

Commentary on the Amitabha Sutra

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1. ESSENCE OF THE SUTRA

1.1 Five layers of the meaning

The Buddha took pity on the multitudes of deluded sentient beings, and put forth transformative teachings according to the various potentials of these deluded sentient beings. Although these teachings all derive from the same source, many different expedient methods are employed.

Among all these expedients, if we seek the most direct and the most complete, none is as good as seeking birth in the Pure Land through Buddha-remembrance (Buddha recitation). If we seek the simplest and most reliable among all the methods of Buddha-remembrance, the best is to develop faith and vows and to concentrate on reciting the Buddha-name.

This is the reason that the ancients took the Amitabha Sutra as their daily study guide, through three Pure Land scriptures have circulated side by side in the world over the generations. The Amitabha Sutra shows that the method of reciting the Buddha-name applies to people of high, medium, and limited capacities. It encompasses both the level of phenomena, and the level of inner truth (noumenon), omitting nothing. It embraces both Zen Buddhism and Scriptural Buddhism, and leaves nothing out. This method is indeed inconceivably great!

Over the generations, since ancient times, there has been no lack of people to comment upon and explain the Amitabha Sutra. Over time, many of these commentaries have fallen into oblivion and nowadays not many survive. [A generation ago], Master Chu-hung of Yun-chi wrote his extensive and subtle commentary, and my own teacher's Master, Yu-hsi, wrote Complete Middle Path Commentary, which is profound and highly learned. [These two commentaries] are like the sun and the moon: all those with eyes see them. But [in these two commentaries] the literary style is elaborate and the levels of meaning are complex. Their ultimate reaches are unfathomable.

Therefore I have put aside all qualms about my own mediocrity and ignorance and composed another commentary, explaining the essential points of the Amitabha Sutra. I would not dare to diverge from elders Chu-hung and Yu-hsi just to be original, nor would I force myself to agree with them for the sake of agreement. When I look upon their example, it is as if lofty peaks surround me. Even though my commentary in no way fully describes the true realm of the Pure Land tradition, I must not fail to give every one of you a personal vision of it.

When one explicates the text of the Amitabha Sutra, there are five layers of profound meaning:

1.2 The Title of the Sutra

First, there is the title of the sutra to explain.

[This scripture is called "The Amitabha Sutra Spoken by Buddha".] This sutra takes its title from the one who expounds it and from the one of whom he speaks. Buddha is the master teacher, the one who expounds the scripture in this world, that is, Sakyamuni. By the power of his vows of

great compassion, he was born here in the world of the Five Turbidities. As the one who was first to awaken, his mission was to bring enlightenment to those who were to awaken later. Buddha is the one who knows all and sees all.

Buddha speaks the sutra with joy in his heart. Buddha's intention is to liberate sentient beings. Since the potential of sentient beings to achieve enlightenment is ripen, Buddha expounds for them these Pure Land teachings which are difficult to believe, and enables his listeners to reach ultimate liberation. That's why he is filled with joy.

Amitabha Buddha is the one Sakyamuni refers to in the sutra. Amitabha is the guide of the Pure Land. By the power of his forty-eight vows, he receives the sentient beings who have vowed to practice Buddha-remembrance by invoking the Buddha-name and enables them to be born in the Land of Ultimate Bliss, and never fall back from there. The Sanskrit name "Amitabha" means "Infinite Life" and also "Infinite Light". The essential point is that everything about him is infinite: his merits and his wisdom, his supernatural powers and his power in the Path, his embodiment and his environment, his work in expounding the Buddhist teachings and liberating sentient beings.

A sutra is any teaching from the golden mouth of a Buddha.

These terms taken together make up the title of the scripture: The Amitabha Sutra Spoken by Buddha. The three categories -- teachings, practices, and inner truth (noumenon), which each sutra should have -- can each be explained in both general and particular senses, as set out in the Tien-tai system.

1.3 The Essence of the Sutra

Second, there is the essence of the sutra to discern.

The true essence of all the Great Vehicle (Mahayana) scriptures is Absolute Reality (Real Mark) itself. What is Absolute Reality? It is the Pure Mind of sentient Beings. This mind is not inside, not outside, and not in between. It is not past, not present, and not future. It is not green or yellow or red or white, long or short or square or round. It is not a scent, not a flavor, not a texture, not a mental object. When we search for it, we cannot find it, but we cannot say it does not exist. It creates all worlds and all realms, but we cannot say it exists. It is detached from conditioned thoughts and discriminations, from all words and characteristics, but conditioned thoughts and discriminations and worlds and characteristics do not have any separate identity apart from it.

Essentially, absolute reality is detached from all characteristics, but merged with all phenomena. Being detached from characteristics, it is formless, and being merged with all phenomena, it gives them all their forms. For lack of an alternative, we impose on it the name "absolute reality" [i.e., Mind, Real Mark, Buddha Nature].

The essence of Absolute Reality is neither quiescent nor aware, but it is both quiescent and yet ever shining with awareness, both shining with awareness and yet ever quiescent. In that it is shining with awareness but quiescent, it is called the Land of Eternally Quiescent Light. In that it

is quiescent but shining with awareness, it is called the pure Dharmakaya (Dharma Body). Aware quiescence is called the Dharmakaya, the Dharma Body of all the Buddhas. Quiescent awareness is called the Sambhogakaya, the Reward Body.

[For the Buddhas] quiescence and awareness are not two, bodies and lands are not two, what is inherent and what is cultivated are not two, true essence and responsive function are not two -- everything is absolute reality. Reality and appearances are neither two nor not two.

Therefore, the essence of reality as a whole, acts as both the environment that surrounds sentient beings and as their very bodies. It acts as both the Dharma Body and the Reward Body of the Buddhas. It acts as both self and others.

Thus the one who speaks the sutra and the one who is spoken of, the Buddhas that can deliver sentient beings and the sentient beings who are delivered, the ability to believe and that which is believed in, the ability to take vows and that which is vowed, the ability to concentrate on the Buddha-name and the Buddha-name which is concentrated upon, the ability to be born in the Pure Land and birth in the Pure Land itself, the ability to praise the Buddhas and the Buddhas who are praised - all of these are the imprint of the “true seal” of Absolute Reality. In other words, the True Mind (Bodhi Mind) sentient beings is the essence of all Mahayana sutras.

1.4 The guiding principle

Third, there is the guiding principle to explain.

The guiding principle is the essential route for cultivating practice, the key link for understanding the essence [of our mind], the guiding framework for the myriad practices. When you hold up a net, the mesh opens up. When you lift the collar of a shirt, the breast and sleeves come too. Thus, after explaining the essence, of the sutra, we must discern the guiding principle. The essential principle for cultivation in this sutra is to develop faith and vows and to recite the Buddha-name. Without faith, we are not sufficiently equipped to take vows. Without vows, we are not sufficiently equipped to guide our practice. Without the wondrous practice of reciting the Buddha-name, we are not sufficiently equipped to fulfill our vows and to bring our faith to fruition.

The sutra first sets forth the pure environment of the Land and the exalted bodies of its inhabitants in order to engender faith in us. Next it urges us to take vows to give guidance to our practice. Then it teaches the practice of reciting the Buddha-name as the route of direct ascent with no falling back (non-retrogression).

Faith means having faith in oneself and faith in other (Buddha and Bodhisattvas). It means being sure about cause and effect, about phenomena and inner truth (noumenon).

Vows mean feeling aversion to the mundane world and detaching from it. Vows mean gladly seeking the Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss.

Practice means persisting in the practice of reciting the Buddha-name single-mindedly and without confusion (with one-pointedness of mind).

[Faith]. Believing in ourselves means believing that the True Mind is not a physical manifestation, and not the reflection of entangling objects, that it extends through time without any before or after and through space without any boundaries. Though it follows causal conditions all day long, it never changes.

All of space in the Ten Directions and all the worlds countless as atoms are originally things created by this Mind of ours. Although we are deluded and confused, if for a single moment we return to this Mind, we are sure to be born in the Land of Ultimate Bliss originally inherent in our own mind, and be troubled no more by worry and doubt. This is called “believing in ourselves”.

Believing in others means having faith that the Tathagata Sakyamuni certainly did not lie, and that the World Honored One Amitabha certainly did not take his vows in vain. It means being certain that all the Buddhas of all the directions never equivocated, and it means following the true teachings of all the enlightened ones. It means establishing our will to seek birth in the Pure Land, and being prey no more to doubt and confusion. This is called “believing in others”.

Believing in the causal basis means having faith that even Buddha-name invocation carried out in a scattered confused state of mind is still a seed of enlightenment, and that this is even more true of invoking the Buddha-name single-mindedly and without confusion. [If we sincerely and single-mindedly invoke the name of Amitabha Buddha], how can we fail to be born in the Pure Land? This is called “believing in the causal basis”, i.e., that recitation is the cause of enlightenment.

Believing in the result means having deep faith that all the spiritually superior beings assembled in the Pure Land have practiced the Buddha Remembrance Samadhi, the meditative concentration that comes from reciting the Buddha-name. When you plant melon seeds you get melons, and when you plant beans you get beans. [Effect follows causes] like a shadow follows a physical shape, like an echo responds to a sound. Nothing is sown in vain. This is called “believing in the result”.

Believing factual phenomena means having deep faith that although this mind of ours is ephemeral, the worlds of the Ten Directions based on it are inexhaustible. The Land of Ultimate Bliss really does exist ten billion Buddha-lands away, adorned with ultimate pure adornments. This is not some fable from Chuang-tzu. This is called “believing factual phenomena”.

Believing in inner truth (noumenon) means having deep faith that the ten billions Buddha-lands (worlds) are in reality not outside our Mind. Since there is really nothing outside of this Mind, we have deep certainty that the whole assembly of beings and surroundings in the Western Paradise is a set of reflections appearing in our mind. All phenomena are merged with inner truth, all falsity is merged with truth. All practices are merged with True Nature. All others are merged with oneself. Our own inherent mind is all-pervasive, and the Buddha-mind is also all-pervasive, and the true nature of the minds of sentient beings is also all-pervasive. It is like a thousand lamps in one room, each of whose light shines on all the others and merges with the other lights without any instruction. This is called “believing in inner truth” (Noumenon).

[Vows]. Once we have these forms of faith, then we must understand that the mundane world is the defilement brought about by our own minds, and we must detach from it; the Pure Land is the purity brought about by our own minds, and we must joyously seek it. We must renounce defilement utterly, until there is nothing that can be renounced, and we must grasp purity utterly, until there is nothing that can be grasped.

Therefore the commentary Miao-tsung said:

If you take grasping and rejecting to the limit, they are not in a different groove than not grasping and not rejecting. If you do not engage in grasping and rejecting, and only value not grasping and not rejecting, this is a form of clinging to inner truth and abandoning phenomena. If you neglect the phenomenal level, then you are not complete at the inner truth level. If you arrive at the point where all phenomena are merged with inner truth, then both grasping and rejecting are also merged with inner truth. Sometimes grasping, sometimes rejecting, nothing is not the Realm of Reality.

[Practice]. When we speak of concentrating on the Buddha-name single-mindedly, we are referring to recitation with a mind that is unified and not chaotic. To invoke the Buddha-name is to invoke the qualities of Buddhahood. Since the qualities of Buddhahood are inconceivable, the Buddha-name itself is also inconceivable. Thus, even if we recite the Buddha-name in a scattered state of mind, it is still a seed of enlightenment, while those who recite single-mindedly will immediately ascent toward enlightenment without falling back.

Many sutras teach Pure Land practices of various kinds: contemplating the image of Buddha, contemplating the concept of Buddha, doing prostrations, making offerings, practicing the five forms of repentance and the six forms of mindfulness, and so on. If you consummate any of these practices, and dedicate the merits toward rebirth in the Pure Land, you will be born there. The method of reciting the Buddha-name is the one that is all-inclusive, embracing people of all mentalities and the one that is easiest to practice. This is why the compassionate one, Sakyamuni Buddha, explained it to Shariputra without being asked. Reciting the Buddha-name can be called the number one expedient among all the expedient methods, the supreme complete truth among all the complete truths, the most perfect of all the perfect teachings.

There is a saying: “If a purifying pearl is put into dirty water, the dirty water cannot but be purified. If the Buddha-name is put into a chaotic mind, even that chaotic mind cannot fail to become enlightened.” Reciting the Buddha-name with faith and vows is a true cause for the Supreme Vehicle. The Four Pure Lands [the Land Where Saints and Ordinary Beings Dwell Together, the Land of Expedient Liberation, the Land of Real Reward, and the Land of Eternally Quiescent Light] are the wondrous fruits of the Supreme Vehicle. If you have the causal basis, then the result is sure to follow.

Therefore, faith, vows and reciting the Buddha-name are the true guiding principles of the Amitabha Sutra.

The characteristics of the Four Pure Lands are described in detail in the Miao-tsung commentary and in the book. An explanation of the Brahma Net Sutra, and I will not explain them in full here. Later on I will give a brief account of them as I explicate the text.

1.5 The Function of the Sutra

Fourth, there is the sutra's function.

The powerful function of this sutra is to enable us to be reborn in the Pure Land and never fall back. Rebirth in the Pure Land can be categorized in terms of the Four Pure Lands, and also into Nine Lotus Grades in each Land. Here I will give a brief explanation of the characteristics of the Four Lands.

