

Gaining Buddhahood Through Amitabha-Recitation Is the Teaching of the Buddhas

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MAIN SECTION

1. The Goal of Dharma-Learning Is to Gain Buddhahood

“Gaining Buddhahood through Amitabha-recitation is the teaching of the Buddhas.” That is to say, “reciting the name of Amitabha Buddha” and thereby “gaining Buddhahood” is the goal of Buddhism. If we recite but do not become a Buddha, that is not the purpose of Buddhist teaching.

To learn the Dharma, we must first take refuge in the Three Gems. But taking refuge is not the goal but the first step, the foundation. The ultimate end of taking refuge is to attain Buddhahood. If not, it isn't true learning of the Dharma or the taking of refuge. So it is with Amitabha-recitation. If the final purpose isn't to become a Buddha, the practice is not real Amitabha-recitation.

There are four methods of “*nianfo*” (invocation or recollection of a Buddha). They are invocation at the level of absolute reality, meditative invocation, invocation by visualization and oral invocation of the Buddha's name. The *nianfo* we speak of is not the first three kinds, but the fourth – recitation of the name. Of the four varieties, “name-recitation” is the simplest, most direct and most widespread. It can be practiced in any era, anywhere and by anyone. It is also the most sublime, surpassing and reliable form. So what we refer to here is name-recitation alone.

As for “Buddha,” there is Shakyamuni Buddha, Amitabha Buddha, Bhaisajyaguru (Medicine) Buddha, Aksobhya Buddha. There are Buddhas of the past and future, the 1,000 Buddhas and the 10,000 Buddhas ... Which Buddha's name do we recite? Not those of the past and future Buddhas, and not those of the 1,000 and 10,000 Buddhas. We recite only “*Namo Amitabha Buddha.*”

Having attained Buddhahood ten *kalpas* ago, Amitabha is the Buddha of Infinite Life. So Amitabha is a Buddha of the present, as well as a Buddha of the future who will forever exist. And what we speak of here is oral recitation of the six-character Name of a Myriad Virtues, *Namo Amitabha Buddha*. In other words, we can achieve Buddhahood by reciting *Namo Amitabha Buddha*.

“Gaining Buddhahood through Amitabha-recitation is the teaching of the Buddhas” means that so long as they recite *Namo Amitabha Buddha*, people can gain Buddhahood, whether they live in the Age of Correct Dharma, the Age of

Semblance Dharma, the Age of Dharma Decline, or even the Age of Dharma Extinction. Moreover, the accomplishment is assured in their present lifetime.

2. Amitabha's Fundamental Vow Is the Basic Intent of All Buddhas

Amitabha's Fundamental Vow is the basic intention of all the Buddhas. All Buddhas commend it, urge faith in it, and specially extend its teaching and validity beyond the extinction of the Dharma.

"Fundamental Vow" has two meanings. One refers to its origins in the causal ground (the environment where the practitioner practices), while the second is "primary, or root, resolution." Before becoming a Buddha, a practitioner in the causal ground aspires to *bodhicitta* (gaining Buddhahood to save beings) and undertakes the Bodhisattva practices. Each resolution he or she thus makes on behalf of sentient beings is a fundamental vow. With reference to the causal ground, each of the 48 Vows Amitabha made for the sake of beings is a fundamental vow. But in terms of the root resolution, only the 18th Vow is the Fundamental Vow. There is a relative relationship between the root and the branches and leaves. In this respect, all the Vows apart from the 18th are secondary vows.

In our school of practice, "Fundamental Vow" usually refers to the 18th Vow, rarely the others. There is a basis for this.

Within the Three Pure Land Sutras, the "Fundamental Vow" referred to in the *Infinite Life Sutra* is the 18th Vow. The sutra contains a "Fundamental Vow *Gatha*":

***By the power of the Fundamental Vow,
Those who hear the name of Amitabha and want rebirth
Will all arrive in his Land of Bliss,
Achieving non-retrogression as a matter of course.***

The contents of the *gatha* explain the 18th Vow.

Bodhisattva Nagarjuna says in his *Chapter on the Easy Path*: "**Amitabha Buddha's Fundamental Vow is like this: If someone invokes me, recites my name and takes refuge in me, this person at once attains the karma of assurance.**"

The “Fundamental Vow” here refers to the 18th Vow as well, with “recites my name and takes refuge in me” being an explication of the 18th Vow. We can see that Bodhisattva Nagarjuna regards the 18th Vow as the Fundamental Vow.

Bodhisattva Vasubandhu’s *Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land* and Master Tanluan’s *Commentary on the Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land* also take the 18th Vow as the Fundamental Vow. Says *Treatise on Rebirth*: **“Those who encounter the power of Amitabha’s Fundamental Vow never come up empty-handed. Quickly, it fulfills their aspiration for rebirth and gives them perfect merit and virtues, as vast and as deep as the ocean.”**

The *gatha*’s mention of “the power of Amitabha’s Fundamental Vow” is another allusion to the 18th Vow.

So in our school, remarks about “the Fundamental Vow” or “the power of the Fundamental Vow” invariably refer to the 18th Vow.

In “the basic intent of all Buddhas,” “basic intent” means “goal.” Buddhas appear in various worlds for the purpose of delivering sentient beings. There is more than a single method of doing so. As the saying goes, “The Buddha gave a variety of teachings to suit a range of minds. If there weren’t manifold mentalities, why was there the need for numerous teachings?” Because sentient beings have 84,000 different kinds of afflictions, there are 84,000 varieties of practice.

But the ultimate teaching given by the Buddhas is the 18th Vow of Amitabha Buddha – that of rebirth in the Land of Bliss through Amitabha-recitation. If all the Buddhas who appeared in the worlds did not teach the other practices, there would be no regrets; their significance would not be lost. But it would not do if they did not teach the achievement of Buddhahood by Amitabha-recitation – deliverance through the Fundamental Vow of Amitabha Buddha. If that were the case, the meaning of the Buddhas’ manifestation in the worlds would be lost. Simply put, the practice that can most extensively and thoroughly deliver sentient beings is “the basic intent of all Buddhas.”

What are the grounds for saying this? In the “Introduction” to the *Infinite Life Sutra*, Shakyamuni Buddha revealed the reason for his appearance in the world – and that all the Buddhas shared his sentiments:

With infinite great compassion, the Tathagata commiserates with the beings of the Three Domains. Therefore he appears in the world to teach and enlighten them. He wishes to save the multitudes by endowing them with real benefits.

This extract is also known as the “passage on Shakyamuni Buddha’s basic intent for appearing in the world,” or the “passage on all Buddhas’ basic intent for appearing in the worlds.”

In the narrow sense, “Tathagata” in “with infinite great compassion, the Tathagata ...” refers to Shakyamuni Buddha himself. In a broader sense it means the Buddhas of the ten directions, and of the past, present and future. All Tathagatas and Buddhas possess great compassion of an indescribable, unfathomable and boundless nature. Because such compassion exists only in Buddhas, it cannot be understood by beings below the stage of Bodhisattva. That’s why it is called “infinite great compassion.”

“Commiserates with the beings of the Three Domains” means to take pity on ordinary beings in the Three Domains and Six Realms. This is why the Buddhas appear in the world. If we were not trapped in the burning house of the Three Domains or the sea of suffering in the Six Realms, there would be no need for the Buddhas to take pity on us. It is precisely because we are alight in the burning mansion and drowning in the sea of suffering that their great compassion arises and they come to save us.

To deliver beings, the Buddhas naturally have to teach the Dharma, so they “teach and enlighten.” The purpose is to save suffering beings and to bring them genuine benefit.

Within the Dharma there are expedient benefits and real benefits. The *Infinite Life Sutra* explains the deliverance of Amitabha Buddha’s 18th Vow, which confers real – ultimate – benefits. Therefore the 18th Vow is the fundamental purpose of all Buddhas. Our explication of “the basic intent of all Buddhas” is based on the text of the Vow. Though this passage is only five or six sentences long, its implications are vast and its meaning profound. It can be said to cover all Buddhist teachings.

3. Amitabha's Fundamental Vow Is Acclaimed by All Buddhas

“Acclaimed by all Buddhas” means praised by past, present and future Buddhas of the ten directions. In the *Infinite Life Sutra*, Shakyamuni Buddha told us:

Buddhas in the ten directions, as numerous as grains of sand in the Ganges River, all acclaim the Buddha of Infinite Life, commending his unfathomable power and virtue!

The worlds in the ten directions contain innumerable Buddhas. How many? They cannot be counted. Shakyamuni Buddha compares their number to grains of sand in the Ganges River. Separately they proclaim the same thing, praising the inconceivable power and merit of Amitabha Buddha. “Power and virtue” refers to Amitabha’s compassion, wisdom, force of resolution, special powers and virtuous deeds, as well as the capacity of his merit to save sentient beings. Even the Buddhas of all directions consider the ability of the Buddha of Infinite Life to deliver beings unfathomable. From this we can see that the power of Amitabha Buddha surpasses that of all other Buddhas.

Having realized their Buddha-nature, of course, all Buddhas are alike and equal. But in the vows they undertook in the causal ground to save beings, and in their ability to do so after fulfilling those vows, Buddhas are not all equal. The resolutions undertaken by Amitabha after five *kalpas* of reflection are his splendid 48 Vows, which no other Buddha made. Nor are the time frame and contents of his Vows matched by any other Buddha. Moreover, in accordance with his Vows, Amitabha became a Buddha only after having spent countless eons gaining the ability to save each and every sentient being. So he also differs from other Buddhas in terms of the accomplishment of his resolutions and practices, as well as their substance.

Because of differences in the causal ground, the strength of the resulting merit after gaining Buddhahood also varies. Thus while Buddha-nature is always equal, there can be large differences in the ability to deliver sentient beings. Some beings are easy to save, others are hard to deliver. The difficult ones can only be saved by Amitabha Buddha. As the *Great Compassion Sutra* says, beings in our world of the Five Turbidities are afflicted by an inordinate amount of greed, anger and

ignorance; abandoned by all other Buddhas, they can only be saved by Amitabha. Among the realms in the ten directions, beings with severe greed, anger and ignorance, because of their collective karma, are born in our Saha world. Only Amitabha Buddha is capable of delivering them.

In other words, other Buddhas may not be able to save all the beings that Amitabha can. These beings must be delivered by Amitabha Buddha, because his power and virtue are special and unfathomable, drawing acclamation from all Buddhas. Indeed, the other Buddhas themselves recite *Namo Amitabha Buddha*, to set an example for sentient beings everywhere. As the 17th Vow says:

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

It means that when Amitabha gained Buddhahood, the achievement impelled the countless Buddhas in all worlds to commend his name. Unless this Vow were realized, he would not become a Buddha. So having the acclamation of the other Buddhas is also one of his resolutions. Further, the *Infinite Life Sutra* says:

The Buddha told Ananda, “The majesty and power of the Buddha of Infinite Life are boundless. There is none among the unconceivable, innumerable Buddhas in all the worlds who do not acclaim them.”

We see Shakyamuni Buddha repeatedly praising the awe-inspiring power and virtue of Amitabha Buddha. So Amitabha’s Fundamental Vow is “acclaimed by all Buddhas.”

