

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
Shāndào'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

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Dedicated to An Lạc

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**A Commentary Explaining
The Scripture About Meditation on the Enlightened Being
'Of Infinite Life'**

觀無量壽佛經疏

By Shàndǎo (善導)

Translated in English by Peter Lunde Johnson

An Outline of the Commentary

The scripture itself is in **five parts** while Shāndào's commentary on it is in **four sections**:

- A. *Section 1 of the commentary, on the profound meaning between the lines* (dūrārtha, 玄義): Buddhist scriptural analyses usually begin with a section on the overarching theme of the text, which includes where it fits in Buddhist teachings generally and an explanation of the scripture's title and how it encapsulates the meaning of the entire scripture. After fourteen stanzas of verse generally praising the scripture, this section is in seven parts:
1. Introducing its overarching theme
 2. Explaining the meaning of its title
 3. Explaining its text in terms of the different methods and goals found on the greater and lesser tracks of spiritual awakening
 4. Distinguishing the different kinds of teachers
 5. Distinguishing between the mental resolve (samādhi, 定) found in meditation and the mental dispersion (vikṣepa, 散) found in the unafflicted actions of thought, word & deed
 6. Reconciling the apparent contradictions in other commentaries about this scripture on the different capacities for spiritual rebirth in the Pure Land, and answering questions about this to eliminate any doubts about it
 7. Explaining the benefits attained by Vaidehī upon hearing the main teaching of the Buddha in this scripture

1. The Introductory Part of the Scripture

- B. *Section 2 of the commentary, on the scripture's introductory narrative* (nidāna, 序): This is Shāndào's commentary on the introductory part of the scripture that precedes and establishes the premise for the main teaching on the sixteen meditations. After a general introduction (on faith and remembrance), the scripture relates the famous story about King Bimbisāra of Magadha being overthrown and imprisoned by his son Ajātaśatru, and the king's consort Vaidehī then being imprisoned by her son after trying to help save her husband's life. The consort, having lost all hope, then earnestly prayed that the Buddha show her a way to find a refuge from the evils of this world so that she could become pure of affliction. In response, the Buddha imparted a transcendental vision of all the Pure Lands of the ten directions so she could choose one as a refuge. After she chose 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), she asked how she could be reborn into this land.
- a. The general introduction: the faithful remembrance of the disciple Ānanda
 - b. The specific introduction: the narrative that leads to the main teaching of this scripture
 1. The setting above at Vulture's Peak (Gṛdhra Kūṭa): on the time, the teacher, the place and the faithful assembly who listened
 2. The setting below at the City of the Royal House (Rājagṛha): on the imprisonment of King Bimbisāra by his son Ajātaśatru and the evil influence of Devadatta
 3. On the imprisonment of the mother Vaidehī
 4. On Vaidehī lamenting the bitter conditions of suffering found in this world
 5. On Vaidehī's requesting and then delighting in the joyful conditions of pure bliss found in the Pure Land generally and the Land of Pure Bliss specifically
 6. The Buddha's teaching about the virtues of mental dispersion found in pure conduct
 7. The Buddha's teaching about the virtues of mental resolve found in meditation, and Vaidehī's subsequent question about how those of the future may attain this bliss of contentment

2. The Main Teaching of the Scripture in Two Parts - The Solicited & Unsolicited Teachings

C. *Section 3 of the commentary, on the solicited teaching: the thirteen visualizations of the virtues of mental resolve (samādhi, 定) found in meditation*

1. Meditation on the setting sun (sūrya asta, 日沒)
2. Meditation on the waters (āpas, 水)
3. Meditation on the ground (bhūmi, 地)
4. Meditation on the bejeweled trees (ratnamaya vṛkṣa, 寶樹)
5. Meditation on the pools (hrada, 池水)
6. Meditation on the tall buildings (prāsāda, 樓)
7. Meditation on the lotus seat (padma āsana, 蓮花座)
8. Meditation on an image of the Buddha (buddha bimba, 佛像)
9. Meditation on the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛)
10. Meditation on the Bodhisattva 'Beholding the Cries (Prayers) of This World' (Avalokiteśvara, 觀世音菩薩)
11. Meditation on the Bodhisattva 'Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength' (Mahā Sthāma Prāpta, 大勢至菩薩)
12. Meditation on the shared characteristics in a universal visualization of the spiritual life
13. Meditation on the unique characteristics in different visualizations of the spiritual life

D. *Section 4 of the commentary, on the unsolicited teaching: the three visualizations of the virtues of mental dispersion (vikṣepa, 散) found in unafflicted thoughts, words & deeds*

14. Meditation on spiritual rebirth for those with the higher capacity for **faith**
 - a. The higher level of spiritual rebirth for those with a higher capacity, including:
 1. The three inner states of the faithful mind that are the means for this rebirth
 - a. Utter sincerity
 - b. Depth of conviction
 1. On the weakness of one's own power
 2. On the greater power of the Buddha's grace through the scripture's words
 - a. On putting the words of the scripture into practice
 - b. Reliance on the scripture's words
 - c. On faith eliminating all doubts
 - d. On a practice that establishes this faith
 1. The five primary practices
 - a. The act of true resolve
 1. Calling on the Buddha by name
 - b. Auxiliary actions that support and complement this resolve
 2. Reading and reciting the Pure Land scriptures
 3. Meditation on the object of worship
 4. Worship of the Buddha
 5. Praising and making offerings to the Buddha
 2. Disparate practices (different forms of practice)
 - c. A vow of dedication to be spiritually reborn in the Pure Land, and the parable about the river in two parts and the white path across it

2. The three outer kinds of conduct ('works') performed to attain this rebirth
 - a. A heart of loving kindness that practices abstinence from the intentional taking of life and is endowed with commitment to moral virtue.
 - b. Reading & reciting scriptures on the universal principles of the greater vehicle
 - c. Cultivating practice of the six kinds of mindful recollection
- b. The intermediate level of spiritual rebirth for those with a higher capacity: Those with different, incomplete expressions of this faith
- c. The lower level of spiritual rebirth for those with a higher capacity: Those with new-found expressions of this faith
15. Meditation on spiritual rebirth for those with the intermediate capacity for **the making of moral commitments**
 - d. The higher level of spiritual rebirth for those with an intermediate capacity: Those who can always keep transcendental moral commitments
 - e. The intermediate level of spiritual rebirth for those with an intermediate capacity: Those who can keep transcendental moral commitments for a period of time
 - f. The lower level of spiritual rebirth for those with an intermediate capacity: Those who can keep worldly moral commitments
16. Meditation on spiritual rebirth for those with the lower capacity for **wrestling with evil through prayer**
 - g. The higher level of rebirth for those with a lower capacity: Those who have committed many unwholesome acts but have not seriously violated the transcendental nature of life's purpose
 - k. The intermediate level of rebirth for those with a lower capacity: Those who have committed many unwholesome acts including serious ones that have made them fall into hell (naraka, 地獄) for a certain period of time
 - i. The lower level of rebirth for those with a lower capacity: Those who have committed the most consequential acts of evil that have made them fall into the endless hell of relentless sufferings (avīci naraka, 無間地獄) for countless lifetimes and must summon the Buddha by name ("Namo Amitāyur Buddhayaḥ", 南無阿彌陀佛) ten times with perfect continuity in order to become freed from it

The conclusion of the scripture's words, in three parts:

3. **On the attainment of the scripture's spiritual benefits**
4. **On the propagation of the scripture**
5. **On the return to Vulture's Peak** (Gṛdhra Kūṭa, 耆闍山)

NOTE ON THE FOLLOWING TRANSLATION:

In the text of the English translation of Shàndào's commentary that follows, the actual content of the commentary is in the larger fonts while the text in smaller fonts consists of the translator's supplemental notations meant to clarify the commentary and, in some cases, interpret it for the modern audience.

A Commentary Explaining The Scripture on the Buddha's Teaching About Meditation on The Enlightened Being 'Of Infinite Life' (觀無量壽佛經疏) in Four Sections

By Shàndǎo (善導)

Section One: On the Profound Meaning Between the Lines, Volume 1 (dūrārtha, 玄義)

The Opening Verse of Dedication

Shàndǎo first offered fourteen stanzas of verse encouraging devotion to the Three Treasures.

“When either those of this world (the laity) or those on the path beyond it (the ordained)
Aspire to realize the ultimate enlightenment
They find it difficult to let go of attachments to the stream of life & death (saṃsāra, 生死)
Or rejoice on fully awakening to the ultimate nature of its purpose (buddha dharma, 佛法).

They all need to inspire an adamant conviction (vajra adhyāśaya, 金剛志)⁴²
That broadly transcends the four currents of self-centered existence (catvāro srota, 四流).⁴³
Vowing to enter into the sphere of Infinite Life (Amitāyus, 阿彌陀)
I take refuge and press my palms together in worship:

Blessed One, with all my heart
I devote my life everywhere in the ten directions
To the transcendental nature of life's purpose (dharma bhūta tathatā, 法性真如) that is like
an ocean,
And to the grace (sambhoga kāya, 報身) and the manifestations (nirmāṇa kāya, 化身) of
those enlightened to it (the Buddhas, 諸佛).

The lives of each and all of those spiritually awakening sentient beings (bodhisattvas, 菩薩)
And their countless followers,
Adorn the ocean with these manifestations
Through three blessed (merit-producing) practices⁴⁴ and ten levels of grounding^{4D} in this
transcendental nature.

Whether their lifetimes of cultivation⁷ have been fulfilled or not,
Whether their knowledge and conduct has been perfected or not,
Whether their emotional disturbances (kleśas, 正使)¹ have been eliminated or not,
Whether their attachments to habitual tendencies (vāsanās, 習氣)⁸³ have subsided or not,

Whether they have attained merit (puṇya, 福) or not, and
Whether they have awakened to a transcendental knowledge of their true purpose
(adhigama avabodha, 證智) or not,
Through both the universal and the supreme kinds of enlightenment
(samyak saṃbodhi, 等覺 & anuttara samyak saṃbodhi, 妙覺)⁴⁵
There is a true penetration (samāpatti, 正受) of adamant resolve.⁴²

In each single moment of thought it corresponds with
All the fruits and virtues of spiritual freedom (nirvāṇa, 涅槃).
I devote my life
To awakening (bodhi, 菩提) to the blessed three-fold spiritual life (trayaḥ kāyāḥ, 三身)⁸³
of the Buddha.

With its unhindered power of spiritual penetration,
The invisible aid of the Buddha's vow embraces and accepts
All of us who take refuge in it and devote our lives to it;
Those on the three tracks of spiritual awakening,⁴⁶ both the worthy and the noble.⁴⁷

Through training in the Buddha's great heart of compassion,
For a long time without ever turning back (avinivartanīyā, 無退) and
Praying for its far-reaching aid in one's preparation,
One sees all the Buddhas continuously in each and every moment of thought.

We who have led foolish and wayward lives,
Wandering in transmigration (saṃsāra, 流轉) for a countless number of lifetimes,
Now encounter the Buddha Śākyamuni, and
The relics of his life still found in this world after the demise of his true purpose
(saddharma vipralopa, 末法).

The original vow of the Buddha of Infinite Life (Amitāyus, 阿彌陀)
Is the way to the pure bliss of contentment.
Through a dedication of both the mental resolve of one's meditations and the mental
dispersion of one's actions
There is a quick realization of the transcendental spiritual life that neither arises nor
perishes (anutpattika dharma kāya, 無生身).

In depending on the basket of scripture for those who awaken sentient beings to it
(bodhisattva piṭaka, 菩薩藏),
And its doctrine on suddenly awakening to the ocean-like nature of the universal vehicle,
There is a teaching about devotion to the Three Treasures (ratna traya, 三寶)
That corresponds with the Buddha's original intent.

The Buddhas of the ten directions are more numerous than the grains of sand along the
River Ganges.
Through six kinds of spiritual penetration (ṣaḍ abhijñāḥ, 六通)²⁶ they illuminate and know
our hearts.
Now, through the vehicle of the two Blessed Ones,
The door to the Pure Land is opened wide.

May its merits and virtues
Be equally bestowed upon all sentient beings
So that we can all similarly inspire the awakened mind (bodhi citta, 菩提心)
And be reborn in this Nation That is Secure in Contentment (Sukhāvatī, 安樂國).

We will first analyze this Meditation Scripture generally in seven parts. This includes:

1. Introducing its overarching theme
2. Explaining the meaning of its title
3. Explaining its text in terms of the different methods and goals found on the greater and lesser tracks of spiritual awakening
4. Distinguishing the different kinds of teachers
5. Distinguishing the differences between the mental resolve (of meditations) and the mental dispersion (of the actions made in thoughts, words and deeds)
6. Reconciling the apparent contradictions in other commentaries about this scripture on the different capacities for spiritual rebirth in this Pure Land, and answering questions to help eliminate any feelings of doubt about it
7. Explaining the benefits attained by Vaidehī upon hearing the main teaching of the Buddha in this scripture

At the end of this section on the profound meaning between the lines, there is Shāndào's personal testament about it. After this first section on the profound meaning between the lines, there will be an analysis of the literal words of the text itself to further explain the scripture's meaning.

1. On the scripture's overarching theme:

- * The mystery of life's transcendental nature (bhūta tathāta, 真如) is broad and great. Those on any of the five tracks⁴⁶ capable of awakening to it cannot fully fathom its scope.
- * This nature of life's purpose (dharmatā, 法性) is deep and lofty. Even through the ten levels of grounding in it (daśa bhūmika, 十聖)⁴⁷, noble beings cannot fathom its infinite bounds.
- * Our different calculations about this transcendental nature (bhūta tathāta, 真如) do not go beyond the vain wriggings of our indolent minds.
- * The infinite bounds found in this nature of life's purpose are based on that which is fundamentally unchanging.

In the pristine sphere of life's purpose (dharma dhātu, 法界) that is beyond any affliction, ordinary and noble beings are both equally perfect, just as they are. It follows that both the depravities of this world and the ultimate principle of reality are both harbored within the consciousness of sentient beings. Merits and virtues are as numerous as the grains of sand along the River Ganges and their unexpressed functions are most profound. However, sentient beings are deeply tainted by karmic obstacles and the pure existential nature of this transcendental sphere is not clearly revealed. Because of this, the great compassionate one was cloaked as an apparent manifestation of the spiritual life with transformative influence (nirmāṇa kāya, 化身) in India. Lest sentient beings enter into the door of the burning house,⁴⁸ he sprinkled sweet dew to moisten the sprouts in his field of cultivation and shined the torch of wisdom, bringing light to those blinded by the long night in the heavy darkness of ignorance. He first prepared them through three kinds of generosity (tri dānāni, 三檀)⁴⁹ and drew them in through four all-embracing virtues (catuḥ saṃgraha vastu, 四種攝事).⁴⁹ He then opened up and revealed the cause for their long lifetimes (kalpas, 劫)⁷ of suffering so that they could awaken to the transcendental nature of life's purpose and enter into the fruits that are found in the life of everlasting contentment. The confused natures of the unthinking flock were separated from each other by their different desires. Although there was not just a single capacity for grasping the transcendental nature, upon being applied to any of the five tracks⁴⁶ that were capable of awakening to it, its cloud of mercy was spread over the entire range of the three-fold sphere²⁵ of sentient existence. This was the Buddha's raining down of the teachings about this transcendental nature through the greatness of

compassion. There are no sentient beings who are not immersed in the grit and the struggles of this world. The Buddha's rain of compassionate purpose draws out the seeds of spiritual awakening (bodhi bījaḥ, 諸菩提種子) from their minds so they can all receive meaningful benefits that have never been experienced before. The sprouts of this true enlightenment grow ever stronger in each and every moment of its remembrance.

In beginning with a distinguished practice, there are pathways to another eighty-four thousand kinds,⁵⁰ with teachings about gradual and sudden spiritual awakening⁷ being called on as appropriate. In adapting to the conditions at hand, all may attain emancipation from their suffering. However, the obstacles of sentient beings are heavy and those that cling to their own understandings are difficult to enlighten. Although one may teach about many different doors of awakening to the nature of life's purpose (dharma paryaya, 法門), they are not all grasped completely because ordinary people are beset with different kinds of emotional disturbances (kleśa 煩惱)¹. In this scripture, Vaidehī's encounter with the Buddha caused her to convey the following request:

"I now wish to be reborn in the World of Pure Bliss, the land of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life ... I only pray that you teach me how to deliberate on it and penetrate it."

Because of her request, the master of spiritual transformation (nirmāṭṛ, 化主) in this world that we must all endure together (sahā loka, 娑婆世界) broadly opened up the essential pathway into the Pure Land. Through this land that is secure in contentment, the Buddha was able to reveal the special intent found in this universal vow of aspiration.

- * Through the unafflicted mental resolve (samādhi, 定) of meditation, doubts and worries are allayed and there is the stilling of the mind.
- * Through the unafflicted mental dispersion (vikṣepa, 散) of actions in thought, word & deed, unwholesome motives are eliminated and there is the cultivation of virtue.
- * Through a vow to dedicate these two practices to a higher purpose that transcends one's own life, there is the seeking of spiritual rebirth in the Pure Land.

On the universal vow of aspiration (vipula praṇidhāna, 弘願): The Longer Scripture on the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Sukhāvatī Vyūha Sūtra, 佛說無量壽經) teaches that, whether they are good or evil, ordinary people can ultimately attain rebirth in the Pure Land and there are none that cannot avail themselves of the vehicle of Buddha Amitāyus with the karmic power of its great vows as the prevailing condition (adhipati pratyaya, 增上緣) for this rebirth. The Buddha's secret intent in teaching this was broad and deep and the pathway to fully comprehending it is difficult to fathom. Even those endowed with the three worthy (merit-producing) practices (traya bhadrā carya, 三賢)⁴⁴ and ten levels of grounding^{4D} in the transcendental nature of life's noble purpose (daśa ārya bhūmi, 十聖地) can barely get a glimpse of it. How much less can those of us with a feather-light faith dare to feign knowledge of its true objective? The essential pathway (for the practice that fulfills these vows) is the dual gateway of mental resolve and mental dispersion as taught in this scripture. 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. 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 everlasting contentment that is found in the transcendental nature of life's purpose (dharma-tā, 法性). This is a brief introduction to the scripture's overall theme.

2. An explanation of the scripture's title:

Its name is 'The Scripture on the Buddha's Teaching About Meditation on the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Buddha Bhāṣita Amitāyur Dhyāna Sūtra, 佛說無量壽觀經) in a single scroll' (eka saṃkṣepa, 一卷).

The Enlightened Being (Buddha, 佛): 'Buddha' is the Sanskrit pronunciation from India.

In China the Buddha has also been called 'The Enlightened Being' (覺者, Jué Zhě).

With one's own awakening to the true nature of life's purpose awakening others and one's own practice then being completely fulfilled, one attains perfect enlightenment.

One's own awakening: This entails choosing a different path from that of ordinary people.

However, because the knowledge of students of the noble path (śrāvakas, 聲聞) is by nature narrow and small-minded, they are really only able to benefit themselves.

They are still deficient in the benefits that arise from greatness of compassion.

Awakening others: This entails choosing a different path from those on either of the two tracks that only seek freedom from affliction on an individual basis, students of life's purpose (śrāvakas, 聲聞) and self-enlightened beings (pratyeka buddhas, 辟支佛).

* Because those awakening sentient beings to the true nature of life's purpose (bodhisattvas, 菩薩) are endowed with a transcendental knowledge (jñāna, 智) of it, they are able to benefit themselves.

* Because they have compassion (karuṇa, 悲) they are also able to benefit others.

In always being capable of both the knowledge and the compassion, their practice is attached to neither the existence nor non-existence of this purpose.

One's own practice being completely fulfilled: This entails choosing a different path from that of the bodhisattvas. When the knowledge and conduct of enlightened beings that have descended into this world (tathāgatas, 如來) are completely fulfilled, they rise beyond ordinary beings, students of life's purpose, self-enlightened beings and those that awaken others, and they are said to become 'Buddhas'.

Teaching About (Bhāṣita, 說): Because the mouths of the Buddhas invoke the true nature of life's purpose, they are said to teach about it. An enlightened being who has descended into this world (tathāgata, 如來) has dealt with many different capacities in teaching about it, adapting to the different opportunities at hand with doctrines that may be gradual or sudden, hidden or revealed. For some, there have been teachings about the six kinds of spiritual penetration²⁶ while for others there have been teachings about the (32) auspicious signs and the (80) excellent refinements of the Buddhas.⁵¹ In being mindful when adapting to the different conditions at hand, everyone realizes benefits.

The Infinite Life (Amitāyus, 阿彌陀): 'Wú Liáng Shòu' (無量壽) is the Chinese pronunciation while 'Namo Amitāyur Buddhaya' (南無阿彌陀佛) is the proper Sanskrit pronunciation:

The following are transliterations in Wade-Giles Chinese, Pin-Yin Chinese, Vietnamese, Japanese, Korean & Sanskrit, then the English meaning:

C	WG	PY	V	J	K	S	English
* 南	Nan	Nám-	Nam	Nam	Nam	Na	(Devotion
* 無	Wu	Wú	Mo	Mu	Myu	Mo	Of One's Life)
* 阿	A	Ē	A	A	A	A	Beyond
* 彌	Mi	Mí	Di	Mi	Mi	Mit-	Measure
* 陀	T'uo	Tuó	Đà	Da	Ta	Āyuh	Life
* 佛	Fo	Fó	Phật	Butsu	Bul	Buddha	Enlightened Being

And so it is called ‘The Devotion of One’s Life to the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life’ (Namo Amitāyur Buddha, 南無阿彌陀佛). In pairing the Sanskrit and Chinese pronunciations, the meaning is understood like this.

Now we say:

The Infinite Life (Amitāyus, 阿彌陀) refers to the nature of purpose (dharma, 法).

The Enlightened Being (Buddha, 佛) refers to the nature of humanity (mānuṣya, 人).

With the nature of humanity and its purpose being expressed together, there is said to be ‘Amitāyur Buddha’.

And in speaking about these two together, the nature of life’s purpose and the nature of humanity, there is the object of meditation. There are two parts on this:

1. The consequences of grace that a Buddha relies on (parakarma phala, 依報)
2. The consequences of grace found in a Buddha’s actions (svakarma phala, 正報)
1. The consequences relied on (parakarma phala, 依報) is a reference to the environment of grace. This is the bejeweled sphere of purpose (dharma dhātu, 法界), also called the spiritual realm. There are three spheres of sentient existence found within it:
 - a. *The adornments below the ground constitute its sphere of desire* (kāma dhātu, 欲界). This includes all the pillars⁷⁰ that radiate as intersecting signs of splendor, all inspiring and illuminating the mind (with life and light).
 - b. *The adornments on the ground constitute the objective reality that is its sphere of form* (rūpa dhātu, 色界). This includes all the (natural) grounds, pools and rising trees as well as all the (mind-made) towers, palaces and buildings.
 - c. *The adornments in the sky constitute its sphere of existential principles that is beyond form* (arūpa dhātu, 無色界). These include all of the magical palaces (in the sky), the blossoms (raining down), the nets and the clouds as well as all the birds, the breezes, the rays of light and the comforting voices that stir and inspire.

Although these three spheres are distinguished, they are all signs of the excellence of non-affliction (anāsrāva, 無漏) found in the pure nation of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyus, 阿彌陀). This is a general conclusion about revealing the adornments found in the environment of grace. This environment of grace is described in the scripture, from the first visualization of the setting sun to the seventh on the lotus seat. The meditations on it can be either general or specific:

- a. The specific meditation on the environment of grace is *the seventh*, the one on the lotus seat, the only one among these first seven that is specifically about the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life.
- b. The general meditations on the environment of grace consists of *the first six*, which are about the ordinary and noble beings found in the sphere of life’s purpose (dharma dhātu, 法界). These visualizations are accepted (through faith) and employed (through practice) and they all similarly lead to a realization of spiritual rebirth here. Because of this, they are called the ‘general meditations’. And of these six meditations, some are on the transcendental nature of this environment of grace while some are on its temporary mental constructs:
 1. *The temporary mental constructs found in the environment of grace* include the visualizations of the setting sun (in the first meditation) and the waters that turn into mirror-like ice and beryl¹² (in the second). Through these meditations, one sees the signs of an object that only resembles the transcendental nature of this environment of grace.

2. *The transcendental nature found in the environment of grace* involves four meditations, from the visualization of the solid ground (the third) to the one on the bejeweled towers (the sixth). Through these meditations one sees the transcendental signs of the object found in this nation of the Pure Land that is beyond any affliction.
2. *The consequences of a Buddha's very actions* (svakarma phala, 正報) is a reference to the person of grace. This is the life of purpose (dharma kāya, 法身), also called the spiritual life of the Buddha. There are two parts on this:
 - a. *The adornments of the one worshipped* (the teacher) is a reference to visualization of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛).
 - b. *The adornments of the noble host* refers to visualization of those present before the Buddha (those with faith who are taught) as well as all those beings who are similarly reborn (sahaja, 同生) in the ten directions of the spiritual realm.

And in the person of grace there are also meditations that are general and specific:

 - a. The specific meditation is one on the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life. In this, there are also visualizations of the transcendental nature of the Buddha's grace (sambhoga kāya, 報身) as well as mental constructs of it (nirmāṇa kāya, 化身).
 1. *The eighth visualization of a mental image of the Buddha is but a mental construct* (prajñapti, 假) *of this person of grace*. Meditations on mental images of the Bodhisattvas 'Beholding the Cries (Prayers) of This World' (Avalokiteśvara, 觀世音) and 'Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength' (Mahā Sthāma Prāpta, 大勢至) are also like this. Because sentient beings are heavily tainted with obstacles of emotional disturbance (kleśa āvaraṇa, 惑障)⁹⁰ that are deeply ingrained, the Buddha understood that a sudden visualization of his true countenance would not result in it being properly revealed. As a consequence, he produced mentally constructed images of its transcendental nature so that their minds could learn to abide in a visualization of it. Because they beheld an object that only simulated the Buddha's very spiritual life, it was called a mental construct of this person of grace.
 2. *The ninth visualization of the Buddha's spiritual life is on the transcendental nature* (bhūta tathāta, 真如) *of this person of grace*. Because they first visualize a mental construct of the Buddha, they are able to gradually put to rest their disordered speculations about the Buddha's transcendental nature of grace. When the mind's eye first opens up, there is only a rough vision of this dual grace. In clarifying the various adornments in the place where it is found, they are able to gradually eliminate the darkness of confusion. Because the obstacles creating this darkness are eliminated, they are ultimately able to see the true signs of this sphere and its transcendental nature with clarity.
 - b. The general meditations on the person of grace includes those in the noble assembly (ārya saṃgha, 聖眾), particularly those on the Bodhisattvas 'Beholding the Cries of This World' & 'Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength' (this includes the 10th & 11th meditations, etc.).

In the foregoing explanation of these general and specific meditations, the person and the environment of grace have both been analyzed in terms of their transcendental nature and temporary mental constructs about them.

Meditation (Dhyāna, 觀) is the illuminated observation of purpose. With a heart of pure faith, one's arms ever embrace the splendor found in knowledge and discernment of the nature of life's purpose, illuminating everything through the grace of the person and the environment of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛).

The Scripture (Sūtra, 經) here is reference to the threads (of words and meanings that invoke the true nature of life's purpose). With these threads, the warp (depth) is able to hold the woof (breadth), creating a fabric with a unique texture. Upon attaining a bolt of this fabric (a scroll of scripture), it has many applications. Through the scripture, one is able to embrace this nature of purpose through the associations between its principles and its practices. The scripture adapts to the different capacities of sentient beings through the mental resolve (samādhi, 定) of meditation and mental dispersion (vikṣepa, 散) of thoughts, words and deeds so that its meaning does not just stand bare like a tree stripped of its leaves. Those able to cultivate their spiritual destiny directly rely on the mutually dependent conditions of doctrine and practice. Through the vehicle of the vow for rebirth in the Pure Land, the practitioner may also realize a contentment of purpose that is unconditional. Upon being reborn in the nation of the Pure Land there is nothing further to fear as one embarks on the practice that leads to the ultimate fruit of awakening (anuttara samyak sambodhi, 極菩提), the spiritual life of enlightenment (dharma kāya, 法身) that forever abides like empty space. Because it summons such benefits, it is called 'the scripture'.

In a single scroll (eka saṃkṣepa, 一卷): Although this Meditation Scripture explains the main teaching in two different assemblies,⁵² it is all told in a single volume, and so it is said to be 'in a single scroll'.

And so it is called 'The Scripture on the Buddha's Teaching About Meditation on the Buddha of Infinite Life in a single scroll'. This explains the meaning of the scripture's title.

3 Explaining the text of the scripture in terms of the different methods and goals on the greater and lesser tracks of spiritual awakening:

Some examples of different methodologies (siddhānta, 宗) used in scriptures include:

- * The Scripture on the Instructions of the Layman 'Of Spotless Reputation' (Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra, 維摩詰所說經) uses 'the inconceivable nature of emancipation' as its methodology.
- * The Long Version of the Scripture on the Deliverance of the Great Discernment (Mahā Prajñā Pāramitā Sūtra, 大品般若波羅蜜多經) uses 'transcendental discernment through understanding the nature of emptiness' as its methodology.
- * Now this Meditation Scripture uses 'a meditation that visualizes the enlightened being' as its methodology. It is also called 'attaining resolve through keeping the enlightened being in mind' (buddha anusmṛti samādhi, 念佛三昧). Its essential nature is a wholehearted vow for rebirth in the Pure Land and a dedication of one's life to it.

In speaking of the doctrines being greater or smaller:

Question: In which of the two baskets of scripture is this one included and to which of the two doctrines does it belong?

Answer: This Meditation Scripture is included in the baskets of scripture on the bodhisattvas (the greater vehicle) and it belongs to the teachings about sudden spiritual awakening (as opposed to those about gradual awakening).⁷

4. **Distinguishing the different kinds of teachers:** In all, there are five kinds of teachers found in the scriptures:

- a. Enlightened beings (Buddhas, 請佛)
- b. Noble disciples (ārya śaikṣya, 聖弟子)
- c. Divine sages (ṛṣis, 天仙) among the gods in the heavens of meditation⁵³
- d. Spiritual forces of nature (bhūta, 鬼神)
- e. Apparitions (nirmāṇika, 變化) of the mind and its imagination

This Meditation Scripture is the Buddha's own teaching.

Question: Where did the Buddha teach it and to whom was it taught?

Answer: The Buddha was in the royal house (Rājagṛha) when he taught it to Vaidehī.

5. **Distinguishing between the mental resolve (samādhi, 定) in meditation and the mental dispersion (vikṣepa, 散) in the unafflicted actions of thought, word & deed:**

This is in six parts:

- a. The one who requested the teaching was the consort Vaidehī.
- b. The one who was requested to teach of it was the Blessed One (Bhagavan, 世尊).
- c. The one capable of teaching it is an enlightened being who has descended into this world (tathāgata, 如來).
- d. That which was taught were the two virtues of mental resolve (samādhi, 定) and mental dispersion (vikṣepa, 散) and the sixteen gateways of meditation.
- e. The teacher was The One Who Has Descended Into This World (Tathāgata, 如來), the Buddha Śākyamuni.
- f. The one taught was Vaidehī.

Question: Who requested the teachings on the virtues of mental resolve and mental dispersion?

Answer: Vaidehī requested the teaching on mental resolve. The one on mental dispersion was an unsolicited teaching from the Buddha.

Questions: Having not yet examined the virtues of mental resolve and mental dispersion, in what words of the text do they first appear? And now, with this doctrine said to be without any falsehood, what capacity is needed to be able to accept it?

Answers: There are two questions here:

1. The capacity needed to accept this doctrine on mental resolve & mental dispersion:

- a. Those without the capacity refers to those without faith who malign, ridicule or make light of the transcendental nature of life's purpose, those who are not human and those who are in one of eight conditions⁵⁴ that make it difficult to hear about it. In these situations, there are people who do not have the capacity to accept it. In such times of rotten forests and stubborn stones, it is impossible for sentient beings to accept the enrichment found in rebirth in a Pure Land and the spiritual restoration it brings.
- b. Those with the capacity: Except for those cited above, people with a wholehearted faith who aspire to this spiritual rebirth through the power that comes from the vehicle of the Buddha's vow of dedication have this capacity. The ablest of these aspire for an entire lifetime while the least able do so during at least ten recollections of the Buddha's name.⁶¹ There is not one who cannot get there.

This answers the above question about those who have the capacity to accept it.

2. The first references to the teachings about the virtues of mental resolve and mental dispersion in the text are both general and specific.
- a. They first appear generally in three different parts of the scripture.
1. The first was where Vaidehī spoke to the Buddha saying: “I pray that you teach me of a place where there is no sorrow or distress”; This was her *general request for the place to seek mental resolve* (samādhi, 定), *which is the sphere of purpose, also called the spiritual realm* (dharma dhātu, 法界)
 2. The second was where she said “I pray that the sun-like Buddha teach me how to meditate on a refuge from this suffering in such a way that all my actions will be pure of affliction”. This was her *general request on how to put this mental resolve into practice, which is through the practice of meditation* (dhyāna, 觀).
 3. The third place is where the scripture says “The Blessed One emitted a golden ray of light from the middle of his brow that illuminated all the innumerable worlds of the ten directions. Upon returning (back inward), the ray remained on the crown of the Buddha's head where it was transformed into a golden beacon that looked like Mount Sumeru.⁵⁵ All the Buddhas in the sublimely pure nations and lands of the ten directions were revealed through it.” These are words *answering the general request to teach about the mental dispersion* (vikṣepa, 散) found in the cultivation of thoughts, words and deeds.
- Although there are these three different parts, they are all on the general capacity to accept this teaching.
- b. Their first specific appearance is found in two parts:
1. From where Vaidehī spoke to the Buddha, saying: “I now wish to be reborn in the World of Pure Bliss (Sukhāvātī, 極樂世界), the site of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛)”, there was her *selection of a specific transcendental knowledge of purpose to seek*, which is that of observing the nature of life's greater purpose with sublimely compassionate discernment (pratyavekṣana jñāna, 妙觀察智).
 2. From where she said “Blessed One, I pray that you teach me how to deliberate on it and how to penetrate it” there was her *request on how to cultivate a specific practice*, which is the resolve of meditation that ever keeps the Buddha in mind (buddha anusmṛti samādhi, 念佛三昧).
- Although there are these two different parts (the first on the wish or vow for spiritual rebirth and the second on the way to put it into practice), they are both about the specific capacity to accept this teaching.
- This is the point in the scripture at which the Buddha began to explain the nature of mental resolve and mental dispersion.

Question: Which of these meditations are about the virtues of mental resolve and which are about the virtues of mental dispersion?

Answer: The part from the first meditation on the setting sun through the thirteenth on the different visualizations of the spiritual life is about the virtues of mental resolve. The last three meditations on the three blessings of virtue and the nine grades of spiritual capacity are about the virtues of mental dispersion.

a. ***On the distinguishing between the mental resolve found in meditation and the mental dispersion found in the actions of thoughts, words and deeds:***

Question: What are the differences between mental resolve and mental dispersion and where do they appear in the text?

Answer: The Scripture says “teach me how to deliberate on it and how to penetrate it”. These are the words where they first appear in the text. In distinguishing between the meanings of deliberation and penetration:

1. Deliberation (cintanā, 思惟) is the preliminary means of preparing for meditation. On visualizing the Pure Land, one generally distinguishes between the dual signs of its grace:
 - a. The consequences that the Buddha depends on (parakarma phala, 依報) refers to the grace of the Buddha’s environment - the spiritual realm, or sphere of purpose (dharma dhātu, 法界)
 - b. The consequences of the Buddha’s actions (svakarma phala, 正報) refers to the grace of the person - the spiritual life, or life of purpose (dharma kāya, 法身).The subject of deliberation appears in the words about the meditation on the ground that speak of “rough visions of the ground in the Land of Ultimate Bliss” and the words of Vaidehī in the introduction that says “teach me how to deliberate on it”.
2. Penetration (samāpatti, 正受): When the visualizing mind is entirely still and the conditions of worry and doubt have subsided, there is an association with the resolve of meditation (samādhi, 三昧) that is called ‘penetration’. The subject of penetration appears in the words about the meditation on the ground that say “when one attains meditation on (the waters) with perfect mental resolve one will see the ground in this land so clearly that it will be impossible to express it all in detail” and the words of Vaidehī in the introduction that says “teach me ... how to penetrate it”.

b. ***On the inseparability of mental resolve and mental dispersion:***

Although mental resolve and mental dispersion have these two different meanings and this generally answers the questions above, in further dealing with it, the understanding about the enlightened being that descended into this world (tathāgata, 如來) here is different from that of many other teachers. These other teachers⁵⁶ concluded that:

- * Deliberation (cintanā, 思惟) is used for both the three blessings (tri guṇa, 三福) of unafflicted conduct and the nine grades of capacity (nava prakāra, 九品) for spiritual rebirth through *the virtues of mental dispersion* (vikṣepa, 散善) (in the cultivated actions of one’s thoughts, words and deeds).
- * Penetration (samāpatti, 正受) is used for entering into the sixteen meditations through *the virtues of mental resolve* (samādhi, 定善).

This understanding is not entirely correct. Why is this so? As it is said in The Scripture on the Great Garland of Universal Enlightenment (Mahā Vaipulya Buddha Avataṃsaka Sūtra, 大方廣佛華嚴經):

“Deliberation and penetration are only different names for the resolve of meditation (samādhi, 三昧)”.

This passage is similar to one found in this scripture about the (third) meditation on the ground that says:

“These reflections of the waters ... are called rough visions of the ground in the Land of Pure Bliss. When one attains a meditation on them with perfect mental resolve, one will see the waters in this land so clearly that ...”

Question: Where in the text is there a request on how to penetrate both mental resolve and mental dispersion?

Answer: At first Vaidehī's request only said:

“Teach me how to meditate on a refuge from suffering in such a way that my actions will be pure of affliction.”

Then later she also requested:

“Teach me how to deliberate on it and how to penetrate it.”

Although there were these two requests, they were both about the virtues of mental resolve. Nowhere in the text is a teaching about the virtues of mental dispersion requested. It was only the Buddha himself who brought it up, without solicitation. Later, on the reason for the virtue of mental dispersion being brought up, the scripture says:

“So that ordinary beings in the future will aspire to cultivate the pure actions that will enable them to attain rebirth in the western Land of Pure Bliss.”

6. Reconciling the apparent contradictions in other commentaries about this scripture on the different capacities for spiritual rebirth in the Pure Land, and answering questions about this to eliminate any doubts about it:

Concerning this, there are six parts:

- a. Explanations of the nine grades of capacity for spiritual rebirth cited in this scripture by other teachers⁵⁶
- b. A critique of this understanding
- c. Another critique of this understanding about the nine grades of capacity
- d. Literary evidence in the text that this scripture was really about the capacities for spiritual rebirth of ordinary people, not beings already on the noble path
- e. Understanding general and specific ideas of time (about rebirth being innate and pre-existing as opposed to being something that is acquired through cultivation)
- f. Understanding that this spiritual rebirth in the Pure Land is not acquired through the lesser track of attaining freedom from affliction on an individual level

a. *Explanations of the nine grades of capacity for spiritual rebirth cited in this scripture by other teachers:*⁵⁶

1. First they brought up three levels of spiritual rebirth for those with a higher capacity:
 - a. The higher level of spiritual rebirth for those with a higher grade of capacity was said to refer to bodhisattvas who realize from the fourth to seventh level of grounding^{4D} (bhūmi, 地) in the transcendental nature of life's purpose. They understood it this way because the Meditation Sūtra says here they have acquired an enduring meditation on this nature of purpose that neither arises nor perishes and transcends their lives in this world (anutpattika dharma kṣānti, 無生法忍).
 - b. The intermediate level of spiritual rebirth for those with a higher grade of capacity was said to refer to bodhisattvas who realize the first to fourth level of grounding^{4D} in this transcendental nature. Why did they understand it this way? Because the sūtra says that they would attain an enduring meditation on this nature of purpose that neither arises nor perishes and transcends their lives in this world within a single lifetime (eka kalpa, 一劫).⁷

- c. The lower level of spiritual rebirth for those with a higher grade of capacity was said to refer to any of those from the lineage (gotrabhū, 種性)⁵⁷ of the bodhisattvas, from those who first show a potential for it up to those who attain the first level of grounding in the transcendental knowledge of life's purpose. Why did they understand it this way? Because this sūtra says that they would attain this first level of grounding in joyfulness (pramudita bhūmi, 喜地)^{4D} within three lifetimes (tri kalpa, 三劫).⁷

These three grades of capacity for such rebirth were therefore said to include those noble beings who are already on the greater track (mahāyāna, 大乘) of spiritual awakening.

2. Next there are the three levels of rebirth for those with intermediate capacities. On them, these teachers said:

- a. The higher level of spiritual rebirth for those with an intermediate grade of capacity was said to refer to those who attain any of the first three fruits on the lesser track of attaining freedom from affliction on the individual level - this includes stream-enterers (srotāpanna, 預流), once-returners (sakṛdāgāmin, 一來) and never-returners (anāgāmin, 不還).³ Why did they understand it this way? Because it says they would soon become truly worthy beings (arhats, 羅漢).
- b. The intermediate level of spiritual rebirth for those with an intermediate grade of capacity was said to refer to ordinary beings who have still not yet undergone an inner spiritual transformation. Why did they understand it this way? Because it says they would soon become stream-enterers (srotāpanna, 須陀洹).³
- c. The lower level of spiritual rebirth for those with an intermediate grade of capacity was said to refer to ordinary people with wholesome worldly virtues who loathe suffering and seek rebirth. Why did they understand it this way? Because it says that they would attain the fruit of becoming truly worthy beings (arhats, 阿羅漢)³ within a single lifetime.⁷

These three intermediate grades of capacity for such rebirth were said to only include those noble people who are on the lesser track (hīnayāna, 小乘) of attaining spiritual freedom from affliction on the individual level.

3. Spiritual rebirth for those with a lower grade of capacity was said to refer to ordinary people who were just beginning to train in the greater vehicle practice. There were said to be three grades according to whether their moral transgressions were light or heavy, but they were all put together into the same single rank. Whether they would eventually attain such rebirth in the Pure Land was not at all certain however.

- b. *A critique of the understanding of these teachers about the nine capacities for spiritual rebirth as described in this Meditation Scripture:*

The bodhisattvas at the higher and intermediate levels of spiritual rebirth for those with a higher capacity were said to refer to those who have attained anywhere from the first up to the seventh level of grounding^{4D} in the transcendental nature of life's purpose. As it is said in The Scripture on the Great Garland of Universal Enlightenment (Mahā Vaipulya Buddha Avatamsaka Sūtra, 大方廣佛華嚴經):

“From the first to the seventh level of grounding, they realize the transcendental nature of life's purpose while still living in this world.”

These are ones who already do not suffer from the fragmentary nature (of life & death). They are said to have already applied their merit to delivering sentient beings for two

great cycles of countless lifetimes (dvāva asaṃkyeya kalpas, 二大阿僧祇劫)⁷ and comprehend the dual emptiness of personality and purpose in pairing the blessings of spiritual cultivation (bhāvana, 修) with transcendental knowledge (jñāna, 智) of the nature of life's purpose. Their minds are said to have already entered into the inconceivable sphere of purpose (dharma dhātu, 法界), transforming it into an infinite number of manifestations through the power of spiritual penetration (abhijñā, 神通)²⁶. Living in the land that is the spiritual reward of grace, they always hear the teachings about the transcendental nature of life's purpose through the grace of the Buddha's spiritual life (sambhoga kāya, 報身) and, in each and every moment of thought (kṣaṇa, 須臾), their manifestations of compassion everywhere fill the ten directions. **The rebuttal:** If this is so, why should they further worry about relying on Vaidehī's request to the Buddha on how to seek rebirth in the Land that is Secure in Contentment (since they have already attained it)? In citing this literary evidence, are not the explanations of these teachers proven to really be mistaken? This is in response to their explanations that the higher and intermediate levels of rebirth for those of higher capacity are only reserved for those at such a level of spiritual development.

The lower level of spiritual rebirth for those with a higher grade of capacity: This was said to only refer to those in the lineage (gotra, 種性)⁵⁷ of the bodhisattvas, from those who have just inspired their minds (bodhi cittotpada, 發菩提心) for the very first time to those who have entered into the first level of grounding in joyfulness (pramudita bhūmi, 喜地) about the transcendental sphere of life's purpose (dharma dhātu, 法界). Like it is said in The Scripture on the Great Garland of Universal Enlightenment:

“These bodhisattvas are said to never turn back. Although their lives still dwell in the stream of life and death, they are never tainted by it, just as geese and ducks live in the water but it is never able to make them wet (so that they will sink).”

And like The Long Version of the Scripture on the Deliverance of the Great Discernment (Mahā Prajñā Pāramitā Sūtra, 大品般若波羅蜜多經) says:

“Bodhisattvas in this rank never turn back because they have acquired two kinds of truly virtuous acquaintances (kalyāṇa mitra, 善識知) who protect and defend them. Who are these good acquaintances? They are:

1. The Buddhas of the ten directions
2. The bodhisattvas of the ten directions

Because their outer thoughts, words & deeds are ever aided by the skillful guidance of these acquaintances, they never lose their way and they are said to be among the ranks of those who never turn back (avinivartanīyā, 無退).”

These bodhisattvas are also capable of attaining the eight signs of becoming a Buddha.⁵⁸ In discussing the merits of their practice, they have already applied the blessings of spiritual cultivation (bhāvana, 修) and transcendental knowledge (jñāna, 智) equally for one great cycle of countless lifetimes (eka mahā asaṃkyeya kalpa, 一大阿僧祇劫).⁷

The rebuttal: Already endowed with these excellent virtues, why should they further worry about relying on Vaidehī's question on how to seek rebirth in the Pure Land? In citing this literary evidence, one recognizes that these teachers are again mistaken. This is a correction of their analysis of this lower level of spiritual rebirth being only attained by those with such a high grade of capacity.

Next, we disprove other misunderstandings about *the three levels of spiritual rebirth for those with an intermediate grade of capacity*: These other teachers said *the higher level of spiritual rebirth for those with an intermediate grade of capacity* referred to those who have attained the first three of the four fruits on the noble path: those of the stream-enterer, (srotāpanna, 預流), the once-returner (sakṛdāgāmin, 一來) and the never-returner (anāgāmin, 不還).³

The rebuttal: In fact, those who have forever cut off the three roads of evil are no longer reborn into the four lower destinies of hell, hunger, brutality & egotism. Although they may commit immoral acts, in being endowed with the certainty that comes from the resolve of meditation they do not incur any karmic consequences. Like the Buddha said:

“Those who attain the four fruits sit on the mat of spiritual emancipation just as I do.” Already having the power realized from acquiring this merit, why would they worry further about how to seek the road of rebirth into the Pure Land like Vaidehī? In fact, the great compassion of the Buddhas is for those that suffer most. The hearts of the Buddhas sympathize with and are mindful of sentient beings who are forever drowning (in the stream of life & death) and, because of this, they encourage their devotion to attaining rebirth in the Pure Land that is beyond affliction. There is a great urgency to rescue those drowning in the water, but what need is there to save those who are already standing on the other shore (of spiritual freedom)? By citing such literary evidence, one recognizes that the analysis of these teachers makes the same mistake as before.

One may (also) recognize these teachers’ errors in (their analysis of) those with *lower spiritual capacities* (one will recognize this in the explanations that follow.).

c. Another critique of this understanding about the nine grades of capacity for spiritual rebirth:

1. *A further critique of their explanation about the higher level of spiritual rebirth for those with a higher grade of capacity*: There are many teachers who speak of this referring to bodhisattvas at the fourth to seventh levels of grounding (bhūmi, 地)^{4D}. If this is so, why does this scripture say (paraphrasing the text):

“There are three kinds of sentient beings who will attain this rebirth:

- a. Those who are able to embrace precepts of moral commitment and cultivate a heart of loving kindness
- b. Those who are unable to embrace precepts of moral commitment or cultivate a heart of loving kindness but are able to read and recite the scriptures on the greater track of spiritual awakening
- c. Those unable to embrace the precepts or read the scriptures but at least are able to call on the names for the Three Treasures and keep them in mind

Each of these three kinds of people focus the energy of their minds outwardly through their thoughts, words and deeds, continuously dedicating these actions without rest through a vow for rebirth in the Land of Pure Bliss for from one to seven days and nights. When their lives come to an end, the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Buddha Amitāyus, 阿彌陀佛) will appear to welcome them with a great host of manifested Buddhas and bodhisattvas, all emitting a radiant splendor and extending their arms. In the time it takes for them snap their fingers, they will be reborn in this nation of the Pure Land.”

In citing this quotation from The Meditation Sūtra, there is the teaching about the greater track for ordinary people with the very highest virtue and capacity who

- live after the Buddha has left this world. Although their days in this world are numbered, with their actions (karmas) being fierce and passionate, how can they be analyzed as being the same as those who are most noble? In fact, the efficacy of the bodhisattvas from the fourth to seventh levels of grounding are inconceivably great. Why would they rely on only one to seven days of virtue to be welcomed into this rebirth by the extended arms of a Buddha seated on a blossom's pedestal? This also corrects the mistaken analysis of this scripture's words by others about who is being referred to in 'the higher level of spiritual rebirth for those with a higher capacity'.
2. Next, there is a further correction of the understanding about the intermediate level of spiritual rebirth for those with a higher grade of capacity: There are teachers who speak of this being about the bodhisattvas who attain from the first to the fourth level of grounding.^{4D} If this is so, why does The Meditation Sūtra say:
- "They do *not necessarily* receive, embrace, read and recite the scriptures about the ... greater track of spiritual awakening."
- Why does it say *not necessarily*? It says *not necessarily* because some read these scriptures while others do not. This scripture only says that these people skillfully understand the meaning of the scriptures but it does not yet discuss their conduct. And it also says (again paraphrased):
- "With deep faith in the cause & effect of actions (karma, 業) and their consequences (vipāka, 報), they do not malign, ridicule or make light of the doctrine about the greater track of spiritual awakening (mahāyāna, 大乘). Through their vows they dedicate the merits and virtues that they have acquired to the Nation of Pure Bliss (Sukhāvati, 極樂) and aspire to be reborn there. When the lives of these practitioners come to an end, they will see the Buddha of Infinite Life ... and a great host of Buddhas and bodhisattvas ... who will extend their arms and welcome them into this nation."
- In citing this quotation from The Meditation Sūtra, it also refers to the teaching of this greater track to ordinary people after the Buddha has left this world. Their karma is somewhat weaker than those with the highest level of spiritual rebirth, causing there to be some difference in their welcome into the Land of Ultimate Bliss at the end of their lives. In fact, the efficacy of the bodhisattvas from the first to the fourth level of grounding is said to be inconceivable, as taught in The Scripture on the Great Garland of Universal Enlightenment (Mahā Vaipulya Buddha Avataṃsaka Sūtra, 大方廣佛華嚴經). Why would they need to rely on Vaidehī's request for a way to attain rebirth in the Pure Land? Again, this is a correction of these other teachers' understanding, this time about who is being referred to in the intermediate level of spiritual rebirth for those with a higher grade of capacity.
3. Next, we correct these teachers' understanding about the lower level of spiritual rebirth for those with a higher grade of capacity: There are teachers who speak of this referring to the lineage (gotrabhū, 種性)⁵⁷ of bodhisattvas before and up to attaining the first level of grounding in joyfulness (pramudita bhūmi, 喜地)^{4D} about the transcendental nature of life's purpose. If this were so, why would The Meditation Sūtra say:
- "They *also* believe in the cause and effect of karma and retribution."
- Why does it say they *also* believe in it? Because some believe in it while others do not, here it says that they *also* do. Further on this, The Meditation Sūtra says:
- "They ... do not malign, ridicule or make light of this greater track, only aspiring to awaken to the nature of life's supreme purpose."

With only one kind of proper action (samyak karmānta, 正業) being mentioned and no other kind being expressed, they are said to be dedicated to a single practice in their aspiration to dedicate any merit they have attained to rebirth in the Land of Pure Bliss (Sukhāvatī, 極樂). This scripture also says (paraphrasing):

“When the lives of these practitioners come to an end, the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛) will come to greet and welcome them ... with ... apparent manifestations of the spiritual life with a transformative influence (nirmāṇa kāya, 化身) that all simultaneously extend their arms ... When they see this ... they will attain this spiritual rebirth.”

This passage from the text only refers to ordinary sentient beings who aspire to this greater track of spiritual awakening after the Buddha has left this world. Because their karma is not as strong, when they leave this world, the speed at which they are welcomed into this Land of Pure Bliss is different. When discussing the spiritual strength of bodhisattvas (prior to and upon attaining the first level of grounding), they are said to be capable of being reborn in any of the Pure Lands in the ten directions that they wish. Why would they need to rely on Vaidehī’s request to the Buddha for advice on how to be reborn in the Nation of Pure Bliss in the west? This is therefore another correction of these other teachers’ analysis, this time about who is being referred to in ‘the lowest level of spiritual rebirth for those with a higher grade of capacity’ in this scripture. And in this scripture, the speed at which these ordinary people with higher grades of capacity attain the three levels of such rebirth are said to be different. How are they different?

- * When there is the higher level of spiritual rebirth for those with a higher capacity, the Buddha extends his arms and welcomes them simultaneously through countless manifestations (nirmāṇa buddhas, 化佛).
- * When there is the intermediate level of spiritual rebirth for those with a higher capacity, the Buddha extends his arms and welcomes them simultaneously through a thousand manifestations.
- * When there is the lower level of spiritual rebirth for those with a higher capacity, the Buddha extends his arms and welcomes them simultaneously through only five hundred manifestations.

It is because of the strength or weakness of their karma that there are these different distinctions in how many manifestations of the Buddha’s spiritual life appear!

Next, we further correct their explanations about the intermediate grades of capacity:

4. On the higher level of spiritual rebirth for those with an intermediate grade of capacity:

There are teachers who say this refers to those who have attained any of the first three fruits of the lesser vehicle, the stream-enterer (srotāpanna, 預流), the once-returner (sakṛdāgāmin, 一來) and the never-returner (anāgāmin, 不還).³ If this is so, why does this Meditation Scripture say:

“These are sentient beings who have accepted and embraced the five precepts of the laity, the eight precepts of austerity or cultivate the full precepts of an ascetic³² and do not commit any of the five most consequential acts of evil or other such immoral acts¹⁸ ... They dedicate the merits they have earned to the western Land of Pure Bliss (Sukhāvatī, 極樂土) and their aspiration to be reborn there ... When the lives of these practitioners come to an end, the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛) will appear before them surrounded by a following of many monks. Emitting a golden radiance, the Buddha will teach

about the true nature of life's purpose ... Before raising their heads, they will attain spiritual rebirth in this World of Pure Bliss."

This passage is about this rebirth in the Pure Land by ordinary people who have embraced precepts of moral commitment on the lesser track of attaining freedom from affliction on the individual level after the Buddha has left this world. How could it be just referring to those who are endowed with these lesser levels of nobility found through attaining the first three fruits³ on the lesser track of freedom from affliction on the individual level?

5. *On the intermediate level of spiritual rebirth for those with an intermediate grade of capacity:*

There are teachers who say that this refers to ordinary people who have attained a vision of the noble path (darśana mārṅa, 見道) through cultivating the three blessed (merit-producing) practices (traya bhadra carya, 三賢)⁴⁴ on the individual level.

If this is so, why does this scripture say:

"These are sentient beings who have embraced precepts of moral commitment ... for a single day and night ... and dedicate the merits and virtues they attain ... When the lives of these practitioners come to an end, they will see the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life before them ... and they will be reborn in the World of Pure Bliss to the west."

How can this passage refer to ordinary people who have attained these three worthy (merit-producing) practices? It only refers to ordinary people who have been without virtue after the Buddha has left this world. If during their life, for one full day and night, they should encounter a situation in which these lesser precepts of moral commitment should be bestowed on them, they should dedicate any virtues they attain from these practices to attaining spiritual rebirth in this Pure Land. It is only through the power of grace from the Buddha's vow that there is this rebirth. Although there is no harm in discussing these lesser noble purposes, the Buddha taught this Meditation Scripture for ordinary people, not just for those who are trying to be noble.

6. *On the lower level of spiritual rebirth for those with an intermediate grade of capacity:*

There are teachers who say this refers to ordinary worldly people who have only cultivated worldly blessings of virtue (laukika bhāvanā mārṅa, 世修道), prior to their next step on the path in which they will seek freedom from affliction through cultivating the three worthy (merit-producing) practices⁴⁴ found on the lesser track of attaining freedom from affliction on the individual level. If this is so, why does The Meditation Sūtra say:

"These are virtuous sons and daughters who have fulfilled their filial duty through supporting their fathers and mothers and practiced benevolence and righteousness in this world. As the end of their lives approach, they meet good spiritual acquaintances who teach them about the contentment found in the nation of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life and the forty-eight great vows (see Appendix A) ... Having heard of these things ... they will be reborn in the World of Pure Bliss to the west."

This passage only refers to people who have not yet heard about enlightenment to the ultimate nature of life's purpose (buddha dharma, 佛法). Although they have offered filial duty and support to their parents, they have not yet inspired a mind that seeks freedom from the afflictions found in this world. As they approach the end of their lives, they meet virtuous acquaintances who encourage them to attain spiritual rebirth in the Land of Pure Bliss. Because these acquaintances

encourage them to dedicate their hearts to it, they will attain rebirth there. And, because these people have spontaneously practiced filial piety but have not yet freed themselves from this world and its afflictions, they are just said to be on the path of those who have fulfilled their filial obligations.

Next, we deal with incorrect understandings about the three levels of spiritual rebirth for people with a lower grade of capacity. There are teachers who say that this refers to ordinary people who are just beginning to train in the practice on the greater track of spiritual awakening and that their three grades of capacity are in accordance with the seriousness of their moral transgressions. Because they are not yet firmly on the noble path, they have difficulty in distinguishing its steps and so easily fall off of it. Now we say that this explanation is not correct. So what are these three grades of lower capacity? It refers to people who only know how to create evil and are without the two kinds of virtuous roots, those that are worldly and those that establish the transcendental nature of life's purpose (buddha dharma, 佛法). How can these people possibly be expected to understand rebirth in the Land of Pure Bliss?

7. The higher level of spiritual rebirth for those with a lower grade of capacity: As the text of the scripture says, although they do not commit the five most consequential acts of evil¹⁸ or commit blasphemy by maligning or making light of the true nature of life's purpose, they commit many other kinds of unwholesome acts and are without any shame or humility about it. In a single moment at the end of their lives they meet a virtuous acquaintance who teaches them about the greater track of spiritual awakening and how to call on the Buddha through a single utterance of their voices. The Enlightened Being of Infinite Life will then send forth manifestations of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas to come and welcome them, and they will attain spiritual rebirth in the Land of Pure Bliss. However, evil people like this only believe what they see before them. If they encounter favorable conditions, they will attain this rebirth. If they do not, they will remain stuck on the three roads of evil (hell, hunger & brutality) and will not escape from them.
8. The intermediate level of spiritual rebirth for those with a lower grade of capacity: This includes people who violate the precepts of moral commitment and cannot keep them, whether they have been formally received or not. And in stealing the community property of the faithful (sāṃghikaṃ dravyam, 僧物), robbing its individual members or teaching others about unclean purposes, they do not have a moment of shame or humility. When the end of their lives approach, all the fierce fires of hell reach them at the same time and are manifested before them. When they see these fires, they meet good spiritual acquaintances (kalyāṇa mitra, 善識知) who teach them of the merits and virtues found in the nation and land of this Buddha and encourage them to attain rebirth there. Having heard them, these people have the means to see the Buddha, attain this rebirth and be spiritually transformed.
 - * Before they met such good acquaintances, the fires of hell came to greet them.
 - * After they encounter them, the manifestations of the Buddha come to greet them.
 Such is the power of grace arising from the vow from the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛).
9. The lower level of spiritual rebirth for those with a lower grade of capacity: This refers to sentient beings who commit the very worst kinds of karma such as the five most consequential acts of evil¹⁸ and the ten most unwholesome acts. Because of these evil actions, these people are certain to fall into hell for an countless number of lifetimes

(asaṃkhyeya kalpa, 阿僧祇劫). When their lives come to an end, they meet virtuous spiritual acquaintances who teach them how to call on the name of the Buddha Amitāyus and encourage them to attain rebirth in the Land of Pure Bliss. Those who depend on these instructions on how to call on the Buddha's name will be reborn here through the vehicle of recalling this name and keeping it in mind.

- * Those who do not meet such a good spiritual acquaintance are certain to sink into hell.

- * Those who do meet such an acquaintance at the end of their lives will be greeted by the seven treasures.¹⁴

And so the ideas about the virtues of mental resolve and the three different grades of capacity in this Meditation Scripture all refer to ordinary people who are mired in the five kinds of corruption⁵⁹ that ultimately prevail after the Buddha has left this world. It is only through the different circumstances of spiritual rebirth they experience that these nine different grades of capacity are distinguished. And what are these circumstances?

- * Three levels of spiritual rebirth are experienced by ordinary people with a greater capacity for virtue (through faith).

- * Three levels of spiritual rebirth are experienced by ordinary people with an intermediate capacity for virtue (through the making of moral commitments).

- * Three levels of spiritual rebirth are experienced by ordinary people with a lesser capacity for virtue, only attaining it through wrestling with evil through prayer.

Because of the evil actions (akuśala karma, 惡業) they have committed, as the end of their lives approach, they must rely on encountering virtuous spiritual acquaintances (kalyāṇa mitra, 善識知) and the power of grace that arises from the Buddha's vow to attain spiritual rebirth in the Land of Pure Bliss. Upon acquiring the blossom of spiritual rebirth, it opens up and they begin to inspire their minds.

Question: Why did these other teachers speak of those with lower spiritual capacities being people who were just beginning to study and train in the doctrine of the greater vehicle?

Answer: In harboring beliefs that were mistaken and harmful to others, the damage they created was serious. Now, the text reveals evidence that those with each of these levels of capacity can all be redeemed. We now see that the Buddha desired to make all ordinary people receive the benefits of spiritual rebirth in the Pure Land, whether they are virtuous or evil and at any of the nine grades of capacity. In bearing faith and being without any doubt in the power of grace that comes from the Buddha's vow, they can all attain this rebirth in the Land of Pure Bliss.

d. Evidence in the text about this scripture really being for ordinary people:

Two Questions:

1. In correcting the mistaken interpretations above, how does one know that the meditations in this scripture from the Blessed One are for common, ordinary people and not just for those that are noble of purpose?
2. Because ordinary people cannot properly ascertain this just through their personal feelings, is there also literary evidence to be found in this scripture?

Answer: Ordinary sentient beings are heavily corrupted by afflictions and their knowledge and discernment is shallow and short-sighted, while the deliberations of noble beings is broad and deep. With this being the case, how can ordinary beings

know or discern this by themselves? We will now offer evidence through ten citations of the scripture's very words.

1. The Meditation Sūtra says:

"The Buddha addressed Vaidehī, saying: I will now teach you about this with metaphors so that ordinary beings in the future will aspire to cultivate the pure, unafflicted actions that will enable them to attain rebirth in the western Land of Pure Bliss."

This is its first proof.

2. And it says:

"The One Who Has Descended Into This World (Tathāgata, 如來) will now teach about actions that are pure of affliction for all sentient beings of the future who will be subject to the damages that are inflicted by emotional disturbances, the enemies of their true purpose (kleśa śatru, 煩惱賊)."

This is its second proof.

3. And it says:

"The One Who Has Descended Into This World will now teach Vaidehī and all sentient beings of future generations how to meditate on the World of Pure Bliss in the west."

This is its third proof

4. And it says:

"Vaidehī said: Blessed One, those who are like me can now see this nation and land through the power of the Buddha's grace. However, after the Buddha's passing how will sentient beings who are tormented by the five kinds of suffering that come from corruption, evil and lack of virtue be able to see the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life and this World of Pure Bliss?"

This is its fourth proof.

5. As it says in the part on visualization of the setting sun:

"You and all those like you should first focus your minds on a point to the west, directing all of your thoughts towards this single place. How does one go about doing this? All sentient beings except those who are born blind should begin by looking towards the setting sun and inspiring mindful thoughts."

This is its fifth proof.

6. As it says in the part on visualization of the ground:

"The Buddha addressed Ānanda: You should keep the Buddha's words in mind and teach of this visualization of the ground for all those of future generations who aspire to become free from suffering."

This is its sixth proof

7. As it says in the part on visualization of the lotus seat:

"Vaidehī said: Blessed One, now, because of the power of your grace, I have seen the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life and these two great bodhisattvas. How will ordinary sentient beings in the future be able to see them through this power of the Buddha's grace after you are gone?"

This is its seventh proof.

8. Later in his answer about visualization of the lotus seat, the Buddha says:

"The Buddha addressed Vaidehī: (You and ordinary sentient beings of the future) who desire to see this Buddha should mindfully visualize ..."

This is its eighth proof.

9. As it says in the part on visualization of an image of the Buddha:
“The spiritual life (dharma kāya, 法身) of the Buddhas that descend into this world enters into the hearts and minds of all sentient beings from the transcendental sphere of purpose (dharma dhātu, 法界) ...”

This is its ninth proof.

10. As it says in each of the visualizations of the nine grades of capacity:

“These are sentient beings who ...”

This is its tenth proof.

Although there are ten quotes cited above that are not the same, they all similarly clarify that the enlightened being that descended into this world (tathāgata, 如來) only taught these sixteen meditations for those sentient beings who have forever been drowning in suffering. It is not concerned about those who are endowed with noble purposes, whether these purposes are great or small. With all these literary proofs being provided, how can there be any more confusion about this?

e. Understanding general & specific ideas of time (on spiritual rebirth being innate and pre-existing or something that is acquired through cultivation): This is in two parts:

1. *On spiritual rebirth in the Pure Land being innate and pre-existing:* On this, Asaṅga’s Summary of the Greater Vehicle Doctrine (Mahāyāna Saṃgraha, 攝大乘論) says:
“It is just as how those who call on the name of the Enlightened Being of Abundant Treasures (Bahuratna Buddha, 多寶佛)⁶⁰ are predestined to realize the path of supreme spiritual awakening (sambodhi, 無上菩提), never turning back or falling from it.”

Question: Generally speaking, awakening to the nature of life’s purpose (bodhi, 菩提) is called the fruit of enlightenment (buddha phala, 佛果). It is also said to be a direct consequence of the Buddha’s spiritual life (svakarma phala, 正報), the principle of the noble path (mārga yukti, 道理) that begins with arousing the resolve to attain enlightenment (bodhi cittotpada, 發菩提心). Many different practices are employed to prepare for its perfect realization. Isn’t it impossible to hope to realize it merely from the practice of calling on the Buddha’s name (buddha anusmṛti, 念佛)? How can it be realized from this one practice among so many?

Answer: As the final chapter in The Scripture on the Great Garland of Universal Enlightenment (Mahā Vaipulya Buddha Avataṃsaka Sūtra, 大方廣佛華嚴經) ‘On Entering Into the Inconceivable Sphere That is the Arena of Life’s Purpose’ (Gaṇḍa Vyūha, 入法界) says (paraphrasing):

“The Bhikṣu ‘Cloud of Virtue’ (Megha Śrī, 功德雲比丘) spoke to the young prince ‘Of Sublime Wealth’ (Sudhana Kumāra, 善財童子), saying:

‘In the ocean of the Buddha’s countless practices of meditation, I have only mastered a single one, the resolve of meditation attained through calling on the Buddha (buddha anusmṛti samādhi, 念佛三昧).’”

(See Appendix C for a full reading of this.)

In citing this passage of literary evidence was there not reference but to a single practice? Although there was just this single practice, from arising out of the stream of life & death (saṃsāra, 生死) to reach spiritual freedom (nirvāṇa, 涅槃), he never turned back or sank back down, and so in the scripture it is said that he never fell from the noble path.

Question: Chapter two in The Scripture on the Lotus Blossom of Sublime Purpose (Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra, 妙法蓮華經) ‘On Skillfulness in Ways & Means’, (Upāya Kauśalya, 方便) says:

“Anyone calling out ‘Namo Buddha’ even once is *already* on the path to attaining enlightenment.”

Is there any difference between this and the citation from Asaṅga’s Summary of the Greater Vehicle?

Answer: In the citation from The Summary of the Greater Vehicle Doctrine, calling on the Buddha only referred to one’s own aspiration to realize the fruit of enlightenment. In the scripture cited here, calling on the Buddha’s name is brought up to contrast it with a distracted mind that is still choosing among any one of ninety-five different ways of cultivating the noble path that are really external to the principle of attaining its true resolve (samādhi, 定). In fact, none of these external paths are just about calling on a Buddha’s name. One really only needs to call on the Buddha’s name once to be on the path of enlightenment, and so the scripture speaks of *already* being on it.

2. On this spiritual rebirth being acquired; planting a seed to attain its fruit in the future:

Asaṅga’s Summary of the Greater Vehicle Doctrine also says:

“People will only be spiritually reborn in the Land that is Secure in Contentment because they have made a vow to do so.”

In the future many will try to penetrate the meaning of this teaching in Asaṅga’s discourse’s but will not understand its true intent and will mistakenly interpret the passage in The Meditation Sūtra about those at the lower level of spiritual rebirth for those with a lower grade of capacity attaining rebirth in the Pure Land after only ten invocations of the Buddha’s name.⁶¹ In imitating this practice, they will find that after ten such invocations they have still not really attained this spiritual rebirth. This can be likened to one who saves a single golden coin with the objective of acquiring a thousand of them. It will take many days to attain that many coins, and one will not earn a thousand of them just through a single day of effort. The idea of attaining spiritual rebirth through ten recitations⁶¹ of the Buddha’s name is like this. One is only making a cause towards this rebirth in the distant future and one will never really attain it merely through calling on the Buddha ten times. Although the path to enlightenment is ultimately about the spiritual rebirth of ordinary people, the scripture also has them call on a Buddha’s name in their aspiration to renounce evil. In deceptively speaking about them attaining spiritual rebirth on the noble path when they have not yet actually done so, there is the device called ‘distinguishing the Buddha’s true intent but still having to deal with the different levels of maturity found in people’s spiritual capacities’ (kāḷāntara abhiprāya, 別時意).

3. On the continuity of the vow:

Question: Why does the Shorter Scripture on the Buddha of Infinite Life (Amitāyus Sūtra, 阿彌陀經) say:

“The Buddha addressed Śāriputra, saying: If there are virtuous sons or daughters who hear about the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life and wholeheartedly embrace this blessed one’s name (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛) with an undistracted mind for from one ... to seven days, when their lives end, this Buddha will appear standing before them with the whole assembly of noble beings (welcoming them to this spiritual rebirth in the Pure Land).”

But then later say:

“Like this, there are as many enlightened beings (Buddhas, 諸佛) as there are grains of sand along the River Ganges. With each in their own nation, they extend their long, broad tongues that cover all of the billion-fold spiritual realm and express these heartfelt words to sentient beings: ‘All of you should faithfully accept this Scripture on the Grace of the Buddhas’ Remembrance ...’”

The grace of remembrance (parigraha, 護念) here is a reference to the *continuity* of calling on the Buddha’s name for from one to seven days.

4. On practice - the practical application of the vow:

Up to now, the holy teachings (of the scriptures and discourses) have been used to cite literary evidence. We have not yet examined all of those practicing *now* who do not really understand the practice’s true intent. In discussing those whose minds are common and ordinary (limited to the six realms of affliction between heaven and hell) or small (limited to the lesser track of only seeking freedom from affliction on an individual level), there is only a taking of the scripture’s words on faith. However, many of the Buddhas’ sincere words can be twisted into falsehoods by those who misinterpret them. How can one stand seeing these words turned into falsehoods like this? But since this does happen, one can really only rely on the attainment of good spiritual acquaintances and the grace descending from the Buddha’s vows in all of one’s aspirations for rebirth in the Land of Pure Bliss, and one should consider the nature of these vows well in one’s own inner deliberations. So as to not harm those in this world with a mistaken understanding about the Buddha’s words, one must not just hold onto (for example) the Bodhisattva Asaṅga’s Summary of the Greater Vehicle Doctrine (Mahāyāna Saṃgraha, 攝大乘論) as the one authoritative guidebook on this. If one does so, one’s own mistakes could end up harming others.
Question: Why is it that one can begin their practice and yet be said to have not attained this spiritual rebirth?

