

The Land of Pure Bliss

Sukhāvatī

極樂國土

On the Nature of Faith & Practice in
Greater Vehicle (Mahāyāna) Buddhism
Including a Full Translation of
Shàndǎo's Commentary in Four Parts Explaining
The Scripture About Meditation on the Buddha 'Of Infinite Life'
(Amitāyur Buddha Dhyāna Sūtra, 觀無量壽佛經)

Introduction, footnotes & translation by Peter Lunde Johnson

© 2020, Peter Lunde Johnson
Distributed through An Lạc Publications
www.anlacpublications.com

Edition 2

Cover Design by Kim Bower
Special thanks to Doug Baudisch for his help in proofreading the text
Ref 040125

Except as provided by the Copyright Act, no part of this publication
may be reprinted or reproduced or utilized in any form or by any electronic,
mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including
photocopying and recording, storage in a retrieval system or transmission in any form
or by any means, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

All rights reserved

ISBN # 979-8-5951-0477-7

*

Dedicated to An Lạc

Table of Contents

An Introduction to the Pure Land	1
The noble path; selfless dedication to life's greater purpose through one's own efforts	2
The grace that descends from another, higher power and works through one's own life	3
The existential nature of life's transcendental purpose: The original vow that constitutes	
The Buddha's spiritual life (dharma kāya, 法身)	4
The three-fold nature of the Buddha's spiritual life (tri kāya, 三身)	6
The Buddha of Infinite Life (Amitāyus, 無量壽) & Infinite Light (Amitābha, 無量光)	
Personalizing the grace descending from the Buddha's spiritual life (sambhoga kāya, 報身)	8
The Two Buddhas: The Historical Buddha Śākyamuni &	
The Buddha of Infinite Life & Light	10
The Buddha of Infinite Life & Light as part of a pantheon of enlightened beings	11
The Land of Pure Bliss (Sukhāvatī, 極樂世界)	13
The Bodhisattva - spiritual rebirth & the symbolism of the lotus blossom	16
The Bodhisattva practice	18
The different Bodhisattvas	19
Buddhist eschatology:	
Pure Land teachings about the latter days or 'end times'	20
Pure Land teachings about the very end of life & being reconciled with death	21
The primary Pure Land scriptures	23
The development of Pure Land Buddhism in India	26
The development of Pure Land Buddhism in China	28
1. Prominent interpreters before Shàndǎo	28
2. Shàndǎo (善導)	32
3. Prominent interpreters after Shàndǎo	40
Pure Land Buddhism in Japan through the Heian Period	42
The development of Pure Land Buddhism in Japan during the Kamakura Period	45
1. Hōnen (法然)	45
2. Shinran (親鸞)	50
The conclusion of the introduction	53
 The Main Translations:	
 The Scripture on the Buddha's Teaching About Meditation on the Enlightened Being	
'Of Infinite Life' (Amitāyur Dhyāna Sūtra, 觀無量壽佛經)	54
 Shàndǎo's Commentary Explaining The Scripture About Meditation on the Enlightened Being	
'Of Infinite Life' In Four Parts (觀無量壽佛經疏四帖)	76
1. On the Profound Meaning Between the Lines (dūrārtha, 玄義)	80
2. On the Scripture's Introductory Narrative (nidana, 序)	113
3. On the Main Teaching about the Virtues of Mental Resolve (samādhi, 定)	165
4. On the Main Teaching about the Virtues of Mental Dispersion (vikṣepa, 散)	
and the Conclusion.....	242
 Footnotes	307

Supplemental Translations

Appendix A: The forty-eight vows of the Bodhisattva ‘Treasury of Purpose’ (Dharmākara, 法藏) from The Longer Scripture on the Buddha of Infinite Life (Sukhāvāṭī Vyūha Sūtra, 佛說無量壽經)	376
Appendices B - D: From The Scripture on the Great Garland of Universal Enlightenment (Mahā Vaipulya Buddha Avataṃsaka Sūtra, 大方廣佛華嚴經):	
Appendix B: On the ten kinds of virtuous actions made on the bodhisattva path	379
Appendix C: On the first of the fifty-two steps on the bodhisattva path: Attaining the Resolve of Meditation Through the Practice of Keeping the Buddha in Mind (Buddha Anusmṛti Samādhi, 念佛三昧)	381
Appendix D: On the last of the fifty-two steps on the bodhisattva path: The Practice-Fulfilling Vows of the Bodhisattva ‘Wholly Worthy’ (Samantabhadra Caryā Praṇidhāna, 普賢行願)	384
Appendix E: Chapter Sixteen of The Scripture on the Lotus Blossom of Sublime Purpose (Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra, 妙法蓮華經): ‘On Measuring the Lifespan of The One Who Has Descended Into This World’ (Tathāgata Āyus Pramāṇa, 如來壽量)	396
Appendix F: ‘On the Easier Practice (of Faith)’ (Sukha Caryā, 易行), Chapter Nine of The Discourse About the Scripture on the Ten Levels of Grounding (Daśa Bhūmika Vibhāṣā Śāstra, 十住毘婆沙論) Attributed to Nāgārjuna.....	402
Appendix G: The Commentary on the Longer Scripture About the Buddha of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha Sūtra Upadeśa, 無量壽經優波提舍) & Verse on the Vow For Spiritual Rebirth (願生偈) Attributed to Vasubandhu	407
Appendix H: Chapter Two ‘On the Practice (Caryā, 行) (of Keeping the Buddha in Mind)’ from The Scripture on the Meditation In Which the Buddhas All Stand Up Before One (Pratyutpanna Buddha Saṃmukha Avasthita Samādhi Sūtra, 般舟三昧經)	420
Appendix I: ‘On the Practice of (Keeping the Buddha on Mind While) Ever Walking’ in accord with The Scripture on the Meditation In Which the Buddhas All Stand Up Before One in Volume Two of Zhiyi’s ‘Greatness of Introspection With Stillness of Mind’ (Móhē Zhǐguān, 摩訶止觀)	423
Appendix J: An Esoteric Explanation of the Name ‘Infinite Life & Light’ (Amida Hishaku, 阿彌陀秘釋) by Kakuban	428
Appendix K: On The Esoteric Meaning of Letters from ‘The Chapter on the Matrix of Letters’ (Akṣara Mātrkā Vyākhyā, 釋字母品) by Amoghavajra (不空) and other Tantric sources	432
Appendix L: Hōnen’s ‘One Page Testament’ (Ichimai Kishōmon, 一枚起請文)	437
Appendix M: ‘Going Back Home’ (歸去來兮辭), a poem by Táo Yuānmíng	438
Index	440
Bibliography	452

An Introduction to the Pure Land

‘Pure Land’ teachings and practices have been a major current and essential part of ‘greater vehicle’ (mahāyāna, 大乘) Buddhism from its very beginning. Not just a particular school of its thought or even a specific practice of it, it is more of an expression of its devotional dimension than its deep philosophical, metaphysical or epistemological aspects. In Buddhism, faith, practice and transcendental knowledge of life’s purpose are really inseparable but, without the devotional element of sincere faith, one’s practice will likely result in attachments to a selfish kind of bliss or an overweening pride in one’s knowledge or the virtues of one’s own purpose.

Buddhism as a religious faith was established to keep the teachings of the Buddha Śākyamuni alive after his death in this world. Shortly after he passed away, his disciples convened a council in Rājagṛha (now Rajgir) to determine how to maintain the community of faith and compile his teachings about life’s true purpose (saddharma, 正法 or 妙法) for posterity. At this council, his cousin and personal aide Ānanda demonstrated an extraordinary ability to faithfully remember his master’s exact words. Upon gathering these teachings together in an organized and coherent way, they were revealed to be the essence of the doctrine. From Ānanda’s recitations, the canon of Buddhist scripture (sūtra piṭaka, 經藏) was established. Similarly, the disciple Upāli remembered and recited the canon of rules that became the monastic code (vinaya piṭaka, 律藏) for the ordained community. The oral tradition of reciting these two canons became one of the core practices of Buddhism, the ever-repeated remembrance of the Buddha’s timeless words that keeps bringing them back to life in the here and now. With the Buddha no longer in the world to guide his disciples, there were many temptations that could lead them to stray from the rigors of the noble path. His physical life (rūpa kāya, 色身) had perished because it was impermanent, like all things of this world. However, his spiritual life (dharma kāya, 法身), his purpose revealed through his words, transcended death. Through the grace of its legacy, it continued to teach and guide the faithful to a timeless realm that was pure of affliction, beyond the ignorance, want, suffering and death that define sentient existence. This spiritual realm (dharma dhātu, 法界) was called ‘The Pure Land’. The enduring nature of this grace descending from the Buddha’s spiritual life and transcending mortality was eloquently illustrated in the parable of the good doctor who feigns his own death in the sixteenth chapter of The Lotus Sūtra, ‘On Measuring the Lifespan of The One Who Has Descended Into This World’ (Tathāgata Āyur Pramāṇa, 如來壽量) (translated as Appendix E). To accept the enduring transmission of life’s true purpose as taught by the Buddha entails an act of faith - taking refuge in the Three Treasures (ratna traya, 三寶), the timeless object of worship in Buddhism:

- a. *I take refuge in the Enlightened Being* (buddhaṃ śaraṇaṃ gacchāmi, 歸依佛), the teacher of life’s transcendental purpose, the one who has entered into the pure bliss of spiritual freedom (nirvāṇa, 涅槃) but, through the power of grace, still descends into this world to bestow the sublime knowledge of this purpose on sentient beings.
- b. *I take refuge in Life’s True Purpose* (dharmaṃ śaraṇaṃ gacchāmi, 歸依法), that taught, the enduring spiritual foundation upon which life is grounded, serving as a moral guide for action on the noble path.
- c. *I take refuge in the Community of Faith* (saṃghaṃ śaraṇaṃ gacchāmi, 歸依僧), those taught, those awakening to this sublime nature of life’s purpose who will become the enlightened beings of the future (bodhisattvas, 菩薩).

In this sense, Pure Land teachings and practices represent the very essence of Buddhist faith, ever bringing the timeless object of worship back to life, inspiring the hearts and minds of those in this world to attain freedom from affliction and awaken to a higher sense of life’s true purpose.

The Noble Path; Selfless dedication to life's greater purpose through one's own efforts

While the Buddha was in this world, he encouraged his disciples to follow his example and leave home (attachments to this world) to attain enlightenment through their own efforts. He laid out the noble path of transcending the self-centered sphere of sentient existence, attaining freedom from its afflicted nature and awakening to a higher sense of purpose beyond it. There were two main tracks of accomplishing this that were explained in the scriptures:

1. *The lesser track* (hīnayāna, 小乘) involved attaining freedom from suffering and affliction¹ on an individual level. This entailed cultivating the noble path in five stages² and realizing the four fruits³ of spiritual emancipation, culminating in the perfection of nobility and selflessness only found in a truly worthy being (arhat, 阿羅漢).
2. *The greater track* (mahāyāna, 大乘) involved awakening to the transcendental nature of life's purpose through fulfilling vows of dedication to deliver all sentient to this freedom from affliction. This entailed cultivating the five stages on the noble path through accomplishing forty-two steps⁴ towards becoming a spiritually awakened sentient being (bodhisattva, 菩薩). These tracks are not mutually exclusive, rather they are different but complementary aspects of one another, like the two sides of a coin.

This noble path was not easy. It required the complete dedication and sacrifice of one's own life for a purpose that is greater than oneself and consequently it was most difficult and arduous, as expressed in the Buddha's very last words about it before passing from this world:

“All the motive forces of life are fleeting and subject to perishing;
Be vigilant in attaining a full realization (of the noble path).”⁵

In the early Buddhism of India, a distinction was made between those of different capacities for attaining this full realization:

1. *Those with keen spiritual capacities* (tīkṣṇa indriya, 利根) depended on keeping their own moral commitments and diligently training in the teachings about moral provisioning (earning spiritual merit) and developing an intensified motivation. They first attained a vision of the noble path on an intuitive level through introspective meditation in accordance with the nature of life's purpose (dharma anusāra, 隨法行) and then attained emancipation from afflictions on the innate level through cultivating the noble path and a transcendental knowledge (jñāna, 智) of the nature of life's purpose driven by this vision (dṛṣṭi prāpta 見得).
2. *Those with dull spiritual capacities* (mr̥dv indriya, 鈍根) depended on faith in teachings and guidance from others about the stages of moral provisioning and preliminary practice. They sought a transcendental vision of the noble path in accordance with this faith (śraddhā anusāra, 隨信行) and emancipation from their innate afflictions through a cultivation of the noble path that was primarily driven by the power of this faith (śraddhā adhimukti, 信解).

Those whose spiritual attainments were only attained through faith were considered more vulnerable to backsliding in their emancipation from affliction because faith alone is susceptible to the beliefs and speculations of false teachers as well as the sophistry found in the arguments of discursive thought. Those directly grounded in transcendental knowledge were said to be immune from this vulnerability. Vasubandhu and subsequent masters offered ample evidence from the scriptures that this was not necessarily so, and that unshakeable deliverance can be found in all those who are truly worthy, whether through their faith or their knowledge and sense of purpose. From this premise came the School of Engaged Meditation (Yogācāra, 瑜伽宗) and all further developments in the Buddhism of the greater track, or vehicle.

The deliverance of grace from another, higher power

Pure Land Buddhism is premised on the assumption that, without an enlightened being to lead and guide us in this world, the nature of our sentient existence is hopelessly corrupted by affliction¹ and we cannot attain freedom from this affliction by relying solely on the cultivation of merit through our own will power (sva bala, 自力). According to its teachings, we must aspire for a spiritual rebirth, a restoration of the spiritual foundation of consciousness (āśraya parāvṛtti, 轉依). This entailed a quantum leap to a place beyond the trap that is the closed loop of self-centered existence. This is rebirth in the Buddha's world that is pure of affliction and endures beyond the vicissitudes of life & death (saṃsāra, 生死). Through relying on this other, higher power (paratantra, 依他力), the spiritual life (dharma kāya, 法身) of the Buddha is able to appear in the minds of sentient beings as a manifestation (nirmāṇa kāya, 化身) that will teach and guide them. The mystery is how to bridge the gulf between these two worlds and allow for the transmission of this greater purpose. According to Pure Land Buddhism, the answer is through the power of grace from the transcendental vows found in the spiritual lives of the enlightened beings who have descended into this world (tathāgatas, 諸如來). This higher power of grace has two inseparable and complementary aspects that are reflected in the two Chinese translations for the Sanskrit term 'grace of the spiritual life' (sambhoga kāya, 報身 or 受用身):

1. *The grace that is a consequence (effect) of the causes (vows) made by the Buddhas in the past* (sambhoga kāya, 報身): This is a power realized through vows made long ago (pūrva praṇidhāna, 本願) by enlightened beings whose grace has descended into this world (tathāgatas, 諸如來) here and now. This timeless grace serves as 'another, higher power' greater than one's own that one can depend on and take refuge in (paratantra bala, 他力).
2. *The grace that is realized through acceptance (faith) and employment (practice) of these vows* (sambhoga kāya, 受用身) by 'spiritually awakened sentient beings' (bodhisattvas, 菩薩) as it works through their lives: This is the causal aspect of the power arising here and now from one's own practice (sva ānuvṛtti, 自行) that is in accord with the grace descending from the Buddha's spiritual life. In terms of the bodhisattvas' practice, there are two fundamental aspects in this transmission from the Buddha's spiritual life to that of a sentient being.
 - a. The inspiration of the Buddha's vows *through faith*, a sudden transcendental vision of the noble path (darśana mārga, 見道) that is timeless but must ever be renewed until it becomes continuous without interruption (anantarya, 無間) in the here and now
 - b. Fulfillment of these vows *through practice*, a cultivation of actions on the noble path (bhāvanā mārga, 修道) that gradually increases spiritual merit over time

The various practices of spiritual deliverance (pāramitās, 波羅蜜) that are involved in cultivating virtue and attaining merit are countless in number and variation but it is the vow of dedication (praṇidhāna, 願) that ultimately drives them through the nature of faith. Attaining the needed resolve of meditation (samādhi, 定) is the result of enduring observation (kṣānti, 忍), an ever repeated remembrance (anusmṛti, 隨念) of this vow of dedication, this single timeless moment (eka kṣaṇika, 一念) of aspiration here and now to attain enlightenment. In ever bringing this moment back into mind through remembrance over time, it becomes continuous without interruption. This way faith and practice become inseparable, breaking the endless cycles of afflicted cause and effect (action and suffering) that have defined the very nature of sentient existence as conditioned self-interest and a self-centered point of view since the very beginning of time.⁶

The existential nature of life's transcendental purpose: The original vow that constitutes the Buddha's spiritual life (dharma kāya, 法身)

The Buddha's original vow (pūrva praṇidhāna, 本願) constitutes the very first inspiration of the mind awakening to life's greater, transcendent purpose (prathama bodhi citta utpādika, 初發菩提心), the moment that needs to ever be nurtured and renewed. Its cultivation leads to growth of the embryonic nature of enlightenment (tathāgata garbha, 如來藏) within sentient beings until it is continuous without interruption. This existential moment has two aspects:

- a. As a revelation of truth it is a perceptual experience, a vision of the nature of life's purpose that the Buddha first explained as its 'four truths' (catvāry ārya satyāni, 四聖諦)
 1. *The reality of suffering* (duḥkha satya, 苦諦), the mortal nature of sentient existence
 2. *The reality of its origination* (samudaya satya, 集諦), the cause of its affliction¹
 3. *The reality of its transcendence* (nirodha satya, 滅諦), leading to freedom from this affliction
 4. *The reality of the noble path* (ārya mārga satya, 聖道諦), the process of deliverance
- b. As a vow of determination, it is an act of resolve responding to this vision. In terms of the four truths, it is called the 'four broad vows' (catvāry ādyaṃ praṇidhānaṃ kṛtaṃ, 四弘誓願):
 1. *On the truth of suffering*:
"Sentient beings (sattva, 衆生 or 有情) are without bounds, I vow to deliver them all."
 2. *On the truth of its origination*:
"Emotional disturbances (kleśa, 煩惱) are without end, I vow to eliminate them all."
 3. *On the truth of its transcendence*:
"Spiritual freedom (nirvāṇa, 涅槃) is the ultimate enlightenment, I vow to realize it."
 4. *On the truth of the noble path*:
"The means to realizing the true (transcendental) nature of life's purpose (dharma paryāya, 法門) are countless, I vow to master them all."

The transcendental nature of these vows is grounded in the dialectical principle of the middle way (madhyamā pratipad, 中道) that reconciles all kinds of duality. As explained by Nāgārjuna (龍樹) in the introductory stanza of verse that begins his Discourse on the Dialectical Principle of the Middle Way (Mūla Madhyamaka Kārikā, 中論), it is:

"Beyond arising (into existence) and perishing (into non-existence),
Beyond (the permanence of) eternity and (the impermanence of) transience,
Beyond (the sameness of) unity and (the differences of) diversity, and
Beyond coming (into the future) and going (into the past)
anīrodham anutpādam, anucchedam aśāsvataṃ |
anekārtham anānārtham, anāgamam anirgamam ||
不生亦不滅 不常亦不斷
不一亦不異 不來亦不出

The vows of the Buddha that constitute the spiritual life or 'life of purpose' (dharma kāya, 法身) have a transcendental nature because they entail a complete dedication of one's life and all of the treasure of merit one has attained through cultivating the noble path, dedicating or 'turning it all over' (pariṇāmanā, 迴向) to the benefit of sentient beings. On the level of perfect enlightenment (the Buddha) in which there is a complete fulfillment of these transcendental vows, there are said to be two complementary aspects in this dedication:

1. Going forth into the Pure Land (gata pariṇāmanam, 往相迴向) is the dedication of one's life to leaving home (renouncing attachments to life in this world) and being reborn in the transcendental sphere of life's purpose (dharma dhātu, 法界). This entails a vow to attain complete freedom (nirvāṇa, 涅槃) from affliction while delivering all sentient beings into this freedom to the very limit of one's human capacity. To accomplish this, one must turn over all the spiritual treasure of merit one has earned in this world and one's very life to this greater purpose. It is only fully realized by 'one that has gone, or ascended from this world' (tathagata, 如去), also called 'one who has departed (this life) well' (sugata, 善逝), a manifestation of the Buddha's spiritual life that has had a transformative influence in this world (nirmāṇa kāya, 應身 or 化身) and then entered into the ultimate freedom (parinirvāṇa, 般涅槃), as exemplified by the life of the Buddha Śākyamuni (釋迦牟尼佛).
2. Returning from the Pure Land (pratyāgata pariṇāmanam, 還相迴向) refers to spiritual rebirth (parāvṛtti, 往生), a restoration of the Buddha's spiritual life through acceptance (faith) and employment (practice) of its timeless vows. This entails a dedication to leave the transcendental sphere and return to the mortal realm of life and death, endowed with the power of grace from the Buddha's original vows and transcending death to deliver all sentient beings to the other shore of spiritual freedom. This is the dedication of 'one that has come, or descended into this world' (tathāgata, 如來), the grace of the Buddha's spiritual life (sambhoga kāya, 報身 or 受用身) as exemplified by the Buddha of Infinite Life (Amitāyus, 阿彌陀佛).

These two kinds of dedication are also reflected in complementary aspects of:

- #1 Entering into the bliss of meditation with complete spiritual freedom and
 - #2 Leaving this meditation and re-entering this world with a sense of purpose
- These two aspects are really inseparable, mirror images of one another.

Through taking refuge in the Buddha's original vows, the bodhisattva is able to fulfill them:

- #1 This simultaneous revelation of truth and vow of determination constitutes the sudden moment of spiritual awakening (yauḡapadya bodhi, 頓悟),⁷ a timeless moment of realization that arises in the here and now.⁶ The constant renewal of this moment without interruption in the conscious mind is the essential nature of Pure Land practice. In becoming continuous, this vision of the noble path (darśana mārga, 見道) is also called 'the first level of grounding in joyfulness about the transcendental nature of life's purpose' (pramuditā bhūmi, 極喜地).
- #2 Putting this vow into practice through one's actions (thoughts, words & deeds) in this world is the gradual process of spiritual awakening (kramata bodhi, 漸悟)⁷ that occurs over time as duration⁶. In the scriptures it is often called 'the three rounds of countless lifetimes' (trīṇy asaṃkhyeya kalpāni, 三阿僧祇劫) in cultivation⁷ that go on until there is realization of 'all ten levels of grounding in the transcendental nature of life's purpose' (daśa bhūmi, 十地).^{4D} This is the bodhisattva's transcendental cultivation of the noble path (bhāvanā mārga, 修道).

