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## **Companion to the Three Pure Land Sutras**

By the Pure Land School Editorial Department

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# Table of Contents

Preface .....	5
<i>Chapter 1:</i> History of the Pure Land Teachings .....	11
<i>Chapter 2:</i> Selection of the Pure Land Sutras .....	25
<i>Chapter 3:</i> Timeline of the Pure Land Sutras .....	31
<i>Chapter 4:</i> Translations of the Pure Land Sutras .....	39
<i>Chapter 5:</i> Brief Introduction to the Pure Land Sutras .....	47
<i>Chapter 6:</i> Gist of the Pure Land Sutras .....	55
<i>Chapter 7:</i> Key Ideas of the Pure Land Sutras .....	65
<i>Chapter 8:</i> The Core and the Body of the Pure Land Sutras .....	69
<i>Chapter 9:</i> The Evident and the Hidden in the Pure Land Sutras .....	83
<i>Chapter 10:</i> Credentials of the Pure Land Sutras .....	91

# Preface

The *Infinite Life Sutra* says this of the basic intention behind Shakyamuni Buddha's birth into the world: ***“With infinite great compassion, the Tathagata commiserates with the beings of the Three Domains. Therefore, he appears in the world to disseminate the teaching of the Way, wishing to save the multitudes by endowing them with real benefits.”***

Why did Shakyamuni emanate in the Saha world to achieve Buddhahood there? There is but one answer: “To save the multitudes.” “To save” means to deliver, and “the multitudes” refers to sentient beings. In other words, to deliver beings of the ten directions from the suffering of endless rebirth in the Three Domains and Six Realms. That is, to save all suffering beings from reincarnation in the 25 forms of existence, the burning house of the Three Domains, and the Six Realms.

How does the Buddha achieve his aim? Again, there is only one answer: “With real benefits.” The “real benefits” refer to “the power of Amitabha Buddha’s Fundamental Vow.” That is, the 18<sup>th</sup> among the 48 Vows — “rebirth (in the Pure Land) through Amitabha-recitation.”

At the start of the sutra’s Second Fascicle, Shakyamuni Buddha says: *“All sentient beings who, having heard his name, rejoice in faith, recite his name even once and make sincere dedication of merit in aspiration to be reborn there, will immediately attain rebirth and achieve non-retrogression.”* And: *“By the power of that Buddha’s Fundamental Vows, those who hear his name and wish to be reborn will all reach his land and naturally attain the state of non-retrogression.”* Thus does the Buddha urge and guide sentient beings to believe and accept deliverance via “the power of Amitabha’s Fundamental Vow.”

The multitudes of long-suffering beings in the burning house of the Three Domains and the Five Turbidities of our iniquitous world should take full advantage of the present life. They should have faith

in the Buddha’s truthful words and teachings, and give themselves over to deliverance by “the power of Amitabha’s Fundamental Vow,” accepting the “real benefits.” They would then be able to leave the burning house of the Three Domains, be reborn in the Pure Land and gain Buddhahood there. That way our *raison d’être* here would match that of Shakyamuni Buddha, as well as the core intention of Amitabha Buddha’s Vows – the three merging into one.

“The power of Amitabha’s Fundamental Vow” is basically the “Pure Land path.” In a lifetime of teachings, Shakyamuni Buddha referred to Amitabha’s Pure Land in more than 200 sutras. Master Jingxi (711-782) of the Tiantai School observed: “In all [the Buddha’s] teachings, Amitabha gets the most praise.” Among the many texts mentioning Amitabha’s Pure Land, it is the *Infinite Life Sutra*, *Contemplation of Infinite Life Sutra* and *Amitabha Sutra* that have become the three representative, iconic scriptures, collectively called the “Three Pure Land Sutras.” The rest are known as supplementary texts (for example, the “Chapter on Bodhisattva Samantabhadra’s Practices and Vows” and “Chapter on Bodhisattva

Mahasthamaprapta's Perfect Mastery of Amitabha-Recitation.”)

In great detail, the Three Pure Land Sutras discuss the karmic causes and effects relating to Amitabha's deliverance of sentient beings, as well as the marvelous splendors of the Land of Bliss. Therefore all practitioners who wish in this lifetime to gain the deliverance of Amitabha's Fundamental Vow and its “real benefits” should correctly understand the key points of the Three Sutras. Unless they do that, they would likely lose the benefits.

At the nucleus of the Three Sutras is the *Longer Sutra (Infinite Life Sutra)*. Its own center is the 48 Vows, at the heart of which is the 18<sup>th</sup> Vow, whose high point is in turn its “accomplishment text.” The text's kernel: ***“[Beings who] rejoice in faith, recite his name even once and make sincere dedication of merit in aspiration to be reborn there, will immediately attain rebirth and achieve non-retrogression.”*** Therefore the accomplishment text of the 18<sup>th</sup> Vow is the core of the Pure Land School's core – and the School's quintessence.

Since ancient times, we have lacked an explanatory text that links and integrates the Three Sutras, thoroughly analyzing and summarizing them, while systematically highlighting their key points. Though Pure Land practitioners have been plentiful, a lack of knowledge about the central elements have made them ask: Which sutra is the core text? Which principles should be taught? Are the fundamentals of the Three Sutras consistent or not? What is the spirit that connects them all? How should they be received and upheld? Unless these points are understood, Pure Land practitioners would not be able to grasp the deep meanings or even the basics of the teachings. Invariably, they undertake mixed practices or develop doubts and regress.

This booklet outlines the origins of the Pure Land teachings, as well as the key points of the Three Sutras and their interrelationships. Many of its perspectives were unknown to, or misunderstood by, practitioners of the Pure Land path in ancient times. They not only shed light on longstanding points of confusion, but also explore finer issues never before raised.

Both longtime practitioners and beginners will benefit from its acquaintance.



## *Chapter 1*

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# **History of the Pure Land Teachings**

1. “Upon seeing the morning star, he became thoroughly awakened.” Two-thousand five hundred years ago, Shakyamuni Buddha achieved enlightenment under the bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya. As on a limpid autumnal night, the stars and moon in the sky were brightly reflected on a sea-like plain. The all-inclusive universe floated clearly in the oceanic mind of Shakyamuni Buddha, illuminated by his enlightenment.

At that moment, the Buddha wanted very much to transmit his profound and marvelous vision of awakening to others. Then he realized they might have no way of perceiving such a deep, wondrous state of mind, and thought about entering nirvana immediately. Yet, when he reviewed the dream-like illusion of human life and recalled the delusional suffering of sentient beings, a great compassion swept over him. He felt unable to abandon them and enjoy nirvana alone. So he left his seat of enlightenment.

The Buddha first went to Deer Park and spoke of the Dharma to five bhikkus, including Ajnata-Kaundinya. It was Shakyamuni Buddha’s first

discourse, known as the “initial turning of the Dharma wheel.”

For the next five decades, the Buddha did his utmost to teach the Dharma. There were no written records at the time. It was only in the year he entered nirvana that his disciples first assembled to compile the Tripitaka, the Buddha’s canonical teachings. The exercise was repeated roughly a hundred, two hundred and three hundred years afterwards – a total of four times. As passed on to posterity, the Tripitaka consists of sutras, precepts and commentaries.

2. The Pure Land teachings began with Shakyamuni Buddha’s discourses on Mt. Gridhrakuta near Rajgir and Jeta Grove at Anathapiṇḍika’s Monastery, Sravasti. They became progressively clear and distinctive. At a later assembly, they were compiled into the *Infinite Life Sutra*, *Contemplation of Infinite Life Sutra* and *Amitabha Sutra*. That allowed the Pure Land teachings to become something tangible, able to shine forth in our world.

Yet this only takes the Three Sutras as the pivot in seeking the origins of Pure Land principles. There's a broader perspective. In today's Tripitaka, there are 200-odd texts relating to Amitabha Buddha.

First, the "Avatamsaka Section": Towards the end of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, the text ("Chapter on Samantabhadra's Practices and Vows") says: ***"When my life ends, may I be able to eliminate all obstacles and see Amitabha Buddha, so I may instantly be reborn in the Land of Peace and Joy."***

Though Bodhisattva Samantabhadra spoke these words to Sudhana, they clearly demonstrate the aspiration to rebirth in the Land of Peace and Joy in Pure Land teaching.

Next, the "Vaipulya Section": The 363 texts include not only the Three Pure Land Sutras. Dozens of other scriptures contain elements of Pure Land thought.

Then the "Prajna Section": In the 600 fascicles of the *Maha-prajnaparamita Sutra*, fascicles 1, 401 and 479 describe aspects of the Western Land of Bliss.

And the "Lotus Sutra Section": According to the seventh fascicle of the *Lotus Sutra*, "Chapter on the Parable of the Illusory City," there was a Buddha named Mahabhijnabhibhu. Of 16 princes mentioned, the ninth became a Buddha, named Amitabha. The 23<sup>rd</sup> fascicle of the same sutra, "Chapter on the Past Lives of Bodhisattva Medicine King," also says that practitioners who hear of local matters relating to Bodhisattva Medicine King will, when their lives end, be reborn in Amitabha Buddha's Land of Peace and Joy.

