Guide to the Pure Land

Writings of Master Yuanyin

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Preface

Preface

In the latter half of 1999, Master Yuanyin, in light of the circumstances then prevailing in Buddhist circles and drawing on his own personal experience, offered a profound exposition of the principles found in the Pure Land scriptures, articulating what earlier generations had not articulated.

With deep compassion, the Master personally put this into practice and wrote his final essay during his lifetime, entitled “An Essential Guide to the Pure Land.” He earnestly prayed that fellow practitioners of Pure Land practice would genuinely take birth and death seriously and arouse bodhicitta. Yet years later, we discovered that some printed editions had omitted Sections Four and Five of Part B, which we deeply regret. These two sections contain the Master's most crucial instructions for Pure Land practitioners in their cultivation. Therefore, in this edition, we have restored the original text of these two sections for the benefit of later generations.

Summer, Yichou Year
Respectfully written by a disciple of the Heart-of-Heart Dharma

A. Realization and Cultivation in the Buddha Dharma

A. Realization and Verification of the Buddhadharma

All sentient beings equally possess undefiled wisdom-nature, no different from that of the Buddha. Yet, because they are deluded by phenomenal appearances, each creates different karma; the depth of their delusion likewise varies, and thus their capacities for the Way differ as wise or foolish, keen or dull.

In response to these differing capacities, our compassionate Buddha, adapting to sentient beings as a physician prescribes medicine according to the illness, taught the various great and lesser, provisional and complete, sudden and gradual dharmas. This was solely to enable sentient beings to recover quickly and return home, leaving the ocean of suffering behind. Among these teachings, there is no distinction of depth or superiority.

Later patriarchs, according to their own cultivation and in response to the inclinations of sentient beings, established various schools. During the Tang and Song dynasties, when the Buddhadharma flourished greatly, there were ten major Buddhist schools in China. Later, because of changing times and conditions, transformations in social customs, and the hardships of people's lives, the Buddhadharma gradually declined. Now only the three major schools of Chan, Pure Land, and Esoteric Buddhism remain.

Among these three major schools, none is swifter or more direct in realization and verification than the Chan school. Yet sentient beings in this Dharma-ending age have poor capacities, heavy obscurations, and shallow wisdom. Directly pointing them toward seeing their true nature does not accord with their capacities. Even if they gain some awakening at the level of principle, they lack deep faith, cannot gain a firm footing, and are unable to temper themselves amid circumstances, safeguard realization, eliminate habitual tendencies, and realize the Way. As for investigating a huatou, the sense of doubt does not arise, deluded thoughts cannot be cut off, the sense faculties and their objects do not easily fall away, and subject and object are still less able to vanish together. How, then, can they realize the mind and see their true nature? Thus, the Chan school lacks successors, and seems in grave danger of dying out altogether. This is deeply lamentable.

As for Esoteric Buddhism, China originally had Tang Esoteric Buddhism, but it was completely extinguished during the time of Zhu Yuanzhang in the Ming dynasty because successive emperors feared and opposed it. The Esoteric Buddhism now practiced includes, apart from Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism, Japanese Eastern Esoteric Buddhism. This teaching comprises the progressive stages of the Nine Vehicles; it is complete in its higher and lower, deeper and shallower levels, and is indeed an excellent Dharma for practice in this Dharma-ending age. Yet its rituals are complicated, and beginners are generally very attached to forms. Moreover, it cannot entirely avoid the appearance of resembling cults of ghosts and spirits. It is therefore not especially suited to Chinese people's preference for simple and

convenient methods of practice. Furthermore, the barrier of the Tibetan language has prevented Esoteric Buddhism from being widely propagated in Chinese regions.

Of these three schools, the Pure Land school is, at present, the one most suited to the cultivation of Chinese people. In the Pure Land school, one need only single-mindedly recite the sacred name of Amitābha Buddha and need not cultivate anything else. It truly is a teaching suited both to principle and to people's capacities. Though a single sacred name may appear simple, its meaning is in fact profound and vast.

It begins at what is closest at hand: one silently and continuously sustains a single sacred name within the mind, enabling one, without even being aware of it, to transform the ordinary mind into a sacred mind. It is like the hair and nails of a person, which grow naturally although one does not see them growing. Thus, it encompasses the essential meaning of the three baskets and twelve divisions of the scriptures, and can also embrace the efficacy of all schools. If we still do not wholeheartedly engage in Buddha-recitation and cultivate the Pure Land, it would truly be a great pity!

