Segment-by-Segment Correct Meaning of the Amitābha Buddha Sūtra

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I. The Assembly of Sages Present at the Dharma Gathering

"Together with" means sharing in the merits of this very practice. Those who have long read the Amitābha Sūtra often merely yearn for the bliss of the Western Pure Land without understanding the spiritual realm of ultimate bliss; they know only the adornments with form in the West, without realizing the meritorious adornments of

the formless; they merely vow to be reborn there, without understanding how rebirth is attained; and they know only the meaning of the single gate to the West, without comprehending the wonder of the universal gate of the West.

The Western Land of Ultimate Bliss is a Buddha-land that perfectly pervades the ten directions, in which the one and the universal mutually encompass one another, reaching the utmost vastness and subtle precision. In Buddhist scriptures, plain wording often conveys profound meaning; this is so in this sūtra and in the Universal Gate Chapter. At the beginning of this sūtra, certain names are specially singled out: sixteen persons, from Śāriputra to Aniruddha.

For those of the Lesser Vehicle who incline toward biased emptiness and are not yet able to directly realize the Mahāyāna and broadly open up prajñā, the Buddha further taught of a world with form as evidence, wishing them not to cling to biased emptiness but to turn and recognize existence. Among the sixteen, Śāriputra is especially placed first because, when the Buddha teaches prajñā to those of the Lesser Vehicle, he cannot do without Śāriputra, whose wisdom is comparatively lofty. This is called entrusting.

Among the great bodhisattvas, Mañjuśrī is placed first to make clear that this sūtra cannot be understood without prajñā. Next is Bodhisattva Ajita, who is Maitreya. The Buddha first teaches forms in order to integrate them back into intrinsic nature. Thus it may be known that nature and form interpenetrate: neither empty nor existent. Only then does the spiritual realm of ultimate bliss begin to open. This is called being held in mindful care. Therefore, this sūtra must not be interpreted merely by clinging to its words; one must also comprehend it through its spiritual realm. Then one will know the Buddha's vast compassion. Are there people in the world who wish to be reborn together with all the noble assembly? May they first relinquish their preconceived views, kindly consider these humble views, and test for themselves what the ultimate outcome may be.

Thus have I heard. At one time, the Buddha was staying in the Jetavana Grove, Anāthapiṇḍada's Park, in Śrāvastī, together with a great assembly of 1,250 bhikṣus. All were great arhats, known and recognized by the assembly: Elder Śāriputra, Mahāmaudgalyāyana, Mahākāśyapa, Mahākātyāyana, Mahākauṣṭhila, Revata, Śuddhipanthaka, Nanda, Ānanda, Rāhula, Gavāṃpati, Piṇḍola Bhāradvāja, Kālodayin, Mahākapphiṇa, Vakkula, and Aniruddha—together with such great disciples.

Also present were great bodhisattvas: Mañjuśrī, Prince of the Dharma; Bodhisattva Ajita; Bodhisattva Gandhahastin; Bodhisattva Ever-Vigorous; and such other great bodhisattvas. There were also Śakra, Lord of the Devas, and countless multitudes of devas.

II. The Buddha's Teaching on the Western Land of Ultimate Bliss

Sentient beings possess five wisdoms, and Buddha-lands likewise have five directions. Speaking in terms of China, the center is India; to the east is Mañjuśrī's monastery on Mount Wutai, a place that ordinary beings can reach. To the south is Potalaka—not the present-day Putuo. To the north is the Kālacakra practice site, namely the land of Shambhala, which in the future will certainly become connected with the world, and there a wheel-turning king will appear. Once this king appears, the three disasters of the world will be eliminated, and peace will naturally prevail.

To the west is the Land of Ultimate Bliss, the so-called Western Gate of Accomplishment; that is, Amitābha Buddha, whom Esoteric Buddhism venerates as the Ḍākinī Buddha-Mother. This means that this Buddha can travel throughout the boundless realm of empty space to teach and transform immeasurable sentient beings. This Buddha-Mother illuminates the ten directions and receives all beings. The "hundred thousand koṭis of Buddha-lands" means that in each of the ten directions there are a hundred thousand koṭis of Buddha-lands; it indicates complete pervasiveness. It need not be measured solely from this land.