If you recite the Buddha-name without cutting off your Delusions of Views and Thoughts, depending on how scattered or how concentrated you are, you are reborn within the Nine Lotus Grades of the Land Where Saints and Ordinary Beings Live Together.

If you recite the Buddha-name to the point of single-mindedness (phenomenal level), your Delusions of Views and Thoughts are cut off and you are reborn in the Land of Expedient Liberation of Arhats and Pratyeyi Buddhas.

If you recite the Buddha-name to the point single-mindedness (noumenon or inner truth level), and you smash from one to forty-one levels of ignorance and delusion, then you are born in the Land of Real Reward where Bodhisattvas live.

However, if you recite the Buddha-name to the point where all forty-two levels of ignorance and delusion are totally cut off, this is the highest reward and you will be reborn in the Land of Eternally Quiescent Light where the Buddhas dwell.

The Amitabha Sutra has this kind of powerful function, which no text can describe. The powerful function of the Amitabha Sutra should not be mentioned on the same day as the [far more pessimistic teaching] that lifetime after lifetime of cultivation (with all the dangers of retrogression) is necessary before you can expect enlightenment. How can Zen Buddhists and Scriptural Buddhists fail to consider this?

1.6 Forms of the Buddhist teaching in this Sutra

Fifth, there are the forms of the Buddhist teaching in the sutra to explain.

The sutra is contained in the Mahayana canon, Bodhisattva vehicle, and is "self-spoken" -- delivered by the Buddha without being asked.

This sutra enables sentient beings with many karmic obstructions who live in the Dharma-Ending Age to make a direct ascent toward enlightenment without falling back.

Thus, in the future when all the other sutras have perished, only this Amitabha Sutra will survive for another century, to bring deliverance on a wide scale to sentient beings.

The Amitabha Sutra is a remedy for all sicknesses. It is beyond relativities, a perfect fusion, with inconceivable power. The mystic treasury of the Flower Ornament (Avatamsaka) Sutra, the secret gist of the Lotus Sutra, the essential teachings on mind of all the Buddhas, the compass of

all the Bodhisattvas' myriad practices - none of them is outside of this sutra. If I wanted to praise it at length, at the end of time I still would not be finished. Those with wisdom must know this sutra for themselves.

Part II - Introductory Section of the Sutra

The text of the sutra is divided into three sections. The first is the introduction. The second is the main body of the text, which gives the correct guiding principles and the third is the history of the transmission of the text. These three parts are called the excellent opening, the excellent middle, and the excellent ending.

The introduction is like the head, complete with eyes, ears, and nose. The main body of the text is like the body, complete with all the internal organs. The transmission history is like the hands and feet, which move unimpeded.

In sum, the introduction covers the overall structure of the sutra, while the transmission history shows that the bestowal of the teaching has been unimpeded. The connection of these two portions with the main body of the sutra is not a minor matter. Lately people have not understood this. When they read the sutras, they delve a bit into its principles, then plunge into the main body of the text, treating the introduction and the transmission history as if they were empty formulas. If this were true, why are we told that both the opening words and the closing words of a sutra are also excellent?

2.1 General Introduction

The introductory portion of the Amitabha Sutra first reveals the time and place of the Dharma assembly at which the sutra was expounded, and then describes the assembly of those who were present.

Thus have I heard: Once Buddha was in the land of Shravasti, in the garden of Jeta and Anathapindika.

This section describes the assembly where the Pure Land doctrine was taught. They are the words of Ananda [the Buddha's personal assistant], who recorded the sutra.

“Thus have I heard” expresses Ananda's faithful obedience to what he was receiving from our teacher Sakyamuni. “Once” describes the moment the teaching was given. “Buddha” is the teacher. “The Garden of Jeta and Anathapindika”, in the land of Shravasti, is the place where Buddha preached this sutra.

The essence of Mind (Real Mark) has not changed from ancient times to modern. If we recite the Buddha-name to seek birth in the Pure Land, basing ourselves upon the essence of absolute reality (Mind), we will definitely not go wrong. When the sutra begins “Thus have I heard” it attests that this is a correct teaching.

Absolute reality is not self and it is not no-self. Ananda in saying “Thus have I heard” as he recited the sutra had not done away with the false self, and so he still says “I”. Ananda's ears

produced auditory consciousness, so he could personally hear the perfect voice of Sakyamuni Buddha preaching this sutra -- this was like *emptiness sealing emptiness*. It is in this sense that Ananda “heard” the sutra.

“Once Buddha was in the land of Shravasti” the sutra continues. “Once” means at the time when the paths of teacher and students, of Sakyamuni Buddha and his audience, joined, and a full sharing of preaching and listening took place.

“Buddha” is the name for one who has been enlightened and who brings enlightenment to others, whose enlightened practice is complete and who functions as the great teacher of humans and gods.

The place name “Shravasti” in Sanskrit means “hearing things”. It was the name of a great kingdom in India, and also of its main city, King Prasenajit’s capital during the time of Sakyamuni Buddha. The King Crown Prince was called Jeta, which means “Victorious in Battle”. A senior minister of the king, Sudatta, was also called Anathapindika, which means “Benefactor of Widows and Orphans”. Anathapindika paid for Prince Jeta’s garden in gold, and donated it to Buddha and his monks. Prince Jeta was very moved, and donated the trees in that parcel of land. Thus the double name [for the site where Buddha preached the sutra]: “the Garden of Jeta and Anathapindika”.

Next the sutra describes the assembly who came to hear Buddha preach. There were three groups: first, the group of monastic disciples (Arhats), second, the group of Bodhisattvas, and third, the congregation of human and gods.

Why are the monastic disciples put first? It was because they had left behind worldly forms, because they always accompanied the Buddha, and because the Buddha Dharma depends on monks and nuns to spread it.

Why are the Bodhisattvas placed in the middle. It was because their forms are not fixed, because they do not always accompany the Buddha, and also in order to suggest the idea of the Middle Path.

Why are the humans and gods placed last? It was because they have worldly form, because they are a mixed lot including both ordinary people and sages, and because their role is to support and protect Buddhism on the outside.

There are three aspects to the description of the monastic disciples: first, an account of their quality and number; second, praise for their high standing and virtues; and third, a list of the foremost among them. The sutra reads:

He was accompanied by twelve hundred and fifty great bhikshus...

“Bhikshu” is a Sanskrit term with a triple meaning.

First, “bhikshu” means a mendicant, someone who has just a single bowl to his name, accumulates nothing, and relies exclusively on alms for the necessities of life.

Second, “bhikshu” means someone who strives to destroy the evil of afflictions and avoid perceptions molded by desire.

Third, “bhikshu” means someone who has accepted the full set of 250 disciplinary precepts and abandoned mundane preoccupations. He is said to give fright to demons.

The word for the monastic community as a whole, “Sangha”, means a harmonious association. This harmony at the level of inner truth means sharing the understanding of the truth of transcendental liberation. At the phenomenal level, harmony means dwelling together without rancorous speech, with the same joyful intent, and the same understanding, sharing the same precepts and sharing material goods equally.

The sutra speaks of twelve hundred and fifty Bhikshus. The three brothers Kashyapa had together a thousand disciples, Sariputra and Maudgalyayana had two hundred and Yasha had fifty. These were all people who had become Buddha’s disciples shortly after his enlightenment, people who felt deep gratitude for Buddha’s benevolence and followed him everywhere.

[The sutra continues:]

all of them great Arhats, well known to everyone.

The word “Arhat” also has three meanings. First, it represents one who is worthy of offerings, as the result of being a mendicant [when he was a Bhikshu]. Second, it means a slayer of evil, as the result of having destroyed afflictions. Third, it means one who is no longer subject to Birth and Death. It also means one who is wise and liberated, one who is liberated from doubt.

All these great Arhats are great beings belonging to the Dharmakaya (i.e. great Bodhisattvas), who expediently take the appearance of monastic disciples of the Buddha. They have realized the inconceivable reality of this Pure Land teaching, and so they are called “great”. They accompanied the Buddha as he turned the Wheel of the Dharma, bringing benefits to all the realms of humans and gods, and so they were “well known to all”.

Now the sutra lists the leaders of the Arhats:

Among them were his leading disciples, such figures as the Elders Shariputra, Mahamaudgalyayana, Mahakashyapa, Mahakatyayana, and Mahakausthila, Revata, Sudhipanthaka, Nanda, Ananda, Rahula, Gavampati, Pindolabharadvaja, Kalodayin, Mahakapphina, Vakula, and Aniruddha, etc., all great disciples.

“Elder” is the term given to those who are honored both for their virtue and their long years as monks.

Among the Buddha’s Arhat disciples, the Venerable Shariputra was the foremost in wisdom and the Venerable Maudgalyayana was foremost in supernatural powers.

The Venerable Mahakashyapa’s body shone with a golden light: he transmitted the Buddha’s Mind Seal and became the first patriarch of the Zen tradition. He was foremost among the Buddha’s monastic disciples in ascetic practices.

The Venerable Mahakatyayana was of a Brahmanical lineage, and was foremost in debate.

The Venerable Mahakausthila was foremost in question-and-answer dialogue.

The Venerable Revata was the foremost in remaining free of error and confusion.

The Venerable Suddhipanthaka had been dull by nature but through memorizing two words of the sutra [sweep clean, i.e., sweep the mind clean], his eloquence became limitless and he was the foremost in upholding the truth of Real Mark.

The Venerable Nanda was Buddha's own younger brother, and was foremost in formal comportment. The Venerable Ananda was Buddha's cousin, and served as his personal attendant: he was the most learned and always committed the Buddha's spoken teachings to memory.

The Venerable Rahula was Buddha's son and heir from the time when the Buddha was a royal prince, and he was the foremost in never advertising his cultivation. The Venerable Gavampati had spoken evil in past lives, and was affected by the karmic retribution for this by having a voice like a snorting ox: he was foremost in receiving the offerings of the gods.

The Venerable Pindola-bharadvaja broke the rule against displaying spiritual powers and was told to remain in this world for a long time. He was foremost as a field of blessings for sentient beings.

The Venerable Kalodayin was Buddha's emissary, and he was foremost in spreading the teaching.

The Venerable Mahakapphina was the foremost in knowledge of astronomy.

The Venerable Vakula was the longest lived of Buddha's monastic disciples.

The Venerable Aniruddha was another of Buddha's cousins, and he was foremost in the magical ability of his celestial eye.

Fundamentally, all these constant companions of the Buddha were Bodhisattvas belonging to the Dharmakaya, who just manifested themselves as monastic disciples of the Buddha -- to spread the Buddha's teaching.

Now they were to hear of the all-encompassing merits of the Pure Land, and gain the benefits of the supreme truth. Giving their lives to benefit the Path, they purified the Buddha-lands. Thus they are called an appropriate audience for the occasion.

Now the sutra describes the group of Bodhisattvas in the assembly:

Also present were the Bodhisattvas-Mahasattvas: Manjushri, Prince of the Dharma; the Bodhisattva Ajita, the Invincible; the Bodhisattvas Gandhahastin and Nityodyukta, and other such great Bodhisattvas..

“Bodhisattva-mahasattva” in Sanskrit means a great Bodhisattva, a sentient being whose Bodhi Mind is fully developed, in whom compassion and wisdom are operating in tandem to benefit both self and others.

Buddha is the King of the Dharma. Manjushri continued the vocation of teaching wisdom, so he is called the Prince of the Dharma. Among the Bodhisattvas, he is foremost in wisdom. Without fearless genuine wisdom, you cannot truly understand the Pure Land teaching, and so Manjushri is put first in the assembly of Bodhisattvas hearing the Amitabha Sutra.

The Bodhisattva Ajita is Maitreya. In the future he will become a Buddha, but now he is at the stage of Equal Enlightenment.

Next the sutra lists the Bodhisattvas Gandhahastin and Nityodyukta, because they are the ones who have cultivated practice for eons without ever stopping, making constant progress, tirelessly benefitting self and others.

These Bodhisattvas of high rank must all seek birth in the Pure Land, so that they will not be separated from seeing the Buddha, hearing the Dharma and giving offerings in person to the Sangha, in order that they may quickly perfect the Bodhi Mind and achieve Supreme Enlightenment. [See the vows of Samantabhadra, Avatamsaka Sutra, ch. 40.]

Also present was Shakra, the king of the gods, along with countless numbers of heavenly beings, making up a great assembly

The name “Shakra” means “the one who can be lord” (also known as Indra); he is the king of the Trayastrimsha Heaven, the Heaven of Thirty-Three. Below his heaven are the heavens of the four deva-kings. Above are the Heaven of Yama, the Tushita Heaven, the Nirmanarati Heaven, the Paranirmita Heaven, the heavens of form, the formless heavens, and innumerable other heavens.

“Making up a great assembly “ means that there were also other gods, Asuras, and other supernatural beings from all the worlds of the Ten Directions in attendance (to hear Buddha expound the Amitabha Sutra), and that all had the potential to benefit from the Pure Land teaching.

Thus ends the general introduction to the sutra. Next comes the particular introduction.

2.2 Particular Introduction

The wondrous gate of the Pure Land is inconceivable, and no one was able to ask about it, so Buddha took it upon himself to begin by extolling its name.

