

# Taming the Monkey Mind

## *A Guide to Pure Land Practice*

by the Buddhist scholar

**Cheng Wei-an**

Translation with Commentary by

**Dharma Master Saddhisukha**

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# Pure Land in a Nutshell

Of the various forms of Buddhism that developed after the demise of the historical Buddha in 480 B.C., Mahayana (the “Great Vehicle”) became the dominant tradition in East and parts of Southeast Asia. This broad area encompasses China, Korea, Vietnam and Japan, among other countries.

In time, a number of schools arose within Mahayana Buddhism in accordance with the capacities and circumstances of the people, the main ones being the Zen, Pure Land and Esoteric schools. Among these schools, Pure Land has the greatest number of adherents, although its teachings and methodology are not widely known in the West.

Given its popular appeal, [Pure Land] quickly became the object of the most dominant form of Buddhist devotion in East Asia. (M. Eliade, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religions*, Vol. 12.)

## What is Pure Land?

[Pure Land comprises the schools] of East Asia which emphasize aspects of Mahayana Buddhism stressing faith in Amida, meditation on and recitation of his name, and the religious goal of being reborn in his “Pure Land,” or “Western Paradise.” (Keith Crim, editor, *Perennial Dictionary of World Religions*, p. 586.)

The most common Pure Land practice is the recitation of Amitabha Buddha’s name (Buddha Recitation or Buddha Remembrance). This should be done with utmost faith and a sincere vow to achieve rebirth in the Pure Land.

Along with this popular form of Pure Land, there is a higher aspect, in which Amitabha, the Buddha of Infinite Light and Life, is equated with our Buddha Nature, infinitely bright and everlasting (Self-Nature Amitabha, Mind-Only Pure Land). Thus, to recite the Buddha’s name is to recite the Buddha of our own mind, to return to our own pure mind.

## Main Characteristics of Pure Land

- (i) Its teachings are based on compassion, on faith in the compassionate Vows of Amitabha Buddha to welcome and guide all sentient beings to His Pure Land.
- (ii) It is an easy method, in terms of both goal (rebirth in the Western Pure Land as a stepping-stone toward Buddhahood) and form of cultivation (can be practiced anywhere, any time with no special liturgy, accoutrements or guidance).
- (iii) It is a panacea for the diseases of the mind, unlike other methods or meditations which are directed to specific illnesses (e.g., meditation on the corpse is designed to sever lust, counting the breath is meant to rein in the wandering mind).
- (iv) It is a democratic method that empowers its adherents, freeing them from arcane metaphysics as well as dependence on teachers and other mediating authority figures.
- (v) It is a shortcut that leads the cultivator to escape Birth and Death and attain Buddhahood for himself and, ultimately, other sentient beings (Bodhi Mind):

“Whoever recites the name of Amitabha Buddha, whether in the present time, or in future time, will surely see the Buddha Amitabha and never become separated from him. By reason of that association, just as one associating with the maker of perfumes becomes permeated with the same perfumes, so he will become perfumed by Amitabha’s compassion, and will become enlightened without any other expedient means.” (Surangama Sutra in Dwight Goddard, ed., *A Buddhist Bible*, p. 245)

# Preface

*by Elder Master Suddhisukha*

I learned about Buddha Recitation at early age as my parents were following the Pure Land path long before I was born. However, throughout the years, I have never come across a book that explained the Buddha Recitation method as thoroughly as this one. In order to spare the cultivator questions over how to practice and achieve results, and where to turn when encountering obstacles, I have translated this small book. Hopefully, it will be of some help to those who tread the Pure Land path, so that, in accordance with their situation and affinities, they may practice and reap the desired results.

I will not, in this book, touch upon the advantages or introduce the Pure Land path, as there are already a number of books on the subject. I will instead follow the lead of the author, and directly address the methods of practice.

In order to clarify the methods presented by the author and increase the understanding of fellow-practitioners to a certain extent, I have added some words of explanation after each method (according to my own understanding). However, despite all my efforts, numerous lapses and errors are bound to remain. I sincerely hope that spiritual advisors and Dharma friends from the four quarters will fill in the lacunae, for which I would be very grateful.

The cultivator is not expected to follow all the methods presented in this volume, but rather to pick and choose according to his situation, level and circumstances. If a given method does not bring results quickly or is not suitable, the reader can switch to another. The goal should always be to achieve one-pointedness of mind, or in other words, the Buddha-Recitation Samadhi. Good results will come to those who know how to practice at the right level.

I sincerely hope that the compassionate light of Amitabha Buddha will illuminate our Self-Nature Amitabha, and that when the conditions of our earthly existence come to an end, we will be reborn, according to the power of Amitabha's vows, in the Land of Peace and Bliss.

HOMAGE TO AMITABHA BUDDHA.

Suddhisukha Temple  
of Zen Summer Retreat, 1963

# Forty-eight Aspects of Buddha Recitation



## (1) Buddha Recitation and the Mind

Having made up your mind to engage in Pure Land practice by reciting the Buddha's name, you should not dwell on sundry good or bad actions <sup>(1)</sup> once they have been performed. In other words, everyday activities should be carried out in a matter-of-fact way, and once finished, be let go. <sup>(2)</sup> Do not hold on to them – or they will disturb your peace of mind.

In fact, the reason you fail to let go of sundry good or bad actions is that your mind has not yet been tamed. If you have recited the Buddha's name to the point where the mind-ground is bright and clear, the mind in samadhi has no room for sundry thoughts.

You should realize that Buddha Recitation can turn ordinary persons into sages. It is the most important means of liberation in this world and the worlds beyond.

*Commentary.* Daily occupations are overly time-consuming. The dusts of the world – layers upon layers of them – cling to our lives. As a result, we cannot be free of speculation and calculation, and too much calculation causes the mind to churn and be in turmoil; too much turmoil saps our energy and spirit. Therefore, when we realize that this life is fleeting, not permanent – a matter of borrowing and repaying – and return to the spiritual life, everlasting and true, we cannot but let go of false realms to live in the realm of True Suchness. Mundane or sacred, deluded or enlightened – everything is but Mind alone. <sup>(3)</sup>

## (2) Watch the Mouth during Buddha Recitation

Having decided to practice Buddha Recitation, do not be reckless or inconsiderate with words, nor let your speech be tainted by the bad karma of killing, stealing, sexual misconduct and dishonesty. <sup>(4)</sup> If you have erred, remind yourself immediately that Pure Land practitioners should not utter inconsiderate words, and then recite the Buddha's name aloud a few times to quell the mind and immediately wash away the unclean words.

*Commentary.* As disciples of the Buddha practicing Buddha Recitation, we should naturally watch our tongues. If we inadvertently utter meaningless or inconsiderate words, we should reflect upon them and repent. I refer not just to words which do not benefit anyone, but even more to those which cause suffering and resentment in others – in which case not a single word should cross our lips. The Buddha is purity itself – what good can come out of reciting His name with an impure tongue? The Brahma Net Sutra <sup>(5)</sup> teaches that day after day, we give rise to the three evil karma of body, speech and mind; the instances of evil speech karma are incalculable.

The mouth is the door to myriad karma, evil or good. Therefore, we should think carefully

before speaking. Furthermore, for those who practice Buddha Recitation, speech has to be purer still. In other words, a careless word, a wicked word, must be eradicated in its gestation stage, before it has taken form – it should never be allowed to escape our lips. To cultivate body and mind but not speech is a great mistake!

### **(3) Regulating the Body during Buddha Recitation**

Having decided to practice Buddha Recitation, you must keep your body pure <sup>(6)</sup> at all times and in all movements and gestures - whether walking, standing, sitting or reclining. When the body is pure, the mind will also be pure.

The Pure Land practitioner should ponder this teaching. It is never wrong.

*Commentary.* The body has a strong influence on the mind. Therefore, in order to have a strong, upright spirit and an unflinching faith in both self-power and Other-power (the power of the Buddhas), and to practice Buddha Recitation resolutely, it is necessary to cultivate an exceptionally pure body before starting out. The mind is pure because the body-karma is tranquil and undefiled. Thus, for Buddha recitation to yield good results, the first condition is to keep the body pure.

### **(4) Buddha Recitation with a Rosary**

With this method, the rosary is fingered with each recitation of the Buddha's name. The word "Amitabha" may be recited, rather than the long formula "Namo Amitabha Buddha", as it is very easy to achieve singlemindedness with the shorter expression.

You can finger the rosary upon the first or third syllable of the word "Amitabha", but whichever you decide, you should stick to it and not make mistakes. This is the method of using the rosary to focus the mind.

*Commentary.* The purpose of fingering the rosary is to achieve singlemindedness – each recitation following the previous one without a single intervening delusive thought. It is as though all the beads are glued together without a single gap.

Moreover, such recitation is a skillful means of reminding beginners who have not yet achieved correct thought to focus on the Buddha's name. Through this method, the indolent can become industrious, the dilatory can redouble their efforts and strive harder. When correct thought is achieved, the Buddha's name does not leave the mind – at that time, whether or not one uses a rosary no longer matters. Therefore, practitioners of limited good roots need this method as an expedient. Otherwise, there is no use buying a rosary and letting it gather dust.

### **(5) Reciting Aloud**

When your mind is in a state of torpor or when delusive thoughts arise unchecked, compose yourself and recite the Buddha's name aloud a few hundred times. You will then naturally experience a pure, peaceful state. This is because the faculty of hearing is very keen and therefore people are easily influenced by external factors which disturb the mind and lead to errant, delu-

sive thoughts. Thus, you need to recite aloud to control the faculty of hearing and enlighten the mind. When the mind hears only its own sounds, each sound in its totality following upon the one before, all thoughts of right and wrong, what should and should not be done, are naturally abandoned.

*Commentary.* When we are exhausted and sluggish, we tend to doze off or feel as if something were pressing on both body and mind. If we engage in pure, silent recitation at such times, our lethargy can only increase.

Therefore, it is better to recite aloud, pondering that the Buddha's name originates from the Self-Mind and returns to the Self-Mind through the ears in an unending circle. We should continue to practice in this manner until the mind clears up, the demon of drowsiness disappears and only Buddha Recitation remains, clear and distinct. Only then should we stop.

## **(6) Buddha Recitation in a Low Voice**

When the mind is scattered, or when you are tired and weighed down by many pressing tasks, you need not recite aloud. You need only focus your mind and thoughts and recite carefully in a low voice.

Only when your breath returns to normal, your spirits rise, and your mind is calm and at peace, should you recite aloud.

*Commentary.* The purpose of reciting the Buddha's name in a low voice is to treat the disease of scattered mind. There are times when the volume and pressure of work or other demanding activities make mind and body overburdened and weary. At these times, it is better to recite in a low voice, as reciting aloud can only add fuel to the fire and increase the power of the demon of scattered mind. To recite in a low voice, with each word, each sentence clearly and carefully enunciated, gradually settles the mind. When that point is reached, one can then recite aloud.

## **(7) Diamond Recitation**

If the mind is agitated and the breath uneven, something is bothering you, or reciting the Buddha's name either aloud or in a low voice is inconvenient, you should just move your lips, practicing silent recitation (Diamond Recitation). With this method, the number of recitations does not matter; the essential condition is that each word, each recitation should come from the mind.

*Commentary.* The Diamond method differs from recitation in a low voice in that the lips move but no sound is heard. This method is useful when our sleeping or living quarters are close to someone else's. In such circumstances, reciting in a loud or a low voice might disturb them. We should then just move our lips and practice Diamond recitation. The number of recitations does not matter as long as the Buddha's name originates in the Self-Mind, moves the tip of the tongue and produces a sublime sound. Even though the sound is not audible, it reverberates throughout the Dharma realm (cosmos) while remaining part of the current recitation.

## (8) Silent recitation

There are instances when it is not appropriate to recite either aloud or in a low voice. There are times when it is awkward to finger a rosary. There are still other times when even Diamond Recitation may be inappropriate. <sup>(7)</sup> For such instances, the ancients have devised an excellent expedient. It is not to move the lips, not to utter a sound, but merely to concentrate mind and thoughts on recitation, silently touching the upper front teeth with the tongue, or alternatively, to visualize this action. The only condition is that the Buddha's name be clear and distinct, though it is uttered not from the mouth but from the Self-Nature. The faculty of hearing and the inner mind interpenetrate, the inner mind is stamped on the tip of the tongue, the tip of the tongue pulls along the faculty of recitation, the faculty of hearing hears the Self-Nature – the three (inner mind, hearing, recitation) form one unit. Recitation interpenetrates with recitation – in time the visualization of “everything as Mind-Only” is realized.

*Commentary.* This silent recitation method, when used to perfect the visualization of Mind-Only is somewhat difficult and is a high-level practice. It is reserved for the most part for those advanced along the path of cultivation. The cultivator must employ visualization-mind not recitation-thought. He does not move his lips, yet the sound is clear and distinct. It is the sound of the Self-Nature. This is the method of “reverting the faculty of hearing to hear the sound of the Self-Nature.” To perfect such recitation is to penetrate the true nature of all dhar-mas, to penetrate the truth that everything is made from Mind alone.

## (9) Regulating the Breath

When the mind is at peace and the breath is regular, you should first visualize yourself seated in a circular zone of light, then visualize the breath going in and out of your nose as you silently recite the Buddha's name once with each breath. You should regulate the breath so that it is neither slow nor hurried, the mind and the breath reinforcing each other, following each other in and out. Whether walking or standing, reclining or sitting, proceed in this manner without interruption.

If you always “secretly recite” in the above manner, focusing the mind over a long period of time, there will no longer be a distinction between the breath and the recitation – your body and mind merging with empty space. When recitation is perfected, the mind-eye will open up and samadhi is suddenly realized. This is the state of Mind-Only Pure Land. <sup>(8)</sup>

*Commentary.* This method is similar to Counting the Breath Meditation, which is one of the Six Profound Dharma Doors [leading to Nirvana]. It utilizes the counting of each breath to regularize inhaling and exhaling. Each breath, whether in or out, is accompanied by a silent recitation of the Buddha's name, in an even manner, neither too slow nor too fast. Otherwise, the recitation could become an obstacle to achieving one-pointedness of mind. Through this kind of uninterrupted recitation, the mind becomes pure, free of distractions, and merges with the unimpeded immensity of empty space – everything is Mind-Only. And, if the mind is pure, the environment is also entirely pure – as far as we are concerned.

## (10) Reciting in Accordance with Individual Circumstances

When experiencing lethargy and drowsiness, you should practice circumambulation while reciting the Buddha's name.

When besieged by numerous sundry thoughts, sit straight and recite silently. If neither circumambulation nor sitting is appropriate, you can kneel or stand, or even lie down for a moment or adopt any other suitable position to recite. The important thing is not to forget the words "Amitabha Buddha", even for an instant. This is the secret for reining in the mind-demon (deluded mind).

*Commentary.* Buddha Recitation is not limited to periods of leisure, or those appointed times when, having cleansed ourselves, we sit or kneel before the Buddha's altar – we must absolutely never neglect recitation. This is because the mind and thoughts of sentient beings are too agitated in everyday life. As soon as there is an empty interval, sundry thoughts immediately arise to disturb the mind.

Therefore, whether walking, standing, sitting or reclining, whether speaking or silent, whether the mind is agitated or at peace, we must strive to recite the Buddha's name without allowing sundry thoughts to intervene. Like a general guarding a town or a cat stalking a mouse, there must not be an instant's interruption. Any form of uninterrupted recitation of the Buddha's name, suitable to the individual's circumstances and environment, is acceptable, as long as the mind is concentrated on the Buddha's name.

## (11) Buddha recitation Can Be Practiced Anywhere

Whether you are in a clean or a dirty place, a quiet, out-of-the-way location or the marketplace, a place you like or a place you abhor, you need only engage in introspection and "return the light inward," thinking thus: I have encountered situations like this countless times throughout numerous lifetimes, yet there is one thing I have not been able to do: it is to recite the Buddha's name and achieve rebirth in the Pure Land. Therefore, even now I am still subject to the cycle of Birth and Death. By now I should not worry about where recitation takes place. I need only hold securely to this 'mind of Buddha Recitation' – even if it costs my life. I must recite without interruption, one recitation after another without a single gap.

Why is this? It is because if there is a single interruption, all kinds of sundry thoughts – good, bad or neutral – will arise. For this reason, even when in the bathroom, even in the process of giving birth, you should concentrate on reciting the Buddha's name. The greater the hardship, the greater the suffering, the more you need to recite – just as an infant cries out for his mother, unafraid that she will become upset or angry...

*Commentary.* Those who lack a deep understanding of the Dharma generally believe that to recite in dirty places such as bathrooms creates bad karma. However, this is not true in Pure Land Buddhism because the Buddha's name should be ever present in our minds. If we interrupt our recitation when taking a meal, urinating, defecating, etc., sundry delusive thoughts will insert themselves between the recitations. If sundry thoughts arise, one after another without interruption, how can we avoid committing transgressions and revolving in the ocean of Birth and Death?

At present, most of us are not fully committed to uninterrupted Buddha Recitation and thus

improper thoughts arise – countless afflictions, sufferings and hardships. We should therefore redouble our efforts to practice more and practice harder, always reciting the Buddha’s name – except when we are busy. Nothing worthwhile happens naturally. Everything requires a great deal of work and effort before success is achieved. So many things in life will try our patience and make us grieve. To avoid them, there is nothing better than holding firmly to the Buddha’s name.

Buddha Amitabha is like a compassionate mother watching over her infant child. There is no mother who does not care for her children. Buddha Amitabha will never abandon sentient beings, nor will he ever be angry with them, otherwise, he could never have become a Buddha! It is the same for all Buddhas and Bodhisattvas; none lack mercy or compassion. I exhort all of you to engage in Buddha Recitation and not belittle this practice.

