

Buddhism:

The Awakening of Compassion and Wisdom

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Chapter One

Introduction

It is necessary for us to have correct understanding before practicing Buddhism; otherwise, all the time and effort spent in cultivation will be futile, as the most superior result will not be attained. Therefore, I would like to briefly explain the true nature of Buddhism.

Chinese history tells us that about three thousand years ago, Buddha Shakyamuni, the founder of Buddhism was born in Northern India. He lived for seventy-nine years and dedicated forty-nine of them to teaching. In 67 AD, one thousand years after he entered Parinirvana, these teachings were formally introduced into China.

Before acquiring a good knowledge of Buddhism, we need to understand the terms Buddha, Dharma, Buddhist Dharma, and Buddhist teaching, as they are important to our cultivation. Buddha is a Sanskrit word, meaning “wisdom and enlightenment.” Why was it transliterated as Buddha and not translated into wisdom and enlightenment? The meaning of “Buddha” is so profound and extensive that these two words were insufficient to cover the original meaning. Therefore, transliteration was used with further explanations.

In essence, Buddha means wisdom while in application or function it means enlightenment. There are three levels of wisdom. First, “General and All Knowledge Wisdom” is the correct understanding of the noumena, or essence, of the universe. It is the wisdom of knowing the general aspect of all existences, the wisdom of Theravada sages.

Second, “Differentiation Wisdom” is the wisdom that can correctly comprehend all the infinite phenomena of the universe, the

wisdom of knowing the discriminative aspect of all existences, the wisdom of Bodhisattvas. How did these phenomena arise? From where? In what way? What were their results?

Third, “Overall and Perfect Knowledge Wisdom” is the exhaustive and perfect perception and comprehension of the truth of life and the universe without the slightest doubt or error, the wisdom of Buddhas. The Buddha, possessing all three of these kinds of wisdom, completely understood the true reality of life and universe.

The function of wisdom is enlightenment. There are three classifications of enlightenment. First is “self-enlightenment,” a state in which one possesses no erroneous thoughts, speech, or behavior. Arhats and Pratyekabuddhas in Theravada Buddhism have attained this level of self-enlightenment, but have not yet generated the Bodhi mind to help others achieve enlightenment.

Second, is “enlightenment of self and others,” a state in which one helps others to reach enlightenment after achieving his or her own. Bodhisattvas in Mahayana Buddhism have attained this level.

Third is “Perfect Complete Enlightenment,” a state in which one reaches perfection in both enlightenment for self as well as helping others to reach enlightenment. This is the state of Buddhas.

The Buddha told us that this perfect wisdom and virtue are innate to all beings. The sutras, recorded teachings of the Buddha, tell us, “all sentient beings can attain Buddhahood” and “every being possesses the wisdom and virtuous character of the Buddha.” In other words, all beings are equal to Buddhas in nature. However, due to our wandering thoughts, discriminations, and attachments, which are the root cause of all sufferings and disasters, we have temporarily lost our original Buddha-nature. Thus, we continue being born into the endless cycle of birth and death.

The more we rid ourselves of these wandering thoughts and attachments, the more we will experience freedom from suffering, and the more wisdom and enlightenment we will uncover. Once we completely free ourselves from wandering thoughts, discriminations, and attachments, our fixations to certain ideas or objects, we will regain our lost Buddhahood that is our original perfect enlightened state, our true nature Buddha.

Possessing great wisdom and enlightenment enables us to truly know all that exists and all that is infinite. This includes matters and objects as tiny as a speck of dust or the finest hair on the human body, to those as great as the infinite universe. All of these are the objects of our perception, or wisdom and enlightenment.

The Buddha used the word Dharma to symbolize these infinite phenomena. Buddhist Dharma or principle is the infinite wisdom and enlightenment, the perception of all things and laws in life and the universe. The Chinese often say that Buddhist Dharma is as infinite as the object perceived is infinite and the wisdom perceivable is infinite. This wisdom is innate to our true nature.

The Buddha said, “Innate perception and the objects in the universe perceived are ONE not TWO.” When we think about it logically, if the Buddha’s words are complete and perfect, then we can believe that this wisdom and enlightenment are ultimate and perfect. However, if perceived and perceivable are opposites, then wisdom can hardly be complete and perfect and is limited.

The Buddha told us that knowable and known, perceivable and perceived are ONE not TWO. This is called the One True Dharma Realm, the most genuine, perfect, and highest realm as explained to us in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. The Western Pure Land of the Pure Land school also belongs to and is not separate from

the One True Dharma Realm. The Western Pure Land, was created by Amitabha Buddha as an ideal place of cultivation and those who are born there are no longer subject to reincarnation within the six realms.

In 1923, a well-known Buddhist scholar, Mr. Ouyang Jingwu gave a speech at Nanjing Normal University in China, titled “Buddhism Is Neither a Religion Nor a Philosophy. It Is a Modern-day Essential.” It caused considerable sensation. His well-documented speech gave much conclusive support to the proper definition and understanding of Buddhism.

Chapter Two

What Is Buddhism

This question arises in all those who wish to better understand it. Buddhism is a most virtuous and perfect education directed by the Buddha towards all beings in the universe. It covers a boundless range of phenomena and principles that is much broader than what is currently studied in modern universities. In regards to time, it encompasses the past, present and future and in regards to space, it encompasses everything from our daily lives to the infinite universe. Buddhism is an education of the wisdom and understanding of life and the universe and is not a religion. The teachings of Confucius concerns one lifetime; the teachings of the Buddha concern infinite lifetimes.

How can we tell that Buddhism is an education? Today, the terms teacher and student are only used in school. We call Buddha Shakyamuni our original teacher and we call ourselves students, as did our predecessors in ancient China. This is unlike religions in which the god and his or her disciples do not have a teacher-student relationship, but rather a parent-child relationship. In Buddhism, however, it is clearly stated that the Buddha is the teacher and we are the students. Bodhisattvas and we are classmates; they were the Buddha's former students while we are his current ones.

Furthermore, a monk or nun is called *heshang*, which is the transliteration of the Sanskrit word meaning a direct mentor who provides teachings and acts as our personal guide. We share a close teacher-student relationship with this individual. Buddhist temples or centers have only one heshang. Teachers who teach on

behalf of the heshang are called *asheli*. Their speech and behavior can be models for us to follow. Others who do not directly teach would be called Dharma masters or *fashi*. They are like teachers whose lectures we do not attend or those who do not directly teach us. All these terms are characteristics of education and are not found in religion.

For further examples of how Buddhism is an education, we can examine Chinese temples and centers where the activities are held. They are educational institutions, which combine Buddhist teaching and art, similar to the combination of a modern school and a museum. Nowadays, people pursue the arts in everything. Buddhism, however, practiced artistic teaching as early as three thousand years ago.

The staff organization further illustrates the similarity to modern schools. The heshang is equivalent to the principal of the school, deciding policies, making plans for courses of study, and employing the teachers. Reporting to the heshang are three associates or program executives, who are in charge of everything directly related to teaching, advising and disciplining, and general services. In China, a traditional temple or center was regarded as a Buddhist University. From this administrative structure, we can further see that Buddhism truly is an education.

Chapter Three

The Five Forms of Buddhism Today

Currently, there are at least five forms of Buddhism. The first form is the traditional Buddhism I have just discussed. It is the education of the Buddha's teachings. This original form is rarely seen today. The other four forms are deviations of this one.

The second form is religious Buddhism. Although originally not a religion, it has become one in the past few hundred years. Today, it is difficult to deny this. Why? The external form of Buddhism today is indeed that of a religion. It is no longer the education found in traditional centers where cultivators had up to sixteen hours a day for both lessons and cultivation. The lessons included listening to lectures and discussions. The cultivation session included either Buddha name chanting or sitting meditation. Study and cultivation were used hand in hand to strive for the right and proper understanding and practice, to purify practitioner's minds and to eventually attain the state of enlightenment.

Since the monks and nuns spent sixteen hours a day on study and cultivation, there was little time for discriminatory or wandering thoughts, and so achievement could be attained relatively quickly. Unfortunately, this traditional form of Buddhism is seldom seen nowadays in these centers for many of them have become a place to make offerings, to pray for blessings and to conduct memorial services. It is little wonder that people regard Buddhism as a religion.

The third form is philosophical or academic Buddhism often found as a course in college. This is inappropriate. Why? Buddhist education is a complete university in itself, including all branches of learning. But now it is reduced to merely a philosophical disci-

pline. Regarding it as such, we miss the importance of the fact that the teachings are a necessity for all sentient beings. Why? Because these teachings can resolve all problems ranging from those in our current lives to those in the future, including even those of birth and death. Buddhism's scope is broad and profound and regarding it as merely an academic field of study is frankly, another deviation. These two forms cause no harm to society. Religions try to encourage people to be good. Philosophy strives to pursue truth and to gain knowledge.

The fourth and most recent deviation is Buddhism as a show. It consists of a few hours of music, singing, and dancing with a short talk in between. However, the fifth form is a deviation that has gone too far, that of the distortion of Buddhism into a cult. This deviated form has appeared in the last thirty to forty years. The exploitation of Buddhism by evil cults has gone too far. In the name of Buddhism, they take advantage of the weaknesses of human nature, creating chaos by cheating and misleading people, endangering the safety of the public. Some of their propaganda and deeds can sound extremely enticing and appealing. However, if we join their activities, which doom us to ruin, by the time we realize our mistake, the damage will have already been done. It will then be too late to regret. Therefore, we need to choose wisely which form to practice in order to receive the true benefits.

Chapter Four: The Goal of Buddhist Education

The Buddhist Educational System

What is the ultimate goal of the Buddha's teachings? It is to attain the Perfect, Complete Enlightenment. Transliterated from Sanskrit, it is called anuttara-samyak-sambodhi. Out of respect, this phrase was maintained in its original form rather than translated. There are three stages within this enlightenment; "Proper Enlightenment," "Equal and Proper Enlightenment," and "Perfect, Complete Enlightenment."

The Buddha told us, that although scientists, philosophers, and religious scholars may have reached a good understanding about life and the universe, this realization is neither complete nor proper. Why? Although they have obtained some understanding, they are far from having freedom from anxiety, from ending their afflictions. They indulge themselves in the Five Poisons of greed, anger, ignorance, arrogance, and doubt. They remain mired in all the troubles of human relationships and are swayed by personal feelings. In other words, they are human.

If a person has severed greed, anger, ignorance, arrogance, doubt, and afflictions, the Buddha will acknowledge this person as having attained the first level, that of Proper Enlightenment. He or she will be called an Arhat, the initial academic degree in Buddhism. Arhats differ from Buddhas in the way that they use their mind. They use it in the same manner we do. The difference is that we still have afflictions while Arhats do not.

The next higher level of enlightenment is that of Equal and Proper

Enlightenment, represented by Bodhisattvas. They resemble Buddhas in motivation but have not yet reached the same level of enlightenment. The minds of Bodhisattvas are genuine; they remain forever unchanged and are similar to those of Buddhas. Buddhas use the full and perfect true heart. Buddhas represent the highest level of enlightenment, which is the Perfect Complete Enlightenment.

In Buddhist classic literature, the perfect, true mind of a Buddha was symbolized by a full moon. The mind of a Bodhisattva was symbolized by a crescent moon, which was neither full nor perfect. And the mind of an Arhat was symbolized by moonlight reflected from the surface of water. It is illusory.

These three levels of enlightenment can be compared to our college educational system. The level or degree of Arhat is similar to earning an undergraduate degree. The level of Bodhisattva is similar to earning a master's degree and the level of Buddha is similar to earning a doctoral degree. The word Buddha is not exclusive to Buddha Shakyamuni, but is a common title for any being who has attained the perfect complete enlightenment. Thus, Buddha, Bodhisattva, and Arhat are only names or titles to represent the levels of enlightenment or a degree we receive in Buddhism. And they are most certainly not deities to be worshiped.

So, a Buddha is one who has fully comprehended the truth of life and the universe and acquired the ultimate and perfect wisdom. This is also the goal of Buddhist education, to enable beings to attain this same level of wisdom. Therefore, Buddhism is a teaching of wisdom.

The Objectives of the Buddha's Teachings

The principle of Buddhism is to break through all superstitions and delusions. It is to resolve delusion to attain happiness and enlightenment, to eliminate suffering to gain serenity and purity of mind. What is delusion? When we do not thoroughly and properly understand the phenomenon around us, we tend to be deluded and to have wrong ideas, which lead us to make mistakes. Then we suffer ill consequences as a result. However, if we have correct understanding about life and the universe, we will be free from mistakes in thought, judgment, and behavior. Then our result, or effect, will be favorable. Thus, resolving delusion to attain enlightenment is the cause and eliminating suffering to attain happiness and purity is the effect.

Only through resolving superstition and delusion, can enlightenment be attained. This is the objective of the Buddha's teaching. This wisdom will enable all beings to differentiate true from false, proper from improper, right from wrong, and good from bad. It can help us to establish a dynamic and caring attitude toward life and our surroundings. So, we can clearly see that Buddhism is neither passive nor obsolete, nor is it retreating from society.

As said in the *Buddha Speaks of the Infinite Life Sutra of Adornment, Purity, Equality, and Enlightenment of the Mahayana School* or the *Infinite Life Sutra*, Buddhism can perfectly solve all afflictions and problems. It enables us to obtain true and ultimate benefits by creating fulfilling lives, happy families, harmonious societies, prosperous nations, and a peaceful world. These are the objectives of the Buddha's teachings for our world now. The ultimate objectives of abandoning all worries thus transcending the

six realms are even more incredibly wonderful. Therefore, we can see that it is an education that will enable us to attain truth, virtue, beauty, wisdom, and genuine eternal happiness.

Chapter Five The *Ksitigarbha Sutra*

The Great Perfection

After understanding the goals and principles of the Buddha's teachings, we need to deepen our understanding of the Dharma. What is the Dharma? It is the true reality of life and the universe, all the teachings of the Buddhas, which are included in sutras. These ancient textbooks documented all of the Buddha's teachings and were recorded by his students. The most basic one of Mahayana Buddhism is the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*. It can be regarded as a textbook for first grade students, within which, the truth was clearly explained, not with spoken language but with emissions of light. The sutra, as told by the Buddha, begins with his emitting infinite bright lights called:

1. Great Perfection Brightness Cloud
2. Great Compassion Brightness Cloud
3. Great Wisdom Brightness Cloud
4. Great Prajna Brightness Cloud
5. Great Samadhi Brightness Cloud
6. Great Auspicious Brightness Cloud
7. Great Good Fortune Brightness Cloud
8. Great Merit Brightness Cloud
9. Great Refuge Brightness Cloud and
10. Great Praise Brightness Cloud

Although ten kinds are given, it does not mean that there are only ten. The number ten is regarded as a symbol of perfection, a complete cycle symbolizing infinity.

What is called perfection in the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* is called infinity in the *Infinite Life Sutra*. Not only can life be infinite, everything can be infinite! However, of all the infinities, that of life is the most important. We may have boundless wealth and immeasurable good fortune, but how can we enjoy them if we do not have sufficient lifespans? Therefore, the Pure Land school uses “infinite life” to symbolize all infinities. In the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*, the ten Brightness Clouds represent this concept. “One is all, and all is one” clearly explains the infinite cosmos and life.

Upon what did the Buddha base his teachings of life and the universe? First is the Great Perfection Brightness Cloud. The great perfection of Esoteric Buddhism is the true nature in Chinese Buddhism. The true nature is great perfection. The following nine clouds of compassion, wisdom, etc. are perfect, everything is perfect. This great perfection is our own innate, true nature.

It was from this initial point that the Buddha imparted the infinite teachings to us, thus revealing the true nature of all phenomena in the universe. Everything that the Buddha taught is innate to us. It is the original true nature within each of us. The purpose of his forty-nine years of teaching was to help us to learn how to live happy and fulfilling lives. This unique and complete education is for all beings and is much more vast and extensive than our modern educational system.

People work hard everyday. What drives them to get up early in the morning and work long hours before coming home? It is the pursuit of prestige and wealth, especially wealth. Would people continue to work if they could not receive money or some degree of prestige after having worked for a whole day? It is most unlikely. Most would become listless and unwilling to work. Therefore, for most people, the

driving force in our society is wealth, followed by prestige.

Buddhas and Bodhisattvas desire neither wealth nor fame yet they work harder than we do. What is the driving force behind this conscientious teaching while expecting nothing in return? It is the second Brightness Cloud, the Great Compassion Brightness Cloud. It is like a mother's love for her children, especially her newborn baby, but it is more profound in depth. A mother does so out of natural love and compassion, asking for nothing in return. This love is called a heart of compassion. The compassion of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas towards all beings is boundless, unconditional, and universal. It is the eternal driving force that compels them to help all sentient beings. Therefore, the Great Compassion Brightness Cloud follows the Great Perfection Brightness Cloud.

In order to teach others, we practice cultivation as well as encouraging others to do likewise. We do so to sincerely introduce Buddhism to other people. What is our driving force? Compassion. But if we do so for wealth or fame, then it is purely business and this is totally wrong for it totally violates the very spirit of Buddhism.

In fact, the circulation of the teachings, including sutras and reference works should be unconditional. Copyrighted materials do not accord with the true spirit of Buddhism. Every time I am presented with a Buddhist book, I first check for the copyright page. If it says "This book is protected by copyright; any unauthorized printing of this book shall lead to punishment," I will not read the book. If asked why I do not want to read it, my answer is that any true and good knowledge should benefit others unconditionally and that reprinting should be allowed. It would be a waste of time and energy to read copyrighted books. Only the writings of those who are broadminded and kind-hearted and who sincerely

practice what they teach deserve to be read and studied. How can we expect a narrow-minded, profit-seeking person to write good things and conclude them with the great perfection?

Compassion is built on rationale and is free of emotions. To be otherwise, it is delusion and therefore is wrong. There are two Buddhist sayings, “Compassion is the essence; accommodating means are the way to guide people with different capacities.” The other seemingly says the complete opposite, “Unwise compassion often incurs misfortunes and accommodating means often leads to immorality.” The reason behind this apparent contradiction is that if we ignore rationality and instead yield to emotion, compassion then often results in misfortune while doing favors for someone gives rise to immorality. Hence, this is followed by the Great Wisdom Brightness Cloud, the third of the ten great perfections. Perfect wisdom gives rise to perfect compassion. Wisdom is the method of convenience. Only by wisely utilizing various methods of wisdom and compassion, can we help sentient beings be enlightened and freed from sufferings.

The next brightness cloud is the Great Prajna [Intuitive Wisdom] Brightness Cloud. What is the difference between intuitive wisdom and wisdom? The *Great Prajna Sutra* states, “Prajna innocence, knowing everything.” It is intuitive wisdom without knowing and yet knowing everything. Without knowing is intuitive wisdom; knowing everything is wisdom. In other words, one is essence and the other is function. From a different perspective, wisdom is the knowledge of things and the realization of truth. Intuitive wisdom, our original wisdom, is that which can free people from worries and afflictions. Acquired wisdom is that which can interpret all phenomena in the universe. It arises from the original

wisdom. If we cannot completely attain the great perfection of the universe, how can we teach about it to others?

When worries are completely eradicated and ignorance dispelled, we can attain our own great perfection and restore our original ability. From that point on, we are in a state of total awareness and capable of doing everything, we are omniscient and omnipotent. The brightness clouds of wisdom and intuitive wisdom contain profound meanings and are the perfect complete wisdom.

How do we attain wisdom? It is innate to our true nature, but it is now covered. Where is it? The Buddha told us that it is not permanently lost just temporarily lost. When we reach enlightenment, we can uncover this wisdom. Then how can we free ourselves from delusion and recover our original ability? One method taught by the Buddha is deep concentration, which is also called the Great Samadhi Brightness Cloud. Samadhi is another transliteration from Sanskrit meaning the proper enjoyment, which has the same meaning as deep concentration.

Buddhism emphasizes cultivation or correcting our thoughts and behavior. It is to correct everything that arises from our body, mouth and mind, the three karmas of erroneous behavior, speech, and thoughts. To correct the three karmas, we start from the mind as the Zen school teaches, “cultivation should start from the root.” What is the root? The mind. If our mind is proper then our thoughts, speech, and behavior will likewise be proper.

In Buddhism, there are innumerable methods of practice. All of these methods are ways for concentration in cultivation. Not only the Zen school emphasizes concentration in cultivation. All the schools do, although they may not all use the term meditation.

Pure Land Buddhism calls it One Mind Undisturbed or purity

of mind. Esoteric Buddhism explains it as Three Mystic Practices, the three karmas of body, speech, and mind corresponding to those of the Buddha. Used here corresponding means concentration. We can see that various schools emphasize the same principles. They simply use different terms to describe it. Therefore, since all lead to the same goal, all methods are equal and no one method is better than another.

We can choose whichever method best fits our manner of living and level of achievement and understanding. The most important point is to concentrate on just one method. The more methods we try to follow, the more confused we will become. The more confused we are, the more difficult it is to succeed. This is very important, as samadhi or deep concentration, is the key to success in our learning and cultivation. We explain these as the Threefold Learning of precepts or self-discipline, deep concentration, and wisdom. Self-discipline leads to deep concentration. From deep concentration arises wisdom. Therefore, intuitive wisdom arises from deep concentration. This deep concentration in our true nature is called the Great Samadhi Brightness Cloud.

Of the ten brightness clouds, the first five explain fundamental principles and the latter five explain the methods. The fundamental principles are the basis of the Buddha's teachings. The following are the five methods.

First is the Great Auspicious Brightness Cloud. What does auspicious mean? For most of us, auspicious means to get what we deserve. If we obtain what we do not deserve, then it is not auspicious. The meaning of auspicious in Buddhism is much more profound: throughout the universal existence, nothing is beyond our knowledge and experience. This is great auspiciousness. For ex-

ample, when we are mindful of Buddha Amitabha and vow to be born into the Western Pure Land, we will attain birth into the Western Pure Land. If we vow to be born into the Flower Adornment World, we will attain the stage of awakening of Buddha Vairocana. This is the original meaning of auspicious.

In our world, the Buddha taught different methods for different levels of understanding and this is the utmost auspiciousness. First, the Buddha's teachings never contradict the true reality of life and the universe. Second, the Buddha always adapted his teachings to fit the audience's level of comprehension. His teachings would be a failure if they proved to be incomprehensible for the listeners or if they were too simple and boring. Neither of these would be auspicious. Therefore, the appropriate teaching is most auspicious. The Buddha conveys all he wishes to: we hear all that we can understand and absorb. This is the utmost, the greatest and perfect auspiciousness.

Nowadays, people pursue wealth, knowledge, health and long life. This is called good fortune. If the Buddha asks us to learn and practice Buddhism but we do not receive what he said we would, then we will reject the teachings. Why? If we cannot get what we wish for now, how can we believe we will receive what is promised to us for the next life? It is all too distant and uncertain. When will we get to enjoy the promised great reward? However, if we can receive benefits now, we will be much more likely to believe in the promise of even greater rewards in the future. By truly practicing Buddhism, we will attain all that we wish for.

This is similar to a tree blossoming and bearing fruits. Only when we see the beautiful blossoms, will we believe there will be good fruits. If the flower does not bloom, how can we believe there will be

fruit? Therefore, we have the Great Good Fortune Brightness Cloud following the Great Auspicious Brightness Cloud. We must cultivate the cause before we can attain the effect.

