

Pure Mind,  
Compassionate Heart:  
Lessons from the Amitayha Sutra



VENERABLE WULING

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## In Appreciation

My sincere appreciation  
to the students in the  
Buddhism class at  
Stateville Correctional Center  
for asking the questions  
that told me  
it was time to give this teaching.



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## Buddha Speaks the Amitabha Sutra

Thus have I heard: Once Buddha was in the land of Shravasti, in the garden of Jeta and Anathapindika. He was accompanied by twelve hundred and fifty great bhikshus, all of them great Arhats, well known to everyone. Among them were his leading disciples, such figures as the Elders Shariputra, Mahamaudgalyayana, Mahakashyapa, Mahakatyayana, and Mahakausthila, Revata, Suddhipanthaka, Nanda, Ananda, Rahula, Gavampati, Pindola-bharadvaja, Kalodayin, Mahakapphina, Vakula, and Aniruddha . . . [and others such as these], all great disciples. Also present were the Bodhisattvas-Mahasattvas: Manjushri, Prince of the Dharma; the Bodhisattva Ajita, the Invincible; the Bodhisattvas Gandhahastin and Nityodyukta, and other such great Bodhisattvas. Also present was Shakra, the king of the gods, along with countless numbers of heavenly beings, making up a great assembly.

At that time Buddha said to the Elder Shariputra: "West of here, past a hundred billion Buddha-lands, there exists a world called *Ultimate Bliss*. In this land there is a Buddha called Amitabha, who is preaching the Dharma right now."

Why is this land called Ultimate Bliss? It is called

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“Ultimate Bliss” because the sentient beings in this land are free from the myriad sufferings common to mankind, and only know every kind of joy.

Furthermore, this land is called “Ultimate Bliss” because it is surrounded by seven rings of railings, and seven layers of netting, and seven rows of trees, all made of the four precious jewels.

Moreover, the Land of Ultimate Bliss has ponds of seven jewels filled with the waters of eight virtues. The bottom of each of the ponds is pure golden sand, and the stepped walkways that lead up from all four sides of each of the ponds are made of gold, silver, lapis lazuli and crystal. Above the ponds there are towers which are adorned with silver and gold and lapis lazuli and crystal and mother of pearl, red agate and carnelians. In the ponds there are lotus flowers as big as cartwheels: blue ones shining with blue light, yellow ones shining with yellow light, red ones shining with red light, and white ones shining with white light, each emitting a subtle pure fragrance.

The Land of Ultimate Bliss is complete with all these adornments and virtues.

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And there is more—celestial music is constantly playing in this Buddha-land, and the ground is made of pure gold. Heavenly flowers rain down at all hours of the day and night. In the morning the sentient beings of this land fill their robes with multitudes of wondrous flowers and make offerings to hundreds of billions of Buddhas in other worlds. When it is meal time, they return to their own land, to eat, and circumambulate the teaching assembly.

The Land of Ultimate Bliss is complete with all these adornments and virtues.

And there is more still—in this land there are birds of all sorts of wondrous variegated colors: white cranes, peacocks, orioles, egrets, kalavinkas, and jivanjivas. All these birds bring forth harmonious songs day and night. Their songs communicate such Buddhist teachings as the Five Roots, the Five Powers, the Seven Factors of Enlightenment, the Eightfold Path, as well as other teachings. When sentient beings in this land hear the singing of the birds, they become mindful of the Buddhas, mindful of the Dharma, mindful of the Sangha.

Do not think that these birds were born as birds due to

## Buddha Speaks the Amitabha Sutra

karmic retribution for past misdeeds. Why not? In this Buddha-land, the Three Evil Planes of Existence do not exist.

In this Buddha-land even the names of the Evil Planes of Existence do not exist, much less the realities. All these birds are the creations of Amitabha Buddha, fashioned in order to sing the sounds of the Dharma.

In this Buddha-land, there is a slight breeze that stirs the rows of jewel trees and jewel netting, so that they emit subtle wondrous sounds, like hundreds and thousands of melodies playing all at once. All those who hear these sounds spontaneously become mindful of the Buddha, mindful of the Dharma, and mindful of the Sangha.

This Buddha-land is complete with all these adornments and virtues.

What do you think: why is this Buddha called Amitabha?

The light of this Buddha is infinite, and shines on all lands throughout the universe without obstruction. Thus this Buddha is called Amitabha. Also, the life-

## Buddha Speaks the Amitabha Sutra

span of this Buddha and his people is an infinite number of immeasurable eons, and so he is called Amitabha.

Amitabha Buddha attained enlightenment ten eons ago.

Moreover, this Buddha has innumerable disciples, all of whom are Arhats, whose numbers are incalculable. Amitabha also has a following of innumerable Bodhisattvas.

The Land of Ultimate Bliss is complete with all these adornments and virtues.

None of the sentient beings who are born in the Land of Ultimate Bliss ever fall back into a lower realm. Many among them have only one more lifetime to go before Buddhahood. Their number is incalculable: they can be spoken of as innumerable.

When sentient beings hear these teachings, they must take a vow to be born in this land. Why so? So that they can be together with all these Beings of Superior Goodness.

One cannot be born in this land through minor good

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roots, blessings, virtues [good fortune] and causal connections. If there are good men or good women who hear of Amitabha Buddha, and recite his name *singlemindedly and without confusion*, for one day or two days or three days or four days or five days or six days or seven days, then when these people are about to die, Amitabha Buddha and his whole assembly will appear before them. When they die, their minds being *unified and not chaotic* they will attain rebirth in Amitabha's Land of Ultimate Bliss.

I have seen this benefit, and so I speak these words. If sentient beings hear what I say, they must make a vow to be born in that land.

Right now I am extolling the benefits of the inconceivable virtues of Amitabha Buddha. But in the eastern direction there are also countless other Buddhas, like Akshobhya Buddha, the Buddha "Marks of the Polar Mountain", the Buddha "Great Polar Mountain", the Buddha "Light of the Polar Mountain", and the Buddha "Wondrous Voice". Each of them . . . [with the truthfulness of a Buddha, teaches] in his own land and covers a whole cosmos, speaking these sincere words: "all of you sentient beings should believe this sutra extolling inconceivable

virtues, which all Buddhas protect and keep in mind” .

In the worlds of the southern direction there are countless other Buddhas, like the Buddha “Lamp of the Sun and Moon”, the Buddha “Light of Renown”, the Buddha “Great Blazing Shoulders”, the Buddha “Lamp of the Polar Mountain”, and the Buddha “Infinite Vigor”. Each of them . . . [with the truthfulness of a Buddha, teaches] in his own land and covers a whole cosmos, speaking these sincere words: “all of you sentient beings should believe this sutra extolling inconceivable virtues, which all Buddhas protect and keep in mind” .

In the worlds of the western direction there are countless other Buddhas, like the Buddha “Infinite Life”, the Buddha “Innumerable Characteristics”, the Buddha “Innumerable Banners”, the Buddha “Great Light”, the Buddha “Great Illumination”, the Buddha “Jewel Appearance”, and the Buddha “Light of Purity”. Each of them . . . [with the truthfulness of a Buddha, teaches] in his own land and covers a whole cosmos, speaking these sincere words: “all of you sentient beings should believe this sutra extolling inconceivable virtues, which all Buddhas protect and keep in mind” .

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In the worlds of the northern direction there are countless other Buddhas, like the Buddha "Blazing Shoulders", the Buddha "Supreme Voice", the Buddha "Hard to Injure", the Buddha "Born of the Sun", and the Buddha "Netted Light". Each of them . . . [with the truthfulness of a Buddha, teaches] in his own land and covers a whole cosmos, speaking these sincere words: "all of you sentient beings should believe this sutra extolling inconceivable virtues, which all Buddhas protect and keep in mind".

In the worlds of the nadir there are countless other Buddhas, like the Buddha "Lion", the Buddha "Repute", the Buddha "Light" [of Name], [the Buddha "Dharma",] the Buddha "Dharma Banner", and the Buddha "Upholding the Dharma". Each of them . . . [with the truthfulness of a Buddha, teaches] in his own land and covers a whole cosmos, speaking these sincere words: "all of you sentient beings should believe this sutra extolling inconceivable virtues, which all Buddhas protect and keep in mind".

In the worlds of the zenith there are countless other Buddhas, like the Buddha "Pure Voice", the Buddha "Sojourner King", the Buddha "Incense Fragrance", the Buddha "Fragrant Light", the Buddha "Great

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Blazing Shoulders”, the Buddha “Body of Multicolored Jewel Flower Garlands”, the Buddha “Sala Tree King”, the Buddha “Precious Flower Virtue”, the Buddha “Sees All Truths”, and the Buddha “Like the Polar Mountain”. Each of them . . . [with the truthfulness of a Buddha, teaches] in his own land and covers a whole cosmos, speaking these sincere words: “all of you sentient beings should believe this sutra extolling inconceivable virtues, which all Buddhas protect and keep in mind” .

Why do you think this is called the sutra that is protected and kept in mind by all the Buddhas?

If there are good men or women who hear this scripture, uphold it and hear the names of all these Buddhas, these good men and women will be protected and kept in mind by all the Buddhas, and will not retrogress along the path of Supreme, Perfect Enlightenment. Therefore, all of you should faithfully accept what I say and what all the Buddhas have said.

All of those who have vowed, or are vowing, or will vow to be born in the land of Amitabha Buddha reach the level where they do not retrogress from Supreme, Perfect Enlightenment. They are already born, are now

being born, or will be born in that land. Therefore, all good men and women, if they have faith, must make a vow to be born in that land.

Just as I am now extolling the inconceivable virtues of all the Buddhas, all those Buddhas are likewise extolling my inconceivable virtues, with these words: “Sakyamuni Buddha is able to carry out a most difficult and rare task. In the Saha World, the World of Endurance, in an evil world of the Five Corruptions—the corruption of the age, the corruption of views, the corruption of afflictions, the corruption of sentient beings, and the corruption of life—he is able to achieve Supreme, Perfect Enlightenment, and to expound the Pure Land teaching, which all beings in all worlds find hard to believe.”

Know then that in the midst of this evil world of the Five Corruptions, I am able to carry out this difficult task, attain Supreme, Perfect Enlightenment, and expound the Pure Land teaching, which is so hard for beings in all worlds to believe. This is indeed most difficult!

When Buddha finished preaching this scripture, Shariputra and all the monks, gods, humans, asuras

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and others who had been listening, having heard what the Buddha said, rejoiced and faithfully accepted it. They all bowed in homage and departed.

Amitabha Sutra Spoken by Buddha

## Preface

A few years ago, we published a book titled *Going Home to the Pure Land* in the hope that it would help people better understand and benefit from their practice of the Pure Land teachings. The book contains a simple practice session that begins with the *Amitabha Sutra* and its description of the wonders of the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss.

While the physical descriptions of this extraordinary land can be readily recognized, the principles, being more subtle, are not as easily comprehended. Their depth was not an issue when Sakyamuni Buddha spoke the *Amitabha Sutra*, for those in attendance had already reached certain levels in their practice. They, therefore, understood the implied, profound meanings of the sutra. But with the passage of time, the levels of those who read the sutra have declined progressively. Thus, for students who wish to gain its intended benefits, explanations by wise patriarchs and ancient masters have become increasingly important.

Although there are excellent commentaries on the *Amitabha Sutra* by the Pure Land patriarchs, I know of only one that is available in English. Fortunately for us, it is the highly regarded explanation by Great Master Ouyi, a seventeenth century master of the Tiantai school of Buddhism who was later recognized as the ninth patriarch of the Pure Land school. Translated by

## Preface

J. C. Cleary, the commentary is titled *Mind-Seal of the Buddhas*. Although the Great Master professed qualms about his “mediocrity and ignorance,” nothing in his writing supports these reservations. But the reality of my own mediocrity and ignorance is all too real.

Thus, for this basic introduction to the sutra, it is most fortunate that I have access to several resources on the Pure Land teachings. These include Venerable Master Chin Kung’s lucid and insightful 2003 lecture series, lectures by Venerable Wu Fan, J. C. Cleary’s *Mind-Seal of the Buddhas*. Also, several Pure Land practitioners have graciously agreed to serve as editors and readers. Their insights and assistance have proven invaluable.

And so, with all these to guide me, I have proceeded with this introduction of the *Amitabha Sutra* in the hope that its English readers will deepen their understanding and appreciation of it. For although the *Amitabha Sutra* may initially seem elementary and straightforward, it is incredibly profuse with symbolic representations and profound teachings.

Venerable Master Chin Kung once gave a series of more than 330 ninety-minute lectures on it and then commented that he could have kept on lecturing!

Please note that for simplicity’s sake I will be referring to our practice as buddha-name chanting. Others

## Preface

also refer to this as buddha-name recitation. There will indeed be times that we chant to a basic melody, for instance, when practicing with a group at a Pure Land center. But at other times, we will wish to practice on our own. At such times, instead of a melodic chanting, we can simply utter the name aloud or silently.

And finally, a technical note on the conventions used for punctuation. Punctuation should aid readers, ensuring that they enjoy the reading experience, not feel overwhelmed by it. For example, capitalization is often deemed respectful of the material, but excessive use interrupts the smooth flow of our reading. Buddhist books with their numerous technical terms, including varied states of mind, enumerated lists, and detailed cosmology, are especially prone to this.

This tendency to capitalize every term, however, is changing. Today, the standard convention in Buddhist books is to limit such spelling treatment.

And so in *Pure Mind, Compassionate Heart* you will find capitalization restricted to a handful of uses: Buddha, Dharma, proper names and titles, terrestrial names, Buddhist schools, and book and sutra titles. Hopefully, this will increase your ease of reading and even result in the written words feeling closer to what they initially were, a series of Dharma talks on the *Amitabha Sutra*.

## The Amitabha Sutra

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## The Amitabha Sutra

Almost three thousand years ago, Sakyamuni Buddha came to this world to teach the Dharma, the truth of life and the universe. To help us realize the truth of suffering and learn how to end that suffering, he compassionately taught 84,000 Dharma doors. It was necessary to speak so many methods because everyone has different capabilities. He knew that the best method for some people would not be the most suitable for others.

For example, in the Dharma Perfect Age, a time that occurred after Sakyamuni Buddha entered parinirvana, those who practiced the teachings succeeded in their cultivation primarily by observing the precepts. Practitioners in the next age, the Dharma Semblance Age, succeeded in their cultivation mainly by practicing meditative concentration.

Both these ages have passed, and we are now in the Dharma-Ending Age, an era of declining spiritual abilities. In this current age, people lack both the self-discipline to observe precepts and the capacity to focus their minds through meditative concentration. Indeed, their

afflictions, ignorance, and bad habits have increased. It is all too easy to regress in one's practice: advancing in one lifetime but losing ground in many more. These people need a different Dharma door.

Who are "these people"? We are.

What is the Dharma door we need? The Pure Land Dharma door.

To help us learn it, Sakyamuni spoke of it in various sutras and elaborated on it in the *Infinite Life Sutra*, the *Visualization Sutra*, and the *Amitabha Sutra*. Of these three sutras, the *Infinite Life Sutra* provides a detailed description of that land. It tells of the time when Amitabha Buddha was still a monk named Dharmakara and of the forty-eight vows Dharmakara made relating to the formation of the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss. The sutra then presents the principle of cause and effect, explaining how both moral behavior and chanting the name of Amitabha Buddha will result in being born in the Western Pure Land.

The *Visualization Sutra* contains sixteen meditations, also with the goal of being born in that land.

The *Amitabha Sutra*, while also describing some of the physical elements of the Pure Land, is the sutra in which Sakyamuni urged people three times to make the vow to seek birth in the Western Pure Land. The *Amitabha Sutra* is one of the rare sutras categorized as

## The Amitabha Sutra

self-spoken. *Self-spoken* means that Sakyamuni Buddha himself introduced the teaching when no one asked the relevant questions. This is what happened with this sutra. Although no one asked about the Pure Land Dharma door, Sakyamuni Buddha knew that it would be ideal in our Dharma-Ending Age. Not only does it teach us how to be born in the Pure Land, it also assures us that we can bring along our residual karmas. These are karmas that have yet to bear fruit. Even with these karmas, once in the Pure Land, we will never again regress in our practice and learning.

The full title of the *Amitabha Sutra* is *Buddha Speaks the Amitabha Sutra*. There are two Buddhas in this title: Sakyamuni and Amitabha. Throughout the sutra, the speaker is Sakyamuni. He was born as Prince Siddhartha almost 3000 years ago in present-day Nepal. As the young prince grew up, he became increasingly aware of the suffering that all beings undergo. In time, he renounced his position as the future king and became a wandering seeker searching for the way to end suffering. Siddhartha studied under well-known spiritual teachers including those of meditation and asceticism. He learned and excelled at all they had to teach him. But no one knew the way to end suffering permanently. And so he continued his search.

## The Amitabha Sutra

After several years, Siddhartha came to realize that the way to end suffering was through a balanced approach that avoided the extremes of self-indulgence and self-mortification. It was through practicing in this manner that he reached the point where he attained enlightenment and was finally free. Free from what? Free from delusion and suffering. Free from samsara—the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.

Siddhartha was now Sakyamuni Buddha, the awakened one. He remained in this world for another forty-nine years, teaching others what he had realized. At the age of seventy-nine, he entered parinirvana, the passing away of the physical body of a Buddha.

The second Buddha spoken of in the sutra title is Amitabha Buddha. Many kalpas ago, a king named World Abundant heard a Buddha named Lokeshvara teaching the Dharma. Delighted by Lokeshvara's teaching, King World Abundant awakened. Resolving to seek the supreme truth, he relinquished his throne and became a monk called Dharmakara. He then asked Lokeshvara Buddha how to attain buddhahood and help all beings end suffering.

With Lokeshvara Buddha guiding him, Dharmakara aspired to make supreme, wondrous vows, thoroughly contemplated what was good and bad about heavenly and human beings, and what was excellent and inferior

## The Amitabha Sutra

about their lands. From these, he single-mindedly selected what he wanted and formed his great vows. For five kalpas, he sought and explored diligently, persevered respectfully and carefully, and cultivated merits and virtues.

Dharmakara made forty-eight great vows. He pledged that if his forty-eight vows were not accomplished, he would not attain buddhahood. In the eighteenth great vow, Dharmakara promised to guide us to his land if we mindfully chant his name aloud or silently ten times as we breathe our last breaths.

With the accomplishment of these forty-eight great vows, Dharmakara became Amitabha Buddha—the Buddha of Infinite Light and Infinite Life. Through his vows, he formed the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss. An ideal land for us to learn and practice in, it is described in the sutra as having marvelous adornments including golden sand, jeweled trees, birds that sing the teachings, luminescent lotuses, flowers that float down from the sky.

But while these truly are wondrous physical attributes, they are also symbolic representations of the Pure Land principles and practice. The purpose of studying these principles and practicing them is to be born in the Western Pure Land—to be close to Amitabha Buddha and all the bodhisattvas, and to complete our

learning and cultivation there so that we too can become a Buddha.

What is the problem with simply studying and practicing in this world?

It does not offer a suitable learning environment. There are far too many distractions; opportunities to practice are rare. Our human life span is far too short for learning all that we need to. In the Western Pure Land, however, we have an ideal learning environment, one created for us by Amitabha Buddha. And if we want to go to the Western Pure Land—with unwavering belief, the vow to be born there, and mindful chanting of the buddha-name—we can!

Sakyamuni told us that when we go there, all the Buddhas will be our teachers and beings of superior goodness will be our companions. Who are these beings? The beings of superior goodness in the lowest land, the Land Where Sages and Ordinary Beings Dwell Together, are practitioners of the ten virtuous karmas. Those in the Land of Real Reward are equal-enlightenment bodhisattvas. For example, both Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva and Mahasthamaprapta Bodhisattva are equal-enlightenment bodhisattvas. With them as our guides, and Amitabha Buddha as our teacher, how can we fail to attain supreme, perfect buddhahood!

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The Pure Land is the best possible learning environment for us. Once there, our greed, anger, and ignorance will not arise. There are several reasons for this.

First, objects we think of will immediately appear before us, thus eliminating those conditions in which the thought of something can quickly develop into greed.

Second, everyone in the Western Pure Land is a virtuous person. Even if we have not completely eradicated our anger, it will not arise because there are no conditions for us to become angry.

Third, our senses will always encounter the Dharma. We will not be ignorant. As we live there, we will no longer have to consciously work at ending our three poisons of greed, anger, and ignorance like we do here. With the passage of time, without any deliberate effort on our part, they will naturally fade away.

When we begin to understand all that Sakyamuni and Amitabha have done for us, we will feel grateful to both Buddhas. We feel grateful to Sakyamuni Buddha for having had the compassion and wisdom to know how invaluable this sutra would be for the beings suffering in the cycle of rebirth and to have taught it. We feel grateful to Amitabha Buddha for having spent five kalpas both in learning and in accumulating merits and

good fortune, and using them to create an ideal land where we can practice and advance to buddhahood without falling back. A remarkable opportunity.

How do we avail ourselves of this opportunity?

With the three requisites of belief, vow, and practice, which are the guiding principles of the *Amitabha Sutra*.

As Great Master Ouyi wrote, "Without faith [belief], we are not sufficiently equipped to take vows. Without vows, we are not sufficiently equipped to guide our practice. Without the wondrous practice of mindfully reciting the Buddha-name, we are not sufficiently equipped to fulfill our vows and bring our faith [belief] to fruition."<sup>1</sup>

Belief is to believe that we too have buddha-nature and that through mindful chanting, we will be born in the Pure Land. It is to believe that Sakyamuni Buddha did not lie when he taught of Amitabha Buddha and the Pure Land, and to believe that Amitabha Buddha did not fail to fulfill his vows. It is to believe in cause and effect, and that even if we chant with an unfocused mind, we are still planting the seeds for our future birth in the Pure Land. It is to believe that the Western Pure Land truly does exist far to the west. And deep within us.

Vow is the unwavering aspiration to be born in the Western Pure Land. We make the vow upon realizing

## The Amitabha Sutra

that while the cycle of rebirth is filled with suffering, happiness abounds in the Pure Land.

Practice is to diligently and joyfully chant Amitabha's name, single-mindedly and without confusion. We can chant in any language. For example, in Chinese, we would chant "Amitufo." In English, since we do not have an established chant, we could simply repeat "Amitabha Buddha." This buddha-name chanting is the form of buddha-remembrance that Sakyamuni spoke of in the sutra.

## The Garden of Jeta and Anathapindika

Thus have I heard:

Once Buddha was in the land of Shravasti,  
in the garden of Jeta and Anathapindika.

Sakyamuni Buddha told Ananda, his attendant and also the person who heard all of Sakyamuni's teachings, that when he later repeated the sutras, he should always start with the words "Thus have I heard." "Thus" means that Sakyamuni definitely spoke the sutra. "I" is Ananda referring to himself, and saying that he was indeed present at Sakyamuni Buddha's teaching. "Heard" refers to Ananda's having both understood and absorbed what Sakyamuni Buddha said. It is not a case of listening without comprehending.

"Once" refers to the time when Sakyamuni spoke this sutra. He said to use "once" instead of a particular time and date because these are not the same everywhere. We can see this when we consider a date. What

is December 1st for one person can already be December 2nd for someone else. The use of various kinds of calendars such as lunar, Gregorian, and others can also lead to further confusion. It may be the same point in time, but people use different dates and calendars to identify it.

“Once” also means that the conditions for people to hear a specific sutra had matured. If the necessary conditions had not existed, Sakyamuni Buddha would not have spoken the sutra. It would have been pointless. Therefore, “once” is when teacher and student are in accord. Students are willing, indeed happy, to learn from the teacher. The teacher is willing, and happy, to teach. It is a joyous coming together as the mind of the student and that of the teacher are in sync.

“Sravasti” was the capital city of a prosperous Indian kingdom. A prince named Jeta lived in Sravasti, as did a wealthy and respected merchant known for helping the poor. Due to his generosity, people called the merchant Anathapindika, which means “giving to orphans and the solitary elderly.”

After hearing Sakyamuni speak the Dharma, Anathapindika decided to offer the Buddha a place in which to teach. Determining that the most suitable site was a park owned by Prince Jeta, he asked if he could

## The Garden of Jeta and Anathapindika

buy the land. Initially, Prince Jeta declined, but eventually they came to an agreement.

Anathapindika then happily instructed that the gold in his warehouses be brought and used to cover all the ground in the park to fulfill their agreement. Moved by Anathapindika's generosity, Prince Jeta wondered what kind of person Sakyamuni was to elicit such respect. When Anathapindika told him about Sakyamuni, Prince Jeta wanted to join the merchant in making the offering.

The two benefactors decided they would jointly offer the park to Sakyamuni Buddha. They had living quarters and assembly halls built, ponds and wells dug, pathways put in, and an impressive gate built at the entrance to the park. In honor of these two benefactors, the monastery became known as the Garden of Jeta and Anathapindika.

## The Great Arhats

He was accompanied by twelve hundred and fifty great bhikshus, all of them great Arhats, well known to everyone.

In this next passage from the sutra, we learn of the various groups present in the Amitabha assembly and the order of their listing. This order is significant. The monastics were named first because they had renounced the world, they always accompanied Sakya-muni Buddha, and they were responsible for propagation of the Dharma.

The bodhisattvas, taking the form of either monastics or laypeople, were listed in the middle because they represented the Middle Way and they did not always accompany the Buddha. Heavenly beings were named last because they had the forms of those living in this world, that of ordinary people and sages, and they had

## The Great Arhats

the responsibility of supporting and protecting the Dharma out in the world.

Accompanying the Buddha were “twelve hundred and fifty great bhikshus.” “Bhiksus” usually refers to ordained Buddhist monks of Theravada Buddhism. When the word “great” precedes bhiksu, it indicates that the person is a practitioner of Mahayana Buddhism. The great bhiksus were students of the Buddha who joined him shortly after he had attained enlightenment. They were the three Kasyapa brothers and their students, totaling one thousand people in all; Sariputra and his students, totaling one hundred people; Maudgalyayana and his students, totaling one hundred people; and the elder Yasa and his group, totaling fifty people.

No longer erring in their speech, thoughts, or judgment, arhats have no karmic causes to hold them in the cycle of rebirth, and so they transcend it. We can begin to see why transcending in this way is so difficult. To eliminate the affliction of thoughts, we must first control our wandering thoughts. But we always have wandering thoughts. All the time and everywhere! Even at night, for our dreams are also wandering thoughts. And day or night, our thoughts are so numerous that we have an incredible number of them in just one second! Little wonder it is so difficult to transcend samsara

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by eliminating these afflictions. Fortunately, we have another method—the Pure Land Dharma door—which enables us to transcend through our belief, vow, and practice.

The great arhats spoken of in the sutra were “well known to everyone.” When people saw these arhats learning from the Buddha, they must have concluded that the Buddha was indeed virtuous and accomplished. Why else would these highly respected arhats be his students! The presence of the arhats in the assembly thus helped foster peoples’ confidence in the Buddha, enabling more people to learn from and emulate him.

Now that Sakyamuni Buddha is no longer in this world, how do we learn from and emulate him?

We do so by adhering to the teachings of the sutras. While there are several Pure Land sutras for us to read, we should choose just one and then delve deeply into it, learning and chanting it for an extended length of time. Gradually, our thoughts and views will mirror the teachings in our selected sutra. When we can do this, we will be putting aside our views and ideas, and emulating Sakyamuni Buddha. We will live, work, and interact with people according to his teachings and, in doing so, help introduce the Dharma to others.

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In his commentary on the *Amitabha Sutra*, Great Master Ouyi wrote that propagation of the Dharma depends on the sangha. In other words, monastics are responsible for the transmission of Sakyamuni Buddha's teachings. To help them accomplish this, Sakyamuni taught the six principles of harmony for monastics in a sangha to follow in daily life.

First is harmony in having the same viewpoints. It is important for sangha members to adhere to the same principles and methods for learning and practice. By closely following the teachings found in the sutras, members will gradually hold the same viewpoints—viewpoints that are the same as those embraced by awakened beings.

Second is harmony in observing the same precepts. These rules are the standards for daily life. The five precepts of no killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, false speech, or intoxicants are fundamental for all sanghas. When the members observe these precepts, their mental, verbal, and physical karmas will be correct, and they will become role models for others.

Third is harmony in living together. To succeed in their cultivation, members of a sangha need to get along. The way to do this is to build on the precepts with the ten virtuous karmas of no killing, stealing,

sexual misconduct, false speech, divisive speech, harsh speech, enticing speech, greed, anger, or ignorance.

Fourth is harmony in speaking without conflict. This harmony adheres to the four verbal virtuous karmas of no false, divisive, harsh, or enticing speech. When people live and work together, bad verbal karma is easily committed, which brings about harmful consequences. For example, a speaker did not mean to hurt another's feelings, but was unmindful when uttering his words. Regrettably, the saying "more speech, more trouble" is too often true. It is better to speak mindfully and only when necessary. This will reduce painful regrets and worries of how to undo the harm that was done. Better yet, "speak one sentence less of chatter, chant once more the buddha-name."

Fifth is harmony in experiencing the Dharma bliss. The mind of a sangha member should be sincere, pure, and impartial. This pure mind is the mind of compassion. The principal achievement from practice is happiness. As sincerity and compassion increase, so does happiness. As happiness increases, worries and fears decrease, and the mind dwells on what the practitioner chooses. And the most wonderful—and happiest—thought for a Pure Land practitioner to dwell on is the name of Amitabha Buddha.

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Sixth is harmony in sharing benefits. In a sangha, all members have the same standard of living and share offerings equitably.

Through successful implementation of the six principles of harmony, a sangha will meet its responsibility of propagating the teachings. By studying their selected Pure Land sutra, the members will learn how awakened beings think and act. They will then know how to emulate these beings. As the sutra is chanted, the words describing the speech and actions of the Buddhas will fall like Dharma rain and be absorbed by each individual's consciousness, watering the awaiting seeds of goodness.

## The Leading Disciples

Among them were his leading disciples, such figures as the Elders Shariputra, Mahamaudgalyayana, Mahakashyapa, Mahakatyayana, and Mahakausthila, Revata, Suddhipanthaka, Nanda, Ananda, Rahula, Gavampati, Pindola-bharadvaja, Kalodayin, Mahakapphina, Vakula, and Aniruddha . . . [and others such as these], all great disciples.

Next in the sutra, we learn of the leading arhats in the assembly who stayed by Sakyamuni Buddha's side. Each of them had a special ability that was well known. Learning more about who these arhats were and what they accomplished, or sometimes failed at, in their various lifetimes is in itself a teaching. Some arhats represented cause and effect, while others symbolized various aspects of cultivation including humili-

ty, patience, open-mindedness, filial piety, compassion, perseverance.

The first arhat named was the Elder Sariputra.

