

In One Lifetime:
Pure Land Buddhism

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Pure Land Buddhism

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 af-

flictions, 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 on 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 re-born 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 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 equally close. 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 *gongzhou* (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 *gongzhou* 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 gongzhou 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 gongzhou to form the focal point.

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

When setting up your gongzhou, 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 gongzhou 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 gongzhou.

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 gongzhou 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.

We can also do our walking in a relatively smaller flat path area of about twenty yards or so. When you reach the end of the walking area, pause and then turn slowly to your right. Stand for a few seconds and then resume walking. Whether walking on the path, pausing, or standing still for a moment, remain focused on your chanting.

Bowing

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. 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, just repeat the entire bow in reverse order. Slowly turn the hands so they are palms down. 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. Change the position of your feet so your toes are on the ground and your feet are ready to support you as you rise. 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 tape 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 work
adorn the Buddha's Pure Land,
repay the Four Kindnesses above,
and relieve the sufferings of those
in the Three Paths below.

May those who see or 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 Kindnesses are the Three Jewels (the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha), parents, teach-

ers, 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 con-

tinue 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 and audio tapes are a very good alternative and the contents can be transferred easily to MP3 players. CDs, tapes, or chanting machines may be requested from Amitabha Buddhist societies and Pure Land Learning Centers.

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 *Shurangama Sutra*
6. The *Rebirth Treatise*

The Three Conditions

The first of the Five Guidelines is the Three Conditions, which were related by the Buddha in the *Visualization Sutra*. He explained that the Three Conditions were the true causes of pure karma for all Buddhas of the past, present, and future.

In the *Amitabha Sutra*, the Buddha further explained that to be reborn in the Western Pure Land, we have to be "good men and good women." The standard for this is the Three Conditions; thus, they are a crucial part of our practice, an integral component of rebirth in the Pure Land. To achieve this rebirth, we need belief, vows, and practice—leading a moral life and chanting Amitufo mindfully.

The First Condition is:

1. Be filial to and provide for parents
2. Be respectful to and serve teachers
3. Be compassionate and not kill any living beings
4. Cultivate the Ten Virtuous Conducts. Physically, we are to refrain from killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct. Verbally, we are to refrain from lying, 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 harmony in:

1. Having the same viewpoints
2. Observing the same precepts
3. Living together as a group
4. Speaking without conflict

5. Experiencing the Dharma bliss
6. 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 prac-

tice. 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 the 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 happi-

ness 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 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 insightful 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 (*dana*)
2. Precept observation (*shila*)
3. Patience (*kshanti*)
4. Diligence (*virya*)
5. Meditative concentration (*dhyana*)
6. Wisdom (*prajna*)

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

The fifth of the Five Guidelines is the Ten Great Vows of Samantabhadra in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. These vows lead to the attainment of Buddhahood and are the practice of the highest-level bodhisattvas who have freed themselves from delusion. The Ten Great Vows are to:

1. Respect all Buddhas
2. Praise all Buddhas
3. Make offerings extensively
4. Repent karmic obstacles
5. Be joyful at other's meritorious deeds
6. Request the turning of the Dharma wheel
7. Request the Buddhas to remain in this world
8. Constantly follow the Buddha's teachings
9. Accord with all sentient beings
10. Dedicate all merits

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 which 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

There are some things that you need to be aware of when visiting a Buddhist center. The following is from a list of guidelines used at one of our societies. By following 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 follow this arrangement to be polite.
9. When moving around the cultivation hall, try to avoid crossing in front of those who are chanting or prostrating.
10. When you greet (or write to) a monastic, it is polite to use the honorific of Venerable before their 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.

Chanting Session

First, place a container of clean water on the gongzhou if you have not already done so. Next, if you wish, light a stick of incense. If you have respiratory problems, there are some very nice smokeless varieties available. After lighting the incense, do not blow on the incense but fan it gently with your hand to put out the flame and allow it to burn slowly. Raise the lower tip of the incense to lightly touch your forehead with the incense pointed towards the Buddha and then place the incense in the holder.

In the following ceremony, which we follow sequentially, we first pay respects to Sakyamuni Buddha for teaching us about the unsatisfactory reality of our existence and of the happiness and liberation of the Pure Land. We then pay our respects to Amitabha Buddha for his compassionate vows to help all beings who request that help. Next, we begin chanting “Amitufo,” which is the main part of the session. Continue this chanting for the time you have set aside for your practice.

After chanting, we pay our respects to the bodhisattvas Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta for their

exemplary teachings of compassion and wisdom respectively, and then to all the bodhisattvas in the Pure Land for having progressed on the path of awakening. Next is the Verse of Repentance to express our deep regret for having harmed innumerable beings throughout our countless lifetimes. We conclude with 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.

One half bow, three full bows, one half bow
Place water container on gongzhou and light incense
One half bow

Homage to our original teacher Sakyamuni Buddha.
One half bow

Homage to Amitabha Buddha.
One standing bow, then be seated and chant:

Amitufo
Stand and resume hezang

Homage to Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva.
One half bow

Homage to Mahasthamaprapta Bodhisattva.
One half bow

Homage to the great pure sea of Bodhisattvas.
One half bow

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.
One half bow

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

May those who see or 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.
One half bow, three full bows, one half bow

Thoughts from Master Yin Guang Thirteenth Patriarch of Pure Land Buddhism

Whether a lay or a monk or nun, we need to respect those who are older than we are and to exist harmoniously with those around us.

We are to endure what others cannot and practice what others cannot achieve.

We should do all we can on behalf of others and help them to be good.

When sitting quietly, we would do well to reflect on our own faults.

When talking with friends do not discuss the rights and wrongs of others.

In our every action, from dawn to dusk and dusk to dawn, recite the Buddha's name.

When reciting, whether aloud or silently, do not give rise to wandering thoughts.

If wandering thoughts arise, immediately dismiss them.

Constantly maintain a modest and regretful heart. Even if we have upheld true cultivation, we still need to feel that our practice is shallow and never boast.

We should mind our own business and not the business of others.

See only the good examples of others instead of their shortcomings.

We would do well to see ourselves as ordinary and everyone else as bodhisattvas.

If we can cultivate according to these teachings,
we are sure to reach
the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss.

Closing Thoughts

Buddhist practice is not confined to learning about Buddhist principles and chanting a Buddha's name while bowing, sitting, or walking. Buddhist 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 shortcoming, 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, consideration, and tolerance held equally and joyfully for all.

Dedication of Merits

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

May those who see or 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.

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