Finally, the "Nirvana Section": Among the 40 fascicles of the *Maha-parinirvana Sutra*, fascicles 1, 3, 10 and 24 speak of matters relating to the Land of Bliss.

To sum up, it's has not been fully established whether Shakyamuni Buddha directly spoke the more than 200 sutras in which Pure Land teachings and thought are mentioned. However, it is beyond doubt that during his five decades of Dharma-teaching, the Buddha often referred to Amitabha's Land of Peace and Joy. The comment by Tiantai Master Jingxi that "in



all [the Buddha's] teachings, Amitabha gets the most praise" was hardly overstated.

3. The five centuries following Shakyamuni Buddha's entry into nirvana were a time when the schools of the Lesser Vehicle flourished, so the Mahayana Pure Land teachings were not prominent. Even so, Pure Land thinking could be found in Lesser Vehicle commentaries of the period such as the *Dharmaskandha-sastra*, attributed to Ven. Magamoggallana (6<sup>th</sup> century BCE).

Later came *The Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana* by Bodhisattva Asvaghosa (1<sup>st</sup> century CE), a representative figure of the first phase of Mahayana Buddhism. It explicitly records the embrace and protection of Amitabha Buddha and rebirth in the Pure Land.

Next was Bodhisattva Nagarjuna (2<sup>nd</sup> century CE), the "patriarch of the eight schools." In the *Chapter on the Easy Path* in his *Exposition of the Ten Stages*, he spoke clearly of "the Difficult Path" and "the Easy Path." Within the latter, Nagarjuna explicitly observed that recitation of Amitabha Buddha's name was the

Easy Path. And in *The Twelve Rites*, he specially praised Amitabha's virtues. Further, he propagated Pure Land teachings throughout his *Treatise on the Perfection of Wisdom*.

In the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE, Bodhisattva Vasubandhu composed the *Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land*, using as foundations the Three Pure Land Sutras. He explained the true essence of "single-mindedly entrusting one's life" to the deliverance of Amitabha Buddha.

Thanks to the efforts of the above-mentioned masters, the bud of other-power teachings relating to Amitabha Buddha began to blossom into beautiful flowers, from obscurity into prominence.

4. Buddhism was introduced to China in 67 CE, during the reign of Emperor Ming of the Eastern Han Dynasty. It came with the Indian monks Kāśyapamātāṅga and Dharmarakṣa. The former's elder brother brought to China a portrait of Amitabha Buddha. Eight decades later, in 147, the monks An Shigao from Parthia and Lokaksema of Tokhara jointly translated the *Infinite Life Sutra*. The scripture

was later rendered some dozen times by various translators. The *Contemplation of Infinite Life Sutra* and *Amitabha Sutra* were each translated two, three times. Only after such cultivation did the Pure Land teachings sprout in Chinese soil.

The three-plus centuries from the Eastern Han to the late Western Jin Dynasty were the time of scripture translations in China. But even during the Eastern Jin, the time of Masters Zhu Sengxian (c. 320) and Dao'an (312-385), the idea of rebirth in the Pure Land of Tushita Heaven had appeared. By the era of Master Huiyuan (334-416) of Mt. Lushan, Pure Land teachings were flourishing.

Huiyuan was said to have formed a White Lotus Society of 123 monastics and lay people. On Mt. Lushan in today's Jiangxi Province, they diligently practiced Buddha-contemplation, day and night. Later scholars called it Buddha-invocation of the Lushan lineage.

But the Pure Land teachings that are broadly circulated and deeply entrenched among practitioners today are not those of the Lushan group. They

originated when the north Indian monk Bodhiruci arrived in Luoyang in 507 and translated Bodhisattva Vasubandhu's *Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land*, then transmitted it to Master Tanluan (476-542; alternative: 476-554).

Tanluan was originally a student of the Four Shastras School. While visiting a hermit surnamed Tao in southern China, he had embraced the *Immortality Classic* and the search for longevity. On the way home, he encountered Master Bodhiruci in Luoyang, who gave him a copy of the *Contemplation of Infinite Life Sutra*. As a result, Tanluan burned the deficient immortality texts and dedicated himself to the Pure Land path. He later composed the *Commentary on the Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land*, vigorously laying out before the world the profound meaning of other-power (Buddha-power) in Pure Land teachings.

Afterwards, prominent monastics, going outside their own schools, propagated Pure Land principles, either by writing commentaries on the Three Pure Land Sutras or practicing Buddha-invocation samadhi. They included Huiyuan of Jingying Monastery (523-

592); Zhizhe (538-597) of Guoqing Monastery, founder of the Tiantai School; Jizang (549-623) of Jiaxiang Monastery, an adherent of the Three Treatises School; Kuiji (632-682) of Ci'en Monastery, synthesizer of the Yogacara School; Yuanxiao (617-686) of Huanglong Monastery, a follower of the Avatamsaka School; Yiji (919-987) of Quanjiao Monastery, revivalist of the Tiantai School; Jingxing (dates unknown) of the Yogacara School; and Zhili (960-1028) of the Tiantai School.

The only one to avoid the doctrines of other schools and focus exclusively on Pure Land was Master Daochuo (562-645) of Xihe. He took monastic vows at the age of 14, focusing on the *Nirvana Sutra* to settle his mind. On a visit to Xuanzhong Monastery in Shibi Valley, he read Master Tanluan's memorial tablet and was deeply moved. Daochuo, then 48, thoroughly dedicated himself to the Pure Land path. Thenceforth, he recited Amitabha's name 70,000 times a day and gave discourses on the *Contemplation Sutra* more than 200 times. He also composed the *Collection on the Land of Peace and Joy*, actively advocating the Pure Land teachings.

After that, Master Shandao (613-681) of the Tang Dynasty, whose teacher was Daochuo, wrote the *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra, In Praise of the Rite of Rebirth, In Praise of Dharma Activities, Dharma Paths of Contemplation and Invocation* and *In Praise of Pratyutpanna*. By doing so, he made authoritative definitions of long-misunderstood Pure Land principles, creating a backbone for Pure Land Buddhism in China. The teachings began to prosper, growing into a huge, magnificent tree with flowers and fruits. Following Shandao were his disciples Huaigan (c. 680), Fazhao (747-821) and Shaokang (736-805), who inherited his legacy.

5. After the late Tang Dynasty, the lineage of Master Shandao was lost in China. The Pure Land teachings became mixed into the other Buddhist schools and their doctrines. Yet a brilliant flower could not remain forever buried in the underbrush. Though they disappeared in China, the works and commentaries of Tanluan, Daochuo and Shandao were passed on to Japan.

Master Honen (1133-1212), known as “the foremost in wisdom” among Japanese monastics, sought an expeditious and surpassing Dharma path, and read the Tripitaka five times. From Master Shandao’s *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra*, Honen finally realized that the sole key to liberation lay in Pure Land practice. From then on, he hid his appearance of wisdom to display a simple, foolish persona, dedicated to single-minded Amitabha-invocation (recitation). Following in Shandao’s footsteps, he formed the Pure Land School of Japan, forging an independent path for the Pure Land teachings and spreading them far and wide.

6. A considered assessment suggests that in whatever age, when human thought approaches exhaustion, an awareness dawns of the frailty of one’s own efforts. The tendency is then to rely on a form of great spiritual power. This is underscored by the fact that representative figures in Indian, Chinese and Japanese Buddhism mostly relied on Amitabha Buddha’s other-power deliverance to settle their own minds and focus their lives.

In India, however, Pure Land never developed to the status of a school, with its own essential principles. After Buddhism entered China, it was Master Tanluan who first established theoretical foundations for the Pure Land School. Master Daochuo inherited and carried forward his teachings. And Master Shandao in the Tang period systematized the theories and actualized the practice and rites. The Pure Land School was formally established.

Regrettably, the “Huichang Buddhism Persecution” in the late Tang and the wartime chaos of the Five Dynasties & Ten Kingdoms period led to the loss of the Shandao lineage’s texts, which should have benefited posterity continuously. The bulk vanished from Chinese soil, including the school’s founding scripture, *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra*. The orthodox transmission of the Pure Land School was thus interrupted.

For more than a millennium afterwards, Pure Land practitioners lacked unadulterated theoretical guidance. They could only use the self-power concepts of the other schools to explain the Buddha-power-

assisted Pure Land teachings. Defeating their own purpose, they lost the great benefit of rebirth in the Pure Land.

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Masters Huijing and Jingzong extracted from the Taisho Canon the lost scriptures of the Shandao lineage, collating, editing, publishing and circulating them. Under their energetic championship, the lineage's light of truth again shines forth, like the rising sun in the East. It is gradually lighting up the world, gaining the knowledge and approval of Pure Land practitioners. They are guiding more and more Pure Land adherents onto the bright road that leads to certain rebirth in Amitabha's Land of Bliss.

7. To sum up, the Pure Land teachings are needed by all sentient beings, in all eras. As long as the universe and humans exist, so long as flowers give off fragrance and birds sing, whatever the era, the teachings can answer the deepest requirements in people's hearts. They will forever continue to impart great, true comfort.



