A Brief Explanation of the Meaning of the Amitābha Sūtra

Master Wang Xianglu

Contents

A Brief Explanation of the Meaning of the Amitābha Buddha Sūtra

A Brief Explanation of the Meaning of the Amitābha Buddha Sūtra

Amitābha Buddha Yidam Mantras

These are the Great Rebirth Mantras. The three mantras should be recited consecutively; elderly people may recite only the ten-syllable third mantra.

1. Oṃ, Bēimă, Dálā, Sài, Svāhā.

2. Tadyathā: Oṃ, Amite Amite, Upāya, Amitā Saṃbhava, Amitā Bhijñate, Amitā. Gāmini, Gaṅgala, Gīti Gāli, Sarva, Keśa, Kṣayaṅkāri, Svāhā.

3. Oṃ, Amitā, Jabi, Amitā, Hūṃ.

This mantra should be received through personal oral transmission before it is recited.

A Brief Explanation of the Sūtra’s Meaning

For forty-nine years the Buddha taught the Dharma, employing all kinds of skillful means for no other purpose than to gather sentient beings’ minds into oneness. Only when even this one cannot be obtained are all sufferings and afflictions truly crossed over. The Buddha responds to beings according to their capacities; there is no fixed Dharma. The method of Buddha-remembrance is also one kind of skillful means. One must not rigidly cling to holding the name as Buddha-remembrance. Whoever inwardly contemplates intrinsic nature, outwardly studies sūtras and treatises, and never departs from awakened nature in thought after thought is practicing Buddha-remembrance.

For thousands of years, many have practiced Buddha-remembrance, but few have attained accomplishment. The reasons are these: first, they seek easy gain and cannot endure hardship; second, they do not understand the essential point of mind, so their strength is insufficient; third, they divide into schools and factions, giving rise to notions of purity and defilement; fourth, they do not obtain the key to the method of holding the name.

First one must understand what it is that practices Buddha-remembrance. What, too, is this thing that suffers all day long, is upside down and confused, and wanders through birth and death? Only then should one practice Buddha-remembrance. When the mind-ground is clear, I do not depart from the Buddha, and the Buddha does not depart from me; Buddha and self share the same light, essence and function are thusness, everywhere is the Pure Land, and every place is the West. Practitioners must understand that birth and death are a grave matter. With earnest and heartfelt resolve, diligent effort, and vigorous practice, rebirth in the Western Pure Land is not difficult; one can certainly realize avaivartika in this very life.

The two Chinese characters jing ( ), “pure,” and tu ( ), “land,” should be explained separately. “Pure” means sweeping away all habitual tendencies so that there is no contamination. “Land” refers to the original mind-ground. The wondrous substance of my original awakening is likewise of immeasurable light, illuminating the lands of the ten directions without obstruction. Its life is also boundless and immeasurable. It is one substance with the Buddha and not two. Amitābha and I have never come or gone, nor have we ever been separated. In delusion, the Western Land becomes Avīci; in awakening, Avīci itself is the West. Therefore the sūtra says: “If one wishes to purify one’s land, one must first purify one’s mind. As one’s mind is purified, so the Buddha-land is purified.”

The Pure Land is the fruition-ground ultimately realized and verified by all children of the Buddha. If one practices without realizing the Pure Land, it cannot be called accomplishment. Thus the West belongs to the gateway of accomplishment. All methods—whether Chan meditation, Vajrayāna, Dharma Characteristics, precepts, or holding the name—are preliminary expedients for cultivating pure karma, used to realize the Pure Land. Once practice and conduct are accomplished, none of these dharmas has any further use.

Therefore, the words Pure Land are the honorable name for the perfected virtues of the fruition-ground. They do not belong to a particular method. One must not establish it alone as a single school and rank it superior or inferior to other traditions; nor is it that the West alone is pure and other directions are defiled. For all dharmas return to the Pure Land; the Pure Land is not some separate dharma. Nor is it necessary to enter purity by this method alone, while other methods cannot do so. The founders of schools originally opened provisional expedients suited to

their time. How could these have been intended to give rise in later generations to views of superiority and inferiority, even to the mistaken belief that other schools are impure, leading them to oppose one another like fire and water? Could this have been the patriarchs' original aspiration? Could it have been the fundamental intent of the Pure Land?

"Pure" means ultimately pure, and "land" means the original mind-ground. All beings born in the Western Land possess the supreme virtue of purity of mind-ground. I too must possess this pure mind before I can assemble in one place with all the beings of superior goodness. The three—roots of goodness, merit and virtue, and conditions—must all be completely present before there can be correspondence. To cling one-sidedly to a single gate as supreme and claim that dharmas are higher or lower is not the Pure Land.

To regard other schools with hostility as demonic or monstrous is for one's own mind already to have entered the demonic and monstrous; this is not the Pure Land. Even without these two faults, if one covets the Pure Land teaching because the Buddha receives and guides one, this still rests on the inferior disposition of seeking convenience and dependence; it too is not the Pure Land. With such inverted views, what then can be meant by roots of goodness and merit and virtue? Though one may have conditions, one has already produced obstacles for oneself. This self-deception through incorrect views is not accomplishment.

People of the higher, middling, and lower capacities all inherently possess the virtues of the Pure Land. It is regrettable only that their power of vow is unequal; they have essence but no function. Hence the lament: "They are not sentient beings, nor are they not sentient beings." It is only because their conditions differ that their realization and entry also differ accordingly. The Buddha taught this Dharma gate so that beginners might sow its seeds at the causal stage and first form an excellent affinity with the West.

Those of middling capacity, having prior causes from the past, may rely on this to enter realization, using it as an aid and condition for rebirth. Those of higher capacity are about to bring the fruition-ground to perfection; once received and guided, they attain accomplishment. Therefore it is said that it universally embraces practitioners of all three capacities.