Moreover, given that the Buddha is able to evaluate the potentials of sentient beings unerringly, he saw that this great assembly ought to hear about the wondrous gate of the Pure Land so they could gain benefits. Therefore, he did not wait for questions, but began by himself.

At that time Buddha said to the Elder Shariputra: “West of here, past a hundred billion Buddha-lands, there exists a world called Ultimate Bliss. In this land there is a Buddha called Amitabha, who is preaching the Dharma right now.”

The Pure Land method takes in all people, whether they are of low, medium, or high capacity. It is beyond all relativities, in perfect fusion. It is inconceivable: it is perfectly all-encompassing, and goes completely beyond all other Buddhist methods. It is very profound and hard to believe in. Therefore it is specially announced to those of great wisdom: without the highest level of wisdom, you cannot arrive directly at the stage where you have no doubts about the Pure Land teaching.

“West” signifies the place where the Pure Land appears. A “Buddha-land” is a whole great galaxy of worlds that are all taught by one Buddha. In terms of our world, there is a central Polar Mountain, and four continents to the east, west, south, and north of it illuminated by the same sun and moon, surrounded by circular range of iron mountains: this is one world. A thousand of these make up a small world-system, thousand small world-systems make up a medium world system, and a thousand medium world-systems make up a great galaxy of worlds. West of a hundred billion of such Buddha-lands is the Land of Ultimate Bliss.

There exists a world called Ultimate Bliss.” This introduces us to the name of Amitabha’s environment, to his domain. In the temporal dimension, its time is reckoned in terms of past, present, and future. In the spatial dimension, its boundaries are reckoned in terms of the Ten Directions (the four cardinal directions, the four intermediate directions, the nadir and the zenith).

The Sanskrit name for the Land of Ultimate Bliss is “Sukhavati”. It is also called the Land of Peaceful Nurturing, the Land of Peace and Bliss, the Land of Pure Equanimity and a few other names. The basic meaning is that it is utterly peaceful and secure, and forever removed from all forms of pain and suffering. This is explained at length below.

There are four kinds of Pure Land, and each kind is in turn subdivided in terms of purity or defilement (see glossary, “Four Pure Lands”).

Buddhas have three bodies, which are discussed in terms of singularity and multiplicity [see glossary: “Three Bodies of the Buddhas”].

When the sutra says, “there exists a world called Ultimate Bliss” and “there exists a Buddha called Amitabha,” it is saying that both that world and that Buddha do actually exist. There are four meanings here.

1. There is a real Pure Land, and it makes us happy to seek it.
2. It gives us truthful instructions, to make us concentrate on the Pure Land.
3. The Pure Land is not a figment of the imagination or a mirage, that it is not a roundabout teaching not to be taken literally, that it is not an empty falsity, that it is not a land reached via the Theravada Vehicle.
4. The Pure Land is part of our true nature, to enable us to have a profound realization of it and penetrate into the truth of Real Mark (the Mind).

“Buddha expounding the Dharma” on this occasion shows that both the Pure Land and Amitabha exist — this is not a case of “the past is already gone, and the future has not yet taken shape.” We

must make a vow to be born in the Pure Land, and to hear Amitabha's teaching personally, so that we may quickly achieve true enlightenment.

The fact that the Pure Land and Amitabha Buddha are here in the present encourages us to have faith. The fact that Amitabha's world is called the Land of Ultimate Bliss encourages us to vow to be born there. The fact that the Buddha in the Pure Land is called Amitabha encourages us to engage in the wondrous practice of invoking his name.

The words of the sutra are concise, but the meaning is very profound.

This concludes the commentary on the introductory portion of the sutra

Part III - Main Section of the Sutra

3.1 Faith in the Pure Land

The main body of the sutra is divided into three parts. The first presents a full-scale description of the wonders of the Pure Land and of Amitabha in order to arouse our faith. The second makes a special point of urging sentient beings to seek rebirth in the Pure Land, in order to get them to vow to do so. The third teaches Pure Land practitioners to recite the Buddha-name in order to establish their practice.

The essential message of the sutra as a whole is to induce people to develop faith and vows and recite the Buddha-name. Vows and faith are the acts of wisdom, while reciting the Buddha-name is an act of practice. *Whether we achieve rebirth in the Pure Land depends entirely on whether or not we have faith and vows. How high we rank in the Pure Land depends entirely on how deeply we recite the Buddha-name.* Thus the act of wisdom is the guide and the act of practice is true cultivation: they go together like eyes and feet.

The first part of the main body of the sutra has two sections: the first describes the wonders of the Pure Land and the second describes the wonders of Amitabha.

3.1.1 The Wonders of the Pure Land

Now let us look at the first part. Buddha asks Shariputra:

Why is this land called Ultimate Bliss?

Next comes the explanation, in two parts: an explanation of the beneficiaries of the Pure Land and an explanation of what they receive.

It is called "Ultimate Bliss" because the sentient beings in this land are free from the myriad sufferings common to mankind, and only know every kind of joy.

Sentient beings are the ones who receive the benefits of the Pure Land. All sentient beings can be said to have inherent enlightenment (Buddha Nature). But here we are talking in the language of everyday people, using the lowest to stand for the highest.

In this mundane world of ours, the world is called “Saha” (Endurance), suffering and happiness intermingle. We suffer when we suffer pain, because it harries the body and the mind. When we are happy we soon suffer the pain of disintegration, since happiness does not remain for long. When we are neither suffering nor happy, we still suffer the pain of transiency, since all things are transitory by nature.

The Pure Land is forever removed from these three kinds of suffering. The happiness in the Pure Land is not the same as the happiness in our world, which is only relative to suffering, so the former is called ultimate bliss...

Next, Buddha explains what sentient beings experience in Amitabha’s Land of Ultimate Bliss:

Furthermore, this land is called “Ultimate Bliss” because it is surrounded by seven rings of railings, and seven layers of netting, and seven rows of trees, all made of the four precious jewels.

The number seven represents the seven categories of the Thirty-seven Limbs of Enlightenment (the four mindfulnesses, the four right efforts, the four bases of miraculous power, the five roots, the five powers, the seven factors of Enlightenment, and the eightfold path). The four precious jewels represent the four qualities of enlightenment: that it is eternal, blissful, personal, and pure.

The word “surrounded” stands for the innumerable abodes of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. The fact that the surroundings are all made of the four precious jewels indicates that the sentient beings in the Pure Land have their own deep merit, and the fact that these precious things surround them stands for the holy ones who are everywhere in this Land of Ultimate Bliss...

Next the sutra gives two broad explanations: first, explanation of what sentient beings receive in the Pure Land and second, a combined explanation of the recipients and what they receive.

The first explanation is also in two sections: a description of where sentient beings are born in the Pure Land, and a summary of the powers of Amitabha Buddha.

Moreover, the Land of Ultimate Bliss has ponds of seven jewels filled with the waters of eight virtues. The bottom of each of the ponds is pure golden sand, and the stepped walkways that lead up from all four sides of each of the ponds are made of gold, silver, lapis lazuli and crystal. Above the ponds there are towers which are adorned with silver and gold and lapis lazuli and crystal and mother of pearl, red agate and carnelians. In the ponds there are lotus flowers as big as cartwheels: blue ones shining with blue light, yellow ones shining with yellow light, red ones shining with red light, and white ones shining with white light, each emitting a subtle pure fragrance.

Earlier on the sutra described where sentient being live in the Pure Land; now it describes where they are born.

The jewel ponds and the things made of gold and silver and so on in the Pure Land are not the same as the earth and stones in our mundane world.

The eight virtues of the water that fills the jewel ponds in the Pure Land are the following: it is pure and clear, unlike the turbid water of our world; it is clear and cool, unlike the water of our world, which is either too cold or too hot; it has a sweet pleasing taste, unlike the water of our world, which has an inferior taste ... it is light and limpid, unlike the heavy water of our world; it is sparkling bright, unlike the murky water of our world; it is peaceful, unlike the turbulent water of our world; it eliminates hunger and thirst, unlike the water of our world which makes us shiver; it always nurtures the capacities of sentient beings, unlike the water of our world ... The water in the Pure Land always keeps the jewel ponds perfectly full, unlike the water in our world, which can dry up or overflow. The bottom of the jewel ponds is pure golden sand, unlike the mud and muck on the bottom of ponds in our world. The walkways ... are made of precious things, unlike the brick and stone walkways in our world.

The pavilions above the ponds are adorned with silver and gold and crystal and mother of pearl and red agate, unlike the pavilions in our world. These pavilions are dwelling places, and they are also places where teaching assemblies are held. As soon as a person is reborn in the Pure Land, and comes forth from one of the lotus-wombs in one of the jewel ponds, that person can enter a teaching assembly, see Amitabha Buddha, and hear the Dharma being preached. The bodies that are born from these lotuses are shining with light, and the lotus-wombs themselves are also shining with light. The colored lights of the Land of Ultimate Bliss are infinitely varied ... The “subtle pure fragrance” of the lotus flowers is emblematic of their special virtues: they are ethereal, unobstructed, formless, and not sense-objects ...

In the next sentence, the sutra sums up the powers of Amitabha Buddha.

The Land of Ultimate Bliss is complete with all these adornments and virtues.

All the adornments of the dwellings in the Pure Land and the settings in which sentient beings are reborn in the Pure Land are created by the inherently real virtues of the great vows and great deeds of Amitabha Buddha. That’s why he can adorn all the Four Pure Lands, and embrace all the ordinary people and saints of all the worlds of the past, present, and future, and enable them to be reborn in the Pure Land.

With his great vows, Amitabha creates the causal basis for sentient beings to multiply their good roots, and with his great deeds he creates the conditions for sentient beings to increase their merits and virtues. Amitabha enables us to develop faith and vows and to recite the Buddha-name, and from moment to moment achieve these virtues. All this is already accomplished: it is not just happening now, nor is it yet to happen. All the adornments of Amitabha act as an augmenting substance that stimulates the development of all the adornments within the minds of sentient beings. Amitabha in *totomerges* with sentient beings: all his powers merge with ours. Thus the sutra says that the Pure Land “is complete with all these adornments and virtues.”

Next the sutra explains the sentient beings in the Pure Land and what they receive. First it explains what they experience in terms of the five sense-faculties and five sense-objects. Next it explains this in terms of hearing and sounds. Again, the first part is divided into the explanation itself and the summary.

And there is more -- celestial music is constantly playing in this Buddha-land, and the ground is made of pure gold. Heavenly flowers rain down at all hours of the day and night. In the morning the sentient beings of this land fill their robes with multitudes of wondrous flowers and make offerings to hundreds of billions of Buddhas in other worlds. When it is meal time, they return to their own land, to eat and circumambulate the teaching assembly.

Music represents the sense-object *sound*, the ground represents the sense-object *form*, the flowers represent the two sense-objects *form* and *scent*, food represents the sense-object *flavor*, making offerings represents the sense-object *touch*. It is obvious that the sense-faculties of sentient beings in the Pure Land are paired with sense-objects to show that in the Pure Land there is only happiness.

The music is constantly playing, twenty-four hours a day. The ground is made of pure gold, because Amitabha's Pure Land is a world adorned with precious things, whose basic substance is gold.

The sutra says that flowers rain down at all hours of the day and night. But since both the Pure Land and its inhabitants shine with light, and do not depend on sun and moon for illumination, how can there be a division of day and night? This is just said provisionally to accord with the distinctions we make in our mundane world.

The Sanskrit name for the flowers that rain down in the Pure Land (Mandarava) means both "as we wish" and "white flowers".

Making offerings to Buddhas in other worlds symbolizes that through having a true causal basis, we can attain the ultimate fruit (Buddhahood), and that the virtues of this ultimate attainment extend everywhere. Using the language of our mundane world, the sutra speaks of hundreds of billions of Buddhas. The idea is that after we are reborn in the Land of Ultimate Bliss, we can make offerings to Sakyamuni Buddha and Maitreya Buddha and if we are strengthened by the supernatural power of Amitabha, there is no place too far for us to reach.

The time for eating is the morning, so the sutra says the inhabitants of the Pure Land return to their own land when it is time to eat to show their supernatural power of travel. They go to all the worlds in the Ten Directions without leaving their own land.

This passage shows that in the Pure Land every sound, every sense-object, every moment, and even every step and every snap of the fingers, interpenetrates without obstruction, and are in accord with the three Jewels [Buddha, Dharma and Sangha] of all the worlds of the Ten Directions. It also shows that in our mundane world, the defilements and obstructions are so serious that our world is separated from the Land of Ultimate Bliss, even though it is not really separated from it. When we are reborn in the Land of Ultimate Bliss, our virtues will be so great that we will be separated from this mundane world called "Endurance", without really being separated from it ...

The Land of Ultimate Bliss is complete with all these adornments and virtues.

Next the sutra explains what is experienced in the Pure Land in terms of hearing sound. In fact, the Land of Ultimate Bliss encompasses the potential of the Dharmadhatu, (cosmos). *All the sense-objects are perfect and wondrous there, and produce all the teachings.*

This passage in the sutra is also divided into two parts: a particular explanation and a general summation. The particular explanation discusses the sounds that transform sentient beings, and the sounds that transform inanimate things. It tells of the sounds of the birds bringing the benefits of the Dharma, and then briefly answers a question.