4. Faith in Amitabha’s Fundamental Vow Is Encouraged by All Buddhas

What all Buddhas encourage us to believe, and voice their support for, is this: that recitation of Amitabha’s name assuredly leads to rebirth in the Land of Bliss, and that rebirth there ensures the achievement of Buddhahood. In the *Amitabha Sutra*, the passages on “Buddhas in the six directions” all say:

In their own lands, these Buddhas, innumerable as grains of sand in the Ganges River, extend their long, broad tongues until they cover a great chiliocosm, speaking these words of truth: “Sentient beings should have faith in this sutra, acclaimed as containing unfathomable merit and supported by all the Buddhas.”

“Sentient beings should have faith in this sutra, acclaimed as containing unfathomable merit” signifies the Buddhas encouraging us to believe and accept the *Amitabha Sutra*, which contains inconceivable virtue.

The sutra says that so long as we “recite [Amitabha’s] name steadfastly,” we would “have abundant virtuous roots and meritorious blessings” and be assured of rebirth in the Land of Bliss. If we hold fast to Amitabha’s name, we would be reciting “single-mindedly, without deviation” – which means “consistently and without changing.” To recite the name steadfastly, single-mindedly and without changing is what “for one day ... for seven days” means.

When this person approaches the point of death, Amitabha Buddha, together with Bodhisattvas Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta as well as the Bodhisattvas of the great sea of purity, will arrive to receive him or her. Because the person would not be troubled and obstructed by karmic debtors, demons or those of other faiths, his mind would not be severely confused. Correct thoughts would arise and he would be reborn in the Land of Bliss.

Such is the content of the *Amitabha Sutra*. It also says that the 18th Vow’s implications are the basic intent of all Buddhas, who acclaim them and urge people to believe in them. As Shakyamuni Buddha expounds this teaching, the Buddhas bear witness and encourage us to have faith in it. That is because it is the goal of all Buddhas. Shakyamuni Buddha’s teaching is thus equivalent to the teaching of all the Buddhas. In the twelve divisions of the Buddhist canon, the Buddhas collectively bear witness only to the *Amitabha Sutra*. This is the sole teaching receiving the blessing and protection of all Buddhas. That is why the scripture is also known as the *Sutra Supported by All the Buddhas*.

5. Amitabha's Fundamental Vow Is Specially Preserved by All Buddhas

Moreover, this school of teaching and practice is retained specially by the Buddhas. In the Circulation Section of the *Infinite Life Sutra*, Shakyamuni Buddha says:

In times to come, the sutras and the Dharma will perish. But, out of pity and compassion, I will retain and preserve this sutra for a hundred years more. Those sentient beings that encounter it can obtain deliverance as they wish.

This is a very important passage in the *Infinite Life Sutra*. Yet not many can see its significance. It allows us to understand how much importance Shakyamuni Buddha attached to this sutra and this teaching! It also establishes their special consequence for all of Buddhism.

“In times to come” means in the future. The Dharma cycle in our world is divided into the Age of Correct Dharma, the Age of Semblance Dharma and the Age of Dharma Decline. After that comes the Age of Dharma Extinction, when “the sutras and the Dharma will perish.” The Age of Correct Dharma lasts 500 years (some say a thousand), the Age of Semblance Dharma a thousand, and the Age of Dharma Decline 10,000 years.

It is now about 2,600 since Shakyamuni Buddha entered into nirvana, so we are in the Age of Dharma Decline. “Dharma Extinction” would be a time when all Buddhist scriptures have disappeared from the world. Of course, there would be no monastics, no Three Gems. People would be ignorant of cause and effect of the past, present and future, as well as of karmic consequences and the principles governing rebirth in the Six Realms. They would not know that they should uphold the Five Precepts and undertake the Ten Good Actions.

Even so, Shakyamuni Buddha says he would show pity and compassion towards us as the scriptures vanished one by one during the Age of Dharma Extinction. He would specially preserve the *Infinite Life Sutra*, which expounds the teaching of Amitabha Buddha's deliverance, in the world for a further hundred years (another translation of the sutra says perpetual preservation). If sentient beings

encountered the sutra, they could be saved and leave the cycle of rebirth. So Amitabha's Fundamental Vow is "specially preserved by all Buddhas."

The reason Buddhas appear in various worlds is to deliver sentient beings. Only a method that suits all ages, all beings' capabilities and karmic inclinations, and imposes no pre-conditions or limitations, can comprehensively save beings on a basis of equality. Amitabha's Fundamental Vow does precisely that.

The name *Namo Amitabha Buddha* contains all virtues and merit. Anyone who wants to be reborn in the Land of Bliss can be reborn by reciting "*Namo Amitabha Buddha*." Sacred beings who have already escaped the cycle of rebirth have no need of Amitabha's deliverance. The ordinary beings of our world are either good people or bad people. Even if they are good, they perform positive deeds and accumulate merit only according to circumstances; they have not yet freed themselves from the suffering of the Six Realms.

Encountering negative conditions, bad people commit evil and fall into the Three Wretched Realms. But if they meet with positive circumstances and collect merit through good actions, they could be reborn in the human or celestial realms. Therefore good and bad people ascend or descend as they encounter different karmic conditions. They are still suffering ordinary beings, in need of Amitabha's deliverance.

In the *Longer Sutra*, the *Contemplation Sutra* and the *Amitabha Sutra*, Shakyamuni Buddha makes exhortations to Bodhisattva Maitreya, Ven. Ananda and Ven. Sariputra respectively.

The *Longer Sutra* is the *Infinite Life Sutra*. In it, the Buddha urges Maitreya to ensure that the teaching of Amitabha's Fundamental Vow circulates in our world forever. The text says:

The Buddha told Maitreya, "Those who hear the name of that Buddha [Amitabha], rejoice and recite his name even once shall receive the utmost benefit, which is to possess unsurpassed merit and virtue."

This passage of “Exhortation and Circulation” is where Shakyamuni Buddha urges Bodhisattva Maitreya to perpetuate Amitabha’s Fundamental Vow, so that it never becomes lost.

“Those” in “those who hear” refers to all sentient beings. It doesn’t matter whether they lived during the time of Shakyamuni Buddha or after he entered nirvana, or if they are good or bad people.

“The name of that Buddha” means the great six-character name, *Namo Amitabha Buddha*.

“Rejoice” – the person is delighted and grateful that Amitabha’s name can save him. Even if he or she encounters and recites the name as death approaches, this person will gain the ultimate benefit – rebirth in the Land of Bliss and attainment of Buddhahood there. Thus the reference to possession of “unsurpassed merit and virtue.”

Contemplation Sutra is the *Contemplation of Infinite Life Sutra*. In this scripture Shakyamuni Buddha advises Ven. Ananda –

The Buddha told Ananda, “Bear these words well in mind. To bear these words in mind means to recite the name of the Buddha of Infinite Life [Amitabha].”

The Buddha teaches Ven. Ananda: You must recite well this phrase, “*Namo Amitabha Buddha*.” That is “to recite the name of the Buddha of Infinite Life,” as translated into Chinese.

The “well” in “bear these words well in mind” means to do something properly and steadfastly. How do we recite well? In general, by reciting “*Namo Amitabha Buddha*” scrupulously. In other words, to recite earnestly and exclusively, without deviation, admixture or doubt. From start to finish, we recite only *Namo Amitabha Buddha*, without mixing in other Buddhas, mantras or teachings and practices. We do not doubt the deliverance of Amitabha Buddha. With purity and simplicity, we recite *Namo Amitabha Buddha*. This is known as “scrupulous Amitabha-recitation.”

The *Contemplation Sutra* devotes much space to explicating the “13 contemplations” and the “three meritorious actions and nine levels of rebirth.” Most

people may think, “Since that is so, we should circulate and promote the substance of the 13 contemplations or the three meritorious actions and nine levels of rebirth. Why did Shakyamuni Buddha tell Ananda to circulate the recitation of Amitabha’s name?”

We should know that the most important part of a sutra often appears at its conclusion. At the end of the *Contemplation Sutra*, the Buddha did not instruct us to “contemplate the image” of Amitabha Buddha, but to “recite the name” of Amitabha Buddha. From this we see that the purpose of the *Contemplation Sutra* is not to expound the contemplations or the three meritorious practices and nine levels of rebirth. Rather, it is to induce practitioners of the Sacred Path – who adhere to such practices – to undertake exclusive name-recitation.

Because the name contains all the virtues of Amitabha Buddha with functional uses for the benefit of reciters, its recitation enables us directly to possess all of Amitabha’s merit. Besides, contemplative visualization is difficult while name-recitation is easy. And the latter allows the reciter immediately to have Amitabha’s merit. Even if a person contemplates properly, he or she is unable to take on Amitabha’s virtues at once. In any case, most people are incapable of meditative visualization.

So in terms of methodology, contemplation is relatively hard, nor is it the ultimate in terms of merit. For these two reasons the Buddha did not advise the practice of contemplation, but instead advocated name-recitation. For “Amitabha and his name are one,” and name-recitation is easy. Moreover, the objects of the 13 contemplations are not Amitabha Buddha himself, and the three meritorious practices and nine levels of rebirth, in the context of ordinary beings, are flawed virtues. Compared with the merit of Amitabha’s name, they embody only few, not plentiful, virtuous roots and meritorious blessings.

After delivering the *Contemplation Sutra*, Shakyamuni Buddha went on to preach the *Amitabha Sutra* (or *Shorter Sutra*). In the latter he mentioned no other practices: Throughout the 1,858-character sutra, the Buddha spoke only about the practice of name-recitation. In other words, he was expounding on “recite the name” in the passage **“Bear these words well in mind. To bear these words in mind means to recite the name of the Buddha of Infinite Life [Amitabha]”** from the Circulation Section of the *Contemplation Sutra*. In the *Shorter Sutra*, “for

one day, for two days ... for seven days” is a re-exposition of the text in the *Contemplation Sutra’s* Circulation Section.

It was in the *Shorter Sutra* that Shakyamuni Buddha gave Ven. Sariputra his injunction on how to circulate the teaching that recitation according to Amitabha’s 18th Vow ensures the attainment of Buddhahood. In the sutra, the Buddha, taking the initiative, called Sariputra’s name 36 times. Sariputra did not answer, and only listened quietly to the Buddha’s discourse. Twice the Buddha asked Sariputra a question, but the latter, despite being the wisest among the disciples, had nothing to say about the realm of Amitabha Buddha. Sariputra could only respectfully receive and joyfully accept Shakyamuni Buddha’s exposition and injunction. Thus we see that the Buddha delivered this sutra “on his own initiative, without prompting.”

6. The Three Sutras Illuminate Only Exclusive Recitation

The *Longer Sutra* explicates only one thing, the *Contemplation Sutra* underscores a single point, and the *Shorter Sutra* reveals comprehensively. In his *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra*, Master Shandao says: **“The 48 Vows of the Infinite Life Sutra explain only that exclusive recitation of Amitabha Buddha’s name leads to rebirth in the Land of Bliss. The Amitabha Sutra shows that, whether for a day or seven days, recitation of Amitabha’s name results in rebirth. The passages on meditative and non-meditative virtues in this sutra [the Contemplation Sutra] underscore only that exclusive name-recitation leads to rebirth.”**

“The *Longer Sutra* explicates only one thing” ... The substance of each of the 48 Vows is different, yet Master Shandao says they “explain only” one thing. “Only” is the same as uniquely, singularly – meaning that the only thing the 48 Vows make clear is that the exclusive recitation of Amitabha Buddha’s name leads to certain rebirth in the Land of Bliss. That’s why we say “the *Longer Sutra* explicates only one thing.”