These two components of #1 ever renewing of the original vow by taking refuge in its timeless moment of realization again and again and #2 fulfillment of this vow through practice are inseparable and complementary aspects of one another and analogous to the two components of going forth into the Pure Land and then returning from it by descending back into this world. Another analogy often cited in the scriptures is that of the bodhisattva who is the captain of a boat that is anchored to the 'other shore' of spiritual freedom (nirvāṇa, 涅槃) but ever returns to this side of the river to pick up and deliver afflicted sentient beings who are still suffering in the sphere of life and death (saṃsāra, 生死).

The three-fold nature of the Buddha's spiritual life (tri kāya, 三身)

The teachings about this transcendental nature of the Buddha's spiritual life were fully developed in the sixteenth chapter of The Lotus Sūtra, 'On Measuring the Lifespan of The One Who Has Descended Into This World' (Tathāgata Āyur Pramāṇa, 如來壽量). This nature of the Buddha's spiritual life that transcends death became known as the three-fold spiritual life (tri kāya, 三身) of 'the enlightened being who has descended into this world' (tathāgata, 如來). There are three inseparable aspects to this spiritual life:

1. *The existential nature of this spiritual life* (dharma kāya, 法身 or svabhāvika kāya, 自性身) is found in the Buddha's original transcendental vows (pūrva praṇidhāna, 本願).
2. *The grace of this spiritual life* (sambhoga kāya, 報身) is the transcendental knowledge and vision that descends into this world as a result of the acceptance and employment of these vows (praty upabhoga, 受用) by awakened sentient beings (bodhisattvas, 菩薩) through faith and a practice in which they dedicate and turn their lives over to fulfilling these transcendental vows.
3. *The apparent manifestations of this spiritual life* (nirmāṇa kāya, 化身) are the thoughts, words and deeds that have a transformative influence on the minds of sentient beings. This includes employing the mnemonic devices (prayers, images, etc.) through which they accept, embrace and retain this grace of the Buddha's spiritual life.

The parable in the sixteenth chapter of The Lotus Sūtra explains this three-fold nature:

1. *The existential nature of Buddha's spiritual life* (dharma kāya, 法身) are the transcendental vows of the Buddha that are forever in this world over a countless number of lifetimes.⁷
2. *The grace of this spiritual life* (sambhoga kāya, 報身) is illustrated by a doctor who dispenses the 'medicine' (oṣadhi, 藥) for those sickened by the poison (viṣa, 毒) of affliction¹, leaving this medicine in our world as a legacy. Those who take this medicine (accepting it through faith in these vows and employing it through putting it into practice in their thoughts, words and deeds) see the Buddha in the Pure Land and hear the teachings about them.
3. *The apparent manifestations of this spiritual life* (nirmāṇa kāya, 化身) in the world of sentient existence we must all endure together (saḥā loka, 娑婆世界) are the fleeting, impermanent images of the Buddha and the Pure Land in the existential realm of here and now that rise and perish in each moment. For the afflicted, there are attachments to these manifestations, just as those who are attached to that which is transient are inevitably bound to suffer the afflictions inherent in their mortal condition. When sentient beings have an existential awakening to the impermanence, emptiness and suffering of life this world (here illustrated by the death of the Buddha), they take the medicine and are cured of their affliction.

This parable further says that, in preparing the medicine, the doctor seeks out the finest herbs with the most pleasing color, fragrance and taste (practices of spiritual cultivation best suited to their needs and desires), pounding, sifting and blending them to perfection. 'Pounding, sifting and blending' here refers to the transcendental knowledge that observes life's greater purpose with subtly compassionate discernment (pratyavekṣaṇa jñāna, 妙觀察智), skillfully crafting the empowered words and images of the Buddha into perfected mnemonic devices that sentient beings can embrace and keep in mind to help sustain the continuous mindfulness (smṛti, 念) and resolve (samādhi, 定) needed to overcome afflictions and awaken to a greater sense of life's purpose. See Appendix E for a translation of this sixteenth chapter of the Lotus Sūtra.

These mnemonic devices include prayer formulas (mantra, 咒 & dhāraṇī, 陀羅尼) and iconic images of the Buddha, the bodhisattvas and the adornments of the Pure Land (adhīdevas, 本尊 & maṇḍalas, 曼荼羅), distillations of the Buddha's teachings (scriptures) into mental images (nimitta, 相) that facilitate this retention. These can include invoking the names of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas as well as the titles of the scriptures that perfectly encapsulate their meaning. In many cases (such as many Pure Land scriptures), the titles of the scriptures themselves include the names of the Buddhas, the bodhisattvas and the Pure Lands.

The Lotus Sūtra further explains that the scripture itself is the vessel or reliquary of this medicine, containing the Buddha's spiritual life. Within the scripture, there are found the timeless Buddhas, Pure Lands, bodhisattvas and other noble beings that constitute the Three Treasures, the object of worship and meditation. However, this spiritual life remains latent until its embryonic nature is nurtured through acceptance (faith) and employment (practice). As was realized at the great council held right after the Buddha Śākyamuni's death so long ago, the tradition of reciting the scripture is the repeated, systematic remembrance of the Buddha's timeless words that ever brings them back to life in the here and now.⁶ On this, The Lotus Sūtra says that there is this acceptance (with faith) and employment (putting it into practice) 'by reading, reciting, writing or copying even a single stanza of its verse'. This is how one is spiritually reborn (restored) in the Buddha's Pure Land.

In his commentary on the fourteenth of the sixteen visualizations in The Meditation Sūtra, the main subject of the work at hand, Shāndào explains the essential nature of faith and practice, which forms the core of his teaching. This explanation includes:

1. Putting the words of the scripture into practice
2. Solely depending on the scriptures' words (as the source of the other, greater power)
3. Eliminating all doubts through the building of faith
4. Employing a specific practice that will effectively establish this faith

Where the Lotus Sūtra most perfectly describes and illustrates the principles involved, the Pure Land Sūtras offer a more specific application of these principles in a simple praxis that anyone can adopt and utilize.⁸ Due to the attachments found in the afflicted nature¹ of sentient beings, it is necessary to employ different skillful means (upāya kauśalya, 方便善巧) to increase their faith and so reach them and draw their minds toward spiritual awakening. Faith entails the acceptance and employment of a provisional means in order to attain discernment (prajñā, 般若 or 慧) of the transcendental nature of life's purpose. The Pure Land cycle of scriptures emphasized the faithful acceptance of the delivering power of a specific Buddha as a person rather than the Dharma as a transcendental purpose. In personalizing faith through this use of specific names and mental images there is the making of a more personal connection. Attachments to names and images have a strong emotional impact on the subconscious mind that is largely subliminal. Through accepting (adopting) them, they serve as seeds of faith in the transcendental nature of life's purpose. Through retaining them in a practice that reinforces their hold on the mind, these seeds are sustained and grow ever stronger, having an ever greater spiritual power over the conscious mind. Of course, these attachments must ultimately be let go after realizing the transcendental nature of the Buddha's spiritual life, just as only the seed-bearing fruit of the lotus remains after the blossom falls away and just as only the grace of our legacy remains after we pass away from this world.

The Buddha of Infinite Life (Amitāyus, 無量壽) & *Infinite Light* (Amitābha, 無量光):
Personalizing the grace that descends from the Buddha's spiritual life (sambhoga kāya, 報身),
The consequences that descend from the actions (svakarma phala, 正報) *that fulfill the*
Buddha's original vows

According to Buddhist teachings, the purpose for the appearance of all the enlightened beings that have descended into this world (sarva tathāgataḥ, 諸如來) is the same, to deliver the bliss of freedom from affliction¹ to sentient beings and to awaken them to a greater sense of life's purpose.⁹ However, from early on, a distinction was made between the physical life (rūpa kāya, 色身) of the historical Buddha Śākyamuni who appeared and perished in this world and the enduring nature of the Buddha's spiritual life or 'life of purpose' (dharma kāya, 法身) found in the Buddha's original vows that transcend life and death. This distinction was said to have been made by the Buddha Śākyamuni himself, especially later in his life, and was a subject of interest and speculation even among the very early schools of Buddhism.¹⁰

The Buddhist scriptures teach that there have been many enlightened beings (Buddhas) in the past, with each of them having spheres of influence in their own places (lands) and times (ages), and that they are all worthy of our praise and reverent worship. The worship of a distinct 'Buddha of Infinite Life' (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛 or 無量壽佛) per se appears to have arisen with the advent of greater vehicle (mahāyāna, 大乘) Buddhism, no later than the beginning of the common era or the first century CE. It clearly originated in response to existential questions about transcending death and distinguishing between what is empty and impermanent and what is real and everlasting, particularly with regards to our spiritual lives and the nature of enlightenment.

- * *In early Mahāyāna Buddhism*, the Buddha of Infinite Life personified the enduring nature of the Buddha's spiritual life (dharma kāya, 法身) that transcends life and death while the Buddha Śākyamuni personified the manifested physical life (rūpa kāya, 色身) of the Buddha that appeared and perished in this world. This reflected the dual nature of ultimate reality (paramārtha satya, 真諦) and conventional reality (saṃvṛti satya, 世俗諦), as explained in the early Dialectical School (Madhyamaka, 中觀宗) of Nāgārjuna and his followers.
- * *In later Mahāyāna Buddhism*, the Buddha of Infinite Life came to personify the grace of the spiritual life (sambhoga kāya, 報身 or 受用身) that descends into this world as a result of the Buddha's transcendental vows and the acceptance and employment of it by spiritually awakened sentient beings (bodhisattvas, 菩薩) through their faith, their practice, and the manifestations of this grace that appear in their minds (nirmāṇa kāya, 化身 or 應身). This is a reflection of the later doctrine of the three-fold spiritual life, as explained in the School on Engaged Meditation (Yogācāra, 瑜伽宗) of Asaṅga, Vasubandhu and their followers.

The existential nature of this spiritual life can be described by the nature of zero and one, with zero representing the afflicted nature¹ of self-centered existence and one representing the Buddha, enlightenment to the transcendental nature of life's purpose.

- * *In the formula $0/1 = 0$* , there is putting the impermanent and empty nature of one's own self-centered existence over the transcendental nature of life's purpose.
- * *In the formula $1/0 = \infty$* , there is putting the infinite and enduring nature of the Buddha's transcendental nature (spiritual life) over one's own self-centered existence.

The name 'Infinite Life' (Amitāyus, 阿彌陀 or 無量壽) addresses this nature:

- * The Sanskrit prefix 'A' (阿 or 無) refers to negation, being without or beyond existence (0).
- * 'Mit-' (彌 or 量) means measured or finite, being endowed with (sentient) existence (1).
- * Together 'Amit-' therefore means without measure or limitation, that is, infinite (∞).
- * 'Āyus' (壽 or 陀) means 'life' or 'lifespan', and refers to the infinite (never perishing) grace of compassion descending from the Buddha's spiritual life .

The name 'Infinite Light' (Amitābha, 阿彌陀 or 無量光) is also given to this Buddha, with the word 'ābhā' (光) meaning light, referring to *transcendental discernment* of this spiritual life.

'Infinite Life & Infinite Light' together refer to the mutually dependent aspects of compassion and transcendental discernment from the Buddha ever being mediated by the dialectical principle.

The character "ta' here (陀) here in the Chinese transliteration of the Sanskrit can mean either life (āyus) or light (ābha). It is sounded as 'ta' instead of 'a' in both cases because of the Sanskrit rule of 'combining sounds' (saṃdhi, 合音), with the 'ā' of āyus or 'ābha' taking on the sound on the previous syllable (here 'mit-').

These two names 'light' and 'life' therefore reflect the dual nature of this Buddha's grace found in the *transcendental knowledge that observes the nature of life's purpose with subtly compassionate discernment* (praty avekṣana jñāna, 妙觀察智): #1 the light found in (subtly) transcendental discernment (knowledge & vision) and #2 the life of compassion found in transcendental vows.

1. The light (ābhā, 光) of *discernment* (prajñā, 慧) frees sentient beings from the afflictions that are speculations of the imagination (vikalpa, 分別), just as one is freed from them through attaining a transcendental vision of the noble path (darśana mārga, 見道).
2. The life (āyus, 壽) of *compassion* (karuṇā, 悲) frees sentient beings from the afflictions that are innate (sahaja, 俱生) at the existential level of life and death, just as one is freed from them through transcendental cultivation of the noble path (bhāvanā mārga, 修道).

A key reason for the success of Pure Land Buddhism was the efficacy of its praxis in adapting to a broad range of people with different levels of spiritual capacity, a key element of the greater vehicle (mahāyāna, 大乘) doctrine that compassion especially requires reaching out first and foremost to the most afflicted among us.

- * Practices in earlier schools of Buddhism were designed primarily for monks and stressed deep introspective meditation on the existential nature of purpose (dharma, 法) and the empty nature of identity (ātma, 我) or personality (pudgala, 人). Those of weaker spiritual capacity were said to be those who practice in accordance with faith (śraddhā anusārin, 隨信行者) while those of stronger capacity practice in accordance with a sense of purpose (dharma anusārin, 隨法行者). Because of this, the idea of worship and meditation through the identity of a person as its object was not stressed as it was only for those with a lower spiritual capacity, particularly worldly people (such as those found in the laity) incapable of discerning the transcendental nature of life's purpose.
- * With the advent of greater vehicle Buddhism it was accepted that both purpose and identity by themselves are empty of any real existential nature, (the Dialectical School's position that arose first), and that there is really only the virtual nature of consciousness that is expressed through the metaphors of identity and purpose (the Yogācāra School's position that arose subsequently). In allowing for worship of and meditation on the delivering power of both the Buddha as a person and the Dharma as a purpose (although realizing their virtual nature as hypothetical constructs), the door was opened to people of all capacities to attain the bliss of contentment (freedom from affliction) and meaningful benefits (a greater sense of purpose) through Pure Land practices (those practices driven by faith). Through them, it was said that the power of the Buddha's mercy and compassion could reach those of all spiritual capacities in both the ordained and the lay communities.

The Two Buddhas: The Historical Buddha Śākyamuni & The Buddha of Infinite Life & Light

The Pure Land scriptures distinguish between the historical Buddha Śākyamuni, the teacher in these scriptures, and the Buddha Infinite Life & Light (Amitāyus & Amitābha, 阿彌陀佛, collective called Amita), who is the subject of these teachings. In these scriptures:

- * *The Buddha Śākyamuni* exemplifies the manifestation of the Buddha's spiritual life (nirmāṇa kāya, 化身 or 應身) that appeared at a defined time and place in this afflicted world we must all endure together (saḥā loka, 娑婆世界), teaching sentient beings how to become free from affliction through their own efforts and awakening them to a higher sense of life's purpose. The relics of this life are still found in this world after the demise of this true purpose (saddharma vipralopa, 末法), expressing the impermanence of life in this world.
- * *The Buddha of Infinite Life & Light* exemplifies the grace of transcendental knowledge that has descended from the past vows of this spiritual life (sambhoga kāya, 報身 or 受用身). This grace is found in the World of Pure Bliss (Sukhāvatī, 極樂世界) that is beyond any affliction. Upon being spiritually reborn into this world through a faith-based practice, there is attainment of an enduring observation of the timeless, transcendental nature of life's purpose that neither arises nor perishes (anutpattika dharma kṣānti, 無生法忍).
- * *The Buddha Śākyamuni* therefore personalizes the more difficult path of leaving home and overcoming the afflictions of sentient existence through one's own efforts.
- * *The Buddha of Infinite Life & Light* personalizes the easier path of overcoming afflictions by faith in the grace of deliverance attained through another power, beyond one's own efforts.

In our main translation here, Shāndào offered a parable about a river of fire and water (illustrating afflictions) and a white path (of deliverance) across it that illustrates this teaching about the two Buddhas. In this parable:

- * *The Buddha Śākyamuni* is *heard* on the east side of the river, inspiring us to let go of the past (the east is a metaphor for the past). He is the teacher, urging us to go, to abandon our attachments to this world, renouncing the impermanence, affliction, suffering and emptiness of life & death (saṃsāra, 生死) through our own efforts of cultivation.
- * *The Buddha of Infinite Life & Light* is *seen* on the west side of the river, welcoming us into the future (the west is a metaphor for the future). He is the deliverer, beckoning us to come and enter into the future with faith, accepting spiritual freedom (nirvāṇa, 涅槃) through the power of a grace that transcends our own efforts and our own lives.

In fact, these two Buddhas are inseparable mirror images of one another. It is only through the self-centered lens of our sentient existence that we perceive them being in the past and the future, just as when the earth revolves, the sun only appears to be moving from the east to the west. On this, Shāndào said:

“We can only hope that the Buddha Śākyamuni will inspire us to embark on the quest and the Buddha Amitāyus will welcome us into this nation (of the Pure Land). With one inspiring us to go and the other beckoning us to come, how can we refuse? The only way to accomplish this is to be diligent in reverently fulfilling the true purpose for our lives and, at the end of them, renouncing this filthy world and realizing the ever-lasting contentment found in the transcendental nature of life's purpose (dharma-tā, 法性).”

In fact, the lives of all the Buddhas are essentially the same and the biography (jātaka, 本生) of the past life of the Buddha of Infinite Life as the monk 'Treasury of Purpose' (Dharmākara, 法藏) found in The Longer Scripture on the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyus Sūtra, 佛說無量壽經) can be seen as a thinly veiled narrative on the life of the Buddha Śākyamuni.

The Buddha of Infinite Life & Light as part of a pantheon of enlightened beings

Buddhism has always accepted the premise that there have been many different manifestations of the Buddha. For example, The Longer Scripture on the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life presents a lineage of fifty-three Buddhas prior to the Buddha of Infinite Life (Amitāyus, 阿彌陀) and The Scripture on the Great Garland of Universal Enlightenment (Mahā Vaipulya Buddha Avataṃsaka Sūtra, 大方廣佛華嚴經) describes a veritable constellation of Buddhas and bodhisattvas. After the seventh century, a school of Buddhism arose that adopted a wide array of ritual practices (tantras, 怛特羅) and was known variously as the School of Invocations (Mantrayāna, 真言宗), the Esoteric Doctrine (Saṃdhāya Bhāṣita, 密教 or 密宗) and the Adamantine Vehicle (Vajrayāna, 金剛乘). This school developed a pantheon of Buddhas that incorporated the Buddha of Infinite Life & Light as one of five primordial Buddhas. This later movement was largely an outgrowth of combining the richly colorful theatricality of Hindu ritual practices with the teachings of the School on Engaged Meditation (Yogācāra, 瑜伽宗). This worship of and meditation on the five enlightened beings descending into this world (pañca tathāgataḥ, 五如來) ‘personalized’ the Yogācāra teaching about the five-fold grounding of enlightenment.¹¹

First there is the Buddha that personifies the existential nature of this enlightenment:

1. The Greatness of Illumination That Descends Into This World (Mahā Vairocana Tathāgata, 摩訶毘盧舍那如來), often translated into Chinese as ‘The Greatness of the Sun’ (大日), is found in the central Pure Land that is called ‘The Glorious Array of Adornment Over All’ (Akaniṣṭha Ghana Vyūha, 色究竟密嚴), personifying *the existential nature of the spiritual realm, the transcendental sphere of life’s purpose* (dharma dhātu svabhāva, 法界體性). Here there is the Buddha’s unconditional vow that is the foundation of its transcendental nature, endowed with the true nature of emptiness.

Then there are the four Buddhas with their Pure Lands that personify the four kinds of transcendental knowledge (catvāri jñānāni, 四智) about life’s greater purpose, the powers of grace that reveal its transcendental nature and result in the spiritual restoration of the eight projections of consciousness (aṣṭābhir vijñānaiḥ, 八識) found in sentient beings:

2. The Undisturbed Stillness That Descends Into This World (Akṣobhya Tathāgata, 阿閼鞞如來) in the land to the east called ‘Sublime Joy’ (Abhirati, 妙喜) is also called ‘The Master and Teacher of Healing Through the Light of Beryl That Descends Into This World’¹² (Bhaiṣajya Guru Vaiḍūrya Prabhā Rāja Tathāgata, 藥師琉璃光如來) in the eastern land ‘Illumination of Beryl’ (Vaiḍūrya Nirbhāsa 琉璃光)¹². The first name emphasizes the Buddha’s great stillness of mind (śamatha, 止) while the latter emphasizes the Buddha’s greatness of introspective meditation (vipaśyanā, 觀心). This Buddha personifies *the transcendental knowledge that is a perfect mirror of life’s greater purpose* (mahā ādarśa jñāna, 大圓鏡智), the perfection of introspection with stillness of mind that spiritually restores the subconscious store of memory (ālaya vijñāna, 阿賴耶識), opening up and revealing this transcendental knowledge. The ‘east’ here is a metaphor for *the memory of the past*.
3. The Producer of Treasure That Descends Into This World (Ratna Sambhava Tathāgata, 寶生如來) is found in the land to the south called ‘Auspicious Blessings’ (Śrīmat, 吉慶), personifying *the transcendental knowledge of life’s greater purpose with the nature of equanimity (between self & other)* (samatā jñāna, 平等性智). This knowledge is attained through spiritual restoration of the consciousness that deliberates and calculates self-interest (manas, 末那).

4. The Infinite Life & Light That Descends Into This World (Amitāyur Tathāgata, 無量壽如來 & Amitābha Tathāgata, 無量光來) is found in the land to the west called 'Pure Bliss' (Sukhavatī, 極樂), personifying *the transcendental knowledge of observing life's greater purpose with subtly compassionate discernment* (praty avekṣana jñāna, 妙觀察智), particularly through words and images. This knowledge is attained through spiritual restoration of the consciousness that distinguishes imagined objects & objectives (mano vijñāna, 意識). The 'west' serves as a metaphor for *the hopes & aspirations of the future*.
5. The Unfailing Success That Descends Into This World (Amogha Siddhi Tathāgata, 不空成就) is found in the land to the north called 'Accomplishing the Work' (Karma Sampad, 業成就), personifying *the transcendental knowledge that accomplishes life's greater purpose* (kṛtya anuṣṭhāna jñāna, 成所作智). This knowledge is attained through spiritual restoration of the five sensory projections of consciousness - vision, hearing, touch, taste and smell (pañca vijñāna, 五識). Sometimes the Buddha Śākyamuni is said to be in this Pure Land.

A host of other associations with these five Buddhas are made in the Tantric School with bodhisattvas, consorts, seed mantras, postures, gestures, implements, elemental principles, colors, seasons of the year, etc. With the richness of so many Buddhas, bodhisattvas, consorts, ritual implements, symbols and the like, it is easy to see the object of worship as being something external or get distracted and lose the original focus of one's practice which, again, is to attain the bliss of contentment (freedom from affliction) and meaningful benefits (a greater sense of life's purpose) while on the bodhisattva path of delivering sentient beings. For this reason, the Tantric School entails initiation through a master to guide one through its maze of different ritual practices of meditation and focus on one that will be efficacious to that end in accord with one's capacities and proclivities. It is also the reason why there is greater need in the Tantric School for an emphasis on penetrating the nature of emptiness as found in the Dialectical School (Madhyamaka, 中觀宗) to serve as an antidote for any attachments to the distractions caused by all this external imagery. The Pure Land School had a different approach, claiming that worship of and meditation on the Buddha of Infinite Light and Life is enough, as it is simpler to follow, reaches more of those in need and ultimately leads to the same result.