## *Chapter 2*

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# **Selection of the Pure Land Sutras**

1. Throughout his life, Shakyamuni Buddha taught according to prevailing circumstances, prescribing specific remedies for specific ailments. He guided people according to their proclivities and abilities, dispatching suitable medicines for their afflictions.

So the lineage masters of the various schools chose, from among the many sutras, those teachings that most resonated in their hearts as the foundation for core principles when they established their schools.

For example, the Tiantai School picked the *Immeasurable Meanings Sutra*, *Lotus Sutra* and *Samantabhadra Meditation Sutra*, while the Esoteric School chose the *Vairocanabhisambodhi Sutra*, *Vajrasekhara Sutra* and *Susiddhikara Sutra*. They established their doctrines on these texts and used them as the basis for practice – the core scriptures.

Then there are the three sutras on safeguarding the nation: the *Lotus Sutra*, *Benevolent King Who Protects the Nation Sutra* and *Golden Light Sutra*. Also, the three sutras relating to Bodhisattva Maitreya: the *Sutra on (Maitreya's) Previous Lives*, *Sutra on*

*(Maitreya's) Future Lives and Sutra on (Maitreya's) Attainment of Buddhahood*. All are core scriptures.

2. As for Pure Land, there are 200-odd texts that reference Pure Land thinking, as previously mentioned. The central scriptures are the *Infinite Life Sutra*, *Contemplation of Infinite Life Sutra* and *Amitabha Sutra*, while the others are secondary or supplementary texts.

In selecting the Three Sutras, consider first the Pure Land teachings from India. Bodhisattva Nagarjuna's *The Easy Path* cites the "Fundamental Vow of Amitabha Buddha," and Bodhisattva Vasubandhu's *Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land* mentions the name "Infinite Life Sutra." The outline may be clear of the Pure Land principles established by the two Bodhisattvas from Amitabha's Fundamental Vow in the *Infinite Life Sutra*. But it was still hard to discern a system of core sutras for the Pure Land School.

Later Master Tanluan composed the *Commentary on the Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land* to explicate in detail the *Treatise on Rebirth*. He focused

on discussing “Infinite Life Sutra” and the words “rely on” in the gatha with “I rely on the sutras.” Specifying reliance on the Three Pure Land Sutras, he said:

***“Infinite Life” is another name for the Tathagata of the Pure Land of Peace and Joy. His splendid merits were introduced by Shakyamuni Buddha to followers in Rajgir and Sravasti. The essence of those teachings is the name of the [Infinite Life] Buddha.***

Two sutras were spoken at Rajgir about the “splendid merit and virtues of the Buddha of Infinite Life” – the *Infinite Life Sutra* and *Contemplation of Infinite Life Sutra*. Master Tanluan specially explained that the Three Sutras were a single entity, with the name of Amitabha Buddha as its substance, and that the name represented true merit and virtues. It could certainly enable those who aspired to rebirth and recited it to be reborn in the Pure Land, where they could quickly gain Buddhahood, ensuring their efforts weren’t in vain.

It was Tanluan’s commentary on the *Treatise on Rebirth* that clarified Amitabha’s deliverance as told in the Three Pure Land Sutras, as well as the Pure Land thought passed on by Bodhisattvas Nagarjuna and Vasubandhu. This enabled their widespread propagation and underscored that *Treatise on Rebirth* was a commentative text based on the Three Sutras.

Master Shandao also chose these Three Sutras as the sole standard for Pure Land followers and practitioners. It is a consistent concept throughout his Five Works in Nine Fascicles. From “Explanation of the Deep Mind” in the “Meaning of Non-Meditative Practices” chapter within his *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra*:

***Primary Practices are those that rely exclusively on the practices in the sutras on rebirth. Which are those? Read and recite exclusively the Contemplation Sutra, Amitabha Sutra and Infinite Life Sutra.***

“Primary, rely, sutras”... Juxtaposed together, the meaning is very clear. These three are evidently the principal, core scriptures.

In its opening chapter, Master Honen’s *Collection on Choosing Buddha-Recitation According to the Fundamental Vow* says:

*The “Three Sutras and One Commentary” illuminate the Pure Land teachings.*

*The Three Sutras are 1) Infinite Life Sutra, 2) Contemplation of Infinite Life Sutra, and 3) Amitabha Sutra. The Commentary is Vasubandhu’s Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land. Perhaps these three sutras can be called “the Three Pure Land Sutras.”*



### *Chapter 3*

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## **Timeline of the Pure Land Sutras**



1. When was the *Infinite Life Sutra* (*Longer Sutra*) delivered? History provides no clues. But in his *Explication of the Contemplation Sutra*, Master Honen spoke of the “three passages and one rationale.”

The “three passages” are:

i) In the *Contemplation Sutra*’s “Visualization of the Lotus Throne,” the text says “**originally created through the power of Bhikku Dharmakara’s vows.**” This refers to the exposition in the *Longer Sutra* that the karma of the 48 Vows was accomplished by (Dharmakara’s) vow-power. From that we know the *Longer Sutra* had been spoken before the *Contemplation Sutra*.

ii) Where the *Contemplation Sutra* discusses those reborn in the “lower level of the middle grade,” the text also refers to “**the 48 Vows of Bhikku Dharmakara.**” If the 48 Vows had not already been cited in the *Longer Sutra*, the passage at this point should have gone on to say something about the Vows. But it did not do so. This suggests that the 48 Vows were laid out before the *Contemplation Sutra* was delivered.

iii) In the First Fascicle of the *Longer Sutra*, Ven. Ananda asks Shakyamuni Buddha: “Has Bodhisattva Dharmakara already attained Buddhahood and entered Parinirvana? Or has he not yet become a Buddha? Or is he [a Buddha] of the present?” The Buddha replied: “**Bodhisattva Dharmakara has already attained Buddhahood. He now resides in the western direction, ten trillion worlds away from here. His Buddha Land is called 'Peace and Joy.'**”

This is a question about whether Bhikku Dharmakara has attained Buddhahood. Yet the *Contemplation Sutra* gives detailed descriptions of the environment and beings of the Pure Land of Peace and Joy, which has already become reality. If the *Contemplation Sutra* came before the *Longer Sutra*, Ven. Ananda during the delivery of the former would already have heard about the circumstances of Amitabha Buddha’s Land of Peace and Joy. He would not have needed to ask Shakyamuni Buddha about it again in the *Longer Sutra*. That Ananda did so is further evidence that the *Longer Sutra* preceded the *Contemplation Sutra*.

The “one rationale” is: The *Longer Sutra* told how Bhikku Dharmakara resolved on self-cultivation and of conditions in the Pure Land. Therefore the *Contemplation Sutra*, using what the *Longer Sutra* said as a basis, related at length the methods of the 16 Contemplations and provided more detailed descriptions of the Pure Land. Thus we know that the sequence was “*Longer Sutra* first, *Contemplation Sutra* later.”

2. The contents of the *Contemplation of Infinite Life Sutra* suggest that it was delivered during the year Crown Prince Ajatasatru killed his father King Bimbisara and acceded to the throne.

There is a detailed account of this in the introductory section of the *Contemplation Sutra*. It says:

***Thus I have heard. At one time, the Buddha stayed at Mt. Gridhrakuta (Vulture Peak) in Rajgir. He gathered with an assembly of 1,250 senior bhikkus, along with 32,000 Bodhisattvas with Dharma Prince Mañjuśrī as the leader.***

***At that time, in the great city of Rajgir, there was a prince named Ajatasatru. Following the incitement of Devadatta, a treacherous companion, he seized his father, King Bimbisara, and imprisoned him in a chamber with seven layers of guards. All ministers were forbidden from visiting.***

But when did Ajatasatru kill his father and take the throne? This is recorded in the second fascicle of the *Samantapasadika*:

***Eight years after Ajatasatru became king, the Buddha entered nirvana.***

*Mahāvamsa* II-31 also said: Bimbisara ruled for 52 years. Before meeting the Buddha, he had been king for 15 years, and continued to reign for 37 years afterwards. Bimbisara’s son, Ajatasatru, planned to kill his father. A perverse, immoral person, he ruled for 32 years. Shakyamuni Buddha entered nirvana in the eighth year of his reign. Afterwards, Ajatasatru ruled another 24 years.

These texts show that Ajatasatru took the throne eight years before the Buddha's nirvana – the time the *Contemplation Sutra* was spoken.

Yet the “Chapter on Bodhisattva Kasyapa” in the *Nirvana Sutra* says: **“Three months after the accession of King Ajatasatru, Shakyamuni Buddha entered nirvana.”** But from various observations, this version from the *Nirvana Sutra* is wrong.

Going by the notion that the Buddha gained enlightenment at age 30, we can deduce that he delivered the *Contemplation Sutra* within the 44 years afterwards. In recent years, many researchers have placed the time of his nirvana at 485 BCE. That would have meant he taught the *Contemplation Sutra* around 492 BCE, the time of its propagation.

When were the sutra's contents written down and enshrined as a scripture? The answer is unclear, as determining materials are lacking.

