



Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra, in Four Fascicles

Compiled by Master Shandao of the Tang Dynasty

English translation by Householder Foqing,
edited by Householder Jingtu



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Tel: 886-2-87894818
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FIRST FASCICLE

Section on the Underlying Meaning
of the *Contemplation Sutra*

Section on the Underlying Meaning of the *Contemplation Sutra*

To begin, everyone should aspire for refuge in the Three Gems.

Monastics and householders of the present time:

Let us all awaken the supreme Bodhi-mind.

Samsara is hard to loathe —

Just as the Dharma is hard to love.

Together we arouse a vajra-like heart,

To leap beyond, break the Four Inundations apart.

Aspiring to be born in Amitabha's land,

In refuge we bow with folded hands.

O World-Honored One, my mind singularly tied,

I entrust my life through all realms far and wide,

To Dharma-nature, True Suchness, as the ocean vast,

To all Reward and Emanation Buddhas amassed.

To all Bodhisattvas in their forms sublime,

With relations boundless, in magnitude so prime,

To all their splendors, all transformations free,

The Ten Stages and Three Sages, grand as the sea.

*Whether the appointed kalpas are fulfilled or yet remain,
Whether wisdom and conduct are complete or to be attained,
Whether afflictions are gone or linger in trace,
Whether latent habits endure or have been effaced,*

*Whether exertion is needed or effort stilled,
Whether wisdom is gained or remains unfulfilled,
Wondrous Enlightenment and Equal Awakening,
They abide in samadhi, vajra-mind persisting.*

*With truth resonant in a single thought,
Attaining the fruit and virtue nirvana has brought.
To them we entrust our lives, all and complete —
To Buddhas of Three Bodies, honored for Bodhi feats.*

*With unhindered power, in their mighty grace,
May they grant unseen support, their vows embrace.
To them, with full devotion, we entrust our lives —
To saints and sages of the Three Vehicles, noble and wise.*

*Emulating the Buddhas, great compassion we track,
Through countless kalpas, never turning back.
Sincerely we pray for their support from afar,
In each thought, behold them all, wherever they are.*

*Deluded and lost in ignorance we stray,
Adrift in samsara through vast kalpas' sway.
Yet Shakyamuni, the Buddha we now meet,
In Dharma Decline, his sutras endure as our guiding creed.*

*The Fundamental Vow of Amitabha, profound,
To the Land of Bliss, the gateway vitally bound.
Virtues from meditation and non-meditation transferred,
We swiftly attain the birthless body conferred.*

*On the Bodhisattva Canon my reliance shall be,
Sudden teaching, One Vehicle, vast as the sea.
In the Three Gems I urge refuge, by speaking these odes,
In tune with the Buddha-mind, my resolve unfolds.*

*Buddhas in ten directions, countless as Ganges sand,
With sixfold powers, shine on me and understand.
Following the teaching of the Two Buddhas,
I open wide the Pure Land path.*

*May the merit gained from these deeds I share,
Be received by all beings, equally and everywhere.
Let the Bodhi-mind arise in all and never cease,
And us be reborn in the Land of Joy and Peace.*

Within this *Contemplation Sutra*, an initial analysis is made in seven sections, followed by an interpretation of the sutra's entire text.

1. Preface and main theme.
2. Explanation of the sutra's title.
3. Textual interpretation; discussions of (i) differing core principles and (ii) classification of the teachings.
4. Spotlighting various speakers of sutras, places of delivery, and audiences.

5. Differentiation between meditative and non-meditative virtues, as well as the difference between general and specific requests.

6. Reconciliation of ostensible discrepancies between this sutra and certain commentaries, with extensive question-and-answer discussions to resolve doubts.

7. Identification of the point in time when Lady Vaidehi gained benefit from hearing the Buddha's direct teaching.

1. Preface and main theme

True Suchness, I venture to consider, is so vast that beings of the Five Vehicles cannot fathom its bounds. Dharma-nature is so profound that not even the Ten [types of] Sacred Beings can surmise its depths. The measure of True Suchness is not to be found outside the restless mind. The boundless Dharma-nature remains ever immobile from the origin. Within the non-phenomenal Dharma Realm, both the ordinary and the sacred are equally perfect. The two-fold Suchness, both contaminated and uncontaminated, together encompasses all sentient beings. Merits and virtues, immeasurable as grains of sand in the Ganges River, embody its essence and functions of profound clarity. Yet, obscured by dense layers of defilement and hindrances, the pure substance neither manifests nor radiates.

Thus, the Compassionate One (Shakyamuni Buddha) departed from [the Unsurpassed Land in] the western direction and hastened to enter the gate of the burning house. He sprinkled nectar to nourish the ignorant, and shone the torch of wisdom to illuminate the heavy darkness of endless night. His teachings on Threefold Generosity and the

Fourfold Embraces guide all beings universally. By revealing the causes of suffering across endless *kalpas*, he awakened insight into the blissful fruits of infinite life in nirvana.

Notwithstanding the varied proclivities of the deluded and the absence of disciples capable of realizing the One Reality, he classified his teachings into the Five Vehicles. Spreading clouds of kindness across the Three Domains and showering Dharma rain with great compassion, he universally cleansed the afflictions of sentient beings and granted them unprecedented benefits.

The Bodhi seed sprouted, and the bud of enlightenment grew. From their minds, the beings began supreme practices along the 84,000 paths. Gradual or sudden teachings suited their respective capacities. All who followed his guidance attained liberation.

Yet, hindered by heavy obstacles, seekers of realization struggled to awaken. Though the myriad teachings offered profuse benefits, the deluded were unable fully to embrace them.

Vaidehi's circumstances prompted her to entreat the Buddha: "I now wish to be reborn in the Land of Bliss. I earnestly beseech you, Tathagata, to teach me the practices of contemplative reflection and correct meditative absorption."

In response to her request, the Lord of Teachings in the Saha world (Shakyamuni Buddha) opened wide the Path of Importance to the Pure Land; the Powerful One in the Land of Bliss (Amitabha Buddha) revealed the extraordinary intent of his Great Vow.

The “Path of Importance” encompasses both meditative and non-meditative practices as taught in this *Contemplation Sutra*. “Meditative practice” refers to calming anxiety and concentrating the mind, while “non-meditative practice” involves rejecting evil and cultivating good. Practitioners dedicate the merit from both while aspiring to rebirth in the Pure Land.

As for the “Great Vow,” the *Longer Sutra* states that all ordinary beings, whether good or evil, who attain rebirth in the Pure Land invariably rely on the power of Amitabha Buddha’s Great Vow as an augmentative cause.

Moreover, the vast, profound esoteric intents of the Buddha render the teachings abstruse. Even the Three [categories of] Sages and Ten [types of] Sacred Beings cannot fathom what they can glimpse, so how could I — an outsider in faith, as light as a feather — dare claim to grasp their true meaning?

I reverently submit to Shakyamuni Buddha’s dispatch from this world and Amitabha Buddha’s welcome to the Pure Land. With one sending me off and the other receiving me, how could I not go?

I can only devote myself diligently to the Dharma my entire life. When this defiled body is cast off, I shall realize the eternal bliss of Dharma-nature in the Pure Land.

This concludes the brief statement of the preface and main theme.

2. Explanation of the sutra's title

The sutra is titled: “*Contemplation of Infinite Life Sutra, as Spoken by the Buddha, One Fascicle.*”

“*Buddha*” is the original Sanskrit pronunciation in the Western Regions (ancient India). In this land (China), it is rendered as “Enlightened One.” Self-enlightenment, enlightening others, and perfection of enlightenment practices — a being who accomplishes this is called “*Buddha*.”

“Self-enlightenment” differentiates the person from ordinary beings. But such Sravakas, being narrow and inferior in their pursuits, can only benefit themselves and lack the great compassion needed to benefit others.

“Enlightening others” differentiates the practitioner from the Two Vehicles. Bodhisattvas, possessing wisdom, can benefit themselves and, with compassion, benefit others. They cultivate wisdom and compassion simultaneously, remaining unattached to both existence and non-existence.

“Perfection of enlightenment practices” differentiates from Bodhisattvas. Tathagatas have fully perfected wisdom practices and completed their requisite time. Having transcended the Three Stages [ordinary beings, the Two Vehicles, and Bodhisattvas], they are called “Buddhas.”

“*Spoken*” refers to articulation and expression through the voice, hence “*spoken*.”

Moreover, the Tathagata expounded the Dharma in various ways, tailored to the capacities of his audience. Gradual or sudden teachings were delivered as appropriate. Implicit or explicit expressions differed according to circumstances. At times, all six of his sense faculties conveyed teachings, as did his marks and physical characteristics. By accommodating beings' thoughts and conditions, he enabled all to obtain benefits along the path of realization.

“Infinite Life” is the Chinese rendering of the Buddha's name, whereas “Namo Amitabha Buddha” preserves the original Sanskrit pronunciation from the Western Regions.

Additionally, “Na” means entrust and “mo” signifies life. “Amita” denotes infinite, while “abha” refers to longevity. “Buddha” means Enlightened One. The phrase thus translates as “[I] entrust [my] life to the Enlightened One of Infinite Life.” This correspondence between the Sanskrit and Chinese expressions conveys that meaning.

Further, “Infinite Life” refers to the **Dharma** [that can be realized], while “Enlightened One” represents the **person** [who can realize it]. Both the Dharma and the person are jointly expressed, hence the name “Amitabha Buddha.”

In addition, the terms “person” and “Dharma” embody the objects of contemplation, which are of two types:

- i) Circumstantial reward (the environment);
- ii) Direct reward (the beings there).

The **circumstantial reward** consists of three types:

a) Splendors beneath the ground — all radiant jeweled pillars, illuminating and reflecting one another.

b) Splendors above the ground — all jeweled ground, ponds, forests, mansions, palaces and pavilions.

c) Splendors in the air — all magically manifested jeweled palaces, floral nets, jeweled clouds, transformed birds, breezes, radiance, and the sounds and melodies produced by their motion.

Though distinct, these three categories collectively represent the flawless, truthful, supreme features of Amitabha's Pure Land. Together they constitute its circumstantial splendors.

The circumstantial reward is comprehensively revealed in this sutra, from the "Contemplation of the Sun" through the "Contemplation of the Lotus Throne."

Within this circumstantial reward, there are common and specific elements.

The specific pertains to the Contemplation of the Lotus Throne, a reward that belongs solely to Amitabha Buddha.

The common aspect refers to the remaining six contemplations preceding the specific aspect. These correspond to the shared circumstantial reward accessible to both ordinary and sacred beings throughout the Dharma Realm. All who are reborn there partake of this reward together; hence it is called "common."

Further, these six comprise the **true** and the **provisional**:

The provisional consists of the visualized sun, water and ice. These serve as unreal, provisional circumstantial rewards, as they represent visible phenomena in this world that bear resemblance.

The true circumstantial rewards begin with the “*vaidurya* ground” and extend to the “Contemplation of the Jeweled Mansions.” These constitute the real circumstantial rewards, as these are visible phenomena in the Pure Land that are genuine and flawless.

The **direct reward** consists of two types:

- i) The splendor of the overlord, Amitabha Buddha.
- ii) The splendor of the sacred assembly, including the multitudes presently in the Pure Land and all those yet to be reborn there from the ten directions of the Dharma Realm.

This direct reward is also divided into the **common** and the **specific**.

The specific refers to Amitabha Buddha, which also includes both the **true** and the **provisional**.

The **provisional direct reward** corresponds to the Eighth Contemplation — the “Contemplation of Images,” including Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprabhata. The reason: Due to heavy hindrances of sentient beings, they remain deeply entangled in defilements and delusions. Concerned that a direct visualization of Amitabha’s true form might preclude its manifestation, the Buddha established a provisional image of the true form to aid mental concentration. Visualizing this image as identical to Amitabha leads to

contemplative attainment. This is the provisional direct reward.

The **true direct reward** pertains to the Ninth Contemplation — the “Contemplation of the True Body.” Through the previous contemplation of the provisional direct reward, restless thoughts gradually subside, and the mind’s eye opens. Practitioners roughly see the myriad splendors of the pure Two Rewards in that land; both drowsiness and delusion are dispelled. As obstructions fall away, the true scenes and features of the Pure Land come into view.

The **common direct reward** consists of Avalokitesvara and the sacred assembly in the subsequent contemplations.

The above categories of common and specific, true and provisional together constitute the Two Rewards — direct and circumstantial.

The term “*Contemplation*” is the act of illumination — continually upholding the light of wisdom with pure faith, as a hand holds a torch, to illuminate the vision of Amitabha’s direct and circumstantial rewards.

“*Sutra*” literally means “warp” [in Chinese]. The warp supports the weft, weaving a complete fabric that fulfills its intended purpose. This sutra upholds its teachings, harmonizing the noumenal with the phenomenal. The meditative and non-meditative approaches accommodate different capacities while preserving the integrity of principles. They enable practitioners to make use of their guidance and practice, ensuring rebirth in the Pure Land through [Amitabha Buddha’s] vows, thereby realizing unconditioned Dharma bliss. Once reborn, they are free from fear and embark on continual practice until they ultimately attain Bodhi fruition and the eternally abiding Dharma body, likened to the Void. That which confers such benefits is called “*Sutra*.”

“*One Fascicle*” refers to this *Contemplation Sutra* as a single work. Though expounded in two gatherings, it remains a unified teaching; hence, “*one fascicle*.”

Thus arises the title *Contemplation of Infinite Life Sutra, as Spoken by the Buddha, One Fascicle*. This concludes the explanation of the sutra’s title.

3. Differing core principles and categorical classification of the teaching

Just as the *Vimalakirti Sutra* takes inconceivable liberation as its core, and the *Great Prajna Sutra* has emptiness-wisdom as its essence, such examples are numerous.

This *Contemplation Sutra* takes Buddha-contemplation samadhi as its core principle, and also takes Buddha-invocation samadhi as its core principle. Its scriptural substance (body) is the single-minded dedication of merit in aspiration to rebirth in the Pure Land.

Categorical classification of the teaching —

Question: Which of the two canons (Sravaka and Bodhisattva) includes this sutra? Which of the two types of teachings (gradual and sudden) is it classified under?

Answer: This *Contemplation Sutra* is included in the Bodhisattva canon and classified under the sudden teachings.

4. Various speakers of sutras

The initial expounders of sutras fall into one of five categories:

- i) Shakyamuni Buddha.
- ii) His sacred disciples.
- iii) Devas and immortals.
- iv) Ghosts and spirits.
- v) Transformed beings.

The *Contemplation Sutra* was spoken by Shakyamuni Buddha himself.

Question: Where did the Buddha give this teaching, and to whom was it addressed?

Answer: The Buddha delivered it in the Royal Palace, addressing Vaidehi and others.

5. Differentiation between meditative and non-meditative virtues

There are six aspects:

- i) The subject making the supplication is Vaidehi.

ii) The object of the supplication is Shakyamuni, the World-Honored One.

iii) The subject delivering the exposition is Tathagata Shakyamuni.

iv) The object of the exposition includes both meditative and non-meditative virtues, as well as the 16 Contemplations.

v) The accomplishing subject is Tathagata Shakyamuni.

vi) The accomplished object is [the rebirth of] Vaidehi and others.

Question: Upon whose request were the meditative and non-meditative virtues taught?

Answer: The meditative virtues were requested by Vaidehi, while the non-meditative virtues were expounded by the Buddha on his own initiative.

Question: In which passages are the meditative and non-meditative virtues established? Given that the Buddha's teachings embrace sentient beings without ever being in vain, what dispositions are capable of receiving these two virtues?

Answer: Here are the two explanations.

First, slanderers of the Dharma, the faithless, those subject to the Eight Difficulties, and inhuman beings cannot receive this teaching. They are like rotten wood that cannot sprout and hard rocks that never absorb moisture. There is no basis for their transformation.

Aside from these, **all who wholeheartedly believe and rejoice with the aspiration to rebirth in the Pure Land, sustained throughout life, even down to ten recitations, will invariably attain rebirth by relying on Amitabha's vow-power.**

This answers the above question concerning which dispositions are capable of receiving this teaching.

Second, regarding where the two virtues are established in the text, there are both general and specific references.

The general reference (pertaining to all pure lands) has three points:

i) In the passage “*Vaidehi addressed the Buddha: I humbly beseech you, World-Honored One, to expound in detail on places free from sorrow and distress, [where I may be reborn],*” Vaidehi expressed her intent, making a general request on her own behalf for seeking rebirth;

ii) When she said: “*I entreat you, sun-like Buddha, to teach me how to contemplate the realm of pure karma,*” she generally requested guidance for herself on practices leading to that rebirth;

iii) The World-Honored One's display of pure lands on the radiant platform fulfilled her general request that he “*expound in detail [for her].*”

Though they differ in focus, these three points explain the general reference.

The specific reference has two aspects:

i) In the passage *“Vaidehi addressed the Buddha: My wish now is to be reborn in the Land of Bliss, where Amitabha Buddha resides,”* she makes a specific selection on her own behalf in terms of seeking rebirth;

ii) The sentence *“I earnestly beseech you to teach me the practices of contemplative reflection and correct meditative absorption”* expresses Vaidehi’s personal request regarding specific practices.

Though distinct, these two aspects together explain the specific reference.

From this point on, the meanings of the meditative and non-meditative virtues will be explained.

Question: What are meditative virtues, and what are non-meditative virtues?

Answer: The Contemplation of the Sun through the Thirteenth Contemplation are meditative virtues. The Three Meritorious Actions and the Nine Levels of Rebirth are non-meditative virtues.

Question: What distinctive aspects are included among the meditative virtues? In which passage are they established?

Answer: They are established in the passage where the sutra says: *“Teach me the practices of contemplative reflection and correct meditative absorption.”*

As for “distinctive aspects,” there are two: the first is contemplative reflection, and the second is correct meditative absorption.

“Contemplative reflection” refers to the preliminary expedient practice prior to meditative contemplation. It involves visualizing both the general and specific characteristics of the circumstantial and direct rewards of the Pure Land. This corresponds to the statement in the Contemplation of the Ground: “*Visualizing in this way is called roughly seeing the Land of Bliss.*” It echoes the request: “*Teach me contemplative reflection.*”

“Correct meditative absorption” refers to the complete subsiding of the thinking mind, where both cogitation and perception are entirely extinguished, aligning with samadhi. This is correct meditative absorption. It corresponds to the statement in the Contemplation of the Ground: “*Those who attain samadhi will perceive the ground of that land with clear and distinct vision.*” This correlates with the request: “*Teach me correct meditative absorption.*”

Though meditative and non-meditative virtues differ in meaning, this concludes the comprehensive response to the questions above.

The foregoing interpretations differ from those of other masters.

The other masters use “contemplative reflection” to describe the Three Meritorious Actions and Nine Levels of Rebirth, linking it with non-meditative virtues. They apply “correct meditative absorption” to all Sixteen Contemplations, considering them meditative virtues.

I would argue against such an interpretation. Why? The *Avatamsaka Sutra* states: “***Both contemplative reflection and correct meditative absorption are merely synonyms of samadhi.***”

This accords with the passage on the Contemplation of the Ground. Given this scriptural evidence, how could they be equated with non-meditative virtues?

Moreover, in Vaidehi's previous request to the Buddha, she merely said: *"Teach me how to contemplate the realm of pure karma."* Then, in her subsequent request, she said: *"Teach me the practices of contemplative reflection and correct meditative absorption."* Although there are two requests, they both pertain solely to meditative virtues.

By contrast, the entire section on non-meditative virtues contains no supplication, as this teaching was initiated voluntarily by the Buddha. Scriptural evidence for this lies in the sutra's later section on causal conditions for non-meditative virtues: *"It will also enable future generations of ordinary beings..."*

6. Reconciliation of discrepancies between the sutra and commentaries, with extensive question-and-answer discussions to resolve doubts

This part consists of six elements:

- i) Other masters' interpretations of the Nine Levels of Rebirth.
- ii) Refutation based on Dharma principles.
- iii) Restatement of the sutra passages on the Nine Levels, and refutation through reverse reasoning.
- iv) Scriptural evidence conclusively proving that all Nine Levels of Rebirth apply to ordinary beings, not saints.

v) Reconciliation of the “intention for a different time.”

vi) Reconciliation of the idea that “Seeds of the Two Vehicles are not born there.”

i) Other masters’ interpretations

a) The **three levels of the upper grade (tier)** are interpreted by other masters as follows:

- Those in the upper level of the upper grade are Bodhisattvas from the 4th up to the 7th (exclusive) Bodhisattva stages. Reason: They immediately attain Endurance for the Non-Arising of Dharmas upon reaching the Pure Land.
- Those in the middle level of the upper grade are Bodhisattvas from the 1st up to the 4th (exclusive) Bodhisattva stages. Reason: They attain the same Endurance one small *kalpa* after rebirth.
- Those in the lower level of the upper grade are Bodhisattvas from the Seed-Nature stage up to the 1st Bodhisattva Stage (exclusive). Reason: It takes three small *kalpas* in that realm for them to enter the 1st Bodhisattva stage.

All three levels are Mahayana sacred beings.

b) The **three levels of the middle grade** are interpreted by other masters as follows:

- Upper level of the middle grade — Sravakas of the 3rd stage (Anagami). Reason: They immediately attain the stage of Arhat upon reaching the Pure Land.

- Middle level of the middle grade — Ordinary practitioners of the inner ranks. Reason: They attain the stage of Sotapanna (Stream-Enterer) upon rebirth in that realm.
- Lower level of the middle grade — Ordinary beings with worldly virtues who loath suffering and seek rebirth in the Pure Land. Reason: It takes one small *kalpa* in that realm for them to become Arhats.

All three levels are sacred beings of the Lesser Vehicle.

c) The **three levels of the lower grade** are interpreted by other masters as follows:

These levels consist of ordinary beings who are beginners on the Mahayana path. They are classified into three levels based on the severity of their misdeeds, yet they share the same stage, seeking and aspiring to rebirth in the Pure Land.

These interpretations may not be correct, it should be understood.

ii) Refutation based on Dharma principles

Regarding the aforementioned Bodhisattvas from the 1st to the 7th stages, the *Avatamsaka Sutra* states: ***“Bodhisattvas from the 1st up to the 7th stages possess bodies born from Dharma-nature and bodies born from transmutation. They never experience the suffering of segmented existences. In terms of practice endeavors, they have completed the dual cultivation of virtue and wisdom for two great asamkhyeya kalpas and realized the non-substantiality of both atman (beings) and dharmas (phenomena). They wield unfathomable supernatural powers with***

boundless freedom and manifest transformations without restraint. Residing in Realms of Rewards, they continually hear Dharma teachings from Reward-Body Buddhas and deliver sentient beings with great compassion throughout the ten directions, pervading all worlds in an instant.”

In light of this, what concerns could lead them to rely on Vaidehi to request the Buddha for rebirth in the Pure Land? Based on this textual evidence, could the interpretations of other masters not be mistaken? This ends the refutation concerning the upper two levels of the upper grade.

Regarding the lower level of the upper grade, the earlier claim that it extends “from the Seed-Nature stage up to the 1st Bodhisattva stage” appears improbable. A scripture (the *Treatise on the Perfection of Wisdom*) states: ***“These Bodhisattvas are non-retrogressive; though physically remaining in samsara, they are not tainted by birth and death, like geese and ducks in water that do not get wet.”***

According to the *Maha Sutra*: ***“Bodhisattvas at these stages are protected by two kinds of true Dharma friends and thus do not retrogress: (i) Buddhas of the ten directions and (ii) Mahasattvas of the ten directions.***

“With their constant external empowerment through body, speech and mind, these Bodhisattvas never retrogress from virtuous dharmas, hence their stage of ‘non-retrogression.’ These Bodhisattvas are also capable of manifesting the Eightfold Aspects of Realizing the Way and guiding sentient beings. In terms of practice endeavors, they have completed the dual cultivation of virtue and wisdom for one great asamkhyeya kalpa.”

With such supreme virtues, what further concerns could lead them to depend on Vaidehi's request for rebirth? Based on this textual evidence, the interpretations of other masters are once again proven mistaken.

This ends the refutation relating to the upper grade of rebirth.

Next is the refutation regarding the three levels of the middle grade. The sundry masters claim that "the upper level of the middle grade comprises Sravakas at the 3rd Stage (Anagami, or Non-Returner)." However, beings at this stage have permanently severed ties to the Three Wretched Realms and will no longer be reborn in the Four Destinies. Though they may commit negative karma in the present, they are certain not to incur a next life from karmic retribution. As the Buddha says: *"These beings of the Fourfold Fruition sit together with me on the seat of liberation."*

With such merit and power, what further concerns could lead them to depend on Vaidehi's request for rebirth?

Buddhas, out of great compassion for those who suffer, commiserate with beings permanently submerged in samsara. Therefore, they urge such beings to seek rebirth in the Pure Land. Consider this: Drowning persons urgently require special rescue, while those safely on shore have no need for aid. Based on this textual evidence, the interpretations of the other masters are once more shown to be invalid.

The same understanding can apply to the two lower levels.

iii) Restatement of the sutra passages on the Nine Levels, and refutation through reverse reasoning

According to other masters, “Aspirants reborn in the **upper level of the upper grade** are Bodhisattvas from the 4th up to the 7th Bodhisattva stages.” Why, then, does the *Contemplation Sutra* state [paraphrase]:

“Three types of beings are certain to attain rebirth. What are these three?”

- *Those who can uphold precepts and cultivate compassion.*
- *Though unable to uphold precepts or cultivate compassion, those who can still recite and chant Mahayana sutras.*
- *Though unable to uphold precepts or chant sutras, those who can still invoke the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.*

“These three types of beings apply exclusive, diligent effort in their respective practices for one day and night, or even up to seven days and nights, continuously without interruption. They dedicate the merits of their practices in aspiration to rebirth in the Pure Land. When they approach death, Amitabha Buddha, along with emanated Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and the sacred assembly, radiate light and extend their hands. In an instant, these practitioners are reborn in the Pure Land.”

This scriptural evidence demonstrates that these practitioners are top-grade **ordinary beings**, exceptionally virtuous on the Mahayana path, living after the Buddha’s passing. Their practice lasts only a few days, yet it is marked by intense effort. How could they be equated with sacred beings beyond the initial Bodhisattva stage? The practice of Bodhisattvas from the 4th to the 7th stages are truly beyond imagination. Why would they rely on just one to seven days of virtuous practice to seek rebirth through the Buddha’s welcoming hands and lotus pedestal?

This concludes the reverse refutation relating to rebirth at the upper level of the upper grade.

Next, concerning the **middle level of the upper grade**, the other masters state: “They are Bodhisattvas from the 1st to the 4th stages.” Why, then, does the *Contemplation Sutra* say: “...without needing to memorize the Mahayana scriptures”?

What is meant by “without needing”? It means they may read [the sutras] or may not. The text speaks only of a need to “properly understand the meaning” without mentioning actual practice.

The sutra further states: “*They have deep faith in cause and effect and refrain from slandering the Mahayana. They dedicate these virtuous roots in aspiration to rebirth in the Pure Land. As they approach death, Amitabha Buddha, along with emanated Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and the sacred assembly, extend their hands in unison, and the practitioners are immediately reborn in the Pure Land.*”

This textual evidence confirms that these practitioners are also **ordinary beings** of the Mahayana path living after the Buddha’s passing. Their practices are slightly weaker, leading to differences in how they are welcomed at life’s end. However, the practice of Bodhisattvas from the 1st to the 4th stages are, as described in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, “**truly beyond comprehension.**” How could they depend on Vaidehi’s request to attain rebirth? This concludes the reverse refutation concerning the middle level of the upper grade.

As for the **lower level of the upper grade**, the other masters state: “They are Bodhisattvas from the Seed-Nature stage up to the 1st Bodhisattva stage.” Why, then, does the *Contemplation Sutra* say: “...also have faith in cause and effect”?

What is meant by “*also have faith*”? It implies that they may have faith or may not, hence the word “*also*.” The sutra further states: “*They refrain from slandering the Mahayana and simply develop the resolve for supreme enlightenment.*”

Only this single sentence refers to their actual practice, and no other virtuous actions are mentioned. They dedicate this single deed in aspiration to rebirth in the Pure Land. As they approach death, Amitabha Buddha, along with emanated Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and the sacred assembly, extend their hands in unison, and the practitioners are immediately reborn in the Pure Land.

Based on this scriptural evidence, they could only be sentient beings after the Buddha’s passing who have developed the Mahayana resolve, yet whose weak practices lead to differences in how they are welcomed at the time of departure. In contrast, the Bodhisattvas at the [alleged] stages possess powers and abilities that enable them to be reborn freely in any pure lands of the ten directions as they wish. How could they depend on Vaidehi’s request for the Buddha to guide their rebirth in the Western Land of Bliss? This concludes the reverse refutation concerning the lower level of the upper grade.

These three levels differ in the circumstances at the time of departure. What are the differences?

- **Upper level of the upper grade** — At the time of departure, Amitabha Buddha and countless emanated Buddhas extend their hands in unison.
- **Middle level of the upper grade** — At the time of departure, the Buddha and 1,000 emanated Buddhas extend their hands in unison.

- **Lower level of the upper grade** — At the time of departure, the Buddha and 500 emanated Buddhas extend their hands in unison.

These differences arise from the varying strengths of their karma.

Next, regarding the three middle-grade levels, other masters state: “The **upper level of the middle grade** comprises Sravakas at the 3rd stage (Anagami).” Why, then, does the *Contemplation Sutra* say [paraphrase]: *“They are sentient beings who receive and observe the Five Precepts and the Eight Precepts, and uphold various other Buddhist disciplines. They do not commit the Five Gravest Transgressions and remain free of various faults. As they approach death, Amitabha Buddha and a retinue of bhikkus appear before them, radiating light and expounding the Dharma. Upon seeing this, the practitioners are instantly reborn in the Land of Bliss.”*

As this passage shows, they are ordinary beings after the Buddha’s passing who uphold Lesser Vehicle precepts — how could they possibly be sacred beings of the Lesser Vehicle?

Regarding the **middle level of the middle grade**, other masters state: “They are Inner Ordinaries below the Seeing-Path stage.” Why, then, does the *Contemplation Sutra* say [paraphrase]: *“They observe the precepts for one day and one night and dedicate the merit in aspiration to rebirth in the Pure Land. As death approaches, they see Amitabha Buddha and are immediately reborn there.”*

Going by this textual evidence, how can they be Inner Ordinaries? They could only be ordinary beings who, after the Buddha’s passing, lack virtuous deeds and idly live out their remaining days and nights. Then, upon encountering some Lesser Vehicle condition, they receive Lesser

Vehicle precepts and dedicate this merit in aspiration to rebirth in the Pure Land. Through the power of Amitabha's vows, they are reborn there.

Speaking of lesser sacred beings, there are no obstacles to their rebirth in the Pure Land. However, **the Buddha taught this *Contemplation Sutra* specifically for ordinary beings — it does not concern sacred beings.**

Regarding the **lower level of the middle grade**, other masters state: "They are worldly ordinary beings below the stage of Lesser Vehicle Inner Ordinaries. They cultivate only worldly merit and aspire to renunciation." Why, then, does the *Contemplation Sutra* say [paraphrase]: "*They are sentient beings who are filial to their parents and display worldly benevolence and kindness. As they approach death, they encounter a Dharma friend who recounts the blissful phenomena of the Pure Land and the 48 Vows of Amitabha Buddha. After hearing this, they are immediately reborn in the Pure Land*"?

This textual evidence proves that these beings have not previously encountered the Buddha's teachings. Though practicing filial piety, they have no intention of pursuing renunciation. Only at the time of death do they meet a Dharma friend who encourages them to seek rebirth in the Pure Land. Moved by this urging, they change their minds and are thereby reborn there. Furthermore, throughout their lives, they naturally practice filial piety, yet not out of a wish for renunciation.

Next, regarding the three levels of the lower grade, the other masters state: "They consist of ordinary beings who are beginners on the Mahayana path. They are classified into three levels based on the severity of their misdeeds. As they lack attainment stages, it is difficult to distinguish their relative ranking." This, however, is not the case. Why?

Beings of these three levels possess no virtuous roots, whether Buddhist or worldly, and engage solely in evil deeds. How do we know this?

According to the sutra text on the **upper level of the lower grade** [paraphrase]: *“They only refrain from committing the Five Gravest Transgressions and slandering the Dharma, but indulge in all other forms of evil. They are devoid of shame, even for a single thought. When they approach death, they encounter a Dharma friend who speaks of the Mahayana and instructs them to recite Amitabha’s name once. At that moment, Amitabha Buddha immediately dispatches an emanated Buddha and Bodhisattvas to welcome them, and they instantly attain rebirth in the Pure Land.”*

Such evildoers are found everywhere. If they encounter virtuous conditions, they can attain rebirth in the Pure Land; but if not, they will inevitably fall into the Three Wretched Realms, with no hope of escape.

On the **middle level of the lower grade** [paraphrase]: *“They have previously received Buddhist precepts but fail to uphold them. Instead, they casually abandon and break them. They also steal the communal property of the Sangha, plunder the personal belongings of resident monastics, and teach the Dharma with impure motives, showing not even a single thought of shame or remorse.*

“As death approaches, the flames of hell rise before them, appearing all at once. At the sight of these flames, they encounter a Dharma friend who speaks of the merits of Amitabha Buddha’s Pure Land and encourages them to seek rebirth there. Upon hearing this, they immediately see Amitabha and follow the emanated Buddha to be reborn in the Pure Land.”

Before meeting the Dharma friend, they were greeted by hell's fires. After the encounter, they are welcomed by the emanated Buddha. All of this is due to the power of Amitabha Buddha's vows.

On the **lower level of the lower grade** [paraphrase]: *“These sentient beings commit unwholesome deeds, including the Five Gravest Transgressions, the Ten Evil Actions and various other offenses. Due to their negative karma, they are doomed to fall into hell for countless kalpas of uninterrupted suffering. When approaching death, they encounter a Dharma friend who instructs them to recite the name of Amitabha Buddha and encourages them to seek rebirth in the Pure Land. By following this instruction and calling the Buddha's name, they attain rebirth because of the recitation.”*

If they do not encounter a Dharma friend, they will surely descend into the lower realms. But through meeting the Dharma friend at the time of death, they are welcomed by a seven-jeweled lotus.

Further, throughout the passages in the *Contemplation Sutra* on meditative virtues and the Three Grades of Rebirth, the teachings apply to ordinary beings of the Five Turbidities, following the Buddha's passing. It is solely due to differences in the karmic conditions they encounter that they are classified into nine distinct levels.

How is this so?

- ***Three Upper-Grade Levels* — Ordinary beings who have encountered Greater Vehicle conditions.**

- ***Three Middle-Grade Levels* — Ordinary beings who have encountered Lesser Vehicle conditions.**
- ***Three Lower-Grade Levels* — Ordinary beings who have encountered adverse conditions. Due to their negative karma, they can only rely on a Dharma friend as death approaches and, through the power of Amitabha Buddha's vows, attain rebirth in the Pure Land.**

Only after their arrival, when the lotus blooms, do the latter group begin to develop the Bodhi-mind. How can they be regarded as beginners on the Mahayana path? To hold such a view not only brings personal loss but also misleads others, resulting in significant harm.

Passages from the sutra will now be cited as evidence, **in hopes that both virtuous and wicked ordinary beings today benefit equally from the Nine Levels of Rebirth, awaken faith free of doubt, and, by relying on the power of Amitabha's vows, attain rebirth in the Pure Land without exception.**

iv) Scriptural evidence

Question: Regarding the preceding reverse refutations, how can it be ascertained that the World-Honored One intended [these teachings] for ordinary beings and not for sages? Is this conclusion determined solely from subjective sentiment, or is there also scriptural evidence to support it?

Answer: Sentient beings are weighed down by heavy defilements and possess only shallow and narrow wisdom. The Buddha's intentions are

boundless and profound — how could I presume to interpret them on my own? Now, I will quote the Buddha’s words one passage after another as clear evidence.

This scriptural evidence consists of ten passages from the sutra.

Passage 1

The *Contemplation Sutra* states: “*The Buddha said to Vaidehi: I will now explain this in detail for you, using various analogies. It will also enable future generations of ordinary beings who wish to cultivate pure karma to attain rebirth in the Western Land of Bliss.*”

Passage 2

The sutra states: “*Now, the Tathagata will teach about pristine, pure karma for all beings of future generations, those afflicted by vexatious thieves.*”

Passage 3

It states: “*Today, the Tathagata will instruct Vaidehi and all future beings to contemplate the Western Land of Bliss.*”

Passage 4

It further states: “*Vaidehi said to the Buddha: Through the Buddha’s power, I am able to behold that land today. Yet, after the Buddha’s Parinirvana, sentient beings will become turbid, wicked and devoid of virtue, burdened by the five sufferings. How will they be able to see that Buddha Land?*”

Passage 5

At the beginning of the Contemplation of the Sun, it is stated: “*The Buddha said to Vaidehi: You and sentient beings should focus your minds...*”

Continuing until: “*...all sentient beings who have eyes, except those born blind, can see the setting sun.*”

Passage 6

Apropos the Contemplation of the Ground, it is stated: “*The Buddha said to Ananda: You should preserve my words and expound this method of contemplating the ground to all multitudes of future generations who seek liberation from suffering.*”

Passage 7

In the Contemplation of the Lotus Throne, it is stated: “*Vaidehi said to the Buddha: World-Honored One, through the Buddha’s power, I have seen Amitabha Buddha and the two Bodhisattvas. How can sentient beings of future generations behold them?*”

Passage 8

In the subsequent response to the aforementioned request, it is stated: “*The Buddha said to Vaidehi: You and sentient beings who wish to contemplate that Buddha should begin by envisioning...*”

Passage 9

In the Contemplation of Images, it is stated: “*The Buddha said*

to Vaidehi: Tathagatas enter the mind of each sentient being. For this reason, when thinking of a Buddha, your minds become...”

Passage 10

For the Nine Levels, each is explained as being intended for all sentient beings.

The foregoing, while consisting of ten varied phrases, nonetheless **demonstrates that the Buddha expounded the Sixteen Contemplations solely for sentient beings endlessly embroiled in samsara, addressing neither Greater nor Lesser Vehicle sacred beings.** Given such textual evidence, how could there be any error?

v) Reconciliation of the “intention for a different time”

This consists of two points:

a) The *Compendium of the Mahayana* mentions [as an example of the different-time intention]: ***“Those who invoke Prabhutaratna (Abundant Treasures) Buddha will attain non-retrogression and non-descent in supreme Bodhi.”***

Any reference to “Bodhi” pertains to the realization of Buddhahood, which is the direct reward. According to the principles of attaining Buddhahood, myriad practices must be perfected before realization is possible. How could anyone expect the single practice of Buddha-invocation to accomplish this? Such a possibility does not exist.

Despite the mention of Buddhahood not yet attained, Buddha-invocation is indeed one of the myriad practices. How do we know this? As stated in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*: ***“Bhikku Meritorious Cloud said to***

Sudhana: ‘In the vast ocean of the World-Honored Ones’ wisdom, I know only one practice, called Buddha-invocation samadhi’.”

With this piece of textual evidence, is it not truly one of the practices?

Though invocation is only a single practice, from within samsara until the attainment of Buddhahood, it ensures eternal non-retrogression and non-submergence. Thus, it is termed “non-descent.”

Question: If that is the case, why does the *Lotus Sutra* state: “**By reciting ‘Namo Buddha’ once, one has already accomplished the Buddha path,**” which signifies the complete attainment of Buddhahood. How does this differ from the previous statement?

Answer: a) In the *Compendium*, reciting the Buddha’s name is intended solely for the attainment of one’s own Buddhahood. The *Lotus Sutra*, however, highlights Buddha-recitation to distinguish it from the 95 non-Buddhist paths. This is because none of these paths have followers who recite a Buddha’s name at all. Thus, by merely reciting Namo Buddha once, one is already embraced within the Buddha path, hence the phrase “already accomplished.”

b) The *Compendium* references [as another example of the different-time intention]: “**A person attains rebirth in the Land of Peace and Joy solely through aspiration.**”

The principle behind this instance has long been misunderstood by those well-versed in the *Compendium*, who mistakenly equate it with the case of rebirth in the lower level of the lower grade through ten recitations, assuming that rebirth is not attained immediately.

They draw an analogy: Earning a thousand coins from a single coin requires many days and cannot be accomplished in a single day. Similarly, the ten recitations of the Buddha's name merely serve as a cause for rebirth in the distant future; immediate rebirth is not attained. They argue that the Buddha's intent was simply to encourage future ordinary beings to abandon evil and recite the Buddha's name — that his mention of rebirth is an expedient means, and rebirth is, in fact, not yet attained. This is the “intention for a different time.”

Why, then, does the *Amitabha Sutra* state [paraphrase]: ***“The Buddha said to Śāriputra: ‘Good men and women who hear of Amitabha Buddha should steadfastly recite his name for one to seven days, with single-minded aspiration to rebirth. When death approaches, Amitabha Buddha and the sacred assembly will welcome them to be reborn in the Pure Land’ ”?***

A subsequent passage of the sutra says: ***“Buddhas from each of the ten directions, innumerable as grains of sand in the Ganges River, each extend their long, broad tongues until they cover the three-thousand-fold great chiliocosm, speaking these words of truth: ‘All you sentient beings should have faith in this Protection and Remembrance of All Buddhas Sutra’.”***

The “protection and remembrance” specifically applies to those who recite the Buddha's name for one to seven days, as mentioned above.

With this sacred teaching as clear evidence, I cannot fathom what today's practitioners mean. Why do they trust and accept the views of ordinary people with lesser wisdom, yet dismiss all the Buddhas' words of truth as falsehoods? How tragic this is! How could they make such intolerable claims!

Nonetheless, I sincerely hope that all aspirants to rebirth will carefully reflect: It is far better to stake this present lifetime on believing — even if mistakenly, by some chance — in the Buddhas’ words than to cling to Bodhisattvas’ treatises as a guide to practice. A stubborn adherence to the latter not only harms themselves but also misleads others.

Question: Why is it said [in the *Compendium*] that, despite initiating practice, one still fails to attain rebirth?

Answer: To attain rebirth, one must embrace both practice and aspiration. Only then can rebirth be achieved. However, the *Compendium* mentions only the aspiration to rebirth without indicating that practice has been undertaken.

Question: Why do you say practice is not indicated?

Answer: Because not even a single thought [of practice] has ever arisen in the person’s mind. That is why practice is not mentioned.

Question: What is the difference in meaning between aspiration and practice?

Answer: As the sutras state, practice alone is isolated and leads nowhere, while aspiration alone is futile and also leads nowhere. Aspiration and practice must support each other to achieve success in any endeavor. The *Compendium* mentions only aspiration and does not indicate practice. This is why rebirth is not immediately attained, and [the aspiration] merely serves as a cause for rebirth in the distant future. This is the precise meaning.

Question: What does “aspiration” signify [for the *Compendium*] to assert that rebirth is not attained?

Answer: It signifies that, upon hearing from others about the unfathomable happiness of the Western Pure Land, one promptly makes a wish: “I, too, hope to be reborn there.” However, after these words are spoken, no further actions follow. This is what is meant by “aspiration.”