Answer: If one aspires to attain spiritual rebirth, one needs to perfect both a vow to attain it and a practice that will fulfill this vow. This discourse by Asaṅga only speaks of inspiring a vow and does not actually discuss any specific practice.

Question: Why doesn’t it do so?

Answer: It has not yet been considered at all and so it has not been discussed.

Question: What are the distinctions between a vow and its practice?

Answer: As it is said in the holy teachings:

“In only having a technique of practice, there is no goal to reach.

In only having a vow of dedication, one’s attempt to reach it will be in vain.

One needs the vow and practice to support each other for there to be success.”

Because Asaṅga’s discourse simply spoke about inspiring a vow but did not yet discuss how to apply it to a specific practice, there was not yet a complete teaching about the attainment of spiritual rebirth in the Pure Land. It only discussed the making of a cause for such a rebirth that was still very far away. This is the meaning of this.

Question: How can one speak of there being the vow’s intent but there not being spiritual rebirth?

Answer: Having heard others speak about the western Land of Pure Bliss being inconceivable, one makes a vow of dedication, saying ‘I too vow to attain spiritual rebirth there’. In being guided by these words but without any continuity in the maintaining of this vow, there is just said to only be a vow (a promise). Now, through the continuity expressed in this Meditation Scripture

through the metaphor of ‘the ten invocations of the Buddha’s name’⁶¹, there is a fulfillment of the vow through:

- a. The ten practices fulfilling the Buddha’s transcendental vows (dasa caryā praṇidhāna, 十行願) from the Bodhisattva said to be ‘Wholly Worthy’ (Samantabhadra, 普賢)^{17G} (See Appendix D for a full reading on this) &
- b. The ten distinguished practices that deliver transcendental discernment of purpose (daśa pāramitā, 十行) from the Bodhisattva ‘Bestowing Sublimity of Discernment’ (Mañjuśrī, 文殊師利)^{17A}

These practices are found in the final chapter of The Scripture on the Great Garland of Universal Enlightenment (Mahā Vaipulya Buddha Avataṃsaka Sūtra, 大方廣佛華嚴經) called ‘On Entering Into the Transcendental Sphere That is the Arena of Life’s Purpose’ (Gaṇḍa Vyūha, 入法界).

Question: How are these vows perfected through practice in the scripture at hand?

Answer:

- * In saying ‘Namo’ there is the devotion of one’s life. This is also called ‘inspiring the vow of dedication’.
- * In saying ‘Amitāyur Buddha’ there is putting this vow into a specific practice. Through combining these two there is the direct attainment of spiritual rebirth.

5. On the inseparability of one’s own actions and the greater power of grace one depends on:

- * And when Asaṅga’s Summary of the Greater Vehicle Doctrine speaks of calling on the Enlightened Being of Abundant Treasures (Bahu Ratna Buddha, 多寶佛),⁶⁰ it referred to one seeking the fruit of enlightenment through the consequence of one’s own actions (svakarma phala, 正報).
- * Later, in only arousing the vow to seek rebirth in the Pure Land, it referred to the consequences in the environment that one depends on (parakarma phala, 依報).

One is the consequences of one’s own actions while the other is the consequences one depends on. Are they not similar to one another? In fact, seeking enlightenment through the consequences of one’s own actions is the more difficult path. If one’s skill in one’s practice is insufficient, it is easier to rely on the grace of the Buddha’s transcendental vows, the fruits attained from another, higher power. However, through reliance only on these vows, the mind is not yet able to penetrate it - it must also be put into practice in one’s own life. This is comparable to how committing oneself to spiritual transformation is easy but actual mastery of it is more difficult. There are those who make a vow to attain spiritual rebirth in the Pure Land and at the same time commit themselves to the transformation of all sentient beings in this world. This is a lot easier said than done! However, whether one is able to exert oneself for a whole lifetime or for just ten continuous recollections of the Buddha’s name without interruption,⁶¹ ultimately no one can fail to attain this spiritual rebirth through relying on the power of grace descending from the Buddha’s transcendental vows. And so it is said to be the easier path. This is ultimately impossible to put into words but, when those who have faith harbor doubts about it, the holy teachings (of the scriptures) are cited to help clarify its meaning. This way, those who wish to hear about it have a way to quickly put their confusions to rest.

f. *Why there is no spiritual rebirth in the Pure Land through the lineage (gotra, 種性) of the lesser vehicle of attaining freedom from affliction at the individual level:*

1. On the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛) as the reward of grace that descends from the Buddha’s spiritual life (sambhoga kāya, 報身):

Question: Is the pure nation of the Buddha of Infinite Life (Amitāyus, 阿彌陀) the

reward of grace from the Buddha's spiritual life (sambhoga kāya, 報身) or an apparent manifestation of the Buddha's spiritual life that has a transformative influence (nirmāṇa kāya, 化身)?

Answer: It is the reward of the Buddha's grace, not just an apparent manifestation of it. How do we know this? Like The Scripture of the Universal Nature of the Greater Vehicle (Mahāyāna Sama Svabhāva Sūtra, 大乘同性經) teaches:

"The Buddha of Infinite Life (Amitāyus, 阿彌陀佛) and the western Land Secure in Contentment (Sukhāvatī, 西方安樂) constitute the reward of grace from an enlightened being and the land where this Buddha resides."

And The Longer Scripture on the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Sukhāvatī Vyūha Sūtra, 佛說無量壽經) says (paraphrasing):

"During the time of the Buddha 'Lord of This World's Abundance' (Lokeśvara Rāja, 世饒王佛), the monk 'Treasury of Purpose' (Dharmākara, 法藏) practiced the bodhisattva path after the arousing of forty-eight vows."

One of these vows (the eighteenth) was:

"If, when I become a Buddha, the sentient beings of the ten directions call on my name and title up to ten times⁶¹ continuously without interruption in a vow to attain rebirth in my nation but they are not reborn here, I will not retain this enlightenment." (See Appendix A for all forty-eight such vows)

Having attained enlightenment, the spiritual life of this monk 'Treasury of Purpose' has now become a reward of grace descending from these causes that were made (when he was in this world). Furthermore, this Meditation Scripture says that when those with a higher grade of capacity for spiritual rebirth approach the end of their lives, the Buddha of Infinite Life will come to welcome them with apparent manifestations of the Buddha's spiritual life that have transformative influence (nirmāṇa kāya, 化佛), with this reward of grace descending from the Buddha's spiritual life (sambhoga kāya, 報身) being said to be simultaneous with all these manifestations extending their arms. Because of this, the scripture says that the Buddha of Infinite Life is *with* these apparent manifestations. Through this testimony from the scripture, one understands that the Buddha of Infinite Life is really a reference to this reward of grace. In fact, this reward of grace and the response (of these apparent manifestations in this world) are just different names for the eyes of the Buddha. These aspects of the Buddha's spiritual life were first described in Asaṅga's Summary of the Greater Vehicle Doctrine (Mahāyāna Saṃgraha, 攝大乘論) as 'the reward of grace that creates a response in this world', but later described as 'the response in this world that creates the reward of grace'. Generally speaking, this reward of grace refers to the practice of a cause that is not in vain but rather is destined to summon a fruit in the future (after the Buddha's life in this world) while the response itself is the fruit of enlightenment that is called its '(final) reward of grace'. The cultivation of a myriad practices by the Buddha over a three-fold cycle of countless lifetimes (tri asaṃkhyeya kalpa, 三大阿僧祇劫)⁷ was certain to lead to an awakening to the transcendental nature of life's purpose and so now, after the path of enlightenment has been realized, there is the response of the Buddha's spiritual life in this world (nirmāṇa kāya, 應身). Through the revelations of the Buddhas of the past and the present, the essential nature of this three-fold spiritual life (trayaḥ kāyāḥ, 三身) has been distinguished. There is really nothing

else to be distinguished outside of this existential nature, which is beyond any differentiations of it. Even though the eight signs of attaining enlightenment in this world⁵⁸ have endless variations and the names of the Buddhas are as numerous as the particles of dust and grains of sand in the universe, beyond discussing their essential nature, they are all just apparent manifestations of the Buddha's spiritual life (nirmāṇa kāya, 應身). And so here the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛) has been revealed to be the reward of grace that descends from the spiritual life (sambhoga kāya, 報身).

2. *On the ultimate spiritual freedom* (parinirvāṇa, 般涅槃) *and the permanence or impermanence of this reward of grace:*

Question: The reward of grace from the Buddha's spiritual life (sambhoga kāya, 報身) is said to remain forever without arising or perishing. So why does The Scripture on the Prophecy About the Bodhisattva 'Beholding the Cries of This World' (Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva Vyākaraṇa Sūtra, 觀音授記經) teach of a time when the Buddha of Infinite Life (Amitāyus, 阿彌陀) will also enter the ultimate spiritual freedom (parinirvāṇa, 般涅槃)? How is this explained?

Answer: Whether or not the Buddhas ever enter into the ultimate spiritual freedom is only a matter known in the sphere of enlightenment and not something that can be pried into through the shallow knowledge of those on the three vehicles,⁴⁶ much less understood by ordinary people (of the six paths between heaven and hell). Although this is so, for those determined to know something about it, I dare to cite a scripture to show testimony about it. The Chapter on the Ultimate Spiritual Freedom Being Beyond Any Illusion (Nirvāṇa Anirmita, 涅槃非化) in the Longer Version of the Scripture on the Deliverance of the Great Discernment (Mahā Prajñā Pāramitā Sūtra, 大品般若波羅蜜多經) has the following dialogue: Subhūti was known for his grasp of the nature of emptiness (śūnyatā, 空) and was a protagonist in the Scriptures on the Deliverance of Transcendental Discernment' (Prajñā Pāramitā Sūtras).

"The Buddha addressed the disciple Subhūti:

"If a magician creates the apparition of a human being, do you think that this apparition has a real substance that is without emptiness, or not?"

Subhūti said:

"It does not, Blessed One!"

The Buddha then said:

"With there being form (objective reality) so there are illusions. With there being consciousness as well as its emotional feelings, mental associations and other motive forces, there are also illusions, and even in all the different kinds of transcendental knowledge (sarvākāra jñātā, 一切種智) there are illusions."

Subhūti again spoke to the Buddha:

"Blessed One! If worldly purposes are illusions, are the purposes beyond this world also illusions? These include mindfulness of the four subjective spheres,^{13A} the four proper exertions,^{13B} the four magical feet,^{13C} the five spiritual capacities,^{13D} the five spiritual powers,^{13E} the seven limbs of awakening,^{13F} the eight-fold noble path,^{13G} the three doors of emancipation⁶² as well as the Buddha's ten powers,^{63A} four kinds of fearlessness,^{63B} four unhindered kinds of interpretation⁶⁴ and eighteen unique kinds of purpose^{63H} as well as all the other fruits of awakening to the transcendental nature of life's purpose. It also includes all virtuous and noble people such as the

stream-enterers (srotāpanna, 預流), the once-returners (sakṛdāgāmin, 預流), the never-returners (anāgāmin, 不還), the truly worthy beings (arhats, 羅漢),³ the self-enlightened (pratyeka buddhas, 辟支佛),⁴⁶ the great beings awakening others to the true nature of life's purpose (bodhisattva mahāsattvas, 摩訶薩),⁴⁶ the perfectly enlightened beings in this world (Buddhas, 佛)^{45a} and the Most Blessed Ones (Bhagavans, 世尊) beyond it that are worshipped^{45b} - are all of these lives and their purposes also illusions or are they not?"

The Buddha answered Subhūti, saying:

"All purposes found everywhere are endowed with illusions. These include:

- * All of the manifestations of students of the noble path, beings awakening to the afflicted nature of sentient existence in their own lives, beings awakening others to life's greater purpose & perfectly enlightened beings.
- * All of the manifestations of emotional disturbance (kleśa, 煩惱)¹ as well as all of their cycles of cause and effect, that is, actions (karma, 業) and their consequences (vipāka, 報).

And so Subhūti, there are illusions found everywhere in the conditions that cause the arising of consciousness."

Subhūti then spoke to the Buddha again, saying:

"Blessed One! In severing these emotional disturbances, there are the fruits of the stream-enterers, the once-returners, the never-returners, the truly worthy and the self-enlightened. And so, in the elimination of all these disturbances and their habitual tendencies (vāsanās, 習氣), are all of these apparent manifestations of spiritual transformation endowed with illusions or not?"

The Buddha answered, saying:

"Whenever purposes have the complementary aspects of arising and perishing, there are the illusions that arise from apparent manifestations."

Subhūti said:

"What purpose is there that is without the illusions of arising and perishing?"

To this, the Buddha said:

"Only in the (unconditional) aspect of spiritual freedom (nirvāṇa, 涅槃) that is beyond any falsehood is there a purpose that is without any illusions."

Subhūti said:

"Blessed One! Like the Buddha himself has taught, all purposes are universal and not created by students of the noble path, the self-enlightened, those awakening sentient beings to the nature of life's purpose or those who are perfectly enlightened. With or without a Buddha enlightened to it, the transcendental nature of life's purpose is always endowed with the nature of emptiness, and only through this nature there is found the ultimate spiritual freedom (nirvāṇa, 涅槃). But how is this freedom unlike illusion?"

The Buddha then addressed Subhūti and said:

"So it is, so it is! The complete equanimity found in the nature of all purposes (sarva dharma samatā, 諸法平等) is not produced by students of the noble path and the nature of emptiness is even found in the ultimate spiritual freedom. However, if newly inspired bodhisattvas hear that the nature of all purposes everywhere is ultimately empty and that even spiritual freedom is endowed with illusions, their minds will become alarmed and worried. Because of this, for these newly inspired bodhisattvas, should not

I distinguish between these purposes by saying that those that arise and perish are like illusions, and those that neither arise nor perish are not like illusions?”

From this holy teaching of the scriptures, we have examined this and determined that the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛) is the reward of grace that descends from the Buddha’s spiritual life (sambhoga kāya, 報身). Even so, this reward of grace can still enter into the ultimate spiritual freedom. Those with knowledge (jñāna, 智) of the transcendental nature of life’s purpose will understand the meaning of this.

3. On the lineages of capacity (gotra, 種性)⁵⁷ that enter into this reward of grace and those that do not:

Question: Having spoken of the reward of grace from the Pure Land and the Buddha’s spiritual life being both lofty and sublime, how can those of small nobility (on the lesser track of seeking freedom from affliction on the individual level) who take on the hardships of austerity and ordinary people (of the six paths) who are tainted with obstacles of emotional disturbance attain entry into the ultimate spiritual freedom through this state of grace?

Answer: In discussing sentient beings who are tainted with spiritual obstacles (on the six paths) and those (on the lesser track) who have real hardship in attaining a destiny of contentment, it is only through the powerful conditions created by taking refuge in the Buddha’s vow of dedication that those on the five vehicles⁴⁶ capable of transcendental knowledge are able to enter into it.

Question: When speaking about ordinary people (of the six paths) and those of small nobility (on the lesser track) attaining spiritual rebirth, why does Vasubandhu’s Commentary on the Scripture About Infinite Life (Amitāyus Sūtra Upadeśa, 無量壽經優波提舍 or Sukhāvati Vyuha Sutra Upadeśa, 淨土論) say:

“No one is spiritually reborn who is effeminate,²⁴ of diminished capacity or on the lesser track of only seeking their own deliverance.”

In this Meditation Scripture, those of the lesser track have been revealed to be spiritually reborn in this nation. How can we dispel our doubts about this and clear up our misunderstandings?

Answer: You have recited the words of the text but not yet penetrated the principle beyond the words. Instead of comprehending it you have just added to the confusion. Now we will cite the Buddha’s teaching to clarify proof and allay your feelings of doubt. And what is this proof? There are three levels of rebirth in the Pure Land for those with a lower capacity described in this Meditation Scripture. How should they be understood? On the higher level of spiritual rebirth for those with lower capacity, the scripture says (paraphrasing):

“These foolish people manifest many unwholesome purposes and have been without any shame or humility. When the end of lives their lives approach, they meet good spiritual acquaintances (kalyāna mitra, 善識知) who teach them of this greater track and ... how to call on the Buddha’s name. Because they call on the Buddha’s name ... the Buddhas and bodhisattvas are revealed before them. Through the vehicle of a bejeweled lotus blossom, they will be reborn in this land. When the blossom opens up, the Bodhisattva ‘Beholding the Cries of This World’ will teach them about this greater track of spiritual awakening. Upon hearing about it with faith and understanding it, they will awaken to the supreme nature of life’s purpose (sambodhi, 無上道心).”

Question: What is the difference between the mind (citta, 心) and a seed-nature, or lineage (gotra, 種性)⁵⁷ of spiritual capacity?

Answer: It is only a matter of semantics, as the meaning is really no different. With the opening up of the blossom, the vessel of a person's spiritual life is cleansed and one first properly hears about the transcendental nature of life's purpose without analyzing it into differences between it being either greater or smaller. Only upon hearing about this is there the means to bear faith in it. And so the Bodhisattva 'Beholding the Cries of This World' does not teach about the lesser track of (on attaining enlightenment on the individual level) per se. This bodhisattva only teaches of the greater track (of the universal enlightenment) from the very beginning. And upon hearing about it and greatly rejoicing in it, there is inspiration of the supreme path of enlightenment. This is called the lineage of rebirth into the greater track of spiritual awakening. It is also called spiritual rebirth into its state of mind.

* *The rebirth of those from the lesser track:* And when the blossoms of those on the lesser track open up and the Bodhisattva 'Beholding the Cries of This World' teaches them about the transcendental nature of life's purpose, they hear about this greater track and bear faith in it. This is called 'the spiritual rebirth of those from the lineage of the lesser track'. It is also a reference to the rebirth of their state of mind. This is so for those at all three levels in this intermediate grade of capacity because they can all inspire this state of mind. Because they hear about this greater track of spiritual awakening, they are reborn into its lineage. Because they do not hear about the lesser track, they are no longer reborn back into its lineage of becoming merely students of the noble path or self-enlightened beings. Generally speaking, the lineage of their capacity refers to their state of mind. From this, one understands that there is no longer any rebirth back into this lineage of the lesser track.

* *The rebirth of those who are effeminate²⁴ or of diminished capacity:* This refers to those who, through the power of their own efforts, are without any lineage (agotraka, 無種)⁵⁷ for transcendental knowledge of purpose or lines of capacity to produce the virtues of spiritual freedom (nirvāṇa, 涅槃) from affliction. This should be properly understood.

And so, when sentient beings of the ten directions who have cultivated moral commitments on the lesser track to only attaining freedom from affliction on the individual level then make a vow to attain spiritual rebirth and are without any obstacles to doing so, they will attain it. Only upon reaching out to those who have already realized the smaller fruits (found on this lesser track) will they be converted (and become dedicated to) those fruits that are great. Each one who is so converted then becomes dedicated to that which is great and never returns back to the mindset of the lesser track. Because of this, it is said that there is no rebirth back into a lesser lineage.

* At first the spiritual life is understood in terms of its different lineages (gotra, 種性)⁵⁷ of capacity not being defined (aniyata, 不定) as greater or smaller.

* Afterwards it is understood in terms of ending (any aspiration for) the lesser fruits (of only attaining freedom from affliction on the individual level).

This should be properly understood.

7. Explaining the benefits attained by Vaidehī upon hearing the main teaching of the Buddha in this scripture:

Question: Vaidehī spoke of attaining an enduring meditation on the transcendental nature of purpose that neither arises nor perishes and was beyond her life in this world (anutpattika dharma kṣānti, 無生忍). You have not yet explained when she attained it. Where does this appear in the text?

Answer: Vaidehī's attainment of an enduring meditation on this nature of life's purpose that transcends life in this world and neither arises nor perishes appears at the beginning of the seventh meditation (on the lotus seat). Here the scripture says:

"The Buddha addressed (Ānanda and) Vaidehī: "Listen carefully, deliberate on and remember the following well. I will now teach of a specific method to eliminate suffering and distress ... When these words were spoken, the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛) appeared standing in the emptiness of space with the two great Bodhisattvas 'Beholding the Cries of This World' (Avalokiteśvara, 觀世音菩薩) & 'Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength' (Mahā Sthāma Prāpta, 大勢至菩薩), attending the Buddha to the left and right respectively... When Vaidehī saw the Buddha of Infinite Life she worshiped at Śākyamuni's feet."

Upon rejoicing and praising this vision, she realized an enduring meditation on the transcendental nature of purpose that neither arose nor perished and went beyond her life in this world. We know this because later, in the part near the end of the scripture on the attainment of benefits, it says (paraphrasing):

"Vaidehī ... then saw the broad and far-reaching signs found in this Land of Ultimate Bliss and the spiritual lives of the Buddha and the two bodhisattvas. With her heart rejoicing, she praised that which that she had never before seen. In a single moment, she attained a great spiritual awakening endowed with an enduring meditation on the transcendental nature of life's purpose that neither arose nor perished and went beyond her own life in this world.

She did not attain this meditation when just seeing all the pure nations and lands in the radiance of the lotus pedestal itself (in the introductory part of the scripture).

Question: The above words say that, when Vaidehī saw these things in this Nation and Land of the Ultimately Sublime Bliss (Sukhāvatī, 極妙樂國土), her heart rejoiced and she praised that which that she had never before seen. In a single moment, she attained a great spiritual awakening, an enduring meditation on the transcendental nature of purpose that neither arises nor perishes and went beyond her life in this world.

How do you explain the meaning of this?

Answer: This was on the Blessed One's fulfillment of Vaidehī's first specific request, about providing the skillful ways and means (upāya kauśalya, 方便) needed to encourage the cultivation of this meditation through signs of the benefits to be attained. How do we know this? Because right afterwards the Buddha said to her:

"The enlightened beings that have descended into this world (tathāgatas, 如來) have different skillful ways and means to make you attain this vision."

Following this, there were the visualizations of the setting sun, the waters, the ground and the others up to the thirteenth meditation (on the different visualizations of the spiritual life). All of these meditations constitute different skillful means to help encourage attainment of the resolve of meditation (samādhi, 定). The Buddha desired to make sentient beings realize each one of these meditations and see these sublime phenomena so that their minds would rejoice and they would attain an enduring

meditation on the transcendental nature of purpose that neither arises nor perishes and goes beyond their lives in this world. Such was the mercy and compassion of the enlightened being who descended into this world (tathāgata, 如來) for those of later generations. These benefits were revealed in order to encourage their cultivation and make them progress in their training without ever losing the mysterious aid that comes from the noble power of grace descending from the Buddha's spiritual life.

Shandao's Personal Testament

I personally attest to all the above by declaring the following: With my hands faithfully holding all the different strands of the scripture's words, I have tied them together into thirteen parts in this first section on the profound meaning between the lines of the text (dūrārtha, 玄義).

These thirteen parts are enumerated as follows: The main explanation of the profound meaning was first broken down into seven parts. The sixth part (on reconciling the contradictions arising from different teachings about the capacities for rebirth) was then further broken down into six parts, turning the seven parts into a total of twelve parts.

1. Introducing its overarching theme
 2. Explaining the meaning of its title
 3. Explaining its text in terms of the different methods and goals found on the greater and lesser tracks of spiritual awakening
 4. Distinguishing the different kinds of teachers
 5. Distinguishing the differences between the mental resolve (found in meditations) and the mental dispersion (found in the actions made through thoughts, words and deeds)
 6. Reconciling the apparent contradictions in other commentaries about this scripture on the different capacities for spiritual rebirth in this Pure Land, and answering questions to help eliminate any feelings of doubt about it:
 - a. Explanations of the nine grades of capacity for spiritual rebirth cited in this scripture by other teachers
 - b. A critique of this understanding
 - c. Another critique of this understanding about these nine grades of capacity
 - d. Literary evidence in the text that this scripture was really about the capacities for spiritual rebirth of ordinary people, not beings already on the noble path
 - e. Understanding general and specific ideas of time (about rebirth being innate and pre-existing as opposed to being something that is acquired through cultivation)
 - f. Understanding that this spiritual rebirth in the Pure Land is not acquired through the lesser track of attaining freedom from affliction on an individual level
 7. Explaining the benefits attained by Vaidehī upon hearing the main teaching of the Buddha in this scripture
- With the introductory verse added at the beginning, there are a total of thirteen parts.

These thirteen parts all conform with the ultimate principle of the noble path, the profound gateway into the secret intent of the two Blessed Ones, the Buddha who appeared in this world (Śākyamuni, 釋迦牟尼) and the Buddha of Infinite Life (Amitāyus, 阿彌陀佛) who has entered into the grace endowed with the ultimate spiritual freedom (nirvāṇa, 涅槃). I first fully realized the profound meaning of this during three nights of revelation. Although there are the seven main parts on this profound meaning that are not the same, together they generally explain the meaning of the scripture before going into the analysis of each passage of its text (found in volumes two through four that follow). My desire in this first volume has been to make the faithful eliminate their doubts so they can first seek the profound meaning of the scripture without getting bogged down (in the details of the text). This should be properly understood.

End of Volume One, The Section on the Profound Meaning (dūrārtha, 玄義)

Shàndǎo's Commentary Explaining The Scripture About Meditation on the Enlightened Being 'Of Infinite Life' (觀無量壽佛經疏)
Volume 2

Here begins a line-by-line analysis of the words of the scripture's text

We will now summarize the scripture's text in five parts to clarify its meaning. In the first four, the Buddha appeared at an assembly⁵² in the City of the Royal House (Rājagṛha, 王舍城) where the main teaching about the methodology (siddhānta, 正宗) was made:

1. From "Like this I have heard ..." to "Vaidehī then spoke to the Buddha, saying ... 'how will sentient beings who are tormented by the five spiritual destinies of suffering that arise from corruption, evil and lack of virtue be able to see the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life and this World of Pure Bliss?'" there is *the introductory narrative* (nidāna, 序).
2. From the first sentence in the part on visualization of the setting sun saying "The Buddha addressed Vaidehī: You and all those like you should visualize ..." to the sixteenth and final visualization on the lowest level of spiritual rebirth for those with the lowest capacity, there is the part on *the main teaching of the methodology* (siddhānta, 正宗).
3. From "As the Blessed One spoke, Vaidehī and her five hundred female attendants heard ..." to "... Countless divine beings also aspired to attain the supreme spiritual awakening" there is the part on *the attainment of the scripture's benefits, or reward* (hitārtha, 得益).
4. From "Ānanda then arose from his seat and spoke before the Buddha ..." to "... the venerable Maudgalyāyana, the venerable Ānanda and Vaidehī had all heard the teaching of the Buddha's and greatly rejoiced" there is a part on *the propagation of the scripture* (pravṛtta, 流通).

In the fifth and final part of the scripture, there is a short second assembly⁵² at Vulture's Peak. Here:

5. Beginning with "Ānanda later told the great assembly about these events", the narrative is only in three parts (as there is no part on the attainment of a reward):
 - a. From "The Blessed One then walked though the emptiness of space and returned to Vulture's Peak", there is *the introduction*.
 - b. From "Ānanda later told the great assembly about these events ..." there is a part on *the main teaching of the methodology*.
 - c. From "Countless people ... and other supernatural beings then also heard the Buddha's teaching. They all rejoiced, worshiped the Buddha and then departed" there is a part on *the propagation of the scripture*.

Because there is a need to establish a setting, there is first *the introduction*. With the introduction having been made, there is next *the main teaching of the methodology*. Having finished teaching of it, finally there is then a desire to communicate about it to those of later generations who will embrace it. Because of this, lastly there is praise of its excellent virtues and encouragement of its study. This last part is on *its propagation*.

- * Although in the scripture as a whole there are five different parts delineated, in the second assembly there is a further division into three parts - an introduction, a main teaching and a part on its propagation.
- * Although there are the five different parts described in the first assembly, it can also be summarized as just having three these parts.

1. **On the Scripture's Introduction** (nidana, 序):

In beginning the scripture, the introduction is divided into two parts:

- a. The single phrase "Like this I have heard" is called *the testament of faith*.
- b. From "At one time ... " to the end of the introduction where it says "... after the Buddha's passing how will sentient beings ... be able to see the Buddha of Infinite Life and the World of Pure Bliss?" there is *the introductory narrative*.

a. **The Testament of Faith:**

The Scripture first says:

"Like this I have heard."

如是我聞。

In these first words that are a testament of faith, there are two parts:

1. Like this (evaṃ, 如是) is a general reference to *the teaching* that was heard.
2. I have heard (mayā śrutam, 我聞) specifically refers to Ānanda, *the person who was able to hear it, remember it and recall (recite) it (with faith)*.

Because of this, the scripture says "Like this I have heard". Together, these two parts explain the testament of faith.

Like this (evaṃ, 如是): For this scripture, this is a reference to the two-fold doctrine on the mental resolve of meditation (samādhi, 定) & mental dispersion of conduct (vikṣepa, 散). This is a reference to the mental resolve of meditation, which directly benefits the mental dispersion of conduct. It is what the Enlightened Being That Descended Into This World (Tathāgata, 如來) taught about here. In saying that this doctrine is without mistake, it is said to be "like this".

Like is also a reference to the doctrine being in accordance with the *aspirations* of sentient beings. With it being in accord with their aspirations, the Buddha was able to deliver them from affliction.

This is also a reference to the correspondence between the doctrine and the *capacities* of sentient beings.

And so the scripture says they are "like this".

Like this is also a reference to it being the teaching of The One Who Has Descended Into This World. (With the words 'is' or 'are' being substituted for the word 'this' here to properly convey the meaning of this passage):

- * Teaching of the gradual (doctrine) just like gradual (cultivation of the noble path) is & teaching of the sudden (doctrine) just like sudden (vision of the noble path) is.
- * Teaching of the characteristics (of purpose) just like the nature of these characteristics are & teaching of the emptiness (of purpose) just like the nature of emptiness is.
- * Teaching of human purposes just like the nature of human purpose is & teaching of divine purpose just like the nature of divine purpose is.
- * Teaching of lesser (purposes) just like the lesser (track of attaining freedom from affliction on an individual level) is & teaching of greater (purposes) just like the greater (track of spiritually awakening all sentient beings) is.
- * Teaching of ordinary purposes just like the self-centered nature of ordinary existence is & teaching of noble purposes just like the selfless nature of nobility is.

- * Teaching of causes just like the nature of karma is & teaching of effects just like the nature of consequences is.
- * Teaching of suffering just like the nature of suffering is & teaching of happiness just like the nature of contentment is.
- * Teaching of that which is distant just like the distance (of the past and future) are & teaching of that which is immediate like the immediacy of (the here and now) is.
- * Teaching of similarities just like the similarities (of universal categories) are & teaching of distinctions just like the distinctions (of uniqueness) are.
- * Teaching of purity just like the purity (of non-affliction) is & teaching of corruption just like the corruption (of emotional disturbance) is.
- * In teaching of all these characteristics of purpose and their thousands of different distinctions, The One Who Descended Into this World (Tathāgata, 如來) observed and thoroughly understood each and every one of them.
- * In adapting to all the different minds of sentient beings, the Buddha established all of the different spiritual practices for them, with each of them bringing about benefits that were not the same.
- * With the laws of karma and retribution being the spontaneous nature of life's purpose (dharmatā, 法然), these teachings are without mistake and do no harm, and so they are what is referred to as "this".

And it is for this reason that the scriptures customarily begin with the words "like this".

I have heard (mayā śrutam, 我聞): These were the words of Ānanda, who was the Buddha's cousin and personal attendant. Having always followed the Buddha, he became his well-known associate. Having always been seated beside him, he was able to listen to the Buddha's teachings first hand and remember their intent. This is also why he was later able to express and communicate their meaning to others without mistake. And it is because of this that the scriptures customarily begin with the words "I have heard".

Faithful testimony: This is a reference to Ānanda's acceptance of the duty to carry on the Buddhist tradition of embracing, keeping and transmitting the doctrine for later generations. In facing sentient beings, he said that there was a meditation on the true nature of life's purpose "like this" that "I have heard" from the Buddha. He attested to it so that others with a sincere heart could believe in it. And so this is called the part of the introduction on the faithful testament. This explains the scripture in terms of Ānanda's understanding of it.

b. The introductory narrative

The introductory narrative is in seven parts:

1. Establishing the setting
 2. The imprisonment of the father
 3. The imprisonment of the mother
 4. Loathing the bitter conditions of suffering
 5. Delight in the joyful conditions of pure bliss
 6. The virtues of mental dispersion found in the conditions of unafflicted conduct
 7. The virtues of mental resolve found in the conditions of unafflicted meditation
-
1. From “At one time the Buddha was dwelling on Vulture’s Peak by the City of the Royal House” to “Mañjuśrī, a prince of life’s true purpose, was the head of the assembly”, there is the establishment of the setting.
 2. From “At this time, in the great City of the Royal House, there was a crown prince named Ajātaśatru” to “the former king showed in his countenance that he was content and at peace” there begins the telling of the introduction with a part on the circumstances surrounding the imprisonment of the father.
 3. From “After these three weeks had passed, Ajātaśatru asked the chief guard of the dungeon if his father was still alive” to “he ordered his guards to confine (his mother) to a chamber deep in the castle and never allow her to leave it again” there is a part on the circumstances surrounding the imprisonment of the mother.
 4. From “When Vaidehī was locked up in confinement, she became pale and ashen with worry and despair” to “She said: Blessed One! What immoral act in the past did I commit to bear this evil child? Blessed One! Why have you had such a (familial and spiritual) affiliation with Devadatta?” there is a part on loathing the bitter conditions of suffering.
 5. From “Blessed One! I pray that you teach me of a place where there is no sorrow or distress, a refuge where I may go to be reborn” to “I now wish to be reborn in the World of Pure Bliss, the site of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life. Blessed One, I pray that you teach me how to properly deliberate on it and penetrate it”, there is a part on delighting in the joyful conditions of pure bliss.
 6. From “The Blessed One then gently smiled upon her, with a radiance of five colors being projected from his mouth” to “The Buddha then further said to Vaidehī: ‘Do you not now understand that these three kinds of conduct are the primary cause for the Buddhas’ actions through the past, present and future?’”, there is a part on the virtues of mental dispersion found in the conditions of unafflicted conduct.
 7. From “The Buddha then addressed both Ānanda and Vaidehī: ‘Listen carefully and consider well what you hear!’” to “Vaidehī then spoke to the Buddha, saying: ‘Blessed One, those who are like me can now see this nation and its land through the power of the Buddha’s grace. However, after the Buddha’s passing, how will sentient beings who are tormented by the five spiritual destinies of suffering that arise from corruption, evil and lack of virtue be able to see the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life and this World of Pure Bliss?’”, the introductory narrative concludes with a part on the virtues of mental resolve found in the conditions of unafflicted meditation.

Although there are seven distinct parts described above that are not the same, together they constitute a general analysis of the introduction.

1. The scripture begins the introductory narrative by establishing the setting:

The scripture begins by saying:

“At one time the Buddha was dwelling on Vulture’s Peak by the City of the Royal House, with a large assembly consisting of one thousand two hundred fifty monks and thirty-two thousand bodhisattvas. Mañjuśrī, a prince of life’s true purpose, was the head of the assembly.”

一時佛在王舍城耆闍崛山中。與大比丘眾千二百五十人俱。菩薩三萬二千。文殊師利法王子。而為上首。

1. Shāndào’s commentary says:

On the establishment of the setting, there are four parts:

- a. The time
 - b. The enlightened being
 - c. The place that was spiritually transformed
 - d. The assembled community of faith
- a. At one time (ekasmiṃ samaye, 一時): This brings up the time⁶ in the establishment of the setting. From here, the Buddha taught about the transcendental nature of life’s purpose, so the scripture first needed to establish the time and place. Only by relying on the causes and conditions (at hand, here and now) can sentient beings open up and awaken to this transcendental nature. In approaching those with the capacity to accept it, the Buddha, the master of spiritual transformation (nirmāṭṛ, 化主), had to deal with the necessities of time (now) and place (here).

One time:^{6b} Sometimes this is a reference to the twelve hours of a day or night, a month, a season, a year or some other period of time. The One Who Descended Into This World (Tathāgata, 如來) was able to respond to the capacities of sentient beings through all of these different time periods and influence them accordingly.

The place: In adapting to the circumstances at hand, The One Who Descended Into This World taught about the transcendental nature of life’s purpose.

- * Sometimes it was on a mountain or in a forest.
- * Sometimes it was in a royal house (a castle), a village or a town.
- * Sometimes it was in the wilderness or among burial mounds.
- * Sometimes it was among people, be they many or few.
- * Sometimes it was among the places where the gods dwell among the heavens.⁵³
- * Sometimes it was among students of life’s purpose (śrāvakas, 聲聞).
- * Sometimes it was among those awakening others to it (bodhisattvas, 菩薩).
- * Sometimes it was among the eight groups of supernatural beings (aṣṭau nikāyāḥ, 八部),⁶⁵ the kings of heaven (catur mahā devarājā, 四天王) or all the other gods found in the heavenly host.⁵³
- * Sometimes it was among ordinary beings, whether they were at one, two or many different places.
- * Sometimes it was among noble beings, whether they were at one, two or many different places.

In adapting to the time and place, The One Who Descended Into This World observed and recognized the circumstances without adding anything to them or subtracting anything from them, adapting to the conditions at hand in order to convey the true nature of life's purpose in such a way that each person could benefit from it.

- * Although a great bell resounds, one must first strike it to hear its knell.
- * The great noble one (the Buddha) always bestowed mercy, but one needed to make a request (a prayer) in order to hear him teach.

Because of this, the scripture says "at one time".

At one time (ekasmiṃ samaye, 一時):

Question: When Ajātaśatru rose up and rebelled against his father the king, where was the Buddha?

Answer:

- * *In terms of the timeless moment⁶ above being aware of the transient conditions below:*
At this one time, The One Who Descended Into This World (Tathāgata, 如來) was privately with two audiences upon Vulture's Peak, the students of life's purpose (śrāvakas, 聲聞) and those awakening sentient beings to it (bodhisattvas, 菩薩). At the same time, those down below appeared before those above. Because of this, the scripture says it was all "at one time".
- * *In terms of the transient conditions below being aware of the timeless moment above:*
Also, at this one time, while the Buddha was with these two audiences up at Vulture's Peak, those at the castle learned about the true reason for Ajātaśatru's act of betrayal. This is a reference to those up above appearing to (and teaching) those down below.

And with these two occurring simultaneously, the scripture says "at one time".⁶

- b. The Enlightened Being (Buddha, 佛): This is a reference to the master of spiritual transformation (nirmāṭṛ, 化主). In distinguishing the Buddha Śākyamuni from all of the other Buddhas, there was his appearance in this scripture.
- c. On Vulture's Peak (Gṛdha Kūta, 耆闍崛山) by the City of the Royal House (Rājagṛha, 王舍城): This refers to the timeless place of spiritual transformation and the setting where The One Who Has Descended Into This World was to travel. It is in two parts:
 1. He came to the City of the Royal House (Rājagṛha, 王舍城)⁵² and other villages to spiritually transform worldly people (the laity).
 2. He came to Vulture's Peak (Gṛdha Kūta, 耆闍崛)⁵² and other places to spiritually transform those who had left home (the ordained).
1. Those who were householders (gṛhastha, 俗人) greedily sought permanence in the objects of the five sensory desires. Even when they sought to inspire a mind pure of affliction, trying to teach them about the true nature of life's purpose still seemed futile, like trying to write on water. However, by adapting to the conditions at hand, the Buddha was always able to benefit sentient beings everywhere, never flagging in his greatness of compassion. The structures of lay and ordained lives may differ, but not the place where they dwell. This was called 'abiding in the objective reality (the sphere of form) that was immediately before them'.
2. Those who left home (pravrajita, 出家人) sacrificed their personal lives and abandoned their livelihoods for a higher calling. In forsaking their personal desires, they became devoted to the principle of truth. When their minds became adamant,⁴²

they were like perfect mirrors. In their reflections they sought the grounding in perfect enlightenment (buddha bhūmi, 佛地)¹¹ that would broadly benefit both themselves and others. If they did not detach themselves from the drama and clamor of this world, this virtue would have been impossible for them to realize. This was called ‘abiding in the place where they took refuge’ (niśraya, 依止住).

- d. From with a large assembly of ... monks (bhikṣus, 比丘) ... to Mañjuśrī, a prince of life’s true purpose, was the head of the assembly, there was the host of the Buddha’s disciples. In terms of this audience, there were two parts:
1. The students of the noble path
 2. The host of those awakening sentient beings to the transcendental nature of life’s purpose
1. In terms of the students of life’s purpose (śrāvakas, 聲聞), there are nine parts:
- a. “With” here refers to the fact that they lived in the same time and place as the Buddha in this world.
 - b. Generally on that which is great
 - c. The characteristics that were great
 - d. The audience that was great
 - e. The elders that were great
 - f. The number of people that was great
 - g. Those honored beings from the past who were great
 - h. The real inner virtues that were great
 - i. The fruits of realization that were great

Question: Virtually all the Buddhist scriptures (sūtras, 經) start out by listing the students of the noble path (śrāvakas, 聲聞) who were in attendance. Why is this?

Answer: This has a specific intent. Most of these students of life’s purpose still had beliefs that were external to the noble path. Like The Scripture on the Virtuous and the Foolish (Damamūka Nidāna Sūtra, 賢愚經) says:

“Uruvilvā Kaśyapa⁶⁶ led 500 disciples whose cultivation was based on false beliefs. Gaya Kaśyapa⁶⁶ and Nada Kaśyapa⁶⁶ each led 250 disciples whose cultivation was also based on false beliefs. All 1,000 of these people accepted the Buddha’s influence and eventually became worthy beings (arhats, 羅漢). There were another 250 disciples led by Śāriputra and Maudgalyāyana who were originally followers of the skeptic philosopher Sañjaya Vairaṭiputra.⁶⁶ Their spiritual cultivation was also based on false beliefs. They also accepted the Buddha’s influence and eventually attained the fruits of the noble path. With these four groups all being assembled together in a single place (following the Buddha), there were said to be 1,250 people in all.”

Question: Among this audience there were also some whose beliefs were not external to the noble path. Why does it refer to all of them together?

Answer: As it says in the scriptures, there were always some who followed the Blessed One who held beliefs which were external to the noble path. These were beliefs that lacked the qualities of equanimity and non-attachment. In fact, all schools of different beliefs only emphasize certain external aspects of virtue and so tend to accumulate attachments. Because of this, those with different schools of belief are given different names. And those with beliefs that are external to the noble path are many while those without them are few.

Question: How did all these people who had not yet fully examined their beliefs that are external to the noble path end up following the Buddha?

Answer: There are two explanations:

1. In terms of Buddha's understanding
2. In terms of the understanding of those with beliefs external to the noble path

1. In terms of Buddha's understanding: All of these beliefs that are external to the noble path are like changing winds that are forever blowing about but are not really about the transcendental nature of life's purpose as a whole. Although the Buddha penetrated the true dialectical principle, in guiding people there were still their innate habitual tendencies to contend with. Because The One Who Descended Into This World knew how to spiritually awaken sentient beings, he did not just transform them on the outside. Lest he damage them, he properly observed the sprouting of their spiritual capacities and did not let any of their unwholesome actions (akuśala karma, 不善業) later bear fruit in this world. For this reason, he helped them make their own approaches to understanding this transcendental nature and he did not pay undue attention to the external characteristics of their benefits. This explains it in terms of the Buddha's understanding.

2. In terms of the understanding of those whose beliefs were external to the noble path: This refers to those like the Kaśyapa brothers⁶⁶ who had been drowning along the stream of life and death for a countless number of lifetimes, again and again returning to the six paths of ordinary existence with all its inexpressible sufferings. With foolish and harmful views, they were buffeted about by the changing winds and long drifted in the ocean of suffering without having a chance to meet an enlightened teacher. It was only through their past encounter with an enlightened being that they came to understand the mercy of the Blessed One. Because he selflessly favored them with his teaching about the transcendental nature of life's purpose, we are now the recipients of the benefits. In seeking and reflecting on the virtues of the Buddha's grace, we may at first be disconcerted upon seeing that there only seem to be the relics that remain from his ultimate demise. However, the transcendental nature of the Buddha's purpose is realized upon attaining a familiarity with the sacred rites that are ever unchanging over the generations, not through ever changing reinterpretations of them that really just reflect our own beliefs. This explains it in terms of the understanding of those with beliefs that are external to the noble path.

Question: Why were those honored and worshiped from the past said to still be among the host of good spiritual acquaintances (kalyāna mitra, 善識知)?

Answer: In having had lofty virtue, they were said to be 'honored and worshiped' and, in having seniority in years, they were said to be 'from the past'. Because both those that were ordinary and those that were noble recognized the inner virtues of these people of the past and were aware of their distinctly different outer characteristics, they were still said to be among the host of 'good spiritual acquaintances'.

Although there are nine parts described above that are not the same, together they generally explain the host of students of life's purpose (śrāvakas, 聲聞).

2. *Those awakening sentient beings to the transcendental nature of life's purpose* (bodhisattvas, 菩薩).

There are seven parts on this:

- a. Their characteristics
- b. Their numbers
- c. Their ranks
- d. Their fruits
- e. Their virtues
- f. Distinguishing the lofty standing of the Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī (文殊師利)^{17A}
- g. The general conclusion

These Bodhisattvas are endowed with countless practices that fulfill the Buddha's transcendental vows. Securely abiding in the merits and virtues from their greater sense of purpose, they travel throughout the ten directions to put them into practice with skillful ways and means. Upon entering into the treasury found within this true purpose of the Buddha, they will ultimately reach the other shore of spiritual freedom. Spiritually transforming countless worlds, they will ultimately attain perfect universal enlightenment (samyak saṃbodhi, 等覺). In revealing its radiance and splendor that everywhere illuminates the ten directions, the countless lands of the Buddha shake and tremble in six different ways.⁶⁷ Adapting to the conditions at hand, they open up, reveal and then turn the wheel of life's purpose.⁶⁸ In beating the drum of purpose, holding the sword of purpose, shaking the thunder of purpose and then pouring down the rain of purpose, they generously proclaim it and ever awaken the world to it through its sound. Rending the networks of evil, they disperse their many false beliefs, eliminate the struggles and woes of this world and break through the moats of selfish desire. Upon revealing that which is pure and clear, their radiance merges with a perfect awakening to the supreme nature of life's purpose (buddha dharma, 佛法), propagating it with compassion to spiritually restore damaged sentient beings. In being without any vanity or greed, they accomplish all of this with equanimity of mind while perfecting countless hundreds and thousands of kinds of meditative resolve (samādhis, 三昧). In each and every moment, they shoulder the burden of supporting all sentient beings everywhere, loving them like they were their own children. Through their own virtue, they deliver them all to the other shore of spiritual freedom. In realizing the countless merits and virtues of enlightened beings, they open up and reveal a transcendental knowledge and discernment that is inconceivable.

And so in conclusion:

- * Although the seven parts described above are not the same, together they generally describe the host of bodhisattvas.
- * Although there are the two audiences described above that are not the same, together they generally describe the audience at the beginning of the introduction.

2. The circumstances surrounding the imprisonment of the father:

On this, the scripture says:

At this time, in the great City of The Royal House, there was a crown prince named Ajātaśatru who, following the evil counsel of his friend Devadatta, forcibly arrested and detained his father, the King Bimbisāra. He confined the king to a dungeon in the castle with walls that were made of stone seven layers thick and proclaimed to the court that no one could visit him. However, Bimbisāra's chief courtesan Vaidehī revered the great king. After bathing and grooming herself, she would smear her body with a paste of honey and flour and conceal a grape beverage in her necklaces so that she could secretly nourish him during conjugal visits in the dungeon. After eating the pastry and drinking the grape juice, the former king sought water to rinse out his mouth. Having done so, he joined his palms together with reverence, faced towards Vulture's Peak, worshiped the Blessed One from afar and then spoke these words of prayer:

"Your disciple Mahā Maudgalyāyana has been my intimate friend. May you have mercy and compassion on me, and send him to confer upon me the eight precepts of commitment to an austere life."

On hearing this, the Blessed One dispatched Mahā Maudgalyāyana, who flew as quick as a falcon to be with the former king. Upon visiting him, he bestowed the eight precepts of commitment to austerity on him each and every day. The Blessed One also dispatched the venerable monk Pūrṇa to teach him about the true nature of life's purpose. This went on for a period of three weeks. Having had a chance to eat the honey paste and hear about this nature of life's purpose, the former king showed in his countenance that he was content and at peace.

爾時王舍大城有一太子。名阿闍世。隨順調達惡友之教。收執父王頻婆娑羅。幽閉置於七重室內。制諸群臣一不得往。國大夫人名韋提希。恭敬大王。澡浴清淨。以酥蜜和妙用塗其身。諸瓔珞中盛葡萄漿密以上王。爾時大王。食妙飲漿。求水漱口。漱口畢已。合掌恭敬。向耆闍崛山遙禮世尊。而作是言。大目乾連是吾親友。願興慈悲授我八戒。時目乾連如鷹隼飛疾至王所。日日如是授王八戒。世尊亦遣尊者富樓那。為王說法。如是時間經三七日。王食妙蜜得聞法故。顏色和悅。

2. Shāndào's commentary says:

On the circumstances surrounding the imprisonment of the father, there are seven parts:

- The site where there was a manifestation of the Buddha's spiritual influence
- The son's mistake: associating with and faithfully accepting the counsel of an evil person
- The son betrayed the father - King Bimbisāra was imprisoned by his son Ajātaśatru
- The courtesan secretly gave food and drink to the king
- Because of his imprisonment, the father sought to learn about the transcendental nature of life's purpose
- Because he requested it (prayed for it), the father acquired a nobility of purpose
- Because the former king was nourished through food and hearing about the true nature of life's purpose, his life was sustained for many days

a. *The site where there was a manifestation of the Buddha's influence:*

On this, the scripture says:

At this time, in the great City of the Royal House.

The City of the Royal House (Rājagṛha, 王舍城): This describes the site of the spiritual transformation. In ancient times, ordinary people who built their houses within the city walls suffered having them burnt by fires from heaven (bolts of lightning) and other natural disasters, but these fires never seemed to damage the royal house (made of stone). After some time, the people's representatives presented a petition to the king:

"Many of your subjects who have built houses have seen them burned by these fires.

Only the royal house has not been damaged by them. Do you not know why this is?"

The king addressed his subjects, saying:

"From now on, when houses are built for my subjects, they will be built by the royal house (with its superior specifications)."

The subjects who obeyed the king's order in the building of their houses did not suffer these fires any more. Because of this tradition, this city became known as the City of the Royal House.

The great city (mahā janapada, 大城): This city was very large, said to have ninety thousand inhabitants. Because of this, it was called 'the great city'.

The site where there was a manifestation of the Buddha's spiritual influence: This is explained in two parts:

1. Ajātaśatru was the instigator of evil, imprisoning both his father and his mother. Because they were imprisoned, they came to loathe this world we must all endure (sahā loka, 娑婆世界). The mother prayed for refuge in a world that is without sorrow.
2. The One Who Descended Into This World (Tathāgata, 如來) responded to her request with a supernatural ritual in which a beam of light was transformed into a beacon that illuminated all of the Pure Lands. Seeing this, the courtesan then sought rebirth in the Land That is Secure in Contentment (Sukhāvatī, 安樂土). Praying with all of her heart for a teaching on how to practice meditation on it, the Buddha first taught her how to cultivate the three blessings of virtuous conduct. Then, after teaching her how to properly observe this land, he opened up the door to meditative resolve (samādhi, 定) and revealed the benefits acquired by sentient beings on nine different levels.

For this reason, it was called a site where there was a manifestation of the Buddha's spiritual influence.

b. *The son's mistake - Ajātaśatru's association with and faithful acceptance of counsel from an evil person:*

Shāndào's detailed commentary on the history of Ajātaśatru and his association with Devadatta comes primarily from the account found in The Scripture on the Ultimately Great Freedom (Mahā Parinirvāṇa Sūtra, 大般涅槃經). His teacher Dào chuò (道綽) was a renowned master of this scripture.

On this, the scripture says:

There was a crown prince named Ajātaśatru who, following the evil counsel of his friend Devadatta, ...

Crown Prince is a reference to his social rank.

Ajātaśatru was his given name. And while Ajātaśatru (阿闍世) is its Sanskrit pronunciation, it can be translated as 'The Potential Enemy' (未生怨). He was also known as the Crown Prince 'With a Withered Finger' (Kuṇika, 折指).

Question: Why was he called 'The Potential Enemy'?

Answer: He was given this name because of something that happened before he was born.

We will now tell the story of his birth (nidāna, 因緣). Originally the king Bimbisāra did not have any offspring who could serve as an heir. Although he sought to attain a son by trying to employ the various different spiritual forces of nature, he was without any success. Suddenly, a soothsayer appeared among the king's subjects who told him:

"I see that there is a hermit living up in the mountains whose life will end before too long. When his life ends, he will be reborn as a child to the king."

When the king heard this, he rejoiced and asked:

"When will this person's life end?"

The soothsayer answered the king by saying:

"He is due to die in three years."

The king then said:

"I am already very old and the nation is without an heir. Why must we wait another three years?"

The king then dispatched an envoy to go into the mountains and appeal to this hermit by saying:

"The great king is without a child, a successor who will carry on his line. He has sought here and there among the spiritual forces of nature for a way to have a son, but has been hard-pressed by his lack of success. However, now a soothsayer has seen you, a great hermit whose life will not last very long, and he has prophesized that when you die you will be reborn as a child of the king. We request that you do us a favor and attend to this immediately (by dying now)."

Upon receiving these instructions, the envoy went into the mountains, approached the hermit and told him of the king's request. The hermit answered the envoy by saying:

"I have another three years before my life will end. Despite the king's order, it is not possible for me to consider dying now."

The envoy respected the hermit's answer and returned to inform the great king. Upon being told of the hermit's feelings, the king said:

"I am the lord of the whole nation, and all that the people own ultimately belongs to me. In not undertaking my wishes, this hermit is violating my divine right."

The king then gave a further order to the envoy:

"Go back and make another request to him, and this time if it is not obeyed, kill him. With his life coming to an end, will he not then provide me with my child?"

The envoy received this order and again approached the hermit, informing him of the king intentions. Upon hearing the envoy's words, the hermit still refused. The envoy told the hermit he had no choice but obey his order and kill him. The hermit then said:

"You should tell the king that, since my life is not yet due to end, he is in effect murdering me. Through the actions (karmas, 諸業) of his thoughts and words, the king has dispatched you to kill me in actual deed. If I end up providing the king with a child, through my thoughts and words as that child I will in turn dispatch people to kill the king."

Upon uttering these words, the hermit was killed. And having died, he was conceived in the royal house according to the prophecy. Later, upon hearing that his wife was with child, the king rejoiced. Before the birth, a soothsayer was summoned to examine the courtesan and tell if it was to be a boy or a girl. Having examined her, the soothsayer told the king:

"This child will not be a girl, but he will do great harm to the king."

The king then said:

“My nation and land will all be given to him and belong to him, so even if he would harm me, I am not afraid.”

However, upon reflecting more on the soothsayer’s words, the king started to have mixed feelings of joy and sorrow in his heart. In speaking to his courtesan, he said:

“We must secretly plan on how to deal with this coming child that the soothsayer says will do harm to us. You should wait until the day of his birth and then enter the lofty tower of the castle and give birth there. You must not let anyone be there with you to receive the baby so that we can arrange that he just falls down into the grounds of the courtyard below. How could you help that the baby died? I will really be without any sorrow, but my voice will not betray my true feelings.”

His wife agreed to the king’s scheme and, when the child was born, she followed these instructions. However, when the child was dropped to the ground, his life was not successfully aborted and he only damaged the little finger on one of his hands. Because of this injury, he also became known as the Crown Prince ‘With a Withered Finger’ (Kuṇika, 折指).

This episode will now be further explained in five parts:

1. The encounter with an evil influence: Devadatta brought out the potential evil of Ajātaśatru (‘The Potential Enemy’).
2. Devadatta sought to learn magical arts rather than focus on proper introspection.
3. Devadatta used magic tricks to curry favor with and manipulate the crown prince.
4. Devadatta’s ambition and conceit led to his humiliation and disgrace.
5. Devadatta then plotted his revenge.

1. Encounter with an evil influence: Devadatta brought out the potential evil of Ajātaśatru (‘The Potential Enemy’):

The meaning of his name ‘Potential Enemy’ came to fruition because of the jealous mind of the evil monk Devadatta (literally ‘The Fever of Heaven’). Through the crown prince’s encounter with this monk, the evil circumstances of his birth were revealed and the prophecy of the king’s demise came true. We will now tell the story of how the jealousy of this monk made these evil circumstances come to pass. The evil nature in the heart of Devadatta was fiercely inflamed. Although he left home (to be ordained as a monk), he was always jealous of the reputation, the privileges and the support that was afforded to his cousin, the Buddha Śākyamuni. In fact, Ajātaśatru’s father, King Bimbisāra, was a major lay patron (dānapati, 檀越) of the Buddha, who at one time made many offerings to The One Who Had Descended Into This World (Tathāgata, 如來), among them hundreds of carts with gold, silver and the rest of the seven treasures¹⁴ as well as fine raiments, delicious fruits and other foods, fragrant blossoms of every color, and musicians playing beautiful music. Audiences in the hundreds and thousands came to the Buddha’s assemblies, surrounding, praising and making many offerings to the Buddha and the community of faith (Saṃgha, 僧) that followed him.

2. Devadatta sought to learn magical arts rather than focus on proper introspection (vipaśyanā, 觀): When Devadatta saw all of this, his jealous mind only became further inflamed. When he met the Buddha’s disciple Śāriputra (舍利弗), he sought training from him in the supernatural powers (siddhis, 悉地) of penetrating through objects (ṛddhi viṣaya jñāna sāksāt kriya abhijñā, 身如意通). The venerable Śāriputra told him:

“Virtuous one, you should further train in mindfulness of the subjective four spheres (catvāri smṛty upasthānāni, 四念處).^{13A} There is no need to train in the supernatural powers of penetration.”

With his request not being answered to his liking, he approached other venerable ones of the ordained community, seeking training in these supernatural powers. None of the five hundred other disciples he asked would instruct him in this, and all of them suggested he train in mindfulness of the four subjective spheres instead. With all his requests being denied, he finally approached his colleague (and brother) Ānanda (who could perfectly recite the words of the Buddha but was still without a perfect understanding of their meaning). Speaking to Devadatta, he said:

“You are my brother. I wish to learn and train in the supernatural power of spiritual penetration. Please instruct me in the step-by-step methodology of how to master it.”

Although Ānanda had attained the first fruit of a stream-enterer (srotāpanna, 預流), he had not yet realized how to penetrate the minds of others and did not recognize his elder brother’s ulterior motives in studying these supernatural powers and plotting evil schemes against the Buddha. Ānanda tried to satisfy his brother Devadatta’s request by instructing him in the step-by-step methodology of acquiring these powers:

- * He first taught him how to sit erect with the legs in the locked (lotus) position and imagine *the mind elevating the body* off the ground. At first one imagines it leaving the ground by just a fraction of an inch, then an inch, then a foot, then ten feet and eventually one imagines it dwelling up in the emptiness of space without any barriers. One then imagines the body returning back to its original location, seated on the ground.
- * Next, one imagines *the body elevating the mind*. First it leaves the ground by only a fraction of an inch, then an inch, and so forth just as before. With the body elevating the mind just as the mind elevated the body, it again reaches up into the emptiness of space. Having done so, it then again returns the mind back into the body in its original seated position.
- * Next, one imagines the body and mind both being elevated, then returning together. Like before, first by a fraction of an inch, then by an inch and finally entirely.
- * Next, one imagines the body and the mind penetrating through the barriers of every kind of substance found in the objective sphere (of form) so that nothing any longer presents any kind of barrier.
- * Eventually one imagines even penetrating through great mountains and the very ground (of the earth itself). With one’s body being able to penetrate form like this, it is without any barriers as if it were in the emptiness of space, seeing clear through all the different characteristics of form.
- * Finally, one imagines one’s own body being great enough to everywhere fill all of empty space, and it being able sit or lie down anywhere in it at will. With one’s hands, one can reach out and stir the sun, moon and stars in the sky. Other times one imagines one’s body being small enough to enter inside the most minute particle. All of this is imagined without any problems at all.

Like this, Ānanda taught Devadatta the step-by-step methodology. After Devadatta received these instructions and completely understood this technique of meditation in detail, he single-mindedly focused on its practice for seven days and seven nights until he fully mastered the supernatural power (siddhi, 悉地) of penetrating through objects (ṛddhi viṣaya jñāna sāksāt kriya abhijñā, 身如意通).

3. Devadatta used magic tricks to curry favor with and manipulate the crown prince:
Having been endowed with these powers, Devadatta encountered the crown prince Ajātaśatru in the hall of the royal house. Here, he magically transformed himself by rising up into the sky. Fire rose above his body and water shot out from below it. He then made fire shoot out from his right side and water shoot out from his left. Sometimes he revealed himself to be of great size and other times he revealed himself to be very small. Sometimes he was seated in the midst of the sky and other times he laid down in it. All of this was done at will. The crown prince saw all of this going on and then asked those around him who this person was. Those about him answered the crown prince, saying:

“This is the venerable Devadatta.”

Upon hearing this, the heart of the crown prince rejoiced. He raised up his arms and called out to him, saying:

“Venerable one, why not come down here below and meet with me?”

Seeing the crown prince call him out, Devadatta then transformed himself into a child with an innocent face, only as tall as the crown prince’s knee. When the crown prince picked him up, Devadatta embraced him, cooing softly and toying with crown prince’s mouth. Putting the crown prince’s spittle in his mouth, the infant then swallowed it. Then, in an instant, he returned himself back into his original size. Having witnessed Devadatta making all these various kinds of magical transformations, the crown prince marveled, developing a great reverence and esteem for him. Seeing he had endeared himself to the crown prince, Devadatta then told him about all the offerings that had been made to the Buddha and his followers by his father, the king Bimbisāra. Having heard about this, the crown prince then spoke to the venerable Devadatta, saying:

“As your disciple I am also able to furnish five hundred carts of material things.

May I not also offer them up as gifts to you and your followers like this?”

Devadatta replied to him, saying:

“Crown prince, that idea is a very virtuous one indeed.”

After Devadatta acquired many great offerings from the crown prince, his mind became arrogant and overbearing. It was comparable to how sprinkling bile on the nose of a vicious dog (or striking it with a rod) only makes the dog more fiercely evil. In this case, the bile was the crown prince’s support and the dog’s nose was the greedy mind of Devadatta. The crown prince’s support only made Devadatta more fiercely evil. Because of this, he then tried to create a schism within the Buddha’s community of faith (Saṃgha, 僧), altering the teachings by making more difficult precepts of moral commitment (śīla, 戒) for his followers to obey.

4. Devadatta’s ambition and conceit ultimately led to his humiliation and disgrace:

One time, while the Buddha was teaching a great assembly of both ordinary and noble beings, Devadatta approached the Buddha and asked the following of him:

“Because your many responsibilities have tired you, you should now hand over your leadership of this community to me. Blessed One, you have now reached an old age and you have become burdened by your years. You deserve to just dwell in inner peace for the rest of your life.”

All in the great host was startled to hear Devadatta say this, and they stared at each other in wonder. The Blessed One then corrected Devadatta in front of them, saying:

“I would not even hand over responsibility for teaching about the transcendental nature of life’s purpose to eminent monks such as Śāriputra and Maudgalyāyana. Why would I do so to a foolish lickspittle such as you?”

5. Devadatta then plotted his revenge:

When Devadatta heard the Buddha's words of admonishment, he felt disgraced and humiliated. It was as if a poisonous arrow had entered into his heart, and it only served to further inflame his foolish and violent intentions. Because of this, he decided to meet with the crown prince and hatch an evil scheme with him. When the crown prince saw Devadatta approach, he made the following observation with good intentions:

"Venerable one, today your complexion is pale and ashen, not the same as in the past."

Devadatta answered him by saying:

"I am indeed pale and ashen, but it is only out of my concern for you, crown prince."

The Crown Prince then reverently asked:

"Venerable one, what do you mean when you say you are this way on my account?"

Devadatta answered him, saying:

"Does the crown prince recognize it or not? The Blessed One (the Buddha) is many years old and he can no longer fully take on his responsibilities. He should retire and make me the Buddha. Likewise, your father the king is very old. He too should retire, and the crown prince should sit on the throne. Wouldn't it be better if there were a new king and a new Buddha in command?"

Upon hearing this, the crown prince stared at him with great anger and admonished him, saying:

"You must not utter such words!"

Devadatta then told the crown prince:

"The crown prince must not be angry. Your father the king has not really been good to you at all. At the time of your birth, your father's first desire was to send his wife into the hundred-foot tall tower with the hope that you should be dropped down into the courtyard below and die. You were truly blessed that your life was not aborted right then and there and that you only injured your small finger. If you do not believe this, just look at your withered finger, as this should be enough to convince you that what I say is true."

Having heard these words, the crown prince further examined the matter and then said:

"Did this really occur, or not?"

Devadatta answered him, saying:

"If this not be true, may I be accused of speaking recklessly."

Because of these words, the crown prince became convinced that he was indeed telling the truth. Upon believing in and being manipulated by Devadatta's words, he followed and obeyed his evil friend's suggestions.

c. *The son betrayed the father - Bimbisāra was imprisoned by his son Ajātaśatru:*

On this, the scripture says:

(Ajātaśatru) forcibly arrested and detained his father, the King Bimbisāra. He confined the king to a dungeon in the castle with walls that were made of stone seven layers thick and proclaimed to the court that no one could visit him.

This is about Ajātaśatru being taken in by the evil scheme of Devadatta and suddenly abandoning the feelings that naturally exist between a father and his son. Not only did he lose the ultimate grace of this relationship but his act of betrayal resulted in a complete change in the course of his life and its destiny.

- * In taking the king by surprise, it is said that he arrested him.
- * In not letting him go after he had taken him, it said that he detained him.

Because of this, the scripture says he arrested and detained his father.

Father: This is a distinction of their most intimate personal relationship.

King was a reference to his rank.

Bimbisāra was his given name.

He imprisoned the king to a dungeon in the castle with walls that were made of stone seven layers thick: With the walls being this thick, it was no trivial matter to get through them. It is not possible to imprison people within thin walls and without guards. With there only being a single door in the jail of the royal palace, people on the outside could easily be restricted and kept out and access was allowed only to those officials who followed the new king's orders. If this access was not strictly regulated, those with sympathetic feelings for the prisoner would be able to get through it. Therefore, to shut off all relationships between those on the outside and the inside, the former king was confined in the castle's jail, a dungeon with walls that were made of stone seven layers thick.

d. The courtesan secretly nourished the king with food and drink:

On this, the scripture says:

However, Bimbisāra's chief courtesan Vaidehī revered the great king. After bathing and grooming herself, she would smear her body with a paste of honey and flour and conceal a grape beverage in her necklaces so that she could secretly nourish him during conjugal visits in the dungeon.

Chief courtesan is a reference to the prominence of her rank.

Courtesan is a reference to her social rank while Vaidehī was her given name.

Revered the great king: This is about the courtesan seeing the door where the king was being imprisoned, becoming very troubled because she could not get a message through to him and fearing that he might lose his life. Bathing with fragrant herbs, she made her body fresh and clean. Preparing a paste of honey and flour, she smeared it on her body and then applied a paste of dried corn-flour over the honey. She then put on clean clothes to cover this honey paste and wore necklaces. She looked like she customarily did so that she would not arouse any outsiders' suspicions. The beads on the necklaces were tubes with holes on each end. With one end stopped up with wax, they were filled with a grape beverage (*drākṣā rasa*, 葡萄漿) and then stopped up on the other end as well. All the tubes on her necklaces were filled like this. Being all dressed up, she showed up unexpectedly and slowly walked into the castle's jail to see (and have conjugal visits with) the former king.

Question: The new king's subjects followed orders that did not permit others to see his father. However, they did not examine the courtesan at the cell door and did not restrict her from entering the cell. Why was this?

Answer: These subjects were not involved (in the rivalry between the old king and his son). They were tasked with preventing those with sympathy for the former king from getting through and, in retrospect, they should have revised the regulations to make them stricter. To the jailors, the courtesan was just his woman, and they did not fully recognize that her motives were no different from those of the king. Her past karmic relationship with the king was very strong, being endowed with the intimacy inherent in the relationship between a husband and his wife. They were essentially of the same mind but, because she was just his woman, the jailors were not concerned about her. This is why she was able to attain entry and see the former king.

- e. *Because of his imprisonment, the father king sought to learn about the transcendental nature of life's purpose:*

On this, the scripture says:

After eating the pastry and drinking the grape juice, the former king sought water to rinse out his mouth. Having done so, he joined his palms together with reverence, faced towards Vulture's Peak, worshiped the Blessed One from afar and then spoke these words of prayer:

"Your disciple Mahā Maudgalyāyana has been my intimate friend. May you have mercy and compassion on me, and send him to confer upon me the eight precepts of commitment to an austere life."

Once the courtesan saw the king, she pared the flour paste off of her body, rolled it into balls and gave it to him to eat. After he ate it, the courtesan sought to acquire some clean water from the castle for the king to rinse out his mouth and, upon providing it to him, he did so. Without this food for his body in the morning, his mind would have had nothing to sustain it through the day. As an act of homage and respect, he then pressed his palms together and faced towards Vulture's Peak (Gṛdhra Kūta, 耆闍), worshipping The One Who Had Descended Into This World (Tathāgata, 如來) and praying for his aid and protection.

- * This homage was an act of the body as well as an act of the mind.
- * Furthermore, in uttering the words that followed, there was a prayer that was an act of the mouth as well as an act of the mind.

Mahā Maudgalyāyana has been my intimate friend: This has two meanings:

- * Only in terms of the secular (lay) world was Maudgalyāyana distinguished as being an intimate of the king.
- * Being in jail and facing death, the king no longer had a home life. Maudgalyāyana then became his preceptor, teaching him the principles of spiritual practice.

Being able to fly through empty space, Maudgalyāyana did not have the problem of needing to enter and exit through the door of the castle's jail. And because he was an intimate of the king in the secular world as well as his good spiritual friend (kalyāna mitra, 善識知), when he left this world, he was called an 'intimate friend'.

May you have mercy and compassion on me, and send him to confer upon me the eight precepts of moral commitment to a life of austerity: This is on the father of the king in the past having deep feelings of reverence for the Buddha's teachings on the true nature of life's purpose and esteeming Maudgalyāyana personally. If it were not for the hardships he now encountered in being imprisoned, he would not have reverently requested him as a member of the Buddha's community (Saṃgha, 僧). Now, in meeting with the prisoner, Maudgalyāyana did not need to bow and submit to his secular authority. The former king was only a prisoner requesting Maudgalyāyana as a preceptor, accepting the eight precepts of austerity³² from him.

Question: In venerating him from afar, Bimbisāra first worshiped the Blessed One. But why did he request Maudgalyāyana instead of the Buddha to receive these precepts?

Answer: The Buddha was without any fault and the most honored one among all sentient beings, whether common or noble. In wholeheartedly making his prayer, first there was worship of the great teacher. The precepts themselves were just a secondary consideration, and so only Maudgalyāyana was requested as the person to come and bestow them. In fact, the king's main intent was to cherish and keep these precepts of moral commitment and this is why he first troubled to worship the Blessed One.

Question: The precepts of moral commitment to virtue (śīla, 戒) taught by the enlightened beings that have descended into this world are countless, but the king's father only requested the eight precepts³² of moral commitment to a life of austerity and no others. Why is this?

Answer: Other precepts may be somewhat more lenient but the time it takes for them to work is longer. These eight are used by those who fear they will lose their mindfulness of the stream of life & death (saṃsāra, 生死). As taught in other Buddhist scriptures, in these eight precepts householders (those of the laity) embrace the precepts of moral commitment observed by those who have left home (the ordained). In embracing them, their minds need to be very earnest and strictly observant. Because of this, the practice is more intense and the time it takes for them to work is shorter. When their observance is only limited to one day and one night, one observes them and then just lets them go (gives them up).

