

# Pure Land Perspectives on 'Humanist Buddhism'

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## ***Introductory Note***

An abbreviated version of this essay, titled “The Role of the Pure Land Perspective on Humanist Buddhism in the Building of a Harmonious World,” was awarded a special prize at the inaugural World Buddhist Forum of 2006. The same year, it was published in the 4<sup>th</sup> issue of *Sound of the Dharma*, the publication of the Buddhist Association of China, as a recommended article of distinction.

Responding to the wishes of Pure Land practitioners, we now publish this version as a stand-alone title. May our fellow practitioners recite Amitabha Buddha’s name exclusively and perform positive deeds. May they propagate Pure Land teachings, practice Humanist Buddhism and promote social harmony.

***The Editors***

# **1. The Origins of Humanist Buddhism**

## **a) Buddhism of Human Life**

Buddhism has always attached much importance to everyday life, as experienced by human beings. In modern times, however, Buddhism seemed to some people to have little to do with daily life, concerning itself instead with deliverance of the dead and of spirits. This led to much misunderstanding and criticism of Buddhism in our society.

As a result Master Taixu (1890-1947) advocated a “Buddhism of Human Life” (*rensheng fojiao*), which was meant to counter the “Buddhism of the dead and of spirits.” Its purpose was to foster lives grounded in reason and ethics, encouraging people to cultivate the Bodhisattva path while in the human realm, with Buddhahood as the ultimate goal. This is the Buddhism of Human Life.

## **b) Humanist Buddhism**

The thinking behind Buddhism of Human Life was like a breath of fresh air, sweeping away shortcomings accumulated over time. It resonated broadly within knowledgeable Buddhist circles. Passed on and developed, it has evolved into the doctrine of “Humanist Buddhism” (*renjian fojiao*) advocated by Buddhists on both sides of the Taiwan Strait.

The similarities of “Buddhism of Human Life” and “Humanist Buddhism” are greater than the differences between them. The latter term is more in keeping with the times. “Humanist” means of the human world, within the human community, among human beings. Compared with “Human Life,” it not only infers a special quality of being humanity-centric, but highlights the harmony and interconnectedness in human relationships. It thus emphasizes collective interests, common progress and mutual prosperity.

In today’s world, interaction is increasing among individuals, peoples and countries, making them ever more connected but also triggering many disputes and conflicts. That is why the values of Humanist Buddhism are particularly relevant, and in practical ways.

The Buddhism of Human Life is sometimes seen as concerning itself only with life and not death, focused merely on the present and neglecting the eternal future. This derisive misunderstanding goes against the basic intention of the Buddhism of Human Life.

Today, the term Humanist Buddhism is inclusive and accommodative. From an individual's experience of birth, aging, sickness and death, of joy and sorrow, union and separation, to the cooperative exchanges and the disputes and conflicts among groups, races, regions and countries – all are of concern to Humanist Buddhism. So is the collective welfare necessary for humanity's progress, as well as the common problems arising from development. With perspectives rooted in the Dharma, Humanist Buddhism provides guidance on all matters relating to an individual, between individuals, among humankind, and between people and the world they inhabit.

Indeed, Humanist Buddhism is the answer to how Buddhism should develop in the present age. It shows how Buddhism's propositions, in principle and in practice, always embody a specific era.

Humanist Buddhism provides a meaningful direction not only for the present, but for the future as well. For the so-called human world is a notion that evolves over time; it is not restricted to a single era. So long as there are human beings on this planet, they collectively constitute the human world. Therefore Humanist Buddhism necessarily seeks to advance with the times.

## **2. The Meaning of Humanist Buddhism**

### **a) Explaining the Term**

As the name implies, Humanist Buddhism has a two-fold nature: It is “of the human world” and “of Buddhism.”

To be of the human world means to be centered on human beings, never straying from their domain. Humanist Buddhism exists and develops within the human realm. It serves, teaches and delivers, and provides benefits in the world of humans. It is not empty, mystical talk about deities, demons and ghosts.

To be “Buddhistic” means that while it is of the human world, it does not stop there. It has Buddhism’s liberation and attainment of Buddhahood as its ultimate goals. In other words, while being of the world, it has the extra-worldliness that is a special characteristic of Buddhism. It is not a worldly philosophy that panders to popular tastes while neglecting Buddhism’s essence of supramundane deliverance.