In this *Contemplation Sutra*, the ten recitations of Amitabha Buddha’s name fully embody ten aspirations and ten practices. How is this so? **“*Namo*” signifies entrusting one’s life and also carries the meaning of aspiring to rebirth and dedicating merit. “*Amitabha Buddha*” represents the practice. With these meanings, rebirth is assured.**

Furthermore, in the *Compendium*, reciting Prabhutaratna Buddha’s name aims to pursue Buddhahood, namely the direct reward, whereas solely aspiring to rebirth in the Pure Land orients to its circumstantial reward. The direct versus the circumstantial — how can they be similar? The direct is difficult to attain, so the single practice [of Buddha-invocation], though consummate, does not yield success. The circumstantial is easier to pursue; nonetheless, one [simple] wish does not suffice to enter [the Pure Land].

Notwithstanding the above, consider commoners from the outlying regions of a country. While they may easily entrust themselves to the sovereign, they can scarcely attain rulership. Likewise, today’s aspirants to rebirth are all beings who entrust themselves [to Amitabha] — how could that not be effortless?

As long as one recites for an entire lifetime, even down to ten times, relying on the power of Amitabha’s vow, none will fail to attain rebirth. Therefore, it is “easy.”

This is precisely:

*True meaning is not found in words alone,
Lest faithful hearts let seeds of doubt be sown.
The Buddha's sacred teachings must be clearly shown,
Then confusion in those who hear is overthrown.*

vi) Reconciliation of the notion that “Seeds of the Two Vehicles are not born there”

Question: Is Amitabha's Pure Land a Realm of Rewards or a Realm of Transformation?

Answer: It is a Realm of Rewards, not a Transformation Realm. How do we know this? The *Mahayana Same-Nature Sutra* states: ***“The Western Land of Peace and Joy is a Realm of Rewards, and Amitabha Buddha there is a Reward Body Buddha.”***

The *Infinite Life Sutra* states [paraphrase]: ***“When he practiced the Bodhisattva path in the presence of Tathagata Lokeshvararaja, Bhikku Dharmakara proclaimed 48 vows, each and every one of which declared: ‘If, when I achieve Buddhahood, sentient beings of the ten directions who recite my name and aspire to be reborn in my land, even with as few as ten recitations, should fail to be reborn, may I not attain perfect enlightenment’.”***

Given that he has attained Buddhahood, this is precisely the body that recompenses his practices in the causal ground.

Furthermore, in the *Contemplation Sutra*, when those in all three levels of the upper grade approach death, it is invariably stated: ***“Amitabha Buddha, along with emanated Buddhas, come to welcome them.”***

This is the Reward Body Buddha together with the Transformation Body Buddhas [emanated Buddhas] extending their hands in welcome, hence the phrase “*along with.*”

Based on this textual evidence, we know that Amitabha is a Reward Body Buddha.

However, “Reward Body” and “Response Body” are simply synonyms, akin to “eye” and “oculus.” Earlier translations rendered “Reward” as “Response,” while later ones phrased “Response” as “Reward.”

References to “Reward” emphasize that causal practices are never in vain; they inevitably lead to the corresponding fruition — the effect echoes the cause, and this is called “Reward.” On the other hand, the myriad practices cultivated over three *asamkhyeya kalpas* unfailingly give rise to Bodhi in response. The body that results from completion of the path to Buddhahood is the Response Body.

For all Buddhas, past and present, the Three Bodies are distinctly established, beyond which there is no other entity. The Eight Aspects of Realizing the Way, though boundless in their manifestations, and the Buddhas’ epithets, though as numerous as dust and sand, are in essence all encompassed within the category of Transformation. However, Amitabha Buddha, now in the Pure Land, is a Reward Body.

Question: If Amitabha is said to be a Reward Body Buddha, and given that Reward Bodies are eternally abiding, never subject to birth and death, why does the *Avalokitesvara Prediction Sutra* state: “***There is also a time when Amitabha Buddha enters Parinirvana***”?

How can this be reconciled?

Answer: The matter of entering or not entering [Parinirvana] pertains solely to the realm of Buddhas. Even those of the Three Vehicles, shallow in wisdom, cannot glimpse it — let alone lesser and ordinary beings. Nevertheless, for those who insist on knowing, I will boldly cite a sutra as clear evidence to demonstrate.

The *Great Prajna Sutra*’s “Chapter on Nirvana Not Being Transformational” states:

“The Buddha asked Subhūti: ‘What do you think? If a transformed being creates another transformed being, does this transformed being have any real entity that is not empty?’

“Subhūti replied: ‘No, World-Honored One.’

“The Buddha told Subhūti: ‘Form is transformational, as are sensation, perception, mental formations and consciousness — extending even to All-Inclusive Wisdom, which is also transformational.’

“Subhūti said to the Buddha: ‘World-Honored One, if worldly dharmas are transformational, and so are extra-worldly dharmas, then are the following dharmas also transformational: the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, Four Correct Efforts, Four Bases of Supernatural Power, Five Mental Faculties, Five Powers, Seven Factors of Bodhi, the Noble Eightfold Path, Three Liberation Gates, Buddhas’ Ten Powers, Four Fearlessnesses, Four Unobstructed Wisdoms, Eighteen Special Qualities, all Dharma fruitions, as well as sages and sacred beings — Sotapannas, Sakadagamis, Anagamis,

Arhats, Pratyekabuddhas, Bodhisattva Mahasattvas and Buddhas, the World-Honored Ones?’

“The Buddha told Subhūti: ‘All dharmas are transformational. Among these, there are transformations in the Sravaka dharmas, Pratyekabuddha dharmas, Bodhisattva dharmas, Buddha dharmas, affliction dharmas, and dharmas of karmic causes and conditions. Therefore, Subhūti, all dharmas are transformational.’

“Subhūti asked the Buddha: ‘World-Honored One, with regard to the riddance of afflictions, namely, the fruitions of Sotapanna, Sakadagami, Anagami and Arhat, as well as the Pratyekabuddha Path, in which lingering tendencies of afflictions are eliminated... are all these also transformational?’

“The Buddha told Subhūti: ‘Dharmas that exhibit the characteristics of arising and ceasing are all transformational.’

“Subhūti asked: ‘World-Honored One, what dharmas are not transformational?’

“The Buddha replied: ‘Dharmas that neither arise nor cease are not transformational.’

“Subhūti asked: ‘What dharmas neither arise nor cease and are therefore not transformational?’

“The Buddha answered: ‘Nirvana without delusive characteristics is a dharma that is not transformational.’

“ ‘World-Honored One, as you yourself have said, all dharmas are equal. They are not created by Sravakas, Pratyekabuddhas, Bodhisattva

Mahasattvas or Buddhas. Whether or not a Buddha appears, all dharmas are constantly empty in nature. This emptiness in nature is nirvana. How, then, can this singular dharma of nirvana not be transformational?’

“The Buddha replied to Subhūti: ‘Indeed, indeed! All dharmas are equal, not created by Sravakas, and so on, up to the point that emptiness in nature is nirvana. If Bodhisattvas with newly formed resolve hear that all dharmas are ultimately empty in nature, and that even nirvana is transformational, their minds may become shocked and fearful. Therefore, for such newly resolved Bodhisattvas, I made a distinction: Dharmas that arise and cease are transformational, while those that neither arise nor cease are not transformational’.”

Now, as verified by the above sacred teaching, Amitabha Buddha is definitively a Reward Body Buddha. Even if he were to enter Parinirvana in the future, the principle is not contradicted. Those with wisdom should understand this.

Question: Given that Amitabha Buddha and his Pure Land are of the Reward nature, and that, due to the sublimity and subtlety of Reward dharmas, even lesser sacred beings have difficulty gaining access. How can ordinary beings, hindered by defilements, possibly do so?

Answer: If we speak of the defilements and hindrances of sentient beings, to admire and pursue [the Pure Land] would truly be difficult. However, precisely by relying on Amitabha’s vows as a powerful condition, all Five Vehicles can invariably be reborn there.

Question: If ordinary beings and lesser sacred beings can attain rebirth, why does Vasubandhu’s *Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land*

state: ***“Women, deformed beings and those with seeds of the Two Vehicles are not born there”?***

Yet, at present, beings of the Two Vehicles do exist in that land. How then should this statement in the *Treatise* be understood?

Answer: You are fixated on the words while overlooking the principles and the context. Adding to this, by confining yourself to narrow views and confusion, you leave no path to awakening. To dispel your doubts, I will now cite the Buddha’s words as clear evidence. What is this evidence? It lies in the three Lower-Tier levels in the *Contemplation Sutra*. As stated in the passage on the upper level of the lower grade: *“There are sentient beings who commit numerous evil deeds and lack a sense of shame or remorse. When these ignorant beings approach death, they encounter a Dharma friend who speaks of the Mahayana and instructs them to recite the name of Amitabha Buddha. When they recite, an emanated Buddha and Bodhisattvas appear before them. With golden light and radiant canopies, they welcome them to the Pure Land. After the lotus blooms, Avalokitesvara expounds the Mahayana to them, and upon hearing it, they immediately awaken the mind resolved on supreme enlightenment.”*

Question: What is the difference between “seed” and “mind”?

Answer: These two terms are used as convenient, with no difference in meaning. When the lotus blooms, the beings’ body-vessels are pure and fully capable of receiving the Dharma. They also make no distinction between lesser and greater teachings; as long as they hear, faith arises immediately. Therefore, Avalokitesvara does not expound the Lesser Vehicle but begins directly with the Mahayana. Upon hearing it, the beings greatly rejoice and instantly awaken the mind resolved on supreme

enlightenment. This is called “the Mahayana seed is born” and also “the Mahayana mind arises.”

If, when the lotus blooms, Avalokitesvara were first to expound the Lesser Vehicle, listeners would generate faith upon hearing, and then “the seeds of the Two Vehicles would be born” or “the Two-Vehicle mind would arise.”

The same principle also applies to the lower two levels.

Beings of all three levels awaken their resolve in that Pure Land. It is truly through hearing the Mahayana expositions that the Mahayana seed is born. Since they do not hear lesser teachings, “the seeds of the Two Vehicles are not born.” Whenever the term “seed” is used, it refers to the mind.

Here ends the explanation of “the seeds of the Two Vehicles are not born.”

As for “women and deformed beings,” since they do not exist in the Pure Land, the meaning is self-evident.

Moreover, sentient beings from the ten directions who have cultivated Lesser-Vehicle precepts and practices in aspiration to rebirth in the Pure Land will all be reborn with no obstacles. Yet, upon arrival, they first attain the Lesser Vehicle fruition. Immediately upon such attainment they convert to the Mahayana. From that point on, they will never retrogress to give rise to the Two-Vehicle mind. Hence, “the seeds of the Two Vehicles are not born.”

The former of the two explanations above pertains to those of indeterminate seed nature and the initial arousing of resolve in them,

while the latter concerns those of the Lesser-Vehicle [seed nature] and the termination of their lesser fruition. This should be understood.

7. Identification of the point in time when Vaidehi attained benefit from hearing the Buddha's direct teaching

Question: Given that Vaidehi attained the Endurance [for the Non-Arising of Dharmas], at what point did she attain it, and in which passage is this mentioned?

Answer: Her attainment of the Endurance is found at the beginning of the Seventh Contemplation. The sutra states: *"The Buddha said to Vaidehi: 'I will teach you in detail the methods to eliminate suffering and distress.' As these words were spoken, the Buddha of Infinite Life appeared, standing in the air, along with Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta attending him by his sides. Upon seeing them, Vaidehi bowed in veneration with her head touching the feet of the Buddha."*

Filled with joy and offering praise, she attained the Endurance for the Non-Arising of Dharmas. How do we know this? In the subsequent Benefits Section, it is stated: *"They saw the Buddha's form and the two Bodhisattvas. Filled with joy, they marveled at this unprecedented experience. They attained a sudden great awakening and realized the Endurance for the Non-Arising of Dharmas."*

This attainment did not occur at the time when pure lands were displayed on the radiant platform.

Question: In an earlier passage, it is stated: *“Upon witnessing the extraordinarily wondrous and blissful phenomena of that land, your hearts will be filled with joy, and you will immediately attain the Endurance for the Non-Arising of Dharmas.”*

How can this sentence be explained to achieve reconciliation?

Answer: This sentence serves simply as a convenient prologue provided by the World-Honored One in response to Vaidehi’s earlier specific request, introducing the benefits [of subsequent contemplations] as an exhortation to practice. How do we know this? In a subsequent passage, it is stated: *“The Tathagatas possess extraordinary skillful means to enable you to attain this vision.”*

The contemplations of the sun, water and ice, leading up to the 13th Contemplation, are all “extraordinary skillful means.” Their purpose is to enable sentient beings to succeed in all these contemplations. Upon witnessing the wondrous phenomena, they will rejoice in their hearts and thereby attain the Endurance for the Non-Arising of Dharmas. This is nothing more than the Tathagata’s compassion for beings of the age of decline, presenting [the benefits] and encouraging practice so that those who have accumulated cultivation may not miss the present-life benefits from the imperceptible support of sacred power.

To sum up the verification: The thirteen essentials above (seven divisions and six reconciliation passages) cover the pivotal core and central nexus (of the sutra). Each statement accords with Dharma principles, reflecting the underlying meaning. Up to this point, the intent has been fully presented. I have thrice submitted the foregoing for verification with the Buddhas’ words.

Though consisting of seven varied divisions, the passages collectively constitute the Underlying Meaning that precedes the main text. In addressing discrepancies between the sutra and commentaries, as well as the [derivative] challenges and criticisms, each argument is substantiated with scriptural evidence, aiming to ensure that believers remain free from doubt and seekers avoid stagnation. This should be understood.



SECOND FASCICLE

Meaning of the Introduction to the
Contemplation Sutra

Meaning of the Introduction to the *Contemplation Sutra*

From this point onward, the interpretation of the sutra text unfolds. It is generally organized into five parts to illuminate the scripture's meaning.

1. Introduction

From “*Thus I have heard*” to “*burdened by the five sufferings. How will they be able to see the Land of Bliss?*”

2. Main Part

From the opening sentence of the Contemplation of the Sun, “*The Buddha told Vaidehi: You and sentient beings,*” to “*reborn in the lower level of the lower grade.*”

3. Benefits Part

From “*As the Buddha delivered these teachings*” to “*Countless celestial beings also awakened the resolve for supreme enlightenment.*”

4. Circulation Part

From “*Ananda rose from his seat and said to the Buddha*” to “*Vaidehi and others, upon hearing the Buddha’s teachings, were all filled with great joy.*”

These four parts comprise the **Royal Palace Gathering**, during which the Buddha directly delivered the teaching.

5. Gridhrakuta Gathering

Ananda transmitted the Buddha’s teaching to the great assembly. This also consists of three parts:

i) Introduction

“*Then, the World-Honored One ascended through the air and returned to Mt. Gridhrakuta.*”

ii) Main Part

“*Ananda recounted the entire event in detail to the great assembly.*”

iii) Circulation

From “*Countless devas, nagas and yakshas, upon hearing the Buddha’s words, were all filled with immense joy*” to the end.

- First comes the Introduction, as all teachings arise from specific causes.

- Next, with the introduction established, the discourse unfolds formally to present the Main Part of the teaching.
- Once fully delivered, the teaching is meant to be transmitted to future generations; thus its excellence is praised and practice exhorted, forming the Circulation Part at the end.

The foregoing, though consisting of five varied parts, concisely outlines the meaning of the Introduction, Main Part, and Circulation.

The Introduction is further divided into two aspects:

1. **Authentication Introduction:** *“Thus I have heard.”*

2. **Origination Introduction:** From *“At one time”* to *“How will they be able to see the Land of Bliss?”*

Thus I have heard.

1. The term **“Authentication”** carries two meanings:

- *“Thus”* serves as a general indication of the host of the teaching — the one who spoke the sutra.
- *“I have heard”* pertains specifically to Ananda — the one who heard the exposition.

“Thus I have heard” encompasses both these meanings.

Furthermore, *“Thus”* refers to the teachings — both meditative and non-meditative virtues. It is also a definitive term, signifying that those

who practice will inevitably benefit. This affirms the flawless nature of the Tathagata's words; hence, "*Thus*."

Additionally, "*Thus*" equates to "as such":

- "As" signifies the fulfillment of beings' wishes — by responding to their inner inclinations, the Buddha delivers them.
- "Such" indicates that the teachings correspond to beings' capacities.

Hence, "*Thus*."

Moreover, "*Thus*" [or "as such"] clarifies the Tathagata's words [they conform precisely to what they denote]:

- Gradual teachings are presented as gradual, sudden teachings as sudden.
- Form is taught as form, emptiness as emptiness.
- Human dharmas as human dharmas, celestial dharmas as celestial dharmas.
- The small as small, the great as great.
- The mundane as mundane, the sacred as sacred.
- Causes as causes, effects as effects.
- Suffering as suffering, joy as joy.
- The distant as distant, the near as near.

- Sameness as sameness, difference as difference.
- Purity as purity, impurity as impurity.

In speaking of all the myriad dharmas, with countless distinctions, the Tathagata perceives and knows them all, with perfect clarity. Following their minds, [sentient beings] practice, and each attains different benefits. Causal karma and its consequences unfold naturally, in accordance with dharma, without error or omission. This, too, is called “such.” Hence, “*Thus.*”

“*I have heard*” implies that Ananda, by constantly following the Buddha as his attendant, acquired extensive erudition and abundant experience. Regularly at the Buddha’s side, he was able to listen to the Tathagata’s words and memorize them, directly absorbing the tenets and principles conveyed. The phrase emphasizes the absence of error in his transmission of the teachings. Hence, “*I have heard.*”

Furthermore, the term “Authentication” is used to clarify that Ananda, having received the Buddha’s teachings, was entrusted with transmitting them to later generations. Facing sentient beings, he declared: “The following methods of contemplation are what I heard from the Buddha and are hereby affirmed as genuine and trustworthy.” This is referred to as the Authentication Introduction. This explanation is with respect to Ananda.

2. The “**Origination Introduction**” is divided into seven aspects:

i) Pre-Teaching Introduction

From “*At one time, the Buddha stayed at...*” to “*...with Dharma Prince Mañjuśrī as the leader.*”

ii) Cause for the Father's Confinement

From “*At that time, in the great city of Rajgir...*” to “*...his complexion became serene and content*” — the formal beginning of the “Origination Introduction.”

iii) Cause for the Mother's Confinement

From “*Then, Ajatasatru asked...*” to “*...forbidding her from ever leaving again.*”

iv) Cause for Aversion to Suffering

From “*Imprisoned and haggard, Vaidehi was...*” to “*...Devadatta as a relation?*”

v) Cause for Admiration of Purity

From “*I humbly beseech you, World-Honored One, to expound in detail...*” to “*...teach me the practices of contemplative reflection and correct meditative absorption.*”

vi) Cause for Revealing the Practices of Non-Meditative Virtues

From “*The World-Honored One smiled...*” to “*...the primary causes of the pure karma of all Buddhas, past, present and future.*”

vii) Cause for Expounding the Contemplations as Meditative Virtues

From “*The Buddha addressed Ananda and Vaidehi: ‘Listen carefully...’*” to “*...How will they be able to see the Land of Bliss?*”

The foregoing, though consisting of seven varied passages, thoroughly delineates the “Origination Introduction.”

i) Pre-Teaching Introduction

The Pre-Teaching Introduction consists of four elements:

At one time,

(1) The phrase “*at one time*” pertains to the moment when guidance was first set in motion. The Buddha’s discourse necessarily began at a specific time and place. While the awakening of sentient beings inevitably relied on causes and conditions, the Lord of Teachings’ encounter with suitable circumstances hinged upon time and place.

Furthermore, “*at one time*” can also refer to the twelve [two-hour] periods of day and night, any month or year, or the four seasons. Each represents the “time” when the Tathagata responded to the varying circumstances of beings in guiding them.

The “place” is wherever suited the occasion. The Tathagata delivered teachings in various settings, including:

- Forests and mountains.
- Royal palaces and villages.
- Wildernesses and graveyards.
- Gatherings of humans and celestial beings, regardless of number.
- In the presence of Sravakas and Bodhisattvas.

- Among the eight classes of supernatural beings, as well as human and heavenly kings.
- Solely to ordinary beings — one, two or many.
- Solely to sacred beings — one, two or many.

Whatever the specific time and place, the Tathagata saw and knew with precision — neither more nor less. He taught according to conditions, benefiting each learner. Just as a great bell, though resonant, must await the strike before it can resound, so too the Great Sage, in extending compassion, must await a request before he speaks. Thus, it is said “*at one time.*”

Moreover, regarding “*at one time,*” when Ajatasatru was committing transgressions, where was the Buddha? At that very moment, the Tathagata was at Mt. Gridhrakuta with none but the two assemblies. This demonstrates that [Ajatasatru’s evil actions], described later, occurred simultaneously with [the Buddha’s presence at Mt. Gridhrakuta], noted earlier. Thus, it is said “*at one time.*”

Furthermore, the phrase “*at one time*” indicates that the Buddha, along with the two assemblies, was at Mt. Gridhrakuta at the moment they became aware of Ajatasatru’s evil deeds. This shows that [the Buddha’s presence at Mt. Gridhrakuta], mentioned earlier, coincided with [Ajatasatru’s wrongdoing], detailed later. Hence, the phrase “*at one time.*”

... the Buddha

(2) The term “*Buddha*” designates the Lord of Teachings, distinctly highlighting Shakyamuni instead of other Buddhas.

... stayed at Mt. Gridhrakuta (Vulture Peak) in Rajgir.

(3) From “*stayed at Mt. Gridhrakuta (Vulture Peak) in Rajgir*” onward clarifies the places where the Tathagata traveled and taught. These fall into two categories:

- a) Visits to royal cities and villages to teach laypeople.
- b) Travels to Mt. Gridhrakuta and similar places to guide monastics.

Furthermore, householders remain attached to the Five Desires in unbroken continuity. Even if they generate a pure mind, it is like drawing a picture on water. Yet, to benefit beings universally according to their circumstances, the Buddha never forsook great compassion. Because monastics and laypeople differ in their outward appearance, they cannot dwell together. The residences of householders are called “circumstantial dwellings” (where the Buddha traveled to teach).

By contrast, monastics renounce their bodies and relinquish worldly life, striving to sever desires and enter nirvana. Their resolve is as firm as *vajra*, and their minds resemble a perfectly clear mirror. They aspire to Buddhahood and substantially benefit both themselves and others. Without fully taking leave of worldly clamor, such virtue cannot be attained. The residences of monastics are termed “reliant dwellings” (where the Buddha lived).

He gathered with an assembly of 1,250 great *bhikkus*, along with 32,000 Bodhisattvas with Dharma Prince Mañjuśrī as the leader.

(4) “*He gathered with an assembly of 1,250 great bhikkus...*” to “*...as the leader*” specifies the composition of the gathering of the Buddha’s disciples.

This assembly is divided into two groups: Sravakas and Bodhisattvas.

For the Sravaka assembly, there are nine aspects:

a) “*Gathered with*” indicates that the Buddha was together with the assembly.

[Connotations of “*great*”:]

b) Greatness in overall qualities.

c) Greatness in appearance.

d) Greatness in multitude.

e) Greatness in seniority.

f) Greatness in number.

g) Greatness in venerable status.

h) Greatness in true inner virtues.

i) Greatness in realization.

Question: At the beginning of all sutras, Sravakas are placed at the forefront in this manner. Why is this?

Answer: There is a particular purpose. What is it? Many of the Sravakas previously adhered to external paths (non-Buddhist traditions). As stated in the *Sutra on the Wise and the Foolish*:

Uruvilvā-Kāśyapa once led 500 disciples in the practice of erroneous teachings; Gayā-Kāśyapa led 250 disciples in the same; and Nadī-Kāśyapa led another 250 in the same manner. These 1,000 disciples later received the Buddha's guidance and attained Arhathood. Additionally, 250 disciples of Sariputra and Moggallana had previously gathered in one place, practicing erroneous teachings. They too received the Buddha's guidance and attained Dharma fruition. Together, these four groups formed the 1,250 disciples.

Question: In this assembly, some were not former adherents of external paths. Why are they labeled collectively?

Answer: As stated in the sutras, these former adherents of external paths constantly followed the World-Honored One, never departing from him. However, the Tripitaka compiler (Ananda) selectively included disciples with outer virtues, resulting in inconsistent labeling. The majority had indeed practiced other paths; only a few had not.

Question: Why did these former adherents of external paths follow the Buddha continually?

Answer: There are two interpretations: one from the Buddha's perspective and the other from that of the adherents.

- From the Buddha's perspective, these adherents had long been influenced by mistaken views, extending beyond the present lifetime. Though they had entered the path of truth, residual inclinations persisted. Recognizing this, the Tathagata did not permit them to teach externally, fearing that they might harm the budding roots of correct views among sentient beings, increase negative karma and hinder realization in this and future lives. For this reason, the Tathagata kept them nearby, disallowing them from benefiting others. This reflects the Buddha's perspective.
- From the adherents' viewpoint, according to the notion of Kāśyapas and others: "For countless *kalpas*, we have been mired in samsara, transmigrating through the Six Realms and enduring indescribable suffering. Bound by ignorance and mistaken views, confined tightly within erroneous teachings, we have never encountered an enlightened master and have drifted endlessly in the abyss of misery. Yet, through karmic blessings from past lives, we are fortunate to meet the Compassionate Honored One, whose universally impartial teachings nourish us. Reflecting on the Buddha's grace and virtue, even if our bodies were shattered to the utmost in gratitude, it would hardly suffice. Thus, we feel compelled to attend personally upon his sacred presence without the briefest pause." This completes the interpretation from the adherents' perspective.

Question: Why are these venerable elders called "*well-known to the public*"?

Answer: "Venerable" signifies exalted virtue, and "elder" denotes advanced age. Recognized by both ordinary and sacred beings for their exceptional inner virtues and distinguished outward qualities, they are

called “*well-known to the public.*”

The foregoing, though consisting of nine varied phrases, explains the Sravaka assembly.

Next is the explanation of the Bodhisattva assembly, which involves seven aspects:

- a) Appearance.
- b) Number.
- c) Stage.
- d) Realization.
- e) Virtues.
- f) Special highlighting of Mañjuśrī’s position of elevated virtue.
- g) Summary.

Furthermore, these Bodhisattvas fulfill countless practices and vows, while abiding peacefully in all meritorious dharmas. They travel through the ten directions, employ skillful expedient means, enter the Buddha-Dharma treasury, and finally attain the Other Shore (nirvana). In countless worlds, they manifest the attainment of perfect enlightenment and radiate brilliance that universally illuminates the ten directions. Countless Buddha Lands experience the Six Kinds of Convulsion. Adapting to varied circumstances, they give discourses and turn the wheel of the Dharma. They beat the Dharma drum, wield the Dharma sword, rumble Dharma thunder, pour Dharma rain, and bestow the Dharma teachings

as alms. Their Dharma voices incessantly enlighten beings in all worldly realms. They tear the net of heterodoxy, eliminate false views, dispel worldly weariness, and destroy the traps of desire. They reveal what is pure and undefiled, shed light on the Buddha Dharma and advocate the correct paths. Empathizing with all living beings, they refrain from arrogance and laziness. Having attained the truth of universal equality, they fully possess countless hundreds of thousands of *samadhis*, in which they pervade everywhere in an instant, missing nothing. They shoulder the burdens of beings, cherishing them as their own children, and use all their roots of goodness to deliver the multitudes to the Other Shore. They acquire the infinite merit and virtue of Buddhas, their wisdom clear and open, beyond all comprehension.

Though varied in content, the seven phrases elucidate the Bodhisattva assembly.

The foregoing, though consisting of two differing assemblies, thoroughly explains the Pre-Teaching Introduction.

ii) Cause for the Father's Confinement

This comprises seven aspects.

At that time, in the great city of Rajgir,

(1) “*At that time, in the great city of Rajgir...*” generally identifies the place where the teaching was initiated.

In ancient times, whenever the common people built dwellings in the city, heavenly fire consumed their structures, while royal buildings remained untouched. The people then jointly appealed to the king:

“Whenever we build homes, they are burned by heavenly fire, yet the royal mansions are never harmed. We do not understand why.”

The king advised them: “From now on, when building, simply say: ‘I am making this house for the king’.”

The people returned and followed his advice while constructing; their homes were no longer burned. This practice was passed down through generations, and the place became known as “*Rajgir* (Royal Abode).”

The term “*great city*” highlights its exceptional size. With a population of 900,000, it was called “*the great city of Rajgir*.”

The “place where the teaching was initiated” is thus described for two reasons:

a) King Ajatasatru’s malice gave rise to the causal conditions for the confinement of his parents. This confinement awakened [in Vaidehi] an aversion to the Saha world and an aspiration to be reborn in a realm free of sorrow.

b) The Tathagata responded to Vaidehi’s request by transforming his light into a radiant platform, revealing visions of the sacred phenomena in pure realms. Vaidehi expressed her wish to be reborn in the Land of Peace and Joy and earnestly sought guidance on the necessary practices. The Buddha expounded the Three Meritorious Actions as the causal practices and the correct contemplations as the meditative approach. He further illuminated the various benefits associated with the Nine Levels of Rebirth.

These causal conditions give rise to the name “place where the teaching was initiated.”

... there was a prince named Ajatasatru. Following the incitement of Devadatta, a treacherous companion,

(2) “*There was a prince...*” to “*...a treacherous companion*” illustrates how King Ajatasatru, clouded by delusion, succumbed to the misguidance of the malicious person (Devadatta).

The term “*Prince*” highlights his status.

“*Ajatasatru*” is his name.

Furthermore, “*Ajatasatru*” is the original Sanskrit pronunciation from the Western Regions (ancient India), commonly rendered in Chinese as “Enmity Before Birth.” The prince was also dubbed “Broken Finger.”

Question: Why was he called “Enmity Before Birth” and “Broken Finger”?

Answer: The reason lies in the past causal conditions that resulted in these names. The king father, initially without children, sought divine aid far and wide, but his efforts were in vain. Then a seer informed him: “I know of an ascetic in the mountains who is nearing the end of his life. After his death, he is destined to be reborn as your son.”

Hearing this, the king was overjoyed and asked: “When will this person pass away?”

The seer replied: “In three years, his life will come to an end.”

The king said: “I am already old, and the kingdom has no heir. How can I possibly wait another three years?”

The king immediately commanded an envoy to journey into the mountains to invite the ascetic: “The great king has no son and no heir to inherit the throne. He has sought divine aid far and wide, but without success. A seer has foretold that you, Revered Ascetic, will soon pass away and be reborn as the king’s son. We humbly implore you to show mercy and come without delay.”

The envoy, following the king’s command, entered the mountains and conveyed the message in full to the ascetic. The latter replied: “I still have three years before my life reaches its end. For the king to summon me to go immediately — this cannot be done.”

The envoy returned and reported the ascetic’s response to the king in full.

The king said: “I am the ruler of this entire nation; all people and things belong to me. I have humbled myself to seek his favor, yet he has rejected my goodwill!”

He then commanded the envoy: “Go and ask him once more. If he refuses, kill him. Once he has died, would he not still be reborn as my son?”

With this command, the envoy returned to the ascetic and conveyed the king’s intent in full. However, even upon hearing the envoy’s words, the ascetic remained unyielding. Following the king’s order, the envoy prepared to kill him.

The ascetic said: “Tell the king: My life has not yet ended, but he has sent someone, with thoughts and words, to kill me. If I were to become the king’s son, I would, in turn, use my thoughts and words to have someone kill him.”

With these words, the ascetic accepted his death. After he died, he was immediately reborn in the royal palace.

That very night, the queen sensed she had conceived. The king was overjoyed at the news and, at dawn, summoned the seer to determine whether the queen would bear a boy or a girl. After observing, the seer said: “It is a son, not a daughter. But this son will bring harm to the king.”

The king replied: “All my lands shall be entrusted to him. Even if harm should come, I have no fear.”

Be that as it may, the seer’s words left the king torn between joy and worry. In confidence, he spoke to the queen: “My lady, let us handle this matter in secret. The seer has foretold that the boy will bring me harm. When you give birth, do so atop the high tower, directly over the courtyard well. Do not let anyone catch him; let him fall to the ground, so that he will die on impact. In this way, I shall have nothing to fear, and no one else will know.”

The queen agreed to the king’s plan. When the time came, she did exactly as instructed. Yet, though the newborn fell to the ground after birth, he did not die — only his little finger was injured. From then on, he was known as the “Broken-Finger Prince.”

“Enmity Before Birth” refers to these negative causal conditions from the prince’s previous life, which Devadatta, out of malice and jealousy, later revealed to the prince.

How did jealousy lead to the revelation of those negative conditions?

Devadatta, wicked by nature, was prone to violence. Although he had taken the tonsure, he harbored persistent envy towards the Buddha, coveting his fame and material support.

The king father, a devoted patron of the Buddha, once made abundant offerings to the Tathagata: gold, silver and others of the seven treasures, fine clothing, superior garments, and hundreds of varieties of fruits and delicacies, each loaded onto 500 carriages. Accompanied by fragrant incense, flowers and musical performances, a gathering of thousands upon thousands joined in praise, surrounding and escorting the offerings to the Buddha's assembly. There, the gifts were presented to the Buddha and the monastic community.

As Devadatta witnessed this, his jealousy deepened. He approached Sariputra and sought instruction in special powers. Sariputra replied: "Worthy One, you should focus on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness; there is no need to learn special powers." Disheartened by the refusal, Devadatta turned to other venerable ones with the same request. However, none of the 500 disciples agreed to teach him, instead directing him to cultivate the Four Foundations of Mindfulness.

Unable to find a teacher, Devadatta eventually sought instruction from Ananda, saying: "You are my younger brother. I wish to learn special powers, so teach me step-by-step."

Although Ananda had attained the 1st stage of Sravaka realization, he had not yet developed the telepathic ability and was unaware of Devadatta's hidden intention to use these powers in a malicious plot against the Buddha. Ananda led Devadatta to a quiet place and began teaching him step by step.

Seated in the full-lotus posture, he first instructed: Use the mind to lift the body, imagining it rising — an inch above the ground, then a foot, then a yard. Upon reaching the ceiling of the room, envision it as empty and non-obstructing, allowing passage and ascension into the open air. Then guide the mind to return to the original seated position.

Next, use the body to elevate the mind, rising first an inch above ground, then a foot and so on, following the same method previously described. Let the body lift the mind, and the mind lift the body. Upon reaching the open air, guide the body back down to the original seated position.

Then, imagine lifting the body and mind together in the same manner as before — rising an inch, then a foot and so on. Repeat the process in a continuous cycle.

Afterwards, envision the body and mind entering all material, mutually-obstructive objects while cultivating the thought of being immaterial and unobstructed.

Next, envisage all mountains, rivers, lands and other material forms entering your body, like the Void free from obstruction, where no appearances of form remain visible.

Then, imagine your body at times vast, filling the Void, sitting or lying down without restraint. Whether seated or lying down, you can grasp and move the sun and moon with your hands. At other times, your body becomes small, entering fine particles of dust. Throughout, maintain an awareness of being free from obstruction.

Thus, Ananda taught step by step.

After receiving the teaching, Devadatta went to another secluded place. Applying single-minded focus for seven days and nights, he attained the special powers, achieving unrestrained mastery in all aspects.

Having gained the powers, he arrived in front of the prince's hall and, suspended in midair, manifested extraordinary supernatural transformations: fire emerged above his body and water below; water appeared on his left side and fire on his right. He presented himself in a large form, then a small one, sitting or reclining in the air, moving freely at will.

Upon seeing him, the prince asked his attendants: "Who is this?"

They replied: "It is Venerable Devadatta."

Hearing this, the prince was overjoyed and immediately raised his hands, calling out: "Venerable One, why not come down?"

Devadatta, perceiving the invitation, transformed into an infant and descended directly onto the prince's knees. The prince embraced him, uttering soft sounds to amuse him. He then allowed a droplet of saliva to fall into the infant's mouth, which he swallowed. Shortly after, Devadatta returned to his original form.

The prince, having witnessed Devadatta's various miraculous transformations, regarded him with heightened reverence. Observing the prince's deep respect, Devadatta spoke of the offerings prepared by his king father — 500 carriages of each type of tribute — which were delivered and presented to the Buddha and the monastic community. Hearing this, the prince said to Devadatta: "As your disciple, I too can prepare the same, with each kind of tribute loaded onto 500 carriages, as

offerings to Venerable One and as alms for the monastic assembly. Would this not be comparable to that offering?” Devadatta replied: “Prince, your intention is excellent indeed!”

Thenceforth, Devadatta received abundant offerings, which inflated his arrogance. It was like striking a vicious dog on the nose with a stick, only to provoke even greater aggression. In the same way, the prince wielded the “stick” of material gain and support, striking the “dog’s nose” of Devadatta’s greed, further intensifying his malice. As a result, Devadatta disrupted the monastic community, altered the Buddha’s teachings and precepts, and introduced practices inconsistent with the original teachings and precepts.

While the Buddha was discoursing on the Dharma before an assembly of both ordinary and sacred beings, Devadatta approached and demanded disciples from the Buddha, declaring: “Entrust the entire Dharma treasury to me. World-Honored One, you are now advancing in age and should retreat to a quiet place to rest in seclusion.”

Upon hearing this, the entire assembly was struck with astonishment, exchanging looks of surprise and disbelief.

At that time, the World-Honored One addressed Devadatta before the assembly: “Sariputra, Moggallana and others are great marshals of the Dharma, yet I have not entrusted the teachings to them — how much less to you, an ignorant one who feeds on spittle!”

Hearing the Buddha’s rebuke before the assembly, Devadatta reeled as if a poisonous arrow had pierced his heart, further fueling his insanity and resentment. He seized the opportunity and approached the prince to hatch a malicious scheme.

Seeing Devadatta, the prince respectfully inquired: “Venerable One, today your countenance appears haggard, unlike before.”

Devadatta replied: “I am haggard today precisely because of you, Prince.”

The prince asked respectfully: “Venerable One, what do you mean by ‘because of me’?”

Devadatta answered: “Prince, do you not understand? The World-Honored One has grown old and is no longer capable; he should be removed, and I shall take his place as Buddha. Your king father is also aged and should likewise be removed, so that you may ascend to the throne. A new king and a new Buddha to rule and teach — would that not be a delight?”

Hearing this, the prince became enraged and rebuked him: “Don’t say such things!”

Devadatta replied: “Prince, do not be angry. Your father has no true kindness towards you. When you were about to be born, he had the queen placed atop a hundred-foot tower to give birth over an open courtyard well, intending for you to fall to your death. It was only through your own karmic blessings that your life was spared, though your little finger was injured. If you do not believe me, look at your own finger — it is proof enough.”

Hearing this, the prince sought further confirmation, asking: “Is this truly so?”

Devadatta replied: “If it were not true, why would I come here to speak such wild words?”

After this exchange, the prince began to trust in and accept Devadatta's malicious schemes. Thus it is said, *"Following the incitement of Devadatta, a treacherous companion..."*

... he seized and detained his father, King Bimbisara, in a chamber with seven layers of guards. All ministers were forbidden from visiting.

(3) *"He seized and detained his father, King Bimbisara..."* to *"...forbidden from visiting"* recounts the confinement of the king by his son.

Ajatasatru adopted Devadatta's evil plan, abruptly severing the bond between father and son. Not only did he betray the boundless grace of parental nurture, but his transgressions also became notorious, their infamy spreading far and wide.

Suddenly capturing the king is termed "seizing" and holding him without release is termed "detaining." Hence, the phrase *"seized and detained."*

"Father" highlights the ultimate closeness of kinship.

"King" signifies his status.

"Bimbisara" is his name.

"In a chamber with seven layers of guards" underscores the gravity of the act and the severity of the situation. Simple confinement in a populated area without strict security would have been insufficient. Only the king's palace was appropriate, as it was strictly closed to outsiders

and only long-serving ministers were permitted to attend. Now, without stringent measures, there was concern that secret communication might occur. As a result, all contact between the inside and outside was severed, and the king was confined within a chamber guarded by seven layers of sentries.

The queen mother, named Vaidehi, was devoted to the king. After bathing and cleansing herself, she applied a mixture of ghee, honey and fried flour onto her body and filled her ornaments with grape pulp, secretly offering them to the king.

(4) “*The queen mother...*” to “*...secretly offering them to the king*” illustrates how the queen secretly provided sustenance to the king.

“*Queen mother*” signifies her supreme position.

“*Queen*” denotes her status.

“*Vaidehi*” is her name.

“*Devoted to the king*” signifies that when the queen saw the king confined, with doors tightly guarded and no means of communication, she feared for his life. So she bathed in fragrant water to cleanse her body, then applied ghee and honey to her skin, followed by a layer of fried flour. She dressed in clean garments to cover her body, and adorned her outer robes with ornaments in her customary fashion, taking care not to arouse suspicion among outsiders. She also made use of the hollows within her ornaments — sealing one end with wax, filling them with grape pulp, then sealing the other. All her ornaments were prepared this

way. Once fully adorned, she proceeded into the palace with measured steps to meet the king.

Question: The ministers were under an edict forbidding them from seeing the king. Why did the guards allow the queen to enter without restraint?

Answer: The ministers, being of different status and considered outsiders, gave rise to concerns about potential covert communication, necessitating strict restrictions. In contrast, the queen, as a woman, was perceived as having no ulterior motives. She shared a profound karmic bond with the king; though separate in body, they were united in heart through their long marriage. Without the suspicions associated with outsiders, the guards allowed her to enter and see the king.

The king ate the fried flour and drank the grape pulp, then requested water to rinse his mouth. Afterwards, he joined his palms in reverence, turned towards Gridhrakuta and from afar paid homage to the World-Honored One, saying: “Mahāmoggallāna is my relative and friend. I pray for his compassion to bestow upon me the Eight Precepts.”

(5) “*The king ate the fried flour...*” to “*...bestow upon me the Eight Precepts*” recounts how, due to his confinement, the king father sought Dharma teachings.

After seeing the king, the queen scraped ghee and flour from her skin, kneaded them into balls, and offered them to him. The king accepted and

ate. Once he had finished, the queen fetched fresh water from within the palace for him to rinse his mouth. With his mouth cleansed, unwilling to pass the time idly and let his mind drift, he reverently pressed his palms together and turned towards Mt. Gridhrakuta. He paid homage to the Tathagata and sought protection. This constitutes the king's veneration as physical karma, which also involves mental karma. From "*saying*" onward, the text presents his supplication as verbal karma, which similarly engages mental karma.

"Mahāmoggallāna is my relative and friend" has two meanings: As a layperson, Moggallāna used to be a collateral relative of the king; after ordination, he served as a Dharma mentor, freely entering and leaving the palace without restriction. As a layperson, he was a relative; as a monastic, he was a friend — hence the reference to *"relative and friend."*

"I pray for his compassion to bestow upon me the Eight Precepts" reflects the king father's profound reverence and devotion towards the Dharma, as well as his humility in honoring the worth of others above himself. If not for the hardship of confinement, he would have had no difficulty personally extending respectful invitations to the Buddha and the Sangha. However, imprisoned and unable to express his reverence in person, he could only turn to Moggallāna to grant him the Eight Precepts.