A skeptic might ask, “Why did Master Shandao make such an interpretation? Could he have been mistaken?” We know that Master Shandao was an incarnation of Amitabha Buddha; there must have been a reason he made such an explication.

In effect, each of the 48 Vows teaches us to gain rebirth and then Buddhahood in the Pure Land by reciting *Namo Amitabha Buddha*. Every Vow

induces us to achieve rebirth and Buddhahood, and encourages sentient beings to admire the Land of Bliss. If the Pure Land were not so pure, marvelous, magnificent and transcendent, we would not wish to be reborn there.

Therefore we can say that every Vow carries this message: If you want to be reborn in the Land of Bliss, which is devoid of beings from the Three Wretched Realms, you have to recite Amitabha's name ... If you wish to be reborn in the Pure Land, whose denizens have gold-colored bodies, you need to recite Amitabha's name ... If you want to be reborn in the Land of Bliss, whose dwellers immediately gain six special powers, you must recite Amitabha's name ... If you wish to be reborn in the Pure Land, where beings at once achieve the karma of assurance and non-retrogression, you have to recite Amitabha's name ... If you want to be reborn in a realm of infinite light and life, you need to recite Amitabha's name. Each and every Vow makes clear that Amitabha-recitation leads to rebirth in the Land of Bliss. So Master Shandao's explication has a profound underlying meaning.

Shandao's striking, groundbreaking interpretation is like a ray of sunshine that dissolves the darkness, allowing us to see the light.

"The *Contemplation Sutra* underscores a single point" ... Master Shandao notes that the sutra's passages on the virtuous meditative and non-meditative practices underscore only that "exclusive Amitabha-recitation certainly leads to rebirth in the Land of Bliss." Such an interpretation is completely different from those of other lineage masters. The latter explain that the part on "meditative virtues" illuminates the virtuous meditative practices, while that on "non-meditative virtues" emphasizes the virtuous non-meditative practices. But Shandao says that explications of "meditative virtues" and "non-meditative virtues" all point to the recitation of *Namo Amitabha Buddha*. The reason: Master Shandao knows that Shakyamuni Buddha's purpose in delivering the *Contemplation Sutra* is to induce sentient beings of all abilities and karmic inclinations to recite *Namo Amitabha Buddha*. The ultimate aim of the Buddha's discourse on meditative and non-meditative virtues is not those practices themselves, but recitation of *Namo Amitabha Buddha*. Thus the virtuous practices, whether meditative or non-meditative, singularly underscore that "exclusive Amitabha-recitation leads to rebirth in the Land of Bliss."

If we practice meditative contemplation, or undertake the three meritorious practices towards the nine levels of rebirth, we might not gain rebirth in the Pure Land. Why? One reason is that we cannot truly accomplish those practices, so we won't attain rebirth. Moreover, we cannot be reborn unless we dedicate the merit from such practices towards rebirth.

However, Amitabha-recitation is like driving along a super-highway. There is only one direction: We can only go forward, not backward. We cannot turn back. Before achieving the goal of Buddhahood, there is no way for us to stop. That's why we say that gaining Buddhahood through Amitabha-recitation is the teaching of the Buddhas.

In the last three sections, we quoted passages from the sutras to show that "Amitabha-recitation leads to Buddhahood." The following sections will cite the stories of two Bodhisattvas as corroboration.

7. Manjusri Resolves to Be Reborn in the Land of Bliss

In the *Sutra on Buddha-Contemplation Samadhi*, the Buddha predicted that Bodhisattva Manjusri would be reborn in the Land of Bliss. Manjusri made a vow in the form of a *gatha*:

***When my life ends, may I be able to eliminate all obstacles,
See Amitabha Buddha and be reborn in the Land of Peace and Joy.
Following rebirth in his realm, may Amitabha fulfill
My great wish by appearing and making
A prediction of Buddhahood on my behalf.***

Bodhisattva Manjusri is the foremost in wisdom and the teacher of seven Buddhas. In the *Sutra on Buddha-Contemplation Samadhi* he states the goal of his practice, revealing that his ultimate wish is to be reborn in the Land of Bliss.

Manjusri is a Bodhisattva of the highest level, a single stage removed from Buddhahood. Despite his position, "the slightest mistake would lead to the gravest error." Consider Bodhisattva Maitreya, who dwells in Tusita Heaven. Despite being just a stage away from Buddhahood, he has to wait 5 billion and 670 million years before he can go to our Saha world and become a Buddha. A single stage can require that much time to accomplish.

If we are reborn in the Land of Bliss, we immediately attain the status of a Buddha. That is why even Bodhisattva Manjusri aspired to eliminate all impediments as death approached and quickly see Amitabha Buddha, so he could be reborn instantaneously in the Pure Land and fulfill his great wish. What great wish? That Amitabha appear and make a prediction about his attainment of Buddhahood. That is the foremost among his aspirations.

8. Samantabhadra Vows to Gain Rebirth in the Land of Bliss

In the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, Bodhisattva Samantabhadra makes Ten Great Vows on behalf of all beings and seeks rebirth in the Land of Bliss. Says a *gatha* in the sutra:

***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.***

The substance of this *gatha* is virtually the same as that of the previous one. Samantabhadra is also a Bodhisattva of the highest level. There are three versions of the *Avatamsaka Sutra* – 40 chapters, 60 chapters and 80 chapters. The “Chapter on Samantabhadra’s Practices and Vows” is the final one in the *Avatamsaka*; it is also the sutra’s most important, quintessential chapter. It is because of this chapter that the *Avatamsaka Sutra* is so esteemed within Buddhism.

The focal point of the chapter is Bodhisattva Samantabhadra’s Ten Great Vows, and his wish for rebirth in the Land of Bliss. Thus we speak of the “Master of the Ten Great Vows.” Samantabhadra himself aspires to rebirth in the Land of Bliss, and urges advanced Bodhisattvas of 41 different stages attending the *Avatamsaka* assembly to join him in doing so. This is the focal point of the *Avatamsaka Sutra* and what makes it so revered.

Manjusri and Samantabhadra are Bodhisattvas of the highest order, and they both dedicate the merit they have achieved towards rebirth in the Land of Bliss. Moreover, they lead the senior Bodhisattvas of 41 stages in seeking rebirth there. Thus we see that Pure Land practice is the final destination of all Dharma schools and practitioners. If the 84,000 schools do not converge on Pure Land in the end, they would have no ultimate harbor. Those who learn and practice this teaching but not the others, however, have no regrets, as they have already attained consummation.

Manjusri and Samantabhadra are attendants to Shakyamuni Buddha, representing respectively the Buddha's wisdom and resolution-directed action. That they both considered the Pure Land their ultimate haven underscores the reason Shakyamuni Buddha appeared in the world to teach the Dharma. It is to guide beings and instruct practitioners to seek rebirth in the Land of Bliss.

Consider the countless streams and rivers that flow through the land and ultimately into the ocean. If they did not do so, they would have no final destination. Similarly, if Dharma practitioners did not have Amitabha's Pure Land as their ultimate harbor, they would be unable to attain the final state of Buddhahood. That's why Master Yinguang said, "If sentient beings of the nine realms put aside this teaching, they would have no means of achieving Buddhahood." By resolving to be reborn in the Land of Bliss, Bodhisattvas Manjusri and Samantabhadra were setting personal examples to underline the point.

Next, we will cite accounts of manifestations by Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, as well as Manjusri and Samantabhadra, to urge lineage masters to seek rebirth in the Pure Land. The stories will further illustrate what we just said – that Manjusri and Samantabhadra were setting examples for us. They will also emphasize that Amitabha Buddha's Fundamental Vow is "the basic intent of all Buddhas, acclaimed by all Buddhas, encouraged by all Buddhas and specially preserved by all Buddhas."

9. Avalokitesvara Encourages Huiji to Be Reborn in the Land of Bliss

The first account is of Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara encouraging Master Huiji to be reborn in the Pure Land. Master Huiji was also known as Master Cimin, a mentor of state during the Tang Dynasty.

Master Huiji's lay surname was Xin. He was a native of Donglai, in today's Shandong Province. During the reign of Tang Emperor Zhongzong, he saw Tripitaka Master Yijing journey to India in search of the Dharma and was filled with admiration. He too set sail and, after three years, arrived in India. He visited and paid respects at all the sacred sites associated with Shakyamuni's life and attainment of Buddhahood, seeking the scriptures in Sanskrit.

Having experienced much hardship and suffering, Master Huiji developed a revulsion towards our Jambudvīpa habitat. Was there a country, a place, he wondered, where there was only happiness and no pain? Was there a school of practice that allows a practitioner to see the Buddhas quickly?

Everywhere he went, he posed these questions to Tripitaka masters – of the sutras, the *vinaya* (monastic discipline) and scriptural treatises – that he met. They all urged him to practice according to Pure Land teachings and seek rebirth in the Land of Bliss. He happily paid his respects and began to practice accordingly.

Master Huiji gradually made his way to northern India, arriving in the northwestern kingdom of Gandhara. To the northeast of the royal city was a large mountain, which harbored a sacred image of Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara. People who asked with the greatest sincerity and respect were often able personally to see the Bodhisattva.

Master Huiji went to the summit. There he made prostrations and reverences for seven days, and stopped taking all food and drink. Applying himself with great diligence, he was prepared to die, in the hope that Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara would manifest and instruct him.

On the seventh night Avalokitesvara appeared in mid-air, more than ten feet tall and assuming purple-golden form. Seated on a lotus platform made from seven kinds of jewels, he gazed down at Master Huiji. The Bodhisattva stretched out his right arm and, stroking the monk's head, said, "If you wish to propagate the Dharma to benefit yourself and others, the only way is to recite exclusively the name of Amitabha Buddha and sincerely resolve to be reborn in his Land of Bliss. After you see Amitabha and myself, you will receive the greatest benefit of all. You should know that Pure Land is a splendid school of practice that exceeds all other schools."

Having thus spoken, Avalokitesvara vanished. Master Huiji had been utterly exhausted, but after hearing these words he was at once invigorated.

Master Huiji lived during the time of Emperor Zhongzong of the Tang Dynasty. Inspired by the scripture-seeking journey of Tripitaka Master Yijing to India, he resolved to travel there himself. At the time there were no airplanes, steam ships, trains or cars. The only means of transport was by sea. Nor did vessels have any navigational tools; they merely went with the prevailing currents, going wherever these carried them.

It took Master Huiji three years to reach India. In fact, he was staking his life, ready to give it up in his determination to seek the Dharma in India. His resolve was comparable to that of Master Xuanzang, who had said “better to take a step towards death in the west than to retreat a step to the east” during his quest to remedy the deficiency of scriptures in China.