Whatever the case, Shakyamuni Buddha spoke the *Contemplation Sutra* on Mt. Gridhrakuta when he

was 73 – about eight years before his nirvana. There, at the same time, he taught the *Lotus Sutra*.

3. Historically, as with the *Longer Sutra*, it isn't possible to date the *Amitabha Sutra*. But from its teachings, it was clearly delivered after the *Contemplation Sutra*. In the main section of the *Contemplation Sutra*, though much was said about meditative and non-meditative practices, they were not the Buddha's fundamental intention. So in the circulation (concluding) section, practitioners were urged only to **“recite the name of the Buddha of Infinite Life.”**

Yet it was hard to make people understand with such a brief, simple statement. Thus it was necessary to speak the *Shorter Sutra* and stress in detail that practitioners should abandon the sundry (meditative and non-meditative) practices, which have few virtuous roots, and focus exclusively on the path of Amitabha-recitation. So the *Shorter Sutra* was apparently delivered after the *Contemplation Sutra*. This accords with Master Honen's assessment in his *Explication of the Shorter Sutra*.

4. To sum up, though it's not possible to specify the timing of the Three Sutras, their sequential order is firmly established. The *Longer Sutra* came first, then the *Contemplation Sutra*, and finally the *Shorter Sutra*.



## *Chapter 4*

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# **Translations of the Pure Land Sutras**

1. The *Infinite Life Sutra* has been translated twelve times in China. Five of the renderings exist today, while the other seven have been lost. They are called the “five surviving and seven missing” versions.

- *Infinite Life Sutra, as Spoken by the Buddha* (2 fascicles, Later Han Dynasty, translator An Shigao; lost)
- *Sutra of Awakening to Infinite Purity and Equality* (4 fascicles, Later Han Dynasty, Lokaksema; **surviving**)
- *Longer Amitabha Sutra* (2 fascicles, Eastern Wu Dynasty, Zhi Qian; **surviving**)
- *Infinite Life Sutra, as Spoken by the Buddha* (2 fascicles, Cao-Wei Dynasty, Samghavarman; **surviving**)
- *Sutra of Awakening to Infinite Purity and Equality* (2 fascicles, Cao-Wei Dynasty, Bai Yan; lost)

- *Infinite Life Sutra, as Spoken by the Buddha* (2 fascicles, Western Jin Dynasty, Dharmarakṣa; lost)
- *Sutra of Infinite Life, Ultimate Truth and Perfect Enlightenment, as Spoken by the Buddha* (2 fascicles, Eastern Jin Dynasty, Dharmabala; lost)
- *New Infinite Life Sutra* (2 fascicles, Eastern Jin Dynasty, Buddhahadra; lost)
- *New Infinite Life Sutra* (2 fascicles, Liu-Song Dynasty, Baoyun; lost)
- *New Infinite Life Sutra* (2 fascicles, Liu-Song Dynasty, Dharmamitra; lost)
- *Assembly of the Tathagata of Infinite Life* (2 fascicles, Tang Dynasty, Bodhiruci; **surviving**)
- *Splendors of Infinite Life Sutra* (3 fascicles, Northern Song Dynasty; **surviving**).

Of the five extant translations, each has its emphases and omissions, though the *Infinite Life Sutra* rendered by Samghavarman is the most comprehensive. Successive lineage masters and senior monks of the Pure Land School have since antiquity relied primarily on the Samghavarman translation, using the other four as supplementary reference.

In the modern era, a little over a century ago, a Sanskrit version of the *Infinite Life Sutra* was discovered in Nepal, north of India. In 1894, Dr. Max Mueller in England translated the Sanskrit text into English and published it as Vol. 49 in the “Sacred Books of the East” series. In 1908, Dr. Nanjo Bunyu of Japan also rendered the Sanskrit sutra into Japanese. Its title: *Infinite Life Sutra, as Spoken by the Buddha – A Japanese Translation from the Sanskrit and Comparison With the Five Chinese Translations*.

However, when compared with the five existing Chinese renderings, the original Sanskrit text contains many omissions. It is even inferior to *Assembly of the Tathagata of Infinite Life* from the Tang era. So this Sanskrit text cannot serve as the basis or benchmark of the principles of the Pure Land School.

In summation, there are six versions: five Chinese translations and one original text in Sanskrit. Of the six, our choice is still the more complete *Infinite Life Sutra, as Spoken by the Buddha*.

2. In China, the *Contemplation of Infinite Life Sutra* is said to have both “two translations” and “three translations.” The “three translations” refer to:

- *Contemplation of Infinite Life Sutra, as Spoken by the Buddha* (1 fascicle, Later Han Dynasty, translator unknown; lost)
- *Contemplation of Infinite Life Sutra, as Spoken by the Buddha* (1 fascicle, Liu-Song Dynasty, Kalayashas; **surviving**)
- *Contemplation of the Infinite Life Buddha Sutra* (1 fascicle, Liu-Song Dynasty, Dharmamitra; lost)

“Two translations” simply takes away the first item above. In any case, only the translation by Kalayashas is in circulation today. Dr. Takakusu Junjiro and Max Mueller jointly produced an English

rendering of Kalayashas' text and included it in Vol. 49 of "Sacred Books of the East."

3. The *Amitabha Sutra* has three translations in China:

- *Amitabha Sutra, as Spoken by the Buddha* (1 fascicle, Yao-Qin Dynasty, translator Kumarajiva; **surviving**)
- *Shorter Infinite Life Sutra, as Spoken by the Buddha* (1 fascicle, Liu-Song Dynasty, Gunabhadra; lost)
- *Sutra in Praise of the Pure Land Embraced by All Buddhas* (1 fascicle, Tang Dynasty, Xuan Zang; **surviving**)

Max Mueller made an English translation from the Sanskrit and included it in Vol. 49 of "Sacred Books of the East." Nanjo Bunyu also translated the Sanskrit text into Japanese, titled *Amitabha Sutra, as Spoken by the Buddha – A Japanese Translation from the Sanskrit and Comparison With the Two Chinese Translations*. He published it alongside his

aforementioned Japanese rendering of the Sanskrit *Longer Sutra*.

Though the Three Sutras have multiple translations, here are the three used as benchmarks for the Pure Land teachings:

- *Infinite Life Sutra, as Spoken by the Buddha* (2 fascicles, Samghavarman, 252 CE)
- *Contemplation of Infinite Life Sutra, as Spoken by the Buddha* (1 fascicle, Kalayashas, 433)
- *Amitabha Sutra, as Spoken by the Buddha* (1 fascicle, Kumarajiva, 402).



*Chapter 5*

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**Brief Introduction to the Pure  
Land Sutras**



1. *The Infinite Life Sutra, as Spoken by the Buddha* is the first of the Pure Land School's three core scriptures. It is also called, in abbreviated form, the *Longer Sutra*, *Longer Core*, *Life Sutra* or *Two-Fascicle Sutra*, being divided into the first and second fascicles.

The First Fascicle tells how Bhikku Dharmakara, in the causal ground, became a monk, made his vows, practiced, and accomplished the Land of Bliss. The Second Fascicle describes the splendid features of the realm after its creation, and urges three tiers of beings (upper, middle, lower) of different proclivities and abilities "single-mindedly and exclusively to recite the name of the Buddha of Infinite Life." It also warns explicitly about the pain and suffering in the Saha world, engendering in sentient beings a revulsion towards it and a wish to leave.

Finally, it enjoins Bodhisattva Maitreya: Amitabha-recitation contains immeasurably great benefits, merit and virtues; one should overcome all obstacles to hear, believe and practice this teaching. In future, when the Way and the sutras are all

extinguished, this sutra will be retained in the world for another hundred years, so as to save suffering beings in the Age of Dharma Extinction.

The *Infinite Life Sutra* is also known as *Basic Intention Sutra*, for it is the scripture in which Shakyamuni Buddha announces the underlying reason for his appearance in our world. Pinpointing the basic intention, the sutra's introductory section says: "***With infinite great compassion, the Tathagata commiserates with the beings of the Three Domains. Therefore, he appears in the world to disseminate the teaching of the Way, wishing to save the multitudes by endowing them with real benefits.***"

The text tells how all Buddhas emanate because they feel compassion for ordinary beings in the burning house of the Three Domains and the sea of suffering in the Six Realms. Though they speak a lifetime's teachings, ultimately they guide beings towards the Buddha-recitation path of Amitabha's deliverance (to give them real benefits). "Real benefits" means the path of Amitabha-recitation. If not for that path, the multitudes would have no means of

leaving behind the suffering in the fiery house of the Three Domains.

The path of Buddha-recitation is both surpassing and easy to practice. Master Shandao said: “Amitabha-recitation is the gateway to nirvana.” Recitation of Amitabha Buddha’s name leads to certain rebirth in Amitabha’s Pure Land. Reciters exit the suffering of the Three Domains and Six Realms, and experience the joy of nirvana and the attainment of Buddhahood. They are thus “endowed” with the “real benefits” of recitation followed by Buddhahood.