In truth, all of these different Buddhas just represent the different projections of consciousness in their spiritually restored state as the transcendental knowledge found in the unafflicted nature of enlightenment. They are not really separate from each other and they are not something external to be found outside the nature of the mind. They are reflections of that which one can aspire to and take refuge in through worship, prayer and deep introspective meditation. In awakening to one, there is awakening to all. However, worship and meditation on the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life & Light is said to have a special efficacy for afflicted sentient beings because the mind distinguishing what are seemingly external imagined objects (mano vijñāna, 意識) is the place where afflictions are most manifest in the conscious mind and the transcendental knowledge of observing life's greater purpose with subtly (subliminally) compassionate discernment (praty avekṣana jñāna, 妙觀察智) puts the existential nature of enlightenment into sharpest focus in the conscious, discursive mind through revealing both its shared and unique characteristics (sāmānya lakṣaṇa, 共相 & sva lakṣaṇa, 自相), that is, imagined objects (mental images and words) and the transcendental reality that goes beyond them. For this reason, it has been deemed by Pure Land advocates to be the most accessible for afflicted sentient beings to penetrate and understand. In being the most approachable and reaching the most people, it is said to be most compassionate and efficacious.

The Land of Pure Bliss (Sukhāvatī, 極樂世界):

The environment of grace that this Buddha depends on (parakarma phala, 依報)

The spiritual life of a Buddha is inseparable from the land that serves as its sphere of influence. The Buddha is the sower, the land is the field of cultivation & its sentient beings are the harvest. Their grace reflects this spiritual life (dharma kāya, 法身) and its realm (dharma dhātu, 法界):

1. *The grace of the spiritual life* (sambhoga kāya, 報身) is a result of the consequences of the Buddha's own actions (svakarma phala, 正報) in fulfilling transcendental vows.
2. *The environment of grace* (sambhoga kāya kṣetra, 報身土) is the sphere of life's purpose relied upon (parakarma phala, 依報), the Pure Land where the Buddha's work is accomplished. These actions and this environment are said to be completely *pure* of affliction (anāsrava, 清淨).

There are a few different Chinese translations for 'The Land of Pure Bliss' (Sukhāvatī, 極樂國土):

1. 'Sukha' (樂) means 'contentment' or 'bliss' and refers to the joyfulness (pramuditā, 歡喜) found in freedom from affliction. The character 極 literally means 'ultimate'. In qualifying 'contentment' or 'bliss' (sukha, 樂) here it is referring to its ultimate purity or perfection.
2. The suffix 'vatī' here refers to 'possessing', 'being endowed with', 'being filled with' or 'being grounded in'. The Chinese translators interpreted this various ways:
 - a. 'Land' (土) refers to the field (kṣetra) of cultivation on a global level.
 - b. 'Nation' (國) refers to the different sentient beings (sattva) found there on a societal level.
 - c. 'World' (世界) refers to the different adornments (alaṃkāra) found there.

Sukhāvatī is also called 'Secure in Contentment' (安樂), emphasizing the nature of its grounding (bhūmi, 地). All of these terms are interchangeable in the scriptures and sometimes combined.

In his Commentary on The Longer Scripture About the Infinite Life (Sukhavatī Vyūha Sūtra Upadeśa or Amitāyus Sūtra Upadeśa, 無量壽經優波提舍), Vasubandhu describes seventeen virtues of this land. The first is its essential nature while the other sixteen are its characteristics:

1. Its purity (parisuddha, 清淨)
2. Its size (pramāṇa, 量)
3. Its moral nature (prakṛti, 性)
4. Its luminous shapes and forms (varṇa saṃsthāna, 形相)
5. Its diversity (vicitratā, 種種事)
6. Its beauty (surūpa, 妙色)
7. Its feel (spraṣṭavya, 觸)
8. Its three elements of earth, water & sky (pṛthivī apah ākāśa, 三種)
9. Its rain (varṣa, 雨)
10. Its clear light (prakāśa, 光明)
11. Its sublime voice (brahma ghoṣa, 妙聲)
12. Its master (īśvara, 主)
13. Its followers (parivāra, 眷屬)
14. Its sustenance (upabhoga, 受用)
15. Its freedom from difficulty and hardship (akṛcchratva, 無諸難)
16. Its gateway to the greatness of meaning and significance (mahā paryāya, 大義門)
17. Its fulfillment of all aspirations (sarva paryeṣaṇāḥ paripūrṇa, 一切所求滿足)

A full English translation of this Commentary is offered in Appendix G.

In this vision of the Land of Pure Bliss (Sukhāvātī, 極樂世界), there are the many different characteristics described that serve as metaphors for objects of meditation on the virtues of the Buddha's world. Examples in The Scripture About Meditation on the Enlightened Being 'Of Infinite Life' (Amitāyur Dhyāna Sūtra, 觀無量壽佛經) include:

1. **The Setting Sun** (sūrya asta, 日沒): The sun is the distant object of light in empty space that earlier arose in the east and now appears to be setting in the west, illuminating all things above the great stream of consciousness while beckoning us towards the future. Here, the east serves as a metaphor for the past while the west serves as one for the future. Facing the sun setting over the waters in the west and focusing the mind only on this single object can be likened to a distant hope, the worshiping of a god from afar. It is an aspiration towards the ultimate goal - illumination of the transcendental nature of life's purpose (tathatā, 真如), entry into the great spiritual freedom (parinirvāṇa, 般涅槃) and future rebirth in grace.
2. **The Waters** (āpas, 水): The waters serve as a metaphor for the stream of consciousness, the turbulence of the mind that becomes quieted through the stillness of meditation. Upon becoming calm, the waters become congealed like ice, reflecting everything like the surface of a mirror. Upon deeper meditation, this mirror is seen to be like beryl, reflecting what is on the outside while at the same time revealing what is on the inside. This can be likened to meditation with introspection and stillness of mind (śamatha vipaśyanā, 止觀).
3. **The Ground** (bhūmi, 地): The ground itself can be likened to the adamantine solidity and strength of meditative resolve (samādhi, 定), the bedrock that is straight, even and level, transcending the crests and troughs of emotional disturbances (kleśa, 煩惱).
4. **The Bejeweled Trees** (ratna vṛkṣa, 寶樹): Trees serve as metaphors for the growth of spiritual capacities (indriya, 根) through cultivating the noble path (bhāvanā mārga, 修道). The roots of virtue (kuśala mūla, 善根) penetrate the ground below while the limbs of discernment (prajñā, 慧) aspire to the light above, serving as metaphors for nourishment of the spiritual life and the blossoming and fruition of spiritual awakening. There are said to be seven rows of seven trees, likened to the thirty-seven facets of spiritual awakening (saptatrimśad bodhipakṣa dharmāḥ, 三十七道品) in seven categories and the seven branches of this awakening (sapta bodhy aṅgāni, 七覺支).¹³ Each tree is said to be made of the seven kinds of treasure (sapta ratnāni, 七寶)¹⁴ and on the trees' limbs there are many different kinds of birds proclaiming the transcendental nature of life's purpose for all to hear.
5. **The Pools** (hrada, 池水): The pools of fresh and clear water can be likened to the composure of meditation (samāhita, 勝定) that nourishes and sustains the depths of the mind, from the flow of the conscious mind swirling on the surface to the wish-fulfilling gems (cintāmaṇi, 如意珠) planted deep in the subconscious store of memory. These gems are magic spells, pearls of wisdom that are unafflicted seeds (anāsrava bījaḥ, 諸無漏種) of transcendental knowledge (jñāna, 智). These pearls are white, expressing the purity of this transcendental nature, but within them there are seen all the colors of the rainbow as they reflect the different desires and aspirations of sentient beings through the dialectical principle of the middle way found in the existential nature of life's purpose.

6. **The Buildings** (prāsāda, 樓): Tall buildings (towers, pagodas, etc.) provide higher perspectives, lofty and broad vistas. These can be likened to the unafflicted speculations and deliberations of the imagination (vikalpa, 分別) that arise during meditation, the mental constructs (prajñāpti, 假想) of the conscious mind that serve as the building blocks of enlightenment. Here there are found the mental associations (samjñā, 想) of judgment, inference and logical reasoning through which the mind seeks to discover and express the inexpressible truths about the transcendental nature of life's purpose. These building blocks include divine images as well as the letters, words and phrasings found in the prose and verse of the scriptures on the greater vehicle of spiritual awakening. Divine music is said to arise from the buildings' rooms of meditation, proclaiming, praising and explaining the transcendental nature of life's purpose. This can be likened to deliberation on the ever repeated prayers (mantras, 咒) and invocations (dhāraṇīs, 陀羅尼), the mnemonic devices that inspire and spiritually awaken sentient beings and are then retained and kept in their minds, ever guiding and supporting their resolve as they do the work of the Buddha.
7. **The Lotus Seat** (padma āsana, 蓮花座): The lotus seat serves as a metaphor for the place of enlightenment (bodhi maṇḍa, 道場) found at the very peak and axis of this world where there is the timeless transcendental vision of the noble path (darśana mārḡa, 見道). It is here that there is the existential nature (svabhāva, 體) of the unafflicted mind, endowed with the simultaneity of seed & fruit (cause & effect, karma & retribution, cultivation & realization), the conditions that directly cause the arising of consciousness (hetu pratyaya, 因緣) in the here and now. It is the place where the Buddha is seated, touches the ground (bhūmi sparśa, 地觸) and walks upon this world, where the Buddha's transcendental vows are put into practice and the enduring observation of the timeless nature of life's purpose (anutpattika dharma kṣānti, 無生法忍) meets the existential nature of this corrupt world of life & death that we must all endure together (sahā loka, 娑婆世界). It is also said to be the place where the Buddhas descend into this world and the bodhisattvas rise up from the ground. And so, while the tree of enlightenment (bodhi vṛkṣa, 菩提樹) is where there is cultivation of the noble path (bhāvanā mārḡa, 修道), with seed and fruit gradually ripening over the duration of time, the lotus seat is where there is the timeless moment of its transcendental vision, with its seed and fruit occurring suddenly and immediately.⁶

Like this, there are many adornments described in the Pure Land scriptures and other greater vehicle scriptures, notably The Lotus Sūtra, The Sūtra on the Great Garland of Universal Enlightenment and the scriptures of the Tantric School.¹⁵

In this environment of grace, the whole world is alive as an inconceivable unity that endures. It is only due to our afflicted nature as sentient beings that we see it as being fragmented into countless competing forces that arise and then perish.

The Bodhisattva - spiritual rebirth and the symbolism of the lotus blossom

Entry into the Pure Land is described as a spiritual rebirth, a restoration of the foundation of consciousness (āśraya parāvṛtti, 轉依) in which one is freed from the rounds of suffering defined by the afflictions of self-centered existence and then reborn into this higher sphere. This rebirth is expressed first as being in the closed bud of a lotus blossom, symbolizing the seed or 'embryonic nature' of enlightenment (tathāgata garbha, 如來藏), then as being seated on the pericarp (fruit) of its fully opened blossom where there is a sudden revelation of perfect enlightenment that is fully grounded in the transcendental nature of life's purpose:

1. The lotus rises up from the mud and stagnant waters below but remains untainted by them. It reveals its beautiful blossom and fruit above, just as the nature of enlightenment arises from the afflicted nature of sentient existence, untainted through its freedom from affliction and higher sense of purpose. The roots of the lotus depend on nourishment from the mud and waters below to grow (the physical and emotional life), but its full blossoming and seed-bearing fruit (discernment and fulfillment of purpose) depend on transcending them and rising towards the light and rain that descend from above (the grace that comes down from the Buddha as the illumination of transcendental discernment and rain of compassion). Like this, bodhisattvas remain rooted in this world but transcend their attachments to it, accepting and employing the Buddha's grace that descends from above.
2. The lotus is distinguished in that its blossom and seed-bearing fruit (pericarp) appear only very briefly and at the same time, like the simultaneity of cause and effect found in the immediate moment here and now. Here there is found the direct cause for the arising of consciousness (hetu pratyaya, 因緣), the existential nature in which the seeds of memory from the subconscious store of memory (ālaya vijñāna, 阿賴耶識) are simultaneous with the evolving manifestations of the conscious mind (pravṛtti vijñāna, 轉識). In the mind that is pure of affliction, these seeds arise from the embryonic nature of enlightenment.

* *In the closed lotus bud*, this embryo is implanted within the womb of the subconscious storehouse of memory that produces the virtual nature of consciousness, its evolving manifestations that include the five senses of vision, hearing, taste, smell and touch, the distinctions of physical and mental objects, and the calculations of self-interest. This is 'the sphere of the womb' (garbha dhātu, 胎藏界), the lotus realm where the grace of compassion (karuṇa, 悲) raises sentient beings up from the muck of the life and death struggles in this world. Through purity of devotion, the embryo of enlightenment gestates in this womb, aspiring to spiritual freedom and a higher sense of purpose, the grace of compassion and discernment that descends from above. When it acquires an adamant resolve through the power of this grace, it will be reborn to do the work of the Buddha. This adamant resolve comes from 'the realm of the thunderbolt' (vajra dhātu, 金剛界) where transcendental discernment of purpose (prajñā, 般若) is able to cut through the illusions found in the virtual nature of consciousness while doing the work of fulfilling the Buddha's vows. The womb and the embryo of enlightenment are both found in this secret inner chamber of the closed lotus. The Sanskrit word garbha (藏) means 'inner chamber' and refers to the place where this synergy between the womb and the embryo of enlightenment occurs.

* *Upon fully opening up*, the blossom is revealed and its seed-bearing fruit (pericarp) serves as the seat for meditation that is grounded in the transcendental nature of life's purpose. This lotus seat is the place of spiritual awakening (bodhi maṇḍa, 道場) at the peak and axis of this world, the meeting place between the timeless nature of life's purpose and the existential reality here & now. The Buddhas are said to be seated in meditation here.

In his 'Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sūtra' (法華玄義), Zhìyǐ of the Tiāntāi School explains the title of the sūtra (The Lotus Blossom of Sublime Purpose) and how the lotus blossom symbolizes the perfect union of the transcendental nature of life's purpose with existential reality, saying:

"Sublime (Sat, 妙) is a reference to the transcendental nature that is inconceivable (subliminal and unknowable by the discursive mind).

Purpose (Dharma, 法) is a reference to the ten spiritual realms with their ten existential aspects, all of the characteristics of life's purpose (manifested through the mind) that are at once both provisional (hypothetical constructs) and real (existential).

Lotus Blossom (Puṇḍarīka, 蓮華): Because this sublime purpose is difficult to understand, the metaphor of the lotus blossom is used to make it easier to explain. In outlining this from beginning to end, there are six parts.

(In the first half of the sūtra) the seed-bearing fruit (with its simultaneity of cause and effect) illustrates this perfect union of the transcendental and the existential while the blossom illustrates the provisional teachings and practices (the means of awakening to it):

1. For the sake of the seed-bearing fruit, there is the blossom. This illustrates that, to reveal the transcendental nature of purpose (timeless vows), the Buddha offered various provisional teachings and practices (over time). On this, the sūtra says:
'The supreme freedom (nirvāṇa, 涅槃) is understood through the power of ways and means. Although there are various paths to revealing it, there is really only one track of enlightenment (to the transcendental nature of life's purpose).'
2. The blossom opens and the seed-bearing fruit is revealed. This illustrates opening up that which is provisional to reveal this transcendental nature. On this, it says:
'Opening up the doors of the ways and means to reveal this transcendental nature.'
3. The blossom falls away, and only the seed-bearing fruit of the lotus fruit remains. This illustrates discarding the provisional teachings and practices and so establishing this transcendental nature. On this, it says:
'Honestly discarding the ways and means and only teaching about this supreme path of enlightenment (this transcendental nature of the Buddha's original vows).'

(In the second half of the sūtra) the seed-bearing fruit illustrates the source (the grace of the spiritual life (sambhoga kāya, 報身) that descends from the Buddha's transcendental vows (dharma kāya, 法身)) while the blossom illustrates its apparent manifestations (in this world that respond to the needs of sentient beings (nirmāṇa kāya, 應身)):

4. From the source (the seed-bearing fruit) there are its manifestations (blossoms). This illustrates that the manifestations of the spiritual life depend on the transcendental nature (of the grace) that is their source. On this, it says:
'I have really attained enlightenment and descended into this world for all of eternity, if anything. However, to instruct and influence sentient beings, I have taught that, while young, I left home and attained perfect enlightenment.'
5. The blossom opens up and the seed-bearing fruit is revealed, illustrating opening up the manifestations of the spiritual life to reveal their source. On this, it says:
'All those of this world reason that I have only first attained enlightenment in this life, but in reality I have attained enlightenment and descended into this world for a countlessly infinite number of lifetimes.'
6. The blossom falls away and only the seed-bearing fruit remains. This illustrates the discarding of the manifestations to establish their source. On this, it says:
'All of the teachings of the enlightened beings descending into this world are made like this (through appearing to enter into the ultimate freedom - nirvāṇa, 涅槃) in order to deliver sentient beings. All of them are true and none of them are false.'"

The Bodhisattva practice

The name ‘bodhisattva’ is a compound word describing the duality of its essential nature:

- * **Bodhi** (菩, short for 菩提) refers to *awakening* to the transcendental nature of life’s purpose.
- * **Sattva** (薩, short for 薩埵) refers to a *being* endowed with sentient existence in this world.

In accepting the grace descending from the transcendental vows of the Buddha, bodhisattvas share in their nature because it entails a dedication of their very lives and all the treasure of merit they have attained in cultivating the noble path, ‘turning it all over’ (pariṇāmanā, 迴向) to life’s greater purpose, that is, for the benefit of all sentient beings. This is often expressed in the scriptures as ‘being without regard for their own lives or livelihood’ or ‘not being stingy with their own lives or livelihood’ (sva kāya jīviṭa nirapekṣa, 不自惜身命). This nature of devotion involves turning from an orientation based on the attainment of merit for oneself to one of offering it all up to others, giving it all away. This commitment originally made by the Buddha long ago in the past is then ever being renewed in the present by those bodhisattvas who accept and employ it to the very limit of their capacity. Examples of this transcendental nature of dedication abound in the scriptures on the greater vehicle (mahāyāna sūtras, 大乘經):

- * In The Longer Scripture on the Array of Adornments in the Land of Pure Bliss (Sukhāvātī Vyūha Sūtra), translated in Chinese as the Scripture on the Buddha’s Teaching About Infinite Life (Buddha Bhāṣita Amitāyus Sūtra, 佛說無量壽經), the monk ‘Treasury of Purpose’ (Dharmākara, 法藏) becomes the Buddha of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛) upon fulfilling forty-eight vows (See Appendix A for a translation of them).
- * The Bodhisattva ‘Wholly Worthy’ (Samantabhadra, 普賢) completely fulfills the grace of this Buddha’s spiritual life in the last chapter of the Scripture on the Great Garland of Universal Enlightenment (Mahā Vaipulya Buddha Avataṃsaka Sūtra, 大方廣佛華嚴經) through ten practice-fulfilling vows, reflecting one who has become fully grounded in all the virtues of the bodhisattvas (see Appendix C for a translation of this).

In the greater vehicle teachings of Buddhism, this dedication of merit (pariṇāmanā, 迴向) leads to the bodhisattva’s ten-fold grounding in the transcendental nature of life’s purpose (daśa bhūmi, 十地)^{4D} and the fulfillment of perfect enlightenment (samkyak sambodhi, 正等覺). In hearing of these great beings, it is evident that fulfillment of these vows requires a super human dedication far exceeding our capacity as sentient beings in this world. However:

- * One will awaken to a transcendental vision of the noble path and a reverence for those beings who have been able to sacrifice everything for the benefit of humanity.
- * One will reveal the reality of one’s own limitations as an afflicted being, instilling the conscience (the sense of shame and humility) that is a necessary foundation for breaking through the overwhelming karmic obstacles we face as afflicted sentient beings.
- * One will create the tension inherent in the dynamic between these two extremes of sentient existence and spiritual enlightenment that defines the existential nature of faith.

This way, the Pure Land practice is able to have efficacy for people of all spiritual capacities, from the great bodhisattvas fulfilling their work in delivering all sentient beings from suffering to those who are deeply mired in affliction and the consequences from their past evil actions.

The power of grace attained from this practice is largely subliminal for us, influencing our minds on a subconscious level. Just as the mercy and compassion of the Buddha forsakes no one, so the practice of Pure Land Buddhism provides an easier path that is accessible to all those aspiring to become free from the afflicted nature of life in this world and enter into the first level of grounding in joyfulness about the transcendental nature of life’s purpose (pramuditā bhūmi, 極喜地), the gateway into its ‘Land of Pure Bliss’ (Sukhāvātī, 極樂世界).

The Different Bodhisattvas

There are countless bodhisattvas named¹⁷ and described in greater vehicle scriptures (mahāyāna sūtras, 諸大乘經), personifying the merits and virtues realized by those in the community of faith (saṃgha, 僧) through the practice of doing the Buddhas' work and fulfilling their vows. Where the Buddha personifies the timeless vows made from the past and the grace of their descent into this world that is a consequence of their complete fulfillment, the bodhisattvas represent the cultivation of countless merits and virtues that lead to the deliverance of sentient beings (sattva, 有情 or 衆生) through the acceptance and employment of this grace, putting these vows into practice (caryā praṇidhāna, 行願) and fulfilling them over time.

- * *Through transcendental vision of the noble path* (darśana mārga, 見道) there is the bodhisattva's knowledge of the Buddha's timeless vows that goes beyond speculations of the discursive mind (nirvikalpa jñāna, 無分別智) and leads to attainment of the first level of grounding in joyfulness about the transcendental nature of life's purpose (pramuditā bhūmi, 極喜地).
- * *Through transcendental cultivation of the noble path* (bhāvanā mārga, 修道) there is the knowledge attained subsequently (pṛṣṭha labdha jñāna, 後得智) and nine more progressively deeper levels of grounding (bhūmi, 地)^{4D} in this transcendental nature (bhūta tathatā, 真如). Although there are countless bodhisattvas¹⁷ cited in the greater vehicle scriptures that represent the merits and virtues that fulfill the Buddhas' transcendental vows, in the Pure Land scriptures about the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyus, 無量壽) and Infinite Light (Amitābha, 無量光), there are only two bodhisattvas that appear in the Land of Pure Bliss as the Buddha's aides, reflecting the essence of the Buddha's dual nature:

1. *The Bodhisattva 'Beholding the Cries (Prayers) of This World'* (Avalokiteśvara, 觀世音) personifies the greatness of compassion (mahā karuṇa, 大悲) that is manifested in countless different forms, hearing the prayers of afflicted sentient beings in order to deliver them from suffering to the bliss of contentment. This reflects carrying out and fulfilling the original vows of compassion made by *The Enlightened Being of Infinite Life* (Amitāyus, 無量壽).
2. *The Bodhisattva 'Endowing (Sentient Beings) With Great Spiritual Strength'* (Mahā Sthāma Prāpta, 大勢至) personifies deliverance of the greatness of transcendental knowledge and discernment (mahā jñāna prajñā, 智慧), empowering sentient beings with a greater sense of purpose. This reflects carrying out and fulfilling the original vows to deliver these spiritual capacities that were made by *The Enlightened Being of Infinite Light* (Amitābha, 無量光).