The more a person is aware of the suffering in our Saha world and the pain of repeated rebirth, the greater his determination to find liberation. And if someone is conscious of the importance of freeing herself from the cycle of rebirth, she will pursue a school of teaching and practice that can help her do so with certainty. As the teaching goes, “Human form is hard to obtain but we have gained it; the Dharma is difficult to hear, yet we have heard it. If we don’t achieve liberation from this body in this life, when will we do so?” Having taken human form and heard the Dharma doesn’t mean we would wish to be born again. We would certainly want to achieve liberation this very lifetime.

Master Huiji had such a notion. There may be 84,000 schools of practice, but if he were unable to gain deliverance in the present lifetime despite all the scriptures and teachings, he would have thought it a great pity. He decided to seek a practice that would allow anyone to achieve liberation in this life. He believed only that had value and meaning.

“The Buddhas respond to those who are sincere,” goes the saying. Not only did Tripitaka masters introduce to Huiji the Pure Land practice of seeking rebirth in the Land of Bliss, Avalokitesvara himself manifested to touch his head, instruct him and give him a prediction of Buddhahood. The Bodhisattva told him, “If you want to benefit yourself and others and propagate the Dharma, the only way is to recite exclusively the name of Amitabha Buddha and devoutly seek rebirth in his Land of Bliss. Then you would be able to see not only me, but also Amitabha Buddha. Of all the Dharma practices in this world, none exceeds this one!” That was the teaching of Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara.

Master Huiji had been fasting and had gone without food and drink for seven days. He was extremely tired in both body and spirit. But after being suddenly touched on the head by Avalokitesvara and given instruction and a prediction, he felt as though he had drunk sweet dew and received deliverance. He became thoroughly energized.

After returning to China he entered the capital Changan, where he received the esteem of the Emperor and was appointed mentor of state. He became known as Tripitaka Master Cimin. A well-known *gatha* of his goes:

*In the causal ground, that Buddha [Amitabha] made a great vow:
I will personally welcome all who, having heard my name, recite it.
It matters not whether they are poor or rich,
Or slow-witted or highly talented.
It doesn't matter if they hear the Dharma often or
Uphold the precepts with great purity,
Or if they have broken the precepts or committed severe karmic offenses.
So long as they turn their minds around and recite Amitabha's name often,
Rubble can be transformed into gold.*

This *gatha* can be said to underscore unequivocally the unconditional deliverance of Amitabha Buddha, which stems from his great, profound compassion. It also highlights emphatically the fundamental intent of all the Buddhas.

Bodhisattvas Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta are attendants to Amitabha Buddha. One represents Amitabha's great compassion, the other his immense wisdom. The purpose of the pair's appearance in this world is to guide sentient beings towards the Pure Land and to recite *Namo Amitabha Buddha*.

Therefore those who practice according to the teachings of Avalokitesvara should know that the Bodhisattva's aim in manifesting in the world is not that we should continue such practice forever, but that we eventually come around to reciting Amitabha's name. Only that truly fulfills Avalokitesvara's famous pledge to "save the suffering and deliver those in peril."

The reason is that the travails of this world are merely of a secondary, temporary nature. Fundamental suffering comes from our entrapment in the cycle of rebirth, which gives rise to perpetual pain. Its eradication alone is genuine deliverance of those in difficulty and pain. Fundamental, everlasting suffering is terminated when all beings are induced to undertake Pure Land practice and recite Amitabha's name, gaining rebirth in the Land of Bliss and becoming Buddhas there. That is the ultimate aim of Bodhisattvas Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta.

10. Manjusri and Samantabhadra Urge Fazhao

To Seek Rebirth in the Land of Bliss

In 767, Master Fazhao was living at Yunfeng Monastery in Hengzhou. One day he suddenly saw in his congee bowl an image of the Great Sacred Bamboo Grove Monastery. Another day, he had a vision in the same bowl of various monasteries on Mt. Wutai, as well as magnificent scenes from the Pure Land.

On April 6, 770, Master Fazhao was alone after having travelled to Foguang Monastery on Mt. Wutai. In the wee hours (between 1 and 3 a.m.) he saw an unusual beam of light; it came from afar and fell on his person. He went towards the light and followed it for about 50 *li* (25 kilometers). There he saw a mountain, at the foot of which flowed a stream. To its north stood a stone gateway. Beneath it were two children, who called themselves Sudhana and Nanda.

The boys led Master Fazhao to a monastery. Its signboard read “Great Sacred Bamboo Grove Monastery” – exactly what the monk had seen in his bowl. The grounds of the monastery were paved with gold; it had rows of trees fashioned from the seven jewels. The treasure-studded scene was magnificent.

Master Fazhao entered the grounds and went inside the lecture hall. There, on the west side, he saw Bodhisattva Manjusri; to the east was Bodhisattva Samantabhadra. Each sat on a sacred seat, with tens of thousands of Bodhisattvas surrounding them. Manjusri and Samantabhadra were expounding the Dharma to the assembly.

Master Fazhao went up to the two Bodhisattvas and paid his respects. He then asked, “In the Age of Dharma Decline, ordinary sentient beings are long removed from the time of the World-Honored One. Their knowledge is superficial, their capabilities are weak and their karmic afflictions are especially severe. It is virtually impossible for their innate, pure Buddha-nature to emerge. The Dharma is as vast and as boundless as the ocean. Which school should we practice, so we can most easily access the essence of the Dharma?”

Bodhisattva Manjusri told Fazhao, “Your current practice of *nianfo* [Buddha-invocation] is precisely the one most suited to the Age of Dharma Decline. Among all the schools of practice, none is superior to Buddha-invocation and making offerings to the Three Gems. Those who can accomplish these will be able quickly to complete the twin practices of accumulating meritorious blessings and wisdom.

“Buddha-invocation and offerings to the Three Gems are the loftiest and most important practices. Because I, in *kalpas* past, engaged in meditative invocation, in Buddha-invocation, and made offerings to the Three Gems, I obtained the All-Inclusive Wisdom of the Tathagatas.

“You should know that the various Dharma practices, the paramitas, deep meditative concentration and even the Buddhas in the ten directions all arise from Buddha-recollection and Buddha-invocation. Thus the practice of *nianfo* is the king of all practices.”

Master Fazhao asked, “How should we invoke?” Replied Bodhisattva Manjusri, “To the west of this Saha world is Amitabha Buddha. The power of this Buddha’s vows is unfathomable. You should recite Amitabha Buddha’s name purely, without interruption or deviation. When you die, you will certainly be reborn in the Land of Bliss, ensconced in the state of non-retrogression.”

Having thus spoken, the great holy beings Manjusri and Samantabhadra both reached out with their golden arms to stroke Master Fazhao’s head, saying, “Because you have recited the name of Amitabha Buddha, you will shortly attain supreme wisdom and enlightenment. If there are good men and women who wish to achieve Buddhahood quickly, there is no better way than Amitabha-recitation. So long as they recite the name of Amitabha single-mindedly, they will be able to gain enlightenment rapidly.”

Master Fazhao was delighted to hear this. He paid his respects to the Bodhisattvas, said goodbye and left the hall. The two boys escorted him out of the monastery. As he lifted his head, the edifice abruptly disappeared. Master Fazhao gathered some rocks to mark the location.

The above accounts come from *Biographies of Prominent Monastics*. They tell us that Bodhisattvas Avalokitesvara, Manjusri and Samantabhadra all advise us to seek rebirth in the Land of Bliss.

The second story arose from a vision Master Fazhao had in his bowl: of a monastic complex, on whose portal was inscribed “Great Sacred Bamboo Grove Monastery.” Unlike most temples, this one had grounds paved with gold. Its buildings and lecture halls were adorned with various jewels, and they were surrounded by sacred assemblies of countless Bodhisattvas.

Both the monastery and the assemblies were of magnificent, surpassing appearance, unlike anything in this world. They resembled the Land of Bliss, as

described in the *Shorter Sutra*. Master Fazhao thought they must be part of a sacred, otherworldly environment, not a mundane one.

Once he had the chance, Master Fazhao asked senior monks and other worthies where he could find the kind of landscape he saw in his bowl. They told him it should be located on Mt. Wutai, a Dharma ground associated with Bodhisattva Manjusri. People who made sincere supplications there often saw the Bodhisattva manifest. Later, a devout Fazhao went to Mt. Wutai with a few like-minded companions – and experienced this remarkable episode.

When most practitioners encounter Bodhisattvas, whether in dreams or during meditation or Amitabha-recitation, they do not speak with the sacred beings. Even if they do, only a few words are exchanged. None were like Master Fazhao, who had a face-to-face dialogue and received instructions, and even blessings and a prediction of Buddhahood. Such an interaction was marvelous indeed.

Master Fazhao went inside the Dharma hall and, after paying respects to the two Bodhisattvas, said: **“In the Age of Dharma Decline, ordinary sentient beings are long removed from the time of the World-Honored One. Their knowledge is superficial, their capabilities are weak and their karmic afflictions are especially severe. It is virtually impossible for their innate, pure Buddha-nature to emerge.”** Fazhao spoke with his own circumstances in mind, and they apply all the more to us.

Master Fazhao was telling the Bodhisattvas that it was hard to meet good teachers in an age so far removed from that of Shakyamuni Buddha. Though the Dharma still circulated and there still were monastics, true practitioners were rare and virtually none could bring their practice to fruition. Thus we are unable to encounter truly accomplished teachers, while our own wisdom is shallow and our capabilities are feeble. Having weak ability is like a hole-riddled cup: It is simply incapable of holding water. If we have frail capabilities, it would be impossible for us to free ourselves from the cycle of rebirth by dint of our own practice.

For Buddhists, the purpose of life is to end the cycle of rebirth; that is why we must learn the Dharma. And the aim of learning the Dharma is to attain Buddhahood. There are short-term and long-term goals on the path to Buddhahood. The former is to end the cycle of rebirth and the latter is to become a Buddha. If we can't even free ourselves from repeated rebirth, we needn't think about Buddhahood. So we

must first seek to end the rebirth cycle. Even so, if we can be born in the Land of Bliss through Amitabha-recitation, we would not only end further rebirths, but advance all the way to Buddhahood. We would become Buddhas in a single lifetime, accomplishing both goals at the same time.

Since he was appointed a teacher of state, Master Fazhao must have been a person of substantial learning, morality and achievement in his practice. Even so, when confronted with the issue of freeing himself from the cycle of rebirth, he became aware of his own shallowness and lack of ability, as well as the weight of his karmic afflictions. The Buddha-nature inherent in all sentient beings was obscured by the afflictions and karmic obstructions, unable to emerge. Would I, he must have thought to himself, forever be unable to extricate myself from repeated rebirth in the Six Realms of the Three Domains?

When people are thoroughly convinced that they cannot free themselves from endless rebirth through their own efforts, what Master Shandao calls “the context for faith” arises. Only those exposed to such circumstances can believe and accept wholeheartedly the deliverance of Amitabha Buddha. People who do not understand that their knowledge is superficial, their capabilities weak, their karmic obstructions heavy and their afflictions powerful, will not be able to have complete faith in Amitabha’s deliverance.

Consider an ordinary person. Unless he is conscious that he has fallen into an ocean and is bobbing up and down with the waves, in danger of drowning any moment, a desire to be rescued would hardly arise in his mind. If he is aware he is in the water, without hope of extricating himself, however, he would not only accept salvation by a passing ship but embrace it with his very life.

