

GOING HOME  
TO THE  
PURE LAND

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## CONTENTS

## Part One

<b>Amitabha Sutra Recitation</b>	1
Introduction	3
I Resolve	6
Morning Verse	8
Purity Verse	9
Praise of the Lotus Pool Assembly	10
Amitabha Sutra	10
Praise to Amitabha Buddha	26
Wish for Rebirth into the Pure Land	27
Repentance Verse	28
Four Great Vows	29
Dedication of Merit	30
Three Refuges	31

## Part Two

<b>Pure Land Buddhism</b>	35
Pure Land Buddhism	37
Chanting	42
Cultivation	44
The Five Guidelines	64
Care of Dharma Materials	81
Visiting a Buddhist Center	82
Buddha-name Chanting Session	85

## Part Three

<b>Death and Dying</b>	89
Guidelines for Spiritual Advisors	91
Living Will	98



Part One

Amitabha Sutra  
Recitation



## ORDER OF PRACTICE SESSION

The following practice session is based on the Amitabha Sutra recitation session that is practiced in many Amitabha Buddhist Societies.

To begin the session, either hold this book up or place it on a table and hold your hands in the *hezang* position. Hands are thus held for the remainder of the session except where indicated during the *Amitabha Sutra* by (  $\wedge$  ) for hezang and (  $\_$  ) for hands at waist level. Now, bow once, do three prostrations, and bow one more time. If you are unable to do prostrations, you can do all bows.

You may now light some incense if you wish. Upon lighting the incense, fan it gently with your hand (do not blow on it) to put out the flame and allow the incense to burn down slowly. Raise the incense and hold it close to your forehead with the incense pointed towards the Buddha. Then, place the incense in the holder.

Next, change the water in the water container. Pour the water into another container for other uses, like drinking or watering plants. Do not drink out of the water container itself. Pour fresh water into the container and return to the gongzhuo. Say the **Purity**

**Verse** while holding the container in both hands with your thumbs and first and second fingers. After completing the verse, raise the container to your forehead, say “Amitufo” ten times and then place the container back on the gongzhuo in front of the incense holder.

Next, read the **Praise of the Lotus Pool Assembly**. After completing the praise, begin to recite the **Amitabha Sutra**. Do not analyze the words. Our goal here is to focus single-mindedly on reciting the text. As Great Master Yinguang said, “Without trying to find the meaning of the sutra, just recite it in one stretch from beginning to end.” The purpose of the recitation is to clear the mind of all wandering thoughts, discriminations, and attachments so that we may attain purity of mind. When our minds become more pure, our understanding will naturally become more profound.

After the sutra, we read the **Praise to Amitabha Buddha** to pay our respects to Amitabha Buddha for his compassionate vows to help all beings. After the praise, we chant “**Amitufo**” for a predetermined length of time. We then vow to attain rebirth in the Western Pure Land by reading the **Wish for Rebirth into the Pure Land**.

Next, we say the **Repentance Verse** to express our

deep regret for having harmed innumerable beings throughout all our lifetimes. We then read the **Four Great Vows** to transform our repentance into vows to help all beings end their suffering.

After that, we read the **Dedication of Merit** to pass on the goodness that has resulted from our chanting to help all beings end suffering and attain lasting happiness. To conclude the session, we read the **Three Refuges**.

The session may be done individually or in a group. If in a group, the bell master begins the praise, sutra, and so on, by saying the first two words. Others then join in. Read through from beginning to end, but do not read the page headings.



## PURITY VERSE

May the tranquility, purity, and impartiality symbolized by this water be attained by all beings.

May they learn of the Western Pure Land, vow to be reborn there, and achieve that rebirth to forever leave suffering behind and attain lasting happiness.

## PRAISE OF THE LOTUS POOL ASSEMBLY

Amidst the sea-vast lotus pool assembly,  
may Amitabha Buddha together with  
Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta,  
sitting on the lotus platforms, lead beings  
to ascend the golden stairway. These sages  
have the great vows to help all beings leave  
the mundane world.

Homage to the sea-vast lotus pool assembly of  
Bodhisattvas and Great Bodhisattvas. (3 times)

## BUDDHA SPEAKS THE AMITABHA SUTRA

(^) Homage to the sea-vast lotus pool  
assembly of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. (3 times)

Bell master: Buddha Speaks

Everyone: The Amitabha Sutra

Thus have I heard: Once Buddha was in the land of Shravasti, in the garden of Jeta and Anathapindika. He was accompanied by twelve hundred and fifty great bhikshus, all of them great Arhats, well known to everyone. Among them were his leading disciples, such figures as the Elders Shariputra, Mahamaudgalyayana, Mahakasyapa, Mahakatyayana, and Mahakausthila, Revata, Suddhipanthaka, Nanda, Ananda, Rahula, Gavampati, Pindola-bharadvaja, Kalodayin, Mahakapphina, Vakula, and Aniruddha...[and others such as these], all great disciples. Also present were the Bodhisattvas-Mahasattvas:

Manjushri, Prince of the Dharma; the Bodhisattva Ajita, the Invincible; the Bodhisattvas Gandhahastin and Nityodyukta, and other such great Bodhisattvas. Also present was Shakra, the king of the gods, along with countless numbers of heavenly beings, making up a great assembly. (—)

At that time Buddha said to the Elder Shariputra: “West of here, past a hundred billion Buddha-lands, there exists a world called Ultimate Bliss. In this land there is a Buddha called Amitabha, who is teaching the Dharma right now.

[Shariputra,] why is this land called Ultimate Bliss? It is called “Ultimate Bliss” because the sentient beings in this land are free from the myriad sufferings common to mankind, and only know every kind of joy.

Furthermore [Shariputra], this land is called “Ultimate Bliss” because it is surrounded by

seven rings of railings, seven layers of netting, and seven rows of trees, all made of the four precious jewels.

Moreover [Shariputra], the Land of Ultimate Bliss has ponds of seven jewels filled with the waters of eight virtues. The bottom of each of the ponds is pure golden sand, and the stepped walkways that lead up from all four sides of each of the ponds are made of gold, silver, lapis lazuli, and crystal. Above the ponds there are towers which are adorned with silver and gold and lapis lazuli and crystal and mother of pearl, red agate and carnelians. In the ponds there are lotus flowers as big as cartwheels: blue ones shining with blue light, yellow ones shining with yellow light, red ones shining with red light, and white ones shining with white light, each emitting a subtle pure fragrance.

[Shariputra,] the Land of Ultimate Bliss is

complete with all these adornments and virtues.

And there is more [Shariputra]—celestial music is constantly playing in this Buddha-land, and the ground is made of pure gold. Heavenly flowers rain down at all hours of the day and night. In the morning the sentient beings of this land fill their robes with multitudes of wondrous flowers and make offerings to hundreds of billions of Buddhas in other worlds. When it is mealtime, they return to their own land...to eat, and [to] circumambulate the teaching assembly.

[Shariputra] the Land of Ultimate Bliss is complete with all these adornments and virtues.