These two also express the main currents of greater vehicle (mahāyāna, 大乘) Buddhism in India with the Bodhisattva 'Beholding the Cries of This World' (Avalokiteśvara, 觀世音) reflecting the emphasis on compassion found in the School on Engaged Meditation (Yogācāra, 瑜伽宗) while the Bodhisattva 'Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength' (Mahā Sthāma Prāpta, 大勢至) reflects the emphasis on the deliverance of transcendental discernment found in the Dialectical School (Madhyamaka, 中觀宗). These two are meant to summarize the merits and virtues found in all the great bodhisattvas and so only these two are mentioned. The essence of effective communication is found in brevity, conciseness and the limiting of excessive wording. Through only focusing on a single Buddha and two Bodhisattvas, Pure Land Buddhism endeavors to establish a single practice that encapsulates the essential nature of spiritual enlightenment without digressing into the existence of countless different Buddhas and bodhisattvas that reflect its countless merits and virtues.

The Pure Land teaching of Buddhism being for the latter days or end times

As already explained, Pure Land Buddhism (and Buddhism of the greater vehicle generally) is concerned with preserving the teachings of the Buddha and keeping them alive after his death in this world, when the world is full of corruption and there is no one in this world to lead and guide sentient beings. Three periods were identified explaining the gradual erosion of the Buddha's different teachings (and the efficacy of different Buddhist practices) over time.

- a. The true purpose (saddharma, 正法): During this period, the Buddha's teachings flourished in this world. Many were able to properly put them into practice and realize enlightenment.
- b. The imitation of the true purpose (saddharma pratikṣepa or saddharma pratirūpaka, 像法): During this period, the teachings gradually became more formalized and the connection to the Buddha's vow of dedication was weakened. Although many still practiced, few were able to do so properly and realize enlightenment.
- c. The demise of the true purpose (saddharma vipralopa, 末法): During this final period of strife, contention and false beliefs, the Buddha's teachings became corrupted and virtually no one could properly put them into practice or realize enlightenment.

There are various calculations for the length of each of these first two periods, five hundred years, a thousand years, etc., but the principle remains that the efficacy of the teachings and practices tends to erode over time, causing a need to revive the original transcendental vows of the Buddha's spiritual life (dharma kāya, 法身).

In the greater vehicle scriptures (mahāyāna sūtras, 大乘經) there are many references to the 'end times', when individuals, societies and even the land itself will prevent sentient beings from awakening to the transcendental nature of life's greater purpose through their own actions and only faith in the grace of the Buddha's spiritual life will have the power to deliver them.

There are said to be five kinds of corruption (pañca kaṣāyāḥ, 五濁) that prevail at these times:

1. The corruption of the age (kalpa kaṣāyā, 劫濁): This is a reference to an apocalyptic age when the earth itself (the 'land') will be undergoing great upheaval, dissolution and destruction. Actually it is not just the fact of the world's decline that is corrupting. More properly 'the corruption of the age' refers to the evils that proliferate at these end times of destruction when there is great desperation.
2. The corruption of society (sattva kaṣāyā, 眾生濁): Emerging societies tend to be more purely virtuous when they begin to form. However, when they disintegrate, the ten unwholesome acts¹⁸ between members of these societies become increasingly fierce as they break down.
3. The corruption of mental associations through false beliefs (dṛṣṭi kaṣāyā, 見濁): This refers to attachment to extremes of nihilism and eternalism and self-serving beliefs in which the evils committed by oneself are rationalized into virtues while those of others are not.
4. The corruption of feelings through emotional disturbances (kleśa kaṣāyā, 煩惱濁): When worlds and societies fall apart, sentient beings have more evil dispositions and family troubles, facing all those before them with dispositions of greed, hatred and selfish disinterest.
5. The corruption of lifespans (āyu kaṣāyā, 命濁): Because of the corruption from false beliefs and emotional disturbances, many resort to killing and harming one another without any mercy or compassion, causing there to be great suffering and the shortening of lifespans.

With the whole environment falling apart like this, there is no opportunity for a Buddha to appear in the world or for sentient beings to realize spiritual enlightenment through their own efforts. It is at these times that the Pure Land teachings emphasizing faith in the grace of a higher power are said to be the most efficacious.

The very end of life & being reconciled with death

Another reason for the appeal of Pure Land Buddhism has been its ability to address the ultimate existential crisis common to all sentient beings. It is one thing to accept letting go of one's self-centered existence and turning it over to the grace of the transcendental nature of life's purpose found in the Buddha's spiritual life on an intellectual or even intuitive level and quite another to do so on the innate level that is rooted in the very survival instinct of the subconscious mind. With the approach of death and the extinction of one's own life there is submission to the ultimate 'other power'. In fording the stream of life and death and being delivered to the other shore, there is crossing the infinite chasm between zero and one, the abyss of emptiness and impermanence inherent in self-centered existence and the aspiration for spiritual rebirth in an eternal life. Through bridging this seemingly irreconcilable gap, the grace of the Buddha's spiritual life transcends death, reveals the true nature of time⁶ and life's purpose and brings comfort to those suffering this ultimate nature of affliction.

There are many accounts of a transcendental spiritual experience at the moment of death being revealed through observing Pure Land practices. The Scripture About Meditation on the Enlightened Being 'Of Infinite Life' (Amitāyur Dhyāna Sūtra, 觀無量壽佛經) and Shāndào's commentary on it describe symbolic forms of these dream-like experiences, such as the Buddha, the bodhisattvas and the other noble beings welcoming and praising one with out-stretched hands, being led into the Pure Land, rejoicing, being spiritually reborn in a lotus bud that then opens up, being freed from karmas, seeing the light, hearing the teachings about the transcendental nature of life's purpose and teaching of it to others, serving the Buddhas, etc. Different images arise for those with different levels of spiritual capacity. Another theme expressed by Shāndào was that of 'going back home' (歸去來),¹⁹ suggesting that upon being freed from this world of suffering and affliction there is a feeling of comfort and familiarity upon going back to the place one came from, re-entering the state of intermediate existence (antarā bhava, 中有) between death and spiritual rebirth (a period traditionally and symbolically said to last up to forty-nine days). 'On Emancipation From the Intermediate State Through Hearing' (Bardo Thodol), a work attributed to Padmasambhava and popularly known as The Tibetan Book of the Dead, similarly speaks of meeting the Buddha of Infinite Life & Light (in Sanskrit Amitāyus & Amitābha, in Tibetan tshe.dpag.med & od.dpag.med) upon entering into this intermediate state (in Tibetan called the 'bardo'). The goal is the spiritual restoration of the subconscious store of memory (ālaya vijñāna, 藏識) into the transcendental knowledge that is a perfect mirror of life's greater purpose (mahā ādarśa jñāna, 大圓鏡智) and then its transference (in Sanskrit 'saṃkrānti', 移轉, in Tibetan 'phowa', 頗瓦) through this intermediate state. This entails the ultimate existential experience of death and rebirth, giving up one's own life for another. At death, the energy of the mind is said to be concentrated in this memory and then go two ways. The dross from the afflicted mind exits through the nine orifices of the body (the eyes, ears, nostrils, mouth, genitals & anus) while the unafflicted nature of its pure spirit withdraws from the extremities and ascends the spine to the tenth gateway, the crown of the head, also called the anterior fontanelle (uṣṇīṣa, 頂上), directly into the Pure Land (buddha kṣetra, 佛土) chosen, with the most accessible generally deemed to be the Land of Pure Bliss (Sukhāvatī, 極樂國土). It is said that this entry can only be successfully undertaken by one who has attained a transcendental vision of the noble path, that is, (the first level of) grounding in the greater nature of life's purpose. Through accomplishing this, some of the customary experiences occurring at death are said to be by-passed.

It is also said that this transformation of (impermanent) consciousness (vijñāna, 識) into (enduring) transcendental knowledge (jñāna, 智) and mindful and purposeful transference (saṃkrānti, 移轉) can be aided by spiritual guides on the behalf of the dying through special ritual practices. Many Pure Land masters prescribed death bed rites preparing one for the moment of facing the infinite, including invocation of the Buddha's name with mindfulness while facing westward. In his 'Effective Methods for Attaining the Resolve of Meditation Through Mindfulness on the Ocean of Signs Descending from the Buddha of Infinite Life' (觀念阿彌陀佛相海三昧功德法門 or 觀念法門), Shàndào prescribed the following:

"Whether or not one is sick, as one approaches death (kāla kṛyāṃ karamāṇaḥ, 欲命終時) one should wholly depend on the meditative resolve attained through keeping the enlightened being in mind (buddha anusmṛti samādhi, 念佛三昧). Facing westward and being mindful of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛), (after confession and repentance) one should remain singly focused with one's body and mind maintaining perfect composure (samāhita, 正當身心). With the sound of one's voice being in accord with this state of composure, one should keep repeating the name of this Buddha without interruption, with one's mental resolve ever aspiring to be welcomed by the Buddha and the noble assembly, reborn in the Pure Land and seated on a lotus pedestal there.

"If those envisioning this are sick, they should tell the ones attending them about this vision, who should then make a record of their account. If those who are sick cannot speak, those attending them should ask them various questions about their visions. If it is determined that they are having visions with unwholesome signs, the attendant should invoke the Buddha's name for them, confessing and repenting on their behalf to help rid them of the consequences resulting from evil actions (akuśala karma, 不善業) that have been committed in the past.

"If these consequences are eliminated and the dying then see themselves seated on a lotus pedestal with the noble assembly before them in response to the invocations on their behalf, it should be recorded as previously noted.

"If the dying person's family comes to visit, those who have been drinking alcohol or eating meat or pungent foods such as leeks, garlic and onions should not be allowed to enter into the room. If they are allowed to enter, they should not sit beside this person, as the demonic spirits emanating from their strong aromas could cause the dying to lose a proper state of mindfulness and, upon dying, they could fall into one of the three evil paths.

"Those who carry out these prayers well on behalf of the sick and retain the teachings of the Buddha will similarly cause the conditions for seeing this enlightened being. With the Buddha appearing before them, in addition to having nursed the sick they will have themselves also entered into the place of spiritual awakening (bodhi maṇḍa, 道場)."

There is a point worth reiterating here. Before it was explained that it is one thing to accept letting go of one's self-centered existence and turning it over to the grace of the transcendental nature of life's purpose on an intellectual or even intuitive level and quite another to do so on the level that is innately rooted in the very survival instinct of the subconscious mind. To really do so on this innate level is not just to vanquish the devil by being reconciled with death but to also forever uproot the source of the emotional disturbances that rise up on the speculative level of the conscious mind in dealing with the vicissitudes faced by sentient beings in this world. In fact, on this deeper level, one's whole life is really a preparation for one's inevitable demise, the denouement of one's life story when all is revealed at the end.

The Primary Pure Land Scriptures

Although many greater vehicle scriptures espouse the principles of Pure Land Buddhism, there are four in particular that form the foundation for the specific practice of worshipping the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛) and attaining spiritual rebirth in the Land of Pure Bliss (Sukhāvatī, 極樂世界).

1. The Scripture on the Resolve of Meditation in Which the Buddhas All Stand Up Before One (Pratyutpanna Samādhi Sūtra, 般舟三昧經) was translated into Chinese by the Kushan Buddhist monk Lokakṣema (支婁迦讖) around 179 CE and was among the earliest Buddhist scriptures translated into Chinese.²⁰ The setting is the Bamboo Grove (Veṇuvana, 竹林) at Rājagṛha, the capital of Maghada where the Buddha Śākyamuni addressed this teaching to the Bodhisattva ‘Guardian of Blessings’ (Bhadrapāla, 毘陀和). Ajātaśatru was the king at this time, evidencing that it was late in the Buddha’s lifetime, when it is said he taught the scriptures about the greater vehicle doctrines. It describes attaining a resolve of meditation (samādhi, 三昧) in which all the Buddhas are seen standing before one (pratyutpanna buddha saṃmukha avasthita, 現在諸佛悉在前立). This involves first focusing all of one’s thoughts, words and deeds on the Buddha of Infinite Light & Life (Amita, 阿彌陀) in the world of ‘Sublime Devotion’ (Sumati, 須摩提), another name for the ‘Land of Pure Bliss’ (Sukhāvatī, 極樂), through cultivating mindfulness of this Buddha (buddha anusmṛti, 念佛) in the subjective realm of purpose (dharma upasthāna, 法處) without any attachments in the first three subjective realms of mental associations (citta upasthāna, 心處), emotional feelings (vedanā upasthāna, 受處) & physical desires (kāya upasthāna, 身處).²¹ After first seeing the Buddha of Infinite Life & Light, all the countless Buddhas in the sphere of life’s transcendental purpose (dharma dhātu, 法界) will be revealed before one. The scripture then offers similes for the nature of the mind in these four subjective realms during meditation and finally encourages its practice and promotion. A summary of the second chapter of this scripture ‘On the Practice’ is found in Appendix H.
2. The Longer Scripture on the Array of Adornments Found in the Land of Pure Bliss (Sukhāvatī Vyūha Sūtra) was translated into Chinese several times and there are five versions extant. The first was by Lokakṣema (支婁迦讖) in c. 179 as ‘On the Infinitely Pure Universal Enlightenment’ (佛說無量清淨平等覺經) and the second by Zhīqiān (支謙) as ‘On the Deliverance of Humanity Through the Perfectly Enlightened Being of Infinite Life’ (佛說阿彌陀三耶三佛薩樓佛檀過度人道經). However the third translation as ‘On the Infinite Life’ (Amitāyus Sūtra, 佛說無量壽經) is the one customarily used. This one is traditionally attributed to Saṅghavarman (康僧鎧) c. 252 but many scholars now believe it was made by Buddhahadra (佛陀跋陀羅) c. 421. The setting is Vulture’s Peak (Gṛdhrakūṭa, 耆闍崛山) in Rājagṛha where he addressed this teaching to Ānanda, his cousin and personal attendant.
 - * First there is a narrative on the origin (jātaka, 本生) of the Buddha of Infinite Life & Light that begins by listing the names of fifty-three Buddhas of the past, ending with the Buddha ‘Lord & Master of This World’ (Lokeśvara Rāja, 世自在王). After hearing this Buddha teach about the true nature of life’s purpose, a king was inspired to attain the supreme enlightenment. Giving up his throne and all his worldly possessions, he became the monk ‘Treasury of Purpose’ (Dharmākara, 法藏). After the Buddha gave him a transcendental vision of the countless worlds of enlightenment, the monk made forty-eight vows to dedicate his life to delivering sentient beings (see Appendix A). Through the many practices he undertook to fulfill these vows as a bodhisattva, he

created the Land of Pure Bliss (Sukhāvātī, 極樂世界). Upon attaining enlightenment as the Buddha of Infinite Life & Light (Amitāyus Buddha, 阿彌陀佛) and entering into nirvāṇa, this Buddha remained in this Pure Land to deliver all sentient beings who faithfully accepted and called on him by name. After explaining this Buddha's dual name (Infinite Life & Light), the many adornments of this land are described as well as:

- * How sentient beings are reborn there and their different capacities to do so
- * How other bodhisattvas come to visit this land
- * The two bodhisattvas of this land and their virtues: the Bodhisattva 'Beholding the Cries of This World' (Avalokiteśvara, 觀世音菩薩) & the Bodhisattva 'Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength' (Mahā Sthāma Prāpta, 大勢至菩薩)
- * Having finished the narrative to Ānanda, Śākyamuni then addressed the Bodhisattva Maitreya¹⁷ as well as those among humanity and the heavens of meditation on:
 - * The nature of evil actions and their consequences
 - * The encouragement of virtue and discouragement of evil
 - * The two kinds of spiritual rebirth: #1 sudden rebirth through pure faith in the power of the Buddha's grace, and #2 gradual rebirth through one's own power of cultivation and subject to doubts, as an embryo that still needs to gestate in a womb (in this scripture) or as a lotus bud aspiring to open (in The Meditation Sūtra)
 - * The encouraging of faith and nurturing of the embryonic nature of enlightenment
 - * Bodhisattvas from other Pure Lands visiting the Land of Pure Bliss
 - * Encouragement to accept and promote this scripture

3. The Shorter Scripture on the Array of Adornments in the Land of Pure Bliss

(Sukhāvātī Vyūha Sūtra) was first translated by Kumārajīva (鳩摩羅什) in 402²² as 'On the Buddha of Infinite Life & Light' (Buddha Bhāṣita Amitāyus Sūtra, 佛說阿彌陀經) and then by Xuánzàng (玄奘) in 650 as 'In Praise of the Buddha in the Pure Land' (稱讚淨土佛攝受經). This scripture is primarily used for recitation due to its brevity and conciseness. The earlier translation is the preferred edition for this purpose due to Kumārajīva's literary eloquence. The setting for this scripture is Prince Jeta's Grove in Śrāvastī, a place the Buddha often visited during the rainy seasons and where he is said to have performed two miracles:

- a. The two-fold miracle (yamaka prātihārya, 雙神變): Appearing in the sky, with radiating flames of light rising up into the heavens and water raining down into the earth
- b. The great miracle (mahā prātihārya, 大神變): Multiplication of the one Buddha into many. Here, the Buddha addressed his chief disciple Śāriputra, explaining:
 - * The name 'World of Pure Bliss' (Sukhāvātī, 極樂世界)
 - * The many wondrous adornments to be found in this land
 - * The dual name of its Buddha 'Infinite Light' & 'Infinite Life', reflecting the two-fold miracle of light and rain, that is, the ascent of discernment and descent of compassion
 - * How long it has been since this Buddha attained enlightenment
 - * Those found in this land; truly worthy beings on the noble path (arhats, 阿羅漢) and bodhisattvas who will never again retreat from their purpose (avinivartaniya, 不退轉)
 - * How one may attain spiritual rebirth in this land upon leaving this world - through the resolve of keeping the Buddha's name in mind (buddha anusmṛti samādhi, 念佛三昧)
 - * The many Buddhas found in all different directions (reflecting the great miracle of the multiplication of one Buddha into many) who praise the Buddha of Infinite Life & Light. After an exhortation to faith, the Buddha Śākyamuni praises all these Buddhas who praise the Buddha of Infinite Light & Life. They in turn praise Śākyamuni for teaching of this faith to those who are in this world where there are the five kinds of corruption.

4. The Scripture About Meditation on the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha Dhyāna Sūtra, 觀無量壽佛經) was translated by Kālayaśas (疆良耶舍) c. 424-442. Shāndào's commentary on this scripture is the main subject of this work. Unlike the other scriptures here, there is no extant Sanskrit or Tibetan edition, leading many to believe this scripture was apocryphal (first composed in Chinese or a central Asian language). The Sanskrit title used is a reverse translation - it also could be rendered as 'Mindfulness of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life' (Amitāyur Buddha Anusmṛti Sūtra) or 'Visualization of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life' (Amitāyur Buddha Darśana Sūtra). The setting for this scripture is two sites in Rājagṛha, the capital of Maghada - the king's castle (representing the afflicted world) and Vulture's Peak (Gṛdhra Kūṭa, 耆闍崛山), the Buddha's unafflicted sphere high above it (the timeless, transcendental sphere beyond this world). The narrative begins with news that Bimbisāra, the king of Magadha, has been overthrown and imprisoned by his son Ajātaśatru who has followed the evil counsel of his associate, the evil monk Devadatta. Although the son is waiting for his father to starve to death in the dungeon, it turns out that the father's consort Vaidehī (the mother of the usurper Ajātaśatru) has been smuggling food and drink to his cell during conjugal visits and the Buddha has been dispatching two of his disciples to the old king to give him comfort and resolve. Upon learning of this, the son becomes enraged and almost kills his own mother. After being warned by his councilors, he thinks better of this and imprisons her instead. The mother Vaidehī, having lost all hope, then earnestly prays that the Buddha show her a way to find a refuge from the evils of this world so that she may become pure of affliction. In response, the Buddha magically appears with two of his disciples (Mahā Maudgalyāyana & Ānanda) to comfort her and provide her with a transcendental vision of all the Pure Lands of the ten directions so she may choose one as a refuge. Vaidehī chooses the western World of Pure Bliss (Sukhāvatī, 極樂世界), the site of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛) and asks how she may be reborn into this land.

- * After providing the former king with a vision that enables him to accept the end of his life with grace, the Buddha teaches Vaidehī about the kinds of virtuous conduct that will enable her to become pure of affliction.
- * He then explains to her that, although her mind is weak and she lacks the divine eye of meditation attained through rigorous discipline, through the power of their grace the Buddhas have skillful methods to enable those like her to see this Pure Land.
- * After seeing this Pure Land through the power of the Buddha's grace, Vaidehī asks how other sentient beings tormented by the sufferings that arise from corruption, evil and lack of virtue can be able to see the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life and this World of Pure Bliss in the future, after the Buddha's passing.

The Buddha then describes sixteen meditations through which this vision can be attained.

- * The first is addressed only to Vaidehī (who did not yet have any powers of mental resolve) while the rest are addressed to both her and the Buddha's disciple Ānanda (so he could teach of them to others in the future)
- * The first thirteen involve the virtues of mental resolve (samādhi, 定) found in meditation while the last three involve the virtues of mental dispersion (vikṣipta, 散) found in the unafflicted conduct (thoughts, words & deeds) of those of different spiritual capacities.
- * The specifics of these sixteen meditations will be covered in detail later in the text.

Having heard the Buddha's words, Vaidehī and her attendants rejoice and aspire to attain enlightenment. The Buddha then encourages Ānanda to remember this teaching, ever keep the name of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛) in mind and teach of it to others, which he does.