Question: While the king first bowed to the World-Honored One as an act of distant veneration, he invited only Moggallāna to grant the precepts. What was his intent?

Answer: Among all beings, whether ordinary or sacred, none is more revered than the Buddha. Thus, with wholehearted sincerity in his aspiration, the king first paid homage to the Great Master. However, receiving precepts was of secondary significance, so he invited only

Moggallana to confer them. The king's intent was solely to obtain the precepts, which would fulfill his purpose. Why unnecessarily trouble the World-Honored One?

Question: The Tathagata's precepts are boundless in number. Why did the king request only the Eight Precepts, leaving aside the others?

Answer: The other precepts are somewhat more lenient and observed over longer durations. There was a concern that he might lose mindfulness mid-way and remain trapped in samsara. The Eight Precepts, however, are referred to in other sutras as "householders undertaking monastic precepts." Observing them requires the relevant mind to be exceptionally meticulous and time-pressed. Why? Because the required period of observation is brief, lasting only a day and a night. Upon completion, the precepts are relinquished.

How do we know that observing these precepts requires both a meticulous, time-pressed mind and practice? This is made fully explicit in the text of the precepts, which states:

"Disciple of the Buddha, from this dawn until the next, for one day and one night, as Buddhas do, refrain from — "

1. Taking life.

- Can you uphold it?
- Response: "I can uphold it."

2. Stealing.

3. Sexual activity.

4. Lying.
5. Consuming intoxicants.
6. Adorning the body with cosmetics.
7. Singing, dancing, engaging in performances, or watching or listening to them.
8. Reclining on high, luxurious beds.

These eight are precepts, not fasting vows. “Abstinence from food after noon” is the sole fasting vow, not a precept.

These precepts all cite the Buddhas as exemplars. Why? Only the Buddhas have fully eradicated both vexations and habitual tendencies. For others, negative habits persist, making them unsuitable as paragons. This demonstrates that upholding these precepts requires an extraordinarily meticulous and time-pressed mind and practice.

Furthermore, as the Buddha taught, these precepts bring eight supreme benefits. Those who observe them fully and without violation for one day and one night accrue merit surpassing the attainment stages of humans, celestial beings, and the Two Vehicles, as extensively detailed in the sutras. Inspired by these benefits, the king undertook the precepts day after day.

Moggallana swiftly reached the king's side, like a falcon in flight. Day after day, he appeared in this manner to confer the Eight Precepts upon the king. The World-Honored One also sent the Venerable Purna to expound the Dharma to him.

(6) “*Moggallana swiftly...*” to “*...expound the Dharma to him*” describes how the king received the sacred teaching, as he requested.

Moggallana, through telepathy, perceived the king father's plea from afar. Instantly, he employed his supernatural power and reached the king's side. To aid understanding of this power's features, the text compares it to a falcon in flight. In truth, Moggallana's ability enabled him to circle the Four Dvīpas hundreds of thousands of times in an instant — how could a falcon possibly compare? Comparisons of this type are far too many to detail here; they are extensively described in the *Sutra on the Wise and the Foolish*.

“*Day after day, he appeared in this manner to confer the Eight Precepts upon the king*” suggests that the monarch's lifespan was extended, prompting Moggallana to return repeatedly to confer the precepts.

Question: Given that the Eight Precepts are described as superior, receiving them once should be sufficient. Why is it necessary to receive them day after day?

Answer: A mountain is never too high, the sea never too deep, a blade never too sharp, and the sun never too bright. People never tire of goodness or of eliminating wrongdoing; the virtuous never find virtue excessive, and Buddhas are never burdened by sublimity.

The king's intention was clear: "Having been imprisoned and deprived of the freedom to come and go, I fear, with every thought, being summoned for execution."

Thus, day and night, he wholeheartedly relied on the Eight Precepts, hoping to elevate his accumulated virtue as support for his future karmic path.

"The World-Honored One also sent the Venerable Purna to expound the Dharma to him" illustrates the deep compassion of the World-Honored One, who sympathized with the king's sudden imprisonment and was concerned he might fall into sorrow and distress. Among the sacred disciples, Purna was the most competent in expounding the Dharma, adept in skillful means and in opening people's hearts. For this reason, the Tathagata sent him to the king to deliver teachings and dispel the latter's worries and afflictions.

Three weeks passed in this way. As the king ate fried flour and honey and listened to the Dharma, his complexion became serene and content.

(7) *"Three weeks passed..."* to *"...his complexion became serene and content"* recounts how, through consuming the food and hearing the Dharma, the king father survived for many days.

This illustrates that the queen provided food over an extended period, relieving the king's hunger and thirst. Meanwhile, the two sages nurtured him internally with the precepts and Dharma, skillfully uplifting his spirit. The food sustained his body, while the precepts and Dharma nourished his spirit, dispelling suffering and sorrow. As a result, his complexion became serene and content.

The foregoing, though consisting of seven varied phrases, thoroughly explains the Cause for the Father's Confinement.

iii) Cause for the Mother's Confinement

There are eight aspects.

Then, Ajatasatru asked the security guard: "Is my father still alive?"

(1) "*Then, Ajatasatru asked...*" to "*...still alive?*" relates Ajatasatru's inquiry about his father's condition.

Ajatasatru had imprisoned his father for many days, denying him all human contact and withholding food and water. After more than two weeks, his father was expected to have died. With this in mind, Ajatasatru approached the palace gates and asked the guards: "*Is my father still alive?*"

Question: A person cannot survive beyond seven days after his last meal. The king father had already endured for three weeks, so his death should have been certain. Why did Ajatasatru not simply ask: "Gatekeeper, is my father dead for good?" Instead, why did he inquire with uncertainty: "*Is he still alive?*" What was his intent?

Answer: By framing his question this way, Ajatasatru concealed his true intent. As the arbiter of state affairs, he could not act casually. Since his father, the former king, was naturally his closest relation, it would not have been appropriate to openly inquire about his death, for fear of misstepping at that moment and inviting reproach. Thus, while inwardly focused on "death," he outwardly inquired about "being alive," seeking

to preempt lasting disrepute for perverse wrongdoing.

The guard reported: “Sire, the Queen has smeared fried flour and honey on her body, filled her ornaments with grape pulp and brought them to the king. Bhikkus Moggallana and Purna descended from the air to teach him the Dharma. They cannot be stopped.”

(2) “*The guard reported...*” to “*...they cannot be stopped*” gives the gatekeeper’s detailed account of the situation.

After Ajatasatru had inquired whether his father was still alive, the gatekeeper respectfully provided a response.

“*The guard reported: ‘Sire, the Queen has smeared...’*” describes how the queen secretly provided food to the king. Having received the sustenance, he was able to extend his life. Though many days had passed, he remained alive. This was entirely the queen’s intention and not the fault of the gatekeeper.

Question: The queen provided food by smearing flour on her body and concealing it under her clothing, entering and leaving unnoticed. How was the gatekeeper able to reveal the details of her actions?

Answer: No secret can remain hidden indefinitely; no matter how skillfully or securely it is concealed, it will eventually come to light. The king was confined within the palace, and the queen visited daily. Had she not secretly provided fried flour, the king would have had no means to survive. The term “secretly” reflects the gatekeeper’s account of the

queen's intent — she believed her actions were hidden and unknown to others, but unexpectedly, the gatekeeper had become fully aware. With the situation at a dead end, further concealment was impossible, prompting the gatekeeper to reveal everything to Ajatasatru.

“Bhikkus Moggallana and Purna...” describes how the two sages arrived and departed through the air rather than by the gates. They entered and left daily to teach the king the Dharma. [According to the gatekeeper:] “Your Majesty should understand that when the queen provided food, we had no prior directive from you to restrain her, so we did not dare to intervene. As for the two sages traveling through the air, this too was beyond our control as gatekeepers.”

Hearing this, Ajatasatru became enraged with his mother: “She is a traitor, siding with the enemy. These *bhikkus* are evildoers, conjuring deceptive illusions, allowing this wicked king to survive for so many days.” Grabbing a sharp sword, he was about to kill his mother.

(3) *“Hearing this, Ajatasatru...”* to *“...he was about to kill his mother”* illustrates King Ajatasatru's anger and resentment.

Upon hearing the gatekeeper's explanation, Ajatasatru was overcome with fury and malice towards his mother, which led him to speak harsh words against her. He then committed both evil and transgressive acts through the three types of karma: verbal transgression by cursing his parents as traitor and enemy, verbal evil by insulting the *bhikkus*, and physical transgression by taking up a sword with the intent to kill his mother. His physical and verbal actions, being directed by his mind, also

constitute mental transgression. Alternatively, the preparatory acts are classified as evil, while the subsequent primary deeds are categorized as transgressions.

“She is a traitor...” reflects his harsh verbal utterance. Why did Ajatasatru curse his mother as a traitor and ally of the enemy? Originally, he resented his father and regretted he had not died sooner. However, his mother secretly provided food to the king, prolonging his life. Thus, he insulted her: *“She is a traitor, siding with the enemy.”*

“These bhikkus are evildoers...” illustrates that Ajatasatru, already resentful towards his mother for secretly providing food, grew even angrier upon hearing that the *bhikkus* were regularly visiting the king. In his fury, he exclaimed: *“What kind of [conjured] illusions are allowing this wicked king to survive for so many days?”*

“Grabbing a sharp sword...” depicts how Ajatasatru, consumed by intense wrath, turned his aggression towards his mother. How heartbreaking it was! Seizing her hair, he raised his sword, and her life hung by a thread. With palms joined, the kindly mother bent her body and lowered her head, leaning into his hand. At that moment, her entire body was drenched in sweat, and her spirit nearly faded away. Alas, what sorrow! In a daze, she found herself engulfed in this misery.

At that time, there was a minister named Moonlight, who was both intelligent and knowledgeable. He and Jivaka bowed before the king and said: “Sire, your humble servants have learned from the Vedas that since the beginning of this *kalpa*, there have been 18,000 wicked kings

who coveted the throne and killed their fathers. But no one has ever heard of the atrocity of killing one's mother. Sire, if you commit this heinous act and defile the Ksatriya caste, we cannot bear to witness it! Such a deed would befit a *chandala* (butcher, outcaste), who wouldn't be fit to live here." Having said this, the two ministers placed their hands on their swords, stepped back and began to withdraw.

(4) "*At that time, there was a minister named Moonlight...*" to "*...stepped back and began to withdraw*" portrays how the two subjects offered earnest remonstrances, ignoring the king's intentions.

Minister Moonlight, as second-in-command of the state, was responsible for establishing guiding principles of governance, aspiring to bring renown to the kingdom among all nations and set an example for other states. Suddenly he witnessed Ajatasatru's fierce rebellion and transgression, as he wielded a sword with intent to kill his mother. Moonlight could not bear to see such an evil act. Therefore he, "*together with Jivaka,*" risked their lives to make direct remonstrances.

"*At that time*" refers to the moment when Ajatasatru intended to kill his mother.

"*There was a minister*" introduces one person's rank.

"*Moonlight*" identifies his name.

"*Both intelligent and knowledgeable*" highlights his virtues.

As for the phrase “*together with Jivaka*,” Jivaka was another son of the king father, born to Lady Amra. Upon suddenly witnessing his elder brother turn against his mother, Vaidehi, Jivaka joined Moonlight in offering remonstrance.

Regarding “*bowed before the king...*,” when offering counsel and remonstrance to someone of high rank, it is requisite to bow first as a gesture of respect. The two ministers observed this practice, first demonstrating respect with folded hands and bowed bodies in an effort to move the king’s heart before expressing their true intention.

“*And said: ‘Sire...’*” indicates that Moonlight was preparing to present his opinion, hoping that Ajatasatru would open his heart and listen. Therefore, he first needed to address him formally.

“*Your humble servants have learned from the Vedas*” signifies that [the minister] extensively referenced both ancient and contemporary sources, including records of former kings. As an ancient saying goes: “To speak without reference to classics brings shame to the noble-minded.” Since this remonstrance was a matter of grave importance, how could one speak without basis or make unfounded statements?

“*Since the beginning of this kalpa*” highlights the timeframe.

“*There have been 18,000 wicked kings*” serves as a general reference to rulers who acted indecently and rebelliously.

“*Coveted the throne*” indicates that, driven by malice and greed, they sought to usurp their fathers’ thrones.

“Killed their fathers” suggests that, having developed malice towards their fathers, they could not tolerate the latter’s continued presence and felt compelled to take their lives.

The mention of “18,000” implies that, by killing his father, Ajatasatru aligned himself with those wicked kings.

“But no one has ever heard of the atrocity of killing one’s mother” indicates that, from ancient times to the present, historical records have often recounted instances of patricide to seize power. However, narratives of matricide out of greed for the throne are entirely absent. Since the beginning of this *kalpa*, wicked kings driven by ambition have killed their fathers but spared their mothers. This is referencing the past to underscore a contrast with the present. Ajatasatru’s patricidal transgression for power stemmed from his father’s position as one worthy of coveting, aligning the son with the wicked kings of history. Yet, as his mother held no position subject to greed, his violent betrayal and harm towards her starkly contrast with previous examples.

The phrase *“Sire, if you commit this heinous act”* suggests *“you will defile the Ksatriya caste.”* The term *“Ksatriya caste”* denotes the noble lineage among the four castes, representing the royal bloodline passed down through generations, distinguished from the common people.

“We cannot bear to witness it” means to say: The king’s wicked actions, which harm and dishonor the ancestors and kin, spread infamy far and wide. Witnessing them, we, as esteemed families and prominent clans, are overwhelmed by shame and disgrace, left with no place to hide.

In the phrase *“would befit a chandala,”* *chandala* refers to the lowest of the four castes, characterized by inherent cruelty and wickedness,

devoid of benevolence and righteousness. Though appearing human, their behavior mirrors that of beasts. The king, a member of the noble caste and supreme authority over state affairs, was about to commit heinous acts against his mother. How would he be any different from those of the lowest caste?

The phrase “*wouldn’t be fit to live here*” conveys two meanings:

a) The king has committed evil, disregarding moral conduct and ethical codes. How could the noble capital and this divine land tolerate a *chandala* as the sovereign? This suggests an intent to banish him from the royal palace and imperial city.

b) If the king were to remain in our country, he would harm our kin and lineage. It would be better to exile him to another land, a place completely cut off, where he would be never heard of again. Thus, “*wouldn’t be fit to live here.*”

“*Having said this, the two ministers...*” illustrates that the ministers had offered forthright remonstrances, speaking poignant, unembellished words. They had drawn widely from examples both ancient and modern, hoping to awaken the king’s understanding.

“*Placed their hands on their swords*” means that each minister kept his hand on his own sword.

Question: Their blunt, offensive language of remonstrance had inevitably offended the king’s majesty, breaking the bond of loyalty between ruler and subject. Why did they not simply turn and leave, but instead “*stepped back and began to withdraw*”?

Answer: Though their coarse words confronted the king, their purpose was to dissuade him from harming his mother. However, fearing that Ajatasatru's anger had not subsided and that he might wield his sword to endanger them, they placed their hands on their own swords for self-defence and stepped back to withdraw.

Ajatasatru, shocked and fearful, cried out to Jivaka: "Are you not on my side?"

(5) "*Ajatasatru, shocked and fearful...*" to "*...Are you not on my side*" illustrates Ajatasatru's fear.

Upon witnessing the two ministers object with blunt, piercing remarks and observing them press their hands on their swords as they withdrew, Ajatasatru feared they might betray him and ally with his father, inciting further trouble. This left him deeply unsettled inside, hence the description "*shocked and fearful*." "They have forsaken me; but for whom did they do so?" Suspicious and hesitant, he promptly questioned Jivaka: "*Are you not on my side?*"

Jivaka was Ajatasatru's younger brother. As the ancients said: "When a family faces calamity, only close kin come to its aid." "Since you are my brother, how can you behave like Moonlight?"

Jivaka pleaded: "Sire, please do not kill your mother!"

(6) "*Jivaka pleaded...*" to "*...please do not kill your mother*" represents the two ministers' repeated remonstrances.

This presents Jivaka's direct response to Ajatasatru: "If you wish us to serve as your ministers, we earnestly request that you do not harm your mother." With this, their forthright remonstrations came to an end.

Hearing this, Ajatasatru repented and called for help. He dropped his sword and refrained from harming his mother.

(7) "*Hearing this, Ajatasatru...*" to "*...refrained from harming his mother*" illustrates that Ajatasatru accepted the remonstrations and spared his mother's life.

Following Jivaka's remonstrance, Ajatasatru experienced remorse and shame for his prior actions. He immediately pleaded with the two ministers for pardon and forgiveness. Thus, he promptly spared his mother from the threat of death, returning the sword in his hand to its sheath.

He then ordered the palace officials to confine her in the depths of the palace, forbidding her from ever leaving again.

(8) "*He then ordered the palace officials...*" to "*...forbidding her from ever leaving again*" relates that Ajatasatru, out of lingering resentment, confined his mother.

Though he accepted the counsel of his ministers and refrained from taking her life, Ajatasatru harbored residual anger and did not permit her to remain outside. He instructed the palace attendants to confine her deep

within the palace, forbidding her from leaving or meeting with the king father.

The foregoing, though consisting of eight varied phrases, thoroughly explains the Cause for the Mother's Confinement.

iv) Cause for Aversion to Suffering

This consists of four elements.

Imprisoned and haggard, Vaidehi was consumed with distress.

(1) "*Imprisoned and haggard...*" to "*...with distress*" describes the queen being confined by her son.

Although the queen was spared from death, she was further confined in the depths of the inner quarter, under extremely tight guard and with no means of escape. Worn down by endless sorrow, she inevitably became haggard, lamenting:

*What calamity today! What sorrow and fear!
Ajatasatru, the King, has drawn me near.
Though his sharp blade halted half-way,
In palace depths, still bound in plight I stay.*

Question: Since the queen was spared from death and entered the palace, she ought to feel surprise and joy. Why did she instead experience even greater sorrow and distress?

Answer: There are three reasons:

a) With the queen herself confined, there was no one left to provide food for the king. Upon learning of her plight, the king could only feel greater sorrow and distress. Deprived of sustenance and burdened by mounting worries, the king surely would not have much longer to live.

b) Being imprisoned, would the queen ever again have a chance to see the Tathagata and his disciples?

c) The queen was confined deep within the palace on orders, with officials guarding so tightly that not even a drop of water could slip through. From dawn to dusk, she was gripped by the fear of impending death.

With these three concerns weighing heavily on both her body and mind, how could she not grow haggard?

Facing the direction of Mt. Gridhrakuta, she bowed to the Buddha from afar and said: “Tathagata, World-Honored One, in the past, you often sent Ananda to comfort me. Now I am overwhelmed with sorrow and grief. But because of your awe-inspiring majesty, World-Honored One, I cannot hope to see you. I earnestly wish you can send Moggallana and Ven. Ananda to meet with me.”

After speaking, she wept with grief, her tears falling like rain. She bowed again to the Buddha from afar. Before she could lift her head,

(2) “Facing the direction of Mt. Gridhrakuta...” to “Before she could lift her head” suggests that, due to her confinement, the queen appealed to the Buddha, intending to convey her thoughts.

Unable to approach the Buddha in person due to her confinement, the queen could only offer her wholehearted devotion by turning towards Mt. Gridhrakuta and bowing to the World-Honored One from afar. She hoped the Buddha would compassionately perceive his disciple’s sorrow and anguish.

“Tathagata, World-Honored One, in the past...” carries two meanings:

a) Prior to the king father’s confinement, he and the queen were able to approach the Buddha in person, or alternatively, the Tathagata and his disciples could directly receive the king’s invitation. However, now that both were in confinement, all connections were severed, and mutual communication was disrupted.

b) Since the time of the king’s imprisonment, the World-Honored One had frequently sent Ananda to console the queen. Why was this necessary? Witnessing the king’s confinement, the Buddha feared that the queen might be overwhelmed with sorrow and distress. So he sent Ananda to offer her comfort.

The phrase “because of your awe-inspiring majesty, World-Honored One, I cannot hope to see you” reveals the queen’s humility and her reverent reliance upon the Buddha: “As your disciple, I am clothed in this impure female form and lack the roots of merit. Buddha, exalted in virtue and majesty, you are not one to be approached lightly. I earnestly implore you kindly to send Moggallana and others to meet with me.”

Question: The Tathagata, as the Lord of Teachings, would never miss an opportune moment to guide sentient beings. Why did the queen not repeatedly extend her invitation [directly to the Buddha], but instead asked for Moggallana and others? What was her intention?

Answer: The Buddha's virtue is exalted and magnificent, so she did not presume to invite him over a matter she deemed minor. Instead, she wished to see Ananda, so that he might convey her messages to the Buddha. Understanding her intention, the Buddha would then entrust Ananda to relay his words and offer her guidance. For this reason, she sought an audience with Ananda.

"After speaking" signifies the conclusion of the previously expressed intent in its entirety.

"She wept with grief, her tears falling like rain" reveals that the queen acknowledged the gravity of her own negative karma and implored the Buddha's compassion. With deep reverence and sincerity, her eyes brimmed with sorrowful tears. Yearning intensely for the Buddha's sacred presence, she further prostrated from afar, her forehead pressed to the ground, remaining motionless, reluctant to rise quickly.

... the World-Honored One at Mt. Gridhrakuta perceived her thoughts. He immediately instructed Moggallana and Ananda to reach her through the air. The Buddha himself vanished from Mt. Gridhrakuta and appeared in the royal palace.

As Vaidehi raised her head, she beheld the World-Honored One, Shakyamuni Buddha, his body

radiant with a purple-golden color, seated on a lotus made of hundreds of jewels. Moggallana attended on his left, and Ananda on his right. In the air, devas such as Sakra, Brahma and the World Protectors (Four Heavenly Kings) were present, showering celestial flowers all around as offerings.

(3) “*The World-Honored One at Mt. Gridhrakuta...*” to “*...celestial flowers all around as offerings*” indicates that the World-Honored One personally arrived in response to the invitation.

This also shows that the World-Honored One, while staying at Mt. Gridhrakuta, was already aware of the queen’s thoughts and intentions.

“*Instructed Moggallana and Ananda to reach her through the air*” reflects the fulfillment of the queen’s request.

“*The Buddha himself vanished from Mt. Gridhrakuta*” implies that the security restrictions in the palace against the queen were exceptionally strict. If the Buddha had shown his presence in approaching her, Ajatasatru might have become aware and imposed further detentions or obstacles. Thus, it was necessary for him to disappear from one location and manifest in another.

“*As Vaidehi raised her head*” indicates the moment the queen paid her respects.

“*She beheld the World-Honored One*” illustrates that the World-Honored One had already appeared in the palace, allowing the queen to see him as soon as she raised her head.

The mention of “*Shakyamuni Buddha*” distinguishes him from other Buddhas. While “World-Honored One” is a universal title for all Buddhas and their physical characteristics are uniform, specifying Shakyamuni here removes uncertainty.

“*His body radiant with a purple-golden color*” highlights his physical characteristics.

“*Seated on a lotus made of hundreds of jewels*” distinguishes this seat from others.

“*Moggallana attended on his left*” and so forth confirm that no others were present — only these two *bhikkus*.

“*Sakra, Brahma and the World Protectors*” refers to the celestial kings and their retinues. Observing the World-Honored One discreetly appear in the royal palace, they anticipated rare and marvelous teachings: “Through Vaidehi, we celestial beings will benefit from hearing unprecedented guidance.” United in this intent, they all remained in the nearby sky, listening from afar with divine hearing and offering showers of flowers.

“*Sakra*” refers to *Śakro devānām indraḥ*, the Lord of the Devas.

“*Brahma*” denotes the Brahma lord who presides over the Realm of Form.

“*The World Protectors*” signifies the Four Heavenly Kings who safeguard the world.

“*Devas*” refers to celestial beings from the heavens of both the Form and Desire realms. Seeing their celestial kings approach the Buddha, they followed their lords to receive teachings and present offerings.

Seeing the World-Honored One, Vaidehi tore off her ornaments and prostrated herself on the ground, wailing to the Buddha: “World-Honored One, what karmic offenses did I commit in past lives to give birth to such an evil son? And what causes and conditions have linked you, World-Honored One, to Devadatta as a relation?”

(4) “*Seeing the World-Honored One, Vaidehi...*” to “*...Devadatta as a relation*” recounts how the queen raised her head, beheld the Buddha, and voiced her sorrow and lament, revealing grievances knotted deep within her heart.

“*Tore off her ornaments*” implies that the queen, who still wore jeweled ornaments due to lingering attachment, suddenly saw the Tathagata, felt ashamed and tore them off.

Question: Why did she tear them off?

Answer: The queen was the most noble of the noble, the most revered of the revered. Numerous attendants catered to her needs in all four postures — sitting, walking, standing and lying down — and her clothing was always tended to by others. Upon seeing the Buddha, she felt profound shame and, without waiting to unbuckle or unlace, ripped them away at once. Thus, the phrase “*tore off*.”

“Prostrated herself on the ground” describes that the queen, her heart full of unbearable grievance and sorrow, leapt up from her seat, sprang to her feet, and threw herself to the ground. These actions signify the depth of her grief and anguish, even bypassing the usual decorum of respectful bowing.

“Wailing to the Buddha” portrays the queen writhing before him, crying out loudly, overwhelmed by suffocating oppression.

“World-Honored One...” describes how the queen, after writhing and weeping for some time, gradually regained clarity. Composing herself, she assumed a dignified posture and, with palms pressed together, addressed the Buddha: “Since my birth in this life, I have never committed grave offenses. I do not understand what past karma and causal conditions have led to this disastrous retribution, binding me to this child as his mother?” This illustrates that, due to her deep-seated hindrances, the queen was unable to discern the karmic causes from the past. Now harmed by her own son, she perceived this calamity as sudden and unexpected, imploring: “May you, Buddha, compassionately show me the path forward.”

“And what causes and conditions have linked you, World-Honored One...” is how the queen addressed the Buddha: “I am but an ordinary being, burdened by boundless negative karma and delusion, and I accept that such retribution has come upon me. However, World-Honored One, you have practiced the Path over countless *kalpas*, having fully eradicated both vexations and habitual tendencies. Your all-encompassing wisdom shines brilliantly, and with the fruit of enlightenment perfected, you have attained the title of Buddha. I cannot comprehend what causes and conditions have linked you to Devadatta as a relation.”

This statement carries two meanings:

a) The queen blamed her son for his sudden, violent malice towards her and the king father.

b) She also hated Devadatta: “It was he who abetted my Ajatasatru in devising such an evil scheme. Without Devadatta’s incitement, my son would never have harbored such malevolence.”

For these reasons, she posed this question.

As for the queen’s question about the Buddha being “*linked to Devadatta as a relation*,” there are two types of relations: lay relations and monastic relations.

In terms of lay relations, the Buddha had four paternal uncles: the Buddha himself was the son of King Śuddhodana; Kimbila, the son of King Śuklodana; Devadatta, the son of King Droṇodana; and Mahānāma, the son of King Amṛtodana. These are considered the Buddha’s external relations in lay life.

As for monastic relations, Devadatta, as a disciple of the Buddha, is regarded as one of his inner relations.

The foregoing, though consisting of four varied phrases, thoroughly explains the Cause for Aversion to Suffering.

v) Cause for Admiration of Purity

This consists of eight aspects.

“I humbly beseech you, World-Honored One, to expound in detail on places free from sorrow and distress, where I may be reborn. I find no joy in Jambudvipa, this turbid and iniquitous world.”

(1) “*I humbly beseech you, World-Honored One...*” to “*...this turbid and iniquitous world*” conveys the queen’s general request for what she sought (rebirth in a sorrowless land) and specifically highlights this realm of suffering.

Upon encountering her own suffering, the queen recognized the impermanence of the world and saw that all Six Realms are alike, with no place for peace of mind. At that time, hearing the Buddha speak of pure abodes as free from birth and death, she aspired to abandon her impure body and attain the unconditioned bliss of those abodes.

“It is mired in defilement and evil, filled with hell-beings, hungry ghosts and animals, and crowded with unwholesome gatherings. I pray that in the future, I will neither hear evil sounds nor see wicked people.”

(2) From “*It is mired in defilement and evil...*” to “*...nor see wicked people,*” the queen described the realm she detested.

Jambudvipa is entirely iniquitous, devoid of any place worth desiring. It merely deludes the ignorant with illusions, causing them to endure endless suffering.

“This turbid and iniquitous world” specifically refers to the realm of suffering. It also denotes the receptacle world — the retributive environment of sentient beings and the place upon which they depend.

The mention of *“hell-beings”* and others indicates the three most severe levels of negative retribution.

“Filled with” indicates that these three gatherings of suffering beings are not limited to Jambudvīpa but pervade the entire Saha world. Hence, the phrase *“filled with.”*

“Crowded with unwholesome gatherings” implies that within the Three Domains, the Six Realms differ — their types as innumerable as grains of sand in the Ganges — and they vary according to the mind. A sutra states:

Karma adorns consciousness. Life after life, from one place to another, and in varied realms, sentient beings receive karmic retribution according to causal conditions. Yet they remain incapable of recognizing one another, even when face to face.

“I pray that in the future...” reflects the queen’s profound sincerity in loathing the suffering of the Saha world, admiring the unconditioned realm, and aspiring to return eternally to permanent bliss. However, the unconditioned realm is not easily approached, nor can the distressing Saha world be easily escaped. The queen herself has not yet developed a *vajra*-like resolve to sever permanently the fundamental root of birth and death. Without personally following the compassionate Honored One, how could she hope to be free from such endless sighs of sorrow?

Even so, *“I pray that in the future, I will neither hear evil sounds nor see wicked people”* conveys her additional wish neither to hear nor see

individuals like Ajatasatru and Devadatta, acts of patricide, disruptions of the Sangha, and evil reputations and sounds. Given that Ajatasatru, her son by birth, harbored murderous intent towards her and his father, how much greater harm might come from those with looser connections? Thus the queen made no distinction between the intimate and the distant, renouncing all of them altogether.

“Now, I prostrate myself before you, World-Honored One, with my five limbs touching the ground, imploring your compassion and seeking repentance.”

(3) “*Now, I prostrate myself before you...*” to “*...seeking repentance*” reveals the queen’s understanding that pure abodes are so wondrous that only the virtuous can be reborn there. Fearing that lingering negative karma might hinder her path, she implored the Buddha’s compassion and further sought repentance.

“I entreat you, sun-like Buddha, to teach me how to contemplate the realm of pure karma.”

(4) “*I entreat you, sun-like Buddha...*” to “*...the realm of pure karma*” reflects Vaidehi’s general request for guidance on the practices necessary for rebirth in pure realms.

The queen, having previously made a general request regarding pure realms for her rebirth, now made another general request for guidance on practices required to achieve that rebirth.

The expression “*Sun-like Buddha*” signifies both the Dharma and the metaphor. Just as the rising sun dispels all darkness, the radiance of the Buddha’s wisdom illuminates the night of ignorance.

“*Teach me how to contemplate...*” conveys that, having developed an aversion to the defiled world and an admiration for pure realms, the queen sought to calm her mind and focus on contemplation to attain rebirth in a pure land.

At that moment, the World-Honored One emitted a light from between his eyebrows. Golden in hue, it illuminated innumerable worlds throughout the ten directions. Returning to rest upon the Buddha’s crown, the light transformed into a golden platform, majestic like Mt. Sumeru. Within it appeared the pure, wondrous Buddha Lands of the ten directions: some formed from the seven treasures, others composed entirely of lotus flowers, some resembling the palaces of Ishvaradeva, and others like crystal mirrors, reflecting worlds in all directions. Countless Buddha Lands such as these, resplendent and vividly clear, were revealed to Vaidehi’s sight.

(5) From “*At that moment, the World-Honored One emitted a light from between his eyebrows*” to “*were revealed to Vaidehi’s sight,*” the World-Honored One extensively displayed pure lands in response to Vaidehi’s earlier general request.

Answering the queen's expansive request for pure lands, the Tathagata emitted a light from between his eyebrows, illuminating the worlds in all ten directions. This light gathered [the features of] pure lands and returned to his crown, transforming into a golden platform resembling Mt. Sumeru. The term "*like*," meaning "resembling," indicates that the platform was similar to Mt. Sumeru, with a narrow middle and broad top. Within this platform, all Buddha Lands appeared, each varied in kind and uniquely distinctive in splendor. By the Buddha's divine power, every detail was clearly and vividly revealed. Through his empowerment, Vaidehi was able to witness them all.

Question: Vaidehi initially asked the Buddha to "*expound in detail on places free from sorrow and distress.*" Why did the Buddha, instead of explaining in detail, display extensive visions [of these realms] within the golden platform? What was his intention?

Answer: This reveals the subtle, esoteric intent of the Tathagata. When Vaidehi uttered her request, it opened wide the gateway to pure abodes. Had he given only a general description, he was concerned that, without seeing directly, her mind might still be clouded by doubts. Thus the Buddha displayed each pure land before her eyes. Then, according to whatever she needed, she was allowed to choose freely as she wished.

Then Vaidehi said to the Buddha: "World-Honored One, though these Buddha Lands are pure, immaculate and radiant,

(6) "*Then Vaidehi said to the Buddha...*" to "*...immaculate and radiant*" conveys that the queen, having fully accepted all that was revealed, was filled with profound gratitude for the Buddha's grace.

She expansively beheld Buddha Lands of the ten directions, each one exquisite and resplendent. Yet, when she sought to compare them to the Land of Bliss, none matched its splendor at all. Thus she declared: *“my wish now is to be reborn in the Land of Peace and Joy.”*

Question: Since the Buddhas of the ten directions have equally eradicated delusions, completed their practices, and fully perfected realization, there should be no differences among them. Why is it that such distinctions of superiority and inferiority still exist, given that all are pure lands of the same kind?

Answer: All Buddhas, as Dharma Kings, exercise supernatural powers with perfect freedom. The superiority or inferiority of Buddha Lands lies beyond the comprehension of deluded beings. In accordance with the capacities of his audience, the Buddha revealed or concealed the qualities of certain realms as appropriate, ensuring the efficacy of his teachings. Thus, the excellence of other realms may have been deliberately veiled, while the supremacy of the Western Pure Land was uniquely brought to light.

“ ... my wish now is to be reborn in the Land of Bliss, where Amitabha Buddha resides.”

(7) *“My wish now is to be reborn in the Land of Bliss...”* signifies Vaidehi’s specific choice of the realm for her desired rebirth.

Each of Amitabha Buddha’s 48 vows for the establishment of his land unfailingly generates supreme, augmentative causes, and —

- Based on these causes, supreme practices were cultivated.

- Through these practices, supreme realization was attained.
- Through such realization, supreme rewards were realized.
- Through these rewards, the Land of Bliss was accomplished.
- Relying on the Land of Bliss, compassionate transformation is universally manifested.
- Through compassionate transformation, the gateway to wisdom is revealed.

Yet, the compassionate mind is boundless and wisdom, infinite. Through the union of compassion and wisdom, the nectar of Dharma flows far and wide, its nourishment embracing beings universally.

Various other scriptures abound with passages of exhortation, where all Great Sages, with united hearts, collectively guide and extol. With these causal conditions, the Tathagata imperceptibly enabled the queen to make her specific selection.

“I earnestly beseech you, World-Honored One, to teach me the practices of contemplative reflection and correct meditative absorption.”

(8) “*I earnestly beseech you, World-Honored One...*” clarifies the queen’s request for guidance on specific practices.

Having chosen her destination for rebirth, Vaidehi further sought to undertake specific practices, inspiring herself to sustain mental focus in hopes of realizing the benefits of rebirth.

“Contemplative reflection” refers to the preliminary expedient practice preceding meditative concentration, involving visualization and recollection of the four categories of splendors associated with the circumstantial and direct rewards of the Pure Land.

“Correct meditative absorption” refers to the state in which the earlier visualizations gradually become more subtle and refined, as inference and conception dissolve entirely, leaving only the meditative mind in perfect harmony with its object. This is *“correct meditative absorption.”*

A brief explanation has been given here; further elaboration will follow in the subsequent teaching on contemplation methods. This should be understood.

The foregoing, though consisting of eight varied phrases, thoroughly explains the Cause for Admiration of Purity.

vi) Cause for Revealing the Practices of Non-Meditative Virtues

This consists of five elements.

The World-Honored One smiled. Rays of five-colored light emanated from his mouth, each illuminating the crown of King Bimbisara.

Though the king was confined at the time, his mind’s eye was unobstructed. From afar, he beheld the World-Honored One, bowed with his forehead to the ground and, progressing spontaneously, attained the stage of Anagami (Non-Returner).

(1) “*The World-Honored One smiled...*” to “*...attained the stage of Anagami (Non-Returner)*” describes how the Buddha benefited the king with radiance.

The Tathagata perceived the queen’s aspiration to rebirth in the Land of Bliss, as well as her further request for the necessary practices to attain it. In this, the Buddha’s original intent was fulfilled, and the purpose of Amitabha’s vows was revealed. Through these two petitions (by the queen), the gateway to the Pure Land was flung wide open — not only would Vaidehi attain rebirth, but all who hear this teaching could likewise reach that realm. Moved by this benefit, the Tathagata smiled.

“*Rays of five-colored light emanated from his mouth*” highlights the spontaneous, ever-present dignity of all Buddhas, both mental and oral. Any light they radiate unfailingly brings benefit.

“*Each illuminating the crown of King Bimbisara*” indicates that the light from the Buddha’s mouth did not radiate in other directions but focused exclusively on the crown of the king’s head.

The light emitted from various parts of the Buddha’s body conveys benefits to specific realms:

- From his feet: the hell realm.
- From his knees: the animal realm.
- From his concealed genital region: the realm of ghosts and spirits.
- From his navel: the asura realm.
- From his heart: the human realm.

- From his mouth: followers of the Two Vehicles.
- From between his eyebrows, practitioners of the Mahayana.

It is now revealed that the Buddha's light was emitted from his mouth, directly illuminating the crown of the king's head, signifying the bestowal of the Lesser Vehicle fruition upon the king. Had the light emanated from between the Buddha's eyebrows and entered through his crown, it would have symbolized the conferral of a Bodhisattva prediction. Such implications are vast and boundless, defying complete enumeration.

"Though the king was confined at the time..." describes how, when the Buddha's light illuminated the crown of the king's head, the mind's eye of the monarch was opened. Despite the many barriers and partitions, he naturally beheld Shakyamuni Buddha. This vision arose solely from the Buddha's radiance, entirely beyond the king's expectation. He extended veneration, took refuge and immediately transcended to realize the third stage of Sravaka fruition.

**Then the World-Honored One said to Vaidehi:
 "Do you now understand? Amitabha Buddha is
 not far from here. You should focus your mind and
 meticulously contemplate that land to accomplish
 pure karma. I will now explain this in detail for you,
 using various analogies.**

(2) From *"Then the World-Honored One said to Vaidehi..."* to *"...using various analogies,"* the Buddha responded to the queen's earlier request for the practices necessary for rebirth in the Pure Land she had

specifically chosen.

From the previously mentioned disappearance from Mt. Gridhrakuta and appearance in the royal palace up until this point in the text, the World-Honored One remained seated in silence without speaking a word. During this interval, as the queen repented and implored, and the Buddha emitted light and displayed the pure lands, Ananda, who was attending the Buddha, witnessed these events in the royal palace. Upon returning to the mountain afterwards, he recounted these occurrences to the assembly at Gridhrakuta, which is how this text came to be recorded. However, this does not entirely rule out moments during that time when the Buddha did speak. This should be understood.

“Then the World-Honored One said to Vaidehi...” conveys the Buddha’s open declaration and his assent to expound.

The sentence *“Amitabha Buddha is not far from here”* defines the contemplative object for focusing the mind. There are three points:

- Proximity in distance. Beyond 10 trillion Buddha realms from here lies the Pure Land of Amitabha Buddha.
- Though vast in physical distance, it can be reached in a single thought upon departure from here.
- When Vaidehi, her companions, and future beings with karmic affinity focus their minds on contemplation and invocation, and reach alignment with meditative concentration, they as a matter of course behold Amitabha Buddha continually.

With these three meanings, Amitabha Buddha is thus *“not far.”*

“You should focus your mind...” conveys that deluded ordinary beings are burdened by significant hindrances, their minds highly scattered and restless. Unless clinging and grasping are entirely severed, pure visions cannot arise. This is precisely the Buddha’s teaching on settling the mind and sustaining contemplative practices. To follow this path is *“to accomplish pure karma.”*

“I will now explain...” suggests that the causal conditions were not yet fully mature, making it inappropriate to teach only the meditative method. After further observing her capability, the Buddha took the initiative to introduce the practice of the Three Meritorious Actions.

“It will also enable future generations of ordinary beings who wish to cultivate pure karma to attain rebirth in the Western Land of Bliss.”

(3) *“It will also enable future generations...”* to *“...the Western Land of Bliss”* highlights the specific aptitudes for the teaching and encourages practice to attain benefits.

This emphasizes the immense profundity of the benefits arising from the queen’s requests — future beings who turn their minds towards the Pure Land will unfailingly be reborn there.

“Those who wish to be reborn in that land should cultivate three kinds of meritorious actions:

1. Be filial to parents, respect and serve teachers and elders, maintain kindheartedness, refrain from killing, and cultivate the Ten Good Actions.

2. Undertake and uphold the Three Refuges, fully observe the myriad precepts and avoid undignified comportment.

3. Awaken the Bodhi-mind, believe deeply in cause and effect, read and chant Mahayana scriptures, and encourage others to practice.

These three kinds of deeds are called pure karma.”

(4) “*Those who wish to be reborn in that land...*” to “*...are called pure karma*” encourages cultivation of the Three Meritorious Actions.

Sentient beings are classified into two types of capacities: meditative and non-meditative. Meditative practice alone does not encompass all beings. Thus, the Tathagata revealed the Three Meritorious Actions as a skillful means to accommodate those with scattered, restless dispositions.

The phrase “*to be reborn in that land* ” specifies the intended destination.

The statement “*should cultivate three kinds of meritorious actions*” serves as a general introduction to the practice.

What are the three?

1. Be filial to parents...

This consists of four elements:

- “*Be filial to parents*” signifies that all beings come into existence dependent on conditions. What does “dependent on conditions” mean? It

refers to birth through transformation, embryos, eggs or moisture. Each of these four birth types, in turn, encompasses all four, as detailed in the sutras. As long as beings arise through causal conditions, they have parents. Where there are parents, there is profound grace.

Without a father, the cause that initiates birth is absent; without a mother, the conditions for [sustaining] what is to be born are disrupted. If neither parent exists, there is no foundation for taking bodily form. Only when both parental conditions are complete does a place for receiving a body exist. For the body to take shape, beings must rely on their own karma-consciousness (*karma-vijñāna*) as the internal cause and the essence and blood of the parents as the external conditions. Through the convergence of the causes and conditions, the body comes into being.