Moreover, Humanist Buddhism refers to a Buddhism that humankind is capable of practicing – one everyone can accomplish, allowing each person to achieve liberation and gain Buddhahood. If it can only be practiced by advanced Bodhisattvas, it should be called Buddhism of the Bodhisattva world, or “Bodhisattva Buddhism.” If only senior Arhats can practice it, it would be called “Arhat Buddhism.”

In the *Lotus Sutra*, Bodhisattva Medicine King made preparations for twelve hundred years and set himself afire as an offering to the Buddha of his world. And the *Vimalakirti Sutra* tells of Householder Vimalakirti, whose “ten-foot room accommodated the whole cosmos” and whose “purity of mind cleansed the entire nation.” Those are Buddhist teachings and practices, but they can only inspire sentient beings of the human realm; the latter are incapable of practicing them. Naturally, such practices cannot be considered a part of Humanist Buddhism.

Buddhism is not only of the human world. When we speak of Humanist Buddhism today, it means the personal, appropriate and practical study and practice of the Dharma from a human standpoint.

### **b) Dialectical Relationships**

The human world is mundane, while Buddhism is supramundane. Humanist Buddhism represents a dialectical union of the mundane and the supramundane. With an extra-worldly attitude, we perform worldly tasks. Without abandoning worldly deeds, we accomplish extra-worldly liberation.

The human realm is the context for teaching and transformation, while Buddhism is the creed that can teach and transform. Humanist Buddhism is the dialectical union of practice and principle. If something accords with the principles of Buddhism but not with the circumstances of the human world, it is not Humanist Buddhism. Nor is anything that resonates with worldly human sentiments, but fails to do so with the truths of Buddhism.

The human realm is mundane and secular; Buddhism is sacred. Humanist Buddhism is a dialectical unification of the temporal with the holy.

The world is the form and Buddhism the substance. Humanist Buddhism is the dialectical amalgamation of form and substance.

The human world is the starting point and Buddhism the destination. Humanist Buddhism is the dialectical union of the beginning and the end.

### **c) Illustrative Examples**

For example, good deeds of charity and relief are unquestionably of the human world. Some people think that by performing charitable, relief works in society, Buddhist organizations, monasteries and individuals are practicing Humanist Buddhism. That's not necessarily so.

We practice Humanist Buddhism only when we do worldly good deeds with *bodhicitta* (an aspiration to Buddhahood to save other beings), dedicate the merit towards supreme enlightenment, make progress gradually and finally gain Buddhahood – or when we resolve to be reborn in the Pure Land and dedicate merit towards a speedy, non-retrogressive rebirth there.

If *bodhicitta* or the aspiration to rebirth are lacking and the motivation is solely ordinary sympathy or goodwill, even if a deed is performed by monastics or involves the donation of a fortune to charity, it is but a mundane good work. It has nothing to do with Buddhism, and cannot be considered the practice of Humanist Buddhism. Says the

*Avatamsaka Sutra: “If bodhicitta is absent, even the practice of good is the work of Mara [evil, confusion].”*

### ***3. The Special Characteristics of Humanist Buddhism In the Pure Land School***

#### **a) Special Buddhist Characteristics of the Pure Land School**

“Pure Land school” in this document refers to the teachings relating to Amitabha Buddha’s Pure Land. It is the school that advocates reliance on the power of Amitabha’s Fundamental Vow to gain rebirth in the Western Land of Bliss.

“Special Buddhist characteristics” means the attributes that distinguish Buddhism. What has them is Buddhism, while what hasn’t, is not. At an immediate level, the aim is liberation from the cycle of rebirth. At the ultimate level, it is to attain Buddhahood.

The goal of the Pure Land school is rebirth in the Pure Land of Amitabha Buddha. Once reborn, our karmic bonds to the Three Domains are forever severed and we gain Buddhahood as a matter of course. Therefore the special Buddhist characteristics of the school is beyond doubt. Moreover, among all the Buddha’s teachings (and the eight major Mahayana schools of China), it is no exaggeration to say that Pure Land is the school with the most evident Buddhist attributes. It is also the most completely preserved and least prone to misinterpretation.

Among the other schools, the Chan teaches that “our self-nature is pure; we were originally Buddhas.” The *Avatamsaka Sutra* says, “**Mind, Buddha and sentient being – they are the same**” (in nature). And the *Vimalakirti Sutra* notes that “**when the mind is pure, so is the whole land.**” Such teachings are often misinterpreted by the shallow-minded as: There is no need to practice towards self-betterment, or to seek liberation, Buddhahood or rebirth in the Pure Land. That is a grave error, completely lacking the spirit of Buddhism.

