Questions on Pure Land Practice

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In studying Buddhism, it is most important to distinguish the principles clearly and not let emotional views dictate one's actions. To lose sight of the central purpose is to mislead others and oneself; nothing could be more regrettable. Thirty years ago, I too was someone who stressed Pure Land alone and disparaged Esoteric Buddhism and Chan. Looking back on it now, I find such pointless disputes truly laughable. Later, sensing the terror of birth and death and seeing that sectarian divisions are no solution, I repeatedly urged my fellow practitioners to repent and reform without delay, lest they ruin this great matter of their own. Now that we are all advancing in years, we must absolutely not go astray again. I raise this question especially in the hope of discussing it with discerning people throughout the country.

During the Buddha's lifetime, there was no talk of sects. Only because sentient beings differ in their capacities did he respond to them accordingly, giving rise to various dharma gates. As it is said, "The return to the source is not two, though skillful means have many gates." In truth, Chan, Pure Land, and Esoteric Buddhism all return to the same source. The Chan school realizes Buddhahood by seeing one's nature; Pure Land sees the Buddha when the lotus opens; and Esoteric Buddhism attains Buddhahood in this very body. All are pure practices through which one realizes the mind and sees one's true nature.

One oneself is the master; the various dharmas are supporting conditions; attainment comes about through causes and conditions. It is not that what is realized by the Chan school differs from Esoteric Buddhism, nor that the Esoteric school's seeing of one's nature differs from the opening of the lotus in Pure Land. The three traditions alike require awakening to the ungraspability of all things. They share this same reality: dharmas are equal, without superiority or inferiority. Here, dharma means the mind Dharma. All alike seek to realize bodhi; what dispute can there be? Thus, those who divide into sects all begin from an incorrect foundation.

The two words “Pure Land” are not terms exclusive to the West. The land is one’s intrinsic nature, and purity is its original aspect. This means that it is originally pure, but is covered by ignorance and thus not recognized. Now, whether one practices Chan, Esoteric Buddhism, or Pure Land, all are practices for purifying this land. A sūtra says: “If one wishes to know the realm of the Buddha, one should purify one’s mind until it is like empty space.”

The Chan school first requires a great death: all thoughts die away, yet this is not annihilationist emptiness. What is this if not Pure Land? Through the empowerment of the three mysteries in Esoteric Buddhism, one sees the yidam. The yidam is the most exalted Pure Land inherently possessed within oneself. In the Pure Land school, when the lotus opens one sees the Buddha. Through the method of Buddha-recitation, like a child remembering its mother, uninterrupted pure mindfulness brings attainment of samādhi; this is foremost. It is, first of all, the Pure Land of one’s own nature.

When the lotus opens, it is one’s own lotus that opens and sees the Buddha; one sees the Buddha of one’s intrinsic nature. The whole practice arises from awakening to the unborn. Thus one is in mutual accord with Amitābha Buddha and enters the realm of ultimate bliss. The West in principle and the West in manifestation naturally correspond, and one is reborn there at once. Therefore, to be reborn in the Land of Ultimate Bliss, one must first attain one’s own ultimate bliss. That is to say, one must first purify one’s own land before one can be reborn in the Pure Land.

All Buddhas and bodhisattvas ascend lotus seats. This signifies that the lotus is one’s own mind, and that Buddhahood is accomplished wholly through one’s own mind. The West is a gate of attainment, and attainment is a fruition. Therefore it is symbolized as the Lotus school. From this it may be seen that every school returns to the Pure Land; it does not refer exclusively to one particular direction.

Group Buddha-recitation, accompanied by the small handbell and wooden fish, began with Master Huiyuan and was established for beginners. Later, practitioners generally proceed to silently reciting alone, using this to gather in the six sense faculties and return them to one mind. They first begin with the practice of the myriad dharmas returning to the One, thereby connecting with the Chan school; then they undertake the practice of asking where the One returns. They recite with the mouth and practice with the mind, neglecting neither.

This method is also the same as that of Esoteric Buddhism. The six characters “Namo Amitābha Buddha” are a contracted pronunciation of the eight characters “Namo Amitābhadābu Dayā,” and are the first line of the Short Rebirth Mantra. People have mistakenly pronounced it as “Namo Amituopo ye”; in fact, the error arose from differences among local dialects.

