



# Commentary on the Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land

*a.k.a. Commentary on the Gatha of Aspiration to Rebirth  
-- Upadesa (Teaching) on the Sutras Relating to Infinite Life*

*Treatise composed by Bodhisattva Vasubandhu;  
Chinese translation by Bodhiruci, North Indian monk from Yongning Monastery of the Wei Dynasty  
Commentary by Tanluan, monk from Xuanzhong Monastery, Shibi Valley, Xihe of the Wei Dynasty*

English translation by Householder Foqing,  
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## Preface

This book has been called the “most remarkable text of the Pure Land School.” Its author was remarkable, the book is remarkable, and its influence is still more remarkable.

First, Bodhisattvas Nagarjuna and Vasubandhu of India composed respectively the “Chapter on the Easy Path” in *Exposition of the Ten Stages*, and the *Gatha of Aspiration to Rebirth -- Upadesa (Teaching) on the Sutras Relating to Infinite Life* (a.k.a. *Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land*). These works propagated the unique characteristics and auspiciousness of Amitabha Buddha and the Pure Land.

As the lineage masters of the Madhyamaka and Yogacara schools of Indian Buddhism, the pair not only expounded on the marvels of the Land of Bliss from the viewpoints of different sects. They also vowed to be reborn there, setting personal examples.

According to Madhyamaka principles, all phenomenal forms are empty (unreal). The Yogacara school teaches that all objective conditions are non-existent. But the two separately delivered the same teaching on Amitabha’s Pure Land -- one that “indicates the direction in space and establishes the phenomenal form” for practitioners to “settle their minds on the objective manifestations.”

Such an insight was both unusual and hard to believe. When first introduced into China, the two expositions seemed not to have received much attention or discussion in Buddhist circles. It wasn't until the Northern Wei Dynasty that they became popular. That was after Master Tanluan, a man of rare discernment, applied the thought of the Four Treatises School to blend together the compassion and wisdom the two Bodhisattvas applied in creating their works. By citing Nagarjuna's "Chapter on the Easy Path," Tanluan made a commentary on Vasubandhu's *Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land*. In doing so, he practiced himself and converted others, leaving a broad legacy.

Master Yinguang said: "Bodhisattva Vasubandhu wrote extensively to expound the Buddha vehicle. He composed the *Treatise on Rebirth* according to the *Sutras Relating to Infinite Life*, by which he introduced the Five Paths of Invocation so people could attain rebirth in the Pure Land eventually.... Master Tanluan wrote his *Commentary* to provide a detailed explication, revealing fully and thoroughly the vows of Amitabha Buddha and the sincere aspiration of Bodhisattva Vasubandhu. If Tanluan hadn't understood deeply the Buddha's mind and possessed unhindered eloquence, how could he have accomplished that?"

This is praise for Master Tanluan's *Commentary*. Based on Nagarjuna's "Chapter on the Easy Path," it explains Vasubandhu's *Treatise on Rebirth*, combines the Pure Land thinking of the two great Indian Bodhisattvas, and lays the foundation for transmission of the correct Pure Land teaching in China. It enabled the completion of the Pure Land School.

*Treatise on Rebirth* comprises a *Gatha* of 96 lines, followed by an Explication of 10 chapters. The *Gatha* expresses Bodhisattva Vasubandhu's resolve to "single-mindedly entrust his life" to Amitabha Buddha, his faith

in, and acceptance of, Amitabha's deliverance, and his aspiration to rebirth in the Pure Land. The Explication discusses the Five Paths of Invocation and elaborates in detail the causal-ground practice of Amitabha-recitation. Taking the Path of Reflection as core emphasis, it contemplates the splendid features of the Pure Land, its Buddha and its Bodhisattvas. These are also known as the "Three Aspects and 29 Kinds" of splendors.

If we ordinary beings know and believe that all those splendors of the Pure Land were accomplished by Amitabha Buddha for us to be reborn there and accordingly recite his name aspiring to rebirth, then, in our exclusive practice of name-recitation, we would naturally cultivate fully the Five Practices of Invocation. We will be reborn in the Land of Bliss and quickly achieve the fruits of the five merits and virtues, bringing benefits to ourselves as well as others.

The special characteristics that distinguish the Pure Land School from other Buddhist schools (the Sacred Path) are centered on two main themes. They are the "splendid merit of Substantive Sustenance and Support," and the "quick attainment of Buddhahood by relying on the power of Amitabha's vows." These themes embody in full the fundamental principles of the Pure Land School -- "the Difficult Path and the Easy Path," "self-power and other-power," and "recitation of Amitabha's name relying on his Fundamental Vow." They also include "rebirth of ordinary beings in the Pure Land's Realm of Rewards," "rebirth assured in the present lifetime," "non-retrogression achieved in this lifetime," and "attainment of eligibility for nirvana without eradicating vexations."

Master Tanluan should be given credit for establishing the Pure Land School's classification of the Buddha's teachings. In his *Commentary*, he inherited and integrated the two trends of thought of Nagarjuna and Vasubandhu. Tanluan also pioneered in Chinese Buddhism the notion of "reciting

Amitabha's name, relying on other-power." He presented the five-fold essentials to demonstrate the difficulties of "practicing through self-power." Through the "proof by three vows," he illustrated the ease of "attaining Buddhahood relying on other-power." By analyzing the Two Paths and Two Powers, he clarified Amitabha's Fundamental Vow: Sentient beings who recite his name ten times can be reborn in the Pure Land by relying on Amitabha's power. Thus Master Tanluan laid the foundations for the formal establishment of the Pure Land School.

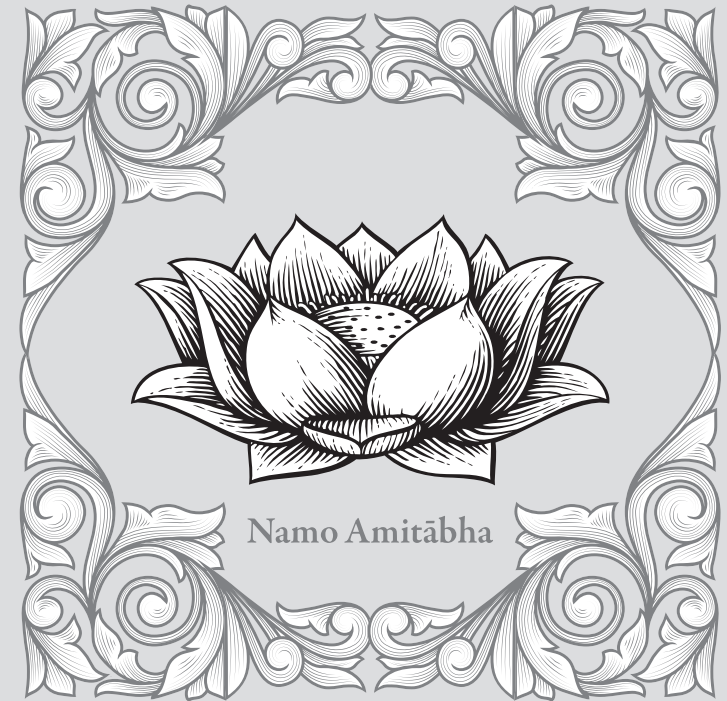
Without Master Tanluan, there would not be Masters Daochuo and Shandao. According to the *Infinite Life Sutra*, the 18th Vow of Amitabha Buddha is the Fundamental Vow of name-recitation relying on other-power. It was spotlighted by Master Tanluan and extensively propagated by Master Shandao. So we know how important Tanluan's *Commentary* is among the Pure Land teachings. It can be regarded as equivalent to sutras or upadesas (treatises). All subsequent Pure Land teachers have followed its purport and advocated the deliverance of the Fundamental Vow and the practice of Amitabha-recitation. Without an in-depth understanding of the *Commentary*, we cannot have a correct perception of the entire Pure Land teaching, much less practice name-recitation for rebirth with real effect.

The *Commentary* is succinct in style and rich in content. It isn't easy to understand the literal meanings of its words, let alone its subtle, underlying implications. Also hard to grasp is the true significance of the "Amitabha-recitation and aspiration to rebirth" that the patriarchs conveyed and elaborated. Any deficient, superficial or erroneous comprehension would defeat the masters' compassion in writing the *Treatise* and the *Commentary*, and frustrate our own effort to pursue rebirth and Buddhahood.

Seekers can refer to the *Sectional Comparative Edition of the Commentary on the Treatise on Rebirth*, the *Essentials of the Commentary on the Treatise on Rebirth*, and the *Discourse on the Core of the Commentary on the Treatise on Rebirth*. The titles, in Chinese only, are published by the Pure Land Culture and Education Foundation. Besides, the *Annotation Translation of the Commentary on the Treatise on Rebirth* (in Chinese) is being compiled and edited.

-- Pure Land School Editorial Department

November 15, 2022



# First Fascicle



## Introduction

I reverently refer to Bodhisattva Nagarjuna’s *Exposition of the Ten Stages (Dashabhumika-Vibhasha Shastra)*, which says: **“There are two paths for Bodhisattvas to pursue Non-retrogression (*avaivart*): the Difficult Path and the Easy Path.”**

The “Difficult Path” means that it is hard to pursue Non-retrogression in the world of Five Turbidities, at a time when there is no Buddha. The difficulty lies in many aspects. Several are roughly listed below for illustration:

1. Non-Buddhist paths appear to be virtuous but perturb the Bodhisattva teachings;
2. The way of the Sravaka focuses on self-benefit and impedes [the awakening of] the Great Compassion;
3. Rogues and villains destroy others’ outstanding virtues;
4. The positive fruits of good deeds lead to negative consequences and ruin monastic practices;
5. Practitioners rely only on self-power and lack support from other-power.

Such things can be seen everywhere. It is like travelling overland on foot -- an arduous journey.

The “Easy Path” signifies that, simply by believing in Amitabha Buddha, aspiring to be reborn in the Pure Land, and relying on the Buddha’s vow-power, one will attain rebirth in the Pure Land. There the person will be sustained and supported by Buddha-power and immediately join the Great Vehicle Assembly of Assured Enlightenment. The “Assured Enlightenment” is precisely the stage of Non-retrogression. It is like sailing on water, which is joyous.

The *Upadesa on the Sutras Relating to Infinite Life* is the supreme instruction of the Mahayana, like a leeward vessel that never retreats.

“Infinite Life” is another name for the Tathagata of the Pure Land of Peace and Joy. His splendid merits were introduced by Shakyamuni Buddha to followers in Rajgir and Sravasti. The essence of those teachings is the name of the [Infinite Life] Buddha. At a later time, a saintly being, Bodhisattva Vasubandhu, humbly submitted to the compassionate teachings of Shakyamuni Tathagata. Based on the sutras, he composed the *Gatha of Aspiration to Rebirth* and added an extended summary to explicate the *Gatha*.

“*Upadesa*” is a Sanskrit term which has no precise equivalent in Chinese. It can be partially rendered as “treatise.” The lack of a Chinese equivalent is because there was no Buddha in China originally. With reference to books, writings by Confucius were termed “classics,” while those by other ancients were called “works [by masters].” State histories, chronicles and similar texts have their respective styles.

Among the twelve divisions of the Tripitaka spoken by Shakyamuni Buddha, there are “commentary sutras,” called “*upadesas*” (teachings). In

addition, some of Shakyamuni’s disciples explicated his teachings according to their implied meanings. The Buddha permitted these expositions also to be titled “*upadesas*” because they conform to the features of the Buddha Dharma. The term “treatise” in Chinese only means “commentary.” How could it be an exact equivalent?

To put it another way, a woman is called “mother” by her son and “sister” by her siblings. In such cases, the way a person is referred to varies according to context. When a mother or sister is simply called “woman,” it’s a generic reference to a person of the female sex. How could it pinpoint her position in the family hierarchy? The same is true of the translation of “treatise” here. Therefore, the Sanskrit transliteration is retained -- “*upadesa*.”

This *Treatise* in whole is divided into two sections: a general exposition followed by an explication.

The exposition is the five-character *Gatha* that runs from the beginning. The explication is the part that goes from “The *Treatise* states” to the end. The two sections are so divided to serve a twofold purpose: The *Gatha* eulogizes the underlying sutras to provide an overview, while the explication paraphrases the *Gatha* to interpret its significance.

“Infinite Life” refers to the Tathagata of Infinite Life, who has inconceivable longevity of lifespan. “Sutras” literally means “constant” [in Chinese]. It herein signifies that the pure, splendid merits of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas of the Land of Peace and Joy, as well as of the Land itself, can greatly benefit sentient beings and shall constantly prevail in the world. Therefore, the Pure Land teachings are called “Sutras.”



“*Upadesa*” is a Buddhist scriptural treatise. “Aspiration” means a strong willingness. “Rebirth” signifies that Bodhisattva Vasubandhu aspires to be reborn in the Pure Land of Peace and Joy by way of transformation from the Tathagata’s pure lotus flower. Therefore he says “aspiration to rebirth.” “*Gatha*” is a poetic meter comprising a number of metrical lines. With five characters each line, it briefly extols Buddhist sutras, so it is called “*Gatha*.”

“*Vasu*” translates as “heaven” and “*bandhu*,” “connection.” Vasubandhu is the name of the author. Stories about him are recorded in the *Sutra on the Transmission of Dharma Teachings*.

“*Bodhisattva*” is a transliteration from Sanskrit. “*Bodhi*” is the name of the path towards Buddhahood. “*Sattva*” means a living being, as well as the qualities of boldness and persistence. A being who follows the Buddhist path with full valor and vigor is called a “*Bodhisattva*.” In Chinese, the term is shortened to “*Pusa*.”

“*Composed*” means “written.” Since authorship is significant, the author is identified as per “composed by (Bodhisattva Vasubandhu).”

Therefore [the title] reads “*Gatha of Aspiration to Rebirth - Upadesa on the Sutras Relating to Infinite Life*, composed by Bodhisattva Vasubandhu.”

This is the end of the explanation of the *Treatise*’s title.

The *Gatha* comprises the Five Paths of Invocation, which will be explained later in the explication section.

The first four-phrase verse contains three of the Paths. The first three phrases denote the Paths of Reverential Acts and Acclamation; the last one relates to the Path of Aspiration.

The second verse comprises a self-statement of the author: “I composed this *Treatise*, based on the Buddhist sutras, so it accords with the teachings of the Buddha,” being grounded on an authoritative source. Why did he state that? Because it justifies the title “*Upadesa*.” The verse also wraps up the first three Paths and sets the scene for the other two. So it is placed right after the opening verse.

The third through the 23<sup>rd</sup> verses pertain to the Path of Reflection. The final verse is the Path of Merit-Dedication.

So ends the chapter-division of the *Gatha*.

**World-Honored One, I single-mindedly  
Entrust my life to the Tathagata of Unhindered Light  
Shining throughout the Ten Directions;  
May I be reborn in the Land of Peace and Joy.**

“World-Honored-One” is a general title for all Buddhas. In terms of wisdom, there is nothing a Buddha does not understand. As for termination, a Buddha leaves no residue of karmic proclivities. With such wisdom and termination, a Buddha can benefit the world and is venerated by everyone. So he is called “World-Honored One.”

Here, the term refers specifically to Shakyamuni Tathagata. How do we know? The next line reads, “I rely on the sutras.” Bodhisattva Vasubandhu lived in Shakyamuni Tathagata’s Age of Semblance Dharma. He followed Shakyamuni’s teachings and aspired to be reborn [in the Pure Land]. His aspiration to rebirth is grounded on an authoritative basis. So we know the term

refers to Shakyamuni. But if some assert it embraces all Buddhas, that's not wrong.

A Bodhisattva takes refuge in a Buddha the way a filial son submits to his parents, or a loyal minister to his king and queen. His actions and inactions are not motivated by his own will. His advances and retreats stem from [the Tathagata]. Grateful for the Tathagata's compassion and benevolence, the Bodhisattva feels impelled to address the Tathagata first. Moreover, [Vasubandhu's] aspiration isn't easy to fulfill. Without support from the Tathagata and his majestic power, how could it be accomplished? So he implores assistance from such supernatural power, and addresses [the Tathagata] reverentially.

"I single-mindedly" are the self-urging words of Bodhisattva Vasubandhu. They evoke his invocation of the Tathagata of Unhindered Light and his aspiration to be reborn in the Land of Peace and Joy. He does so in continuous mindfulness, without interruption by other thoughts.

**Question:** Buddhism has the teaching of no "self." Why does the author say "I" here?

**Answer:** Saying "I" has three fundamental implications:

1. It was spoken from a skewed view [believing in substantial existence of "self"];
2. A term employed with arrogance;
3. A personal pronoun used in ordinary conversation.

Here, by saying "I," Bodhisattva Vasubandhu is referring to himself. It is used as a personal pronoun in ordinary conversation, not out of skewed view or arrogance.

[The *Gatha* says,] "[I] entrust my life to the Tathagata of Unhindered Light shining throughout the Ten Directions."

To "entrust my life" is the Path of Referential Acts. "The Tathagata of Unhindered Light shining throughout the Ten Directions" corresponds to the Path of Acclamation.

How do we know that to "entrust my life" is prostration, a key reverential act? In his *In Praise of Amitabha*, Bodhisattva Nagarjuna mentions "I bow in worship," "I entrust my life," and "prostration to entrust my life." The explication section of this *Treatise* also speaks of "practicing the Five Paths of Invocation," which include Reverential Acts. Since Bodhisattva Vasubandhu aspires to be reborn in the Pure Land, how could he not undertake such acts? Hence we know that to "entrust my life" is to make prostration. However, prostration is simply to show veneration; it does not necessarily mean to entrust one's life, while to entrust one's life inevitably entails prostration. We can therefore infer that to entrust one's life is weightier. In the *Gatha*, Vasubandhu makes his resolution, so it's fitting that he professes "I entrust my life." Yet in the explication section, he explains the meaning of the *Gatha* and talks generally about "prostration." The two phrases complement each other, and together reflect the full meaning.

How do we know that "the Tathagata of Unhindered Light shining throughout the Ten Directions" represents the Path of Acclamation? Later in the explication it is said:

"What is the Path of Acclamation? It is to recite that Tathagata's name, according to the manifestation of that Tathagata's luminous wisdom and the meaning of the name. The purpose is to correspond with practice that accords with ultimate reality."

In the *Infinite Life Sutra* taught in Sravasti, the Buddha explains the name of Amitabha Tathagata as follows:

“Why is the Buddha called Amitabha? Because his light is boundless, and illuminates all the lands of the ten directions without hindrance. That is why he is called Amitabha.

“Further, that Buddha’s lifespan, as well as those of the people in his land, are immeasurable, boundless *asamkhyeya-kalpas*. That is why his name is Amitabha.”

**Question:** If the radiance of the Tathagata of Unhindered Light is boundless and illuminates all the lands of the ten directions without hindrance, why aren’t the beings in this world illumined by the radiance? And if the radiance does not cover the beings, isn’t there hindrance?

**Answer:** The hindrance is on the part of the beings, not the radiance. It is like the sunlight shining throughout the Four Dvipas (inhabited island-continents). But the blind do not see it. It’s not that the sunlight fails to illuminate all things. Also it is similar to dense clouds raining profusely. Hard rocks do not wet through. But it doesn’t follow that the rainwater is not infiltrative.

Sravaka doctrine says that a Buddha leads three thousand great chiliocosms. Mahayana teaching proclaims that every Buddha guides countless, limitless worlds of the ten directions. Now, by uttering “the Tathagata of Unhindered Light shining throughout the Ten Directions,” Bodhisattva Vasubandhu acclaims [Amitabha Buddha] in the light of that Tathagata’s name and according to the manifestation of that Tathagata’s luminous wisdom. Thus we know this verse denotes the Path of Acclamation.

[The *Gatha* says] “May I be reborn in the Land of Peace and Joy.”

This line represents the Path of Aspiration. It signifies that Bodhisattva Vasubandhu entrusts his life [to Amitabha Buddha]. The meaning of “Peace and Joy” is revealed in the Path of Reflection below.

**Question:** In Mahayana sutras and treatises, it is repeatedly stated that sentient beings are ultimately without birth and devoid of substance. Why does Bodhisattva Vasubandhu say “may I be reborn”?

**Answer:** The statement that “sentient beings are ultimately without birth and devoid of substance” has two implications:

1. Ordinary people speak of “truly existing” sentient beings and see “truly existing” births and deaths. But these matters ultimately have no existence, like tortoise hair, like the void;
2. Since all phenomena arise from causes and conditions, they are not “born”; they are non-existing like the void. The rebirth [in the Pure Land] aspired to by Bodhisattva Vasubandhu is attributed to such “arising from causes and conditions.” Because of this attribution, the so-called rebirth is merely a borrowed term. It is not the “truly existing” sentient beings or “truly existing” births and deaths that ordinary people conceive of.

**Question:** What principle is the “rebirth” here based on?

**Answer:** In this world, a borrowed-term “person” practices the Five Paths of Invocation. Each invocation constitutes the cause of the next one. The borrowed-term “person” in this defiled realm and the borrowed-term “person” in that Pure Land [after his rebirth] are neither entirely identical nor completely different. Nor is his every thought and subsequent thought. Why is that? If they

were identical, causality would not exist. If they were different, they would not be in continuation. This principle is explained in detail in the *Treatise on the Gate of Observing Identity and Difference* [by Nagarjuna].

So ends the first verse, on three Paths of Invocation.

The second verse justifies the title “*Upadesa*,” concludes the preceding [three Paths] and introduces the remaining [two Paths].

**I rely on the sutras -  
The manifestation of true merits -  
To speak this *Gatha* of aspiration as a summation  
[of the sutras]  
Which conforms to the Buddha’s teaching.**

How does this verse justify the title “*Upadesa*”? How does it conclude the preceding three Paths and introduce the next two?

The *Gatha* says, “I rely on the sutras” and “[this *Gatha*] conforms to the Buddha’s teaching.” Suttas are Buddhist scriptures. [This verse indicates that] I expound the meaning of the [Pure Land] scriptures, thereby conforming to the sutras’ teaching. Since my exposition [the *Treatise*] accords with the features of the Buddha Dharma, it should be called “*Upadesa*.” The title is thus justified.