## **(12) Fixed Periods of Buddha Recitation**

With the previous method, you are enjoined to practice Buddha Recitation at all times without interruption. However, because there are no definite periods for Buddha Recitation [the method demands a good deal of self-discipline]. Few people can therefore practice it.

With this method, the expedient of fixed periods of recitation is introduced. There should usually be two periods per day, in the morning and in the evening, and these periods should be strictly observed every day, without fail, throughout life.

Furthermore, if during the twenty-four hour period, you can recite the Buddha’s name one additional time, do it once; if you can recite it many times, do so many times. It does not matter whether the recitation is audible or not. The ancients had a saying:

Utter one fewer idle phrase;  
Recite the Buddha’s name one more time;  
How wonderful it is!

*Commentary.* There are people who cannot recite the Buddha’s name at all times, because of work or family obligations. Thus, we have the expedient of fixed periods of Buddha Recitation. In this way, everyone can practice the Pure Land method. One crucial point to remember: once the fixed periods are established, they should be adhered to without deviation, even during sickness or other suffering. The above notwithstanding, whenever we have a free moment, we should immediately think of the Buddha’s name.

To replace sentient beings’ thoughts with Buddha-thoughts, while not necessarily a sublime method, is still a rare expedient which can turn delusion into enlightenment.

## **(13) Facing an Image or not, during Buddha Recitation**

When facing a statue of the Buddha, consider it as a real Buddha. There is no need to get attached to any particular direction or to any of the Three Bodies of the Buddha. <sup>(9)</sup> You should think thus: I must achieve singlemindedness, and that singlemindedness must be about the Buddha. My eyes should be focused on the Buddha’s image, my mind should recite the Buddha’s name with utmost sincerity – with utmost sincerity, a response is guaranteed.

If you do not have a statue, just sit straight facing west. As soon as you begin reciting, visualize the Buddha's light shining on your head, recitation following recitation without a break. If you practice this way, even the heaviest karma can be dissipated.

*Commentary.* Practitioners of limited capacities, who cannot yet visualize "this Mind is the Buddha", should use the expedient of facing a Buddha image and "moved by the image, develop a pure mind". The important thing is to be utterly sincere, because only with utmost sincerity can we "touch" the Buddha and receive a response.

This method has been clearly explained and there is no need for lengthy comments. The practitioner should read the above passage closely and follow its teachings. Evil karma will then disappear and the Buddha Mind will manifest itself.

### **(14) Buddha Recitation While Otherwise Occupied**

[In the midst of a busy life], if you can recite the Buddha's name once, recite it once; if you can recite it ten times, recite it ten times. In the midst of endless activities, if you have but one moment of leisure, you need only let go of everything and recite the Buddha's name clearly and distinctly.

The famous Chinese poet Su Tung-p'o wrote the following verse:

Recite the Buddha's name while walking;  
Recite the Buddha's name while seated.  
Even when busy as an arrow,  
Always recite the Buddha's name.

The ancients practiced Buddha Recitation with such eagerness indeed! Truly, they should be emulated.

*Commentary.* There are people who are so busy with daily occupations that they can scarcely find time to recite the Buddha's name. Nevertheless, amidst a hundred different activities, there must be one or two moments of free time. During these moments, we should immediately begin to recite the Buddha's name, rather than letting the mind wander aimlessly, [reminiscing] and suffering needlessly. Handle the affairs of this world as they come and let go of them afterward. Why harp on them and be disturbed? Why not use the time to recite the Buddha's name and keep the mind at rest? Many people waste endless hours in idle chatter, bringing countless troubles and vexations upon themselves. Sometimes, a few sentences uttered thoughtlessly in pleasant conversation are enough to cause worry and affliction, suffering and tears!

### **(15) Buddha Recitation During Periods of Leisure**

In this world, there are many unfortunate people who cannot enjoy a moment of leisure, however much they may so desire. Therefore, they cannot cultivate. Today you have the time, and moreover, the opportunity to learn about the practice of Buddha Recitation; you should make every effort to collect body and mind to recite the Buddha's name at all times, assiduously and without interruption. In this way, you will not be wasting time. If you let your mind and thoughts wander, not achieving anything worthwhile, wasting endless days and months, turning

your back on the Four Great Debts, and then, tomorrow the Ghost of Impermanence suddenly arrives, what can you do to resist it?

*Commentary.* There are people who wish to have some leisure time to practice Buddha Recitation, but cannot find it. Life today is full of pressing obligations, but we should not delay any longer. Let us redouble our efforts to recite the Buddha's name, not letting time fly by, bringing us to old age and death. At that time, no matter how much we may wish for a little bit of time, no matter how much we may long to postpone death by even an hour to recite the Buddha's name, it is impossible. All that is left are regrets.

## **(16) Practicing Buddha Recitation When Rich and Renowned**

Merits and virtues in this life all stem from cultivation in past lifetimes. This is true of those who presently enjoy honors and esteem, as well as of high-ranking monks whose goal is to rescue humanity. However, honors and esteem cannot last; if because of them evil karma is created, it will be difficult to escape the ocean of Birth and Death. <sup>(10)</sup>

I ask you to ponder this: what can a Pure Land cultivator carry with him when death comes and he closes his eyes forever? It is, of course, the virtues generated by Buddha Recitation. This is no different from a boat that sails thanks to the currents of the river. Thus, the path of cultivation for all sentient beings should be to organize Pure Land retreats, or invite monks and nuns to provide guidance in Buddha Recitation, or publish and distribute Pure Land sutras and commentaries, or commission Buddha images for veneration and recitation of the Buddha's name. Such activities may be limited in scope but should be sustained and accompanied by a strong determination to be reborn in the Pure Land. This is a path of cultivation for everyone. What can be more honorable than to serve as the envoy of the King of the Dharma - the Buddha Himself!

*Commentary.* Although we may enjoy wealth and honors thanks to merits and virtues sown in previous lifetimes, all these are temporary. Once the last breath leaves the body, everything is left behind. Why become attached to these false, fleeting images? You should clearly realize this and endeavor to accumulate merits and virtues through Buddha Recitation. Strive with all your might to do so, just as you strive to acquire wealth in this life. Those lacking in wisdom take the false for the true, chasing forms and realms, honors and wealth - vain and external as these may be. Although you may enjoy a few pleasures, these are fleeting, lasting but a moment. Life is evanescent, the body is fast decaying. Only virtues and morality endure, true and free of external hustle and bustle, not subject to fleeting pleasures. The sage Confucius once said: "Eating leftover rice, drinking rainwater, with my arms as a head-rest, I still feel happy inside." Such happiness is the happiness of the wise.

## **(17) The Poor Should Also Recite the Buddha's Name**

Alas! There are people who toil day in and day out, ordered around by others, wretched and miserable. If they do not seek to escape such a life, they will fare worse in future lifetimes.

Do realize that whether you are rich or poor, exalted or humble, young or old, male or female, you should face west early each morning and recite the Buddha's name with utmost sincerity

and without interruption, without letting sundry thoughts intrude upon the utterances. Then dedicate all virtues thus accrued toward rebirth in the Pure Land. You will receive numerous benefits in this life and, upon leaving this world, naturally achieve rebirth in the Pure Land. Amitabha Buddha is truly a rescue ship for everyone in the ocean of suffering!

*Commentary.* No one in the world is so poor as to lack even body and mind. We should therefore use this body and mind that we already have to recite the Buddha's name. There is a story in the sutras about the sage Mahakatyayana rescuing a poor servant by requesting her to "sell" him her poverty by means of Buddha Recitation – and she succeeded in doing so. We should emulate this poor old woman and "sell off" our poverty. Why hang on to it and endure more suffering?

To suffer and be aware that you are suffering, while searching for a way out – this is the path of the sages. To suffer and be unaware of your suffering, and on top of that to mistake that suffering for happiness – no words can do justice to your predicament!

### **(18) Pure Buddha Recitation**

A wise man should not let himself be misled. He should recite the Buddha's name in a pure way so as to strengthen his wisdom.

You should know that if a wise person recites the Buddha's name, many others will follow his lead and those who have erred in their practice will find it easier to return to the Buddha's way. Why? It is because the reputation of a wise person can open the minds of lesser mortals. Moreover, through his wisdom, he can find ways to rescue them.

*Commentary.* The actions of a wise person can have a beneficial influence on those with lesser capacities or those lacking in wisdom – as long as such actions are performed with good intentions. Therefore, a wise person should be worthy of that trust and not be led astray by deluded or vile actions based on greed or lust.

An influential person who cultivates Buddha Recitation will have a beneficial effect upon those around him. Thanks to his skills and intelligence, augmented by the confidence of those around him, he is able to accomplish meritorious deeds which can influence everyday human behavior and values. To perform a modest act while achieving major results is something we all desire. Nevertheless, many wise and intelligent people who have the opportunity to benefit humanity refuse to act, or if they act, do so in a perfunctory way. How regrettable!

### **(19) True and Earnest Buddha Recitation**

To eschew wealth and fame, to avoid showing off one's capacities, but merely to practice sincerely – this is something very few can achieve.

The ancients taught that it is difficult to find a "dull and ignorant" Zen practitioner, even if we go out of our way. Yet, a practitioner of Buddha Recitation need only worry that he is not "dull and ignorant".

The two words "true and earnest" are a straight highway leading to the Pure Land. Why? It is because when Buddha Recitation is true and earnest, there are only the words "Amitabha

Buddha”, and not a single deluded thought.

*Commentary.* The practitioner who singlemindedly recites the Buddha’s name, is not attached to any external realm, is unmoved by any disturbances and sees everything as not connected in any way to himself – such a person may appear outwardly as extremely naive, “dull and ignorant”. However, he is precisely the one who is truly enlightened, truly pure. Such a person is not easy to find!

Furthermore, according to Pure Land teaching: “without singleminded recitation, it is impossible to achieve rebirth in the Pure Land.” With singlemindedness, myriad conditions are left behind and only the Buddha’s name remains. At that time, the practitioner’s mind and the Buddha Mind are in unison; the Western Pure Land is not separate from the practitioner. There is no need to probe deep or ponder far, for the Buddha’s realm is in front of us. The Pure land path is truly unique!

## **(20) Reciting the Buddha’s Name When Happy**

Happiness derives either from our interaction with other human beings or from favorable events. Although the causes may be trivial, this kind of happiness is part of the human condition. You should realize, however, that such happiness is ephemeral – it is false, not true. Use those moments of happiness to “return the light inward” and recite the Buddha’s name. You should then avail yourself of the Buddha’s light and within the context of those joyful events, abandon your negative thoughts to cultivate good deeds continuously for the rest of your life. You will then surely be reborn in the Pure Land, a great happiness indeed!

*Commentary.* During our lifetime, we experience few moments of happiness but many of suffering. Even when we are happy, that happiness is ephemeral, lasting but a moment and then giving way to the numerous sufferings which torment sentient beings. Therefore, what is enduring about that happiness, that should make us proud, grasping and clinging to it?

What should really make us happy is the pure joy of the Self-Mind, which is true and everlasting. The Pure Land of Amitabha awaits the pure in Mind. Rebirth in that realm is indeed the ultimate joy.

## **(21) Vow to Recite the Buddha’s Name**

The real aim of Buddha Recitation is rebirth in the Pure Land. However, the compassionate power of the Buddhas is unfathomable: if you recite their names, your wishes will be fulfilled. For this reason, the sutras teach that Buddha recitation can bring ten major benefits. [On the other hand], worshiping and bowing down before deities and repenting [before their altars], engaging in sundry practices, taking non-Buddhist vows, or foolishly believing in divination, fortune-telling and horoscopes – none of these activities can be compared to reciting Amitabha Buddha’s name and seeking His assistance.

Some people might ask: what if we fail to obtain a response after reciting the Buddha’s name?

Answer: you have not yet recited and are already worried about not obtaining a response. This doubt is the very cause that will bring the result of non-response. Cause and result cannot differ. Is this doubt not something you should fear?

*Commentary.* The Buddhas represent great mercy, great compassion, great wisdom, great virtues. They are honored as supreme teachers of gods and men along the Six Paths. Therefore, when in need of help, why not seek it from the Buddhas! It is strange indeed that many people are more in awe of demons and ghosts than of the Buddhas! Could it be because the Buddhas are compassionate while demons and ghosts are evil? Or is it because their minds are not pure but tormented by transgressions and evil, twisted actions? Thus, they disregard the true and fear the false. Practitioners should ponder the matter carefully, lest, though sons and daughters of the Buddhas, they unwittingly act as disciples of the demons!

## **(22) Recite the Buddha's Name to Overcome Animosity**

All untoward circumstances and events in life are the result of adverse causes and conditions [from previous lives]. Do not, therefore, develop evil thoughts and create karmic debts – perpetuating the cycle of resentment and wrongdoing into the future. Adapt to causes and conditions and, more important, do not forget to recite the Buddha's name.

The Buddha is all wisdom, all light, all merit and virtue. He will respond to your call, and even if you meet with untoward circumstances, these will soon turn out to be favorable.

*Commentary.* “The knots of resentment and hatred should be severed, not retied.” To avoid repaying one wrong with another is the way to put an end to all wrongs. The safest way is to recite the Buddha's name.

Ten thousand hardships, bitter and harsh  
Are dissipated instantly with one recitation of the Buddha's name;  
To recite is to sever resentment and hatred,  
If the mind is pure, how can the infernal gates close behind us?  
Recite the Buddha's name, spread compassion around;  
Enemies and friends being equal, where can disaster be found?

## **(23) When Ashamed, Recite the Buddha's Name**

In this life or in previous ones, once evil karma has matured, suffering follows in its wake. Each bit of suffering in this life is due to a bit of evil karma. You cannot blame fate for being uneven; you can only be ashamed for not having cultivated sooner. Each time you think of the Buddha, you should be so moved that every hair on your body stands on end and, overcome with emotion, you are completely drained ... Each utterance of the Buddha's name, each syllable, then comes from your liver, your marrow – this is the true state of Buddha Recitation.

Nowadays, when laymen or monks and nuns recite the Buddha's name, they do so with their lips, while their minds are scattered, or else they concentrate the mind only during recitation. When recitation is over, the mind is again clouded. Others engage in mundane conversation while reciting. <sup>(11)</sup> Thus, even if they recite all their life, they obtain no response. People who witness this may think that seeking rebirth in the Pure Land through Buddha Recitation is just an illusion, but this is assuredly not the Buddha's fault!

*Commentary.* Sentient beings and the Buddhas have the same pure Self-Nature, not two different ones. However, the Buddhas have attained Enlightenment and abandoned the false for the true. We, on the other hand, always take the false for the true, “abandoning Enlightenment to merge with the dusts,” resigned to wandering aimlessly in the cycle of affliction and grief. There is no greater shame than this! We should therefore try our utmost to cultivate singlemindedly until death, seeking to escape Birth and death. Let us abandon mundane thoughts filled with affliction, so that we may be spared wallowing for many lifetimes in the river of delusion and the ocean of suffering!

## **(24) Recite the Buddha’s Name in Earnest**

In daily life, if you see anyone stuck in a situation that deserves compassion, but you do not respond, it is contrary to human morality. However, if you only develop intellectual compassion but fail to act, how can you merge with the compassionate nature of the Buddhas? Once compassion has developed, you must find a way to save others from suffering – a way to help all sentient beings escape suffering once and for all. You should realize that the reason why Buddha Amitabha is honored with the title “Great Compassionate Being” is that He always rescues sentient beings. Since it is based on this compassion that you seek the Buddha’s assistance to escape suffering, how can you fail to recite with the highest level of resolve?

*Commentary.* The purpose of Buddha Recitation is to transcend Birth and Death. However, Birth and Death is a heavy chain, extremely difficult to wrench free of, as our bad karma and afflictions are too deep-rooted. Moreover, transgressions and evil karma are accumulating continuously, day in and day out. If our power of recitation is weak and our thoughts are not utterly sincere and determined, we cannot escape Birth and Death ourselves, let alone help others. Therefore, we must be extremely earnest and sincere in reciting the Buddha’s name, so as to be in unison with His Compassionate Mind – like a lost child who longs to be re-united with his mother.

## **(25) Buddha Recitation and Offerings**

In everyday life, on the occasion of a seasonal festival or the festival of a Buddha or Bodhisattva, it is customary to make offerings, according to one’s means, of incense, lights, flowers and fruits. However, these are merely material offerings – not offerings of the Dharma. Dharma offerings relate to the mind and are on a much higher plane than any material offering.

In recent times, because of the popularity of non-Buddhist beliefs, [we can witness all kinds of deluded practices, such as making offerings of non-vegetarian foods on the Buddha’s altar or conjuring up ghosts and spirits in search of health and riches]. Such practices are wasteful and deceptive.

Only Buddha Recitation can eliminate all ills and it costs nothing. Yet, few people bother to learn about it. I sincerely hope that the wise will not allow themselves to be misled.

*Commentary.* To make non-vegetarian offerings is to sacrifice the lives of other sentient beings in order to ameliorate one’s own. It is utterly selfish and inhuman. Deities and saints cannot be swayed by offerings like officials receiving bribes! Providence is impartial; it does not favor anyone. If we perform good deeds we accrue good karma; if we perform evil deeds we accrue evil

karma. That is all ...

Moreover, if the mind is righteous and the body pure, what need is there to worry? When we recite the Buddha's name, that name is taking center stage in our mind, which is then in unison with the Mind of the Buddhas, sharing the same pure wave-length. How can any demon or ghost dare to possess such a mind? Belief in superstitions and evil spirits not only opens us to ridicule, it can also cause a great deal of harm, by allowing others to take advantage of our beliefs and fears. I urge you to ponder the issue very carefully.

