

What Kind of Buddha Is Amitabha?

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Dear Dharma masters and fellow practitioners: *Namo Amitabha Buddha!*

I come from Taiwan. I was born and raised there, and I speak the *Minnan* dialect. I have long wanted to visit Xiamen, as my ancestors lived around the area between Zhangzhou and Xiamen in Fujian Province. Today I am able to return to my ancestral homeland. Though my emotions are mixed, I am deeply touched!

More than half the audience here, I think, can understand *Minnan* dialect. Today I hope we can use it to discuss the Dharma, our common interest, in an intimate, relaxed and lively manner.

The Buddha's teachings are vast in scope, consisting of the so-called 84,000 – or even countless – schools. As the contents of these teachings are so rich, ordinary people find them difficult to understand. After the Dharma spread into China, the lineage masters classified them into eight major schools. Of the eight, the most popular, resilient and durable is the Pure Land school.

The Pure Land school teaches the recitation of "*Namo Amitabha Buddha.*" Though many people do not know the doctrines of Buddhism, they are acquainted with the term "Amitabha Buddha." When they meet a monastic, they will say, "Amitabha Buddha." Even non-Buddhists, on encountering a Dharma-learner or an assembly of monks, might make a mental association with Amitabha Buddha. Thus the phrase "*Namo Amitabha Buddha*" is quite well known within and outside Buddhist circles.

Even so, what kind of Buddha is Amitabha? Today I will discuss the issue from two perspectives – the phenomenal (practical) and the noumenal (theoretical):

- **Firstly, Amitabha Buddha is a Buddha who has fulfilled his Fundamental Vow.**
- **Secondly, Amitabha Buddha is a Buddha who delivers sentient beings from suffering.**
- **Thirdly, Amitabha Buddha is a Buddha whose light embraces (reciters of his name).**
- **Fourthly, Amitabha Buddha is a Buddha who receives (reciters) as they are about to die.**

First, ***Amitabha Buddha is a Buddha who has fulfilled his Fundamental Vow.*** Amitabha is able to become *Namo Amitabha Buddha* because of his Fundamental Vow.

If Amitabha had not undertaken his Fundamental Vow, this great Buddha, who can deliver us all, would not exist. Of course, all who achieve Buddhahood have their own fundamental vows, but Amitabha's Fundamental Vow is different from theirs. It contains what they do not have and surpasses the vows of the Buddhas of the ten directions. That's why, after Amitabha achieved Buddhahood, the power he attained from accomplishing his Fundamental Vow was extraordinarily splendid, vast and profound.

There are two kinds of fundamental vow, a general one and a specific one. The word "fundamental" also has a two-fold meaning: One is fundamental in "cause" – relating to the causal ground, where the practitioner practices – and the other is fundamental in the "root," or underlying, sense. Let's now explain briefly the meaning of "fundamental vow."

Every Buddha, before attaining Buddhahood, must undertake the Four Great Vows. Therefore Buddhists daily recite the "Verse of Penitence" before the Buddha, repenting our karmic obstructions and resolving at the same time to achieve *bodhicitta* (gaining Buddhahood to save beings). Vowing to attain *bodhicitta* is actually to recite the *gatha* of the Four Great Vows:

*I vow to deliver the innumerable sentient beings,
I vow to terminate the endless afflictions
I vow to learn the countless Dharma teachings,
I vow to accomplish the supreme path of the Buddha.*

These are resolutions common to all Buddhas. Thus the Four Great Vows are general vows, applicable to every single Bodhisattva and Buddha.

Specific vows, however, are all different. For instance, Shakyamuni Buddha made 500 vows and Bhaisajyaguru (Medicine) Buddha 12, while Amitabha Buddha undertook his 48 Great Vows.

In the *Infinite Life Sutra*, Amitabha Buddha said, "**I undertook transcendent vows.**" That means the vows he originally undertook surpassed those of the other Buddhas, containing substance that theirs did not have. When he introduced Amitabha, Shakyamuni Buddha also said, "**his vows exceeded all Buddhas'.**" In other words, Amitabha's 48 Vows transcended those of the Buddhas in the ten directions.

How long did it take for Amitabha Buddha to make those vows, according to the *Infinite Life Sutra*? Says the scripture, ***“For fully five kalpas, he reflected deeply and decided on the practices to establish his Buddha realm.”*** Amitabha Buddha carefully considered and planned how he could simply and easily deliver all sentient beings, and enable them to gain Buddhahood expeditiously after they had arrived in the Land of Bliss. To achieve those goals, Amitabha engaged in five full *kalpas* of unceasing, meticulous reflection.

The vows would be empty if he did not continue to accumulate merit by practicing the Six Paramitas and myriad virtuous deeds, and learning the innumerable Dharma teachings. How long did Amitabha Buddha take to amass such merit and virtues? ***“Over inconceivable, countless eons, he cultivated and accumulated the incalculable virtuous practices of the Bodhisattvas,”*** notes the sutra. So it required unfathomable, countless eons of continual accrual of merit and virtues.

In the original Chinese, “countless eons” is *zhaozai yongjie*. “Zhao” and “zai” are very large numbers. While *zhao* is countable, *zai* is just about the biggest among the traditional Chinese numbers. Added to *zhaozai* is “*yong*,” which makes the duration longer still. *Yong* means forever, transcending time. “*Jie*,” or *kalpa*, is an astronomical figure, though it is still measurable. But when *zhaozai yongjie* is preceded by “inconceivable,” the result becomes immeasurable. That’s because “inconceivable” means something that cannot be described, compared or imagined. Amitabha Buddha took this much time to amass the incalculable virtuous practices of the Bodhisattvas so as to accomplish his 48 Great Vows completely.

During this lengthy period, other Buddhas practiced in their causal grounds, achieved Buddhahood in the accomplishment grounds, returned to save beings, and entered nirvana. But Amitabha was still practicing, accumulating merit and virtues on behalf of sentient beings. Why did it require so much time to reflect on the 48 Great Vows? And why did it take so long to complete them? Because among the 48 is a most important, key vow – a fundamental resolution that must be thoroughly accomplished.

In terms of the causal ground, each of the 48 Vows can be considered a casual vow. But one among them is the most basic: the 18th. Why do we always refer to the 18th Vow when we speak of Amitabha’s Fundamental Vow in the Pure Land school? Because if there were no 18th Vow, the 48 Great Vows would be neither invaluable nor

splendid. It is only because of the 18th Vow that the value of Amitabha Buddha's 48 Great Vows is revealed.

For the 18th Vow is the vow that delivers all sentient beings. The range of beings in the ten directions is vast, boundless. It includes living beings in the Ten Dharma Realms – namely, the four sacred realms (Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Pratyekabuddhas and Sravakas) and the six realms for ordinary beings (celestial beings, asuras, humans, animals, hungry ghosts and hell beings). The beings in the four sacred Dharma realms have already transcended the cycle of rebirth pertaining to the Three Domains and Six Realms. Those in the other six are still undergoing such rebirth.

Among the Ten Dharma Realms, all beings in the nine realms other than that of Buddhas are targets of deliverance by Amitabha Buddha. These are the beings in the ten directions to be saved under the 18th Vow.

The 18th Vow is the foundation of Pure Land teaching. It is not only Amitabha's Fundamental Vow but the basic intent of all Buddhas. It is also advocated, expounded and supported by the Buddhas of the ten directions. The *Infinite Life Sutra* says:

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

Shakyamuni Buddha said that the 18th Vow's teaching of deliverance by Amitabha Buddha should be preserved forever in our universe. Even when the previous Buddha had entered nirvana and the next Buddha had not been born in our world, this teaching should be passed on indefinitely.

There are only 36 characters in the Chinese text of the 18th Vow. We should try to memorize the text if we can, because it is the foundation of our school of teaching and practice. It can be said to be the life of Amitabha Buddha, as well as ours. It was because of the 18th Vow that Bhikku Dharmakara could become Amitabha Buddha. And it is due to the 18th Vow that we can be freed from the cycle of rebirth in this very lifetime.