As for “concluding the previous three Paths and introducing the next two,” what does Vasubandhu rely on [to say so], and why and how does he do so?

What does he depend on? He relies on the sutras. Why does he rely on them? Because Amitabha Tathagata is the manifestation of true merits. How

does he rely on them? He practices the Five Paths of Invocation to pursue conformity [with the sutras].

This is the end of “concluding the preceding [three Paths] and introducing the next two.”

“Suttas” are the directly-spoken part of the twelve divisions of Buddhist scriptures, which include the Four-*Agamas* Tripitaka. The Mahayana scriptures outside this Tripitaka are also called sutras. “Rely on the sutras” here refers to the Mahayana sutras outside the [Four-*Agama*] Tripitaka, not to the *Agamas*.

As for “the manifestation of true merits,” there are two kinds of merit:

1. Merit that arise from a flawed mind and do not conform to Dharma-nature. This happens when ordinary beings undertake wholesome actions of the human/celestial attribute and receive human/celestial karmic rewards. Both the causes and consequences are delusory and false. Such merit is therefore called “untrue merit.”
2. The merits of splendid Buddhist works that arise from a Bodhisattva’s wisdom and pure deeds. They conform to Dharma-nature and bear the characteristic of purity. Such dharmas are non-delusory and not false. So they are called “true merits.” Why are they non-delusory? Because they conform to Dharma-nature and accord with the Two Truths. Why are they not false? Because they induce sentient beings to enter [the realm of] Ultimate Purity.

[The *Gatha* says] “[I] speak this *Gatha* of aspiration as a summation [of the sutras], which conforms to the Buddha’s teaching.” “Summation” means a full summary, pithily encompassing the originals. “*Gatha*” refers to the poetic meter of five-character lines. “Aspiration” is a strong resolve to be reborn [in the Pure

Land]. “Speak” means to speak the *Gatha* and its subsequent explication. In sum, the *Gatha of Aspiration to Rebirth* is spoken as an all-embracing summary of the sutras and conforms to the Buddha’s teaching. “Conform to” is like a box and its lid fitting each other.

### **I reflect on the features of that Land; It transcends the path of the Three Domains.**

This verse begins the Fourth Path -- of Reflection.

The Path is divided into two sections:

1. Reflections on the accomplished splendors of the realm of the receptacle [i.e., the Pure Land];
2. Reflections on the accomplished splendors of the realm of sentient beings [in the Pure Land].

This line down to “... I aspire to be reborn in Amitabha Buddha’s Land” makes up the section of “reflections on the accomplished splendors of the realm of the receptacle.” These reflections are further divided into 17 parts. The heading of each part will be given in the corresponding passage below.

The two lines cited depict the first object, called “reflection on the accomplished splendid merit of Purity.” Purity is the general characteristic [of the Pure Land].

The Buddha originally vowed to accomplish the splendid merit of Purity because he saw that the Three Domains were characterized by illusion, transmigration [in the Six Realms] and endlessness [of suffering]. Like a

caterpillar looping itself or a silkworm enmeshed in its own cocoon, sentient beings were pitiful indeed! They were entangled in the Three Domains, deluded and defiled. The Buddha intended to set them in a place which is free of illusion, transmigration and endlessness, where they can enjoy ultimate peace, joy and purity. Therefore, he accomplished the splendid merits of purity.

“Accomplishment” denotes that this purity is neither corruptible nor contaminable. It contrasts with the Three Domains, which are subject to defilement and destruction.

“Reflect on” is to observe. “That” refers to the Land of Peace and Joy. “Features of that Land” means the pure characteristics of the Land of Peace and Joy. These features will be elaborated on below.

In the line “it transcends the path of the Three Domains,” “path” means a route or a way. A given cause yields a specific result, and a certain result responds to a particular cause. Through the route [of causality], the cause reaches the result, and the result traces back to the cause. Therefore it is called a “path.”

“The Three Domains” are:

1. The Desire Domain, including the Six Heavens of Desire, humans of the Four Dvīpas, animals, hungry ghosts and hells;
2. The Form Domain, which consists of the First, Second, Third and Fourth Meditation Heavens;
3. The Formless Domain, comprising the Heavens of Boundless Space, Boundless Consciousness, Nothingness, and Neither Perception nor Non-Perception.

These Three Domains resemble a dark house in which unenlightened ordinary beings reincarnate endlessly. The pleasures of living things are just slightly different from their sufferings. Their lifespans vary in length but only for the time being. Overall, nothing here is not flawed. [Disasters and blessings] coexist, depend on one another and alternate in succession without end. Beings are mired in various states of existence and undergo mixed sensations and feelings. They cling incessantly to the Four Inverted Beliefs. From causes through consequences, delusion and futility persist unceasingly.

The Land of Peace and Joy arose from the compassion and correct contemplation of Bodhisattva [Dharmakara]. It was established by the supernatural power and original vows of [Amitabha] Tathagata. Because of this Land, [living beings] can bid farewell forever to births by womb, egg and dampness; the long tether of [their] karmic bondage is eternally severed. Consider [an archer with] the skill of shooting arrows in continuous alignment – [he] needn't wait to be reminded to string his bow. Likewise, [those reborn in the Pure Land] spontaneously cultivate diligence, modesty, benignness and accommodation, attaining the virtues of Bodhisattva Samantabhadra. To say that [the Pure Land] transcends the Three Domains is still an understatement.

### Ultimately it is like the void, Immense and boundless.

These two lines refer to the accomplished splendid merit of Spaciousness.

The Buddha originally vowed to accomplish the splendid merit of spaciousness because he saw that the Three Domains were confined and narrow. There were dilapidated walls, precipices, uplands and canyons. Palaces and mansions were pressed together, and the ground and fields were congested.

Short roads impeded travel; mountains and rivers blocked free passage; national borders partitioned the land surface. Seeing these constraints, Bodhisattva [Dharmakara] vowed to accomplish the splendid merit of spaciousness, resolving: “May my Land be immense and boundless like the void.”

“Like the void” means that, notwithstanding the profusion of beings reborn, [the Pure Land] remains spacious as though they weren't there. “Immense and boundless” explains the significance of “like the void” above. Why is the Land like the void? Because it is immense, boundless.

“Accomplishment” means that, despite sentient beings of the ten directions who have been reborn, are being reborn or will be reborn [in the Pure Land] are innumerable and unlimited, [the Land] is always and will always be immense and boundless like the void. It will never be fully occupied. Hence it is said: *“Ultimately it is like the void, immense and boundless.”*

**Question:** Vimalakirti's 11-square-meter chamber accommodated [millions of Bodhisattvas and deities], yet there was still space to spare. Why was it necessary to have boundlessness to achieve immensity?

**Answer:** The immensity need not be measured by concrete yardsticks. With the simple analogy “like the void,” why bother to invoke the 11-square-meter chamber? Further, the chamber's huge accommodative capacity is highlighted to contrast its limited size in measure. But in terms of “karmic reward,” how can the relative spaciousness of the chamber [in this Saha world] rival the absolute immensity of the Pure Land?



## It arises from the Great Compassion of the Right Path And extra-worldly roots of virtue.

These two lines refer to the accomplished splendid merit of the Fundamental Nature [of the Pure Land].

Why did the Buddha originally vow to accomplish this splendor? He saw that some lands had the Domain of Desire because beings had attachments and sensuous cravings. Other realms contained the Domains of Form and Formlessness because some beings liked meditation while others disliked it. The Three Domains all stemmed from flawed, erroneous paths. [Beings there] were dreaming amid a lengthy sleep and didn't know how to transcend [their condition]. So [Bodhisattva Dharmakara] generated the mind of Great Compassion: "When I become a Buddha, I shall, by the path of unexcelled perfect enlightenment, create a Pure Land that transcends the Three Domains."

"Fundamental nature" signifies "essence." It means that the Pure Land conforms to Dharma-nature and does not conflict with the essence of the Dharma. That coincides with the principle about "Ratnaraja Tathagata's arising from the fundamental nature," as taught in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*.

"Fundamental nature" can also be formed by accumulated inclinations. This indicates that, by persistently cultivating various Paramitas, Bodhisattva Dharmakara accrued meritorious proclivities that finally forged [the fundamental nature of the Pure Land].

Still another meaning of "fundamental nature" is the "sacred-seed nature." Previously, in the presence of Lokeshvararaja Buddha, Bodhisattva Dharmakara attained "Endurance for the Non-Arising of Dharmas," an achievement called

the stage of the "sacred-seed nature." In that "nature," he made his 48 Great Vows and established this Land, naming it the "Pure Land of Peace and Joy." It is the result arising from the [sacred-seed nature]. [Vasubandhu] speaks of the causal factor of the resultant [Land], and therefore calls it "fundamental nature."

Further, "fundamental nature" implies "certainty" and "inalterability." It is like the ocean's nature, which is of one flavor. All waters that flow in are certain to acquire that single flavor; it does not change with the inflows. It is also like the human body, which is of impure nature. When delicious food of wonderful colors and tastes enter the body, it becomes unclean. However, beings reborn in the Pure Land of Peace and Joy all have pure form and pure mind. They will all ultimately attain the pure, universal Unconditioned Dharma Body (Dharmakaya). This is because the pure nature of the Land of Peace and Joy has already been accomplished.

"It [the Pure Land] arises from the Great Compassion of the Right Path and extra-worldly roots of virtue" refers to the great Path of Universal Equality. The Path of Universal Equality is called the "Right Path" because Universal Equality is the substantive characteristic of all dharmas. Since all dharmas are equal, [Bodhisattva Dharmakara] generated the [Bodhi] mind which is universally equal. Since his mind is universally equal, he practiced the universally equal Path. Since the Path is universally equal, he developed Great Compassion which is universally equal. Great Compassion is the direct cause of the Buddha Path. Hence the reference to "the Great Compassion of the Right Path."

Compassion arises upon three types of conditions:

1. The condition of sentient beings, in which case the compassion is called small compassion;

2. The condition of dharmas, which results in medium compassion;
3. No-condition, leading to Great Compassion.

Great Compassion is “extra-worldly virtue.” The Pure Land of Peace and Joy originated from Great Compassion, so Great Compassion is said to be the root of the Pure Land. Hence *“it arises from ... extra-worldly roots of virtue.”*

**Radiating pure light all around,  
It resembles a mirror, or the halos of the sun and the  
moon.**

These two lines depict the accomplished splendid merit of Appearance.

The Buddha originally vowed to accomplish this merit because he saw that the sun traveled across the four Dvipas one by one. When its beams shone over one of the Dvipas, they failed to cover the other three. Candles in a hall only illuminated its space; the brightness couldn't extend more than 20 meters. Thus he made the vow of “radiating pure light all around,” like solar and lunar halos that are self-luminous. That Land of Peace and Joy, though immense and boundless, is infused with pure luminance throughout its entirety. Hence it is said, *“Radiating pure light all around, it resembles a mirror, or the halos of the sun and the moon.”*

**[Its myriad things] embody treasure-like qualities,  
And possess all exquisite splendors.**

These two lines refer to the accomplished splendid merit of Assorted Objects.

Why did the Buddha originally vow to accomplish this splendor? He saw that in some lands, palaces are adorned with clay, and buildings made of wood and stone. Gold- and jade-engravings hardly fulfill the designers' expectations, and decorative works entail onerous preparation and arduous labor. Therefore he generated the mind of Great Compassion: “When I become a Buddha, I shall definitely render [my Land] luxuriant with treasures, which shall be resplendent and natural. They shall be abundant so no one needs to be concerned [about their adequacy], and all inhabitants will naturally achieve the Buddha Path.” Those adornments are so resplendent that even Visvakarman, known for his ingenious workmanship, would be unable to work out the design, however hard he tried.

“Quality” denotes “essence.” Since the subject who produced [the Pure Land] is pure, how could the objects so produced be impure? Accordingly, the [Vimalakirti] Sutra says, “As the [Buddha's] mind is pure, the Buddha Land is pure.” Hence it is said, *“[Its myriad things] embody treasure-like qualities and possess all exquisite splendors.”*

**Its undefiled radiance is intensely brilliant,  
Bright and pure, illuminating all realms.**

These two lines depict the accomplished splendid merit of Wonderful Colors.

Why did the Buddha originally vow to accomplish this splendor? He saw that in some lands there existed the difference between good and bad. With that disparity, [sentient beings] distinguished between superiority and inferiority. This provoked affirmation and negation, the arising of which entangled the beings in prolonged reincarnation in the Three Domains. Therefore he generated the mind of Great Compassion and initiated a resolution of universal excellence:



“My Land shall radiate with intense brilliance – supreme, unparalleled, not like the golden hues of the human and celestial realms that may be outshone by others.”

What is it like to be outshone? It is like a bright mirror [whose light] is invisible if placed beside gold. The gold of today is invisible if compared to that from the Buddha’s time. The gold from the Buddha’s time is invisible if compared to Jambu River gold. Jambu River gold is invisible if compared to the gold sand on the *chakravartin*’s path in the ocean. The *chakravartin*’s gold sand is invisible if compared to the Gold Mountains. The Gold Mountains are invisible if compared to the gold of Mt. Sumeru. Mt. Sumeru gold is invisible if compared to the golden necklace of the Heaven of the Thirty-Three. The golden necklace of the Heaven of the Thirty-Three is invisible if compared to the gold of the Suyama Heaven. The Suyama Heaven gold is invisible if compared to the Tushita Heaven gold. The gold of the Tushita Heaven is invisible if compared to that of the Nirmanarati Heaven. The Nirmanarati Heaven’s gold is invisible if compared to the Paranirmita Vasavartin Heaven’s gold. The gold of the Paranirmita Vasavartin Heaven is invisible if compared to the radiance of the Land of Peace and Joy.

Why is that? Because the golden radiance of that Land arose from non-defiled karma; because the purity of the radiance has been fully accomplished. The Pure Land of Peace and Joy was created from the pure karma of Bodhisattva [Dharmakara] when he had attained Endurance for the Non-Arising of Dharmas. It is now headed by the Dharma-King Amitabha Tathagata, who supports the Land with augmentative power. Hence it is said, “*Its undefiled radiance is intensely brilliant, bright and pure, illuminating all realms.*” “Illuminating all realms” signifies that the radiance illuminates the two realms [the receptacle realm and the sentient-beings realm].

**Merit-grass of a jeweled nature  
Softly whirls left and right.  
Stroking it brings transcendent delight,  
Surpassing the touch of *kacilindika*.**

These four lines refer to the accomplished splendid merit of Sensation.

Why did the Buddha originally vow to accomplish this splendor? He saw that in some lands, gold and jade were highly valued but couldn’t be worn as clothing. Bright mirrors were prized as treasures but failed to serve as bedding. These things were pleasing to the eye but unsuitable for bodily use. Didn’t the sensations of body and eye conflict with each other? Therefore he resolved: “In my Land, humans and celestial beings shall have their six senses experiencing enjoyment in perfect harmony, as well blended as water and milk. They don’t have to choose [between senses], as in the story of picking between Chu and Yue [mutually hostile kingdoms].” So the seven treasures of the Pure Land are supple, pleasing to the eye and convenient for the body.

“*Kacilindika*” is the name of a soft grass in India. It gives pleasant sensation to those who touch it. So [Vasubandhu] uses it as a simile.

\* Note by the commentator [Master Tanluan]: The soil, stone, grass and wood in this world have specific physical forms. Why did the translator [Bodhiruci] consider the jewels [in the Pure Land] as grass? It may be because those jewels are limber, delicate, billowy and supple. For that reason he called them grass. If I had participated in the translation work, I would have put it some other way.

“Brings transcendent delight” suggests that while stroking *kacilindika* engenders defiled pleasure, touching the soft treasure [in the Pure Land] gives rise to Dharma-joy. These two kinds of delight differ greatly. Is not the latter transcendent? Hence it is said, “*Merit-grass of a jeweled nature softly whirls left and right. Stroking it brings transcendent delight, surpassing the touch of kacilindika.*”

**Jeweled blossoms of a myriad varieties  
Overflow the ponds, brooks and springs.  
As gentle breezes waft through flowers and leaves,  
Interlaced light beams shimmer in colorful splendor.**

These four lines depict the accomplished splendid merit of Water.

Why did the Buddha originally make this vow? He saw that in some lands, huge waves of water surged frightfully with spume and sediment. Frozen seas, floating icebergs and stormy floods aroused depression and other mental disorders. Looking ahead, [sentient beings] lacked reassurance and peace of mind. Looking back, they were reminded of the terrors.

Seeing this, Bodhisattva [Dharmakara] generated the mind of Great Compassion: “When I become a Buddha, all the streams, springs, ponds and pools shall be harmonious with the palaces. A myriad jeweled flowers will adorn the water. Gentle breezes will blow mildly through [petals and leaves], reflecting and emitting radiance in wondrous patterns. [The water] shall please the mind, delight the body, and be agreeable in all ways.” Hence it is said, “*Jeweled blossoms of a myriad varieties overflow the ponds, brooks and springs. As gentle breezes waft through flowers and leaves, interlaced light beams shimmer in colorful splendor.*”

**From the palaces and mansions,  
Worlds in the ten directions can be seen without  
obstruction.  
Various trees sparkle with fantastic-colored lights,  
Surrounded by railings of precious gems.**

These four lines depict the accomplished splendid merit of Earth.

Why did the Buddha originally vow to accomplish this splendor? He saw lands with lofty hills and soaring peaks. Plateaus were covered by dead trees. Rolling mountain ranges interwove with bold cliffs and deep valleys. Thatches and shrubs suffused ravines. Vast dark seas stretched beyond the horizon. Huge weedy marshes were bereft of human presence.

Seeing these, Bodhisattva [Dharmakara] vowed with Great Compassion: “In my Land, the earth shall be flat and smooth like the palm of a hand. Palaces and mansions shall mirror the ten directions. Reflected objects are neither specific nor non-specific. Bejeweled trees and railings shall enhance each other’s radiance and sublimity.” Thus it is said, “*Worlds in the ten directions can be seen without obstruction. Various trees sparkle with fantastic-colored lights, surrounded by railings of precious gems.*”

**Immeasurable treasures interweave into  
Nettings that extend throughout the sky.  
Multifarious bells are chiming,  
Broadcasting the excellent sounds of the Dharma.**

These four lines depict the accomplished splendid merit of the Sky.

Why did the Buddha originally vow to accomplish this splendor? He saw that in some lands, smoke, clouds, dust and fog permeated and blocked the sky. Thunder, lightning, torrents and floods fell from above. Ominous light appeared in the air from time to time. Countless disturbances incited panics and phobias.

Seeing these, Bodhisattva [Dharmakara] generated the mind of Great Compassion: “In my Land, the sky shall be covered with bejeweled nets; bells of different sizes shall ring out melodies to propagate Dharma teachings. Seeing these, my people will never get bored. Instead, they are inspired to pursue virtue and enlightenment.” Hence it is said, *“Immeasurable treasures interweave into nettings that extend throughout the sky. Multifarious bells are chiming, broadcasting the excellent sounds of the Dharma.”*

**Magnificent flowers and robes rain down,  
Dispersing countless fragrances through the air.**

These two lines describe the accomplished splendid merit of Rain.

Why did the Buddha originally vow to accomplish this splendor? He saw that in some lands, people wanted to cover the ground with their clothes and dress-accessories to welcome an honored person, or offer fragrant flowers and familiar treasures to express reverence. But such intentions seldom yielded satisfactory results because they lacked the requisite causal karma and pertinent karmic fruits. Therefore [Bodhisattva Dharmakara] made a vow of Great Compassion: “In my Land those items shall constantly drizzle down from the sky to satisfy everyone.”

Why does the author use the word “rain”? Because he’s concerned that a clinging thought may appear in a reader’s mind: “If flowers and robes continuously fall around, they should congest the space eventually. How could such a problem not exist?” Therefore the author adopts the term “rain” as a simile. When rain falls at appropriate times, it causes no flooding hazard. How could the karmic blessings in the Pure Land contain anything that would bring trouble to its beings?

The [*Infinite Life*] Sutra says, “During the six periods of the day, treasured-robes and -flowers rain down from the sky. The texture of the treasures is soft. As one treads on them, they sink a few inches. When the foot is lifted, they return to their original shape. After being used, they blend into the treasured ground, like water flowing into trenches.” Hence it is said, *“Magnificent flowers and robes rain down, dispersing countless fragrances through the air.”*

**The Buddha’s wisdom is brilliant and pure like the sun;  
It dispels the darkness and obscurity of worldly  
ignorance.**

These two lines refer to the accomplished splendid merit of Radiance.

Why did the Buddha originally vow to accomplish this splendor? He saw that in some lands, beings had sunlight on the tops of their heads but remained blinded by ignorance. So he vowed, “All light in my Land shall be able to dispel the darkness of ignorance, [and guide beings] towards Buddha-wisdom. It shall do nothing that is not beneficial.”

Further it is said that the radiance of the Land of Peace and Joy arises from the Tathagata’s wisdom, and therefore can dispel worldly ignorance. The

[*Vimalakirti*] Sutra says, “In certain Buddha Lands, radiance performs the Buddha’s work.” That is the case here. Hence it is said, **“The Buddha’s wisdom is brilliant and pure like the sun; it dispels the darkness and obscurity of worldly ignorance.”**

***A brahma* [sacred] name inspires enlightenment  
far and wide.  
Subtle and wonderful, it is known throughout the ten  
directions.**

These two lines depict the accomplished splendid merit of the Wonderful Name.

Why did the Buddha originally make this vow? He saw that in some lands, there existed virtuous Dharma, but their names did not spread far. Some other lands were well-known, yet their names weren’t subtle and wonderful. There were still other lands whose names were subtle, wonderful and widespread, but couldn’t enlighten sentient beings. So he vowed to accomplish this splendor.