That’s why only those who are aware of their own shallow knowledge, feeble ability and severe afflictions can thoroughly believe and accept the deliverance of Amitabha Buddha.

Our deficient capabilities can be compared to an inability to earn money, our heavy karmic obstructions to an incapacity to repay debts. Under such circumstances, liberation always eludes us and the attainment of Buddhahood is hopeless. To recognize clearly that we cannot extricate ourselves – that constitutes “the context for faith.”

What does a person in such circumstances do? Not go begging everywhere, but quickly find a wealthy benefactor – that is, depend on Amitabha’s deliverance. This benefactor must have two characteristics. The first is that he must be the wealthiest person in the land. His treasure must exceed that of the king; in fact, it would be immeasurable. Secondly, he must be the most compassionate of all people. His love must be absolute, unconditional. Whoever asks for help, he would give it. Such is a genuine wealthy benefactor.

A person unable to save herself needs to rely on a rich benefactor. To do so is to recognize completely Amitabha’s power to deliver us, and not to go begging all over the place.

To undertake miscellaneous practices is like begging everywhere. Today we practice this, tomorrow that. Today we participate in this service, tomorrow that one. We scramble from one Dharma center to another. Is such practice good? Compared with not practicing at all, such practices are good and will accrue some merit. Yet they still resemble begging: If we can get something, we might be able to carry on a while, having three meals a day. If not, we would go hungry. We would still have no means to pay off our debts. Throughout our lives, we would have no secure place in which to dwell. We would always be begging, never finding a haven. That is the result of mixed practice.

To entrust our impermanent, ever-changing lives completely to the eternal Amitabha Buddha, who has an infinite lifespan and delivers beings absolutely, is to give ourselves over to *Namo Amitabha Buddha*. Thenceforth we would recite *Namo Amitabha Buddha* exclusively and stop mixed practice. That way, we would sever the roots of rebirth with a single blow, and achieve assured rebirth in the Land of Bliss, followed by certain Buddhahood!

To do this is to rely entirely on our rich benefactor, not to go begging everywhere. To rely on our benefactor is to depend completely on Amitabha’s power, and to cease begging everywhere is to stop counting on self-power. Only by abandoning self-power will we be able to depend entirely on other-power. If we give ourselves over to other-power, we will naturally leave self-power behind. We will no longer engage in miscellaneous practices, but practice exclusively.

Master Fazhao asked, **“The Dharma is as vast and as boundless as the ocean. Which school should we practice, so we can most easily access the essence of the Dharma?”** The Dharma can be compared to the great ocean, with no boundary as far as the eye can see. It can make us feel quite helpless, not knowing which of the teachings to practice. That’s all the more so when every school seems beyond our ability to practice. Indeed, even Master Fazhao felt compelled to ask, “Which school should we practice, so we can most easily access the essence of the Dharma?”

Despite the great variety of schools, if we can grasp what is fundamental, we would have no regrets even if we didn’t – or couldn’t – learn all the other teachings. But if we do not grasp the essence, we would still be deficient and feel regretful, even if we learned all the other practices.

Master Fazhao posed his previous question from the perspective of his weak capabilities. The following question focuses on the importance of the various schools of teaching and practice.

“Bodhisattva Manjusri told Master Fazhao, ‘Your current practice of *nianfo* [Buddha-invocation] is precisely the one most suited to the Age of Dharma Decline.’ ” Responding to Fazhao’s query, Manjusri first tells him the answer and then explains it in detail. The “practice of *nianfo*” is the key to this passage.

A certain *gatha* says:

*We must be focused in our practice, we must know the way.
If we know the way, life and death will end altogether.*

It means that practice is not just randomly following others in reading the scriptures, chanting the sutras, making mountain pilgrimages, performing penitence rites or joining Dharma services. Not so! Rather than practicing haphazardly, if we could recognize the path, grasp its fundamentals and access its core, life, death and rebirth would cease simultaneously and at once. But if we failed to find the way, understand the essentials and access the core of the Dharma, our practice would be in vain. That’s because if life and death were not ended, the cycle of rebirth would continue. We would only be making a karmic connection with the Dharma – like going up a treasure-laden mountain and returning empty-handed. So the “practice of *nianfo*” is the key to this part of Bodhisattva Manjusri’s discourse. It is also the “essence of the Dharma,” in the words of Master Fazhao.

The practice of *nianfo* is recitation of “*Namo Amitabha Buddha.*” There is a saying: “All scriptures in the twelve divisions of the Tripitaka are contained in the six characters.” The Buddha taught 84,000 schools of practice, collected into the dozen divisions of the Tripitaka; they are all encompassed in the six characters. Therefore if we can recite *Namo Amitabha Buddha* exclusively, we will have grasped the essence of the Dharma.

The practice is not only most apt for the Age of Dharma Decline, it also suits the Ages of Correct Dharma and Semblance Dharma. Why is that? Because Amitabha-recitation accommodates people of all capabilities; if 10,000 recite, 10,000 will be reborn in the Pure Land. It doesn’t matter if a person is of superior, intermediate or inferior ability, intelligent or dull, literate or illiterate, male or female, young or old, worthy or unworthy – anyone who recites will achieve rebirth. Such certainty does not apply to practitioners of other schools. Whether they achieve their goal depends on whether their abilities are suited to the relevant practice.

Amitabha-recitation is just reciting “*Namo Amitabha Buddha.*” Anyone who can speak can do it. It is the simplest and easiest, as well as the quickest and most complete practice. Why? Because we can accomplish its purpose in this very lifetime. The moment we breathe our last, we will be reborn in the Land of Bliss. Once there the cycle of rebirth in the Three Domains and the Six Realms will end, and we will attain Buddhahood. We need not wait for future lifetimes.

For the Land of Bliss is not a realm of Sravakas, Pratyekabuddhas or Bodhisattvas, but of Buddhas. Someone who has gained access to a realm of Buddhas will certainly become a Buddha. Consider the countless rivers and streams in our own world. Some are pure and others are polluted; some are fragrant, while others stink. But once they flow into the ocean, they take on the flavor of the water there.

That is why Amitabha-recitation is not only suitable for all eras, but also fits sentient beings of all capabilities. That is why the practice of the Pure Land school is known as “the Easy Path.”

Bodhisattva Manjusri also said, “**Among all the schools of practice, none is superior to Buddha-invocation and making offerings to the Three Gems.**” Of course, it would be very good if we could perform Amitabha-recitation and make offerings to

the Three Gems as well. But if we don't have the ability, or if the karmic conditions aren't there, we should not mind. Amitabha-recitation encompasses everything.

As for offerings, some people have the ability to make them while others do not. Still others, even though they can do so, don't know where to make offerings. With Amitabha-recitation, however, it doesn't matter if we are capable or not; so long as we have a mouth, we can recite. Wherever people may be or whatever work they do, all can recite Amitabha's name. That may not be true for the practices of other schools.

“Those who can accomplish these will be able quickly to complete the twin practices of accumulating meritorious blessings and wisdom.” To complete the practices of accumulating meritorious blessings and wisdom is to attain Buddhahood. A *gatha* says, “No need to cultivate blessings and wisdom for three great *asamkhyeya-kalpas*; with the six characters we can exit the universe.” The standard path to Buddhahood requires cultivating blessings and wisdom for three great *asamkhyeya-kalpas*, accumulating merit through the Six Paramitas and myriad virtuous practices. Another 100 *kalpas* are needed to perfect the 32 marks and 80 physical characteristics of a Buddha. Only then will a practitioner achieve Buddhahood. Without going through this process, there is no way of doing so.

That is to practice through self-power. To do so, we must have exceptional wisdom and ability; our karmic obstructions must be minimal and our afflictions few. This is beyond our capabilities. But if we can recite the name of Amitabha Buddha exclusively, we would be able in short order to complete the practices of accumulating both blessings and wisdom. So it is said that there is “no need to cultivate blessings and wisdom for three great *asamkhyeya-kalpas*; with the six characters we can exit the universe.”

Here “the universe” refers to the Three Domains and Six Realms. So long as we rely on *Namo Amitabha Buddha*, we would be able not only to leave the Six Realms, but also be reborn in the Land of Bliss. Once there, we would quickly gain Buddhahood.

The Bodhisattva also said, **“Buddha-invocation and offerings to the Three Gems are the loftiest and most important practices. Because I, in *kalpas* past, engaged in meditative invocation, in Buddha-invocation, and made offerings to the**

Three Gems, I obtained the All-Inclusive Wisdom of the Tathagatas.” During past *kalpas*, Bodhisattva Manjusri gained the wisdom of Buddhas through meditative invocation, Buddha-invocation and offerings to the Three Gems. Of the three practices, “Buddha-invocation” means declaiming Amitabha’s name. So long as we open our mouths and recite “*Namo Amitabha Buddha*,” that is it.

If we had to “invoke through meditation,” we wouldn’t be able to do it. Such contemplation is difficult and its merit is less. Name-recitation is easy, and its merit great. That’s because the six-character name and its substance are one. Amitabha’s functions and capabilities are contained in the name, so that the Buddha’s light emanates from the bodies of all those who recite it, erasing their karmic afflictions. In dark, impure places, reciters will at once see adversity turn into good fortune and escape their difficulties unscathed. If they encounter ghosts, demons or monsters, they will immediately evade them. If karmic debtors beset them, *Namo Amitabha Buddha* can resolve their conflicts and even deliver the spirits of the debtors. So Amitabha-recitation is said to be simple, easy and marvelous.

As for meditative invocation, we are unable to do it – which means the practice would have no effect. Of the three practices, therefore, Amitabha-recitation is the easiest.

“I obtained the All-Inclusive Wisdom of the Tathagatas” – a reference to the perfect wisdom of the Buddhas. There are three kinds of wisdom: Sravaka and Pratyekabuddha Wisdom, Bodhisattva Wisdom, and All-Inclusive Wisdom. The first type is associated with Sravakas and Pratyekabuddhas, a wisdom of the Lesser Vehicle. The second sort is linked with Bodhisattvas. The last kind is the wisdom of the Buddhas.

Though we are ordinary beings, full of greed, anger and ignorance as well as karmic obstructions, by relying solely on recitation of *Namo Amitabha Buddha* we can transcend the first two types of wisdom and rapidly attain Buddha wisdom.

Master Yinguang said in a *gatha*:

*Be not surprised that a single recitation should surpass
Ten stages on the path of the Bodhisattvas;
We should know that the six characters encompass the Three Vehicles
Of the Sravaka, Pratyekabuddha and Bodhisattva*

We should not doubt, or be amazed, that by reciting *Namo Amitabha Buddha* we could transcend the ten stages and surpass in wisdom Sravakas, Pratyekabuddhas and even Bodhisattvas. We should know that the six-character name contains all the merit of the Three Vehicles (Sravaka, Pratyekabuddha and Bodhisattva), straight through to the attainment of Buddhahood.

Ours is therefore a school of “horizontal transcendence.” What do we transcend? The realms of Sravakas, Pratyekabuddhas and Bodhisattvas, directly entering that of Buddhas. The horizontal transcendence of such realms does not depend on our own capabilities, but entirely on the power and virtue of Amitabha Buddha – in other words, on Buddha-power.

