

The Pristine Pure Land School

A Discourse by Dharma Master Huijing

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English translation by Householder Jingtū

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Foreword

Due to a lack of ability and wisdom, I had made scant progress in understanding the profundities of the Dharma despite many years of effort. Though I practiced according to the Pure Land school, I was never confident about attaining rebirth in the Land of Bliss. My vexations and deluded thinking raged like storms, never stopping for a moment. When I tried to repress them by reciting Amitabha Buddha's name, they only became more intense. The result: I constantly felt anxious, without an anchor.

Later I had the good fortune to read the series of publications by the Shandao lineage of the Pure Land school. Suddenly, a refreshing coolness seemed to permeate my mind and heart. Ah, so for ten *kalpas* Amitabha Buddha has been calling out to homeless orphans like ourselves, fervently hoping we will quickly return home! Only then did I realize that for all the heavy negative karma we carry, we can still be reborn in the Land of Bliss – thanks entirely to the power of Amitabha Buddha's vows. So long as we single-mindedly recite his name, we will already have boarded the ship of Amitabha's Great Vows. It will convey us safely to our home in the Land of Bliss.

In the summer of 2009, our assembly invited Venerable Master Huijing to Shenyang to speak to us about the Pure Land school. He kindly and happily accepted. Listening to him speak, I was full of the joy of the Dharma and benefitted greatly. From start to finish, Master Huijing never dwelt on abstruse theoretical matters. His discourses were a completely natural manifestation of his authentic faith. He said, for example:

*Faith becomes our very lives. With faith, we are alive.
Without it we are not; we would have no life of deliverance, of
enlightenment.*

*Faith, to us, is fundamental and of the utmost importance.
Parents, children and spouses are all important to us, but they leave
us in the end. What stays with us is Namó Amitabha Buddha and
our faith alone.*

Those words were intensely moving. Without the slightest embellishment, they pointed directly to the truth. They were the expression of true faith.

For novice Dharma seekers, Master Huijing had this advice:

Some people say they do not make a specific number of recitations. They say they do not recite consciously, for recitation is always on their minds and they are constantly thinking of Amitabha Buddha and declaiming his name.

It doesn't work like that – unless a person is capable of habitual, reflexive recitation. Otherwise, external thoughts will intrude and the recitations will amount to no more than a few hundred a day.

If we sit still and recite every morning, or set a goal of 1,000, 5,000 or 10,000 recitations a day, however forgetful we may be, we will still have accomplished those recitations.

That is why beginners should aim to do a specific number of recitations every day. Besides the morning's sitting recitation, do a set number during the day, time permitting. After a while, the process will become habitual. At that point, you will instinctively recall Amitabha and recite his name, even if you don't set targets or use recitation beads. Your mouth will unconsciously move to Amitabha's name; it will be entirely reflexive.

His words were simple, but powerful. They unerringly exposed the inclination of people today towards superficiality and laziness, making us ashamed of our own shortcomings and stiffening our resolve to do better. They left a deep impression on me.

To help karmically inclined Dharma friends better learn Ven. Huijing's penetrating discourse in Shenyang, I have transcribed and edited its contents. My own shortcomings mean that there will invariably be flaws. I hope learned practitioners will take the trouble to point them out, so they can be corrected.

Namo Amitabha Buddha!

Dharma learner Chen Yu, at the Great Buddha Monastery, Shenyang

CHAPTER I: Sui-Tang Pure Land vs. Song-Ming Pure Land

The Pure Land schools of Buddhism can be divided into two categories: those of the Sui and Tang dynasties (581-907), and those of the Song and Ming dynasties (960-1644).

Sui- Tang Pure Land: The Original Tradition

The Sui-Tang Pure Land refers to the tradition established by Venerable Master Shandao (613-681). It is the Pure Land lineage that runs from Masters Nagarjuna (c. 150-250), Vasubandhu (c. 320-400), Tanluan (476-542) and Daochuo (562-645) through to Master Shandao. It is the pristine form of Pure Land practice, unadulterated and uncomplicated. Because it is pristine, it is correct. And because it is free of extraneous elements, it does not equivocate.

For those who practice according to this tradition, as the saying goes, “ten out of ten, a hundred out of a hundred, will achieve rebirth in the Pure Land.” In other words, anyone who practices properly can be reborn in the Land of Bliss. Indeed, even in the present life he or she can already be considered a member of the Pure Land’s sacred assembly. This is the Pure Land school of the Sui and the Tang dynasties, the Shandao lineage.

Song-Ming Pure Land: A Mixed Heritage

The Song-Ming Pure Land tradition runs from the Northern Song (960-1127) through to the Ming (1368-1644) and even the Qing (1644-1911) dynasties. Though it is, like the Shandao lineage of the Sui and Tang, a part of the Pure Land heritage, its substance is different. Because it incorporates elements from the Tiantai, Huayan (Garland, or Avatamsaka) and Chan (Zen) schools, its philosophical content seems rich and weighty. It has drawn on the thought of the schools of the Sacred Path (i.e., the non-Pure Land schools). As a result, however, it makes practitioners uncertain and uneasy about their ability to achieve the ultimate goal of rebirth in the Pure Land.

The Loss of Scriptures

Why did the Pure Land of the Song and Ming dynasties become diluted? It was because the main works of the Shandao tradition were gradually lost in China. The works: Vasubandhu's *Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land*, Tanluan's *Commentary on the Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land*, Daochuo's *Collection on the Land of Peace and Joy* and Shandao's *Five Works in Nine Fascicles*. They were taken to Japan, however, where their teachings took root and flourished.

In the final years of the Qing Dynasty, householder Yang Renshan had these long-lost texts shipped back to China with the help of a Japanese friend. He established the Jinling Sutra Publishing House in Nanjing to print and circulate the lost scriptures.

The disappearance of the texts in the late Tang Dynasty meant that Pure Land practitioners and advocates in subsequent times lacked access to the thinking and practice of the Shandao tradition. As a result, they interpreted Pure Land from the perspectives of their own schools. The Tiantai used Tiantai principles to explain Pure Land, the Huayan used Huayan concepts and the Chan used Chan viewpoints. Pure Land was no longer pure.

An Easy Path

In their original form, the Pure Land teachings were easy to practice. They also constituted a special and splendid tradition. Nagarjuna, in his *Chapter on the Easy Path*, called it "the Easy Path." "Easy" meant that anyone could practice it, gain rebirth in the Land of Bliss and attain Buddhahood. Therefore it was easy.

The original Pure Land practice was easy because recitation of "*Namo Amitabha Buddha*" (I take refuge in Amitabha Buddha) alone was enough to gain the practitioner rebirth in the Land of Bliss. It was exceedingly simple – there was no need to recite other scriptures or mantras, or to undertake practices of the other schools. If one had to add other sutras or mantras, or perform other acts of merit to enter the Pure Land, that would become very complicated; it would not be easy or simple at all.

Namo Amitabha Buddha consists of only six characters. Because of its simplicity, it can be readily practiced by people of all capabilities – superior, intermediate and inferior. It can be performed by monastics and householders

alike. As the saying goes, Buddha-recitation “accommodates practitioners of all ability and aptitude; if 10,000 practice it, 10,000 will be reborn in the Pure Land.”

At the same time, reciters can in this very life be certain of rebirth in the Pure Land. And rebirth leads to the speedy attainment of Buddhahood. So what is simple produces a transcendent outcome. If something were easy but ultimate achievement took more than a lifetime, or if Buddhahood required a long time after entry into the Pure Land, it would not be so transcendent or splendid.