In India, purification practices are called “*brahma* deeds” and marvellous sounds are known as “*brahma* speech.” Since the Heaven of Brahma is revered in that country, “*brahma*” is often used as a sacred, acclamatory term. It is also said that the dharmas of the Central Country (India) are linked with the Heaven of Brahma.

“Name” pertains to “reputation” or “renown.” Here it refers to the name of the Land of Peace and Joy. The [*Infinite Life*] Sutra says, **“If a person simply hears the name of the Land of Peace and Joy and wants to be reborn there,**

**he, too, will achieve his wish.”** This shows that the name can enlighten sentient beings.

The *Treatise on the Perfection of Wisdom* says, **“Pure lands such as these are not included in the Three Domains. Why is that? Because without desire, they are not of the Desire Realm; with solid foundations, they are not of the Form Realm; with forms of existence, they are not of the Formless Realm. Actually, pure lands originated from the individual karma of the respective [founding] Bodhisattvas.”**

The Pure Land of Peace and Joy transcends [worldly] existence but manifests [wondrous] existence. This is called “subtle.” The name of the Pure Land can enlighten [sentient beings]. This is called “wonderful.” Hence it is said, **“A brahma [sacred] name inspires enlightenment far and wide. Subtle and wonderful, it is known throughout the ten directions.”**

**Amitabha Buddha, the perfectly enlightened one,  
Sustains and upholds [the Pure Land] with his  
Dharma-King’s beneficence.**

These two lines depict the accomplished splendid merit of the Overlord.

Why did the Buddha originally make this vow? He saw that in some lands where a *raksasa* (demon) ruled, mutual slaughter prevailed. But when the treasured-wheel [of a *chakravartin*] was stationed in the royal palace, the four Dvipas were free of trouble. This is similar to the grass swaying with the wind. Doesn’t the prime governing power determine [the circumstances of a nation]? Therefore [Bodhisattva Dharmakara] vowed, “In my Land, there shall always

be a Dharma-King, who shall sustain and uphold the Land with the beneficent power of the Dharma-King.”

“To sustain and uphold” is likened to the immortal crane which ceaselessly warbled the name of Zi’an, who had [saved its life and] died 1,000 years ago, thereby bringing him back to life. It also echoes the mother fish which managed to ensure the safety of its eggs laid on a seasonal wetland by thinking of them constantly.

The Land of Peace and Joy is upheld by the beneficent power of Amitabha’s perfect enlightenment. How could it have anything that does not pertain to perfect enlightenment? Hence it is said, *“Amitabha Buddha, the perfectly enlightened one, sustains and upholds [the Pure Land] with his Dharma-King’s beneficence.”*

### **The pure, floral multitudes of the Tathagata Are born there by transformation in flowers of perfect enlightenment.**

These two lines refer to the accomplished splendid merit of Kinsfolk.

Why did the Buddha originally make this vow? He saw that in some lands [fetal] bodies gestated in wombs that were full of blood. Creatures germinated from feces and urine. Noble families bred arrogant, malicious youngsters. Eminent talents were born to lowly parents. Ridicule aroused burning wrath, and humiliation provoked chills to the heart. Therefore Bodhisattva [Dharmakara] vowed, “In my Land, all beings shall be born from within the Tathagata’s pure flowers. My kinsfolk shall all be equal. They shall have no reason to adulate or abuse one another.” Hence it is said, *“The pure, floral multitudes*

*of the Tathagata are born there by transformation in flowers of perfect enlightenment.”*

### **They relish the flavor of the Buddha Dharma, And feed on meditative concentration.**

These two lines depict the accomplished splendid merit of Nourishment.

Why did the Buddha originally make this vow? He saw that in some lands people searched birds’ nests and broke eggs to prepare sumptuous feasts. [Hungry parents] suspended sand sacks in houses, pretending they were full of rice, so as to console their starving [children]. How heartbreaking! Therefore [Bodhisattva Dharmakara] made a vow of Great Compassion: “In my Land, the Buddha Dharma, *dhyana* and *samadhi* shall serve as food, and there shall be no need to labor for any other nourishment.”

“Relish the flavor of the Buddha Dharma” is like the occasion when Candrasuryapradipa Buddha taught the *Lotus Sutra* for 60 small *kalpas*. At the site, his listeners sat in the same place for 60 small *kalpas*, which seemed to them a short moment. None of them slacked off in body or mind.

“Feed on meditative concentration” means that the Great Bodhisattvas [in the Pure Land] constantly abide in *samadhi* without the need for other sustenance. “*Samadhi*” denotes that, when the human and celestial beings of that Land need food, all kinds of delicacies appear before them. They see the items with their eyes and smell the fragrance with their noses. Their bodies are comfortable and pleased, and their needs are spontaneously satiated. When they have finished, the food vanishes. And if they wish, it appears again. Hence it is said, *“They relish the flavor of the Buddha Dharma and feed on meditative concentration.”*



**Forever free from physical and mental afflictions,  
They enjoy uninterrupted happiness.**

These two lines denote the accomplished splendid merit of the Absence of Hardship.

Why did the Buddha originally make this vow? He saw that in some lands [a chancellor] would win the emperor's favor at dawn but panic in fear of decapitation at dusk. One who lived in thatched dwellings as a child might enjoy luxurious quarters as an adult. [A commander] could lead his army into battle amid high morale and the fanfare of flutes, but later [his lord] would hasten him to withdraw his troops and retreat. There were many disappointments and deprivations like these. So [Bodhisattva Dharmakara] vowed, "In my Land, a pleasant enjoyment shall prevail without cessation."

"Physical afflictions" refer to hunger, thirst, cold, heat, killing, injury and so forth. "Mental afflictions" include [perceptions of] "right and wrong" and "gain and loss," the Three Poisons and the like. Hence it is said, "*Forever free from physical and mental afflictions, They enjoy uninterrupted happiness.*"

**In that realm of virtuous Mahayana roots,  
[All beings are] equal, and with no unsavory names.  
Women, deformed beings and those with  
Seeds of the Two [Lesser] Vehicles are not born there.**

These four lines describe the accomplished splendid merit of the Great Principle Gate. That Gate provides entry to the Great Principle. The Great

Principle is the very reason Mahayana (the Greater Vehicle) is so called. It is like a person visiting a city. He can enter the city if he finds its gate. Once a person is reborn in the Land of Peace and Joy, he accesses the gate to the achievement of Mahayana.

Why did the Buddha originally make this vow? He saw that in some lands, even though a Tathagata, saints and sages existed, the land was turbid. So that Buddha had to divide the One Vehicle into Three in his teaching. [A Buddha's disciple] was criticized for raising eyebrows [to look at a woman]. The deaf were ridiculed for communicating by sign language. Therefore [Bodhisattva Dharmakara] vowed, "I shall give the whole of my Land a single flavor of Mahayana, of equality. The Land shall never grow seeds whose [Bodhi] root is spoiled. There shall be no women or deformed beings. Even their names shall not exist." Hence it is said, "*In that realm of virtuous Mahayana roots, [all beings are] equal, and with no unsavory names. Women, deformed beings and those with seeds of the Two [Lesser] Vehicles are not born there.*"

**Question:** According to the *Infinite Life Sutra* expounded at Rajgir, among his 48 Vows, Bodhisattva Dharmakara pledges: "***If, when I achieve Buddhahood, there should be one who can count and know the number of Sravakas in my Land, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.***" This is the first evidence that Sravakas do exist [in the Pure Land].

Also, in his *Exposition on the Ten Stages*, Bodhisattva Nagarjuna composed *In Praise of Amitabha*, saying: "*They surpass the prison of the Three Domains. Their eyes are like lotus-petals. They are the limitless throng of Sravakas! Hence, I bow in reverence [of Amitabha].*" This is the second evidence of the existence of Sravakas.

Further, the *Treatise on the Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana* says: **“Buddha Lands differ from one another. Some only have Sravaka-sanghas, and some, Bodhisattva-sanghas. Some Buddha Lands have sanghas of both Bodhisattvas and Sravakas, such as Amitabha’s Land of Peace and Joy.”** This is the third evidence of Sravakas’ existence.

In various sutras, when the Land of Peace and Joy is mentioned, it is mostly said that there are Sravakas, and never that there are none. Sravaka-hood is one of the Two Vehicles. Now the *Treatise* says even names from the Two Vehicles do not exist in the Pure Land. How can [this divergence] be reconciled?

**Answer:** By reasonable inference, the Land of Peace and Joy should not have the Two Vehicles. Why is that? Where there is a sickness, there is a medicine. This is common sense. The *Lotus Sutra* says: **“Shakyamuni Tathagata divided the One Vehicle into Three because he appeared in a world of the Five Turbidities.”** Since the Pure Land is free of the Five Turbidities, it is obvious that the Three Vehicles do not exist there.

The *Lotus Sutra* says of Sravakas: **“How did they achieve liberation? They did so only in the sense of severing falsehood and delusion. In fact they have not attained comprehensive liberation, as they haven’t realized the Supreme Way.”** Based on this principle, as long as Arhats have not accomplished full liberation, they are destined to be born again. They will not be reborn inside the Three Domains. Outside the Three Domains, there is no place for them to be reborn other than the pure lands. Therefore, they can only be reborn in the pure lands.

References to “Sravakas” signify those who come from elsewhere to be reborn in the Pure Land. Their original name of “Sravaka” has been retained. Consider *Sakra*, Lord of the Devas, who used to be surnamed *Kausika* when he

was born as a human. Later, although he became a celestial lord, Shakyamuni Buddha still addressed him as *Kausika*, so people would know his origin. This is a similar example.

Further, the *Treatise* simply says, “those with seeds of the Two [Lesser] Vehicles are not born there.” This means that the Land of Peace and Joy does not engender seeds of the Two Vehicles. How does this preclude the rebirth of Two-Vehicle beings [from elsewhere]? To use a metaphor, oranges do not grow in the north of the Yangtze River but they can be seen in fruit stores in the Heluo region [north of the river]. Also, parrots do not migrate out of Longxi, yet caged parrots are kept under house-beams in the Zhao and Wei kingdoms [outside Longxi]. It merely shows that oranges and parrots are not produced in areas beyond their respective places of origin. The “existence” of Sravakas in the Pure Land is similar. This explanation reconciles the *Treatise* with the sutras.

**Question:** Names designate things. Where there is something, it has a name. As long as the Land of Peace and Joy has no such things as the Two Vehicles, women and the deformed, why is it still necessary to mention the absence of the three names?

**Answer:** Feeble-minded Bodhisattvas lack firm will [in the pursuit of Buddhahood] and are therefore scorned as “Sravakas.” Flatterers and weaklings are derided as “women.” A person with normal eyesight but unable to discern matters with common sense is ridiculed as “blind.” He who has good hearing but doesn’t understand what he hears is taunted as “deaf.” Those who can speak with their tongues but stammer or speak little are mocked as “mute.” Notwithstanding their wholesome sense-organs, they have unsavory names such as these. Therefore it is necessary to say that these names do not exist, to clarify that the Pure Land does not have such discriminatory terms.

**Question:** Bodhisattva Dharmakara's fundamental vows and Bodhisattva Nagarjuna's *In Praise [of Amitabha]* all seem to marvel at the profusion of Sravakas in the Pure Land. What does that signify?

**Answer:** Sravakas take the Reality Sphere as the [final stage of] enlightenment. By rights they cannot further generate the root of Buddhahood enlightenment. However, with the inconceivable supernatural power of his fundamental vows, Amitabha Buddha embraces the Sravakas and enables them to be reborn in the Pure Land. Also with such supernatural power, he further inspires their resolve for supreme enlightenment. To draw an analogy, after a toxic-feathered bird enters a river and poisons all fish and mussels, a rhinoceros touches the water and the dead creatures revive [from the detoxification effect of the rhino horn]. Thus do those who shouldn't live come back to life -- something to marvel at. Moreover, among the Five Inconceivables, the Buddha Dharma is the most unfathomable. The Buddha can enable Sravakas to further awaken the aspiration to supreme enlightenment. This is truly the ultimate inconceivability.

### **All that sentient beings wish for and delight in Can be satisfied.**

These two lines depict the accomplished splendid merit of the Satisfaction of All Demands.

Why did the Buddha originally make this vow? He saw that in some lands, celebrities and senior officials were not allowed to retire into seclusion as they wished. Those of mediocre ability or humble origins had no way of rising up as they wanted. Everyone's lifespan was determined by karma and beyond his own control. An example was Asita, the ascetic. People like him were blown about by the karma-wind, with no freedom of choice. Therefore, [Bodhisattva

Dharmakara] vowed, "In my Land, all beings' wishes shall be fulfilled." Hence it is said, "*All that sentient beings wish for and delight in can be satisfied.*"

### **Therefore I aspire to be reborn In Amitabha Buddha's Land.**

These two lines conclude the foregoing reflections on the accomplishment of the 17 kinds of splendors of the Pure Land, by reason of which [Vasubandhu] aspires to be reborn there.

Here ends the explanation of the purity of the receptacle realm.

The following section relates to reflections on the purity of the sentient-beings realm.

This section is divided into two parts:

1. Reflecting on the splendid merits of Amitabha Tathagata;
2. Reflecting on the splendid merits of the Bodhisattvas.

There are eight categories of reflections on the Tathagata's splendid merits. The heading of each will be given in the corresponding passage below.

**Question:** Some commentators broadly explain "sentient beings" as follows: Since they reincarnate in the Three Domains and undergo many births and deaths, they are called sentient beings ("many births"). But in this *Treatise*, the Buddha and Bodhisattvas are termed "sentient beings." Why is that?

**Answer:** The *[Mahaparinirvana] Sutra* says, "**A phenomenon has countless names; a name has innumerable meanings.**" To interpret "sentient



beings” as sufferers of multiple births and deaths is the Lesser Vehicle’s way of defining “sentient beings in the Three Domains.” It is not the Greater Vehicle’s [Mahayana’s] interpretation of the term.

The Mahayana’s definition of “sentient beings” accords with the *Sutra of Neither Increase nor Decrease*, which says **“the term ‘sentient beings’ connotes neither arising nor perishing.”** Why is that? If there is arising [in substantial existence], then when an arising is done, a subsequent arising should immediately follow. Thus there would be the error of ceaselessness [of arising] and the error of “not arising but arising.” So there is no arising [in substantial existence]. Only if there is arising would there be perishing. Where there is no arising, how could there be perishing? Therefore “non-arising and non-perishing” is the meaning of “sentient beings.” The *[Vimalakirti] Sutra* says, **“The Five Sensations are completely void and non-existing, and that is the [Mahayana’s] meaning of ‘suffering’.”** This is the same kind of case.

## Countless great king-treasures [adorn] His exquisite pure lotus pedestal.

These two lines depict the accomplished splendid merit of the Throne.

Why did the Buddha originally make his throne splendid? He saw a Bodhisattva attain *Anuttara-samyak-sambodhi* (supreme, perfect enlightenment) in the final life while seated on a straw mattress. As humans and celestial beings beheld that episode, they failed to advance their faith, veneration, aspiration and cultivation with the augmentative power [of the enlightened being]. Therefore [Bodhisattva Dharmakara] vowed, “When I become a Buddha, my Buddha-throne shall be made of an exquisite pure lotus pedestal adorned by the countless great king-treasures.”

As for “countless,” the *Contemplation of Infinite Life Sutra* says, **“On the seven-jeweled ground, there is a lotus-king throne made of great treasures. Each petal of the lotus flashes hundreds of bejeweled colors and displays 84,000 veins which are as resplendent as celestial paintings. Every vein emits 84,000 rays of light. Small petals extend 250 yojanas in length and width. Each lotus encompasses 84,000 petals. Between the petals are billions of ornamental king muni-gems. Each muni-gem issues thousands of radiant beams. The radiance spreads out like canopies made of seven jewels, thoroughly covering the ground. The podium is made of sakrabhilagna gems. This lotus-podium is decorated with 80,000 vajra-kimsuka gems, brahma-muni-gems, and exquisite pearly nets. On that podium stand spontaneously four pillars of treasured banners. Each banner resembles a hundred quadrillion Mt. Sumerus. Treasured valances drape the pillars, similar to those in Yama Heaven. They are adorned with five billion exquisite gems, each releasing 84,000 rays of light. Each ray glows with 84,000 different hues of golden color. The golden color suffuses the treasured Land of Peace and Joy and transforms into various objects everywhere, such as vajra seats, pearly nets, and multicolored flowery clouds. Throughout the ten directions, the golden color mutates and manifests as wished, and performs the Buddha’s work.”**

Phenomena such as these are too numerous to be counted. Therefore it is said, **“Countless great king-treasures [adorn] his exquisite pure lotus pedestal.”**

**His excellent physical marks radiate for one *xun* square.  
His outward manifestations transcend all others’**

These two lines refer to the accomplished splendid merit of Physical Karma.

Why did the Buddha originally make splendid his physical karma? He saw that some Buddhas’ bodies radiated [only] one *zhang* square of light, which was hardly more capacious than the light from a human body. Their physical signs were roughly equal to those of a *chakravartin*. Devadatta lacked only two of [Shakyamuni’s] bodily marks, and thus managed to turn King Ajatasatru [against Shakyamuni]. Possibly for the same reason, Sanjaya-vairattiputra and the like dared [place obstacles before Shakyamuni] like a mantis [trying to stop a chariot]. Therefore, [Bodhisattva Dharmakara] made splendid his physical karma.

According to the traditional definition, six *chi* [or 6.5 feet] equals one *xun*. The *Contemplation of Infinite Life Sutra* says, **“Amitabha Tathagata’s height is as many yojanas as 60 trillion nayutas of sand grains in the Ganges River. The Buddha’s halo is [as large] as 10 billion Three Thousand Great Chiliocosms.”**

The translator [Bodhiruci] used *xun* as the measure. How obscure! When country folks say “*xun*,” they mean the distance between the two hands spread apart horizontally, without distinguishing between length and breadth or between long and short. Perhaps the translator adopted this method to measure Amitabha Tathagata’s side-stretched arms and called it “one *xun*.” The Buddha’s halo should have a diameter also -- as many *yojanas* as 60 trillion *nayutas* of sand grains in the Ganges River. Therefore it is said, **“His excellent physical**

**marks radiate for one *xun* square. His outward manifestations transcend all others’.”**

**Question:** The *Contemplation of Infinite Life Sutra* says, **“Tathagatas are bodies from the Dharma Realm [Dharmakaya], and enter the mind of each sentient being. For this reason, when we think of a Buddha, our mind becomes the [Buddha’s] 32 marks and 80 physical characteristics. Our mind becomes a Buddha; this mind is the Buddha. The ‘ocean’ of the Buddhas’ perfect universal knowledge arises from the thinking mind.”** What does this mean?

**Answer:** “Body” is the aggregation [of various factors]. “Realm” implies the demarcation of matters. For example, the realm of the eye arises from five causal conditions -- the sense organ, objects, space, brightness and mental engagement. It is called the “eye realm.” Eyes react only to their own pertinent conditions, but not to other [impertinent] conditions. That’s because the matters involved are distinct from those of other realms. The realms of the ear, nose, etc. are similar.

By saying “Tathagatas are bodies from the Dharma Realm,” [the sutra means that] the Dharma Realm pertains to sentient beings’ mental dharmas. Since the mind can generate all worldly and extra-worldly dharmas, it is called the “Dharma Realm.” The Dharma Realm can produce all Tathagatas’ bodies bearing excellent marks and physical characteristics, just like objects and other [eye-pertinent conditions] giving rise to eye consciousness. Therefore, Buddhas’ bodies are called bodies of Dharma Realm . This body does not react to other conditions, so it enters the thinking minds of all sentient beings.

“When we think of a Buddha, our mind becomes the [Buddha’s] 32 marks and 80 physical characteristics.” This means when a sentient being is mindful

of a Buddha, the latter's excellent marks and physical characteristics manifest in the being's mind. This is like clear water reflecting the images of objects. The [reflecting] water and the [reflected] images are neither identical nor different. Hence it is said that the Buddha's body with the excellent marks and physical characteristics is precisely the thinking mind.

"Our mind becomes a Buddha" indicates that the mind is capable of becoming a Buddha. "This mind is the Buddha" signifies that outside the mind there is no Buddha. It's like the fire produced from wood: It cannot be separated from the wood. It can burn the wood. As the wood is burnt by the fire, the wood is precisely the fire.

In the sentence "The 'ocean' of the Buddhas' perfect universal knowledge arises from the thinking mind," the "perfect universal knowledge" means knowing things in true accordance with the Dharma Realm. Since the Dharma Realm is free of phenomenal characteristics, the Buddhas are non-perceptive. As they are non-perceptive, there is nothing they do not know. Knowing without perception is the "perfect universal knowledge." This knowledge is of immeasurable profundity and extensiveness, so it is compared to an ocean.

### **The Tathagata's exquisite, wondrous voice Resounds with *brahma*-tones throughout the ten directions.**

These two lines depict the accomplished splendid merit of Verbal Karma.

Why did the Buddha originally vow to accomplish this splendor? He saw that some Tathagatas' names seem not to be venerated [by all]. Once a carter of a non-Buddhist faith called the Tathagata disrespectfully by his worldly

surname "Gautama." And on the day of the Tathagata's enlightenment, his voice only reached the Brahma Heaven. Therefore, [Bodhisattva Dharmakara] vowed, "When I become a Buddha, my wondrous voice shall spread far and wide; hearers shall attain Endurance [for Non-Arising]." Hence it is said, ***"The Tathagata's exquisite, wondrous voice resounds with brahma-tones throughout the ten directions."***

### **Like the earth, water, fire, wind and space, [the Tathagata's mind] is non-discriminative.**

These two lines depict the accomplished splendid merit of Mental Karma.