Question: How can one in this case recognize these precepts in detail and then apply the mind to earnestly embracing them?

Answer: This is revealed in the words of the Traditional Rules of Conduct (Prātimokṣa, 戒文) that say:

“Child of the Buddha, from this dawn to the next, for one day and one night, like the Buddhas, one should observe #1 the first precept of not taking the life of any sentient being. Are you able to embrace this precept of moral commitment or not?”

One answers:

“Yes, I am able to embrace it.”

In explaining the rest of them it says:

“Child of the Buddha, from this dawn to the next, for one day one night, like the Buddhas, one should:

- #2 Not steal (take things that are not given)
- #3 Not lie (speak falsely)
- #4 Not indulge in sexual acts (selfish physical gratification)
- #5 Not indulge in intoxicants (alcohol, etc.)
- #6 Not indulge in vanities (cosmetics, personal adornments, etc.)
- #7 Not indulge in amusements (dancing, music, etc.)
- #8 Not indulge in luxuries (relaxing in comfortable beds, chairs, etc.)

These are the eight precepts of austerity that go beyond just fasting (upavāsa, 齋).” In just not eating improperly (not eating proscribed food and having only one meal each day, before noon), there is the one precept of fasting that goes before other precepts. All of these precepts of moral commitment to virtue are cited as being realizations (siddhi, 成 or 悉地) of the Buddhas. This is because their true purpose is only properly learned and fathomed among them. Because all those except the Buddhas eventually return back to their bad habits, they are not cited as being their realizations. One acquires understanding of these precepts through applying one's mind and approaching one's practice of them with earnestness and strict observation. And the Buddhas have taught that the observation of these precepts of austerity are eight excellent kinds of purpose. When people embrace them for one day and one night without any violations, there is the attainment of merits and virtues that transcend those attained in the objective spheres of humanity, heaven and the lesser track of only seeking freedom from affliction on the individual level. Because the precepts of moral commitment to austerity have benefits such as these, Bimbisāra accepted them day after day as the end of his life approached.

f. Because he requested it, the father acquired this nobility of purpose:

On this, the scripture says:

On hearing this, the Blessed One dispatched Mahā Maudgalyāyana, who flew as quick as a falcon to be with the former king and, day after day, bestowed the eight precepts of commitment to austerity on him. The Blessed One also dispatched the venerable monk Pūrṇa to teach him each day about the true nature of life's purpose.

Because Maudgalyāyana had attained the power to understand the hearts and minds of others (para citta jñānam, 他心通),²⁶ he recognized the prayer of the king's father from afar. Through the power of spiritual penetration through which one can travel anywhere at will in the spiritual realm (ṛddhi vidhi jñānam, 身如意通),²⁶ he reached the king in the time it took for him to snap his fingers. The illustration of being as quick as a falcon is cited here for those who are unaware of the signs of this spiritual penetration. In fact, through the power of penetration, Maudgalyāyana could orbit the four quarters under heaven a hundred thousand times in a single moment. How can the speed of a falcon possibly be compared to this? A host of comparisons like this are made to illustrate the speed of spiritual penetration in The Scripture on the Virtuous and the Foolish (Damamūka Nidāna Sūtra, 賢愚經).

Day after day, (he) bestowed the eight precepts of austerity on him: This is about the life of Bimbisāra being sustained as a result of receiving these precepts of moral commitment to austerity from Maudgalyāyana.

Question: The eight precepts of commitment to the austere life³² are said to have most excellent virtues. Receiving them just once should be enough. Why did he need to keep receiving them day after day?

Answer: There is no mountain too steep, no ocean too deep, no sword too sharp, no sun too bright, no person too good, no evil too slight, no virtue too blessed and no Buddha too noble. After becoming imprisoned, the king's wish was to not be imprisoned any longer, yet in thought after thought, he feared someone would be called on to kill him. During these days and nights, he wholeheartedly looked up to and relied on the eight precepts of austerity, hoping to attain a nobility of virtue and secure the asset of good karma for a future spiritual rebirth.

The Blessed One also dispatched the venerable monk Pūrṇa to teach him each day about the true nature of life's purpose (Dharma, 法): This is on the seriousness of the Blessed One's mercy and compassion. He was mindful that the king was suddenly faced with the hardship of being imprisoned for the rest of his short life and that he was burdened by the sadness of depression and the distress of worry.

Pūrṇa (富樓那): Of the noble disciples, he was the most capable of eloquently expressing the true nature of life's purpose and being skillful in the ways and means of opening up and inspiring people's hearts and minds. For this reason, The One Who Had Descended Into This World (Tathāgata, 如來) dispatched him to teach the king about the sublime nature of this purpose and so eliminate his depression and worry.

g. Because the former king was given nourishment and heard about the transcendental nature of life's purpose, he was sustained for many days:

On this, the scripture says:

This went on for a period of three weeks. Having had a chance to eat the honey paste and hear about this nature of life's purpose, the former king showed in his countenance that he was content and at peace.

This is about two things:

1. The elimination of hunger and thirst through the daily servings of food and drink from his courtesan Vaidehī
2. The skillful opening of the king's mind through inner resources - the precepts of moral commitment to an austere life and the teachings about the true nature of life's purpose from the two noble beings Maudgalyāyana and Pūrṇa.

Food was able to sustain his body while the precepts of moral commitment and teachings about the nature of life's purpose were able to sustain his spirit. Upon eliminating his suffering and depression, his countenance showed that he was happy and truly had inner peace, that is, he had found contentment.

Although there are the seven parts described above that are not the same, collectively they explain the circumstances surrounding the father's imprisonment.

3. The circumstances surrounding the imprisonment of the mother

On this, the scripture says:

After these three weeks had passed, Ajātaśatru asked the chief guard of the dungeon if his father was still alive. The guard answered him by saying:

“Great king, the chief courtesan of your father has been secretly smearing a paste of honey and flour on her body and wearing necklaces containing a grape beverage. She has been providing this nourishment to the king during her conjugal visits, and the ascetics Mahā Maudgalyāyāna and Pūrṇa have been descending from the sky to teach the king about the nature of life’s purpose. It has been impossible for us to control them.”

When Ajātaśatru heard these words he became furious, saying:

“My mother is a traitor because she has become an accomplice working for my enemy.

These ascetics are evil people, using artful magical spells to delude the former king.

Together, they have prevented this evil king from dying for these many days.”

He then brandished his sharp sword, intending to slay his mother. At this point, two ministers approached the new king. One was Candraprabha, who was quick, brilliant and endowed with much wisdom. The other was Jivaka, a famous physician. After saluting the new king, Candraprabha spoke up first, saying:

“Great king, we have learned from the holy scriptures, the great discourses and the ancient wisdom of the Vedas that, from the earliest times, there have been as many as eighteen thousand kings who have killed their own fathers out of greed for the thrones of their nations. However, we have never heard of any of them killing their own mother this way. Should the king now dare to commit such a grave offense, it will bring disgrace upon the lineage of our ruling class. As your subjects we cannot bear to witness this. It would be the act of an outcast, and we will not stay here with you if you do this.”

Having spoken, the two great subjects withdrew, stepping backwards with their hands on their swords. Surprised and alarmed, Ajātaśatru then turned to Jivaka and asked him:

“Are you not on my side?”

Jivaka answered him, saying:

“Great king, be careful, do not harm your mother.”

On hearing this, the new king relented and sought their forgiveness. Laying down his sword, he did not harm his mother. Instead, he ordered his guards to confine her to a chamber deep within the castle and never allow her to leave it again.

時阿闍世問守門人。父王今者猶存在耶。時守門者白言。大王。國大夫人身塗妙蜜。瓔珞盛漿持用上王。沙門目連及富樓那。從空而來為王說法。不可禁制。時阿闍世聞此語已。怒其母曰。我母是賊。與賊為伴。沙門惡人。幻惑咒術。令此惡王多日不死。即執利劍欲害其母。時有一臣名曰月光。聰明多智。及與耆婆。為王作禮。白言大王。臣聞毘陀論經說。劫初已來。有諸惡王貪國位故。殺害其父一萬八千。未曾聞有無道害母。王今為此殺逆之事。污刹利種。臣不忍聞。是栴陀羅。我等不宜復住於此。時二大臣說此語竟。以手按劍卻行而退。時阿闍世驚怖惶懼。告耆婆言。汝不為我耶。耆婆白言。大王。慎莫害母。王聞此語懺悔求救。即便捨劍止不害母。敕語內官。閉置深宮不令復出。

3. **Shàndǎo's commentary says:**

On the circumstances surrounding the imprisonment of the mother, there are eight parts:

- a. Ajātaśatru asked for news about his father.
- b. The guard answered him.
- c. The anger and rage of King Ajātaśatru
- d. Two ministers admonished him and did not acquiesce to his actions.
- e. King Ajātaśatru became fearful.
- f. The two ministers further admonished him.
- g. He accepted their admonishment and spared his mother's life.
- h. He imprisoned his mother because of his lingering resentment.

a. *Ajātaśatru asked for news about his father:*

On this, the scripture says:

After these three weeks had passed, Ajātaśatru asked the chief guard of the dungeon if his father was still alive.

When the new king Ajātaśatru imprisoned his father, he handed him over to people who were ordered to cut off his access to food and water for many days. He figured that his father would only live for a couple of weeks at most. Three weeks after handing him over, he made the following inquiry to the guard: "Is my father still alive?"

Question: If one is restricted from having a single meal for seven days one will likely die.

After three weeks, Ajātaśatru must have figured that his father would be dead for sure.

Why then did he need to ask the guard if his father was dead yet? How could there have been any doubt that required him to ask if he was still living?

Answer: Ajātaśatru's wished to find out about this in a confidential manner. Although he had many resources at his disposal, it would have been very inappropriate for him to bring up this matter publicly. Because of the natural feelings that exist between a parent and his child, it was unbearable for him to ask outright about whether or not his father had died yet, and he feared that he would be subject to ridicule if he was wrong about his father being dead. By discreetly signaling his interest in this matter (to the guard) instead of publicly inquiring about it, he desired to prevent talk about his betrayal of his family.

b. *The guard answered him:*

On this, the scripture says:

The guard answered him by saying:

"Great king, the chief courtesan of your father has been secretly smearing a paste of honey and flour on her body and wearing necklaces containing a grape beverage. She has been providing this nourishment to the king during her conjugal visits, and the ascetics Mahā Maudgalyāna and Pūrṇa have been descending from the sky to teach the king about the nature of life's purpose. It has been impossible for us to control them."

Here Ajātaśatru asked about his father and the guard answered him. He told the new king about how the chief courtesan was secretly providing food and drink to his father, and how this was able to prolong his life. However, he said the fact that the king's father was able to survive so long was a result of the courtesan's doing and it was not their fault.

Question: The courtesan provided food to the king by smearing paste on her body and concealing it under her clothes as she entered and left the cell on her conjugal visits.

She did this so that no one could see it. How did the guards find out that the courtesan was serving him food this way?

Answer: Personal secrets are virtually impossible to hide forever. Even though she skillfully concealed this from the jailors, eventually her actions were uncovered. With the king's father being in the castle's dungeon and the courtesan visiting him day after day, the secret was bound to come out. If she wasn't surreptitiously bringing him the paste to eat, the king wouldn't have had the means to survive for so long.

Secretly: The king of course expected the guards to tell him about the courtesan's intentions. The courtesan mistakenly reasoned that people outside of her confidence would never know her secret and the guards would never catch on to it. But the truth inevitably came out and the new king was told.

The ascetics (śramaṇas, 沙門) Maudgalyāyana and Pūrṇa: These two noble beings came and went by flying through empty space, not because of any door or road. Day after day, they came and went, teaching the king about the true nature of life's purpose so that he could understand it. In taking him meals to eat, the courtesan was the first to disobey the new king's instructions. The guards did not dare to intercept and restrict her. And, because the two noble beings traveled through the emptiness of space, there was no way that they could be controlled by a mere door.

c. *The anger and rage of King Ajātaśatru:*

On this, the scripture says:

When Ajātaśatru heard these words he became furious, saying:

"My mother is a traitor because she has become an accomplice working for my enemy.

These ascetics are evil people, using artful magical spells to delude the former king.

Together, they have prevented this evil king from dying for these many days."

He then brandished his sharp sword, intending to slay his mother.

Having heard the guard's account, Ajātaśatru developed a mind of hatred and anger towards his mother, Bimbisāra's courtesan, with his mouth uttering ugly epithets about her. And through the arising of his thoughts, words and deeds against her, there were the three kinds of evil acts (akuśala karma, 惡業).

1. In denouncing his own father and mother as traitors, his mouth was committing a verbal act of evil. In maligning the ascetics, his mouth was committing another verbal act of evil.
2. In brandishing a sword to kill his mother, his body was committing a physical act of evil.
3. In directing the body and the mouth, his mind was committing mental acts of evil.

And while at first only his means were evil, later his entire conduct was consumed in this treachery.

My mother is a traitor: This is on his mouth uttering ugly epithets. Why did he denounce his mother as a traitor and an accomplice working for his enemy? King Ajātaśatru's primarily blamed his father but his resentment for her would not soon end. His mother had provided nourishment to his father so he would not die. Because of this, he denounced her, saying "My mother is a traitor and an accomplice working for my enemy."

The ascetics are evil people: While Ajātaśatru hated his mother for taking food to his father, he also heard about the ascetics Mahā Maudgalyāyana and Pūrṇa visiting the king. This caused even more hatred and rage. Because of this, he thought to himself "what artful spells have they conjured up so that this evil king would not die for these many days?"

He then brandished his sharp sword: This expresses the fearsomeness of King Ajātaśatru's rage towards his mother. What inner pain he must have suffered in the moment he intended to cut off his own mother's head off with his sword! With his mother begging

for mercy, she pressed her palms together and knelt down, with her head bowed and her life in her child's hands. Warm sweat streamed everywhere from her body and her spirit was utterly devastated, thinking to herself "Alas, all is lost! All of a sudden there is so much suffering and hardship".

d. Two ministers admonished him and did not acquiesce to his actions:

On this, the scripture says:

At this point, two ministers approached the new king. One was Candrababha, who was quick, brilliant and endowed with much wisdom. The other was Jivaka, a renowned physician. After saluting the new king, Candrababha spoke up first, saying:

"Great king, we have learned from the holy scriptures, the great discourses and the Vedas that, from the earliest times, there have been as many as eighteen thousand kings who have killed their own fathers out of greed for the thrones of their nations. However, we have never heard of any of them killing their own mother this way. Should the king now dare to commit such a grave offense, it will bring disgrace upon the lineage of our ruling class. As your subjects we cannot bear to witness this. It would be the act of an outcast, and we will not stay here with you if you do this."

This is on the two subjects admonishing the king and not obeying his orders. These two subjects were among the nation's chief ministers, guiding the government's policies and hoping to promote the nation's good reputation everywhere throughout the eight points of the compass. Suddenly, they had witnessed King Ajātaśatru rising up in rebellion and brandishing his sword, desiring to kill his own mother. Unable to stand seeing such an evil turn of events, Candrababha and Jivaka rebuked their king and warned him.

At this point: This refers to the moment King Ajātaśatru desired to kill his own mother.

Two ministers: This is a reference to their rank.

Candrababha (月光, literally 'Moonlight'): This is one of their given names.

Quick, brilliant and endowed with much wisdom: This is a reference to his virtues.

The other was Jivaka (耆婆): Jivaka (a renowned physician) was also a son of the new king's father (Bimbisāra, 頻婆娑羅王), a child of the courtesan Āmradārikā (also known as Āmrapālī, 柰女). Upon suddenly seeing his elder brother betray his own mother, he joined Candrababha in warning Ajātaśatru.

After saluting the new king: Whenever one desires to advise or admonish a great leader, one needs to first make a physical gesture of respect. Now these two subjects did so, first making a gesture of respect to awaken and stir the king's heart by folding their hands before their hearts and then bowing before speaking their minds.

Candrababha spoke, saying: This is on the real intent of Candrababha, explaining his disapproval and hoping to make King Ajātaśatru open up his heart, listen and grasp the gravity of the situation. For this reason, he felt the need to first speak about their understanding from the teachings of the ancient wisdom of the Vedas (毘陀) and other scriptures that extensively offer accounts about the history of the kings from the past. The ancients spoke of never forsaking the canon of scripture, the conscience of our ancestors who were endowed with nobility of character. He warned the king that killing his mother was not a trivial matter. How could these be empty or false words?

From the earliest ages: This is a reference to the length of time.

There have been many kings: This indicates that, generally speaking, they were not a cruel and savage people.

Out of greed for the thrones of their nations: This is on the king's greed for usurping his father's throne.

Kill or harm their fathers: Since it was clear he had already rebelled against his father, it was going to be impossible to detain him forever and it was inevitable that he would kill him.

Eighteen thousand: With this king killing his father he was now the same as many who had done so in the past.

However, we have never heard of any of them killing their own mother this way: This is about how, from ancient times to the present, there have been many stories about sons killing their fathers to usurp their thrones out of greed, but no accounts of them killing their mothers in their efforts to do so. Based on historical records, this would be the first time that a king had not only killed his father but also showed no mercy for his own mother. Ajātaśatru was killing his father out of lust for the throne, as had happened many times in the past, but his mother did not have any rank for him to seek. In violently assaulting her like this, it was very different from the past.

If the king should now dare to commit such a grave offense, it will bring disgrace upon the lineage of our ruling class: The ruling class (kṣatriya, 刹利) was the lineage of warriors and kings, and it was considered by them to be the highest of the four castes. Its noble heritage and reputation had been established over many generations and it would be completely discredited if this were done!

As your subjects we cannot bear to witness this: In seeing this evil conduct from the new king, there would be disgrace and dishonor put on their family and their ancestors, and there would be the ruining of their good name. Their sense of shame would never allow for this.

Outcast (caṇḍāla, 旃陀羅): This is a reference to the dregs of society who dwell beneath the four castes and are without any benevolence or righteousness in their hearts. Although they wear the skins of human beings, their conduct is the same as that of wild beasts. The king is supposed to reside above these castes to protect those of all walks of life, overseeing them all with the myriad resources at his command. When those who are graced with this privilege adopt this evil conduct, how are they any different from society's outcasts?

We will not stay here with you: This has two meanings:

1. The king was now committing evil acts and no longer maintaining any propriety. How could the state sustain such an outcast as its lord? Because of this, they intended to leave the castle.
2. Because the king was destroying the reputation of their family and their ancestors in their own country, it would be preferable to be exiled to another place far away, to be forever banished to a land where they were not known. Because of this, they said "we will not stay here with you".

Having spoken, the two great subjects withdrew, stepping backwards: This is on the two subjects directly warning the king with very blunt words, citing ancient and modern precedents in the hope they could open up the king's heart and awaken his mind.

With their hands on their swords: The subjects kept their hands on their own swords (in case they needed to also defend themselves from the new king's revenge).

Question: In warning him to desist from this coarse act of evil, they did not avoid offending the king. With the moral obligation that exists between a ruler and his ministers already having been compromised, why didn't they just turn around to leave instead of stepping backwards (as if out of respect)?

Answer: Although they opposed the king with blunt words, they still hoped to prevent any harm to his mother. Also, the poison of Ajātaśatru's hate and anger was not yet eliminated and they were prepared with their swords in case there was any danger to themselves. This is why they did not just turn around to leave, but instead stepped backwards.

e. King Ajātaśatru became fearful:

On this, the scripture says:

Having spoken, the two great subjects withdrew, stepping backwards with their hands on their swords. Surprised and alarmed, Ajātaśatru then turned to Jīvaka and asked him: "Are you not on my side?"

When Ajātaśatru saw his two subjects bluntly warn him and offer to resign, and then saw them keep their hands on their swords as they withdrew, he was alarmed that they would turn their backs on him in favor of his father. He then had to recalculate his position. Because this resulted in feelings of insecurity, he suddenly became fearful. With them having abandoned him, he no longer recognized who they were. With his mind full of doubts and uncertainties, he asked Jīvaka "Are you not on my side?".

Jīvaka was the new king's (half) brother.

The ancients said: "When a family is facing disaster, not even one's closest relatives will save one." Here, in effect, Ajātaśatru was saying: "Jīvaka, you have been my brother, just like Candraprabha".

f. The two ministers further admonished him:

On this, the scripture says:

Jīvaka answered him, saying:

"Great king, be careful, do not harm your mother."

This was Jīvaka's honest answer to the new king. He was in effect saying "If you desire to keep us as ministers, you must not harm your mother." This was a direct warning.

g. King Ajātaśatru accepted the admonishment and spared his mother's life:

On this, the scripture says:

On hearing this, the new king relented and sought their forgiveness. Laying down his sword, he did not harm his mother.

Having accepted Jīvaka's warning, Ajātaśatru mind bore remorse and contrition. Being ashamed of his actions, he faced his two subjects, seeking their sympathy and begging for their forgiveness. Because of this, he spared his mother from the danger of being killed and returned his sword to its sheath.

h. King Ajātaśatru imprisoned his mother because of his lingering resentment:

On this, the scripture says:

Instead, he ordered his guards to confine her to a chamber deep within the castle and not allow her to leave it again.

Although King Ajātaśatru accepted his subjects' warnings to spare his mother, he still had lingering resentment and did not allow her to travel freely within the castle. He ordered his guards to confine her to a chamber deep inside it, and he did not allow her to ever leave this place or visit his father, the former king.

Although the eight parts described above are not the same, they generally explain the circumstances surrounding the mother's imprisonment.

4. Loathing the bitter conditions of suffering:

On this, the scripture says:

When Vaidehī was locked up in confinement, she became pale and ashen with worry and despair. Facing towards Vulture’s Peak, she worshipped the Buddha from afar and spoke these words:

“Blessed One, One Who Has Descended Into This World - before, you used to send Ānanda to come and console me. Now, I am worried and in utter despair. The Blessed One is majestic and exalted, but I no longer have any way to see you. I pray that you send your disciples Mahā Maudgalyāyana and Ānanda to come visit me.”

Having spoken these words, she grieved and wept a shower of tears. Bowing down towards the Buddha and worshipping him from afar, she did not raise her head back up for even a moment. Although the Blessed One was on Vulture’s Peak at this time, he knew what weighed on Vaidehī’s mind. He dispatched Mahā Maudgalyāyana and Ānanda to come down to her through the emptiness of space. The Buddha himself also vanished from Vulture’s Peak and reappeared in her chamber deep in the royal house. When Vaidehī finally raised her head, she suddenly saw the Blessed One, the Buddha Śākyamuni before her. His body was a burnished golden color and he was seated on a lotus blossom composed of hundreds of jewels. Maudgalyāyana attended him on his left while Ānanda attended him on his right. The Lord Almighty of Heaven, the Creator of the Universe, the Guardians of the World and a host of other heavenly beings were also seen surrounding the Buddha in the emptiness of space, showering down the divine blossoms they held as offerings to him. When Vaidehī saw the Blessed One, she took off her necklaces and prostrated herself on the ground. Weeping and sobbing before the Buddha, she said:

“Blessed One! What immoral act in the past did I commit to bear this evil child?

Blessed One! Why have you had such a (familial & spiritual) affiliation with Devadatta?”

時韋提希被幽閉已。愁憂憔悴。遙向耆闍崛山。為佛作禮而作是言。如來世尊在昔之時。恒遣阿難來慰問我。我今愁憂。世尊威重無由得見。願遣目連尊者阿難。與我相見。作是語已。悲泣雨淚遙向佛禮。未舉頭頃。爾時世尊在耆闍崛山。知韋提希心之所念。即敕大目犍連及以阿難。從空而來。佛從耆闍崛山沒。於王宮出。時韋提希禮已舉頭。見世尊釋迦牟尼佛。身紫金色坐百寶蓮華。目連侍左。阿難在右。釋梵護世諸天在虛空中。普雨天華持用供養。時韋提希見佛世尊。自絕瓔珞舉身投地。號泣向佛白言。世尊。我宿何罪生此惡子。世尊復有何等因緣。與提婆達多共為眷屬。

4. Shàndào’s commentary says:

On loathing the bitter conditions of suffering, there are four parts:

- a. The courtesan was imprisoned by her child.
- b. Because of this imprisonment, the courtesan sought the Buddha to express her wishes.
- c. The Blessed One came and visited her, as requested.
- d. The courtesan raised her head and saw the Buddha. She then lamented, expressing her deepest feelings.

a. *The courtesan was locked up in confinement by her child:*

On this, the scripture says:

When Vaidehī was locked up in confinement, she became pale and ashen with worry and despair.

Although she has been spared from being killed, the courtesan was confined to a chamber

deep within the castle. The guards were extremely strong and there was no way for her to escape. With only thoughts of sorrow in her bosom, she was naturally pale and ashen. Lamenting, she said:

“Alas, for today I suffer. In facing the summons of King Ajātaśatru, a sharp blade has severed our bond and I have been confined to this chamber deep within the castle.”

Question: With the courtesan being spared from death and being confined in the castle, she should have been relieved and happy. Why was she even more worried and depressed instead?

Answer: There were three different reasons for this:

1. With the courtesan being confined, there would no longer be anyone to provide food to the former king. When he heard that she was also locked up, he would be even more worried and depressed. Now, in being without any food and being even more depressed, he would surely not survive much longer.
2. In being imprisoned, when would the courtesan ever again see the face of The One Who Has Descended Into This World or those of his disciples?
3. With the courtesan imprisoned deep within the castle, the guards could prevent her from getting even a drop of water to the king, and from dawn to dusk her only worry was his impending death.

For these three reasons, her body and mind were depressed and her countenance was pale and ashen.

b. *Because of her imprisonment, the courtesan sought the Buddha to express her wishes:*

On this, the scripture says:

Facing towards Vulture’s Peak, she worshipped the Buddha from afar, and spoke these words:

“Blessed One, One Who Has Descended Into This World - before you used to send Ānanda to come and console me. Now, I am worried and in despair. The Blessed One is majestic and exalted, but I no longer have any way to see you. I pray that you send your disciples Mahā Maudgalyāyana and Ānanda to come visit me.”

Having spoken these words, she grieved and wept a shower of tears. Bowing down towards the Buddha and worshiping him from afar, she did not raise her head back up for even a moment.

With the courtesan in confinement, she was unable to be at the Buddha’s side. Facing towards Vulture’s Peak and wholeheartedly worshiping the Blessed One from far away, she prayed for his mercy and compassion, and a chance to express her worry and grief to his disciples.

Blessed One (Bhagavan, 世尊), One Who Has Descended Into This World (Tathāgata, 如來), before you used to send Ānanda to come and console me. Now, I am worried and in utter despair: This has two meanings:

1. Before the former king was imprisoned, sometimes he and his wife were able to be close to the Buddha and sometimes The One Who Has Descended Into This World and his disciples accepted the king’s invitations to be with them. Now, with both of them being confined, this was no longer possible.
2. With the former king in prison, she asked the Blessed One to dispatch Ānanda to come and console her. And why did the Buddha have him come now? Because he saw that the former king was imprisoned, the Buddha sent Ānanda to ask about her out of concern for her grief and distress.

The Blessed One is majestic and exalted, but I no longer have any way to see you: This is on the courtesan's humble devotion to the Buddha's disciples. Because of her tainted character and effeminate nature,²⁴ she knew she was weak and her blessings of virtue were few. The Buddha's virtue was majestic and lofty, and there was no reason for her to expect him to contact her directly, so she requested that he dispatch Maudgalyāyana as well as Ānanda to see her.

Question: The One Who Has Descended Into This World (Tathāgata, 如來) is the Lord of Spiritual Transformation (nirmāṭṛ, 化主) who does not miss any time or opportunity to deliver sentient beings. Why didn't the courtesan extend her request to all three who ended up coming to see her (the Buddha, Maudgalyāyana and Ānanda)?

Answer: She did not dare to presume by requesting that the Buddha in all his majesty deal directly with her humble circumstances. However, in requesting to see Ānanda, she desired that he speak to the Blessed One on her behalf. Because the Buddha understood our wishes, he caused Ānanda to transmit the Buddha's very own words in the scripture to us. This explains why she requested to see Ānanda instead of asking to see all three.

Having spoken these words: This is a reference to that just explained.

She grieved and wept a shower of tears: Because her own moral transgressions were heavy, the courtesan requested the Buddha's aid. She had feelings of reverence for the Buddha and deep grief about her own suffering, and she had tears welling up in her eyes. In the sacred ritual of worshiping the Buddha from a distance with reverent yearning, her head was bowed, she was prostrated before the Buddha with bare feet, and she did not raise her head back up for even a moment.

c. The Blessed One came and visited her as requested:

On this, the scripture says:

Although the Blessed One was on Vulture's Peak at this time, he knew what weighed on Vaidehī's mind. He dispatched Mahā Maudgalyāyana and Ānanda to come down to her through the emptiness of space. The Buddha himself also vanished from Vulture's Peak and reappeared in her chamber deep in the royal house. When Vaidehī finally raised her head, she suddenly saw the Blessed One, the Buddha Śākyamuni before her. His body was a burnished golden color and he was seated on a lotus blossom composed of hundreds of jewels. Maudgalyāyana attended him on his left while Ānanda attended him on his right. The Lord Almighty of Heaven, the Creator of the Universe, the Guardians of the World and a host of other heavenly beings were also seen surrounding the Buddha in the emptiness of space, showering down the divine blossoms they held as offerings to him.

Although the Blessed One was at Vulture's Peak, he already recognized what was in the courtesan's heart and mind.

He dispatched Mahā-Maudgalyāyana and Ānanda to come to her through the emptiness of space: This was the Buddha's response to the courtesan's prayer.

The Buddha himself also vanished from Vulture's Peak (Gr̥dhra Kūta, 耆闍山): Visiting the courtesan within the confines of the castle was very difficult. If the Buddha were to be seen coming to visit her and Ajātaśatru found out about it, there would have been trouble. Because of this, he needed to vanish and then reappear there.

When Vaidehī raised her head: This was the time when the courtesan paid her respects to the Buddha.

She saw the Blessed One, the Buddha Śākyamuni before her: The Blessed One's appearance in her chamber within the castle caused the courtesan to raise her head and see him.

The Buddha Śākyamuni was distinguished here from among the other Buddhas. In only discussing the Buddhas generally, the signs of their lives are without any difference. But here it was determined beyond any doubt that it was indeed the Buddha Śākyamuni. His body was a burnished golden color: This was determined to be one of his signs. He was seated on a lotus blossom consisting of a hundred jewels: This was his uniquely chosen seat.

Maudgalyāyana attended him on his left while Ānanda attended him on his right: There were only these two members of the order (Saṃgha, 僧) that accompanied him.

The Lord Almighty of Heaven, the Creator of the Universe, the Guardians of the World:

This is on the divine kings and all those in the heavenly host⁵³ who saw the Blessed One vanish and then be revealed in the royal house to teach about the transcendental nature of life's purpose that is uniquely rare to hear. Because of Vaidehī, we who are among humanity and heaven have heard about spiritual benefits that were previously unknown to us. With each of these beings having a vehicle for their own recollection, they all approached from far away in empty space and rained down blossoms as offerings for the upcoming meal for their divine ears.

The Lord Almighty of Heaven (Śakra Devendra, 帝釋),⁵³ the almighty divine lord over sentient beings in the sphere of desire (kāma dhātu, 欲界).

The Creator of the Universe (Brahma Rāja, 梵王),⁵³ the lord over sentient existence, the higher spheres of creation:

* Its objective reality (the sphere of form - rūpa dhātu, 色界).

* Its existential principles (the sphere beyond form - arūpa dhātu, 無色界)

The Guardians of the World (Lokapālas, 護世):⁵³ These are the four divine kings of heaven (catur deva rājāḥ, 四天王) in the worldly sphere of desire who protect humanity and its four social classes from evil.

The heavenly host of other heavenly beings (Devas, 諸天):⁵³ This is the heavenly host found in the three-fold sphere of sentient existence (of its desires, the objective reality of its form and its existential principles that are beyond form).²⁵ Having seen these four divine kings arrive to be at the Buddha's side, all the gods of the heavenly host also heard him teach about this true nature of life's purpose and made offerings to him.

d. Upon raising her head, the courtesan saw the Buddha. She then lamented, expressing her deepest feelings:

On this, the scripture says:

When Vaidehī saw the Blessed One, she took off her necklaces and prostrated herself on the ground. Weeping and sobbing before the Buddha, she said:

"Blessed One! What immoral act in the past did I commit to bear this evil child?

Blessed One! Why have you had such a (familial & spiritual) affiliation with Devadatta?"

Took off her necklaces: These necklaces represented the courtesan's bodily adornments, the objects of her craving for vanities and earthly desires which she had not yet given up. Suddenly, upon seeing The One Who Had Descended Into This World, she was ashamed and took them off.

Question: Why did she take off her necklaces?

Answer: For the courtesan, these necklaces were her most prized possessions and she wore them everywhere, whether she was walking, standing, seated or lying down. Many people had offered her gifts of fine clothes and adornments which she used to show herself off. Now, having seen the Buddha, her feelings of humility and shame

were deep and she no longer felt comfortable wearing them, so she suddenly took them off. This is why the scripture says that she took them off.

Prostrated herself on the ground: With the inner heart of the courtesan feeling bound to her suffering, she bemoaned the hardship she had to endure. Because of this, she got up from her seated position and stood. Then, from her standing position, she again prostrated herself on the ground. Her feelings of remorse and repentance were deep and she did not need to undertake any further ritual of worship.

Crying and sobbing before the Buddha: With her sadness and grief turning into crying and sobbing, the courtesan's mind was sweet and docile towards the Buddha.

She said: "Blessed One! What immoral act in the past did I commit to bear this evil child?":

The courtesan's tears eventually made her sweet and agreeable and she calmed down. Pressing her palms together with her spine having a straight and upright deportment, she spoke to the Buddha, saying "In my whole life I have never created any great sin, but what cause did I make in the past to give me the misfortune of having this child?"

The courtesan was unaware of the depth the past spiritual obstacles caused by her past actions (karma āvaraṇa, 業障) and did not know what caused her to bear a child that would wreak such havoc on her life. She prayed that the Buddha would have mercy and compassion on her and show her the right path.

"Blessed One! Why have you had such a (familial and spiritual) affiliation with Devadatta?":

This is on the courtesan facing the Buddha and asserting that she was just a common sinner laden with confusions who could not fathom why she had received such an evil retribution as this, and that she was resigned to her fate. On the other hand, the Blessed One had walked the noble path for countless lifetimes (asaṃkhyeya kalpas, 無數劫),⁷ vanquishing all emotional disturbances (kleśa, 正使) and their habitual tendencies (vāsaṇa, 習). Being illuminated by the perfect fruits of transcendental knowledge, he was called the Buddha. Why had he not yet examined why he had such an affiliation with Devadatta? This idea is in two parts:

1. The courtesan had blamed her son, who had suddenly rebelled violently against his father and mother.
2. She also hated Devadatta for inciting her son Ajātaśatru and teaching him how to hatch such an evil scheme. If not for Devadatta, her child would never have wished for this. This is why she asked such a question. In the courtesan asking the Buddha about his affiliations with Devadatta, there are two parts:

a. He had family affiliations: The Buddha's father was one of four brothers.

Each of them had two sons:

1. Siddhārtha (Śākyamuni) & Nanda were the sons of Śuddhodana (白淨王)
2. Devadatta & Ānanda were the sons of Śukhlodana (白飯王)
3. Mahānāma & Anuruddha were the sons of Droṇodana (斛飯王)
4. Tiṣya & Bhadrīka were the sons of Amṛtodana (甘露飯王)

These were called the *outer* affiliations of the Buddha's family.

b. He had affiliations among those who had left home: With Buddha making Devadatta a disciple, there was also an *inner* affiliation.

Although there are four parts described above that are not the same, they generally explain her loathing of the bitter conditions of suffering.

5. Delight in the joyful conditions of pure bliss

On this, the scripture says:

(Vaidehī continued):

“Blessed One! I pray that you tell me of a place where there is no sorrow or distress, a refuge where I may go to be spiritually reborn. I no longer take pleasure in the jungle we live in and the depravities of its evil world. This place is corrupted, filled with hells, demons of hunger and brutal beasts. So much evil has accumulated here! May I never again hear these evil voices or see these evil people. I now face the Blessed One, prostrate myself on the ground, seek mercy and confess my moral transgressions. I only pray that the sun-like Buddha teach me how to meditate on a refuge from this suffering in such a way that all my actions will be pure of affliction.”

The Blessed One then emitted a golden ray of light from the middle of his brow that illuminated all the innumerable worlds of the ten directions. Upon turning inward, the ray remained on the crown of the Buddha's head and was transformed into a golden beacon that looked like Mount Sumeru. All the other Buddhas in the sublimely pure nations and lands of the ten directions were revealed through it:

- * Some of these lands were composed of the seven treasures.
- * Some simply consisted of lotus blossoms.
- * Some were like the palace of the great lord that rules over all the heavens in the sphere of desire.
- * Some were like mirrors of crystal in which the light of all these innumerable nations and lands of the Buddhas in the ten directions were reflected.

All of these beautiful visions were made for Vaidehī to see and to choose from. She then spoke to Buddha again, saying:

“Blessed One, although all these nations of the Buddhas are pure and radiant with light and splendor, I now wish to be reborn in the World of Pure Bliss, the site of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life. Blessed One, I pray that you teach me how to properly deliberate on it and penetrate it.”

唯願世尊。為我廣說無憂惱處。我當往生。不樂閻浮提濁惡世也。此濁惡處。地獄餓鬼畜生盈滿。多不善聚。願我未來不聞惡聲。不見惡人。今向世尊五體投地。求哀懺悔。唯願佛日教我觀於清淨業處。爾時世尊放眉間光。其光金色。遍照十方無量世界。還住佛頂。化為金臺如須彌山。十方諸佛淨妙國土。皆於中現。或有國土七寶合成。復有國土純是蓮花。復有國土如自在天宮。復有國土如頗梨鏡。十方國土皆於中現。有如是等無量諸佛國土嚴顯可觀。令韋提希見。時韋提希白佛言。世尊。是諸佛土。雖復清淨皆有光明。我今樂生極樂世界阿彌陀佛所。唯願世尊。教我思惟教我正受。

5. Shàndào's commentary says:

On delight in the joyful conditions of pure bliss, there are eight parts:

- a. The courtesan generally requested a place pure of affliction to seek refuge.
- b. She brought up escaping the loathsome sphere (of affliction).
- c. She generally sought a Pure Land, a sublime place where evil is not produced:
The transcendental sphere of life's purpose (dharma dhātu, 法界).
- d. She generally asked about the kind of practice that would enable her to enter into a Pure Land: meditation with stillness of mind (dhyāna, 禪).
- e. The Blessed One revealed a general visualization of the Pure Lands in response to her request.

- f. The courtesan was moved by these general revelations of the Buddha's state of grace
- g. Among these Pure Lands, the courtesan selected a specific one to seek - the Land of Pure Bliss (Sukhāvatī, 極樂世界).
- h. The courtesan requested the specific practice of meditation by which she could enter into this land: The resolve of meditation attained through recalling the Enlightened Being (buddha anusmṛti samādhi, 念佛三昧) 'Of Infinite Life & Light'.

a. The courtesan generally requested a place pure of affliction to seek refuge:

On this, the scripture says:

"Blessed One! I pray that you tell me of a place where there is no sorrow or distress, a refuge where I may go to be spiritually reborn. I no longer take pleasure in the jungle we live in and the depravities of its evil world."

The jungle we live in (Jambūdvīpa, 閻浮提)^{27D} is a specific reference to the realm of human suffering. It was upon encountering this suffering in her own life that the courtesan awakened to the impermanence of this world. The six spiritual paths that span from heaven to hell are similarly without the grounding that comes from attaining a secure peace of mind. Upon hearing the Buddha teach that the Pure Land is beyond that which arises and perishes (anutpada, 無生), she wished to renounce life in this defiled world and realize the contentment that is unconditional.

b. She brought up escaping this loathsome sphere:

On this, the scripture says:

"This place is corrupted, filled with hells, demons of hunger and brutal beasts. So much evil has accumulated here! May I never again hear these evil voices or see these evil people."

This is generally about the evils found in the jungle we live in (Jambūdvīpa, 閻浮提).^{27D} There is not a single thing here one should thirst for. However, because of their illusions, foolish people are confused into forever swallowing its pains.

This corrupt place: This is the sphere of suffering (duḥkha dhātu, 苦界). It is also seen as being a vessel, an environment that contains our lives. And so it is also a reference to the consequences upon which we depend (parakarma phala, 依報).

Hells, demons of hunger and brutal beasts:¹⁶ These are the three levels found in the gravest fruits of evil.

Filled with: The accumulation of these three kinds of suffering does not just indicate the jungle we live in (Jambūdvīpa, 閻浮提). It is also the world that we must all endure together (saḥa loka, 娑婆世界) and it exists everywhere. Because of this, it said to be "filled with" these evil fruits.

So much evil has accumulated here: This is about all the different distinctions of the mind found on the six paths¹⁶ and the three-fold sphere of sentient existence²⁵ that are as numerous as the grains of sand along the River Ganges. The scriptures say that all our actions (karma, 業) are able to adorn our consciousness (vijñāna, 識). In all the various places in our world we adapt to the conditions at hand and so receive the fruits and rewards of our spiritual destiny (gati, 趣). When we are all opposed to one another, we do not even recognize each other.

In the future, may I not hear evil voices nor see evil people: This is about the courtesan penetrating all of this with a heart that was genuinely sincere. In loathing the sufferings of this world we must all endure together (saḥa loka, 娑婆世界) and delighting in the

contentment that is unconditional, she became forever devoted to realizing eternal bliss. However, it is not possible to easily enter into this unconditional sphere *in degrees*. One does not suddenly attain freedom from the suffering and distress of this world we must all endure together without inspiring the adamant resolve⁴² that forever cuts off the very source of life & death (saṃsāra, 生死). If one is not intimate with the mercy of the Blessed One, how can one summon such a long and sustained effort?

In the future, may I never again hear these evil voices or see these evil people: This is on not wishing to hear evil voices or see evil people like King Ajātaśatru, people who would kill their own fathers and damage or destroy the community of faith (Saṃgha, 僧). The King Ajātaśatru was a son who nurtured a murderous intent towards his very own parents. Is it not even easier for those who have impersonal relationships to harm one other? Because of this, the courtesan could not distinguish between close and distant relationships in suddenly renouncing all attachments to this world.

c. *She generally sought a Pure Land, a sublime place where evil is not produced:*

The transcendental sphere of life's purpose (dharma dhātu, 法界)

On this, the scripture says:

"I now face the Blessed One, prostrate myself on the ground, seek mercy and confess my moral transgressions."

Lest she have other moral transgressions and spiritual obstacles that she could not let go of, she sought mercy and needed to confess.

d. *She generally asked about what kind of practice would enable her to enter into a Pure Land: Meditation with stillness of mind* (dhyāna, 禪)

On this, the scripture says:

"I pray that the sun-like Buddha teach me how to meditate on a refuge from this suffering in such a way that all my actions will be pure of affliction."

This is on the courtesan generally praying for a practice that will lead to spiritual rebirth in a Pure Land.

The sun-like Buddha: This pairs the nature of the Buddha's purpose with an illustration.

Just as a sunrise eliminates darkness, the sun that is the radiant splendor of the Buddha's transcendental knowledge of purpose brings light to the long night of ignorance.

Teach me how to meditate on a refuge from this suffering in such a way that all my actions will be pure of affliction: Already able to loath corruption and delight in purity, when she focused her thoughts with peace of mind and secure in contentment, there would be the attainment of spiritual rebirth in this pure refuge.

e. *The Blessed One revealed a general visualization of the Pure Lands in response to her request:* On this, the scripture says:

The Blessed One then emitted a golden ray of light from the middle of his brow that illuminated all the innumerable worlds of the ten directions. Upon turning inward, the ray remained on the crown of the Buddha's head and was transformed into a golden beacon that looked like Mount Sumeru. All the other Buddhas in the sublimely pure nations and lands of the ten directions were revealed through it:

- * Some of these lands were composed of the seven treasures.
- * Some simply consisted of lotus blossoms.
- * Some were like the palace of the great lord that rules over all the heavens in the sphere of desire.

- * **Some were like mirrors of crystal in which the light of all these innumerable nations and lands of the Buddhas in the ten directions were reflected.**

All of these beautiful visions were made for Vaidehī to see and to choose from.

When the Blessed One saw that the courtesan generally sought rebirth in the Pure Land, The One Who Had Descended Into This World (Tathāgata, 如來) emitted a ray of light from between his brows that illuminated the ten directions of the Pure Land and included all the nations found there. This radiance then turned inward towards the crown of his head and was transformed into a golden beacon that was like Mount Sumeru.⁵⁵ In resembling Mount Sumeru, its waist was slender and its top was broad. Through it, all the nations of the Buddhas were revealed at the same time. With the various nations of the Pure Land not being the same, they were adorned with different glories.⁶⁹ Through the spiritual power of the Buddha, they were all illuminated in detail so that Vaidehī could see them all.

Question: Above, Vaidehī requested that the Buddha generally teach her about a place that is without sorrow. Why didn't the Buddha then elaborate on all of these different nations of the Pure Land, and what was the idea of revealing them all through a golden beacon?

Answer: There was a secret intent behind this revelation of The One Who Had Descended Into This World (Tathāgata, 如來). When Vaidehī uttered the words that conveyed her request, the Buddha generally opened up the door to all the Pure Lands. If he had then specifically elaborated on each of them,⁶⁹ she would not have really seen any of them and she would have still been confused. Thus, by revealing all of them together and just placing them before her eyes, she could believe in them as she needed and she could choose among them for herself according to her own wishes.

- f. *The courtesan was moved by these general revelations of the Buddha's state of grace:*

On this, the scripture says:

She then spoke to Buddha again, saying:

"Blessed One, although all these nations of the Buddhas are pure and radiant with light and splendor, ..."

This is on the courtesan generally seeing the quintessential nature of all the different nations of the Buddhas in the ten directions simultaneously. In preferring the glories that adorn the Land of Pure Bliss (Sukhāvatī, 極樂世界) to those of the others, she said "I now wish to be reborn in this Nation Secure in Contentment" (The World of Pure Bliss).

Question: The Buddhas of the ten directions all similarly eliminate the confusions of emotional disturbance, and the perfect fruits realized from their various cultivations of practice are also without any difference. What are the merits and drawbacks in each of the different kinds of Pure Lands?

Answer: The Buddha is the lord of the true nature of life's purpose and the master of spiritual penetration. He is without any confusion with regards to the suitability and unsuitability of its different paths. Some are concealed and some are revealed when adapting to the different spiritual capacities of sentient beings and looking to sustain the benefits of spiritual transformation. Some of those that are suitable may therefore be concealed when only revealing the one in the western direction as the best choice.

- g. *Among these Pure Lands, the courtesan selected a specific place (kind of transcendental knowledge) to seek - the Land of Pure Bliss (Sukhāvatī, 極樂世界):*

On this, the scripture says:

"I now wish to be reborn in the World of Pure Bliss, the site of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life."

The World of Pure Bliss (Sukhāvātī, 極樂世界) refers to the nation of The Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur, 阿彌陀) and his forty-eight vows (found in Appendix A). All these vows arouse the most distinguished cause (of faith).

- * Upon relying on this cause, there arises a most distinguished practice.
- * Upon relying on this practice, there is attainment of a most distinguished fruit.
- * Upon relying on this fruit, there is attainment of a most distinguished reward of grace.
- * Upon relying on this reward, there is attainment of pure bliss.
- * Upon relying on this pure bliss, there is penetration of the compassion that spiritually transforms.
- * Upon relying on this compassion that spiritually transforms, there is the opening up of the door that leads to transcendental knowledge and discernment of purpose.

And with the heart of compassion being inexhaustible, the transcendental knowledge of purpose is also without bounds. In being endowed with a practice with both compassion (karuṇa, 悲) and transcendental knowledge (jñāna, 智), the sweet dew (amṛta, 甘露) of spiritual freedom (nirvāṇa, 涅槃) is opened up wide. In causing the transcendental nature of life's purpose to be nourished, everywhere flocks of sentient beings are led to spiritual rebirth here. Many other scriptures in the Buddhist canon encourage the seeking of this place of refuge, and a host of noble beings have been of one mind in praising it. For this reason, The One Who Had Descended Into This World (Tathāgata, 如來) secretly led the courtesan to make this specific choice.

h. The courtesan requested a specific practice:

On this, the scripture says:

“Blessed One, I pray that you teach me how to properly deliberate on it and penetrate it.”

With Vaidehī having selected a place to attain this rebirth, she then asked for advice on how to cultivate its specific practice, keep her mind focused on it and directly attain its benefits.

Teach me how to deliberate on it: This is on the preliminary ways and means (sāmantaka upāya, 前方便) that lead to meditative resolve (samādhi, 定). With deliberation (cintanā, 思想) one keeps the Nation of Pure Bliss in mind with its two kinds of grace:

1. The environment of grace, the consequences the Buddha depends on (parakarma phala, 依報) also called the spiritual realm or ‘sphere of purpose’ (dharma dhātu, 法界)
2. The person of grace, the consequences of the Buddha’s own actions (svakarma phala, 正報), also called the spiritual life or ‘life of purpose’ (dharma kāya, 法身)

There are four kinds of adornment found in deliberating on this state of grace:

1. Being motionless yet penetrating it (不動而至)
2. Reaching it anywhere in a single moment (一念遍至)
3. Making offerings invisibly (with anonymity & without prejudice) (供養無相)
4. Revealing the true nature of life’s purpose, just as the Buddha does (示法如佛)

Teach me how to penetrate it: Upon deliberating on it, it gradually becomes more subtle and refined. When the awakening (of the subject) and the visualization (of the object) are both transcended and there is a perfect union between the resolve of the mind and its object, there is ‘penetration’ (samāpattī, 正受) (of meditative resolve).

Having outlined this analysis, the (sixteen) gateways of meditation that follow will further distinguish it. This should be understood.

Although there are eight parts described above that are not the same, collectively they explain the delight found in the conditions of pure bliss (and its freedom from affliction).

6. On the virtues of mental dispersion found in the conditions of unafflicted conduct

On this, the scripture says:

The Blessed One then gently smiled upon her, with the radiance of five colors being projected from his mouth. Each of these rays of light became illuminated on the crown of King Bimbisāra's head. Although the great king was still imprisoned in the dungeon, his mind's eye became unobstructed and he was able to see the Blessed One from afar. Worshipping him by bowing his head with his face down, he then spontaneously attained the fruit of one who will never again need to return to this world. The Blessed One then spoke to Vaidehī, saying:

“Did you not know that the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life is not very far from here?

You should focus your mind and carefully meditate on the pure, unafflicted actions of those in this nation. I will now teach you about this with metaphors so that ordinary beings in the future will aspire to cultivate actions that are pure of affliction, enabling them to attain rebirth in this western Land of Pure Bliss. Those who desire to be reborn in this nation should undertake cultivation of the three blessings of unafflicted conduct:

1. First, they should offer filial duty and support to their fathers and mothers, serve and respect their teachers and elders, have a kind heart that abstains from the intentional taking of life and cultivate the ten kinds of virtuous acts.
2. Second, they should accept and embrace the Three Treasures and all the precepts of moral commitment to virtuous and noble purposes, never being in violation of them through the dignity of their conduct.
3. Third, they should inspire the minds of sentient beings to awaken them to the transcendental nature of life's purpose, deeply believe in cause and effect of karma and retribution, read and recite the scriptures about the greater track of the noble path and encourage others to diligently cultivate this practice.

These three kinds of conduct are said to be the actions that are pure of affliction.”

The Buddha then further said to Vaidehī:

“Do you not now understand that these three kinds of conduct are the primary cause for the Buddhas' actions through the past, present and future?”

爾時世尊即便微笑。有五色光從佛口出。一一光照頻婆娑羅王頂。爾時大王雖在幽閉。心眼無障遙見世尊。頭面作禮。自然增進成阿那含。爾時世尊告韋提希。汝今知不。阿彌陀佛去此不遠。汝當繫念諦觀彼國淨業成者。我今為汝廣說眾譬。亦令未來世一切凡夫欲修淨業者得生西方極樂國土。欲生彼國者。當修三福。一者孝養父母。奉事師長。慈心不殺。修十善業。二者受持三歸。具足眾戒。不犯威儀。三者發菩提心。深信因果。讀誦大乘。勸進行者。如此三事名為淨業。佛告韋提希。汝今知不。此三種業乃是過去未來現在。三世諸佛淨業正因。

6. Shāndào's commentary says:

On the virtues of mental dispersion (vikṣepa, 散) as demonstrated in cultivating conditions of unafflicted conduct, there are five parts:

- a. The radiance of the Buddha's grace benefited the former king.
- b. The Buddha answered the courtesan's questions about the specific practice she had chosen.
- c. To elevate her capacity, the Buddha encouraged the cultivation of her conduct through revealing the benefits to be attained.
- d. The Buddha encouraged Vaidehī and Ānanda to cultivate practice of the three blessings of unafflicted conduct.
- e. The Buddha encouraged a noble effort from an ordinary being.

a. *The radiance of the Buddha's grace benefited the former king:*

On this, the scripture says:

The Blessed One then gently smiled upon her, with the radiance of five colors being projected from his mouth. Each of these rays of light became illuminated on the crown of King Bimbisāra's head. Although the great king was still imprisoned in the dungeon, his mind's eye became unobstructed and he was able to see the Blessed One from afar. Worshipping him by bowing his head with his face down, he then spontaneously attained the fruit of one who will never again need to return to this world.

This is on The One Who Had Descended Into This World (Tathāgata, 如來) seeing the courtesan request to:

#1 Be reborn in the Land of Pure Bliss, and

#2 Cultivate a practice that would enable her to enter into this spiritual rebirth

These are also called #1 'entering into the Buddha's own mind' & #2 'revealing the transcendental vow of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life' (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛). It is because of these two requests that the door of the Pure Land was broadly opened up. Not only did Vaidehī enter into it, but all those who hear of it and come to know of it will attain its benefits. Because of this, there was the gentle smile (susmita, 微笑) of The One Who Descended Into This World.

With the radiance of five colors being projected from his mouth: The minds and the mouths of the Buddhas are always endowed with a majestic and awesome purpose like this, and the light of these five colors⁷⁰ they issue forth certainly has these benefits.

Each of these rays illuminated the crown of the King Bimbisāra: This light was issued from the Buddha's mouth.⁷⁰ It did not come from any other place and it only illuminated the crown of the king's head. In fact, the radiance from all the places on the Buddha's body bestow benefits.

- * The light issued from below the Buddha's feet illuminates the benefits for those on the path that leads to a destiny in hell (naraka gati, 地獄趣).
- * When the light is issued from his knees, it illuminates the benefits for those on the path that leads to a destiny of brutality among the beasts (tiragyoni gati, 畜生趣).
- * When the light is issued from his genitals, it illuminates the benefits for those on the path that leads to a destiny among the demons of hunger (preta gati, 餓鬼趣).
- * When the light is issued from his guts, it illuminates the benefits for those on the path that leads to a destiny among the giants of ego (asura gati, 阿修羅趣).
- * When the light is issued from his heart, it illuminates the benefits for those on the path that leads to a destiny among human beings (manuṣya gati, 人趣).
- * When the light is issued from his throat, it illuminates the benefits for those on the path that leads to a destiny among the divine beings of heaven (deva gati, 天趣).
- * When the light is issued from his mouth, it illuminates the benefits for those on the lesser track of attaining freedom from affliction on an individual level.
- * When the light is issued from his brow, it illuminates the benefits for those on the greater track of awakening sentient beings to the true nature of life's purpose.

Now this light was issued from the Buddha's mouth and it directly illuminated the king's crown. This was the bestowing of the lesser fruit of enlightenment upon him. If the light had been issued from the Buddha's brow and entered the king's crown it would have bestowed the prophecy of becoming a bodhisattva upon him. The meaning of these things is measurelessly broad and deep and impossible to completely convey here.⁷¹

Although the great king was still imprisoned in the dungeon ...: This is about the former king receiving this radiance that illuminated the crown of his head. His mind's eye opened up and, although he was saddled with many obstacles (āvaraṇa, 障) as a consequence of his past actions (karma, 業) and his emotional disturbances (kleśa, 煩惱), he was able to spontaneously see the auspicious signs of the Buddha. It was because of the light of this grace that he was able to see the Buddha, not because he aspired to do so or he willed it. In paying homage to and taking refuge in the Buddha, he transcended this world and realized the third fruit of the never-returner (anāgamin, 阿那含).^{3C}

b. *The Buddha answered the courtesan's question about the specific practice she had chosen:*

On this, the scripture says:

The Blessed One then spoke to Vaidehī, saying:

“Did you not know that the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life is not very far from here? You should focus your mind and carefully meditate on the actions of those in this nation that are pure of affliction. I will now teach you about this with metaphors ...”

From the disappearance of The One Who Had Descended Into This World (Tathāgata, 如來) from Vulture's Peak (Gṛdhra Kūta, 耆闍) to the reappearance of the Blessed One in the confines of the royal house, the Buddha had remained seated in silence, not yet uttering a word. During this time, the courtesan had confessed, prayed and asked questions, and there had been the issuing of the light, the revelation of the Pure Lands, etc. It is only because Ānanda saw these events with the Buddha in the royal house and later spoke of them to the great host upon returning to Vulture's Peak that we have a firsthand account of it. But it was not without a time in which the Buddha did in fact speak. This should be understood.

At this time the Blessed One spoke to Vaidehī: This is the Buddha addressing her about the upcoming teaching.

The Buddha of Infinite Life is not very far from here: This is a reference to the object of meditation. There are three points that should be kept in mind about this:

1. Although the nation of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛) is more than a hundred million worlds (kṣetra, 刹) away, it is said to be 'not far from here'.
2. Although the noble path seems very long and the goal very far away, it can be reached in but a single moment of thought (eka kṣaṇa. 一念).
3. When Vaidehī and sentient beings in the future focus their minds on it, meditate on it and keep it in mind, and there is perfect correspondence between their mental resolve and this object of meditation, they will always be able to see it spontaneously.

For these three reasons this Buddha was said to be 'not far from here'.

You should focus your mind and carefully meditate on the actions of those in this nation

that are pure of affliction (śuddha karman, 淨業): The minds of ordinary people are deeply obstructed by confusions that agitate and distract them. If they do not immediately let go of these conditions, there will be no way for them to reveal this sphere that is pure of affliction. Here there will be a proper instruction on how to securely abide in meditation with peace of mind. If one depends on these instructions, one's actions will become pure of affliction.

I will now teach you about this with metaphors (upamā, 譬): With her capacity not yet being sufficient, it was impossible to just teach her directly about the resolve of meditation. Having observed her capacity, the Buddha began by teaching her about practicing the three kinds of unafflicted conduct.

- c. *Elevating her capacity, encouraging the cultivation of her conduct through the benefits to be attained:*

On this, the scripture says:

“ ... so that ordinary beings in the future will aspire to cultivate acts that are pure of affliction, enabling them to attain rebirth in this western Land of Pure Bliss.”

The courtesan wished to attain the benefits from a keen capacity for spiritual rebirth that becomes ever-more deep, and for sentient beings of the future who dedicate themselves to reaching the Pure Land to also be able to do so.

- d. *Encouraging Vaidehī and Ānanda to cultivate practice of the three blessings of unafflicted conduct:*

On this, the scripture says:

“Those who desire to be reborn in this nation should undertake cultivation of the three blessings of unafflicted conduct:

1. **First, they should offer filial duty and support to their fathers and mothers, serve and respect their teachers and elders, have a kind heart that abstains from the intentional taking of life and cultivate the ten kinds of virtuous acts.**
2. **Second, they should accept and embrace the Three Treasures and all the precepts of moral commitment to virtuous and noble purposes, never being in violation of them through the dignity of their conduct.**
3. **Third, they should inspire the minds of sentient beings to awaken to the transcendental nature of life’s purpose, deeply believe in cause and effect (karma and retribution), read and recite the scriptures about the greater track of the noble path and encourage others to diligently cultivate this practice.**

These three kinds of conduct are said to be the actions that are pure of affliction.”

This is about the spiritual capacity of sentient beings, which is essentially of two kinds:

1. *The mental resolve* (samādhi, 定) found in singleness of mind; This is a reference to the unafflicted resolve of meditation.
2. *The mental dispersion* (vikṣepa, 散) found in the cultivation (bhāvanā, 修) of conduct, the creation of causes that have consequences (karma, 業); This is a reference to the unafflicted thoughts, words and deeds that arise from the discursive mind.

If the teaching of the Buddha only depended on the practice of mental resolve, they would not be accessible to all sentient beings. Because of this, The One Who Had Descended Into This World (Tathāgata, 如來) used the skillful ways and means (upāya, 方便) of teaching about the three ways of cultivating unafflicted conduct for those whose spiritual capacities were agitated and subject to mental dispersion.

Those who desire to be reborn in this nation: This nation refers to the place of refuge.

Should undertake cultivation (bhāvanā, 修) of the three blessings of unafflicted conduct:

This generally refers to the avenues or gateways of conduct that lead to the earning of merit, or spiritual blessings (puṇya, 福). What are these three called?

1. **Worldly blessings;**
This is reference to the triumph of virtue over evil.
2. **Accepting the Three Treasures with faith and keeping them in mind;**
This is reference to a commitment to purposes that are both virtuous and noble.
3. **Inspiring all sentient beings to awaken to the transcendental nature of life’s purpose;**
This is reference to faith in a higher calling of purpose.

1. **Worldly Blessings:** This is in four parts:

- a. Fulfilling one's filial obligations and offering support to one's parents
- b. Serving and respecting one's teachers and elders
- c. Having a kind heart that abstains from the intentional taking of life
- d. Cultivating the ten kinds of virtuous acts

- a. Fulfilling one's filial obligations and offering support to one's parents: All ordinary beings everywhere depend on conditions to be reborn. What are these conditions?

- * Some beings are reborn through moisture (asexually).
- * Some are reborn through an egg.
- * Some are reborn through a womb.
- * Some are reborn through spiritual transformation.

In the case of rebirth through a womb, there is only birth because there is both a father and a mother. There is great favor in being blessed with a father and mother.

- * If there was no father, the initial cause for rebirth would be lacking.
- * If there was no mother, the conditions for rebirth could not be fulfilled.
- * If these two people did not get together, there would be no basis for them to be entrusted with this new life.

It is therefore necessary to have both a father & mother for there to be the conditions to conceive a life with sentient feelings. Already desiring to conceive such a life:

- * Through their own conscious actions there is the inner cause.
- * Through mixing of the semen, the egg and the blood (DNA) of the father and mother there are the outer conditions.

With the cause and conditions being blended together, a life is produced. Because of this, the favor of having a father and mother is absolutely essential. After this, the mother harbors the new life in her womb for ten lunar months, enduring constant suffering and distress whether she is walking, standing, seated or lying down.

She also has to worry about the risk of dying at the time that she gives birth. After children are born, there are another three years during which they constantly need food, sleep, and cleaning after lying in their own defecation and urine or soiling their bedding and clothing. When children grow up they will love their own spouses and children and may even turn against their own fathers and mothers, possibly even bearing hatred and resentment against them. In not fulfilling their filial obligations, their behavior is no different from that of animals. One's parents are the ultimate field of blessings in this world, just as the Buddha is the ultimate field of blessings beyond it.

At one time when the Buddha was in this world, there was widespread hunger and need. People everywhere were starving. Bones and abandoned corpses were found throughout the length and breadth of the country. Monks and many others begged for food that was difficult to attain. During this time, the Blessed One waited for the other monks (bhikṣus, 諸比丘) to go out before he entered the city to beg for food by himself. From dawn to noon, he would go from door to door asking for food, only to find that people were without and he would return with an empty alms bowl. Day after day, he would go out and, more often than not, he would return empty-handed. One day, he chanced upon a monk on the road. Upon meeting the Buddha, this monk saw that the Buddha's complexion has changed and that he had a hungry appearance. Questioning the Buddha, he said:

"Blessed One, have you eaten?"

The Buddha answered, saying:

“Bhikṣu, for three days I have begged for food but have not acquired a spoonful.

I can share with you that I am now hungry and with little strength.”

Hearing the Buddha speak, the monk was sad he could not help, thinking to himself:

“The Buddha is the supreme field of blessings that looks over and protects sentient beings. Now is the right time for me to sell the three articles of my monk’s uniform to buy a bowl of food for him.”

Having made this thought, he sold his uniform and acquired a bowl of food,

bringing it to the Buddha. When the Buddha saw this, he asked the monk:

“Bhikṣu, at this time of the year when people everywhere are starving to death, how were you able to come up with this bowl of fresh food?”

When the monk explained what he had done, the Blessed One further said:

“Bhikṣu, these three articles of clothing are a symbol the Buddhas’ livelihood in this world that endures through the past, the present and the future. They are one of the reasons why they are honored, esteemed and favored. I appreciate your good intentions in exchanging them to acquire this meal for me, but I do not deserve it.”

The monk answered the Buddha, saying:

“The Buddha is the field of blessings for the three-fold realm of sentient existence,²⁵ the most noble of the noble, yet you say you do not deserve it. Who could deserve it more than you?”

The Buddha said:

“Bhikṣu, do you still have a father and mother?”

He answered, saying:

“Yes, I do.”

The Buddha said:

“You should then go and offer it to them.”

The monk said:

“The Buddha may say he does not deserve it, but how could my father and mother possibly deserve it more than you?”

The Buddha said:

“Why do they deserve it? Your very existence is due to them and they are the most important blessing in your life. For this reason, they deserve it most of all.”

The Buddha also asked the monk:

“Do your father and mother have faith in what the Buddha has taught, or not?”

The monk answered, saying:

“They do not believe entirely”

The Buddha then said:

“You now have a faithful heart, and to see you offering me this meal brings me great joy. Through this, you have attested to your faith. But even before you teach your parents to take refuge in the Three Treasures, they deserve to have this food.”

When the monk accepted the Buddha’s advice, he left feeling greater compassion and respect for his parents. And so there is the great need for fulfilling one’s filial obligations and supporting one’s father and mother. Mahāmāya (摩訶摩耶) died

seven days after she gave birth to the Buddha and was then reborn in the heaven of the thirty-three gods (trayastrimśa devaloka, 忉利天).⁵³ Some years after he had attained enlightenment, on the fifteenth day of the fourth month (the beginning of the rainy season), the Buddha entered this heaven to teach his mother about the true nature of life’s purpose and to reward her for the ten lunar months that she had harbored him in her womb. With even the Buddha having a filial obligation to

support his parents like this, how much more so do ordinary people? And so one should appreciate the ultimately deep favor that is owed to one's own father and mother.

- b. *Serving and respecting one's teachers and elders*: This is on the teaching of propriety and etiquette, and applying oneself to the study, learning and attainment of virtue. If one's conduct is flawless, even to the point of becoming a Buddha, it is really just a result of the strength of one's good relationship with one's teachers. It is absolutely essential to revere and honor this great favor that one has been blessed with from them. In reality, one's attitude towards one's father and mother, one's teachers and one's elders is all about one's respect for a higher authority.
- c. *Having a heart of loving kindness that abstains from the intentional taking of life*: This is on a fundamental respect for the lives of all sentient beings everywhere. When one sees evil conditions, there is an instinct to fear it and to run and hide to avoid it, and only to protect one's own life. The Scripture on the Unfettered Being 'Greatness of Truth' (Mahā Satya Nirgrantha Sūtra, 大薩遮尼乾子所說經) says:
"There are no sentient beings without a love of life. One must never kill them or treat them with cruelty. One should forgive all as one would forgive oneself."
This is an illustration that proves this point.
- d. *Cultivating the ten kinds of virtuous acts*:⁷¹ Among the ten unwholesome acts, *the intentional taking of life* is the worst, and because of this, it is listed first. Among the ten virtuous acts, the prolonging of life is the most important and, because of this, the taking of life and prolonging of life are considered counterparts of each other. All the other nine unwholesome acts (*stealing, adultery, lying, a divisive tongue, hateful speech, dissembling speech, jealousy, anger & attachment to false beliefs*) and the other nine virtuous acts (abstaining from these evils) reach down into all nine grades of capacity for spiritual rebirth. This will be elaborated on later. These nine are all about worldly virtue and are all said to be the lesser (humbler) practices found in the heart of loving kindness.

2. *Accepting the Three Treasures with faith and keeping them in mind*: Worldly blessings are relatively inconsequential in that the results they produce are not comprehensive and enduring. Precepts of moral commitment (śīla, 戒),³² on the other hand, are more significant in that they lead to the fruit of spiritual awakening (bodhi, 菩提). Only when sentient beings are devoted does their faith turn from shallow to deep. After accepting the three-fold refuge of putting their trust in an enlightened being (Buddha, 佛), the true nature of life's purpose (Dharma, 法) and the community of faith (Saṃgha, 僧), they are taught the rest of the precepts of moral commitment.

Keeping all the precepts of moral commitment to purposes that are both virtuous and noble (upasampadā, 具足戒): In fact, there are many different categories of precepts. For some there are just the precepts of moral commitment to the threefold refuge (trusting in the Buddha, Dharma & Saṃgha). For others there are the many different kinds of moral commitment³² made on the noble path in accordance with one's capacity. For those awakening sentient beings to the nature of life's purpose (bodhisattvas, 菩薩) there are three categories of precepts (tri vidhāni śīlāni, 三聚):³²

- * The formally divided numbers of precepts (5, 8, 10, 250, 500, etc.)
- * Whatever works best for people's welfare
- * Whatever delivers sentient beings from suffering to spiritual freedom

For some there are the ten most serious precepts for a monk or the full slate of precepts.³² And in each of these different precepts there are also lesser, greater and complete degrees of intensity in their observation.

Never being in violation of them through the dignity of their conduct: This is on the thoughts, words and deeds of the mind, mouth & body. Whether walking, standing, seated or lying down, one can skillfully observe all these precepts of moral commitment with a dignified demeanor. Whether (these rules are) easy or difficult, obvious or subtle, one is able to embrace and keep them all. When there is genuine confession with remorse (kṣamâpatti pratideśana 懺悔), their violation does not lead to loss of dignity in one's demeanor. This is about 'the virtues of moral commitment'.

3. *Inspiring the minds of sentient beings to awaken to the transcendental nature of life's purpose* (bodhi cittotpada, 發菩提心): All those sentient beings who rejoice and take interest in the greater (vehicle) must not get bogged down in that which is shallow or short-sighted. If they do not inspire a broad mind, how can they awaken to that which is great? In inspiring the mind in thoughts, words and deeds:

- * May my body be at one with the nature of emptiness that contains the whole of the space/time continuum.
- * May my mind ever be at one with the transcendental sphere of life's purpose (dharma dhātu, 法界) that contains all sentient beings everywhere.
- * *By my deeds* may I reverently make offerings to and worship (the Buddha), and may the Buddha accompany me everywhere I go in the deliverance of all sentient beings.
- * *By my words* may I praise the teachings about the true nature of life's purpose, may I accept these words that lead to my own spiritual restoration and may I then speak of these teachings to all those who seek the path of enlightenment.
- * *By my thoughts* may I enter into meditation on all the individual lives found in the transcendental sphere of life's purpose, and may I respond to their different capacities and the conditions at hand in delivering them, with no one ever being left behind.
- * And in inspiring these vows:
 - * May I transmit them everywhere throughout the boundless sphere of empty space so that there is no place that they do not reach,
 - * May I perform my work in their propagation to the ultimate limit of my ability &
 - * May my body never be fatigued and my mind never be satisfied.

To awaken sentient beings to the transcendental nature of life's purpose (bodhi, 菩提):

This is a reference to the fruit of enlightenment (buddha phala, 佛果).

Inspiring their minds (cittotpada, 發心): This refers to inspiring the minds of all sentient beings who are able to seek it. Because of this, the scripture speaks of 'inspiring the minds of sentient beings to awaken to the transcendental nature of life's purpose'.

Deeply believe in cause & effect (karma & retribution): This is in two parts.

In the worldly cause and effect of suffering and contentment:

- * When one causes contentment, there is the effect of feeling contentment.
- * When one causes suffering, there is the effect of feeling suffering.

The cause and effect of karma and retribution beyond this world can be likened to someone who uses a seal to make an impression on wax. Even if the seal is broken, the impression from the past will still be there and remain without any doubt.