Let's press our palms together and respectfully recite the 18th Vow:

If, when I achieve Buddhahood, sentient beings of the ten directions who sincerely and joyfully entrust themselves to me,

wish to be reborn in my land and recite my name, even ten times, should fail to be born there, may I not attain perfect enlightenment. Excepted are those who commit the five gravest transgressions or slander the correct Dharma.

Release your palms, please.

These words are mainly a declaration by Amitabha Buddha that the purpose of his achievement of Buddhahood is to deliver all sentient beings to the Land of Bliss. So long as any being wishes to be reborn there and exclusively recites the Great Name of a Myriad Virtues, *Namo Amitabha Buddha*, Amitabha would assuredly enable him or her to be born there. If Amitabha were unable to do this, he says, he would not become a Buddha. In other words, if there were but a single being who could not thus be reborn, it means Amitabha's power is still insufficient and that he is not yet qualified to become a Buddha. He would need to continue his practice and accumulation of merit and virtues, until his power is enough to enable all beings who recite his name to be born in the Pure Land. Then and only then would he become a Buddha.

It is easier to become other Buddhas, for they require only three great *asamkhyeya-kalpas* to attain supreme enlightenment. The process is known as "cultivating blessings and wisdom for three great *asamkhyeya-kalpas*, and perfecting the marks and physical characteristics of a Buddha for another 100 *kalpas*."

To gain Buddhahood, however, Amitabha took countless eons, accumulating the incalculable virtuous practices of the Bodhisattvas. It required such a long time because Amitabha Buddha must be able to save all beings in a convenient and easy manner.

Amitabha's goal is to deliver "sentient beings in the ten directions." Ordinary beings in our Saha world, whose greed, anger and delusion are especially powerful and whose negative karma is unusually heavy, are all targets of Amitabha's deliverance. Sentient beings in the ten directions include sacred as well as ordinary beings. The latter encompass both good and evil beings, including even beings in Avici Hell.

This indicates that Amitabha Buddha's deliverance does not discriminate, and applies on a basis of equality. Sacred or ordinary beings, good or bad persons, monastics or householders, practitioners or non-practitioners, people who are pure or impure of mind – all are targets of Amitabha's deliverance. If any being wishes to be reborn in the

Land of Bliss and recites his name, Amitabha Buddha will enable him or her to be born there without fail.

What then are the conditions for deliverance? They are very simple, and stated in the 18th Vow: Those ***“who sincerely and joyfully entrust themselves to me, wish to be reborn in my land and recite my name, even ten times,”*** can be born there.

The “sincerely” in “sincerely and joyfully entrust” means with a devout, truthful heart. To be reborn in the Land of Bliss, we must be inwardly sincere. We must not merely say we want rebirth, but actually not wish it, preferring to return and enjoy life as a human being. That is not being sincere. Therefore “sincerely” includes “joyfully entrusting,” “wishing to be reborn” in the Land of Bliss and “reciting [Amitabha’s] name, even ten times.”

We should be genuine in everything we do. If we weren’t sincere in our interactions with others, we would be hypocrites and dissemblers, and our relationships would be meaningless and without value. When it comes to such important matters as seeking rebirth in the Pure Land and release from the cycle of rebirth, how could we not be sincere?

Simply speaking, Amitabha Buddha’s conditions for delivering us are that we “sincerely and joyfully entrust” ourselves to him, “wish to be reborn” in his land, and “recite [his] name, even ten times.” “Sincerely” encompasses “joyfully entrust themselves to me, wish to be reborn in my land and recite my name, even ten times.” “Joyfully entrust” represents faith. “Wish to be reborn in my land” – wanting rebirth in the Pure Land – signifies aspiration. And “recite my name, even ten times” is practice.

Therefore “joyfully entrust” has the meaning of “faith in, and aspiration to, rebirth.” To that add “recite my name, even ten times” and we have “faith, aspiration and practice.” Thus we can see that the 18th Vow includes the perfect and complete Pure Land requirement of “faith, aspiration and practice.” And “sincerely” runs through faith, aspiration and practice.

In greater detail, “sincerely” means with a genuine heart. When we say we have faith in the Land of Bliss and in Amitabha Buddha, we must truly believe. If we hear that the Pure Land and Amitabha exist but don’t really believe, harboring question marks in our minds, that is not believing “sincerely.” So when we say we believe in the existence

of the Land of Bliss and of Amitabha Buddha, in Amitabha's deliverance, in the Pure Land as our ultimate home, we must have true and genuine faith.

From Amitabha's perspective, he is calling out to us: "You must gain rebirth in my Land of Bliss." From our viewpoint, we say: "We wish to be reborn in the Land of Bliss." As Amitabha Buddha genuinely wants to deliver us to the Land of Bliss, we must also wish truly to be reborn there, and not merely follow others in reciting a dedication *gatha*.

"Recite my name, even ten times" is to recite, from now on, the name of Amitabha for one day if we have only a day to live, for two days if we have two days, for seven days if we have seven days left. If our life ends in seven days, we will then be reborn in the Land of Bliss. If our life is extended to eight days, we recite for eight days. And if it is prolonged to eight years or 80 years, we recite "*Namo Amitabha Buddha*" for those remaining years of our lives. We do not need to dedicate merit from the practices of other schools, as we already have all the merit and virtues needed for immediate rebirth.

The 18th Vow is about "faith, aspiration and practice." Faith refers to "sincerely and joyfully entrust themselves to me." What about "wish to be reborn in my land"? From the perspective of Amitabha, he is always calling out to us, urging us to let him deliver us to the Land of Bliss. This is "wish to be reborn in my land," in Amitabha's Buddha-mind. With reference to us sentient beings, it would be "wish to be reborn in his land" – that is, to heed Amitabha's call and want rebirth in the Western Pure Land. This is the meaning of "aspiration." And "practice" is to "recite my name, even ten times." That is, to recite *Namo Amitabha Buddha* exclusively for the rest of our lives.

Although Amitabha Buddha laid out the preconditions for our deliverance, in fact there are virtually no conditions. That's because all we need do is to have faith in and accept Amitabha's deliverance, to want rebirth in the Land of Bliss, and to recite his name according to the amount of time we have. During our recitation, it matters not whether we feel vexed, or have stray or deluded thoughts. Amitabha's requirements are merely these, and such conditions are really like having none at all. As long as we wish to be reborn in the Pure Land, that is enough. We need not pay any money, nor have we anything to lose.

Amitabha-recitation is the simplest thing. If we can speak, we can recite. We can recite the way we talk. For us, Amitabha-recitation and aspiration to rebirth are very simple and easy. They require no money and there is no risk of loss. In particular, we have fewer stray or deluded thoughts, as well as vexations, during Amitabha-recitation. Reciting like this makes us feel even more at ease, right?

[The assembly: "Yes."]

And if we are vexed, or suffering from illness or depression, recitation gradually induces an inner peace, without our being conscious of it. In this respect, the name that Amitabha Buddha asks us to recite gives us only benefits, and no harm, correct?

[The assembly: "Yes."]

Aspiration to rebirth is a state of mind, a yearning to be reborn in the Land of Bliss. It requires no outlay of time, money or toil. So there is nothing to lose. There are only benefits, and no detriments, to being reborn in the Pure Land. We can think in terms of laying down a bet: Though I don't wholly believe in the Land of Bliss and am not sure about its existence, I can still aspire to rebirth there. Why? If there turns out to be no reincarnation and no Land of Bliss, I still don't lose anything at all! But if rebirth and the Pure Land do exist, I would have made a gain at no cost. And the magnitude of the gain would be incalculable, for it is the greatest source of virtue and blessings in the universe.

That's because if there really is a Land of Bliss, we would certainly become Buddhas there and be freed from repeated reincarnation in the Three Domains and Six Realms. We would have the same infinite lifespan, light, wisdom and compassion as Amitabha Buddha. We would share Amitabha's 48 Vows, and be able to split our persons and travel to countless worlds in the ten directions to deliver sentient beings. What great gains we would have reaped from our aspiration to rebirth!