Here is the first part:

And there is more still - in this land there are birds of all sorts of wondrous variegated colors: white cranes, peacocks, orioles, egrets, kalavinkas and jivanjivas. All these birds bring forth harmonious songs day and night. Their songs communicate such Buddhist teachings as the Five Roots, the Five Powers, the Seven Factors of Enlightenment, the Eightfold Path, as well as other teachings.

When sentient beings in this land hear the singing of the birds, they become mindful of the Buddhas, mindful of the Dharma, and mindful of the Sangha [Community of monks and nuns].

Although all Buddhist methods are subsumed under the Thirty-Seven Limbs of Enlightenment, the potentials and circumstances of sentient beings all differ, and *so different forms of the Buddhist teaching have been devised*, some open, some closed, using all sorts of terminology. The Teaching is expressed effectively to all sentient beings according to what they are ready to hear.

This enables those who hear the Teaching to become mindful of the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. It enables them to develop the Bodhi Mind (aspiration for enlightenment for the benefit of self and others), and to put an end to afflictions. They vividly see the inconceivable mercy and awe-inspiring character of the Buddha, so they become mindful of the enlightened ones. The joy of the Dharma enters their hearts and they are filled with the flavor of the Dharma, so they become mindful of the teaching of enlightenment. They listen to the teaching together, and accept it as a community, and wholeheartedly cultivate realization, so they become mindful of the community of seekers.

The three forms of contemplation (on emptiness, on relative reality, and on the mean) and the three objects of contemplation (the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha) have different aspects but the same essence.

You should use the foregoing brief analysis of the difference among the Thirty-Seven Limbs of Enlightenment to understand the four levels of the Buddhist Teaching (elementary, common, special, and complete) and the three levels of truth (absolute, relative, and the mean).

In the next passage the sutra briefly answers a question:

Do not think that these birds were born as birds due to karmic retribution for past misdeeds. Why not? In this Buddha-land, the Three Evil Planes of existence (as animals, hungry ghosts, and hell-beings) do not exist. In this Buddhaland even the names of the Evil Planes of Existence do not exist, much less the realities. All these birds are the creations of Amitabha Buddha, fashioned in order to sing the sounds of the Dharma.

It is obvious that the sutra is answering possible objections that might be raised.

Question: Are birds (as animals) not creature belonging to one of the Evil Planes of existence?

Answer: The birds in the Pure Land are not birds as a result of karmic retribution for having committed evil. They are called birds, but they are all communicating the ultimate merits of the Tathagatas. They can be called “birds of the ultimate”, and this is a beautiful appellation conveying their innate virtues, not some pejorative name [connoting creatures born in a low plane of existence].

Question: What does it mean that these birds are fashioned by Amitabha?

Answer: There are four reasons for this.

First, ordinary people take delight in these birds and can be taught by them, since this suits their feelings, and makes them happy. Second, when the birds express the Dharma, they enable their listeners to become virtuous. Third, by making us realize that we should not think of these birds in a pejorative way, it counteracts our tendency to make arbitrary distinctions. Fourth, the birds are emanations of Amitabha, which let us awaken to the everywhere - equal nature of the Dharma Body, which is inherent in everything and creates everything.

This passage shows us that all the sounds in the Pure Land, such as the sound of the breeze and the rustling of trees, as well as everything about the Pure Land environment and the Buddha who presides there, whether a provisional expedient or an absolute reality -- all these things are in their very essence identical to Amitabha Buddha with his Dharma Body, Reward Body, and Emanation Body. All these things are no different from Amitabha Buddha, who is eternal, blissful, personal, and pure.

In this Buddha-land, there is a slight breeze that stirs the rows of jewel trees and jewel netting, so that they emit subtle wondrous sounds, like hundreds and thousands of melodies playing all at once. All those who hear these sounds spontaneously become mindful of the Buddha, mindful of the Dharma, and mindful of the Sangha.

In the Pure Land, both sentient beings and inanimate things manifest the wondrous Dharma together, and simultaneously expound the innumerable methods of the *elementary, common, special* and *complete* teachings. They offer explanations to all beings according to their kind, enabling their audiences to become mindful of the Three Jewels -- Buddha (the Enlightened One), Dharma (the Teaching of Enlightenment), and Sangha (the Community of Seekers).

By becoming mindful of the Three Jewels, sentient beings receive four benefits. When ordinary people first hear the teaching, their bodies experience delight: this is the benefit of joy. When

their vital energy makes contact with the Three Jewels, they are sure to be able to develop the Bodhi Mind: this is the benefit of becoming virtuous. Using this virtue to conquer afflictions is the benefit of destroying evil. Awakening to the Three Jewels [Buddha, Dharma, Sangha] as one single essence is the benefit of understanding the Supreme Truth.

At this point the sutra sums up the foregoing presentation with the line:

This Buddha-land is complete with all these adornments and virtues.

The sutra sums things up again and again so that we can believe with profound faith that all the adornments of the Pure Land are brought into being by the vows and actions of our guide Amitabha, and manifested by his wisdom, and that they are also brought about by our own pure karma, as manifestations of consciousness. The Buddha-mind and the minds of sentient beings are reflections of each other, just as the lights of many lamps both individually reach everywhere and seem to merge into one. Inner truth as a whole forms phenomena, and phenomena as a whole are merged with inner truth. Our entire True Nature gives rise to genuine religious practice, and genuine religious practice in its entirety lies within our True Nature. This is something we should constantly ponder deeply.

How can anyone talk as if there is another “Pure Land that is Mind Alone” apart from this Pure Land? If you do this you are indulging in empty babbling.

This is the end of the section in the sutra describing the wonders of the Pure Land.

3.1.2 The Wonders of Amitabha

Next the sutra takes up the wonders of Amitabha Buddha himself. First Buddha poses a question, and then proceeds to explain Amitabha’s name:

What do you think: why is this Buddha called Amitabha?

This sutra teaches the wondrous practice of reciting the name of Amitabha, so it makes a special point of explaining the name. The intent of the sutra is that people should develop deep faith in the inconceivable powers of this great name and its myriad virtues, and singlemindedly recite the Buddha-name without any further doubts or diversions.

The next passage gives two explanations of the name” Amitabha” -- as “infinite light” and as “infinite life”. The literal translation of “Amitabha” is “infinite”, and infinity is actually unexplainable. Here in the sutra, our teacher Sakyamuni Buddha uses the meanings” infinite light” and “infinite life” to encompass all sorts of infinity.

Infinite light extends through space in all directions; infinite life extends through time and reaches through past, present, and future. The dimensions of space and time interpenetrating are the body of the universe. This body as a whole is the body and land of Amitabha, and this body as a whole is the name of Amitabha.

Thus, Amitabha *is* the inherently enlightened True Nature of sentient beings, and reciting the name of Amitabha reveals this enlightenment. Inherent enlightenment and the enlightenment as it is revealed through cultivation and realization are fundamentally not two different aspects, just as sentient beings and Buddhas are not two different things. Thus, if we are in accord with our inherently enlightened true nature for a moment, we are Buddhas for a moment, and if we are in accord with our inherently enlightened true nature moment after moment, we are Buddhas moment after moment.

First, the sutra gives the definition of the name of Amitabha as “Infinite Light”:

The light of this Buddha is infinite, and shines on all lands throughout the universe without obstruction. Thus this Buddha is called Amitabha.

The true nature of mind is still but always shining with awareness; hence it is a light. The idea here is that Amitabha Buddha penetrates to the infinite essence of the true nature of mind, so his light is infinite. All the Buddhas penetrate to the true nature of mind, and they all shine through all the worlds in the Ten Directions, so they all could be called “Infinite Light”.

But the Buddhas in the causal stages (i.e., as Bodhisattvas) differ in the power of their vows, and they are named differently according to their circumstances. When Amitabha (in a previous incarnation in the distant past) was the monk Dharmakara, he made forty-eight vows, among them the vow that his light would forever shine through all the worlds in the Ten Directions. Now that he has achieved Buddhahood, what he vowed has been accomplished.

The light of the Dharmakaya is boundless, and the light of the Sambhogakaya is in accord with True Nature -- in this the paths of all the Buddhas are the same. The light of the Nirmanakaya (Emanation Body such as Sakyamuni) differs in scope: in some Buddhas it shines for a hundred miles, in other Buddhas it shines a million times further: in some Buddhas it illuminates one world in others it illuminates a million worlds. Only Amitabha’s light shines universally. Thus Amitabha in particular is named “Infinite Light”.

Still, the three Buddha-bodies are neither one nor different. *These distinctions are made only to benefit sentient beings.* We must understand that there are no obstructions among the three Buddha-bodies. From the point of view of ordinary people, if their affinity with the Buddhas is deep, then the light of the Buddhas will reach them everywhere, and always appear to them in its complete fullness in all worlds.

Next the sutra gives the definition of the name Amitabha as “Infinite Life”:

Also, the life-span of this Buddha and his people is an infinite number of immeasurable eons, and so he is called Amitabha.

The true nature of Mind is shining with awareness yet ever still: hence it is life. The idea here is that Amitabha Buddha penetrates to the infinite essence of the true nature of Mind, so his life span is infinite.

When Amitabha was Dharmakara, the king of vows, he made a vow that the life spans of both Buddhas and humans in his realm would be infinite. Now what he vowed has been accomplished in the Pure Land, and he is given the special name “Infinite Life.

We must understand that the names “Infinite Light II and “Infinite Life” are both based on the equivalent potential inherent in sentient beings. Because sentient beings and Buddhas are inherently equal, those who invoke the name of Amitabha will be no different from him either in their light or in their life span.

Moreover, given the truth of infinite light, when sentient beings are born in Amitabha’s Land of Ultimate Bliss, they are also born in all the lands of the Ten Directions, and when they see Amitabha Buddha, they are also seeing all the Buddhas of the Ten Directions. Thus they are saved themselves and they can bring benefits to all.

Given the truth of infinite life, the people in the Land of Ultimate Bliss are in the position that they are certain of attaining complete enlightenment in a single lifetime and will not be reborn in different forms.

We must realize that there is no name of Amitabha apart from the mind of infinite light and infinite life that is before us now at this moment, and there is no way for us to penetrate the mind of infinite light and infinite life that is before us now at this moment apart from the name of Amitabha. I hope you will ponder this deeply!

Now comes the section of the sutra that describes Amitabha and his assembly:

Amitabha Buddha attained enlightenment ten eons ago.

The life span of Amitabha Buddha is infinite, and here when the sutra just speaks of ten eons, this is just a provisional way of teaching. In fact Amitabha’s time has been endless, and he has urged, is urging, and will urge all the sentient beings of the past, present, and future to quickly seek birth in the Pure Land, share in the infinite life of the Buddhas, and accomplish this all in one lifetime.

The sutra goes on to speak of Amitabha’s innumerable disciples who are Arhats, Bodhisattvas, and one-life Bodhisattvas. All of them achieved their status during the past ten eons. Here the sutra is really illustrating the fact that throughout all the worlds of the Ten Directions in the past, present, and future, many sentient beings achieve birth in the Pure Land with no falling back, and do so easily.

Moreover, this Buddha has innumerable disciples, all of whom are Arhats, whose numbers are incalculable. Amitabha also has a following of innumerable Bodhisattvas.

In other worlds, sentient beings who are set in their ways as followers of the Lesser Vehicles do not get to be born in Amitabha’s Pure Land. But if those who have studied the practices of the Lesser Vehicles in their early lives develop the Bodhi Mind and turn toward enlightenment when they are facing death, and make great vows, they too will be reborn in the Pure Land.

Again, the sutra sums things up:

The Land of Ultimate Bliss is complete with all these adornments and virtues.

Amitabha Buddha himself, his disciples, and the Bodhisattvas who follow him, are all within the causal ground of Amitabha, created by his vows and his actions. This is also the case at the level of results; when one [dharma] is formed, all [dharma] are formed. Thus Amitabha Buddha himself, his disciples, and the Bodhisattvas who follow him, are neither identical to nor different from each other: self and others are not two. Thus, after describing Amitabha Buddha himself, his disciples and the Bodhisattvas who follow him, the sutra says, “The Land of Ultimate Bliss is complete with all these adornments and virtues.” Amitabha can enable those who have faith and vows and recite his name to become complete with all these virtues too, from moment to moment.

This is the end of the first part of the sutra, which gives a broad account of the wondrous fruits of the Pure Land environment and Amitabha and his assembly, in order to arouse our faith.

In the next section of the sutra, Buddha urges all sentient beings to seek rebirth in the Pure Land and to make vows.

Part IV - Main Section of the Sutra (cont'd)

3.2 Vowing to achieve rebirth in Pure Land

There are two parts in this section. The first part reveals the supreme causal basis for rebirth in the Pure Land, and the second part extols the special excellence of the Pure Land.

What is the special excellence of the Pure Land? Sentient beings can be reborn there carrying their karmic load with them, and thereby transcend the Triple World “horizontally”. Amitabha’s Pure Land is a pure land where saints and ordinary beings dwell together, but it includes all Four Lands (the Land where Saints and Ordinary Beings Dwell Together, the Land of Expedient Liberation, the Land of Real Reward, and the Land of Eternally Quiescent Light), and reveals the Four Teachings (elementary, common, special, and complete).