The Great Merit Brightness Cloud represents the next guiding principle. All Buddhas spent a long time, one hundred eons, cultivating good fortune after attaining Buddhahood. Why? A Buddha cannot help sentient beings if he himself does not have good fortune. People will not believe in a teacher who talks of good fortune but obviously lacks it. However, when the teacher has good fortune and explains that it comes from cultivation, then people will listen and follow his or her teachings.

Therefore, only if the teacher has good fortune and virtue in addition to wisdom can he or she help sentient beings. Thus, the Buddha taught us to cultivate both good fortune and wisdom. However, good fortune is different from merit in that merit helps us to transcend the cycle of birth and death. We accumulate merit by practicing the Threefold Learning of precepts or self-discipline, deep concentration and wisdom.

In our practice, we need to rely on the next principle of The Great Refuge Brightness Cloud. This is not what is usually thought of as taking refuge in the Three Jewels of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. Rather, it is to return to and rely upon the Three Jewels, the great perfection of our true nature.

The Great Praise Brightness Cloud symbolizes educating others about Buddhism, praising the perfect and infinite merits and virtue of the true nature. What does Buddhism teach us? To attain our perfect true nature. Zen Buddhism often says that we should search for the original state of our perfect true nature.

In summary, the Buddha emitted light at the beginning of the

Ksitigarbha Sutra. This light has many more infinite, boundless meanings than the ten brightness clouds discussed. The first five brightness clouds are the Great Perfection of true nature and the last five are the function of the true nature. These ten comprise the basis of the Buddha's teachings and are to be found in many sutras, often represented by emissions of light. Many people read of the brightness clouds without any real understanding of the profound meanings within. Not only this sutra, but also all sutras start and flow from the Great Perfection.

The Great Perfection of Mahayana Buddhism

The sequence of practice in Mahayana Buddhism is represented in China by the four Great Bodhisattvas: Ksitigarbha of Jiuhua Mountain, Avalokitesvara of Putuo Mountain, Manjusri of Wutai Mountain, and Samantabhadra of Emei Mountain.

Ksitigarbha means stored treasure of the great mother earth, which represents our mind. Without the earth, nothing could survive. So, the Buddha used the earth as a metaphor for our mind, which is the Great Perfection. It encompasses infinite compassion, wisdom, intuitive wisdom, auspiciousness, good fortune, merit, and virtue. Therefore, all that the Buddha told us in the sutras is infinite, is the Great Perfection. Understanding this will enable us to find the boundless meanings within.

The *Ksitigarbha Sutra* explains that we begin our learning and practice by being filial to our parents and respectful to our teachers and elders. Buddhism is an education of honoring teachers and revering their teachings, which is based on the foundation of filial piety. How can we expect a person who is not filial to his or

her parents to respect his or her teachers? A teacher, regardless of learning and capabilities, cannot impart knowledge to a student who does not respect or listen.

Therefore, only when we honor teachers and revere their teachings can we truly succeed in our learning of Buddhism. The *Ksitigarbha Sutra* is the sutra of the filial piety, which is the very heart of the Great Perfection. All other perfections arise from it. From here, we extend this loving and caring for parents to respecting teachers and elders.

We keep expanding from here until we respect and care for all sentient beings without discrimination or attachment. This is the enhancement and extension of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva and is the teaching of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva. Therefore, without filial piety, there would be no great compassion. This is similar to building a house. The second floor must be built upon the first floor. In being filial to parents and showing compassion for all other beings, we should not use emotions. Rather we need to base this compassion on rationale and wisdom. Only in this way can we attain positive results.

Next is Manjusri Bodhisattva, who symbolizes wisdom and Samantabhadra Bodhisattva who symbolizes the practice of filial piety, respect, compassion and wisdom in our daily lives. If we practice these principles when interacting with others, handling matters and objects, then we ourselves are Universal Worthy Bodhisattva.

The teachings of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva are perfect. As the *Avatamsaka Sutra* tells us, we cannot attain Buddhahood if we do not follow this teaching. Why? This Bodhisattva is perfect in every thought, every vow, and every deed. Without true wisdom,

the great vow of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva cannot be fulfilled.

These four great Bodhisattvas exemplify this understanding and represent the perfection of Mahayana Buddhism. Therefore, from Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, we learn filial piety and respect. From Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva, we learn great compassion. From Manjusri Bodhisattva we learn great wisdom, and from Samantabhadra Bodhisattva we learn the great vows and conduct.

Chapter Six

The Five Guidelines

The Buddha used innumerable methods to correspond with the level of attainment of his listeners. However, regardless of the particular method, he never deviated from the Great Perfection. In other words, all his teachings arose from the true nature. Consequently, all methods are equal.

It is like the harmony between the leading role and the supporting roles in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. If Shakyamuni Buddha is the leading role, all the other Buddhas are the supporting roles. When Amitabha Buddha is the leading role, Vairocana Buddha will be the supporting role. Any Buddha can take the leading role.

Harmonious cooperation between the roles is also found among the Bodhisattvas. If we regard Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva as the leading role in our learning of Buddhism, all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are in the supporting roles. If Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva takes the leading role, Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva or others take the supporting role.

This principle applies to sutras as well. When we choose the *Infinite Life Sutra* as our primary sutra then all the others become secondary. If we take the *Diamond Sutra* as the primary then the *Infinite Life Sutra* and the *Avatamsaka Sutra* become the secondary. All Bodhisattvas and all sutras are equal in nature. Whichever primary method is chosen it is praised as number one. However, saying that a certain method is number one does not mean that the others are less important or effective. If we forget this, then we commit a serious offense. What offense? Praising oneself and belittling others.

Consider the origin of the *Visualization Sutra*. When Queen Vaidehi suffered from overwhelming family misfortune, she bitterly said to the Buddha, “Life is filled with suffering. Is there not a place without suffering? I wish to live in such a world.” Through his extraordinary abilities, Buddha Shakyamuni displayed for the queen all the worlds of all the Buddhas in the universe. She vowed to be born into Amitabha Buddha’s Western Pure Land, the world of Ultimate Bliss and requested that Shakyamuni Buddha teach her how to accomplish this.

He taught her to practice the Three Conditions explaining that they were the fundamental causes of attaining Buddhahood for the Buddhas of the past, present and future. Therefore, they are a crucial part and foundation of our practice. The Three Conditions are the basis of Buddhism and crucial in our attainment of Buddhahood.

The Three Conditions

To be a virtuous person, it is necessary to first follow the Three Conditions. In sutras, we often see the phrase “good men and good women.” What are the requirements for being good? Meeting each of the eleven principles contained in the three Conditions. Thus, we will see that the requirements are stringent. Good men and good women in the heaven and human realms need only meet the First Condition. Theravada practitioners are required to fulfill the First and Second Conditions. But for Mahayana practitioners, good men and good women must meet all three. As we see in Mahayana sutras such as the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* and the *Infinite Life Sutra*, it is to live our lives in accordance with the eleven principles.

Failure to satisfy any one of the principles would prohibit a per-

son from being considered good. Regardless of what the Buddha taught, the methods of learning and cultivation or the true reality of life and the universe, all accord with the Great Perfection. The eleven principles of the Three Conditions are likewise perfect in every word.

The First Condition: The Good Fortune Required to be a Human or Heavenly Being

The First Condition includes to:

- 1) Be filial to our parents,
- 2) Be respectful to our teachers and elders,
- 3) Be compassionate and not killing any living beings, and
- 4) Cultivate the Ten Virtuous Conducts.

Consider the first and second principles of being filial to our parents and respectful to our teachers and elders. The Chinese character for filial piety, “Xiao,” is comprised of two parts. The top part “old” means the previous generations and the bottom part “children” means the future generations. This demonstrates that the previous generations and the future generations are actually one entity. They are ONE rather than TWO. In our modern world, the existence of the generation gap has resulted in parents and children being TWO instead of ONE. This gap contradicts the principle of filial piety, which has no generation gap.

The past had its own past; the future will have its own future. The past had no beginning and the future will have no end. They are one. Filial Piety reaches beyond time and extends throughout the universe. In other words, it encompasses the entire universe. Who can practice the principle of filial piety to perfection? Only a

Buddha can do so. Without having attained Buddhahood, we cannot achieve the Great Perfection in practicing filial piety.

Filial piety has profound meanings in Buddhism. It means to take care of parents physically, mentally and to fulfill their wishes. To further extend and enhance our respect and care for our parents, we have compassion for all beings in this world. As stated in the *Brahma Net Sutra*, “All men are my father; all women are my mother.” This is the broadening of our mind of filial piety so that it encompasses all beings in the universe, in the past, present and future.

Mahayana teachings are based on the principle of filial piety for without it there would be no principle of respecting teachers. It is illogical that we would not be filial to our parents, yet respectful to our teachers. We could have ulterior intentions, for example, flattering the teacher to obtain a better grade. Filial piety and respect go together. At the same time that we are filial to our parents, we also elevate that filial piety to being respectful to our teachers. Only when we realize this truth will we truly appreciate the value of the principle of filial piety. The *Ksitigarbha Sutra* is the Buddha’s teaching of filial piety for only when we treat our parents with such respect can we uncover the infinite treasures within our own true nature.

Being filial toward our parents is a virtue of our true nature. Only virtuous acts can uncover our true nature. It is the first and most fundamental principle of the Three Conditions. The Chinese respect ancestors even though they are distant from them by hundreds, even thousands of years. They memorialize them on important festivals. Why? Their ancestors and they are all one entity. There is no gap between them. Sincerely memorializing our ancestors corresponds with our true nature. If we remember and re-

spect our ancestors, we will certainly be filial to our parents. When we are filial toward our parents, it naturally follows that we will respect our teachers.

When we disappoint our parents by not respecting teachers, not following their instructions and not studying hard, we violate the principle of filial piety. Also, siblings would do well to live in harmony. Not getting along with brothers and sisters will cause parents to worry thus also violating the principle of filial piety. By getting along with others at work, meeting responsibilities, and abiding by laws, we will not cause our parents to worry, thus we accord with the principle of filial piety. These are a true perfection of virtue. Buddha Shakyamuni taught us to begin our learning from here. He is our original teacher from three thousand years ago. If we respect a teacher from this far in the past, how would we not respect our current teachers?

When we pay respect to an image of the Buddha, we are not worshipping him. We respect the image as a representation of our original teacher and therefore we pay our debt of gratitude to him. This is why the followers of the Buddha respect the Buddha's images as well as memorial plaques of ancestors. This practice has a far-reaching and widespread educational significance, for at the sight of them, we remember our obligation of caring for and respecting our parents, teachers, and elders.

The *Ksitigarbha Sutra* tells us about compassion after explaining the Great Perfection. Compassion is the third principle of the First Condition. Compassion is also a virtue of true nature and crucial to our practice. When the virtue of filial piety and respect for parents and teachers is expanded, it becomes compassion. Compassion includes not killing any living being. This statement

has profound meanings. Without a thorough comprehension of the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*, we cannot understand the true meaning behind not killing any living being.

Of all bad karmas, that resulting from killing is most serious. Why? All living beings have the natural instinct of fearing and evading death. The present victim does not know or understand that he was the killer in a previous lifetime. He or she would not think, “I killed this person so now it is my turn to be killed.” Instead, the present victim will think only of revenge. This vengeance will be repeated in the endless cycle of birth and death and the mutual hatred will grow stronger and stronger.

This is the most terrible of all the bad offenses and is why we need so urgently to practice compassion for all beings. There are infinite ways to practice compassion, but in the Three Conditions, the Buddha particularly stressed not killing any living being. In other words, killing is an ultimate act of being unfilial towards our parents and disrespectful towards our teachers and elders.

The Buddha taught the basic Five Precepts and the first of these is the first of the Ten Good Conducts—do not kill. Continuing to kill is to completely disregard his teachings and is an ultimate act of disrespect. This disrespect is tantamount to being unfilial to our parents. Consequently, if we ignore these instructions and kill, we are neither compassionate nor filial.

The fourth principle is “Following the Ten Good Conducts” which are criteria for good behavior and are to be found in many cultures and religions throughout the world. Buddha Shakyamuni told us that if we practice these good conducts, we would not fall into the Three Bad Realms. Instead, we would likely to be born into the heaven realms if we practice these good conducts dili-

gently. If we achieve the deep concentration along with the Four Immeasurable Minds of loving-kindness [giving happiness to others], compassion [taking away bitterness of others], joy [liberating others from suffering and feeling happy for them] and letting go [of the first three minds], we will rise to an even higher level of the heavens, the Heaven of Form and the Heaven of Formless.

The Buddha groups the Ten Good Conducts into three major categories: physical, verbal, and mental. Physically, we are prohibited from killing, stealing and committing sexual misconduct. Regardless of their good deeds or their ability in deep concentration, those who have sexual desires can only rise as far as the Heaven of Desire. This heaven has six levels; the higher we rise, the lighter these desires.

A person who sincerely cultivates and has thus attained even the lowest level of deep concentration would be able to suppress sexual desires. At this level the Five Desires of wealth, lust, fame, food or drink and sleep would not arise. Although the desires are not completely eradicated, they can be suppressed by deep concentration. Only the one, who can resist temptations of desire, can attain this state and thus be born into the heavens above the First Level Meditation Heaven. Understanding this explains why attainment throughout this process is so difficult. When we are attempting to practice, we can first ask ourselves, “Can I resist the Five Desires of wealth, lust, fame, food, and sleep”? If we yield to temptation, we will not be able to rise to this level of heaven.

The second good conduct is to not steal. For instance, some people like to evade paying their income taxes. This is equivalent to stealing money from the country and the retribution from this is much serious than that from stealing private property. When we steal one

person's property, we only have a debt to that one person. But if we steal property of the country, we will have a hopelessly insurmountable debt because then we will have stolen from and thus owe every taxpayer. For example, the United States has a population of well over two hundred million. Two hundred million creditors! Just imagine the consequences! Therefore, a sincere practitioner must be a law-abiding person devoted to meeting public responsibilities. One who does not violate the good deeds of no killing, stealing or sexual misconduct conducts themselves properly.

There are four verbal good conducts; no lying, abusive speech, divisive speech, or enticing speech. First, do not lie. To lie is to cheat deliberately; it is dishonesty. Second, do not make harsh or abusive remarks. Those who have this bad habit speak with no sense of propriety; their words can be irritating or very harmful.

Third, do not talk about others behind their back for this sows discord among people. A person says to Sam, "Tom has said something bad about you." And then this person says to Tom, "Sam has said something bad about you." Whether this person does so deliberately or unintentionally, he is bearing tales and gossiping. In our society, many people do this unintentionally. At times, so many people participate in this that the subject becomes distorted beyond recognition. A well-meant message or remark may become just the opposite after everyone who passes it adds or omits something. This can cause serious consequences ranging from discord among individuals to war among nations.

Fourth, do not use enticing words. These can sound very sweet and attractive but often conceal bad intentions. Just look at many of today's movies, singers, and performers. They sound beautiful and look good but what are they teaching people to do? To lie,

steal, or kill. Fifth, do not commit sexual misconduct.

Finally, there are three mental good conducts; no greed, anger or ignorance. Greed includes being miserly, reluctant to give of our belongings, our knowledge to help others. This can become the greatest obstacle to overcome in our practice. The Buddha taught giving as a way to eradicate our greed. Some practitioners are able to resist any worldly temptations; however, they cannot resist the desire to learn many methods of practice. So, they have not truly rid themselves of their greed.

The Buddha has taught us to let go of all desires and greed. He did not ask us to turn to new objects for our greed. In the past, we sought worldly joys, now we seek and attach to Buddhist knowledge. The mind of greed is still there. Therefore, whether for worldly life or for Buddhist knowledge, we would do well not to be greedy. Greed is the source of all misdeeds and wrongdoing.

Greed leads to resentment and anger. Why? We become resentful and angry when our greed is not satisfied and this brings about immense worries and afflictions. Greed is the cause of the karma that results in us being born into the hungry ghost realm. By failing to rid ourselves of the resentment and anger caused by greed, we can be born into the hell realm. Ignorance, having no wisdom, results in us being born into the animal realm. In both worldly teachings and in Buddhism there is truth and falsehood, justice and injustice, right and wrong, good and bad. An ignorant person cannot tell the difference between them. Intentional or unintentional, he or she often confuses false and truth, bad and good.

The Three Poisons are the biggest obstacles to our attainment of enlightenment. Buddhism, especially the Zen school, advocates starting our practice from the root, the mind. To start from this

root, we need to sever our greed, anger, and ignorance.

These three physical, four verbal and three mental deeds comprise the Ten Good Conducts. If we are filial to and care for our parents, respect and serve our teachers and elders, and are compassionate without any killing and practice the Ten Good Conducts, we will be regarded as good people by society. However, we still cannot be called “good men and good women” in the Buddhist sense because the criterion for this are higher than just these four principles. Thus, it is not easy for us to achieve even the basic standards.

The Second Condition: The Good Fortune Required to be a Theravada Sage

The second of the Three Conditions is to:

- 1) Take the Three Refuges,
- 2) Abide by precepts laws and customs and
- 3) Behave in a proper and dignified manner.

Mahayana Buddhism is based on the foundation of Theravada Buddhism, which was introduced into China during the Sui and Tang Dynasties, thirteen hundred years ago, but these earlier teachings soon gave way to Mahayana Buddhism. Why did the Theravada teachings decline in China? In ancient times, people who learned Buddhism had already been nurtured in the Taoist and Confucian teachings and these were enough to replace the Theravada teachings. Since the Taoist and Confucian teachings were similar to the Mahayana teachings, it was natural for the Chinese to accept and use them as the foundation for the Mahayana teachings.

Consequently, Theravada teachings never really developed in China. Today, people learn and practice Mahayana but ignore Theravada Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. This is similar to ignoring the foundation and first floor when building a house. Such an attempt would not work because the house would be “a cabin in the sky.”

Theravada Buddhism is established on the human-heavenly basis, which includes being filial to our parents, respectful to teachers and elders, compassionate and not killing any living being, and cultivating the Ten Virtuous Conducts. With this base, we can meet the criteria to begin learning and practicing Buddhism. Paying our respects to the teacher, we take the Three Refuges of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. Taking refuge is the fifth principle of the Three Conditions. We pay respect to Buddha Shakyamuni and express the wish to follow his teachings for the rest of our lives. From this point on, we will have the standards for changing our thoughts, speech, and deeds.

In ancient times, everyone understood the meaning of the Three Jewels. Today however, many people misunderstand. Upon hearing the word "Buddha," they think of an image, when they hear the word "Dharma," they think of a sutra; and when they hear the word "Sangha," they think of monks and nuns.

The Sixth Patriarch of Zen, Master Huineng, foresaw the possibility that people in the future would misinterpret the meaning of the Three Jewels. Therefore, whenever he taught, instead of using Buddha, Dharma, or Sangha, he used awakening, proper understanding, and purity. These are more easily understood and less subject to misunderstanding. They are called the Three Jewels of true nature and are the true principles for us to follow. If we become misled here and

follow an individual master, we will remain misled from now on. If this happens, how can we achieve any real attainment?

When we take refuge in the Three Jewels, we first return to and rely upon the Buddha. For uncountable eons, we have been wandering helplessly and miserably in the six realms. Now we have met a good teacher who shows us that we need to return from our delusion and erroneous thinking, and to rely upon the awakening of our true nature that was originally awakened. So, the Buddha that we rely upon is not to be found outside of ourselves but is innate to our true nature. The Pure Land school teaches, “Buddha Amitabha and the Pure Land are already within our true nature.” Buddha Amitabha, Buddha Shakyamuni, and all Buddhas manifest from our true nature. Therefore, what we rely upon is the Buddha or awakening of our true nature. From now on, we should be awakened and never again be deluded or filled with attachments, for if we do so then we have not turned back.

Next, we return to and rely upon the Dharma in which our thoughts of life and the universe completely accord with true reality. This treasure is only found within our true nature. Buddha Shakyamuni taught us to return from erroneous thoughts and to rely only upon those that are correct. This is to return and rely upon the Dharma. The Buddha did not tell us to blindly follow him but rather to find the truth for ourselves.

Next, we return to and rely upon the Sangha, which represents purity of the Six Senses of sight, sound, smell, taste, touch and thought. Most of us will find that our six senses become polluted when they encounter external surroundings. When these are pleasing, we develop a heart of greed that is pollution. When these are displeasing, we develop a heart of resentment and anger that

is pollution as well. We need to remember that the Five Desires of wealth, lust, fame, food, and sleep and the Seven Human Emotions of joy, anger, sorrow, fear, love, hate, and desire are impurities of the heart. Originally, our true nature was pure without impurities. We need to eradicate all impurities and rely upon our pure heart. This is to return and rely upon the Sangha.

In summary, taking refuge in the Buddha means being awakened and not deluded. Taking refuge in the Dharma means being proper and not deviated. Taking refuge in the Sangha means being pure and not polluted. These are the Three Jewels of true nature for our practice—*awakening*, *proper understanding*, and *purity*. From now on, we need to forget our past and return to and rely upon these Three Jewels and use them to correct our thoughts, speech, and behavior.

When we attain one of the Three Refuges, we achieve the other two as well. Think about it. Will an awakened person have erroneous thoughts? Will this person have an impure heart? Can a person with erroneous thoughts and an impure heart attain awakening? The Buddha has shown us three guidelines to uncover our original true nature and to attain Buddhahood. This is similar to a Buddhist cultivation center with three entrances, we only need to step through one, and we are in!

Zen Buddhism uses the method of Sudden Enlightenment to uncover the true nature; however, only cultivators with superior abilities and purity of mind can achieve attainment in this way. For example, Master Huineng only taught students with superior abilities.

Other schools such as the Tiantai, Avatamsaka, and Three Discourse schools use the method of *proper understanding* by correcting thoughts and behavior following the guidelines in the sutras. How-

ever, this requires endurance and much practice because achievement takes a long time and we have to study many sutras.

The Pure Land and Esoteric schools, however, emphasize practice through *purity* of mind through cultivation. It is logical that these two schools are popular today in the Dharma Ending Age. However, the Pure Land school does not require unusually superior abilities or a long period for practice. As it stresses Buddha-Name Chanting to attain purity of mind, it is much easier to practice and to reach attainment in the Pure Land school than in the Esoteric school. Again, although the doors to the cultivation center are different, each of them will give us entry. Therefore, all methods are equal and that the three methods of *awakening*, *proper understanding*, and *purity* are in essence the same.

Thus, we need to acquire a clear understanding of the Three Jewels of true nature and to know which method to choose as the basis for our practice. Only in this way will we find genuine refuge. Otherwise, we will remain ignorant of where to take refuge and upon what to rely.

Although we may now have more understanding of the Three Jewels, we may still be confused as to how to practice them daily. Each school has its own representations of the Three Jewels. For example, in the Avatamsaka school there are Buddha Vairocana, the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, Manjusri Bodhisattva, and Samantabhadra Bodhisattva and the forty-one Great Bodhisattvas, respectively. They are our role models to emulate.

The Three Jewels of the Tiantai School are Buddha Shakyamuni, the *Lotus Sutra*, and the Bodhisattvas named in the sutra, respectively. In the Pure Land school the Buddha is represented by Buddha Amitabha; the sutra is represented by the *Infinite Life Sutra*, the

other four sutras and one treatise; and the Sangha is represented by Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva, Mahasthamaprapta Bodhisattva, Manjusri Bodhisattva and Samantabhadra Bodhisattva.

