally born have greater wisdom than before; the womb-born have no wisdom.”** That’s in the context of settling the mind.

In terms of starting practice, Amitabha-recitation is superior to mixed practices. Those who recite are transformationally reborn, while mixed practitioners are womb-born.

Though there are five types of Buddha-wisdom, they amount to no more than the Six-Character Name. The *Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land* compares name-recitation to Amitabha Buddha’s “light of wisdom.” So to recite Amitabha’s name exclusively is to have faith in Buddha-wisdom, while those who engage in mixed practices constantly wonder, “How could I be reborn just through recitation?” Doubting Buddha-wisdom, they delight in sundry practices.

Reciters have intimate, proximate and augmentative karmic connections to Amitabha Buddha. Buddha and reciter have each other in mind, and their words, deeds and thoughts aren’t separate. Naturally, the reciter at rebirth would be close to the Buddha. Mixed practitioners have no intimate, proximate or augmentative karmic links. Their minds are distant and separate from that of Amitabha. At rebirth obstacles spontaneously arise between them and the Buddha, and they go into the lotus-pod (womb).

There are many names for womb-birth: doubting Buddha-wisdom, one is encased in the lotus-pod -- as in a mother’s womb. The pod is big, and those inside enjoy various pleasures. Since it resembles a palace, it is called “palace-womb” or “womb-palace.” And because it looks like a lotus flower outside and

a palace inside, it’s also called “palace-flower.” Impeded by doubt, the reborn is confined within the lotus ... like being trapped in a city. Thus the term “city of doubt.” Since access to the Dharma is difficult, there are references to the “peripheral ground.” Being remote from Amitabha Buddha, it’s also known as the “peripheral region.”

Regarding the levels of rebirth and womb-birth, some think the latter is outside the Nine Levels of Rebirth. Other believe the Nine Levels are womb-birth, and differ only by degree, being encased in the lotus and unable to see the Three Gems. Rebirth is divided into Nine Levels according to the extent of doubt, the amount of virtue, the weight of karmic offenses and the speed at which the flower opens. The Nine Levels denote the benefits received. Actually, the levels aren’t limited to nine; they should be indefinite.

Of the Nine Levels, the lowest three are said to involve Amitabha-recitation leading to rebirth inside the lotus. That resembles womb-birth, which is linked to negative karma. But the intention is suppressive, to forestall wrongdoing. The highest level involves mixed practices, yet the person is received by a golden platform and is directly reborn by transformation. This evokes the Three States of Mind, and aims to spotlight the significance of recitation. See details below.

Some also say that womb-birth occurs in a “transformational realm.” It was brought into being by mixed karma, a temporary way station and incremental construct, not an ultimate destination. But this merely borrows the normal usage of the term “transformational realm.” Actually, it all happens in the Realm of Rewards, a matter of “different perspectives on the same place.”

Section 5. Tiers and Levels of Rebirth

A. Do the Tiers and Levels Exist?

There are different views on whether there are tiers and levels of rebirth in the Land of Bliss.

One interpretation holds that since the Land of Bliss is a pure Realm of Rewards, there naturally aren't any tiers or levels. Moreover, there is no mention of them in the 48 Vows. All the pledges promise equal benefits -- golden bodies, no differentiation in appearance, possession of the six supernatural powers, infinite life, etc. Thus we know there aren't different levels of benefits in the Realm of Rewards. And the *Treatise of Rebirth in the Pure Land* speaks of “**an equal, singular appearance,**” while *Commentary on the Treatise of Rebirth in the Pure Land* notes that “**originally there were nine levels, but now there are none.**”

According to this view, the tiers and levels were an expedient expression by the World-Honored One to entice and teach sentient beings of this world. As the *Longer Sutra* says: “**The Sravakas, Bodhisattvas, and celestial and human beings there have advanced wisdom and have attained supernatural powers. In that they are of one kind, without differences. But for expediency vis-a-vis other realms, they are called celestial beings**

and human beings. Their faces are upright, transcendent and rare; their complexions are refined and marvellous. Neither celestial nor human, they all have bodies that are natural, of nothingness and unbounded.”

Since the Five Vehicles are equal, the different names arise only in deference to various local customs. So it is with the tiers and levels of rebirth.

Another interpretation says that although the Pure Land is a Realm of Rewards, it does accommodate tiers and levels. That's because the grades are specified in both the *Longer Sutra* and the *Contemplation Sutra*. Moreover, other Rewards Realms only have advanced Bodhisattvas. So they are equal and of one kind, without different levels. Since the Land of Bliss accommodates ordinary beings with roots of disparate quality and different accomplishment in self-cultivation, how could they enjoy the same benefits after rebirth in the Pure Land?

A close look at the two interpretations shows that each has its merits. In summary, we can say that the Land of Bliss encompasses a single type of Realm of Rewards, but two types of rebirth. Those who are transformationally born through Amitabha-recitation aren't subject to tiers and levels, but mixed practitioners undergoing womb-birth are.

Reciters without tiers and levels wholly abandon self-power and rely entirely on Buddha-power. Because the cause is equal, so is the karmic consequence. Therefore levels and classes of rebirth are transcended. “Those who recite Amitabha's name exclusively,” says Master Tanluan, “are brothers throughout the Dharma realms.” Notes Master Shandao, “On the path to enlightenment, they share the same karma and practice.” He adds: “But if their karmic causes are different, they would be differentiated by the nine levels.” And: “By relying on Amitabha's vow as supplemental cause, practitioners of all

Five Vehicles are similarly reborn.”

Before they recite Amitabha's name, practitioners each have different karma, forming the context for nine levels of rebirth. Having recited it, they depend on the Buddha's vow as supplemental karma -- and the Five Vehicles enter the Pure Land equally. As Master Tanluan says, “Originally there were nine levels, but now there are none.”

Some say there are tiers and levels even in recitation -- in terms of number, length and skill. This is all for the sake of expediency, to encourage enthusiasm among practitioners. Because Amitabha's name transcends quantity, it is not restricted by relativity. A scripture says, “Even a single recitation brings great benefits, enough to encompass unsurpassed virtues and merit.” Master Shandao interprets that as “up to a lifetime's recitation, or just a single one” and “regardless of (a person's) bad karma or good fortune.” Also: “To recite persistently, whether for long or short periods -- that is the karma of assurance.”