To be considered an elder in the Buddhist community, one had to be virtuous and learned, have a good reputation, and have been a monastic for a long time. The first two arhat elders named in the sutra, Sariputra and Mahamaudgalyayana, were the Buddha's chief students.

Among the arhat students, Sariputra was the foremost in wisdom. Wisdom is not the same as intelligence. While we can use intelligence in both good and bad ways, with wisdom, we will naturally know what is good and what is bad.

As readers of a sutra, our confidence in its principles and methods can increase as we learn which highly respected arhats, bodhisattvas, and others were present in a particular assembly. For example, just as Sariputra was the foremost of the arhats in wisdom, Manjusri was the foremost among the bodhisattvas in wisdom. So, among the arhats and the bodhisattvas, those who were foremost in wisdom were named first in their respective sections of the sutra. This order of the names carries a very profound meaning: to choose and practice this sutra—this Dharma door—a practitioner must have wisdom.

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Sariputra was also known for his patience and self-control. We read in the sutras that one time in Sravasti, a group of men were speaking in praise of Sariputra. A man passing by overheard them say that Sariputra had great patience and was always calm, never angry. The passer-by interjected that this must be because no one had ever irritated the arhat!

Determined to test this, the man went off in search of Sariputra. Finding him on his alms round, the man came up behind Sariputra and struck him. Sariputra calmly continued walking without even looking back. It was as if nothing had happened. Feeling ashamed, the man caught up with Sariputra and begged for his pardon. When mildly asked the reason, the man admitted that he had intentionally struck Sariputra to test his patience.

Sariputra forgave the man, who then invited Sariputra to his home to eat. When they came out of the house afterward, they found that a crowd had gathered. Having heard of the incident, people wanted to punish the man. Sariputra asked the crowd who had been struck. Himself? Or those in the crowd? They answered that it was Sariputra. Sariputra replied that he had already forgiven the man. And with that, he dispersed the crowd.

The second arhat named in the sutra was Mahamaudgalyayana, who was the foremost in extraordinary powers.

A Sanskrit word, *Maha* means "great." We learn in the *Ullambana Sutra* how Mahamaudgalyayana, wishing to repay the kindness of his parents for giving him life, used his powers to learn where his deceased mother had been reborn. Finding that she was reborn as a hungry ghost, he brought her food. But when she tried to place it in her mouth, the food turned into burning coals.

In anguish, Mahamaudgalyayana went to the Buddha and asked him how to help his mother. The Buddha told Mahamaudgalyayana that his mother's rebirth as a hungry ghost was due to her past karmas. He then taught Mahamaudgalyayana how she and other parents, living and deceased, could be helped. The teaching put into practice, Mahamaudgalyayana's tears and grief faded away when he saw his mother released from her rebirth as a hungry ghost.

In another sutra, we read of a time when the Buddha, accompanied by Mahamaudgalyayana and other monastics, visited a kingdom to teach. The citizens ignored the Buddha, but bowed and made offerings to Mahamaudgalyayana! When the other monastics declared that it was not right, the Buddha calmly ex-

plained that in a past lifetime, he and Mahamaudgalyayana had lived close to one another. When bothered by bees, the future Buddha wanted to smoke them out from their nest. The future Mahamaudgalyayana not only declined to assist in this but also spoke of the suffering of the bees. He vowed to help them when he attained awakening.

Now the Buddha and Mahamaudgalyayana were together again. They found themselves in a kingdom where the queen bee of the former hive was the king, the drones were ministers, and the workers citizens. Having no affinity with the Buddha, these people ignored him. But due to their affinity with Mahamaudgalyayana, they revered the arhat and were happy to learn from him.

The next arhat named in the sutra was Mahakasyapa, who was foremost in ascetic practice.

Kasyapa came from a very wealthy family, so his becoming an ascetic was noteworthy. Why would he give up everything and adopt such a rigorous method of practice? After all, ascetics lead lives of austere self-discipline, forgoing physical comfort and material enjoyment, and relinquishing personal viewpoints.

Learning how Mahakasyapa lived, we conclude that his life was one of suffering. What we cannot imagine is that he was filled with joy, the joy that he found in his

meditation. We may think that our life is happy or at least more comfortable than his was, but what Mahakasyapa saw was ordinary people, with all their desires, emotions, and expectations, living in a world of self-inflicted suffering.

By renouncing craving and attachments, Mahakasyapa found that his mind became more tranquil and unobstructed, able to realize what ordinary people could not. We learn of an example of this when the Buddha once silently held up a flower in an assembly. While others merely looked on, Mahakasyapa alone smiled. The Buddha explained that he had just conveyed the Dharma door of unspoken direct transmission to Mahakasyapa.

We also learn in the sutras that Mahakasyapa's body radiated a golden light. What was the cause of this light? In a previous lifetime, Mahakasyapa was a goldsmith. A girl brought a statue of a Buddha to him and requested that he cover it with gold leaf. He happily did so but declined the girl's offer of payment. Thus, they both accumulated the merits from adorning the image of a Buddha with gold. Their karmic reward for many lifetimes was that each of them had a good physical appearance that radiated golden light.

The next arhat, Mahakatyayana, was foremost in debate. Due to his understanding and great eloquence, he skillfully expounded the teachings.

The arhat named after him, Mahakausthila was foremost in question-and-answer discourse.

A prominent figure who was rather self-confident, Kausthila liked to debate. When he debated his sister, he won every time. But after she became pregnant with the child who would later become the arhat Sariputra, Kausthila began losing debates to her, one after another. He decided that since his sister had previously always lost, it must be the unborn baby who was causing her to win. Kausthila, feeling that it would look bad if he were to lose a debate to his sister's child in the future, went in search of teachers to learn from.

Years later, he returned and heard that Sariputra had become a student of the Buddha. Convinced that this was a mistake, Kausthila went to the Buddha with the goal of winning a debate with him and getting Sariputra to return home. Instead, not only was Kausthila won over by the Buddha's answers, he became the Buddha's student as well!

The arhat Revata was "foremost in remaining free of error and confusion."<sup>2</sup>

The *Amitabha Sutra* talks about "single-mindedly and without confusion" and of "minds being unified and

not chaotic.” Revata represented this clear, calm state of mind. He genuinely fulfilled the three refuges. He was awakened, not deluded; held correct views, not deviated ones; and maintained a pure mind, not a corrupted one.

The arhat Suddhipanthaka was named next.

In his earlier days with the sangha, Suddhipanthaka was the slowest of the Buddha’s students. His memory was so poor that he could not even remember a four-line verse that the arhats tried to teach him. His older brother, also a monastic, told Suddhipanthaka that he was too “stupid” to learn from the Buddha and that he should leave the sangha.

Encountering the greatly distressed Suddhipanthaka, the Buddha asked him what had happened. When Suddhipanthaka replied that his brother had told him to leave, the Buddha gave Suddhipanthaka a broom and told him to sweep the grounds every day and to focus on the words “sweep clean” while he swept.

Following the Buddha’s instructions, Suddhipanthaka swept the grounds and kept repeating “sweep clean, sweep clean.” Soon, not only was his mind swept clean, it was free of the affliction of views and thoughts. Thus, he attained the level of arhat. When the other arhats wondered how he accomplished this, the Buddha explained that Suddhipanthaka had been a highly

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accomplished Dharma master in a previous lifetime. But fearing that others would surpass him if he taught wholeheartedly, he always held back when teaching. This holding back resulted in his slow-wittedness in his current lifetime.

Some of us may feel that we have limited abilities and a poor memory, and consequently cannot learn Buddhism. Suddhipanthaka set an example for us. Comparing ourselves to him, we will realize that our abilities are not nearly as limited as his were. So if he was able to succeed, surely we can as well!

At the other extreme, those considering how profound Sariputra's wisdom was will likely conclude that their wisdom does not come close to his. And yet, as wise as he was, Sariputra mindfully chanted the name of Amitabha Buddha. Isn't it only logical for us to follow his example and also chant the buddha-name?

The arhat Nanda, the Buddha's younger half-brother, was foremost in comportment. Not only handsome, Nanda also had an excellent demeanor and a pleasing voice.

After Nanda was the arhat Ananda. One of the Buddha's cousins, Ananda was foremost in remembering the Buddha's teachings. Ananda was also his personal attendant. Contrary to the slow Suddhipanthaka, Ananda needed to hear the Buddha's teaching only

once to remember and repeat it. He did so at the first council of five hundred great arhats, held shortly after the Buddha's parinirvana. What Ananda recited had to be acknowledged by everyone as having been said by the Buddha. Thus approved, the teachings were recited and later written down.

This method of repeating the teachers' lectures is how the Buddha's teachings have been passed down till today. Dharma masters continue to give their teachers' lectures, just as Ananda did. This ensures that the lecturer will not make mistakes because the teachings will have been transmitted, through generations of monastics, from teacher to student.

We can see an example of the gravity of saying something incorrect in the following account of a Dharma master who gave a wrong answer. The master had been asked, "Is an accomplished practitioner still governed by the law of cause and effect?"

To this he answered incorrectly, "No, an accomplished practitioner is not governed by the law of cause and effect."

This wrong answer misled the questioner and resulted in the Dharma master's negative karmic consequence of being reborn as a fox for 500 lifetimes. The fox, however, was diligent in its cultivation and succeeded in acquiring extraordinary powers, even the

ability to appear as a human. Although it knew the karmic cause of why it was a fox, it could do nothing to change this karmic result.

After encountering Master Baizhang, an awakened Zen Master, the fox in the form of an elderly man came to listen to Master Baizhang's lectures every day. Others at the lectures became familiar with the man, but only Master Baizhang knew that he was actually a fox.

One day, the fox told Master Baizhang its story and requested his help. Master Baizhang instructed it to return the next day and ask the same question.

The following day, the fox came back and asked, "Is an accomplished practitioner still governed by the law of cause and effect?"

Master Baizhang replied, "An accomplished practitioner is not ignorant of the law of cause and effect."

The master's answer, "an accomplished practitioner is not ignorant of the law of cause and effect," means the practitioner still has karmic retributions and is clear about these without any confusion. With the answer thus changed from "not governed by" to "not ignorant of," the fox was able to end his lifetimes of being reborn as a fox. He died the next day. Master Baizhang, knowing the fox was now dead, retold its story and took some people to the mountain to bury the fox.

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If a lecturer says something wrong and this results in misleading people, the retribution is severe. Therefore, Dharma lecturers give their teachers' lectures without interjecting personal opinions, a tradition passed down from Ananda till today.

The arhat Rahula was foremost in never calling attention to his cultivation.

The Buddha's son, Rahula became a novice monk when he was very young. While it looked as though he was playing every day, the Buddha knew that his young son was practicing self-discipline, meditative concentration, and wisdom. Rahula is an excellent example of the Buddhist principle that substance is far more important than formality.

The arhat Gavampati, whose name means "ruminating ox," was foremost in receiving offerings from heavenly beings.

The Buddha explained that in a past lifetime when Gavampati was a novice monk, he saw an old monk chanting a sutra. Due to his advanced age and the loss of many of his teeth, the old monk chanted very unclearly. The novice laughed, "When you chant a sutra, you look like an ox eating!"

The old monk warned him to quickly repent. He explained, "I have attained arhatship. Because of your words, you will fall into the hells."

Terrified, the novice monk immediately repented, but he still suffered the karmic retribution of being reborn as an ox for several hundred lifetimes.

Although Gavampati was now an arhat, he still had the habit of moving his mouth like an ox eating. If people laughed at him when he went on alms round, they would plant the same negative causes he had planted. Thus, out of compassion for those who would make offerings to Gavampati, the Buddha told him not to go on alms round with the others. Heavenly beings, because they knew that Gavampati was a great arhat, respected him. They would never ridicule him. And so, the Buddha told Gavampati to go to the heavens to receive offerings.

The arhat Pindola-Bharadvaja was foremost for being a field of good fortune.

Just as a well-planted field will yield crops, a field of good fortune will yield good karmic results to those who make offerings to deserving beings.

One day, Pindola-Bharadvaja exhibited his extraordinary powers by ascending into the air to retrieve a sandalwood alms bowl that had been placed atop a high pole. As a result, the Buddha rebuked him for his exhibitionism and told him to remain in this world to enable people to gain good fortune by making offerings

to him. And so, Pindola-Bharadvaja is still in this world serving as a field of good fortune.

The arhat Kalodayin was foremost in propagating the teachings.

Kalodayin possessed both wisdom and the knowledge of the methods most suitable for the circumstances and capabilities of those he helped. He was thus able to assist countless people to advance on the path to enlightenment.

The arhat Mahakapphina was foremost in knowledge of the stars.

When he was a layperson, he decided that he wanted to become a monastic student of the Buddha. On his way to visit the Buddha, he stayed overnight at a potter's home, where he shared a room with a monk. That night the monk taught him about the Dharma. Due to this teaching, Mahakapphina attained the level of arhat. The monk was actually a manifestation of the Buddha who, upon perceiving Mahakapphina's sincerity in becoming a monk, taught him the Dharma.

The arhat Vakula was foremost in longevity.

His long life was the result of his having made offerings to a gravely ill monk in a past lifetime, as well as having kept the precept of no killing for many lifetimes. In keeping this precept, Vakula had another out-

come, a very rare one of having numerous rebirths as a human being.

Health and longevity are karmic results from giving. Other outcomes are wealth and wisdom. The giving of wealth, material and non-material, will result in wealth. The giving of teachings will result in wisdom, and the giving of fearlessness will result in health and longevity. To be foremost in longevity among all the accomplished arhats at the assembly, Vakula must have extensively practiced the giving of fearlessness.

Understanding the importance of good karmic outcomes, the Buddha encouraged the cultivation of both good fortune and wisdom. We can see the importance of cultivating both in the saying "Cultivating wisdom but not good fortune will result in an arhat not receiving any offerings. Cultivating good fortune but not wisdom will result in a royal elephant wearing precious jewels."

The first part describes a person who nurtured wisdom, but not good fortune. He attained arhatship, but because he had not cultivated good fortune, no one made offerings to him when he went on alms round. The second part describes a person who nurtured good fortune, but not wisdom. Having good fortune, he was reborn as a royal elephant, who when ridden by the king, wore many precious jewels.

The arhat Aniruddha was foremost in the heavenly eye.

While still a relatively new student of the Buddha, Aniruddha, who was another of the Buddha's cousins, was admonished by him for sleeping too much. Aniruddha then applied himself so diligently that he did not sleep at all and thus became blind. As a result of this, the Buddha taught him a meditation that enabled him to attain the heavenly eye. Aniruddha was thus able to see a thousandfold world system.

Additionally, a long, long time ago, during one of Aniruddha's past lives, there was a famine. Seeing an alms-seeker and realizing that no one was offering him any food, Aniruddha offered his own to the man. The man was actually a pratyekabuddha. As a result of his offering, Aniruddha received the karmic reward of being free from poverty for ninety-one kalpas.

By learning about these members of the Buddha's sangha, it is clear that they represented the cultural and intellectual elite of that time. They were respected for their wisdom and practice, as well as for their ability to clearly explain the profound teachings of the Buddha. Their presence in this Amitabha assembly, listening to the teaching on the Pure Land, demonstrates to people how invaluable this beautiful and utterly profound Pure Land Dharma door is. If one can believe, learn, and

practice this Dharma door, the results will be beyond imagination.

Sixteen arhats are named in the sutra—from the wise Sariputra to the slow Suddhipanthaka; from the young Rahula to the oldest arhat, Vakula; from the confident debater Mahakausthila to the ascetic Mahakasyapa. They all “rejoiced and faithfully accepted” this Pure Land sutra, which shows that all people—intelligent or dull, young or old, outgoing or contemplative—can accept and practice this teaching.

## The Bodhisattvas-Mahasattvas

Also present were the  
Bodhisattvas-Mahasattvas: Manjushri,  
Prince of the Dharma; the Bodhisattva  
Ajita, the Invincible; the Bodhisattvas  
Gandhahastin and Nityodyukta, and other  
such great Bodhisattvas.

A bodhisattva is a sentient being who has developed the bodhi mind, the compassionate mind in which every thought is to attain enlightenment for self and all others. They can manifest as monastics or laypeople, male or female, and can be of any age, occupation, or social position.

Bodhisattvas go to the buddha-lands in the ten directions to teach and help all beings. Some of these lands are magnificently adorned with seven jewels, but others are very polluted or unpleasant. Where there is an affinity, the bodhisattvas will go there, whether a

situation is favorable or not. Moreover, they do not like or dislike any situation. In other words, they travel around all the buddha-lands without feeling attachment or aversion. Neither do they give rise to any thought or discrimination. As the *Infinite Life Sutra* says, the bodhisattvas are “pure, firm, calm and joyous” and their vows are “steadfast and unmoving.”

Bodhisattvas practice to eradicate their ignorance. As they do so, they progress in their cultivation through fifty-one levels of attainment. The first forty levels comprise ten levels of faith, ten levels of abiding, ten levels of practice, and ten levels of dedication. Following these forty levels are the mahasattva levels of the great bodhisattvas, comprising any of the ten levels of ground or the highest bodhisattva level, that of equal enlightenment. Having progressed through these fifty-one levels, bodhisattvas realize the ultimate attainment—buddhahood.

To understand the difference between Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and ordinary people, consider an analogy of tightly wound metal coils. Buddhas, perfectly enlightened beings, are like coils that are completely unwound, perfectly straightened out. Bodhisattvas, partially enlightened beings, are like coils in the process of straightening out.

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Ordinary people in this world, being totally unenlightened, are like stubborn coils that remain tightly wound. Not yet having eradicated the first erroneous view of the affliction of views—the view of self—they are still attached to their physical body, thinking of it as “self.” Thus engrossed, ordinary sentient beings think of self-benefit before thinking of benefiting others. Such thinking leads them to harm others. What about bodhisattvas? Bodhisattvas have no thoughts of harming others. They selflessly come to this world to help beings awaken.

The first bodhisattva named in the sutra was Manjusri.

While the Buddha is known as the King of the Dharma, Manjusri is called the Prince of the Dharma. “King” refers to comfort and freedom. The Buddha, having mastered the Dharma, achieved absolute comfort and freedom. Thus, he is the King of the Dharma. Manjusri is the “Prince” because he continues the Buddha’s work.

Of all the bodhisattvas at the Amitabha assembly, Manjusri was the foremost in wisdom. As we learned previously, of the arhats, Sariputra was the foremost in wisdom. So, among both the bodhisattvas and the arhats, those who were foremost in wisdom were named first in their respective sections of the sutra.

This carries a very profound meaning: to choose and practice this Dharma door, one must have wisdom. What is our foremost wisdom? Being mindful of and chanting Amitabha Buddha's name.

The second bodhisattva named in the sutra was Ajita.

Known as Ajita in India, he is called Maitreya in China. His name is translated as "invincible," meaning that no one can surpass him in compassion. His compassion, based on wisdom, is sincere, pure, and impartial. It pervades the entire Dharma realm—all of time and space.

Sincerity is a mind without wandering thoughts, discriminations, and attachments.

Purity is a mind without attachments.

Impartiality is interacting with all phenomena without discriminatory thoughts, attachments, or expectations.

Having wisdom is having the ability to know the difference between true and false, proper and deviated, right and wrong, and beneficial and harmful, while still interacting with phenomena appropriately.

Could Maitreya's compassion be called love?

In light of the definitions just given, no, because compassion and love are not the same. Love, arising from emotions and not from wisdom, is capricious. In-

sincere, impure, and biased, love is what unawakened people feel for certain individuals.

Compassion, on the other hand, arises from wisdom, not emotions. Sincere, pure, and impartial, compassion is what Buddhas and bodhisattvas feel toward all beings. While love flows from attachments and discriminations, compassion flows from the true nature.

What is the true nature?

It is one of the terms that Sakyamuni Buddha used for buddha-nature, the true and immutable nature of all beings. As Venerable Master Chin Kung said in his lectures on the *Amitabha Sutra*, "When the Buddha spoke of the true nature, he only said 'inconceivable.' In other words, we cannot understand it with our mind or explain it with words. Words are too limited to describe the truth. There is a limit to our thinking and imagination. The limit is our store consciousness. The true nature is not the store consciousness, so it is beyond detection."

Maitreya Bodhisattva will become the next Buddha in our world. In the sutras, different terms and words such as *world* and *buddha-land* refer to a great galaxy in which one Buddha dwells and teaches. So saying that Maitreya will be the next Buddha in our world means he can do so anywhere in our great galaxy.

Where will beings in the Western Pure Land become a Buddha?

Wherever they have an affinity to do so.

When can they do so?

In one lifetime.

When we have belief, have made the vow, and mindfully chant Amitabha Buddha's name at the end of our life, as we are breathing our last breaths, we can see him come to guide us to the Western Pure Land. We will discard our physical body and go with him at that point. Then, in the Pure Land, we will continue our learning and practice. Gradually, degree by degree, our ignorance will be eliminated. When completely eliminated, we will then be able to become a Buddha in whatever buddha-land in which we have an affinity with the beings and when those beings' conditions have matured. In that same lifetime.

The third bodhisattva named in the sutra was Gandhahastin, whose name means "no resting."

The fourth bodhisattva was Nityodyukta, whose name means "making constant progress."

These two bodhisattvas encourage us to practice. They teach us that when we learn and practice the Pure Land method, we should have no doubt, no interruption, and no intermingling with other teachings.

## The Bodhisattvas-Mahasattvas

The presence in the Amitabha assembly of these four equal-enlightenment bodhisattvas is profoundly significant for us. Here are beings—one level below buddhahood—learning this teaching about the Pure Land. How can we fail to follow their example? We need to believe in this Dharma door, vow to be born in the Western Pure Land, and be diligent in our practice. Nothing is more important to us than mindfully chanting Amitabha Buddha's name. Other practices, such as visualization, meditation, and mantra recitation are not necessary for us. We just mindfully chant the buddha-name. This chanting is the simplest and easiest method, a supreme method taught by all Buddhas.

## Shakra, the King of the Gods

Also present was Shakra, the king of the gods, along with countless numbers of heavenly beings, making up a great assembly.

“Shakra, the king of the gods,” is the king of the trayastrimsa heaven, the second lowest of the six heavens in the desire realm. Although there are “countless numbers of heavenly beings,” he is specifically named because his heaven is close to the human path. Most people are not aware of the higher heavens of the desire realm, much less those in the form and formless realms, because those heavens are too far away from us. Shakra, however, is known and respected in this world. Therefore, Sakyamuni Buddha used him to represent all heavenly beings.

Next in the sutra, we will learn about the Pure Land Dharma door, a teaching that Sakyamuni Buddha said,

“all beings in all worlds find hard to believe.” Hard indeed, for as it is often said, this Dharma door is the “easiest to practice, but the most difficult to believe.” Those who cannot believe in it but believe in other methods will need three asamkhyeya kalpas to attain buddhahood.

Those who believe in the Pure Land method and sincerely practice it will need only one lifetime. This achievement is the incredible result of belief. Very simply, there was not enough time for Sakyamuni to explain everything to us. Our life span here is just too short. Our birth in the Western Pure Land will give us all the time we need to learn and practice.

Consider the Buddha’s response to a monk who asked him some metaphysical questions. To help this monk focus on the immediate goal of his practice and not waste precious time, the Buddha posited a story of a man who was shot with a poisoned arrow. A doctor was found, but before the man would agree to the treatment he wanted to know certain things. What caste was the archer? What was his name and clan? Where was he from, what town or city? Was he tall or short, dark or fair? What kind of bow and style of shaft did he use? What kind of sinew was used on the arrow? What was the bowstring made of? What kind of bird

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were the feathers from? The wounded man would die before he could hear all the answers!

We are like this wounded man who was running out of time and should have just trusted the good doctor. We should believe Sakyamuni Buddha, whose life and attainment proved the validity of his teachings, and use the method he prescribed for us. When we are out of danger in the Pure Land, we will have all the time required to learn all that we wish—and need—to learn.

## The Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss

At that time Buddha said to the Elder Shariputra: "West of here, past a hundred billion Buddha-lands, there exists a world called *Ultimate Bliss*. In this land there is a Buddha called Amitabha, who is preaching the Dharma right now."

Sakyamuni Buddha spoke of a world "west of here" to help us understand where the Pure Land is in relation to our world. He further explained that it lies "past a hundred billion Buddha-lands." A buddha-land is a great galaxy in which one Buddha dwells and teaches. And so, from the aspect of phenomenon, a hundred billion buddha-lands is an inconceivable distance from us. Fortunately, from the aspect of noumenon, of principle, the Pure Land is already within our true nature.

Sakyamuni Buddha said, “there exists a world” to ensure that no doubt arises in the listener—this world does indeed exist. Telling us it is called “Ultimate Bliss” is done to encourage us to vow to be born there, not in our world that is called Endurance.

“In this land there is a Buddha called Amitabha.” Saying that Amitabha Buddha is in that land is done to assure us that he is neither a figment of imagination nor a being who will come into existence sometime in the distant future. He is real, and he already exists in his Pure Land. By mindfully chanting his name—a cause—we will form a connection with him and be born in his land—the effect.

When we vow to be born in the Pure Land, he will know. He will be aware that we want to end our suffering. And with infinite patience, he will wait for us to form a connection with him. How do we do this? By single-mindedly chanting his name. And for how long? For the rest of our life—but most crucially when we are breathing our last breaths.

It is as if Amitabha is always reaching out to us with a perfectly steady hand. But our hand, moving erratically all the time, a symbol of our thoughts jumping from one thing to another, must first be stilled before we can take his. By single-mindedly repeating Amitabha’s name as we are breathing our last breaths, our fi-

nally still mind will resonate with his and we will be as one. He will come, just as he vowed, to guide us to his land of Ultimate Bliss.

“Preaching the Dharma right now,” tells us that in the Pure Land, Amitabha Buddha is currently teaching the Dharma. He has been doing so since he became a Buddha ten kalpas ago. In comparison, Sakyamuni Buddha taught the Dharma in this world for just forty-nine years. These forty-nine years of teaching were so difficult for him to do because our world has a terrible learning environment.

It is even worse today for we are now in the Dharma-Ending Age. People today have very short lives and little time to learn and practice. They have deep-seated bad habits and numerous afflictions, not the least of which are selfishness, greed, anger, ignorance, and arrogance. They have long-established worldly desires including those for food, sleep, sensory indulgence, fame, prestige, wealth.

Absorbed in all these afflictions and desires, people have not created the necessary conditions for Buddhas to come here often to teach. Maitreya Bodhisattva will not come to our world to become a Buddha for another 5,670 million years!

This multi-million-year gap between the two Buddhas, Sakyamuni and Maitreya, shows how incredibly

rare it is in our world, our buddha-land, to be able to learn directly from a Buddha.

The Western Pure Land, however, has an excellent learning environment. Amitabha has been teaching there for kalpas. In that time, uncountable beings in that land have eradicated their afflictions and allowed none to develop. They have erased all bad habits and strengthened their good habits. From this, we can see why a superior learning environment is so important.

While there are uncountable beings in the Pure Land now, initially there were none. Where did they come from? These beings with their abundance of good roots, good fortune, and causal connections came from worlds in all the ten directions.

Having good roots means that they believed and comprehended the teachings in this sutra. We can too.

Having good fortune means that they were willing to practice according to the teachings and were able to succeed in that practice. We can too.

They developed good roots and good fortune within themselves. We can too.

Causal connections are external factors and refer to favorable conditions. The most significant favorable condition is to meet a genuinely good teacher who introduces and teaches this Dharma door to us.

## The Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss

It is an incredibly rare opportunity to hear of such an ideal land for learning and practice. If we want to be born there, we too must have abundant good roots, good fortune, and favorable causal connections. We may be able to rely on others to help us where favorable connections are concerned, but we have to cultivate good roots and good fortune ourselves.

## A Land of Joy without Suffering

Why is this land called Ultimate Bliss?  
It is called "Ultimate Bliss" because the  
sentient beings in this land are free from  
the myriad sufferings common to mankind,  
and only know every kind of joy.

Although Sakyamuni Buddha was talking to Sariputra, he was addressing all those in the assembly and those of us to come. Throughout the *Amitabha Sutra*, Sakyamuni Buddha asked several questions and then proceeded to answer every one himself while Sariputra remained silent. For him, the wisest of the arhats, to not even attempt an answer to any of Sakyamuni's questions indicates how profound this sutra is.

"Why is this land called Ultimate Bliss?" is the first question Sakyamuni Buddha posed.

When Sariputra respectfully did not respond, Sakyamuni began to describe the myriad wonders in

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the Pure Land, starting with its name. The name of the land is Ultimate Bliss because the sentient beings there have overcome their afflictions through mindfulness of Amitabha Buddha. No longer acting from greed, anger, and ignorance or from a mind that has wandering thoughts, discriminations, and attachments, the beings are always blissful. The name of the land reflects this great joy. Thus, the beings in that land are “free from the myriad sufferings common to mankind.”

Buddhism summarizes these as eight types of suffering.

The first suffering is birth. An unborn baby not only has form but also feelings and consciousness. Sakya-muni explained that due to feelings and consciousness, the baby feels pain while in the womb. At birth, the baby finds itself being expelled from the womb and pushed through the narrow birth canal. Thrust from the only environment that it knows, it suddenly encounters one that is very different: air instead of fluid, light instead of darkness, coolness instead of warmth. First pain, then shock. Little wonder babies cry at birth.

The second suffering is old age. As we age, we find that our energy is not what it used to be. Experiencing aches and pains, we are more sensitive to heat and cold. Wanting to remember a name, we cannot. Wanting to see or hear something, we realize that these sens-

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es have weakened with time. Wishing to move hurriedly, we fail to do so for our legs are not as strong nor our reflexes as quick as they once were. Suffering from the deterioration of these and other faculties, we fear they will worsen even more in the future.

The third suffering is sickness, both mental and physical. We may cry out for help, but no one comes. Given our favorite food, we may find that we have no appetite. We may be in pain and need medicine, but be unable to obtain it. When we do get the medication, we may become dependent upon it or find that it no longer helps us. Severely troubled mentally and emotionally, we find that others, unable to relate to our pain, are not always sympathetic. Their inability to empathize just adds to our suffering.

The fourth suffering is death. When we are dying, our body is weak, and we are unable to control it. We want to sleep, but our sleep is erratic. Or we want to stay awake, but invariably find ourself drifting off. We may slip into unconsciousness and be unable to chant. At that point, even if others are chanting for us, it will be hard for us to be born in the Western Pure Land. If we are still conscious, we may want to die because our pain is unbearable or we are utterly exhausted. But still, we live. Fearful of what will happen to us when we

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die, we do not know which suffering is greater: life or death. So we cling to the former in fear of the latter.

The fifth suffering is separation from loved ones. A person we love no longer returns our love and leaves us. Our children grow up and, having busy lives, no longer come to visit. We want to care for our parents, but find ourselves forced to leave them when our work takes us elsewhere. When we are dying, we have to leave all those we love. Worried about their futures, we realize there is nothing we can do, and we suffer even more.