We learn compassion from Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva and single-minded concentration from Mahasthamaprapta Bodhisattva. “The Perfect and Complete Realization of Mahasthamaprapta Bodhisattva” in the *Surangama Sutra* tells us how Mahasthamaprapta Bodhisattva concentrated on Buddha Name Chanting from the time he took refuge until the time he attained enlightenment. He taught us that the proper way to chant is the complementary practice of concentrating the six sense organs and continuous pure mindfulness of Buddha Amitabha. Pure mindfulness is to chant with a pure mind and without doubt, or intermingling with other thoughts or methods. Continuous is the uninterrupted chanting with one word after another and is the key to success in the practice of Buddha Name Chanting that was taught by Mahasthamaprapta Bodhisattva.

Mr. Xia Lianju wrote in his book *Essentials for Practice of the Pure Land School*, that Mahayana Bodhisattva was the founding patriarch of the Dharma realm. Initially, his comment greatly surprised me because I had never heard this before. Later, I understood what he meant and greatly admired him for his perception. In all the universe, Mahasthamaprapta Bodhisattva was the first Bodhisattva to concentrate solely on the Buddha Name Chanting.

When Buddha Shakyamuni manifested in our Saha world, the first sutra he taught in the state of Samadhi was the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. In this assembly, the Ten Great Vows of Universal Worthy Bodhisattva conclude the sutra and guide us to the Western Pure Land. Thus, Samantabhadra Bodhisattva is the founding patriarch

of our world. After the *Infinite Life Sutra* was introduced into China, Master Huiyuan who lived during the Eastern Jin Dynasty, which was sixteen hundred years ago, built a cultivation hall and brought together one hundred twenty-three fellow practitioners. They exclusively studied the *Infinite Life Sutra* and practiced Buddha Name Chanting. Therefore, the three founding patriarchs of the Pure Land school are Mahasthamaprapta Bodhisattva of the Dharma realms, Samantabhadra Bodhisattva of our Saha world, and Master Huiyuan of China.

Years ago, my late teacher, Mr. Li Bingnan, of Taizhong, Taiwan, suggested that I introduce Pure Land Buddhism to the west. I established a cultivation center in Dallas, Texas and called it the "Avatamsaka Lotus Society," the same name I used in Taiwan. When I brought statues of Amitabha Buddha, Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva, and Mahasthamaprapta Bodhisattva from China, they were too small for the twenty-one foot hall. I thought that it would be better for the paintings to be larger and the images to have western features to symbolize the introduction of Pure Land Buddhism to the west.

Just one day before my departure for the United States, I received some paintings with the request that they be taken to Dallas. I still do not know who the donor was. The paintings were of Amitabha Buddha, Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva, and Mahasthamaprapta Bodhisattva. What a surprise! The features of Amitabha Buddha were Indian, Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva's were Chinese, and Mahasthamaprapta Bodhisattva's were western!

The donor had the same idea as I. The western features of the founding patriarch of the Dharma Realm symbolized the arrival of Pure Land Buddhism in the United States. Thus, the Pure Land

Society was set up in the west. Mr. Xia Lianju had been the first to suggest that a Pure Land Society be formed. However, it did not happen in China, but in Dallas.

The Three Jewels are also represented by images of Buddhas, sutras, monks, and nuns. They are to remind us of the need to return and rely on the Three Jewels of our true nature. When we see images of the Buddha, they remind us to be awakened and not deluded when interacting with others and circumstances. Without this daily reminder, we will remain confused and wrapped up in worldly affairs.

The sutras are to be recited daily but not for the benefit of the Buddha. We recite them as another reminder of how to cultivate our mind and how to properly interact with others and circumstances. For example, our daily conduct is an expression of the *Infinite Life Sutra* when we emulate the qualities found within it.

The image of a monk or nun, whether he or she has abided by the precepts, reminds us to keep our six senses from becoming polluted. We need to understand that we do not take refuge in individuals who pass on to us the meaning and the cultivation guidelines of the Three Jewels of awakening, proper understanding, and purity.

Although there are an uncountable number of methods, their objectives are the same. It is often said, “all roads lead to Rome” and “all methods are the same.” Pure Land practitioners should never criticize or slander Zen, Esoteric, or any other schools because their objectives are the same as ours; they simply follow different methods. This is similar to our taking a bus while others chose to walk. We cannot say that they are wrong when all roads lead to the same destination. They have the freedom to choose their way.

When I was in the United States, a student asked me, “I am confused by so many methods. Which one do you think I should choose?” At the time, there happened to be a ball on the ground, which I pointed to and said, “Look at this ball. The surface has points countless as the number of methods. The teachings require you to find the center of the ball. You can reach it from any point on the surface as long as you follow a straight line. You need not find a second or a third point for as an old saying goes, ‘Follow the road and you will get home. There is no need to circle around.’”

He then understood that Buddhism pursues the true mind. Once we attain enlightenment, we attain everything. Therefore, no matter which method we choose, the key to success is concentration on one method. So long as we adhere to our chosen method, we will achieve deep concentration, attain wisdom, and uncover the true nature of Great Perfection.

From all of this, we can see how important the Three Jewels are to us for monks and nuns are the treasure of the Sangha. We need to respect all of them. We can learn from the good ones, as well as from those who do not follow the rules and guidelines. We emulate the former and use the latter to serve as negative examples.

If we fail to understand that taking refuge in the Three Jewels does not mean following a certain person, then there will be the most serious of consequences, as we will fall into Avici Hell. Why? There is only one Sangha in the universe and the Sangha in our world is a part of this whole. If we take refuge in and follow only one individual monk or nun, regard that person as our only teacher, and refuse to respect others, we will be “splitting and sowing discord among the group.” This is the fifth of the Five Deadly Offenses. The first four are murdering our father, murdering our mother, intentionally caus-

ing a Buddha to bleed, killing a Bodhisattva or an Arhat. Thus, it would be even worse to choose only a certain monk or nun for refuge than not to take refuge at all.

Furthermore, we only need to take refuge once. It does not accomplish anything to take refuge from one person this time and then from another later. We may think that we can get much more protection if we follow many monks and nuns. However, as the saying goes: “A clay idol crossing a river cannot even protect himself.” Nobody can protect us. Only when we take Refuge in the Three Jewels of our true nature, can we protect ourselves. Some of those here today, may have gone through a Taking Refuge Ceremony. If you now have a clearer understanding, you can properly take refuge in the Three Jewels by following the principles of awakening, proper understanding, and purity.

The sixth principle of the Three Conditions is to abide by the precepts, laws, and customs. Of all the precepts, the most important are the basic Five Precepts. My late teacher, Zhangjia Living Buddha once said, “The Three Refuges and the Five Precepts are so essential that all Buddhist cultivators need to abide by them every moment.”

Then he explained further: “It is like a train ticket for you to get from northern to southern Taiwan. From the moment you board the train until you reach your destination, you must hold on to that ticket. You must not lose it, because you have to show it when you depart. Taking Refuge in the Three Jewels and the first Five Precepts are as important to you as that train ticket.” He further explained that if we cease to follow the Three Jewels and the precepts, we will lose the teachings and will no longer be a student of the Buddha.

The Five Precepts are no killing, stealing, committing sexual

misconduct, lying, and taking intoxicants. The first four offenses are physical transgressions of the true nature. Whether or not we have taken the precepts, it is wrong to commit these acts. But for one, who has formally taken the Five Precepts, this will be considered as committing a double violation.

However, drinking alcohol and taking intoxicants is different. A person who has not taken the precepts is not guilty when drinking, however, a person who has taken the precepts and then drinks will have broken this precept. The purpose of refraining from intoxicants is to prevent us from committing the first four transgressions while under the influence; therefore, intoxicants in themselves are not wrong. This is an example of why we need to understand the purpose of the Buddha's precept setting, its function and benefit.

When deciding whether to formally take the Five Precepts, the essence of all the precepts, we need to ask the Dharma Master to explain to us exactly what they mean. Only then we will know when and how to abide by them. Merely reading a book about the precepts does not necessarily ensure our commitment to keeping them.

Some people have complained that there are too many precepts, that it is too easy to violate them, and thus, they abandon abiding by them. This is why most people prefer reading or listening to talks about the sutras while avoiding those on precepts. We need to remember that precepts guide us in our behavior and are the proper conduct of all Buddhas. If there were no precepts, there would be no Buddhism. If there were no courtesies, there would be no Confucianism. Merely reciting the sutras without practicing their teachings will result in our not receiving any of their benefits. True learning lies in practice and the precepts rep-

resent the practice of Buddhism. Thus, abiding by the Five Precepts becomes the standard for our daily lives and the guidelines for us to attain proper enlightenment.

When the Buddha was in our world, he was joyful and open-minded, whether taking part in daily life or teaching and it was this joy and energy that attracted people and helped them to accept Buddhism. It is not meant to bind us, but to benefit all beings by bringing them joy and happiness. The formation of the precepts was to show us the right path to attain a happy and fulfilling life.

A good illustration is my late teacher, Mr. Li Bingnan, who lived a simple yet happy life. For decades, he only ate one meal a day, but, whenever he was invited out for dinner, he accepted. On several occasions, he invited me to accompany him. Since I had been practicing the precept of not eating after noontime for years, I felt very uncomfortable when being invited. Mr. Li simply said, "Come with me! Come with me!"

Later he explained, "With this attachment, you will not be able to help people because if you intend to help them, you must help them to be happy. Eating this dinner is not violating the precepts but lifting them. They invited you with good intentions. If you reject their invitations, they will think you are closed to reason. Then, they will not only reject Buddhism; but, will also say that we practitioners are arrogant and look down upon others. They may also urge others to avoid Buddhists. So, you could ruin the opportunity of an untold number of people to learn of Buddhism. This will result in the creation of negative karma for you." Therefore, he was not violating the precepts but was instead simply lifting them for this meant making others happy, helping them to learn

of Buddhism as well as according with conditions.

When we arrived at one dinner, the host apologized: “I am very sorry that I did not know that my Mr. Li does not eat after noon.” The host was obviously deeply moved that Mr. Li had accepted his invitation. We can see from this that Buddhism is flexible. However, it would have been entirely different if Mr. Li, or one who practices this precept, had simply wanted to eat something after noontime.

Many years ago when I was young, a friend told me a story about himself that occurred during the Sino-Japanese War. After the fall of Nanjing, some Japanese soldiers chased the individual and two of his friends. They fled to a temple and were saved by an old monk who shaved their heads, gave them clothing to wear, and told them to blend into the large assembly of monks. When the Japanese soldiers arrived at the temple, they were unable to find the three and soon left. Thus, the friends were saved.

When the war was over, they returned to Nanjing. Wishing to repay their debt of gratitude, they invited the old monk to a lavish banquet. He arrived to find the table laden with chicken, duck, pork, and fish. Suddenly, they remembered that the monk was a vegetarian! They were extremely upset over their mistake and did not know what to do, but the monk acted as if there was nothing unusual, picked up his chopsticks, and invited everyone to sit down. The three friends were greatly moved.

Did the old monk break the precepts? No! His behavior followed what is said in the sutras: “Compassion and kindness are the basis of Buddhism and skillful means are the method.” He had used the first of the Four Beneficial Methods—making others happy. The old monk was moved by their gesture and did not blame them for their honest mistake. He had used the same

method that the Bodhisattvas use to help people through the Dharma doors. If he had been angry, he could have easily ruined their interest in Buddhism. But he was wise enough to use the opportunity to help guide three people. From this, we again see that Mahayana Buddhism is highly flexible, as it accords with the existing circumstances.

The Five Precepts are the heart of all the precepts. Expanding from them, we follow all the precepts as set forth by Buddha Shakyamuni, as well as the social norms, customs, rules, and laws in every country. When in China we follow Chinese customs, rules, and laws. When in the United States we follow American customs, rules, and laws. In other words, precepts are rules we need to follow in our daily lives. Modern means of transportation have greatly increased opportunities for travel to different areas of the world. We need to follow the advice of “When in Rome do as the Romans do.” This is called strictly abiding by the precepts.

Many of the precepts taught by Buddha Shakyamuni were appropriate for that time but are no longer suitable today. Why? Our manner of living, dressing, and eating is very different from those of India several thousand years ago. For example, of the two hundred fifty precepts for monks, ten rules on the etiquette of dressing are unsuitable today as ancient Indians dressed differently than we do. Eating is another area that has changed considerably. Therefore, when we recite and study the texts on the precepts today, we are learning “the spirit and not just the letter.”

Likewise, when we practice adhering to the precepts, the most important point is to follow their fundamental spirit: “Do nothing that is bad: do everything that is good.” Doing nothing bad is a Theravada precept directed toward us and is to be followed con-

scientifically in order to develop self-discipline. The Chinese call this “Attending to one’s own moral wellbeing even while alone.” When we practice self-discipline, we need to remain true to the precepts, even when no one is around. “To do all that is good” is for the benefit of all beings and is a Bodhisattva precept that teaches us how to interact with others. Precepts are the criteria for distinguishing between good and bad.

Because of the differences in the political system, philosophy, and culture, the precepts needed to be modified when Buddhism was introduced into China. The rules established by Master Baizhang in the Tang Dynasty, over one thousand years ago, were the modified versions adapted for China at that time; however, the essence remained unchanged. This is similar to a state revising the law from time to time. As new situations arise, it becomes necessary to amend some articles, but the principles remain the same. In China, temples and centers in every province and region have their own version of the precepts that need to mesh with the local conditions for people to follow them. This is simply a modification. If this is not done, Buddhism will not survive. Only through this updating and modification will it be vital and constantly renewed, allowing it to be accepted and practiced around the world.

The Buddha told us that if we can abide by the precepts and laws, we would have a tranquil body and mind that will enable us to be free from worries and fears. Since, deep concentration arises from tranquility, the precepts are essential to self-cultivation. If we break the law or the precepts, then our consciences will be plagued by guilt even we are not punished. Moreover, even if we avoid worldly retributions, there is no way to avoid our karmic retributions. When the body and mind are disturbed, we cannot con-

concentrate on our practice and to practice successfully, we need to be tranquil. It is said, “Precepts or self-discipline lead to deep concentration, from which wisdom arises.”

The seventh principle of behaving in a dignified and proper manner means we act appropriately for the circumstances we are in. We act from the heart of sincerity and respect for all beings—animate and inanimate, to accord with social codes of behavior. In summary, the Second Condition, including abiding by the precepts, is a Theravada act of merit and our basis for Mahayana practice.

The Third Condition: The Good Fortune Required to be a Bodhisattva

The Third Condition is built upon the basis of the Second Condition and includes to:

- 1) Have the Bodhi mind of compassion and understanding,
- 2) Believe deeply in the law of causality,
- 3) Recite and uphold the Mahayana sutras, and
- 4) Encourage others to advance on the path to Enlightenment.

The eighth principle is generating the Bodhi mind. Chinese Buddhists primarily practice Mahayana Buddhism and wish to develop the Bodhi mind, the awakened mind that is genuinely free from delusions and that realizes this world is filled with suffering. It is the compassionate and sincere mind, with every thought to attain realization for self and others. The Buddha told us that suffering exists throughout the six realms, including the human and heaven realms. In the human realm can be summarized as the

Eight Sufferings of birth, old age, sickness, death, hardships, the inability to have what we want, separation from our loved ones and association with those we dislike.

A person who has been born into the Form Heaven is one who has accomplished deep concentration as well as having severed the desires for wealth, lust, food, drink, fame, and sleep. In this realm, there is no suffering arising from external circumstances such as famine, storm, and sickness; but the beings here still suffer the inevitable consequences of time, deterioration of the body, and finally the realization that they will not remain in this heaven permanently. With a physical body, we are mortal as we are born, become old, fall ill, and die. With material form, there is impermanence of creation, existence, annihilation, and void.

A higher level is the Formless Heaven. Here, there is no sensuality, no form of male or female, and no material form. The inhabitants have no sufferings arising from external circumstances or deterioration. However, here exists the realization that nothing is eternal, that they are not in Nirvana, and they will not they remain in the Formless Heaven forever. Therefore, the only way to be genuinely free and happy is to transcend the three realms of the Desire Heaven, the Form Heaven, and the Formless Heaven of pure spirit. How? By practicing according to the Buddha's teachings, for in this way we will truly generate the Bodhi Mind and be enlightened.

The Bodhi mind is fulfilled by the Four Great Vows of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas that are:

Sentient beings are innumerable;
I vow to help them all.
Afflictions are inexhaustible;

I vow to end them all.
Ways to practice are boundless;
I vow to master them all.
Enlightenment is unsurpassable;
I vow to attain it.

Mahayana Bodhisattvas cherish the heart to help all sentient beings. They not only know their own suffering and try to help themselves, but they also want to help all sentient beings. To equally wish to help all beings is the great Bodhi mind. The *Infinite Life Sutra* tells us that Bodhisattvas “befriend and voluntarily help all living beings.” Even if we do not request it, they come to help. To voluntarily introduce Buddhism to all is the pure cause of a Bodhisattva.

To help all beings, we first need to know how to help ourselves. To do this we free ourselves from worries and afflictions. It is important for us to follow the Four Great Vows in the order listed, but practitioners often try to practice the third vow of various methods before they practice the second vow, to be free from afflictions. Of the Four Great Vows, they want to achieve the latter two of learning all methods and attaining enlightenment, but not the first two of helping all beings and abandoning afflictions. Their attempts are like trying to build the third and fourth floors of a house without building the first and second.

Today, there are many practitioners. But few of them have succeeded for they did not understand that first they needed to vow to help all sentient beings, for this great compassion is a critical driving force for genuine learning and practice. Nor did they begin with the prerequisites of eliminating delusion, greed, attachments,

and ignorance that disturb and distress the mind. There are so many beings waiting for us to help them eradicate their suffering. If we have no virtue, knowledge, or ability, how can we help others? We do not attain Buddhahood for ourselves. This is the power of great kindness and compassion.

Years ago, when I first started to study with my late teacher, Mr. Li, he placed three restrictions on me: I was to follow only him, not to read any books or reference materials without his permission, and as everything I had previously learned was not recognized, I was to restart as a beginner.

The first blocked my ears, the second covered my eyes, and the third cleared my mind. The requirements seemed so imperious and unreasonable that I thought: "What an arrogant and autocratic man he is!" Nevertheless, I accepted his restrictions and learned from him. I did not realize that these restrictions were precepts to help me to cut off my afflictions. My mind became purer with much less wandering thoughts after following his restrictions for just six months. His method helped me to practice the second great vow to end all afflictions.

I became very grateful to him and although he had only asked me to follow his restrictions for five years, I volunteered to extend my study with him for another five. After ten years as his student and abiding by his rules, I had established a solid foundation in Buddhism. He lifted the ban and encouraged me to broaden my field of study. In other words, I could listen to any teacher, even ones with deviated thoughts. I could read any books. Why? He told me that all knowledge would be beneficial rather than harmful to me because I could distinguish between good and bad, right and wrong and would not be misled by anyone. He likened it to a child who was innocent

and young, needing the guidance and protection of parents before developing the ability to judge and make decisions.

Good teachers are genuinely compassionate, kind, patient in teaching, dedicated, and try to protect their students from contamination of the mind. It is crucial for us to be close to a good teacher; however, being close does not mean being next to the teacher but rather to listen to and follow their teachings. It is usually very hard to find the right teacher and we only meet him or her after many lifetimes. Some people have said to me that I was most fortunate to have met good teachers, but where could they find one? This teacher is to be encountered rather than sought and the chances for this are rare indeed. It is a matter of affinity and the right conditions maturing. We need to nurture the good root and opportunities.

If we are unable to meet these rare teachers, then we can learn from ancient sages. Mr. Li modestly told me that he only had the ability to teach me for five years and encouraged me to continue my studies by learning from his teacher, the late Venerable Master Yin Guang. Mr. Li advised me not to emulate famous Buddhist scholars, who while knowledgeable, had not attained achievement in cultivation. Master Yin Guang was currently the best teacher. When we cannot find the true knowledge of goodness in current teachers, we can turn to ancient sages.

Many people have succeeded with this method. The first person in China to take an ancient master as his teacher was Mencius who learned from the writings of Confucius. Mencius, who is acknowledged as a great sage, second only to Confucius, learned exclusively from Confucius. After Mencius, many others succeeded in their academic pursuits using the same method. Another exam-

ple is Master Ou Yi of the Ming dynasty, who was a patriarch of the Pure Land school.

As for finding a good teacher today, do not follow me for I am not eligible to be a teacher. Mr. Li once advised me to learn from Master Yin Guang. I recommend that you should select the best teacher, Buddha Amitabha and the *Infinite Life Sutra* for your practice. When we succeed in our practice, we will attain Buddhahood. The most important thing in Buddhism is to concentrate on and delve deeply into one method. Then, we will surely reach deep concentration and attain wisdom.

In the past, dedicated practitioners normally spent five years for this stage of learning and cultivation, during which time they specialized in a certain method. Afterwards, they were allowed to study various sutras. At that point, I believe their understanding would be greatly improved and they would naturally understand the meanings in sutras. If we still have wandering thoughts and discriminations, and have not yet awakened our wisdom, then even if we were to study for three hundreds years, we would still not understand the meanings of the sutras or their commentaries.

Mr. Li had placed three restrictions on me that I thought were his alone. In 1989, when I was lecturing in Singapore, Master Yan Pei invited me to give a lecture to a group of practitioners. Seeing many young people, I told them of my experiences and advised them to solely follow Master Yan Pei: “follow one teacher and one method, and you will surely succeed.” After the lecture, Master Yan Pei invited me to have tea and told me that when he was a young monk, his teacher had placed the same three restrictions on him. Then I realized that the three restrictions were not the creation of one individual, rather they were the prerequisites that past

masters set for their students.

It was then that I understood what “Inheritance of the tradition from the master” meant. When the teacher thinks that we are good students, he will require us to follow the three restrictions; first, he will cover our eyes and block our ears so that no worries will intrude. When we truly have abandoned all attachments and gained wisdom, we will be allowed to study other methods. Therefore, extensive learning is conducted in the second stage rather than at the beginning.

Difficulties can arise if we engage in extensive learning at the very beginning. It is similar to hearing instructions from one teacher and beginning to follow him or her and then hearing instructions from a second teacher and feeling as if we were facing two paths going in different directions. With three teachers, we will be caught at a three-way junction and with four; we are stuck at a crossroads not knowing which way to go. Therefore, it is important to follow only one teacher at one time. Reading of ancient sages, monks, nuns, and laypeople, we see that some followed their teacher for twenty to thirty years until they achieved some awakening. Only then did they begin to study extensively with other teachers.

Buddhist education is different from modern education in terms of concepts and methods, for instance, in a university; we must be very careful and take our time choosing our major. Buddhism however, is different because here we are expected to awaken to perfect, complete wisdom first and then in the future we will become knowledgeable in all other departments of the university. Where do we start? We start from the intensive study of a certain method; as is said: “awakening in one sutra means awakening in all sutras.” What does awakening mean? Awakened

means we have attained wisdom.

Modern education is similar to building a pyramid. We read extensively and then narrow the scope of learning to specialize in one subject to progress from extensive to intensive learning. But, no matter how tall the pyramid or how large its base; the pyramid has its zenith. Buddhism is different for it is like a tree with roots, trunk, branches, leaves, and finally fruits. An infinite process, it starts from one point, the root, and develops into the Great Perfection of the true nature so that eventually we understand everything. Worldly knowledge has its limitations after which there is no more to learn, but Buddhism is boundless. The wisdom of Buddhism is beyond the comprehension of average people. Buddhism may seem ordinary at the beginning, but the achievements we make later are inconceivable while worldly studies initially appear extensive and comprehensive but in the end, provide no lasting accomplishment.