Analogy of the Ship

Master Nagarjuna described the Pure Land school as simple, easy to practice, relaxing and reassuring. He used the analogy of “travelling by ship.” On board a ship, it does not matter if we are healthy or ill, or whether we can move about easily or not. So long as we stay on the vessel, we can travel from one shore to the other in a relaxed, easygoing manner.

The analogy implies that whether we can extricate ourselves from the cycle of rebirth does not depend on our own efforts. As ordinary beings, all we have is the ability to create karma, not to end rebirth or achieve Buddhahood. That is why Nagarjuna said that apart from Pure Land practice, all other schools tread the “difficult path.”

The Difficult Path

To illustrate the difficulty involved, Master Nagarjuna used another analogy – travelling by land. If we wish to journey somewhere far away, it would be easy if we could go by ship or plane. It would be hard indeed if we had to go on foot. Even if we climbed mountains and crossed rivers after much effort, it is not certain we will arrive at our destination. The great distance means there will be hidden dangers and many obstacles.

Master Nagarjuna employed yet another analogy. Imagine if we had to lift a great chiliocosm with our hands. Can we do it? We can carry 5 catties (2.5 kg.), perhaps even 10 catties. But there is no way we can move a great chiliocosm. Nagarjuna used this analogy to point out that it is exceedingly difficult for us to leave the cycle of rebirth and attain Buddhahood by dint of our own efforts.

There is a saying about how hard it is to “soar into the heavens.” By taking an airplane, we can indeed ascend to the sky for a while. But without a plane, can we soar into the heavens? Of course not.

So long as we “aspire to rebirth in Amitabha Buddha’s Pure Land and recite his name exclusively,” it would be as though we had boarded the ship of his great vow. Monastic or householder, accomplished practitioner or otherwise, pure of mind and heart or not – all would be reborn in the Land of Bliss. That’s why we should no longer be considered ordinary beings trapped in the cycle of rebirth, but members of the sacred assembly in the Land of Bliss. It is said: “Those who single-mindedly recite the name of Amitabha Buddha will certainly be reborn in his Land of Bliss.” Such is the cause, such is the effect.

Mixed Practice

The Pure Land practice of the Song and Ming dynasties also centered on recitation of Amitabha Buddha’s name and aimed at rebirth in the Land of Bliss. However, it added various conditions and required the practitioner to perform many meritorious acts as supplementary provisions. If we are able to accomplish such merit, well and fine. But what if we cannot? What then?

There are genuine deeds of merit as well as inauthentic ones. As a matter of fact, the meritorious actions we undertake are infused with greed, anger and ignorance; they are contaminated, flawed and ultimately false. Does such merit constitute sufficient grounds for our rebirth in the Pure Land?

At the same time, the Pure Land thinking of the Song and Ming stresses that we must achieve a certain level of proficiency in our practice. The practitioner needs to attain an initial state of meditative concentration. Or he is required to eliminate delusions of views and thoughts and arrive at a state of phenomenal single-mindedness. She may also have to eradicate the myriad delusions to achieve noumenal single-mindedness. Such accomplishments would ensure a high rebirth status. This interpretation is completely at loggerheads with that espoused by the Shandao tradition.

The Pure Land Is My Home

The Land of Bliss is our home because Amitabha Buddha established it for the benefit of all sentient beings. Sentient beings include holy beings as well as very ordinary ones. And ordinary beings include both good and evil ones – all of whom are sentient beings. Amitabha’s Land of Bliss was built to accommodate all beings; its rights of ownership and usage were registered in our name. As for the qualifications needed to go there and to attain Buddhahood there, Amitabha Buddha already accomplished them on our behalf. They are enshrined in the six-character name, *Namo Amitabha Buddha*.

The Name of a Myriad Virtues

For any being who seeks rebirth in the Pure Land, where is the enabling cause, action and merit to be found? They reside in the name *Namo Amitabha Buddha*. This name is complete, all-encompassing and transcendent. In other words, the name completes, encompasses and transcends the merit of the 84,000 schools of Dharma practice.

The cause, action and merit required to enter the Land of Bliss are contained entirely in the name of Amitabha Buddha. For those who aspire to the Pure Land and to Buddhahood, the merit encompassed by Amitabha’s name lacks nothing; it is complete in itself. For this reason, *Namo Amitabha Buddha* is known as the “Name of a Myriad Virtues.”

Reciting the Name Guarantees Rebirth

According to the tradition taught by Master Shandao, all who recite the name of Amitabha Buddha will be reborn in the Pure Land.

Master Shandao said: **“All who recite the name will be reborn in the Land of Bliss.”**

Reciters will achieve rebirth, with 100% certainty, in the Pure Land.

Shandao also said: **“Rebirth is certain because of the power of [Amitabha Buddha’s] vow.”**

We will certainly reach the Pure Land by relying on Amitabha’s vow. Amitabha Buddha had sworn an oath to establish the Land of Bliss for us. He also vowed that all beings should be able to enter the Pure Land by reciting the Name

of a Myriad Virtues. That's why Master Shandao said, "Rebirth is certain because of the power of [Amitabha Buddha's] vow."

Further, Shandao said: **"Because of the power of Amitabha Buddha's vow, rebirth in the Pure Land is easy."**

The power of Amitabha's oath makes it easy for reciters to gain rebirth.

Additionally, **"Because of the power of Amitabha Buddha's vow, no one will fail to achieve rebirth."**

Those who "aspire to rebirth in Amitabha Buddha's Pure Land and recite his name exclusively," be they holy or ordinary beings, good or evil beings, will certainly be reborn, without exception. That is why Master Shandao observed: **"Humans or celestial beings, wholesome or unwholesome beings – all shall be reborn. In the Pure Land, no differences separate them. They all walk an irreversible path to Buddhahood."**

Again: **"All beings, sacred and profane, gain rebirth by dint of [Amitabha Buddha's] vow. In the Pure Land, no differences separate them. They all walk an irreversible path to Buddhahood."**

Without this teaching, we would lack conviction about rebirth. If our minds are uncertain, our practice will be uneasy. Who can say that someone with a wavering mind is assured, even in this life, of rebirth in the Land of Bliss? We would not be able to have such assurance unless we practice in the tradition of Master Shandao.

Scriptural Basis

This lineage is grounded in the sutras. If it had no foundation there, if it hadn't been taught by Shakyamuni Buddha, it would not be a part of the Dharma. Indeed, it wouldn't be Buddhism. As the saying goes, "To interpret the scriptures literally is to do injustice to the Buddhas of the past, present and future. To depart from the sutras by a single word is to speak as Mara (the Evil One)." All schools of Buddhism must be grounded in the sutras.

On which texts did Masters Nagarjuna, Vasubandhu, Tanluan, Daochuo and Shandao base their teaching? None other than the Three Pure Land sutras.

Shakyamuni Buddha spoke a multitude of sutras, mentioning the Pure Land in more than 200 of them. These sutras all touched on Amitabha Buddha and his Land of Bliss.

The Three Pure Land Sutras

Of these 200-odd texts, three focused exclusively on the wondrous splendors of the Land of Bliss and the merit behind Amitabha Buddha's deliverance. They are the *Infinite Life Sutra*, the *Contemplation of Infinite Life Sutra (Contemplation Sutra)* and the *Amitabha Sutra*. Their exclusive focus is the reason they are known as the "Three Pure Land Sutras."