And there is more still [Shariputra]—in this land there are birds of all sorts of wondrous variegated colors: white cranes, peacocks, orioles, egrets, kalavinkas and jivanjivas. All these birds bring forth harmonious songs day and night. Their songs communicate such

Buddhist teachings as the Five Roots, the Five Powers, the Seven Factors of Enlightenment, the Eightfold Path, as well as other teachings. When sentient beings in this land hear the singing of the birds, they become mindful of the Buddha, mindful of the Dharma, mindful of the Sangha.

[Shariputra,] do not think that these birds were born as birds due to karmic retribution for past misdeeds. Why not? In this Buddha-land, the Three Evil...[Paths] of Existence do not exist.

[Shariputra,] in this Buddha-land even the names of the Evil...[Paths] of Existence do not exist, much less the realities. All these birds are the creations of Amitabha Buddha, fashioned in order to sing the sounds of the Dharma.

[Shariputra,] in this Buddha-land there is a slight breeze that stirs the rows of jewel trees

and jewel netting, so that they emit subtle wondrous sounds, like hundreds and thousands of melodies playing all at once. All those who hear these sounds spontaneously become mindful of the Buddha, mindful of the Dharma, and mindful of the Sangha.

[Shariputra,] the Land of Ultimate Bliss is complete with all these adornments and virtues.

What do you think [Shariputra]: why is this Buddha called Amitabha?

[Shariputra,] the light of this Buddha is infinite, and shines on all lands throughout the universe without obstruction. Thus this Buddha is called Amitabha. Also [Shariputra], the life-span of this Buddha and his people is an infinite number of immeasurable eons, and so he is called Amitabha.

[Shariputra,] Amitabha Buddha attained enlightenment ten eons ago.

Moreover [Shariputra], this Buddha has innumerable disciples, all of whom are Arhats, whose numbers are incalculable. Amitabha also has a following of innumerable Bodhisattvas.

[Shariputra,] the Land of Ultimate Bliss is complete with all these adornments and virtues.

[Moreover Shariputra,] none of the sentient beings who are born in the Land of Ultimate Bliss ever fall back into a lower realm. Many among them have only one more lifetime to go before Buddhahood. Their number is incalculable: they can be spoken of as innumerable.

[Shariputra,] when sentient beings hear these teachings, they must take a vow to be born in this land. Why so? So that they can be together with all these Beings of Superior Goodness.

[Shariputra,] one cannot be born in this land

through minor good roots...[good fortune] and causal connections. [Shariputra,] if there are good men or good women who hear of Amitabha Buddha, and recite his name singlemindedly and without confusion, for one day or two days or three days or four days or five days or six days or seven days, then when these people are about to die, Amitabha Buddha and his whole assembly will appear before them. When they are about to die, their minds being unified and not chaotic they will attain rebirth in Amitabha's Land of Ultimate Bliss.

[Shariputra,] I have seen this benefit, and so I speak these words. If sentient beings hear what I say, they must make a vow to be born in that land.

[Shariputra,] right now I am extolling the benefits of the inconceivable virtues of Amitabha Buddha. ( 八 ) In the eastern

direction there are also countless other Buddhas, like Akshobhya Buddha, the Buddha Marks of the Polar Mountain, the Buddha Great Polar Mountain, the Buddha Light of the Polar Mountain, and the Buddha Wondrous Voice. Each of them ... [teaches in his own land with the truthfulness of a Buddha] and covers a whole cosmos, speaking these sincere words: “all of you sentient beings should believe this sutra extolling inconceivable virtues, which all Buddhas protect and keep in mind.”

[Shariputra,] in the worlds of the southern direction there are countless other Buddhas, like the Buddha Lamp of the Sun and Moon, the Buddha Light of Renown, the Buddha Great Blazing Shoulders, the Buddha Lamp of the Polar Mountain, and the Buddha Infinite Vigor. Each of them ... [teaches in his own land with the truthfulness of a Buddha] and

covers a whole cosmos, speaking these sincere words: “all of you sentient beings should believe this sutra extolling inconceivable virtues, which all Buddhas protect and keep in mind.”

[Shariputra,] in the worlds of the western direction there are countless other Buddhas, like the Buddha Infinite Life, the Buddha Innumerable Characteristics, the Buddha Innumerable Banners, the Buddha Great Light, the Buddha Great Illumination, the Buddha Jewel Appearance, and the Buddha Light of Purity. Each of them ... [teaches in his own land with the truthfulness of a Buddha] and covers a whole cosmos, speaking these sincere words: “all of you sentient beings should believe this sutra extolling inconceivable virtues, which all Buddhas protect and keep in mind.”

[Shariputra,] in the worlds of the northern

direction there are countless other Buddhas, like the Buddha Blazing Shoulders, the Buddha Supreme Voice, the Buddha Hard to Injure, the Buddha Born of the Sun, and the Buddha Netted Light. Each of them ... [teaches in his own land with the truthfulness of a Buddha] and covers a whole cosmos, speaking these sincere words: “all of you sentient beings should believe this sutra extolling inconceivable virtues, which all Buddhas protect and keep in mind.”

[Shariputra,] in the worlds of the nadir there are countless other Buddhas, like the Buddha Lion, the Buddha Repute, the Buddha Light, the Buddha Dharma Banner, and the Buddha Upholding the Dharma. Each of them ... [teaches in his own land with the truthfulness of a Buddha] and covers a whole cosmos, speaking these sincere words: “all of you sentient beings should believe this sutra

extolling inconceivable virtues, which all Buddhas protect and keep in mind.”

[Shariputra,] in the worlds of the zenith there are countless other Buddhas, like the Buddha Pure Voice, the Buddha Sojourner King, the Buddha Incense Fragrance, the Buddha Fragrant Light, the Buddha Great Blazing Shoulders, the Buddha Body of Multicolored Jewel Flower Garlands, the Buddha Sala Tree King, the Buddha Precious Flower Virtue, the Buddha Sees All Truths, and the Buddha Like the Polar Mountain. Each of them ... [teaches in his own land with the truthfulness of a Buddha] and covers a whole cosmos, speaking these sincere words: “all of you sentient beings should believe this sutra extolling inconceivable virtues, which all Buddhas protect and keep in mind.” (—)

[Shariputra,] why do you think this is called the sutra that is protected and kept in mind

by all the Buddhas?

[Shariputra,] if there are good men or women who hear this...[sutra], uphold it and hear the names of all these Buddhas, these good men and women will be protected and kept in mind by all the Buddhas, and will not retrogress along the path of Supreme, Perfect Enlightenment. Therefore [Shariputra,] all of you should faithfully accept what I say and what all the Buddhas have said.

[Shariputra,] all those who have vowed, or are vowing, or will vow to be born in the land of Amitabha Buddha reach the level where they do not retrogress from Supreme, Perfect Enlightenment. They are already born, are now being born, or will be born in that land. Therefore, [Shariputra,] all good men and women, if they have faith, must make a vow to be born in that land.