The development of Pure Land Buddhism in Greater India

The idea of a distinction between the historical life (rūpa kāya, 色身) of the Buddha Śākyamuni who was born in this world, freed sentient beings from their afflictions, awakened them to a higher sense of life's purpose and then perished, and the Buddha's spiritual life (dharma kāya, 法身) that transcends death and continues to teach them, is as old as Buddhism itself.¹⁰

- * As explained before, at the first council at Rājagṛha held immediately after the Buddha Śākyamuni's death (fifth century BCE), it was realized that his teachings were brought back to life through continued remembrance and recitation of his words. From the beginning it was also accepted that there were other Buddhas in the past and will be more in the future.
- * At the second council held at Vaiśālī a hundred years after the Buddha's death, there was a schism in the ordained community over monastic rules of conduct. Over time, the more liberal branch known as the 'Majority' or 'Greater Community' (Mahā Saṃghika, 大衆部) developed many of the ideas that would characterize 'greater vehicle' (mahāyāna, 大乘) Buddhism. These included such ideas as the transcendental nature of the Buddha's spiritual life (dharma kāya, 法身), a field or 'land' of cultivation (buddha kṣetra, 佛土), an embryonic nature of enlightenment (tathāgata garbha, 如來藏), the primacy of the bodhisattva ideal (one awakening to a higher sense of purpose) over that of the arhat (one freed from all afflictions), the nature of emptiness (śūnyatā, 空) and Maitreya¹⁷ as a Buddha of the future.
- * At the beginning of the common era, as the greater vehicle teachings were first revealed in writing, many different names began to be used to invoke, visualize and remember this transcendental Buddha, for the first time accompanied by anthropomorphic imagery.²³ In chapter nine 'On the Easier Practice' (Sukha Caryā, 易行) of his 'Discourse About the Scripture on the Ten Levels of Grounding' (Daśa Bhūmika Vibhāṣā Śāstra, 十住毘婆沙論), Nāgārjuna (龍樹), the second century CE founder of the Dialectical School (Madhyamaka), explained the essential nature of what became Pure Land Buddhism, distinguishing between the more difficult path of meditation on the nature of purpose and easier path of faith, providing instruction on worship, invocation and meditation on the different names of the Buddha and bodhisattvas. In this discourse he suggested the special efficacy of focusing on worship of the Buddha of Infinite Light & Life as a simplified method of practice that can reach even those of weak spiritual capacity. See Appendix F for a translation of this.
- * Greater Vehicle Buddhism and Pure Land Buddhism in particular thrived in the Kushan Empire (貴霜)²³ based in Puruṣapura (now Peshawar in Pakistan), especially during the reigns of kings Kaniṣka and Huviṣka (c. 127-190 CE). This empire dominated north India and central Asia into the fourth century CE. Largely responsible for establishing what later became known as the Silk Road, it facilitated the promotion of Buddhism through Central Asia. It was at this time that the Buddha of Infinite Life & Light as a representation of the transcendental Buddha especially took hold. This was also the period during which Buddhism was first introduced to China by Kushan monks like Lokakṣema, who translated many scriptures, including several on the Pure Land practice c. 179 CE. Those on the Buddha of Infinite Life & Light were therefore among the earliest translated into Chinese.
- * With the arising of the School on Engaged Meditation (Yogācāra) in the fourth century, Pure Land Buddhism reached its full development in India as expressed in the Commentary About the Scripture on the Array of Adornments in the Land of Pure Bliss (Sukhāvātī Vyūha Upadeśa), attributed to Vasubandhu. This was translated into Chinese by Bodhiruci as The Commentary About the Scripture on the Infinite Life (Amitāyus Sūtra Upadeśa, 無量壽經優波提舍). A full translation of this Discourse is found in Appendix G.

According to Vasubandhu's discourse, the purpose of the Pure Land practice is to produce an enduring observation of the nature of life's purpose that neither arises nor perishes (anutpattika dharma kṣānti, 無生法忍) and so provide entry into the first level of grounding in joyfulness (pramuditā bhūmi, 極喜地) about this transcendental nature. This is a vision of the noble path (darśana mārga, 見道) endowed with a knowledge of this sublime nature that is beyond any speculations (nirvikalpa jñāna, 無分別智). This first level of grounding is a prerequisite to realizing all ten levels (daśa bhūmi, 十地)^{4D} and never retreating in doing the work of the bodhisattvas that fulfills the Buddha's transcendental vows.

- * In India it was suggested that Pure Land Buddhism was for those of lesser spiritual capacity on the noble path who need the help of another, higher power because they are incapable of enduring the rigors of the bodhisattva path through the power of their own efforts. While it is true that entry into this Pure Land of transcendental meditation is a first step in getting beyond the afflictions of self-centered existence in order to do the work of the bodhisattvas in delivering sentient beings into the bliss of contentment and a higher sense of purpose, it is a prerequisite for the bodhisattva path, a necessary means for allowing this other, higher power of grace found in the transcendental nature of life's purpose to work through one's own life in accomplishing this work. This work is not accomplished through one's own efforts alone, nor is it accomplished without one's own efforts. Through the dialectical process of the middle way, there is a blending of the distinctions between one's own powers and this other, greater power. This dialectical process of progress on the noble path was elaborated in 'The Scripture on the Whole Arena of Life's Purpose' (Gaṇḍa Vyūha), which later became the final chapter 'On Entering Into the Sphere of Purpose' (Dharma Dhātu Praveśa, 入法界) in The Scripture on the Great Garland of Universal Enlightenment (Mahā Vaipulya Buddha Avataṃsaka Sūtra, 大方廣佛華嚴經). It is the story of a young prince (kumara, 童子) named 'Of Sublime Wealth' (Sudhana, 善財) who embarks on a great spiritual journey. Guided by the Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī (who personified deliverance of the transcendental discernment of life's purpose), he encounters fifty-two good spiritual friends (kalyāṇa mitra, 善知識) who teach him the different practices that will lead to attainment of the supreme enlightenment (with Mañjuśrī, there are fifty-three friends altogether).
 - * *The first of these fifty-two friends, the Monk 'Cloud of Virtue' (Meghaśrī, 功德雲), teaches Sudhana about the Pure Land practice, on attaining 'the resolve of meditation that keeps the Buddha in mind' (buddha anusmṛti samādhi, 念佛三昧) and enables one to enter into the state of joyfulness, the first level of grounding in the transcendental nature of life's purpose (pramuditā bhūmi, 極喜地), called elsewhere 'The Land of Pure Bliss' (Sukhāvatī, 極樂世界). This is the initial acceptance of the grace descending from the transcendental vows of the Buddha's spiritual life through an act of faith.*
 - * *The last of these fifty-two, the Bodhisattva 'Wholly Worthy' (Samantabhadra, 普賢) represents the final, complete fulfillment of all the different levels of grounding (bhūmi, 地) in this transcendental nature of life's purpose on the bodhisattva path, beyond all the dualities of self and other. This is the full employment of this grace by putting this faith into practice through vows that are the ultimate fulfillment of this grace.*
- These first and last components are inseparable and complementary aspects of one another. Translations of these two parts of the chapter are found in Appendices C & D, respectively.
- * As the School on Engaged Meditation matured in the late seventh & early eighth centuries, it incorporated an elaborate array of ritual (Tantric) practices found in Hindu traditions and the simplicity of Pure Land Buddhism became largely subsumed by these elements.

The development of Pure Land Buddhism in China

After the initial phase of translating Pure Land scriptures into Chinese, there was a period of making commentaries on them. There were three stages in this interpretative period.

1. Prominent interpreters before Shàndǎo
2. The interpretation of Shàndǎo (613-681)
3. Prominent interpreters after Shàndǎo

1. Prominent interpreters before Shàndǎo

- a. *Huìyuǎn* (慧遠, 336-416) *of Mount Lú* (Lú Shān, 廬山): After being converted to Buddhism by the renowned monk Dào'ān (道安), Huìyuǎn established the Monastery of the Eastern Forest (Dōnglín Sì, 東林寺) in 402 on Mount Lú in southeast China. This monastery drew prominent monks and lay people alike, becoming the first school committed to the Pure Land practice in China, using the Scriptures on the Land of Pure Bliss (Sukhāvatī Vyūha Sūtra) as well as the methodology explained in The Scripture on the Resolve of Meditation in Which the Buddhas All Stand Up Before One (Pratyutpanna Samādhi Sūtra, 般舟三昧經). This revered monastery and temple complex still exists today. Huìyuǎn is also noted for composing an essay entitled On Why Monks Do Not Worship Kings (沙門不敬王者論) and his correspondence with the renowned translator Kumārajīva, which is still extant.²²
- b. *Tánluán* (曇鸞, 476–542): After meeting the renowned translator Bodhiruci, Tánluán renounced Daoism and embraced Buddhism. In 529 he composed an exegesis about Bodhiruci's translation of Vasubandhu's Commentary on the Longer Scripture About Infinite Life (Sukhāvatī Vyūha Upadeśa or Amitāyus Sūtra Upadeśa, 無量壽經優波提舍) & Verse Declaring the Vow For Spiritual Rebirth (願生偈), which laid out a number of principles that would forever define Pure Land Buddhism in East Asia, including:
 1. Five reasons why other practices are too difficult in the latter days, when there is no Buddha in the world, which refers to the distinction of easy & difficult practices from chapter nine in Nāgārjuna's Discourse About the Scripture on the Ten Levels of Grounding (Daśa Bhūmika Vibhāṣā Śāstra, 十住毘婆沙論) (translated as Appendix F):
 - a. Non-Buddhists (tīrthikas, 外道) attached to the external aspects of cultivating virtue are confused about the nature of emptiness in the bodhisattva's purpose.
 - b. Students of life's purpose (śrāvakas, 聲聞) who are excessively oriented toward attaining their own spiritual benefits lack the necessary mercy and compassion.
 - c. Those who commit evil acts with indifference to their consequences do harm to the virtues of others.
 - d. Attachments to delusions about the consequences of one's own virtuous actions are able to damage the nobility of selfless (saintly) conduct (brahma caryā, 梵行).
 - e. By only relying on one's own powers one does not accept and embrace the support from the other, higher power of grace.
 2. The proper mental resolve (samyak samādhi, 正定) produced during moments of recalling the name of the Buddha eliminates the obstacles (āvaraṇa, 障) caused by actions with evil consequences (akuśala karma, 不善業). The idea of ten such moments of remembrance without interruption is a reference to the cultivation of continuous mental resolve over moments in time, building up the strength of this resolve. 'Ten consecutive moments' serves as a metaphor for the perfection of this uninterrupted retention.

3. Proper praise of the Buddha's name must be accompanied by faith in the transcendental nature of its purpose. Tánluán described this faith (śraddhā, 信) as:
 - a. A sincerity (prasāda, 淳心) that is always clear, without any opacity
 - b. A singleness of mind (ekagrata, 一心) that is wholehearted, without uncertainty
 - c. A continuity (saṃtati, 相續心) that is never interrupted by other thoughts
 Invoking the Buddha's name will not have efficacy without these qualities of faith.
4. 'Rebirth' into the Pure Land is entry into the transcendental nature of life's purpose in which there is really neither birth (arising) nor death (perishing).
5. With entry into the Land of Pure Bliss there is an enduring observation of this nature that neither arises nor perishes (anutpattika dharma kṣānti, 無生法忍). This is also called 'transcendental vision of the noble path' (darśana mārga, 見道), 'knowledge of the nature of life's purpose that is beyond any speculations about its distinctions' (nirvikalpa jñāna, 無分別) and 'grounding in joyfulness about the transcendental nature of this purpose' (pramuditā bhūmi, 歡喜地).
6. Although there are different grades of spiritual capacity for entering into the Land of Pure Bliss, once one is reborn there are no longer any such distinctions.
 This refers to Vasubandhu's verse that says 'no one is reborn (into the Pure Land) effeminate,²⁴ of diminished capacity or on the lesser track of just aspiring to freedom from affliction on the individual level.' He was referring here to the thirty-fifth of the forty-eight vows in this Longer Scripture. The enumeration of nine different grades of capacity is found in The Scripture About Meditation on the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha Dhyāna Sūtra, 佛說觀無量壽佛經)
7. The Pure Land is the timeless, transcendental sphere of life's purpose (dharma dhātu, 法界), the ultimate reality (paramārtha satya, 第一義諦) that is pure of any affliction, unlike the three-fold sphere of sentient existence (trayo dhātavaḥ, 三界)²⁵ that is found in the conventional reality of this world (loka saṃvṛti satya, 世俗諦).
8. There are two levels of the spiritual life (dharma kāya, 法身)
 - a. The transcendental nature of the spiritual life (dharmatā dharma kāya, 法性法身) is the very essence of this life (svabhāvika kāya, 實相身) that is unconditional and only found in its timeless and formless grace (sambhoga kāya, 報身).
 - b. The ways & means of the spiritual life (upāya dharma kāya, 方便法身) refers to its actual substance (dravya kāya, 為物身) that is conditional. Here there are the causes and conditions that arise and perish that are found in its manifestations (nirmāṇa kāya, 應化身) responding to the needs of sentient beings here and now. These two are said to be different but really inseparable.
9. There are two complementary aspects in the dedication of one's life and all of the treasure of merit one has attained, that is, in 'turning it all over' (pariṇāmanā, 迴向) for the benefit of sentient beings:
 - a. Ascending, or going forth into the Pure Land (gata pariṇāmanam, 往相迴向) is a dedication to attain complete freedom (nirvāṇa, 涅槃) from affliction while delivering all sentient beings in this world to the limit of one's human capacity.
 - b. Descending, or returning from the Pure Land (pratyāgata pariṇāmanam, 還相迴向): Upon being reborn from this transcendental sphere, there is a dedication to returning back to the mortal realm of life and death, endowed with the power of grace from the Buddha's original vow to transcend death and continue to deliver all sentient beings to the other shore of spiritual freedom.

10. *Dependence on another, higher power* (paratantra, 依他力) is relying on and taking refuge in the original vows of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life. Tánluán especially singled out three of this Buddha's forty-eight original vows in this regard:
 - a. The eighteenth vow, which promises spiritual rebirth in the Land of Pure Bliss to those sentient beings who aspire to it with faithful and contented hearts while calling on the Buddha's name up to ten times without interruption.
 - b. The eleventh vow, which promises those who are reborn in the Land of Pure Bliss will abide in a perfectly collected state of mental and physical resolve (samāhita, 定聚) and definitely be delivered into freedom from affliction.
 - c. The twenty-second vow, which promises those who are reborn into the Land of Pure Bliss will suddenly transcend all the preliminary stages of the bodhisattva practice and, in a single lifetime, attain all the virtues cultivated by the vows of Bodhisattva 'Wholly Worthy' (Samantabhadra, 普賢) that would otherwise entail three rounds of countless lifetimes to cultivate.⁷

In his commentary, Tánluán also made a distinction between relying on one's own power and putting trust in another, higher power (paratantra, 依他力) by saying:

"To illustrate dependence on one's own power (svatantra, 依自在力):

Out of fear of the consequences from following the three roads of evil, one accepts and retains a moral commitment (śīla, 戒) to virtue and is able to cultivate the resolve of meditation (dhyāna samādhi, 禪定). Through this resolve one cultivates the powers of spiritual penetration (abhijñā, 神通).²⁶ Through the powers of spiritual penetration there is the ability to travel throughout the four continents found under heaven (cātur dvīpa, 四天下)²⁷ and deliver sentient beings. Like this, there are those things that are attained through one's own powers.

To illustrate the difference between this and reliance on another, higher power:

An ordinary person riding a donkey does not move very fast, but the chariot of a wheel-turning king soars through space, traveling quickly throughout the four continents under heaven without any difficulties. Like this, there is that said to be attained through another, higher power."

- c. *After Tánluán and before Shàndǎo*, there was a gradual evolution of thought about #1 the nature of the Buddha's three-fold spiritual life, #2 the nature of the Pure Land & #3 the different capacities for attaining rebirth there, evidenced from the commentaries composed by five prominent masters of Pure Land Buddhism. Each of these teachers built on the ideas of their predecessors, producing its distinctive East Asian character.²⁸
 1. *Huìyuǎn* (慧遠, 523-592) *from the Monastery 'Of Pure Reflection'* (Jìngyǐng Sì, 淨影寺) near Cháng'ān (長安) first trained in the 'Northern School' on Vasubandhu's Commentary About the Scripture on the Levels of Grounding in the Transcendental Nature (Dì Lùn Zōng, 地論宗), an early Chinese School on Engaged Meditation (Yogācāra, 瑜伽宗) led by Huiguāng (慧光, 468-537). He also likely was trained in Paramārtha's Yogācāra School on Asaṅga's Summary of the Greater Vehicle Doctrine (Shè Lùn Zōng, 攝論宗) as well. In addition to a number of other works, Huìyuǎn wrote a Commentary About The Longer Scripture on Infinite Life (無量壽經義疏), but it was his Commentary on the Scripture About Meditation on the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (觀無量壽經義疏) that was especially influential. He should not be confused with the earlier Huìyuǎn of Mount Lú (慧遠, 336-416) discussed before.

2. *Zhìyǐ* (智顗, 538–597) studied under Paramārtha and later founded the first truly indigenous Chinese school of Buddhism, the Tiantāi School based on the Lotus Sūtra that synthesized the ideas from the Dialectical (Madhyamaka) and Engaged Meditation (Yogācāra) Schools. Along with his definitive commentaries on The Lotus Sūtra, among his many works were commentaries about The Shorter Scripture on the Buddha of Infinite Life (阿彌陀經義記) and The Scripture About Meditation on the Buddha of Infinite Life (觀無量壽佛經疏) and A Five-Fold Methodology for Practicing Remembrance of the Buddha (五方便念佛門). In addition to these, in his magnum opus, The Greatness of Introspection With Stillness of Mind (Mó Hē Zhǐ Guān, 摩訶止觀), Zhìyǐ summarized the Pure Land practice found in The Scripture on the Resolve of Meditation in Which the Buddhas All Stand Up Before One (Pratyutpanna Samādhi Sūtra, 般舟三昧經), establishing it as one of his four primary meditation practices. A translation of Zhìyǐ's summary is found in Appendix I.
3. *Jízàng* (吉藏, 549–623) was a leading proponent of the Chinese Dialectical School (Madhyamaka, 三論宗). In addition to commentaries on the main scriptures and discourses of that school and lengthy commentaries on the Lotus and Vimalakīrti Sūtras, among his many works were commentaries about The Longer Scripture on the Buddha of Infinite Life (無量壽經義疏) and The Scripture About Meditation on the Buddha of Infinite Life (觀無量壽經義疏).
4. *Dào chuò* (道綽, 562–645) was a scholar of The Scripture on the Ultimately Great Freedom (Mahā Parinirvāṇa Sūtra, 大般涅槃經) who became a leading light of Pure Land Buddhism after studying the teachings of Tánluán. Making a distinction between the noble path (the monastic practice of spiritual cultivation) and the path to the Pure Land (open to all and relying on the Buddha's grace), he stressed that salvation in the latter days (saddharma vipralopa, 末法) was open to all (not just those on the noble path) but only possible through confession, repentance and accepting the grace of compassion from the Buddha's transcendent vows with faith. He lectured often on The Scripture About Meditation on the Buddha Infinite Life and Shàndǎo became his disciple after attending his lectures. His beliefs are found in his 'Collected Essays on Securely Abiding in Contentment' (安樂集).
5. *Jiācái* (迦才, c. 620-680) was a contemporary of Shàndǎo who wrote a 'Discourse on the Pure Land' (淨土論) that shed light on the history of eminent Pure Land masters and offered some new ideas on the nature of the Pure Land and those with the capacity to enter into it.

As already noted, these five masters gradually helped shape the understanding about Pure Land Buddhism in China in three primary areas:

- * The nature of the Buddha's three-fold spiritual life (trikāya, 三身), particularly in terms of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛)
 - * The nature of the Pure Land as the transcendental sphere of life's purpose (dharma dhātu, 法界), particularly in terms of the Land of Pure Bliss (Sukhāvatī, 極樂國土)
 - * The different capacities of sentient beings for attaining rebirth in the Pure Land
- See footnote 28 for an analysis of their different theories about these three subjects.

2. Shàndǎo (善導, 613-681)

Shàndǎo was the composer of the main work at hand, *The Commentary Explaining The Scripture About Meditation on the Enlightened Being 'Of Infinite Life' in Four Parts* (觀無量壽佛經疏四帖). This commentary became the most accepted interpretation of this scripture as well as a foundation for the subsequent practice of Pure Land Buddhism in China and East Asia. It also became a primary source of inspiration for Hōnen and Shinran, the founders of the two primary Pure Land sects of Japan. Just as the early Táng Dynasty represented a golden age for Chinese culture in general and Chinese Buddhism in particular, Shàndǎo represented a pinnacle of Pure Land thought and practice in China, and his teachings reached people at all strata of society.

His Spiritual Training:

Shàndǎo entered a monastery at a young age and first studied the Lotus and Vimalakīrti Sūtras under Mingsheng (明勝), a follower of the Dialectical School (Madhyamaka, 三論宗) of Jízàng (吉藏). The rigorous scholastic nature of this school apparently did not appeal to him, and it is said that he had an epiphany upon seeing a painting of the Land of Pure Bliss (Sukhāvātī, 極樂世界) that was based on *The Scripture About Meditation on the Enlightened Being 'Of Infinite Life'* (Amitāyur Dhyāna Sūtra, 觀無量壽佛經). After this experience, Shàndǎo devoted himself to study of the Pure Land scriptures in general and this one in particular. Based at the Monastery 'Of Transcendental Awakening' (Wùzhēn Sì, 悟真寺) in the Zhōngnán Mountains (終南山) just southeast of the Táng Dynasty capital of Cháng'ān (長安), he spent about sixteen years traveling about China and seeking out teachers of Pure Land Buddhism, which may have also included training in 'the resolve of meditation in which the Buddhas all stand before one' (pratyuṭpanna samādhī, 般舟三昧) at the Monastery of the Eastern Forest (Dōnglín Sì, 東林寺) on Mount Lú founded by (the earlier) Huìyuǎn. He eventually sought out the Pure Land Master Dào chuò (道綽) at the Monastery 'For Meditation on the Profound Dialectical Principle' (Xuánzhōng Sì, 玄中寺) in central Shānxī province, already venerated as the place where Tánluán (曇鸞, 476–542) spent his later years teaching about the Pure Land practice. Here Shàndǎo attended the renowned lectures of Dào chuò on *The Meditation Sūtra* and became his most illustrious disciple. After Dào chuò's death in 645, Shàndǎo apparently returned west to the Monastery 'For Transcendental Awakening' (Wùzhēn Sì, 悟真寺) where he probably prepared for his teaching career in the capital city of Cháng'ān (長安, modern Xi'ān, 西安).