Why did the Buddha originally vow to accomplish this splendor? He saw that when expounding Dharma teachings, some Tathagatas said: "This is black, this is white, and this is neither black nor white," and taught the inferior, middle, superior and supreme methods of practice. There were limitless classifications such as these, and it seemed that the Tathagatas had a discriminative mind. Therefore [Bodhisattva Dharmakara] vowed, "When I become a Buddha, I shall be like the earth that bears loads without discerning the light from the heavy; like water nourishing the growth but not distinguishing between poisonous weeds and auspicious herbs; like fire that cooks things, whether fragrant or fetid; like wind blowing through, making no distinction between the sleeping and the awake; like space that accommodates all without minding openness or blockage. Grasping the truth within, I shall pacify sentient beings without. I shall expunge the unreal [distinctions] and return to the real [oneness], resting in serenity." Hence it is said, ***"Like the earth, water, fire, wind and space, [the Tathagata's mind] is non-discriminative."***

**Celestial and human beings [in the Pure Land] are an  
unshakable assembly;  
They are born from the ocean of pure wisdom.**

These two lines depict the accomplished splendid merit of the Assembly.

Why did the Buddha originally vow to accomplish this splendor? He saw that when some Tathagatas taught the Dharma, their audiences had a great variety of aptitudes and proclivities. When learning the Buddha's wisdom, some retrogressed and others were even submerged [by deluded thoughts]. Because of such inequality, the assemblies were not pure. Therefore [Bodhisattva Dharmakara] vowed, "When I become a Buddha, all celestial and human beings shall be born from the pure ocean of the Tathagata's wisdom."

"Ocean" suggests that the Buddha's All-Inclusive Wisdom is profound, extensive and without limit. It does not accommodate the "corpses" of the middling and inferior aptitudes – the followers of the Two Vehicles and practitioners of assorted virtues. So it is compared to the ocean. Hence it is said, *"Celestial and human beings [in the Pure Land] are an unshakable assembly; they are born from the ocean of pure wisdom."* "Unshakable" means that the celestials and humans of the Pure Land have attained the Mahayana root and cannot be swayed.

**Like Sumeru, the king of mountains,  
[Amitabha's] wondrous sublimity is unsurpassed.**

These two lines depict the accomplished splendid merit of the Leader.

Why did the Buddha originally make this vow? He saw that among the followers of some Tathagatas were bullies such as Devadatta and his like. And certain earthly monarchs ruled with equal status to the Buddha, unaware that they should venerate the latter. There were those who invited the Buddha but forgot they had done so because of distractions. Such incidents suggested that the leadership power [of the Tathagatas] had not been perfectly accomplished. Therefore [Bodhisattva Dharmakara] vowed, "When I become a Buddha, the multitudes [in my Land] shall not presume to be my equal. [I,] the Dharmaking, shall be the sole [leader], and there shall be no worldly king." Hence it is said, *"Like Sumeru, the king of mountains, [Amitabha's] wondrous sublimity is unsurpassed."*

**Celestials and humans are an assembly of intrepid beings.  
They surround [Amitabha], beholding him with  
reverence.**

These two lines depict the accomplished splendid merit of the Lord.

Why did the Buddha originally vow to accomplish this splendor? He saw that among the followers of certain Tathagatas were some who did not harbor due respect for the Buddhas. For example, a *bhikku* once said to Shakyamuni Buddha, "If you do not answer the 14 questions I raised, I shall switch to some other path."

In another case, Kokalika [senior disciple of Devadatta] maligned Sariputra [senior disciple of Shakyamuni Buddha] [for breaking a precept]. The Buddha admonished Kokalika three times, but the latter spurned the reprimands.

Moreover, followers of non-Buddhist faiths pretended to join the Buddha's assembly and constantly awaited chances to find fault with the Buddha. And the Devaputra demon of the Sixth Heaven repeatedly created obstacles for the Buddha.

Because of disrespectful happenings such as these, [Bodhisattva Dharmakara] vowed, "When I become a Buddha, the assembly of celestial and human beings [in my Land] shall always be reverential without weariness."

The reason only "celestial and human beings" are mentioned is that the Pure Land does not have women or the eight kinds of deities. Hence it is said, "*Celestials and humans are an assembly of intrepid beings. They surround [Amitabha], beholding him with reverence.*"

**Observing the power of Amitabha's fundamental vows,  
[I find that] those who encounter it never come up  
empty-handed.  
It enables quick fulfillment of  
The great treasure ocean of merit and virtues.**

These four lines describe the accomplished splendid merit of Substantive Sustenance and Support.

Why did the Buddha originally vow to accomplish this splendor? He saw that some Tathagatas only had Sravakas in their Sanghas, with none pursuing the path of Buddhahood. Further, there were those who encountered the Buddha but still failed to escape from the Three Wretched Realms, like Sunaksatra, Devadatta and Kokalika. Some heard a Buddha's name and aspired to supreme

enlightenment, but later encountered negative circumstances and retrogressed to the stage of Sravaka or Pratyekabuddha. Considering those who passed by in vain, retrogressed or were submerged, [Bodhisattva Dharmakara] vowed, "When I become a Buddha, those who encounter me shall all quickly obtain the supreme great treasure." Hence it is said, "*Observing the power of Amitabha's fundamental vows, [I find that] those who encounter it never come up empty-handed. It enables quick fulfillment of the great treasure ocean of merit and virtues.*"

The meaning of "sustenance and support (upholding)" is as defined above.

Here end the reflections on the eight kinds of splendid merit accomplished by the Buddha.

Next are reflections on the four kinds of accomplished splendid merits of the great Bodhisattvas in the Land of Peace and Joy.

**Question:** What is missing after reflection on the Tathagata's splendid merits? Why is it still necessary to reflect on those of the Bodhisattvas?

**Answer:** Where there is a wise monarch, there are capable ministers. Good examples are the Emperors Yao and Shun, who reputedly ruled without action. If the Tathagata acted alone as the Dharma-king but lacked great Bodhisattvas assisting alongside as Dharma-ministers, could this be acclaimed as "perfect"? It is also like a small pile of firewood, which could not make a big fire because of its limited size.

The *[Infinite Life] Sutra* says, "**Amitabha Buddha's Land has innumerable great Bodhisattvas, such as Avalokitesvara, Mahasthamaprapta, etc. They will all succeed to Buddhahood in other lands after the present**



**lifetime.”** A person who recalls them, recites their names, takes refuge in them or contemplates them will have all his aspirations fulfilled, said the Universal Gateway Chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*.

However, Bodhisattvas relish merit and virtue, like the sea swallowing inflows of water without feeling satiated. Shakyamuni Tathagata once heard a blind monk sighing, “Can someone who loves merit and virtue please thread this needle for me?” Hearing this, the Tathagata rose from meditation and went to the monk. He said, “I love meritorious blessings,” and threaded the needle. Recognizing the Buddha’s voice, the monk was surprised and delighted, saying to the Buddha, “World-Honored One! Aren’t your merits and virtues perfect yet?” “Yes, they are perfect already and I need nothing more,” replied the Buddha. “But this body of mine was born from merit and virtue. Appreciating their grace, I said I love them.”

To answer the underlying question, it is true that reflecting on the Buddha’s splendid merits can have all one’s aspirations fulfilled without missing anything. The reasons for further contemplating the Bodhisattvas’ merits are indicated in the preceding passages.

**The Land of Peace and Joy is pure,  
Its immaculate wheel constantly turns.  
Manifested bodies of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas  
resemble the sun --  
Even as they stand firmly like Mt. Sumeru.**

Why did the Buddha originally vow to accomplish this splendor? He saw that some Buddha Lands only had junior Bodhisattvas who were unable to

perform the Buddha’s work extensively in the worlds of the ten directions. Or there were only Sravakas, humans and celestial beings whose beneficial activities were limited. Therefore [Bodhisattva Dharmakara] vowed, “In my Land, there shall be innumerable great Bodhisattvas who, without moving from their original place [the Pure Land], shall be able to travel extensively in the ten directions, make various transformations, practice according to ultimate reality, and perform the the Buddha’s work constantly.”

This is likened to the sun – while staying in the sky, it can be reflected in all rivers. Has the sun has come [into the water]? Or has it not?

As the *Mahasamnipata Sutra* says, **“It is like someone who is skilled at building dykes. He begins by calculating and arranging adequate capacity for the dyke. When it’s time to release water, he need not expend more mental effort. So it is with Bodhisattvas. They first construct various ‘dykes’ to make offerings to Buddhas as well as edify and guide sentient beings. Then, after they enter samadhi, their bodies and minds remain non-moving, while they practice according to ultimate reality and perform the Buddha’s work constantly.”**

“Practice according to ultimate reality” means to practice regularly, yet in reality there is nothing to practice. Hence it is said, **“The Land of Peace and Joy is pure, its immaculate wheel constantly turns. Manifested bodies of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas resemble the sun -- even as they stand firmly like Mt. Sumeru.”**

**They emit immaculate, resplendent light  
Which, in a moment and at the same time,  
Shines on all Buddhas' assemblies  
And benefits all living beings.**

Why did the Buddha originally vow to accomplish this splendor? He saw that some Tathagatas' followers wanted to make offerings to innumerable Buddhas of other lands or resolved to edify and guide countless sentient beings. But to do so, they had to leave one place to go to another. When reaching the south, they were unable to show up in the north until later. They couldn't, in a moment and at the same time, emit lights to illuminate every place and reach all worlds in the ten directions to edify and guide beings. There were such [antithetical] phenomena as presence vs. absence and earlier vs. later. Therefore, [Bodhisattva Dharmakara] vowed, "The great Bodhisattvas in my Land shall reach the ten directions simultaneously within a moment to perform all kinds of Buddha-work." Hence it is said, "*They emit immaculate, resplendent light which, in a moment and at the same time, shines on all Buddhas' assemblies and benefits all living beings.*"

**Question:** The previous section says that [the Bodhisattvas] reach the ten directions simultaneously while their bodies remain non-moving. To reach without moving already means "at the same time," doesn't it? Then how is it different from this [section]?

**Answer:** The previous section only says to reach without moving. It allows a time sequence of precedence. The present section says there is no "earlier or later." This is the difference. Further, this section complements the meaning of "non-moving" given previously. If it is not "at the same time,"

there should be "comings and goings." Should there be "comings and goings," [the Bodhisattvas] would not be non-moving. Therefore, to consummate the implication of "non-moving," it is necessary to reflect on the simultaneity.

**They rain down heavenly music, flowers and robes,  
As well as delicate incense, as offerings,  
And acclaim the merits and virtues of the Buddhas  
Without minds of discrimination.**

Why did the Buddha originally accomplish this splendor? He saw that in some Buddha Lands, the Bodhisattvas, humans and celestial beings had narrow mindsets, and could not reach endless worlds in the ten directions simultaneously to make offerings to Buddhas and their assemblies. Some dared not yearn for the pure realms because their own lands were filthy. Others disdained the impure worlds on account they inhabited pure abodes. Given such prejudices, they could not make offerings to Tathagatas everywhere and cultivate extensive roots of virtue.

Therefore [Bodhisattva Dharmakara] vowed, "When I become a Buddha, all multitudes of Bodhisattvas, Sravakas, celestial and human beings in my Land shall be able to appear simultaneously at all Buddhas' assemblies in the ten directions. They will manifest rain of heavenly music, flowers, robes and incense as their offerings, and utter wonderfully eloquent words to praise the Buddhas' merits and virtues. While acclaiming the great compassion and forbearance of a Tathagata in a defiled land, they do not behold any sign of defilement in that land. Whereas they extol the infinite splendors of a Tathagata in a pure realm, they do not see any signs of purity in that realm."

Why is that? Because all dharmas are equal, and all Tathagatas are equal. So each Buddha is called “the equally enlightened one.” If one generates a thought that distinguishes Buddhas’ lands as superior or inferior, his offerings to Tathagatas are not Dharma offerings. Hence it is said: *“They rain down heavenly music, flowers and robes, as well as delicate incense, as offerings, and acclaim the merits and virtues of the Buddhas without minds of discrimination.”*

**For worlds that lack  
The treasure of Buddha Dharma merits,  
I aspire to be reborn in each of them  
To teach the Dharma there as Buddhas do.**

Why did the Buddha originally make this vow? He saw that some weak-minded Bodhisattvas only enjoyed practicing in a land where a Buddha dwelt; they had no solid, compassionate resolve. Therefore [Bodhisattva Dharmakara] vowed, “When I become a Buddha, Bodhisattvas in my Land shall all be compassionate and vigorous. With firm determination, they shall be willing to leave the Pure Land for other realms where no Buddha, Dharma and Sangha exist. In those realms, they shall uphold and glorify the Gems of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. And they shall manifest as though a Buddha exists there, so as to ensure that the Buddha-seeds will never be extinct anywhere.” Hence it is said, *“For worlds that lack the treasure of Buddha Dharma merits, I aspire to be reborn in each of them to teach the Dharma there as Buddhas do.”*

Here end the reflections on the four kinds of accomplished splendid merit of the Bodhisattvas.

The following four lines pertain to the Path of Merit-Dedication.

**By composing this *Treatise* and speaking the *Gatha*,  
I aspire to see Amitabha Buddha,  
And, together with all sentient beings,  
To be reborn in the Land of Peace and Joy.**

These four lines represent the author’s dedication of merit. “Merit-dedication” means that the author dedicates his merits to all sentient beings universally. He wishes to see Amitabha Tathagata and be reborn in the Land of Peace and Joy together with them.

**By virtue of the *Gatha*, I have generally expounded on  
passages from the sutras relating to Infinite Life.**

**Question:** In the section of Merit-Dedication, Bodhisattva Vasubandhu says, *“And, together with all sentient beings, [I aspire] to be reborn in the Land of Peace and Joy.”* What kind of sentient beings is he referring to?

**Answer:** According to the *Infinite Life Sutra* delivered at Rajgir, the Buddha told Ananda, *“All Buddhas, Tathagatas in the ten directions, as many as the grains of sand in the Ganges River, jointly acclaim the unfathomable majestic power and merit of the Infinite Life Buddha. All sentient beings who, having heard his name, rejoice in faith, recite his name even once and make sincere dedication of merits in aspiration to be reborn there, will immediately attain rebirth and achieve non-retrogression. Excepted are those who commit the Five Gravest Transgressions or slander the correct Dharma.”*



According to this, all “outer ordinary beings” [Buddhists who have not attained the status of “saintly being”] can attain rebirth [in the Pure Land].

Further, the *Contemplation of Infinite Life Sutra* mentions Nine Levels of rebirth. Those of the lowest level of the lower grade are depicted as follows -- **“There are sentient beings who have committed unwholesome karmic deeds, the Five Gravest Transgressions, the Ten Evil Actions and other various negative offenses. Due to their negative karma, such foolish beings are doomed to fall into the Wretched Realms to undergo countless kalpas of endless suffering.**

**“When such a foolish person is dying, he encounters a Dharma friend who consoles him in every way, speaks the wondrous Dharma to him, and teaches him to recollect [Amitabha] Buddha. Yet his agony makes recollection difficult. Then the Dharma friend tells him, ‘If you cannot recollect in mind, you should call out the name of the Infinite Life Buddha.’ These words touch the dying person’s heart. With unbroken voice, he calls ‘Namo Amitabha Buddha’ ten times. Since he recites the Buddha’s name, thought by thought, his negative karma leading to reincarnation over 8 billion kalpas is eradicated. At the point of death, he sees a golden, sun-like lotus appear before him. In a flash, he is reborn in the Land of Peace and Joy. [He stays] in a lotus for twelve great kalpas, after which the flower-bud blossoms. Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta, with voices of great compassion, teach him about the absolute reality behind all dharmas and methods to eliminate negative karma. He listens joyfully and immediately generates the Bodhi-mind. Such is a person reborn [in the Pure Land] at the lowest level of the lower grade.”**

This sutra confirms clearly that ordinary people of the lower grade can all be reborn [in the Pure Land] on account of their faith in the Buddha, provided

they do not slander the correct Dharma.

**Question:** The *Infinite Life Sutra* says, all sentient beings who aspire to be reborn in the Pure Land will attain rebirth -- except those who commit the Five Gravest Transgressions or slander the correct Dharma. The *Contemplation of Infinite Life Sutra* says that sentient beings who commit the Five Gravest Transgressions, the Ten Evil Actions and other various negative offenses can also attain rebirth. How would you reconcile these two sutras?

**Answer:** One sutra mentions two kinds of serious misdeeds – one is the Five Gravest Offenses, and the other is slander of the correct Dharma. Offenders of either cannot be reborn in the Pure Land. The other sutra only cites the Five Gravest Transgressions, the Ten Evil Actions and other negative offenses without referring to slander of the correct Dharma. Therefore, as long as one does not slander the correct Dharma, one can be reborn in the Pure Land.

**Question:** If a person commits the Five Gravest Transgressions but doesn’t slander the correct Dharma, the *[Contemplation] Sutra* acknowledges he can be reborn in the Pure Land. What if a person only slanders the correct Dharma but doesn’t commit the Five Gravest Transgressions and other negative offenses? If she aspires to be reborn in the Pure Land, can she attain that rebirth?

**Answer:** If a person slanders the correct Dharma, even though he has no other offenses, he definitely cannot attain rebirth. Why is that? Because sutras say that those who commit the Five Gravest Transgressions will fall into the Great Avici Hell. There they will suffer grave tortures for one *kalpa*. A slanderer of the correct Dharma will fall into the Great Avici Hell. When the current *kalpa* ends, he will be transferred to another Great Avici Hell. This way, he will successively go through hundreds of thousands of Great Avici Hells. The Buddha did not predict when the slanderer can be released from those

hells. The reason is that slandering the correct Dharma is an extremely serious transgression.

Further, the correct Dharma is the Buddha Dharma. If the foolish person slanders the Buddha Dharma, how could he possibly wish to be reborn in a Buddha's land? Even if he has such a wish simply out of a desire for the peace and happiness of the land, it would be like seeking non-water ice or smokeless fire. What justification could there be for his attainment of that rebirth?

**Question:** What are the manifestations of slandering the correct Dharma?

**Answer:** Saying that “there is no Buddha, no Buddha Dharma, no Bodhisattvas and no Bodhisattva Dharma,” or firmly holding such views through personal assessment or by accepting them from others, are all called slandering the correct Dharma.

**Question:** Holding such opinions is one's own business. How could that afflict other sentient beings to the extent of outweighing the Five Gravest Transgressions?

**Answer:** If there were no Buddhas or Bodhisattvas to edify and guide sentient beings by teaching the worldly and extra-worldly paths of virtue, how could anyone learn about benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and sincerity? In that case, all virtuous conduct in the world would be extinguished, and all extra-worldly sages and men of virtue would disappear. You only know that the Five Gravest Transgressions are heavy, but you are unaware that they result from an absence of the correct Dharma. So slanderers of the correct Dharma have committed the gravest offense of all.

**Question:** Scriptures on karma say: “The karmic path is like a weighing scale. The heavier karma leads the pull [towards the karmic destination].” The *Contemplation of Infinite Life Sutra* says, **“A person who commits the Five Gravest Transgressions, the Ten Evil Actions and other negative offenses should fall into the Wretched Realms to undergo countless kalpas of endless suffering. But when he is dying, he encounters a Dharma friend, who teaches him to recite ‘Namo Amitabha Buddha.’ Such words touch his heart and with unbroken voice he recites ten times. Then he is reborn in the Pure Land of Peace and Joy. He immediately joins the Great Vehicle Assembly of Assured Enlightenment, and will never retrogress. He is forever freed from the sufferings of the Three Wretched Realms.”** In this case, how does the principle “The heavier karma leads the pull” apply?

Additionally, over countless *kalpas*, [that person] has created flawed karma through numerous deeds, and is therefore “bound” to the Three Domains. If, merely by reciting “Amitabha Buddha” ten times, he escapes the Three Domains, what does the term “binding karma” mean?

**Answer:** You mean that the binding karma from the Five Gravest Transgressions and Ten Evil Actions is heavy, and those from the “ten recitations” by the person of the lowest level of the lower grade is light. So the karma from his offenses should “pull” him towards Hell first, thus “binding” him to the Three Domains. The true principle and measure should be this: Being heavy or light is defined by the state of mind, causal conditions and decisiveness; it doesn't depend on the length of time.

How is karmic weight decided by the frame of mind? The evildoer himself relied on his own false, perverted views to create the negative karma. But with the Dharma friend's consolation by skillful means and upon hearing the teaching

of absolute reality, he completed the ten recitations. The former pertains to falsity and the latter, the truth. How can the two be comparable? Consider a room that is dark inside for a thousand years. If light shines in, even for a short while, the room immediately brightens. How could the darkness refuse to leave, claiming it has occupied the room for a thousand years? This is called “decided by the state of mind.”

How is it decided by causal conditions? The evildoer himself relied on his own deluded thoughts to create the negative karma. His victims were sentient beings who also suffered from afflictions and illusory karmic retributions. But with supreme faith and reliance on Amitabha Tathagata’s name, which is expedient, resplendent, truthful, pure and infinitely meritorious, the evildoer completed the ten recitations. This is like a person who has been shot by a poisoned arrow. His tendons and bones are broken. When he hears the beat of a drum coated with antidote, the arrow pops out and the toxin vanishes. Can anyone say that since the arrow is deeply embedded and the poison is severe, hearing the drum cannot remove the arrow and poison? This is called “decided by causal conditions.”

How is it determined by decisiveness? The wrongdoer created the negative karma by relying on thoughts that were each followed by a [distracting] thought and interrupted by other miscellaneous ones. But he completed the ten recitations with no subsequent, distracting thoughts. This is called “decisiveness.”