By following the Four Great Vows, we will eventually uncover our original true nature. In the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, Sudhana serves as a role model for our cultivation and not only taught us the principles and methods but also how to apply them in our daily lives. Manjusri Bodhisattva, Sudhana's first teacher, instructed him to follow the aforementioned three restrictions and to sever all afflictions, to accomplish self-discipline, deep concentration, and wisdom. After Sudhana had attained original wisdom, Manjusri Bodhisattva then allowed him to travel extensively and to learn other methods by visiting fifty-three spiritual guides who represented different occupations and levels in society.

His last visit was with Samantabhadra Bodhisattva who taught him the Ten Great Vows, how to chant "Amitufo," and to be born

into the Western Pure Land, where upon meeting Buddha Amitabha, he attained perfect complete enlightenment. Without being born into the Pure Land and meeting Buddha Amitabha, we will only fulfill the second and third vows of severing all afflictions and mastering all methods but will find it difficult to attain Buddhahood.

In the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, both Manjusri Bodhisattva and Samantabhadra Bodhisattva had reached the level of equal enlightenment and vowed to be born into the Pure Land. I was surprisingly pleased to discover this when I gave talks on the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. I wondered why enlightened Bodhisattvas in the Avatamsaka World would want to be born into the Western Pure Land. Considering how wonderful their own world was, it seemed unnecessary for them to do so but after thinking about it, I realized that they had vowed to go there to be able to attain Buddhahood in a shorter time. If not for this, there would be no reason to go to the Pure Land of Buddha Amitabha.

Suddenly, I realized that if we wanted to attain the perfect complete enlightenment, we needed to go to the Western Pure Land. Only by understanding the “Chapter of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva’s Conduct and Vows” will we know the proper way to study and practice Mahayana Buddhism. And when we truly understand, have awakened, and generated the Bodhi mind, we will finally be free from delusions and attachments.

Earlier in my practice, I was puzzled by this phrase in the *Visualization Sutra* for it seemed to imply that a Bodhisattva had no understanding of the law of causality. If we know that good causes will result in good effects and that bad causes will result in bad effects, how could it be that a Bodhisattva was not aware of this? Yet, the sutra urges Bodhisattvas to believe in cause and effect. I

could not understand it.

Upon reading the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, especially the chapter about the Ten Grounds, I suddenly understood. It said that: “from the beginning to the end, the Ten Ground Bodhisattvas have always practiced mindfulness of the Buddha.” I then realized that the Bodhisattvas, from the first to the tenth ground and the level of equal enlightenment, all practiced the Buddha Name Chanting method.

I also came to understand that “Chanting the Buddha’s name is the cause and attaining Buddhahood is the effect.” Since many Bodhisattvas were unaware of this, Buddha Shakyamuni explained it in this sutra. It was their firm belief in the above statement that led Manjusri Bodhisattva, Samantabhadra Bodhisattva, and Sudhana to vow to be born into the Pure Land. It was after I had studied and lectured on the *Avatamsaka Sutra* that I came to understand this statement. Thus, it really is difficult to acquire this understanding.

The sutras help us to understand the true reality of life and the universe so that we will know the proper way to think and behave as well as the appropriate cultivation method to use. Only when we truly accord with the teachings of the sutra, will we benefit.

The daily minimum for cultivation is to participate in the morning and evening sessions. The purpose of the morning session is to start a new day by reminding ourselves to base our thought and behavior on the Buddha’s teachings. The purpose of the evening session is to reflect on whether we have followed the instructions. If not, then we need to earnestly regret and vow to correct our mistakes.

For the sessions, Pure Land practitioners used to recite the *Amitabha Sutra*, recite the Rebirth Mantra three times, and then chant “Amitufo.” The more they chanted, the better the results. This practice of single-mindedness was the same for morning and

evening. While the *Amitabha Sutra* appears simple, it is actually extremely profound for to recite and benefit from it, we need a pure and quiet heart. The second time I lectured on the commentary of the *Amitabha Sutra*, it took over three hundred sessions, an indication of its complexity.

I now recommend the *Infinite Life Sutra*, which is easier to understand both in language and meaning. Since many people lead such busy lives, I suggest reciting chapter six, which is comprised of the forty-eight vows of Buddha Amitabha, for the morning session. This chapter is the core of Pure Land Buddhism because true cultivators need to have the same compassion and vows as those of Buddha Amitabha. For the evening session, I recommend reading chapters thirty-two to thirty-seven, in which the Buddha teaches us how to end all wrongdoings, practice virtuous conduct, and how to interact with others, matters, and objects in our daily living. If we follow these chapters then we are abiding by the precepts.

If we follow the above practices, are mindful of Buddha Amitabha, and abide by the teachings in these six chapters, we will have the same mind, vows, understanding, and practice of Buddha Amitabha and then we are Buddha Amitabha. But if we chant or read indifferently without applying the principles, then all our efforts will be futile. The combination of morning and evening sessions was designed in ancient times and proved useful, for the people of that time had better understanding of what they were reciting. These sessions reminded people to behave in a proper manner and thus helped them to detect their faults. Today, people simply recite absentmindedly, like small children who sing a song with the right words to the right tune, but without understanding

the meaning. Only when we become aware of the purpose and method of chanting the sutra can we actually achieve any results.

My late teacher, Mr. Li, always told his students that when they listened to lectures, they needed to concentrate on understanding the principles in the sutra and not the words themselves. These principles are the laws governing the Buddha's teachings as well as worldly teachings. One, who thoroughly understands the principles of one sutra, can then use them to master all sutras. To benefit, the student must conscientiously and wholeheartedly follow the methods taught by the teacher without being distracted by anything new or different.

To develop the Paramita of Patience, we need to persevere in our cultivation. People may recommend other methods or sutras as a better choice; do not listen to them or pay any attention until we attaining wisdom. Delve deeply into just one method for this is the key to success in our study and cultivation.

To do this, we extensively introduce Buddhism to those who are willing to learn. The first ten principles of the Three Conditions are for self-benefit and cultivation while the eleventh is to encourage and help others to understand and practice. To help others is the act of an enlightened being.

By fulfilling all the principles in the Three Conditions, from practicing filial piety for parents to encouraging others on the path to enlightenment, we will become the "good men and women" of the Mahayana sutras. The *Ksitigarbha Sutra* tells us that if we chant the name, make offerings to Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva and accord with the teachings, then we can be born into the thirty-third Heaven one hundred times, without falling into the Three Bad Realms.

In our world, we are considered a good men or women after fulfilling the First Condition. The criteria in the Theravada teachings require us to meet the First and Second Conditions; however, in the Mahayana teachings, we are required to meet all three conditions. Therefore, when reading sutras, we need to ask ourselves if we are qualified to be "good men or women." How much have I achieved? And does my conduct conform to the standards set forth in the Mahayana teachings.

The Six Harmonies

The Three Conditions are the basis for individual cultivation whereas the Six Harmonies are the basis for group cultivation. The Sangha is a group of four or more people who properly practice the Buddha's teachings together, especially the Six Harmonies that are to:

1. Share the same viewpoints and goals,
2. Observe the same precepts and rules,
3. Live and practice together harmoniously,
4. Accord with others and do not quarrel,
5. Experience the inner peace and happiness from practicing the teachings, and
6. Share benefits harmoniously.

Share the Same Viewpoints and Goals.

This means mutual understanding or agreement. A group needs to share the same viewpoints of the principles and methods for study and practice. This is the basis for harmonious group cultivation.

If society is to remain stable, its members need to live in har-

mony. Only harmony can draw us together in terms of opinions, ideas, and our way of life. In other words, being harmonious can minimize the differences in human relations and improve equality. After that, peace and then finally, happiness can be achieved. To obtain happiness we must have a peaceful heart and body. Both Buddhist and worldly teachings emphasize the importance of harmony and respect.

Some years ago, I went to Beijing and visited the Forbidden City, where there are three main palaces, the names of which all contain the word harmony. This shows that the early emperors of the Qing dynasty, the last dynasty, tried to rule the country with harmony. However, the disharmony, which plagued the imperial family at the beginning of this century, ended the dynasty. Therefore, harmony is crucial for lasting peace and happiness.

The Buddha provided innumerable methods to practice but he did not intend that we try them all. We need to find the one most appropriate for us and then remember that the key lies in exclusive pursuit. In ancient times, the Pure Land school adopted three sutras and one treatise. Now we emphasize five sutras and one treatise. As stated in an ancient Chinese textbook, “Of all the teaching principles, exclusive pursuit is the most important.”

Suppose some people like the *Infinite Life Sutra* while others prefer the *Amitabha Sutra*. Can these two groups of people merge into one? They may merge, but they cannot practice harmoniously together, for when one half begins to recite the *Infinite Life Sutra*, the other half will want to recite the *Amitabha Sutra*. In order to create group unity, it will be necessary to set up two separate centers.

This explains why there are so many different Pure Land centers even though we are all Pure Land practitioners. The same

principle applies to choosing sutras with multiple commentaries. Which one will we use? This will result in a further setting up of cultivation centers. The same process can even occur when deciding which form of chanting to follow. Some prefer to slowly chant “Namo Amitufo” while others prefer a faster “Amitufo, Amitufo, Amitufo.” It would be very difficult for the two groups to practice harmoniously together.

The people in ancient temples and centers were able to achieve because everyone shared the same viewpoints and goals and practiced the same method without intermingling. Their very atmosphere was conducive to magnificence and peace. Thus, all those who entered naturally gave rise to respect.

Unfortunately, a common situation in modern Buddhist centers is that the teachings of various schools are intermingled. Contradictions and conflicts can become unavoidable, and it will be difficult for practitioners to focus, much less to succeed. So, it becomes evident that to “Share the same viewpoints and goals” is crucial in a center.

If the people in a group share similar ideas and viewpoints as well as the same interests and objectives, they can remain in harmony and thus form a Sangha. However, they may as well form a separate one if differences arise. Otherwise, there would be conflicts and no one would succeed. By providing an infinite number of methods for cultivation, the Buddha meant to ensure that people of different viewpoints and interests would all be able to succeed in their cultivation. Thus, it is said that all paths lead to the same goal, as all methods are equal. This demonstrates the Buddha’s great, compassionate heart, as he never forces anyone to practice one particular method.

As we have seen from the example in the *Visualization Sutra*, Madame Vaidehi, being overwhelmed by the suffering in this world, asked the Buddha to tell her of a place where suffering did not exist. Instead of directing her to the Western Pure Land, he displayed all the Buddha lands for her so that she could choose one for herself. This is unlike most of us who want others to accept our opinions; “I have been practicing this method. It’s great. Come and try it.” When others have different ideas and viewpoints, this will often disrupt the harmony of the group and is the very thing we should guard against. The best way to introduce Buddhism is to provide a general introduction to the Mahayana teachings and practices and let others choose whichever method they prefer.

Those who prefer Buddha Name Chanting can practice together; those who prefer meditation can practice together. In this way, everybody has a place to go for cultivation and there is no need to pressure anyone into using one particular method. All methods are equal and were taught to meet our different needs, abilities, and levels of understanding. Thus, each school should respect and praise the other. This is the true practice of the first harmony.

Observe the Same Precepts and Rules

When we live and practice together, we need to have rules and regulations for without them there will be disorder. Needless to say, the rules need to include the five fundamental precepts set by the Buddha. Rules vary for lay sanghas and monastic centers. The former conforms to the five fundamental precepts, and the latter to the monk or nun precepts. In addition, common rules, regulations, local

laws, and customs are also to be observed. These comprise the permanent resident agreement of a cultivation or monastic center.

One or two members can be designated to draft the rules, which are then presented to the group for discussion and voting. Each individual living in the center must abide by the agreement once it is set up. If every member respects and abides by the agreement, there will be no discord within the group, because all are have equal status and no special privileges are granted to anyone. Thus, the Sangha is truly democratic and law abiding.

Live and Practice Together Harmoniously

The purpose of establishing a cultivation center is to help everyone achieve in group practice. It is not to help individuals escape their worldly responsibilities. It is a serious mistake to think this way, especially in the light of all the offerings such centers receive from followers and the reality that every offering will have to be repaid, if not in this lifetime then in a future lifetime.

The manner of living together does not mean that each person has his or her own room. If comfortable facilities are available, it will be very difficult to achieve. Why? The *Ksitigarbha Sutra* tells us that: “Every single movement or stirring of thoughts on the part of the living beings is karma and an offense.”

For uncountable eons, we have been deluded and confused and have thus committed infinite wrongdoings. Consequently, we have developed and accumulated infinite bad habits. When with others, we usually try to behave ourselves. But, when alone, we tend to indulge ourselves in doing whatever we feel comfortable with and easily forget proper conduct.

To counter this, members of the group share sleeping quarters. These quarters in a traditional Buddhist setting are comprised of one large bed with a space for each person. Quilts are neatly folded as in an army barracks. Life in a Buddhist temple or center is even more rigorous than that of the army, and the monastics are more disciplined than soldiers are. Only by living in such a disciplined environment are we able to mold our temperament and reform ourselves through the Threefold Learning of self-discipline, meditative concentration, and wisdom. This is true cultivation.

However, there are exceptions in temples and centers. For example, the managing monastic and the executive deputy chief, due to their responsibilities, have their own rooms, which are usually very small, in order for them to plan and take care of daily tasks without disturbing others. Monks and nuns, who are aged or ill, also have their own rooms. To accomplish our cultivation, this shared living is necessary, even in today's affluent society.

Accord with Others and Do Not Quarrel

All the members who live together need to do so without quarreling. In this way, they can best concentrate their efforts on cultivation. When people are together, the most frequent act is that of speech, so speech karma is the easiest to commit. We have a proverb, "Illness enters by the mouth; Trouble exits from the mouth." Another is "More speech, more trouble."

One, who eats too much, easily becomes sick. One, who talks too much, easily gets into trouble. Sometimes misunderstandings arise because the listener is sensitive while the speaker is careless. Both parties develop resentment and hatred which give rise to endless re-

taliation in the future. This is why ancient sages advised us to “Speak one sentence less of chatter, chant once more the Buddha’s name.” The less we speak, the better it is for the less trouble we will be in. Ideally, we would only speak when it was necessary.

When I was in Los Angeles, a friend told me about the three-day Zen retreat his high-school son had attended. Once inside, no one was allowed to talk. The daily practice was sitting meditation, from 8 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. and from 7:30 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. Nothing else was done. Keeping silent for three days in a Buddhist center like this will help us to calm down and relax. The boy was so impressed that he wanted to go back for the longer winter session. The distinctive feature of such an environment is the harmony of silence and no quarrelling.

So, at a strict Buddhist center where chatting or other irrelevant talk is forbidden, there is virtually no opportunity for quarrelling. Almost exclusively, all we will find is the silent or voiced continuous chanting of “Amitufo” in the chanting hall. In an Esoteric temple or center, the chanting of mantras is ceaseless.

For instance, during my early stage of Buddhist study, I was under the guidance of Zhangjia Living Buddha for three years. Through my observation, he never stopped silently chanting a mantra while moving his lips even when he was with visitors. He only paused to talk and as soon as he was finished, would resume his silent chanting.

This silent chanting while moving our lips is a form of practice called “Diamond Recitation.” Zhangjia Living Buddha was one of the sincerest practitioners I have ever met. His mind was pure without any attachments or wandering thoughts. His teaching method was exceptional. He never spoke a word until he found the

listener attentive and concentrated.

He then spoke only a few words while looking directly into your eyes. Each of his words bore heavy weight, which his listener would never forget and adhere to for the rest of his or her life. The goal of our practice is to eradicate all afflictions and attain the Buddha Name Chanting Samadhi. If we do not practice this method, it will be very difficult for us to achieve this goal.

Experiencing the Inner Peace and Happiness from Practicing the Teachings

This is to savor the Dharma bliss. Whichever practice method we choose, the basic achievement we have in our practice is happiness. If we feel unhappy after beginning our practice, we have encountered a serious problem. But the problem does not lie with the Buddha's teachings. We may have done something that goes against the principles of these teachings or we may have chosen the wrong method for us. Otherwise, the results would be evident—awakening from confusion and obsession, leaving sufferings behind, and obtaining happiness.

With each passing year, we would have fewer worries while enjoying greater happiness and freedom. This is the evidence of success in our practice. If we are not achieving this, then we need to determine the problem. If we can correct our mistakes, find the root cause of our afflictions and sever them, we can then benefit from our practice.

Practicing Buddhism is to experience life and to train our minds. Buddhist cultivation arises from our minds as we participate in daily life. What kind of mind do we cultivate? One of pu-

rity. When we have proper viewpoints and understanding, and truly dedicate ourselves to Buddhism, regardless of who we are or what our circumstances are, whether favorable or unfavorable, we will be able to reduce karmic debts and to plant the seeds of good fortune, wisdom, and happiness. How then can we be unhappy? A feeling of joy naturally arises from our heart, as we savor the Dharma bliss. If we practice together harmoniously, everybody will attain this Dharma joy, everybody will attain achievement.

Share Benefits Harmoniously

In ancient times, monastics led a simple life with one meal a day. They received food offered by people in the village, rested under the trees at night, and cultivated constantly. [Gradually, living quarters and public buildings were built.] These became centers where monastics gathered. They functioned as schools which taught Buddhism to the local community. Learned and far-sighted people built these “schools” with the financial support from those who were wealthy and influential. Then, respected monks were invited to cultivate and conduct the teachings.

Such facilities were Buddhist educational institutions where everyone shared equally. If this principle of equality was to be applied to society, there would be no psychological imbalance and hence no social disturbances.

At Buddhist centers, none of the Six Harmonies can be neglected or else there will not be a true Sangha. As the Chinese say, “Harmony in the family is the basis for any undertaking.” Similarly, if a country is united, it will not be easy for another power to dominate it, because the power of unity is inconceivable. Conse-

quently, if a family, company, social group, or a country can practice three of the six harmonies of sharing the same viewpoints and goals, observing the same precepts and rules, and sharing benefits equally, they will become prosperous.

We find an example in the business world where Japanese business developed dramatically after World War II. It has only been half a century, but these businesses were among the most successful in the world. Why? They have practiced these three harmonies. By sharing the same viewpoints and goals, the Sangha can reach common understanding. By abiding by the same precepts and rules, everyone obeys the law. By sharing all benefits harmoniously, everyone is assured that there will be fairness in all things.

The importance of harmony also holds for the family. As the Chinese say, “Harmony in the family is the basis for any undertaking.” One day, a student of mine asked for my opinion about the kind of person he should marry. I told him, “You should try to find someone who has the same viewpoints and goals that you do. Then you will help each other and enjoy a happy family life. You cannot just emphasize love for love is volatile and unreliable. It may fade after the two of you get married at which point everything can change.”

Therefore, a happy family life is built upon the basis of the Six Harmonies. If we do not understand this, it will be difficult for us to have a happy and enjoyable family.

The Threefold Learning

We know that the very nature of Buddhism is education. It encompasses a large number of subjects, which cover the perfect knowledge of life and the universe. The textbooks for these subjects are sutras. However, not all of the sutras in India were brought to China. Because of the difficulties in the long journey between China and India in ancient times, both the Indian monks who visited China and the Chinese monks who returned after visiting India, had to limit the number of books they carried. They selected the most important ones and had to leave the others behind. So, all the books that were introduced into China were considered the essence of Buddhism.

However, after their introduction, not all of the books could be translated. Further screening had to be done and only the best and the most essential were selected for the difficult translation process. The project was financed by the central government. Experts, who were monks and laypeople from all over China as well as from foreign countries, were invited to participate in the mammoth translation effort. According to historical records, Master Kumarajiva's translation institute had over four hundred people while Master Xuanzang's institute had more than six hundred people.

The name of the translator that we see today at the beginning of the sutra is the chief of the institute and represents all the translators in the group. The Chinese sutras that we have today are fairly complete. However, the Indian Sanskrit versions have been largely lost with few remaining. After the Chinese sutras, the second largest collection is that of Tibet. Part of this collection was translated directly from the Sanskrit and the rest came from the Chinese versions.

Princess Wencheng of the Tang dynasty brought Buddhist sutras to Tibet when she was married to the Tibetan king. This is why the introduction of Buddhism to Tibet was some six hundred years later than the introduction of the teachings to Chinese. As the Tibetan king built up belief in Buddhism, a new school from India found its way into Tibet.

An important part of the teachings are the Threefold Learning of abiding by the precepts or self-discipline, meditative concentration, and wisdom. Accomplishment of these can relieve the suffering of this world. The Buddha told us that the teachings would remain in our world for almost 12,000 years. The Dharma Perfect Age would last five hundred years. The Dharma Semblance Age would last one thousand years. The Dharma Ending Age, which we are now in, will last ten thousand years.

What are the sufferings of the sentient beings in our current age? The first is committing the wrongdoings of the Ten Bad Conducts. The Buddha taught us the first learning of self-discipline to overcome these. The second suffering is the inability to remain serene and at peace. The Buddha taught us the second learning of meditative concentration to achieve purity of mind and tranquility. The third suffering is ignorance. The Buddha taught us the third learning of wisdom to overcome our current state of ignorance.

Committing wrongdoings, being confused, and remaining in ignorance are three of the major problems of sentient beings in our contemporary world. The Buddha will teach when these problems afflict the sentient beings in our world. However, if the beings are not ill, there will be no need for the Buddha to teach. The *Diamond Sutra* says: "In the end, we even have to lay aside the Buddha's teachings, let alone worldly teachings." When beings are

well, the teachings are unnecessary and introducing them might even lead to more problems. This is similar to a healthy person taking medicine every day and eventually falling ill.

Moral self-discipline cures our body, meditative concentration cures our mind, and wisdom cures our behavior. Therefore, a person who practices Buddhism is wise in thought, speech, and behavior. So how could such a person be unhappy?

The Six Paramitas

Now that we understand the Three Conditions, the Threefold Learning, and the Six Harmonies, how do we use them in our daily lives when interacting with people and situations? To answer this the Buddha taught us the Six Paramitas of giving, abiding by the precepts, patience, diligence, meditative concentration, and wisdom. If we follow these in everything we do, from brushing our teeth in the morning until going to bed at night, we will be genuinely practicing.

The Paramita of Giving

The Giving of Wealth. Generally speaking, the majority of people seek wealth as their foremost pursuit for without it, life can be very hard. After this, people pursue intelligence, wisdom, health, and long life. Regardless of whether they are in the east or in the west: whether they lived either in the past or are living now, these have been, and remain, the major pursuits of humankind.

If Buddhism is supposed to fulfill our wishes, can it provide these things for us? We have heard that “In Buddhism, every sin-

cere plea will receive a response.” Then why have most people not received what they wished for? They have not attained their wishes for they are not aware of the true reality of life and universe, or the right method to fulfill their wishes. If we understand these principles and truths, all our wishes can be fulfilled.

The Buddha taught us that wealth, wisdom, and long life are all karmic results. If we want to obtain the result, we must first establish and nurture the cause. Good causes bring about good results: bad causes garner bad results. Where there is a cause, there will be a result and where there is a result, there was a cause. This is a natural law that never changes and the law around which all other laws in the universe revolve.

Consider someone who is very wealthy. How did this happen? It is not because the person is unusually clever or has better ideas to make money. Many other people are cleverer and have better ideas. Why are they not successful? The Buddha taught us that having wealth is the karmic result of a cause planted in former lifetimes. What was this cause? It was through the giving of wealth.