For this reason, the grace of parents is profound. From the moment a mother conceives, she endures ten months of constant discomfort — whether walking, standing, sitting or lying down. She also faces the fear of life-threatening peril during childbirth. After the child is born, for three years, she constantly sleeps amid filth, her bed, blankets and clothing often soiled. Yet when children grow up and become attached to their spouses and offspring, they may grow resentful towards their parents, showing neither filial piety nor gratitude. Such behavior is no different from that of animals.

Furthermore, parents are the supreme field of blessings in the worldly realm, while the Buddha is the supreme field of blessings beyond the world. Once, while the Buddha was in the world, a great famine struck. People perished from hunger, and white bones lay scattered across the land. The *bhikkus* struggled to obtain food through begging. After they went out, the World-Honored One entered the city alone for alms. From dawn until noon, he knocked on every door, but no one offered food. He

returned with an empty bowl. The next day, he went again and received nothing; on the third day, he tried once more but still came back empty-handed.

On the road, a *bhikku* encountered the Buddha and noticed his unusual complexion, which seemed pale with hunger. The *bhikku* asked: “World-Honored One, have you eaten today?”

The Buddha replied: “*Bhikku*, for the past three days, I have not received even a single ladle of food through begging. I am now weak from hunger and lack the energy to speak with you.”

Hearing the Buddha’s words, the *bhikku* could not hold back his tears of sorrow, thinking to himself: “The Buddha is the supreme field of blessings, the protector of all beings. I should sell my Three Robes to buy a bowl of rice and offer it to the Buddha. Now is the time.”

With this resolve, he proceeded to buy a bowl of rice and hastily offered it to the Buddha. The Buddha, fully aware, asked: “*Bhikku*, in this time of famine, when people are starving to death, where did you obtain this bowl of pure-colored rice?”

The *bhikku* explained everything in detail. The Buddha then said: “*Bhikku*, the Three Robes symbolize the banner of all Buddhas — past, present and future. The causes and conditions surrounding these robes are of utmost honor, weight and grace. You have traded them to obtain this rice and offered it to me. I deeply appreciate your kindness, but I cannot consume it.”

The *bhikku* implored: “Buddha, you are the field of blessings across the Three Domains, the ultimate among the sacred. If even you say you cannot consume this, who else can?”

The Buddha replied: “*Bhikku*, are your parents still living?”

He answered: “Yes.”

The Buddha continued: “Then offer it to them.”

The *bhikku* said: “Buddha, if even you say you cannot consume it, how can my parents?”

The Buddha replied: “They can. Why? Your parents gave birth to your body and thus have profound and weighty grace towards you; therefore they are deserving.”

The Buddha then asked: “*Bhikku*, do your parents have faith in the Buddha?”

The *bhikku* replied: “Neither of them has faith.”

The Buddha said: “Now they will. Seeing you bring them this food will fill them with great joy. Because of this, their faith will awaken. First, instruct them to take refuge in the Three Gems. Then they will be able to consume this food.”

Having received the Buddha’s guidance, the *bhikku* departed with both sorrow and reverence in his heart. For these reasons, it is crucial to practice filial piety towards one’s parents.

Moreover, the Buddha’s mother, Queen Maya, gave birth to him and passed away seven days later, ascending to the Heaven of Trayastrimsa. After attaining enlightenment, on the 15th day of the 4th month, the Buddha appeared in Trayastrimsa and spent the summer expounding the Dharma to his mother, repaying her grace for the ten months she carried

him. If even the Buddha himself cherished parental grace and practiced filial piety, how much more so should ordinary people? Thus, we realize the boundless depth of parental grace.

- “*Respect and serve teachers and elders*” means that, through the power of teachers as virtuous companions, we learn proper etiquette, acquire knowledge, cultivate merit, avoid errors in causal practices, and may even attain Buddhahood. Such profound kindness deserves the highest reverence.

In relation to parents, teachers and elders, it is the “practice of reverence towards those above.”

- “*Maintain kindheartedness and refrain from killing*” signifies that all sentient beings regard life as fundamental. When confronted with adversity, they panic, flee, hide and evade, solely to protect their own lives. As a sutra states:

***All sentient beings
Cherish their lives.
Do not kill or strike;
Feel as they feel.***

This serves as evidence.

- “*Cultivate the Ten Good Actions*” underscores that killing is the gravest of the Ten Evil Actions and is therefore listed first. Conversely, preserving life — the foremost of the Ten Good Actions — serves as its direct counterpart. The remaining nine evil and nine good actions will be discussed in detail in the Nine Levels of Rebirth below.

These pertain to Worldly Virtues, also known as the “practice of kindness towards those below.”

2. Undertake and uphold the Three Refuges...

- Worldly Virtues are limited and fragile, yielding only incomplete rewards. By contrast, the Buddha’s precepts, exalted in virtue, lead to the realization of Bodhi. However, devotion and faith in sentient beings should gradually develop from shallow to profound — beginning with taking refuge in the Three Gems and progressing to learning various precepts.
- “*Fully observe the myriad precepts*” acknowledges the vast array of practices, including the Three-Refuge precepts, the Five Precepts, the Eight Precepts, the Ten Goodness Precepts, the 250 Precepts, the 500 Precepts, the Novice Precepts, the Three Cumulative Bodhisattva Precepts, and the Ten Inexhaustible Precepts, among others — hence the phrase “*fully observe the myriad precepts*.” Moreover, each individual precept allows for varying degrees of observance: lesser, greater and complete.
- “*Avoid undignified comportment*” emphasizes that physical, verbal and mental actions — whether in walking, standing, sitting or lying down — serve as skillful means to uphold all precepts by embodying dignified conduct. Practitioners who safeguard and maintain all precepts, both major and minor, whether coarse or subtle, and promptly repent any violations are said to “*avoid undignified comportment*.”

These are Virtues of Precepts.

3. Awaken the Bodhi-mind...

- This encourages sentient beings to admire and resolve on the Mahayana path, steering away from the shallow pursuits of the Lesser Vehicle. Without cultivating a great, all-encompassing aspiration, how can one hope to achieve Bodhi?

May my body to be as vast as the Void and my mind as boundless as the Dharma Realm, encompassing sentient beings of all natures.

- **Through physical karma**, I shall venerate them, make offerings, pay homage, welcome and bid them farewell as they come and go, and deliver them all to liberation without exception.
- **Through verbal karma**, I shall praise and expound the Dharma, enabling them all to accept my teachings and, upon hearing my words, attain enlightenment without exception.
- **Through mental karma**, I shall enter samadhi to observe and manifest emanations throughout the Dharma Realm, delivering them according to their inclinations, leaving no one behind.

I make this vow, aspiring for it to expand boundlessly, like the Void, pervading all places. My practice shall flow unceasingly, extending into the infinite future, with my body tireless and my mind never weary or complacent.

“Bodhi” refers to the fruition of Buddhahood.

“Mind” denotes sentient beings’ mind that is capable of seeking [Bodhi].

Thus, “*awaken the Bodhi-mind.*”

- “*Believe deeply in cause and effect*” comprises two aspects, the first of which pertains to the worldly cause and effect of suffering and happiness: Those who create causes of suffering will undergo suffering as a consequence, while those who cultivate causes of happiness will experience happiness in return. This is akin to a wax seal pressing into clay; once the seal dissolves, the inscription is complete. Such is beyond doubt.
- “*Read and chant Mahayana scriptures*” signifies that sutras and teachings function like a mirror. Through repeated reading and reflection, wisdom arises. Once the eye of wisdom opens, one naturally turns away from suffering and delights in nirvana.
- “*Encourage others to practice*” suggests that suffering is like poison and wrongdoing, a blade — driving transmigration through the Three Domains and inflicting harm upon sentient beings. By contrast, goodness resembles a polished mirror, and the Dharma, sweet nectar: The mirror reflects the correct path back to truth, while the nectar pours as Dharma rain, inexhaustible and ever-flowing. To ensure that all beings are nourished and partake equally in this stream of Dharma, it is essential to encourage one another.

“*These three kinds of deeds...*” concludes and summarizes the preceding practices.

The Buddha said to Vaidehi: “Do you now understand? These three types of karma are the

primary causes of the pure karma of all Buddhas, past, present and future.”

(5) From “*The Buddha said to Vaidehi...*” to “*...all Buddhas, past, present and future,*” the Buddha inspired ordinary beings by referencing the Great Sages. As long as practitioners focus their minds with unwavering resolve, rebirth in the Pure Land is assured without doubt.

The foregoing, though consisting of five varied phrases, thoroughly explains the Cause for Revealing the Practices of Non-Meditative Virtues.

vii) Cause for Expounding Contemplations as Meditative Virtues

This consists of seven aspects.

**The Buddha addressed Ananda and Vaidehi:
“Listen carefully, listen carefully! Reflect on this properly. Now, the Tathagata will teach about pristine, pure karma for all beings of future generations, those afflicted by vexatious thieves.**

(1) “*The Buddha addressed Ananda and Vaidehi...*” to “*...those afflicted by vexatious thieves*” indicates the Buddha’s call for attention and his assent to expound.

The Tathagata granted Vaidehi’s earlier request for guidance on the practices required to attain rebirth in the Pure Land, for which she had already expressed her aspiration. Now, through this text, the Buddha was about to expound on the expedient means for achieving correct meditative absorption. This is a causal condition of utmost importance,

bearing profound benefits — rarely encountered across countless *kalpas* and revealed only now. For this reason, the Tathagata summoned the two of them (Ananda and Vaidehi) together.

“*Addressed Ananda*” conveys: “I will now begin to expound the teaching of the Pure Land path. You must diligently uphold and transmit it, ensuring it is never lost.”

“*Addressed Vaidehi*” implies: “You have requested this teaching. I will now expound it. You must listen attentively, reflect deeply, and accept it with sincerity, ensuring there is neither misunderstanding nor omission.”

“*For all beings of future generations*” denotes that whenever the Tathagata taught, he especially focused on those constantly submerged in samsara. Now, he was about to spread the cloud of compassion equally, wishing for all beings to partake in the nourishment to come.

“*Those afflicted by vexatious thieves*” underscores the immense hindrances faced by ordinary beings. Deluded attachments and deep ignorance blind them to the reality that the Three Wretched Realms, like fiery pits, lie hidden beneath their feet. As they begin practicing in accordance with conditions, striving to cultivate provisions for progress on the Path, the six “thieves” [of sensory perception], upon awakening to their efforts, rush forth to seize and plunder. Deprived of this Dharma wealth, how can such beings escape sorrow and suffering?

“*Teach about pristine, pure karma*” indicates that the Tathagata, upon perceiving the negative karma of sentient beings, was about to expound the methods of repentance, guiding them to sever its continuity and ultimately attain eternal purity.

Furthermore, “*pristine, pure*” refers to practicing in accordance with the contemplative methods outlined below — single-mindedly invoking the Buddha and attentively visualizing the Western Pure Land. With each thought, negative karma is eradicated, thus becoming “*pristine, pure.*”

“Well done, Vaidehi! It is an excellent question.

(2) “*Well done...*” illustrates that the queen’s request accorded with the Buddha’s intent.

“Ananda, you must uphold this teaching and proclaim the Buddha’s words widely to all multitudes.

(3) From “*Ananda, you must uphold this teaching...*” to “*...proclaim the Buddha’s words widely to all multitudes,*” the Buddha urged the preservation and dissemination of his teaching, a Dharma of profound significance that must be widely distributed.

After summoning both individuals to settle down and listen attentively, the Tathagata specifically instructed Ananda to uphold the teaching without forgetting, and to expound and disseminate it widely among the multitudes.

“*Buddha’s words*” implies that the Tathagata eradicated all faults of speech countless *kalpas* ago, and that, whenever he spoke, all who heard naturally develop faith.

“Today, the Tathagata will instruct Vaidehi and all future beings to contemplate the Western Land of Bliss. Through the Buddha’s power, you will behold that pure realm as clearly as seeing your own face reflected in a bright mirror. Upon witnessing the extraordinarily wondrous and blissful phenomena of that land, your hearts will be filled with joy, and you will immediately attain the Endurance for the Non-Arising of Dharmas.”

(4) From “*Today, the Tathagata...*” to “*...attain the Endurance for the Non-Arising of Dharmas,*” the Buddha encouraged practice and clarified its benefits.

The Tathagata’s intent: to reveal the skillful means of contemplation to the queen and future generations, guiding them to focus their minds on the Western Pure Land, renounce samsara and aspire to rebirth in the Land of Bliss.

“*Through the Buddha’s power...*” signifies that sentient beings, burdened by karmic hindrances, are inherently blind to the truth before their eyes. They perceive what lies as close as their palm to be as distant as a far-off land, mistaking a nearness obscured by a bamboo curtain for a separation of a thousand miles. How, then, could ordinary beings hope to glimpse the Buddhas’ realms, which lie wholly beyond their reach? Without the Buddha’s power and its unseen support, how could they possibly behold the Pure Land?

“*As clearly as seeing your own face reflected in a bright mirror...*” suggests that when the queen and other sentient beings enter

contemplation, focusing their minds with unwavering concentration, and their minds align with the contemplated scene, all aspects [of the Pure Land] will manifest. When the vision arises, it is no different from seeing reflections in a mirror.

“Your hearts will be filled with joy and you will immediately attain the Endurance for the Non-Arising of Dharmas” conveys that the sudden vision of Amitabha Buddha’s pure, radiant land fills practitioners with unparalleled elation. This joy enables them to attain immediately the Endurance for the Non-Arising of Dharmas, also known as the Endurance of Joy, the Endurance of Enlightenment, and the Endurance of Faith.

This is a prefigurative mention, not yet indicating a specific point of attainment. The intention is to inspire the queen and others to admire this benefit and to practice diligently with unwavering focus. Only when the visualization manifests can that endurance be realized. This largely refers to the endurance within the Ten Faiths, not the [higher] endurance beyond the Stage of Comprehension and Practice.

The Buddha told Vaidehi: “You are an ordinary being with limited mental perception. Lacking divine sight, you are unable to see far. Yet the Tathagatas possess extraordinary skillful means to enable you to attain this vision.”

(5) *“The Buddha told Vaidehi...”* to *“...enable you to attain this vision”* emphasizes that the queen was an ordinary being, not one who has attained sacred status. Lacking such status, she depended on the imperceptible support of the Buddha’s sacred power to see the Pure Land, despite its vast distance.

The Tathagata feared that sentient beings might mistakenly regard the queen as a sacred being rather than an ordinary person. Such confusion could lead to self-abasing thoughts: “Vaidehi must be a Bodhisattva appearing in the guise of an ordinary being. How could we, mere transgressors, ever compare to her?” To dispel this misunderstanding, the Buddha declared: *“You are an ordinary being.”*

“With limited mental perception” refers to a lack of great resolve, characteristic of an ordinary person.

“Lacking divine sight” indicates that the queen’s physical sight was limited in range, barely worth mentioning. Given the extraordinary distance of the Pure Land, how could she possibly perceive it?

“Yet the Tathagatas possess extraordinary skillful means...” denotes that beholding the splendors of the Pure Land through the mind is beyond the capacity of ordinary beings like the queen and is instead entirely attributable to the Buddha.

**At that time, Vaidehi said to the Buddha:
“World-Honored One, through the Buddha’s power,
someone like me is able to behold that land today.**

(6) From *“At that time, Vaidehi said to the Buddha...”* to *“...behold that land today,”* the queen reiterated the Buddha’s earlier grace [in enabling the vision], intending to raise further questions.

The queen understood the Buddha’s intention. “What appeared on the radiant platform, I had assumed to be the result of my own ability to perceive it. Only through the Buddha’s exposition did I realize it was due to the Buddha’s grace in skillful means. That being the case, while the

Buddha is present in the world, sentient beings benefit from his grace, enabling them to see the Western Pure Land. But when the Buddha enters Parinirvana and no empowerment is available, how could they possibly behold it?”

“Yet, after the Buddha’s Parinirvana, sentient beings will become turbid, wicked and devoid of virtue, burdened by the five sufferings. How will they be able to see the Land of Bliss?”

(7) “*Yet, after the Buddha’s Parinirvana...*” to “*...the Land of Bliss*” reflects the queen’s compassion for all beings, wishing for their shared rebirth — forever transcending the Saha world and abiding in the eternal bliss of the Pure Land.

The Tathagata’s unwavering commitment to the deliverance of beings extend endlessly into the future without cease. Yet, as generations passed and time changed, beings’ dispositions grew shallow and narrow. Thus, the Tathagata curtailed his eternal lifespan, relinquishing countless *kalpas* to align with the brevity of human life. To tame the arrogant, he revealed impermanence; to transform the obstinate, he manifested decay and extinction. Thus, “*after the Buddha’s Parinirvana.*”

The phrase “*sentient beings*” indicates that after the cessation of the Tathagata’s transformative activity [in this world], sentient beings are left without refuge. Lost in ignorance and fear, they wander aimlessly through the Six Realms.

“*Turbid, wicked and devoid of virtue*” refers to the Five Turbidities — the turbidities of *kalpa*, views, afflictions, sentient beings and life.

- **Turbidity of *Kalpa*** — The *kalpa* itself is not inherently turbid; however, during a decrease *kalpa* [when the lifespan of beings decrease by a year every century], all forms of evil multiply and intensify.
- **Turbidity of Sentient Beings** — At the beginning of a *kalpa*, beings are purely virtuous; as it nears its end, they increasingly engage in the Ten Evil Actions.
- **Turbidity of Views** — Beings perceive their own evils as entirely virtuous while condemning the faultless as being in the wrong.
- **Turbidity of Afflictions** — In the present time, marking the end of the current *kalpa*, beings are evil by nature and difficult to approach. Whatever comes into contact with the six sense faculties triggers greed and anger, resulting in rivalries.
- **Turbidity of Life** — The foregoing turbidities of views and afflictions fuel rampant killing as well as a lack of compassion, kindness and nurturing care. In sowing the seeds of suffering through acts of killing, how can one possibly expect the reward of long life?

Furthermore, “turbidities” are devoid of virtue in substance.

This ends the brief explanation of the meaning of the Five Turbidities.

“*Burdened by the five sufferings*” refers to five of the Eight Sufferings: birth, aging, sickness, death and separation from loved ones. These are collectively known as the Five Sufferings. When three additional sufferings — the burning affliction of the Five Aggregates, failing to obtain what is sought, and association with the disliked — are

included, they complete the Eight Sufferings. These Five Turbidities, Five Sufferings, and Eight Sufferings pervade the Six Realms, sparing none. They ceaselessly oppress and afflict beings. Only those who are free from these sufferings transcend the realm of ordinary beings.

From “*How will they be able to see*” onward, the queen, having brought forth the case of beings afflicted by suffering, asked: “They are burdened by exceedingly deep negative karma, unable to see the Buddha or receive his empowerment. How could they possibly behold that land?”

The foregoing, though consisting of seven varied phrases, thoroughly explains the Cause for Expounding Contemplations as Meditative Virtues.

[Summary of this fascicle:]

1. Authentication Introduction
2. Pre-Teaching Introduction
3. Origination Introduction.

Though these are three distinct introductions, they collectively form the Introduction Part.



THIRD FASCICLE

Main Part of the *Contemplation Sutra*
— Meaning of the Meditative Virtues

Main Part of the *Contemplation Sutra* — Meaning of the Meditative Virtues

From this point onward, the exposition of the Main Part unfolds, which consists of the Sixteen Contemplations. Each will be explained in sequence alongside its respective text, rendering prior enumeration unnecessary.

The delineation of the sutra's Main Part presented here differs from that of other masters. It establishes the Main Part directly upon the teaching itself, beginning with the first sentence of the Contemplation of the Sun and extending through to the section on rebirth in the lower level of the lower grade. The passages preceding the Contemplation of the Sun, though diverse in content, function as the introduction of causes, as is evident from the sutra's textual progression. This should be understood.

1. Contemplation of the Sun

First, introduction.

Next, explanation.

Finally, conclusion.

It consists of five items.

The Buddha told Vaidehi: “You and sentient beings should focus your minds and direct your thoughts towards contemplating the Western Pure Land.”

(1) “*The Buddha told Vaidehi...*” to “*...direct your thoughts towards contemplating the Western Pure Land*” represents the Buddha’s general instruction and exhortation.

Previously, Vaidehi aspired to rebirth in Amitabha’s Pure Land and inquired about the practice of correct meditative absorption. The Tathagata immediately agreed to teach. However, as the conditions and faculties of his audience had not yet fully matured, a direct revelation of that practice would not have been all-encompassing. Therefore, he instead expounded the causal practices of the Three Meritorious Actions, offering them as a previously unheard teaching for the benefit of all. He then renewed his call for attentiveness and urged its dissemination, emphasizing its rarity and ability to awaken faith and understanding among the multitudes.

In the phrase “*The Buddha told Vaidehi: ‘You and sentient beings,’*” the Buddha explained and exhorted that those who wish to transcend worldly afflictions and seek rebirth in the Pure Land must be resolute.

“*Should focus your minds...*” suggests that sentient beings are distracted and restless, their consciousness as erratic as monkeys and their minds galloping ceaselessly through the Six Senses. Amid the multiplicity of external conditions, greed and chaotic thoughts arise with

every encounter. How can the Calmness of Mind Samadhi be attained unless practitioners sever external distractions and embrace stillness? Then, the western direction is directly indicated, and the remaining nine directions are excluded.

Thus, through one body, one mind, one dedication of merit, one place, one meditative realm, one continuity, one refuge and one correct mindfulness, visualization is perfected, and correct meditative absorption is attained. In this life and future existences, practitioners achieve liberation according to their aspirations.

**“How should this contemplation be practiced?
Contemplate in this way: all sentient beings who
have eyes, except those born blind, can see the
setting sun.”**

(2) “*How should this contemplation be practiced...*” to “*...can see the setting sun*” restates the object to be contemplated.

Sentient beings, having long drifted through samsara, do not understand how to still their minds. Though drawn towards the Western Pure Land, they remain uncertain how to engage their minds. Thus, the Tathagata posed a counter-question on their behalf, aiming to dispel their doubts and attachment, as well as reveal the method of correct mindfulness.

“*Contemplate in this way*” restates the preceding intent and illuminates the forthcoming expedient means for entering contemplation.

“*All sentient beings*” refers collectively to those eligible for rebirth.

“Who have eyes, except those born blind...” distinguishes between those capable of practicing this teaching and those who are not.

“Those born blind” refers to individuals who have been unable to see anything since birth. This condition is described as “born blind.” Such beings should not be taught the Contemplation of the Sun, as they are unacquainted with its radiant characteristics.

Except for those born blind, beings who lose their sight due to karmic circumstances after birth can succeed in the Contemplation of the Sun when taught. Having formed an impression of its radiant characteristics before their vision was impaired, they can be guided to recollect the sun’s features despite their subsequent blindness. With correct mindfulness and persistence, success is assured, regardless of the time required.

Question: Previously, Vaidehi made her request, wishing to see the Land of Bliss, and the Tathagata agreed to teach. Why did he first instruct her to focus her mind on contemplating the sun? What was his intent?

Answer: The Tathagata had three intents:

First, he sought to guide sentient beings in identifying specific objects for concentrating the mind. By indicating the direction, he provided a clear point of orientation. This method bypasses winter and summer, focusing instead on spring and autumn, when the sun rises precisely in the east and sets directly in the west. Beyond the sun’s setting point, directly westward, surpassing ten trillion Buddha Lands lies Amitabha’s Pure Land.

Second, he sought to help sentient beings recognize the severity of their own karmic hindrances. How could they perceive this? By following the instruction to focus their minds on contemplation of the sun.

To start concentrating the mind, practitioners are instructed to assume the full-lotus posture and sit upright:

- Place the right foot on the left thigh, aligning it with the outer edge.
- Place the left foot on the right thigh, aligning it with the outer edge.
- Rest the left hand atop the right palm, maintaining an upright position.
- Close the mouth and teeth without leaving any gaps, and press the tip of the tongue against the upper palate to ensure the throat and nasal airways are clear and unblocked.

Afterwards, practitioners are told to contemplate the Four Elements of the body as entirely empty, both internally and externally, devoid of any substance:

- **Earth Element.** Visualize the Earth Element of the Body, including skin, flesh, tendons, bones and so on, dispersing towards the west. The visualization extends to the farthest limits of the western direction until even the form of a single particle is no longer visible.
- **Water Element.** Visualize the Water Element of the body, including blood, sweat, saliva, tears and so forth, dispersing towards the north. The visualization extends to the farthest limits of the northern direction until even the form of a single particle is no longer visible.

- **Wind Element.** Visualize the Wind Element of the body dispersing towards the east. The visualization extends to the farthest limits of the eastern direction until even the form of a single particle is no longer visible.
- **Fire Element.** Visualize the Fire Element of the body dispersing towards the south. The visualization extends to the farthest limits of the southern direction until even the form of a single particle is no longer visible.
- **Space Element.** Visualize the Space Element of the body merging with the Void of the ten directions until even the form of a single non-empty feature is no longer visible.
- **All Five Elements.** Visualize all Five Elements of the body as entirely empty, leaving only the Consciousness Element, which remains crystal clear, stabilized in tranquil abidance, like a perfect mirror that brightly reflects both within and without, radiating with pristine clarity and purity.

Through such visualization, distracting thoughts are dispelled, and the mind gradually stabilizes in concentration. Then, gently shift the mental focus to the sun for attentive contemplation. Practitioners with superior capabilities may, in a single sitting, witness its radiant sign appear before them. When this sign manifests, it may resemble the size of a coin or a mirror. Thereupon, practitioners can directly perceive the features relating to the severity of their respective karmic hindrances.

- i) Black hindrances resemble black clouds veiling the sun.
- ii) Yellow hindrances resemble yellow clouds veiling the sun.

iii) White hindrances resemble white clouds veiling the sun.

This sun [being contemplated], veiled by clouds, fails to manifest or shine with clarity and brilliance. Similarly, the karmic hindrances of sentient beings obstruct and obscure the realm of the pure mind, preventing it from radiating with lucidity.

Practitioners who perceive this phenomenon must immediately adorn the practice site, place a statue of the Buddha there, bathe and cleanse themselves, don clean garments, and burn exquisite incense. They should confess before all Buddhas, sages and saints. Facing the Buddha image, they must repent, for the entire length of their present life, the misdeeds committed since beginningless time through body, speech and mind, including the Ten Evil Actions, the Five Gravest Transgressions, the Four Major Offenses, slandering of the Dharma, and wrongdoings of an *icchantika*. It is of utmost importance that they weep with sorrow and tears, generate profound shame and remorse that penetrate into the core of their heart, and reproach themselves with bone-deep contrition. After repentance, they should resume their previous sitting posture, settle the mind and refocus on the object of contemplation. When the meditative vision arises, if the preceding three hindrances are completely eliminated and the pure vision in contemplation becomes vivid and luminous, this is called the “sudden eradication of hindrances.”

Those who completely eliminate their hindrances through a single session of repentance are called practitioners with superior faculties. If one session of repentance removes only the black hindrance, only the yellow and white, or solely the white, this is referred to as gradual removal rather than sudden eradication.

Having recognized the signs of their negative karma, practitioners must continue repentance with diligent, wholehearted effort. During the three or six periods of the day and night, they should repent immediately whenever they remember. This reflects the highest faculties and superior practice. It is like being burned by boiling water or fire — once felt, we promptly jump away. How could one delay and wait for a specific time, place, condition or person before seeking relief?

Third, the Buddha sought to help sentient beings recognize the myriad splendid, radiant characteristics of Amitabha Buddha's Two Rewards — direct and circumstantial — which illuminate both within and without, surpassing the brilliance of this sun by hundreds of millions of times. Those unable to perceive the luminosity of that realm should observe the radiant qualities of this sun. Whether walking, standing, sitting or lying down, or while paying respect, invoking, recollecting or contemplating, they should hold this understanding firmly in mind. In time, they will attain a concentrated mind and behold the phenomena of that Pure Land — blissful and magnificent.

For these reasons, the World-Honored One began by teaching the Contemplation of the Sun.

“Begin by visualizing it. Sit upright facing west and carefully reflect on the place where the sun is about to set. Keep your mind firm and steady, visualizing attentively without distraction. See the sun, shaped like a suspended drum, as it prepares to set.

(3) From “*Begin by visualizing it...*” to “*...as it prepares to set,*” the Buddha formally taught the method of contemplation.

With an upright posture and dignified comportment, practitioners should face west, focus on the object of contemplation with a steady mind, and remain firm without wavering. In this manner, all [contemplative] aims will be realized.

“Once seen, ensure the vision remains clear and distinct, whether your eyes are closed or open.”

(4) “*Once seen...*” to “*...whether your eyes are closed or open*” elucidates the characteristics of successful contemplation.

By focusing the mind on visualizing the sun, restraining mental activity, dispelling distractions, and maintaining unwavering thought after thought, the pure vision emerges with clarity and precision.

Furthermore, when practitioners first behold this sun in meditative concentration, they immediately experience the bliss of samadhi. Both body and mind, within and without, dissolve in a harmonious fluidity beyond comprehension.

Upon witnessing this vision, practitioners must firmly collect the mind to stabilize it. They must not allow to arise the impulse to covet or grasp. If desire materializes, the mind’s water begins to ripple — and the pure vision is lost. The vision may grow unsteady, dim or shift into hues of black, blue, yellow, red or white, unable to remain serene.

When encountering such a phenomenon, practitioners should immediately reflect: “The wavering and instability of these visions

arise from my desirous, mind-stirring thoughts, thereby disrupting and extinguishing the pure vision.” They should then settle the mind, regain correct mindfulness, and start again from the original point. As the forms of instability dissipate, the tranquil mind reemerges.

Having recognized this fault, practitioners must prevent the resurgence of such elevated craving.

The same applies to all subsequent contemplations in assessing both (i) correctness or incorrectness, and (ii) attainment or loss. When contemplating the sun and perceiving it, where mind and object align, one engages in correct contemplation. If one contemplates but fails to perceive, instead seeing various miscellaneous phenomena — where mind and object diverge — it is a case of incorrect contemplation.

This is precisely:

*This dark abode of Saha, dim and confined,
Where nothing encountered can be truly aligned.
Only the radiant sun, in its unfolding shine,
Calls to mind the Bliss afar, as a distant sign.*

“This is the Visualization of the Sun, called the First Contemplation.”

(5) “*This is*” onward is the conclusion.

The foregoing, though consisting of five varied phrases, thoroughly explains the Contemplation of the Sun.

2. Contemplation of Water

First, introduction.

Next, explanation.

Finally, conclusion.

It consists of six elements.

“Next, visualize water. See the water as clean and pure, ensuring the vision is clear and distinct, with the mind free from distraction. After perceiving the water, visualize it as turning into ice. Once the ice appears crystal-clear, visualize it as vaidurya. That completed, envisage the vaidurya ground, glittering and translucent inside and out.

(1) “*Next, visualize water...*” to “*...glittering and translucent inside and out*” generally describes the substance of the Pure Land’s ground.

Question: The previous teaching on the Contemplation of the Sun guides practitioners towards recognizing the signs of their respective karma, hence the Buddha’s instruction to visualize the sun. In this contemplation, why is the visualization of water taught?

Answer: The sun constantly shines, symbolizing the eternal radiance of the Land of Bliss. However, one might wonder whether its terrain is uneven like the rugged landscape of this defiled realm. In the Saha world, a dark house lit only by the sun, domes and pits create the ground’s irregularity. To find the most fitting representation of evenness, nothing

surpasses water. Thus, water is chosen to symbolize this levelness, offering a comparison to the vaidurya ground of the Pure Land.

Question: Water in this world is wet and soft. Is the ground of the Pure Land the same?

Answer: The level water in this world represents the perfect evenness of the Pure Land, with no highs or lows. As water is transformed into ice, it parallels the vaidurya ground there, glittering and translucent inside and out.

Across countless *kalpas*, Amitabha Buddha cultivated practices of universal equality, free from partiality. He extinguished both vexations and habitual tendencies, and thus yielded the reward of the resplendent, translucent ground of his land.

Question: Practitioners are instructed first to visualize water to stabilize the mind, then transform it into ice, and finally transmute the ice into the vaidurya ground. How is this process carried out so that these visions may arise?

Answer: One must maintain a stable bodily posture by applying the same method previously taught for the Contemplation of the Sun. To attain mental concentration by visualizing water, it is necessary to face a similar scene for observation, as this facilitates focus.

Practitioners: Stay in a quiet place. Take a bowl of water and place it on the ground in front of your meditation bed, filling it to the brim. Then, sit on the bed, and affix a small white object, about the size of a bean, between your eyebrows. Lower your head to face the water surface and single-mindedly observe the reflection of the white spot, avoiding any other visual contact.

At first, the water placed on the ground ripples without pause. Observing it face-down, one sees no reflection. With persistent observation, the image of the face gradually emerges. Initially, the reflection is unstable — sometimes elongated or shortened, sometimes wide or narrow, and occasionally appearing or disappearing. When such phenomena occur, the mind must be applied with utmost precision. Soon, the ripples become faint, as if moving yet still, and the image of the face gradually comes into sharp clarity.

Though the facial features — eyes, ears, nose and mouth — are visible, do not grasp at them or obstruct them. Simply relax body and mind, knowing their presence without clinging. Focus solely on the white spot, observing it clearly and distinctly. With correct mindfulness, guard against losing focus or being drawn to other objects. When seeing this, the mind gradually abides, and the water's nature becomes limpid.

Furthermore, practitioners: To determine whether the ripples of your mind's water have settled, simply observe whether this water exhibits stillness or movement. This reveals whether the vision appears in the mind, and whether its appearance is clear or obscure.

Moreover, once the water becomes still, take an object the size of a grain of rice and casually drop it from just above the water surface. The water immediately ripples, spreading throughout the bowl. Observe the water face-down — the white spot is moving. Next, drop an object the size of a bean into the water. The ripples grow larger, causing the white spot on the face to appear and disappear intermittently. If something as large as a jujube is dropped in, the ripples become even stronger, making the white spot, along with the observer's head and face, vanish completely — all due to the water's movement.

Metaphors in this context:

- Bowl — the body-vessel.
- Water — the mind's water, fluidity.
- Ripples — chaotic thoughts and afflictions.
- Gradual cessation of ripples — through restraint and severance of all external conditions, the mind abides in single-pointed focus.
- Stillness of water and appearance of vision — the observing mind is undisturbed, the contemplated object remains unmoving, and tranquility is achieved both within and without, allowing the sought-after form to manifest clearly.

Furthermore, both subtle and coarse thoughts cause the mind's water to move. When the mind's water moves, stillness is lost.

Likewise, when fine or coarse particles are dropped into still water, ripples immediately arise.

Practitioners: Simply observe whether this water appears to be moving or still to discern whether your own mind abides.

Loss or retention of the manifested vision, as well as the correctness of the contemplation should be assessed in the same way as previously described in the Contemplation of the Sun.

Additionally, Bodhisattva Vasubandhu offers these praises:

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

*Ultimately it is like the Void,
Immense and boundless.*

This illustrates in general the extent of the ground of the Pure Land.

“Beneath the ground are golden banners made of diamond and seven treasures, supporting the vaidurya ground. Each banner has eight sides and facets, perfectly formed, and each side is composed of hundreds of precious jewels. From each jewel, thousands of luminous rays shine forth, each ray displaying 84,000 colors, illuminating the vaidurya ground like trillions of suns, too numerous to distinguish.

(2) “*Beneath the ground are golden banners made of diamond and seven treasures...*” to “*... too numerous to distinguish*” describes the underground splendors. There are seven aspects:

- i) The substance of the banners is flawless *vajra*.
- ii) They manifest as supporting the ground, reflecting and illuminating its splendors.
- iii) Their sides and facets are perfectly formed, signifying the absence of cylindrical attributes.
- iv) They are composed of hundreds of precious jewels, whose quantity surpasses the number of dust particles.

v) Thousands of luminous rays shine forth from each jewel, permeating the boundless expanse of space.

vi) Brilliant rays radiate in myriad colors that illuminate other realms, transforming according to circumstances, bringing benefit at all times.

vii) All rays emit vibrant hues, outshining the sun; newcomers who behold them find it impossible to take in their details fully.

So goes the praise:

*Beneath, adorned with banners of jewels sevenfold,
Countless and boundless, in trillions not to be told.
Eight sides and facets, a hundred gems compose,
To Non-Arising, naturally awaken those who behold.*

*The jeweled land, birthless, permanently abides,
Each treasure emits myriad radiant tides.
Practitioners gaze with unwavering sight;
Their spirits soar towards the Western height.*

More praise:

*In bliss unconditioned, quiescent is the Pure Land,
Ultimately freed from being and non-being's stand.
Filled with great compassion, they roam the Dharma Realm wide,
In manifold forms, benefiting all equally, none denied.*

*Revealing their powers as the Dharma they relay,
Perfect marks shown, or in no-remainder they stay.
They manifest splendors as thought gives rise,
Those who behold are freed from karmic ties.*

Yet more praise:

*Return home — tarry not in Mara's domain!
Adrift vast kalpas, through the sixfold terrain.
Nowhere does joy endure; sorrow fills the ear.
Past this brief life, we'll enter that Nirvanic sphere.*

“Upon the vaidurya ground, golden cord-like pathways crisscross. Boundaries made of the seven treasures clearly divide the land into distinct sections.

(3) “*Upon the vaidurya ground...*” to “*...clearly divide the land into distinct sections*” describes the splendors above the ground, highlighting its exceptional magnificence.

This conveys the notions of reliance, support, perfection and purity:

- Reliance: The seven-treasured pools and groves are what relies; the vaidurya ground, what is relied upon.
- Support: The ground is the supporter; the pools, platforms and trees, the supported.
- Perfection: Amitabha's all-encompassing and pervasive causal practices yield perfect, radiant rewards.
- Purity: The brilliance and purity of the Pure Land embody its flawless essence.

Goes the praise:

*The jeweled ground, resplendent, beyond all compare,
Its radiance, through all directions, shining everywhere.
Jeweled pavilions and lotus platforms spread all round,
In vibrant hues, exquisite, their brilliance unbound.*

*Treasured clouds and canopies drift through the sky,
Sacred beings in communion soar freely on high.
Jeweled banners and pennants turn with the breeze,
While jeweled instruments glow, echoing hearts' pleas.*

*Those reborn with doubts, their lotuses unbloomed,
Palms joined in enclosure, cocooned as in wombs.
No suffering within, but Dharma joy instead,
Swiftly, as barriers dissolve, their petals spread.*

*Eyes clear, ears keen, their bodies with golden glow,
Bodhisattvas composed, jeweled robes they bestow.
With light upon the body, Three Endurances complete;
To behold the Buddha's presence, they leave the golden seat.
Welcomed by Dharma friends into sacred arrays,
They gaze on the honored visage: "All praise!"*

"Golden cord-like..." describes pathways made of gold, shaped like golden cords. In other depictions:

- The ground is composed of various jewels, with paths formed from vaidurya.
- The ground is vaidurya, with paths of white jade.

- The ground is cast in purple gold and silver, with paths consisting of myriad jewels.
- Both the ground and paths are crafted from indescribable treasures.
- The ground consists of tens of millions of treasures, with paths made of two or three kinds of jewels.

In this way, the materials alternate and intertwine — complementing, integrating, reflecting and illuminating one another, enhancing their brilliance in perfect harmony. Every light and color remains distinct, without disorder or confusion. Practitioners should not assume that only golden pathways exist and exclude those of other treasures.

“From within each treasure, 500 hues of light radiate, like flowers, stars and moons suspended in the sky. These lights form brilliant platforms, along with millions of mansions and pavilions crafted from hundreds of treasures. On each side of the platforms, billions of flowered banners and countless musical instruments serve as adornments.

(4) *“From within each treasure, 500 hues of light radiate...”* to *“...musical instruments serve as adornments”* describes the splendors of the sky. They consist of six elements:

- i) The jewels emit numerous rays of light.

- ii) Metaphors illustrate their characteristics.
- iii) The light transforms into platforms.
- iv) The light transforms into mansions and pavilions.
- v) The light transforms into flowered banners.
- vi) The light transforms into the sounds of jeweled instruments.

Furthermore, each of the various jewels on the ground emits 500 hues of light. Every hue and ray surges skywards, merging into a radiant platform. Within each platform are tens of millions of jeweled pavilions, each adorned and constructed with one, two, three, four or even inexpressible types of treasures.

The metaphors “*like flowers, stars and moons*” illustrate the splendors, as the Buddha, out of compassion, sought to prevent beings from failing to recognize them.

“*On each side of the platforms, billions of flowered banners and countless musical instruments serve as adornments*” refers to the expansive jeweled ground radiating boundless light. Each ray transforms into a luminous platform, collectively filling the entire sky. Practitioners, whether walking, standing, sitting or lying down, should constantly visualize this scene.

“Eight kinds of pure breezes emanate from the light, playing the instruments and echoing sounds that expound on suffering, emptiness, impermanence and egolessness.”

(5) “*Eight kinds of pure breezes...*” to “*...impermanence and egolessness*” indicates that the light transforms into melodious sounds, which further take the form of expounding the Dharma. It consists of three aspects:

i) Eight kinds of breezes arise from the light.

ii) As the breezes and light emerge, they play musical instruments, producing melodious sounds.

iii) The sounds expound on the Four Inverted Beliefs, the Four Noble Truths, and other Dharma teachings as numerous as grains of sand in the Ganges River.

Goes the praise:

*The Land of Peace and Joy is pure,
Its immaculate wheel turns ever more.
In a moment, and all at once,
It benefits beings, boundless and immense.*

*Praising Buddhas' virtue and merit
With minds unclouded by prejudice,
Quickly it fulfills, without cessation,
Vast merits — the great treasure ocean.*

“This is the Visualization of the Water, called the Second Contemplation.”

(6) “*This is*” onward is the conclusion.

The foregoing, though consisting of six varied phrases, thoroughly explains the Contemplation of Water.

3. Contemplation of the Ground

First, introduction.

Next, explanation.

Finally, conclusion.

There are six elements.

“When this visualization is completed,

(1) “*When this visualization is completed*” concludes the preceding contemplation and transitions into the next.

“ ... contemplate one aspect after another, ensuring the vision is perfectly clear and distinct. Whether your eyes are closed or open, never allow the vision to fade or dissipate. Except during sleep, keep it constantly in mind. Visualizing in this way is called roughly seeing the ground of the Land of

Bliss. Those who attain samadhi will perceive the ground of that land with clear and distinct vision, its details beyond full description.

(2) “*Contemplate one aspect after another...*” to “*...its details beyond full description*” elucidates the characteristics of successful contemplation. There are six aspects:

i) The mind must focus on a single object and must not contemplate in a collective or mixed manner.

ii) With concentration on a single object, its vision will manifest. Once it appears, one must ensure it remains clear and distinct.

iii) When the vision arises in the mind, whether with eyes open or closed, one must preserve it from dissipation.

iv) In all four physical postures, one must maintain continuous mindfulness day and night, except during sleep. Remembrance must be sustained, with no letting go.

v) With the mind in uninterrupted focus, the characteristics of the Pure Land are seen. This is called seeing within the thinking mind, as it still involves *vitarka* (inference) and *saṃjñā* (conception).

vi) As the thinking mind gradually subsides and both inference and conception fully dissolve, one aligns with correct meditative absorption and attains samadhi, where the exquisite, wondrous phenomena of the Pure Land are truly witnessed. How could the details ever be fully described?