#### **b) Special Humanist Characteristics of the Pure Land School**

These consist of three aspects. They are: characteristics needed in the human world, characteristics practicable there, and characteristics capable of bringing complete and perfect benefits to humans.

##### ***i) The Pure Land school is needed in the human realm***

“Needed in the human realm” means something that every person requires. It is needed in all eras during which there are human beings.

A human lifetime is full of hustle and bustle; all day long, we busy ourselves with this and that. We have a thousand cares, ten thousand tasks to perform. What is a person’s basic wish? What does he need? What does she seek? In plain language: to leave suffering behind and obtain happiness! That is the instinctive pursuit of human beings. It is so with everyone. There is no one who does not aspire to happiness and joy, no one who doesn’t want to avoid misfortune and pain.

The Pure Land school advocates seeking rebirth in the Land of Bliss. The *Infinite Life Sutra*, one of the Three Pure Land Sutras, has this to say about the name of that realm and the reasons for wanting rebirth there:

***Not even the names of the suffering in the Three Wretched Realms are heard there, only the spontaneous sounds of happiness. That is why it is called the Land of Peace and Joy.***

The sutra also says:

***It is devoid of distinctions and beyond all boundaries. You should each strive diligently to attain it, rising above the worldly realms and achieving rebirth in the Land of Peace and Joy. By horizontally transcending the Five Unfortunate Realms, they will naturally be closed off.***

The *Amitabha Sutra* says:

***The sentient beings in his [Amitabha Buddha’s] realm are free from all suffering and experience only manifold joys. That is why it is called the Land of Bliss.***

The *Contemplation of Infinite Life Sutra* says:

***I should seek rebirth where there are no worries or vexations. I take no delight in Jambudvipa, for it is a turbid and unwholesome world.***

The *Commentary on the Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land* notes:

**If someone hears of the purity, peace and joy of his [Amitabha's] land and develops an aspiration to be born there, this person too will gain rebirth, immediately attaining the karma of assurance. Thus the very name of this land is a Dharma activity. How inconceivable!**

The Land of Bliss is also known as the Land of Peace and Joy. If one wishes to be reborn there after learning of the happiness there, that is sufficient for rebirth. From the name "Land of Bliss," we can see how deeply concerned is the Pure Land school with the most fundamental of human aspirations. Such a focus transcends race, nation, social status, ideology and even religion. It is something all people need. It was so in ancient times, is so now, and will be so in the future.

Human beings instinctively seek happiness and joy. This is the first humanist characteristic of the Pure Land school.

***ii) The Pure Land teachings can be practiced in the human realm***

If something is practicable, in terms of individuals, it means that all beings in the human world can practice it. In the context of eras, it can be practiced during all time periods when there are people.

If something is needed by humans but ultimately cannot be practiced in the human world, it does not possess humanist characteristics.

For example, people need freedom of travel and transportation. In the celestial realms, deities have special powers enabling them to go hither and thither at will. But because this is impossible in the human world, such powers do not have humanist characteristics. Flying in a plane, however, is a kind of transportation freedom that does have such attributes.

There are countless ways to practice in the Pure Land school. Broadly speaking, they can be divided into "common" and "unique" methods.

Common methods: So long as practitioners dedicate the resulting merit towards rebirth in the Pure Land, all wholesome actions, mundane and extra-worldly, at once become Pure Land practices. The clearest pointer is found in the *Contemplation of*

*Infinite Life Sutra*. It refers to the practice of the meditative and non-meditative virtues<sup>1</sup> with a **“sincere mind, deep mind and mind of merit-dedication towards rebirth”** in the Land of Bliss. That encompasses all worldly and supramundane acts of virtue, and turns them into Pure Land practices.

Unique methods: The Pure Land school has a special, unique practice – exclusive recitation of the name, *Namo Amitabha Buddha*. As the *Infinite Life Sutra* says, we should **“consistently and exclusively recite the name of the Buddha of Infinite Life.”** Advises the *Contemplation Sutra*, **“Recite the name of the Buddha of Infinite Life.”** Says the *Amitabha Sutra*, those who **“hear of Amitabha Buddha”** should **“hold fast to his name.”**

In other words, Pure Land can be practiced as long as the wholesome, extra-worldly teachings of Buddhism – “resolving to achieve *bodhicitta*, reading and reciting Mahayana scriptures,” etc. – exist in the human realm. That’s because when we dedicate the merit from these supramundane virtues towards rebirth, they immediately become Pure Land practices. Even if Buddhism’s extra-worldly virtues have disappeared from the human domain and there remain only mundane virtues – “being filial towards parents, respecting and serving teachers and elders,” etc. – Pure Land can still be practiced. The reason: Dedication of these worldly virtues towards rebirth transforms them into Pure Land practices.