The giving of wealth results in having wealth, the giving of teaching results in being wise, and the giving of fearlessness results in a healthy, long life. Therefore, if we wish to have wealth, wisdom, and healthy, long lives in our future, we need to establish and nurture these causes in this lifetime. Only a small number of people obtain the results from causes they developed in their early years. Regardless of the time frame, we must develop the cause to receive the result. This is the law of causality. And this law never changes.

Giving is the most important requirement for practicing the Bodhisattva way. If we could sum up all the methods in Buddhism, we would find that all methods accord with the Six Pa-

ramitas. When we consider the Six Paramitas, we find that their essence is giving. One of the types of giving is that of wealth. When most people hear this, they often think of donating money to a charitable, religious, or educational organization. This is incorrect because such thinking is too narrow in meaning and is far from the true Bodhisattva way.

Selflessly thinking of the welfare of others is the giving of wealth. Thus, everyone is practicing the giving paramita daily and in this way, we are all emulating Bodhisattvas. We are just not aware of it. For example, when we get up in the morning and prepare breakfast for the family, we are practicing giving and kindness as did Samantabhadra Bodhisattva. By doing so we will be happy. We will have no thought of “Poor me, my family regards me as a servant. I have to wait on them every day.” If we complain like this, all the good fortune which we have achieved will vanish. But once we change our complaints and problems into the giving paramita, we will immediately enjoy the benefits of the joy and wisdom of the teachings.

An employee who works hard every day just to earn money or to receive a promotion is not practicing giving. However, if this employee works hard to benefit the company and society, and not for the sake of money or a promotion, he or she is cultivating giving and will never be tired.

I, myself, enjoy traveling around the world to help people to understand the Buddha’s teachings, and in this way, am practicing the giving of teaching. I help others to better understand how to change their lives in the hope that they will be able to reduce their troubles, obtain joy and wisdom, and thus be able to lead better lives.

In 1984, I made my third trip to Los Angeles. I went straight from the airport to the site where the speech was being held and began a talk that lasted nine hours. I delivered the talk while standing but at the end, it was the listeners who were tired, not I! The longer I spoke, the more energized I felt and the stronger my voice became. Why? Because I was so enthused about introducing the profound and subtle Buddhism to the listeners.

This is the joy of teaching of Buddhism and frankly, the best nutrition. Nowadays, people talk a great deal about health food. But it is false nutrition. Buddhists talk of keeping a pure, quiet, and happy heart. Having such a heart and obtaining this joy will enable us to remain healthy and young. Worry will only make us old and sick.

In the US, some social practices are actually giving. Most people pay for medical insurance for protection against catastrophic medical bills in the event they become ill. But the reality is that as we make preparations for a possible illness by making our monthly premium payments, we are bound to become ill. If we do not then we will have wasted our money!

But if we change our perspective and think that our money has been used to help those that are sick, then we will have practiced giving and will never become ill. Why? Because we have developed the cause of no illness. If we give to and look after aged people, we will receive good karmic results in the future. When we ourselves become aged, then others will come to take care of us.

Today, most people have car insurance. If we think that we are making payments just to help those who may encounter accidents, then we will never encounter misfortune, because we have given wealth and compassion. It is our way of thinking that determines

whether we are a Bodhisattva or an ordinary person. What is the difference? A Bodhisattva is awakened and always does things to benefit others, whereas ordinary people are always doing things to benefit themselves. When we do everything for others, we can get wonderful benefits, too wonderful to imagine. The kinds of giving are boundless and can be practiced any time, any day, any way.

In Buddhism, the giving of wealth consists of both external and internal wealth. External wealth is comprised of worldly possessions whereas internal wealth concerns our body. If we volunteer to help others without expectation of benefit, we are again practicing the giving of internal wealth. We can practice this giving of internal wealth all the time.

This can help us to see that in the Buddhist criteria for good and bad, all deeds arising from the wish to help others are good and all deeds arising from selfishness are bad. This may all be difficult for one to understand at first. Why should we not benefit ourselves? The reason why ordinary people cannot attain Buddhahood is due to the two attachments of self and knowledge. By ridding ourselves of self-attachment, we attain the level of Arhat. By ridding ourselves of the attachment to knowledge, we attain Buddhahood.

If our every thought is of self-benefit, our self-attachment will grow daily. Even as we plant some good causes, our attachments will increase. The Buddha told us that if we wished to transcend the cycle of birth and death, we must rid ourselves of both self and knowledge-attachment. Self-attachments are afflictions that hinder us from attaining purity of mind. Knowledge-attachment hinders us from uncovering our all-knowing wisdom, our true wisdom.

The Giving of Teachings. The second form of giving brings us

wisdom, intelligence, and skill. Generally, it falls into two categories: Buddha's teachings and worldly teachings. To enthusiastically impart all of our knowledge to those who are interested in learning is the giving of teaching. It is not limited to the teachings of Buddhism but could be teaching others cooking, engineering, etc. It is the unconditional and free imparting of knowledge or skills in any field.

A schoolteacher who instructs out of the sincere desire to help others is also practicing the giving of teaching. A teacher who does so just to earn a living or a position is not. A genuine practitioner of the giving of Dharma is enthusiastic and never weary of giving. When we give for self-benefit, we will become disappointed upon failing to obtain prestige or other benefits and will thus lose our enthusiasm. On the other hand, a Bodhisattva is always compassionately working for the benefit of all sentient beings and never attaches any conditions to what is given.

In the *Infinite Life Sutra*, the Buddha told us that of all the kinds of giving, that of the teachings is foremost. Worldly teachings do not get to the heart of the matter. Buddhism is a perfect teaching, which can help us to attain the boundless wisdom, virtue, and skill to enable us to be free of all worries, leave the cycle of birth and death, and put an end to rebirth, and ultimately, to attain Buddhahood. This giving is perfect and remarkable, and it is only found in Mahayana Buddhism. All Buddhas praise this giving. In Buddhism, the most important form of giving is that of books, audio and videotapes, CDs, as well as that of accepting other's invitations to lecture and thus, to create opportunities for them to learn the Buddha's teachings.

However, many currently circulated Buddhist materials are

printed with copyright warnings. These are not the giving of Dharma but are commercial endeavors. Some Dharma masters, when requested to speak, ask how much they will be paid. These are not true giving of the teachings.

The act of a Bodhisattva is to benefit others, not self. If a person truly wanted to learn of Buddhism, a Bodhisattva would simply go to them to fulfill their wish. They would never do anything that would make it difficult for any person willing to learn, as long as the person could receive the true benefits from Buddhism.

The Giving of Courage. This form of giving has broad implications as it helps to remove the fears and insecurities of others. For example, if foreign forces were invading our country, we could join the army to help protect the citizens. If someone was afraid to go home alone at night, we could offer to go with him or her. Being a vegetarian is another example, because if we all followed this practice, then all living creatures would no longer regard us as a threat. Any act that helps sentient beings feel safe and secure is the giving of fearlessness. In doing so perfectly, we will definitely gain health and long life.

Emperor Qian Long of the Qing dynasty, attained wealth, intellect, wisdom, and a healthy long life. “Honorable as a great emperor and wealthy as one who possesses the entire world.” He was truthful, clever, wise, and lived a long life. He was emperor for sixty years and Supreme Emperor, Father of an Emperor, for four years. He was endowed with these great virtues because in his previous lifetimes he had practiced the cultivation of the giving of wealth, Dharma, and courage.

The Buddha teaches that Bodhisattvas must practice the Paramita of Giving. Paramita means perfection. The question is how can we practice giving to the state of perfection. We do so simply

by turning our thoughts around, by no longer thinking of ourselves but solely of others. In this way, we will be practicing “giving” anytime, anywhere.

But, we will not yet have achieved perfect giving. Perfect giving is to let go, to be willing to give all that we possess, and to help all others. Giving and gaining are one. If we have not practiced giving, we will not gain. When we give less, we gain less. When we give more, we gain more.

Do you have fears, worries? Do you have birth and death, re-birth? Why aren't you willing to discard them? Giving is to part with all of these to attain great perfection and great freedom. This is the ultimate perfect giving, the Paramita of Giving. We start by parting with our material possessions and gradually part with everything. If we are able to let go of our afflictions, birth and death, then we will uncover the purity, wisdom, and abilities within our true nature.

The Paramita of Abiding by the Precepts

The second Paramita is Precept Observation, which means abiding by customs, rules, and laws. Everything, big or small, worldly or beyond, has their own natural laws. We need to follow these for only by doing so, can we accomplish an undertaking quickly and perfectly. For example, within the family, we need structure in human relationships to guide the behavior between parents and children, husbands and wives, and brothers and sisters. The manner of how things are accomplished needs to be followed. This is similar to cooking rice; we wash it, put it into the pot, and then cook it. Without following the proper sequence, the rice will not

be properly cooked.

This is even truer in learning and practicing Buddhism. If we want to achieve, we must follow the guidelines told to us by the Buddha: the Four Great Vows of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. First, we vow to help all living beings. After that, we discard all worries, habits, and attachments, to end all afflictions. Only then do we master all methods. Finally, we attain Buddhahood. Only when we become Buddhas, will we have the ability to help all beings and thus perfectly achieve the First Great Vow, “Sentient beings are innumerable, I vow to help them all.”

Some may ask, “Is it really necessary to attain Buddhahood? Won’t it be enough to become a Bodhisattva?” Although a Bodhisattva can help beings, he is unable to help a Bodhisattva who is of an equal or a higher attainment. For example, an Equal-enlightenment Bodhisattva cannot help another Equal-enlightenment Bodhisattva. However, a Buddha can help them as well as all others. Therefore, only when we attain Buddhahood, can we perfectly help all beings in the universe. With such a vow, we can generate the great compassion to help others, to be diligent in severing our afflictions and mastering all methods.

Today, many practitioners have not yet sincerely generated their vows although they recite them daily. Why do I say this? Because they still have the mind of discrimination: ideas of favoring and disfavoring, self and other, and love and hate. Consequently, they discriminate. They help people they like and ignore those they dislike. Theirs is not a genuine vow, is not a perfect vow. A perfect vow is that of a Bodhisattva and arises from the non-discriminatory mind—the Bodhi mind. It is wonderful, inconceivable, and far beyond the minds of ordinary people.

The Paramita of Patience

In whatever we do, we need to exercise patience. As stated in the *Diamond Sutra*: “All natural laws of the universe attribute their success to patience.” Without it, we cannot succeed in anything. For example, to complete our college education, we have to be patient for at least four years. This audience needs to be patient to sit here for two hours listening to my lecture before you achieve perfection in this lesson.

Without patience, we can never achieve anything, no matter how good our conditions are. Of the Six Paramitas, the Buddha stressed giving and patience in particular in the *Diamond Sutra*. They are the keys to success in cultivation.

It has been said, “It is difficult to handle matters, but it is even more difficult to interact with people.” It was not so difficult to interact with people in the past, but now, it is. Why? In the past, education taught people the proper way in which to conduct themselves. Today it teaches people how to make a living. It is no wonder that we do not know how to conduct ourselves. We are unable to understand the changing of our own emotions, much less those of others. Therefore, it has become increasingly difficult to get along with other people.

There are three categories of patience. First, tolerate the injuries of physical and verbal abuse. Patience is a virtue. With patience, we will have a quiet and pure mind; thus, it will be easier to attain meditative concentration and achievement. When we successfully practice patience, we will gain the greatest good fortune. Second, we would do well to be patient with variations of the natural elements, hot and cold, summer and winter, hunger

and thirst, as well as natural disasters.

Third, be patient in the arduous course of our practice. Before we attain the joy of cultivation and our cultivation becomes strong, we will encounter many obstacles. However, once we get through this phase, we will attain happiness. Why? Because we are on the right path. This is like traveling on an expressway. Before we can get on it, we keep driving around trying to find the entrance. This is very frustrating because there are many cars in our way and we cannot drive fast. We have to remain patient. Once we get on the expressway, it is much more pleasant because traffic moves smoother and faster with no hindrances. Our practice of Buddhism is like this.

In the beginning, we move around, trying different methods and schools. Which one shall I choose? What shall I learn? Some people are fortunate because they only need to spend a few years looking for the right method. Others are not so fortunate and may take ten or twenty years, or even a lifetime, in the attempt to find the right method. Fortune is the result of our roots of goodness, merit and virtue, and cause and condition. With these, the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas will surely help us, as they never abandon anyone. And once we have the mind to accept their teachings, we will be helped by the Buddha to find awakening. Then, our futures will be bright.

Why, does the Buddha not simply tell us with what we need to know? He did. But we did not listen. We were told the method, but thought to ourselves, "Well this may not be a good method. I heard that another one is better." We have thus argued with the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. So, they have chosen not to come to us. Please carefully consider this. We need to be very patient be-

fore we can attain achievement. Without patience, we cannot advance to a higher stage, for patience is the prerequisite for meditative concentration and diligence.

The Paramita of Diligence

The Chinese word for diligence is comprised of two characters meaning perseverance in a specialized field and progress. The two need to work together. Buddhism is not conservative or backward, but seeks daily improvement. Neither has it become irrelevant. Such thinking is erroneous because the people who think this way do not know the Paramita of Diligence.

Progress is good, but more important is progress with diligence. Currently, there are many great scientists in the west who have made many discoveries. They persevered and did research everyday. The same applies to learning Buddhism. We practice diligence when we choose one school or method and stay focused on our selection, studying until we excel in it, before moving to another method.

It is not effective to concentrate on different methods at the same time. Once we understand one method, we will understand all of them. In other words, "Once we achieve in one, we achieve in all." If we try to practice many methods before we are enlightened, they will become obstacles. Let me tell you what happened to one monk who specialized in the Buddha Name Chanting method.

In the beginning of this century, Master Dixian had a student who became a monk at the age of forty; so, the student was almost the same age as the master. The two had been childhood friends. Master Dixian, who was from a well-off family, had received a

good education. However, his childhood friend was from a poor family and had received little education. When the friend grew up, he could only do manual labor and, thus, had a very difficult life.

One time, he went to visit Master Dixian. After staying at the temple for a few days, he told the master that he too wanted to become a monk. “Why?” asked the Master. His friend replied, “Because life is too hard and I want to be a monk.” The master initially denied this request because he felt the rigorous training and sutra memorization would prove too much for someone who was illiterate and much older than novice monks usually are. The other monks would look down upon his friend. Feeling everything would prove too much for his friend, the master denied the request.

But when the friend persisted, the master gave in and said, “I will accept you as a monk. But I don’t think you need to take the vows of abiding by the precepts because you may not stand the rigor of the fifty-three day training. There are many deserted temples in the countryside, I will find you one to stay in.” The master arranged for some practitioners to provide meals for the new monk. He then taught his friend to chant “Namo Amitufo.” “Just recite this phrase over and over. When you are tired, take a rest. When rested, resume your chanting. I am sure that you will greatly benefit from this.”

And so, the new monk isolated himself in the small temple and concentrated solely on his chanting. Three years later, he went to visit friends and relatives. He came back and told the woman who had been cooking for him, “There is no need to prepare food for me tomorrow.” The woman thought the monk, who had not left the temple for three years, had decided to re-visit his friends again the following day.

The next day, she went by the temple to see if he had returned. She went to the temple and called out. Receiving no reply, she went into the temple and found him standing, with his chanting beads in his hand. She greeted him. The monk did not reply. When she moved closer to him, she realized that he was dead but still standing! Never having seen anything like this before in her life, she rushed off to ask the others who were looking after the monk, what to do. They sent a message to the master's temple to inform him of the strange occurrence and asked what to do.

Due to difficulties in traveling, it took Master Dixian three days to arrive at his friend's temple. He understood that his old friend had been born into the Western Pure Land. He looked at the still-standing dead friend and said admiringly to him, "You have proved that your decision three years ago to become a monk was a fruitful one. Not one of the Dharma masters or abbots at all the famous temples can match your achievement." For three years, the uneducated monk had done nothing but recite "Namo Amitufo." His single-minded, ceaseless chanting had resulted in his achievement of being freed from the cycle of birth and death, and of being born into the Western Pure Land.

The practice of diligence is important regardless of what we are doing. Whether chanting "Amitufo," sitting in meditation, chanting mantras, or studying sutras, we need to be diligent. In studying sutras, if we want to help ourselves as well as others, it would be best to specialize in just one sutra for study and lecturing. In this way, each time we study and lecture, we will reach a new state of mind and improve each time.

A person who lectures on the *Amitabha Sutra* for ten years will become Amitabha Buddha. A person, who lectures on the "Uni-

versal Door Chapter" for ten years, will become Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva. A person, who tries to learn ten sutras in ten years, will become a jack of all trade and a master of none. Now we can see how important diligence is!

Years ago, when I was a professor at the Buddha Light Temple, a Buddhist university in Taiwan, I recommended to the principal that each student specialize in only one single sutra, "This way in ten to twenty years, your Buddha Light will shine over the entire world." However, my idea was not accepted. If it had been, we would now have many experts giving Dharma talks. What a wonderful accomplishment that would have been!

In this way, people who wanted a talk on the *Amitabha Sutra* would have Amitabha Buddha to speak. People who wanted a talk on the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* would have Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva to speak. Every graduate from the university would have become an expert! Only in this way can Buddhism become widely accepted.

So, I hope that all those who give Dharma talks will become experts instead of general scholars. Such students may appear to be knowledgeable in many areas, however, in reality; they are incapable of mastering anything. On the other hand, students who specialize in one subject will turn out to be versatile experts. All the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are versatile, but they all concentrate on their respective teaching. To be diligent is to delve deeply into one method. The virtue and benefits of practicing the Paramita of Diligence are, in this way, infinite.

The Paramita of Deep Concentration

The fifth Paramita is meditative concentration, which includes the

concentration levels practiced within the heavenly realms and beyond. The concentration of the heavenly realms is comprised of eight levels. If we succeed in our cultivation of them, we will be born into the higher heavens. Beyond the heavenly realms, meditative concentration is found in the realms of Arhats and Mahayana Bodhisattvas. Finally, the highest level of concentration is that practiced by all Buddhas. The key to all methods of practice lies in meditative concentration.

It is a mistake to think that only Zen Buddhism practices meditative concentration. Pure Land Buddhism uses Buddha Name Chanting to concentrate the mind. Tiantai Buddhism practices tranquility and contemplation, which is another form of meditative concentration. Esoteric Buddhism uses the Three Mystic Practices, the three karmas of body, speech, and mind corresponding to those of the Buddha. So, although different schools use different terms, they all practice meditative concentration. Therefore, in the Six Paramitas, concentration encompasses the above forms as well as all the phenomena in our daily lives.

What is this concentration? Being the master of our mind. We have goals, which will never be changed or influenced by the environment. Scientist succeeds in their research because they do not allow themselves to be distracted by other concerns. So, they attain a scientific concentration. When we successfully practice the Buddha Chanting Method, we will attain the Buddha Chanting Samadhi, as did Master Dixian's student. If we are able to endure, we will become patient and, thus, be able to persevere and progress, and attain meditative concentration, which is the essence of our practice.

In the *Platform Sutra*, the Sixth Patriarch of Zen, Master

Huineng explained that meditative concentration was more than just sitting in meditation. He himself reached awakening upon listening to the *Diamond Sutra*. Therefore, all of his lectures were based on the principles in this sutra. He said that meditation is not being attached to any phenomena. Concentration is sustaining the mind of tranquility. In the *Diamond Sutra*, the Buddha taught the proper attitude to have when encouraging others to practice Buddhism, “Do not attach to changing form, maintain the mind of stillness, do not be moved.”

The *Avatamsaka Sutra* tells us of the fifty-three visits of Sudhana. When Sudhana went to visit Yuxiang, a venerable sage who practiced meditative concentration, the boy could not find the old man. Where was he? The sage was not found to be sitting in meditation at home or in the temple. He was found roaming around a market! What was he doing there? He was maintaining the mind of tranquility by practicing meditative concentration and not attaching to phenomena.

He was not sitting cross-legged facing a wall for hours, a position we often admire and expect of a master. We often find ourselves looking down on the master of meditative concentration whom we see bustling around in excitement. We do not yet realize that such a master has reached a much higher level of attainment than the practitioner in the lotus position may have attained. A higher level of meditative concentration or Samadhi can exist in all acts.

Why is meditative concentration so important? Why did the Buddha caution us to stay away from form and to remain unmoved in our heart? Because all phenomena are illusory, like dreams, bubbles, and shadows. They are unattainable. The Buddha sees through everything and urged us not to give rise to any

discriminatory thoughts or attachments. If we can do so, then we will uncover our true nature and attain the Buddha's understanding of all things in the universe. This is the Paramita of Wisdom.

The Paramita of Wisdom

The Sixth Paramita is intuitive wisdom. We apply it in our daily lives, as we learn the Bodhisattva way. We know everything around us but we do not cling to it as we do our best to help others. Why? This act of helping others originates from the thought and practice of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, "Unconditional compassion for all others for we are all one entity." This is like a person naturally using the left hand to brush away a mosquito that is biting the right hand. Would the left hand ask why it should help the right hand? Of course not. They are part of the same body.

Today, we have temporarily lost our true nature, not knowing that all beings and we are one entity. In our ignorance, we discriminate between others and ourselves. We become perplexed and obsessed, spreading confusion, committing wrongdoings, and bringing sufferings to others and ourselves. The Buddha taught us how to break through delusion so that we would awaken to the truth that to help others is to help ourselves. Such a heart of compassion is unconditional because it originates from understanding of "Unconditional compassion for all others for we are all one entity."

In conclusion, everything has its own methods and continuity. This is abiding by the precepts. With endurance and perseverance, we will have patience. To specialize without slacking is diligence. To be master of our mind and not to be swayed by external condition is meditative concentration. To thoroughly understand all

phenomena is wisdom.

Therefore, the Buddha taught us to adopt the Six Paramitas of giving, abiding by the precepts, patience, diligence, meditative concentration, and wisdom into our daily lives. In this way, we will be practicing the Bodhisattva way. It is a mistake to think that once we have accepted the Bodhisattva precepts, we will automatically become a Bodhisattva. If we are ignorant of the Six Paramitas and thus cannot apply them, then even if we have accepted the Bodhisattva precepts, we will be no more than clay idols unable to even help ourselves.

The Ten Great Vows of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva

Only when we have applied the first four of the five guidelines: the Three Conditions, the Six Harmonies, the Threefold Learning, and the Six Paramitas, will we truly be a student of the Buddha and be close to Bodhisattvas. Based on the foundation of the Six Paramitas, we can progress to the next level of our practice, which is comprised of the Ten Great Vows of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva.

These vows were taught to us by the Buddha in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. This is the last stage of our cultivation leading to Buddhahood. We cannot practice the Six Paramitas and advance to the Ten Great Vows until we have fulfilled the first four guidelines. The main characteristic of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva is an immeasurably broad and compassionate heart. Every one of his vows is complete and perfect.

The First Vow:
To Respect all Buddhas

Who are Buddhas? We read the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, “Sentient or insentient, all attain wisdom”. All beings that have self-awareness and all things, such as plants and minerals, are Buddhas-to-Be. With respect for all beings and things, not just the present Buddhas, we will foster the heart of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva. His heart is different from that of most Bodhisattvas.

Buddhist practitioners are respectful to the Buddha; however, this respect may not be completely sincere. Why not? If we are listening to a lecture, but suddenly think of an important appointment or hear our cell phone ringing, what will we do? We will leave the hall immediately to attend to business or the telephone call! Thus, our respect and belief are not genuine. If we were truly sincere and respectful, we would regard attendance at the lecture as our prime concern. But, in fact, if we are listening to a talk on the sutra and someone tells us that there is a business opportunity that will us make a million dollars, we will immediately leave the lecture hall. Our respect and belief are not genuine enough.