Mixed practitioners are separated by tiers and levels because they have mixed self-power into their practice. Because the karmic causes are different, so are the consequences. There are five disparities:

1. There are levels to their karmic inclinations or abilities, namely upper, middle and lower.
2. There are gradations to their practices or actions -- namely of great, small and worldly merit; their negative deeds are also of relative weight.
3. There are levels among the Sacred Assembly that arrives to welcome the practitioner to the Pure Land. Present are *Sambhogakaya* (Reward

Body) Buddhas as well as *Nirmanakaya* (Manifest Body) Buddhas ... and the number of *Nirmanakaya* Buddhas.

4. There are discrepancies among the flowers -- in the length of time it takes them to open.
5. There are differences in the benefits received, after the flowers have bloomed. Dharma realizations are greater or lesser, and they take longer or shorter time.

The first two are causes, the latter three are consequences. The causes are karmic abilities and practices -- what can be and are cultivated. The consequences are the sacred welcoming assembly, which is in this world, and the opening of flowers and benefits received, which occur in the Pure Land.

B. Meaning of the Tiers and Levels

The significance of the Pure Land path is to show that Amitabha-recitation is the ultimate truth and the various practices are expedient means. To embrace the expedient with the ultimate and induce practitioners of all inclinations and abilities to recite is the overarching teaching of both Shakyamuni Buddha and Amitabha Buddha. It is to underscore this meaning that the tiers and levels were established. They have four aims:

i. To make clear that Amitabha-recitation embraces all inclinations and aptitudes

That's the meaning of the passage in the *Longer Sutra* on the Three Tiers.

ii. To guide practitioners of all proclivities towards Amitabha-recitation

That's the significance of the text in the *Contemplation Sutra* on the Nine Levels.

iii. To accommodate all inclinations and emotional preferences

The Buddha-mind is equal and without distinction. But those unable to believe fully in Buddha-wisdom and only trust ordinary people would be skeptical if they heard that both good and evil reciters would be reborn in the Pure Land on an equal basis. So the tiers and levels are established expediently: the good are reborn in the higher levels and the bad in the lower ones.

iv. To suppress evil and promote good

Lacking wisdom, ordinary beings are liable to adopt the skewed view that "evil deeds are all right" if they hear that both good and bad people are reborn on an equal basis. That's the reason the tiers and levels were set up, showing expediently that superior practitioners are reborn in higher grades and lesser ones in lower levels.

The *Longer Sutra* and *Contemplation Sutra* both speak of Amitabha-recitation as well as the sundry practices. It is for reasons of expediency that they delineate the tiers and levels. The *Shorter Sutra* mentions only recitation and not miscellaneous practices. Focusing wholly on the ultimate reality, it does not refer to gradations. Those reborn in the Pure Land, it says, "all achieve non-retrogression" and "are one lifetime removed from Buddhahood"; they dwell "in the company of supremely virtuous beings."

C. Aptitude and Dharma in the Three Tiers

In the *Longer Sutra*, beings of the Three Tiers have different aptitudes and inclinations -- upper, middle and lower. More specifically:

1) Upper-tier proclivities -- Become a monastic and cultivate merit and virtues extensively;

2) Middle-tier inclinations -- Become a householder and do good deeds, to a greater or lesser extent;

3) Lower-tier aptitudes -- They include even those incapable of meritorious or virtuous actions. The scriptures refer to an absence of good; logically, that should imply an ability to do evil. Moreover, "even those" in this context suggests that practitioners who have made efforts to do good find favor with the Buddhas. It subtly promotes good and discourages evil.

All three tiers of practitioners have resolved to achieve *bodhicitta*, recite Amitabha Buddha's name exclusively, and aspire to rebirth in the Pure Land. Yet resolve and aspiration refer to the general and specific settling of the mind, while exclusive recitation is the practice. So the Three Tiers all recite the name of Amitabha Buddha.

Recitation by itself encompasses a myriad proclivities and countless practices. Becoming a monastic, aspiring to rebirth and cultivating virtue are all enfolded into name-recitation. They cannot stand alone, whereas recitation does not rely on the sundry practices. Consider the evergreen trunk of a tree. Branches and leaves flourish when they are near it, and shrivel when at a distance.

In *Dharma Path of Contemplation and Recitation*, Master Shandao explains: **“The Buddha said that all sentient beings have different inclinations and capabilities -- of upper, middle and lower levels. According to their proclivities, the Buddha urged them all to recite exclusively the name of the Buddha of Infinite Life.”**

D. The Nine Levels of Mind-Practices

“Meaning of the Non-Meditative Practices” in the *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra* notes, **“Though preceding passages spoke of the merits of the meditative and non-meditative virtues, the Buddha’s underlying wish is that sentient beings recite Amitabha’s name single-mindedly.”** So we know that the 13 meditative practices and the nine levels of non-meditative practices were taught in order to steer practitioners towards Amitabha-recitation.

The Nine Levels are used to illuminate their mind-practices.

i. Mind

“Mind” refers to settling of the mind, and also the Three States of Mind.

Sincere Mind means a truthful, genuine mind. Ordinary beings are false, while Amitabha is real. Our mind is genuine when we let go of ourselves and depend on the Buddha. Deep Mind is a mind with profound faith. It is to believe that we are powerless and the Buddha is powerful. To depend on the Buddha is definitely Deep Mind. To return to Amitabha Buddha, never retrogress, recite consistently and think of rebirth -- that is the Mind of Merit-Dedication and Aspiration.

Thus the Three States of Mind signify reliance on Amitabha Buddha and

aspiration to rebirth in the Pure Land. When this mindset is true and substantive, not false and insubstantial, it is called Sincere Mind. When resolute and unwavering, it is known as Deep Mind. When consistent and non-retrogressive, it is the Mind of Merit-Dedication and Aspiration. The Three States of Mind are fully manifested in the name, “Namo Amitabha Buddha.” According to Master Shandao, “Namo” means to “entrust our lives” to Amitabha, as well as to “dedicate merit towards rebirth” in his Pure Land.

“Meaning of the Non-Meditative Practices” explains it thus: **“The World-Honored One revealed the benefit according to circumstances. Its meaning is abstruse and hard to understand. If the Buddha did not raise the question and answer it himself, comprehension would be impossible.”**

With the Three States of Mind, he linked the Nine Levels and embraced the Meditative and Non-Meditative Virtues. He was able to explain the benefit of rebirth according to Meditative or Non-Meditative contexts. The Buddha’s intention was that sentient beings recite the name of Amitabha exclusively. This purpose was obscure and hard to know, so the Buddha posed the question and answered it himself. He spoke of the Three States of Mind so as to steer people towards Amitabha-recitation. If things are explained to them, practitioners would recite. So the Three States of Mind are key to inducing them to recite Amitabha’s name.

ii. Practice

“Practice” means starting practice. Among the Nine Levels, those from the Upper Tier -- whether of superior, immediate or inferior ability -- practice Greater-Vehicle virtues. Those of the Middle Tier, with superior, intermediate or inferior ability, perform worldly good acts. These six categories constitute virtuous persons; they undertake mixed practices.