Read and recite the scriptures on the greater vehicle: These teachings of the scriptures can be likened to a mirror. In reading them and researching them often, one opens up and awakens to a knowledge and discernment of the transcendental nature of life's purpose. When the eyes of knowledge and discernment are opened up, one can loathe suffering and delight in the contentment of spiritual freedom (nirvāṇa, 涅槃).

And encourage others to diligently cultivate this practice: Suffering is like a poison while evil purposes are like knives. These two proliferate throughout the three-fold realm of sentient existence,²⁵ harming sentient beings. Being committed to virtuous conduct is like cleaning a mirror while transcendental knowledge and discernment of the transcendental nature of life's purpose is like a nectar of sweet dew.

- * With the mirror there is illumination of the noble path by taking refuge in its dialectical principle.

- * With the nectar of sweet dew there is the endless pouring of a rain that is ever teaching about this true nature of life's purpose.

In cherishing it and holding it sacred, one receives its nourishment and continuously comprehends the flow of this transcendental nature. For this reason, it is necessary for practitioners to ever encourage one another.

These three kinds of conduct are called 'the actions that are pure of affliction' (śuddha karman, 淨業): This is a general conclusion about the three blessings of unafflicted conduct described above.

e. Encouraging a noble effort from an ordinary being:

On this, the scripture says:

The Buddha then further said to Vaidehī:

"Do you not now understand that these three kinds of conduct are the primary cause for the Buddhas' actions through the past, present and future?"

When those endowed with this conduct focus their minds with the resolve of meditation, they will attain spiritual rebirth in the Land of Pure Bliss without a doubt.

Although there are five parts described above that are not the same, collectively they explain the virtues of mental dispersion as demonstrated in the conditions of one's unafflicted conduct.

7. The virtues of mental resolve found in the conditions of unafflicted meditation:

On this, the scripture says:

The Buddha then addressed both Ānanda and Vaidehī:

“Listen carefully and consider well what you hear! The One Who Has Descended Into This World has now taught about making actions that are pure of affliction for all the sentient beings of the future who will be subject to the damages that are inflicted by emotional disturbances, the enemies of mental resolve.

* You have done well, Vaidehī, because your questions about this have been most appropriate!

* Ānanda, you should accept and keep in mind the Buddha’s words and teach of them to as many different audiences as possible.

The One Who Has Descended Into This World will now teach Vaidehī and all sentient beings of future generations how to meditate on this western Land of Pure Bliss. Through the power of the Buddha’s grace there is the ability to see this pure unafflicted nation and land as if one was holding up a clear mirror and looking at an image of one’s own face. When seeing all the things in this Nation and Land of Sublime Contentment, one’s mind will rejoice and one will attain an enduring meditation on the true nature of life’s purpose that neither arises nor perishes and transcends one’s own life in this world.”

The Buddha then spoke just to Vaidehī, saying:

“You are an ordinary person with a weak mind and confused thoughts. You have not yet attained the divine eye of meditation and so you cannot observe that which is far away. However, the enlightened beings that have descended into this world have different skillful ways and means to make you acquire this vision.”

Vaidehī then spoke to the Buddha, saying:

“Blessed One, those who are like me can now see this nation and its land through the power of the Buddha’s grace. However, after the Buddha’s passing, how will sentient beings who are tormented by the five kinds of suffering that arise from corruption, evil and lack of virtue be able to see the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life and this World of Pure Bliss?”

佛告阿難及韋提希。諦聽諦聽善思念之。如來今者。為未來世一切眾生為煩惱賊之所害者。說清淨業。善哉韋提希快問此事。阿難。汝當受持廣為多眾宣說佛語。如來今者。教韋提希及未來世一切眾生觀於西方極樂世界。以佛力故。當得見彼清淨國土。如執明鏡自見面像。見彼國土極妙樂事。心歡喜故。應時即得無生法忍。佛告韋提希。汝是凡夫心想羸劣。未得天眼。不能遠觀。諸佛如來有異方便。令汝得見。時韋提希白佛言。世尊。如我今者以佛力故見彼國土。若佛滅後諸眾生等。濁惡不善五苦所逼。云何當見阿彌陀佛極樂世界。

7. Shàndǎo’s commentary says:

On the virtues of mental resolve as demonstrated in the conditions of unafflicted meditation, there are seven parts:

- a. Ordering Vaidehī and Ānanda to listen to the impending teaching
- b. The courtesan’s questions were proper and with noble intent.
- c. Encouraging them to embrace these deep teachings about the transcendental nature of life’s purpose, and the importance of propagating them
- d. Encouraging the cultivation (of this meditation) with signs of the benefits to be attained
- e. The courtesan was an ordinary, common person, not a noble being.
- f. Having attained this state of grace, the courtesan desired to bring up another question.

- g. The courtesan had a compassionate heart for others, wishing they could attain spiritual rebirth like herself, forever escape this world we must all endure (sahā loka, 娑婆世界) and long travel about the World of Pure Bliss (Sukhāvatī, 極樂世界).

a. *Ordering Vaidehī and Ānanda to listen to the impending teaching:*

On this, the scripture says:

The Buddha then addressed both Ānanda and Vaidehī:

“Listen carefully and consider well what you hear! The One Who Has Descended Into This World has now taught about making actions that are pure of affliction for all the sentient beings of the future who will be subject to the damages inflicted by emotional disturbances, the enemies that destroy mental resolve.”

This is about answering Vaidehī’s prayer for:

1. Rebirth in the Land of Pure Bliss (Sukhāvatī, 極樂).
2. The practice that The One Who Had Descended Into This World (Tathāgata, 如來) promised would enable her to attain this rebirth

These words are on answering her sincere prayer to open up and reveal the ways and means of penetrating meditative resolve (samāpatti, 正受). This was about the essential reason for realizing the benefits of this deep place. The Buddha was now starting to teach of that which people had hoped to hear about for countless lifetimes (kalpas, 劫).⁷ For this reason, The One Who Descended Into This World generally addressed this to both kinds of people (to both ordained & lay people, as represented by Ānanda & Vaidehī respectively).

In addressing Ānanda: I now want you to open up the door to the Pure Land and teach of it to others so they will embrace it and never let it become forgotten.

In addressing Vaidehī: You have requested this teaching and I now wish to explain it to you. Listen well and consider it carefully. Upon accepting it, you must never forget it.

For all sentient beings in the future: The approach of The One Who Descended Into This World was more than anything else disposed towards the spiritual transformation of all those sentient beings who were forever drowning in the stream of life and death. With the cloud of mercy being equally spread out over all sentient beings, the Buddha now aspired to also benefit those who sought spiritual nourishment in the future.

The damages inflicted by emotional disturbances (kleśa, 煩惱)¹, the enemies that destroy mental resolve (cauroddharaṇika, 害煩惱賊): This is about the obstacles that are faced by ordinary people, whose mistaken cravings are such a serious problem and whose confusions are so deep. Without needing to alarm them about the pit of darkness that lied just below their feet, the three evils of hatred, greed and the stupidity of selfish disinterest, the Buddha adapted to the conditions at hand and established this practice. Assessing the resources available, he determined how sentient beings could use them to make progress on the noble path and recognize the six thieves of emotional disturbance¹ that vie to snatch away their wealth of mental resolve and, even if they had already lost it, how can they cease suffering from sorrow and depression and so gain it back?

Taught about actions that are pure of affliction: Because they have seen the immoral actions committed by sentient beings, the enlightened beings that have descended into this world have taught them ways to confess them and aspire to end the continuity of this habitual conduct so that, ultimately, they will be forever purified of affliction.

Pure: By relying on the gateways of meditation that follow, they can focus their minds on recalling the Buddha (buddha anusmṛti, 念佛) and visualizing the western Land of Pure Bliss (Sukhāvatī, 極樂世界). Then, in each and every thought, the consequences from their immoral acts will be eliminated so they can become pure of heart.

b. *The courtesan's questions were proper and with noble intent:* On this, the scripture says:
"You have done well (sadhu!, 善哉), Vaidehī, because your questions about this have been most appropriate!"

c. *Encouraging them to embrace these deep teachings about the transcendental nature of life's purpose, and the importance of propagating them:*

On this, the scripture says:

"Ānanda, you should accept and keep in mind the Buddha's words and teach of them to as many different audiences as possible"

The One Who Descended Into This World (Tathāgata, 如來) first generally discussed making all people find contentment through listening to and accepting his words with faith. He then specifically ordered Ānanda to accept these words with faith, always keep them in mind and never forget them, and then propagate them to as many people and in as many places as possible by teaching others how to cultivate this practice.

The Buddha's words: Over the ages, The One Who Descended Into This World had learned to eliminate all kinds of verbal miscues and was able to adapt the words of his teachings in countless different ways so that all who heard them could naturally bear faith in them.

d. *Encouraging the cultivation (of this meditation) with signs of the benefits to be attained:*

On this, the scripture says:

"The One Who Has Descended Into This World will now teach Vaidehī and all sentient beings of future generations how to meditate on this western Land of Pure Bliss.

Through the power of the Buddha's grace there is the ability to see this pure unafflicted nation and land as if one was holding up a clear mirror and looking at the image of one's own face. When seeing all the things in this Nation and Land of Sublime Contentment, one's mind will rejoice and one will attain an enduring meditation on the true nature of life's purpose that neither arises nor perishes and transcends one's own life in this world."

This is on the desire of The One Who Has Descended Into This World to reveal the ways and means of skillful meditation to the courtesan as well as all those of future generations, to make them renounce their attachments to this world that we must all endure together (sahā loka, 娑婆世界) and make them aspire to attain the bliss of ultimate contentment.

Through the power of the Buddha's grace there is the ability to see this pure unafflicted nation and land: When karmic obstacles contact the eyes of sentient beings, they produce a kind of blindness. If even something in the palm of one's hand seems far away, other (people and) places will seem to be separated from one by more than a thousand li (miles) of sharpened bamboo stakes. Even more so are ordinary people with these kinds of obstacles separated from peering into their own hearts where there is the true sphere of the Buddhas. In being without the mysterious grace of their noble power, how can they possibly get to see this Nation of Pure Bliss?

As if one was holding up a clear mirror and seeing the image of one's own face: This is about the courtesan and all other sentient beings who enter into and abide in this meditation. When stillness of mind is never lost, the mind and its object are able to continuously correspond and all is revealed. When this object is properly revealed, it is like the reflection of a mirror in which all things are seen without any need to speculate about their different distinctions.

One's mind will rejoice and one will attain an enduring meditation on the true nature of life's purpose that neither arises nor perishes and transcends one's own life in this world: When the pure light and splendor from the nation of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛) is suddenly revealed before one's eyes, there is such a virtue of excellent refinement that one jumps for joy. Because of this, one rejoices upon attaining an enduring meditation on the true nature of life's purpose that neither arises nor perishes and transcends one's own life in this world (anutpattika dharma kṣānti, 無生法忍). It is also called the joy that is enduring, the awakening that is enduring and the faith that is enduring. Since this discussion on the profound meaning of this enduring meditation has been made before the main part of the scripture on the sixteen different meditations, it does not yet indicate the place where Vaidehī first realized it. The Buddha desired to make the courtesan reflect on this benefit so that, when she focused her mind with courage and strength on these visualizations, she would awaken to the true nature of life's purpose in a way that was enduring. This is a reference to the enduring observation (kṣānti, 忍) attained through being endowed with the ten attitudes of faith (daśa śraddhānāni, 十信).⁷² It does not however refer to the higher kinds of enduring observation realized subsequently through the ten abodes of mindful purpose (daśa dharma upasthānāni, 十解),^{4A} the ten practices of virtue (daśa pāramitā, 十行),^{4B} etc., found in the forty steps on the bodhisattva path.⁴

e. The courtesan was an ordinary, common person, not a noble being:

On this, the scripture says:

The Buddha then spoke just to Vaidehī, saying:

"You are an ordinary person with a weak mind and confused thoughts. You have not yet attained the divine eye of meditation and so you cannot observe that which is far away. However, the enlightened beings that have descended into this world have different skillful ways and means to make you acquire this vision."

Because she was not herself noble, she needed to rely on the mysterious aid of the noble power that arises from the Buddha's grace. This way she was able to see this nation even though it was far away. The One Who Descended Into This World (Tathāgata, 如來) said this, lest sentient beings be confused by thinking that the courtesan was noble, not ordinary. Raising doubts about this would have produced hesitation and weakness of faith. In fact, however, in terms of the sphere of purpose (dharma dhātu, 法界), Vaidehī would later (in retrospect) be revealed to have been one awakening others (bodhisattva, 菩薩) to the transcendental nature of life's purpose who was temporarily living in this world as an ordinary sentient being. We who are sinful people living in the latter days cannot compare ourselves to her without being conceited. And so, in order to allay our doubts about this, the Buddha told Vaidehī that she was an ordinary person.

A mind of weak and confused thoughts: This is because ordinary beings have never had any great goals.

Not yet attained the divine eye of meditation (divyaṃ cakṣu, 天目):⁷³ Because the courtesan only had eyes of flesh,⁷³ her depth perception was insufficient. How could she possibly see the Pure Land that was so far away?

The enlightened beings that have descended into this world have different ways and means to make you attain this vision: You who are an ordinary being will be unable to attain this vision or see the adornments of this nation and land without relying on the power of grace that arises from accomplishment of the Buddha's work.

f. *Having realized this state of grace, the courtesan desired to bring up another question:*

On this, the scripture says:

Vaidehī then spoke to the Buddha, saying:

“Blessed One, those who are like me can now see this nation and its land through the power of the Buddha’s grace.”

The courtesan received an understanding of the Buddha’s intent that was like the radiance she saw rising up above the lotus pedestal. She reasoned at first that it was to be realized through her own ability, but upon facing the Blessed One and seeing him open it up and reveal it, she began to understand that this vision was only realized through the ways and means of the Buddha’s grace. And with this being so:

- * While the Buddha was still in this world, sentient beings could receive his directions and use them to see the Pure Land to the west.
- * When the Buddha passed away from this world and entered into the ultimate spiritual freedom (parinirvāṇa, 般涅槃), they would no longer be able to receive his aid in preparing for it. How would they then be able to see it?

g. *The courtesan had a compassionate heart for others, wishing they could attain spiritual rebirth like herself, forever escape this world we must all endure (sahā loka, 娑婆世界) and long travel about the World of Pure Bliss (Sukhāvātī, 極樂世界):*

On this, the scripture says:

(Vaidehī continued:)

“However, after the Buddha’s passing, how will sentient beings who are tormented by the five spiritual destinies of suffering that arise from corruption, evil and lack of virtue be able to see the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life and this World of Pure Bliss?”

The mind of The One Who Descended Into This World (Tathāgata, 如來) did not come to rest after being transported across the threshold of life in this world. Upon passing from this world, The One Who Descended Into This World was reborn into a long lifespan that has endured for vast ages in terms of human years. However, the shallow and exaggerated feelings of ordinary people are forever changing over the passage of time. Attending to their arrogant and conceited thoughts, the Buddha showed them the reality of impermanence, and how their seemingly indestructible lives in this world that they shared with him are transformed into oblivion. Because of this she spoke about “after the Buddha’s passing.”

Sentient beings: After the transformative work of an enlightened being who has descended into this world (tathāgata, 如來) had concluded, sentient beings would no longer have a safe place in which they could put their trust and reliance. Scurrying about everywhere in alarm, they would roam throughout the length and breadth of the six paths between heaven and hell (without a Buddha’s guidance).

Corruption, evil and lack of virtue: This is illustrated by the five kinds of corruption (pañca kaṣāyāḥ, 五濁):

1. *The corruption of the age* (kalpa kaṣāya, 劫濁): Actually, it is not the age itself that is corrupt. More properly it is the fact that evils increasingly grow at times when worlds face destruction (and there is greater desperation among their inhabitants).
2. *The corruption of society* (sattva kaṣāya, 眾生濁): Emerging societies are more purely virtuous when they first begin. During their end times, the ten unwholesome acts of these societies become ever-more fierce.

3. *The corruption of beliefs* (dṛṣṭi kaṣāya, 見濁): In oneself, evils are rationalized as being virtues, but they are not viewed this way in others.
4. *The corruption of emotional disturbances* (kleśa kaṣāya, 煩惱濁): When this age ends, sentient beings will have evil dispositions and family troubles, facing all that is before them with greed, hate and strife.
5. *The corruption of lifespans* (āyus kaṣāya, 命濁): Because of the dual corruptions of false beliefs and emotional disturbances, there are many that kill and harm others without any mercy or accommodation. Having caused suffering and shortened lives, how can they realize the desired fruit of living for many years?

In fact, corruption is essentially the lack of virtue. This summarizes the meaning of these five kinds of corruption.

Tormented by the five kinds of suffering: First there are the five kinds of suffering:

1. Birth (*We are the heirs & owners of the consequences from our actions (karma). Born from them, they define our world.*)
2. Old age (*We are sure to become old. It is inevitable.*)
3. Sickness (*We are sure to become ill. It is inevitable.*)
4. Death (*We are sure to die. It is inevitable.*)
5. Separation from the things we love
(*We are sure to part ways from all that is dear to us. It is inevitable.*)

These are called the five kinds of suffering. In adding another three there are said to be the eight kinds of suffering:

6. The fierceness of suffering that comes from the five projections of our own afflicted purposes (pañca skandha, 五陰)¹¹
7. The suffering that comes from not acquiring what we seek
8. The suffering that comes from hating that which we have acquired

These are generally called the eight kinds of sufferings. These five kinds of corruption, five kinds of suffering and eight kinds of suffering all permeate the experiences of the six lower spiritual paths that span from heaven to hell,¹⁶ and there are none among us who are not constantly tormented by them. If we not did not experience these different kinds of suffering, we would not be counted among ordinary sentient beings.

After the Buddha's passing, how will sentient beings who are tormented by the five kinds of suffering that come from corruption, evil and lack of virtue be able to see the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛) and the World of Pure Bliss (Sukhāvatī, 極樂世界)?:

The courtesan brought up the capacity of sentient beings to escape from suffering in the future, after the Buddha's passing. Those saddled with the very deep-set consequences from the immoral acts that they have committed will not see the Buddha nor will they receive any help in preparing to do so. How will they ever be able to see this nation of the Pure Land?

Although there are these seven parts described above that are not the same, collectively they explain the virtues of mental resolve (samādhi, 定善) as demonstrated in the conditions of one's meditation.

In summarizing this section on the introductory part of the scripture:

- * First, we explained the testament of faith
- * Then we explained the setting
- * Finally, we explained the unfolding of the introductory narrative.

Although there are these three parts described above that are not the same, collectively they explain this part on the introduction.

Shàndǎo's Commentary Explaining The Scripture About Meditation on the Enlightened Being 'Of Infinite Life' (觀無量壽佛經疏)
End of Volume 2

Shàndào's Commentary Explaining The Scripture About Meditation on the Enlightened Being 'Of Infinite Life' (觀無量壽佛經疏) Volume 3

Section 3, On the Main Teaching about the Virtues of Certainty (adhimokṣa, 勝解) **and Decisiveness** (niścaya, 決) **Found in Mental Resolve** (samādhi, 定)

From here, there is an explanation of the main methodology (siddhānta, 正宗) of this scripture through sixteen visualizations. These will be examined one at a time so we will not trouble to lay them out in detail ahead of time.

The first thirteen visualizations (darśana, 見) are on the virtues of mental resolve (samādhi, 定) found in unafflicted meditation (dhyāna, 禪) and are treated in this third section of the commentary. They include visualizing:

1. The setting sun (sūrya asta, 日沒)
2. The waters (āpas, 水)
3. The ground (bhūmi, 地)
4. The bejeweled trees (ratnamaya vṛkṣa, 寶樹)
5. The pools of fresh water (hrada, 池水)
6. The tall buildings (prāsāda, 樓)
7. The lotus seat (padma āsana, 蓮花座)
8. An image of the Buddha (buddha bimba, 想像), an apparant manifestation of the Buddha's spiritual life
9. The Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛), the grace of the Buddha's spiritual life
10. The Bodhisattva 'Beholding the Cries (Prayers) of This World' (Avalokiteśvara, 觀世音菩薩)
11. The Bodhisattva 'Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength' (Mahā Sthāma Prāpta, 大勢至菩薩)
12. The shared characteristics (sāmānya lakṣaṇa, 共相) of the universal spiritual life
13. The unique characteristics (sva lakṣaṇa, 自相) of different spiritual lives

The last three visualizations are on the virtues of mental dispersion (vikṣepa, 散) found in unafflicted thoughts, words and deeds. They will be examined in section four of the commentary. They include visualizing:

14. Spiritual rebirth for those with a higher capacity (through faith)
15. Spiritual rebirth for those with an intermediate capacity (through the making of moral commitments)
16. Spiritual rebirth for those with a lower capacity (through wrestling with evil using the power of prayer)

The explanation of the main teaching established here is not the same as that of other teachers⁵⁶ and is based simply on the purpose for these visualizations. From the first one on the setting sun to the last on the lower level of spiritual rebirth for those with a lower grade of capacity, there is the main teaching of the methodology. And beginning with meditation on the setting sun, although their meanings are explained, one should understand that the efficacy of this text is based on how well it responds to the requests originally posed by Vaidehī in the introduction: These requests were as follows:

1.-2. The General Requests:

1. Tell me of a place where there is no sorrow or distress, a refuge where I may go to be spiritually reborn: This is on *the transcendental sphere of life's purpose* (dharma dhātu, 法界).
2. Teach me how to meditate on a refuge from this suffering in such a way that all my actions will be pure of affliction: This is on *the practice of meditation* (dhyāna, 觀).

3.-4. The Specific Requests - answered through the first thirteen visualizations:

3. I now wish to attain rebirth in the World of Pure Bliss (Sukhāvātī, 極樂世界), the Land of The Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛); This is about *being grounded in a specific kind of transcendental knowledge* (jñāna, 智) about the nature of life's greater purpose, that of observing it with subtly compassionate discernment (pratyaवेक्षणा, 妙觀察).
4. Blessed One, I pray that you teach me how to deliberate on and penetrate it: This is on *attaining the resolve of meditation* (samādhi, 三昧) *through a specific practice*, that of continuously keeping the enlightened being in mind (buddha anusmṛti, 念佛)
5. **The Final Request - answered through the last three visualizations:** After the Buddha's passing, how will sentient beings who are tormented by the five spiritual destinies of suffering that arise from corruption, evil and lack of virtue be able to see the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life and this World of Pure Bliss?

1. The Scripture's Words About Visualizing the Setting Sun:

The Buddha then addressed Vaidehī:

"You and all those like you should first focus your minds on a point to the west, directing all of your thoughts towards this single place. How does one go about doing this? All sentient beings except those who are born blind should begin by looking towards the setting sun and inspiring mindful thoughts about it. Properly seated in meditation and facing westward, you should gaze towards the setting sun, with your mind steadily focused on it and your thoughts never straying from it, seeing it as if it were a drum suspended over the horizon. Having visualized it, whether your eyes are open or closed, you will always be able to clearly see it anywhere. This first meditation is called 'visualization of the setting sun'. Observing it this way is said to be a proper meditation on it. Observing it any other way is said to be an incorrect meditation."

佛告韋提希。汝及眾生。應當專心。繫念一處。想於西方。云何作想。凡作想者。一切眾生自非生盲。有目之徒皆見日沒。當起想念。正坐西向諦觀於日。令心堅住。專想不移。見日欲沒狀如懸鼓。既見日已。閉目開目皆令明了。是為日想。名曰初觀。作是觀者名為正觀。若他觀者名為邪觀。

1. Shàndǎo's Commentary About Visualizing the Setting Sun (sūrya asta, 日沒):

The purpose of this first visualization is to teach about focusing the mind on a single object for a sustained period of time. The sun is the distant object of light in empty space that first arose in the east but now seems to be setting in the west, illuminating all things above the great stream of consciousness and beckoning us to the future. The east is a metaphor for the past while the west is one for the future. Facing the sun setting over the waters in the west and focusing the mind only on this single object is aspiring to the ultimate goal; illuminating the transcendental nature of life's purpose (tathatā, 真如), entering the ultimate spiritual freedom (parinirvāṇa, 般涅槃) and attaining rebirth in grace. It is not about staring at the sun in a way that will damage one's eyes! First the subject is introduced, then there is a distinction of its signs and finally there is a conclusion. There are five parts in this explanation:

- a. Encouragement to make this visualization
- b. The initial approach to its meditation
 1. Focusing the mind on a single object over a sustained period of time
 2. Becoming aware of the weight of the obstacles that arise due to the consequences of one's past actions (karma āvaraṇa, 業障) and then eliminating them
 - a. Mastery of the technique
 - b. Becoming aware of one's own obstacles of karma
 - c. Confession and repentance
 - d. Gradual vs. sudden elimination of these obstacles
 3. The illumination of grace from the object of worship
- c. A description of its proper visualization
- d. The signs of realizing it
- e. The general conclusion

a. Encouragement to make this visualization:

On this, the scripture says:

The Buddha then addressed Vaidehī: "You and all those like you should first focus your minds on a point to the west, directing all of your thoughts towards this single place."

This is general encouragement to practice this meditation. Vaidehī⁷⁴ first asked about rebirth in the land of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛) and how to properly attain penetration of it (samāpatti, 正受). This was the appropriate time for The One Who Had Descended Into This World to teach her about it. However, because her capacity to practice meditation was weak, he first taught her about the three blessings of virtuous conduct to produce spiritual benefits that she was not yet sufficiently aware of.

Again, the three blessings are:

1. The blessings of worldly virtue, with good prevailing over evil
2. The blessings of moral commitment to purposes that are worthy and noble⁴⁷
3. The blessings of a higher calling, awakening sentient beings to the transcendental nature of life's purpose

The One Who Descended Into This World also encouraged propagation of this meditation so that others could awaken to this transcendental nature that is difficult to learn about.

The Buddha addressed Vaidehī: 'You and all those like you should':⁷⁴ These are words of encouragement. Those who desire to rise above the struggles of this world and aspire to spiritual rebirth in the nation of an enlightened being (buddha kṣetra, 佛國) need to be encouraged to inspire the necessary resolve of meditation (samādhi, 三昧).

Only Vaidehī is addressed here as Ānanda already knew how to focus his mind on a single object.

Focus your minds: The minds of sentient beings tend to become scattered and agitated like those of monkeys and apes, wandering about everywhere among the six externally projected objects of sensory perception¹¹ without a moment of rest. Because their minds cannot focus steadily on a single object, all of the objects that their eyes come into contact with produce greedy desires and distracted thoughts. How can they possibly secure the peace of mind that comes from this resolve of meditation? Through connecting with and trusting in the stillness of mind that comes from this resolve, there is a continuous focus of mind that is directed straight towards the western Pure Land or any of the other nine fortresses (Pure Lands)⁶⁹ found in the transcendental sphere of life's purpose (dharma dhātu, 法界). This way there is a single life, a single mind, a single devotion, a single alignment between subject & object, a single continuity and a single refuge, all attained through the singularity that is inherent in proper remembrance (samyak smṛti, 正念). This is called a proper penetration (samāpatti, 正受) of the visualization that leads to spiritual rebirth following life in this world as well as a realization of the emancipated understanding that one has sought.

b. The initial approach to the meditation (anāgamyā samādhi, 未至定):

On this, the scripture says:

"How does one go about doing this? All sentient beings except those who are born blind should begin by looking towards the setting sun and inspiring mindful thoughts about it."

This is about the initial approach to this meditation. Sentient beings who have long traveled down the stream of life & death (saṃsāra, 生死) do not understand what peace of mind is. Although they may be pointed in the western direction, they do not know how to focus their minds with resolve (samādhi, 定). Because of this, The One Who Had Descended Into This World answered Vaidehī's question by pointing to a single place of proper remembrance (samyak smṛti, 正念) in order to eliminate her doubts and attachments.

Inspiring mindful thoughts about it (manasikāra, 作想) is a reference to mental deliberation (cintanā, 思惟). Through it one enters into the skillful ways and means of meditation.

The four ways & means of meditation include:

1. Mental associations (saṃjñā, 想) in the sphere of desire (kāma dhātu, 欲界), seeking and discovery (savitarka savicarā bhūmi, 有尋有伺地)
2. Detailed observations (pratyavekṣa, 諦觀) in the sphere of form (rūpa dhātu, 色界), the objective reality before one that is beyond seeking and discovery (avitarka avicārā bhūmi, 無尋無伺)
3. Transcendental visions (satya darśana, 見) in the sphere of existential principles that are beyond form (arūpa dhātu, 無色界)
4. The resolve of meditation (samādhi, 三昧) in the sphere of purpose (dharma dhātu, 法界), endowment with the transcendental nature of purpose

All sentient beings: This is a general reference to all those who are born into this world.

Except those who are born blind: This distinguishes between those who are fit for this meditation and those who are not.

Born blind refers to those born from their mother's womb with eyes that cannot see. They are the so-called 'born blind'. These people cannot be taught to make this meditation on the setting sun because they are unfamiliar with the sun and its orb of light. Then again there are those who have lost their sight some time after birth because of some external set of unfortunate circumstances. These people can still be taught to make this visualization of the setting sun because, before they suffered their disability, they were aware of the sun and its bright orb of light. Although they now suffer the misfortune of blindness, they can still have a proper remembrance of it and so firmly embrace this meditation. There is no time limitation after which they will forget it.

Question: Vaidehī requested to see the Land of Pure Bliss as an object of meditation and The One Who Had Descended Into This World began to teach of it. Why was this first teaching on it about abiding in a visualization of the setting sun?

Answer: There are three reasons for this:

1. *The Buddha desired to make sentient beings always keep an object of meditation in mind through focusing the mind on this single object over a sustained period of time:*
The Buddha was not referring to the place where the setting sun is found during the extremes of the winter and summer. Only in the spring and autumn does it rise exactly in the east and set exactly in the west. The land of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛) lies directly to the west where the sun sets, hundreds, thousands and millions of worlds (kṣetra, 刹) away (a metaphor for the distant future).
2. *The Buddha desired to make sentient beings aware of the weight of the obstacles that arise due to the consequences from their past actions* (karma āvaraṇa, 業障) by teaching them how to abide in a state of mind in which they meditate on the setting sun. There are four parts on this.
 - a. *On mastering the technique of meditation:* When one first desires to abide in this meditation, one begins by meditating (outwardly) on its physical form (visual light) and then, turning inward, one progressively goes about penetrating the nature of the mind. One begins by sitting with the spine erect but relaxed and the legs locked in lotus position, with the right foot resting on left thigh and left foot resting on right thigh, and with both of them at the same level. The left hand rests upon the right hand.⁷⁵ The body is straight and erect, and the mouth is closed but the teeth are not clenched tight. The tongue lightly touches the roof of the palate, keeping the channel of air between the throat and nose clear and unobstructed. One then meditates on the physical body, its four elemental principles, the inner and outer nature of emptiness and the complete absence of any substance or existential nature.
 1. First one visualizes the elemental projection of earth (solidity) in the body, the skin, muscles, bones, etc., and then imagines its (outward) dispersion westward as far as possible so that not even a single particle of it remains visible.
 2. Next one visualizes the elemental projection of water (fluidity) in the body - blood, sweat, tears, urine, etc., and then imagines its dispersion northward as far as possible so that not even a single particle of it remains visible.

3. Next one visualizes the elemental projection of *wind* (the impelling forces of vital energy (prāṇa, 氣) such as breath, gas, etc.), and then imagines its dispersion eastward as far as possible so that not even a single particle of it remains visible.
4. Next one visualizes the elemental projection of *fire* (the radiance of body heat, neural energy, etc.) in the body, and then imagines its dispersion southward as far as possible so that not even a single particle of it remains visible.
5. Next one visualizes the elemental projection of *empty space* in the body which corresponds with the ten directions so that not even a single particle blocking space remains visible.
6. Finally one visualizes the perfect emptiness of these five elemental projections from the body described above, realizing that only *consciousness* really exists, pure and unchanging, like a perfect mirror reflecting all both inside and outside, shining through and revealing everything with perfect clarity and purity.

When making this meditation, the distracted thoughts of the imagination are eliminated while the mind gradually becomes ever-more focused so that its attention then can gradually turn towards the setting sun. Those with keen spiritual capacities will see its signs clearly presented before them in a single sitting. When this object appears, for some it may be seen as the size of a coin while for others it as big as the entire circumference of their reflection.

- b. ***On becoming aware of one's own karmic obstacles:*** In accordance with one's illumination, one sees the weight of the obstacles that have resulted from one's intentional actions (karma āvaraṇa, 業障).
 1. Those with black karma see the sun as if black clouds were obstructing it.
 2. Those with gray karma see the sun as if gray clouds were obstructing it.⁷⁶
 3. Those with white karma see the sun as if white clouds were obstructing it.

With the sun still being obstructed by clouds, its full illumination is not revealed. The karmic obstacles of sentient beings are also like this. When these obstacles cover and conceal the pure object of meditation in the mind, one is not able to clearly illuminate it.
- c. ***On confession & repentance:*** In order to visualize the signs of the setting sun's illumination more clearly, one needs to beautifully adorn the place of spiritual awakening (bodhimaṇḍa, 道場) and enshrine an image of the Buddha before one. One bathes, dons clean clothing, burns incense and invokes the names of the Buddhas and those in the community of faith (Saṃgha, 僧) that are noble and worthy. Facing an image of the Buddha, one confesses and repents for all of the immoral thoughts, words and deeds that one has committed from the beginningless past to the present day in this very life. These include the ten kinds of unwholesome acts (daśa akuśala karma, 十惡), the four grave wrongs (with conscious intent to do harm) (catvāraḥ pārājikā dharmāḥ, 四重), the five most consequential acts of evil (pañca ānantaryaḥ, 五逆) that lead to the hell of incessant suffering (avīci naraka, 無間地獄) as well as slander, the maligning or ridiculing of the teachings about the transcendental nature of life's purpose and the harmful acts of the ignorant who are without faith in any moral purpose beyond their self-interest (icchantika, 一闍提).¹⁸ To overcome these karmic obstacles, one must grieve over these transgressions with an outpouring of tears, deeply bearing shame and remorse until one is able to penetrate the mind's intent to its very core, cutting through to the bone and

ultimately holding oneself completely responsible for one's actions. On confessing, one returns as before to a seated meditation on the setting sun, abiding in it with perfect peace of mind. When this object is revealed before one, the three obstacles (traya āvaraṇaḥ, 三障) that form the endless cycles of affliction are eliminated.

These three include:

1. Emotional disturbances (kleśa, 煩惱)¹
2. Consequence-producing actions (karma, 業)
3. The suffering of these consequences (vipāka, 報)

The meditation on this pure object then becomes clear and bright. This is called the sudden transcendence of karmic obstacles.

- d. ***On sudden vs. gradual repentance:*** Some can eliminate these obstacles through a single confession. These people are said to have a keen spiritual capacity. For others, one confession only eliminates the gray⁷⁶ and white obstacles, while for others still it only eliminates the white obstacles. This is called 'the gradual elimination of karmic obstacles', and it is unlike the sudden transcendence realized by those with a keen capacity. In already becoming awakened to the signs of one's own karma like this, one only needs to keep confessing with diligence of mind, from three to six times each day and night until one is able to continuously keep one's confession in mind. This is the best practice, the kind that leads to the highest possible capacity. It can be likened to one who becomes aware that there is boiling water or fire burning one's body. Only upon becoming aware of it can one go about removing the cause of this suffering.

3. ***The Buddha desired to make sentient beings aware of the illumination of grace arising from the object of meditation:*** This grace consists of two aspects:

- a. ***The Enlightened Being of Infinite Life*** (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛), the grace that descends directly from the Buddha's transcendental vows (spiritual life) and the actions that have fulfilled these vows (svakarma phala, 正報)
- b. ***The Land of Pure Bliss*** (Sukhāvatī, 極樂世界), the grace that descends indirectly from the environment produced by the Buddha (parakarma phala, 依報):

Through the light and splendor of its various adornments and signs it glows and dazzles inside and out, outshining the radiance of the sun by hundreds, thousands and millions of times. The practitioner who is not yet aware of these signs of light should first look at the signs of splendor descending from the orb of the sun. Whether walking, standing, sitting or lying down, one ritually recalls, remembers and visualizes its grace, ever making this understanding. Before long, one will attain this visualization of grace, seeing the phenomena of the Pure Land and delighting in its many adornments. For this reason, The Blessed One first taught this meditation on visualizing the setting sun.

- c. ***A description of its proper visualization:***

On this, the scripture says:

"Properly seated in meditation and facing westward, you should gaze towards the setting sun, with your mind steadily focused on it and your thoughts never straying from it, seeing it as if it were a drum suspended over the horizon."

This is an instruction on how to properly make the meditation. It refers to the body sitting up erect and facing westward with a proper demeanor, keeping the object held firmly in mind and not stirring for a sustained period of time.

d. The signs of its realization:

On this, the scripture says:

“Having visualized it, whether your eyes are open or closed, you will always be able to clearly see it anywhere.”

This describes the sign of having accomplished this meditation. It refers to the mind that has control over its visualization of the setting sun, with the conditions in which confused thoughts stirring the mind have been eliminated. When there is this sign of purity in the mind, the object of meditation becomes clearly revealed. And when the practitioner is in this first meditation, there is a visualization of the setting sun and composure in the resolve of meditation (samāhita, 定樂), with the body and mind being blended together inside and out into a state that is inconceivable. When one visualizes it like this, it is easy for the mind to attain this resolve without any need to greedily hold onto or be attached to any higher state of mind. If a greedy state of mind does rise up, there will be a stirring of the waters (of the mind) and the pure object of meditation (reflected on the surface of this water) will be lost. Sometimes it is stirred, sometimes it is darkened, and sometimes there are black, blue, yellow, red or white discolorations and one does not retain this serene and still state of meditation. When experiencing these things, one should think to oneself:

“These objects are disturbing my mind and I am not securely abiding in peace of mind.

Because of my own greed, my mindfulness has been stirred up, causing the pure object of meditation to disappear.”

When there is the arising of a state of proper mindfulness (samyak smṛti, 正念) that is secure in contentment, these signs of mental disturbance disappear and again there is stillness of mind. Having recognized the errors in one’s meditation, one learns to not allow the greedy mind to rise up again. In all of the following meditations, the attainment and loss of proper and improper meditation are the same as they are here. In observing and seeing the setting sun, the mind corresponds with its object of meditation and there is said to be proper meditation. In observing but not seeing the sun, but rather seeing other different objects, the mind does not correspond with its object of meditation and there is said to be an improper meditation. And so, in the material phenomena found in the dark and gloomy house of this world we must all endure together (saḥā loka, 娑婆世界), there is no better metaphor than the expansive splendor of the shining sun to convey the great distance of the goal, which is reaching the Land of Pure Bliss (Sukhāvatī, 極樂世界).

e. The general conclusion:

On this, the scripture says:

“This first meditation is called ‘visualization of the setting sun’. Observing it this way is said to be a proper meditation on it. Observing it any other way is said to be an incorrect meditation.”

This is the general conclusion.

Although there are five different parts described above, collectively they explain the visualization of the setting sun.

2. The Scripture's Words About Visualizing the Waters:

The Buddha then addressed both Ānanda and Vaidehī:

“Having accomplished this first meditation, you should next visualize a great body of water (before the setting sun), seeing it everywhere in the western quarter under heaven. Seeing that it is clear and calm, you should distinctly visualize it without any distracting thoughts. Having seen it this way, you should then imagine it turning solid like ice, reflecting everything like a mirror. After visualizing it this way, you will then further see it as if it were made of beryl, reflecting what is on the outside while at the same time revealing what is on the inside. Having imagined it this way, you will then see all of the different reflections of what is found inside and outside this ground of beryl.

- * Below there are golden pillars made of diamonds and the seven treasures that support this ground of beryl. These pillars each have eight sides and eight corners, and they are each adorned with hundreds of jewels. Each of these jewels emits a thousand rays of light and each ray of light has eighty-four thousand different colors. As they are reflected in the ground of beryl, they shine like a million suns. They are so dazzling that they cannot all be seen in detail.
- * Above the ground of beryl there are golden cords that crisscross and intersect like nets, with the different areas of the ground divided into distinct fields that are each illuminated by one of the seven treasures.
- * In each of these treasures there is a radiance of five hundred colors. The rays of light are like blossoms that resemble the stars and the moon. Suspended in the emptiness of space, they turn into beacons of light through which there are seen millions of buildings composed of hundreds of jewels. Each side of these beacons is adorned with millions of blossoms and banners as well as countless musical instruments.
- * Eight kinds of pure breezes rise up from the light to play these instruments, producing sounds that teach the truths about suffering, emptiness, impermanence and selflessness. This second meditation is called ‘the visualization of the waters’.”

佛告阿難及韋提希。初觀成已。次作水想。想見西方一切皆是大水。見水澄清。亦令明了。無分散意。既見水已當起冰想。見冰映徹作琉璃想。此想成已。見琉璃地內外映徹。下有金剛七寶金幢。擎琉璃地。其幢八方八楞具足。一一方面百寶所成。一一寶珠有千光明。一光明八萬四千色。映琉璃地。如億千日不可具見。琉璃地上。以黃金繩雜廁間錯。以七寶界分齊分明。一一寶中有五百色光。其光如花。又似星月。懸處虛空成光明臺。樓閣千萬百寶合成。於臺兩邊各有百億花幢無量樂器。以為莊嚴。八種清風從光明出。鼓此樂器。演說苦空無常無我之音。是為水想。名第二觀。

2. Shāndào's Commentary About Visualizing the Waters (āpas, 水):

The purpose of this second visualization is to teach about introspective meditation with stillness of mind

(śamatha vipaśyanā, 止觀). The waters serve as a metaphor for the turbulence of the mind that becomes quieted through the stillness of meditation. Upon becoming calm, the water becomes congealed like ice, reflecting everything like the surface of a mirror. Upon further observation, it is as if it were made of beryl,¹² reflecting what is on the outside while at the same time revealing what is on the inside.

- * Through stillness of mind (śamatha, 止), the waves caused by emotional disturbances become congealed as feelings of impartiality (upekṣā, 捨) that are like ice or solid glass. With the waves subsided, the surface of the waters become perfectly level and even, reflecting everything on the outside just like a mirror.
- * Through introspection (vipaśyanā, 觀心) the mind becomes like beryl, reflecting what is on the outside while at the same time revealing what is on the inside.

Like the visualization of the setting sun, the scripture first brings up the subject, then distinguishes its signs and finally ends with a conclusion. There are six parts on this visualization of the waters:

- a. The even and level nature of the ground found in the transcendental nature of purpose
 1. On attaining the impartiality found in equanimity of mind, the even and level nature of purpose
 2. On the nature of reflection
 3. On the waves of affliction stirring the mind
 4. On the size of these afflictions
- b. The adornments below the ground: visualizing the Land of Pure Bliss in the sphere of desire
- c. The adornments on the ground: visualizing it in the sphere of form, the objective reality of sentient existence
- d. The adornments in the empty space above: visualizing it in the sphere of existential principles that are beyond form
- e. The light is transformed into teachings on the nature of life's purpose: visualizing it in the transcendental sphere of purpose
- f. The general conclusion

a. *The essential nature of the ground (grounding in the even & level nature of purpose):*

On this, the scripture says:

The Buddha then addressed both Ānanda and Vaidehī:

“Having accomplished this first meditation, you should next visualize a great body of water (before the setting sun), seeing it everywhere in the western quarter under heaven. Seeing that it is clear and calm, you should distinctly visualize it without any distracting thoughts. Having seen it this way, you should then imagine it turning solid like ice, reflecting everything like a mirror. After visualizing it this way, you will then further see it as if it were made of beryl, reflecting what is on the outside while at the same time revealing what is on the inside. Having imagined it this way, you will then see all of the different reflections of what is found inside and outside this ground of beryl.”

This generally describes the essential nature of the ground and is in four parts:

1. *On attaining the impartial feelings of equanimity, the even and level nature of grounding found in meditation on the transcendental nature of life's purpose:*

Question: In the first visualization, the Buddha taught about meditation on the setting sun to make sentient beings recognize the signs of their own karma. What is the purpose in this teaching about the visualization of the waters?

Answer: The sun's orb is always shining, expressing the everlasting illumination in the Land of Pure Bliss. And lest one incorrectly think that this land is not even and level, and that it is endowed with the highs and lows of the tainted world that we live in, there is the meditation on the waters that are by nature even and level. Only the sun is able to illuminate the dark and gloomy house of this world that we must all endure together (sahā loka, 娑婆世界). This world has hills and valleys and is not without its high and low places. In aspiring to reach the place that is even and level, there is this stilled nature of the waters, much less their ultimate transformation into the ice-like surface of a mirror and then a ground of beryl.¹²

2. *On the nature of reflection:*

Question: The waters in the transcendental sphere have the evening and leveling qualities of moistening and then softening (*that make the uneven even, the unlevel level*). Does the ground which we have not yet examined also have these same qualities of water?

Answer: The even and level nature of this sphere is similar to the ground in being without crests and troughs, highs and lows. But when the water turns solid like ice it ultimately becomes a ground that is like beryl,¹² reflecting what is on the outside while at the same time revealing what is on the inside. This illustrates the solid and firm vows of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀) attained over countless lifetimes,⁷ perfecting the cultivation of introspection without prejudice. With the instigators of emotional disturbance (kleśa, 正使)¹ and their resultant habitual tendencies (vāsanā, 習氣) both subsiding, there is the ability to come into touch with and penetrate the reflecting wheel of the ground.

3. *On the waves of affliction (āsrava, 有漏)¹ stirring the mind:*

Question: Having taught visualization of the waters (of the mind) through keeping the mind abiding in meditation, the waters turn into ice and then become a ground of beryl.¹² How does one reveal this object of meditation?

Answer: When one desires to meditate on the waters, the posture of one's body is the same as before in the visualization of the setting sun. One again faces towards the object of meditation with a similar mind of resolve. However, in this case, the object of meditation has changed. One should find a quiet place, get a bowl of water, fill it to the brim and place it on the ground in front of where one is seated. Sitting here, one places a white mark between one's brows that is the size of a bean (the object of introspection). One then lowers one's head so that one's face is just over the water in the bowl, looking at the white mark with singleness of mind and not thinking about anything else. If at first the water in the bowl has waves, the image of one's face will not be seen at all. In observing it persistently, one will eventually be able to make it out. At first, its appearance may not remain still, with it suddenly looking long or short, broad or narrow. One moment one will see it, the next one will not. When signs of it begin to appear, one may need to exercise the mind's powers of concentration to the utmost to keep it in mind. Not long after this, the waves in the water will become smaller and smaller, to the point that it will not seem to stir at all. At this point, the signs of one's face will become more clearly revealed. Although one sees one's face and its eyes, ears, nose and mouth, etc., one should neither focus one's gaze on these specific signs of it or to turn away from them. Only through relaxing the body and the mind does one recognize that they are all there but at the same time not become attached to them. One then keeps one's focus only on the white mark between the brow, steadily observing it. One maintains this state of proper mindfulness (samyak smṛti, 正念) without losing one's meditative resolve no matter what different conditions arise. When one observes it like this, the mind abides ever deeper in this meditation on the spontaneous nature of the waters. And when one desires to know whether or not the waves in the waters of one's own mind are abiding in this meditation, one only needs to observe whether the signs reflected in its waters are stirring or not stirring and one will recognize whether or not the object of one's own mind is being revealed clearly and brightly.

4. *On the different sizes of these afflictions:*

And after the water has become still:

- * First, one takes a grain of rice and drops it in the water, causing waves to ripple everywhere in the bowl. Looking at one's reflection in the water, one sees that the white mark between one's brows is stirring.

- * Next one takes a bean and drops it in the water. The waves become larger, and the white mark between the brows above may or may not be distinguished at all.
- * Finally, one drops a date in the water and the waves become even larger, and the white mark between the brows and all the other signs of the body, head and face vanish completely, becoming invisible because the water has become so agitated.

The grain of rice can be likened to mental associations (saṃjñā, 想), the bean to such cognitive thoughts being mixed with emotional feelings (vedanā, 受) and the date to such thoughts being mixed with emotional feelings and afflicted motive forces (saṃskāra, 行) and resulting in emotional disturbances (kleśa, 煩惱).

The bowl illustrates the body, the vessel of one's spiritual life

The water illustrates the liquid nature of one's own mind.

The waves illustrate the disordered speculations of the imagination (vikalpa, 分別), those with emotional disturbances (kleśas, 煩惱) being attached to them.

The gradual dispersion of the rippling waves illustrates the gradual attainment of mental resolve and the letting go of the host of distracting conditions, with the mind remaining focused on the single object of meditation.

The object appearing in the still water illustrates how the object is not stirred when the subjective conditions of the mind are without disorder, with the stillness revealing all both inside and out.

And the waters of the mind are stirred by both subtle and coarse thoughts of the imagination. With these waters being stirred, the object of meditation is lost. And with the subtle and coarse dusts of sensory data (mental and sensory objects)¹¹ being cast into waters that are calm and still, the ripples of waves are stirred up. The practitioner needs only to look at whether or not the waters are stirring to know whether or not the mind is abiding in meditation. And just like the visualization of the setting sun described before, this meditation is improper or proper depending on whether or not its object is lost or not. And so the introductory verse of praise in Vasubandhu's Commentary on the Scripture on Infinite Life (Amitāyus Sūtra Upadeśa, 無量壽經優波提舍) says:

"In observing the signs in this world
Of the noble path that transcends the three-fold sphere of sentient existence,²⁵
It is ultimately like empty space,
Boundlessly broad and great." // 3

This generally illustrates the different measures of the ground in this Land of Bliss.

b. The adornments below the ground: visualizing the Land of Pure Bliss in the sphere of desire (kāma dhātu, 欲界)

On this, the scripture says:

"Below there are golden pillars made of diamonds and the seven treasures that support this ground of beryl. These pillars each have eight sides and eight corners, and they are each adorned with hundreds of different kinds of jewels. Each of these jewels emits thousands of rays of light and each ray of light has eighty-four thousand different colors. As they are reflected in the ground of beryl, they shine like a million suns. They are so dazzling that they cannot all be seen in detail."

This is on the adornments below the ground. It is in seven parts:

1. The pillars 'proportionality' (realized through equanimity of mind) is a metaphor for the adamant nature of non-affliction (anāsrāva, 無漏).
2. In supporting the ground, these pillars⁷⁰ reflect and reveal its adornments.
3. The sides and corners of the pillars perfectly express the linear aspects of partiality.

4. They are composed of hundreds of different kinds of jewels that are as countless as the particles of dusts and grains of sands in the universe, all emitting rays of light.
5. Eighty-four thousand⁵⁰ rays of light arise from each of these jewels in a boundless circumference of light.
6. The light is of many different colors, all illuminating different places in accordance with the capacity of those seeing them while at the same time spiritually transforming them. There is no time that this light is not bestowing benefits.
7. This array of light disperses, issuing forth an infinite variety of colors that outshines the sun. Ultimately it is impossible to see it all in detail.

On this, two stanzas of verse in Shàndǎo's 'Hymns of Praise for the Rebirth Ceremony' (往生禮讚偈) say:

"Below the ground there are pillars⁹³ adorned with the seven treasures,¹⁴
Limitless, boundless, countless millions of them.
Their eight corners and eight sides are composed of hundreds of different kinds of
jewels,
Those seeing this spontaneously awaken to the transcendental nature of life's
purpose that goes beyond this world.

The transcendental nature of this bejeweled land endures forever.
With each and every jewel emitting innumerable rays of light,
The practitioners ever look to the west with all their hearts,
With their spirits soaring as they penetrate it."

There are two more stanzas in it that say:

"The unconditional contentment attained in this land to the west is endowed with a
serene stillness.
It is ultimately free and unfettered, transcending the bounds of existence and
non-existence.
Traveling through this sphere perfumed with greatness of compassion,
It benefits all different lives equally and without prejudice.

Some manifest spiritual powers of penetration (abhijñā, 神通),²⁶ teaching about the
transcendental nature of life's purpose,
Some manifest the (32) auspicious signs and (80) excellent refinements (found in the
greatness of humanity)⁵¹ and then enter into the spiritual freedom that is beyond
any residue of life and death (nirupadhiśeṣa nirvāṇa, 無餘涅槃).⁷⁷
These different adornments are all manifested according to one's aspirations.
The flock of sentient beings who see them eliminate the obstacles that have arisen
due to the consequences of their own actions (karma āvaraṇa, 業障)."

And finally there are two more stanzas that say:

"In going back home (歸去來)¹⁹
We must not tarry in the lands of the devils (where the external obstacles of fear and
temptation prevent us from realizing the supreme enlightenment)
In the countless lifetimes flowing inexorably into the future,
Bound to the six paths (of good and evil),¹⁶ where all things pass away.

In these, there is not a trace of contentment
 And one only hears sounds of anguish.
 After the end of this life
 May we all enter into the fortress of spiritual freedom (nirvāṇa, 涅槃).“

c. *The adornments upon the ground: visualizing the Land of Pure Bliss in the sphere of form - the objective reality (rūpa dhātu, 色界) of sentient existence:*

On this, the scripture says:

“Upon the ground of beryl there are golden cords that crisscross and intersect like nets, with the different areas of the ground divided into distinct fields that are each illuminated by one of the seven treasures.”

This description of the adornments above the ground reveals their unique kinds of excellence. This is on the perfect purity of our dependence on grace and its embrace of us.

- * The pools with the seven treasures, the trees of the forest and all the other signs in the environment are that which is dependent (āśrita, 能依) while the bejeweled ground of beryl¹² is the foundation on which they depend (āśraya, 所依).
- * This ground is the environment that embraces and supports them all (ādharaṇa, 能持), while the pools, trees and all other signs within it are that which is embraced and supported (ādhānatā 所持).

This is because the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛) is the cause for this practice of dependence and embrace to become perfectly fulfilled and for the reward of grace to be restored to its perfectly pure illumination. Pure illumination here is a reference to the essential nature of non-affliction (anāsrāva, 無漏). On this, there are another four and a half stanzas of verse that say:

“The size of the bejeweled ground is without compare,
 Its radiance illuminates everything in the ten directions.
 Everywhere it is covered with bejeweled buildings and lotus pedestals.
 Its different colors are innumerable, like those in a beautifully clear moonlight.

A canopy of bejeweled clouds covers the sky overhead,
 With a host of noble beings flying across it.
 As the bejeweled banners overhead flutter in the wind,
 One’s thoughts turn to the precious splendor of the music descending from above.

From the arena of confusion and doubts, there are buds not yet blossomed.⁹⁴
 In joining one’s palms together into a receptacle that resembles a womb,
 Inside there is a contentment of purpose, beyond any suffering.
 When spiritual obstacles are eliminated, these buds blossom instantly.

With their eyes and ears fresh and clear and their bodies having a golden color,
 The bodhisattvas become bestowed with bejeweled raiments.
 Upon contacting the radiance, they realize the three kinds of enduring observation⁹⁵
 While aspiring to see the golden pedestal on which the Buddha is seated.

These allies of the Buddha’s purpose are welcomed and invited to enter the great assembly,
 The Blessed One’s countenance tacitly praises them, as if to say ‘very good’
 (sādhū!, 善哉).

Golden cords that crisscross and intersect like nets:⁹⁶ This refers to the creation of bright golden pathways, conditions that resemble golden cords:

- * Some imagine the ground to be made of various different jewels, and the pathways to be made of beryl
- * Some imagine the ground to be made of beryl, and the pathways to be made of white jade.
- * Some imagine the ground to be made of burnished gold and silver, and the pathways to be made of hundreds of kinds of jewels.
- * Some imagine the ground to be made of an inexpressible number of jewels, and the pathways to be made of them as well.
- * Some imagine the ground to be made of millions of jewels, and the pathways to be made of just two or three kinds of jewels.

Like this, the different signs may vary. In being composed of these things, they sparkle with a radiance that reveals various different kinds of light and color. None of them are the same, yet not one of these signs is mixed up or in disorder. Those practitioners who do not speak of there only being a golden pathway therefore do not speak of it only being made of some other kind of treasure.

d. *The adornments in the sky above: visualizing the Land of Pure Bliss in the sphere of existential principles that are beyond form* (arūpa dhātu, 無色界):

On this, the scripture says:

“From within each of these treasures there is a radiance of five hundred colors. The rays of this light are like blossoms that resemble the stars and the moon. Suspended in the emptiness of space, they turn into beacons of light through which there are seen millions of buildings composed of hundreds of kinds of jewels. Each side of these beacons is adorned with millions of blossoms and banners as well as countless musical instruments.”

This is on the adornments found in the sky and it is in six parts:

1. The rays of light arise from within these treasures
2. This radiance reveals auspicious signs
3. These auspicious signs turn into beacons of light
4. The beacons of light reveal towers and buildings
5. The beacons of light reveal blossoms and banners
6. The beacons of light reveal instruments creating the sounds of precious music.

Each of the different jewels on the ground emits five hundred colors of light⁷⁰ and each of the colors penetrates the sky above, with each creating a single-colored beacon. On each side of these beacons there are millions of bejeweled buildings, each composed of one, two, three, four or an inexpressible number of jewels as adornments.

Like blossoms that resemble the stars and the moon: Through the Buddha’s mercy and compassion these metaphors are employed, lest people not become aware of the true meaning of these things.

Each side of these beacons is adorned with millions of blossoms and banners as well as countless musical instruments: The bejeweled ground has an infinite light and splendor, and each ray of light reveals and creates a beacon of light that everywhere fills the sky. Whether walking, standing, sitting or lying down, practitioners (yogins, 行者) are ever making these different visualizations.

- e. *The light is transformed into teachings about the transcendental nature of life's purpose: visualizing the Land of Pure Bliss in the transcendental sphere of life's purpose* (dharma dhātu, 法界):

On this, the scripture says:

"Eight kinds of pure breezes rise up from the light to play these instruments, producing sounds that teach the truths about suffering, emptiness, impermanence and selflessness."

This is on the light being transformed into teachings about the transcendental nature of life's purpose. There are three parts:

- a. The breezes arise from the light.
- b. When the breezes arise from the light, there is the sound of music and drums.
- c. There are as many teachings about the nature of life's purpose as there are grains of sand along the River Ganges, revealing:
 1. The four illusions about the nature of life and death (saṃsāra, 生死):
These are the illusions about the purity (śubha, 淨), contentment (sukha, 樂), permanence (nitya, 常) & identity (ātman, 我) found in sentient existence being refuted by the truth of its impurity (aśubha, 不淨), suffering (duḥkha, 苦), impermanence (anitya, 無常) & selflessness (anātman, 無我).
 2. And the four-fold transcendental nature of spiritual freedom (nirvāṇa, 涅槃):
This is a reference to the purity, contentment, permanence and identity found in the transcendental nature of life's purpose, the grace that descends from the transcendental vows of the Buddha.

On this, there are introductory stanzas of verse in Vasubandhu's Commentary on the Scripture on Infinite Life (Amitāyus Sūtra Upadeśa, 無量壽經優波提舍) that say:

"I see the power of the Buddha's original vows
And those who encounter it do not do so in vain.
They are able to quickly be fulfilled with all the merits and virtues
Found in the great ocean of treasure. // 19

"The Land Secure in Contentment is pure of affliction.
Forever turning the immaculate wheel of life's purpose,
The manifestations of the Buddha and bodhisattvas are like the sun,
Steady and enduring like Mount Sumeru.⁵⁵ // 20

"With its light being gloriously immaculate
In each and every moment of thought,
It illuminates all the Buddhas and their assemblies,
Providing meaningful benefits to the flocks of sentient beings. // 21

"Raining down divine music and clothing and covering the ground with blossoms,
Making offerings of sublime fragrances and other treasures
And praising the virtues of the Buddhas
There are no thoughts of distinctions among them." // 22

- f. *The general conclusion:* On this, the scripture says:
"This second meditation is called 'visualization of the waters'."
This is the general conclusion.

Although there are six different parts described above, collectively they explain the visualization of the waters.

3. The Scripture's Words About Visualizing the Ground:

On this, the scripture says:

"When producing this visualization of the waters in your mind, each observation of them should be clear and thorough in detail, whether your eyes are open or closed. You should never forget this vision or become distracted by other objects. Except when in (deep, dreamless) sleep, you should ever remember it and keep it in mind. Observing the waters this way is said to be a proper meditation on them. Observing them any other way is said to be an incorrect meditation."

The Buddha then said to both Ānanda and Vaidehī:

"When these reflections on the waters are made, they are called rough visions of the ground in the Land of Pure Bliss. When you attain a visualization of them with perfect mental resolve, you will see the ground in this land so clearly that it will be impossible to express it all in detail. This third meditation is called 'visualization of the ground'."

The Buddha then just addressed Ānanda:

"You should keep the Buddha's words in mind and teach of this visualization of the ground for all those of future generations who desire to become free from suffering. When they meditate on this ground, they will eliminate the consequences that have arisen from the immoral acts they have committed along the stream of life and death over eighty million lifetimes. Upon renouncing their attachments to life in this world, they will certainly be reborn in the Pure Land and without any doubt they will attain a realization of this visualization. Observing the ground this way is said to be a proper meditation on it. Observing it any other way is said to be an incorrect meditation."

此想成時。一一觀之極令了了。閉目開目不令散失。唯除食時。恒憶此事。作此觀者名為正觀。若他觀者名為邪觀。

佛告阿難及韋提希。水想成已。名為粗見極樂國地。若得三昧。見彼國地了了分明。不可具說。是為地想。名第三觀。佛告阿難。汝持佛語。為未來世一切大眾欲脫苦者。說是觀地法。若觀是地者。除八十億劫生死之罪。捨身他世必生淨國。心得無疑。作是觀者名為正觀。若他觀者名為邪觀。

3. Shāndào's Commentary About Visualizing the Ground (bhūmi, 地):

The purpose of this third visualization is to teach about grounding in the resolve of meditation (samādhi, 定). The first and second paragraphs here still discuss the visualization of the waters, but as a transition to the third visualization of the ground. This transition is a kind of intermediary meditation (dhyāna antara, 中間禪) between the second and third visualizations in which relatively more refined visions of the waters are called 'rough visions of the ground'. This way it becomes clear that these two visualizations are inseparably connected. The ground itself can be likened to the adamant solidness and strength of meditative resolve, the bedrock that is straight, even and level, beyond the crests and troughs of emotional disturbances (kleśa, 煩惱).

Concerning the visualization of the ground, again first there is an identification of the subject, then a distinction of its signs and finally a conclusion. This is in six parts.

- a. The conclusion of the visualization of the waters leads to one of the ground
- b. Describing the signs of attaining the resolve of meditation (samādhi, 定)
- c. The general conclusion
- d. Encouraging its propagation
- e. Revealing the benefits realized through attaining this resolve of meditation
- f. The distinction between proper & improper meditation on the ground

a. The conclusion of the visualization of the waters leads to one of the ground:

On this, the scripture says:

"When producing this visualization of the waters in your mind ..."

This is on the conclusion of the second meditation (on the waters) ultimately leading to the introduction of this third one (on the ground).

b. Describing the signs of attaining the resolve of meditation:

On this, the scripture says:

"each observation of them should be clear and thorough in detail, whether your eyes are open or closed. You should never forget this vision or become distracted by other objects. Except when in (deep, dreamless) sleep, you should ever remember it and keep it in mind. Observing the waters this way is said to be a proper meditation on them. Observing them any other way is said to be an incorrect meditation."

The Buddha then said to both Ānanda and Vaidehī:

"When these reflections on the waters are made, they are called rough visions of the ground in the Land of Pure Bliss. When you attain a meditation on them with perfect mental resolve, you will see the ground in this land so clearly that it will be impossible to express it all in detail."

This describes the signs of realizing perfect mental resolve (samādhi, 三昧) in six parts:

1. The mind is directed towards a single object, and one does not just observe it generally or in a haphazard way.
2. In remaining focused on this single object, it will be revealed before one. In being revealed directly before one, it will become thoroughly clear in detail.
3. When the object has been revealed before one, whether one's eyes are opened or closed, one will keep it in mind and never forget it.
4. Whether one is seated, walking, standing or lying down and whether it is day or night, one recalls it all the time. Except when one is in (deep, dreamless) sleep, one remembers it, keeps it in mind and never forgets it.
5. With this mind of resolve never being interrupted, one will see the signs of the Pure Land. This is called deliberation (cintana, 想心) on the visualization, because one is still self-conscious of the visualization.
6. The visualizations of the mind gradually becomes more and more subtle until their self-conscious recollection is suddenly eliminated. This is called proper penetration (samāpatti, 正受), which is realizing a perfect resolve of meditation (samādhi, 三昧) that is endowed with a complete union between subject and object. With a transcendental vision of this sublime object, how can it be expressed in detail? The ground is vast and boundless, its bejeweled pillars are countless and its host of jewels are dazzling in ever changing colors. Because of this, one is encouraged to ever keep it before one's eyes while maintaining one's resolve with all one's heart.

c. The general conclusion:

On this, the scripture says:

"This third meditation is called 'visualization of the ground'."

This is a general conclusion.

d. *Encouraging its propagation:*

On this, the scripture says:

The Buddha then just addressed Ānanda:

“You should keep the Buddha’s words in mind and teach of this visualization of the ground for all those of future generations who desire to become free from suffering.”

This is on encouraging propagation of this visualization and adapting to the conditions at hand to teach of it, in four parts:

1. *Who is addressed* (just the disciple Ānanda, and by extension those who are ordained)⁷⁴
2. *Encouraging them to keep the Buddha’s words in mind and propagate them broadly* for posterity
3. *Assessing the capacity of sentient beings* for enduring acceptance of and faith in this meditation; This is about the aspiration to renounce the eight kinds of suffering,⁵⁹ the five kinds of sufferings⁵⁹ and the sufferings of the three evil paths that are found along the stream of life & death (saṃsāra, 生死) in this world we must all endure together (saḥā loka, 娑婆世界). It is hearing about, believing in and practicing this meditation without being stingy with one’s life or livelihood and teaching of it to others with urgency. If there is a single person who lets go of the sufferings of life & death there will be the genuine reward of the Buddha’s grace. How is this so? The Buddhas appear in this world employing various ways and means to encourage and influence sentient beings, not simply desiring to control evil and cultivate blessings in order to make them receive the rewards found in the social realm of humanity and the heavens of meditation. The contentments of humanity and heaven are transient, like bolts of lightning. In an instant, they are gone and once again there is entry into the three evil paths and long periods of suffering. For this reason, the Buddhas encourage them to seek spiritual rebirth in the Pure Land and face the supreme awakening (bodhi, 菩提) to the transcendental nature of life’s purpose. And so now with there being a connection with the signs of the Pure Land, they are encouraged to commit to being reborn there and praise the Buddha there through the resolve found in the Buddha’s original vows. If they do not have faith in this practice, it will be like it is said in The Scripture on the Infinitely Pure Universal Enlightenment (佛說無量清淨平等覺經), the first translation of the Longer Scripture on the Buddha of Infinite Life (by Lokakṣema, 支婁迦讖):

“When these people hear the teachings about this technique (dharma paryāya, 法門) of meditation on the Pure Land, it is like they hear it and see it but they don’t really hear or see it. One should understand that, for those without faith, the three evil paths (of greed, hatred and the stupidity of selfish indifference) arise first of all in minds saddled with obstacles of immoral character that have not yet been fully eliminated. Of them, the Buddha said:

‘I have taught these people but they have not yet attained emancipation from their afflictions.’”

This scripture also says:

“When people (with faith) hear the teaching of this method of meditating on the Pure Land, there is an interaction between compassion and joyfulness, with the hair of their bodies standing on end. One should know that they have cultivated and learned about this transcendental nature of life’s purpose in the past. Now, upon hearing more about it, there is rejoicing, proper remembrance, the cultivation of its practice and the certainty of attaining spiritual rebirth in this Pure Land.”

4. *Properly instructing them on how to abide in this meditation* on the bejeweled ground.

e. *Revealing the benefits realized through attaining the resolve of meditation* (samādhi, 定):

On this, the scripture says:

“When they meditate on this ground, they will eliminate the consequences that have arisen from the immoral acts they have committed along the stream of life and death over eighty million lifetimes. Upon renouncing their attachments to life in this world, they will certainly be reborn in the Pure Land and without any doubt they will attain a realization of this visualization.”

This is on the benefits revealed from attaining this resolve of meditation. It is in four parts:

1. They can meditate on this bejeweled ground without being distracted by any other object.
2. Through meditation on the bejeweled ground that is without affliction (anāsrāva, 無漏), they are able to eliminate the afflictions (asrāva, 有漏) produced from the immoral acts they have committed (akuśala karma, 惡業) over many lifetimes (kalpas, 劫).⁷
3. Having renounced attachment to life in this world, they will attain spiritual rebirth in the Pure Land with certainty.
4. In cultivating the cause of proper remembrance (samyak smṛti, 正念), they will eliminate all of their doubts. Although they will attain future rebirth in the Pure Land, they are still like lotus buds that have not yet fully opened up.⁹⁴
 - a. Some of them will be born into its frontier realms.⁷⁸
 - b. Some of them will descend into the rooms of its palaces.⁷⁸
 - c. Some of them will open up into blossoms of resolve (samādhi, 三昧) through the great compassion of the bodhisattvas who have eliminated all of their doubts and obstacles. These blossoms will open up in palaces and reveal the signs of the Buddha’s spiritual life (dharma kāya, 法身). These are the allies of the Buddha’s true purpose who lead by traveling among assemblies and seeing their bejeweled grounds with focused minds. Transcending the obstacles caused by the immoral acts they have committed in past lives, they put their vows into practice until the consequences of their past actions (karmas, 諸業) are perfectly eliminated. When their lives end they will be without any doubt about their rebirth in the Pure Land. Now, having observed all these excellent benefits, they are further encouraged by being able to distinguish between proper and improper meditation.

f. *The distinction between proper & improper meditation:*

On this, the scripture says:

“Observing the ground this way is said to be a proper meditation on it. Observing it any other way is said to be an incorrect meditation.”

This is the distinction between its improper and proper meditation. The meaning of improper and proper meditation was already taught in previous visualization of the setting sun.

Although there are six different parts described above, collectively they explain the visualization of the ground.

4. The Scripture's Words About Visualizing the Bejeweled Trees:

On this, the scripture says:

The Buddha then addressed Ānanda and Vaidehī:

“Having visualized the ground, you should next meditate on its bejeweled trees. In each observation of these trees, you will visualize there being seven rows of seven trees. Each of these trees is eighty-four thousand yojanas tall. These bejeweled trees have blossoms and leaves that are perfectly composed of the seven treasures. Each of the blossoms and leaves produce different colors from these treasures.

From beryl-colored blossoms there arises a golden radiance.

From crystal-colored blossoms there arises a crimson radiance.

From carnelian-colored blossoms there arises a radiance like mother of pearl.

From mother of pearl-colored blossoms there arises an emerald radiance.

Coral, amber and the other treasures serve as reflecting ornaments. On each tree there are seven rows of beautiful stringed pearls that cover them like nets.⁹⁶ Between each row of nets there are five million palaces with beautiful blossoms like those found in the palace of the Creator where celestial children naturally dwell. Each child wears a necklace composed of five hundred million of the Almighty Lord of Heaven's most auspicious gems of wish fulfillment. The radiance of these magic gems shines for hundreds of yojanas like the light from a hundred million suns and moons blended together. It is impossible to describe them all in detail. The colors from these jewels all rise up and blend together. The different rows of trees are arranged in an orderly way and their leaves are spread out in proper proportion. Among the leaves beautiful blossoms are produced, spontaneously bearing fruits composed of the seven treasures. Each leaf of the trees is equally twenty-five yojanas in length and width. Their leaves have thousands of colors with hundreds of different patterns. Like celestial ornaments, they have a host of beautiful blossoms that are like the golden color of the Jambū River. They spin like wheels of fire between the leaves, issuing forth fruits like those from the vase of the Almighty Lord of Heaven. Emitting a great radiance of light, they turn into flagpoles and canopies with innumerable jewels. Inside these bejeweled canopies there are reflections of all the Buddha's works throughout the great billion-fold world. All the nations of the Buddhas in the ten directions are revealed to be here as well. Upon seeing these trees, you should also meditate on each of them in a proper sequential order, observing the trees' trunks, branches, leaves, blossoms and fruits and distinguishing each of them clearly in detail. This fourth meditation is called 'visualization of the trees'. Observing them this way is said to be a proper meditation on them. Observing them any other way is said to be an incorrect meditation.”