The profound respect of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva is perfectly genuine, regardless of whether it is for Buddhas, sentient beings, or insentient objects. Why? He understands that they all have a Buddha-nature. Therefore, offending a sentient being is offending a Buddha. Thus, we too should respect all beings.

Then how do we act towards tables and chairs? They are also to be respected as beings, for everything is the result of the coming together of causes. What is the right way to show respect for things? Prostrate to them three times a day? No. We show respect

to material objects by keeping them orderly and clean.

For example, books go neatly into a bookcase. When doing something, we are earnest and responsible, trying to do it the best we can. We treat people, situations, and objects with equal respect. This is the virtuous way of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva. This is the expanded and perfected way of the Six Paramitas, and the most perfect and effective way for Buddhist cultivation.

The Second Vow:

To Praise the “Thus Come One”

The second vow is to “Praise the ‘Thus Come One.’” Since, the first vow is “To respect all Buddhas” why don’t we combine them—“Praise and respect all Buddhas”? There is a profound meaning within these two vows. “Respect all Buddhas” applies to behavior. When considering the form, we are to show respect for everybody, regardless of whether they are good or bad. Also, we are to respect all laws whether they are accepted or heretical. “Praise the ‘Thus Come One’” applies to nature. So, there is a difference. We admire the good but not the bad, although we respect the latter as well. And, therein, lies the difference.

In the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, Sudhana understood this very well. He respected and praised nearly every one of the fifty-three spiritual guides he visited. However, three of them he respected but did not praise: Fasumiduo, Ganluhuowang, and Shengrepoluomen. The first was a prostitute and symbolized greed. The second was hot-tempered and symbolized anger, punishing those who caused him the slightest offense by plunging them into boiling oil or driving them into a hill of daggers. The third was a heretic and

symbolized ignorance. These three symbolized the Three Poisons of greed, anger, and ignorance. To Sudhana, the three were to be respected but not praised. From this, we see that praise is linked to virtue.

Only good characteristics and accepted laws deserve praise. But we still respect all beings and things because respect reflects purity of mind and the virtue of respecting others equally. We respect heretical beliefs while we praise accepted ones such as Christianity, which helps raise people to the heaven realms. This is not achieving the perfect, complete enlightenment, but it is incomparably better than heretical beliefs that will lead people to fall into the three lower realms. So, we praise Christianity. However, we never praise cults for they encourage people to commit wrongdoings.

We can see that there is a big difference between the first and second vows although both come from a pure and perfect intention.

The Third Vow:

To Make Offerings Extensively

The primary characteristic of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva is an immeasurably broad and compassionate mind, which in Mahayana Buddhism is considered as the perfect function of the true nature. Ordinary Bodhisattvas have seen to their true nature, but it is partial, not perfect. Only the virtuous character of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva is perfect. All his vows are directed to all beings in the universe. Herein lies the difference between Samantabhadra Bodhisattva and ordinary Bodhisattvas who practice just the Six Paramitas. An offering to one Buddha is an offering to all Buddhas. His offerings are not only made to Buddhas but also to

sentient and non-sentient beings. Therefore, one is all and all is one. With this great broad-mindedness, we can attain the non-discriminatory and boundless perfection.

Samantabhadra Bodhisattva told us that of all the many kinds of offerings, that of the teachings is supreme. However, only the Buddha's teachings can help sentient beings break through confusion and delusion, to uncover the perfect true nature, to become enlightened. No other kind of offering can do this. As Buddhism is an education, we are to honor the teacher and revere his or her teachings. Only in this way, can we attain perfect, complete enlightenment.

In the teachings of Buddha Shakyamuni, which sutra is the most important? In the Sui and Tang dynasties, over a thousand years ago, great Buddhist scholars studied and compared all of the sutras from Buddha Shakyamuni's forty-nine years of teaching. They agreed that the *Avatamsaka Sutra* was the most important. So, the *Avatamsaka Sutra* was commonly acknowledged as the perfect teaching.

The scholars then made comparisons between the *Infinite Life Sutra* and the *Avatamsaka Sutra* and concluded that the *Infinite Life Sutra* was higher than the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. They explained that the *Avatamsaka Sutra* and the *Lotus Sutra* are the two most important. In Chinese Buddhism, they are called the "First Vehicle Perfect Teachings." Both function as the guide to the *Infinite Life Sutra*. Therefore, the *Infinite Life Sutra* is really the number one teaching.

When I first read this, I was very pleased because it agreed with my personal experience. It was the *Avatamsaka Sutra* that guided me to Pure Land Buddhism. I lectured on this sutra for seventeen years. Later, I only lectured on the "Chapter of Samantabhadra's

Conduct and Vows” from the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. During these seventeen years, I deeply comprehended the meaning of the Ten Great Vows of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva in guiding beings to the Western Pure Land. This Pure Land is the essence and the final destination of the *Avatamsaka*. From this experience, I realized that the ancient masters were right.

So, we know what is the best and most important among all of Buddha Shakyamuni’s teachings. However, it was only after Mr. Xia Lianju, a Buddhist layman, edited a compilation of the five versions of the original translations of the *Infinite Life Sutra* that we could enjoy a perfect benefit. The great project of editing such an extensive literary collection demonstrated that Mr. Xia was not an ordinary person, but rather the manifestation of a great Bodhisattva. This great being felt compassion for the sentient beings in our world, which revealed that the opportunity for many beings to attain Buddhahood had matured. Thus, he manifested in our world to compile the sutra versions and propagate the Pure Land method during our Dharma Ending Age.

When I visited Beijing, a student of Mr. Xia presented me with a photo of his teacher. Upon returning to Taiwan, I printed an enlarged copy of the photo. Although it is not very clear due to repeated duplications, an amazing phenomenon is apparent. Behind Mr. Xia’s head the image of a Buddha appears. Light is emitting from this image as well as from below his shoes. Although the photo has been reduplicated many times, we can still clearly see that the image over Mr. Xia’s head is that of a Buddha sitting on his lotus seat. We placed the photo in a prominent position to express our gratitude to this great Bodhisattva for having given us such a gift and for guiding us in our cultivation and propagation of Buddhism.

The *Infinite Life Sutra* is the most important sutra for helping all beings to attain Buddhahood. It contains forty-eight chapters. Which chapter is number one? Of all the chapters, chapter six is the most important. It tells us of Buddha Amitabha's forty-eight vows. When we read the *Infinite Life Sutra*, we see that Buddha Shakyamuni accorded with these vows when he introduced the history and background of the Pure Land.

Which of these vows is number one? The great scholars and monks in ancient China agreed that the eighteenth vow is number one. It tells us that ten recitations of Buddha Amitabha's name will result in birth into the Pure Land.

In my early years of study, I questioned whether the Buddha had the ability to help a person to immediately become a Buddha, even if the person was doomed to rebirth in the Avici Hell, the lowest of the hell realms. If the Buddha was unable to accomplish this, then his wisdom and ability were limited and saying that he had all virtues and perfect abilities was a compliment rather than a fact.

However, if the Buddha was capable of helping such a person become a Buddha, then I would believe that he was really perfect in wisdom and capable and thus worthy of our admiration. This question remained unanswered until after I read the forty-eight vows of Buddha Amitabha in the sutra. Then I realized that the Buddha's wisdom and virtuous character are indeed perfect and universal.

The Buddha is indeed capable of helping a person who has committed serious offenses to become a Buddha. The question lies in whether or not the person believes and accepts. If not, then the fault lies with the individual, not the Buddha. So, after reading the *Infinite Life Sutra* we know that anyone who sincerely practices the recitation method will surely succeed.

In the earlier example of Master Dixian and the student who so successfully chanted “Namo Amitufo” for three years, the student knew in advance when he would be born into the Pure Land. He told the woman who brought his food daily, that she need not bring it the following day. After he passed away from this world, he remained in a standing position for three days waiting for his master to come to make final arrangements. His birth into the Pure Land was into the highest level. His accomplishment is proof of the eighteenth vow, which explains to us that this birth can be accomplished with just ten recitations of “Amitabha.”

Anyone who firmly believes in this method surely has good roots, great merits, and virtues. The *Infinite Life Sutra* explains that the monk’s rebirth after such a short time of practice was due to his having made offerings to innumerable Buddhas in previous lifetimes. As a result, he was able to believe and practice. Without his good roots from previous lifetimes, he would not have been able to believe regardless of what his teacher had said.

The name of Buddha Amitabha contains infinite meanings. It is the name of the universe, so it includes everything. If we want to know the meaning of the name, we can read the *Infinite Life Sutra*, the explanation of the name. If we want to understand the *Infinite Life Sutra* we can read the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, for it is a detailed explanation of the *Infinite Life Sutra*. If we want to understand the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, we can read the entire canon for it is the detailed explanation of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. By using this method to understand the sutras, we will know that the merit and virtue of the name of Buddha Amitabha are truly extraordinary.

This name alone contains all of Buddhism as well as all laws throughout the universe. Therefore, to chant this name is to chant

all sutras. During the reign of Emperor Qianlong, there was a famous monk Ciyun Guanding. Among his many works is the *Directory to the Visualization Sutra*, which tells us that when we seek escape from disasters we can resort to reciting sutras, chanting mantras or drawing divination slips. However, if a person has committed grave wrongdoings then the only thing that will work is to recite “Namo Amitufo.”

From this, we understand that this is the best method to follow when facing disaster. Many people do not know this so they resort to other methods. Therefore a person who is ill may recite the *Medicine Master Sutra* and when faced with disaster may recite the “Universal Door Chapter.” This person does not know that the merits and virtues of Buddha Name Chanting make it the number one method.

Then why didn’t Buddha Shakyamuni tell us so directly? Why did he teach us so many sutras and methods? Because many people do not believe in the Buddha Name Chanting method. So, he kept the finest method for last. This is similar to what we see in the Taiwan Palace Museum. Most people consider the beautiful jade collection of the Qing dynasty, to be more valuable than the bronze ware, which resembles pieces of metal, not realizing the bronze ware is the most valuable part of the collection in the museum. Similarly, most people do not realize the true value of Buddha Name Chanting. So, the Buddha had to teach all the sutras to guide sentient beings to the Pure Land.

Master Shandao told us that the only purpose for all Buddhas to manifest in the world is to tell us of the original vows of Buddha Amitabha. Today, we can truly understand, cultivate, and propagate the Pure Land method. Truthfully, this is due to the

support of the Three Jewels. Also, the opportunities today for sentient beings to achieve attainment are very good.

In the past five to six years, millions of copies of the *Infinite Life Sutra* have been printed and spread throughout the world. I have traveled around the world introducing and recommending this sutra. Many people have liked and accepted it. Seeing you here working and practicing so earnestly, I am very pleased and feel that my hard work has been rewarded. Therefore, if we can practice and widely propagate this method, than I can say that we have perfectly fulfilled the vow to “Make Offerings Extensively.”

The methods used by Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are infinite in number. They are the display of great compassion and lead to birth into the Pure Land. For example, Samantabhadra Bodhisattva is the founder of Esoteric Buddhism. Also, Zhuenti Bodhisattva, one of the great patriarchs of Esoteric Buddhism, is a manifestation of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva. Both Samantabhadra Bodhisattva and Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva urge us to seek birth into the Western Pure Land.

We ordinary people discriminate between Chinese and Esoteric Buddhism, but Buddhas and Bodhisattvas with their perfect freedom and non-discriminatory minds do not discriminate among the different schools. All eighty-four thousand methods lead to the same goal. With this understanding, we will naturally respect all methods and schools.

The Fourth Vow:

To Regret Karmic Obstacles

Everybody has karmic obstacles. Every thought in a person's mind

causes a karmic act, which in turn will certainly result in an obstacle. What is obstructed? Our true nature, within which there is infinite wisdom and virtue. There are two types of obstacles: those caused by afflictions and those caused by knowledge-attachment. We create these constantly. The Buddha told us in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, “All beings have the Buddha’s wisdom and virtue but cannot attain them due to their wandering thoughts and attachments.”

Like a doctor, the Buddha pointed out the root cause of our illness. Attachments are the root cause of afflictions and wandering thoughts are the root cause of knowledge-attachment. For all methods, learning and cultivation is simply a matter of doing away with our wandering thoughts and attachments. Once we do this, we will uncover our Buddha nature. All the methods in Buddhism teach us to regret our karmic obstacles. Thus, to regret karmic obstacles is the key to our cultivation.

However, it is very difficult to remove these obstacles. Of all the methods, that of the Pure Land is unique. For even if we have committed an extremely grave crime such as one of the Five Deadly Offenses and are thus destined to fall into the Avici Hell, we can still remove our obstacles and attain Buddhahood. We need to feel remorse, vow to change, practice Buddha Name Chanting and accord with the Buddha's teachings to attain birth into the Pure Land. This is why Master Ciyun said that this recitation method alone is able to dispel obstacles, for they cannot be dispelled reciting sutras or mantras.

In the past few years there was a theory being circulated that said a person with remaining karma could not attain rebirth into the Pure Land. This greatly shocked and panicked Pure Land practitioners. When I went to Los Angeles in 1984, I was asked if

this was really true. On hearing the question, I smiled and said, “If it were true that no person with remaining karma could be born into the Pure Land, then the only person there would be Buddha Amitabha. What then is the use of going there?” The person questioned “Why?” I replied, “Have you ever heard of the four lands, three kinds and nine grades in the Pure Land?” He replied that he had read of them in the sutras. I told him “If no one with remaining karma had been born into the Pure Land, why are there four lands, three kinds, and nine levels?” With this, he understood.

The division of lands, kinds and levels is based on the amount of remaining karma. With heavier karma, we are born into a lower grade: with lighter karma, a higher grade. I then explained, “The Bodhisattvas Avalokitesvara, Mahasthamaprapta, and Samantabhadra are all Equal-enlightenment Bodhisattvas. The sutras tell us that even Bodhisattvas of this high level still possess one degree of remaining ignorance. Isn’t this a karmic act?” My questioner was relieved at my words.

So even an Equal-enlightenment Bodhisattva goes to the Pure Land with remaining karma. Buddha Amitabha is the only one there without any karma. I then concluded, “Who says that a person with remaining karma cannot be born into the Pure Land!” My words seemed to help as the individual laughed merrily for he began to see that all beings in the Pure Land had gone there with their remaining karma.

Buddhism teaches us not to be angry or hold grudges against others. So, I added, “It is not wrong to advocate extinguishing karma for it is good to carry as little karma to the Pure Land as possible. In this way the person can attain birth into a higher level.”

Later, I went to New York. As soon as I got off the plane, I was

asked the same question. People did not know the truth. As soon as I explained, they understood that it was not wrong to have karma. Extinguishing karma is good for it is feeling remorse for the obstacle.

Buddha Name Chanting is a sincere act of feeling remorse and vowing to change. However, when feeling remorse we must be sure that our heart is the same as Buddha Amitabha's, our vow is the same as Buddha Amitabha's and our behavior corresponds with that of Buddha Amitabha. How do we do this? With sincerity by not merely chanting with our mouth but with our heart. In this way, we will perfectly fulfill the teachings in the sutras. Only by doing so can it be said that we are true cultivators of the recitation method.

Be sure that with every thought of "Amitufo" we have the same thought and vow as the Buddha. We need to turn his forty-eight vows into our own. Only in this way can we be rid of karmic transgressions.

The Fifth Vow:

To be Joyful over Others Meritorious Deeds

This requires us to go against what seems so natural to us, jealousy. It is natural for humans to have this emotion. For example, small children appear unhappy when others receive more candy than they do. This is jealousy and it is a major obstacle to our self-cultivation. Samantabhadra Bodhisattva largely attributed this vow to jealousy. He taught us not to feel envy but rather to regard others meritorious deeds as our own and to further assist them in their endeavors.

This vow tell us to not only feel joyful over others meritorious deeds but to help them accomplish even more. If we are unable to

offer assistance, we can at least express our joy and admiration. However, if we are able to offer assistance then it will be a true fulfillment of this vow. Remember that helping others is helping ourselves. We would do well to love and tolerate those who exceed us for in this way we will accomplish the virtue of this vow.

In ancient times, education in China was such that each succeeding generation was expected to exceed the current generation in accomplishment. If not, the education was considered a failure. People today however, are afraid that others will exceed them. When they teach others, they may hold back important information. This is called grudging teaching, which will incur the retribution of ignorance. Grudging money incurs poverty. These people are not aware how serious the retribution will be. We should strive to continuously progress in our cultivation of virtue, acquisition of knowledge, development of ability and improvement of the standard of life. Only in this way will education be successful with the entire society progressing.

It will be our responsibility in the next era to educate others. If we fail to attain virtue, knowledge and ability, we will not be able to help the next generation of sentient beings. Why? Look at today's children. The education they receive is leaning more and more towards science and technology while society is becoming increasingly complicated. Therefore, those who have vowed to help others will need to have a purer heart, greater wisdom and higher virtue to cope with the new era and opportunities. Jealousy and hatred are extremely harmful to our true nature and hence should be extinguished. So, the virtue of being joyful over other's meritorious deeds will be even more important.

The Sixth Vow:

To Appeal to the Buddha to Turn the Dharma Wheel

Since we benefit from the education we receive from the Buddha, what can we do to repay his kindness? Nowadays, most people enshrine and worship him, making daily offerings to his image on an altar. Is this the right way to repay him? No. These are only rituals to remind us not to forget the Buddha's kindness. The Buddha's wish is for all beings to hear the truth, practice accordingly, and receive the benefits to attain Buddhahood. The only way we can repay him is to take his heart as our own. Only in this way can we repay our respected teacher.

Therefore, we can request the turning of the Dharma-wheel, in other words, we invite knowledgeable masters to teach us about the sutras. This is also the greatest good deed and virtue. Why? Because it brings the teachings to the world. But if no one invites Dharma masters to lecture, they will not have the opportunity to do so. So, people who invite them to give Dharma talks will obtain great merits.

Many people are willing to invite masters to chant or recite believing that they will receive inconceivable good fortune. But actually, they may not understand the meaning of what they are reciting. Therefore, if they invite the Dharma master to give a talk, then the good fortune, merit and virtue are even greater. The listeners will acquire a better understanding of the text and will be more inclined to recite the sutra and follow its teachings.

Unfortunately, if we want to invite a master to give a talk on the sutra today, we will find it hard to find an eligible one since there are so few. Many times, as I have traveled to give talks, I

have been told that it was very difficult to find masters to speak. I have smiled and said, “Having a master to teach is a result. We need to plant the cause before we can attain this result. You are wishing for it without having planted the cause! Where on earth can we find such a deal!” What does “planting the cause” mean in this instance? To help train Dharma masters.

People like to listen to talks by senior, famous masters. Younger, unknown masters are normally inexperienced so fewer people attend their talks. Thus, they become discouraged and thinking that giving talks is too difficult, they return to conducting ceremonies. What should we do to help these less experienced masters? The younger and more inexperienced they are the more we need to attend their talks. This will encourage them to continue to practice and to improve.

However, even if we attend every one of the master's talks, we should not praise them. Unfounded praise is more harmful than slander. People may become very angry when slandered but for a person with integrity and enthusiasm the slander will only serve as a stimulant. The more embarrassed he or she becomes, the more determined he or she becomes. This person will do their utmost to achieve. However, if people praise and eulogize the master, he or she will think that they are so good that further improvement is unnecessary. This thinking leads to arrogance. Therefore, we should neither praise inexperienced masters nor make offerings to them. With too much money and fame, they will soon become tainted.

A person gives rise to the Bodhisattva heart and becomes a monk or nun but later becomes corrupt due to receiving excessive praise and offerings from followers. So, these followers are to blame for ruining this monk or nun. When the monk or nun re-

ceives the retribution, the followers will share the responsibility. Then whom should we make offerings to? The person with a firm mind for he or she will neither feel excited when praised, nor troubled when slandered. Only they deserve to receive the praise and admiration for only they will not be harmed by it. We would do well to strongly recommend this master to others, so that the master can help more beings.

To accept praise and offerings is very difficult. Buddhists say that, “A single grain from the donor is heavier than Mt. Sumeru. I will serve the donor like a bull in my next life if I do not transcend the six realms of rebirth at the end of this one.” So it is not easy to properly accept offerings. Even Buddhas and Bodhisattvas do not enjoy the offerings made to them, let alone we ordinary beings. However, when the donor wishes to foster good deeds and virtues, the master should accept the offerings and then pass them on to others.

Earlier in this century, Master Yin Guang set a good example for us. His innumerable followers gave many offerings. He used all the money to print sutras. Following his example, I have also used all the money donated to print sutras. I then freely distribute the books to everybody. This is the transference of giving. In this way, everybody would share in the good fortune. This is the proper way of accepting offerings from followers.

Using the offerings for personal use is absolutely wrong and immoral. Even if the money is used to build a Buddhist center, the center has to be used to promote Buddhism. Only in this way can the donor receive the merits and virtues. Otherwise, without propagation and cultivation, it will become a place of competition and conflict. Therefore, we must be very careful if we want to build a center. My late teacher, Mr. Li, once said, “When building

a center, everybody is a Bodhisattva doing their best to complete the work. But after it is built, everybody becomes a demon.” Why? Because they are all trying to grab power and profit. They have forgotten their initial genuine intention in building the center.

We have to be very careful when making offerings to a Dharma master. The Buddha told us that there were four kinds of offerings that could be made to monks and nuns. The first is food without which they cannot survive. The second is clothing. If it becomes worn, provide new ones if there is not another one available. The third is medicine which is to be provided upon illness. The fourth is basic lodging.

Nowadays, followers offer monks and nuns houses and whatever good things they can afford. Then they live such a comfortable life that they no longer want to go to the Pure Land! The present life becomes so satisfactory that the goal to transcend the cycle of birth and death to attain Buddhahood fades. This is very harmful to their cultivation. They have left their secular home behind. To present them with a house is to urge them to return home. Isn't this harmful to them? Having received ownership of a house, they have again acquired property. This is regression of their cultivation.

The follower is then actually a criminal who will ruin the master. These people do not understand that this is harming Buddhism and damaging the spirit of the Three Jewels. They think they are doing a good deed and accumulating much merit. When they see the king of the hell realms after they die, they will feel bewilderment at their punishment. We must have true wisdom to cultivate good fortune, merits, and virtues in Buddhism. Followers need to be told of this but many masters are reluctant to tell them

so because then they may not receive offerings.

What about me? I am determined to go to the Pure Land. I will not remain in this world to continue to bear the suffering. Thus, to tell the truth, I do not care whether you make offerings to me or not. It would be even better for me if you did not for it would save me a lot of trouble. Because of this, I started the Corporate Body of the Buddha's Educational Foundation, which is devoted to the printing and distribution of Buddhist books. I told the manager "Print more if there are more offerings. Print fewer if there are fewer offerings. There is no need to print any if there are no offerings, which is best."

When too many offerings are received, we have to take the trouble to select among all the Buddhist books to determine which ones are most suitable to print and then decide how best to print them. With no offerings, there would be no worries, no troubles. So we should not seek offerings, seek a center or ask for anything. Then we will have a pure mind and a quiet heart on our path to enlightenment. Cultivating a pure mind and a quiet heart, helping others to cultivate the same and staying away from fame and profit is true cultivation.

We need to foster novice monks and nuns by placing them in hardships. If we cannot bear to see them experiencing hardship, we are harming them. When Buddha Shakyamuni was in this world, all of his students had only one meal a day and spent the night sitting under trees. Is this not a life of hardship? If we had been there and felt sorry for them and helped them out of their hardships, how could they have attained enlightenment?