Shàndǎo arrived in the capital around 648. In addition to being home to the imperial court, Cháng'ān was by then very cosmopolitan and in fact the most populous city in the world. Xuánzàng (玄奘) had recently returned from his epic journey to India (in 645) and his renowned translation team was already assembled and busy at work, headquartered at the Monastery 'Greatness of Merciful Grace' (Dà Cí'ēn Sì, 大慈恩寺), which was dedicated by the Emperor Gāozōng (高宗) in 648. This dedication ceremony is likely the event that brought Shàndǎo to the capital to embark on his pastoral career in the city.²⁹ History records that he took residence at the Monastery 'Greatness of Merciful Grace' for a time. After this, Shàndǎo spent most if not all of his time in the capital, also residing at the Monastery 'Bounds of the Transcendental Nature' (Shíjì Sì, 實際寺) and, most notably, the Monastery 'Illumination of Light' (Guāngmíng Sì, 光明寺).

His Pastoral Career:

Like his teacher Dào chuò, in addition to being a monk, Shàndǎo was a missionary, serving as a pastor to people at all strata of society, calling on them to confess and repent for their moral failings and take refuge in the Buddha of Infinite Life, because the latter days had already arrived and all sentient beings were depraved and hopelessly afflicted, incapable of deliverance through their own powers alone. Much of Shàndǎo's work was among the common people, 'even the butchers and wine sellers'. As a consequence, he became enormously popular, with his followers 'as numerous as those going to the marketplace'. This was in marked contrast to Xuánzàng, who found special favor with the royal court, the intelligentsia and the great team of monks and scholars that worked on his monumental translation project. In his 'Transmission of Rebirth in the Pure Land' (淨土往生傳), Jièzhū (戒珠, 985–1077) later told an anecdote about a person who once asked Shàndǎo if he would be able to attain rebirth in the Pure Land just through skillfully keeping the Buddha in mind. His answer was "You will get what you wish for in accordance with how well you keep it in mind" or, perhaps, "You will fulfill your vows in accordance with how well you keep (the Buddha) in mind" (如汝所念, 遂汝所願). In other words, everything ultimately depends on one's inner attitude, the sincerity of one's faith as described in the fourteenth meditation of The Scripture About Meditation on the Buddha 'Of Infinite Life' (Amitāyur Dhyāna Sūtra, 觀無量壽佛經). His words on the nature of faith in his explanation of this meditation is a key to his understanding of Buddhism.

His Personality, Artistic Temperament & Creative Accomplishments:

Shàndǎo led the simple life of a holy man. It is said that he slept little, begged for his food as was the practice of the Buddha's disciples and was fastidious in observing the precepts of commitment to monastic discipline. He gave away any fine foods he was given and only ate the most basic kinds himself. He cleaned his own food bowl and washed his own clothes, and only undressed to bathe. He never gazed at women, he laughed at sophisticated language and had no interest in fame, wealth or amusements. Those who met him were always impressed by his utter sincerity, depth of faith and dedication to promoting his beliefs. He was clearly a mystic, given to dream-like revelations of religious experience. In his dedication to promoting the Pure Land practice, he appealed to people's emotional feelings, creating bridges to supernatural visions in contrast to the great intellectual achievements of eminent scholars like Xuánzàng, whose teachings appealed more to logic and reason. Shàndǎo's visual sense, which first inspired him to Pure Land practice upon seeing a painting of the Land of Pure Bliss, manifested itself in his extraordinary artistic talents. Visual aids were very much an integral part of his work:

- * It is said he made hundreds of frescoes and paintings on silk and linen, depicting the supernatural images and narratives found in the Pure Land scriptures, especially those found in The Meditation Sūtra and his commentary on it.
- * Empress Wǔ Zétiān (武則天) commissioned him to help oversee design and construction of the great Buddha and Bodhisattva statues at the renowned Temple 'Worship of Our Ancestors' (Fèng Xiān Sì, 奉先寺), built in 672-675 at the 'Dragon Gate Grottoes' (Lóngmén Shíkū, 龍門石窟) in Luòyáng (洛陽).³⁰
- * It is said he was responsible for supervising the repair of many temples and pagodas.
- * It is also said that, with his disciples, he made many tens of thousands of copies of Kumārajīva's translation of Shorter Scripture 'On the Buddha of Infinite Life & Light' (Amitāyus Sūtra, 阿彌陀經) and distributed these throughout China for use in recitation. These were all hand-written, as block printing had not yet been developed.

His Literary Works included:

- * His magnum opus, 'A Commentary in Four Parts (四帖疏) on The Scripture About Meditation on the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life' (Amitāyur Buddha Dhyāna Sūtra, 觀無量壽佛經), is the main subject of the present translation.
- * His 'Effective Methods for Attaining the Resolve of Meditation Through Mindfulness on the Ocean of Signs from the Buddha of Infinite Life' (觀念阿彌陀佛相海三昧功德法門 or 觀念法門), in one volume, was about different methods of meditation on the Buddha.
- * 'The Mirror of Keeping the Buddha in Mind' (念佛鏡) was said to have been co-authored with his presumed disciple Dào jǐng (道鏡), in two volumes
- * He also composed three works that describe Pure Land ritual practices of worship:
 1. Hymns Used in the Ceremony of Chanting, Circumambulation and Resolve for Rebirth in the Pure Land' (轉經行道願往生淨土法事讚), in two volumes
 2. 'Hymns of Praise for the Rebirth Ceremony' (往生禮讚偈), in one volume
 3. 'Hymns Employed During Circumambulation in the Rebirth Ceremony, Explaining the Resolve of Meditation in Which the Buddhas All Stand Up Before One in Accord With The Meditation Sūtra' (依觀經等明般舟三昧行道往生讚), in one volume

After Shàndǎo's Death in 681:

Much beloved by the ordinary people of the great city, Shàndǎo was said to have been given 'one of the three great funerals of the Táng Dynasty.' His remains were then interred in the Zhōngnán Mountains (終南山) that he loved so much. His disciple Huáiyùn (懷惲) selected the spot and had the thirteen story 'Pagoda of Holy Reverence' (Chónglíng Tǎ, 崇靈塔) & Monastery 'Store of Fragrance' (Xiāngjī Sì, 香積寺) built at the site. Frequently visited by the Empress Wǔ Zétiān, it became one of the most popular temples in China. The pagoda and temple still exist and are a popular pilgrimage site (near present-day Xī'ān).

A famous poem about this temple in the mountains was made by Wángwéi (王維, 701-761) about a hundred years later called 'Passing By Xiāngjī Temple' (過香積寺). Wáng Wéi was a renowned painter, poet, musician and government official who, after retiring, entered a monastery and trained under the meditation master Shénhuì (神會, 684-758).

Passing By Xiāngjī Temple (Guò Xiāngjī Sì, 過香積寺) By Wángwéi (王維, 701-761)

不知香積寺，	數裡入雲峰。	Bù zhī Xiāngjī sì,	Shù lǐ rù yún fēng.
古木無人徑，	深山何處鐘。	Gǔ mù wú rén jìng,	Shēn shān hé chù zhōng.
泉聲咽危石，	日色冷青鬆，	Quán shēng yān wēi shí,	Rì sè lěng qīng sōng.
薄暮空潭曲，	安禪制毒龍。	Báo mù kōng tán qū,	Ān chán zhì dú lóng.

Unfamiliar with the way to the Temple 'Store of Fragrance' (Xiāngjī Sì),
I have traveled miles through misty peaks.
There is no beaten path to it among the ancient trees,
But from somewhere deep in the mountains, a bell tolls.
With the sound of streams lapping against treacherous rocks,
And the sunlight being cooled by tall green pines,
At dusk, on the edge of a deep, still pool,
The venomous serpent (of affliction) is subdued in the stillness of meditation.

Shàndǎo's interpretation of the Pure Land teachings

On the nature of the three-fold spiritual life (trikāya, 三身), particularly in terms of The Buddha of Infinite Life & Light:

Shàndǎo agreed with his teacher Dàochuò that the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛) is the very grace of the spiritual life (sambhoga kāya, 報身) that has descended into this world as a result of the Buddha's past vows.

On the nature of the Pure Land (buddha kṣetra, 佛土), particularly in terms of the Land of Pure Bliss (Sukhāvatī, 極樂國土):

Again, Shàndǎo essentially agreed with Dàochuò's interpretation (see footnote 28).

On the nine different capacities of sentient beings for attaining rebirth in the Pure Land:

Here Shàndǎo offered a fresh interpretation, although he may have received it from Dàochuò.

- a. The three levels of spiritual rebirth for those with a higher capacity reflect those who are endowed with different grades of faith (śraddhā, 信) in the transcendental nature of life's purpose.

1. The higher level of spiritual rebirth for those with a higher grade of capacity:

This refers to those who dedicate their lives and all the merits and virtues they have attained with utter sincerity and depth of conviction in their aspiration to be reborn in the Pure Land; This depth of conviction causes a tension due to the dynamic between the two extremes inherent in the existential nature of faith.

- a. Acceptance that, because of our human condition as depraved sentient beings in this corrupted world, there is no chance for such a spiritual restoration or rebirth solely based on our own will power and our own efforts and actions.
 - b. Acceptance that we can only attain this rebirth through another, higher power of grace descending from the Buddha's transcendental vows. This existential nature of faith is eloquently expressed by Shàndǎo in his famous parable about the river in two parts and the white path of deliverance across it.

In terms of one's actions in this world that support this faith, this higher level of spiritual rebirth for those with a higher grade of capacity entails having a heart of loving kindness, abstaining from the intentional taking of life as well as a commitment to moral virtue, reading and reciting the scriptures on the greater vehicle and cultivating practice of six kinds of mindful recollection.³¹

2. The intermediate level of spiritual rebirth for those with a higher grade of capacity:

This refers to those who do not necessarily read and recite the scriptures of the greater vehicle in practice but dedicate and offer up their lives and all the merits and virtues they have earned in their aspiration to attain spiritual rebirth in the Pure Land, skillfully understand what this means and are not alarmed or shaken by its ultimate significance; With deep faith in the cause and effect of actions and their consequences, they do not malign or ridicule the teachings about the transcendental nature of life's purpose.

3. The lower level of spiritual rebirth for those with a higher capacity:

This refers to others dedicating their lives this way while awakening to the supreme nature of life's purpose, faithfully accepting the laws of karma and retribution and never maligning or ridiculing the teachings in the scriptures on the greater vehicle.

b. The three levels of rebirth for those with an intermediate capacity are about those who are making different grades of moral commitment (śīla, 戒) to virtue:

4. *The higher level of spiritual rebirth for those with an intermediate capacity:*

This refers to those who inspire a vow to dedicate the merit they have earned to rebirth in this Pure Land and keep their moral commitments such as those to the five precepts of the lay life, the eight precepts of austerity or the full precepts of an ascetic.³² They have also never committed the five most consequential acts of evil.¹⁰

5. *The intermediate level of spiritual rebirth for those with an intermediate capacity:*

This refers to those who inspire a vow to dedicate the merit they have earned to rebirth in this Pure Land and have been able to embrace the eight precepts of austerity, the precepts of a novice ascetic or the full precepts of an ascetic³² for at least a single day and night with flawless demeanor.

6. *The lower level of spiritual rebirth for those with an intermediate capacity:*

This is a reference to those who inspire a vow to dedicate the merit they have earned to rebirth in this Pure Land and fulfill their filial duty by supporting their fathers and mothers and practicing worldly benevolence and righteousness.

c. The three levels of rebirth for those with a lower capacity are about those wrestling with the consequences from different grades of evil (akuśala karma, 不善業) through prayer

7. *The higher level of spiritual rebirth for those with a lower capacity:*

This refers to those who inspire a vow to dedicate the merits they have earned to rebirth in this Pure Land but have committed many unwholesome acts,¹⁸ Although they have not maligned or ridiculed the great vehicle scriptures, they have committed these unwholesome acts without any shame or humility.

8. *The intermediate level of spiritual rebirth for those with a lower capacity:*

This refers to those who inspire a vow to dedicate the merits they have earned to rebirth in the Pure Land but have violated precepts of moral commitment, including the five for a virtuous life as a layperson, the eight for leading an austere life and the many observed in the ascetic life.³² They have also stolen property belonging to the community of faith, taken the goods of its members, taught others about unclean purposes without shame or humility, or glorified themselves in evil purposes. Because they have committed these acts, they have fallen into hell (naraka, 地獄).

9. *The lower level of spiritual rebirth for those with a lower capacity:*

This is a reference to those who inspire a vow to dedicate the merits they have earned to rebirth in this Pure Land but have made the most unwholesome actions, including the ten serious kinds of evil as well as the five most consequential acts of evil.¹⁸ By committing these evil acts, they have (respectively) fallen into the path of evil for a countless number of lifetimes and suffered in the hell that is relentless and never-ending (avīci naraka, 無間地獄).

The Buddha's teaching in The Scripture About Meditation on the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life is addressed to both an ordinary afflicted being (the consort Vaidehī) and one of the Buddha's closest disciples (the monk Ānanda) and so these nine levels of capacity can certainly be understood on different levels. However, since Shāndào's interpretation is based on life in the latter days after the demise of the Buddha's purpose (saddharma vipralopa, 末法) when the five kinds of corruption (pañca kaśāyāḥ, 五濁) prevail in this world, his understanding of the scripture's meaning is based on the conditions at hand, with all sentient beings hopelessly afflicted, like Vaidehī.

Repentance as a prerequisite for attaining the resolve of meditation:

Like Dàochuò, Shàndǎo believed that in the latter days when there is no Buddha in this world, all sentient beings are depraved and must practice confession with sincere and heartfelt repentance (kṣamāpatti pratideśana 懺悔) as a prerequisite to overcoming the spiritual obstacles that are a consequence of one's immoral actions (karma āvaraṇa, 業障), as these obstacles prevent the mental resolve (samādhi, 定) needed to attain rebirth in the Pure Land. He distinguished three levels in the sincerity of this repentance:

- a. With hot perspiration exuding from the body and tears exuding from the eyes
- b. With hot perspiration exuding from the body and blood exuding from the eyes
- c. With blood exuding from both the body and the eyes

Mental resolve vs. mental dispersion:

The dual gateway of mental resolve and mental dispersion is the key to understanding Shàndǎo's interpretation of the sixteen visualizations in The Scripture About Meditation on the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha Dhyāna Sūtra, 觀無量壽佛經):

- * *The mental resolve* (samādhi, 定) that leads to entry into the sphere of meditation is explained in the first thirteen visualizations. These reveal the inner nature of the Pure Land as well as the Buddha and the bodhisattvas found there.
- * *The mental dispersion* (vikṣipta, 散) of actions (thoughts, words and deeds) that arises out of the sphere of meditation is explained in its last three visualizations. These reveal the spiritual capacities of sentient beings for attaining spiritual rebirth in the Pure Land through the cultivation (bhāvanā, 修) of their manifested behavior (samudācāra, 現行).

Recitation and remembrance by itself being a sufficient cause for spiritual rebirth:

Even though it is the practice prescribed for those of the lowest capacity, Shàndǎo taught that recitation and remembrance of the Buddha's name and title (buddha anusmṛti, 念佛) by itself is a sufficient cause for attaining spiritual rebirth in the Pure Land, grounding in joyfulness about the transcendental nature of life's purpose (pramuditā bhūmi, 極喜地). This would seem to contradict the teachings of Yogācāra founder Asaṅga in his Summary of the Greater Vehicle Doctrine (Mahāyāna Saṃgraha, 攝大乘論) implying that (ten) continuous, uninterrupted recitations of the Buddha's name and title (as in 'Namo Buddha') only constitute a vow without its application through a practice and that such a spiritual rebirth would therefore only occur at some time in the future. Shàndǎo explained how 'ten vows and ten practical applications of them' are in fact both included in ten such continuous recitations of the Buddha's name that are without any interruption:

- * In saying 'Namo' there is the devotion of one's life and treasure. This is said to be inspiring the vow of dedication (pariṇāmana, 願).
 - * In saying 'Amitāyur Buddha' there is said to be a distinguished practice (viśeṣa adhigama, 勝行) of this vow, leading to spiritual deliverance (pāramitā, 波羅蜜多).
 - * Through these being combined, there is the direct attainment of this spiritual rebirth through grounding in the transcendental nature of life's greater purpose (bhūmi, 地).
- Consequently, according to Shàndǎo, even through recitation with singleness of mind alone there is acceptance (faith) and employment (practice) of the grace that is found in the Buddha's spiritual life (sambhoga kāya, 受用身).

Recitation & remembrance vs. visualization:

In promoting spiritual rebirth (parāvṛtti, 往生) in the Pure Land to people of different spiritual capacities, Shàndǎo encouraged different means of entry. They can be summarized into two essential aspects: #1 remembering the Buddha through the power of words and #2 visualization, seeing the Buddha through the power of the imagination.

#1 Penetration of the resolve of meditation by keeping the Buddha in mind through invocation

(buddha anusmṛti samādhi, 念佛三昧): This is a reference not only to invoking and remembering the words of the Buddha about the nature of life's purpose, but especially to invoking and remembering the name and title of the Buddha (口稱名號) over and over to perfect the practice until it is continuous without interruption. In volume two of his 'Greatness of Introspection With Stillness of Mind' (Móhē Zhǐguān, 摩訶止觀), Zhìyǐ describes the practice this way:

"Sometimes invocation and remembrance are simultaneous.

Sometimes there is remembrance first and invocation afterwards.

Sometimes there is invocation first and remembrance afterwards.

These aspects of invocation and remembrance follow each other continuously without any time for rest."

This practice makes powerful subliminal impressions as the dispersive acts (vikṣipta, 散) of the conscious mind (its thoughts, words and deeds) condition or 'perfume' the subconscious through the power of voiced sound (śruta vāsanā, 聞熏習), leading to the attainment of a continuous mental resolve (samādhi, 定). The different capacities for attaining this resolve are described in the last three visualizations of The Meditation Scripture, with the last one in particular doing so through the power of words.

#2 Penetration of the resolve of meditation by keeping the Buddha in mind through a visualization

(buddha dhyāna (or darśana) samādhi, 觀佛三昧): As this mental resolve of meditation becomes continuous, there is the ability to visualize the Buddha, the adornments of the Pure Land and the noble beings found within it. At first, these meditations utilize mental images (sa nimitta, 有相) but ultimately they go beyond any particular mental images (nirnimitta, 無相). This process from visualizations to the transcendence of specific mental images is described in the scripture's first thirteen meditations.

Shàndǎo prescribed beginning with the invocation of the Buddha's name and title until there is a continuous remembrance of it with mental resolve. This leads to a penetration of resolve (samāpatti, 正受) and a transcendental vision in which voiced sound and visible form become one and all mental associations are transcended (asamjña, 無想). It is said that each time Shàndǎo invoked the name and title of the Buddha Amitāyus, light would emanate from his mouth revealing an image of the Buddha.

The four aspects involved in the perfect cultivation of this recitation:

In his 'Hymns of Praise for the Rebirth Ceremony' (往生禮讚偈), Shàndǎo explains that there are four aspects involved in the ever-repeated cultivation (abhīkṣṇa abhyāsa 數修) of reciting the Buddha's name that lead to the continuous mental resolve needed for spiritual rebirth:

- a. Its reverent cultivation (satkāra abhyāsa, 恭敬修), with a worshipful attitude
- b. Its exclusive cultivation (aśeṣa abhyāsa, 無餘修), focusing on nothing else
- c. Its continuous cultivation (ānantarya abhyāsa, 無間修), without interruption
- d. Its long-term cultivation (dīrgha kāla ābhyāsa, 長時修), for the rest of one's life

The five-fold practice that leads to continuous mental resolve vs. disparate practices:

According to Shàndào, there are Five Primary Practices (pañca samyak pratipatti, 五正行) that lead to attaining this continuous, uninterrupted mental resolve:

- a. The direct, immediate act of true resolve (samyak samādhi karma, 正定業) in accordance with the Buddha's vow in which invocation and remembrance are timeless, that is, ceaseless and continuous: Whether one is walking, standing, seated or lying down, one is never concerned about the length of time involved or whether the Buddha is near or far away:
 - #1 Calling on the Buddha by name (nāmadheya grahaṇa 稱名) with singleness of mind
- b. The four acts that support and complement (sahāya karma, 助業) this direct and immediate act of resolve when performed with singleness of mind (ekacitta, 一心):
 - #2 Reading and reciting the Pure Land scriptures (svādhyāya, 讀誦)
 - #3 Meditating on the object of worship (pravicaya, 觀察): This refers to
 - a. Visualizing the Buddha, the Bodhisattvas and the Pure Land
 - b. Examining the details of their adornments and deliberating on their meaning
 - c. Continuously remembering them and keeping them in mind.
 - #4 Worshiping the Buddha in gestures (vandanā, 禮拜) and words (namaskāra, 禮拜)
 - #5 Praising (stotra, 讚嘆) and making offerings (pūjanā, 供養) to the Buddha

Disparate Practices (miśra carya, 雜行): Outside of the direct, immediate act of true resolve and the acts that support and complement it, there are all of the many different virtuous acts committed that are called 'disparate practices', occurring through the mental dispersion of conduct - thoughts, words and deeds. When cultivating the five primary practices that support each other in leading to continuous mental resolve, there is always an intimacy with and approach to a state of proper mindful recollection (samyak smṛti, 正念) that is said to be uninterrupted (ānantarya, 無間). When there are disparate practices, this mindfulness may be interrupted, causing a detachment from this continuity. 'Disparate practices' are therefore those that are not only unnecessary for realizing this continuity of resolve but also may potentially interrupt it. Some of these disparate practices are purpose-based (based on cultivating the noble path through one's own efforts) while others are faith-based (dedicated to attaining spiritual rebirth through accepting and employing another, higher power). For those who are still insufficient in mental resolve, observing a faith-based practice that is based on an object of worship other than that of the Buddha of Infinite Life & Light may actually serve to distract from the singleness of mind needed to realize the benefits attained through observing this faith-based practice. And so disparate practices reveal the nature of sectarianism inherent in the provisional nature of such practices that are faith-based. Faith entails the acceptance and embrace of a provisional means to realize a greater sense of purpose. Because the mind is weak and easily distracted by objects in the sphere of desire, it needs a single object on which it can continuously focus its attention that will ever re-awaken and renew its faith through the mindfulness of remembrance (smṛti, 念). Upon awakening faith and the other spiritual capacities (indriya, 根),^{13D} bodhisattvas transcend these provisional skills and reveal the greater purpose beyond them. This includes both the use in meditation and the transcendence of #1 the nature of emptiness (śūnyatā, 空性), #2 the employment of mental constructs (prajñāpti, 假有) such as words and mental images and #3 the dialectical principle of the middle way (madhyamā pratipad, 行中道).

