Key Issues in Rebirth in the Western Pure Land

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Contents

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I. Exploring “With Faith and Vows Alone, Even Scattered-Mind Buddha-Recitation Can Lead to Rebirth”

II. Exploring Whether One-Pointedness of Mind Without Distraction Is Necessary

III. An Inquiry into “Relying Solely on Amitābha’s Vow-Power for Rebirth While Carrying Karma”

Key Issues in Rebirth in the Western Pure Land

Recently, among fellow practitioners of the Pure Land school, a debate has been brewing over whether rebirth in the Western Pure Land requires one-pointedness of mind without distraction. The points at issue may be summarized in the following three differing views:

1. So long as one possesses faith and vows, one may attain rebirth even while practicing Buddha-recitation with a scattered mind.

2. Buddha-recitation with a scattered mind can only cultivate wholesome roots. To ensure rebirth in the Western Pure Land, one must, in addition to faith and vows, practice earnestly and attain one-pointedness of mind without distraction.

3. So long as one relies on Amitābha’s vow-power, one can attain rebirth while carrying karma; why, then, is one-pointedness of mind without distraction necessary?

Of these three divergent views, the third is the easiest to state: one need hardly practice at all, for by relying solely on Amitābha’s vow-power one can attain rebirth. The second is more difficult: one must attain one-pointedness of mind without distraction before rebirth is possible. The first is comparatively easy: so long as one has faith and vows, Buddha-recitation with a scattered mind can also bring rebirth in the West. Each side has its reasons and neither yields to the other. As a result, later

students are left unable to decide what to believe or how to proceed, not knowing how they should practice in order to accord with the subtlety of the Way.

“How can one truly attain rebirth in the Pure Land?” This is a major and crucial question in the Pure Land school. If it is not clearly and correctly understood, it will indeed harm the practice of the Pure Land school. For the Pure Land Dharma gate is acclaimed as an exceptional expedient means: it enables horizontal transcendence of the three realms, rebirth in the Pure Land, transcendence of birth and death, and complete realization of bodhi.

If one has not yet clearly understood the practice, how can one avoid taking a wrong road and losing one’s direction? Still less can one safely and smoothly attain the goal of rebirth in the Western Pure Land. But if one merely speaks of rebirth in the West while being unable actually to attain it, then the entire purpose is lost and it has no meaning at all.

Then how can one certainly attain rebirth in the Pure Land? Must one attain one-pointedness of mind without distraction? This is indeed a major question worthy of investigation. Therefore, one cannot remain silent and let matters take their course, thereby harming later students. Though I am not equal to the task, I too shall join the discussion of this momentous question of right and wrong. I will now briefly set forth my own limited view and hope that worthy and learned people throughout the country will correct me.

To arrive more readily at a clear answer, I shall divide the three views mentioned above into three questions and discuss them one by one in detail, so as to clarify how rebirth in the Pure Land may be attained and whether one-pointedness of mind without distraction is required.

1. An Inquiry into “So Long as One Possesses Faith and Vows, Buddha-Recitation with a Scattered Mind Can Also Bring Rebirth”

First, I feel that the meaning of this formulation is somewhat unclear.

What exactly is meant by “a scattered mind”? Does it refer to beginning students whose minds cannot immediately become pure, who should not vainly hope for quick results, but must rely on the practice of holding the Buddha’s name to sweep away deluded thoughts and gradually attain one-pointedness? (As Master Lianchi, Master Yinguang, and others have said, the accumulated habitual tendency toward ceaseless deluded stirring over many lives cannot be swept clean by a short period of Buddha-recitation.

It is like a person long afflicted with illness, who cannot be cured by one or two doses of medicine. Therefore, those who recite the Buddha’s name must possess a

long-range resolve, reciting steadily and continuously without slackening. When practice has deepened over a long time, it will certainly prove effective, and one will attain one-pointedness of mind.) Or does it mean that, having now aroused the resolve to recite the Buddha's name and seek rebirth in the West, we may nevertheless remain entangled with the habitual tendencies of ignorance and karma, fastening the conditions of the Sahā world to our minds as though with glue and lacquer, and then naturally attain rebirth in the Western Pure Land when we grow old and die?

If their intention is the former, then this encourages later students not to fear difficulty or be troubled by the mischief of a scattered mind. So long as they establish heroic resolve, set great aspirations, and diligently advance, they will certainly attain one-pointedness and assuredly gain rebirth.

Then we should applaud it with both hands. But if their intention is the latter, we find it deeply regrettable. For this is arsenic and poison that harms later students, and it must never be accepted. We seek rebirth in the Pure Land, yet our minds continually cling to the wives, wealth, children, and status of the Sahā world. The ancients called this "holding fast to a post while shaking the oars." One cannot even set out; how, then, can one enter into responsive communion with Amitābha, become continuous and undivided, and attain rebirth in the Western Pure Land?

National Teacher Yulin said: "In all cultivation, one must assess oneself and the Dharma, and practice with a straightforward mind and straightforward conduct. If one can truly detest the three realms and firmly resolve to attain rebirth, then one should rely exclusively on the Amitābha Sūtra, hold firmly to the sacred name, gather in the six sense faculties, and maintain uninterrupted pure mindfulness. This is what is called holding to the name and attaining one-pointedness of mind without distraction, whereby rebirth is certain. This is the practice of first benefiting oneself and then benefiting others.

"But if one cannot let go emotionally of present wealth, rank, and fame, and does not yet deeply loathe desires for sex and food, then one will not easily develop deep faith in the Dharma gate of rebirth. Even if one has faith, what benefit is there in practicing for the Pure Land with one's body while one's mind clings to the Sahā world?" Patriarch Hanshan said: "Though the mouth recites Amitābha, if the mind is scattered, even shouting until one's throat breaks is futile."

Does this not plainly say that Buddha-recitation with a scattered mind is fruitless? Could it be that these great patriarchs did not understand doctrine as thoroughly as you do, or that what they said was untrue? Some may say that these are words of Chan patriarchs and differ somewhat from the Pure Land school. Then let us cite, as

further evidence, a passage from Master Lianchi's "Third General Exhortation to Buddha-Recitation."

The Master said: "Someone may ask: 'Nowadays, many people recite the Buddha's name, yet few attain rebirth in the West. Why is this?' (This sufficiently shows that those reborn in the West are not the majority.) There are three reasons. First, although they recite the Buddha's name with their mouths, their minds are not wholesome; for this reason they cannot attain rebirth.

"I urge people everywhere: since you recite the Buddha's name, you must act in accordance with the Buddha's teachings. You must accumulate virtue and cultivate blessings; be filial to your parents; loyally serve your ruler; let brothers love one another and husbands and wives respect one another; be utterly sincere and trustworthy; gentle and patient; fair and upright; secretly cultivate virtue and employ skillful means; and be compassionate toward all.

"Do not kill living beings, humiliate those beneath you, or oppress common people. Whenever an unwholesome thought arises, apply yourself to Buddha-recitation and be sure to recite until that unwholesome thought retreats. Only then are you a person who recites the Buddha's name, and you will certainly attain rebirth and Buddhahood. Second, although they recite the Buddha's name with their mouths, their minds wander in confused thoughts; for this reason they cannot attain rebirth. (Take heed, take heed.) I urge people everywhere: when reciting the Buddha's name, restrain the mind-monkey and intention-horse, articulate every word clearly, and observe with every moment of mind. It should be as though you yourself were in the West, face to face with Amitābha, not daring to become scattered. Only then are you a person who recites the Buddha's name, and only then can you attain rebirth in the West. [The remainder is omitted.]"

This passage is so clear. I think that after reading it, no one will remain uncertain and irresolute, much less continue to argue that Buddha-recitation with a scattered mind can also bring rebirth in the West.

Moreover, in the recorded sayings of Chan Master Chewu in The Ten Essentials of the Pure Land, there is this essential principle of Pure Land cultivation: "Truly take birth and death as your concern; arouse bodhicitta; with deep faith and vows, uphold the Buddha's name; use gathering the mind in focused attention as the initial expedient; take one-pointedness of mind without distraction as the ultimate destination; and take auspicious signs of rebirth as verification." Does this not likewise show that the patriarchs of the Pure Land school did not advocate Buddha-recitation with a scattered mind?

But why can Buddha-recitation with a scattered mind not bring rebirth? We must investigate this further and understand it clearly. Otherwise, merely echoing others

and swallowing dates whole, without understanding why, will ultimately become an obstruction of delusion. When we put effort into practice, it will also surely be weak and ineffective, unable to overcome the enemy and attain the result. How then could we hope to attain rebirth in the West and realize the Way? Without wearying of detail, I shall now examine the matter further as follows:

As everyone knows, all sentient beings inherently possess the Tathāgata's wisdom and virtuous characteristics. Originally they are Buddhas, originally neither arising nor ceasing. It is only because beginningless ignorance stirs deludedly, causing them to mistake the false for the true, give rise to delusion and create karma, and undergo retribution according to karma, that they vainly suffer the cycle of birth and death within that which is originally without birth and death.

Now, if we wish to attain rebirth in the West and be liberated from birth and death, yet do not use the practice of Buddha-recitation to recite away this deluded mind of a single thought that here and now gives rise to delusion and creates karma, transforming the deluded mind into the Buddha-mind—so that the whole Buddha is mind and the whole mind is Buddha—but instead let the deluded mind freely invert itself, cling and pursue conditions, and obstinately stir, how can we avoid being bound by karmic circumstances and sinking into the six realms? And how can we, at the moment of death, repel these illusory images of karmic consciousness and attain rebirth in the West? A sūtra says: "If one wishes to purify one's land, one must first purify one's mind. As one's mind becomes pure, the Buddha-land becomes pure."

Therefore, if one wishes to be reborn in the Western Pure Land, one must first let go of everything, recite the Buddha's name single-mindedly, and purify one's mind-ground. A sūtra says: "Everything is created by the mind." If the mind is scattered and defiled, it is utterly incompatible with the pure realm. In the end, one can only be reborn in an impure land; there is no way around this.

Someone may say: "Rebirth in the West depends entirely on other-power—the compassionate power of Amitābha Buddha's guidance and reception. It is not like practicing other Dharma gates, in which one relies on self-power to realize the Way."

I reply: other-power does not exist apart from self-power; apart from self-power, there is absolutely no other-power. This principle applies even to worldly dharmas. Between nations, between people, and even among insentient grasses, trees, and forests, there is no instance of something that lacks the capacity to survive on its own and survives entirely by relying on others or other things. Examples of this kind are too numerous to enumerate.

The supramundane Dharma is no exception. Ānanda aroused the resolve at the same time as the Buddha, but because his cultivation was inadequate, he did not

realize the Way until after the Buddha's parinirvāṇa; how far he still was from Buddhahood, none can say. Rāhula, because his father was the Buddha, did not cultivate himself and was rebuked by the Buddha. Such cases everywhere demonstrate that without making one's own effort, and by relying entirely on other-power, no undertaking can be accomplished.

As for Amitābha Buddha's reception through the guidance of his great vows, it is responsive communion: when a practitioner's mind is pure and pure karma has matured, Amitābha appears before that person. It does not mean that he runs up to the practitioner and pulls that person off to the West! Pure karma practitioners, please do not misunderstand this point. The sūtras all say that "the Buddha and the assembly of sages appear before one," not that the Buddha "comes" before one. This is clear proof.

The difference between the single characters "come" and "appear" is slight, but their meanings are vastly different; how can they be confused? Chan Master Yongming and Master Yinguang both gave a precise explanation: "When one recites the Buddha's name with one-pointedness of mind without distraction, responsive communion occurs, and that Buddha appears before one just as the moon appears when water is clear. If the water is muddy, although the moon is in the sky, its reflection does not appear.

"The mind of one who recites the Buddha's name is like water, and the Buddha is like the moon. If the mind-water is muddy, the Buddha-moon cannot appear before one." Thus, beyond other-power, self-power is also required. Without self-power, other-power has nowhere to take hold. Therefore, the Pure Land Dharma gate is cultivated through the combined practice of self-power and other-power. Relying solely on other-power without self-power invariably ends in miserable defeat. Otherwise, why did Master Yinguang teach us to "uphold the Buddha's name with deep faith and vows" and to do so "as though rescuing one's head from flames"?

At present, some Pure Land practitioners fail to understand this principle and do not apply themselves vigorously. When the moment of death comes and they do not see the Buddha appear, they panic and suppose that the Buddhadharma is ineffective, mistakenly believing that the Buddha's vows are empty. They do not realize that their own mind-water is impure; even if the Buddha personally appeared before them, they would not see him.

They are like people blind from birth who, having never seen the sun, curse it for not appearing before them. Is that not unjust? All this comes from an improper foundation: greedy for an easy bargain, they have been deceived by a group of blind teachers. They think that, by reciting the Buddha's name with a scattered mind and relying solely on Amitābha's vows, they can attain rebirth. Little do they know that

not only will they fail to attain rebirth, but they will also incur the grave offense of slandering the Buddha and destroying the Dharma, and in future lives will have to undergo severe karmic retribution. Is this not terribly unjust?

Someone may say: “You know only one side, not the other. Why did Master Ouyi write in “On Buddha-Recitation by Name and the Nine Grades and Four Lands” that, if one wishes to be certain of rebirth in the Land of Ultimate Bliss, nothing is better than taking faith as the guide and vows as the driving force?”

“If one’s faith is true and one’s vows are earnest, then even if one recites the Buddha’s name with a scattered mind, one will certainly attain rebirth. If one’s faith is not true and one’s vows are not fervent, then even if one attains one-pointedness of mind without distraction, one will not attain rebirth.” Why did he later say, “Those who recite the Buddha’s name with deep faith and earnest vows, yet whose minds are often scattered while doing so, are reborn in the lowest grade of the lowest rank”? Does this not clearly and unmistakably tell us that one can attain rebirth in the Western Pure Land even by reciting the Buddha’s name with a scattered mind?

At present, we seek only rebirth in the lowest grade of the lowest rank, or even birth in the borderland or the city of doubt. That is enough for our vows, for once reborn in the Pure Land, one attains non-retrogression. There is no need to seek rebirth in the middle or higher grades and invite needless hardship. Thus, we need only recite the Buddha’s name with a scattered mind—idling about, carefree and dissipated, enjoying ourselves. At death, we can still attain rebirth in the lowest grade in the Land of Ultimate Bliss and ultimately become Buddhas just the same. Why would one not do this? Why must we exhaust deluded emotions, eradicate greedy attachments, and diligently uphold a single Buddha-name in a dry and flavorless way, thereby making trouble for ourselves?

Answer: Master Ouyi’s words require the greatest care. Do not glide over them casually, failing to attend to the whole passage and focusing only on the four words “reciting the Buddha’s name with a scattered mind.” Do not suppose that the Master advocated scattered-minded Buddha-recitation, so that there is idleness to indulge in and easy advantages to gain. This may suit your wishes perfectly: you can muddle along in the Sahā world and, when death comes, still be reborn in the Western Pure Land and enjoy great bliss. How comfortable! Yet you do not realize that your calculations are mistaken. At the moment of death, you will see only the entanglement of the dark karma created during life; how will you see the Buddha extending his hand? Though remorse and regret then arise together, it will already be too late.

Let us now analyze and examine this passage in detail:

First, the statement that those who recite the Buddha's name with deep faith and earnest vows will certainly attain rebirth even if their minds are scattered, whereas those whose faith and vows are not true or earnest will not attain rebirth even if they have one-pointedness of mind without distraction, was intended to distinguish those who uphold Amitābha's holy name merely as an aid to entering samādhi and do not think of rebirth in the Land of Ultimate Bliss—that is, those without faith and vows. At the end of the Ming dynasty, many Chan students often used name-recitation to enter samādhi. Therefore, Master Ouyi said: "Even if your Buddha-recitation is so profound that wind cannot penetrate it and rain cannot soak it, without faith and vows you can never attain rebirth."

Second, the six words "faith is true and vows are earnest" must precede "reciting the Buddha's name with a scattered mind" before one can attain rebirth. It does not mean that scattered-minded Buddha-recitation alone enables one to attain rebirth. There is much significance here; do not lightly pass it over. What does it mean for faith to be true? And what does it mean for vows to be earnest? To make the matter more persuasive, let us look at how the great patriarchs explained and described "true faith" and "earnest vows."

I. An explanation of faith: First, one must believe that mind, Buddha, and sentient beings are without difference. We are Buddhas not yet accomplished; Amitābha is a Buddha already accomplished. Their awakened nature is not two. Next, one must believe that we are Buddhas in principle and Buddhas in name, whereas Amitābha is the ultimate Buddha.

Although their nature is not two, their respective stages are as far apart as heaven and abyss. If we do not single-mindedly recite that Buddha's name and seek rebirth in that land, we will inevitably follow our karma in the round of rebirth and undergo immeasurable suffering. Next, one must believe that although our karmic obstacles are deep and grave and we have long dwelt in the realm of suffering, we are sentient beings within Amitābha's mind; and although Amitābha is adorned with the myriad virtues and lies beyond ten billion Buddha-lands, he is the Buddha within our own minds.