Its meaning will be explained further below. In Esoteric Buddhism, there are three ways of attaining Buddhahood: first, attaining Buddhahood in this very life; second, attaining Buddhahood in the intermediate state; and third, being born after death into a family that studies Buddhism and cultivating oneself to Buddhahood. The Ḍākinī Buddha-Mother spoken of there is precisely Amitābha Buddha, who guides beings to rebirth while they carry karma.

If a person has only begun to clarify the mind-ground, deeply yearns for the West, and can truly let go of all worldly ties, then the mind will not be confused. Such a person can join in affinity with the Buddha-Mother and attain rebirth. Therefore, these three places cannot be reached without spiritual powers. Spiritual powers mean that the mind is unobstructed. Only after the mind is unobstructed can one eliminate habitual tendencies and have one's mind sealed in accord with the Buddha's mind.

The Buddha specially opened this vast Dharma gate of great compassion: first, in response to the capacities of the sixteen great disciples of that time; and second, for the immeasurable sentient beings of later times who have the requisite affinities. One should know that everyone inherently has affinities, but not everyone necessarily has the blessings. Such blessings consist in faith that does not turn back and in being willing to undertake genuine practice. Hence it is called a Dharma

difficult to believe. “That Buddha is now present, teaching the Dharma.” What Dharma is this? It is simply a Dharma difficult to believe.

What, then, is meant by “ultimate bliss”? It is the ultimate bliss of the state attained after realizing the mind. If one took the riches and honors of material form to be bliss, why would the Buddha have painstakingly instructed Śāriputra? Thus, this sūtra is entirely concerned with the ultimate bliss of this state. If disputes arise from sectarianism and self-view, eliminate them at once; do not mislead yourself.

At that time the Buddha told the Elder Śāriputra: “West of here, beyond a hundred thousand koṭis of Buddha-lands, there is a world named Ultimate Bliss. In that land there is a Buddha named Amitābha, who is now present, teaching the Dharma. Śāriputra, why is that land called Ultimate Bliss? Because the sentient beings of that land have none of the many sufferings; they receive only every kind of bliss. Therefore it is called Ultimate Bliss.”

III. The Meritorious Adornments of the Splendid Attributes of the Dependent Recompense in That Land

Because sentient beings cling to appearances as real, the Buddha guides them through the splendid adornments of subtle forms. All illusory appearances are inseparable from the illusory mind, and the illusory mind itself arises from true nature. Thus, there is no harm in provisionally regarding illusion as real; one need not rigidly cling to distinctions between the real and the illusory. In terms of essence, nothing is illusory; in terms of appearances, nothing is truly real. That which is neither illusory nor real is the merit and virtue of pure emptiness. This is an initial expedient method. Moreover, although what people see with their eyes is the same, their perceptions differ; this is simply because each person's blessings differ. Hence there is a division into nine grades.

Moreover, Śāriputra, the Land of Ultimate Bliss is surrounded on all sides by seven tiers of balustrades, seven tiers of netting, and seven rows of trees, all made of the four precious substances. For this reason, that land is called Ultimate Bliss.

Moreover, Śāriputra, in the Land of Ultimate Bliss are pools of the seven precious substances, filled with water possessing eight meritorious qualities. The bottoms of these pools are entirely covered with golden sand. Their four sides have stairways made of gold, silver, lapis lazuli, and crystal. Above them stand pavilions, also adorned with gold, silver, lapis lazuli, crystal, mother-of-pearl, red pearls, and agate. The lotuses in the pools are as large as carriage wheels: blue lotuses emit blue light, yellow lotuses emit yellow light, red lotuses emit red light, and white lotuses emit

white light. They are subtle, wondrous, fragrant, and pure. Śāriputra, the Land of Ultimate Bliss is adorned with such merit and virtue.

IV. The Meritorious Adornment of Wondrous Sounds in That Land's Dependent Recompense

The Land of Ultimate Bliss is the mind's ultimate bliss. But how could forms and sounds therefore be discarded? One simply does not cling to appearances and is not bound by sounds and forms; thus one attains the ultimate bliss of great freedom. This section proceeds from form and gradually enters the realm of empty luminosity, yet it still does not depart from conditioned offerings and adornments with form, as in the case of the kalaviṅka and jīvajīvaka birds.

As for what expresses intrinsic nature, all things are inseparable from intrinsic nature. Within the purity of intrinsic nature, there can never be any principle by which good and evil become entangled; how, then, could there be even the name of an evil realm? It is precisely through the accomplishment of the dharmakāya that, in every circumstance, one is naturally joyful and at ease.