If the determining factor were our own ability, it would be uncertain whether we could even regain human form in the future. Even if we did, it’s an open question whether we could encounter the Dharma again. With rebirth in the celestial realms very unlikely, how much more so the cessation of rebirth in the Three Domains and Six Realms ... not to mention transcending the achievements of Sravakas, Pratyekabuddhas and Bodhisattvas!

So the issue is not one of reliance on ourselves, but on Amitabha Buddha. If we understand this, we would not be skeptical or amazed. When Master Yinguang says “be not surprised,” he means we should be neither startled nor doubtful. “Should know” means we ought to know and believe. And by saying “the six characters encompass the Three Vehicles,” he tells us that these six characters both contain and surpass the Three Vehicles. Because Amitabha infused into the characters all the merit he accumulated from his practice, his name crystallizes the virtues of the Buddhas. That’s why Bodhisattva Manjusri said that Amitabha-recitation leads quickly to “the All-Inclusive Wisdom of the Tathagatas.”

“You should know that the various Dharma practices, the paramitas, deep meditative concentration and even the Buddhas in the ten directions all arise from Buddha-recollection and Buddha-invocation. Thus the practice of *nianfo* is the king of all practices.” “The various Dharma practices” means the manifold teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha, while “the paramitas” and “deep meditative concentration” refer collectively to the Six Paramitas and myriad virtuous deeds. “The practice of *nianfo* is the king of all practices” – such a description and commendation can be said to be the highest praise of all.

There is only one king in a kingdom. He is unique, supreme, peerless. No one else is of the same rank, and no one can compare with him. This “king” encompasses and transcends all. He can be said to contain everything. If the king is present, everything is complete; without him, only a small part remains. The “king” can therefore give rise to everything and is the source of all things. This indicates that the virtue and merit from the myriad practices arise from Amitabha-recitation, and that Amitabha-recitation can give rise to all the other schools of practice.

It is impossible for us to understand and learn all the 84,000 schools. But if we learned only Amitabha-recitation, it would encompass the myriad practices. If we do not undertake Amitabha-recitation and practice according to the other schools, we would not cover all the practices but only a small portion of them. Therefore “the practice of Amitabha-recitation is the king of all practices.”

Master Yinguang once said:

*All schools of teaching flow from this Dharma realm;
All schools of practice return to this Dharma realm.*

There are no Dharma schools that do not stem from the phrase, *Namo Amitabha Buddha*. Master Yinguang describes “*Namo Amitabha Buddha*” as a “Dharma realm.” The term refers to all things in the universe. Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Pratyekabuddhas, Sravakas, the Three Domains and Six Realms, beings with and without form – all belong to the Dharma realm.

The first line of the *gatha* means that all Dharma realms, which seek a school enabling liberation, flow from the teaching and practice of Amitabha-recitation. And “all schools of practice return to this Dharma realm” indicates that, in the end, all Dharma practices revert to Amitabha-recitation. The meaning coincides with Bodhisattva Manjusri’s statement that “the practice of *nianfo* is the king of all practices.”

Following Manjusri’s discourse on *nianfo*, Master Fazhao immediately asks, “**How should we invoke?**” We can see that both the questions and the answers are concise and interconnected; they are not random. Bodhisattva Manjusri goes on to say, “To the west of this Saha world is Amitabha Buddha.” First, he explicitly points to *Namo Amitabha Buddha* in the Western Land of Bliss.

There are Buddhas of the past, present and future. Manjusri does not want us to recite the names of past or future Buddhas, but that of a Buddha of the present. As for present Buddhas, some dwell in the east, some in the west, some in the south and some in the north. There are Buddhas in all the ten directions. Which one should we recite? The one in the Land of Bliss to the west of our Saha world – Amitabha Buddha.

This identification of a Buddha to the west is called “indicating the direction and establishing the entity.” So the teaching and practice of Amitabha-recitation is a school that “indicates the direction and establishes the entity.” To “indicate the direction” is to point out the Land of Bliss to the west, and to “establish the entity” is to identify the Buddha called Amitabha. We can see that Pure Land teaching differs from the Chan school’s “Pure Land of the mind, Amitabha Buddha of our own nature.”

“The power of this Buddha’s vows is unfathomable. You should recite Amitabha Buddha’s name purely, without interruption or deviation. When you die, you will certainly be reborn in the Land of Bliss, ensconced in the state of non-retrogression.” What does “recite Amitabha Buddha’s name purely and without interruption” here mean? Is it the same as the “recite Amitabha Buddha’s name purely and without interruption” in the “Chapter on Bodhisattva Mahasthamaprapta’s Perfect Mastery of Amitabha-Recitation” in the *Surangama Sutra*? Actually, it is the same. But some people interpret the phrase in the style of the schools of the Sacred Path (self-power), and that would be completely wrong.

In fact, to “recite Amitabha Buddha’s name purely and without interruption” is very simple. Everyone can do it, and there is nothing especially mysterious or abstruse about it. It means to recite “*Namo Amitabha Buddha*” exclusively, with the frequency determined by how much time we have. To recite when the thought crosses our minds and when we open our mouths – that is to “recite Amitabha Buddha’s name purely and without interruption.” It is the same as what Master Shandao said about the “karma of assurance.” He said:

To recite Amitabha’s name single-mindedly and without variation, whether walking, standing, sitting or lying down, whether for long or short periods – that is the karma of assurance. It is so because it accords with Amitabha Buddha’s vow.

In “to recite Amitabha’s name single-mindedly,” “single-mindedly” means exclusively. If we have time to practice, we recite Amitabha’s name only. We do not meditate, chant sutras and mantras, do penitence or engage in other practices. Otherwise our practice would not be exclusive; it would not be single-minded, but of two minds.

In our daily lives, whether we are walking, standing, sitting or lying down, we recite Amitabha’s name according to how much time we have. We eat when it’s time to eat and sleep when it’s time to sleep. We do things when it’s time to do them, without restrictions or inhibitions. That is to do something “whether walking, standing, sitting or lying down, whether for long or short periods.” To recite Amitabha’s name single-mindedly and exclusively is to do so without deviation – which is the same as reciting “purely and without interruption.”

There are two kinds of Amitabha-recitation. One is to recite in a focused manner. The other is to recite randomly, without focus. Focused recitation means that in our free moments, we recite quietly, in a concentrated and single-minded way. To recite while doing something else is unfocused recitation. Such random recitation is also without deviation, meeting the requirement of being “without interruption or deviation.”

Normally, therefore, if we aren’t reciting in a focused way, we are doing so randomly. If we aren’t reciting out loud, we are doing so softly. If we aren’t performing *vajra* recitation (moving the lips, but without producing sounds audible to persons nearby), we are reciting silently. We can recite according to our personal circumstances, karma and capability. If we wish to do so for an extended period, without interruption or becoming tired, it is best to use *vajra* recitation.

“When you die, you will certainly be reborn in the Land of Bliss.” Here, Bodhisattva Manjusri uses the word “certainly” as a guarantee to sentient beings. “Certainly” means 100 percent – not 99 percent, but 100 percent! If one person practices accordingly, a single person will be reborn in the Pure Land. If a hundred practice, a hundred will achieve rebirth. It is the same with 1,000 or 10,000 people. Thus the saying that if 10,000 practice, 10,000 will be reborn.

“Ensconced in the state of non-retrogression.” Those reborn in the Land of Bliss have arrived in a realm of Buddhas. Since that is so, they will never again retreat

on the path to Buddhahood. The *Shorter Sutra* says, **“Sentient beings born [in the Land of Bliss] all achieve non-retrogression. Many attain the state of being one lifetime removed from Buddhahood.”** The “state of being one lifetime removed from Buddhahood” refers to those who are Buddhas-in-waiting.

When they finished speaking, the two great holy beings Manjusri and Samantabhadra reached out to stroke Master Fazhao’s head and gave him a prediction of Buddhahood.

“If there are good men and women ...” What qualifies people as good men and women? Are we good men and women? According to standard doctrines, we would not qualify. Regarding “good,” there is the good in the Five Precepts and the good of the Ten Good Actions. To judge our actions, speech and thoughts by the yardsticks of the Five Precepts alone, we do not qualify as good men and women. All the more so with the Ten Good Actions.

In the school of Amitabha-recitation, however, anyone who recites Amitabha’s name and aspires to rebirth in the Land of Bliss can be called a good man or woman. Such reciters, even though they still have greed, anger and ignorance and fall prey to negative behavior resulting from their karma, feel ashamed, knowing full well that they are iniquitous ordinary beings. It is precisely because they are reciters capable of feeling ashamed that they can become good men and women.

In his *Explication of Important Points in the Amitabha Sutra*, Master Ouyi, the prominent monk of the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, explained “good men and women” thus:

Good men and women: Monastics or householders, rich or poor, old or young, beings in the Six Realms or subject to the Four Modes of Birth – if they hear the name of Amitabha Buddha, their meritorious roots of many kalpas will have matured. Even if they have committed the Five Gravest Transgressions and Ten Evil Actions, they can be called good.

It matters not whether they are monastics or householders, male or female, young or old, or whether they are beings in the Six Realms or subject to the Four Modes of Birth. So long as they have heard the name *Namo Amitabha Buddha* (“hear the name of Amitabha Buddha” is the same as “hears of Amitabha Buddha” in the

Shorter Sutra), it means that their positive roots of many *kalpas* have ripened. They may have committed the most heinous karmic offenses, but they can all be called good men and women.

What is to “hear of Amitabha Buddha”? It is to hear the teaching of Amitabha’s deliverance of sentient beings, and to accept and believe it. If we can do this, we are good men and women.

However, only human beings are able to hear Amitabha’s name and accept and believe in it. As for hell beings, hungry ghosts and animals, how could they have the wisdom to understand? Therein lies the difference between those who are responsive to the teaching and those who merely form a karmic link with it. Those who understand are in the former group, while those who don’t belong to the latter.

There is a saying, “once [a teaching] passes through our ears, it becomes forever a seed for Buddhahood,” or “once [it] enters through the ears, it becomes a permanent seed for the journey to enlightenment.” If Amitabha’s name can enter through our ears, it plants the seed for our enlightenment and achievement of Buddhahood. Those who “hear of Amitabha Buddha” are therefore known as good men and women. The same meaning is found in the *Lotus Sutra*, which says: ***“If those whose minds are distracted and confused should enter a temple and recite ‘Namo Buddha’ but once, they will all accomplish the path to Buddhahood.”***

“So long as they recite the name of Amitabha single-mindedly ...” Here “single-mindedly” means exclusively, not of two minds. To recite exclusively, relying on Amitabha alone and reciting his name – that is to recite single-mindedly. It is also known as “scrupulous Amitabha-recitation.” It means we do not recite Amitabha’s name now, mantras later in the day and sutras tomorrow, or do meditation the day after and practice the esoteric tradition the following day. We do not engage in such mixed practices.

When we are reciting Amitabha’s name, it doesn’t matter whether we have mental distractions and vexations or not. So long as we believe that Amitabha-recitation leads to rebirth in the Land of Bliss and persist with our recitation, we will assuredly be reborn in the Pure Land.