This is precisely:

*Vast and boundless spreads that realm's land,
Where jeweled banners in profusion stand.
Gems and treasures in radiant array,
Shifting, transforming in endless display.*

Therefore:

*May all beings, with hearts sincere and true,
Behold it always, ever in view.*

“This is the Visualization of the Ground, called the Third Contemplation.”

(3) “*This is*” onward is the conclusion.

The Buddha said to Ananda: “You should preserve my words and expound this method of contemplating the ground to all multitudes of future generations who seek liberation from suffering.”

(4) From “*The Buddha said to Ananda...*” to “*...seek liberation from suffering,*” the Buddha urged the dissemination of this teaching and its extensive exposition according to conditions. There are four elements:

i) Open declaration.

ii) Exhortation: Preserve the Buddha’s words and widely expound to

future generations the benefits of the previously taught Contemplation of the Ground.

iii) Those with the capacity to receive and believe in this teaching: They are ones who seek to abandon their samsaric bodies in the Saha world, burdened by the Eight Sufferings, the Five Sufferings, and the torments of the Three Wretched Realms. If they believe and begin to practice immediately upon hearing it, instruct them without delay — even at the cost of your own life.

If even one person is brought to sever suffering and transcend samsara, this is called truly repaying the Buddhas' grace. Why is this so? When the Buddhas appear in the world, they employ various skillful means to guide and transform beings, not merely to have them refrain from evil and cultivate blessings for the sake of human and celestial pleasures. Such pleasures are like flashes of lightning, brief and fleeting. Once they vanish, beings fall back into the Three Wretched Realms, enduring suffering without end.

For this reason, the Buddhas exclusively urge the immediate quest for rebirth in the Pure Land, in pursuit of unsurpassed Bodhi. Thus, as present conditions allow, one should encourage others to aspire to rebirth. This accords with the Buddhas' fundamental intent.

Those unwilling to believe and practice are described in the *Sutra of Pure Enlightenment* as follows:

If anyone hears the Pure Land teaching but listens as if not hearing and sees as if not seeing, know that this person has only recently emerged from the Three Wretched Realms, with negative karma and obstacles not yet fully exhausted, resulting in the lack of faith and devotion.

The Buddha says:

I declare that such a person is not yet ready for liberation.

This sutra further states:

If anyone hears the Pure Land teaching and experiences a mix of sorrow and joy, with body hair standing on end, know that this person has practised this teaching in past lives. Now, upon hearing it again, the individual immediately rejoices, devotes to practice with correct mindfulness, and will surely attain rebirth in the Pure Land.

iv) Formal instruction on contemplating the jeweled ground to stabilize the mind.

“Those who contemplate the ground this way eliminate their reincarnation-fated negative karma accumulated over 8 billion *kalpas*. Upon leaving this life and in future lifetimes, they will surely be reborn in the Pure Land. Do not doubt this.

(5) “*Those who contemplate the ground this way...*” to “*...Do not doubt this*” reveals the benefits of this contemplation. There are four aspects:

i) The teaching focuses solely on contemplation of the jeweled ground, without involving other objects.

ii) By contemplating the flawless jeweled ground, flawed negative karma accumulated over numerous *kalpas* is eradicated.

iii) After this life ends, rebirth in the Pure Land is assured.

iv) Causal practices must be cultivated with correct mindfulness, unmixed with doubt. Otherwise, even if reborn in the Pure Land, one will remain enclosed within a lotus bud, [also referred to as] being born in the Border Field or falling into a womb-like palace. Only when Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara enters the Blooming Samadhi is the obstacle of doubt removed. The palace-lotus blossoms, revealing one's physical form, and Dharma companions escort the person to join Amitabha Buddha's assembly.

This is precisely:

*With mind focused, the jeweled ground appears;
Past wrongs and barriers dissolve, all cleared.
Vows and deeds fulfilled, assurance karma complete;
At life's end, rebirth attained — no doubt indeed.*

Having presented these superior benefits, the Buddha further urged practitioners to differentiate between correct and incorrect contemplations.

“Contemplating this way is called correct contemplation; contemplating otherwise is called incorrect contemplation.”

(6) “*Contemplating this way...*” distinguishes between correct and incorrect contemplations. The meanings of correct and incorrect were previously discussed in the Contemplation of the Sun.

The foregoing, though consisting of six varied phrases, thoroughly explains the Contemplation of the Ground.

4. Contemplation of the Jeweled Trees

First, introduction.

Next, explanation.

Finally, conclusion.

It consists of ten elements.

**The Buddha said to Ananda and Vaidehi:
“After completing the visualization of the ground,
proceed to contemplate the jeweled trees.**

(1) “*The Buddha said to Ananda...*” to “*...proceed to contemplate the jeweled trees*” conveys the Buddha’s open declaration and generally designates the name of this contemplation, concluding the preceding section and leading into the next.

**“As you do, reflect on each detail, envisioning
seven tiers of arrayed trees.**

(2) The phrase “*As you do*” reiterates this contemplation.

“*Reflect on each detail...*” gives rise to the subsequent features of this contemplation and formally sets forth its ritual guidelines.

Amitabha Buddha’s Pure Land is vast and boundless. How could its

jeweled trees and forests be confined to a mere sevenfold arrangement?

The phrase “*seven tiers*” here refers to intricate formations in which, for example, a single tree may have gold roots, purple-gold trunks, silver branches, agate twigs, coral leaves, white jade flowers, and pearl fruits. Seven tiers such as these, with varied treasures interchanging to form roots and trunks, extending to flowers and fruits, create a total of 49 configurations.

Alternatively, a single jewel may constitute an entire tree, while in other instances, two, three, four, or even countless billions of indescribable treasures combine to form one. This concept is extensively discussed in the *Commentary on the Amitabha Sutra*. This is “*seven tiers*.”

“*Arrayed*” indicates that the forest trees in that land, though abundant, are arranged in straight, aligned formations without disorder.

“*Envisioning*” implies that practitioners who have not yet attained proficiency in true contemplation — such that it becomes effortless and responsive at will — must rely on imaginary visualization to stabilize the mind and achieve the benefits of contemplation.

“Each tree stands 8,000 *yojanas* tall,

(3) “*Each tree...*” to “*...yojanas tall*” reveals the physical dimension of the trees.

All the jeweled forest trees originated from the flawless mind of Amitabha Buddha. Because the Buddha’s mind is flawless, the trees, too, are flawless. A passage of praise states:

*It arises from the Great Compassion of the Right Path
And extra-worldly roots of virtue.
Radiating pure light all around,
It resembles a mirror, or the halos of the sun and the moon.*

The “physical dimension” of each tree measures 320,000 *li* in height. There is no aging or death, no sapling or new sprout, nor any gradual growth from germination to maturity — all arise simultaneously and fully formed, equal in size. Why is this so? Because that realm is at the stage of flawlessness and non-arising; how could birth, death, or gradual growth exist?

“ ...with leaves and flowers made of the seven treasures, lacking nothing. Each leaf and flower radiates the colors of precious jewels: from the color of vaidurya shines golden light, from crystal, red light, from agate, the light of tridacna, and from tridacna, green pearl light. Coral, amber and all other precious gems embellish the trees.

(4) “*With leaves and flowers...*” to “*...embellish the trees*” depicts the myriad trees, their diverse splendors and decorations, in a profusion of distinctive manifestations. There are four elements:

i) Flowers and leaves of the jeweled trees match up in various combinations.

ii) Each root, trunk, branch, twig and fruit is composed of myriad treasures.

iii) Each flower and leaf differs from all others. For example, from within the vaidurya color radiates the golden light. Following this pattern, diverse combinations interweave with one another.

iv) The jeweled trees are further adorned with all kinds of assorted treasures.

A passage of praise states:

***Its myriad things embody treasure-like qualities,
And possess all exquisite splendors.
Its undefiled radiance is intensely brilliant,
Bright and pure, illuminating all realms.***

More praise is offered:

*In Amitabha's Pure Land, jeweled trees abound
Their branches hang low, with saintly robes around.
Jeweled clouds drift by, forming canopies on high,
Transformed birds sing, their voices never die.*

*Circling in the air, twirling so freely,
They sound Dharma tones into the sacred assembly.
Sages from other realms hear, and their hearts open,
The wise in the Pure Land behold, and insight is woken.*

“Wondrous pearly nets fully cover the trees, with each tree veiled in seven layers of netting. Between each layer are 50 billion exquisite floral palaces, resembling those of Lord Brahma. Celestial children naturally dwell there. These children are adorned with necklaces made of 50 billion radiant sakrabhilagna Muni-gems, whose light illuminates 100 *yojanas*, like the combined brilliance of billions of suns and moons, their details indescribable. Myriad jewels intermingle, shining with the most sublime colors, surpassing all others.

(5) “*Wondrous pearly nets...*” to “*...surpassing all others*” describes the splendid features of the space above the jeweled trees. There are seven aspects:

- i) Pearly nets in the sky cover the trees.
- ii) The nets consist of multiple layers.
- iii) The number of palaces is specified.
- iv) Each palace houses many celestial children.
- v) The children wear pearl necklaces as adornments.
- vi) Light from the necklaces illuminates vast distances.
- vii) The light shines in supreme colors, surpassing all others.

“These jeweled trees stand in perfect alignment, their leaves spreading in orderly patterns. Among the leaves, exquisite flowers bloom, naturally bearing seven-jeweled fruits.

(6) “*These jeweled trees...*” to “*...bearing seven-jeweled fruits*” reveals that, despite their vast number, the forest trees are free from disorder. Their blossoms and fruits do not emerge from within the trees, but manifest spontaneously. They arise from the profound causal practices of Bodhisattva Dharmakara.

“Each leaf extends 25 *yojanas* in length and width, displaying thousands of colors and hundreds of patterns, resembling celestial ornaments. Some wondrous flowers radiate the hue of Jambunada gold, like spinning fire wheels revolving amid the leaves.

(7) “*Each leaf...*” to “*...revolving amid the leaves*” describes the varied external appearances of the flowers and leaves. There are five aspects:

- i) Each leaf is identical in size, with no distinction.
- ii) The leaves display a specific number of radiant colors.
- iii) To address potential lack of understanding, an analogy is provided — “*resembling celestial ornaments.*”

iv) The leaves bear wondrous flowers, their color akin to heavenly gold, with forms resembling fire wheels.

v) The flowers illuminate one another, revolving amid the leaves.

“From them emerge various fruits, like Indra’s vases, emitting brilliant light. These rays transform into banners and countless jeweled canopies, within which the activities of all Buddhas throughout the three-thousand-fold great chiliocosm are reflected. Buddha Lands of the ten directions also manifest within.”

(8) “*From them emerge various fruits...*” to “*...also manifest within*” reveals the manifestations of the fruits’ unfathomable virtues and functions. There are five elements:

i) Jeweled fruits emerge naturally.

ii) An analogy illustrates the appearance of the fruits.

iii) The fruits radiate divine light, which then transforms into banners and canopies.

iv) The jeweled canopies are perfectly round and radiant, within which the three-thousand-fold chiliocosm appears, revealing the various splendid phenomena of the Two Rewards — direct and circumstantial.

v) The pure lands of all ten directions universally manifest within the canopies, visible to all human and celestial beings in the Pure Land.

Moreover, these trees are exceedingly high, and their length and width immeasurably vast. Each bears numerous flowers and fruits that undergo myriad miraculous transformations. Since every tree is like this, all the trees scattered throughout that land, bearing abundant fruits, are likewise the same. This is what we should know. All practitioners, whether walking, standing, sitting or lying down, should constantly contemplate this scene.

“After visualizing these trees, contemplate each detail in sequence: reflect on the tree trunks, stems, branches, leaves, flowers and fruits, ensuring each image is clear and distinct.”

(9) “*After visualizing these trees...*” to “*...clear and distinct*” elucidates the characteristics of successful contemplation. There are three elements:

- i) The characteristics of successful contemplation are summarized.
- ii) Contemplation should proceed sequentially, avoiding mixture and disorder.
- iii) Practitioners should direct the mind to focus on the objects step by step: First, contemplate the tree roots, then visualize the trunk and branches, up through the flowers and fruits. Next, envisage the nets and palaces, then the children adorned with jeweled necklaces, followed by the dimensions of the leaves, as well as the light and colors of the flowers and fruits. Finally, visualize the banners and canopies, which widely manifest the activities of the Buddhas. By contemplating each element in an orderly sequence, no detail will remain unclear.

“This is the Visualization of the Trees, called the Fourth Contemplation.”

(10) “*This is*” onward is the conclusion.

This is precisely:

*Jeweled trees shine, their lights interlace,
Curtains of nets drift through halls in space.
Blossoms glow in hues of countless kinds,
Fruits reveal other lands, in visions unconfined.*

The foregoing, though consisting of ten varied phrases, thoroughly explains the Contemplation of the Jeweled Trees.

5. Contemplation of the Jeweled Ponds

First, introduction.

Next, explanation.

Finally, conclusion.

There are seven aspects.

“Next, envision the water.”

(1) “*Next, envision the water...*” generally designates the name of this contemplation, connecting the preceding section and leading into the next.

While the jeweled trees are exquisite, the land cannot be deemed perfect without ponds and water. These elements prevent the land from appearing barren and adorn the environment as part of the circumstantial reward. Thus, contemplation of the ponds and channels was taught.

“In the Land of Bliss, there are eight ponds. The water in each pond, formed from the seven treasures, is soft and yielding, originating from the king wish-fulfilling gem.”

(2) “*In the Land of Bliss...*” to “*...originating from the king wish-fulfilling gem*” clarifies the number of ponds and the source of the water. There are five elements:

i) The Pure Land is specified.

ii) The name of the ponds includes the word “eight.”

iii) Each pond and its banks are composed of the seven treasures. The radiance of the treasures shines pervasively, fully illuminating the “water of eight virtues” and merging it with the hues of various jewels. Thus, it is called jeweled water.

iv) These myriad treasures are soft and supple by nature.

v) The water of the eight ponds originates from the wish-fulfilling gem and is therefore called “wish-fulfilling water.”

This water possesses eight virtues:

i) *Purity and moisture*, corresponding to the sense sphere of form.

ii) *Absence of foul odor*, corresponding to the sense sphere of smell.

iii) *Lightness*, iv) *coolness*, and v) *softness*, corresponding to the sense sphere of touch.

vi) *Sweetness*, corresponding to the sense sphere of taste.

vii) *Agreeability and comfort when consumed*, and viii) *absence of afflictions after drinking*, corresponding to the sense sphere of dharma.

The meaning of these eight virtues is explained in detail in the *Commentary on the Amitabha Sutra*.

Thus goes the praise:

*The splendid, blissful Land of Peace and Nurture,
Jeweled ponds of eight virtues send streams all over.
All four banks aglow with seven treasures bright,
Waters clear and luminous, reflecting jeweled light.*

*Soft and supple by nature, touch of hardness unfound,
Bodhisattvas walk slowly, with fragrance all around.
Jeweled canopies formed by jeweled clouds and scents,
They hover aloft and veil the banners' firmament.*

*Jeweled banners, majestic, surround jeweled halls,
Draped with pearly nets, ringing jeweled bells' tolls.
Jeweled nets resonate tunes in endless turns,
Extolling the jeweled palaces as the heart yearns.*

*In each palace and mansion, a Buddha convenes,
Numerous as Ganges sands, sacred beings sit in reflection serene.*

*May those here with affinity constantly recall,
At life's end, be reborn in those Dharma halls.*

“This water flows into fourteen streams, each reflecting the wondrous colors of the seven treasures. The channels are lined with gold, and their beds are composed of multicolored vajra sand.

(3) “*This water flows into fourteen streams...*” to “*...multicolored vajra sand*” describes how each pond sends forth multiple streams, spiraling and revolving without disorder. There are three aspects:

- i) The number of channels.
- ii) The banks of each channel are golden.
- iii) The sand at the bottom of the channels reflects the colors of myriad jewels.

“*Vajra*” signifies that [the sand] is flawless in substance.

“In each stream, there are 6 billion seven-jeweled lotuses. Each lotus is perfectly round, uniform in size, and spans 12 *yojanas*. The *muni* water flows among the flowers, moving along the trees upwards and downwards.

(4) “*In each stream...*” to “*...moving along the trees upwards and*

downwards” indicates that the water possesses unfathomable functions. They have five aspects:

i) The text specifically points out that it is the channels whose splendid features will be described.

ii) The number of jeweled flowers within the channels.

iii) The size of the flowers.

iv) The *muni* water flows among the flowers.

v) Jeweled water flows out of the channels, moving freely along the jeweled trees, unimpeded in its rise and fall; thus it is called wish-fulfilling water.

“Its subtle and exquisite sound expounds the teachings on suffering, emptiness, impermanence, egolessness and the Paramitas, while also praising the marks and physical characteristics of the Buddhas.

(5) “*Its subtle and exquisite sound...*” to “*...physical characteristics of the Buddhas*” conveys that the water possesses unfathomable virtues. There are two aspects:

i) The jeweled water flows among the flowers. When subtle waves meet, exquisite sounds arise, expounding the wondrous Dharma within.

ii) As the jeweled water reaches the shore, it moves along the trees, branches, twigs, flowers, fruits and leaves, flowing freely up and down.

When they touch in the process, they produce exquisite sounds through which the wondrous Dharma is expounded. At times, they recount the sufferings of beings, awakening great compassion in Bodhisattvas and urging them to guide others. At other times, they offer teachings on the human and celestial vehicles, the Two [Lesser] Vehicles, the stages below or beyond the initial Bodhisattva stage, or the Three Bodies of the Buddha stage.

“The king wish-fulfilling gem emits a subtle, wondrous golden radiance that transforms into birds of hundreds of bejeweled colors. These birds sing in elegant, harmonious tones, constantly praising the practice of invoking the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

(6) “*The king wish-fulfilling gem...*” to “*...invoking the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha*” suggests that the *muni*-gem possesses many miraculous merits. There are four elements:

- i) Golden radiance emanates from within the king gem.
 - ii) The radiance transforms into birds of hundreds of bejeweled colors.
 - iii) The birds’ songs are elegant, surpassing heavenly music.
 - iv) The bejeweled birds sing in continuous tones, unanimously praising the invocation of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.
- The **Buddha** is the unsurpassed great teacher of all beings, guiding them to dispel delusion and embrace the truth.

- The **Dharma** is the unsurpassed medicine for beings, capable of removing the poisons and ailments of afflictions, leading to the purity of the Dharma body.
- The **Sangha** is the unsurpassed field of blessings for beings. Those who wholeheartedly and untiringly make the Four Offerings will, as a matter of course, generate the circumstantial rewards of all Five Vehicles according to their aspirations and needs.

The precious gem first originates the eight-flavored water and then radiates myriad golden lights. It not only dispels darkness and eliminates ignorance but also performs the Buddha's work everywhere.

“This is the Visualization of the Water of Eight Meritorious Virtues, called the Fifth Contemplation.”

(7) “*This is*” onward is the conclusion.

The foregoing, though consisting of seven varied phrases, thoroughly explains the Contemplation of the Jeweled Ponds.

6. Contemplation of the Jeweled Mansions

First, introduction.

Next, explanation.

Finally, conclusion.

There are eleven items.

“In this land of myriad treasures,

(1) “*In this land of myriad treasures*” generally designates the name of this contemplation, connecting the preceding section and leading into the next.

Though the Pure Land is adorned with jeweled streams flowing throughout, it would not be truly exquisite without jeweled mansions, palaces and pavilions. For this purpose, the splendors of the circumstantial reward must manifest in complete variety and full perfection.

“... every region

(2) “*Every region*” indicates that the regions where the jeweled mansions are situated pervade the entire land, and the mansions are likewise innumerable.

“... contains 50 billion jeweled mansions.

(3) “*Contains 50 billion jeweled mansions*” reveals their number. Since this holds true for a single region, it similarly applies throughout the land. This should be understood.

“Inside these mansions, countless celestial beings perform heavenly music.

(4) “*Inside these mansions...*” to “*...perform heavenly music*” describes the splendors within the mansions.

“There are also musical instruments suspended in the sky, like those of the deity Ratnadhvaja (Jeweled Banners), which emit melodies without being played.

(5) “*There are also musical instruments...*” to “*...emit melodies without being played*” illustrates the splendors outside the mansions. Jeweled musical instruments float in the sky, their melodies resonating as Dharma sounds throughout the six periods of day and night. They resemble those of the deity Ratnadhvaja, who effortlessly accomplishes his feats without deliberate thought.

“These various sounds resonate with teachings on the invocation of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

(6) “*These various sounds...*” to “*...and Sangha*” underscores that although the music is without consciousness, it has the function of expounding the Dharma.

“Accomplishing this visualization is referred to as roughly seeing the jeweled trees, jeweled ground and jeweled ponds of the Land of Bliss.

(7) “*Accomplishing this visualization...*” to “*...jeweled ponds of the Land of Bliss*” elucidates the characteristics of successful contemplation.

By focusing the mind steadfastly on the jeweled mansions as the object of contemplation, aspiring to perceive them, and subduing thoughts

with unwavering resolve, the aforementioned splendors will fully appear.

“This is the General Contemplation, called the Sixth Contemplation.”

(8) “*This is*” onward is the conclusion.

“Those who attain this vision

(9) “*Those who attain this vision*” reiterates the preceding contemplation and leads into the subsequent benefits.

“... eliminate their reincarnation-destined negative karma of countless billion *kalpas* and after death will surely be reborn in the Pure Land.

(10) “*Eliminate...*” to “*...reborn in the Pure Land*” explains that contemplating in line with the teachings removes obstacles accumulated over countless *kalpas*, purifies the body-vessel, fulfills the Buddha’s fundamental intent, and certainly ensures rebirth in the Pure Land at life’s end.

“Contemplating this way is called correct contemplation; contemplating otherwise is called incorrect contemplation.”

(11) “*Contemplating this way...*” to “*...incorrect contemplation*” distinguishes between correct and incorrect contemplation.

The foregoing, though consisting of eleven varied phrases, thoroughly explains the Contemplation of the Jeweled Mansions.

7. Contemplation of the Lotus Throne

First, introduction.

Next, explanation.

Finally, conclusion.

There are nineteen aspects.

The Buddha said to Ananda and Vaidehi: “Listen carefully, listen carefully! Reflect on this properly. I will teach you in detail the methods to eliminate suffering and distress.

(1) From “*The Buddha said to Ananda...*” to “*...the methods to eliminate suffering and distress,*” the Buddha called for attention and agreed to expound. The passage consists of three elements:

- i) The Buddha’s open declaration to the two individuals.
- ii) He urged attentive listening, requiring them to receive the teaching earnestly and practice it with correct mindfulness.
- iii) He taught the method of contemplating the lotus throne. By focusing the mind and sustaining invocation, negative karma and suffering are eliminated.

“You should remember and preserve my teaching and expound it widely to the multitudes.”

(2) From “*You should remember and preserve...*” to “*...expound it widely to the multitudes,*” the Buddha urged the dissemination of the teaching.

The [forthcoming] teaching on contemplation is profound and important, offering rapid deliverance to sentient beings who remain submerged, ensnared by delusional attachments, and endlessly adrift in the Six Realms. “You should uphold this contemplative teaching, promote its practice universally, enable all to understand and embrace it, and ascend to liberation together.”

As these words were spoken, the Buddha of Infinite Life appeared, standing in the air, along with Mahasattvas Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta attending him by his sides. Their radiance was so brilliant that it could not be fully perceived, and even 100,000 times the luster of Jambunada gold could not compare.

(3) “*As these words were spoken...*” to “*...could not compare*”: The Lord of Teachings in the Saha world [Shakyamuni Buddha], for the sake of sentient beings, maintained mindfulness of the Western Pure Land, while the Compassionate Honored One of the Land of Peace and Joy [Amitabha Buddha], perceiving the situation, manifested his presence in the eastern Saha world.

This demonstrates that the two Honored Ones, whether in assenting to expound or manifesting presence in response, shared the same intent, differing only in being visible or invisible. Precisely because of the vast discrepancies in the aptitudes of sentient beings, ranging from the adept to the unrefined, the two Buddhas acted in perfect coordination and harmony to fulfill their intent.

The phrase “*As these words were spoken*” indicates that the preceding notion consists of seven points:

i) This phrase marks the moment when the Buddha summoned and exhorted the two individuals.

ii) Amitabha Buddha appeared immediately as Shakyamuni spoke, affirming the attainment of rebirth.

iii) Amitabha stood in the air, signifying that as long as one redirects the mind with correct understanding and aspires to be reborn in his Pure Land, rebirth is attained instantly.

Question: Buddhas are supremely exalted in virtue and do not act hastily or casually. Since Amitabha Buddha is fully capable of upholding his original vows and manifesting his presence out of great compassion, why did he not assume a dignified seated posture to deliver beings?

Answer: This is because the Tathagata has a particular esoteric intention. The Saha world is a realm of suffering, filled with impurities and wickedness. Under the burning torment of the Eight Sufferings, frustration and adversity arise at every turn. Deceptive intimates wear false smiles, while the six thieves (six senses) remain ever present. The fiery abyss of the Three Wretched Realms looms, ever ready to consume.

Had Amitabha Buddha not taken rapid steps to rescue the deluded, how could beings escape the prison of karmic bondage? Therefore, he must swiftly embrace and deliver beings and cannot afford to delay by assuming a dignified seated posture in response.

iv) Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta served as attendants, signifying the absence of others.

v) The Three Sacred Beings are perfect and pure in both form and mind, radiating transcendent brilliance.

vi) The Buddha's body illuminates the ten directions with boundless radiance; how could ordinary beings, burdened by defilements and obstructions, fully behold it?

vii) The Buddha's body is flawless, as is his light; how could the flawed celestial gold possibly compare?

Upon seeing the Buddha of Infinite Life, Vaidehi bowed in veneration with her head touching the feet of Shakyamuni Buddha

(4) “*Upon seeing the Buddha of Infinite Life...*” to “*...touching the feet of Shakyamuni Buddha*” reveals that **Vaidehi was, in truth, an ordinary woman of defiled nature, unworthy of praise. Yet, through the imperceptible support of the Buddha's sacred power, she had the honor of bowing in homage when Amitabha manifested.**

This is precisely:

*Once she had gazed upon the Pure Land,
She rejoiced, her heart could scarce withstand.
Now beholding Amitabha right before her eyes,
Within, she awakens, the Endurance alight.*

... and said: “World-Honored One, now, through the Buddha’s power, I have seen the Buddha of Infinite Life and the two Bodhisattvas.

(5) From “*and said...*” to “*...and the two Bodhisattvas,*” the queen, embracing the Buddha’s grace, prepared to voice her doubt on behalf of sentient beings, leading to the subsequent question.

The queen’s intent: “While the Buddha is now present, I have, through his empowerment, been able to behold Amitabha. But after the Buddha’s passing, how will sentient beings be able to see him?”

“How can sentient beings of future generations contemplate them?”

(6) From “*How can sentient beings...*” to “*...contemplate them,*” the queen petitioned on behalf of all beings, seeking to enable them to see as she had seen.

The Buddha said to Vaidehi: “Those who wish to contemplate that Buddha should begin by

(7) From “*The Buddha said to Vaidehi...*” to “*...should begin by*”, the Buddha made a universal declaration of his consent to expound.

Question: While the queen petitioned on behalf of both herself and all beings, why did the Tathagata, in his response, address only Vaidehi without mentioning other beings?

Answer: When the Buddha appeared in this world for sentient beings, he taught to inspire them according to their capacities and often took the initiative to guide universally, even without being asked. How could one assume that in addressing a specific individual, he did not equally encompass all others? The absence of an explicit mention is merely a matter of textual brevity; his intention to include all beings is beyond question.

“... envisioning a lotus flower on the seven-jeweled ground.

(8) From “*envisioning*” to “*...seven-jeweled ground,*” the skillful means of contemplation was expounded.

Question: Sentient beings, blinded and benighted, grow weary in their pursuit of visualization. They are like sleepwalkers roving in the night; even what lies before their eyes remains obscure. How could they possibly perceive the distant pure realm that they seek?

Answer: Due to their delusions and obstructions, any attempt to engage the mind brings only exhaustion. Yet, by relying on the distant support of the Buddha’s sacred power, they are able to perceive all that they contemplate.

What is the method to be performed to settle the mind and bring about clear vision?

All practitioners who wish to perform the method should first, with utmost sincerity, repent before an image of the Buddha — confessing past offenses, giving rise to deep remorse, and weeping with grief, tears streaming.

After completing repentance, further entreat — both mentally and verbally — Shakyamuni Buddha and all Buddhas of the ten directions, as numerous as grains of sand in the Ganges.

Next, reflect upon Amitabha's Fundamental Vow, saying:

“I, disciple [name], am like one born blind, shrouded by heavy negative karma, deeply ensnared in the abyss of hindrances and separation. I implore the Buddha's compassion to embrace, protect and hold me in remembrance — to guide, instruct, illuminate and awaken me — so that my aspiration for vision may be fulfilled. Now, I completely relinquish my body and life, entrusting myself with utmost reverence to Amitabha Buddha. Whether sight is granted or not rests solely upon the power of the Buddha's grace.”

Having spoken these words, sincerely repent once more. Upon completion, go to a quiet place, face westward, and sit upright in the full-lotus posture as previously instructed. Once the mind is stabilized, gently shift the mental focus to visualize the jeweled ground of the Pure Land, with its various colors distinctly clear.

At the initial stage of contemplation, avoid randomly visualizing multiple objects, as this hinders concentration. Instead, focus solely on a

small area, about the size of a square inch or foot. Persist for one to seven days, or even a month, a year, or two to three years. Whether day or night, whether walking, standing, sitting or lying down, continually align all physical, verbal and mental karma with meditative concentration.

Only when worldly concerns are completely set aside — as if being unconscious, deaf, blind or dull — can meditative concentration be surely and easily attained. Otherwise,

The three karmas waver with distractions,
Mental focus drifts, chasing the waves.
Even through a thousand-year lifespan,
The Dharma eye remains unopened.

When the mind attains concentration, a luminous sign may first appear, or the jeweled land and other clear, unfathomable scenes may initially come into view. There are two types of seeing:

i) Envisioned seeing, which still involves awareness and cognition. While pure scenes are perceived, their clarity is not sharply distinct.

ii) Entering the “correct meditative absorption,” or samadhi, where both internal and external awareness are extinguished. The pure scenes witnessed in this state are beyond comparison to those of envisioned seeing.

“Each petal of the lotus flashes hundreds of jeweled colors and displays 84,000 veins, as resplendent as celestial paintings. Every vein emits 84,000 rays of light.

(9) “*Each petal of the lotus...*” to “*...84,000 rays of light*” describes the various splendors of the jeweled lotuses. There are three elements:

- i) Each lotus petal displays an array of jeweled colors.
- ii) Each petal contains numerous jeweled veins.
- iii) Each vein radiates a multitude of rays and colors.

Practitioners are taught to steady their minds and visualize each aspect, allowing the mind’s eye to perceive everything.

After perceiving the lotus petals, visualize the following in succession:

- Myriad gems between the petals.
- Radiant beams emanating from the gems, forming jeweled canopies.
- The lotus podium, and various treasures and pearly nets on it.
- Four pillars of treasured banners on the podium.
- Treasured valances draping from the banners.
- Gems on the valances emitting multicolored rays that fill the sky, each manifesting extraordinary signs.

Follow this sequence, and fix the mind on each aspect one by one without wavering. Before long, the meditative mind will be attained. Once it is achieved, all those splendors will fully manifest. This should be understood.

“Envision all of them clearly and distinctly.

(10) “*Envision all of them...*” elucidates the characteristics of successful contemplation.

“Small petals extend 250 *yojanas* in length and width.

“Each lotus encompasses 84,000 petals. Between the petals are billions of ornamental king Muni-gems. Each Muni-gem issues thousands of radiant beams. The radiance spreads out like canopies made of seven jewels, thoroughly covering the ground.

(11) “*Small petals...*” to “*...thoroughly covering the ground*” depicts how each petal displays various splendors. There are six elements:

- i) The size of each lotus petal.
- ii) The number of petals.
- iii) The number of ornamental gems between the leaves.
- iv) Each gem emitting thousands of radiant beams.

v) Each gem's radiance transforming into jeweled canopies.

vi) The canopies illuminating the space above and covering the jeweled ground below.

“The podium is made of sakrabhilagna gems.

“This lotus-podium is decorated with 80,000 vajra-kimsuka gems, brahma Muni-gems, and exquisite pearly nets.

(12) *“The podium is made of sakrabhilagna gems...”* to *“...and exquisite pearly nets”* describes the splendors on the podium.

“On that podium stand spontaneously four pillars of treasured banners. Each banner resembles 100 quadrillion Mt. Sumerus. Treasured valances drape the pillars, similar to those in Yama Heaven.

“They are adorned with 5 billion exquisite gems,

(13) *“On that podium...”* to *“...5 billion exquisite gems”* describes the splendors of the banners. They have four aspects:

i) Four pillars of jeweled banners naturally stand on the podium.

ii) The size of the banners is specified.

iii) Treasured valances naturally hang from the banners, resembling those of celestial palaces.

iv) Numerous precious gems naturally adorn the banners, their brilliant light forming luminous embellishments.

“... each releasing 84,000 rays of light. Each ray glows with 84,000 different hues of golden color. The golden color suffuses the treasured land and transforms into various objects everywhere, such as *vajra* seats, pearly nets, and multicolored flowery clouds. Throughout the ten directions, the golden color mutates and manifests as wished, and performs the Buddha’s work.

(14) “*Each releasing 84,000 rays of light...*” to “*...and performs the Buddha’s work*” reveals that the gems’ light possesses unfathomable virtues and functions. There are five elements:

- i) Each gem emits numerous rays of light.
- ii) Each ray shines with a spectrum of colors.
- iii) Each ray and its colors suffuse the treasured land.
- iv) Wherever the light extends, it manifests various splendors.

v) These splendors include *vajra* platforms, pearly nets, flowery clouds, and jeweled musical instruments, filling the ten directions completely.

**“This is the Visualization of the Lotus Throne,
called the Seventh Contemplation.”**

(15) “*This is*” onward is the conclusion, with the name of the contemplation.

**The Buddha told Ananda: “This wondrous flower
was originally created through the power of Bhikku
Dharmakara’s vows.**

(16) “*The Buddha told Ananda...*” to “*...created through the power of Bhikku Dharmakara’s vows*” explains the causal factor for the accomplishment of the lotus throne.

**“Those who wish to invoke Amitabha Buddha
should first envision this lotus throne. In
performing this, refrain from mixed visualizations.
Contemplate every aspect: each petal, each
jewel, each ray of light, each platform and each
banner. Ensure their images are perfectly clear
and distinct, as if seeing your own reflection in a
mirror.**

(17) “*Those who wish to invoke Amitabha Buddha...*” to “*...as if seeing your own reflection in a mirror*” reiterates the ritual guidelines for contemplation — focusing the mind to contemplate sequentially as previously instructed, without mixing or disorder.

“Once this contemplation succeeds, practitioners will eliminate their reincarnation-fated negative karma accumulated over five trillion *kalpas* and will certainly be reborn in the Land of Bliss.

(18) “*Once this contemplation succeeds...*” to “*...be reborn in the Land of Bliss*” concludes the characteristics of successful contemplation. Two benefits are cited:

- i) The benefit of eliminating negative karma.
 - ii) The benefit of attaining rebirth in the Pure Land.
-

“Contemplating this way is called correct contemplation; contemplating otherwise is called incorrect contemplation.”

(19) “*Contemplating this way...*” to “*...is called incorrect contemplation*” distinguishes between correct and incorrect contemplation.

This is precisely:

*Splendid blossoms rest upon jeweled ground,
Between their petals, the rarest treasures abound.
Four banners shimmer on the podium bright,
Their radiance enacts the Buddhas’ sacred rite.*

The foregoing, though consisting of nineteen varied phrases, thoroughly explains the Contemplation of the Lotus Throne.

8. Contemplation of the Images

First, introduction.

Next, explanation.

Finally, conclusion.

There are thirteen elements.

The Buddha said to Ananda and Vaidehi: “Having seen this phenomenon, proceed to envisage the Buddha. Why?”

(1) “*The Buddha said to Ananda...*” to “*...proceed to envisage the Buddha*” concludes the preceding section and leads into the next.

The question “*Why?*” reflects Shakyamuni Buddha asking: “Why is it necessary to envisage the Buddha?”

“Tathagatas are bodies of the Dharma Realm, and enter the mind of each sentient being.”

(2) “*Tathagatas are bodies of the Dharma Realm...*” to “*...the mind of each sentient being*” explains that, out of great compassion, all Buddhas manifest in response to the thinking minds of sentient beings. For this supreme benefit, we are encouraged to visualize them.

Question: Since Vaidehi had previously petitioned Amitabha Buddha alone, why did the Tathagata [Shakyamuni] generally refer to all Buddhas? What was his intent?

Answer: He sought to reveal that all Buddhas have equally attained the Three Bodies and fully realized the ultimate fruition of compassion and wisdom, without distinction. Seated in dignified composure, their emanations manifest universally, beyond all limits. Responding to beings with affinities, they appear throughout the Dharma Realm at any time.

“Dharma Realm” carries three implications:

i) Because their [Buddhas’] mind pervades all things, this explains the term “Dharma Realm.”

ii) Because their body permeates all things, this explains the term “Dharma Realm.”

iii) Because they face no obstructions, this explains the term “Dharma Realm.”

Because the mind extends [everywhere], the body too reaches [everywhere]. Since the body accompanies the mind, it is called the *“bodies of the Dharma Realm.”*

“Dharma Realm” refers to the domain that serves as the object receiving instruction and guidance — the realm of sentient beings.

“Bodies” refer to the **subject** that imparts instructions and guidance — the bodies of all Buddhas.

“Enter the mind of each sentient being” means that when beings have thoughts of wishing to see the Buddhas, the Buddhas, through their unobstructed wisdom, immediately perceive and enter the beings’ thinking minds, manifesting accordingly. Thus, when practitioners behold a Buddha in visualization, invocation, dreams or meditative concentration, this principle is realized.

“For this reason, when thinking of a Buddha, your minds become the [Buddha’s] 32 marks and 80 physical characteristics. It is the mind that creates Buddha, the mind that is Buddha. The ‘ocean’ of the Buddhas’ perfect universal knowledge arises from the thinking mind.

(3) “*For this reason*” to “*...arises from the thinking mind*” concludes the foregoing, encourages practice, and explains its benefits.

Practitioners should fix their minds on thinking of the Buddha, taking only the Buddha as the object of perception. Begin from the crown of his head to the soles of his feet, keeping [these features] in mind without letting go. Contemplate one feature after another, avoiding even the slightest pause. Or reflect on his ushnisha, or the white tuft between his eyebrows, extending downwards through the thousand-spoked wheel marks on his soles.

As one visualizes these, the Buddha’s image — dignified and resplendent, with all marks and physical characteristics in full perfection — will appear clearly and vividly. This occurs because the mind adheres to each feature, and thus, each feature manifests. If the mind does not affix to them, they cannot be seen. As long as the mind envisions and forms [the image], it manifests in response to the mind. Therefore, it is said: “*your minds become the [Buddha’s] 32 marks and 80 physical characteristics.*”

The term “*80 physical characteristics*” suggests that once the Buddha’s marks manifest, all his physical characteristics appear along with them. This is the Tathagata instructing practitioners to visualize in full.

“It is the mind that creates Buddha” means that, relying on their own faith, practitioners affix their minds to [the Buddha’s] marks as if generating [the Buddha in their minds].

“The mind that is Buddha” means that when practitioners apply their minds to think of the Buddha, his form manifests in accordance with such thinking. This is the “in-mind Buddha.” Beyond this mind, there is absolutely no other Buddha.

“The Buddhas’ perfect universal knowledge” signifies that all Buddhas, having attained fully perfected, unobstructed wisdom, constantly and universally know all minds throughout the Dharma Realm, whether with or without mental deliberation. As long as you give rise to a thought of them, they will manifest from your thinking mind, as if arising.

Some practitioners may interpret this teaching as referring to (i) contemplating the Dharma Body as consciousness only, or (ii) contemplating self-nature as pure Buddha-nature. Such interpretations are entirely mistaken, completely lacking even the slightest similarity to the intended meaning.

The phrase *“envisioning his image”* signifies that the teaching only provisionally establishes the Buddha’s 32 marks. How could the Buddha’s body of the True-Suchness Dharma Realm possess any mark to be affixed to or physical form to be grasped? The Dharma Body is formless, entirely beyond the sphere of visual perception, and utterly incomparable with any analogy. Therefore, the Void is employed as a metaphor for the substance of the Dharma Body.

Moreover, this teaching on contemplation specifically points to the [Western] direction and establishes phenomenal characteristics to help settle the mind and grasp the objects of contemplation. It never touches upon the principle of formlessness or detachment from thoughts. The Tathagata foresaw that iniquitous, turbid ordinary beings in the Age of Dharma Decline would fail to settle their minds even with established phenomenal characteristics (forms) — let alone if they were to seek contemplation free from characteristics. This would be like a person without special powers attempting to build a house in mid-air.

“Therefore, you should focus single-mindedly on contemplating that Buddha, Tathagata, Arhat (One Worthy of Offerings) and Samyak-samuddha (One With Correct Universal Knowledge).”

(4) “*Therefore, you should...*” to “*...Samyak-samuddha (One With Correct Universal Knowledge)*” explains that, due to the previously described benefit, single-minded focus inevitably leads to success. Thus you should teach and encourage one another to contemplate that Buddha.

“To contemplate that Buddha, begin by envisioning his image.”

(5) “*To contemplate that Buddha*” references the preceding teaching and transitions into the next.

“*Begin by envisioning his image*” designates the object to be contemplated.

“With eyes closed or open, picture a majestic image in the hue of Jambunada gold, seated on that lotus. Once this image is perceived, the mind’s eye will open with clear and distinct sight, allowing a vision of the seven-jeweled adornments of the Land of Bliss: jeweled ground, jeweled ponds, and rows of jeweled trees. Heavenly jeweled canopies cover them entirely, and nets of myriad treasures fill the sky. After these sights appear, ensure the vision is clear and distinct, as if viewing them in your palms.

(6) “*With eyes closed or open...*” to “*...as if viewing them in your palms*” presents the characteristics of successful contemplation. There are four aspects:

i) In all four physical postures, whether with eyes open or closed, visualize a golden image as if present before one’s eyes. Maintain constant contemplation of this vision.

ii) Once one is able to contemplate the image, it must have a seat. Thus, envision the lotus throne as previously instructed, with the image seated upon it.

iii) With the image visualized and perceived as seated, the mind’s eye opens.

iv) Once the mind’s eye opens, one beholds the golden image and the myriad splendors of the Land of Bliss, all of which — whether on the ground or in the sky — are clear, distinct and unobstructed.