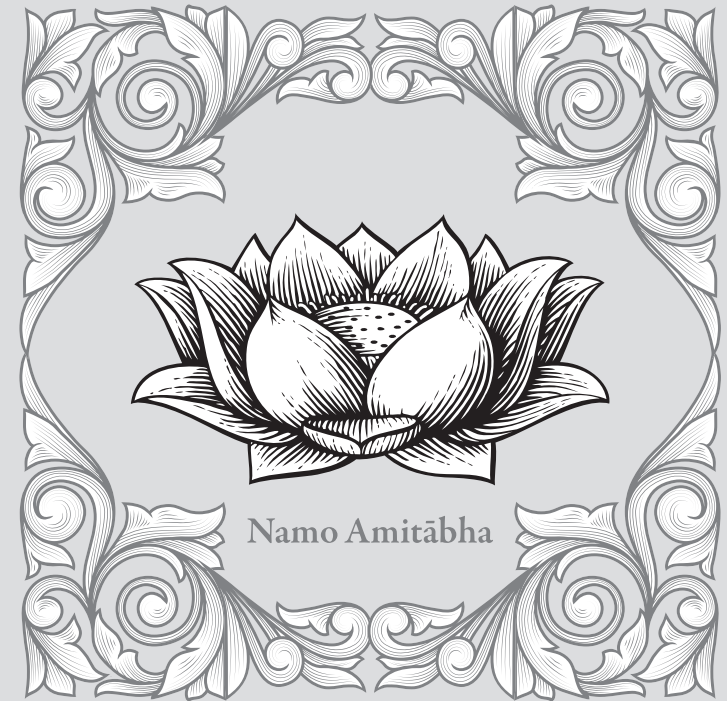
Compared with these three aspects, [the karma of] the ten recitations is heavier. Since the heavier karma pulls more strongly [towards the karmic destination], the person can transcend the Three Domains. The two sutras have the same meaning.

**Question:** How much time is “one thought”?

**Answer:** [The temporal length of] a hundred times’ arising-and-ceasing is one instant. Sixty instants equal the time of one thought. But this time span does not apply to the “[ten] recitations” discussed here. To recollect either Amitabha Buddha’s overall physique or a specific part of it is to focus one’s mind on contemplation with no other thoughts. “Ten recollections” is to do so for ten consecutive times. Reciting the Buddha’s name is the same.

**Question:** The reciter would be able to count the exact number of recollections only if she diverts her attention to another objective condition and then focuses her mind back [on Amitabha Buddha]. But if she so knows the number, her thought was not uninterrupted. If she concentrates her mind on recollecting the Buddha, how could she know the number of recollections?

**Answer:** References to “ten recitations” in the *[Contemplation] Sutra* are meant to illustrate that the karma [of assurance leading to rebirth in the Pure Land] was accomplished [as a result of the recitations]. It is not necessary [for the reciter] to know the exact number. As the saying goes, “a summer cicada has no idea about seasons.” Is the insect even conscious of what exactly summer is? Those who know [the four seasons] speak the proverb. Likewise, those with supernatural power affirm that “ten recitations generate the karma of assurance.” Reciters only need to keep reciting in continuity without seeking other ways. Why bother to calculate the number of recitations? If one indeed needs to count, there is a method. But it has to be taught orally. It cannot be written down.



## Second Fascicle

### The *Treatise* states:

Starting here is the section that explicates the *Gatha*. It has ten subsections:

1. General meaning of the *Gatha of Aspiration to Rebirth*;
2. Reflection and the awakening of faith;
3. Objects and characteristics of reflection;
4. Accrediting purity to the Mind of Aspiration;
5. Attracting, instructing and transforming [sentient beings] by expedient means;
6. Avoiding impediments to Bodhi;
7. Conforming with the Bodhi path;
8. Ensuring correspondence among terms and connotations;
9. Accomplishment of aspirations;
10. Fulfilment of beneficial conduct.

“Treatise” means discussion -- of the *Gatha*’s implications. “States” is to speak, indicating that the contents to follow will examine and explicate the *Gatha*. Hence it is said, “***The Treatise states.***”

As for the “general meaning of the *Gatha of Aspiration to Rebirth*,” [Vasubandhu says]

**What does this *Gatha of Aspiration to Rebirth* reveal? It reveals that [I] contemplate the Land of Peace and Joy and see Amitabha Tathagata, because [I] aspire to be reborn in that Land.**

Regarding “reflection and awakening of faith,” the subsection has two levels of significance:

1. Presenting the power of the Five Paths of Invocation;
2. Expounding the Five Paths of Invocation.

In presenting the power of the Five Paths of Invocation, [Vasubandhu says]

**How should we reflect? How can our faith be awakened?  
Good men and women who practice the Five Paths of  
Invocation with success will eventually attain rebirth in  
the Land of Peace and Joy and see Amitabha Buddha.**

In expounding the Five Paths of Invocation, [Vasubandhu says]

**What are the Five Paths of Invocation? They are:**

1. **Path of Reverential Acts;**
2. **Path of Acclamation;**
3. **Path of Aspiration;**
4. **Path of Reflection;**
5. **Path of Merit-Dedication.**

“Path” signifies entry and exit. If we find the path, we can access a place without hindrance. The first four invocations comprise the entrance to the Pure Land of Peace and Joy. The last one is the exit, through which we set out to edify and guide sentient beings with great compassion.

**What are reverential acts? They are physical karma to  
venerate Amitabha Tathagata, the Worthy One, the One  
With Correct Universal Knowledge.**

Buddhas, Tathagatas have innumerable virtues, so their virtuous titles are also uncountable. If one wants to specify all the titles, there would not be enough paper and pens to record them. So some sutras just enumerate ten titles and others, three. The purpose is to retain the most reverential ones. How can they be considered exhaustive?

Three such titles are “Tathagata,” “the Worthy One” and “the One With Correct Universal Knowledge.”

“Tathagata” is one who understands and expounds dharmas in conformity with their inherent reality. All Buddhas have come from a secure, serene path and so does this Buddha (Amitabha). He will not undergo further reincarnation. Hence he is called “Tathagata” [Thus-Come One].

“The Worthy One” is one who is worthy of offerings. The Buddha has completely eliminated mental fetters and attained All-Inclusive Wisdom. He is worthy of offerings from all sentient beings of heaven and earth. Hence he is called “the Worthy One.”

“The One With Correct Universal Knowledge” is a person who knows that all dharmas in essence never decay, increase or decrease. Why don’t they decay? Because they negate the functioning of the [discriminative] mind and transcend the sphere of language expression. All dharmas are immovable and unshakable, like the nature of Nirvana. Hence the Buddha is called “the One With Correct Universal Knowledge.”



The meaning of “Unhindered Light” was explained in a comment on the *Gatha* above.

### **The reason [for reverential acts] is that one aspires to be reborn in the Pure Land.**

Why does [Vasubandhu] say this? Because Bodhisattvas’ Dharma activities include paying respects to all Buddhas of the ten directions continuously over the Three Periods of the Day and the Three Periods of the Night, yet they do not necessarily aspire to be reborn [in a particular Buddha Land]. But now, since we should constantly aspire to rebirth in the Pure Land, we must perform reverential acts before Amitabha Tathagata.

### **What is acclamation? It is the verbal karma of praising and extolling [Amitabha Buddha].**

“Praise” means “to speak highly of.” “Extol” means “to eulogize by way of chanting.” Acclamation cannot be conveyed without vocal action. Hence it is said to be “verbal karma.”

### **It is to recite that Tathagata’s name according to the manifestation of the Tathagata’s luminous wisdom and according to the meaning of the name. The purpose is to correspond with practice that accords with ultimate reality.**

“To recite that Tathagata’s name” means to call the name of the Tathagata of Unhindered Light.

“According to the manifestation of the Tathagata’s luminous wisdom” signifies that the Buddha’s luminosity is the manifestation of wisdom. Such luminosity suffuses the worlds of the ten directions without hindrance, and can dispel the darkness of ignorance among sentient beings everywhere. It surpasses the luster of sunbeams, moonlight and pearls, which only remove the gloom in an empty space.

“According to the meaning of the name... The purpose is to correspond with practice that accords with ultimate reality.” This indicates that the name of the Tathagata of Unhindered Light can eliminate the ignorance of sentient beings and fulfill all their aspirations. However, there are some who do recite Amitabha’s name and recollect him but whose ignorance persists. Their wishes are not satisfied. Why is that? Because they fail to practice according to ultimate reality and do not correspond with the meaning of the name. What does it mean that they fail to practice according to ultimate reality and do not correspond with the meaning of the name? It means they do not know that the Tathagata is the “Body of Absolute Reality” and the “Body for the Benefit of Living Beings.”

Further, there are three kinds of non-correspondence:

1. One’s faith is not genuine; it’s sometimes there, sometimes not.
2. One’s faith is not concentrated; it lacks resoluteness.
3. One’s faith is not continuous; it is interrupted by other thoughts.

The three are correlated and each implies the others. If our faith is impure or dishonest, it is equivocal. Being equivocal, our thoughts become discontinuous. Or conversely: Because our thoughts are discontinuous, we lack firm faith --

without which our hearts and minds aren't genuine. To be the opposite of all that is to correspond with practice that accords with ultimate reality. Therefore the author declares, "I single-mindedly..."

**Question:** Names are indicators of phenomena, like a finger pointing at the moon. If reciting the Buddha's name can fulfill the reciters' aspirations, a finger pointing at the moon should be able to remove darkness. Since the finger doesn't do that, how can name-recitation fulfill the reciters' aspirations?

**Answer:** Phenomena differ in countless ways and should not be covered by the same rule. There are cases where names themselves are the phenomena [they denote]. There are also names that differ from the phenomena [they represent]. The former include the names of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, "Prajna-paramita," Dharani phrases, as well as spells and [mystical] terms. For example, *Terms to Cure Swelling* contains incantations, one of which reads *richu dongfang zhachi zhahuang* ["The sun rises in the east, red at first and yellow later."] Yet, even if the curative spell is cast for a swelling at dusk or midnight, the bump also heals with no relevance to [the actual] sunrise.

Consider also two armies poised for battle. All soldiers keep chanting the spell *linbing douzhe jie zhenlie zaiqian*. By reciting the nine characters while marching, the warriors can avert injury from various weapons. *Baopuzi* [*Book of the Master Who Embraces Simplicity*] values the spell as a "major technique" of war. Another example: One who suffers from muscle cramp can obtain relief by heating it with a fire-baked papaya. And if the person only calls out "papaya," the cramp also goes away.

I once applied the method, to perfect effect. Simple cases such as these are widely known in our mundane world. How much more true must it be in the realm of the inconceivable? The metaphor of the drum coated with relief

medicine is another case. It was already explained above, so I do not repeat it here. Names that are different from the phenomena [they represent] are like the finger pointing at the moon.

**What is aspiration? Our minds resolve constantly to recite [Amitabha's name] single-mindedly and to be reborn eventually in the Land of Peace and Joy. The purpose is to practice *samatha* according to ultimate reality.**

"*Samatha*" is translated as "stopping." Stopping means harnessing the mind to abide at a single point and abstain from evil-doing. This translation doesn't deviate from the general meaning of *samatha* but hardly conveys all its connotations. Why? Calming one's mind to rest on the nose-tip is also called "stopping." Meditating on impurities, compassion and causality stops greed, anger and delusion respectively. Such practices are called "stopping" too. When a person about to act does not do so, it's called "stopping" as well. By this token, "stopping" is vague and generic; it doesn't accurately correspond to *samatha*. Think in terms of the toona, cudrania, ulmus and willow -- they are all called trees. If we only say "a tree," how can we distinguish an ulmus from a willow?

"Stopping," as an equivalent of "*samatha*," has three implications here:

1. One recites "Amitabha Tathagata" single-mindedly and aspires to rebirth in the Land of Peace and Joy. The name of the Tathagata and the name of that Land can halt all evils.
2. The Land of Peace and Joy transcends the path of the Three Domains.



Once a person is reborn in that Land, he spontaneously stops unwholesome acts of body, speech and mind.

3. The supportive power of Amitabha Tathagata's perfect enlightenment naturally forestalls intentions to pursue Sravaka or Pratyekabuddha status.

These three kinds of stopping stem from the reality-based merits of the Tathagata. Hence it is said, "*The purpose is to practice samatha according to ultimate reality.*"

**What is reflection? It is to contemplate with wisdom and correct perception the Land of Peace and Joy.  
The purpose is to practice *vipasyana* according to ultimate reality.**

"*Vipasyana*" is translated as "reflection." But "reflection" in a general sense also hardly conveys all the connotations [of *vipasyana*]. Why? Because contemplating the impermanence, vexation, emptiness, egolessness and Nine Aspects of the body is called "reflection" as well. Consider too the character "tree"; it doesn't identify whether the tree is a toona or a cudrania.

"Reflection," as the equivalent of "*vipasyana*," similarly has two implications:

1. One generates mental conceptions here to contemplate the three kinds of splendid merits [of the Pure Land]. Since those merits are based on reality, the practitioner also reaps merits that accord with reality. Because of such reality-rooted merits, she will certainly attain rebirth in the Pure Land.

2. Once reborn in the Pure Land, one immediately sees Amitabha Buddha. Bodhisattvas who have not attained the Pure-Mind Stage will eventually achieve the Dharma-Body of Universal Equality. Like Pure-Mind Bodhisattvas and Bodhisattvas of Higher Stages, they will ultimately realize Tranquil Extinction (nirvana) and Universal Equality.

Hence it is said, "*The purpose is to practice vipasyana according to ultimate reality.*"

**The underlying reflection is of three kinds.  
What are they? They are:**

1. Contemplating the splendid merits of that Buddha's Land;
2. Contemplating the splendid merits of Amitabha Buddha;
3. Contemplating the splendid merits of the Bodhisattvas [in the Pure Land].

Reflection connotes "beholding" and "observing." "Beholding" is [the process] when one's mind attends to the object [being contemplated]. "Observing" means that the beholding mind remains perspicacious.

**What is merit-dedication? It means that one does not forsake any suffering beings, but constantly resolves to perform merit-dedication as a top priority. The purpose is to achieve the Mind of Great Compassion.**

Merit-dedication comes in two forms:

1. The “going” form;
2. The “returning” form.

The “going” form is where we dedicate our own merits to all sentient beings, with an aspiration to be reborn together in Amitabha Tathagata’s Pure Land of Peace and Joy. The “returning” form signifies our aspiration that, after rebirth in the Pure Land and attainment of expedient power from *samatha* and *vipasyana*, we shall return to the “dense woods” of reincarnation to edify and guide all sentient beings towards the Buddha path. Both forms serve to free sentient beings from the sea of endless life-and-death. Hence it is said, “... **perform merit-dedication as a top priority. The purpose is to achieve the Mind of Great Compassion.**”

The subsection on the “objects and characteristics of reflection” appertains to two kinds of objects:

1. The objects of the receptacle [the Pure Land];
2. The objects of the sentient-beings [in the Pure Land].

The objects of the receptacle involve three factors:

1. Objects and characteristics of the Pure Land;
2. Manifesting the benefits to self and others;
3. Entry into the “First-Principle Truth.”

As for “objects and characteristics of the Land,” [Vasubandhu says,]

**How should one reflect on the splendid merits of that Buddha’s Land? The splendid merits of the Buddha’s Land arise out of the accomplished unfathomable power of the Land. It resembles a precious, wish-fulfilling *mini-pearl*, the intrinsic nature of which is relatively similar [to that of the Land].**

“Unfathomable power” indicates, in a general sense, that the 17 kinds of splendid merit of the Buddha’s Land have a power that cannot be grasped. As consistently taught in various sutras, there are five kinds of “unfathomable”:

1. The number of sentient beings is unfathomable;
2. The power of karma is unfathomable;
3. The power of dragons is unfathomable;
4. The power of meditative concentration is unfathomable;
5. The power of the Buddha Dharma is unfathomable.

In this *Treatise*, the Buddha’s Land is unfathomable for two kinds of power:

1. The power of karma, meaning that [the Land] was accomplished by Bodhisattva Dharmakara with the karmic power of his great vows, which stemmed from his extra-worldly virtuous roots;

2. [The Land] is sustained and upheld by Amitabha Buddha, the perfectly enlightened one, with his beneficent power as a Dharma-King.

The unfathomable nature of the Pure Land is demonstrated by the 17 kinds [of splendid merit] described in the passages below. Each is inconceivable. Explanations will be given in the respective passages.

In the sentence “It resembles a precious, wish-fulfilling *muni*-pearl, the intrinsic nature of which is relatively similar [to that of the Land]”, the wish-fulfilling nature of a *muni*-pearl is used to express the unfathomable quality of the Pure Land. When a Buddha enters nirvana, he exerts the power of expediency to leave behind *sarira* (sacred relics) from his [post-cremation] body fragments so as to benefit sentient beings. As the good fortune of beings becomes exhausted, the *sarira* turn into precious, wish-fulfilling *muni*-pearls.

Most of the pearls are in the oceans, where the Great Dragon-Kings use them as head ornaments. If a *chakravartin* [ideal universal ruler] is born in the world, he can acquire such a pearl by dint of compassion so as to create benefits for sentient beings in Jambudvīpa. If there is demand for the necessities of daily life, such as clothes, food, drink and lamps, as well as a myriad other articles, the *chakravartin* performs ablution and abstinence, places the pearl on the top end of a long pole, and makes a pledge. He says, “If I am truly a *chakravartin*, may this pearl cause the [wanted] articles to rain down and carpet the ground for one, ten or a hundred miles, in accordance with my wish.” At once, various items fall from the sky to satisfy all the demands, and everyone gets what they want. This results from the power inherent in the pearl’s nature. So it is with the Buddha Land of Peace and Joy, because it has been perfected with all the essential qualities to bestow peace and joy.

“Relatively similar” suggests that, while the power of the precious pearl can cause clothes, food and other items to rain down on those who want them, it is only capable of responding to their demands, and cannot obviate those demands. The Buddha Land, however, is not the same. It has the nature of perfection and accomplishment, so nothing is lacking there. [Vasubandhu] only employs the [wish-fulfilling] characteristic [of the pearl] as a metaphor. Hence the reference to “relatively similar.”

Further, the pearl merely assuages sentient beings’ needs for food, clothes and the like. It cannot fulfill their aspiration to pursue the supreme path towards Buddhahood. Besides, it grants their wishes only in their present lives, but doesn’t do so throughout countless lifetimes. There are innumerable differences like these, hence the author says “similar.”

**As for “reflecting on the accomplished splendid merits of that Buddha’s Land,” there are 17 aspects. We should know this. What are the 17? They are:**

1. The accomplished splendid merit of purity;
2. The accomplished splendid merit of spaciousness;
3. The accomplished splendid merit of fundamental nature;
4. The accomplished splendid merit of appearance;
5. The accomplished splendid merit of assorted objects;
6. The accomplished splendid merit of wonderful colors;
7. The accomplished splendid merit of sensation;
8. The accomplished splendid merit of water, earth and sky;
9. The accomplished splendid merit of rain;
10. The accomplished splendid merit of radiance;
11. The accomplished splendid merit of the wonderful name;
12. The accomplished splendid merit of the overlord;
13. The accomplished splendid merit of kinsfolk;
14. The accomplished splendid merit of nourishment;
15. The accomplished splendid merit of the absence of hardships;
16. The accomplished splendid merit of the Great Principle Gate;
17. The accomplished splendid merit of the satisfaction of all demands.

Above is the paragraphing of the *Gatha*'s text. Explanations to each paragraph are given below.

**As for “the accomplished splendid merit of purity,”  
the *Gatha* says:  
“I reflect on the features of that Land;  
It transcends the path of the Three Domains.”**

Why is this unfathomable? Because even an ordinary person who is full of afflictions can attain rebirth in the Pure Land. His negative karma, which may otherwise fetter him to the Three Domains, will not in the end bind him. This is called “to attain eligibility for nirvana without eradicating vexations.” How is this fathomable?

**As for “the accomplished splendid merit of spaciousness,”  
the *Gatha* says:  
“Ultimately it is like the void,  
Immense and boundless.”**

Why is this unfathomable? Because when human and celestial beings of that Land want palaces and mansions, whether with a width of one, a hundred or a thousand *yojanas*, whether containing a thousand or ten thousand rooms, the buildings will be completed just as they wish. So it is with every individual. Furthermore, for the beings of the ten directions who aspire to rebirth [in the Pure Land], whether they are already reborn, now being reborn, or to be reborn, their numbers within an instant or a day are beyond count. Yet that Land is still like the void, and never appears congested. Abiding in a realm of such

spaciousness, sentient beings hold great, all-embracing aspirations which are as boundless as the void. The spaciousness of that Land procures the breadth of its sentient beings' minds. How can this be fathomable?

**As for “the accomplished splendid merit of the  
fundamental nature,” the *Gatha* says:  
“It arises from the Great Compassion of the Right Path  
And extra-worldly roots of virtue.”**

Why is this unfathomable? Consider the *kalakula*, an insect with a tiny body. In a gale, it becomes the size of a mountain. It changes physical dimensions according to wind strength. That is similar to sentient beings reborn in the Land of Peace and Joy. Once born there, the world of the “Right Path,” they immediately acquire the extra-worldly virtuous roots and join the Assembly of Assured Enlightenment -- just like the *kalakula* taking a physical form not determined by its own body. How can this be fathomable?

**As for “the accomplished splendid merit of appearance,”  
the *Gatha* says:  
“Radiating pure light all around,  
It resembles a mirror, or the halos of the sun and the  
moon.”**

Why is this unfathomable? The patient endurance of contempt brings a pleasing appearance. It stems from a person's heart and mind. But when beings are reborn in the Pure Land, whether they were resentful or forbearing in the past makes no difference. Human and celestial beings possess equally exquisite

countenances and physiques. That is the result of the power of pure radiance. The radiance is not an action of mind but functions as an action of mind. How is this fathomable?

As for “the accomplished splendid merit of assorted objects,” the *Gatha* says:  
 “[Its myriad things] embody treasure-like qualities,  
 And possess all exquisite splendors.”

Why is this unfathomable? The assorted objects [of the Pure Land] are made of one, ten, a hundred or a thousand kinds of treasure. They accord with what everyone wishes at heart, and nothing is lacking. If so intended, they disappear immediately. [Beings of the Pure Land] enjoy such free mastery of things, which transcends supernatural powers. How is this fathomable?

As for “the accomplished splendid merit of wonderful colors,” the *Gatha* says:  
 “Its undefiled radiance is intensely brilliant,  
 Bright and pure, illuminating all realms.”

Why is this unfathomable? When the radiance falls on objects, it brightens both their exterior and interior. When it illuminates beings’ minds, it eradicates their ignorance. The radiance performs Buddha-work. How can this be fathomable?