Moreover, the nine grades are not first divided into nine grades after rebirth. Before rebirth, there are already countless grades. How then can one say that everyone can attain accomplishment in this very life? Present claims that rebirth is so easy were originally intended as expedient means of guidance. Yet this overlooks sentient beings' weak dispositions: those whose resolve is not earnest will refuse diligent

practice even if still more expedient methods are offered. Instead, because it is said to be too easy, they take the Dharma lightly, and the resulting harm only grows.

First, considering it too easy, they do not arouse earnest resolve. Second, believing that the Buddha can receive them, they remain inverted at death without reproaching themselves; instead they blame the Dharma, doubt the Dharma, slander the Buddha, and fall into hell. Third, those who truly apply themselves may, after long practice and still lacking certainty, give rise instead to doubt and retreat. Fourth, they refuse the silver dais and insist on waiting for the golden dais; because of such greed, Māra seizes the opportunity.

The sūtras say that this is extremely difficult, yet it is instead called extremely easy; ascetic practitioners will surely give rise to doubt and fear—this is the fifth. Any one of these is enough to obstruct faith, much less all of them. Therefore one must be cautious in establishing teachings. If one wishes skillfully to guide people, it is enough first to make them fear suffering and arouse earnest resolve. Why must one cling one-sidedly to this principle and take it as a fixed conclusion?

To cultivate the Pure Land, one must first establish right faith. What is right faith? It is not merely faith that the West is a Pure Land; it is faith that Buddha-lands exist throughout the ten directions, as the Amitābha Sūtra already states. This is the first.

It is not merely faith that the Pure Land is that land; it also refers to the Pure Land of one's own intrinsic nature. The Western Pure Land, moreover, is established by the purity of intrinsic nature of all beings of superior goodness. They share the same equal fundamental basis; principle and phenomena interpenetrate, and all attain Buddhahood. This is the second.

Believe that Buddha-lands have no fixed definition. In the Sahā world and in hell, distinctions produce purity and defilement; but in the Buddha's view, there is not a single place that is not a Pure Land. Sentient beings themselves give rise to illusory impure minds and create karma. If they transform this through the power of wisdom, that very moment is the Pure Land. This is the third. The Buddha neither comes nor goes; Amitābha is everywhere, in every place. Practitioners obstruct their own minds and therefore do not see him. This is the fourth.

Those who understand this meaning possess what is called right faith. This is the Dharma difficult to believe. I have already discussed it in my earlier Essential Teachings of Amitābha. The purpose of the Pure Land Dharma gate is first to purify one's intention; therefore one must attain one-pointedness of mind without distraction. Such one-pointedness is the fruition realized after awakening, whereas holding the name in Buddha-remembrance is a method of practice before realization.

Buddha means awakening; Buddha-remembrance means abiding in awakening in thought after thought. Whenever the mind gives rise to greed or anger, a single awakening instantly turns it into purity. This is the unsurpassed, perfect, and sudden Dharma gate. Thus one utterance of Amitābha immediately transcends the grave sins of birth and death accumulated through eighty billion kalpas. Yet although turning toward awakening is swift, turning back toward delusion is also easy.

Why does it speak of eighty billion kalpas rather than ninety billion? Nine is the ultimate number. Since one has not yet departed from dharmas, it speaks of eighty. If even this single phrase is emptied, one directly comprehends the meaning of Buddhahood: everything is wholly purified, and only then may one speak of ninety billion kalpas.

Sentient beings have only one thought, not thought after thought. With one thought of the Buddha, they may immediately turn back to a thought of anger. One must abide in the Buddha in thought after thought; then one forms an unbroken whole, and greed and anger have no way to arise. When this matures over time, it is called accomplishment.

Again, sentient beings are only thought after thought, not one thought. Why? Because their thoughts are constantly caught up in people, affairs, emotions, and views: if not greed, then anger; if not anger, then ignorance. These are evoked by the evil causes of the three karmas. If thoughts continue without interruption, there can be no hope of ever escaping the conditions of the Sahā world. One must be like a practitioner who has realized one thought of pure faith and never retreats. Though habitual tendencies continually arise, one must constantly maintain awareness without losing it. When one's strength is sufficient and one cannot be shaken, this is called one-pointedness of mind without distraction; only then can one correspond with the Buddha.

One-pointedness of mind without distraction is the ultimate standard of cultivating to the Pure Land of one's intrinsic nature. But how can it be attained? There are immeasurable Dharma gates, yet in general they do not go beyond two paths: the primary and the auxiliary. The primary is called contemplating the mind: turning back to question oneself and remaining earnestly alert in all one's actions. This is called practice—cultivating in action.

The auxiliary is called adopting methods: relying on methods as supportive conditions to purify the mind. Once the mind is pure, they have no further use.

Yet the conditions of Dharma gates differ in every case, and what suits the recipient must be paramount. Some hold the Buddha's name; some enter samādhi; some explain principle to break through illusory appearances; some arouse the three awakenings; some use adverse people and circumstances for self-reflection. All

these are methods of Buddha-remembrance. Even reading sūtras, bowing to the Buddha, burning incense, making offerings, and cultivating every wholesome dharma are all Buddha-remembrance, provided that thought after thought accords with the Buddha's pure intention and never loses awakened awareness.