The sixth suffering is association with those that one dislikes. This suffering also includes things and situations we dislike. We no longer love the person we once did, but find ourselves trapped in the relationship. Required to work with people who always speak ill of us and who we mistrust, we are fearful and ill at ease. Feeling trapped in lives we cannot control, in families whose members are our karmic enemies, in situations with people who hold very different views and goals, we see no end to our suffering.

The seventh suffering is unfulfilled desires. We strain against our fate. Those without power crave it, the childless yearn for children, the impoverished dream of wealth. Rarely are our hopes fulfilled and our expectations realized. When we do attain what we want, things

change, and we lose what we have. The suffering seems interminable.

The eighth suffering is due to the five aggregates of form, feeling, conception, impulse, and consciousness. Simply put, the suffering due to the five aggregates is the absence of both physical and mental well-being.

Form, the first aggregate, refers to matter, our physical body.

Feeling, the second aggregate, while usually associated with our body, is actually mental phenomena. Feeling includes pain, happiness, and so on.

Conception, the third aggregate, refers to the sixth, or mental awareness, consciousness.

Impulse, the fourth aggregate, refers to the seventh, or thinking mind, consciousness. Impulse describes the continuous, uninterrupted flow of thoughts that examines and considers. As soon as one such thought ceases, the next arises immediately, streaming through our mind at an incredible rate. The vast majority of these thoughts are too subtle for us to notice, but we are nonetheless affected by their vibrations. And no matter how subtle the thoughts may be, they are mental karmas and, as such, will bring about their related karmic effects.

Consciousness, the fifth aggregate, refers to the eighth, or store, consciousness. Consciousness means

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“storing” and is indestructible. Our actions are karmic. They all sow their own seeds and these accumulate in our store consciousness. When certain seeds in this store consciousness encounter the right conditions, they mature. This maturation leads to the next rebirth and its ensuing life, which with few exceptions will be subject to the eight types of suffering. At the end of this new life, again, some seeds in the store consciousness encounter the right conditions and mature. Once more we are reborn. And once more we suffer. The suffering thus continues like a never-ending spiral.

Hoping to help us end our suffering, Sakyamuni Buddha encouraged us to seek birth in the Land of Ultimate Bliss. Once there, we will break out of this cycle of death and rebirth, and “only know every kind of joy.” How so?

There is no suffering from the process of birth because beings in the Pure Land are born from lotuses, not from the womb. There is no suffering from old age or sickness because the body is not composed of flesh, blood, and bones. There is no suffering from death for the lifetime in the Pure Land is infinite and concludes in buddhahood. Neither is there suffering of separation from loved ones because beings in that land have no attachments. There is no association with those that one dislikes because everyone is awakened. And there

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is no suffering from unfulfilled desires because should a being have the thought of something, it will appear naturally.

As we now know, when seeds in our store consciousness encounter the right conditions, they mature. This process of the seeds ripening causes us to undergo endless rebirths and suffering in samsara because, far too often, it is our bad seeds that will develop.

In the Pure Land, however, the bad seeds in the beings' store consciousnesses do not have the conditions to mature. Why? Because everything the beings see and hear helps them to give rise to pure thoughts, to chant Amitabha Buddha's name. With only the seeds for goodness and for attaining buddhahood maturing, the beings no longer give rise to form, feeling, conception, impulse, and consciousness, the five aggregates that had previously kept them trapped in the cycle of rebirth.

All these are just some of the reasons why Sakya-muni Buddha assured us that the beings in that land "are free from the myriad sufferings common to mankind, and only know every kind of joy."

## Trees of Precious Gems

Furthermore, this land is called “Ultimate Bliss” because it is surrounded by seven rings of railings, and seven layers of netting, and seven rows of trees, all made of the four precious jewels.

Each of the seven rows of trees is neatly and methodically arranged. The beautiful branches, leaves, fruits, and flowers on the trees are made of precious gems. There is one line of railing, then one layer of netting, and then one row of trees. Beyond that is a second line of railing, a second layer of netting, and a second row of trees, and so on, until there are seven rows of railing, netting, and trees.

People may wonder why everything is in sevens: the railings, the netting, the trees. It all seems so rigid. There are reasons for such a specific number. In addition to the number seven representing the seven major

components of the thirty-seven limbs of enlightenment, the number seven also stands for perfection in Mahayana Buddhism. Everything in the Pure Land—buildings, clothing, food, and more—reflect the preferences of the beings there. Everything accords with the beings' wishes. Everything is therefore perfect. This excellence, this perfection, abounds in the Pure Land.

For example, no effort is required to build a house, to produce clothes, or to prepare food. The *Infinite Life Sutra* explains this phenomenon. If a being wants to live in a big house, the house will be big. If a small dwelling is preferred, it will be small. Prefer it to be in the air instead of on the ground? So be it. Everything is as one wishes. This sounds like all the beings in the Pure Land still have desires and wandering thoughts. Not at all. Only those who are newly arrived still do. Those who are more advanced have eliminated their residual habits and wandering thoughts.

In the *Amitabha Sutra*, Sakyamuni Buddha described the lowest land, the Land Where Sages and Ordinary Beings Dwell Together. He did so because this is where we will most likely be born. After being born in this land, our residual habits and wandering thoughts will be kept under control.

But since they are not yet eliminated, these habits and thoughts can still arise. How?

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Consider food. In the Pure Land, sustenance is unnecessary. But a being who has not yet eliminated all wandering thoughts may suddenly think of a particular dish. With that thought, the dish will appear. The being, seeing it suddenly materialize and inhaling its aromas, will remember that in the Pure Land sustenance is not required. With that realization, the food will disappear. Gradually, due to the supportive power of Amitabha's vows, help from their fellow practitioners, and the being's own continued learning and practice, thoughts of things like food and houses will fade. In time, such thoughts will cease.

The amazing living environment in the Pure Land where all this happens is symbolized by the "four precious jewels" of gold, silver, lapis lazuli, and crystal. These gems represent the four attributes of nirvana.

The first attribute of nirvana is permanence, which means constancy. In this passage, Sakyamuni Buddha described the unchanging, permanent environment in the Western Pure Land. Except for those newly born in the Pure Land, the vast majority of beings there have eliminated their discriminations, attachments, and wandering thoughts. This results in permanence.

In marked contrast, our world is impermanent. We have yet to reduce our wandering thoughts, much less eliminate them. Indeed, we still immerse ourselves in

them. Rising and falling at an incredible rate, these thoughts are constantly moving, ceaselessly changing.

Sakyamuni Buddha often spoke of the nine Dharma realms, which consist of the hells, hungry ghosts, animals, humans, asuras, the heavens, sound-hearers, pratyekabuddhas, and bodhisattvas. Which of these nine realms we find ourselves in depends on the levels we achieve in our cultivation of the ten virtuous karmas.

Sakyamuni further explained that all phenomena in these realms are “created by the mind and altered by the consciousness.” “The mind” refers to the *true mind*, and “the consciousness” refers to the *false mind*. Actually, the true mind and the false mind are the same mind. When one is completely awakened and is no longer deluded, one’s mind is the true mind. When one is not yet awakened and is still deluded, one’s mind is the false mind.

In the Western Pure Land, as well, phenomena are created by the mind. But they are “not altered by the consciousness.” Beings in the Pure Land do not use the consciousness, the false mind. They use the true mind. The true mind is unchanging. The true mind explains why there is permanence in the Pure Land, and the false mind explains why there is impermanence in the nine Dharma realms. In other words, permanence occurs when beings use the true mind, which is wisdom.

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In contrast, impermanence occurs when beings use the false mind, which is the consciousness.

Consciousness has eight components, each with its respective function, or activity. The first five sub-consciousnesses: eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body consciousnesses see, hear, smell, taste, and touch, respectively. The sixth sub-consciousness, mental awareness, discriminates. The seventh sub-consciousness, the thinking mind, attaches. The eighth sub-consciousness stores the seeds of our past physical, verbal, and mental karmas. These residual karmas include our wandering thoughts—all our impressions from countless lifetimes over innumerable kalpas. The eight sub-consciousnesses, all together, comprise the “consciousness.” The consciousness is the false mind that we beings in the nine Dharma realms use.

Beings who use the true mind still see, hear, smell, taste, and touch, but these sense consciousnesses do not plant any new seeds in the store consciousness. In other words, with the true mind, these beings have no wandering thoughts, no discriminations, and no attachments.

The second attribute of nirvana is joy, which is pure and lasting. In our world, people do not have joy. At best, they can experience happiness, but it is neither pure nor enduring. Joy, on the other hand, is pure and

enduring. It comes from progressing in one's cultivation of precept observation, meditative concentration, and wisdom; from advancing on the bodhi path; and from learning every day. Doing all these, the beings in the Western Pure Land have great joy.

The third attribute of nirvana is true self. True self means to be in control, to have freedom. In the cycle of rebirth, we are not in control, not of others, not of the environment. Not even of ourself. After all, we do not wish to get caught up in thoughts of regret or resentment or worry, but we do. We do not desire to be separated from loved ones or to be around those we dislike, but we are. We do not want to get sick or become frail, and yet we will. We are not in control.

When we go to the Western Pure Land, however, we will be in control. We will not become sick or frail. We will not age. We will master our bad habits and our wandering thoughts. All these things happen even in the lowest of the four lands, the Land Where Sages and Ordinary Beings Dwell Together.

The other three lands are the Land of Expedient Liberation, the Land of Real Reward, and the Land of Eternally Quiescent Light. Our natural assumption is to think the lands are separated with prescribed borders. In the Western Pure Land, however, such physical boundaries do not exist. The four lands actually over-

lap. As a result, we could be in the Land Where Sages and Ordinary Beings Dwell Together while the being next to us is in the Land of Expedient Liberation.

Think of the lands as states of mind that we achieve due to our level of practice. The higher the level of attainment in practice, the higher the state of mind, the higher the land. For example, being born in the Land Where Sages and Ordinary Beings Dwell Together occurs through constant mindfulness of Amitabha Buddha. Constant mindfulness enables one to use the buddha-name to control afflictions, residual habits, and wandering thoughts. It is like placing a stone on some weeds. With the stone inhibiting the growth of the unwanted plants, they will wither. Continuing to keep the weeds in check will, in time, eliminate them.

In constant mindfulness, one is continuously aware of Amitabha Buddha. The degree of awareness can vary. When one is meditating on the name, one single-mindedly chants the name and is focused on it. Because one's sole thought is of Amitabha Buddha, there are no wandering thoughts. At other times, because one needs to concentrate on a task, focus will be divided. One will not be able to focus just on chanting. But even though one is not single-mindedly concentrating

on the name, one is continuously thinking of Amitabha. Here as well, wandering thoughts do not arise.

Understandably, lessened awareness of the name is not as powerful as single-minded focus. But even mindfulness that is not yet single-minded will enable the buddha-name to become more solidly established in our mind. Gradually, our focus will increase, and the chanting of the buddha-name will allow us to restrain our afflictions until we eradicate them.

When we attain constant mindfulness of Amitabha Buddha, our afflictions will not arise. Thus, we will neither be angry in adverse conditions nor be attached to those that are favorable. We will be in this state naturally—there will not be any intentional control.

In other words, we will focus on chanting Amitabha's name, and will not have to think, "I need to chant Amitabha's name to control my afflictions and attachments." Exerting an effort to control these occurs when we are at the stage of learning and practice, at a point when we have not yet achieved constant mindfulness. When we achieve it, we will not exert any effort to control our afflictions and attachments, but will react naturally.

There are nine levels of birth in constant mindfulness. Our achievement will determine which level we will be at. The levels also indicate how and when we

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pass away. If we are in one of the higher three levels, we will be able to pass away whenever we wish. At that time, we can go without any illness. We may be seated, or even standing. If we do not yet feel like leaving this world, we can stay longer. Everything can be achieved at will. If we are in the middle three levels, we will be able to know a few months in advance when we are going to pass away. Again, we may leave this world standing or seated. If we are in the lower three levels, we may know several days in advance of our death but can become ill before we die.

The Land of Expedient Liberation is where arhats, pratyekabuddhas, and lower-level bodhisattvas, after eradicating the affliction of views and thoughts, dwell. Beings born in this land have attained a lower level of one-mind undisturbed, that of one-mind undisturbed at the level of phenomena.

The Land of Real Reward is where higher-level bodhisattvas dwell. Beings born in this land have attained a higher level of one-mind undisturbed, that of one-mind undisturbed at the level of noumenon. Through continuous chanting of the buddha-name, they have not only eradicated the affliction of views and thoughts but have also eradicated the affliction of dust and sand, which is discrimination.

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The Land of Eternally Quiescent Light is the land where Buddhas dwell.

Which of these four lands we are born in depends on the level of our practice. If we are born in the Land Where Sages and Ordinary Beings Dwell Together, we will be able to visit Buddhas in the ten directions every day to learn from them.

If we are born in the Land of Real Reward, we will no longer need to go to other pure lands to learn from different Buddhas. When we want to see a particular Buddha, that Buddha will be right in front of us even though he is still teaching in his own land. In the Land of Real Reward we are no longer bound by time and space. There is no need to travel anywhere. The Buddhas in the three times of the past, present, and future, and of the ten directions will be right in front of us. This is an incredible state.

The fourth attribute of nirvana is purity, which refers to a mind free of attachments. Do the beings in the Western Pure Land go back to the cycle of rebirth? Yes, they most certainly do. But not because their respective karmic forces pull them back. They go back, and they do so willingly, because of their vows to help those still trapped in suffering. How do they help? By teaching.

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With pure minds, the bodhisattvas in the Western Pure Land have no attachments, not even when they are in the heavens to help beings there. Neither do the bodhisattvas have afflictions, not even when they are in the hells, where suffering abounds, to help the beings there. To the bodhisattvas, the ten Dharma realms are all the same. Thus, wherever they go in the realms, bodhisattvas have no afflictions and no attachments.

Although they do not feel happiness or suffering, when they return to the cycle of rebirth, they sometimes act like they do. Such skillful behavior facilitates teaching, for it helps people feel that awakened beings are not so very different from them. People are thus inspired to think, "if they can succeed in their cultivation, I, too, should be able to succeed."

When they go to a world to teach the beings there, bodhisattvas manifest in the most suitable form for each being. They do so intuitively and naturally. And they do so in countless Dharma realms at the same moment in time. This is true joy. True purity.

In our world, the four attributes of permanence, joy, true self, and purity do not exist. Everything here is impermanent, and there is no real happiness. There is no true self. People are attached to their physical body, believing it to be the self. But the body is not in control. It has no freedom. Also, peoples' minds are not pure

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here. Their thoughts are tainted with selfishness, greed, anger, ignorance, and arrogance. The reality is that this world is painfully different from the Western Pure Land, where there is permanence, joy, true self, and purity. Why remain here when we can go to that land instead!

## Ponds of Seven Jewel s

Moreover, the Land of Ultimate Bliss has ponds of seven jewels filled with the waters of eight virtues.

Just as with the rows of railing, netting, and trees, the number seven in “ponds of seven jewels” symbolizes perfection. Unlike the gems of our world, those in the Pure Land are perfectly pure, flawless, and soft. Their colors are incomparably more varied and their tactile quality vastly more pleasing.

After hearing about these wonderful features, we need to remind ourselves that we do not go to the Pure Land to surround ourselves with exquisite gemstones. We go there to achieve the attributes they symbolize: purity and perfection.

The Pure Land has myriad ponds “filled with the waters of eight virtues.” All who wish to can refresh themselves in the ponds. The *Infinite Life Sutra* explains

that both the depth and the temperature of the water change to meet our preferences. The water will be as deep or as shallow, as warm or as cool as we would like it to be. But it is not just the water that is wonderful. Everything in the Pure Land makes the beings there feel peaceful and content.

The first of the water's eight virtues is clarity and purity. The water in the Pure Land is perfectly pure, unlike the water in our world, which is contaminated by natural and human-made pollutants. Even water from our most remote mountain streams has impurities, ranging from minerals to bacteria.

The second virtue is coolness. The temperature of the water in the Pure Land depends on the beings' preferences. To say the water is cool means that it calms and cleanses the mind. Water temperatures in our world are subject to changes in weather and other influences. Ranging from boiling to freezing, the water here can quickly become hazardous.

The third virtue is sweetness. The water in the Pure Land is pleasing and refreshing. In our world, ocean water is salty and undrinkable in its natural state. Even fresh water often tastes unpleasant.

The fourth virtue is lightness and softness. The water in the Pure Land is very light because the beings there have let go of attachments and discriminations.

## Ponds of Seven Jewels

In our world, because of our myriad attachments, the water is so heavy that a single gallon of it weighs over eight pounds.

The fifth virtue is softening. While the water in the Pure Land is moistening, water in our world can dry out our skin. Thus, we often have to resort to moisturizers to return our skin to its earlier supple and soft condition.

The sixth virtue is peaceful. In the Pure Land, the water accords with the beings' wishes. As it is always soothing and poses no danger, the beings feel very peaceful. Water in our world may be beautiful and calm. But it can also be dangerous, inundating all that lies in its way.

The seventh virtue is nourishing. The water in the Pure Land makes the beings there feel energetic, not only free from thirst but also from hunger and illness. In our world, drinking too much water leads to bloatedness and discomfort. After we drink, our throat can still feel rough and dry. We could even die from quickly drinking an excessive amount of water.

The eighth virtue is nurturing. This is the most important virtue. The water in the Pure Land helps the beings there to strengthen their good roots. It purifies their thoughts, enabling them to improve their practice. And merely by touching the water, they are invigorat-

## Ponds of Seven Jewels

ed. In this world, not only does water provide mere temporary relief from thirst, it is often unhealthy, thus causing problems for both our body and mind.

## Wal kways and Towers

The bottom of each of the ponds is pure golden sand, and the stepped walkways that lead up from all four sides of each of the ponds are made of gold, silver, lapis lazuli and crystal. Above the ponds there are towers which are adorned with silver and gold and lapis lazuli and crystal and mother of pearl, red agate and carnelians.

On Earth, the bottom of ponds is mud; the walkways and buildings are constructed from bricks, concrete, and stone. Whereas in the Pure Land, “the bottom of each of the ponds is pure golden sand” and the walkways around the ponds “are made of gold, silver, lapis lazuli, and crystal.” Knowing that we are already familiar with the beauty of precious metals and stones, Sakyamuni Buddha used these four gems as examples.

## Walkways and Towers

In reality, the infinite gems in the Pure Land are far superior to those here on Earth.

The *Infinite Life Sutra* describes how the towers and pavilions, which serve as both dwellings and places of learning, are in the sky as well as on the ground. Like the walkways and ground, the buildings are made of gemstones, with colors and brightness varying from one to the next.

Amitabha Buddha has adorned the land with such beauty for everyone: for the well-being of those already dwelling there and for those yet to be born there. Everything in the Pure Land is done to help beings there progress in their practice. With our confidence in the marvelous aspects of that land thus strengthened, we will be even more determined to be born there.

## Luminescent Lotus Flowers

In the ponds there are lotus flowers as big as cartwheels: blue ones shining with blue light, yellow ones shining with yellow light, red ones shining with red light, and white ones shining with white light, each emitting a subtle pure fragrance.

The beings in the Pure Land are born not by being thrust from a womb but by stepping out of a lotus. This is significant because those born from a womb experience the eight types of suffering. The suffering of birth includes the suffering of being inside the womb, not just of being born. A being inside a lotus, however, does not feel any discomfort or pain. Indeed, the *Avatamsaka Sutra* tells us that when in the lotus, one feels that the flower is the whole world.

The *Amitabha Sutra* tells of various colored lotuses, “blue ones shining with blue light, yellow ones shining

## Luminescent Lotus Flowers

with yellow light, red ones shining with red light, and white ones shining with white light." Blue, yellow, and red are primary colors, those that cannot be created by mixing other colors together. The presence of these primary colors assures us that infinite colors are possible in the Pure Land. Everything there, from the adornments to the beings, glows with light. The light radiating from each lotus is of the same hue as the flower.

While lotus flowers in samsara have a pleasing fragrance, the lotuses in the Pure Land have a "subtle pure fragrance." Great Master Ouyi wrote in his commentary on the *Amitabha Sutra* that "the 'subtle pure fragrance' of the lotus flowers is emblematic of their special virtues: they are ethereal, unobstructed, formless, and not sense-objects."<sup>3</sup>

Where do the lotuses come from?

We know that in this world, lotuses grow from the mud at the bottom of ponds. Gradually, the lotuses rise until, finally, they break through the surface of the water. In the Western Pure Land, however, the lotuses arise from our mind.

If we now believe, vow to be born in the Western Pure Land, and chant the name of Amitabha Buddha, a lotus bud with our name on it will appear in a pond in that land. The size, radiance, and color of the flower

will reflect our diligence in chanting. If we stop this practice or change to another Dharma door, our lotus will wither. But when we grow increasingly sincere and happy in our chanting, our lotus will grow bigger and brighter. As we breathe our last breaths and single-mindedly chant the buddha-name silently or aloud, Amitabha, accompanied by a retinue of bodhisattvas, will come to us with our lotus. We will then enter the lotus and sit upright within it.

When it is time for our lotus to open, we will step out. Our body, glowing with light just like our lotus, will be fully grown with the same appearance as all the other beings in the Pure Land. We will then be able to stroll around the Pure Land, listening to birds teaching the Dharma or attending the assemblies to hear Amitabha teach.

We can be born in this extraordinary land if we have belief, resolute vow, and truly practice. An ancient patriarch said that for those who engaged in Pure Land practice without intermingling with other practices, if ten thousand people truly practice, all ten thousand would be born in the Pure Land. Their success is due to their firm belief, resolute vow, and enthusiastic practice according to the teachings.

But more recently we have been told that if ten thousand people practice, only a handful will succeed

in being born in the Pure Land. Why the difference? These few sincerely believe, vow, and practice. The vast majority do not, so their chanting is not single-minded. Thus, they fail to be born in the Pure Land.

Understanding this, we should value our good roots and good fortune. Although we have been reborn in this world of ignorance and suffering, we have encountered an inconceivably rare opportunity—the opportunity to become a Buddha. We need to have the determination to want to be born in the Pure Land and the will to let go of all worries and afflictions. We do this because we realize that everything here is an illusion. Nothing else matters as much as being born in that land.

## The Wonderful Adornments and Virtues

The Land of Ultimate Bliss is complete with all these adornments and virtues.

In his commentary, Great Master Ouyi wrote of the two primary causes that resulted in all the wonderful aspects of the Pure Land.

First, the wonders come from the support of Amitabha Buddha. He vowed that if wonders arising from his inconceivable merits and virtues did not fill his land, he would not become a Buddha. Since we learn from Sakyamuni Buddha that Amitabha does indeed exist, we know that these wonderful aspects do indeed pervade the Pure Land.

Second, the Pure Land exists because of our own mind. As we chant Amitabha Buddha's name we purify our mind. As it is purified, it merges with the mind of Amitabha. Amitabha's vows and our pure mind result in a beautifully adorned and virtuous Pure Land.

Cel estial Music

And there is more—celestial music is constantly playing in this Buddha-land, and the ground is made of pure gold. Heavenly flowers rain down at all hours of the day and night. In the morning the sentient beings of this land fill their robes with multitudes of wondrous flowers and make offerings to hundreds of billions of Buddhas in other worlds. When it is meal time, they return to their own land, to eat, and circumambulate the teaching assembly.

One of the many wonderful aspects of the Land of Ultimate Bliss is celestial joy: the joy that comes from music that plays naturally, the making of offerings to hundreds of billions of Buddhas, heavenly flowers that float down to rest on the golden ground. Luminescent, the flowers cover the ground like a soft carpet. When

we step on them, they sink by a few inches. When we lift our foot, the flowers rise as well. When it is time for new flowers to fall, those already on the ground naturally disappear.

The name of these flowers is *mandara*, a Sanskrit word meaning “as one wishes.” This name assures us that there is no suffering arising from unfulfilled desires, which is one of the eight types of suffering that we undergo in our world. As mandara flowers, the blossoms take the form we wish. If we prefer jasmine, the flowers will be jasmine; if we prefer roses, the flowers will be roses.

The flowers “rain down at all hours of the day and night.” But why speak of night when there is none in a land that is always glowing with light? The phrase “day and night” accords with our human habits and how we perceive time. Thus, Sakyamuni described the falling flowers in terms that we could relate to.

“In the morning,” the beings gather masses of wondrous flowers to “make offerings to hundreds of billions of Buddhas in other worlds.” When it is mealtime, they return to the Pure Land to eat. This description illustrates how quickly the beings can visit and make offerings to Buddhas in other lands, and then come back to the Pure Land. Since this takes so little time, we know that even those in the lowest land, the

Land Where Sages and Ordinary Beings Dwell Together, have extraordinary powers. These include the ability to see all forms, to hear all sounds, to know the thoughts of others, to be anywhere at will, and to accomplish something by willing it.

When visiting Buddhas in other worlds, the beings do not have to return immediately to the Pure Land. If they have good affinities with the beings or the Buddha in another land, they may stay there longer to help those beings or to learn from that Buddha. If their affinities are light, they can return sooner. The decision to stay longer or come back sooner is wisely based not on attachments but rather on Dharma affinities.

Having good Dharma affinities and extraordinary powers, the beings in the Pure Land can help others. In contrast, here in samsara, while we may wish to assist others, we lack the necessary abilities, impartiality, and wisdom to do so. Our mind is fickle, our good fortune inadequate. Thus, when we attempt to come to the aid of others, we are hindered by our attachments and aversions, which seem only to increase even as we try to do something good. It is little wonder that we often fail in our attempts to help.

Once we are born in the Pure Land, all this will change. Like the beings in the Pure Land who can accumulate great good fortune and merit by making daily

offerings to countless Buddhas, we too will be able to accumulate merit. Listening to Amitabha Buddha's teachings and asking questions at any time, we will remain enthusiastic and progress steadily. And like everyone there, with Amitabha's support, our enjoyment, wisdom, and abilities will be similar to those of eighth ground bodhisattvas, beings who are a few levels below Buddhas!

This achievement is possible thanks to Amitabha's causal vows, the vows he made before becoming a Buddha, and his support for us. Having read the sutra, we should realize that we too need to have the great vow to help all beings. Realize also that the extraordinary powers we attain in the Pure Land are already in our true nature. By chanting Amitabha Buddha's name, we will uncover this true nature and receive his support as well as that of all Buddhas.

From all this, we can see why chanting the name of and being mindful of Amitabha Buddha are the foremost extraordinary powers.

## The Perfectly Adorned Land of Ultimate Bliss

The Land of Ultimate Bliss is complete  
with all these adornments and virtues.

This sentence concludes the description of the gems, ponds, buildings, flowers, and music that perfectly adorn the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss. How did Amitabha Buddha know what he wanted to include in his land? While still the monk Dharmakara, he practiced and visited twenty-one billion buddha-lands, and adopted the good points and corrected the shortcomings he had seen in each for his own future land. He then made forty-eight vows, engaged in pure practice, and accrued merits and virtues. With these accomplished, he created and adorned the Land of Ultimate Bliss.

In all of this, Dharmakara's every thought was to help all who wanted to learn the Dharma. He felt great

## The Perfectly Adorned Land of Ultimate Bliss

compassion for those who often encountered obstacles in their quest to learn, obstacles from not having suitable environments. Understanding this, Dharmakara sought to provide the best possible environment in which these beings could learn and practice.

And he succeeded.

Magnificently.

## Birds That Sing the Dharma

And there is more still—in this land there are birds of all sorts of wondrous variegated colors: white cranes, peacocks, orioles, egrets, kalavinkas, and jivanjivas. All these birds bring forth harmonious songs day and night. Their songs communicate such Buddhist teachings . . .

From what Sakyamuni Buddha described, we can see the principal reason to be born in the Pure Land—to listen to the teachings. While birds in our world are re-born as such due to their karma, the birds in the Pure Land were created specifically by Amitabha Buddha to sing the Dharma. Listening to the beautiful songs in the Pure Land, beings there can learn even while strolling along the paths or resting by the ponds.

Sakyamuni specifically named white cranes, peacocks, orioles, and egrets because people in this world

know of them. But in the Pure Land there are myriad birds, all far more marvelous than anything we know here. And so Sakyamuni introduced two of them: *kalavinkas*, whose name means “beautiful sound,” and *jivanjivas*, birds with two heads.

The “Buddhist teachings” spoken of in this passage refer to the seven major components of the thirty-seven limbs of enlightenment. They are the four foundations of mindfulness, the four right efforts, the four bases of supranormal abilities, the five roots, the five powers, the seven factors of enlightenment, and the eightfold path. In *samsara*, we focus primarily on the first three sets of components; in the Western Pure Land, we deepen our practice as we continue with the latter four.

We begin our practice of the thirty-seven limbs with the four foundations of mindfulness. These four enable us to observe a given situation with wisdom.

The first foundation of mindfulness is contemplation of the body as impure. Contemplation refers to the thoughts and views based on true wisdom. And so contemplation of the body as impure is our view of the body. If our body were pure, it would not cause us any problems. We would not become sick; we would not age. We would be in control of our body and always happy. The stark reality that we do become ill, that we will age, and that we are neither in control nor always

happy should make us realize that our body is impure. It is but a bag of skin containing flesh, tissues, blood, and bones, with bodily wastes regularly expelled from its nine orifices. The body ages, grows ill, dies, and decomposes. Very honestly, there is nothing worth being attached to.

With this awareness of how to properly view our body, we can use it more wisely. While there is no need to pamper it, we do need to care for it. When tired, we rest for a suitable length of time. When hungry, we eat some simple, nourishing food. Sakyamuni Buddha did not tell us to cherish or indulge this body. But neither did he suggest that we abuse it. We are to understand what it is: a vehicle to carry us to our goal. What is that goal? To transcend samsara and be born in the Western Pure Land.

The second foundation of mindfulness is contemplation of feelings as suffering. As we have learned, suffering permeates our life. Even if we feel happy at this moment, experience teaches us that our happiness will not last. And when it ends, we will again experience discomfort if not distress. Or outright suffering.

Furthermore, we are not the only ones who undergo suffering. All beings in the cycle of rebirth experience three kinds of suffering. The three are the suffering from the feelings that arise from contact with unpleas-

ant things, from the deterioration of form, and from the passage of time. The kind of suffering a being undergoes depends on which of the three realms—desire, form, or formless—the being is in.

The desire realm consists of the paths of the hells, hungry ghosts, animals, humans, asuras, and the six lowest heavens. Beings in this realm undergo all three kinds of suffering: contact with unpleasant things, deterioration of form, and passage of time. These beings are ruled by their desires and feelings. To be governed by these is suffering, and the more one resists, the more one rails against it, the more one suffers.