Even if it became impossible to undertake both Buddhist and worldly acts of virtue, the Pure and teachings can still be practiced. That’s because anyone can recite Amitabha’s name – anytime, anywhere and under any circumstances. In the *Contemplation Sutra*, we come upon someone who has committed the Five Gravest Karmic Transgressions and Ten Evil Actions. At the point of death, this person has a vision of the hell realms and has no time to perform any good deeds, worldly or supramundane. Even such a person, by reciting Amitabha Buddha’s name one to ten times, is reborn splendidly in the Land of Bliss. The *Infinite Life Sutra* refers to the Age of

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<sup>1</sup> Virtues cultivated through meditative and non-meditative practices, respectively. All virtues, worldly and Dharma-related, belong to one category or the other. In the “Section on the Underlying Meaning” of his *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra*, Master Shandao says, **“‘Meditative’ means to still anxiety and concentrate the mind. ‘Non-meditative’ means to reject evil and nurture good. One should dedicate these two practices in aspiring to rebirth”** in the Pure Land.

Dharma Extinction 10,000 years hence, when people are evil to the extreme and neither worldly nor extra-worldly virtues exist. Even then, one can be reborn, as one wishes, in the Pure Land.

Why is this? The reason lies with Amitabha Buddha, master of the Land of Bliss. As Bodhisattva Dharmakara in the causal ground, he achieved a profound understanding of the nature of the Dharma and of sentient beings. Forsaking the difficult for the easy and the inferior for the superior, he undertook his Great Vow: to encompass all virtues in his exalted six-character name, and enable all foolish, ordinary beings in the World of Five Turbidities who recite it to gain rebirth in his Pure Land.

Among the innumerable schools of Buddhism, is there another one that can so broadly, perpetually exist in the human realm, transforming and benefitting humankind?

Some schools can be practiced by the saintly or the wise, but not by the ordinary or the foolish. Others were practicable in ancient times, but not in the modern era. Their humanist nature is thus limited.

The humanity-centered character of the Pure Land school, however, is without limits. The vows of Amitabha Buddha are aimed precisely at the ordinary and the foolish. This is the second humanist characteristic of the Pure Land school.

### ***iii) The Pure Land teachings can bring complete and perfect benefits to humans***

Because of people's inherent flaws, there is no guarantee that human behavior will be rational and beneficial. On the contrary, it is often full of irrational and harmful elements.

Consider the basic human desire to avoid suffering and seek happiness. It is the root of progress in human civilization, as well as the source of much darkness and evil. That's because there is no proper understanding of suffering and happiness, of how to evade the former and attain the latter. Effective ways to do so are lacking.

In seeking happiness for ourselves, our families or our nations, we may bring harm to others, their families or their countries. Or we may pursue short-term satisfactions, at the expense of long-term happiness. We observe in the human world all sorts of inequalities, crimes, crises and conflicts. To guide people towards proper understanding and to regulate their behavior requires much political, legal, ethical and religious effort.

Buddhism's Pure Land school has long highlighted this point, in a clear and comprehensive manner. It has also provided a practicable corrective. Says the *Amitabha Sutra*:

***That Buddha's light is boundless, illuminating the lands of the ten directions without obstruction. This is why he is called Amitabha. That Buddha's lifespan, as well as those of the people in his land, are innumerable, boundless asamkhyeyakalpas. That is why his name is Amitabha.***

***Beings who hear this teaching should resolve and aspire to be reborn in that land.***

***[If a good man or woman] hears of Amitabha Buddha and holds fast to his name ... [this person] will at once gain rebirth in Amitabha's Land of Bliss.***

An absolute, thorough-going realm of peace and joy, as well as the means to reach it, is contained in the name of Amitabha Buddha, which Pure Land practitioners constantly recite.