## **(26) Reciting the Buddha's Name to Repay your Filial Debts**

The filial debt you owe to your parents is the greatest debt of all. How can it ever be repaid? To provide all their necessities and earn titles and honors to glorify their names are mundane ways. While these actions are meritorious, from the vantage point of Truth, they are not the ideal, perfect way (because they still fall within the cycle of suffering that is the human condition). There is only one perfect way – it is to recite the Buddha's name and counsel your parents to do likewise, dedicating all the merits and virtues toward rebirth in the Pure Land. You will thus sow a diamond seed, as in the future, both you and your parents will be liberated. Moreover, one utterance of the Buddha's name can eradicate the karma of countless transgressions and afflictions. Therefore, anyone who wishes to repay his profound debt to his parents cannot fail to learn about the Pure Land method.

*Commentary.* Providing for the everyday needs of our parents is merely fulfilling our filial obligations according to the ways of the world.

If our parents do not cultivate transcendental causes, they are bound to flounder in the Triple Realm, revolving endlessly in the cycle of Birth and Death. How can this be considered perfect devotion on our part?

What, then, is the path of supreme devotion? It is the Pure Land method of reciting the Buddha's name, seeking rebirth in the Pure Land of Amitabha Buddha at the end of this retribution body (lifetime). Thanks to the power of Amitabha Buddha's vows (Other-power), all evil karma, be it as heavy of a huge stone block, can be easily transported across the river of Birth and Death.<sup>(12)</sup> Thus, a small effort reaps great results. Why are we still undecided?

## **(27) Practicing Charity through Buddha Recitation**

If you see someone suffering, you should first help him with the necessities of life and then comfort him and counsel him to recite the Buddha's name. To relieve suffering temporarily, charity is the urgent thing. However, to relieve the suffering of many lifetimes, the Pure Land method is more urgent still.

If you see a person or an animal in danger but cannot help, immediately recite the Buddha's name, dedicating all the merits and virtues to his soul. <sup>(13)</sup> Moreover, during a serene night, you might recite a sutra or the Buddha's name, wishing that all sentient beings may escape suffering and disaster. In time of war or epidemic, recite the Buddha's name throughout the night, wishing that all the wrongs and suffering of sentient beings may be eliminated.

While reciting the Buddha's name, you should visualize that each recitation is bringing benefits to all sentient beings – from the heavens above to the cosmic winds below. Such charitable

practice is truly inconceivable. <sup>(14)</sup>

*Commentary.* We should first help others with the necessities of life to relieve their physical suffering and then counsel them to recite the Buddha's name to rescue their souls. In those instances where we cannot help, we should singlemindedly recite the Buddha's name, concentrating all our good thoughts on the sufferer, that he may escape his present condition and be reborn peacefully in an auspicious realm.

One utterance of the Buddha's name  
Eliminates injustices and wrongs from time immemorial ... <sup>(15)</sup>

## **(28) Self-Nature Recitation, Self-Nature Listening**

The mind begins to think, which moves the tongue; the tongue in turn moves, producing sound, and that sound returns to the Self-Mind. This is the method of "mind reciting, mind listening."

If the mind recites and listens, the eyes cannot see wrongly, the nose cannot smell wrongly, the body cannot move wrongly because the master (the mind) has been "kidnapped" by the words "Amitabha Buddha".

*Commentary.* To recite the Buddha's name is to recite the Buddha of the Self-Mind; the ears hearing the Buddha's name actually hear the Self-Mind. The sound comes from the Self-Mind and returns to the Self-Mind, turning around and around in a circle. Not even a bit of deluded thought remains, and as a result, all mundane dusts, all deluded realms disappear.

Recite the Buddha's name, recite the Mind,  
The Mind recites the Buddha;  
Meditate, Meditate on the Self-Nature,  
The Self-Nature meditates.

## **(29) Recitation within Recitation**

Once recitation of the Buddha's name is perfected, of the Six Dusts only the "dust" of hearing remains. All six faculties are entirely concentrated in the faculty of hearing. The body no longer feels any coming or going, the tongue no longer knows how to move, the mind how to discriminate, the nose how to breathe, the eyes how to open and close. The two supreme methods of cultivation, of the Bodhisattvas Avalokitesvara and Mahasthama, are but one; nothing is not round and perfect. This is because sense organ is sense object, sense object is sense organ, and both organ and object are consciousness. The Eighteen Elements are all gathered in one element. Although at the outset they do not penetrate one another, in time they will gradually do so.

Usually, a clean, quiet corner should be selected for Buddha Recitation, about fourteen to seventeen square feet in area. You should circumambulate once, moving clockwise, and then slowly recite the Buddha's name with your voice growing louder and louder. As you recite this way for three or more circumambulations, you will feel your mind and voice becoming clearer, filling the universe, encircling the Ten Directions, encompassing the whole Dharma Realm. This

is the method of resting body, mind and realm in the sound of the Buddha's name, and it is to rest body and mind in the sound of the Buddha's name that you recite. This is the supreme realm, which erases the polluted mind full of afflictions, and which the practitioner should endeavor to reach. (This method needs no further clarification.)

### **(30) Recitation in the Light of the Self-Mind**

If [all] sounds are the sound of the Self-Mind, then [all] lights are also the light of the Self-Mind. If the sound of the Self-Mind exists anywhere, the light of the Self-Mind also shines from that place. If you rest in the sound of the Self-Mind to recite the Buddha's name, you are resting in the light of the Self-Mind as you recite. This is also the supreme realm where the polluted, afflicted mind has been eliminated. The practitioner should strive to cultivate this method.

### **(31) Recitation in the Nature of the Self-Mind**

As the sound of the Self-Mind surrounds you and the light of the Self-Mind shines upon you, the Mind-Nature naturally reveals itself. This True Mind is like a huge, round, bright mirror that nothing can obstruct. The Ten Directions, the Three Periods of Time, ourselves, the Buddhas and sentient beings, the cycle of suffering in the impure world, the lotus seat in the Pure Land – all are but images in the mirror. Thus, to recite aloud is to recite in the light, to recite in the mirror; it is neither the same nor different. This is the ultimate auspicious realm, completely free of the deluded mind. You should strive with all your might to attain it.

*Commentary.* The Mind-Nature is intrinsically ever pure (silent and still), but its manifestations are manifold (reflecting and shining). Once we realize that the totality of these manifestations are not separate from the unchanging Self-Nature, then Mind, Buddhas and sentient beings, intrinsically one, become empty, bright and unimpeded. Anyone who can practice Buddha Recitation to that level, must have exceptionally wholesome roots. The myriad phenomena are but images in the mirror, intrinsically non-existent, born and disappearing through causes and conditions. What influence can they have on the unchanging, unborn and undying nature of the True Mind? To internalize this truth is to escape the restrictive perimeters of space and time.

### **(32) Uninterrupted Recitation**

Recite in the morning, recite in the evening, recite when you are at leisure, recite when you are busy, recite in clean places, recite in unclean places – there should not be a single thought which is not of the Buddha. Even if you have to entertain friends and serve guests every day and thus have to interrupt your recitation, only vocal recitation should be interrupted, not mental recitation. Practicing with such constancy, you can easily achieve samadhi.

### **(33) Recitation without Sundry Thoughts**

The absence of sundry thoughts is “stopping”. Stopping is the cause of samadhi. If you can put a stop to sundry (impure) thoughts, correct thoughts (samadhi) will naturally appear.

Sundry thoughts fall into three categories: good, bad and neutral. To eliminate all three is to eliminate sundry thoughts. <sup>(16)</sup> The mind requires stillness. With stillness, neither good nor bad thoughts arise. The mind requires clarity. With clarity, there is no “neutral” thought.

There is no recitation except recitation of the Buddha’s name. Therefore, the mind is always still. In recitation, there is [only] Buddha, therefore, the mind is always bright and clear.

### **(34) Uninterrupted Recitation**

Reciting the Buddha’s name without interruption is visualization, and visualization is the cause of wisdom. The previous utterance of the Buddha’s name has gone, the next one has not come, the present utterance is not static. <sup>(17)</sup> Practice visualization in this manner – clearly but without attachment, without attachment but clearly. Proceeding continuously in this way, you will arrive at the truth that “everything is made from Mind alone” – Buddha is Mind, Mind is Buddha.

*Commentary* (to the three methods above). To recite the Buddha’s name is to recite the Buddha of the Self-Mind. Therefore, whether the place of recitation is clean or dirty does not matter. Moreover, sentient beings and Buddhas share the same Self-Nature True Mind. That Self-Nature, that Buddha Nature, originally bright, has, as a result of delusion, been covered by afflictions and ignorance. We are so deluded and perverse that day in and day out we pursue worldly dusts and false realms, drawing further and further away from the True Nature, mistaking the false for the True. Once we are enlightened, we return to the light of the Self-Mind, but it is not easy, in a short time, to erase the dark afflictions which have tainted it for so long. Therefore, it is necessary to recite continuously (to recite the Buddha’s name is to recite the Buddha of the Self-Mind). With Buddha thoughts succeeding one another at all times, sentient being thoughts cease to exist. Thus, even when we are extremely busy, only audible recitation is interrupted; how can the thoughts inside us be restrained? When the mind is completely occupied with Buddha thoughts, how can sundry thoughts arise any longer? Sundry thoughts having ceased to arise (the wind has stopped!), the Mind is no longer moved by anything. At that point, the mind is peacefully resting in samadhi (the water is calm). The myriad dharmas now appear – nothing at all is missing. With myriad dharmas manifesting themselves naturally, the Self-Mind shines in a sublime, unique way (wisdom). The cultivator who can practice Buddha Recitation to this level has effectively reached perfection.

### **(35) Zen is Buddha Recitation**

Meditation based on a koan <sup>(18)</sup> is called koan meditation. Meditation in which the practitioner sits and stops the thought process is referred to as sitting meditation. Koan and sitting meditation are both Zen. Zen and Buddha are both Mind. Zen is the Zen of Buddha. Buddha is the Buddha in Zen. Buddha Recitation does not conflict with koan or sitting meditation. Moreover, the meditator can use the words “Amitabha Buddha” as a koan, reciting forward, reciting backward, reciting in one direction, reciting in another, upside down, turning around, without leaving his current thought. Even if it is not called Zen, Zen is still part of it.

The Zen practitioner, to succeed in his cultivation, must practice to the stage of “one thought in resonance with the Mind” (samadhi), and enter suddenly into the realm of Emptiness.

To recite the Buddha's name to the level of one-pointedness of mind – if this is not resonance (samadhi) what else can it be? To recite to the point where the mind is empty, is it not perpetual samadhi?

In alert, focused Buddha recitation there is samatha, vipassana, samadhi, wisdom – each recitation is perfect. Where else can Zen be found if not here?

*Commentary.* Zen is Pure Land because both Zen and Pure Land aim at reaching one-pointedness of mind. Although two expedients are involved, the result is the same. However, Zen is ten times as difficult!

The well-known commentary *Returning Directly to the Source* contains the following similes: “those who practice methods other than Pure Land are no different from ants climbing a high mountain or worms crawling up to the tip of a bamboo stalk. The Pure Land method of Buddha Recitation is a shortcut relying on the Buddha's power. It is like a boat sailing downstream with the wind in its sails or a worm digging its way out sideways [horizontal escape <sup>(19)</sup>]. There is no faster way.”

### **(36) Precepts are Buddha**

To keep the precepts is to rein in the body; to recite the Buddha's name is to rein in the mind. Keeping the precepts for an extended period of time rectifies the body; reciting the Buddha's name for an extended period of time leads to an empty mind. The nature of the precepts and the nature of recitation are not two different things. Constantly keeping the precepts prevents transgressions and mistakes; constantly reciting the Buddha's name enables the cultivator to overcome “near-death karma” <sup>(20)</sup> and transcend the Triple Realm. If your precept-keeping has reached a high level and you dedicate these virtues toward rebirth in the Pure Land, you are bound to achieve rebirth in the middle Lotus Grades. <sup>(21)</sup> If, on the other hand, you cannot do both, then try to recite the Buddha's name assiduously, as though you were extinguishing a fire burning on your head.

*Commentary.* Precept-keeping aims ultimately at keeping the Self-Mind pure. As the practitioner does not commit transgressions, he does not develop guilt and remorse. Buddha Recitation also aims at purifying the Self-Mind. Therefore, to keep the precepts is to recite the Buddha's name. However, Buddha Recitation is the more vital expedient when the cultivator is not yet keeping the precepts fully. It is thus urgent to recite the Buddha's name, so that once the mind is pure, the precepts naturally become pure as well.

### **(37) Sutras are Buddha**

The entire Buddhist canon comes from the Mind; if the Mind is not Buddha, the teachings are just a waste. However, is there anyone's mind which is not Buddha? [If so], it is only because he does not stop and think.

Mahayana cultivators who have studied the Dharma must have read the Surangama Sutra, and among them there are some who belittle the Bodhisattva Mahasthamaprapta while praising the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara. A tiny bit of attachment on this point is enough to plant

a seed of Birth and Death. All their learning, farsighted views and profound understanding serve merely to strengthen the seeds of suffering; they are of no help at all toward the goal of escaping Birth and Death. I urge you to let go quickly, let go of everything and concentrate on Buddha Recitation, seeking rebirth in the Pure Land and the company of Amitabha Buddha.

Otherwise, if you cannot let go of these attachments immediately, then dedicate the virtues of studying and explaining the sutras toward rebirth in the Pure Land and fulfilment of the Four Great Vows. This will bring rebirth in the Pure Land. If, moreover, you can spread the Pure Land teachings, making others understand the benefits of Buddha Recitation, then even a wink or a thought will adorn the Pure Land. Thus, there is no doubt that your rebirth will be at the highest Lotus Grade! <sup>(22)</sup>

*Commentary.* In the Surangama Sutra, the Bodhisattva Mahasthama cultivates the samadhi of Buddha Recitation to achieve omniscience, while the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara cultivates the faculty of hearing and also achieves omniscience. Both Bodhisattvas achieve the same state of omniscience. However, when asked by Buddha Sakyamuni to choose among the different methods of cultivation, the Bodhisattva Manjusri selected the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara's practice as supreme. To misunderstand or become attached to this teaching, and think that Avalokitesvara is above Mahasthama, is contrary to the spirit of the sutra. It is because of this attachment that discrimination arises – the thought that this Bodhisattva is higher and that Bodhisattva is lower. This attachment stems [ultimately] from attachment to self, which has existed since time immemorial. Such attachment clouds the mind, making it easy for deluded views to develop. It thus creates suffering in the Self-Mind and this suffering lasts forever, time without end. How dangerous, indeed!

If you study, understand and lecture well but are limited to that study and understanding, with the mind divided, attached to language, words and phrases, how different are you from a silkworm stuck in its cocoon, ultimately dying within that very cocoon!

Is it not better to make every effort to adorn the Pure Land, or to follow the true and earnest approach of Buddha Recitation, rather than discourse pompously upon the pros or cons of this method or that? The latter can only entangle your pure thoughts and is of no help in the Great Matter of Birth and Death.

Moreover, if you exercise all your understanding and abilities to propagate Pure Land, or to extol the merits of Buddha Recitation far and wide – using skillful means to urge people of all capacities to practice the Buddha Recitation Samadhi – then, truly, your rebirth in the Pure Land will not be that far off!

### **(38) Not Reciting is Reciting**

As soon as any action is completed or a word is uttered, and there has not even been time to think of reciting the Buddha's name, yet the Buddha's name has already appeared – this is the state leading to samadhi.

### **(39) Reciting but not Reciting**

This means reciting without growing weary or bored, while feeling better and better.

It means reciting the words “Amitabha Buddha” in a very clear, distinct way, without inter-

ruption and finding that these words have suddenly, temporarily, become frozen in your mind. It is to have no thoughts of the word “Amitabha” and no thoughts other than this word. This can provisionally be called attaining an auspicious realm, but not truly the state of Empty Mind. However, if you are diligent in reciting the Buddha’s name, the realm always appears and in time you will achieve the state. If because of a thought of Empty Mind, you succumb to drowsiness and lethargy, you are lacking in wisdom.

You should realize that the more empty your mind is, the more wondrous and pure your recitation will be. When you use the self within the Buddha Mind to recite the Buddha in your own mind, neither Emptiness nor Non-Emptiness can be found. It is as though the sun or moon, while shining on the Jade Palace, were revolving around the Polar Mountain and shining on the whole world.

Indeed, what can be better than Wonderful Enlightenment becoming Perfect Enlightenment (Buddhahood)? <sup>(23)</sup>

*Commentary.* Once we have recited the Buddha’s name to the point where it is effortless, we become free and unimpeded. There is no effort, no reflection – non-recitation yet nothing other than recitation, recitation yet nothing other than the state of non-recitation of the Self-Mind.

This is like a person learning to ride a bicycle. He appears to be using his head, his body, both arms and both legs, but the bicycle is still listing to one side or another. However, once he has mastered the technique, there is no need to grip the wheel or contort his body. With normal pedaling and no great exertion of effort, the bicycle runs straight, with none of the difficulties encountered earlier.

The ancients used to say: there is nothing in life so difficult that it cannot be done. The only problem is that we do not act, or if we do act, we fail to do so steadfastly over a period of time. That is why, in the end, nothing is well done. What greater cause for regret is there?

#### **(40) Reciting the Buddha’s Name in Isolation**

When cultivating, a Bhiksu/Bhiksuni does not require the presence of fellow-cultivators. The more isolated his place of practice the better! He may recite in either a loud or a low voice, as he pleases, slowly and deliberately, or with utterances following one another in rapid succession. The only important condition is to achieve singlemindedness. He should tell himself “my body is alone but my mind is not, because the Mind of Amitabha Buddha and of all the Buddhas has never left me, even momentarily. The Buddhas know immediately what is going through my mind. If I give rise to even a single thought, the Buddhas know it. How can I be isolated?”