Yet in recent times, those who cultivate the Pure Land have greatly misunderstood this school's true principles and methods of practice. They have propagated the vast and profound Pure Land school as though it were a practice of the Lesser Vehicle, saying that one cultivates this Dharma in order to go to the West and enjoy blessings and a good life, thereby avoiding suffering in the Sahā world. Such claims make informed practitioners of great resolve hesitate to approach it and cause them to keep their distance. Those without understanding, meanwhile, fear that rebirth in the West will be difficult, and mistakenly vow to be reborn in the borderland, the city of doubt. They have distorted the originally magnificent Pure Land school beyond recognition, leaving people at a loss as to where to turn. There can be no greater offense!

As stated above, the single sacred name of Amitābha Buddha in the Pure Land school can encompass the teachings of the three baskets and twelve divisions, and include the methods of practice of every school. Yet those who propagate the teaching have not explained its true principles clearly, and so everyone has been left in doubt and uncertainty. Consequently, the Pure Land school has also recently suffered a severe decline. This is entirely because those who propagate the teaching do not themselves truly understand its doctrine and methods of practice, but merely pass errors along from one person to another. How could they fail to distort the Pure Land school beyond recognition?

Now, in order to make practice easier for everyone, clear away the obstacles to Pure Land cultivation, and restore the vigor of the Pure Land school, I shall not begrudge

the karmic consequences of speech, but will briefly explain, one by one below, the points that people are liable to misunderstand.

B. Regarding the Scripture Text

B. Regarding Scriptural Passages

I. The passage in the Amitābha Sūtra: “The light of that Buddha is immeasurable, illuminating the lands of the ten directions without obstruction.”

There is no need to speculate about the two words “that Buddha”; they naturally refer to Amitābha Buddha. In a broader sense, however, they do not refer solely to Amitābha Buddha, but to the Buddha-nature of all sentient beings.

Since mind, Buddha, and sentient beings are no different from one another, and the wondrous essence of sentient beings’ original awakening is one substance with the Buddha and nondual, it is said that it neither increases in sages nor diminishes in ordinary beings. So long as we diligently cultivate the Dharma, eliminate all evil habits—ignorance—and restore our Original Face, there is no one who will not, like Amitābha Buddha, possess immeasurable light illuminating the lands of the ten directions without obstruction. This explanation can strengthen everyone’s faith, encourage them to practice courageously, and prevent any further doubt about whether rebirth in the Western Pure Land is possible.

II. “Those who have now been born, those who have already been born, and those who will be born”

Those who explain the teachings all interpret “those who will be born” as meaning that one may attain accomplishment through future practice and be reborn in the Western Pure Land. But this is not so. A single Chinese character may have several meanings, and its interpretation differs according to its use. Although the character dang can indeed mean “in the future,” it does not have that meaning here.

Because the Pure Land school is a great tradition encompassing all eight teachings, rather than a Lesser Vehicle, it should be understood as meaning “right now,” that is, the present moment. This means that one who practices the Buddha-remembrance Dharma gate may attain rebirth in this very life, and may also be born in the West at this very moment without taking a single step. For mind itself is the land, and the land itself is mind.

So long as your mind is pure, unstained by a single thing, and all afflictions are extinguished, this very moment is the West; there is no need to wait for rebirth after death. Therefore, great teachers of the Pure Land school say that, in order to ensure rebirth in the West, one must be able to be born in the West now. The Sixth

Patriarch said in the Platform Sūtra that the West may be moved before you all; this is precisely what he meant.

III. “After taking food, they engage in circumambulation”

Those who explain the teachings mistake this Mahāyāna scriptural passage, which benefits the masses, for a Lesser Vehicle passage concerning self-benefit. They say that after eating their fill in the West, people have nothing to do but walk about, take a stroll, and digest their food. This is truly laughable and utterly mistaken. In this passage, the two characters fànshí should be read in their alternative pronunciations: fàn as fǎn, “return,” and shí as sì, “attend to.”