The Buddha taught us to regard hardship as our teacher. Only by living most simply and frugally can we acquire a true Dharma

heart and be firmly determined to transcend this world. So, hardships are good for us. If we are not willing to undergo hardship ourselves then we can at least respect those who are and not try to extricate them from their difficulties. Only when we sincerely help inexperienced monks and nuns to improve will we have good masters promoting Buddhism.

The Seventh Vow:

To Request the Buddha to Reside in this World

The main purpose of the sixth vow is to introduce Buddhism to all people. If we hope to have accomplishment in our cultivation, the vow to request the turning of the Dharma wheel is not enough. Have you seen anyone attain enlightenment simply by listening to a talk on the sutra only once or twice in his or her lifetime? If this could happen, then enlightenment would be obtainable only when the Buddha was in the world and unobtainable when he was not. However, with our limited abilities we cannot do this, so we need to request the Buddha to reside in this world. In other words, we need a teacher who is with us every day so that we can be under their constant guidance and thus be able to reach enlightenment.

Years ago, I was asked by Mr. Li about my aspirations. I told him that I wished to travel around the world encouraging others to practice Buddhism. He nodded and told me that this was good, that I could achieve but I could not help others to do so. I asked why. He replied that I could only propagandize. He said that he had lived in Taizhong for more than thirty years and therefore many people had attained achievement. He went on to explain that if he had not lived in Taizhong but had simply visited to lec-

ture once or twice a year than nobody would have had any achievement. To be able to help another, there needs to be an existing affinity. Without this affinity, even a Buddha cannot help us. By traveling around the world propagating Buddhism, we meet many people but the affinities with them are lighter. Staying in one place to conduct regular teachings needs stronger affinities.

I have benefited greatly from my travels as I have been freed from the concept of home. Every day I was either on the road or in a hotel. Where is my home? No home at all. Although I have places to give talks, I usually do not stay there for longer than a few weeks. The shattering of the idea of home has proven to be an escape for me.

If we want to reach any achievement, we need to request the Buddha to remain in this world. The Buddha himself is no longer here but his followers are, be they monks and nuns or laypeople. Those who are knowledgeable and virtuous can be invited to reside in our town or city to give teachings. In this way, we will be constantly under their guidance. It is easy to provide for masters of virtue and character because they lead simple lives. However, the lecture hall should look magnificent so that the listeners will like it and will thus develop respect for the center. However, if the appearance of the hall is mediocre they might look down on the center. People often set store by appearance and pay less attention to content. Although a person who knows the true value of things does not attach much importance to appearance, a splendid and imposing looking lecture hall is necessary for people to see initially.

Although the lecture and cultivation halls are very impressive, the living quarters of the monks and nuns are very simple. If we look at the temples in China, we will understand. Even the head

monk lives in a small room. The luxurious exterior rooms are only for laypeople and visitors. By carefully observing this we will know the right manner we need to have and the right methods we need to adopt. Doing so properly will enable Buddhism to take root, grow, blossom and bear fruit wherever we live.

From the above, we can see that among the Ten Great Vows of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva, the first seven are for a Bodhisattva's vows and conduct and the last three are the ways to dedicate all merits.

The Eighth Vow:

To Constantly be a Diligent Follower of the Buddha's Teachings

Although the Buddha no longer resides in this world, we still have his sutras to follow and study. Following the sutras is the highest standard in our learning and practicing Buddhism.

The Ninth Vow:

To Accord with all Sentient Beings

We need to accord with the wishes of all sentient beings in the universe. This is extremely difficult to do and is why the Chinese say that filial piety and according with others go together. Learning Buddhism is to honor filial piety and to accord with the being's wishes. While according, we need to look for the right opportunities to try to encourage people to stop committing wrongdoings. This will help them to break through delusion and attain enlightenment. However, to do this perfectly, we need to recognize the right way and time and for this, we need wisdom, expediency and flexibility.

The Tenth Vow:
To Dedicate all Merits

This means dedicating all of our good deeds and merits to all the sentient beings in the universe. It means broadening our hearts so that the entire universe becomes one entity. Only when we have reached this state can we be said to have attained the Great Perfection.

In our learning and, we use five sutras and one treatise:

1. The *Buddha Speaks of the Infinite Life Sutra of Adornment, Purity, Equality and Enlightenment of the Mahayana School*,
2. The *Amitabha Sutra*,
3. The *Visualization Sutra*,
4. “Samantabhadra Bodhisattva’s Conduct and Vows” from the *Avatamsaka Sutra*,”
5. “The Perfect Complete Realization of Mahasthamaprapta Bodhisattva through Buddha Name Chanting” from the *Surangama Sutra*, and
6. The *Rebirth Treatise*.

We practice the Five Guidelines:

1. The Three Conditions,
2. The Six Harmonies,
3. The Threefold Learning,
4. The Six Paramitas, and
5. The Ten Great Vows of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva.

Very simple, very clear, not at all complicated. If we consistently follow these in our learning and cultivation, we are assured of success. As an ancient sage said, “If ten thousand practice, ten thousand will succeed.” We now have the principles and methods

of learning and cultivation. How do we interact with others and circumstances in our daily lives? If we follow the above five guidelines, single-mindedly chant the name of Buddha Amitabha and seek birth into the Pure Land, we will definitely succeed.

Chapter Seven

The Right Order of Learning Buddhism

Belief, Understanding, Practice, and Realization

We have looked at the basis for learning and cultivation and have had a brief introduction to the main practice guidelines. Now, let's look at the creative teaching methods of Buddhism. As Master Qingliang explained, in the *Avatamsaka Sutra* learning and cultivation can be divided into the four stages of belief, understanding, practice, and realization.

The first stage is belief. When we are able to believe then our conditions have matured. There is a saying "the Buddha is unable to help those who have no affinity with him." What is affinity? It is being able to believe. Even a Buddha cannot help someone whose conditions have not yet matured. However, when they have matured, the person will have belief. Then the Buddha can help. Religions are different from Buddhism in that once the believers have faith, they are saved, whereas, the belief in Buddhism, means that we believe in the benefits of Buddhism and accept one of the many methods.

Once we have the belief, we have to have understanding. Buddhism explains the truth of life and the universe. Only after we have acquired a true understanding of it can we begin our practice. Therefore, practice is based on understanding. If we do not understand the principles and methods, how can we practice? True practice is based on the foundation of principles and correct methods. The ultimate goal of practice is to achieve attainment, to attain the real benefit. What is attainment? It is the application of what we believe, under-

stand, and practice in our daily lives, to attain the ultimate enjoyment in life. For example, what we find in the *Infinite Life Sutra* is just what we think and practice. What we think and practice in our daily lives conforms to the sutra. This is attainment and true reality and this is what makes Buddhism so valuable.

Thus, we need to know the proper sequence of cultivation, which is belief, understanding, practice, and attainment. When we speak of belief, first we believe in ourselves. This is where Buddhism differs from religion. In religion the most important criteria is to believe in God. In Buddhism the most important criteria is to believe in ourselves, not something outside of ourselves. We need to believe that we have the same Buddha nature. Believe that originally we were Buddhas. Believe that we are no different from the Buddhas. Believe that our true nature has become polluted and that once we remove this pollution we will uncover our true nature.

However, if we are always dwelling on thoughts that we have heavy karmic obstacles and fear that this will keep us from achieving attainment, then we definitely will not achieve. Why? If we do not believe that we can achieve, then even the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas cannot help us. Buddhas and Bodhisattvas can only help those who help themselves. Therefore, it is crucial that we have this confidence and belief in ourselves.

In addition, we also need to believe in the teachings of the Buddhas. We have been told infinite principles and methods. We will surely succeed as long as we follow them. After we have belief in ourselves, we need to have belief in the Buddha's teachings. Master Ou Yi described this as believing in principles and in matter. Where does matter come from? From the principle, that is the pure mind of the true nature. All phenomena in the universe arise

from the principle. They are related by the endless cycle of cause and effect. A cause gives rise to an effect, which in turn becomes the cause of the next effect. This process continues ceaselessly. Developing understanding and belief in true reality builds our confidence enabling us to seek thorough understanding of everything. Only in this way can we be free from confusion and doubt, which are obstacles in our cultivation and thus obtain enjoyment and smooth advancement.

In practicing Buddhism, it is most important to accept the teacher's instructions and practice according to the recommended methods. This has been the right way to learn since ancient times. The first requirement was to follow the five-year learning restriction, which was set by the teacher. In so doing so, the teacher took full responsibility for whether the student succeeded or failed. This is the principle of honoring teachers and revering their teachings. This principle, however, no longer holds today for teachers are not responsible and students are not earnest. The principles of teaching are declining and this is the tragedy of our times. Students no longer respect teachers and teachers no longer sincerely help students to achieve.

The five-year learning restriction resulted in the student following just one teacher. It laid the foundation for the Threefold Learning of self-discipline, deep concentration and wisdom. It was the responsibility of the teacher to see that the student learned this. Consider Zen Buddhism. What did the teacher ask of the student for the first five years? They were assigned a simple manual labor and asked to perform it earnestly, without change, every day. They were also to memorize the sutra. They were to read after completing their work and not to be concerned with anything else.

The purpose of this labor was not to treat them as servants.

After a while the student felt bored and would think that he or she had worked very hard for five years without accomplishing anything. In actuality, he or she had acquired much without realizing it. What was acquired? Afflictions were greatly reduced and concentration was increased because of a ban against seeing and listening to many things. If the ban was properly followed, the students attained both good fortune and wisdom. What is good fortune? Working every day in the way place was cultivating the practice of giving. Since monks and nuns had no money to give away, they could work to cultivate the Paramita of Giving.

Through the restrictions on listening and reading thereby concentrating the six sense organs, the students also acquired a pure mind and attained deep concentration. This is wisdom. So, the teacher taught the students to cultivate good fortune and establish the foundation of self-discipline, deep concentration, and wisdom. The teaching was designed to be subtle yet effective. With the five-year learning restriction as a base, upon listening to one or two years of Dharma lectures, the students could become enlightened.

In the biographies of eminent monks, we see that through this method many monks become enlightened in three to five years. Today, however, practitioners can live in a temple or center for thirty or fifty years, even a lifetime without awakening. They may have read numerous sutras but were still not enlightened. At most, they have memorized some general knowledge about Buddhism, but have not severed their afflictions or attained wisdom. So, we must try to find a good teacher for guidance. This advice may seem boring at first. But after the initial stage, we will be truly delighted with our achievement.

Many of us have made the big mistake at the beginning of our cultivation, of wanting to learn all different methods. Ancient learned monks and nuns started with the second of the Great Vows of Buddhas and Bodhisattva, “Afflictions are inexhaustible, I vow to end them all.” In ending all afflictions, we will achieve deep concentration and attain wisdom. Then, the “Ways to practice are boundless, I vow to master them all.” This is the correct order for cultivation. The mistake many people make is to attempt to study extensively without having severed afflictions. Master Qingliang called this “understanding with no practice,” These people concentrate only on understanding while neglecting the practice. They do not try to end their afflictions to cultivate a pure mind. As a result, they develop deviated viewpoints rather than proper views and knowledge.

Practicing the Threefold Learning Concurrently

What is the first step in learning Buddhism? Start by reciting one sutra. Do we need to understand it? No. For when we have not ended afflictions, our understanding will be erroneous. Then why do we recite only this sutra? By reciting the sutra, the Threefold Learning of self-discipline, deep concentration and wisdom are accomplished together.

Self-discipline requires that we “do nothing that is bad and do all that is good.” Reciting a sutra can prevent us from having wandering thoughts so we will be prevented from doing anything that is bad. Sutras are words that flow from the Buddha’s true nature. Nothing can surpass these words in virtue. Therefore, reciting a sutra is doing all that is good and results in the perfection of self-

discipline so there is no need to practice the precepts one-by-one.

When reciting a sutra we must focus to cultivate concentration. Clear enunciation of every word correctly without any omission is the practice of wisdom. Therefore, reciting the sutra properly is to practice the Threefold Learning at the same time. Any attempt to analyze the sutra while reciting is in fact treating the sutra as a worldly book. This will result in none of the Threefold Learning being accomplished and is not true cultivation. Never belittle the practice of sutra recitation, as it is the base of cultivation. Reciting for one hour is one hour of cultivation, reciting for two hours is two hours of cultivation, and so on. Needless to say, the longer the better.

Many of my fellow practitioners in Taiwan and Dallas are reciting the *Infinite Life Sutra* ten times a day. So far, some may have chanted the sutra over two thousand times, thus they are very familiar with the text and only need thirty to forty-five minutes to finish one sutra. Reciting ten times thus means five or six hours of practicing self-discipline, deep concentration, and wisdom. With so many hours devoted to cultivation, we will naturally develop a serene mind in just a few years.

Sutras flow from the pure and quiet mind of the Buddha. When we have developed a mind as pure and quiet, we will understand all we read in the sutra. The reason why the sutra is so hard to understand now is that our minds are filled with wandering thoughts. How can this mind be in harmony with one that is pure and quiet? This is why we do not understand the Buddha's words. So, if we want to learn from a good teacher, we need to trust and believe that their methods are proper and correct.

Just chose one sutra without being distracted by any others. If we chose to follow the Pure Land school, we recite and study the *Infinite*

Life Sutra. If we choose to follow the Tiantai School, we recite and study the *Lotus Sutra*. If we choose to follow the Avatamsaka school, we recite and study the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. When choosing a school follow its principles and delve deeply into the sutra for five years. In other words sever all afflictions and try to develop a pure and quiet heart. This is the first step in learning Buddhism.

Frankly speaking, five years of learning and cultivating were enough for practitioners to attain pure minds in the past, because their minds were not as polluted as ours now are. In the past, children would remain innocent until around ten years of age. Then they would begin to be aware of differences between right and wrong, self and others. They would begin to develop such characteristics as greed, anger, ignorance, and arrogance. Look at today's children. They start showing greed, anger, ignorance and arrogance when they are only a few years old! Where do they learn these things? From television. They are exposed to television every day. Naturally, they become polluted. They do not have the happy innocent childhood their parents had. How unfortunate they are!

I was born and grew up in the countryside and was knew little of the world until I was thirteen. True happiness is to remain innocent as long as possible in childhood and to not be aware of any of the suffering in the world. All I knew was how to play. Once we loose our childhood innocence, we are no longer happy. For then we have to be constantly aware of others. So, I say that modern people are less fortunate than their predecessors are.

Once we have developed a pure and quiet mind, and have attained wisdom, we can begin to broaden our knowledge. We can see, hear, and learn of anything that we are interested in, for now we have attained wisdom and will not be affected by our surround-

ings. Since we have self-control, the more we see and hear the wiser we will become, and the greater our strength from deep concentration will be. How are deep concentration and wisdom increased? Remaining unmoved by surroundings will enhance deep concentration. Developing a clear and understanding mind will enhance wisdom. Then we can learn from other schools to enhance our deep concentration and wisdom. First, we practice self-discipline, concentration, and wisdom to attain our original wisdom. Then we can learn extensively to perfect our acquired wisdom. This is the way of learning from ancient times.

The Buddha told us in the *Great Prajna Sutra*, “innocent intuitive wisdom knows all.” So, we must cultivate “innocence” first. The five-year method of practicing self-discipline results in our remaining innocent of the happenings in the world. When we are again in contact with the world, we will be aware of “knowing all.” This is the right sequence and method to learn and practice Buddhism.

Ancient patriarchs not only abided by the rules set by Buddha Shakyamuni but also took Confucianism as the basis for their learning and practice. Chinese Buddhism abandoned Theravada Buddhism in place of Confucianism. Chinese Buddhists adopted the five virtues of Confucius of gentleness, kindness, respectfulness, thriftiness, and humility as the basis for learning Buddhism. From this foundation, they developed the Three Conditions, Six Harmonies, Threefold Learning, Six Paramitas, and Ten Great Vows.

All the schools of Mahayana Buddhism adopted this framework of learning and teaching. In other words, we can accomplish our learning and cultivation in any school as long as we follow these principles and methods. So, we can say that practicing the Five Virtues and Six Harmonies is the basis and a unique characteristic

of Chinese Buddhism.

There was another advanced method of teaching and learning in Buddhism: continuing education for teachers. It was not until recently that this method again came into use. Buddha Shakyamuni had many students. Some stayed with him because they had not finished their study and thus had not yet become independent. But others had reached some achievement. The latter were Bodhisattvas, who were responsible for propagating Buddhism. They went to different locations, set up centers, and taught on behalf of the Buddha. Then they would return to where the Buddha currently was for a three months summer retreat for continuing education.

This is similar to today's summer vacation when the students are out of school but the teachers cannot rest for they need to receive further training. So, the Bodhisattvas went back to be with the Buddha for a summer retreat. They listened to his teaching and thus were able to increase their concentration, wisdom, and virtues. They also discussed difficulties they had encountered in their teaching and tried to find the solutions. They learned from each other in seeking self-improvement. This system of continuing education has been infrequently seen in Chinese history.

It is advisable that Buddhist centers and societies conduct summer and winter retreats of Buddha Name Chanting and Zen meditation, seminars, and so on for short-term training. This is very effective and people are able to accept this idea of short-term continuing education. If we directly tell them that it is for severing afflictions; cultivating self-discipline, deep concentration, and wisdom; and transcending the cycle of birth and death, only a few people can accept this concept or be interested.

Today, people differ in their concept of Buddhist education from

people in the past. They want to learn more at the beginning of their study, not knowing that their method will limit their accomplishment whereas following the traditional method in practicing Buddhism can result in infinite benefits. In the past many people have benefited from this traditional method and achieved in their cultivation and attained Buddhahood. However, at best, the present methods can only help us to get a doctorate of Buddhism, fame and wealth. But frankly speaking, it will not be easy for us to sever afflictions or transcend the cycle of birth and death.

Chapter Eight

The Artistic Aspects of Buddhist Education

The Earliest System of Continuing Education

Buddha Shakyamuni gave lectures in many places, as did Confucius. In India, the Buddha and his students were invited by different groups to give talks. They would lecture in those areas for a while but did not remain permanently. As most of the Buddha's twelve thousand and fifty students would follow him, it would have been very difficult for one place to support all of them. Only after Buddhism was introduced into China did Buddhist monks and nuns take up permanent residence in what was similar to a Buddhist educational institution. This came about because the introduction of Buddhism into China was supported and financed by the emperor.

In India, people respected ascetics who traveled holding an alms bowl and therefore supplied them with offerings. In China, however, people would have regarded this tradition as begging. Since the emperor who respected them as teachers had invited the monks to China, it would have been unacceptable to have them roaming the streets begging for food. Therefore, houses were built for them to live in and people were sent by the imperial court to assist the monks so they would not have to worry about their livelihood.

By the Tang dynasty, the system of Buddhist universities had developed. Masters Baizhang and Mazu were the initiators of these institutions. Master Mazu was the Eighth Patriarch of the Zen school and the third generation student of Master Huineng. There is a Chinese saying that "Master Mazu built the university

and Master Baizhang set up the rules.”

What is this Buddhist university? It was the systemization of Buddhist teaching; the next step after what had been the verbal passing of teachings from a teacher to private students. After Master Mazu, the idea of the university continued to grow. This educational system was the special feature of Chinese Buddhism. The textbooks, lectures, and teaching methods all attained the highest level of artistry as can be seen in the writing, music, images, architecture, offering implements, and such. Today, however, many of these perfect teachings are lost to us

The Art of Buddhism

Today, the quality of Buddhist music has deteriorated. We are short of talented people, not only Buddhist artists with creative talents. Therefore, A Buddhist artist has to be profoundly learned for only then can he or she truly teach others and convey truth, goodness, beauty and wisdom. Ancient masters with high spiritual achievements composed Buddhist musical lyrics, but because the minds of today's people who chant them are not pure, their expression of them is also not pure. Spiritually, they have yet to achieve a state of awakening and are thus unable to move us. The artistic decline is caused by the lack of talented practitioners, it does not mean that Buddhism lacks artistic substance.

Anyone who has been to China and visited the Dunhuang murals or the Yungang grottoes, or the stone sutra texts found in Fangshan county, Beijing, knows how magnificent Chinese Buddhist artworks can be. The stone sutras were found in the years after the cultural revolution and are more extensive than the Bud-

dhist Canon. Some of the sutras were translated at a later time than those in the Buddhist Canon. Fortunately, they survived in the Fangshan site.

The stone slabs are carved on both sides with each beautiful character the size of a thumb. The entire project took four hundred years to complete, equal in scale to the building of the Great Wall. This recently discovered collection includes tens of thousands of stone slabs stored in seven caves. At present, only two of the caves are open to the public. We were filled with awe and admiration when we saw these stone sutras and could not help but admire our ancestors for having preserved such a legacy for us.

Today, schools and museums are separated. However, the system of Buddhist universities is similar to a combination of school and museum, for the art forms are educational, not just artistic. They exhibit inspiration and wisdom not discernable by average people. For example, when people see the many images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, they conclude that Buddhists worship many deities and therefore Buddhism is a religion and one of low standards at that.

Most people believe that an advanced religion worships only one god. They do not understand that Buddhism is not a religion, that we do not worship the images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas but rather we regard them as teaching aids, which help us to understand the different methods of cultivation. One single image or method is insufficient to represent all phenomena in our world, so Buddhism uses many kinds of artistic works to represent them. Once we have understood the educational significance of Buddhist artistry, we will naturally give rise to admiration and appreciation.

All Buddhas symbolize our virtuous nature. All Bodhisattvas

and Arhats symbolize the virtue of practice. Without the virtue of practice, the innate virtuous nature cannot be revealed. This complementary relationship is why the *gongzhou* [table where images, water, incense and offerings are placed] includes both Buddha and Bodhisattva images. The Buddhas represent original nature and the Bodhisattvas represent the application of this nature and form. This original nature is empty, as it has no set form. All creations or form arise from this original nature and once there is form, there is application. This is why in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, the Buddha does not comment on the teachings, for the original nature that is empty has nothing to say. But the Bodhisattvas do have something to say since they apply the principles.

Not only is the original nature unexplained but also no thought arises from it. The saying that “Whenever I open my mouth I blunder; whenever I have an idea I am wrong.” is said in terms of original nature represented by one Buddha. Why are there two Bodhisattvas to represent application? The infinite and innumerable form and application are divided into two categories; wisdom [understanding] and practice [behavior]. Practice corresponds with understanding. Understanding is the principle and practice is the application.

When we see the image of Buddha Shakyamuni, usually Ananda and Kasyapa, two great Arhats are to his left and right. Buddha Shakyamuni represents our original nature. Ananda, who is foremost in hearing, represents understanding and wisdom. Kasyapa, who is foremost in asceticism, represents practice. We may also see Buddha Vairocana, the wisdom body of Buddha Shakyamuni, with Manjusri Bodhisattva and Samantabhadra Bodhisattva to his left and right. Manjusri Bodhisattva represents

understanding; Samantabhadra Bodhisattva represents practice.

Pure Land Buddhism regards Buddha Amitabha as the original nature with Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva representing compassion and practice, and Mahasthamaprapta Bodhisattva representing wisdom and understanding. Due to these profound meanings, there cannot be two or more Buddhas and three or more Bodhisattvas.

Each Buddha represents a part of the virtuous nature. Every part of it is perfect so “one is all, all is one.” Each name illustrates the virtues. For example, “Shakya” means kindness, teaching us that we need to treat others with kindness and compassion. “Muni” means stillness and purity. The whole meaning of Shakyamuni teaches us to behave toward others with kindness and compassion, to strive for purity of mind for ourselves. This is the meaning of Shakyamuni and is innate to our original nature.