If you have questions about the Pure Land method, you should consult Pure Land sutras and treatises for clarification. There are many such sutras and commentaries, such as the Shorter Amitabha Sutra, the Longer Amitabha Sutra, the Meditation Sutra, Patriarch Chih-i’s Treatise on Ten Doubts about the Pure Land, Master T’ien Ju’s Doubts and Questions about Pure Land, etc. <sup>(24)</sup> I am merely covering a few easily understood Pure Land teachings in this book. There are many more interesting teachings to be found throughout the above-mentioned books. Furthermore, you should also try to study at the feet of masters who understand the Pure Land method in depth.

*Commentary.* Cultivators need to practice in a quiet, out-of-the-way area, in order to keep

the mind focused. This is particularly the case in Pure Land Buddhism, because without one-pointedness of mind, it is impossible to achieve rebirth in the Pure Land. To achieve this one-pointedness of mind, we should, first of all, look for a quiet place to settle our mind and thoughts. (When the surface of the lake is calm, the myriad stars will be reflected in it. There is no better way to keep the waters calm than to stop the wind.) When we have penetrated the still nature of the Self-Mind, we have become one with the Dharma Body of the Buddhas. At that time, not only does our own wisdom-light emerge, it is also merged with the countless wisdom-lights of the Buddhas of the Ten Directions. How can our light be called isolated?

The only thing to worry about is our delusions, lack of understanding and endless competing in the arena of the mundane and the vulgar. When the time comes to leave our bodies, we will, like a shadow, enter the Avici hells alone, isolated and orphaned!

### **(41) Organizing a Buddha Recitation Retreat**

A Buddha Recitation retreat usually lasts seven days. If you are in retreat alone [you should see to it that all the basic necessities of life are available.] During the retreat, you should discourage others from moving about in the general area, so as to reserve the entire time for Buddha Recitation.

If there are five or six persons who wish to go into retreat together, you should plan to have a retreat attendant, as well as to establish strict rules and affix them to the door. All comings and goings, meals, offerings of flowers and fruits should be handled by the attendant, so that the participants can concentrate on reciting the Buddha's name throughout the seven-day period.

If you are still constrained by family obligations and do not know the pros and cons of serious cultivation, you should not rush into organizing retreats.

*Commentary.* Without going on retreat, we may be too occupied with everyday activities, guests and friends to find the necessary peace and quiet for Buddha Recitation. Therefore, we need to go on retreat as an expedient to get away from visitors and daily activities.

We should have the necessities of life at hand (to avoid thinking about them), or else seek the help of others, and peacefully recite the Buddha's name. With this method, the retreat lasts only seven days, but if we have the time and the means, we can organize additional retreats, without limit. Once we have decided to go into retreat, external events should not be allowed to take control and end the retreat half-way. To end a retreat hastily before the agreed number of days has elapsed is truly regrettable!

Be aware that the more eagerly we cultivate, the more we are tested by demons (karmic forces). Therefore, we cannot be wishy-washy, but must have a good understanding and plan well before acting. Otherwise, we may lose the battle and end in failure – setting ourselves up as objects of ridicule.

### **(42) Group Recitation**

If four or five persons decide to meet as a group to engage in Buddha Recitation, they should establish the rules and agree on the order of seniority at the outset, before beginning to practice.

From the beginning of each session, each time the wooden fish is struck, each time the Bud-

dha's name is recited, one person should take the lead, while everyone else follows in a regular, even manner, without confusion – as otherwise, the minds of the participants could be disturbed.

*Commentary.* This method, unlike the previous one, does not require the participants to organize retreats, but merely to cultivate as time and conditions permit. The number of participants does not matter and there is no fixed number of days of practice.

### **(43) Recitation for the Purpose of Helping Others**

The following activities are wholesome and conducive to accruing virtues: reciting the Buddha's name peacefully in one spot and dedicating the merits and virtues to others; joining in a retreat with other persons; propagating the Pure Land method; lending Pure Land texts to others; dispelling other people's doubts about this method; and counseling others to recite the Buddha's name steadfastly.

However, if you can practice supportive recitation <sup>(25)</sup> at the bedside of the dying, helping them to keep the Buddha's name continuously in mind so that they may be reborn in the Pure Land – you will be helping to realize the Dharma Body Wisdom-Life (Pure Mind) of others. The virtues of such action are on a higher level than all other activities.

### **(44) Buddha Recitation in Time of Calamity**

If you remember to practice Buddha Recitation in time of calamity, you will receive a wonderful response. Take a country suffering invasion or a village decimated by a plague. In both places, Buddha Recitation should be practiced steadfastly. If one person recites, one person is at peace; if a hundred persons recite, a hundred are at peace. It is not that the Buddha is being partial, but rather that he always appears in the equal, non-discriminating light ... the light of the Buddha coming to protect us, the Dharma-protecting deities rescuing us – we will naturally escape danger and calamity. Do not doubt this.

*Commentary.* Some people may ask: how can reciting the Buddha's name eliminate calamities? They ask because they are not earnest or are doubtful about obtaining a response. These very doubts show why they do not obtain favorable results. You should realize that when we think only of Buddha Recitation and nothing else, our thoughts transcend body and mind. If such pure thoughts are stretched out [over hours and days...], what suffering can affect us? There is a great deal of significance to the saying:

A good response is due to the self;  
Non-response is also due to the self.

If one person, then many persons begin to recite the Buddha's name, they are abandoning evil thoughts for good thoughts. If these good thoughts follow one after another without end, what disaster cannot be eradicated, what suffering cannot be dispelled?

Furthermore, the sutras record ten specific benefits of reciting the Buddha's name ... I urge practitioners to strengthen their faith and redouble their efforts.

## (45) Buddha Recitation in Dreams

If you have unshakeable vows and engage in deep, pure cultivation, holding fast to the Buddha's name in the daytime, holding fast to it at night, then you will naturally recite the Buddha's name even in your dreams. This presages that you will soon achieve the goal of rebirth in the Pure Land. Therefore, you should continue to recite evenly, redouble your efforts, never scaling them down, never allowing your mind to become scattered.

*Commentary.* To recite the Buddha's name in the above manner is to have reached a rather high stage. Some persons can recite at night but not in the daytime, or when awake but not when asleep. Their recitation is subject to interruption because it has not yet become second nature. You should strive to keep the Buddha's name constantly in mind, whether awake or dreaming. To achieve this, train yourself to recite the Buddha's name in bed until falling asleep. Moreover, before climbing into bed, you should awaken the mind of recitation. Tell yourself that there is no better way to escape Birth and Death than constant recitation of the Buddha's name, when awake or asleep. If each day you remind yourself of this, you will grow accustomed to recitation and naturally succeed.

As an aside, if you wish to get up in the morning at a specific time, you should adopt the following method. Before retiring, tell yourself aloud: I should awake at five o'clock (or four o'clock, as you wish). If you repeat this to yourself two or three times, you will awaken in the morning at the desired time. One point to remember, though: the first few days you may not wake up at the right time, because your mind is not yet tamed. However, as time goes by, you will be closer and closer to the appointed time until one day you begin to awaken precisely at the desired hour – every day. This is a question of habit and there is nothing strange about it.

## (46) Buddha Recitation in Times of Illness

A serious illness is a reminder of death. Death is the important link between sages and ordinary men, the pure and the impure. [In the event of terminal illness] you should develop thoughts of death (to avoid fearing it) and be diligent in reciting the Buddha's name, awaiting death with determination. When the time comes, the light of Amitabha Buddha will appear to welcome and escort you, thus fulfilling your vow of rebirth in the Pure Land. If you stop reciting the Buddha's name when you are ill, all your feelings of attachment, fear and affliction will create a turmoil in your mind, while all manner of sundry thoughts will arise. How then can you escape the path of Birth and Death?

Once, long ago, there was a monk who, afflicted with a serious illness, groaned loudly "help, help!" He then realized that a cultivator should remember to practice, and that to groan was wrong. Immediately, he began to recite the Buddha's name. However, his suffering did not diminish. Therefore, each time he groaned "help, help" he would follow the groan with the Buddha's name, day and night without fail. Upon recovering, he told everyone: "when I was ill, each time I groaned, I followed it with the Buddha's name. Now that I am well, the words 'Amitabha Buddha' remain while the 'Help, help' has disappeared and is nowhere to be found. How amazing!" This is an instance of being steadfast in the face of illness.

*Commentary.* No one in the world can avoid death. However, there are some people who are so afraid of death that they lose all self-respect or are so eager to live that they ignore death. What a pity!

Even if we fear death, we cannot escape it. Therefore, fear is superfluous ... Even when a relative, a very close one, dies, some persons do not dare to approach the corpse, let alone uncover the face and look at it. We should realize that death is ready for us at all times. Let us not fear it, but rather endeavor to ensure ourselves a [future] life where there will never be death: the path of liberation. Thus, we should redouble our efforts to recite the Buddha's name and not fear death. The death of this present body is but a temporary change of body. Countless impermanent bodies will succeed one another in the future – if we have not achieved liberation.

### **(47) Buddha recitation at the Time of Death**

At the time of death, make the effort to remember the words “Amitabha Buddha”, never letting them slip away from your mind. If you can recite aloud, by all means do so. If not, then recite softly. If you are too weak to recite at all, think of the words “Amitabha Buddha”, engraving them in the depths of your mind – and never forget them.

Those who attend the dying should counsel them, continuously urging them to remember the Buddha, to recite the Buddha's name.

You should realize that because of scattered, deluded thoughts at the time of death, you have been wallowing in the Triple Realm throughout many lifetimes, many eons. Why? It is because Birth and Death are governed by your last thought at the time of death. If that single thought is focused on the Buddha, your body may be dead but your mind, being undisturbed, will immediately follow that single thought toward rebirth in the Pure Land. <sup>(26)</sup> Therefore, remember to recite the Buddha's name, always, without fail!

*Commentary.* The Pure land practitioner on the verge of death should have the following thoughts: “The last moment before death is of utmost importance for a Pure Land cultivator. If I do not guard it carefully and am not skillful, I will not only waste the efforts of an entire lifetime, I will be burdened by the sufferings of the cycle of Birth and Death, with no hope of escape. This is not to mention that this body came into being as a result of karmic consciousness, of the convergence of my father's seed and my mother's egg, and that it is subject to decay and death. Where there is form, there is decay, where there is life, there is death – nothing can last forever.

“The world I live in comes from filthy, deluded karma and is hardly a pure and peaceful realm meriting attachment. Today I singlemindedly recite the Buddha's name, vowing to be reborn in the Pure Land at the time of death. This is no different from throwing away a dirty old shirt and putting on a clean one – what can possibly be better?”

If you can reflect upon the above and plan in advance, then at the time of death, you will be free of attachment to the body and the world around you. With pure thoughts and one-pointedness of mind, you will be reborn instantly in the Pure Land – even ten thousand horses cannot drag you back!

### **(48) Vows, Repentance and Buddha Recitation**

Alas! There are countless people who are unaware of Buddha Recitation. There are those who think Buddha recitation is akin to superstition and refuse to recite. There are monks and nuns who recite the Buddha's name as a matter of routine without knowing the true reason why.

There are persons with “deluded wisdom” who believe in the Buddha yet refuse to recite. There are ignorant persons who do not know about the Buddha and therefore do not recite. These are but a few examples. In addition, there are ordinary people who, upon learning about cause and effect, recite the Buddha’s name. However, they do so with the expectation of receiving merits and blessings in future lifetimes. Thus, they, too, cannot escape the seeds of Birth and Death.

It is truly difficult to find anyone who recites the Buddha’s name for the sake of transcending Birth and Death – perhaps one or two out of a hundred! We should realize that to recite the Buddha’s name is to be in unison with the compassionate Mind of the Buddha – it is to make the great vow of rescuing all sentient beings [Bodhi Mind]. <sup>(27)</sup>

“All offenses and past wrongs done to others, I now repent; all virtues and good roots, large and small, I now dedicate to rebirth in the Pure Land.”

This is the principal cause (motive) of Buddha Recitation.

*Commentary.* Whatever we do should have a goal that leads naturally to a result. Buddha Recitation for the sake of transcending Birth and Death and achieving rebirth in the Pure Land – the goal and the result – is truly sublime, yet practical. This is something that cannot be derided.

If we realize this point, our efforts are not wasted. If we truly recite the Buddha’s name seeking escape from Birth and Death, there is no point in seeking mundane merits and blessings. How can the myriad phenomena of this world, fleeting, impermanent as they are, be the place where we entrust our true selves, inherently permanent and everlasting? It is only because of evil karma, heavy obstructions and limited wisdom that we must resign ourselves to an unfortunate destiny.

Therefore, once we clearly understand this and decide to recite the Buddha’s name, we should strive to repent in all sincerity, so that our mind may be serene and pure, free of afflictions and illusions. Only then can we hope to realize our vow of rebirth in the Pure Land of Amitabha Buddha for the ultimate benefit of all sentient beings. <sup>(28)</sup>

END

# Notes

by Van Hien Study Group

- (1) **Sundry good/bad actions:** In the Meditation Sutra, good actions are divided into pure and sundry actions. Sundry good actions are those that require effort and are carried out with an expectation of benefit, merits or virtues. Pure actions are those which are performed in order to transcend Birth and Death, namely, meditation, visualization or Buddha Recitation. Sundry bad actions are actions influenced by impure thoughts. (Master Sudhisukha)

**Sundry thoughts:** deluded, impure thoughts.

- (2) **Parable:** In a time long past, Maitreya was in his incarnation as a laughing, big-bellied monk with a sack perpetually on his back. He used to travel about the countryside seeking alms and sharing them with whomever happened to be nearby. He would customarily sit under a tree, surrounded by young children, to whom he would tell stories to illustrate Buddhist teachings. Seeing this, an elder monk of the time became annoyed at what he perceived as untoward conduct on the part of Maitreya. One day, he cornered Maitreya and tried to test him with the following question: “Old monk, pray tell me, just what do you think is the essence of the Buddha’s teachings?” Maitreya stopped for a moment, looked him in the eye, and just let his sack fall to the ground. As the puzzled monk wondered what to make of this singular action, Maitreya bent down, picked up his sack and walked away. Dropping the sack, “letting go”, forgive and forget – that is the teaching of Maitreya, the Buddha of the future.
- (3) See the following verse found in the Avatamsaka Sutra, Ch. 20. It expresses one of the key teachings of Mahayana Buddhism:

“If people want to really know  
All Buddhas of all time,  
They should contemplate the nature of the cosmos:  
All is but mental construction  
(i.e., Everything is made from Mind alone.)”

(T. Cleary, tr., The Flower Ornament Sutra, Vol. I, p. 452)

**Borrowing and repaying:** In Buddhism, everything is governed by the law of Cause and Effect. Life is an unending cycle of transgression and retribution, borrowing and repaying.

- (4) Not to kill, steal, engage in sexual misconduct or false speech are the four cardinal precepts or injunctions taught by the Buddhas. Not only must you not break any of these precepts through words, you must also refrain from all other unwholesome speech. (Master Sudhisukha)
- (5) **Brahma Net Sutra:** This is a sutra of major significance in Mahayana Buddhism. In addition to containing ten major Mahayana precepts, the sutra also contains forty-eight less important injunctions. These 58 major and minor precepts constitute the Bodhisattva Precepts, taken by most Mahayana monks and nuns and certain advanced lay practitioners. It is believed that the current version of the Brahma Net Sutra is only a fraction of the original sutra, most of the rest having been lost. An English version of this sutra is

available from the Sutra Translation Committee (Bronx, NY) and the Buddha Educational Foundation (Taiwan).

- (6) **Pure karma of the body:** to refrain from killing, stealing and sexual misconduct. Moreover, all actions and gestures should be upright, undefiled, unsoiled by worldly dusts. (Master Suddhisukha)
- (7) This is because Diamond Recitation, while silent, still involves moving the lips.
- (8) The expression “Self-Nature Amitabha, Mind-Only Pure Land” represents the quintessence of Pure Land/Buddha Recitation Practice. At the noumenon level (i.e., at the level of principle), Amitabha, the Buddha of Infinite Light and Infinite Life, is our Self-Nature, always bright and everlasting – thus the expression Self-Nature Amitabha. Rebirth in the Pure Land is rebirth in our mind, which is intrinsically pure, like the Pure Land – thus the expression Mind-Only Pure Land.
- (9) **Three Bodies of the Buddha:** “A concept adopted in Mahayana to organize different concepts of the Buddha appearing in the sutras.” (A Dictionary of Buddhist Terms and Concepts, p. 448)

“The three bodies are:

1. **Dharmakaya:** the Dharma-body, or the ‘body of reality’, which is formless, unchanging, transcendental, and inconceivable. Synonymous with suchness, or emptiness.
  2. **Sambhogakaya:** the ‘body of enjoyment’, ‘the bliss or reward body’, the celestial body of the Buddha. Personification of eternal perfection in its ultimate sense. It ‘resides in the Pure Land and never manifests itself in the mundane world, but only in the celestial spheres, accompanied by enlightened Bodhisattvas.’
  3. **Nirmanakaya:** the ‘manifested or incarnated body’ of the Buddha. In order to benefit certain sentient beings, a Buddha incarnates himself into an appropriate visible body, such as that of Sakyamuni Buddha ...” (G.C.C. Chang).
- (10) **Third lifetime:** a general Buddhist Teaching which can be summarized as follows: In the first lifetime, the practitioner engages in mundane good deeds which bring ephemeral worldly blessings (wealth, power, authority, etc.) in the second lifetime. Since power tends to corrupt, he is then likely to create evil karma, resulting in retribution in the third lifetime.

Thus good deeds in the first lifetime are potential ‘enemies’ of the third lifetime.

To ensure that mundane good deeds do not become ‘enemies,’ the practitioner should dedicate all merits to a transcendental goal, i.e., to become Bodhisattvas or Buddhas or, in Pure Land teachings to achieve rebirth in Amitabha’s Pure Land – a Buddha-land beyond Birth and Death.