Furthermore, the method to focus the mind on contemplating the image is as previously explained. Begin at the crown of the Buddha's head and visualize each feature one by one: his face, eyebrows, white tuft, eyes, nose, mouth, ears, throat, neck, shoulders, arms, hands and fingers. Then, draw the mind upward to visualize the chest, abdomen, navel, concealed genital region, legs, kneecaps, feet, toes and the thousand-spoked wheels — one after another. Reflecting from the top down is called “sequential contemplation,” while reflecting from the thousand-spoked wheel upward is called “reverse contemplation.” By concentrating the mind this way, alternating between sequential and reverse orders, success will inevitably be attained soon.

Additionally, the Buddha's body must be contemplated from top to bottom, together with the lotus throne and the jeweled ground, as a unified whole.

Among the thirteen contemplations, this single contemplation — on the jeweled ground, jeweled lotus throne, and golden image — is the most essential. For those who seek to instruct others, this is the method to teach. Mastering this method naturally leads to distinct clarity in all the other contemplations.

“Having seen this phenomenon,

(7) “*Having seen this...*” concludes the preceding contemplation of the Buddha's image and leads into the next contemplation of the two Bodhisattvas.

“... envision another large lotus to the left of Amitabha, identical to the previous flower with no difference. Then, imagine one more large lotus to the right of the Buddha. Visualize an image of Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara seated on the left lotus throne, shining with the same golden hue as before. Then, picture an image of Bodhisattva Mahasthamaprapta seated on the right lotus throne.

(8) “*Envision another large lotus...*” to “*...seated on the right lotus throne*” completes all the foregoing guidance on contemplating the Three Sacred Beings’ forms and transitions into the subsequent contemplation of their multiple manifestations. To contemplate the two Bodhisattvas, follow the same approach as for contemplating the Buddha.

“When this visualization is accomplished, the images of the Buddha and the Bodhisattvas will all emit light. Shining with a golden hue, the rays illuminate the jeweled trees. Beneath each tree are also three lotuses, supporting an image of Amitabha Buddha and the two Bodhisattvas respectively, filling the entire land.

(9) “*When this visualization is accomplished...*” to “*...filling the entire land*” concludes the contemplation of the multiple physical forms and opens into the subsequent signs of expounding the Dharma.

Practitioners, whether walking, standing, sitting or lying down, should consistently anchor their minds to all the jeweled trees, jeweled mansions, lotus ponds and other features of the Pure Land. Whether through reverential actions, invocation or contemplation, they should always uphold this understanding.

“When this visualization is accomplished, practitioners will be able to hear the flowing water, radiance, jeweled trees, geese and ducks expounding the wondrous Dharma. Whether entering or exiting samadhi, practitioners will continually hear the wondrous Dharma.

“Upon exiting samadhi, practitioners should remember and uphold what they have heard without forgetting,

(10) “*When this visualization is accomplished...*” to “*...uphold what they have heard without forgetting*” describes how, through meditative concentration, practitioners behold the splendors of the Pure Land and hear all its splendid phenomena proclaim the wondrous Dharma. Having seen and heard these marvels, they should retain them with unwavering constancy, free from forgetfulness. This is known as “maintaining a concentrated mind.”

“... ensuring it aligns with the sutras. If it does not, it is delusional thinking; if it does, it is called the rough visualization of the Land of Bliss.

(11) “*Ensuring it aligns with the sutras...*” to “*...rough visualization of the Land of Bliss*” distinguishes between correct and incorrect contemplation.

“This is the Visualization of the Images, called the Eighth Contemplation.

(12) “*This is*” onward is the conclusion.

“Contemplating in this way eliminates reincarnation-fated negative karma of innumerable billions of *kalpas* and leads to attainment of Buddha-invocation samadhi in this present life.”

(13) “*Contemplating in this way...*” to “*...Buddha-invocation samadhi in this present life*” clarifies that practicing contemplation with a resolute mind yields benefits in this very life.

This is precisely:

*Karmic obstructions weigh on beings, bound,
The true Buddha’s vision remains unfound.
Thus the Great Sage, with compassion so vast,
For now guides their minds to images held fast.*

The foregoing, though consisting of thirteen varied phrases, thoroughly explains the Contemplation of the Images.

9. Contemplation of the True Body

First, introduction.

Next, explanation.

Finally, conclusion.

There are twelve elements.

The Buddha said to Ananda and Vaidehi: “When this visualization is accomplished, proceed to contemplate the physical characteristics and radiance of the Buddha of Infinite Life.

(1) “*The Buddha said to Ananda ...*” to “*...radiance of the Buddha of Infinite Life*” conveys the Buddha’s open declaration, concludes the prior contemplation of the images, and transitions into the subsequent contemplation of the true body.

“Ananda, you should know that the body of that Buddha is 10 trillion times more brilliant than Jambunada gold from Yama Heaven.

(2) “*Ananda, you should know...*” to “*...gold from Yama Heaven*” reveals that the true Buddha’s physical form surpasses the color of heavenly gold.

“His height spans as many *yojanas* as 60 trillion *ayutas* of sand grains in the Ganges River.

(3) “*His height spans...*” to “*...sand grains in the Ganges River*” describes the magnitude of the Buddha’s body.

“The white tuft between his eyebrows spirals to the right and equals the size of five Mt. Sumerus. The Buddha’s eyes resemble the waters of the Four Great Oceans, with a striking contrast between black and white. From each pore of his body, light shines forth as immense as Mt. Sumeru.

“That Buddha’s halo extends as vast as 10 billion three-thousand-fold great chiliocosms. Within this halo are emanated Buddhas — numerous as 100 trillion *ayutas* of sand grains in the Ganges River — each attended by countless emanated Bodhisattvas.

(4) “*The white tuft...*” to “*...countless emanated Bodhisattvas*” teaches contemplation of the Buddha’s general physical characteristics. There are six aspects:

- i) The magnitude of the white tuft between his eyebrows.
- ii) The magnitude of his eyes.
- iii) The magnitude of the light emanating from his pores.

- iv) The magnitude of his halo.
 - v) The number of emanated Buddhas.
 - vi) The number of attendants.
-

“The Buddha of Infinite Life bears 84,000 marks, and each mark contains 84,000 physical characteristics. Within each characteristic are 84,000 beams of radiance. Each beam permeates all worlds in the ten directions, embracing and never abandoning sentient beings who invoke that Buddha.

(5) “*The Buddha of Infinite Life...*” to “*...who invoke that Buddha*” teaches contemplation of the specific characteristics of the Buddha’s body and describes how his radiance benefits those with karmic affinity. There are five elements:

- i) The number of his marks.
- ii) The number of his physical characteristics.
- iii) The number of beams in his radiance.
- iv) The extent of his radiance’s illumination.
- v) Wherever his radiance reaches, specific sentient beings benefit from its embrace.

Question: All who cultivate myriad practices and dedicate the merits towards rebirth in the Pure Land will invariably attain rebirth. Yet, given that the Buddha's light shines universally, why does it embrace only those who practice Amitabha-recitation? What is the meaning behind this?

Answer: This carries three meanings.

1) Intimate affinity: When sentient beings begin their practice, their mouths constantly recite Amitabha's name, and the Buddha immediately hears. Their bodies consistently perform reverential acts towards him, and the Buddha immediately sees. Their minds continually invoke the Buddha, and he immediately knows. As sentient beings recollect him, he responds in kind. Through these three types of karma, the two remain inseparable. This is intimate affinity.

2) Close affinity: When sentient beings wish to see Amitabha, the Buddha responds to their thoughts and manifests before them. This is close affinity.

3) Augmentative affinity: Through reciting Amitabha's name, sentient beings immediately eradicate offenses accumulated over numerous *kalpas*. At the end of their lives, Amitabha and the sacred assembly naturally appear to welcome them. This process remains unhindered by the bondage of negative karma. This is augmentative affinity (augmentative cause).

Other myriad practices, though called virtuous, are utterly incomparable to the practice of Amitabha-recitation.

Therefore, various sutras abound with passages that extensively commend the merits and functions of Amitabha-recitation. For

example, the 48 Vows in the *Infinite Life Sutra* invariably emphasize that exclusive recitation of Amitabha Buddha's name ensures rebirth in the Land of Bliss. The *Amitabha Sutra* teaches that one to seven days of exclusive recitation of Amitabha's name guarantees rebirth, a truth affirmed by Buddhas of the ten directions, as numerous as grains of sands in the Ganges River. In this *Contemplation Sutra*, both the meditative and non-meditative texts underscore that exclusive name-recitation secures rebirth. Such examples are abundant.

Thus concludes the exposition of Buddha-invocation samadhi.

“His radiance, marks, physical characteristics and emanated Buddhas defy full description.

(6) “*His radiance, marks, physical characteristics...*” offers but a summary of the lesser [scale of splendors], thereby indicating the greater [indescribable magnitude of splendors beyond]. Those who hastily attempt to contemplate the whole will find its totality difficult to fully grasp.

“Simply recall and visualize. Let the mind's eye see.

(7) “*Simply recall and visualize...*” explains that the exquisite and wondrous splendors transcend the perceptual range of ordinary beings. Even without attaining the vision before their eyes, practitioners should simply recall and visualize, allowing their mind's eye to perceive.

“Those who behold this phenomenon will immediately perceive all Buddhas of the ten directions. Because this vision reveals the Buddhas, it is called Buddha-invocation samadhi.

“Contemplating in this way is termed contemplating the body of all Buddhas. By contemplating the Buddhas’ body, one also perceives the Buddhas’ mind. The Buddhas’ mind is none other than Great Compassion, embracing sentient beings with unconditional kindness.

(8) *“Those who behold this phenomenon...”* to *“...with unconditional kindness”* affirms that the merits of the practice unfold without disappearing and that the benefits of contemplation are fully realized. There are five aspects:

i) Contemplating [Amitabha Buddha] leads to a vision of all Buddhas in the ten directions.

ii) The vision of all Buddhas constitutes Buddha-invocation samadhi.

iii) Contemplating a single Buddha is contemplating the body of all Buddhas.

iv) Perceiving the Buddhas’ body leads to perceiving their mind.

v) The Buddhas’ mind, whose essence is benevolence and compassion, universally embraces all beings with this great, impartial benevolence.

“Those who contemplate this way will, upon leaving this life and in future lifetimes, be reborn before Buddhas and attain the Endurance for the Non-Arising of Dharmas.

(9) *“Those who contemplate this way...”* to *“...attain the Endurance for the Non-Arising of Dharmas”* confirms the benefit of attaining rebirth in the Pure Land after departing from this life.

“Therefore, the wise should single-mindedly contemplate the Buddha of Infinite Life.

“To contemplate the Buddha of Infinite Life, begin with one of his marks and physical characteristics. Simply contemplate the white tuft between his eyebrows and ensure the vision is perfectly clear and distinct. Upon seeing the white tuft, his 84,000 marks and physical characteristics will naturally come into view.

“Those who see the Buddha of Infinite Life will immediately behold countless Buddhas of the ten directions. Upon seeing them, these Buddhas will come forth to bestow upon the contemplators predictions of Buddhahood.

(10) *“Therefore, the wise ...”* to *“...predictions of Buddhahood”* reiterates the benefits of contemplation to encourage its practice. It consists of five elements:

i) The text identifies those who are qualified to practice contemplation.

ii) Practitioners should single-mindedly contemplate the Buddha of Infinite Life.

iii) The numerous marks and physical characteristics should not be contemplated collectively or in a mixed manner; instead, focus exclusively on the white tuft. Once the tuft is perceived, all other marks naturally manifest.

iv) Upon perceiving Amitabha Buddha, practitioners simultaneously behold all Buddhas of the ten directions.

v) Having perceived all Buddhas, practitioners receive their predictions of Buddhahood while in meditative concentration.

“This is the universal contemplation of all the form bodies and physical marks, called the Ninth Contemplation.

(11) *“This is the universal contemplation”* onward is the conclusion.

“Contemplating this way is called correct contemplation; contemplating otherwise is called incorrect contemplation.”

(12) *“Contemplating this way...”* distinguishes between correct and incorrect contemplation.

Precisely:

*His true form vast, beyond all seek,
His tuft, majestic as the Five Peaks.
His voice responds as each one inclines,
His light illuminates all sentient minds.*

*He draws all beings to entrust their lives,
With thoughts collected, none cast aside,
And relying on his great original vows,
They are reborn in that land his vow endows.*

The foregoing, though consisting of twelve varied phrases, thoroughly explains the Contemplation of the True Body.

10. Contemplation of Avalokitesvara

First, introduction.

Next, explanation.

Finally, conclusion.

There are fifteen items.

**The Buddha said to Ananda and Vaidehi:
“After beholding the Buddha of Infinite Life with
clear, distinct vision, proceed to contemplate
Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara.**

(1) “*The Buddha said to Ananda...*” to “*...Bodhisattva*

Avalokitesvara” concludes the preceding contemplation of the true body and introduces the subsequent contemplation of the Bodhisattva.

“His height reaches 80 trillion *nayuta yojanas*, and his body shines with a purple-golden color. Atop his head is a flesh ushnisha, and behind his nape, a radiant halo extends 100,000 *yojanas* in all directions.

“In his halo reside 500 emanated Buddhas, each resembling Shakyamuni. Every emanated Buddha is accompanied by 500 emanated Bodhisattvas and countless celestial beings as attendants. The whole-body radiance of Avalokitesvara reflects all the forms and features of sentient beings from the Five Realms.

(2) “*His height reaches...*” to “*...sentient beings from the Five Realms*” generally describes the Bodhisattva’s physical features. There are six aspects:

- i) The magnitude of his body.
- ii) The color of his body is distinct from that of the Buddha.
- iii) His flesh ushnisha differs from the Buddha’s.
- iv) The magnitude of his halo.
- v) The number of emanated Buddhas and attendants.

vi) His whole-body radiance universally reflects sentient beings in the Five Realms.

“Crowning his head is a heavenly diadem made of bhilagna Muni-gems, within which stands an emanated Buddha, towering 25 *yojanas* tall.

(3) “*Crowning his head...*” to “*...towering 25 yojanas tall*” depicts the emanated Buddha within his heavenly diadem, exceptional and extraordinary.

“Avalokitesvara’s countenance glows with the color of Jambunada gold.

(4) “*Avalokitesvara’s countenance...*” clarifies that the color of his countenance is different from that of his body.

“The tuft between his eyebrows shimmers in the hue of the seven treasures, emitting 84,000 kinds of radiance. Within each beam appear innumerable hundreds of thousands of emanated Buddhas, each accompanied by countless emanated Bodhisattvas as attendants. All manifestations, freely transforming as wished, fill the worlds of the ten directions, shining like red lotuses.

(5) “*The tuft between his eyebrows...*” to “*...shining like red lotuses*” illustrates how the radiance from his white tuft transforms freely and

pervades the ten directions, manifesting countless emanated Buddhas and their attendants, while its hue is likened to red lotuses. The passage contains five elements:

- i) The white tuft displays the colors of the seven treasures.
- ii) The number of types of the radiance from the tuft.
- iii) The number of emanated Buddhas within the radiance.
- iv) The number of attendants.
- v) The emanated Buddhas and attendants transform freely and pervade the ten directions.

“Eight billion wondrous streams of brilliance adorn his body as ornaments, within which all splendors are fully revealed.”

(6) “*Eight billion wondrous streams...*” to “*...fully revealed*” makes clear that his body is adorned with radiance as ornaments, rather than material treasures.

“His palms radiate the colors of 50 billion diverse lotuses, and each fingertip bears 84,000 intricate patterns resembling seal imprints. Each pattern contains 84,000 colors, and each color emits 84,000 rays of light, which are soft and delicate, universally illuminating all. With his divine hands, he receives and guides sentient beings.”

(7) “*His palms radiate...*” to “*...receives and guides sentient beings*” presents the compassionate function of his hands. There are six aspects:

- i) The palms exhibit the colors of diverse lotuses.
- ii) Each fingertip bears 80,000 intricate imprint patterns.
- iii) Each imprint reveals more than 80,000 colors.
- iv) Each color radiates over 80,000 beams of light.
- v) The light, soft and delicate in essence, illuminates all equally.
- vi) With his radiant, divine hands, he receives and guides sentient beings with karmic affinity.

“When he lifts his foot, a thousand-spoked wheel mark appears on his sole, spontaneously transforming into 50 billion radiant platforms. When he sets his foot down, *vajra muni* flowers scatter all over, filling all of space.

(8) “*When he lifts his foot...*” to “*...filling all of space*” signifies the virtuous functions embodied in his feet.

“He possesses all other physical marks and characteristics identical to those of a Buddha,

(9) “*He possesses all other physical marks...*” reveals that [his remaining marks and characteristics] are identical to those of Amitabha Buddha.

“... with only two exceptions: the fleshy ushnisha atop his head and the invisible vertex mark, which are not equal to those of the World-Honored One.

(10) “*With only two exceptions...*” to “*...those of the World-Honored One*” clarifies the distinction in stages between the teacher (Amitabha) and the disciple (Avalokitesvara). The latter’s fruition and vows are not yet fully realized, leading to imperfections in his two marks, which symbolize his state of incompleteness.

“This is the contemplation of the true form body and physical marks of Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, called the Tenth Contemplation.”

(11) “*This is*” onward is the conclusion.

The Buddha said to Ananda: “Those who wish to contemplate Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara should do so in the manner described.

(12) “*The Buddha said to Ananda...*” to “*...do so in the manner described*” reiterates the conclusion of the preceding text and leads into the subsequent benefits.

“Through this contemplation, practitioners will avoid all calamities, completely purify karmic obstacles and eliminate their reincarnation-fated negative karma accumulated over countless *kalpas*. Simply hearing his name brings immeasurable blessings, how much more so contemplating him?”

(13) “*Through this contemplation...*” to “*...how much more so contemplating him*” encourages contemplation and highlights its benefits.

“Those who intend to engage in this contemplation should begin with the fleshy ushnisha atop his head, followed by the heavenly diadem and then proceed to the other marks. Contemplate them in sequence, ensuring the vision is clear and distinct, as if viewing them in your palms.”

(14) “*Those who intend...*” to “*...in your palms*” restates the ritual guidelines for contemplation and urges sentient beings to dedicate their minds, thereby attaining two benefits [purifying karma and bringing blessings].

“Contemplating this way is called correct contemplation; contemplating otherwise is called incorrect contemplation.”

(15) “*Contemplating this way...*” distinguishes between correct and incorrect contemplation.

This is precisely:

*Avalokitesvara, with vows so profound,
Manifests in all ten directions, unbound.
With divine hands bearing radiant light,
He guides and receives as conditions are right.*

The foregoing, though consisting of fifteen varied phrases, thoroughly explains the Contemplation of Avalokitesvara.

11. Contemplation of Mahasthamaprapta

First, introduction.

Next, explanation.

Finally, conclusion.

There are thirteen elements.

“Next, contemplate Bodhisattva Mahasthamaprapta.

(1) “*Next, contemplate Bodhisattva Mahasthamaprapta*” generally designates the name of this contemplation.

“His body equals Avalokitesvara in size,

(2) “*His body equals...*” explains the features to be contemplated. There are five aspects:

- i) His body is the same size as Avalokitesvara's.
- ii) The body's color matches Avalokitesvara's.
- iii) His facial features are identical to Avalokitesvara's.
- iv) His bodily radiance, marks and physical characteristics are the same as Avalokitesvara's.
- v) The features, radiance and transformations of his white tuft match Avalokitesvara's.

“... and his halo, with a radius of 125 *yojanas*, illuminates an area of 250 *yojanas*.”

(3) “*His halo, with a radius of 125 yojanas...*” describes the characteristics of his halo, setting it apart from that of Avalokitesvara. Four elements are mentioned:

- i) The magnitude of his halo.
- ii) The extent of illumination.
- iii) The number of emanated Buddhas.
- iv) The number of attendants accompanying the emanated Buddhas.

“His whole-body radiance shines throughout the ten directions, glowing with a purple-golden color. Sentient beings with karmic connections can all behold him.”

“By seeing the light from even a single pore of this Bodhisattva, one sees the pure and wondrous brilliance of innumerable Buddhas in the ten directions. For this reason, he is also named ‘Boundless Light.’ His light of wisdom universally illuminates all beings, enabling them to escape the Three Wretched Realms. Having attained such supreme power, he is thus named Mahasthamaprapta, meaning ‘Great Strength Arrived.’

(4) “*His whole-body radiance...*” to “*...meaning Great Strength Arrived*” illustrates how his body’s radiance spreads far and wide, illuminating and benefiting those with karmic affinity, and extending equally across other realms, all in purple-gold hue. The passage consists of eight elements:

- i) The text describes his whole-body light and other specific radiance.
- ii) The extent of illumination.
- iii) Wherever his radiance reaches, everything takes on a purple-gold hue.
- iv) All those with karmic connections to him from past lives can perceive and be touched by his radiance.
- v) By simply seeing the radiance from a single pore of his body, practitioners can behold the pure, wondrous bodily radiance of innumerable Buddhas. This illustrates that even minimal contemplation

can yield the benefit of vast manifestations. The aim is to arouse in practitioners wholehearted yearning and reverent admiration, inclining them to enter meditative contemplation and realize this.

vi) His name originates from his radiance.

vii) The essence and function of his radiance: Its essence is flawless, and thus he is called “Light of Wisdom”; its function is to eliminate the suffering of the Three Wretched Realms throughout the ten directions, and so he is called “Supreme Power.”

viii) His name, Mahasthamaprapta (Great Strength Arrived), is derived from his virtues.

“The heavenly diadem of this Bodhisattva has 500 jeweled flowers, each displaying 500 jeweled platforms. Within each platform, the vast and magnificent features of pure, wondrous Buddha Lands in the ten directions are revealed.”

(5) “*The heavenly diadem of this Bodhisattva...*” to “*...the ten directions are revealed*” describes the splendid characteristics of his heavenly diadem, which differ from Avalokitesvara’s. There are four aspects:

i) The number of jeweled flowers on the diadem.

ii) The number of jeweled platforms on each flower.

iii) Within each platform, the pure lands of all Buddhas in the ten directions are revealed.

iv) As the lands of other directions appear, neither the platforms nor the lands expand or contract.

“The fleshy ushnisha atop his head resembles a *padma* flower, upon which rests a jeweled vase filled with abundant radiance, manifesting the Buddhas’ deeds universally.

(6) “*The fleshy ushnisha atop his head...*” to “*...manifesting the Buddhas’ deeds universally*” describes the characteristics of both his ushnisha and the jeweled vase it bears.

“His other physical marks are identical to those of Avalokitesvara, with no difference.

(7) “*His other physical marks...*” clarifies that they are identical to those of Avalokitesvara.

“When this Bodhisattva moves, all worlds in the ten directions experience convulsion. Wherever the ground trembles, 50 billion jeweled flowers bloom, each one majestic and resplendent, like those in the Land of Bliss.

(8) “*When this Bodhisattva moves...*” to “*...like those in the Land of Bliss*” affirms that the characteristics of his movements differ from Avalokitesvara’s. The passage contains four items:

- i) The distinct characteristics of his movements.
- ii) The extent of the convulsions.
- iii) Wherever the ground trembles, numerous flowers bloom.
- iv) The flowers are tall, prominent and adorned with radiant ornaments, resembling the splendid lotuses of the Pure Land.

“When this Bodhisattva takes his seat, the seven-jeweled [Pure] Land quakes instantly, along with countless Buddha Lands between the Land of Golden Light below and the Land of the King of Radiance above, as numerous as dust particles. From these lands, countless emanations of the Buddha of Infinite Life, Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta gather like clouds in the Land of Bliss, filling the entire sky. Seated upon lotus thrones, they expound the wondrous Dharma, delivering beings from suffering.

(9) “*When this Bodhisattva takes his seat...*” to “*...delivering beings from suffering*” explains that the characteristics of his seated presence differ from those of Avalokitesvara. There are seven elements:

- i) His seated posture.
- ii) The Land of Bliss quakes first.

iii) Then, other lands, near and far, tremble.

iv) Numerous Buddha Lands, below and above, shake.

v) The emanations of Amitabha Buddha, Avalokitesvara and others gather like clouds.

vi) Filling the entire sky, they are all seated upon jeweled lotuses.

vii) They expound the Dharma in emanated forms, each responding to beings as appropriate.

Question: The *Amitabha Sutra* states:

The sentient beings in that realm are free from all suffering and only experience manifold joys. That is why it is called Bliss.

Why does this *Contemplation Sutra* describe the emanated forms expounding the Dharma as “*delivering beings from suffering*”? What is the intent?

Answer: The suffering and joy mentioned here comprise two kinds: the suffering and joy within the Three Domains, and those in the Pure Land.

Regarding the Three Domains, suffering refers to the torment of the Three Wretched Realms, the Eight Sufferings, and similar afflictions. Joy signifies the pleasures of the five desires in the human and celestial realms — delights that are indulgent and binding. Though labeled as joys, they are, in truth, profound sufferings, ultimately devoid of even a single moment of genuine happiness.

As for the Pure Land, suffering pertains to Pre-Stage levels of attainment [on the Bodhisattva path] in contrast to the Above-Stage, while joy characterizes the Above-Stage in comparison to the Pre-Stage. Similarly, realizing lower wisdom is deemed suffering when measured against higher wisdom, while attaining higher wisdom is considered joy in comparison to the lower. From this single example, the principle becomes clear.

Here, the phrase “*delivering beings from suffering*” simply means enabling those in lower levels to ascend to higher ones, transforming inferior attainments into superior realizations. The fulfillment of their original aspirations is thus called “joy” — hence, “*delivering beings from suffering*.”

If this were not the case, then within the Pure Land — where all sacred beings embody the essence of flawlessness and the function of great compassion, abiding eternally, free from Segmented Birth and Death (*pariccheda-cyuti*) — on what grounds could anything still be called suffering?

“Contemplating this way is called correct contemplation; contemplating otherwise is called incorrect contemplation.

“Visualizing Bodhisattva Mahasthamaprapta in this way constitutes the contemplation of his form body and physical marks, called the Eleventh Contemplation.

(10) “*Contemplating this way...*” to “*...the Eleventh Contemplation*” distinguishes between correct and incorrect contemplation and concludes by demarcating the endpoint of this contemplation.

“Through contemplation of this Bodhisattva, practitioners eradicate *asamkhyeya* reincarnated negative karma of countless *kalpas*.

(11) “*Through contemplation of this Bodhisattva...*” explains a benefit from practicing this contemplation — eradication of negative karma from countless *kalpas*.

“Those who practice this contemplation will never again be reborn through the womb, but will instead always freely roam in the pure and wondrous Buddha Lands.

(12) “*Those who practice this contemplation...*” to “*...pure and wondrous Buddha Lands*” concludes the preceding text and clarifies further benefits.

“The accomplishment of this contemplation is called the complete contemplation of Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta.

(13) “*The accomplishment of this contemplation...*” mentions again the two Bodhisattvas together and clarifies the characteristics of successful contemplation.

This is precisely:

*Great Strength Arrived, whose virtue crowns the height,
Firmly seated, he shakes realms beyond all sight.
Emanations summoned — like clouds, they gather near;
Expounding the Dharma for beings who hear.
No longer bound to the womb-born life,
They roam the Dharma Realm in boundless delight.*

The foregoing, though consisting of thirteen varied phrases, thoroughly explains the Contemplation of Mahasthamaprapta.

12. Overall Contemplation

First, introduction.

Next, explanation.

Finally, conclusion.

There are six aspects.

“When seeing this phenomenon,

(1) “*When seeing this phenomenon...*” reiterates the preceding contemplation and transitions to the next.

“... initiate the mind to visualize being reborn in the Western Land of Bliss, seated in the full-lotus posture within a lotus flower. Envision the lotus closing and then opening. As it opens, picture the

radiance of 500 colors illuminating your body. Imagine your eyes opening to behold Buddhas and Bodhisattvas filling the sky. The sounds from the water, birds, trees and Buddhas all expound the wondrous Dharma.

(2) “*Initiate the mind...*” to “*...all expound the wondrous Dharma*” exhorts focusing the mind to enter contemplation, which entails constantly envisioning oneself as already reborn in the Pure Land. There are nine elements:

- i) Envision oneself as already reborn.
- ii) Visualize the direction of the Western Pure Land.
- iii) Imagine sitting in a lotus flower.
- iv) Visualize the lotus closing.
- v) Visualize the lotus blooming.
- vi) Picture the jeweled radiance shining upon one’s own body.
- vii) Upon being illuminated, envision one’s eyes opening.
- viii) With eyes opened, envision seeing the Buddha and Bodhisattvas.
- ix) Imagine hearing the Dharma.

“Such teachings are perfectly aligned with the twelve divisions of the scriptures. Upon exiting samadhi, remember and retain [the vision] without losing it.

(3) “*Such teachings are perfectly aligned...*” to “*...without losing it*” explains that practitioners should guard their minds and keep them in constant recollection, both in meditative and non-meditative states. This ensures that (i) the contemplating mind remains clear and pure, and (ii) all evil ceases to arise. The rationale: Internal alignment with Dharma joy leads to the external absence of obstructions from the Three Evils.

“Having visualized this phenomenon, it is called seeing the Land of Bliss of the Buddha of Infinite Life.

(4) “*Having visualized this phenomenon...*” specifies the benefits of successful contemplation.

“It is the Overall Contemplation, called the Twelfth Contemplation.

(5) “*It is*” onward is the conclusion.

“The Buddha of Infinite Life manifests countless emanations. Together with Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta, they constantly appear at places where people practice.”

(6) “*The Buddha of Infinite Life...*” to “*...they constantly appear at places where people practice*” reaffirms that practitioners of this contemplation receive the benefit of protection and remembrance of Amitabha Buddha and the other two of the Three Sacred Beings.

This is precisely:

*Sentient beings, their minds with focus held fast,
Aspire to behold the Western Pure Land vast.
Twofold Splendors — the land and beings there,
Ever vivid and clear, as if seen in direct stare.*

The foregoing, though consisting of six varied phrases, thoroughly explains the Overall Contemplation.

13. Miscellaneous Contemplation

First, introduction.

Next, explanation.

Finally, conclusion.

There are eleven elements.

The Buddha said to Ananda and Vaidehi: “Those who sincerely wish to be reborn in the Western Pure Land should

(1) “*The Buddha said to Ananda...*” is the Buddha’s open declaration, concluding with an exhortation to practice and leading into what follows.

“... first contemplate the image of Amitabha Buddha, appearing 16 feet tall above the waters of the ponds.

(2) “*First contemplate the image of Amitabha Buddha...*” urges contemplation of the Buddha’s image to represent the true Buddha, and visualization of the water to symbolize the ground. Thus, the Tathagata guides sentient beings to adopt more accessible visual objects so they can reorient the mind and enter contemplation.

Whether upon lotuses in pond waters, or within jeweled palaces and pavilions; whether beneath jeweled trees in jeweled forests, or inside jeweled platforms and halls; whether in the sky, or amid jeweled clouds and floral canopies — one should settle the mind and visualize emanated Buddhas appearing in locations such as the above, one by one. This method aims to match the objects of visualization with the capacity of practitioners, making contemplation easier to accomplish.

“As mentioned earlier, the physical size of that Buddha is boundless, beyond the comprehension of ordinary minds.

(3) “*As mentioned earlier...*” to “*...beyond the comprehension of ordinary minds*” clarifies that the vastness of the object and the limitations of ordinary minds make successful contemplation entirely unattainable. This aroused the Buddha’s compassion and pity, leading him to recommend contemplating smaller images.

**“However, through the power of his past vows,
those who recall and envision his form will
certainly succeed.**

(4) “*However, through the power...*” to “*...will certainly succeed*” reveals that ordinary minds are narrow and limited, whereas the measure of the sacred form is vast and boundless. This impedes focused visualization, and success may be exceedingly difficult.

This is precisely:

*Not by smallness is success ever denied,
Nor by greatness is his vast form made hide.
Through Amitabha’s vows, weighty and deep,
All who visualize are bound to reap.*

**“Simply contemplating the Buddha’s image brings
immeasurable blessings — how much more so
when contemplating his complete physical form
and marks!**

(5) “*Simply contemplating the Buddha’s image...*” to “*...complete physical form and marks*” draws a comparison to highlight superiority. If merely visualizing the Buddha’s image generates immeasurable merit, contemplating the true Buddha brings even greater benefits.

“Amitabha Buddha, with supernatural powers wielded at will, manifests freely throughout the ten directions. He may appear in a vast form, filling the sky, or in a smaller form, measuring sixteen or eight feet.

(6) “*Amitabha Buddha...*” to “*...measuring sixteen or eight feet*” explains that the Buddha’s images visualized by contemplative practitioners, whether large or small in size, are all true. There are three aspects:

i) With unhindered supernatural powers, Amitabha’s physical form pervades all things, manifesting freely as intended.

The term “*at will*” carries two meanings:

a) In accordance with the wishes of sentient beings — Amitabha responds to their thoughts and delivers them accordingly.

b) In accordance with Amitabha’s own intent — his Five Eyes pervasively perceive everything, and his six supernatural powers operate with complete freedom. Upon discerning those ready for liberation, his body and mind reach them simultaneously in an instant, with no distinction of earlier or later. Through his body, speech and mind, he guides and enlightens them, offering benefits suited to their diverse dispositions.

ii) Amitabha may manifest in either large or small forms.

iii) His physical forms, whether large or small, always radiate the color of genuine gold. This distinguishes correct contemplation from incorrect contemplation.

“All his manifestations shine in the hue of genuine gold, with halos, emanated Buddhas and jeweled lotuses as previously described.

(7) “*All his manifestations...*” ascertains that, although the manifested forms vary in size, their radiance and characteristics are identical to those of the true Buddha.

“Bodhisattvas Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta appear in identical forms everywhere.

(8) “*Bodhisattvas Avalokitesvara...*” affirms the same principle as the previous visualization: when the Buddha appears large, his attendants are large; when the Buddha appears small, his attendants are similarly small.

“Sentient beings distinguish between them simply by contemplating the marks on their diadems.

(9) “*Sentient beings distinguish...*” guides practitioners to contemplate the distinction between the two Bodhisattvas.

How are they distinguished? Avalokitesvara is crowned with an upright emanated Buddha, while atop Mahasthamaprapta rests a jeweled vase.

“These two Bodhisattvas assist Amitabha Buddha in guiding all beings.

(10) “*These two Bodhisattvas...*” reveals that Amitabha, Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta share a profound karmic bond, forged through past vows. Together, they pledged to renounce evil and attain enlightenment side by side, accompanying one another, like shadows and echoes, as they traverse realms to guide and benefit sentient beings.

“This is the Miscellaneous Contemplation, called the Thirteenth Contemplation.”

(11) “*This is*” onward is the conclusion.

The foregoing, though consisting of eleven varied phrases, thoroughly explains the Miscellaneous Contemplation.

From the Contemplation of the Sun through the Miscellaneous Contemplation, the text represents the World-Honored One’s comprehensive response to Vaidehi’s fourth request: “*Teach me the practices of contemplative reflection and correct meditative absorption.*”

In sum, goes the praise:

*First taught: the Sun Contemplation dispels the dark,
Visualize water turning to ice — it purifies the heart.
Below, golden pillars mirror and shine around,
Above, in layers, splendors rise and abound.*

*Jeweled clouds and canopies swirl in the sky,
Human and heavenly music entwines on high.
Jeweled trees hang pendants amid their fruits,
Streams of virtue flow, bathing flowers through.*

*Jeweled towers and halls each to each connect,
Light reflects light — no shadow to detect.
Three lotuses stand apart, outshining all seats,
Four banners uphold pearly netted sheets.*

*Ignorant minds stray, yet to awaken aware,
Focus and observe the image seated there.
Once the mind opens, the sight of true Buddha found,
His radiance and marks beyond all measure abound.*

*Avalokitesvara, savior for the Dharma sphere,
Manifests unceasing in the Saha world here.
Strength Arrived, his mighty light shakes every land,
Shining by conditions, leading to Amitabha's hand.*

*Return! Return!
To the Land of Bliss, sublime home we yearn.
Envision rebirth there, in the lotus bound,
Behold the Buddha's splendors, hear the Dharma's sound.*

*Some beings' minds are blocked by deluded thought,
Failing to reach the highest true realm long sought.
Thus the Tathagata taught the gradual sight:
Gold forms, sixteen feet, in lotus ponds bright.*

*Though manifested forms vary, great or small,
They deliver as befits living beings all.
To Dharma friends who seek rebirth, I say:
Turn west, chant his name, let nothing sway.*

Moreover, in response to [Vaidehi's fourth] request earlier:

The Contemplation of the Sun through the Contemplation of the Lotus Throne fully elucidates the circumstantial reward.

The Contemplation of the Images through the Miscellaneous Contemplation thoroughly expounds the direct reward.

Though these Two Rewards differ, together they embody the teaching on meditative virtues.



FOURTH FASCICLE

Main Part of the *Contemplation Sutra*
— Meaning of the Non-Meditative
Virtues

Main Part of the *Contemplation Sutra* — Meaning of the Non-Meditative Virtues

From this point onward, the meaning of non-meditative virtues — the Three Tiers (grades) — will be explained.

This consists of two aspects:

1. The Three Meritorious Actions — the primary cause.

2. The Nine Levels of Rebirth — the primary practice.

The Three Meritorious Actions comprise the following:

First, Worldly Virtuous Roots. Without encountering the Buddha's teachings, practitioners voluntarily cultivate filial piety, benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and sincerity — these are Worldly Virtues.

Second, Virtues of Precepts. Precepts encompass those of humans, celestial beings, Sravakas and Bodhisattvas. Whether practitioners completely or partially receive the precepts, or completely or partially uphold them, as long as they dedicate the merit towards rebirth in the Pure Land, such rebirth will inevitably be attained.

Third, Virtues of Practices. Ordinary beings resolve to pursue the Mahayana path, cultivate practices themselves, and encourage those with affinities to abandon wrongdoing, nurture virtuous minds, and dedicate their merit towards rebirth in the Pure Land.

Among these Three Meritorious Actions, practitioners who cultivate:

- only Worldly Virtues,
- only Virtues of Precepts,
- only Virtues of Practices,
- the first two virtues (Worldly Virtues and Virtues of Precepts),
- the last two virtues (Virtues of Precepts and Virtues of Practices),
or
- all three types of virtues

... will invariably attain rebirth through merit dedication.

Those who do not practice any of the Three Meritorious Actions are transgressors of the Ten Evil Actions, holders of erroneous views, and *icchantikas*.

The Nine Levels of Rebirth will be explained in detail as the discussion reaches the corresponding text. This should be understood.

This concludes the brief explanation of the distinctions and meanings of the Three Meritorious Actions.

14. Contemplation of the Upper Tier

Regarding Virtues of Practices related to the Contemplation of the Upper Tier, a preliminary overview is provided before the textual interpretation, outlining eleven topics:

- I. General presentation of the open declaration.
- II. Identification of the stage [of those reborn].
- III. General reference to those with karmic affinity.
- IV. Recognition of the Three Minds as the primary cause.
- V. Identification of dispositions qualified [for the appropriate levels].
- VI. Different practices upheld.
- VII. Different timings of practice.
- VIII. Dedication of practice in aspiration to rebirth in Amitabha Buddha's Pure Land.
- IX. Differences in the welcome by sacred beings at life's end, and the varying time lengths of arrival in the Pure Land.
- X. Varying time lengths for the lotus to bloom after arrival.
- XI. Differences in the benefits received after the lotus blooms.

These eleven topics apply to all Nine Levels of Rebirth. Each level invariably encompasses these eleven topics, totaling [approximately] 100 in all.

Further, these eleven topics provide a general overview preceding the text on the upper grade, and they similarly serve as an overview before the discussions on each of the middle and lower grades.

In addition, when these topics are examined against the sutra's text, they may be complete in some levels and incomplete in others. While some are implicit and others explicit, all should inherently be present in every level based on their underlying rationale. Therefore, it is necessary to unfold and elucidate them fully, so as to facilitate practitioners' understanding and recognition.

The foregoing, though consisting of eleven varied topics, thoroughly outlines the three levels of the upper grade.

Next, the stage of rebirth in the upper level of the upper grade:

First, introduction.

Next, explanation.

Finally, conclusion.

There are twelve elements.

The Buddha said to Ananda and Vaidehi: “Those reborn [in the Pure Land] at the upper level of the upper grade are

(1) “*The Buddha said to Ananda...*” conveys two points:

i) The Buddha's open declaration.

ii) Identification of the stage, referring to ordinary beings who cultivate the superior virtues of the Mahayana path.

“... sentient beings who, aspiring to such rebirth, cultivate the Three States of Mind, through which they instantly secure their rebirth.

(3) “*Sentient beings who...*” to “*...they instantly secure their rebirth*” generally indicates this specific type of beings who attain rebirth in the Pure Land. There are four aspects:

- i) The text identifies those who can awaken faith [in the Pure Land teaching].
 - ii) They aspire to rebirth in the Pure Land.
 - iii) They cultivate the Three States of Mind (or Three Minds).
 - iv) They attain the benefit of assured rebirth.
-

“What are these three? They are the Sincere Mind, the Deep Mind and the Mind of Merit-Dedication and Aspiration. Those who fully possess the Three States of Mind will certainly be reborn in that land.

(4) “*What are these three...*” to “*...certainly be reborn in that land*” identifies the Three Minds as the primary cause of rebirth in the Pure Land. There are two elements:

- i) The World-Honored One revealed various benefits as befitting the differing dispositions of beings. However, his true intent is always subtle, difficult to fathom. Without the Buddha’s questioning and inquiring on his own, understanding his will would be impossible.

ii) The Tathagata himself answered his own question regarding the Three Minds.

a) The Sincere Mind stated in the sutra. “Sincere” encompasses both truthfulness and genuineness.

This aims to clarify that all sentient beings, in cultivating understanding and practice through physical, verbal and mental karma, must act from a truthful and genuine state of mind.

One must not outwardly appear virtuous and diligent while harboring deceit and falsehood within — consumed by greed, anger, deviance and hypocrisy; endlessly scheming and cunning; iniquitous by nature and resistant to goodness; venomous like snakes and scorpions. Otherwise, even if one begins practice through words, deeds and thoughts, such actions are but “toxic virtues,” also known as “deceptive and false deeds,” rather than genuine, truthful karma.

If practitioners attempt to settle their minds and begin practice in this manner, even with painstaking mental and physical effort — rushing and striving through all twelve periods day and night, driven by urgency as if their heads were aflame — such efforts are still labeled “toxic virtues.” Dedicating such toxic deeds towards rebirth in Amitabha Buddha’s Pure Land will never result in rebirth.

Why? Because when Amitabha Buddha practiced the Bodhisattva path in the causal ground, even for a single thought or a single instant, all that he cultivated through the three kinds of karma arose entirely from a truthful, genuine mind. Whatever he offered and pursued was likewise truthful and genuine.

Furthermore, truthfulness and genuineness comprise two aspects: being truthful and genuine in benefiting oneself, and being truthful and genuine in benefiting others.

Being truthful and genuine in benefiting oneself can be further divided into two scenarios:

First, within a truthful and genuine mind, one subdues and eliminates all evils, both one's own and others', and renounces this defiled realm. Whether walking, standing, sitting or lying down, one recalls and emulates all Bodhisattvas in subduing and eliminating evils, thinking: "I shall do likewise."