That is, after listening in the West to the teachings of Buddhas and bodhisattvas, partaking fully of the Dharma food, and accomplishing the great Way, one should travel throughout the ten directions and teach and transform sentient beings. Like a crow returning to feed its parent, one in turn gives sentient beings the Dharma food. Thus the Pure Land school is Mahāyāna; it is not merely a matter of looking after oneself, eating one’s fill in the West, strolling about, and enjoying oneself.

IV. “When the lotus opens, one sees the Buddha and awakens to the unborn”

It is commonly said that those reborn in the lowest grade sit within lotuses in the lotus pond and must wait twelve kalpas before their lotuses open, allowing them to emerge and see the Buddha. From the wording, this interpretation may indeed seem correct, but this is not the meaning of the scripture.

Rather, it means that those reborn in the lowest grade are firmly attached to appearances, so that the flower of their mind cannot open at once. They must undergo twelve kalpas of arduous practice, gradually eliminating their clinging and deluded habits, before the flower of the mind can open and they can personally see their own Buddha-nature. It does not mean that they can pay homage to Amitābha Buddha only after twelve kalpas.

If they could see the Buddha only after twelve kalpas, then would they not already have seen the Buddha when he came to guide them to rebirth in the Western Pure Land? Why wait another twelve kalpas? Furthermore, “when the lotus opens, one sees the Buddha” does not mean that only after rebirth in the West does the lotus open and one see the Buddha. It means that when we now exert ourselves in Buddha-recitation, until deluded thoughts cease, the Buddha-name vanishes, and subject and object both fall away, the flower of the mind naturally opens and we personally see our own Buddha-nature. This is like the Chan school’s direct realization of Buddha-nature. Thus Pure Land is Chan.

V. Regarding the Lotus Opening After Twelve Kalpas

Those who lecture on the scriptures all explain it as meaning that those reborn in the lowest grade must sit dejectedly within a lotus-womb for twelve kalpas, until the lotus finally opens and they may emerge. They do not realize that the lotus-womb of twelve kalpas refers to the womb-prison in the borderland, the city of doubt; it does not refer to the Land of the Common Residence of Ordinary Beings and Sages in the West for those reborn in the lowest grade.

So long as you are reborn in the Land of the Common Residence of Ordinary Beings and Sages in the West, even if you are reborn in the lowest grade, you are free to move about; you are not confined in a lotus-womb prison.

Those who remain confined in the lotus-womb prison do so because, at the time of rebirth, they lacked true faith and earnest vows, believing only half-heartedly and harboring doubts. Thus they are reborn in the borderland, the city of doubt. Otherwise, they certainly would not be born there, much less remain confined in the lotus-womb prison. Of course, not everyone reborn in the Western Pure Land must pass through the borderland, the city of doubt. Nor is there any fixed duration of twelve kalpas. If you practice diligently, the time is short; otherwise, it is long. A single thought may transcend a million kalpas, let alone twelve kalpas, which pass in but an instant.

VI. “At the time of death, that Buddha appears before them”

Everyone says that “at the time of death”—that is, when one dies—Amitābha Buddha naturally appears before one. This too is not quite accurate. If a practitioner of the Pure Land school can truly uphold the name single-mindedly, that person can see the Buddha at once and need not wait until death. The Buddha in “seeing the Buddha” refers both to Amitābha Buddha and to the Buddha of one’s own nature.

The four words “at the time of death” do not refer only to the moment of dying. They mean that when, through Buddha-recitation, your deluded thoughts dissolve and the root of birth and death is severed, the Buddha will certainly appear before you. If we wish to transcend birth and death, we must first know the origin of birth and death, just as one who wishes to cut off water must first know its source. Otherwise, if we blindly proceed in confusion, not only will we fail to see results, but we will also invite trouble.

We must know that the reason we undergo birth and death is that we have deluded thoughts. If we were not deluded by external appearances, if deluded thoughts did not stir, and if we created no karma, then there would fundamentally be no birth and death. This is because our Buddha-nature originally has neither birth nor death. It is only because we are deluded by external appearances, fail to abide in our own nature, and allow ignorance and deluded thoughts to stir that we create karma, undergo retribution, and vainly suffer the cycle of birth and death.

When we diligently practice Buddha-recitation until the sense faculties and their objects fall away and subject and object both fall away, that is the time when the root of birth and death is severed; it is also the time of death. Thus “at the time of death” does not mean waiting until one dies. It means practicing continuously and closely, until after long effort one’s practice reaches complete maturity and one-pointedness of mind without distraction; then Buddha-nature naturally appears before one.