In the mundane context, these three lifetimes can be conceived of as three generations. Thus, the patriarch of a prominent family, through work and luck, amasses great power, fortune and influence (first lifetime). His children are then able to enjoy a leisurely, and, too often, dissipated life (second lifetime). By the generation of the grandchildren, the family’s fortune and good reputation have all but disappeared (third lifetime).

- (11) For example, a practitioner may have a telephone next to him while he is reciting the Buddha’s name. The phone rings and he answers it, while continuing to strike the wooden fish! This indicates a lack of earnestness.

(12) The Questions of King Milinda Sutra contains the following parable: “A minute grain of sand, dropped on the surface of the water, will sink immediately. On the other hand, a block of stone, however large and heavy, can easily be moved from place to place by boat. The same is true of the Pure Land practitioner. However light his karma may be, if he is not rescued by Amitabha Buddha, he must revolve in the cycle of Birth and Death. With the help of Amitabha Buddha, his karma, however heavy, will not prevent his rebirth in the Pure Land.”

(13) This teaching is reflected in the Brahma Net Sutra (note 5):

“Now, if you wish to save a certain being but it’s beyond your capacity, then you should singlemindedly recite the Buddha’s name. For example, you may see some pigs or sheep that are about to be slaughtered, and you can’t liberate them because you aren’t able to buy them all. At this time you should singlemindedly recite the Buddha’s name so those creatures can hear it. You can speak Dharma also. You can say to them, ‘All of you living beings should bring forth the Bodhi resolve [Bodhi Mind].’ This is creating causes and conditions for rescuing their wisdom-light. Although you are not saving their physical bodies, you are rescuing their wisdom-light.” (Master Hui Seng)

(14) According to Buddhist cosmology, our earth is suspended in space as a result of the unceasing movement of cosmic winds. This section illustrates the basic teaching of Pure Land and all other Mahayana schools: the purpose of cultivation is to rescue all sentient beings, including the practitioner himself (Bodhi Mind). See in this connection, Brahma Net Sutra, Secondary Precepts 20 and 45.

(15) This seemingly exaggerated statement is easily understood in the light of the Buddha’s teachings. Injustices, like all karma, good and bad, have their source in the mind. One utterance of the Buddha’s name while in samadhi can change that mind and therefore eliminate, or at least mitigate, all the wrongs from time immemorial.

To take a simple example from everyday life, suppose a person driving home from work were cut off and almost hit by another vehicle. Incensed, he might chase after the other car and at a stop light, start to give the driver a piece of his mind. However, should he discover that the driver’s wife was badly injured and about to undergo an operation, would his anger not change into understanding and forgiveness? See also main text, section 44.

(16) See note 1.

(17) As soon as we produce the “present” utterance, that utterance is already a thing of the past! Nothing remains still.

(18) **Koan**: “Literally, Koan means a public case ... However, it now refers to the statements, including answers, made by Zen masters. These statements are used as subjects for meditation by novices in Zen monasteries. Koan are also used as a test of whether the disciple has really [achieved an Awakening]. Helped by koan study, students of Zen may open their minds to the truth. By this method they may attain the same inner experience as the Zen masters. It is said that there are one thousand seven hundred such koans on record. The term wato [hua-t’ou or topic] is also used in this sense.” ( Japanese-English Buddhist Dictionary)

“A word or phrase of non-sensical language which cannot be ‘solved’ by the intellect but which holds a person’s attention while a higher faculty takes over. Used as an exercise for

breaking the limitations of thought and developing intuition, thereby allowing one to attain a flash of awareness beyond duality (Kensho.), and later Satori.” (Christmas Humphreys, *A Popular Dictionary of Buddhism*)

- (19) “Horizontal” and “vertical” are figures of speech, which can readily be understood through the following example. Suppose we have a worm, born inside a stalk of a bamboo. To escape, it can take the hard way and crawl vertically all the way to the top of the stalk. Alternatively, it can poke a hole near its current location and escape horizontally into the big, wide world. The horizontal escape, for sentient beings, is to seek rebirth in the Pure Land of Amitabha Buddha.
- (20) **Near-death karma:** According to Buddhist teachings, at the time of death people are assailed by all kinds of afflictions, such as love, hate, regret, which they have been unable to let go of during their lifetimes. See also Notes 25 and 26.
- (21) The levels of rebirth in the Western Pure Land as described in the Meditation Sutra, a key Pure Land text. According to this sutra, there are nine grades, divided into three sets of three grades each. The more merits and virtues the practitioner accumulates, the higher the grade. These grades are in fact representative of an infinite number of levels corresponding to the infinite levels of karma of those reborn in the Pure Land.
- (22) **Four Great Vows:** These are the common vows of all Mahayana practitioners, be they lay or monastic, which are recited at the end of each Meditation/Recitation session. The Four Great Vows, which represent the Bodhi Mind, are:

“Sentient beings are numberless; I vow to save them all.  
Afflictions are inexhaustible; I vow to end them all.  
Schools and traditions are manifold, I vow to study them all.  
The Buddha-way is supreme; I vow to complete it.” (Ross, p. 48)

Belittling Mashasthama and praising Avalokitesvara : the teachings of the Buddha are audience-specific. Thus, to some, Avalokitesvara’s teaching on the faculty of hearing is supreme, while to others, Mahasthamaprapta’s on Buddha Recitation is the highest. This is why the Buddha praises all sutras as supreme and many sutras are called “king of the sutras” – “king” for its target audience.

- (23) **Wonderful Enlightenment:** the stage of cultivation immediately preceding Perfect Enlightenment, or Buddhahood.  
  
**Polar Mountain:** The mythological mountain at the center of the universe.
- (24) All of these texts, along with others on Pure Land, have been translated into English. See the list of publications of the Sutra Translation Committee at the front of this book or contact the Buddha Education Foundation in Taiwan ([overseas@budaedu.org.tw](mailto:overseas@budaedu.org.tw)).
- (25) **Supportive recitation:** recitation performed by one or more Pure Land practitioners alongside a dying person, to assist him in achieving rebirth in the Pure Land. This is important for Pure Land practitioners as at the time of death, one is like a turtle being skinned alive. Filled with pain and fear, without the support of like-minded practitioners, one is likely to forget about Buddha Recitation and Pure Land rebirth. See also Note 20.

(26) This is comparable to driving west from New York to Los Angeles, and then in a split second, taking the wrong fork on the highway, winding up south at the Mexican border. To make the right decision at the fork requires study of the relevant maps (previous cultivation). Alternatively, the driver can put his trust in a guide who knows the way (a good spiritual advisor). The crucial point here is to have the right advisor at the right moment. In this scenario, one second late is too late.

(27) **Bodhi Mind** (Skt. **Bodhicitta**): The spirit of Enlightenment, the aspiration to achieve it, the Mind set on Enlightenment. It involves two parallel aspects; i) the determination to achieve Buddhahood and ii) the aspiration to rescue all beings.

The ultimate goal of all Mahayana practice is to achieve Enlightenment and transcend the cycle of Birth and Death – that is, to attain Buddhahood. In the Mahayana tradition, the precondition for Buddhahood is the Bodhi Mind (*bodhicitta*), the aspiration to achieve full and complete Enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings, oneself included.

(28) This is a crucial teaching of Pure Land Buddhism. As Vasabandhu, the Patriarch of the Mind-Only School wrote in his well-known Treatise on Rebirth:

“To develop the Bodhi Mind is precisely to seek Buddhahood; to seek Buddhahood is to develop the mind of rescuing sentient beings; and the mind of rescuing sentient beings is none other than the mind that gathers in all beings and helps them to achieve rebirth in the Pure Land.” (Seeker’s Glossary of Buddhism, 2nd ed., p. 64)

# The Bodhi Mind

by

**Dharma Master Thich Thien Tam**

(excerpted from *Buddhism of Wisdom and Faith* (Horizontal Escape))

## *Essay on the Bodhi Mind*

### 1) Meaning of the Bodhi Mind (Bodhicitta)

Exchanging the virtues of Buddha Recitation for the petty merits and blessings of this world is certainly not consonant with the intentions of the Buddhas. Therefore, practitioners should recite the name of Amitabha Buddha for the purpose of escaping the cycle of Birth and Death. However, if we were to practice Buddha Recitation for the sake of our own salvation alone, we would only fulfill a small part of the Buddhas' intentions.

What, then, is the ultimate intention of the Buddhas? The ultimate intention of the Buddhas is for all sentient beings to escape the cycle of Birth and Death and to become enlightened, as they are. Thus, those who recite Amitabha Buddha's name should develop the Bodhi Mind (aspiration for Supreme Enlightenment).

The word "Bodhi" means "enlightened." There are three main stages of Enlightenment: the Enlightenment of the Sravakas (Hearers); the Enlightenment of the Pratyeka (Self-Awakened) Buddhas; the Enlightenment of the Buddhas. What Pure Land practitioners who develop the Bodhi Mind are seeking is precisely the Enlightenment of the Buddhas. This stage of Buddhahood is the highest, transcending those of the Sravakas and Pratyeka Buddhas, and is therefore called Supreme Enlightenment or Supreme Bodhi. This Supreme Bodhi Mind contains two principal seeds, Compassion and Wisdom, from which emanates the great undertaking of rescuing oneself and all other sentient beings.

To reiterate, the Bodhi Mind I am referring to here is the supreme, perfect Bodhi Mind of the Buddhas, not the Bodhi Mind of the Sravakas or Pratyeka Buddhas.



The Mahavairocana (Dai Nichi) Sutra says:

The Bodhi Mind is the cause  
Great Compassion is the root (foundation)  
Skillful means are the ultimate.

For example, if a person is to travel far, he should first determine the goal of the trip, then understand its purpose, and lastly, choose such expedient means of locomotion as automobiles, ships, or planes to set out on his journey. It is the same for the cultivator. He should first take Supreme Enlightenment (Buddhahood) as his ultimate goal, and the compassionate mind which benefits himself and others as the purpose of his cultivation, and then, depending on his preferences and capacities, choose a method, Zen, Pure Land or Esotericism, as an expedient for practice. Expedients, or skillful means, refer, in a broader sense, to flexible wisdom adapted to circumstances – the application of all actions and practices, whether favorable or unfavorable,

to the practice of the Bodhisattva Way. For this reason, the Bodhi Mind is the goal that the cultivator should clearly understand before he sets out to practice.

Thus, while the previous chapter dealt with the importance of the Pure Land method and its immediate purpose of escaping Birth and Death, this chapter goes into the Supreme Bodhi Mind (Buddhahood) as the ultimate goal of the cultivator.

When Buddha Sakyamuni preached the Four Noble Truths, we might expect that he would have explained the “cause” of suffering first. Instead, He began with the Truth of Suffering, precisely because he wanted to expose sentient beings to the concept of universal suffering. Upon realizing this truth, they would become concerned and look for the cause and source of suffering. Likewise, this author, following the intent of the Great Sage, first brought up the Pure Land method of escaping Birth and Death as a most urgent matter, and will proceed next to discuss the Bodhi Mind.

The Avatamsaka states:

To neglect the Bodhi Mind when practicing good deeds is the action of demons.

This teaching is very true indeed. For example, if someone begins walking without knowing the destination or goal of his journey, isn't his trip bound to be circuitous, tiring and useless? It is the same for the cultivator. If he expends a great deal of effort but forgets the goal of attaining Buddhahood to benefit himself and others, all his efforts will merely bring merits in the human and celestial realms. In the end he will still be deluded and revolve in the cycle of Birth and Death, undergoing immense suffering. If this is not the action of demons, what, then, is it? For this reason, developing the supreme Bodhi Mind to benefit oneself and others should be recognized as a crucial step.

## 2) The Bodhi Mind and the Pure Land Method

The Dharma, adapting to the times and the capacities of the people, consists of two traditions, the Northern and the Southern. The Southern tradition (Theravada) emphasizes everyday practical realities and swift self-emancipation, leading to the fruits of the Arhats or Pratyeka Buddhas. The Northern tradition (Mahayana, or Great Vehicle) teaches all-encompassing truths and stresses the goal of liberating all sentient beings, leading to the complete Enlightenment of the Tathagatas. Pure Land is a Mahayana teaching and therefore is not only directed toward the goal of self-enlightenment, but stresses the enlightenment of others at the same time.

When Buddhism spread to China [around the first century A.D.], it evolved, through the teachings of the Patriarchs, into ten schools. Among them are two schools which belong to the Southern (Theravada) tradition, the Satysiddhi School and the Abhidharma School. However, the faculties and temperament of the Chinese people did not correspond to the Southern tradition, and, therefore, within a short period of time it faded away. The other eight schools, are all Mahayana: the T'ien T'ai (Tendai) School, the Avatamsaka School, the Madyamika (Three Treatises) School, the Mind-Only (Yogacara) School, the Vinaya (Discipline) School, the Zen School, the Esoteric School and the Pure Land School. The vehicle for popularizing the Pure Land School is the Buddha Recitation method.

Pure Land being a Mahayana teaching, if the practitioner, in addition, develops the Supreme Bodhi Mind, mind and method will be perfect. This leads to Buddhahood, which encompasses both “self-benefit” and “other benefit.” If he recites the Buddha's name seeking rebirth in the celestial or human realms, Buddha Recitation becomes a celestial or human method. A practitioner who develops such a mind will receive only the blessings of the celestial or human realms.

When such blessings are exhausted, he will sink into a lower realm. If the practitioner is interested first and foremost in self-enlightenment, he will receive only the less exalted, incomplete fruits of the Sravakas and Pratyeka Buddhas.

Therefore, when reciting the Buddha's name, we should develop the supreme Bodhi Mind. There is a saying, "if you are off by a thousandth of an inch, you are off by a thousand miles." This being the case, Pure Land practitioners should pay particular attention to developing a proper Bodhi Mind.

## *The Practices of the Bodhi Mind*

### **3) How to Develop the Bodhi Mind**

Awakening the Bodhi Mind, as indicated earlier, can be summarized in the four Bodhisattva vows:

Sentient beings are numberless, I vow to save them all;  
Afflictions are inexhaustible, I vow to end them all;  
Dharma doors are boundless, I vow to master them all;  
Buddhahood is unsurpassable, I vow to attain it.

However, it is not enough simply to say "I have developed the Bodhi Mind," or to recite the above verses every day. To really develop the Bodhi Mind, the practitioner should, in his cultivation, meditate on and act in accordance with the essence of the vows. There are cultivators, clergy and lay people alike, who, each day, after reciting the sutras and the Buddha's name, kneel down to read the transference verses: "I wish to rid myself of the three obstructions and sever afflictions ..." However, their actual behavior is different: today they are greedy, tomorrow they become angry and bear grudges, the day after tomorrow it is delusion and laziness, the day after that it is belittling, criticizing and slandering others. The next day they are involved in arguments and disputes, leading to sadness and resentment on both sides. Under these circumstances, how can they rid themselves of the three obstructions and sever afflictions?

In general, most of us merely engage in external forms of cultivation, while paying lip service to "opening the mind." Thus, the fires of greed, anger and delusion continue to flare up, preventing us from tasting the pure and cool flavor of emancipation as taught by the Buddhas. Therefore, we have to pose the question, "How can we awaken the Bodhi Mind?"

In order to develop a true Bodhi Mind, we should ponder and meditate on the following six critical points:

#### **Point 1: the Enlightened Mind**

Sentient beings are used to grasping at this body as "me," at this discriminating mind-consciousness which is subject to sadness and anger, love and happiness, as "me." However, this flesh-and-blood body is illusory; tomorrow, when it dies, it will return to dust. Therefore, this body – a composite of the four elements (earth, water, fire and air) – is not "me." The same is true of our mind-consciousness, which is merely the synthesis of our perception of the six "Dusts" (form, sound, fragrance, taste, touch and dharmas).

Take the case of a person who formerly could not read or write, but is now studying English or German. When his studies are completed, he will have knowledge of English or German. Another example is a person who had not known Paris but who later on had the opportunity to visit France and absorb the sights and sounds of that city. Upon his return, if someone were to

mention Paris, the sights of that metropolis would appear clearly in his mind. That knowledge formerly did not exist; when the sights and sounds entered his subconscious, they “existed.” If these memories were not rekindled from time to time, they would gradually fade away and disappear, returning to the void.

This knowledge of ours, sometimes existing, sometimes not existing, some images disappearing, other images arising, always changing following the outside world, is illusory, not real. Therefore, the mind-consciousness is not “me.” The ancients have said:

The body is like a bubble, the mind is like the wind; they are illusions, without origin or True Nature.

If we truly realize that body and mind are illusory, and do not cling to them, we will gradually enter the realm of “no self” – escaping the mark of self. The self of our self being thus void, the self of “others” is also void, and therefore, there is no mark of others. Our self and the selves of others being void, the selves of countless sentient beings are also void, and therefore, there is no mark of sentient beings. The self being void, there is no lasting ego; there is really no one who has “attained Enlightenment.” This is also true of Nirvana, ever-dwelling, everlasting. Therefore, there is no mark of lifespan.

Here we should clearly understand: it is not that the eternally dwelling “True Thusness” has no real nature or true self; it is because the sages have no attachment to that nature that it becomes void.

Sentient beings being void, objects (dharmas) are also void, because objects always change, are born and die away, with no self-nature. We should clearly realize that this is not because objects, upon disintegration, become void and non-existent; but, rather, because, being illusory, their True Nature is empty and void. Sentient beings, too, are like that. Therefore, the ancients have said:

Why wait until the flowers fall to understand that form is emptiness?

The practitioner, having clearly understood that beings and dharmas are empty, can proceed to recite the Buddha’s name with a pure, clear and bright mind, free from all attachments. Only when he cultivates in such an enlightened frame of mind can he be said to have “developed the Bodhi Mind.”