Sentient beings who are born in Amitabha’s Pure Land purify the Four Lands completely, see the three Buddha-bodies perfectly, and fully arrive at the point where they cannot fall back from their position, from their practice, or their mindfulness. All the people in Amitabha’s Pure Land will attain enlightenment in one lifetime.

All these special features of the Pure Land are pointed out in the next two sections of the sutra. One should study them carefully.

3.2.1 Supreme causal basis

Now the first passage:

None of the sentient beings who are born in the Land of Ultimate Bliss ever fall back into a lower realm [i.e., they are Avaivartika]. Many among them have only one more lifetime to go before Buddhahood. Their number is incalculable: they can be spoken of as innumerable.

The sutra uses a Sanskrit word “Avaivartika”, that means “not falling back” (non-retrogression). There are three senses of this “not falling back” that apply sentient beings in the Pure Land. First, they do not fall back from their position: having entered the holy stream (four levels of sagehood culminating in Arhatship), they do not fall back to the level of gods and men. Second, they do not fall back from their practice: as followers of the Bodhisattva path they continue to work for the salvation of all beings, and do not fall back to the level of the Lesser Vehicles with their concern limited to individual salvation. Third, they do not fall back from their mindfulness: from mind-moment to mind-moment, they flow into the ocean of all-knowledge.

In Amitabha’s Pure Land, the ten forms of mindfulness are fully developed, and even those who dwell on its lowest level, and have been born in there bringing along their karmic burdens, do not fall back from their position, from their practice, or from their mindfulness.

According to the doctrines of the non-Pure Land Buddhist scriptures, it is a deviation from the established terminology to speak of skipping stages. It is only in Amitabha’s Pure Land of Common Residence, where saints and ordinary beings dwell together, that people are not in any of these stages, and yet in all of them. Such transcendence of names and forms does not exist in any other Buddha-land; this definition of stages and levels, this teaching, does not exist in any other Buddha-land. But how could any of this exist if not for the ultimate reality of the true nature of mind, if not for the special effect of reciting the Buddha-name, if not for the great vows of Amitabha?

In the non-Pure Land Buddhist scriptures, the stage of having only one lifetime to go before enlightenment is generally attributed only to Bodhisattvas. But everyone in the Land of Ultimate Bliss will achieve enlightenment in one lifetime and among them are countless numbers of superlative Bodhisattvas.

Among the teachings given by Sakyamuni Buddha only the Avatamsaka Sutra explains perfect realization of Buddhahood in a single lifetime. The basis for perfect realization is explained in the Chapter on the “Vows of Samantabhadra”, which shows the way back to the land called “Peaceful Nurturing” (another name for Amitabha’s Pure Land). The Avatamsaka Sutra thus urges the whole assembly in the Flower Store World (cosmos) on toward the Pure Land.

How amazing! Ordinary people in the Pure Land reach the stage of having only one lifetime to go before enlightenment, just like the great Bodhisattvas. What a sublime teaching -- it is truly unfathomable! What was given to us in the Flower Ornament (Avatamsaka) Sutra is here in the Amitabha Sutra. Yet from ancient times until now, few have believed in it, and many have

doubted it. Complex writings have been produced, but the truth has been sacrificed. All I can do to set things right is give my heart's blood.

3.2.2 Special excellence

At this point in the sutra, Buddha gives a specific admonition:

When sentient beings hear these teachings, they must take a vow to be born in this land. Why so? So that they can be together with all these Beings of Superior Goodness.

The Arhats and the Bodhisattvas the sutra talks about at the beginning as part of the assembly listening to Buddha expound the sutra can be called “good people”. But only those who are at the top level of the causal ground for enlightenment, are called “Beings of Superior Goodness” (Beings of the Highest Virtue). The sutra says “all these Beings of Superior Goodness” because their number is large.

“Being together” expresses the idea that in the Pure Land the ordinary and the holy live together. There are sages of real attainment, who still carry some past impure karma, and sages adept in provisional expedients, with their vows of great compassion, so ordinary people in the Pure Land get to live together with holy sages. There are real saints whose desires have been extinguished, and teachers with skill-in-means whose entanglements have been ended. They differ widely in levels of attainment, and of bliss, but for the time being they are together in the Pure Land.

In our mundane world, on the other hand, those who see and hear such holy sages are few, and among those who do have the good fortune to see or hear them, few have the opportunity to approach them.

When a Buddha is in the world, there may be relatively many holy ones [helping to spread the teaching], but after all they are still rare jewels, and they cannot cover the whole world like the stars of the firmament.

But even though Amitabha's Pure Land is a place where saints and ordinary beings dwell together, their actions and their achievements are different.

Those who have been born in the Pure Land are together due to their transcendental karma and inconceivable deeds. These beings act as one another's teachers, and work in harmony, so that they may end ignorance and delusion and together achieve wondrous enlightenment.

Therefore, the ordinary sentient beings born in the Pure Land, by virtue of not falling back, have in fact transcended many levels of Bodhisattvahood. If we say they are ordinary people, this is wrong, because they are beyond the cycle of rebirth; they are on the verge of enlightenment, and are no different from the great Bodhisattvas Avalokiteshvara and Mahasthamaprapta. Although they are going to attain Enlightenment in their current lifetime, still, they must be called ordinary people, and they cannot be called One-Life Bodhisattvas. This state of affairs cannot be encompassed by the systems of the non-Pure Land sutras, and has no precedent in Buddha-lands other than Amitabha's Pure Land. Therefore, we must realize that the most urgent task for sentient beings is to cross over to the Common Residence Pure Land Where Saints and Ordinary

Beings Dwell Together. The Land of Ultimate Bliss, Amitabha's Pure Land, is unique -- it surpasses all the other pure lands.

Only when we comprehend this can we have deep faith in the power of the vows of Amitabha. Only when we believe in the power of Amitabha Buddha can we have deep faith in the virtues of his name. Only when we have deep faith in the recitation of the name of Amitabha can we have deep faith in the True Nature of sentient beings, which has always been inconceivable. Only when we have this deep faith can we make great vows.

The text of the sutra says sentient beings must take a vow to be born in the Pure Land. This word "must" points to deep faith. Making vows with deep faith is precisely the Mind of Supreme Enlightenment.

In sum, faith and vows are truly the guiding compass leading to the Pure Land. Relying on faith and vows and consistently invoking the Buddha-name is correct practice.

If your faith and vows are solid and strong, then even if you recite the Buddha-name only ten times, or only once, as you are on the brink of death, you are sure to attain birth in the Pure Land. Without faith and vows, even if you recite the Buddha-name until you achieve a level of concentration the Zen literature describes as "wind cannot enter you and rain cannot wet you" and "you stand like a silver wall or an iron wall", you will still not have a way to be born in the Pure Land.

Those who cultivate Pure Land practices must realize this truth. The Longer Amitabha Sutra also takes "vows" as essential and is identical in meaning to this section.

3.3 Practice

Now the sutra directly teaches practitioners that reciting the Buddha-name is the way to practice. First it shows the working of cause and effect in creating the bodies of the Buddha, and then it reiterates its admonition to recite the Buddha-name.

3.3.1 Creating the bodies of the Buddha

The sutra reads:

One cannot be born in this land through minor good roots, blessings, virtues and causal connections. If there are good men or good women who hear of Amitabha Buddha, and recite his name singlemindedly and without confusion, for one day or two days or three days or four days or five days or six days or seven days, then when these people are about to die, Amitabha Buddha and his whole assembly will appear before them. When they die, their minds being unified and not chaotic, they will attain rebirth in Amitabha's Land of Ultimate Bliss.

Good roots stem from the Bodhi Mind, the direct cause. Other meritorious actions that promote the path, such as charity, discipline, and meditation, bring merits and virtues. They are the conditions that help the Bodhi Mind to develop.

Literalist disciples of the Lesser Vehicle (Shravakas and Pratyeka Buddhas), have few good roots. The meritorious deeds and virtues of human beings and gods, defiled as they are, are also few. These will not enable you to be born in the Pure Land. Only if you have faith and vows and recite the Buddha-name will each and every repetition of the Buddha-name be amply supplied with good roots, merits and virtues. Even if you invoke the Buddha-name in a scattered state of mind, the merits and good roots are still incalculable -- how much the more so when you invoke the Buddha name single mindedly.

By invoking the Buddha-name, you will bring on a response -- the impression is made and the seal is lifted -- Amitabha and his holy retinue come to you without coming, and extend a hand to lead you off. You, the person practicing Buddha-name recitation, recognize Amitabha in your mind, and you go to the Pure Land without going, placing yourself in a jewel lotus there.

When the sutra speaks of “good men and good women”, it does not matter whether you are monks and nuns or householders) whether you are high-ranking or low-ranking) old or young. No matter what your station in life) even if you belong to the Six Planes of Existence and are subject to the Four Modes of Birth) the fact that you are now able to hear the Buddha-name means that the good roots you have accumulated over many eons have ripened and you deserve the appellation “good”. This is so even if you have committed the Five Deadly Sins and the Ten Evil Deeds.

“Amitabha Buddha” is the all-inclusive term for the myriad virtues. When you use the name of Amitabha to summon virtue) all the virtues are engendered. Thus, reciting the name of Amitabha is the correct practice, and you do not need to get involved with other practices such as visualization or meditation. Reciting the name of Amitabha is the simplest and most direct method.

If you hear the Buddha-name and believe in it, if you believe in it and make vows, then you are fit to recite the Buddha-name. If you do not have faith and do not make vows, it is as if you never heard [the Buddha-name] at all. Merely hearing the name of Amitabha without faith and vows may become a long-term causal basis for your enlightenment, but it cannot be called the “wisdom that comes from hearing”.

Reciting the Buddha-name is a matter of being mindful of the Buddha-name from moment to moment -- thus it is the “wisdom that comes from reflecting on what you heard”.

There are two levels of practice in reciting the Buddha-name: reciting the Buddha-name at the phenomenal level and reciting the Buddha-name at the level of inner truth (noumenon).

1. *Reciting the Buddha-name at the phenomenal level* means believing that Amitabha exists in his Pure Land in the West, but not yet comprehending that he is a Buddha created by the Mind, and that this Mind is Buddha. It means you resolve to make vows and to seek birth in the Pure Land, like a child longing for its mother and never forgetting her for a moment.
2. *Reciting the Buddha-name at the level of inner truth*(noumenon) means believing that Amitabha and his Pure Land in the West are inherent features of our own [pure] Minds,

the creation of our own [pure] Minds. It means using the great name of Amitabha, which is inherent in our Minds and the creation of our Minds, as a focal point to concentrate on, so that we never forget it for a moment.

The sutra speaks of reciting the Buddha-name for one to seven days, defining a period of time in which we should achieve singlemindedness. This passage can be interpreted in two ways.

One interpretation is that those with sharp faculties will be able to reach singleminded Buddha-remembrance after one day of invoking the Buddha-name. Those with dull faculties will only be able to reach complete undisturbed Buddha-remembrance after seven days of invoking the Buddha-name. Those of middling faculties may take from two to six days to reach singleminded Buddha-remembrance.

Another interpretation of this passage is that those with sharp faculties will be able to maintain singleminded Buddha-remembrance for seven days, those with dull faculties will only be able to maintain it for a single day, and those of middling faculties may maintain it for from two to six days.

There are also two categories of singleminded practice (Undisturbed One Mind).

1. Regardless of whether you recite the Buddha-name at the phenomenal level or the inner truth level, if you invoke the name of Amitabha until you subdue all afflictions (anger, greed, ignorance...) and put an end to Delusions of Views and Thoughts, this is the One Mind at the phenomenal level.
2. Regardless of whether you recite the Buddha-name at the phenomenal level or the inner truth level, if you invoke the name of Amitabha until your mind opens and you see inherent Buddhahood, this is the One Mind at the level of inner truth.

The One Mind at the phenomenal level is not tainted by Delusions of Views and Thoughts, and the One Mind at the inner truth level is not deluded by the supposed dualisms of essence and form, Nirvana and Samsara, Buddhas and sentient beings. This is “the wisdom that comes from cultivation”.

When you are not subject to Delusions of Views and Thoughts at the moment of your death, the response you get is that Amitabha Buddha will appear before you in his Emanation Body, along with his whole retinue of holy ones. Your mind will no longer create the delusions of desire, form, and formlessness characteristic of this mundane world “Endurance”, and you will go to be reborn in either the Pure Land Where Saints and Ordinary Beings Dwell Together, or the Pure Land of Expedient Liberation, in Amitabha’s Pure Land.

When you are no longer deluded by dualisms at the moment of your death, the response you get is that Amitabha Buddha will appear before you in his Reward Body, along with his whole retinue of holy ones. Your mind will no longer create the delusions of Samsara and Nirvana, and you will go to be reborn in either the Pure Land of Real Reward, or the Pure Land of Eternally Quiescent Light, in Amitabha’s Pure Land.

We must then realize that reciting the name of Amitabha is not only a method that is simple and direct, it is also a method for Sudden Complete Enlightenment. Since, in reciting the Buddha-

name, you merge with Buddha from moment to moment, without bothering with visualization or meditation, you immediately witness perfect illumination, with no excess and no lack. Those of the highest faculties cannot go beyond this level, while those of the lowest capabilities are also able to reach it. Of course the way Amitabha appears to people and the level of the Pure Land they are born in is not the same for those of different capacities.