Primary Texts and Secondary Sources

Explications of the Pure Land school must be based on this canon. Only then can the teaching be pure, pristine. Other texts should be employed only as supplementary material. Thus there are "primary texts" and "secondary sources" among the sutras. Primary texts can be relied upon absolutely. As for secondary sources, we should use only their relevant sections as supplements and ignore the rest. The only primary texts of the Pure Land school are the Three Pure Land Sutras.

Masters Nagarjuna, Vasubandhu, Tanluan, Daochuo and Shandao relied exclusively on the Three Sutras to teach Pure Land, without mixing in other doctrines. So what they taught had been rigorously screened. It was entirely pure, and completely proper in terms of principle and practice.

Exclusive Practice Leads to Certain Rebirth

Our focused, pristine Pure Land practice is both simple and easy. By exclusively reciting the name of Amitabha Buddha, we will certainly gain rebirth in the Land of Bliss, as the practice is the primary cause of rebirth. If our recitation is not exclusive, rebirth becomes uncertain. We may, or may not, be reborn in the Pure Land.

Someone who exclusively recites *Namo Amitabha Buddha* relies intuitively on the deliverance of Amitabha Buddha alone. He or she depends entirely on the power, the vow and the virtue of Amitabha Buddha. If one relies exclusively, and the object of reliance can be depended upon, one can be said to have

accomplished the goal of rebirth in this very life. If one does not rely exclusively, then the outcome becomes tentative. One may accomplish, or one may not.

CHAPTER 2: Amitabha's 18th and 19th Vows

Categorizing the 48 Vows

I will now use the vows relating to rebirth in the *Infinite Life Sutra* to substantiate the issues I have been talking about.

Amitabha Buddha undertook 48 Great Vows. They can be divided into three categories: those that relate to the Land of Bliss, those about Amitabha Buddha, and those regarding the merit needed to be reborn in the Pure Land.

Inconceivable Consequences in the Land of Bliss

Of the vows relating to the Pure Land, take the 1st – on the Non-Existence of the Three Wretched Realms. It means that the Land of Bliss does not have any beings from the Three Wretched Realms (animals, hungry ghosts and hell beings). Because of his great compassion, vow and power, Amitabha Buddha delivers to the Pure Land those beings whose negative karma would have landed them in the Three Wretched Realms, ensuring they will never again fall into those realms. That is why Amitabha undertook the Vow on the Absence of Beings from the Three Wretched Realms.

The 2nd Vow is on No More Rebirths in the Wretched Realms. It induces Amitabha name-reciters who have reached the Land of Bliss to resolve to save beings in infinite worlds. Therefore they will never again fall back into the Three Wretched Realms.

The 3rd Vow is that All Beings (in the Pure Land) Will Have Golden Complexions, while the fourth stipulates that Beings Will Not Be Differentiated by Physical Beauty or Ugliness. Their appearance will be the same and, like Amitabha Buddha, they will have golden complexions. Whatever the status of their rebirth, they will resemble Amitabha Buddha, possessing the 32 – or even 84,000 – physical attributes of a Buddha. Their appearance will be resplendent

with the myriad virtues. As the *Sutra of Infinite Life and Splendor* says, ***“They will have golden bodies like Amitabha, and their physical characteristics will be flawless.”***

The 5th through 10th Vows affirm that all beings who are reborn in Amitabha’s Pure Land will have six kinds of paranormal powers.

The 11th Vow promises Assured Attainment of Nirvana. All beings reborn in Amitabha Buddha’s Pure Land immediately achieve nirvana, the extinction of suffering. Such is the meritorious nature and function of the Land of Bliss.

The 12th is the Vow of Infinite Light and the 13th is the Vow of Infinite Life. These show that the Buddhahood status achieved in the 11th Vow is the same as that of Amitabha Buddha. Amitabha means infinite life; when we reach the Land of Bliss, we too will have infinite life. And as Amitabha also means infinite light, that is what we will be when we are reborn in the Land of Bliss.

Amitabha Buddha can ensure that all beings – holy or ordinary, monastic or lay, even good or evil – attain Buddhahood once they arrive in the Pure Land. If they are reborn there, people otherwise destined for the Three Wretched Realms will have their negative karma expunged by the power of Amitabha’s vows. Relying on the virtue of Amitabha Buddha, they quickly achieve Buddhahood.

From the first 13 Vows alone, we can see the marvelous, unfathomable consequences that apply in the Land of Bliss. Summed up Master Shandao approvingly: ***“The Land of Bliss is the realm of unconditioned nirvana; Amitabha-recitation is the gateway to nirvana.”*** He also said: ***“Wisdom removes our past karma; unwittingly we enter the realm of ultimate reality. The infinite kalpas and eons are compressed into the single flick of a finger.”***

The Three Vows of Deliverance

Where in the 48 Vows does Amitabha Buddha promise to save all sentient beings? The pledge is contained in the 18th, 19th and 20th Vows, which are known as the “Three Vows of Deliverance.” Salvation of sentient beings is accomplished by these vows. They allow beings to be reborn in the Land of Bliss, where they become Buddhas according to the first 13 vows – as explained above – and achieve immeasurable light and life, like Amitabha Buddha.

That is why the 18th, 19th and 20th Vows are the ones with the greatest relevance to us. Without them, we would have no part in the Land of Bliss, however resplendent and transcendental it may be. For us, these three vows are of the utmost importance.

Vows of Direct Causation and Karmic Connection

Amitabha Buddha uses the three oaths to encompass and save all sentient beings. But because beings have vastly different capabilities and preferences, Amitabha has to make use of the 18th, 19th and 20th Vows to cover them all.

The 18th and 19th are known as the “vows of direct causation” (of rebirth). Those who meet the conditions set out in these oaths will achieve rebirth in the Land of Bliss at the end of this very life.

The 20th is the “vow of karmic connection.” Those who satisfy its criteria, though they may not attain rebirth in this lifetime, have nonetheless formed a karmic bond with Amitabha Buddha, who will never abandon them. Amitabha will wait for the necessary conditions to ripen before guiding them into the Pure Land, perhaps in the next lifetime or two. Ancient worthies said of the 20th Vow: “A fish with a hook in its mouth will not stay in the water long.”

Easiest Among the Easy

The 18th and 19th Vows both relate to the direct causes of rebirth. But if we look more closely, only the 18th Vow constitutes the Easy Path mentioned by Master Nagarjuna. It provides an easy path because it only asks practitioners to have faith in Amitabha’s deliverance, wish for rebirth in Amitabha’s Pure Land and single-mindedly recite Amitabha’s name (paraphrase). To recite exclusively the name of Amitabha Buddha is something even a child or a parrot can do. So the practice can be regarded as the easiest among the easy.

The Difficult Among the Easy

The 19th Vow institutes the difficult path of the Pure Land school. It involves resolving to achieve *bodhicitta* (gaining Buddhahood to save beings), engaging in virtuous acts, and dedicating the resulting merit towards rebirth in the Land of Bliss. Of course, in the context of the difficult courses undertaken by the schools of the Sacred Path, it is still a relatively easy path. Yet it is the difficult

among the easy, whereas the 18th Vow is the easy among the easy. Therein lies the difference.

The 18th Vow – Amitabha’s Fundamental Intent

The 18th Vow represents the fundamental intent of Amitabha Buddha. Beings who recite Amitabha’s name according to the 18th Vow have a direct, intimate connection with Amitabha Buddha. That relationship is unbreakable.

Those who recite according to the 19th Vow have no such link with Amitabha. To aspire to *bodhicitta*, to perform wholesome deeds, to dedicate merit in the manner of the other schools – none of these practices rely exclusively on Amitabha, none of them involve the single-minded recitation of his name. What connection can there be with Amitabha Buddha? There is none.