Even when hearing the melodious calls of birds, one is as though constantly mindful of the Buddha. The spiritual state is already elevated. Among the thirty-seven factors conducive to awakening, one should apply effort throughout to the five faculties, five powers, seven factors of awakening, and Noble Eightfold Path. How could one add the preceding four divisions and twelve factors again, turning back to cultivate them in reverse? Therefore, the propagation of the Dharma sound is natural and transformative; it is not that the Buddha must again expound this illusory Dharma in order to delude people.

Moreover, those who can be reborn in that land share in the virtues of Amitābha. In Esoteric Buddhism, Amitābha has four meanings; the fourth is that Amitābha is the intrinsic nature of all sentient beings. Even sentient beings who have not yet attained rebirth equally possess this nature; how much more so those who have already been reborn there?

Therefore, those who wish to arouse the resolve for rebirth must never deceive themselves and thereby deceive others. Ask yourselves: Can you truly maintain purity in a single thought? Are you free from contention in worldly affairs? Do you have pure faith in the Dharma? Is your mindfulness of Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha truly natural? If even a fraction of self-interested calculation remains, then a fraction of self-view is present. If one has not accomplished this during life, how can one attain rebirth after death? Sound pertains to the ear; one must ask one's own mind.

Only after passing through this gate may one speak of the principle of attaining rebirth and entering the direct recompense.

Moreover, Śāriputra, in that Buddha-land heavenly music is constantly played, and the ground is of gold. During the six periods of day and night, māndārava flowers rain down from heaven. The sentient beings of that land, each morning, fill the hems of their robes with many wondrous flowers and make offerings to a hundred thousand koṭis of Buddhas in other lands. When it is time to eat, they return to their own land, take their meal, and then engage in walking meditation. Śāriputra, the Land of Ultimate Bliss is adorned with such merits and virtues.

Furthermore, Śāriputra, that land always has many kinds of wondrous birds of varied colors: white cranes, peacocks, parrots, śāris, kalaviṅkas, and jīvajīvakas. All these birds, throughout the six periods of day and night, bring forth harmonious and elegant sounds. Their sounds proclaim the five faculties, five powers, seven factors of awakening, Noble Eightfold Path, and teachings such as these. When the sentient beings of that land hear these sounds, they are all mindful of the Buddha, mindful of the Dharma, and mindful of the Saṅgha.

Śāriputra, do not say that these birds were truly born as the retribution for evil karma. Why is this so? That Buddha-land has no three lower realms. Śāriputra, in that Buddha-land there is not even the name of the evil realms, much less their actual existence. All these birds are transformations created by Amitābha Buddha in order to cause the Dharma sound to spread.

Śāriputra, when a gentle breeze stirs the rows of jeweled trees and jeweled nets in that Buddha-land, they give forth subtle and wondrous sounds, like hundreds of thousands of kinds of music playing all at once. Those who hear these sounds naturally give rise to the mind of mindfulness of the Buddha, mindfulness of the Dharma, and mindfulness of the Saṅgha. Śāriputra, that Buddha-land is adorned with such merits and virtues.

V. The Merits and Adornments of the Dharma Nature of the Principal Recompense in That Land

This section speaks of the merits of that Buddha’s Dharma-nature: his light illuminates the ten directions—this is its function; his life span is immeasurable—this is its essence.

This should be explained in terms of the distinction between the particular and the universal. Earlier it was said that a Buddha has five lands and naturally possesses the five wisdoms. In human beings, one’s inherent original self-nature is Vairocana; this is the particular aspect. In relation to all directions, it is the universal gate. In this

Buddha-land, Śākyamuni is Vairocana; this is the particular aspect. In relation to other worlds, it is the universal gate. The other land is likewise so: Amitābha, in his own person in the West, is Vairocana; this is the particular aspect. Yet in relation to the lands of the ten directions, his light shines everywhere; this is the universal gate. Buddha-land and Buddha-land mutually encompass one another through the particular and the universal; thus I and Amitābha likewise mutually encompass one another through the particular and the universal. It is only because sentient beings share the same essence but differ in function that they cannot activate this function.

If those who now cultivate pure karma do not first understand this principle, then even if that Buddha comes through empty space to receive them, it will be difficult for them to accord with him. How, then, can they be reborn there? The purpose of the Esoteric Buddhist practice of dual bodies is that I and the Buddha commune in spirit and understanding, without any division between self and other. When one orally recites the name Amitābha, one is naming one's own original body.