The form realm consists of the next eighteen heavens. Beings in these heavens have achieved a certain degree of meditative concentration and have severed the five desires for wealth, sex, fame, food, and sleep. But because form itself is subject to the cycle of creation, existence, and destruction, these heavenly beings still undergo birth, old age, sickness, and death. While they no longer experience the first kind of suffering, which arises from contact with unpleasant things, they do undergo the second and third kinds—suffering arising from the deterioration of form and suffering arising from the passage of time.

The formless realm consists of the four highest heavens. Beings in these heavens have achieved deep

meditative concentration. With lifetimes that can last as long as 80,000 eons, they are the most advanced beings in samsara. Having realized that the body is the root of suffering and that form is the cause of misfortune, these heavenly beings do not have, or want, a physical body. Free of physical bodies, they do not experience the first two kinds of suffering.

But the third kind—suffering arising from the passage of time—still exists for those in the formless realm. Even in the highest heavens, the lives of the heavenly beings are finite. Once these beings deplete their good fortune, their lifetime will end. As they realize that their meditative concentration is not permanent, that it too will cease, they suffer intensely.

Nowhere in samsara—from the lowest hell in the desire realm to the highest heaven in the formless realm—are beings permanently free from these three sufferings that arise from feelings. Grasping the significance of this truth will help provide us with the motivation necessary to transcend samsara and, finally, leave suffering behind. We accomplish this by being born in the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss.

The third foundation of mindfulness is contemplation of the mind as impermanent. Sakyamuni explained that in just one second, hundreds of thousands of thoughts arise and then cease. We presume they are

simultaneous and connected. We believe they are real. But Sakyamuni taught that our thoughts are impermanent for they are always changing. Since the ordinary mind is impermanent, with passing, wandering thoughts that are not real, there is nothing to attach to. And yet we regard this mind as “self ” or “I.” But how can “I” be real when my thoughts and mind are not?

Only that which is permanent and unchanging is real. Ending delusion and ignorance is real. Selflessly helping others is real. The Pure Land is real. And by practicing in accordance with the teachings in the *Amitabha Sutra*, we can go to that land, forever leaving impermanence and falsity behind.

The fourth foundation of mindfulness is contemplation of all things as without self, as dependent. Our always-wandering thoughts create a tangle of ceaselessly changing causes and conditions. These causes and conditions produce impermanent phenomena that are dependent on other impermanent phenomena. They are not independent. We are not in control, not at peace.

Contemplating the four foundations of mindfulness will help us see the truth. In samsara, the body is born from a womb and is tainted; in the Pure Land the body is born from a lotus and is pure. In samsara, feelings are suffering; in the Pure Land, there is great joy. In

samsara, our constantly changing thoughts result in impermanence; in the Pure Land permanence abounds. And finally, in samsara, all things are without self-entity; in the Pure Land the beings have uncovered their buddha-nature and are at peace.

By contemplating these four foundations of mindfulness often, we will uncover wisdom and move closer to being born in the Pure Land.

Next in our practice of the thirty-seven limbs are the four right efforts.

This group of practices concerns unwholesome and wholesome states. The first and second right efforts are preventing new evil from arising and ending existing evil. Moreover, in addition to the avoidance and elimination of evil, virtues should be cultivated. We accomplish this with the third and fourth right efforts of generating new virtues and enhancing existing virtues.

The standards for virtue, which serve as the foundation for both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism, are the ten virtuous karmas. The opposite of the ten virtuous karmas are the ten evil karmas. Why are these karmas called evil? As we read in *The Seeker's Glossary of Buddhism*, "Buddhism is not dualistic, and, therefore, does not divide phenomena into absolute 'good' or 'evil'. It recognizes 'evil' as 'limitation', and, therefore, purely relative. There is therefore no 'problem of Evil'

as in theistic systems of thought. *All evil is traced to desire for self.* The 'basic evil' is the idea of separateness, and the Buddhist goal is the removal of evil by the eradication of every selfish inclination."<sup>4</sup>

If an evil thought has already arisen or a wrongdoing has already been committed, steps should be taken to prevent it from happening again. The evil karmas of killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, false speech, divisive speech, harsh speech, enticing speech, greed, anger, and ignorance are harmful to all those involved. When thoughts of these unwholesome karmas are extinguished, wholesome and virtuous thoughts and behavior will follow.

The four right efforts underlie all of Sakyamuni Buddha's teachings. We should eliminate what is evil and give rise to what is virtuous. As an example, consider the paramitas of giving, precept observation, patience, diligence, meditative concentration, and wisdom. Greed is bad; giving is virtuous. Committing wrongdoings is bad; observing the precepts is virtuous. Anger is bad; patience is virtuous. Laziness is bad; diligence is virtuous. An unfocused mind is bad; meditative concentration is virtuous. Ignorance is bad; prajna wisdom is virtuous.

We need to eradicate greed, wrongdoing, anger, laziness, an unfocused mind, and ignorance, and re-

place them with their opposites: giving, precept observation, patience, diligence, meditative concentration, and wisdom. Doing so, we will have continuous pure thoughts. Eventually, we will attain supreme, perfect enlightenment—buddhahood. For us deluded beings, wandering thoughts and misfortune are the norm. Sadly, meditative concentration and good fortune are not.

To counteract this, we need to practice the four bases of supranormal abilities, which are the next major component in our practice of the thirty-seven limbs.

The four bases of supranormal abilities are not superhuman powers that need to be acquired. We already have these abilities in our true nature. But too often they lie dormant. We have yet to reach the calm mind that allows our supranormal abilities to arise and function.

The four bases of supranormal abilities are strong aspiration, diligence, mindfulness, and inquiry. Widely used throughout the sutras, these terms have varying meanings depending on the context in which they appear. By studying both the sutras and their commentaries, we will better grasp these contextual meanings. For example, we can view the four bases in terms of what they lead to: contentment, constant joy, peace of mind, and understanding the truth.

## Birds That Sing the Dharma

The first base of supranormal abilities is strong aspiration, the intense longing to succeed in our practice. This yearning to achieve is the antidote to our laziness. As our aspiration becomes firmer, our laziness will abate. Gradually we will grow more content.

The second base of supranormal abilities is diligence, which leads to constant joy. Diligence enables us to continuously progress so that we move forward in our practice at a rate that suits our capabilities and levels. When improving every day, every month, and every year, how could there not be joy? What gives a practitioner joy? Progress, which comes from daily diligence. What is suffering? Remaining stuck in our cultivation or, even worse, regressing.

The third base of supranormal abilities is mindfulness, which leads to the peace of mind that a focused mind brings. For Pure Land practitioners, this is one-mind undisturbed as taught in the *Amitabha Sutra*. In one-mind undisturbed, one's mind is not deluded. A commentary on the *Ten Virtuous Karmas Sutra* called this mindfulness "one mind correctly dwelling." When our mind is "correctly dwelling," whether mindfully chanting the buddha-name or when working, interacting with people, and engaging in tasks, it will be free of wandering thoughts, discriminations, and attachments. At this point our mind will be at peace, for this is the

state of one-mind undisturbed. On the other hand, if Pure Land practitioners' minds dwell incorrectly—on wandering thoughts, discriminations, and attachments—they will not be at peace. Thus, “correctly dwelling” with one-mind undisturbed is crucial.

The fourth base of supranormal abilities is inquiry, or investigation. It is using wisdom, which will enable us to understand the truth. With this understanding, our mind will not be deluded and we will attain great freedom.

The four foundations of mindfulness—the body as impure, feelings as suffering, the mind as impermanent, and all things as dependent—will enable us to wisely observe situations in which we find ourselves.

The four right efforts—preventing new evil from arising, ending existing evil, generating new virtues, and enhancing existing virtues—will help us to be virtuous.

The four bases of supranormal abilities—strong aspiration, diligence, mindfulness, and inquiry—will help us to increase our meditative concentration and good fortune.

With these practiced in samsara, we will be prepared to progress further in our practice of the thirty-seven limbs of enlightenment in the Pure Land.

## The Five Roots and the Five Powers

. . . the Five Roots, the Five Powers, . . .

*Root* means “being able to sustain and grow.” As the five roots are cultivated, the five powers are nurtured and strengthened, doubt is dissolved, and virtues are successfully developed. The five roots are like a tree growing. Early on, it’s a seedling with shallow, undeveloped roots. Over time, it grows into a sapling and eventually into a tree able to withstand the fiercest storms. Just like that seedling, the five powers will likewise become stronger. Both the five roots and the five powers have the same components: belief, diligence, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom.

The first root, belief, gives rise to the diligence root. The diligence root gives rise to the mindfulness root. The mindfulness root gives rise to the concentration root, which gives rise to the fifth root, wisdom. These five roots then develop into the five powers, with the

## The Five Roots and the Five Powers

wisdom root generating the first power, belief. The deeper and stronger the roots, the deeper and stronger the powers. Since all five powers arise from the wisdom root, the wisdom root nurtures the five powers.

The first of the five roots and the five powers is belief. It is the foundation of our practice and one of the three requisites for birth in the Western Pure Land. Belief is to be confident and not to have any doubt. We believe in our practice of chanting the name of Amitabha Buddha, knowing that it is the right practice for us. We also believe in our support practices; for example, the ten virtuous karmas and the six paramitas. Ultimately, belief in the Pure Land method will help us transcend the cycle of rebirth.

We can learn about the importance of belief through an account of Master Dixian, the forty-third patriarch of the Tiantai school, and his old friend who wanted to become a monk. They became friends when they were children, even though they came from different backgrounds. The educated Master Dixian came from a well-to-do family while his friend was illiterate and came from an impoverished family. When the friend grew up he had a difficult life, mending broken pots and dishes. Every day, he carried his tools on a pole as he walked around town struggling to earn some money.

One day, he went to visit his childhood friend, Master Dixian, who had by then become a monk. After staying at the monastery for a few days, he told the master, "I want to become a monk."

"Why?" asked the master.

"Life is filled with suffering. I really must become a monk," the friend replied.

The master said, "Don't joke with me. Just stay here for a few days and then go back to your work."

Why wouldn't the master let him become a monk? Because he thought that his friend, now in his forties, was too old to adjust to the rigors of monastic life. The training would be too difficult for him. As to chanting the sutras or learning to lecture on them, he couldn't read. If he lived in the monastery, others would look down on him. It would all be too difficult. Therefore, the master denied his friend's request.

But the friend persisted. "No, I have to become a monk. I don't want to mend pots anymore."

The master was now in a quandary. Recalling their close childhood friendship, he finally said to his friend, "If you're sure that you want to become a monk, you have to agree to my conditions first."

The friend replied, "No problem. You are my teacher. I will accept whatever you say."

The master said, "Very well, I will tonsure you, but you will not take the monastic precepts because the fifty-three days of formal training will be too difficult for you. Nor will you live in this monastery afterward. There are many small deserted temples in the countryside. I will find one for you to stay in." Master Dixian then arranged for some local lay practitioners to see to his friend's basic needs. An elderly woman was found to cook for him and do his laundry.

The master told the new monk, "Just chant Amitabha Buddha's name. When you are tired, take a rest. When rested, resume chanting. Persevere with the chanting, and you will surely benefit from this in the future."

The uneducated monk sincerely followed the master's teaching. A rare student indeed! Dedicating himself solely to his mindful chanting, he did not leave the temple for three years. Then, one day, he went out to visit his friends and relatives.

Upon returning to the temple, he told the woman who cooked for him, "There is no need to prepare food for me tomorrow."

She thought to herself, "He has not left here for three years. Today he went to visit his friends. Maybe his friends invited him to a meal tomorrow and that's why he told me not to cook."

## The Five Roots and the Five Powers

The next day, the woman went to the temple around noon to see if the monk had returned. After calling out to him and receiving no reply, she went into the temple to look for him. Finding him standing upright, his chanting beads in his hand, she again called out. But still he did not respond. Moving closer to him, she realized that he was dead!

He had died while standing, chanting the buddha-name.

The woman was astounded. She had never seen anything like this in her life. Bewildered, she rushed off to tell the others who also looked after the monk. Not knowing what to do either, they sent a messenger to notify Master Dixian.

It was three days before the master arrived at the temple. When he saw the still-standing monk, he announced admiringly, "Your becoming a monk has borne fruit. Not one of the Dharma masters or abbots at any of the famous temples and monasteries can match your achievement." The monk had focused on chanting the name of Amitabha Buddha. After just three years, he was born in the Pure Land! Even after he died, he was still standing. He did not die of illness, and, in fact, knew in advance when he was going to pass on. His success was due in no small part to his unwavering belief.

## The Five Roots and the Five Powers

The second of both the five roots and the five powers is diligence. Diligently applying ourself to our primary practice enables us to make focused progress. As we begin to see some results, we will enjoy the practice and not tire of it. Diligence can also be applied successfully to everything we do. Whether chanting, working, or completing other activities, we do so steadily. When it is appropriate, we take a break. After a reasonable time, we return to our task. If we keep striving and are always diligent, we will eliminate our habit of laziness, initially in everyday duties; ultimately in our Buddhist practice.

Looking at the thirty-seven limbs, we see that diligence appears several times. If we wish to be born in the Pure Land, we must be diligent in our daily practice for without diligence our roots will remain shallow and our powers weak.

The third of the five roots and the five powers is mindfulness, which will improve with our diligence. *Mindfulness* means “keeping in mind”: keeping both the primary practice and the supplemental means in mind. As buddha-name chanting practitioners, our most important practice is to keep the name of Amitabha Buddha always in mind, using the name to check our wandering thoughts, discriminations, and attachments.

## The Five Roots and the Five Powers

The fourth of the five roots and five powers is concentration, a focused mind. This is the mind that no longer seeks externally, for it knows that everything we need is already within us. By focusing our mind on chanting the name of Amitabha Buddha, we will reach the state where we are continuously aware of him. At that point, there will be no need to worry about how to act. With our mind focused on Amitabha's name, we will react from our true nature and do what is right naturally.

Amitabha Buddha is the root of our concentration in the Pure Land Dharma door. Our every thought should accord with Amitabha and with the Pure Land teachings. As it is said, "When one accords with Amitabha Buddha in one thought, one is Amitabha Buddha in that thought. And when one accords with Amitabha Buddha in every thought, one is Amitabha Buddha in every thought."

The fifth of the five roots and five powers is wisdom. As we have seen, the first root, belief, leads to the root of diligence, then to the root of mindfulness, then of concentration, and finally of wisdom. The root of wisdom, in turn, leads to and nurtures the five powers. Wisdom can eliminate all doubts and improper beliefs, help us overcome our afflictions, and uncover our true nature. It enables us to naturally know the difference

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between true and false, proper and deviated, right and wrong, beneficial and harmful. With wisdom, we will thoroughly comprehend everything we encounter, knowing how to interact appropriately with things and situations. When our wisdom has deep roots, we will not waver; we will be firm and unshakable. When the five roots grow into the five powers, these powers will enable us to help not only ourselves but others as well.

## The Seven Factors of Enlightenment

. . . the Seven Factors of Enlightenment, . . .

In our practice of the thirty-seven limbs of enlightenment, the five roots and the five powers are followed by the seven factors of enlightenment. These factors help us know how to prevent obstacles from arising in our practice.

The first factor of enlightenment is mindfulness. Mindfulness enables us to know real from false and helps us distinguish between what are genuine needs and what are simply desires. With this awareness, we will then know what we should pursue, as opposed to what we typically pursue—the five desires of wealth, sex, fame, food, and sleep! In foolishly chasing these desires, we ignore the second of the four foundations of mindfulness: mindfulness of feelings as suffering.

Failing to grasp the cause of suffering, we set ourselves up for even more suffering. Desiring wealth, we

## The Seven Factors of Enlightenment

become frustrated when we feel that we do not have enough. Longing for fame, we feel irritated when others do not praise us in the way we want. Craving a particular food, we feel disappointed when it fails to satisfy us in the way we expect.

Such endless desires and our resultant feelings are all wandering, pointless thoughts. We pursue things of this world, forgetting that they are illusory and temporary, not real and lasting. When we realize that everything in the cycle of rebirth is an illusion, we will come to understand that impermanent worldly phenomena cannot go with us when we die. The only thing that will go with us is our karma. We must strive, therefore, to accomplish good karmas and avoid committing those that are bad. Having the wisdom to tell real from false—this is being mindful.

The second factor of enlightenment is the correct choice of teaching. This factor addresses the need to evaluate correctly the teachings that are available so that we can choose the method that is best suited to our abilities and conditions. For example, drawn to Buddhism, we have evaluated the teachings and picked the Pure Land method of learning and practice. Now, as students of the Pure Land school, we need to choose our teacher. This accomplished, we need to learn how

## The Seven Factors of Enlightenment

to practice from him or her, so that we can progress in the right direction.

The third factor of enlightenment is diligence: the tireless striving to attain a goal. Usually, we are enthusiastic when we choose to begin a new endeavor. But, as is often the case, this enthusiasm wanes after a while. If we are not careful, this can also happen with our practice. There is a saying that in the first year of learning Buddhism, a Buddha is right in front of us. In the second year, a Buddha is on the distant horizon. In the third year, he is off in the clouds. All too easily, our interest dwindles. If this happens, then even learning and practicing Buddhism can become mindless routine. But if we are able to maintain our original enthusiasm and sincerity for learning Buddhism, buddhahood will surely be achieved.

The fourth factor of enlightenment is joy. Dharma joy is peaceful and pure. Once we have tasted the flavor of the Dharma, there will be no stopping us. During our learning and chanting, we will feel real joy, a sign that we are making courageous and diligent progress.

The fifth factor of enlightenment is ease, which enables our mind to become stable and calm. To accomplish this, we need to know how to rid ourselves of afflictions. Afflictions quickly arise when we are affected

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by our surroundings and frustrated in the face of difficulties. It is very easy to reach this point, where we just want to give up. Instead of being troubled and wanting to abandon our practice, we need to delve more deeply into it. We do so by initially using our buddha-name chanting to master our afflictions and then to eliminate them. When our chanting is firmly entrenched, we will naturally be neither angry in adverse conditions nor attached to pleasant ones.

The sixth factor of enlightenment is concentration. The goal of concentration in our practice is to uncover our true nature. As Buddhists, we need single-minded concentration. We achieve this by delving deeply into one method and being immersed in it for a long time. We should not try to learn various methods. Trying to succeed by learning many methods is like trying to arrive at a destination by taking different routes, all at the same time.

If we concentrate on our practice of chanting Amitabha Buddha's name and resist the temptation to learn other methods, we will be able to achieve constant mindfulness. In this state, we will no longer have thoughts stemming from selfishness, greed, anger, ignorance, or arrogance. We will no longer crave wealth, sex, fame, food, and sleep. We will not have eliminated these afflictions, but we will be able to keep them in

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check. At that time, we will be continuously aware of Amitabha Buddha.

But if we are intrigued by many things and want to learn as much as we can from them, we will make little progress in reaching constant mindfulness. In the end, we may learn much but will achieve little. Clearly, this is not what we want to happen. We need to remember that the key to success in all undertakings is single-minded concentration.

The seventh factor of enlightenment is equanimity. Not yet having attained equanimity, we usually find ourselves tempted by external stimuli. Our senses will be aroused by these stimuli and we will react to them. But we should not be attached to them. When they are gone, we should not yearn for them. Every time we reminisce about them, a seed is planted in our store consciousness as we create yet another karmic cause. Although our speech and actions may not be creating a karmic cause, our thoughts are. We should remember that "all phenomena are illusory" and "all conditioned existences are like a dream, an illusion, a bubble, a shadow."

We need to turn to these seven factors of enlightenment when we encounter problems in our learning and practice. They can help us determine the right method to prevent more obstacles from arising. If we

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feel sleepy or for whatever reason cannot be mindful of Amitabha, we can use mindfulness, diligence, and joy to aid us in selecting the most suitable practice. For example, after doing sitting meditation for a while, we may switch to prostrations or walking meditation. Or, if we think that chanting is tedious, we can think of the beautiful aspects of the Pure Land: how everything there glows with light, how soft the golden ground is, or how beautifully the birds sing.

Alternatively, should we feel agitated or become distracted by external stimuli, we can practice ease, concentration, and equanimity to calm ourselves. We can think of how Amitabha gave rise to extraordinary compassion and made his great vows for our benefit, and then encourage ourselves to be more like him. We can think of someone whose practice we admire and respect, and try to be more like that person. Or, we can remind ourselves how content we are when we sincerely practice.

These are just some of the ways we can overcome obstacles in our practice and, thus, continue to move forward on the path to enlightenment.

## The Eightfold Path

. . . the Eightfold Path,  
as well as other teachings.

The five roots, the five powers, and the seven factors of enlightenment are explainable in general terms. And, being non-specific to any school, they apply to both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. The explanations for the eightfold path, however, differ slightly between the two branches in regards to both the principles and the practice.

The eightfold path has eight components, each of which includes "right." *Right* means "with true wisdom." This is the wisdom that has never been tainted by wandering thoughts, discriminations, and attachments. When wisdom is mingled with selfishness, greed, anger, ignorance, or arrogance, then everything we think, say, and do becomes tainted and thus wrong. No more true wisdom. No more right.

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The first component of the eightfold path is right view. Right view is the correct outlook on life and the universe. To have right view, we need to clearly understand the four noble truths. The four truths are composed of two sets of cause and effect, in which the effect precedes its cause. The first set, cause and effect at the worldly level, consists of the first and second truths—the existence of suffering and the cause of suffering. The second set, cause and effect at the supramundane level, consists of the third and fourth truths—the end of suffering and the path that leads to the end of suffering. If we are clear about the principles taught in the sutras, are clear about causes and effects of the universe, we will have right view.

Additionally, in the Pure Land school, the standard for right is to be always mindful of Amitabha Buddha as we strive to be born in the Pure Land. Right view is to believe without a doubt that Amitabha Buddha and the magnificent environment in the Western Pure Land are just as Sakyamuni Buddha introduced them in the sutras. Clearly, our right view does not come from seeing the Western Pure Land with our own eyes. It comes from our belief in the sutras, which were spoken by Sakyamuni Buddha. We believe in Sakyamuni, knowing he would not lie to us. We believe that every word Sakyamuni spoke is true. We base our right view on the

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Pure Land sutras and our wholehearted belief in their teachings.

The second component of the eightfold path is right thought. All thoughts should arise from a mind free of attachments and afflictions.

In the Pure Land school, right thought is Amitabha Buddha. When we are not thinking about Amitabha and the Western Pure Land, we have wandering thoughts, thoughts that continually keep us undergoing the karmic retribution of endless rebirths. We should transform the thoughts and karmas that hold us in samsara to the pure thoughts and karmas of the Western Pure Land. We should think about the Pure Land. Think about Amitabha Buddha and all that he has done to provide us with the ideal environment for learning and practice. This is right thought for Pure Land Buddhists.

The third component in the eightfold path is right speech. Right speech includes not using speech that is false, divisive, harsh, or enticing. It is to speak in a way that is of benefit to those listening. It is to choose the words to be spoken very carefully.

In the Pure Land school, right speech is "Amitufo." We greet people with "Amitufo." When someone calls our name, we reply "Amitufo." When we respond to an email or a text, we write "Amitufo." This is our

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right speech. We constantly keep Amitabha Buddha in mind.

The fourth component in the eightfold path is right action. Right action includes no killing, no stealing, no sexual misconduct. It is to act without attaching to anything and to be careful of one's behavior, making sure it is proper. It is to act without intermingled wandering thoughts of selfishness, discrimination, or attachment.

In the Pure Land school, right action consists of three distinct karmic actions. They are thinking about Amitabha Buddha, which is a mental activity; chanting the name of Amitabha Buddha, which is a verbal action; and paying respect to Amitabha Buddha, which is a physical action. These are the three right actions of the Pure Land school.

The fifth component is right livelihood. The sutras speak of right livelihood as avoiding occupations that harm others; for example, not dealing in the trading of human beings or the production and sale of weapons, animals, intoxicants, and poisons. Essentially, right livelihood is to work in a way that respects the environment and all the beings in it. To have a livelihood that benefits others is best. If this is not possible, then the goal should be, at the very least, to do no harm.

In the Pure Land school, right livelihood, our true work, is mindfully chanting the name of Amitabha

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Buddha for the rest of our life and practicing according to the Pure Land teachings. It is setting examples for others with our mental, verbal, and physical actions by living in a way that will aid and not harm others.

The sixth component is right effort. Right effort is to be diligent in cultivating a virtuous, pure mind. This cultivation can be accomplished through the four right efforts: preventing new evil from arising, ending existing evil, generating new virtues, and enhancing existing virtues. Right effort also enables one to determine what is worthwhile. It is to maintain one's health, to be joyful, and not push to do what is beyond one's abilities.

In the Pure Land school, right effort is to delve deeply into our Dharma door and to diligently immerse ourselves in it for a long time. We should strive to achieve constant mindfulness, which will allow us to control our wandering thoughts, afflictions, and residual habits. In this state, although we will not yet have eradicated our afflictions and residual habits, they will no longer arise.

The seventh component is right mindfulness. One should be mindful in all actions, avoiding those that are bad and doing only those that are good. Right mindfulness lies at the heart of the other seven components of the eightfold path. One's views, thoughts, speech, actions, livelihood, effort, and concentration cannot be

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right if one is not mindful, not focused on what one is currently thinking and doing.

In the Pure Land school, our principal practice in right mindfulness is generating the bodhi mind and concentrating on mindfully chanting the buddha-name. Additionally, we have supplemental means of practice. These help us end all wrongdoings and perform good deeds, and accumulate merits and cultivate virtues. We dedicate these merits and virtues to help us be born in the Western Pure Land. We accomplish these good deeds, virtues, and merits by practicing the five precepts, the ten virtuous karmas, the six paramitas, and the initial components of the thirty-seven limbs of enlightenment. All of these will help us end our residual habits and afflictions, strengthen our belief and vow, and single-mindedly make unadulterated progress. This is right mindfulness.

The eighth component is right concentration. Right concentration is to practice one Dharma door for the rest of one's life and not to keep switching to other methods.

In the Pure Land school, right concentration is focusing on Amitabha Buddha. When our buddha-name chanting is efficacious, we will keep our afflictions and residual habits in check. Through our belief, vow, and chanting we will remain focused and unshaken. We will

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have established the initial achievement level of our practice: constant mindfulness of Amitabha Buddha.

The thirty-seven limbs of enlightenment can differ from school to school. How each of us understands and practices them depends on our karmic roots, just as these roots determine which school we gravitate to and practice. Regardless of the school we choose, we need to remember that everything in the cycle of rebirth is an illusion. We do not want to be misled by our personal views. And so, we need to attentively practice the first three major components of the thirty-seven limbs of enlightenment: the four foundations of mindfulness, the four right efforts, and the four bases of supranormal abilities.

As we progress, we will find that we have fewer wandering thoughts, discriminations, and attachments. We will then be able to practice the latter limbs of enlightenment: the five roots, the five powers, the seven factors of enlightenment, and the eightfold path.

It is extraordinarily difficult to accomplish all components of the seven limbs of enlightenment in one lifetime given that we practice them in sequential order. It would be an incredible achievement for us to complete every one of them in our all too brief human life. This is why transcending the cycle of rebirth through

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the practice of methods other than Pure Land is so difficult!

The Pure Land method has a rare advantage—it is the easiest to practice. But many find this fact difficult to believe. If we fulfill the three requisites of belief, vow, and practice, then as our practice of the thirty-seven limbs in the Pure Land deepens, we will accomplish them all!

In other words, by concentrating on the name of Amitabha Buddha, we will complete all the thirty-seven limbs of enlightenment.

## The Songs of the Birds Inspire Mindfulness

When sentient beings in this land hear the singing of the birds, they become mindful of the Buddhas, mindful of the Dharma, mindful of the Sangha.

Sakyamuni Buddha explained that, as they listen to the bird's Dharma talks, the beings in the Pure Land become mindful of the Buddha, mindful of the Dharma, and mindful of the sangha. Here in samsara, we also strive to be mindful.

When we take the three refuges, we are being mindful of the Buddha, of the Dharma, and of the sangha.

To be mindful of the Buddha is to return from delusion and rely upon awareness and understanding. Awareness, enlightenment, and the pure mind are the principles underlying all schools of Buddhism. We should always reflect, asking ourselves if our mental,

verbal, and physical karmas reflect what the Buddha taught.

Being mindful of the Dharma is to return from erroneous views and rely upon proper views and understanding. We should ask ourselves if our thoughts are proper. Do they accord with what is in the sutras? We depend on these teachings because we cannot depend on our personal viewpoints.

Being mindful of the sangha is to return from pollution and disharmony, and rely upon purity of mind and the six principles of harmony. Here, we ask ourselves if our mind is pure, free of afflictions and wandering thoughts. Is our life one of harmony? Or is it one of discord? If the latter, we can use the six principles of harmony as guidelines in our interactions with others in our workplace, our family, and our sangha.

If we are sincerely mindful of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the sangha, then we have accepted the teachings and have indeed taken the three refuges. If, however, we continue to hold our same improper understanding, then we have not accepted—have not internalized—the teachings, but have only gone through the formality of taking part in a ceremony.

## Birds Created to Sing the Dharma

Do not think that these birds were born as birds due to karmic retribution for past misdeeds. Why not? In this Buddha-land, the Three Evil Planes of Existence do not exist. In this Buddha-land even the names of the Evil Planes of Existence do not exist, much less the realities. All these birds are the creations of Amitabha Buddha, fashioned in order to sing the sounds of the Dharma.

Next, Sakyamuni Buddha spoke to Sariputra about how birds in the Pure Land are not like those in our world. Here, due to their past karmas, birds are reborn in the "Three Evil Planes of Existence." Why are the planes, also known as paths, called evil? In Buddhism, evil refers to things that hold beings back from acting from their buddha-nature, their true nature. Thus, call-

ing something “evil” is not saying it is bad or immoral. Nor is it saying that individual beings in these paths are evil. On the contrary, since all beings have buddha-nature, the beings in these three paths are fundamentally good.

Understanding this, consider the roots of the three evil paths: greed, anger, and ignorance. These three are so destructive they are called the three poisons. Greed is the cause that results in rebirth in the hungry ghost path. Anger is the cause that results in rebirth in the hell path. Ignorance is the cause of rebirth in the animal path. These three poisons, which sentient beings experience in samsara, hold us back from attaining our goal of enlightenment and of helping others.

It is very different in the Pure Land. Since the three evil paths do not exist in that land, we can see that the birds are not there because of karmic consequences. As Sakyamuni Buddha said, “All these birds are the creations of Amitabha Buddha, fashioned in order to sing the sounds of the Dharma.”

Why did Amitabha create the birds?