Even so, there is a link. As these practitioners dedicate their merit towards rebirth in the Pure Land, Amitabha Buddha, with his great compassion, always tries to save all beings that can be saved. Since a person aspires to *bodhicitta*, performs good works and seeks rebirth in the Pure Land, Amitabha will naturally seize the chance to deliver him or her. To ease the person’s anxieties, Amitabha pledges (in the 19th Vow) to come just before the moment of death and lead him or her to the Land of Bliss.

Yet the point remains that Amitabha Buddha’s basic intention lies in the “exclusive recitation” of his name inherent in the 18th Vow. As Master Shandao explained, **“If we examine Amitabha Buddha’s Fundamental Vow, its intention is that all beings should consistently and exclusively recite his name.”** This intent does not lie in the 19th Vow; we shall say more about this later.

The 18th Vow

I will now explain the text –

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

are those who commit the five gravest transgressions or slander the correct Dharma.

Let's begin with the 18th Vow, which consists of 36 characters. Its general meaning is this: It is one thing if Amitabha does not achieve Buddhahood. But if he does, all beings who believe in his deliverance, see his Land of Bliss as their eternal, happy home and want to be reborn there, will certainly gain such rebirth if they single-mindedly recite Amitabha Buddha's name.

Of Sincerity

"Sincerely" refers to something that comes from the bottom of our hearts – sincerity, genuineness. We need to be sincere and genuine in the way we live, the way we conduct ourselves. If we are not, whatever we do loses its meaning. Two people are truly friends only if their relationship is characterized by sincerity. If their feelings are false and they are only using each other, can we really call them friends?

Every day we undertake to seek rebirth in Amitabha's Pure Land. But we may simply be following everyone else in reciting the dedication text and our sentiments may not truly be from the heart. Indeed, we may not really wish to go to the Land of Bliss. This is not sincerity.

"Sincerity" in this context is easy to understand. It means something that comes truly from the heart. I truly believe there is a Land of Bliss, I genuinely wish to be reborn there, and I am really reciting the name of Amitabha Buddha. Such is sincerity.

There are those who explain "sincerity" as a quality that is very complex, even mysterious, so ordinary people can't understand it. That would be wrong. Since Pure Land practice is the Easy Path, its principles should be readily intelligible and its practice easy to accomplish. So "sincerely" here means to come genuinely from the heart. To go a step further, it means to act with the utmost earnestness: I seek rebirth in the Land of Bliss with the greatest seriousness, and I rely most sincerely on Amitabha Buddha's deliverance.

Sincerity is implemented through faith, and faith arises from true entrusting within our hearts. Sincerity is also realized through our wish to be

reborn in the Land of Bliss. And sincerity is accomplished through recitation of Amitabha's name. The recitation must also be genuine, not perfunctory nor merely a matter of following others. Thus sincerity is manifested in faith, aspiration for rebirth and Amitabha-recitation. These are the three causative factors of rebirth in the Pure Land.

Joyful Entrusting

Entrusting is rooted in faith – our belief that the Land of Bliss and Amitabha Buddha exist. This is the first stage of faith. The next is the conviction that it was for our sake that Amitabha Buddha undertook his Vows and established the Land of Bliss. We must believe the Pure Land is our world, our home. It belongs to us; the ownership and usage rights are registered in our names. If we wish to return there, we naturally are able to do so. Since the Land of Bliss is our home, our abode in an earlier time, to go back there would be entirely in accordance with our nature. This is faith. To return to our Home of Bliss with faith and joy in our hearts is to “entrust joyfully.”

What is to entrust ourselves to Amitabha's deliverance? Taking the initiative, Amitabha Buddha unconditionally saves all sentient beings on a basis of equality. To have faith in this is to entrust ourselves to Amitabha's deliverance.

It was after five *kalpas* of contemplation that Amitabha undertook his 48 Vows. He then accumulated immeasurable Bodhisattva virtues over countless eons. It was before those innumerable eons that Amitabha made his Vows on our behalf and began his meritorious practices. All that time, we were undergoing countless rebirths, sinking into the Three Wretched Realms and getting nowhere. It was then that Amitabha resolved to save us ignorant, suffering beings. This he did on his own initiative, not at our behest or in response to our supplication.

A Parent-Child Analogy

When a couple have a child, they naturally love it with all their heart, care for it and make sure it receives an education. Does the baby have to press its palms together and ask its parents to do this? No. It is in the nature of parents to love, care for and educate their children. What is innate is neither fabricated nor needs to be cultivated; it naturally is. So parents do not have to be compelled to

love and look after their children. They do so as a matter of course. Indeed, they are often prepared to sacrifice themselves to protect their offspring.

If parents, who are ordinary beings afflicted by greed, anger and ignorance, can do this, how much more so can Amitabha Buddha? On behalf of all sentient beings, Amitabha on his own initiative vowed to deliver us unconditionally and without discrimination. Do Buddhas, like us ordinary beings, take a discriminatory perspective? Of course not!

A Buddha does not entertain concepts of self, others, sentient beings or their continuing existence. A Buddha makes no distinction between adversaries and intimates, and regards self and others as one. Because a Buddha does not dwell in duality, he does not differentiate between holy and ordinary beings; she does not distinguish between male and female, or between monastics and householders. That is to be a Buddha. If someone still makes those distinctions, he is an ordinary being, not a Buddha.

'Wish for Rebirth in My Land'

The words “wish to be reborn in my land” are from the perspective of Amitabha Buddha’s vow. His purpose is to call upon all sentient beings and to save them. His message is: You must hurry up and come to my Land of Bliss. Once you are here, you will be able to avoid further rebirths, and you will stop creating bad karma and suffering because of it. You will never again grow old, become sick or die. Not only will you gain the six special powers, you will also achieve Buddhahood quickly.

Saving Beings from Avici Hell

In calling out to all beings, Amitabha Buddha said in the *Sutra of Infinite Life and Splendor*: ***“May sentient beings caught in the various realms of rebirth be reborn soon in my land, so they can enjoy peace and happiness. Exercising compassion constantly to save all beings, I will deliver them from Avici Hell.”***

That is the call issued by Amitabha when he urges beings to “wish to be reborn in my land.” He is asking all beings undergoing rebirth in the Six Realms, particularly the Three Wretched Realms, to be “reborn soon in my land, so they

can enjoy peace and happiness.” Come quickly to the Land of Bliss, he says, for it is your home and refuge. By contrast, “there is no peace in the Three Realms; they are like a house on fire, terrifying and full of pain.”

Amitabha Buddha “constantly [exercises] compassion to save all beings, [delivering] them from Avici Hell.” The beings in this hell committed grave offenses; their wrongdoings constitute the most serious negative karma of all. Amitabha is always beckoning, ready with his boundless compassion to save all sentient beings unconditionally and on a basis of equality, including those in Avici Hell. He hopes they will resolve to be reborn in the Land of Bliss. So long as they are willing, they will be reborn. That is how Amitabha Buddha saves those who seek rebirth in his realm.

‘Recite My Name, Even Ten Times’

Next, Amitabha speaks of those who “recite my name, even ten times.” This is the lowest possible standard for recitation. It means rebirth is available virtually without conditions or obstacles. Everyone can achieve it, giving hope to all beings.