As for “the accomplished splendid merit of sensation,”  
 the *Gatha* says:  
 “Merit-grass of a jeweled nature  
 Softly whirls left and right.  
 Stroking it brings transcendent delight,  
 Surpassing the touch of *kacilindika*.”

Why is this unfathomable? Ordinary jewels are hard in texture but this one is soft and pliable. [Worldly] pleasures of touch induce obsession, while this [transcendent delight] enhances the aspiration to enlightenment. It is like the case of [Bodhisattva] Priyamkara. How can this be fathomable?

Once there was a Bodhisattva named Priyamkara. He had a beautiful countenance and thus incited lust in others. However, the [*Maharatnakuta*] Sutra says, “**Those who had been driven by desire for him either were reborn in heaven or had their Bodhi-mind awakened.**”

As for “the accomplished splendid merit of three kinds,”  
 there are three elements that should be known.  
 What are the three?

1. Water;
2. Earth;
3. Sky.

The three are mentioned together because they are of the same category. Why is that? First, they are part of the six great elements, namely the void,

consciousness, earth, water, fire and wind. Second, they are among the non-discriminating elements: earth, water, fire, wind and the void. [Vasubandhu] only mentions the three because the element of consciousness pertains to the realm of sentient beings; fire doesn't exist in the Pure Land; wind, though existent, is invisible and stays in no fixed place. Therefore, of the six great elements and the five [non-discriminating] ones, [Vasubandhu] selects the three that exist [in the Pure Land] and can be rendered splendid, and mentions them together.

As for “the accomplished splendid merit of water,”  
the *Gatha* says:

“Jeweled blossoms of a myriad varieties  
Overflow the ponds, brooks and springs.

As gentle breezes waft through flowers and leaves,  
Interlaced light beams shimmer in colorful splendor.”

Why is this unfathomable? Human and celestial beings in the Pure Land do not live on water and cereals. Why should they need water at all? Besides, the Land is perfected with accomplished purity, so nothing there needs to be washed clean. Why should water be required? Moreover, the absence of the four seasons ensures [the climate is] constantly comfortable with no heat vexation. Why should water be necessary? Even though it is unneeded, water does exist in the Pure Land. There must be a reason.

The [*Infinite Life*] Sutra says, “*If the Bodhisattvas and Sravakas of that Land enter the jeweled ponds and intend the water surface to cover their feet, the water forthwith covers their feet. If they want it to reach their knees, waists or necks or to shower their bodies, it immediately*

*does accordingly. If they expect the water to resume its original state, it forthwith returns to normal. Its temperature spontaneously cools down or warms up according to their wishes. The water refreshes their spirits, delights their bodies, and eliminates their mental impurities. It is crystalline, transparent and clean, as if intangible. Jewelled sands shine throughout the ponds, with no depth unilluminated. Mild ripples spin around and merge into one another. The flows are serene, gentle, neither too fast nor too slow.*

“*Limitless wondrous sounds naturally rise from the ripples. Everyone hears the sounds he ought to hear. Some hear the sounds of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Some hear the sounds of quiescence, emptiness, egolessness, Great Compassion, Paramitas, Ten Powers, [Four Kinds of] Fearlessness, [Eighteen] Special Qualities, supernatural powers and wisdom, non-doing, neither arising nor perishing, Endurance for the Non-Arising of Dharmas, nectar empowerment, and a myriad other wonderful Dharma-sounds. Hearers rejoice immensely. They conform to the meanings of purity, freedom from desire, Tranquil Extinction and absolute reality. They submit to the Three Gems, the [Ten] Powers, the [Four Kinds of] Fearlessness, and the [Eighteen] Special Qualities. They follow the path pursued by Bodhisattvas who have supernatural powers and wisdom, as well as that pursued by Sravakas. Names of the suffering in the Three Wretched Realms do not exist. There are only tones of spontaneous happiness. That is why the Land is called ‘Peace and Joy’.*”



This water performs Buddha-work. How can it be fathomable?

As for “the accomplished splendid merit of earth,”  
the *Gatha* says:  
“From the palaces and mansions,  
Worlds in the ten directions can be seen without  
obstruction.  
Various trees sparkle with fantastic-colored lights,  
Surrounded by railings of precious gems.”

Why is this unfathomable? These assorted objects are made of one, ten, a hundred or innumerable kinds of treasure, all according to the beings’ wishes, and endowed with full splendors. These splendid items bear a resemblance to clear, bright mirrors, and reflect all the pure and impure phenomena as well as positive and negative karmic circumstances in all worlds of the ten directions. Having seen such phenomena, human and celestial beings of the Land spontaneously achieve a consciousness to avert [the impure and negative], the way we quickly withdraw our hand from boiling water, and to pursue [the pure and positive] as though afraid of lagging behind.

It is also like the great Bodhisattvas being crowned with a treasure that mirrors the Dharma-nature. With such a treasured crown, a Bodhisattva sees all Buddhas and understands the nature of all dharmas. A further example: When the Buddha expounded the *Lotus Sutra*, he emitted light from between his eyebrows. The light illuminated 18,000 lands in the east, coloring all of them golden. Reflected in that light were the beings in every world of the Six Realms, from Avici Hell up to the highest heaven, together with their births, deaths,

destinies, positive and negative karma and circumstances, as well as their karmic fruits, both good and bad. All are seen, and such reflections perform Buddha-work. How is this fathomable?

As for “the accomplished splendid merit of the sky,”  
the *Gatha* says:  
“Immeasurable treasures interweave into  
Nettings that extend throughout the sky.  
Multifarious bells are chiming,  
Broadcasting the excellent sounds of the Dharma.”

Why is this unfathomable? The *[Infinite Life] Sutra* says, “**Immeasurable jewelled nettings spread over the Buddha’s Land. All are adorned with gold thread, pearls, countless varieties of treasure, and wondrous, precious gems. Jewelled bells are hung around the netting on four sides. Light and colors dazzle brilliantly, rendering the nettings resplendent. Natural breezes of virtue gently arise and whiffle by. With mild, comfortable temperatures, beings feel neither cold nor hot, but warm and cool. Tenderly and softly, the breezes move neither too slowly nor too quickly. When wafting through the nettings and jewelled trees, the breezes generate infinite but subtle Dharma-sounds; they also distribute countless, delicate virtue-fragrances. Those hearing the sounds and smelling the fragrances see their vexations and defiled habits vanish spontaneously. As the breezes touch their bodies, they feel happy.**”

These sounds perform Buddha-work. How can this be fathomable?

As for “the accomplished splendid merit of rain,”  
the *Gatha* says:

“Magnificent flowers and robes rain down,  
Dispersing countless fragrances through the air.”

Why is this unfathomable? The *[Infinite Life] Sutra* says: **“The breezes scatter flowers to cover the Buddha’s entire Land. The flowers fall in sequence, according to their colors and without disarray. They are supple and bright, emitting rich fragrances. Treading on them, our feet sink four inches. When we lift one foot, the flower-bed resumes its original level. After the flowers are used [for offering], the ground cracks open so they submerge and vanish, leaving the ground clean without residue. In each of the six time periods, the breezes scatter flowers once, and they do so six times [a day]. Further, a myriad jeweled lotuses blanket the Land. Each, with ten trillion petals, blooms with the radiance of countless colors. The cyan-colored glow with cyan radiance, the white-colored with white light. Blue, yellow, red and purple flowers glisten with the radiance of their respective hues. They are bright and glorious, surpassing the sun and the moon.**

**“Each flower releases 360 trillion beams of light. Each beam emanates 360 trillion Buddhas. The Buddhas’ bodies are of a purple-golden color; they have extraordinary, outstanding features. Moreover, each Buddha emits hundreds of thousands of light rays as they expound the profound, wonderful Dharma teachings throughout the ten directions. Buddhas such as these induce innumerable sentient beings to abide in the correct path towards Buddhahood.”**

The flowers perform Buddha-work. How can this be fathomable?

As for “the accomplished splendid merit of radiance,”  
the *Gatha* says:

“The Buddha’s wisdom is brilliant and pure like the sun;  
It dispels the darkness and obscurity of worldly  
ignorance.”

Why is this unfathomable? The Land’s radiance arose as a karmic consequence of [Amitabha] Tathagata’s wisdom. When beings are exposed to the radiance, the darkness of their ignorance will eventually be eliminated. The radiance is not wisdom, but it functions as wisdom. How can this be fathomable?

As for “the accomplished splendid merit of the  
wonderful name,” the *Gatha* says:  
“A sacred name inspires enlightenment far and wide.  
Subtle and wonderful, it is known throughout the ten  
directions.”

Why is this unfathomable? A sutra says, **“If by merely hearing about the purity, peace and joy of the Pure Land, a person resolutely aspires to rebirth there, he will gain that rebirth and forthwith join the Assembly of Assured Enlightenment.”**

This is how the Land’s name performs Buddha-work. How can this be fathomable?

**As for “the accomplished splendid merit of the Overlord,” the *Gatha* says:**

**“Amitabha Buddha, the perfectly enlightened one,  
Sustains and upholds [the Pure Land] with his Dharma-  
King’s beneficence.”**

Why is this unfathomable? The perfectly enlightened Amitabha is inconceivable. The Pure Land of Peace and Joy is sustained and upheld by the beneficent power of the perfectly enlightened Amitabha. How can anyone say it is fathomable?

“Sustain” means to ensure that something does not change or perish. “Uphold” means to prevent something from dissolving or disappearing. It’s like applying an immortalizing elixir to a seed. The seed will then not decay in water or burn in fire, but will sprout if causal conditions are satisfied. Why is that? Because of the elixir’s power. If a person who has been born in the Pure Land of Peace and Joy is willing to be reborn in the Three Domains to edify and guide sentient beings, he can forsake his life in the Pure Land and be reborn as he wishes. Though he is so reborn in the Three Domains, which is a place of mixed states of existence and full of “water” and “fire” (extreme miseries), his supreme Bodhi-seed will never spoil. Why is that? Because the seed has been sustained and upheld by the beneficent power of the perfectly enlightened Amitabha.

**As for “the accomplished splendid merit of kinsfolk,” the *Gatha* says:**

**“The pure, floral multitudes of the Tathagata  
Are born there by transformation in flowers of perfect  
enlightenment.”**

Why is this unfathomable? In worlds with multiple forms of birth, beings emerge from embryos, eggs, moisture or by transformation. All have kinsfolk. Suffering and pleasures are diverse. The reason is that the beings’ karma are various and complicated. In the Land of Peace and Joy, no one is not born by transformation in the pure flowers of Amitabha Tathagata’s perfect enlightenment. This is because they have uniformly practiced Amitabha-recitation without following any other path. [Reciters] throughout the entire Dharma Realm are brothers. So Amitabha’s kinsfolk are infinite. How can this be fathomable?

**As for “the accomplished splendid merit of nourishment,” the *Gatha* says:**

**“They relish the flavor of the Buddha Dharma,  
And feed on meditative concentration.”**

Why is this unfathomable? [Beings in the Pure Land] do not subsist on food, because there is something else to nourish them [namely, the Buddha Dharma and meditative concentration]. Doesn’t it signify that the Tathagata has fulfilled his original vows? By relying on the Buddha’s vows, they sustain their lives. How can this be fathomable?

As for “the accomplished splendid merit of the absence of hardship,” the *Gatha* says:

“Forever free from physical and mental afflictions,  
They enjoy uninterrupted happiness.”

Why is this unfathomable? A sutra says: “**The body is the receptacle of suffering, and the mind, the source of vexations.**” Beings [in the Pure Land] have bodies and minds, but they enjoy bliss without interruption. How can this be fathomable?

As for “the accomplished splendid merit of the

Great Principle Gate,” the *Gatha* says:

“In that realm of virtuous Mahayana roots,  
[All beings are] equal, and with no unsavory names.  
Women, deformed beings and those with  
Seeds of the Two [Lesser] Vehicles are not born there.”

We should know that karmic rewards in the Pure Land are free of two kinds of unsavory aspects. The first relates to substance. The second involves names. The substance comprises three kinds of beings:

1. Seekers of the Two-Vehicle paths;
2. Women;
3. Deformed persons.

These three deficiencies do not exist in the Pure Land, so it is said to be “free of unsavory substance.” The unsavory names are also of three kinds. It’s not just that the three kinds of unsavory substance do not exist; even the names of the three -- “Two Vehicles,” “women” and “deformed persons” -- are never heard there. So the Land is said to be “free of unsavory names.” “Equal” means being undifferentiated and having uniform characteristics.

Why is this unfathomable? Celestial beings take their meals from the same container, but their food differ in quality according to their respective karma. [Shakyamuni Buddha] pressed his toe on the ground to show that the Saha world’s pebbles were, for him, the gold of a pure land. Aspirants to rebirth [in the Land of Peace and Joy] varied among nine levels originally, but have no difference [in the Pure Land]. It is like the Zihe and Shengshui rivers. Each has water of a different flavor, but they become of one and the same taste [after flowing into the sea]. How can this be fathomable?

As for “the accomplished splendid merit of the satisfaction of all demands,” the *Gatha* says:  
“All that sentient beings wish for and delight in  
Can be satisfied.”

Why is this unfathomable? For the human and celestial beings of the Pure Land who wish to leave for other countless Buddha Lands to make offerings to Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, all their wishes are granted and the tributes they

want to offer are made available as they wish. Further, those who intend to forsake their lives in the Pure Land and be reborn in other realms with lifespans of their own choice, will have all their intentions fulfilled. This way, though they have not attained the restraint-free stage, they enjoy the equivalent functions of such freedom. How can this be fathomable?

As for “manifesting the benefits to self and others,” [Vasubandhu says]

**The brief account above of the 17 kinds of accomplished splendid merits of Amitabha Buddha’s Land shows that the Tathagata has accomplished the great meritorious powers for his own benefit as well as to benefit others.**

“Brief” suggests that the merits of the Pure Land are infinite and not limited to the 17 kinds. When Mt. Sumeru entered a mustard seed, and when the great ocean was contained in a skin pore, was it because of the magic of the mountain and ocean, or the power of the pore and seed? It was the one who possessed supernatural power that manifested those miracles. So while the 17 kinds benefit sentient beings, they surely imply self-benefit for Amitabha Buddha as well.

As for “entry into the ‘First-Principle Truth,’” [Vasubandhu says]

**The splendors of the Land of the Buddha of Infinite Life are the wondrous manifestations of phenomena according to the “First-Principle Truth.” The sixteen verses (the 2<sup>nd</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup>) and the one verse (the 1<sup>st</sup>) have been expounded in due sequence. We should know this.**

The “First-Principle Truth” is the dharma of causes and conditions in the Buddha-Ground. This Truth means [manifests itself as] the realm of “phenomena” [in the Pure Land]. Therefore, the splendors described in the sixteen verses [2<sup>nd</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup>] are called the “wondrous manifestations of phenomena.” The implications will be further explained in the passage on “Summary in the One Dharma Verse.”

“And the one verse [has] been expounded in due sequence” refers to the order enumerated in the 17 verses for contemplating the general and specific purity-related characteristics of the receptacle realm [the Pure Land]. How does the sequence begin? [It begins] with the opening paragraph, which says, “*[I] entrust my life to the Tathagata of Unhindered Light*” and “*May I be reborn in the Land of Peace and Joy.*”

A doubt arises here. It asks: “Birth is the fundamental origin of existence and the ultimate source of all suffering. If we forsake birth [in the Three Domains] and aspire to be born [in the Pure Land], how can we extinguish birth?”

To resolve this doubt, we should contemplate the accomplished splendid merits of the Pure Land, and understand that rebirth in the Pure Land is a “birthless birth,” relying on the pure original vows of Amitabha Tathagata. It is nothing like the delusory births in the Three Domains.

Why is that? Because the Dharma-nature is perfectly pure and ultimately birthless. The term “reborn/rebirth” here is used simply to accommodate the standard sentiments of those who seek rebirth [in the Pure Land]. Since such rebirth is [ultimately] birthless, how can there be any “birth” to extinguish? If one does extinguish birth, then, (i) in relation to the supreme [goal of Buddhahood], he will never attain the [Dharma]-body which can act



despite being non-active in essence; and (ii) in terms of the lesser [goal of Sravakahood], he will forever wallow in adherence to the three [Lesser Vehicle] voids, which are not the [real, ultimate] void. His roots [of Buddhahood] will decay and vanish forever, for which he should mourn with bitter wailing that shakes three thousand great chiliocosms. There will be no way to turn back and resume [the supreme Bodhi path], on account of which he will bring disgrace on himself. [The realm] that embodies this truth of [birthless] birth is called the “Pure Land.” The Pure Land home is [revealed by] the 17 verses.

The 17 verses comprise two parts -- the general and specific characteristics.

The opening verse describes the general characteristic -- that is, the pure Buddha Land transcends the path of the Three Domains.

What are the manifestations of such transcendence? They are the following 16 kinds of accomplished splendid merits.

The first is spaciousness: ultimately [the Pure Land] is like the void, immense and boundless.

Given the spaciousness, what is its essence? So we contemplate the fundamental nature. “Fundamental nature” signifies “essence.” The Pure Land has arisen from the Great Compassion of the Right Path and extra-worldly virtuous roots.

As for extra-worldly virtuous roots, what phenomena did they spawn? Thus we next reflect on the splendid appearance.

Knowing the appearance, we should perceive the substance that displays such appearance. So we next contemplate the assorted objects.

Having perceived the assorted objects, it is desirable to know their wonderful colors. Hence we reflect on the wonderful colors.

After that, we may wonder what sensations these colored items produce. So we contemplate tactile sensations.

Cognizant of the tactile sensations, it is necessary to understand the visual sensations. Therefore we reflect on the three splendid objects: water, earth and sky.

Given the visual sensations, we should further learn about the olfactory sensations. So we contemplate the robes, flowers and fragrance.

Having known the sensations relating to eyes and nose, we should be aware that [the Pure Land] is free from contamination. So we contemplate the brilliance of the Buddha’s wisdom.

Aware of the purifying power of wisdom’s light, we should realize how extensively the name [of the Pure Land] is known. Hence we reflect on the fame of the wonderful name.

Acquainted with the wonderful name, we should be conscious of who is augmenting its fame. So we contemplate the overlord Buddha.

Given the presiding Buddha, who are his kinsfolk? We next reflect on them.

Knowing the kinsfolk, we should be aware of their enjoyments. Thus we reflect on what they enjoy.

Having understood these enjoyments, we should know whether they are, or are not, subject to hardships. Hence, we contemplate the absence of hardship.



Given the absence of hardship, what is the principle behind such absence? We reflect on the Great Principle Gate.

Having learnt about the Great Principle Gate, we should know if this Gate is or is not ultimately perfect. We next contemplate the satisfaction of all demands.

Furthermore, the 17 verses not only clear up doubts. Contemplating the 17 kinds of accomplished splendid merits also gives rise to true, pure faith, which assures rebirth in the Land of Peace and Joy.

**Question:** Those who understand the “birthless” birth explained above would be the upper-tier aspirants. But for a person of the lowest level of the lowest grade, who seeks rebirth in the Pure Land by dint of the “Ten Recitations,” does he not hold to actual birth? If so, he would be adhering to the Two Incorrect Notions. Then in all probability, he will (1) fail to gain rebirth in the Pure Land or (2) further generate the delusion that birth really exists [even though he has already been reborn in the Pure Land].

**Answer:** Think in terms of a pure *muni*-pearl. When it is placed in filthy water, the water immediately becomes clear and clean. Consider a person with the “filth” of negative karma that would otherwise entrap him in an endless cycle of rebirth. If he hears Amitabha Tathagata’s name -- a pearly, supreme name of purity and non-birth -- it enters his turbid mind. Thought by thought, his negative karma is extricated and his mind is purified. He will forthwith be reborn in the Pure Land.

Further, when that *muni*-pearl is wrapped in a piece of colored silk and dropped in water, the water instantly takes the color of the silk. In the Pure Land, there is an unexcelled “pearl” -- Amitabha Tathagata. This pearl is wrapped in a “silk piece” of countless accomplished splendid merits. When it is submerged

in the “water” of the reborn being’s mind, why can’t it convert her wrongful belief in [the realness of] birth into the wisdom of non-birth? Another example is to light a fire on an icy surface. The intense flame melts the ice. Once the ice thaws, the fire dies. That lowest-tier person is unaware that the Dharma-nature is birthless. But by relying on the power of Amitabha-recitation, she engages her mind in rebirth [in the Pure Land] and aspires to such rebirth. Since the Pure Land is a realm of non-birth, the “fire” of her mistaken belief in [the realness of] birth spontaneously goes out.

The section on the sentient beings [in the Pure Land] comprises two parts:

1. Reflecting on the Buddha;
2. Reflecting on the Bodhisattvas.

Of “reflecting on the Buddha,” [Vasubandhu says]

**How should we contemplate the accomplished splendid merits of the Buddha? There are eight kinds of characteristics to reflect on. We should know this.**

The meaning of “reflect on” was explained in previous verses.

**What are the eight kinds?**

1. The accomplished splendid merit of the throne;
2. The accomplished splendid merit of physical karma;
3. The accomplished splendid merit of verbal karma;
4. The accomplished splendid merit of mental karma;
5. The accomplished splendid merit of the assembly;

6. The accomplished splendid merit of the leader;
7. The accomplished splendid merit of the overlord;
8. The accomplished splendid merit of substantive sustenance and support.

What is the accomplished splendid merit of the throne?

The *Gatha* says:

“Countless great king-treasures [adorns]  
His exquisite pure lotus pedestal.”

To reflect on the throne, we should comply with the *Contemplation of Infinite Life Sutra*.

What is the accomplished splendid merit of physical  
karma?

The *Gatha* says:

“His excellent physical marks radiate for one *xun* square.  
His outward manifestations transcend all others.”

To reflect on the Buddha’s body, we should comply with the *Contemplation of Infinite Life Sutra*.

What is the accomplished splendid merit of verbal  
karma?