佛告阿難及韋提希。地想成已。次觀寶樹。觀寶樹者。一一觀之作七重行樹想。一一樹高八千由旬。其諸寶樹七寶花葉無不具足。一一華葉作異寶色。琉璃色中出金色光。頗梨色中出紅色光。馬腦色中出車璫光。車璫色中出綠真珠光。珊瑚琥珀一切眾寶以為映飾。妙真珠網彌覆樹上。一一樹上有七重網。一一網間有五百億妙華宮殿。如梵王宮。諸天童子自然在中。一一童子有五百億釋迦毘楞伽摩尼寶以為瓔珞。其摩尼光照百由旬。猶如和合百億日月。不可具名。眾寶間錯色中上者。此諸寶樹行行相當。葉葉相次。於眾葉間生諸妙花。花上自然有七寶果。一一樹葉。縱廣正等二十五由旬。其葉千色有百種畫。如天纓絡。有眾妙華作閻浮檀金色。如旋火輪。宛轉葉間踊生諸果。如帝釋瓶。有大光明。化成幢幡無量寶蓋。是寶蓋中。映現三千大千世界一切佛事。十方佛國亦於中現。見此樹已。亦當次第一觀之。觀見樹莖枝葉華果皆令分明。是為樹想名第四觀。作是觀者名為正觀。若他觀者名為邪觀。

4. Shàndǎo's Commentary About Visualizing the Bejeweled Trees (ratnamaya vṛkṣa, 寶樹):

The purpose of this fourth visualization is to teach about the cultivation (bhāvanā, 修) of spiritual awakening (bodhi, 菩提). 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 enlightenment (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.

Concerning the visualization of the bejeweled trees, again first there is identification of the subject, then a distinction of its signs and finally a conclusion. There are ten parts:

- a. Generally bringing up the visualization's name
- b. Elaborating on its name: on the thirty-seven facets of spiritual awakening
- c. The size of the trees
- d. The different adornments and decorations on the trees
- e. The adornments in the sky above the trees
- f. Although there are many trees, they are without any disorder
- g. The different colors and shapes of the leaves
- h. The inconceivable virtues and functions of their fruits
- i. Conclusion on the realizing the signs of this meditation
- j. The general conclusion

a. Generally bringing up the visualization's name:

On this, the scripture says:

The Buddha addressed Ānanda and Vaidehī:

"Having visualized the ground, next one meditates on its bejeweled trees."

This generally introduces the name of the visualization. The conclusion of the meditation on the ground (of resolve) naturally leads to this one on the trees (of cultivation).

b. Elaborating on the meditation's name: On the thirty-seven facets of spiritual awakening (saptatrimśat bodhipākṣika, 三十七道品) in seven categories including its seven branches of enlightenment (sapta bodhy aṅgāni, 七覺支):

On this, the scripture says:

"In each observation of these trees, you will visualize there being seven rows of seven trees."

The bejeweled trees: This generally brings up the meditation's name.

In each observation: For some there is one tree with roots of yellow gold, a trunk of burnished gold, branches of silver, stems of agate, leaves of coral, blossoms of white jade and fruits of pearl. These seven combinations of treasure¹⁴ are interchangeable on the roots, trunks, branches, stems, leaves, blossoms and fruits. With there being seven different combinations of these different kinds of treasures on the seven parts of the trees, all together there are forty-nine kinds of trees. For some, each tree is made of a single treasure. For others, each tree is of two, three, four, a hundred, a thousand, a million or an inexpressible number of them. The meaning of this has been elaborated in this scripture as well as the Shorter Scripture on the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Buddha Bhāṣita Amitāyus Sūtra, 佛說阿彌陀經) and so there are said to be the seven combinations of the seven treasures.

The rows: Although there are many trees in the forest, their various rows are orderly and straight, and so they are without disorder.

Visualizations: Those who are not yet fully trained in the true mastery of this meditation must avail themselves of these hypothetical mental constructs of the imagination to abide in it and realize its benefits.

c. *The size of the trees:*

On this, the scripture says:

“Each of these trees is eighty-four thousand yojanas tall.”

This explains how all of the bejeweled trees in the forest flow from the mind of the Buddha of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛) that is without affliction (anāsrāva, 無漏). Because the Buddha’s mind is without affliction, these trees are also without affliction. On this, the introductory verse in Vasubandhu’s Commentary on the Scripture on the Buddha of Infinite Life (Amitāyus Sūtra Upadeśa, 無量壽經優波提舍 or 淨土論) says:

“The mercy and compassion of this straight path

Produce roots of virtue that transcend this world.

Its pure light and clarity are full

Like the reflected orbs of the sun and moon.” //4”

The size of the trees: Each of the trees is 320,000 li (or 84,000 yojanas)⁷⁹ tall and they are without old age or death. They are not born small and they do not gradually grow larger from birth. They all arise suddenly at the same time, with their sizes being even and their numbers being equal. How is this so? Those in the Pure Land are without affliction (anāsrāva, 無漏) and neither arise nor perish (anutpāda, 無生). How can they be invested with the meaning of gradually becoming larger that is associated with the arising and perishing found in the nature of life and death?

d. *The different adornments and decorations on the various trees:*

On this, the scripture says:

“These bejeweled trees have blossoms and leaves that are perfectly composed of the seven treasures. Each of the blossoms and leaves produce different colors from these treasures.

From beryl-colored blossoms there arises a golden radiance.

From crystal-colored blossoms there arises a crimson radiance.

From carnelian-colored blossoms there arises a radiance like mother of pearl.

From mother of pearl-colored blossoms there arises an emerald radiance.

Coral, amber and the other treasures serve as reflecting ornaments.”

This is on the different trees being adorned and decorated with a variety of different signs. It is in four parts:

1. The blossoms and leaves of the forest’s various trees are not the same.
2. Each of the roots, trunks, branches, stems and fruits, etc., possesses a host of jewels.¹⁴
3. The light from each of the blossoms and leaves is transformed differently when reflected in beryl,¹² with the color of the ground where it arises radiating a golden color, transforming the different signs like this.
4. These reflections lead to further decorations with all the different kinds of treasure.¹⁴

Another stanza of verse in Vasubandhu’s Commentary on the Scripture on Infinite Life (Amitāyus Sūtra Upadeśa, 無量壽經優波提舍) says:

“The Pure Land is composed of many prized treasures,

And perfectly endowed with wondrous adornments.

It blazes with an immaculate light,

A pure clarity that dazzles those of this world.” //5”

Another two stanzas say:

“The pure nation of the Buddha of Infinite Life has many bejeweled trees,
With branches hanging on all four sides,
Divine raiments draping all around them,
And bejeweled clouds shading them.

Singing birds appear whirling about overhead,
Joining the assembly to create music about the true nature of life’s purpose.
Noble beings from other lands come and rejoice upon hearing these sounds, while
Those from this land see the shapes of these trees and are spiritually awakened.’

e. The adornments in the sky above the trees:

On this, the scripture says:

“On each tree there are seven rows of beautiful stringed pearls that cover them like nets. Between each row of nets there are five million palaces with beautiful blossoms like those found in the palace of the Creator where celestial children naturally dwell. Each child wears a necklace composed of five hundred million of the Almighty Lord of Heaven’s most auspicious gems of wish fulfillment. The radiance of these magic gems shines for hundreds of yojanas like the light from a hundred million suns and moons blended together. It is impossible to describe them all in detail. The colors from all these jewels all rise up and blend together.

This is on the adornments in the sky above the trees. It is in seven parts:

1. Networks of gems⁹⁶ that descend from the sky above cover the trees.
2. The networks have many layers.
3. The number of palaces such as the palace of the Creator (brahma rāja, 梵王)⁷⁸
4. Inside each palace there are many children.
5. The children wear necklaces⁸⁰ made of magic wish-fulfilling gems such as the Almighty Lord of Heaven’s (Indra’s) most auspicious gems of wish fulfillment (śakra abhi lagna maṇi ratna, 釋迦毘楞伽摩尼寶).¹⁴
6. The broad-ranging radiance emanating from these necklaces
7. The transcendental light and its colors rise up and blend together.

f. Although there are many trees, they are without disorder:

On this, the scripture says:

“The different rows of trees are arranged in an orderly way and their leaves are spread out in proper proportion. Among the leaves beautiful blossoms are produced, spontaneously bearing fruits composed of the seven treasures.”

Although there are many trees in the forest, they are without any disorder. When their blossoms open up, their seed-bearing fruits do not just arise from inside of them, just as the transcendental vows of the monk ‘Treasury of Purpose’ (Dharmākara, 法藏) spontaneously came into existence by a profound cause of grace (not just an act of will).

g. The different colors and shapes of the leaves:

On this, the scripture says:

“Each leaf of the trees is equally twenty-five yojanas in length and width. Their leaves have thousands of colors with hundreds of different patterns. Like celestial ornaments, they have a host of beautiful blossoms that are like the golden color of the Jambū River. They spin like wheels of fire between the leaves ...”

The colors of the blossoms and leaves are not the same. This is in five parts:

1. The size of the leaves are equal and without any differences
2. The number of colors arising from the leaves
3. Metaphors like those about the divine necklaces⁸⁰ are used to allay subconscious fears and doubts
4. Among the leaves there are beautiful blossoms with colors that are comparable to the divine gold of the Jambū River.⁸¹ The blossoms are likened to wheels (vortexes) of fire.
5. Their radiance is revealed between the leaves.

h. The fruits and their inconceivable virtues and functions:

On this, the scripture says:

“issuing forth fruits like those from the vase of the Almighty Lord of Heaven. Emitting a great radiance of light, they turn into flagpoles and canopies with innumerable jewels. Inside these bejeweled canopies there are reflections of all the Buddha’s works throughout the great billion-fold world. All the nations of the Buddhas in the ten directions are revealed to be here as well.”

This is on the inconceivable virtues and functions of the fruits. It is in five parts:

1. When the bejeweled fruits are produced, they arise and appear spontaneously.
2. Using metaphors to describe the fruits, like those from the vase (kalaśa, 瓶) of the Almighty Lord of Heaven (śākra devendra, 帝釋)⁵³
3. The blossoms emit light that transforms into flagpoles (dhvaja yaṣṭi, 幢幡) (projections of the unafflicted purpose of the spiritual life and its accomplishments)⁷⁰ and canopies (providing penumbras, the appearances of identity - ātma, 我).
4. The bejeweled canopies perfectly illuminate the inner manifestation of the billion-fold sphere of purpose (dharma dhātu, 法界)¹⁶ and the dual grace that comes directly from the spiritual life of the Buddha (svakarma phala, 正報) and indirectly from the environment around the Buddha (parakarma phala, 依報), adorning the Pure Land with its various signs.
5. The Pure Lands of the ten directions are everywhere manifested in these canopies so that those here from humanity and the heavens of meditation can always make visualizations of them, whether they are walking, standing, seated or lying down.

i. Conclusion on the realizing the signs of the meditation:

On this, the scripture says:

“Upon seeing these trees, you should also meditate on each of them in a sequential order, observing the trees’ trunks, branches, leaves, blossoms and fruits and distinguishing each of them clearly in detail.”

This is the conclusion on realizing the signs of this meditation. It is in three parts:

1. The conclusion on realizing the signs of the meditation
2. The sequence of observations is without any disorder
3. Each observation arises and remains as an object in the mind. First one meditates on the trees’ roots, then the trunks, then the branches and finally the blossoms and fruits. Next the networks of pearls and palaces are visualized. Next there are the sizes of the leaves and the colors of the blossom and fruits. Then the flagpoles and canopies are visualized, all being revealed as the work of the Buddha. In being able to observe each of these in a proper sequential order, one distinguishes each of them clearly.

j. The general conclusion:

On this, the scripture says:

“This fourth meditation is called ‘visualization of the trees’. Observing them this way is said to be a proper meditation on them. Observing them any other way is said to be an incorrect meditation.”

This is the general conclusion. These bejeweled trees continuously shine with the networks of pearls⁹⁶ and palaces⁷⁸ suspended in space. The blossoms are divided into thousands of colors, and the fruits are revealed in different places.

Although there are ten different parts above, together they broadly explain the visualization of the bejeweled trees.

5. The Scripture's Words About Visualizing the Pools of Fresh Water:

On this, the scripture says:

The Buddha then again addressed both Ānanda and Vaidehī:

“Having already visualized the trees, next you should deliberate on the pools of fresh water. For those who aspire to visualize the fresh waters found in the Land of Pure Bliss, there are these pools with their different kinds of virtue. The waters of each pool are composed of the seven treasures but here they have the nature of suppleness and pliability. Springing forth from royal wish-fulfilling gems, these waters are then divided into fourteen different branches. Each branch is made of one of the colors of these seven treasures. The banks of these waters are a yellow gold, and their beds are covered with a sand composed of multi-colored diamonds. In each pool there are six million lotus blossoms made of these seven treasures. Each lotus blossom is round, symmetrical and twelve yojanas in diameter. The waters arising from these wish-fulfilling gems flow among the blossoms and meander between the trees. As they ripple, their sounds sublimely teach about the nature of suffering, emptiness, impermanence, selflessness and the ways of spiritual deliverance. They also praise the many auspicious signs and excellent refinements of the Buddhas. These royal wish-fulfilling gems also issue forth a beautiful golden splendor that is transformed into birds with the colors of hundreds of different jewels. Their songs are melodious and elegant, ever recalling and praising the enlightened being, the true nature of life's purpose and the community of faith. This fifth meditation is called ‘visualization of the waters with the eight kinds of virtue’. Observing the pools of fresh water this way is said to be a proper meditation on them. Observing them any other way is said to be an incorrect meditation.”

佛告阿難及韋提希。樹想成已。次當想水。欲想水者。極樂國土有八池水。一一池水七寶所成。其寶柔軟從如意珠王生。分為十四支。一支作七寶色。黃金為渠。渠下皆以雜色金剛以為底沙。一水中六十億七寶蓮花。一蓮華團圓正等十二由旬。其摩尼水流注華間尋樹上下。其聲微妙演說苦空無常無我諸波羅蜜。復有讚歎諸佛相好者。從如意珠王踊出金色微妙光明。其光化為百寶色鳥。和鳴哀雅。常讚念佛念法念僧。是為八功德水想。名第五觀。作是觀者名為正觀。若他觀者名為邪觀。

5. Shàndǎo's Commentary About Visualizing the Pools of Fresh Water (hrada, 池水):

The purpose of this fifth visualization is to teach about the flow of unafflicted purposes in the mind that nourish and sustain spiritual cultivation. 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 the magic spells or mantras, the pearls of wisdom that are unafflicted seeds (anāsrava bījaḥ, 諸無漏種) of transcendental knowledge (jñāna, 智). The 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.

Concerning visualization of the pools, again first there is the bringing up of the subject, then a distinction of its signs and finally a conclusion. This is in seven parts.

- a. Generally bringing up the visualization's name
- b. The number of pools and their origin
- c. The different currents feeding the pools of fresh water that swirl yet are without disorder
- d. Their inconceivable functions
- e. Their inconceivable virtues
- f. The many spiritual virtues found in the gems of wish-fulfillment (cintāmaṇi, 如意珠)
- g. The general conclusion

a. *Generally bringing up the name of the visualization:*

On this, the scripture says:

The Buddha then again addressed Ānanda and Vaidehī:

“Having already visualized the trees, next one should deliberate on the pools of fresh water.”

This is generally introducing the visualization’s name, with the conclusion on the meditation on the trees naturally leading to the introduction of this one. Although the bejeweled trees are alive, if they were without the fresh water of the pools they could not be called thriving. These pools exist for two reasons:

1. So that this world will not be empty and desolate
2. To adorn the environment of the Pure Land

It is because of this that there is this visualization of the pools of fresh water.

b. *The number of pools and their origin:*

On this, the scripture says:

“For those who aspire to visualize the fresh waters found in the Land of Pure Bliss, there are these pools with their different kinds of virtue. The waters of each pool are composed of the seven treasures but here they have the nature of suppleness and pliability. Springing forth from royal wish-fulfilling gems ...”

This is on the number of pools and the place from which they arise. There are five parts:

1. Indicating where they all come from, (the unafflicted seeds of consciousness that are) royal wish-fulfilling gems (cinta maṇi rāja, 如意珠王)
2. The pools have eight names (describing their virtues).
3. The shore of each pool is composed of the seven treasures,¹⁴ and because the light of these jewels is reflected in the waters and illuminates it, the waters of the eight virtues are said to be the same colors as these jewels. And because of this they are called ‘the bejeweled waters’.
4. The essential nature of these bejeweled waters is suppleness (subtleness) and pliancy (adaptability).
5. Because the waters of the eight pools everywhere arise from ‘wish-fulfilling gems’ (cinta maṇi, 如意珠) they are called ‘the wish-fulfilling waters’.

These fresh waters have eight kinds of virtues:

- a. In being clear there is alignment (āyatana, 入)¹¹ with the sense of *visible form* (rūpa, 色).
- b. In being odorless there is alignment with the sense of *fragrance* (gandha, 香).
- c. -e. In being light, cool and soft, there is alignment with the sense of *touch* (spraṣṭavya, 觸).
- f. In being delicious, there is alignment with the sense of *taste* (rasa, 味).
- g. -h. In quenching thirst while being drank and soothing afterwards, there is alignment with the sense of *purpose* (dharma, 法).¹¹

The different meanings of these eight kinds of virtues are also described in the Shorter Scripture on the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyus Sūtra, 阿彌陀經).

There are also four stanzas of verse on this that say:

“The adornments of pure bliss soothe and nourish the land.

The flow of the eight virtues in the bejeweled pools everywhere fulfills it.

The seven treasures reflect and shine between their four shores, and

The colors of the waters are illuminated by the radiance of these jewels.

The essential nature of the water is suppleness and pliancy, and it is not hard to the touch. Bodhisattvas methodically walk about, perfuming everything with precious fragrances. The clouds of these precious fragrances waft overhead, and A canopy covers the sky overhead with bejeweled banners.

These banners adorn and surround bejeweled palaces,⁷⁸ and The palaces are draped by bejeweled strings with bells and pearls hanging from them. The strings create precious music that plays thousands of melodies. Adapting to the capacity of the audience, they extol the Buddha from these bejeweled palaces.

Each palace and tower has an assembly of a Buddha. With noble hosts as numerous as the grains of sand along the River Ganges, they sit and deliberate on the Buddha's words. Vowing to connect with these words, they ever remember and recall them. Renouncing attachments to life in this world, they are all reborn together in these temples devoted to life's greater purpose."

c. *The different currents feeding the pools that swirl yet are without any disorder:*

On this, the scripture says:

"these waters are then divided into fourteen different branches. Each branch is made of one of the colors of these seven treasures. The banks of these waters are a yellow gold, and their beds are covered with a sand composed of multi-colored diamonds."

This is on the different swirling currents feeding the pools but being without disorder.

It is in three parts:

1. The number of streams: fourteen

Viewed from above, these fresh waters are seen to have branches, just like the trees. The fourteen branches of these waters serve as a metaphor for the nourishing and the sustaining of the seven branches of spiritual awakening.

2. The shore of each stream is made of yellow gold

3. The sand on the bottom of the streams is made of diamonds of many different colors

The diamonds here express the adamant nature that is without affliction (anāsrāva, 無漏).

d. *The inconceivable functions of the pools' waters:*

On this, the scripture says:

"In each pool there are six million lotus blossoms made of these seven treasures. Each lotus blossom is round, symmetrical and twelve yojanas in diameter. The waters arising from these wish-fulfilling gems flow among the blossoms and meander between the trees."

This is on the inconceivable functions of the pools' waters, in five parts:

1. Distinguishing the streams and revealing their adornments

2. The number of bejeweled lotus blossoms in the streams

A metaphor for the millions of applications of the six kinds of spiritual deliverance (pāramitās, 波羅蜜)

3. The size of the blossoms (12 yojanas in diameter)⁷⁹

4. The waters arising from these wish-fulfilling gems (cinta maṇi, 摩尼寶)¹⁴ flow among the blossoms.

5. These precious waters flow from the streams and meander unobstructed between the bejeweled trees above.

And, because of this, they are called 'the wish-fulfilling waters.'

e. *The inconceivable virtues of the pools' waters:*

On this, the scripture says:

"As they ripple, their sounds sublimely teach about the nature of suffering, emptiness, impermanence, selflessness and the ways of spiritual deliverance. They also praise the many auspicious signs and excellent refinements of the Buddhas.

This is on the inconceivable virtues found in the pool's waters. There are two parts:

1. The precious waters flow among the blossoms and touch them with subtle waves (vibrations). With the arising of their sublime sounds, everywhere there are teachings about the transcendental nature of life's purpose.
2. Above the bejeweled shores of the waters, one sees the trees' branches, stems, blossoms, fruits and leaves, etc. Some are high, some low and some in between. Everywhere there is contact with them there is the arising of sublime sounds. In these sounds everywhere there are these teachings about the sublime nature of life's purpose.
 - a. Some teach of the sufferings of sentient beings, stirring & awakening the compassion in bodhisattvas' hearts and encouraging them in the deliverance (pāramitā, 波羅蜜) of other sentient beings to the other shore of spiritual freedom from affliction.
 - b. Some teach the purposes of humanity and the contentments of heaven
 - c. Some teach of the purposes of the two tracks for attaining freedom from affliction on the individual level (students of the noble path and the self-enlightened).
 - d. Some teach of the bodhisattvas' first level of grounding in joyfulness or their higher levels of grounding (bhūmi, 地)^{4D} in the transcendental nature of life's purpose.
 - e. Some teach of the (five-fold) grounding of enlightenment (buddha bhūmi, 佛地)⁸³ and the Buddha's three-fold spiritual life (trikāya, 三身).⁸³

f. *The many spiritual virtues found in royal wish-fulfilling gems: (cinta maṇi rāja, 如意珠王):*

On this, the scripture says:

"These royal wish-fulfilling gems also issue forth a beautiful golden splendor that is transformed into birds with the colors of hundreds of different jewels. Their songs are melodious and elegant, ever recalling and praising the enlightened being, the true nature of life's purpose and the community of faith.

This is on the many spiritual virtues found in 'royal wish-fulfilling gems'. There are four parts on this:

1. A golden radiance arises from within these wish-fulfilling gems.
2. This light is transformed into a hundred kinds of precious birds.
3. The voices of the birds produce a divine music that is incomparably elegant
4. The sound of their voices ever recall the Three Treasures of the Buddha, Dharma & Saṃgha with praise:
 - a. The Enlightened Being (Buddha, 佛) is the supreme teacher of sentient beings, leading them to eliminate their illusions and face reality.
 - b. The True Nature of Life's Purpose (Dharma, 法) is the supreme medicine for sentient beings that is able to dispel the sickness of emotional disturbances (kleśa, 煩惱) and purify the spiritual life (dharma kāya, 法身).
 - c. The Community of Faith (Saṃgha, 僧) is the supreme field of blessings for sentient beings. Its members are spontaneously mindful, ever responding to the needs of those on the five tracks⁵⁷ that can accept this nature of life's purpose (with faith).

These royal wish-fulfilling gems first produce the waters of the eight flavors (feelings of joy and contentment) and afterwards raises up various kinds of golden radiance (transcendental discernments of purpose imbued with compassion). In doing so, they do not simply destroy the darkness and eliminate the twilight of ignorance, but reach first of all into the places where they are best able to accomplish the Buddha's work.

g. The general conclusion:

On this, the scripture says:

"This fifth meditation is called 'visualization of the waters with the eight kinds of virtue'. Observing the pools of fresh water this way is said to be a proper meditation on them. Observing them any other way is said to be an incorrect meditation."

This is the general conclusion.

Although there are seven different parts described above, collectively they explain the visualization of the bejeweled pools of fresh water.

6. The Scripture's Words About Visualizing the Bejeweled Buildings:

On this, the scripture says:

The Buddha again addressed Ānanda and Vaidehī:

"There are a host of bejeweled nations in this land. In each of its regions there are found five hundred million bejeweled buildings. In the chambers of these buildings there are countless divine beings creating heavenly music. There are also musical instruments suspended in space like bejeweled celestial flagpoles, playing by themselves without a player. In this symphony of sounds, everywhere there are teachings that recall the enlightened being, the true nature of life's purpose and the monks that are found in the community of faith. In making this meditation there is a rough vision of the World of Pure Bliss with its bejeweled trees, its grounds and its pools of water. This sixth meditation (on the mind-made structures found here) is called 'a general visualization of the environment in the Pure Land'. When you see it, there will be an elimination of the consequences that have resulted from the gravest acts of evil committed over countless millions of lifetimes. Furthermore, after your life ends, you will certainly be reborn in this Nation of Pure Bliss. Observing the buildings this way is said to be a proper meditation on them. Observing them any other way is said to be an incorrect meditation."

佛告阿難及韋提希。眾寶國土。一一界上有五百億寶樓。其樓閣中有無量諸天。作天伎樂。又有樂器懸處虛空。如天寶幢不鼓自鳴。此眾音中。皆說念佛念法念比丘僧。此想成已。名為粗見極樂世界寶樹寶地寶池。是為總觀想。名第六觀。若見此者。除無量億劫極重惡業。命終之後必生彼國。作是觀者名為正觀。若他觀者名為邪觀。

6. Shāndào's Commentary About Visualizing the Bejeweled Buildings (prāsāda, 樓):

The purpose of this sixth visualization is to teach about the unafflicted deliberations of the mind that support transcendental discernment of purpose (prajñā, 慧). Tall buildings (towers, pagodas, etc.) provide lofty and broad vistas. These can be likened to the unafflicted speculations and distinctions made by the imagination (vikalpa, 分別), the hypothetical mental constructs (prajñāpti, 假想) of the mind that serve as the building blocks of enlightenment. Here there are the mental associations of judgment, inference and logical reasoning through which one seeks to discover and express the inexpressible. 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. Divine music is said to arise from the buildings' rooms of meditation, proclaiming, praising and explaining the nature of life's greater, transcendental purpose. This can be likened to deliberation on the ever-repeated prayers and invocations that inspire and awaken sentient beings and are continuously kept in mind.

Concerning the visualization of the bejeweled buildings, again first there is an introduction of the subject, next there is a distinction of its signs and finally there is a conclusion. There are eleven parts:

- a. Generally bringing up the name of this visualization
- b. The places where these bejeweled buildings are found
- c. The number of buildings
- d. The adornments inside the buildings' rooms: the rooms are metaphors for the higher spheres of meditation on sentient existence in its spheres of objective reality (form) and existential principles (beyond form). In this context, the sphere of desire is likened to the hallways connecting these rooms.
- e. The adornments outside the buildings (the transcendental sphere of purpose that contains and goes beyond these buildings)
- f. Although the music is subliminal, it is able to teach about the transcendental nature of life's purpose
- g. Realizing the signs of this meditation
- h. The general conclusion
- i. In first witnessing the signs of this meditation, later benefits will be produced
- j. On spiritual rebirth and elimination of the obstacles caused by the consequences of past actions
- k. Distinguishing between proper and improper meditation on these buildings

a. Generally bringing up the name of the visualization:

On this, the scripture says:

The Buddha again addressed Ānanda and Vaidehī:

“There are a host of bejeweled nations in this land.”

This generally brings up the visualization’s name. The prior visualization of the pools naturally leads to this one. This clarifies that, although the Pure Land has precious currents that focus the flow of one’s attention, if there are no bejeweled towers, palaces or buildings, one has not yet fully adorned this environment of grace with all the provisions that sentient beings need to live in it.

b. The places where these bejeweled buildings are found:

On this, the scripture says:

“In each of its regions ...”

This is about the places where these bejeweled buildings are found. With the sphere of the ground being found everywhere, the countless buildings are as well.

c. The number of buildings:

On this, the scripture says:

“there are found five hundred million bejeweled buildings.”

This reveals their number. With them already being found in each region of the Pure Land, they fill these nations and one should understand that they are found in all of them like this. Millions of applications of the five projections from the spiritual life (asamasama pañca skandha, 五分法身).⁹³

d. The adornments inside the buildings’ rooms:

The rooms can be likened to the two higher spheres of meditation on sentient existence; the objective reality of its form (rūpa dhātu, 色界) and its existential principles that are beyond form (arūpa dhātu, 無色界). In this context, the sphere of desire (kāma dhātu, 欲界) can be likened to the hallways connecting these rooms:

On this, the scripture says:

“In the chambers of these buildings there are countless divine beings creating heavenly music.”

These are the adornments found inside the buildings’ chambers.

e. The adornments outside the buildings

This can be likened to the transcendental sphere of purpose (dharma dhātu, 法界) beyond these buildings.

On this, the scripture says:

“There are also musical instruments suspended in space like bejeweled celestial flagpoles, playing by themselves, without a player.”

These are the adornments that are found outside and beyond these buildings. The precious music soars into the sky through different voices (all teaching about the transcendental nature of life’s purpose) six times each day and night. It is said that it is as if the musical instruments were suspended in space like bejeweled celestial flagpoles,⁷⁰ as, being selfless, those in this land do not deem themselves to be the creators (owners) of their own work.

f. Although the music is subliminal, it is able to teach about the true nature of life’s purpose:

On this, the scripture says:

“In this symphony of sounds, everywhere there are teachings that recall the enlightened being, the true nature of life’s purpose and the monks that are found in the community of faith.”

Here it is explained that this music subliminally teaches about this transcendental nature. Being subliminal, they directly influence the subconscious mind.

g. Realizing the signs of this meditation:

On this, the scripture says:

“In making this meditation there is a rough vision of the World of Pure Bliss with its bejeweled trees, its grounds and its pools of fresh water.”

This is on realizing the signs of the meditation. This is focusing on the object of meditation, longing to see its bejeweled buildings and fixing the mind on them without ever forgetting them. In doing this, all the above adornments are revealed.

h. The general conclusion:

On this, the scripture says:

“This sixth meditation (on mind-made structures) is called ‘a general visualization of the environment in the Pure Land’.”

This is a general conclusion (about the mind-made structures of the spiritual life (mano maya kāya, 意成身 or 意生身)).

i. In first witnessing these signs of the meditation, subsequent benefits will be produced:

On this, the scripture says:

“When you see this ...”

Upon first seeing these signs of the meditation, there are other benefits that will be produced afterwards (the elimination of karmic obstacles).

j. Spiritual rebirth and the elimination of the obstacles caused by the consequences of past actions (karma āvaraṇa, 業障):

On this, the scripture says:

“there will be an elimination of the consequences that have resulted from the gravest acts of evil committed over limitless millions of lifetimes. Furthermore, after your life ends, you will certainly be reborn in this land.”

This is on how this meditation eliminates the karmic obstacles that have been produced over many lifetimes (kalpas, 劫).⁷ The spiritual life is a pure vessel responding to the Buddha’s own mind, renouncing life in this world and being without any doubt about spiritual rebirth in another world.

With spiritual rebirth, or restoration of the spiritual foundation (āśraya parāvṛtti, 轉依), being a quantum leap to a higher level of awakening, from consciousness (vijñāna, 識) to transcendental knowledge (jñāna, 智).

k. Distinguishing between proper and improper meditation:

On this, the scripture says:

“Observing the buildings this way is said to be a proper meditation on them. Observing them any other way is said to be an incorrect meditation.”

This is distinguishing between proper and improper meditation on these buildings.

Although there are eleven different parts described above, collectively they explain the visualization of the bejeweled buildings.

7. The Scripture's Words About Visualizing the Lotus Seat:

On this, the scripture says:

The Buddha again addressed both Ānanda and Vaidehī, saying:

"Listen carefully to the following words, deliberate on them and remember them well.

I will now teach of a specific method to eliminate suffering and distress. You should ever keep it in mind and broadly teach of its details to those in the great assembly of faith."

When these words were spoken, the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life appeared standing in the emptiness of space attended by the two great Bodhisattvas 'Beholding the Cries of This World' & 'Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength' to the Buddha's left and right respectively. The splendor of light was so magnificent that it was impossible to see it all in detail. The light from the golden sands of a hundred thousand Jambū Rivers could not be compared to it. When Vaidehī saw the Buddha of Infinite Life, she worshiped at Śākyamuni's feet and spoke to him, saying:

"Blessed One: Now, through the power of your grace, I have seen the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life and these two great bodhisattvas. How will ordinary sentient beings in the future be able to see them through the power of this grace after you are gone?"

The Buddha answered Vaidehī, saying:

"Those who aspire to observe this Buddha should mindfully visualize a lotus blossom rising up from the ground composed of the seven treasures. Each petal of this blossom produces hundreds of precious colors that course through its eighty-four thousand veins. It is like a celestial painting, with the eighty-four thousand rays of light from each of its veins being clearly seen and distinguished. The length and width of each petal is at least two hundred fifty yojanas, and the blossom has eighty-four thousand petals of this size or greater. Between each of the petals there are a hundred million royal wish-fulfilling gems that serve as reflecting ornaments. Each of these wish-fulfilling gems emits thousands of rays of light, and these rays serve as canopies composed of the seven treasures, everywhere covering the ground. The pericarp of this blossom serves as a pedestal composed of the Lord Almighty's most auspicious of wish-fulfilling gems. It is gloriously decorated with eighty thousand diamonds, rubies, wish-fulfilling gems of the Creator and nets composed of strings of beautiful pearls. There are four pillars that arise spontaneously above this pedestal with bejeweled banners, each of them as high as a hundred million Mount Sumerus. Above these banners there are bejeweled canopies like those found in the celestial palace of Yama, the lord over judgment, repentance and atonement, with each of them also having five hundred million sublimely precious gems that gloriously decorate them. Each of these jewels emits eighty-four thousand rays of light and each ray of light in turn creates eighty-four thousand different hues of a golden color. Each of these golden colors pervade the land, here and there being transformed into different auspicious signs such as diamond pedestals, nets of gems and clouds that are composed of various different kinds of blossoms. Everywhere in the ten directions this ground is transformed at will through the accomplishment of the Buddha's work. This seventh meditation is called 'visualizing the lotus seat'.

The Buddha then only addressed Ānanda:

"This visualization of the lotus seat is realized through the power of grace that comes from the original vows made by the Monk 'Treasury of Purpose' (Dharmākara, 法藏). One who aspires to recall this Buddha should first visualize this beautiful lotus seat and meditate on each petal, gem, ray of light, pedestal, pillar and banner, distinguishing each and every one of them, just as one sees the image of one's own face in a mirror. In realizing this visualization, one will eliminate the accumulated consequences of the immoral acts that have been committed along the stream of life and death over five hundred million lifetimes

and there will most certainly be rebirth in the World of Pure Bliss. Observing the lotus seat this way is said to be a proper meditation on it. Observing it any other way is said to be an incorrect meditation.”

佛告阿難及韋提希。諦聽諦聽善思念之。吾當為汝分別解說除苦惱法。汝等憶持。廣為大眾分別解說。說是語時。無量壽佛住立空中。觀世音大勢至。是二大士侍立左右。光明熾盛不可具見。百千閻浮檀金色不得為比。時韋提希見無量壽佛已。接足作禮。白佛言。世尊。我今因佛力故。得見無量壽佛及二菩薩。未來眾生。當云何觀無量壽佛及二菩薩。佛告韋提希。欲觀彼佛者。當起想念。於七寶地上作蓮花想。令其蓮花一一葉作百寶色。有八萬四千脈。猶如天畫一一脈有八萬四千光。了了分明皆令得見。華葉小者縱廣二百五十由旬。如是蓮華有八萬四千大葉。一一葉間。有百億摩尼珠王。以為映飾。一一摩尼珠放千光明。其光如蓋七寶合成。遍覆地上。釋迦毘楞伽摩尼寶以為其臺。此蓮花臺。八萬金剛甄叔迦寶。梵摩尼寶妙真珠網。以為交飾。於其臺上。自然而有四柱寶幢。一一寶幢如百千萬億須彌山。幢上寶縵如夜摩天宮。復有五百億微妙寶珠。以為映飾。一一寶珠有八萬四千光。一一光作八萬四千異種金色。一一金色遍其寶土。處處變化各作異相。或為金剛臺。或作真珠網。或作雜花雲。於十方面隨意變現施作佛事。是為花座想。名第七觀。佛告阿難。如此妙花。是本法藏比丘願力所成。若欲念彼佛者。當先作此妙花座想。作此想時不得雜觀。皆應一一觀之。一一葉。一一珠。一一光。一一臺。一一幢皆令分明。如於鏡中自見面像。此想成者。滅除五百億劫生死之罪。必定當生極樂世界。作是觀者名為正觀。若他觀者名為邪觀。

7. Shāndào's Commentary About Visualizing the Lotus Seat (padma āsana, 蓮花座):

The purpose of this seventh visualization is to reveal the seat of enlightenment where there is a transcendental vision of the noble path (darśana mārga, 見道). This place of enlightenment (bodhi maṇḍa, 道場) is the very peak & axis of this world where the existential nature (svabhāva, 體) of the unafflicted mind is endowed with the simultaneity of seed & fruit (cause & effect, karma & retribution), the conditions that directly cause the arising of consciousness (hetu pratyaya, 因緣) here & now. It is where the Buddha is seated and touches the ground, where the Buddha's transcendental vows are put into practice and the enduring observation of the timeless nature of life's purpose (anupattika dharma kṣānti, 無生法忍) meets this world we must all live in together (saḥa loka, 娑婆世界). It is also where the Buddhas descend into this world and the bodhisattvas rise up from the ground. While the tree of enlightenment (bodhi vṛkṣa, 菩提樹) is where there is cultivation of the noble path (bhāvanā mārga, 修道), with seed & fruit gradually ripening over the duration of time, the lotus seat is where there is the timeless moment of its transcendental vision, with seed & fruit occurring suddenly and immediately. On the meditation of the lotus seat, again first there is an introduction of the subject, then a distinction of its signs and finally a conclusion. There are nineteen parts:

- a. Directing them to listen well to the impending teaching
- b. Encouraging propagation of this teaching
- c. Visualizing the master of spiritual transformation in this world we must all endure together
- d. Vaidehī's effeminate nature was common and tainted, and her words were inadequate
- e. She accepted the Buddha's grace with thanks
- f. She requested that others see as she had seen
- g. Generally explaining the upcoming teaching
- h. Teaching the technique of the meditation
- i. The various adornments of the bejeweled blossom
- j. Distinguishing the meaning of the signs in this visualization
- k. The various adornments on the petals
- l. The signs of adornment on the pericarp that serves as a pedestal
- m. The adornments on the flagpoles above the pedestal
- n. The signs of radiance from the gems and their inconceivable virtues and functions
- o. The general conclusion about the name of the visualization
- p. The reason for visualization of the lotus seat
- q. Further revealing the ceremony of this meditation
- r. The conclusion on the signs of realizing this visualization
- s. Distinguishing between proper and improper meditation on it

a. *Directing them to listen well to the impending teaching:*

On this, the scripture says:

The Buddha again addressed both Ānanda and Vaidehī, saying:

“Listen carefully to the following words, deliberate on them and remember them well.

I will now teach of a specific method to eliminate suffering and distress.”

This is on directing them to listen well to the impending teaching. It is in three parts:

1. Addressing the lives of the two kinds of people of faith: the ordained (like Ānanda) and the laity (like Vaidehī)
2. Ordering them to listen, he makes them carefully consider his words and cultivate the practice of proper remembrance, or mindfulness (samyak smṛti, 正念).
3. The Buddha then teaches them about visualization of the lotus seat. Only through it is one able to abide in a condition that mindfully eliminates the sufferings resulting from the commission of immoral acts.

b. *Encouraging propagation of this teaching:*

On this, the scripture says:

“You should ever keep it in mind and broadly teach of its details to those in the great assembly of faith.”

This is encouraging the propagation of this teaching. It is on the essential nature of the meditation’s deep purpose, which is to urgently rescue those sentient beings that are ever drifting along the currents of the six spiritual paths between heaven and hell¹⁶ and sinking into the stream of life and death (saṃsāra srota, 生死流) with unhealthy cravings and confused thoughts. You should embrace this meditation and everywhere encourage its cultivation. Through its universal realization everyone understands what they hear and similarly aspires to attain spiritual emancipation.

c. *Visualizing the master of spiritual transformation (nirmāṭṛ, 化主) in this world that we all endure together (sahā loka, 娑婆世界):*

On this, the scripture says:

“When these words were spoken, the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛) appeared standing in the emptiness of space attended by the two great Bodhisattvas ‘Beholding the Cries of This World’ (Avalokiteśvara, 觀世音) & ‘Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength’ (Mahā Sthāma Prāpta, 大勢至) to the Buddha’s left and right respectively. The splendor of light was so magnificent that it was impossible to see it all in detail. The light from the golden sands of a hundred thousand Jambū Rivers could not be compared to it.”

To benefit all of us who live in this world we all must endure together (sahā loka, 娑婆世界), the Buddha Śākyamuni, the master of spiritual transformation (nirmāṭṛ, 化主), taught about the visualization of this western land. Because the Blessed One (Amitāyus, 阿彌陀) found in this Land Secure in Contentment (Sukhāvatī, 安樂土) understands our feelings with mercy, there is a mirror-like reflection of the Buddha from the east (Śākyamuni, 釋迦牟尼). Like this, these two blessed ones are committed to responding to the needs of sentient beings no differently. The only real difference is that one is hidden and one is revealed:

* Śākyamuni inspires us to let go of the past; This Buddha is the teacher, urging us to depart from the east (life and death, saṃsāra) through our own efforts. The east is a metaphor for the past.

* Amitāyus welcomes us into the future; This Buddha is the rescuer, beckoning us to enter the west (spiritual freedom, nirvāṇa) through the power of grace beyond our own efforts. The west is a metaphor for the future.

Their differences can be likened to the way the artisans of Yǐng (郢) in the ancient capital of Chǔ (楚) used different tools that complemented each other in the creation of their beautiful works of art.

When these words were spoken: Concerning this, there are seven parts:

1. It was the proper time to address and encourage both the laity and the ordained.
2. The Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀) responded through the power of the voice, revealing that it was the time to realize this spiritual rebirth.
3. This Buddha then stood up⁸² in the emptiness of space and declared:
“With devotion and a mind of proper mindfulness you should vow to be reborn in my nation”. Upon standing up, there was this spiritual rebirth.

On standing up and arising from meditation:⁸²

Question: It is impossible to simply be heedless about the most honored virtues of the Buddhas. Because they remember their original vows and never forsake them, the Buddhas are ever responding with great compassion to the sufferings of sentient beings. However, why do they need to stand up (arise from their meditations). Why can't they just remain seated in meditation when elevating the capacity of sentient beings?

Answer: This clarifies that the enlightened beings who descend into this world have a hidden intent. Only through suffering in the world that we must all endure together (saḥa loka, 娑婆世界) with all its different evils do we similarly reside in the burning house⁴⁸ with its eight signs of suffering.⁵⁹ In just stirring up opposition to these evils, they will only reappear. Feigning friendship with smiles on their faces, the six kinds of emotional disturbance (kleśa, 煩惱)¹ are the enemies of life's noble purpose, ever adapting to conditions in order to deceive us and make us again desire to re-enter into the fires arising from the three evils (of greed, hate and stupidity). If the Buddhas did not get up on their feet to rescue those of us who are lost and confused, we would forever remain imprisoned in the shackles of our own karma. How could we summon the effort needed to overcome these obstacles if they did not leave their meditations and stand up?

4. The appearance of the attendants 'Beholding the Cries of This World' & 'Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength' show no other attendants were needed.
5. The lives (bodies) and hearts (minds) of these three blessed ones are perfectly pure of affliction, and the splendor of their radiance is magnificent and transcendent.
6. If the radiant splendor of grace from the Buddha's spiritual life didn't illuminate all of the ten directions, how could ordinary people tainted with karmic obstacles see it?
7. The Buddha's spiritual life is without affliction (anāsrāva, 無漏) and the radiance of its grace is also like this. How can the divine gold of the afflicted be compared to it?

d. Vaidehī's common feminine nature was tainted, and her words were inadequate:

On this, the scripture says:

When Vaidehī saw the Buddha of Infinite Life, she worshiped at Śākyamuni's feet ...

This is about the nature of Vaidehī, a tainted, ordinary woman of weak capacity whose words were inadequate. Only through the invisible aid of the noble power of grace was the Buddha revealed and accepted with a bowed head. And so, in approaching the Pure Land, there was a rejoicing in something that was not earned through her own merit. Now, therefore, in properly observing the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life, there was the additional benefit of this enduring observation of this nature of life's purpose that neither arose nor perished and transcended her own life (anutpattika dharma kṣānti, 無生法忍).

e. *She accepted the Buddha's grace with thanks:*

On this, the scripture says:

... and spoke to him, saying:

"Blessed One: Now, through the power of your grace, I have seen the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life and these two great bodhisattvas."

This is on the courtesan accepting the Buddha's grace with gratitude. In order to express her remaining doubts, she would produce another question afterwards that reflected her state of mind. With the Buddha now present before her and her also being mindful of seeing the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life and the bodhisattvas, she wanted to know how sentient beings would be able to see this after the Buddha Śākyamuni had passed away from this world?

f. *She requested that others see as she had seen:*

On this, the scripture says:

"How will ordinary sentient beings in the future be able to see them through the power of this grace after you are gone?"

This is on the courtesan making a request that others see what she has seen.

g. *Generally explaining the upcoming teaching:*

On this, the scripture says:

The Buddha answered Vaidehī, saying:

"Those who aspire to observe this Buddha should mindfully visualize ..."

These words generally introduce the upcoming words of instruction.

Question: The courtesan made a request to attain spiritual rebirth. However, doesn't her thanking The One Who Had Descended Into This World for this gift indicate that Vaidehī had not before attained this rebirth?

Answer: The influence of the Buddha's spiritual life descended into this world through the power of grace, teaching about the transcendental nature of life's purpose by adapting to the different capacities of sentient beings. She did not also request a teaching on how to propagate this purpose herself, but what words specifically indicated that she was not prepared to propagate it? Although she did not say she wanted to do so by her words, through her heartfelt connection with this she certainly did propagate the Buddha's purpose.

h. *Teaching the technique of the meditation:*

On this, the scripture says:

"... a lotus blossom rising up from the ground composed of the seven treasures."

This is a teaching on the technique of skillful meditation.

Question: Sentient beings chasing after the speculations of their imaginations (vikalpa, 分別) are forever toiling in the blindness of ignorance. With their eyes everywhere facing the darkness as they wander about at night, how can they possibly see this pure object (of meditation) that is so far off in the distance?

Answer: It is impossible for sentient beings to do so when they are wearily toiling in the confusion of obstacles that stir up their minds. Only by looking up and relying on the power of the Buddha's grace will they be able to truly perceive everything that they are looking at. How can they make this object remain in their minds so that they can truly see it? Aspiring to realize it, practitioners should first place an image of a Buddha before themselves, confessing and exposing their moral failings and repenting with a sincere mind. Bearing great shame and remorse, they should weep with the utmost

grief. Having repented, they should further request help from the Buddha Śākyamuni and the Buddhas of the ten directions that are as numerous as the grains of sand along the River Ganges and recall the original vow of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛) by saying:

“As your disciple I have been blind. My moral failings have been most serious and the obstacles separating me from you are very deep. I pray for the Buddha’s mercy and compassion; please accept me, protect me and keep me in mind. Show me the way to awaken to this object of meditation and attain its realization. If I should now suddenly lose my life or my livelihood, I will look up to and take refuge in the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life. Whether or not I will see this meditation all depends on the power of the Buddha’s grace.”

Having made these words and again confessed with sincerity of mind, they should find a quiet place and face westward, sitting upright with their legs locked in the lotus position as before. With their minds remaining on the object of meditation, they should slowly turn their thoughts towards visualizing the different colors of this bejeweled ground. If at first this visualization is not attained, it is because there are still disordered thoughts in their minds imagining many different objects, making it difficult for them to attain the necessary resolve of meditation. They should then first try to observe just a square inch or a square foot of this ground. They may need to do this for one day, two days, three days, a week, a month, a year, or even two or three years. Whether it is day or night, and whether they are walking, standing, sitting or lying down, their thoughts, words and deeds should always be endowed with this mental resolve of meditation (samādhi, 三昧). This resolve of meditation is only easy to attain when they have renounced everything else, like those who are deaf, blind and dumb or those who have lost interest in the things of this world. If this is not so, their thoughts, words and deeds will continue to follow and chase after the conditions before them and the resolve of the visualization will be lost in the ripples of emotion. In this case, the eye of purpose⁷³ will not open up even if they should live for another thousand years. When they do begin to realize this resolve of meditation, some will first see the signs of its illumination while others will first see the various distinctions of the bejeweled ground that are inconceivable. There are two kinds of visualization:

1. *In deliberation on the visualization* (cintana, 想見), there is a consciousness of both the subjective knower and the known object. In this case, although one sees the pure object, there is not yet a clear distinction of it.
2. *In true penetration of it* (samāpatti, 正受) *through the resolve of meditation* (samādhi, 三昧), there is transcendence of this duality between the inner and outer aspects of consciousness. This pure vision of the object beyond any mental image (nirnimitta, 無相) cannot be compared to mere deliberation on the visualization.

i. The various adornments of the bejeweled blossom:

On this, the scripture says:

“Each petal of this blossom produces hundreds of precious colors that course through its eighty-four thousand veins. It is like a celestial painting, with the eighty-four thousand rays of light from each of its veins ...”

This is on the bejeweled blossoms being endowed with various adornments, in three parts:

1. Each petal is endowed with a host of precious colors (*of light*).
2. Each petal has a host of precious veins (*of life*).
3. Each vein has a host of radiant colors (*with life and light being combined together*).

This makes the practitioner's mind abide in each of the visualizations, and makes the mind's eye be able to see them completely. Having seen the blossom's petals:

- * Next one visualizes the host of jewels between the petals
- * Next one visualizes the radiance arising from the jewels, with the rays of light becoming bejeweled canopies.
- * Next one visualizes the blossom's pericarp that serves as the pedestal for this lotus seat. Upon it, there are hosts of jewels, networks of gems,⁹⁶ etc.
- * Next one visualizes the four pillars rising above this pedestal with bejeweled banners.
- * Next one visualizes the bejeweled gems and their radiant splendor of many colors that fills the sky above the banners, with each of them manifesting different signs.

Like this, one makes a sequence of visualizations. With the mind abiding in each one, they are never forgotten. Not long after this, one will attain a perfect resolve of meditation. Having attained it, one will penetrate and understand the meaning of all these adornments.

j. Distinguishing the meaning of the signs in this visualization:

On this, the scripture says:

"... being clearly seen and distinguished"

This refers to distinguishing the meaning of these signs of the meditation.

k. The various adornments of the different petals:

On this, the scripture says:

"The length & width of each petal is at least two hundred fifty yojanas, and the blossom has eighty-four thousand petals of this size or greater. Between each of the petals there are a hundred million royal wish-fulfilling gems that serve as reflecting ornaments. Each of these wish-fulfilling gems emits thousands of rays of light, and these rays serve as canopies composed of the seven treasures, everywhere covering the ground."

This is on the various petals having different kinds of adornments. It is in six parts:

1. The size of the petals (250 yojanas long and wide)⁷⁹
2. The quantity of petals (84,000)⁵⁰
3. The number of wish-fulfilling gems¹⁴ reflected between the petals
4. The wish-fulfilling gems emit thousands of rays of light
5. The light from each of these different gems¹² is transformed into bejeweled canopies.¹⁵
6. The canopies illuminate the sky above and cover the bejeweled ground below.

l. The signs of adornment on the pericarp that serves as a pedestal:

On this, the scripture says:

"The pericarp of this blossom serves as a pedestal composed of the Lord Almighty's most auspicious of wish-fulfilling gems. It is gloriously decorated with eighty thousand diamonds, rubies, wish-fulfilling gems of the creator and nets composed of strings of beautiful pearls."

These are the adornments on the pericarp (padma karṇika, 蓮果) that serves as a bejeweled pedestal (ratnamaya kūṭāgāra, 寶臺) for the lotus seat.

m. The adornments of the banners above the pedestal:

On this, the scripture says:

"There are four pillars that arise spontaneously above this pedestal with bejeweled banners, each of them as high as a hundred million Mount Sumerus. Above these banners there are bejeweled canopies like those found in the celestial palace of Yama,

the lord over judgment, repentance and atonement, with each of them also having five hundred million sublimely precious gems that gloriously decorate them."

This is on the adornments above the pillars with bejeweled banners, in four parts:

1. Above the pedestal there are four pillars (projections of the Buddha's spiritual life) with bejeweled banners (fulfillments of purpose).¹⁵
2. The size of the banners
3. Above the banners there are bejeweled canopies (providing the penumbras of identity) shaped like divine palaces (of meditation).⁷⁸
4. Above the banners there is a host of precious gems with a sparkling radiance that reflects on and decorates them.

n. The signs of radiance from these gems and their inconceivable virtues and functions:

On this, the scripture says:

"Each of these jewels emits eighty-four thousand rays of light and each ray of light in turn creates eighty-four thousand different hues of a golden color. Each of these golden colors pervades the land, here and there being transformed into different auspicious signs such as diamond pedestals, networks of precious gems and clouds that are composed of various different kinds of blossoms. Everywhere in the ten directions this ground is transformed at will through the accomplishment of the Buddha's work."

This is on the radiance of the precious gems and the signs of their inconceivable virtues and functions. There are five parts:

1. Each gem has many (84,000)⁵⁰ rays of light
2. Each ray of light produces a different color
3. Each color and ray of light everywhere pervades the bejeweled land.
4. Each ray of light that reaches this place creates a different kind of adornment.
5. Some create golden pedestals, some networks of gems,⁹⁶ some clouds of blossoms and some precious music that everywhere fills the ten directions.

o. The general conclusion about the name of the visualization:

On this, the scripture says:

"This seventh meditation is called 'visualizing the lotus seat'."

This is a general conclusion about the meditation's name.

p. The reason for attainment of the lotus seat:

On this, the scripture says:

The Buddha then only addressed Ānanda:

"This visualization of the lotus seat is realized through the power of grace that comes from the original vows made by the monk 'Treasury of Purpose' (Dharmākara, 法藏)."

This is on the reason for attaining a visualization of the lotus seat.

Here only Ānanda is addressed.⁷⁴

q. Further revealing the ceremony of this meditation:

On this, the scripture says:

"One who aspires to recall this Buddha should first visualize this beautiful lotus seat and meditate on each petal, gem, ray of light, pedestal, pillar and banner, distinguishing each and every one of them, just as one sees the image of one's own face in a mirror."

This further reveals the majesty of the meditation. Like before, the mind abides in a sequence of visualizations that do not become mixed up or disordered.

r. *The conclusion on the signs of realizing this visualization:*

On this, the scripture says:

“In realizing this visualization, one will eliminate the accumulated consequences of the immoral acts that have been committed along the stream of life and death over five hundred million lifetimes and there will most certainly be rebirth in the World of Pure Bliss.”

This is the conclusion on accomplishing this meditation. There are two parts on this:

1. There is the benefit of eliminating the karmic consequences that have arisen from the commission of immoral acts.
2. There is the benefit of attaining spiritual rebirth in the Land of Pure Bliss, (the first level of grounding in joyfulness about the transcendental nature of life’s greater purpose, also called ‘an enduring observation of the nature of life’s purpose that neither arises nor perishes and transcends one’s own life’ (anutpattika dharma kṣānti, 無生法忍).

s. *Distinguishing between proper and improper meditation on it:*

On this, the scripture says:

“Observing the lotus seat this way is said to be a proper meditation on it. Observing it any other way is said to be an incorrect meditation.”

This is on distinguishing between its proper and improper meditation. And so:

- * The lotus blossom depends upon the bejeweled ground.
- * In between its petals there are rare treasures.
- * The luster from the four banners (realizations of the four transcendental kinds of knowledge - catvāri jñānāni 四智)¹⁵ above the pedestal issues a radiance that reveals the Buddha’s work.

Although there are nineteen different parts described above, collectively they explain the visualization of the lotus seat.

8. The Scripture's Words About Visualizing an Image of the Buddha:

The Buddha then again addressed both Ānanda and Vaidehī:

"Having seen this lotus seat, one next visualizes an image of the Buddha. Why is this so?

The grace of the spiritual lives of the enlightened beings that have descended into this world enters into the hearts and minds of sentient beings through the transcendental sphere of life's purpose. Because of this, when you visualize an image of the Buddha, there will be the appearance of the thirty-two auspicious signs and eighty excellent refinements that are found in the greatness of humanity. With the mind assuming the form of enlightenment, there is an awakening to the mind of enlightenment, and so the Buddha's ocean of omniscience arises through these visualizations of the mind. As a consequence, one should wholeheartedly focus one's mind on and carefully visualize:

'The Enlightened Being',

'The One Who Has Descended Into This World',

'The One Who Is Truly Worthy' &

'The One Who Is Truly Omniscient'.

One begins by reflecting on an image of the Buddha. Whether one's eyes are open or shut, each precious image of the Buddha enthroned upon a lotus seat is the color of the golden sands in the Jambū River. Having already acquired this image of the seated Buddha, the mind's eye opens up and one clearly and distinctly sees the Land of Pure Bliss, its ground adorned with the seven treasures, its rows of trees draped with silken shrouds and its sky filled with a host of bejeweled silken nets. Upon visualizing these things, they become as clear as if they were in the palm of one's hand. Having seen them, one should further visualize a great lotus blossom rising up to the left of the Buddha. It is just like the one described before, no different. One then sees another great lotus blossom just like it arising to the Buddha's right. Next, one visualizes an image of the Bodhisattva 'Beholding the Cries of This World' on the lotus seat to the Buddha's left, emitting a golden radiance that is the same as the one described before. Then one visualizes an image of the Bodhisattva 'Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength' on the lotus seat to the Buddha's right. Having made these visualizations, all the images of the Buddha and the bodhisattvas everywhere emit a beautiful radiance. This light is a golden color that shines upon the bejeweled trees. Below each tree there are another three lotus blossoms, and upon each of them there are similar images of the Buddha and the two bodhisattvas, with their light everywhere flooding the land. When these visualizations have been made, the practitioner will hear the flow of the fresh waters and see the radiance of the light shining on the bejeweled trees, with mallards, geese and pairs of perching ducks all proclaiming the sublimely true nature of life's purpose. Whether entering or exiting this meditation, one will always hear these teachings about it. Having heard them, upon leaving the meditation, the practitioner will forever remember them and keep them in mind, never forgetting them. They will also combine this meditation with recitation of the scripture and deliberation on its meaning.

* If the meditation is inconsistent with the scripture, it is said to be a false visualization.

* If it is consistent, it is said to be a rough vision of the Land of Pure Bliss.

This eighth meditation is called 'visualizing a reflected image of the Buddha'. Those who make this meditation eliminate the consequences resulting from the immoral acts they have committed along the stream of life and death over countless millions of lifetimes. Because this apparent manifestation reveals the grace that descends from the spiritual life of the Buddha, it is called 'the resolve of meditation attained through recalling the enlightened being'. Observing it this way is said to be a proper meditation on it.

Observing it any other way is said to be an incorrect meditation."

佛告阿難及韋提希。見此事已。次當想佛。所以者何。諸佛如來是法界身。遍入一切眾生心想中。是故汝等心想佛時。是心即是三十二相八十隨形好。是心作佛是心是佛。諸佛正遍知海從心想生。是故應當一心繫念諦觀彼佛多陀阿伽度阿羅呵三藐三佛陀。想彼佛者。先當想像。閉目開目見一寶像如閻浮檀金色坐彼華上。像既坐已。心眼得開。了了分明。見極樂國七寶莊嚴寶地寶池寶樹行列。諸天寶縵彌覆樹上。眾寶羅網滿虛空中。見如此事極令明了如觀掌中。見此事已。復當更作一大蓮華在佛左邊。如前蓮華等無有異。復作一大蓮華在佛右邊。想一觀世音菩薩像坐左華座。亦放金光如前無異。想一大勢至菩薩像坐右華座。此想成時。佛菩薩像皆放妙光。其光金色照諸寶樹。一一樹下亦有三蓮華。諸蓮華上各有一佛二菩薩像。遍滿彼國。此想成時。行者當聞水流光明及諸寶樹鳧鴈鴛鴦皆說妙法。出定入定恒聞妙法。行者所聞。出定之時憶持不捨。令與修多羅合。若不合者名為妄想。若與合者。名為羸想見極樂世界。是為想像。名第八觀。作是觀者。除無量億劫生死之罪。於現身中得念佛三昧。作是觀者名為正觀。若他觀者名為邪觀。

8. Shāndào's Commentary About Visualizing an Image of the Buddha

(buddha bimba, 佛想像):

The purpose of this eighth visualization is to reveal an apparent manifestation of the Buddha's spiritual life that has a transformative influence (nirmāṇa kāya, 變化身), a reflection of the grace that descends from the Buddha's spiritual life (sambhoga kāya, 報身). This is an 'apparent' or 'mind-made' manifestation of the spiritual life (mano maya kāya, 意成身 or 意生身) that arises through the resolve of meditation. It entails distinguishing and beholding an object of worship as a mental image (nimitta, 相). It really only consists of the virtual nature of consciousness (vijñapti matratā, 唯識), as it reflects one's own needs and desires as well as the speculations of one's own imagination (vikalpa, 分別).

In the visualization of the Buddha's reflected image, again first there is an introduction of the subject, then a distinction of its signs and finally a conclusion. There are thirteen parts:

- a. At the conclusion of the visualization of the lotus seat there is this one of the Buddha's image.
- b. The great mercy (mahā maitri, 大慈) of the Buddhas responds to the hearts and minds of sentient beings
- c. Encouraging sentient beings by revealing the benefits to be attained through this visualization
- d. The benefits attained from focusing the mind and abiding in the previous visualization of the lotus seat
- e. Beginning this visualization
- f. Distinguishing its signs
- g. The conclusion about visualizing this reflected image of the Buddha
- h. Visualizing the three-fold image of the Buddha
- i. Visualizing the division and multiplication of this three-fold image of the Buddha
- j. Because of this visualization, one will see all the adornments found in the Land of Pure Bliss
- k. Distinguishing between its proper and improper meditation
- l. The general conclusion
- m. The revealed and hidden benefits from being able to mindfully cultivate this meditation

a. *At the conclusion of the visualization of the lotus seat there is this one of the Buddha's image:*

On this, the scripture says:

The Buddha then again addressed both Ānanda and Vaidehī:

"Having seen this lotus seat, one next visualizes an image of the Buddha. Why is this so?"

The conclusion of the previous visualization of the lotus seat naturally leads to this one on a reflected image of the Buddha.

Why is this so?: This is on why it was now necessary to visualize an image of the Buddha.

b. *The great mercy of the Buddhas that responds to the hearts and minds of sentient beings:*

On this, the scripture says:

“The grace of the spiritual lives of the enlightened beings that have descended into this world enters into the hearts and minds of sentient beings through the transcendental sphere of life’s purpose.”

This is on the great mercy (mahā maitri, 大慈) of the Buddhas that responds to your mind through revealing themselves in it. Because they offer such excellent benefits, I encourage you to visualize them.

Question: Vaidehī’s request before only indicated her wish to see the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛). Having not yet seen this Buddha, The One Who Had Descended Into This World (Śākyamuni) now brought up seeing all of the Buddhas generally. Why is this?

Answer: The Buddha desired to reveal that the nature of the three-fold spiritual life (tri kāya, 三身) is similarly realized by all enlightened beings that descend into this world (tathāgatas, 諸如來). The fruits attained through their compassion (karuṇa, 悲) and transcendental knowledge of purpose (jñāna, 智) are the same, perfectly equal to each other and without any difference. In sitting with an erect posture and reflecting on the manifestation of a Buddha who is not physically there, one resolves to connect with this Buddha in a place and time of our conditional world (here and now) and so approach the transcendental sphere of purpose (dharma dhātu, 法界) that is timeless. There are three ways to understand the nature of the Buddha’s spiritual life that is found in this timeless sphere of purpose:

1. Its mind is everywhere.
2. Its body is everywhere.
3. There are no obstacles or barriers (between the body and the mind).

With the mind being in accordance with the body and the body being in accordance with the mind, there is a realization of this spiritual life of the Buddha that is found in the timeless sphere of life’s purpose.

The transcendental sphere of life’s purpose (dharma dhātu, 法界), also called the spiritual realm, refers here to the lives of sentient beings as the object of spiritual transformation.

The spiritual lives (dharma kāya, 法身), also called ‘lives of purpose’, refers to those able to transform these sentient beings. It is a reference to the spiritual lives of the Buddhas.

Entering into the hearts and minds of sentient beings: Because sentient beings inspire thoughts and wishes to see the Buddhas, the Buddhas recognize them. Through the Buddhas’ unhindered powers of interpretation⁶⁴ they are able to enter into their hearts and minds and be revealed to them. The meaning of this is only realized by those who are able to see the Buddha in their thoughts, recollections, dreams or meditations.

c. *Encouraging sentient beings by revealing the benefits attained through this visualization:*

On this, the scripture says:

“Because of this, when you visualize an image of the Buddha, there will be the appearance of the thirty-two auspicious signs and eighty excellent refinements that are found in the greatness of humanity. With the mind assuming the form of enlightenment, there is an awakening to the mind of enlightenment, and so the Buddha’s ocean of true omniscience arises through these visualizations of the mind.”

This is the conclusion about encouraging them by revealing the benefits to be attained through this visualization. It is a reference to creating an understanding of the real nature of the enlightened being through the making of a visualization.

The thirty-two auspicious signs (dvātriṃśan mahā puruṣa lakṣaṇāni, 三十二相) found in the greatness of humanity (mahā puruṣa, 大人):⁵¹ From the crown of the head to the soles of the feet, one visualizes the Buddha without any interruption, making each of these visualizations without a moment's rest. First, there is a visualization of the crown of the head,⁸⁷ then the white whorl of hair between the brows⁸⁵ and ultimately the sign of the thousand-spoked wheel on the soles of the feet.⁸⁷ When making these visualizations, the image of the Buddha is endowed with all of these auspicious signs and excellent refinements and they are clearly revealed in all of their awesome majesty. Because the mind connects with each one of these signs, they are each revealed. If the mind did not connect with them, it would be impossible to see them. Only through visualizing them with one's mind will they respond and become visible. Because of this, the scripture says "your mind assumes the forms of the thirty-two auspicious signs ..."

The eighty excellent refinements (aśīty anuvyañjanāni, 八十種好):⁵¹ Having already revealed the Buddha's thirty-two auspicious signs, the host of excellent refinements follow accordingly. This is the teaching about the complete visualization of and meditation on an enlightened being who has descended into this world (tathāgata, 如來).

With the mind assuming the form of enlightenment: Only through depending on one's own mind of faith is there a connection with the Buddha and the creation of these thirty-two auspicious signs and eighty excellent refinements.

There is an awakening to the mind of enlightenment (是心是佛): The mind able to visualize the Buddha depends on these physical visualizations to reveal it. This is enlightenment being beheld in the mind, as there is no Buddha apart from this one found in the mind.

The Buddha's ocean of omniscience: This refers to the perfectly full, unhindered and unhesitating knowledge (anāvāraṇa jñāna, 無障礙智) that is realized by the Buddhas. Whether premeditated or not, it is always able to understand the hearts and minds of all sentient beings everywhere in the transcendental sphere of life's purpose (dharma dhātu, 法界). You only have to be able to make this visualization and from your mind's imagination it will be revealed, just as if the Buddha was still in this world. There are some who interpret this to refer to a meditation on the spiritual life (dharma kāya, 法身) that is only the virtual nature of consciousness (vijñapti mātratā, 唯識),⁸³ a meditation on its existential nature (svabhāva, 自性)⁸³ or the pure embryonic nature of enlightenment (buddhatā, 佛性 or tathāgata garbha, 藏).⁸³ These speculative ideas about it are complex and ultimately do not really bear any resemblance to its real significance.

We have spoken of the visualization of an image of the Buddha being a mental construct in the form of the thirty-two auspicious signs.⁵¹ How can the Buddha's spiritual life (dharma kāya, 法身) in the transcendental sphere of purpose (dharma dhātu, 法界) have such signs that can be connected with or physically beheld? In reality, the spiritual life is beyond form and beyond anything that can be seen before our eyes, and further there is no way it can be divided up into parts. For this reason, empty space is used to illustrate its essential nature. And so this method of visualization only indicates a place for it to be found and establishes mental images (nimitta, 相) for it in order for the mind to behold it and focus on it as an object. It generally does not clarify that which is beyond any such mental images (nirnimitta, 無相) or beyond any object of mindfulness. The One Who Descended Into This World foresaw that in a distant age there would be ordinary people whose minds would be corrupted with immorality and unable to focus their minds on any image of an enlightened being, much less grasp the ultimate reality beyond such an image. They would be like people without any magical skills who tried to build palaces in the sky and live in them.

d. *The benefits from focusing the mind and abiding in this visualization:*

On this, the scripture says:

“As a consequence, one should wholeheartedly focus one’s mind on and carefully visualize:

‘The Enlightened Being’ (Buddha, 佛),

‘The One Who Has Descended Into This World’ (Tathāgata, 多陀阿伽度),

‘The One Who Is Truly Worthy’ (Arhat, 阿羅呵) &

‘The One Who Is Truly Omniscient’ (Samyak Sambuddha, 三藐三佛陀).”

This is, as before, on the benefits attained from focusing the mind and abiding in this visualization. Turning these mental images over in the mind provides encouragement and instructs one in this meditation on the Buddha.

e. *Beginning this visualization:*

On this, the scripture says:

“One begins by reflecting on an image of the Buddha.”

The conclusion of the last meditation (on the lotus seat) naturally leads to this meditation (on the Buddha’s image).

One should first reflect on an image: This refers to the object of meditation being observed here.

f. *Distinguishing its signs:*

On this, the scripture says:

“Whether one’s eyes are open or shut, each precious image of the Buddha enthroned upon a lotus seat is the color of the golden sands in the Jambū River. Having already acquired this image of the seated Buddha, the mind’s eye opens up and one clearly and distinctly sees the Land of Pure Bliss, its ground adorned with the seven treasures, its rows of trees draped with silken shrouds and its sky filled with a host of bejeweled silken nets. Upon visualizing these things, they become as clear as if they were in the palm of one’s hand.”

This is on distinguishing the signs of accomplishing this visualization. There are four parts:

1. Whether one is seated, standing, walking or lying down, and whether one’s eyes are open or shut, one sees a golden image of the Buddha as if it were before one’s very eyes so that one can always visualize it.
2. To observe this image, first there must be a place where it is seated.⁸² Therefore one first visualizes the lotus seat and then an image of the Buddha enthroned upon it.
3. Having visualized and discerned this seated image, the mind’s eye opens up.
4. When the mind’s eye opens up, one sees a golden image of the Buddha, the Land of Pure Bliss with its many adornments and the sky above the ground. Everywhere this vision is clear and unobstructed.

Again, the method for abiding in meditation on the image is the same as taught before. Beginning at the crown of the head, one visualizes each sign, including the whorl of hair between the brows, the eyes, the nose, the mouth, the ears, the throat, the nape, the shoulders, the arms, the hands and the ten fingers. Next the mind’s attention is drawn towards visualizing the chest, the abdomen, the navel, the genitals, the thighs, the knees, the shins, the feet, the ten toes and the sign of the thousand-spoked wheel on the soles of the feet. In each of these visualizations, observing the signs from top to bottom is called meditation in the proper order while observing the signs from the bottom to the top is called

meditation in the reverse order. If one can abide in this meditation in both the proper and reverse orders like this, before long one will be certain of success in mastering it. Because of this, it is necessary to meditate on the Buddha's body, the lotus seat and the bejeweled ground, and penetrate them all in both sequential orders. In fact, of the first thirteen meditations on the virtues of meditative resolve, these three (those on the bejeweled ground, the lotus seat and the golden image of the Buddha's body) are the most important to master. If one desires to instruct people in these meditations, this visualization of the image of the Buddha is the best one to start with. In successfully visualizing this one, the rest will be understood spontaneously.

g. The conclusion about visualizing this reflected image of the Buddha:

On this, the scripture says:

"Having seen them, ..."

