

Pure Land Buddhism:

Support for the Dying

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Pure Land Learning College
57 West Street, Toowoomba, QLD 4350, Australia
Telephone: 61-7-4637-8765 Fax: 61-7-4637-8765
Email: purelandcollege@iinet.net.au
Website: www.amtb-aus.org

PURE LAND BUDDHISM

The Pure Land school of Mahayana Buddhism is widely practiced in Asia. Though still in its formative years in the West, its roots extend all the way to ancient India.

We generally think in terms of only one Buddha: Sakyamuni, who lived over 2500 years ago. But, since any sentient being can awaken and innumerable numbers have, there are innumerable Buddhas. Sakyamuni Buddha, after his enlightenment, explained that he saw not only his past lifetimes but also how the future would unfold.



Sakyamuni saw people in our time having more afflictions, worries, and wandering thoughts. Our deep-seated bad habits having become even more entrenched over thousands of lifetimes would make liberating ourselves solely by our own efforts almost impossible. He knew that to end one's problems and attain lasting happiness many people would need the help of another Buddha: Amitabha, the Buddha of Infinite Light and Infinite Life.

Almost all of the teachings by Sakyamuni were the result of his being asked a question. In a departure from the norm, and when the time was right, Sakyamuni initiated

the teaching that introduced Amitabha and his pure land. This spontaneous teaching by Sakyamuni is what makes this teaching so special.

In this teaching, Sakyamuni recounted how the bodhisattva Dharmakara, after witnessing the suffering of sentient beings, spent five eons studying all the Buddha lands. Dharmakara then made forty-eight vows, the fulfillment of which would create the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss. He declared that he would not attain Buddhahood unless his vows for a perfect pure land, where all beings would advance along the Buddhist path and never again fall back into suffering, were accomplished. Once these vows were accomplished, Dharmakara Bodhisattva became Amitabha Buddha. He is now speaking the Dharma in his pure land and helping all who are truly sincere in their vows to be reborn there.

With help from Amitabha, we do not have to rely solely on ourselves to attain enlightenment as we would with other methods. In Pure Land Buddhism, we rely on the compassionate Buddhas and bodhisattvas to help us. Thus, reliance on self and on another are combined as we request by way of our mindful chanting that Amitabha Buddha, through the strength of his vows, help us to be reborn in the Pure Land as we breathe our last breath in our present body.

Amitabha also vowed that once we attain this rebirth, we will always progress in our practice and learning. We will be able to continue our practice in the Pure Land, or, when we choose, return to this and other worlds to help others, without being affected by unfavorable environments or our

former bad habits. If we wish, we will be able to do this even before we attain supreme enlightenment.

Due to Amitabha Buddha's merits and virtues, and the goodness of all the beings there, the Pure Land has innumerable wonders and advantages, all of which arise from the great vows, deeds, and purity of all the beings there. Through his vows, Amitabha helps all beings create the causes to plant the roots of goodness. With his deeds, he creates the conditions for beings to accumulate merits. With his purity, he has created a perfect land—one that is free from pollution, anger, and intolerance. It is a land of peace and serenity. It is a world of equality, joy, and beauty. In comparison, our world is one of delusion and suffering, filled with worry and anxiety.

For countless people, Pure Land practice is the most suitable for several reasons. First, it is relatively easy to practice in almost any environment: alone, with other practitioners, or even amid the hustle and bustle of everyday life.

Second, there are no difficult entry-level criteria. Even if one's abilities and knowledge are modest, with belief, vows, and practice, we will be reborn in the Pure Land. Belief means that we need to believe in the Buddhas and their teachings, and in causality. We need to believe in ourselves and that we have the same true nature as a Buddha. We need to believe that by living a moral life and being mindful of Amitabha Buddha we will be born into the Western Pure Land and become a Buddha in one lifetime.

And third, due to the vows of Amitabha, achievement

through this method can be attained more quickly and more easily than with other practices. We can understand this better through an analogy. We come to a river that we wish to cross. We can swim across but our baggage is very heavy and the water is treacherously deep.

Alternatively, we can get on a boat that will quickly and safely take us and our baggage to the other shore. Symbolically, the “other shore” is the achievement of enlightenment. The baggage we carry is our deep-seated bad habits and negative karmas accumulated over uncountable lifetimes, and the boat is Amitabha Buddha’s compassionate will. The ticket to board the boat is belief, the sincere vow to be reborn in the Pure Land, and practice, which includes leading a moral life and mindfully chanting “Amitufo.”