To call him Amitābha means that, in one's thoughts, one continually envisions his light universally shining without omission, and that I too am embraced by it. That function is mentioned first and essence afterward is not a reversal: the intent is for practitioners first to visualize him, reflect upon him, and revere him earnestly, so that Buddha-name recitation becomes effective. This section is of the greatest importance and is the framework of the entire sūtra. Practitioners must attain a luminous mind-ground and enter into rigorous concentration. That Buddha comes through empty space to embrace and transform them, while I, with an empty mind, receive his embrace. If one does this and is not reborn there, such a case has never existed. Rather than attend to this, people stir up pointless disputes—whom are they deceiving?

Śāriputra, what do you think? Why is that Buddha called Amitābha? Śāriputra, that Buddha's light is immeasurable; it illuminates the lands of the ten directions without obstruction. Therefore he is called Amitābha. Moreover, Śāriputra, the life span of that Buddha and of his people is immeasurable and boundless, extending for asaṃkhyeya kalpas. Therefore he is called Amitābha. Śāriputra, Amitābha Buddha attained Buddhahood ten kalpas ago.

VI. The Incalculable Number of Noble Companions in That Land

This speaks of the excellence of the beings in that land—the so-called assembly of foremost good people. Their goodness is the highest goodness, not goodness measured in contrast to evil. When even goodness is not posited, this is called supreme goodness; it is also called purity. Therefore, all sentient beings born there

are avaivartika, that is, established on the immovable ground and capable of one-pointedness of mind without distraction.

The immovable ground is the first bhūmi of a bodhisattva, the Ground of Joy; only then can one accord with that world. If one harbors even a single attachment, distress and vexation immediately arise, and the slightest evil thought is stirred. How could one then be together with them? Moreover, in that land there is not even the name of the evil realms, whereas I have the reality of evil thoughts. How could, among innumerable avaivartikas, there be room for even a single evil sentient being?

Therefore, one should ask oneself whether one can now enter that land and join the assembly of sages as companions. There is no need to ask whether one may or may not be reborn there in the future. It depends entirely upon the accord of one's disposition, degree of attainment, and spiritual realm. If they accord, then even without going, one has gone; if they do not accord, what help is there in empty vows? One must certainly uphold the Name to assist this, and seek realization within a fixed period, as in the seventh section.

Moreover, Śāriputra, that Buddha has immeasurable and boundless disciples among the śrāvakas, all of them arhats, whose number cannot be known by calculation. The assembly of bodhisattvas is likewise. Śāriputra, that Buddha-land is adorned with such virtues and accomplishments. Moreover, Śāriputra, all sentient beings born in the Land of Ultimate Bliss are avaivartika. Among them are many who, in one more lifetime, will succeed to Buddhahood. Their number is extremely great and cannot be known by calculation; it can only be described as immeasurable, boundless asaṃkhyeyas.

VII. The Section on Making Vows for Rebirth Through Buddha-Recitation

How vast and great are such undertakings; how could they be accomplished hastily? Although everyone has a share in them, everyone abandons themselves. If they do not follow the Buddha's intent, what can be done? To be able to have deep faith in oneself and resolutely proceed along the upward path is a root of goodness. Having encountered the Buddha and heard the Dharma, one is willing to practice austerely with one mind: if one day does not suffice, then seven days; if one seven-day period does not suffice, then seven periods of seven days. During these seven days, one does not know on which day one may suddenly realize the state of non-distraction, gradually entering the state of becoming continuous and undivided. Then, after a long time, when conditions ripen, whether for one day or seven days, there will not be a single day in which the mind is not thus settled. This is what is meant by "for

three months without departing from benevolence”; it is a matter of causes and conditions.

When these two come together and merit and virtue are fulfilled, superior conditions must be present; a small measure is insufficient. As for the ten recitations at the time of death, they must be supported by prior conditions. For one has long since wearied of and abandoned the Sahā world, with absolutely no second thought; apart from rebirth in the Western Pure Land, there is absolutely no other path. Then a single thought is enough. But if one’s vows are not earnest, one’s holding of the Name is not sincere, and one’s mind is ordinarily in constant confusion rather than one-pointed, then at the critical time one cannot avoid confusion and inversion.