Since mind and intrinsic nature are not two, response and communion naturally occur. Our intense suffering can certainly evoke a response, and the Buddha's compassion can certainly answer it, just as a magnet attracts iron—there can be no doubt. As it is said: "The Tathāgatas of the ten directions pity and remember sentient beings as a mother remembers her child. … If the child remembers the mother as the mother remembers the child, then throughout life after life mother and child will not be separated by distance."

“If the minds of sentient beings” (note the word “minds”) “remember the Buddha and recite the Buddha’s name, then now and in the future they will certainly see the Buddha” (Śūraṅgama Sūtra). It is also said: one must remain unchanged from beginning to end and remain unaltered when encountering gain or loss; only then is faith true. True faith has three aspects: first, faith that Amitābha receives sentient beings who recite the Buddha’s name and enables their rebirth in the Western Pure Land—this is absolutely not false.

Second, faith that by upholding Amitābha’s name from one day up to seven days, with one-pointedness of mind without distraction—please note this—one attains rebirth. I shall practice in accordance with this teaching. Third, faith that the Dharma gate of Buddha-recitation transmitted by Mahāsthāmaprāpta Bodhisattva and the patriarchs of the Pure Land school contains not a single false word. I shall rely on it, practice courageously and diligently, and accomplish samādhi.

Furthermore, when the mind that recites the Buddha’s name enters samādhi through wisdom, illuminating yet ever quiescent, this is faith in the Buddha inherently present within oneself. When wisdom arises through samādhi, quiescent yet ever illuminating, this is faith in the Dharma inherently present within oneself. When samādhi and wisdom merge completely, and quiescence and illumination are nondual, this is faith in the saṅgha inherently present within oneself.

It is also said: Faith does not mean merely believing in the magnificently adorned Buddha-land of the West and thereby considering oneself to have aroused faith. One must also deeply believe that one’s own intrinsic nature is Amitābha and that one can inherently become a Buddha in the same way. Everyone can become Yao or Shun; all sentient beings can become Buddhas. The only difference is between delusion and awakening. The magnificently adorned land of dependent and principal recompense in the West is the Pure Land of phenomena; the purity of my own intrinsic nature is the Pure Land of principle. Mind pervades all places; all are the West. The ten directions are no different from the West. It is not enough merely to believe that the Sahā world is suffering, that the West is blissful, and that the Land of Ultimate Bliss truly exists.

II. Explaining vows: First, at all times—note, at all times, not merely when circumstances are unfavorable, while behaving otherwise when one is happy—one must loathe the suffering of birth and death and afflictions in the Sahā world, yearn for the bliss of bodhi in the Land of Ultimate Bliss, and strive with all one’s strength for rebirth there.

Next, one must vow to follow the Pure Land Dharma gate transmitted by the Buddhas and patriarchs, cultivate it courageously and diligently, cleanse habitual defilements, make body and mind pure and serene, and realize the bliss of the Pure

Land in this very life. Next, one must resolve to attain unsurpassed awakening, perfect bodhi, and make offerings to all Buddhas. Then one must arouse the vast mind to liberate all sentient beings, vowing not to become a Buddha until the realm of sentient beings is empty.

Further, in whatever one does, whether good or evil, one should dedicate good deeds toward seeking rebirth; for evil deeds, one should repent and vow to seek rebirth, with no other aspiration. It is also said: The mind that recites the Buddha's name should seek one-pointedness of mind without distraction—yet one must not deliberately strive for it, for striving makes it more remote. This is called a pure vow. Vowing never to rest until one is reborn in the West is called a constant vow. Attaining unsurpassed awakening and widely liberating sentient beings is called a great vow. … Only when one arouses the mind in this way can one be said to possess true faith and earnest vows.

Fellow practitioners, I ask you: if we truly possess the faith and vows described above, could we still endlessly calculate over and cling to the food, sex, wives, wealth, children, emoluments, reputation, status, and other concerns of the Sahā world? Once we can let go of all these circumstances, like flowers in empty space and the moon reflected in water, what deluded thoughts could remain to trouble and confuse us? If no deluded thoughts disturb us, then when we recite the Buddha's name, our state will be as follows:

As Master Lianchi said above, it will be as though we were personally before Amitābha, unable even to spare time from reverence, sincerity, and earnestness. What deluded thoughts could still stir in disorder? Is this not attaining one-pointedness without seeking it? Thus Master Ouyi said: "If faith is true and vows are earnest, then even if one recites the Buddha's name with a scattered mind, one will certainly attain rebirth."

You should note the word "even." It means that if faith and vows are truly earnest, as when one's head is on fire, there is no fear that one will not be single-minded. At such a time, one cannot obtain even inverted deluded thoughts; hence the word "even." At the same time, this is a contrasting statement directed at those mentioned below, whose Buddha-recitation may be excellent but who cannot attain rebirth because they lack faith and vows.

Therefore, having said that "those with faith and vows can attain rebirth in the West even if they recite the Buddha's name with a scattered mind," do not misunderstand this to mean that, by lazily and carelessly reciting Amitābha of the West with our mouths while thinking of the Sahā world's wealth and sensual pleasures in our minds, we can easily and freely attain rebirth in the Western Pure Land.

Furthermore, the statement that “those who recite the Buddha’s name with deep faith and earnest vows, yet whose minds are often scattered, are reborn in the lowest grade of the lowest rank” refers to practitioners with deep and grave habitual karmic obstacles. Though they now possess deep faith and earnest vows, their deluded thoughts and habitual tendencies cannot be cleansed away at once. Although the coarse deluded thoughts of craving for the world have been cut off, subtle habitual deluded thoughts still intrude from time to time.

As the ancients said: “Though the wind has ceased, the waves still surge; though principle has appeared, thoughts still intrude.” Although such deluded thoughts are subtle, because thoughts other than the Buddha still arise, they must be called a “scattered mind.” Yet because they are subtle, one recognizes them as soon as they arise and does not invert oneself or cling to conditions. Therefore, as soon as one raises the Buddha-recitation, the deluded thoughts immediately vanish and one returns to purity.

This practice of illuminating thoughts as they arise and dissolving them through illumination was described by Chan Master Guifeng as follows: “If deluded thoughts arise, do not follow them at all. Even if there is an intermediate state, karma cannot bind one.” Since karma cannot bind one, one can make the vow to attain rebirth. Conversely, if people who crave the Sahā world, are confused by deluded thoughts, and never cease clinging to conditions also hope to cite this precedent and attain rebirth, they are truly daydreaming.

However, to return to the matter: if someone is naturally open and unrestrained, not greatly attached to worldly circumstances, or ordinarily does not believe in the Buddha but does not slander the Buddha either, and has been unable to recite the Buddha’s name with one-pointedness, then, upon hearing the instruction of a good spiritual friend at the moment of death, that person may suddenly repent and awaken, let go completely, single-mindedly recite the name, and seek rebirth in the West. Such a person can also attain rebirth through ten recitations, or even one recitation.

Yet people of such sudden capacity are scarcely found even one or two among tens of millions. A single thought at the moment of death depends entirely on one’s usual training. If one has not practiced diligently in ordinary times, then being able at the moment of death to reverse the situation in a single thought and take mastery is truly more difficult than winning the grand prize in an airline lottery. It certainly cannot be taken as a model.

We have said much concerning whether one can attain rebirth in the Western Pure Land through scattered-minded Buddha-recitation. For ease of understanding, let us now briefly summarize:

1. If the mind that craves the Sahā world has not been extinguished, the root of attachment has not been severed, and emotional views have not been removed, and one merely recites the Buddha's name with the condition-seeking mind of inverted deluded thoughts, then even though one has some slight faith and vows, because these are not deep or earnest, one only plants distant causal roots of goodness and cannot attain rebirth. One must wait and strive in a future life before one's wish can be fulfilled.

2. Although suddenly changing course in a single thought at death also offers hope of rebirth, it is too perilous and the opportunity is exceedingly rare. Among tens of millions, scarcely one person is found. Therefore, it also cannot be cited as a model.

(One should understand that those who attain rebirth through ten recitations at the end of life had not heard the Buddhadharma during their lifetime. Only when the signs of death appear do they hear the instruction of a good spiritual friend, thoroughly repent and awaken, and let go completely; therefore, they are able to bring the ten recitations into accord. If such people of sharp faculties had heard the Buddhadharma ten years earlier, they would have attained realization ten years earlier; if they had heard it twenty years earlier, they would have attained realization twenty years earlier. If people like us hear the Buddhadharma early on yet harbor a calculating mind, unable to let go of worldly attachments while vainly hoping for rebirth through ten recitations, this itself is already a divided mind. How could there be accord?)

II. A Discussion of Whether One-Pointedness of Mind Without Distraction Is Necessary

Once the first question has been clarified, the second is not difficult to resolve. One-pointedness of mind without distraction is the opposite of a scattered mind. Since a scattered mind is unacceptable, it goes without saying that one must attain one-pointedness of mind without distraction. Yet truth becomes clearer through discussion, and this matter is of great importance, so let us discuss it in some detail.

What is called "one-pointedness of mind without distraction" was not created or prescribed by any patriarch. It was personally proclaimed from the golden mouth of Śākyamuni Buddha and is clearly recorded in the shorter Amitābha Sūtra.

Since the Buddha says that one must attain one-pointedness of mind without distraction, which patriarch would dare say that it is unnecessary? Still less would we, people of inferior capacities in this later age, dare say so. The Buddha possesses perfect and universal knowledge. If we wish to practice and realize the Way, whose words could we heed if not the Buddha's? But why is one-pointedness of mind without distraction necessary? What is its rationale? We touched on this when discussing the first question; now let us examine it in detail.

Śākyamuni Buddha said that those who wish to be reborn in the Pure Land cannot do so with scant roots of goodness, merit and virtue, and causes and conditions. Nothing better reveals the extent of these three than the depth of one's Buddha-recitation practice. Therefore, Buddha-recitation must attain one-pointedness of mind without distraction; only then can one possess sufficient roots of goodness, merit and virtue, and causes and conditions to be reborn in the Pure Land.

It is said that the shorter Amitābha Sūtra was translated by Master Kumārajīva in a free rendering. On the basis of the original Sanskrit meaning, and in accordance with Chinese modes of expression, he used the four characters "one-pointedness of mind without distraction."

Master Xuanzang, however, based on the Consciousness-Only principle that "all is manifested by mind and transformed by consciousness," said that Buddha-recitation requires "binding one's mindfulness without distraction." Only by transforming deluded consciousness and bringing pure karma to maturity can one be reborn in the West. This is roughly its meaning; the exact scriptural wording is difficult to recall. Although the wording of the two masters' translations differs slightly, their meaning is the same: both teach practitioners of Buddha-recitation to let go of everything, recite the Buddha with reverence, cut off the root of attachment, and bring mind and Buddha into communion as an unbroken whole. Only then can they be reborn in the Western Pure Land.

The great patriarchs have offered various views concerning "one-pointedness of mind without distraction." These may be summarized under the following headings:

(I) One-pointedness of mind without distraction means that there is no mind that can be disturbed: one has reached the state in which mind and consciousness have completely vanished, neither true nor deluded remains, and both subject and object are gone. In other words, it is the moment of awakening described in the Chan school as "with a sudden 'hū' sound, the bottom drops out of the bucket." At that time, mind is the land, and the land is mind; outside mind there is no land, and outside the land there is no mind. Mind, Buddha, and sentient beings have become completely one.

(II) One-pointedness of mind without distraction has degrees of depth and shallowness, and may be divided into noumenal one-pointedness and phenomenal one-pointedness. Phenomenal one-pointedness means diligently maintaining the name, so that the Buddha's name is distinctly clear in the mind. Whether dressing, eating, walking, standing, sitting, or lying down, the great name continues uninterruptedly and seamlessly, like one's breathing: neither scattered nor sunk in dullness. Maintaining the name in this way is called phenomenal one-pointedness—that is, gathering the mind into oneness.

Noumenal one-pointedness is to investigate directly and realize that all phenomena are thus, without duality. Thus, Buddhas and sentient beings are nondual; self and others are nondual; cause and effect are nondual; dependent and direct retribution are nondual; purity and defilement are nondual; suffering and happiness are nondual; attraction and aversion are nondual; grasping and relinquishing are nondual; bodhi and afflictions are nondual; birth and death and nirvāṇa are nondual. All these dual dharmas share a single characteristic, one clear and level path, requiring no forced arrangement.

But if one investigates in accordance with reality, and carries that investigation to its utmost, one suddenly accords with one's own original mind. Then one knows that dressing and eating are entirely samādhi, and that laughing, joking, anger, and scolding are all Buddha-activities. A one-pointed mind and a scattered mind alike become empty talk; throughout the twenty-four hours, not the slightest different characteristic can be found. The Western Pure Land is present here and now; the ten directions do not differ from the West. The unborn is birth, and birth is the unborn. This is called noumenal one-pointedness.

(III) Whether noumenal or phenomenal one-pointedness, both concern ordinary, unenlightened beings. Anyone who has a mind can cultivate and learn them. Do not place them too high as states reserved for sages, contenting yourselves with inferiority and thinking that they are not matters within your own capacity. You must know that everything is created by mind. If you wish to be reborn in the Pure Land, you must first purify your mind. If the mind is impure, rebirth in the Pure Land is difficult; if the mind is pure, one naturally attains one-pointedness of mind without distraction and will certainly be reborn in the Pure Land.

From this it can be seen that one-pointedness of mind without distraction is originally intended to make the mind clear and the water still, so that the Buddha may appear before one and guide one to rebirth. It is not a matter of aspiring to something impossibly lofty. Phenomenal one-pointedness in particular is a practice that Buddha-recitation practitioners must possess. It is not something beyond reach. Do not fear it: if we understand the key and apply ourselves diligently, we will certainly succeed.

Even noumenal one-pointedness and the state of seeing one's true nature, which you may regard as supremely lofty, are not absolutely unattainable. All sentient beings inherently possess this pure, unstained Buddha-nature, which neither arises nor ceases. It is neither sought from without nor obtained through practice.

Mountains, rivers, the great earth, grasses, trees, forests, men and women, young and old, eating and daily life—even every sound, every form, every thought, and every dharma—are all manifestations and functions of intrinsic nature.

As long as we recognize it and clearly understand that intrinsic nature is the substance of appearances and appearances are the function of intrinsic nature, then, when seeing forms and hearing sounds, we will not be turned by sounds and forms, but can see intrinsic nature through their appearances.

In other words, as long as in our daily activities we respond to conditions and apply ourselves without being deluded by the false appearances of things, clinging to them in the mind, or being inwardly shaken by them—remaining tranquil yet alert, alert yet tranquil—we turn all things rather than being turned by things, and employ all times rather than being employed by time. This is seeing one's true nature.

Viewed in this way, the lofty state of noumenal one-pointedness is our innate capacity and is certainly not unattainable. If we can realize noumenal one-pointedness, the mind will be pure and unstained, naturally corresponding with the Western Pure Land. Moreover, all Buddhas are originally of one body, so we can become completely one with Amitābha and thereby attain rebirth in the highest grade of the Pure Land.

Someone may say: "It is easy to say, but difficult to put into practice." The answer is: once we clearly understand the essential principle, we need only make a firm resolve and struggle against our deluded habits. Rely on the single Buddha-name as a weapon. Whenever a deluded habit stirs and begins to cling to an object or circumstance, immediately raise the great name and drive it back. Raise it again and again, drive it back again and again, day after day and year after year—need we fear that we will not succeed? Moreover, for those of good capacity, there is no need for repeated vigilant effort: as soon as they hear it raised, they return home and sit securely.

Someone may say: "That is a Chan state and has nothing to do with Pure Land practitioners." The answer is: do not underestimate the Pure Land. The Pure Land is originally Chan, and Chan is the Pure Land. The Pure Land is utterly complete, vast, lofty, and supreme; it is not an inferior dharma gate. Chan is the Chan of the Pure Land, and the Pure Land is the Pure Land of Chan. Chan and Pure Land are not separate households.

Regrettably, recent Pure Land practitioners are content with the lesser and inferior. They consider rebirth in a borderland sufficient to fulfill their vows. They do not diligently cultivate Buddha-recitation by maintaining the name, but merely perform the morning and evening services perfunctorily and consider the matter finished. Thus they have made this excellent Pure Land dharma gate into something quite unworthy.

They do not know that Master Yinguang, a great modern master of the Pure Land school, also entered retreat several times to specialize in Buddha-recitation and

realized the Buddha-recitation samādhi. His writings describing that samādhi are entirely in accord with Chan, and include the Dharma saying: “Nothing does not flow forth from this dharma realm, and nothing does not return to this dharma realm.” Consider it: is this dharma gate lofty or not? Is it necessary or not to cultivate one-pointed Buddha-recitation diligently and without cease?