We may be ordinary beings with weak wills, foolish delusions and abundant karmic afflictions. But if we had this wish to be reborn in the Land of Bliss, it would be a great resolution. Why? Because such an aspiration can lead to our rebirth and accomplishment of Buddhahood. Without this wish, we would continue to reincarnate in the Six Realms. Without this aspiration, we would lose this prodigious source of virtue and blessings.

Moreover, our belief in Amitabha's deliverance is "great faith," faith that is unfathomable. Why? Amitabha Buddha has inconceivable merit and virtues. If we can believe and accept, isn't this an inconceivable faith?

We believe that Kinmen lies across the Taiwan Strait, and beyond it is the island of Taiwan. Though we have neither seen, nor been to, those places, we believe that Kinmen and Taiwan exist. This also is a kind of true faith. But such faith has little value, because whether we believe or not, it has no effect on our liberation from the cycle of rebirth. This faith is only a mundane belief of ordinary beings.

However, it is different if we believe in Amitabha's deliverance and the Land of Bliss as our ultimate harbor. Both cases involve faith, but the value is not the same because the substance is different. Believing in Amitabha's deliverance and the Land of Bliss as our final haven can allow us to escape reincarnation in the Three Domains and Six Realms, and achieve Buddhahood. Isn't this the supreme faith?

It's the same with "practice." If we open our mouths to recite Amitabha's name or hold *Namo Amitabha Buddha* in our minds, that would be "great practice." The resulting merit is greater than from upholding the Five Precepts or performing the Ten Good Actions. The Five Precepts only enable us to be reborn as humans, while the Ten Good Actions lead to rebirth as celestial beings. Such accomplishments are still insubstantial, distorted, flawed and defiled. Says the *Commentary on the Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land*: **"In the human and celestial realms, both causes and effects relating to virtuous actions and their consequences are distorted and unreal. They are therefore known as insubstantial merit."** The reason is that they are performed amid rebirth in the Six Realms.

However, "*Namo Amitabha Buddha*" is pure, substantial and of great benefit, possessing supreme, inconceivable merit and virtues. Even if we recite this pure, substantial and supreme phrase with our defiled minds and impure mouths, it would still be "great practice," entirely unflawed.

That is why the Pure Land school is called "the Easy Path." It is easy because it is –

- 1) **Easy to understand.** It isn't complicated. Its principles are very plain, not abstruse or difficult. Upon hearing them, we comprehend immediately.
- 2) **Simple.** By merely reciting *Namo Amitabha Buddha*, we acquire right away the perfect, complete merit and virtues required for rebirth. We are 100%

assured of rebirth in the Land of Bliss. We do not need the merit from reciting many sutras, or from undertaking mountain pilgrimages and penitence rites, or from intensive study of the scriptures, to be reborn. From now until we die, reciting *Namo Amitabha Buddha* alone is enough.

- 3) **Easy to practice.** Whether we are young or old, smart or dull, whether we have studied the scriptures thoroughly or not – all of us can perform it. Thus it is “easy to practice.” If you can do it and they can do it, but a small number cannot, it could not be called “the Easy Path.” It is the Easy Path only if everyone can practice it and gain rebirth in the Land of Bliss, be they young or old, wise or foolish, capable or incapable of self-cultivation, learned or without learning, good or evil. To gain Buddhahood by practicing the other schools is known as “the Difficult Path.” The degree of difficulty is extreme. But if we wish to be reborn in the Land of Bliss, it is as easy as turning our palms over. Everybody can do it.
- 4) **Induces ease of mind.** While practicing this teaching, we are relaxed and at ease. It is not arduous at all. In this respect, it is completely different from the Difficult Path, which relies on self-power.

Therefore Bodhisattva Nagarjuna classified all Dharma schools into two groups, one being “the Difficult Path” and the other “the Easy Path.” The Easy Path refers to deliverance according to the 18th Vow of Amitabha Buddha. All others schools and their practices are regarded as the Difficult Path.

To help us understand the difference between the two paths, Nagarjuna drew an analogy. The Difficult Path, he said, was like “walking,” and the Easy Path was like “sailing.” Walking was strenuous, he added, while sailing was relaxing and enjoyable. In ancient times, transportation consisted of boats and carts drawn by oxen or horses. It wasn’t like today, when we have planes, trains and buses. If we needed to go on foot to a faraway place, those who were old or unhealthy wouldn’t be able to get there. Even if we were healthy, or happened to be a world-champion runner, we still might not make it. Why? Because we must climb mountains and cross rivers; we might also encounter bandits. We could be tested by hunger, cold and fatigue. We might collapse a fraction of the way into our journey.

That is like relying on our own abilities to practice, hoping to transcend the cycle of rebirth in the Three Domains and Six Realms and to reach the realm of Buddhas. It is

very difficult. But if we depend on the deliverance of Amitabha Buddha, the journey would be comfortable and reassuring. Thus the Easy Path is a teaching and practice that is simple and joyful.

Why is Amitabha-recitation “the Easy Path”? It is entirely because of the support from the power generated by Amitabha’s Fundamental Vow. We should know that Amitabha Buddha resolved that “so long as sentient beings want rebirth in the Pure Land of Amitabha and recite his name exclusively, [he] will enable them to be born there without fail.”

That’s why Amitabha Buddha took countless eons to accumulate the merit and virtues required for our rebirth in the Land of Bliss, for our rapid attainment of Buddhahood there, and to repay our karmic debts from previous lifetimes. Only when all this merit was accomplished did he gain Buddhahood and become *Namo Amitabha Buddha*. Therefore “*Namo Amitabha Buddha*” naturally contains all the myriad practices, good actions and virtues that Amitabha achieved over countless eons. The name also comprises thoroughly the merit and virtues of innumerable *dharani*. Thus it is known as the “Great Name of a Myriad Virtues.”

The word “myriad” in the Name of a Myriad Virtues is not a specific number. It means “complete, perfect, transcendent” and refers to the merit and virtues needed for rebirth. The name is wholly complete, entirely perfect and can free us from rebirth in the Three Domains and Six Realms. Once we arrive in the Land of Bliss, we would rise above the Bodhisattvas and achieve Buddhahood quickly.

Because Amitabha Buddha fulfilled his Fundamental Vow, he completed the merit and virtues necessary for our rebirth. What did Amitabha’s achievement of Buddhahood accomplish? Our assured rebirth in the Pure Land. If Amitabha had not become a Buddha, we would have no credentials, in terms of merit and virtues, for rebirth. Since Amitabha did gain Buddhahood, we now have his name to recite. By doing so, we would at once possess the qualifications required for rebirth.

At this point, do we understand what kind of Buddha Amitabha is? He is a Buddha whose Fundamental Vow has been accomplished! Having fulfilled his Vow, he then dedicates and gives to us all the merit and virtues he attained while doing so. And because the reason Amitabha became a Buddha is so that we can attain rebirth and Buddhahood, all his accumulated merit and virtues become ours.

There is a saying: “The enlightenment of the achievement ground becomes the essence of the causal ground. Like an ocean the cause encompasses all the achievements, while the achievements permeate the origins of the cause.” This means that Amitabha’s perfect enlightenment is the cause of our rebirth in the Land of Bliss: He turns the merit and virtues he gained while attaining Buddhahood in the achievement ground, into the merit we ordinary beings need to be reborn in the Pure Land and become Buddhas. Conversely, the cause of our rebirth is the achievement of Amitabha’s enlightenment. So Amitabha’s attainment of Buddhahood means our rebirth, and our rebirth signifies Amitabha’s gaining of Buddhahood.

If we could not be reborn, Amitabha would not be able to become a Buddha. Since Amitabha has achieved Buddhahood, it means we can certainly be reborn in the Pure Land by reciting his name. Thus our rebirth and Amitabha’s attainment of Buddhahood are forever bound together, inseparable.