The *Gatha* says:

“The Tathagata’s exquisite, wondrous voice  
Resounds with *brahma*-tones throughout the ten  
directions.”

What is the accomplished splendid merit of mental  
karma?

The *Gatha* says:

“Like the earth, water, fire, wind and space, [the  
Tathagata’s mind] is non-discriminative.”  
“Non-discriminative” means that there are no  
discriminating thoughts.

Ordinary sentient beings create karmic offenses with their deeds, words and thoughts. As a result, they reincarnate endlessly in the Three Domains. Therefore, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas make splendid their own physical, verbal and mental karma, and apply them to rectify the three false, deceptive karmas of sentient beings.

How does such rectification proceed? Because of their misguided belief in the realness of the body, sentient beings are born into bodies associated with the three Wretched Realms, bodies that are despicable and ugly, bodies subject to the Eight Difficulties, and bodies that transmigrate endlessly. When such beings gaze upon Amitabha Tathagata’s radiant body with its perfect physical characteristics, they will be freed from all the karmic constraints of their own bodies, as mentioned above. They will join the Tathagata’s family and ultimately achieve physical karma identical to that of the Buddha.

By dint of their arrogance, sentient beings slander the correct Dharma, malign saints and sages, and despise their elders and betters. Such people should suffer the pain of tongue-ripping, of being deaf-mute, of their verbal instructions being disobeyed, and of being unknown and unnoticed. If suffering beings such as these hear Amitabha Tathagata's name of supreme virtue or his Dharma-teaching voice, they will be liberated from all the constraints of their verbal karma listed above. They will join the Tathagata's family and ultimately achieve verbal karma identical to that of the Buddha.

As a result of their false views, sentient beings generate discriminative thoughts. They differentiate between existent and non-existent, right and wrong, good and evil, this and that, and so forth. Because of such discrimination, they remain submerged in the Three Domains and undergo a myriad sufferings, including from differentiating among objects and having to make choices. They [are like] sinking into deep slumber over a long night, without being able to escape. If those sentient beings are illuminated by the non-differentiating light of Amitabha Tathagata, or hear about his impartial mental karma, they will be freed from all the constraints imposed by their own mental karma listed above. They will join the Tathagata's family and ultimately achieve mental karma identical to that of the Buddha.

**Question:** The mind bears characteristics of perception. How can a mind be non-discriminative like earth, water, fire and wind?

**Answer:** A mind perceives, but if it enters absolute reality, it becomes non-perceptive. Like a snake which, though curved by nature, straightens after crawling into a bamboo tube. It's also like a human body, which feels pain when pricked by a needle or stung by a bee. But if bitten by a leech or cut by a scalpel coated with anesthetic, the body senses nothing. Thus being perceptive or non-perceptive depends on causal conditions. And if it depends on causal conditions,

[the mind itself] is neither perceptive nor non-perceptive.

**Question:** After a mind enters absolute reality, it is rendered non-perceptive. How can it attain All-Inclusive Wisdom?

**Answer:** An ordinary being's mind is perceptive, so there are things that it does not know. The mind of a sacred being is non-perceptive, so there is nothing it does not know. Since non-perception [enables all-inclusive] knowledge, such knowledge appertains to [the realm of] non-perception.

**Question:** You've said that since [the mind of a sacred being is] non-perceptive, there is nothing it does not know. If there is nothing it does not know, isn't it true that it does know various phenomena? Since it knows various phenomena, how can you say that it is non-discriminative?

**Answer:** All phenomenal manifestations are like phantoms. But such phantom-manifestations of an elephant and a horse are not without distinctions in terms of body length, neck, nose, head and feet. When observing them, would a person of wisdom say that the elephant and the horse exist and differentiate between them?

**What is the accomplished splendid merit of the assembly?**

**The *Gatha* says:**

**“Celestial and human beings [in the Pure Land] are an unshakable assembly;**

**They are born from the ocean of pure wisdom.”**

**What is the accomplished splendid merit of the leader?**

*The Gatha says:*

**“Like Sumeru, the king of mountains,  
[Amitabha’s] wondrous sublimity is unsurpassed.”**

**What is the accomplished splendid merit of the lord?**

*The Gatha says:*

**“Celestials and humans are an assembly of intrepid  
beings.  
They surround [Amitabha], beholding him with  
reverence.”**

**What is the accomplished splendid merit of substantive  
sustenance and support?**

*The Gatha says:*

**“Observing the power of Amitabha’s fundamental vows,  
[I find that] those who encounter it never come up  
empty-handed.  
It enables quick fulfillment of  
The great treasure ocean of merit and virtues.”**

The accomplished splendid merit of substantive sustenance and support relates to the power of the original vows of Amitabha Tathagata. Now I shall briefly reveal non-substantive activities that fail to sustain and support [their

objectives]. This is to spotlight the definition of “substantive sustenance and support.”

There was once [a warlord] who economized on his food to maintain his followers but was betrayed [and killed] by one of them on a warship. A [rich] person who had been accumulating money to stuff his vault could not avoid starving to death in the end.

Such happenings are familiar to us. That which is obtained fails to fulfill its intended purposes. Properties that are reserved lack durability. The reason is that they result from false, delusive karma, and therefore cannot sustain and support [the expected results].

“Substantive sustenance and support” relies on the 48 Vows made by Bodhisattva Dharmakara in the causal ground as well as the divine, unrestrained powers of Amitabha Tathagata today. The Vows enabled the powers; the powers fulfil the Vows. The Vows were not in vain. The powers are substantive. The powers and the Vows complement each other without the least deviation. That’s why we say “accomplished.”

**One immediately sees Amitabha Buddha [upon rebirth  
in the Pure Land]. Bodhisattvas who have not yet  
attained the Pure-Mind Stage will eventually achieve the  
Dharma Body of Universal Equality, and will ultimately  
realize Tranquil Extinction (nirvana) and Universal  
Equality. They will become equal with the Pure-Mind  
Bodhisattvas and Bodhisattvas of higher stages.**

“Dharma-Body of Universal Equality” applies to Bodhisattvas of the 8th Stage and above, whose bodies are born from Dharma-Nature [namely Dharma-Body Bodhisattvas].

“Tranquil Extinction and Universal Equality” is the principle realized by Dharma-Body Bodhisattvas. Since they have attained that principle, they are said to have the “Dharma Body of Universal Equality.” And because that principle is what Bodhisattvas with the “Dharma Body of Universal Equality” have attained, it is called the “principle of Tranquil Extinction and Universal Equality.”

Such a Bodhisattva has achieved “natural *samadhi*.” By dint of the supernatural power of such *samadhi*, he can, while staying at one place, present in all worlds of the ten directions in a flash and at the same time, so as to make various offerings to all Buddhas and their great assemblies. In countless worlds that lack Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, he can manifest in various forms, expound diverse Dharma teachings, deliver all sentient beings, and perform Buddha-work constantly. But all along he never has any thought about his own coming and going, making of offerings and deliverance [of beings]. For this reason, his body is called the “Dharma Body of Universal Equality,” and the principle is called the “principle of Tranquil Extinction and Universal Equality.”

“Bodhisattvas who have not yet attained the Pure-Mind Stage” refers to Bodhisattvas of the 1st to the 7th Stages. They also can appear in hundreds, thousands, millions, billions and quadrillions of Buddha-less lands to perform Buddha-work. But to do so, they must activate mental engagement to enter *samadhi*, instead of staying passive. Because of such mental engagement, they are said to have “not yet attained the Pure-Mind Stage.” If these Bodhisattvas aspire to rebirth in the Pure Land of Peace and Joy, they will immediately see

Amitabha Buddha [upon rebirth]. Having seen him, they will ultimately become equal with Bodhisattvas of higher stages in terms of body and realization. This should be why Bodhisattvas Nagarjuna, Vasubandhu and their like aspired to rebirth in the Pure Land.

**Question:** According to the *Sutra of the Ten Stages*, Bodhisattvas progress in their practice stage by stage, gradually accumulating infinite merit. They succeed only after many *kalpas* of cultivation. Why is it said here that having seen Amitabha Buddha, they will ultimately become equal with Bodhisattvas of higher stages in terms of body and realization?

**Answer:** “Ultimately... equal” is used here, not “immediately... equal.” Since the “equality” will not be lost, the word “equal” is used.

**Question:** If the “equality” isn’t immediate, why mention it at all? So long as a Bodhisattva attains the 1st Stage, he will incrementally advance his practice and finally, as a matter of course, become equal with Buddhas. Why does the author need to say “become equal with Bodhisattvas of higher stages”?

**Answer:** As a Bodhisattva reaches the 7th Stage, he attains the great Tranquil Extinction, a state where he sees no Buddhahood to pursue when looking up and no sentient beings to save when looking down. So he may want to abandon the Buddha Path and enter into realization of the Reality Sphere [ultimate reality]. At such time, without Buddhas of the ten directions admonishing him with their transcendent power, he would forthwith enter extinction, thereby becoming no different from Sravakas and Pratyekabuddhas. But if that Bodhisattva is reborn in the Land of Peace and Joy and sees Amitabha Buddha, he would not encounter this difficulty. Hence the text has to say “ultimately... become equal” with Bodhisattvas of higher stages.



Further, in the *Infinite Life Sutra*, one of the fundamental vows of Amitabha Tathagata says: ***“If, when I achieve Buddhahood, Bodhisattvas from other Buddha Lands are reborn in my land, they shall definitely attain the utmost stage of being one lifetime removed from Buddhahood. In addition, there are those who originally vowed to manifest freely for the benefit of sentient beings. Fortified by ‘Great Vow’ armor, those Bodhisattvas shall accumulate virtuous seeds and deliver all beings. They shall tour Buddha Lands, carry out Bodhisattva activities, make offerings to Buddhas and Tathagatas of the ten directions, guide countless sentient beings as numerous as grains of sand in the Ganges River, and have them established on the path to supreme, perfect enlightenment. They shall transcend the ordinary sequence of Bodhisattva-practice stages and instantly manifest themselves as cultivating the virtues of Samantabhadra. Should this not happen, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.”***

From this sutra, it can be inferred that Bodhisattvas of the Pure Land may not have to advance from one Bodhisattva stage to the next. The Ten-Stage sequence is the grading of attainment that Shakyamuni Tathagata taught to accommodate the aptitudes of the beings in Jambudvīpa. Why does the Pure Land have to be the same? Among the Five Inconceivables, the Buddha Dharma is the most unfathomable. If someone says that Bodhisattvas must necessarily go from one stage to the next without the possibility of transcending them, I would not assume anything like that.

Consider the tree called “Very Strong.” It grows from beneath the ground and comes to maturity over 100 years. One day, it springs up [above ground] a thousand feet. Then each day afterwards, it does the same. How can its total height over 100 years be compared with that of a tall pine? People see pines growing no more than an inch a day. When they hear about “Very Strong,”

how can they not doubt it? It is the same when someone hears Shakyamuni Tathagata’s [teaching about a person] who attained Arhathood after attending a single Dharma talk and [a person] who achieved Endurance for the Non-Arising of Dharmas by [practicing] just one day. He would regard the teaching as merely an expedient means to induce people into Buddhism, not one that conforms exactly to the truth. If he hears what this *Treatise* says, he would also disbelieve. Extraordinary words do not find entrance into the ears of the ordinary. So it stands to reason that they do not accept [the transcendence of Bodhisattva stages].

**The eight verses briefly explained above reveal the sequence of [Amitabha] Tathagata’s accomplished splendid merits for his own benefit and that of others. This should be known.**

What is that sequence? The first 17 verses depict the accomplished splendid merits of the Land. After the Land, we should know about its overlord Buddha, so we contemplate the Buddha’s splendid merits. Given the Buddha’s splendors, where is he seated? So we reflect on the throne. Following the throne, we should learn about its owner – we contemplate the Buddha’s splendid physical karma. After his physical karma, it’s desirable to know of his voice and fame, so we reflect on his splendid verbal karma. With knowledge of his widespread fame, we should understand the reason for such fame. Hence we contemplate the Buddha’s splendid mental karma. Aware of the accomplishment of the three kinds of karma, with which [Amitabha] Buddha has become a great mentor for human and celestial beings, who are qualified to receive his guidance? Thus we reflect on the merits of the assembly. Knowing that the assembly has infinite merits, we ought to identify its leader. So we contemplate the leader – Amitabha



Buddha. To avoid misunderstanding the leader simply as a senior member of the assembly, we reflect on the Buddha as the overlord. Having learnt about the overlord, what augmentative karma does he have? So we contemplate the splendors of substantive sustenance and support. Thus concludes the sequence of the eight verses.

As for “reflecting on the Bodhisattvas,” [Vasubandhu says]

**How should one reflect on the accomplished splendid merits of the Bodhisattvas? To do so, one should note that the Bodhisattvas have accomplished the merits of four kinds of correct practice. This should be known.**

“Suchness” is the concrete essence of all dharmas. Practice in conformity with “suchness” is without [the discriminative awareness of] practice. Practice without practice is called “practice according to ultimate reality.” Its essence is oneness, yet according to its underlying meaning, practice has four kinds. Therefore, the four kinds of practice are collectively called “correct.”

**What are the four? First, while remaining motionless in a single Buddha Land, [a Bodhisattva] reaches the ten directions simultaneously in various transformed bodies. The aim is to practice according to ultimate reality and to perform Buddha-work constantly.**

The *Gatha* says:

**“The Land of Peace and Joy is pure.  
Its immaculate wheel constantly turns.  
Manifested bodies of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas  
Resemble the sun, standing firmly like Mt. Sumeru.”**

**They enable sentient beings to bloom into lotuses [of enlightenment] from the mire [of vexations].**

Bodhisattvas above the 8th Stage abide in *samadhi* constantly. On the strength of *samadhi*, they remain immobile in their original place [the Pure Land] but can travel throughout the ten directions to make offerings to Buddhas and guide sentient beings.

The “immaculate wheel” refers to the virtuous merit of the Buddha Ground. Such merit is free of contamination from afflictions and karmic habits. Buddhas persistently turn this Dharma-wheel for Bodhisattvas. Great Bodhisattvas can also employ it to guide and edify all beings without resting a moment. Hence the text says “constantly turns.”

The Dharma Body resembles the sun, and manifested bodies are like the sunlight shining throughout all worlds. The reference to “the sun” does not suffice to clarify the “non-moving” state, so it is added: “standing firmly like Mt. Sumeru.”

Regarding the “lotuses [of enlightenment] from the mire [of vexations],” the *Vimalakirti Sutra* says: **“Lotuses do not grow on plateaus or dry lands, but in swamps and mires.”** This metaphor suggests that ordinary beings who are mired in vexations can, with the guidance of Bodhisattvas, bloom into

flowers of the perfect enlightenment of Buddhahood. Indeed! [Bodhisattvas in the Pure Land] inherit and enrich the Three Gems and constantly preserve them from vanishing.

**Second, those manifested bodies can, through all times and simultaneously, single-mindedly and wholeheartedly, emit magnificent radiance and reach worlds in the ten directions to edify and guide sentient beings. They adopt various expedient means and cultivate all kinds of practices to eliminate the sufferings of all beings. The *Gatha* says:**  
**“They emit immaculate, resplendent light.**  
**In a flash and at the same time,**  
**It shines over all Buddhas’ assemblies,**  
**And benefits all living beings.”**

Previously it was said that [the Bodhisattvas] reach [all worlds] without moving. But that still allows earlier and later arrivals. So here is added “in a flash and at the same time” to signify that there is no before or after.

**Third, in all worlds, they illuminate every Buddha’s assembly without omission, and make offerings to all Tathagatas, convey their reverence, and extol the Buddhas’ virtuous merits to an unlimited, all-inclusive extent. The *Gatha* says:**

**“They rain down heavenly music, flowers and robes,  
 As well as delicate incense and so forth, as offerings.  
 They acclaim the merit and virtues of the Buddhas  
 Without bearing discriminative minds.”**

“Without omission” indicates that [the Bodhisattvas] travel to all worlds and all Buddhas’ assemblies; there is no world or Buddha’s assembly left unvisited. The revered Master Sengzhao said, “The Dharma Body has no form but manifests diverse forms in answer to all kinds of [beings’ aptitudes]. The ultimate truth does not speak, yet its profound law pervades every [world]. The imperceptible adjudicative power [of causality] does not calculate, yet each consequence perfectly corresponds to its cause.” That should cover the underlying significance [of how Bodhisattvas of the Pure Land deliver sentient beings].

**Fourth, in all worlds of the ten directions where the Three Gems do not exist, [the Bodhisattvas] uphold and glorify the ocean-like virtues and merits of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. They expound Buddhism to all sentient beings, and enable them to understand the teachings and practice the same according to ultimate reality. The *Gatha* says:**  
**“For worlds that have not**  
**The treasure of Buddha Dharma merits,**  
**I aspire to be reborn in each of them**  
**To teach the Dharma there as Buddhas do.”**

The previous three verses speak of omnipresence only in lands where there are Buddhas. Without the fourth verse, [one might assume that] the Dharma Body is not universally pervasive and that supreme virtuousness is not all-embracing.

Here ends [the subsection on] the objects and characteristics of reflection.

Below is the fourth part of the explication. It is titled “Accrediting purity to the Mind of Aspiration.”

Of “accrediting purity to the Mind of Aspiration,” [Vasubandhu says]

**Further, concerning the aforesaid contemplation of the accomplished splendid merits of (1) the Buddha Land, (2) the Buddha and (3) the Bodhisattvas, these three kinds of accomplishments were made splendid by [Bodhisattva Dharmakara’s] Mind of Aspiration. This should be known.**

“This should be known” signifies that we should be aware that these three kinds of accomplishments were rendered splendid by [Bodhisattva Dharmakara’s] pure Mind of Aspiration, from which the original 48 vows were generated. Since the cause is pure, the consequence is pure. The pure consequence did not arise from no cause or from other causes.

**The reason is that [the three kinds of splendors can be] summarized briefly in the One Dharma Verse.**

The above 17 verses on the Land’s splendors, 8 verses on the Tathagata’s splendors and 4 verses on the Bodhisattvas’ splendors constitute the expansive [presentation]. The summary in the One Dharma Verse is the brief [presentation].

Why [does Vasubandhu] present expansive as well as brief versions that are mutually encompassing? The reason is that each of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas have two kinds of Dharma Bodies: the Dharma Body of Dharma-Nature and the Dharma Body of Expediency. The former produces the latter, and the latter represents the former. The two Dharma Bodies are different yet inseparable, uniform but non-identical. For this reason, the expansive and the brief accounts are mutually encompassing, and collectively called “Dharma” [as in “One Dharma”]. Without understanding such mutual incorporation, Bodhisattvas cannot benefit themselves and others.

**The One Dharma Verse is the Purity Verse.  
The Purity Verse tells of True Wisdom and the  
Unconditioned Dharma Body.**

These three phrases are correlated, complementary, and mutually encompassing. Why are [the three kinds of splendors] called “Dharma”? The reason is that they are pure. For what reason are they called pure? Because they are [in essence] True Wisdom and the Unconditioned Dharma Body.

“True Wisdom” is the wisdom of [realizing] absolute reality. Since absolute reality is devoid of phenomenal characteristics, True Wisdom transcends perception. “Unconditioned Dharma Body” is the body of Dharma-Nature. As Dharma-Nature is in the state of Tranquil Extinction, the Dharma Body is free from phenomenal characteristics. Being free from phenomenal characteristics,

there is no phenomenal characteristic that the Dharma Body cannot manifest. So the resplendent characteristics and refinements [of the environment and beings of the Pure Land] are [manifestations of] the Dharma Body. Whereas [True Wisdom] transcends perception, there is nothing [True Wisdom] does not know. Therefore All-Inclusive Wisdom is True Wisdom.

The term “Wisdom” is modified by the word “True” to clarify that “Wisdom” involves neither doing nor not-doing. “Dharma Body” is designated as “unconditioned” to indicate that it is neither phenomenal nor non-phenomenal. Where a negation is negated, do the two-fold negations equal an affirmation? Actually, only the absence of negation is called affirmation. Affirmation establishes itself without depending on negations. It transcends the negation of affirmation, negation of negation, and hundred-fold negations. That is why the “Purity Verse” is so called. It expresses True Wisdom and the Unconditioned Dharma Body.

### **This purity has two aspects. This should be known.**

The teaching above on correlation, complementation and mutual encompassment connects One Dharma with Purity and further links Purity with Dharma Body. Here, [the author] classifies Purity into two aspects. Hence it is said, “This should be known.”

#### **What are the two aspects?**

- 1. The purity of the realm of the receptacle [the environment];**
- 2. The purity of the realm of sentient beings.**

**The purity of the receptacle realm is represented by the above-mentioned 17 kinds of accomplished splendid merits of the Buddha Land; they are designated the “purity of the receptacle realm.” As for the purity of the sentient-beings realm, the above-mentioned 8 kinds of accomplished splendid merits of the Buddha and 4 kinds of accomplished splendid merits of the Bodhisattvas are called the “purity of the sentient-beings realm.” Thus, the One Dharma Verse encompasses implications for the two aspects of Purity. This should be known.**

Sentient beings [in the Pure Land] are subjects who individually receive their respective rewards. The Pure Land itself functions as their common reward [for the beings’ enjoyment]. The subjects and the functionality are not identical. Hence it is said, “This should be known.”

However, all dharmas arise from the mind; there exists no other realm [than the mind]. Sentient beings and the receptacle are therefore neither different nor identical. As they are non-identical [in form], they are classified [into two categories] according to their respective meanings; since they are not different [in essence], they are equally pure.

“Receptacle” pertains to the functional aspect. It signifies that the Pure Land serves as enjoyment for the pure beings there. So it is named “receptacle.” If an unwashed container is used to clean food, the food becomes unclean because the holder is dirty. When a clean vessel holds soiled food, the former turns impure because the latter is defiled. Only when both are unstained can they

be called pure. Therefore, the designation of “purity” inevitably encompasses both [aspects].

**Question:** When saying “the purity of the sentient-beings realm,” the author must be referring to the Buddha and Bodhisattvas. Does this “purity” include the human and celestial beings in the Pure Land?

