Attaining Rebirth: Eliminating Karma Versus Carrying Karma

English Edition



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Prajñā as Its Principle | Dhāraṇī as Its Method | The Pure Land as Its Ultimate Destination



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Lately, almost everywhere across the country, a spirited debate has emerged regarding a unique, alternative expedient in Pure Land School of Buddhism: “attaining rebirth with carrying karma.” One side argues that for rebirth to truly occur, one must first entirely eliminate their delusional karma. The opposing side contends that this is unnecessary, insisting that practitioners can instead carry their karma with them into rebirth. Both sides present their own coherent arguments, creating a seemingly irreconcilable divide.

Those who advocate the 'rebirth after eliminating karma' theory argue that the concept of 'rebirth with karma' is a harmful fallacy. This belief not only undermines the Pure Land School practitioners' aspiration for rebirth at the end of life, but also detracts from the dignified and solemn image of the entire sect. They contend that 'karma' itself is defiled and obstructive, completely incompatible with the Pure Land and a cause of hindrance on the path; how, then, could one carry it into the Western Pure land? Therefore, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas have never mentioned this highly erroneous notion of 'rebirth with karma' in any of the sutras or treatises.

Those who advocate the "rebirth while carrying karma" theory say: "Although the expression "rebirth while carrying karma" was not directly said by the Buddhas or Bodhisattvas,

but this meaning is not absent from the sutras and treatises. For example, The Sutra of Bhikshu Nāgasena states: "If you place a large stone on a boat, the stone will not sink due to the force of the boat. If there is no boat, the small stone will also sink." The stone represents the "karma" created by ordinary beings, and the boat represents the power of the Buddha. Does this not clearly mean that with the power of the Buddha, one can be reborn with karma? Therefore, as long as we, the Pure Land practitioners, have firm faith and sincere vow, and single-mindedly recite the Buddha's name, we don't need to eliminate any karma, and we will definitely be reborn at the end of our lives. The argument that rebirth only after karma being eliminated is a demonic teaching, which cannot be trusted and must be completely overthrown.

The two opposing arguments have led to a deadlock, causing significant debate within the Buddhist community. Without a consensus, future students struggle to obtain guidance on how to practice in a way that accords with the Dharma. Therefore, we invite virtuous and prominent masters from all sides to share their perspectives and discuss this matter openly aimed at reaching a sound conclusion, clarifying uncertainties, setting the record straight, and keeping future students from going astray.

To determine which of these two views is correct, we must first understand where they came from. Then, through a comparative discussion, we can identify their contradictions and draw a sound conclusion.

A. Those who hold the theory of "Rebirth Though Eliminating Karma"

1. Looking at many Pure Land practitioners in recent times, one finds that they are unwilling to sincerely and diligently recite the Buddha's name. Instead, they merely go along with the group and perform the morning and evening practices in a casual and perfunctory manner. It is as though elementary school students are simply handing in their assignments: once they have finished the recitations and liturgical practices, they consider their Buddha-recitation practice to be complete. They fail to put real effort into chanting to transform their deluded habits of attachment and craving, or to shift their delusive thoughts in order to eliminate inner impurities. Instead, they often shift the entire responsibility of their future rebirth in the Pure Land onto Amitabha Buddha alone.

If they do not see Buddhas or Bodhisattvas： coming to receive them at the moment of death and fail to reach the Western Pure Land, they mistakenly blame it on the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. For this reason, Master Lianchi once

lamented that ‘many recite the Buddha's name, but few attain rebirth in the Western Pure Land.' This is all because practitioners lack single-minded devotion and seek only easy convenience, and thereby delaying and harming their own progress. Therefore, we must sound a wake-up alarm and advocate 'Rebirth through Eliminating Karma' to awaken the masses of practitioners from their deep and confused slumber."

2. Nowadays, many Pure Land practitioners misunderstand the concept of ‘rebirth with karma.' They assume that as long as they possess Faith and Vows, and perform their morning and evening liturgies, it is of no consequence if they commit unwholesome deeds, believing they can simply be reborn carrying their karma regardless!

In Shenjiamen, I noticed many people drying fish and shrimp. I asked them, 'Aren't most people here in the Zhoushan area Buddhists?' They replied, 'Yes, we are all Buddhists.' Confused, I couldn't help but ask, 'Then why do you still kill living beings?' They answered, 'We will achieve rebirth in the Pure Land with our karma!” They interpret the term “rebirth while carrying karma” in this way. Aren’t they destroying the holy image of the Pure Land School?

