

ESSENCE
OF THE
INFINITE LIFE
SUTRA

ESSENCE
OF THE
INFINITE LIFE
SUTRA

VENERABLE MASTER
CHIN KUNG

PURE LAND COLLEGE PRESS
TOOWOOMBA, AUSTRALIA

© 2013 by Pure Land College Press

Some rights reserved. No part of this book may be altered without written permission from the publisher. Reprinting is allowed for non-profit use.

For the latest edition, contact purelandpress@gmail.com

Translation by the Pure Land Translation Team

Cover design by Pure Land College Press

Cover image © Wong Sze Fei - Fotolia.com

16 15 14 13 1 2 3 4 5

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication
Data

Author: Shi, Chin Kung.

Title: Essence of the infinite life sutra / Chin Kung Shi.

ISBN: 9780980711486 (pbk.)

Subjects: Pure Land Buddhism--Doctrines.

Buddhism--Doctrines.

Dewey Number: 294.3926

Published by:

Pure Land Learning College Association, Inc.

57 West St., Toowoomba, Qld 4350, Australia

T: 07 4637 8765 F: 07 4637 8764 E: pllc2001@gmail.com

www.purelandcollege.org.au

Printed in Taiwan by He Yu Publication House

CONTENTS

Venerable Master Chin Kung AM	i		
Foreword	vii		
Preface	ix		
Excerpt 1	1	Excerpt 21	156
Excerpt 2	12	Excerpt 22	160
Excerpt 3	23	Excerpt 23	162
Excerpt 4	24	Excerpt 24	171
Excerpt 5	27	Excerpt 25	176
Excerpt 6	30	Excerpt 26	180
Excerpt 7	32	Excerpt 27	185
Excerpt 8	38	Excerpt 28	191
Excerpt 9	42	Excerpt 29	196
Excerpt 10	54	Excerpt 30	200
Excerpt 11	65	Excerpt 31	204
Excerpt 12	66	Excerpt 32	207
Excerpt 13	72	Excerpt 33	209
Excerpt 14	81	Excerpt 34	211
Excerpt 15	83	Excerpt 35	219
Excerpt 16	86	Excerpt 36	221
Excerpt 17	104	Excerpt 37	224
Excerpt 18	113	Excerpt 38	227
Excerpt 19	124	Excerpt 39	228
Excerpt 20	141	Excerpt 40	229

Excerpt 41	231	Excerpt 51	292
Excerpt 42	237	Excerpt 52	299
Excerpt 43	244	Excerpt 53	306
Excerpt 44	256	Excerpt 54	308
Excerpt 45	260	Excerpt 55	314
Excerpt 46	269	Excerpt 56	317
Excerpt 47	275	Excerpt 57	323
Excerpt 48	279	Excerpt 58	326
Excerpt 49	284	Excerpt 59	332
Excerpt 50	289	Excerpt 60	335

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

VENERABLE MASTER CHIN KUNG AM

Venerable Master Chin Kung AM, born in 1927, is an eminent monk in the Pure Land school of Mahayana Buddhism. He has learned Buddhism for more than sixty years and has lectured on it for over fifty years. He is advisor to over 100 Amitabha Buddhist Societies and Pure Land Learning Centers worldwide. In 2001, he founded the Pure Land Learning College Association, Inc. (PLLCA), Toowoomba, Australia.

Master Chin Kung pioneered the use of the Internet and satellite television in propagating the Buddha's teachings. His recorded lectures are distributed in books and on DVDs, CDs, and other media. He has sponsored the printing and distribution of the Buddhist Canon and Buddhist sutras, books, and images as well as books on moral education. All these are freely distributed worldwide. To this day, the Master still teaches tirelessly on a daily basis. His lectures are broadcast live to audiences around the world.

Born in Lujiang County, Anhui Province,

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

China, the Master studied Buddhism and the classics under the guidance of Professor Fang Dongmei, a great philosopher of his time; Zhangjia Living Buddha, a renowned monk of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition; and Mr. Li Bingnan, a lay practitioner and master of Buddhism and Confucianism. In 1959, Master Chin Kung became a monk at Linji Temple in Yuanshan, Taipei and was given the Dharma name Chin Kung, which means “pure emptiness.” He has served as instructor at the Tripitaka Institute at Shipu Temple, professor of the School of Philosophy at the Chinese Culture University, and president of the Chinese Buddhist College.

Master Chin Kung founded the Hwa Dzan Dharma Giving Association, the Hwa Dzan Buddhist Audio-Visual Library, and the Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation in Taiwan.

For his achievements in building interfaith harmony and fostering peace, Master Chin Kung was awarded honorary doctorates and professorships by the University of Queensland, Griffith

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

University, and the University of Southern Queensland; Australia, and Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University, Indonesia. He is the Honorary Founding Patron of the Australian Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of Queensland.

In 2005, Master Chin Kung was appointed to the Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in the General Division by Queen Elizabeth II. He was recognized for service to the Buddhist community in Queensland, particularly through the propagation of Buddhism and the fostering of interfaith activities between diverse ethnic groups, and to the community through support for educational and health institutions.

In 2006, Master Chin Kung and the PLLCA were invited by UNESCO to co-organize the event “Celebrating the 2550th Birth Anniversary of the Buddha” at UNESCO Headquarters, Paris. The subject of the event was “Discover the Buddhist Contribution to Humanity” to enable more people to learn from the Buddha how to reconcile conflict and promote social stability and world peace

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

through education. The goal was to prove that through the moral teachings of sages and saints, it is possible to teach people to be good, and it is possible to teach people of different faiths to live together harmoniously.

In 2009, Master Chin Kung was appointed as an International Trustee of *Religions for Peace*, an international peace organization that is active on every continent. Its mission is to create multi-religious partnerships to confront issues such as stopping war, ending poverty, and protecting the earth.

Since the late 1990s, Master Chin Kung has both initiated and participated in interfaith forums and summits in many countries speaking on the importance of education. He explains that it is imperative that all religious teachers sincerely “learn to be a teacher and act as a role model for all” and encourages these teachers to practice the teachings of the sages and saints in their daily life, delve deeply into the teachings of their own religions, and also humbly learn from other religions.

Currently he is lecturing on the *Infinite Life*

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

Sutra, hoping that the daily teachings can transform the current mindset of people today and help foster world peace. Master Chin Kung's message of loving-kindness and compassion for all has been the central theme of his teaching. With thoughts of sincerity, respect, humility, and harmony, he dedicates himself to help all beings gain long-lasting happiness and joy. This has been his life's work.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

FOREWORD

In August 1993, Venerable Master Chin Kung gave an eight-hour lecture series titled *Essence of the Infinite Life Sutra* at Ta Kioh Buddhist Temple in San Francisco, USA. The Hwa Dzan Lecture Notes Team transcribed the recorded lectures and organized them. In addition, relevant segments from the lectures on the *Infinite Life Sutra* given in San Jose in June 1992 were excerpted as a supplement.

This compiled transcription was given to Venerable Master Chin Kung for correction and editing. Originally titled *Lecture Notes on the Essence of the Infinite Life Sutra*, it has now been translated and published under its original name. Freely circulated, it is humbly offered to readers for them to benefit from the Dharma.

Pure Land Translation Team
Toowoomba, Australia
November 2013

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

PREFACE

For this lecture series at Ta Kioh Buddhist Temple, I plan to give four lectures, eight hours in total, to introduce the *Infinite Life Sutra*. The *Infinite Life Sutra* is called *The Longer Sutra* in the Pure Land school. I have given several lecture series on it in the United States.

In the past few years, the Buddhist Canon has been printed in Taiwan and distributed worldwide. After more than ten reprints, the number of copies in circulation is very impressive. Chinese classics such as the Complete Library of the Four Branches of Literature and Selections from the Four Branches of Literature have also been published and given to libraries around the world. Therefore, there is no fear of their being lost to the world.

The literary treasures are abundant, but it would be a shame if no one read them. How many people have an opportunity to read the Buddhist Canon from beginning to end even once in this lifetime? And when they attempt to read it, they may not be able to comprehend it.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

It occurred to me that important passages in the sutras can be excerpted and compiled into a book to facilitate reading, studying, and practicing in life. In this way, traditional Chinese culture and Mahayana Buddhism will truly be able to benefit all beings.

Master Hongyi's *Wanqing Ji* is a collection of excerpts from the sutras and quotations from the patriarchs, 101 of them in all. I once lectured on the *Wanqing Ji* in an easy-to-understand way and the audience liked it very much. Therefore, I feel studying the excerpts is worth trying. This time I have taken sixty excerpts from the *Infinite Life Sutra*. If this experiment is successful, I think that the Buddhist Canon can be studied in this way. The Taisho Buddhist Canon is one hundred volumes. If it is condensed into one volume, studying it will be more convenient. The voluminous classics like the Complete Library of the Four Branches of Literature and Selections from Library of the Four Branches of Literature can also be condensed into one or two volumes by excerption. This way, in the future, everyone will be able to read them.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

Excerption requires identifying the essence. This is a must. It is like finding the right medicine for an illness. What symptoms are present society and people exhibiting? Today, society is in disorder. People have conflicting thoughts. They feel helpless and do not have any sense of security.

When we look into the root cause, we find it is none other than (1) people not maintaining proper relationships with others, (2) the loss of morality, and (3) people ignoring the principles and truth of the law of cause and effect. These are the main causes of today's problems in society. This is why our excerpts should focus on morality and the principles and truth of causality.

The sixty excerpts were chosen based on problems in society. The focus was not on Pure Land practitioners. For Pure Land practitioners, instead of these excerpts, I would definitely choose the forty-eight vows and chapters 32 through 37. These are the chapters Pure Land practitioners must study and understand.¹

¹ Regrettably, we do not have an approved English translation of the *Infinite Life Sutra*.—Trans.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

Reading these sixty excerpts is the same as reading the entire *Infinite Life Sutra*. It is impossible for a sutra to suit one's capacity from beginning to end. There may be parts that seem boring and that are not applicable for the reader. The reader may thus lose interest.

The excerpts, on the other hand, are the essence. Whether one reads them or listens to lectures on them, one will be highly interested to learn and practice them.

Shi Chin Kung

EXCERPT ONE

All followed and cultivated the virtues of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva, were replete with infinite vows and practices, and steadfastly dwelt in the virtues and merits of all dharmas.

This first excerpt points out the objective of the Pure Land school.

A well-accomplished practitioner added “The Chapter of the Vows and Practices of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva” to the three Pure Land sutras and named them the four Pure Land sutras. He did so based on the above excerpt. These words tell us that the beings in the Western Pure Land—in the four lands and from the lowest to the highest of the nine rebirth grades—all cultivate the virtues of Samantabhadra. It is not surprising then that in the Lotus Treasury assembly, all forty-one levels of Dharma-body Mahasattvas follow the example of

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

Samantabhadra Bodhisattva—they mindfully chant the Buddha-name and seek rebirth in the Land of Ultimate Bliss.

It is also stated in the Mahayana sutras that if a bodhisattva does not cultivate the practice of Samantabhadra, he will not be able to perfectly attain Buddhahood. “Perfect” refers to the attainment of perfect Buddhahood, which is the Buddhahood of the Perfect Teaching mentioned in the Tiantai school.

“Vows” in “infinite vows and practices” means aspiration. “Practices” means implementation, to carry out. When we condense “infinite vows and practices,” we have the Four Great Vows. When expanded, the Four Great Vows become infinite vows and practices.

Samantabhadra Bodhisattva uses the Ten Great Vows as the key guiding principle for infinite vows and practices. The practice of Samantabhadra differs from other methods, for the mind of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva is truly pure and impartial: there is no discrimination or attachment. He treats everyone in the entire Dharma Realm equally.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

The first of the Ten Great Vows is “to respect all Buddhas.” “All Buddhas” encompasses all beings. The *Avatamsaka Sutra* and the *Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment* both say: “All beings are Buddhas in nature.” Therefore, “to respect all Buddhas” is to equally respect the past Buddhas, the present Buddhas, and the future Buddhas (all beings).

It is stated in the sutras that all sentient beings have Buddha-nature. It is called Dharma-nature in non-sentient beings. Buddha-nature and Dharma-nature refer to the same nature. This is why the *Avatamsaka Sutra* says: “Sentient and non-sentient beings all have the same Buddha-wisdom.”

We should be as respectful to non-sentient beings as to Buddhas. For example, tables and chairs are non-sentient beings. Our respect to them should be the same as that to Buddhas, without any difference. This is the practice of Samantabhadra. When we see tables and chairs, we put them in their proper places and keep them clean. This is showing our respect to them. The respect in our hearts is exactly the same, though how we express the respect differs. Practicing respect for all

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

Buddhas starts from this point [the impartial respect for all beings].

Respect—everything should start with it, not just when we are learning the supreme Buddhadharmā. “Single-minded respect”—we often read these words in the repentance section that appears in the Buddhist practice book. Single-mindedness is the practice of Samantabhadra. It signifies impartiality. Single-mindedness is maintaining the same mind whether we encounter Buddhas, people, animals, or tables and chairs. With two minds, differences and discrimination arise. Therefore, with two minds or three minds, we are not quite respectful and not following the practice of Samantabhadra. We must clearly understand this before we know how to learn.

The second vow is “to praise Tathagata.”¹ What is the difference between “Tathagata” and “Buddha”? From the aspect of form, we say “Buddha.” We should single-mindedly and equally respect all [Buddhas, all beings]. From the aspect

¹ One of the ten titles of the Buddha.—Trans.

of nature, we say “Tathagata.” If something accords with the true nature, then it is good and we should praise it. If it does not accord with the true nature, then it is bad. We should be respectful to all but we should not praise bad things or wrongdoers. We should keep our distance [i.e., not learn from them] and continue to be respectful. In our respect, there should be no difference.

Sudhana’s visiting fifty-three wise teachers² is a very good example of this. Normally, when he visited a wise teacher, he would first pay respect and then praise the teacher. But among the fifty-three wise teachers, all of whom he showed respect to, there were three he did not praise. The first of the three teachers was a Brahman named Jayosmaya, who symbolized ignorance. The second was a king named Anala, who symbolized anger. The third was a woman named Vasumitra, who symbolized greed. To these three teachers who symbolized greed, anger, and ignorance, Sudhana showed respect but did not praise them.

² The accounts of Sudhana’s visits to the fifty-three wise teachers are from a chapter in the *Avatamsaka Sutra* — Trans.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

From this we understand that when we praise, we praise the good, not the bad. But when we pay respect, we do not differentiate between good and bad. There is a significant difference between praising and paying respect. We must realize this.

I will not go into detail about the Ten Great Vows, as I have done so elsewhere.

The ten vows of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva sum up infinite practices and vows. But the forty-eight vows of Amitabha Buddha are more detailed than the Ten Great Vows. However, the most important of all is to be “replete.” Are we “replete”? If we have belief and practice but no vows,³ then we will not be able to attain rebirth in the Western Pure Land. If we truly want to attain rebirth in the Western Pure Land in this lifetime, we must chant the forty-eight vows in the *Infinite Life Sutra* as our morning cultivation every day. By chanting them every day and constantly learning them, we make

³ Belief, vow, and practice are the three requisites for being reborn in the Pure Land.— Trans.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

the forty-eight vows our causal vows.⁴ Then we are “replete” with the vows. Amitabha Buddha’s forty-eight vows are infinite practices and vows, and include the Ten Great Vows of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva and the Four Great Vows.

“All . . . steadfastly dwelt in the virtues and merits of all dharmas.” “The virtues and merits of all dharmas” is “Namo Amitufo.” During the Sui and Tang dynasties, eminent monks compared the sutras from the Buddha’s forty-nine years of teaching to determine which was number one. They agreed that the *Avatamsaka Sutra* was number one. It was the king of the sutras and the fundamental Dharma-wheel. Next, they made a comparison between the *Avatamsaka Sutra* and the *Infinite Life Sutra* and concluded that the *Infinite Life Sutra* was number one. Why? At the end of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, Samantabhadra taught the Ten Great Vows and guided all beings to the Western Pure Land, and with this the sutra was perfectly completed. On the other hand, the *Infinite Life Sutra*, from the

⁴ Causal vows are vows made before one becomes a Buddha—Trans.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

beginning to the end, describes the Western Pure Land. Hence, the *Infinite Life Sutra* sums up and fulfills the final goal of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. The *Infinite Life Sutra* is thus number one of all number ones.

Mr. Xia Lianju divided the *Infinite Life Sutra* into forty-eight chapters. Which chapter is number one? The chapter with the forty-eight vows. The forty-eight vows were spoken by Amitabha Buddha himself and are the most important part of the entire sutra.

Of the forty-eight vows, which vow is number one? The eminent monks said that the eighteenth vow is number one. Why did they say so? The eighteenth vow says that through mindful chanting of “Amitufo” ten times at the end of one’s life one can attain rebirth in the Western Pure Land. This illustrates the inconceivability of the merit of the name of Amitabha Buddha. This is why the name of Amitabha Buddha is “the virtues and merits of all dharmas.”

When the name of Amitabha Buddha is elaborated on, we have the forty-eight vows. When the

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

forty-eight vows are elaborated on, we have the *Infinite Life Sutra*. When the *Infinite Life Sutra* is elaborated on, we have the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. When the *Avatamsaka Sutra* is elaborated on, we have all the sutras from Sakyamuni Buddha's forty-nine years of teaching.

Therefore, the name Amitabha Buddha is the key guiding principle. When we master this guiding principle, we will thoroughly understand the entire Dharma, all the sutras, and all the Dharma doors.

“Steadfastly dwelt in” means focusing one's mind on Amitufo. For a true practitioner who wants to have a fast, assured success in his or her practice in this lifetime, the Buddha-name is all he or she needs. One chants and reads the sutras to understand the truth. Once confidence is established upon one's understanding of the principles and the truth, one will naturally let go of everything else.

Not only did Sakyamuni Buddha use this method as the foremost method to teach all beings, but all Buddhas do the same also. The Pure Land

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

method is hard to believe but easy to practice. Only when one has great good fortune and great wisdom will one be able to believe this method. In the Theravada tradition for example, Sariputra⁵ is foremost in wisdom. In the Mahayana tradition, Manjusri is foremost in wisdom. Therefore, if one is not superior in wisdom, one cannot believe this method.

Let's think about this. Not only can our wisdom not compare with that of Manjusri Bodhisattva, it cannot even compare with that of Elder Sariputra of the Theravada tradition. But when we hear the Pure Land method, we are immediately delighted, believe and accept it, and are willing to learn and practice it. From this viewpoint, we are not inferior to Manjusri Bodhisattva. He chose this method, so have we. His choice was a wise one, so is ours.

“Steadfastly dwelt” means our minds will no longer waver once we understand the principles and the phenomena of the truth, after which our

⁵ Both the Elder Sariputra and Manjusri Bodhisattva are listed in the assemblies listening to the *Amitabha Sutra* and the *Infinite Life Sutra*.—Trans.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

minds will truly settle in “Namo Amitufo.” This [Namo Amitufo] is “the virtues and merits of all dharmas.”⁶

⁶ These are the virtues and merits of Buddhahood.—Trans.

EXCERPT TWO

With the power of meditative concentration and wisdom, they subdued Mara's enmities.

"Mara" does not refer to demons but to various afflictions that torture and torment us. The sufferings in this world are so painful that they are even more terrifying than encountering demons.

"Enmities" refers to enemy. The sutras talk about "ten evils the enemy." The ten evils are the physical activities of killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct; the verbal activities of using false speech, divisive speech, harsh speech, and enticing speech; and the mental activities of greed, anger, and ignorance. These are the ten kinds of enemies within us. All beings are unwilling to do away with these "Mara's enmities," so the beings' every thought and every deed strengthen and increase the ties to them. The knot of enmity becomes very hard to unravel and evil karmas continue to be

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

committed. Consequently, the beings suffer in this lifetime and will suffer even more in the next lifetime.

This is why when one transmigrates within the Six Paths, one's future lifetimes will get worse and worse, and one will sink into a lower and lower path. This is the truth. If we observe calmly, it will not be hard to see this.

“Subduing Mara’s enmities” is to teach us how to elevate our states and how not to retrogress any more. The *Diamond Sutra* talks about subduing one’s mind. This mind [in the *Diamond Sutra*] is “Mara’s enmities” mentioned above. What is this mind? The mind of the ten evils. The mind of wandering thoughts. The mind of afflictions. The mind of delusion. How do we subdue it? With meditative concentration and wisdom.

Therefore, we must cultivate meditative concentration. Only when we have meditative concentration will wisdom arise. When the Buddha taught all beings, his aim was for people to achieve the Three Learnings of precept observation, meditative concentration, and wisdom. Observation of the

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

precepts leads to the achievement of meditative concentration. And from meditative concentration, wisdom arises.

Meditative concentration is pivotal to one's learning and cultivation of Buddhism. Observation of the precepts is the means to achieve meditative concentration. Meditative concentration is the means to uncover wisdom. Uncovering wisdom is the true objective because only wisdom can help us solve all problems. Meditative concentration helps us suppress, subdue, and control Mara's enmities; wisdom helps eliminate them. Therefore, when our wisdom comes forth, the Ten Evil Karmas will become the Ten Virtuous Karmas and one's enemies will become one's great teachers and great supporters. This way, one is transformed from an ordinary person into a sage; suffering is transformed into happiness; and the Ten Dharma Realms are transformed into the One True Dharma Realm.

For every Buddhist school and Dharma door, wisdom is the objective of cultivation and meditative concentration is the key.

The Buddha-name chanting method is the most

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

wondrous method of the eighty-four thousand methods. But after chanting the Buddha-name for a long time, why haven't we achieved meditative concentration? The reason is that we do not have the foundation of precept observation. So, how can we attain the Buddha-name Chanting Samadhi when we have not even achieved Constant Mindfulness of Amitabha Buddha? From this we can see that observation of the precepts is immensely important. The precepts, however, are not limited to the Five Precepts, the Ten Precepts, the bodhi-sattva precepts, or the monastic precepts.

Some people think that they are abiding strictly by the precepts and thus feel great about themselves. They often criticize others for breaking the precepts. If this is how they "observe" the precepts, then they will never achieve meditative concentration. Why? Because when they see others transgressing the precepts, afflictions arise, and their minds become disturbed and are no longer pure.

Master Huineng put it aptly, "If one is a true practitioner, one will not see the faults of others." We should strictly adhere to the precepts with a

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

pure mind. We should not be concerned whether others are pure or not, we should just keep our own mind pure.

If we think that we are observing the precepts and yet daily sees the faults of others, such cultivation will bring, at the most, only a little good fortune for us in the next lifetime. In addition, the good fortune may not be enjoyed in the human or heavenly paths because we may not be reborn as a human or heavenly being.

Even animals, such as the pets kept by wealthy families, can have good fortune. In the path of hungry ghosts, there are also those with good fortune. For example, city gods, village gods, and mountain gods all enjoy offerings from people every day. [Good fortune notwithstanding,] when one's cultivation leads one to such a plight, all of one's efforts will be wasted!

Since ancient times in China, there were practitioners, both lay and monastic, who succeeded in their cultivation after three to five years of practice. Why is it that we don't have any success today, even after twenty or thirty years of effort? If we

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

say that it is because our intelligence or wisdom cannot compare with theirs, I don't believe it. If we say that our good fortune cannot compare with theirs, I believe it even less.

What is the reason? It is that the practitioners in the past listened to their teachers, but nowadays we do not. They inherited their teachers' lineage; today, people forsake their teachers.

When one's teacher indicates a path for one, a path that will lead to success, [and if one follows that path accordingly,] one then "inherits the teacher's lineage." The teacher would help one lay a foundation for learning and practice. This is the teacher's duty. If one does not have the foundation, one must not leave the teacher, just like a child must not leave its parents. When the child grows up and becomes independent, then he or she will be allowed to leave home.

In the past, one could leave one's teacher only when one had attained fundamental wisdom. Fundamental wisdom is meditative concentration. When one attains meditative concentration, wisdom will arise. When empowered with meditative

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

concentration and wisdom, one will then be allowed to leave one's teacher and travel all over to learn from others.

Take Sudhana's visits to fifty-three teachers, for example. Under the guidance of Manjusri Bodhisattva, he attained fundamental wisdom, which is "with the power of meditative concentration and wisdom." With this ability, he was then allowed to visit fifty-three teachers. His visiting all fifty-three teachers is "subduing Mara's enmities."

The fifty-three teachers represent the fifty-three categories under which all walks of life are subsumed. In other words, we can interact with anyone, whether male or female, young or old, and from any occupation. By doing this, we are perfecting our acquired wisdom.

Remaining unaffected and giving no rise to greed in a favorable situation, and remaining unmoved and not tempted in an adverse situation—this is attaining meditative concentration. In any situation, when one understands and is clear about everything—this is attaining wisdom. Thus, the "power of meditative concentration and wis-

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

dom” is the true basis of one’s learning and practice.

Nowadays the teacher’s lineage is broken. The only remedy is to take an ancient accomplished practitioner as our teacher.

In my life, my greatest good fortune was coming into contact with the tradition of a teacher’s lineage. When I was studying Buddhism in Tai-chung, Mr. Li Bingnan said modestly, “With my knowledge and virtue, I am not qualified to be your teacher.” He advised me to take Great Master Yinguang, who was his teacher, as my teacher.

Great Master Yinguang had already passed away, but his writings were still available. Single-mindedly learning and practicing the *Collection of Great Master Yinguang’s Writings* is becoming his student. Reading the great master’s books, following his teaching, and practicing accordingly is inheriting the teacher’s lineage.

As Pure Land practitioners, we take Amitabha Buddha as our teacher. Where is Amitabha Buddha? He is in the *Infinite Life Sutra*, the *Amitabha Sutra*, and the *Visualization Sutra*. When

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

we single-mindedly and earnestly study these three sutras, we are taking him as our teacher and are his good students.

Chanting the sutras is cultivating the precepts, cultivating meditative concentration, and cultivating wisdom. When chanting a sutra we simply read the words, without thinking of their meaning. Chanting sincerely this way is cultivating the precepts, meditative concentration, and wisdom.

The spirit of the precepts is “do nothing that is bad and do everything that is good.” “Do nothing that is bad” is the essence of the Theravada precepts. “Do everything that is good” is the essence of the bodhisattva precepts. In all the precepts, nothing falls outside of “do nothing that is bad and do everything that is good.”

When we respectfully and single-mindedly chant a sutra without wandering thoughts, discrimination, and attachments, then nothing bad is being done. The Theravada precepts are fulfilled. The sutras are words of truth flowing from the Buddha’s true nature. Nothing surpasses these words in virtuousness. Therefore, chanting a sutra

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

is “doing everything that is good.” All the precepts are thus fulfilled.

Single-mindedly chanting a sutra without wandering thoughts, distractions, or doubt—this is cultivating meditative concentration. From start to finish, enunciating clearly every word without mistake or omission—this is cultivating wisdom: fundamental wisdom. Thus, chanting a sutra is cultivating simultaneously the precepts, meditative concentration, and wisdom.

If we think about the meaning of the sutra while chanting it, it will ruin the cultivation of precept observation, meditative concentration, and wisdom. This is treating the sutra as a worldly book.

Chanting a sutra is cultivating the precepts, meditative concentration, and wisdom, as is sitting in meditation in the Zen school and reciting mantras in Tibetan Buddhism. The methods are different, but the results to be attained are the same. As it is said, “All Dharma doors are equal, and no one Dharma door is superior or inferior to another.”

When chanting a sutra, one should focus on

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

chanting. If one wants to study it, one should find another time to do so and should not mix chanting with studying. Otherwise, one will fail completely in both.

When one attains meditative concentration and wisdom, the daily interaction with people and handling of matters and affairs will go smoothly. Obstacles will decrease naturally. One will be able to turn the ten evil thoughts into the ten virtuous thoughts and truly subdue Mara's enmities. Buddhism often talks about "breaking through delusion and attaining enlightenment, and leaving suffering behind and attaining happiness." These effects will truly manifest.

EXCERPT THREE

Constantly, they used the Dharma sound to
awaken all the worlds.

“Dharma” refers to methods and principles.

The teaching in the previous two excerpts is for self-cultivation and self-benefit. The teaching in this excerpt is for benefiting others. When we benefit from our learning and practice, we should use the experience, through words and our examples, to help others achieve the same results we have.

“All the worlds” refers to the beings in the Nine Dharma Realms.

EXCERPT FOUR

[They] . . . cleansed dirt and pollution, and
revealed cleanliness.

This excerpt is a metaphor. The purpose of our chanting the sutras and the Buddha-name is to cleanse the contamination in our character, thoughts, and views so as to “reveal cleanliness”—to restore a pure mind.

The full title of the *Infinite Life Sutra* is *Buddha Speaks the Mahayana, Infinite Life, Adornment, Purity, Impartiality, and Enlightenment Sutra*.

Purity, impartiality, and enlightenment are the guidelines for learning and practicing. What are we learning? We are learning to (1) cultivate a pure mind, (2) cultivate an impartial mind, and (3) be awakened and not deluded. Purity, impartiality, and enlightenment are one in three and three in one. The Pure Land school focuses on the cultivation of a pure mind. When the mind is pure, the

land will be pure. The connection between us and Amitabha Buddha of the Western Pure Land lies in a pure mind.

In the present age, pollution is an extremely serious problem. The whole world is urgently calling for protection of the environment. Scientists also warn that if the pollution on earth is not abated, then in fifty years it will not be a fit place for the human race to live. From this we can see how serious pollution is.

Although many people try to reduce pollution, their efforts produce very little results. Why? Because they only know the phenomena—they do not realize the noumenon [the underlying root cause of pollution]. All the efforts for environmental protection provide only superficial solutions: they do not get to the root cause. What is the root cause? It is the polluted human nature—a polluted mind, polluted thoughts, polluted views, and polluted feelings. This kind of pollution is much more harmful than environmental pollution!

Twenty years ago, when I was at Mr. Fang Dongmei's home one day, two officials from the

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

Department of Education happened to be there on a visit. At that time, the Taiwan government was promoting the revival of Chinese culture. An official asked Mr. Fang, "Is there a method that can revive Chinese culture?" Mr. Fang looked very serious and was silent for several minutes. Then he said, "Yes, there is." The officials happily asked him what the method was. He said, "The publication of all the newspapers and magazines in Taiwan must stop. All the television and radio stations must also shut down." Upon hearing this, they shook their heads. "Impossible!" they said. Mr. Fang explained, "Newspapers, magazines, and television and radio programs are polluting the human nature and destroying traditional Chinese culture every day. As long as these things exist, efforts to revive Chinese culture will be ineffective."

This is why I often urge Buddha-name chanting practitioners not to read newspapers and magazines or to watch television, in order to shield their pure mind.

EXCERPT FIVE

Their minds constantly and truly dwell on the
Way to enlighten all beings.

The first of the Four Great Vows is “Sentient beings are innumerable; I vow to help them all.” Always having this thought is “the Way to enlighten all beings.”

This excerpt is about generating the bodhi mind—a mind that constantly abides by the Four Great Vows.

But before we can help others, we must first succeed in our practice. The Four Great Vows not only refer to a great bodhi mind, they also spell out the sequence for our cultivation and attainment. The vows are our guide as well as our driving force.

Cultivation should start with the eradication of afflictions. Following one teacher helps us eradicate afflictions. When we eradicate afflictions com-

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

pletely, Mara's enmities are no more, and we accomplish meditative concentration and wisdom. We next learn the boundless Dharma doors.

People today forsake the first two of the Four Great vows and start with the third one, "Dharma doors are boundless; I vow to master them all." Many of them spend only a few days learning and then start telling others that they are incarnates of a certain Buddha or bodhisattva. This is complete nonsense. They are deceiving themselves as well as others.

In the past, when one started to learn Buddhism, one had to first learn the precepts for five years. The precepts refer to the teachings and rules set by the teacher. One had to spend at least five years learning from one teacher before one was able to achieve meditative concentration and wisdom. With this foundation [achievement of meditative concentration and wisdom], one was allowed to learn extensively. In the past, when life was much simpler than today, five years were required for following the teacher's rules. Today, the living environment is very polluted, more than ten times

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

what it was before. Therefore, if five years were required in the past, fifty years are required for learning the precepts today.

But if we tell everyone to do so for fifty years, then no one will want to learn Buddhism.

Therefore, it is best to mindfully chant “Namo Amitufo” unceasingly, and only after we meet Amitabha Buddha do we learn extensively.

Our cultivation of the Four Great Vows should be divided into two stages. Presently, we cultivate only the vows of “helping innumerable sentient beings” and “ending inexhaustible afflictions.” When we get to the Western Pure Land, we then cultivate the vows of “learning boundless Dharma doors” and “attaining supreme Buddhahood.” This is the correct sequence. If we start with cultivating the last two vows, this will obstruct our Buddha-name chanting practice. This is why it is a matter of immediate urgency to wholeheartedly chant “Amitufo” and seek rebirth in the Western Pure Land.

EXCERPT SIX

To all living beings they were friends, [who would help] without being asked.

When teaching all beings, the bodhisattvas have this vow of compassion: on their own accord, they become good friends to all beings. When we emulate the bodhisattvas, we should learn to perceive the suitable way and the right time to teach a being. If we do not help this being when the condition is mature, then we would be failing the being. By helping the being when the condition has not matured, we are courting a rebuff.

Every being is different in capacity; additionally, the condition for learning Buddhism is not the same for every being. If a being likes Zen meditation, let the being sincerely cultivate Zen meditation. If a being likes to recite mantras, let the being do so respectfully. All methods are equal, and no one method is superior or inferior to another. To

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

accommodate people with different capacities, the Buddha taught many methods. If a method could help every being, then there would be no need for Sakyamuni Buddha to teach all these methods.