People of superior ability in the Lower Tier are guilty of the Ten Evil Actions, while those of intermediate ability in the Lower Tier are precept-breakers. Lower-Tier persons of inferior ability have committed the five gravest transgressions. Beings of these three categories are entirely evil, devoid of virtue. Amitabha-recitation is their sole means of deliverance.

But since the Three States of Mind mean the settling of the mind through Amitabha-recitation, the Three States are common to all Nine Levels and recitation is present in each of them. It is not restricted to the three levels of the Lower Tier. And the Three Tiers mentioned in the *Longer Sutra* and the Nine Levels in the *Contemplation Sutra* are just abbreviated and expanded forms of each other respectively. Therefore because the Three Tiers recite Amitabha's name, recitation is also present throughout the Nine Levels.

Yet recitation is mentioned only with reference to the Lower Tier. The reason is to reveal the loftiest Dharma principle through the lowest level of capability. A karmic offender who is approaching death cannot be saved by greater or lesser worldly virtues. Such a person can only be freed rapidly from the cycle of birth and death through Amitabha-recitation. So we know that mixed practice cannot deliver those near death. Only recitation can rescue such heavy offenders; it is truly the *sarpirmandla* (supreme) medicine. If precept-breakers and karmic offenders can expunge their offenses and gain rebirth by abruptly embracing Amitabha, how much more so would those who recite the Buddha's name and do good in ordinary times. Naturally Amitabha Buddha would enfold them and never abandon them.

E. Expanding and Contracting the Tiers and Levels

Since ancient times, there have been different explanations of the similarities and differences between Tiers and Levels. In a literal sense, there can be said to be four discrepancies:

1. In good against evil;
2. In degree of aspiration and resolve;
3. In terms of greater or lesser, bigger or smaller;
4. With reference to Amitabha-recitation.

Yet in terms of significance, the Three Tiers and Nine Levels are the same: In each, rebirth in the Pure Land is achieved through Amitabha-recitation and dedication of merit.

According to our school, the Tiers and Levels are identical, differing only in whether they are expanded or abbreviated. The purpose of such differences is to draw beings of various inclinations and capabilities into the single vehicle of name-recitation.

Among the 16 visualizations in the *Contemplation Sutra*, the 14th, 15th and 16th are known as the "visualizations of the Three Tiers." The text refers to visualizations for rebirth by "upper," "middle" and "lower" tiers. The sutra takes the Nine Levels as the Three Tiers of rebirth. This shows that it is the Three Tiers when abbreviated and the Nine Levels when expanded. Further expansion would bring the number of Levels to 81. In fact, such expansion could be infinite.

Though the Three Tiers and the Nine Levels alike draw those of different proclivities towards Amitabha-recitation, people nonetheless experience various degrees of ease or difficulty according to their state of mind and practice.

i. According to practice

In the *Longer Sutra*, the Three Tiers are mentioned right after the fulfillment text of the 18th Vow. They flow from name-recitation and embrace all other practices. They first encompass virtuous monastics, then virtuous householders and, finally, people without virtue. In all cases, **“single-minded, exclusive recitation”** is cited. And in keeping with the basic intent of name-recitation, the text urges aspiration to achieving *bodhicitta*. Yet towards the end of the part on the Three Tiers, it adds **“those who hear the profound teaching, happily believe it without any doubt, and make a single recitation of that Buddha’s name, wishing to be reborn in his realm...”** This shows that aspiring to *bodhicitta* isn’t essential for rebirth in the Pure Land; more important is name-recitation according to the Three States of Mind.

The Nine Levels in the *Contemplation Sutra* start with the meditative virtues. For those incapable of practicing the meditative virtues, it speaks of the non-meditative virtues. It first discusses the Mahayana virtues. To those unable to cultivate them, it talks about Lesser Vehicle virtues. Those who cannot even practice those receive instruction on worldly virtues. There is a descent with each level until the bottom three, where no virtues -- meditative, non-meditative, Greater Vehicle, Lesser Vehicle or worldly -- can be cultivated and only bad karma is created. There, the sutra speaks of Amitabha-recitation. By the power of Amitabha Buddha’s vows, all can gain rebirth in the Land of Bliss.

That’s like reaching a dead end ... only to have an opening emerge. Name-recitation comes in reverse order to the cultivations; it is deliberately placed in

the lowest three levels. And aspiration to *bodhicitta* is mentioned only in the top tier, not in the middle and bottom ones.

ii. According to mind

About the Three Tiers, it is said after the fulfillment text of the 18th Vow: **“Of the inhabitants of the worlds in all directions, those who aspire with Sincere Mind to rebirth in the Pure Land can be encompassed by the Three Tiers.”** That is to say, exclusive name-recitation can be expounded to those who possess the Three States of Mind. And those with different roots and capabilities -- whether they are capable of taking monastic vows or not, whether they are able to cultivate virtue or not -- are all induced to recite the name of Amitabha Buddha.

Originally, the Nine Levels consisted of those who cultivated the various practices. They did not possess the Three States of Mind, and wished to dedicate the merit from their practices towards rebirth in the Pure Land. But as the explication says, “The merit arising from such settling of the mind and practice can collectively be called toxic merit. It is not possible to gain rebirth in that Buddha’s Pure Land by the dedication of such toxic merit.”

Thus by expounding the Three States of Mind ahead of the deeds and practices of the Top Level in the Upper Tier, all Nine Levels can be embraced. Mind can guide practice. With the Three States of Mind directing deeds and practices, Amitabha-recitation would lead to rebirth in the Pure Land, relying on the vow power of the Buddha. The “Meaning of the Non-Meditative Practices” chapter of the *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra* says: **“The World-Honored One revealed the benefits according to circumstances; their meaning is hidden and hard to fathom.”** That’s what it was referring to.

To sum up, the Three Tiers encompass the expedient within the real, according to the basic intent of Amitabha Buddha. And the Nine Levels transform the capabilities of sentient beings, leading them from the expedient to the real. By juxtaposing the two texts, the meaning becomes clearer.