All human suffering and misfortune stem from ignorance and the cycle of rebirth. They are manifested in impermanence and continual reincarnation. For humankind, the ultimate good fortune and happiness is to dispel ignorance – with infinite light – and forever transcend the rebirth cycle, attaining infinite life. The path to such a status lies in entrusting our lives to Amitabha (literal meaning: “infinite light” and “infinite life”), to recite the name of this Buddha.

The Pure Land teachings are not only needed in the human world and practicable there. They also ensure that such needs and practices are compatible with the truth, and bring genuine, perfect and absolute benefits to self and others, nations and peoples, at all times, in this life and forevermore. They are entirely devoid of conflicts of interest between self and others, between the present and the future.

Now we will discuss how the Pure Land school benefits the human world at three levels: the individual, the nation and the world.

### ***i) How Pure Land teachings benefit ourselves***

The innumerable benefits can be grouped under two categories: those of our present and future lives.

There are eleven benefits in the present life:

**1. Amitabha positions himself above our heads; 2. Protected by the Buddha's light; 3. Supported by all the Buddhas; 4. Accompanied by Bodhisattvas; 5. Safeguarded by spirits; 6. Elimination of bad karma; 7. Accumulation of good fortune and wisdom; 8. Avoidance of disaster; 9. Longevity and health; 10. A good death; 11. Attainment of the karma of assurance**

There are four benefits in the future life:

**1. End of the reincarnation cycle; 2. Rebirth in the Pure Land; 3. Attainment of Buddhahood; 4. Comprehensive deliverance of sentient beings**

The 15 kinds of benefit above were earnestly described by Shakyamuni Buddha. They are all true, with cases witnessed throughout the ages. I have only mentioned them in passing. Some people think that the Amitabha-recitation of the Pure Land school brings no benefits in our present lifetimes. That is a great misunderstanding.

### ***ii) How Pure Land teachings benefit other people***

All the benefits accruing to us can be obtained by others if we conscientiously recite Amitabha's name and dedicate the resulting merit to them. The subject is vast, so I will only cite a couple of examples. When parents recite, their children are spared calamity. If children and grandchildren recite, their deceased ancestors are delivered.

Moreover, if we gain rebirth in the Pure Land, we will become Buddhas and deliver beings extensively. We benefit ourselves as well as others in a complete and perfect manner.

### ***iii) How Pure Land teachings benefit our family, country and the world***

In the broader sense the topic is endless, so I will just highlight key points. All the world's conflicts, from the level of families and groups to that of societies and nations, arise from clashes of interest. They also result from our limited perspectives on this tiny

planet, as well as the confinement of our thinking to this brief lifetime. As the saying goes, we “compete for advantage amid a spark from flint stones and fight for pre-eminence atop a snail’s tentacles.”

If we can practice Pure Land Amitabha-recitation, admire the golden realm (the Pure Land) a hundred thousand *koti* Buddha-lands away, and aspire to ease of body and mind lasting countless *kalpas*, we would be only too eager to avoid the five worldly desires. And the most serious problems that beset humankind today – nuclear weapons, regional wars, the energy crisis, environmental pollution, terrorism, violence, pornography and drugs – would vanish.

As the *Infinite Life Sutra* says:

***Wherever the Buddha goes there are no nations, towns or villages that are not transformed. The entire land is peaceful and harmonious, and the sun and moon shine brightly. The wind blows and the rains fall as they should, and calamities do not occur. The country is prosperous and the people feel secure. There is no need for soldiers or weapons. The people hold virtue and benevolence in high regard, and cultivate propriety and accommodation.***

How inspiring!

The Pure Land teachings can be practiced by everyone. Their practice brings full and practical benefits to self, others, family, nation and the world.

When the circumstances and the teachings are in resonance, they produce countless benefits. This is the third humanist characteristic of the Pure Land school.

## ***4. The Mission of Humanist Buddhism In the Pure Land School***

How should Buddhism be developed in the present age? Nurtured by the scriptures and inspired by tradition, our forebears brought forth the concept of Humanist Buddhism. They experimented actively and undertook beneficial investigations amid everyday realities.

Relying on advantages provided by their school and mindful of Amitabha Buddha's compassion, Pure Land practitioners should all the more assume responsibility for relevant tasks and activities. They should regard Humanist Buddhism as an inherent mission.