We Pure Land practitioners cannot make people practice the Pure Land method. When someone's condition has matured, we should voluntarily introduce Buddhism to help the person. There are many stages in learning Buddhism. As the person gradually advances in practice, he or she will naturally find the most direct route—the wondrous Pure Land method. Therefore, to help all beings skillfully and expediently, we should be patient.

EXCERPT SEVEN

Great compassion arose from these bodhisattvas. They empathized with all sentient beings. With a heart of compassion, they lectured on the teachings, taught by example, and also imparted the Dharma Eyes. They blocked all evil paths and opened the door of virtuousness. They regarded all beings as themselves. They rescued and helped living beings and shouldered the burden of helping them all cross over to the other shore.

“Arose” means came forth. The words “taught by example” mean to demonstrate through behavior. “Lectured on” means to speak the Dharma. Not only did the bodhisattvas teach with words, but they also taught by example. In “imparted the Dharma Eyes,” “imparted” means to pass on,

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

“Dharma” means method of practice, and “Eyes” is a metaphor. This metaphor refers to helping others understand the truth of all phenomena and principles.

In “blocked all evil paths,” “blocked” means to prevent and be on guard and “evil paths” means the Bad Realms. “The door of virtuousness” means, simply put, the virtuous teachings that enable one to be reborn in the human or heavenly path.

Sentient beings are deluded. They indulge in the Five Desires⁷ and the Six Dusts⁸—in worldly pleasures. We should generate a mind of great compassion, empathize with sentient beings, and introduce the Pure Land method to them. Compassion and empathy must be put into action. This is enthusiastically propagating the Pure Land method. With all our hearts we must do our best—we must treat this task as the most important thing in this lifetime.

⁷ The Five Desires are wealth, sex, fame, food, and sleep.—Trans.

⁸ The Six Dusts are pollutants of the Six Senses of sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and thought.—Trans.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

“With a heart of compassion, they lectured on the teachings, taught by example, and also imparted the Dharma Eyes. They blocked all evil paths and opened the door of virtuousness.” These sentences describe the method of teaching. We do not need to be onstage to expound on Buddhism, but we should do so whenever and wherever we encounter someone. We introduce Buddhism to that person in a way that is most suitable for that person. If he or she cannot accept Buddhism at all, simply say “Namo Amitufo.” As time goes by and the person gradually understands, that person will also say “Namo Amitufo” the next time we meet. In this way, we will have accomplished our goal. This is just one of many ways.

For example, a practitioner is always happy and healthy, something everyone very much envies. If we are truly healthy and happy, others will surely ask us, “Why are you always happy?” We tell them, “Because I mindfully chant the Buddha-name.” Practicing Buddha-name chanting will lead to true happiness and good health. If they feel happy in listening to our explanation, then we are

making good use of the opportunity to teach them. “Taught by example” refers to us living a happy, satisfied, and joyful life. This is a good signboard for the Buddha’s teaching. When people see this, they will like it and will want this happiness for themselves. Hence, they will want to learn Buddhism.

How does one avoid falling into the evil paths? If one does not create evil karmas, naturally one will not fall into the evil paths. Evil paths are due mainly to evil thoughts—evil thought is the cause. Evil conduct is unvirtuous karma and bad retributions will surely follow. The law of cause and effect never fails.

If we do not want to have any bad retributions, we should not have any bad thoughts. With pure and proper thoughts, we will definitely not have any bad retributions.

The words “opened the door of virtuousness” mean urging people to end wrongdoings and to practice virtuous conduct. When people end wrongdoings and practice virtuous conduct, the benefit will go to them; the benefit does not involve us. Those who do this will receive the benefit. It is

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

not that others practice and we benefit. Definitely, when we practice we benefit. When this happens, we are proving to others that good rewards come from ending wrongdoings and practicing virtuous conduct.

There are people who become scared when we tell them about transcending the Three Realms⁹ and attaining Buddhahood. But they get happy when we talk about them becoming immensely rich and important in their next lifetime. When we encounter such people, we should teach them the methods of being born as a human or a heavenly being. There are also people who have great aspirations. They know that the Three Realms are filled with sufferings, and that even in the heavenly path —where good fortune is great and the life span is long—the heavenly beings will still die one day. For these people with great aspirations, their wish is to transcend the Three Realms. We should teach them the methods of transcending the Three

⁹ Three Realms: Desire, Form, and Formless realms. The Desire realm consists of the paths of hells, hungry ghosts, animals, humans, asuras, and desire heavens.—Trans.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

Realms. This is a door of great virtuousness.

Frankly, the only method of practice that allows one to succeed in one lifetime is the Buddha-name chanting method. In all my forty-plus years of learning Buddhism, this is what I have realized. The Buddha-name chanting method is truly wondrous. If we introduce it to others, we are opening the door of utmost virtuousness. Nothing is more virtuous than this.

“They regarded all beings as themselves. They rescued and helped living beings and shouldered the burden of helping them all cross over to the other shore.” When we treat others like we would treat ourselves, that is, with no difference whatsoever, it is “unconditional compassion for all others as we are all one entity” as taught in Mahayana Buddhism. We should treat all impartially. As long as a person accepts our help, we should wholeheartedly help this person.

Buddhist practitioners should have this vow: help all beings far and wide, uphold the proper teachings, and pass on the Buddha’s wisdom to future generations.

EXCERPT EIGHT

The Thus Come One commiserates with the beings in the Three Realms with infinite great compassion. This is why he appears in the world: to expound Buddhist teachings and spread them everywhere, like light; to help all beings; and to bring true benefit to them.

“Light” has the meaning of reaching places far and wide. “Expound” means to teach and to propagate. “Buddhist teachings” refers to the way to transcend life and death and to perfectly attain Buddhahood. “Help” means to save and to rescue. “True benefit” refers to fulfilling the wishes of all beings.

This excerpt explains the reason why the Buddha came to this world. Why did he appear in India and not in China? Although Chinese culture had already existed for a long time, the highest aspiration of the Chinese was to be reborn in the heavens. They did not have the thought of tran-

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

scending the Three Realms. For rebirth in the human or heavenly paths, Confucian teachings and Taoist teachings were sufficient. Therefore, the Buddha did not need to go there.

At the time in India when Sakyamuni Buddha appeared, many religions were flourishing. The sutras mentioned six major non-Buddhist masters. The practitioners of Brahmanism, the Yoga system, and Samkhya were able to attain very high levels of meditative concentration: they were able to be reborn in the Fourth Formless Heaven, a feat that the Chinese had not been able to accomplish. Frankly, when the Chinese were reborn in the heavens, they could only get to the heavens in the Desire Realm. They could not get to the heavens in the Form Realm.

Indians could be reborn in the heavens in the Form Realm and even in the Formless Realm, but they could not transcend them. They thought that the Fourth Meditation Heaven or the Fourth Formless Heaven was the state of nirvana. It was a great misconception.

Therefore, at that time, only the people in In-

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

dia, out of all the people in the world, had the right capacities and mature conditions. The Buddha “commiserated with the beings in the Three Realms” and appeared there to help them transcend the Six Paths and attain the true Bodhi and nirvana.

The Buddha was impartial. When the conditions of the beings in a place were mature, he would use the most appropriate method to teach them. As stated in “Universal Door Chapter”:¹⁰ “For those who will only be liberated upon the manifestation of a Buddha, then the manifestation in the form of a Buddha will appear to present the teachings.” In India, they needed a Buddha to teach them and in China, they needed a bodhi-sattva. The manifestations were different but the objective was the same. The objective was “to help all beings; and to bring true benefit to them.”

If a person wants to be reborn in the heavens, the Buddha will teach the method to that person, and he or she will be truly reborn there. This is

¹⁰ This chapter is from the *Lotus Sutra*.—Trans.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

bringing true benefit to that person.

The absolutely perfect, true benefit is attaining Buddhahood. Becoming a Bodhisattva of Equal Enlightenment is not yet ultimate and perfect. The *Infinite Life Sutra* teaches us the method of seeking rebirth in the Western Pure Land through belief, vow, and mindful Buddha-name chanting. It is the ultimate and perfect true benefit.

As mentioned in the three Pure Land sutras, we can perfectly accomplish the goal of rebirth in the Land of Ultimate Bliss in one lifetime—without waiting until the next lifetime. There, in the four lands, each with nine grades, the environment as well as all the beings are wondrously magnificent.

The teaching of Sakyamuni Buddha at this Dharma assembly is absolutely true. The Buddha mentioned “true” three times in this sutra. It is very rare for the word “true” to be mentioned three times in a sutra.

EXCERPT NINE

May I attain the pure sound of a Buddha and may my Dharma voice spread everywhere limitlessly, propagating the teachings of precept observation, meditative concentration, and diligence. May I thoroughly understand the profound, wonderful Dharma. May my wisdom be as vast and as deep as the sea. May my mind be pure, void of dust and toil. May I transcend boundless doors of the evil paths and quickly reach the shore of ultimate enlightenment. May I be forever free of greed, anger, and ignorance, and with the power of samadhi end all delusions and faults.

“May I attain the pure sound of a Buddha and may my Dharma voice spread everywhere limitlessly.” This is a magnificent vow of Amitabha Buddha. The purpose of being a Buddha is to universally

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

help all beings. This is done by lecturing on the Dharma. This verse is even clearer than what Master Huineng said in the *Platform Sutra*, as it reveals the purpose of becoming a Buddha. We Buddhist practitioners should aspire to this.

We bring nothing with us at birth and we take nothing with us at death. Not fame, nor prestige, nor wealth, nor gain. If every day we wished for them, it would be very foolish of us. As the *Diamond Sutra* says: “All phenomena are illusory.” It also says: “All conditioned existences are like a dream, an illusion, a bubble, or a shadow.”

Therefore, we should constantly think about spreading the Dharma and benefiting all beings throughout all the Dharma Realms. This way, we will be of the same mind, the same vow, and the same practice as all Buddhas without realizing it. We will definitely attain Buddhahood!

The words “propagating the teachings of precept observation, meditative concentration, and diligence” refer to the Six Paramitas that bodhisattvas cultivate, which are giving, precept observation, patience, diligence, meditative concentra-

tion, and prajna wisdom.

But only precept observation, meditative concentration, and diligence are listed here. They refer to the Six Paramitas, which are the practice of Mahayana bodhisattvas. If precept observation, meditative concentration, and wisdom were listed here, then this would be referring to the Three Learnings.

The words “thoroughly understand the profound, wonderful Dharma” mean “enlightening the mind and seeing the true nature,” as taught in Mahayana Buddhism. If one cannot thoroughly understand the profound, wonderful Dharma, one will not be able to help all beings extensively.

In this sutra, the sense of these words is more thorough, more complete. Based on the principles, method, and level of practice taught in this sutra, we can see that the profound, wonderful Dharma refers to this wondrous teaching of the Pure Land school: “This mind is Buddha, and this mind becomes Buddha. Enlighten the mind and reach the original nature. Mindfully chant the Buddha-name, attain rebirth in the Western Pure Land, and,

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

without retrogression, attain Buddhahood.” This teaching is not found in any other Mahayana sutra. The words “the profound, wonderful Dharma” convey this meaning specifically.

The forty-eight vows open up the supreme Dharma door for us—this is completely the state of Tathagata at the attainment stage. This Dharma door teaches us to mindfully chant the Buddha-name and attain rebirth in the Western Pure Land. This is taking [Amitabha Buddha’s] rewards and making them our causes. Great Master Ouyi said that the sentient beings in the Nine Dharma Realms (bodhisattvas, sound-hearers, pratyekabuddhas, and the beings in the Six Paths) who rely on themselves alone cannot understand this. That is why this is “the profound, wonderful Dharma.”

The *Avatamsaka Sutra* and the *Lotus Sutra* are both wonderful Dharma. But when they are compared with the *Infinite Life Sutra*, the latter is number one. Therefore, the *Infinite Life Sutra* is “the profound, wonderful Dharma.”

It is not hard to believe the teaching in the *Avatamsaka Sutra* and the *Lotus Sutra*, but it is hard

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

to believe the teaching in the *Infinite Life Sutra*, which is the most hard-to-believe method. Therefore, if we introduce the *Infinite Life Sutra* to others, it is quite normal that they will not believe it. If a person believes it when we introduce it to them, this person is not an ordinary person. As stated in the *Infinite Life Sutra*, this is a bodhisattva who has manifested as a human being; he or she is not an ordinary person.

“May my wisdom be as vast and as deep as the sea.” To widely help all beings, one must first help oneself. To help others achieve in their practice, one must first achieve perfect wisdom. In this way, one will have the ability to help others. After stating the great vow of helping others, Dharmakara Bhikshu said that he then sought deep, vast wisdom. This deep, vast wisdom is innate in the true nature, not attained from the outside. How does one attain profound wisdom? The next sentence tells us the method.

“May my mind be pure, void of dust and toil.” “Dust” refers to pollutants: when something is tainted with dust, it gets dirty. “Toil” refers to af-

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

fictions. In order to restore a pure mind, we must stay far away from all pollutants and eradicate afflictions.

“May my wisdom be as vast and as deep as the sea. May my mind be pure, void of dust and toil.” The two sentences complement each other. Because they complement each other, boundless Dharma bliss will arise. The more one achieves in practice, the more wisdom one will have. The more wisdom one has, the deeper is one’s belief and thus the more one will achieve in practice. As one achieves more in practice, one will have even more wisdom. This is how meditative concentration and wisdom complement each other perpetually. When one practices this way, one will transcend all evil paths.

“May I transcend boundless doors of the evil paths.” The cause to achieve this is cultivation of a pure mind. Once the mind is pure, all obstacles that prevent us from obtaining good fruits from our cultivation will be eliminated, and one will stay away from the evil paths. When one is free of anger, one will transcend the door of hells. When one

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

is free of ignorance, one will transcend the door of animals. When one is free of greed and miserliness, one will transcend the door of hungry ghosts. Therefore, when one eradicates greed, anger, and ignorance, one will transcend the Three Evil Paths. And if one does not have the slightest yearning for the good fortune in the human and heavenly paths, one will transcend the Six Paths.

The sentence in the excerpt is also a statement of comparisons. When the path of hungry ghosts is compared with the path of hells, the path of hungry ghosts is good and the path of hells is bad. When the path of animals is compared with the path of hungry ghosts, the path of animals is good and the path of hungry ghosts is bad. When the realm of arhats and pratyekabuddhas of the Theravada tradition is compared with that of Mahasattvas, the realm of arhats and pratyekabuddhas is bad and the realm of Mahasattvas is good. When the realm of bodhisattvas is compared with that of Buddhas, the realm of bodhisattvas is bad and the realm of Buddhas is good. Therefore, “boundless doors of the evil paths” also encompasses the realms of

sound-hearers, pratyekabuddhas, and bodhisattvas. Only when one perfectly attains Buddhahood will one transcend the evil paths.

In “quickly reach the shore of ultimate enlightenment,” the words “shore of ultimate enlightenment” refer to perfect and complete Buddhahood. In other words, “boundless doors of the evil paths” means that the path of the bodhisattvas of the Provisional Teaching and all the paths below are bad paths. Therefore, the bad paths include not only the Six Paths but also the realms of sound-hearers, pratyekabuddhas, and the bodhisattvas of the Provisional Teaching.

“Forever free of greed, anger, and ignorance” is saying that the three kinds of affliction—Affliction of Views and Thoughts, Affliction of Dust and Sand, and Affliction of Ignorance¹¹—are completely eradicated. This is the state of Tathagata at the attainment stage.

The words “with the power of samadhi end all delusions and faults” are saying that one is no

¹¹ The three kinds of afflictions refer to attachments, discriminations, and wandering thoughts respectively. — Trans.

longer deluded about anything in this world and beyond. Whether cultivating, teaching, interacting with people, or engaging in tasks, one will definitely not commit wrongdoings. How does one achieve this? With the power of samadhi. “Samadhi” used here refers to the Buddha-name Chanting Samadhi.

The last few sentences [starting from “May my wisdom be as vast and as deep as the sea”] were Amitabha Buddha’s guidelines for learning and practice when he was at the causal stage. Compare our practice to that of Amitabha Buddha at the causal stage. Do we also seek wisdom as our ultimate goal and seek nothing else?

If one seeks wisdom, one must achieve a pure mind. When one has a pure mind, wisdom manifests. A pure mind is like a mirror. Its function is to see everything clearly in its reflection. This [seeing everything clearly] is having wisdom. If one wants to have a pure mind, one’s mind must not be contaminated even in the slightest way—by mundane teachings (the Five Desires and the Six Dusts) or by supramundane teachings (that is, Mahayana,

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

Theravada, True Teachings, or Provisional Teachings). This is very important. One must try to have a mind of the utmost purity, and speech and behavior of the utmost virtuousness.

There are two approaches in learning Buddhism. The first is practice—here one starts with cultivating a pure mind. The other is understanding—here one studies the teachings. Which approach is more advantageous? Practice. As long as one has a pure mind, it does not matter that one has no knowledge of Buddhism. If one eradicates affliction, then the mind is pure and the Buddha Land will also be pure. One will be able to attain rebirth in the Western Pure Land.

If one uses the approach of understanding, after one is clear about all the principles, methods, and states, one still needs to practice, starting from the basics. One cannot achieve in one's cultivation with only knowledge and no practice. When one uses the approach of practice, one mainly cultivates mindfulness; understanding of the teachings is supplementary. One need not make painstaking effort to seek understanding—it will come natu-

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

rally. Practice is the correct approach. If one uses this approach, whether one reads the sutras or listens to lectures, one will benefit from each particular sentence that one understands. If one does not understand a sentence, it does not matter, as one will understand it when one listens to the lectures again. One will naturally understand after listening to lectures a few times. One need not get stuck on a sentence or a paragraph; otherwise, one's mind will become disturbed.

In the title of this sutra are the words "purity, impartiality, and enlightenment." These three are one in three and three in one. When we attain one, we attain all three. Of the three, cultivating a pure mind is the easiest. The way to cultivate a pure mind is to mindfully chant the Buddha-name. When we are not chanting the Buddha-name, we should listen to the chanting of the Buddha-name. It is best if we can listen to our own chanting. So, we could record our chanting, and when we are not chanting, listen to this recording. This is very effective. This is cultivating a pure mind.

[In the part of the excerpt that talks about

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

Dharmakara Bhiksu's practice for his own enlightenment,] Dharmakara Bhiksu put wisdom as his first priority and the result of his practice is this: with the power of samadhi he ended all delusions and faults. [This samadhi places] equal emphasis on both meditative concentration and wisdom. The purpose [of Dharmakara practicing this way] is tremendously profound. It truly provides a very valuable reference for our learning practice.

EXCERPT TEN

I will constantly practice the Six Paramitas of giving, precept observation, patience, diligence, meditative concentration, and wisdom. For those sentient beings who are not yet awakened, I will help them attain awakening. For those who are awakened, I will help them attain Buddhahood. Rather than make offerings to sages as countless as the Ganges sands, I would perseveringly and courageously seek proper enlightenment.

The statement “I will constantly practice the Six Paramitas of giving, precept observation, patience, diligence, meditative concentration, and wisdom” describes the conduct of bodhisattvas in this world. In other words, it is the standard for their mindset and practice. We should learn this.

“Giving” is letting go—letting go of everything in this world. All the afflictions, even illnesses,

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

birth and death, and the root cause of transmigration come about because one is unwilling to let go of wandering thoughts and attachments. One truly reaps the fruit of one's actions. The purpose of giving is to help one let go of one's concerns, worries, afflictions, wandering thoughts, discriminations, and attachments.

Many people think that they are walking the bodhisattva path, practicing giving and making offerings everywhere. But their intent is to gain a lot through giving a little. They give some money because they want to have wealth and give teachings because they want to have intelligence and wisdom.

If one practices giving with such thinking, one is not a bodhisattva. Such thinking comes from an ordinary being's wandering thoughts of greed, anger, ignorance, and arrogance.

The purpose of bodhisattvas practicing giving is to let go of their wandering thoughts. When they let go of all the wandering thoughts, boundless wisdom, capabilities, and wealth innate in the true nature will naturally manifest. [Once we let go,]

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

there is no longer a need to seek or to cultivate.

When Master Huineng attained enlightenment, he said, “Who would have expected that inherent nature is originally complete in itself? . . . Who would have expected that inherent nature can produce myriad things?”¹² All enjoyment is as one wishes and manifests from one’s thoughts.

When the Buddha taught giving, he was teaching us to let go of wandering thoughts and to uncover innate virtues. This is a true benefit.

A big problem with ordinary beings is that we cannot let go. Therefore, we trouble the Buddhas and bodhisattvas to use various expedient means to indirectly and tactfully help us gradually let go. Bodhisattvas set examples with their behavior to teach us to practice giving and to let go of fame, prestige, gain, wealth, the Five Desires, the Six Dusts, affliction, worry, and birth and death. When we let go of everything, we will attain great freedom.

The *Diamond Sutra* says: “Even the Dharma has

¹² *The Sutra of Hui-neng*, trans. Thomas Cleary (Shambhala, Boston and London, 1998), 11.

to be laid aside, let alone worldly teachings.” “Dharma” refers to the Buddha-dharma. One should not be attached to the Buddha-dharma either. Any attachment is a mistake. The Buddha-dharma is like a boat, something we use for crossing a river. Upon reaching our destination, we should let go of the tool that got us there. The Buddha-dharma is to help us overcome difficulties. When we have done so, we should not be attached to the Buddha-dharma and should let go of it too.

“Precept observation” means abiding by laws. When one abides by laws, one will naturally have peace of mind and be free of all fears. Etiquette taught in Confucianism and the precepts taught in Buddhism are the norms for our daily behavior. The most important fundamental precepts set by the Buddha are these four: no killing, no stealing, no sexual misconduct, and no lying. These four offenses are intrinsically wrong. Regardless of whether we have received the precepts, we commit an offense when we do any of these four acts.

The precept of not taking intoxicants is a preventive measure. When we carefully look at people

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

who committed grave offenses, we will see that a lot of them were alcohol related—one loses reason when drunk. This was why the Buddha included not taking intoxicants as a major precept.

In addition, we should also abide by the country's laws and customs. This way, we will get along harmoniously with others. This is the true meaning of precept observation.

“Patience” is forbearance. The *Prajna Sutra* says: “All accomplishments are attributed to patience.” Therefore, patience requires resolute endurance. Considerable patience is needed for any accomplishment in worldly undertakings, let alone in learning Buddhism. One must be able to exercise patience. When one is patient, one will be able to maintain a tranquil mind and advance in one's cultivation. If one is not patient, one will not have any progress in one's cultivation no matter how diligently one cultivates. Patience requires true effort. It is a prerequisite for meditative concentration.

The Chinese term for “diligence” is *jingjin*. *Jing* means “unadulterated” and *jin* means “making pro-

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

gress.” Many practitioners resolve to exert themselves but their efforts are unfocused. They learn many things, but they get all mixed up. This is adulterated progress, so they cannot achieve in their practice.

When one concentrates on one Dharma door, one’s progress will be rapid. For example, if a person learns only one sutra, after one year this person will achieve in his or her learning. On the other hand, if another person simultaneously learns ten sutras, his or her achievement in learning cannot compare with that of the person who concentrates on one sutra.

After one learns a sutra, for example the *Amitabha Sutra*, and studies it for ten years, wherever one goes in the world, people will say “Amitabha Buddha is here” or “You are Amitabha Buddha manifested.” If one learns the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* for ten years, one will become Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva. If one learns the “Universal Door Chapter” for ten years, one will become Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva. The question is whether one is able to focus on one sutra.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

People today like to learn extensively; that is, to learn many things. This concept is wrong, and such thinking will lead to failure—definitely not success.

I had a little exposure to my teacher's lineage. I followed the teaching of my teacher Mr. Li Bingnan but not completely. Had I completely followed his teaching, I would have achieved more than I have today. I am regretful now.

In ten years I learned five sutras under Mr. Li's guidance. He set a rule that a student had to learn one sutra well, before starting the second sutra. What was the criterion for "learning well"? Mr. Li's acknowledgement. If he did not think that the student had learned it well, the student had to continue learning it. As a Chinese saying goes, "If one does not listen to the advice of an elder person, one will soon suffer disadvantages." Young people have little experience and act rashly. They do not believe the experience of older people and thus suffer disadvantages.

"Meditative concentration" means being in control and not being disturbed by the environment. In the Buddha-name chanting method, it is One

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

Mind Undisturbed, which is a pure mind. “Wisdom” is rational and not the same as mundane intelligence. When one has wisdom, one will not make any mistake when interacting with people and engaging in tasks.

The statement “I will constantly practice the Six Paramitas of giving, precept observation, patience, diligence, meditative concentration, and wisdom” talks about the Six Perfections. The first five are about cultivation. When one cultivates according to the methods and principles, wisdom will naturally be uncovered. How does one know when one’s wisdom is uncovered? It can be seen in one’s daily life. These six are the norms for the daily behavior of a bodhisattva. When wisdom is present in giving, one will practice giving without being attached to the act of giving—“the *Three Wheels*¹³ are essentially empty.” This is wisdom. In observing the precepts without attachment to form, one naturally conforms to the standards of the precepts. When wisdom is present in one’s activities—in pa-

¹³ The Three wheels refers to the person who gives, the person who receives the giving, and that which is given.—Trans.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

tience, in diligence, and in meditative concentration—the same applies. This way, one will truly be able to leave suffering behind and attain happiness.

“For those sentient beings who are not yet awakened, I will help them attain awakening.” For those who have not been in contact with Buddhism, we should find ways and opportunities to introduce Buddhism to them; for those who do not understand Buddhism, we should find ways and opportunities to help them understand Buddhism.

“For those who are awakened, I will help them attain Buddhahood.” For those who have learned Buddhism and aspire to quickly achieve in their practice, we should teach them the Buddha-name chanting method to help them achieve in one lifetime.

“Rather than making offerings to sages as countless as the Ganges sands, I would perseveringly and courageously seek proper enlightenment.” This sentence is very important. Many people in this world seek good fortune. They make offerings every day in order to get good fortune, longevity, and wealth. The Buddha said that it is bet-

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

ter to have firm aspiration and confidence, and courageously and diligently seek rebirth in the Western Pure Land. When one is reborn in the Western Pure Land, one will attain Buddhahood in one lifetime.

The good fortune from making offerings to Buddhas and bodhisattvas is tremendous. But not only can we not make offerings to a Buddha or a bodhisattva today, we cannot even meet an arhat or a stream-enterer. The offerings we can make are only to the images of Buddhas or bodhisattvas. Is it possible to accrue any good fortune by making offerings to these images? It depends on how we go about making offerings.

The offerings are symbolic. The flowers offered to a Buddha image symbolize cause. Just as a plant blooms first and then bears fruit, fruit symbolizes effect. The flowers offered serve to remind us to have belief, vow, and mindfully chant the Buddha-name. This is cultivating the cause. Attaining rebirth in the Western Pure Land in the future and being close to Amitabha Buddha is the effect. Making offerings in this way will bring good fortune.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

The simplest offering is a glass of water. Water serves to remind us to maintain a mind as pure, as impartial, and as tranquil as water—without the slightest dust, pollution, or ripple.

Lamps offered symbolize light. Our minds should be as just and as honorable. We should help others, even at our expense. The lamps offered should be oil lamps. The burning of oil represents sacrificing oneself to illuminate others. This is great compassion. Today, light bulbs are used and this symbolic representation [of the oil lamps] is hardly seen.

Therefore, these things seen in a Buddhist cultivation center are educational in nature and serve to remind the practitioners [of the Buddha's teachings] at all times. But today many people forget the true meaning of the offerings. They use the offerings as a way to fawn on or to ingratiate themselves with Buddhas and bodhisattvas. A true gentleman in this mundane world would not accept any flattery, let alone Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Hence, we must understand the true meaning of making offerings.

EXCERPT ELEVEN

I will constantly use compassion to uproot
[the misery of] sentient beings and to awaken the
boundless beings who are suffering.

“Constantly” refers to time, and “boundless” refers to space. Time and space cover all manner of beings. Amitabha Buddha, out of great compassion, wants to teach and help all the beings in all the Dharma Realms.

EXCERPT TWELVE

If one wholeheartedly seeks the Way and
ceaselessly makes focused and diligent
progress, one will surely attain Buddhahood.
There is no wish that one cannot fulfill.

It is difficult to attain the Way. When one can attain what is difficult, one can surely attain everything else. But one must first know the principles and methods of seeking. The principles lie in the word “wholeheartedly.” “Wholeheartedly” means having a true sincere mind, that is, one with the utmost sincerity. Mr. Zeng Guofan¹⁴ once said, “Not having a single thought arise is called sincerity.” Master Huineng said, “Originally, there was nothing at all.” This describes the true mind. If one seeks the Way with this mind, one will attain what one seeks because everything in the world is gen-

¹⁴ 1811-1872. An eminent government official, military general, and Confucian scholar of the Qing dynasty. — Trans.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

erated by the true mind.

Buddhas and bodhisattvas have extraordinary powers and can make boundless treasures appear. Why is it that they can do so but we cannot? Because their minds are the true mind and ours are the false mind. The true mind can create [everything]. Everything in the Ten Dharma Realms is created by the true mind. The Mahayana sutras say, “All phenomena are created by the true mind and altered by the consciousness.”

The beings in the Western Pure Land make food and clothing appear at will. This is because their minds are pure. A pure mind is the true mind. Today, we have numerous wandering thoughts, afflictions, worries, and concerns—we do not have the true mind. The “wholeheartedly” is important.

Learning and practicing Buddhism is nothing other than letting go of wandering thoughts, discriminations, and attachments. When one does so, the true mind will manifest. It is true that “in Buddhism, every wish can be fulfilled.”

“Ceaselessly make focused and diligent progress”—this is how one should seek. When one

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

makes progress, one will not go backward. “Focused” means heading in one direction and towards one goal. Be it Buddhism or worldly pursuits, one will surely succeed in one’s seeking. There are many Buddhist practitioners who seek progress in their cultivation but have little success. What is the reason? They learn too many things, and the things they learn are too varied. They are not making focused and diligent progress; instead, the progress they make is unfocused. This is why their efforts are to no avail.

There are many sutras. From the aspect of principle, every method is number one. All methods are equal, and no one method is superior or inferior to another. But from the aspect of phenomena, every person’s capacity, intelligence, and living environment differ. They find some methods easier to learn and practice, and others harder. Hence, the question of easiness or difficulty does not lie in the methods. It lies in a person’s capacity and living environment.

The Buddha-name chanting method is suitable for everyone to learn and practice regardless of

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

one's capacity. Other methods such as Zen meditation and Tibetan Buddhism are not as easy for one to learn and practice. The Buddha-name chanting method is simple and convenient. It does not matter whether one has a Buddha image at home or if one has flowers to offer. Everyone can learn and practice. This method does not emphasize appearances or learning environment. It is the most convenient method.

Everyone has a different capacity. If one forces oneself to learn an unsuitable method, one will have a difficult time. But if one learns a method that one is interested in, then the learning will be easier. Will one be able to attain rebirth in the Western Pure Land if one practices another method? Yes, one will. It is clearly stated in the *Infinite Life Sutra* that if a practitioner of another method dedicates merits to be reborn in the Western Pure Land, he or she will attain rebirth there. From this we can see that Amitabha Buddha did not say that one has to learn the *Infinite Life Sutra* and mindfully chant "Amitufo" to achieve rebirth in the Western Pure Land.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

Regardless of which method one learns and practices, one must be able to suppress one's afflictions and vow to seek rebirth in the Land of Ultimate Bliss where one will be close to Amitabha Buddha. If one cannot suppress one's afflictions, one will not be able to attain rebirth there. This is the true requirement.

As long as we grasp the principle of "focused and diligent progress," we will surely achieve in our practice. Ancient accomplished practitioners said that mastering one is more important than studying many. It is also said, "When one masters one sutra, one naturally masters all sutras." If we want to have a deep understanding of the Buddhist Canon, what should we do? Should we learn many or delve deeply into one method?

Historically, many of those who delved deeply into one method achieved in their learning and practice. Of those who learned many methods, very few succeeded in their cultivation. Those who learned a variety of methods and succeeded were exceptionally talented. People who have a medium or low capacity do not have the ability to learn

many methods and succeed.

Therefore, we should delve deeply into one method.

If one “ceaselessly makes focused and diligent progress, one will surely attain Buddhahood. There is no wish that one cannot fulfill.” If we understand the principles and methods, we will be able to fulfill any wish. Be it academics, one’s work, or a Buddhist practitioner’s cultivation, applying this principle and method will lead to complete success.

It will not be hard to accomplish any undertaking in this world or beyond if we have a sincere mind. What makes it difficult is our deviated thoughts. Obstacles are created by us. Indeed, “no phenomena exist outside the mind; the mind does not exist outside any phenomena.” We must understand this.

EXCERPT THIRTEEN

Dharmakara heard the Buddha's discourse and saw everything shown to him. He aspired to make supreme, wondrous vows. He thoroughly contemplated¹⁵ what was good and bad about heavenly and human beings and what was wonderful and inferior about their lands.¹⁶ He single-mindedly selected what he wanted and formed his great vows. For five kalpas, he diligently sought and explored, respectfully and carefully persevered, and cultivated merits and virtues. He thoroughly understood all the merits and adornments of the twenty-one kotis¹⁷ of Buddha Lands as thoroughly as he understood one Buddha Land.

¹⁵ Contemplated also means understood. — Trans.

¹⁶ All the Buddha Lands in the ten directions. — Trans.