Amitufo is a Sanskrit transliteration. “Amituo” means infinite. “Fo” means Buddha. What is infinite? Everything, infinite wisdom, ability, long life, and so on. But of all infinities, infinite life is the most important for without it all infinities are useless. With it, we can enjoy all other infinities.

How can we gain these infinities? Infinity is none other than our original true nature. Master Huineng said, “True nature is innate; from true nature arises all phenomena in the universe.” In other words, it means infinity. What method do we use to obtain this infinity? We practice the teachings of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva and Mahasthamaprapta Bodhisattva. The former teaches us to be compassionate; the latter teaches us the single-minded concentration of Buddha Amitabha. Mahasthamaprapta Bodhisattva taught us “Concentrate solely on Buddha Amitabha, without ceasing, without intermingling with other methods, and in this way

one will assuredly attain wisdom and enlightenment.”

Adding to this is the compassionate way of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva. Behaving towards others with compassion and chanting only “Namo Amitufo” will enable us to enjoy infinite life. In this way, we will develop our virtuous nature and uncover our infinite merits and virtues. Thus, when we pay respect to the images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, we need to understand that each is representative of a way of cultivation and of the truth of the universe.

The Hall of Heavenly Guardians

Buddhist architecture is also an artistic expression. From the exterior, the main cultivation hall appears to have two stories, but there is only one story inside. The external two stories represent “absolute truth” or the true reality of life and the universe, and “relative truth” or worldly views still clouded with delusion. The interior single story illustrates that both are the same truth. To the deluded, the two appear distinct and different; however, to the enlightened, they are one and the same.

Upon entering a Buddhist center, we first see the Hall of Heavenly Guardians. In the center of the hall is Maitreya Bodhisattva. To his left and right are four heavenly guardians or Dharma protectors. Maitreya Bodhisattva, called the ‘Happy Buddha’, is represented by the image of the historical monk Budai, a manifestation of this Bodhisattva. His big smile says, “Want to learn Buddhism? Be happy and greet all with a smile.” His big stomach symbolizes great tolerance and equality. Only by emulating his generosity, patience, and serenity can we learn and practice Buddhism.” Therefore, Maitreya Bodhisattva sits facing the door tell-

ing all who enter, “only those who can accomplish this are eligible to learn Buddhism.”

Standing beside Maitreya Bodhisattva are the four heavenly guardians or Dharma protectors. They are symbolic guardians of the practitioners of the Buddhist way. Whom do they protect? They protect us by reminding us to educate ourselves and to safeguard the proper knowledge, which we should learn. Each guardian portrays a different aspect of thought or action.

The eastern Dharma protector symbolizes responsibility and safeguards the territory, which means that all of us are responsible for ourselves, our family, society and the country as a whole. How do we fulfill this responsibility? If each of us performs our duties well, fulfilling our obligations, we support each other and ourselves as well. In this way, society will be harmonious and the country will be prosperous and powerful.

The southern Dharma protector symbolizes progress and teaches us diligence. It is not enough to just meet our responsibilities. We need to make progress with each passing day for no progress means we regress. He emphasizes the importance of constantly cultivating and advancing our virtue, conduct, wisdom and ability, and to improve performance in our duties and our standard of living. From this, we can see that Buddhism is progressive, always leading the times.

The western Dharma protector symbolizes comprehensive vision and knowledge gained through exposure to the world. He represents the need to open our eyes to observe nature and humanity, to refine what we see and learn, and to distinguish good from ill. The northern Dharma protector symbolizes comprehensive study and learning. Both teach ways of practice and how to achieve the goals in responsi-

bility fulfillment and self-improvement. As the ancient Chinese have said, “To read ten thousand books and to travel ten-thousand miles.” Reading is the means for accomplishing the fundamental knowledge. Traveling ten thousand miles is to learn from observation. Through travel we see advantages of others and learn from them.

We also see their shortcomings, which can in turn serve as a warning to us so that we constantly improve ourselves. In this way, we can build a prosperous society and a safe country. In doing so, we safeguard the Dharma. So, the images of the Bodhisattvas and Dharma protectors remind us to be diligent in the pursuit of our goals and responsibilities. So, we can see that Buddhism is neither a religion nor superstition.

The four Dharma protectors hold various objects to symbolize different aspects of the Dharma. The eastern Dharma protector of “managing the nation” holds a lute, which symbolizes the principle that we need to refrain from acting with undue haste but should keep to the middle path. It is like playing a lute, if the strings are too loose, it will not play. If they are too tight, they will break. We need to be responsible in our duties and do things in a proper, balanced way.

The southern Dharma protector of growth holds the sword of wisdom that cuts away all troubles and worries. The western Dharma protector holds a dragon or snake that is twining around him. The dragon or snake symbolizes change. Today, everything is constantly changing, only when we can see the truth will we be able to interact with ease and serenity.

The northern Dharma protector holds an umbrella symbolizing protecting us from all the pollution that is around us. While learning, we need to safeguard our pure mind and quiet heart from becoming polluted. Furthermore, we need to understand the true

reality of life and the universe, to have the wisdom and ability to properly interact with all people, and handle matters and objects.

All of this can be learned from visiting the Hall of Heavenly Guardians. If we regard the protectors as deities with magical powers who will protect us if we burn incense, prostrate and offer flowers and fruit praying for protection and safety we will be sadly mistaken. This is superstition. All the facilities, images of Buddha and Bodhisattvas and any offerings made are teaching tools designed to inspire our mind and wisdom. They also serve to remind us of the importance of being enlightened instead of deluded, virtuous instead of deviated, pure instead of polluted. These are the three principles of Buddhist teaching and practice.

Therefore, everything in a Buddhist center serves as a teaching aid. Even the offerings are educational. A container of water symbolizes the Dharma. The water is clean symbolizing that our minds need to be as pure as the water. It is calm without a single ripple, symbolizing the tranquility in our hearts. It is to have purity and equality of mind. Flowers symbolize the cause as the blossoming of flowers results in the bearing of fruit. Flowers symbolize the Six Paramitas. Fruits are not offered to the Buddha or Bodhisattvas to eat. They remind us that if we want the sweet fruit or the good result, we must cultivate and accumulate good deeds, the cause. Thus, everything we see in the way place is a teaching aid. The Buddhas and Bodhisattvas neither smell nor eat, they want for nothing.

We also see lamps, which symbolize wisdom and brightness; incense sticks, which symbolize self-discipline and deep concentration. You will not see anything in the cultivation and lecture halls that do not symbolize some teaching. However, it is a sad loss that many Buddhists are totally ignorant of the educational signifi-

cance of these objects. They do not know why they burn the incense or why they make offerings to the images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Their belief is actually superstition. Some people criticize Buddhists being superstitious. These critics are right. Too many Buddhists are confused about Buddhism.

We need to be clear on what we are learning and explain this to the skeptics and critics, then I believe they will also want to learn. I have introduced Buddhism to people in China in this manner. After hearing my explanation, they said they had been ignorant of such a good thing and wished to learn more.

In conclusion, it is the genuine wisdom and infinite enlightenment in Buddhism that helps all sentient beings obtain true benefits and happiness. The Buddha teaches all beings with his boundless, compassionate heart. Throughout history Buddhist practitioners, whether they be of the Esoteric, Zen, or any other school, have made great achievements following these principles and methods. Today, however, people know very little of the genuine principles and methods, so few have any real achievements.

In our Dharma-Ending Age, people have overwhelming obstacles from their accumulated karma. Under these circumstances, the Buddha Name Chanting method is most effective due to its simplicity and expediency. It neither takes a long time nor requires special rituals. Anyone can practice it any time, any place. This is why so many people have achieved attainment. Taiwan is neither large in population nor size, but in the last forty years, by my most conservative estimate, at least five hundred people have attained birth into the Pure Land to become a Buddha in one lifetime.

To succeed, we accord with teachings in the five Pure Land sutras and one commentary, generate the Bodhi mind and concen-

trate on mindfulness of Buddha Amitabha. The *Awakening of Faith Sastra* stated that, “Enlightenment is innate, delusion is not.” Therefore, we definitely can uncover our innate Buddha nature and proper viewpoints. We definitely can discard what is not innate, our delusion, deviated viewpoints and impurities. Thus, we recite sincerely “Amitufo” to rid ourselves of our negative karmas and habits, to live simply and to practice diligently to attain the Buddha Name Chanting Samadhi. Then, finally we will attain freedom in body and mind, and understand the true reality.

We are free to go whenever we wish. If we choose to remain here for a longer time, that’s all right. Since so many have achieved, why can’t we? We have not sincerely chanted long enough. How long is long enough? According to ancient records, many have achieved after three years. After that, we no longer have any fears. We will feel perfectly safe and our minds will be at ease. If the Third World War were to start today and a nuclear bomb was to explode, we would simply say that it was time to go to the Pure Land. No pain, no fear, true freedom. Then, this is what the *Infinite Life Sutra* stated of “the true benefit given to all sentient beings.”

Adopt whatever teachings and practices are beneficial and effective. There is only one ultimate goal for us; benefiting all sentient beings, helping them free themselves from delusions and sufferings, and enabling them to attain happiness and enlightenment. If badgering or battering works, use it. If gentleness works use it. But be aware that falsehoods, attachments, emotions, and delusions have nothing to do with Buddhism or achieving our goal. I hope everyone will attain the goal of freedom from delusion, attachment and suffering, to attain happiness, tranquility and the perfect complete enlightenment.

The Ten-Recitation Method

This simple, convenient, and effective way to practice Buddha name chanting is especially suitable for those who find that they have little time for cultivation. The chanting helps us to be mindful of Amitabha Buddha. It brings us joy.

We begin when we wake up. Sit up straight and clearly chant “Amitufo” ten times with a calm and focused mind, aloud or silently. We repeat this eight more times during the day, each time chanting “Amitufo” ten times. This chanting can be done by following one of two programs. Please choose the one that is the most suitable for your circumstances.

One program is to chant upon waking up,
before and after breakfast,
before work
before and after lunch,
before and after dinner, and before retiring.

The other program is to chant upon waking up,
before breakfast,
before and after our morning’s work,
before lunch,
before and after our afternoon’s work,
before dinner, and before retiring.

The key is regularity; disruption of this practice will reduce its effectiveness. When we recite consistently without interruption, we will soon feel an increase in our wisdom, serenity, and purity of mind. Diligent practice of this method together with unwavering belief, vows, and living a moral life can ensure fulfillment of our wish to reach the Western Pure Land.

Glossary

affinity. Favorable or unfavorable relationships with others.

affliction. Condition or cause of pain, distress, and suffering which disturbs the body and mind. They can be thoughts of gain or loss, of wanting to control others, of criticism or slander. They might be worries, doubts, regrets, etc.

Alaya Consciousness. Our karma repository, the thought database from all of our past and present lives, good and bad.

Amitabha. The name of the Buddha of the Western Pure Land, primarily meaning Infinite Life and Infinite Light. To help all beings attain Buddhahood, Amitabha Buddha created the Western Pure Land, an ideal place of cultivation. Shakyamuni Buddha, the historical Buddha of our world, explained that people in our age would be immersed in afflictions and bad habits. Due to this, virtually the only hope that we have to transcend our sufferings is to properly practice the Pure Land method and thus be born into the Pure Land.

Amitabha Sutra. One of the three primary Pure Land sutras. The wonders and advantages of the Western Pure Land are due to the merits of Amitabha Buddha and arise from his great vows and great deeds.

attachments. These are strong desires or cravings for family, friends, possessions, sensuous pleasures, erroneous views, life, the idea of the self as an individual, etc.

Bodhi mind. This is the goal of Mahayana Buddhism, to ultimately think of others, to uncover the innate compassion and wisdom of the true nature, and to transcend the cycle of rebirth to attain Buddhahood. The Bodhi Mind is the compassionate mind in which every thought is to attain Supreme Perfect Enlightenment for self and all others.

Bodhisattva. One who has vowed to attain Supreme Perfect Enlighten-

ment for themselves as well as for all beings. While Buddhas symbolize our virtuous nature, Bodhisattvas and Arhats represent the virtue of practice, without which, the innate virtuous nature cannot be revealed.

Buddha. Buddha is a Sanskrit word, meaning “wisdom and enlightenment.” A Buddha is one who has reached supreme perfection both in self-realization and in helping others to attain realization. The innumerable Buddhas are not gods to be worshipped but compassionate and wise beings to be respected and emulated.

causality (also know as cause and effect). Everything that happens to us is the result of what we have thought, said, or done. What we undergo in this lifetime are the consequences of what we had done in our previous lifetimes, while what we do now will determine what we undergo in our future lifetimes.

Constant Mindfulness of Buddha Amitabha. The state in which we do not have discriminatory thoughts and attachments. At this point, the mind remembers the Buddha and does not forget him. After prolonged cultivation, we ceaselessly contemplate the Buddha.

delusion. False beliefs and views, not understanding the true reality.

Dharma. 1) The teachings of the Buddha (generally capitalized in English); 2) things, events, phenomena, everything in the universe; and 3) duty, law, doctrine.

discriminatory thoughts. Discriminatory thoughts and attachments are the root cause of why we are still subject to reincarnation. Discriminatory thoughts occur when we see others and ourselves as two.

dust. All the pollutants that contaminate our true nature. They include form, sound, scent, taste, touch, and views.

enlightenment. Generally means Supreme Perfect Enlightenment, the enlightenment of the Buddhas. It is to see one’s true nature and to comprehend the true reality.

filial piety. Filial piety has profound meanings in Buddhism. It means to take care of parents physically, mentally and to fulfill their wishes. To further extend and enhance our respect and care for our parents, we have compassion for all beings in this world.

Five Human Relationships. These principles taught by Confucius are founded on traditional moral principles. They include those between husbands and wives, parents and children, siblings, friends, political leaders and the public.

Five Practice Guidelines. 1) The Three Conditions; 2) The Six Harmonies; 3) The Three Learnings; 4) The Six Paramitas; and 5) Universal Worthy Bodhisattva's Ten Great Vows.

Five Precepts. The Five Precepts are to not kill, steal (to take what is not given), engage in sexual misconduct, lie, or take intoxicants. The first four offenses are physical transgressions of the true nature. Whether or not we have taken the precepts, it is wrong to commit these acts. For someone who has taken the Five Precepts, this is a double violation. However, to take intoxicants is different. Only someone who has taken the precepts and then takes intoxicants will have broken this precept.

Five Pure Land Sutras and One Treatise. (1) *Buddha Speaks of the Infinite Life Sutra of Adornment, Purity, Equality, and Enlightenment of the Mahayana School (Infinite Life Sutra)*; (2) *Amitabha Sutra*; (3) *Visualization Sutra*; (4) "Universal Worthy Bodhisattva's Conduct and Vows", from the *Avatamsaka Sutra*; (5) "The Perfect Complete Realization of Great Strength Bodhisattva through Buddha Name Recitation" from the *Surangama Sutra*; and (6) the *Rebirth Treatise*.

Forty-Eight Vows. Different Bodhisattvas make different vows. Dharmakara Bodhisattva made forty-eight vows before he became Amitabha Buddha. He wished to create an ideal land for all those who wished to transcend reincarnation within the Six Realms. These beings would be born in the Pure Land as Bodhisattvas who would never regress in their practice. They would learn all the ways to help other beings transcend

birth and death, and to attain Buddhahood. The reason why the Western Pure Land is so outstanding lies in the perfection of these vows.

Four Kindnesses. Triple jewels, parents, teachers, all sentient-beings.

good fortune. All the goodness in one's life. It may manifest as happiness, friends, family, health, longevity, intelligence, prosperity, position, etc. Good fortune is the benefit of the human and heaven realms, and can be carried with us from one life to another but it cannot help us to transcend reincarnation.

Infinite Life Sutra. One of the three primary sutras of the Pure Land School, the *Infinite Life Sutra* is often called the longer Amitabha Sutra. The shorter version is called the *Amitabha Sutra*. The Amitabha Sutras are unusual in that they were self-spoken. Shakyamuni Buddha, knowing that the time was right for this teaching, initiated the teaching himself. This was unusual because almost all of the teachings by the Buddha were the result of a question being raised by one of his students.

karma. A deed. Karma is divided into three types: good, bad, and neutral, that which is neither good nor bad.

Mahayana. One of the two major branches of Buddhism, it is the Bodhisattva path of helping all sentient beings to attain Enlightenment.

merits and virtues. Merits are accumulated by selflessly doing good deeds without wandering and discriminatory thoughts, or attachments, and the correction of our erroneous thoughts and behavior. Virtues arise from deep concentration and wisdom.

One Mind Undisturbed. This is the totally focused mind without any improper thoughts which is the goal in Buddhism. It is the pure mind that Pure Land practitioners achieve by single-minded concentration on "Amitufo."

One True Dharma Realm. The ultimate state of Buddhahood without any differentiation between realms for everything is one. With differentiation, we will see ten realms; Buddhas know there is actually only one.

phenomena. Things, events, happenings: everything in the entire universe. Noumenon is the principle or essence while phenomena is the event or form. Noumenon is perceived through intuition or thought while phenomena is perceived through the senses. Noumenon is the theory as opposed to the phenomena that is reality.

precepts. In Buddhism, precepts are rules that were laid down by Shakyamuni Buddha to guide his students from erroneous thoughts, speech, and behavior. However, one need not be a Buddhist to uphold the Buddhist precepts. In the more general sense, precepts are rules or principles that prescribe a particular course of action or conduct.

pure mind or purity of mind. The mind without wandering and discriminatory thoughts, or attachments. The pure mind has no thoughts of like or dislike, favorable or unfavorable. It has no greed, anger, ignorance, arrogance, doubt, or wrong views. It is the calm mind that is no longer affected by the environment. It is the serene and natural state of all beings.

retribution. Karmic punishment from erroneous thoughts, words, or deeds.

root of Goodness. Good qualities or seeds sown in a good life to be reaped later. The ultimate benefit of deep roots of goodness for Pure Land practitioners is birth in the Western Pure Land.

samadhi. Proper enjoyment. Usually denotes the particular final stage of pure concentration and contemplation. There are many degrees and types of Samadhi.

samsara (also known as the Six Paths). Three upper realms are heavens, demi-gods, and humans. Three lower realms are animals, hungry ghosts, and hells.

Sangha. A group of four or more people who properly practice the Buddha's teaching together, especially the Six Harmonies.

Sanskrit. A language of ancient India.

sentient-being. A living being that is self-aware and that can experience feeling or sensation.

Six Harmonies. The Six Harmonies, the second of our five practice guidelines, are the basis for harmonious interaction whether in the family, the Sangha [group of four or more people who properly practice the teachings], at work, etc. Especially for practitioners, they are: 1) To share the same views and goals, 2) To abide by the same precepts and rules, 3) To live and practice together harmoniously, 4) To accord with others and not quarrel, 5) To experience the inner peace and happiness from practicing the teachings, and 6) To share benefits harmoniously.

Six Paramitas. The fourth of the Practice Guidelines. Bodhisattvas abide by six guidelines that are called the Six Paramitas or Perfections. These teach us how to remedy our major afflictions. Giving, moral self-discipline, patience, diligence, meditative concentration, and wisdom.

six senses. Sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, and thought. External.

sutra. Teaching by the Buddha, initially given verbally, later compiled, and written down by the Buddha's students.

Ten Great Vows of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva. Samantabhadra Bodhisattva personifies the vows and conduct of the Buddhas. He is usually depicted seated on an elephant with six tusks that represent the Six Paramitas that are the fifth of the Practice Guidelines. 1. To respect all Buddhas. 2. To praise the "thus come on." 3. To make offerings extensively. 4. To regret karmic obstacles. 5. To be joyful over others meritorious deeds. 6. To appeal to the buddha to turn the Dharma wheel. 7. To request the buddha to reside in this world. 8. To constantly be a diligent follower of the Buddha's teachings. 9. To accord with all sentient beings. 10. To dedicate all merits.

Ten Virtuous Conducts. The Ten Virtuous Conducts are basic to our practice of Buddhism. The Buddha grouped the Ten Virtuous Conducts into three major categories: physical, verbal, and mental to protect the

three karmas of body, mouth, and mind. Physically, we are prohibited from killing, stealing, and engaging in sexual misconduct. The four verbal virtuous conducts prohibit us from lying, abusive language, bearing tales, and using seductive words. The three mental virtuous conducts prohibit us from having greed, anger, or ignorance.

Theravada Buddhism. The Path of strictly abiding by the precepts. The objective is to attain realization for him/herself. It is often called the path of the elders and is primarily practiced in Southern Asia and the west.

Three Bad Paths. Please see Six Realms.

Three Conditions. The first of the Five Practice Guidelines. The first condition embodies the practice of self-discipline. The second condition embodies the practice of deep concentration, and the third condition embodies the practice of wisdom. The First Condition is to: A) Be filial to one's parents, B) Be respectful to one's teachers and elders, C) Be compassionate and not kill any living beings, and D) Follow the Ten Virtuous Conducts. The Second Condition is to: E) Take the Three Refuges, F) Abide by the precepts, laws and customs, and G) Conduct oneself in a proper and appropriate manner. The Third Condition is to: H) Give rise to the Bodhi mind, I) Deeply believe in the Law of Causality, J) Recite and uphold Mahayana sutras, and K) Encourage others to advance on the path to Enlightenment.

Three Dharma Ages. The Dharma Perfect Age began with Shakyamuni Buddha's demise and lasted five hundred years, during which Enlightenment was often attained. The Dharma Semblance Age began after that and lasted one thousand years, during which Enlightenment was seldom attained. The Dharma Ending Age that we are now in began after that and will last for ten thousand years during which Enlightenment will rarely be attained.

Three Karmas. Created by our body, mouth, and mind.

Threefold Learning. The third of the Practice Guidelines. *Moral self-*

discipline or precepts keeping leads to *deep concentration* that gives rise to *wisdom*. The Threefold Learning is the fourth of our five practice guidelines. To practice according to the teachings is self-discipline; when our minds are settled and focused on one method of cultivation, we will have deep concentration and with deep concentration, we will uncover our innate wisdom

true nature. Our original, true self that we still have, but is which is currently covered by deluded thoughts and evil karma. In essence, since we have the same true nature as Buddhas have, we are equal to the Buddhas. Once we break through our delusion, we will uncover this true nature and attain Supreme Enlightenment.

Visualization Sutra. The third of the primary sutras of the Pure Land School. In the *Visualization Sutra*, we learn that when Queen Vaidehi suffered from overwhelming family misfortune, she bitterly said to Buddha Shakyamuni: “Life is filled with suffering. Is there not a place without it? I wish to live in such a world.” Shakyamuni Buddha displayed for her all the Buddha lands in the universe. After seeing all the worlds, she herself chose the Western Pure Land and vowed to be born into that world. Concerned about those who would come after her and be unable to learn directly from the Buddha, she asked on their behalf how to achieve rebirth into the Pure Land.

wandering thoughts. Afflictions that cloud our true nature. To have no wandering thoughts means to have absolute proper and virtuous thoughts, not that our minds are empty of all thoughts. As ordinary beings, we use an illusory mind, the mind that arises and ceases, and that has wandering thoughts. Enlightened beings use the true mind that constantly dwells on truth. They do not have wandering thoughts but deep concentration, the state without discriminatory wandering thoughts or attachments.

Western Pure Land. The world created by Amitabha Buddha, which is an ideal place of cultivation, for those who are born there are no longer subject to reincarnation.