“[Reciting] my name, even ten times” refers even to those who have never learned the Dharma or recited Amitabha’s name. They are at the point of death, and time is short. Yet if they but recite Amitabha’s name ten times, they will be reborn in the Land of Bliss. This means that all beings, even if they seek rebirth and begin reciting at this late stage, can achieve rebirth.

The wording “recite my name, even ten times” is used to cover all beings who call out the name of Amitabha Buddha. It indicates that the Land of Bliss is available to all reciters.

So “recite my name, even ten times” means “up to a lifetime’s recitation, in the context of one’s regular lifetime,” as well as “just ten recitations, with reference to a person at the point of death.”

For those about to die, “even ten times” signifies that even if they never learned the Dharma, recited Amitabha’s name, performed good deeds or accumulated merit, even if they never took the Three Refuges, they can still achieve rebirth in the Land of Bliss with but ten recitations. However foolish or

inept we may be, we have surely recited the name of Amitabha more than ten times. If even they can be reborn, we certainly can as well.

Amitabha Buddha has made known his benchmark for entry into the Pure Land: wanting rebirth and reciting his name. Everyone is capable of meeting such conditions, and anybody who does gains rebirth in the Land of Bliss.

'If They Fail to Be Born, May I Not Attain Enlightenment'

Amitabha Buddha has not set any real preconditions, merely mentioning up to ten recitations. All we need do is to recite his name with single-mindedness. He then says “should [such reciters] fail to be born there, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.” Should we not be reborn in the Pure Land after reciting accordingly, Amitabha would not attain Buddhahood. He would have to continue his practice until we could be so reborn; only then would he be able to achieve Buddhahood. Therefore all beings who recite Amitabha’s name according to his 18th Vow have a direct and intimate relationship with Amitabha Buddha. They are virtually bound together with him, becoming a single entity.

The words “should [they] fail to be born there, may I not attain perfect enlightenment” contain particularly profound implications. Unless you are able to gain rebirth, they suggest, I cannot become a Buddha; only by enabling you to be reborn can I achieve Buddhahood. Without me, you cannot gain rebirth; with me, you will be able to do so. Using perfectly enlightened Buddhahood as collateral, Amitabha Buddha undertakes to deliver all imperfect beings from the cycle of rebirth in the Six Realms, allowing them to be reborn in the Land of Bliss and become Buddhas.

Given such ramifications, hasn’t Amitabha Buddha in fact tied his achievement of Buddhahood to our rebirth in his Pure Land? Such a bond essentially creates a single entity. Without our rebirth, there would be no Amitabha Buddha; without Amitabha Buddha, we could not be reborn in the Land of Bliss.

Name of a Perfectly Enlightened Buddha

As for “up to ten recitations” – what are we supposed to recite? Amitabha’s name as a perfectly enlightened Buddha. Having achieved perfect

enlightenment, Amitabha uses his Buddha's name to save sentient beings, letting them recite it. This great six-character name embodies the merit of all the Buddhas, and sentient beings everywhere can gain rebirth in the Pure Land by reciting it.

Amitabha Buddha said that if he were unable to realize such a name, he would not become a Buddha. The name would not then exist. Only if the name came into being, could be recited by sentient beings and could allow them to be reborn in the Pure Land would he be able to achieve Buddhahood.

That's why the phrase "should [they] fail to be born there, may I not attain perfect enlightenment" is so important and closely linked with us. Of course, each part of the 18th Vow is indispensable, but these words have especially far-reaching significance. In the 18th Vow, we and Amitabha Buddha are forever joined together. Only when the 18th Vow has been fulfilled can all the other vows be realized. If the 18th Vow had not been accomplished, neither would be any of the others.

The 17th Vow

The 18th Vow is also related to the 17th Vow. In the 18th Vow, "recite my name, even ten times" refers to recitation of Amitabha Buddha's name. We learn about the name in the 17th Vow. There, Amitabha Buddha says:

If, when I achieve Buddhahood, innumerable Buddhas in the ten directions should not unanimously extol my name, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

Amitabha is pledging to induce all Buddhas to praise the power and merit of his name, and to laud its unfathomable nature. Through such acclamation, sentient beings can learn of the name and its boundless and inconceivable virtues. That is why the 18th Vow follows the 17th. In fact the two can be considered as one. The ten recitations mentioned in the 18th Vow are recitals of Amitabha's name, praised and propagated in the 17th Vow by all the Buddhas.

It is because of the 17th Vow that Shakyamuni Buddha appeared in our world, eventually to expound on the meritorious power of Amitabha's name and its ability to save all beings. And because Shakyamuni Buddha spoke of this

practice and praised the boundless and unfathomable virtues of Amitabha's name, we are able to hear and learn about it. We can then recite the name single-mindedly, without mixing in various other practices.

The Name Contains All Virtues

That is why the Buddhas extol in the 17th Vow the merit inherent in Amitabha's name as being above all other virtues. That is why Amitabha's name is the Great Name of a Myriad Virtues. It transcends the merit of the Five Precepts and the Ten Good Actions, as well as the practices of the Four Noble Truths, the Twelve Links of Dependent Arising, the Six Paramitas and the myriad virtuous deeds. And it surpasses the merit from sentient beings' resolve to achieve *bodhicitta* and their performance of all good actions.

Only after hearing of the merit in Amitabha's name will we be moved to believe that the phrase *Namo Amitabha Buddha* contains boundless and inconceivable virtue. Only then will we call out the name and recite it with single-mindedness.

The name of Amitabha Buddha contains all virtues, and these virtues are the primary cause of rebirth in the Land of Bliss. The merit required for rebirth is all there, with nothing missing. Whether for rebirth or for the achievement of Buddhahood, all the necessary merit is contained in the name. We must hear and learn about it, before we will recite it single-mindedly.

In Rebirth and Enlightenment, Sentient Beings and Amitabha Are One

Amitabha Buddha also said if he were unable to accomplish the name so sentient beings could recite it and be reborn in the Land of Bliss, he would not become a Buddha. He is bound to us, a state that can be described as "in rebirth and enlightenment, the aptitude (of sentient beings) is at one with the teaching (of Amitabha)." Our rebirth is tied to Amitabha's enlightenment (attainment of Buddhahood). Without our rebirth in the Pure Land, there would be no Amitabha Buddha. And without Amitabha Buddha, we would have no rebirth there.

Of course, this does not mean that Amitabha depends on our practice – that he would gain Buddhahood only if our practice is sufficient to achieve rebirth

in the Land of Bliss. Rather, the merit required for our rebirth has already been accomplished for us by Amitabha Buddha. This is the essence of the 18th Vow.

Karmic Intimacy

So beings who recite Amitabha's name according to the 18th Vow have a direct relationship with Amitabha Buddha. Master Shandao calls this connection "intimate karma." One of his *gatha* goes: **"Of Amitabha's 48 Great Vows, the one on name-recitation alone is most intimate. When we recite Amitabha's name, he embraces us with his mind; if we think of Amitabha, he knows it."**

The Vows refer to the 48 resolutions Amitabha Buddha made on saving all sentient beings. "The one on name-recitation alone is most intimate": Only the 18th Vow – on achieving rebirth through recitation of Amitabha's name – is closely tied to Amitabha Buddha. The 19th and 20th Vows are neither intimately linked with Amitabha nor close to him. Those qualities apply solely to the 18th Vow – thus the word "alone."

Explaining 'Intimate'

Just how intimate are we name-reciters with Amitabha Buddha? First, let us look at the word "intimate." Chinese characters are not arbitrarily made up. They have their inherent implications. There is an appropriateness not only in the artistry of their form, but also in their substance. The character for "intimate" is formed from the characters "stand," "wood" and "see." It suggests a person standing on top of a tree (wood) and gazing in all directions.