3. To clear away the recent decadent and polluted trends within the Pure Land School and to revitalize Buddhism, we

must vigorously advocate ‘rebirth in the Pure Land through eliminating karma.' This serves as a wake-up call to ensure that Pure Land practitioners truly achieve rebirth in the Western Pure Land instead of just shouting slogans. Thereby, this will prevent the core teachings of the Pure Land tradition from being obscured and eventually fade into extinction.

B. Advocates of "Rebirth with Karma"

1. Fearing that individuals might be intimidated by challenges and hesitate to embrace the faith and take up the practice, which would subsequently damage the Pure Land school and sever the wisdom-life of sentient beings."

2. Misunderstanding the difficulty of "rebirth through eliminating karma" and not knowing what actually constitutes clearing karma to attain rebirth. It is generally believed that karma is only eliminated when ignorance is completely wiped out and all karmic emotional attachments are emptied. Isn't this far too difficult? How many people could actually achieve it? Therefore, it should be firmly opposed.

3. Failing to truly understand the profound essence of "rebirth with karma. They only know that carrying karma is convenient, but don’t know what kind of karma is being carried. Furthermore, they fail to realize that when reciting

the Buddha's name with every thought, they are precisely eliminating their own mental karma at the very root of the mind, which serves as the true cause for future rebirth.

From the two viewpoints discussed above, whether they are proponents of ‘eliminating karma for rebirth' or ‘carrying karma for rebirth,' both start from good intentions. Both want to protect Pure Land practitioners so they can truly be reborn in the West, in order to avoid delays and failure. Since their ultimate goal is exactly the same and there is no inherent conflict between them, it should not be difficult to find common ground, reconcile their differences, and arrive at a unified conclusion.

To reach a unified conclusion, we must first examine and analyze the meaning of the word “karma,” because the central issue in both of these viewpoints is precisely the question of karma. Then, what exactly is “karma”?

The Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana states: “From ignorance as the cause arise the three subtle characteristics.” The first of these three subtle characteristics is the “characteristic of karma” (karmalakṣaṇa). What, then, is the “characteristic of karma”?

Originally, from beginningless time, we sentient beings have failed to abide in the intrinsic nature of Suchness (tathatā). Deluded by ignorance, we become unaware, and the mind

begins to stir. This stirring of mind is what is called “karma.” Therefore, “karma” carries the meaning of “action” or “activity”; in the scriptures it is also referred to as “delusion, karma, and suffering,” or more simply as “delusion-karma.”

The term “characteristic” (lakṣaṇa) refers to this: because the mind moves and becomes deluded about its original perfect luminosity, the originally formless Suchness gives rise to the illusory appearances of space and the four great elements. These correspond to what the Dharma Characteristics (Faxiang) school calls the “object aspect” (nimitta-bhāga). The originally inherent wisdom-light is transformed into the deluded perceiving consciousness, which is called the “seeing aspect” (darśana-bhāga).

All phenomena in the world of sentient beings—everything that possesses form and appearance—are established on the basis of these two aspects: the seeing aspect and the object aspect. These two aspects are also identical with the second and third of the three subtle characteristics described in the Awakening of Faith: the “characteristic of perceiving” and the “characteristic of the object realm”

From this, it is evident that karma is precisely volitional action. Since sentient beings differ in their degrees of delusion and awakening, the karma they create also differs,

and the karmic fruits they manifest are correspondingly distinct.

The karma created by ordinary beings is called defiled karma (sāsrava karma), which leads to the karmic results of segmented birth and death within the Three Realms and Six Paths. The karma created by the Two Vehicles is called undefiled karma (anāsrava karma), which leads to rebirth in the Land of Expedient Means with Remnants. The activities performed by bodhisattvas are called neither-defiled-nor-undefiled karma, which lead to the fruition of the Land of True Reward and Adornment.

Ordinary beings are deeply mired in delusion, clinging to illusory things as solid reality and mistaking false appearances for truth. Driven to satisfy their own selfish desires, they do not hesitate to commit vast amounts of unwholesome karma. Consequently, they are unable to transcend birth and death, and their cycling through Samsara never ceases. Today, if we wish to attain rebirth in the Pure Land and horizontally transcend the Three Realms, yet fail to eliminate this fundamental root of birth and death—the karma of being deluded by phenomena and the illusory stirring of the mind—how can we possibly fulfil our original aspiration and truly realize our vow of rebirth in the Pure Land?