[Shariputra,] just as I am now extolling the

inconceivable virtues of all the Buddhas, all those Buddhas are likewise extolling my inconceivable virtues, with these words: ( 〽 ) “Sakyamuni Buddha ( 〽 ) is able to carry out a most difficult and rare task. In the Saha World, the World of Endurance, in an evil world of the Five Corruptions—the corruption of the age, the corruption of views, the corruption of afflictions, the corruption of sentient beings, and the corruption of life—he is able to achieve Supreme, Perfect Enlightenment, and to expound the Pure Land teaching, which all beings in all worlds find hard to believe.”

[Shariputra,] know then that in the midst of this evil world of the Five Corruptions, I am able to carry out this difficult task, attain Supreme, Perfect Enlightenment, and expound the Pure Land teaching, which is so hard for beings in all worlds to believe. This is

indeed most difficult!

When Buddha finished...[teaching this sutra],  
Shariputra and all the monks, gods, humans,  
asuras and others who had been listening,  
having heard what the Buddha said, rejoiced  
and faithfully accepted it. They all bowed in  
homage and departed.

Amitabha Sutra spoken by Buddha

Uproot all Karmic Hindrances for Rebirth  
into the Pure Land Dharani

NA MO AH MEE DOH POH YEH

DOH TOH CHAY DOH YEH

DOH DEE YEH TOH

AH MEE LEE DOH POH PEE

AH MEE LEE DOH SHEE DAN POH PEE

AH MEE LEE DOH PEE CHIA LANG DEE

AH MEE LEE DOH PEE CHIA LANG DOH

CHAY MEE NEE CHAY CHAY NAH

CHIH DOH CHIA LEE SO POH HO

(Dharani 3 times)

## PRAISE TO AMITABHA BUDDHA

Amitabha Buddha, all in golden color,  
with form, features and radiance unequalled,  
white curls winding like the five Sumeru  
Mountains, and purple eyes as clear as the  
four great seas.

In his aura are transformed Buddhas in  
countless millions, and transformed  
Bodhisattvas, also, in limitless number;  
forty-eight vows he made to enlighten sentient  
beings and to enable all nine grades to reach the  
other shore.

Homage to the most compassionate one of the  
Western Paradise, Amita Buddha.

**Amitufofo** (Chant as time allows)

## WISH FOR REBIRTH IN THE PURE LAND

We wish to be born in the Western Pure Land with lotus blossoms, in nine orders, as parents. When the lotus blossoms fully, we shall see the Buddha and be enlightened with the absolute truth, with never-retrogressive Bodhisattvas as companions.

## REPENTANCE VERSE

All evil actions committed by me  
since time immemorial,  
stemming from greed, anger, and ignorance,  
arising from body, speech, and mind,  
I deeply repent having committed.

## FOUR GREAT VOWS

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.

## DEDICATION OF MERIT

May the merits and virtues accrued from this practice adorn the Buddha's Pure Land, repay the Four Kinds of Kindness above, and relieve the suffering of those in the Three Paths below.

May all those who see and hear of this bring forth the heart of understanding and compassion, and at the end of this life be born together in the land of Ultimate Bliss.

## THREE REFUGES

To the Buddha I return and rely, returning  
from delusions and relying upon awareness and  
understanding.

(One prostration)

To the Dharma I return and rely, returning  
from erroneous views and relying upon proper  
views and understanding.

(One prostration)

To the Sangha I return and rely, returning  
from pollution and disharmony, and relying  
upon purity of mind and the Six Harmonies.

(Three prostrations and one bow)

## Terms Used

bow: a bow from the waist with hands in hezang  
hezang: hands together and held in front of chest at level of one's heart  
gongzhuo: a table upon which is placed a Buddha image, container of water, incense, flowers, etc.  
prostration: a full bow to the floor

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For the sake of layout and ease in chanting rapidly in a group, we have taken the liberty of removing the quote marks around each of the names of the Buddhas of the six directions.

We also thank the Sutra Translation Committee of the United States and Canada for their translation of the "Praise to Amitabha Buddha" and "Wish for Rebirth into the Pure Land," both of which are from the *Buddhist Liturgy*, Second Edition, 1993.





Part Two

Pure Land

Principles and Practice



## PURE LAND BUDDHISM

With the wish to help all beings,  
may all my thoughts, words,  
and actions be void of attachment and ego.  
May they arise from compassion and wisdom.  
May they be imbued with patience and joy.

Once, the Buddha was asked if he was a god. The Buddha replied that no, he was not a god. Then was he an angel? No. A spirit? No. Then what was he? The Buddha replied that he was awakened. Since the Buddha, by his own assertion, is not a god, we do not worship him. We respect and are grateful to him for teaching us many different methods to help us find the way to be liberated from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, and like him, to become perfectly enlightened.

One of the methods the Buddha taught is Pure Land Buddhism. Though still in its formative years in the West, Pure Land Buddhism is widely practiced in Asia and its roots extend all the way to ancient India.

We generally think in terms of only one Buddha:

Sakyamuni, who lived about 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 knowing 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 (an incredibly long period of time) 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 samsara, 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 his 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 his 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 before we attain supreme enlightenment.

Due to Amitabha Buddha's merits and virtues, and the goodness of all the beings there, his 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 anger, and intolerance. It is a land of peace, serenity, and equality. In comparison, our world is one of delusion and suffering, filled with worry

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 the 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.”

## CHANTING

The simplest way to practice Pure Land is by chanting “Amitufo,” which is Amitabha Buddha in Chinese. It does not matter whether we chant in Chinese or any other language as long as we do it properly. When we chant, the sound of “Amitufo” arises in our minds. And as we utter “Amitufo,” our minds concentrate on and embrace that sound. While chanting, do so sincerely and continuously.

As one keeps chanting and the mind focuses on the sound of “Amitufo,” errant thoughts are replaced with pure thoughts. In this way, we also create less negative karma. After Amitabha Buddha has been in our mind continuously for a long time, our true nature—our Buddha-nature—will gradually be uncovered.

It is similar to a child remembering a dearly loved one: a mother, father, or someone else. The dearly loved one is always with him, always in his heart. Likewise, he is always in the dearly loved one's heart—and never forgotten. In a similar way, Amitabha is always thinking of us, waiting for us to reach out to him so that he may respond to us.

Amitabha Buddha is the wise and compassionate teacher who understands everything, and who is always thinking of us, lifetime after lifetime after lifetime. We are the students who are trying to learn and to practice. Just as a good teacher listens to the calls for help from a student looking for the right answers, if we have unwavering belief, vow to be reborn in the Pure Land, and sincerely practice, Amitabha will respond. All we have to do is chant his name mindfully.

When we chant to the point of single-mindedness with the sole thought of “Amitufo,” we successfully form a connection with him—in fact, we become one with him. In that instant we are in the Pure Land—far to the west and deep within us. As we breathe our last breath in this world, if we can form this connection, form this oneness with “Amitufo,” we will attain our next rebirth in the Western Pure Land and leave suffering behind. And once there, we will have all the time we need to continue our practice and learning, for we will be in the company of Amitabha Buddha and all the bodhisattvas. They will help us learn all the ways to wisely and compassionately help other beings.