Our Pure Land teaching therefore flows “from the achievement to the cause,” not “from the cause to the achievement.” In the latter case, ordinary beings practice, going from the Ten Faiths to the Ten Abidings, Ten Actions, Ten Dedications, Ten Stages and then Buddhahood. They progress step by step, ascending one stage at a time. In our school, however, “the enlightenment of the achievement ground becomes the essence of the causal ground.” The merit and virtues from Amitabha’s enlightenment become the causative factors of our rebirth and attainment of Buddhahood. So we do not need to practice the Ten Faiths, Ten Abidings, Ten Actions, Ten Dedications or Ten Stages. We can transcend all the stages by gaining rebirth and Buddhahood.

For that reason, “the Easy Path” is also known as the school of “horizontal transcendence.” In Taipei there is a building that’s 101 stories high. If we climbed each story to the top, it would take a very long time and arduous effort. But if we took an express elevator, we would arrive at the summit very quickly and easily.

Why is Pure Land teaching and practice “the Easy Path,” characterized by “lateral transcendence”? The answer also lies in Amitabha’s Fundamental Vow. If Amitabha Buddha did not fulfill his Fundamental Vow, none of the conditions would obtain. But once it was accomplished all the requirements are present. We are then qualified to be reborn in the Pure Land and can anticipate becoming Buddhas.

Every time someone gains Buddhahood, it is a rare and precious event. But it may not be directly or closely related to us, because these Buddhas did not make a resolution like the 18th Vow for our sake. Nor did they, on our behalf, accumulate over countless eons the incalculably meritorious Bodhisattva virtues before attaining Buddhahood.

Amitabha Buddha is not the same. His achievement of Buddhahood is predicated on our rebirth in the Land of Bliss. Indeed, he has wagered his very life as Amitabha Buddha on our rebirth! Amitabha Buddha can come into being only if he is able to bring about our rebirth. Thus his achievement of Buddhahood was for our sake.

So what kind of Buddha is Amitabha? First of all, he is a Buddha who has fulfilled his Fundamental Vow.

Secondly, ***Amitabha Buddha is a Buddha who delivers sentient beings from suffering.*** As I just said, Amitabha became a Buddha in order to deliver sentient beings in the ten directions. And we beings can be saved because of his achievement of Buddhahood. Living beings may ask, “Can we really be delivered? When will the deliverance begin?” The answers depend on whether Amitabha has gained Buddhahood, and when. If he had not yet become a Buddha, his name would not exist for us to recite, and there would be no Land of Bliss where we can be reborn and attain Buddhahood.

May I ask: Has Amitabha become a Buddha?

[The assembly: “Yes, he has.”]

How long has he been a Buddha?

[The assembly: “Ten *kalpas*.”]

Correct! It has been ten *kalpas* already. For ten *kalpas*, Amitabha Buddha has been calling out to us, watching over us, protecting us, waiting for us. For ten *kalpas*, Amitabha has been beseeching us: Ordinary beings, good and evil! You must come and be born in my Land of Bliss. I am waiting for you here!

Amitabha has been calling out to us all along. He even pressed his palms together to implore us, saying: All sentient beings are my sole children. You wander among the Three Domains and Six Realms, suffering from reincarnation therein. As your parent, I cannot bear this. My children, please hurry home so that you will find peace and

happiness! I have already prepared all the sustenance you will need for the journey. Long ago I took care of the necessary expenses and mode of transport for your return. So long as you board it, you will have all you need to eat and wear. It will take you safely to your original home of bliss.

For ten *kalpas*, Amitabha Buddha has thus been exhorting us.

How did Amitabha resolve to become a Buddha who can easily deliver beings in the ten directions? The relevant factors can be found in his 48 Vows. How could he enable sentient beings to be easily, safely and comfortably reborn in the Land of Bliss? The answer is also in the 48 Vows. Each and every one of Amitabha's Vows was made to save beings. If there were a single Vow that hadn't been undertaken for the sake of beings, it would be meaningless and Amitabha would discard it. Thus Amitabha is a Buddha who delivers sentient beings.

Amitabha Buddha did not lay down any conditions for saving beings. If he did, it is merely that we "wish to be reborn" in the Pure Land and "recite his name." No matter how splendid and pure is the Land of Bliss, how exceedingly compassionate is Amitabha Buddha and how great is the power of his Vows, Amitabha would have no relationship with us if we do not want rebirth in the Pure Land. We would continue to reincarnate forever within the Six Realms.

So we must first aspire to be reborn in the Land of Bliss, then recite Amitabha's name exclusively. That would be enough. Such a person would assuredly be reborn, as Amitabha has accomplished his Vows. That's why Master Shandao said, **"If sentient beings recite his name, they will certainly be reborn in the Land of Bliss."**

Sentient beings in the ten directions include everyone. Sacred and ordinary beings, good and evil persons, householders and monastics, those capable and incapable of practicing, the wise and the foolish – so long as they recite "*Namo Amitabha Buddha*," they will definitely be reborn. Why? Because Amitabha has accomplished his Fundamental Vow. Said Master Shandao, **"Today Amitabha is before us, having achieved Buddhahood. We should know that his Fundamental Vow has been unequivocally fulfilled."** We should know that Amitabha's Fundamental Vow is substantive and weighty, because he has achieved Buddhahood!

Every vow made by Amitabha was for the sake of sentient beings. As long as we wish to be delivered, want rebirth in the Land of Bliss and recite his name exclusively,

we will be saved by Amitabha Buddha. For his name is like a big ship. We sentient beings bob up and down in the sea of suffering within the Six Realms. If we wish to be reborn in the Land of Bliss and recite exclusively the name of Amitabha, it is like boarding the vessel of Amitabha's great Vow. As soon as the time comes – when their worldly lives end – those who have boarded this ship will arrive on the other shore, in the Land of Bliss.

Though our lives haven't ended and we are still suffering in the Six Realms, we are destined not to sink again as we have already boarded the ship of Amitabha's great Vow. In our world, however luxurious a liner we sail on, we could still face danger. The ship of Amitabha's great Vow, however, will never be threatened because it was built, and is piloted, by him. Its crew and attendants are the sacred assembly from the Land of Bliss. That's why it will certainly arrive on the opposite shore, with no risk. This is entirely due to the deliverance of Amitabha Buddha.

Simply speaking, if we merely recite Amitabha's name the task of our rebirth will already be accomplished. We would no longer be ordinary beings undergoing reincarnation in the Six Realms, but members of the Pure Land's sacred assembly.

Whether we can be reborn depends not on us but on Amitabha Buddha. Consider the case of a child who wanders around, begging for sustenance. He has no food, clothes or home. One day someone recognizes him as the king's only son, the crown prince. He suddenly takes on noble status. Thenceforth he is no longer an itinerant beggar, but the high and mighty crown prince.

As Master Yinguang said, **“If our minds are firmly set on liberation from life and death, and we can believe [in this teaching] without a shred of doubt, though we still live in this Saha world, we are long-term residents no more. Though we haven't yet been born in the Land of Bliss, we are already its guests.”**

As long as our wish for rebirth does not change and our Amitabha-recitation is exclusive, not mixed, we need not wait until we die or even for the future. Right away, we are no longer ordinary beings caught in the cycle of rebirth, but a part of the sacred assembly in the Land of Bliss.

Thirdly, ***Amitabha Buddha is a Buddha whose light embraces (reciters of his name).*** *Namo Amitabha Buddha* is also known as the “name of light.” For Amitabha Buddha is the embodiment of infinite light. As the *Amitabha Sutra* says, **“That**

Buddha's light is boundless, illuminating the lands of the ten directions without obstruction. This is why he is called Amitabha.

The passage means that this Buddha possesses immeasurable light, which fills the entire cosmos. Moreover, his light cannot be impeded by anything – neither physical obstacles such as the sun, moon, stars, rivers and mountains, nor non-physical ones like our karmic obstructions, stemming from many lifetimes of greed, anger and delusion.

To sum up, at all times and in all places, Amitabha's light can easily and quickly fall on us, protecting and delivering us. Therefore Amitabha is a Buddha whose light embraces. "Light" refers to Amitabha's Buddha light. "Embraces" means that from this moment on, Amitabha does not let us out of his sight, all the time protecting us and waiting for us. When we die, he guides us to the Land of Bliss.