¹⁷ The edge, the highest point. As a numeral, koti means one hundred thousand, one million, or ten million. —
<http://www.sutrasmantras.info/glossary.html#koti>

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

The Buddha Land he created surpassed all
Buddha Lands.

“Dharmakara heard the Buddha’s discourse.”
“Dharmakara” was the Dharma name of Amitabha
Buddha at the causal stage, when he was a bhiksu.
“Heard” refers to listening to his teacher’s intro-
duction. Here “Buddha” refers to Lokeshvararaja
Tathagata, Dharmakara Bodhisattva’s teacher.

Dharmakara Bodhisattva told his teacher about
his aspirations and asked his teacher to teach him
how to fulfill them. When a student has a virtuous
and great aspiration, the teacher will always
wholeheartedly help the student accomplish it.
Therefore, Lokeshvararaja Tathagata not only ex-
plained to Dharmakara what he wanted to know
but also used extraordinary powers to display the
Buddha Lands in the ten directions to him, and
that allowed him to see them clearly.

At the beginning of the *Visualization Sutra*,
a similar situation is described, which was the
cause of Sakyamuni Buddha speaking the sutra.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

Queen Vaidehi encountered family misfortunes. Her son killed his father the king, harmed her, and usurped the throne. Having encountered such great misfortune, she became disheartened and asked Sakyamuni Buddha if there was a better and safer place where she could be reborn. Instead of directing her to one specific Buddha Land, Sakyamuni Buddha displayed all the Buddha Lands in the ten directions for her to choose from. This was the same method that Lokeshvararaja Tathagata employed for Dharmakara Bodhisattva.

Queen Vaidehi chose Amitabha Buddha's Western Pure Land. And then Sakyamuni Buddha taught her the method to attain rebirth in the Land of Ultimate Bliss. This is essentially the content of the *Visualization Sutra*.

Lokeshvararaja Tathagata displayed all the Buddha Lands in the ten directions to Dharmakara Bodhisattva. After seeing all these, he "aspired to make supreme, wondrous vows. He thoroughly contemplated what was good and bad about their heavenly and human beings and what was wonderful and inferior about the lands." "Their" refers to

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

all the Buddha Lands in the Ten Directions. In the Six Paths in all Buddha Lands there were good and bad beings. This is talking about the living environment, which involves living beings and situations.

The Land of Ultimate Bliss did not come from Amitabha Buddha's baseless imagination or dreams. He truly saw many Buddha Lands, and they all differed vastly from one another. Some lands were very wonderful, and others had many shortcomings. "What was wonderful and inferior about those lands" refers to the material environment [which involves inanimate things]. "Inferior" refers to a very bad environment. "Wonderful" refers to a very good and beautiful environment. The environment of every being is different. The causes every being creates are different and result in different effects [environments]. Dharmakara Bodhisattva understood the principles and truths.

"He thoroughly contemplated. . . . He single-mindedly selected what he wanted and formed his great vows." How was the Western Pure Land created? Dharmakara Bodhisattva visited various Buddha Lands and adopted their strengths and re-

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

jected their shortcomings. In other words, the Land of Ultimate Bliss is an amalgamation of the excellent qualities of all the Buddha Lands.

He saw that all the Buddha Lands in the ten directions had Six Paths, and the suffering was tremendously intense, especially in the Three Evil Paths. Thus he wanted his first vow to be that there would be no Three Evil Paths in the land he would create. This is how this great vow came to be.

The Chinese often say, "Read ten thousand books, travel ten thousand miles." Listening to lectures on the sutras is like reading books, and seeing all the Buddha Lands is like traveling ten thousand miles. Because he heard with his own ears and saw with his own eyes, Dharmakara Bodhisattva's knowledge and wisdom were true. He had such abundant knowledge and experience that he was able, by selection, to create his own land. This was how the Land of Ultimate Bliss came about.

The causes and conditions for how the Land of Ultimate Bliss came about were different from those for the other Buddha Lands. The causes and

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

conditions for the latter were complicated and not simple: good ones and bad ones were mixed together. In the Western Pure Land, Dharmakara chose only pure and virtuous dharmas. His purpose was to provide a wonderful learning and practice environment for the beings from all the Buddha Lands in the ten directions who truly generate the great mind and who aspire to [understand and] transcend the cycle of birth and death, and attain Buddhahood in one lifetime. He wanted to provide the best learning and living environment.

“For five kalpas, he diligently sought and explored, respectfully and carefully persevered, and cultivated merits and virtues.”

The words “sought and explored” mean that one needs to clearly recognize and understand the virtuous dharmas and the bad dharmas, and the good and bad retributions. And then one needs to end all wrongdoings and to cultivate all virtues.

The words “respectfully and carefully persevered” mean that one needs to be respectful when interacting with people and engaging in tasks. A respectful mind is the true mind. In addition to be-

ing respectful, one needs to carefully persevere, so that one will not lose what one has learned and practiced.

The word “cultivated” means correcting one’s faults and applying one’s learning to life.

“Five kalpas” is the time Dharmakara spent cultivating and forming vows. There are several ways to measure kalpas. “Increasing and decreasing kalpas” is the one that is most often heard of. Sakyamuni Buddha said that in the Saha world, the shortest life span of humans averages about ten years. At this point, the suffering in this Saha world is tremendously intense. Every one hundred years, the life span increases by one year, until the life span reaches eighty-four thousand years. Then subsequently, every one hundred years, the life span decreases by one year until the life span is again down to ten years. One cycle of an increasing and a decreasing life span is a small kalpa. Twenty small kalpas make up one medium kalpa. Four medium kalpas make up one great kalpa. The kalpas mentioned in the Mahayana sutras refer to great kalpas.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

Dharmakara Bhikṣu spent such a long time cultivating that he was able to truly take in all the strengths of all the Buddha Lands and reject the shortcomings.

“He thoroughly understood all the merits and adornments of the twenty-one kotis of Buddha Lands as thoroughly as he understood one Buddha Land. The Buddha Land he created surpassed all Buddha Lands.”

“Twenty-one” is not an actual number. It represents perfection. For example, in the *Amitabha Sutra*, the number seven represents perfection. It signifies the four directions, the zenith, the nadir, and center. In the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, ten is used to represent perfection. Counting from one to ten, ten is a complete and perfect number. Ten tens is one hundred, also a complete number.

Tibetan Buddhism uses sixteen and twenty-one to represent perfection.

“The Buddha Land he created surpassed all Buddha Lands.” “The Buddha Land he created” refers to the Land of Ultimate Bliss that he established. “All Buddha Lands” refers to the twenty-

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

one kotis of Buddha Lands. The Western Pure Land is an amalgamation of the wonderful strengths of all the Buddha Lands. It has all the strengths of the Buddha Lands and is free of all the shortcomings. Naturally, it surpasses all these Buddha Lands and fulfills Dharmakara's great vows. This sentence from the excerpt is saying that the Land of Ultimate Bliss has been created.

The prerequisite for rebirth in the Western Pure Land is a pure mind. When the mind is pure, the land will be pure. The Buddha taught us to cultivate a pure mind with "belief, vow, and practice." True belief, sincerely vowing, and single-mindedly chanting "Amitufo" will help us suppress wandering thoughts, discriminations, and attachments. In doing so, we will meet the initial standards for purity and be reborn [in the Pure Land] in the Land Where Sages and Ordinary Beings Dwell Together.

EXCERPT FOURTEEN

He dwelt in true wisdom and courageously
made focused and diligent progress.

The Buddha mentioned “true” three times in the *Infinite Life Sutra*. Here, we have “true wisdom.”

Of all the teachings, one gets to know Buddhism. Moreover, one learns the Pure Land method of Mahayana teachings. Also, one chooses “belief, vow, and Buddha-name chanting” and seeks rebirth in the Western Pure Land, and one’s mind steadfastly dwells in this. Such is “dwelling in true wisdom.”

In practicing the Pure Land method, one follows the principle of “no doubt, no intermingling, and no interruption.” One also diligently learns and practices using the method of “the perfect control of the six senses with continuous pure thoughts” taught by Mahasthamaprapta Bodhisattva. This is “courageously making focused and diligent pro-

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

gress.”

Everything in this world is illusory. We need to be truly awakened! People often say “We bring nothing with us at birth and we take nothing with us at death.” Only mindfully chanting the Buddha-name and seeking rebirth in the Western Pure Land, where our life span will be as infinite as that of Amitabha Buddha, is real. Without life, everything is futile. This is true wisdom. Nothing is truer than this!

EXCERPT FIFTEEN

He accumulated and nurtured moral conduct. He gave no rise to any thoughts of greed, anger, ignorance, or desire. He was not attached to form, sound, smell, taste, texture, or mind object.

Accumulating merits and virtues should start with “giving no rise to any thoughts of greed, anger, ignorance, or desire” as well as “not being attached to form, sound, smell, taste, texture, or mind object.” When there is no greed, anger, ignorance, desire, or wandering thoughts, and when one does not yield to external temptations—this is merit. If one cultivates this way, one will attain a pure mind, from which wisdom will arise.

When one has meditative concentration and wisdom, one has great benefit. Meditative concentration and wisdom come forth when the true mind is active. As a result, one is able to control one’s

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

destiny anywhere in the universe. When one does not have meditative concentration and wisdom, one is controlled by affliction and temptation. This is pitiable.

Therefore, cultivation is nothing but this: internally, ridding oneself of greed, anger, and ignorance; and externally, cutting off all temptations.

This excerpt teaches us a principle of learning and practice. When we have “thoughts of greed, anger, ignorance, or desire,” our behavior will not be proper and will need reforming. This excerpt is the standard for [differentiating between] proper and deviated.

Master Huineng said, “Originally, there was nothing at all.” He was talking about the true mind because there is nothing in the true mind. Greed, anger, ignorance, and arrogance are the false mind. Because these illusory things are there, even though we have the true mind, it is unable to function. When we eradicate greed, anger, ignorance, and arrogance, our minds will become pure. Even when forms, sounds, smells, tastes, textures, and mind objects from the external environment try to

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

tempt us, we will not have any thoughts of greed, anger, ignorance, and arrogance.

The major sutras say “All beings are Buddhas in nature.” So why have we become the way we are? The *Avatamsaka Sutra* puts it aptly: it is because of wandering thoughts and attachments. Wandering thoughts are ignorance. Attachments turn into greed and anger. These are the root problems of sentient beings.

EXCERPT SIXTEEN

He planted numerous roots of virtue and did not mind [his] varied sufferings. He had few desires and was content. He pursued only white dharmas¹⁸ and brought benefits to all beings. He was tireless in pursuing his aspirations and vows, achieving results through the power of patience. He constantly harbored compassion and patience for all sentient beings. With a kind expression and caring words, he advised, taught, urged, and encouraged them. He was respectful to the Three Jewels and attended to his teachers without any insincerity or flattery in his heart. All of his conduct was magnificent, and he was a role model in every way. He regarded all dharmas as illusory and remained in the samadhi that is eternally

¹⁸ White dharmas mean wholesome dharmas.—Trans.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

quiescent. He guarded well his verbal karmas and did not ridicule others' faults. He guarded well his bodily karmas and did not transgress any precept or codes of behavior. He guarded well his mental karmas and kept himself pure and uncontaminated.

The words “planted numerous roots of virtue” mean to accumulate merits and virtues. “Roots” are the foundation; they can give rise to myriad virtues. That which can give rise to something is the root. The root of virtue for the Pure Land school is this phrase: Homage to Amitabha Buddha. When one focuses on and practices only the Pure Land method, one continuously and mindfully chants the Buddha-name. This method will help us to keep our minds in an unperturbed and tranquil state from within (where no affliction arises) and not be attached to any phenomena from without. Actually, all of the eighty-four thousand Dharma doors aim to achieve this state.

Of all the methods, the Buddha-name chanting

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

method is the most convenient and the easiest in which to succeed. When one mindfully chants the Buddha-name, one's cultivation will be enhanced by the supportive powers of Amitabha Buddha and all other Buddhas in the ten directions. This is why all the other methods cannot compare with this one.

The words "did not mind [his] varied sufferings" mean that Dharmakara did not mind any of the sufferings he underwent: he accepted them peacefully. Sufferings are brought about by the evil deeds committed in the present and past lifetimes. When we understand the causes of the sufferings, we will willingly undergo them and not blame others.

How should we live our lives? We should let go of any situation or condition, whether favorable or adverse, and just concentrate on chanting the Buddha-name.

Dharmakara "had few desires and was content." When one has few desires and is content, one's afflictions will be reduced. Every day, it is enough for one to have a full stomach, adequate

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

clothing, and a place to shield one from wind and rain. A content person is often happy. When one is content, one will want few things. The less one wants, the more at ease and the happier one is. If one truly does not compete with others or crave anything, one will be happier than a celestial being.

When one has meditative concentration, one will keep the mind in an unperturbed and tranquil state from within and not be attached to any phenomena from without.

Every aspect in one's life should be simple. Simplicity leads to a long life. The ancient Chinese often said, "Illness enters through the mouth." Nowadays, many people contract strange illnesses, which come mostly from the food consumed. In the past in China, there were people in the countryside who maintained a simple diet, but they were healthy and lived a long life. This proves that the simpler the food, the healthier one is.

A pure mind with no wandering thoughts, a regular routine, a simple diet, few desires, and contentment—these are the essentials for good health.

"He pursued only white dharmas." Black signi-

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

fies bad, and white signifies good. Ancient Indians used black and white, and the Chinese used bad and good. Pursuing only white dharmas means pursuing only wholesome dharmas; that is, single-mindedly seeking goodness.

What are wholesome dharmas? And what are unwholesome dharmas? The Buddha said that anything that benefits oneself is unwholesome and that anything that benefits all beings is wholesome. Why is benefiting oneself bad?

One transmigrates within the Three Realms and the Six Paths because of ego-attachment. In other words, when one's every thought is of oneself and for oneself, then one will transmigrate within the Six Paths. Arhats transcend the Six Paths by eradicating ego-attachment. When ego-attachment is eradicated, there is no more transmigration.

When dharmas-attachment is eradicated, the Ten Dharma Realms no longer exist. At this point, one has enlightened the mind and seen the true nature. Dharmas-attachment is hindrance arising from the attachment to our knowledge. Ego-attachment is hindrance arising from our afflic-

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

tions. When one has ego-attachment, one has affliction. When one has dharmas-attachment, one has ignorance. Therefore, when one eradicates ego-attachment, one transcends the cycle of birth and death.

If our every thought is of ourselves, ego-attachment will worsen day by day. How then can we transcend the Three Realms? This is why the Buddha taught us to always think of benefiting all beings. This way, the thoughts of benefiting ourselves will gradually diminish and go away. Our every thought and every deed should be for all beings, not for ourselves. When all beings have good fortune, we too have good fortune, because we are also one of the beings. Similarly, we cannot avoid misfortune if all beings have misfortune.

Having all beings in one's every thought and wholeheartedly helping them is "pursuing only white dharmas." It is also "bringing benefits to all beings." "Bringing" means giving. Benefiting living beings is sacrificing oneself to benefit others.

"He was tireless in pursuing his aspirations and vows." We seek wholesome dharmas, sacrifice our-

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

selves to benefit others, and serve them tirelessly and diligently. If we are healthy and have a long life, then this is good fortune for all beings.¹⁹ If we have a short life, then this is misfortune for all beings. Our physical body has no relevance to our self. It also has no relevance in any of our gains or losses, our benefit or harm. Our body is only a tool used to benefit all beings. This is the attainment of great freedom! When we complete a meritorious deed, the merit is not ours. When we fail, it is not our fault. With no merit or fault and with the benefit belonging to all beings, we will be tireless in accomplishing our aspirations and vows.

The words “achieving results through the power of patience” mean accomplishing the paramita of patience, one of the Six Paramitas that bodhisattvas practice. One can be patient even when it is difficult to do so. Of course, one also needs to have true wisdom. When one has true wisdom, one will know how to benefit all beings.

¹⁹ By having a longer life we have more time to help more beings. With a shorter life, we have less time to help beings. — Trans.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

Although accomplishing a meritorious deed requires certain opportunities and conditions, procedures, and sequential order, one still must have patience to accomplish it. As the *Diamond Sutra* says: “All accomplishments are attributed to patience.” Of the Six Paramitas, which are practiced by bodhisattvas, the paramita of patience is crucial to one’s success or failure.

“He constantly harbored compassion and patience for all sentient beings.” “All sentient beings” refers to all beings, in particular those beings who are suffering, who have committed evil karmas, and who are deluded. We should always treat them with empathy. This sentence teaches us that when interacting with people and engaging in tasks, we should do so with the mindset of compassion and tolerance.

“With a kind expression and caring words” describes the demeanor in which one presents oneself: with a pleasant expression and gentle manner. “Caring words” does not refer to pleasant words but to words that come from love and the wish to protect. These words can benefit people and help

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

them break through delusion and attain awakening.

In the sutras, all the words spoken by the Buddha are caring words. Even a scolding or a reprimand are caring words if the words truly benefit someone. Why bother to reproach or discipline someone, if we don't truly care about that person?

“He advised, taught, urged, and encouraged them.” This is using expedient means to encourage people and help them make progress.

The following examples are all wholesome dharmas, the true source of all happiness.

“He was respectful to the Three Jewels and attended to his teachers.” The mention of the Three Jewels here is not just a reference to the Three Jewels of the Three Refuges: it means we need to dwell in and uphold the Three Jewels. The emphasis of the Three Refuges is the Three Jewels of True Nature—awakening, correct understanding, and purity, which are our true refuges.

The Three Jewels in our true nature are awakening, correct understanding, and purity. The

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

Buddha signifies the awakening of our true nature, the Dharma signifies the correct understanding of our true nature, and the Sangha signifies the purity of our true nature. We should be respectful to them. Every day, in our every thought we should ask ourselves if we are awakened? Do we have correct understanding? Are our thoughts and views correct? Are our minds pure? The purpose of dwelling in and upholding the Three Jewels is to constantly remind us of the Three Jewels of True Nature.

We receive the Buddha's teaching and take him as our teacher. There are two meanings in our making offerings to a Buddha image. The first is to remember and appreciate where we come from, and to never forget. The second is to remind us of the awakening of the true nature. What does the Buddha signify? To be awakened, not deluded. From morning till night, are we awakened or not when interacting with people, engaging in tasks, and handling objects? A Buddha image constantly reminds us to be awakened, not deluded; to maintain a pure mind, one beyond pollution; and to

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

have correct thoughts and views at all times, in all places, and in all situations, whether favorable or adverse. This is being “respectful to the Three Jewels.”

“Attended to his teachers” is respecting one’s teachers and their teachings. Like Confucianism, Buddhism is also founded on filial piety to one’s parents and respect for one’s teachers. Confucian teaching flourished because of this foundation, as did the Buddha’s teaching. Filial piety is thus very important, for only when one is filial will one respect teachers. If one truly respects one’s teachers, one will receive the Way taught by the teachers. If one does not respect one’s teachers, they will not be able to teach one anything no matter how good they are. Why? Because one will not believe them nor be willing to learn from them. When one respects one’s teachers, one will listen to their teaching and diligently practice accordingly, thus receiving merits and benefits. Respecting one’s teachers is respecting the Way and receiving it.

The words “without any insincerity or flattery in his heart” teaches us to not only treat the Three

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

Jewels and teachers with sincerity, but also all beings. We should cultivate this habit in daily life.

“All of his conduct was magnificent and he was a role model in every way.” The word “magnificent” conveys the “truth, goodness, and beauty” that ordinary people often speak of. But such “truth, goodness, and beauty” exists as a concept, not a reality. On the other hand, truth, goodness, beauty, and wisdom truly exist in the Western Pure Land.

When we abide by the Buddha’s teachings, and interact with people and handle matters with a sincere, respectful, pure and great compassionate heart, our minds and conduct will be “magnificent.” So, when we mindfully chant “Amitufo,” we must take Amitabha Buddha’s causal vows as our causal vows.

Dharmakara “was a role model in every way.” He was a role model not only for practitioners but also for the general public. The meaning of these words is infinitely profound and broad.

Whatever our occupation or status in society, we should set a good example for everyone, espe-

cially our peers. In the chapter “Sudhana’s Visits to Fifty-three Wise Teachers” in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, of the fifty-three bodhisattvas, five appeared as monastics and the others as men and women of all ages and all walks of life. Their behavior set good examples for society.

Bodhisattvas not only teach by words. Their every action is also a good example for others. This shows the bodhisattvas’ great compassion. Only by doing so can they change prevailing habits and customs for the better, and encourage and reform people. To encourage and reform people, one teaches not only by words: one’s every action and thought should also be for the benefit of them. If a lay practitioner, regardless of his or her occupation, works for the benefit of society and all beings, he or she is a bodhisattva, a role model.

“He regarded all dharmas as illusory and remained in the samadhi that is eternally quiescent.” This sentence describes Dharmakara’s inner state. All phenomena, whether mundane or supramundane, are illusory. As the *Diamond Sutra* says: “All conditioned existences are like a dream, an illusion,

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

a bubble, or a shadow.” Why take them seriously?

“Samadhi” is a Sanskrit word. The Chinese translation is “proper enjoyment.” The “proper enjoyment” of bodhisattvas is purity, quiescence, and Nirvana. Purity, quiescence, and Nirvana are the enjoyment of Buddhas and Mahasattvas. Lay bodhisattvas can also enjoy them.

Some practitioners have built up large businesses. They tell me, “Master, I am in great suffering. Employees do not follow my orders and it is hard to do business. I have a lot to worry about every day.” Actually, what is there to worry about? The Buddha taught us to “regard all dharmas as illusory and remain in the samadhi that is eternally quiescent.” If we truly practice this, we will lead a very happy and very free life! How then can there be suffering?

There are many entrepreneurs who learn Buddhism. But their learning is not thorough enough. They do not thoroughly understand the principles taught by the Buddha. If they truly understood, their situations would be different.

In Chinese history, the prosperity in the early

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

years of the Qing dynasty was unprecedented. The flourishing age during the rule of Emperors Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianglong lasted for more than one hundred and fifty years. During these years, each emperor would lead all the government officials and military officers in chanting the *Infinite Life Sutra* every day at the imperial court. They abided by the Buddha's teachings and practiced accordingly.

If the owner and the employees of a company know the wondrous benefit of doing this, and they chant a sutra for fifteen to twenty minutes every morning, then they are abiding by the Buddha's teachings. They are the Buddha's students, and they are practicing accordingly. So how can the company not flourish? Doing this is establishing consensus based on the Buddha's teaching.

It requires wisdom to "regard all dharmas as illusory." When one understands the truth of everything, it will be easy to handle matters without making any mistake. Because one does not understand the truth, wrong steps are taken and one ends up making mistakes.

“He guarded well his verbal karmas and did not ridicule other’s faults.” This describes Dharmakara’s external behavior. The sentence “He regarded all dharmas as illusory and remained in the samadhi that is eternally quiescent” describes his attainment and wisdom. “Regarding all dharmas as illusory” is wisdom. “Remaining in the samadhi that is eternally quiescent” is meditative concentration.

When one truly has meditative concentration and wisdom, one’s external behavior will reflect that—“he guarded well his verbal karmas and did not ridicule other’s faults.” When seeing the faults of others, one does not talk about them.

The *Platform Sutra* says: “If one is a true practitioner, one will not see the faults of others.” Why will one not see the faults of others? Because one regards all dharmas as illusory! There is no fault. There is no merit. There is no good and no evil. One’s mind is impartial: without discrimination or attachment, there is neither good nor evil, neither right nor wrong, and neither true nor false. One will naturally not speak of the faults of others.

Therefore, good or evil, right or wrong, and true or false—these are unfounded discriminations formed by people in this world.

“He guarded well his bodily karmas and did not transgress any precept or codes of behavior.” Simply put, one’s demeanor and behavior naturally conform with proper customs: there will be no lack of courtesy; there will be no wrongdoing.

“He guarded well his mental karmas and kept himself pure and uncontaminated.” Of the three kinds of karmas, the hardest to guard is one’s mental karmas, and the easiest bad karmas to commit are verbal karmas. This is why verbal karma is listed first.

In the title of this sutra are the words “purity, impartiality, and enlightenment.” Purity, impartiality, and enlightenment are one in three and three in one. When the mind is pure, it is also impartial. Since it is pure, it must also be enlightened. When the pure mind is functioning, that is enlightenment. An enlightened mind is definitely pure and impartial.

In learning Buddhism, one needs only to culti-

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

vate a pure mind. When one has a pure mind, one will naturally be impartial and enlightened. At all times, in all places, and in all situations, whether favorable or adverse, one needs to maintain a pure and uncontaminated mind.

The mind will naturally be pure when (1) internally, greed, anger, ignorance, and arrogance do not arise in one, and (2) externally, one is not attached to any environment, good or bad. A pure mind is the true mind and is true wisdom. When handling any situation, one will do it correctly and completely, without any mistakes. All mistakes arise from desire and thoughts of gain and loss.

EXCERPT SEVENTEEN

Always using the practice of the Six Paramitas of giving, precept observation, patience, diligence, meditative concentration, and wisdom, he taught and transformed beings to help them steadfastly establish a bodhi mind.

“Always” means forever and never changing. One should follow these six principles at all times.

The first paramita is giving. For us, this means letting go and helping others. There are three kinds of giving: the giving of wealth, the giving of teachings, and the giving of fearlessness. Giving is a karmic cause. If we want to have wealth, we should practice the giving of wealth. If we want to be intelligent and wise, we should practice the giving of teachings. If we wish to have good health and a long life, we should practice the giving of fearlessness. In the giving of fearlessness, the most

important thing is not to harm any being. In addition to not killing beings, we should not even cause them to have afflictions. A vegetarian diet is a form of the giving of fearlessness: We do not eat the flesh of animals or cause them to have afflictions. To be more proactive, we should free captured animals.

I was supposed to be a person with little good fortune and a short life span. But I have lived to this age and my good fortune seems to increase year by year. Both are the rewards from my learning the Buddha's teaching and practicing it accordingly in this lifetime.

One should not enjoy the good fortune oneself because one will use it up very quickly. When one has good fortune, one should share it with others. This way, one's good fortune will never be used up. This is the truth.

As I gained more wisdom, I saw the ins and outs of everything more clearly than before. Thus, I was able to do things that benefited others in a more appropriate and perfect way. Moreover, I did not ask to have my life extended but it was. This is

true freedom!

In the bodhisattva practice, giving is listed first. My rewards from the three kinds of giving can be clearly seen by everyone.

The second paramita is precept observation. We should observe the precepts and codes of behavior that the Buddha laid out. The teachings in the sutras that the Buddha earnestly and patiently taught us should be followed too. We should also abide by the laws and customs of our countries. If we abandon the precepts, then the practice and upholding of the Buddha's teachings will disappear. So even if we lecture on the Dharma, and study and discuss it every day, it will be futile. Why? Because our lives are disconnected from the teachings, we are not applying what we are learning. No matter how profoundly or how well we can lecture on Buddhism, nothing will be achieved. That is why Buddhism has always emphasized practice.

The Buddha taught "three cumulative pure precepts." "Three cumulative" means three main categories.

The first category is "uphold precepts and

codes of behavior.” This encompasses all the teachings that the Buddha taught in the sutras. We should practice all that the Buddha wants us to do and not otherwise.

The second category is “uphold precepts by practicing virtuous dharmas.” A deed that is good should be done. A deed that is bad should not be done. We should know that the spirit of the precepts is to prevent wrongdoing or stop evil conduct; it helps us to end wrongdoings and to practice virtuous conduct.

Even though the Buddha did not list everything we should or should not do, we need to adhere to the spirit of his teachings. For example, the Buddha did not tell us not to smoke, but we know that smoking is not good for us or for others. Therefore, we should not smoke. Things of this nature fall under “uphold precepts by practicing virtuous dharmas.”

The third category is “uphold precepts by bringing lasting benefits to all sentient beings.” When a deed benefits beings, we should do it. There are three kinds of beneficial deeds. The first

kind is the deed that will bring immediate benefit but will have a harmful effect in the future. This kind of deed should not be done. The second kind is the deed that will bring benefit not only now but also in the future. This kind of deed is truly beneficial. The third kind is the deed that will not bring immediate benefit but will bring great benefit in the future. This kind of deed is also beneficial.

This shows that Buddhas and bodhisattvas look far ahead, not only at the immediate future.

The third paramita is patience.²⁰ To accomplish any undertaking, one needs to bear any hardship that one encounters. In the process of cultivation, one will surely encounter frustration. The more diligent one is, the greater the amount of frustration one faces. Why is there so much frustration? Because of the evil karmas that one has committed over countless kalpas, obstacles from karmic forces

²⁰ The cultivation of this virtue involves two aspects: to be patient without anger in the face of harm done by others and to endure various afflictions and suffering and to be unafraid of the implications of such Mahayana teachings as emptiness.— Damien Keown, *Dictionary of Buddhism* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003), 148.

are unavoidable. The only solution is to tolerate any hardship. This will decrease karmas. If one has meditative concentration, it can eliminate karmas. One should face obstacles with wisdom, resolve them with forbearance, acquiesce, and make diligent progress. Only with the paramita of patience will one be able to improve. If one is not patient, one will encounter obstacles.

The fourth paramita is diligence.²¹ The Chinese term for “diligence” is *jingjin*. *Jing* means “pure and unadulterated” and *jin* means “making progress.” For bodhisattvas, diligence is their only good root.²²

Nowadays, many Buddhist practitioners make the mistake of learning too many different things, resulting in a mixture. Although they make progress every day, their progress is adulterated. They

²¹ Diligence means to courageously cultivate good dharmas and end evil dharmas. It is to focus and to progress tirelessly. — Trans.

²² Diligence is the only good root of the bodhisattvas because they are already replete with worldly good roots of no greed, no anger, and no ignorance. This good root of diligence allows the bodhisattvas to advance in cultivation without regression until they attain enlightenment. — Trans.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

spend a lot of time and effort but their accomplishment is very limited.

The little achievement I have in this lifetime is due to having a good teacher. He forbade me to proceed in an unfocused and random way. I learned from Mr. Li Bingnan in Taichung for ten years. His teaching method was that even if a student was very smart and had an exceptional capability, he or she could simultaneously learn only two sutras at most. If the student wanted to learn three sutras [at one time], he would not teach this student. Students who did not have a good capability learned only one sutra. Only when Mr. Li considered that a student had learned a sutra well enough would he teach the student a new one. Otherwise, he would not allow the student to learn a new sutra. During my ten years with Mr. Li, I learned five sutras, whereas in a Buddhist college, the students study more than five sutras in one semester.

The first sutra I learned was the *Sutra on Ananda Asking about the Good Fortune and Misfortune of Learning the Buddha's Teachings*; the second was the

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

Amitabha Sutra; the third was the “Chapter of the Vows and Practices of Samantabhadra”; the fourth was the *Diamond Sutra*; and the fifth was the *Surangama Sutra*. I spent ten years learning only these sutras. Mr. Li’s criterion was that only when one learned one sutra well enough could one learn a new one. “Well enough” meant that the student could explain the sutra thoroughly on stage to an audience. When the student lectured on stage, Mr. Li would sit in the last row. Without using a microphone, the student had to talk loud enough for Mr. Li to hear. Heading toward one direction and one goal, his students were thus laying a good foundation and would naturally understand the other sutras.

“When one masters one sutra, one naturally masters all sutras.” The question is whether one has truly learned and understood the sutra and entered into the states described in the sutra.

The fifth paramita is meditative concentration. It means being in control of one’s mind. Within, the mind is unmoved; without, the mind is not attached to phenomena. One should not be easily tempted

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

by any external phenomena. For example, when one learns a sutra, one concentrates on this sutra. This way, one would be in control of one's mind.

The sixth paramita is wisdom. Simply put, when one interacts with people and engages in tasks, one should do so based on reason, not on emotions.

This excerpt teaches us the six principles for interacting with people and engaging in tasks in daily life. These are also the guidelines that bodhi-sattvas use in teaching and transforming beings to help them be steadfastly established [in the bodhi mind].

EXCERPT EIGHTEEN

Brings forth the bodhi mind, observes all the precepts, firmly abides in them without any transgression, brings abundant benefits to sentient beings, and offers them all the good roots that one has cultivated to help them attain peace and happiness.

This excerpt sets the standard, throughout our lives, for interacting with people and engaging in tasks. “Bodhi” is Sanskrit, meaning “enlightenment.” “Bringing forth the bodhi mind” means bringing forth the mind to attain enlightenment and be free of confusion and delusion. An ordinary being is called an ordinary being because such a person is confused and deluded.

The excerpt also teaches us to interact with people and engage in tasks with a sincere mind. We should not deceive them or act falsely. Sincerity is the bodhi mind. The *Visualization Sutra* talks about

“a mind of the utmost sincerity.” This is the noumenon of the bodhi mind.

How can one be truly free of confusion or delusion? Let us observe a truly awakened person. This person has a clear understanding of him- or herself as well as the living environment. Understanding is awakening. What is the standard for understanding?

The Buddha was a truly awakened person. He is our standard. The Buddha said that the truth of this world is “suffering, emptiness, and impermanence.” This is the truth of this mundane world. No one can escape from this.

This world is filled with suffering, is empty in nature, and is impermanent. We must clearly understand this. When we do, we should abandon “suffering, emptiness, and impermanence” in this world and seek the state of “permanence, joy, true self, and purity.” Achieving this, we are truly awakened. The state of “permanence, joy, true self, and purity” is the state of Buddhas and bodhisattvas.