The holding of the name in the Amitābha Sūtra is one method among the Dharma gates of Buddha-remembrance, not a fixed method. If there were a fixed method, it would not be Buddhadharma. Buddha-remembrance is not difficult; what is difficult is being genuine. In recent times, "being genuine" has been understood merely as doing one's duty, but this does not exhaust its meaning. Lao ( ) means "unmoving," and shi ( ) means "not false." If the mind constantly remains in such tranquil quiescence, then when all appearances of external circumstances and thoughts arise, one is not carried away by them. If for one day or seven days there is not a day when one is not thus, one forms an unbroken whole. Then, if one ordinarily attains one-pointedness of mind without distraction, at death the mind will naturally not be inverted.

Buddha-remembrance is not difficult; eliminating habitual tendencies is difficult. If habitual tendencies are not eliminated, how can one enter and realize the ground of awakening, abiding in awakening in thought after thought? In writing this discussion, I know well that those who hear it will surely find eliminating habitual tendencies arduous, will instead regard Buddha-remembrance as a fearful path, or may even denounce it as Māra's teaching. Yet true practitioners will not dismiss these words as absurd. They will certainly transform their former dependent mentality and their habitual tendency to seek the easy way. They will reverse their former conduct. In worldly affairs, they will strive to be loyal to their country, filial toward their parents, friendly toward their siblings, harmonious with their spouse, trustworthy toward friends, and fully carry out their human duties as Buddha-remembrance.

In supramundane dharmas, they will strive to arouse great compassion, liberate sentient beings, clarify the mind-ground, reach intrinsic nature, empty external circumstances, sweep away accumulated habits, and return to realize the Pure Land as Buddha-remembrance. For the world includes both worldly and supramundane affairs, but mind has neither this nor that, neither coming nor going. Not thinking evil is Buddha-remembrance; not thinking awakening is thinking delusion. This refers to the mind's activity, not to oral chanting. Yet people now mistakenly take holding the Buddha's name alone to be Buddha-remembrance. Thus they lose its essential principle and reduce it to singing the Buddha's name, taking loudness and quantity as superior. This results in ailments such as constricted breath and chest pain; people often become weary, doubtful, and discouraged, and after a long time fail to correspond. This is the error of an incorrect causal ground—truly lamentable.

The Buddha liberates sentient beings by enabling them to liberate themselves—the sentient beings within themselves, that is. These sentient beings are a general term for afflictions. Afflictions are the result, partial attachment is the cause, and partial attachment is itself a result whose cause is nonawakening. Therefore, the foremost point of the essential teaching is to realize the mind; when the mind is clear, attachments are broken.

The Buddha did not himself claim to have taught any Dharma during forty-nine years, and said that whoever maintains that the Tathāgata taught any Dharma thereby slanders the Buddha. He feared that people would rigidly cling to the Dharma without understanding adaptation, and would instead suffer from this attachment. Thus we know that all Dharma taught by the Buddha was expediently adapted to particular circumstances and was not a fixed teaching that could never be modified. Any dharma is ultimately not final; does the unconditioned itself amount to nirvāṇa? Only those who understand this meaning can accord with the Pure Land.

The profundity of the meaning of the Amitābha Sūtra is truly inconceivable. First, it speaks of the excellence of its people: in this assembly are all great arhats and all bodhisattvas, while in the Land of Ultimate Bliss all are avaivartika, together with the supreme virtuous beings who are one lifetime away from Buddhahood. Second, it speaks of the excellence of the land: it is adorned with seven precious substances, unlike worldly treasures. Third, it speaks of the excellence of its environment: when a gentle breeze stirs, all becomes the flowing proclamation of Dharma sounds.

Fourth, it speaks of the excellence of its essence: its light is immeasurable, illuminating the lands of the ten directions without obstruction; its lifespan is immeasurable, unlike worldly lifespans; even the name of the lower realms cannot be found there. Fifth, it speaks of the excellence of its function: one offers wondrous flowers to the Buddhas of the ten directions, rather than merely taking meals and practicing walking meditation.

In sum, there are no sufferings there; one receives only all manner of happiness, and it is therefore called Ultimate Bliss. Ultimate Bliss is without characteristics. This precisely reveals the essence of vajra prajñā: free from the four characteristics and four views of self and person, giving rise to mind without abiding, penetrating the non-self of persons and dharmas, and thereby revealing the wondrous functioning of Amitābha. All culminates in realization of the Pure Land.

The Amitābha Sūtra fundamentally places primary importance on self-cultivation. “One should make vows” is the initial point of entry; upholding the Name is the supporting condition for rebirth; and one-pointedness of mind without distraction is the final mind-seal. The Buddha neither comes nor goes. Unless one’s mind bears

the same seal as the Buddha's, even if the Buddha stands before one, there can be no communion. What is this seal? It is simply seeing my own clear, quiescent Pure Land.

To uphold means to hold to Amitābha's sacred name thought after thought without losing it, just as a child remembers its mother. Beginners cannot but be encouraged by the words "one should make vows," and so on. Yet for a child in relation to its mother, there is no distinction between "should" and "should not"; "should" means that it naturally must be so. This is not only so in relation to Amitābha, but naturally so also in relation to all Buddhas of the ten directions. This is what is meant by giving rise, in a single thought, to pure faith.

The flavor of the Amitābha Sūtra is like tasting a sweet spring. One who can recognize its flavor in plain water and distinguish spring water from ordinary water truly knows its taste. But if one knows only of the seven-treasure adornments of the Western Land and does not recognize the adornments of merit and virtue, or understands only merit and virtue but has not grasped the meaning of accomplishment, then one remains as far away as a hundred thousand koṭis of Buddha-lands.