**Answer:** [The humans and celestials in the Pure Land] can be called pure [beings], but they are not truly pure yet. That’s like a monastic sage who is titled a “*bhikku*” because he “kills” the “bandits” of vexations. When an ordinary man is ordained a monk, he is also called a *bhikku*, regardless whether he observes the monastic precepts or breaks any of them. Another instance is the *chakravartin*’s anointed crown-prince who was born with 32 physical marks of excellence and possessed the seven treasures right after his birth. Though he was not yet able to perform the noble undertakings as a *chakravartin*, he was also called a “*chakravartin*,” for he was bound to become one. Humans and celestials [of the Pure Land] are alike. They have all joined the Great-Vehicle Assembly of Assured Enlightenment, and will undoubtedly attain the pure Dharma Body after all. By reason of this assured attainment, they can be called “pure.”

As for “assimilating and transforming [beings] by expedient means,” [Vasubandhu says]

**As specified above, the Bodhisattvas practice *samatha* on the brief aspect and *vipasyana* on the expansive aspect, whereby they accomplish the soft and flexible mind.**

The “soft and flexible mind” refers to the “mind of non-duality” attained through mutually compliant practices of “stopping” [*samatha*] on the brief

aspect and “contemplating” [*vipasyana*] the expansive aspect. It is like an image being reflected in water. The water and image depend on each other to acquire their respective clarity and calmness.

**They know, according to ultimate reality, all the expansive and brief dharmas.**

To “know, according to ultimate reality” means to know in conformity with absolute reality. Of the 29 verses on the expansive aspect and the one verse on the brief aspect, nothing is not absolute reality.

**Thus they accomplish the “dedication of merit by skillful, expedient means.”**

“Thus” means that the former expansive aspect and the latter brief aspect are both absolute reality. Knowing absolute reality, [the Bodhisattvas] realize that sentient beings in the Three Domains are false, delusive phenomenal manifestations. With such realization, they generate true compassion. Since they know the true Dharma Body, they initiate true refuge-taking. As for compassion and refuge-taking, there are skillful expedient means presented below.

**What is a Bodhisattva’s “dedication of merit by skillful, expedient means”? It denotes that, by right of all his merit and virtuous roots accumulated through the five kinds of practice, such as prostration etc., a Bodhisattva aspires to extricate the sufferings of all sentient beings**



**instead of seeking sustained enjoyment of his own.  
[Therefore,] he resolves to embrace all beings to be  
reborn in the Land of Peace and Joy together with him.  
This is called the accomplishment of the Bodhisattva's  
“dedication of merit by skillful, expedient means.”**

According to the *Infinite Life Sutra* spoken at Rajgir, of the Three Tiers of people who are reborn in the Pure Land, all have awakened the “Unsurpassed Bodhi-mind,” though their practices differ in quality. Such “Unsurpassed Bodhi-mind” is the resolve to become a Buddha. Such a mind wishes to deliver sentient beings. The mind wishing to deliver sentient beings is the mind aspiring to induce beings to be reborn in the Pure Land. Therefore, aspirants for rebirth in the Pure Land of Peace and Joy should awaken the “Unsurpassed Bodhi-mind.” If a person does not awaken the “Unsurpassed Bodhi-mind” and, after hearing about the incessant enjoyment of pleasures in the Pure Land, wishes to be reborn there only for such enjoyment, then he will probably not attain that rebirth. Hence it is said, “a Bodhisattva aspires to extricate the sufferings of all sentient beings instead of seeking sustained enjoyment of his own.”

“Sustained enjoyment” means that the Pure Land of Peace and Joy is upheld and sustained by the power of Amitabha Tathagata’s Fundamental Vows, and its inhabitants enjoy pleasures without interruption.

The standard meaning of “dedication of merit” is that one offers all the merit he has accumulated to every sentient being as they walk the Buddha Path together.

“Skillful, expedient means” signifies that a Bodhisattva resolves to light the

“fire” of his own wisdom to “burn” the “grass and wood” of all sentient beings’ vexations. “If there should be one being who has not yet become a Buddha, may I not attain Buddhahood.” But [it turns out that] before all sentient beings become Buddhas, that Bodhisattva has already attained Buddhahood. It’s like using a wooden poker to stir a fire so as to burn all grass and wood. Before the grass and wood are consumed, the poker has already turned to ash. Just because the Bodhisattva gives precedence to others’ enlightenment, he attains Buddhahood ahead of them. That’s why it is called “skillful, expedient means.”

“Expedient means” here refers to the resolve of [Bodhisattvas] to embrace all sentient beings and guide them towards rebirth together in the Buddha Land of Peace and Joy. That Buddha Land is the path towards the ultimate goal of Buddhahood, and [therefore] the unparalleled expedient means.

As for “avoiding impediments to Bodhi,” [Vasubandhu says]

**A Bodhisattva who perfectly understands the  
accomplishment of merit-dedication as specified above  
can avoid three kinds of non-conformity with the  
Bodhi-gate. Which three? First, by relying on the “gate  
of wisdom,” [the Bodhisattva] refrains from seeking  
pleasures for himself. He distances his mind from the  
notion of ego and attachment to self.**

Wisdom includes knowing about progression [towards Buddhahood] and guarding against retrogression. Wisdom is also to realize emptiness and egolessness. Relying on wisdom, a Bodhisattva refrains from seeking pleasures for himself, and distances his mind from notions of ego and attachment to self.



**Second, by relying on the “gate of compassion,” [the Bodhisattva] eradicates the sufferings of all sentient beings, and distances his mind from unwillingness to comfort them.**

Compassion comprises removing others’ suffering and bringing them joy. Out of compassion, a Bodhisattva eliminates the sufferings of all sentient beings, and distances his mind from unwillingness to pacify them.

**Third, by relying on the “gate of expediency,” [the Bodhisattva] sympathizes with all sentient beings, and distances his mind from expectations of offerings and veneration for himself.**

Expediency connotes righteousness and selflessness. Being righteous, the Bodhisattva sympathizes with all sentient beings. Being selfless, he distances his mind from expectation of offerings and respect for himself.

**This is called averting three kinds of non-conformity with the Bodhi-gate.**

As for “conformity with the Bodhi-gate,” [Vasubandhu says]

**By averting these “three kinds of non-conformity with the Bodhi-gate,” a Bodhisattva attains perfectly the “three**

**kinds of conformity with the Bodhi-gate.” What are the three? The first is the undefiled pure mind, because he refrains from seeking his own pleasures.**

Bodhi is a pure realm free of defilements. Seeking one’s own pleasure is contrary to Bodhi. Therefore, the undefiled pure mind conforms with the Bodhi-gate.

**The second is the pacifying pure mind, because [the Bodhisattva] eradicates the sufferings of all sentient beings.**

Bodhi is a pure realm that gives peace and comfort to all sentient beings. If one does not resolve to deliver all beings from the suffering of birth-and-death, he goes against Bodhi. Therefore, eradicating the sufferings of all sentient beings conforms with the Bodhi-gate.

**The third is the joy-giving pure mind, because [the Bodhisattva] enables all sentient beings to attain Great Bodhi, and embraces them to be reborn in the Pure Land.**

Bodhi is the realm of ultimate permanence and joy. If one does not enable all sentient beings to attain ultimate permanence and joy, he deviates from Bodhi. What do beings rely on to attain ultimate permanence and joy? They rely on the Mahayana Gate. The Mahayana Gate is precisely the Land of Peace

and Joy. Hence it is further said: “because [the Bodhisattva] embraces [sentient beings] to be reborn in the Pure Land.”

**That is the meaning of “attain perfectly the three kinds of conformity with the Bodhi-gate.” This should be known.**

As for “ensuring correspondence among terms and connotations,” [Vasubandhu says]

**The above-mentioned three gates – wisdom, compassion and expediency – embody *prajna*, and *prajna* embodies expediency. This should be known.**

*Prajna* is the wisdom of realizing ultimate reality. Expediency refers to the wisdom of mastering expedient, appropriate means. By realizing ultimate reality, one rests his mind in Tranquil Extinction. With mastery of expedient, appropriate means, he thoroughly understands the aptitudes of all sentient beings. The wisdom of such understanding is all-responsive, without [discriminative] perception. The wisdom of Tranquil Extinction is also non-perceptive and all-knowing. That being the case, wisdom and expediency interact with each other for a person to take action while abiding in tranquility. Taking action does not prevent him from abiding in tranquility because of the effect of wisdom. Tranquility does not disable him from taking action due to the power of expediency. Hence wisdom, compassion and expediency embody *prajna*, and *prajna* embodies expediency.

“This should be known” means we should be aware that wisdom and expediency are the birth-parents of Bodhisattvas. Without relying on wisdom

and expediency, no one can successfully pursue the “Bodhisattva Path.” Why is that? Because without wisdom, one would fall into erroneous views when seeking to benefit sentient beings; without expediency, he would enter the realization of Reality Sphere [which is the Lesser-Vehicle attainment] when he meditates on the Dharma-Nature. Hence “this should be known.”

**As discussed above, [a Bodhisattva] “distances his mind from the notion of ego and attachment to self, from unwillingness to comfort sentient beings, and from the expectation of offerings and veneration for himself.” These three kinds of practices ward off the impediments to Bodhi-mind. This should be known.**

Each phenomenon is subject to specific impediments. Like the wind being an impediment to stillness, soil to water, dampness to fire, the Five Transgressions and Ten Evil Actions to birth in the human and celestial realms, and the Four Inverted Views to attainment of Sravakahood. Failure to perform the aforementioned three kinds of “distancing” impedes the Bodhi-mind.

“This should be known” means that those who wish to be free from impediments [to Bodhi] should distance themselves from the three kinds of impediments.

**The three kinds of mind discussed above -- the undefiled pure mind, the pacifying pure mind, and the joy-giving pure mind -- are abbreviated into one: the true mind of wondrous, transcendent joy. This should be known.**

There are three kinds of joy:

1. External pleasure, arising from the five sensory perceptions;
2. Internal delight, arising from mental perceptions of the first, second and third *dhyanas*;
3. Dharma joy, arising from wisdom. It derives from a love of Buddha-merit. It is a mind free from the notion of ego, a mind free from unwillingness to sympathize with sentient beings, and a mind free from expectation of offerings for oneself. The purity of each augments the two others; together, they constitute the “true mind of wondrous, transcendent joy.” “Wondrous” describes the excellence of the joy, because it arises from the Buddha. “Transcendent” denotes that it transcends all pleasures in the Three Domains. “True” means it is neither false nor illusory.

As for the “accomplishment of aspirations,” [Vasubandhu says]

**Thus Bodhisattvas, with the mind of wisdom, the mind of expediency, the mind of non-impediment, and true mind of wondrous, transcendent joy, can be reborn in the Buddha’s Pure Land. This should be known.**

“This should be known” means that we should be aware that these four kinds of pure merit can enable a person to gain rebirth in the Buddha’s Pure Land; such rebirth does not rely on any other conditions.

**This is called “the Bodhisattvas, Mahasattvas comply with the Five Dharma Gates, so all their efforts reap achievements freely as they wish.” The reason is that the above-mentioned physical karma, verbal karma, mental karma, intellectual karma and expediency-wisdom karma are in compliance with the Dharma Gate [of the Pure Land].**

“Freely as they wish” means that by dint of the power of the five kinds of merit, one can be reborn in the Pure Land and enjoy the freedom to appear in and disappear from that Land. The “physical karma” is prostration; the “verbal karma,” acclamation; the “mental karma,” aspiration; the “intellectual karma,” contemplation; the “expediency-wisdom karma,” merit-dedication. Vasubandhu means that by converging the five kinds of karma, a Bodhisattva conforms to the Dharma Gate for rebirth in the Pure Land, thereby accomplishing the causal karma for ultimate liberation.

As for the “fulfilment of beneficial conduct,” [Vasubandhu says]

**There are another five Gates, which successively bring about five kinds of virtuous merit. This should be known. What are the five Gates? They are:**

1. Gate of the Approach;
2. Gate of the Great Assembly;
3. Gate of the Residence;

#### 4. Gate of the Room;

#### 5. Gate of the Playground in the Garden and Woods.

**Of these five Gates, the first four engender the merit of “entry” and the fifth, the merit of “exit.”**

These five Gates reveal the successive sequence from “entry” to “exit.” For the “entry” part, the initial arrival at the Pure Land is called the Approach. There, the reborn being joins the Great-Vehicle Assembly of Assured Enlightenment, thereby getting close to *Anuttara-samyak-sambodhi*. After entering the Pure Land, he immediately accedes to the Tathagata’s Great Assembly. Then he reaches the Residence, where he can practice the Dharma with peace of mind. Inside that house, he enters the Room in which he dwells to perform his practice. When he accomplishes the practice, he reaches the Guidance Ground, where he teaches others. The Guidance Ground is the “ground where Bodhisattvas entertain themselves.” So the gate of exit is called the Gate of the Playground in the Garden and Woods.

What do the [four] gates of “entry” merit and the [one] gate of “exit” merit signify particularly ? [The explication] states:

**The first gate of “entry”: Those who perform reverential acts before Amitabha Buddha to gain rebirth in his Land, shall be reborn in the Land of Peace and Joy. This is called the first gate of “entry.”**

Reverential prostrations before the Buddha and aspiration to rebirth in his

Land are the initial sign of merit.

**The second gate of “entry”: Those who acclaim Amitabha Buddha, recite the Tathagata’s name in accordance with its meaning, and practice in compliance with the Tathagata’s luminous wisdom, accedes to the Great Assembly. This is called the second gate of “entry.”**

Acclaiming [Amitabha Buddha] in conformity with his name’s meaning is the second sign of merit.

**The third gate of “entry”: Those who single-mindedly and attentively aspire to rebirth in the Pure Land and thus practice *samatha*, the samadhi of tranquility, shall enter the Land of the Lotus Treasury [the Pure Land]. This is called the third gate of “entry.”**

Practicing cessation of restless thoughts by single-mindedly aspiring to be reborn in the Pure Land is the third sign of merit.

**The fourth gate of “entry”: Those who practice *vipasyana* by attentively contemplating the sublime splendors of that Land, shall reach the Pure Land and enjoy the bliss of various Dharma flavors. This is called the fourth gate of “entry.”**

“The bliss of various Dharma flavors” means that, in *vipasyana*, there are the flavors of contemplating the purity of the Buddha Land, of the Mahayana in embracing and delivering sentient beings, of [Amitabha’s] ultimate substantive sustenance and support, and of [Bodhisattvas’] practices of imitating [Amitabha’s] feat by vowing to establish pure lands. There are countless flavors of the resplendent Buddha Path such as these, so the text says “various.” This is the fourth sign of merit.

**The fifth gate of “exit”: Those who, with great compassion, observe all suffering beings, manifest transformation bodies, and return to the garden of transmigration and the woods of vexation. They “play games” there with supernatural power, reaching the Guidance Ground. That’s because they made merit-dedication with the power of their original vow [to deliver all beings]. This is called the fifth gate of “exit.”**

“Manifest transformation bodies” is likened to the manifestations depicted in the Universal Gateway Chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*. “Play games” has two meanings. First, it connotes “great ease.” Bodhisattvas deliver sentient beings the way a lion hunts a deer – without difficulty, as if playing a game. Second, it implies “no one to deliver.” In meditative contemplation, Bodhisattvas realize that sentient beings have no existence in the ultimate sense. They deliver countless beings, yet in reality there are no beings to be delivered. Delivery of beings is a manifestation, like games. “The power of their original vow” means that, in the realm of the Dharma-Body, great Bodhisattvas constantly abide in *samadhi*. However, they manifest assorted bodies, exercise various supernatural

powers and teach the Dharma in sundry ways. All their activities stem from the power of their original vows. It is similar to an asura harp producing melodies spontaneously without a player. This is called the fifth sign of merit in the Guidance Ground.

**By entering the four gates, Bodhisattvas accomplish the practice of self-benefit. This should be known.**

“Accomplish” means that [Bodhisattvas] have fulfilled the [goal of] benefiting themselves. “This should be known” emphasizes that because [Bodhisattvas] can benefit themselves, they are able to benefit others. None can benefit others if they’re unable to benefit themselves.

**By exiting the fifth gate, Bodhisattvas accomplish the practice of merit-dedication in order to benefit others. This should be known.**

“Accomplish” means that by virtue of merit-dedication, [Bodhisattvas] attain the Guidance Ground. Whether cause or consequence, there is nothing that cannot benefit others. “This should be known” tells us that because [Bodhisattvas] can benefit others, they are able to benefit themselves. None can benefit themselves if they’re unable to benefit others.

**By practicing the Five Paths of Invocation described above, Bodhisattvas bring benefits to themselves as well as others. They quickly achieve *Anuttara-samyak-sambodhi*.**



The attainment of Buddhahood is called *Anuttara-samyak-sambodhi*. Those who achieve this *bodhi* are called “Buddhas.” By saying that [the Bodhisattvas] “quickly achieve *Anuttara-samyak-sambodhi*,” [Vasubandhu] means they become Buddhas rapidly.

*A* means “non”; *nut tara*, “excelled”; *samyak*, “perfect”; *sam*, “universal”; *bodhi*, “way.” Translated together, the term means “non-excelled perfect universal way.”

“Non-excelled” means that this “way” thoroughly encompasses Absolute Truth and Buddha Nature. Nothing surpasses it. Why? Because it is “perfect.” “Perfect” describes the sacred wisdom of Buddhas. Knowing things in accordance with Dharma Reality is called “perfect” wisdom. Since Dharma-Nature has no phenomenal form, sacred wisdom is non-perceptive.

“Universal” has two meanings:

1. The sacred mind [of a Buddha] knows all dharmas universally;
2. The Dharma Body pervades the Dharma Realm universally.

Both the mind and the body permeate all things. The “way” refers to the unimpeded way. The *[Avatamsaka] Sutra* says, **“Unimpeded ones of the ten directions transcend birth-and-death through one single way.”** The “one single way” is the unimpeded way. “Unimpeded” means having the insight that birth-and-death is precisely *nirvana*. With such an insight, one enters the “Dharma Gate of Non-Duality,” bearing the feature of non-hindrance.

**Question:** Why is it said that one attains [*Anuttara-samyak-sambodhi*] “quickly”?

**Answer:** Because the *Treatise* says that by practicing the Five Paths of Invocation, [Bodhisattvas] accomplish benefits to themselves as well as others. Even so, the underlying reason is that Amitabha Tathagata constitutes the augmentative karma. “To benefit from others” and “to benefit others” are formulated from different standpoints. From the Buddhas’ perspective, it is should be “to benefit others,” and from that of sentient beings, “to benefit from others.” Since the author will expound on Buddha-power here, he uses the phrase “to benefit others.” This implication should be known.

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.

The [18<sup>th</sup>] Vow says, **“If, when I achieve Buddhahood, sentient beings of the ten directions who earnestly believe and rejoice, 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.”**

Relying on the power of Amitabha’s Vow, one who recites the Buddha’s name ten times is reborn in the Pure Land. Having attained such rebirth, the being is free from transmigration in the Three Domains. Without transmigration, he will quickly attain [*Anuttara-samyak-sambodhi*]. This is the first proof.

The [11<sup>th</sup>] Vow says, **“If, when I achieve Buddhahood, human and celestial beings in my land do not remain in the Assembly of Assured Enlightenment and do not definitely achieve nirvana, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.”**



Depending on the power of Amitabha's Vow, one remains in the Assembly of Assured Enlightenment. Remaining in the Assembly, he will certainly achieve nirvana. With no obstacles of retrogression, he will quickly attain [*Anuttara-samyak-sambodhi*]. This is the second proof.

The [22<sup>nd</sup>] Vow says, ***“If, when I achieve Buddhahood, Bodhisattvas from other Buddha Lands are reborn in my land, they shall definitely attain the utmost stage of being one lifetime removed from Buddhahood. In addition, there are those who originally vowed to manifest freely for the benefit of sentient beings. Fortified by ‘Great Vow’ armor, those Bodhisattvas shall accumulate virtuous seeds and deliver all beings. They shall tour Buddha Lands, carry out Bodhisattva activities, make offerings to all Buddhas Tathagatas of the ten directions, guide countless sentient beings as numerous as grains of sand in the Ganges River, and have them established on the path to supreme, perfect enlightenment. They shall transcend the ordinary sequence of Bodhisattva-practice stages and instantly manifest themselves as cultivating the virtues of Samantabhadra. Should this not happen, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.”***

Counting on the power of Amitabha's Vow, one transcends the ordinary sequence of Bodhisattva-practice stages and instantly manifests as cultivating the virtues of Samantabhadra. Due to such transcendence, one will quickly attain [*Anuttara-samyak-sambodhi*]. This is the third proof.

From the above, it can be inferred that the “other-power” is the augmentative cause. Is it not so?

I shall further give examples to illustrate the features of “self-power” and “other-power.” Consider a person who observes Buddhist precepts out of fear of the Three Wretched Realms. By observing the precepts, he is able to practice

meditation, through which he cultivates supernatural powers. With such powers, he can travel through the four Dvipas. All these are called “self-power.” But in the case of a frail man who is too weak to saddle and ride a donkey, when he follows a *chakravartin* on an outing, he can ride in the sky and travel through the four Dvipas without hindrance. Such is called “other-power.” How unwise [not to rely on other-power]! Future students who hear that other-power is available to depend on should have faith. Do not restrict yourselves.

### **Here ends the brief explication on the *Gatha of Aspiration to Rebirth* - Upadesa on the *Sutras Relating to Infinite Life*.**

Sutras begin with “Thus [I have heard]” in order to clarify that faith enables in-depth understanding. They conclude with “respectfully comply with the teaching” so as to indicate the end of the Buddha's discourse. The *Treatise* opens with “I single-mindedly entrust my life” to highlight the purpose of the *Treatise*. It closes with “Here ends” to show that the doctrine has been fully explained. The narrator [of sutras] and the composer [of the *Treatise*] are different, hence the two types of text have their respective styles.