Buddhism talks about “understanding the cycle

of birth and death and transcending the Three Realms.” When one clearly understands the truth of life and death and of transmigration within the Six Paths, one is an awakened person. When one understands the truth, the next step is transcending the Six Paths and freeing oneself from samsara. This is what Buddhas and bodhisattvas do.

When one is clear about the truth, how should one cultivate? When the Buddha was in this world, which was during the Dharma-perfect Age, people had high capacities and the majority could succeed in any method that they chose to practice! After the Buddha’s time, during the Dharma-semblance Age, people did not have as high a capacity as earlier. With that, the quality of the Buddha’s teachings gradually deteriorated as they were passed down. But it was not that the sutras had degenerated; rather, it was the lecturers’ interpretation of the sutras that had worsened. As time went by, the lectures on the Dharma became more and more incorrect. Now it is the Dharma-ending Age, more than three thousand years after the Buddha’s parinirvana. The deterioration has reached a point

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

where we do not know what to do. It gets more and more difficult for us to attain realization from learning and practicing Buddhism.

Three thousand years ago, the Buddha knew completely what was going to happen in society today! He did not fail those of us who truly sought transcendence, who truly sought enlightenment. The Buddha, in the *Great Collection Sutra*, said that in the Dharma-perfect Age, one could succeed in cultivation by observing the precepts; in the Dharma-semblance Age, one could succeed in cultivation by practicing meditative concentration; and in the Dharma-ending Age, one could succeed in cultivation by learning the Pure Land method. The Buddha was telling us, the people of today, that we will definitely succeed in our cultivation if we learn and practice the Pure Land method.

The Dharma-ending age lasts ten thousand years. One thousand years have passed, and there are nine thousand years to go. The *Infinite Life Sutra* says that at the end of that nine thousand years, the

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

Dharma will be lost²³ to our mundane world. The *Infinite Life Sutra*, however, will remain in this world for another one hundred years. At the end of that one hundred years, even the *Infinite Life Sutra* will also be lost to the world. But there will still exist the six syllables “Namo Amitufo.”

From this we can see the inconceivable merit of “Namo Amitufo.” The people who live after the Dharma-ending Age will be able to attain liberation by relying on “Namo Amitufo.” Today, we have a better chance.

Great Master Daochuo of the Tang dynasty was a patriarch of the Pure Land school. During his lifetime, he lectured only on the three Pure Land sutras, and he did so more than two hundred times. From this we can see that practicing and propagating only one Dharma door is the perfect bodhi mind.

To understand the cycle of birth and death, one

²³ The Dharma will be lost because no one understands the teachings completely to teach us, because the teachings are misinterpreted, or because no one knows the existence of the sutra. — Trans.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

must first know that life is filled with suffering, and that the suffering in future lifetimes will become even worse than in the current lifetime. If one does not want to be reborn in the human path, can this wish be fulfilled? Unless one mindfully chants the Buddha-name and seeks rebirth in the Western Pure Land, one's wish may not be fulfilled. Therefore, one must be determined to attain rebirth there in this lifetime. This is the true bodhi mind.

When one has an awakened mind, one's behavior also needs to be awakened. In other words, one should lead the life of an awakened person. In daily life, when one interacts with people and engages in tasks, one's every thought should be awakened, not deluded. The following sutra text is the Buddha's teaching of the correct activities and practice for the bodhisattvas in this world.

In "...observe all the precepts, firmly abide in them without any transgression," the meaning of observing the precepts, in a broad sense, is abiding by laws and the codes of behavior.

The spirit of the precepts is "do nothing that is bad and do everything that is good." "Do nothing

that is bad” is the spirit of the Theravada precepts. “Do everything that is good” is the spirit of the bodhisattva precepts.

There are various levels for good and bad. For example, in the Five Vehicles of Buddhism, there are five levels: the human vehicle, the heavenly vehicle, the sound-hearer vehicle, the pratyekabuddha vehicle, and the bodhisattva vehicle. The humans and heavenly beings are still within the Three Realms and have not yet transcended the cycle of rebirth. The sound-hearers and the pratyekabuddhas have truly transcended transmigration within the Six Paths.

The perfect Dharma, however, is founded on being a good human being. If one is not a good person, how can one become a Buddha? Where should one start with learning Buddhism? One starts with learning to be a good person.

The *Visualization Sutra* teaches the Three Conditions. The first condition includes being filial to and providing and caring for parents, being respectful to and serving teachers, being compassionate and not killing any living beings, and culti-

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

vating the Ten Virtuous Karmas. This first condition is the basis for being a good person.

The Five Precepts are the fundamental precepts, which Buddhas and bodhisattvas also abide in. When we expand the scope of the precepts, we have laws. All the laws, moral values, and customs of our countries should be followed. They are all within the scope of the precepts. In addition, we should control our sensual desires. We should firmly abide by the precepts and not transgress them.

This is “do nothing that is bad,” the spirit of the Theravada precepts.

“Brings abundant benefits to sentient beings” describes a Mahayana precept. “Sentient beings” encompasses not only people but also animals and plants. “Abundant benefits” refers to not just the most abundant but also the highest benefits.

We should do our best to perform deeds that will benefit others. Maybe there is a limit to what we can do, but if we perform deeds with a sincere, respectful, and pure mind and with patience, we will have the support of Buddhas and bodhisattvas.

Our wishes will surely be fulfilled.

The Buddha said: “All dharmas are created by the mind.” When we think about a matter [that will benefit others] every moment of every day, never forgetting it, then this matter will be successfully accomplished. If we think “This is so difficult. I cannot do it. Forget it!” then this matter will not be accomplished. Why? Because when we stop thinking of benefiting others, we stop generating energy. Thoughts will truly generate inconceivable energy—this is continual mindfulness.

When one understands this principle, one sees that those who are mindful of Buddha will attain Buddhahood. A practitioner who chants the Buddha-name will definitely attain rebirth in the Western Pure Land—this is also the same principle. When one mindfully chants “Amitufo” and is mindful of the Western Pure Land—being diligently mindful without any interruption—then Amitabha Buddha will definitely come to one.

We should wholeheartedly do things that will bring true, vast and great benefits to all beings. We must ensure that this thought does not cease.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

“Offer them all the good roots that one has cultivated to help them attain peace and happiness” teaches us to broaden our minds. Before we began to learn Buddhism, we used to always think of ourselves—our happiness and our family’s. We seldom thought about the country or society. This means that we were not broad-minded.

After we began to learn Buddhism, we read about the great vows of Amitabha Buddha, whose state of mind encompasses the entire Dharma Realm. That is the perfect manifestation of the true mind. We should learn this.

In doing any deed, no matter how small, one should dedicate the merit accrued to all beings, wishing that all suffering beings could leave suffering behind and attain happiness. This is a form of Dharma offerings: by giving of ourselves for all beings.

One does not personally enjoy the good fortune one has cultivated but shares it with all beings. This is the meaning of *dedication*. One shares one’s wisdom, good fortune, skills, and abilities with all beings, wishing that all beings could have peace

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

and happiness. This is a bodhisattva practice. Can this be done? Yes. If one truly practices, others will benefit. If these people are about to encounter a disaster, and there is someone who has great good fortune and merits, either they will not encounter the disaster or the severity of the disaster will be reduced.

To help avert world disasters, we must earnestly learn and practice. All we need to do is sincerely do our best, with our every thought of doing it for the suffering beings. We will definitely not want to enjoy the merits accrued but offer them universally to all beings.

Bodhisattvas are courageous and diligent. Where do they get their energy from? From this thought of great compassion, they work for all beings, not for themselves. An awakened person will surely behave this way. If one does not behave this way and thinks of oneself and one's family, or even a small group of people, one is not awakened. One's mind is still very narrow. An awakened person would undoubtedly have a very broad mind.

EXCERPT NINETEEN

They should practice good deeds, such as (1) no killing, (2) no stealing, (3) no sexual desire, (4) no lying, (5) no enticing speech, (6) no harsh speech, (7) no divisive speech, (8) no greed, (9) no anger, and (10) no ignorance.

“They should practice good deeds” refers to the Ten Virtuous Karmas, which are the standards for our thoughts and for our interacting with others and engaging in tasks. If one behaves in accordance with the Ten Virtuous Karmas in one’s lifetime, one is a good person. The Ten Virtuous Karmas are the most basic standards for good and bad.

The *Visualization Sutra* teaches the Three Conditions. The first includes being filial to parents, and providing and caring for them; being respectful to and serving teachers; being compassionate and not killing any living beings; and cultivating

the Ten Virtuous Karmas. This is the most important foundation for learning Buddhism. When we are filial to our parents, respect our teachers, and are compassionate, then the Ten Virtuous Karmas are fulfilled. Of the Ten Virtuous Karmas, three are physical karmas, four are verbal karmas, and three are mental karmas. The three virtuous physical karmas are no killing, no stealing, and no sexual desire.

The first virtuous physical karma is no killing. The scope of “killing” is very extensive. It includes personally doing the killing; killing verbally (in other words, telling someone to kill); feeling happy when seeing an act of killing; and giving rise to an intention to kill because of anger and hatred. These are all included in “killing.” In other words, no killing means that one has absolutely no thought of harming others. This way we nurture compassion.

The second virtuous physical karma is no stealing. The scope of “stealing” is very extensive. In Buddhism, stealing is defined as taking without permission. If we handle something that is owned by somebody else without their permission, this is an act of stealing. Those who steal will have to repay

the debt in the future. It is said that one has to repay a life with a life and money with money. The law of cause and effect never fails. When one steals from one person, the resultant offense is relatively light: the karmic ties are fewer. But, some things are owned by many people, such as the public facilities in a city. If one steals anything from a public facility, one has to pay back all the residents of this city, because they pay taxes and are thus the owners. If one steals from the facilities of a state or federal government, one will have to pay back the whole nation. With stealing, the resultant offense of stealing “property of the Three Jewels”²⁴ is the most seri-

²⁴ “Property of the Three Jewels” is a Buddhist terminology that refers to the property of a temple or monastery. The statue of a Buddha, the worship hall, flowers, canopies—these are the property of the Buddha Jewel. Sutras, stationery, containers and linens for protecting sutras—these are the property of the Dharma Jewel. Dormitories and farms of monasteries; clothing, alms bowls, and other personal items belonging to monastics—these are property of the Sangha Jewel. The items for each Jewel must only be used for that Jewel and not otherwise. For example, the flowers in the chanting hall should not be used as a personal item.—*Practical Buddhist Dictionary “Shi Yong Fo Xue Ci Dian”* compiled by Gao Guan Lu, 1934 (Buddhist Book Store, China).

ous—such properties are things belonging to a temple or monastery. The Buddha-dharma is owned by the entire Dharma realm, which has no boundary. In other words, all the monastics are the owners. If one steals something from a cultivation center, the transgression is inconceivably grave. One who steals the property of the Three Jewels will surely fall into the hells realm.

Stealing is the easiest offense to commit and the one most frequently committed. For example, there are some in business who always try to pay less tax. This is stealing. Stealing in this manner is a very grave transgression. One must know that one should feel remorse and then make amends by cultivating goodness.

In the history of Buddhism in China, Great Master Yongming is the one most famous for doing good deeds with the use of public funds, funds he was not authorized to use. Before he became a monastic, he was a low-ranking government clerk in the taxation department. He often used government money to free captured animals. After it was reported that he had taken money, he was sen-

tenced to death, according to the law.

When the emperor heard that he used the public funds solely to free captured animals, he gave these instructions to the official supervising the execution: "If he shows fear before the execution, execute him. But if he does not show the slightest fear, then bring him to me."

When the clerk was about to be beheaded, he did not show any signs of fear. The supervising official asked him, "Why are you not afraid?" He said, "I exchange my life for tens of thousands of lives. It's worth it! I am happy!" The official reported this to the emperor. The emperor asked the clerk, "Do you have any wish?" The clerk replied, "I want to become a monastic." The emperor granted his wish and became his Dharma protector.

After Great Master Yongming attained great enlightenment through Zen meditation, he focused on the Pure Land teachings and concentrated on mindfully chanting the Buddha-name. His biography says that he was Amitabha Buddha manifested.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

The master's stealing is not the same as when we ordinary people do it. Ordinary people steal for personal enjoyment; he stole to benefit all beings. Hence, the Buddha-dharma truly is flexible. It adapts to circumstances, but there is only one objective: to benefit all beings and society. If we steal for our enjoyment, the transgression is inconceivably grave. This example is worthy of our deep contemplation.

The third virtuous physical karma is no sexual desire. Whether one is a lay practitioner or a monastic, sexual desire will increase one's greed and deviated thoughts and obstruct one's pursuit of the supramundane teachings. Therefore, in order to achieve true purity of mind and attain a higher rebirth grade, one must not have sexual desire. If one cannot end sexual desire, one must at least not commit sexual misconduct. The Ten Virtuous Karmas teach no sexual misconduct. This means having no sexual conduct with anyone other than with one's spouse. This is absolutely forbidden.

The four virtuous verbal karmas are no lying, no enticing speech, no harsh speech, and no divi-

sive speech.

The first virtuous verbal karma is no lying. In learning Buddhism, to generate the bodhi mind where should one start? One starts with no lying. If one keeps on lying, how can one's true mind come forth? One must be sincere and not deceive oneself and others. This is the very foundation of the Buddha-dharma.

We want to truly understand the Buddha's intention in laying down the precepts as well as know the spirit of the precepts. This way, we will know how to be flexible in observing the precepts in daily life. This is very important.

Here's an example from a sutra. A hunter was chasing a rabbit and came to a crossing. He saw a person there and asked, "Did you see a rabbit?" "It went that way," the person replied. The rabbit had actually run the other way but the person at the crossing, in order to save the rabbit, told a lie to keep the hunter away from it. His lying was lifting the precept, not transgressing it. What he did saved not only the animal but also the hunter. Although the hunter had intended to kill the rabbit, he did

not succeed; so his offense was light.

This tells us that with all precepts, if what we do is to benefit beings, it is lifting the precepts, and if what we do is to benefit only ourselves, then we are transgressing the precepts and are guilty of offenses. When we benefit all beings, we have merit. When we sacrifice ourselves to benefit others, we are bodhisattvas.

The second virtuous verbal karma is no enticing speech. Enticing speech means using inviting words to deceive others or to lure them to commit bad deeds. Today's songs, dance, dramas, movies, novels, and even some literature—known as art nowadays—are full of enticing speech from the viewpoint of Buddhism. They teach people to kill, to steal, and to commit sexual misconduct. The offenses are immensely grave. Let us carefully look at the karmic effects: many famous movies stars come to a bad end. That is their karmic retribution in this lifetime. Their future karmic retributions will be even worse.

I lecture on the Dharma and earnestly urge people to do good deeds, but few people come to

listen. Those entertainment shows require entrance fees, and at very high prices too, yet many people attend them. From this we can see that people would rather listen to enticing words than to good advice.

The third virtuous verbal karma is no harsh speech, which is offensive language. It hurts people's dignity.

The fourth virtuous verbal karma is no divisive speech. Divisive speech stirs up trouble, whether one does so intentionally or unintentionally. If one does so intentionally, the offense is grave. If one does so unintentionally, it is a fault, and the outcome determines the gravity of the offense. If one causes discord between two persons or two groups of people, the gravity of the offense depends on the extent of the discord. If one causes two countries to go to war, which results in the loss of many lives and damage to much property, then the offense is immensely grave.

From the above, when one's divisive speech causes extensive damage and the damage lasts a long time, one will fall into the tongue-pulling hell

or the Avici hell. Therefore, we must be very careful with our speech.

The three virtuous mental karmas are no greed, no anger, and no ignorance. These are also called the Three Good Roots. All the wholesome dharmas arise from them. Greed, anger, and ignorance are the Three Poison Afflictions, and all the evil dharmas arise from them. Therefore, the three mental karmas are truly the determinant and the root cause of one's suffering and happiness. We must be careful.

People in this world crave fame, prestige, gain, wealth, the Five Desires, and the Six Dusts. If one gets something that one craves, it is because one is destined to have it. If one is not destined to have something, no matter what one does, one will not get it. After reading *Liaofan's Four Lessons*, we will understand this: if one is destined to have something, one cannot get rid of it no matter what; if one is not destined to have something, one cannot get it no matter what.

Mr. Yuan Liaofan is a good example. The good thing about Liaofan was that he knew his destiny,

and knowing his destiny made him content with his lot. Destiny is natural. He accepted his karmic retributions that he was destined to have. Therefore, he did not have any wandering thoughts. His mind was pure.

If everyone understands the law of cause and effect and is content with his or her present life, the world will be at peace. There will be no conflict. When everyone's mind is calm, he or she will truly have happiness in this lifetime. This good fortune can be had by the rich and those in high position. And also by the poor and lowly. Everyone will be happy.

The most frightening thing is that people do not know the existence of destiny or understand the law of cause and effect, nor believe in it. Consequently, people behave as they like and commit wrongdoings every day.

Although one's destiny is predetermined, it changes every day in accordance with one's behavior. So, can one change one's destiny? Yes, one can. If one's behavior every day adds a little to or subtracts a little from good fortune—by one doing

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

small good acts and committing small bad acts—then one's life will be governed by one's destiny, and there will be no change. But if one does major deeds—either good or evil—then one's destiny will be changed.

Therefore, one's destiny after one is forty years old is greatly influenced by one's behavior in this lifetime. One's destiny before one is forty years old is pre-determined, greatly influenced by one's good and evil deeds done in past lifetimes. If one is truly awakened and diligently ends wrongdoings and practices virtuous conduct, one's destiny will change for the better after one is forty years old. This is very important.

Buddhism can help us enjoy good fortune in this lifetime. If we truly believe it and diligently practice, we will become happier and happier in our old age. This depends on our cultivation. The Buddha taught us to practice the Ten Virtuous Karmas. If we practice diligently, worldly good fortune will naturally come to us without our seeking.

The first virtuous mental karma is no greed. In addition to worldly things, one should also not

have greed for supramundane teachings. One must completely let go of everything before one's mind can become pure. One should not be attached to what one has or crave for what one does not have. The most important thing is to maintain a pure mind—having is no different from not having.

People often say that one brings nothing with one at birth and one takes nothing with one at death. When we die, we cannot take anything that we own with us. We must clearly understand this truth. Does anything we have now belong to us? No. If we think that what we have belongs to us, this is ignorance! What we have we are just using temporarily, like when we stay in a hotel. Nothing belongs to us. If we can thoroughly understand this reality, we will not have greed. We will be at ease regardless of what we encounter in life and will not mind or take anything seriously.

When we understand the truth, we will have peace of mind. When we have peace of mind, we will surely see the truth. Therefore, we should let go of everything that is irrelevant—we should absolutely give no rise to greed. We should enthusias-

tically do more good deeds for all beings and society.

The second virtuous mental karma is no anger. When things do not go as one wishes, one usually gets angry and becomes unhappy. This is very harmful. We often talk about accumulating merits. Merits are like a forest. We cultivate a lot of merits, but when we get angry, the fire of anger will burn away all the merits. This is described as “Fire burns away the forest of merits.”

We should ask ourselves “How much merit do we have?” If we had lost our temper this morning, then we would end up, since that bout of anger, with only a few hours of merits. If we lose our temper at the end of our lives, then we will burn away completely all the merits accumulated in this lifetime.

Anything that causes us to lose our temper is a manifestation of Mara. Mara sees that we have accumulated many merits, and he cannot destroy them—so he induces us to burn our forests of merits.

Hence, when one who truly has wisdom and is awakened faces an adverse situation, this person

will absolutely not burn away his or her merits, will absolutely not lose his or her temper. [To achieve this,] this person must practice patience.

When we have patience, we will have meditative concentration. When we have meditative concentration, we will have wisdom. Of the Six Paramitas, giving and precept observation allow us to cultivate merits. Patience allows us to preserve merits. If one cannot practice patience, one will destroy one's own merits.

Merits are precept observation, meditative concentration, and wisdom. When one loses one's temper, one will not have any precept observation, meditative concentration, and wisdom.

If one cultivates good fortune but loses one's temper often, harbors hatred and jealousy, is arrogant, or loves to outdo others, one will have no merits but will still have great good fortune. This is because good fortune cannot be burned away. Which path will this kind of people be reborn in? The Buddha said that they will be reborn in the path of asuras. Asuras have good fortune but no virtues. They are prone to anger and lose their

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

tempers easily, and hurt others. But when they use up their good fortune, they will fall into a bad realm. Buddhism often talks about “anger and resentment in the third lifetime”—one cultivates good fortune in the first lifetime, enjoys it in the second lifetime, and falls into a bad realm in the third lifetime.

We must know that our anger harms us more than others: it harms us 70 percent and others 30 percent.

The third virtuous mental karma is no ignorance. Ignorance means no wisdom. There are many smart people, eloquent in debate or skillful at talking or writing, but they do not have wisdom. What is wisdom? The ability to truly differentiate between true and false, proper and deviated, right and wrong, and beneficial and harmful.

If an old village lady, one who has never received any formal education and is illiterate, when told to mindfully chant “Amitufo” does so sincerely during the remainder of her lifetime, then she has true wisdom. Why? Because she chooses to mindfully chant “Amitufo” to seek rebirth in the

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

Western Pure Land, which is true, not false; proper, not deviated; beneficial, not harmful; and good, not bad. Her choice is correct in every aspect. This is true wisdom!

Many intelligent people in this world doubt the Buddha-name chanting method. They even slander it. This act is totally without wisdom. This is ignorance! They do not get any benefit. Moreover, they obstruct others from learning and practicing this method, even to the point of causing them to stop their practice. This offense is very grave, and the future karmic retributions are unthinkable.

No greed, no anger, and no ignorance—these are the roots of all wholesome dharmas in the world. If one cultivates virtuousness from the root, then one is an intelligent person.

EXCERPT TWENTY

One should single-mindedly cultivate a pure mind, set body and mind upright, and eradicate desire and eliminate worry. One should maintain a compassionate mind and make focused and diligent progress. One should not be angry or jealous or be gluttonous or stingy. One should not have regret halfway or have doubts. One should be filial, have utmost sincerity, be loyal, and be trustworthy. One should believe that the Buddha's teachings in the sutras are profound. One should believe that doing good deeds will bring good fortune.

“Should single-mindedly cultivate a pure mind, set body and mind upright, and eradicate desire and eliminate worry. One should maintain a compassionate mind and make focused and diligent progress.” These words are of great significance to our

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

cultivation of behavior and thoughts, as well as our health, longevity, and happiness. When one has a long life, one wants to have good health and not show one's age—this is true happiness. How does one achieve this? By single-mindedly cultivating a pure mind.

The Buddha said: “Dependent rewards change according to proper rewards.”²⁵ Proper rewards refer to the mind, or thoughts. But thoughts are not the true mind—they are the false mind. The true mind neither arises nor ceases. It is pure and has no need to do anything. All phenomena—that are manifested by the true mind and that also neither arise nor cease—are called the One True Dharma Realm.

If the true nature is mired in delusion, the true

²⁵ Dependant reward is the part of the reward on which one's existence depends; the secondary and circumstantial part of the reward which one receives in this life as the result of acts in previous lives, such as house, utensils and surroundings . . . The proper reward is the principal reward which one receives in this life as the result of acts in previous lives, namely, one's own body and mind. . . Hisao Inagaki, *A Dictionary of Japanese Buddhist Terms* (Nagata Bunshodo, Kyoto, 2003, 5th Edition), 43 and 311.

mind—which neither arises nor ceases—will change into a mind that arises and ceases. Today, we have wandering thoughts. When a thought ceases, another one arises. This arising and ceasing is called *consciousness*—the One True Dharma Realm is thus changed to the Ten Dharma Realms. How does the change occur? It is “altered by the consciousness.” In other words, “all dharmas are created by the mind.”

Thoughts are consciousness. The true mind has no thoughts. The Ten Dharma Realms are created by the mind. In other words, thoughts (consciousness) can change and can create. All the magnificent proper and dependent rewards²⁶ in the Ten Dharma Realms are what are being changed and created.

If one wants to stay healthy and young, know-

²⁶ Proper rewards are also described as main rewards. “Dependent and main rewards are based on past karmic actions. The ‘main rewards’ refer to living beings, while the ‘dependent rewards’ refer to the physical environment on which the living beings ‘depend,’ such as the land, ponds, trees, and so forth.” — Van Hien Study Group, *The Seeker’s Glossary of Buddhism* (Sutra Committee of the United States and Canada, New York, 2003, 2nd Edition), 180.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

ing this principle and method will help one change one's physical condition. If one does not know the principle and method, one will be affected by one's emotions and the external environment. One will not be in control and thus will suffer.

What kind of mind should one maintain? Be single-minded and have a pure mind. The purer the mind, the healthier the mind. When the mind is healthy, the body will be healthy. If one's mind and body are pure, how can one not be healthy! One's physical condition changes in accordance with one's thoughts and emotions. Control invariably lies in one's thoughts.

The standard for Buddha-name chanting is One Mind Undisturbed. We should always focus our minds on "Amitufo." We should take refuge in Amitabha Buddha, turning away from everything else and single-mindedly relying on him. When we truly do so, we will be free of all pollution and will attain purity. "Single-mindedly cultivate a pure mind" is very important!

"Set body and mind upright, and eradicate desire and eliminate worry." Before this line, we have

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

“single-mindedly cultivate a pure mind,” which refers to keeping the mind proper. When our every gesture, movement, word, and smile accord with the teachings of the Buddha, we are keeping our behavior proper. Setting one’s body and mind upright is behaving in an impressive and dignified manner. This is respectfulness. This is about codes of behavior. In other words, when one behaves in accordance with codes of behavior, one shows respect to the Buddha and the Dharma.

There are great obstacles when body and mind are not upright. One obstacle is desire, and the other is worry. When these two obstacles are eliminated, body and mind will be upright. The obstacle to the body is desire, for it leads the body astray. Our minds will be filled with misery and hardship. Therefore, if one wants to truly make one’s mind and body upright, one must “eradicate desire and eliminate worry.”

Not only should one not have desire for fame, prestige, gain, wealth, the Five Desires, and the Six Dusts, one should also not have desire for bringing “abundant benefits to sentient beings” or helping

others.

It is aptly put in the *Diamond Sutra* that the Buddha helped boundless beings to awaken, but there were really no beings for the Buddha to help. Why did the Buddha say that he did not help a single being? Because, in everything it is good to accord with conditions. According with conditions is to accord with the natural way of things. When conditions are available, wholeheartedly do the best, but take no credit for any of it. When conditions are not available, do not actively seek such conditions.

“One should maintain a compassionate mind and make focused and diligent progress.” Personally, one should maintain a pure mind, and towards others, one should maintain a compassionate mind. “Progress” means to keep on moving forward without retrogressing. “Focused and diligent,” which also refers to progress that is pure and unadulterated, means to courageously and diligently head in one direction and towards one goal. True cultivation is to have compassion for all, because when one cultivates, one is a role model for all be-

ings. When one succeeds in one's cultivation, one will definitely help all beings.

“One should not be angry or jealous.” Anger is a great obstacle. It is said, “A moment of anger will open up the door to millions of obstacles.” Why does anger arise? Because one takes everything in this world as real. The Buddha told us “all phenomena are illusory” and “all conditioned existences are like a dream, an illusion, a bubble, or a shadow.” Nothing is real! Relationships between humans as well as between humans and all beings and everything else are all about causes, conditions, and effects.

Conditions may be favorable or adverse. When an adverse condition appears, one should know that it results from a bad cause planted in the past. If a person displeases one or goes against one, then one should just laugh it off, as this will cancel out the karmic debt incurred in the past. If one becomes angry, one will incur another debt on top of the old debt. Instead of canceling out the old debt, one will have even more problems. As it is said, “If one owes money, one will repay with money. If one

owes life, one will repay with life. Reprisal breeds reprisal. It is cyclical and never ending.”

A person who is truly awakened will have a very calm and contented mind. When a favorable condition comes along, one will not feel happy, and when an adverse condition appears, one will not feel angry. One always maintains a pure and honorable mind. When the mind is pure, one will see clearly the causes and effects of a matter and will not become angry.

One is jealous because one cannot bear to see others do well. A person receives something good because this person had cultivated a good cause—this is his or her reward. What is there to be jealous of? If we want good rewards, we only need to plant good causes. We should know to rejoice at others’ meritorious deeds and help them accomplish them. When it comes to bad deeds, we should not help people commit them.

“One should not . . . be gluttonous or stingy.” In a narrow sense, “gluttonous” means being fussy about food. In a broader sense, it includes all material enjoyment. A stingy person is someone who is

unwilling to give to others.

From giving, the merits are tremendous: in our present life, we can end afflictions and eliminate karmic obstacles; in our cultivation, we can break through ignorance and see the true nature. This is why bodhisattvas' cultivation is the practice of giving.

There are three types of giving: the giving of wealth, the giving of teachings, and the giving of fearlessness. The Six Paramitas are various forms of giving. Precept observation and patience are forms of the giving of fearlessness. For example, if we observe the precept of not stealing, people will not be on guard against us or fear us. This is the giving of fearlessness. If we practice patience, we will not mind when someone unintentionally says something offensive to us.

Diligence, meditative concentration, and wisdom are forms of the giving of teachings. The Six Paramitas dictate all forms of practice. The boundless Dharma doors practiced by bodhisattvas do not fall outside the Six Paramitas—and the Six Paramitas are all subsumed under giving. From

this we can see that the merit of giving is truly inconceivable.

We just need to single-mindedly cultivate a pure mind, set the body and the mind upright, and practice giving more often. We will receive inconceivable merit.

Being gluttonous and stingy—residual habits from countless kalpas—are great obstacles to the practice of giving and must be overcome. One should live a thrifty life and maintain this simple life. Even when one becomes successful and has great wealth in the future, one should still live thriftily. This way, one will truly have good fortune.

A good example in Chinese history is the Prime Minister Fan Zhongyan of the Song dynasty. He came from a poor family. When he was a county-level scholar, he was so poor that every day he would divide the porridge that he cooked into four portions, eating a portion for each meal. Even when he became the prime minister, he still maintained a very simple life. He had a very high salary, which he spent on charity and the poor. During the

time when he was the prime minister, he supported more than three hundred households with his income. Therefore, he led a very hard and austere life. Great Master Yinguang greatly admired him and considered him a person worthy of respect and emulation, and in China, second only to Confucius.

Nowadays, many old people set aside an amount of money for future medical bills. The Buddha said: "All dharmas are created by the mind." If every day we think about getting old and falling sick, how can we not look old or get sick? If we change our way of thinking and give the money that has been set aside to help those who are poor and sick, we will not get sick. Why will we not fall sick? Because there is no money set aside for getting sick [for we no longer think and worry about it]!

When we learn Buddhism, we should learn wisdom like this.

I do not get sick because I know the law of cause and effect. This is why I have donated my medical-contingency money. I am truly at ease!

One should not be stingy. Helping others is

helping oneself. If one thinks about aging and sickness every day, one will truly bring harm to oneself.

“One should not have regret halfway.” When we do a good deed, regretting it halfway through will result in our early efforts counting for nothing. For example, one learns and practices the Pure Land method, but after a period of time, one hears that there is another method that is better. Regretting one’s previous choice, one starts to practice another method. This is wrong. No matter what others say, one should not have second thoughts—just continue with the Pure Land method.

“Not . . . have doubts” means that we should absolutely not doubt the teachings of the sages or Buddhas and bodhisattvas. This way, we will be able to truly make focused and diligent progress.

“One should be filial.” Filial piety is the absolute foundation of Buddhism. Frankly, only when one attains Buddhahood can filial piety be practiced to perfection. Only a Buddha can be perfectly filial.

If we want to practice filial piety to perfection, we just need to single-mindedly chant the Buddha-

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

name and seek rebirth in the Western Pure Land. When we meet Amitabha Buddha, our filial piety will then be perfect. It is because [once we are in the Pure Land] we will be able to recognize our parents and also all our parents from past lifetimes and clearly know which paths they are in, so that when the conditions are mature, they will listen and accept our advice to mindfully chant the Buddha-name when we urge them to. This way, we will have the ability to help them. We will be able to help our families, friends, and those who have an affinity with us—from every one of our lifetimes—transcend the Six Paths, attain rebirth in the Western Pure Land, and attain Buddhahood. This is great filial piety! This is true filial piety!

Presently, it is good if we can take good care of our parents, in particular their spiritual well-being when they are advancing in age. The most important of all is to urge them to mindfully chant the Buddha-name. This is true filial piety. If our parents do not accept our advice, this is because we have not learned Buddhism well enough. If we really follow the Buddha's way, they will naturally

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

accept our advice. When we diligently learn Buddhism, we will influence our parents. This requires patience and waiting for the proper time and right conditions.

“Have utmost sincerity, be loyal, and be trustworthy.” “Utmost sincerity” means being absolutely and completely sincere. When we are sincere to the Buddha, to the Dharma, and to our teachers, we will truly benefit.

Loyalty and trustworthiness are the norms when we interact with others and engage in tasks.

“One should believe that the Buddha’s teachings in the sutras are profound.” This is true wisdom. In particular, the Pure Land texts, such as the *Amitabha Sutra*, the *Infinite Life Sutra*, and the *Visualization Sutra*, are as the Buddha said—Dharma that is hard to believe. This is because even though the texts do not seem to be profound, the meanings and the states described are actually infinitely profound and broad. Great Master Shandao said in his *Commentaries on the Visualization Sutra* that it is not just ordinary people who cannot thoroughly understand the teachings in these three

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

sutras, but also arhats, pratyekabuddhas, and the bodhisattvas of the Provisional Teaching. Therefore, not only do ordinary beings find it hard to believe the sutras, even the great bodhisattvas still have doubts. These sutras are truly Dharma that is hard to believe.