Someone may ask, “To be reborn in the Pure Land, we rely on the great compassion and vast vows of Amitabha Buddha to receive and guide us. Why do we need to eliminate our karma before we can be reborn there?” The answer is: “If delusions and karmic obstructions have not been purified, one will inevitably remain attached to all the illusory appearances of the Saha world. Although the Buddha may come to receive and guide such a person, because the mind is still deluded and tainted by karma, one will be unable to see the Buddha and will miss the precious opportunity for rebirth in the Pure Land.”

Chan Master Yongming Shou said, “The Buddha is like the moon in the sky. It reflects upon thousands of rivers and waters, but not in the murky water. If the mind of someone who recites the Buddha’s name is not clear and pure, it is like dirty water that cannot reflect the moon and thus cannot see the Buddha.” If one does not see the Buddha at the moment of death, how can one be reborn in the Pure Land?

Many individuals who recite the Buddha's name, due to their greedy attachment to gold, silver, and treasures, end up reborn as wealth-guarding ghosts; or, due to their infatuation with their wives and children, fall to become home-guarding ghosts; or, out of attachment to their physical bodies and infatuation with the splendor of their graves and

burial goods, sink to become corpse-guarding ghosts, and so on.

As the ancient masters said, "It is futile to row a boat while it is moored to a post!" This means that if we wish to be reborn in the Western Pure Land, yet refuse to let go of our attachments to the Sahā world, it is just like trying to row a boat being moored tightly to a post on the shore. No matter how much force we exert, the boat cannot move forward. How then can we attain rebirth in the Western Pure Land?

Given this, wouldn’t rebirth in the Western Pure Land be extremely difficult? No! It is not difficult at all! Have we not heard that the Buddha said, "Reciting the holy name of Amitābha Buddha just once can eliminate eighty billion kalpas of heavy karmic offenses from the cycle of birth and death"? We now recite the Buddha's name every day and at all times—not just once. What karma then is there left to fear that cannot be eliminated, or what sins that cannot be wiped away?

Therefore, eliminating karma to attain rebirth is by no means a difficult task. We only need to see through all the sounds, sights, possessions, profits, wives, wealth, children, and official status of this Sahā world, recognizing them all as mere dreams, illusions, bubbles, and shadows—fundamentally unobtainable—and thus cease to pursue or

cling to them. Instead, we should wholeheartedly apply the Buddha-recitation method of "mind-chanting and ear-listening" to cultivate diligently and sincerely, then even the heaviest karma can ultimately be dissolved into the realm of nonexistence.

You might wonder, "Why is it so easy?" The answer is that karma arises from the mind, not from anywhere else. Now, our minds are completely in accord with the Buddha, and every thought is of the Buddha. The Buddha is the mind, and the mind is the Buddha. The whole mind is the Buddha, and the whole Buddha is the mind. Where, then, can karma find a place to stand?

Moreover, at the very moment of our death and rebirth in the Pure Land, we perceive only Amitābha Buddha and the assembly of holy beings coming to receive and guide us, with absolutely nothing else in sight. At such a time, what karma is there left to speak of? Is this not precisely because the power from our lifelong Buddha-recitation has eliminated our karma? And is it not also due to the compassionate power of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas to embrace and receive us that our karma has been eliminated?

Speaking like this, the theory of "eliminating karma and attaining rebirth" appears to be firmly established. Could it be that the theory of "rebirth with karma" is incorrect? No,

"rebirth with karma" is not wrong either, because our ability to attain rebirth relies entirely on the perfection of our skill in Buddha-recitation, which results in us no longer clinging to the Sahā World. This state is called "the maturation of pure karma." in technical terms. Although this "pure karma" is not contaminated karma, isn't it also karma? If we take it with us to rebirth, isn't it "rebirth with karma"?

Those who attain rebirth in the lowest grade have not yet attained a mind that is empty and pure. They still cling to appearances, and there remains a sense of place and a notion of being born somewhere, which confines them to being reborn in a realm where ordinary beings and saints coexist. The term "ordinary" refers to sentient beings with karma.

"If one attains the highest grade of rebirth, birth is precisely non-birth, and non-birth is precisely birth; a single direction is all ten directions, and all ten directions are one direction. Pure and impure are without distinction, and East and West are undivided. The mind is empty and thoughts are pure, yet one clings not to emptiness or purity. Beyond learning and abiding in non-action, yet is unaware even of non-action. At this stage, whether one 'carries karma' or 'carries no karma' becomes entirely irrelevant—for is not 'carrying no karma' precisely the total elimination of karma?"

Some might argue that describing the maturation of pure karma as 'rebirth carrying residual karma' seems a bit forced. Let us now further examine the so-called “defiled karma” referred to by ordinary people when they speak of “rebirth with karma.” From beginningless time throughout countless kalpas, we sentient beings have remained deluded and unaware, deeply attached to appearances and having accumulated heavy layers of defilement.