The Buddha spoke these words to indicate the practice at the causal stage and complete fulfillment at the fruition stage; they are not necessarily to be understood in terms of before and after death.

When worldly people hear such words as “I see this benefit,” they are delighted and wish to hear them. Yet they neglect the method for attaining one-pointedness of mind, as well as the five occurrences of the word “difficult” spoken by the Buddha in the tenth section. They insist on cleverly defending themselves with the claim that rebirth is still possible through ten recitations. Skillful means of guiding people onward are, of course, compassionate; but they do not realize that there are also sentient beings of inferior wisdom who take this as indulgence, thinking that it is enough merely to plant roots of goodness. Whether one can attain rebirth or not should be asked of the practitioner personally.

How should one question oneself? One should ask whether, in one’s ordinary mental state, one can transcend and be liberated; whether, during seven days, one can become thus continuous and undivided and hold fast to the principal matter. Only then will one receive the mindful protection of the Buddha of the Western Pure Land and be together with all the most virtuous people.

Śāriputra, when sentient beings hear this, they should make vows and aspire to be born in that land. Why? Because there they may gather together in one place with such people of supreme goodness. Śāriputra, one cannot be born in that land with few roots of goodness, merit and virtue, and causes and conditions.

Śāriputra, if any good man or good woman hears of Amitābha Buddha and holds fast to his name for one day, two days, three days, four days, five days, six days, or seven days, with one-pointedness of mind without distraction, then at the time of that person’s death, Amitābha Buddha, together with the assembly of sages, will appear before them. When that person dies, their mind will not be confused or inverted, and they will immediately attain rebirth in Amitābha Buddha’s Land of

Ultimate Bliss. Śāriputra, because I see this benefit, I speak these words: if sentient beings hear this teaching, they should make vows and aspire to be born in that land.

VIII. All Buddhas in the Ten Directions Exhort Faith and Offer Protection Section

This section expresses the wonder of the mutual inclusion of the Western Pure Land and the ten directions, of the single gate and the universal gate. But what is the principal means by which they mutually include one another? It is this undistracted mind. The sūtra protected and kept in mind is not merely the Amitābha Sūtra of a little more than a thousand Chinese characters; it is that which all the Buddhas of the ten directions, as numerous as the sands of the Ganges, have jointly realized.

The Buddhas of the ten directions are each distributed in the four quarters, illuminating everywhere a hundred thousand koṭis of Buddha-lands. Their lights mutually encompass one another and merge into the ocean of one Buddha-nature: Amitābha is Vairocana. This section particularly emphasizes such words as “also,” “each in its own land,” “broad and long,” “pervading and covering,” “you should believe this,” “inconceivable,” and “the sūtra protected and kept in mind.” Savor the significance and realm of each word. Most wonderful of all is the implicit word “same”: if our minds bear the same seal as the Buddhas of the ten directions,

then we will certainly be protected and kept in mind by all Buddhas, and all will attain non-retrogression from unsurpassed, perfect enlightenment. Only then are the roots of goodness, merit and virtue, causes, and conditions complete. Such a vast Dharma gate is difficult to discuss with those who have not aroused a vast mind and do not possess the capacity for immeasurable Dharma.

In expounding this passage again, the Buddha also conveys the meaning of the Diamond Sūtra’s analogy of the space of the ten directions to a great mind. He further fears that people may cling greedily to one direction and narrow their own aspirations. This is spoken for those of the highest vehicle. Throughout the forty-nine years, the Buddha’s compassionate liberative work was solely to remove attachment to self. Those who now greedily cling to the Western Pure Land likewise do not accord with the Buddha’s intent. Faith, vows, and strength of aspiration certainly must be firm; yet the meaning of the Western Pure Land and the ten directions must also be complete. With comprehensive contemplation, the meaning

leaves nothing that is not understood; when principle is fully grasped, no view remains impure. The Buddhas of the three times all breathe through one nostril—how could the Buddhas of the ten directions not equally protect and keep beings in mind? The statement that there are Buddhas in the ten directions is meant to

prevent attachment to one direction, for each has its own causes and conditions. Their speaking truthful words with the mark of the broad and long tongue reveals the vastness of the Dharma and entry into the Buddha's true lineage.