Although the Dharma is hard to believe, it is easy to practice. If we practice accordingly, we will succeed! We have to believe that these teachings describe the state of Buddhas at the attainment stage, not the states of bodhisattvas. This is why it is hard to believe and understand.

“Should believe that doing good deeds will bring good fortune.” The previous sentence, “One should believe that the Buddha’s teachings in the sutras are profound,” is about the Buddha-dharma. This phrase, “. . . should believe that doing good deeds will bring good fortune,” is about mundane teachings. This teaches us to deeply believe in causality: a virtuous mind will surely bring about good fortune; evil thoughts will surely bring about misfortune. Good and bad thoughts are causes, and good fortune and misfortune are results.

EXCERPT TWENTY-ONE

They completely realize that all dharmas are like a dream, an illusion, or an echo.

“Echo” refers to reverberated sounds. If we shout in a valley, there will be echoes. This excerpt sentence conveys the same meaning as this teaching in the *Diamond Sutra*: “All conditioned existences are like a dream, an illusion, a bubble, or a shadow.” Both explain the truth of all phenomena in the universe.

All phenomena exist but they do not truly exist because their existence does not last forever but changes from moment to moment. That is why phenomena are said to be impermanent.

Therefore, we can use and enjoy the phenomena but should not be attached to them. When we are attached, we will suffer. All afflictions, evil karmas, and retributions arise from attachment.

All phenomena, including our bodies, are im-

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

permanent. Therefore, we should also not be attached to our bodies; where the body is concerned, we should just accord with conditions. If we become ill, we can cure the illness with a pure mind and we will recover. The body changes according to the mind. When the mind is pure, all the organs in the body will naturally work properly—there will be no illnesses.

This excerpt is to teach bodhisattvas to have true wisdom, to truly and thoroughly awaken, and to realize that all phenomena are not real. If one is truly awakened, one will naturally be unperturbed in any situation and one can enter very deep meditative concentration—being unperturbed is achieving meditative concentration. When one's mind is not perturbed, one will truly understand all phenomena. This understanding is wisdom. Being free of discrimination and attachment is meditative concentration. When we have both meditative concentration and wisdom, meditative concentration and wisdom are perfect and complete. This is where we start to cultivate meditative concentration and wisdom. This is real.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

The *Diamond Sutra* says: “All conditioned existences are like a dream, an illusion, a bubble, or a shadow, like a dewdrop or a flash of lightning. Contemplate them thus.” “Dewdrop” refers to the morning dew. “A flash of lightning” exists for an extremely short time. “Contemplate them thus” means that this view is correct and is the truth. In all situations, when one’s mind has no thoughts of gain or loss, true or false, good or bad, right or wrong, and beneficial or harmful—one’s mind will be completely pure.

The Buddha talked about true and false, right and wrong, good and bad, and beneficial and harmful. Who are these teachings for? For ordinary beings. For those who cannot see through to the truth. When one cannot see through, one has attachment. When there is any single thought of discrimination or attachment, in everything there is truth and falsehood, there is right and wrong, and there is good and bad. In his aim to guide people to end wrongdoings and practice virtuous conduct, the Buddha had no choice but to use expedient teaching.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

We should know that the Buddha, in his expedient teaching, used diametrically opposed principles. This duality helps us to not fall into the Three Evil Paths. We should first keep ourselves in the Three Good Paths and avoid falling into the Three Evil Paths. This is, however, not the true purpose of the Buddha's teaching. The true purpose is to help all beings transcend the Three Realms and attain Buddhahood in one lifetime. But because the beings cannot accept this, the Buddha used expedient teaching. As to the true teaching, there is no teaching to expound on.

EXCERPT TWENTY-TWO

They thoroughly understand the nature of all dharmas: everything is empty and without self.

The word “dharmas” refers to phenomena. The word “nature” refers to innate character or noumenon. The noumenon of all phenomena is empty and quiescent. When the Buddha said that all phenomena are empty, he meant that the noumenon is empty: phenomena do not have self-nature and are empty in themselves. Everything is empty and without self. “Self” implies being in control. “Everything is empty and without self” means that no one controls the phenomena. Then, how do phenomena come about? They arise from the combination of various conditions. Boundless conditions gather and generate them. Therefore, phenomena do not have self-nature or self-identity.

When we are clear about this truth, we should

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

absolutely not attach to any phenomena or give rise to any thought. The mind should always be pure, impartial, and awakened.

EXCERPT TWENTY-THREE

They completely understand all the Buddhas' profound teachings. They tame all their faculties. Their bodies are supple and their minds are gentle. They delve deeply into true wisdom and no longer have residual habits.

The word “profound” conveys depth, not secrecy. Secrecy means that there is something that cannot be revealed to others, and so this something must not be a good thing. Buddhism has no secrets. “Profound” in Buddhism means that—with the capacities of the beings being low, and with the Buddha’s teachings being tremendously profound in noumenon and broad in meaning—careless people cannot understand the teachings. This is why Buddhism is “profound.”

What is “all the Buddhas’ profound teachings”? It is “Namo Amitufo”—this is the profound teaching of all the Buddhas in the ten directions and

three time periods. This is why the merit of the name of Amitabha Buddha is inconceivable.

The Buddha's great wisdom, virtues, and capabilities, and his skillful use of expedient teaching in helping all beings are very profound. We cannot understand any of these but the bodhisattvas born in the Western Pure Land all "completely understand." If we can completely understand, we will be no different from the bodhisattvas of the Western Pure Land.

If one truly and thoroughly understands, one will dedicate oneself to mindfully chanting the Buddha-name and have absolutely no doubts. Then one is a bodhisattva of the Land of Ultimate Bliss. Although one is currently not there yet, one will definitely be reborn there.

There are very few who understand all the Buddha's profound teachings. Great Master Shandao said that many bodhisattvas are not even aware that this method is the fastest, most reliable, and perfect method for attaining Buddhahood. In Chinese history, many patriarchs and eminent masters of other schools turned to the Pure Land

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

teachings after they truly understood the Pure Land method in their old age. All of them concentrated on mindfully chanting the Buddha-name and sought rebirth in the Western Pure Land.

Anyone who clearly understands this method will practice it.

The Western Pure Land is an ultimate, perfect state. If a person wants to learn a particular method, this person, whatever his capacity, will hear the method that accords with his or her capacity. For example, if one has the capacity for Theravada teachings, one will hear Buddhas and bodhisattvas lecturing on Theravada teachings. If one has the capacity for Mahayana teachings, one will hear nothing but Mahayana teachings. A being will immediately hear what he or she wants to hear, and immediately see what he or she wants to see—all at the level of the being's capacity. This is great perfection and truly ultimate.

Therefore, in the Western Pure Land, everything that one's faculties [that is, six sense organs] come into contact with is (1) the state of the Buddha-dharma and (2) revealed from the innate

virtues of Amitabha Buddha. In such a wondrous environment, how could one be deluded? How could afflictions arise? Therefore, all of one's faculties are naturally tamed.

"They tame all their faculties." "Faculties" refers to the body, a strong body without any problems. We all want a strong body. How do we get it? If we learn to tame all our faculties, our bodies will naturally become strong.

There are many ways to tame our faculties. Zen meditation is a major method. There are also other methods such as (1) *samatha* and *vipasyana*, (2) observing and illuminating, (3) chanting mantras, and (4) chanting a Buddha's name. But no method surpasses the Buddha-name chanting method. Why? Because when one mindfully chants the Buddha-name, one will receive help from the Buddhas.

Some people may say that when one chants mantras, one will also get help from Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Indeed, when chanting mantras as practiced by the Esoteric school, the Buddhas and bodhisattvas will also be there to help, but it is not as good as chanting the name of Amitabha Buddha.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

When one chants mantras, one will have the help of one or two Buddhas or bodhisattvas. To have the help of three to five Buddhas and bodhisattvas is incredible. But when one mindfully chants the name of Amitabha Buddha, one will have the help of all the Buddhas in the ten directions and in the three time periods. This is why the merit of the name of Amitabha Buddha is inconceivable!

At all times, when one single-mindedly chants the Buddha-name, the mind will be free of all wandering thoughts, afflictions, worries, and concerns. Mindfully chanting the Buddha-name will thus tame all of one's faculties. One's body will be supple and one's mind will be gentle. One will be able to achieve physical and mental well-being.

We may want to ask, "What is the method that the bodhisattvas of the Western Pure Land practice to achieve taming all their faculties and having a supple body and gentle mind?" It is mindfully chanting "Amitufo." As Mahasthamaprapta Bodhisattva said, "I and fifty-two fellow practitioners. . . ." "Fifty-two" refers to the ten stages of faith, ten stages of abiding, ten stages of practice,

ten stages of dedication, ten stages of ground, the stage of equal enlightenment, and the stage of wondrous enlightenment. “Fellow practitioners” refers to practitioners who shared the same aspiration and focused on practicing the Pure Land method. This tells us that from Mahasthamaprapta Bodhisattva’s initial generation of the bodhi mind until attainment of Buddhahood, he practiced the chanting of “Amitufo,” without any changes. This is truly inconceivable! Chanting “Amitufo” enables us ordinary beings to attain Buddhahood.

After attaining Buddhahood, what method is used to universally help all beings? It is still mindfully chanting “Amitufo.” This is the Mahasthamaprapta Dharma door.

Mr. Xia Lianju wrote in *Essentials for Practice of the Pure Land School* that Mahasthamaprapta Bodhisattva is the first patriarch of the Pure Land school. When I first read it, I felt great admiration. That Mr. Xia could make such a statement is not an easy thing!

Mahasthamaprapta Bodhisattva is the first one in the entire Dharma Realm to advocate practicing

only the Pure Land method. Therefore, he is the first Pure Land patriarch in the Dharma Realms.

In the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, Samantabhadra Bodhisattva taught the Ten Great Vows and guided all beings to rebirth in the Western Pure Land. Thus, Samantabhadra Bodhisattva is the first Pure Land patriarch in the Saha world.

During the Eastern Jin dynasty, Great Master Huiyuan built a cultivation hall on Mt. Lu and brought together one hundred and twenty-three fellow practitioners to practice solely the Buddha-name chanting method. He is the first Pure Land patriarch in China.

All these patriarchs advocated the practice and propagation of only the Pure Land teachings.

When we are clear about all these, we will be able to dissolve doubt and develop belief. We need nothing but the *Amitabha Sutra* (or the *Infinite Life Sutra*) and the chanting of "Amitufo." Our doubts will truly be dissolved.

If we diligently learn and practice this way, after three to five years we will be sure of attaining rebirth in the Western Pure Land and will not

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

waste this lifetime. As stated in the sutras, once one has done what needs to be done, one will no longer be in samsara. One can truly achieve this.

But if we learn in an unfocused way, our re-birth into the Pure Land is not guaranteed, and we will have to depend on the conditions at the end of our lives. We must know this.

“They delve deeply into true wisdom.” When the mind is pure, wisdom will manifest. When the pure mind is at work, it is true wisdom. Not only have the bodhisattvas of the Western Pure Land perfectly attained it, but if we learn and practice according to this method, we will also enjoy physical and mental well-being and be free of any illness.

The cause of all illnesses in this world is an impure mind. When the mind is pure, how can one become ill! When the mind is pure, the body will be tamed. When the body is tamed, one’s physiology will be normal and will completely accord with the natural law. When everything is normal, there will be no obstruction.

When one has afflictions or worries, there will be changes in one’s physiology, which will cause

abnormalities. One thus becomes ill.

When we understand this principle and truth, we will be able to cultivate a healthy body. Furthermore, we will be able to attain freedom from life and death. When we are about to pass away, we will know the time in advance. We will not suffer from any illness. We can choose when to leave. This shows true achievement in cultivation.

“No longer have residual habits” means that one has completely eliminated all residual habits. It is not easy to achieve this in our practice here in this world. Residual habits are truly difficult to eliminate. But when we are reborn in the Western Pure Land, we will be able to achieve this.

EXCERPT TWENTY-FOUR

What they have said is sincere and true. They delve deeply into the meanings and flavor. They enlighten all sentient beings. They show by example and teach the proper Dharma.

“What they have said is sincere and true.” “Sincere” means that what they [the bodhisattvas of the Western Pure Land] say is the truth; it is absolutely not a lie. This excerpt sentence is praising the teachings in the Buddhist sutras—where every word and every sentence are words of truth.

The word “meanings” in “they delve deeply into the meanings and flavor” means principle. “Flavor” refers to the flavor of the Dharma. When we truly delve deeply into the meanings and flavor, we will find that the meanings and flavor in the sutras are boundless. Not only that, but we will also find the name of Amitabha Buddha to have boundless meanings and flavor.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

How do we get to taste the flavor? By single-mindedly chanting the Buddha-name, we will taste boundless meanings and flavor. After we taste the flavor of the Dharma, there will be no stopping us. During our learning, we will truly feel joy and will definitely be making courageous and diligent progress.

Now, when we chant the Buddha-name we do not taste any flavor of the Dharma because when we chant “Amitufo” we are thinking of other things. This is the reason that our cultivation has not gone anywhere. We should diligently continue with our chanting. Anything that obstructs us from single-mindedly chanting should be discarded. In addition, we should chant with a sincere, pure, and respectful mind. After chanting in this way for half a year, we will taste the flavor of the Dharma. When we do, we will have confidence in attaining rebirth in the Western Pure Land. The more we chant, the firmer our confidence. We will be able to know in advance the time of our rebirth.

Those who are very advanced in their cultivation can attain rebirth at their own will. They can

go anytime they want. If they want to go now, they can. If they want to go at a later time, they can. They have truly attained freedom in life and death.

Frankly, every one of us can achieve this. The question is whether we are willing to concentrate on chanting. Jueming Miaoxing Bodhisattva clearly said in *Pointing Clearly to the West* that our chanting should not be intermingled with anything. Intermingling is not concentrating.

“They enlighten all sentient beings. They show by example and teach the proper Dharma.” “Enlighten” means to help. They help their students; they show by example and lecture on the true Dharma.

How does one show by example? By practicing according to the teachings. If we teach people to act one way but we ourselves act another way and do not practice what we teach, then those who listen to us may not believe our words. For example, if I tell you to mindfully chant the Buddha-name and I do not do so myself, would you believe my words? You would not.

One must practice what one teaches. This is

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

“show by example.” One is not putting on a show; one understands the teachings and principles in the sutras and actually practices them fully. One does what the Buddha teaches one to do and does not do what the Buddha teaches not to do.

All the methods that the Buddhas and bodhisattvas use to teach the beings are expedient teachings, which serve as guides [to the ultimate teachings]; they are not the latter. The ultimate teaching is the teaching of mindfully chanting the Buddha-name and seeking rebirth in the Western Pure Land. The *Avatamsaka Sutra*, in its conclusion, teaches practitioners to mindfully chant the Buddha-name and seek rebirth in the Western Pure Land. But most ordinary beings do not believe or accept this Buddha-name chanting method. It is a method that is hard to believe. To make people believe and accept this method—this is the difficulty.

Buddhas and bodhisattvas are compassionate. They earnestly and patiently urge us, and skillfully use various means to lead us to achieve the state of attainment. When we achieve this state, we will

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

truly feel grateful to the Buddhas and bodhisattvas for their kindness. Only by practicing the Buddha-name chanting method can we succeed²⁷ in one lifetime. If we do not practice this method, we will only plant a few good roots in this lifetime and will continue to transmigrate within the Six Paths.

²⁷ Success in one lifetime refers to transcending the Ten Realms and attaining Buddhahood in one lifetime. The Ten Realms consists of the Six Paths and the Four Sage Dharma Realms.—Trans.

EXCERPT TWENTY-FIVE

They travel to all the Buddha Lands. There is none that they like or dislike; and there is no thought of wanting or of not wanting. Neither do they have thoughts of “others” or of “I,” nor thoughts of dissatisfaction and enmity.

The bodhisattvas of the Western Pure Land go often to the Buddha Lands in the ten directions to teach and help all beings. Some Buddha Lands are magnificently adorned with seven jewels, but others are very polluted or unpleasant. When there is affinity, the bodhisattvas will go there, whether a situation is favourable or not. Moreover, they do not like or dislike any situation. In other words, they travel around all the Buddha Lands without feeling attachment or aversion. They do not give rise to any thought, discrimination, or attachment.

When we go abroad to visit other countries, if

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

we feel like or dislike, then our minds are polluted. We should cultivate meditative concentration and wisdom during the trips. When we see and understand everything clearly, we have wisdom. When we do not have any like or dislike, we have meditative concentration. Therefore, when we visit other countries we should simultaneously cultivate meditative concentration and wisdom.

Furthermore, in daily life when we interact with people and engage in tasks, we should also cultivate meditative concentration and wisdom. For example, if someone tries to anger us and we are able to not give rise to any thought, we are cultivating One Mind Undisturbed. The person who tries to anger us is a good teacher for us. Without him or her, how can we achieve the paramita of patience?

These situations—someone says charming words to us but we do not attach to the words, or someone tries to stir up trouble but we feel no anger—help us to cultivate and attain meditative concentration and wisdom.

One Mind Undisturbed and the Buddha-name Chanting Samadhi taught in Pure Land Buddhism

are both attained in this way. If one's mind is perturbed by others gossiping or starting rumors about us, one should immediately feel remorse: "I am wrong again. I am affected by the external environment again."

Daily, in every thought, stay awakened and do not be deluded when interacting with others and engaging in tasks. Any situation at any time is a good teacher for us.

"And there is no thought of wanting or of not wanting." It is erroneous to wish for something. When one wishes for something, suffering follows. When one gains something, something will be lost. Both are painful.

It is also erroneous to [have thoughts of] not wishing for something, because one would reject all opportunities. [Thoughts of] wishing for something is seeking affinities. [Thoughts of] not wishing for something is also seeking affinities. Therefore, bodhisattvas practice the Middle Way: when they teach beings, they are according with conditions, not seeking affinities.

"Neither do they have thoughts of 'others' or of

'I,' nor thoughts of dissatisfaction and enmity." The thoughts of "others" and "I" are in the four marks taught in the *Diamond Sutra*: the Mark of Self, the Mark of Others, the Mark of Being, and the Mark of Life Span. "Dissatisfaction and enmity" means that one bears resentment and hatred when others go against one's wish, and one forms attachment when they go along with one's wish.

Therefore, we should be impartial to all people in any situation, whether they are good or bad. An impartial mind will lead to a pure mind. Attachment as well as dissatisfaction and enmity are wandering thoughts. When one is free of all wandering thoughts, all discriminations, and all attachments, one will attain a pure and impartial mind. When the mind is pure and impartial, one will definitely be awakened, not deluded. One will then realize the goal of "purity, impartiality, and enlightenment."

EXCERPT TWENTY-SIX

[Those Bodhisattvas] have a mind of great compassion and of bringing benefits to all beings. They discard all attachments and accomplish infinite merits and virtues.

“Great” refers to a pure and impartial mind—such a mind is free of discrimination and attachment. Great compassion is compassion from a pure mind and an impartial mind.

This excerpt tells us that the bodhisattvas of the Western Pure Land have the ability to travel to all the Buddha Lands and to any place in the entire Dharma Realm. The sutras teach that the past has no beginning and the future has no end. From this, we know that space (in Buddhism it is called Dharma Realm) is immensely vast. This is the area the bodhisattvas cover in their travels—the vastness of the Dharma Realm. If they have an affinity with a place, they will manifest themselves there to

benefit the beings.

The conditions are mature for some beings but are not for others. If a being does not have the conditions, one should help the being develop the conditions. If the conditions of a being are not yet mature, one should help them mature. If the conditions of a being have matured, one should guide that being to attain rebirth in the Western Pure Land.

The standard for mature conditions in the Pure Land school is different from those in other schools. In other schools, a practitioner needs to completely eradicate all afflictions and attain great awakening. In the Pure Land school, a practitioner needs to have true belief, be willing to make the vow, and sincerely chant the Buddha-name. Such a practitioner is a being whose conditions have matured. This cultivation is easier than in other schools.

Throughout the boundless worlds in the ten directions, the bodhisattvas of the Land of Ultimate Bliss (1) seek the Buddha-dharma and (2) help all beings. When they seek the Buddha-

dharma, they are not attached to the act of seeking. When they help beings, they are not attached to the act of helping. They discard all attachments and teach all beings. This way, they are able to attain infinite merits and virtues.

In “merits and virtues,” “merits” refers to effort, and “virtues” refers to result. “Merits” is the cause; “virtues” is the result. How does one cultivate merits? The Buddha taught us these three principles—which are the Three Learnings to preserve [our merits and virtues]: precepts, meditative concentration, and wisdom.

One practices according to the precepts, meditative concentration, and wisdom. For example, if one observes the precepts and attains meditative concentration, precept observation is “merits” [effort], and meditative concentration is “virtues” [result]. If one cultivates meditative concentration and attains awakening, the cultivation of meditative concentration is “merits,” and awakening is “virtues.”

If one observes the precepts but does not have meditative concentration, then this is not considered as “merits and virtues.” There is “merits” [ef-

fort] but no “virtues” [result]. Here, precept observation will turn into good fortune—one will have good fortune in the human or heavenly path in the next lifetime.

If one cultivates meditative concentration but does not attain awakening, one will have the karmic result of being reborn in the heavens, in the Form Realm or the Formless Realm—one will not transcend the Three Realms. This good fortune [of being reborn into the heavens] is minuscule. If one attains enlightenment and uncovers one’s true nature, one will transcend the Three Realms.

“Infinite merits and virtues” signifies the attainment of Buddhahood. Only when one is a Buddha will one be replete with “infinite merits and virtues.” This is our ultimate goal in learning Buddhism.

How do we accomplish infinite merits and virtues? By discarding all attachments. From this we can see that the reason why we cannot succeed in our practice is due to our not being able to let go of our attachments. Therefore, we should not be attached to either worldly phenomena or supramun-

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

dane teachings. If we can discard all wandering thoughts and attachments, we will attain infinite merits and virtues.

If there is even one thing that we cannot discard or let go of, we will not have any achievement. But to let go is truly hard. Because of this, infinite great compassion arose in Amitabha Buddha, and he established a special cultivation place in the Dharma Realm for learning and practice—for beings like us who cannot let go to also have achievement. This is inconceivable!

With the cultivation places of all the other Buddhas in the ten directions, one must let go of both worldly phenomena and supramundane teachings before one can be reborn there. But, only in the land of Amitabha Buddha, [while letting go is ideal,] not letting go is also alright. This way, everyone will be truly helped and awakened.

When we get to the Western Pure Land, Amitabha Buddha and the beings of superior goodness (in other words, the great bodhisattvas) will help us discard all our attachments so that we can attain supreme enlightenment.

EXCERPT TWENTY-SEVEN

They know that all phenomena are empty
and quiescent. Retribution body and
afflictions—both remnants are completely
eradicated.

“They know that all phenomena are empty and quiescent”—this sentence conveys exactly the same meaning as “the four basic elements are all empty” and “the five aggregates are without self-identity.” The four basic elements refer to the four qualities of a physical substance: earth, water, fire, and air.

Earth refers to substance. In Buddhism, the tiniest substance is called a speck of dust; in science, it is the atom, electron, or particle. Earth signifies that substance does exist and can be detected by scientific instruments. Water indicates moisture. Fire indicates temperature. The scientific terms are electropositive and electronegative. Fire is electropositive and water is electronegative. Air indicates

motion: it is not still. In addition, it moves at great speed.

The four basic elements are the four fundamental features of a substance. All phenomena in the universe are made up of this basic substance. The *Diamond Sutra* says: “a composite is not a composite. It is called a composite.” This basic substance makes up all phenomena, from something as large as a planet or a galaxy to something as small as a speck of dust.

Where does the basic substance come from? It is manifestation of the mind. A commentary of the Consciousness-only school says that from ignorance and non-enlightenment the Three Subtle Marks arise, and with the external environment as conditions the Six Coarse Marks grow. Within the Three Subtle Marks are the *subjective aspect*²⁸ and the *objective aspect*: the *mark of the subjective perceiver*

²⁸ Yogacara Buddhism speaks of four aspects of the functioning mind, two of which are the subjective aspect (that which sees) and the objective aspect (what is seen). — Trans.

and the *mark of the objective world*.²⁹

The basic substance is the *mark of the objective world*, which is the objective aspect. The objective aspect is generated by the subjective aspect. Existence arises from non-existence and returns to non-existence—“all phenomena are empty and quiescent.” When we understand this, we will know the truth that all phenomena are empty.

Do what we see, hear, and touch presently exist? Or do they not exist? From the perspective of principles, they do not exist; from the perspective of phenomena, they do exist. This existence is nominal: it is not real. But the non-existence is real. What is real never changes. That which changes is not real. Non-existence never changes and is thus called *true emptiness*.

With regards to existence, all phenomena change. It is obvious that a person goes through birth, aging, illness, and death. Any person can perceive these changes. In actuality, there are subtler changes, such as the metabolism of the cells of

²⁹ The third subtle mark is the mark of karma from ignorance.—Trans.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

a body. Such changes occur every instant. Plants go through arising, abiding, changing, and extinction. Minerals or planets go through formation, existence, annihilation, and voidness. We realize all this.

Therefore, all phenomena are constantly changing. Since they change, they are not real. This is why existence is called *nominal existence*, *illusory existence*, or *marvelous existence*. Thus this Buddhist term: true emptiness and marvelous existence.

But we should know that existence and non-existence in Buddhism are one. Where is *true emptiness*? It is in *marvelous existence*. Where is marvelous existence? It is in true emptiness. True emptiness refers to noumenon, and marvelous existence refers to phenomena. This way, we will be able to see the mark of the objective world clearly. What is the benefit of seeing it clearly? It will help us discard all attachments.

From where do attachments arise? From us not understanding the truth and from thinking that we can own things. Not only can we not own worldly possessions, we cannot even own our body, so is

there any point in being attached to anything? Naturally, we will let go! When we truly let go we will attain eternal life.

True emptiness refers to the true nature. Why is true nature true emptiness? Because there is no sign of it: it shows no form and thus cannot be perceived by the eyes. True nature emits no sound and thus cannot be heard by the ears. It cannot be perceived or imagined. Our Six Sense Organs absolutely cannot detect anything here. But true nature truly exists. It is the noumenon of all phenomena in the universe. All phenomena arise from it.

When one sees the true nature, one is in the state of neither arising nor ceasing. One will have the freedom to manifest as any form. One will be able to manifest in any form one wishes.

We are now deluded, so we cannot manifest as anything no matter how hard we think. After we see the true nature, we will be able to manifest as anything. Throughout the entire Dharma Realm, we will be in control—we will be our own master; we will attain great freedom!

Therefore, we must know the truth: “All phe-

nomena are empty and quiescent.” This is stated from principles, from noumenon.

“Retribution body and afflictions—both remnants are completely eradicated.” “Both” refers to the retribution body and afflictions. “Remnants” refers to habits, and they are the hardest to eliminate. “Retribution body” signifies birth and death—when we transmigrate within the Six Paths, we continually get a body and discard it.

Transmigration is a phenomenon. Why is there this phenomenon? Because we have afflictions. The phenomenon of transmigration within the Six Paths is generated by afflictions. When we end afflictions, there will be no transmigration. For example, arhats—having eradicated the Affliction of Views and Thoughts—have transcended the Six Paths.

EXCERPT TWENTY-EIGHT

Their minds are clean like snow mountains.
Their patience is like the earth: with
impartiality, it bears everything. Their purity
is like water: it cleanses all dirt.

“Their minds are clean like snow mountains.”
“Snow mountains” refers to the Himalaya Mountains, which are blanketed with snow all year round.

Sakyamuni Buddha was born in today’s Nepal, south of the Himalaya Mountains. Therefore, when the Buddha lectured on the Dharma, he often used “snow mountains” as a metaphor for cleanliness and purity—a pure mind without any pollution.

“Earth” stores boundless treasures. Grain that grows on the earth nourishes us, and gold, silver, and precious minerals that are stored in the earth are for our benefit. But we need to cultivate land to be able to harvest from it. We also need smelting

know-how to extract the underground treasures for our benefit.

This is why Mahayana Buddhism teaches us to start our learning with Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva. “Earth” is a metaphor for the mind. Our minds contain infinite wisdom and capabilities. We need to use the teaching of “filial piety and respect for teachers” in the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* to plough and plant, and to extract and refine, so that we can obtain benefits.

“Their patience is like the earth: with impartiality, it bears everything.” Should we pour perfume onto the earth, it will not be delighted. Nor will it be disgusted should we pour excrements on it. The earth bears everything impartially. This teaches us to practice the paramita of patience.

The mind should be like the earth, which bears everything impartially. No matter who or what we encounter, our minds should always be impartial. Patience is very important in both worldly and supramundane undertakings. If we do not have patience, we will not be able to accomplish anything. Accomplishing a great undertaking requires great

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

patience; even a small undertaking requires a little patience. Therefore, the *Diamond Sutra* says: “All accomplishments are attributed to patience.”

It is stated in the sutras that it takes three asamkhyeya kalpas of cultivation for an ordinary being to attain Buddhahood. This is truly an extremely long time. How can one do this without patience? We Pure Land practitioners know that, according to the sutras, when ordinary beings attain rebirth in the Western Pure Land they bring along their karmas and achieve [Buddhahood] in one lifetime. This is how precious the Western Pure Land is!

Of course, there are many factors contributing to this speedy achievement. The most wondrous factor is perfectly attaining the three non-retrogressions. If we practice in other lands, we will progress as well as retrogress. And we will retrogress more than we progress. This is why it will take a long time [to attain Buddhahood].

When we know this truth, we should muster the greatest patience possible for learning the Pure Land teachings. We should have true belief and

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

resolutely vow to seek rebirth in the Western Pure Land. We must have the determination to go there and meet Amitabha Buddha in this lifetime. With this determination, we sincerely chant the Buddha-name until the end of our lives.

We will surely attain rebirth there.

Other than this, “all phenomena are illusory.” We should get by however we can, not fuss about things, and not be attached to things. We should regard all phenomena with impartiality and single-mindedly seek rebirth in the Western Pure Land. We should not seek fame or wealth. We should lead as thrifty a life as possible. This way, the resolve to seek rebirth there will be more sincere and resolute. All good deeds, and even good thoughts, should be dedicated to the adornment of the Western Pure Land, not to the pursuit of worldly good fortune.

“Their purity is like water: it cleanses all dirt.” “Purity” describes the mind. “Dirt” refers to affliction or pollution. This sentence teaches us to have a mind as pure and impartial as water. We make an offering of a glass of water to a Buddha’s image be-

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

cause water symbolizes a pure mind. This offering constantly reminds us that the mind of a Buddha is pure and impartial, just like water, and we should emulate the Buddhas by completely cleansing away our afflictions, wandering thoughts, discriminations, and attachments.

EXCERPT TWENTY-NINE

The minds of these Bodhisattvas are upright.
They are tireless in discussing and seeking
the Dharma.

“The minds of these Bodhisattvas are upright.”
“Upright” means sincere. We should treat others
with a sincere mind and not be afraid of being de-
ceived. We want to attain rebirth in the Western
Pure Land in the future. All the beings there have a
sincere mind. If our minds are not sincere, we will
not be able to attain rebirth there.

A sincere mind should be nurtured in everyday
life. We should interact with people and engage in
tasks with the utmost sincerity. This is teaching us
to maintain an upright mind.

“They are tireless in discussing and seeking the
Dharma.” This sentence talks about cultivating
oneself and teaching others. “Discussing” benefits
both oneself and others. This is what is known

about teaching: both teacher and student benefit. When one teaches another, one never tires. When one seeks the Dharma, one is also tireless.

Whether one seeks the Dharma or teaches others, the biggest obstacle is tiredness. When Confucius taught a student, he would not continue to teach the student if the student did not apply what he had learned to three other situations. But when Buddhas and bodhisattvas teach, they are tireless.

I remember one particular time when I saw Mr. Li teach. I was deeply moved. Mr. Li was over seventy years old at that time. Over a period of three hours, his students asked him many questions. He was unhurried and patient in his answers. This was very admirable. From this we know that Buddhas and bodhisattvas are tireless in teaching all beings.

There are many people who get tired in their learning, regress, and do not continue to make diligent and focused progress. Why do they get tired? Even though they are learning, they have not obtained the true benefits. If they have, how can they be tired? People get tired or regress because their minds are coarse and their goals are

shallow. When they achieve a simple goal, they are satisfied and do not want to go further.

During the Tang dynasty, when Precept Master Daoxuan of Zhongnan Mountain was learning the *Vinaya in Four Parts*, he listened to the lectures on it for more than twenty times. He was thus able to become a patriarch.

People today listen to the lectures on a sutra once and do not care to hear it again. How can they succeed! When I was in Taichung, I listened to Mr. Li Bingnan's lectures on *Fourteen Lectures on Buddhism* for eleven years. Only when I was thoroughly familiar with it was I able to taste the flavor of the Dharma.

Years ago in Taichung, at the request of eight people including myself, Mr. Li generated the mind to lecture on the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. Mr. Li would lecture one hour a week, and so it would have taken him sixty to seventy years to complete the lectures on the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. He was in his seventies or eighties. That meant that he had to live to one hundred fifty or one hundred sixty to complete the lectures. These are good examples for us.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

We should be tireless in cultivating ourselves and teaching others.

EXCERPT THIRTY

They are good, pure, and gentle. They abide
in quiescent concentration and are wise
in perception.

“Good” refers to honesty and simplicity. Good and “pure” describe mindset. Good refers to good fortune; pure, to wisdom. When one has both good fortune and wisdom, one has true merit. “Gentle” describes attitude: gentle, kind, respectful, thrifty, and humble.