In ancient times communications were primitive. There were no cars, telephones or mobile phones. Our family members may be out working, or our children playing outside. Dusk has arrived, and it is starting to rain. Are our loved ones returning yet? We anxiously climb a tree to look around for them. That is to be "intimate."

Worldly Intimacy

Our intimate relationship with Amitabha Buddha is that of a single, inseparable entity. The intimacy of our worldly ties can be divided into three categories – first-level, second-level and third-level closeness. The relationship between parents and children is of first-level intimacy. Second- and third-level

associations derive from this. Our relationships with uncles and aunts are of the latter kind. It is only because we have first-level ties that we also have second- and third-level connections. If they weren't the brothers and sisters of our parents, would we call them uncles and aunts?

Of all these relationships, the bond between parents and children is the most intimate. It is both natural and irreplaceable. Because children are born of parents, they wouldn't exist if their parents didn't. Sons and daughters come into being when their spirits reincarnate at the moment their fathers' sperm meets their mothers' ovum. Besides our spirit, our father's sperm and our mother's blood must be there in order for us to be born. So it is our parents' blood that runs in our veins, not our uncles', aunts' or anyone else's.

The intimate bond between parents and children is a work of nature. We inherit our parents' genes, and their sperm and blood. This relationship is different from all others. It is completely natural and forms the core of all family relationships.

Amitabha's Closeness

The closeness of Amitabha's bond with us exceeds that of all other Buddhas. The reason is that none of the other Buddhas undertook a vow not to attain Buddhahood if reciters of their names failed to gain entry to their Pure Lands. Only Amitabha did that. He said, "should you fail to gain rebirth, I would not be able to become a Buddha." In other words, your rebirth means my attainment of Buddhahood, and my achievement of Buddhahood means your rebirth. It is this relationship that prompted Master Shandao to declare the vow "on name-recitation alone is most intimate."

Amitabha and the Other Buddhas

All Buddhas are fully enlightened and all have great compassion. As the saying goes, "The single recitation of a Buddha's name eliminates as much bad karma as there are grains of sand in the Ganges riverbed. A single prostration before a Buddha generates boundless merit." Such acts all remove evil karma and accrue merit and wisdom.

Yet which other Buddha built a Land of Bliss for us? None!

Can we extricate ourselves from the realms of rebirth and speedily attain Buddhahood by reciting the names of the other Buddhas? No!

Did the other Buddhas vow not to achieve Buddhahood unless we could enter their Pure Lands by reciting their names? No!

Of all the Buddhas only Amitabha undertook his 48 Vows on our behalf, notably pledging in the 18th that “should [reciters] fail to be born there, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.”

Our rebirth is the result of the merit from Amitabha’s achievement of Buddhahood. His merit becomes our merit, in the way that our father’s sperm and our mother’s blood become our body. So Amitabha’s merit and virtues are our merit and virtues, and his assets are our assets. Whatever Amitabha Buddha has, that too is ours – the way a father’s possessions and property are also his son’s.

Because Amitabha’s vows exceed those of other Buddhas and can save all beings, they are lauded by all the Buddhas. That is why the Buddhas encourage sentient beings to believe in Amitabha’s deliverance, seek rebirth in his Pure Land and recite his name single-mindedly.

Recitation Is the Cause, Rebirth the Effect

So we are certain to achieve rebirth through name-recitation; it is a natural process. Recitation is the cause and rebirth the effect. Certain causes always produce certain effects. When recitation is the cause, it is impossible that the effect be anything other than rebirth.

One who understands this principle will recite Amitabha’s name exclusively when he or she undertakes Pure Land practice, without mixing in other practices. The reason is the person knows that such single-minded practice will ensure rebirth. This constitutes the core of the pristine Pure Land tradition.

‘Karma of Assurance’

Master Shandao tells us that recitation of Amitabha Buddha’s name is the “karma of assurance” – action that guarantees our rebirth in the Land of Bliss. He said: **“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.”

So name-recitation is the karma of assurance. “Assurance” contrasts with “non-assurance” and “mistaken assurance.” Assurance means 100% certainty: the cause unambiguously leads to the effect.

‘Non-Assurance’ and ‘Mistaken Assurance’

And what of “non-assurance”? When the cause is equivocal, the effect may or may not be achieved. That is non-assurance. “Mistaken assurance” means that the cause is absent in the first place, so the effect will not materialize. Such is mistaken assurance. It does not imply wrongdoing, only that there is no cause-and-effect relationship.

Name-Recitation Is the Karma of Assurance

In the Pure Land tradition, the 18th Vow – on rebirth through name-recitation – defines the karma of assurance. That’s why Master Shandao called it “the act that ensures” rebirth. A Pure Land practitioner who neither recites Amitabha’s name exclusively nor relies solely on the power of Amitabha’s vow, but instead undertakes mixed practices, would not be performing karma of assurance. And one who practices according to schools other than Pure Land and has no wish to be reborn there, would be accumulating “karma of mistaken assurance,” in terms of rebirth in the Land of Bliss. That is because such practice has nothing to do with the Pure Land school. Therefore Master Shandao called name-recitation the karma of assurance.

The 19th Vow

Now we will explain the 19th Vow –

If, when I attain Buddhahood, all sentient beings who aspire to enlightenment, perform various meritorious deeds and sincerely wish to be born in my land, should not, when they die, see me appear before them surrounded by a multitude of sacred beings, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

‘Perform Various Meritorious Deeds’

“Various” means numerous, so “various meritorious deeds” can be taken as a reference to the Six Paramitas and the myriad practices. These include the Five Precepts, Ten Good Actions, Four Noble Truths, Twelve Links of Dependent Arising, Six Paramitas and all the practices of the diverse Dharma schools. To “perform various meritorious deeds” is to undertake all good acts. That is why “various meritorious deeds” is also called the myriad practices or various actions.

As far as Amitabha’s Pure Land is concerned, however, Master Shandao considers performance of the various deeds and dedication of their merit towards rebirth to be “mixed practice.” That’s because such practices are manifold and highly diverse; they are neither pure nor focused.

To perform various good deeds is a basic practice of all Buddhists. But from the perspective of the Pure Land school, to seek rebirth through the dedication of merit from wholesome action is known as mixed practice. If we rely solely on the name and the deliverance of Amitabha Buddha, the question of merit from mixed practice does not arise. For we would be depending not on our own good deeds to gain rebirth in the Pure Land, but entirely on the merit inherent in Amitabha’s name.

The main reason Amitabha Buddha made his 19th Vow is to save those who are naturally disposed to diverse practice. After all, not everyone is inherently inclined towards the 18th Vow. In undertaking his 19th Vow, Amitabha is in effect saying to the former: As long as you dedicate the merit from your various practices towards rebirth in the Land of Bliss, I promise that I will, when you are near death, come before you with the sacred assembly to deliver you. This is the 19th Vow.

The first point about the 19th Vow is that it does not involve single-minded recitation of Amitabha Buddha’s name. The second: It has no connection with Amitabha’s pledge that “should [name-reciters] fail to be born there, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.”

Differences Between the Two Vows

The 19th Vow is different from the 18th. The 18th Vow is single-minded: It involves solely the recitation of Amitabha's name, and relies exclusively on Amitabha Buddha. When Amitabha pledged not to achieve Buddhahood unless all reciters of his name could gain rebirth in the Land of Bliss, he effectively bound himself to the reciters, one to one. The rebirth of those who recite means the achievement of Buddhahood by Amitabha, and the attainment of perfect enlightenment by Amitabha means rebirth for reciters. Rebirth in the Pure Land and attainment of Buddhahood are inextricably linked.