VII. Reading and Reciting Mahāyāna Scriptures

The Buddha said that, in order to attain rebirth in the highest grade, one must read Mahāyāna scriptures. Yet there are now people who advocate that practitioners of the Pure Land school need read only the Amitābha Sūtra and the Infinite Life Sūtra, and should not read any other scriptures at all; otherwise, they say, one will become confused and be unable to attain rebirth in the West.

Is this not plainly opposing the Buddha and misleading believers? When the Buddha taught the reading and recitation of Mahāyāna scriptures, he was teaching people to open the true eye and expand their wisdom, so that they would genuinely understand the truth of rebirth in the Western Pure Land. One must not cling to anything; only then can one attain rebirth in the highest grade. Although the Western Pure Land is a resultant land brought about by the Buddha’s cultivation over countless kalpas, it is also inseparable from the wondrous functioning of Buddha-nature. It must not be regarded as substantially real, thereby giving rise to a clinging mind.

The Diamond Sūtra says: “All appearances are illusory.” This teaches us to recognize this principle clearly and receive its genuine benefit. Otherwise, if we cling to things as substantially real, the mind will not be empty and obstacles will arise; how could one attain rebirth in the highest grade? Let us consider the words of the great teachers of the Pure Land school, and we will know the truth: “One is born, indeed, yet has not gone; one has gone, indeed, yet has not been born.”

This shows that intrinsic nature is empty and pure, that all things are nonexistent, and that all material appearances are empty illusions. We need only respond to conditions and make use of them without clinging; then nothing obstructs us, and we may be carefree and at ease. Otherwise, we are bound and fettered; how could we attain rebirth in the highest grade?

C. Misguidance Concerning Practice

C. Misguided Views on Spiritual Practice

I. The Claim That Buddha-Recitation Does Not Require One-Pointedness Without Distraction

The Buddha taught that Buddha-recitation must be undertaken with wholehearted concentration: whether for one day, two days, or as many as seven days, one should attain one-pointedness of mind without distraction, and that Buddha will appear before one. Yet teachers today say that Buddha-recitation need not attain one-pointedness without distraction; they say that merely reciting the Buddha's name with a scattered mind is enough for rebirth in the Western Pure Land. This truly harms people.

If scattered Buddha-recitation can truly lead to rebirth in the West, why did the Buddha teach that Buddha-recitation requires one-pointedness without distraction? Why did Mahāsthāmaprāpta Bodhisattva instruct people who recite the Buddha's name to "gather in the six sense faculties and maintain uninterrupted pure mindfulness"? To "gather in the six sense faculties" means to collect the mind on the Buddha and not allow even the slightest deluded thought to stir.

"Uninterrupted pure mindfulness" is even more difficult. This is the practice of safeguarding realization after awakening in the Chan school; it is not something ordinary people can accomplish, so I shall not discuss it further now. Master Hanshan put it even more clearly: "If the mouth recites Amitābha while the mind is scattered, even shouting until one's throat breaks is in vain." He also said that one must press forward in Buddha-recitation with utmost effort, like pushing a heavily laden cart up a mountain, without the slightest slackening. According to the teachings of the Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and patriarchs, the teachings of today's teachers are clearly misleading and must not be trusted.

II. The Claim That Buddha-Recitation Is Unnecessary and That Believing in the Western Land of Ultimate Bliss Is Enough for Rebirth There

This is even more harmful than the preceding claim. The profundity of the Pure Land school lies in the three words faith, vows, and practice. If one truly has deep faith and earnest vows to be reborn in the West, why would one not practice? Moreover, the Pure Land school embodies profound principles in simple, accessible practice; through genuine practice, one tacitly accords with the subtle wonder of the Way.

If one merely speaks without practicing, can one succeed? Only genuine practice demonstrates deep faith and earnest vows. Without practice, how can one's vows be expressed? A journey of a thousand miles begins beneath one's feet. If one does not take even a single step, how can one reach the destination? The teaching that Buddha-recitation is unnecessary is precisely destructive of the Pure Land school. How can it be trusted?