This sentence tells us what attitude we should have when interacting with people and engaging in tasks. It also shows the true benefit of the Buddha’s teaching.

“Quiescent concentration” refers to a pure mind; externally, behavior is composed. As stated

in the sutras: “Naga³⁰ is constantly in meditative concentration. There is not a time when it is not.” Every movement and every action is composed and dignified, just like in meditative concentration.

“Wise in perception” is a pure mind in function. It is also wisdom coming forth—the mind is bright, and one is clear about everything in the external environment. Therefore, “abide in quiescent concentration and are wise in perception” means the mutual cultivation of meditative concentration and wisdom. One has meditative concentration and wisdom.

Letting go of all worldly concerns and single-mindedly chanting the Buddha-name—this is cultivating meditative concentration. In addition, this is also cultivating good fortune and wisdom. As Great Master Ouyi said, single-mindedly chanting

³⁰ A class of serpent-like beings in Hindu and Buddhist mythology. They are said to live in the underworld and inhabit a watery environment. Frequently considered to be benevolent, they also believed to act as guardians of hidden Mahayana texts. The philosopher Nagarjuna is said to have been given many scriptures by them, such as the Prajna-paramita Sutras.— Damien Keown, *Oxford Dictionary of Buddhism* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003) 185.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

the Buddha-name will “bring ample good roots and good fortune.” “Ample good roots” is wisdom. “Ample good fortune” is good fortune. Therefore, mindfully chanting “Amitufo” is cultivating both good fortune and wisdom.

Sakyamuni Buddha praised Amitabha Buddha’s light as “the most exalted of all lights and the most supreme of all Buddhas’ [lights].” Light signifies wisdom. “The most exalted of all lights” means the most exalted wisdom. “The most supreme of all Buddhas’ [lights]” signifies that of all Buddhas, Amitabha Buddha’s wisdom and good fortune are the greatest.

Therefore, if Buddha-name chanting practitioners sincerely chant “Amitufo,” they will receive a response from Amitabha Buddha. As it is said, “When one accords with Amitabha Buddha in a single thought, one is Amitabha Buddha in that thought.” “When one accords with Amitabha Buddha in a single thought” means Amitabha Buddha’s wisdom and good fortune become one’s own wisdom and good fortune.

When one mindfully chants “Amitufo” for a

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

long enough time, one will merge with Amitabha Buddha and become one. This is why Buddha-name chanting practitioners attain inconceivable achievements in a short time. “Abide in quiescent concentration and are wise in perception”—these are achieved through Buddha-name chanting.

EXCERPT THIRTY-ONE

Their bodies and minds are pure. They have
no craving or greed.

“Their bodies and minds are pure.” The mind is the master. When the mind is pure, the body will be pure. But the body can also affect the mind. The Buddha taught us that our behavior should accord with the precepts and proper codes of behavior. The purpose is to help us nurture good habits in daily life—so that the mind will naturally be calm.

“They have no craving or greed.” Of the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination, *craving*, *grasping*, and *becoming*³¹ are the causes of one’s transmigration within the Six Paths. When one eradicates any one of the three, one will transcend the Six Paths. *Craving* is delusion, *grasping* is attachment, and *becoming* is karma. If one cannot

³¹ These three are called Trishna, Upadana, and Bhava in Sanskrit.—Trans.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

eradicate *craving* or greed, one should eradicate *grasping*. If one cannot eradicate *grasping* either, then one can only try to eradicate *becoming*, but this requires advanced cultivation.

When Buddhas and bodhisattvas manifest in this world, they act the same way as we do. For example, Living Buddha Jigong, who was very well known to Chinese people, seemed to have craving and attachment. So how did he succeed in his cultivation? Because he did not have *becoming*. This was a very advanced achievement! We ordinary people cannot eradicate grasping or becoming, so we can only try to eradicate craving and greed.

When we have craving, we will have anger. When we have greed, we will be filled with greed, anger, ignorance, and arrogance. Greed is the root. When greed is uprooted, our afflictions will all disappear and the mind will become pure. When the mind is pure, the body will be pure. Ordinary beings can achieve this.

No craving or greed; pure are the mind and body. With this foundation, and with belief, vow,

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

and the mindful chanting of the Buddha-name to seek rebirth in the Western Pure Land, we will definitely be reborn there.

EXCERPT THIRTY-TWO

Steadfast and unmoving are their vows. . . .
They [bodhisattvas] seek the Way in a gentle
and correct manner. . . . They are pure, firm,
calm, and joyous.

“Steadfast and unmoving are their vows.” “Steadfast” refers to a calm mind. “Unmoving” means that they are set on one direction and one goal. Great Master Shandao said that if one seeks understanding, then one can learn any sutra. But if one wants to achieve attainment in cultivation, one can only succeed by delving deeply into one method. Therefore, cultivation is different from seeking understanding.

In today’s society, we should focus our energy on practice. This is the way to success. When the mind is focused on one method, one will realize the truth and be at peace.

“They seek the Way in a gentle and correct

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

manner.” “The Way” signifies an impartial, upright mind. In the sutra title, the words “purity, impartiality, and enlightenment” convey the meaning of “gentle and correct.” “Gentle” signifies the Middle Way—not too fast and not too slow. “Correct” means according definitively with the Buddha’s teachings.

For example, we mindfully chant the Buddha-name and seek rebirth in the Western Pure Land. We have deep belief and we sincerely vow. This is “steadfast and unmoving are their vows.” In daily life, we learn and practice based on the principles and methods taught in the sutras. This is “correct.” Our learning and practice will not go wrong.

“They are pure, firm, calm, and joyous.” When we learn and practice according to the principles and the methods, we will naturally have a pure and calm mind, and be filled with Dharma bliss. We will have a happy and perfect life. These are the wondrous benefits that we will get now.

EXCERPT THIRTY-THREE

People in the world strive for things of little urgency. Amidst extreme evils and severe sufferings, they diligently work . . . dictated by their minds. . . . Whether they have or do not have, they worry.

“People in the world strive for things of little urgency.” “People in the world” refers to the beings in the Six Paths. “Of little urgency” means of no importance. The beings in the Six Paths all busy themselves with unimportant things and forget the important things such as (1) knowing the truth of life and the universe, (2) understanding the transmigration within the Six Paths, and (3) transcending the Six Paths.

“Extreme evils and severe sufferings” are karmic results. “Extreme” means severe. “Severe evils” refers to the Ten Evil Karmas: the physical karmas of killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct; the ver-

bal karmas of false speech, divisive speech, harsh speech, and enticing speech; and the mental karmas of greed, anger, and ignorance. As the Ten Evil Karmas increase continually, they are called “extreme evils.” When one commits such extreme evils, how can one not suffer retribution! Great suffering is transmigration within the Six Paths; small suffering is the suffering in one’s present life, from birth to death.

“They diligently work . . . dictated by their minds.” “Mind” refers to greed, anger, ignorance, deluded mind, and wandering thoughts. In this kind of environment, people work hard and busy themselves every day simply out of “greed, anger, ignorance,” and for “fame, prestige, gain, wealth,” the Five Desires, and the Six Dusts.

“Whether they have or not, they worry.” When one obtains something, one is afraid of losing it. When one does not have something, one craves it. So one worries both ways: when one has something and when one does not. This is the true picture of society and the world presently.

EXCERPT THIRTY-FOUR

Parents and children, siblings, spouses, and relatives should respect and love each other, and should not be hateful or jealous of one another. They should share what they have with those who do not. They should not be greedy or stingy. Their speech and facial expression should always be gentle. They should not be defiant or unkind to one another.

“Relatives” refers to people of the same clan. People are together because of karmic links. Throughout our lives, the occasional meeting of someone is also due to a karmic link. More so, members of the same family—their link is even stronger.

Four kinds of karmic links exist between children and parents. The first is to repay kindness. In past lifetimes, they had a good and happy relationship with one another. The children come to repay

kindness, so they are very filial.

The second is to exact revenge. The children are karmic debtors from past lifetimes. They are usually wastrels. When they grow up, they will cause the family's ruin.

The third is to collect debt. It all depends on how much the parents had owed the children. If the parents did not owe much [previously], the children will die young. If the parents had owed the children a lot, the parents will spend a lot of money on the children's education and take very good care of them, and the children will suddenly die when they are adults.

The fourth is to repay debt. The children owed the parents in past lifetimes. When the amount is a lot, the children will look after their parents very attentively.

If the children's debt is little, they will take care of their parents just enough to ensure that their parents lack nothing. But there is no respect for their parents—the children only take care of their physical needs.

When these four kinds of karmic links exist be-

tween people, they will become family. People will become relatives or friends when the karmic link is weaker. When the link is stronger, people will become family.

If there is a bad karmic link with someone, any debt must be repaid. As is said “One who owes life will repay with a life. One who owes money will repay with money.” But education can help make amends. Teaching people will help them understand the truth, and any enmity can be resolved even if it was incurred in past lifetimes.

Education will help us transform bad karmic links into good ones and transform worldly-love affinity into Dharma affinity. This is most wonderful.

“Should respect and love each other” is the way to be a human being. Confucianism teaches the Five Cardinal Human Relationships and the Ten Obligations. Every person has ten different roles and should fulfill the obligation of each role. “Parents should love their children, and children should be filial to their parents; elder siblings should care for younger siblings, and younger siblings should

respect elder siblings.” In a family, if one’s role is that of a son, one should fulfill filial piety. As a father, one should be kind and loving. Knowing human relationships and understanding one’s responsibilities—this is what education teaches us.

Education teaches one how to interact with others and lets one know one’s role in relation to others. Hence, the efficacies of education let us maintain harmonious and prosperous families, a stable society, a flourishing country, and a peaceful world. But today, education does not have these efficacies any more. The goal of education today is the exact opposite of that in the past.

“Should not be hateful or jealous of one another.” “Hateful” refers to a resentful heart, a jealous heart. We should expand our respect and love beyond the scope of our family and encompass society and all beings. This way, society will be harmonious and the world will be at peace. Then, we will truly be able to live peacefully and happily.

One cannot live alone and away from society. Therefore, in everything, one must consider the well-being of society. One must not harbor hatred

or jealousy. When one encounters an adverse condition or situation, one should contemplate it over and over and find the root cause. One's mind will naturally be calm and afflictions will not arise.

“They should share what they have with those who do not.” When we have more things than we need, we should voluntarily help those in need. In our daily life, we should take care of one another. Each being's cultivation is different, thus the good fortune that each being has is different. Those who have great good fortune should take care of those who have little good fortune. This way, everyone will live in peace with one another.

If the rich are heartless—thinking of their own enjoyment and not caring about the suffering of others—society will be in turmoil. If the rich can take care of the poor, the poor would then be able to manage their lives. They will appreciate the kindness that the rich have shown them. Society will be peaceful and everyone can have a happy life.

If society is in turmoil, no matter how great one's good fortune or wealth is, one will still have a

miserable life.

We start with helping our family members and relatives, then gradually extend our help to all beings. Today, there are many young, virtuous people who are enthusiastic about learning. We should help them, so as to nurture them to become exceptional people for society, country, and the world—to bring benefit to all beings. The merit will be incomparably wondrous. When our children and relatives grow up, they will naturally have good fortune.

We should look far ahead.

“Should not be greedy or stingy.” “Stingy” means that we are unwilling to help others with what we have. When we are not greedy or stingy, we will have a broad mind and great good fortune.

“Their speech and facial expression should always be gentle.” This is saying that one should speak in a gentle way and always wear a smile.

The Buddha’s teachings pay great attention to this. This is why a Buddhist monastery or temple has an image of Maitreya Bodhisattva. This bodhisattva represents “speech and facial expression

should always be gentle.”

“They should not be defiant or unkind to one another.” “Defiant or unkind” signifies that there are differences in opinion. When there are differences in opinion, there will be disputes. Consider the countries, ethnic groups, and political parties that have split up. Why did they split up? Because they had disagreements and could not reach a consensus. None would yield to the other.

Let us look again at the political leaders in ancient times, leaders who led people to a common understanding. How did they do this?

In China, since the time of Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty, Confucianism was used to establish a common understanding. Later, Emperor Ming of the Han dynasty added Buddhism and Taoism. In other words, the Chinese were taught the Three Teachings.³² Doing it this way was accepted by everyone. This educational method was used until the Qing dynasty. The method used by the emperors in the past was truly brilliant!

³² Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism.—Trans.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

Today, everyone follows his or her own views. Those who agree are few, and those who disagree are many. Therefore, it is easy to split up.

This excerpt teaches us (1) how members of a family and their relatives should get along with one another and (2) how a family can become happy and harmonious. This is the foundation for our happiness throughout our lives.

If every person follows the Buddha's teaching, he or she will behave properly and will not overstep the boundaries, even when there are differences in opinions or feelings of unfairness.

EXCERPT THIRTY-FIVE

In worldly matters, people alternate harming one another. Retribution may not occur right away. One should see through to this reality as soon as possible.

The people in this world do not understand this truth and they take revenge over and over, back and forth. They have a strong desire for vengeance. Revenge may not happen right away, but we should know that when an enmity is created, sooner or later revenge will come.

Therefore, we should see through [retribution] and let go [of enmity]. We should completely change from within.

This excerpt alerts us to guard against disasters—not just natural disasters but, more importantly, man-made ones. We may not be experiencing a disaster now but we should be far-sighted and look into the future. This way, we will know how

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

to deal with matters at this present moment. There is a Chinese saying: "Those who fail to see ahead will soon find trouble right before them."

Besides, everything in this world changes all the time! In the past, no matter how things changed, the changes could be predicted somewhat because there were moral standards. No matter which dynasty it was, things did not deviate much from the standards.

Today, the standards have been discarded. The teachings of the ancient sages and the teachings of Confucius and Mencius have been discarded. Even the Buddha's teachings are unwanted. Therefore, people today are at a loss as to what to do. This is very frightening!

EXCERPT THIRTY-SIX

All of you should consider carefully. Stay far away from all evils. Choose what is virtuous to diligently practice. Love, desire, prestige, and splendor cannot be had forever. . . .

There is no happiness at all.

“All of you should consider carefully.” We should seriously contemplate everything. Understanding the truth, we will be diligent in our cultivation.

Simply put, “stay far away from all evils” refers to [staying away from] all those things that are harmful to others and that are beneficial solely to oneself.

For ourselves, “choose what is virtuous” refers to having belief and vow, mindfully chanting the Buddha-name, and seeking rebirth in the Western Pure Land. From all the sutras that Sakyamuni

Buddha taught in the forty-nine years,³³ we choose only the three Pure Land sutras. Putting aside all others, in this lifetime we learn and practice according to the teachings in the three Pure Land sutras. This way, we will achieve our goal.

In daily life, we must do things that benefit society. When we do our best and accord with conditions, the merit accrued will be perfect and complete. In addition, we should be able to tell good from bad and right from wrong, and should make the right choices.

“Diligently practice” means that we should put in our best efforts to do things diligently. [In doing so,] both ourselves and others will benefit.

“Love, desire, prestige, and splendor” refers to fame, prestige, gain, wealth, the Five Desires, and the Six Dusts. The Five Desires are wealth, sex, fame, food, and sleep.

Love, desire, prestige, and splendor “cannot be had forever” because they are transient, like fleeting clouds. At the end of one’s life, if one is still at-

³³ The Buddha taught for forty-nine years after he attained enlightenment. — Trans.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

tached to this world, this will obstruct one from attaining rebirth in the Western Pure Land. Therefore, one must give up fame, prestige, gain, wealth, the Five Desires, and the Six Dusts, and stay far away from all evils.

When we truly understand the truth, we will be highly cautious in all situations and remain constantly vigilant.

EXCERPT THIRTY-SEVEN

You should uproot all attachments and desires, and put an end to all sources of evil. Then you will be able to travel freely among the Three Realms without any obstruction.

“You should uproot all attachments and desires.” “Attachments and desires” are karmic obstacles. One may be diligent in learning Buddhism but if one does not eliminate even a small amount of karmic obstacles, at the end of one’s life, one’s obstacles will obstruct one from attaining rebirth in the Western Pure Land. Therefore, if one truly wants to succeed in cultivation, one should “uproot all attachments and desires.” If one’s attachment to wealth, sex, fame, food, and sleep is reduced, the karmic obstacles will also decrease.

“Put an end to all sources of evil.” The sources of all evils are greed, anger, ignorance, arrogance, doubt, and wrong views. These six are the primary

afflictions.

How do we “uproot all attachments and desires, and put an end to all sources of evil”? By mindfully chanting “Amitufo,” having deep belief and a sincere vow, and constantly thinking of attaining rebirth in the Western Pure Land. In all these, we must not be lax. Attachments, desires, and sources of evil will naturally diminish and will gradually stop arising.

Although we cannot completely eradicate them, as long as they do not arise and our Buddha-name chanting practice is effective, we will be able to attain rebirth in the Western Pure Land, carrying along our residual karmas.

The *Diamond Sutra* says: “How does one subdue one’s mind?” The mind here refers to wandering and distracting thoughts. We mindfully chant the Buddha-name to subdue and control our wandering and distracting thoughts. This method is extremely amazing!

“Then you will be able to travel freely among the Three Realms without any obstruction.” This is saying that the bodhisattvas appear in the Six

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

Paths to universally help all beings without being obstructed. We should learn this ability. When we come into contact with people to help them, our minds should be on Amítufo.

When we achieve in Buddha-name chanting practice and no wandering thoughts, discriminations, or attachments arise, we will be able to “travel freely among the Three Realms.” When we come into contact with people, we will not be hindered or affected by them. In the Six Paths, we use the profound and supreme Pure Land method to help all beings—urging them to learn and practice together so that they can attain rebirth in the Western Pure Land and, without retrogression, attain Buddhahood.

EXCERPT THIRTY-EIGHT

Words and behavior should be faithful and trustworthy. Within and without should match.

This is the basic attitude we need when we start our practice. The ancient people talked about ending wrongdoing and practicing virtuous conduct. Where does one start? One starts with no lying. Confucius said, “If a person cannot be trusted, there is no standing³⁴ for that person.” If a person is not trustworthy, there is no place in society for that person. In ancient society in China, “trustworthiness” was considered of foremost importance. It is so today as well. One must be dutiful and trustworthy. Our hearts and behavior should be in accordance.

³⁴ “No standing” means the person is not respected in society and he will not be able to establish himself. — Trans.

EXCERPT THIRTY-NINE

Having received the Buddha's clear teachings, we need to be focused and diligent in our learning, and practice according to the teachings. There is no doubt at all.

When we receive the Buddha's clear teachings, we need to aspire to learn and practice with concentration and diligence. We should practice according to the teachings without any doubt or regret. If we learn and practice this way, we will succeed.

EXCERPT FORTY

[All of you] can rectify your minds, correct your thoughts, and refrain from committing evil deeds in this world. This is quite a great merit.

“Rectify your minds, correct your thoughts” refers to generating the bodhi mind. Simply put, rectifying one’s mind means not thinking, not seeing, and not hearing anything that is not reasonable or that does not accord with the Buddha’s teaching. This is cultivating an upright and sincere mind.

“Evil deeds” refers to anything that does not benefit all beings.

Presently, the world is an evil world of the Five Corruptions.³⁵ In particular, the tools used to spread news and views are overwhelming. Those

³⁵ The corruption of the age, the corruption of views, the corruption of afflictions, the corruption of sentient beings, and the corruption of life. — Trans.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

who commit evil deeds are many and those who cultivate virtuous deeds are few.

Those who know and accept the Buddha's teaching should rectify their minds, correct their thoughts, and refrain from committing evil deeds in this chaotic world. If one "refrains from committing evil deeds," and cultivates the Ten Virtuous Karmas, this is great merit. One is accumulating merits and virtues.

EXCERPT FORTY-ONE

Buddha . . . teach all beings to . . . discard the Five Evils, leave the Five Sufferings, stay away from the Five Burnings, subdue and transform their thoughts, and observe the Five Goodnesses so as to obtain the good fortune from this.³⁶

The Buddha taught all beings to end wrongdoings and practice goodness so that they can receive true good fortune. In “discard the Five Evils,” the “Five Evils” are killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and taking intoxicants. These are causes.

The first evil is killing, which will bring about the retributions of illness and a short life span. No killing and a vegetarian diet will bring about the rewards of good health and a long life.

³⁶ This paragraph in the sutra begins with “Now I become a Buddha here to teach and transform all beings to discard the Five Evils, leave the Five Sufferings . . .” —Trans.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

The second evil is stealing. Its retribution is poverty. If we want to be wealthy and keep our wealth forever and not lose it, we need to know how to cultivate the cause. Those who constantly think of stealing from others will not keep their wealth for long. Those who are happy to give will most certainly obtain great wealth.

The third evil is sexual misconduct. Everyone wants to have a prosperous and happy family. To achieve this, one must definitely not commit sexual misconduct.

The fourth evil is lying. In the world at large, when one does not lie and keeps one's word, one will win the trust, respect, and support of others. One's career will be smooth.

The fifth evil is taking intoxicants, which will confuse one's mind. When one is intoxicated, one cannot control one's speech or behavior and thus will very often commit offenses that result in grave mistakes.

The Buddha taught us to end these Five Evils and cultivate the Five Goodnesses, which are the Five Precepts of no killing, no stealing, no sexual

misconduct, no lying, and no taking intoxicants. These five precepts should be adhered to from the time we begin to generate the mind to learn Buddhism until the time we attain the level of bodhi-sattva. When we seek rebirth into the Pure Land by Buddha-name chanting, if we cannot fulfill these five precepts, then no matter how many times we chant the Buddha-name we will not be able to attain rebirth.

The Western Pure Land is a place where the beings of superior goodness gather. If we cannot end the Five Evils and cultivate the Five Goodnesses, we will be incompatible with the Pure Land. We must accord with virtuousness so as to have Amitabha Buddha come to escort us to his land.

In “leave the Five Sufferings, stay away from the Five Burnings,” “Five Sufferings” are *flower retributions*³⁷ and “Five Burnings” are *fruit retributions*.³⁸ When there are causes, there will surely be effects. Committing the [above] five evil causes will bring about the retributions of suffering. “Sufferings” re-

³⁷ Retributions received in the present lifetime.—Trans.

³⁸ Retributions to be received in future lifetimes.—Trans.

fers to the sufferings in life. "Burnings" refers to the future sufferings in the Three Evil Paths.

From this we can see that when one commits evil karmas, one will suffer not only now but also in the future, where the retributions will be even more terrible.

"Thoughts" in "subdue and transform thoughts" refers to wandering thoughts, greed, anger, ignorance, and arrogance. "Transform" means transforming afflictions into Bodhi and transforming killing into compassion. This is the goal of the Buddha in teaching people.

How does one subdue and transform one's thoughts? When an evil thought arises, one should instantly have the wisdom to be aware of it and stop the wandering thought. For many kalpas, for which there is no beginning, ordinary beings have been immersed in affliction and habits, so they naturally have many wandering thoughts. But as it is said, "Do not fear a thought arising; fear realizing it too late." When an evil thought arises, one should immediately detect it and transform it into "Amitufo." This is cultivation. In the Zen school, this is the

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

practice of *enlightening illumination*. Here is where we practice: transforming an evil thought into a virtuous thought, transforming an evil thought into “Amitufo.” The thought of “Amitufo” is the most virtuous. There is no thought more virtuous than this.

“Observe the Five Goodnesses so as to obtain the good fortune from this.” The Five Goodnesses are the Five Precepts. We should abide by the Five Precepts. In addition to not killing, we should maintain a vegetarian diet because it is healthy.

There are many strange illnesses nowadays. How do they come about? Medical and scientific studies have come up with some theories that seem correct but are actually wrong. The true cause is eating meat. A proverb says, “Illness enters through the mouth; trouble exits from it.” Meat is undoubtedly poisonous. Great Master Yinguang once told a story. A woman breastfed her children. The first one died, so did the second one. Subsequently, the milk was sent to a lab for testing. It was found that she had fed the children when she was angry. Her anger

generated a poisonous substance that made the milk poisonous. She thus poisoned her own children.

From this we can deduce that when any living being is being killed, it is not everyday anger that the being feels but something more intense—hatred. Therefore, all meat is poisonous and eating meat is the same as taking poison. One may not get ill immediately, but over a long time this will bring about strange illnesses. A vegetarian diet will surely bring about good health and longevity.

“No killing” will bring about longevity. “No stealing” will bring about great wealth. “No sexual misconduct” will bring about a dignified appearance. “No lying” will bring about people’s respect. “No intoxicants” is a wise thing as one will maintain a clear head.

Cultivating the Five Goodnesses will naturally bring about good fortune, longevity, good health, and wealth. Everything will go well in one’s family and in one’s career. This is what one will get now. Future rewards will be even more wondrous.

EXCERPT FORTY-TWO

All kinds of beings in this world want to do evil. The strong overpower the weak, with both of them overwhelming and killing one another in turn. They cruelly harm and slaughter, and alternately devour one other. They do not know to do good deeds and will thus suffer misfortunes and punishments later. . . . [Karmic foes will] in turn take revenge on one another. . . . The suffering is beyond description.

This excerpt describes the saying “the weak are the prey of the strong.” Is this statement true? No. What is true is that reprisal breeds reprisal. It would seem that the weak are to be eaten or dominated by the strong, but it is not so. The Buddha, who had perfectly realized the five kinds of eyes,³⁹

³⁹ The five kinds of eyes are human eye, heavenly eye, wisdom eye, Dharma eye, and Buddha eye.—Trans.

clearly saw the truth of transmigration within the Six Paths. He said that the beings in the Six Paths alternately take revenge on one another, lifetime after lifetime.

It is said, “A human dies and is reborn a sheep; a sheep dies and is reborn a human.” In this life you are the human and you are stronger than the sheep; you kill and eat it. In the next life, the sheep becomes the human and you become the sheep; he will kill and eat you. Each one, in turn, pays back. This is “in turn take revenge on one another.” Such agony!

The weak being the prey of the strong is an abnormal phenomenon. It is a malicious relationship—one of continual reprisals. In addition, when one takes revenge, one will not do it in the exact amount—one will overdo it a little. Therefore, the enmity will continue lifetime after lifetime without end and will never be resolved. The retributions will become more and more terrible.

The first part of *The Complete Works of Zhou Anshi* is *Lord Superior Wen Chang Tract of the Quiet Way*. In the first section, Lord Superior Wen

Chang talked about seventeen of his lifetimes of karmic causes and effects. The retributions were terrible—truly horrifying. It is worthy of our vigilance.

We understand the truth, so we should feel empathy for all beings—we should love them, not harm them. What is the cause of wars in this world? The Buddha told us that it is killing. Therefore, if wars are to end forever, beings should not eat meat.

Years ago when I was lecturing in Taipei, there was an elderly lay practitioner, a Mr. Wu from Ningbo. He used to do business in Shanghai and started to learn Buddhism in his old age. He told me a true story that happened in Shanghai.

A friend of his, who was also a businessman, worked for a German before World War II. This friend was very honest, trustworthy, and hard-working. Therefore, the German businessman was very fond of him.

When the war broke out, the German businessman returned to his country and entrusted the company to Mr. Wu's friend, who ran it well. After

the war ended, the German did not come back. It was said that he had died. Mr. Wu's friend ended up owning the company. Of course, he did not take it by force. It naturally became his because the owner died.

Mr. Wu's friend had a child. When the child was eleven or twelve, he dropped ten dollars (at that time, ten dollars was a lot of money) on the ground. An acquaintance of his father picked up the money and said, "Call me 'Uncle' and I'll give you back the ten dollars." The child retorted, "You call me 'Uncle' and I'll give you ten dollars."

That year, the father, Mr. Wu's friend, was fifty years old. At his birthday party, he suddenly saw that his child looked like his late German employer (the father alone saw this). Having started learning Buddhism, the father realized that his late employer probably was reborn in his family and became his son. There and then, he announced the transfer of all his property to his son. This was a very smart thing to do.

This story illustrates that a child is born into a family to collect debt, repay debt, repay kindness,

or exact revenge. This is definitely true. The Buddha talks about the four kinds of karmic links that exist between parents and children. Those who come to repay kindness are filial children. Those who come to exact revenge hold grudges from past lifetimes and will cause families to break up and family members to die. Some come to collect debt. The son of Mr. Wu's friend is a good example. Some come to repay debt. These are the causes for those who are in the same family.

When a child is born into one's family, one needs to know to change—to transform bad relationships into Dharma relationships.

“They do not know to do good deeds and will thus suffer misfortunes and punishments later.” “Misfortunes and punishments” are the Five Sufferings and the Five Burnings. People in general know only to kill animals to satisfy their desire for food—they do not know the disastrous consequences of such actions.

Before Venerable Guanghai became a monk, he handled military supplies in the military. At that time, he was eating one chicken a day. That's three

hundred and sixty chickens a year—a thousand chickens after three years!

After he became a monk, he was diligent in cultivation and strictly abided by the precepts. He was well versed in the precepts and also wrote books. One day when he was taking a shower, he suddenly saw that the bathroom was full of chickens, and they were all trying to jump on him. When he tried to dodge them, he fell down, breaking his leg. He told me that as a result of learning Buddhism and observing the precepts, this was a light retribution for the grave offenses he had committed. From this we see how horrifying retributions can be. Had he not learned Buddhism, his retribution would have been even more terrible.

Therefore, we should make a vow that when we attain rebirth in the Western Pure Land and attain Buddhahood, we will first help those beings we have killed. “When I attain Buddhahood, you will be the first ones I help. Please do not cause trouble or obstruct me. If you obstruct me, I will not be able to succeed in cultivation, and you will continue to suffer in the Six Paths.”

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

The Dedication of Merit says “Repay the Four Kinds of Kindness above, and relieve the suffering of those in the Three Paths below.” In the Three Paths, the first ones to be helped are those who hold grudges against us.

When we encounter animals, we should mindfully chant the Buddha-name and dedicate the merit to them. It is quite usual to chant “Amitufo.” It is even better if we chant the Three Refuges. “Return and rely upon the Buddha so as not to be reborn into the hells. Return and rely upon the Dharma so as not to be reborn as a hungry ghost. Return and rely upon the Sangha so as not to be reborn as an animal.” We chant this to the beings in the Three Evil Paths. When we encounter animals, we can chant the Buddha-name and dedicate the merit to them, as well as chant the Three Refuges.

EXCERPT FORTY-THREE

People in this world do not follow laws and rules. They are extravagant, indulge excessively in desires, and are arrogant—they willfully do whatever they want. Those who hold high positions are corrupted; they are not upright in their duties. They falsely incriminate others and harm loyal and upright people. What they think is contrary to what they say; they are scheming and deceitful. They will try to deceive all—regardless of whether others have high or low positions, regardless of whether they are related or not. They get angry and are ignorant—they want to gain the riches of others. They desire more, and compete for advantage and profit. Grudges form and turn into enmities, causing families to be ruined and members to separate or die. They do not care about before and after. Some rich people are stingy and unwilling to

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

give. Imprisoned by their desires, their greed runs deep. Their minds labor and their bodies suffer. They continue like this until the very end, yet nothing will accompany them. What will follow them into their next life will be their good karmas, bad karmas, good fortune, and misfortune. They may go to happy places or to extremely miserable places. When seeing the virtuousness of others, they become hateful and slanderous, instead of having respect and admiration. They constantly harbor the intent to steal, hoping to appropriate the wealth of others for their own. After they use it up, they try to take more again. Spiritual beings of heaven and earth will record their deeds and eventually they will fall into the evil paths.

“People in this world do not follow laws and rules.”
“Rules” are regulations, etiquette, customs, and moral values. When people do not obey laws or

follow etiquette, society will be in chaos. The following describes the chaotic phenomena of society.

“They are extravagant, indulge excessively in desires, and are arrogant—they willfully do whatever they want.” “Willfully doing whatever they want” means that they do whatever they like without restraint.

“Those who hold high positions are corrupted; they are not upright in their duties.” “Those who hold high positions” refers to people who have leadership roles in society. “Corrupted” means not understanding the principles. “Not upright” refers to improper thoughts and behavior—for selfish gains, the public is harmed. This refers to the government officials who take bribes and abuse the law. Their intentions are not upright. They do not work for the benefit of the people. Instead, they benefit themselves by thinking of all kinds of ways to cheat people of their hard work and possessions. Such stealing is very grave.

The following are examples.

“They falsely incriminate others and harm loyal and upright people.” This is to forcibly take the

power, position, or wealth of others. This is having the mind of stealing.

“What they think is contrary to what they say; they are scheming and deceitful.” This is saying that what these people say and do are different. They scheme to defraud others. Things like this have happened throughout history and around the world. No matter how wise and able a leader is, it is unavoidable for him or her to wrong a few innocent people or to make mistakes that are bad for citizens. Throughout history, in this world, we cannot find a person who is perfect, one who has never made a mistake in his or her lifetime.

“They will try to deceive all—regardless of high or low position, regardless of whether they are related or not.” “High” refers to one’s elders. “Low” refers to one’s juniors. “Related or not” refers to relatives and non-relatives. To benefit themselves, they deceive all: elders, juniors, family, and outsiders. Families are in discord—with parents, children, siblings, relatives, and friends all trying to deceive one another.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

“They get angry and are ignorant—they want to gain the riches of others. They desire more, and compete for advantage and profit.” This is brought about by greed for wealth and benefit. Always wanting to get more for ourselves and not wanting to yield, we quarrel with others and others with us, and we become foes.