E. The Three Meritorious Practices and Various Virtues

The Three Meritorious Practices are the three mentioned in the “Introduction” to the *Contemplation Sutra* -- worldly merit, merit from precepts and merit from practice. “Merit” is another name for virtuous roots. Mundane virtues -- such as benevolence, justice, propriety, wisdom and trust -- are known as worldly merit. The virtue from observing the precepts of Buddhism’s Greater and Lesser Vehicles constitutes merit from precepts. The splendidly virtuous practices of the Greater Vehicle are, in particular, called merit from practice.

i. Worldly merit

“To be filial towards parents, to respect and serve teachers and elders, to be merciful and avoid killing, to cultivate the Ten Good Actions.” The first two items are practices of respect, the latter two of compassion. To be merciful and refrain from killing is foremost among the Ten Good Actions, so it is specially cited.

ii. Merit from precepts

“To undertake and uphold the Three Refuges, to take fully the precepts, to avoid faulty comportment.” To take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha are the Three Refuges. To progress from disbelief to belief in

the Buddha is to abandon evil for good. It is known as the Three Refuges to overturn evil. After that, there are the pure precepts for the three assemblies and the ten heavy and 48 light precepts of the Greater Vehicle -- and the five, eight, ten or full precepts of the Lesser Vehicle. Those who take refuge in the Three Gems through precepts are said to receive the Three Refuges of Precepts.

To undertake the precepts of both the Greater and Lesser Vehicles is to take fully the precepts. While upholding the precepts, care must be exercised over small movements or gestures -- such as the 84,000 of the Greater Vehicle and the 3,000 of the Lesser Vehicle. To carry them out properly is to avoid faulty comportment.

iii. Merit from practice

“To aspire to *bodhicitta* (supreme enlightenment), to believe deeply in cause and effect, to read and recite Mahayana scriptures, and to encourage practice.” Aspiration to *bodhicitta* can be of the Sacred Path as well as the Pure Land Path. With the Sacred Path, both aspiration and practice towards enlightenment take place in this world. Aspiration under the Pure Land Path occurs in this world but practice is undertaken in the Pure Land. So gaining merit from practice is common to both the Sacred and the Pure Land paths.

The mention of *bodhicitta* within the Three Tiers and Nine Levels refers only to the Pure Land Path. Believing deeply in cause and effect means to believe in all karmic workings within the Ten Dharma Realms. To read and recite the Mahayana scriptures is to do so with all Greater Vehicle texts, in both the Sacred and Pure Land paths. To encourage practice means to teach others while practicing oneself, undertaking together the Buddhist road.

When the merit from the Three Practices is dedicated towards rebirth in the Pure Land, these are known as miscellaneous practices.

The Three Meritorious Practices and the Nine Levels differ in their contraction or expansion, as explained. We won't go into detail here.

Section 6. Rebirth Assured in the Present Lifetime

If rebirth occurs in proper sequence this lifetime, its timing according to karmic causes would be either 1) during the lifetime, or 2) at the point of death.

The two form a pair of contrasts. Rebirth assured during the present lifetime means the karmic causes of rebirth are settled during one's regular lifetime. Such determination does not need to take place as one dies. A practitioner whose causes of rebirth have been settled is someone whose rebirth in the Pure Land is assured. Such people can continue reciting the name of Amitabha Buddha, content and with hearts at ease. Whatever their manner of death, including being comatose and unable to recite, they will be received by the Buddhas and other sacred beings and be reborn in the Pure Land.

This is the opposite to rebirth being determined at the point of death. The latter means that the karmic causes of rebirth have not been settled during a person's regular lifetime. Such determination occurs only when he or she dies.

Someone who has faith in Amitabha's deliverance and exclusively recites the Buddha's name has encountered the Dharma and performed recitation in regular life. So the person's rebirth has been assured in the present lifetime. Those who lack the karmic conditions to encounter the Dharma and only do so and recite as death approaches, have their rebirths determined at the point

of death. Master Shandao calls it “karma of assurance,” or “karma of assured rebirth.” Master Tanluan describes it as the “settling of karmic affairs.”

This stems from the Fundamental Vow of **“if they should fail to be born there [the Pure Land], may I not attain perfect enlightenment”** -- the merit derived from the six characters “Namo Amitabha Buddha” that Amitabha created ten *kalpas* ago, when he attained Buddhahood. The name encompasses the merit that sentient beings need to be reborn in the Pure Land. It was accomplished by Amitabha as the karmic cause of rebirth and gifted to beings. As a result, beings who believe in and accept the name will have their aptitude aligned with the teachings of the Buddha. With every recitation, they achieve the karma of assurance.

Those who doubt or do mixed practice cannot attain the karmic causes of rebirth during this lifetime. Throughout life, they are fearful and unsettled. Their karma of rebirth can only be accomplished if the Buddhas arrive to welcome them at the point of death.

Section 7. Non-Retrogression Achieved in the Present Lifetime

It is generally believed that non-retrogression is achieved after rebirth in the Pure Land. Even so, though they are ordinary beings in this lifetime, those who practice Amitabha-recitation exclusively have already gained the benefit of non-retrogression. Thus the reference to “non-retrogression achieved in the present lifetime.” “Non-retrogression” means only going forward, not backwards, on the path of Buddhahood. The certain qualification for Buddhahood cannot be lost.

Non-retrogression in the present lifetime was first advocated in Bodhisattva Nagarjuna’s *Chapter on the Easy Path*. Master Shandao also referred to “those whose hearts were touched by the light do not go backwards.”

Within the Three Pure Land Sutras, the 48 Vows in the *Longer Sutra* contain a vow of “Attaining Insight Into No Birth and No Death Upon Hearing the Name.” That’s the 34th Vow, which says: **“If, when I attain Buddhahood, sentient beings in the countless unfathomable Buddha-lands who have heard my name should not obtain Bodhisattva insight into no-birth and no-death as well as various profound practices, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.”**

In the 7th Contemplation of the *Contemplation Sutra*, Queen Vaidehi at once attained nirvana when she saw Amitabha Buddha. And the *Shorter Sutra*

says: ***“Those who have vowed, vow and will vow, wishing to be reborn in Amitabha Buddha’s land, all achieve non-retrogression on the path to Anuttara-samyak-sambodhi (supreme enlightenment).”***

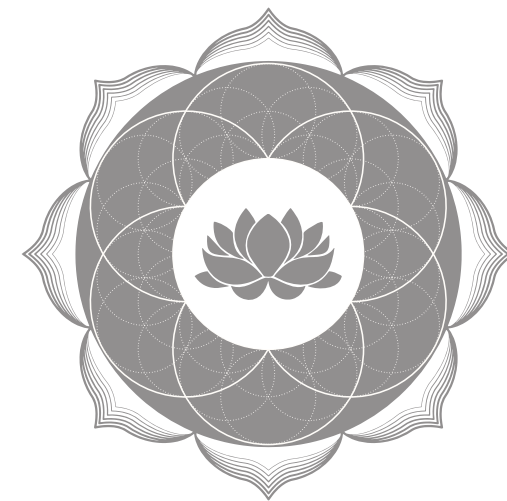
From the viewpoint of their own karma, ordinary beings drown in the sea of mortality and constantly reincarnate, much less achieve non-retrogression. But those who rely on the other-power of Amitabha's Fundamental Vow, recite his name and aspire to rebirth will enter into non-retrogression in this lifetime. They will not lose the status of ordinary beings. Those who realize non-retrogression after rebirth in the Pure Land attain the sacred status of great Bodhisattvas.