#### Point 2: the Mind of Equanimity

In the sutras, Buddha Sakyamuni stated:

All sentient beings possess the Buddha Nature; they are our fathers and mothers of the past and the Buddhas of the future.

The Buddhas view sentient beings as Buddhas and therefore attempt, with equanimity and great compassion, to rescue them. Sentient beings view Buddhas as sentient beings, engendering afflictions, discrimination, hatred and scorn. The faculty of vision is the same; the difference lies in whether we are enlightened or not. As disciples of the Buddhas, we should follow their teachings and develop a mind of equanimity and respect towards sentient beings; they are the Buddhas of the future and are all endowed with the same Buddha Nature. When we cultivate with a mind of equanimity and respect, we rid ourselves of the afflictions of discrimination and scorn, and engender virtues. To cultivate with such a mind is called “developing the Bodhi Mind.”

#### Point 3: The Mind of Compassion

We ourselves and all sentient beings already possess the virtues, embellishments and wisdom of the Buddhas. However, because we are deluded as to our True Nature and commit evil deeds, we revolve in Birth and Death, to our immense suffering. Once we have understood this, we should rid ourselves of the mind of love-attachment, hate and discrimination, and develop the mind of repentance and compassion. We should seek expedient means to save ourselves and others, so that all are peaceful, happy and free of suffering. Let us be clear that compassion is different from love-attachment, that is, the mind of affection, attached to forms, which binds us with the ties of passion. Compassion is the mind of benevolence, rescuing and liberating, detached from forms, without discrimination or attachment. This mind manifests itself in every respect, with the result that we are peaceful, happy and liberated, and possess increased merit and wisdom.

If we wish to expand the compassionate mind, we should, taking our own suffering as a starting point, sympathize with the even more unbearable misery of others. A benevolent mind, eager to rescue and liberate, naturally develops; the compassionate thought of the Bodhi Mind arises from there. For instance, in a situation of war and famine, the young, who should be cared for by their parents, grow up orphans, helpless and forsaken. Likewise, the old, ideally, are supported by their children. However, their children having been killed prematurely, they are left to grieve and suffer alone. Witnessing these examples, our hearts are moved and we wish to come to their rescue. The compassionate thought of the Bodhi Mind, which up to that time had not developed, will spontaneously arise.

Other examples: there are young men, endowed with intelligence and full of health, with a bright future, who are suddenly cut down by bullets and bombs. There are also young women in their prime who suddenly lose the parents and family members upon whom they depend for support and therefore go astray, or they become orphans, their future livelihood and survival under a dark cloud. Witnessing these occurrences, our hearts are deeply moved and we wish to come to their rescue. The compassionate thought of the Bodhi Mind, which up to that time had not developed, will spontaneously arise.

There are people who are sick but cannot afford the high cost of treatment and must therefore suffer needlessly for months or years, to the point where some even commit suicide. There are the poor and unemployed, whose wives and children are undernourished and sick, their clothing in rags; they wander aimlessly, pursued by creditors, enduring hunger and cold, day in and day out. They can neither live decently nor die in peace. There are people who face difficult mental problems, without family or friends to turn to for advice and solace. There are those who are deluded and create bad karma, not knowing that in the future they will suffer retribution, unaware of the Dharma and thus ignorant of the way to emancipation. Witnessing these occurrences, our hearts are deeply moved and we wish to come to their rescue. The compassionate thought of the Bodhi Mind, which up to that time had not developed, will spontaneously arise.

In broader terms, as the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra taught in the Avatamsaka Sutra:

Great [Bodhisattvas develop] great compassion by ten kinds of observations of sentient beings: they see sentient beings have nothing to rely on for support; they see sentient beings are unruly; they see sentient beings lack virtues; they see sentient beings are asleep in ignorance; they see sentient beings do bad things; they see sentient beings are bound by desires; they see sentient beings drowning in the sea of Birth and Death; they see sentient beings chronically suffer from illness; they see sentient beings have no desire for goodness; they see sentient beings have lost the way to enlightenment. [Bodhisattvas] always observe sentient beings with these awarenesses. (Thomas Cleary, tr., The Flower Ornament Scripture [Avatamsaka Sutra].

Having developed the great compassionate mind, we should naturally develop the great Bodhi Mind and vow to rescue and liberate. Thus the great compassionate mind and the great Bodhi Mind interpenetrate freely. That is why to develop the compassionate mind is to develop the Bodhi Mind. Only when we cultivate with such great compassion can we be said to have “developed the Bodhi Mind.”

**Point 4: The Mind of Joy**

Having a benevolent mind, we should express it through a mind of joy. This mind is of two kinds: a rejoicing mind and a mind of “forgive and forget.” A rejoicing mind means that we are glad to witness meritorious and virtuous acts, however insignificant, performed by anyone, from the Buddhas and saints to all the various sentient beings. Also, whenever we see anyone receiving gain or merit, or prosperous, successful and at peace, we are happy as well, and rejoice with them.

A “forgive and forget” mind means that even if sentient beings commit nefarious deeds, show ingratitude, hold us in contempt and denigrate us, are wicked, causing harm to others or to ourselves, we calmly forbear, gladly forgiving and forgetting their transgressions.

This mind of joy and forbearance, if one dwells deeply on it, does not really exist, because there is in truth no mark of self, no mark of others, no mark of annoyance or harm. As stated in the Diamond Sutra:

The Tathagata teaches likewise that the Perfection of Patience is not the Perfection of Patience; such is merely a name. (A.F. Price, tr., “The Diamond Sutra,” p. 44. In *The Diamond Sutra & The Sutra of Hui Neng*.)

The rejoicing mind can destroy the affliction of mean jealousy. The “forgive and forget” mind can put an end to hatred, resentment, and revenge. Because the mind of joy cannot manifest itself in the absence of Enlightenment, it is that very Bodhi Mind. Only when we practice with such a mind, can we be said to have “developed the Bodhi Mind.”

**Point 5: The Mind of Repentance and Vows**

In the endless cycle of Birth and Death, all sentient beings are at one time or another related to one another. However, because of delusion and attachment to self, we have, for countless eons, harmed other sentient beings and created an immense amount of evil karma.

The Buddhas and the sages appear in this world out of compassion, to teach and liberate sentient beings, of whom we are a part. Even so, we engender a mind of ingratitude and destructiveness toward the Triple Jewel (Buddha, Dharma, Sangha). Now that we know this, we should feel remorse and repent the three evil karmas. Even the Bodhisattva Maitreya, who has attained non-retrogression, still practices repentance six times a day, in order to achieve Buddhahood swiftly. We should use our bodies to pay respect to the Triple Jewel, our mouths to confess our transgressions and seek expiation, and our minds to repent sincerely and undertake not to repeat them. Once we have repented, we should put a complete stop to our evil mind and conduct, to the point where mind and objects are empty. Only then will there be true repentance ... We should also vow to foster the Triple Jewel, rescue and liberate all sentient beings, atone for our past transgressions, and repay the “four great debts,” which are the debt to the Triple Jewel, the debt to our parents and teachers, the debt to our spiritual friends, and finally, the debt we owe to all sentient beings.

Through this repentant mind, our past transgressions will disappear, our virtues will increase with time, leading us to the stage of perfect merit and wisdom. Only when we practice with such a repentant mind can we be said to have “developed the Bodhi Mind.”

**Point 6: The Mind of no Retreat**

Although a practitioner may have repented his past transgressions and vowed to cultivate, his habitual delusions and obstructions are not easy to eliminate, nor is the accumulation of merits and virtues through cultivation of the six paramitas and ten thousand conducts necessarily easy to achieve. Moreover, the path of perfect Enlightenment and Buddhahood is long and arduous, full of hardship and obstructions over the course of untold eons. It is not the work of one or two life spans. For example, the Elder Sariputra [one of the main disciples of Buddha Sakyamuni] had reached the sixth “abode” of Bodhisattvahood in one of his previous incarnations and had developed the Bodhi Mind practicing the Paramita of Charity. However, when an externalist (non-Buddhist) asked him for one of his eyes and then, instead of using it, spat on it and crushed it with his foot, even Sariputra became angry and retreated from the Mahayana mind.

We can see, therefore, that holding fast to our vows is not an easy thing! For this reason, if the practitioner wishes to keep his Bodhi Mind from retrogressing, he should be strong and firm in his vows. He should vow thus: “Although this body of mine may endure immense suffering and hardship, be beaten to death or even reduced to ashes, I shall not, in consequence, commit wicked deeds or regress in my cultivation.” Practicing with such a non-regressing mind is called “developing the Bodhi Mind.”



The six cardinal points summarized above are sine qua non for those who aspire to develop the Bodhi Mind. Those who do not earnestly practice on this basis will never attain Buddhahood. There are only two roads before us: revolving in Birth and Death, or liberation. Although the way to liberation is full of difficulties and hardships, each step leads gradually to the place of light, freedom, peace and happiness. The way of Birth and Death, while temporarily leading to blessings in the celestial and human realms, ultimately ends in the three Evil Paths, subjecting us to untold suffering, with no end in sight.

Therefore, fellow cultivators, you should develop a mind of strong perseverance, marching forward toward the bright path of great Bodhi. The scene of ten thousand flowers vying to bloom in the sky of liberation will be there to greet you!

**4) Teachings on the Bodhi Mind**

The sutras have expounded at length on the Bodhi Mind, as exemplified in the following excerpts from the Avatamsaka Sutra:

In such people arises the [Bodhi Mind] – the mind of great compassion, for the salvation of all beings; the mind of great kindness, for unity with all beings; the mind of happiness, to stop the mass misery of all beings; the altruistic mind, to repulse all that is not good; the mind of mercy, to protect from all fears; the unobstructed mind, to get rid of all obstacles; the broad mind, to pervade all universes; the infinite mind, to pervade all spaces; the undefiled mind, to manifest the vision of all buddhas; the purified mind, to penetrate all knowledge of past, present, and future; the mind of knowledge, to remove all obstructive knowledge and enter the ocean of all-knowing

knowledge. (Thomas Cleary, tr., The Flower Ornament Scripture [Avatamsaka Sutra], Vol. III, p. 59.)

Just as someone in water is in no danger from fire, the [Bodhisattva] who is soaked in the virtue of the aspiration for enlightenment [Bodhi Mind] is in no danger from the fire of knowledge of individual liberation ...

Just as a diamond, even if cracked, relieves poverty, in the same way the diamond of the [Bodhi Mind], even if split, relieves the poverty of the mundane whirl.

Just as a person who takes the elixir of life lives for a long time and does not grow weak, the [Bodhisattva] who uses the elixir of the [Bodhi Mind] goes around in the mundane whirl for countless eons without becoming exhausted and without being stained by the ills of the mundane whirl. (Ibid., p. 362, 364.)



We can see that in the Avatamsaka Sutra, the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas explained the virtues of the Bodhi Mind at length. The above are merely a few major excerpts. The sutras also state:

The principal door to the Way is development of the Bodhi Mind. The principal criterion of practice is the making of vows.

If we do not develop the broad and lofty Bodhi Mind and do not make firm and strong vows, we will remain as we are now, in the wasteland of Birth and Death for countless eons to come. Even if we were to cultivate during that period, we would find it difficult to persevere and would only waste our efforts. Therefore, we should realize that in following Buddhism, we should definitely develop the Bodhi Mind without delay.

That is why Elder Zen Master Hsing An wrote the essay, “Developing the Bodhi Mind” to encourage the Fourfold Assembly. In it, the Master described eight approaches to developing the Bodhi Mind, depending on sentient beings’ vows: “erroneous/correct, true/false, great/small, imperfect/perfect.” What follows is a summary of his main points.

- 1) Some individuals cultivate without meditating on the Self-Nature. They just chase after externals or seek fame and profit, clinging to the fortunate circumstances of the present time, or they seek the fruits of future merits and blessings. Such development of the Bodhi Mind is called “erroneous.”
- 2) Not seeking fame, profit, happiness, merit or blessings, but seeking only Buddhahood, to escape Birth and Death for the benefit of oneself and others – such development of the Bodhi Mind is called “correct.”
- 3) Aiming with each thought to seek Buddhahood “above” and save sentient beings “below,” without fearing the long, arduous Bodhi path or being discouraged by sentient beings who are difficult to save, with a mind as firm as the resolve to ascend a mountain to its peak – such development of the Bodhi Mind is called “true.”
- 4) Not repenting or renouncing our transgressions, appearing pure on the outside while remaining filthy on the inside, formerly full of vigor but now lazy and lax, having good intentions intermingled with the desire for fame and profit, practicing good deeds tainted by defilements – such development of the Bodhi Mind is called “false.”

- 5) Only when the realm of sentient beings has ceased to exist, would one's vows come to an end; only when Buddhahood has been realized, would one's vows be achieved. Such development of the Bodhi Mind is called "great."
- 6) Viewing the Triple World as a prison and Birth and Death as enemies, hoping only for swift self-salvation and being reluctant to help others – such development of the Bodhi Mind is called "small."
- 7) Viewing sentient beings and Buddhahood as outside the Self-Nature while vowing to save sentient beings and achieve Buddhahood; engaging in cultivation while the mind is always discriminating – such development of the Bodhi Mind is called "imperfect" (biased).
- 8) Knowing that sentient beings and Buddhahood are the Self-Nature while vowing to save sentient beings and achieve Buddhahood; cultivating virtues without seeing oneself cultivating, saving sentient beings without seeing anyone being saved – such development of the Bodhi Mind is called "perfect."

Among the eight ways described above, we should not follow the "erroneous," "false," "imperfect," or "small" ways. We should instead follow the "true," "correct," "perfect," and "great" ways. Such cultivation is called developing the Bodhi Mind in a proper way.

In his commentary, Zen Master Hsing An also advised the Great Assembly to remember ten causes and conditions when developing the Bodhi Mind. These are: our debt to the Buddhas, our parents, teachers, benefactors and other sentient beings; concern about the sufferings of Birth and Death; respect for our Self-Nature; repentance and elimination of evil karma; upholding the correct Dharma; and seeking rebirth in the Pure Land.

On the subject of rebirth, he stated, quoting the Amitabha Sutra:

You cannot hope to be reborn in the Pure Land with little merit and virtue and few causes and conditions or good roots.

Therefore, you should have numerous merits and virtues as well as good roots to qualify for rebirth in the Pure Land. However, there is no better way to plant numerous good roots than to develop the Bodhi Mind, while the best way to achieve numerous merits and virtues is to recite the name of Amitabha Buddha. A moment of singleminded recitation surpasses years of practicing charity; truly developing the Bodhi Mind surpasses eons of cultivation. Holding firmly to these two causes and conditions assures rebirth in the Pure Land.

Through these teachings of the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and Patriarchs, we can see that the Bodhi Mind is essential for the practice of the Way.

### *Key Conditions with respect to the Bodhi Mind*

#### **5) The Path of Birth and Death is Full of Danger**

There are many gates to the garden of Enlightenment. As long as the practitioner takes the great Bodhi Mind as his correct starting point, whatever Dharma door he chooses, in accordance with his capacities and preferences, will bring results.

If we consider "capacity," Pure Land embraces persons of all levels. Not only ordinary people but also Bodhisattvas (Manjusri, Samantabhadra) and Patriarchs (Asvaghosha, Nagarjuna) have all vowed to be reborn in the Pure Land. If we take "timing" into consideration, we should realize that in this Dharma-Ending Age when sentient beings in general have scattered minds and heavy

obstructions, Buddha Recitation is easy to practice and can help the practitioner achieve rebirth in the Pure Land in just one lifetime. However, if we discuss “individual preferences,” the Pure Land method alone cannot satisfy everyone; hence the need for many schools and methods.

In general, cultivators endowed with a sharp mind, seeking a direct, simple and clear approach, prefer Zen. Those who are attracted to supernatural power, the mystical and the mysterious prefer the Esoteric School. Those who like reasoning and require a clear, genuine analysis of everything before they can believe and act, prefer the Mind-Only School ... Each school has further subdivisions, so that adherents of the same school may have differing practices.



The cultivator who has developed the Bodhi Mind, vowing to save himself and others, may follow any of the schools mentioned earlier. Nevertheless, in this Dharma-Ending Age, he should, at the same time, practice Buddha Recitation seeking rebirth in the Pure Land – thus ensuring success without retrogression. Why is this so? There are three cardinal points:

In the wasteland of Birth and Death, there are many dangers and obstacles to cultivation. In order to escape the dangerous cycle of Birth and Death and ensure that there is no retreat or loss of the Bodhi Mind, we should seek rebirth in the Pure Land. This is the first cardinal point the practitioner should keep in mind.

The ancients often reminded us:

If we cultivate without striving for liberation, then our cultivation in this life is in fact an enemy during our third rebirth.

This is because in the first lifetime, we endure suffering and bitterness in our practice and therefore, in the next life we enjoy wealth, intelligence and authority. In this second lifetime, it is easy to be deluded by power and wealth, “charming spouses and cute children,” and other such worldly pleasures. Having tasted lust and passion, it is easy to become attached, and the deeper the attachments, the closer we are to the dark place of perdition, as we resort to numerous evil deeds to strengthen our power, authority and ambitions. Having generated such causes in our second lifetime, how can we fail to descend upon the three Evil Paths in our third lifetime?



Some would ask: “If we have expended efforts to cultivate and sow good seeds in our previous life, how can we lose all our good roots and wisdom in the second lifetime, to the point of descending upon the Evil Paths in the third lifetime?”

Answer: Although good roots exist, the bad karma accumulated for eons past is not necessarily wiped out. Furthermore, on this earth, good actions are as difficult to perform as climbing a high tree, while bad deeds are as easy to commit as sliding down a slope. As the sages of old have said:

The good deeds performed all of one’s life are still not enough; the bad deeds performed in just one day are already too many.