III. The Claim That Rebirth in the West Is Difficult and That It Is Better to Vow for Rebirth in the Borderland, the City of Doubt

This view is still more harmful. Rebirth in the West is what the Buddha vowed to guide sentient beings toward. So long as you sincerely yearn for it and wish to go to that land, you are in accord with the Buddha's great vow. Like a magnet drawing iron, there is no difficulty at all. Moreover, although the Land of Ultimate Bliss is the fruition-land resulting from the Buddha's cultivation at the causal stage, it is not separate from one's own nature.

The intrinsic nature of us sentient beings is no different from that of the Buddha. Since it is a land of intrinsic nature, we sentient beings also have a share in it. So long as the mind-ground is pure, rebirth is simply a return to one's own home; what difficulty could there be? As explained above, those reborn in the Borderland, the City of Doubt, are there because their faith is not genuine and their vows are not earnest. It is not that the Buddha refuses them rebirth and sends them to sit imprisoned in a womb. Once we understand this, we will have no doubts or fears about rebirth in the West and will gladly aspire to it.

In summary, rebirth in the Western Land of Ultimate Bliss is truly not difficult. So long as we have genuine faith and earnest vows and practice faithfully, there is no one who cannot attain rebirth there.

This is especially true of the lowest grade of the lowest rebirth. So long as we genuinely recognize that this Sahā world is a world of suffering, that all forms and appearances are illusory, unreal, unobtainable, and not worth pursuing, we can let go of everything, without the slightest attachment or concern, and leave the mind entirely open and empty. Then, at the time of death, we will naturally be reborn in the Western Land of Ultimate Bliss.

As for seeking the highest grade of the highest rebirth, one must further recognize that even the jeweled land of the West is not ultimately real. It is merely a raft for ferrying people across, a temporary wondrous function, and likewise unobtainable. The Diamond Sūtra says: "All appearances are illusory." Since the West has all kinds of wondrous appearances, it too is clearly illusory.

Yet although appearances are illusory, their wondrous functioning is not absent; this is not annihilationist emptiness. Thus there are nine grades of rebirth, determined by the depth of a practitioner's cultivation and the level of the practitioner's realization of the Way. The Heart Sūtra says: "Form is emptiness; emptiness is form." Form and emptiness are suchness as one: neither attached to emptiness nor attached to existence. Wondrous presence is suchness; this is the Buddha at the fruition stage.

IV. A Third Misunderstanding

(I) Practicing for Future Lives

"The Western Pure Land is difficult to attain rebirth in. Buddha-recitation can only cultivate blessings to be enjoyed in future lives, so that one will not suffer poverty and hardship." This misunderstanding is widely circulated among ordinary Buddha-recitation practitioners. It causes Pure Land practitioners to lose great confidence, so that they seek only to be reborn as human beings and enjoy blessings in future lives, while losing their wisdom-life of rebirth in the West, realizing the Way, and transcending birth and death. What a grievous injustice.

As stated above, rebirth in the highest grade of the highest rebirth is not easy, but the lowest grade of the lowest rebirth presents no great difficulty. So long as you sincerely believe, earnestly vow to attain rebirth, wholeheartedly aspire to the benefits of rebirth in the Western Pure Land, and let go of all affairs and human attachments in the Sahā world, then of ten thousand practitioners, all ten thousand will go; not one will be left behind. This is why I raise this issue especially today: to urge everyone to be clear-minded and not let others' reckless talk delay your own future.

(II) Fear of Having Too Many Deluded Thoughts

When beginners first arouse the resolve and recite the Buddha's name, their deluded thoughts cannot possibly cease at once. Thoughts continually arise and fall, fluttering without rest. Yet Buddha-recitation practitioners often misunderstand this, believing that their faculties are poor and that they are unfit to cultivate the Way. Or they think that Buddha-recitation actually produces more deluded thoughts, so that it would be better not to recite at all. Consequently, they do not practice and ruin their own wisdom-life. This is truly regrettable.

They do not realize that, while reciting the Buddha's name, being aware that their deluded thoughts are moving is actually a good thing. When they are not reciting and are busy and distracted, their thoughts are in turmoil, but they do not see them at all. Now, because of Buddha-recitation, the mind has become relatively still, and they can therefore see the deluded thoughts in motion.