The Sixth Patriarch's words were intended to counter one-sided attachment; the statement that beings in the Western Pure Land have offenses is not the intent of this sūtra. Yet neither is it necessary to insist categorically that beings in the Western Pure Land are without offenses, for there are those who attain rebirth while carrying karma. Karma is itself sin; because they have not reached ultimate completion, this is so. Only the name of the lower realms does not exist in the West, much less their actuality. Nevertheless, when one first attains rebirth, karmic force has not yet been purified. Though one possesses seeds of wrongdoing, there are simply no causes and conditions for those wrongs to come to fruition; this does not mean that one is absolutely without sin. Therefore, after rebirth in the Western Pure Land, one must still undertake additional cultivation.

Rebirth while carrying karma does not mean that those guilty of wrongdoing may attain rebirth. It means that habitual tendencies remain and the seeds of evil action have not yet been purified, while the causes and conditions for rebirth have already matured. Once reborn, one constantly dwells with the supreme virtuous beings and naturally, when the lotus opens, sees the Buddha.

This Buddha refers to the Pure Land of one's own nature, and the flower is the flower of one's own wisdom-mind; this strongly emphasizes thorough awakening to one's original nature. If this Buddha still referred to Amitābha, then the Buddha who comes to guide one at the time of rebirth would already have been seen; why wait until the flower opens? Phrases in the Amitābha Sūtra such as "have already been

born," "are now being born," and "will be born" mean that the mind yearns toward it; rebirth need not necessarily occur after death. The sincerity of one's longing during life is itself rebirth. Since mind neither comes nor goes—not that it does not come and go—it goes according to its vows; there is no distinction between during life and after death.

The Sahā world of the five turbidities fundamentally arises from the turbidity of views. Yet views need not necessarily be turbid; these are called Buddha-knowledge and Buddha-views. Turbidity, however, can never be apart from views, and is therefore called the turbidity of views. Where the turbidity of views is impure, it cannot be called a Pure Land.

The Esoteric Buddhist method of Buddha-recitation has, in brief, four meanings. First is the superficial meaning: Amitābha refers to the bhikshu Dharmākara, who made forty-eight vows before Lokeśvararāja Buddha and thereby accomplished the present Land of Ultimate Bliss. Second is the profound secret meaning: Amitābha means immeasurable life and immeasurable light. Third is the secret within the secret: Amitābha is Vairocana; thus the one gate and the universal gate are not different.

Fourth is the profound secret within the secret: Amitābha is the innate virtue shared in secret by all sentient beings. Because sentient beings have not realized the essential nature of Vairocana, they cannot give rise to Amitābha's wondrous contemplation. A represents the dharmakāya, signifying original non-arising and non-ceasing; mi represents the sambhogakāya, signifying my great freedom; tuo represents the nirmāṇakāya, signifying suchness, unmoving. That Buddha is called Amitābha because he possesses these supreme virtues and is honored for them.

All sentient beings alike possess this Pure Land. How can they abandon themselves in despair and willingly remain in an inferior and lesser state? The foregoing has briefly explained the meaning of the Pure Land, so that practitioners may first understand it clearly. But how, then, should one cultivate and realize it?

Among all Dharma gates, the Pure Land gate has attracted the greatest number of students in recent times because it is convenient and reliable, thus suiting the Sahā world's sentient beings, who crave convenience and ease; consequently, many have taken it up without realizing it. I have often examined the reasons closely. First, their faith and understanding are not correct, and they regard themselves as too inferior. Second, because it is easy, their resolve lacks urgency. Third, their methods of cultivation are too confused, and results come very slowly. Fourth, because results are slow, they may lose interest and incline toward worldly considerations,

rather than undertaking earnest and sincere practice. Fifth, they do not understand the primary and subsidiary practices of the Pure Land, and apply them in reverse

order; thus their deluded minds cannot be subdued. As a result, they split Buddha-recitation and ordinary conduct into two separate matters and cannot put the practice to use. Sixth, most Pure Land practitioners enter the gate midway: they have not thoroughly understood the causal ground, follow others blindly, and are governed by their first impressions. They establish sectarian boundaries and slander other schools, though this is not their original intention.

In the past, there was someone who doubted and slandered Esoteric Buddhism, showing it in his words and expression. Suddenly, when someone questioned him about the origins of the Rebirth Mantra and the Great Compassion Mantra, he was ashamed and awakened, and dared not slander it again. This is an example of the kind. Therefore, in cultivating and realizing the Pure Land, one must take the proper cause as foremost. There are also three kinds of practice. First is the Dharma cause at the causal ground: begin with understanding, as in the preceding discussions, so that one comprehends it throughout and will not later doubt and retreat.

Second are additional practices as supporting conditions. Take practical cultivation as fundamental: emphasize methods of upholding the Name, cultivate Chan meditation as well, practice wondrous functioning in one's dealings with others after leaving the cushion, and use other Dharma gates as aids. Then realization may come more quickly; in ordinary times one will not become negligent or lament that one practices for one day and lets ten days grow cold. At the time of death, one may perhaps have something to rely on and achieve attainment in this very life.

Third is the complete fulfillment of the fruition ground, with verification of the mind-ground as primary. Realization includes mutual verification and self-verification. Mutual verification means that practitioners examine one another's gains and losses. Self-verification means that one knows for oneself, as one alone knows whether water is cold or warm: outwardly it is verified in circumstances, inwardly it accords with principle, and between these it is sealed in the mind.

These three kinds of practice must be transmitted face to face. One should undertake them in periods of a certain number of days, with a small group of disciples, selecting a place to reside peacefully and cultivate; then there will surely be some point of actual realization.

The former method of Buddha-recitation should appropriately be modified somewhat as follows. First, do not recite loudly. If there are many people, they may be divided into groups that take turns reciting; while one group recites, another group may listen. Second, there is no need to use prayer beads throughout; one may form the Amitābha mind-seal, which makes it easier to enter samādhi. Third, there is no need to circumambulate the Buddha while reciting. In the Chan school, circumambulation after prolonged sitting is used to dispel drowsiness; here it only

increases distraction and is quite unnecessary. Thus, collective recitation is not as good as reciting together with a small number of people: the more people there are, the less benefit is gained.