To avoid controversy, let us set aside these profound theories for the moment and discuss them with everyone later, when we take up a special discussion of the Pure Land. For now, let us speak of phenomenal one-pointedness.

When discussing the first question, we already said that rebirth in the Western Pure Land requires a mind as clear and still as water, so that the Buddha and the noble assembly can appear before one. If the mind-water is impure, then even though the Buddha stands before one, one is like a person blind from birth who cannot see the sun. Therefore, if one wishes to be reborn in the West, the mind must be pure.

We also said that true faith and earnest vows naturally enable one to let go of Sahā —the defiled, ugly, and suffering world—cut off the root of attachment and emotional views, and, through fiercely holding to the name, naturally and without contrivance attain the state of one-pointedness of mind without distraction. We also said that even for fellow practitioners of somewhat lesser capacity and heavier deluded habits, if coarse delusions have been cut off but subtle delusions still intrude, there remains hope of rebirth in the Western Pure Land so long as they raise the Buddha-thought high, illuminate and dispel deluded thoughts, and do not follow them in their wandering.

These statements define phenomenal one-pointedness of mind without distraction and explain why it is necessary.

Because we can cut off and let go of all things in the Sahā world, without being bound and disturbed by emotional attachment, we can inwardly and continuously nurture the sacred name so that it neither scatters nor sinks into dullness. When subtle deluded habits intrude, we will not be shaken by them, and thus the sacred name can remain distinctly clear and continue without interruption.

At the same time, because our practice becomes effective, the mind grows clearer and purer, enabling us to let go of worldly conditions still more fully. Our Buddha-recitation becomes ever more reverent, and our meditative stability grows ever deeper. Only by such mutually reinforcing, one-pointed recitation can the mind become clear and the water still, so that the sacred realm appears before us and we are reborn in the Western Pure Land.

I think that no one who truly wishes to be reborn in the Western Pure Land would dare to say, or be willing to say, that such one-pointedness of mind without

distraction is unnecessary. Search through the recorded sayings of all the patriarchs, and not one says that one-pointedness of mind without distraction is unnecessary. On the contrary, they all praise it, encourage students to realize it, and admonish beginners not to neglect it. Master Lianchi has a special essay on this subject in Notes from the Bamboo Window. Let us cite several further examples below:

Master Jiliu said in Instructions to the Assembly at the Opening of a Seven-Day Intensive Retreat: “If one has not reached the ground of one-pointedness of mind without distraction, this is precisely what is meant by scant roots of goodness, merit and virtue, and causes and conditions. How could one hope to be reborn in that land?!”

Master Yinguang said in “Letter to Lay Practitioner Chen Xizhou”: “With scattered-minded Buddha-recitation, rebirth is difficult to attain; with ‘one-pointed Buddha-recitation,’ rebirth is assured.” He also said in Letter Thirteen: “The practice of Buddha-recitation is the simplest and easiest, the broadest and greatest of methods. Only with the utmost earnestness and sincerity can one bring about a response and communion with the Way, and personally obtain real benefit in this very life.”

“If one is lazy and indolent, with no reverence or awe, one merely plants distant causes. The offense of irreverence and contempt may have consequences too dreadful to contemplate; even if one attains rebirth among humans or devas, it will be utterly impossible to join the great assembly…” Is laziness and indolence scattered-mindedness or one-pointedness? This is equivalent to saying that scattered-minded Buddha-recitation cannot bring rebirth in the West.

Master Lianchi said in “Letter in Reply to Lay Practitioner Sun Guangliang”: “For applying oneself, nothing surpasses one-pointed Buddha-recitation. Recite to the utmost and awaken; once awakened, there is nothing further to discuss. Even if one does not awaken greatly, leaving this Sahā world and being reborn in that Pure Land is itself liberation from the world. Eliminating scattered thoughts and making right mindfulness wholly unified is the ultimate truth. Now, without concerning oneself with whether one has left the world or not, or whether it is true or not, if one’s practice reaches ‘one-pointedness,’ all will naturally be settled.”

He also said in “Letter in Reply to Lay Practitioner Yuan Xinyuan of Suzhou”: “Now one should only recite the Buddha with exclusive sincerity. After reciting for a long time until one attains ‘one-pointedness of mind without distraction,’ one will certainly awaken. Even if one does not awaken, the power of a lifetime of Buddha-recitation will ensure that, at the time of death, one knows for oneself and, upon dying, will certainly be reborn in the Pure Land.”

Such examples are too numerous to enumerate. Thus, the importance of one-pointedness of mind without distraction for rebirth in the Western Pure Land is truly beyond dispute.

Perhaps only those mediocre Buddha-recitation practitioners who inwardly wish for rebirth in the Western Pure Land but at the same time remain attached to the Sahā world—unable to let go of their lovely wives and beloved children, reluctant to part with glory, wealth, and rank—and certain lazy fellows afraid of hardship, would concoct, through self-styled reasoning and self-justification, a set of erroneous doctrines that depart from the sūtras and teachings, thereby deceiving women and children. They say, "There is no need for one-pointedness of mind without distraction; scattered-minded Buddha-recitation can also bring rebirth in the West." They do not realize that, in seeking merely to speak glibly for the moment, harming themselves may not matter much, but harming others will send them to hell as swiftly as an arrow flies!

Someone may say: "If one must attain one-pointedness of mind without distraction in order to be reborn, then those reborn in the West will be very few." I reply: Judging by the standard of one-pointedness in practice described above, the requirement is not high and is not impossible to fulfill.

So long as practitioners are willing to sacrifice immediate pleasures, release the entanglements at hand, exert themselves with some diligent effort, and continuously uphold the Buddha's name inwardly, everyone can realize this and be reborn in the Western Pure Land. What difficulty is there? As for the number of those reborn in the West, it seems that since ancient times their number has not been great. The reason lies in these mistaken and fallacious claims—"One-pointedness of mind without distraction is too difficult and unnecessary; scattered-minded Buddha-recitation is enough for rebirth in the West"—which harm people by causing practitioners to crave worldly blessings and refuse to apply themselves. Consequently, few attain rebirth in the West.

Consider the "Third Universal Exhortation to Buddha-Recitation" by Master Lianchi cited above. At its beginning, he sighs deeply: "Nowadays I see that many people recite the Buddha's name, yet few are reborn in the West. Why is this?" He then sorrowfully attributes the reason to this: "Though their mouths recite the Buddha's name, their minds indulge in wild and confused thoughts; for this reason they cannot be reborn in the West!" What a profound regret! What irrefutable evidence!

Friends and colleagues, you must know that seeking rebirth in the Western Pure Land is the great matter of transcending birth and death. It is not a matter of asserting oneself, disputing right and wrong, or venting one's emotions.

You need to reflect calmly: When I recite the Buddha's name with such a scattered mind, can I remain in command amid the activities of daily life, especially at critical moments of gain and loss, favorable and adverse circumstances, sorrow and joy? Can I remain unmoved by circumstances, with the Buddha's name before me? Going a step further, ask yourself: Can I remain in command while asleep and dreaming? Amid laughter or terror, can I remain unmoved by dream-images, with the Buddha's name appearing before me?

If you cannot remain in command in any of these circumstances, then when the thirtieth day of the twelfth lunar month arrives, with your wife gathered around your bed, illness leaving you dazed, the wind-blade dismembering your body, and intense pain pressing upon you—while all the events of your life and all unresolved posthumous entanglements surge into your mind one by one—how can you remain in command, recite the Buddha's name, and seek rebirth in the Western Pure Land? You must know that even if you can remain in command during the day, in dreams you cannot remain in command even halfway;

and even if you can remain in command in dreams, at death you cannot remain in command even halfway! For dreams are a state of half-delirium, whereas death is a state of great delirium. If, because one has not applied oneself diligently, one cannot attain rebirth at the end of life, then will not the claim that "there is no need for one-pointedness of mind without distraction; scattered-minded Buddha-recitation itself can bring rebirth" become an empty check, bringing grief upon oneself? I do not say this merely to startle you or frighten you, nor do I make lofty and unrealistic demands that you must do this or that, lest you be unable to attain rebirth in the West.

The truth is that to be genuinely reborn in the Western Pure Land, one certainly cannot attain rebirth easily merely by relying exclusively on Amitābha's vow-power to guide one there while making no effort oneself. Yet we see that most present-day Pure Land practitioners merely seek what is easy and cheap, unwilling to apply themselves.

As a result, they either yearn for worldly ties or remain attached to family wealth; they either suffer unbearable illness or lapse into unconsciousness. As for those said to be reborn in the Western Pure Land, one does not know to what place they have wandered amid birth and death. Therefore, I am willing to risk censure and dare to offer you these unpleasant words. They are truly compelled by conscience: I cannot but speak boldly in an effort to remedy the ills of our time.

III. An Examination of "Relying Solely on Amitābha's Vow-Power for Rebirth While Carrying Karma"

The phrase “rebirth while carrying karma” does not appear explicitly in the Buddhist sūtras. It was developed by the patriarchs through integrating the meanings of the sūtras and treatises. Its actual intent is this: ordinary beings on the ordinary ground have karmic obstacles and deeply ingrained habitual tendencies that cannot be entirely removed through cultivation in a single lifetime.

Even if one has attained great and thorough awakening, the final portion of ignorance has still not been destroyed, for even at the stage of an equal enlightenment bodhisattva, one portion of ignorance remains. Who can attain realization to the stage of equal enlightenment within one lifetime? This remaining ignorance is deluded karma. What is called “rebirth while carrying karma” means being reborn while carrying this karma.

Even Buddha-recitation practitioners who realize one-pointedness at the level of principle seem unable to surpass an equal enlightenment bodhisattva. Thus, they still inevitably retain ignorance, and if they wish to attain rebirth, they must still attain rebirth while carrying karma. It certainly does not mean that Buddha-recitation practitioners may commit harmful acts during their practice—injuring others to benefit themselves—and later be reborn while carrying karma.

Someone may say: Master Yinguang said that people who have committed the five heinous offenses and ten evil acts may ordinarily know nothing of cultivation, though they have never slandered the Buddha; yet if, at the time of death, they encounter a good spiritual friend who instructs them, arouse the vow to recite the Buddha’s name, and seek rebirth in the Western Pure Land, they too may attain rebirth while carrying karma.

Does this not plainly tell us that we may commit some harmful acts now and later attain rebirth while carrying karma? I reply: Please note that when such great evildoers encounter a good spiritual friend at death, can maintain clear right mindfulness, relinquish body and mind, disregard the suffering of illness, and single-mindedly recite the Buddha’s name while seeking rebirth in the Western Pure Land—what tremendous power this requires! And what great wholesome roots, merit and virtue, and causes and conditions this entails! Is this something

that ordinary people can hope to attain? I have personally seen many people who had recited the Buddha’s name for years but, at the time of death, were tormented by the suffering of illness and unable to recite the Buddha’s name. Some even did not wish to hear the Buddha’s name; some thought of their relatives and did not wish to remember or recite the Buddha; others were unconscious and unable either to recite or hear the Buddha’s name.

Yet these great evildoers can, at the time of death, accept the teaching, let go completely, maintain clear right mindfulness, single-mindedly recite the Buddha’s

name, repel the realm of darkness, and attain rebirth in the Western Pure Land. What power enables this? Could it be that the Buddha is close to them but distant from others, generous to the former but stingy toward the latter? There are indeed profound causes and conditions involved. Some practitioners in former lives did not understand the essential point of mind, but merely sought to attain meditative stability. They exerted themselves to suppress deluded thoughts, refusing to let them move, like placing a stone on grass: when the stone is removed, the grass grows again. This is not ultimate.

Therefore, when they die and return again in another life, their habitual tendencies and deluded impulses arise with even greater force than before, and they become evil and perverse. But when they hear instruction, it activates their former causes; thus, they can immediately let go, wholeheartedly recite the Buddha's name, and seek rebirth in the Pure Land. This is not accidental. Or they may be bodhisattvas practicing in adverse circumstances, manifesting such traces in the present life. In order to liberate beings, they defile their outward appearance to conceal their conduct. Ordinary people cannot opportunistically imitate them, invoke such precedents, and expect rebirth.

Someone may say: Great Chan masters directly realize the Buddha ground. As it is said, "The two awakenings of equal enlightenment and wondrous enlightenment are still merely men carrying straw sandals for him," they should surely have no final portion of ignorance remaining.

Then, when such persons are reborn in the West, do they not need rebirth while carrying karma? I reply: What Chan realizes is Buddhahood in principle. The principle-nature it realizes is neither two nor different from that of a Buddha, but in terms of phenomena, it has not yet realized the fruition of Buddhahood. Thus, it cannot be regarded as equal to Śākyamuni Buddha, Amitābha Buddha, and the like.

Did not an emperor ask Xuansha, "When those in your school see their nature and become Buddhas, have they already reached the fruition of Buddhahood?" Xuansha replied, "They are only Buddhas at the causal stage, not Buddhas at the fruition stage." Therefore, awakening and seeing one's true nature generally means only ascending to the first bhūmi, corresponding to the stage of seeing the Way. One must still continue cultivating and realizing upward, gradually destroy ignorance, and fully realize the dharmakāya. Thus, to say that after seeing one's nature in the Chan school one directly ascends to the stage of no cultivation, no attainment, and no realization is a grave error. For one still has something like the grief of losing one's parents; how then could one not need rebirth while carrying karma?

Furthermore, the so-called stage of no cultivation, no attainment, and no realization refers to the side of principle and is also the language of one who has arrived home.

Since all sentient beings are originally Buddhas, what need is there for cultivation and realization? Yet when ignorance, karma, and habitual tendencies have not been exhausted, attachment still remains, and one is still surfacing and sinking in the evil realms, how can one not still be a sentient being? Where there are karmic habits, there are illusory experiences; where there are illusory experiences, there are necessarily illusory cultivation, illusory attainment, and illusory realization. Thus, this statement of no cultivation, no attainment, and no realization is indeed the true language of one who has arrived home. For among ordinary beings nothing is diminished, among sages nothing is increased, in defilement nothing is lost, and in purity nothing is gained. If one is still on the road yet speaks of no cultivation, no attainment, and no realization, is that not speaking too soon?

Someone may say: “The end is identical with the beginning; birth and death are precisely nirvāṇa; the road itself is home. Although one has transcended birth and death, one remains within the six realms.” I reply: The nonduality of all things is the truth, but one must realize it to this extent before this can be said.

If there are still pleasure and pain, fear, vexation, anxiety over gain and loss, and so forth, then the road is not home, and birth and death are not identical with nirvāṇa. For the aggregates have not yet been penetrated, and illusory experiences still remain. Even in the human realm, there remains the view of pleasure and pain; how much more so in the other realms! Consider Devadatta: in hell he experiences the bliss of the third dhyāna. The difference is as vast as heaven and earth! Therefore, those who cultivate the mind must be exceedingly careful. Do not idly utter grand words and recklessly invite calamity!

Furthermore, one who has truly realized no cultivation, no attainment, and no realization does not speak of no cultivation, no attainment, or no realization. Once one speaks of no cultivation, no attainment, and no realization, is one not squarely situated within cultivation, attainment, and realization?

Yet among practitioners of the Chan school, awakening varies greatly in depth and cannot be generalized. Some penetrate directly to the end: their accumulated habitual tendencies and ignorance are all shattered at once. This is what the Śūraṅgama Sūtra calls, “At the level of principle, awakening is sudden; through awakening, they are simultaneously dissolved.” Such people are those of no cultivation, no attainment, and no realization. But such people of great capacity are, after all, few and hard to find.

Others, though they have already seen their true nature, still retain accumulated habitual tendencies. They must employ continuous and meticulous safeguarding realization, gradually eliminating habitual tendencies and progressively breaking

through ignorance, until they fully realize the dharmakāya. This work of safeguarding realization is cultivation within non-cultivation.

Because they no longer use any dharma gate for cultivation, nor do they hope for any attainment or accomplishment, they ordinarily employ only alert awareness: whenever a thought arises, awareness immediately empties it; nor do they abide in emptiness, but let things function naturally, freely enjoying themselves. Eventually there is neither awareness nor non-awareness, neither emptiness nor non-emptiness, neither freedom nor non-freedom. One passes the whole day as if foolish and dull, with neither gain nor loss; only then has one arrived home and completed the task. This kind of work is what the Śūraṅgama Sūtra calls, “In phenomena, cultivation is gradual; through the successive stages, they are exhausted.” Most practitioners today belong to this kind of sudden awakening followed by gradual cultivation.

Enough—this is not a discussion of Chan, and we have strayed too far from the subject. Let us leave it for another time. Now let us return to the topic and discuss rebirth while carrying karma. Regrettably, people in the various traditions today often broaden the meaning of this phrase and thereby misunderstand it.