For example, people in positions of power and authority whom we meet today have all, to a greater or lesser extent, practiced charity and cultivated blessings and good karma in their previous lives. However, few among them now lean toward the path of virtue, while those who are mired in fame and profit constitute the majority. Let us ask ourselves, how many persons of

high academic achievement, power and fame would agree to leave the secular life, opting for a frugal, austere existence directed toward the goal of lofty and pure liberation? Monks and nuns, too, may patiently cultivate when they have not yet reached high positions. However, with power and fame, and many disciples bowing to and serving them, even they may become easy prey to the trappings of the vain world. Nowadays, how many individuals, clergy or laymen, who were practicing vigorously in the past, have gradually grown lax and lazy, abandoning cultivation or leaving the Order entirely, retreating from the Way – why even mention the next lifetime?



If such is the case in the human realm, how much more difficult it is to cultivate in the celestial realms, where the Five Pleasures are so much more subtle!

We have been talking about those who enjoy blessings. Those lacking in blessings and leading a life of deprivation also find it difficult to cultivate. Even if they are middle class, in this life full of heterodox ways, they may find it difficult to meet true Dharma teachers or to discover the path to liberation. Let us not even mention those treading the three Evil Paths, where cultivation is tens of thousands times more difficult, because they are deluded and suffering both in mind and body.

The cycle of Birth and Death is filled with such dangers and calamities. Thus, if we do not seek rebirth in the Pure Land, it is difficult to ensure non-retrogression of the Bodhi Mind.

## 6) The Need to Seek Liberation in this Very Life

In this Dharma-Ending Age, if we practice other methods without following Pure Land at the same time, it is difficult to attain emancipation in this very lifetime. If emancipation is not achieved in this lifetime, deluded as we are on the path of Birth and Death, all of our crucial vows will become empty thoughts. This is the second cardinal point which the cultivator should keep in mind.

Those practitioners who follow other schools, stressing only self-help and a firm, never-changing mind, believe that we should just pursue our cultivation life after life. Even if we do not achieve emancipation in this life, we shall certainly do so in a future lifetime. However, there is one thing we should consider: Do we have any firm assurances that in the next lifetime, we will continue cultivating? For, if we have not yet attained Enlightenment, we are bound to be deluded upon rebirth, easily forgetting the vow to cultivate which we made in our previous lifetimes. Moreover, in this world, conditions favoring progress in the Way are few, while the opportunities for retrogression are many. How many monks and nuns have failed to pursue their cultivation upon rebirth, as in the examples summarized in the first chapter?

The sutras state:

Even Bodhisattvas are deluded in the bardo stage,  
Even Sravakas are deluded at birth.

Bardo is the intermediate stage between death and rebirth ... In the interval between the end of this current life and the beginning of the next life, even Bodhisattvas are subject to delusion, if they have not yet attained [a high degree of] Enlightenment.

Another passage in the sutras states:

Common mortals are confused and deluded when they enter the womb, reside in the womb, and exit from the womb. Celestial kings, thanks to their merits, are awake upon entering the womb, but are confused and deluded when residing in or exiting from the womb. Sravakas are awake when they enter and reside in the womb; however, they are confused and deluded when they exit from the womb. Only those Bodhisattvas who have attained the Tolerance of Non-Birth are always awake – entering, residing in, and exiting from the womb.



In a few instances, ordinary people, because of special karmic conditions, are able to remember their previous lives, but these are very rare occurrences. Or else, they could be Bodhisattvas who took human form in order to demonstrate the existence of transmigration to sentient beings. Otherwise, all sentient beings are deluded when they pass from one life to another. When they are in such a state, all their knowledge of the Dharma and their great vows from previous lives are hidden by delusion and often forgotten.

This author recalls the story of a Dharma colleague. In his youth, each time he happened to be dreaming, he would see himself floating freely, high up in the air, traveling everywhere. As he grew older, he could only float lower and lower, until he could no longer float at all. In the commentary *Guide to Buddhism*, there is the story of a layman who, at the age of four or five, could see everything by night as clearly as in the daytime. As the years went by, this faculty diminished. From the age of ten onward, he could no longer see in the dark, except that from time to time, if he happened to wake up in the middle of the night, he might see clearly for a few seconds. After his seventeenth birthday, he could experience this special faculty only once every two or three years; however, his special sight would be merely a flash before dying out. Such persons had cultivated in their previous lives. However, when they were reborn on this earth they became deluded, and then, as their attachments grew deeper, their special faculties diminished.

There are similar cases of persons who can see everything clearly for a few dozen miles around them. Others can see things underground, through walls, or in people's pockets. However, if they do not pursue cultivation, their special faculties diminish with time and, in the end, they become just like everyone else. Some persons, having read a book once, can close it and recite every line without a single mistake. Others have a special gift for poetry, so that whatever they say or write turns poetic. However, if they do not pursue cultivation, they sometimes end by rejecting the Dharma.

An eminent Master once commented that such persons had practiced meditation in their previous lives to a rather high level and reached a certain degree of attainment. However, following the Zen tradition, they sought only immediate awakening to the True Nature, severing attachment to the concepts of Buddha and Dharma (i.e., letting the mind be empty, recognizing no Buddha and no Dharma). Therefore, those who failed to attain Enlightenment were bound to undergo rebirth in the Triple Realm, whereupon, relying on their mundane intelligence, they sometimes became critical of Buddhism. Even true cultivators in the past were thus; how would today's practitioners fare compared to them?



As Buddha Sakyamuni predicted, “In the Dharma-Ending Age, cultivators are numerous, but those who can achieve Supreme Enlightenment are few.” And, not having achieved it, even with bad karma as light as a fine silk thread, they are subject to Birth and Death. Although there may be a few cultivators who have awakened to the Way, being awakened is different from

attaining Supreme Enlightenment. During rebirth, they are bound to be deluded and unfree. In subsequent lifetimes, there may be few conditions for progress and many opportunities for retrogression, making it difficult to preserve the vow of liberation intact.

Concerning the retrogression of practitioners who have merely experienced Awakening, the ancients have provided three analogies:

- 1) When we crush prairie grass with a stone block, though the grass cannot grow, its roots are not yet rotten or destroyed. If conditions arise that cause the stone to be overturned, the grass will continue to grow as before.
- 2) When we pour water into a jar, though the impurities are deposited at the very bottom, they are not yet filtered out. If conditions change and the water is stirred up, the impurities will rise.
- 3) Take the case of clay which is molded into earthenware but not yet fired in a kiln. If it should rain, the earthenware would certainly disintegrate.

The strong probability that those who have merely experienced an Awakening will retrogress during transmigration is similar to the above examples.

Furthermore, in the Dharma-Ending Age, how many cultivators can claim to be awakened to the Way? Awakening to the Way is not easy. There was once a Zen Master who practiced with all his might for forty years before he succeeded. Another Great Master sat for so long that he wore out more than a dozen meditation cushions before he saw his Original Nature. As far as today's Zen practitioners are concerned (with the exception of a few saints who have taken human form to teach sentient beings), the majority only manage to achieve a temporary calming of the mind and body; at most they may witness a few auspicious realms! Even if they have awakened to the Way, they can still encounter dangerous obstacles during transmigration, as previously described. The path of Birth and Death, filled with fearful dangers for those who have not attained Enlightenment, is the same. Therefore, to claim that we should not fear Birth and Death is a superficial point of view.

Furthermore, over the centuries, the Dharma has met with difficulties in some parts of the world. Wherever materialism has spread, Buddhism has come under criticism. There are places where temples and pagodas have been destroyed, sutras and commentaries burned, monks and nuns forcibly returned to lay life, and common citizens barred from practicing their faith. Even if Buddhism is revived later on, it will have undergone changes and possibly lost some of its vitality ... For this reason, we should follow the Pure Land School, to ensure non-retrogression of the Bodhi Mind. Even if we follow other schools we should, at the same time, practice Buddha Recitation seeking rebirth in the Land of Ultimate Bliss.

This is the common exhortation of such eminent sages as Masters Lien Ch'ih, Ou I, Chien Mi and Yin Kuang.

## 7) How to Perfect the Bodhi Mind

Having developed the Bodhi Mind and considering our own capacities and circumstances, what expedients should we adopt to perfect that Mind? If we want both the self-centered and the altruistic aspects of the Bodhi Vow to be complete, there is no better way than to seek rebirth in the Pure Land. This is the third cardinal point that the practitioner should keep in mind.

A high-ranking monk of old, having expressed his determination to cultivate, penned the following verses:

I have pondered this world, and the world beyond,  
Whose name would one recite, if not Amitabha's?

Truthfully, after reading these verses, pondering, and comparing Dharma methods, people's capacities and the current environment, this author is convinced that Pure Land is the safest and most complete path.



Some may say that having awakened the Bodhi Mind, we should remain in the Saha World, because in this world there are many sentient beings in need of help. Why seek rebirth in the Pure Land?

Let me reverse the question: What are the conditions that would allow us to save sentient beings? They are, of course, merit, virtue, wisdom, eloquence, spiritual power and auspicious features and bearing. (Do we have these qualities to any degree?) Particularly, severing afflictions and delusions and developing wisdom, so that we are not led astray by mundane things, is no easy matter! The ancients have said, "Severing Delusions of Views is as difficult as preventing water from running down a mountain forty miles high." If it is so difficult to rid ourselves of Delusions of Views, how much more difficult it is to sever Delusions of Thought, Delusions of "Dust and Sand," and ignorance.

Delusions of Views, simply put, are the afflictions connected with seeing and grasping at the coarse level. Delusions of Thought are afflictions at the subtle level. For countless eons, the infectious filth of greed, anger and delusion, as well as countless other erroneous views, have been instilled in our mind-consciousness. Can we really manage, in the short span of this life, to do away with them all? Today's cultivators, in general, have few blessings and shallow wisdom. Just reciting the words "Amitabha Buddha" in an accomplished manner is difficult enough. Why even mention such distant goals as saving sentient beings at will?

For this reason, the immediate necessity is to seek rebirth in the Western Pure Land, first rescuing ourselves from the cycle of Birth and Death and then relying upon the auspicious environment of that Land to practice vigorously. We should wait until we have achieved Enlightenment and developed wisdom, eloquence, spiritual powers and auspicious features before returning to the Saha World to rescue sentient beings. Only then will we have some freedom of action.

Nevertheless, considering the responsibility and the compassionate mind of the cultivator, we should not completely reject all attempts to save sentient beings in our current life. In truth, however, our present altruistic attempts can only be within the framework of "according to one's means and conditions." This is not unlike the case of someone who, having fallen into the river of delusion, tries his best to reach the shore, all the while shouting to others, exhorting them to do likewise.



To speak more broadly, even if we have attained the stage of Non-Birth and must reside in the evil worlds in order to perfect the "paramitas," in reality we cannot be away from the various pure lands. Why is this so? As stated in the sutras, even Bodhisattvas of the First Stage cannot know the "comings and goings" of Bodhisattvas of the Second Stage, much less the realms of the Buddhas! For this reason, in the Avatamsaka Sutra [one of the most grandiose texts of the Mahayana canon], after preaching the Ten Great Vows, the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra immediately admonished the Bodhisattvas at all fifty-two levels (i.e., all Bodhisattvas) to seek rebirth in the Western Pure Land. This is because Amitabha Buddha is always teaching in

that Land, and Bodhisattvas wishing to enter the lofty, esoteric realm of the Tathagatas should remain close to and study with Him.

Thus, even the highest level Bodhisattvas should spiritually divide themselves – on the one hand remaining in the various defiled worlds to accumulate good deeds and on the other, being present in the various pure lands to be close to and cultivate with the Buddhas. Rebirth in the Pure Land of Amitabha Buddha is, therefore, important for sentient beings – from the lowest beings to the highest level Bodhisattvas.

As seen above, there are many obstacles along the path of Birth and Death. If we have not reached the stage of Non-Birth, it is easy to become deluded during transmigration and descend into evil realms. For this reason, to ensure non-retrogression of the Great Bodhi Mind and fulfillment of the Bodhi Vow, common mortals such as ourselves – who urgently need to resolve the issue of Birth and Death existing before our very eyes – should seek rebirth in the Pure Land of Amitabha Buddha. Even the highest Bodhisattvas cannot remain away from the Pure Land, if they wish to enter the lofty, esoteric realms of the Tathagatas and fulfill the Great Bodhi Vow.

# Introduction to Pure Land Buddhism

by

**Dr. J.C. Cleary**

Buddhism has evolved many, many forms during its long history. Codes of conduct, guidelines for communal life, rituals, meditative practices, modes of teaching, images, fables and philosophies have varied greatly over time and place. According to the fundamental Buddhist principle of skill-in-means, this multiformity is natural and proper, a necessary response to the great variety of circumstances in which Buddhism has been propagated.

Skill-in-means requires that the presentation of the Buddhist Teaching, (sometimes simply called “the Dharma”), be adapted to the mentality and circumstances of the people being taught. According to Buddhist seers, the absolute truth is inconceivable and cannot be captured in any particular formulation. Therefore in Buddhism there is no fixed dogma, only provisional, partial expressions of the teaching, suited to the capabilities of the audience being addressed.

In keeping with this fundamental principle, a tolerant, nonsectarian approach has normally prevailed throughout Buddhist history. Where dogmatic controversies and sectarian partisanship have cropped up in the communities of Buddhist followers, these are distortions of the teaching, and have always been based on misunderstanding and misinformation ...



Pure Land Buddhism is a religion of faith, of faith in Amitabha Buddha [and in one’s capacity to achieve Buddhahood]. Amitabha Buddha presides over the Pure Land, a “paradise” in the west, the Land of Ultimate Bliss, named “Peaceful Nurturing.” In the Pure Land, there is none of the suffering and defilement and delusion that normally blocks people’s efforts toward enlightenment here in our world (which the Buddhists named “Endurance.”)

The immediate goal of Pure Land believers is to be reborn in Amitabha’s Pure Land. There, in more favorable surroundings, in the presence of Amitabha, they will eventually attain complete enlightenment.

The essence of Pure Land practice thus consists of invoking the name of Amitabha Buddha, contemplating the qualities of Amitabha, visualizing Amitabha, and taking vows to be born in the Pure Land.



Making a vow to attain birth in the Pure Land signifies a fundamental reorientation of the believer’s motivations and will. No longer is the purpose of life brute survival, or fulfillment of a social role, or the struggle to wrest some satisfaction from a frustrating, taxing environment. By vowing to be reborn in the Pure Land, believers shift their focus. The joys and sorrows of this world become incidental, inconsequential. The present life takes on value chiefly as an opportunity to concentrate one’s awareness on Amitabha, and purify one’s mind accordingly.

The hallmark of Pure Land Buddhism is reciting the buddha-name, invoking Amitabha Buddha by chanting his name. Through reciting the buddha-name, people focus their attention on Amitabha Buddha. This promotes mindfulness of buddha, otherwise known as buddha-remembrance [buddha recitation].

In what sense is buddha “remembered”? “Buddha” is the name for the one reality that underlies all forms of being, as well as an epithet for those who witness and express this reality. According to the Buddhist Teaching, all people possess an inherently enlightened true nature that is their real identity. By becoming mindful of buddha, therefore, people are just regaining their own real identity. They are remembering their own buddha-nature.

Buddha as such is a concept that transcends any particular embodiment, such as Shakyamuni Buddha (the historical buddha born in India), or Maitreya Buddha (the future buddha), or Vairocana Buddha (the cosmic buddha) or Amitabha Buddha (the buddha of the western paradise). Buddha exists in many forms, but all share the same “body of reality,” the same Dharmakaya, which is formless, omnipresent, all-pervading, indescribable, infinite – the everywhere-equal essence of all things, the one reality within-and-beyond all appearances.

Dharmakaya Buddha is utterly abstract and in fact inconceivable, so buddha takes on particular forms to communicate with living beings by coming within their range of perception. For most people, this is the only way that buddha can become comprehensible and of practical use. The particular embodiments of buddha, known as Nirmanakaya, are supreme examples of compassionate skill-in-means.

Pure Land people focus on buddha in the form of Amitabha, the buddha of infinite life and infinite light. Believers put their faith in Amitabha Buddha and recite his name, confident in the promises he has given to deliver all who invoke his name. All classes of people, whatever their other characteristics or shortcomings, are guaranteed rebirth in the Pure Land and ultimate salvation, if only they invoke Amitabha’s name with singleminded concentration and sincere faith.

### **Buddha-Name Recitation**

Buddha-name recitation is practiced in many forms: silently or aloud, alone or in groups, by itself or combined with visualization of Amitabha or contemplation of the concept of buddha, or combined with the methods of Zen. The aim is to concentrate one’s attention on Amitabha, and let all other thoughts die away. At first and all along, miscellaneous thoughts intrude, and the mind wanders. But with sustained effort, one’s focus on the buddha-name becomes progressively more steady and clear. Mindfulness of buddha – buddha-remembrance – grows stronger and purer.

Reciting the buddha-name functions as a powerful antidote to those great enemies of clear awareness that Buddhists have traditionally labeled “oblivion” and “scattering.” “Oblivion” refers to the tendency of the human mind when not occupied by its habitual thoughts to sink into a state of torpor and sleepy nescience. “Scattering” is the other pole of ordinary mental life, where the consciousness flies off in all directions pursuing objects of thought and desire.

Through the centuries, those who practice it have found that buddha-name recitation is a much more beneficial use of mind than the ordinary run of hopes and fears that would otherwise preoccupy their minds. Calm focus replaces agitation and anxiety, producing a most invigorating saving of energy. “Mixed mindfulness is the disease. Mindfulness of buddha is the medicine.”

According to the Pure Land teaching, all sorts of evil karma are dissolved by reciting the buddha-name wholeheartedly and singlemindedly. What is karma? In Buddhist terms, “karma” means “deeds,” “actions.” Through sequences of cause and effect, what we do and what those we interact with do determines our experience and shapes our perceptions, which in turn guides our further actions.