Let us now go back and elaborate on the sentence, “The power of this Buddha’s vows is unfathomable.” In the Dharma, five things are said to be “unfathomable” or “inconceivable.” First, the number of sentient beings is unfathomable. Secondly, the force of karma is inconceivable. The third: the power of dragons is unfathomable. Fourthly, the power of meditative concentration is inconceivable. And finally, the power of the Dharma is unfathomable.

“The number of sentient beings is unfathomable.” From the beginning to the end of time, there is neither addition to, nor subtraction from, the number of beings, which is without limit. In other words, if sentient beings gained Buddhahood all at once, their realms would not be any fewer. If they did not become Buddhas, their realms would not increase in numbers either. There is no way to calculate the number of beings.

How many sentient beings are there among the six ordinary and four sacred categories, and in the nine Dharma realms? It’s something that cannot be conceived. Therefore “the number of sentient beings is unfathomable.”

“The force of karma is inconceivable.” Why is this so? For example, a crow is naturally black; it does not need to be dyed. An egret is born white and needs no dyeing either. A phoenix or peacock has naturally beautiful feathers; there is nothing artificial about them. People who do not understand the intricacies say they are made by nature.

In ancient India, a certain school of thought held that everything in the universe came into being spontaneously. This is not what the Buddha taught. According to the Dharma, all things arise from a convergence of karmic conditions. There is a cause behind each effect. In the case of crows and egrets, their colors are the result of their karmic contacts in prior lifetimes with black and white. All things have their karmic causes. An effect cannot exist spontaneously without its cause.

“The power of dragons is unfathomable.” A dragon can summon the wind and the rain; it can soar among the clouds and ride the mists. A single drop of water can cover the entire universe. This is why the power of dragons is unfathomable.

“The power of meditative concentration is inconceivable.” If a person can enter a sufficiently powerful state of concentration, his or her body will not decay

even after a hundred or a thousand years. The Buddha had a few disciples whose bodies are still in this world. Take, for example, Ven. Kasyapa. The Buddha instructed him to present monastic robes to Bodhisattva Maitreya when the latter came to our world to become a Buddha. So Kasyapa has retained his physical presence in this world. That is the case with many other Arhats. This illustrates the inconceivable power of meditative concentration.

In such a state one can also exercise a variety of special powers. This is unfathomable as well. But there is a saying that “special powers are no match for the force of karma.” Among the Buddha’s disciples, Ven. Moggallana was the most accomplished in special powers. After his mother fell into the realm of hungry ghosts, he was unable to save her. Only by accumulating merit through offerings to the Three Gems was he able to free her from her suffering. So the power of meritorious virtue is superior to special powers; only it can neutralize negative karma.

“The power of the Dharma is unfathomable.” The realm of Buddhas can be understood only by Buddhas. It cannot be divined by those at the Bodhisattva stage or below. So among the five inconceivable things, the power of the Dharma is the most unfathomable of all. And within the unfathomable power of the Dharma, most inconceivable is the power of Amitabha Buddha’s vows.

How much so? The *Contemplation Sutra* tells of a sentient being who committed the gravest karmic offenses but gains rebirth in the Pure Land at the lowest of the nine levels. This person, who has never done any good his entire life, is about to die. He starts to panic only when the flames of hell have started to singe his feet. At this moment he encounters a Dharma friend who tells him the teaching of Amitabha-recitation. He recites “*Namo Amitabha Buddha*” but ten times – and the hellfire at once transforms into lotus flowers. He not only escapes the clutches of hell, but leaves the Three Domains and Six Realms and gains rebirth in the Land of Bliss, assured of Buddhahood! Such is the inconceivable nature of Buddha-power and Buddha-merit.

The dialogue during which Bodhisattvas Manjusri and Samantabhadra advise Master Fazhao to seek rebirth in the Land of Bliss is as simple as it is remarkable. Not a word is superfluous or wasted. Actually Fazhao’s questions were not only for himself, but posed on our behalf as well. Nor did Manjusri answer alone; Samantabhadra also responded. In fact, it was not just the two Bodhisattvas who

answered, but Shakyamuni Buddha as well as the past, present and future Buddhas of the ten directions. That's because Amitabha-recitation is a teaching propagated by Shakyamuni Buddha and all the other Buddhas.

The two Bodhisattvas' discourse to Master Fazhao is a lesson for all of us suffering beings in the Age of Dharma Decline. When we are hearing the Dharma, it should be as though we were doing so in the presence of the Buddha, as if he were teaching us individually. While listening to the Dharma, the experience should be as real to us as if we were actually on the spot. That is to cherish and value the Dharma. Only then would we derive benefit from it.

11. Shakyamuni and the Other Buddhas Advise Us to Look to the Western Pure Land

Master Shandao said, **"Therefore Shakyamuni and the other Buddhas all urge us to go to the Western Land of Bliss."** *(In Praise of the Rite of Rebirth)*

The words are few, but their meaning is profound. Shakyamuni, as well as the Buddhas of the three time frames and ten directions, all counsel sentient beings throughout time and space to believe and accept Amitabha's deliverance, recite his name and seek rebirth in his Pure Land. This is the meaning of "Shakyamuni and the other Buddhas all urge us to go to the Western Land of Bliss."

On this point, there is verification in the scriptures, as well as in principle and in practice. The scriptural evidence has been discussed in the above sections on how Amitabha's Fundamental Vow is "the basic intent of all Buddhas, acclaimed by all Buddhas, encouraged by all Buddhas and specially preserved by all Buddhas." The accounts of Manjusri, Samantabhadra and the other Bodhisattvas propagating this teaching constitute practical corroboration.

12. Amitabha-Recitation Is the Beginning and the End of All Dharma Practices

Master Yinguang said, **"If they abandoned this teaching, sentient beings in the nine realms would not, at the extra-worldly level, be able to achieve Buddhahood. If they forsook this teaching, the Buddhas of the ten directions would be unable, on the worldly plane, to benefit the multitudes."**

The statement may be brief, but its implications are very broad and deep. Some people may not understand it, or they may doubt it or even reject it. Why? “If beings of the nine realms cannot gain Buddhahood after abandoning this teaching, wouldn’t it mean that all the other practices are useless?” they might ask. “And if Buddhas aren’t able to help all sentient beings once they forsake this teaching, it implies the other teachings must be flawed.” Is it really like that? Let’s examine the matter closely.

“Sentient beings in the nine realms” refers to beings of the nine Dharma realms, ranging from the highest-level Bodhisattvas to denizens of Avici Hell. The nine realms are home to ordinary beings of the Six Realms (celestial beings, humans, asuras, animals, hungry ghosts and hell beings) and the three types of sacred beings (Sravakas, Pratyekabuddhas and Bodhisattvas).

Originally there were ten Dharma realms, the tenth being that of Buddhas. But Buddhas have arrived at the ultimate destination; those who haven’t are beings in the other nine realms. If beings of these nine realms want to reach the endpoint, the supreme attainment of Buddhahood, they eventually have to recite the name of Amitabha Buddha.

Consider streams and rivers. In the end, they all necessarily flow into the sea. If they do not, they have not reached their ultimate destination. The goal of learning and practicing the Dharma is to become a Buddha – that is the final destination. To gain Buddhahood, we need to hold the Buddhas in mind; we must comprehend the substance of Buddhas and their realms. The simplest and most convenient way of doing so is *Namo Amitabha Buddha*, for the six characters contain completely the virtue and functions of the realm of Buddhas. The task becomes extremely difficult if we were to rely on our own ability instead of reciting “*Namo Amitabha Buddha*.”

At the same time, it would be very hard for Buddhas to save sentient beings if they departed from the teaching and practice of Amitabha-recitation. Even one as capable as Master Fazhao, upon considering the birth-less and death-less realm of Buddhahood, realized that he didn’t qualify for access, that his abilities were deficient and his afflictions heavy. If not for the teaching and practice of Amitabha-recitation, he wouldn’t know when he could escape the cycle of rebirth in the Three Domains and Six Realms.

If the Buddhas did not have the teaching and practice of Amitabha-recitation and its consequent rebirth in the Pure Land, how would they be able to deliver sentient beings thoroughly? As for ourselves, how could we achieve liberation from the Three Domains without this teaching? Rebirth in a celestial realm is beyond our reach, and even regaining human form in a future life is hard. Wouldn't we in fact be condemned to endless rebirth in the Three Wretched Realms?

Master Yinguang also said, **“For Buddhas of the ten directions and three time frames, [Amitabha-recitation] is, from start to finish, the all-encompassing teaching and practice in their achievement of Buddhahood and deliverance of sentient beings.”**

To gain Buddhahood and save beings, all Buddhas, from beginning to end, had to rely on Amitabha-recitation. Recitation of Amitabha's name is, in terms of becoming a Buddha and delivering beings, an all-encompassing teaching and practice. That is because the aim of Buddhahood is to save beings, which requires the aspiration to *bodhicitta*, undertaking the Four Great Vows and practicing the Six Paramitas and myriad virtuous deeds. In the context of Amitabha-recitation, however, the practice itself includes all of that. So the teaching is the “beginning and the end” of all Dharma practices.

13. Amitabha-Recitation Is the Profound Teaching of the Avatamsaka Sutra and the Secret Essence of the Lotus Sutra

Master Ouyi said this of Amitabha-recitation: **“Profound teaching of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, secret essence of the *Lotus Sutra*; core instruction of the Buddhas, beacon for the Bodhisattvas in their myriad practices.”**

There are three versions of the *Avatamsaka Sutra* – in 40 fascicles, 60 fascicles and 80 fascicles. The teaching and practice of Amitabha-recitation is the sutra's profound hidden treasure, the summation of its essence.

Among the Buddha's teachings, the *Avatamsaka Sutra* has been acclaimed as the richest and most sublime. Thus we speak of the “lofty, noble *Avatamsaka*.” Within the Dharma, when we reach this sutra we have arrived at the summit. But which is the most profound part, the heart of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*? It is an

exhortation to seek rebirth in the Land of Bliss by reciting the name of Amitabha Buddha.

Why do we say this? The most important part of the *Avatamsaka Sutra* is its “Chapter on Samantabhadra’s Practices and Vows.” It describes how Bodhisattva Samantabhadra undertakes his Ten Great Vows and leads the Avatamsaka assembly’s senior Bodhisattvas of 41 stages in aspiring to rebirth in the Land of Bliss. This episode is called “The Master of the Ten Great Vows Leads [the Bodhisattvas] Towards the Land of Bliss.” Completion of the Avatamsaka assembly’s vows and practices is known as the “profound teaching of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*.” That’s why we say that the sutra’s aim and essence is to induce a “return to the Land of Bliss.”

Given our capabilities, however, gaining rebirth in the Pure Land through the dedication of virtues mentioned in the *Avatamsaka* is simply impossible. For example, the three versions of the sutra would add up to 180 fascicles. If we recited a fascicle every day, we would need half a year to complete the recitation. If we recited six fascicles daily, a month would be required. Also, we may not be able to remember what we recite.

The Bodhisattvas at the Avatamsaka assembly have all achieved advanced status. Yet in the end, even they had to seek rebirth in the Land of Bliss. For the advanced Bodhisattvas to dedicate the merit they accumulated towards rebirth would be considered a journey of self-power along the difficult path. And the Bodhisattvas actually *have* virtues that they can dedicate. What merit can we iniquitous ordinary beings possibly have, in order to make such a dedication?