## CULTIVATION

Our practice of chanting “Amitufo” can be done anywhere anytime. But if we wish to have a special place for practice in our home, we first need to decide where we would like it to be. A separate room is ideal, but when this is not possible a quiet and comfortable spot will do just as well. It is also advisable to choose a set time in the day, perhaps early in the morning when the mind is still relatively calm or at night as you are winding down from a long day and wish to let go of anything that is troubling you.

When setting up your *gongzhuo* (the table where you place the Buddha image, incense, and other practice aids), place only objects that relate to your practice on it, not everyday objects. Apart from creating a respectful atmosphere, this will be beneficial to your concentration. You can use a bookshelf if space is limited; however, it is best to not place objects other than Dharma materials or books above this shelf. If the *gongzhuo* needs to be placed in your bedroom, do not place it at the foot but rather to the side of the bed.

A simple arrangement would be to place a statue or picture of Amitabha Buddha alone or accompanied by two bodhisattvas on the gongzhuo with a clean container of water in front of Amitabha. Looking at the image of Amitabha, you would place Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva on the right side and Mahasthamaprapta Bodhisattva on the left side. If you have difficulty in obtaining an image, you can contact one of the societies listed at the back of this book to request a picture. If it is not possible to obtain a statue or other images, you may simply write “Amitabha Buddha” on a piece of paper and place it behind the container of water.

If you are in a situation where even this is not possible, just focus quietly on your practice. Motivation is what is important. A sincere wish to chant, to improve oneself, and to help others, is the most important requirement for practice.

## Symbolism and Use

The image of the Buddha symbolizes our true nature, the same nature as that of all Buddhas. The images of the bodhisattvas symbolize understanding and

practice. Mahasthamaprapta, also known as Great Power Arrived Bodhisattva, symbolizes wisdom and Avalokitesvara, also known as Great Compassion Bodhisattva, symbolizes compassion. Wisdom and compassion are complementary and need to be used together.

If using a statue you can place it on a stand or box to elevate it above the other objects. The statue and bodhisattva images are placed at the back of the gongzhuo to form the focal point.

Water represents purity and stillness. Our minds need to be as pure and calm as water as well as void of greed, anger, and ignorance. This will enable us to interact with others and situations with a serene and nondiscriminatory mind, which viewing everything impartially, reflects everything clearly but non-judgmentally, like a mirror.

When setting up your gongzhuo, use a new cup or glass for the water. Try to use a clear glass container, as seeing the water will remind you of what it symbolizes. Place the container in the center of the gongzhuo and change the water regularly. The traditional time to change the water is in the morning. If this does not fit into your morning

routine, you can instead change the water when you do your daily chanting.

Incense symbolizes self-discipline and training which will awaken our wisdom and compassion. When lit, the incense is transformed from something hard and unyielding into the fragrance of the Dharma, the truth that teaches us how to end suffering and thus find lasting happiness. Place the incense holder in front of the water.

Flowers represent causality. Our every thought, word, and deed are causes that will bear results. If we wish to have good results we must first plant the seed to create the cause. Also, flowers can serve to remind us of impermanence for as beautiful as flowers are, their beauty is short-lived. Nothing lasts forever. Everything is impermanent.

Flowers may be placed at the foot of the Buddha image or to the side. A potted plant or silk flowers can be used instead of cut flowers. Change them when they are no longer suitable for the gongzhuo.

Candles symbolize wisdom and brightness illuminating the darkness of ignorance, just as a single lit candle can illuminate a room that has been dark for thousands of years. The candle also represents the act

of giving as it gives of itself so that others may see.

A pair of candles may be placed on both sides of the gongzhuo arrangement. For safety, you may use lamps instead of candles. Also, there are small battery-operated candles that serve as a safe, yet fitting, alternative to candles.

## Forms of Practice

To begin our practice, we put our hands together, palm to palm in front of our heart. Fingers are also placed together without any space between them. Eyes are focused on the tips of the middle fingers. Elbows are slightly bent. The head is tilted slightly down. This movement is used to express respect and is called *hezang* in Chinese. Besides being used to symbolize the mind without wandering thoughts, it is also used to express the oneness of the true nature.

It is traditional to begin practice with a simple ceremony that includes bowing to the Buddha. Bowing, also called prostrating, is our way of showing respect and can serve to purify the three karmas of body, speech, and mind when it is combined with chanting. Since this practice can be

difficult physically for people who are unaccustomed to the movements, it is acceptable to do a standing half bow instead of a full bow to the floor.

When ready to begin a practice session, do a half bow, three full bows, and a half bow. Both forms will be explained in detail in following sections. With this bowing, we pay respect to the Buddha and mentally prepare to begin our chanting. Having done this, we may next light an incense stick if conditions allow, and then take up our position.

### Sitting

Assume a comfortable position on a meditation cushion or stool, or on a chair. Use a cushion, either on the floor or your chair, that is slanted so the back is slightly higher than the front of the cushion. This will incline your pelvis forward and provide better support. When sitting on the floor with a cushion, you may do so in a full or partial lotus position, or you may cross your legs. If this position is painful, it may be more comfortable to use a meditation stool or higher cushion. Sitting on the stool and placing one's legs under it in a simulated kneeling position is

the usual position. If sitting on a chair, place both the soles of both feet on the floor about a foot apart.

To sit in a lotus position, sit on the cushion and try to place the top of your left foot on your right thigh. Next, place your right foot on your left thigh to form a stable seat. The back and shoulders should be erect but relaxed. If this is too difficult, as it is for many people, try the half lotus position, in which you raise only one foot onto a thigh, and rest the other under the opposite thigh. Or sit cross-legged. Please remember that it is not necessary to force yourself to sit in an unfamiliar position that is too physically demanding.

Try to determine whether your discomfort is simply the result of sitting still in a different position from what you are used to, or due to taking up a position that is just too difficult or painful. It is more important to focus on subduing our pointless, wandering thoughts than on subduing bodies that are not used to sitting in unfamiliar ways.

Hold your hands on your lap with the back of the right hand resting on the palm of the left hand, and with thumb tips slightly raised and lightly touching. Eyes may be lightly closed or slightly open. If you

feel drowsy when your eyes are closed, open them slightly. Posture is very important, so sit upright comfortably without slumping or leaning forward. Hold the head at a slight downward tilt with the chin pulled in just a little. In this position, begin chanting “Amitufo” aloud or silently.

Breathe in through the nose, pulling the air down into the deepest part of the lungs while distending the diaphragm and then slowly breathe out through the nose. Breathing should be natural. Try to use your diaphragm to pull the air deeper into your lungs instead of breathing shallowly. In silent chanting, the tip of the tongue lightly touches the back of the upper teeth, and teeth and lips are held as usual. Shoulders are level and elbows are held slightly away from your sides.