It is like seeing dust in a room when sunlight shines through a crack; or like seeing the sand and mud below only after muddy water has settled and the water above has become clear. Thus this is the light of initial awakening, a sign that one is approaching emptiness, and a very good thing. There is no need to fear having many deluded thoughts. Simply continue reciting patiently. Deluded thoughts will gradually diminish from many to few, and in the end they will disappear.

(III) Fear of Falling into Emptiness

When Buddha-recitation practitioners sincerely and single-mindedly recite the Buddha's name, they may reach a point at which deluded thoughts cease and the Buddha's name can no longer be recited. Fear then arises: they think that they have left the Buddha behind and fallen into emptiness, so they immediately take up the Buddha's name and begin reciting again. They do not realize that this is precisely the time when mind and Buddha commune, become continuous and undivided, and the Pure Land appears before them. Lacking guidance, they fail at this moment to apply vigorous effort, seize the opportunity, and recognize the Original Face. They thus miss the Buddha-recitation samādhi and lose the future opportunity for the highest grade of rebirth. This is truly regrettable.

V. Two Wrong Paths in Practice

There are two wrong paths in the practice of Buddha-recitation that one must know: one is drowsiness and falling asleep; the other is falling into an indeterminate state.

(I) When beginners recite the Buddha's name, deluded thoughts are always fluttering about; this is called restlessness. As their practice gradually deepens and they become settled in meditative stability, they may instead easily grow drowsy and fall asleep. Drowsiness and sleep are often easily confused with entering samādhi, leaving people unable to distinguish them clearly.

This is because those newly entering samādhi inevitably experience something resembling drowsiness or sleep. Those who do not understand think they have fallen asleep and hastily rouse themselves, thereby disrupting the meditative state. This is deeply regrettable. Let us now distinguish samādhi from sleep so as to avoid mistakes. Although those newly entering samādhi may experience something resembling drowsiness or sleep, their bodies do not collapse, their mudrās do not loosen, and their Buddha-recitation does not cease. At such a time, they should quietly maintain the state without moving. In sleep, however, the body collapses, the mudrās loosen, and Buddha-recitation stops. At that time, one should become alert, open one's eyes, recite the Buddha's name aloud to dispel the demon of sleep, and then slowly gather in the mind and enter samādhi again.

(II) Falling into an indeterminate state. Those who recite the Buddha's name single-mindedly and seek nothing are not likely to fall into an indeterminate state. Some people, however, suppress thoughts from arising while seeking to enter samādhi quickly, and they often easily fall into such a state. What is called an indeterminate state is sinking into emptiness and stagnating in quiescence, with no awareness at all; it differs greatly from samādhi. In attaining Buddha-recitation samādhi, although deluded thoughts dissolve and body, mind, and world melt into emptiness, awareness is not absent. Rather, there is clear, numinous knowing that is never

obscured. These must not be confused. Those who cultivate Buddha-recitation samādhi should know the difference.

VI. Worldly Dharmas and Buddhadharma Are Nondual

Another common fault among practitioners is not knowing that worldly dharmas are Buddhadharma and Buddhadharma is worldly dharmas. They therefore often become averse to work, delight in going deep into the mountains to cultivate emptiness, or sit motionless on the meditation cushion all day.

They do not realize that sitting in this way leads only to dead-tree Chan, without living application. At most, they may in the future attain the fruit of arhatship; if things go badly, they may easily fall into an indeterminate state and become stagnant water. They can neither become Buddhas nor attain rebirth in the West. Therefore, when we practice and recite the Buddha's name, we must know that all worldly dharmas are Buddhadharma. Simply do everything with full effort and without attachment: that is Buddhadharma.

Washing rice and cooking, washing and starching clothes—these are Buddha-recitation. Working, writing, designing, and conceiving ideas are nothing other than Buddha-recitation. In this way, work and Buddha-recitation do not obstruct one another. Others will not misunderstand and say that Buddhadharma is passive and world-renouncing; nor will one fall into the stagnant water of sinking into emptiness and lingering in quiescence, and thus into the dead fruition of earth, wood, gold, and stone.