This is the conclusion on realizing the above visualization of a reflected image of the Buddha's spiritual life. Visualization of the two bodhisattvas follows afterwards.

h. Visualizing the three-fold image of the Buddha:

On this, the scripture says:

"... one should further visualize a great lotus blossom rising up to the left of the Buddha. It is just like the one described before, no different. One then sees another great lotus blossom just like it arising to the Buddha's right. Next, one visualizes an image of the Bodhisattva 'Beholding the Cries of This World' (Avalokiteśvara, 觀世音) on the lotus seat to the Buddha's left, emitting a golden radiance that is the same as the one described before. Then one visualizes an image of the Bodhisattva 'Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength' (Mahā Sthāma Prāpta, 大勢至) on the lotus seat to the Buddha's right."

This is visualizing a three-fold image of the Buddha's spiritual life that subsequently leads to meditations on the division and multiplication of this spiritual life (kāya vibhakti, 分身).⁸⁴ Those who wish to meditate on these two bodhisattvas use the same method as that used in observing the Buddha.

i. Visualizing the division and multiplication of this three-fold image of the Buddha:

On this, the scripture says:

"Having made these visualizations, all the images of the Buddha and the bodhisattvas everywhere emit a beautiful radiance. This light is a golden color that shines upon the bejeweled trees. Below each tree there are another three lotus blossoms, and upon each of them there are similar images of the Buddha and the two bodhisattvas, with their light everywhere flooding the land."

This is the conclusion on visualizing the division and multiplication of the spiritual life described before, which produces subsequent images that teach about the transcendental nature of life's purpose. Whether the practitioners are walking, standing, sitting or lying down, they are always connected with this land and all of its bejeweled trees, buildings, blossoms and pools, etc. Whether worshiping through mindful recollection or visualizing through meditation, they always make this same understanding.

j. Because of this meditation, one will see all the adornments found in the Land of Pure Bliss:

On this, the scripture says:

“When these visualizations have been made, the practitioner will hear the flow of the fresh waters and see the radiance of the light shining on the bejeweled trees, with mallards, geese and pairs of perching ducks all proclaiming the sublimely true nature of life’s purpose. Whether entering or exiting this meditation, one will always hear these teachings about it. Having heard them, upon leaving the meditation the practitioner will forever remember them and keep them in mind, never forgetting them.”

This is on the resolve of meditation causing one to see all the adornments in the Land of Pure Bliss. In revealing them, all of these adornments are also able to teach about the sublime nature of life’s purpose. Having seen and heard all of this, practitioners (yogins, 行者) must always keep it all in mind and never forget it. This is called ‘maintaining the mind’s resolve of meditation’.

k. Distinguishing between its proper and improper meditation:

This scripture says:

“They will also combine this meditation with recitation of the scripture (sūtra, 脩多羅) and deliberation on its meaning.

* **If the meditation is inconsistent with the scripture, it is said to be a false visualization.**

* **If it is consistent, it is said to be a rough vision of the Land of Pure Bliss.”**

This is on distinguishing between proper and improper meditation.

l. The general conclusion:

On this, the scripture says:

“This eighth meditation is called ‘visualizing a reflected image of the Buddha’.”

This is the general conclusion.

m. The revealed and hidden benefits from being able to mindfully cultivate this meditation:

On this, the scripture says:

“Those who make this meditation eliminate the consequences resulting from the immoral acts they have committed along the stream of life and death over countless millions of lifetimes. Because this apparent manifestation (nirmāṇa kāya, 變化身) reveals the grace that descends from the spiritual life of the Buddha, it is called ‘the resolve of meditation that is attained through recalling the enlightened being’ (buddha anusmṛti samādhi, 念佛三昧). Observing it this way is said to be a proper meditation on it. Observing it any other way is said to be an incorrect meditation.”

This is on being mindful of both the revealed and the concealed benefits that come from cultivating this meditation. For those in the flock of sentient beings with heavy karmic obstacles, meditation on the transcendental nature of the spiritual life of the Buddha is very difficult. Through the great compassion of the noble one, one is also able to attain these benefits by focusing one’s mind on the Buddha’s image.

Although there are thirteen different parts described above, collectively they explain a visualization of the Buddha’s reflected image.

9. The Scripture's Words About Visualizing the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life

(Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛):

On this, the scripture says:

The Buddha then again addressed both Ānanda and Vaidehī:

“Having made these visualizations, you should further observe the light and splendor arising in the signs of grace from the spiritual life of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛). Ānanda, you should know that:

- * The body of the Buddha of Infinite Life is a golden color, like the hundreds of billions of particles of gold in the Jambū River that flows through the Heaven of Yama, lord over judgment, repentance and atonement.
- * The Buddha is as many yojanas tall as there are grains of sand along sixty trillion of the River Ganges.
- * In the middle of the Buddha's brow there is a white whorl of hair curling to the right that is the size of five Mount Sumerus.
- * The eyes of the Buddha are clear and the size of the waters in the four great oceans, with the blue irises and the whites of the eyes being clearly distinguished.
- * The pores of the Buddha's skin emit a clear radiance like that of Mount Sumeru.
- * The Buddha's halo of light illuminates a hundred billion-fold worlds. Inside this halo there are as many manifestations of the Buddha's spiritual life as there are grains of sand along hundreds, thousands, millions and billions of the River Ganges. Each of these manifestations of the Buddha's spiritual life also has a host of countless bodhisattvas serving it.

The Enlightened Being of Infinite Life has eighty-four thousand auspicious signs. In each of these, there are eighty-four thousand excellent refinements. In each of these excellent refinements there are in turn eighty-four thousand rays of light. Each of these rays of light shines everywhere in the worlds of the ten directions, embracing and never forsaking all the sentient beings who keep the Buddha in mind. The radiant signs and refinements found in all these manifestations of the Buddha are impossible to completely describe in detail. You should continuously recall this visualization to make your mind clearly see them all. Those who see these things will also see all the Buddhas of the ten directions. Because of this, it is called 'the resolve of meditation attained through recalling and keeping the Buddha in mind'. Making this observation is also called 'visualizing the grace descending from the spiritual lives of all the Buddhas'. By observing this, one also sees their minds. With there being the minds of the Buddhas, so there is the greatness of their mercy and compassion. In being endowed with this unconditional mercy and compassion there is the inclusion and acceptance of all sentient beings. Upon making this observation and renouncing attachment to one's own life in this world of suffering, there will be a spiritual rebirth before the Buddhas in this other world, the transcendental sphere of life's purpose, where there is an enduring meditation on this nature of purpose that neither arises nor perishes and goes beyond one's own life in this world. Because of this, those with wisdom should focus their minds through meditation and deliberation on the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life. Those who have already observed this Buddha of Infinite Life and penetrated each of these auspicious signs and excellent refinements only need to observe the white whorl of hair in the middle of the Buddha's brow to ultimately make them all clearly understood. Upon seeing this one sign, they will spontaneously see all of these eighty-four thousand signs and refinements. And those who visualize this Enlightened Being of Infinite Life will then see all of the countless Buddhas of the ten directions. Because they see all of these countless Buddhas before them, they will have a prophecy of their future enlightenment bestowed upon them. This ninth meditation is also

called ‘visualizing the grace of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life in all of its forms’. Observing it this way is said to be a proper meditation on it. Observing it any other way is said to be an incorrect meditation.”

佛告阿難及韋提希。此想成已。次當更觀無量壽佛身相光明。阿難當知。無量壽佛身。如百千萬億夜摩天閻浮檀金色。佛身高六十萬億那由他恒河沙由旬。眉間白毫右旋宛轉如五須彌山。佛眼清淨如四大海水清白分明。身諸毛孔演出光明如須彌山。彼佛圓光如百億三千大千世界。於圓光中。有百萬億那由他恒河沙化佛。一一化佛。亦有眾多無數化菩薩。以為侍者。無量壽佛有八萬四千相。一一相中。各有八萬四千隨形好。一一好中復有八萬四千光明。一一光明遍照十方世界。念佛眾生攝取不捨。其光相好及與化佛。不可具說。但當憶想令心明見。見此事者。即見十方一切諸佛。以見諸佛故名念佛三昧。作是觀者。名觀一切佛身。以觀佛身故亦見佛心。諸佛心者大慈悲是。以無緣慈攝諸眾生。作此觀者。捨身他世生諸佛前。得無生忍。是故智者應當繫心諦觀無量壽佛。觀無量壽佛者。從一相好入。但觀眉間白毫極令明了。見眉間白毫相者。八萬四千相好自然當見。見無量壽佛者。即見十方無量諸佛。得見無量諸佛故。諸佛現前受記。是為遍觀一切色想。名第九觀。作是觀者名為正觀。若他觀者名為邪觀。

9. Shāndào's Commentary About Visualizing the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life

(Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛):

The purpose of this ninth visualization is to reveal the grace that descends from the Buddha's spiritual life (sambhoga kāya, 報身), the transcendental knowledge that observes the nature of life's greater purpose with sublimely compassionate discernment (praty avekṣana jñāna, 妙觀察智). This grace arises from the Buddha's original vows. Being transcendental, it ultimately goes beyond any mental images (nirnimitta, 無相).

Concerning visualization of the grace of the Buddha's spiritual life, again there is bringing up the subject, a distinction of its signs and then a conclusion. It is in twelve parts:

- a. After the visualization of the Buddha's reflected image, there is one of the grace descending from the Buddha's spiritual life (sambhoga kāya, 報身 or 受用身)
 - b. Revealing the signs of this grace
 - c. The size of this grace
 - d. Generally observing the signs of its adornment
 - e. The connection with benefits through observing the distinct signs of its radiance
 - f. On the observation of a little of it revealing much
 - g. The subtlety of its adornments
 - h. The efficacious visualization of all the Buddhas that is without error
 - i. Renouncing attachment to life in this world and attaining spiritual rebirth in another world
 - j. Further encouragement by revealing the benefits to be attained through cultivating this meditation
 - k. The general conclusion
 - l. On distinguishing between proper and improper meditation on this Buddha
- a. *After the visualization of the Buddha's reflected image, there is one of the grace descending from Buddha's spiritual life:*
On this, the scripture says:
The Buddha then again addressed both Ānanda and Vaidehī:
“Having made these visualizations, you should further observe the light and splendor arising in the signs of grace from the spiritual life of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛).”

This is on addressing the grace that descends from the transcendental spiritual life of the Buddha (sambhoga kāya, 報身). The last visualization of the Buddha's reflected image (nirmāṇa kāya, 化身) naturally leads to this visualization of the Buddha's grace.

b. Revealing the signs of this grace:

On this, the scripture says:

“Ānanda, you should know that:

- * **The body of the Buddha of Infinite Life is a golden color, like the hundreds of billions of particles of gold in the Jambū River that flows through the Heaven of Yama, lord over judgment, repentance & atonement.”**

This is on the revealed signs of grace from the Buddha’s spiritual life that transcend the divine golden colors of heaven.⁸¹

c. The size of this grace:

On this, the scripture says:

- * **The Buddha is as many yojanas tall as there are grains of sand along sixty trillion of the River Ganges.**

This is on the size of the grace emanating from the Buddha’s spiritual life.

d. Generally observing the signs of its adornment:

On this, the scripture says:

- * **In the middle of the Buddha’s brow there is a white whorl of hair curling to the right that is the size of five Mount Sumerus.**
- * **The eyes of the Buddha are clear and the size of the waters in the four great oceans, with the blue irises and the whites of the eyes being clearly distinguished.**
- * **The pores of the Buddha’s skin emit a clear radiance like that of Mount Sumeru.**
- * **The Buddha’s halo of light illuminates a hundred billion-fold worlds. Inside this halo there are as many manifestations of the Buddha’s spiritual life as there are grains of sand along hundreds, thousands, millions and billions of the River Ganges. Each of these manifestations of the Buddha’s spiritual life also has a host of countless bodhisattvas serving it.**

This general visualization of the signs of grace from the Buddha’s spiritual life is in six parts:

1. The size of the whorl of hair between the brows⁸⁵
2. The size of the eyes
3. The amount of radiance emanating from the pores of skin
4. The size of the halo⁸⁶
5. The number of the Buddha’s manifestations
6. The number of the Buddha’s attendants

e. The connection with benefits through observing the distinct signs of its radiance:

On this, the scripture says:

“The Enlightened Being of Infinite Life has eighty-four thousand auspicious signs.

In each of these, there are eighty-four thousand excellent refinements. In each of these excellent refinements there are in turn eighty-four thousand rays of light. Each of these rays of light shines everywhere in the worlds of the ten directions, embracing and never forsaking all the sentient beings who keep the Buddha in mind.”

Upon meditating on and distinguishing the signs of grace from the Buddha’s spiritual life, there are benefits to be attained from this connection with its radiance. This is in five parts:

1. The number of auspicious signs (32)⁵¹
2. The number of excellent refinements (80)⁵¹
3. The number of rays of light (84,000)⁵⁰
4. The reach of the light’s illumination
5. Wherever the radiance reaches, spiritual benefits are received.

Question: In the cultivation of the many different practices of Buddhism, it is only through being able to dedicate the merits one has earned (pariṇāmana, 迴向) that there is the attainment of spiritual rebirth. How can it be said that connecting with the universal illumination of the Buddha's grace only comes through recalling the enlightened being (buddha anusmṛti, 念佛)?

Answer: There are three meanings to this (karmic) connection:

1. *The Intimacy of the Connection* (jñāti nidāna, 親緣): When sentient beings employ this practice:
 - a. With the mouth ever invoking the name of the Buddha, the Buddha will hear them.
 - b. With the body ever worshiping and revering the Buddha, the Buddha will see them.
 - c. With the mind ever remembering the Buddha, the Buddha will know them.With sentient beings remembering and recalling the Buddha, the Buddha also remembers and recalls sentient beings. The inseparability of their thoughts, words and deeds is called the *intimacy* of the connection.
2. *The Approach of the Connection* (samāsanna nidāna, 近緣): When sentient beings wish to see the Buddha, the Buddha called on responds by becoming revealed before their eyes. This is called the *approach* of the connection.
3. *The Prevalence of the Connection* (adhipati nidāna, 增上緣): By invoking and keeping the Buddha in mind, sentient beings eliminate the consequences that have arisen from the immoral actions they have committed over many lifetimes. When their lives come to an end, the Buddha will appear before them with the noble assembly to welcome them into the Land of Pure Bliss and the shackles of bad karma will no longer be a barrier between them. This is called the *prevalence* of the connection.

Although many other practices are said to be beneficial, over all they do not compare with that of recalling and keeping the enlightened being in mind (buddha anusmṛti, 念佛). Because of this, there is widespread praise for the efficacy of this practice in various places throughout the scriptures. For example:

- * In the forty-eight vows found in The Longer Scripture on the Buddha of Infinite Life (Sukhāvatī Vyūha Sūtra, 佛說無量壽經), there is a special focus on recalling the name and title of Amitāyus to attain spiritual rebirth.
- * In The Shorter Scripture on the Buddha of Infinite Life (Amitāyus Sūtra, 阿彌陀經), there is a focus on recalling the name and title of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛) in from one to seven days to attain this rebirth. And, later in this scripture, there is a certification that it is a genuine practice of the Buddhas of the ten directions that are as numerous as the grains of sand found along the River Ganges and that it is without any falsehood.
- * And in the words about mental resolve and mental dispersion in this Scripture on the Meditation of the Buddha of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Dhyāna Sūtra, 佛說觀無量壽佛經), there is special focus on recalling the name and title of the Buddha as the means to attain this rebirth.

These are not the only instances of literary evidence. There are many citations in the scriptures that reveal the efficacy of attaining meditative resolve through recalling the Buddha (buddha anusmṛti samādhi, 念佛三昧).

f. On the observation of a little of it revealing much:

On this, the scripture says:

"The radiant signs and refinements found in all these manifestations of the Buddha are impossible to completely describe in detail."

This is the conclusion on the observation of little revealing much. Those that suddenly desire to observe it will find it difficult to do so completely.

g. The subtlety of its adornments:

On this, the scripture says:

"You should continuously recall this visualization to make your mind clearly see them all."

This is on seeing the subtle adornments that transcend an ordinary object of meditation. Although they are not yet revealed completely before one's eyes, one should keep remembering and recalling them to make the mind's eye eventually be able to see them all.

h. The efficacious visualization of all the Buddhas that is without error:

On this, the scripture says:

"Those who see these things will also see all the Buddhas of the ten directions. Because of this, it is called 'the resolve of meditation attained through recalling and keeping the Buddha in mind'. Making this observation is also called 'visualizing the grace descending from the spiritual lives of all the Buddhas'. By observing this, one also sees their minds. With there being the minds of the Buddhas, so there is the greatness of their mercy and compassion. In being endowed with this unconditional mercy and compassion there is the inclusion and acceptance of all sentient beings."

This is on the benefits to be attained through the efficacious visualization of the Buddhas being without error. There are five parts on this:

1. Because of this visualization, one sees all the Buddhas of the ten directions
2. By seeing these Buddhas one ultimately attains the resolve of meditation (samādhi, 三昧) that comes from keeping the enlightened being in mind (buddha anusmṛti, 念佛).
3. In only observing one Buddha there is a visualization of the grace from the spiritual lives of all the Buddhas.
4. Because one sees the grace descending from the spiritual lives of the Buddhas, one sees the minds of the Buddhas.
5. The essential nature of the Buddha's mind is compassion (karuṇa, 悲) and the mercy of loving kindness (maitrī, 慈). With equanimity of mind (upekṣā, 平等), the greatness of this kindness and compassion is universal, illuminating and including all.

i. Renouncing attachment to life in this world and attaining spiritual rebirth in another world:

On this, the scripture says:

"Upon making this observation and renouncing attachment to one's own life in this world of suffering, there will be a spiritual rebirth before the Buddhas in this other world, the transcendental sphere of life's purpose (dharma dhātu, 法界), where there is an enduring meditation on this nature of purpose that neither arises nor perishes and goes beyond one's own life in this world (anutpattika dharma kṣānti, 無生法忍)."

This is on renouncing attachment to life in this world and so attaining the benefits of spiritual rebirth in another beyond it.

j. Further encouragement by revealing the benefits to be attained through cultivating this meditation:

On this, the scripture says:

“Because of this, those with wisdom should focus their minds through meditation and deliberation on the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛). Those who have already observed this Buddha of Infinite Life and penetrated each of these auspicious signs and excellent refinements only need to observe the white whorl of hair in the middle of the Buddha’s brow to ultimately make them all clearly understood. Upon seeing this one sign, they will spontaneously see all of these eighty-four thousand signs and refinements. And those who visualize this Enlightened Being of Infinite Life will then see all of the countless Buddhas of the ten directions. Because they see all of these countless Buddhas before them, they will have a prophecy of their future enlightenment bestowed upon them.”

This is further encouragement by revealing the benefits to be attained through cultivating this meditation, in five parts:

1. Those who are able cultivate this meditation (‘those with wisdom’).
2. Focusing their minds, they carefully meditate on the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛).
3. The many different signs and excellences are first observed generally. Then, in just meditating on the white whorl of hair between the brows,⁸⁵ the whole host of signs are spontaneously revealed.
4. Having seen the Buddha of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛), one sees all the Buddhas of the ten directions.
5. Having seeing all the Buddhas of the ten directions, one visualizes being bestowed with a prophecy of future enlightenment (vyākaraṇa, 受記).

k. The general conclusion:

On this, the scripture says:

“This ninth meditation is also called ‘visualizing the grace of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life in all of its forms’.”

This is the general conclusion.

l. On distinguishing between proper and improper meditation on this Buddha:

On this, the scripture says:

“Observing it this way is said to be a proper meditation on it. Observing it any other way is said to be an incorrect meditation.”

This is on distinguishing between its proper and improper meditation. And so, if the true shape and measure of the whorl of hair between the brows is as extensive and far-reaching as five Mount Sumerus, the impact from the sound it invokes will adapt to all of the different capacities receiving it and the benefits will radiate out to all of those with consciousness through their contact with it. In harboring a sacred aspiration to devote one’s life to focusing on this visualization without forgetting it, the vehicle of the Buddha’s original vow will spread evenly over the entire Nation of the Pure Land.

Although there are twelve different parts described above, collectively they explain this visualization of the grace of the Buddha’s spiritual life.

10. The Scripture's Words About Visualizing the Bodhisattva 'Beholding the Cries (Prayers) of This World' (Avalokiteśvara, 觀世音菩薩):

The Buddha again addressed both Ānanda and Vaidehī:

"Having clearly and distinctly seen the Buddha of Infinite Life, next you should visualize the Bodhisattva 'Beholding the Cries of This World' (Avalokiteśvara, 觀世音菩薩).

- * This bodhisattva's body is of a burnished golden color and is as many yojanas tall as eighty trillion times the number of grains of sand there are along the River Ganges.
- * The crown of the bodhisattva's head has a fleshy protuberance, surrounded by a halo of light with a radius of a hundred thousand yojanas. Within this halo there are five hundred manifestations of the Buddha's spiritual life that are just like that of the Buddha Śākyamuni. Around each of these manifestations of the Buddha there are those of five hundred bodhisattvas with countless divine beings attending them.
- * Within the radiance of the halo emanating from the bodhisattva's body, there are seen sentient beings from the five spiritual paths that span from heaven to hell, all presenting different forms and signs.
- * On top of the bodhisattva's head there is a crown composed of the Lord Almighty's most beautiful wish-fulfilling gems, over which stands a manifestation of the Buddha that is twenty-five yojanas tall.
- * The face of the Bodhisattva 'Beholding the Cries of This World' is the color of the gold found in the waters of the Jambū River.
- * The whorl of hair in the middle of the bodhisattva's brow is endowed with the colors of the seven treasures, and from it is emitted the splendor of eighty-four thousand different rays of light. Each ray of this light contains countless hundreds of thousands of manifestations of the Buddha's spiritual life, with each of them in turn having countless bodhisattvas in attendance. They all reveal themselves in different forms at will and fill all the spheres of the ten directions.
- * The arms of the bodhisattva are the color of a crimson lotus.
- * There are eighty thousand different kinds of light forming necklaces and bracelets that emit a beautiful splendor and everywhere reflect all of the beautiful adornments of this bodhisattva.
- * The palms of the bodhisattva's hands produce the five hundred million different colors that are found in lotus blossoms.
- * The ten fingers of the bodhisattva are each endowed with eighty-four thousand kinds of prints that are each like a unique stamp. Each of these fingerprints has eighty-four thousand different colors, and each of these colors in turn contains eighty-four thousand different hues of light. The radiance from this light is subtle and delicate, illuminating all things everywhere. With these precious hands, the bodhisattva welcomes and guides sentient beings.
- * When the feet of the bodhisattva are raised, their soles reveal the sign of a thousand spoked wheel on the ground below. These are spontaneously transformed into pedestals that emit five hundred million rays of light. When the feet of the bodhisattva come back down, there are blossoms, diamonds and pearls scattering about everywhere, covering everything.

All the other auspicious signs and excellent refinements of the bodhisattva are the same as those of the Buddha, without any difference. The only sign that is differently blessed is the size of the fleshy protuberance on the very top of the head and its invisible crown.

This tenth meditation is called 'visualizing the true form of the Bodhisattva 'Beholding the Cries of This World'."

The Buddha then just addressed Ānanda:

“Those who desire to see the Bodhisattva ‘Beholding the Cries of This World’ should make this meditation. Those who accomplish it will not encounter any misfortunes, as they will be cleansed of all their karmic obstacles and they will eliminate the consequences from the immoral acts they have committed along the stream of life & death over an immeasurable number of lifetimes. In just hearing the name of this bodhisattva they will attain countless benefits. How many more will there be if they carefully meditate on all of these signs and refinements? Those who desire to meditate on the Bodhisattva ‘Beholding the Cries of This World’ should begin by observing the fleshy protuberance found at the top of the bodhisattva’s head and then observe the divine crown. The host of other signs are then observed in sequential order and clearly distinguished as if they were objects in the palm of one’s hand. Observing it this way is said to be a proper meditation on it. Observing it any other way is said to be an incorrect meditation.”

佛告阿難及韋提希。見無量壽佛了了分明已。次亦應觀觀世音菩薩。此菩薩身長八十億那由他恒河沙由旬。身紫金色。頂有肉髻。頂有圓光。面各百千由旬。其圓光中有五百化佛。如釋迦牟尼。一一化佛。有五百菩薩無量諸天。以為侍者。舉身光中五道眾生。一切色相皆於中現。頂上毘楞伽摩尼妙寶。以為天冠。其天冠中有一立化佛。高二十五由旬。觀世音菩薩面如閻浮檀金色。眉間毫相備七寶色。流出八萬四千種光明。一一光明。有無量無數百千化佛。一一化佛。無數化菩薩以為侍者。變現自在滿十方界。臂如紅蓮花色。有八十億微妙光明。以為瓔珞。其瓔珞中。普現一切諸莊嚴事。手掌作五百億雜蓮華色。手十指端。一一指端有八萬四千畫。猶如印文。一一畫有八萬四千色。一一色有八萬四千光。其光柔軟普照一切。以此寶手接引眾生。舉足時。足下有千幅輪相。自然化成五百億光明臺。下足時。有金剛摩尼花。布散一切莫不彌滿。其餘身相眾好具足。如佛無異。唯頂上肉髻及無見頂相。不及世尊。是為觀觀世音菩薩真實色身想。名第十觀。佛告阿難。若欲觀觀世音菩薩當作是觀。作是觀者不遇諸禍。淨除業障。除無數劫生死之罪。如此菩薩。但聞其名獲無量福。何況諦觀。若有欲觀觀世音菩薩者。當先觀頂上肉髻。次觀天冠。其餘眾相亦次第觀之。悉令明了如觀掌中。作是觀者名為正觀。若他觀者名為邪觀。

10. Shàndǎo’s Commentary About Visualizing the Bodhisattva ‘Beholding the Cries (Prayers) of This World’ (Avalokiteśvara, 觀世音菩薩):

The purpose of this tenth visualization is to reveal the bodhisattva practice that fulfills the Buddha’s grace of compassion (karuṇā, 悲) by hearing and answering the prayers of sentient beings in this world.

This bodhisattva arises to the Buddha’s left (the viewer’s right)

With regards to meditation on the Bodhisattva ‘Beholding the Cries of This World’

(Avalokiteśvara, 觀世音菩薩), there is again first bringing up the subject, then a distinction of its signs and finally a conclusion. There are fifteen parts:

- a. After concluding on the grace of the Buddha’s spiritual life, there is one on the grace of this bodhisattva.
- b. Generally indicating the signs of grace descending from this bodhisattva’s spiritual life
- c. The unique manifestation of the Buddha above the bodhisattva’s divine crown
- d. The color of the bodhisattva’s face is not the same as that of the Buddha
- e. The radiance from the whorl of hair everywhere fills the ten directions
- f. The body is adorned with radiant necklaces and bracelets and the arms are a crimson color
- g. The hands have the functions of loving kindness (giving joy) and compassion (relieving suffering)
- h. The feet have special virtues and functions (traveling through space and time)
- i. The similarities with the Buddha
- j. The uniquely preeminent rank of the great teacher (the Buddha)
- k. The general conclusion
- l. Encouraging its practice so there will be benefits in the future
- m. Encouraging its practice so there will be benefits in both the present and the future
- n. Further revealing the proper use of this meditation and encouraging its wholehearted embrace
- o. On distinguishing between proper and improper meditation on this bodhisattva

- a. *After concluding on the grace descending from the Buddha's spiritual life, there is a meditation on this bodhisattva:*

On this, the scripture says:

The Buddha again addressed both Ānanda and Vaidehī:

"Having clearly and distinctly seen the Buddha of Infinite Life, next you should visualize the Bodhisattva 'Beholding the Cries of This World' (Avalokiteśvara, 觀世音).

This is on visualization of the grace of the Buddha's spiritual life naturally leading to the visualizing of this bodhisattva.

- b. *Generally indicating the signs of grace from this bodhisattva's spiritual life:*

On this, the scripture says:

- * **This bodhisattva's body is of a burnished golden color and is as many yojanas tall as eighty trillion times the number of grains of sand there are along the River Ganges.**
- * **The crown of the bodhisattva's head has a fleshy protuberance, surrounded by a halo of light with a radius of a hundred thousand yojanas. Within this halo there are five hundred manifestations of the Buddha's spiritual life that are just like that of the Buddha Śākyamuni. Around each of these manifestations of the Buddha there are those of five hundred bodhisattvas with countless divine beings attending them.**
- * **Within the radiance of the halo emanating from the bodhisattva's body, there are seen sentient beings from the five spiritual paths that span from heaven to hell, all presenting different forms and signs.**

On generally indicating the signs of the bodhisattva's spiritual life, there are six parts:

1. The size of the bodhisattva's body
2. The color of the body that is not the same as that of the Buddha
3. The fleshy protuberance on the crown of the bodhisattva's head is not the same as that of the Buddha, which is fully opened up.⁸⁷
4. The size of the halo⁸⁶ emanating from the crown of the head⁸⁷
5. The number of the Buddha's manifestations and attendants
6. The radiance of the halo emanating from bodhisattva's body that everywhere reveals sentient beings from the five spiritual paths (the same as the six lower spiritual paths between heaven and hell¹⁶ but not mentioning the giants of ego - pride and jealousy).

- c. *The unique manifestation of the Buddha above the bodhisattva's divine crown:*

On this, the scripture says:

- * **On top of the bodhisattva's head there is a crown composed of the Lord Almighty's most beautiful wish-fulfilling gems (śakra abhi lagna maṇi ratna, 毘楞伽摩尼妙寶), over which stands a manifestation of the Buddha that is twenty-five yojanas tall.**

This is on the unique distinction of having a manifestation of the Buddha above the crown of the bodhisattva's head.⁸⁷

- d. *The color of the bodhisattva's face is not the same as that of the Buddha:*

On this, the scripture says:

- * **The face of the Bodhisattva 'Beholding the Cries of This World' is the color of the gold found in the waters of the Jambū River.**

The colors of this bodhisattva's face and body are both different from that of the Buddha.

- e. *The radiance from the whorl of hair everywhere fills the ten directions and the arms are a crimson color:*

On this, the scripture says:

- * **The whorl of hair in the middle of the bodhisattva's brow is endowed with the colors of the seven treasures, and from it is emitted the splendor of eighty-four thousand different rays of light. Each ray of this light contains countless hundreds of thousands of manifestations of the Buddha's spiritual life, with each of them in turn having countless bodhisattvas in attendance. They all reveal themselves in different forms at will and fill all the spheres of the ten directions.**
- * **The arms of the bodhisattva are the color of a crimson lotus.**

This is on the radiance emanating from the whorl of hair between the bodhisattva's brows that transforms everything in the ten directions. In serving the Buddha of Infinite Life, the color of the bodhisattva's arms is compared to the petals of a crimson lotus. There are five parts on this:

1. The whorl of hair between the bodhisattva's brow emits the hues of the seven treasures.¹⁴
2. The amount of radiance from the whorl of hair between the brows.⁸⁵
3. The number of the Buddha's manifestations and their radiance
4. The number of the Buddha's attendants
5. The manifestations of the Buddha's attendants are revealed to be everywhere in the ten directions.

- f. *The body is adorned with radiant necklaces and bracelets:*

On this, the scripture says:

- * **There are eighty thousand different kinds of light forming necklaces and bracelets that emit a beautiful splendor and everywhere reflect all of the beautiful adornments of this bodhisattva.**

This is on the bodhisattva's wearing necklaces and bracelets⁸⁰ emitting a radiance that is not composed of any jewels.

- g. *The hands have the functions of loving kindness (giving joy) and compassion (relieving suffering):*

On this, the scripture says:

- * **The palms of the bodhisattva's hands produce the five hundred million different colors that are found in lotus blossoms.**
- * **The ten fingers of the bodhisattva are each endowed with eighty-four thousand kinds of prints that are each like a unique stamp. Each of these fingerprints has eighty-four thousand different colors, and each of these colors in turn contains eighty-four thousand different hues of light. The radiance from this light is subtle and delicate, illuminating all things everywhere. With these precious hands, the bodhisattva welcomes and guides sentient beings.**

This is on the bodhisattva's hands⁸⁸ having the functions of mercy and compassion. There are six parts:

1. The hands' palms create the colors of different lotus blossoms
2. Each finger is straight and has 84,000 fingerprints,⁵⁰ each with a unique expression.
3. Each of these fingerprints has 84,000 different colors
4. Each of these colors have 84,000 different hues
5. The light's essence is softness and gentleness and they equally illuminate all things
6. With the precious light of these hands,⁸⁸ the Bodhisattva welcomes and guides all those who connect with them.

h. The feet's special virtues and functions (traveling through space and time):

On this, the scripture says:

- * **When the feet of the bodhisattva are raised, their soles reveal the sign of a thousand-spoked wheel on the ground below. These are spontaneously transformed into pedestals that emit five hundred million rays of light. When the feet of the bodhisattva come back down, there are blossoms, diamonds and pearls scattering about everywhere, covering everything.**

This is on the virtues and functions of the bodhisattva's feet.⁸⁷

i. The similarities with the Buddha:

On this, the scripture says:

"All the other auspicious signs and excellent refinements of the bodhisattva are the same as those of the Buddha, without any difference."

This is on the similarities of the bodhisattva's signs with those of the Buddha.

j. The unique rank of the great teacher (the Buddha):

On this, the scripture says:

"The only sign that is differently blessed is the size of the fleshy protuberance on the very top of the head (uṣṇīṣa śīrṣa, 頂上肉髻) and its invisible crown (anavalokita mūrdhata, 無見頂)."

This sign⁸⁷ serves to distinguish the unique rank of the great teacher (the Buddha). With the fruit from the vow not yet being completely fulfilled, these two signs still have a deficiency, expressing that the bodhisattva is residing on ground that is still imperfect.

k. The general conclusion:

On this, the scripture says:

"This tenth meditation is called 'visualizing the true form of the Bodhisattva 'Beholding the Cries of This World'."

This is the general conclusion on this meditation.

l. Encouraging its practice so there will be benefits in the future:

On this, the scripture says:

The Buddha then just addressed Ānanda:

"Those who desire to see the Bodhisattva 'Beholding the Cries of This World' should make this meditation."

(In only addressing Ānanda), this also is on encouraging propagation of the practice to bring about benefits in the future.⁷⁴

m. Encouraging its practice so there will be benefits in both the present and the future:

On this, the scripture says:

"Those who accomplish it will not encounter any misfortunes, as they will be cleansed of all their karmic obstacles and they will eliminate the consequences from the immoral acts they have committed along the stream of life and death over an immeasurable number of lifetimes. In just hearing the name of this bodhisattva they will attain countless benefits. How many more will there be if they carefully meditate on all of these signs and refinements?"

This is on encouraging one to attain the benefits of this meditation now and for the future.

- n. *Further revealing the proper use of this meditation and encouraging its wholehearted embrace:*

On this, the scripture says:

The Buddha then just addressed Ānanda:

“Those who desire to meditate on the Bodhisattva ‘Beholding the Cries of This World’ should begin by observing the fleshy protuberance found at the top of the bodhisattva’s head and then observe the divine crown. The host of other signs are then observed in sequential order and clearly distinguished as if they were objects in the palm of one’s hand.”

This further reveals the proper use of the meditation (in one’s own practice) while also encouraging (others in) its wholehearted embrace. This way, there is the attainment of two kinds of benefits.

- o. *On distinguishing between proper and improper meditation on this bodhisattva:*

On this, the scripture says:

“Observing it this way is said to be a proper meditation on it. Observing it any other way is said to be an incorrect meditation.”

This is on distinguishing between proper and improper meditation on this bodhisattva.

The Buddha’s vow is further reflected and revealed in the ten directions by the Bodhisattva ‘Beholding the Cries of This World’, whose precious hands serve sentient beings by revealing the radiance of the Buddha, guiding and welcoming sentient beings while adapting to their different capacities.

Although there are fifteen different parts above, collectively they explain the visualization of the Bodhisattva ‘Beholding the Cries of This World’.

11. The Scripture’s Words About Visualizing the Bodhisattva ‘Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength’ (Mahā Sthāma Prāpta, 大勢至菩薩):

The Buddha addressed Ānanda and Vaidehī:

“Next you should visualize the Bodhisattva ‘Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength’ (Mahā Sthāma Prāpta, 大勢至菩薩).

- * The measurements of this bodhisattva’s body are the same as those of the Bodhisattva ‘Beholding the Cries of This World’.
- * The halo of light has a radius of two hundred twenty-five yojanas and then shines for another two hundred fifty yojanas beyond this.
- * The light emanating from the bodhisattva’s body illuminates the lands of the ten directions, making them a burnished golden color. All sentient beings with a karmic connection with this bodhisattva can see this.
- * From each pore of this bodhisattva’s skin, one can see a pure and beautiful splendor of light that shines in the ten directions from as many Buddhas as there are grains of sand along an infinite number of the River Ganges. For this reason, this bodhisattva is said to have a boundless radiance.
- * Through the transcendental knowledge and discernment that universally illuminates the true nature of all sentient beings, this bodhisattva is endowed with a supreme power of grace that is able to free them all from the three roads of evil. For this reason, this bodhisattva is said to endow them with great spiritual strength.
- * The divine crown on this bodhisattva’s head has five hundred bejeweled lotus blossoms. Each of these blossoms has a pericarp endowed with five hundred jewels that serves as a pedestal. On each of these pedestals, the signs of the breadth and length of all the pure and beautiful lands of the Buddhas in the ten directions are revealed.
- * Atop the crown of the bodhisattva’s head there is a fleshy protuberance that is like the bud of a red lotus. Upon this fleshy protuberance there is a single bejeweled vase. Its magnificent light and splendor everywhere reveal the accomplishment of the Buddha’s work.

The other signs of this bodhisattva’s body are the same as those of ‘Beholding the Cries of This World’, without any difference.

- * When this bodhisattva walks, all the worlds of the ten directions tremble and shake. Each place where the ground trembles and shakes, a hundred million bejeweled blossoms appear. Each of these bejeweled blossoms reveals glorious adornments that are like the others found in the World of Pure Bliss.
- * When this bodhisattva sits down, the lands of the seven treasures all tremble and shake simultaneously, from the Land of the Buddha ‘Of Golden Splendor’ below to the Land of the Buddha ‘Of the Supremely Clear Light’ above. In between these, there are all the multiple incarnations of the Buddha of Infinite Life, the Bodhisattva ‘Beholding the Cries of This World’ & the Bodhisattva ‘Endowing Sentient Beings with Great Spiritual Strength’ that are as countless as the particles of dust in the universe. Everywhere they assemble on lotus seats in the clouds over the World of Pure Bliss, filling up the sky. Here they proclaim and teach about the sublime nature of life’s purpose and deliver sentient beings from suffering.

This eleventh meditation is called ‘visualizing the true form of the Bodhisattva ‘Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength’. In meditating on this bodhisattva, one will eliminate the consequences that have resulted from the immoral acts that have been committed over a countless number of lifetimes along the stream of life and death. Those making this meditation will no longer need to dwell in a womb (with only an embryonic

nature of enlightenment) and will always be able to travel freely throughout all the pure and beautiful lands of the Buddhas. Those who have accomplished this visualization are said to have attained completely perfect meditations on both the Bodhisattva ‘Beholding the Cries of This World’ and the Bodhisattva ‘Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength’. Observing them this way is said to be a proper meditation on them. Observing them any other way is said to be an incorrect meditation.”

佛告阿難及韋提希。次觀大勢至菩薩。此菩薩身量大小亦如觀世音。圓光面各二百二十五由旬。照二百五十由旬。舉身光明照十方國。作紫金色。有緣眾生皆悉得見。但見此菩薩一毛孔光。即見十方無量諸佛淨妙光明。是故號此菩薩名無邊光。以智慧光普照一切。令離三塗得無上力。是故號此菩薩名大勢至。此菩薩天冠有五百寶蓮華。一一寶華有五百寶臺。一一臺中。十方諸佛淨妙國土廣長之相。皆於中現。頂上肉髻如鉢頭摩花。於肉髻上有一寶瓶。盛諸光明普現佛事。餘諸身相如觀世音等無有異。此菩薩行時。十方世界一切震動。當地動處各有五百億寶花。一一寶花莊嚴高顯。如極樂世界。此菩薩坐時。七寶國土一時動搖。從下方金光佛剎。乃至上方光明王佛剎。於其中間無量塵數分身無量壽佛分身觀世音大勢至。皆悉雲集極樂國土。側塞空中坐蓮華座。演說妙法度苦眾生。作此觀者。名為觀見大勢至菩薩。是為觀大勢至色身相。觀此菩薩者名第十一觀。除無數劫阿僧祇生死之罪。作是觀者不處胞胎。常遊諸佛淨妙國土。此觀成已。名為具足觀觀世音及大勢至。作是觀者名為正觀。若他觀者名為邪觀。

11. Shāndào’s Commentary About Visualizing the Bodhisattva ‘Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength’ (Mahā Sthāma Prāpta, 大勢至菩薩):

The purpose of this eleventh visualization is to reveal the bodhisattva practice that fulfills the Buddha’s grace of delivering the greatness of transcendental discernment (mahā prajñā pāramitā, 大慧波羅蜜多) to sentient beings by bestowing (the five) spiritual capacities (of faith, diligence of effort, mindfulness, mental resolve and the discernment of purpose) upon them through the power that arises from the Buddha’s words. This bodhisattva arises to the Buddha’s right (the viewer’s left)

In the visualization of the Bodhisattva ‘Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength’, there is again bringing up the subject, distinguishing its signs and a conclusion.

There are thirteen parts:

- a. Generally bringing up the name of this visualization
- b. Distinguishing the signs of this visualization that are the same as those of the Bodhisattva ‘Beholding the Cries of This World’
- c. The signs of the halo of light emanating from the crown of this bodhisattva’s head and their similarities and differences with those of the Bodhisattva ‘Beholding the Cries of This World’
- d. The far-reaching light and splendor of the halo emanating from the bodhisattva’s body and the benefits attained from connecting with it
- e. The adornments on this Bodhisattva’s divine crown and their differences from those of the Bodhisattva ‘Beholding the Cries of This World’
- f. The sign of the bejeweled vase above the fleshy protuberance on the crown of this bodhisattva’s head
- g. Other similarities with the Bodhisattva ‘Beholding the Cries of This World’
- h. The difference in this bodhisattva’s stride (traveling through space and time) from that of the Bodhisattva ‘Beholding the Cries of This World’
- i. The difference in this bodhisattva’s seated posture (in meditation) from that of the Bodhisattva ‘Beholding the Cries of This World’
- j. The general conclusion on distinguishing between proper and improper meditation on this bodhisattva
- k. The immediate benefits attained through cultivating this meditation
- l. A general conclusion on the previous words and the future benefits to be attained through spiritual rebirth
- m. A general conclusion on accomplishing a visualization of the spiritual lives of these two bodhisattvas and distinguishing their different signs

a. *Generally bringing up the name of this visualization:*

On this, the scripture says:

The Buddha addressed Ānanda and Vaidehī:

“Next you should visualize the Bodhisattva ‘Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength’ (Mahā Sthāma Prāpta, 大勢至菩薩).”

This passage generally brings up the name of the visualization.

b. *Distinguishing the signs of this visualization that are the same as those of the Bodhisattva ‘Beholding the Cries (Prayers) of This World’:*

On this, the scripture says:

- * **The measurements of this bodhisattva’s body are the same as those for the Bodhisattva ‘Beholding the Cries of This World’.**

Next there is a distinction of the signs of this visualization. There are five parts:

1. The size of the body is like that of the Bodhisattva ‘Beholding the Cries of This World’.
2. The color of the body is like that of ‘Beholding the Cries of This World’.
3. The signs of the face are like those of ‘Beholding the Cries of This World’.
4. The radiance of the body’s auspicious signs and excellent refinements⁵¹ is like that of ‘Beholding the Cries of This World’.
5. The radiance from the whorl of hair between the brows⁸⁵ is like that of ‘Beholding the Cries of This World’.

c. *The signs of the halo of light from the crown of this bodhisattva’s head & their similarities and differences with those of the Bodhisattva ‘Beholding the Cries of This World’:*

On this, the scripture says:

- * **The halo of light has a radius of two hundred twenty-five yojanas and then shines for another two hundred fifty yojanas beyond this.**

This is on the signs of the halo emanating from this bodhisattva’s crown and their similarities and differences from those of the Bodhisattva ‘Beholding the Cries of This World’. There are four parts.

1. The size of the halo⁸⁶ (250 yojanas)⁷⁹
2. The distance of the light’s illumination
3. The number of manifestations of the Buddhas
4. The number of attendants for these Buddhas

d. *The far-reaching light and splendor emanating from the bodhisattva’s body and the benefits attained from connecting with it:*

On this, the scripture says:

- * **The light emanating from the bodhisattva’s body illuminates the lands of the ten directions, making them a burnished golden color. All sentient beings with a karmic connection with this bodhisattva can see this.**
- * **From each pore of this bodhisattva’s skin, one can see the pure and beautiful splendor of light that shines in the ten directions from as many Buddhas as there are grains of sand along an infinite number of the River Ganges. For this reason, this bodhisattva is said to have a boundless radiance.**
- * **Through the transcendental knowledge and discernment that universally illuminates the true nature of all sentient beings, this bodhisattva is endowed with a supreme power of grace that is able to free them all from the three roads of evil. For this reason, this bodhisattva is said to endow them with great spiritual strength.**

This is on the splendor of light emanating from the bodhisattva's body and the far-reaching benefits that illuminate all those with a connection to the bodhisattva as well as all those in other directions who acquire this burnished golden color. There are eight parts:

1. The general and specific illuminations of the halo⁸⁶ emanating from the bodhisattva's body are not the same
2. The distance of the light's illumination
3. The places that the light comes into contact with all turn a burnished golden color.
4. Only those with a connection to the Bodhisattva 'Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength' from a past life will see this light and benefit from contact with it.
5. From the splendor of light issued from but a single pore of the bodhisattva's skin, they are able to see the pure sublime light issued from the lives of many Buddhas. This is revealing the many benefits that come from just little bit of this light.
6. The name of this bodhisattva is established from this boundless radiance.
7. On the essential nature and the function of this radiance:
 - a. Its essential nature is non-affliction (anāsrāva, 無漏). This is a reference to the radiance of its transcendental knowledge and discernment.
 - b. Its function is the supreme power (bala, 力) able to eliminate all the sufferings from the three evils (of greed, hatred and stupidity), everywhere in the ten directions.
8. The name 'Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength' is established from the defining virtues of this bodhisattva.

e. The adornments on the divine crown and their differences from those of the Bodhisattva 'Beholding the Cries of This World':

On this, the scripture says:

- * **The divine crown on this bodhisattva's head has five hundred bejeweled lotus blossoms. Each of these blossoms has a pericarp endowed with five hundred jewels that serves as a pedestal. On each of these pedestals, the signs of the breadth and length of all the pure and beautiful lands of the Buddhas in the ten directions are revealed.**

This is on the adornments on the divine crown being different from those of the Bodhisattva 'Beholding the Cries of This World'. It is in four parts:

1. The number of bejeweled blossoms above the crown
2. The pericarps (padma karṇika, 蓮果) above these blossoms serve as bejeweled pedestals (ratnamaya kūṭāgāra, 寶臺)
3. On each pedestal the Buddhas in the Pure Lands of the ten directions are reflected and revealed.
4. The Pure Lands of all the other directions are revealed, with the transcendental nature of all these domains neither arising nor perishing.

f. The sign of the bejeweled vase above the fleshy protuberance on the crown of the head:

On this, the scripture says:

- * **Atop the crown of the bodhisattva's head there is a fleshy protuberance that is like the bud of a red lotus (padma, 鉢頭摩花). Upon this fleshy protuberance there is a single bejeweled vase. Its magnificent light and splendor everywhere reveal the accomplishment of the Buddha's work.**

This is about the sign of the bejeweled vase (ratnamaya kalaśa, 寶瓶)⁸⁷ atop the fleshy protuberance on the crown (uṣṇīṣa śīrṣa, 頂上肉髻)⁸⁷ of the bodhisattva's head containing the nectar of immortality (amṛta, 甘露) (that spiritually empowers sentient beings).

g. *Other similarities with the Bodhisattva 'Beholding the Cries of This World':*

On this, the scripture says:

"The other signs of this bodhisattva's body are the same as those of 'Beholding the Cries of This World', without any differences."

This indicates the similarities with the Bodhisattva 'Beholding the Cries of This World'.

h. *The difference in this bodhisattva's stride (traveling through space and time) from that of the Bodhisattva 'Beholding the Cries of This World':*

On this, the scripture says:

- * **When this bodhisattva walks, all the worlds of the ten directions tremble and shake. Each place where the ground trembles and shakes, a hundred million bejeweled blossoms appear. Each of these bejeweled blossoms reveals glorious adornments like the others found in the World of Pure Bliss.**

This is on the signs of walking⁸⁸ being different with those of 'Beholding the Cries of This World'. There are four parts:

1. The differences in this bodhisattva's stride
2. The far-reaching signs in the trembling of the ground⁶⁷
3. The number of blossoms being revealed where the tremors take place
4. The manifestation of the exalted blossoms is further revealed. The luster of these many decorations is like those in the other adornments of the World of Pure Bliss.

i. *The difference in this bodhisattva's seated posture (in meditation) from that of the Bodhisattva 'Beholding the Cries of This World':*

On this, the scripture says:

- * **When this bodhisattva sits down, the lands of the seven treasures all tremble and shake simultaneously, from the land of the Buddha 'Of Golden Splendor' below to the land of the Buddha 'Of the Supremely Clear Light' above. In between these, there are all the multiple incarnations of the Buddha of Infinite Life, the Bodhisattva 'Beholding the Cries of This World' & the Bodhisattva 'Endowing Sentient Beings with Great Spiritual Strength' that are as countless as the particles of dust in the universe. Everywhere they assemble in the clouds over The World of Pure Bliss, seated on lotus seats and filling up the sky. Here they proclaim and teach about the sublime nature of life's purpose and deliver sentient beings from suffering.**

This is on the signs of this Bodhisattva's seated posture being different from those of the Bodhisattva 'Beholding the Cries of This World'. There are seven parts on this.

1. The signs of this bodhisattva's seated posture⁸²
2. First the bodhisattva's own nation is stirred up
3. Then the lands of other directions near and far are stirred up
These span from the Buddha 'Of Golden Splendor' (Suvarṇa Prabhāsa, 金光) personifying the reach of compassion below to the Buddha 'Of the Supremely Clear Light' (Jvalana Uttama, 光明王佛) personifying the reach of transcendental discernment above.
4. The amount of stirring and shaking in the fields of enlightenment (buddha kṣetra, 佛刹).
5. The multiple incarnations (kāya vibhakti, 分身) of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life, the Bodhisattva 'Beholding the Cries of This World' and the Bodhisattva 'Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength' assemble in clouds.
6. The sky above is filled everywhere with them seated on bejeweled blossoms
7. These multiple incarnations (individual lives) each teach about the sublime nature of life's purpose, with each responding to their suitable opportunities to do so.

Question: The Shorter Scripture on the Buddha of Infinite Life & Light (Amitāyus Sūtra, 阿彌陀經) says:

“It is called ‘The Land of Pure Bliss’ because the sentient beings in this nation are without any suffering, only having feelings of contentment.”

If this is so, then why does this Scripture About Meditation on the Buddha of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Dhyāna Sūtra, 佛說觀無量壽經) tell of the multiple incarnations of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas in the Land of Pure Bliss teaching about the sublime nature of life’s purpose and *then* delivering sentient beings from suffering?

Answer: We will now discuss the two kinds of suffering and contentment:

1. On the suffering & contentment found in the three-fold sphere of sentient existence (trayo dhātavaḥ, 三界):²⁵

This is a reference to the spheres of #1 its desires (kāma dhātu, 欲界), #2 the objective reality of its forms (rūpa dhātu, 色法) and #3 its existential principles that are beyond form (arupa dhātu, 無色界)

- a. Suffering is based on three roads of evil (greed, hate & stupidity), the eight kinds of suffering,⁵⁹ etc.
- b. Contentment is based on existence in the realms of humanity and heaven with their idle attachments to the pleasures of the five sensory desires, etc.

Although one speaks of this as contentment, in fact there is great suffering in this three-fold sphere of sentient existence and there is certainly not a single moment of absolutely real, enduring contentment (pure bliss).

2. On the suffering & contentment found in the Land of Pure Bliss (Sukhāvatī, 淨土)

This a reference to the transcendental sphere of life’s purpose (dharma dhātu, 法界)

- a. In seeking the bodhisattvas’ levels of grounding (bhūmi, 地)^{4D} in the transcendental nature of life’s purpose while still ascending through the thirty preliminary stages (of introspection, practice of virtue and dedication of merit),^{4A-C} there is suffering.
- b. In being grounded but seeking that which precedes this grounding there is contentment.
- c. In realizing a lesser knowledge of purpose but seeking a higher knowledge of it there is suffering.
- d. In realizing the higher knowledge of purpose but seeking a lesser knowledge of it there is contentment.

In bringing up these examples each is possible to understand.

Now, when we speak about the deliverance of suffering sentient beings, it is only to make us advance from lower ranks and ascend to higher ones, and to turn our lower realizations into higher realizations. In speaking about what we seek we talk about contentment, and for this reason the scriptures speak about deliverance from suffering. In the Pure Land, where there is no longer any suffering, non-affliction is the essential nature and greatness of compassion is the function. And so, with noble beings ultimately abiding there forever free from the fragmentations of life and death (saṃsāra, 生死), what further meaning is there to suffering?

- j. *The general conclusion on distinguishing between proper and improper meditation on this bodhisattva:*

On this, the scripture says:

“This eleventh meditation is called ‘visualizing the true form of the Bodhisattva Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength’.”

This is about distinguishing between proper and improper meditation on this bodhisattva and a general conclusion about correctly distinguishing between the two bodhisattvas.

k. The immediate benefits attained through cultivating this meditation:

On this, the scripture says:

“In meditating on this bodhisattva, one will eliminate the consequences that have resulted from the immoral acts that have been committed over a countless number of lifetimes along the stream of life and death.”

This is on the immediate benefits attained from cultivating this meditation, eliminating the consequences from the immoral acts that have been committed over many lifetimes.

l. A general conclusion on the future benefits to be attained through spiritual rebirth:

On this, the scripture says:

“Those making this meditation will no longer need to dwell in a womb (with only an embryonic nature of enlightenment) and will always be able to travel freely throughout the pure and beautiful lands of the Buddhas.”

This reference (to dwelling in a womb or a bud)⁹⁴ is a general conclusion on the previous words and the future benefits to be attained through this rebirth.

m. A general conclusion on accomplishing a visualization of the spiritual lives of these two bodhisattvas and distinguishing their signs:

On this, the scripture says:

“Those who have accomplished this visualization are said to have attained completely perfect meditations on both the Bodhisattva ‘Beholding the Cries of This World’ and the Bodhisattva ‘Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength’. Observing them this way is said to be a proper meditation on them. Observing them any other way is said to be an incorrect meditation.”

This is a general conclusion about visualizing the spiritual lives of these two bodhisattvas and distinguishing their signs. The Bodhisattva ‘Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength’ sits in majestic loftiness, stirring up other lands and being able to cause the clouds of individual lives to proclaim the transcendental nature of life’s purpose and benefit sentient beings, be free from confinement to the embryonic state of enlightenment (tathāgata garbha, 如來藏)⁹⁴ and forever travel throughout the spiritual realm (dharma dhātu, 法界), doing the work of the Buddha.

Although there are thirteen different parts above, collectively they explain the visualization of the Bodhisattva ‘Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength’.

12. The Scripture's Words About the Shared Characteristics Found in the Universal Visualization of the Spiritual Life:

On this, the scripture says:

The Buddha then addressed both Ānanda and Vaidehī:

“When seeing these things, a visualization will arise in the mind in which you will see yourself being reborn in the western World of Pure Bliss, seated on a lotus blossom in a cross-legged posture. You will first visualize the lotus blossom being closed around you and then see it opening up. When it unfurls, you will visualize it being endowed with a radiance of five hundred colors that perfectly illuminates your life. Upon opening up your eyes, you will see the Buddhas and bodhisattvas filling up the sky and hear the waters, the birds, the trees of the forests and the sound of the Buddhas’ voices everywhere proclaiming the sublime nature of life’s purpose as expressed in the twelve narrative styles of the scriptures. When leaving this meditation, you will always remember it and keep it in mind, never forgetting it. Upon seeing these things, one is said to see the Buddha of Infinite Life and the World of Pure Bliss. This twelfth visualization is called ‘meditating on the universal nature of the spiritual life’. The countless manifestations of the Buddha of Infinite Life are forever descending to the place where people practice this meditation, together with those of the Bodhisattva ‘Beholding the Cries of This World’ and the Bodhisattva ‘Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength’. Observing it this way is said to be a proper meditation on the universal nature of the spiritual life. Observing it any other way is said to be an incorrect meditation.”

佛告阿難及韋提希。見此事時當起想作心自見生於西方極樂世界。於蓮華中結跏趺坐。作蓮華合想。作蓮華開想。蓮華開時。有五百色光來照身想。眼目開想。見佛菩薩滿虛空中。水鳥樹林及與諸佛。所出音聲皆演妙法。與十二部經合。若出定時憶持不失。見此事已。名見無量壽佛極樂世界。是為普觀想。名第十二觀。無量壽佛化身無數。與觀世音及大勢至。常來至此行人之所。作是觀者名為正觀。若他觀者名為邪觀。

12. Shàndǎo's Commentary on the Shared Characteristics (sāmānya lakṣaṇa, 共相) found in A Universal Visualization of the Spiritual Life:

The purpose of this twelfth visualization is to reveal the shared characteristics (sāmānya lakṣaṇa, 共相) that are found in all spiritual lives, including one's own.

On this universal visualization, again first there is an introduction to the subject, then a distinction of its signs and finally a conclusion. There are six parts:

- a. The previous visualization leads to this one
- b. With a focused mind one enters into this meditation, ever visualizing one's own spiritual rebirth
- c. Whether composed in meditation or dispersed in thoughts, words and deeds, one always keeps it in mind, never forgetting it
- d. The benefits from realizing this visualization
- e. The general conclusion
- f. Further bringing up the hidden benefits for those who are able to meditate on and keep in mind the universal grace of the three-fold spiritual life that descends from the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life and all of the other Buddhas

a. *The previous visualization leads to this one:*

On this, the scripture says:

The Buddha then addressed both Ānanda and Vaidehī:

“When seeing these things, ...”

This is on the previous visualization on the Bodhisattva “Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength’ leading to this universal visualization.

b. *With a focused mind one enters into meditation, ever visualizing one's own spiritual rebirth:*

On this, the scripture says:

"... a visualization will arise in the mind in which you will see yourself being reborn in the western World of Pure Bliss, seated on a lotus blossom in a cross-legged posture. You will first visualize the lotus blossom being closed around you (as if it were a womb) and then see it opening up. When it unfurls, you will visualize it being endowed with a radiance of five hundred colors that perfectly illuminates your life. Upon opening up your eyes, you will see the Buddhas and bodhisattvas filling up the sky and hear the waters, the birds, the trees of the forests and the sound of the Buddhas' voices everywhere proclaiming the sublime nature of life's purpose ..."

This is on the mind with focused attention entering into this meditation and ever visualizing one's own spiritual rebirth. It is in nine parts, including visualizations of:

1. One's own spiritual life
2. Spiritual rebirth in the west (the future)
3. The lotus seat
4. The closed blossom (the embryonic nature of enlightenment)⁹⁴
5. The blossom opening up (the blossoming of perfect enlightenment)
6. The precious light illuminating one's life
7. The precious mantle of light shining over one, making one's eyes open up
8. The eyes opening up and seeing the Buddhas and bodhisattvas
9. The ears hearing the teachings about the sublime nature of life's purpose

c. *Whether composed in meditation or dispersed in thoughts, words and deeds, one always keeps it in mind and never forgets it:*

On this, the scripture says:

"... as expressed in the twelve narrative styles of the scriptures. When leaving this meditation, you will always remember it and keep it in mind, never forgetting it."

Through the twelve narrative styles of the scripture⁸⁹ this meditation is dispersed into thoughts, words and deeds but never loses the remembrance (of the Buddha) that protects the mind. This is based on:

1. The mind of meditation being clear and pure
2. Evils never arising again

Because it is associated with contentment of purpose on the inside, on the outside it is without any obstacles of improper thoughts, words and deeds.

d. *The benefits from realizing this visualization:*

On this, the scripture says:

"Upon seeing these things, one is said to see the Buddha of Infinite Life and the World of Pure Bliss'."

This is on the benefits to be attained from realizing this visualization.

e. *The general conclusion:*

On this, the scripture says:

"This twelfth visualization is called 'meditating on the universal nature of the spiritual life'."

This is the general conclusion.

f. Further bringing up the hidden benefits for those who are able to meditate on and keep in mind the universal grace of the three-fold spiritual life that descends from the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life and all of the other Buddhas:

On this, the scripture says:

“The countless manifestations (nirmāṇa kāya, 化身) of the Buddha of Infinite Life are forever descending to the place where people practice this meditation, together with those of the Bodhisattva ‘Beholding the Cries of This World’ and the Bodhisattva ‘Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength’. Observing it this way is said to be a proper meditation on this universal nature of the spiritual life. Observing it any other way is said to be an incorrect meditation.

This further discusses people’s ability to meditate on this and receive the benefits that descend from the grace of the three-fold spiritual life of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛) that protects and keeps them in mind. Because of this, there are all the countless flocks of sentient beings who focus their minds on recalling the Buddha’s transcendental vows and look to the west where there is the dual grace that:

- * Directly comes from the Buddha’s actions (svakarma phala, 正報) and
 - * Indirectly comes from the environment around the Buddha (parakarma phala, 依報).
- They are forever comprehending it just as their eyes see it.

Although there are six different parts described above, collectively they explain the universal visualization of the spiritual life.

13. The Scripture's Words About the Unique Characteristics (sva lakṣaṇa, 自相) found in Different Visualizations of the Spiritual Life:

On this, the scripture says:

The Buddha then again addressed both Ānanda and Vaidehī:

"If you are sincere about being spiritually reborn in this Land of Pure Bliss to the west, you should first observe a sixteen-foot-tall image of the Buddha standing over a lotus pond. As explained before, the true size of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life is without bounds and beyond the power of the ordinary mind to comprehend. However, through the power of grace from the past vows of The One Who Has Descended Into This World, those who aspire to visualize and keep this Buddha in mind will certainly be able to do so. In merely visualizing an image of the Buddha, there are limitless blessings of merit to be attained. How many more so are there in meditating on the perfect signs that descend from the grace of the Buddha's spiritual life? Through the spiritual power of grace, the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life can be transformed into any form at will and be revealed in any of the lands of the ten directions. Sometimes there is the manifestation of a great body that fills up the whole of the sky while at other times there is the manifestation of a smaller body that is sixteen or even eight feet tall. All of these different manifestations are of a pure golden color. The manifestations of the Buddha's halo and the bejeweled lotus seat are as explained before. The Bodhisattvas 'Beholding the Cries of This World' and 'Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength' appear to be the same wherever they are. Sentient beings can only distinguish between these two bodhisattvas by observing the signs on the crowns of their heads. They both support the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life by everywhere spiritually transforming sentient beings. This thirteenth meditation is called 'observing the different visualizations of the spiritual life'. Observing them this way is said to be a proper meditation on them. Observing them any other way is said to be an incorrect meditation."

佛告阿難及韋提希。若欲至心生西方者。先當觀於一丈六像在池水上。如先所說。無量壽佛身量無邊。非是凡夫心力所及。然彼如來宿願力故。有憶想者必得成就。但想佛像得無量福。況復觀佛具足身相。阿彌陀佛神通如意。於十方國變現自在。或現大身滿虛空中。或現小身丈六八尺。所現之形皆真金色。圓光化佛及寶蓮花。如上所說。觀世音菩薩及大勢至。於一切處身同。眾生但觀首相。知是觀世音。知是大勢至。此二菩薩助阿彌陀佛。普化一切。是為雜想觀。名第十三觀。作是觀者名為正觀。若他觀者名為邪觀。

13. Shāndào's Commentary About the Unique Characteristics (sva lakṣaṇa, 自相) found in Different Visualizations of the Spiritual Life:

The purpose of this thirteenth visualization is to reveal the unique characteristics (sva lakṣaṇa, 自相) found in different visualizations of the spiritual life. The twelfth visualization naturally leads to this one.

In the different visualizations of the spiritual life, again there is first an introduction of the subject, next a distinguishing of its signs and finally a conclusion. Altogether, there are eleven parts on this:

- Addressing the different livelihoods of sentient beings to encourage their different kinds of spiritual rebirth
- Observing an image that expresses the transcendental nature of the spiritual life while visualizing the waters that express the different kinds of ground where it is observed
- With the object being great and the mind being small, these visualizations are extremely difficult to realize
- The ordinary mind is narrow and shallow while the noble mind is broad and deep. Without a proper methodology for attaining these visualizations, they remain very difficult to realize.
- Comparing these visualizations and revealing that which is most suitable
- Although the meditations on the Buddha's image may be great or small, they all ultimately illuminate the transcendental nature of grace that descends from the Buddha's spiritual life.

- g. Although our spiritual lives may be great or small, the signs of their radiance are not different from the grace that descends from the Buddha's spiritual life.
- h. The similarities with the previous meditations (on the two bodhisattvas)
- i. Encouraging meditation of the two distinct bodhisattvas
- j. More on the connection between the vows of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life and the Bodhisattvas 'Beholding the Cries of This World' & 'Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength'
- k. The general conclusion

a. Addressing the different livelihoods of sentient beings to encourage their different kinds of spiritual rebirth:

On this, the scripture says:

The Buddha then again addressed both Ānanda and Vaidehī:

"If you are sincere about being spiritually reborn in this Land of Pure Bliss to the west"

This is on encouraging this spiritual rebirth.

b. Observing an image that expresses the transcendental nature of the spiritual life while visualizing the waters that express the different kinds of ground where it is observed:

On this, the scripture says:

"you should first observe a sixteen-foot-tall image of the Buddha standing over a lotus pond."

This is about observing an image of the Buddha that expresses the transcendental nature of the spiritual life while visualizing the waters that express the ground where it is observed, with The One Who Has Descended Into This World teaching sentient beings through an object that makes it easier for them to turn their minds towards meditation. For some, it is in an image of a Buddha standing above the waters (the sphere of desire) of a lotus pool while for others it is in the interior of a bejeweled palace (in the two higher spheres).⁷⁸ For some it is seated under a bejeweled tree of a forest (cultivating meditation) while for others it is on the bejeweled pedestal in a palace hall or among bejeweled clouds of blossoms in the sky overhead (in a transcendental vision). Like this, there are different places for each mind to abide in a visualization where they can create an apparent manifestation of the Buddha's spiritual life (nirmāṇa kāya, 化身) that will spiritually transform them. This is called 'the creation of different objects for those of different capacities to make it easier for all to attain a visualization of the spiritual life'.

c. With the object being great and the mind being small, these visualizations are extremely difficult to realize:

On this, the scripture says:

"As explained before, the true size of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life is without bounds and beyond the power of the ordinary mind to comprehend."

This is on the object being great and the mind being small, making the object extremely difficult to realize. Induced by noble intent and compassion, there was encouragement to visualize that which is small.

d. The ordinary self-centered mind is narrow and shallow while the noble and selfless mind is broad and deep. Without a proper methodology for attaining these visualizations, they remain very difficult to realize:

On this, the scripture says:

"However, through the power of grace from the past vows of The One Who Has Descended Into This World, those who aspire to visualize and keep this Buddha in mind will certainly be able to do so."

The ordinary self-centered mind is narrow and small while the noble and selfless mind is broad and great. Since there is no way to focus the mind on these visualizations (without the Buddha's help), they are difficult for one to realize by oneself. It is not really because the mind is small that it is difficult to realize them, nor is it because of the greatness of their reality that they are not yet revealed. It is simply because the power of grace arising from the vows of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛) that these visualizations are ever realized at all.

e. Comparing these visualizations and revealing which is the most distinguished:

On this, the scripture says:

"In merely visualizing an image of the Buddha, there are limitless blessings of merit to be attained. How many more so are there in meditating on the perfect signs that descend from the grace of the Buddha's spiritual life?"

This is on comparing the relative efficacies of these revelations. With the visualizing of an image of the Buddha bringing one limitless blessings, how much more are there benefits to be attained from meditating on the transcendental nature of the grace descending from the Buddha's spiritual life?

f. Although the subjective and objective observations on the Buddha's image may be great or small, they all ultimately illuminate the transcendental nature of grace that descends from the Buddha's spiritual life:

On this, the scripture says:

"Through the spiritual power of grace, the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life can be transformed into any form at will and be revealed in any of the lands of the ten directions. Sometimes there is the manifestation of a great body that fills up the whole of the sky while at other times there is the manifestation of a smaller body that is sixteen or even eight feet tall. All of these different manifestations are of a pure golden color."

This is on the fact that, although there are subjective and objective aspects in the observation of the Buddha's image and the grace may be appear to be great or small, all the different illuminations of it are transcendental. There are three parts to this:

1. With the visualization of the three-fold spiritual life⁸³ of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛) being penetrated without any interruptions (apratihata, 無礙), it is everywhere complete in accord with one's intention. There are two meanings to being 'in accordance with one's intention' (yatha iccha, 隨意 or 如意):
 - a. *As sentient beings intend:* All sentient beings are delivered in accordance with their own needs and capacities.
 - b. *As the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life intends:* With the perfect illumination of the five kinds of eyes⁷³ and perfect mastery of the six kinds of spiritual penetration,²⁶ the Buddha ceaselessly observes the spiritual capacities of sentient beings in each and every moment in order to deliver them by awakening them to the three wheels that constitute the cycles of impermanence, impurity and suffering, benefiting each of them in different ways.
2. Some manifest lives with greater purposes while some manifest lives with lesser ones.
3. Although these different visualizations of the spiritual life may be great or small, they are all composed of a pure golden color.

This is on distinguishing between a proper and improper meditation on them.

- g. *Although our spiritual lives may be great or small, the signs of their radiance are not different from the grace that descends from the Buddha's spiritual life:*

On this, the scripture says:

"The manifestations of the Buddha's halo and the bejeweled lotus seat are as explained before."

This refers to the fact that although some lives are great and some are small, there is no difference in the nature of the transcendental grace in any of these signs of radiance.

- h. *The similarities with the previous meditations (on the two bodhisattvas):*

On this, the scripture says:

"The Bodhisattvas 'Beholding the Cries of This World' & 'Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength' appear to be the same wherever they are."

This is on it being the same as the previous meditations on the two bodhisattvas. With the Buddha being great the attendants are also great. With the Buddha being small the attendants are also small.

- i. *Encouraging meditation of the two distinct bodhisattvas:*

On this, the scripture says:

"Sentient beings can only distinguish between these two bodhisattvas by observing the signs on the crowns of their heads."

This is advice on how to distinguish between the meditations on these two distinct bodhisattvas. How are these two distinguished?

- * On the head of the Bodhisattva 'Beholding the Cries of This World' there is a standing manifestation of the Buddha.⁷ (looking down upon aspiring sentient beings).
- * On the head of the Bodhisattva 'Endowing Sentient Beings with Great Spiritual Strength' there is a bejeweled vase (ratnamaya kalaśa, 寶瓶)⁸⁷ (with the nectar of immortality).

- j. *More on the connection between the past vows of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life and the Bodhisattvas 'Beholding the Cries of This World' & 'Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength':*

On this, the scripture says:

"They both support the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life by everywhere spiritually transforming sentient beings."

This is on equally connecting with the past vows of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life, the Bodhisattva 'Beholding the Cries of This World' and the Bodhisattva 'Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength' who are all similarly pledged to overcoming evil and the delivering spiritual awakening. In following and adapting to the illumination of their signs, one travels to the place where there are all the benefits of spiritual transformation.

- k. *The general conclusion:*

On this, the scripture says:

"This thirteenth meditation is called 'observing the different visualizations of the spiritual life'. Observing them this way is said to be a proper meditation on them. Observing them any other way is said to be an incorrect meditation."

This is the general conclusion.