The chapter on Buddha-remembrance by Mahāsthāmaprāpta places special emphasis on remembering the Buddha and reciting the Buddha's name. It stresses practice of the mind: when remembrance becomes intense, it naturally issues from the mouth without one noticing. Thus, to hold fast to the name involves two practices proceeding together: holding fast belongs to the mind, while reciting belongs to the mouth. Only when mind and mouth are as one can one become single-minded. If one further forms the Amitābha mudrā with the hands, this is called the mutual sealing of the three mysteries, and the practice is complete.

Nowadays people merely recite with the mouth, hear bells and chimes, or contemplate splendid scenes. The mystery of speech is present, but the mystery of mind is absent. If they then use prayer beads to count, or imitate the Chan practice of walking meditation or circumambulating the Buddha, the mystery of body is absent as well. Since the three mysteries are incomplete, how can the six faculties mutually gather one another and attain samādhi without great difficulty? Therefore, though they may practice for decades, they still receive no news.

Some may become utterly concentrated and at times attain states of samādhi, but suffer because no one verifies their realization for them. Their practice then has no way to advance further, and they come to feel dry, still, and devoid of flavor. Yet the instructions they seek this year are no different from those of previous years.

This leaves students with no gate through which to enter. They can only seek visions of light or Buddhas, not knowing that the deluded mind arises dependently. Relying on illusion, they establish further illusion; should an illusory appearance suddenly arise, they may be so startled and delighted as to become deranged. Yet their habitual tendencies and views remain as before. They merely suppress greed and anger rather than transform and eliminate them. Once they are stirred, they have no meditative stability at all, and their confusion is just as it was before.

They then abandon this and turn to Esoteric Buddhism, or enter a Chan meditation hall instead. The more they meddle, the less they obtain the method. They then seek doctrinal teachings and sūtras and treatises, thinking that wide learning and much knowledge, along with the ability to lecture and speak, will give them greater assurance. They do not realize that, once others praise and pay homage to them, they may unconsciously fall into the pit of fame, reputation, and material gain. This adds frost to snow; birth and death become still more firmly entrenched. All this results from practicing Buddha-recitation without the proper method.

Although such people may have deep dharma obstacles from previous lives, those who mislead them must also bear responsibility. Moreover, when practitioners themselves fail to obtain the proper method, they cannot help urgently seeking elsewhere. They bow to every teacher and seek every method, pursuing Dharma day

after day, without knowing where the true meaning of each dharma lies or whether it suits their own capacity.

They seek teachers everywhere and even assess the teachers, taking their ears for their eyes. Doubt and disparagement then arise, though they themselves do not know it. Anxious and lost at the crossroads, they know not what to do. Some simply abandon practice altogether; some practice Chan and Pure Land together; some pursue Pure Land and Esoteric Buddhism side by side. With a foot in two boats, they do not know where they will arrive. Unable to do otherwise, they seek proof after death, saying, “The crown of the head is warm; I shall certainly be reborn in the West.”

They also say, “All my life I have heard much and recited much. Even if I am not reborn in the West, this small merit and virtue should at least keep me from falling into the evil realms. That is enough.” How do they know that the whole work lies in establishing one’s footing while alive? If, while alive, one has no firm grasp, how could it help after death? This is the greatest question of my own life. How can we stand by and watch?

Recently, someone suddenly asked whether the Western Land truly exists. A certain great teacher said that the Western Land does not exist. Doubt and disparagement then greatly arose, and this person came to ask me about it. I could not help laughing and said, “Why do you not understand the great teacher’s compassion, but instead fall into his trap? If he were worldly and concerned with pleasing people, he would also say, ‘The Buddha said it exists; who would dare say it does not?’”

Those who heard this would surely leave delighted, not realizing that he was not such a person. Since he was a great teacher, how could he not know that the Buddha taught the Amitābha Sūtra? Clearly, he prescribed medicine in response to the person who came to ask. Before he had fully explained the matter, the questioner had already formed emotional views. Unwilling to humble himself and investigate the reason thoroughly, he left even a renowned physician unwilling to prescribe a second dose of medicine.

You must know that the Buddhadharma concerns transcending birth and death, and that transcending birth and death depends on breaking through the turbidity of views. Your intention is to cling single-mindedly to existence. Once existence is affirmed, a dependent mind arises; therefore, he uses nonexistence to break your view of existence, wishing you to investigate it deeply. If a visitor did not believe in existence and was instead attached to the view of nonexistence, he would use existence to break that view. For the moment, do not debate whether the Western Land exists or does not exist.

Before that great teacher had finished speaking, the visitor failed to understand his meaning and refused the teaching at once. The teacher's whole compassionate intention was wasted, and his compassion was deeply betrayed. Later, the person again asked me, "After all, does the Western Land exist?" I said, "If I tell you directly, you certainly will not believe it. Let me first ask you: 'All that has form is illusory.' Do you believe this?" He replied, "The Buddha said so; how could I not believe it?"