VII. Seeking Samādhi and the Claim That Samādhi Is Unnecessary

Buddha-recitation practitioners often dispute whether samādhi should be sought or not. Those who insist on it pursue it with all their strength and thereby invite demonic obstacles. Those who reject it often drift into Buddha-recitation with a scattered mind and, because deluded thoughts flutter about, fail to attain rebirth in the West. Therefore, when reciting the Buddha's name, we should simply maintain an ordinary mind and recite with single-minded earnestness, without concern for whether samādhi is attained. At first there may be some rising and falling of deluded thoughts, but as practice deepens over time, without seeking samādhi, samādhi will naturally appear. Conversely, if one does not practice diligently but pursues samādhi, one will not only fail to attain samādhi but will also fall into a wrong path.

VIII. The Method of Ten Recitations

The Pure Land school truly provides extraordinary expedient means, attending to every aspect. This also reveals the painstaking care of the Buddha and the patriarchs. For busy Buddhist practitioners who have no leisure to recite the

Buddha's name and cultivate the Way, they specifically established the method of ten recitations: each morning, one faces a Buddha image, burns incense, makes prostrations, and then recites the Buddha's name for ten breaths. This is counted as completing the morning service.

Everyone therefore practices according to this method, considering ten breaths of recitation sufficient to complete it. They do not realize that this method of ten recitations was intended for busy people who have no time to practice, sit in meditation, and concentrate on Buddha-recitation. It is a wondrous method that uses a brief period and the breath to gather in the mind, prevent deluded thoughts from arising, and purify the original mind.

Once the mind has become pure, maintain this pure mind constantly amid walking, standing, sitting, and lying down. Do not suppose that, after ten recitations before the Buddha, you may let your thoughts run wild or behave recklessly. Therefore, after making ten recitations before the Buddha, you must continue Buddha-recitation unceasingly in the four postures. Never think that ten recitations settle the matter.

IX. Rebirth in the West Through Only a Little Buddha-Recitation

Because of the bodhisattvas' compassion and the simplicity of the practice, people often mistakenly believe that one need only casually recite the Buddha's name a few times to be reborn in the West. They do not know how rebirth in the West takes place, nor how the Buddha comes to guide one. Chan Master Yongming Yanshou tells us in the Records of the Mind Mirror: "When the Buddha comes to guide one, there is in truth neither coming nor going."

This guidance is like the moon in the sky. The moon does not move, yet its reflection appears simultaneously in a thousand rivers and streams. If you walk east, its reflection goes east; if you walk west, it too goes west. It appears that the moon follows you east and west, but in fact the moon neither goes east nor west.

The Buddha's coming to receive one is the same. As soon as your mind is pure, the form of the Buddha appears within your mind. If your mind is impure, it is like a basin of muddy water that cannot reflect the moon: you will not see the Buddha come to receive you, and you cannot be reborn in the West. From this we may know that whether one can be reborn in the West depends entirely on the purity of one's mind. It is certainly not that the Buddha runs up to us and pulls us off to the West.

Thus, what is reborn in the West is not this foul bag of skin, but our pure mind. Therefore, if we are to be reborn in the West, we must use the Buddha's name to cleanse our defiled minds of greed, anger, and ignorance. It is not enough merely to recite the Buddha's name casually a few times.

X. On Rebirth While Carrying Karma and Rebirth Through Eliminating Karma

The original purpose of cultivating the Way through Buddha-recitation is to eliminate karmic obstacles and realize the Way; there is no question of carrying karma. The Contemplation Sūtra of Amitāyus Buddha says that a person of the lowest grade who recites the Buddha's name can eliminate the grave offenses of birth and death accumulated over fifty or eighty billion kalpas. This shows that Buddha-recitation is the best dharma gate for eliminating karma and realizing the Way. So long as we recite the Buddha's name with sincere reverence, all karmic obstacles can be eliminated. We need not fear that deep karmic obstacles will make rebirth in the West difficult.

Why, then, do some people now speak at length of rebirth while carrying karma? Because the various evil karmas of greed, anger, ignorance, pride, and doubt that we have accumulated over countless lives and kalpas cannot all be eliminated at once. Master Ouyi said: "The karmic obstacles eliminated through our cultivation of the Way and Buddha-recitation are only like the soil under a fingernail; those not yet eliminated are like the soil of the great earth." For this reason, the evil karma not yet eliminated through our Buddha-recitation remains very deep and substantial; it cannot all be eliminated in this one lifetime. When we are reborn in the West at the end of life, we cannot avoid being reborn while carrying this residual, uneliminated evil karma.