Though ordinary beings in this world who attain non-retrogression would not recede on the path to Buddhahood, they remain ordinary beings. They are not Bodhisattvas. Only those who accept the deliverance of Amitabha Buddha and recite his name exclusively can receive such an unfathomable benefit.

Chapter

10

Guiding Principles And Special Characteristics Of The Pure Land School



Section 1. Significance of the Guiding Principles and Special Characteristics

“Guiding principles” refers to the underlying aim of the teachings of a school or sect, and the ways to achieve it. And “special characteristics” are the inherent elements of a school that others lack. Guiding principles and special characteristics are related, though their angles of expression are different.

The teachings of a school may be very broad. But by grasping the guiding principles and special characteristics, one understands their essentials. Even if other details are missed, it’s no big problem. On the contrary, one would remain an outsider even if one studies a school’s scriptures extensively but doesn’t know the guiding principles and special characteristics.

Section 2. Guiding Principles: A Four-Line Gatha

The guiding principles of the Pure Land School can be summarized in a four-line *gatha*:

- Faith in, and acceptance of, Amitabha’s deliverance
- Single-minded recitation of Amitabha’s name
- Aspiration to rebirth in Amitabha’s Pure Land
- Comprehensive deliverance of all sentient beings

The first two lines describe the method -- settling the mind and starting practice, respectively. The last two are the purpose: to benefit oneself as well as others.

The first line shows that this school relies on deliverance by Buddha-power, not self-power cultivation. Through faith, adherents accept the compassion of Amitabha Buddha; they do not seek inherent wisdom through self-realization. They humbly regard themselves as practitioners of a Dharma school that benefits karmic offenders, sufferers and fools, not one accommodating the saintly, the wise or the good.

The second line underscores that “Amitabha’s deliverance” is “Amitabha’s name.” To “have faith in and accept Amitabha’s deliverance” is to “single-mindedly recite Amitabha’s name.” It is exclusive not mixed, easy not difficult, clear not equivocal.

The third line makes plain that the purpose of Amitabha’s deliverance is rebirth in Amitabha’s Pure Land. All who aspire to rebirth can be reborn.

The fourth line illuminates the benefit of Amitabha’s deliverance -- rebirth in the Realm of Rewards, followed by quick achievement of Buddhahood. Having become a Buddha, one can extensively deliver other beings in all directions. The *gatha* stresses that in the Pure Land School, rebirth, Buddhahood and deliverance of others all depend on the singular recitation of Namō Amitabha Buddha.

Moreover, the first line speaks of abandoning self-power for other-power; the second, letting go of the hard for the easy; the third, leaving behind this Saha world for that Pure Land; and the fourth, to realize supreme enlightenment. Receive Amitabha’s deliverance first, then save other beings. Recipients of Amitabha’s deliverance would certainly be able to deliver others.

Section 3. Special Characteristics: Four Catchphrases

The special characteristics of the Pure Land School are encapsulated in four catchphrases:

- Recitation of Amitabha’s name, relying on his Fundamental Vow
- Rebirth of ordinary beings in the Pure Land’s Realm of Rewards
- Rebirth assured in the present lifetime
- Non-retrogression achieved in this lifetime

The first two phrases are the core principles of the Pure Land School, while the second pair highlight special benefits in this lifetime. In addition, the first catchphrase mentions the cause and the other three the consequences. The root naturally contains the branches, as the cause necessarily produces the effects. So all four phrases can be abbreviated to two: “Recitation of Amitabha’s name, relying on his Fundamental Vow; Rebirth of ordinary beings in the Pure Land’s Realm of Rewards.” That can be shortened to just one: “Recitation of Amitabha’s name, relying on his Fundamental Vow.”

“Fundamental Vow” refers to the principle, “recitation of Amitabha’s name” to the practice. “Ordinary beings” points to the capability of relevant

practitioners, and “rebirth in the Realm of Rewards” to the karmic consequence.

So “Recitation of Amitabha’s name, relying on his Fundamental Vow; Rebirth of ordinary beings in the Pure Land’s Realm of Rewards” illuminates the Pure Land School’s “capability (of practitioners), principle, practice and benefits.” In other words, because Amitabha’s Fundamental Vow is substantive, by reciting his name and aspiring to rebirth, iniquitous ordinary beings can be born in the Pure Land’s real, flawless Realm of Rewards.

Moreover, the karma needed for such rebirth is completely accomplished in the present lifetime, without waiting for death. Thus non-retrogression is attained in this very world, not after rebirth in the Land of Bliss.

“Recitation of Amitabha’s name”: The schools of the Sacred Path take sentient beings’ nature of mind as their substance and its realization as their goal. The Pure Land School alone takes the name in the Fundamental Vow as its substance and rebirth via its recitation as its objective. Therefore “recitation of Amitabha’s name” is a special characteristic that distinguishes the Pure Land School from the Sacred Path schools.

Moreover, though various Buddhas also urge rebirth in their pure lands, none are known to have taken a fundamental vow on rebirth through name-recitation. Amitabha was the only Buddha who made such a vow. So “recitation of Amitabha’s name” is a special characteristic that elevates the Pure Land School above the pure lands of other Buddhas.

“Rebirth of ordinary beings in the Realm of Rewards”: In the cultivation practices of the Sacred Path schools, only Bodhisattvas of the Ten Stages can go to the Realms of Rewards of the various Buddhas. These other pure lands do not lack Realms of Rewards, but they are not accessible to iniquitous ordinary

beings. Only in the Pure Land School can an ordinary being, through the power of Amitabha Buddha’s vows, be reborn in the most marvellous Realm of Rewards in the Land of Bliss and gain the status of a Buddha.