Some people think that this reflects the vast compassion of Buddhas and bodhisattvas: so long as they make offerings to the Buddha, recite the Buddha’s name, investigate Chan, or uphold mantras every day, it does not matter if they commit a few offenses or do a few bad deeds. Buddhas and bodhisattvas will still forgive and pardon them. In the Pure Land school, Amitābha Buddha will guide them to rebirth in the Western Pure Land; in other schools, the corresponding Buddhas and bodhisattvas will protect them and enable them to transcend saṃsāra.

Consequently, without any scruples, they cultivate and recite the Buddha’s name on the one hand while doing bad things on the other, thus defiling Buddhism beyond recognition. This gives worldly people cause to slander it, saying: “If you want to find the black-hearted, look among vegetarian religionists!” “Their mouths recite Amitābha and Śākyamuni, while their hearts harbor greed, theft, and deceit!” How can one hear this without anguish?

Let us ask: are Pure Land practitioners who entertain such thoughts inwardly pure? Can they accord with the Pure Land? Can they enter into responsive communion with Amitābha and become one with him? Yet some blind fools still stubbornly insist that it does not matter: “We have Amitābha Buddha as our refuge. Although we may have done some bad things, at the end of life the Buddha will still pity and forgive us, and come

to receive us in the Western Pure Land!” Ha! If Amitābha Buddha were indeed to receive you in the Western Pure Land under such circumstances, would that not

amount to encouraging you to commit evil in the world? Is there any such principle? If this were truly the case, why would the Buddha teach cause and effect and karmic retribution? And why would he urge people to refrain from all evil and cultivate every good?

Someone may ask: “Are not those who commit the five heinous offenses and ten evil acts serious criminals? How can they be reborn in the Western Pure Land through ten recitations at the end of life?” The answer is: Please do not misunderstand. They did not commit the five heinous offenses and ten evil acts after coming to faith in the Buddha. Previously, because they did not understand cause and effect, they committed such acts unintentionally and mistakenly. Thus, after they came to faith in the Buddha, they could suddenly awaken, repent thoroughly, eliminate the karma in their minds, and be reborn in the Western Pure Land. In contrast, if those who already believe in the Buddha commit further offenses, they knowingly violate the teachings, and their offense is increased. Moreover, their effort is inadequate and their Buddha-recitation slack; they cannot repent of their karma. How could they be reborn there?

I think that when such people put on a stubborn front and say that it does not matter, their hearts are not entirely free from trembling. Everyone has an innate moral conscience; having done bad things, they are inevitably reproached by it and suffer deeply in fear.

Even if such people are for a time blinded by profit and desire, suppressing their conscience and knowing neither shame nor fear, at the final instant of death the evil deeds they have committed can no longer remain hidden. They appear before their eyes one by one, and, severely reproached by conscience, they suffer beyond measure. The pain of that moral condemnation surpasses every cruel punishment: it is as though Mount Tai were pressing upon one’s head, a great fire were burning one’s body, and blades of wind were dismembering one’s limbs—unbearable suffering! They may weep and howl, their breathing hurried and their spirits confused, drifting aimlessly with their karmic circumstances into the evil realms. At that time, can they still stubbornly claim, “Amitābha will receive me”?

Fellow Dharma friends, do not misunderstand the phrase “rebirth while carrying karma.” You must not think that it is all right to recite the Buddha’s name while doing a few bad things. This is absolutely unacceptable. For the cycle of rebirth in the six realms is governed entirely by wholesome and unwholesome karma; it does not change according to human wishes.

Now, if we seek further to be reborn in the Pure Land and be liberated from birth and death, yet our minds are not kind and good—if we do not even qualify for rebirth in the human realm—how can we be reborn in the Western Pure Land?

Therefore, Master Yi, in describing “true faith,” says that in addition to faith in oneself and faith in others, one must also have faith in cause and effect and in principle and phenomena. This teaches us that our minds must be pure and kind if we are to attain the blessed fruition of the Pure Land, adorned with myriad virtues.

Moreover, as cited above, Master Lianchi lists those whose minds are not kind and good as the first of the three kinds of people who cannot be reborn in the Pure Land. This shows that a kind and good mind is the first prerequisite. If we have committed wrongs, we should swiftly repent bitterly before the Buddha from this very day onward, never commit them again, and diligently perform every good deed to redress our former transgressions. Only then may we hope for rebirth in the Western Pure Land. If we rely exclusively on the Buddha’s power to receive us while doing evil and hoping for rebirth while carrying karma, we are truly heading east while intending to travel west.

Furthermore, the matter of being received through other-power was touched on briefly in the first section. Since it has arisen in connection with the present topic, it must now be discussed in greater detail:

First, let us consider the three provisions for rebirth in the Western Pure Land: faith, vows, and practice. Like the three legs of a tripod, none can be absent. Since practice is indispensable alongside faith and vows, it is clearly extremely important. Since practice is so important, rebirth in the Western Pure Land cannot depend exclusively on other-power. If those who rely solely on Amitābha’s vows could indeed rely on Amitābha alone, what need would there be for “practice”? Since practice is required, self-power is especially necessary in addition to other-power.

Perhaps some who seek an easy way and fear making effort will say, “Master Yi said: ‘Whether one attains rebirth is entirely determined by the presence or absence of faith and vows; the higher or lower rank is entirely determined by the depth or shallowness of name-holding.’ From this it appears that practice—holding the name—is merely the basis for one’s rank, whereas rebirth in the Western Pure Land depends wholly on faith and vows and thus exclusively on the Buddha’s power. At present, so long as we can be reborn in the West, we need not care about our rank. Even rebirth in the borderland would fulfill our wishes, for ‘So long as one sees Amitābha, why fear that one will not awaken?’ It is enough if we can be reborn in the Western Pure Land.”

They do not realize that the Master’s words form a parallel couplet and cannot be separated and interpreted out of context. First he speaks of faith and vows, and then he speaks of practice. His meaning is that faith and vows guide practice, and practice brings faith and vows to fulfillment.

That is to say, for rebirth in the Western Pure Land, faith and vows must serve as the guide. Without faith and vows, one cannot attain rebirth. At the same time, this was also said for those who practice but lack faith and vows. As we noted in the first section, many Chan practitioners in the Ming dynasty borrowed Buddha-recitation as an expedient for entering samādhi; they had practice but lacked faith and vows.

Yet rebirth in the Western Pure Land has nine grades, high and low, and the rank of one's rebirth is entirely determined by the depth or shallowness of one's work in holding the name. Does this not clearly and unmistakably tell us that, for rebirth in the Western Pure Land, those of high rank certainly require deeper work in Buddha-recitation, while even those of low rank require some, though shallower, work in Buddha-recitation in order to attain rebirth? It is not determined by the Buddha alone through reliance solely on his power. Only this understanding accords with Master Yi's true intent and is also consistent with the teachings of the other Buddhas and patriarchs.

If practice were unnecessary and one could attain rebirth through faith and vows alone, why did the Buddha in the Amitābha Sūtra instruct us to hold fast to the name? Why did he teach us in the Contemplation Sūtra of Amitāyus Buddha to cultivate the various contemplative practices? The Master was a great patriarch of the teachings in his generation. How could he contradict the Buddha's intention and mislead later generations with baseless notions of his own invention? And how could one say that the Master's personal views surpassed the Buddha's?

Further, Master Yinguang states in his Letter to Lay Practitioner Chen Xizhou: "Take faith and vows as the guide, and Buddha-recitation as the practice that verifies them. Faith, vows, and practice are the essential principles of the Buddha-recitation Dharma gate. With practice but without faith and vows, one cannot attain rebirth; with faith and vows but without practice, one likewise cannot attain rebirth. When faith, vows, and practice are complete and lacking in nothing, rebirth is certain."

This shows that faith, vows, and practice are the three essentials for rebirth in the Western Pure Land. Like the three legs of a tripod, none can be absent. Master Yi and Master Yinguang were both Dharma patriarchs of the Pure Land tradition; their lineage was transmitted directly from above to below. The former could never have misquoted the latter, nor could the latter have opposed the former. Thus, those who say that faith and vows alone are sufficient and that practice is unnecessary are merely blind fools seeking an excuse for laziness.

Moreover, according to ordinary reasoning, if one has faith and vows, why would one not practice? Without practice, how can one demonstrate that one has faith and vows? Still less can one bring faith and vows to complete fulfillment. Thus faith and vows are the guide to practice, while practice is the destination of faith and vows.

Without faith and vows, practice cannot be initiated; without practice, faith and vows cannot be perfected. They condition and complete one another, and none of the three can be absent. This shows how important practice is within faith, vows, and practice!

Since practice is as important as faith and vows, it must look like genuine practice. One must never carelessly recite the Buddha's name with one's mouth while thinking of the Sahā world in one's heart, merely going through the motions. Such practice is equivalent to no practice at all.

If one recites the Buddha's name with the mouth but does not turn the mind, one cannot sever deluded thoughts, transform the deluded mind, or eliminate deluded habitual tendencies. One practices and practices, yet remains in the same old place, never advancing a single step—merely deceiving oneself and others. What benefit is there in that? If we are to practice, we must follow the instructions left by the Buddhas and patriarchs. As urgently as if rescuing one's head from fire, we must sincerely and earnestly nurture a single Buddha-name in the heart, never

forgetting it from thought to thought. Like pushing a heavily laden cart uphill, we must exert ourselves to the utmost, pressing forward without allowing a single step to slacken. The six-character great name must follow word by word and phrase by phrase, each word and phrase passing distinctly through the mind. With trembling care, we must take this great name of myriad virtues as a vajra king's precious sword, using it to struggle against our deluded thoughts, roots of attachment, and emotional views. Still more, throughout the day and night, we must gather in the six sense faculties and maintain uninterrupted pure mindfulness.

If we can truly apply ourselves in this way, neither seeking immediate results nor vainly hoping that a Buddha outside the mind will come to welcome us, thereby stirring up all kinds of demonic obstacles, then we will certainly proceed gradually from the distracted confusion of a beginner's Buddha-recitation, eliminate deluded thoughts, and attain one-pointedness of mind without distraction. In this light, what is there about so-called one-pointedness of mind without distraction that is so unattainably lofty as to inspire extreme fear? What goal is there that cannot be reached, such that people must quarrel over it?

When the mind is fearful, one will certainly lack vigor in practice; and if one practices without vigor, nothing can succeed. Therefore, firm faith is the first essential. Success depends on human effort. So long as we first understand the principles clearly and find the key, then press forward without retreating, there is no reason why anything we undertake cannot succeed.

Moreover, practice by other-power certainly does not mean that one need expend no effort at all and can succeed by relying entirely on someone else. The ancients

compared it to mosquitoes and flies clinging to a fine horse's tail. Yet the mosquitoes and flies must first fly to the horse's tail and must exert themselves to hold on; it does not mean that they need make no effort whatsoever.

Thus, it is entirely untenable to suppose that one can be reborn in the Western Pure Land by relying completely on the Buddha's power. Only through the combined power of self and other can this be accomplished. Furthermore, self and other are originally nondual; it is only because the deluded mind discriminates that self and other arise. Fundamentally, mind, Buddha, and sentient beings are one body, like a thousand lamps in one room: their lights are no different. Yet because of ignorance, we falsely take the reflections before us to be real.

We then cling to them as a self, and because of self there arises other; thus right and wrong come into being. Now, if the single name of the Buddha becomes effective and, in that very moment, a deluded thought dissolves, the self itself cannot stand—so whence could other arise? Therefore, self and other are fundamentally one body. Why speak of self-power and other-power? Those who speak of self-power and other-power do not truly know self and other. Alas!

Next, as "other-power" is generally understood, when a Buddha appears in the world and teaches you the method of Buddha-recitation, is that not other-power? When you practice, you have the great name endowed with myriad virtues as that upon which you rely; and because you uphold the name, Amitābha's adornments of the causal mind and wisdom-light of the fruition ground bless and protect you—is that not other-power? At the moment of death, through the communion of response, the Buddha manifests.

Within one's mind—this is what is meant by being guided and received—and there is also the Western Land of Ultimate Bliss as one's support. Is that not still more other-power? With so much other-power serving as favorable conditions, you have already gained every advantage. Yet you still think it insufficient and wish to expend no effort at all, expecting the Buddha to pull you up to heaven. Is there any such principle?

If there were, since we have not only today begun to believe in the Buddha and recite the Buddha's name, we should long ago have been reborn in the Western Pure Land and attained Buddhahood. Why, then, have we wandered until today, suffering here? Someone may say: "Although we may have believed in the Buddha for more than one lifetime, perhaps in former lives we practiced other schools and never recited the Buddha's name, and therefore were not reborn. For in the Pure Land, of ten thousand practitioners, ten thousand go." If that is so, why has there been since ancient times the lament: "Many recite the Buddha's name, but few are reborn in the West"? And could it be that Amitābha

If he can pull us there, then can Śākyamuni not pull us there? All the Buddhas of the ten directions vow to liberate all sentient beings. If they could pull them there, then as soon as a single Buddha appeared in the world, all sentient beings should have been liberated! Thus, there is no such thing as relying on the Buddha's power to pull you there. An ancient master said, "Even if you take him by the arm and lead him, he cannot go; only when he himself is willing will it accord."

one must be willing oneself before there can be a response. You must understand that the Buddha's power is boundless, but the karmic power of sentient beings is also boundless. Master Yinguang most highly praised relying on the compassionate power of the Buddha to guide one to rebirth in the West, yet he also said that Buddha-recitation must be earnest and sincere before one can be highly admitted into the ocean-wide assembly. Does such "earnest sincerity" not require a great deal of hard effort?

Going a step further, those who possess self-power do not seek other-power, yet other-power comes of itself. Conversely, those who exhaust themselves in seeking other-power while having no self-power at all can never obtain other-power; even if other-power is present, it can do nothing for them.

For when practitioners can truly be sincere and earnest, diligent and unremitting, they invisibly evoke the blessings, protection, and care of all Buddhas and bodhisattvas. When their practice becomes effective and deluded thoughts are cast off, their minds accord with the Buddha's mind; self and other are one body, and Buddhas and sentient beings are nondual. They further receive the mindful protection of the Buddhas of the ten directions, who extend their hands, touch their crowns, and bestow predictions of Buddhahood.

But those who are lazy and scattered, unwilling to practice, or who practice without vigor, have filth and defilement in their own minds and cannot connect with the pure light of the Buddha. All that they see and encounter is a mass of dark karma. Thus, although the Buddha appears before them and extends a hand to guide them, they are like those born blind who cannot see the sun. Therefore, in the first section we said: "Self-power is other-power, and other-power is self-power. Only with self-power is there other-power; without self-power, there is no other-power." Fellow practitioners, please reflect deeply.

In truth, the Pure Land school is the Chan school, and the Chan school is the Pure Land school; the two schools are not different. Do not vainly distinguish between self-power and other-power. Yet only persons of great capacity and superior wisdom can penetrate Chan's mysterious principle, recognize that appearance is identical with nature and that mind is identical with Buddha, and remain at all times and in all places unturned by things while freely turning things themselves.

The Pure Land school, however, does not necessarily require investigation into these profound principles. One need only settle the sacred name of Amitābha in the practitioner's mind, uphold it closely and continuously without interruption, and naturally, without conscious awareness, transform the scattered and deluded mind little by little into the pure Buddha-mind, thereby realizing the Buddha Way.

It is like the hair, fingernails, and toenails on a person's body: although one does not see them growing, they naturally grow continuously and imperceptibly.

The wonder of Buddha-recitation lies in making an immediate transformation at the root of the practitioner's birth and death—that is, in deluded thoughts. It causes one to recollect the Buddha, recollect the Dharma, and recollect the Saṅgha, and naturally not to dwell on greed, anger, and ignorance. It imperceptibly turns the deluded mind around and invisibly draws the practitioner out of birth and death.

It does not require investigation into profound principles, yet naturally accords in secret with the subtle wonder of the Way. So long as one single-mindedly upholds the name and recites the Buddha, one naturally accomplishes the unsurpassed Way. Therefore, Pure Land Buddha-recitation is a vast dharma gate that universally embraces practitioners of all three capacities. This is truly the skillful functioning of wisdom flowing from the great compassion in old Śākyamuni's heart!

When, through wholehearted acceptance and close, continuous upholding, you directly see Amitābha's true nature, only then will you know that self-power and other-power have always been nondual, and that sentient beings and Buddhas are originally one body. Looking back on the disputes and arguments of former days, they will seem like discussing Buddha-work in a dream. Would one not blush with shame?

This long and rambling discussion still requires one further reminder: cultivating the Pure Land is not limited to the single practice of reciting the Buddha's name. Contemplating the mind, upholding mantras, reciting sūtras, performing good deeds, and so forth may all, just like Buddha-recitation, be dedicated toward rebirth in the Western Pure Land. One-pointedness of mind without distraction is the crucial issue in the Pure Land Dharma gate. We need only let go of everything, hold firmly to the Buddha's name, and recite it continuously and unceasingly; then we shall naturally and securely arrive at our destination.