In cultivating pure karma, each thought is fundamental. The Dharma gate of Buddha-remembrance should be divided as follows:

A. Upholding the Name: uphold and take refuge in the sacred name of Amitābha Buddha, saying “Namo Amitābha Buddha.” Namo is the self that takes refuge, and Amitābha is the Buddha in whom one takes refuge; thus self and Buddha unite as one. This is upholding the Name. When the mind upholds the Buddha’s name, it does not cling to worldly affairs; all inverted afflictions naturally fall away, and all suffering and adversity are crossed over by oneself.

B. Visualization: contemplate the compassionate freedom of Amitābha Buddha and all the bodhisattvas; contemplate the various adornments of the Western Land. When the mind contemplates them, it does not contemplate worldly affairs, and all inverted afflictions naturally dissolve.

C. Longing for bliss: yearn for the various joys of that land and aspire to them. When the mind longs for them, it no longer longs for all the imperfect pleasures of the world. Above this was called upholding the Name; here it is called mindfulness. Uphold this Dharma in its entirety and do not uphold other dharmas; only then is it called Buddha-remembrance.

D. Fearing suffering: suffering and happiness are mutually conditioned. Longing for that happiness therefore gives rise to fear of this suffering; fearing it, one urgently seeks escape, and the aspiration for rebirth first becomes earnest. If one recites the Buddha’s name while seeking worldly blessings, it is like burning incense in a latrine: although the fragrance pervades everywhere, it does not depart from the stench. How can this be called purity? The sūtras say that those who seek wealth obtain wealth and those who seek children obtain children; this is to lead beginners into the Buddha Way, not the ultimate supramundane Dharma. If one truly recites the Buddha’s name, every thought is in awakening; there can certainly be no such inferior view.

E. Cultivation: its method may be summarized in ten rules:

First, focus the mind exclusively on this six-character formula of Buddha-name recitation.

Second, do not recite aloud; move the lips slightly and use vajra recitation.

Third, form the Amitābha samādhi mudrā with the hands.

Fourth, regard yourself as pure and nondual with the Buddha.

Fifth, do not use prayer beads; use time for counting, with one hour constituting one session.

Sixth, disregard all external affairs. Should thoughts arise, do not try to cast them aside; simply attend to your own recitation. As one lets go and gathers in again, after hundreds or thousands of times, one will naturally enter the pattern and settle into samādhi.

Seventh, adopt an intensive method: take forty-eight days as one period, with no more than ten sessions each day. Gradually increase from seven to ten sessions; at times one may reduce them to eight or nine. Averaging twenty thousand recitations per day, one will complete more than four hundred sessions and attain one million recitations. With the mind wholly focused on that, one will naturally realize and enter samādhi.

Eighth, adopt a gradual method: practice one session each day. This too can calm the mind and nurture one’s nature. Those with worldly responsibilities need not be excessively greedy for more.

Ninth, make vows seeking awakening, not other things. With awakening, one naturally ceases to long for worldly pleasures and seeks liberation; thus the aspiration for rebirth naturally becomes earnest. Even if one has no affinity with the Western Land, one will certainly attain rebirth in another Buddha-land. Otherwise, one will only continue to sink in the Sahā world of the five turbidities.

Tenth, detailed rules for cultivation. This section provides an introductory method for beginning Buddhist practitioners: first gather in the wild mind and rein in this unbridled horse. It is like a child holding a sharp blade: one exchanges it for candy, yet this is still not ultimate. Again, when the child's hand is made sticky by the candy, it must further be wiped clean, until it is clean and empty. Therefore, the following is set forth:

1. Choose a quiet room and gather about five or six fellow practitioners. Set a fixed period of forty-eight days. The room temperature must not be too high. For all arrangements, one may refer to the Heart-of-Heart Dharma practice in Records of the Yihai Lectures (1935).

2. Practice only one session each day, each session lasting one hour. During a seven-day retreat, however, first practice six or seven sessions daily, gradually increasing to ten sessions—that is, ten hours. In warm weather, rise at 2:30 each morning and begin sitting at 3:00. One may sit two sessions consecutively, then rest for fifteen or thirty minutes after every two sessions; the time may be determined as appropriate.

3. Form the Amitābha mudrā: turn both palms upward, lay the four fingers of the right hand flat upon the left hand, and touch the tips of the two thumbs together. This is also called the samādhi mudrā of the Buddhas of the ten directions. While on the meditation cushion, never release the mudrā. This is the first essential instruction. (Body secret)

4. When sitting, either the full or half lotus posture is acceptable. If one is elderly and one's legs are too stiff for the lotus posture, one may conveniently sit with the legs crossed. The rear of the seat must be higher than the front, with the legs lower down. The eyes should be closed, though occasionally opening them to look at the time does no harm.