“Grudges form and turn into enmity, causing families to be ruined and members to separate or die. They do not care about before and after.” “Before” refers to cause and “after” refers to retribution. People do not know about cause and effect, which is why they are not afraid to do as they please. When retributions appear, it is too late for regret. The result is their families are destroyed and they lose their own lives.

“Some rich people are stingy and unwilling to give.” This is describing the rich and prestigious people who are greedy and stingy, and who are unwilling to help others.

People in this world do not understand the truth of life and the universe. They are ignorant and selfish. The Buddha told us the truth of life

and the universe—the entire Dharma Realm is one entity, and the true nature of Buddhas and bodhisattvas and that of all beings are one. From this, we realize that we and all the other beings in the entire Dharma Realm are closely knit—when we love ourselves, we will love all beings; when we help others, we are helping ourselves.

Buddhist practitioners must broaden their minds and care about all beings. The broader the mind, the greater the good fortune. In this world and beyond, the Buddha's good fortune is the greatest good fortune because his mind "embraces the expanse of space and encompasses the vastness of the universe."

Wealth is good fortune, and it will be used up some day. It is stated in the sutras that one's wealth belongs to five families. The first is water, which can flood one's properties. The second is fire, which can burn one's properties. The third is the government. In the past, the government would confiscate all the properties of a criminal. The fourth is robbers and thieves. The fifth is spendthrift children, who are hard to guard against.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

How does one protect one's wealth? By giving. One should try to do more charitable acts that benefit society and all beings.

During the Spring and Autumn period in China, Mr. Fan Li was a senior official of King Gou Jian of the Yue state. After the Yue state was conquered by the Wu state, he helped Gou Jian restore the Yue state. When he completed his mission, he changed his name and started to do business. Within a few years, he amassed a great fortune. After he became wealthy, he gave away all his wealth and again started a small business. Within a few years, he amassed another great fortune. He then gave away all his wealth a second time. In his lifetime, he amassed great wealth three times and gave everything away three times. He was truly wise and able. What he did was very correct.

When we have enough food and clothing, we should take care of the poor and work for the benefit of society and the local community. We must know to practice virtuous conduct, cultivate good fortune, and accumulate merit. The more wealth we give away, the more we will receive.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

When we give, we will gain. When we do not give, we will not gain.

“Imprisoned by their desires, their greed runs deep. Their minds labor and their bodies suffer.” When one has a lot of money, one worries about gains and losses. One will not be at ease. Therefore, one suffers physically and mentally.

“They continue like this until the very end, yet nothing will accompany them.” An ancient eminent master said, “[When we die,] we cannot take anything with us; only karmas will accompany us.” Fame and honor, wealth and rank, and money and possessions—we cannot take these with us. All the good karmas and bad karmas created in our lifetime will stay with us. Those who are truly awakened know that they should cultivate what they can take with them. What they cannot take along, they should just ignore and waste no energy on.

“What will follow them into their next life will be their good karmas, bad karmas, good fortune, and misfortune.” Good karmas will bring about good fortune. Bad karmas will bring about misfortune.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

“They may go to happy places or go into extremely miserable places.” “Happy places” refers to the human and heavenly paths. “Extremely miserable places” refers to the Three Evil Paths (of hells, hungry ghosts, and animals). It is our own good and bad karmas that dictate and pull us into the path that we are reborn in. This is retribution, not the work of Lord Yama, God, Buddhas, or bodhisattvas.

“When seeing the virtuousness of others, they become hateful and slanderous, instead of wanting to emulate them.” Such thinking and behavior is not virtuous. Jealousy and hatred are indeed thoughts of stealing. Why? Because one does not like to see others doing better. This mindset is not normal. Wishing that others be worse off or becoming displeased, critical or slanderous when seeing virtuous people or good deeds being done—these are all thoughts of stealing.

A virtuous person delights upon seeing other virtuous people or good deeds and will wholeheartedly assist these people and help them accomplish their good deeds. A virtuous person sets a

good example for whatever community he is in, and his good deeds will definitely benefit the general public.

When we help others achieve their goals, we will succeed in our cultivation of virtues. When we obstruct others, we are committing tremendously grave offenses.

“They constantly harbor the intent to steal, hoping to appropriate the wealth of others for their own. After they use it up, they try to take more again.” These people use various illegal means to take the gains of others and use them for their own enjoyment. When they use up the ill-gotten gains, they will again think of other ways to get more. This is stealing—having both the intent and the action.

“Spiritual beings of heaven and earth will record their deeds and eventually they will fall into the evil paths.” “Spiritual beings” refers to heavenly and earthly spirits. When one gives rise to an evil mind and commits evil deeds, one may fool others but not the spiritual beings. They keep a re-

cord of what one does. This is the first sense of this sentence.

“Spiritual beings” also refers to one’s consciousness, which the Chinese call conscience. Others may not know the evil deeds that one commits, but one clearly knows it in one’s heart. The seeds of these deeds will be embedded in the Alaya Consciousness and will not vanish. When the conditions mature, one will suffer retributions. This is the second sense of the sentence.

Our every thought and every action are recorded, like the data in a computer. Our Alaya Consciousness records all our good and evil thoughts and actions, similar to what a computer does. This is our database, containing not only data in this lifetime but also data from all past lifetimes. Spiritual beings and people who have the ability can read our data.

Therefore, we should be cautious with our thoughts. We should not allow any evil thought to arise. Every thought should be of benefiting all beings and not be of harming them. This way, we will truly succeed in attaining great virtue.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

“Eventually they will fall into the evil paths.” This talks about retribution. Ultimately, these people will fall into the evil paths.

If the Buddha does not tell us these truths, there is no one else who can clearly explain them to us. This is how the Buddha helps and protects us: he teaches us to be constantly alert to our thoughts, words, and actions, so that we will not have any evil thought or commit any evil deed. This is leaving suffering behind and attaining happiness.

EXCERPT FORTY-FOUR

People in this world are born from interrelated karmic causes. How long can one live? Unvirtuous people are not proper in their behavior and thoughts. They usually harbor evil intentions and their minds are constantly preoccupied with immoral lust.

Restlessness fills their minds, and their exterior persona reveals wantonness. They waste away their family fortune. What they do is unlawful. Things that they should seek, they are unwilling to.

“People in this world are born from interrelated karmic causes.” Society is the phenomenon of living beings existing together. No one can live independently. People have to rely on one another. Therefore, when one thinks about oneself, one must also think about others.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

“How long can one live?” A human life span is short. Life is fragile. In this world, ten years can pass without a person attaining anything. Truly, this is like a dream. The ancient Chinese said, “Since ancient times, few live to the age of seventy.” Now, although medicine has advanced and life spans seem to have lengthened, in Africa and many other places where the living environment is very bad, people die of hunger and babies lose their lives every day. If we take this into account, the average life expectancy is less than seventy years.

People have shared karma and individual karma. Some people cultivate good fortune, so they have a longer life span. But even if they live to one hundred, this is still a short time. Therefore, seeing through this and letting go will definitely be beneficial for us.

“Unvirtuous people are not proper in their behavior and thoughts. They usually harbor evil intentions and their minds are constantly preoccupied with immoral lust. Restlessness fills their minds, and their exterior persona reveals wantonness. They waste away their family fortune.” This

part of the excerpt talks about those whose afflictions, karmic obstacles, and bad habits are very severe. These people's thoughts and behavior are not proper. They usually harbor evil intentions, and the thoughts of lust never cease. Therefore, their desires burn inside them like a fierce fire and this shows in their appearance—"their exterior persona reveals wantonness." The immediate retribution is "wasting away their family fortune." Such people are called spendthrift children or prodigal children.

"What they do is unlawful." This refers to ruining other people's reputations and moral integrity. In ancient times, this was very serious. Today, people attach little importance to this, nevertheless it is an obstacle to one's cultivation, personal happiness, and a safe society. If one truly believes in cause, condition, and retribution, one will naturally understand.

"Things that they should seek, they are unwilling to." The Buddha said this with deep feeling. Instead of seeking and doing what we should, we are unwilling to do so. What should we be seeking?

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

Transcending the cycle of birth and death. This is what we should seek. It is a great suffering to be in the cycle of birth and death. The Buddha showed us a path to transcend the cycle. If we believe him and follow this path, our wish will be fulfilled.

This excerpt talks about the evil of sexual misconduct. The gravest offense of all is killing; the greatest obstacle to one's cultivation is sexual desire. These are two great obstacles. If in one's cultivation one wishes to transcend this world, one will not be able to transcend the Three Realms without eradicating sexual desire.

Although the Pure Land method allows one to bring one's residual karmas into the Western Pure Land, one must suppress one's sexual desire, anger, and ignorance. This way, one will be sure of attaining rebirth there. If one cannot suppress them, then no matter how much one chants the Buddha-name, it is as an ancient Chinese said: "Even if one chants until one's throat is hoarse, one's chanting is still futile." One will only form a good affinity with Amitabha Buddha, but one will not succeed in attaining rebirth in the Pure Land in this lifetime.

EXCERPT FORTY-FIVE

People in this world do not think of practicing goodness. They use divisive speech, harsh speech, false speech, and enticing speech. They detest and are jealous of virtuous people. They discredit the worthy and the wise. They are not filial to their parents, and they are not respectful to their teachers and elders. They are not trustworthy to their friends, and it is difficult for them to be sincere and honest. They are conceited and claim that they have attained the Way.

They are wild and bully others. They encroach on the rights of others. They want others to fear and respect them, while they themselves feel neither fear nor shame. These people are stubborn and hard to transform.

They constantly harbor arrogance and haughtiness. They rely on the protection of the good fortune from past lifetimes. They commit evil deeds in this lifetime and use up

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

their good fortune. At the end of their lives,
all their evil deeds will come back to
overwhelm them.

This excerpt talks about the evils of false speech. False speech is dishonesty. If one is not honest, one will absolutely not succeed in one's cultivation. Why? Because cultivation requires a sincere mind. When one is not sincere in one's words, one's mind is false. How can one with a false mind succeed in cultivation? Even in this world, a person who is not trustworthy cannot have a place in society. One can deceive others for a short time but not forever.

“Divisive speech” is the sowing of discord. “Harsh speech” is speaking harshly and hurting others. “False speech” is telling lies to deceive people. “Enticing speech” is sweet words meant to deceive others. For example, songs, dance, movies, and dramas today lead people to have evil thoughts. All these are “enticing speech.”

The arts in ancient China were all based on the standard of “no evil thoughts.” For example, plays

and novels taught people to understand the law of cause and effect—good deeds will bring about good retributions; bad deeds will bring about bad retributions. They promoted loyalty, filial piety, moral integrity, and justice. This is one way of teaching the general public.

Those who engage in entertainment and art should guide society in a positive direction, by teaching that which is virtuous or good. This way, they will have boundless good fortune. Otherwise, they will create evil karmas.

“They detest and are jealous of virtuous people.” When they see virtuous people or good deeds being done, jealousy and anger arise in them.

They “discredit the worthy and the wise.” A worthy person is a person of virtue. A person of virtue and wisdom can influence the people in an area, improve the social customs, and set a good example for the local people. His or her merit will be very great. If one is jealous of or dislikes this person and obstructs this person from doing his or her good deeds—sabotaging this person instead of helping or rejoicing at the good deeds—then the

offense is grave, as it has affected all the people in the area.

“They are not filial to their parents, and they are not respectful to their teachers and elders.” This shows extreme arrogance! This applies not only to the general public but also to Buddhist practitioners. The *Visualization Sutra* teaches us the Three Conditions. The first includes being filial and providing and caring for parents, being respectful to and serving teachers, being compassionate and not killing, and cultivating the Ten Virtuous Karmas.

Filial piety and respect for one’s teachers are the absolute foundations. If one is not filial to one’s parents or does not respect one’s teachers, then there is no need to talk about other things. To show gratitude for the love and care given by one’s parents, one should be respectful and filial to them. Both mundane and supramundane teachings are based on filial piety. Buddhism—a teaching where the teacher as well as the teachings are highly revered—is founded on filial piety. If the public ignores filial piety, then there is no foundation for

Buddhism. Like building a house, if there is no foundation, how can the house stand firm?

“They are not trustworthy to their friends, and it is difficult for them to be sincere and honest.” Due to the guidance of our teachers, we have wisdom and skills. This is a great kindness to us. If one thinks nothing of the kindness of one’s parents and teachers, how can one be a friend?

In present society, it is indeed as described here. The relationships between people and between countries are based entirely on gains or losses, not on moral obligations and justice.

“They are conceited.” Because they are arrogant, they look down on their parents and teachers, thinking that their parents and teachers cannot compare with them and are not as capable as they. Therefore, they are arrogant to their elders.

They “claim that they have attained the Way.” If one claims that one has attained the Way but has not done so, it is a great lie. This lie deceives people and damages Buddhism, and the retribution is falling into the Avici hell.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

“They are wild and bully others. They encroach on the rights of others.” This is tyrannizing others.

“They want others to fear and respect them, while they themselves feel neither fear nor shame.” Shame—being pricked by one’s conscience and caring about public opinion—is a good mental quality. “Feeling neither fear nor shame” means that one has no conscience and does not care about criticism from the public, ignoring it completely. This is why one dares to act unlawfully—one is full of oneself.

“These people are stubborn and hard to transform.” It is hard to change and reform these people.

“They constantly harbor arrogance and haughtiness.” They are proud and arrogant.

“They rely on the protection of the good fortune from past lifetimes.” Why does a bad person who rides roughshod over others enjoy high status, wealth, and power in society while not suffering any punishment? Because the good fortune he or she cultivated in past lifetimes is abundant—the conditions for the evil deeds done in this lifetime

have not yet matured, so the retributions have not materialized.

It is stated in the sutras: "If you want to know the causes planted in past lifetimes, look at what you are experiencing in this lifetime. If you want to know your karmic effects in future lifetimes, look at what you are doing in this lifetime." What we do in this lifetime will bring about retributions in future lifetimes. A good cause will bring about a good retribution. A bad cause will bring about a bad retribution. If a retribution has not happened, it is because the time has not yet come.

"They commit evil deeds in this lifetime and use up their good fortune." One cultivated great good fortune in past lifetimes and could have enjoyed it for one hundred years. But because one commits evil deeds, one's good fortune is used up in fifty years. This is the diminishing of good fortune. This is definitely not the gods and deities controlling this to punish one. It is due to one's karmic forces. The karmic force of the evil deeds gets stronger and the karmic force of the virtuous deeds gradually becomes weaker. As the good karmas cannot coun-

teract the evil karmas, the karmic force of the evil karmas will become stronger and stronger. Retributions from the stronger karma will be meted out first, pulling one to suffer them. This is the principle.

“At the end of their lives, all their evil deeds will come back to overwhelm them.” At the end of one’s life, the evil karmas will manifest, and one will have to suffer retributions. “All their evil deeds” refers to the evil paths. The karmic foes and creditors from this and past lifetimes will come to take one’s life if one owes them life or to collect debt if one owes them money. This is why Buddha-name chanting practitioners should dedicate merits from their learning, practicing, and giving—“repaying the Four Kinds of Kindness above, and relieving the suffering of those in the Three Paths below.

“Repaying the Four Kinds of Kindness above” means that the merits are dedicated to those who have shown us kindness. “Relieving the suffering of those in the Three Paths below” means that the merits are dedicated to the karmic foes and credi-

tors from numerous kalpas. Throughout my entire life, I have been repaying debts with my cultivation. We make offerings to those who have shown us kindness, and we repay debts to our karmic creditors. This way, we will eliminate many obstacles to our cultivation. This is the truth. When we truly understand, we will courageously and diligently learn and practice.

We should generate the bodhi mind, single-mindedly chant "Amitufo," and seek rebirth in the Western Pure Land. This is an assured path. As an ancient eminent master said, "If ten thousand people practice [the Pure Land method], all ten thousand will attain rebirth." So, we will surely succeed. Only when we attain rebirth in the Western Pure Land will we be able to truly repay those who have shown us kindness in past lifetimes and help those we have enmities with attain Buddhahood.

Therefore, only when we attain rebirth in the Western Pure Land can we resolve enmities with all beings.

EXCERPT FORTY-SIX

People in this world are indecisive and indolent. They are unwilling to do good deeds, be disciplined in their behavior, or cultivate [proper] karmas. They disobey their parents and rebel against their teachings. They are like foes to their parents, who may as well not have them as children. They are ungrateful, go against ethics, and do not repay kindness shown to them. They are dissolute, fool around, and indulge excessively in alcohol and good food. They are rash, overbearing, and contradictory, ignorant of the ways of the world. They have no sense of righteousness or propriety, and cannot take advice or guidance.

“People in this world are indecisive and indolent.”
“Indecisive” means that the mind does not have a stand and has no direction. “Indolent” means lazy-

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

ness and the seeking of momentary comfort and pleasure.

If one wants to accomplish an undertaking, whether mundane or supramundane, the first requirement is to have an aspiration. This serves as the direction and goal for one's lifelong effort. Some people seek fame and become famous. Some people seek gains and they acquire them. Why? Because they concentrate on one goal. It is the same with cultivation. There are many Buddhist schools and methods but one can delve deeply into only one.

Great Master Shandao said that if one wants to seek understanding, one can use teachings from various schools as reference, but for cultivation, one must choose only one Dharma door. One can know various paths but can walk only one. One cannot walk two paths at the same time. Therefore, to reach one's goal there must be only one method of cultivation. This is the principle.

All Buddhas urge people to mindfully chant the Buddha-name and seek rebirth in the Western Pure Land. Why? Although there are many Bud-

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

dhist schools and Dharma doors, they are all different in degree of difficulty. For example, the goal of Zen meditation is to enlighten the mind and see the true nature. But it is hard to see the true nature. Why can't one see the true nature? Because there are obstacles. What obstacles? Affliction of Views and Thoughts, Affliction of Dust and Sand, and Affliction of Ignorance. One must completely eradicate Affliction of Views and Thoughts as well as Affliction of Dust and Sand, and eliminate at least a part of ignorance before one can enlighten the mind and see the true nature.

When one mindfully chants the Buddha-name and seeks rebirth in the Western Pure Land, one will carry along one's residual karmas. It does not matter if one has not eliminated a part of Affliction of Views and Thoughts. This is why the Pure Land method is wondrous and why all Buddhas extol it greatly.

But being indecisive and indolent is a grave obstacle, regardless of which Dharma door one learns and practices. Even when one chants the Buddha-

name, one will not be able to attain rebirth in the Western Pure Land.

“They are unwilling to do good deeds.” Being able to practice virtuous conduct is good fortune. People in this world all seek wealth, wisdom, good health, and longevity. Can they get them? “In Buddhism, every wish can be fulfilled.” If one knows the right principle and method and seeks accordingly, one’s every wish will be fulfilled.

Wealth is a karmic result. Where there is a result, there must have been a cause. When one cultivates a cause, one will surely get the result. The cause of having wealth is giving. The more one gives, the more one will get. When one gives, one is planting a cause. When one gives naturally, one will get the result quickly, and in abundance.

Wisdom is a karmic result. Its cause is the giving of teachings. When one willingly and gladly teaches what one knows, whether worldly knowledge or Buddhism, and does not hold back anything, one will have more and more wisdom.

Good health and longevity are karmic results. The causes are the giving of fearlessness. When

others have fear or difficulty, we help them or protect them so that they feel secure and are free of all fears. These actions are the giving of fearlessness. The most thorough and ultimate giving of fearlessness is nothing other than having a vegetarian diet. One does not eat the flesh of any being. One should not upset or harm any being. The karmic results are good health and longevity.

They are unwilling to “be disciplined in their behavior, or cultivate [proper] karmas.” “Be disciplined in their behavior” means cultivating one’s body and mind. “Cultivate [proper] karmas” means cultivating one’s wholesome karmas.

“They disobey their parents and rebel against their teachings. They are like foes to their parents, who may as well not have them as children.” The children defy their parents. They are like enemies to their parents, who feel that they would rather not have them as children. Such is the disappointment the parents have with their children.

“They are ungrateful, go against ethics, and do not repay kindness shown to them. They are dissolute, fool around, and indulge excessively in alco-

hol and good food.” The children fail to show gratitude to their parents for their kindness in raising them. They do not provide for their parents. In addition, they “indulge excessively in alcohol and good food.” This means that they are particular about their food. Being dissolute means that they do whatever they like. Fooling around means that they hate to do proper work; they like to eat and loaf about.

“They are rash, overbearing, and contradictory, ignorant of the ways of the world.” “Contradictory” means that they lose their temper and have conflicts with others. They do not know the ways of the world. They are obstinate, boorish, domineering, and unreasonable.

“They have no sense of righteousness or propriety, and cannot take advice or guidance.” They do not want to hear advice or accept good suggestions.

EXCERPT FORTY-SEVEN

Between heaven and earth, the Five Paths are separate and distinct. Good retribution, bad retribution, good fortune, and misfortune intermingle continually with one another. One has to bear them alone. No one else can take one's place.

“Between heaven and earth, the Five Paths are separate and distinct.” “Between heaven and earth” refers to the universe. In the universe, there are infinite planets where human beings and advanced living beings live. The entire Dharma Realm is a place of our activity.

“The Five Paths” refers to the Six Paths. Asuras are found in four paths—the heavenly path, the human path, the animal path, and the path of hungry ghosts—but not in the hells path. So, these paths are called the Five Paths as the asura path is not counted as an additional path. When we talk

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

about the Six Paths, we are referring to these paths: heavenly, human, asura (this refers specifically to the heavenly asuras), animal, hungry ghosts, and hells. The *Surangama Sutra* talks about the Seven Paths, which are the Six Paths plus the path of immortals.

The heavenly path, the human path, the animal path, the path of hungry ghosts, and the hell path are the Five Paths that are separate and distinct.

“Good retribution, bad retribution.” This talks about the origin and the phenomena of the Five Paths. A virtuous mind and conduct will bring about rebirth into the heavenly or the human path. These are the good paths. An evil mind and conduct will bring about rebirth into the Three Evil Paths. Although people are in the human path, they are all different: there are those who are rich and those who are poor, those of high position and those of low position. This is because people have different individual karmas.

People born in the human path have the same shared karma. But in past lifetimes, they cultivated different goodness and good fortune. Those who

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

cultivated great good fortune enjoy a good life in this lifetime. Those who cultivated little good fortune suffer many hardships and difficulties.

Causes and their resultant effects are very complex. Transmigration in the Six Paths is entirely the result of one's good and bad deeds. If one's physical, verbal, and mental karmas are virtuous, one will be reborn in the Three Good Paths. If the three karmas are bad, one will fall into the Three Evil Paths.

“Good fortune, and misfortune intermingle continually with each other.” There is good fortune in misfortune and misfortune in good fortune. Only a person with wisdom can clearly see this and adeptly make use of this.

An example of good fortune in misfortune is one who lives in poverty and is not sure when the next meal will be. As a result, this person feels that life is filled with suffering and wants to get out of this world—he or she lets go of all worldly concerns, sincerely chants the Buddha-name, attains rebirth in the Western Pure Land, and eventually

attains Buddhahood. Thus, this person has good fortune.

[The Buddha said:] “Discipline oneself with a hard life.” As a result, one will have no attachment to this world and will be even more earnest in seeking rebirth in the Western Pure Land and meeting Amitabha Buddha. Oftentimes, one obtains good fortune because of misfortune.

One who enjoys wealth and prestige in this world may chant the Buddha-name but this person’s every thought is still attached to the Saha world—thus causing the opportunity of attaining Buddhahood in this lifetime to slip by.

“One has to bear them alone. No one else can take one’s place.” No one can do these matters for us. Everyone must cultivate for themselves. We must understand this and practice diligently.

EXCERPT FORTY-EIGHT

If in that environment, one can single-mindedly suppress one's thoughts, correct one's behavior and mind, have one's deeds match one's words, have one's actions be of the utmost sincerity, do only good deeds, and commit no evils, then one will be liberated and obtain virtues and good fortune from these.

“If in that environment, one can single-mindedly suppress one's thoughts.” “In that environment” refers to today's evil world of the Five Corruptions, which is full of complications and vileness. The most important thing is to “single-mindedly suppress one's thoughts.” All the evil thoughts must be subdued. This is where we start concentrating our efforts in our cultivation. What should we do when an evil thought arises?

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

The wondrous thing about the Pure Land method is the inconceivability of the merit of the Buddha-name. When an evil thought arises, we chant “Amitufo” to transform the evil thought into a thought of Buddha. We can also think about the wondrous merits of Amitabha Buddha or the various deeds of Amitabha Buddha, such as how he cultivated at the causal stage to establish the Western Pure Land to help all beings in the ten directions leave suffering forever behind and perfectly attain Buddhahood.

If we study the sutras well and concentrate on thinking about the magnificent direct and circumstantial rewards in the Western Pure Land, all wandering thoughts will cease. When we truly seek rebirth in the Western Pure Land and truly achieve in cultivation—when we are in this state—our every thought will be of Amitabha Buddha and the Western Pure Land. We will undoubtedly attain rebirth there. This is the best way to “single-mindedly suppress one’s thoughts.”

One should “correct one’s behavior and mind.” “Correct” means being upright, and following eti-

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

quette and laws. We need to follow all the teachings of the Buddha and practice accordingly. “Correct one’s mind” means that at all times, in all places, and in all situations, our every thought never deviates from “Namo Amitufo.” This is having proper thought.

If we do not have proper thoughts, we have evil thoughts. When there is improperness, there is evil. When there is neither proper nor improper thought, we fall into *undefinable delusion*. Delusion is ignorance. The retribution is rebirth in the animal path. We will not be able to transcend the Three Evil Paths. Therefore, it is very important to correct one’s behavior and mind.

One should “have one’s deeds match one’s words.” One should not say one thing and mean another.

“Have one’s actions be of the utmost sincerity.” One should be sincere when interacting with beings, engaging in tasks, and handling objects. One should not be afraid of being deceived or being taken advantage of. If one is not willing to be taken advantage of or to be deceived now, one will con-

tinue to transmigrate endlessly in the Six Paths, life after life, to repay or collect debts.

One should only use the true mind. One should have the same regard towards all beings, situations, and objects as one has towards the Buddhas and bodhisattvas. This way, one is truly generating the bodhi mind. The bodhi mind is a sincere mind. Whether chanting the Buddha-name or contemplating the magnificent direct and circumstantial rewards and merits of Amitabha Buddha, one should maintain a sincere mind. Even in daily life, one should also use a sincere mind. This is “generating the bodhi mind and single-mindedly focusing on chanting.”

“Do only good deeds, and commit no evils.” Learning Buddhism is learning to be awakened and wise, and not to do foolish things. When we see others make mistakes, we should try to skillfully and expediently remind them, alert them, or advise them. When we do good deeds, we must do so earnestly and not fear that others will laugh at us or obstruct us. Good deeds are beneficial to society.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

As to “commit no evils,” not only do we not do any evil deed, we should not even give rise to any evil thought.

“One will be liberated and obtain virtues and good fortune from these.” Who liberates whom? One liberates oneself. It is truly as stated: “The Buddha did not liberate the beings.” The Buddha only explained the truth to us. When we understand, we have to walk the path ourselves.

EXCERPT FORTY-NINE

Trivial matters can develop into matters of great angst and extreme severity. This is all due to a desire for wealth, lust, and an unwillingness to give. Each one thinks of nothing but one's own enjoyment and disregards what is right or wrong. Compelled by ignorant desires, people want to benefit themselves and compete for gains. During the time of enjoying rank and riches, they cannot endure insults and do not cultivate virtuous deeds. Power and influence will not last long and will soon disappear. The law of nature will prevail and will eventually set things right.

“Trivial matters can develop into matters of great angst and extreme severity.” This sentence is a general statement. “Trivial matters” refers to minor delusions. These will gradually become great evils

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

if we do not awaken in time. Hatred very often starts as a very tiny, trivial grudge. In “great angst and extreme severity,” “angst” refers to tribulation and “severity” refers to harsh vengeance.

We should see through this and not take things to heart. If in our interaction with others we suffer minor unjustified treatment, we should not take it too seriously, get attached to it, or mind it. We should absolutely not harbor any thought of vengeance.

“This is all due to a desire for wealth, lust, and an unwillingness to give.” This points out the root cause of the predicament of the beings in the Six Paths. In many of our past lifetimes, we learned Buddhism, chanted the Buddha-name, and made offerings to and served infinite Buddhas. Why have we not been able to attain rebirth in the Western Pure Land? Because we cannot let go! After infinite kalpas of cultivation, we are unable to succeed, done in by wealth and lust. If we still cannot completely let go of them in this lifetime, we will continue to stay in the cycle of birth and death.

“Each one thinks of nothing but one’s own enjoyment.” One craves wealth. One is lustful. One does not practice giving. One fusses over one’s enjoyment.

One “disregards what is right or wrong.” One cannot tell proper from improper, right from wrong, and good from bad.

“People want to benefit themselves and compete for gains.” They are selfish. They scramble for fame and gain.

“The time of enjoying rank and riches” cannot last forever. Moreover, when one depletes one’s wealth and prestige, evil karmas will come forth.

“They cannot endure insults.” If the rich and prestigious are moderate in their enjoyments and are frugal, their endurance will enable them to maintain their wealth. If they live thriftily and practice giving, their good fortune will last for a long time. Cultivating good fortune and accumulating merits while enjoying one’s wealth—this is the right thing to do. If they cannot restrain themselves and quickly deplete their wealth, their good fortune will soon be used up.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

They “do not cultivate virtuous deeds.” When people are in an environment where they are enjoying a good life, it is very easy for them to be deluded and thereby lose their true nature. They cannot restrain themselves and are unwilling to do good deeds. They commit offenses.

“Power and influence will not last long.” The time during which they can dominate others is very short. It “will soon disappear.”

“The law of nature will prevail and will eventually set things right.” “The law of nature” refers to principles of morality. “Will eventually set things right” refers to the ways of the world. “Set things right” is commonly known as feeling the prick of conscience. In Buddhism, this is called consciousness.

Those who often do good deeds have minds and behavior that are virtuous. Those who often commit evil deeds have minds and behavior that are evil. Good deeds will bring about good retributions; bad deeds will bring about bad retributions. Retributions will occur naturally. They are not con-

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

trolled by spirits, deities, God, Buddhas, or bodhisattvas. Karmic results take place naturally.

EXCERPT FIFTY

Honor the sages and respect the virtuous.

Have compassion and loving-kindness.

“Honor the sages and respect the virtuous.” We should honor, admire, and emulate the sages of this world and beyond. We need to respect the people of virtue and good deeds in this world. We need to do our best to help others accomplish good deeds. “Respect” refers to innate virtues coming forth. This is true virtuous behavior.

The *Avatamsaka Sutra* teaches us to rejoice at the meritorious deeds of others. The effect is to end our afflictions of jealousy, anger, and hatred from infinite kalpas. If we become jealous when we see a virtuous person or when we see a good deed, we are committing an offense. The Buddha taught us to be happy when we encounter good people and good acts. In addition, we should do our best to help a person accomplish his virtuous actions.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

Helping others achieve goodness is the same as achieving our own goodness. Self and others are not two. When we rejoice at those who cultivate virtues and goodness, we will have the same karmic results.

“Have compassion and loving-kindness.” There are different types of compassion. In this world, people’s compassion is based on love and is emotional. To those they like, they show compassion. To those they dislike, they do not show compassion. This kind of compassion is called *love-affinity compassion*. It is based on worldly love.

The compassion of bodhisattvas is called *dharma-affinity compassion*. The bodhisattvas know that all dharmas are equal. The compassion that one has for sentient beings should be the same that one has for oneself. This compassion is based on a profound and true principle.

The compassion of Buddhas is called *great compassion*. It arises entirely from a pure mind, an impartial mind, and a mind that knows everything is one entity. This is true compassion and loving-kindness.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

We must broaden our minds: everything in the entire Dharma Realm is ourselves.

We should nurture a mind of compassion and loving-kindness. This is the source of true happiness. If we want happiness, the root is compassion and loving-kindness. We should put ourselves in the position of others. When we think of ourselves, we should also think of others and of all the beings in the universe.

EXCERPT FIFTY-ONE

Rectify your mind. Rectify your behavior.
Rectify your ears, eyes, mouth, and nose.
Behavior and mind should be pure and clean,
and accord with virtuousness. Do not let
your leisure pursuits or desires take control.
Do not commit any evil deed. Speech and
facial expressions should be gentle.
Cultivation should be focused. Body and eye
movements should be calm and composed.
Doing things in haste will result in failure
and regret.

This excerpt teaches us how to correct our wrong actions in daily life. There are many kinds of actions. Generally, they are grouped into three categories: physical, verbal, and mental. This passage teaches us that through body, speech, and mind, we correct our thoughts and behaviors.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

“Rectify your mind.” “Your” shows that in the matter of cultivation, no one can do it for us—we need to make the effort to restrain ourselves in order to have any result.

“Mind” refers to mental karma, thoughts, and thinking. They are the sources of all evils. The Buddha taught us to cultivate from the root. The root is the mind. “Rectify” means to correct. When the mind is not proper, we should immediately correct it—be honorable and open. This is how we begin learning Buddhism.

From the aspect of phenomena, a true Buddhist practitioner should have a mind of the utmost virtuousness. There is nothing that this person does in this lifetime which he or she cannot tell others. Sima Guang⁴⁰ in ancient China is a very good example. He was honest from childhood. Throughout his life, he did not do anything that he could not tell others. This was because his mind was proper, honorable, and open. He had nothing to hide.