### **a) The Historical Position**

Buddhism has always stressed development that accords with both the Dharma's principles and concrete circumstances. After entering China Buddhism blended with Chinese culture, traditions and national characteristics, resulting in the blossoming of the eight major Mahayana schools during the Tang Dynasty. The lineages were passed down the ages and brought benefits to countless sentient beings. Nothing happened that was not in accordance with the temper of the times and of contemporary people.

From the Song Dynasty onward, the various schools declined and eventually merged into the Pure Land school. Only the Pure Land tradition stood aloft, renewing itself over a long period of time.

Let's examine the issue in terms of the Buddhist and the humanist characteristics of the sundry schools. In the former context, Pure Land and the other lineages are all part of the true teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha. They all guide sentient beings towards supramundane liberation and, ultimately, Buddhahood. In other words, they are completely equal with respect to their Buddhist characteristics.

Yet the other schools were unable to match Pure Land in terms of its accessibility, and its ability to suit all beings in every era. In other words, a difference in the schools' humanist attributes led to a situation in which "all lineages withered, while Pure Land alone flourished." We can see how important are a school's human-centered characteristics to its fortunes!

History has demonstrated the Pure Land tradition's comprehensive and sustainable suitability for human communities. Today, in accordance with society's progress, we need to promote the spirit of Humanist Buddhism. The Pure Land school must shoulder its responsibilities in this respect.

### **b) The Actual Situation**

Though detailed statistics are lacking, my longtime observations suggest that more than 90% of orthodox Buddhists with views on life and death aspire to rebirth in the Land of Bliss.

*Monastics or householders, most consistent practitioners  
Dedicate their merit towards rebirth in the Land of Bliss.  
Whatever the personal practice of dying people,  
Assisting reciters invariably chant Amitabha's name.*

Whether for the sake of oneself or others, those seeking to avoid disaster, recover from illness, have filial descendants or deliver deceased forebears must not neglect Amitabha Buddha.

On the walls of countless monasteries are prominently etched the characters "*Namo Amitabha Buddha.*"

In their morning and evening practice, Buddhists recite the *Amitabha Sutra* and the name of Amitabha Buddha.

Dharma masters urge their disciples to recite Amitabha's name conscientiously.

Major monasteries all have a hall of Amitabha-recitation and hold seven-day recitation retreats.

Lay groups have recitation halls and organize Amitabha-recitation groups.

When Buddhists see and greet one another, or bid each other farewell, they say, "*Amitabha Buddha.*"

When children run into a monk, they will exclaim, "*Amitabha Buddha.*"

The first thing that comes to mind when ordinary people think of Buddhism is "*Amitabha Buddha.*"

The Pure Land school of Amitabha Buddha has permeated every corner of the human world, as well as all aspects of life and death. Master Taixu, who lived in the Republican era, said: A single invocation of Amitabha Buddha is enough to represent all of Chinese Buddhism.

Without the nurture of the Pure Land teachings or the participation of Pure Land practitioners, so-called Humanist Buddhism would be like water without a source, or a tree without roots.

Given such realities, the propagation of Humanist Buddhism necessarily becomes the mission of Pure Land practitioners at large.

### **c) An Illustrative Analogy**

Individual people and the world resemble a tightly sealed boiler. Humankind's afflictions of greed and anger are like the fire, while the constraints imposed by worldly laws and ethics are the walls of the boiler. People are like the water in the container.

The rapid development of technology today has facilitated the extensive expression of human creativity. At the same time the pursuit of material desires has greatly intensified, and conflicts and crises have multiplied. The constraints of conscience are weakening and moral values are falling by the wayside.

This is like the fire burning ever more fiercely inside the boiler, even as the container's walls are being corroded. The water boils and the pressure from the steam builds steadily; the boiler is in danger of exploding any time.

The reality is that more and more people, unable to bear the intense pressure, are taking their own lives. Indeed, the whole world is like a powder keg that could ignite at any minute!

Thinking people are all worried about the situation. Among the Dharma schools other than Pure Land, these problems would naturally be solved if practitioners could douse the flames of greed and anger, and achieve a realization of emptiness. In that case, the fire would be extinguished, the water cooled – and the pressure would vanish. Yet ordinary beings today are incapable of accomplishing this. So while this is a door to a solution, it is a door that is closed.

Buddhism's Pure Land school teaches us to cultivate an aversion towards our Saha world and a joyful aspiration to the Land of Bliss. It is like removing the fire underneath and opening the boiler's top. Though the flames of greed and anger have not been put out and the water of wisdom have yet to form, the pressure is quickly released. We feel at peace, relieved and happy.