5. During this hour, never release the mudrā. Do not stop reciting with the mouth, but do not recite aloud; the lips must move slightly. This is called vajra recitation. It is the easiest way to attain samādhi and does not cause such problems as constricted breath or chest pain. Moreover, while on the meditation cushion, never stop the mantra. This is the second essential instruction. (Speech secret)

6. Concentrate wholeheartedly on cultivation. Let the mind become empty, and regard yourself as a Buddha. This is the third essential instruction. When a myriad thoughts arise in confusion, as soon as you notice them, turn back and attend to Buddha-recitation. Let go and gather in; turn and empty. When, in an instant, the succession of preceding and following thoughts is cut off, this is the state of pure emptiness; this is the Buddha realm. (Mind secret)

7. With the blessing of the three secrets, over time one passes from distraction to samādhi, and from contemplation to emptiness. While on the meditation cushion, be utterly resolute and pay no heed to anything. If various transformations arise in the body, do not rejoice; do not become doubtful, fearful, or angry; nor is it necessary to visualize anything, for there is already the mudrā. Visualization is established for beginners who need to gather in the mind, in order to bring the myriad dharmas back to the One. If one applies oneself too intensely, then, when visualization is accomplished, one may not know how to adapt,

and instead develop rigid attachment, or even become unbalanced through fixation. When the body and hands become numb, as though they were absent, and the mind is empty and quiescent, as though without knowing, continue the silent recitation in the mouth without stopping; keep the mudrā formed without releasing it. At times one may mistakenly recite another mantra, much as if asleep, though this is not actually so. These are signs of samādhi appearing; there is no need for alarm or doubt. If the mind is scattered and confused, do not be afraid either. Simply ignore it, and before long you will naturally be at ease.

Here, then, is the method of putting it into practice:

A. Clarifying the principle: clarify the principle of putting it into practice. What is meant by putting it into practice is the wonder of Buddha-remembrance everywhere and at all times, through which one naturally receives its benefit. Thus one knows that Buddha-remembrance need not necessarily take place in a Buddha hall.

B. Clarifying its application: this means clarifying where it is applied. Why do people practice Buddha-remembrance? It is to cut off afflictions. Afflictions are originally nonexistent; because of nonawakening, one vainly gives rise to delusion. When delusion is broken, afflictions naturally cease. Therefore, amid ordinary human affairs, one must not leave awareness even for an instant; this is not leaving the Buddha even for an instant. Such Buddha-remembrance is thought after thought of purity: everywhere there is no distinction between self and other. One who contemplates all things freely and without hindrance is Buddha.

C. Nonduality: nonduality means clarifying that the Buddha and I are nondual. Before the Buddha cultivated, the Buddha and I were nondual. The Buddha too became a Buddha through cultivation. Having now become a Buddha, this is called the virtue of fruition. I now cultivate at the causal stage and will naturally attain the fruition of Buddhahood in the future; therefore this is called the causal mind. In essence, they are nondual. Sentient beings are likewise so.

Nonduality also means clarifying that bodhi and afflictions are nondual. Worldly people do not understand the essential nature of Buddhahood and are accustomed to discriminating and calculating, so they divide them into two things. They do not know that delusion and awakening are the same thing: even when one is deluded, Buddha-nature is not lost. Nonduality also means seeing all words and sounds as none other than the true aspect. Wherever there is a Buddha, there is Buddha-remembrance everywhere. When Buddha-remembrance is present at all times, it becomes continuous and undivided, continuing spontaneously without deliberate effort to sustain it. This is to attain the wonder of putting it into practice.

D. Mutual respect: I respect the Buddha, and the Buddha also respects me; the Buddha does not view beings with discrimination. I respect people as Buddhas, and people also respect me as a Buddha. The Buddha-nature of others and my own Buddha-nature are originally no different. We respect one another and regard ourselves as disciples. This is true Buddha-remembrance. Moreover, it is not only before Buddhas or other people: toward all sentient beings, and even toward all things, one should have this same respect. By respect is not meant that one must necessarily bow in homage or take refuge. It is respect for the fact that all share the same Buddha-nature, whose essence is itself empty and quiescent. The Buddha is thus, I am thus, and all sentient beings are thus. Thus, there is nowhere that is not Buddha-remembrance.

(Having begun in this way, can thoughts of killing, stealing, or sexual misconduct still arise?)

E. Assimilation: assimilate all people and affairs with the Buddha. Then one will constantly awaken to one's own habitual tendencies and deeply reform them. As this gradually becomes habitual, one will not lose awareness and contemplation from thought to thought. This is truly the unsurpassed dharma gate of Buddha-remembrance.

F. The great body: to realize the great body is to have all Buddha lands enter the ocean of one's own nature, with nothing excluded. The Western Land of Ultimate Bliss is simply one Buddha land within the ocean of my own nature. Thus one can no longer divide self and other, coming and going. Therefore, what is called rebirth does not mean that the body comes and goes; it means realizing purity and sharing this inherent virtue with Amitābha Buddha.

G. Rebirth: rebirth is the mind's aspiration. First take the West as the destination; then transform the West into the ten directions; then transform the West into one's own nature. Further, unite principle with phenomena: the West truly has a Buddha land, and one does not abandon phenomena because of principle. This enters into the perfect meaning of neither real nor unreal. Therefore, one goes without going, and is reborn without being born. Since one is originally unborn, this does not prevent one from provisionally establishing coming and going in order to strengthen one's practice and vows.

H. Cultivation and realization: cultivation and realization of samādhi are to be assessed amid activity, rather than in meditative stillness. What is samādhi? It means right receptivity: taking non-receptivity toward everything as right receptivity. If, when encountering circumstances, one is not deluded, and does not receive joy or anger, one attains right samādhi. Thus samādhi is also called right concentration, meaning that the mind has no defiled attachment. At its ultimate, this is one-pointedness of mind without distraction. We are all too habituated to worldly affairs and emotional views, and too unfamiliar with the Buddha Way. We must practice daily until we become thoroughly proficient, constantly bringing this mind back to the ground of awareness. Each day, contemplate at least ten times. What is called contemplation begins with self-questioning and reflective observation, for example:

1. Ask yourself: If the person I love most were to become ill or die, could I cut off attachment? When my mind is stirred, could I steady and restrain it? Could I resolve and transform my sorrowful thoughts? Further reflect: although this may be only hypothetical, if it actually happened before my eyes, what would I do? If there is anything I cannot do, then I must diligently undertake additional practices.