But if we recite the name of Amitabha Buddha, our merit would be greater even than theirs. As Master Yinguang said, “Be not surprised that a single recitation should surpass ten stages on the path to Bodhisattvahood; we should know that the six characters encompass the Three Vehicles of the Sravaka, Pratyekabuddha and Bodhisattva.” Thus we say the profound teaching of the *Avatamsaka Sutra* is Amitabha-recitation, leading to rebirth in the Land of Bliss.

The ancient worthies said that the *Avatamsaka Sutra* is an extended version of the *Longer Sutra (Infinite Life Sutra)*, while the *Longer Sutra* is a condensed version of the *Avatamsaka*. That’s because the *Longer Sutra* speaks of Amitabha Buddha’s 48 Great Vows, the core of which is the 18th Vow. And the 18th Vow is about achieving

rebirth in the Pure Land through recitation of Amitabha's name. So the heart of the *Longer Sutra* is Amitabha-recitation and resultant rebirth. The *Avatamsaka Sutra* also speaks of dedicating merit towards rebirth in the Pure Land. Thus it is said to be an expanded version of the *Longer Sutra*. The goal is the same in both sutras. If we recite Amitabha's name and aspire to be reborn in the Land of Bliss, we will already have grasped the core meaning of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*.

“Secret essence of the *Lotus Sutra* ...” The *Lotus Sutra* was the last major teaching given by Shakyamuni Buddha before he entered nirvana. The secret in the scripture is also the achievement of rebirth in the Land of Bliss through Amitabha-recitation.

The *Lotus Sutra* has 28 chapters, divided into seven fascicles. Its 23rd section, titled “Chapter on the Past Lives of Bodhisattva Medicine King,” says:

Those who hear this sutra and practice according to its teachings will, when they die, be reborn at once in the Land of Peace and Joy. Amitabha Buddha and the sacred assembly will surround them. Such persons will be born in a lotus flower, installed in a bejeweled seat.

This statement is very important. If someone can practice as the sutra instructs, he or she can be reborn in the Pure Land when death comes. The person will be surrounded by Amitabha and various great Bodhisattvas. He or she will be reborn, ensconced in a jeweled seat within a lotus flower. The goal of the *Lotus Sutra*, then, is also rebirth in the Land of Bliss.

Even so, though rebirth is the common aim, the method in the *Lotus Sutra* is the exercise of self-power, taking the difficult path. Our way is simple, through the mere recitation of *Namo Amitabha Buddha*. That's why Master Ouyi called Amitabha-recitation the “secret essence of the *Lotus Sutra*.”

To gain rebirth by reciting Amitabha's name is also the “beacon for the Bodhisattvas in their myriad practices.” The goal of Bodhisattvas is to gain Buddhahood and save sentient beings. Amitabha-recitation can allow them to complete the twin practices of accumulating meritorious blessings and wisdom

rapidly. It surely serves as a compass, pointing the direction, as the Bodhisattvas practice.

14. Amitabha-Recitation Sums Up Shakyamuni Buddha's Sacred Teachings

The ancient worthies said, **“Most sutras praise Amitabha Buddha; the recitation of his name sums up the sacred teachings of a lifetime.”**

More than 200 Buddhist sutras extol Amitabha Buddha, encouraging us to recite his name and seek rebirth in the Land of Bliss. Therefore “most sutras praise Amitabha Buddha.”

“The recitation of his name sums up the sacred teachings of a lifetime.” The conclusion, the summation, of a lifetime’s teaching by Shakyamuni Buddha is Amitabha-recitation. Why? Shortly before entering nirvana, the Buddha delivered the *Lotus Sutra*, the *Nirvana Sutra*, the *Longer Sutra* and related scriptures, including the *Contemplation Sutra* and the *Shorter Sutra*. Thus the sacred teachings of a lifetime are summed up in the recitation of *Namo Amitabha Buddha*.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

QUESTION: After being reborn in the Land of Bliss, how long does it take us to receive a prediction of Buddhahood from Amitabha Buddha?

ANSWER: According to the teaching of our school, we don’t have to wait until after rebirth to receive the prophecy. Amitabha Buddha’s prediction comes in this very lifetime.

Moreover, the prediction is equal to those given to the great Bodhisattvas. The *Longer Sutra* refers to “a status equal to Maitreya’s.” So our prediction is on the same level as that of Maitreya. The *Contemplation Sutra* describes Amitabha-reciters as *pundarika* flowers, lauding them as the equals of Bodhisattvas Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta. This is also a kind of prophecy. In this respect, I included a *gatha* at the end of the “Introduction” to Vol. 1 of *Records of the Effects of Amitabha-Recitation*:

*If we examine Amitabha Buddha's Fundamental Vow,
Its intention is that all beings should consistently and exclusively
Recite his name.
To gain rebirth in the Pure Land through name-recitation
Is Amitabha's basic wish;
Knowing and believing this, we should recite single-mindedly.
Those who do so are persons of superior capability;
Embraced by Amitabha's light, they are assured of rebirth.
For them the Longer Sutra predicts a status equal to Maitreya's;
The Contemplation Sutra hails them as pundarika flowers.
A magical elixir transforms iron into gold;
Amitabha-recitation turns the ordinary into the sacred.*

“If we examine Amitabha Buddha’s Fundamental Vow, its intention is that all beings should consistently and exclusively recite his name”: This is a quotation from Master Shandao, our school’s founder.

“To gain rebirth in the Pure Land through name-recitation is Amitabha’s basic wish”: To achieve certain rebirth in the Land of Bliss, all we need do is recite the name of Amitabha Buddha. The reason: This is Amitabha’s fundamental wish.

His 18th Vow says, ***“If, when I achieve Buddhahood, sentient beings of the ten directions who sincerely and joyfully entrust themselves to me, wish to be reborn in my land and recite my name, even ten times, should fail to be born there, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.”*** Since Amitabha has attained perfect enlightenment, all beings are assured of rebirth as long as they recite his name. Such is the inevitability of karmic cause and effect.

“Knowing and believing this, we should recite single-mindedly”: If we know and believe this, we should thereafter recite in this manner, as we are taught.

“Those who do so are persons of superior capability”: Such people have the most advanced capabilities. It doesn’t matter whether they are literate, possess wisdom or have studied the scriptures in depth. So long as they recite accordingly – even if they don’t understand the substance of the 18th Vow – they are persons of superior capability.

“Embraced by Amitabha’s light, they are assured of rebirth”: Amitabha is a Buddha who embraces. Such people are already enfolded in his light, never to be abandoned. They do not have to wait until they have drawn their last breath to be certain of rebirth in the Pure Land. In this very moment they are already assured.

“For them the *Longer Sutra* predicts a status equal to Maitreya’s”: The *Longer Sutra* is the *Infinite Life Sutra*. In it Shakyamuni Buddha has already made Buddhahood predictions on their behalf, adding that their status would be equal to that of Maitreya. Like Maitreya, we too will become Buddhas. That’s because all sentient beings in the Land of Bliss are a single lifetime away from Buddhahood.

“The *Contemplation Sutra* hails them as *pundarika* flowers”: In the *Contemplation Sutra*, Shakyamuni Buddha praises Amitabha-reciters as *pundarika* flowers. These are lotus flowers. People extol the Buddha as a *pundarika* flower, and he uses the same term to commend reciters. This further indicates that Amitabha-reciters will become Buddhas.

“A magical elixir transforms iron into gold”: We have long been like a heap of scrap iron, ordinary beings full of greed, anger and delusion. Such beings are either good or bad, continually being reborn in the Six Realms. What can elevate ordinary beings in the Six Realms into the ranks of the sacred, allowing them to enter the realm of Buddhas? Not the merit we ourselves cultivate, but recitation of Amitabha’s name.

Consider iron. There is no way to turn it into gold – except by means of a magic potion. Whatever they do, ordinary beings are still full of greed, anger and ignorance. The sole means of lifting them into sacred realms is a complete reliance on Amitabha-recitation.

QUESTION: In Mahayana Buddhism, is Pure Land considered a partial (expedient) teaching or a complete (ultimate) teaching?

ANSWER: There are the so-called Pitaka, Common, Distinctive and Round teachings. The “Round” teaching is perfect, complete. The other three teachings are partial or expedient; they are incomplete and not perfect, like the doctrines of the Smaller Vehicle.

Within the Mahayana, or Greater Vehicle, there is a division into the “partial” and the “complete” teachings. The former is an expedient means. It leads you half-way and lets you rest when you are tired. After you are refreshed, it guides you further along the path. Those teachings that lead you half-way and allow you to rest are known as expedient or partial. Only those that guide you to the ultimate destination are called complete.

The Tiantai school classifies the Buddha’s teachings into the Greater Vehicle and the Smaller Vehicle. And the Mahayana teachings are further divided into the partial and the complete, thus the “Pitaka, Common, Distinctive and Round” categories.

The teachings of the Pure Land school are complete, and within the complete teachings they are direct and immediate. They are the most complete among the complete teachings, and the most direct among the immediate.

QUESTION: How should we make dedications?

ANSWER: The important thing in making dedications is to be sincere. Amitabha Buddha knows whether we are sincere or not. If we are, if we express our wishes sincerely – that is to make a dedication. How good is our dedication does not depend on whether we can read a certain text. It is our sincerity that is most important.

Each of our publications has on its back cover a *gatha* of dedication: “May the resulting merit be distributed everywhere without discrimination. May we all aspire to perfect enlightenment for the sake of other beings, and be reborn in the Land of Peace and Joy.” If someone in our family especially needs such a dedication, we can say, “May the merit from this be transferred to so-and-so,” followed by “and distributed everywhere without discrimination. May we all aspire to perfect enlightenment for the sake of other beings, and be reborn in the Land of Peace and Joy.” Sometimes we are unable to express ourselves fully. It doesn’t matter, for Amitabha knows, and the effect is the same.

QUESTION: Are there any taboos in Amitabha-recitation? Must we use beads while reciting?

ANSWER: There no taboos at all in our Amitabha-recitation. Recitation beads are used for counting. Some people do not count, as they have already made a regular habit of Amitabha-recitation. Wherever they are, whatever they are doing, they recite. Having made a habit of recitation, they need not use beads.

But for beginners, it is best to set a daily number for recitations. They can use beads to count, a bead for each recitation, or for five or ten recitations. If we use a bead to mark five recitations, completing a string would mean we have done 500 recitations. If a bead denotes ten recitations, we would have accomplished a thousand.

QUESTION: When did Shakyamuni Buddha teach the three Pure Land sutras – and in what order?

ANSWER: In terms of unfolding the teachings, he first delivered the *Longer Sutra*, then the *Contemplation Sutra* and, finally, the *Shorter Sutra*. The teaching of the *Contemplation Sutra* coincided with the time the Buddha preached the *Lotus Sutra*. For it was while he was delivering the *Lotus Sutra* that King Bimbisara was imprisoned by his son. Deep inside the palace, Queen Vaidehi thought of Shakyamuni Buddha, who paused his discourse on the *Lotus Sutra* to teach her the *Contemplation Sutra*. It should have been shortly after he taught the *Longer Sutra*. We can't be certain about the precise time, but it should have been around then. That is why we say, "Amitabha-recitation sums up the Buddha's sacred teachings."