Those who practice according to the 19th Vow rely on themselves. They depend on their own *bodhicitta*. They bank on their own ability to perform a variety of meritorious deeds. Whether their capabilities are those of a saint or an ordinary being, whether they are accomplished or inept, they accordingly dedicate the merit from their actions toward rebirth in the Pure Land. Amitabha Buddha would then come lead them there.

The 19th Vow therefore has no intrinsic link with Amitabha Buddha. He delivers its adherents only because they have dedicated the merit from their actions to rebirth in the Pure Land.

So we can say that Amitabha attained Buddhahood mainly for the sake of those who practice according to the 18th Vow. Having becoming a Buddha, however, he also delivers beings who do not solely recite his name and do not rely exclusively on him. Otherwise, practitioners of other Dharma schools would not be able to gain rebirth in the Land of Bliss.

The 19th Vow is thus as different as can be from the 18th Vow. Adherents to the latter are inseparable from Amitabha; it is for their sake that he became a Buddha. Practitioners according to the former are separate from Amitabha Buddha, with no intrinsic connection. It is only because of their aspiration for rebirth in the Pure Land, when they are dying, that Amitabha saves them.

Unsurpassed Merit

Moreover, the 18th Vow grows directly out of the 17th Vow, which has all the Buddhas praising the unfathomable merit contained in Amitabha's name. Not so with the 19th Vow. Its adherents rely on their own capabilities and the merit they personally accumulate. Such virtue is completely different from the virtue

bound up in the name of Amitabha Buddha. Amitabha's merit is that of a Buddha; it is flawless, perfect. As the sutras say, the name of Amitabha contains "infinite, boundless and unfathomable merit."

The *Infinite Life Sutra* describes the merit in reciting Amitabha's name according to the 18th Vow in the following terms: "***Done with joy and enthusiasm, a single recitation is enough to ensure the greatest benefit, for it fully contains unsurpassed merit.***" Thus name-recitation brings unparalleled benefit and constitutes matchless virtue.

We must realize that the aspiration to Buddhahood (*bodhicitta*) among ordinary beings like ourselves is largely hollow. It cannot be compared with the substantive and inconceivable merit of Amitabha Buddha. Amitabha's name is of an extra-worldly nature. It represents true, unthinkable and unlimited virtue.

At most, we can practice the Five Precepts and the Ten Good Actions. So it is clear that the aspiration to Buddhahood and the various meritorious practices cannot compare with Amitabha's name, nor can even the simultaneous practice and propagation of the other Dharma schools. So long as we single-mindedly recite the name of Amitabha Buddha, the effects will far exceed the merit from *bodhicitta* and the various practices.

Fulfillment Text of the 18th Vow

The fulfillment text for the 18th Vow says –

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

The fulfillment passage relating to the 18th Vow is Shakyamuni Buddha's explanation of the vow. Because Amitabha has indeed achieved Buddhahood, the 18th Vow is operational and in force. So long as we act according to it, we will experience the appropriate consequences.

Preceding the fulfillment text of the 18th Vow is that of the 17th Vow. It says –

Innumerable Buddhas in the ten directions all praise the supernal, unfathomable merit of Amitabha.

Then follows the fulfillment passage of the 18th Vow. After sentient beings have heard all the Buddhas enthusiastically commending the inconceivable and supernal virtue of Amitabha’s name, if they recite it but once – even if they hear it only near the point of death, recite it one time and generate a single thought of dependence on Amitabha – they will “immediately attain birth and achieve non-retrogression.”

Non-Retrogression

Such persons will at once be reborn in the Land of Bliss. As for non-retrogression, there are three kinds. The type mentioned here means not falling back on the path to Buddhahood. Those who are reborn in the Land of Bliss immediately achieve non-retrogression; they in fact attain the state of being one lifetime away from perfect enlightenment. The *Amitabha Sutra* says –

Sentient beings born in the Land of Bliss all achieve non-retrogression. Many attain the state of being one lifetime removed from Buddhahood.

The state of being one lifetime removed from Buddhahood is that of a Bodhisattva of the highest level, one on the brink of becoming a Buddha.

Simile of the Crown Prince

That is akin to the status of a crown prince, waiting to ascend the throne and become king. Before he does so, he dwells in his own palace and is known as the crown prince. Once his father is no longer on the throne, he ascends it. He has the qualifications to become king, but is merely waiting for the appropriate time.

Once we have arrived in the Land of Bliss, we possess the credentials for Buddhahood. But Amitabha is the Buddha in the Land of Bliss, and his lifespan is infinite. So even if we, in the Pure Land, possess the same boundless light and

infinite life as Amitabha Buddha, we stand one level below him. Like Avalokitesvara (Guanyin) and Mahasthamaprapta, we are known as Bodhisattvas one lifetime removed from Buddhahood.

Simile of the White Lotus Flower

The *Contemplation Sutra* describes and commends those who recite Amitabha Buddha's name as follows –

You should know that those who recite Amitabha's name are like white lotus flowers among humankind. Bodhisattvas Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta become their close friends.

In the world of humans, name-reciters are compared to the *pundarika* (white lotus) flower. Pundarika is a synonym for Buddha. The Buddha is a pundarika flower among humankind, and name-reciters are already being called white lotus flowers.

The reason is that reciters are assured of rebirth in the Land of Bliss, which is a realm for the achievement of Buddhahood. They will certainly become Buddhas. And Bodhisattvas Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta will be their close and wonderful friends.

Wonderful Friends

Even so, we are still ordinary beings, full of greed, anger and ignorance. We have our moods, we lose our temper and we feel resentful about this and that. When we get angry, we whip up a raging storm, full of wind and rain. If we only recite the name of Amitabha Buddha, top-level Bodhisattvas like Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta will be our friends – because we are reciters.

However, if we do not recite single-mindedly but undertake assorted practices, that does not happen. So the status and function are entirely different for adherents to the 18th and the 19th Vows. That is made clear in the fulfillment text –

All sentient beings who, having heard his name, rejoice in faith, recite his name even once and sincerely dedicate the merit of virtuous practices to that land, aspiring to be born there, will immediately attain birth and achieve non-retrogression.

We instantly attain the qualifications for rebirth and the status of non-retrogression. This passage explicates the 18th Vow, not the 19th. The 19th Vow involves aspiration to Buddhahood and manifold meritorious practices. Despite their resolve and their dedication of merit towards rebirth from learning various Dharma schools, adherents' practices remain imperfect and they themselves are full of afflictions. Because they do not rely exclusively on Amitabha Buddha, they will not "immediately attain birth and achieve non-retrogression."

CHAPTER 3: Questions and Answers

ON FAITH: Reciting the name of Amitabha Buddha brings many benefits, but where is the proof? We have compiled three volumes of *Records of the Effects of Amitabha-Recitation*, which contain a wide range of cases. You should, on the one hand, seek to understand the principles behind the teachings. At the same time, you should read the documented cases of events arising from name-recitation. This complementary approach will give rise to faith.

Each person has Buddha-nature, which contains an inherent wisdom. When you have read widely, you will be able to judge whether something makes sense or not. If you know neither the teachings nor the recorded cases, naturally you will have doubts. You will ask, can things really be so?