I said, "When the Buddha said that all that has form is illusory, he said only that it is illusory; he did not say that it does not exist. It exists, but is illusory. Do you believe this meaning?" He said, "I do." I said, "The Western Land originally does not exist. Amitābha Buddha, wishing the sound of Dharma to spread abroad, brought it forth through the transformative accomplishment of his forty-eight skillful vows."

It is just like a small gathering today: everything is plainly present, and one cannot say that it does not exist. Yet everything among us comes together through conditions; because it arises from causes and conditions, it cannot be grasped. Therefore, one cannot call it existent. Its ultimate nature is empty and unreal; it is only provisionally existent. If you can truly awaken to the principle of emptiness of nature, that is seeing the Buddha when the lotus opens and attaining rebirth freely. Why concern yourself with whether it exists or does not exist?

If you speak in terms of appearances, the Western Land truly exists, but it is illusorily existent. If you speak in terms of intrinsic nature, both it and we are wholly empty in nature; even this illusory body of your own does not exist. But when ordinary people hear that it does not exist, they become suspicious and unbelieving, even frantic. Chan Master Huangbo said: "Dharmas are fundamentally not existent; do not form a view of nonexistence. Dharmas are fundamentally not nonexistent; do not form a view of existence. Existence within nonexistence is entirely emotional view." Therefore, the foremost principle of Buddha-recitation is to cease contrivance and forget views. This is the right path for practicing Pure Land. Thus, the principles must be clearly distinguished.

Someone else asked, "According to what you say, everything depends on one's own power to recite the Buddha's name and awaken. Does this mean that it has nothing to do with the Buddha's guidance?" I said, "No. This is a method accomplished through the combined strength of both sides. You must recite until recitation continues without deliberate holding, passing from the realm of transformation into purity; only then can you connect with the Buddha. First you are guided by Dharma, and then you are received through manifestation."

It is like a person who has fallen into a well and urgently seeks to get out. Someone above lowers a rope to rescue him, but the person in the well must first tie himself securely and connect with the person above; only then can he be pulled out of

danger. If he relies solely on the person above while making no effort himself, would that not be laughable? Know that there is always someone above the well and that the rope is already there. Yet one gives rise to all kinds of deluded thoughts, makes no effort oneself, and merely asks whether there is anyone above the well. Is that not delusion?

All dharmas are originally empty appearances, and there is no fixed rule as to difficulty or ease. Methods that are easy are easy to enter but difficult to trust; the Pure Land is one such method. One may be reborn through as few as ten recitations—could anything be easier? But because it is too easy, people take it lightly and do not become deeply earnest. Thinking that the Buddha will guide them, they give rise to a dependent mind and begin to wait. At death, they ask others to assist their recitation, and in ordinary times feel no need for urgency. What is extremely easy is thus turned into what is extremely difficult. Whose fault is that?

The Western Land is a gate of attainment, not a child's game. Without effort, attainment is absolutely impossible. One especially needs the power of prajñā and must be diligent like a great elephant crossing a river, cutting off all currents, before attainment can be achieved.

At the beginning of the sūtra, Śāriputra leads the assembly, while Mañjuśrī, the Dharma Prince, heads the bodhisattvas. This precisely signifies that the sūtra leads from the prajñā of the Lesser Vehicle into the prajñā of the Great Vehicle. Ajita is Maitreya, signifying that one must break through all appearances and return to intrinsic nature. The following two bodhisattvas signify that this Dharma requires diligence like a great elephant crossing a river.

Among the twelve divisions of scripture, this sūtra belongs to the category of teachings spoken by the Buddha of his own accord. Because the śrāvakas and pratyekabuddhas were attached one-sidedly to emptiness without knowing it, the Buddha therefore taught existence to rescue them, saying: "Beyond the West there is a world, and there is Amitābha Buddha."

He is now teaching the Dharma. I see this as beneficial. Moreover, the adornments of form—such as the seven treasures, the water of eight virtues, the ground of gold, and the splendors of lotuses—are gradually shed until one reaches the subtle wonder of sound. All flow forth from intrinsic nature.

It then points to the essence of immeasurable life and the function of immeasurable light, which illuminates the lands of the ten directions without obstruction. The excellence of its people cannot be measured or described. Again and again, it urges people to make vows and also indicates the method: if one upholds the name and never forgets Amitābha in thought after thought, and is willing to concentrate on

mindfulness of Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha, one will naturally have no leisure to entertain thoughts of greed, anger, and ignorance.