All is mind-only: when the mind thinks of māras, it is a māra; when it thinks of Buddha, it is Buddha. Thus, the Pure Land is the collective designation for the accomplishment of the merit and virtue of fruition by practitioners. Whether this direction or the ten directions, this Dharma or that Dharma, at root it all lies in faithfully accepting without doubt; accomplishment will certainly be attained. To purify one's own land is the Dharma that is most complete and vast. When mind meets with Buddha, one will certainly receive their protection and remembrance. Readers of the sūtras need not be constrained by words. If one can understand the Amitābha of one's own nature, one will know what it is that is protected and kept in mind.

Śāriputra, just as I now praise the inconceivable benefits of Amitābha Buddha's merit and virtue, so too in the eastern world there are Akṣobhya Buddha, Sumeru-Form Buddha, Great Sumeru Buddha, Sumeru-Light Buddha, Wondrous-Voice Buddha, and Buddhas such as these, as numerous as the sands of the Ganges. Each, in his own land, brings forth the mark of the broad and long tongue, pervading and covering a great trichiliocosm, and speaks truthful words: "You sentient beings should believe this sūtra of praise for inconceivable merit and virtue, protected and kept in mind by all Buddhas."

Śāriputra, in the southern world there are Sun-Moon-Lamp Buddha, Renowned-Light Buddha, Great Blazing-Shoulder Buddha, Sumeru-Lamp Buddha, Immeasurable-Diligence Buddha, and Buddhas such as these, as numerous as the sands of the Ganges. Each, in his own land, brings forth the mark of the broad and long tongue, pervading and covering a great trichiliocosm, and speaks truthful words: "You sentient beings should believe this sūtra of praise for inconceivable merit and virtue, protected and kept in mind by all Buddhas."

Śāriputra, in the western world there are Immeasurable-Life Buddha, Immeasurable-Form Buddha, Immeasurable-Banner Buddha, Great-Light Buddha, Great-Brilliance Buddha, Jewel-Form Buddha, Pure-Light Buddha, and Buddhas such as these, as numerous as the sands of the Ganges. Each, in his own land, brings forth the mark of the broad and long tongue, pervading and covering a great trichiliocosm, and speaks truthful words: "You sentient beings should believe this sūtra of praise for inconceivable merit and virtue, protected and kept in mind by all Buddhas."

Śāriputra, in the northern world there are Blazing-Shoulder Buddha, Most-Victorious-Voice Buddha, Unyielding Buddha, Sun-Born Buddha, Net-of-Light

Buddha, and Buddhas such as these, as numerous as the sands of the Ganges. Each, in his own land, brings forth the mark of the broad and long tongue, pervading and covering a great trichiliocosm, and speaks truthful words: “You sentient beings should believe this sūtra of praise for inconceivable merit and virtue, protected and kept in mind by all Buddhas.”

Śāriputra, in the lower world there are Lion Buddha, Renowned Buddha, Renowned-Light Buddha, Dharma Buddha, Dharma-Banner Buddha, Upholder-of-Dharma Buddha, and Buddhas such as these, as numerous as the sands of the Ganges. Each, in his own land, brings forth the mark of the broad and long tongue, pervading and covering a great trichiliocosm, and speaks truthful words: “You sentient beings should believe this sūtra of praise for inconceivable merit and virtue, protected and kept in mind by all Buddhas.”

Śāriputra, in the upper world there are Brahmā-Voice Buddha, King-of-Constellations Buddha, Supreme-Fragrance Buddha, Fragrance-Light Buddha, Great Blazing-Shoulder Buddha, Buddha Whose Body Is Adorned with Multicolored Jewel Flowers, King-of-Śāla-Trees Buddha, Jewel-Flower-Virtue Buddha, Beholder-of-All-Meanings Buddha, Sumeru-Mountain Buddha, and Buddhas such as these, as numerous as the sands of the Ganges. Each, in his own land, brings forth the mark of the broad and long tongue, pervading and covering a great trichiliocosm, and speaks truthful words: “You sentient beings should believe this sūtra of praise for inconceivable merit and virtue, protected and kept in mind by all Buddhas.”

Śāriputra, what do you think? Why is this called the sūtra protected and kept in mind by all Buddhas? Śāriputra, if good men or good women hear this sūtra and uphold it, and hear the names of these Buddhas, then these good men and good women will all be protected and kept in mind by all Buddhas, and will all attain non-retrogression from unsurpassed, perfect enlightenment. Therefore, Śāriputra, all of you should faithfully accept my words and what all the Buddhas have spoken.