Today's Pure Land practitioners have not extinguished their inner flames of greed and anger. But they understand deeply the suffering and unease that such afflictions bring to themselves and others, to the nation and to the world. With their basic attitude of aversion and letting go, they no longer wish to experience intense conflict with either themselves, other people or the world as a result of personal pursuits. Such actions would only worsen the suffering all around.

At a fundamental level, Pure Land practitioners have no expectations of this world. They chase after nothing, and have neither powerful loves nor hatreds. They are not judgmentally attached to notions of good and evil. They have let go, and their minds are unfettered and calm. They view themselves, others and the world with a sense of peaceful harmony. A Pure Land practitioner thinks, "What can I really do for others?" This is like moving the fire from under the boiler, so it can provide warmth to other people.

The minds of Pure Land practitioners are settled and at ease, focused on the Land of Bliss a hundred thousand *koti* Buddha-lands away. There, their minds find repose and comfort, and are energized. Their eyes too are focused there. They are no longer of this world, and they have no desire to possess a single tree or blade of grass here. They are people of another realm.

Consider someone who is about to be transferred to a far-away destination, a person no longer belonging to their present location. He might say sincerely, "I'm so sorry to have offended you all, and repeatedly. Please forgive me! Before I leave, is there anything I can do for you?"

A person who is about to die recalls the harm he has done to others during his lifetime and feels deep remorse. He is genuinely contrite. He also remembers all the favors he received from others and feel apologetic; he is truly thankful. He says, "I am taking leave now! Thank you all so much, and please forgive me! I wish you the best!"

Those who seek rebirth in the Pure Land approach everyone and everything with this attitude of gratitude and humility. Their minds are temperate and their compassion is capacious. They are accommodating in their modesty and joyful in their serenity. Through the conduit of "*Namo Amitabha Buddha*," all vexations and tensions are released into the vast spaces of the Pure Land. Bathed in Amitabha's light, they are transformed into auspicious, multi-colored clouds, adorning the infinite cosmos.

With respect to people's inner tensions and pressure, and the world's crises and conflicts, the Pure Land school of Amitabha Buddha is like a device to release the stress within the sealed boiler, a safety valve. It steers our minds towards the untainted, splendid, bright and peaceful Pure Land, thereby relieving the world's suffering and helping us achieve ultimate serenity and joy.

The human world, so full of vexations and conflicts, needs the comfort and deliverance of Buddhism's compassion, purity and dignified peace. The basic goal of Buddhism, with its illuminating wisdom and quiescent joy, is none other than to dispel the deluded darkness of human beings and bring them everlasting peace and happiness.

That is precisely the mission of the Pure Land school!

## ***5. The Practice of Humanist Buddhism In the Pure Land School***

We must build a basic understanding of the practice of Humanist Buddhism in the Pure Land school. In light of prevailing realities, there are seven specific demands.

### **a) A Basic Understanding**

*Ipsa facto*, the Pure Land school and its special characteristics constitute an ultimate and all-encompassing Humanist Buddhism. To propagate the teachings and practice of the Pure Land school is to implement Humanist Buddhism in a fundamental way.

The Pure Land tradition resonates directly with the intention of the Buddha in coming to this world to deliver beings, and dovetails with people's wish to forgo suffering and seek happiness. It embraces all aptitudes, from the deft to the dull. No one is incapable of practicing it, and looking into the future there are none who cannot achieve rebirth in the Pure Land. Without abandoning their worldly works, practitioners can attain marvelous, supramundane results. In the present life they enjoy peace of mind and happiness; in the next one they will exit the cycle of rebirth. Certain of rebirth in the Pure Land, they tread the Bodhisattva's path while in the human realm. They bring benefits to themselves and others without discrimination, and illuminate the world equally.

If we examine the origins of the Pure Land school and trace the expansive arc of its development, we find at every turn the particular attributes of Humanist Buddhism: It is "needed in the human realm," it "can be practiced in the human realm" and it "can bring complete and perfect benefits to humans."

We should grasp the true meaning of the Pure Land teachings, follow in the footsteps of earlier saints and sages, and work hard to propagate the Pure Land school in our human realm. By doing so, we can provide shade amid the distressing heat of the world with cooling clouds of compassion, whose rainfall quenches the thirst of the multitudes with the sweet dew of imperishability. Even if our practice and actions are not termed "Humanist Buddhism," they nonetheless constitute its substance. They represent a fundamental realization of Humanist Buddhism.