Although there are eleven different parts described above, collectively they explain the different visualizations of the spiritual life.

The conclusion on these first thirteen visualizations:

In this third volume on the virtues of mental resolve and the first thirteen visualizations, from the first on the setting sun to the thirteenth on the different visualizations of the spiritual life, there is a general explanation of the Blessed One's answer to Vaidehī's fourth request that says:

"Blessed One, I pray that you teach me how to properly deliberate on and penetrate the World of Pure Bliss (Sukhāvatī, 極樂世界), the land of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛)."

This is on how to attain the resolve of meditation through recalling and keeping the enlightened being in mind (buddha anusmṛti samādhi, 念佛三昧)

On this, Shāndāo composed eight stanzas of verse that say:

"First there is a teaching about visualizing the setting sun that eliminates the darkness.
Then there is a visualization of the waters and realizing the crystalline purity of the mind.
Below the ground, there are the shining reflections of golden pillars.
Upon it there are millions of adornments.

Bejeweled clouds and canopies swirl about in the sky overhead
And those of heaven and humanity hear different kinds of music.
Necklaces hang down between the various fruits of the bejeweled trees, and
The virtues of fresh water in the pools and streams flow among the lotus blossoms.

Bejeweled towers and buildings are found everywhere on the grounds
With different rays of light illuminating them all equally without prejudice.
Three lotus blossoms alone wind their way above them all,
Each with four pillars holding bejeweled banners, and canopies above them.

In the conscious minds of those endowed with confusion, the light (of spiritual awakening)
has not yet dawned.
Seated here and now, their minds become focused on an image of the Buddha in the
stillness of meditation.
In a single moment, their minds open up and they visualize the grace of the Buddha's
spiritual life.
The radiance from the auspicious signs and excellent refinements found in the spiritual life
of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life grows ever stronger.

To save sentient beings from suffering, the Bodhisattva 'Beholding the Cries of This World'
connects them to the transcendental sphere of purpose.
There is never a time that this bodhisattva is not descending into this world we must all
endure to spiritually transform them.
The awesome radiance of the Bodhisattva 'Endowing Sentient Beings with Great Spiritual
Strength' is able to shake them and stir them up.
Adapting to the conditions at hand, this bodhisattva illuminates the assembly that is before
the Buddha of Infinite Life.

Upon going back home (歸去來)¹⁹

They are secure in the essential nature of pure bliss.

Properly keeping this western land in mind, they harbor thoughts of returning to the lotus seat

And seeing the Buddha graced with a voice that teaches about the transcendental nature of life's purpose.

There are still sentient beings saddled with minds in confusion.

Because it is difficult for them to connect with this object of transcendental meditation

The One Who Has Descended Into This World opens it up gradually

Through the vision of a sixteen-foot-tall golden image of the Buddha over a lotus pond.

Although the different manifestations of the spiritual life in the holy rites may be great or small,

They each respond to the opportunities available to deliver sentient beings of different capacities.

Everywhere encouraged by good spiritual acquaintances among those born in this world we must all endure together,

One should face westward and focus one's mind on recalling the Buddha."

And also concerning this response to Vaidehī's request:

1. From the first visualization of the setting sun to the seventh on the lotus seat, there is a general description of the indirect grace from the environment upon which the Buddha depends (parakarma phala, 依報). This is the grace that descends from the spiritual realm, the transcendental sphere of life's purpose (dharma dhātu, 法界).
2. From the eighth visualization of a reflected image of the Buddha's spiritual life to the thirteenth meditation on the different visualizations of the spiritual life, there is a general description of the grace coming directly from the Buddha's actions (svakarma phala, 正報). This is the grace of the spiritual life, the life of purpose (dharma kāya, 法身).

Although these describe the dual grace of the environment and person that are not the same, together they clarify the meaning of the virtue found in the resolve of meditation (samādhi, 定).

Commentary on the Scripture About Meditation on the Buddha of Infinite Life

End of Volume 3, The Main Teaching on the Virtues of Mental Resolve (正宗分定善義卷第三)

Commentary on the Scripture About Meditation on the Buddha of Infinite Life

Volume 4, On the Main Teaching about the Virtues of Mental Dispersion (vikṣepa, 散):

The thirteenth meditation on the different visualizations of the spiritual life naturally leads to these last three visualizations of the different capacities for spiritual rebirth realized through the virtues of mental dispersion. Beginning here, the scripture explains the meaning of the three levels in the virtues of mental dispersion (vikṣepa, 散善) that are found in one's conduct, the actions of one's thoughts, words and deeds that are pure of affliction. There are two different ways this is explained:

1. *The Three Blessings of Earned Merit* (puṇya traya, 三福) describe the proper causes of virtue. These were first addressed in the introductory section of the scripture, right before the section on the sixteen kinds of meditation.
2. *The Nine Grades of Capacity* (nava prakāra, 九品) describe the proper conduct of virtue.

The Three Blessings of Earned Spiritual Merit (puṇya traya, 三福):

1. *The First Blessing is Worldly Virtue* (laukika puṇya, 世俗善): This includes the virtuous spiritual capacities that are observed in this world. Having not yet heard the Buddha's teaching about the transcendental nature of life's purpose, there is only one's own practice of respect for one's parents, teachers and elders, the proper rearing of children, benevolence towards humanity, fulfilling of one's moral obligations, worship, wisdom and faith.
2. *The Second Blessing is the Virtue of Moral Commitment* (śīla puṇya, 戒善): This includes the precepts of moral commitment observed by those of humanity (manuṣya, 人), those in the heavens of meditation (devas, 天), students of the noble path (śrāvakas, 聲聞) and spiritually awakening sentient beings (bodhisattvas, 菩薩) endowed with a higher sense of purpose. Some of these precepts are received (by ordination or initiation) and some are not, some of them are embraced (consciously) and some are not (being spontaneously observed). Only in being able to dedicate the merits earned from them can one attain spiritual rebirth.
3. *The Third Blessing is the Virtue of a Higher Calling* (kṛta puṇya, 行善): This includes those who enter into the greater track of the bodhisattva path. It involves connecting one's own capacities with those of ordinary people through various different practices and encouraging conditions that will lead to freedom from evil and the embracing of a state of mind dedicated to spiritual rebirth in the Pure Land.

And so, in terms of these three blessings of earned merit:

- * Some people only practice worldly virtues and dedicate them to attaining spiritual rebirth.
- * Some people only practice the virtues of moral commitment and dedicate them to attaining this rebirth.
- * Some people only practice the virtues of the higher calling and dedicate them to attaining it.
- * Some people only practice the two higher kinds of virtues and dedicate them to attaining it.
- * Some people only practice the two lower kinds of virtues and dedicate them to attaining it.
- * Some people practice all three of these virtues and dedicate them to attaining it.
- * Some people do not practice any of these three kinds of virtue. These are people who have no faith in anything but their own self-interest (icchantika, 一闍提). They are attached to false beliefs and practice the ten unwholesome kinds of purpose.¹⁸

The Nine Grades of Capacity for Spiritual Rebirth (nava prakāra, 九品) will now be described in the scripture's text. Right before discussing the first visualization of the setting sun there was a brief analysis of these three blessings of earned merit. The meanings of these are now further distinguished in terms of these nine grades of capacity for spiritual rebirth.

In summary, these nine grades are:

14. Those with a higher capacity for spiritual rebirth (faith in the transcendental nature of life's greater purpose)
 - a. The higher level of rebirth for those with a higher capacity
 - b. The intermediate level of rebirth for those with a higher capacity
 - c. The lower level of rebirth for those with a higher capacity
15. Those with an intermediate capacity for spiritual rebirth (the making of moral commitments)
 - d. The higher level of rebirth for those with an intermediate capacity
 - e. The intermediate level of rebirth for those with an intermediate capacity
 - f. The lower level of rebirth for those with an intermediate capacity
16. Those with a lower capacity for spiritual rebirth (wrestling with evil through prayer)
 - g. The higher level of rebirth for those with a lower capacity
 - k. The intermediate level of rebirth for those with a lower capacity
 - i. The lower level of rebirth for those with a lower capacity

14. Shàndào's Introduction to Visualizing the Levels of Spiritual Rebirth For Those with a Higher Grade of Capacity:

The thirteenth meditation on the different visualizations on the spiritual life naturally leads to this one.

The purpose of this fourteenth visualization is to teach about spiritual rebirth by those with the highest capacity, that for faith in the transcendental nature of life's purpose.

Each of the nine grades of capacity can be generally explained through applying eleven gateways of understanding:

- #1 Addressing those with different livelihoods (the laity like Vaidehī and the ordained like Ānanda)
- #2 Their different standings in terms of the resolve of meditation (samādhi, 定)
- #3 The different conditions for spiritual rebirth
- #4 The primary cause of spiritual rebirth
- #5 The capacities for sustaining this resolve
- #6 The different ways of sustaining it
- #7 The amount of time involved in the cultivation of their actions (bhāvanā, 修)
- #8 Dedicating the merits earned from their cultivation to spiritual rebirth in the Pure Land
- #9 The speed with which the noble host comes to welcome them at the end of their lives
- #10 The time it takes to acquire the adamantine pedestals and for the blossoms to open up
- #11 The different benefits attained upon reaching these adamantine pedestals

Now the meaning of these eleven gateways will be applied in explaining the nine grades of capacity for spiritual rebirth. With each of these nine grades of capacity being endowed with these eleven gateways, altogether these grades of capacity can be endowed with a hundred different meanings (ninety-nine different aspects (9 x 11) and the overall transcendental principle).

The text will first generally explain these eleven gateways in terms of the three higher grades of capacity. Then it will do so in terms of each of the intermediate and lower grades. In these explanations, some these capacities will be explained using all eleven gateways while in others only a few of them will be explained for the sake of brevity. Although some of these gateways may not be discussed in explaining some of these nine grades, in principle they can be found in all nine different capacities. And so it is necessary to broadly open up and reveal the overall principle to make this easier for practitioners to understand.

Although there are these eleven different gateways that can be applied to all nine levels of capacity as explained above, the scripture begins with a general explanation of the three higher grades of capacity for this rebirth (through faith).

14a The Scripture's Words on Visualizing the Higher Level of Spiritual Rebirth

For Those with a Higher Grade of Capacity:

The Buddha then spoke to both Ānanda and Vaidehī:

"Overall, people are endowed with nine grades of capacity for being reborn into this Pure Land to the west. First among these is the higher level of spiritual rebirth for those with a higher capacity. When sentient beings vow to be spiritually reborn in this nation, they inspire the three inner states of the faithful mind that serve as the means for this rebirth.

And what are these three? They are:

1. Utter sincerity
2. Depth of conviction
3. A vow of dedication to be reborn in the Pure Land.

Those endowed with these three states of mind will surely be reborn into this nation.

There are also three outer kinds of conduct sentient beings perform to sustain this spiritual rebirth. These three are:

1. Having a heart of loving kindness that practices abstinence from the intentional taking of life and is endowed with precepts of commitment to moral virtue.
2. Reading and reciting the scriptures on the greater vehicle of spiritual awakening and its broad universal principles
3. Cultivating practice of the six kinds of mindful recollection

When sentient beings dedicate the merit they have attained from these three kinds of virtuous conduct to spiritual rebirth in the nation of the Buddha of Infinite Life, they will attain this rebirth in from one to seven days. Because these people are diligent and courageous, by the time that they are reborn in this nation of the Pure Land, they see the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life before them, together with the Bodhisattva 'Beholding the Cries of This World', the Bodhisattva 'Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength', countless manifestations of the Buddha's spiritual life and a great assembly that includes hundreds and thousands of monks, students of the noble path and countless divine beings from the heavens of meditation who dwell in palaces made of the seven treasures. The Bodhisattvas 'Beholding the Cries of This World' and 'Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength' appear before them holding adamantite pedestals for them to sit upon. The Enlightened Being of Infinite Life emits a great radiance that illuminates the lives of these practitioners. The Buddha and the bodhisattvas all stretch out their hands to greet and welcome them. The Bodhisattva 'Beholding the Cries of This World', the Bodhisattva 'Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength' and countless other bodhisattvas then praise the practitioners' diligence of effort. Upon seeing all of this, the practitioners rejoice and jump for joy. Seeing themselves seated on these adamantite pedestals, they follow the Buddha and are reborn into this nation *in the time it takes for them to snap their fingers*. Having been reborn in this Pure Land, they see the grace arising from the spiritual lives of the Buddha and the bodhisattvas with their full host of auspicious signs in the radiance and splendor of the bejeweled forest where they proclaim and teach about the sublimely true nature of life's purpose. Having heard this, they attain an enduring awakening to this sublime nature of purpose that neither arises nor perishes and transcends their lives in this world. In the passing of a single moment, they appear before a succession of Buddhas from all the Pure Lands of the ten directions. Having served this procession of Buddhas, they receive a prophecy of their enlightenment from each of them. Upon returning to their own Land of Pure Bliss, they have learned and mastered retention of countless hundreds and thousands of prayers. This is called 'the higher level of spiritual rebirth for those with a higher grade of capacity'.

佛告阿難。及韋提希。凡生西方有九品人。上品上生者。若有眾生願生彼國者。發三種心即便往生。何等為三。一者至誠心。二者深心。三者迴向發願心。具三心者必生彼國。復有三種眾生。當得往生。何等為三。一者慈心不殺具諸戒行。二者讀誦大乘方等經典。三者修行六念。迴向發願生彼佛國。具此功德。一日乃至七日。即得往生。生彼國時。此人精進勇猛故。阿彌陀如來與觀世音及大勢至無數化佛百千比丘聲聞大眾無量諸天。七寶宮殿。觀世音菩薩執金剛臺。與大勢至菩薩至行者前。阿彌陀佛放大光明照行者身。與諸菩薩授手迎接。觀世音大勢至與無數菩薩。讚歎行者勸進其心。行者見已歡喜踊躍。自見其身乘金剛臺。隨從佛後。如彈指頃往生彼國。生彼國已。見佛色身眾相具足。見諸菩薩色相具足。光明寶林演說妙法。聞已即悟無生法忍。經須臾間歷事諸佛。遍十方界。於諸佛前次第受記。還至本國。得無量百千陀羅尼門。是名上品上生者。

14a Shāndào's Commentary on Visualizing the Higher Level of Spiritual Rebirth For Those with a Higher Grade of Capacity:

Next, the scripture begins with the highest level of spiritual rebirth for those with a higher grade of capacity. Again, first it brings up the subject, then it distinguishes its signs and finally it draws a conclusion. All eleven gateways are described here as well as a general conclusion:

- #1 Addressing those with different livelihoods (the laity like Vaidehī and the ordained like Ānanda)
 - #2 Their standing in terms of the resolve of meditation (samādhi, 定)
 - #3 The conditions for spiritual rebirth through faith
 - #4 The primary cause of spiritual rebirth: the three inner states of faith
 - 1. Utter sincerity
 - 2. Depth of conviction
 - 3. A vow of dedication
 - #5 The capacity for sustaining this resolve of faith
 - #6 The ways of sustaining it: the three outer practices
 - 1. Having a heart of loving kindness that is committed to moral virtue
 - 2. Reading and reciting the scriptures on the greater vehicle
 - 3. Cultivating practice of the six kinds of mindful recollection
 - #7 The amount of time involved in the cultivation of their actions (bhāvanā, 修)
 - #8 Dedicating the merits earned from this cultivation to spiritual rebirth in the Pure Land
 - #9 The speed with which the noble host comes to welcome them at the end of their lives
 - #10 The time it takes to for them to reach the adamant pedestals for the blossoms to open up
 - #11 The different benefits attained upon acquiring these adamant pedestals
- The general conclusion

#1-2 Addressing those with different kinds of livelihoods and distinguishing their standing in terms of the resolve of meditation:

On this, the scripture says:

The Buddha then spoke to both Ānanda and Vaidehī:

“Overall, people are endowed with nine grades of capacity for being reborn into this Pure Land to the west. First among these is the higher level of spiritual rebirth for those with a higher capacity.”

This is based on the first two of the gateways:

- #1 Addressing those of different livelihoods (the laity like Vaidehī and the ordained like Ānanda)
- #2 Distinguishing their standing in terms of the resolve of meditation (samādhi, 定)

#3 *The conditions for spiritual rebirth through faith*

On this, the scripture says:

"When sentient beings vow to be spiritually reborn in this nation, they inspire the three inner states of the faithful mind that serve as the means for this rebirth."

This is on generally bringing up the different conditions for spiritual rebirth, in four parts:

1. Being capable of such faith
2. Making a vow of dedication to spiritual rebirth
3. Maintaining a continuously inspired state of mind
4. Being endowed with the benefits of attaining this rebirth

#4 *The primary cause of spiritual rebirth: the three inner states of faith*

On this, the scripture says:

"And what are these three? They are:

1. Utter sincerity
2. Depth of conviction
3. A vow of dedication to be reborn in the Pure Land

"Those endowed with these three states of mind will surely be reborn in this nation."

In distinguishing these three inner states of mind that are the primary cause for the resolve of meditation (samādhi, 定) there are two parts:

1. The secret intent of the Blessed One (Bhagavan, 世尊) in adapting to the capacities of sentient beings and revealing the benefits to be attained is difficult to comprehend. Without the Buddha bringing up this question ('And what are these three?') and then answering it they would not have been able to attain this understanding.
2. The One Who Had Descended Into This World (Tathāgata, 如來) began here to answer this question by enumerating these three states of mind.

1. Utter Sincerity (abhiprasanna citta, 至誠心):

* 'Utter' (abhi, 至) here refers to the nature that is transcendental (tathatā, 真).

* 'Sincerity' (prasanna, 誠) refers to the nature that is existentially real (svabhāvatā, 實).

The Buddha desired to clarify that, in cultivating their practice, all sentient beings need to create a state of mind in which their thoughts, words and deeds are based on this nature of transcendental reality. 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. Greed, hate, stupidity, deception and treachery have a hundred different angles, and the nature of evil is difficult to eliminate. It infiltrates the inner mind like snakes and scorpions. Although one tries to elevate the consequence-producing actions (karmas, 諸業) of thoughts, words and deeds through cultivating the mind, when it is infiltrated with evil its practice of virtue is insincere, or 'mixed with poison'. This cannot be called the utterly sincere conduct that is based on transcendental reality. When one starts out with one's practice having a mindset like this, even though one painstakingly pushes the body and mind, urgently going about one's practice of meditation twelve hours each day and night, one is still like a person whose head is on fire, with all of one's virtues being mixed with poison. In trying to dedicate the merits of a practice that is mixed with poison to the seeking of rebirth in the Buddha's Pure Land it becomes an impossible task. Why is this so? Before, when the Buddha of Infinite Life was still honing the practice of his vow as the bodhisattva Dharmākara, in each and every moment all the thoughts, words and deeds he cultivated were everywhere based on an utterly sincere state mind and everything he strived for was based on the transcendental principles of reality. All that he offered up and all that he aspired to was utterly sincere.

And there are two kinds of utter sincerity, one that benefits oneself and another that is for the benefit of others. In terms of benefiting oneself, there are another two aspects:

1. *The Elimination of Evil* (akuśala prahāna, 捨惡): This refers to a determination to subdue and eliminate all the evils found both in oneself and others as well as those that corrupt the society as a whole. Whether walking, standing, seated or lying down, one imagines that “I am like the bodhisattvas in being determined to renounce all of these evils”.
2. *The Cultivation of Virtue* (kuśala bhāvana, 修善): This refers to diligently encouraging the cultivation of all the common and noble virtues found both in oneself and others.
 - a. In terms of words (vāk karma, 口業):
 - * With words of utter sincerity, one praises the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyus, 阿彌陀), including the dual grace that comes directly from the Buddha as a person and indirectly from the environment around the Buddha.
 - * With words of utter sincerity, one loathes and condemns all the suffering and evil in the three-fold sphere²⁵ (of sentient existence) and the six spiritual paths¹⁶ (in the transcendental sphere of life’s purpose) spanning from heaven to hell that are found in both oneself and others, including those that come directly from people’s actions as well as those that come indirectly from the environment around them. One also praises the wholesome virtues that arise from the thoughts, words and deeds of all sentient beings. When their actions are unwholesome, one should respect people but remain distant from their actions, not following them or rejoicing in their conduct.
 - b. In terms of deeds (kāya karma, 身業):
 - * In performing deeds of utter sincerity, one presses one’s palms together and reverently worships the grace of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life, that which comes directly from the Buddha as a person as well as that which comes indirectly from the environment around the Buddha. This includes the making of four kinds of offerings (to sentient beings).
These are: 1. Food and drink, 2. Clothing, 3. Medicine & 4. Shelter, a place to rest.
 - * In performing deeds of utter sincerity, one disparages and renounces all attachments to the three-fold sphere²⁵ of sentient existence that are found both in oneself and others, including those which come directly from people as well as those which come indirectly from the environment around them.
 - c. In terms of thoughts (citta karma, 心業):
 - * In thoughts of utter sincerity, there are the visualizations, deliberations and meditations that recall and keep the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life in mind as if the Buddha were before one’s very eyes. This includes those which come directly from the Buddha as a person as well as that which comes indirectly from the environment around the Buddha.
 - * In thoughts of utter sincerity, one loathes and renounces attachments to the three-fold sphere of sentient existence²⁵ that are found in both oneself and others. This includes those that come directly from people as well as those that come indirectly from the environment around them.

Unwholesome thoughts, words & deeds certainly need to be renounced with utter sincerity. However, when wholesome thoughts, words & deeds arise, they not only need to be made with utter sincerity but also without any attachments to them. Whether these actions are just inside the mind or outwardly expressed, and whether they are made consciously or from the darkness of the subconscious, they all need to be based on this utter sincerity. It is because of this that we speak of the ‘utter sincerity’ that is found in the mind of faith.

2. **Depth of Conviction** (gambhīra citta, 深心): This refers to the opposite but complementary aspects that define the depth of faith (adhyāśaya, 深信) and produce its inner tension and dynamics. These polar aspects imbuing faith with depth are two-fold as follows:
- a. *The weakness of one's own power:* With the determination and resolve of deep faith, one believes that one's own life has manifested all the evils and immoral acts of a common, ordinary person in the realm of life & death (saṃsāra, 生死) for a countless number of lifetimes (asaṃkhyeya kalpas, 阿僧祇劫)⁷ and that it is forever lost in this wilderness and drowning in its currents, without any hope for escape.
 - b. *The greater power of the Buddha's grace that descends from the words of the scriptures:*
 - * With the determination and resolve of deep faith, one believes that the forty-eight vows found in The Longer Scripture on the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Sukhāvatī Vyūha Sūtra, 無量壽經) embrace and accept all sentient beings and that those who entrust themselves to them without any doubts or reservations will be carried on the vehicle of the Buddha's power and be endowed with the resolve required to attain spiritual rebirth in the Land of Pure Bliss.
 - * And with the determination and resolve of deep faith, one believes in the Buddha Śākyamuni's teachings about the three blessings of worldly virtue, moral commitment & the higher calling, the nine grades of capacity for spiritual rebirth and the two virtues of mental resolve and mental dispersion, and one believes that this Buddha also attested to and praised the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛), including the dual grace that comes directly from this Buddha as a person (svakarma phala, 正報) and indirectly from the environment around the Buddha (parakarma phala, 依報), all as explained in this Scripture About Meditation on the Buddha of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Dhyāna Sūtra, 觀無量壽經). This causes people to rejoice and cherish the Buddha dearly.
 - * And with the determination and resolve of deep faith, one believes the Buddha Śākyamuni's teaching about the Buddhas of the ten directions who are as numerous as the grains of sands along the River Ganges, all attesting to the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛) and encouraging the remembrance of this Buddha's name so that all ordinary people can attain the resolve needed to be reborn in this Land of Pure Bliss, all as explained in the Shorter Scripture on the Buddha of Infinite Life (Amitāyus Sūtra, 阿彌陀經).

Putting the words of the scriptures into practice:

- * With the determination and resolve of deep faith, one hopes and reverently prays that all practitioners will wholeheartedly believe in the Buddha's words and they will have the determination and resolve to put this faith into practice, not just be concerned about their own lives and livelihood.
 - a. When the Buddha moves them to renounce attachments to their lives in this world, they will renounce them.
 - b. When the Buddha moves them to cultivate this practice, they will practice it.
 - c. When the Buddha moves them to propagate this practice elsewhere, they will go there. This is called following and obeying the true intent of the Buddha's teachings and so being a true disciple of the Buddha.

Depending on the scriptures' words:

- * And all those who are able to depend on these scriptures and practice them with deep faith will guide sentient beings without misleading or harming them. This is because the Buddha was full of great compassion for humanity, with words that were utterly sincere. Until one attains enlightenment (becomes a Buddha), one's knowledge and practice are not yet perfected. Those still training in the ten stages of grounding^{4D} have not yet fully eliminated the obstacles of emotional disturbance and cognitive dissonance (kleśa āvaraṇa, 煩惱障 & jñeya āvaraṇa, 所知障)⁹⁰ and the fruits of their vows have not yet been completely fulfilled. Even if common and noble people deliberate on the intent of the Buddha's teachings, they are still not yet able to completely comprehend them. Although they try to judge them for themselves, they still need to ask the Buddha for proof to determine their true meaning.
- * When the words are proved to be in accord with their true intent, the Buddha says "so it is, so it is!" (tathā tathā, 如是如是).
- * When they are proved to not be so, the Buddha says "your explanation of the meaning is incorrect".
- * Without such proof, the words are not determined to be right or wrong and are said to without real enduring value.
- * In being endowed with such proof, they are said to be in accordance with Buddha's true teaching.

When the Buddha spoke, whether the words were many or few, there was a teaching of the true doctrine, the true meaning, the true practice, the true understanding and the true knowledge, and there was no need to ask the bodhisattvas, those in the heavens of meditation or ordinary human beings to determine whether they were right or wrong. When Buddha taught them like this there was a definitive understanding of the doctrine. Bodhisattvas who taught of it had a partial understanding, with words that expressed the teaching incompletely. One should understand this. Therefore, now, when people look for advice on the conditions for spiritual rebirth, they must only have deep faith in the words of the Buddha Śākyamuni when determining and focusing on their practice. They must not believe in or utilize the teachings of any of the bodhisattvas that do not correspond with the Buddha's doctrine because the obstacles of doubt will lead to attachments and confusions and they will lose the great benefits that come from the attainment of this spiritual rebirth. This refers to the ways that those with a deep mind of faith build up a determination and resolve in their own minds, cultivating their practice in accordance with the teaching and always eliminating doubts and mistakes. They never turn back or waver because of any particular understanding or practice, or because of attachments to different views or courses of training.

On faith (śraddhā, 信) eliminating all doubts (vicikitsā, 疑)

Question: The knowledge of ordinary people is shallow and the obstacles caused by their confusion is deep. When they meet people with different understandings and practices who quote many different scriptures and discourses to provide objections and evidence that suggests ordinary people are so obstructed by their immoral actions that they will never attain spiritual rebirth, how do they deal with this problem and produce the faith, determination and resolve needed to make progress on the noble path and prevent a cowardly retreat?

Answer: When there are people who quote a lot of evidence from scriptures and discourses that suggests there will not be any spiritual rebirth, practitioners should answer them by saying:

“Virtuous one, although you cite the scriptures and provide evidence from them that there is no spiritual rebirth on the noble path, like those with selfish intent, your determination not to accept the existence of this rebirth is destructive and harmful. Why is this so? In fact I am also not without belief in these scriptures and discourses, respecting them and believing in all of them. However, when the Buddha taught this Meditation Scripture it was for a distinct place (the corrupt world), a distinct time (the latter days), to deal with a distinct capacity (ordinary sentient beings) and to realize a distinct benefit (attaining spiritual rebirth). And when the Buddha taught other scriptures, he was not teaching these Pure Land scriptures (including The Meditation Sūtra, the Shorter & Longer Sūtras on the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life, etc.). In fact, the Buddha taught many different doctrines to prepare those of specific spiritual capacities with maturities that were not the same. These (Pure Land) scriptures were generally taught to explain the practice of bodhisattvas to ordinary human beings (manuṣyas, 人) and divine beings in the heavens of meditation (devas, 天). Here (in this Meditation Scripture) there is the teaching about the virtues of mental resolve and dispersion that was only for Vaidehī and those ordinary beings living in the world of the five kinds of corruption and the five kinds of suffering⁵⁹ after the Buddha’s passing from this world, and it attested to the fact that they will attain this spiritual rebirth. For this reason, I now depend on this teaching of the Buddha and reverently practice it with singleness of mind. Even if you and hundreds, thousands and millions of others offer guidance that there is no spiritual rebirth, it will only increase my faith in its existence.

There are practitioners who go further by saying:

“You who are virtuous should listen well: I shall now teach you more about the determination and resolve of my faith. If there are worthy beings (arhats, 羅漢),³ self-enlightened beings (pratyeka buddhas, 辟支佛)⁴⁶ or those awakening sentient beings who have not yet reached any of the levels of grounding (bhūmi praviṣṭa bodhisattvas, 地上諸菩薩)^{4A-C} in the transcendental nature of life’s purpose, and whether there is just one of them, many of them or enough of them to fill the ten directions, and they all quote evidence in the scriptures and discourses to prove that there is no spiritual rebirth, I will still not have a single moment of doubt, as it would only increase my mind of pure faith in this teaching. Why is this so? It is because the Buddha’s words in these scriptures were made to produce a determination and resolve in its definitive meaning, not to refute it or destroy it.

And there are those who go further, saying:

“Listen well: If there are bodhisattvas at the first stage of grounding (bhūmi, 地) or even the tenth,^{4D} and whether there is only one of them or there are enough of them to everywhere fill the ten directions, and they all speak in unison, saying:

‘You said that the Buddha Śākyamuni revealed the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛) and praised him while also condemning attachment to the three-fold sphere⁵ and the six paths of this world.¹⁶ You then said he encouraged sentient beings to focus their minds on recalling this Buddha while cultivating other virtues, and that after this present life they would surely attain the resolve needed to be reborn in this Buddha’s Pure Land. This is most certainly a fabrication and it is impossible to depend on this belief.’

“Although I hear them say this, I will still not bear a single moment of doubt and it will only further increase my determination, resolve and complete faith. Why is this so? It is because these words of the Buddha are absolutely real, with a definitive teaching about the nature of determination and resolve. This is a real knowledge, a real vision with a real proof. This is not something to be found in the words of a doubting mind. And the Buddha’s words cannot be refuted or destroyed by the different views and understandings of any of the bodhisattvas. And if they really are bodhisattvas, they would not be contradicting the teaching of the Buddha.”

And there are those who go even further, saying:

“I put forward the following that practitioners should understand: Suppose there is a manifestation of a Buddha’s spiritual life (nirmāṇa kāya, 化佛) or even the reward of grace descending from this Buddha’s spiritual life (sambhoga kāya, 報佛). Then further suppose that this descends from one of them or enough of them to fill all of the ten directions with a splendor of radiance. Then suppose that each and every one of them raises up their tongues everywhere over the ten directions to say:

‘The idea that Śākyamuni taught of and praised the signs of the Buddha of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛) and that he encouraged all ordinary people to focus their minds on recalling this Buddha and cultivating other actions with a vow to dedicate the merits they earned towards attaining rebirth in this Buddha’s Pure Land is fabricated teaching and it is most certainly untrue.’

“Even if I heard this taught by the Buddhas, ultimately I would still not raise a single thought of doubt, of turning back or of fear that I would not attain rebirth in this land of the Buddha.”

Question: How can this be possible?

Answer: Each and all of the Buddhas are equally endowed with the same knowledge and vision, understanding and practice, realization and awakening, fruits of attainment and greatness of compassion. There are really no differences or distinctions among them. That which one Buddha determines is the same as that which all of them determine. For example, earlier Buddhas determined that sentient beings should abstain from the taking of life and the rest of the ten unwholesome acts (daśa akuśala karma, 十惡).¹⁸ Ultimately, when there are no longer any violations or violators of these transgressions, there will only be the ten virtuous acts (daśa kuśala karma, 十善)⁷¹ and ten distinguished practices (daśa viśeṣa carya, 十行) that are in accordance with the meaning of the six kinds of spiritual deliverance (ṣaḍ pāramitā, 六度).^{4B} Furthermore, when another Buddha later appears in this world, how can this Buddha turn the meaning of these ten virtuous acts into practice of the ten unwholesome acts? Through deliberating on the principle of the noble path, one clearly recognizes that there is no contradiction in the words and the actions of the Buddhas. Therefore, when the Buddha Śākyamuni encouraged all ordinary people to exert themselves in this life, focus on cultivating mindfulness and, upon renouncing their lives in this world, be resolved to attain spiritual rebirth in this nation of the Pure Land, the Buddhas of the ten directions everywhere similarly praised it, encouraged it and attested to it. This is because they all have the same essential nature of great compassion. In the teaching of each Buddha there is the teaching of all the Buddhas. In the teaching of all the Buddhas is the teaching of each of the Buddhas. In the teaching of the Shorter Scripture on the Buddha of Infinite Life & Light, the Buddha Śākyamuni praised the various kinds of adornments found in the Land of Pure Bliss. In this scripture he also encouraged all ordinary people

to be solely focused on recalling the Buddha's name and title for a period of from one to seven days so there would be attainment of the resolve (samādhi, 三昧) necessary to realize spiritual rebirth. Later, this scripture speaks of the Buddhas of the ten directions that are as numerous as the grains of sand along the River Ganges, lauding the Buddha Śākyamuni who was able to reveal and praise the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life while still living in the evil and faithless world tainted by the five kinds of corruption.⁵⁹

The Buddha Śākyamuni encouraged and urged sentient beings in the future to recall the name and title of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛) so that they would be certain of spiritual rebirth. There is ample literary evidence of this cited in these scriptures. And, lest sentient beings not believe the Buddha Śākyamuni, each and all of the Buddhas in the ten directions simultaneously extended their long, broad tongues everywhere over the billion-fold sphere of life's purpose (dharma dhātu, 法界)¹⁶, expressing the following heartfelt words to sentient beings.

"All of you should faithfully accept the teachings, the praise and the testimony of the Buddha Śākyamuni. Ordinary people should not worry about whether their moral failings or their virtues have been great or small, and whether the time they have cultivated this Pure Land practice has been long or short. Whether they have practiced it for a full hundred years or just from one to seven days, if they just focus on recalling the name and title of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛) with all their heart, there is no doubt that they will develop the resolve (samādhi, 三昧) needed to realize spiritual rebirth in the Land of Pure Bliss (Sukhāvātī, 極樂世界). Because of this, there is the same heartfelt testimony from all of the Buddhas about the teaching of this one Buddha."

This explains people's standing in terms of the *depth* of their faith.

A practice that establishes this faith:

There are essentially two kinds of practice:

- a. **The Primary Practice** (samyak pratipatti, 正行): When solely focused on the practice prescribed in the scriptures about spiritual rebirth in the Land of Pure Bliss, there is said to be its primary practice. There are five components of this primary practice:
 - #1 A single-minded focus on reading & reciting the Pure Land scriptures (svādhyāya, 讀誦):
 1. The Scripture About Meditation on the Buddha of Infinite Life (佛說觀無量壽經)
 2. The Shorter Scripture on the Buddha of Infinite Life (佛說阿彌陀經)
 3. The Longer Scripture on the Buddha of Infinite Life (佛說無量壽經), etc.
 - #2 A single-minded focus of meditating on the object of worship (cittasya ekāgratā, 專注): The flow of meditation on this object adorned with the two kinds of grace includes:
 - a. Seeking (vitarka, 尋) and discovery (vicāra, 伺) through the making of mental and verbal associations (samjñā, 想) in deliberation (cintanā, 思)
 - b. Visualizations (darśanā, 觀察) that go beyond these associations (asamjñā, 無想)
 - c. Remembrance with continuous mindfulness (smṛti, 憶念)
 - #3 A single-minded focus on worshipping the Buddha (vandanā, 禮)
 - #4 A single-minded focus on calling on the Buddha by name (nāma grahaṇa, 稱名)
 - #5 A single-minded focus on praising (stotra, 讚嘆) & making offerings (pūjanā, 供養) to the Buddha

These five are said to constitute its proper practice. And concerning this proper practice, there are also two complementary aspects:

- a. In being singly focused on #4 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 ***an act*** (karma, 業) ***of true resolve*** (samyak samādhi, 正定) because it conforms with the nature of the Buddha's (eighteenth) transcendental vow.
 - b. In relying on the four other components of this proper practice, #1 reading & reciting the scriptures, #2 meditating on the grace of the Pure Land, #3 worshipping the Buddha & #5 praising & making offerings to the Buddha, there are ***auxiliary acts*** (sahāya karma, 助業) that support and complement this act of true resolve.
2. **Disparate Practices** (miśra caryā, 雜行): Outside of this proper practice that produces and supports this true resolve, there are many other practices sustaining resolve that are said to be 'disparate practices'. When cultivating the components of the proper practice that produces this resolve, there is always an intimacy with and approach to a state of continuous mindfulness (smṛti, 念) that is said to be *uninterrupted* (ānantarya, 無間). When there are disparate practices, this continuity can become interrupted, with these practices actually causing a detachment from this resolve. Although these disparate practices may be dedicated to attaining rebirth in a Pure Land, they are not *necessary* to the continuity of this form of mindfulness and so they can cause such a detachment. There are practices that cause a sustaining of meditative resolve but, since they are directed toward different objects of worship (such as other Buddhas and their respective Pure Lands), they can actually serve to break the continuity of mindfulness on the Buddha of Infinite Life & the Land of Pure Bliss in those with insufficient faith.

And so the scripture speaks about the *depth* of faith.

3. **Arousing a Vow of Dedication** (pariṇāmana praṇidhāna, 迴向發願心):

In the mind that arouses a vow of dedication, all the thoughts, words and deeds from the past and present that have produced or are producing the cultivation of virtuous capacities are offered up and dedicated to attaining spiritual rebirth in the Pure Land. This includes all of the merits and virtue one has earned from them, whether they are of this world or beyond this world. It also includes accepting and rejoicing (anumodanā, 隨喜) in the merits and virtues that have been earned through the thoughts, words & deeds of others, whether they are common or noble and whether they are worldly or beyond this world. This vow to dedicate all the merit that has been earned through the cultivation of virtuous capacities by oneself and others to spiritual rebirth in the Pure Land must be made with an utterly sincere mind of deep faith. Because of this, it is called ‘arousing a vow of dedication’. And those who inspire various vows of dedication to spiritual rebirth in the Pure Land certainly need to visualize them with the determination and resolve of an utterly sincere mind. Because this mind of deep faith is adamant, people with different views, different forms of religious training and different understandings or practices cannot shake, shatter or break it. With determination, resolve and singleness of mind, they advance by taking refuge in that which is upright and true. They do not take heed in other people’s words that cast doubts about this faith or turn back out of weakness or cowardice. In turning back, they would fall from the path and lose the great benefits that come from this spiritual rebirth.

Question: How should one respond when people with different understandings and practices introduce disorder and confusion, expressing doubts and objections about this attainment of spiritual rebirth? Some of them may say:

“You and all sentient beings, including those living now and those from countless lifetimes in the past, have all committed immoral thoughts, words and deeds that have resulted in evil consequences for ordinary and noble beings alike. These acts have never been redressed or atoned for. They include the ten unwholesome acts, the five most consequential acts of evil, the four gravest wrongs, maligning and ridiculing the teachings about of the transcendental nature of life’s purpose,¹⁸ lack of faith in any purpose beyond one’s own interest (icchantika, 一闡提) and other violations of moral commitment, as well as different beliefs that are harmful and destructive. Since these immoral acts have bound us to the path of evil and the three-fold sphere of sentient existence,²⁵ how through merely cultivating this recollection of the Buddha (buddha anusmṛti, 念佛) can we possibly enter into a land that is without any afflictions and without any attachments to life in this world, and how we can possibly enter into the ranks of those who never turn back or realize an enduring spiritual awakening in a single lifetime?”

Answer: The number of the Buddhas’ teachings and practices exceed those of the particles of dust and grains of sand. The Buddhas are aware of the different capacities and feelings of sentient beings and adapt to conditions that are not the same. For example, worldly people believe in what they can see, that light is able to destroy darkness, space is able to contain existence, the ground is able to nourish life, water is able to sustain it and fire is able to destroy it. Phenomena like this are all found in the mutual interacting conditions that constitute the nature of life’s purpose. The eyes see thousands of different kinds of images and make countless kinds of distinctions. Even more so do the inconceivable powers of the Buddha’s purpose benefit sentient beings in many ways.

* Through the door of departure, one lets go of emotional attachments (and attains spiritual freedom).

- * Through the door of entry, one enters into emancipated knowledge and discernment (of the transcendental nature of life's purpose).

In adapting to the conditions that arise in one's practice, each person seeks their own path to this freedom of mind. Why would you lead me towards conditions that are not essential for my practice and will only create obstacles of confusion for me? In fact, the conditions for my practice are the ones that I want, not necessarily the ones you are looking for. The conditions for your practice are the ones that you want, not necessarily the ones that I seek. Therefore, with each person adapting the cultivation of their practice according to their own predilections, there is certain to be a faster attainment of emancipation from affliction. However, practitioners should also recognize that:

- * If they desire to *train in understanding*, they must learn about the nature of all purposes being everywhere inseparably connected, from the common (six paths)¹⁶ to the noble (three tracks)⁴⁶ to the ultimate fruit of enlightenment.
- * If they desire to *train in practice*, they must rely on conditional (provisional) techniques for which they have an affinity. This way their effort will be less demanding and they will attain a greater benefit.

The parable of the river in two parts & the white path across it:

And in speaking to all practitioners who seek spiritual rebirth, I will now further teach a parable to help protect their faith and guard them against the dangers of false and mistaken beliefs.

There once was a person who desired to head towards a place that was hundreds and thousands of li⁷⁹ to the west. Suddenly, while en route to this destination, he came upon a river in two parts that joined together at the point where he was and blocked his way. One part was of fire stretching southward while the other was of water that stretched to the north. Each of these parts of the river was a hundred paces across and of bottomless depth, and the two parts extended boundlessly to the south and north respectively. At the place where these two parts of the river met, there was also a white pathway that was perhaps four or five inches wide. This pathway served as a bridge that spanned the eastern and western shores of the river and was also one hundred paces across. Waves from the water swelled and splashed against the path from the north while flames of fire scorched it from the south. The waves and flames were ever crossing over the thin white path without a break. The place where these two parts of the river met was a vast, desolate swampland and there were no other people there who could be of any assistance. There were also gangs of thugs and packs of fierce beasts there who saw that this person was all alone, and they all vied to kill him. Fearing for his life, this person who had traveled westward suddenly saw that these two great parts of the river blocked his way. In his mind he thought to himself: "I can see no end to this river that stretches seemingly forever to the north and the south, but I can also see that there is a white path across it that is extremely narrow. Although, at one hundred paces, the eastern and western shores of the rivers are relatively close to each other, how can I possibly walk the narrow path that spans it without falling into the river? Today I shall certainly die without a doubt.

- * In trying to turn back (to the east), the gangs of thugs and packs of fierce beasts will close in on me.
- * In trying to escape to the north or south, the fierce beasts and poisonous insects in the swamp will vie to go after me.
- * In trying to follow the narrow path to the west I fear I will fall into either the northern or southern side of the river."

Seized with an inexpressible dread, he thought to himself:

"If I turn back, I will die. If I remain here, I will die. If I continue on, I will die. Since I will die no matter what I do, I would rather just continue along the path before me. Already being on this path, I must surely now try to cross this river."

Having made this determination, he suddenly heard a voice coming from the eastern shore encouraging him to go forward:

"Virtuous one, if you just walk across this path with determination and resolve, there will be no danger of dying, but you will surely die if you just remain here where you are."

And above the western shore there was a person beckoning him to come forward, saying:

"If you come straight ahead with singleness of mind and proper mindfulness, I can protect you. Do not fear the host of dangers that would come from falling into this river of water and fire."

Having heard the encouragement to go from the voice in the east and the beckoning to come from the person in the west, he sought to advance straight along the white path with his body and mind properly straight and balanced, with determination and resolve, and without the bearing of any doubt, cowardice or thoughts of turning back. However, upon taking one or two steps, the gang of thugs on the eastern shore shouted out to him, saying:

"Come back virtuous one, this path is steep and dangerous, and it cannot be safely crossed. You will surely die without a doubt. Don't worry, we have no evil intentions towards you."

Although he heard them shouting out to him like this, he did not turn back, look at them or consider their entreaties. Instead, he advanced with singleness of mind and a mindfulness of the path straight ahead of him. In a single moment, he reached the western shore and was forever free from all of these dangers. Seeing many good friends there, he rejoiced in ceaseless contentment.

An explanation of the parable:

This is the parable. Next, we will conclude on it by explaining its meaning:

- * *The eastern shore of the river* illustrates the burning house⁴⁸ of this world we must all endure together (sahā loka, 娑婆) while the western shore illustrates the precious freedom found in the Nation of Pure Bliss (Sukhāvatī, 極樂).
- * *The gangs of thugs and packs of fierce beasts pretending to be friends* illustrate the six senses and their six objects, the five projections of afflicted purpose¹¹ and the four elementary principles of physical form¹¹ found in sentient beings who are endowed with the afflicted deliberations and calculations of self-interest.
- * *The vast, empty swampland* where there were no people to help this person illustrates the place where there are only acquaintances that follow evil and are unworthy of being considered good spiritual friends (kalyāṇa mitra, 善知識 or 善友).
- * *The two parts of the river with water (to the north) and fire (to the south)* illustrate the attachments of sentient beings along the stream of afflicted consciousness:
 - a. Attachments to greed and appetites are like water (in which one can drown).
 - b. Attachments to hate and anger are like fire (in which one can burn).
- * *The white path that spans the river* between the north and south and is but four or five inches wide illustrates the pure vow of the unafflicted mind for spiritual rebirth that can elevate sentient beings from the emotional attachments (kleśa, 煩惱) of greed & hate.
 - a. Because greed and hate are strong, the expanse of water and fire to the north and south are illustrated as being very extensive.
 - b. Because the virtuous mind is fragile and weak, the white path spanning the river is illustrated as being very slender.

- * The waves of water are ever splashing against the path, illustrating the cravings and lusting thoughts that are ever stirring up, tainting and corrupting the virtuous mind.
- * The flames of fire are ever scorching the path, illustrating the hatreds and resentments that are ever rising up, burning up the wealth of purpose that comes from the merits and virtues one has earned through cultivation.
- * The person walking on the path straight across the river to the west illustrates those who have dedicated all of their actions and any merit they have earned through cultivation of their spiritual practice to rebirth in the Pure Land found in the west (and never turning back).
- * The person whose voice is heard from the eastern shore encouraging him to go straight westward illustrates the Buddha Śākyamuni (from the past). Having already entered into the greatness of spiritual freedom (nirvāṇa, 滅), people do not see him but because of his teaching about the true nature of life's purpose, it is possible for them to seek it out. This is the teaching being illustrated as a voice (the voice of the scriptures).
- * The shouting from the gangs of thugs calling for him to return after he has taken one or two steps illustrates people with harmful beliefs with attachments to specific understandings and practices. In teaching these false beliefs, they spread confusion and disorder and cause one to commit immoral acts, turn back from the straight path and lose their way.
- * The person over the western shore beckoning him to come forward illustrates the grace that descends from the past vows of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (guiding and encouraging us to future rebirth in the Pure Land).
- * Reaching the western shore in a single instant, seeing good friends there and ceaselessly rejoicing in contentment illustrate those sentient beings who have forever been drowning in the stream of life and death, mired in their own delusions for a vast number of lifetimes without any means of liberation. Having reverently accepted the order of the Buddha Śākyamuni to go westward from the east and putting their trust in the compassionate beckoning of the Buddha of Infinite Life, they have now faithfully obeyed the wish of these two Blessed Ones and have not paid any attention to the stretches of water and fire. Forever recalling the Buddha of Infinite Life with a continuous state of mindfulness, they have traveled along the noble path on the vehicle powered by this Buddha's vow. Having renounced attachment to their own lives in this world, they have attained rebirth in this nation of the Pure Land where they now see this Buddha's auspicious signs and celebrate with never-ending joy.

And so all those who practice this way, whether they are walking, standing, sitting or lying down, are forever cultivating their thoughts, words and deeds without question day and night, in all times and seasons, ever making this understanding and visualization. Because of this, they are said to arouse the mind of dedication to the realization of spiritual rebirth.

Dedication (pariṇāmana, 迴向) also refers to those already reborn in this nation who arouse the greatness of compassion by returning back to the stream of life & death in order to teach and deliver sentient beings. This is also said to be dedication.

This dedication (pariṇāmana, 迴向) therefore has two different but complementary aspects:

1. Going forth into the Pure Land (往相迴向): The dedication of one's life in this world to be reborn in the Pure Land and attain spiritual freedom (nirvāṇa, 涅槃); This is the original vow of dedication to forsake one's own enlightenment and turn all of one's merits over to entering into this Pure Land. It was made by The One Who Has Ascended, or Gone (Tathagata, 如去), exemplified by Dharmākara and Śākyamuni.
2. Returning from the Pure Land (還相迴向): Having been reborn in the Pure Land, one returns to the stream of life & death endowed with the grace of the Buddha's power to deliver all sentient beings to this Pure Land. This was the original vow of compassion (karuṇā praṇidhāna, 願悲) made by The One Who Has Descended, or Come (Tathagata, 如來), exemplified by the Buddha of Infinite Life (Amitāyus).

And so, in summary:

- * Upon being endowed with these three inner states of mind:
 - #1 Utter sincerity
 - #2 Depth of conviction and
 - #3 A vow of dedication,There is no practice of meditation that cannot be accomplished.
- * With this vow being put into practice, there is no way one will not be spiritually reborn into this Pure Land, and
- * In being endowed with these three inner states of faith, one will also understand the meaning of spiritual penetration (samāpatti, 通攝) through the resolve of meditation (samādhi, 定).

#5 *The capacity for sustaining the resolve of faith:*

On this, the scripture says:

“There are also three outer kinds of conduct (or ‘works’) sentient beings perform to sustain this spiritual rebirth.”

This is on assessing the capacity of sentient beings to take on this purpose and depend on the teaching to cultivate this practice of meditation.

#6 *The different ways of sustaining it - the three different practices:*

On this, the scripture says:

“What are these three? They are:

- 1. Having a heart of loving kindness that practices abstinence from the intentional taking of life and is endowed with precepts of commitment to moral virtue.**
- 2. Reading and reciting the scriptures on the greater vehicle of spiritual awakening and its broad universal principles**
- 3. Cultivating practice of the six kinds of mindful recollection**

This is about the three different ways to sustain this purpose. They are:

1. Having a heart of loving kindness (maitra citta, 慈心) that practices abstinence from the intentional taking of life (killing): There are many ways to kill. Some kill through their words, others through their deeds or thoughts.
 - a. Killing through words includes its ordering or approval.
 - b. Killing through deeds includes using one’s own body and hands to directly kill.
 - c. Killing through thoughts includes scheming and calculating different ways and means to kill.

Regardless if it is against any one of the four different kinds of living things,⁹¹ the taking of life is able to corrupt one with an immoral nature and so block rebirth in the Pure Land. However, in arousing a merciful mind towards all forms of life there is the bestowal of security, contentment and longevity on all sentient beings, and so it is the most excellent and sublime of all the precepts of moral commitment (śīla, 戒). This corresponds with the third part on the blessing of worldly virtue as described before (in the introductory section on the virtues of mental dispersion as demonstrated in the conditions of one’s conduct) as ‘a kind heart that abstains from the intentional taking of life’. There are two aspects in this virtue, the preventative virtue of abstinence and the pro-active virtue of practice:

- * Not taking life in one's own conduct is the preventative virtue of abstaining from it.
- * Teaching others not to take life is the pro-active virtue putting it into practice.
- * When the vow not to take life has been made by both oneself and others, there is also said to be the preventative virtue of abstinence.
- * When the taking of life has been completely eliminated forever it is called the pro-active virtue of putting it into actual practice.

Although there are these two virtues of preventative abstinence and pro-active practice, when they are only at the individual level, they are ultimately considered to be at the lesser level of mercy in actual practice.

Endowed with precepts of commitment to moral virtue (śīla, 戒):

- * For ordinary human beings (mānuṣya, 人), divine beings in the heavens of meditation (devas, 天) and those on the lesser track of only attaining freedom from affliction at the individual level, including students of the noble path (śrāvakas, 聲聞) and self-enlightened beings (pratyeka buddhas, 辟支佛), there are the lesser precepts of moral commitment.
- * For those with a generous heart who accept the higher calling of the greater track, there are the precepts of moral commitment to awakening all sentient beings to the transcendental nature of life's purpose (bodhisattva śīla, 菩薩戒).

In ranking them in terms of their moral commitment, those endowed with the precepts of the bodhisattvas have a higher capacity because their resolve naturally combines the capacities of those on the lesser track of individual moral commitment with this second, higher level of virtue (spiritually awakening sentient beings through the reading and recitation of the great vehicle scriptures).

2. Reading and reciting the scriptures on the greater vehicle (mahāyāna, 大乘) and its broad universal principles (vaipulya, 方等): This refers to the teachings about the natures and proclivities of sentient beings not being the same and their understandings about the transcendental nature of life's purpose consequently being different.
 - * First there are those who are only capable of the worldly blessings of cultivating a heart of loving kindness towards all sentient beings or embracing precepts of moral commitment to virtue (at the individual level).
 - * Then there are those who read and recite the greater vehicle scriptures (mahāyāna sūtras, 大乘經) (at the collective level) as their primary practice.
 - * In fact, through embracing precepts of moral commitment to virtue, all those of the five vehicles⁴⁶ can acquire and retain the spiritual capacity for perfect enlightenment (saṃbuddha, 三佛).
 - * The purpose of reading and reciting the great vehicle scriptures is to perfume people with knowledge and discernment of the myriad practices that can endowed them with the three merit-producing practices (trayaḥ bhadra carika, 三賢)⁴⁴ and the ten levels of grounding (daśa bhūmi, 十地)^{4D} in the transcendental sphere of purpose (dharma dhātu, 法界). When comparing the virtues and functions of the different tracks for spiritual awakening, they are each seen to have their own merits.
 - * Reading and reciting the scriptures of the greater track is also naturally associated with the third level of virtue (cultivating practice of the six kinds of mindfulness).

3. Cultivating practice of the six kinds of mindful recollection (ṣaḍ anusmṛtayaḥ, 六念): These also correspond with the blessings found in the higher calling on the greater bodhisattva track described before:

- a. Mindfulness of the Buddha (buddha anusmṛti, 念佛) refers to keeping the mind focused on the merits and virtues of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life in one's thoughts, words and deeds. The remembrance of all the Buddhas is like this as well.
- b. And with singleness of intent there is mindfulness of the transcendental nature of life's purpose (dharma anusmṛti, 念法) that is the realization of the Buddhas.
- c. And with singleness of intent there is mindfulness of the community of faith (saṃgha anusmṛti, 念僧), those awakening sentient beings to the transcendental nature of life's purpose (bodhisattvas, 菩薩).
- d. And with mindfulness of the moral commitments (śīla anusmṛti, 念戒) of the Buddhas, including the Buddhas of the past and the bodhisattvas of the present, there is the making of commitments that are difficult to make and renouncing of attachments that are difficult to renounce. This includes renouncing attachments that are on the inside (in one's subjective mind), on the outside (in the objective reality before one) and both inside and outside (in the interactions that involve both).
- e. Bodhisattvas who aspire to be mindful of the transcendental nature of life's purpose are not stingy with their lives or their wealth (sva kāya jīviṭa nirapekṣa, 不自惜身命). Those who become mindful of this recognize it and apply it to their training, first by becoming blessed with spiritual merit (bhādra, 賢) and afterwards by becoming noble and selfless (ārya, 聖)⁴⁷. This is mindfulness of letting go of attachments to one's life and one's livelihood (tyāga anusmṛti, 念捨).
- f. And through mindfulness of the divine beings in the heavens of meditation (devatā anusmṛti, 念天), bodhisattvas realize the ten levels of grounding (daśa bhūmi, 十地)⁴⁸ in the transcendental nature at the very end of their lives. Having practiced the most difficult practices for a three-fold countless number of lifetimes (trīṇy asaṃkhyeya kalpāni, 三阿僧祇劫)⁷ through successfully accomplishing countless practices of virtue, they then attain an anointing on the crowns of their heads (abhiṣeka, 灌頂).

Practitioners who are mindful of this think to themselves:

“From the boundless past, with others I have aspired to eliminate evil and walk on the path of those who have awakened sentient beings (bodhisattvas, 菩薩) to the transcendental nature of life's purpose. There have been others, more than the number of particles of dust there are on the earth, who have strived without being stingy with their lives or their livelihoods, walking the noble path, being diligent and causing the perfect fruit of enlightenment to ripen. But in reality, up until now, we who are ordinary beings have been forever wandering through the stream of life and death saddled with emotional disturbances (kleśas, 煩惱),¹ with the obstacles of evil becoming ever-more numerous and being blessed with only the slightest discernment of purpose (prajñā, 慧). This is facing the heavy darkness (of reality) with a clear mirror.”

Upon suddenly pondering these matters, one laments about it with alarm and grief!

#8 *Dedicating the merit earned from cultivation to spiritual rebirth in the Pure Land:*

On this, the scripture says:

“When sentient beings dedicate the merit they have attained from these three kinds of virtuous conduct to spiritual rebirth in the nation of the Buddha of Infinite Life, ...”

This is on each of them first being dedicated to seeking this place in the cultivation of their actions (bhāvana, 修).

#7 *The amount of time involved in the cultivation of their actions* (bhāvana, 修):

On this, the scripture says:

“they attain this rebirth in from one to seven days.”

This is on the amount of time involved in the cultivation of their practice (bhāvana, 修).

Some exert themselves for all their lives and some for just a single day, a single hour or just a single moment and, conversely, they attain rebirth after a single moment, a single hour, a single day or after a whole lifetime. The main idea being discussed here is the amount of time it takes to attain spiritual rebirth in the Pure Land, from the very first inspiration of the mind until one is committed for the rest of one’s life without ever turning back. And in possessing the merits and virtues of these three outer kinds of conduct:

- * Some possess one of them
- * Some people possess the first two (those with mind of loving kindness and those reciting the scriptures)
- * Some people possess the last two (those reciting the scriptures and those practicing mindfulness)
- * Some people possess all three kinds
- * Some people are without any of these three. These people can be likened to animals that wear the skins of human beings. They cannot really be called fully human.

And ultimately one should not be concerned about whether or not one possesses all three of these, just to dedicating the merits one earns from them to the attainment of spiritual rebirth in the Pure Land. This should be understood.

#9 *The speed with which the Buddha and the noble host welcome them at the end of their lives:*

On this, the scripture says:

“Because these people are diligent and courageous, by the time that they are reborn in this nation of the Pure Land, they see the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life, before them, together with the Bodhisattva ‘Beholding the Cries of This World’, the Bodhisattva ‘Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength’, countless manifestations of the Buddha’s spiritual life and a great assembly that includes hundreds of thousands of monks, students of the noble path and countless divine beings from the heavens of meditation who dwell in palaces made of the seven treasures. The Bodhisattvas ‘Beholding the Cries of This World’ and ‘Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength’ appear before them holding adamantine pedestals for them to sit upon. The Enlightened Being of Infinite Life emits a great radiance that illuminates the lives of these practitioners. The Buddha and the bodhisattvas all stretch out their hands to greet and welcome them. The Bodhisattva ‘Beholding the Cries of This World’, the Bodhisattva ‘Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength’ and countless other bodhisattvas then praise the practitioners’ diligence of effort. Upon seeing all of this, the practitioners rejoice and jump for joy. Seeing themselves seated on these adamantine pedestals, they follow the Buddha and are reborn into this nation in the time it takes for them to snap their fingers.”

This is on the speed with which the noble host comes to greet them at the end on their lives. It is in eleven parts:

1. First the meditation reveals the nation that they have returned to.
2. Next it reveals the diligence and resolve found in their practice of this meditation, and the relative strength of the merits and virtues they have attained.
3. The grace of the spiritual life from the lord and master of transformation (nirmāṭṛ, 化主), the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life, will then appear before them.
4. There is the further revelation of the Bodhisattvas 'Beholding the Cries of This World' (Avalokiteśvara, 觀世音) & 'Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength' (Mahā Sthāma Prāpta, 大勢至) and the great host of countless beings who all emanate from the Buddha of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛) to welcome them.
5. There are the bejeweled palaces of this great host adorned with the seven treasures.¹⁴
6. The Bodhisattvas 'Beholding the Cries of This World' & 'Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength' both hold adamantine pedestals (vajra kūṭāgāra, 金剛臺) for them.
7. The Enlightened Being of Infinite Life emits a radiance illuminating their spiritual lives.
8. After the Buddha has emitted this radiance and illuminated their lives, all of the manifestations of the Buddha (nirmāṇa buddhas, 化佛) extend their arms at the same time.
9. Having extended their arms and lifted them on to the pedestals, the Bodhisattva 'Beholding the Cries of This World' and all the other bodhisattvas voice praise and encouragement to them.
10. They see themselves being carried on these pedestals, following the Buddha.
11. The speed in which all this occurs is the time it takes for them to snap their fingers.

#10 Upon acquiring the adamantine pedestals, the blossoms open up:

On this, the scripture says:

"Having been reborn in this Pure Land, ..."

Upon being seated on the adamantine pedestal, there are no longer any obstacles that prevent the blossom from remaining open.⁹⁴

#11 The different benefits attained upon acquiring the adamantine pedestals:

On this, the scripture says:

"... they see the grace arising from the spiritual lives of the Buddha and the bodhisattvas with their full host of auspicious signs in the radiance and splendor of the bejeweled forest where they proclaim and teach about the sublimely true nature of life's purpose. Having heard this, they attain an enduring awakening to this sublime nature of purpose that neither arises nor perishes and transcends their lives in this world. In the passing of a single moment, they appear before a succession of Buddhas from all the Pure Lands of the ten directions. Having served this procession of Buddhas, they receive a prophecy of their enlightenment from each of them. Upon returning to their own Land of Pure Bliss, they have learned and mastered retention of countless hundreds and thousands of prayers."

This is on the different benefits attained after being seated upon the adamantine pedestal. There are three parts:

1. First they hear about the sublime nature of life's purpose and attain an enduring observation of it that neither arises nor perishes and transcends their lives in this world (anutpattika dharma kṣānti, 無生法忍).

2. In an instant (kṣana, 須臾) a procession of Buddhas appears before them, making a sequential number of prophecies (vyākaraṇa, 受記) about their enlightenment.
3. In traveling to their own nation and other places, they also attest to the two benefits of hearing about (śruta, 聞) and keeping this nature of life's purpose in mind (smṛti, 念) through mastering the invocation of countless hundreds and thousands of prayers that enable them to remember it (dhāraṇī mukha, 陀羅尼門).

The general conclusion:

On this, the scripture says:

"This is called 'the higher level of spiritual rebirth for those with a higher grade of capacity'."

Although there are the twelve parts described above that are not the same, they generally explain the meaning of the higher level of spiritual rebirth for those with a higher grade of capacity.

14b. The Scripture's Words on Visualizing the Intermediate Level of Spiritual Rebirth For Those with a Higher Grade of Capacity:

On this, the scripture says:

"Next, there is the intermediate level of spiritual rebirth for those with a higher grade of capacity. Although they do not necessarily accept, embrace, read and recite the scriptures on the universal principles of the greater vehicle teaching, they skillfully understand their meaning and their minds are not alarmed or shaken by their ultimate significance. With deep faith in the cause and effect of actions and their consequences, they do not malign or ridicule the teachings of this greater vehicle doctrine. They dedicate all of the merits and virtues they have attained in their aspiration to be reborn in the Nation of Pure Bliss. When the lives of these practitioners come to an end, they will see the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life before them, surrounded by the Bodhisattva 'Beholding the Cries of This World', the Bodhisattva 'Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength' and a great host of countless followers, all holding pedestals of a burnished golden color for them. The Buddha then offers each of them these words of praise:

'As a prince of life's true purpose, you have practiced with an understanding of the ultimate significance of the greater vehicle. Because of this, we have now come to greet and welcome you.'

Simultaneously the hands from a thousand manifestations of the spiritual life of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life are then extended to them. These practitioners see themselves seated on these pedestals of burnished gold. With their palms pressed together they stretch out their arms and praise the Buddha. In just a single moment, they are reborn in the pools of the seven treasures found in this nation. These pedestals of burnished gold are in great bejeweled lotus buds that open up over the span of a single night. The bodies of the practitioners also become a burnished golden color and below their feet there are lotus blossoms composed of the seven treasures. The Buddha and the bodhisattvas simultaneously emit a radiant splendor, illuminating the lives of these practitioners, whose eyes have opened up and become clear. Because of the merit earned in their past lives, they everywhere hear a host of voices that effortlessly teach deep truths of the greatest significance. They then descend from their golden pedestals and worship the Buddha with their palms pressed together, praising the Blessed One. Within seven days, they will attain a realization of the supreme universal enlightenment and never turn back. They will then be able to fly throughout the ten directions, serve the Buddhas there and cultivate their resolve of meditation. Within the span of a short lifetime, they will attain an enduring meditation on the nature of life's purpose that neither arises nor perishes and transcends their lives in this world, and a prophecy of their enlightenment will be revealed to them. This is called 'the intermediate level of spiritual rebirth for those with a higher grade of capacity'."

上品中生者。不必受持讀誦方等經典。善解義趣。於第一義心不驚動。深信因果不謗大乘。以此功德。迴向願求生極樂國。行此行者命欲終時。阿彌陀佛與觀世音及大勢至。無量大眾眷屬圍繞。持紫金臺至行者前讚言。法子。汝行大乘解第一義。是故我今來迎接汝。與千化佛一時授手。行者自見坐紫金臺。合掌叉手讚歎諸佛。如一念頃。即生彼國七寶池中。此紫金臺如大寶花。經宿即開。行者身作紫磨金色。足下亦有七寶蓮華。佛及菩薩俱放光明。照行者身目即開明。因前宿習普聞眾聲。純說甚深第一義諦。即下金臺禮佛合掌讚歎世尊。經於七日。應時即於阿耨多羅三藐三菩提。得不退轉。應時即能飛至十方。歷事諸佛。於諸佛所修諸三昧。經一小劫得無生法忍現前受記。是名上品中生者。

14b. Shàndǎo's' Commentary on Visualizing the Intermediate Level of Spiritual Rebirth For Those with a Higher Grade of Capacity:

Next, there is the intermediate level of spiritual rebirth for those with a higher capacity. Again, first it brings up the subject, then it distinguishes its signs and finally it makes a conclusion. There are eight parts:

- #2 A general introduction to their standing in terms of the resolve of meditation (samādhi, 定)
- #6, #7 & #8 In dedicating this cultivation of their actions there is attainment of a resolve of meditation directed towards the west
- #9 The Buddha of Infinite Life approaches with the noble host, holding pedestals
- #9 The speed by which the host of noble beings extend their arms - in a single moment
- #10 The time it takes for the blossom to open up - over the span of one night
- #11 The benefits attained here after the blossom has opened up
- #11 The benefits attained in other places
- The general conclusion

#2 A general introduction to their standing in terms of the resolve of meditation (samādhi, 定):

On this, the scripture says:

"Next, there is the intermediate level of spiritual rebirth for those with a higher grade of spiritual capacity."

This generally introduces the subject and identifies the spiritual standing of ordinary people with the next level of capacity for the greater vehicle teaching (combining the lesser vehicle with the greater vehicle).

#6, #7 & #8 - In dedicating the cultivation of their actions, there is the attainment of a resolve of meditation directed towards the west:

On this, the scripture says:

"Although they do not necessarily accept, embrace, read and recite the scriptures on the universal principles of the greater vehicle teaching, they skillfully understand their meaning and their minds are not alarmed or shaken by their ultimate significance. With deep faith in the cause and effect of actions and their consequences, they do not malign or ridicule the teachings of this greater vehicle doctrine. They dedicate all the merits and virtues they have attained in their aspiration to be reborn in the Nation of Pure Bliss."

This is on the sixth, seventh and eighth gateways, on dedication of the merits they have attained in cultivation of their actions during visualization of the Pure Land to the west:

- #6 The ways of sustaining this purpose
- #7 The amount of time involved in the cultivation (bhāvana, 修) of their actions (karma, 業)
- #8 The vow of dedication in the cultivation of their practice to rebirth in the nation of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛).

There are four parts:

1. Acceptance of this purpose is not uniform: Some read and recite the scriptures on the universal principles of the greater vehicle teaching (vaipulya sūtras, 方等經典) while others do not.
2. Skillful understanding of the meaning of emptiness in the doctrine of the greater vehicle:
Some hear that all purposes are everywhere endowed with the nature of emptiness.
 - * The stream of life & death (saṃsāra srota, 生死流) and the unconditional purpose (asaṃskṛta dharma, 無爲法) of spiritual freedom (nirvāṇa, 涅槃) are both endowed with the nature of emptiness.
 - * Ordinary people and noble beings are both endowed with the nature of emptiness.

- * The illumination (of wisdom) & darkness (of ignorance) are both endowed with the nature of emptiness.
- * The six paths¹⁶ of this world are endowed with the nature of emptiness as are those of the three worthy ranks of virtue (traya bhadra avastha, 三賢)⁴⁴ and ten noble levels of grounding (daśa ārya bhūmi, 十聖)^{4D} that transcend this world.

When they look into these, their essential natures are inseparable and they are without any duality. Although they hear this taught their minds remain undisturbed and they do not become stagnated in doubt.

3. Having deep faith in the cause & effect (karma & retribution) of suffering & contentment, both in this world and beyond it: These people do not bear any stagnation of doubt about the nature of cause & effect (karma & retribution) or any of the other principles of the noble path. If they did bear doubt in this, they would not attain the blessings of this practice. With all the worldly fruits and rewards from this practice becoming impossible to attain because of their doubts, how much more would this be so of spiritual rebirth in the Pure Land? This is associated with the third of the worldly blessings described in the second volume of this commentary, just prior to the explanation of the sixteen meditations.
4. Dedication of all their actions to spiritual rebirth to the Pure Land

#9 *The Buddha of Infinite Life approaches with the noble assembly, holding pedestals:*

On this, the scripture says:

“When the lives of these practitioners come to an end, they will see the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life before them, surrounded by the Bodhisattva ‘Beholding the Cries of This World’, the Bodhisattva ‘Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength’ and a great host of countless followers, all holding pedestals of a burnished golden color for them. This Buddha then offers each of them these words of praise: ‘As a prince of life’s true purpose, you have practiced with an understanding of the ultimate significance of the greater vehicle. Because of this, we have now come to greet and welcome you.’

This is on the Buddha of Infinite Life approaching them with the noble host, holding pedestals for them. It is in five parts:

1. The practitioners’ lives will not last very long
2. The Buddha of Infinite Life descends with the great host
3. Those that serve the Buddha approach the practitioners, holding pedestals of burnished gold (kāñcana kūṭāgāra, 紫金臺) for them
4. The Buddha and the noble host praise their cultivation with the same voice
5. Lest the practitioners harbor any doubt, the Buddha tells them ‘we have now come to greet and welcome you’.

#9 *The speed with which the Buddha and the host of noble beings extend their arms - in a single moment:*

On this, the scripture says

“Simultaneously the hands from a thousand manifestations of the spiritual life of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life are then extended to them. The practitioners see themselves seated on these pedestals of burnished gold. With their palms pressed together they stretch out their arms and praise the Buddha. In just a single moment, they are reborn in the pools of the seven treasures found in this nation.”

This is on the ninth gateway, the speed it takes for the noble host to come and welcome them with open arms. There are five parts on this:

1. A thousand manifestations of the spiritual life (nirmāṇa kāya, 化身) of the Buddha of Infinite Life extend their hands at the same time
2. Having accepted these extended hands, the practitioners are seated on the pedestals of burnished gold and see their own spiritual lives.
3. Having seen themselves seated on these pedestals, they press their palms together, look up and praise the Buddha and the great host
4. This all occurs in a single moment of thought
5. Seated on these lotus pedestals, they enter into the bejeweled pools of the Pure Land.