We can say that the method of reciting the name of Amitabha fully encompasses all the varieties of Buddhism, the “Eight Teachings and Five Periods” (i.e., all the teachings of the Buddha’s during his lifetime, according to the T’ien- t’ai schema). In so doing, it is the most complete expression of the Buddha’s compassionate heart, teaching spontaneously without being asked. What incredible power!

***Question: The Meditation Sutra is devoted to explaining visualization. Why do you say not to bother with visualization?**

Answer: This idea comes from the Meditation Sutra itself. Because the superior forms of visualization focusing on the Sambhogakaya of Amitabha are beyond the mental power of ordinary people, that sutra in the thirteenth contemplation also introduces a lower grade of visualizing the form of Amitabha focusing on the Nirmanakaya, that is, the physical form, of Amitabha. However those whose karmic barriers are heavy cannot even focus on Amitabha in that way, so in the sixteenth contemplation, the sutra teaches the method of invoking the name of Amitabha. The Amitabha Sutra concentrates on the Buddha-name-recitation method of the sixteenth contemplation because it is the Dharma-Ending Age, and there are many people with heavy karmic obstructions... -

***Question: Masters like T’ien-ch’i and Tu-feng have proposed meditating on the Zen question, “Who is the one reciting the Buddha-name?” Why do you say that it is not necessary to practice Zen meditation?**

Answer: This idea comes from Master T’ien-ch’i himself as well as other masters. Master T’ien-ch’i did not want to stand idly by while people reciting the Buddha- name failed to comprehend the compassion of Sakyamuni in teaching Buddha-name-recitation, so he posed this question to help them wake up to the real sense of reciting the Buddha-name, which is that our True Mind, not our deluded errant mind should do the recitation (i.e., recitation should be singleminded with no deluded errant thoughts). When he taught this it was like the dawn returning after a long night.

If we are unwilling to still our minds by following Master T’ien-ch’i’s advice to contemplate “Who is the one reciting the Buddha-name?” in order to recite the Buddha- name with complete concentration, we are taking hold of “a fragment of tile with which to knock on a door to hit out at our own grandparents [our Mind]”; we are rebelling against our own patriarchal teachers and doing evil, rather than obeying them and being good.

***Question: Those who are willing to still their minds by reciting the Buddha-name will be all right, but how can those who are unwilling to still their minds achieve accord with the Buddha’s Mind?**

Answer: Alas! The reason that Master T'ien-ch'i is asking you to still your minds by reciting the Buddha-name and reach accord with the Buddha's Mind is precisely because you are not yet willing to do so. Since you have not yet developed true faith, it is as though you are wearing thick leather blinders, and cannot see through them. You must realize that those with eyes have no reason to light a lamp when the sun is shining - why should those without eyes struggle to find a lamp in broad daylight?

The Bodhisattva Mahasthamaprapta (a Pure Land sage) has given us a saying that is like a great mass of fire lighting the Buddha Remembrance Samadhi: "Without using any other expedients than Buddha recitation, you are able to open your own mind." Who dares to touch this saying? How can you not be burned by it?

* Question: **When Amitabha Buddha appears to Pure Land practitioners who are on the brink of death, how can they be sure it is not a demon?**

Answer: If a Zen follower is not meditating on the Buddha, and yet Buddha suddenly appears unexpectedly, this is called a demon (delusion). A Pure Land practitioner sees the Buddha while focusing on the Buddha. Thus in his case, cause and effect coincide and his mind is in unison with that of the Buddhas. The appearance of the Buddha is therefore not a demon. There is no need to worry about this.

*Question: **When the sutra speaks of reciting the Buddha-name singlemindedly for seven days, does this refer to ordinary times, or to the time when we are about to die?**

Answer: This refers to ordinary times.

*Question: **If we recite the Buddha-name for seven days, singlemindedly and without confusion, but later we again become confused and create bad karma, will we still, achieve birth in the Pure Land?**

Answer: A person who has actually managed to recite the Buddha-name singlemindedly will not become confused or create bad karma again.

*Question: **The Longer Amitabha Sutra speaks of attaining birth in the Pure Land through ten repetitions of the Buddha-name. The Treatise of the Precious King of Samadhi speaks of attaining birth in the Pure Land through a single repetition of the Buddha-name. Are they referring to ordinary times or to the time when we are about to die?**

Answer: Attaining birth in the Pure Land through ten repetitions of the Buddha-name applies to both times. If we recite the Buddha-name ten times each morning, this is an ordinary occasion. On the other hand, the Longer Amitabha Sutra speaks of attaining birth in the Pure Land through ten repetitions (and this is the same as what the Meditation Sutra says) -- this refers to when we are on the brink of death. As to the passage in the Treatise of the Precious King of Samadhi about attaining birth in the Pure Land through a single repetition of the Buddha-name, this refers to the time when we are facing death.

***Question: If we can attain birth in the Pure Land through ten repetitions of the Buddha name, or even a single repetition, why do we need seven days of reciting the Buddha-name, as the Amitabha Sutra says?**

Answer: If we have not done the work of reciting the Buddha-name singlemindedly for seven days during ordinary times, how can we manage to recite ten times or even once when we are on the brink of death?

It would be one chance in a million if someone who had committed many evils were to have a causal basis from past lives ripen as he was on the brink of death, enabling him to meet a spiritual friend, hear his teaching, and develop faith and vows. How could he be so lucky? Master T'ien Ju's book *Doubts and Questions about the Pure Land* has refuted this idea of waiting till death to practice Buddha recitation in great detail. People these days should read that book.

***Question: If Amitabha's Pure Land is a hundred billion worlds away from here, how can we be reborn there instantly?**

Answer: A hundred billion worlds are not beyond one moment of thought, since fundamentally there is nothing outside the True Mind. When we rely on the power of Buddha that is inherent in our own mind, what is so hard about being born in the Pure Land instantly?

It is like a multi-layered scene of mountains and rivers and towers reflected in a mirror: all the layers appear there in the mirror, and in reality there is no near and far. All are reflected at once, appearing without before or after. When the sutra says "West of here, past a hundred billion Buddha-lands, there exists a world called 'Ultimate Bliss'", it is also like this. When the sutra says "In this land there exists a Buddha called Amitabha, who is expounding the Dharma right now", it is also like this.

It is also like this when a person who has developed faith and vows and recited the Buddha-name is about to die, and Amitabha and all his assembly of saints appear before that person. It is also like this when the person dies without his or her mind falling into delusion, and the person is immediately born in Amitabha's Land of Ultimate Bliss.

We must recognize that every word in the sutra is reflected in the Great-Perfect- Wisdom-Mirror of the Ocean-Seal Samadhi.

***Question: Reciting the Buddha-name is a partial practice, an auxiliary practice. Why do you call it a principal practice?**

Answer: Basing ourselves on the One Mind, we speak of faith, vows, and practice. There is however no order of precedence here, nor is naming three aspects a set definition. Without vows and practice, we cannot speak of true faith. Without practice and faith, we cannot speak of true vows. Without faith and vows, we cannot speak of true practice.

Relying fully on our faith and our vows, we recite the Buddha-name. Thus faith, vows, and practice seem to be three things, but all three are fully present in every repetition of the Buddha-

name. This is why reciting the Buddha- name is called the cause and condition for numerous good roots, merits and virtues. The Meditation Sutra means this when it says that by invoking the Buddha-name, from moment to moment we are clearing away the bad karma of eighty million eons of birth and death. Without great merits, virtues and good roots, how could we clear away bad karma on such a grand scale?

*Question: **With the intensity that comes from reciting the Buddha-name on the brink of death, we can clear away a lot of bad karma. Can we achieve the same result in ordinary times if we invoke the Buddha-name singlemindedly?**

Answer: When the sun comes out, all darkness disappears. When we invoke the great name of Amitabha, myriad evil deeds are wiped away.

*Question: **Can we also clear away bad karma if we invoke the Buddha-name with a scattered mind?**

Answer: The merit and virtue of the Buddha-name are inconceivable, so how could they not clear away bad karma? But reciting the Buddha-name with a scattered mind does not guarantee being reborn in the Pure Land, since the good roots created by a diffuse, scattered recitation are no match for the evils that have accumulated from time without beginning.

We must understand that all of space could not contain our accumulated evils, if they took on physical form. Every repetition of the Buddha-name might wipe away the bad karma of eighty millions eons of birth and death, but even if we recited the Buddha-name day and night for a hundred years, the amount of bad karma which would be wiped out is like the amount of dirt under a fingernail, while the amount of bad karma remaining is like all the dirt on earth.

The only way to eliminate all bad karma is to recite the Buddha-name to the point of singleminded concentration. . This is like a powerful warrior breaking out of an encirclement, so even three armies cannot hem him in any more. In all instances however, invoking the Buddha-name is a seed for becoming enlightened. It is like an indestructible diamond.

When Sakyamuni Buddha was in the world, there was an old man who asked to become a monk. The congregation of five hundred monks all said the old man was lacking in good roots. Buddha however said: “.countless ages ago this man was being pursued by a tiger, and cried out ‘Nam Mo Amltabha Buddha!’ Now the good roots from that occasion have become ripe: he has met me and found the path. This is not something that followers of the Lesser Vehicle can perceive.” This story, together with the teachings of the Lotus Sutra, show, that even those who invoke the Buddha-name in scattered, confused state of mind have planted the seed of Buddhahood. How can we not believe them?

It is my humble hope that no matter whether you are a layperson or a monk or nun, no matter whether you are smart or stupid, you will adopt a positive attitude toward this simple, direct, Sudden Perfect Pure Land teaching. Do not look upon it as difficult and shrink away from it. Do not look upon it as easy and become complacent and not try hard enough. Do not look upon it as shallow and despise it. Do not look upon it as profound and not dare to accept it as your task.

The name of Amitabha which we recite is truly inconceivable. But the True Mind of those who recite it is also truly inconceivable. If you recite the Buddha-name once, you are inconceivable for the time the sound of it lasts. If you recite it ten or a hundred or a thousand or a million times, or countless times, you are inconceivable all the while the sound of your recitation lasts.

3.3.2 Admonition to recite the Buddha's name

In the next passage in the sutra, Buddha reiterates his advice:

I have seen this benefit, and so I speak these words. If sentient beings hear what I say, they must make a vow to be born in that land.

Buddha says, "I have seen this benefit." The vision of the Buddha is the ultimate in clarity. The benefit he has seen is that through reciting the Buddha-name, sentient beings can transcend the world of the Five Corruptions, be reborn within the Four Lands, and reach the level where they do not backslide. This benefit is brought about by the inconceivable merit of the Buddha-name.

With reference to what happens when we die, this benefit is that our minds do not fall into delusion and error. In this polluted world, if we rely solely on self-effort in our practice, it is extremely hard to gain power over the crucial juncture of birth and death.

If there is the least bit of bad karma that you have not cleared away by the time you are about to die, you will plunge into an untoward rebirth -- this applies no matter whether you have ignorantly cultivated a misguided practice and trusted in your deluded intellect, or whether you have had some profound awakenings and your conduct has been consistent and correct. As the Pure Land Patriarch Yung-ming said, "Nine out of ten people who practice Zen meditation miss the road: scenes of delusion appear before them at death, and in an instant they follow them off." This is truly a chilling prospect! Even Arhats become deluded again as they emerge from the womb, and even Bodhisattvas can become benighted between death and a subsequent rebirth. Here, at the point of death, how can you forcibly act the master? If you expect to be so lucky, you are a fool.

The only way out is to have faith, vows, recite the Buddha-name and rely on other-power. Amitabha's vows of compassion are certainly not empty promises. If we have faith and vows and recite the Buddha-name, when we die Amitabha and the assembly of saints will appear before us to lead us away. That way we will not fail, and we will easily be reborn in the Pure Land.

Buddha saw that sentient beings' greatest suffering is to fall into confusion at the moment of death, and so he vouchsafed this Pure Land teaching to us. This is why he urged us again and again to take vows: because vows can guide us.

*Question: If Buddha is a creation of the Mind, if Buddha is the Mind, why do you not speak of our own inherent Buddha as supreme? Why do you insist that another Buddha, Amitabha Buddha, is better?

Answer: This Pure Land teaching is all a matter of comprehending that Amitabha Buddha is precisely our own Buddha Nature, our Mind. If we mistakenly refer to the Buddha as “other”, we would fall into one form of delusive view. If we were to overemphasize our own inherent Buddha, this would be another form of delusive view. Both are wrong.

Through our invoking the Buddha-name both at the phenomenal level and at the level of inner truth (noumenon), Amitabha and the assembly of saints appears before us: this is our inherent True Nature becoming manifest. Also, we are born in the Pure Land and see Amitabha and hear his teaching: this is perfecting the body of wisdom of our True Nature. This is not awakening through something other than ourselves.

The Pure Land teaching is profound and wondrous. It destroys all sophistry and cuts off all delusive views. Only those with the wisdom of Ashvaghosha, Nagarjuna, Chih-i and Yung-ming can take it up completely. Those of worldly intelligence, the followers of Confucianism and the devotees of Zen, may try to figure it out to the limit of their powers, but the more they think about it, the farther off they get. In terms of being able to reach the wisdom of the Buddhas and mesh with the wonders of the Path, such intellectuals are not as good as ordinary men and women who recite the Buddha-name in all sincerity.