What is the embrace of Amitabha's light like? When we sleep at night, mosquitoes bite us. But if we are inside a mosquito net, they could not do so. What kind of mosquitoes bite us when we are in the Three Domains and Six Realms? There are our enemies and karmic debtors, who want to collect the debts. There are demons and beings of other faiths, who prevent us from freeing ourselves from the rebirth in the Six Realms. So long as we recite the name of Amitabha Buddha, we would always be protected by the mosquito net of Amitabha's light. Whatever their size, the mosquitoes would not be able to bite us.

It is also like this glass. Water that is in the glass will not flow out; it stays in the glass indefinitely. A reciter is always within the glass of Amitabha's light. He or she will never again be reborn in the Three Domains and Six Realms. For this is a Buddha whose light embraces.

Therefore a person who wants to be reborn in the Land of Bliss and recites Amitabha's name exclusively will, from the moment he or she develops faith in Amitabha and starts reciting, be embraced all life long by Amitabha's light. Protected by Amitabha Buddha, this person will not be troubled by enemies and karmic debtors, obstructed by demons and beings of other faiths, or hurt by disasters. Amitabha's name has these functions as a matter of course; we need not make any entreaties. When we light a fire, it naturally burns. If we pour water, it flows downward automatically. These are natural properties. We do not need to understand the principles behind them, or

beseech some power to make them happen. In terms of benefits in the present life, Amitabha-recitation can eliminate misfortunes, increase blessings and boost longevity.

Our bodies emit light, whose intensity varies with our thoughts and blessings. Positive thoughts will produce a strong, auspicious light. Malevolent thoughts will bring forth a muddied, malicious light. The greater our blessings, the more powerful the light we emit. The fewer our blessings, the weaker the light. If we are filial towards our parents, respect and serve our teachers and elders, and venerate the Three Gems, the light we give off will be clearer and more extensive. And if we take a step further and recite Amitabha's name, our light can be said to fill the entire universe.

How are we able to radiate such a powerful light? Because Amitabha Buddha's light is infinite. Amitabha transformed all the merit and virtues he had accumulated into his name and dedicated it to us sentient beings. The name therefore contains all of his light. When we ordinary beings recite this name of light with our tiny minds, we merge with Amitabha Buddha and his light. The light from our bodies will follow Amitabha's infinite light to the farthest, boundless reaches of the universe.

Consider a drop of water. Though it is but a single drop, when poured into the ocean it becomes one with the ocean. This is why the body of every Amitabha-reciter emits the Buddha's light.

Once, a Dharma master went to the United States to propagate the Buddha's teachings. He led the assembly in Amitabha-recitation in a Dharma hall. After the service an American came up to him and exclaimed admiringly, "Master, dear Master! I am a student of special powers, and I was observing the reciters in the hall. Those who recited sincerely emitted a large body of light. It was so expansive that it just about enveloped the entire planet. However, the light from those who were not sincere was very weak, like successive flickers coming in and out of their mouths. After witnessing such an extraordinary scene, I started to study Buddhism."

A scripture says, "The person of an Amitabha-reciter is illuminated by light of 40 *li* [20 kilometers]." We may think that 40 *li* covers a large expanse. Compared with the earth, however, it is small – as the earth is tiny compared with the universe. Yet one who recites the name of Amitabha Buddha sincerely will emit enough light to encompass the earth.

Think of it this way: Are our mouths clean? There is a bad smell when we open our mouths. Even so, as soon as we open them to recite “*Namo Amitabha Buddha*,” light comes forth. When we recite his name, Amitabha Buddha goes in and out of our persons, emitting light. Invisible to ordinary people, it can be seen by devas and ghosts, as well as Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

Therefore so long as we recite Amitabha’s name, deities and ghosts will not obstruct us. Even if we have karmic conflicts with them, these can be resolved because of our recitation. Thenceforth, they will no longer ask for repayment of karmic debts. Moreover, our Amitabha-recitation can enable them to gain deliverance. So when we recite Amitabha’s name, we unconsciously deliver spirits of the deceased, as well as our ancestors. We are also providing protection to our descendants. Amitabha-recitation is truly the simplest and most splendid teaching of the Buddha!

For a reciter, nothing is more important than the name of Amitabha Buddha. It can be compared to our very lives. With the name, we have life; without it we don’t. Because without Amitabha’s name, we will appear before King Yama (lord of the underworld) for judgment after we die – a miserable fate indeed.

Fourthly, ***Amitabha Buddha is a Buddha who receives (reciters) as they are about to die.*** From the moment someone starts reciting his name, Amitabha provides him or her with the full and uninterrupted protection and care of his infinite light. When we are about to die, he will appear before us to welcome us to the Land of Bliss. As the *Amitabha Sutra* says, ***“When that person approaches the point of death, Amitabha Buddha and the sacred assembly will appear before him. When death comes, his mind will not be severely confused. He will at once gain rebirth in Amitabha Buddha’s Land of Bliss.”***

If a dying person has not normally recited Amitabha’s name, he would be flustered and confused, fearful of where he might end up after drawing his final breath. He would deeply regret having to leave behind his beloved family, all his achievements in this world, all his assets and his surroundings. Then his karmic enemies and debtors would come to demand repayment. The black and white officials of the underworld would haul him off in chains for trial and judgment. It would be agonizing, and he would be nervous, even terrified.

But Amitabha-reciters would not be afraid, because Amitabha Buddha would come in person to protect them and welcome them. He would arrive just before the dying person breathes her last. Able to see Amitabha clearly, she would rejoice and follow him, to be reborn in the Land of Bliss.

As long as we want to be born in the Pure Land and recite his name exclusively, Amitabha Buddha will receive us when the time comes. From now till the end of our lives, Amitabha will not abandon, forget or forsake us even for a moment. He will come to welcome us whether we are clear-headed at the time, or in a coma. In the latter case, it's only our sensory organs that have lost consciousness. It may seem to bystanders that the unconscious person is incapable of Amitabha-recitation, being unable to see, hear or move. But the person is clear in mind.

Someone who wishes to be reborn in the Land of Bliss can still, at this moment, invoke Amitabha Buddha. Moreover, when Amitabha Buddha arrives to receive her, each is fully aware of the other. So during our lifetime, we only need be responsible for reciting Amitabha's name. As for rebirth, Amitabha Buddha will, as a matter of course, take care of it in a complete and perfect manner, and lead us to the Land of Bliss.

It does not matter if a reciter cannot declaim Amitabha's name because of the torments of dying. His mind is at ease, thinking: "Amitabha Buddha will receive me when the time comes." An Amitabha-reciter will not be fearful or anxious on her deathbed; she will wait quietly for Amitabha's arrival. While doing so, it is enough that we relax and calmly recite: "*Namo Amitabha Buddha, Namō Amitabha Buddha, Namō Amitabha Buddha ...*" To sum up, Amitabha Buddha's arrival will fill the hearts of all reciters with comfort and hope.

Some people may worry, thinking: "What if I can't recite Amitabha's name because of my suffering as death approaches?" I tell you, it doesn't matter. Do not worry, because Amitabha Buddha knows your condition, as he has extensive special powers and abundant force of resolution. With his great compassion and wisdom, Amitabha is aware of each person's karmic obstructions as well as his or her condition as death nears. He knows if the individual can recite or not, and is conscious or not. Amitabha Buddha knows all this. He will neither abandon us nor fail to deliver us. When the time comes, he will assuredly arrive to receive us.

Therefore if we sincerely, truly want rebirth in the Land of Bliss, if we no longer engage in mixed practices and thoughts and recite "*Namo Amitabha Buddha*" exclusively, we will certainly be born there when we die. It does not matter whether we are conscious or not, or that we may not be able to recite because of our condition. We need only be responsible for reciting Amitabha's name during our regular lifetime. It is not important if we cannot recite because of illness as death approaches. We can just wait calmly for Amitabha Buddha to appear and deliver us. For we know that Amitabha is a Buddha whose light embraces reciters and delivers them as they are dying. When the time comes, he will certainly arrive to receive us.