Therefore the *Infinite Life Sutra* represents the very core of Shakyamuni Buddha’s basic intention. Alone among the scriptures, it is known as the *Basic Intention Sutra*. It is also referred to as the *Specially Retained Sutra* or *Uniquely Retained Sutra*. In other words, when all scriptures disappear after the 10,000 years of the Age of Dharma Decline, this sutra alone will remain – because it enshrines the Buddha’s basic intention.

2. The *Contemplation of Infinite Life Sutra*, abbreviated as *Contemplation Sutra*, is the second of

the three core Pure Land sutras. At Queen Vaidehi’s behest, Shakyamuni Buddha spoke of the meditative practices, then explained the non-meditative practices on his own initiative. He steered sentient beings to admire the Pure Land and dedicate merit to rebirth there. Though he spoke extensively about meditative and non-meditative practices, in the circulation section he recommended only the path of Buddha-invocation – exclusive name-recitation according to Amitabha’s Fundamental Vow. Master Shandao wrote his *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra* to explicate this text. Explaining that the three sutras of “rebirth through Amitabha-recitation” shared a single essence, he established the Pure Land School.

Master Shandao, in his “Meaning of the Introduction to the *Contemplation Sutra*,” described Shakyamuni Buddha’s lifetime of Sacred Path teachings on self-power practice as “pre-transformation” (i.e., before the Pure Land Sutras). In other words, the various doctrines of the Sacred Path were expedient steps towards the Buddha’s unfolding of the Pure Land path. For Shakyamuni Buddha’s underlying intention was to teach about Amitabha’s

Pure Land. But because the conditions weren't yet ripe, Shakyamuni first taught the Avatamsaka, Agama, Vaipulya, Prajna, Lotus and Nirvana doctrines. Only when the time and circumstances were right did he deliver the Three Pure Land Sutras in succession.

So all the Buddha's other teachings were expedient precursors to the Pure Land Sutras. Master Shandao called these doctrines "a lifetime's teachings pre-transformation." They are wholly encapsulated within the *Contemplation Sutra's* meditative and non-meditative practices. Practitioners are induced to focus on name-recitation according to Amitabha's Fundamental Vow. Therefore the sutra's circulation section says: ***"Bear these words well in mind. To bear these words in mind means to recite the name of the Buddha of Infinite Life."***

Master Shandao explains: ***"Though preceding passages spoke of the merits of the meditative and non-meditative virtues, the Buddha's underlying wish is that sentient beings recite Amitabha's name single-mindedly."***

That is why the *Contemplation Sutra's* circulation section is also known as the "Summation Text of a Lifetime's Teachings." In the *Amitabha Sutra*, Shakyamuni Buddha presses on from this summation text by speaking exclusively of Buddha-recitation according to Amitabha's Fundamental Vow, referring to no other teachings. Therefore the *Amitabha Sutra* is also known as the "Summation Sutra of a Lifetime's Teachings."

3. *Amitabha Sutra, as Spoken by the Buddha* is the last of the three core Pure Land sutras. Its abbreviated names include *Amitabha Sutra* and *Shorter Sutra*. Before entering nirvana, Shakyamuni Buddha, without being asked, spoke of the splendors of the environment and inhabitants of the Land of Bliss. Three times he urged sentient beings to aspire to rebirth there. As for the methods of rebirth, he no longer mentioned the dedication of merit from virtuous practices but directly spotlighted the chief cause of Amitabha-recitation, which confers abundant virtuous roots and meritorious blessings. If they recite his name single-mindedly, sentient beings will certainly be welcomed and guided by Amitabha, to

be reborn in his Pure Land with correct thoughts. All Buddhas sincerely bear witness to these benefits.

Continuing from the circulation section of the *Contemplation Sutra*, this sutra provides a final summary of Pure Land thought on Amitabha Buddha's deliverance via the Fundamental Vow. It is also Shakyamuni Buddha's summing up of his lifetime of teaching, and is thus called the "Summation Sutra of a Lifetime's Teachings."

Of the scripture, Master Ouyi says in his *Explication of Important Points in the Amitabha Sutra*:

*It is the hidden treasure of the Avatamsaka Sutra, the secret essence of the Lotus Sutra. Not even the inner thoughts of all Buddhas or the compass of the Bodhisattvas' myriad practices exceeds this.*



## *Chapter 6*

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# Gist of the Pure Land Sutras

1. The *Infinite Life Sutra* was spoken by Shakyamuni Buddha in a state of perfect samadhi on Mt. Gridhrakuta. Appearing in a majestic form similar to Amitabha Buddha's and with Ven. Ananda as addressee, he revealed the other-power path that was the basic intention of his appearance in the world.

The First Fascicle tells of the causes and consequences relating to Amitabha Buddha's Pure Land.

The causal conditions: When Amitabha Buddha manifested as Bhikku Dharmakara at the time of Lokeshvararaja Buddha, he viewed 21 billion Buddha Lands. From their best, most beautiful features, he wanted to establish a Pure Land and made 48 Vows. His great threefold pledge was to save, and cause to be reborn in the Land of Tranquil Nourishment, all those who hear the rationale behind his vow-power and believe in it, be they virtuous or malevolent, wise or foolish. Unless this were accomplished, he vowed not to gain Buddhahood. For countless *kalpas* afterwards, he practiced according to his vows. These are the causal conditions of Amitabha's Pure Land.

The consequences: Bhikku Dharmakara practiced, fulfilled his vows, became Amitabha Buddha, and accomplished the Western Pure Land. He manifested the six-character name, "Namo Amitabha Buddha," throughout the worlds of the ten directions, allowing sentient beings to hear and believe in it.

Then, the Second Fascicle relates the causes and consequences of sentient beings' rebirth.

The causes can be divided into two kinds: i) rebirth from Amitabha-recitation and ii) rebirth through various practices. The Second Fascicle first discusses the causes of rebirth from recitation, then the causes of rebirth via sundry practices. Later, in the gatha on "Eastern lands," the various Buddhas praise and recommend these two causes of rebirth.

The consequences of beings' rebirth: That is, the fruit of Buddhahood from beings' rebirth in the Pure Land. From the meaning of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Vow, Shakyamuni Buddha proceeds to explain that Bodhisattvas Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprabhata were the first two to be reborn, adding that all persons after rebirth fully possess the 32 marks of a Buddha, perfect

wisdom and special powers. They are able to make offerings to Buddhas in the ten directions and freely deliver sentient beings in countless worlds, as they wish.

Next is the passage where Shakyamuni Buddha urges beings to believe in the teachings and shun evil. He earnestly advises people to avoid the Five Evil Actions, engage in the Five Good Actions, and refrain from forsaking benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and sincerity. Then comes a reference to those who “do not recognize Buddha-Wisdom.” Here “Buddha-Wisdom” means Amitabha’s ability to deliver sentient beings equally and on a non-discriminatory basis. Those who firmly believe in Buddha-Wisdom will, after rebirth, enter the Realm of Rewards directly; their lotus will open and they will see Amitabha Buddha. Those who do not so believe but nonetheless recite Amitabha’s name exclusively will be reborn in a womb-palace and stay there 500 years. So people are urged to believe firmly in the Buddha’s unfathomable wisdom.

2. The gist of the *Contemplation of Infinite Life Sutra*: When Shakyamuni Buddha was teaching the Dharma on Mt. Gridhrakuta, a great tragedy occurred in Rajgir. Crown Prince Ajatasatru imprisoned his father King Bimbisara and subjected his mother, Queen Vaidehi, to similar suffering. Under unbearable grief, Vaidehi thought of Shakyamuni Buddha from a distance. The Buddha appeared in Vaidehi’s room using special powers. From his own light, he manifested Buddha Lands of the ten directions before her. After viewing them, she asked about the way to attain rebirth in Amitabha Buddha’s Pure Land.

Shakyamuni Buddha first told Vaidehi about practice of the 13 meditative virtues. They aim to still anxiety and focus the mind, making it calm and free of extraneous thoughts so as to contemplate the Land of Tranquil Nourishment, as well as its Buddha and Bodhisattvas. Then Shakyamuni Buddha started teaching Vaidehi “the methods to eliminate suffering and distress.” When he reached the Seventh Contemplation – the Lotus Throne – Amitabha Buddha suddenly appeared in mid-air. Bowing to Amitabha in veneration, Vaidehi developed faith in certain rebirth. She was delighted, awakened.

Having spoken of the 13 contemplations of meditative virtues, Shakyamuni Buddha, without Vaidehi's asking, went on to talk about the three contemplations relating to non-meditative virtues. The latter means abandoning evil and doing good, with a scattered mindset.

What are these virtues? They are the so-called three meritorious practices: worldly good, good of the Theravada and good of the Mahayana. The Buddha uses these to classify the proclivities and capabilities of sentient beings, dividing them into nine grades.

In the Mahayana category are those of the upper level, upper grade; middle level, upper grade; and lower level, upper grade. Among the three meritorious practices, they undertake actions aimed at achieving Bodhi and Buddhahood.

Possessed of Theravada propensities are those in the upper level, middle grade and the middle level, middle grade. They observe precepts among the three meritorious practices. Those reborn in the lower level of the middle grade have worldly inclinations and practice worldly virtues.