“I have seen this benefit and so I speak these words”. Buddha’s eye and Buddha’s voice clearly affirm j this truth, so how can we dare to go against it? Shouldn’t we accept it?

This concludes the commentary on the main body of the sutra. ,

The Pure Land method of developing faith and vows and reciting the Buddha-name both perfectly subsumes and perfectly surpasses all other Buddhist methods. Vertically, it intermingles with all the Buddhist teachings; horizontally, it stands apart from them.

Buddha spontaneously gave this Pure Land teaching without being asked. Who is worthy to extol it and transmit it? Only when a Buddha communicates with a Buddha is it possible to fully express the absolute reality of all the teachings. This Amitabha Sutra is about a Buddha-realm, and it can only be transmitted from Buddha to Buddha.

Part V - Text Transmission

4.1 General Admonition to Accept the Teaching

The final part of the sutra deals with its transmission. This is in two sections: a general admonition to accept the teaching, and a concluding encouragement. Buddha says:

Right now I am extolling the benefits of the inconceivable virtues of Amitabha Buddha.

The virtues of Amitabha are inconceivable in five senses.

First, Amitabha enables us to transcend the triple world “horizontally,” without having to wait until we cut off all delusion.

Second, Amitabha's Pure Land includes the Four Lands (the Land where Saints and Ordinary Beings Dwell Together, the Land of Expedient Liberation, the Land of Real Reward, and the Land of Eternally Quiescent Light), so that we do not have to go step-by-step from one to another (i.e. once reborn in the Pure Land, we will never retrogress).

Third, Amitabha's merit makes salvation possible for us by simply invoking his name, without having to resort to other methods, such as meditation (Zen) or visualization.

Fourth, Amitabha's merit makes salvation possible in one to seven days, without requiring many eons and many lifetimes.

Fifth, by invoking the name of one Buddha, Amitabha, we are protected and kept in mind by all the Buddhas.

All this is the result of the great vows and deeds of our guide and teacher Amitabha. That is why Buddha speaks of "the benefits of the inconceivable virtues of Amitabha Buddha."

Furthermore, when Pure Land practitioners recite the Buddha-name with faith and vows, they are gathering in all the virtues of Amitabha Buddha and making them their own. This is another reason why Buddha speaks of "the benefits of the inconceivable virtues of Amitabha Buddha. "

Later on in the text, Sakyamuni Buddha speaks of "the inconceivable virtues of all the Buddhas" and also "my inconceivable virtues." Here Sakyamuni Buddha is saying that all the Buddhas, as well as he himself, all consider Amitabha's virtues as their own.

But in the eastern direction there are also countless other Buddhas, like Akshobhya Buddha, the Buddha "Marks of the Polar Mountain", the Buddha "Great Polar Mountain", the Buddha "Light of the Polar Mountain", and the Buddha "Wondrous Voice". Each of them, "extending his broad, long tongue", preaches in his own land and covers a whole cosmos, speaking these sincere words: "all of you sentient beings should believe this sutra extolling inconceivable virtues, which all Buddhas protect and keep in mind".

"Akshobhya" means "Immovable". Each Buddha has countless virtues, and so he must have countless names, each established according to the teaching situation. Sometimes these names are based on causal conditions, sometimes on results achieved, sometimes on inherent nature, sometimes on apparent characteristics, sometimes on practices or vows or other things. Although each name only refers to one aspect of Buddhahood, each name still includes the four benefits a Buddha brings: joyful faith, helping others, counteracting evil, and witnessing absolute truth. Each name illustrates a particular quality of Buddhahood. If we were to try to express all the qualities of the Enlightened Ones, we could talk till the end of time and never be able to finish.

Space in the east is infinite, and there is an infinite number of worlds there. Since there is infinite number of worlds, there is also an infinite number of Buddhas who dwell in those worlds. Thus the sutra refers to "countless other Buddhas." All these Buddhas are using their eloquence to urge us to have faith in this sutra. If we sentient beings still fail to have faith in this sutra, we are being utterly stupid and benighted.

One of the traditional marks of a Buddha is a “long, broad tongue”. If an ordinary person tells no lies for three lifetimes, his tongue will be long enough to reach his nose. The Buddhas mentioned in this sutra have realized the wondrous Pure Land teaching of the Great Vehicle, and so their tongues are long and broad enough to cover a whole galaxy of worlds. This symbolizes that they are truly in accord with absolute reality -- it is fact, not fiction.

The title of the sutra, as it circulates among us today, “The Amitabha Sutra Spoken by Buddha”, was devised by the master translator Kumarajiva, who knew that we Chinese like brevity. It skillfully matches the wondrous practice of reciting the Buddha-name. Master Hsuan-tsang translated the sutra with the longer title, The Sutra Extolling the Pure Land Accepted by Buddha. The two translations differ in style, but the meaning is the same:

In the worlds of the southern direction there are countless other Buddhas, like the Buddha “Lamp of the Sun and Moon”, the Buddha “Light of Renown”, the Buddha “Great Blazing Shoulders”, the Buddha “Lamp of the Polar Mountain”, and the Buddha “Infinite Vigor”. Each of them, extending his broad, long tongue, preaches in his own land and covers a whole cosmos, speaking these sincere words: “all of you sentient beings should believe this sutra extolling inconceivable virtues, which all Buddhas protect and keep in mind”.

In the worlds of the western direction there are countless other Buddhas, like the Buddha “Infinite Life”, the Buddha “Innumerable Characteristics”, the Buddha “Innumerable Banners”, the Buddha “Great Light”, the Buddha “Great Illumination”, the Buddha “Jewel Appearance”, and the Buddha “Light of Purity”. Each of them, extending his broad, long tongue, preaches in his own land and covers a whole cosmos, speaking these sincere words: “all of you sentient beings should believe this sutra extolling inconceivable virtues, which all Buddhas protect and keep in mind”.

The Buddha “Infinite Life” has the same name as Amitabha. In the worlds of the Ten Directions, Buddhas who share the same name are innumerable. It is also possible that the sutra here is referring to our guide and teacher Amitabha. For the sake of saving sentient beings, there is no harm in Buddha Amitabha praising what the Tathagata Sakyamuni teaches in this sutra.

In the worlds of the northern direction, there are countless other Buddhas, like the Buddha “Blazing Shoulders”, the Buddha “Supreme Voice”, the Buddha “Hard to Injure”, the Buddha “Born of the Sun”, and the Buddha “Netted Light”. Each of them, extending his broad, long tongue, preaches in his ownland and covers a whole cosmos, speaking these sincere words: “all of you sentient beings should believe this sutra extolling inconceivable virtues, which all Buddhas protect and keep in mind”.

In the worlds of the nadir there are countless other Buddhas, like the Buddha “Lion”, the Buddha “Repute”, the Buddha “Light”, the Buddha “Dharma Banner”, and the Buddha “Upholding the Dharma”. Each of them, extending his broad, long tongue, preaches in his own land and covers a whole cosmos, speaking these sincere words: “all of you sentient beings should believe this sutra extolling inconceivable virtues, which all Buddhas protect and keep in mind”.

Below our world (nadir) there is an infinite number of galaxies and beyond it there are also an infinite number of galaxies, including the Heavens of Desire, of Form, and the Formless Heavens, and so on.

The word “Dharma” means “teaching”, “truth”, “method”.

In the worlds of the zenith there are countless other Buddhas, like the Buddha “Pure Voice”, the Buddha “Sojourner King”, the Buddha “Incense Fragrance”, the Buddha “Fragrant Light”, the Buddha “Great Blazing Shoulders”, the Buddha “Body of Multicolored Jewel Flower Garlands”, the Buddha “Sala Tree King”, the Buddha “Precious Flower Virtue”, the Buddha “Sees All Truths”, and the Buddha “Like the Polar Mountain”. Each of them, extending his broad, long tongue, preaches in his own land and covers a whole cosmos, speaking these sincere words: “all of you sentient beings should believe this sutra extolling inconceivable virtues, which all Buddhas protect and keep in mind”.

These are the infinite worlds that are located toward the zenith, above our mundane world. They too have many layers, and like our mundane world include Realms of Desire, of Form, and Formlessness, in an infinite number of levels.

*** Question:** There are certainly pure lands in all directions, so why make a special point of praising Amitabha’s Pure Land in the west?

Answer: This is not a good objection. If we made a point of praising Akshobhya’s Pure Land in the east, you would wonder why we were emphasizing the eastern direction, and go on and on with your specious reasoning.

*** Question:** Why not make the whole universe the focal point instead of Amitabha’s Pure Land?

Answer: There are three reasons. We focus on Amitabha’s Pure Land because this makes it easy for beginners to develop the Bodhi Mind, because Amitabha’s fundamental vows are most powerful, and because Amitabha has a special affinity with the sentient beings in our world.

The Buddhas offer salvation to sentient beings, and: sentient beings accept the Buddhas’ teachings, but in this process there are differences in degrees of ease and profundity -- it is all a matter of karmic links.

Depending on where the karmic affinities of sentient beings lie, the Buddhas extend the virtue of their benevolence, and stimulate the development of those sentient beings with all kinds of teachings. They can enable sentient beings to experience joy in the teaching and have faith in it, they can spark the development of the seeds of goodness from past lives, they can make it hard for the barriers of delusion to screen sentient beings off from the truth, and they can enable sentient beings to bring forth their self-nature.

Fundamentally, all the Buddhas manifest their teaching activities from within the Dharmakaya. They solidify sentient beings’ affinity with the truth and strengthen their seeds of enlightenment.

Whether within the world or beyond it, the deeds of the Buddhas are all inconceivably great. They energize teaching vehicles and expound them to vast audiences. They plunge into the ocean of suffering where sentient beings dwell, and use their compassion to enable them to harmonize with the still light. Thus do the Buddhas exemplify the myriad virtues and epitomize the highest spiritual powers.

Finally, we must understand that the seeds of enlightenment come to fruition as a result of conditions. These conditions constitute the Dharma Realm as a whole. When the Buddhas are mindful of one, they are mindful of all, and when one dharma is born, all Dharmas are born: there is one scent, one flower, one sound, one form. When the Buddhas accept our repentance and give us a prediction of enlightenment, when they rub our heads and reach down their hands to us, they create universal reverberation in all the worlds of the past, present, and future in the Ten Directions.

Therefore, these conditions are called “the Dharma Realm of conditional arising”. This is the meaning of remembering, of creating affinity with the Dharma Realm of the Ten Directions.

Ordinary people can simply resolve to seek rebirth in the Pure Land, while people at a profound level should not abandon Amitabha’s Pure Land in the west and seek the Flower Store World (Vairocana Buddha’s universal Pure Land) instead: If you think that Amitabha’s Pure Land is an expedient device, but Vairocana’s Flower Treasury World is a true reality, if you think that Amitabha’s Pure Land is associated with the Lesser Vehicle, but Vairocana’s Flower Store World belongs to the Mahayana teaching, you are completely under the sway of imaginary ideas and emotional clinging. Why? Because you have not comprehended that the provisional teachings and the final teaching have a single essence, and that categories like Big Vehicle and Small Vehicle have no set identity.

Why do you think this is called the sutra that is protected and kept in mind by all the Buddhas?

If there are good men or women who hear this scripture, uphold it and hear the names of all these Buddhas, these good men and women will be protected and kept in mind by all the Buddhas, and will not regress along the path of Supreme, Perfect Enlightenment.

Therefore, all of you should faithfully accept what I say and what all the Buddhas have said.

This sutra is devoted to revealing that the Mind is supreme. The names of various Buddhas also reveal their supreme, perfect, ultimate virtues. Thus, those who hear this sutra and the names of the Buddhas are protected and kept in mind by all the Buddhas. Those who hear this sutra and accept its teachings will consistently recite the name of Amitabha, and the name of Amitabha is itself protected and kept in mind by all of the Buddhas.

*** Question: What about those who only hear the names of the various Buddhas, but do not uphold the teachings of the sutra -- are they also kept in mind by all Buddhas and protected against backsliding?**

Answer: There is a partial answer to this, and a comprehensive answer.

“The Sutra on Divining the Results of Good and Evil Karma” says that those who intone the Buddha-name in a confused, unfocused, defiled state of mind are not really “hearing” the Buddha-name and are incapable of decisive faith and understanding. By reciting the Buddha-name they only obtain conditioned merits in the human and celestial realms, but do not get the far-reaching and profoundly wondrous benefits of reciting the Buddha-name.

Those who single mindedly recite the Buddha-name to the point of total concentration called “One-Practice Samadhi” achieve the mind of vast and wondrous virtues. This is called attaining the stage of quasi- Tolerance of Non-Birth (the forbearance that comes from realizing that all phenomena are unborn). By doing this these people truly hear the names of the Buddhas of the Ten Directions.

This is the way it must be with the sutra as well. After you hear it, you must put it into practice by reciting the Buddha-name. When you recite the Buddha-name to the point of singlemindedness, then you are really hearing the names of the Buddhas, and then you become protected and kept in mind by the Buddhas. This is the partial answer.

The comprehensive answer is this: The compassion of the Buddhas is inconceivable, and the virtues of their names are also inconceivable. Therefore, once you hear the Buddha-name, no matter whether you are mindful or not, or whether you believe in it or not, it always becomes the seed of an affinity with the truth. Moreover, when the Buddhas bring salvation to sentient beings, they do not sort out friends and enemies: they go on working tirelessly for universal salvation. If you hear the Buddha-name, Buddha is bound to protect you. How can there be any doubts about this?