GUIDELINES FOR SPIRITUAL ADVISORS

1. Remind the patient of the suffering of this world and the joys of the Pure Land to help strengthen his or her vow to be reborn into there. The spiritual advisor should also enumerate and praise the patient’s good deeds, merits, and virtues. This will help the patient to be happy and free of doubts,

certain that when the time comes to die, he or she will, thanks to his or her good deeds, vow, and practice, be reborn into the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss.

2. It is important to remind the dying person to cease thinking of wealth and property, as well as attachments to family and friends.

3. If the patient has written a will so much the better, but if not, it is best to counsel against writing one at this time. The advisor can also advise everyone to refrain from gossip and distracting conversations as they could rekindle the patient's attachment to this world, which is detrimental to the patient's desired rebirth.

4. When relatives and friends come to visit, they should be discouraged from becoming emotional in the patient's presence. If they wish to help, they can stand to the side and chant "Amitufo" aloud. Explain to the visitors that crying at this time could distract the patient from the desired rebirth in the Pure Land, and result in the patient being subjected to much suffering.

5. The patient should be counseled to practice generosity and give away personal effects to those who need them. Also, the patient can purchase Buddha images, sutras, and other Buddhist materials, and request that they also be given away. This will help the patient to increase his or her merits and reduce bad karma, thus facilitating a good rebirth.

The good advisor should keep these general guidelines in mind, but be ready to improvise according to the situation.

CONDUCTING SUPPORTIVE BUDDHA NAME CHANTING

Supportive chanting by family members and Dharma friends is crucial when a patient is on the verge of death because, at that time, he or she is weak both mentally and physically. In such trying circumstances, it becomes increasingly difficult to focus on chanting “Amitufo.” This is why Supportive Buddha Name Chanting is so important.



GUIDELINES FOR CONDUCTING SUPPORTIVE BUDDHA NAME CHANTING

1. To help focus the patient’s thoughts, respectfully place a statue or picture of the standing Amitabha Buddha in front of the patient where it can be easily seen. Place a container of clean water in front of this image and some fresh flowers in a vase near it. Lightly scented incense, or even a smokeless variety, may be burned. (A strong fragrance or excessive smoke might cause the patient to have difficulty in breathing.)
2. Those who come to practice supportive chanting should remember that the patient, who is in a weakened state, requires adequate fresh air. If too many people are in the

room at one time, the patient may have difficulty breathing and become agitated, resulting in more harm than good. Also, people should pre-arrange their chanting time and silently take turns, so that the chanting can continue uninterrupted. Each session can last about an hour.

3. According to Master Yin Guang, the thirteenth patriarch of the Pure Land school, the short chanting form of “Amitufo” should be used, so that the patient can easily register this name in the most subtle consciousness, at a time when both mind and body are very weak.

It would be wise to ask the patient which is preferred—“Amitufo” or “Namo Amitufo.” In this way, the patient can comfortably and silently chant along with the group. To go counter to the patient’s likes and habits may destroy his or her concentration. People should not chant too loudly so as not to expend too much energy and shorten the time they can chant. On the other hand, they should not chant in too low a voice or the sound might not register in the patient’s mind. Also, they should not speak to one another while in the room.

Chanting should neither be overly loud or soft, slow or fast. Each utterance should be clear and distinct, so that it can be heard clearly and penetrate deep into the patient’s consciousness. One caveat: if the patient is too weak or is in coma, he may have difficulty hearing the chanting. In such a case, someone should chant close to the patient’s ear to help the patient to maintain a clear, steady mind.

4. With regard to instruments, it is generally better to use the small hand bell with its clear, limpid sound, as it can help the patient develop a pure and calm mind. However, this may not apply in all cases. If possible, it is best to ask the patient in advance what is preferred. If some details do not suit the patient, we should adapt to the circumstances and be flexible.

AFTER THE PATIENT DIES

1. Relatives should not cry in the presence of the patient immediately before and after the death. Doing so can cause the dying patient to develop thoughts of attachment which can prevent the much sought rebirth and resultant liberation.



2. It is vitally important not to touch or move the body of the deceased person. Thus, people should wait at least twelve hours, and preferably twenty-four, before washing and dressing the body.