So the “rebirth of ordinary beings in the Realm of Rewards” is a special characteristic absent among the Sacred Path schools as well as the pure lands of other Buddhas.

“Rebirth assured in the present lifetime”: Self-cultivation in the Sacred Path schools relies on the accumulation of merit by self-power. That happens incrementally, through many stages of achievement. For example, those who have attained the first stage of the Sacred Path need to go seven times between the earthly and celestial realms before they can achieve liberation without remainder.

With the Pure Land School, even a person with heavy karmic offenses can, this very lifetime, be assured of rebirth, ending the cycle of life and death. But a belief that people must accumulate meritorious deeds before Amitabha Buddha would appear to deliver them on their deathbeds is still colored by the self-power of the Sacred Path. This brings an element of uncertainty to rebirth in the Pure Land.

Note that the phrase is “rebirth assured in the present lifetime,” not “rebirth assured after this lifetime.” The karma for rebirth is achieved during a person’s regular lifetime, the moment he or she recites Amitabha’s name and aspires to rebirth in the Pure Land. That’s because name-recitation according to the Fundamental Vow depends on Amitabha’s vow power for rebirth. Since the Buddha’s vow power is already accomplished, the karma needed for beings’ rebirth has been completed by Amitabha. And because of this completion, anytime that sentient beings believe in the Buddha’s deliverance, accept it

and recite Amitabha's name, they at once achieve the karma of rebirth via the Buddha's vow power. They do not have to wait until they die.

At any time, any person who believes in deliverance, aspires to rebirth and recites the name accomplishes forthwith the karma of rebirth. Because such karma is imperishable, recitations naturally follow on from one another, each leading towards certain rebirth. That is why "karma of assured rebirth," "ten thousand reciters, ten thousand rebirths," and "no encounters [with the Pure Land path] are wasted" are special, unique characteristics associated with the Pure Land School.

"Non-retrogression achieved in this lifetime": In the cultivations of the Sacred Path, the status of non-retrogression is an extremely difficult, important and esteemed achievement. It is not to be spoken of wantonly or rashly expected. It requires a practitioner to maintain correct views lifetime after lifetime, assiduous cultivation, and *kalpas* of diligent effort. In the course of such long, arduous cultivation, quitters are as abundant as water in the ocean, while those who progress are as scanty as droplets. Even Sariputra, having become a 6th-stage Bodhisattva, retrogressed when asked for an eye, not to mention others.

But with the Pure Land School, even wicked ordinary beings, by reciting Amitabha's name according to his Fundamental Vow, fully obtain the myriad merits from the Buddha's countless practices -- all the virtuous karma needed for rebirth in the Pure Land. In the Saha world, they attain non-retrogression. And they enter the ranks of the sacred assembly without having terminated all afflictions. Such a teaching is absent among the schools of the Sacred Path. It is another special characteristic of the Pure Land School, unique within the ten directions.

So the four catchphrases above can be abbreviated to one: "Recitation of Amitabha's name, relying on his Fundamental Vow." It naturally gives rise to the other three. Because of "Recitation of Amitabha's name, relying on his Fundamental Vow," there is "Rebirth of ordinary beings in the Realm of Rewards." As a result of "Recitation of Amitabha's name, relying on his Fundamental Vow," "Rebirth is assured in the present lifetime." Because of "Recitation of Amitabha's name, relying on his Fundamental Vow," there is "Non-retrogression in this lifetime."

Many propagators of Pure Land from antiquity to today advocate name-recitation, but they do not rely on the Fundamental Vow as the core. They urge practitioners to seek rebirth in the Pure Land, yet they do not understand the rebirth of ordinary beings in the Realm of Rewards.

According to Master Shandao, the teachings of the Pure Land School may be broad. But their core can be summarized as "Recitation of Amitabha's name, relying on his Fundamental Vow" and "Rebirth of ordinary beings in the Realm of Rewards." "Fundamental Vow" is the teaching that can be explicated, while "name-recitation" is the practice that can be advocated. "Ordinary beings" refers to the capability of the practitioners, and "rebirth in the Realm of Rewards" is the benefit of their practice.

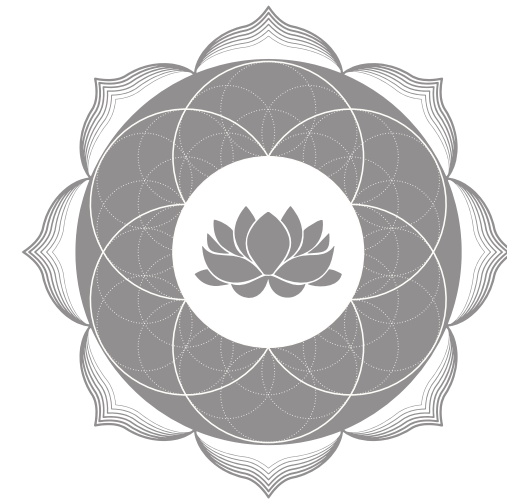
Thus "Recitation of Amitabha's name, relying on his Fundamental Vow" and "Rebirth of ordinary beings in the Realm of Rewards" illuminate the capability, teaching, practice and benefits relating to the Pure Land School. The summary also makes clear the cause and effect, as well as the method and the goal. It is the very essence of the school. If the principle is present, it is interdependently the Pure Land School. Without it, it's merely the jumbled teachings of various masters -- and does not constitute the Pure Land School.

The Six Characters (Namo Amitabha Buddha) encapsulate the Three States of Mind, Four Cultivations, Five Paths of Invocation, Three Tiers and Nine Levels (of rebirth), as well as non-discrimination between meditative & non-meditative practices and “good” and “evil” practitioners. In fact, all the teachings are included.

This is why we speak of “exclusive recitation of Amitabha Buddha’s name.” As long as we recite Amitabha’s name exclusively, we embrace all the merit from the Three States of Mind, Four Cultivations, Five Paths of Invocation and the meditative & non-meditative practices.

Namo Amitabha Buddha!

Appendix



The Pure Land Charter

A “charter” outlines the principles characteristic of a Dharma school and sets forth guidelines for practice by its adherents. It is as important to the school as a constitution is to a country.

The Pure Land Charter was drafted by Dharma Master Huijing. It serves as a manifesto for the Pure Land School, summarizing its evolution over more than a millennium, up to the present day. The Charter consists of 18 clauses defining the essential elements of the school and clearly lays out its framework.