Beings in the Pure Land come from worlds where they enjoyed listening to birds sing. Knowing this, Amitabha compassionately created birds that sing the teachings. These birds, however, are found only in the Land Where Sages and Ordinary Beings Dwell To-

gether, the land described in the *Amitabha Sutra*. Of the four different lands comprising the Pure Land, the Land Where Sages and Ordinary Beings Dwell Together is the one where most beings are born.

Since these beings have not yet eliminated their worldly habits, many of them still have the habit of enjoying the sounds of birds singing. But unlike the songs of the birds in samsara, the songs of the birds in the Pure Land are truly wondrous, for they are songs of the Dharma!

Additionally, as Great Master Ouyi wrote, "By making us realize that we should not think of these birds in a pejorative way, it counteracts our tendency to make arbitrary distinctions."<sup>5</sup> Amitabha Buddha, knowing that we usually view animals as inferior to humans, was gently teaching us not to look down on others.

All of us have planted the seeds to be reborn as animals. But animals, at least, are repaying their karmic debts. We humans are still creating them! As Sakya-muni Buddha said in the *Surangama Sutra*, "A human dies and becomes a sheep. A sheep dies and becomes a human." We should therefore be thankful for our good fortune and never look down on other beings, considering them inferior. Remember, we are all in samsara. And where we are within samsara depends entirely on our karma.

## Birds Created to Sing the Dharma

All the birds in the Pure Land are singing the Dharma simultaneously. Wouldn't the sound of these teachings, all at once, be chaotic? No! We will only hear the teaching we wish to. For example, you and I are sitting next to each other in the Pure Land. I want to learn about the *Amitabha Sutra*, so I will hear a teaching on the *Amitabha Sutra*. You, on the other hand, may want to learn about the *Infinite Life Sutra*, so you will hear a teaching on the *Infinite Life Sutra*. Amazing!

This individualized education is as stated in Buddhism: "The Buddha speaks one teaching, but the listeners understand it according to their capacities." And so among the myriad teachings of the Dharma that the Buddha speaks, we will hear our chosen teaching and understand that teaching according to our capacity.

From all this, we can see that Amitabha Buddha is a compassionate teacher. Patiently guiding us, he ensures that we will hear the teaching that we are ready for and happy to learn.

## Breezes Stir the Trees

In this Buddha-land, there is a slight breeze that stirs the rows of jewel trees and jewel netting, so that they emit subtle wondrous sounds, like hundreds and thousands of melodies playing all at once. All those who hear these sounds spontaneously become mindful of the Buddha, mindful of the Dharma, and mindful of the Sangha.

In the previous passage, the sutra spoke of sentient beings singing “the sounds of the Dharma.” In this passage, it tells how even non-sentient beings can teach. Sakyamuni Buddha explained that the breezes rustling the trees produce musical sounds, which, in resonance with the beings’ calm, pure minds, become the most beautiful melodies. All together, the instruments, thousands and thousands of them, sound like they are playing a wondrous symphony.

## Breezes Stir the Trees

All the beings who listen to the music naturally “become mindful of the Buddha, mindful of the Dharma, and mindful of the Sangha.” In other words, the beings give rise to enlightenment, proper understanding, and purity of mind, respectively. How different this is from our world where people remain mired in delusion, misunderstanding, and impure thoughts. There is no enlightenment, no proper understanding, no purity of mind. Thus, unlike the beings in the Pure Land, our minds can produce winds so fierce that they drive those hearing them to feel terrified.

From all this, we can see that even the environment in the Western Pure Land encourages the beings there to improve their bodhi mind. In our world called Endurance, by contrast, the environment is filled with constant distractions that only intensify our greed, anger, and ignorance.

As ordinary people, we are easily affected by our surroundings, so we should choose the best environment for our practice. This is why Sakyamuni Buddha encouraged us to strive to be born in the Pure Land.

## The Wonderful Iy Adorned Buddha Land

This Buddha-land is complete with all these adornments and virtues.

Sakyamuni Buddha again told Sariputra that the Pure Land is wonderfully adorned. These adornments do not just flow from Amitabha Buddha's vows and practice. They also flow from our mindfulness of his name and from our true nature. Therefore, we should never think that we are not good enough or fortunate enough to enjoy such incredible things.

At the other extreme, we should not be overly self-confident, imagining that we will assuredly be born in the Pure Land in this lifetime. We still need to follow the three requisites: have firm belief, vow to be born in the Pure Land, and practice diligently.

## Why Is This Buddha Called Amitabha?

What do you think:  
why is this Buddha called Amitabha?

Why did Sakyamuni Buddha introduce Amitabha Buddha and the Pure Land? Because Amitabha is an excellent teacher for us. We can practice this Pure Land method and be confident that when we do it correctly we will be able to attain buddhahood in just one lifetime. Furthermore, people in our world have a strong affinity with Amitabha. Drawn to him by this affinity, we are happy to learn from him, glad to chant his name. And so Sakyamuni Buddha introduced this method to us.

As Great Master Ouyi wrote in his commentary on the *Amitabha Sutra*, "This sutra expressly teaches the wonderful practice of mindful buddha-name chanting, so it makes a special point of explaining this name. This is to enable people to deeply believe that this great

## Why Is This Buddha Called Amitabha?

name, which is endowed with myriad virtues, is inconceivable, so that they would single-mindedly chant the buddha-name with no more doubts.”

We must first understand that the most important teaching in this sutra is that we should mindfully chant Amitabha Buddha’s name. Chanting is the easiest and simplest, the most convenient, and the most wondrous of the four forms of the buddha-mindfulness practice. The four forms are buddha-mindfulness based on real mark, buddha-mindfulness by contemplation of an image, buddha-mindfulness by visualization, and buddha-mindfulness by buddha-name chanting.

The *Amitabha Sutra* advocates the fourth form—buddha-name chanting—as does the *Infinite Life Sutra*. These sutras attest to the profound significance of the name Amitabha Buddha. For these reasons, Sakyamuni emphasized the name by asking Sariputra why he thought this Buddha is called Amitabha.

## The Buddha of Infinite Light

The light of this Buddha is infinite, and shines on all lands throughout the universe without obstruction. Thus this Buddha is called Amitabha.

When Sariputra remained silent, Sakyamuni Buddha went on to explain Amitabha Buddha's name in terms of infinite "light." In the next passage, he spoke of Amitabha's infinite "life." "Infinite" describes that which is innate in the true nature: infinite wisdom, infinite virtues and abilities, and infinite auspicious marks. These three categories of infiniteness cover all the infinities in the entire universe.

In these passages from the sutra, light represents space and life represents time. Thus, infinite light and infinite life encompass all of space and all of time. They are used here to symbolize all infinities.

## The Buddha of Infinite Life

Also, the life-span of this Buddha and his people is an infinite number of immeasurable eons, and so he is called Amitabha. Amitabha Buddha attained enlightenment ten eons ago.

In this world, to be reborn as a human being is an unbelievably rare opportunity. Such a birth is as rare as a turtle rising from the depths of a vast sea to break through the surface into the center of a solitary wreath of flowers floating on the water. As incredibly rare as this is, far rarer is it to be reborn as a human at a time when a Buddha is teaching the Dharma. We can see this in our world Endurance.

Almost 3000 years ago, Sakyamuni Buddha taught in our world for forty-nine years. He said that the teachings would remain here for 12,000 years. This stretch of time would comprise three ages: the Dharma

Perfect Age, the Dharma Semblance Age, and the Dharma-Ending Age.

We have already entered the last age, the Dharma-Ending Age, which will continue for 9000 more years. Sakyamuni Buddha said that when this age comes to a close, the teachings will be lost to us for 5,670 million years at which time Maitreya Bodhisattva will come to this world. He will come to this buddha-land, to become a Buddha and teach us the Dharma.

Conversely, in the Pure Land, Amitabha Buddha has been teaching for ten kalpas, or eons, and is still teaching! What's more, he will continue to teach for an incredibly long time because his lifetime "is an infinite number of immeasurable eons."

Infinity and *asamkhyeya*, signify particular numbers in the ancient numbering system of India, just like one million is a specific number today. The *Avatamsaka Sutra* lists 144 such numerical units, with *asamkhyeya* and infinity among the ten largest. When used in the sutra, infinite means a number so inconceivably large that we are incapable of calculating it. Nonetheless, it does represent a given span of time. So even a lifespan of "an infinite number of immeasurable eons" will eventually end.

When Amitabha's lifespan ends, and he passes into final nirvana, Avalokitesvara will become the next

Buddha in the Pure Land. Then, after Avalokitesvara enters final nirvana, Mahasthamaprapta will become the next Buddha. From this, we can see yet another of the inconceivable advantages of being born in the Pure Land. Not only is the environment ideal, but we already know two of the future Buddhas who will continue teaching there when their predecessors enter final nirvana. Knowing who the next two Buddhas in the Pure Land will be assures us of the amazing continuity of the teachings.

## Innumerabl e Arhats and Bodhisattvas

Moreover, this Buddha has innumerable disciples, all of whom are Arhats, whose numbers are incalculable. Amitabha also has a following of innumerable Bodhisattvas.

Amitabha Buddha's innumerable arhat and bodhisattva students in the Pure Land came not just from our world, but also from the worlds in the ten directions. In those worlds, they listened to and followed the teachings of the Buddhas who were their fundamental teachers, just like we follow the teachings of our fundamental teacher, Sakyamuni Buddha.

And just like Sakyamuni Buddha, all those Buddhas introduced the Western Pure Land and taught the *Amitabha Sutra*, the *Infinite Life Sutra*, and the *Visualization Sutra* to many beings. Their students who sincerely practiced the Pure Land method were born in the

## Innumerable Arhats and Bodhisattvas

Western Pure Land. So numerous were these sincere students that their number is “incalculable.”

We know that bodhisattvas dwell in the Pure Land, but how is it that arhats are also there?

Although arhats do not practice the Pure Land method, if they generate the bodhi mind and vow to be born in Amitabha’s land when approaching death, they will be able to achieve that birth. Once in the Pure Land, they will continue their progress by learning and practicing the Pure Land method.

## The Wonderful Adornments and Virtues

The Land of Ultimate Bliss is complete  
with all these adornments and virtues.

Why does Sakyamuni Buddha keep telling Sariputra that the land “is complete with all these adornments and virtues”? It is done to reinforce the importance of the attributes in that land. A significant attribute is Amitabha Buddha’s support, which all beings there receive. Thanks to this support, the abilities, wisdom, good fortune, and enjoyments of these beings are almost the same as Amitabha’s.

How can this be? We can begin to see how this works with an analogy of a young man who was born to impoverished parents. Although the young man works very hard, he just can’t seem to get ahead. His parents aren’t able to help him because they too are struggling financially. However, he has an aunt who is extremely wealthy. Appreciating how hard her nephew

works and understanding his difficult circumstances, she thoughtfully invites him to live with her in her house. By moving in, he gets to enjoy the same luxurious life she does. He does not own anything he enjoys; rather, he shares his aunt's good fortune.

We will be in similar circumstances when, thanks to our belief, vow, and constant mindfulness of Amitabha, we are born in the Pure Land. And likely, we will be born in the Land Where Sages and Ordinary Beings Dwell Together. Even though we will not yet have accrued our own great good fortune, we will be able to share in and enjoy that of Amitabha Buddha.

Great Master Ouyi said that such a situation could happen only in the Western Pure Land and is not to be found anywhere else in the universe. Without Amitabha Buddha's support, we will not be able to transcend the cycle of rebirth in one lifetime. It will just be too difficult for us. This situation of sharing Amitabha's good fortune is therefore of the utmost importance for us.

## Non-retrogression

None of the sentient beings who are born in the Land of Ultimate Bliss ever fall back into a lower realm.

This sentence assures us that all the beings in the Pure Land have reached the level of non-retrogression. This also means that they are always improving. The swiftness of their unceasing improvement is possible thanks to the support of Amitabha Buddha and the excellent learning conditions in the Pure Land.

In comparison to those conditions, ours here in samsara are woefully inadequate. How so? Being reborn as a human is incredibly rare; and when we do finally obtain a human rebirth, we may not live in a place where we can hear the teachings. Or, upon our hearing of this Dharma door and wanting to practice the teachings, we find that friends and family members oppose our practice. Perhaps our surroundings are so

## Non-retrogression

pleasurable that we are too distracted to practice. Alternatively, our surroundings may be so harsh that all we can think of is surviving for one more day. One way or another, we lack the good fortune to have suitable conditions for practice.

On the other hand, we could indeed be fortunate enough to hear the teachings, have time to practice, enjoy the support of friends and family members, and possess favorable surroundings for practice. But what if in the face of all our advantages we became arrogant and self-absorbed? We could squander our good fortune on personal enjoyments. Or feeling lazy and complacent, we could dismiss the urgency of practice saying there will be time another day.

For these and so many other reasons, we all too often regress in our practice to attain buddhahood.

The quickest way to attain buddhahood is to make continuous progress—to reach the level of non-retrogression. For beings like ourselves, this is best accomplished in a land that is tailored to accommodate our needs and shortcomings. And so Sakyamuni told us that of all the pure lands, we should seek birth in the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss, a land so ideal that Buddhas in the ten directions teach the Pure Land method and encourage all beings to seek birth there.

## Non-retrogression

We can further appreciate the importance of this sutra passage assuring us of non-retrogression when we consider five fundamental reasons why we will never fall back in that land.

First is Amitabha Buddha's twentieth vow. Of the beings who sincerely practice and chant his name, he said that at the end of their lives, along with an assembly of bodhisattvas, he would come to escort them. In an instant, they would be born in his land and become non-retrogressive bodhisattvas.

Furthermore, Amitabha concluded all forty-eight of his vows with the same pledge: if he did not fulfill the particular vow he would not attain perfect enlightenment. Sakyamuni told us that Amitabha became a Buddha ten kalpas ago. This is our assurance that all of Amitabha's forty-eight vows were indeed fulfilled, including the vow of non-retrogression for all those born in his land.

Second, Amitabha supports all beings who sincerely chant his name. Due to this support, all those in the Pure Land will never again regress. But one does not even have to wait to be born in the Pure Land to receive Amitabha's help. Those who sincerely practice and vow to be born in the Pure Land will receive his support even now, even here in samsara.

## Non-retrogression

We can see how this works upon reading Amitabha's thirteenth and fourteenth vows. In these two vows, he pledged that when he became a Buddha, his light would be infinite. Universally illuminating the ten directions, it would be unsurpassed by any other Buddha's light and would exceed by a quadrillion times that of the sun and the moon. All beings who saw his light, who were illuminated by it, and who felt it touch their bodies, would be peaceful and joyous. They would perform virtuous deeds with compassion and eventually be born in his land. If all this were not so, he would not attain perfect enlightenment.

With his infinite light, Amitabha found a way to help and support us even while we are still in samsara. But if Amitabha's light is illuminating the ten directions, why do we not see it? We are not yet truly sincere in our chanting. It is as if, on a cloudless day, the sun shines brightly all around us, but we stand gripping an open umbrella directly overhead. In ignorance, we block the very light that is streaming unabatedly toward us.

Third, even the trees, railings, birds, and celestial breezes in the Pure Land teach the Dharma. None of these happen in our world. We do not get to learn from the trees or the birds, from the nature that surrounds us. There is no continuous teaching, and so it is much

## Non-retrogression

easier for us to regress in our learning. And even when we do listen to teachers or read their books, it is still very easy to be lazy and to have wandering thoughts. In the Pure Land, however, we will be immersed continuously in the teachings. With Amitabha's support, our mind will naturally be pure and proper.

Fourth, in our world, one teacher instructs many students. In the Pure Land, each being has a manifestation of Amitabha for a teacher. Furthermore, beings in the Land Where Sages and Ordinary Beings Dwell Together who wish to learn from other Buddhas can go to the lands of those Buddhas to learn from them. Beings in the Land of Real Reward who want to learn from other Buddhas will see a manifestation of that Buddha right in front of them. Thus, the beings in the Pure Land can effortlessly learn from countless Buddhas. How can anyone possibly regress with such extraordinary conditions and such excellent teachers!

Fifth, depending on the level of attainment in the Pure Land, afflictions will either be held at bay or eliminated. Amitabha has created a world in which afflictions—which are serious obstacles to our progress—do not have any opportunity to arise. Therefore, there is no cause to bring about an effect that will trigger our regression.

## Non-retrogression

For example, in accordance with his fifth vow, everyone has the same appearance. In our world, some people are very attractive, which can lead to arrogance. Others may not be as fortunate and, thus, suffer from feelings of low esteem. Both arrogance and a sense of inferiority are afflictions. The perfect equality of appearance in the Pure Land assures that such afflictions do not materialize, which in effect leads to their elimination.

These are the five fundamental reasons why we will always improve in our practice in the Pure Land. Because of such reasons, we will attain the three stages of non-retrogression. Those who have perfectly attained all three levels are bodhisattvas of the seventh ground and above.

The first stage of non-retrogression is no falling back from one's level. One eliminates the affliction of views and, in so doing, attains the level of a sage, a being who has accomplished his goal.

The second stage of non-retrogression is no falling back from one's practice. One continuously progresses on the bodhisattva path and perseveres to fulfill the vow of "sentient beings are innumerable; I vow to help them all." Practitioners at this second stage do not fall back into seeking only their individual attainment. Now observant of others, they voluntarily go to them

## Non-retrogression

when their conditions have matured and they are ready to learn.

The third stage of non-retrogression is no falling back from one's mindfulness. One will never again fall back because every thought accords with prajna wisdom, the wisdom innate in the true nature.

These are the three stages of non-retrogression we attain by being born in the Pure Land. This wonderful attainment is due to Amitabha Buddha's support.

## One Lifetime Away from Buddhahood

Many among them have only one more lifetime to go before Buddhahood. Their number is incalculable: they can be spoken of as innumerable.

Here we learn that “many among them have only one more lifetime to go before Buddhahood.” These are equal-enlightenment bodhisattvas, awakened beings just one level below buddhahood! And there are so many equal-enlightenment bodhisattvas in that land that “their number is incalculable.” In our world, we cannot find even one equal-enlightenment bodhisattva, but in the Western Pure Land they are everywhere. Avalokitesvara, Mahasthamaprapta, Manjusri, Samantabhadra, and Maitreya are all equal-enlightenment bodhisattvas. When we are with such bodhisattvas every day, how could we regress!

## One Lifetime Away from Buddhahood

Where else can we have Amitabha Buddha and the Buddhas in the ten directions as our teachers? Where else can we have bodhisattvas waiting to succeed Buddhas as our fellow practitioners? Where else can we find such a good learning environment?

If we truly understand all this, we will realize that our world fails completely in comparison to the Western Pure Land. With such understanding, we will not attach to anything in this world. Nothing will be able to keep us here. We will not want to be here. We will let go of all attachments and practice diligently and wholeheartedly to go to the Land of Ultimate Bliss. This is where we want to go. The sooner we go, the better off we will be. And the better off the beings still trapped in samsara will be. For once we are in the Pure Land we can help them as well, just as we vowed.

But if there is just one thing that we cannot let go of, we will not be able to go there.

We must let go of everything.

## Vow to Be Born in the Pure Land

When sentient beings hear these teachings,  
they must take a vow to be born in this  
land. Why so? So that they can be together  
with all these Beings of Superior  
Goodness.

This is the first time in the sutra that Sakyamuni Buddha advised, "When sentient beings hear these teachings, they must take a vow to be born in this land."

In this short sutra, he urged us not once but three times to make a vow to be born in the Pure Land. Why so many times? Because this vow is of vital importance. Vow, belief, and practice are like the legs of a three-legged stool. Without any one leg, the stool cannot stand; without the vow, birth in the Pure Land cannot take place. And so, Sakyamuni repeatedly said in the sutra that those who hear it should vow to be born in this land.

## Vow to Be Born in the Pure Land

When we truly vow and sincerely practice according to the *Amitabha Sutra*, we will develop the bodhi mind to cultivate ourselves and help all beings. As we mindfully chant the buddha-name, we will no longer be affected by our surroundings, our desires, or by others' opinions. Chanting mindfully requires a degree of concentration and stability, and for this we need genuine vows and unwavering belief.

How do we develop our vow and belief?

We develop them by learning and practicing the Pure Land teachings and progressing step by step. Additionally, just like the legs of that stool, our belief, vow, and practice need to be balanced for all three are equally important.

Sakyamuni Buddha next told Sariputra that beings born in the Pure Land would “be together with all these Beings of Superior Goodness.” These beings have eliminated greed, anger, ignorance, and arrogance. They practice the ten virtuous karmas, the six paramitas, and the ten great vows of Samantabhadra. Surrounded by such accomplished beings in that land, how could we not practice diligently and progress smoothly toward buddhahood?

And yet, despite knowing about the beings and the environment in the Pure Land, are we practicing diligently to go there? Great Master Ouyi said that practi-

## Vow to Be Born in the Pure Land

tioners who are not, lack belief in this Dharma door. Although they study and chant, they remain half convinced and half in doubt. Instead of believing in the utmost importance of fulfilling their vow to be born in the Pure Land, and hence spending time on it, they prefer spending time in satisfying their desires and indulging their senses. Too often, they choose these over mindful buddha-name chanting. A tragic mistake.

Great Master Ouyi was deeply distressed about this. He was not distressed with people not having opportunities to hear this sutra. That happens because they have overwhelming karmic obstacles. The master was concerned about the people who do have the opportunity to hear the sutra but let the opportunity slip by. They waste the chance to practice according to the teachings. Their belief and vow are not strong enough. And so such people, ruled by their afflictions and residual habits, continue to commit the ten evil karmas.

If we genuinely believe this Dharma door—if we sincerely vow to be born in the Pure Land—we will stop committing the ten evil karmas. We will practice the ten virtuous karmas. Why? Because with true belief, we will do everything possible to fulfill our vow and join “the Beings of Superior Goodness” in the Western Pure Land.

Good Roots, Good Fortune,  
and Causal Connections

One cannot be born in this land through  
minor good roots, blessings, virtues [good  
fortune] and causal connections.

This sentence tells us what is needed to be born in the Pure Land: abundant and great good roots, not just minor ones, and right causal connections, not just any ones. How do we get these? By chanting the name of Amitabha Buddha. When we do so, we share in the benefits derived from the good roots, good fortune, virtues, and causal connections of Amitabha and all other Buddhas. It is like that impoverished young man who, by living with his wealthy aunt, shared in her good fortune. Additionally, when chanting, we uncover our own good roots, good fortune, virtues, and causal connections that are already within our true nature.

Uncovering these is why chanting the buddha-name is so important.

Why do we obtain all these by chanting Amitabha's name?

Amitabha vowed that those who chant his name would be born in the Pure Land. This vow assures us that if we chant properly, we will receive his support. We do not get such support when we chant the names of other Buddhas. Why not? Because Amitabha's forty-eight vows resonate with our true nature and because we have an excellent affinity with him. Other Buddhas do not have Amitabha's forty-eight vows. Nor do we have a strong affinity with them. So the mutual resonance is not as powerful when we chant their names.

What are good roots, good fortune, and causal connections?

Good roots is our having firm belief and resolute vow. We have firm belief when we do not have the slightest doubt about the Pure Land teachings and when we understand and believe in the buddha-name chanting method. We have resolute vow when we let go of all worldly physical and mental concerns, and focus on being born in the Pure Land.

To accumulate and strengthen our good roots, we need to learn the Dharma. If we believe—but are unable to practice—then we do not have enough good

fortune. We are not alone in this because in samsara the good roots and good fortune to become a Buddha are extremely rare.

Good fortune is making the vow to be born in the Western Pure Land, mindfully chanting the buddha-name, and practicing the teachings. It is meeting good fellow practitioners and learning and discussing the teachings with them to deepen our understanding. After we have this understanding, good fortune is applying what we believe and understand in our daily life, and single-mindedly chanting Amitabha's name.

To want to be a Buddha is the highest aspiration we can have. If we have enough good fortune, we will find it easy to concentrate on Amitabha's name and will not find ourselves distracted from the practice. If we do not yet have enough good fortune, we can work on letting go of our selfishness and doing good deeds for the sake of all beings.

Furthermore, it is crucial that we strive to always chant the buddha-name. This chanting makes it easier for our mind to become calm. Having a tranquil mind, we will better know how to help others. Gradually, as we help others, our good fortune will increase. This brings us full circle because having more good fortune makes it easier for us to concentrate on chanting the name of Amitabha, which is the wisest use of our good

fortune. Using our good fortune unwisely, we will end up enjoying it here in samsara. Enjoying it here will be yet another tragic mistake because the good fortune of being reborn in samsara does not begin to compare with the good fortune of being born in the Pure Land.

Causal connections is having good conditions, those that enable us to practice. For this to happen, we need many conditions to occur.

First, we need to be reborn as a human, which is extraordinarily rare.

Second, we need to be reborn at a time when the teachings are present in the world. Such a rebirth is so rare because the teachings are absent from this world of Endurance for prolonged periods of time. As we previously learned, Sakyamuni's teachings will only remain for 9000 more years, and Maitreya will not appear for another 5,670 million years after that. Additionally, even if the teachings are present in the world and we are reborn as humans during this time, we may not be in a place where we can learn them.

Third, if we do learn of the teachings, we may not be able to genuinely accept them.

Fourth, even if we do accept them, due to our personal situation, we may lack the conditions to practice.

Fifth, if we are able to practice Buddhism, we may encounter schools other than Pure Land, even though our roots are with the Pure Land school.

Sixth, even if we have the roots to encounter and learn the Pure Land teachings, we may not meet a teacher to learn from and practice under.

Finally, we may be able to hear of Buddhism, accept the teachings, later encounter the Pure Land method, and find our teacher, but then fail to make being born in the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss the most important thing in our life!

All these are just some of the many problems we can encounter while trying to practice. Perhaps we can now begin to appreciate why it is so extraordinarily difficult for us to transcend samsara. Only when we have the good roots, good fortune, and good causal connections to accept and diligently practice the Pure Land Dharma door, without doubt or intermingling with other teachings, will we finally be able to transcend.

Understanding all this, we should value our good roots, good fortune, and causal connections, and seize this rare opportunity to be born in the Pure Land. The accumulation of such good roots and good fortune takes an unbelievably long time. If we sincerely vow to be born in the Pure Land and concentrate on chanting Amitabha's name, we will be paying our gratitude to all

Buddhas, to all our parents of countless lifetimes, and to our own true nature.

This true nature has always existed, but we have yet to uncover it. And so we remain in a seemingly endless dream. We should not wish to dream of having the good fortune to be successful, to win the praise of others, or to enjoy our good fortune in the cycle of rebirth. In the cycle of rebirth, whether we are suffering or enjoying our good fortune, the only difference is that we are either in a bad dream or a pleasant dream. Either way, we are in a dream.

We do not practice Buddhism to have pleasant dreams. We practice to awaken from all dreams! This is why Sakyamuni Buddha told us to be mindful of and attach to Amitabha Buddha to be born in his land. Up till now we have remained attached to our desires and opinions. Now, we need to sever our attachments to all that we like or dislike, to all that we are used to. We need, instead, to attach to the name of Amitabha Buddha so that we can always be mindful of him. Doing so, we will finally awaken and no longer be lost in a dream.

## Good Men and Good Women

If there are good men or good women who hear of Amitabha Buddha, and recite his name *single-mindedly and without confusion*, for one day or two days or three days or four days or five days or six days or seven days, then when these people are about to die, Amitabha Buddha and his whole assembly will appear before them.

Here Sakyamuni Buddha spoke to Sariputra of “good men or good women” who single-mindedly chant the name of Amitabha Buddha from one to seven days. What is the standard for being a good man or a good woman? In other schools, it is fulfilling the ten virtuous karmas. In the Pure Land school, the standard is to be mindful of Amitabha Buddha. When we are sincerely mindful of him, we will resonate with his mind of goodness. This will naturally fulfill the ten virtuous

karmas. Good speech and good actions will follow from our mindfulness just as water naturally flows downhill.

Anyone who has tried to chant the name of Amitabha Buddha single-mindedly can appreciate just how difficult it is.

When we first begin to chant, we do so with a scattered and chaotic mind. This is a mind in which our erratic thoughts bombard us continuously as we attempt to chant. And it seems that the harder we try to focus, the more chaotic our mind becomes. Quite honestly, our mind has been chaotic for a very, very long time. We were simply not aware of it. Now, after trying to focus our mind time after time, we realize just how scattered and chaotic our thoughts are. This realization is vital if we are to progress in our practice. For as an ancient practitioner warned, “even if one chants the Buddha’s name until one’s throat is hoarse, one’s chanting with a scattered and chaotic mind will be futile.”

It will be futile because chanting with a scattered and chaotic mind will not result in being born in the Pure Land in the current lifetime. Luckily for us, the practitioner’s warning does not mean that such chanting is worthless. At the least, it will result in good fortune, though this good fortune will be enjoyed only by

being reborn as a human or heavenly being in a future lifetime.

As we continue diligently with our chanting, little by little our mind becomes less chaotic. We gradually begin to chant with a scattered mind. This describes an unfocused mind, one that is not yet able to concentrate solely on the buddha-name. And so sometimes we will be mindful of Amitabha Buddha, and at other times we will have wandering thoughts. While a scattered mind is not our goal, with this mind we are at least able to begin to use the buddha-name to reduce and even keep our wandering thoughts at bay. When our chanting is not sufficient to accomplish this, we can simultaneously visualize Amitabha, our lotus flower, or the other adornments of the Pure Land while we chant.

What we are striving to attain is constant mindfulness. This is spoken of in the *Infinite Life Sutra* as “single-mindedly concentrating on mindfully chanting the buddha-name.” Constant mindfulness is to continuously hold the name of Amitabha in our mind, whether walking, standing, sitting, or lying down. With constant mindfulness, we will no longer have afflictions like selfishness, greed, anger, ignorance, or arrogance. We will be using one pure thought—that of Amitabha Buddha—to replace all wandering thoughts.

When we are born in the Western Pure Land through mindful chanting, we will still have wandering thoughts. At that point, we will not yet have eliminated them. We bring them along because they are still with us. What about residual karmas? We also bring along these remaining karmas. Once in the Pure Land, our continued chanting will further reduce these wandering thoughts and residual karmas, gradually eradicating them all. In time, we will attain the state of one-mind undisturbed.

To be born in the Western Pure Land, we should always regard ourselves as beginners. We should also remember what we have learned. No matter what conditions we encounter, irrespective of the various emotions or ideas we may have, we should not attach to the conditions. Indeed, we should not attach to anything of this world. Rather, we should practice to achieve constant mindfulness, to have the name of Amitabha Buddha in our mind twenty-four hours a day.

In this sutra passage, Sakyamuni spoke of chanting Amitabha Buddha's name "for one day or two days or three days or four days or five days or six days or seven days." The *Infinite Life Sutra* says ten days, and the *Visualization Sutra* specifies just one day on the condition that we truly repent. The number of days differs because to help everyone, Sakyamuni Buddha taught dif-

ferent methods to different people. The ultimate purpose of our practice is to attain constant mindfulness. We cannot assure ourselves that when we are about to die we will be in this state, and so we need to prepare, even for thirty or forty years.