If you are not yet accustomed to such practice and experience discomfort such as leg cramps, slowly move your legs into a position in which you are more comfortable. It is best to keep initial sessions short: ten to fifteen minutes. Sessions may be gradually lengthened as you become more used to the practice. It is better to do a short period of chanting than not do it at all. You may use walking or bowing to calm

both mind and body before you begin your sitting. Continue your chanting as you vary the physical forms of practice.

## Walking

We can practice walking indoors or outdoors. This practice is excellent for mindfulness as well as for calming down both mind and body. We are usually so wrapped up in rushing from one place to another that before we can sit quietly we need to gently slow ourselves down. Thus, it is often helpful to begin a longer chanting session with walking because this helps to make the transition from hurried everyday activities to our practice.

Unlike our usual walking as a means to get from one place to another, often quickly and without any real sense of where we are, our practice of walking while chanting is slow and deliberate. While we do not become absorbed in our surroundings, we do remain aware of where we are and what is happening around us. Ideally, we remain alert but are not distracted by activities around us.

If your area for walking is large enough, you can

walk in a circle. While walking slowly, be aware of lifting and placing your feet upon the floor or the earth. Instead of the usual hurried impact on the surface we are walking on, the foot should gently touch it. Keep body movements smooth and lithe, as with tai chi movements. During this practice, hands are held at slightly lower than waist level in front of us, with the back of the right hand resting on the palm of the left and with our thumb tips lightly touching. Walk clockwise, as this has been the custom since the time of the Buddha.

There are two basic forms of our walking. In the faster form, lift your right foot off the floor, or ground, and move it forward and place it on the floor as you chant “A” (pronounced as “ah”). Then repeat the movement with your left foot as you chant “mi” (pronounced as “me”). Step again on your right foot as you chant “tuo” (pronounced as “tuaw”) and then on the left foot on “fo” (pronounced as “faw”). In the slower method, step on your right foot as you chant “A” and slowly shift your weight from your heel to your toes as you chant “mi.” Then step on your left foot on “tuo” and slowly shift your weight from your heel to your toes as you chant “fo.”

In both forms, all movements should be deliberate and careful. While we usually step on the right foot first people at other centers might step on the left, so if you attend different centers you will need to see how they do their walking meditation.

During the walking, our chanting may be done aloud or silently to ourselves. Whether aloud or silent, listen to and focus on the sound of your chanting. Walking may be used to break up longer periods of sitting or as the sole form of practice. During retreats or regular chanting sessions, some centers use walking meditation more often since it effectively counters the drowsiness and stiffness that can arise from prolonged periods of sitting.

### Prostrating

We bow not to worship but to pay our respects to the Buddha for teaching us, to recognize the Buddha-nature that is in him and in all beings, and to practice humility by touching the floor with our head.

If we are focused and sincere in what we are doing, we will be cleansing the three karmas of body,

speech, and mind. For example, as we bow, our body will be moving as we chant, and with each bow, we will purify some of our negative karma we had created through our former actions. As we think “Amitufo,” we will purify some of our evil karma created by our past thoughts. As we chant “Amitufo,” we will purify some of our past harmful speech. In our chanting, we pronounce each syllable clearly and distinctly so that we hear the chant whether it is voiced or silent. Regardless of whether we chant when walking, sitting, or bowing, our focusing on the Buddha’s name will decrease our everyday worries. Eventually, they will be eliminated.

To begin bowing, stand with your feet pointing slightly outward in a “V” and your heels a few inches apart. Place your hands in the hezang position, look down at the tips of your middle fingers, and slightly tilt your head down. Keeping your neck straight, slowly bend forward until you have bent over almost forty degrees. Then, bend at the knees and, while holding your left hand in the same position at chest level, move your right hand toward the floor so that it will support you as your bending knees complete lowering you to the ground.

When your right hand touches the ground bring the left hand to the ground as well, but about six inches ahead of the right. Be sure to place both hands on the floor so they will be in front of your head when it touches the floor. With this support of both hands on the ground, continue bending your knees to the ground until your knees are on the floor. Your right hand should be just in front and slightly outside the edge of the right knee, and the left hand still ahead of the right. For those with problems in the wrist or joints, or who feel unsteady due to physical conditions you may place both hands down at the same time to form a better support.

Next, flex your feet so that the tops of your feet are resting on the floor and your toes are almost touching each other. Your lower legs and feet will now be resting on the floor and your buttocks will be resting on your legs.

Move your right hand to a position level with your left and angle your hands towards each other so your lower arms and hands form an inverted “V” without the hands touching one another and with your palms down. Continue lowering your upper body until your forehead touches the floor. At this point, slowly and

supplely make a loose fist with each hand and then turn your hands over so they are palms up with fingers very gently curled. Position your hands as if offering to hold the Buddha with your hands. This is the final position in the full bow. Your forehead, forearms, knees, lower legs, and feet will now be resting on the floor. Keep your slightly curved back parallel to the floor. Do not push your stomach down thereby pulling the middle of your backbone down; keep the back gently curved.

To raise yourself, repeat the bow in reverse order. Slowly turn the hands so they are palms down. Change the position of your feet so your toes are on the ground and your feet are ready to support you as you rise. Then pull your right hand towards your body a foot or so and this will help to straighten and raise your trunk. If needed, pull your left hand towards your body until it is more level with your right hand then using both hands push yourself up. Continue rising and straightening up until you are again standing upright with palms together at chest level.

Begin with only a few bows, bowing slowly and gently while being mindful of your movements, and

gradually increase the number you do. If possible, do this practice while a chanting machine or CD is playing. You may remain in the full bow position for several seconds until you begin to rise.

### Dedication of Merits

Upon completion of our chanting, we formally dedicate our merits to being born into the Pure Land by reciting the following:

May the merits and virtues accrued from this  
practice adorn the Buddha's Pure Land,  
repay the Four Kinds of Kindness above,  
and relieve the sufferings of those  
in the Three Paths below.

May those who see and hear of this,  
bring forth the heart  
of understanding and compassion and,  
at the end of this life,  
be born together in the Land of Ultimate Bliss.

The Four Kinds of Kindness are the Three Jewels of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha; parents; teachers; and all beings. At the initial level of understanding, the “Three Paths below” are those of animals, hungry ghosts, and hell dwellers. In the cycle of rebirth, these three are below those of humans, asuras, and heavenly beings.

But at a higher level of understanding, the Three Paths can be viewed as the Realm of Desire (our world), the Realm of Form (where the lesser deities dwell), and the Realm of Formlessness (where the higher deities dwell). Until one transcends the cycle of rebirth, one is still bound to rebirth within the hell, hungry ghost, animal, human, asura, and heavenly paths. Yes, even for those in the heavenly realms, where existence is truly wonderful, such existence will one day end and suffering will return.