Habitual patterns of perception and behavior build up and acquire momentum. Now we are in the grips of “karmic consciousness,” so-called because it is a state of mind at once the result

of past deeds and the source of future deeds. This is the existential trap from which all forms of Buddhist practice aim to extricate us.

According to the Pure Land teaching, buddha-name recitation is more effective for this purpose than any other practice, and can be carried out by anyone. The key is being singleminded, focusing the mind totally on Amitabha, and thus interrupting the onward flow of karmic consciousness. This is where Zen and Pure Land meet.

### **All Classes Go to the Pure Land**

Buddha-name recitation enables all classes of people to attain birth in the Pure Land, from the most virtuous Buddhist saints, to those who are incapable of meritorious actions and do not develop the aspiration for enlightenment [Bodhi Mind].

In Pure Land terminology, “nine classes” go to the Pure Land. The highest class are those who achieve the traditional goals of Buddhism – that is, who free themselves from desire, observe the precepts, and practice the six perfections of giving, discipline, forbearance, energetic progress, meditation and wisdom. The lowest class who go to the Pure Land are those who keep on, as wayward human animals, piling up evil karma and committing all kinds of sins: even they can attain birth in the Pure Land, if only they focus their minds and recite the buddha-name.

Buddha-name recitation in itself dissolves away evil karma, no matter how – so say the Pure Land teachings. Infinity lies latent in the gaps within moment-to-moment mundanity in the Zen formulation. But above all it is the power of Amitabha that makes birth in the Pure Land possible for sinners as well as saints, because Amitabha has vowed to save all who faithfully and singlemindedly invoke his name.

### **The Pure Land**

Amitabha’s Pure Land is depicted in a way designed to attract believers. In the Pure Land there is no sickness, old age, or death. The sufferings and difficulties of this world do not exist. Those born in the Pure Land come forth there from lotus flowers, not from a woman’s womb in pain and blood, and once born they are received and welcome by Amitabha and his assistants. They receive immortal, transformed bodies, and are beyond the danger of falling back into lesser incarnations. They are in the direct presence of Amitabha Buddha and the great bodhisattvas Kuan-yin (Avalokitesvara) and Shih-chih (Mahasthamaprapta), who aid in their ultimate enlightenment.

Those who go to the Pure Land live there among beings of the highest virtue. Beautiful clothing and fine food are provided to them ready-made. There are no extremes of heat and cold. Correct states of concentration are easy to achieve and maintain. There are no such things as greed, ignorance, anger, strife, or laziness.

The Pure Land is described, metaphorically, as resplendent with all manner of jewels and precious things, towers of agate, palaces of jade. There are huge trees made of various gems, covered with fruits and flowers. Giant lotuses spread their fragrance everywhere. There are pools, also made of seven jewels, and filled with the purest water, which adjusts itself to the depth and temperature the bathers prefer. Underfoot, gold covers the ground. Flowers fall from the sky day and night, and the whole sky is covered with a net made of gold and silver and pearls. The Pure Land is perfumed with beautiful scents and filled with celestial music.

Most precious of all, in the Pure Land, we are told, not only the buddha and bodhisattvas, Amitabha and his assistants, but even the birds and the trees (as manifestations of Amitabha) are continuously expounding the Dharma, the Buddhist Teaching.

## Pure Land Literature

Pure Land literature offers many stories presented as real-life biographical accounts which corroborate the efficacy of Pure Land practice, and the description of the Pure Land paradise drawn from the scriptures. Like most Buddhist biographies written in China, these accounts are very terse, and focus on the subject's religious life. There are stories of men and women, monks and nuns, nobles and high officials and commoners too, people young and old in various stations of life, all devoted to Pure Land practice.

The stories often relate people's early experience of Buddhism, and note the various practices they took up and the scriptures they studied. In due time, as the stories tell it, their faith in Pure Land is awakened, perhaps by meeting an inspirational teacher, perhaps through a dream or vision, perhaps from hearing the Pure Land scriptures, perhaps from personal acquaintance with a devoted Pure Land practitioner.

The stories always make a point of the zeal and dedication of the true believer in reciting the buddha-name. Here are some typical descriptions:

“He cut off his motivation for worldly things and dedicated his mind to the Pure Land.”

“He concentrated his mind on reciting the buddha-name.”

“She recited the buddha-name with complete sincerity.”

“He set his will on the Pure Land.”

“She recited the buddha-name day and night without stopping.”

“He recited the buddha-name singlemindedly.”

“She developed the mind of faith and recited the buddha-name tirelessly.”

“She turned her mind to buddha-name recitation and practiced it wholeheartedly, never slacking off.”

“The older he became, the more earnest he was in reciting the buddha-name.”

This is the message of the Pure Land life stories.

The climax of a typical Pure Land biography comes in the subject's death scene, when buddha-name recitation is rewarded and the Pure Land teachings are confirmed.

The believer dies peacefully, even joyously, with mind and body composed, in full confidence of rebirth in paradise, reciting the buddha-name. Often the Pure Land devotee is able to predict his or her own death in advance, and calmly bid farewell to loved ones. Sometimes the believer receives reassuring visits from Amitabha in dreams or visions to prepare her or him to face the end.

Various signs give proof that the dying person is about to be reborn in the Pure Land. Uncanny fragrances and supernatural colored lights fill the room. Celestial music is heard. Flowers from the Pure Land appear: yellow lotuses, green lotuses, golden lotuses. The dying person sees Amitabha coming from the west to welcome him, or feels Amitabha's hand on his head, or sees Amitabha accompanied by Kuan-yin and Shih-chih appear to lead him to paradise. The dying person sees visions of the Pure Land: Amitabha and his companions seated on a jeweled dais, or the seven jewel ponds, or a staircase of gems leading up to the Pure Land.

Those close to the dying believer receive assurances that rebirth in the Pure Land is imminent. In the most frequent motif, the dying person announces to his or her companions, “Buddha is coming to welcome me!” The dying person’s relatives dream of a lotus opening in the Pure Land’s jewel pond, with their reborn kinsman appearing inside it. Or the relatives see visions of the deceased riding off to the west on a green lotus. Or the dead person visits the survivors in dreams and assures them that she has indeed been reborn in the Pure Land.

After the person dies, the people in the room perceive a magical fragrance and hear celestial music gradually fading away toward the west. A golden lotus might appear on the death bed or on top of the coffin. The dead believer’s corpse does not decompose. Auspicious colored clouds hang over the funeral pyre.

With elements like these, the death scenes in Pure Land biographies are meant to prove to the faithful that rebirth in the Pure Land is indeed the guaranteed fate of those who recite the buddha-name.



Besides collections of believers’ biographies, Pure Land literature includes other types of works designed to promote faith in the Pure Land teachings.

Many commentaries were composed on the sutras basic to Pure Land Buddhism: the Amitabha Sutra, the Contemplation of Amitabha Sutra (Meditation Sutra), and the Sutra of Infinite Life (Longer Amitabha Sutra).

Pure Land adepts also wrote essays to explain Pure Land beliefs in terms of Great Vehicle Buddhism as a whole, and to answer objections to Pure Land teachings and clarify points of doubt.

Some writers linked the Pure Land teaching to the other currents in Buddhism by picking out references to Amitabha’s Pure Land and buddha-name recitation contained in the Buddhist scriptures and philosophical treatises not identified with the Pure Land school.

There are many records of talks given by famous Pure Land teachers down through the centuries, and personal letters they wrote, urging people to adopt Pure Land practice as the most effective way to make progress on the Buddhist Path.

### **Pure Land Associations**

For many Pure Land Buddhists, an important means of strengthening their faith has been membership in a group of fellow believers. The faithful join to form Pure Land associations, where they can meet regularly with like-minded people to recite the buddha-name and, if they are fortunate, listen to genuine teachers expound Pure Land texts. Though buddha-name recitation can of course be done alone in private, many people have found group recitation very powerful in helping them to focus their attention. Being part of a community with shared beliefs helps to reinforce the dedication of the individual and his belief that Pure Land is a correct application of the Dharma that really works for people of that place and time. When methods are being applied correctly, the group also provides the individual believer with living examples of the mental strength and unshakable serenity acquired by longterm practitioners of buddha-name recitation.

Pure Land adepts often founded teaching centers where people could gather to recite the buddha-name and hear the Pure Land doctrine. They enrolled believers in religious associations dedicated to buddha-remembrance, with their own bylaws for membership, scheduled meetings, and guidelines for practice. Though many monks and nuns practiced buddha-name recitation, and many lay Buddhists pursued Pure Land practice on their own, the typical institutional form

of Pure Land Buddhism was the voluntary association of laypeople, sometimes, but not always, led by monks and nuns.

On a purely social level, Pure Land associations could evolve into communities that offered their members not only ideological companionship and a sense of belonging, but also tangible material support in the form of mutual aid and a network of people who could be trusted and relied on. In many times and places, Pure Land societies have had their own facilities and funds. Under oppressive conditions, where the local social structure offered little security and much institutionalized violence and exploitation, popular religious groupings might become the real locus of loyalty and community feeling.

### **Pure Land Buddhism as Other-worldly**

Among the many varieties of Buddhism, the Pure Land teaching most deserves the epithet “other-worldly,” often erroneously applied to Buddhism as a whole. Pure Land doctrine teaches that this world is an arena of unavoidable suffering and frustration, and holds out the vivid prospect of rebirth in another, better world, where sickness, pain and death do not exist. This world is a hopeless trap, from which we can escape only by the power of Amitabha. Unless we attain rebirth in the Pure Land, peace and happiness, to say nothing of enlightenment, are beyond reach ...

From a Buddhist perspective, it is the modern “this-worldly” orientation to life that is a form of unrealistic escapism and unwarranted pessimism about human possibilities. It is unrealistic because it seeks the meaning of life in gratifications that can only be temporary and partial: it seeks escape from mortality in transient pleasures. It is unnecessarily pessimistic because it ignores or denies the transcendental capacity inherent in humankind: “turning one’s back on enlightenment to join with the dusts.”

### **Pure Land Buddhism within the Buddhist Spectrum**

What was the relationship between Pure Land and the other forms of Buddhism in East Asia?

Pure Land teaching incorporated many of the standards and perspectives that were basic in popular Buddhism as a whole, deriving from the Buddhist scriptures. Pure Land teachers urged their listeners to observe the basic Buddhist moral code, to refrain from killing, stealing, lying, sexual excess, and intoxication. Strict vegetarianism was encouraged, as a corollary to the precept against taking life. Pure Land people were to give their allegiance to the “Three Jewels,” that is, the enlightened one (Buddha), the teaching of enlightenment (Dharma), and the community of seekers (Sangha).

Pure Land teachers adopted the usual Buddhist moral perspective of cause and effect, of rewards and punishments according to one’s actions. Pure Land people were taught to accumulate merit by good works, such as giving charity to the needy, helping widows and orphans, maintaining public facilities, supporting monks and nuns, contributing money and supplies for ceremonies and rituals, and making donations to Buddhist projects like building temples, casting statues and painting images, and copying and printing scriptures. Many Pure Land believers, in addition to reciting the buddha-name, studied and chanted various Buddhist scriptures, like the Lotus Sutra, the Diamond Sutra, and the Flower Ornament (Avatamsaka) Sutra. All these merit-making activities were viewed as auxiliary to the main work of reciting the buddha-name.

Pure Land theorists were faced with the task of clarifying their teaching of salvation through faith in Amitabha, given the mainstream scriptural Buddhist view of salvation as the reward

for eons of diligent effort at self-discipline and purification and refinement of perceptions. By holding out the prospect of rebirth in the Pure Land through buddha-name recitation even to sinners, the Pure Land teaching appears to depart from a strict rule of karmic reward, which emphasizes the individual's own efforts as the decisive factor in spiritual attainment.

The Pure Land teachers explained this apparent anomaly by appealing to the infinite compassion of Amitabha Buddha (as an expedient embodiment of the infinitely pervasive Dharmakaya Buddha), who promises that all who invoke his name will attain birth in his Pure Land. The pioneers of the Pure Land teaching indeed took the position that for people in the later ages, the arduous path of self-restraint and purification proposed in the old Buddhist scriptures was no longer feasible. For average people, the only hope of salvation would be to rely on another power than their own, the power of Amitabha Buddha [in addition to their own personal effort].

The Pure Land practice of reciting the buddha-name bears a family resemblance to the chanting of mantras that plays a major role in esoteric Buddhism. As the Pure Land master Chu-hung said, "Reciting the buddha-name is equivalent to upholding a mantra. After you have gained power by reciting the buddha-name, you will be able to face objects with equanimity." According to the Pure Land teaching, invoking the buddha-name brings into play the vows of Amitabha Buddha, whose supernatural powers bring those who invoke him rebirth in the Pure Land. The key element is faith in Amitabha, and the Pure Land teaching is propounded as an easy path open to everyone.



Reciting the buddha-name and chanting mantras can be seen to operate in similar ways, from the point of view of the analysis of the workings of the human mind taught by Yogacara Buddhism and adopted by the Zen school.

Both practices in effect suspend the operation of the discriminating intellect, the faculty of the internal dialogue through which people from moment to moment define and perpetuate their customary world of perception. As the Yogacara bodhisattvas pointed out, people ordinarily are not in touch with phenomena themselves, but rather with mental representations projected onto phenomena. What we ordinarily perceive is not the world itself, but a description of the world that we have been conditioned to accept. The internal dialogue of the intellect holds in place these representations, which make up the world of delusion.

By focusing on the sounds of the mantra or the syllables of the buddha-name invocation, the internal dialogue is stopped. Once its grip is loosened, the description it perpetuates is suspended. Then other descriptions of reality, other worlds, can come into view (such as Amitabha and the Pure Land, or the interplay of deities visualized in esoteric Buddhism, or the infinite vistas of the Avatamsaka Sutra).



Operating in East Asia, Pure Land teachers had to reconcile their views with the perspective of Zen Buddhism. While Pure Land was the most widespread popular form of Buddhism in East Asia, Zen was the form that was intellectually preeminent.

According to the Zen school, since all people inherently possess buddha-nature, the potential for enlightenment, enlightenment equal to the buddhas can be attained in this lifetime by a properly directed and executed effort to break through the barriers of delusion. Rather than venerating the Buddhist scriptures as sacred but unattainable standards, the Zen people went to great lengths to apply the perceptions revealed in the sutras in practice. Generations of enlightened Zen adepts "appeared in the world" to demonstrate a freedom from worldly bonds and a mastery of the Buddha Dharma that proved that liberation was not an unattainable goal.

Through their personal example and the unparalleled originality of their utterances, the Zen masters made a great impact on East Asian high culture in the realms of religion, philosophy, and aesthetics. The prestige of Zen was such that the other schools of Buddhists, and Confucians and Taoists as well, all had to answer to its perspectives.

The Pure Land school accepted the Zen perspective as valid in principle, but questioned how many people could get results by using Zen methods. Pure Land teachers granted that Zen might indeed be the “direct vehicle,” but insisted that for most people it was too rigorous and demanding to be practicable. The Pure Land method of buddha-name recitation was offered as a simpler method by which average people could make progress toward enlightenment. The Pure Land teachers pointed out that many who scorned Pure Land methods as simplistic, and who proudly claimed allegiance to the Zen school, actually achieved nothing by stubbornly clinging to Zen methods. “With Zen, nine out of ten fail. With Pure Land, ten thousand out of ten thousand succeed.”

The Zen school itself came to make room for Pure Land methods. From the time of Yung-ming Yen-shou in tenth century China, who was a master of scriptural Buddhism, Pure Land, and the Zen school, the synthesis of Zen and Pure Land figured prominently in the teachings of many Zen adepts.

In the Zen understanding of Pure Land, Amitabha Buddha represents the enlightened essence of our own true identity, while the Pure Land is the purity of our inherent buddha mind. Buddha-name recitation is effective as a means to cut through the deluded stream of consciousness and focus the mind on its true nature. “Being born in the Pure Land” means reaching the state of mental purity where discriminating thought is unborn and immediate awareness is unimpeded.

The synthesis of Zen and Pure Land methods was epitomized by the “buddha-name recitation meditation case” taught by many Zen masters. “Meditation cases” (koans) in Zen are generally short sayings or question-answer pairs or dialogues or action-scenes which were designed for use as focal points in meditation. They were designed with multiple levels of meaning that interact with the mind of the person meditating to shift routine patterns of thought and open up deeper perceptions. Sustained concentration on the meditation point provides the opportunity for direct insights beyond the level of words.

Examples of meditation cases are: “What was your original face before your father and mother gave birth to you?” “The myriad things return to one: what does the one return to?” “What is the Dharmakaya? A flowering hedge.” “What is every-atom samadhi? Water in the bucket, food in the bowl.” Sayings like these were everyday fare in the Zen school. The Pure Land master Chu-hung put together a detailed compendium of how to meditate with koans.

In the buddha-name recitation meditation case, the person intently reciting the buddha-name asks himself or herself, “Who is the one reciting the buddha-name?” “Who is the one mindful of buddha?” The question is answered when the practitioner comes face to face with his or her own buddha-nature. The one mindful of buddha is the buddha within us. This is the Zen rationale for Pure Land practice. (Excerpted from Pure Land, Pure Mind.)

## DEDICATION OF MERIT

*May the merit and virtues  
accrued from this work,  
Adorn Amitabha Buddha's Pure Land,  
Repaying the four kinds  
of kindness above,  
and relieving the sufferings of  
those on the Three Paths below.*

*May those who see and hear of this,  
And all sentient beings in the Dharma Realm,  
All develop the Bodhi Mind,  
And live the Teachings for  
the rest of this life,  
Then be born together in  
The Land of Ultimate Bliss.*

## HOMAGE TO AMITABHA BUDDHA!