3. Prominent Chinese interpreters after Shàndǎo

- a. **Huáigǎn** (懷感, died c. 670), *a direct disciple of Shàndǎo*: Huáigǎn first studied the Yogācāra School but later turned to the Pure Land teaching at the Monastery 'Of a Thousand Blessings' (Qiānfú Sì, 千福寺) in Ch'ang'ān. He is best known for composing the influential 'Discourse Dispelling Doubts About the Pure Land' (釋淨土群疑論), a blend of both Yogācāra and Pure Land beliefs.³³ Dying before he could finish this work, it was completed by Huáiyùn (懷惲, 640-701), another disciple of Shàndǎo.
- b. **Huìrì** (慧日, 680-748) *the pilgrim* was from Shāndōng Province (山東) in Eastern China. He had a chance to meet the renowned monk and traveler Yìjìng (義淨, 635–713) after the latter's return from India and Śrī Vijaya (a Buddhist kingdom in Sumatra) and resolved to some day study there himself. In 702 he left for India and, like Yìjìng, took the sea route to India via Śrī Vijaya. He visited the sacred places during his sixteen years of travel, learning from Buddhist masters and collecting Sanskrit texts. For his return trip to China, he took the land route over the Silk Road. On his way back, he had a vision of the Bodhisattva 'Beholding the Cries of This World' (Avalokiteśvara, 觀世音) in Gandhara and here resolved to devote himself to the Pure Land path. He returned to the Chinese capital Cháng'ān in 719 with many Indian texts and then settled in Luòyáng where he cultivated the Pure Land practice according to The Scripture on the Resolve of Meditation in Which the Buddhas All Stand Up Before One and wrote his 'Collection of Passages Concerning Spiritual Rebirth in the Pure Land' (往生淨土集). Quoting from the scriptures, he challenged the beliefs of many teachers of the Meditation School (Chán Zōng, 禪宗) of his time who claimed that the Pure Land practice was not an authentic Buddhist teaching. His work helped lay the foundation for the blending of Meditation and Pure Land practices which is still prevalent in East Asia to this day.
- c. **Fǎzhào** (法照, 8th–early 9th century), *composer of the five movements in recitation*, trained in Pure Land practice at Mount Lú, in accordance with the same Scripture on the Resolve of Meditation in Which the Buddhas All Stand Up Before One and was likely influenced by the recitation techniques of the Meditation (Chán, 禪) master Jìngzhòng Wúxiāng (淨衆無相, 684-762) in which the invocation of the Buddha's name is drawn out (引聲念佛) to attain stillness of mind and transcend attachments.³⁴ He then studied at the Monastery 'Of Misty Peaks' (Yúnfēng Sì, 雲峰寺) under Pure Land master Chéngyuǎn (承遠), a disciple of Huìrì. While there in 766, he was inspired to invent a new technique for reciting the Buddha's name called 'remembrance of the Buddha in five movements' (五會念仏) that was said to more powerfully induce the mental resolve of meditation (samādhi, 三昧). These five movements consist of the following:
In the first four movements, the six syllables 'Namo Amito Fo' are recited with a gradually quickening tempo in (sequentially) rising tones along the pentatonic scale:
1. A slow pace of recitation in an even, base tone (平聲緩念)
 2. A slow pace of recitation with a gradual sequence of rising tones (平上聲緩念)
 3. An intermediate pace of recitation, neither quick nor slow (非緩非急念)
 4. A gradually quickening pace of recitation (漸急念)
- In the fifth movement only the four syllables 'Amito Fo' are recited in the highest tone:
5. The quickest pace of reciting the four syllables in the highest tone (四字轉急念)

In 769, at the 'Eastern Lake' Monastery (Húdōng Sì, 湖東寺) in Nányuè, Fǎzhào perfected this five-movement method, inducing profound spiritual visions. As a result of these visions, in 770 he moved to the Monastery 'Bamboo Forest of the Great Sage' (Dà Shèngzhúlín Sì, 大聖竹林寺) at the renowned Mountain of the Five Pedestals (Wǔtái Shān, 五臺山) where he promoted this practice. It became well-known throughout China, becoming popular both at court and among ordinary people alike. The Emperor Dàizōng (代宗) summoned Fǎzhào to the capital at Cháng'ān where he instructed the literati in its proper practice and wrote an explanation of it entitled 'Praise of the Pure Land Through Five Movements in Recitation and Remembrance of the Buddha's Name' (淨土五會念佛略法事儀讚). His thesis was based on The Longer Scripture on the Buddha of Infinite Life and the meditation in which the Buddhas all stand before one (pratyutpanna samādhi, 般舟三昧) as taught by the Tiāntāi School. In this thesis, he cited chapter fourteen of The Longer Scripture which says:

"When a pure breeze wafts through (the trees in the Pure Land), exquisite sounds of the pentatonic scale spontaneously arise, creating a symphony of music."

He enjoyed great success in spreading Pure Land teachings amidst the competition of the Meditation and Esoteric Schools (Chàn Zōng, 禪宗 & Mìjiào Zōng, 密教宗), which had become very popular at the time. The monk Ennin (圓仁, 794–864) later brought this five-movement practice to the Tendai School at Mount Hiei in Japan (in 851) where it also became very popular.

There were of course many other notable masters over the centuries as Pure Land Buddhism spread throughout China and the rest of East Asia, enriching the tradition with innovations and testaments to faith. Another notable trend was its incorporation in other schools, blending the efficacy of Pure Land practices in different ways, notably in the School on the Practice of Engaged Meditation (Wéishí Zōng, 唯識宗), the Schools based on The Lotus Sūtra (Tiāntāi Zōng, 天台宗), The Garland Sūtra (Huáyán Zōng, 華嚴宗) and perhaps most notably in the Meditation School (Chàn Zōng, 禪宗). The blending of Pure Land practices with the Meditation School ultimately became the most prevalent form of Buddhism in China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam and remains so to this day.

Pure Land Buddhism in Japan through the Heian Period (平安時代, 794 to 1185):

1. *Buddhism was first introduced to Japan* from the Baekje Kingdom (百濟, 18-680 CE) of southwest Korea early in the Asuka Period (飛鳥時代, 538–710) and was propagated at court largely through the efforts of the Japanese regent Prince Shōtoku (聖德太子, 574 – 622). During the Nara Period (奈良時代, 710 to 794) Chinese culture was adopted (including the written language), a grand capital city was built at Heijō-kyō (modern Nara) modeled after Cháng'ān, the capital of the Chinese Táng dynasty, and the first six schools of Buddhism became established institutions. Although Pure Land thought and practices were known from the earliest days, at this point they were subsumed within the other schools. With the movement of the capital to Heian-kyō (modern Kyōto) in 794 and establishment of the two esoteric schools (Tendai and Shingon), Buddhism reached the pinnacle of its power and influence in Japan, particularly at court and among the aristocracy.³⁵ It was during this Heian Period that Pure Land Buddhism began to be regarded more seriously in Japan.
2. *Saichō* (最澄, 767-822) went to China and brought the teachings and practices of the Tiāntāi School (天台宗, J. 'Tendai Shū') back to Japan, establishing a monastery complex at Mount Hiei (比叡山) near Kyōto in 804. As Saichō established it, this was a comprehensive school of Buddhism that included all the different teachings of the Buddha being integrated without any contradiction, with the Lotus Sūtra being the ultimate teaching that properly synthesized them all. Saichō described the practices of his school as 'a blending of four different methodologies' (shishū yūgō, 四宗融合). This way, under the umbrella of the Lotus Sūtra, the Tendai School synthesized all the different kinds of Buddhist practice:
 - a. *The methodology for attaining mental resolve* (samādhi, 定) involved four modes of practice³⁶ as described in volume two of 'The Greatness of Introspection With Stillness of Mind' (Móhē Zhǐguān, 摩訶止觀), the magnum opus of Zhìyǐ (智顗), founder of the Tiāntāi School in China. The second of these, attaining resolve of meditation through always walking (常行三昧), involved worship of the Buddha of Infinite Life & Light through recitation and remembrance of the Buddha's name in accord with The Scripture on the Resolve of Meditation in Which the Buddhas All Stand Up Before One (Pratyutpanna Samādhi Sūtra, 般舟三昧經). See appendices H and I for translations of these works.
 - b. *The methodology for meditation* involved introspection with stillness of mind through his 'three thousand aspects of life's purpose in a single moment of thought' (一念三千).¹⁶
 - c. *The methodology for ritual practice* originated from the various ceremonial practices described in volume two of 'The Greatness of Introspection With Stillness of Mind' but expanded to include the wealth of sacraments imported from the scriptures of the school known as the Esoteric School (C. Mìjiào Zōng, J. Mikkyō Shū, 密教宗), with all its invocations (mantras, 真言 & dhāranīs, 陀羅尼), objects of worship (maṇḍalas, 曼荼羅 or adhidevas, 本尊), gesticulations (mudrās, 手印), etc. The blending of these with the practices and principles of the Tendai school became known in Japan as Taimitsu (台密).
 - d. *The methodology for attaining moral commitment* referred to the precepts of ordination into the clerical life, particularly to the bodhisattva precepts that commit one to serving humanity through bringing contentment (freedom from affliction) and meaningful benefits (a greater sense of life's transcendental purpose) to all sentient beings.⁹

Although the Mantra School (Shingon Shū, 真言宗) founded by Kūkai (空海, 774–835) rivaled Tendai for popularity and the court's favor,³⁵ students of the Tendai School spawned most future innovations in Japanese Buddhism, including those of Pure Land Buddhism.

3. *Later proponents of Pure Land faith during the Heian period:*

Ennin (圓仁, 794–864), a disciple of Saichō, traveled to the Mountain of the Five Pedestals (Wūtái Shān, 五臺山) in China in 838 where he received training in cultivating the resolve of meditation in which the Buddhas all stand up before one (pratyutpanna samādhi, 般舟三昧) as prescribed by Zhìyǐ (see appendix I). Upon returning to Mount Hiei in 847, he established a center for this cultivation that included some variations on the Chinese method. Although these included daily observances, unlike the practice that lasted for a grueling ninety days in accordance with Zhìyǐ's original prescription, the main observance lasted for only seven days, with a special observance being made from the eleventh to the seventeenth day of the eighth month (around the harvest moon). Ennin also studied Fǎzhào's five-movement recitation practice and the science of voiced sound (śabda vidyā, 聲明)³⁹ while at the Mountain of the Five Pedestals and then travelled to Cháng'ān, where he trained in ritual practices of Esoteric Buddhism. He brought all these innovations in Buddhist practice back to Japan when he returned in 847. In 854 he became the third abbot of the Tendai School.

Genshin (源信, 942-1017) was a disciple of Ryōgen (良源, 912-985), a later reformer and reviver of the Tendai school in Japan and promoter of Pure Land practices. Genshin wrote 'A Summary of the Essentials for Rebirth in the Pure Land' (Ōjōyōshū, 往生要集), an influential work in Japan that included a description of twenty-five levels of sentient existence,³⁷ an elaboration of the three-fold sphere of sentient existence²⁵ as an object of introspective meditation. The text offered graphic descriptions of the horrors of suffering found in this world that we must all endure as well as the joys to be found in the Pure Land.³⁷ These accounts (particularly the apocalyptic visions of the lower levels) captured the imagination of those at all strata of society and drew many to Pure Land Buddhism.

Ryōnin (良忍, 1072-1134) was a prominent leader of the Tendai School who developed 'The School on Blending & Interpenetration Through Remembrance of the Buddha' (Yūzū Nembutsu Shū, 融通念仏宗). 'Blending & interpenetration' here referred to how one's own recitation of the Buddha's name leads to a blending of the grace from the Buddha's spiritual life and its interpenetration with all the identities (ātman, 我) & purposes (dharman, 法) of sentient existence into an inconceivable unity. Conversely, it also referred to how other's recitation can influence one's own. This blending & interpenetration was said to help bring about the spiritual rebirth of all sentient beings in the Pure Land. This doctrine was based on the principle of mutual possession explained in Zhìyǐ's 'three thousand (or billion) phenomena of life's purpose in a single moment of thought' (一念三千)¹⁶ and the 'seamless blending & interpenetration of all mutually dependent phenomena' (事事圓融 or 事事無礙) as taught in the School on the Garland Sūtra (C. Huáyán Zōng, J. Keron Shū, 華嚴宗).³⁸ It is said that, during a deep meditation on this principle, Ryōnin summarized it as follows:

"Within each person, there are found all people,
Within all people, there is found each person.
Within each practice (of Buddhism), there are found all of its practices,
Within all of its practices, there is found each practice.
With the ten spheres of life's purpose¹⁶ being within a single moment of remembrance,
There is a blending and interpenetration of them all with remembrance of the Buddha.
With hundreds, thousand and millions of these remembrances being accumulated,
All merits and virtues are perfectly fulfilled."

Kakuban (覺鑊, 1095-1143) was a member of the ‘Mantra School’ (Shingon Shū, 真言宗) of Esoteric Buddhism founded by Kūkai in 819 and based at Mount Kōya (Kōyasan, 高野山), south of Ōsaka. Kakuban’s beliefs ultimately led to establishment of a reformed branch of that school (Shingi Shingon Shū, 新義真言宗). He is largely responsible for what became known as ‘esoteric recitation and remembrance of the Buddha’s name’ (himitsu nembutsu, 秘密念仏). He explained three kinds of mantras invoking the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life & Light (Amida, 阿彌陀), consisting of nine, six and three syllables. These are:

- * The nine-syllable mantra: Om̐ A-Mṛ-Ta Te-Je-Ha-Ra Hūṃ
- * The six-syllable mantra: Na-Mo A-Mi-Da Butsu
- * The three-syllable mantra: A-Mi-Da

These were explored in several of his works, which included:

- * *An Esoteric Explanation of the Five Vortexes of Psycho-Somatic Energy and the Nine-Syllable Invocation* (五輪九字明秘密釋): In this work he describes the nine-syllable mantra on the Buddha of Infinite Life & Light:
 - * **om̐** (or the syllable aum̐, 唵) is said to be the primordial vibration of consciousness. It is the voice of the creator (brahma ghoṣa, 梵響), the sound of the universe (praṇava, 本發音) that includes all sounds.³⁹
 - * **a-mṛ-ta** (阿-彌唎-哆) is ‘deathless’, a reference to the infinite life (of compassion)
 - * **te-je-ha-ra** (帝-際-賀-羅) is a compound of tejas (radiance) and hara (emitting), a reference to illumination of the infinite light (of transcendental discernment).
 - * **hūṃ** (吽) is said to be the primordial vibration of spiritual power. Uniting the vital energy of breath and consciousness, the sound of the voice and its meaning, life and its purpose, it is likened to the roar of a lion. It is also called the seed (bija, 種子) of armor (kavaca, 被甲) or intensity (kūrca, 堅) that is found in lettered sounds (varṇa, 字聲) versus the unlettered (acoustic) sound of the voice (dhvanim, 音聲).³⁹
- * *An Esoteric Compendium on the Most Important Matter of Life* (一期大要秘密集)
- * *An Esoteric Explanation of the Name Amida* (阿彌陀秘釋): In this work, Kakuban describes thirteen titles for Buddha of Infinite Life & Light and explains the esoteric meaning of the three-syllable mantra A-Mi-Da. While Vairocana (The Great Illuminator) represents the existential nature of the Buddha’s spiritual life (svabhāvika dharma kāya, 自性法身), Amida is its grace, the transcendental knowledge observing life’s greater purpose with subtly compassionate discernment (pratyaवेक्षणा jñāna, 妙觀察智) that can reach all afflicted sentient beings. A translation of this short work is provided as Appendix J. Also see more on the esoteric meaning of Sanskrit letters in Appendix K.

3. *Outside of the orthodox schools* there were many itinerant ascetics (shami, 沙彌) and holy men (hijiri, 聖), including shamans, mountain ascetics (yamabushi, 山伏), Taoist magicians and reciters of Buddhist mantras that traveled about, serving the religious needs of the common folk, praying for and attending to the sick, performing funeral rites, etc. (similar hermit sages (xiānrén, 仙人) served in this capacity in China). Many of them recited the name of Amida Buddha, popularizing belief in the powers found in the Buddha’s name among the public at large. Prominent among these ‘Amida hijiri’ was the former Tendai monk Kūya (空也, 903-972), who traveled the countryside, adding musical rhythms and dance to his public prayers and his performance of good works for the people such as helping in the construction of roads and bridges, the digging of wells and burying the corpses of the abandoned dead.

The Development of Pure Land Buddhism in the Kamakura Period

The Kamakura period (鎌倉時代, 1185–1333) was established by the first shōgun, Minamoto no Yoritomo (源頼朝) after the Genpei Civil War (源平合戦, 1180–1185). This period is known for the dominance of the warrior (samurai, 侍) caste and the establishment of feudalism in Japan. Major Buddhist temples became ever-more enmeshed in political entanglements, corruption and battles between their factions of warrior monks (sōhei, 僧兵). Abbots catered to the aristocracy while the warrior monks became powerful military forces in the capital. Many disaffected monks left the orders while a few established their own schools of Buddhism emphasizing faith over the formalism of the traditional schools and directly appealing to ordinary lay people, not just clergy, the wealthy, the court and the intellectual elites.

Among the innovators that established their own schools during this period were:

- * Hōnen (法然, 1133–1212) founded the Pure Land School (Jōdo Shū, 浄土宗).
- * Shinran (親鸞, 1173–1263) founded the Transcendental Pure Land School (Jōdo Shin Shū, 浄土真宗).
- * Eisai (栄西, 1141–1215) founded the Rinzaï (臨濟) School of Meditation (Zen Shū, 禪宗).
- * Dōgen (道元, 1200–1253) founded the Sōtō (曹洞) School of Meditation (Zen Shū, 禪宗).
- * Nichiren (日蓮, 1222–1282) founded his own (eponymous) reformed Lotus Sūtra School (Nichiren Shū, 日蓮宗).

The religious movements of this period sought to purify religious faith and free it from the clutter of rituals, gods, shamanism and superstitious practices such as geomancy, astrology and the like. The emphasis on a single practice however led to myopic attitudes of exclusivity, sectarianism and intolerance in some cases that were difficult for the unawakened to reconcile.

1. *Hōnen* (法然, 1133-1212) & *The Pure Land School* (Jōdo Shū, 浄土宗)

Honen trained as a Tendai monk. Following the practice laid out in Genshin's 'Summary of the Essentials for Rebirth in the Pure Land' (Ōjōyōshū, 往生要集), he became a renowned scholar and enjoyed a prominent position in the Tendai hierarchy. However, in 1175 he had a spiritual awakening after studying Shāndào's Commentary Explaining The Scripture About Meditation on the Enlightened Being 'Of Infinite Life' (觀無量壽佛經疏), particularly the following passage on the act of true resolve (samyak samādhi, 正定):

"In being singly focused on calling on the name and the title of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛) with singleness of mind, one invokes the Buddha by name, with this ever-repeated remembrance (anusmṛti, 隨念) becoming ceaseless and continuous. Whether one is walking, standing, seated or lying down, one is never concerned about the length of time involved or whether the Buddha is near or far away. This is called the act (karma, 業) of true resolve (samyak samādhi, 正定) because it conforms with the nature of the Buddha's transcendental vow." (see page 253)

This epiphany led him to leave the Tendai school, don the black robes of a novice and embrace Pure Land Buddhism exclusively. He moved to Ōtani east of Kyōto where he propagated his form of Buddhism for almost forty years. He became very popular, attracting followers among all social classes, aristocrats, warriors and commoners alike. Hōnen's signature teaching was 'the exclusive cultivation of keeping the Buddha in mind' (senju nembutsu, 専修念仏). He believed this to be the true teaching of Shāndào, and he regarded Shāndào to be his personal teacher, even though he had lived some five hundred years earlier. Hōnen taught that it was impossible for people in the latter days to attain liberation from afflictions just through the making of moral commitments, cultivating meditation or studying the scriptures, practices that require the exercise of one's own power or capacities. Instead, he believed one must first wholly accept and rely on the higher power

of transcendental grace only attained through calling on the Buddha's name in accordance with the eighteenth vow found in The Longer Scripture on the Buddha of Infinite Life. To him this meant that, in the latter days, all other Buddhist teachings and practices were no longer of use without first exclusively embracing the Pure Land practice. The essence of Hōnen's beliefs were explained in his 'Collection of Passages on Choosing the Original Vow to Recite the Buddha's Name and Keep it in Mind' (Senjaku Hongan Nembutsu Shū, 選択本願念仏集), completed in 1197. In it, using quotations from the Pure Land Scriptures and their interpreters over the ages, he described a four-step process by which the faith-based Pure Land practice should be applied. These four steps consisted of the following:

1. Discarding practice of the noble path through willful effort, one focuses on the Pure Land path: Because all sentient beings in the latter days have weak spiritual capacities, they are only involved in a selfish pursuit of spiritual goals, taking on outer signs of virtue when inside they are really vain and pretentious. Because of this, the difficult practices of the noble path (keeping moral commitments, cultivating meditation, studying the scriptures, etc.) requiring the exertion of one's own effort and will power to attain merit must be renounced as ultimately being of no avail. Instead, one should only focus on building faith through the acceptance and reliance on another, higher power of grace attained through reciting and keeping the names of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas in mind. As we will see, this discarding of the noble path is only a temporary measure until one has been become truly selfless through spiritual rebirth in the Pure Land.
2. Discarding any other (disparate) practices for attaining merit and the auxiliary actions that support the attainment of true resolve, one only focuses on the true act of resolve itself: Having already discarded the practices of the noble path, next one makes a further choice to establish a singleness of mind in one's faith. There are two parts to this step:
 - a. Hōnen interpreted this to include discarding faith and reliance in the higher power of grace attained through reciting and keeping the names of any Buddhas or bodhisattvas other than the Buddha of Infinite Life & Light (Amida), as these will only serve as distractions and prevent the proper attainment of singleness of mind.
 - b. Shāndào explained that there are five primary practices that lead to the singleness of mind needed to enter into the Land of Pure Bliss:
 - #1 Reading and reciting the Pure Land scriptures
 - #2 Meditation on the object of worship, the dual grace of the Buddha of Infinite Life (Amitāyus, 阿彌陀) and the Land of Pure Bliss (Sukhāvatī, 極樂世界)
 - #3 Worship of the Buddha
 - #4 Calling on the Buddha by name
 - #5 Praising and making offerings to the Buddha
 Of these Shāndào said the fourth, calling on the Buddha Amida by name, is the act of true resolve (samyak samādhi karma, 正定業) while the other four are only auxiliary actions (sahāyika karma, 助業) supporting and complementing this resolve. Hōnen said that, at first, one should discard all these except calling on this one Buddha by name, the true act of resolve based on the Buddha's eighteenth original vow in the Longer Scripture on the Buddha of Infinite Life. Through this second step, he said that there is attainment of what Shāndào called a 'determined resolve (niścita citta, 決定心) for spiritual rebirth (parāvṛtti, 往生)', what The Scripture About Meditation on the Enlightened Being 'Of Infinite Life' called 'the securely abiding mind' (citta dhāraṇa, 安心)' endowed with the three aspects of faith:
 - a. Utter sincerity (abhiprasanna citta, 至誠心)
 - b. Depth of conviction (adhyāśaya or gambhīra citta, 深心)
 - c. A vow of dedication (pariṇāmana praṇidhāna, 迴向發願心)

Shāndǎo's description of these three aspects of faith is the essence of his teaching. In his 'Hymns of Praise for the Rebirth Ceremony' (往生禮讚偈), he further explains that there are four aspects involved in this ever-repeated cultivation:

- a. Its reverent cultivation (satkāra abhyāsa, 恭敬修), with a worshipful attitude
 - b. Its exclusive cultivation (aśeṣa abhyāsa, 無餘修), focusing on nothing else
 - c. Its continuous cultivation (ānantarya abhyāsa, 無間修), without interruption
 - d. Its long-term cultivation (dīrgha kāla ābhyāsa, 長時修), for the rest of one's life
3. Having attained this determined resolve (niścita citta, 決定心), there is rebirth in the Pure Land and one is then able to reappropriate the auxiliary actions that support and complement this resolve as well as other (disparate) Pure Land practices (practices of faith):

The first two steps were a matter of discarding practices that were improperly understood and focusing solely on deepening faith and spiritual resolve. Having done so, one is then able to properly cultivate the auxiliary actions that support and complement the attainment of resolve as well as the disparate practices of the Pure Land and so reintegrate them without selfish intent, distraction or loss of faith.