Beings reborn in the upper, middle and lower levels of the lower grade have nothing to do with the three meritorious practices. Though they are malevolent people who hardly do any good, even they can be reborn in the Pure Land by reciting the name of Amitabha Buddha.

Finally, the sutra lauds recitation of the six-character name, "Namo Amitabha Buddha," as the most splendid way to attain Buddhahood. The scripture advises people to believe and undertake its teachings.

3. The *Amitabha Sutra* was spoken by Shakyamuni Buddha in Jeta Grove, Anathapindika's Monastery in Sravasti, with Ven. Sariputra as the addressee. It first indicates the location of the Land of Bliss, then explains the name "Bliss." It proceeds to praise the splendors of the environment there, including the jewelled trees and ponds as well as heavenly music. Using boundless light and infinite life to explain Amitabha's name, the sutra expresses praise that people reborn in his land also gain those attributes.

It goes on to note that those who want such rebirth would have to abandon the merit and virtues of self-power, which have few virtuous roots and meritorious blessings. Instead, they are admonished to recite the name of Amitabha Buddha, which contains abundant virtuous roots and meritorious blessings. That brings out the full meaning of what was left incomplete in the *Contemplation Sutra*. Finally, Shakyamuni Buddha describes how all Buddhas of the six directions – east, south, west, north, above and below – as plentiful as sand in the Ganges River, verified the truth and substantiality of Amitabha-recitation. Citing the benefits of protection and remembrance by the Buddhas, it advises people to believe in Amitabha Buddha and recite his name.

4. The underlying intention of Shakyamuni Buddha's appearance in the world was solely to promote the Fundamental Vow of Amitabha Buddha and encourage sentient beings to undertake other-power Amitabha-recitation. While Shakyamuni first taught the *Infinite Life Sutra*, delivering a broad message, he didn't clearly explain why recitation was superior to other practices. He had to go on to the

*Contemplation Sutra* and *Amitabha Sutra*, so that even skeptics with deep self-power inclinations could hear the message (of Amitabha's deliverance) and believe it. We can only respond to Shakyamuni Buddha's profound compassion and earnest arrangements with tears of joy.





*Chapter 7*

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**Key Ideas of the Pure Land  
Sutras**

1. The previous chapter examined the contents of the Three Sutras in sequential order. It's time to consider the main ideas of the scriptures. "Key ideas" means the broad outline, the principle notions – the general narrative of a book or an article. It's a rough, simple extraction of the substance that a text wishes to express.

As the ancients said, "key ideas" seek to "embrace the beginning and the ending, to connect the first and the last." It's a guideline to sum up a sutra's opening and conclusion, and to unify everything in between.

2. Key idea of the *Infinite Life Sutra*: The text's principal thrust lies in the "dispatch" and the "calling out" respectively of Shakyamuni Buddha and Amitabha Buddha. They wish to confer upon sentient beings the real merit and virtues of the latter's six-character name. Shakyamuni relates the karma behind Amitabha and his Pure Land, and urges beings to seek rebirth there. In terms of Shakyamuni Buddha and his intention, it is to dispatch (beings to the Land of Bliss). From the perspective of Amitabha Buddha, he is calling out (for them to come home).

3. Key idea of the *Contemplation of Infinite Life Sutra*: According to Master Shandao's "Section on the Underlying Meaning" (*Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra*), Shakyamuni Buddha introduced the "Path of Importance" to guide those attached to the meditative and non-meditative practices of the Sacred Path towards other-power Buddha-recitation. That is the key idea of the scripture.

In the Pure Land teachings, the Path of Importance is a crucial gateway for practitioners of the difficult, self-power meditative and non-meditative virtues to enter the Easy Path of other-power recitation (thus its name). So in the *Contemplation Sutra*, Shakyamuni Buddha expediently mentions the self-power teachings of the 13 meditative and three non-meditative virtues. Incrementally, he induces practitioners to turn exclusively to the path of Amitabha-recitation.

*In the Contemplation Sutra,  
Shakyamuni opens the Gate of  
Importance,  
Drawing those with meditative and  
non-meditative inclinations.  
Mixing primary and assorted practices  
Is just for expediency,  
All to steer them towards Buddha-  
recitation,  
The karma of assurance.*

4. Key idea of the *Amitabha Sutra*: The scripture disparages the self-power practices, as they contain few virtuous roots and meritorious blessings. Its key idea is to urge people to recite Amitabha's name, which has abundant virtuous roots and meritorious blessings. This is also clear from the previous chapter.



## *Chapter 8*

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# **The Core and the Body of the Pure Land Sutras**

1. All sutras have have their “core” and “body.” Since ancient times, discussions of scriptures have usually begun with their key idea, then proceeded to define their “core” and “body.” Only then could the fundamental meaning of a text be understood.

The “core” of a sutra: The term means principal, important, purpose, main point. It also implies supremacy, dominance – as in “a country cannot have two kings.” It refers to the most important principle or doctrine discussed in a scripture, its central teaching.

In his *Explication of Important Points in the Amitabha Sutra*, Master Ouyi says: “The core is the essential path for self-cultivation, the nexus for understanding the body, and the framework to steer the myriad practices.” To put it simply, the core is the guiding principle of a Dharma school, its most important form of practice.

The “body” of a sutra: The essence, substance, chief constituent. It is the destination of a text, the convergence point of its meanings – and of the Dharma paths mentioned in a sutra. It’s like the

various stars surrounding the Pole Star, or rivers and streams flowing into the ocean.

Since antiquity, a relevant metaphor has been that the core is like the beams of a house, while the body is akin to the timber used to build it. This is a very good analogy.

2. First, consider the “core” and “body” of the *Infinite Life Sutra*. The two fascicles of the *Longer Sutra* cover a broad range of subjects. Yet the central point is none other than Amitabha Buddha’s 48 Vows, which means the Fundamental Vow is the “core” of the sutra. Even more so, the underlying spirit of each and every vow is the name of Amitabha Buddha. Not only that, but the name is the basic essence that links the entire *Longer Sutra*. Thus Amitabha’s name is the “body” of the scripture.

In fact, the Fundamental Vow and the name originally were not separate. The only difference is that one is the cause (the Vow), while the other is the consequence (the name). Both are of a single essence. But the 48 Vows are the general element, and the

name the distinctive factor. Because of the dichotomy between the general and the distinctive, we speak of the core and the body of the sutra.

3. As for the “core” and “body” of the *Contemplation Sutra*, the various masters are divided. Master Huiyuan said that the core was “Buddha-contemplation samadhi.” But Master Zhizhe considered “contemplating the mind” the sutra’s core, and “ultimate reality” its body. Master Shandao did not explain things like that. In “Section on the Underlying Meaning,” he said:

*The Contemplation Sutra has "Buddha-contemplation samadhi" as its core, and also "Buddha-invocation samadhi" as its core. Its body is the "single-minded dedication of merit towards rebirth in the Pure Land."*

In his initial explanation of the *Contemplation Sutra*, Master Shandao implied that the scripture had two cores and one body.

Let’s first consider the sutra’s core. As the core is the most important part of a text, having two cores of equal stature would be like having a realm with two kings. That would be highly unusual in scripture interpretation. Yet Master Shandao’s formulation of the “two cores” tries to separate the sutra’s form (which is evident) from its substance (hidden). From the external, formal description, the sutra’s core is “Buddha-contemplation samadhi.” But in terms of the inner meaning, the core is “Buddha-invocation (recitation) samadhi.” By examining two sides of the same sutra, Shandao presents a distinguished interpretation.

Thus the *Contemplation Sutra* has two facets: the “evident” and the “hidden.” The evident aspect speaks only of the meditative and non-meditative virtues. So in terms of the evident dimension, the core of the sutra is Buddha-contemplation samadhi. But the hidden aspect points to other-power Buddha-invocation. From that perspective, the core is Buddha-invocation samadhi. Therefore, the *Contemplation Sutra* has two cores – the open and the concealed.

Buddha-contemplation samadhi is to unify all thoughts and meditate on the Buddha's exalted features. And Buddha-invocation samadhi is to rest the mind exclusively on Amitabha Buddha and, with no doubts, pause or admixture, recite his name single-mindedly.

The *Contemplation Sutra*, as per its “evident meaning,” discusses the 16 Contemplations. Succinctly, that's to “contemplate the Land of Bliss, the Infinite Life Buddha, and the Bodhisattvas Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta.” In other words, the environment and the beings of Amitabha's Pure Land. An even simpler description would be “to contemplate the Buddha of Infinite Life.” So, as an initial step, from the evident aspect, contemplation of the Infinite Life Buddha can be said to be the sutra's central point. That corresponds with Buddha-contemplation samadhi.

But a deeper look reveals a “hidden meaning.” To infer from the text on Amitabha Buddha's “appearance in mid-air” during the Seventh Contemplation (Lotus Throne), on “embracing and never abandoning

sentient beings who invoke” Amitabha, and on “name-recitation” by beings in the lower three grades, the sutra clearly takes Buddha-invocation samadhi as its nucleus.