## Nianju

Another method for practice is to use *nianju*, or mala. These are worn around the wrist. In this method, we recite “Amitufo” once as we gently move each bead towards us with our thumb. As we

practice, our thoughts will initially be on the beads, but gradually we will be able to focus more firmly on our chanting. This method is particularly helpful during the day when we can find some time to chant, especially when we wish to return to the sense of serenity that our chanting brings, or when we encounter stressful situations, and so on.

Nianju come in single wrist lengths of varying numbers of beads or a longer length of 108 beads. This longer nianju will usually have three smaller beads evenly spaced along the string, and one “mother” bead. The three smaller beads, usually of a different color, symbolize the following: the Buddha, who represents awakening; the Dharma, which represents proper views and understanding; and the Sangha, which represents harmony and purity of mind.

Nianju beads are often made from the seeds, wood, or root of a Bodhi tree, or from other natural materials like gemstones or different types of wood. Natural materials like wood and seeds darken and develop a beautiful luster as we practice.

If the mother bead of your nianju has a Buddha image, do not use it for your chanting. Stop at the

bead before it and reverse direction so you are moving in the opposite direction. In the Pure Land tradition, most nianju do not have a Buddha image, so we continue our chanting and pass the mother bead in the same manner as the other beads.

### Audio Aids

Many practitioners like to use a chanting machine, which is a small plastic box that contains a computer chip. The chip continuously plays chanting music and allows us to always have the chanting with us. Although we may not consciously focus on the sound of the chanting, the machine serves as an excellent aid to keep the sound at least on a lower level of awareness, ready to rise to our consciousness whenever we wish.

CDs are a very good alternative and the contents can be transferred easily to MP3 players. CDs may be requested from Amitabha Buddhist societies and Pure Land Learning Centers. Chant MP3s can also be downloaded from [www.amitabha-gallery.org](http://www.amitabha-gallery.org)

## 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 throughout the day. Each time we chant “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.

## THE FIVE GUIDELINES

The Five Guidelines form the foundation and are the way we progress in our practice. They are first, the Three Conditions; second, the Six Harmonies; third, the Threefold Learning; fourth, the Six Paramitas; and fifth, the Ten Great Vows. We begin our practice with the first guideline of the Three Conditions and gradually progress from there.

Master Chin Kung extracted these guidelines from the five Pure Land sutras, which consist of three sutras, two chapters from sutras, and one treatise. The Pure Land sutras and treatise are:

1. *The Infinite Life Sutra*
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” from the *Sburangama Sutra*
6. *The Rebirth Treatise*

## The Three Conditions

In the beginning of the *Visualization Sutra*, Queen Vaidehi, having encountered overwhelming family misfortunes and having thus truly experienced suffering, entreated Sakyamuni Buddha, “The world is filled with suffering. Isn’t there a better place, a world without evil? I wish to be reborn there.” Through his transcendental powers, the Buddha compassionately displayed all the Buddha Lands in the ten quarters of the universe for her to observe and choose from.

As Sakyamuni Buddha expected, she chose Amitabha Buddha’s Western Pure Land, also known as the Land of Ultimate Bliss, and requested Sakyamuni Buddha to teach her how to attain rebirth there.

Before the Buddha started on the required practices for rebirth, he taught her to practice the Three Conditions, explaining that they were “the true causes of pure activities of all Buddhas of the three time periods.” This important statement tells us that all Buddhas of the three time periods of the past, the present, and the future, rely on the Three

Conditions as the foundation for their cultivation and attainment of Buddhahood.

The First Condition is:

1. Be filial to and care for one's parents
2. Be respectful to and serve teachers
3. Be compassionate and not kill any living beings
4. Cultivate the Ten Virtuous Karmas.  
Physically, we are to refrain from killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct. Verbally, we are to refrain from false speech, harsh speech, divisive speech, and enticing speech. Mentally, we are to refrain from giving rise to greed, anger, and ignorance.

The Second Condition is:

5. Take the Three Refuges
6. Abide by the precepts
7. Behave in a dignified, appropriate manner

The Third Condition is:

8. Generate the Bodhi mind
9. Believe deeply in causality
10. Study and chant the Mahayana sutras
11. Encourage others to advance on the path to enlightenment

## The Six Harmonies

The Six Harmonies are guidelines that will enable us to get along in a sangha, which is the Buddhist community of four or more people, monastic or lay, who practice the teachings together. The Six Harmonies are:

1. Harmony in having the same viewpoints
2. Harmony in observing the same precepts
3. Harmony in living together
4. Harmony in speaking without conflict
5. Harmony in experiencing Dharma bliss
6. Harmony in sharing benefits

First is harmony in having the same viewpoints, which means establishing consensus in a group. The group members must uphold the same principles and methods that they are studying and practicing for harmonious group cultivation. If we want a stable society, everyone needs to get along with one another. Only harmony can gradually draw together and eventually minimize the differences in our opinions, ideas, and ways of life. Then equality can be achieved, and finally, happiness.

Second is harmony in observing the same precepts. When we live and practice together, we need to have rules, or else there will be disorder. The rules include the precepts set by the Buddha, which vary depending on whether it is a lay or a monastic sangha. The fundamental precepts are the five precepts for a lay sangha, and the monk or nun precepts for a monastic sangha. In addition to the Buddhist precepts, laws and local customs are also to be observed.

Third is harmony in living together as a group. The purpose of establishing a cultivation center is to help every participant in the group succeed in their practice. Living together in a group, practitioners can support each other.

Fourth is harmony in speaking without conflict. By reducing, and ideally eliminating, disputes, people will be better able to focus on their cultivation. People who talk too much often create problems for themselves. Misunderstandings can arise as the listener takes to heart a careless remark of the speaker. Thus, a careless speaker unknowingly incurs many enmities, which give rise to future retaliation. This is why it is best to "Talk less; chant the

Buddha's name more." The less we speak, the fewer problems we will have. It is best that we speak only when necessary.

Fifth is harmony in experiencing Dharma bliss. When we learn and practice a Dharma Door, the basic achievement that we should attain is happiness. If we feel unhappy in our practice, then we have encountered a serious problem. This problem lies not in the Buddha's teachings, but in the way we practice. We may either have done something that goes against the principles of the teachings or applied the principles incorrectly. Otherwise, the results would gradually become apparent as we lessen our suffering. With each passing day, we would enjoy greater happiness and freedom. This shows that we are progressing in our practice. If we are not achieving this, we need to reflect, find our mistakes, and then correct them. We can then thus truly benefit from our practice.

Sixth is harmony in sharing benefits. In the sangha, everything is shared fairly and whenever possible, equally. In this way, everyone's basic needs will be met. Special needs are also to be considered. Understanding that everything in the sangha is an offering, nothing

should be wasted. This will insure that future needs will also be met.

## The Threefold Learning

The third of the Five Guidelines is the Threefold Learning. To counteract the problems of the people in our world and age, the Buddha taught:

1. Moral self-discipline
2. Meditative concentration
3. Innate wisdom

Moral discipline counteracts our habits for wrongdoing. Meditative concentration counteracts the tendency of our minds to wander and have scattered thoughts. Wisdom counteracts ignorance, our wrong views and knowledge, and our lack of correct knowledge.