⁴⁰ 1019-1086. A scholar, historian, and politician of the Song dynasty.—Trans.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

But “rectify your mind” that the Buddha teaches here refers to a higher level state of mind. It refers to a pure mind. Evil pollutes the mind, but so does good. Both evil and good pollute the mind. Therefore, the good karmas lead to rebirth in the Three Good Paths and the evil karmas lead to rebirth in the Three Evil Paths. In other words, one cannot transcend the Six Paths. Only with a pure mind will one be able to transcend the Three Realms [Desire Realm, Form Realm, and Formless Realm. This also refers to the Six Paths.] With a pure mind in control, one’s thoughts, words and deeds will all be pure. When the mind is proper, the six sense organs will naturally be proper.

“Rectify your behavior. Rectify your ears, eyes, mouth, and nose.” This talks about bodily behavior, about someone’s demeanor. The mind of a beginning practitioner is easily affected by the external environment. This is why the Buddha taught beginners to start with observing the precepts and etiquette, and to gradually nurture a pure, sincere mind. When the mind is truly pure, the ears, eyes,

mouth, and tongue, and body will naturally be set right.

“Behavior and mind should be pure and clean, and accord with virtuousness.” “Pure” describes the mind. “Clean” describes the body. The mind should be pure and the body should be clean. This is the key guiding principle. This sentence tells us the standard for cultivating one’s moral character. It teaches us to constantly examine ourselves when a thought arises and to ensure that the body and mind are clean and pure.

What kind of mind is a pure mind? When a mind has no wandering thoughts, it is pure. The standard for cultivating one’s moral character is purity, which means no filth or pollution.

“Virtuousness” here is not the good in good and bad. In our original nature, there is neither good nor bad. In a pure mind, there is also neither good nor bad. This is true virtuousness.

Confucianism says “Attain utmost virtuousness. Utmost virtuousness is the original nature. When the body and mind move away from relativity, one

will attain great freedom—true purity and uprightness.

“Do not let your leisure pursuits or desires take control.” If we cannot let go of our outside interests and greed, no matter how well we clean the body, we are not considered pure.

“Do not commit any evil deed.” Simply put, evil deeds are the Ten Evil Karmas: the physical karmas of killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct; the verbal karmas of harsh speech, divisive speech, false speech, and enticing speech; and the mental karmas of greed, anger, and ignorance. Not committing evil deeds, cultivating the Ten Virtuous Karmas, and observing the Five Precepts—these accord with the Ten Virtuous Karmas.

“Speech and facial expressions should be gentle.” When we interact with others, our facial expressions and words should have a sense of conviviality. *Analects* says: “In practicing etiquette, harmony is paramount.” A Chinese proverb says, “When there is harmony in a family, all undertakings will be successful.” When there is harmony in a family, the family will definitely prosper. When

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

there is harmony in a cultivation center, the proper teachings will be in this world. When there is harmony between the government and populace of a nation, the country will prosper. When all the people in the world get along harmoniously, the world will be at peace, in Great Harmony. Harmony is very important! Where do we start? We start with ourselves. Our speech should be gentle, so should our facial expressions.

“Cultivation should be focused.” This is particularly important. If we want to have any success, whether in worldly pursuits or in Buddhism, we should stay focused. When we learn many different things, our energy, strength, and time will be dispersed. This is why the six major guidelines of bodhisattvas’ practice tell us to be diligent [that is, making focused and diligent progress.] “Focused and diligent” means unadulterated. “Progress” means moving forward. Only when the learning is focused and unadulterated will we succeed.

“Body and eye movements should be calm and composed.” This is talking about one’s demeanor. “Calm” refers to one’s mind; one’s mind should be

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

serene. “Composed” means steady. It also means being unhurried and not rash. We should learn this.

“Doing things in haste will result in failure and regret.” People today are in a hurry and are impatient. In the past, one would feel regret when one did not succeed in one’s studies, career, or cultivation. People today do not have regrets. They think that they have no faults. With no faults, they naturally will have no regrets.

We should calmly think about the Buddha’s teaching. From morning till night, from the first day till the last day of the year, is there a day we do not make mistakes? We are just not aware of them. Being aware of our mistakes and faults is awakening. Correcting our mistakes and faults is cultivation.

EXCERPT FIFTY-TWO

Extensively plant roots of virtue. Do not violate the precepts of the Way. Practice patience and diligence. Be compassionate and single-minded.

“Extensively plant roots of virtue.” “Plant” means to plant and nurture. As to “roots of virtue,” for Mahayana bodhisattvas, the basis of all virtues is the Six Paramitas. For Theravada practitioners, it is the Three Learnings of precepts, meditative concentration, and wisdom. For Pure Land practitioners, mindfully chanting the Buddha-name accords with Buddha—one uses the Buddha-name to awaken oneself and to make one’s mind, vows, understanding, and practice the same as those of Amitabha Buddha. The merit of the Buddha-name is completely revealed. It is the root of all virtues.

One can sincerely chant the Buddha-name even if one is not familiar with the teachings or the prin-

ciples. Because one chants the Buddha-name, no wandering thoughts and attachments arise. One's mind is pure and clear. This also accords with the meaning of "roots of virtue."

Simply put, everything in this world and beyond is invariably about conditions. Conditions may be favorable or adverse. How do conditions come about? They are created by us, initiated by us. Buddhas and bodhisattvas constantly teach us to have a good heart, say kind words, and do good deeds. This is planting and nurturing roots of virtue.

"Virtue" here refers to good fortune. One not only has to plant and nurture but do so extensively. When one broadens one's mind and practice, one's good fortune will be profound and great. Even in this corrupt and evil world, one will still be able to enjoy good fortune. Those who do not cultivate good fortune are the most miserable people in the world. They are pitiable! The truest, greatest, ultimate, and perfect good fortune is mindfully chanting the Buddha-name and seeking rebirth in the Western Pure Land.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

The world is filled with suffering. What people drink is suffering and what they eat is poison. There is no solace, nor does it end. Even if one gets all the wealth and prestige that one wants—just like the effect of a cardiac stimulant being injected into a patient, a spark from a flint, or a flash of lightning—they will soon be gone.

Besides, when people are enjoying their good fortune, committing transgressions is unavoidable. More often than not, the offenses they commit are more extensive than those committed by the poor.

Hence, people should know to cultivate good fortune.

“Do not violate the precepts of the Way.” In a restricted sense, “precepts of the Way” refers to the precepts taught by the Buddha. We should be clear about what the Buddha taught us: what not to do, what not to say, and what thoughts not to have. In a broader sense, “precepts of the Way” encompasses laws, customs, and taboos. We should not violate any of these.

Also, for example, we should never go to other people’s cultivation centers to post notices, hand

out flyers, or get their followers to come to our cultivation center. These are all within the scope of “the precepts of the Way.” In particular, we should not do these things at cultivation centers that give talks.

“Practice patience and diligence.” We should be patient and diligent in everything. If there is no patience, there is no diligence. We should have endurance when facing natural disasters. We should be even more patient in human relationships.

When there is a group of people, there will be differences in views and thoughts on an issue. If every one of us has very stubborn attachments, conflict is inevitable. If we can each yield a little, the problem will be resolved. That is why it is said, “Under the heavens, there were originally no problems.” Give in, even just a little, and there will be no problems. Therefore, we should be patient and diligent.

“Be compassionate and single-minded.” “Compassion” means that we need to have great compassion towards beings and help those who are suffering by relieving their suffering and giving them

happiness. What is the gravest suffering for people today? Being deluded and ignorant! If one is wrong about the truth of life and the universe in one's thoughts, views, speech, and deeds and yet still seeks to have good fortune, this is the gravest suffering!

“Repay the Four Kinds of Kindness above, and relieve the suffering of those in the Three Paths below.” This is our obligation. This is what we should do. How do we repay kindness? How do we save those who are suffering in the Three Paths below? What ability do we have to relieve the suffering of those in the Three Paths below? We do not have this ability!

Relieving the suffering of those in the Three Paths below means that we should help people today who have created these karmic causes but have not yet fallen into the Three Evil Paths. We cannot do anything to help those who have fallen into the Three Evil Paths. Frankly, it is difficult to help those in the Three Evil Paths, even for Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, let alone for us.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

Who will undergo suffering in The Three Evil Paths? Those who are heavily afflicted with greed, anger, or ignorance. Ignorant people cannot tell right from wrong, and are confused about proper and improper, and good and bad. This is the karmic cause for the animal path.

In other words, when we see someone heavily afflicted with greed, anger, or ignorance, this is a person who will fall into the Three Evil Paths. We should do our best to help and remind this person, which will allow this person to awaken and reform on his own. This is great compassion.

“Single-minded” refers to ourselves. It means to be One Mind Undisturbed. One should not only have One Mind Undisturbed as the goal of one’s daily routine practice, one’s mind should also be undisturbed at all times, in all places, and whenever one is helping others. One’s mind should still be undisturbed when one is applying great compassion, repaying kindness, and relieving suffering.

If one’s mind is disturbed when helping others, one should stop helping and just chant the

Buddha-name diligently and unquestioningly. One is not at fault in doing so.

The *Surangama Sutra* says: “If you can change the environment, then you are the same as the Thus Come One.” If one is able to change the environment and be unaffected by it, then one has the ability to help others. If one does not have this ability, one should first cultivate oneself, seeking to achieve in cultivation, before helping others to change. This is very important!

Some bodhisattvas generate the great mind of helping others before they achieve in their own cultivation. They can do so because their minds are focused and are not affected by the environment. They do not change according to the environment. Not achieving in their own cultivation means not attaining Buddhahood, but they are able to become arhats or bodhisattvas. If in helping others, we still fall into the Three Evil Paths, then this is wrong.

We should learn diligently and should not misunderstand the teachings in the sutras.

EXCERPT FIFTY-THREE

Only in this world are there little good and plenty of evil. What people drink is suffering and what they eat is poison. There is no peace or ending.

“This world” refers to the Saha world. An evil world of the Five Corruptions—this is what our present society is. In today’s society, there is little good and a lot of evil. Everyone can see this.

“What people drink is suffering and what they eat is poison. There is no peace or ending.” Food is essential to us ordinary beings in the Six Paths. But what are we consuming today? Suffering and poison.

Great Master Yinguang earnestly urged us to maintain a vegetarian diet. Why?

Generally when people are angry, their sweat is poisonous. Therefore, anger and hatred are poisons. When anger or hatred arises, every part of

the body is filled with poisonous liquid. In the past, there was a woman who breast-fed her baby when she was angry. The baby died after a few days, poisoned by the milk.

Let's look at animals. When an animal is being killed by a human, would it be very happy about it? No. It is just that the animal is unable to resist! In addition, with extreme anger, how can it not become poisonous? Therefore, when one eats meat over a long period of time, poison will accumulate in one's body. When the poison takes effect, one will have strange diseases. As it is said, "Illness enters through the mouth." If we wish for good health and longevity, we should start to have a vegetarian diet. This is very important. Frankly, there are also toxins in vegetarian food: there are pesticides in vegetables. But a vegetarian diet is still better than a meat diet because it is less toxic.

EXCERPT FIFTY-FOUR

To your elders and juniors, men and women,
family members, and friends, you should
impart my teachings. Discipline and reflect
upon yourself. Be in harmony and conform
with justice and truth. Be happy,
compassionate, and filial. If your action is a
transgression, feel remorse about the offense.
Eradicate evil and cultivate virtue. When you
learn about a fault of yours in the morning,
correct it by evening.

“To your elders and juniors, men and women, family members, and friends, you should impart my teachings.”

“Elders” refers to our parents or seniors. “Juniors” refers to our children, nephews and nieces, or anyone younger than ourselves. “Men and women, family members, and friends” refers to our rela-

tives, from our family to the family clan, and then to distant relatives and friends.

When we follow the Buddha's teachings, practice accordingly, and receive the true, wondrous benefits of Buddhism, we should also do our best to introduce Buddhism to others and urge them to learn. When they benefit from the learning, they will also teach others. This way, we will truly repay the kindness of the Buddha. Urge and encourage others to learn this true teaching. Introduce and recommend it to a town, a city, a country, and even the world. Then society will be in harmony and the world will be at peace.

Great Master Yinguang once held a "Protecting the Country and Averting Disasters Dharma Ceremony" in Shanghai. He clearly explained how to protect the country and avert disasters—mindfully chant the Buddha-name and maintain a vegetarian diet. When everyone maintains a vegetarian diet and mindfully chants the Buddha-name, disasters will naturally be averted and the country will naturally be protected. Therefore, we should spread this teaching to the whole world. This is

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

truly repaying the Four Kinds of Kindness above, and relieving the suffering of those in the Three Paths below. This is protecting the world and eliminating disasters.

There are many ways to spread the Buddha's teachings. For example, one could print the sutras and give them to others or circulate cassette tapes, video tapes, CDs, and video discs on Dharma lectures. One does one's best to help others. As for oneself, one should sincerely chant the Buddha-name and seek rebirth in the Western Pure Land. But one should not force others to have the same aspiration. One only needs to help others to (1) have a good heart, (2) say kind words, (3) do good deeds, and (4) have a happy family.

“Discipline and reflect upon yourself. Be in harmony and conform with justice and truth. Be happy, compassionate, and filial.” These words are well said. They are not only for our cultivation. When introducing Buddhism to others, we should teach not only with words but also with exemplary behavior. If we teach only with words but cannot practice what we teach, others may not believe us

or accept the teachings. We must truly practice the teachings so as to really help others build confidence.

“Discipline and reflect upon yourself.” One’s thoughts, spoken words, and behavior should accord with the teachings in the sutras. One should discipline oneself and reflect on one’s behavior and thoughts.

“Be in harmony and conform with justice and truth.” One should be amiable and get along harmoniously with others. “Harmony” refers to the Six Harmonies. “Conform” refers to being in accord with all beings. Harmony and conformity should not be based on emotions but on justice and truth. There is a principle that one should follow when one accords with others: while according with others, one should inspire and change them. If one cannot help others awaken and reform, one should not indulge them.

“Be happy, compassionate, and filial.” Children should be filial to their parents, and parents should love their children. The family will be happy. This is the foundation. Families make up a society. So-

cieties make up a country. Countries make up the world. Therefore, we should know that the origin of happiness is family.

Happiness is also the most basic requirement in one's interacting with others and engaging in tasks. As the Mahayana sutras say: wherever bodhisattvas go, they make all beings happy. The bodhisattvas absolutely do not have any thought of, let alone commit any act of, harming others. This is why they are happy, and so is everyone else.

"Compassion" is impartial and pure. All of Buddha's teachings are developed from filial piety. In Buddhism, filial piety, since the past, has no beginning and into the future, has no end. It extends through time in the three time periods and through space in the ten directions. The entire universe is oneself. It is one entity.

"If your action is a transgression, feel remorse about the offense. Eradicate evil and cultivate virtue. When you learn about a fault in the morning, correct it by evening."

"As people are not sages, how can they be faultless? When a person becomes aware of a fault and

corrects it, there is no virtue greater than this.” [This Confucian quote tells us that] the greatest virtue is correcting faults, which is the teaching of the sages. If one is aware of one’s faults, one is awakened. Cultivation is correcting one’s faults, and correcting one’s faults is cultivation. Being aware of one’s faults is awakening, and correcting one’s faults is true cultivation. When our thoughts, views, spoken words, and behavior are wrong, we should repent. Repentance is not about seeking the forgiveness of Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Rather, sincerely admit one’s wrongdoings, completely correct them, and never make the same mistakes again.

“Eradicate evil and cultivate virtue. When you learn about a fault of yours in the morning, correct it by evening.” This describes truly regretting one’s mistakes. One should awaken quickly and correct one’s faults quickly. When one realizes a fault, one should correct it immediately.

EXCERPT FIFTY-FIVE

Correct your past wrongs and cultivate good karma for your future. Cleanse your mind and change your behavior. You will naturally receive a response. Your wishes will be fulfilled.

This excerpt talks about the saying: “In Buddhism, every sincere request will receive a response.”

“Correct your past wrongs and cultivate good karma for the future. Cleanse your mind and change your behavior.” This teaches us how to seek. If we seek according to the truth and the teachings, our wish will be fulfilled. If our seeking is unreasonable and unlawful, our wish, as expected, will not come to fruition. How can we seek within the truth and the teachings? “Correct your past wrongs and cultivate good karma for the future” is to accord with the teachings. “Cleanse your

mind and change your behavior” is to accord with the truth.

Correct bad habits to end all wrongdoings and cultivate virtuous deeds—this is to “cultivate good karma for the future.” For the future, we should cultivate diligently. This is from the aspect of phenomena.

“Cleanse your mind and change your behavior.” This is from the aspect of the truth. The mind contains afflictions, wandering thoughts, and attachments. These are defilements that need to be removed in order to restore a pure mind. “Behavior” refers to actions—the physical actions of killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct, and the verbal actions of false speech, divisive speech, and so on, and other bad behaviors.

When our mind, thoughts, and views are not pure, we use “Amitufo”—the method of having belief, vow, and chanting the Buddha-name—to cleanse our mind and change our behavior. When we use the method of ending wrongdoings and practicing virtuous conduct, it is correcting our

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

past wrongs and cultivating good karma for the future.

“You will naturally receive a response. Your wishes will be fulfilled.” If we practice in this way, we will naturally receive a response and our wish will be fulfilled.

Therefore, when we learn Buddhism, we must accord with the truth and the teachings, and not seek extraordinary powers or any response. As long as we cultivate the causes according to the teachings, we will reap what we sow—this principle is definite. A Chinese proverb says, “Just focus on farming. Do not ask what you will harvest.”

EXCERPT FIFTY-SIX

Wherever the Buddha goes, whether to a country, a city, or a village, people will be moved and will benefit. All the lands will be enveloped in peace and harmony. The sun and moon will shine clear and bright. Wind and rain will come when needed. Disasters and epidemics will not occur. The country will flourish and the people will enjoy peace.

There will be no need for soldiers or weapons. Virtue will be revered and benevolence will be promoted. People will practice courtesy and humility. There will be no thieves or robbers in the country. There will be neither injustice nor resentment. The strong will not dominate the weak. Everyone will naturally get their fair reward.

“Wherever the Buddha goes, whether to a country, a city, or a village, people will be moved and will

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

benefit.” “The Buddha” here refers to the Buddha’s teachings. “Goes” refers to implementation. “Wherever the Buddha goes” refers to the places where the Buddha’s teachings are implemented. From a place as large as a country to a place as small as a village, if the people there truly practice the Buddha’s teachings, they will change for the better. Those who receive the Buddha’s teachings will have a change in disposition, go from being evil to being virtuous, from being defiled to being pure, and from being improper to being proper. This is the achievement from implementing the Buddha’s teachings.

“All the lands will be enveloped in peace and harmony.” “Peace” means to acquiesce and not go against. Specifically, it means that people understand and accord with the teachings. When everyone abides by and follows the laws, society will naturally be harmonious.

“The sun and moon will shine clear and bright. Wind and rain will come when needed. Disasters and epidemics will not occur.” These describe the

presence of favorable climatic, geographical, and social conditions.

Nowadays, natural disasters occur more and more frequently around the world. It is worthwhile for us to reflect deeply on this. Where do disasters come from? The Buddha said: "Dependent rewards change according to proper rewards." Proper rewards refers to the human mind. Dependent rewards refers to the environment. When the human mind is good, wind and rain will come as they are needed. When the human mind is not good, disasters will occur frequently. Therefore, if we can accept the Buddha's teachings and practice accordingly, it is certain that "the sun and the moon will shine clear and bright, and wind and rain will come when needed."

In Chinese history, we read that when there was a major disaster in the nation, the emperor would cleanse his mind of impurities, abstain from all enjoyments, and maintain a vegetarian diet. He would seriously reflect on himself, "What faults do I have? Why has such a major disaster occurred?" When a disaster occurred, the emperor reflected on

himself, thought about his faults, diligently ended wrongdoings, practiced virtuous conduct, corrected his wrong ways, and made a fresh start, all in the hope of changing the will of Heaven. This makes sense. This is absolutely not superstitious action. It is very rational.

If everyone accepts the Buddha's teachings and practices accordingly, cleansing one's mind and changing one's behavior, all the lands will naturally be harmonious and peaceful.

Only after people live in harmony, will we have a favourable climate. Then nature will also be harmonious and peaceful. "The sun and the moon will shine clear and bright. Wind and rain will come when needed."

During Great Master Lianchi's lifetime, there was a drought one year in Hangzhou. The governor of Hangzhou requested Great Master Lianchi to pray for rain for the local people. Great Master Lianchi said, "I do not know how to pray for rain. I only know Buddha-name chanting." But since praying for rain was for the benefit of the public, he had to do his best. Playing an instrument called

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

a *wood fish* and leading the followers, he walked in the fields, mindfully chanting “Amitufo.” As it is said, “Sincerity will receive a response.” A pure, sincere mind will naturally obtain a response. Indeed, it rained wherever the great master walked! This is a wondrous benefit from truly learning and practicing according to the Buddha’s teachings. This is also the best proof.

“The country will flourish and the people will enjoy peace.” “Flourish” means that manufactured goods and food are abundant. People will have sufficient food and clothing, so body and mind will be at peace, and everyone will be at ease and happy.

“There will be no need for soldiers or weapons.” There will be no wars.

“Virtue will be revered and benevolence will be promoted.” “Virtue” is morality. “Revered” means to respect and follow. “Benevolence” means putting oneself in others’ positions: “Do not do to others what you would not want to be done to you.” When everyone praises morality highly, and abides

by laws and follows rules of conduct, society will naturally be peaceful.

“People will practice courtesy and humility. There will be no thieves or robbers in the country. There will be neither injustice nor resentment.” These are the few requirements in terms of human affairs that must be fulfilled for families to be happy, societies to be harmonious, and countries to be prosperous. “Courtesy” means that people respect and yield to one another. Social order will naturally be good. As it is said, “No doors are shut at night.”⁴¹ “There will be neither injustice nor resentment” means that judicial trials are fair.

“The strong will not dominate the weak.” This sentence means that everyone is able to respect one another regardless of status, wealth, or academic achievement.

“People will naturally get their fair reward.” Everyone will be happy with their roles.

⁴¹ From *Great Learning*.—Trans.

EXCERPT FIFTY-SEVEN

Ajita, you should know that doubt and delusion will do bodhisattvas great harm and cause them to lose great benefit. Therefore, you should understand and believe the supreme wisdom of all Buddhas.

“Ajita” is Maitreya Bodhisattva. At the discourse on the *Infinite Life Sutra*, there were two primary beneficiaries: Elder Ananda in the first part of the discourse and Maitreya Bodhisattva in the latter part. The significance of this is very profound. As Maitreya Bodhisattva will be the next Buddha in this world, the Buddha exhorted him, that when he attained Buddhahood in the future, to be sure to speak the *Infinite Life Sutra* and to urge people to mindfully chant the Buddha-name and seek rebirth in the Western Pure Land.

“You should know that doubt and delusion will do bodhisattvas great harm and cause them to lose

great benefit.” “Doubt” refers to having doubts about the Dharma door of seeking rebirth in the Pure Land—of “belief, vow, and mindfully chanting the Buddha-name.” Consequently, this loss is too immense. For example, if a bodhisattva believes in “belief, vow, and mindfully chanting the Buddha-name,” sincerely chants “Amitufo,” and seeks rebirth in the Pure Land, he will attain Buddhahood in one lifetime. He does not need to go through three asamkheya kalpas.⁴² This is why here the Buddha said that not believing the Pure Land method is an immense loss.

We usually do not have true confidence in Buddhas and bodhisattvas. We still have doubts. Although we learn Buddhism, we continue to consult with fortune-tellers and feng shui experts. This means that we do not have confidence in Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Our minds are contaminated with impurities. The loss is enormous. The purpose

⁴² Since asamkheya means *uncountable*, exact measurements of time are not known. But some common values are 10^{51} , 10^{59} , and 10^{65} years.—Trans.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

of learning Buddhism is to seek a pure mind—One Mind Undisturbed.

“Therefore, you should understand and believe the supreme wisdom of all Buddhas.” The three Pure Land sutras contain the teachings of being mindful of Buddha and seeking rebirth in the Western Pure Land. We will still not completely understand this even if we have the help of the Buddhas’ causal vows.

In this lifetime, we have encountered the Pure Land method. If we can truly believe and vow to seek rebirth in the Western Pure Land, then this is supreme wisdom. Not only is our wisdom supreme, our good fortune is also supreme. If we do not have the highest wisdom and good fortune, we will not practice this method.

EXCERPT FIFTY-EIGHT

The Buddha said: “They plant the good roots, and they are unable to detach from form. They do not seek the Buddha’s wisdom. They are deeply attached to worldly pleasures and the good fortune of the human world. Although they repeatedly cultivate good fortune, the rewards they seek are in the human and heavenly paths. When they obtain the rewards, everything will be abundant, but they are unable to leave the prison of the Three Realms.”

“The Buddha said: ‘They plant the good roots, and they are unable to detach from form.’” This is cultivation with attachment to form. When one has wandering thoughts, discriminations, and attachments, and aspires to do good deeds, one will receive good rewards in the future. But having the

thought of seeking the good fortune of the human and heavenly paths is a great obstacle.

“They do not seek the Buddha’s wisdom.” “Buddha’s wisdom” is mentioned in the previous excerpt: “You should understand and believe the supreme wisdom of all Buddhas.” To seek the Buddha’s wisdom is to seek rebirth in the Western Pure Land. The Pure Land is “the supreme wisdom of all Buddhas.”

True wisdom is not to be sought.⁴³ It is the complete understanding of everything. When the Buddha taught all beings, he answered questions as they were raised, without thinking or contemplating the answer. This is because true wisdom is the innate ability of the true nature. It is innate in the true nature and is not acquired from learning. This is why Ashvaghosha Bodhisattva taught us to be free of the mark of speech, the mark of terms, and the mark of mental cognition.

⁴³ Wisdom comes by letting go of attachments, discriminations, and wandering thoughts. From deep concentration, wisdom arises. It cannot be sought by thinking that one wants wisdom. The thought about seeking wisdom is a wandering thought. — Trans.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

Being free of the mark of speech means not being attached to the words when one listens to the lectures on the sutras. Being free of the mark of terms means not being attached to terminology. Being free of the mark of mental cognition means not using the sixth consciousness to think and contemplate.

Listening to lectures on the sutras without being attached to the mark of speech, the mark of terms, and the mark of mental cognition is cultivating meditative concentration. Listening clearly and understanding perfectly is cultivating wisdom. Listening to the lectures on the sutras in this way is the simultaneous practice of meditative concentration and wisdom.

“They are deeply attached to worldly pleasures.” Being deeply attached to worldly pleasures is a hindrance that arises from afflictions. One is deeply attached to the Five Desires and the Six Dusts, and to riches and honor and is unwilling to let go of them. “Not seeking the Buddha’s wisdom” is a hindrance that arises from the attachment to

knowledge. These two hindrances are extremely serious.

“Although they repeatedly cultivate good fortune, the rewards they seek are in the human and heavenly paths.” This is saying that if one truly observes the precepts and practices goodness, one will have the karmic result of being reborn in the human or heavenly path. If one practices good deeds but transgresses the precepts, one will have the karmic result of being reborn in the Three Evil Paths.

When one who practices good deeds but transgresses the precepts is reborn in the path of hungry ghosts, one will be a king of the ghosts or a deity. Generally the spirits that the Chinese people worship have great influence, are rich, powerful, and have many followers. If one is reborn in the animal path, one will be a pet in a wealthy family and enjoy good fortune in that path. These are examples of those who cultivate good fortune but transgress the precepts.

“When they obtain the rewards, everything will be abundant.” When one receives the good fortune

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

in the human and heavenly paths, one may be a high government official, a general, or belong to a rich family. But which one of them has not created negative karmas or wronged people since ancient times? When one uses up one's good fortune, one will probably go to the Three Evil Paths in the next lifetime. Even if one does not go to the Three Evil Paths, one will not be that rich in the human path. Each lifetime will become worse and worse than the previous one.

When we realize this, how can we not go to the Western Pure Land?

When we look at the conduct and actions of the powerful or influential people in today's society, then we know that we do not want to come back to this human world again. If we do come to the human path again, we should come as a Buddha or a bodhisattva manifested as a being. If we do not come as a Buddha or a bodhisattva manifested as a being, it is still karmic retribution—this is terrible!

We should be constantly vigilant: enjoying the good fortune in the human path is very frightening, but enjoying the good fortune in the heavenly path

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

is not the ultimate either. Although there are few opportunities for us to commit evil deeds in heaven, we will still fall into a lower path when the good fortune is used up. As it is stated in the *Lotus Sutra*: “There is no peace in the Three Realms, just like a house on fire.”

EXCERPT FIFTY-NINE

There are beings who plant good roots and create immense fields of good fortune. But they hold on to form, discriminate, and have a deep and strong attachment to feelings.

They seek to transcend samsara but ultimately will be unable to do so.

The previous excerpt talks about people who “are unable to detach from form. They do not seek the Buddha’s wisdom.” This excerpt talks about those who “hold on to form, discriminate, and have a deep and strong attachment to feelings.” This is a criterion for cultivation—if one commits all these, one will not be able to transcend the Three Realms. At most, one will only enjoy imperfect good fortune in the Three Realms. In this world, one who has great wealth or prestige is one who cultivated in past lifetimes but was unable to eliminate attach-

ment to feelings. Consequently, one obtains their good fortune in the human and heavenly paths.

Therefore, if one truly learns and practices Buddhism and wants to transcend samsara, one must correct one's past wrongs and cultivate good karma for one's future, and cleanse one's mind and change one's behavior. Whether one does a good deed, great or small, one absolutely should not hold on to form, discriminate, or even be attached to it. One should always maintain a pure mind, always be mindful of Amitabha Buddha, and seek rebirth in the Pure Land—everything else should be cleansed.

In “create immense fields of good fortune,” “create” is more wondrous than “plant.” “Plant” means that one plants the field alone. “Create” means that one allows all beings to come and plant.

For example, giving wealth and possessions and making offerings to the Three Jewels are fields of good fortune. If we build a cultivation center, we “create immense fields of good fortune,” as we allow many beings to come and plant good fortune.

The larger the cultivation center, the greater the field of good fortune.

Another example is being filial and providing for parents—this is a field of good fortune. If we run a retirement home, this is also to “create immense fields of good fortune.”

Charitable undertakings like these are great fields of good fortune. We should sincerely and wholeheartedly engage in these undertakings, but we should not “hold on to form, discriminate.” Otherwise, we will not be able to handle things fairly and our minds will not be pure.

Having impure minds and handling things unfairly—doing good deeds this way, ultimately, we will not be able to succeed in seeking to transcend samsara.

EXCERPT SIXTY

Be filial to the Buddha and be constantly mindful of the teachers' kindness. Let this teaching stay in this world for the longest time and do not let it die out. Firmly uphold it and do not let it be destroyed or lost.

“Be filial to the Buddha.” What do we do to be filial to the Buddha? We follow his teachings and practice accordingly. If our minds, vows, understanding, practices, and virtues are the same as those of the Buddha and we become one with him, this is being filial to the Buddha.

The *Avatamsaka Sutra* says: “Sentient and non-sentient beings all have the same Buddha-wisdom.” This is the showing of filial piety being practiced to perfection. In this sutra, filial piety is an impartial mind and an awakened mind. When one has discriminations and attachments, one is not impartial. When one is free of all discriminations and attach-

ments, the entire Dharma Realm will be one entity. At that time, the pure Dharma Body will manifest. Filial piety arises therefrom. Phenomenally, filial piety is an impartial, greatly compassionate mind. Great wisdom and great compassion are filial piety at work.

One should “be constantly mindful of the teachers’ kindness.” “Teachers” refers to good teachers. After the Buddha entered parinirvana, the past patriarchs and eminent masters passed down the Buddha’s teachings. Thus, we are able to hear the Dharma. Therefore, we should be constantly mindful of the kindness of the Buddha and the past great teachers who passed down the Dharma.

How do we repay their kindness? By practicing the teachers’ teachings and propagating them extensively! This is repaying the teachers’ kindness.

The Buddha’s original vow teaches us “to provide all manner of sentient beings the benefit of escaping the long night⁴⁴ and not let them fall into

⁴⁴ “Long night” refers to cycle of rebirth and death within the Five Paths. There are sufferings in the Five Paths.— Trans.

the five paths of rebirth and undergo sufferings.” We should wholeheartedly and diligently put in our utmost effort to fulfill this.

“Let this teaching stay in this world for the longest time and do not let it die out” This action truly fulfills filial piety to the Buddha and mindfulness of the teachers’ kindness. “Let this teaching stay in this world for the longest time and do not let it die out” also refers specifically to the Dharma door of mindfully chanting the Buddha-name and seeking rebirth in the Western Pure Land as taught in this sutra. We should diligently practice it and do our best to propagate it so that it will not die out.

“Firmly uphold it.” We should firmly hold on to our belief and vow and diligently propagate the Buddha’s teachings.

There are two ways to look at “not let it be destroyed or lost.” The first: we misunderstand the teachings, so our learning and practice do not accord with the teachings. The teachings are thus destroyed and lost.

ESSENCE OF THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA

The second is that we use our worldly intelligence and do not propagate the teachings according to the true Dharma. As a result, the people who listen misunderstand the teachings, and they cannot attain rebirth in the Western Pure Land. This is also destroying and losing the teachings.

Therefore, we should learn and practice according to the Buddha's teachings. We should also propagate the Dharma in accordance with how the Buddha taught us. In this way, we will not cause the Buddhas' and patriarchs' teachings to be destroyed or lost by us.

This Dharma assembly comes to a perfect completion now.

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 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.

For a list of
Amitabha Buddhist Societies
and
Pure Land Centers
please visit
www.purelandcollege.org.au

This book is
compliments of