IX. Section on Sentient Beings of the Three Times Who, Upon Arousing the Resolve, Attain Rebirth Alike

Faith is the mother of merit and virtue. When faith is accomplished, merit and virtue are accomplished as well.

The Buddha said that upon first arousing the resolve, one immediately becomes a Buddha. Yet people stubbornly maintain that one can be reborn only after death. This is a fundamental and grave error. Rebirth in the Western Pure Land indeed occurs after death, but whether one can attain rebirth is decided during life. This

shows the excellence of making vows. If, when the four elements are separating and one is in extreme pain, one can remain one-pointedly focused on the Buddha, then it is evident that one is not attached to worldly love and views. To be liberated and transformed is naturally possible. Yet one must regularly contemplate this during life and make one's vows strong. With a turn of a single thought, the eighty-four thousand practices are, in that very moment, all accomplished within the single word emptiness.

This Dharma is most difficult to practice and most difficult to believe. It can by no means be accomplished in a moment of panic at the last minute. Therefore, a single thought of practice leads to non-retrogression. The six phrases—having already made vows, now making vows, and about to make vows; having already been reborn, now being reborn, and about to be reborn—correspond exactly; they are not two separate meanings. The power of mind is beyond comparison. This is a Dharma for suddenly entering the ground of the Tathāgata; hence it is said, "non-retrogression from unsurpassed, perfect enlightenment."

Śāriputra, if there are people who have already made vows, now make vows, or are about to make vows, wishing to be reborn in Amitābha Buddha's land, all these people will attain non-retrogression from unsurpassed, perfect enlightenment. In that land, they have already been reborn, are now being reborn, or will be reborn. Therefore, Śāriputra, all good men and good women who have faith should make vows to be reborn in that land.

X. The Difficulty of Faith for Heavily Obstructed Sentient Beings in the Defiled World

The Buddhas praised Śākyamuni Buddha for being able to accomplish exceedingly difficult deeds. The difficulty does not lie in the deeds themselves; rather, it reveals how beings in the Sahā world are obstinate by nature and difficult to tame.

This Sahā world of the five turbidities is all created by the mind. The mind's stubborn firmness constitutes the turbidity of views. When the mind's eye is obscured by the five turbidities, it cannot see; thus, even when the various adornments are expounded, there is no way for one to enter through faith. Therefore, the Buddha cannot liberate those without affinity. From the repeated use of the word "difficult" five times, this may be understood. I hope that practitioners, knowing the difficulty, will value the Dharma; valuing the Dharma, they will recognize that the Buddha's compassion leaves nothing unattended, remain especially vigilant, and take refuge single-mindedly in the Buddha, thereby perhaps repaying, in some small measure, the Buddha's grace.

Śāriputra, just as I now praise the inconceivable merits of all Buddhas, so too those Buddhas praise my inconceivable merits and say these words: “Śākyamuni Buddha is able to accomplish exceedingly difficult and rare deeds. In the Sahā world, in the evil age of the five turbidities—the turbidity of the kalpa, the turbidity of views, the turbidity of afflictions, the turbidity of sentient beings, and the turbidity of life—he attains unsurpassed perfect awakening and, for the sake of all sentient beings, expounds this Dharma that is difficult for all the world to believe.”

Śāriputra, you should know that in the evil age of the five turbidities, I accomplish this difficult deed: I attain unsurpassed perfect awakening and expound this Dharma, difficult for all the world to believe. This is exceedingly difficult.

XI. Section on Sentient Beings of the Three Times Simultaneously Attaining Dharma Bliss

When the Buddha had finished speaking this sūtra, not only all those present at that time, but also all sentient beings of the present and future—every being in the world, including devas, humans, asuras, and even ghosts, animals, and beings in the hells—could, through affinity with this Dharma, attain liberation and great happiness. On hearing the Dharma, they give rise to faith; through faith, they accept it; having accepted it, they uphold and practice it; through practice, they realize its subtle wonder. All rejoice. Those who bow in reverence and depart set their hearts upon it, whether already born, now being born, or yet to be born. Yet the most essential point is faith and acceptance: faith in and acceptance of this Dharma, which is difficult to believe.

When the Buddha had finished speaking this sūtra, Śāriputra and the bhikṣus, together with all the devas, humans, asuras, and other beings in the world, having heard what the Buddha had taught, rejoiced, believed and accepted it, paid homage, and departed.