Although, through diligent and arduous practice of Buddha-recitation, we have now attained some awakening and come to understand that all worldly and supramundane dharmas are ultimately unobtainable, and that karmic obstructions and offenses are like flowers in the sky or the moon reflected in water—fundamentally nonexistent, yet although this principle may be deeply realized, our old habitual tendencies are not easily eliminated all at once.

They still require a long period of continual purification, sweeping away and polishing, before we can gradually approach the higher stages of realization. It is certainly not possible to completely eradicate all ignorance and habitual obstructions in a single moment.

In the Chan Buddhism school, an enlightened practitioner is said to have ascended to the First Bhūmi, which is the 'Stage of Seeing the Way' (darśana-mārga). In the Dharma-

Character (Yogācāra) School, this corresponds to the 'Stage of Thorough Realization.'

Beyond this, there remain the stages of cultivation from the Second Bhūmi through the Tenth Bhūmi, which constitute the path of cultivation (bhāvanā-mārga), and then the ultimate stage beyond the Ten Bhūmis, culminating in Buddhahood.

This requires the practitioner to exert diligent effort to eliminate their ignorance and habitual obstacles layer by layer, in order to ascend through the stages one by one. Who could possibly accomplish this in a single lifetime, completely dissolving all ignorance and suddenly realizing Buddhahood?

The sutras state that even a Bodhisattva of Equal Enlightenment (Samyak-sambodhi Bhūmi) still has one final trace of ignorance yet to be eliminated. Is this unextinguished remnant of ignorance not precisely a form of karma? Since even a Bodhisattva of Equal Enlightenment still has a trace of karma remaining, who could possibly realize this level of attainment in a single lifetime? Therefore, to be reborn while carrying this unextinguished remnant of karma—is this not precisely what is meant by 'attaining rebirth with carrying karma'?

Thus, to say that one can attain rebirth with carrying karma is by no means incorrect; however, one must not misinterpret its implication. It is a grave mistake to believe that as long as we practice Buddha-recitation, we can indulge in wrongdoing under the assumption that we will simply carry our karma with us anyway.

In summary, our Buddha-recitation is precisely the practice of eliminating karma. Attaining rebirth in the Pure Land originally means that one goes there after the elimination of delusions and karmic obstructions. Moreover, this karma is eliminated through reliance on the compassionate power of the Buddha, so there is nothing difficult about it.

Therefore, there is no need to fear or doubt the teaching of “rebirth after eliminating karmic obstructions,” nor should one, out of fear and suspicion, rise up in a heated opposition against it.

At the same time, those who advocate 'rebirth through eliminating karma' need not reject 'rebirth carrying karma' or denounce it as demonic speech simply because the latter lacks explicit proclamation from the Buddha's golden mouth in the scriptures —thereby causing practitioners to become unsettled and confused, not knowing what to follow.

As we all know, different eras have different grammatical structures and ways of expressing ideas, and the vocabulary

used varies as well. The Buddha entered parinirvāṇa more than two thousand years ago. Although the specific term “rebirth with karma” was not used at that time, what matters is that the underlying meaning and implication are contained within the teachings of the scriptures.

Because, as shown by the above discussion, “carrying karma” and “eliminating karma” may appear different on the surface, but in essence they are completely the same. Within the elimination of karma, there is the carrying of karma; within the carrying of karma, there is the elimination of karma. They are one in two and two in one, with no contradiction whatsoever. Why, then, should we continue to argue endlessly over minor distinctions?

In addition, during this debate, some people have advocated the view that “rebirth with karma” means carrying only past karma, and not present karma. Of course, this viewpoint arises from a good intention: they fear that people might misunderstand the teaching and continue committing unwholesome actions even after taking up Buddha-recitation practice, thereby losing the opportunity for rebirth in the Pure Land.

However, when examined from the standpoint of its underlying reasoning, this position appears somewhat inappropriate. For what are called “past karma” and

“present karma” are nothing more than two categories: karma created in the past and karma being created in the present, or karma accumulated throughout countless past lives and karma created in this present lifetime.

From the perspective of ordinary beings’ deluded thoughts, which manifest the three divisions of time—past, present, and future—this distinction may appear perfectly reasonable. Yet, from the ultimate reality of Suchness (tathatā), these distinctions of past, present, and future fundamentally do not exist.