From that perspective, the “contemplation” in the sutra's title would mean contemplation of Amitabha Buddha's Fundamental Vow. That is, to contemplate and believe. The *Treatise on Rebirth* speaks of “**observing [contemplating] the power of Amitabha's fundamental vows**” – in other words, to “contemplate and believe” that we are embraced by the 48 Vows of the *Infinite Life Sutra*.

Therefore, a single text contains two levels of meaning, the evident and the hidden. At the open level, Buddha-contemplation is the core. From the concealed aspect, Buddha-invocation (recitation) is. The words “and also” indicate the crux of the issue – that beyond Buddha-contemplation is Buddha-invocation.

On to the sutra's body: It lies in the “single-minded dedication of merit towards rebirth in the Pure Land.” Why? Buddha-contemplation or Buddha-invocation, the goal is the single-minded dedication

of merit towards rebirth in the Land of Bliss. That's the culmination, the end-point of the *Contemplation Sutra's* teachings. Master Honen also says: "***The Three Sutras all chose Buddha-invocation as their central point.***"

So we can see that this sutra takes Buddha-recitation as its core and rebirth in the Pure Land as its body. Of the practices that allow us to be embraced, Buddha-recitation is the foremost. The consequence of Buddha-recitation is the benefit of rebirth.

4. The body of the *Amitabha Sutra* is the name of the Buddha of Infinite Life, and the core is the name's exclusive recitation.

How do we know? The sutra's chief contents are threefold: First, it tells of the merit and virtues of the Pure Land's environment and inhabitants, arousing admiration among sentient beings. Then the scripture explains that those with little virtue cannot be reborn there, stressing that name-recitation leads to rebirth. Finally, it describes the sincere admonition of all Buddhas that beings believe and accept the teaching.

Of the three points above, the first guides people in the direction of rebirth through Amitabha-recitation. The second speaks directly of rebirth through recitation, while the third urges beings to believe in rebirth through recitation. So the three points converge into one: rebirth through Buddha-recitation. Therefore, "rebirth through recitation" is the core of the sutra, and the name recited is the body of the entire text.

5. Pure Land adherents have long had their own, different interpretations of the Three Sutras and their various ways of practice. Only the lineage of Masters Tanluan, Daochuo and Shandao have, from the start, treated the Three Sutras as a single, consistent entity. In his *Commentary on the Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land*, Tanluan said of the Three Sutras that "***the essence [body] of those teachings is the name of the [Infinite Life] Buddha.***"

Even more explicitly, Master Shandao pointed out that the Three Sutras had a single core point – to obtain rebirth in the Pure Land through exclusive name-recitation. His *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra* says:

*The 48 Vows of the Infinite Life Sutra illuminate only that exclusive recitation of Amitabha's name leads to rebirth.*

*In the Amitabha Sutra, exclusive recitation of Amitabha's name over one or seven days leads to rebirth. This is sincerely corroborated by Buddhas in the ten directions, as numerous as grains of sand in the Ganges River.*

*And the passages in this sutra [Contemplation Sutra] on the meditative and non-meditative virtues only underscore that exclusive recitation of Amitabha's name leads to rebirth.*

Thus the Three Sutras are wholly consistent in their core and body.

6. On the body of the Three Pure Land Sutras, there are actually two major schools of thought. The first is the Tiantai assessment, which considers “ultimate reality” as the body. Then there is the

Shandao lineage and its Pure Land classifications, which regard Amitabha's name as the body.

The Tiantai believe that all Mahayana sutras have ultimate reality as their body. That's a view common to all Mahayana schools, so there should be no dissent. Yet, to say that Amitabha's name is the body is to take a Pure Land perspective. To Pure Land practitioners, it is not only more appropriate but also more meaningful as a guide to practice. In other words, to take ultimate reality as body is standard in all Mahayana scriptures, but using Amitabha's name as such underscores the surpassing nature of the Three Pure Land Sutras. That's because the six-character name is ultimate reality in all its perfection, the ultimate reality in the fulfillment ground of the merit and virtues of Amitabha Buddha's practice. So it is taken as the body.

The process from noumenal (theoretical) ultimate reality to phenomenal (practical) ultimate reality is unfathomable. If noumenal reality is like the rice crop, phenomenal reality would be steamed rice – ready to be eaten after processing and cooking. Amitabha's name is like the cooked rice, which can be consumed



immediately. Though the portion is the same, the functions are completely different.

To regard ultimate reality as the body would mean that only the realization of ultimate reality would qualify as appropriate practice. That's why all Mahayana sutras take the realization of ultimate reality as their core. If Amitabha's name is the body, reciting or proclaiming it would be practicing according to ultimate reality. The reciter at once realizes the ultimate reality of the Buddha. Therefore the Three Pure Land Sutras have exclusive recitation of Amitabha's name as their core.

To practice directly according to ultimate reality would be self-power. It is difficult, and ordinary beings would find it hard to obtain benefits. The *Collection on the Land of Peace and Joy* says: **"In the context of Mahayana, the True Suchness, the Ultimate Reality and the First-Principle Emptiness have never been within the reach of the mind."** But if one begins practice with name-recitation, even ordinary beings, without eliminating their afflictions, can realize nirvana. Naturally, it would be other-

power, and easy to practice. The *Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land* says: **"To recite that Tathagata's name... is to correspond with practice that accords with ultimate reality."** And Tanluan's *Commentary* on the treatise notes that Amitabha's name is the "Body of Absolute Reality" and the "Body for the Benefit of Living Beings."

Generally speaking, the different interpretations of the Three Pure Land Sutras have created a division of Pure Land traditions into pristine Pure Land and mixed Pure Land streams. To take ultimate reality as the body and adopt the thinking of the Sacred Path schools is the way of the mixed Pure Land traditions. To consider Amitabha's name as the body and emphasize purely the power of the Buddha's vows is the pristine Pure Land path. The Pure Land School of the Shandao lineage applies "the name as body" to the Three Sutras, genuinely highlighting the substance behind the other-power teachings relating to Amitabha Buddha. That resonates with both the specialness of Pure Land teachings and the substandard capabilities of ordinary beings.



*Chapter 9*

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**The Evident and the Hidden in  
the Pure Land Sutras**

1. When comparing two things, there are roughly three ways to show that one is superior to the other: directly, comparatively and obliquely.

- i. *Directly*: “A is the best” – a direct endorsement of A.
- ii. *Comparatively (to reject one & accept the other, explicit)*: “B is inferior, A is superior.” To praise A by comparing it to B.
- iii. *Obliquely (evident vs. hidden, concealed)*: “B is not bad”... Though superficially praising B, the underlying intention is to acclaim A.

The basic ethos of the Three Pure Land Sutras is to commend deliverance through Amitabha’s name, and to urge people to believe in it and undertake Buddha-recitation. Even so, Shakyamuni Buddha had three ways of delivering his message:

- i. To acclaim solely faith in other-power Amitabha-recitation, using the direct method.
- ii. To compare the myriad self-power practices with other-power Amitabha-recitation,

advising rejection of the inferior myriad practices and acceptance of other-power recitation. This is the comparative method.

- iii. While commending the myriad self-power practices and self-power Amitabha-recitation, to subtly acclaim faith in other-power name-recitation. This is the oblique approach.

The second, comparative method is also known as “rejecting (something) & accepting (something else),” while the third, oblique approach is called “making evident & hidden.” So-called “rejecting & accepting” is to compare the myriad practices with Amitabha-recitation – and to drop the inferior myriad practices and adopt the superior name-recitation. The “oblique” option lies in affirming the merit and virtues of the myriad self-power practices and self-power Buddha-recitation, but subtly acclaiming those of other-power recitation as supreme. In other words, the “rejecting & accepting” method makes an explicit comparison, while the “evident vs. hidden” approach adopts a concealed one.

2. Now we will look at where these methods are used in the Three Pure Land Sutras. The *Infinite Life Sutra* employs mostly the “direct” approach. From the start, it advises Buddha-recitation alone. Yet in the part on the three tiers of rebirth in the Second Fascicle, the tone is a bit different. That section lists practices such as taking monastic vows, observing precepts, building pagodas and temples, cultivating various merits and virtues, as well as exclusively reciting the name of Amitabha Buddha.

In “Chapter on the Three Tiers” from his *Collection on Choosing Buddha-Recitation According to the Fundamental Vow*, Master Honen says: ***“It’s to reject the myriad practices for Buddha-recitation that [Shakyamuni] speaks about the myriad practices.”*** And: ***“The myriad practices are spoken so they can be abandoned. Buddha-recitation is discussed in order to adopt it.”***

Though that echoes Master Shandao’s explication in *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra*, the sutra’s section on the three tiers itself contains the implication of “rejecting & accepting.”

What about the oblique method of “evident & hidden” content? That is entirely absent in the *Longer Sutra*. The approach speaks openly and expediently of dedicating merit from the myriad practices, but secretly advocates exclusive Amitabha-recitation. In the *Infinite Life Sutra*, it cannot be found anywhere in the text. Even the part on the three tiers explicitly lists the myriad self-power practices (expedient) and other-power Buddha-recitation (ultimate), avoiding oblique, hidden implications.