We begin with moral self-discipline, with training. On a basic level, we abstain from killing; from stealing; from sexual, or sensual, misconduct; from lying; and from the taking of intoxicants. On a broader basis, we behave in a moral and ethical way in everything we do.

By not killing, we will revere all life, and have compassion and respect for all sentient beings. By our

very existence, we are taking lives. As we walk, we step on insects. To produce the food we eat and the water we drink, millions of other animal and microbiological lives are destroyed. We cannot stop eating or drinking water, but we can make certain we do not waste anything. Understanding our impact on others, we can use what we need, but no more than that.

Not killing also has a more subtle aspect: We should not kill the seeds of goodness in others or harm another emotionally. While our thoughts and actions can be damaging to others, it is our speech that all too easily commits this offense. Our careless, sarcastic, or angry words can deeply wound a child, a loved one, a friend. We need to use our speech wisely and speak from the heart that wishes to help others.

By not stealing, we will respect the property of others and not take or use anything without permission of the owner. This seems simple enough, but this training also means that we do not take that book which is lying unclaimed in a restaurant. Neither do we keep the extra dollar that the clerk mistakenly gave to us nor do we take things from where we work for personal use.

By not committing sexual, or sensual, misconduct, we do not indulge in sensual pleasures, understanding that to do so not only increases our attachments and cravings, but our suffering as well.

By not lying, we speak truthfully, understanding the power that our words can have. We choose our words wisely realizing that great harm can result from ill-considered, untruthful speech.

By not taking intoxicants, we do not take substances that affect our ability to think and behave clearly at all times, and that harm our bodies. Remaining clear-headed helps us to not harm others or ourselves.

Next is meditative concentration. In meditative concentration, we focus our attention on whatever we choose. There are no distractions or worries, no doubts or drowsiness, no discriminations or attachments: We remain unaffected by our environment and maintain a calm, undisturbed mind. Initially, this state will bring joy and a sense of ease. Eventually, it will enable us to see things as they truly are.

In everyday life, we can concentrate on whatever we are doing. We will be aware of what is happening around us but we will not be distracted or disturbed

by it. In daily life, we can practice meditative concentration in everything we do: whether we are working, watering the garden, or driving our car. We choose the object or activity of our attention and then remain focused on it.

We also strive to attain meditative concentration in our Buddhist practice. The practice of concentrating on “Amitufo” will help us to become one with perfect compassion, perfect happiness, and perfect peace. No longer will we feel that we need to attain perfection on our own as we realize that we are already one with that which is perfect.

Third is intuitive wisdom. Intuitive wisdom is not an intellectual pursuit nor is it a measure of academic intelligence. It is knowing and understanding, and it arises from within us when our minds are clear and calm.

## The Six Paramitas

To interact successfully with others, the Buddha taught us the Six Paramitas, or Perfections. The fourth of the Five Guidelines, the paramitas are the practices of bodhisattvas. The Six Paramitas are:

1. Giving
2. Precept observation
3. Patience
4. Diligence
5. Meditative concentration
6. Wisdom

The first paramita is giving. Giving counters greed, and ensures that in the future we will have ample resources to continue helping others. The underlying meaning of giving is letting go.

There are three major kinds of giving. The first is the giving of wealth, be it material resources or our time and energy. When our giving becomes increasingly unconditional, we will begin to feel more liberated spiritually. The more we give away, the fewer possessions we have to worry about. Soon we will realize that we need very little to be truly content.

Second is the giving of teaching. By teaching others, we are helping them to learn how to rely more on themselves. We give material resources to try to solve immediate needs. But, if we want to solve needs that are more far-reaching, we teach. It is not necessary to have exceptional skills. Simply

teach whatever we are good at and what others are not. The highest form of teaching is the Dharma, which can help people find lasting happiness and liberation.

And third is the giving of fearlessness. It is to remove the insecurities, worries, and fears of others, whether the “other” is human or non-human. This giving can be the sharing of a kind word, the giving of our strength and stability, or our understanding. When we relieve the worries and fears of others, and help them to feel more secure, they will be able to find peace and self-respect.

The second paramita is moral discipline, which counters worries and unhappiness, and enables us to continue on our way to awakening. In a more literal sense, it means abiding by the precepts. In a broader sense, the second perfection means ethical behavior, as we follow the customs and laws of wherever we are. Initially, as we begin our practice of discipline, we can focus on refraining from harming others. Gradually, we begin to develop and increase our virtue. The ultimate form of this practice is to benefit others.

The third paramita is patience, which counters anger and hatred, and helps us to avoid arguments and to achieve our goals. We need patience in almost everything we do. If we are in school, we need patience to persevere in our study. At work, patience helps us to properly accomplish our tasks. At home, patience is the foundation for interacting well with family members.

Patience enables us to get along more harmoniously with those around us. For ourselves, patience allows us to recognize our bad habits and to improve ourselves by changing those habits.

The fourth paramita is diligence, or enthusiastic effort. It is the joy that we bring to our practice and to all that is worthwhile in our lives. It is the true delight that arises from deep within us when we are doing what is wholesome. It enables us to keep going when we feel tired or overwhelmed. It is refreshing and inspiring. Cultivating enthusiastic effort counters laziness, and brings joy to our lives as we feel a sense of accomplishment in finishing what we have started.

The fifth perfection is meditative concentration. Our practice and training in discipline and not

harming others will reduce and gradually eliminate our harmful verbal and physical behaviors. Our minds will become calmer and less agitated. When our minds are thus settled, we will be better able to concentrate.

Our concentration will initially reduce and, then, gradually eliminate our disturbing thoughts and emotional behavior. We will then gain meditative concentration, which will enable us to uncover our innate wisdom. Thus, discipline, meditative concentration, and wisdom work together, and are complementary.

The sixth paramita is wisdom. Wisdom counters ignorance, and enables us to know how best to help others and to improve ourselves, including our ability to get along well with others. This wisdom is not that which is gained through intense study and analysis of many diverse subjects. That would be seeking wisdom from external sources. It is our innate, all-knowing wisdom.

If we begin to practice these six perfections in even just some small measure every day, starting with today, gradually, we will begin to look in the right direction, and gradually we will awaken to the perfect goodness, perfect contentment, and perfect

joy that are already within our true nature, our Buddha-nature.

## The Ten Great Vows

Only when we apply the Three Conditions, the Six Harmonies, the Threefold Learning, and the Six Paramitas in our daily lives are we truly learning Buddhism, emulating bodhisattvas, and beginning to resemble a bodhisattva. Bodhisattvas cannot attain Buddhahood only by practicing the Six Paramitas. They also practice Buddha-name chanting.

In the practice of Buddha-name chanting, we can achieve either Constant Mindfulness of Amitabha Buddha or One Mind Undisturbed in Mindfulness, but we cannot achieve One Mind Undisturbed in Enlightenment. In other words, we have to move beyond the foundation of the Six Paramitas and progress to the next level of practice: the Ten Great Vows of Samantabhadra taught in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*.