If one's mind is not inverted in ordinary times, one will naturally be assured at the time of death. One mind means no mind—only this one true mind. The true mind is the mind of no-mind; it is not some separate mind. Use the single phrase "Amitābha" to drive away deluded thoughts. When there is serene thoughtlessness without falling into annihilation, this is the state of one mind.

Having found this path, go deeply into one gate; cultivate diligently and do not grow lax. Your strength will increase day by day. Only ask about the cultivation, not about the harvest: where there is cause, there must be fruition. There is no need to wait until after death; even during this life, the mind will cease to be inverted. Every arising and passing thought is a birth and death. When a deluded thought arises, it is provisionally called the beginning of life; when a deluded thought departs, it is provisionally called the end of life.

Now, by the power of wisdom's illumination at every moment, clearly see its falsity. Thus, at every moment, one is at the time of death, with the mind not inverted. Such diligence is indispensable. Yet the Buddha also feared that the capacity of the assembly might be too narrow to undertake such a great matter. If one stubbornly clings to one direction as supreme, one's mind is not broad, and accomplishment is likewise difficult. Therefore, he invokes the Buddhas of the ten directions, as countless as the sands of the Ganges, all of whom offer this protection and mindfulness, thereby referring to the present sūtra.

A sūtra does not refer exclusively to this written sūtra; it refers precisely to the vajra treasury within the self-nature of sentient beings. Furthermore, once this vow is made, accomplishment occurs immediately: those who have made the vow, are now making the vow, or will make the vow, whether already born, now born, or yet to be born. Such is this broad and perfectly integrated Dharma of Buddha-recitation: it is a direct leap and direct entry, opening the flower of prajñā and seeing the Buddha of true reality, universally embracing practitioners of all three capacities.

Therefore, those of superior capacity can realize their true nature and attain accomplishment during this life, arriving without going. Those of middling capacity enter the grades of rebirth and possess the provisions for rebirth; once there, they hear the Dharma again and cultivate diligently in order to see their true nature. Those of lesser capacity, through the singleness of their thoughts, may also attain rebirth when conditions mature; at the very least, they plant wholesome roots for future lives. In every case, it is the same realization of bodhi.

Yet worldly people are obscured by the five turbidities. They lack the strength to enter through faith, and they do not even dare to do so. This is exceedingly difficult;

the word “difficult” is repeated five times. Alas! It is not that this Dharma is difficult; people make it difficult for themselves. Even the compassion of Buddhas and bodhisattvas can do nothing about this. Moreover, ancient virtuous teachers urged people to cultivate pure karma diligently. Fearing that people would shrink from difficulty and refuse to practice, they therefore called it easy, not realizing that they would again mislead people through this single word “easy.” Truly, when one is propped up in the west, one falls over again in the east. At this point, I hope that you will set aside both views of difficulty and ease, and devote yourselves single-mindedly to Buddha-recitation.

The practice of Buddha-recitation truly needs improvement. The greatest taboo is, during a seven-day retreat, to recite continuously aloud without resting the mouth, for forty-nine consecutive days. This often injures the vital energy and causes distending pain in the chest, becoming a lifelong illness that is extremely difficult to treat. Some therefore become resentful, doubtful, and slanderous.

Therefore, a Pure Land seven-day retreat should last no more than four periods of seven days. During the retreat, the daily time for Buddha-recitation may be increased from seven or eight hours to twelve hours, but no more. One must not recite aloud, and one must form the Amitābha mudrā without letting the mudrā fall apart. For example, rise at 1:30 in the morning, first wash and attend to bodily needs.

Sit at 2:00 and continue for four hours. Rise from the seat at 6:00, take breakfast, sit again at 8:00, and rise at noon for lunch. Sit again at 2:00, rise at 6:00 for dinner, and sleep at 8:00. This is a full day of practice and must not be increased further. For those who recite the Buddha’s name seven or eight hours daily, the schedule may be arranged separately; there is no need to be overly rigid.

During the retreat, the retreat leader must regularly give instruction, inquire into each person’s experience on the cushion, and make corrections when needed. While seated, do not contemplate lights or appearances; simply maintain the three essentials of samādhi: first, do not let the mudrā come apart; second, do not cease Buddha-recitation, letting the lips move slightly but without sound; third, do not allow the mind to move deludedly. When thoughts arise, do not attend to them, but neither suppress deluded thoughts. Nor should one conjure up various appearances, such as seeing light or seeing a Buddha, thereby giving rise to demonic views.