- a. In cultivating actions that support and complement the true act of resolve found in calling on and keeping the Buddha Amida's name in mind, there are said to be what Hōnen called 'similar kinds of auxiliary acts' (J. dorui no jōgo, 同類の助業).
 - b. In cultivating actions that support and complement the true act of resolve found in calling on and keeping the names of other Buddhas and bodhisattvas in mind, there are what he called 'dissimilar kinds of auxiliary acts' (J. irui no jōgo, 異類の助業).
- This way all (disparate) Pure Land practices can be properly observed with singleness of mind and proper meditative resolve (samyak samādhi, 正定).

One's cultivation of these virtuous (auxiliary and disparate) actions is no longer seen as what supports this resolve. Rather, this resolve is seen as being the grace of the original vows of the Buddha's spiritual life working through one's own life to cultivate these virtuous actions. With this reorientation, there is a restoration of the mind's spiritual foundation (āśraya parāvṛtti, 轉依) through which one can fully face the true nature of one's mortal existence and attain enlightenment in accord with one's capacity.

4. Having attained rebirth in the grace of the Buddha's spiritual life and the Pure Land and transcending any attachments to its different manifestations as mental images, one can then reappropriate all the different practices of the noble path and enter into all ten levels of its grounding (daśa bhūmi, 十地) in doing the work of the bodhisattvas.

Having already transcended the afflicted nature of one's self-centered orientation and its mortal nature, all of the practices on the noble path that were discarded as being too difficult for people living in the later days can now be accepted and employed without the insurmountable obstacles of emotional disturbances and cognitive dissonance that plague sentient beings in the corrupt world of the latter days after the demise of the Buddha in this world. Since they now abide in the Pure Land, they are continuously in the presence of the Buddhas and hear their teachings without any distortions, reaching the stage at which there is never any retreat from their purpose (avinivartanīya, 不退轉) and there is the attainment of a prophecy (vyākaraṇa, 授記) to become a Buddha, that is, being assured of ultimately attaining perfect enlightenment.

This process of discarding, choosing and reappropriation should not be seen as being limited to the sphere of religious practice. Rather it comes to encompass all of one's actions and one's social existence. In fully comprehending the implications of this, there is nothing that does not involve keeping the Buddha in mind. The mystery is knowing when this

sudden transformation takes place and when the grace of the Buddha's spiritual life takes over. Faith is not itself enlightenment, only its foreshadowing in this world. Enlightenment is only reached through sacrificing one's self-centered existence, either through death or spiritual rebirth in the Pure Land, with the Land of Pure Bliss (Sukhāvātī, 極樂世界) being the virtual nature of spiritual freedom (sa upādhiśeṣa nirvāṇa, 有餘依涅槃), the only way the ultimate spiritual freedom (nirupādhiśeṣa nirvāṇa, 無餘依涅槃) can be known in the self-conscious mind of a sentient being.

Hōnen faced great persecution in propagating his teachings, primarily for three reasons:

1. *Misunderstandings about his teachings:*

- a. His exclusive cultivation of keeping the Buddha in mind (senju nembutsu, 専修念仏) was seen as a total and categorical rejection of all other Buddhist practices instead of merely a temporary discarding of them.
- b. Hōnen himself cultivated many practices requiring self-cultivation (following the monastic code of discipline, esoteric ritual practices, etc.) while encouraging his disciples to discard them and exclusively cultivate reciting of the Buddha's name.
- c. It is said he encouraged his disciples to disregard the teachings of the scriptures, claiming that the accessibility of Pure Land practice was more important. For example, he said that although the Lotus Sūtra may reveal the supreme doctrine, if ordinary people cannot put it into practice, it was of little use, like showing a beautiful painting to the blind or playing beautiful music to the deaf.

These misunderstandings about his teachings can be explained through the four steps outlined in his 'Collection of Passages on Choosing the Original Vow to Recite the Buddha's Name and Keep it in Mind' described above, but he kept this work secret all his life, only allowing his closest disciples to copy and study it. He presumably kept it secret so those still afflicted would not prematurely believe they had attained enough faith to properly reappropriate other practices in the last two steps of his regimen.

2. *Opposition from rival sects:*

Hōnen's emphasis on discarding all other Buddhist practices naturally drew the enmity of rival schools, especially if they did not properly understand his 'secret' four-step process for their ultimate reappropriation. His success in attracting many followers also led to jealousy and competitive pressures from other schools who viewed him as an upstart with a populist school not even officially sanctioned by the ruling class.

- a. In 1186 Hōnen participated in a debate at the Tendai monastery in Ōhara (just north of Kyōto) during which it is said he offered a credible defense of his beliefs, pointing out among other things that other sects had embraced Pure Land practices, revealing the inadequacy of their own methodologies.
- b. Hōnen's teachings about discarding other Buddhist practices led many of his followers to malign other schools, a situation that progressively worsened.
 - * In 1204 Hōnen had to make his leading disciples sign a seven-point pledge⁴⁰ to refrain from such actions. These seven points revealed the ignorance, intolerance and self-righteousness exhibited by some of his followers.
 - * In 1205 other schools, led by Jōkei (貞慶, 1155–1213), a renowned reviver of the Japanese Yogācāra School (Hossō Shū, 法相宗), presented a nine-point petition⁴¹ to the retired emperor to ban the school because of its sacrileges and excesses. These nine points revealed the dangers perceived by rival schools.
 - * In 1207, due to a scandal involving some of his followers, his enemies were finally able to prevail in having the school officially disbanded and its leaders exiled.

3. Scandalous actions by some of his followers:

Hōnen was personally without reproach but many of his followers were a different story. Among them were not only monks, aristocrats and warriors - there were also the very common - farmers, fisherman, peasants, butchers, drunks, prostitutes, even criminals. The door was open to all who were willing to embrace and call on the name of the Buddha. A seemingly antinomian teaching about salvation by faith and divine grace that implies the discarding of all merit-producing practices and not being bound to any moral law had great appeal to the unscrupulous. Letting his believers follow their own predilections, many indulged in drunken debauchery, rampant promiscuity and even criminal behavior while loudly denouncing the sincerely held beliefs of noble and virtuous followers from other Buddhist schools. This situation came to a head in 1206 when two of his disciples performed religious services with prominent ladies at the retired emperor's palace in his absence and then stayed with them for the night. The ensuing scandal led to the execution of four of his disciples in 1207.

As a result of this scandal, Hōnen and seven of his close disciples were defrocked, his school was officially banned and he was exiled to Tosa province on Shikoku Island (an area now called Kōchi Prefecture). Although pardoned after ten months, he was not allowed to return to the capital until 1211. He died a year later. He summarized the essence of his teachings in his final missive, 'The One Page Testament' (Ichimai Kishōmon, 一枚起請文), composed shortly before his death. A translation of it is found in Appendix L.

Despite the excesses of some of his followers, Hōnen himself was a very strict disciplinarian, introspective and self-critical. Although he was a widely renowned scholar, he eschewed the sophistry associated with intellectual pursuits and was far more concerned about the problems of daily life than doctrinal matters. As a result, after his death there were issues left unresolved for his disciples to wrestle with. Hōnen had allowed his followers to hold different beliefs and follow their own predilections as long as they were committed to the Pure Land practice as he had prescribed it. Some of his disciples were more traditional, practicing mainly Tendai disciplines to attain merit, cultivating introspective meditation, studying the scriptures, etc., through their own efforts. Others tended to be more radical, relying wholly on the other, higher power of grace and eschewing any need to strive for virtue through the exercise of their own will power. This ended up constituting the main fault line between Hōnen's disciples after his death.

1. A distinction was made between the inner attitude of faith that is directly associated with the other, higher power of grace and the actual practice of continuously reciting the name of the Buddha that is associated with a deliberate effort of one's own will power.
2. This distinction was also expressed as the difference between being reborn in the Pure Land through a single calling out of the Buddha's name with remembrance (S. *eka kṣaṇika*, J. *ichinen*, 一念) and being reborn there through many repeated recitations with remembrance over time (S. *bahu kṣaṇika*, J. *tanen* 多念). The latter was sometimes metaphorically described as 'making ten recitations of the name with continuous remembrance' (S. *daśa kṣaṇika*, 十念), as it is expressed in the Pure Land scriptures.
 - a. Rebirth through a single remembrance tended to be associated with taking refuge in the other, higher power of grace and securely abiding in it through the three inner aspects of faith (#1 utter sincerity, #2 depth of conviction & #3 a vow of dedication).
 - b. Rebirth through many remembrances tended to be associated with the effort made through one's own will power and the four aspects involved in its ever-repeated cultivation (#1 reverent attitude, #2 exclusiveness, #3 continuity & #4 length of time).

Hōnen and Shāndǎo both advocated a seamless integration of faith and practice, and were both said to have recited the Buddha's name many thousands of times every day. This was a more traditional understanding of Pure Land practice, also observed by Hōnen's disciples such as Ryūkan (隆寛, 1177-1247), Benchō (弁長, 1162-1238) and Chōsai (長西, 1184-1266). The other, more radical approach was taken by those who claimed that one could be spiritually reborn in the Land of Pure Bliss with even a single invocation of the Buddha's name. This included Hōnen's disciples such as Kōsai (幸西, 1163-1247), Shōku (証空, 1177-1247) and Shinran (親鸞, 1173-1263). The last of these founded the Pure Land School that remains the most popular in Japan to this day.

2. *Shinran: (親鸞, 1173-1263) & The Transcendental Pure Land School (Jōdo Shinshū, 浄土真宗)*

Shinran was a Tendai monk who worked as the maintainer of a Buddhist hall of worship (J. dōsō 堂僧) at Mount Hiei for 'attaining the resolve of meditation on the Buddha while ever walking' (J. jōgyō zanmai, 常行三昧)³⁶ in accordance with The Scripture on the Resolve of Meditation in Which the Buddhas All Stand Up Before One (Pratyutpanna Samādhi Sūtra, 般舟三昧經). He left the Tendai School and joined Hōnen in 1201, becoming one of his close disciples and one of the few allowed to read and copy his 'Collection of Passages on Choosing the Original Vow to Recite the Buddha's Name and Keep it in Mind' (Senjaku Hongan Nembutsu Shū, 選択本願念仏集). He was among those who were defrocked and exiled in 1207. Shinran was exiled from the capital city of Kyōto to Echigo and never had a chance to meet Hōnen again. Nevertheless, for the rest of his life he viewed himself as a transmitter of Hōnen's (and in turn Shāndǎo's) teachings. Upon being defrocked and exiled, Shinran faced an existential crisis, concerned that his life no longer had any defined purpose, having been banned from the clerical life and unskilled for gainful employment in the lay world. He tried preaching in Echigo but he was unable to develop any following. It was during this time in his life that he started calling himself 'the bald-headed fool' (Gutoku, 愚禿), a name he kept for the rest of his life. He also referred to himself as one that is 'neither a cleric nor a layperson' (hisō hizoku, 非僧非俗), a title he later gave to those that embraced and propagated his faith, which eliminated any distinction between clergy and laity. While in Echigo (now Niigata province), he met and married Eshinni (慧信尼) and subsequently had seven children. It was his wife's family that enabled him to have an income during these difficult years. Finally pardoned in 1211, Shinran moved to Kantō, just north of modern-day Tōkyō. Here he developed a following, especially among the farmers, peasants and other ordinary folk. At Kantō he made a vow to chant the three primary Pure Land scriptures a thousand times for the sake of all sentient beings, but after a few days had a revelation and stopped, realizing that a single recitation was all that was needed and it was presumptuous for him to think he could himself save sentient beings when faith itself was a gift from the Buddha of Infinite Life & Light. During this period, he formulated his understanding of Pure Land practice and explained it in his magnum opus completed c. 1224, 'About Doctrine, Practice, Faith and Realization (Kyō Gyō Shin Shō, 教行信證), the short name for 'About the Doctrine, Practice and Realization of the Transcendental Nature that Reveals the Pure Land (Ken Jōdo Shinjitsu Kyōgyōshō Monrui, 顕浄土真実教行証文類). During his time in Kantō, Shinran organized a network of 'centers for the remembrance of the Buddha' (nembutsu dōjōs, 念佛道場) at the homes of his lay followers. These lay congregations (montos, 門徒) by-passed the control and regulations of temples by the government and spread rapidly.

Around 1234 he finally returned to Kyōto with his daughter Kakushinni (覚信尼) to further spread his teachings through his network of residential centers and lay congregations. Like Hōnen, Shinran's found his lay organization difficult to control and abuses occurred, including the embezzlement of donations, the spread of superstitious beliefs, drinking, orgies, etc. This problem became particularly acute in Kantō after Shinran left for Kyōto. Shinran remained in Kyōto propagating his teachings until his death at 90 in the year 1263. His daughter Kakushinni continued his legacy, building his mausoleum and temples, and founding his church, The Transcendental School of the Pure Land (Jōdo Shinshū, 浄土真宗), with her descendants becoming the primary directors (monshu, 門主) of his religion.

Shinran's emphasis was entirely on the inner attitude of faith rather than any external aspects of practice. For him, the act of faith was itself the very nature of salvation. This was not made by the person, but the Buddha within that person, eliminating all calculation of self-interest.

- * For Hōnen, a person of faith calls on the Buddha by name many times (J. tanen 多念) in repeated moments until they become continuous without interruption. It involves a process of establishing a deep relationship with the Buddha's grace.
- * For Shinran, it is the Buddha that calls on the devotee, and it only needs to be done once (J. ichinen, 一念), as the Buddha's transcendental nature is timeless. Rather than being a process of establishing a deep connection with the Buddha's grace, it is recognition of an ever-present relationship with it. Here, in the invocation of the Buddha's name, 'Namu' (I devote my life) is the call from one's own life (first as a call for help, then as a call of thanks and praise) while 'Amida Butsu' is the call to faith from the Buddha's spiritual life, the grace descending from the transcendental nature of life's purpose.

And so for Shinran:

- * The power to bring about this faith does not come from the efforts of the person but rather from the grace of the Buddha's spiritual life. Because of this, one lets go of all other practices and simply focuses on offering up deep praise and gratitude for the power of this grace that is compassionate and emancipating. Any repeated recitation of the name is out of gratitude and praise, not any effort to attain spiritual rebirth. The more one is aware of the fleeting and hopelessly depraved nature of sentient existence, the greater reliance there is on this transcendental nature of grace until there is the moment when perfect faith is established and the Buddha's name is called out this way, fulfilling the conditions for spiritual rebirth in the Pure Land.
- * The three qualities of #1 utter sincerity, #2 depth of conviction & #3 a vow of dedication to spiritual rebirth in the Pure Land cited in the Meditation Sūtra and described in Shāndào's commentary on it come from the grace of the Buddha alone. While Hōnen and Shāndào stressed using one's own power to recite the Buddha's name and attain these three states of mind, Shinran emphasized that these three states of mind were the conditions of the other, higher power necessary to properly recite it.

In explaining the nature of utter sincerity, Shāndào said:

"One must not take on the outer signs of being worthy, virtuous and diligent while, inside one's heart, one is really vain and pretentious." (see page 246)

- * Hōnen interpreted this to mean that one's actions must avoid these flaws, as they are the afflictions that prevent spiritual rebirth.
- * Shinran went further, saying one's own actions are always endowed with these flaws no matter what one does - they are unavoidable, as these afflictions are the very nature of sentient existence.

This other, higher power of grace is endowed with a transcendental knowledge that is beyond any speculations (nirvikalpa jñāna, 無分別智). It is spontaneous (svayaṃbhū, 自然), not self-conscious or consciously induced. Shinran concluded that, upon realizing this, the continued recitation of the Buddha's name is nothing but a reaffirmation, an act of praise and gratitude. With this transcendental nature calling out from within, the self-centered nature of sentient existence responds to the call, with the utter sincerity of the Buddha's grace working through one's own life. This way there is a complete reliance on this other, higher power. At first one's own efforts may serve as a prerequisite for developing a reliance on this power. Without these initial efforts and a final realization of their ultimate futility, this other power may just seem to be a 'deity', even serving as a mask for one's own identity, one's own ego. However, the moment one realizes that this attachment to identity is the source of alienation and suffering and one responds to the call of this grace, one is on the path to deliverance, regardless of the gravity of the consequences that have arisen as a result of one's past actions (karma āvaraṇa, 業障). The fruits from one's own efforts at cultivation can lead to a transcendence of suffering as long as there are no attachments to them, but one must be ever mindful of the weakness and limitations of one's will power, the seemingly endless deliberations and calculations of self-interest and the overwhelming power of affliction over the nature of sentient existence. Ultimately the strivings of one's own will power must be supplanted by this other, higher power of grace until it arises in one's life spontaneously. This is rebirth in the Pure Land, a restoration of the spiritual foundation of consciousness (āśraya parāvṛtti, 轉依). However, this grace is not some ontological being to which one loses one's identity and one should let go of any attachments to its existence or its non-existence. Instead, there is a synergy in the dialectic between this transcendental nature of grace and one's existence in this world as a sentient being. The true nature of this grace is comparable to how the sun illuminates and warms up our world with light and life. Being spontaneous, it has perfect equanimity with regards to who is touched by its radiance. Just as one is embraced by this grace, one responds to it with a primordial vision of the transcendental nature of life's purpose and, without being self-conscious about it, aspires to some form of perfection in one's own life by following a moral and ethical life and fulfilling one's obligations to one's family and society as a whole.

Although Shinran believed he was carrying out Hōnen's (and in turn Shāndào's) teachings, in practical terms his sole emphasis on faith was a clear departure:

- * Hōnen was a renowned scholar and observed the monastic disciplines such as celibacy. Although he maintained a network of temples and a traditional monastic order among his leading disciples, who served as moral exemplars and preserved the purity of the school's doctrines, his followers consisted primarily of lay people who were encouraged to renounce all Buddhist disciplines except for reciting the Buddha's name and keeping the Buddha in mind.
- * Shinran maintained no monastic discipline, for himself or those in his church, deeming them to be strivings of will-power that were ultimately useless in terms of being spiritually reborn in the Pure Land. He married and had many children himself. Describing his church's leaders as 'neither clergy nor laity', his followers were allowed to marry, eat meat and even drink alcohol. Their role was not so much as moral exemplars but skilled performers of rituals and maintainers of church grounds and property. Prayer services were observed in the homes of followers so temples were not really required, although some have always been maintained due to popular demand. Over the centuries, the leadership of the church has primarily been hereditary.

Conclusion of the Introduction

In summary, the origins of Pure Land belief can be traced back to the very establishment of Buddhism as a religious faith right after the death of the Buddha and, according to scriptures of the greater vehicle (mahāyāna sūtras, 大乘經), these beliefs were taught by the Buddha Śākyamuni himself in his later years, especially for sentient beings who would live in the world in the latter days, after the demise of his dispensation (saddharma vipralopa, 末法) when there was no longer a Buddha to guide them. Although there have been different expressions of this Pure Land faith over the centuries, the worship, invocation and remembrance of the Buddha of Infinite Life & Light (Amitāyus & Amitābha) has been its most enduring form, having a tradition that can be traced back two thousand years, from the first composition of the greater vehicle scriptures in India. The interpretations of Pure Land Buddhism have evolved over the centuries in accordance with the times, the cultural milieux of the societies it has flourished in and the capacities of sentient beings to accept and employ this faith in ways that would enable them to attain freedom from their afflictions and awaken to a higher sense of their purpose.

1. In India, there was a greater emphasis on attaining freedom from affliction and a higher sense of purpose on an individual level, attaining merit and working out one's spiritual deliverance through one's own diligent efforts and one's will-power, whether through becoming a truly worthy being who has overcome all affliction (as an arhat) or one who has awakened to a higher sense of purpose to deliver all sentient beings (as a bodhisattva). This was the difficult path of leaving home (all attachments to this world), answering the call to join the monastic order, cultivating enlightenment and passing this noble purpose on to future generations through a greatness of moral commitment, greatness of resolve and greatness of transcendental discernment. True realization of this noble path could only be accomplished by those with a super-human capacity. The Pure Land practice was established as a way of faith for those of weaker capacity to more quickly overcome the intractable karmic obstacles that blocked this path to enlightenment.
2. In China and the rest of East Asia, the relevance of the Pure Land practice increased over time as the connection with the original Buddha became more remote and the attainment of enlightenment through a reliance solely on one's own will power became an ever-more elusive goal. Without a Buddha in this world to guide sentient beings, the sufferings and afflictions they bore in this world were regarded as overwhelming, more than anyone could overcome through the power of their own efforts. Everyone had to acknowledge and repent for their moral failings and put their faith in calling out for help from the compassionate grace descending from the Buddha's transcendental vows made in the distant past. Only through the power of prayer and this grace could there be the resolve necessary to attain rebirth in the Pure Land, where there is a restoration of the spiritual foundation that is able to overcome the afflictions of sentient existence. The Pure Land teaching also had greater success in China and East Asia generally because it was better able to reach out to the laity and ordained alike, and its emphasis on fulfilling of one's filial obligations had broader appeal than just the monastic call to 'leave the home life' (abhiniṣkrama, 出家).

In The Scripture About Meditation on the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life, the Buddha Śākyamuni addresses two people who reflect these two levels of its message:

1. Ānanda was the Buddha's disciple cultivating enlightenment through his own efforts with a great capacity for remembrance who would pass down the scripture's teaching in the future.
2. Vaidehī was the worldly consort of weak spiritual capacity who must solely rely on the power of the Buddha's compassionate grace for rebirth in the Land of Pure Bliss.