This Dharma door leads to attainment of One Mind Undisturbed in Enlightenment and attainment of Buddhahood. It is practiced by Dharma Body

Mahasattvas. These are great Bodhisattvas who have realized the Dharma Body; in other words, they have freed themselves from delusion. Therefore, it is the last step of our cultivation and cannot be reached by skipping the previous steps. Venerable Master Chin Kung has said that if we do not succeed in our practice of the Six Paramitas, we are not even close to practicing the Ten Great Vows.

The distinctive feature of the practice of Samantabhadra is that this bodhisattva has a mind as broad as the universe. As a result, each of his ten vows is ultimate and perfect in itself.

The Ten Great Vows of Samantabhadra are:

1. To respect all Buddhas
2. To praise Tathagata (one of the ten names for Buddha)
3. To make offerings extensively
4. To repent karmic obstacles
5. To rejoice at other's meritorious deeds
6. To request the turning of the Dharma wheel
7. To request the Buddha to remain in this world
8. To constantly follow the Buddha's teachings
9. To accommodate all sentient beings
10. To dedicate all merits universally

In conclusion, our learning of the Pure Land teachings is based on the five Pure Land sutras and one treatise. Our Pure Land practice is based on the Five Guidelines: the Three Conditions, the Six Harmonies, the Threefold Learning, the Six Paramitas, and the Ten Great Vows of Samantabhadra.

These guidelines are very simple, very clear, and not at all complicated. If we follow these guidelines in our learning and practice for the rest of our lives, we will definitely succeed. As an ancient sage once said, “If ten thousand practice, ten thousand will attain rebirth.” We have the principles and the practice methods.

How do we interact with people and engage in tasks in daily life? If we follow these five guidelines we will not go wrong.

In addition, if we single-mindedly practice Buddha-name chanting and seek rebirth in the Western Pure Land, all of us will succeed.

## CARE OF DHARMA MATERIALS

Whether one is at home or traveling, do not place Dharma materials on the floor or the seat of a chair. If other space is temporarily unavailable, we may carefully place a book on the arm of a sofa or chair. Preferably, books should be closed and placed neatly on the higher shelves of a bookcase. When turning the pages, do so carefully and do not turn down the edge of the page to mark your place. If using a book for study, we may write in it if it is a commonly printed book and has no intrinsic value.

The books, images, and other Dharma materials are not to be taken into bathrooms. Also, if possible, please do not place them directly on your bed. When traveling, these books can be wrapped in a clean cloth and placed in your luggage. The books may also be placed on the cloth that is in turn placed on a bed.

When we are in the bathroom or are not properly dressed, chant silently. However, when cleaning or doing chores, we may chant aloud. Silent or voiced chanting brings the same result.

## VISITING A BUDDHIST CENTER

The following are some guidelines for visiting a Buddhist center. By adhering to these and observing how others behave, you will be comfortable visiting any center. You can also ask the person in charge if you are unsure of what to do.

1. Refrain from any practices other than those of the centre.
2. Avoid talking loudly or unnecessarily so as not to disturb others.
3. Dress in a respectful manner and do not wear short skirts or shorts, see-through or tight clothing. Discreet, loose-fitting clothing is appropriate.
4. Do not use perfume and scented lotions; refrain from wearing anything that could make noise.
5. Greet others with hezang and a slight bow.
6. Remove your shoes before entering the cultivation hall. You will usually leave them on in other areas, like the dining hall. It is polite to wear socks. Also try to remove your shoes

in a place where you will not step on the ground prior to entering the hall.

7. Place your hands in the hezang position and bow to the Buddha after you step into the cultivation hall. If the room is not currently being used, you may move to a cushion and do a half bow, three full bows, and a half bow.
8. In many centers it is customary for men to sit on the right side and women to sit on the left. If you are unsure if this custom is followed at the center you are visiting, you might ask ahead of time. If that is not possible follow this arrangement to be safe.
9. When moving around the cultivation hall, try to avoid crossing in front of those who are chanting or prostrating.
10. People come to the centre to practice and to learn. A quiet environment is necessary for both pursuits. In order not to disturb others, please refrain from all unnecessary talking. If talking is necessary, do so quietly. Please respect others' wishes if they indicate they do not want to talk

11. When you greet, or write to, a monastic, it is polite to use the honorific of Venerable before the monastic's name. If you do not know their name, you may simply address them as Venerable. If you would like to use the Chinese, Shifu is Chinese for teacher and can also be used.



Part Three

# Death and Dying



## 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, vows, 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 very good, 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 "Amituofo" 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 karmas, and thus help to facilitate a good rebirth.

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

## 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.

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 Yinguang, 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 one 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,

too slow or too 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, especially 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

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\_\_\_\_\_ 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 as a ghost path or an animal. 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 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 if there is any odor.

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

5. Do not allow the scent of alcohol, onions, scallions, 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 will be 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 made 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\_\_\_\_\_





## CLOSING THOUGHTS

Pure Land Buddhist practice is not confined to learning about particular Buddhist principles and chanting a sutra or the Buddha's name while bowing, sitting, or walking. Our practice is the development of a calmer, purer mind. It to train us to think and behave as a Buddha would in everything we do.

We strive to achieve this mindset through the previous practices as well as through less formal practice. How? By reminding ourselves daily that while all of us have many shortcomings, we should only be concerned with our own. By understanding causality and not blaming others for the difficulties in our lives. And by realizing that all beings suffer and that only when we awaken can we truly help others to be free from pain.

Ultimately, our practice will enable us to have loving-kindness and patience held equally and joyfully for all.

## I RESOLVE

I resolve not to kill.

Instead, I will respect and  
have compassion for all beings.

I resolve not to steal.

Instead, before taking or using anything  
I will ask permission of the owner.

I resolve not to engage in sexual misconduct,  
or any sensory indulgence.

Instead, I will develop the mind  
of self-restraint and purity.

I resolve not to use false speech.

Instead, I will speak the truth in a wise way and  
at the right time.

I resolve not to use harsh speech.

Instead, I will speak words  
that benefit others and foster peace.

I resolve not to use divisive speech.  
Instead, I will speak words that foster  
harmony and understanding.

I resolve not to use enticing speech.  
Instead, I will speak  
sincerely and truthfully.

I resolve to refrain from greed.  
Instead, I will open my heart and  
practice giving.

I resolve to refrain from anger.  
Instead, I will develop patience and  
the compassion to see the suffering of others.

I resolve to refrain from ignorance.  
Instead, I will discipline myself and  
calm my mind so that I can act from wisdom.

May the merits and virtues  
accrued from this work adorn  
the Buddha's Pure Land,  
repay the Four Kinds of Kindness above,  
and relieve the sufferings of those  
in the Three Paths below.

May those who see and hear of this  
bring forth the mind  
of understanding and compassion,  
and at the end of this life,  
be born together  
in the Land of Ultimate Bliss.