The Pure Land school's extraordinary causes and conditions for rebirth have also led students to misunderstanding. They think that, since one can be reborn while carrying karma, there is no harm in creating a little evil karma under the compulsion of greed while practicing. Others think that, since one can be reborn while carrying karma, there is no need to recite the Buddha's name with whole-hearted concentration; they believe that casually reciting a few phrases of the Buddha's name is enough. Thus, they have concocted the fallacious doctrine of distracted Buddha-recitation and rebirth while carrying karma.

Still others have gone further, claiming that rebirth in the West is so easy that, so long as we wish to go there, we may be reborn even without Buddha-recitation. In this way they have fragmented the Pure Land school, leaving later students at a loss as to what to follow and unable to be reborn in the West.

This is truly regrettable! You must know that although rebirth in the West is a practice relying on other-power, depending on the Buddha's guidance, other-power alone, without self-power—the power of Buddha-recitation—will not do. The ancients said that Buddha-recitation and rebirth in the West are like a fly clinging to the tail of a fine horse: if it makes no effort of its own to hold tightly to the horse's tail, it cannot rise up. How, then, can one fail to recite the Buddha's name with

single-minded devotion? Mahāsthāmaprāpta Bodhisattva teaches us to recite the Buddha's name by gathering in the six sense faculties and maintaining uninterrupted pure mindfulness. How can one be reborn in the West without concentrated Buddha-recitation, or without Buddha-recitation at all?

These fallacious doctrines must not be lightly believed. In rebirth while carrying karma, one can carry only the residual karma that has not yet been eliminated. Never create karma and harm others while reciting the Buddha's name and cultivating practice; such a person can absolutely not be reborn in the Western Pure Land.

XI. Concerning States That Appear in Samādhi During Buddha-Recitation Practice

When we first begin Buddha-recitation, we cannot avoid a profusion of wandering thoughts. Gradually, as the mind becomes pure, various different states may appear. Some see the Buddha appear before them; some see dazzling light; some see the sublime realm of the West. Everyone takes these to be auspicious signs, brought about by the efficacy of Buddha-recitation; they praise one another and cling to them without letting go. They do not realize that all such appearances are illusory and not real.

The Diamond Sūtra says: "All appearances are illusory." All such appearances, whether sacred or ordinary, pure or defiled, are false appearances and are certainly not real. One must not cling to them. If, through ignorance, one takes them to be real, there is a danger of falling prey to demons. In Shanghai there were two lay practitioners. One, while reciting the Buddha's name on a third-floor balcony, saw the Buddha come to receive him and leapt down, only to fall to his death.

The other saw a sacred realm of the West appear in a lotus pond and likewise jumped into the pond and drowned. These were disastrous results brought about by not knowing that such appearances are illusory and taking them for real. Therefore, in studying Buddhism, we must know that all states appearing in samādhi are illusory manifestations. We must never take them as real, lest we become deeply trapped in error and fail to realize the Way.

But when a person who recites the Buddha's name is at the end of life, if they simply recite the Buddha's name single-mindedly and seek nothing, a sacred realm will naturally appear before them. In the time of a finger snap, they will be reborn in the Western Land of Ultimate Bliss.

I urge you all to gain a true understanding of the Western Land of Ultimate Bliss and, relying on Amitābha Buddha's great vows and skillful means, to be reborn there and escape the six realms. This is truly the most expedient, simplest, and swiftest path in the Buddhadharma. Yet you must practice earnestly. Never heed slanderous words,

fail to make genuine effort, recite the Buddha's name with a distracted mind, and hope to be reborn while carrying karma. Still less should you refrain from Buddha-recitation and seek rebirth through empty faith and false vows in an effort-free practice. That is absolutely impossible.

I have seen many people whose Buddha-recitation lacked earnestness, as well as some who advocated distracted Buddha-recitation and rebirth while carrying karma, or claimed that one could be reborn without even needing Buddha-recitation. At the end of life, their agony—wishing to be reborn but unable to be reborn, wishing to die but unable to die—was truly alarming. Therefore, without sparing the karma of speech, I have tediously set forth these remarks. Are they appropriate? Since this concerns the lifeblood of Buddhism and the wisdom-life of later students, it is a matter of great importance that admits of no misunderstanding. I hope that all great virtuous teachers everywhere will generously instruct me and correct my errors. My gratitude would be boundless.