Very few people can actually see Amitabha Buddha. But it doesn't mean that what we cannot see, doesn't exist. It's only that the conditions aren't yet ripe. One day, we will see; Amitabha Buddha will appear before us when we are about to leave this world.

In the meantime, we can turn to the *Records* to help us understand that Amitabha Buddha does exist, that he does save sentient beings and that those

who recite his name can avoid disasters and difficulties. When you have read many cases, faith naturally arises.

Once you believe and no longer doubt, that is true faith. But if there is still doubt after your initial believing, faith is not yet genuine. In fact, we all have afflictions; we are all prey occasionally to greed, anger and ignorance. For certain people, some things invariably generate certain doubts.

If we are unable at once to thoroughly accept or even feel affinity for Amitabha's deliverance, that is all right. So long as we sense that we have no real alternative to name-recitation as a means of salvation, the problem isn't great, even if we harbor indefinable doubts. Despite the questioning, if you know in your heart that there is an Amitabha Buddha who delivers beings, you will continue to recite his name. You will also be embraced by Amitabha's light, never to be abandoned. When you are about to leave the world, Amitabha will come to welcome you personally to his Pure Land.

According to the teachings of our school, it does not matter whether you understand the underlying principles or not, or whether you believe or not. So long as you call on the name of Amitabha Buddha, you will be reborn in the Land of Bliss. As Master Shandao said, "Beings who recite Amitabha's name will certainly achieve rebirth."

Nonetheless, if you neither understand nor believe, it will be hardly possible for you to practice single-mindedly. That's why we need to understand and believe. Then we will practice in a focused and exclusive manner. Doubts will not arise and create obstacles.

ON RECITATION TARGETS: I have stressed the method of "diamond (*vajra*) recitation" (moving the lips, but without producing sounds audible to persons nearby). It facilitates compact, sustained recitation.

Why is that? "When the mind weakens, the mouth provides support," goes the saying. If our minds falter, we turn to our mouths for help. As we move our lips our minds instinctively follow the recitations. But if our mouths stay still as we recite silently, our recitations will easily slip and our minds will wander.

Some people say they do not make a specific number of recitations. They say they do not recite consciously, for recitation is always on their minds and they are constantly thinking of Amitabha Buddha and declaiming his name.

It doesn't work like that – unless a person is capable of habitual, reflexive recitation. Otherwise, external thoughts will intrude and the recitations will amount to no more than a few hundred a day.

If we sit still and recite every morning, or set a goal of 1,000, 5,000 or 10,000 recitations a day, however forgetful we may be, we will still have accomplished those recitations.

That is why beginners should aim to do a specific number of recitations every day. Besides the morning's sitting recitation, do a set number during the day, time permitting. After a while, the process will become habitual. At that point, you will instinctively recall Amitabha and recite his name, even if you don't set targets or use recitation beads. Your mouth will unconsciously move to Amitabha's name; it will be entirely reflexive.

FAITH IS LIFE: In life, it is most important to believe in something. To a Dharma practitioner, faith is life itself. I believe that only the Buddha's teachings can free me from the cycle of rebirth, and that only they represent the truth about life and the universe. That is faith.

Within the 84,000 Dharma schools, I believe that Amitabha Buddha alone undertook 48 Great Vows on my behalf, notably the one pledging "if [name-reciters] fail to be born [in the Land of Bliss], may I not achieve perfect enlightenment."

Though the Buddhas are many, Amitabha alone is on my mind; of the 84,000 schools, only that of Amitabha's salvation is in my heart. It alone can deliver me from the Six Realms of rebirth. Not only that, but I will enter the Land of Bliss and achieve Buddhahood. These elements pertain to none of the other Buddhas or schools.

So I entrust my mind, body and life – my life within the cycle of rebirth – entirely to Amitabha Buddha. For the remainder of this life I dedicate my body and mind, and depend on Amitabha to deliver me from the cycle of rebirth and

enable me rapidly to achieve Buddhahood. I rely on Amitabha alone, not any other Buddha or Dharma school.

Such faith becomes our very lives. With faith, we are alive. Without it we are not; we would have no life of deliverance, of enlightenment.

Faith, to us, is fundamental and of the utmost importance. Parents, children and spouses are all important to us, but they leave us in the end. What stays with us is *Namo Amitabha Buddha* and our faith alone.

AMITABHA AS FUNDAMENTAL BUDDHA: In our Dharma hall, we display and venerate only images of Amitabha Buddha. Not the other Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, or the Three Sacred Beings of the Land of Bliss – just Amitabha Buddha.

Why is that so? The most basic, most important, most auspicious, most esteemed, unique and irreplaceable – that is known as the fundamental Buddha. The elemental Buddha is the root and the exclusive source of our faith, to whom we completely entrust our lives. Without this fundamental Buddha, we have no life of our own.

Our life of liberation from suffering and of enlightenment depends entirely on the elemental Buddha. He is like a monarch – most esteemed, absolute, peerless and utterly unique. We don't say this is my fundamental Buddha or Bodhisattva, and that is also my fundamental Buddha or Bodhisattva. It does not work like that.

Nothing compares with Amitabha Buddha or can be considered in equivalent terms. From first to last, Amitabha is our fundamental Buddha. As Master Shandao said, "If you wish to make offerings, do so before Amitabha exclusively. If you wish to recite a name, recite only that of Amitabha Buddha." This constitutes focused practice. It underscores a person's faith, his or her single-minded belief.

Since there is but one absolute truth, we avoid multiplicity in our Dharma hall and honor only Amitabha Buddha. If you practice the other Dharma schools, you should venerate your own fundamental sacred being according to the tenets

of your school. For Pure Land practitioners, a Dharma center should display images of their elemental Buddha – Amitabha – exclusively.

As for the Bodhisattvas Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta, they assist and serve Amitabha Buddha, and they relied on him for their rebirth in the Pure Land. They are our wonderful Dharma friends. But they are not our fundamental sacred being.

Moreover, when we recite Amitabha’s name, we are also calling the names of all the Buddhas as well as Avalokitesvara, Mahasthamaprapta and the other great Bodhisattvas. If we entrust ourselves to Amitabha Buddha exclusively and recite his name single-mindedly, such marvelous effects arise as a matter of course. But if we venerate this Buddha as well as that Bodhisattva, if we have mixed beliefs and practices, that will not happen.

FURNISHING THE DHARMA CENTER: Everything we use to decorate and furnish our Dharma center is related to the Land of Bliss, to Amitabha Buddha or to our Pure Land school. Whatever is not, we don’t use. We can hang portraits depicting Amitabha’s deliverance or the splendors of the Land of Bliss, or quotations from key scriptures of our school and our lineage masters. These illustrate a person’s beliefs – that he or she has faith, a focused and exclusive faith rather than mixed beliefs and assorted practices.

A PRACTITIONER’S LIFESTYLE: As followers of the Buddha, we should be content with simplicity, even poverty, and delight in the Dharma. At home our furnishings should be basic, not luxurious or dazzling to the eye. We should display only what is useful and avoid what is not. Our furnishings should be neat and orderly.

That’s because the world is a lodge in which we are temporary dwellers, and miscellaneous articles are but external objects. We should avoid displaying things that are too much of this world. If our furnishings are all associated with the Dharma and the Pure Land, we will gaze only upon scenarios relating to the Land of Bliss.

This reveals the depth of a person’s faith. Otherwise, faith is still insufficient, limited and even shallow. The deeper our faith, the closer we come to its essence. In our practice, deeper faith brings greater focus and

concentration. Then everyone who recites the name of Amitabha Buddha will gain rebirth in his Pure Land.

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.