2. Ask yourself: What habitual tendency is hardest for me to change in daily life? If things do not satisfy my wishes, can I prevent thoughts of anger from arising in response? If there is anything I cannot do, then I must diligently undertake additional practices. Such additional practices mean struggling with oneself and resolutely eliminating one's habitual tendencies, moving from unfamiliarity to familiarity and from effort to spontaneity. This is genuine pure karma.

3. Ask yourself: Toward the person I dislike most, can I henceforth lessen my resentment and malice? Reflect that before ill feeling arose between us, we too had been on good terms; think also of that person's good qualities. Further reflect on the causes of the ill feeling: both sides have their faults. Gradually achieve equality between enemies and friends.

4. Ask yourself: Can the thing I love most remain forever? If I were to give it away, could my mind remain unmoved? Can I give rise to wise contemplation and transform my deluded attachment to it?

5. Ask yourself: If what I hope for goes against my wishes, if an undertaking fails just as it is about to succeed, or if it is taken from me by someone stronger, what becomes of my meditative stability? If I forcibly suppress it, it will instead become an illness; I must dissolve it through wise understanding.

6. Ask yourself: The world is as chaotic as tangled hemp, and eight or nine things out of ten go against one's wishes. Day and night, all that people hope for are auspicious things such as peace and success. If unfavorable circumstances arise, can I accept them? Can I resolve them by contemplating emptiness?

7. Ask yourself: When hostile circumstances arise, can I yield? Can I examine my own faults and wrongs? Even if I have no faults or wrongs, my hostile mind itself is a fault and wrong. Yet in matters concerning the overall situation and the interests of the public, failing to contend when one should contend becomes passivity and is also a fault and wrong. Can I respond through an all-inclusive, unobstructed contemplation?

8. Ask yourself: Has my thought of great compassion and benefiting others diminished? When an unwholesome thought arises, can I investigate its cause? If, at the time its cause arises, I prevent it beforehand, I will not lose awareness and contemplation. The method of prevention begins by entering through the emptiness of circumstances. When circumstances are empty, the mind naturally becomes empty; outwardly, disputes do not arise. This is giving.

All such methods are methods of putting it into practice. Questioning oneself is the wondrous function of contemplation. Use the mind that contemplates to break through the circumstances contemplated. Over time, when this matures and one's

strength is sufficient, one does not attend to it at all, and not the slightest view remains within. This is called the simultaneous forgetting of subject and object, not their simultaneous annihilation. Annihilation falls into annihilationism; forgetting means non-attachment. This is the state of ease. Yet it too is a subtle habitual tendency. Advance further until even wholesome habits are empty; be empty without attachment to emptiness. Then luminosity is ever quiescent, and one attains great ease. This is the Mind-Seal Dharma of the Pure Land.

The foregoing are methods of counteraction: turning from unwholesomeness to wholesomeness and replacing unwholesome habits with wholesome habits, merely in order to loosen one's conditions of attachment to the Sahā world. One has still not departed from dharmas. Therefore, one should rest the mind and remain constantly quiescent. For this, cultivate dhyāna and samādhi as supporting conditions. When Buddha-recitation becomes spontaneous, without deliberate effort to sustain it, and there is one-pointedness of mind without distraction, this is dhyāna and samādhi. When the mind is continuous and seamless, with no attachment or defilement whatsoever, this is the Pure Land.

Now, as for those who cultivate dhyāna and samādhi, they too do not depart from dharmas. Yet dhyāna and samādhi rely entirely on one's own strength. Those of superior capacity directly realize it at once. The Platform Sūtra says, “Simply use this mind and directly realize Buddhahood.” It first speaks of using the mind to contemplate the mind, which does not depart from the Mind-Ground Dharma Gate and gives rise to all wondrous functions. “Directly realize” means that even this mind that is capable of contemplating is also relinquished; only then is this seeing one's true nature and becoming a Buddha.

Those of middling capacity may rely on the Tiantai method of the three contemplations and enter through emptiness, provisional existence, and the middle: use emptiness to break attachment to existence, use the provisional to break delusion, and enter the middle way as a transitional stage. Upon reaching the middle way, however, one still retains a view of dharmas. One must advance further until even the middle way is not established; abandoning all three contemplations together, one enters the ultimate. Those of lesser capacity cannot be entirely without support; apart from dharmas, they have nothing else on which to rely. Therefore, they must use other methods as supporting conditions.

Among all dharma gates, there are no more than two paths: the primary and the auxiliary. Contemplation of the mind is the primary practice, while all other methods are auxiliary. If one cannot hold the mind steady, one should rely on the Buddha’s power and use other methods as aids. In Esoteric Buddhism, mudrās and mantras are the Buddha’s power, whereas recitation is one’s own power. “Namo Amitābha

Buddha" is a transformed pronunciation of "Namo Amitābuddhāya." When recited fluently and swiftly, it becomes the six characters.

Because it includes mudrās, it is inherently one of the practices of Esoteric Buddhism. Prayer beads were later used by people for counting, but this instead forfeits the benefit of esoteric body practice and impairs esoteric mind practice; the mind cannot become focused. If body, speech, and mind are not integrated in esoteric practice, how can it be called yoga? Therefore, one may chant for years without gaining any real benefit. The fault does not lie in the Dharma, but in the practitioner's cultivation being incompatible with it.

Moreover, the various dharma gates each have their own causes and conditions. At different times, capacities and methods differ. If one method suits a particular capacity, another may not. Thus, one can never cling to a single method as suitable forever. This is why the Pure Land dharma gate must be adapted to circumstances.