Second, within a truthful and genuine mind, one diligently cultivates virtues, both one's own and others', as well as the virtues of both ordinary beings and sages.

- Within a truthful and genuine mind, one generates verbal karma by praising Amitabha Buddha and his Two Rewards. Likewise, within a truthful and genuine mind, through verbal karma, one denounces and abhors the painful, adverse phenomena associated with the Two Rewards — both one's own and others' — within the Six Realms of the Three Domains. Additionally, one praises the virtuous deeds performed by all beings through their thoughts, words and deeds, while maintaining distance from non-virtuous karma and refraining from rejoicing in it.
- Within a truthful and genuine mind, one generates physical karma by joining hands in respectful prostration and offering the four kinds of tributes and more to Amitabha Buddha and his Two Rewards. Likewise, within a truthful and genuine mind, through

physical karma, one disdains and renounces the Two Rewards — both one's own and others' — within these samsaric Three Domains.

- Within a truthful and genuine mind, one generates mental karma by visualizing, reflecting on and recollecting Amitabha Buddha and his Two Rewards as if they were present before one's eyes. Likewise, within a truthful and genuine mind, through mental karma, one despises and abandons the Two Rewards — both one's own and others' — within these samsaric Three Domains.

Non-virtuous karma of body, speech and mind must be renounced within a truthful and genuine mind. Virtuous karma of body, speech and mind must be enacted within a truthful and genuine mind. Whether internal or external, apparent or concealed, all must be genuine and truthful. This is the Sincere Mind.

b) The Deep Mind — a mind with profound faith, also comprising two dimensions:

- First is the **resolute, profound faith that I am an iniquitous ordinary being bound to the endless cycle of birth and death. For countless *kalpas*, I have been ceaselessly submerged and transmigrating in samsara, with no hope of liberation or transcendence.**
- Second is the **resolute, profound faith that Amitabha Buddha's 48 Vows embrace and receive all sentient beings. Without doubt or hesitation, through reliance on the power of his vows, rebirth in the Pure Land is assured.**

Next is the resolute, profound faith in Shakyamuni Buddha's teaching in this *Contemplation Sutra* — on the Three Meritorious Actions, the Nine Levels of Rebirth, and the meditative and non-meditative virtues — as well as in his affirmation and praise of Amitabha Buddha's Two Rewards, which inspire admiration and aspiration.

Further is the resolute, profound faith in the *Amitabha Sutra*, wherein Buddhas of the ten directions, as numerous as grains of sand in the Ganges River, verify and exhort the assured rebirth of all sentient beings in the Pure Land.

With regard to “profound faith,” I respectfully wish that all practitioners wholeheartedly and exclusively trust in the Buddha's words. Disregarding even our own lives, we should resolutely follow this principle: Whatever the Buddha instructs us to renounce, we renounce; whatever he enjoins us to practice, we practice; and wherever he directs us to go, we go. This is true conformity to the Buddha's teachings, alignment with his intentions, compliance with his will, and thus the mark of true Buddhist disciples.

In addition, as long as practitioners deeply trust in this sutra and practice accordingly, they will surely not mislead sentient beings. Why? Because the Buddha fully embodies great compassion and speaks only words of truth.

Apart from the Buddhas, all beings have yet to accomplish their wisdom and practice, remaining in the stage of learning. This is because they have not fully eradicated the Two Obstacles — vexations and habitual tendencies — nor have they fulfilled their fruition and vows. Thus, if such beings, whether ordinary or sacred, attempt to explore or speculate on the underlying intentions behind the Buddhas' teachings, they cannot attain definitive understanding.

Even if they compose commentaries and expositions, they must still seek the Buddha's verification to establish certainty. If their words accord with the Buddha's intent, he affirms them, saying: "It is so, it is so." But if not, he declares: "What you have said is not so." Statements not approved by the Buddhas are deemed indeterminate (*avyākṛta*), lacking both benefit and value. Only those approved by the Buddhas conform to their true teachings.

All the Buddhas' words embody true teaching, true principle, true conduct, true understanding, true karma, and true wisdom. Whether extensive or concise, they require no validation whatsoever from Bodhisattvas, humans, devas or any others.

Whatever a Buddha speaks is the perfect, ultimate teaching, whereas the words of Bodhisattvas and others are merely provisional and non-definitive. This should be understood.

Therefore, at this time, I respectfully advise all practitioners who are karmically affiliated with rebirth [in the Pure Land] to place exclusive, profound faith in the Buddha's words and devote themselves wholeheartedly to practicing them. As for teachings from Bodhisattvas and others that do not align, we must not rely on them, lest we give rise to doubts and obstacles, fall into confusion and delusion, and ultimately forfeit the great benefit of rebirth [in the Pure Land].

Furthermore, a deep mind — meaning profound faith — is a resolutely established will to practice in full accord with the Buddha's teachings. It eliminates all doubts and misinterpretations permanently, without retrogressing, renouncing, wavering or faltering when confronted with alternative interpretations, variant practices, different traditions, divergent views, or attachments to conflicting theories.

Question: Ordinary beings are shallow in wisdom and deeply mired in delusions and obstructions. We may encounter others with differing interpretations and practices who extensively cite scriptures and treatises to challenge and criticize, asserting: “All ordinary beings burdened by negative karma and obstacles cannot be reborn in the Pure Land.” How should we counter such objections, accomplish faith, and advance resolutely without fear or retreat?

Answer: If someone extensively cites scriptures and treatises as proof to assert that rebirth is impossible, practitioners should respond: “Good sir, though you cite scriptures and treatises to support the claim that rebirth is unattainable, based on my understanding, I remain resolutely determined not to be overcome by your argument. Why is this so? It is not that I disbelieve those scriptures and treatises — I fully revere and trust them. However, when the Buddha expounded those teachings, the circumstances, timing, audience and intended benefits were different. Moreover, those scriptures were not spoken at the same time as the *Contemplation Sutra* or the *Amitabha Sutra*.

“The Buddha’s teachings are always adapted to the capacities of the audience, and their timing varies. Those scriptures provide general expositions on the interpretations and practices of humans, celestial beings and Bodhisattvas. In contrast, the *Contemplation Sutra* teaches both meditative and non-meditative virtues, specifically affirming rebirth in the Pure Land for Vaidehi and, after the Buddha’s Parinirvana, all ordinary beings in the Five Turbidities and Five Sufferings. For this reason, I now wholeheartedly rely on this teaching of the Buddha and practice it with unwavering resolve. Even if you and countless others — numbering up to 100 quadrillion — insist that rebirth is impossible, you only strengthen and perfect my faith in attaining it.”

Furthermore, practitioners may assert:

“Good sir, listen closely! I shall now further explain to you the characteristics of resolute faith. Even if Pre-Stage Bodhisattvas, Arhats and Pratyekabuddhas — whether one or many, even filling the ten directions — were all to cite scriptures and treatises as proof that rebirth in the Pure Land is impossible, I would still not give rise to even a single thought of doubt. On the contrary, their claims would only deepen and perfect my pure faith. Why is this so? Because the Buddha’s words are definitive, accomplished teachings of ultimate truth. They cannot be refuted or undermined by anything.

“Furthermore, practitioner, listen carefully! Suppose Bodhisattvas from the first to the tenth stages — whether one or many, even filling the ten directions — were to speak in unison and say: ‘Shakyamuni Buddha, in pointing to and praising Amitabha, denouncing the Three Domains and Six Realms, and encouraging sentient beings to single-mindedly recite Amitabha Buddha’s name and cultivate other virtues, thereby assuring rebirth in the Pure Land after this life’s end, was undoubtedly speaking falsehoods that cannot be trusted.’ Even upon hearing this, I would still not give rise to even a single thought of doubt. On the contrary, such words would only deepen and perfect my resolute, supreme faith.

“Why is this so? Because the Buddha’s words are true, definitive teachings of ultimate truth. Possessing genuine knowledge, genuine understanding, genuine vision and genuine realization, the Buddha speaks not from a mind of doubt. His words cannot be refuted or undermined by any Bodhisattva’s differing views or interpretations. As for genuine Bodhisattvas, they would never contradict the Buddha’s teachings.

“Moreover, setting the foregoing aside, practitioner, you should understand: Suppose emanated Buddhas and Reward Body Buddhas, whether one or many, even filling the ten directions, were all to radiate light and extend their tongues, covering all ten directions, each declaring: ‘What Shakyamuni has taught — praising and urging all ordinary beings to single-mindedly recite Amitabha Buddha’s name and cultivate other virtues with merit-dedication and aspiration, thereby attaining rebirth in the Pure Land — is false and absolutely impossible.’ Even if I were to hear such words spoken by these Buddhas, I would still never give rise to even a single thought of doubt or retreat, nor fear failing to attain rebirth in the Pure Land.

“Why is this so? Because one Buddha and all Buddhas are identical in knowledge, vision, understanding, practice, realization, attainment, stage of fruition, and great compassion, without the slightest difference. Therefore, what is established by one Buddha is equally established by all Buddhas. For example, previous Buddhas prescribed the eradication of killing and the other Ten Evil Actions, and established that complete abstinence from and non-engagement in these offenses constitute the Ten Good Actions and the Ten Virtuous Practices, which accord with the principles of the Six Paramitas. When a later Buddha appears in the world, how could he possibly abolish the Ten Good Actions and instead promote the Ten Evil Actions? Based on this reasoning, it is evident that the words and actions of all Buddhas are never contradictory or inconsistent.

“Whereas Shakyamuni Buddha exhorted all ordinary beings to dedicate their present lives to the sole practice of exclusive recitation and affirmed that they will assuredly be reborn in the Pure Land at life’s end, this equally signifies that all Buddhas of the ten directions offered the

same praise, exhortation and affirmation. Why is this so? Because of their Universal Great Compassion. Beings guided by one Buddha are guided by all Buddhas, and those guided by all Buddhas are guided by any one Buddha.

“As stated in the *Amitabha Sutra*, Shakyamuni Buddha extolled the myriad splendors of the Land of Bliss, further urged all ordinary beings to single-mindedly recite Amitabha Buddha’s name for one to seven days, and affirmed their assured rebirth in the Pure Land. The sutra later states that Buddhas in each of the ten direction, as numerous as grains of sand in the Ganges River, unanimously acclaimed Shakyamuni Buddha who, in an evil age rife with the Five Turbidities — an evil *kalpa*, evil world, evil beings, evil views, and evil afflictions — when wickedness, perversions and faithlessness prevail, pointed to and extolled Amitabha’s name, encouraged beings to recite it, and affirmed their assured rebirth in the Pure Land. This serves as evidence.

“Moreover, Buddhas of the ten directions, out of concern that sentient beings might not believe the words of Shakyamuni Buddha alone, with one mind and at the same time, each extended their tongues, covering the three-thousand-fold great chiliocosm, and proclaimed these words of truth:

All you sentient beings should have faith in what Shakyamuni Buddha has spoken, praised and affirmed: Regardless of the extent of their karmic offenses or merits, whether for a long or short time, all ordinary beings who dedicate their entire lifetime, or even as briefly as one to seven days, to single-minded and exclusive recitation of Amitabha’s name will assuredly attain rebirth in the Pure Land without the slightest doubt!

“Therefore, what is spoken by one Buddha is unanimously authenticated by all Buddhas.”

This is referred to as “establishing faith **in the context of persons.**”

The other is “establishing faith **in the context of practice.**” Practice is divided into two types: primary practices and miscellaneous practices.

- **Primary practices** refer to practices that exclusively follow the methods prescribed in the scriptures on rebirth in the Pure Land.

What are primary practices?

- Single-mindedly and exclusively read and chant this *Contemplation Sutra*, the *Amitabha Sutra*, and the *Infinite Life Sutra*.
- Single-mindedly and exclusively visualize, contemplate and recollect the splendors of the Two Rewards of the Pure Land.
- In acts of reverence, single-mindedly and exclusively prostrate before Amitabha Buddha.
- In verbal recitation, single-mindedly and exclusively invoke the name of Amitabha Buddha.
- In praising and making offerings, single-mindedly and exclusively praise and make offerings [to Amitabha Buddha].

These are the primary practices.

Moreover, these primary practices are further divided into two types:

i) Single-minded and exclusive recitation of Amitabha Buddha's name — whether walking, standing, sitting or lying down, for long or short periods — without abandoning it thought after thought. This is called the “karma of assurance” because it accords with Amitabha Buddha's vows.

ii) Acts of reverence, chanting and others are called “supporting karma.”

- **Miscellaneous practices** are all other virtuous practices apart from the above two primary practices — the karma of assurance and supporting karma.

By cultivating the two primary practices — both the karma of assurance and supporting karma — practitioners keep their minds intimately close [to Amitabha and the Pure Land] and maintain continuous recollection without interruption. This is called uninterrupted practice.

Engaging in the miscellaneous practices, however, causes one's thoughts to be frequently interrupted. Although rebirth in the Pure Land remains possible through dedication of merit, these practices are nonetheless distant and mixed.

This is the Deep Mind.

c) The Mind of Merit-Dedication and Aspiration. This refers to the dedication of the following virtuous roots accumulated in past and present lives:

- Worldly and extra-worldly virtuous roots cultivated through our body, speech and mind.
- Virtuous roots generated by rejoicing in all the worldly and extra-worldly merits cultivated by other ordinary and sacred beings through body, speech and mind.

Within a true and genuine mind of deep faith, we dedicate these virtuous roots — both our own and those of others — in aspiration to rebirth in the Pure Land. This is called the Mind of Merit-Dedication and Aspiration.

Moreover, those who dedicate merit in aspiration to rebirth must do so within a resolute, genuine mind, firmly envisioning that they have already attained rebirth.

This mind of deep faith is as firm as *vajra*, remaining unmoved and undisturbed by people of divergent views, different traditions, alternative interpretations, or variant practices. We abide in resolute single-mindedness, devoted to the right path and advancing directly. Upon hearing their words, we must not waver, lose courage, weaken our resolve, turn back, or stray from the path, lest we forfeit the great benefit of attaining rebirth.

Question: Some individuals, influenced by heterodox or mixed teachings, may uphold differing interpretations and practices. They might mislead or disturb us, or raise doubts and challenges, alleging that rebirth is impossible. They may say:

“You are sentient beings who, throughout countless *kalpas* and even in this very life, have committed various offenses through body,

speech and mind against all ordinary beings and sages. These include the Ten Evil Actions, the Five Gravest Transgressions, the Four Major Offenses, slandering the Dharma, the misdeeds of an *icchantika*, violating precepts and corrupting right views. Such negative karma has yet to be completely eradicated. Bound by this karma to the wretched realms of the Three Domains, how can you, by merely cultivating merit and reciting the Buddha's name within a single lifetime, be reborn into that realm of flawlessness and non-arising, and eternally realize the stage of non-retrogression?"

Answer: Buddhas impart teachings and practices that outnumber the dust and sand, adapting them to the diverse inclinations of beings based on their differences in natural endowments, acquired intelligence, inherent dispositions and causal conditions. Consider, for example, phenomena in the world that are visible to the human eye and therefore deemed trustworthy — such as light dispelling darkness, space containing material things, earth bearing and nourishing, water germinating and moistening, and fire maturing and destroying. All such phenomena are termed dharmas of relativity. If even visible things exhibit endless variations, how much more so with the unfathomable powers of the Buddha Dharma? How could there not be manifold benefits?

As one exits a gateway, one leaves behind a gateway of affliction; as one enters a gateway, one steps into a gateway of wisdom and liberation. Thus, by beginning practice in accordance with conditions, practitioners each seek liberation in their respective ways. Why do you obstruct and confuse me with practices that are neither essential nor karmically suited to me? The practices I cherish are precisely those aligned with my karmic conditions, which may not be what you pursue. Likewise, the practices you delight in accord with your own karmic conditions, which may not be

what I seek. Therefore, let each of us follow our respective inclinations in practice, and we will surely attain liberation quickly.

Practitioners should know this: If one seeks understanding, all teachings — from the stages of ordinary to sacred beings and even to Buddhahood — can be learned broadly without any restriction. However, if one seeks to cultivate practice, one must rely on methods that are karmically suitable for attaining the greatest benefit with the least effort.

In addition, to all aspirants for rebirth, I now offer a parable to help practitioners preserve their faith and guard against challenges from external heresies and divergent views.

What is this parable?

Consider a traveler setting out westward on a journey of hundreds of thousands of miles. Mid-way, there are two rivers — one of fire to the south and one of water to the north. Each river is a hundred paces wide, bottomless, and stretches endlessly to the north and south.

Right between the rivers lies a white path, only five to six inches wide, extending from the eastern shore to the western shore, also spanning a hundred paces. Waves from the water wash over the path, while flames from the fire scorch it. The water and fire intersect, raging without end.

The traveler reaches this open, desolate place, which is devoid of settlements, yet swarming with bands of robbers and fierce beasts. Seeing the person alone, they rush forward, intent on killing the traveler. Terrified of death, the person flees straight westward and suddenly comes upon these great rivers, thinking:

“These rivers stretch endlessly to the north and south, and in between lies a white path, extremely narrow. Though the two shores are close, how could I possibly cross? Today, I am doomed to die.”

As the person considers turning back, the robbers and beasts press in closer and closer. To escape north or south, the traveler would face onrushing swarms of fierce brutes and venomous creatures. Seeking a path westward, the person fears falling into the two rivers. An unspeakable terror permeates the moment.

The person then reflects: “Turning back, I die; staying here, I die; going forward, I die. Since death is unavoidable, I would rather follow this path and move forward. As the path exists, there must be a way to cross.”

While pondering this, the person suddenly hears a voice urging from the eastern shore: “Good man, simply make up your mind to follow this path, and you will surely escape death! If you stay put, you will certainly die.”

Meanwhile, a voice from the western shore calls out: **“Come straight forward with wholehearted resolve and right focus! I will protect you. Fear not at all the danger of falling into water or fire.”**

Hearing the sending-forth exhortation from this shore and the welcoming call from the other, the person steadies body and mind, resolving to advance directly along the path, without doubt, hesitation, or thought of retreat.

After one or two steps forward, the robbers on the eastern shore cry out: “Kind sir, turn back! This path is treacherous and impassable; you will surely die. We bear no ill will towards you.”

Though hearing their voices, the traveler does not look back but advances single-mindedly, remaining focused on the path. Before long, the person reaches the western shore, forever free from all dangers. There, the individual meets good friends and rejoices without end. This is the parable.

The meaning of the parable is as follows:

- Eastern shore — This Saha world, the burning house.
- Western shore — The treasured Land of Bliss.
- Bands of robbers, fierce beasts and deceptive intimates — Sentient beings' six sense faculties, six consciousnesses, six sense objects, Five Aggregates, and Four Elements.
- The open, desolate expanse, devoid of settlements — Frequent association with evil companions and a lack of genuine virtuous Dharma friends.
- The two rivers of water and fire — Sentient beings' desire and attachment are like water, their anger and hatred like fire.
- The middle white path, five to six inches wide — The pure aspiration to rebirth in the Land of Bliss that arises within sentient beings amid afflictions of greed and anger. Because greed and anger are intense, they are likened to water and fire, while the virtuous mind of aspiration, being faint and subtle, is likened to the narrow white path.
- Waves from the water persistently wash over the path — Desirous attachment continually arises, threatening to defile the virtuous mind.

- Flames from the fire constantly scorch the path — Anger and resentment burn away the Dharma-wealth of merit.
- The person walks straight along the path towards the west — Practitioners dedicate all practices and virtuous karma directly towards the Western Pure Land.
- Hearing a voice from the eastern shore urging the person to follow the path directly westward — Shakyamuni Buddha has entered Parinirvana, and later generations cannot see him, but his teachings endure as a guide. They are likened to a voice.
- After one or two steps forward, the robbers call on the person to turn back — Upholders of alternative understandings, deviant practices and heterodox views spread false opinions and interpretations, taking turns to mislead and confuse aspirants for rebirth. Additionally, practitioners themselves may commit offenses, regress, or abandon the path.
- A voice from the western shore calls out — The intention of Amitabha Buddha's vows.
- Reaching the western shore in a brief moment and joyfully meeting good friends — Sentient beings have long been submerged in samsara, endlessly transmigrating through countless *kalpas*, bound by delusion, perversion and self-entanglement, with no means of liberation. Yet, guided by Shakyamuni Buddha, who points to the West, and summoned by Amitabha Buddha through his great compassion, we now trust and follow the intentions of these two Honored Ones. Fearlessly disregarding the rivers of water and fire, we remain unwavering, thought after

thought. Relying on the path of Amitabha Buddha's vow-power, we shall attain rebirth in the Pure Land at life's end. There we will meet Amitabha and experience boundless joy.

Furthermore, all practitioners — whether walking, standing, sitting or lying down — should, in all their practices through body, speech and mind, at any time, day and night, constantly maintain this understanding and continually uphold this perception. This is the Mind of Merit-Dedication and Aspiration.

Additionally, “merit-dedication” refers as well to awakening great compassion after being reborn in the Pure Land and then returning to samsara to guide and transform sentient beings. This, too, is “merit-dedication.”

When the Three Minds are fully established, no practice fails to bear fruit. With aspiration and practice fulfilled, failure to attain rebirth in the Pure Land is utterly impossible.

Furthermore, these Three Minds also extend to encompass meditative virtues. This should be understood.

“There are also three kinds of beings who will attain rebirth.

(5) *“There are also three kinds of beings...”* identifies qualified dispositions — those capable of upholding this teaching and practicing in accordance with its guidance.

“What are these three?”

- 1. Those who are kindhearted, abstain from killing, and observe all precepts;**
 - 2. Those who read and chant the Mahayana scriptures that expound universal equality;**
 - 3. Those who practice the Six Invocations.**
-

(6) “*What are these three...*” to “*...the Six Invocations*” clarifies the specific practices upheld. There are three elements:

- a) “*Those who are kindhearted and abstain from killing.*”

The karma of killing manifests in various forms — verbal, physical and mental.

- Verbal killing refers to issuing commands or granting permission through words. It is termed killing by speech.
- Physical killing involves carrying out acts of killing with the body or directing such acts through gestures. It is termed killing by action.
- Mental killing consists of considering, scheming or planning acts of killing in one’s mind. It is termed killing by thought.

The karma of killing is not limited to any of the Four Modes of Birth; it invariably generates negative karma and obstructs rebirth in the Pure Land.

To extend a heart of kindness towards all living beings is to grant them life, peace and happiness. This also constitutes the foremost, supreme and most excellent precept. It corresponds to the 3rd and 4th phrases in the previous text on the first meritorious action, which says *“maintain kindheartedness, refrain from killing.”*

It encompasses two virtues — cessation and action:

- Refraining from killing by oneself is the “virtue of cessation.”
- Instructing others not to kill is the “virtue of action.”
- Initially stopping killing by both oneself and others is the “virtue of cessation.”
- Ultimately and permanently eradicating it is the “virtue of action.”

Though distinguished as cessation and upholding (action), these virtues together embody the practice of kindness towards those below.

“Observe all precepts” — Precepts, when applied to those of human, celestial, and Two-Vehicle capacities, are “lesser precepts.” However, when applied to those with the resolve and practices of the Greater Vehicle, they are called “Bodhisattva Precepts.”

When ranked according to practitioners’ levels, the precepts upheld by those in the three Upper-Tier levels are called “Bodhisattva Precepts.” This is precisely determined by the individuals’ levels, and their precepts naturally evolve [into Bodhisattva Precepts]. This corresponds to the 2nd meritorious action previously discussed — Virtues of Precepts.

b) *“Those who read and chant the Mahayana scriptures.”*

Sentient beings differ in their inherent dispositions and habitual tendencies, leading them to persist in diverse approaches to the Dharma. The practitioners mentioned in (a) above cherish cultivating kindheartedness and observing precepts as their valued pursuit, while those in this (b) regard reading and chanting Mahayana scriptures as their proper method.

Yet, precepts sustain all capacities throughout the Five Vehicles up to the Threefold Buddhas, whereas scriptures foster the cultivation of wisdom across the Three Sages, Ten Bodhisattva Stages and myriad practices. When comparing their merits and functions, these two approaches each demonstrate distinct effectiveness. This (b) corresponds to the 3rd phrase in the text on the 3rd meritorious action mentioned earlier: *“read and chant Mahayana scriptures.”*

c) *“Those who practice the Six Invocations.”*

The Six Invocations refer to invoking the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, as well as invoking precepts, giving and Devas. This corresponds to the meaning of Mahayana in the 3rd meritorious action mentioned earlier.

i) Invoking the Buddha — Exclusively invoking the merits of Amitabha Buddha’s verbal, physical and mental karma. The same applies to all Buddhas.

ii) Invoking the Dharma — Single-mindedly and exclusively invoking the Dharma realized by the Buddhas.

iii) Invoking the Sangha — Single-mindedly and exclusively invoking the retinues of Bodhisattva Sanghas.

iv) Invoking precepts — Invoking the precepts prescribed by all Buddhas.

v) Invoking giving — Invoking past Buddhas and present Bodhisattvas who are capable of accomplishing what is difficult to achieve and giving what is difficult to relinquish, including internal, external, and internal-external renunciations. These Bodhisattvas seek to pursue the Dharma, sparing neither their lives nor their wealth. Having invoked and recognized these qualities, practitioners must constantly revere and emulate the ancient and modern sages and saints, upholding the spirit of giving their body and life.

vi) Invoking Devas — Invoking the Bodhisattvas of the Tenth Stage in their final lifetime. They have accomplished all arduous practices, completed the [prescribed] three *asamkhyeya-kalpas*, perfected all virtues, and attained the stage of Crown-Anointing Consecration.

Having invoked these, practitioners should reflect:

“Since time immemorial, they and I simultaneously vowed to sever evil and pursue the Bodhisattva path. They have spared neither body nor life, practicing the Way and advancing towards higher attainments. Having perfected all causal practices and ripened their fruition, they have realized sacred status. Their numbers exceed the dust particles of the earth. Yet I, still an ordinary being, have wandered aimlessly until this day. My afflictions and karmic obstacles have only multiplied, while my merit and wisdom remain faint and dim — like gazing into a clear mirror while shrouded in heavy darkness. Pondering this, I cannot help but feel profound fear, sorrow and lamentation.”

“In addition, they dedicate their merit and aspire to rebirth in that land.

(7) “*In addition, they dedicate their merit and aspire to rebirth...*” indicates that all the foregoing practitioners dedicate the virtuous karma of their aforementioned practices toward their aspired goal (rebirth in the Pure Land).

“Those who maintain such merit and virtue for one to seven days will be reborn in the Pure Land.

(8) “*Those who maintain such merit and virtue...*” clarifies the specific timing of practice.

Whether (i) for a lifetime down to a single day, a set period or a single thought, or (ii) for one thought, ten thoughts, a set time, a day up to an entire lifetime, the essence remains the same: Once the aspiration is aroused, one vows never to retrogress in this life, solely upholding rebirth in the Pure Land as the goal.

Furthermore, the phrase “*those who maintain such merit and virtue*” includes practitioners who uphold the foregoing practices a) and b), b) and c), or all three. Those who lack all three, however, are likened to beasts clad in human skin and cannot truly be regarded as human beings.

Whether or not one upholds all three in full, rebirth in the Pure Land can invariably be attained through the dedication of merit. This must be understood.

“Through their diligent and vigorous practice, when they are about to be reborn in that land, Amitabha Tathagata appears, accompanied by Avalokitesvara, Mahasthamaprapta, countless emanated Buddhas, a multitude of hundreds of thousands of *bhikkus* and *sravakas*, innumerable celestial beings and seven-jeweled palaces. Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara holds a *vajra* pedestal and, together with Bodhisattva Mahasthamaprapta, approaches the practitioners.

“Amitabha Buddha radiates great light, illuminating their bodies and, together with the Bodhisattvas, extends his hands in welcome. Avalokitesvara, Mahasthamaprapta and countless other Bodhisattvas praise the practitioners and encourage their resolve to advance. Seeing this, the practitioners rejoice with excitement and find themselves seated on the *vajra* throne. Following behind the Buddha, they are reborn in that land as quickly as a finger snap.

(9) “*Through their diligent and vigorous practice...*” to “*...as quickly as a finger snap*” describes the distinctive welcomes by sacred beings at life’s end and the length of time it takes to arrive in the Pure Land. There are eleven aspects:

i) The destination of rebirth is identified.

ii) The practices are reiterated, emphasizing the practitioners' resoluteness and diligence, and comparing the strength of their virtues [to those of other levels].

iii) Amitabha Buddha, the Lord of Deliverance, personally appears to receive the practitioners.

iv) In addition to Avalokitesvara, countless sacred beings join the Buddha in welcoming the practitioners.

v) Jeweled palaces follow the assemblies.

vi) Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta are again cited, jointly holding a *vajra* pedestal as they approach the practitioners.

vii) Amitabha Buddha emits radiant light, illuminating the practitioners' bodies.

viii) As the Buddha's light envelops them, he and emanated Buddhas simultaneously extend their hands in welcome.

ix) Once the practitioners are received and ascend to the throne, Avalokitesvara and others unanimously praise and encourage their resolve.

x) The practitioners perceive themselves seated upon the *vajra* throne, following the Buddha.

xi) The time length of their arrival in the Pure Land is specified.

“After being reborn in that land,

(10) “*After being reborn...*” explains that the *vajra* throne reaches the Pure Land, and there is no obstacle of the lotus remaining closed.

“... they see the Buddha’s form body complete with all the marks, and the perfected forms of Bodhisattvas likewise. The brilliant jeweled forests expound the wondrous Dharma. Upon hearing it, they immediately attain the Endurance for the Non-Arising of Dharmas. In an instant, they visit and make offerings to all Buddhas throughout the ten directions and, in the presence of each Buddha, receive predictions of Buddhahood in succession. Returning to the Pure Land, they attain countless hundreds of thousands of *dharani* gates.

(11) “*They see the Buddha’s form body...*” to “*...dharani gates*” describes the specific benefits received after the arrival of the *vajra* throne. There are three elements:

i) Upon first hearing the wondrous Dharma, they immediately attain the Endurance for the Non-Arising of Dharmas.

ii) In an instant, they visit and make offerings to all Buddhas and receive predictions of Buddhahood from the Buddhas in succession.

iii) In their own land and other realms, they further attain the twofold benefits of hearing and retention (*dharani*).

“Such is a person reborn at the upper level of the upper grade.

(12) “*Such is a person*” onward is the conclusion.

The foregoing, though consisting of twelve varied phrases, thoroughly explains rebirth in the upper level of the upper grade.

Next, the stage of rebirth in the middle level of the upper grade:

First, introduction.

Next, explanation.

Finally, conclusion.

There are eight aspects.

“Those reborn in the middle level of the upper grade are sentient beings who,

(1) “*Those reborn in the middle level of the upper grade...*” generally identifies their stage, referring to ordinary beings who cultivate the secondary virtues of the Mahayana path.

“... without needing to memorize or chant the Mahayana scriptures, properly understand the meaning and intent of the teachings. They remain unperturbed when encountering the tenets of the supreme truth, have deep faith in cause and effect, and refrain from slandering the Mahayana. They

dedicate these merits in aspiration to rebirth in the Land of Bliss.

(2) “*Without needing to memorize or chant...*” to “*...in aspiration to rebirth in the Land of Bliss*” corresponds to Topics VI, VII and VIII, leading up to the dedication of practices firmly towards the Western Pure Land. There are four elements:

i) The practices upheld are not fixed; practitioners may chant the scriptures or not.

ii) They properly understand the Mahayana principle of emptiness. They may hear that all phenomena are ultimately empty, that birth-and-death (samsara) and the unconditioned state (nirvana) are likewise empty, that both ordinary and sacred beings, as well as wisdom and ignorance, are empty, and that the worldly path of the Six Realms and the extra-worldly path of the Three Sages and Ten Bodhisattva Stages are ultimately non-dual in essence. Upon hearing such teachings, their minds remain calm and free from doubt or hesitation.

iii) They have deep faith in the causes and effects of both worldly and extra-worldly suffering and joy, without harboring doubt or slander regarding these causes and effects, as well as the principles behind them. If doubt or slander arises, no meritorious action can be established, and even worldly rewards become unattainable — let alone rebirth in the Pure Land. This corresponds to the 2nd and 3rd phrases in the text on the 3rd meritorious action.

iv) They dedicate the aforementioned practices towards their intended destination.

“As these practitioners approach death, Amitabha Buddha, surrounded by Avalokitesvara, Mahasthamaprapta and a retinue of countless sacred beings holding a purple-gold pedestal, appears before them, offering praise: ‘Child of the Dharma, you have practiced the Mahayana and understand the supreme truth, so I have come to welcome you today.’

(3) “*As these practitioners approach death...*” to “*...welcome you today*” indicates that Amitabha Buddha and the sacred assembly arrive with a pedestal to receive the practitioners. There are five aspects:

- i) The practitioners are approaching the end of their lives.
 - ii) Amitabha Buddha and the sacred assembly arrive naturally.
 - iii) Attendants present the pedestal before the practitioners.
 - iv) The Buddha and the sacred assembly praise the practitioners in unison, recounting the virtues they have cultivated in their lives.
 - v) Fearing that the practitioners may harbor doubts, the Buddha reassures them, saying: “*I have come to welcome you today.*”
-

“Together with 1,000 emanated Buddhas, they extend their hands in unison. The practitioners find themselves seated on the purple-gold pedestal. With hands joined in praise of the Buddhas, they

are instantly reborn in the Pure Land within a seven-jeweled pond.

(4) “*Together with 1,000 emanated Buddhas...*” to “*...within a seven-jeweled pond*” corresponds to Topic IX and depicts the sacred assembly extending their hands in welcome, as well as the length of time taken to arrive in the Pure Land. There five elements:

i) Amitabha and 1,000 emanated Buddhas simultaneously extend their hands.

ii) As soon as the practitioners take their hands, they find themselves seated upon the purple-gold pedestal.

iii) Realizing they are seated on the pedestal, they join their palms in reverence and praise Amitabha and the assembly.

iv) The time length of arrival is specified.

v) Upon arrival, they abide within the jeweled pond.

“The purple-gold pedestal, resembling a great jeweled lotus, opens after one night. The practitioners’ bodies shine with a purple-golden color. Seven-jeweled lotuses bloom beneath their feet.

(5) “*The purple-gold pedestal...*” corresponds to Topic X and indicates the distinct time length for the lotus to bloom after arrival. Those in the upper level of the upper grade receive a *vajra* pedestal on

account of their superior practice. By contrast, those in this middle level of the upper grade, due to weaker practices, are granted a purple-gold pedestal and are reborn in the jeweled pond, where their lotus opens by the next morning.

“Amitabha Buddha and the Bodhisattvas simultaneously emit light that illuminates the practitioners’ bodies, instantly opening their eyes to clear vision. Due to past practices, they hear all sounds expounding the most profound supreme truth. Descending from the purple-gold pedestal, they bow to the Buddha with joined palms and offer praise to the World-Honored One. After seven days, they immediately attain Non-Retrogression on the path towards *Anuttara-samyak-sambodhi* (supreme, perfect enlightenment).”

(6) “*Amitabha Buddha and the Bodhisattvas simultaneously emit light...*” to “*...Anuttara-samyak-sambodhi (supreme, perfect enlightenment)*” corresponds to Topic XI and describes the specific benefits received after the lotus blooms. They are fivefold:

- i) The Buddha’s light illuminates the practitioners’ bodies.
- ii) Once illuminated, their eyes immediately open with clear vision.
- iii) The teachings they practiced in the human world are now proclaimed through all the sounds in the Pure Land, allowing them to hear the same teachings once more.

iv) With their eyes opened, upon hearing the Dharma, they descend from the purple-gold pedestal, personally approach Amitabha Buddha, and sing praises of his virtues.

v) After seven days, they attain the Endurance for the Non-Arising of Dharmas.

The term “seven days” likely refers to seven days in this world, not in the Pure Land. A span of seven days here is merely a fleeting instant, the moment of a single thought, in that realm. This should be understood.

“From that very moment, they are able to fly and travel throughout the ten directions, visiting and making offerings to all Buddhas, and practicing various samadhis under their guidance. After a small *kalpa*, they attain the Endurance for the Non-Arising of Dharmas and receive predictions of Buddhahood in the presence of the Buddhas.

(7) *“From that very moment, they are able to fly and travel throughout the ten directions...”* to *“...in the presence of the Buddhas”* describes the benefits attained in other lands. They are fivefold:

i) They reach the ten directions.

ii) They visit and make offerings to each Buddha.

iii) They practice various samadhis.

iv) Over time, they attain the Endurance for the Non-Arising of Dharmas.

v) They receive predictions of Buddhahood in the presence of each Buddha.

“Such is a person reborn in the middle level of the upper grade.

(8) “*Such is a person*” onward is the conclusion.

The foregoing, though consisting of eight varied phrases, thoroughly explains rebirth in the middle level of the upper grade.

Next, the stage of rebirth in the lower level of the upper grade:

First, introduction.

Next, explanation.

Finally, conclusion.

There are eight aspects.

“Those reborn in the lower level of the upper grade are sentient beings who,

(1) “*Those reborn in the lower level of the upper grade*” generally pinpoints their stage, referring to ordinary beings who cultivate subordinate virtues of the Mahayana path.

“... also having faith in cause and effect, refrain from slandering the Mahayana and simply develop the resolve for supreme enlightenment.

(2) “*Also having faith in cause and effect...*” to “*...develop the resolve for supreme enlightenment*” corresponds to Topic VI and indicates the specific practices upheld. These are threefold:

i) Their faith in cause and effect is uncertain — at times believing, at times doubting — hence the term “also.” Some of them may hold deep faith comparable to that described in the previous level.

Furthermore, although they have faith, its lack of depth often leads to frequent regressions of virtuous resolutions and repeated indulgence in unwholesome deeds. This arises from their absence of profound conviction in the causes and effects of suffering and happiness.

Those who deeply believe in the suffering nature of samsara never repeat their offenses. Likewise, those who firmly believe in the unconditioned bliss of the Pure Land, once their virtuous resolve has awakened, never regress or forsake it.

ii) Though faith may waver, one must never give rise to doubt or slander towards the Mahayana teachings. Should one fall into doubt or slander, even if surrounded by a thousand Buddhas, that person would not attain deliverance.

iii) The aforementioned virtues may even appear to be devoid of merit. Rather, they involve giving rise to a single thought of aversion to suffering and the willingness to (a) be reborn in the realms of the Buddhas, (b) swiftly fulfill the great compassionate vows and practices of Bodhisattvas therein, and (c) reenter samsara to guide and deliver sentient beings universally. Hence, this is called “awakening the Bodhi-mind.” This principle has already been clarified in the explanation of the 3rd meritorious action.

“They dedicate these merits in aspiration to be reborn in the Land of Bliss.

(3) “*They dedicate these merits...*” corresponds to Topic VIII and specifies the dedication of the foregoing primary practices towards the aspired-to goal (rebirth in the Pure Land).

“As these practitioners approach death, Amitabha Buddha, accompanied by Avalokitesvara, Mahasthamaprapta and other Bodhisattvas holding a golden lotus flower, manifests 500 emanated Buddhas, all appearing to welcome them. Together, the 500 emanated Buddhas extend their hands and offer praise: ‘Child of the Dharma, you have attained purity and resolved to achieve supreme enlightenment. We are here to welcome you.’

“Upon seeing this, the practitioners immediately find themselves seated within the golden lotus. Once seated, the lotus closes and follows Amitabha Buddha, and the practitioners are immediately reborn in the seven-jeweled pond.

(4) “*As these practitioners approach death...*” to “*... in the seven-jeweled pond*” corresponds to Topic IX and depicts the sacred assembly manifesting in welcome and the time length of arrival in the Pure Land. There are nine aspects:

i) The practitioners are approaching the end of their lives.

ii) Amitabha Buddha and the sacred assembly appear, bearing a golden lotus.

iii) Emanated Buddhas extend their hands simultaneously.

iv) The sacred assembly praises the practitioners in unison.

v) The practitioners' negative karma is eradicated, and they are told: "*You have attained purity.*" What they have cultivated in their lives is then recounted — "*You have resolved to achieve supreme enlightenment.*"

vi) Despite witnessing the sacred presence, the practitioners still harbor doubts and fear about failing to attain rebirth. To reassure them, the sacred assembly proclaims in unison: "*We are here to welcome you.*"

vii) Having been assured, the practitioners find themselves seated in the golden lotus, which gently closes.

viii) Following Amitabha Buddha, they instantly attain rebirth in the Pure Land.

ix) Upon arrival, they are reborn in the seven-jeweled pond there.

"After one day and night, the lotus blooms.

(5) "*After one day and night...*" corresponds to Topic X and indicates the specific time length for the lotus to bloom after arrival.

“Within seven days, they are able to see the Buddha, though their minds are not yet clear regarding his myriad marks and physical characteristics. After twenty-one days, the vision becomes perfectly clear. They hear all sounds expounding the wondrous Dharma and

(6) “*Within seven days...*” to “*...expounding the wondrous Dharma*” corresponds to Topic XI and describes the specific benefits received after the lotus blooms.

“... travel through the ten directions, making offerings to Buddhas and receiving the most profound teachings from them. After three small *kalpas*, they master the Illumination Gateways of the Hundred Dharmas and abide in the Stage of Joy.

(7) “*Travel through the ten directions...*” to “*...abide in the Stage of Joy*” describes the benefits attained in other lands, also called subsequent benefits.

“Such is a person reborn in the lower level of the upper grade.

“This is the Visualization of Upper-Tier Rebirth, called the Fourteenth Contemplation.”

(8) “*Such is a person*” onward is the conclusion.

The foregoing, though consisting of eight varied phrases, thoroughly explains rebirth in the lower level of the upper grade.

Thus is praised:

*Upper-Tier aspirants, supreme in roots and deeds,
Seek rebirth in the Pure Land, severing anger and greed.
Their varied practices form three levels defined,
Sustaining the Five Paths, with Three Minds aligned.*

*Recite in full devotion for one to seven days,
At life's end, aboard the lotus, cast the Six Dusts away.
Rejoice! This rare chance is now attained,
The unconditioned Dharma-body, forever gained.*

The foregoing, though consisting of three different levels, collectively elucidates the teaching on the Upper Tier.

15. Contemplation of the Middle Tier

Regarding the Virtues of Practices related to the Contemplation of the Middle Tier, a preliminary overview is given before the textual interpretation. It outlines eleven topics:

- I. General presentation of the open declaration.
- II. Identification of the stage [of those reborn].
- III. General reference to those with karmic affinity.

IV. Recognition of the Three Minds as the primary cause.

V. Identification of dispositions qualified [for the appropriate levels].

VI. Different practices upheld.

VII. Different timings of practice.

VIII. Dedication of practice in aspiration to rebirth in Amitabha Buddha's Pure Land.

IX. Differences in the sacred beings' welcome at life's end and the varying time lengths of arrival in the Pure Land.

X. Varying time lengths for the lotus to bloom after arrival.

XI. Differences in the benefits received after the lotus blooms.

The foregoing, though consisting of eleven varied topics, thoroughly outlines the three levels of the Middle Tier.