Under such circumstances, Amitabha-reciters are always at ease, their hearts and minds calm. That's why this teaching is called "the Easy Path." It is a practice that is easy and joyful. Otherwise, sentient beings will continue to suffer without end.

If Amitabha Buddha did not envelop us in his light or receive us when we die, we would feel anxious even as we recite his name now. We might think, "Oh, no! Though I am reciting diligently now, what if I couldn't do so because of illness when I'm dying? What if I were comatose?" There's no need to worry, because Amitabha Buddha is always there, at all times and in all places, as he has great special powers. He knows our condition, and will protect and receive us in a timely manner.

Our school is one that attaches no pre-conditions. All we need do is to want rebirth in the Land of Bliss and recite "*Namo Amitabha Buddha*" exclusively. We do not undertake assorted practices and rely completely on Amitabha Buddha. That way, we will unquestionably achieve rebirth.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

QUESTION: I have two questions. The first: Our practice must fully embrace faith, aspiration and recitation. In your talk, you emphasized the Fundamental Vow of Amitabha Buddha. What standard must we achieve in our practice of Amitabha-recitation in order to gain rebirth?

If we only have aspiration but do not stress achievement in recitation, would we not be confused with the Fundamental Vow-based schools of Japan? Do we have

to recite until we attain *samadhi* (perfect concentration), continuous mental purity, or single-minded consistency in order to attain rebirth?

ANSWER: There are no requirements such as you mentioned. It's enough merely to recite "*Namo Amitabha Buddha.*"

Why is *Namo Amitabha Buddha* called the "Great Name of a Myriad Virtues"? Because the merit and virtues needed for the rebirth of all sentient beings in the ten directions are contained in the name of Amitabha Buddha. Of course, exclusive recitation doesn't mean reciting Amitabha's name casually or randomly. We should recite according to how much time we have.

For the aptitude of sentient beings in the ten directions is not the same. Some people have more time, others have less. Those with more time should recite more, while those with less can recite less. Some people are more cultured and good-natured; their minds are calmer. When reciting Amitabha's name, they naturally have fewer stray thoughts. Others have more stubborn personalities and their habit energy is stronger, so they will experience more mental distractions while reciting. But none of this matters. It is all right as long as they recite Amitabha's name. Amitabha Buddha knows that sentient beings are subject to such conditions.

Master Shandao said, "**To recite Amitabha's name single-mindedly and without variation, whether walking, standing, sitting or lying down, whether for long or short periods – that is the karma of assurance. It is so because it accords with Amitabha Buddha's vow.**" So it is all right if we just recite the name of Amitabha Buddha. We can recite whether we are walking or standing still, sitting or lying down, at whatever time, wherever we are, and whatever we may be doing. To do this is to be an Amitabha-reciter.

What is "great compassion"? It is to love without conditions. That's why in his 18th Vow, Amitabha Buddha only says "**recite my name, even ten times.**" He did not say we must attain a specific standard. If he did, some people would be able to achieve rebirth in the Pure Land while others would not.

So our school is not some Japanese Pure Land school. Our school of the Fundamental Vow teaches the 18th Vow of Amitabha Buddha. What does the 18th Vow say? It speaks only of Amitabha-recitation. Master Shandao said, "**Shakyamuni Buddha's underlying wish is none other than for beings to recite the name of**

Amitabha single-mindedly and exclusively.” The 18th Vow is called the Fundamental Vow. Thus “Amitabha-recitation, according to the Fundamental Vow” was taught and transmitted by Master Shandao.

What is the purpose of the Fundamental Vow? And what is the reason for Amitabha’s attainment of Buddhahood? The goal is that all sentient beings can be reborn in the Land of Bliss merely by reciting Amitabha’s name. Therefore “Shakyamuni Buddha’s underlying wish is none other than for beings to recite the name of Amitabha exclusively.” Recitation of Amitabha Buddha’s Great Name of a Myriad Virtues is specified in the Fundamental Vow; it is also the only practice mentioned there.

Just now, I mentioned that “Amitabha-recitation, according to the Fundamental Vow” was passed on by Master Shandao. But the practice was not his creation, as it was first cited by Bodhisattva Nagarjuna. The latter’s *Chapter on the Easy Path* says:

Amitabha Buddha’s Fundamental Vow is like this: If someone invokes me, recites my name and takes refuge in me, this person at once attains the karma of assurance and will achieve the state of *Anuttara-samyak-sambodhi* [perfect enlightenment]. One should therefore recite often.

In this passage, Bodhisattva Nagarjuna directly highlights the meaning of “Fundamental Vow” and “Amitabha-recitation.” Thus the 18th Vow is the Fundamental Vow; it is to recite the name of Amitabha Buddha.

Amitabha’s “Fundamental Vow is like this” ... What is it like? “Someone” refers to sentient beings in the ten directions, including sacred and ordinary beings. Among the ordinary beings are good as well as evil ones. “Invokes me” is a mental activity – to think of *Namo Amitabha Buddha*. “Recites my name” is a vocal activity, reciting *Namo Amitabha Buddha*. “To take refuge” is to comply with the wish of Amitabha Buddha and submit to his deliverance. It is to subsume completely our iniquitous life of an ordinary being, our life of repeated birth and death, under Amitabha’s pure and eternal life, a life without birth and death. This is to “take refuge.” Simply speaking, it is to aspire to rebirth in the Land of Bliss.

Thus Bodhisattva Nagarjuna spoke of “Amitabha-recitation, according to the Fundamental Vow.” The evidence is abundantly clear. Was the Fundamental Vow

created by Nagarjuna? No! It was Shakyamuni Buddha who spoke about it in the *Infinite Life Sutra*. The sutra says:

By the power of that Buddha's Fundamental Vow, those who hear his name and wish to be reborn will all reach his land. They will naturally attain a state of non-retrogression.

“That Buddha” refers to Amitabha Buddha. “The power of [his] Fundamental Vow” means the force of the 18th Vow. The Vow does not mention the Three Practices or Six Paramitas, only “those who hear his name and wish to be reborn” in the Pure Land. Those who hear the name *Namo Amitabha Buddha*, want rebirth in the Land of Bliss and thenceforth recite Amitabha’s name exclusively “will all reach his land” – each and every one of them. Moreover, they naturally achieve non-retrogression from this moment on.

Thus the Fundamental Vow was mentioned in the *Infinite Life Sutra* and was transmitted by Bodhisattva Nagarjuna. Master Shandao propagated it in a conclusive manner. So the Fundamental Vow did not originate in Japan. It is the Fundamental Vow of Amitabha Buddha.

The only requirement in the Fundamental Vow is recitation of Amitabha’s name, nothing else. Master Shandao said that Shakyamuni Buddha’s “wish is none other than for sentient beings to recite the name of Amitabha exclusively.” He did not say we have to attain the first stage of meditative concentration, awake or in our dreams. If these were pre-conditions, who would Amitabha Buddha be trying to save? If that were the case, would his compassion be great or small? Would it be conditional or unconditional? So all we need do is to recite Amitabha Buddha’s name consistently and exclusively.

Since ancient times, the expression “*yixin buluan*” (single-mindedly, without deviation) in the *Amitabha Sutra* has been misinterpreted. The reason is that the interpreters did not read Master Shandao’s explication. They explained the term according to Tiantai or Chan doctrines, rather than those of the Pure Land school. Thus the erroneous interpretations.

Three passages in *the Amitabha Sutra* have long been misunderstood:

1) One cannot attain birth in that land with few virtuous roots and meritorious blessings as causal conditions.

2) If a good man or woman hears of Amitabha Buddha and holds fast to his name for one day, two days, three days, four days, five days, six days or seven days, single-mindedly and without deviation

3) When that person approaches the point of death, Amitabha Buddha and the sacred assembly will appear before him. When death comes, his mind will not be severely confused. He will at once gain rebirth in Amitabha Buddha's Land of Bliss.