As this discussion was about to conclude, a compassionate bodhisattva suddenly came forth and said: "You fellow, babbling endlessly and making wild, boastful claims—are you not afraid of offending all quarters and arousing universal indignation?" I replied: "Have you not seen the patriarchs say, 'The Buddhadharma admits of no personal sentiment; rely on the Dharma, not on persons'? And have you not seen the yellow-faced Gautama say, 'For forty-nine years I expounded the

Dharma, yet I never uttered a single word’? Though this petty fellow were to use empty space as paper, the great ocean as an inkstone, and Mount Sumeru as ink, and fill the entire universe with writing, when would he ever have written a single word? How, then, could he offend all quarters? It is precisely thus:”

I fill the universe with thoughts of benefiting living beings, yet no stroke has begun and no character has taken form.

Where there is Dharma to speak, affairs topple over; where there is no Dharma to speak, clouds stretch ten thousand miles.

Poor seekers who probe the mystery keep discussing Buddha-work in their dreams without end.

One-pointedness of mind without distraction is not difficult: in every thought is Amitābha, and every word is clear.

Ha ha! Tell me, has anything been said or not? Take care! Take care!

I. Exploring “With Faith and Vows Alone, Even Scattered-Mind Buddha-Recitation Can Lead to Rebirth”

First, I feel that the meaning of this way of presenting the view seems unclear.

What exactly is meant by “scattered mind”? Does it refer to beginning practitioners whose minds cannot at once become pure, who should not vainly hope for quick results, but must rely on the practice of reciting the Buddha’s name to sweep away deluded thoughts and gradually attain one-pointedness of mind? (As Master Lianchi, Master Yinguang, and others have said, the accumulated habit of deluded movement from many lives cannot be swept clean by Buddha-recitation practiced only for a short time.

It is like a person long afflicted by illness, who cannot be cured by one or two doses of medicine. Therefore, in Buddha-recitation one must have a sustained and long-term resolve, reciting steadily and diligently without slackening. Over time, as one’s practice deepens, it will certainly prove effective, and one will attain one-pointedness of mind.) Or does it mean that, having now aroused the resolve to recite the Buddha’s name and seek rebirth in the West, we may nevertheless continue to be entangled with the karmic habits of ignorance, cling to the circumstances and conditions of the Sahā world in our hearts as though with glue and lacquer, and then, when old age and death arrive, naturally be reborn in the Western Pure Land?

If their intention is the former, then they are encouraging later students not to fear hardship or the disturbances of a scattered mind. As long as they establish heroic resolve and lofty aspirations and strive diligently, they will certainly attain one-pointedness of mind and assured rebirth.

Then we should applaud with both hands! But if their intention is the latter, we find it deeply regrettable. For this is arsenic and poison that harms those who come later; it must never be accepted! We seek rebirth in the Pure Land, yet our hearts remain attached to the wives, wealth, children, and status of the Sahā world. The ancients called this "clinging to the post while shaking the oars." One cannot even set out; how then can one enter into responsive communion with Amitābha Buddha, become continuous and undivided, and be reborn in the Western Pure Land?

National Master Yulin said: "In all cultivation, one must assess oneself and the Dharma, proceed with a straightforward mind and straightforward conduct. If one can truly loathe the three realms and firmly resolve to seek rebirth, then one should rely exclusively on the Amitābha Sūtra, hold firmly to the sacred name, gather in the six sense faculties, and maintain uninterrupted pure mindfulness. This is what is meant by holding to the name with one-pointedness of mind without distraction, thereby assuredly attaining rebirth. This is the practice of first benefiting oneself and then benefiting others.

"If one cannot let go of present wealth, rank, and fame, and does not yet deeply detest desires for sex and food, then it will not be easy to develop deep faith in the Dharma gate of rebirth. Having faith, if one practices for the Pure Land in body while one's mind remains attached to the Sahā world, what benefit can there be?" Patriarch Hanshan said: "Though the mouth recites Amitābha, if the mind is scattered and confused, even shouting until one's throat breaks is in vain.

"Does this not plainly say that reciting the Buddha's name with a scattered mind is futile? Could it be that these great patriarchs did not understand doctrine as thoroughly as you do, and that what they said was untrue? Or perhaps someone may say that these are words of Chan patriarchs and differ somewhat from those of the Pure Land school. Then let us cite a passage from Master Lianchi's "Third Universal Exhortation to Buddha-Recitation" as further evidence.

The Master said: "Someone may ask: 'Nowadays, we see many people reciting the Buddha's name, but few are reborn in the West. Why is this?' (This clearly shows that those reborn in the West are not the majority.) There are three reasons. First, though their mouths recite the Buddha's name, their hearts harbor unwholesomeness; for this reason they cannot attain rebirth."

I exhort people everywhere: since you recite the Buddha's name, you must follow what the Buddha taught. You must accumulate virtue and cultivate blessings; be

filial to your parents; faithfully serve your ruler; let brothers love one another and husbands and wives respect one another; be utterly sincere and trustworthy; gentle and patient; fair and upright; discreetly virtuous and accommodating; and compassionate toward all.

Do not kill living beings, humiliate inferiors, or oppress common people. Whenever an unwholesome thought arises, exert yourself in reciting the Buddha's name, and be sure to recite until that unwholesome thought recedes. Only then are you a person who recites the Buddha's name, and you will certainly attain rebirth and Buddhahood. Second, though their mouths recite the Buddha's name, their minds indulge in wild and confused thoughts; for this reason they cannot attain rebirth. (Take note, take note.) I exhort people everywhere: when reciting the Buddha's name, restrain the monkey-mind and horse-like will; make every word distinct and observe every thought. It should be as if you were personally in the West, face to face with Amitābha, not daring to become scattered or confused. Only then are you a person who recites the Buddha's name, and only then can you be reborn in the West. (The remainder is omitted.)"

This passage is so clear. I think that after reading it, no one will remain hesitant and undecided, much less continue to argue that reciting the Buddha's name with a scattered mind can also lead to rebirth in the West.

There is also the essential teaching on Pure Land cultivation in the recorded sayings of Chan Master Chewu in The Ten Essentials of the Pure Land: "Truly take birth and death as urgent; arouse bodhicitta; with deep faith and vows, uphold the Buddha's name; take collecting the mind in focused concentration as the initial expedient; take one-pointedness of mind without distraction as the ultimate destination; and take auspicious signs of rebirth as verification." Does this not also show that Pure Land patriarchs do not advocate reciting the Buddha's name with a scattered mind?

But why can one not attain rebirth by reciting the Buddha's name with a scattered mind? We must clarify this further. Otherwise, merely echoing others and swallowing dates whole without understanding why will ultimately become an obstruction of delusion. When we put effort into practice, it will also inevitably be weak and powerless, unable to overcome the enemy and attain the result. How then could we hope to be reborn in the West and realize the Way? Without begrudging the detail, let us examine the matter further as follows:

As everyone knows, all sentient beings originally possess the Tathāgata's wisdom and virtuous characteristics. Originally, they are Buddhas and are fundamentally neither arising nor ceasing. Yet because ignorance has deludedly stirred since beginningless time, they take the false for the real, give rise to delusion and create

karma, undergo retribution according to karma, and thus vainly suffer the pain of birth-and-death and rebirth within what is originally free of birth and death.

Now, if we wish to be reborn in the West and be liberated from birth and death, but do not use the practice of Buddha-recitation to recite away this very thought of deluded mind that gives rise to delusion and creates karma, transforming the deluded mind into Buddha-mind—so that the whole Buddha is mind and the whole mind is Buddha—while instead allowing the deluded mind to invert, grasp at conditions, cling, and move deludedly, how can we avoid being bound and dragged down by karmic circumstances into the six realms? And how can we, at the time of death, dispel these illusory images of karmic consciousness and be reborn in the West? A sūtra says: “If one wishes to purify one’s land, one must first purify one’s mind. As one’s mind is purified, so is the Buddha land purified.”

Therefore, if we wish to be reborn in the Western Pure Land, we must first let go of everything, recite the Buddha’s name single-mindedly, and purify the mind-ground. A sūtra says: “All is created by mind.” If the mind is scattered, confused, and defiled, it is utterly incompatible with the pure realm. In the end, one can only be born in a defiled land; this is unavoidable.

Someone may say: “Rebirth in the West depends entirely on other-power—the compassionate power of Amitābha Buddha to guide us. It is not like cultivating other Dharma gates, in which one relies on self-power to realize the Way.”

The answer is: other-power does not exist apart from self-power; apart from self-power, there is absolutely no other-power. This principle applies even to worldly dharmas. Between nations, between people, and even among insentient grasses, trees, and forests, it is impossible for one who lacks the ability to survive on one’s own to survive entirely by relying on others or on other things. Examples of this are too numerous to mention.

The same is even more true of supramundane dharmas. Ānanda aroused the resolve at the same time as the Buddha, but because his cultivation was inadequate, he did not realize the Way until after the Buddha’s parinirvāṇa; how far he still was from Buddhahood is beyond saying. Rāhula, because his father was the Buddha, did not cultivate on his own and was reprimanded by the Buddha. Such cases all show that without making one’s own effort, and while relying entirely on other-power, one cannot accomplish anything.

As for Amitābha Buddha’s great vows to guide beings, this is responsive communion. When a practitioner’s mind is pure and pure karma has matured, Amitābha appears before that person; the Buddha does not run up to the practitioner and pull them off to the West! All you practitioners of pure karma, please do not misunderstand this point. The sūtras all say, “The Buddha and the

assembly of sages appear before them," not that the Buddha "comes" before them. This is clear proof.

The difference between the single characters "come" and "appear" is vast in meaning. How can they be confused? Both Chan Master Yongming and Master Yinguang gave a precise explanation: "When one recites the Buddha's name with one-pointedness of mind without distraction, responsive communion occurs, and that Buddha appears before one, just as the moon appears when water is clear. If the water is turbid, although the moon is in the sky, its reflection is not visible.

"The mind of one who recites the Buddha's name is like water, and the Buddha is like the moon. If the mind-water is turbid, the Buddha-moon cannot appear before one." This shows that in addition to other-power, self-power is necessary. Without self-power, other-power has nowhere to take hold. Therefore, the Pure Land Dharma gate is cultivated through the joint practice of self-power and other-power. To rely solely on other-power without self-power inevitably ends in utter defeat. Otherwise, why did Master Yinguang teach us to recite the Buddha's name "with deep faith and earnest vows, upholding the Buddha's name," and to do so "as if rescuing one's head from fire"?

Nowadays, some practitioners of the Pure Land, because they do not understand this principle, exert insufficient effort. At the time of death, when they do not see the Buddha appear, they panic, assume that the Buddhadharma is ineffective, and mistakenly believe that the Buddha's vows are empty. They do not realize that their own mind-water is impure: even if the Buddha personally appears before them, they will not see him.

It is like someone blind from birth who, having never seen the sun, curses it for not appearing before him. Is that not unjust? All this comes from an incorrect causal basis: seeking an easy bargain, they have been deceived by a group of blind teachers and believe that, by reciting the Buddha's name with a scattered mind, they need only rely on Amitābha's vow-power to attain rebirth. They do not realize that the result is not only failure to attain rebirth, but also the grave offense of slandering the Buddha and disparaging the Dharma, followed by severe karmic retribution in future lives. Is this not terribly unjust?

Someone may say: "You know only one side and not the other. Why did Master Ouyi, in his essay 'On Upholding the Name and the Nine Grades in the Four Pure Lands,' say: 'If one wishes to be assured of rebirth in the Land of Ultimate Bliss, nothing is better than taking faith as the guide and vows as the rearward spur.

If one's faith is true and one's vows earnest, then even if one recites the Buddha's name with a scattered mind, one will certainly attain rebirth. If one's faith is not true and one's vows not strong, then even with one-pointedness of mind without

distraction, one will not attain rebirth'? Why did he further say, 'Those who recite the Buddha's name with deep faith and earnest vows, yet whose minds are often scattered and confused while reciting, are reborn in the lowest grade of the lowest rank'? Does this not clearly and unmistakably tell us that reciting the Buddha's name with a scattered mind can also lead to rebirth in the West?

Now we seek only rebirth in the lowest grade of the lowest rank, or even birth in the borderland or city of doubt; this is enough for our vows. For once one is born in the Pure Land, one attains non-retrogression. There is no need to seek rebirth in the middle or higher grades and thereby invite needless hardship! Therefore, we need only recite the Buddha's name with a scattered mind, idly and carelessly, roaming freely and indulgently, enjoying ourselves. At death, we can still attain rebirth in the lowest grade in Ultimate Bliss and ultimately become Buddhas just the same. Why not do so? Why must we exhaust deluded emotions, extinguish greedy defilement, and painstakingly uphold a single Buddha-name—dry and tasteless—thus seeking hardship for ourselves?

The answer is: Master Ouyi's words require the greatest care. Please do not read them glibly, inattentive to the whole passage, and fix your attention only on the four words "reciting the Buddha's name with a scattered mind." Thinking that the Master advocates such recitation, that there is an opportunity to be lazy and an easy advantage to gain, people find this exactly to their liking. They are happy to muddle along in the Sahā world, thinking that when death comes there will still be a Western Pure Land in which to be reborn and great bliss to enjoy—how comfortable! They do not realize that this wishful calculation is mistaken. When the time of death arrives, they see only the black karma accumulated during life binding and entangling them; where will they see the Buddha come and extend a hand? Though remorse and regret then overwhelm them, it will already be too late!

Now let us analyze and examine this passage in detail together:

First, the statement that those who recite the Buddha's name with deep faith and earnest vows will certainly be reborn even if their minds are scattered, whereas those whose faith and vows are not genuine and earnest will not attain rebirth even if they achieve one-pointedness of mind without distraction, was intended to distinguish such people from those who use the recitation of Amitābha Buddha's sacred name merely as an aid to entering samādhi and have no thought of rebirth in the Land of Ultimate Bliss—that is, those without faith and vows. In the late Ming dynasty, many Chan scholars often used name-recitation to enter samādhi. Therefore, Master Ouyi said: "Even if your Buddha-recitation is so profound that wind cannot penetrate it and rain cannot soak it, without faith and vows you can never attain rebirth."

Second, the six words “faith that is genuine and vows that are earnest” must qualify scattered-minded Buddha-recitation before one can attain rebirth. It is not simply that scattered-minded Buddha-recitation by itself enables rebirth. There is much to consider here; do not pass over it lightly. What constitutes genuine faith? And what constitutes earnest vows? To make this more persuasive, let us look at how the great patriarchs have explained and portrayed “genuine faith” and “earnest vows.”

I. An explanation of faith: First, one must believe that mind, Buddha, and sentient beings are not different. We are Buddhas not yet accomplished; Amitābha is a Buddha already accomplished. Their awakened nature is not two. Second, one must believe that we are Buddhas in principle and Buddhas in name, whereas Amitābha is the ultimate Buddha.

Although intrinsic nature is not two, the levels are as far apart as heaven and abyss. If we do not single-mindedly recollect that Buddha and seek rebirth in that land, we will inevitably be carried along by karma in the round of birth and death and undergo immeasurable suffering. Next, one must believe that although we are heavily burdened with karmic obstacles and have long dwelt in the realm of suffering, we are sentient beings within Amitābha’s mind; and that although Amitābha is adorned with the myriad virtues and lies beyond ten billion Buddha lands, he is the Buddha within our own minds.

Since mind and intrinsic nature are not two, there is naturally a responsive communion with the Way. Our intense suffering will surely evoke a response, and the Buddha’s compassion will surely answer, like a magnet drawing iron—there can be no doubt. As it is said: “The Tathāgatas of the ten directions pity and recollect sentient beings as a mother remembers her child. … If the child remembers the mother as the mother remembers the child, then throughout life after life mother and child will not be far apart or opposed.”

“If the minds of sentient beings”—note the word “mind”—“remember the Buddha and recite the Buddha’s name, then in the present and in the future they will certainly see the Buddha” (Śūraṅgama Sūtra). It is also said: Only when one remains unchanged from beginning to end and does not alter in the face of gain or loss can one be said to have genuine faith. Genuine faith has three aspects: first, faith that Amitābha receives sentient beings who recite the Buddha’s name and enables their rebirth in the West—this is absolutely not false.

Second, faith that if one upholds Amitābha’s name for one day or even seven days, achieving one-pointedness of mind without distraction—please note this—one will attain rebirth. I shall practice in accordance with this teaching. Third, faith that the Dharma gate of Buddha-recitation transmitted by Mahāsthāmaprāpta Bodhisattva

and the patriarchs of the Pure Land school contains not a single false word. I shall rely on it, practice courageously and diligently, and attain samādhi.