Next, the stage of rebirth in the upper level of the middle grade:

First, introduction.

Next, explanation.

Finally, conclusion.

There are eight elements.

The Buddha said to Ananda and Vaidehi:

(1) "*The Buddha said to Ananda...*" generally conveys the open

declaration from the Buddha.

“Those reborn in the upper level of the middle grade are

(2) “*Those reborn in the upper level of the middle grade*” identifies their stage, referring to ordinary beings of the Lesser Vehicle disposition who possess superior virtues.

“... sentient beings who receive and keep the Five Precepts, observe the Eight Precepts and uphold various other Buddhist disciplines. They do not commit the Five Gravest Transgressions and remain free of various faults.

(3) “*Sentient beings who receive...*” to “*...free of various faults*” corresponds to Topics V and VI and clarifies the specific practices upheld. There are four aspects:

- i) Practitioners qualified for this level are identified.
- ii) They receive and observe the precepts and abstinence of the Lesser Vehicle.
- iii) The lesser precepts are limited in strength and cannot eradicate the negative karma of the Five Gravest Transgressions.
- iv) Though they uphold the lesser precepts, violations must not occur. If any transgressions remain, practitioners must continually repent and rectify themselves until purity is fully assured. This corresponds

to the 2nd meritorious action mentioned earlier — Virtues of Precepts. Furthermore, the duration of precept practice may vary: lifelong, a year, a month, a day, a night, or a set period. The general principle, however, is that observance must be maintained until the end of life, without violations.

“They dedicate these virtuous roots in aspiration to rebirth in the Western Land of Bliss.

(4) “*They dedicate these virtuous roots...*” corresponds to Topic VIII and specifies the dedication of practices towards their aspired goal (rebirth in the Pure Land).

“As they approach death, Amitabha Buddha, surrounded by a retinue of *bhikkus*, radiates golden light and appears before them. The Buddha expounds on suffering, emptiness, impermanence and egolessness, and praises their renunciation of worldly life and detachment from myriad forms of suffering.

“Upon seeing this, the practitioners rejoice greatly. Perceiving themselves seated on the lotus pedestal, they prostrate with joined palms in homage to Amitabha Buddha and, before lifting their heads, are instantly reborn in the Land of Bliss.

(5) “*As they approach death...*” to “*...reborn in the Land of Bliss*” corresponds to Topic IX and describes the distinctive welcome by the sacred beings at life’s end and the time length of arrival in the Pure Land. There are six elements:

i) The practitioners are approaching the end of their lives.

ii) Amitabha Buddha appears with an assembly of *bhikkus*, but no Bodhisattvas, are present. This reflects that the Lesser Vehicle disposition evokes the manifestation of an assembly with lesser virtuous roots.

iii) The Buddha emits golden light, illuminating the practitioners’ bodies.

iv) The Buddha preaches the Dharma and praises the practitioners’ renunciation of worldly life and their freedom from numerous sufferings and worldly entanglements, including household affairs, royal service, military expeditions, and distant postings. Having left home and relying on the Fourfold Assembly, they are free from all worldly concerns, dwelling in ease and tranquility, unimpeded in movement and rest. Thus, they are able to cultivate the karma of enlightenment. For this reason, the Buddha praises their “*detachment from myriad forms of suffering.*”

v) Upon seeing and hearing the Buddha, the practitioners experience boundless joy and immediately find themselves seated on the lotus pedestal. Reverentially, they bow their heads to the Buddha.

vi) The practitioners bow in this world, and upon raising their heads, they are already in the Pure Land.

“The lotus then blooms, and

(6) “*The lotus then blooms...*” corresponds to Topic X and indicates the specific time length for the lotus to bloom after arrival.

“... as it opens, they hear sounds extolling the Four Noble Truths and immediately attain Arhat status, possessing the Three Insights, Six Supernatural Powers and Eight Liberations.

(7) “*As it opens...*” to “*...Eight Liberations*” corresponds to Topic XI and describes the benefits received after the lotus blooms. They are threefold:

i) The jeweled lotus blooms due to the practitioners’ diligence and vigor in observing precepts.

ii) Dharma sounds extol the virtues of the Four Noble Truths.

iii) Upon hearing the teaching on the Four Noble Truths there, the practitioners immediately attain Arhathood.

“*Arhat*” means “no birth” and also “no attachment” — their karmic causes are eradicated, hence “no birth,” and their karmic retributions are extinguished, thus “no attachment.”

“Three Insights” refer to the Insight into Previous Lives, the Divine Eye Insight, and the Insight into the Extinction of Defilements.

“Eight Liberations” consist of:

i) First liberation — Contemplating external forms while harboring internal attachment to form.

ii) Second liberation — Contemplating external forms while being free of internal attachment to form.

iii) Third liberation — Features of impurity.

iv) - vii) The four formless absorptions.

viii) Extinction of sensation and perception.

Together, these constitute the Eight Liberations.

“Such is a person reborn in the upper level of the middle grade.

(8) *“Such is a person”* onward is the conclusion.

The foregoing, though consisting of eight varied phrases, thoroughly explains rebirth in the upper level of the middle grade.

Next, the stage of rebirth in the middle level of the middle grade:

First, introduction.

Next, explanation.

Finally, conclusion.

There are seven elements.

“Those reborn in the middle level of the middle grade

(1) “*Those reborn in the middle level of the middle grade*” generally designates the name of the relevant practice and identifies the practitioners’ stage, referring to ordinary beings of the Lesser Vehicle disposition with subordinate virtues.

“... are sentient beings who, for one day and night, observe the Eight Precepts, the Novice Precepts or the Full Precepts, without defect in their comportment.

(2) “*Are sentient beings...*” to “*...without defect in their comportment*” corresponds to Topics V, VI and VII and clarifies the specific disposition, timing and practices upheld. There are three aspects:

- i) They receive and observe the Eight Precepts.
- ii) They receive and observe the Novice Precepts.
- iii) They receive and observe the Full Precepts.

All these three grades of precepts require pure and unbroken observance for one day and one night. Even the slightest offense is deemed a grave transgression, and one’s physical, verbal and mental conduct must remain faultless. This corresponds to the 2nd meritorious action mentioned above, which we should understand.

“They dedicate these merits in aspiration to rebirth in the Western Land of Bliss.

(3) *“They dedicate these merits...”* explains their dedication of practices towards their aspired-to goal (rebirth in the Pure Land).

“As these practitioners, having upheld the precepts and immersed themselves in their fragrance, approach death, they see Amitabha Buddha and a retinue emitting golden light, holding a seven-jeweled lotus, appear before them. They then hear a voice of praise in the sky: ‘Good man, because you are virtuous and have followed the teachings of the Buddhas of the three time frames, I have come to welcome you.’

“The practitioners perceive themselves seated upon the lotus, which immediately closes, and are reborn in the Western Land of Bliss within a jeweled pond.

(4) *“As these practitioners...”* to *“...within a jeweled pond”* corresponds to Topic IX and depicts the sacred beings welcoming practitioners at their life’s end and the time length of arrival in the Pure Land. There are eight elements:

- i) The practitioners are approaching the end of their lives.
- ii) Amitabha Buddha arrives with an assembly of *bhikkus*.

iii) The Buddha emits golden light, illuminating the practitioners' bodies.

iv) The *bhikkus* appear, bearing a lotus flower.

v) The practitioners hear a voice of praise from the sky

vi) The Buddha gives praise: "You have deep faith in the Buddha's words and have followed them without doubt. Thus, I have come to welcome you."

vii) Upon receiving the Buddha's praise, the practitioners find themselves seated upon the lotus throne, which immediately closes.

viii) Once the lotus closes, they are reborn in the Land of Bliss within the jeweled pond.

"After seven days, the lotus blooms, upon which their eyes open.

(5) "*After seven days...*" corresponds to Topic X and indicates the length of time required for the lotus to bloom after arrival.

"Joining palms in reverence, they offer praises to the World-Honored One. Upon hearing the Dharma, they rejoice, attain the stage of Srotapanna (Stream-Enterer) and after half a *kalpa*, reach Arhathood.

(6) “*Joining palms in reverence...*” to “*...reach Arhathood*” corresponds to Topic XI and describes the specific benefits received after the lotus blooms. There are four:

- i) When the lotus blooms, they see the Buddha.
- ii) They join their palms in reverence and praise the Buddha.
- iii) They hear the Dharma and attain the 1st stage of Sravaka realization.
- iv) After half a *kalpa*, they finally achieve Arhathood.

“Such is a person reborn in the middle level of the middle grade.

(7) “*Such is a person*” onward is the conclusion.

The foregoing, though consisting of seven varied phrases, thoroughly explains rebirth in the middle level of the middle grade.

Next, the stage of rebirth in the lower level of the middle grade:

First, introduction.

Next, explanation.

Finally, conclusion.

There are seven aspects.

“Those reborn in the lower level of the middle grade are

(1) *“Those reborn in the lower level of the middle grade”* generally designates the name of the practice and identifies the practitioners’ stage, referring to ordinary beings with superior merit relating to Worldly Virtues.

“... good men and women who are filial to their parents and display worldly benevolence and kindness.

(2) *“Good men and women...”* to *“...display worldly benevolence and kindness”* corresponds to Topics V and VI, and clarifies the specific disposition and practices upheld. It has four elements:

- i) The qualified disposition is identified.
- ii) The persons exhibit filial devotion to their parents and respect for their family members, corresponding to the 1st and 2nd phrases in the text on the 1st meritorious action mentioned earlier.
- iii) They are naturally gentle and kind towards others, whether close or distant. Upon witnessing the suffering of beings, they respond with compassion and respect.
- iv) Individuals in this level have never encountered the Buddha’s teachings, nor do they know to seek them. They simply practice filial piety of their own accord. This should be understood.

“When approaching death, they encounter a Dharma friend who recounts in detail the blissful phenomena of Amitabha Buddha’s land and the 48 Vows of Bhikku Dharmakara.

(3) “*When approaching death...*” to “*...the 48 Vows of Bhikku Dharmakara*” corresponds to Topic VIII and clarifies that encountering the Buddha-Dharma occurs at the end of life, defining its timing.

“After hearing this, they pass away in due course and are immediately reborn in the Western Land of Bliss, as quickly as a strong man bends and stretches his arm.

(4) “*After hearing this...*” to “*...bends and stretches his arm*” corresponds to Topic IX and describes the benefit of attaining rebirth and the time length of arrival in the Pure Land.

“After seven days,

(5) “*After seven days*” corresponds to Topic X. Upon arrival, the lotus may either bloom or remain closed.

“... they meet Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta. Upon hearing the Dharma, they rejoice, attain the stage of Srotapanna and after one small *kalpa*, realize Arhathood.

(6) “*They meet Avalokitesvara...*” to “*...realize Arhathood*” corresponds to Topic XI and describes the specific benefits received after the lotus blooms. There are three:

- i) After a period of time, practitioners finally meet Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta.
- ii) Upon meeting the Two Sacred Beings, they hear the wondrous Dharma.
- iii) After a small *kalpa* they attain Arhathood.

“Such is a person reborn in the lower level of the middle grade.

(7) “*Such is a person*” onward is the conclusion.

The foregoing, though consisting of seven varied phrases, thoroughly explains rebirth in the lower level of the middle grade.

Goes the praise:

*Middle-tier aspirants, with medium roots and deeds,
Keep precepts for a day, on a golden lotus they are seated.
To those filial to parents, merit-transfer is taught,
And shown the cause of joy in the Pure Land they sought.*

*The Buddha appears in welcome, with Sravakas shown,
 Reborn in the Pure Land, beside Amitabha's throne.
 Enclosed in jeweled flowers, they abide seven days,
 Three levels' lotus blooms, yielding fruits of lesser ways.*

The foregoing, though consisting of three different levels, collectively elucidates the teaching on the Middle Tier.

16. Contemplation of the Lower Tier

Regarding the virtuous and evil types of conduct in the Contemplation of the Lower Tier, a preliminary overview is given before the textual interpretation, outlining eleven topics:

- I. General presentation of the open declaration.
- II. Identification of the stage [of those reborn].
- III. General reference to those with karmic affinity.
- IV. Recognition of the Three Minds as the primary cause.
- V. Identification of dispositions qualified [for the appropriate levels].
- VI. Different types of conduct upheld, both suffering and joyful.
- VII. Different timings of practice.
- VIII. Dedication of practice in aspiration to rebirth in Amitabha Buddha's Pure Land.

IX. Differences in the sacred beings' welcome at life's end and the varying time lengths of arrival in the Pure Land.

X. Varying time lengths for the lotus to bloom after arrival.

XI. Differences in the benefits received after the lotus blooms.

The foregoing, though consisting of eleven varied topics, thoroughly outlines the three levels of the Lower Tier.

Next, the stage of rebirth in the upper level of the lower grade:

First, introduction.

Next, explanation.

Finally, conclusion.

There are nine aspects.

The Buddha said to Ananda and Vaidehi:

(1) "*The Buddha said to Ananda...*" conveys the Buddha's open declaration.

"Those reborn in the higher level of the lower grade are

(2) "*Those reborn in the higher level of the lower grade*" identifies their stage, referring to ordinary beings who have committed relatively minor offenses, such as the Ten Evil Actions.

“... sentient beings who create various negative karma. Although they do not slander the Mahayana sutras, these ignorant beings lack a sense of shame or remorse for committing numerous evil deeds.

(3) “*Sentient beings who create...*” to “*...committing numerous evil deeds*” corresponds to Topic V, clarifies the specific disposition, and enumerates the features of severity in their evil deeds committed in this lifetime. There are five elements:

- i) Those with evil-doing dispositions are generally referenced.
 - ii) They create various negative karma.
 - iii) Though committing numerous offenses, they do not slander the Mahayana teachings.
 - iv) The text reiterates that these evildoers are excluded from the ranks of the wise.
 - v) These ignorant beings, despite committing many offenses, never develop a sense of shame.
-

“When approaching death, they encounter a Dharma friend who enumerates the titles of the twelve divisions of Mahayana sutras. By reason of hearing these titles, their extremely heavy negative karma accumulated over 1,000 *kalpas* is

eradicated. The Dharma friend then instructs them to join palms and recite ‘Namo Amitabha Buddha.’ Through reciting the Buddha’s name, their reincarnation-fated negative karma of 5 billion *kalpas* is eliminated.

(4) “*When approaching death...*” to “*...karma of 5 billion kalpas is eliminated*” explains that as death nears, the evildoers encounter virtuous conditions and hear the Dharma. There are six elements:

- i) These evildoers are approaching the end of their lives.
- ii) They unexpectedly encounter a Dharma friend who guides them towards rebirth in the Pure Land.
- iii) The Dharma friend extols various sutras.
- iv) Through the merit of hearing about these sutras, they eradicate the negative karma of a thousand *kalpas*.
- v) The Dharma friend further instructs them to recite Amitabha’s name.
- vi) Through recitation, they eliminate the negative karma of five million *kalpas*.

Question: Why does hearing about the twelve divisions of sutras eliminate only the negative karma of a thousand *kalpas*, whereas reciting the Buddha’s name just once eradicates that of five million *kalpas*? What is the underlying significance of this?

Answer: The wrongdoers are burdened by heavy karma and further oppressed by the agony of approaching death. Though the Dharma friend speaks about various sutras, their minds remain scattered and unsettled in receiving and absorbing the teaching. In this distracted state, the removal of negative karma is relatively limited. By contrast, the singular nature of the Buddha's name has the power to gather and focus a scattered mind. Through guidance in sustaining a correct state of mind and reciting the Buddha's name, the mind grows resolute, enabling the eradication of negative karma accumulated over many *kalpas*.

“At that moment, Amitabha Buddha sends an emanated Buddha, along with emanations of Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta, to appear before the practitioners, praising: ‘Good man, because you have recited Amitabha’s name, all your negative karma has been eradicated, and I am here to welcome you.’ After these words are spoken, the practitioners immediately perceive the light of the emanated Buddha filling the room. Upon seeing this, they rejoice and pass away. Ascending a jeweled lotus, they follow the emanated Buddha to be reborn in the Pure Land within a jeweled pond.

(5) “*At that moment, Amitabha Buddha...*” to “*...within a jeweled pond*” corresponds to Topic IX and illustrates the emanated sacred beings appearing in welcome at life's end and the time length of arrival in the Pure Land. There are six aspects:

i) When practitioners recite his name, Amitabha Buddha sends emanated assemblies to appear in response to their recitation.

ii) Once they manifest, the emanated assemblies join in praising the practitioners.

iii) Their praise speaks only of the merit of name-recitation. They declare: “We are here to welcome you,” without mentioning the hearing of the sutras. Thus, in accordance with the underlying intent of Amitabha’s Fundamental Vow, the sole exhortation is on name-recitation with a correct frame of mind. Rebirth in the Pure Land is a matter of urgency, distinct from scattered, miscellaneous practices. This emphasis on name-recitation is extensively extolled in this and other scriptures, underscoring its supreme benefit. This should be understood.

iv) Upon receiving the proclamation from the emanated assemblies, practitioners see light filling the entire room.

v) Bathed in this light, their lives come to an end.

vi) Riding a lotus flower, they follow the Buddha and are reborn in the jeweled pond.

“After forty-nine days, the lotus blooms.

(6) “*After forty-nine days...*” corresponds to Topic X and indicates the specific time length for the lotus to bloom after arrival.

“At that time, the greatly compassionate Bodhisattvas Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta appear before them, radiating great light, and expound the most profound teachings of the twelve divisions of the scriptures.

“Upon hearing these teachings, they develop faith and understanding and awaken the mind resolved on supreme enlightenment. After ten small *kalpas*, they master the Illumination Gateways of the Hundred Dharmas and enter the first Bodhisattva stage.

(7) “*At that time...*” to “*...enter the first Bodhisattva stage*” corresponds to Topic XI and describes the benefits received after the lotus blooms. There are five elements:

- i) Avalokitesvara and others first emit sublime radiance.
- ii) They appear beside the practitioners’ jeweled lotus.
- iii) They expound the teachings the practitioners heard before their rebirth.
- iv) Upon hearing, the practitioners comprehend the teachings and awaken the Bodhi-mind.
- v) After many *kalpas*, the practitioners attain the stage of the Hundred Dharmas.

“Such is a person reborn in the higher level of the lower grade.

(8) “*Such is a person*” onward is the conclusion.

“By hearing the names of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha — the names of the Three Gems — one attains rebirth (in the Pure Land).”

(9) “*By hearing the names of the Buddha, Dharma...*” reiterates the benefits for practitioners — not only can rebirth be attained through Buddha-recitation alone, but invoking the Dharma and Sangha also enables rebirth.

The foregoing, though consisting of nine varied phrases, thoroughly explains rebirth in the upper level of the lower grade.

Next, the stage of rebirth in the middle level of the lower grade:

First, introduction.

Next, explanation.

Finally, conclusion.

There are seven aspects.

The Buddha said to Ananda and Vaidehi:

(1) “*The Buddha said to Ananda...*” generally conveys the open declaration from the Buddha.

“Those reborn in the middle level of the lower grade are

(2) “*Those reborn in the middle level of the lower grade*” identifies their stage, referring to ordinary beings who have violated the precepts and committed moderate offenses.

“... sentient beings who violate the Five Precepts, Eight Precepts or Full Precepts. These ignorant beings steal the communal property of the Sangha, plunder the personal possessions of resident monastics, or teach the Dharma with impure motives without shame or remorse, defiling themselves with various evil karma. Because of their misdeeds, these offenders are destined to fall into hell.

(3) “*Sentient beings who...*” to “*...destined to fall into hell*” corresponds to Topics V and VI and indicates the specific disposition and the offenses committed. There are seven elements:

- i) Those with evil-doing dispositions are generally referenced.
- ii) They violate various precepts.
- iii) They steal property belonging to the monastic community.
- iv) They expound the Dharma to sustain a false livelihood.
- v) They are entirely devoid of a sense of shame.

vi) They commit numerous other offenses, with evil arising within and manifesting outwardly through deeds and speech. Lacking virtue themselves and scorned by others, they are described as *“defiling themselves with various evil karma.”*

vii) By the marks of these offenses, such beings are certainly bound for hell.

“As they approach death, all the flames of hell rise at the same time. Then they encounter a Dharma friend who, with great compassion, praises and expounds the ten powers and majestic virtues of Amitabha Buddha, extensively commends his radiant light and supernatural powers, and extols precepts, meditative concentration, wisdom, liberation, and knowledge and vision of liberation (the five attributes of the Dharma Body).

“Hearing this, the beings’ reincarnation-fated negative karma of 8 billion *kalpas* is eliminated. The fierce fires of hell transform into cool breezes that carry numerous heavenly flowers. On each flower are emanated Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, arriving to welcome the dying. In an instant, they are reborn in the Pure Land and

(4) *“As they approach death...”* to *“...they are reborn in the Pure Land”* corresponds to Topic IX and describes how both good and evil signs appear at life’s end. There are nine elements:

- i) These evildoers are approaching the end of their lives.
- ii) The fires of hell appear.
- iii) At the time blazing fires arise, they encounter a Dharma friend.
- iv) The Dharma friend expounds the merits and virtues of Amitabha Buddha.
- v) As they hear Amitabha's name, their negative karma of many *kalpas* are instantly eradicated.
- vi) With their negative karma dispelled, the fires transform into cool breezes.
- vii) Carried by these breezes, heavenly flowers appear in array.
- viii) Emanated assemblies arrive in welcome.
- ix) The time length of their arrival in the Pure Land is revealed.

“... remain within a lotus in the seven-jeweled pond for 6 *kalpas*,

(5) “*Remain within a lotus...*” to “*...for 6 kalpas*” corresponds to Topic X and indicates the specific time length for the lotus to bloom after arrival.

“... after which the lotus blooms. At that time, Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta console them with their Brahma voices and expound the most profound Mahayana scriptures. Upon hearing these teachings, they immediately awaken the resolve to achieve supreme enlightenment.”

(6) “*After which the lotus blooms...*” to “*...achieve supreme enlightenment*” corresponds to Topic XI and describes the specific benefits received after the lotus blooms. They are threefold:

- i) As the lotus blooms, Avalokitesvara and another (Mahasthamaprapta) console them with Brahma voices.
- ii) The sacred beings expound profound and wondrous teachings.
- iii) The practitioners comprehend the teachings and awaken the Bodhi-mind.

“Such is a person reborn in the middle level of the lower grade.”

(7) “*Such is a person*” onward is the conclusion.

The foregoing, though consisting of seven varied phrases, thoroughly explains rebirth in the middle level of the lower grade.

Next, the stage of rebirth in the lower level of the lower grade:

First, introduction.

Next, explanation.

Finally, conclusion.

There are seven aspects.

The Buddha said to Ananda and Vaidehi:

(1) “*The Buddha said to Ananda...*” generally conveys the open declaration from the Buddha.

“Those reborn in the lower level of the lower grade are

(2) “*Those reborn in the lower level of the lower grade*” identifies their stage, referring to ordinary beings who have committed all the Five Gravest Transgressions and other major offenses.

“... sentient beings who commit unwholesome karmic deeds, the Five Gravest Transgressions, the Ten Evil Actions and various other offenses. Due to their negative karma, these ignorant beings are fated to fall into the Wretched Realms to undergo many *kalpas* of endless suffering.

(3) “*Sentient beings who...*” to “*...undergo many kalpas of endless suffering*” corresponds to Topics V and VI and clarifies both the specific disposition and severity of offenses. There are seven elements:

- i) Those with evil-doing dispositions are generally referenced.
- ii) “*Unwholesome karmic deeds*” is the general description of their acts.
- iii) The severity of their offenses is clarified.
- iv) Their numerous evils are summed up as deeds not of the wise.
- v) The immensity of evil actions results in the gravity of negative karma.
- vi) Without karma, there is no retribution; without cause, no consequence. Since the causal karma bears no joy, how can its resulting retribution be free from suffering?
- vii) As the causal evil deeds are fulfilled, their karmic retribution will endure for endless *kalpas*.

Question: In the 48 Vows, those who commit the Five Gravest Transgressions or slander the correct Dharma are excluded from rebirth in the Pure Land. In this *Contemplation Sutra*, however, among those reborn in the lower level of the lower grade, only slanderers of the Dharma are excluded, while those who commit the Five Gravest Transgressions are accepted. How should this distinction be understood?

Answer: I would respectfully explain this intent in the context of the deterrent teaching.

The two offenses — slandering the Dharma and committing the Five Gravest Transgressions — are excluded from rebirth under the 48 Vows, as they generate exceedingly severe obstructions. Those who commit

them fall directly into Avici Hell, undergoing suffering for immeasurable *kalpas*, with no prospect of release. Out of concern that beings might commit such offenses, the Tathagata skillfully employs the deterrent of “no rebirth.” Yet this does not imply that the Buddha withdraws his embrace of them.

In the lower level of the lower grade, those who have committed the Five Gravest Transgressions are accepted, while slanderers of the Dharma remain excluded. Since the Five Gravest Transgressions have already been committed, such evildoers cannot be abandoned and left adrift in samsara. Thus, out of great compassion, Amitabha Buddha still embraces them and delivers them through rebirth in the Pure Land. Yet, because they have not slandered the Dharma, the Buddha sets forth a warning: “Those who slander the Dharma will not attain rebirth.” This serves as a deterrent for those who have not yet committed this offense. Those who already have, however, are still embraced and accepted for rebirth.

Though reborn in the Pure Land, they remain enclosed within the lotus for numerous *kalpas*. While confined, they face three obstructions:

- i) They cannot see the Buddha or the sacred assembly.
- ii) They cannot hear the teachings of the correct Dharma.
- iii) They cannot travel to serve and make offerings to Buddhas.

Beyond these limitations, they experience no other suffering. As a sutra states:

They enjoy bliss comparable to that of bhikkus abiding in the third dhyana.

This should be understood.

Though they remain within the lotus for many *kalpas* without it blooming, this is far better than enduring endless *kalpas* of myriad torments in Avici Hell.

Here ends the interpretation relating to the deterrent teaching.

“As these ignorant beings approach death, they encounter a Dharma friend who consoles them in every way, speaks the wondrous Dharma and teaches them to invoke [Amitabha] Buddha. Yet their agony makes invocation difficult. Then the Dharma friend tells them: ‘If you cannot invoke him mentally, you should call out the name of the Infinite Life Buddha.’ These words touch their hearts. With unbroken voice, they call ‘Namo Amitabha Buddha’ ten times. Since they recite the Buddha’s name, thought by thought, their reincarnation-fated negative karma accumulated over 8 billion *kalpas* is eradicated.

“At the point of death, they see a golden, sun-like lotus appear before them. In a flash, they are reborn in the Land of Bliss.

(4) “*As these ignorant beings approach death...*” to “*...accumulated over 8 billion kalpas is eradicated*” illustrates how, through hearing the Dharma and reciting Amitabha’s name, the beings attain immediate benefits. There are ten aspects:

i) The evildoers are mentioned again.

ii) They are approaching the end of their lives.

iii) At the time of death, they encounter a Dharma friend.

iv) The Dharma friend consoles them and teaches them to invoke Amitabha Buddha.

v) Overwhelmed by the agony of impending death, the evildoers are unable to invoke the Buddha's name.

vi) Seeing their distress and inability to invoke, the Dharma friend shifts to teaching them to recite Amitabha's name verbally.

vii) They make a specific number of such recitations, one after another without interruption.

viii) The negative karma of numerous *kalpas* is eradicated.

ix) As the wrongdoers enter a correct state of mind at the time of death, a golden lotus manifests in response.

x) The time length of arrival in the Land of Bliss is revealed.

“[They stay] in the lotus for 12 great *kalpas*, after which it blooms.

(5) “[*They stay*] in the lotus for 12 great *kalpas*...” corresponds to Topic X and specifies the time length for the lotus to bloom after arrival.

“Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta, with voices of great compassion, teach them about the absolute reality behind all dharmas and methods to eliminate negative karma. Upon hearing these teachings, they rejoice and immediately awaken the Bodhi-mind.

(6) “*Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta...*” to “*...immediately awaken the Bodhi-mind*” corresponds to Topic XI and describes the benefits received after the lotus blooms. There are three:

- i) The two sacred beings expound profound, wondrous Dharma.
 - ii) The persons eradicate their negative karma and rejoice.
 - iii) They awaken the Bodhi-mind.
-

“Such is a person reborn in the lower level of the lower grade.

“This is the Visualization of Lower-Tier Rebirth, called the Sixteenth Contemplation.”

(7) “*Such is a person*” onward is the conclusion.

The foregoing, though consisting of seven varied phrases, thoroughly explains rebirth in the lower level of the lower grade.

Goes the praise:

*Lower-Tier wrongdoers, with roots and deeds so base,
Ten evils, five grave faults — steeped in greed and hate.
Four offenses, theft from monks, slander of Dharma true,
Shameless, unrepentant, for their evil karma due.*

*At life's end, like storm-clouds, torments draw near,
Hell's blazing fires before the wicked appear.
A Dharma friend arrives, guiding rebirth anew,
Urging them to call Amitabha with true focus through.*

*At the sound, emanated Buddhas and Bodhisattvas arrive,
With one-thought devotion, in jeweled lotuses they reside.
Yet enclosed for many kalpas due to barriers three,
Till blooms the lotus, and their Bodhi-minds break free.*

The foregoing, though divided into three different levels, collectively elucidates the teaching of the Lower Tier.

The Thirteen Contemplations prescribed earlier are **meditative virtues**, requested by Vaidehi and answered by Tathagata Shakyamuni. The Three Meritorious Actions and Nine Levels of Rebirth discussed thereafter are **non-meditative virtues**, expounded by the Buddha of his own accord. Though the meditative and non-meditative virtues differ, together they complete the exposition of the Main Part.

Benefits Part

First, introduction.

Next, explanation.

There are seven aspects.

As the Buddha delivered these teachings,

(1) “*As the Buddha delivered these teachings*” summarizes the preceding text and transitions into the subsequent description of benefits.

... Vaidehi, along with her 500 maidservants heard his words.

(2) “*Vaidehi, along with...*” refers to those who heard the teaching.

Instantly, they beheld broad and boundless views of the Land of Bliss.

(3) “*Instantly, they beheld broad and boundless views...*” indicates that Vaidehi and others witnessed the manifestations of the Land of Bliss displayed in the radiant platform.

They also saw the Buddha's form and the two Bodhisattvas. Filled with joy, they marveled at this unprecedented experience. They attained a sudden great awakening and realized the Endurance for the Non-Arising of Dharmas.

(4) *"They also saw the Buddha's form and the two Bodhisattvas..."* explains that at the outset of the Seventh Contemplation, Vaidehi beheld Amitabha Buddha and thus attained the benefit of Endurance for the Non-Arising of Dharmas.

The 500 maidservants developed the resolve for *Anuttara-samyak-sambodhi* and aspired to be reborn in the Pure Land.

(5) *"The 500 maidservants..."* signifies that, upon beholding the supreme manifestations, each servant developed the resolve for unsurpassed enlightenment and aspired to be reborn in the Pure Land.

The World-Honored One, Shakyamuni Buddha, prophesied that they would all be reborn there and, after rebirth, they would attain the all-Buddhas-presence samadhi.

(6) *"The World-Honored One, Shakyamuni Buddha, prophesied..."* indicates that the maidservants received the Buddha's predictions of rebirth in the Pure Land and immediately attained the Buddhas-Presence Samadhi.

Countless celestial beings also awakened the resolve for supreme enlightenment.

(7) “*Countless celestial beings...*” recounts that, in the earlier “Cause for Aversion to Suffering,” celestial beings such as Sakra, Brahma, the World Protectors and others followed the Buddha to the royal palace and listened to his teaching from the air. They witnessed and heard:

- Shakyamuni’s white-tuft radiance transforming.
- Amitabha’s golden, sacred form.
- The extraordinary aspects of the Nine Levels of Rebirth.
- That both meditative and non-meditative practitioners are embraced by Amitabha Buddha.
- That all beings, whether virtuous or evil, can return to the Pure Land.
- That the Western Pure Land is right before one’s eyes and not distant.
- That through a lifetime’s firm resolve and focused practice, one forever transcends samsara.

Having heard the Tathagata’s exposition of the rare, wondrous benefits, these celestial beings all awakened the resolve to achieve unsurpassed enlightenment.

This is precisely:

*The Buddha, supreme among all sacred heads,
His words became sutras as they were said.
They nourish the ordinary, the deluded and low,
And bring benefit to all who hear and know.*

The foregoing, though consisting of seven varied phrases, thoroughly elucidates the Benefits Part.

Circulation Part

It comprises two divisions:

A: Circulation in the Royal Palace.

B: Circulation at Gridhrakuta.

Circulation in the Royal Palace

There are seven elements:

At that time, Ananda rose from his seat and said to the Buddha: “World-Honored One, what name should be given to this sutra? How should the essence of this teaching be accepted and retained?”

(1) “*At that time, Ananda rose...*” conveys Ananda’s request for guidance on the circulation of the teaching.

The Buddha said to Ananda: “This sutra is named *Contemplation of the Land of Bliss, the Buddha of Infinite Life, Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara and Bodhisattva Mahasthamaprapta*. It is also

named *Purification and Elimination of Karmic Obstructions and Rebirth in the Presence of All Buddhas.*

(2) From “*The Buddha said to Ananda*” onward, the Tathagata established one of the sutra’s titles by highlighting both the direct and circumstantial rewards. Another title emphasizes that relying on this sutra to begin practice naturally dispels the clouds of the Three Hindrances. This answers the former of the two questions posed in paragraph (1) above: “*What name should be given to this sutra?*”

“You should accept and retain it, never forgetting or discarding it.

(3) “*You should accept and retain it...*” responds to the latter question: “*How should this teaching be accepted and retained?*”

“Those who practice this samadhi will see the Buddha of Infinite Life and the two Mahasattvas in their present lives.

“If good men and women merely hear the name of that Buddha or the names of the two Bodhisattvas, they will eliminate their reincarnation-fated negative karma accumulated over countless *kalpas*. How much more so if they recollect and invoke them!

(4) “*Those who practice this samadhi...*” to “*...if they recollect and invoke them*” presents a comparison to highlight superiority and encourages beings to respect and practice it. There are four aspects:

i) Meditative virtues are collectively referenced, with the designation of “this samadhi.”

ii) Practicing in reliance on the contemplative methods brings the benefit of seeing the Three Sacred Beings.

iii) The dispositions qualified to practice the teaching are identified.

iv) A comparison reveals the superiority of its benefits — merely hearing the names of the Three Sacred Beings extinguishes negative karma of countless *kalpas*. How much more assured is realization for those who uphold a correct state of mind and take refuge!

“You should know that those who invoke that Buddha are like *pundarika* (white lotuses) among humans. Bodhisattvas Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta become their sacred friends. They will be seated in the Bodhimandala (site of enlightenment) and be reborn into the Buddhas’ family.”

(5) “*You should know that those who invoke that Buddha...*” to “*...be reborn into the Buddhas’ family*” demonstrates the extraordinary power and function of Buddha-invocation samadhi, to which the miscellaneous virtuous practices cannot compare. There are five elements:

i) The practice is single-minded recitation of Amitabha Buddha's name.

ii) The text specifies and praises those who invoke his name.

iii) Those who consistently invoke Amitabha are exceptionally rare and beyond compare; thus, the text employs *pundarika* as a metaphor.

"*Pundarika*" is acclaimed as the finest flower in the human world. It is the rarest bloom, the supremely outstanding blossom among humans, and the most exquisite and excellent flower of all. It is also traditionally known as the Flower of *Cai*.

Practitioners of Buddha-invocation are praised as the finest, most excellent, supremely outstanding, rarest, and most transcendent of people.

iv) Those who single-mindedly recite Amitabha Buddha's name are constantly guarded — like a protective shadow — by Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta. These Bodhisattvas also serve as practitioners' close companions and spiritual guides.

v) In addition to these benefits, received in this life, practitioners are immediately reborn into the family of Buddhas — namely, the Pure Land — after life's end. There, they will hear the Dharma continuously, travel to serve and make offerings to Buddhas, and, as their causal practices are perfected and realized, how could the throne of Buddhahood ever be beyond reach?

The Buddha said to Ananda: “Bear these words well in mind. To bear these words in mind means to recite the name of the Buddha of Infinite Life.”

(6) From “*The Buddha said to Ananda: ‘Bear these words well in mind’*” onward, the Buddha entrusted [Ananda] with propagating Amitabha Buddha’s name and ensuring its transmission to future generations.

Though the preceding passages spoke of the merits of the meditative and non-meditative virtues, the Buddha’s underlying wish is that sentient beings recite Amitabha Buddha’s name consistently and exclusively.

When the Buddha spoke these words, Venerables Moggallana and Ananda, along with Vaidehi and others, upon hearing the Buddha’s teachings, were all filled with great joy.

(7) “*When the Buddha spoke these words...*” conveys that both the one who requested the teaching and those entrusted with its transmission heard what they never heard before, saw what they had never seen, and, as if tasting sweet nectar, rejoiced beyond all measure.

The foregoing, though consisting of seven varied phrases, thoroughly explains the Circulation in the Royal Palace.

Gridhrakuta Gathering

This section also consists of three divisions:

Then, the World-Honored One ascended through the air and returned to Mt. Gridhrakuta.

(1) Introduction: From “*Then, the World-Honored One*” onward.

At that time, Ananda recounted the entire event in detail to the great assembly.

(2) Main Part: From “*At that time, Ananda*” onward.

Countless devas, nagas and yakshas, upon hearing the Buddha’s words, were all filled with immense joy. They paid homage to the Buddha and departed.

(3) Circulation: From “*Countless devas*” onward.

The foregoing, though consisting of three varied divisions, thoroughly outlines the Gridhrakuta Part.

[Summary,] from the very beginning [of the *Contemplation Sutra*]:

1. Introduction: From “*Thus I have heard...*” through “*...How will they be able to see the Land of Bliss?*”

2. Main Part: From the Contemplation of the Sun through rebirth in the lower level of the lower grade.

3. Benefits Part: From “*As the Buddha delivered these teachings...*” through “*...Countless celestial beings also awakened the resolve for supreme enlightenment.*”

4. Circulation in the Royal Palace: From “*At that time, Ananda rose...*” through “*...all filled with great joy.*”

5. Circulation at Gridhrakuta: From “*Then, the World-Honored One...*” through “*...They paid homage to the Buddha and departed.*”

The foregoing, though consisting of five varied parts, forms the overall interpretation of the *Contemplation Sutra*.

Postscript

I humbly reflect that true Dharma teachings are rarely encountered, and the essentials of the Pure Land path are even more difficult to come across. Wishing that beings of all Five Realms attain rebirth together [in the Pure Land], the Buddha urged that this teaching be passed down to future generations. However, with his divine powers, the Tathagata transforms in limitless ways, manifesting openly or remaining hidden according to circumstances. His teachings in the Royal Palace were imparted discreetly. Among the venerable assembly at Gridhrakuta, those of lesser wisdom harbored doubts. After the Buddha returned to the mountain, they failed to perceive the full details of the matter. Thus, Ananda expounded the teachings given in the Royal Palace, clarifying both meditative and non-meditative virtues. As a result, the various groups within the assembly heard the Dharma in unison, and all embraced it with reverence, vowing to uphold and practice it.

Respectfully addressed to all friends and those with karmic affinity:

As an ordinary being bound to the endless cycle of birth and death, with shallow wisdom and limited understanding, I dared not presume to devise arbitrary interpretations of the Buddha's profound, intricate teachings. Thus, having expressed my intent and set forth my aspiration, I earnestly sought verification from the Buddhas before daring to commit my mind to this endeavor:

“Homage and refuge to the Three Gems in their entirety, pervading the Void and spanning the Dharma Realm, to Shakyamuni Buddha, Amitabha Buddha, Avalokitesvara, Mahasthamaprapta, the great ocean-like assembly of Bodhisattvas in the Pure Land, and all the splendors of that realm.

“I now intend to present the essential principles of the *Contemplation Sutra* to definitively rectify and standardize interpretations, both past and present, for all time. If this accords with the compassionate intent of the Buddhas of the past, present and future — Shakyamuni Buddha, Amitabha Buddha and others — may I behold in dreams all the scenes and signs aspired to above.”

After proclaiming my aspiration before the images of Buddhas, I adopted a daily practice of chanting the *Amitabha Sutra* thrice, reciting Amitabha Buddha 30,000 times, and reaffirming my aspiration with utmost sincerity.

That very night, I beheld in the western sky all the signs and scenes as specified above, fully revealed — multicolored jeweled mountains layered in hundreds of thousands of tiers, radiant lights of myriad kinds streaming down upon the ground, which itself shone with a golden glow. Amid these splendors were Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, some seated, others standing; some speaking, others silent. Some moved their bodies and hands, while others remained still.

Having witnessed this vision, I stood with palms joined, gazing in reverence for a long time before returning to awareness. I was filled with joy upon waking. Immediately, I began to organize sections and record their meanings and principles.

From that time on, a monk appeared in my dreams each night, giving instruction on the text's underlying meaning and structured divisions. Once his guidance was complete, he no longer appeared.

I finished the draft, and further dedicated myself with utmost sincerity to a seven-day period of daily practice. It included chanting the *Amitabha Sutra* ten times, reciting Amitabha Buddha 30,000 times, and contemplating the splendors of the Pure Land in the early and late hours of the night. I entrusted my life [to Amitabha Buddha] with sincere devotion, in accordance with the methods described above.

That very night, I saw three grinding wheels turning on their own by the roadside. Suddenly, a man riding a white camel appeared before me and urged: "Master, strive diligently. Be resolute in seeking rebirth in the Pure Land, and do not falter. This world is defiled, filled with evil and suffering — it is not worth craving or clinging to."

I replied: "I deeply appreciate the worthy one's kind guidance. I shall dedicate my life to the pursuit of rebirth and dare not allow thoughts of negligence or complacency to arise."

The second night, I beheld Amitabha Buddha, his body shining in the hue of genuine gold, seated upon a golden lotus beneath a tree of seven treasures. Ten monks surrounded him, each seated beneath a jeweled tree. Draped across the Buddha's tree were heavenly garments cascading in graceful folds. Facing west, I sat with palms joined, observing in reverence.

On the third night, I saw two towering banners, exceptionally tall and striking. They were adorned with five-colored streamers. The roads stretched in all directions, offering an unobstructed view.

Having witnessed these visions, I ended the practice before completing the full seven days.

Regarding all the sacred manifestations described above, my intentions were for sentient beings, not myself. Having received these signs, I dare not keep them hidden. Thus, with humility, I present them here after the textual interpretation, hoping they will be widely heard even down to the Age of Dharma Decline.

May all who hear this develop faith, and all who see it attain rebirth in the Pure Land. I dedicate the merit of this endeavor to all beings, that they awaken the Bodhi-mind, treat one another with kindness, and see one another through the Buddha's eye. May they become Bodhi companions, act as true Dharma friends, return to the Pure Land together, and realize the Buddha Path in unison.

This interpretation has been submitted to the Buddhas for verification and is definitively established. Not a single phrase or character may be added or omitted. Those who wish to transcribe it must follow the prescribed method for copying sutras. Let this be understood.