The Diamond Sūtra states: “The mind of the past cannot be obtained; the mind of the present cannot be obtained; the mind of the future cannot be obtained.” This means that these three divisions of the mind throughout time are merely illusory manifestations of deluded thoughts and are ultimately unobtainable.

The so-called three divisions of time are established by taking the “present” as the reference point, from which the past and the future are distinguished. But the “present” itself has no fixed place to stand. The very moment we call it “the present,” it has already become the past.

Consider the second hand of a clock: it is constantly moving from moment to moment. At what point can we truly find a

“present” that remains? Since the present itself has no fixed basis, where then could there be a past or a future?

Therefore, the Avataṃsaka Sūtra states: “The ten periods of time, ancient and present, from beginning to end, are never separate from this very thought-moment.” When this very thought-moment is empty, what we call past and future are nothing more than flowers in the sky and illusory appearances that have vanished. Where, then, can we seek the three divisions of time?

Since the three divisions of time are ultimately unobtainable, one should not say that one carries only past karma and not present karma.

Furthermore, as mentioned above, karma means “action” or “activity.” It is not only the doing of harmful deeds that constitutes karma; performing good deeds is also karma. Throughout the course of a single lifetime, we do not know how much karma we create.

Moreover, “who among human beings, apart from sages, can be free from mistakes?” It is perhaps unavoidable that we may occasionally commit unwholesome actions. At times, we may intend to do something good but inadvertently cause harm, turning it into an unwholesome act. Or we may have committed a harmful action without realizing it at the time.

If we say that rebirth with karma means carrying only past karma but not present karma, then would this not imply that all such people—whether those who perform good deeds or those who perform harmful deeds—would be unable to attain rebirth in the Pure Land?

If this were truly the case, why does the Contemplation Sutra of Amitāyus Buddha say:

“Even those who have committed the five rebellious acts and the ten evil deeds, if at the moment of death they encounter a virtuous spiritual mentor who provides them with guidance, causing them to sincerely repent with one-pointed mind, can still attain rebirth through ten recitations of the Buddha’s name”?

The Buddha’s words are never false, and the scriptures do not speak in vain. These people who have committed the five rebellious acts and the ten evil deeds can still attain rebirth through ten recitations at the moment of death. Does this not prove that even those carrying what the proponents call “present karma” can also attain rebirth? From this, we can see that “rebirth with karma” does not distinguish between past karma and present karma.

Furthermore, karma originally arises from the deluded activity of ignorance. Once we awaken and illuminate it with the light of true wisdom, both present karma and past karma

are instantly extinguished. This is what is meant by “when the mind is empty, karma disappears.” Therefore, even those who have committed the five rebellious acts and the ten evil deeds can attain rebirth through ten recitations at the moment of death.

This is like a dark room: whether it has been closed off for many years or has only just been sealed, once the door is opened, the windows are uncovered, or an electric light is switched on, the darkness immediately disappears. How could there be any distinction between darkness that is “present” and darkness that is “old”?

At this point, someone may ask: “If present karma and past karma can both be eliminated all at once, why did you say earlier that one is reborn with remaining karma?” This is indeed a good question! If all karma has already been completely eliminated, what remaining karma could there possibly be to carry?

One must understand that although the darkness in a room is dispelled instantly once light enters, if the room has been sealed for many years, the musty and stale odor accumulated inside cannot be removed immediately. It requires prolonged ventilation and gradual cleaning, wiping, and polishing before the room can slowly be restored to its original condition.

This musty odor that has not yet been completely removed is like our remaining karma that has not yet been fully exhausted. Therefore, it is this remaining karma that is carried along in rebirth.

Finally, after clarifying these issues, we also hope that those who in the past mistakenly regarded morning and evening recitation services as the completion of Buddha-recitation practice will correct this misunderstanding. In addition to the morning and evening services, one should also sit upright and recite the Buddha's name with the same dedication as in Chan meditation.

The ancient masters taught us to recite the Buddha's name one hundred thousand times each day. Their purpose was to encourage us to remain free from heedlessness, transform the deluded mind into the Buddha-mind, and accumulate the true provisions for attaining rebirth in the Pure Land in the future.

If we can truly practice according to these instructions, while also cultivating all wholesome deeds and refraining from all unwholesome actions, then we will certainly attain rebirth—ten thousand practitioners cultivating, ten thousand practitioners attaining rebirth. What doubts or fears could there possibly be?

May everyone abide in peace and ease, and may you attain rebirth in the highest grade of the Pure Land of Peace and Nourishment (Sukhāvatī).

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Dedication of Merit

May the merit of this deed
Extend universally to all;
May we and all sentient beings
Together attain the Buddha Way.

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