If practitioners truly wish to attain accomplishment swiftly, there are two adaptive methods. First, the method of name-recitation should be adjusted as circumstances require. Second, other methods must be borrowed and employed. Practices such as the Great Dharma of Amitābha, the Six-Syllable Great Bright Mantra practice, the longevity-mantra practice, and even the Heart-of-Heart Dharma of Esoteric Buddhism may all be taken as auxiliary conditions. Once accomplishment is attained, however, none of these methods may be grasped, nor may they be spoken of. Such is the power of skillful means.

The lay practitioner Li Xiaoyuan once told others: "The decline of Buddhism in China is not due to a lack of dharma gates, but only to a lack of people who genuinely practice. Buddhism in China now has more practices than one could possibly exhaust. Each one can lead to the realization of samādhi through practice. Why crave more, travel far to other lands, and merely add to names and forms?" How profound these words are! Since the Pure Land is the name of the perfected virtues of the fruition-ground, its methods of cultivation and realization should be applied according to each person's capacity.

For those who should enter the Pure Land through meditative concentration, meditative concentration should be their instruction. For those who should enter the Pure Land through name-recitation, name-recitation should be their instruction. For those who should enter the Pure Land through such practices as the five precepts and six pāramitās, the five precepts and similar practices should be their instruction.

Although the various dharmas differ, diligence is essential to them all; likewise, they must all return to meditative concentration, through which prajñā unfolds. Once prajñā has unfolded, the mind naturally becomes clear and one's true nature is

naturally seen. Only then can one speak of eliminating habitual tendencies. To whatever extent habitual tendencies are eliminated, to that extent one realizes entry into the Pure Land. When habitual tendencies are completely swept away, realization of the Pure Land is complete. If some remain unpurified, but one's power of vows is sufficient to support rebirth, one may be reborn in the Western Pure Land while carrying karma. Having been reborn there, one continues cultivation and realization until complete purity is attained.

Thus, in the Sahā world there are bodhisattvas who practice purity, while in the West there are ordinary beings reborn while carrying karma. Are they not both lands where ordinary beings and sages dwell together? The difference is that the Sahā world has evil realms, whereas the West does not. The Western Pure Land has many sages, though the Sahā world also has them. Yet in the Sahā world afflictions are abundant: those of lower capacity are defiled by evil, while those of higher capacity are bound by emotional attachment, and in the end they sink into saṃsāra.

Therefore, the Buddha pointed out the Western Pure Land: once reborn there, one will never retrogress. This is why people of this world regard the West as a secure land and must arouse the vow for rebirth there. Yet if one merely has the vow without practice, or if one's cultivation does not accord with the Dharma, then causes and conditions are incomplete. In the Sahā world of the five turbidities, it is exceedingly difficult to realize anuttara-samyak-saṃbodhi. Hence it is said that one cannot be born in that land with few roots of goodness, blessings, causes, and conditions.

Because dharma gates are immeasurable, the various auxiliary conditions are truly indispensable. Now people rely solely on name-recitation, yet are distracted and lack continuity in practice. They cannot enter deeply into a single gate, but take stubborn adherence to be single-mindedness and non-retrogression. Each establishes a separate camp, claiming, "Mine is superior and yours inferior." Such a view is impure; they remain millions of miles away from the Pure Land.

Nor do they know to repent and reform with deep earnestness. When the "last day of the year"—the end of life—suddenly arrives, all the sublime realms of the West will be obscured by afflictions and sensual desires. The power of that Buddha's guidance cannot overcome the pull of one's own karmic force, and rebirth will indeed be difficult.

Yet people commonly insist that rebirth is easy, saying that one may attain it even through ten recitations. Why, then, does the Amitābha Sūtra repeatedly emphasize the word "difficult"? They do not understand that ease and difficulty both belong to discrimination; it is not that the Dharma itself is easy or difficult. Rather, sentient beings have different causes and conditions. For those for whom it is easy, even ten

recitations are an unnecessary burden; a single thought is enough. For those for whom it is difficult, they remain submerged through countless eons; the hells are still not empty. Those who have not practiced are misled by sensual desires, while those who have practiced are again misled by doctrinal views. They mislead themselves and in turn mislead others.

If compassion lacks skillful means, if one seeks the result without establishing the proper cause, and if fixed views have already taken hold, the Pure Land grows ever more distant. At the utmost, one will attain only the defiled fruition of the human and deva realms. It may be said that one plants superior causes for the future Western Pure Land, but it is difficult to say that one can certainly be reborn there in this very life. Those who arouse the resolve to be reborn in the West should be cautious indeed.

Some may further ask: “The sūtras say that even those who have committed the five heinous offenses and ten evil acts may recite the Buddha’s name at the time of death and be reborn. Yet you alone say that rebirth is exceedingly difficult. Does this not contradict the meaning of the sūtras?”

They do not understand that rebirth requires the maturation of prior causes and conditions. When those conditions ripen, even a person who has committed the five heinous offenses and ten evil acts will at that point let go of everything. At the very moment of letting go completely, such a person can no longer be called one who has committed the five heinous offenses and ten evil acts. Otherwise, you might as well wait until death to recite the Buddha’s name, and need not labor diligently in cultivation now. Such statements are skillful means for encouraging those who practice arduously. They mean that, although one may previously have committed the five heinous offenses and ten evil acts, if one awakens at this moment and suddenly realizes the emptiness of intrinsic nature, one is liberated from countless eons. They do not mean that everyone possesses such blessings and conditions.

If this meaning is not properly understood, and one recites the Buddha’s name on the one hand while doing evil on the other, how could it possibly help? Those who raise this question cling rigidly to their views. They merely adhere to the words of the sūtras and do not understand their meaning. How regrettable that such a vast, perfect, and all-encompassing Pure Land Dharma should be misunderstood through narrow and inferior views!