Once we achieve these states, we will not lose them.

Rather, we will be more diligent and work even harder. We will be filled with Dharma bliss and will receive unimaginable benefits. To appreciate the benefits that are possible through diligent practice, we can consider the account of Venerable Yishou who lived four centuries ago. Venerable Yishou chanted the name of Amitabha Buddha while doing walking meditation in a small area that was covered with flat stones. So diligently did he practice walking meditation that he wore holes in the stones. When the stones were replaced, again he wore them down.

Despite his determined practice, Venerable Yishou encountered a serious karmic enmity from a past lifetime. This enmity was reborn as the young orphaned boy whom Venerable Yishou raised. He was a rebellious boy and as time passed, his misdeeds grew more flagrant. When Venerable Yishou spoke to him about this, the boy's behavior became even worse. Finally, one night, he and some other boys attacked Venerable Yishou when the Venerable was doing his walking

meditation. They beat him until he died. But throughout the attack Venerable Yishou continued chanting.

One might ask why such a terrible thing would happen to a monk who practiced so diligently. We need to understand that had Venerable Yishou not practiced so well, he would never have been able to continue chanting until the moment he died.

This account appears in a book that tells of people who were born in the Pure Land. The commentary for this particular account points out that we should always repent. Repent without needing to know what particular bad deeds we did in the past. Just realize that the number of times we committed them is incalculable, and the pain we caused immeasurable. And no matter what happens to us, we should never allow our belief to be shaken. Or our vow to be born in the Pure Land to be forgotten. Like Venerable Yishou, we need to be determined and chant the buddha-name "single-mindedly and without confusion."

How do we do this?

First, we bring the thought of "Amitufo" into our mind. Then, as we chant or say "Amitufo," our ears hear and our mind concentrates on and embraces "Amitufo." Thus, the mind, the mouth, and the ears are all absorbed in this chanting. If intoning silently, we listen to and concentrate on our voice in our mind.

## Good Men and Good Women

This manner of chanting will help us focus and concentrate our mind for “one day or two days or three days or four days or five days or six days or seven days.”

## The Unified and Not Chaotic Mind

When they die, their minds being *unified and not chaotic* they will attain rebirth in Amitabha's Land of Ultimate Bliss.

A "unified and non-chaotic mind" is a mind that is not deluded. With such a mind and by mindfully chanting the buddha-name as we breathe our last breaths, we will be born in the Pure Land. At that point, we have achieved constant mindfulness of Amitabha Buddha. This is the state that is referred to—a mind that is unified and not chaotic.

At this point, we have not yet attained one-mind undisturbed. Fortunately for us, one-mind undisturbed is not a prerequisite for being born in the Pure Land. Fortunate, because few people can achieve this state.

If, however, we are unconscious, it will be extraordinarily difficult to be born in the Western Pure Land. In an unconscious state, our mind is not one that is uni-

fied and not chaotic. In this state, the force of our karma will easily control us. As a consequence of having predominantly committed bad deeds, we will likely go to one of the three evil paths. Our very heavy negative karma carries with it the retribution of much suffering. As the *Diamond Sutra* says, were it not for our practice, our suffering would be much worse. This holds true not only for everyday life but also for when we are dying. When unawakened people are dying, they find it very arduous to maintain a calm, clear mind.

As practitioners, we know that if we can always have an undisturbed mind and always mindfully chant Amitabha's name, it is due to the support of Amitabha. Without such support, it would be almost impossible for us to remain calm, clear, and mindful of him. The pull of our bad karma is too strong.

With this bad karma, coupled with a chaotic mind, we could easily find ourselves unable to chant while we are breathing our last breaths. A chaotic mind is a deluded mind. In this deluded state, it will be very easy for those whom we have hurt or treated unfairly over countless lifetimes to come seeking revenge. These enemies are not evil. Like us, they are unawakened. But having been harmed by us, they wish to hurt us in return. And they know that as long as we continue to be

reborn in samsara, their opportunities to do so can still arise.

If we are born in the Pure Land, however, our karmic enemies will forever lose the chance to get even. Knowing this, they will do everything possible to prevent our birth in that land. And the easiest time to impede us is when we are in a weakened state, when our concentration can falter and our mind become chaotic and deluded. It thus becomes vitally important that we manage to chant mindfully, for the power generated by our chanting can hold these karmic enemies at bay.

But we should do even more. We can dedicate the merit from our chanting to these karmic enemies so they too can be born in the Pure Land. This way, our past enemies can transform into fellow practitioners.

To be single-minded and not deluded as we are breathing our last breaths, we need good fortune. To accumulate good fortune, we need to share that which we already have. We must not waste it. This is accomplished by giving to others and by not indulging ourselves. We also need to cultivate wisdom so that we will know how best to use our good fortune and not inadvertently commit more bad karmas. If we are unwise, we will use up this good fortune. Having none left at the end of our life, we may then become deluded at the time of death.

## The Unified and Not Chaotic Mind

So if we are wise, we will live simply, avoid committing bad karmas, and share our good fortune. Having an ample supply of good fortune at the end of our life, we will be clear minded as we chant the name of Amitabha Buddha and see him come to guide us home to the Pure Land.

## Sakyamuni Buddha's Assurance

I have seen this benefit, and so I speak these words. If sentient beings hear what I say, they must make a vow to be born in that land.

Sakyamuni Buddha telling Sariputra "I have seen this benefit" was to reassure those listening to this teaching, as well as all those who would encounter it in the future. Although those in the assembly had not seen the advantages of being born in the Pure Land, Sakyamuni had.

And having seen those benefits, Sakyamuni told us that good men or good women who hear of Amitabha Buddha and then chant his name single-mindedly and without confusion for one to seven days will receive a remarkable outcome. This outcome refers to horizontal transcendence.

In contrast, other Buddhist schools practice vertical transcendence, which requires that those who wish to transcend the suffering in samsara must go through the step-by-step progression in their practice and cultivation. This is akin to a worm attempting to escape from within a bamboo stalk by breaking through each segment joint in turn as it slowly crawls upward. Only when the worm has pierced the very last joint is it, finally, free.

Horizontal transcendence, the easier way, is akin to the worm just chewing through the side of the bamboo stalk right where it is. Much more quickly, the worm is free!

How does this apply to Pure Land practitioners?

Using horizontal transcendence, we can be born in the Pure Land in our current lifetime whatever our present level of cultivation. We may receive this excellent result if, at the end of our life, our mind is not chaotic or deluded and we chant Amitabha Buddha's name. But what if we are still deluded? Then, once again, we will encounter the very same stumbling block that has hampered us for uncountable lifetimes. If we are deluded at the end of our life, our seeds of residual habits, including greed, anger, ignorance, and arrogance will arise uncontrollably. All these residual habits are amassed in our store consciousness.

## Sakyamuni Buddha's Assurance

This consciousness is the first of the eight consciousnesses to enter a mother's womb at the moment of conception. By the time the fetus is fully developed, it has all the eight consciousnesses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, mental awareness, thinking mind, and store. When a person is dying, the first seven consciousnesses gradually cease to function. Finally, only the store consciousness remains functioning. In most cases, usually within eight hours after death, it will leave the body.

While eight hours is the usual amount of time required for the store consciousness to withdraw from the body, there are instances where more time is taken. Some people are very attached to their body and do not want to let go, and so the store consciousness may not leave until twelve or fourteen hours after death. In some instances, the store consciousness may not leave for several days! Others may even be chanting for them, but by being extremely attached to their bodies, they are obstructed from being born in the Western Pure Land. Intensely deluded, these people are their own obstructions.

Clearly, we need to ensure that we are not deluded at the time of death. To accomplish this, we need to live simply, end wrongdoings, and cultivate wisdom and good fortune. Then, at the end of our life, clearheaded

and without fear, we will be able to be steadfast in our belief and our vow, and mindfully chant the buddha-name. Amitabha Buddha will come to guide us to the Pure Land.

This is why Sakyamuni Buddha spoke of the necessity of a mind that is unified and not chaotic. With such a unified, non-deluded mind, we can, through horizontal transcendence, be born in the Land of Ultimate Bliss while bringing along our residual karmas. Sakyamuni Buddha saw this benefit and urged—for the second time—that we “make a vow to be born in that land.”

As Great Master Ouyi wrote, “It is my humble hope that no matter whether you are a layperson or a monk or nun, no matter whether you are smart or stupid, you will adopt a positive attitude toward this simple, direct, Sudden Perfect Pure Land teaching. Do not look upon it as difficult and shrink away from it. Do not look upon it as easy and become complacent and not try hard enough. Do not look upon it as shallow and despise it. Do not look upon it as profound and not dare to accept it as your task.”<sup>6</sup>

## Extolling the Virtues of Amitabha Buddha

Right now I am extolling the benefits of  
the inconceivable virtues of  
Amitabha Buddha.

Needless to say, unawakened beings like ourselves have yet to see and experience these benefits. Fortunately, Sakyamuni Buddha as well as accomplished masters taught us about the benefits.

As we have just learned, the first is horizontal transcendence, thanks to which we need not undergo the slow, painstaking progress through vertical transcendence. With horizontal transcendence, we can transcend the cycle of rebirth in this very lifetime.

A second benefit is that the four lands making up the Western Pure Land, and which represent four states of mind, all merge. This is in contrast to other buddha-lands where the four lands are separate and

distinct. In the Western Pure Land, dwelling in one land is like being in all four lands at the same time. So all beings are together.

Even though Amitabha Buddha and the bodhisattvas actually abide in lands other than the one we are in, we can still be with them. We can still learn directly from them. We are not yet in those lands because we have not yet attained the respective states of mind. Nonetheless, through our cultivation, we will have access to all the beings in the lands other than ours.

A third benefit is attainment of the three stages of non-retrogression. As we previously learned, the three stages of non-retrogressions are no falling back from one's level, no falling back from one's practice, and no falling back from one's mindfulness. We will attain all three when Amitabha Buddha and the bodhisattvas come to guide us to the Pure Land.

These profound benefits and many more can be achieved through one practice: the mindful chanting of the buddha-name. No other forms of meditation are required. From the moment we first practice till the moment we are born in his land—we chant "Amitufofo."

Exquisitely simple.

Incredibly effective.

## The Buddhas in the Eastern Direction

But in the eastern direction there are also countless other Buddhas, like Akshobhya Buddha, the Buddha “Marks of the Polar Mountain”, the Buddha “Great Polar Mountain”, the Buddha “Light of the Polar Mountain”, and the Buddha “Wondrous Voice”. Each of them . . . [with the truthfulness of a Buddha, teaches] in his own land and covers a whole cosmos, speaking these sincere words: “all of you sentient beings should believe this sutra extolling inconceivable virtues, which all Buddhas protect and keep in mind”.

In this and the next several passages from the sutra, we learn some more names of the innumerable Buddhas who praise the *Amitabha Sutra*. Like the arhats and bodhisattvas listed at the beginning of this sutra, these

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Buddhas are representative. Their names have profound meaning, with each one illustrating a particular quality of buddhahood.

Only Buddhas are listed in this section because only they can fully understand and appreciate all that Amitabha has accomplished on our behalf. Like Sakyamuni, they praise this sutra, “which all Buddhas protect and keep in mind.” By understanding the meaning of the names of the Buddhas listed in this series of sutra passages, we will know the proper order for our practice. In addition, we will also know how to overcome all obstacles in our practice.

The Buddhas of the eastern direction are listed first. Just as the sun rises in the east and begins our day, these Buddhas begin our learning journey by teaching us the fundamentals of learning and cultivation. It is upon this foundation that our determination to practice arises.

The first Buddha named in the eastern direction was Akshobhya Buddha.

Meaning “Immovable,” this Buddha’s name signifies the principle of immovability, which is fundamental for learning and practicing not only the Pure Land Dharma door but also all 84,000 Dharma doors.

We must first have steadfast belief if we are to progress in our practice. If we lack firm belief and are

constantly changing our mind, we will not be able to achieve much in Buddhism. With a genuine wish to practice, we should strive to stay away from the five desires. We should also strive not to be moved by the eight winds of gain and loss, praise and blame, fame and disgrace, and happiness and suffering.

As unawakened people, we are often swayed by our attachments to gain, praise, fame, and happiness, as well as by our aversions to loss, blame, disgrace, and suffering. Such desires and aversions distract us and, in so doing, obstruct our cultivation. But worldly pursuits and conditions are not all that should be of concern to us.

We also need to guard against the attraction of other Buddhist teachings. Having chosen the Pure Land Dharma door, we should remain focused on it, always concentrating on our practice of chanting the buddha-name. Likewise, those drawn to other Dharma doors should focus on their chosen method.

If we waver in our practice when enticed by worldly desires and influences, we will not be able to transcend samsara. If we vacillate between various Dharma doors, we will not be able to delve deeply into just one. In other words, if the five desires and the eight winds move us, we will continue to suffer within samsara.

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And if other Dharma doors move us, we will not achieve constant mindfulness of Amitabha Buddha.

The next three Buddhas—Marks of the Polar Mountain, Great Polar Mountain, and Light of the Polar Mountain—represent the goal that we Buddhist practitioners yearn to reach: buddhahood.

To better appreciate the symbolic significance of these three Buddhas, we need to first grasp the concept of the three bodies of a Buddha. To become a Buddha means the attainment of all three: the truth body, the enjoyment body, and the manifestation body.

The truth body is a Buddha's true body, the ultimate body—formless, transcendental, inconceivable. It is the true self that neither arises nor ceases, that is without beginning and without end. Who attains the truth body? Only those who, realizing that the physical body is the false self, have seen the true nature and attained great awakening.

The enjoyment body is a Buddha's celestial body. It resides in a Pure Land and never appears to ordinary people. The enjoyment body has a beginning but is without end. Once attained, this body will never again be mired in delusion. The enjoyment body is a wisdom body, the body of innate prajna wisdom. When a Pure Land practitioner is no longer deluded by dualism, Amitabha will respond by coming in his enjoyment

body. He will guide the practitioner to the Land of Ultimate Bliss, to be born in either the Land of Real Reward or the Land of Eternally Quiescent Light.

The manifestation body is a body that is incarnated by the truth body and is visible to ordinary beings. The appearance of a Buddha's manifestation body varies in accordance with the thoughts of the beings it appears to. The manifestation body, therefore, can have countless different appearances—not just one. Additionally, one truth body can have a vast number of manifestation bodies. When a Pure Land practitioner eradicates the affliction of views and thoughts, Amitabha will respond by appearing in a manifestation body. He will guide the practitioner to the Land of Ultimate Bliss, to be born in either the Land Where Sages and Ordinary Beings Dwell Together or the Land of Expedient Liberation.

The concept of the three bodies of a Buddha is significant. In the following we will see how it relates to the three Buddhas who represent the practitioners' goal of buddhahood.

The first of these three is Buddha Marks of the Polar Mountain.

In Buddhist cosmology, the Polar Mountain is at the center of the universe. Buddha Marks of the Polar Mountain signifies the enjoyment body. The sutras ex-

plain that this Buddha's name symbolizes the fact that the body of a Buddha has innumerable marks, or physical attributes, each of which is infinitely wonderful. His auspicious marks and his radiance are admired by beings throughout the nine realms.

The next of the three Buddhas, Buddha Great Polar Mountain, signifies the truth body.

This body is the noumenon, or principle, of all phenomena. The truth body is that which creates; the enjoyment body and the manifestation body are those which are created. "Great," in Great Polar Mountain, does not mean big. Rather, it means that there is nothing more or less than this—that it contains everything.

The last of this group of three, Buddha Light of the Polar Mountain, signifies the manifestation body and infinite good fortune.

The radiance of this Buddha illuminates the entire universe. Because the light of Buddha Light of the Polar Mountain pervades everywhere, this Buddha manifests everywhere.

As with all Buddhas, there is a connection between Buddha Light of the Polar Mountain and the beings who request his help. The connection is called "wave motion." The wave motion of all Buddhas is called "light" and is quiescent. Conversely, our wave motions are constantly arising and ceasing and are, therefore,

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called “waves.” A Buddha’s wave motion can be likened to tranquil water whereas our wave motion is like raging surf. But, as both are components of a vast ocean with many aspects, calm water and turbulent surf are inevitably interconnected.

The fifth and final Buddha named in the eastern direction was Buddha Wondrous Voice.

“Wondrous Voice” signifies that single-mindedly chanting the name of Amitabha Buddha is the core method of both learning and practice. This extraordinary chanting, which is the simultaneous application of meditative concentration and wisdom, is the most wondrous sound in this world and beyond. When one mindfully chants the buddha-name, this sound will move all the Buddhas throughout the Dharma realm.

Then Sakyamuni said: “Each of them . . . [with the truthfulness of a Buddha, teaches] in his own land and covers a whole cosmos, speaking these sincere words: ‘all of you sentient beings should believe this sutra extolling inconceivable virtues, which all Buddhas protect and keep in mind.’” Here he referred to the five Buddhas named, as well as “countless other Buddhas” in the eastern direction. Further on in the sutra, Sakyamuni repeated these same words with regard to all the Buddhas in the six directions.

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“The truthfulness of a Buddha” indicates that everything a Buddha says is the truth. As Sakyamuni assured us in the *Diamond Sutra*, a Buddha never lies or exaggerates. Furthermore, all Buddhas expound the same universal truths, which arise from their shared true nature. If a Buddha were to say one untruthful word, it would cause us to doubt all his words. This, in turn, would result in his no longer being able to assist all beings. Therefore, a Buddha will always speak the truth.

Why do all Buddhas try their utmost to convince us to learn and practice the teachings in this sutra? They know that the Land of Ultimate Bliss is no ordinary land. Rather, it is like a school, one jointly supported by all these Buddhas. These enlightened beings are like parents to us, the unawakened beings. They know that we, like children, need to be taught properly if we are to uncover our perfect wisdom, virtues, and abilities. To this end, the school was established, and its teachings are “protected and kept in mind” by all Buddhas.

## The Buddhas in the Southern Direction

In the worlds of the southern direction there are countless other Buddhas, like the Buddha "Lamp of the Sun and Moon", the Buddha "Light of Renown", the Buddha "Great Blazing Shoulders", the Buddha "Lamp of the Polar Mountain", and the Buddha "Infinite Vigor". Each of them . . . [with the truthfulness of a Buddha, teaches] in his own land and covers a whole cosmos, speaking these sincere words: "all of you sentient beings should believe this sutra extolling inconceivable virtues, which all Buddhas protect and keep in mind".

The names of the five Buddhas in the southern direction represent the cultivation of innate prajna wisdom, which all beings possess. Perfectly awakened beings

function entirely from their innate prajna wisdom, while we deluded beings rarely use ours. We are unable to because we have overwhelming karmic obstacles. The result? We remain mired in delusion. Delusion is one's afflictions and residual habits. Because we are deluded, our wisdom lies hidden. Fortunately, if we truly practice according to Sakyamuni Buddha, our wisdom will shine through.

Consider the following analogy about wisdom. The wisdom of Buddhas is like the sun on a beautiful, cloudless day—it shines radiantly without any obstruction. The wisdom of us ordinary beings, however, is like sunlight on an overcast day. Although the sun is shining, dark clouds obstruct its light. In a similar manner, our obstacles block and prevent our wisdom from shining forth.

What are these obstacles?

They are our wandering thoughts, discriminations, and attachments. As the *Avatamsaka Sutra* says, “all beings have the wisdom and virtues of a Buddha but cannot attain them due to their wandering thoughts and attachments.” To overcome our wandering thoughts and attachments, Sakyamuni Buddha taught us how to cultivate. Once we eliminate these impediments, the wisdom and abilities innate in our true nature—our prajna wisdom—will shine through.

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The first Buddha named in the southern direction was Buddha Lamp of the Sun and Moon.

In our world, the sun shines radiantly during the day, and the moon illuminates at night. Lamps can brighten places where sunlight and moonlight cannot reach. "Lamp of the Sun and Moon" signifies that innate prajna wisdom, which is wisdom unhindered by obstructions, is able to perfectly illuminate all things in all places.

The second Buddha named in the southern direction was Buddha Light of Renown.

Here too, "light" signifies wisdom. "Renown" refers to fame, a state where one is highly acclaimed and widely honored for one's accomplishments. This is often accompanied by wealth. The attainment of renown is a critical juncture in one's cultivation. Fame risks entrapment. So it is crucial that decisive action be taken at this point. In personally enjoying fame it will be easy for one to look down on others. With such arrogance, regression will follow.

When we reach this juncture of fame and wealth, we will need to not only use wisdom to illuminate the darkness of our delusion, we will also need to shine it on our renown. In other words, upon having achieved some distinction for our cultivation, this repute must be clearly illuminated and understood. There must not be

the slightest attachment to fame, prestige, gain, and wealth. Otherwise, we will be obstructed by them and remain trapped in the cycle of rebirth when we should be transcending it.

To transcend, we need to eradicate our afflictions. Failing to do so, our innate wisdom will continue to remain largely inaccessible. With the eradication of a part of our afflictions, a part of our wisdom will come forth. With the elimination of all our afflictions, our innate wisdom will come forth fully.

Eradicating afflictions—letting go of wandering thoughts, discriminations, and attachments—takes careful cultivation and innate wisdom. How do we begin to uncover this wisdom? Not through studying many teachings. The way to reveal our wisdom is to delve deeply into just one method and immerse ourselves in it for a long time. This immersion will enable us to understand Sakyamuni Buddha's teachings and practice in accordance with them.

Sakyamuni taught us to see the truth and to let go of our wandering thoughts, discriminations, and attachments. When we start to let go a little, a little of our wisdom is revealed and we will see a little of the truth. Seeing some of the truth will, in turn, help us let go a bit more, uncover a bit more of wisdom, and help us see even more of the truth.

## The Buddhas in the Southern Direction

From our initial generation of the bodhi mind until our attainment of buddhahood, our learning and practice of Buddhism consist of letting go of our wandering thoughts, discriminations, and attachments; uncovering wisdom; and seeing the truth. After we put into practice what we learn from the names of Buddha Lamp of the Sun and Moon, and Buddha Light of Renown, we will reveal two kinds of wisdom: real wisdom and expedient wisdom.

The importance of these two wisdoms can be grasped thanks to the third Buddha, Great Blazing Shoulders.

As practitioners, we should shoulder, or take up, the responsibility to propagate the Dharma and help all beings. To accomplish this, we need both real wisdom and expedient wisdom.

Real wisdom is a pure mind: the mind of sincerity, purity, and impartiality. When we are even just a little attached to our fame, prestige, gain, or wealth, we will no longer have a sincere, pure, and impartial mind. We will not have real wisdom. Consequently, we will also be devoid of expedient wisdom, which is proper understanding and compassion.

Therefore, in lacking a sincere, pure, and impartial mind, we also lack proper understanding and compassion. Instead of having compassion for all beings, we

will be concerned about those we like and indifferent to those we dislike. This is partiality, not impartiality. It is not the way to aid all beings. To propagate the Dharma and aid all beings, we need both wisdoms: real wisdom—the mind of sincerity, purity, and impartiality, and also expedient wisdom—proper understanding and compassion.

The name of the fourth Buddha is Lamp of the Polar Mountain.

This Buddha's name teaches us that in the cultivation of wisdom, the eight sub-consciousnesses that make up the consciousness need to be transformed to wisdom.

The first five sub-consciousnesses are sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. The sixth is mental awareness, the seventh is the thinking mind, and the eighth is the store consciousness. Like an enormous warehouse, this eighth consciousness stores all the karmic impressions from our countless lifetimes over innumerable kalpas.

Each of these eight sub-consciousnesses has a particular role. The first five consciousnesses allow us to perceive through the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body. Discriminations come about from the mental awareness consciousness. Attachments come about from the thinking mind consciousness. Wandering thoughts come about from the store consciousness. These eight

sub-consciousnesses form the consciousness, the false mind. We need to transform this into the true mind. The true mind is wisdom. Bodhisattvas show us how to accomplish this transformation.

As Venerable Master Chin Kung explained, "In cultivating oneself and teaching others, the goal is to break through delusion and attain awakening. One should transform the sixth, or mental awareness, sub-consciousness to wisdom of wondrous observation. Transform the seventh, or thinking mind, sub-consciousness to wisdom of equality in nature. Transform the eighth, or store, sub-consciousness to great perfect mirror wisdom. And transform the first five sub-consciousnesses to wisdom of completion of actions."

With their wisdom coming forth, bodhisattvas transform the mental awareness consciousness to the wisdom of wondrous observation. Wondrous observation is to understand clearly. When the eyes see, one knows precisely what is being viewed. When the ears hear, one knows precisely what is being heard. Similarly, when the nose smells, the tongue tastes, and the body touches, one knows precisely what they are smelling, tasting, and touching.

When one's mental awareness consciousness is transformed into a mind like that of a bodhisattva, one is clear about one's thoughts. This is wondrous obser-

vation. It is like a mirror that reflects clearly, with no wandering thoughts, discriminations, and attachments. It is true wisdom. If there is discrimination in one's knowing, one is deluded and using one's consciousness, not wisdom.

Next, the thinking mind consciousness is transformed to wisdom of equality in nature. Attachments arise from the thinking mind consciousness. With attachments, everything is viewed with partiality: "I want it to be this way or that way; I think this is right and that is wrong." With the elimination of such attachments, impartiality will come forth and wisdom of equality in nature will be attained. At this point, we will be able to fulfill tasks perfectly.

Using consciousness while engaging in a task will inevitably lead to our making mistakes. This happens because, with the use of consciousness, our consideration is limited. When using wisdom, however, we will see the past, the present, and the future, and everything in the ten directions. With time and space perceived in this new manner, we will accomplish all tasks perfectly.

Finally, the store consciousness is transformed to great perfect mirror wisdom. Great perfect mirror is a metaphor for "all knowing." Why all knowing? Embedded in the store consciousness are the seeds of residual habits from innumerable kalpas. These resid-

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ual habits may be good, bad, or morally neutral. Regardless, all of them are transformed into wisdom. With great perfect mirror wisdom, one is clear, without the slightest confusion, about all causes and effects.

When the mental awareness consciousness is transformed to wisdom of wondrous observation, the thinking mind consciousness to wisdom of equality in nature, and the store consciousness to great perfect mirror wisdom, the first five consciousnesses will be transformed to the wisdom of completion of actions. One then acts from this wisdom of completion of actions.

Such actions of wisdom can benefit oneself as well as others. One benefits oneself by attaining thirty-two major marks and eighty secondary characteristics. Some examples of the thirty-two marks, which are the major physical attributes of a Buddha, are light radiating from between the eyebrows, a golden complexion, a circle of light, and an excellent voice. The secondary physical characteristics, which are more subtle, include a face like a clear full moon, fragrance emitting from the pores and mouth, deportment as awesome as that of a lion, a graceful and steady gait.

One benefits others by being a role model and a teacher. This sets an example for all beings. Both, serving as a good role model and as a teacher, are ex-

pressed in the world by the first five transformed sub-consciousnesses.

Learning Buddhism means to learn from Buddhas and bodhisattvas how to transform our consciousness to wisdom. With such wisdom we will remain unaffected by the situations we encounter. Currently, we are affected by everything. Encountering a favorable situation, we become attached to it. Facing an adverse situation, our anger and aversion arise. Explained in terms of the eight sub-consciousnesses, this means that when we come into contact with a situation, our afflictions immediately arise as seven emotions. The seven are pleasure, anger, sorrow, joy, love, hate, and desire.

When we react in response to these, we commit negative karmas. Once these negative karmas are committed, we will naturally suffer their retributions. Fortunately, thanks to having learned the meaning of the name of Buddha Lamp of the Polar Mountain, we now know how to stop this destructive behavior. By transforming consciousness into wisdom, we will stop creating negative karmas, stop planting the seeds for future suffering.

The fifth and final Buddha named in the southern direction was Buddha Infinite Vigor.

Vigor, or diligence, is our root of cultivation. It will facilitate the attainment of great wisdom. Sakyamuni

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Buddha used the metaphor of a root to show the process of growth, of flowering, and of fruit bearing. From where do all wholesome dharmas here in the cycle of rebirth originate and grow? From the three good roots of no greed, no anger, and no ignorance. Vigorous cultivation of these three good roots will bring us good fortune. Lack of their cultivation will result in misfortune.

Having good fortune or misfortune depends on our thoughts. With one worthy thought, we plant a seed for good fortune. With one wrong thought, we plant a seed for misfortune. Understanding this, we will practice changing our thoughts so as to stop planting seeds for misfortune.

Our intentions will be good. Our thoughts and actions will be virtuous.

This is our daily cultivation.

## The Buddhas in the Western Direction

In the worlds of the western direction there are countless other Buddhas, like the Buddha "Infinite Life", the Buddha "Innumerable Characteristics", the Buddha "Innumerable Banners", the Buddha "Great Light", the Buddha "Great Illumination", the Buddha "Jewel Appearance", and the Buddha "Light of Purity". Each of them . . . [with the truthfulness of a Buddha, teaches] in his own land and covers a whole cosmos, speaking these sincere words: "all of you sentient beings should believe this sutra extolling inconceivable virtues, which all Buddhas protect and keep in mind".

As previously seen, the names of the Buddhas in the eastern direction teach us the fundamentals of learning

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and cultivation. We also learned that the names of the Buddhas in the southern direction teach us to cultivate wisdom. Now, from the names of the Buddhas in the western direction, we will learn to accumulate good fortune. As we do this, we need to remember that we do not seek good fortune for our personal enjoyment.

Rather, our objective in accumulating good fortune is to help others by leading them to practice. Our own life will serve as an example. People will wonder how we acquired the advantages that we have: a long and healthy life, good appearance, prestige, wisdom. By example, we will be able to show people that, through practice, they too can attain such advantages.

The first Buddha named in the western direction was Buddha Infinite Life.

It is a name shared by many Buddhas, including the Buddha of the Western Pure Land. Buddha Infinite Life is named first in this passage because infinite life is of vital importance. Even within the context of this present lifetime, a long lifespan is one kind of good fortune. When one has a long lifespan, one has a greater opportunity to practice and thus to awaken sooner.

We can better understand this when we consider how hard it is for us humans to succeed in our practice. The average human lifetime is a matter of mere decades, and much of that time is spent sleeping, work-

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ing, socializing, and with family. We allocate very little of our day to actual practice. With a longer lifespan, however, our cumulative practice time can increase. With that, the likelihood of our success will also increase.

The second Buddha named was Buddha Innumerable Characteristics.

Characteristics such as a youthful complexion and a graceful gait are the auspicious physical attributes that adorn a Buddha's manifestation body. Such features symbolize good fortune.