Most interpretations of Pure Land teaching were made from the Song Dynasty onward, particularly during the Northern Song period (960-1127). People used the thought of the Tiantai school to explicate these passages. Their interpretations of *yixin buluan* were not so correct, as they hadn't seen the works of Master Shandao. Shandao's writings were transmitted to Korea and Japan, but had been lost in China itself since the late Tang Dynasty (618–907). They did not reappear in China until the final years of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911).

Lacking access to Master Shandao's writings, people generally used the doctrines of the schools of the Sacred Path to explain *yixin buluan*. They interpreted the term as meditative single-pointedness, a measure of ability in meditation. Thus the principle of "the Easy Path" was lost. Naturally, the product of such interpretations was not the comfortable and relaxed practice of the Easy Path, analogous to sailing on a ship.

Let's see how Master Shandao of the Pure Land school explained the principles involved. He says, "**The Land of Bliss is a realm of unconditioned nirvana.**" The Pure Land is a realm of rewards, he notes, an environment of nirvana. Once we enter this realm we would, like Amitabha Buddha, attain nirvana. Thus "the Land of Bliss is a realm of unconditioned nirvana."

"It's hard to be reborn there by practicing assorted virtues according to circumstances." All the other schools practice "assorted virtues according to circumstances." If we encounter exoteric teachings today, we would practice according to the exoteric schools. If we come across esoteric teachings, we would adopt esoteric practices. If we chance upon the Tiantai school, we would practice its teachings and dedicate the resulting merit towards rebirth in the Pure Land. And if we meet with Chan teachings, we would practice accordingly and make a similar dedication.

We learn and practice whatever we happen to come across and dedicate the assorted virtues and merit towards rebirth. This is known as “practicing assorted virtues according to circumstances.” By practicing this way, “according to circumstances,” we generate “assorted virtues” – which is to have “few virtuous roots and meritorious blessings.” Thus the saying, “It’s hard to be reborn there by practicing assorted virtues according to circumstances.”

What, then, is to possess “abundant virtuous roots and meritorious blessings”? Master Shandao goes on to explain: **“The Tathagata selects the key method – he teaches us to recite Amitabha’s name with two-fold exclusivity.”** That is, to ask us to recite *Namo Amitabha Buddha* only. All who do so will be reborn in the Land of Bliss, whether they are capable or inept, are pure in mind or not, or are monastics or lay practitioners. That’s because they have met the requirements for recitation of “two-fold exclusivity” and “single-mindedness, without deviation.” So to “hold fast to his name, single-mindedly and without deviation” is to “recite Amitabha’s name with two-fold exclusivity.”

As for “single-mindedly, without deviation” – Single means non-dual, and non-dual is exclusive. “Without deviation” means neither scattered nor mixed. It also indicates exclusivity. So long as we recite Amitabha Buddha’s name exclusively and refrain from assorted practice, that is “single-mindedness, without deviation.”

Yixin buluan does not mean achieving the ability to subdue or end the delusions of views and thoughts. If that were the case, we would not be able to gain rebirth in the Pure Land – and Amitabha Buddha would be out to save only sacred beings, not sentient beings of the ten directions. That’s because those who can achieve “undeviating single-mindedness” in meditative practice, whether of a phenomenal or noumenal nature, are already holy beings who have terminated delusion and ignorance.

If we Pure Land practitioners are to be relaxed, confident that our rebirth in the Land of Bliss is assured, we must first understand the substance of Amitabha Buddha’s 18th Vow. Those who practice Pure Land without such comprehension often lose their way, unable to calm their anxieties. So we must understand the practice of “single-mindedness, without deviation” in this manner.

Since I am a monk, I exclusively recite Amitabha Buddha’s name as a monk. As you are all householders, you should recite Amitabha’s name exclusively as lay

practitioners. Though a monk, I am still full of greed, anger and delusion, an ordinary being with heavy karmic obstructions, as well as false and stray thoughts. So I will just recite Amitabha's name exclusively with such a body and mind. As for householders, if you have fewer afflictions and lighter karmic burdens, your minds would be very clear and pure when you recite Amitabha's name. You can recite exclusively in such a capacity.

Everyone should recite Amitabha Buddha's name exclusively according to his or her own conditions and capability. We would then be reborn on a basis of equality. Why is that? If you are a good person, you will sail on the ship of Amitabha's Vow. If you are a bad person, you will also sail on it. Holy and ordinary beings, monastics and householders – we all sail on the ship of Amitabha's Vow.

Our rebirth depends on the Name of a Myriad Virtues, not on our status. Once we arrive in the Land of Bliss, our status will be thoroughly discarded. We rely completely on Amitabha's name to reach the other shore and to enter the realm of unconditioned nirvana. There we all become Buddhas.

In the Saha world, there are distinctions between male and female, between the wise and learned and those less so, between those with greater or fewer karmic obstructions. Such factors, however, are irrelevant as far as rebirth in the Land of Bliss is concerned. The only relevant factor is the name of Amitabha Buddha. With this name even householders, those who don't know how to practice, those with impure minds, those with delusions of views and thoughts, and even those who haven't surmounted a single stage of ignorance, can be reborn in the Land of Bliss on an equal basis. There, they will become Buddhas equally.

Master Shandao said, **“Humans or celestial beings, wholesome or unwholesome beings – all shall be reborn. In the Pure Land, no differences separate them. They all walk an irreversible path to Buddhahood.”** Says the *Amitabha Sutra*, ***“Sentient beings born in the Land of Bliss all achieve non-retrogression. Many attain the state of being one lifetime removed from Buddhahood.”***

So everyone who enters the Land of Bliss has the same status of non-retrogression, a single lifetime away from becoming Buddhas. This is precisely why our teaching and practice is so precious. It is all due to the Fundamental Vow of Amitabha Buddha. There would be no such value or benefit if Amitabha were not a Buddha who had accomplished his Fundamental Vow.

Fundamental Vow refers both to the “vow in the causal ground” and the “primary, or root, resolution.” Of Amitabha Buddha’s 48 Vows, only the 18th is the root – primary – vow, while the others are secondary vows in the causal ground. Amitabha’s 11th Vow says that everyone in the Land of Bliss is in a state of non-retrogression, assured of attaining nirvana. So once we have reached the Pure Land, we would definitely not slip back but progress to nirvana.

The 21st Vow promises that all beings in the Pure Land will fully possess the 32 marks and 80 physical characteristics of a Buddha. And the 22nd Vow says they will be one lifetime removed from Buddhahood, and able to travel to other worlds to save sentient beings.

Therefore our rebirth and our attainment of Buddhahood are covered by the Fundamental Vow of Amitabha Buddha. Whether the 48 Vows or the 18th Vow, they are perfect and complete. That’s why we stress that Amitabha’s achievement of Buddhahood stems from his Fundamental Vow. He is to be treasured because he is a Buddha of the Fundamental Vow.

QUESTION: Today most major Dharma centers in mainland China teach Pure Land Buddhism, and other schools are declining. Won’t Buddhism be enfeebled if we do not propagate the teachings of other schools such as Yogacara (Consciousness Only) and Tiantai? Wouldn’t the Common path and its teachings become available in fewer and fewer Dharma centers? Besides, while learning and practicing Buddhism, isn’t it necessary to study other scriptures, and not just *the Infinite Life Sutra* or the *Amitabha Sutra*?

ANSWER: Shakyamuni Buddha appeared in this world to deliver sentient beings. As long as that goal is met, his purpose for manifesting in our world is fulfilled. If we learn Buddhism and cannot gain rebirth in the Land of Bliss, but continue in the cycle of rebirth, even if we penetrate deeply the scriptures and master all the 84,000 schools of teaching, that would not be the aim of Shakyamuni Buddha. Nor would it be our purpose for learning the Dharma.

Once we reincarnate, we may not be able to remember what we learned in this lifetime. Besides, we would be reborn according to our karma. If we fall into the hell realm, we would suffer in both body and mind. It would not be possible for us to recall

teachings that we learned in the past. For example, should we enter the embryo of a pig, we would take on the habit energy, characteristics and the ignorance of a pig.