This is only a general outline; the detailed rules are numerous and should be established separately. It is best to gather ten or more people, set a date for four periods of seven days, preferably in late spring or at the end of autumn or beginning of winter, invite a retreat leader, establish various prohibitions within the retreat

quarters, and appoint two retreat attendants. During the twenty-eight days, one should strive to attain realization within the appointed period. If one period is unsuccessful, after an interval of one or two months, undertake a second period, with no more than three periods in all.

If practitioners are truly earnest and resolute, none will fail to realize samādhi. Once samādhi has been realized, they may then refer to the Chan school's methods of practice and Esoteric Buddhism's methods of empowerment as supporting conditions. In this way, they will certainly be assured of rebirth in the Western Pure Land. At this stage, one may perhaps enter Mahāsthāmaprāpta Bodhisattva's perfect-penetration method of Buddha-recitation.

For when that bodhisattva recites the Buddha's name, he gathers in the six sense faculties: at no time and in no place is he not reciting the Buddha's name. Bowing to the Buddha and making offerings are also Buddha-recitation. Wherever he is, seeing emptiness of nature is precisely Buddha-recitation. This is what is called uninterrupted pure mindfulness, becoming continuous and undivided. Such a bodhisattva certainly need not hold prayer beads in hand, recite the six-character name aloud, and regard morning and evening services as practice, only to drift about in confusion the rest of the time. Can those who sincerely cultivate pure karma not take these words as instruction?

Someone may further ask: "Do the morning and evening services of those who now recite the Buddha's name actually have any effect? And when elderly women recite the Buddha's name with their minds fixed solely on posthumous blessings, without even understanding the basis of the Pure Land—does this also have any effect?" The answer is: "It has the same effect, only in diminished measure."

For those who recite the Buddha's name, regardless of the depth or shallowness of their practice, have already imprinted a seed in their minds. Whatever happens, this is always better than not reciting. One need not form concepts of time; after a long while, one may still attain accomplishment through this single imprint. We should not slight later students. Yet the practice of Buddha-recitation begins with upholding the name, and this still cannot be called true Buddha-recitation.

Before one can truly recite the Buddha's name, several conditions must already be present: First, one must deeply believe that the Western Land of Ultimate Bliss is adorned with fragrance and light, possesses exceptional causes and conditions, and that those with firm vows will certainly attain rebirth; ordinary beings cannot be excluded from it. For mind itself is Buddha, and when mind is empty, it is Buddha. When one is truly of one mind, one has already gone beyond the realm of ordinary beings.

Though this may be temporary rather than lasting, because one's vows are firm, in time one can still become continuous and undivided, possessing the qualifications of avaivartika.

Second, one must deeply believe that rebirth is entirely a transformed realm. This mind pervades the ten directions and is therefore protected and kept in mind by the Buddhas of the ten directions. One's strength of spirit naturally becomes great. Within the transformed realm, there is no place that is not a Buddha realm, not the Western Pure Land. At such a time, the boundless body naturally manifests. There is no need to recite the Buddha's name only in a Buddha hall, nor any need to distinguish east, west, south, and north.

Third, one who can truly recite the Buddha's name, even without upholding the name or while attending to ordinary matters, never loses this empty, quiescent illumination. It is like one's own name: even amid confusion, one does not forget it. This is the time of uninterrupted pure mindfulness. Fourth, when concentration reaches its utmost, all other fruits are no longer what one seeks. Golden platforms and silver platforms were established as expedient means for those of lesser capacity.

To speak of being guided and received is an expedient for beginners, putting their minds at ease. It is like supporting a drunken man on his way home, when he needs someone to lead him. But if I am not drunk or confused and already know the way home well, why should I need guidance? Such courage comes entirely from the power of samādhi; then there are none who will fail to attain rebirth. Nowadays, because people do not obtain the proper method of Buddha-recitation and lack supporting conditions, they practice for a long time without result and thus become discouraged.

Some feel they have no assurance at all, and, seeing that others' habitual tendencies have not been eliminated, become fearful. This must absolutely not be so. Continue cultivating devoutly and recite the Buddha's name single-mindedly; only the method must be adjusted. Moreover, the reason those who have long recited the Buddha's name have not attained accomplishment still lies in their failure to apply themselves in ordinary life. Though they have morning and evening services, they inevitably practice only sporadically. Therefore, no matter which dharma gate one cultivates, the essential point is practice off the meditation cushion. Those who do not practice off the cushion fail to do so because they do not know how to practice; they are at a loss as to where to begin. This is a matter that urgently requires discussion.