It is also said: The mind with which we recite the Buddha's name enters samādhi through wisdom; it illuminates while remaining ever quiescent. This is faith in the Buddha inherently present within us. Because samādhi gives rise to wisdom, it remains quiescent while ever illuminating. This is faith in the Dharma inherently present within us. When samādhi and wisdom are fully integrated, and quiescence and illumination are nondual, this is faith in the Saṅgha inherently present within us.

It is also said: Faith does not mean merely believing that the western Buddha land is adorned and splendid, and thereby counting oneself as having aroused faith. One must also deeply believe that one's own intrinsic nature is Amitābha and that one can originally become a Buddha in the same way. Everyone can become a Yao or a Shun; all sentient beings can become Buddhas. The difference lies only in delusion and awakening. The Buddha land of the West, with its adornments of environment and beings, is the Pure Land of phenomena; the purity of my own intrinsic nature is the Pure Land of principle. Mind pervades all places; all are the West. The ten directions are no different from the West. It is not enough merely to believe that the Sahā world is suffering and the West is blissful, or that the Land of Ultimate Bliss truly exists.

II. Explaining vows: First, at all times—note, at all times, not only when circumstances are unfavorable but differently when one is joyful—one must loathe the suffering of birth and death and afflictions in the Sahā world, cherish the bliss of bodhi in the Land of Ultimate Bliss, and strive with all one's strength for rebirth there.

Next, one must vow to follow the Pure Land Dharma gate transmitted by the Buddhas and patriarchs, cultivate it courageously and diligently, cleanse away habitual defilements, and bring body and mind to purity and ease, attaining the Land of Ultimate Bliss in this very life. Next, one must resolve to attain unsurpassed awakening, perfect bodhi, and make offerings to all Buddhas. Next, one must arouse the vast mind to liberate all sentient beings, vowing not to become a Buddha until the realm of sentient beings is empty.

Further, whatever one does, whether good or evil, if it is good, one dedicates it toward seeking rebirth; if it is evil, one repents and vows to seek rebirth. One has no second aspiration. It is also said: When the mind that recites the Buddha seeks to attain one-pointedness of mind without distraction—yet one must not deliberately seek it, for seeking makes it more distant—this is called a pure vow. To vow not to rest until rebirth in the West is attained is called a constant vow. To attain unsurpassed awakening and liberate sentient beings widely is called a great vow. ...

Only by arousing the resolve in this way can one be said to have genuine faith and earnest vows.

Fellow practitioners, let me ask: if we truly possess faith and vows such as these, would the food, sex, wives, wealth, children, rank, salary, reputation, status, and so forth of the Sahā world still occupy our minds, leaving us to calculate and cling without end? Once we can let go of all these circumstances, like flowers in empty space and the moon reflected in water, what deluded thoughts could still linger in our minds and bewilder us? If no deluded thoughts bewilder us, then when reciting the Buddha's name, we

will be as Master Lianchi said above: as though personally before Amitābha, too occupied with reverence, sincerity, and earnestness for anything else. What deluded thoughts could still stir in disorder? Is this not attaining one-pointedness without having sought it? Therefore, Master Ouyi said: "If faith is genuine and vows are earnest, then even with a scattered mind while reciting the Buddha's name, one will certainly attain rebirth."

You should pay attention to the word "even." It means that if one's faith and vows are truly earnest, as when one's head is on fire and must be saved, there is no need to fear that one will not become one-pointed. At such a time, even if one wished to indulge inverted deluded thoughts, one could not do so. That is why the word "even" is used. At the same time, this is a relative statement directed at those mentioned below who recite the Buddha's name without faith and vows: although their practice may be excellent, they cannot attain rebirth.

Thus, when it is said, "Those with faith and vows can be reborn in the West even if they recite the Buddha's name with a scattered mind," do not misunderstand this. Do not suppose that merely by lazily and carelessly reciting Amitābha of the West with our mouths while thinking of the Sahā world's wealth and sensual pleasures in our hearts, we can easily and as we please attain rebirth in the West.

Furthermore, the statement that one who has "deep faith, earnest vows, and Buddha-recitation, yet whose mind is often scattered, will be reborn in the lowest grade of the lowest rank" refers to practitioners with deeply ingrained karmic obstacles and habitual hindrances. Although they now possess deep faith and earnest vows, their deluded thoughts and habitual tendencies cannot be purified all at once. Although the coarse deluded thoughts that crave the world have already been cut off, subtle habitual deluded thoughts still come from time to time to intrude.

As the ancients said: "Though the wind has stopped, the waves still surge; though principle has appeared, thoughts still intrude." Such deluded thoughts are subtle, but because there are thoughts apart from the Buddha, they must still be called a

“scattered mind.” Yet, precisely because they are subtle, one is aware of them as soon as they arise and does not follow them in inverted attachment. Thus, as soon as one raises the Buddha-recitation, the deluded thoughts immediately vanish and one returns to purity.

This practice of illuminating thoughts as they arise and dispelling them through illumination was described by Chan Master Guifeng as follows: “Whenever deluded thoughts arise, do not follow them. Even if there is an intermediate state, karma cannot bind you.” Since karma cannot bind one, one can make vows for rebirth. Conversely, if people who crave the Sahā world, are confused by deluded thoughts, and ceaselessly pursue conditions also wish to cite this precedent in seeking rebirth, they are truly daydreaming.

However, to return to the matter: if someone is naturally free-spirited and not greatly attached to worldly conditions, or although they ordinarily do not believe in Buddhism, they also do not slander it, and have been unable to recite the Buddha’s name one-pointedly, then upon hearing the instruction of a good spiritual friend at the time of death, they may suddenly repent and awaken, let go completely, single-mindedly recite the name, and seek rebirth in the West. Such a person can also attain rebirth through as few as ten recitations, or even a single recitation.

But such persons of sudden capacity are scarcely found even one or two among tens of millions. A single thought at the time of death depends entirely upon one’s usual training. For one who has not practiced diligently in ordinary life to turn the situation around and be self-mastering in a single thought at death is truly harder than winning the grand prize in an airline lottery. This certainly cannot be taken as a model.

Much has already been said concerning whether scattered-minded Buddha-recitation can enable rebirth in the West. For ease of understanding, the following is a brief summary:

1. If the mind that craves the Sahā world has not ceased, the root of attachment has not been cut off, and emotional views have not been eliminated, and one recites the Buddha’s name merely with a mind of inverted deluded attachment, then even if one has some slight faith and vows, because they are not deep and earnest, one only plants distant causal seeds of goodness and cannot attain rebirth. One must wait to exert oneself in a future life before one’s wish can be fulfilled.

2. If, in a single thought at the time of death, one suddenly changes course, there may also be hope of rebirth. But this is too perilous and the opportunity is exceedingly rare; among tens of millions, scarcely one person is found. Therefore, it also cannot be cited as a model.

(You should know that for those who attain rebirth through ten recitations at the time of death, the crucial point is that they had not heard the Buddhadharma during life. Only when the signs of death appeared did they hear the instruction of a good spiritual friend, thoroughly repent and awaken, let go completely, and thus make the ten recitations accord. If such people of sharp faculties had heard the Buddhadharma ten years earlier, they would have attained accomplishment ten years earlier; if they had heard it twenty years earlier, they would have attained accomplishment twenty years earlier. But if people like us hear the Buddhadharma early on, yet give rise to a lazy, opportunistic mind, fail to let go of worldly attachments, and vainly hope for rebirth through ten recitations, then this itself is already a divided mind. How could it accord?)

II. Exploring Whether One-Pointedness of Mind Without Distraction Is Necessary

Once the first question has been clarified, the second will be readily resolved as well. Since one-pointedness of mind without distraction is the opposite of a scattered mind, and a scattered mind is unacceptable, it follows without saying that one must attain one-pointedness of mind without distraction. Yet truth becomes clearer through discussion, and this matter is of great importance, so let us examine it in detail.

So-called “one-pointedness of mind without distraction” was not created or stipulated by any patriarch. It was personally proclaimed by Śākyamuni Buddha, in unequivocal words set forth in the shorter Amitābha Sūtra.

The Buddha says that one must attain one-pointedness of mind without distraction; which patriarch would dare say that it is unnecessary? Still less would people as foolish as ourselves dare to say so. The Buddha is the Perfectly Enlightened One. If we wish to cultivate practice and realize the Way, whose words should we heed if not the Buddha’s? But why is one-pointedness of mind without distraction necessary? What is the principle behind it? We gave a brief explanation when discussing the first question; now let us consider it in greater detail.

Śākyamuni Buddha said that those who wish to be reborn in the Pure Land cannot do so with scant good roots, merit and virtue, or causes and conditions. Nothing better reveals the extent of these three than the depth of one’s practice of Buddha-recitation. Therefore, one must practice Buddha-recitation with one-pointedness of mind without distraction; only then can one fully possess good roots, merit and virtue, and causes and conditions, and be reborn in the Pure Land.

It is said that the shorter Amitābha Sūtra was freely translated by Master Kumārajīva. In accordance with the original Sanskrit meaning and in combination with Chinese modes of expression, he used the four characters “one-pointedness of mind without distraction.”

Master Xuanzang, on the other hand, drawing on the Dharma Characteristics principle that “all is manifested by mind and transformed by consciousness,” said that in Buddha-recitation one must “keep one’s mindfulness undistracted.” Only by transforming deluded consciousness so that pure karma matures can one be reborn in the West. This is roughly the meaning; I can no longer recall the sūtra passage in full. Although the wording of the two masters’ translations differs somewhat, their meaning is the same: practitioners of Buddha-recitation must let go of everything, recite the Buddha’s name with devout sincerity, cut off the root of attachment, and bring mind and Buddha into communion as an unbroken whole; only then can they be reborn in the Western Pure Land.

The great patriarchs have offered various views concerning “one-pointedness of mind without distraction.” In summary, they fall into no more than the following categories:

(I) One-pointedness of mind without distraction means that there is no mind that can be distracted: one reaches the state in which mind, consciousness, and awareness have completely vanished; neither true nor false is established, and both subject and object are gone. In other words, it is the moment of awakening described in the Chan school as “with a ‘hu’ sound, the bottom drops out of the bucket.” At that time, mind is the land, and the land is mind; outside mind there is no land, and outside the land there is no mind. Mind, Buddha, and sentient beings have become completely one.

(II) One-pointedness of mind without distraction has depths and shallows, and is distinguished as noumenal one-pointedness and phenomenal one-pointedness. Phenomenal one-pointedness means reciting the name with sustained continuity, so that the Buddha’s name in one’s mind is clearly and distinctly present. Whether dressing, eating, walking, standing, sitting, or lying down, the great Name continues seamlessly, like breathing: neither scattered nor submerged. This manner of maintaining the name is called phenomenal one-pointedness—that is, gathering the mind into one.

As for noumenal one-pointedness, one directly investigates and realizes that all phenomena are suchness, without dual characteristics. Thus, Buddhas and sentient beings are nondual; self and other are nondual; cause and effect are nondual; dependent and direct retribution are nondual; purity and impurity are nondual; suffering and happiness are nondual; attraction and aversion are nondual; grasping

and relinquishing are nondual; bodhi and afflictions are nondual; birth and death and nirvāṇa are nondual. All these dual dharmas share a single characteristic, a single clear and level path, without any need for forced arrangement.

But if one investigates reality for oneself, and carries that investigation to its utmost, one suddenly accords with one's own original mind. Then one knows that dressing and eating are altogether samādhi, and that laughing, scolding, anger, and reproach are all Buddha-activities. One-pointed mind and scattered mind alike become mere empty talk. Throughout the entire day, not the slightest differing characteristic can be found. The Western Pure Land is present here and now; the ten directions do not differ from the Western Pure Land. The unborn is birth, and birth is the unborn. This is called noumenal one-pointedness.

(III) Whether noumenal one-pointedness or phenomenal one-pointedness, these are matters within the reach of ordinary beings on the grounds of delusion. Anyone who has a mind can cultivate and learn them. Do not set them up too high as the realm of sages and resign yourself to an inferior position, thinking that they are not your own concern. You must know that everything is created by mind. To be reborn in the Pure Land, one must first purify the mind. If the mind is impure, rebirth in the Pure Land is difficult; if the mind is pure, one naturally attains one-pointedness of mind without distraction and will certainly be reborn in the Pure Land.

Thus, "one-pointedness of mind without distraction" is originally for making the mind clear and the water pure, so that the Buddha may appear before one and guide one to rebirth. It is not a matter of aiming too high. Phenomenal one-pointedness in particular is an attainment that practitioners of Buddha-recitation must possess. It is not something impossibly lofty. There is no need to fear it: once we understand the key and practice diligently, we will certainly succeed.

Even the noumenal one-pointedness and realization of one's true nature that you all consider supremely lofty are not absolutely beyond attainment. For all sentient beings inherently possess this unborn, undying, pure, and undefiled Buddha-nature. It is neither sought from outside nor acquired through practice.

Mountains, rivers, and the great earth; grasses, trees, and forests; men and women, young and old; eating, drinking, daily life; indeed, every sound, every form, every mind, and every dharma—none is other than the manifestation of nature, and none is other than its functioning.

So long as we recognize it and clearly understand that nature is the substance of appearances and appearances are the functioning of nature, then, when seeing forms and hearing sounds, we will not be turned by sounds and forms, and can see our true nature through forms and appearances.

In other words, as long as in our daily activities we respond to conditions and apply ourselves without being deluded by the illusory appearances of things, becoming attached to them in the mind, or inwardly shaken by them—being quietly aware and aware in quietness, turning all things without being turned by things, and making use of all times without being turned by time—this is seeing one's true nature.

From this perspective, the lofty realm of noumenal one-pointedness is our innate capacity; it is certainly not unattainable. If we realize noumenal one-pointedness, the mind is pure and undefiled, naturally corresponding with the Western Pure Land. Since all Buddhas are originally of one substance, we can become an unbroken whole with Amitābha and thereby attain rebirth in the highest grade in the Pure Land.

Someone may say: "It is easy to say but difficult to do." The answer is: once we clearly recognize the essential principle, we must make a firm resolve to struggle against our deluded habitual tendencies. Rely on a single Buddha-name as a weapon. As soon as deluded habits stir and begin to cling to objects and circumstances, immediately raise the great Name and drive them back. Raise it again and again; strike them down again and again. Day after day and year after year, how could this fail to succeed? Moreover, for those of good capacity, there is no need for repeated vigilant raising of the phrase: as soon as they hear it raised, they return home and sit securely.

Someone may say: "That is a Chan-school state and has nothing to do with Pure Land practitioners." The answer is: do not disparage the Pure Land. The Pure Land is originally Chan, and Chan is the Pure Land. The Pure Land is utterly complete and vast, supremely lofty; it is not an inferior dharma gate. Chan is the Chan of the Pure Land, and the Pure Land is the Pure Land of Chan. Chan and Pure Land are not separate households.

It is regrettable that recent Pure Land practitioners have willingly settled for the inferior and lesser. They believe that rebirth in a borderland is sufficient to fulfill their vows. They do not diligently cultivate the recitation of the Buddha's name, but merely go through the morning and evening services perfunctorily and consider the matter finished. Thus they have made this excellent Pure Land dharma gate into something quite unrecognizable.

They do not know that Master Yinguang, a great modern teacher of the Pure Land school, also entered retreat several times to specialize in Buddha-recitation and realized the Buddha-recitation samādhi. His writings describing this samādhi are entirely consistent with Chan teachings, and include the Dharma saying: "Nothing does not flow forth from this Dharma realm; nothing does not return to this Dharma

realm." Consider, then: is this dharma gate lofty or not? Must one single-mindedly practice Buddha-recitation with unremitting diligence or not?

To avoid disputes, let us for the moment set aside these profound theories and discuss them with everyone later, when we take up a special study of the Pure Land. For now, let us speak of phenomenal one-pointedness.

When discussing the first question, we already said that rebirth in the West requires the mind-water to be clear and pure, so that the Buddha and the assembly of sages can appear before one. If the mind-water is impure, then even if the Buddha stands before one, one is like a person blind from birth, unable to see the sun. Therefore, if one wishes to be reborn in the West, the mind must be purified.

We also said that true faith and earnest vows naturally enable one to let go of Sahā —the defiled, ugly, and suffering world—and cut off the roots of attachment and emotional views. Under vigorous, resolute holding to the Buddha's name, one can naturally and without contrivance reach the state of one-pointedness of mind without distraction. We also said that even fellow practitioners of somewhat inferior capacity and heavier deluded habits, who have cut off coarse delusions but are still assailed by subtle ones, may still hope for rebirth in the West so long as they firmly raise mindfulness of the Buddha, illuminate and expose deluded thoughts, and do not follow them in their wandering.

The foregoing statements are the definition of phenomenal one-pointedness without distraction and the explanation of why it is necessary.