Pure Land is the largest Dharma school in Buddhism. Since its founding, it has tended to absorb or permeate the other schools. Indeed, rebirth in the Western Land of Bliss has become a shared aspiration and the name of Amitabha Buddha an emblem for all Buddhism. Different historical factors created a situation whereby “the various schools converged with the Pure Land School.” At the same time, however, the Pure Land tradition imperceptibly – and regrettably – lost its own essence. Though they advocate Pure Land practices, the other schools have explicated Pure Land through the lens of their own doctrines. Yes, practitioners seek rebirth in the Western Land of Bliss, but they all do so according to their particular understanding of the method and process.

The original Pure Land School had its own clear, distinctive standpoint. But over time, the practice and method of gaining rebirth, as defined in Amitabha

Buddha’s vows, were subject to misinterpretation and distortion. Buddha-power (reliance on Amitabha’s deliverance) was transformed into an insistence on self-power (dependence on one’s own capabilities), and the Easy Path became the Difficult Way. The result was the undermining of adherents’ faith, as well as increased uncertainty about one’s ability to achieve rebirth in the Pure Land.

This prompted Dharma Master Huijing to spare no effort over the past decade-plus to promote the original Pure Land lineage represented by Master Shandao (613-681), the synthesizer and *de facto* founder of the Pure Land School. Working with the relevant underlying principles and systematizing them, Master Huijing composed this simple, succinct Pure Land Charter. It illuminates the fundamentals of the Pure Land School and provides adherents with a guide to its thought and practice. It is a convenient tool for those who wish to understand, learn and practice the Pure Land tradition.

1. **NAME:** Pure Land School
2. **FUNDAMENTAL BUDDHA:** Namo Amitabha Buddha
3. **SOURCE:** The 18th Vow of Amitabha Buddha (which encompasses all 48 Vows)
4. **GUIDING PRINCIPLES:**
 - Faith in, and acceptance of, Amitabha’s deliverance
 - Single-minded recitation of Amitabha’s name
 - Aspiration to rebirth in Amitabha’s Pure Land
 - Comprehensive deliverance of all sentient beings

5. SPECIAL CHARACTERISTICS:

- Recitation of Amitabha’s name, relying on his Fundamental Vow (the 18th)
- Rebirth of ordinary beings in the Pure Land’s Realm of Rewards
- Rebirth assured in the present lifetime
- Non-retrogression achieved in this lifetime

6. FOUNDER: Master Shandao (synthesizer of the Pure Land School)

7. LINEAGE: Bodhisattva Nagarjuna (c. 150-250), Bodhisattva Vasubandhu (c. 320-400), Master Tanluan (476-542), Master Daochuo (562-645), Master Shandao (613-681)

8. SCRIPTURES:

Core Sutras –

- *Infinite Life Sutra, as Spoken by the Buddha* (2 fascicles); translated by Master Sanghavarman, Cao Wei Kingdom (220-265)
- *Contemplation of Infinite Life Sutra, as Spoken by the Buddha* (1 fascicle); translated by Master Kalayashas, Liu Song Dynasty (420-479)
- *Amitabha Sutra, as Spoken by the Buddha* (1 fascicle); translated by Master Kumarajiva, Yao Qin Kingdom (384-417)

Key Commentaries –

- *Chapter on the Easy Path* (1 fascicle), *The Twelve Rites* (1 fascicle); by Bodhisattva Nagarjuna
 - *Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land* (1 fascicle); by Bodhisattva Vasubandhu
 - *Commentary on the Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land* (2 fascicles), *Gatha in Praise of Amitabha Buddha* (1 fascicle); by Master Tanluan
 - *Collection on the Land of Peace and Joy* (2 fascicles); by Master Daochuo
 - *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra* (4 fascicles), *Dharma School of Contemplation and Recitation* (1 fascicle), *In Praise of Dharma Practices* (2 fascicles), *In Praise of the Rite of Rebirth* (1 fascicle), *In Praise of Pratyutpanna* (“in the presence of the Buddhas”) (1 fascicle); by Master Shandao
9. **FUNDAMENTAL TEXTS:** The Three Pure Land Sutras – *Infinite Life Sutra*, *Contemplation of Infinite Life Sutra*, *Amitabha Sutra*
10. **PRINCIPAL COMMENTARY:** *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra*, by Master Shandao
11. **CLASSIFICATION OF THE DHARMA:** The Pure Land School classifies Shakyamuni Buddha’s teachings into the “schools of the Sacred Path” and the “Pure Land School.”

Schools of the Sacred Path – Practitioners seek enlightenment in this world by eliminating afflictions and breaking the cycle of rebirth by dint of their own efforts. Practice and realization are difficult for ordinary beings. Like walking overland, it entails hardship and suffering. Attainment of the ultimate goal (enlightenment) is slow, gradual and uncertain.

Pure Land School – Adherents aspire to enlightenment in Amitabha’s Western Land of Bliss. They rely on other-power (Amitabha’s power) to gain rebirth in the Pure Land. It is easy for ordinary beings to practice. Like travelling by boat on water, it brings ease and joy. Achievement of the ultimate goal (rebirth in the Pure Land) is quick, sudden and certain.

Other Characteristics

Schools of the Sacred Path –

- i. Theravada: Four Noble Truths (expedient practice)
- ii. Mahayana: Six Paramitas and myriad virtuous deeds (ultimate practice)

Pure Land School –

- i. Path of Importance: Dedication of merit from good deeds to gain rebirth (expedient practice)
- ii. Path of the Great Vow: Rebirth through recitation of Amitabha’s name (ultimate practice)

12. **CLASSIFICATION OF PRACTICE:** Within the Pure Land School, the lineage masters have formulated the “classification of the Path of Importance and the Path of the Great Vow,” as well as the “classification of the Primary Practices and the Miscellaneous Practices.” Summaries of the classifications:

THE TWO PATHS -

i. *Path of Importance:*

- a. Karma (action) of assurance – Single-minded recitation of Amitabha Buddha’s name
- b. Supporting karma – Recitation of scripture, contemplation, reverential actions and praise & offerings, all directed towards Amitabha and his Pure Land

(Our hearts and minds are always close to Amitabha Buddha, as we recall him and recite his name without interruption)

ii. *Path of the Great Vow:*

- a. Great Vow – Amitabha’s Fundamental Vow, requiring 5 *kalpas* of reflection (undertaken on my behalf)
- b. Great Deeds – Amitabha’s myriad virtuous actions, accomplished over countless eons (performed on my behalf)
- c. Great Power – Supreme virtuous power of Amitabha’s name, unimpeded reach of Amitabha’s light (accomplished on my behalf)

(Dedication towards rebirth through other-power)