## b) Seven Specific Tasks

1) Build a scenario under which Pure Land is the guiding Dharma school and the others supplement and support it. Together they advance the cause of Humanist Buddhism.

2) Strengthen and spread the message that “recitation of Amitabha Buddha’s name delivers completely both present and future benefits,<sup>2</sup> and the Pure Land school concerns itself with the practicalities of daily life.” The purpose is to correct the misconception that Pure Land Amitabha-recitation “aims solely to secure the next life and brings no benefits in the present one.”

3) Propagate such Pure Land teachings as “assurance of rebirth in the present lifetime”<sup>3</sup> and “the karma of assurance.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, our rebirth in the Pure Land is assured in this very life and we need not wait until we die. This is to rectify the mistaken belief that in the Pure Land school, “rebirth is only decided at the point of death.”

4) Forsaking the complex for the simple, the hard for the easy, we propagate the basic Pure Land practice of “single-mindedly and exclusively reciting the name” of Amitabha Buddha. This not only suits the capabilities of people in our commerce-dominated age, but also dispels their fear that they “cannot achieve rebirth unless they practice with great diligence so as to eliminate all stray, deluded thoughts.”

5) Teach Pure Land practitioners that they, knowing that their rebirths are assured, should practice the way of the Bodhisattva in the human world. In the process,

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<sup>2</sup> Benefits of the present and future lifetimes.

<sup>3</sup> The karma leading to rebirth is accomplished in the present life, without needing to wait for death. In his *Commentary on the Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land*, Master Tan Luan says, “**The reference to ten recitations [of Amitabha Buddha’s name] is to illustrate that the karma [of assurance, leading to rebirth] is accomplished forthwith.**”

<sup>4</sup> The karma that ensures rebirth in the Pure Land. Taking such action guarantees rebirth absolutely. Master Shandao, in the “Section on Non-Meditative Virtues” of his *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra*, notes: “**To recite Amitabha’s name single-mindedly and without variation, whether walking, standing, sitting or lying down, whether for long or short periods – that is the karma of assurance. It is so because it accords with Amitabha Buddha’s vow.**”

they dignify the land, bring happiness and benefit to sentient beings, and broadly cultivate wholesome karmic connections.

6) Teach all other people that they should believe deeply in the cause-and-effect workings of karma, be sincere and scrupulous in their relationships, and dedicate the merit from such miscellaneous acts of virtue towards rebirth in the Land of Bliss. That way, they will achieve ultimate liberation and attain enlightenment.

7) Generally cooperate with positive forces in politics, the law, philosophy, culture, science, ethics and religion. The reason: to direct people towards what is good and pure, and to encourage and assist one another in times of difficulty, thereby creating the future together.

A journey of a thousand *li* begins with the first step – and Humanist Buddhism starts with each individual.

Knowing that it cannot immediately be disseminated worldwide, we seek to propagate it in a single country first. If that is not possible, we hope to teach it in a locality. If a locality is beyond our reach, we try to spread it within a family. And if that is not feasible, we must first establish it within ourselves.

From an individual to a family and then a country, we subtly alter misfortune and quietly transform the temper of the times. From one to ten, from ten to a hundred, we influence and change one another, bringing untold benefit.

If a single person gains rebirth in the Pure Land, that individual attains non-retrogression on the road to Buddhahood. If ten people are reborn, ten become Buddhas. With Buddhahood comes the ability to move freely among the other nine realms, embracing the worlds in all ten directions. Not forgetting their origins, Buddhas return to our Saha world. They invariably give priority to the human realm, as that is where sentient beings are most capable of practicing the correct Dharma.

And when Buddhas teach in the world of humans, it will be transformed by the Dharma. The seven-jeweled lotus ponds of the Pure Land will arise in our world of Five Turbidities, and the good and evil beings of the nine levels of rebirth will all enter the realm of ultimate reality. How easy it will be!

*A gatha says:*

*Repelled by the suffering of life and death,  
We should seek rebirth in the Land of Bliss.  
Amitabha-recitation leads to certain rebirth;  
It is the true Buddhism of the human realm.*

**Dharma Master Jingzong, January 18, 2006**

*GATHA OF DEDICATION*

**May the resulting merit be distributed everywhere without  
discrimination. May we all aspire to perfect enlightenment for the sake  
of other beings, and be reborn in the Land of Peace and Joy**