Because we can cut off and let go of all affairs and things in the Sahā world, without being bound and troubled by emotional attachments, we can continuously nurture a sacred name in the depths of the mind—neither scattered nor submerged. When subtle deluded habits intrude, we will not be shaken by them; thus the sacred name can remain clearly distinct and continue without interruption.

At the same time, because our practice is effective, the mind becomes ever more clear and pure, enabling us to let go of worldly conditions even more fully. Buddha-recitation becomes increasingly devout, and the power of samādhi grows ever deeper. Only through such mutually reinforcing single-minded recitation can the mind become clear and the water bright, so that the sacred realm appears before us and we are reborn in the Western Pure Land.

I think that no one who truly wishes to be reborn in the West would dare—or be willing—to say that such one-pointedness of mind without distraction is unnecessary. If one searches through the recorded sayings of the patriarchs, not a single one says that it is unnecessary. On the contrary, all praise one-pointedness of mind without distraction, encourage students to realize it, and warn later learners

not to disregard it. Master Lianchi devoted a special essay to this in his Random Notes from the Bamboo Window. A few further examples follow:

Master Jieli said in his Instructions to the Assembly at the Beginning of a Seven-Day Retreat for Diligent Practice: “Before one reaches the ground of one-pointedness of mind without distraction, one truly has scant good roots, merit and virtue, and causes and conditions. How could one hope to be reborn in that land?!”

Master Yinguang said in his Letter to Lay Practitioner Chen Xizhou: “With a scattered mind in Buddha-recitation, rebirth is difficult to attain; with ‘single-minded Buddha-recitation,’ rebirth is certain.” He also said in Letter Thirteen: “The dharma of Buddha-recitation is the simplest and easiest, the broadest and greatest of dharmas. Only with utmost earnestness and sincerity can one enter responsive communion with the Way and personally obtain true benefit in this very life.”

“If one is lazy and indolent, with no reverence or awe, one merely plants distant causes. The offense of irreverence and disrespect then becomes unimaginable; even if one should be reborn among humans or devas, it will be utterly impossible to join the lofty assembly…” Is laziness and indolence scattered mind or one-pointed mind? This amounts to saying that Buddha-recitation with a scattered mind cannot bring rebirth in the West.

Master Lianchi said in “Letter in Reply to Lay Practitioner Sun Guangliang”: “No practice surpasses one-pointed Buddha-recitation. Recite to the utmost and awaken; once awakened, there is nothing further to discuss. Even if one does not attain great awakening, to leave this Sahā world and be reborn in that Pure Land is to transcend the world. To eliminate scattered thoughts and make right mindfulness wholly unified is true reality. Now, do not concern yourself with whether one transcends the world or not, or whether it is true or not. Simply bring the practice to the point of ‘one mind,’ and it will naturally be settled.”

He also said in “Letter in Reply to Lay Practitioner Yuan Xinyuan of Suzhou”: “Now you need only recite the Buddha single-mindedly and sincerely. If, over a long time, you recite until attaining ‘one-pointedness of mind without distraction,’ you will certainly awaken. Even if you do not awaken, the power of a lifetime of recitation will enable you to know for yourself at the time of death, and after death you will certainly be reborn in the Pure Land.”

Examples such as these are too numerous to enumerate. Thus, there can truly be no dispute about the importance of one-pointedness of mind without distraction for rebirth in the Western Pure Land.

I fear that only those mediocre Buddha-recitation practitioners who inwardly wish to be reborn in the Western Pure Land but still cling to the Sahā world—unable to let

go of their beloved wives and children, unwilling to part with glory, wealth, and honor—as well as some lazy people afraid of hardship, would concoct, out of their own ingenuity and self-justification, a set of fallacies that depart from the sūtras and teachings. They use them to deceive women and children, saying, “There is no need for one-pointedness of mind without distraction; scattered-minded Buddha-recitation can also bring rebirth in the Western Pure Land.” They do not realize that, if you seek only momentary verbal fluency, it does not matter if you harm yourself—but if you harm others, you will plunge into hell as swiftly as an arrow!”

Someone may say: “If one must attain one-pointedness of mind without distraction in order to be reborn, then there will be very few people reborn in the Western Pure Land.” The reply is: Judging by the standard of phenomenal one-pointedness described above, the requirement is not high; it is not impossible to achieve.

So long as practitioners are willing to sacrifice immediate pleasures, cast off the entanglements at hand, exert themselves a little more diligently, and continuously uphold the Buddha’s name in their minds, everyone can attain it and be reborn in the Western Pure Land. What difficulty is there? As for the number of those reborn in the Western Pure Land, it seems that since ancient times their number has not been great. The reason lies in these mistaken fallacies—“One-pointedness of mind without distraction is too difficult and unnecessary; scattered-minded Buddha-recitation is enough for rebirth in the West”—which harm people by leading practitioners to crave worldly blessings and refuse to exert themselves. Consequently, few are reborn in the Western Pure Land.

Look at Master Lianchi’s “The Third Universal Exhortation to Buddha-Recitation,” cited above. At the very beginning, he sighs deeply: “Nowadays, many people recite the Buddha’s name, yet few are reborn in the West. Why?” He then regretfully identifies the cause: “Though their mouths recite the Buddha’s name, their minds indulge in wild and confused thoughts; therefore, they cannot be reborn in the West!” What profound regret! What irrefutable evidence!

Fellow practitioners, you must understand that seeking rebirth in the Western Pure Land is a great matter of transcending birth and death. It is not a matter of asserting oneself, disputing right and wrong, or indulging in contentious feelings.

You need to reflect calmly: When I recite the Buddha’s name with a scattered mind, can I remain in command amid the activities of daily life, especially at critical moments of gain and loss, favorable and adverse circumstances, sorrow and joy? Can I avoid being carried away by circumstances and keep Buddha-remembrance before me? Going further, ask yourself: Can I remain in command while asleep and dreaming? Amid laughter or fright, can I remain unmoved by dream states and have Buddha-remembrance appear before me?

If you cannot remain in command in all these situations, then when the final day arrives—when your wife surrounds your bedside, illness leaves you dazed, the wind-knives dismember your body, and pain presses urgently upon you—while every event you experienced in life and every unresolved entanglement after death surges into your mind one by one, how can you remain in command, recite the Buddha's name, and seek rebirth in the Western Pure Land? You must understand that even if you can remain in command during the day, in dreams you will still be unable to remain in command half the time;

even if you can remain in command in dreams, at death you will still be unable to remain in command half the time! For dreaming is half-consciousness, whereas death is profound unconsciousness. If, because you have not practiced diligently enough, you cannot attain rebirth at life's end, then would not the claim that "one need not attain one-pointedness of mind without distraction; scattered-minded Buddha-recitation is enough for rebirth" become an empty check, bringing distress upon oneself? I do not write in this startling manner merely to frighten you, nor do I make lofty and unrealistic demands by insisting that you do this and that, without which you cannot be reborn in the West.

The truth is that, if one is genuinely to be reborn in the Western Pure Land, it is certainly not enough to rely exclusively on Amitābha's vow-power and welcoming guidance while making no effort oneself, imagining that rebirth can then be attained easily. Yet we see that most present-day Pure Land practitioners covet convenience and are unwilling to exert themselves.

As a result, they either pine for worldly ties or remain attached to family wealth; they either suffer unbearable illness or lapse into unconsciousness. Those said to be reborn in the Western Pure Land have gone wandering somewhere in the round of birth and death instead. That is why I willingly risk disapproval and dare offer you all these unpalatable words. Driven by conscience, I have no choice but to speak boldly, in the hope of forcefully correcting the current abuses.

III. An Inquiry into "Relying Solely on Amitābha's Vow-Power for Rebirth While Carrying Karma"

The phrase "rebirth while carrying karma" does not appear explicitly in the Buddhist sūtras. It is an interpretation developed by the patriarchs through integrating the meaning of the sūtras and treatises. Its actual intent is this: ordinary beings of limited capacity have deep and weighty karmic obstacles and habitual tendencies, which cannot be entirely eliminated through cultivation in a single lifetime.

Even after great and thorough awakening, the final portion of ignorance has still not been destroyed. For even at the stage of an equal enlightenment bodhisattva, one portion of ignorance remains unexhausted. Who can, in one lifetime, cultivate and realize the stage of equal enlightenment? This unexhausted ignorance is deluded karma. What is called "rebirth while carrying karma" means being reborn while carrying this "karma."

Even Buddha-recitation practitioners who realize one-pointedness at the level of principle seem unable to surpass an equal enlightenment bodhisattva; thus, they cannot avoid retaining ignorance. Therefore, if they wish to attain rebirth, they must still attain rebirth while carrying karma. This certainly does not mean that practitioners of Buddha-recitation may commit some wrongs, harm others for their own benefit, and still attain rebirth while carrying karma.

Someone may say: Master Yinguang said that those who have committed the five heinous offenses and ten evil acts may ordinarily know nothing of cultivation, though they have never slandered the Buddha. If, at the time of death, they encounter a good spiritual friend who instructs them, make vows, recite the Buddha's name, and seek rebirth in the West, they too can attain rebirth while carrying karma.

Does this not plainly tell us that we may commit some wrongs now and still attain rebirth while carrying karma in the future? The reply is: Please note that when such gravely evil people encounter a good spiritual friend at death, can maintain clear right mindfulness, relinquish body and mind, disregard the pain of illness, and single-mindedly recite the Buddha's name while seeking rebirth in the West—what tremendous power this requires! And what extraordinary roots of goodness, merit and virtue, and causes and conditions! Could ordinary people possibly attain such a state?

I have personally seen many people who had recited the Buddha's name for years but, at death, were distressed by the suffering of illness and could not recite it. Some were thinking of their relatives and were unwilling to remember or recite the Buddha; others fell unconscious and could neither recite nor hear the Buddha's name.

Yet such gravely evil people can instead receive the teaching at death, let go completely, maintain clear right mindfulness, single-mindedly recite the Buddha's name, repel the realms of darkness, and attain rebirth in the West. What power makes this possible? Could it be that the Buddha is close to them but distant from these others, generous to the former but miserly toward the latter? There are in fact profound causes and conditions at work here. Some practitioners in former lives did not understand the essential point of mind, but strove only to attain samādhi. They

exhausted themselves suppressing their deluded minds and would not allow them to stir. This was like weighing down grass with a stone: when the stone is removed, the grass grows again. It is not ultimate.

Thus, when they turn around and return after death, their habitual tendencies and deluded movements may be even stronger than before, and they may become evil and perverse. But once they hear instruction that touches their former causes, they can immediately let go, single-mindedly recite the Buddha's name, and seek rebirth in the Pure Land. This is not accidental. Or they may be bodhisattvas practicing in adversity, manifesting such appearances in this life in order to liberate beings, defiling their outward forms to conceal their conduct. Ordinary people cannot opportunistically imitate them and cite them as precedent for rebirth.

Someone may say: Great Chan masters directly realize the Buddha ground. As the saying goes, "Even equal and wondrous enlightenment are still men carrying straw sandals for him." Surely they no longer have the final portion of ignorance.

Then, when such people are reborn in the West, need they not attain rebirth while carrying karma? The reply is: What Chan practitioners realize is Buddhahood at the level of principle. The principle-nature they realize is neither two nor different from that of a Buddha. Yet in terms of phenomena, they have not realized the fruition-ground of Buddhahood. Therefore, they cannot be regarded as equal to Śākyamuni or Amitābha.

Did not an emperor ask Xuansha, "When one sees one's nature and becomes a Buddha in your school, has one already reached the fruition-ground of Buddhahood?" Xuansha replied, "This is only Buddhahood at the causal stage, not Buddhahood at the fruition stage." Therefore, awakening and seeing one's nature generally means only ascending to the first bhūmi, corresponding to the stage of seeing the Way. One must still cultivate and realize further, gradually destroy ignorance, and fully realize the dharmakāya. Thus, to say that after seeing one's nature in the Chan school one directly ascends to a stage of no cultivation, no attainment, and no realization is a grave error. For one still has the distress of being as though one had lost one's parents. How, then, could one not need to attain rebirth while carrying karma?

Furthermore, the so-called stage of no cultivation, no attainment, and no realization belongs to the side of principle; it is also the language of one who has arrived home.

Since all sentient beings are originally Buddhas, why should they await cultivation and realization? Yet while ignorance and karmic habits remain unresolved, while greed and attachment still persist, and while one is still rising and sinking in the evil realms, how can one not still be a sentient being? Where karmic habits exist, illusory experiences exist; where illusory experiences exist, there are necessarily illusory

cultivation, illusory attainment, and illusory realization. Therefore, the saying “no cultivation, no attainment, no realization” is indeed the true language of one who has arrived home. For in ordinary beings nothing is diminished, in sages nothing is increased; in defilement nothing is lost, and in purity nothing is gained. But if one is still on the road and speaks of no cultivation, no attainment, and no realization, is that not speaking prematurely?

Someone may say: The end is no different from the beginning; birth and death are nirvāṇa, and the road itself is home. Though one transcends birth and death, one remains within the six realms. The reply is: The nonduality of all things is true principle, but one must realize it to this extent before this can be so.

If one still has suffering and pleasure, fear, vexation, and concern over gain and loss, then the road is not home, nor is birth and death equivalent to nirvāṇa. This is because the aggregates have not yet been penetrated and illusory experience remains. Even in the human realm, one still has notions of suffering and pleasure—how much more so in the other realms! Consider Devadatta: in hell he experiences the bliss of the third dhyāna. The difference is as vast as that between heaven and earth. Therefore, those who cultivate the mind must be extremely careful. Do not merely utter grand words and, in reckless abandon, invite calamity!

Furthermore, those who have truly realized no cultivation, no attainment, and no realization do not speak of no cultivation, no attainment, and no realization. Once one speaks of no cultivation, no attainment, and no realization, is one not precisely seated within cultivation, attainment, and realization?

However, Chan practitioners’ awakenings vary greatly in depth and shallowness and cannot be discussed as one. Some penetrate directly to the end: their accumulated habits and ignorance are all destroyed at once. This is what the Śūraṅgama Sūtra calls, “In principle, awakening is sudden; with awakening, all is simultaneously extinguished.” Such people are those of no cultivation, no attainment, and no realization. Yet people of such great capacity are, after all, few and hard to find.

Others, though they have seen their nature, still retain accumulated habits. They must employ the continuous and seamless practice of safeguarding realization, gradually eliminating habitual tendencies and progressively destroying ignorance, until they fully realize the dharmakāya. This practice of safeguarding realization is cultivation without cultivation.

For they do not rely on any dharma gate for cultivation, nor do they hope for anything to attain or accomplish. In daily life, they simply maintain vigilant awareness: whenever a thought arises, one awareness makes it empty; they do not abide even in emptiness, but let things function naturally and freely, enjoying ease. Eventually there is neither awareness nor non-awareness, neither emptiness nor

non-emptiness, neither freedom nor non-freedom. One passes the whole day as if foolish or dull, with neither gain nor loss; only then has one arrived home and completed the task. This is the practice described in the Śūraṅgama Sūtra as, “In phenomena, cultivation is gradual; the causes are exhausted in sequence.” Most practitioners today belong to this type of sudden awakening followed by gradual cultivation.

Enough—this is not a discussion of Chan, and we have strayed too far from the subject. Let us leave it for another time. Now let us return to rebirth while carrying karma. Regrettably, fellow practitioners of the various schools today often extend the meaning of this phrase and thereby misunderstand it.

Some people think this expresses the broad compassion of Buddhas and bodhisattvas: as long as they make offerings to the Buddha, recite the Buddha’s name, investigate Chan, or uphold mantras each day, it does not matter if they commit some offenses or do some wrongs. Buddhas and bodhisattvas will still forgive and pardon them. In the Pure Land school, Amitābha Buddha will guide them to rebirth in the West; in other schools, the relevant Buddhas and bodhisattvas will protect them and enable them to transcend saṃsāra.

Accordingly, they brazenly cultivate and recite the Buddha’s name on the one hand while doing wrong on the other, tarnishing the whole of Buddhism beyond recognition. This leads worldly people to slander it, saying: “If you want to find the black-hearted, look among vegetarian religious practitioners!” “The mouth recites Amitābha and Śākyamuni, while the heart is greedy, thieving, and deceitful!” How can one hear this without grief?

Let us ask: Are the minds of Pure Land practitioners who harbor such thoughts pure or impure? Can they correspond with the Pure Land? Can they enter into communion with Amitābha and become continuous and undivided with him? Yet some blind men still speak stubbornly, saying that it does not matter: “We have Amitābha Buddha as our refuge. Though we have done some wrongs, at death the Buddha will still pity and forgive us, and come to

guide us to rebirth in the West!” Ha, ha! If Amitābha Buddha were to guide you to rebirth in the West under such circumstances, would that not amount to encouraging you to do evil in the world? Is there such a principle? If that were truly the case, why would the Buddha speak of karmic cause and effect? And why would he exhort people to commit no evil and cultivate all good? Someone may say: Are those who commit the five heinous offenses and ten evil acts not serious criminals?