TWO KINDS OF PRACTICES -

i. *Primary Practices:*

- a. Karma (action) of assurance – Single-minded recitation of Amitabha Buddha’s name
- b. Supporting karma – Recitation of scripture, contemplation, reverential actions and praise & offerings, all directed towards Amitabha and his Pure Land

(Our hearts and minds are always close to Amitabha Buddha, as we recall him and recite his name without interruption)

ii. *Miscellaneous Practices:*

- a. Recitation of names of other Buddhas and Bodhisattvas
- b. Performance of other actions

(Our thoughts are interrupted. Though we can be reborn in the Pure Land through the dedication of merit, these are known as distant, mixed practices)

SUMMING UP:

Schools of the Sacred Path -- Difficult Path / Self-power [PUT ASIDE]

Pure Land School -- Easy Path / Other-power:

- i. Miscellaneous Practices [ABANDON]

ii. Primary Practices:

Supporting karma [SUPPLEMENTARY]

Karma of assurance [CORE]

13. **COVERAGE:** From the highest-level Bodhisattvas to severe evil doers, Dharma slanderers and *icchantika* (the vilest, most deluded beings), all are encompassed by Amitabha’s vow of deliverance.

Included are male and female, monastics and householders, the good and the evil, as well as those near death, in the intermediate state (between death and rebirth) and in the Three Wretched Realms (animals, hungry ghosts and hell beings).

In all the nine Dharma realms, be they sacred or ordinary beings, of wholesome or unwholesome nature, none are excluded. There is no one who is incapable of learning, practicing or gaining rebirth in the Land of Bliss. Accommodated are practitioners of all ability and aptitude; all who practice accordingly will be reborn in the Pure Land.

14. **BENEFITS:** Of the present and the future

Present benefits (in this world) -

i. During our lifetime:

- a. Elimination of bad karma, accumulation of good fortune and wisdom
- b. Embraced by Amitabha’s light and protected by the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and celestial beings

- ii. At the point of death:
 - a. Welcomed by Amitabha Buddha and the sacred assembly, who arrive with a lotus platform to greet us
 - b. By Amitabha's grace, we achieve correct thoughts and rebirth in the Pure Land

Future benefits (in the Pure Land) -

Rapid attainment of Buddhahood, and of Amitabha's infinite light and life; deliverance of beings everywhere

ATTRIBUTES OF THE PURE LAND SCHOOL (1):

Ultimate Truths (leading to rebirth in the Pure Land) –

- i. Recite Amitabha Buddha's name single-mindedly: Shakyamuni Buddha's underlying wish is none other than for beings to recite the name of Amitabha exclusively.
- ii. Avoid doubt and mixed practice: Do not doubt, do not break practice, do not dilute (by mixing in other Buddhas or practices).
- iii. Stay foolish and do not argue: Venerate our own school but do not disparage other traditions. Do not debate the relative merits of different Dharma schools; just stay foolish and recite Amitabha's name.
- iv. Six do's and don'ts: Don't seek special experiences, do value

what is commonplace. Don't esteem the mystical and fantastic, do cherish the plain and solid. Don't revere profundities, do appreciate what is ordinary. Don't pursue pure learning, do develop faith. Don't concern yourself with the abstruse, do prize simplicity. Don't go for the complicated, do attach importance to what is familiar.

- v. Respect the lineage: Our writings and discourses must stick conscientiously to our lineage. We must never presume to break tradition with our own elaborations of the teachings. Where the thought and perspective of other schools and lineages differ from ours, respect them but do not follow them. We should firmly uphold our own tradition.
- vi. Develop close ties to fellow practitioners: We should interact closely with like-minded practitioners to study and discuss the Dharma. As for those who follow a different path, we should keep our distance, lest we are distracted from our own practice.

ATTRIBUTES OF THE PURE LAND SCHOOL (2):

Worldly Truths (governing everyday life) –

- i. Be reverential and trusting towards Amitabha Buddha, and compassionate and understanding to other people. In our deportment, we should be modest and amiable.
- ii. Be sincere and scrupulous in your relationships. Avoid evil and cherish good. Be an upstanding citizen by showing civic-mindedness and respecting the law.

- iii. We should feel that our foolishness and capacity for wrongdoing exceed those of others, and that we aren't qualified to argue with them. Do not speak gossip, listen to gossip, spread gossip or discuss gossip. Avoid finding fault with others, publicizing their transgressions or exposing their private matters. Do not quarrel with others over whether you or they are right. Do not neglect the law of cause and effect, or harbor ill will. Do not be false, or engage in flattery or misrepresentation.
- iv. Be respectful and caring towards your family and relatives to create harmonious ties. Hold virtue and benevolence in high regard, and cultivate propriety and accommodation. Maintain an agreeable countenance and pleasant speech, and smile from the bottom of your heart. Think compassionately of sentient beings and treat people generously. Be humble and courteous, never prideful. Have a sense of shame and always be grateful for the Buddha's kindness.
- v. Give peace of mind, happiness, hope and benefit to others. Do everything sincerely and lovingly. Be thankful and respectful under all circumstances. Pay attention to the interests of the whole, and maintain a sense of propriety. Always be considerate of others and willing to suffer disadvantage. Do not be calculating.
- vi. Learn from Amitabha Buddha's great compassion: Treat others the way Amitabha treats you.
- vii. Livelihood – plain and simple. Speech – sincere and harmonious. Bearing – calm and measured.

- viii. Scoundrels shift blame and snatch credit. Ordinary people cover up mistakes and flaunt their achievements. Superior persons decline acclaim and reward for their accomplishments. Those of surpassing virtue share the bitterness and blame from others' errors.
- ix. The way of heaven diminishes the prideful and augments the modest. The way of earth undermines the prideful and replenishes the modest. Spirits and deities inflict calamity on the prideful and bring fortune to the modest. The way of men despises the prideful and favors the modest.
- x. Every time I meet a lowly person on the verge of success, he displays the radiance of humility, as if I could hold it in my hands. Humility affords opportunities to learn from others, opening to us boundless benefits.

PURE LAND SONG (lyrics from Master Shandao's 48-character explanation of the fulfillment of Amitabha Buddha's 18th Vow) –

If, when I achieve Buddhahood, sentient beings of the ten directions who recite my name, even ten times, should fail to be born there, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

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.

PURE LAND EMBLEM: Lotus within a globe.

The design represents “lotuses blooming throughout the world.” The lotus is a well-known symbol for the Pure Land School. The emblem evokes the notion of the Pure Land School spreading across the world.