As with all forms of good fortune, both a long lifespan and a pleasing appearance are for the benefit of others, not for personal enjoyment. In one's continuous efforts to help others to understand and accept Buddhism, such attributes can be very compelling as they exemplify good fortune. It is most effective therefore, if pleasing physical attributes are plainly evident. Appreciating this will help us better understand the next Buddha.

The third Buddha named was Buddha Innumerable Banners.

This name signifies superiority and prominence. In times past in China, a banner would be displayed conspicuously at a monastery to signal that a virtuous and wise monastic was teaching the Dharma there. In a

similar manner, this Buddha's name informs us that he is a Buddha of great prominence and prestige, acknowledged highly for his virtue and wisdom. Due to these accomplishments, he is respected by countless beings. Again, we see the importance of good fortune, which in this example occurs as prominence.

The fourth Buddha was Buddha Great Light, whose name refers to the light of wisdom. Longevity, good fortune, and prominence all originate from great wisdom.

The fifth Buddha was Buddha Great Illumination. This name signifies why great wisdom is so important. Perceiving that a being has attained great wisdom assures others that the being is qualified to help them also achieve such benefits.

The sixth Buddha was Buddha Jewel Appearance. His name signifies an excellent appearance. As we learned from Buddha Innumerable Characteristics, an excellent appearance is a sign of great good fortune.

The seventh and final Buddha named in the western direction was Buddha Light of Purity. This name signifies the foundation for cultivating good fortune. For us to perfectly attain great good fortune, our three karmic activities of thought, speech, and action must be radiant and pure, just like this Buddha's name, Light of Purity.

## The Buddhas in the Western Direction

The Buddhas cited in this sutra passage can help us reinforce our dedication to chanting the buddha-name and learning the Pure Land teachings. In so doing, we will purify our mind and thus accumulate great good fortune.

## The Buddhas in the Northern Direction

In the worlds of the northern direction there are countless other Buddhas, like the Buddha “Blazing Shoulders”, the Buddha “Supreme Voice”, the Buddha “Hard to Injure”, the Buddha “Born of the Sun”, and the Buddha “Netted Light”. Each of them . . . [with the truthfulness of a Buddha, teaches] in his own land and covers a whole cosmos, speaking these sincere words: “all of you sentient beings should believe this sutra extolling inconceivable virtues, which all Buddhas protect and keep in mind” .

The names of the Buddhas in the northern direction show us that once we have wisdom, as taught by the Buddhas in the southern direction, and good fortune,

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as taught by the Buddhas in the western direction, then we should educate others how to attain these as well.

The first Buddha named in the northern direction was Buddha Blazing Shoulders. His name signifies that one should take up the dual mission of all Buddhas: propagate the Dharma and aid all beings.

How to accomplish this is taught through the significance of the names of the remaining four Buddhas in the northern direction.

The second Buddha was Buddha Supreme Voice.

This name signifies that one carries out the Buddha's work with one's voice. As Pure Land practitioners, we understand that the supreme voice is the voice that teaches us how to be born in the Pure Land and urges mindful chanting of Amitabha Buddha's name.

Sadly, we rarely hear this voice. Instead, voices on the Internet, television, and in other media assault us on a daily basis. An unending barrage contaminates our thoughts, actions, and speech. Such voices do not encourage us to become better people. Rather, they incite us to consider our own desires before the needs of others, to seek revenge at the slightest insult, to care for those we like while we disregard everyone else. These voices will draw us to the three evil paths.

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Instead of these voices, we need to listen to the Pure Land teachings for they can help us transcend samsara, never again regress, and become a Buddha.

The third Buddha named was the Buddha Hard to Injure.

This name signifies that when one properly propagates and protects the Dharma, one is courageously making focused and diligent progress. And in doing so, one fears no outside obstructions or difficulties. When propagating Buddhism, we will inevitably face many obstacles. Consequently, for us to give rise to our wisdom, we must determine to never be overwhelmed by these obstructions.

Moreover, upon encountering them, we must not fight, remembering that Buddhas and bodhisattvas never oppose anyone. Indeed, this is why bodhisattvas are called benevolent beings. A benevolent being does not look on any other being as an enemy. When someone attempts to pick a fight, the benevolent being naturally forgives the person and avoids any confrontation. Such a being feels no anger, gives rise to no thought of revenge. This is an awakened being. This is a bodhisattva.

Consider an account of the king of Kalinga. One day, the king and members of his court went hunting. While the king was resting, the ladies in the entourage

saw an ascetic. Curious, they went to him and happily listened as he taught them the Dharma. When the king awoke and saw them associating with a stranger, some members of the hunting party wrongly told him that the ascetic was flirting with the women. The king flew into a rage and had the ascetic killed by dismemberment.

In spite of this, the ascetic did not harbor the slightest hatred toward the king. The ascetic was, in fact, an awakened being. Indeed, he vowed that the king would be the first person he would help after he attained enlightenment.

We learn from sutra accounts that the ascetic was Sakyamuni Buddha in an earlier rebirth. After Sakyamuni attained enlightenment, the first person he helped was one of his former five companions, Kaundinya. In a previous lifetime, Kaundinya was that king of Kalinga.

Such are the actions of awakened beings.

What are the actions of unawakened beings, beings like us? Too quickly, we give in to anger and thoughts of retaliation. Realizing this, we now have the opportunity to determine our level of practice. As soon as a confrontation arises, where on the spectrum are we? Are we awakened? Or still deluded? If we are to awaken, we must exercise self-control. Upon encountering

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minor difficulties, we should feel neither angry nor vengeful. If we can accomplish this, then, in the face of a serious obstacle, it will be much more likely that our cultivation will enable us to naturally remain calm and confident. Finally, when we are able to deal with any situation wisely, not emotionally, nothing will be able to impede us.

The fourth Buddha named was Buddha Born of the Sun.

“Sun” represents wisdom. “Born of the Sun” signifies that teaching and learning complement and support each other, like the wisdom-sun of the teacher and that of the students brightening up the sky. Teachers must follow what they have learned, including their own teachers’ methods, to instruct the students. In turn, students need to learn diligently and, when the time comes, pass those teachings down to the next generation. This process will enable the Dharma to stay in a world for a long time, to benefit humans and heavenly beings.

The fifth and last Buddha named in the northern direction was Buddha Netted Light.

This name signifies the abundant methods employed to fulfill the great vow to help all beings. Buddhas use countless methods, which are analogous to a great net, one that is able to lift up and thus rescue all

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beings from the sea of suffering. If Dharma propagators and protectors make and uphold such a great vow, maintain such a broad mind, and hold such an aspiration, then Buddhism will flourish.

## The Buddhas in the Nadir

In the worlds of the nadir there are countless other Buddhas, like the Buddha "Lion", the Buddha "Repute", the Buddha "Light" [of Name], [the Buddha "Dharma",] the Buddha "Dharma Banner", and the Buddha "Upholding the Dharma". Each of them . . . [with the truthfulness of a Buddha, teaches] in his own land and covers a whole cosmos, speaking these sincere words: "all of you sentient beings should believe this sutra extolling inconceivable virtues, which all Buddhas protect and keep in mind".

The names of the six Buddhas in the nadir represent Buddhism, a teaching that shows all beings how to break through delusion and attain awakening. The six names also signify seeking birth in the Western Pure

Land. Both attaining awakening and seeking birth in the Pure Land are accomplished through wisdom. Thus, wisdom is imperative.

Unfortunately, the highest priority for many people today is the accumulation of wealth. For them, good health and longevity come next in importance, and then wisdom. Thus, of the three, wisdom is often viewed as the least important. Clearly, prioritizing this way is due to ignorance, to a lack of understanding.

In Buddhism, the most important of the three priorities is wisdom. Here, too, good health and longevity come next. But wealth is last. Having wisdom, one will know the causes that will allow one to attain health, longevity, and wealth. But more significantly, by uncovering wisdom, one will know how to reach supreme, perfect enlightenment.

The first Buddha named in the nadir was Buddha Lion.

When a lion roars, all other animals pause and listen. Likewise, when a Buddha speaks, innumerable beings stop to hear his teachings on how to end suffering and attain lasting happiness.

The second Buddha named was Buddha Repute.

His name signifies that when bodhisattvas or patriarchs act on behalf of Buddhas to propagate Buddhism they become famous. But because these bod-

hisattvas and patriarchs are awakened and have wisdom, they know that this fame is to be used to benefit others, not themselves.

The third Buddha named was Buddha Light [of Name].

“Light” signifies ultimate and perfect wisdom, the wisdom of all Buddhas. This wisdom enables the Buddhas to adapt their teaching methods to suit and accommodate all beings, regardless of their abilities or personal preferences. “Name” teaches us to chant the buddha-name until our mind is no longer deluded and we achieve one-mind undisturbed. Accomplishing this, we will be born in the Western Pure Land.

The fourth Buddha named was Buddha Dharma.

The Dharma is the truth that all Buddhas teach. In our world, the teachings of Sakyamuni Buddha have been faithfully passed down by patriarchs and accomplished masters. By relying on their words, which are ultimately the words of Sakyamuni Buddha, we are relying on the Dharma.

The fifth Buddha named was Buddha Dharma Banner.

Here again, we see that “Banner” in a Buddha’s name signifies the instruction of how to choose from the diverse Dharma doors set forth by Sakyamuni Buddha. For beginners, who are trying to find which

method is most suitable, it can be a very confusing time. A Dharma master accomplished in cultivation and experienced in teaching can help people choose a Dharma door, pointing these people in the right direction for their learning and cultivation.

The sixth Buddha named in the nadir was Buddha Upholding the Dharma.

This name means that we uphold—receive and always practice—the Buddha's teachings. If we wish that all beings who have an affinity with a Buddha come to accept, uphold, and study his teachings, and also teach others through their own words and behavior, we must first do so ourselves. This will set a good example.

Buddhas, past patriarchs, and accomplished practitioners sincerely practiced the teachings before they taught people. When one fulfills the teachings and indeed benefits from them, it is proof that the Dharma door being practiced is the right one. When we too accomplish this, it means that we have no doubts or questions. Those we teach will believe us.

## The Buddhas in the Zenith

In the worlds of the zenith there are countless other Buddhas, like the Buddha "Pure Voice", the Buddha "Sojourner King", the Buddha "Incense Fragrance", the Buddha "Fragrant Light", the Buddha "Great Blazing Shoulders", the Buddha "Body of Multicolored Jewel Flower Garlands", the Buddha "Sala Tree King", the Buddha "Precious Flower Virtue", the Buddha "Sees All Truths", and the Buddha "Like the Polar Mountain". Each of them . . . [with the truthfulness of a Buddha, teaches] in his own land and covers a whole cosmos, speaking these sincere words: "all of you sentient beings should believe this sutra extolling inconceivable virtues, which all Buddhas protect and keep in mind".

## The Buddhas in the Zenith

The names of the ten Buddhas in the zenith signify perfection in enlightenment and accomplishment—the attainment of buddhahood—in one lifetime.

The first Buddha named in the zenith was Buddha Pure Voice.

“Voice” refers to teaching. “Pure Voice” signifies that the lecturing on the Dharma should be pure, without any trace of contamination. We can attain such purity by letting go of our contaminants. What are these contaminants? Worldly pleasures and acclaim. The afflictions of selfishness, prestige, and wealth. Greed, anger, ignorance, and arrogance. Having let go of these, when we teach others, our teaching will naturally be pure because we will have become selfless, and our every thought will be for the sake of all beings. Without thoughts of self-benefit, our every act will be free from contaminants, from any selfishness.

No one can do this for us, not even Buddhas and bodhisattvas. They can only teach us the principles and methods, and show us how to put them into practice. Buddhas and bodhisattvas cannot do the work on our behalf. Cultivation is up to us.

Vitally important in our cultivation is letting go. As we let go, we will begin to understand the teachings better and experience their benefits. As we understand more, we will be able to let go more. Eventually, we will

let go of all contaminants and naturally achieve the state of purity.

The second Buddha named was Buddha Sojourner King.

This name signifies the Mahayana teachings, which are direct paths to supreme, perfect enlightenment. Every Mahayana method has its own degree of difficulty, thereby allowing all to cultivate according to their abilities.

The third Buddha named was the Buddha Incense Fragrance.

“Incense Fragrance” refers to five kinds of fragrances of a Buddha’s truth body. The five are morality, meditative concentration, wisdom, liberation, and wisdom flowing from one’s state of liberation. Buddha Incense Fragrance also represents one of the more direct paths in the Mahayana teachings, the Zen Dharma door.

The fourth Buddha named was Buddha Fragrant Light.

This name signifies the Buddha Mindfulness Dharma door of the Pure Land school. While the Zen Dharma door is one of the more direct paths, the most direct Mahayana path is the Pure Land Dharma door. This door is also the most reliable, the easiest, and the simplest. Furthermore, with the Pure Land method,

one's achievement will be incomparably wondrous. This is why the Pure Land Dharma door is called the most direct path.

The fifth Buddha named was Buddha Great Blazing Shoulders. This name signifies shouldering the responsibility to give the supreme teachings to others so that they can attain buddhahood in one lifetime.

The sixth Buddha named was Buddha Body of Multicolored Jewel Flower Garlands. The name signifies perfect attainment of buddhahood in one lifetime, as spoken of in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*.

The seventh Buddha named was Buddha Sala Tree King.

His name signifies that the Esoteric teachings and the Pure Land teachings are one, not two, because the practitioners of both Dharma doors cultivate a pure mind. It is, however, harder to succeed using the Esoteric method than with the Pure Land method.

This is so because while Pure Land practitioners attain purity by staying away from the contamination of worldly pleasures, Esoteric practitioners take the more difficult approach of achieving purity in the midst of worldly pleasures. It is thus better for those of us with more limited abilities to practice the buddha-name chanting method and seek to be born in the

## The Buddhas in the Zenith

Western Pure Land. Once there we will steadily progress in our practice.

The eighth Buddha named was Buddha Precious Flower Virtue, who signifies the perfect enjoyment body.

The ninth Buddha named was Buddha Sees All Truths, who signifies innumerable manifestation bodies.

When a being in the nine Dharma realms makes a request of a Buddha, that Buddha will respond with a manifestation body. Within the request and response framework, there are two possible forms of requests: conscious and subconscious. There are also two possible forms of responses: overt and covert. Overt means that the beings are clearly aware of a Buddha's help. Covert means that the beings are not aware of a Buddha's help. A request, conscious or subconscious, can invoke either an overt or a covert response. But for this request and response to occur, an affinity is necessary. We can thus understand why we need to foster Dharma affinities with as many beings as possible to fulfill our own vow to help them all.

The tenth Buddha named in the zenith was Buddha Like the Polar Mountain, who signifies the pure truth body.

## The Buddhas in the Zenith

In summary, this section in the sutra, with passages on the Buddhas in the six directions, teaches us how to learn and practice, and in what sequence.

First, the names of the Buddhas in the eastern direction teach us the fundamentals of learning and practicing.

Then, the names of the Buddhas in the southern direction instruct us how to cultivate wisdom.

Next, the names of the Buddhas in the western direction show us how to develop good fortune.

The names of the Buddhas in the northern direction teach us that after having laid our foundation of wisdom and good fortune we should teach others.

The names of the Buddhas in the nadir represent Buddhism, which can help all beings break through delusion and attain awakening.

Finally, the names of the Buddhas in the zenith represent ultimate perfection in enlightenment and accomplishment—the attainment of buddhahood—in one lifetime.

Thus, from the beginning of our cultivation through to its completion, the *Amitabha Sutra* succinctly guides us to the ultimate goal—buddhahood.

## The Sutra Taught by All Buddhas

Why do you think this is called the sutra that is protected and kept in mind by all the Buddhas? If there are good men or women who hear this scripture, uphold it and hear the names of all these Buddhas, these good men and women will be protected and kept in mind by all the Buddhas, and will not retrogress along the path of Supreme, Perfect Enlightenment. Therefore, all of you should faithfully accept what I say and what all the Buddhas have said.

Sakyamuni Buddha told Sariputra that if good men or good women, upon hearing this sutra, sincerely accept and practice it, they will receive the support of all Buddhas. Additionally, they will no longer retrogress along the path of supreme, perfect enlightenment. In-

conceivable! It means that once in the Pure Land, thanks to the support of all Buddhas, we will attain non-retrogression.

With non-retrogression we will steadily advance until, finally, we uncover the supreme bodhi mind, the true mind that is already within us. This mind of sincerity, purity, impartiality, proper understanding, and compassion will come forth because our selfishness and worldly desires will no longer obstruct it. Before attaining our ultimate goal of supreme, perfect enlightenment, we will first attain two prior stages of enlightenment.

The first stage of enlightenment is correct enlightenment.

Having eradicated the affliction of views and thoughts, arhats are at this stage. No longer having the incorrect view of self, they no longer think that one's physical body is oneself. Upon eradicating the affliction of views and thoughts, arhats transcend the six paths. If they do come to these paths again, it will be to fulfill their vows. To accord naturally with the thoughts of the beings they come to help and teach, the arhats will manifest in the forms most effective for teaching. The manifestation bodies are for this purpose. They are not the result of karmic retribution. Buddhas and bod-

hisattvas manifest in the same way to help those still trapped in the six paths.

The second stage is correct, universal enlightenment.

Bodhisattvas are at this stage. Having eliminated a part of ignorance, seen a part of the true nature, and attained a part of the truth body, the minds of bodhisattvas are very close to the mind of a Buddha. In the sutras, Sakyamuni Buddha drew an analogy between the mind and the moon to illustrate this. The perfect, true mind of a Buddha is like a full moon. The mind of a bodhisattva is like a crescent moon: real, but neither full nor perfect.

The final stage is supreme, perfect enlightenment.

Buddhas are at this stage. Having realized the untroubled and nondiscriminatory mind, they have attained the perfect wisdom that comprehends all truths.

Sakyamuni, having comprehended all truths, once more exhorted us to seek birth in the Pure Land as he urged us to “faithfully accept what I say and what all the Buddhas have said.” Given that all Buddhas always speak the truth, we can believe in this sutra because Sakyamuni Buddha spoke it.

People who can truly practice as good men or good women will receive the inconceivable benefit of non-retrogression. Once in the Pure Land, they will never

## The Sutra Taught by All Buddhas

again regress on the path to buddhahood. Knowing of this unsurpassed benefit for all beings, all the Buddhas dedicate themselves to convincing us to seek birth in the Pure Land. Indeed, this is why all Buddhas teach the Pure Land Dharma door.

## Supreme, Perfect Enlightenment

All of those who have vowed, or are vowing, or will vow to be born in the land of Amitabha Buddha reach the level where they do not retrogress from Supreme, Perfect Enlightenment. They are already born, are now being born, or will be born in that land. Therefore, all good men and women, if they have faith, must make a vow to be born in that land.

The phrase “those who have vowed” refers to those beings who are already born in the Pure Land. “Are vowing” refers to those who are presently making the vow and mindfully chanting the Buddha’s name. They are the ones who are now being born in the Western Pure Land. Finally, those who “will vow” refers to future practitioners. In time, they will also have an opportunity to hear this sutra and will have the ample

good roots, good fortune, and favorable conditions necessary for practice. When, in the future, they make the vow, they too will be born in that land.

Once in the Pure Land, these beings will not retrogress on the path to supreme, perfect enlightenment. This means that beings already there, those who are presently going there, and those who are born there in the future will all never fall back into the six paths.

“If they have faith, must make a vow.” This is the third time in the sutra that Sakyamuni urged us to make the vow to be born in the Western Pure Land. He urged us so many times because belief and vow are crucial. Indeed, Great Master Ouyi said in his commentary on the sutra that being born in the Western Pure Land depends entirely on whether or not one has belief and vow. Having both belief and vow, one will practice and thus definitely be born in the Pure Land. Which of the lands there that one is born in depends on the depth of meditative concentration of one’s buddha-name chanting.

Let’s say that some practitioners do very well in their buddha-name chanting and achieve one-mind undisturbed at the higher level, the level of noumenon. They will be born as bodhisattvas of non-retrogression in the Land of Real Reward.

Others, as described in Amitabha's eighteenth vow, are able to chant the buddha-name ten times at the end of their lives. Or maybe only twice. Or just once. When these beings are born in the Western Pure Land, they will be born in the Land Where Sages and Ordinary Beings Dwell Together. The good fortune and wisdom of those born here will be almost the same as that of the bodhisattvas in the Land of Real Reward. Whereas the bodhisattvas enjoy those benefits thanks to their own practice, the benefits that we will enjoy in the Land Where Sages and Ordinary Beings Dwell Together are due to Amitabha Buddha's help. Essentially, we will enjoy the benefits provided by his good fortune.

It is like that impoverished young man we learned of previously who was invited by his aunt to live with her. He had little good fortune of his own but was able to enjoy the extensive good fortune of his aunt.

When we are able to enjoy Amitabha's good fortune in the Land Where Sages and Ordinary Beings Dwell Together, not only will we continue to chant, we will chant more diligently. One might now wonder what is the need to chant so much? Remember, we do not chant for ourselves alone! The more sincere our chanting, the stronger our meditative concentration will be.

The stronger our meditative concentration, the higher the land in which we will be born. The higher

the land, the sooner our lotus will open. And the sooner our lotus opens, the more quickly we will begin to perfectly fulfill the four great vows of Buddhas and bodhisattvas. These four vows provide the aspiration and the step-by-step progression for those who have the bodhi mind to help all beings end suffering and attain liberation.

The first of the four great vows is “sentient beings are innumerable; I vow to help them all.”

This is the most important of the four great vows. It is the fundamental, underlying vow that inspires us to practice without ceasing. The remaining three vows assist in the fulfillment of this first vow.

“Help them all” encompasses keeping all beings in mind, caring about them, and aiding them. Although we may have made this fundamental vow, we do not yet have the ability to fulfill it. Why not? The vow to help them all covers not only other people and some animals. It also includes all beings throughout the entire nine Dharma realms: the hells, hungry ghosts, animals, humans, asuras, the heavens, sound-hearers, pratyekabuddhas, and bodhisattvas. These realms represent different dimensions in space. But with our limited current abilities, we cannot see or hear the beings in these various dimensions in order to help them. We cannot communicate with them.

## Supreme, Perfect Enlightenment

How can we resolve this problem? By freeing the inherent abilities that are now obstructed by our afflictions. As soon as we end our afflictions, our innate abilities will come forth. With our innate abilities functioning, we will be able to communicate with the beings in the various dimensions. And be able to help them.

Thus, we have the second great vow: "afflictions are inexhaustible; I vow to end them all."

The third great vow is "ways to practice are boundless; I vow to master them all."

To begin to accomplish this vow, we need two kinds of wisdom. One is acquired wisdom, which comes from outside us. Acquired wisdom allows us to understand the capacities of other beings. With this wisdom, upon meeting other beings, we will immediately understand them and know what they need to progress toward awakening. The other is fundamental wisdom, our prajna wisdom that enables us to know the specific teachings to fill that need. With these two wisdoms, we will be like a good doctor, who is qualified to both diagnose the problem and prescribe the right treatment. We will then begin to fulfill the first of the four great vows, "sentient beings are innumerable; I vow to help them all."

The fourth great vow is "enlightenment is unsurpassable; I vow to attain it."

## Supreme, Perfect Enlightenment

By attaining supreme, perfect enlightenment—buddhahood—we will finally be able to help all beings, even equal-enlightenment bodhisattvas. As a bodhisattva, one can help only those beings who are at a level lower than one's own. A bodhisattva is unable to help other bodhisattvas who are at the same level or higher. When one is a Buddha, however, one can universally help all beings.

We now aspire to be born in the Western Pure Land. Our vow to be born there should be based on the four great vows. The first two of these vows, "sentient beings are innumerable; I vow to help them all" and "afflictions are inexhaustible; I vow to end them all," accord with our aversion to our world of Endurance. The latter two of the four vows, "ways to practice are boundless; I vow to master them all" and "enlightenment is unsurpassable; I vow to attain it," accord with joyously seeking to be born in the Pure Land. Therefore, due to aversion to our present situation, we joyously seek birth in the Land of Ultimate Bliss. Such is the incredible inspiration of the four great vows.

## A Most Difficult and Rare Task

Just as I am now extolling the inconceivable virtues of all the Buddhas, all those Buddhas are likewise extolling my inconceivable virtues, with these words: “Sakyamuni Buddha is able to carry out a most difficult and rare task. In the Saha World, the World of Endurance, in an evil world of the Five Corruptions—the corruption of the age, the corruption of views, the corruption of afflictions, the corruption of sentient beings, and the corruption of life—he is able to achieve Supreme, Perfect Enlightenment, and to expound the Pure Land teaching, which all beings in all worlds find hard to believe.”

“All those Buddhas” refers to all the Buddhas in the ten directions, including Amitabha Buddha. The ten direc-

## A Most Difficult and Rare Task

tions include the six directions we have just learned about plus the intermediate directions of the northeast, southeast, southwest, and northwest. “My inconceivable virtues” is a reference to the merit of Sakyamuni Buddha. What is this inconceivable merit? That he was able to achieve supreme, perfect enlightenment, and to expound the Pure Land teaching, which all beings in all worlds find hard to believe.

In his commentary on the sutra, Great Master Ouyi put Sakyamuni Buddha’s inconceivable accomplishment into perspective. “Explaining the gradual teaching to the beings in this evil world of the five corruptions is easy; explaining the immediate teaching is difficult. Explaining the immediate teaching other than the Pure Land teaching to the beings in this evil world of the five corruptions is still easy; explaining horizontal transcending of the immediate Pure Land teaching is particularly difficult. Explaining horizontal transcending, immediate practice, immediate attainment, and wondrous visualization of the Pure Land teaching to the beings in this evil world of the five corruptions is already not easy. But the most difficult of all is explaining this teaching that requires no laborious practice but mindful buddha-name chanting for one to advance directly to the level of non-retrogression—a unique,

wondrous, and most beneficial method that is beyond imagination.”

Gradual refers to the attainment of the level of non-retrogression over a long period of time. This attainment takes a long time because a practitioner has to progress through many stages. Immediate refers to the quick attainment of non-retrogression. Quick, because a practitioner progresses without stages.

Today it is especially difficult to expound the immediate teaching of horizontal transcendence. Why? Because in this Dharma-Ending Age, many people prefer to hear the gradual teaching. For them a stage-by-stage progression would seem logical. After becoming a stream-enterer, one becomes a once-returner, then a non-returner, and then an arhat. This gradual stage-by-stage methodology makes sense to them and is therefore easier to believe.

With the immediate teaching, by mindfully chanting the name of Amitabha Buddha, we will be able to transcend the three realms of desire, form, and formlessness, be born in the Western Pure Land, where there is no retrogression, and achieve buddhahood. But hearing of such an achievement, people very often doubt this teaching. How can someone accomplish buddhahood so quickly by doing something as simple as chanting a Buddha's name? And so they reject this

teaching, thinking that it just sounds too good to be true.

Yet, even in the face of such difficulties, Sakyamuni Buddha was able to propagate this Pure Land immediate teaching. Moreover, he taught it in our “Saha World, the World of Endurance, in an evil world of the Five Corruptions—the corruption of the age, the corruption of views, the corruption of afflictions, the corruption of sentient beings, and the corruption of life.”

As we previously learned, it is the world that is evil, not those who dwell in that world. Given that all beings have buddha-nature, all beings are intrinsically good. But having not yet uncovered their innate wisdom, they mistake wrong for right and right for wrong. Ignorant and deluded, the beings have the misfortune to dwell, not in a Pure Land, but in the evil world of the five corruptions.

The first corruption is the corruption of the age.

Corruption is pollution. Age is time. The corruption of the age means we live in troubled times. Today, the sky, land, and water—everything—is polluted. People are likewise contaminated in mind, body, and spirit. We need, therefore, to be discerning about those whom we interact with, as well as carefully choose the situations that we encounter. By doing so, we will be better able to maintain a pure, unpolluted mind.

## A Most Difficult and Rare Task

To help us accomplish this mind, we can strive to attain the six principles of harmony: harmony in having the same viewpoints, in observing the same precepts, in living together, in speaking without conflict, in experiencing Dharma bliss, and in sharing benefits. Additionally, we should mindfully chant the Buddha's name and wholeheartedly study our selected Pure Land sutra.

The second corruption is the corruption of views.

This corruption tells us that people, with vastly different opinions, hold many erroneous views. One of our most problematic incorrect views, which leads us to commit untold negative karmas, is the belief that the physical body is "I."

The Buddha taught that the body is not "I." Rather, a body is a living organism composed of various systems, not unlike a machine consisting of many connected parts. These systems comprise multiple organs, which are made up of billions of cells, and these, in turn, are made up of countless atoms. The atoms are made up of protons, neutrons, and electrons. We thus begin to see that a body is a combination of many elements. It comes about due to many conditions. And a body changes ceaselessly. It is impermanent. It is illusory. A body is merely a vehicle; it is something that beings have and use. It is not "I."

Another significant corruption of views is dualism. Dualism arises from our wandering thoughts and attachments. Whereas we may be aware of our more obvious wandering thoughts and attachments, we are not aware of the subtle ones. These thoughts and attachments lie deep in our store consciousness. Although buried, they can arise all too easily.

For instance, the moment we judge something to be short in length, we also immediately think of its opposite, long. When we think of far, we juxtapose it with near. Thinking of big, we also think of small. Everything is thought of in dualistic terms. Our most apparent dualistic concept is the differentiation of "you" and "I": "you" as counter to "I," and vice versa, "I" as counter to "you." From such thoughts of the opposites as something different, disagreements will arise, eventually causing conflicts and, in time, war.

Our erroneous understanding of both causes and effects is another major corruption of views. With causes, for example, we may mistake a non-cause for a cause. Consider how most people think about financial gain. In their attempts to acquire it, they devise various ways to make money. But these are not the causes that will result in wealth. Having wealth is a karmic result. How do we get this karmic result? Sakyamuni taught that the cause which will result in having wealth is the

giving of wealth. If we are unwilling to practice such giving and are instead stingy, then we will ultimately fail in our quest for financial gain. Our cause is wrong.

What about the mistaken views of effects? One example is thinking that good fortune is unrelated to wholesome deeds. Or the other extreme: that misfortune is not related to unwholesome deeds. Lacking understanding, we do not realize why things happen as they do.

But the most serious erroneous view of cause and effect is simply not to believe it, not to believe the natural law of causality.

If we want to have good rewards, we must know to cultivate good causes. Good causes bring about good effects. Bad causes bring about bad effects. To think that we can create bad causes and still get good rewards goes against natural law.

The third corruption is the corruption of afflictions.

There are five major kinds of afflictions.

The first major affliction is greed. Unable to let go of selfishness, we are caught up in personal attachments, always craving to have the world conform to our desires and expectations. We have yet to grasp the reality that everything—things, people, ideas, events—in our world called Endurance is impermanent: nothing can be possessed because nothing can be held on

to. As the *Diamond Sutra* says, "all conditioned existences are like a dream, an illusion, a bubble, a shadow."