How can they attain rebirth in the West through ten recitations at death? The reply is: Do not misunderstand. They did not commit the five heinous offenses and ten evil acts after coming to believe in the Buddha. Previously, unaware of cause and

effect, they committed them unintentionally. Therefore, after believing in the Buddha, they could suddenly repent, thoroughly practice repentance, eliminate the karma of the mind, and attain rebirth in the West. By contrast, when those who already believe in the Buddha commit crimes again, they knowingly offend. Their guilt is thereby increased; moreover, their practice is weak and their Buddha-recitation feeble. Since they cannot repent of their karma, how can they attain rebirth?

I think that when such people put on a stubborn front and say that it does not matter, their hearts are not entirely free from trembling. Everyone possesses an innate moral conscience. Having done wrong, one will inevitably be reproached by one's conscience and suffer deeply in fear.

Even if, for a time, such people are obscured by profit and desire, conceal their consciences, and feel neither shame nor fear, at the final instant of death the evil deeds they have done can no longer remain hidden. They appear one by one before their eyes, and they suffer intensely under the reproach of conscience. The pain of that moral condemnation surpasses every severe torture and cruel punishment. It is as though Mount Tai were pressing upon one's head, a great fire burning one's body, or blades of wind dismembering one's form—unbearable suffering! They weep and howl, their breath grows short, their consciousness becomes confused, and they drift aimlessly after karmic realms into the evil paths. At that time, can they still stubbornly say, "Amitābha will guide me to rebirth"?

Fellow Dharma friends, you must never misunderstand the phrase "rebirth while carrying karma." You must not think that it is all right to recite the Buddha's name while also doing some wrongs. This is absolutely unacceptable. For the cycle of rebirth in the six realms is entirely governed by wholesome and unwholesome karma; it does not change according to human will.

Now, if one seeks further to be reborn in the Pure Land and be liberated from the two forms of birth-and-death—segmented and transformational—yet one's mind-ground is not kind and one does not even qualify for the human realm, how can one be reborn in the Western Heaven? Therefore, Master Ouyi's description of "true faith" says that, in addition to faith in oneself and faith in others, one must also believe in cause and effect and in principle and phenomena. This teaches us that our minds must be pure and kind if we are to attain the blessed fruition of the Pure Land, adorned with all virtues.

Moreover, as quoted above, Master Lianchi listed those whose mind-ground is not good among the three kinds of people who cannot be reborn in the Pure Land, placing them first. This shows that goodness of mind is the foremost prerequisite. If we have committed any wrongs, we should swiftly begin today to repent bitterly

before the Buddha, resolve never to repeat them, and diligently practice all good deeds to remedy our former transgressions. Only then may we hope for rebirth in the Western Pure Land. If one relies exclusively on the Buddha's power to receive one, yet commits bad deeds while hoping to be reborn there while carrying karma, that is truly traveling west while heading east.

Furthermore, the question of being received through other-power was briefly explained in the first section. Since it has now arisen as our subject, it must be discussed in greater detail:

First, consider the three provisions for rebirth in the Western Pure Land: faith, vows, and practice. Like the three legs of a tripod, none can be lacking. Thus, besides faith and vows, practice is also extremely important. Since practice is so important, rebirth in the Western Pure Land clearly does not depend exclusively on other-power. If those who rely solely on Amitābha's vow-power could indeed rely on Amitābha alone, what would be the need for "practice"? Since practice is required, one needs self-power even more, in addition to other-power.

Perhaps some people who seek convenience and fear exertion will say that Master Ouyi said: "Whether one attains rebirth depends entirely on the presence or absence of faith and vows; the higher or lower one's grade depends entirely on the depth or shallowness of name-recitation." From this it would seem that practice—name-recitation—is merely the basis for the higher or lower grades of rebirth, while rebirth in the Western Pure Land depends wholly upon faith and vows, and thus exclusively upon the Buddha's power. At present, we need only attain rebirth in the Western Pure Land; we need not concern ourselves with the grade, and would be satisfied even with rebirth in the borderland, for "So long as one sees Amitābha, why worry that one will not awaken?" It is enough if we can be reborn in the Western Pure Land.

They do not realize that the Master's words form a paired sentence and cannot be split apart and interpreted out of context. He first speaks of faith and vows, and then immediately speaks of practice. His meaning is that faith and vows guide practice, and that through practice faith and vows are brought to fulfillment.

That is to say, in order to be reborn in the Western Pure Land, faith and vows must serve as the guide. Without faith and vows, one cannot attain rebirth. This was also said for those who have practice but lack faith and vows. As we noted in the first section, many Chan practitioners in the Ming dynasty used Buddha-recitation as an expedient for entering samādhi; they had practice but lacked faith and vows.

Yet rebirth in the Western Pure Land differs in its nine grades, and the higher or lower grade of rebirth is determined entirely by the depth of one's skill in name-recitation. Does this not tell us unmistakably that, to be reborn in the Western Pure

Land, those of high grade certainly require deeper skill in Buddha-recitation, while even those of low grade require some lesser degree of skill in Buddha-recitation in order to attain rebirth? It is not a matter of relying solely on the Buddha's power and having the Buddha decide it all. Only this understanding accords with Master Ouyi's true intent and harmonizes with the teachings of the other Buddhas and patriarchs.

If practice were unnecessary and one could attain rebirth solely through faith and vows, why did the Buddha instruct us in the Amitābha Sūtra to hold fast to the Name? And why did he teach us in the Contemplation Sūtra of Amitāyus Buddha to cultivate the various contemplative practices? The Master was a great patriarch of his age. How could he violate the Buddha's intent and, on his own initiative, mislead later generations with groundless talk? How could one say that the Master's personal view surpassed that of the Buddha?

Further, Master Yinguang wrote in his Letter to Lay Practitioner Chen Xizhou: "Take faith and vows as the guide, and Buddha-recitation as the practice and realization. Faith, vows, and practice are the essential principles of the Dharma gate of Buddha-recitation. With practice but without faith and vows, one cannot attain rebirth; with faith and vows but without practice, one likewise cannot attain rebirth. When faith, vows, and practice are all complete and lacking nothing, rebirth is certain."

This shows that faith, vows, and practice are the three essentials for rebirth in the Western Pure Land. Like the three legs of a tripod, none can be lacking. Master Ouyi and Master Yinguang were both patriarchs of the Pure Land school; their Dharma lineage was transmitted in an unbroken succession from above to below. The former would never have misquoted the latter, nor would the latter have opposed the former. Thus, those who say that one needs only faith and vows and no practice are merely blind people's excuses for idleness.

Moreover, according to ordinary reasoning, if one has faith and vows, why would one not practice? Without practice, how can one demonstrate that one possesses faith and vows? And how could one bring faith and vows to complete fulfillment? Therefore, faith and vows guide practice, while practice is where faith and vows find their fulfillment. Without faith and vows, one cannot initiate practice; without practice, one cannot bring faith and vows to fulfillment. They mutually condition and complete one another, and none of the three can be lacking. This shows how important practice is within faith, vows, and practice!

Since practice is as important as faith and vows, it must be genuine practice. One must never carelessly recite the Buddha's name with one's mouth while thinking of the Sahā world in one's heart, treating the matter perfunctorily as though that were enough. Such practice is equivalent to no practice at all.

If one recites the Buddha's name with one's mouth but does not transform one's mind, then deluded thoughts cannot be cut off, the deluded mind cannot be transformed, and deluded habits cannot be removed. One practices on and on yet remains in the old place, never advancing a single step—merely deceiving oneself and others. What benefit is there in that? If we are to practice, we must follow the teachings bequeathed by the Buddhas and patriarchs, as urgently as if our heads were on fire, and cherish the Buddha's name in our hearts with utmost sincerity, thought after thought.

Never forget it. We must be like one pushing a heavily laden cart up a mountain, exerting ourselves to press forward with all our strength, never slowing for a single step. The six-character great name must follow word by word and phrase by phrase, each word and phrase passing distinctly through the mind. With vigilance and reverence, we must take the great name endowed with myriad virtues as a vajra-king precious sword with which to struggle against our deluded thoughts, the root of attachment, and emotional views. Still more, throughout the twenty-four hours, we must gather in the six sense faculties and maintain uninterrupted pure mindfulness.

If we can truly apply ourselves in this way, neither seeking quick results overnight nor vainly expecting a Buddha outside the mind to come and receive us, thereby stirring up demonic occurrences, then we will certainly progress gradually from the scattered and troubled condition of the beginner in Buddha-recitation, eliminate deluded thoughts, and arrive at one-pointedness of mind without distraction. In light of this, what is there about so-called one-pointedness of mind without distraction that is so unattainable as to make us terribly afraid? What goal is there that cannot be reached, such that we must contend over it?

When the mind harbors fear, one will certainly lack vigor in practice; and if one's practice lacks vigor, nothing can succeed. Therefore, firm faith is the foremost essential. Success depends on human effort. So long as we first understand the principles clearly, find the key, and then press resolutely onward without retreating, there is no undertaking that cannot succeed.

Moreover, practice relying on other-power does not mean that one need expend no effort at all and can succeed by relying entirely on someone else. The ancients compared it to mosquitoes and flies clinging to a thoroughbred horse's tail. Yet the mosquitoes and flies must first fly to the horse's tail and must also exert themselves to cling tightly to it; it is not that they use no effort whatsoever.

Therefore, the claim that one can be reborn in the Western Pure Land through complete reliance on the Buddha's power is wholly untenable. Only when self-power and other-power work together can the matter be accomplished. Furthermore, self and other are originally nondual; it is only because the deluded mind discriminates

that self and other arise. Fundamentally, mind, Buddha, and sentient beings are one body. It is like a room containing a thousand lamps: each light is no different from the others. Yet because of ignorance, one mistakenly takes the reflections before one as real.

One then clings to them as self; from self, other arises, and thus right and wrong come into being. Now, if the single Buddha-name becomes effective and the deluded mind of the present thought vanishes, self itself is not established—so where could other come from? Thus, self and other are originally one body. Why speak of self-power and other-power? To speak of self-power and other-power is precisely not to understand self and other. Alas!

Next, in the ordinary sense in which people speak of "other-power," when a Buddha appears in the world and teaches you the Dharma gate of Buddha-recitation, is that not other-power? When you practice, you have the great name endowed with myriad virtues as that upon which to rely; and because you uphold the Name, the adornments of Amitābha's causal mind and the wisdom-light of his fruition ground bless you—is that not other-power? At the end of life, through the communion of response between the Way and the practitioner, the Buddha appears.

In one's mind, this is reception and guidance; moreover, one has the Western Land of Ultimate Bliss as one's support. Is this not even more other-power? With so many forms of other-power as supporting conditions, one has already gained every advantage. Yet is that still not enough, so that one wants to expend no effort at all and have the Buddha pull one up to heaven? Is there any such principle? If there were, then we—who did not begin believing in and reciting the Buddha's name only today—should already have long since attained rebirth.

In the Western Pure Land and Buddhahood. Why, then, are we still wandering about to this day and suffering here? Someone may say: Although we have believed in the Buddha for more than one lifetime, perhaps in former lives we cultivated other traditions and never recited the Buddha's name; therefore, we were not reborn, for in the Pure Land all who practice attain rebirth. If that is truly so, why has there been since ancient times the lament, "Many recite the Buddha's name, but few are reborn in the Western Pure Land"? Could Amitābha do so for us?

And could Śākyamuni not do so for us? The Buddhas of the ten directions all vow to liberate every sentient being. If they could simply pull beings along, then whenever one Buddha appeared in the world, that Buddha should have liberated all sentient beings. Clearly, there is no such thing as relying on the Buddha's power to pull you along. An ancient worthy said: "Even if one takes another by the arm, one cannot make him walk; he must be willing himself before there can be accord."

You must understand that the Buddha's power is boundless, but the karmic power of sentient beings is also boundless. Master Yinguang most highly praised relying on the Buddha's compassionate power to receive one for rebirth in the Western Pure Land, yet he also said that Buddha-recitation must be earnest and sincere if one is to join the lofty assembly in the ocean of sages. Does not such "earnest sincerity" require strenuous effort?

Going a step further, those who possess self-power need not seek other-power, for other-power comes of itself. Conversely, those who exhaust themselves seeking other-power while having no self-power whatsoever will certainly not obtain other-power; even if other-power is present, it can do nothing for them.

For when practitioners truly become earnest and sincere, diligently advancing without slackness, they imperceptibly evoke the blessings, protection, and care of all Buddhas and bodhisattvas. When their practice becomes effective, deluded thoughts are shattered, and their minds are sealed with the Buddha-mind, self and other become one body, Buddhas and sentient beings are nondual. They further receive the protection and mindfulness of the Buddhas of the ten directions, who extend their hands, touch their crowns, and confer predictions of Buddhahood.

But those who are lazy and scattered, unwilling to exert themselves, or whose practice lacks vigor, have filth and defilement in their own minds and cannot connect with the pure Buddha-light. All that they see and encounter is a mass of dark karma. Thus, even if the Buddha appears before them and extends his hand to receive them, they are like those born blind who cannot see the sun. Therefore, as we said in the first section: "Self-power is other-power, and other-power is self-power. Only with self-power is there other-power; without self-power, there is no other-power." Fellow practitioners, please reflect deeply.

In truth, the Pure Land school is the Chan school, and the Chan school is the Pure Land school; the two schools are not different. Do not mistakenly distinguish self-power from other-power. Yet only people of great capacity and superior wisdom can penetrate the subtle principles of the Chan school, recognize that appearances are identical with intrinsic nature and that mind is identical with Buddha, never be turned by things at any time or place, and freely turn things instead.

The Pure Land school, however, does not necessarily require the investigation of such abstruse principles. One need only settle the sacred name of Amitābha in the practitioner's mind, uphold it closely and continuously without allowing interruption, and naturally, without conscious awareness, transform the scattered and deluded mind gradually into the pure Buddha-mind, thereby realizing the Buddha Way.

It is like the hair and fingernails on a human body: though the eye does not see them growing, they naturally grow ever more densely.

The wonder of Buddha-remembrance lies in making a direct transformation at the very root of the practitioner's birth and death—within deluded thoughts—so that one naturally remembers the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha rather than thinking of greed, anger, and ignorance. Imperceptibly, it gradually turns the person's deluded mind around and draws the practitioner out of birth and death.

It requires no investigation of abstruse principles, yet naturally accords with the subtlety of the Way. One need only single-mindedly uphold the Buddha's name in Buddha-recitation, and one will naturally accomplish the unsurpassed Way. Thus Buddha-recitation in the Pure Land tradition is a vast dharma gate that universally embraces practitioners of all three capacities. This truly is the skillful, expedient functioning of wisdom that flowed from Śākyamuni Buddha's great compassionate heart!

When, through earnestly taking it to heart and sustaining it with unremitting attention, you directly see Amitābha's true nature, only then will you know that self-power and other-power have never been two, and that sentient beings and Buddhas are originally one body. Looking back on the disputes and debates of former days, they are like discussing dreams within a dream. Would one not blush with shame?

This rambling discussion has gone on at length, but let me add one reminder: cultivating the Pure Land is not limited to the single practice of reciting the Buddha's name. Contemplating the mind, upholding mantras, chanting sūtras, doing good deeds, and so forth can all, like Buddha-recitation, be dedicated toward seeking rebirth in the Western Pure Land. One-pointedness of mind without distraction is the crucial matter in the Pure Land dharma gate. If we simply let go of everything, hold firmly to the Buddha's name, and recite it continuously and unceasingly, we will naturally arrive safely and securely at our destination.

Our discussion is now drawing to a close when suddenly a compassionate bodhisattva comes forward and says, “You fellow, blabbering on and wildly opening your big mouth—are you not afraid of offending people everywhere and arousing universal indignation?” I reply, “Have you not seen the Patriarch say, ‘The Buddhadharma admits of no personal sentiment: rely on the Dharma, not on persons’? And have you not seen the yellow-faced Gautama say, ‘For forty-nine years I have taught the Dharma, yet I have never spoken a single word’? Thus, even if this humble fellow used empty space as paper, the great ocean as an inkstone, and Mount Sumeru as ink, and filled the entire universe with writing, he still would not have written a single word. How then could he offend people everywhere? As it is said:

Though the universe be filled with intentions to benefit beings, no stroke has begun and no character has taken form.

If there is a Dharma to be spoken, it falls to the side of phenomena; if there is no Dharma to be spoken, clouds stretch ten thousand miles.

Poor are those seekers who probe the mysteries, endlessly discussing Buddhist matters within a dream.

One-pointedness of mind without distraction is no difficult matter: in every thought, Amitābha; in every word, clarity.

Ha ha! Tell me, then: has anything been said or not? Take care! Take care!