3. As mentioned before, the *Contemplation of Infinite Life Sutra* starts by laying out 16 Contemplations involving the meditative and non-meditative virtues. Only at the end does it acclaim “recitation of Namo Amitabha Buddha” alone. Said Master Shandao in “Meaning of the Non-Meditative Virtues”:

***Though preceding passages spoke of the merits of the meditative and non-meditative virtues, the Buddha’s underlying wish is that sentient beings recite Amitabha’s name single-mindedly.***

Master Honen inherited such thinking and established the comparative method of “reject & accept.” He determined that “the myriad practices are spoken so they can be abandoned. Only Buddha-recitation is discussed in order to adopt it.”

As for the oblique approach, consider dark clouds obscuring the sky, through which the flash of a dragon’s claw can be seen (evident). From that we know that the clouds conceal an entire dragon (hidden).

The *Longer Sutra*: The true, ultimate teaching, with no oblique meanings. It is like the whole dragon, fully visible.

The *Contemplation Sutra*: An expedient teaching, therefore it contains oblique elements. The meditative and non-meditative virtues are the evident subjects, while the Great Vow (of Amitabha Buddha) is the concealed component to be promoted. On the surface, Shakyamuni Buddha is speaking about the meditative and non-meditative virtues, opening the Path of Importance in Pure Land teaching. But amid the discourse, Amitabha appears and shows that his great, compassionate Fundamental Vow – the 18<sup>th</sup>

Vow in the *Longer Sutra* – is separate from the Path of Importance. So while the *Longer Sutra* differs from the *Contemplation Sutra* in their “evident” content, the essence of what they wish to promote is the same.

The *Contemplation Sutra* also refers to the Three States of Mind: Sincere Mind, Deep Mind and the Mind of Merit-Dedication & Aspiration. From the “evident” perspective, the trio are the “self-power Three States of Mind” generated by practitioners as they cultivate the meditative and non-meditative virtues and dedicate the merit towards rebirth in the Pure Land. As Master Shandao says in “Section on the Underlying Meaning,” *Contemplation Sutra*: ***“‘Meditative’ means to still anxiety and concentrate the mind. ‘Non-meditative’ means to reject evil and nurture good. One should dedicate these two practices in aspiring to rebirth in the Pure Land.”***

From the “concealed” viewpoint, all beings – sacred or ordinary, good or evil – depend on the single-mindedness and other-power relating to Amitabha’s deliverance. In his “Section on the Underlying Meaning,” Shandao says:

*With reference to the Great Vow, as the Longer Sutra says: Ordinary beings who gain rebirth, be they good or evil, all do so by relying on the karmic power of Amitabha's Great Vow as an augmentative cause.*

4. As mentioned in Chapter 3, the *Amitabha Sutra* elaborates on the meaning left unexplained in the circulation section of the *Contemplation Sutra*. It dispenses entirely with the myriad self-power practices, which have already been designated for rejection. The scripture only says that rebirth cannot be achieved with few virtuous roots and meritorious blessings, and urges aspirants to adopt Amitabha-recitation, which contains abundant virtuous roots and meritorious blessings. Though it doesn't compare the myriad practices directly with Buddha-recitation, the implication is fully apparent. It doesn't openly use the "reject & accept" method, but a close examination shows it has in effect done so.

It isn't apparent that the sutra makes any oblique comparisons.



## *Chapter 10*

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# **Credentials of the Pure Land Sutas**

1. To establish a central point, the relevant core scriptures must be identified. After that, the credentials of the texts need to be ascertained. Only then can their merits and deficiencies be compared with those of other scriptures.

2. The credentials of the Three Sutras can be subjected to either relative or absolute classification and assessment. So-called “relative classification” entails comparison with the credentials of other teachings on an equal basis. “Absolute assessment,” however, elevates the qualifications of one’s own teachings above others’ and stresses solely the absolute value of the former.

Let’s first examine relative classification and assessment.

- The Pure Land-Sacred Path mode (Path of Importance) has two kinds of teachings: Greater Vehicle and Lesser Vehicle.
- Within the Greater Vehicle, there are two teachings: the sudden and the gradual.

- Within the sudden doctrines, there are again two teachings and two transcendences:

*Two teachings –*

- i. The Difficult Path, ultimate teachings of the Sacred Path – the Avatamsaka, Lotus, Esoteric, Ch’an (Zen) doctrines, etc.
- ii. The Easy Path, ultimate teaching of the Fundamental Vow in Pure Land – Three Pure Land Sutras.

*Two transcendences –*

- i. Vertical. Self-power practice under the Sacred Path schools, sudden enlightenment within the present lifetime.
  - ii. Horizontal. Relying on Amitabha Buddha’s Fundamental Vow, transformational rebirth in the Pure Land’s Realm of Rewards.
- Within the gradual doctrines, there are also two teachings and two ascendancies:

*Two teachings –*

- i. The Difficult Path, expedient teachings of the Sacred Path, gradual progress towards enlightenment over *kalpas*.
- ii. The Easy Path, the Pure Land Path of Importance, teachings about the meditative and non-meditative virtues, three meritorious practices, and nine levels of rebirth in the *Contemplation Sutra*.

*Two ascendancies –*

- i. Vertical. Self-power practices of the Sacred Path schools, gradual progress towards enlightenment over *kalpas*.
- ii. Horizontal. Dedication of merit from self-power practices in Pure Land, womb-birth in the Pure Land's Realm of Rewards.

The above classification and assessment follows the “Difficult and Easy Paths” of Bodhisattva Nagarjuna, the “Pure Land Path and Sacred Path”

definitions of Master Daochuo, and the “sudden and gradual teachings” as explained by Master Shandao. It is also grounded in this passage of the *Longer Sutra*:

***You will surely transcend [worldliness],  
end [samsara], escape [the Saha world],  
and be reborn in the Land of Peace and  
Joy. You will quickly cut off [the cycle of  
rebirth in] the Five Wretched Realms,  
which will close as a matter of course.***

A **sudden teaching** is one that enables rapid realization of enlightenment, while a **gradual teaching** entails slow realization.

The **Difficult Path** is the arduous way of self-cultivation; the **Easy Path** centers on easygoing Amitabha-recitation.

The **Sacred Path** involves practicing and achieving enlightenment in this Saha world; the **Pure Land Path** seeks rebirth in the Land of Bliss and the achievement of Buddhahood there.



**Vertical** is synonymous with self-power; **horizontal** means other-power.

**Transcendence** is the same as quick enlightenment; **ascendancy** is to achieve enlightenment incrementally, slowly.

The Three Treatises and Yogacara teachings rely on self-power and take *kalpas* to realize (“**vertical ascendancy**”). The Avatamsaka, Tiantai, Ch’an and Esoteric teachings utilize self-power but are accomplished suddenly (“**vertical transcendence**”). These two categories aim at developing *bodhicitta* (achievement of Buddhahood to deliver others) via self-power, Sacred Path practices.

The 19<sup>th</sup> Vow entails attainment of *bodhicitta* via self-power practices. Womb-born in the Pure Land’s Land of Rewards, practitioners develop deep regret and only see Amitabha Buddha when their lotus flower opens (“**horizontal ascendancy**”).

The 18<sup>th</sup> Vow involves achievement of *bodhicitta* via other-power and practitioners are transformationally reborn in the Realm of Rewards.

They attain nirvana directly, with no circuitous distractions (“**horizontal transcendence**”).

The foregoing is the “relative classification and assessment” from comparing the Sacred Path and Pure Land, including their subdivisions into sudden and gradual teachings.

3. There is also “absolute classification and assessment.” As Master Shandao says in his *In Praise of Pratyutpanna*:

*Texts such as the Contemplation Sutra and Amitabha Sutra proclaim sudden teachings of the Bodhisattva canon.*

That’s to say, the *Contemplation Sutra*, *Amitabha Sutra* and *Longer Sutra* speak of principles that come under the sudden teachings of the Bodhisattva (Mahayana) scriptures. The “Section on the Underlying Meaning” notes: “*This Contemplation Sutra should be included in the Bodhisattva canon, under the sudden teachings.*”

Are the “sudden teachings” mentioned by Master Shandao the same as, or different from, the sudden teachings referenced by other schools?

They are both similar and separate. On the one hand, the schools of the Sacred Path do have sudden teachings. But generally speaking, the Sacred Path focuses on gradual doctrines while only Pure Land teaches sudden deliverance. Why? Though the Ch’an, Esoteric, Tiantai and Avatamsaka schools are said to be sudden paths, they still require the elimination of delusion and achievement of enlightenment. So they are in effect incremental teachings. “Though the doctrine is sudden, [practitioners’] capabilities render them gradual,” as the saying goes.

Only Pure Land explicitly states that ordinary beings, without eradicating delusion, can directly exit the Three Realms, transcending them to achieve enlightenment quickly. This can be achieved by anyone. It’s why Pure Land is an absolute, sudden teaching.

The above is the absolute classification and assessment of the Three Pure Land Sutras. They are like a majestic, timeless peak covered with snow, soaring skyward amid a flat, vast plain.