3. Family and friends should concentrate on chanting in all earnestness and without crying for at least twelve hours. This is to allow the patient's most subtle consciousness adequate time to leave the body. If, during this period, anyone touches the body or cries, the deceased may still experience feelings of pain, sadness,

anger, or self-pity, and sink again into the realms of suffering.

4. During the minimum twelve-hour period (twenty-four hours is preferable), if people can remain chanting near the deceased, so much the better. Except for chanting, nothing should be done.

5. Funeral arrangements should be simple and modest, without unnecessary expenses. Only vegetarian food should be provided for serving meat or fish will burden the departed with more karmic obstacles, making liberation that much more difficult. It is important to remember that even those who have been already been reborn into the Pure Land may still be affected by the behavior of family and friends acting on behalf of the deceased.

LIVING WILL

To my family and all those concerned with my care:

I, _____, of

being of sound mind, make this statement as a directive to be followed if for any reason I become unable to participate in decisions regarding my medical care.

Upon my death and transition into the next life, I do not wish to be reborn into the ghost kingdom or the animal kingdom. I do not wish to suffer. Instead, I wish to follow Amitabha Buddha and to arrive at his Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss. To all my family and friends, I wish to ask for your assistance so that I may not suffer, but

instead remain calm and peaceful to prepare for my arrival to the Western Pure Land.

In the event that I should suffer from a terminal illness to the extent that doctors foresee no possible recovery, I ask that no medical treatment be undertaken. Should I already be in the hospital at this point, I wish to be checked out and brought back home. Please notify my assigned family member or friend _____ at telephone number(s) _____ and _____.

Once home, please position me in the most comfortable, natural position in which I may rest. The assigned family member or friend will lead others in chanting “Amitufo.” Should I decline to the point where I lose consciousness and am no longer aware of my surroundings, the assigned family member or friend shall have full authority in making any decisions regarding my well-being. If this person cannot be contacted, please find a Buddhist master or Buddhist believer to aid in the chanting of “Amitufo” until the assigned person can be reached.

Within twenty-four hours prior to and after my death, I would like to ask my friends and family to comply with the following:

1. Do not touch or move my body or even my bed.
2. Do not change my clothing.
3. Do not place dry ice or other substances on my body. Sandalwood incense may be burned to if there is any odor.

4. Do not let a breeze to blow directly onto my body.

5. Do not allow the scent of alcohol, onion, scallion, garlic, or chives to enter the room.

6. Do not smoke, cry, or talk in the room.

My purpose for asking this is to create an atmosphere in which I may remain calm and at peace. The only sound I wish to hear is “Amitufo,” so that he may escort me to the Pure Land.

If I am at home upon my death, my family should take turns chanting “Amitufo” for eight to twenty-four hours. At this point, I am ready to be moved, washed, and dressed. This period of chanting is the best time to assist me to be calm and peaceful. All funeral arrangements can be set up afterwards. If I should pass away in the hospital, please follow hospital policy and chant as much as is allowed.

During my terminal illness and within forty-nine days after my death, all family members should adopt a vegetarian diet. I do not wish for any killing to be associated with my death. All funeral offerings must be vegetarian. The use of alcohol is strictly prohibited. Funeral arrangements should be kept simple and proper Buddhist etiquette should be followed. I do not wish for any unnecessary excess.

Within forty-nine days following my death, I sincerely ask my family members and friends to seek my rebirth into the Pure Land, and to perform good deeds such as giving offerings to the Three Jewels of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, printing sutras, helping the needy, and so on.

These good deeds will help me to attain additional good karma, and further assist me in arriving at the Pure Land. Most important is for my family to sincerely chant “Amitufo.”

In order for me to benefit the most and to peacefully arrive at the Pure Land, the above points must be followed. This will not only benefit me but all those involved as well. In this manner, I wish for everyone to learn and to believe in Buddhism. Thus, everyone can arrive at the Pure Land, as well.

Amitufo to all.

These directions express my legal right to request or refuse treatment. Therefore, I expect my family, doctor, and all those concerned with my care to regard themselves as legally and morally bound to act in accord with my wishes.

Signed _____

Date _____

Witness: I declare that the person who signed this document, or asked another to sign this document on his or her behalf, did so in my presence and that he or she appears to be of sound mind and free of duress or undue influence.

Witness _____

Date _____