Thus it is most important, when learning the Dharma, that we go deeply into the Pure Land teachings, so we can be reborn in the Land of Bliss. Not only should we learn them, but we should convince people we know to do so as well. To learn these teachings indicates great wisdom, and propagating them is a demonstration of great kindness and compassion. To be able to learn Pure Land is to have abundant virtuous roots and meritorious blessings.

All the scriptures will vanish during the Age of Dharma Extinction, except the *Infinite Life Sutra*, which expounds the Pure Land teachings. If this sutra remains, it means that all sutras are preserved. That's because the aim of all the sutras and treatises is to free us from the cycle of rebirth. If we are so liberated, the goal of all the scriptures will have been met. So don't worry about being unable to study the sutras deeply; fret only about the inability to be reborn in the Pure Land. Once in the Land of Bliss, we will have a deep understanding of all sutras. We will also possess the three insights and six special powers, and realize innumerable *dharani*.

When I was young, I memorized numerous scriptures. With age, my memory has declined and I have forgotten many of the texts. I believe I have been a monastic before, over countless lifetimes, and not necessarily only during this one. I have been a senior monk who studied the scriptures intensively, and I have performed all manner of positive actions. I have been born in the celestial realms: the Heaven of the Four Deva Kings, Trayastrimsa Heaven, Yama Heaven and Tusita Heaven. I have been to them all, including the Heaven of Form and the Heaven Without Form. Moreover, I have studied all the Dharma teachings. And what am I now? Still an ordinary being, because I haven't achieved rebirth in the Land of Bliss.

Moreover, I have killed people. I don't know how many I killed in past lives. Nor do I know how many beings I have harmed, stolen from, robbed, scolded or insulted. So I must have fallen into Avici Hell, been hoisted on a mountain of knives and plunged into a cauldron of boiling oil. I have also been reborn as animals and hungry ghosts. I assumed such forms, only because I was never born in the Land of Bliss.

Besides taking life directly, eating meat is a form of indirect killing. So over countless lifetimes, we have all broken the Five Precepts and committed the Ten Evil

Actions. We have all been to heaven, as well as hell. The *Saddharma-smrty-upasthana Sutra* says, ***“From the celestial realms to the hell domains, and from the hell domains into the celestial realms.”*** Notes the *Nirvana Sutra*, ***“Even if one gains rebirth in realms ranging from the Brahma Heavens to the Heaven of Neither Perception nor Non-Perception, at death one still falls into the Three Wretched Realms.”***

One must possess great meditative ability to be born in the Heaven of Form. Such ability generates special powers, which means one could pass freely through walls, see the past and the future, and read the minds of others. Even so, when life ends and the karmic fortune is spent, one could fall into the realms of hell, hungry ghosts or animals. It is the same with the Heaven Without Form. The longest lifespan there is 84,000 *kalpas*, and beings there dwell in a state of extremely deep meditative concentration. Yet death also brings a tumble into the lower realms.

A king wears gold and jade. But when he falls into the ocean, he is no different from a beggar who falls in there. They will both drown. Similarly, if we do not escape the Three Domains and Six Realms, our fates would be the same. It is so for both good and bad people, monastics and lay practitioners. Only by freeing ourselves from the cycle of rebirth can we achieve an ultimate solution.

We must be wise enough to have this insight. I’m not saying we shouldn’t learn the teachings of the other Dharma schools or propagate them. We should. For instance, we shouldn’t just recite Amitabha Buddha’s name, but do our best to be sincere and scrupulous in our relationships, avoid evil and cherish good, and understand the teachings of the other schools.

However, there is the primary and the secondary. The main point is that we must first comprehend Pure Land principles and keep Amitabha’s name in our minds. Having first settled the issue of life and death, we can then perform other tasks according to circumstances as well as our own abilities. It would be good if we could do the other things, but if we couldn’t, we need have no regrets. All will be completely forgotten in time. When we become old, it would be a blessing if our minds were still clear, and our sight and hearing still functioning – *Namo Amitabha Buddha!* Otherwise, the longer we live the more prone we are to Alzheimer’s disease.

The Tripitaka and its twelve divisions are all embedded in our *alaya* (storehouse, or root) consciousness, with nothing missing. When we reach the Land of Bliss and see Amitabha Buddha, they are fully unpacked, complete. Consider the experience of Shakyamuni Buddha. Before he gazed at the morning star and became enlightened, he was an ordinary being. Once he saw the star, he obtained perfectly the three insights and six special powers, and realized innumerable *dharani*. Instantly he became the Buddha, most honored in the heavens and on earth.

So we shouldn't be afraid of not knowing anything, only that we might not be reborn in the Pure Land. And we need not worry that we couldn't deliver sentient beings extensively, only that we might not attain Buddhahood. If we achieve rebirth, Buddhahood is assured. As Buddhas, we would certainly be able to save beings on a large scale.

To sum up, rebirth in the Pure Land is the first priority. For death is always at our side, waiting for us. We may be run over by a car when we go out; when we fly, our plane may crash. Only by learning the Pure Land teachings can we truly be at ease.

Those who grasp firmly the truth of impermanence will recite Amitabha's name conscientiously. It is this understanding that motivates them to practice diligently, and spur them to find a teaching that would enable them to gain liberation in this very life. People who do not understand impermanence deeply will be slack in their efforts, searching here and there as the days pass one after another. When death does come, it will be too late.

QUESTION: If we only recite Amitabha's name and do not study or bother with the other teachings, I'm afraid all that will be left of Buddhism is the Pure Land school. That way, the era when the Dharma is lost will arrive quickly. So we mustn't be biased, and should steer a middle course. Besides, the other Bodhisattvas practice many other Buddhist teachings.

ANSWER: This question should have been answered just now.

Bodhisattva Manjusri has a *gatha* that reveals his state of mind: "***When my life ends, may I be able to eliminate all obstacles, see Amitabha Buddha and be reborn in the Land of Peace and Joy.***" This is the wish of Bodhisattva Manjusri. He also urged Master Fazhao recite Amitabha Buddha's name exclusively, so he too could be reborn in the Land of Bliss.

And what is the wish of Bodhisattva Samantabhadra? He says, “***When my life ends, may I be able to eliminate all obstacles and see Amitabha Buddha, so I may instantly be reborn in the Land of Peace and Joy.***” He also led the advanced Bodhisattvas of 41 stages attending the Avatamsaka assembly to seek rebirth in the Land of Bliss.

In front of Amitabha Buddha, therefore, both Manjusri and Samantabhadra considered themselves ordinary beings of the lowest grade. They hoped, when their lives ended, to have their karmic obstructions completely cleared, so they could be reborn expeditiously in the Land of Bliss.

The merit and virtues we need to avoid disaster are contained in the name of Amitabha Buddha. Thus the function of eliminating calamity and prolonging life inherent in the Medicine Buddha’s name is also contained in the Great Name of a Myriad Virtues, *Namo Amitabha Buddha*. That’s because the great six-character name is like *agada* medicine, which cures all ailments and afflictions.

Moreover, to recite the name of a single Buddha, *Namo Amitabha Buddha*, is equivalent to reciting the names of all Buddhas. When we recite Amitabha’s name, the Buddhas of the ten directions will come to praise, protect and encourage us. So there is great wisdom in choosing to practice this teaching.

After we learn this practice, there is no further need to recite the names of Bodhisattvas Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta. If we only recited Amitabha Buddha’s name, Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta would happily become our friends, even brothers. They will safeguard us, the way a shadow follows the form that cast it. For the name we recite is the name of the one who sits on top of their heads.

We should realize that Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara’s goal is to guide suffering beings to recite the name of Amitabha Buddha, who will deliver them to the Pure Land. Otherwise, Avalokitesvara would be saying, “How tired I am! You are still reincarnating and suffering. Lifetime after lifetime, again and again, I still have to save you from pain and peril. But if you recite ‘*Namo Amitabha Buddha*’ this very lifetime, I can relax!” That’s the aim of Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara.

So we should know the purpose of this teaching, of this Buddha, of this Bodhisattva. We must not interpret the scriptures literally, or we would lose our way.