Even those who have just heard the Buddha-name once share in the essential common nature of the Dharma body and have created the cause of their enlightenment in the long run, which they will never lose.

The sutra uses the Sanskrit term Anuttara-samyak-sambodhi, which means Supreme, Perfect Enlightenment. This is the ultimate fruit of the Great Vehicle.

To say you have reached the level where you do not fall back (non-retrogression) is another way of saying you will achieve Buddhahood in one lifetime. Thus Buddha urges all his listeners to believe in what this sutra is saying and accept it, and to have faith that the merit of hearing the Buddha-name is like this. Can we refuse to believe what Sakyamuni and all the other Buddhas have communicated to us? This is the end of the section in which Buddha urges us to have faith in the sutra.

4.2 A Conclusive Encouragement

Next Buddha urges us to make vows.

All of those who have vowed, or are vowing, or will vow to be born in the land of Amitabha Buddha reach the level where they do not retrogress from Supreme, Perfect Enlightenment.

They are already born, are now being born, or will be born in that land. Therefore, all good men and women, if they have faith, must make a vow to be born in that land.

Those who have vowed to be born in the Pure Land in the past have already been born there. Those who are now vowing to be born in the Pure Land will be born there at the end of this lifetime. Those who in future lives vow to be born in the Pure Land will be born there in the future. Here Buddha is demonstrating that vows that are made on the basis of pure faith are sure to come true. Without faith, we cannot make vows. Without vows and faith, rebirth cannot occur. That is why Buddha says, “If they have faith, they must vow to be born in that land.”

Vows are a token of faith, and the key link for practice. Making vows is then a most crucial component. When Buddha mentions vows, we must understand that faith and practice are included. That is why he repeatedly urges us most earnestly to make vows.

When we vow to be born in Amitabha’s Pure Land, we are demonstrating our disgust with the mundane world, and our joy in the Pure Land.

In feeling aversion to the mundane world, we are relying on the first two Noble Truths (the truth of suffering, and the truth of the formation of suffering), and taking two of the great vows of Bodhisattvas (to deliver all sentient beings from suffering, and to cut off countless afflictions).

In joyously seeking the Pure Land, we are relying on the other two Noble Truths (the truth of the path, and the truth of ending suffering), and taking the other two great vows of Bodhisattvas to master the endless variety of Buddhist teaching, and to consummate the Supreme Path. Because of such great vows, we will attain Supreme, Perfect Enlightenment and never retrogress.

*** Question:** If we make vows now, is it not correct that all we can talk about is the life to come, not this present life?

Answer: There are two senses here. One concerns a lifetime called the present one. If we vow in the present life to recite the Buddha-name, when we die we are sure to be born in the Pure Land.

The other is about an instant called the present. If our mind accords with the Mind of Buddha Amitabha for one moment, we are born in the Pure Land for one moment. If we reach accord moment after moment, we are born in the Pure Land moment after moment.

Wondrous cause and wondrous effect are not apart from the One Mind. They are like the two ends of a balance, going down and up and sometimes being level.

Why do we have to wait until our life in the mundane world is over before we can be born in the Pure Land’s jewel ponds? All we have to do is develop faith and vows and recite the Buddha-name right now, and our lotus bud is already in bloom, and the image of the Pure Land’s golden thrones appear before us -- at that moment we are no longer inhabitants of this Saha world.

Reciting the Buddha-name is then the highest form of the complete and sudden teaching: impossible to rationalize, difficult to conceive. Only those with great wisdom can truly understand and believe in it.

Just as I am now extolling the inconceivable virtues of all the Buddhas, all those Buddhas are likewise extolling my inconceivable virtues, with these words: “Sakyamuni Buddha is able to carry out a most difficult and rare task. In the Saha World, the World of Endurance, in an evil world of the Five Corruptions -- the corruption of the age, the corruption of views, the corruption of afflictions, the corruption of sentient beings, and the corruption of life -- he is able to achieve Supreme, Perfect Enlightenment, and to expound the Pure Land teaching, which all beings in all worlds find hard to believe.”

Although the virtues and wisdom of all the Buddhas are equal, the way they bestow their teachings differs in degrees of difficulty and ease. Achieving enlightenment in the Pure Land is easy, compared to achieving enlightenment in our corrupt mundane world.

Explaining the Dharma to the sentient beings in the Pure Land is easy, compared to explaining the Dharma to the sentient beings in our corrupt mundane world.

Explaining the gradual form of the Buddhist Teaching to the sentient beings in our corrupt mundane world is easy, compared to explaining the sudden form of the Buddhist Teaching

Explaining the sudden form of the Buddhist Teaching (other than Pure Land teachings) to the sentient beings in our corrupt mundane world is easy, compared to explaining the sudden Pure Land teaching of horizontal transcendence.

Explaining the Pure Land teaching of horizontal transcendence with its sudden practice and sudden realization and wondrous contemplation is not easy. But the hardest of all is explaining this supreme skillful technique, this special surpassing wonder, this Pure Land method that goes beyond all conceptualizations, and teaches us that we do not need laborious cultivation, but have only to recite the Buddha-name in order to ascend directly to the level where we do not fall back from the path to enlightenment. That is why all the Buddhas of the Ten Directions put forward our Sakyamuni Buddha as the most valiant of all.

The sutra speaks of the world of the Five Corruptions (Turbidities). What does this mean?

The corruption of the age means that this is a time when wars and natural disasters are rife. If not for the Pure Land practice which enables us to transcend the mundane world “horizontally”, taking our karmic burden along with us, deliverance would surely be impossible.

The corruption of views means that misguided, perverse views proliferate: the view that our bodies are entities we possess, the view that we are annihilated after death or else live on forever, the view that there is no cause and effect, the view that what we cling to with our arbitrary opinions is best, and the view that we will find salvation by our own subjectively chosen methods.

Because we are deluded by such views and utterly submerged in them, this is called the corruption of views. Amidst the corruption of views, if we do not make use of the expedient means of the Pure Land teaching to discover our Mind, we surely cannot be saved.

The corruption of afflictions means that compulsions and confusions caused by greed, anger, ignorance, arrogance, and doubt are increasing more and more, causing trouble and chaos. Amidst the corruption of afflictions, without the Pure Land practice that affirms that our ordinary minds are one with the Buddha-Mind, we surely cannot be saved.

Under the influence of the corruption of views and the corruption of afflictions, the Five Skandhas mix together in a coarse and debased way, giving rise to what are provisionally called sentient beings; hence the term, the corruption of sentient beings. Sentient beings are debased both at the level of form and at the level of mind, so they are called corrupt. Given the corruption of the human condition, without the practice of shunning the mundane world and joyfully seeking the Pure Land, salvation is impossible.

The corruption of life means that our causal basis and hence the results we realize are both degenerate, and our life spans are shortened, and do not reach a hundred years, so they are called corrupt. Given the corruption of life, we cannot be saved without the Pure Land practice.

Moreover, faith and vows and recitation of the name of Amitabha transform the corruption of the age into an assembly of purity, transform the corruption of views into infinite light, transform the corruption of afflictions into the eternal still light, transform the corruption of sentient beings into beings born by transformation from lotuses in the Pure Land, and transform the corruption of life into infinite life.

Thus each recitation of the Buddha-name is a method of achieving the mind of Supreme, Perfect Enlightenment practiced by our fundamental teacher, Sakyamuni Buddha, in the midst of this evil world of the Five Corruptions. In this sutra, Sakyamuni Buddha is taking the whole essence of this enlightenment and bestowing it on sentient beings of this evil and corrupt world. This is the realm which all the Buddhas experience, and which only the Buddhas can experience fully. It is not something which those in the planes of the hell-beings, the hungry ghosts, the animals, the asuras, the human beings, the devas, the Shravakas, the Pratyekas, or even the Bodhisattvas can fully comprehend by their own power.

When the other Buddhas extol Sakyamuni for teaching the Pure Land method to “sentient beings,” this means the people in our evil -world of the Five Corruptions. When the sutra mentions “all worlds,” it means all the worlds sentient beings inhabit.

The previous admonition to believe in the Pure Land teaching was the command of all the Buddhas. Below is the exhortation of our teacher Sakyamuni Buddha. Here Sakyamuni addresses all sentient beings in the Dharma Realm, as the Buddhas before addressed themselves to “all you sentient beings.” We must realize that the Bodhisattvas like Manjushri and the Arhats like

Mahakashyapa are also included among those to whom this command is given.

Know then that in the midst of this evil world of the Five Corruptions, I am able to carry out this difficult task, attain Supreme, Perfect Enlightenment, and expound the Pure Land teaching, which is so hard for beings in all worlds to believe. This is indeed most difficult!

The single practice of faith, vows, and reciting the Buddha-name is not for the purpose of mundane benefits; it can effect the complete transformation of the world of the Five Corruptions. Only through faith can we enter this realm; mere thinking cannot get us to it.

If it were not for our fundamental teacher Sakyamuni Buddha entering into our evil world, showing the attainment of enlightenment, and using his great wisdom and great compassion to reveal this, practice this, and teach this, how would sentient beings have received this message?

We live amidst the corruption of the age, and we are certainly imprisoned by our time, and harried by suffering.

We live amidst the corruption of views, and we are certainly enmeshed in misguided knowledge, and deluded by false teachers.

We live amidst the corruption of afflictions, and we are certainly ensnared by craving and desire, and burdened by bad karma.

We live amidst the corruption of sentient beings, and we certainly rest complacently in stinking filth, without being aware of it; we are willing to stay degraded and weak, without exerting ourselves to rise any higher.

We live amidst the corruption of life, and we are certainly swallowed up by impermanence, with our lives flashing by too quickly for us to cope.

If we do not deeply understand the severe difficulties we are facing, if we think that there is some other method besides Pure Land practice that can extricate us from the Five Corruptions, we are lost in a welter of empty arguments inside a burning house.

Only if we deeply realize the seriousness of the difficulties we are facing will we be willing to eradicate our dishonest attitudes, and value Pure Land practice for the treasure it is. This is why our teacher Sakyamuni Buddha went to such lengths to explain to us what a dire situation we are in and make us realize the implications.

Finally the sutra reaches its conclusion

When Buddha finished preaching this scripture, Shariputra and all the monks, gods, humans, Asuras and others who had been listening, having heard what the Buddha said, rejoiced and faithfully accepted it. They all bowed in homage and departed.

The Pure Land teaching is inconceivable. It is difficult to believe in and difficult to understand; no one could have asked Buddha about it. But Buddha in his wisdom discerned the dynamics of the situation and realized that the circumstances were ripe for sentient beings to become enlightened. Thus he expounded the Pure Land teaching without being asked, to enable sentient beings to benefit by hearing the truth, to benefit by helping others and doing good, to benefit by shunning evil, and to benefit by experiencing the supreme truth.

Buddha's Pure Land teaching was like timely rain, and thus his listeners "rejoiced and faithfully accepted it."

“Rejoiced” means they felt delight of the body and mind.

“Faithfully” means they had no doubts or ambivalence.

“Accepted it” means they took it in and would never forget it. The phrase “they all bowed in homage” signifies that they were moved by the Buddha’s great benevolence, and entrusted themselves to him. Their departure signifies that they went on to practice consistently according to what Buddha had taught them, and never turned back.

AFTERWORD

The sutra says: “In the Dharma-Ending Age, hundreds of millions of people will cultivate Buddhist practices, but there will rarely be even one who attains enlightenment. They will only find salvation if they rely on reciting the Buddha-name.”

Alas! Our contemporary age is precisely the time of which the sutra is speaking. If we abandon this inconceivably powerful method of reciting the Buddha-name, how can we become pure?

When I first left home and became a monk, I prided myself on being a follower of Zen, and I looked down on the sutras. I wrongly imagined that reciting the Buddha-name was an adaptation of Buddhism suited for those of average and below average capacities.

Later on, due to a grave illness, I developed the aspiration to go to Amitabha’s Pure Land. After I studied various Pure Land writings, like the commentaries Miao-tsung and Yuan-chung as well as the Commentary on the Amitabha Sutra by Chu-hung, I finally came to realize that the Buddha-Recitation Samadhi is truly the supreme jewel. Only then did I become utterly focused on reciting the Buddha-name -- wild horses couldn’t drag me away from it.

A friend of mine who was a long-time Pure Land practitioner wanted to make the great meaning of the Amitabha Sutra clearly apparent in straightforward language, so he asked me to set forth an explanation of the essentials of the sutra. My wish is to enable all sentient beings in the world to be born together in the Pure Land. I could not refuse to serve a good cause, so I set to work writing this commentary in late autumn, 1647, and completed the draft nine days later.

My hope is that every line and every word of this commentary will serve as “life provisions” for Pure Land practitioners, and that everyone who reads or hears about it will progress to the level where there is no falling back. May those who have faith in it and those who are in doubt about it both plant seeds of enlightenment. May those who praise it and those who slander it alike reach liberation

I hope that this commentary is accepted and approved by all Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. I hope my fellow students and friends will be happy with this work and grant me their protection.

Written by Ou-i, a man of the Path, age 49

THE END