The second major affliction is anger. When our greed remains unsatisfied, and things do not occur as we desire, we give in to anger. We may yell and strike out. We may quip sarcastically. We may smolder with resentment. The one thing we fail to do is exercise patience. Or even remember that we should. And so, failing to react wisely, once again our anger destroys our peace of mind and that of others close to us.

The third major affliction is ignorance. Functioning from self-interest and personal viewpoints, we are ignorant—unable to tell true from false, good from bad, right from wrong, virtue from evil, or beneficial from harmful. Just as selflessness is the antidote to greed and patience the antidote to anger, innate prajna wisdom is the antidote to ignorance. When we uncover this wisdom, we will naturally and intuitively know what is moral and correct.

The fourth major affliction is arrogance. Not having eradicated our dualistic view of life, we still perceive everything as such. Dualism not only occurs in thinking of self and others, it also permeates our opinions. We become convinced that our views are right and those of others are wrong. As our ideas and opinions become

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firmly entrenched, we descend into arrogance. The antidote for arrogance is humility. Humility is the sincere and honest virtue that arises from the realization that no being is superior to another. Fundamentally, because all beings have buddha-nature, we are all equal.

The fifth major affliction is doubting the sages' teachings. Questioning the truthfulness of the teachings of awakened beings, we think, speak, and act as we always have: selfishly and erroneously. Questioning how the teachings can help us, we stubbornly cling to our mistaken viewpoints and residual habits instead of immersing ourselves in practices that will ensure our progression toward enlightenment.

The five major afflictions of greed, anger, ignorance, arrogance, and doubt about the sage's teachings are extraordinarily tough to eliminate. And yet it is crucial that we do so because these thoughts and mindsets affect both our words and our actions. When our thoughts are selfish and harmful, our speech and actions will likewise be selfish and harmful.

The fourth of the five corruptions is the corruption of sentient beings.

In referring to us, Sakyamuni Buddha often used the word "being." This way of addressing us not only reminds us to awaken, but it also helps us understand

the truth. This body of ours is not real. When various conditions combine, the phenomenon, a body, comes about. When these conditions separate, the phenomenon ceases to exist. Therefore, we cannot take this phenomenon, this body, as real because it is not permanent.

The fifth corruption is the corruption of life.

Due to our negative karmas, our lifespans are decreasing. The escalation in natural and human-made disasters, conflicts, and wars is causing many more people to die young. We are facing increasing toxic environmental and chemical pollution, which are now being shown to result in life-threatening medical conditions. As our children struggle to survive in the world we are creating, it is very likely that our current average lifespan will end up being longer than that of our children.

Fortunately, even in this world of the five corruptions, it is possible for us to utilize the transformative benefits of our Pure Land practice. Through faith, vow, and practice, we can transform evil into perfect goodness. As Great Master Ouyi advised, "Faith and vows and the adornment of the name of Amitabha transform the corruption of the age into an assembly of purity, transform the corruption of views into infinite light, transform the corruption of afflictions into the

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eternal still light, transform the corruption of sentient beings into beings born from lotuses in the Pure Land, and transform the corruption of life into infinite life."<sup>7</sup>

## This Evil World of the Five Corruptions

Know then that in the midst of this evil world of the Five Corruptions, I am able to carry out this difficult task, attain Supreme, Perfect Enlightenment, and expound the Pure Land teaching, which is so hard for beings in all worlds to believe. This is indeed most difficult!

This Dharma door, the Pure Land teaching, is “so hard for beings in all worlds to believe” because it allows us to attain buddhahood by mindfully chanting the buddha-name.

That’s it. From the moment we begin to practice until the moment we are born in the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss, we chant Amitabha Buddha’s name. Incredibly simple. Unimaginably powerful.

This combination of being simple and yet completely effective is a formula that most people find exceed-

## This Evil World of the Five Corruptions

ingly hard to believe. And thus Sakyamuni Buddha tells us that to teach the Pure Land method is indeed most difficult.

## Joyful ly Accepting the Sutra

When Buddha finished preaching this scripture, Shariputra and all the monks, gods, humans, asuras and others who had been listening, having heard what the Buddha said, rejoiced and faithfully accepted it. They all bowed in homage and departed.

This is the final passage in the *Amitabha Sutra*. "Rejoiced" means that as the minds of those in the assembly opened up with understanding, they felt joy, both physically and mentally. Quite frankly, this joy is indescribable. Nothing else comes close to it because it is nothing less than being able to be forever free of the continuous cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. From no other teaching can one find such joy: not from mundane or even from supramundane teachings.

## Joyfully Accepting the Sutra

For example, Sakyamuni said that the teaching found in the *Ten Virtuous Karmas Sutra* can help one end one's suffering in this world. But the teaching found in the *Amitabha Sutra* is more wondrous still. It describes how to rely on one's own efforts, which will invoke the help of Buddhas and bodhisattvas.

Those who mindfully chant the buddha-name will be assisted by the supportive powers of Amitabha Buddha's causal vows and will be protected and kept in mind by all the Buddhas in the ten directions. How can we not rejoice upon hearing these words? With careful observation and sincere contemplation, we will come to see that nothing can compare with this unequalled joy of being assisted, protected, and kept in mind by Amitabha Buddha and all the Buddhas in the ten directions.

In the phrase "faithfully accepted it," "faithfully" signifies that those in the assembly had no doubt in what Sakyamuni Buddha just taught them.

"Accepted it" means they took in the teaching and never forgot it.

They then "bowed in homage." By bowing, all those in the Amitabha assembly expressed their most sincere gratitude. Their bowing demonstrates that when one sincerely understands the teaching, dissolves doubt, develops belief, and makes the vow, then one's bow is an

## Joyfully Accepting the Sutra

expression of profound and heartfelt appreciation. One's body and mind become one. In gratitude, one then unceasingly remembers, upholds, and studies the teachings, and compassionately teaches others through words and behavior.

And so, in like manner, when we feel grateful for this inconceivably wondrous teaching, we too should express our gratitude as fully as possible by upholding and learning the teachings, and compassionately teaching others through words and behavior. From this moment until the moment we attain buddhahood from practicing the Pure Land method, how can we do anything else but gratefully take these teachings to heart and always be mindful of Amitabha!

## Vowing to Be Born in the Western Pure Land

### Amitabha Sutra Spoken by Buddha

In the *Amitabha Sutra*, Sakyamuni Buddha urged us three times to seek birth in the Pure Land and one time to believe.

He first urged us to seek birth with “when sentient beings hear these teachings, they must take a vow to be born in this land.”

Then for a second time, he urged us with “I have seen this benefit, and so I speak these words. If sentient beings hear what I say, they must make a vow to be born in that land.”

And finally, for the third time, “all good men and women, if they have faith, must make a vow to be born in that land.”

## Vowing to Be Born in the Western Pure Land

Additionally, he also urged us to believe by saying, “all of you should faithfully accept what I say and what all the Buddhas have said.”

Why did he exhort us so many times?

Seeing the suffering that all beings in samsara are subject to, Sakyamuni Buddha compassionately strove to do everything possible to teach us how to end our suffering. And he encouraged us to do so as quickly as possible. How? Through the Pure Land Dharma door. Through the incredibly wondrous practice of buddha-name chanting. For when one chants the buddha-name, one accords with Amitabha Buddha. And as Great Master Ouyi said, “When one accords with Amitabha Buddha in a single thought, one is born in that thought. And when one accords with Amitabha Buddha in every thought, one is born in every thought.”

When we finally accomplish this, no obstruction will remain between us and the Land of Ultimate Bliss. Our mind will be in accord with Amitabha Buddha’s mind. Thus, our mind is the mind of Amitabha Buddha.

Our vows are the vows of Amitabha Buddha.

Our practice is the practice of Amitabha Buddha.

Our thoughts are the thoughts of Amitabha Buddha.

## Vowing to Be Born in the Western Pure Land

Think about this: Will you be able to be born in the Pure Land?

Yes, definitely.



## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Ouyi, Great Master, *Mind-Seal of the Buddhas*, trans. J. C. Cleary, Sutra Translation Committee of the United States and Canada, (Taiwan, The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, Second Edition, 1997) p. 38
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 52
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 64
- <sup>4</sup> *Seeker's Glossary of Buddhism*, Sutra Translation Committee of the United States and Canada, (Taiwan, 3rd Edition, 1998) p. 232
- <sup>5</sup> *Mind-seal of the Buddhas*, p. 71
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p. 99
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p. 120

**acquired wisdom.** The wisdom attained from outside of one. As opposed to fundamental wisdom, which is the wisdom that is already within one.

**affliction of dust and sand.** Discrimination.

**afflictions.** Conditions or causes of pain, distress, and suffering that disturb the body and mind. Some examples are selfishness, greed, anger, ignorance, arrogance.

**Amitabha Buddha.** As the monk Dharmakara, he made forty-eight vows to aid all beings. With his vows accomplished, he became Amitabha Buddha and formed the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss, an ideal land for beings to learn and practice in. The purpose of being born there is to be close to Amitabha Buddha and the bodhisattvas, and to complete one's learning and practice there. Once completed, one becomes a Buddha.

***Amitabha Sutra.*** One of the three primary Pure Land sutras spoken by Sakyamuni Buddha, it introduces the profound principles of the Pure Land school in addition to describing some of the physical elements of the Western Pure Land. Sakyamuni further urged people three times to seek birth in the Western Pure Land, to have belief, and to single-mindedly chant the Buddha's name.

**arhat.** A being who by eradicating the affliction of views and affliction of thoughts has attained liberation from the cycle of birth and death.

**asamkhyeya kalpa.** Although a kalpa is a measure of time, this phrase at times expresses the meaning of being uncountable. (Please also see KALPA.)

**asura.** A race of beings who fought the devas for sovereignty over the heavens and lost. Jealous beings, they accumulated much good fortune by being competitive.

**attachments.** Two basic attachments are ego-attachment, in which one clings to the idea of self, and dharmas-attachment, in which one clings to sensuous desires and false views.

**Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva.** Equal-enlightenment bodhisattva in the Western Pure Land. When Amitabha Buddha's lifespan ends and he passes into final nirvana, Avalokitesvara will become the next Buddha in that Pure Land.

**beings of superior goodness.** Such beings in the lowest land, the Land Where Sages and Ordinary Beings Dwell Together, are the practitioners of the ten virtuous karmas. Such beings in the Land of Real Reward are equal-enlightenment bodhisattvas.

**bhiksu, bhiksuni.** (Sanskrit) An ordained Buddhist monk (bhiksu) or nun (bhiksuni).

**bodhi mind.** The aspiration for enlightenment in which the being seeks to benefit both self and others.

**bodhisattva.** Awakened being who has vowed to become a Buddha, seeking enlightenment for self as well as for all sentient beings.

**buddha-land.** A great galaxy, the space in which one Buddha dwells and teaches. The Western Pure Land is a hundred billion buddha-lands to the west of us.

**buddha-name.** Amitabha Buddha of the Pure Land school. The phrase "chanting the buddha-name" refers to chanting his name.

**buddha-nature.** The true, immutable, and eternal nature of all beings. Also called true nature, it is beyond the understanding of ordinary beings because it cannot be understood with the mind or explained with words. Words

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are too limited to describe the truth. There is a limit to one's thinking and imagination. The limit is the store consciousness. The true nature is not the store consciousness, so it is beyond detection. (Also see TRUE NATURE.)

**causal connections.** Causal connections are external factors, and favorable causal connections refer to favorable conditions. Required for birth in the Pure Land, together with abundant good roots and good fortune. (Please also see CONDITIONS.)

**causal vows.** Vows made before one becomes a Buddha.

**compassion.** Affection that is sincere, pure, equitable, and based on wisdom.

**conditions.** The elements that enable one's karmic causes to either grow or flounder. Favorable conditions help in one's learning and cultivation. Such conditions can dissolve afflictions and residual habits; fortify the determination to seek enlightenment; and strengthen one's belief, vow, and practice. Unfavorable conditions often draw out the dormant afflictions and residual habits in one's eighth consciousness.

**consciousness.** The false mind. Consciousness has eight sub-components, each with its respective function or activity. The first to the fifth sub-consciousnesses are the eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body respectively, and individually they see, hear, smell, taste, and touch, in that order. The sixth consciousness, mental awareness, discriminates. The seventh consciousness, the thinking mind, attaches. The eighth consciousness stores the seeds of our past physical, verbal, and mental karmas, and gives rise to wandering thoughts.

**constant mindfulness.** Achieved through chanting the buddha-name, it is the state in which one is continuously aware of Amitabha Buddha. When meditating on the name, one single-mindedly chants the name and is focused on it. With this sole thought of Amitabha, there are no wandering thoughts. But focus will easily be divided when one is working on a task. Even though one is not single-mindedly concentrating on the name as when chanting, one is still continuously thinking of Amitabha. Here as well, wandering thoughts do not arise.

**correct enlightenment.** Beings at this stage no longer have incorrect views such as thinking that one's physical body is oneself. Nor do they have the affliction of thoughts. Arhats are at this stage.

**correct, universal enlightenment.** Beings who have attained correct, universal enlightenment, have eliminated a part of ignorance, seen a part of the true nature, and attained a part of the truth body. Bodhisattvas are at this stage.

**cycle of rebirth.** Refers to when a being is reborn over and over again in the six paths of the hells, hungry ghosts, animals, humans, asuras, and the heavens. Also called samsara, also the six paths.

**desire realm.** Paths of the hells, hungry ghosts, animals, humans, asuras, and the six lowest heavens. Beings in the desire realm undergo all three kinds of suffering: contact with unpleasant things, the deterioration of form, and the passage of time.

**Dharma.** Truth of life and the universe. It is taught by Buddhas. The plural form, dharmas, refers to phenomena, events, things, etc.

**Dharma door.** School or method. One enters Buddhism through a Dharma door.

**Dharmakara.** The monk who made forty-eight vows to create the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss. With his vows fulfilled, he became Amitabha Buddha.

**discrimination.** One of the root causes of a being remaining in samsara. Discrimination occurs when phenomena are mistakenly viewed from the perspective of duality.

**Dixian, Master.** (1858–1932) Forty-third patriarch of the Tiantai school.

**eight consciousnesses.** Sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, mental awareness, thinking mind, and store consciousness.

**eight types of suffering.** Birth; aging; illness; death; separation from loved ones; association with those we dislike; unfulfilled desires; and suffering due to the five aggregates of form, feeling, conception, impulse, and consciousness.

**eight winds.** Four pairs of influences that hinder one's practice: gain and loss, praise and blame, fame and disgrace, and happiness and suffering.

**eightfold path.** Right view, thought, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration.

**eighty secondary physical characteristics.** Minor physical characteristics of a Buddha. They include a face like a clear full moon, fragrance emitting from the pores and mouth, deportment as majestic as that of a lion, and a graceful and steady gait.

**enjoyment body.** A Buddha's celestial body. It resides in a Pure Land and never appears to ordinary people. The

enjoyment body has a beginning but is without an end. Once attained, this body will never again be mired in delusion. The enjoyment body is a wisdom body, a body of innate prajna wisdom.

**equal-enlightenment bodhisattvas.** Bodhisattvas who are just one level below that of Buddhas.

**evil.** That which obstructs beings and holds them back from acting from their buddha-nature, their true nature. This nature is intrinsically good.

**extraordinary powers.** Abilities that all beings possess, but which lie dormant in those who are not yet awakened. They include the ability to be anywhere at will, to see all forms, to hear all sounds, to know the thoughts of others, and to accomplish something by willing it.

**field of good fortune.** Those making offerings to deserving beings are planting seeds of good fortune. Just like a well-planted field will yield good harvests, a field of good fortune will yield good karmic results.

**fifty-one levels of bodhisattvas.** The first forty levels comprise ten levels of faith, ten levels of abiding, ten levels of practice, and ten levels of dedication. The next eleven levels are mahasattva levels. Here great bodhisattvas are at any of the ten levels of ground or at the level of equal enlightenment.

**five aggregates.** Form, feeling, conception, impulse, and consciousness.

**five corruptions.** Age, views, afflictions, sentient beings, and life.

**five desires.** Wealth, sex, fame, food, and sleep.

**five powers.** Belief, diligence, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom.

**five precepts.** No killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, false speech, and intoxicants.

**five roots.** Belief, diligence, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom.

**form realm.** Consists of eighteen heavens. Beings in these heavens have achieved a certain degree of meditative concentration and have severed the desires for wealth, sex, fame, food, and sleep. But due to having form, they still undergo birth, old age, sickness, and death. (Please also see HEAVENS and THREE REALMS.)

**formless realm.** Consists of the four highest heavens. Beings in these heavens have achieved deep meditative concentration. With lifetimes that can last as long as 80,000 eons, they are the most advanced beings in samsara. (Please also see HEAVENS.)

**four attributes of nirvana.** Permanence, joy, true self, and purity.

**four bases of supranormal abilities.** Strong aspiration, diligence, mindfulness, and inquiry.

**four foundations of mindfulness.** Mindfulness of the body as impure, of feelings as suffering, of the mind as impermanent, and of all things as dependent and without self-nature.

**four great vows.** (1) Sentient beings are innumerable; I vow to help them all. (2) Afflictions are inexhaustible; I vow to end them all. (3) Ways to practice are boundless; I vow to master them all. (4) Enlightenment is unsurpassable; I vow to attain it.

**four lands in Western Pure Land.** The Land Where Sages and Ordinary Beings Dwell Together, The Land of Expedient Liberation, The Land of Real Reward,

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- and The Land of Eternally Quiescent Light. (Also see individual entries.)
- four precious jewels.** Gold, silver, lapis lazuli, and crystal. These gems represent the four attributes of nirvana, which are permanence, joy, true self, and purity, respectively.
- four right efforts.** Preventing new evil from arising, ending existing evil, generating new virtues, and enhancing existing virtues.
- fundamental wisdom.** Innate prajna wisdom, which frees people from afflictions and ignorance. Achieved by delving deeply into one method and immersing oneself in that method for a long time.
- good fortune.** All the goodness in one's life, which may manifest as wealth, happiness, health, family, prosperity, social position. For a Pure Land practitioner, good fortune is making the vow to be born in the Western Pure Land, mindfully chanting the buddha-name, and practicing the teachings.
- good men and good women.** In the Pure Land school, the standard for being a good man or good woman is to be mindful of Amitabha Buddha. In other schools, the standard is to fulfill the ten virtuous karmas.
- good roots.** Virtuous deeds accumulated over numerous lifetimes. They are called roots because they form the basis for future virtues. Properly cultivated, the roots will grow, mature, and bear fruit. For Pure Land practitioners, having good roots is having firm belief and firm vow.
- great perfect mirror wisdom.** The wisdom that enables one to be clear about all causes and effects. Clarity without the slightest confusion.

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**heavens.** The path of heavens comprises twenty-eight levels: six heavens in the desire realm, eighteen heavens in the form realm, and four heavens in the formless realm.

**Huineng, Master.** (638–713) Sixth Patriarch of the Zen school.

**ignorance.** The absence of wisdom. Here, a person is indecisive and in a state of great confusion, unable to differentiate good from bad, right from wrong, virtuous from evil, beneficial from harmful, and truth from falsehood.

**impartiality.** Acting toward all phenomena without discriminatory thoughts, attachments, or expectations.

***Infinite Life Sutra.*** One of the three primary Western Pure Land sutras, it provides a detailed description of that land. It tells of the time when Amitabha Buddha was still the monk Dharmakara and of the forty-eight vows Dharmakara made relating to the formation of the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss. The sutra also presents the principle of cause and effect, explaining how both moral behavior and chanting the name of Amitabha Buddha will result in being born in the Western Pure Land.

**kalpa.** Explained as the time in which a mountain that measures 16x16x16 miles would wear away if it was rubbed by a small cloth once every 100 years. An asamkhyeya kalpa is often said to refer to a number that is roughly equal to 10 to the 51st power or even 10 to the 63rd power. Also called an eon.

**karma.** Deed leading to future consequences, both pleasant and dire. Karma is often used to refer to causality, to the irrefutable law of cause and effect.

**Land of Eternally Quiescent Light.** Highest of the four lands in the Western Pure Land. It is the land where Buddhas dwell.

**Land of Expedient Liberation.** Second lowest of the four lands in the Western Pure Land. Accomplished through a lower level of one-mind undisturbed. Where arhats, pratyekabuddhas, and lower-level bodhisattvas dwell.

**Land of Real Reward.** Second highest of the four lands in the Pure Land. Accomplished through a higher level of one-mind undisturbed. Where higher-level bodhisattvas dwell.

**Land Where Sages and Ordinary Beings Dwell Together.** Lowest of the four lands in the Western Pure Land. Accomplished through constant mindfulness of Amitabha Buddha. Constant mindfulness enables one to use the buddha-name to control afflictions, residual habits, and wandering thoughts.

**mahasattvas.** Great bodhisattvas who are at any of the ten levels of ground or at the level of equal enlightenment. (Please also see FIFTY-ONE LEVELS OF BODHISATTVAS.)

**Mahasthamaprapta Bodhisattva.** Equal-enlightenment bodhisattva in the Western Pure Land. He will become the third Buddha in the Western Pure Land, after Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva, who will be the second Bud-

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dha there. Amitabha Buddha is the first Buddha there and is still teaching.

**Mahayana.** The bodhisattva path of both attaining enlightenment for oneself as well as helping all sentient beings attain enlightenment.

**Maitreya.** Equal-enlightenment bodhisattva, who in 5,670 million years will become the next Buddha in this buddha-land.

**manifestation body.** A Buddha's body that is incarnated by the truth body and is visible to ordinary beings. The appearance of a Buddha's manifestation body varies in accordance with the thoughts of the beings it appears to. The manifestation body, therefore, has countless different appearances, not just one. Additionally, one truth body can have many manifestation bodies.

**Mara.** Often portrayed as a physical demon, Mara stands for our afflictions, our personal demons.

**meditative concentration.** State in which one's mind is clear and does not give rise to wandering thoughts, discriminations, or attachments when one's sense organs come into contact with the environment.

**merits and virtues.** Merits are accumulated by selflessly doing good deeds without wandering and discriminatory thoughts, or attachments. Merits are also accumulated by correcting our erroneous thoughts and behavior. Virtues arise from deep concentration and wisdom.

**non-retrogression.** The level at which practitioners no longer fall back in their practice. Non-retrogression comprises three stages: no falling back from one's level, no falling back from one's practice, and no falling back from one's mindfulness. Those who have perfectly at-

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tained non-retrogression are bodhisattvas of the seventh ground and above.

**one-mind undisturbed.** A being who achieves one-mind undisturbed at the level of phenomena has eradicated the affliction of views and thoughts. One who achieves one-mind undisturbed at the level of inner truth (noumenon) has eradicated both the affliction of views and thoughts, and the affliction of dust and sand.

**Ouyi, Great Master.** (1599–1655) Tiantai master who was later recognized as the ninth patriarch of the Pure Land school. He wrote the commentary titled *Essentials of the Amitabha Sutra*.

**parinirvana.** The final passage of a Buddha into final nirvana.

**Polar Mountain.** Also called Mt. Sumeru. In Buddhist cosmology, it is at the center of the universe.

**prajna wisdom.** Intuitive wisdom, which is innate in the true nature.

**pratyekabuddha.** One who has attained enlightenment through his own efforts. He does not exert himself to teach others.

**purity.** A mind with no attachments.

**residual karmas.** Karmas stored in the store consciousness. They have not yet met the conditions to have their resultant effects come about.

**Sakyamuni Buddha.** The historical Buddha of this world.

**samsara.** The continuous cycle of birth, death, and re-birth. Also known as the six paths.

- sangha.** Buddhist community of four or more practitioners, monastic or lay, who practice together.
- scattered and chaotic mind.** A mind in which a practitioner's thoughts constantly wander, even when chanting.
- scattered mind.** Not yet able to concentrate solely on the buddha-name, the practitioner is sometimes mindful of Amitabha Buddha and at other times has wandering thoughts. While a scattered mind is not the goal, with this mind the person has begun to use the buddha-name to eliminate wandering thoughts.
- seven factors of enlightenment.** Mindfulness, correct choice of teaching, diligence, joy, ease, concentration, and equanimity.
- Shakra.** King of the trayastrimsa heaven, the second lowest heaven in the desire realm.
- sincerity.** A mind without wandering thoughts, discriminations, and attachments. With sincerity there is no doubt, no intermingling, and no interruption.
- six directions.** North, south, east, west, the nadir, and the zenith.
- six paramitas.** Giving, precept observation, patience, diligence, meditative concentration, and prajna wisdom.
- six paths.** Consists of the hells, hungry ghosts, animals, humans, asuras, and the heavens.
- six principles of harmony.** Harmony in having the same viewpoints, observing the same precepts, living together, speaking without conflict, experiencing Dharma bliss, and sharing benefits.
- sound-hearer.** Theravada Buddhism practitioner who seeks to attain arhatship.
- store consciousness.** The consciousness that stores all of a being's past karmas, which have yet to bear fruit.

- stream-enterer.** First of the four stages of enlightenment in Theravada Buddhism. A stream-enterer has a maximum of seven more rebirths in samsara, but none of these will be in the three paths of the hells, hungry ghosts, or animals.
- supreme, perfect enlightenment.** The highest stage of enlightenment. Buddhas are at this stage, having realized the untroubled and nondiscriminatory mind, and having attained the perfect wisdom that comprehends all truths.
- sutra.** Teachings of the Buddha, initially passed down verbally and later written down. Can also be teachings of enlightened beings; for example, Master Huineng's *Platform Sutra*.
- ten directions.** The six directions plus the intermediate directions of the northeast, southeast, southwest, and northwest. Used as a symbol to indicate all directions.
- ten evil karmas.** Killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, false speech, divisive speech, harsh speech, enticing speech, greed, anger, and ignorance.
- ten great vows.** Respect all Buddhas, praise Tathagata, make offerings extensively, repent karmic obstacles, rejoice at others' meritorious deeds, request the turning of the Dharma wheel, request the Buddha to remain in this world, constantly follow the Buddha's teachings, accommodate all sentient beings, and dedicate all merits universally.
- ten virtuous karmas.** No killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, false speech, divisive speech, harsh speech, enticing speech, greed, anger, and ignorance.
- Theravada.** One of the two major forms of Buddhism. Practitioners seek to attain arhatship.

**thirty-seven limbs of enlightenment.** The four foundations of mindfulness, the four right efforts, the four bases of supranormal abilities, the five roots, the five powers, the seven factors of enlightenment, and the eightfold path.

**thirty-two major marks.** Major physical characteristics of a Buddha, including a golden complexion, light radiating from between the eyebrows, a circle of light, and an excellent voice.

**three ages.** The first age is the Dharma Perfect Age, during which a practitioner could succeed in cultivation by observing the precepts. The second is the Dharma Semblance Age, during which a practitioner could succeed in cultivation by practicing meditative concentration. The third age, which is the current age, is the Dharma-Ending Age, during which a practitioner will be able to succeed in cultivation by learning and practicing the Pure Land method.

**three bodies of a Buddha.** The truth body, enjoyment body, and manifestation body. The truth body is that which creates; the enjoyment body and the manifestation body are that which are created. (See individual entries.)

**three kinds of suffering.** Suffering arising from contact with unpleasant things, from the deterioration of form, and from the passage of time.

**three realms.** The desire realm, which comprises the hells through asuras paths and six lowest heavens; the form realm, which comprises eighteen mid-level heavens; and the formless realm, which comprises the four highest heavens. (Please also see individual realms.)

**three requisites.** Belief, vow, and practice. Required for birth in the Western Pure Land.

**true nature.** Original, true self that all beings have but is currently covered by deluded thoughts and evil karma. In essence, since all beings have the same true nature that Buddhas have, all are equal to the Buddhas. Once delusion is eliminated, one will uncover this true nature and attain supreme, perfect enlightenment.

**truth body.** A Buddha's true body, the ultimate body—formless, transcendental, inconceivable. It is the true self, which neither arises nor ceases and has neither beginning nor end.

***Visualization Sutra.*** One of the three primary Pure Land sutras, it contains sixteen meditations for attaining birth in the Western Pure Land.

**wandering thoughts.** Arise when one's true nature is mired in delusion. To have no wandering thoughts is to have absolute proper and virtuous thoughts. It is not a mind that is empty of all thoughts.

**water of eight virtues.** Clarity and purity, coolness, sweetness, lightness and softness, softening, peaceful, nourishing, and nurturing.

**Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss.** The Pure Land formed by Amitabha Buddha through the fulfillment of his great vows. It is an ideal land in which to learn and practice.

**wisdom.** The ability to truly differentiate between true and false, proper and deviated, right and wrong, and beneficial and harmful, while still interacting with phenomena appropriately.

**wisdom of completion of actions.** With this wisdom, one's actions can benefit oneself as well as others.

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**wisdom of equality in nature.** Attained when attachments are eliminated.

**wisdom of wondrous observation.** With wondrous observation, one understands all that is perceived, with no wandering thoughts, discriminations, and attachments. It is like a mirror that reflects clearly.

**Yinguang, Great Master.** (1861–1940) Thirteenth patriarch of the Pure Land school.



## With Gratitude

I wish to thank my Teacher, Venerable Master Chin Kung, for giving his insightful talks on the *Amitabha Sutra* in 2003. Being at another center in Australia, when I learned that he was starting the lecture series at the Pure Land Learning College Association in Toowoomba, I couldn't get back there fast enough to hear the translation.

I also wish to express my sincere appreciation to J. C. Cleary for his translation of the *Amitabha Sutra* and Great Master Ouyi's commentary on the sutra titled *Mind-Seal of the Buddhas*, as well as to Lee Tsu-ku for his permission to use the sutra translation.

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While others have advised on this book, all mistakes are my own.

Venerable Wuling

May the merits and virtues  
accrued from this work  
adorn the Buddha's pure land,  
repay the four kinds of kindness above,  
and relieve the sufferings of those  
in the three paths below.

May all those  
who see and hear of this  
bring forth the heart  
of understanding and compassion,  
and at the end of this life,  
be born together  
in the Land of Ultimate Bliss.

The *Amitabha Sutra* is one of the three primary teachings by the Buddha on the Pure Land school of Mahayana Buddhism. This sutra can initially seem elementary and straightforward as one reads of the Western Pure Land's marvelous adornments including golden sand, jeweled trees, birds that sing the teachings, and flowers that float down from the sky.

Closer study, however, will show that the sutra is incredibly profuse with symbolic representations and profound teachings. As a consequence, commentaries on it have long proved invaluable to help readers and practitioners delve more deeply into the sutra. Basing *Pure Mind, Compassionate Heart* on past commentaries of Pure Land patriarchs and masters, Venerable Wuling, a Pure Land Buddhist nun, offers this book as a brief introduction to this core Pure Land teaching, the *Amitabha Sutra*.

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