#10 The time it takes for the blossoms to open up - over the span of one night:

On this, the scripture says:

“These burnished golden pedestals are in great bejeweled lotus buds that open up over the span of a single night. The bodies of the practitioners also become a burnished golden color and below their feet there are lotus blossoms composed of the seven treasures.”

This is on the tenth gateway, the speed with which the blossom opens up.⁹⁴

- * Because their practice is stronger, those with the highest level of spiritual rebirth and a higher grade of capacity acquire an adamant pedestal (vajra kūṭāgāra, 金剛臺) .
- * Because their practice is a bit weaker, those with an intermediate level of spiritual rebirth and a higher capacity acquire pedestals of burnished gold (kāñcana kūṭāgāra, 紫金臺).

Upon being reborn in the bejeweled pool these latter blossoms open up after a single night.

#11 The benefits attained here after the blossoms have opened up:

On this, the scripture says:

“The Buddha and the bodhisattvas simultaneously emit a radiant splendor, illuminating the lives of these practitioners, whose eyes have opened up and become clear. Because of the merit earned in their past lives, they everywhere hear a host of voices that effortlessly teach deep truths of the greatest significance. They then descend from their golden pedestals and worship the Buddha with their palms pressed together, praising the blessed one. Within seven days, they will attain a realization of the supreme universal enlightenment and never turn back.”

This is on the eleventh gateway. With the blossom having already opened up, there is the attainment of different benefits. There are five parts:

1. The radiance of the Buddha illuminates their spiritual lives.
2. Having received this illumination, the eyes of the practitioners are opened up and see them clearly.
3. These people learn from the voices of this host, hearing about the transcendental nature of life’s purpose.
4. Having opened up their eyes and heard about this nature of life’s purpose, they then descend from their golden pedestals and approach the Buddha, singing praises of the Buddha’s virtues.
5. After seven days they will fully realize this nature of life’s purpose and be without any attachment to their lives in this world.

Seven days: Without this period of seven days of preparation, this nation may not yet be revealed.

Over the course of seven days: In fact, the supreme universal enlightenment (anuttara samyak sambodhi, 阿耨多羅三藐三菩提) is revealed in but a single moment of thought (eka kṣana, 一念 or 須臾). One should understand this.

#11 The benefits attained in other places:

On this, the scripture says:

“They will then be able to fly throughout the ten directions, serve the Buddhas there and cultivate their resolve of meditation. Within the span of a short lifetime, they will attain an enduring meditation on the nature of life’s purpose that neither arises nor perishes and transcends their lives in this world, and a prophecy of their enlightenment will be revealed to them.”

This is on the benefits attained here and in other places. It is in five parts:

1. Their lives reach out in the ten directions.
2. They serve each of the Buddhas there.
3. They cultivate many resolves of meditation (samādhis, 三昧).
4. Within one short lifetime (kalpa, 小劫)⁷ they will attain an enduring meditation on the nature of life’s purpose that neither arises nor perishes and transcends their lives in this world (anutpattika dharma kṣānti, 無生法忍).
5. Each of the Buddhas in these places will reveal a prophecy of their enlightenment (vyākaraṇa, 受記).

The general conclusion:

On this, the scripture says:

“This is called ‘the intermediate level of spiritual rebirth for those with a higher grade of spiritual capacity’.”

This is the general conclusion.

Although there are eight parts described above that are not the same, collectively they explain the meaning of the intermediate level of rebirth for those with a higher grade of spiritual capacity.

14c The Scripture's Words on Visualizing the Lower Level of Spiritual Rebirth For Those with a Higher Grade of Capacity:

On this, the scripture says:

"Next, there is the lower level of spiritual rebirth for those with a higher grade of capacity. They also believe in the cause and effect of karma and retribution and do not malign or ridicule the scriptures on the greater vehicle, only aspiring to awaken to the nature of life's supreme purpose. With a vow to dedicate the merits and virtues they have attained, they seek rebirth in the Nation of Pure Bliss. When the lives of these practitioners come to an end, the Buddha of Infinite Life comes to welcome each of them, holding a golden lotus blossom, together with the Bodhisattva 'Beholding the Cries of This World', the Bodhisattva 'Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength' and a host of followers. Then five hundred manifestations of the Buddha's spiritual life are created that all simultaneously extend their arms with the following words of praise:

'Prince of the True Purpose, because you have now aspired to awaken to the supreme nature of this purpose, we have come to welcome you.'

When they see these things, these practitioners see themselves sitting on these golden lotus blossoms. After being seated on them, the blossoms close up. Upon following the Blessed One they attain spiritual rebirth in one of the pools of the seven treasures found in this land. The lotus blossoms open up after a single day and night. Within another seven days, they get to see the Buddha. Although they see the Buddha, at first they do not see the host of auspicious signs and excellent refinements in clear detail. After a period of three weeks, they are able to see them thoroughly and hear a host of voices all proclaiming the sublime nature of life's purpose. Traveling throughout the ten directions, they make offerings to the Buddhas there, hearing them teach about it. In the span of three short lifetimes, they attain entry into illumination of the hundred-fold sphere of life's purpose and abide in joyfulness, the first level of grounding in its transcendental nature. This is called 'the lower level of spiritual rebirth for those with a higher grade of capacity'."

上品下生者。亦信因果不謗大乘。但發無上道心。以此功德。迴向願求生極樂國。彼行者命欲終時。阿彌陀佛及觀世音并大勢至。與諸眷屬持金蓮華。化作五百化佛來迎此人。五百化佛一時授手。讚言。法子。汝今清淨發無上道心。我來迎汝。見此事時。即自見身坐金蓮花。坐已華合。隨世尊後即得往生七寶池中。一日一夜蓮花乃開。七日之中乃得見佛。雖見佛身於眾相好心不明了。於三七日後乃了了見。聞眾音聲皆演妙法。遊歷十方供養諸佛。於諸佛前聞甚深法。經三小劫得百法明門。住歡喜地。是名上品下生者。

14c. Shàndǎo' Commentary on Visualizing the Lower Level of Spiritual Rebirth For Those with a Higher Grade of Capacity:

Next there is the lower level of spiritual rebirth for those with a higher grade of capacity. Again, first there is an introduction, then an explanation of its signs and finally a conclusion. It is in eight parts:

A general introduction to the subject

#6 The ways of sustaining resolve

#8 Dedicating the cultivation of the practice for rebirth in the nation of the Buddha of Infinite Life

#9 The speed with which the Buddha and the noble host greet and welcome them at the end of their lives

#10 The time it takes for the blossoms to open up - a single day and night

#11 The benefits attained here after the blossoms have opened up

#11 The benefits attained in other places

The general conclusion

#2 *A general introduction to their standing in terms of the resolve of meditation* (samādhi, 定):

On this, the scripture says:

“Next, there is the lower level of spiritual rebirth for those with a higher grade of capacity.”

This generally introduces the subject, identifying the spiritual standing of ordinary people with a lower level of virtue on the great vehicle.

This on faith in the transcendental nature of life’s purpose in terms of worldly virtue.

#6 *The different ways of sustaining this resolve:*

On this, the scripture says:

“They also believe in the cause and effect of karma and retribution and do not malign or ridicule the scriptures on the greater vehicle, only aspiring to awaken to the nature of life’s supreme purpose.”

This is on the sixth gateway, on the different ways of accepting this purpose. It is in three parts (*on different levels of faith*):

1. Here faith in cause and effect (karma & retribution) is indeterminate, not necessarily determined to be of one kind or another. Sometimes they have faith (in the great vehicle scriptures) and sometimes they do not. Because of this, the scripture here says that they ‘also’ believe in cause & effect of karma & retribution. Sometimes they have deep faith in this cause and effect like those described before. However, sometimes their faith is not deep enough and the virtuous qualities of their minds may backslide, allowing unwholesome qualities to rise up again. They are still subject to the cause and effect of conditional suffering and contentment when their faith is not deep enough. When they have deep enough faith in the existential reality of virtue, evil and the stream of life & death, there will be no serious violations in their moral commitment. And when they have deep enough faith in the unconditional contentment found in the Pure Land, they will never retreat from or lose their aspiration to realize the supreme path of enlightenment (saṃbodhi, 無上道心).
2. Although their faith may sometimes be interrupted, they never convey any doubts about or express any slander or ridicule of the scriptures on the greater vehicle. If they should bring up such doubts and slanders, they may not be rescued if even a thousand Buddhas surround them.
3. When the two virtuous practices described above do not work, they only loathe suffering and so wish to be reborn into the sphere of the Buddhas (dharma dhātu, 法界) with singleness of mind. Quickly fulfilling the bodhisattvas’ vows and practicing with greatness of compassion, they then return to the realm of life & death to deliver sentient beings everywhere. Because of this, they are said to be those who undergo ‘inspiration of the spiritually awakened mind’ (bodhi cittotpada, 發菩提心) for the first time.

These three meanings were already explained in the third kind of virtue (*in the higher calling of awakening sentient beings to the transcendental nature of life’s purpose*).

#8 *Dedicating the cultivation of their practice to rebirth in the nation of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life:*

On this, the scripture says:

“With a vow to dedicate the merits and virtues they have attained, they seek rebirth in the Nation of Pure Bliss.”

This is on the eighth gateway, first dedicating the merits they have attained from their proper practice of seeking the Pure Land.

#9 *The speed with which the Buddha and the noble host welcome them at the end of their lives:*

On this, the scripture says:

“When the lives of these practitioners come to an end, the Buddha of Infinite Life comes to welcome each of them, holding a golden lotus blossom, together with the Bodhisattva ‘Beholding the Cries of This World’, the Bodhisattva ‘Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength’ and a host of followers. Then five hundred manifestations of the Buddha’s spiritual life are created that all simultaneously extend their arms with the following words of praise:

‘Prince of the True Purpose, because you have now aspired to awaken to the supreme nature of this purpose, we have come to welcome you.’

When they see these things, these practitioners see themselves sitting on these golden lotus blossoms. After being seated on them, the blossoms close up. Upon following the Blessed One they attain spiritual rebirth in one of a pools of the seven treasures found in this land.”

This is on the ninth gateway, the speed at which the noble host comes to greet and welcome them at the end of their lives. It is in nine parts:

1. Their lives will not last very long
2. The Buddha and the host of bodhisattvas come to them, holding golden blossoms
3. The manifestations of the Buddha’s spiritual life (nirmāṇa kāya, 化身) all extend their arms at the same time
4. Those in the noble host all praise them with the same voice.
5. Through their *renunciation* of immoral acts they are said to be pure. Through their *cultivation* they are said to aspire to awakening to the supreme path of enlightenment (anuttara bodhi citta, 無上道心)
6. Although they observe the holy rites, because of their doubts they fear that they will not attain spiritual rebirth. This is why those in the noble host address them with the same voice, saying “We have come to welcome you.”
7. Having received these words, they see their own lives seated upon golden lotus blossoms, which then close up.
8. Upon following this manifestation of the Buddha, they are reborn in a single moment.
9. They then enter into the bejeweled pools of the Pure Land.

#10 *The time it takes for the blossoms to open up - a single day and night:*

On this, the scripture says:

“The lotus blossoms open up after a single day and night.”

This is on the tenth gateway, the time it takes for these blossoms to open up.

#11 *The benefits attained here after the blossoms have opened up:*

On this, the scripture says:

“Within another seven days, they get to see the Buddha. Although they see the Buddha, at first they do not see the host of auspicious signs and excellent refinements in clear detail. After a period of three weeks, they are able to see them thoroughly and hear a host of voices all proclaiming the sublime nature of life’s purpose.”

This is on the eleventh gateway, the different benefits attained after these blossoms open up.

#11 *The benefits attained in other places:*

On this, the scripture says:

“Traveling throughout the ten directions, they make offerings to the Buddhas there, hearing them teach about it. In the span of three short lifetimes, they attain entry into illumination of the hundred-fold sphere of life’s purpose and abide in joyfulness, the first level of grounding in its transcendental nature.”

This is on the benefits attained in other Pure Lands, also called the benefits that come later.

This includes illumination of the hundred-fold sphere of life’s purpose (śatadharma prakāśa mukha, 百法明門).⁹²

The general conclusion:

On this, the scripture says:

“This is called ‘the lower level of spiritual rebirth for those with a higher grade of capacity’.”

This is the general conclusion

Although there are eight parts described above that are not the same, collectively they explain the meaning of the lower level of spiritual rebirth for those with a higher grade of capacity.

14d The Scripture’s Words Concluding on the Visualization of Spiritual Rebirth

For Those with a Higher Grade of Capacity:

On this, the scripture says:

“This fourteenth meditation is called ‘visualizing spiritual rebirth for those with a higher grade of capacity’. Making this observation called a proper meditation. Making any other observation is called an improper meditation.”

是名上輩生想。名第十四觀。作是觀者名為正觀。若他觀者名為邪觀。

14d Shàndǎo’s Commentary Concluding on the Visualization of Spiritual Rebirth

For Those with a Higher Grade of Capacity:

On this, the scripture says:

“This fourteenth meditation is called ‘visualizing spiritual rebirth for those with a higher level of capacity’. Observing it this way is said to be a proper meditation on it. Observing it any other way is said to be an incorrect meditation.”

This is the general conclusion about the visualization of spiritual rebirth for those with a higher grade of capacity.

There are two stanzas of verse on this that say:

“People with a higher grade of capacity (for faith) in practicing this meditation

Seek rebirth in the Pure Land free from greed and hate.

Concerning the different distinctions of their practice there are three levels (of this faith).

There are five gateways (in its proper practice) that continuously support the three causes (of faith).

They are focused on this practice with diligence of effort for from one to seven days.

At the end of their lives, they appear on the vehicle of a lotus pedestal,⁹⁴ arising from the dusts of the six senses (below).¹¹

They celebrate upon encountering that which is difficult to encounter,

Forever realizing the unconditional nature of grace that descends from the spiritual life.”

Although there are three different ranks described above, they generally explain the meaning of spiritual rebirth for those with a higher grade of capacity.

15. Shàndǎo's Introduction to Visualizing Spiritual Rebirth

For Those with an Intermediate Grade of Capacity:

The purpose for this fifteenth visualization is to teach about spiritual rebirth for those with a capacity for moral commitment.

Before the text, there is a general explanation in eleven parts:

- #1 Addressing those of different livelihoods (the laity and the ordained)
- #2 Distinguishing their standing in terms of resolve of meditation (samādhi, 定)
- #3 Bringing up the conditions for spiritual rebirth
- #4 Distinguishing the inner states of mind that are the primary cause for this rebirth
- #5 Assessing the spiritual capacity for sustaining resolve
- #6 The way of sustaining this resolve of purpose through practice
- #7 The amount of time involved in the cultivation of their actions (bhāvanā, 修)
- #8 Dedicating the merits they have earned from their cultivation to rebirth in the nation of the Buddha of Infinite Life
- #9 The amount of time it takes at the end of one's life for the Buddha and the noble host to welcome them
- #10 The speed in the opening up of the blossoms of spiritual rebirth
- #11 With the blossoms opened up, there are the different attainments of future benefits

15a The Scripture's Words on Visualizing the Higher Level of Spiritual Rebirth

For Those with an Intermediate Grade of Capacity:

On this, the scripture says:

The Buddha again addressed Ānanda and Vaidehī:

"Next there is the higher level of spiritual rebirth for those with an intermediate grade of capacity. These are sentient beings who accept and keep moral commitments such as the five precepts of the lay life or the eight precepts of austerity, as well as those who cultivate the full precepts of an ascetic. They have also never committed any of the five most consequential acts of evil or other such immoral acts. With these virtuous capacities, they arouse a vow to dedicate the merits they have earned to spiritual rebirth in the World of Pure Bliss to the west. At the end of their lives, the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life appears before them surrounded by a following of many monks, emitting a golden radiance and teaching about the nature of suffering, emptiness, impermanence and selflessness. They also praise the virtues of leaving home and attaining freedom from suffering. The practitioners witnessing this rejoice greatly, seeing their own lives seated on the pedestals of lotus blossoms, with their heads remaining bowed and their palms pressed together, worshipping the Buddha. *Before raising their heads*, they attain rebirth in the World of Pure Bliss. The lotus blossoms open up *soon thereafter*. When the blossoms unfurl, they hear a host of voices praising the teachings on the four truths about life's purpose and find themselves on the path of those worthy beings who are endowed with the three kinds of illuminated knowledge, the six kinds of spiritual penetration and the eight kinds of emancipation. This is called 'the higher level of spiritual rebirth for those with an intermediate grade of capacity'."

佛告阿難及韋提希。中品上生者。若有眾生受持五戒。持八戒齋。修行諸戒。不造五逆。無眾過惡。以此善根。迴向願求生於西方極樂世界。行者臨命終時。阿彌陀佛與諸比丘眷屬圍繞。放金色光至其所。演說苦空無常無我。讚歎出家得離眾苦。行者見己心大歡喜。自見己身坐蓮花臺。長跪合掌為佛作禮。未舉頭頃即得往生極樂世界。蓮花尋開。當華敷時。聞眾音聲讚歎四諦。應時即得阿羅漢道。三明六通具八解脫。是名中品上生者。

15a Shàndào's Commentary on Visualizing the Higher Level of Spiritual Rebirth For Those with an Intermediate Grade of Capacity:

Next, the scripture addresses the higher level of spiritual rebirth for those with an intermediate grade of capacity. Again, first it brings up the subject, then it distinguishes its signs and finally it makes a conclusion. There are eight parts:

- #1 Addressing those of different livelihoods - the laity and the ordained
 - #2 Distinguishing their standing in terms of the resolve of meditation
 - #5 & 6 Their capacity to sustain this resolve and their ways of sustaining it
 - #8 Dedicating the cultivation of their practice to rebirth in the nation of the Buddha of Infinite Life
 - #9 The speed at which the noble host comes to greet and welcome them at the end of their lives
 - #10 The time it takes for the blossom to open up
 - #11 The different benefits attained after the blossom opens up
- The general conclusion

#1 *Addressing those of different livelihoods - the laity and the ordained:*

On this, the scripture says:

The Buddha again addressed Ānanda and Vaidehī:

This is on generally addressing those of different livelihoods (the laity and the ordained).

#2 *Distinguishing their standing in terms of the resolve of moral commitment:*

On this, the scripture says:

“Next there is the higher level of spiritual rebirth for those with an intermediate grade of capacity.”

This is on distinguishing their standing in terms of meditative resolve (samādhi, 定). These are ordinary people of higher virtue endowed with the nature and capacities of those on the lesser track of attaining freedom from affliction on the individual level.

#5-6 *Assessing the capacity for this resolve and the different ways of sustaining it:*

On this, the scripture says:

“These are sentient beings who accept and keep moral commitments such as the five precepts of the lay life or the eight precepts of austerity, as well as those who cultivate the full precepts of an ascetic. They have also never committed any of the five most consequential acts of evil or other such immoral acts.

This is on the fifth and sixth gateways, about the sustaining of mental resolve. It is in four parts:

1. Examining the different capacities for enduring observation with meditative resolve
2. Accepting and keeping the lesser vehicle precepts of abstinence, up to and including those of the ascetic (śramaṇa, 沙門)³²
3. Because the power of these lesser precepts of moral commitment is slighter, they cannot overcome the karmic obstacles caused by the five most consequential acts of evil.¹⁸
4. Although they keep the lesser precepts without violation of them, they may have other moral failings and so they need to constantly confess and repent to remain pure. This is associated with the second kind of virtue described right before the explanation of the sixteen kinds of visualization, on the making and keeping of moral commitments (śīladhara, 持戒).

In fact, when cultivating one's moral commitments, some do so at the end of their lives, some do so for a year, a month, a day, a night or just for an hour, etc. This time is not fixed. The main idea here is that at the end of one's life, one no longer violates them or blames others for one's past moral failings.

#8 *Dedicating the cultivation of their practice to rebirth in the nation of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life:*

On this, the scripture says:

“With these virtuous capacities, they arouse a vow to dedicate the merits they have earned to spiritual rebirth in the World of Pure Bliss to the west.”

This is on the eighth gateway of dedicating their cultivation to the seeking of spiritual rebirth in the western Land of Pure Bliss.

#9 *The speed with which the Buddha & noble assembly welcome them at the end of their lives:*

On this, the scripture says:

“At the end of their lives, the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life appears before them surrounded by a following of many monks, emitting a golden radiance and teaching about the nature of suffering, emptiness, impermanence and selflessness. They also praise the virtues of leaving home and attaining freedom from suffering. The practitioners witnessing this rejoice greatly, seeing their own lives seated on the pedestals of lotus blossoms, with their heads remaining bowed and their palms pressed together, worshiping the Buddha. Before raising their heads, they attain rebirth in the World of Pure Bliss.

This is on the ninth gateway, the speed at which the noble host welcomes them at the end of their lives. It is in six parts:

1. Their lives will not last long.
2. The Buddha of Infinite Life descends with a following (parivāra, 眷屬) of many monks (bhikṣuḥ, 諸比丘). There are no bodhisattvas here because the natural capacities of those on the lesser vehicle (focused on their individual attainment of freedom from afflictions) are still in sympathy with this host of beings that have lesser capacities.
3. The Buddha emits a golden radiance that illuminates the lives of the practitioners.
4. To teach them about the nature of life’s purpose, the Buddha also praises leaving home and the attainment of freedom from the hosts of suffering and the various kinds of actions associated with the worldly conditions in the City of the Royal House: suffering (duḥkha, 苦), emptiness (śūnyatā, 空), impermanence (anitya, 無常) and selflessness (anātman, 無我) (with the City of the Royal House (Rājagṛha, 王舍城) here being a metaphor for the state, or society). On the long journey of becoming protected from these things, they have left home (pravrajyā, 出家) and relied on one of the four divisions in the community of faith (laymen, laywomen, monks & nuns). Not needing to worry about all these things anymore, they dedicate their mastery of meditation that is without any obstacles to spiritual rebirth in the Pure Land. To help encourage them in the cultivating of their actions on the noble path, the Buddha praises them by speaking of them attaining ‘freedom from suffering’.
5. Having seen and heard this, they greatly rejoice and see themselves seated on lotus pedestals (padma kūṭāgāra, 蓮花臺), bowing their heads and worshiping the Buddha.
6. Before they raise their heads back up, they will enter into this nation of the Pure Land.

#10 *The time it takes for the blossoms to open up:*

On this, the scripture says:

“The lotus blossoms open up soon thereafter. ”

This is on the tenth gateway, the speed with which these blossoms open up.

#11 *The different benefits attained after the blossoms open up:*

On this, the scripture says:

“When the blossoms unfurl, they hear a host of voices praising the teachings about the four truths about life’s purpose and find themselves on the path of those worthy beings who are endowed with the three kinds of illuminated knowledge, the six kinds of spiritual penetration and the eight kinds of emancipation.”

This is on the eleventh gateway, the benefits that are attained after the blossoms open up.

There are three parts:

1. The bejeweled blossoms open up soon, because their practice of the precepts of moral commitment has been strong and diligent.
2. They hear a host of voices teaching about the transcendental nature of life’s purpose and praising the virtues of its four truths.
3. Upon hearing the teaching about the four truths, they attain the fruit of becoming truly worthy beings.

Truly worthy beings (arhats, (阿羅漢):³ This refers to those who transcend life in this world while still living in it to fulfill the true nature of their purpose. They are also said to be ‘without any attachments’ (āsaṅga, 無著). Despite their mortality, they have transcended life in this world. It is because they have attained the fruit of spiritual awakening that they are also without any attachments to spiritual freedom.

The three kinds of illuminated knowledge (tri vidyā, 三明): This refers to the knowledge of:

1. Past lives (pūrva nivāsa anumṛti jñāna sāksāt kriya vidyā, 宿命智證明)
2. Passage from death to rebirth (cyuty upapatti jñāna sāksāt kriya vidyā, 死生智證明)
3. The elimination of afflictions (āsrava kṣaya jñāna sāksāt kriya vidyā, 漏盡智證明)

The six kinds of spiritual penetration (ṣaḍ abhijñāḥ, 六通):²⁶

The eight kinds of emancipation (aṣṭau vimokṣāḥ, 八解脫):

These are eight progressively deeper levels in the transcending of attachments:

1. Freedom from unwholesome attachment to desires, emotional feelings, mental associations & other motive forces that arise in one’s inner mind and are projected onto external forms (objects).
2. Already free of inner attachments and so having reduced one’s vulnerability to them, there is freedom from the influences of unwholesome forms (objects) that arise in the external environment.
3. Total disillusionment, which is total objectivity; Already free from all unwholesome influences, one then even lets go of attachments to wholesome objects of form. This is freedom from attachment to the influences of all objects of form, even those that are beautiful, pure, true, meaningful, great or sublime.
4. Freedom from any known object: the boundlessness of empty space (ākāśa ananta āyatana, 空無邊處)
5. Freedom from any subjective knower: the boundlessness of consciousness (vijñāna ananta āyatana, 識無邊處)
6. Freedom from all mental associations, realizing the dissociative state, the nothingness beyond sentient existence (ākimcanya, 無所有)
7. Freedom from both mental associations and the dissociative state through realizing the boundlessness of the dialectical principle (naiva saṃjñā anāsaṃjñā āyatana, 非想非非想無邊處)
8. The completely transcendent penetration of resolve: complete freedom from any latent or conscious attachment to any mental associations or emotional feelings (nirodha samāpatti, 滅盡定 or 滅受想定)

The general conclusion:

On this, the scripture says:

“This is called ‘the higher level of spiritual rebirth for those with an intermediate grade of capacity’.”

This is the general conclusion.

Although there are the above eight parts that are not the same, collectively they explain the meaning of the higher level of spiritual rebirth for those with an intermediate grade of capacity.

15b The Scripture's Words on Visualizing the Intermediate Level of Spiritual Rebirth

For Those with an Intermediate Grade of Capacity:

On this, the scripture says:

"Next there is the intermediate level of spiritual rebirth for those with an intermediate grade of capacity. These are sentient beings who are able to embrace the eight precepts of austerity, the precepts of a novice ascetic or the full precepts of an ascetic for at least a single day and night with flawless demeanor. When they dedicate the merits and virtues they attain from their cultivation to the seeking of rebirth in the Nation of Pure Bliss, the fragrance of their moral commitment perfumes this cultivation. At the end of their lives, these practitioners see the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life before them with many followers, emitting a golden radiance and holding lotus blossoms for them composed of the seven treasures. The practitioners then hear a voice in the sky praising them, saying:

"Good sons, because virtuous people like you have followed and obeyed the teachings of the Buddhas of the past, present and future, I have come to welcome you."

The practitioners see themselves upon these lotus seats. The blossoms then close up and they are reborn in the World of Pure Bliss to the west. *Within seven days* the lotus blossoms will open up. Upon unfurling, they open up their eyes, press their palms together and praise the Blessed One. Upon hearing the Buddha teach about the nature of life's purpose, they rejoice and become stream-enterers. *After a half a lifetime* they become truly worthy beings. This is called 'the intermediate level of spiritual rebirth for those with an intermediate grade of capacity'."

中品中生者。若有眾生。若一日一夜持八戒齋。若一日一夜持沙彌戒。若一日一夜持具足戒。威儀無缺。以此功德。迴向願求生極樂國。戒香薰修。如此行者命欲終時。見阿彌陀佛與諸眷屬放金色光。持七寶蓮花至行者前。行者自聞空中有聲。讚言。善男子。如汝善人。隨順三世諸佛教故。我來迎汝。行者自見坐蓮花上。蓮花即合。生於西方極樂世界。在寶池中。經於七日蓮花乃敷。花既敷已。開目合掌讚歎世尊。聞法歡喜得須陀洹。經半劫已成阿羅漢。是名中品中生者。

15b Shàndǎo's Commentary on Visualizing the Intermediate Level of Spiritual Rebirth

For Those with an Intermediate Grade of Capacity:

Next, the scripture describes the intermediate level of spiritual rebirth for those with an intermediate grade of capacity. Again, first it brings up the subject, then distinguishes its signs and finally it makes a conclusion. This is in seven parts:

Generally bringing up the practice's name

#5, #6 & #7 Assessing their capacity to sustain resolve, the ways they sustain it and the amount of time involved in the cultivation of their actions

#8 The dedication of their cultivation to the seeking of spiritual rebirth in the Pure Land

#9 The speed with which the Buddha and the noble host welcome them at the end of their lives

#10 The time it takes for the blossom to open up - seven days

#11 The benefits attained after the blossoms have opened up

The general conclusion

#2 *Generally bringing up their standing in terms of the resolve* (samādhi, 定):

On this, the scripture says:

“Next there is the intermediate level of spiritual rebirth for those with the intermediate grade of capacity.”

This is generally bringing up the standing of those with this capacity. It refers to ordinary people of lesser virtue who practice meditation on the lesser vehicle (focused on their own individual attainment of spiritual freedom from affliction).

#5, #6 & #7 - *Assessing their capacity to sustain this resolve, the way they sustain it and the amount of time involved in the cultivation of their actions:*

On this, the scripture says:

“These are sentient beings who are able to embrace the eight precepts of austerity, the precepts of a novice ascetic or the full precepts of an ascetic for at least a single day and night with flawless demeanor.”

This is on the fifth, sixth and seventh gateways, assessing their capacity to sustain an enduring resolve, the way they sustain it and the amount of time involved in the cultivation of their actions. It is in three parts:

1. Accepting and embracing the eight precepts of austerity (aṣṭāṅga samanvāgatam upavāsam, 八戒齋)³²
2. Accepting and embracing the precepts of a novice ascetic (śrāmaṇera, 沙彌)³²
3. Accepting and embracing the full precepts (paripūrṇa śīla 具足戒) of an ascetic (śramaṇa, 沙門)³²

These three degrees in the precepts of moral commitment are all similarly observed perfectly for a single day or until the consequences from their immoral acts are alleviated, including those from the most serious violations. Their thoughts, words and deeds have a majestic demeanor and they make no mistakes during this period. One should understand that this is also associated with the second of the three virtues described right before the explanation of the sixteen kinds of visualization, on the making of moral commitments (śīla, 戒).

#8 *The dedication of their cultivation* (bhāvana, 修) *to the seeking of spiritual rebirth:*

On this, the scripture says:

“When they dedicate the merits and virtues they attain from their cultivation to the seeking of rebirth in the Nation of Pure Bliss, ...”

This is on dedicating the merits attained from their cultivation to seeking of the Pure Land.

#9 *The speed with which the Buddha and the noble host welcome them at the end of their lives:*

On this, the scripture says:

“... the fragrance of their moral commitment perfumes this cultivation. At the end of their lives, these practitioners see the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life before them with many followers, emitting a golden radiance and holding lotus blossoms for them composed of the seven treasures. The practitioners then hear a voice in the sky praising them, saying:

“Good sons, because virtuous people like you have followed and obeyed the teachings of the Buddhas of the past, present and future, I have come to welcome you.”

The practitioners see themselves upon these lotus seats. The blossoms then close up and they are reborn in the World of Pure Bliss to the west.”

This is on the ninth gateway, the speed with which the noble host comes to welcome them when their lives come to an end. There are eight parts on this:

1. Their lives will not last long
2. The Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛) arrives with a host of monks (bhikṣus, 比丘).
3. The Buddha emits a golden radiance that illuminates the practitioner's lives
4. The monks approach, holding blossoms.
5. The practitioners see themselves and hear a voice in the sky, praising them.
6. The Buddha praises them, saying:
 "Because you have had deep faith in the Buddha's words, and you have followed and obeyed them without any doubts, I have come to welcome you."
7. Having received the Buddha's praise, they see themselves upon lotus seats. Already seated there, the blossoms close up.
8. After the blossoms close, they enter into the bejeweled pools of the western Pure Land.

#10 The time it takes for the blossoms to open up - seven days:

On this, the scripture says:

"Within seven days the lotus blossoms will open up."

This is on the tenth gateway, the time it takes for these blossoms to open up.

#11 The benefits attained after the blossoms have opened up:

On this, the scripture says:

"Upon unfurling, they open up their eyes, press their palms together and praise the Blessed One. Upon hearing the Buddha teach about the true nature of life's purpose, they rejoice and become stream-enterers. After a half a lifetime they become truly worthy beings."

This is on the eleventh gateway, the different benefits attained after the blossoms open up. There are four parts:

1. The blossoms open up and they see the Buddha
2. They press their palms together and praise the Buddha
3. They hear the Buddha teach about the true nature of life's purpose and they attain the first fruit of a stream-enterer (srotāpanna, 須陀洹).³
4. After a half a lifetime (ardha kalpa, 半劫)⁷ they will become truly worthy beings (arhats, 阿羅漢).³

The general conclusion:

On this, the scripture says:

"This is called 'the intermediate level of spiritual rebirth for those with an intermediate grade of capacity'."

This is the general conclusion.

Although there are the above seven parts that are not the same, collectively they describe the intermediate level of spiritual rebirth for those with an intermediate grade of capacity.

15c The Scripture's Words on Visualizing the Lower Level of Spiritual Rebirth

For Those with an Intermediate Grade of Capacity:

On this, the scripture says:

"Next there is the lower level of spiritual rebirth for those with an intermediate grade of capacity. These are virtuous sons and daughters who fulfill their filial duty by supporting their fathers and mothers and practicing worldly benevolence and righteousness.

When the end of their lives approach, they meet good spiritual acquaintances who teach them about the sublime contentment found in the nation of the Buddha of Infinite Life and the forty-eight great vows made by the monk 'Treasury of Purpose'. Having heard about these things, when their lives come to an end they are reborn in the western World of Pure Bliss *in the time it takes for a strong man to flex his arm*. Upon being reborn here, *within seven days* they will meet the Bodhisattvas 'Beholding the Cries of This World' & 'Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength', hear the teachings about the true nature of life's purpose, rejoice and become stream-enterers. *After the passing of one short lifetime*, they awaken to the fruit of becoming truly worthy beings. This is called 'the lower level of spiritual rebirth for those with an intermediate grade of capacity'."

中品下生者。若有善男子善女人。孝養父母行世仁義。此人命欲終時遇善知識。為其廣說阿彌陀佛國土樂事。亦說法藏比丘四十八大願。聞此事已尋即命終。譬如壯士屈伸臂頃。即生西方極樂世界。生經七日遇觀世音及大勢至。聞法歡喜得須陀洹。過一小劫成阿羅漢。是名中品下生者。

15c Shàndǎo's Commentary on Visualizing the Lower Level of Spiritual Rebirth

For Those with an Intermediate Grade of Capacity:

Next, the scripture describes the lower level of spiritual rebirth for those with an intermediate grade of capacity. Again, first it brings up the subject, then it distinguishes its signs and finally it makes a conclusion. There are seven parts:

#2 Generally bringing up their standing in terms of the resolve of meditation (samādhi, 定)

#5 & #6 - Their capacity to sustain this resolve and the ways they sustain it

#8 The time when they encounter the noble host at the end of their lives

#9 The speed with which they attain the benefits of spiritual rebirth

#10 The time it takes for the blossoms to open up

#11 The different benefits attained after the opening of the blossoms

The general conclusion

#2 Generally bringing up their standing in terms of the resolve of meditation (samādhi, 定):

On this, the scripture says:

"Next there is the lower level of spiritual rebirth for those with an intermediate grade of capacity."

This generally brings up this level's name and distinguishes the spiritual standing of those with this resolve of meditation. It refers to ordinary people with distinguished blessings of worldly virtue.

#5 & #6 - *Their capacity to sustain this resolve and the ways they sustain it:*

On this, the scripture says:

“These are virtuous sons and daughters who fulfill their filial duty by supporting their fathers and mothers and practicing worldly benevolence and righteousness.”

This is on the fifth and sixth gateways, assessing their capacity for enduring resolve and their ways of sustaining it. It is in four parts:

1. Assessing their capacity
2. On them offering up filial respect and support to their fathers and mothers and serving their six closest kinds of relatives (their fathers, mothers, older siblings, younger siblings, spouses and children); This is associated with the first of the three virtues described right before the explanation of the sixteen kinds of visualization, on commitment to worldly virtues.
3. The nature of these people’s character is that of gentleness and virtue. They do not choose between their own interests and those of others, and they inspire loving kindness and concern for others when they see suffering and hardship.
4. People with this grade of capacity have never seen the Buddha or heard his teaching about the transcendental nature of life’s purpose, and they do not really understand what it is they are ultimately seeking. They only understand their own practice of offering filial respect and support. This should be understood.

#8 *The time when they encounter the noble host as the end of their lives approach:*

On this, the scripture says:

“When the end of their lives approach, they meet good spiritual acquaintances who teach them about the ultimate contentment found in the nation of the Buddha of Infinite Life and the forty-eight great vows made by the monk ‘Treasury of Purpose’ (Dharmākara, 法藏).”

This is on the eighth gateway, the time that they awaken to the supreme nature of life’s purpose (buddha dharma, 佛法) as the end of their lives approach.

#9 *The speed with which they attain the benefits of spiritual rebirth:*

On this, the scripture says:

“Having heard about these things, when their lives come to an end they are reborn in the western World of Pure Bliss in the time it takes for a strong man to flex his arm.”

This is on the ninth gateway, the speed with which they attain this rebirth.

#10 *The time it takes for the blossoms to open up:*

On this, the scripture says:

“Upon being reborn here, within seven days ...”

This is on the tenth gateway, the time it takes for these blossoms to open up.

#11 *The different benefits attained after the opening of the blossoms:*

On this, the scripture says:

“... they meet the Bodhisattvas ‘Beholding the Cries of This World’ & ‘Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength’, hear the teachings about the true nature of life’s purpose, rejoice and become stream-enterers (srotāpanna, 須陀洹). After the passing of one short lifetime, they awaken to the fruit of becoming truly worthy beings (arhats, 羅漢).”

This is on the eleventh gateway, the different benefits attained after the blossoms open up.

The general conclusion:

On this, the scripture says:

“This is called ‘the lower level of spiritual rebirth for those with an intermediate grade of capacity’.”

This is the general conclusion.

Although there are seven parts described above that are not the same, collectively they explain the meaning of the lower level of spiritual rebirth for those with an intermediate grade of capacity.

15d The Scripture’s Words Concluding on the Visualization of Spiritual Rebirth For Those with an Intermediate Grade of Capacity:

On this, the scripture says:

“This fifteenth meditation is called ‘the visualization of spiritual rebirth for those with an intermediate grade of capacity’. Observing it this way is said to be a proper meditation on it. Observing it any other way is said to be an incorrect meditation.”

是名中輩生想。名第十五觀。作是觀者名為正觀。若他觀者名為邪觀。

15d Shàndǎo’s’s Commentary Concluding on the Visualization of Spiritual Rebirth For Those with an Intermediate Grade of Capacity:

On this, the scripture says:

“This fifteenth meditation is called ‘the visualization of spiritual rebirth for those with an intermediate grade of capacity’. Observing it this way is said to be a proper meditation on it. Observing it any other way is said to be an incorrect meditation.”

This is the general conclusion about the visualization of spiritual rebirth for those with an intermediate grade of capacity.

On this, there are two stanzas of verse that say:

“People who practice this meditation with intermediate grades of capacity

Are seated on golden lotus blossoms after keeping precepts of moral commitment for
a single day or more

Or have provided filial respect and support to their fathers and mothers.

In dedicating the merits they have earned, they are taught about the cause for the joy and
contentment found in the western land.

The Buddha approaches them with a host of students of the noble path holding pedestals.

They reach the lotus seat of the Buddha of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛)

In baskets of blossoms endowed with hundreds of jewels

Within seven days or less, these three grades of lotus blossoms will open up and they will
hear testimony to the lesser truths about the nature of life’s purpose.

Although there are three levels of spiritual rebirth described above that are not the same, collectively they explain such rebirth for those with an intermediate grade of capacity.

16. Shàndǎo's Introduction to Visualizing Spiritual Rebirth For Those with a Lower Grade of Capacity:

Before the text there are eleven parts:

- #1 Addressing those of different livelihoods (the laity and the ordained)
- #2 Distinguishing their standing in terms of resolve (samādhi, 定)
- #3 Bringing up the different conditions for spiritual rebirth
- #4 Distinguishing the primary cause for this rebirth
- #5 Assessing their spiritual capacities for sustaining this resolve
- #6 The ways of sustaining this resolve
- #7 The amount of time involved in the cultivation of their actions (bhāvanā, 修)
- #8 Dedicating the merits they have earned from their cultivation to rebirth in the nation of the Buddha of Infinite Life
- #9 The amount of time it takes at the end of their lives for the Buddha and the noble host to welcome them
- #10 The speed in the opening up of the blossoms (of spiritual rebirth)
- #11 With the blossoms opened up, there is the attainment of future benefits

16a The Scripture's Words on Visualizing the Higher Level of Spiritual Rebirth For Those with a Lower Grade of Capacity:

On this, the scripture says:

The Buddha again addressed Ānanda and Vaidehī:

"Next there is the higher level of spiritual rebirth for those with a lower grade of capacity. These are sentient beings who have committed many unwholesome acts. Although they have not maligned or ridiculed the scriptures about the universal principles of life's purpose, these foolish people have committed many unwholesome acts without any shame or humility. When the end of their lives approach, they meet good spiritual acquaintances who praise the titles, chapters, and passages of the great vehicle scriptures with their twelve narrative styles. By hearing the words of these scriptures, they eliminate and are freed from the gravest consequences caused by the evil actions they have committed over thousands of lifetimes. Those with wisdom also teach them to press their palms together, stretch out their arms and say "I take refuge in the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life" ('Namo Amitāyur Buddhayaḥ'). Because they call on the Buddha's name like this, they are able to eliminate the consequences caused by the immoral acts they have committed over fifty million lifetimes. When this happens, manifestations of the spiritual life of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life are sent down to them as well as those of the Bodhisattvas 'Beholding the Cries of This World' & 'Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength'. Upon appearing before them, they praise each of these people, saying: "Well done, good son! Because you have called out the Buddha's name and repented for your immoral acts, we have come to welcome you."

With these words being spoken, the practitioners see a radiance and splendor from the manifestations of the Buddha's spiritual life that fill the rooms they are in. Upon seeing this, they rejoice and it is the means for them to depart gracefully from this life. Through the vehicle of the bejeweled lotus blossom, they follow these manifestations of the Buddha and are reborn in the bejeweled pools of the Pure Land. *Within seven weeks*, these blossoms unfurl and the Bodhisattvas 'Beholding the Cries of This World' and 'Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength' stand before them with greatness of compassion, emitting a wondrous splendor of light and teaching them the very deep scriptures about the transcendental nature of life's purpose in their twelve narrative styles. Having heard

them with faith and understanding, they aspire to awaken to the supreme nature of this purpose. *Within the span of ten short lifetimes*, they will attain entry into an illumination of the hundred-fold sphere of life's purpose and abide in its first level of grounding. This is called 'the higher level of spiritual rebirth for those with a lower grade of capacity' and 'getting to hear the names of the Buddha, the Dharma & the Saṃgha'. In hearing the names of these Three Treasures there is the attainment of this spiritual rebirth."

佛告阿難及韋提希。下品上生者。或有眾生作眾惡業。雖不誹謗方等經典。如此愚人。多造惡法無有慚愧。命欲終時遇善知識。為讚大乘十二部經首題名字。以聞如是諸經名故。除卻千劫極重惡業。智者復教合掌叉手。稱南無阿彌陀佛。稱佛名故。除五十億劫生死之罪。爾時彼佛。即遣化佛化觀世音化大勢至。至行者前。讚言善哉善男子。汝稱佛名故諸罪消滅。我來迎汝。作是語已。行者即見化佛光明遍滿其室。見已歡喜即便命終。乘寶蓮花。隨化佛後生寶池中。經七七日蓮花乃敷。當花敷時。大悲觀世音菩薩。及大勢至菩薩。放大光明住其人前。為說甚深十二部經。聞已信解發無上道心。經十小劫。具百法明門。得入初地。是名下品上生者。得聞佛名法名及聞僧名。聞三寶名即得往生。

16a Shāndào's Commentary on Visualizing the Higher Level of Spiritual Rebirth For Those with a Lower Grade of Capacity:

Next, the scripture begins with the higher level of spiritual rebirth for those with a lower grade of capacity. Again, first it brings up the subject, then it distinguishes its signs and finally there is a conclusion. There are nine parts:

- #1 Addressing those of different livelihoods - the ordained and the laity
 - #2 Distinguishing their standing in terms of resolve
 - #5 Their capacity for sustaining this resolve, based on the relative nature of their evil
 - #9 Meeting good spiritual acquaintances (kalyāna mitra, 善識知) as the end of their lives approach and hearing about the transcendental nature of life's purpose
 - #9 The speed with which the noble host approach and welcome them at the end of their lives
 - #10 The speed in the opening up of these blossoms - within seven weeks
 - #11 The benefits attained after the opening up of these blossoms
- The general conclusion
Bringing up further benefits that can be attained

#1 *Generally addressing those of different livelihoods - the laity and the ordained:*

On this, the scripture says:

The Buddha again addressed Ānanda and Vaidehī:

This is on generally addressing those of different livelihoods (the laity and the ordained).

#2 *Distinguishing their standing in terms of resolve:*

On this, the scripture says:

"Next there is the higher level of spiritual rebirth for those with a lower grade of capacity."

In distinguishing their standing in terms of resolve, this is a reference to ordinary people who create the lighter of the ten evil acts.¹⁸

#5 *Their capacity to sustain this resolve, based on the relative nature of their evil:*

On this, the scripture says:

"These are sentient beings who have committed many unwholesome acts. Although they have not maligned or ridiculed the scriptures about the universal principles of life's purpose, these foolish people have committed many unwholesome acts without any shame or humility."

This is on the fifth gateway, assessing their capacity for resolve. For their whole lives they have committed immoral acts with various levels of seriousness. It is in five parts:

1. Generally bringing up those with the capacity for creating evil
2. The host of evils created
3. Although they have committed this host of immoral acts, they have not maligned or ridiculed the scriptures about the broad universal principles of the greater vehicle (vaipulya sūtras, 方等經典).
4. Those who create evil are also without transcendental knowledge (jñāna, 智).
5. These foolish people have created this host of evils without bearing a mind of shame or humility.

#9 Meeting good spiritual acquaintances as the end of their lives approach and hearing about the transcendental nature of life's purpose:

On this, the scripture says:

“When the end of their lives approach, they meet good spiritual acquaintances who praise the titles, chapters, and passages of the great vehicle scriptures with their twelve narrative styles. By hearing the words of these scriptures, they eliminate and are freed from the gravest consequences caused by the evil actions they have committed over thousands of lifetimes. Those with wisdom also teach them to press their palms together, stretch out their arms and say “I take refuge in the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life” (‘Namo Amitāyur Buddhayaḥ’). Because they call on the Buddha’s name like this, they are able to eliminate the consequences caused by the immoral acts they have committed over fifty million lifetimes.”

This is about people who have been immoral all their lives but, at the end of their lives, meet good spiritual acquaintances (kalyāna mitra, 善識知) and hear about the transcendental nature of life's purpose. This is in six parts:

1. Their lives will not last long.
2. They suddenly encounter good spiritual acquaintances who teach them about rebirth in the Land of Pure Bliss.
3. These virtuous people praise the great vehicle scriptures (mahāyāna sūtras, 大乘經) with their twelve narrative styles.⁸⁹
4. Through the merit attained through hearing these scriptures, they are able to eliminate the consequences caused by the immoral acts they have committed over a thousand lifetimes.
5. Those good acquaintances who possess wisdom also teach them how to call on and remember the name and title of the Buddha of Infinite Life (by saying ‘Namo Amitāyur Buddhayaḥ’ - ‘I take refuge in the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life’).
6. By calling out the name of this Buddha, they are able to eliminate the consequences caused by the immoral acts they have committed over five million lifetimes.

A million lifetimes in the projections of their own purposes (pañca skandha, 五法蘊).¹¹

Question: Why does hearing these scriptures with their twelve narrative styles⁸⁹ only eliminate the consequences caused by the immoral acts committed over a thousand lifetimes while calling out the name of the Buddha in a single utterance eliminates those of five million lifetimes?

Answer: People who commit immoral acts have heavy obstacles (karma āvaraṇa, 業障).

The suffering of death then approaches to further torment them. Although there are many virtuous people who recite and teach the scriptures, those who hear them and take

heed of them are consumed by many distractions (because there are many words and many different facets of the teaching). Because the focus of their minds is dispersed by these distractions, there is only a limited elimination of the consequences that have been caused by their immoral acts. On the other hand, because the Buddha has but a single name, it is better able to take hold of their scattered minds and settle them. The invocation of the Buddha's name is therefore taught to better create proper remembrance (samyak smṛti, 正念). Because their minds have been saddled with such heavy karmic obstacles, the remembrance of the Buddha's name is more efficacious in eliminating the consequences that have been caused by the immoral acts they have committed over so many lifetimes.

#9 *The speed with which the Buddha and the noble host approach and welcome them at the end of their lives:*

On this, the scripture says:

“When this happens, manifestations of the spiritual life of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life are sent down to them as well as those of the Bodhisattvas ‘Beholding the Cries of This World’ and ‘Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength’.

Upon appearing before them, they praise each of these people, saying:

“Well done, good son! Because you have called out the Buddha's name and repented for your immoral acts, we have come to welcome you.”

With these words being spoken, the practitioners see a radiance and splendor from the manifestations of the Buddha's spiritual life that fill the rooms they are in. Upon seeing this, they rejoice and it is the means for them to depart gracefully from this life.

Through the vehicle of the bejeweled lotus blossom, they follow these manifestations of the Buddha and are reborn in the bejeweled pools of the Pure Land.”

This is on the ninth gateway, the speed with which the host of the manifestations from the spiritual lives of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas come to greet them at the end of their lives. It is in six parts.

1. When the practitioner calls out the Buddha's name, a host of manifestations from the grace of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛) descend and appear before them, teaching them about the transcendental nature of life's purpose.
2. On revealing their lives, this host of manifested beings praise those who have called on this Buddha's name, saying “Well done, good son (sādhū kula putra!, 善哉善男子)!”.
3. When they say “We have come to welcome you” these manifestations of the Buddha are heard praising the merit of calling on the Buddha's name. There is no discussion here of them praising them because they have listened to the scripture. In fact, in seeking to grasp the intent of the Buddha's vow, there is only encouragement to invoke the Buddha's name with proper remembrance (samyak smṛti, 正念) to quickly attain this spiritual rebirth. This is not same as the actions found in the disparate practices (miśra caryā, 雜行) involving mental dispersion (vikṣepa, 散). In this scripture and many others there is widespread praise and encouragement of calling on the Buddha's name, saying that it is essential for attaining this benefit of spiritual rebirth. One should understand this.
4. Having received these words from the host of manifested beings, they also see a radiant splendor that fills the rooms they are in.
5. Experiencing this sublime splendor, they are illuminated with grace and their lives soon end.
6. They are then reborn through the Buddha's lotus blossoms in the bejeweled pools.⁹⁴

#10 The speed in the opening up of these blossoms - within seven weeks:

On this, the scripture says:

"Within seven weeks, ..."

This is on the tenth gateway, the speed in which these blossoms open up.

#11 The benefits attained after the opening up of these blossoms:

On this, the scripture says:

"... these blossoms unfurl and the Bodhisattvas 'Beholding the Cries of This World' and 'Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength' stand before them with greatness of compassion, emitting a wondrous splendor of light and teaching them the very deep scriptures about the transcendental nature of life's purpose in their twelve narrative styles. Having heard them with faith and understanding, they aspire to awaken to the supreme nature of this purpose. Within the span of ten short lifetimes, they will attain entry into an illumination of the hundred-fold sphere of life's purpose and abide in its first level of grounding."

This is on the eleventh gateway, the benefits attained after the blossoms open, in five parts.

1. First the Bodhisattvas 'Beholding the Cries of This World' and 'Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength' emit a radiant splendor.
2. These bodhisattvas then approach the practitioners on their bejeweled blossom seats.
3. They first teach them about spiritual rebirth in the Land of Pure Bliss.
4. Having heard them, the practitioners understand them and their minds (suddenly) awaken to the transcendental nature of life's purpose (sambodhi, 無上道心).
5. Over the course of many lifetimes (kalpas, 劫)⁷ they penetrate the door to illumination of the hundred-fold sphere of life's purpose (śata dharma prakāśa mukha, 百法明門).⁹²

This is abiding in a transcendental vision (darśana mārga, 見道) of the nature of life's purpose that is beyond any speculations (nirvikalpa, 無分別)

The general conclusion:

On this, the scripture says:

"This is called 'the higher level of spiritual rebirth for those with a lower grade of capacity'"

This is the general conclusion.

Bringing up further benefits that can be attained:

On this, the scripture says:

... and 'getting to hear the names of the Buddha, the Dharma & the Saṃgha'. In hearing the names of these Three Treasures there is the attainment of this spiritual rebirth."

This brings up further benefits for practitioners. Not only can they attain spiritual rebirth through recalling the enlightened being (buddha anusmṛti, 念佛), they can also do so through recalling the transcendental nature of life's purpose (dharma anusmṛti, 念法) and recalling those in the community of faith (saṃgha anusmṛti, 念僧).

Although there are the nine parts described above that are not the same, collectively they explain the meaning of the higher level of spiritual rebirth for those with a lower grade of capacity.

16b The Scripture's Words on Visualizing the Intermediate Level of Spiritual Rebirth For Those with a Lower Grade of Capacity:

On this, the scripture says:

The Buddha again addressed Ānanda and Vaidehī:

"Next there is the intermediate level of spiritual rebirth for those with a lower grade of capacity. These are sentient beings who have:

- * Violated precepts of moral commitment, including the five precepts to leading a morally virtuous life among the laity, the eight precepts of those committed to an austere life and the many precepts observed by those committed to an ascetic life.
- * Stolen property belonging collectively to the community of faith or taken the goods of its individual members
- * Taught others of unclean purposes without any shame or humility, and
- * Glorified themselves in evil purposes.

Because they have committed these immoral acts they have fallen into hell. As the end of their lives approach and the fires of hell close in on them all at once, they meet good spiritual acquaintances with greatness of mercy and compassion who praise the name of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛) and teach about this Buddha's ten powers of transcendental knowledge and other awesome virtues. Broadly praising the powers found in the radiance and splendor of grace that descend from the peerless spiritual life of this Buddha, they also praise the five projections of its purpose:

1. The projections of its moral commitment
2. The projections of its meditative resolve
3. The projections of its transcendental discernment
4. The projections of its spiritual emancipation, and
5. The projections of its emancipated knowledge and vision of the transcendental nature of life's purpose.

Having heard about this, these people are able to eliminate the consequences that have arisen from the immoral acts they have committed along the stream of life and death over eighty million lifetimes. The fierce fires of hell are transformed into cool breezes that blow down divine blossoms from heaven. On all these blossoms there are manifestations of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas, greeting and welcoming them. In an instant they are reborn inside lotus blossoms that enter the pools of the seven treasures found in the Pure Land. After a span of six lifetimes, these lotus blossoms unfurl and the Bodhisattvas 'Beholding the Cries of This World' and 'Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength' teach them the very deep scriptures about the greater vehicle of spiritual awakening with the comforting sounds that come from the voice of the creator. Having heard them, they aspire to awaken to the supreme nature of life's purpose. This is called 'the intermediate level of spiritual rebirth for those with a lower grade of capacity'."

佛告阿難及韋提希。下品中生者。或有眾生。毀犯五戒八戒及具足戒。如此愚人。偷僧祇物盜現前僧物。不淨說法無有慚愧。以諸惡法而自莊嚴。如此罪人。以惡業故應墮地獄。命欲終時。地獄眾火一時俱至。遇善知識以大慈悲。即為讚說阿彌陀佛十力威德。廣讚彼佛光明神力。亦讚戒定慧解脫解脫知見。此人聞已除八十億劫生死之罪。地獄猛火化為涼風。吹諸天華。華上皆有化佛菩薩。迎接此人。如一念頃。即得往生七寶池中蓮花之內。經於六劫蓮花乃敷當華敷時。觀世音大勢至。以梵音聲安慰彼人。為說大乘甚深經典。聞此法已。應時即發無上道心。是名下品中生者。

16b Shàndǎo's Commentary on Visualizing the Intermediate Level of Spiritual Rebirth For Those with a Lower Grade of Capacity:

Next, the scripture describes the intermediate level of spiritual rebirth for those with a lower grade of capacity. Again, first it brings up the subject, then it distinguishes its signs and finally it makes a conclusion. There are seven parts:

- #1 Addressing those of different livelihoods (the ordained and the laity)
 - #2 Distinguishing their standing in terms of resolve
 - #5 & #6 - Assessing their capacity to create actions with spiritual consequences (karma, 業)
 - #9 At the end of their lives, they will meet good spiritual acquaintances who approach and welcome them
 - #10 The time it takes for the blossoms to open up - six lifetimes⁷
 - #11 The benefits attained after the blossoms have opened up
- The general conclusion

#1 *Addressing those of different livelihoods (the ordained and the laity):*

On this, the scripture says:

The Buddha again addressed Ānanda and Vaidehī:

This generally addresses those of different livelihoods (the ordained and the laity).

#2 *Distinguishing their standing in terms of resolve:*

On this, the scripture says:

"Next there is the intermediate level of spiritual rebirth for those with a lower grade of capacity. "

In distinguishing their standing in terms of resolve, these are ordinary people who have violated precepts of moral commitment and also committed further immoral acts.

#5 & #6 - *Assessing the capacity to create actions with spiritual consequences* (karma, 業):

On this, the scripture says:

"These are sentient beings who have:

- * **Violated precepts of moral commitment, including the five precepts to leading a morally virtuous life among the laity, the eight precepts of those committed to an austere life and the many precepts observed by those committed to an ascetic life.**
- * **Stolen property belonging collectively to the community of faith or taken the goods of its individual members**
- * **Taught others of unclean purposes without any shame or humility, and**
- * **Glorified themselves in evil purposes.**

Because they have committed these immoral acts they have fallen into hell."

This is on the fifth and sixth gateways, assessing their capacity of resolve based in the evil acts they have committed. It is in seven parts:

1. Generally bringing up those with a capacity for creating evil acts (akuśala karma, 惡業)
2. The many violations of the precepts committed
3. Stealing community property (sāṃghika, 僧物) and robbing its individual members
4. Teaching others how to engage in dishonest livelihoods
5. Generally being without shame or humility
6. Simultaneously creating a host of immoral acts with:
 - * Evil intent arising internally from the thoughts of the mind
 - * Evil acts committed externally through words of the mouth and deeds of the bodyWith their own lives being without any virtue, they also detest everybody else they see. Because of this, the scripture speaks of them 'glorifying themselves in evil purposes'.
7. In assessing these states of immorality, they are certain to enter into hell (naraka, 地獄).

#9 At the end of their lives, they will meet good spiritual acquaintances who will approach and welcome them:

On this, the scripture says:

“As the end of their lives approach and the fires of hell close in on them all at once, they meet good spiritual acquaintances with greatness of mercy and compassion who praise the name of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛) and teach about this Buddha’s ten powers of transcendental knowledge and other awesome virtues. Broadly praising the powers found in the radiance and splendor of grace that descend from the peerless spiritual life of this Buddha, they also praise the five projections of its purpose (asamasama pañca skandha, 五分法身):⁹³

- 1. The projections of its moral commitment (śīla skandha, 戒身)**
- 2. The projections of its meditative resolve (samādhi skandha, 定身)**
- 3. The projections of its transcendental discernment (prajñā skandha, 慧身)**
- 4. The projections of its spiritual emancipation (vimukti skandha, 解脫身), and**
- 5. The projections of its emancipated knowledge and vision (vimukti jñāna darśana skandha, 解脫知見身) of the transcendental nature of life’s purpose.**

Having heard about this, these people are able to eliminate the consequences that have arisen from the immoral acts they have committed along the stream of life and death over eighty million lifetimes. The fierce fires of hell are transformed into cool breezes that blow down divine blossoms from heaven. On all these blossoms there are manifestations of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas, greeting and welcoming them. In an instant they are reborn ...”

This is on the ninth gateway, on the Buddha approaching and welcoming them at the end of their lives. There are nine parts on this:

1. The lives of these immoral people will not last long.
2. The fires of hell approach them.
3. When these fires appear, they meet good spiritual acquaintances (kalyāna mitra, 善識知).
4. These good spiritual acquaintances teach them about the merits and virtues found in the grace that descends from the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life.⁹³
5. Having heard praise about the name and title of this enlightened being (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛), these people eliminate the consequences that have arisen from many lifetimes of committing immoral acts.
6. As a result of this, the raging fires of hell are transformed into gentle breezes from heaven.
7. Divine blossoms rain down, following the breezes.
8. A host of manifested beings approach them and welcome them to the Pure Land.
9. The speed at which all this happens

#10 The time it takes for the blossoms to open up - six lifetimes:

On this, the scripture says:

“... inside lotus blossoms that enter the pools of the seven treasures found in the Pure Land. After a span of six lifetimes, ...”

This is on the tenth gateway, the time it takes for the lotus blossoms to open up.

#11 The benefits attained after the blossoms open up:

On this, the scripture says:

“these lotus blossoms unfurl and the Bodhisattvas ‘Beholding the Cries of This World’ and ‘Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength’ teach them the very deep scriptures about the greater vehicle of spiritual awakening with the comforting sounds that come from the voice of the creator. Having heard them, they aspire to awaken to the supreme nature of life’s purpose.”

This is on the eleventh gateway, the different benefits that are attained after the lotus blossoms open up. There are three parts:

1. When they open up, there are the comforting voices (āśvāsana nāda, 安慰音) of The Bodhisattvas ‘Beholding the Cries of This World’ and “Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength’ that come from the voice of the creator (brahma ghoṣa, 梵聲)
2. They teach the very deep and sublime canon of scripture
3. The practitioners understand these words that inspire their minds

The general conclusion:

On this, the scripture says:

“This is called ‘the intermediate level of spiritual rebirth for those with a lower grade of capacity’.”

This is the general conclusion.

Although there are seven parts described above that are not the same, they collectively explain the meaning of the intermediate level of spiritual rebirth for those with a lower grade of capacity.

16c The Scripture's Words on Visualizing the Lower Level of Spiritual Rebirth For Those with a Lower Grade of Capacity:

On this, the scripture says:

The Buddha again addressed Ānanda and Vaidehī:

"Next there is the lower level of spiritual rebirth for those with a lower grade of capacity.

These are sentient beings who have committed the most immoral actions, including the ten unwholesome acts and five most consequential acts of evil. By committing these acts, these deluded people have fallen into the path of evil for a countless number of lifetimes and the hell of suffering that is relentless and endless. When the end of their lives approach, they meet good spiritual acquaintances who teach them about the sublime nature of life's purpose with various different kinds of comforting words that make them bring the Buddha to mind. However, these people are constantly tormented by their suffering and have no time to rest and recall the Buddha with any continuity. Because of this, their good spiritual acquaintances then address them by saying:

"If you are unable to keep this Buddha in mind, just try to call out your devotion to the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life in words. With utter sincerity, you should try to call out "I take refuge in the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life" ('Namo Amitāyur Buddhayaḥ') ten times in succession with perfect continuity."

Because they call on the Buddha's name in thought after thought like this, they eliminate the consequences that have accumulated from the immoral acts they have committed along the stream of life and death over eighty million lifetimes. When their lives come to an end, they each see a golden lotus bud before them that is like the orb of the sun, and in a single moment they are reborn inside these buds in the World of Pure Bliss. *After the full span of twelve great eons*, lotus blossoms will unfurl from these buds. With greatness of compassion, the voices of the Bodhisattvas 'Beholding the Cries of This World' and 'Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength' then teach these people about the true meaning of life and their unwholesome purposes are eliminated. Upon hearing them teach, these people rejoice and aspire to attain spiritual awakening. This is called 'the lower level of spiritual rebirth for those with a lower grade of capacity'."

佛告阿難及韋提希。下品下生者。或有眾生作不善業五逆十惡。具諸不善。如此愚人以惡業故。應墮惡道經歷多劫受苦無窮。如此愚人臨命終時。遇善知識種種安慰為說妙法教令念佛。彼人苦逼不遑念佛。善友告言。汝若不能念彼佛者。應稱歸命無量壽佛。如是至心令聲不絕。具足十念稱南無阿彌陀佛。稱佛名故。於念念中。除八十億劫生死之罪。命終之時見金蓮花猶如日輪住其人前。如一念頃即得往生極樂世界。於蓮花中滿十二大劫。蓮花方開當花敷時。觀世音大勢至以大悲音聲。即為其人廣說實相除滅罪法。聞已歡喜。應時即發菩提之心。是名下品下生者。

16c Shàndǎo's Commentary on Visualizing the Lower Level of Spiritual Rebirth For Those with a Lower Grade of Capacity:

Next, the scripture describes the lower level of spiritual rebirth for those with a lower grade of capacity, again bringing up the subject, distinguishing its signs and making a conclusion. There are seven parts on this and then a general conclusion:

#1 Addressing those of different livelihoods - the ordained and the laity

#2 Distinguishing their standing in terms of resolve

#5 & #6 - Their capacity that is based on the evils they have created

#9 Meeting good spiritual acquaintances, hearing about the transcendental nature of life's purpose, recalling the Buddha and attaining the benefits of spiritual rebirth

#10 The time it takes for the blossoms to open up

#11 The benefits attained after the blossoms have opened up

#1 Addressing those of different livelihoods - the ordained and the laity:

On this, the scripture says:

The Buddha again addressed Ānanda and Vaidehī:

This is on generally addressing those of different livelihoods (the ordained and the laity).

#2 Distinguishing their different standing in terms of resolve:

On this, the scripture says:

“Next there is the lower level of spiritual rebirth for those with a lower grade of capacity.”

In distinguishing their standing in terms of resolve, these are ordinary people who have committed the most immoral acts, including the five most consequential acts of evil.¹⁸

#5 & #6 - The different degrees of their capacity that are based on the evils they have created:

On this, the scripture says:

“These are sentient beings who have made the most unwholesome actions, including the ten kinds of evil and five most consequential acts of malevolence. By committing these acts, these deluded people have fallen into the path of evil for a countless number of lifetimes and the hell of suffering that is relentless and endless.”

This is on the fifth and sixth gateways, assessing their capacity for evil and their different ways of creating it. It is in seven parts:

1. Their capacity for creating evil
2. Generally bringing up their complete lack of virtue
3. Assessing the seriousness of their immoral acts
4. Generally concluding that this host of evils reflects the actions of those who lack wisdom
5. The evil created in the past is not insignificant
6. Without committing actions (karma, 業) one will not receive consequences (vipāka, 報). Because the actions they have made have been most unpleasant, how can the fruits and rewards they reap be without suffering?
7. The evil they have caused has created a lifetime of consequences that have not yet ended.

Question: In the scripture on the forty-eight vows of Dharmākara (The Longer Sūtra on the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life), all except those who have committed the most consequential acts of evil¹⁸ and maligned the teachings about the transcendental nature of life’s purpose will attain spiritual rebirth. Now, in this passage found in The Meditation Sūtra about the lower level of spiritual rebirth for those with a lower grade of capacity, those who have committed these five most consequential acts of evil can attain spiritual rebirth, but those who have maligned these teachings are still excluded. Why is this so?

Answer: This teaching found in the Longer Scripture should be understood as a device that is used as a preventative technique (śamatha mukha, 止門).

- * In the scripture on the forty-eight vows (The Longer Scripture), it is said that all sentient beings except those who have committed the five most consequential acts of evil and maligned the teachings about the transcendental nature of life’s purpose can attain spiritual rebirth, as committing these kinds of acts cause the two most serious of all karmic obstacles. When sentient beings commit these acts, they enter into the hell of incessant suffering (avīci naraka, 阿鼻地獄), to be tormented for a endless succession of lifetimes (anantara kalpas, 歷劫) without any means of escape. Lest we commit these two kinds of offenses, the enlightened beings that descend into

this world (tathāgatas, 如來) skillfully apply a preventative technique by saying that those who commit these acts will not attain spiritual rebirth, even though they have not really been excluded from the Buddha's compassion.

- * This passage in The Meditation Sūtra on the lower level of spiritual rebirth for those with a lower grade of capacity says that those who have committed the five most consequential acts of evil can attain spiritual rebirth, but it still does not allow that those who have maligned and ridiculed the teachings about the transcendental nature of life's purpose can do so.

It is not possible to abandon people who have already committed these five most consequential acts of evil to aimless wanderings along the stream of life & death. In inspiring further greatness of compassion, the Buddha includes and accepts them for spiritual rebirth. In fact, the Buddha only said that those who commit slander and ridicule about the transcendental nature of life's purpose will not attain this rebirth to prevent those who have not yet committed such acts from doing so. If one has already maligned the teaching, the Buddha will also include them among those who can potentially attain spiritual rebirth. Although these people will be able to attain rebirth in this land, *the lotus bud containing their embryonic spiritual life* (tathāgata garbha, 如來藏) will remain closed for many lifetimes (kalpas, 劫)⁷ before it will open up. While they remain in these buds, they will be saddled with three heavy kinds of obstacles.

1. They will not see the Buddha or the host of noble beings
2. They will not hear the teachings about the transcendental nature of life's purpose
3. They will not make offerings to the procession of Buddhas from different lands

Except for these obstacles, they can avoid other kinds of suffering. As the scriptures say:

“Like monks, they can even enter into the contentment that is found in the third level of meditation (tṛtīyaṃ dhyānam, 第三靜慮).”^{53B}

One should understand that, although they will remain enclosed in these lotus buds for many lifetimes without opening up, is it not better than if they feel the torments in the hell of incessant sufferings (avīci naraka, 阿鼻地獄) for a seemingly eternal number of lifetimes? This seeming contradiction in the teaching of the Buddha should therefore be understood as a measure used to prevent any further commitment of evil actions.

#9 *Meeting good spiritual acquaintances, hearing about the transcendental nature of life's purpose, recalling the Buddha and attaining the benefits of spiritual rebirth:*

On this, the scripture says:

“When the end of their lives approach, they meet good spiritual acquaintances who teach them about the sublime nature of life's purpose with various different kinds of comforting words that make them bring the Buddha to mind. However, these people are constantly tormented by their suffering and have no time to rest and to recall the Buddha with any continuity. Because of this, their good spiritual acquaintances will then address them by saying:

“If you are unable to keep this Buddha in mind, just try to call out your devotion to the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life in words. With utter sincerity, you should try to call out “I take refuge in the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life” (‘Namo Amitāyur Buddhayaḥ’) ten times in succession with perfect continuity.”

Because they call on the Buddha's name in thought after thought like this, they eliminate the consequences that have accumulated from the immoral acts they have committed along the stream of life and death over eighty million lifetimes.”

This is on hearing about the transcendental nature of life's purpose, recalling the Buddha

and attaining the benefit of spiritual rebirth. There are ten parts on this:

1. These are people who create the most evil.
2. Their lives will not last very long.
3. As the end of their lives approach, they meet good spiritual acquaintances (kalyāna mitra, 善識知).
4. These good spiritual acquaintances comfort them and teach them to recall the Buddha.
5. People suffer the coming of death because of the immoral acts that they have committed, not because they have recalled the Buddha's name.
6. Their good spiritual acquaintances recognize their suffering and loss of mindfulness, and teach them how to verbally call on the name and title of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha" (阿彌陀佛).
7. The number of times they verbally recall this name without ceasing
8. They eliminate the consequences from the immoral acts they have committed over many lifetimes.
9. With proper remembrance at the end of their lives, there is the approach of the golden blossom.
10. The speed with which they reach this nation of the Pure Land

#10 The time it takes for the blossoms to open up:

On this, the scripture says:

"When their lives come to an end, they each see a golden lotus bud before them that is like the orb of the sun, and in a single moment they are reborn inside these buds in the World of Pure Bliss. After the full span of twelve great eons, lotus blossoms will unfurl from these buds."

This is on the tenth gateway, the time it takes for the blossom to open up - twelve great eons (mahā kalpas, 大劫).⁷

#11 The benefits attained after the blossoms have opened up:

On this, the scripture says:

"With greatness of compassion, the voices of the Bodhisattvas 'Beholding the Cries of This World' and 'Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength' then teach these people about the true meaning of life and their unwholesome purposes are eliminated. Upon hearing this teaching, these people rejoice and aspire to attain spiritual awakening."

This is on the eleventh gateway, the different benefits that are attained after the blossoms open up. There are three parts on this:

1. The two noble bodhisattvas proclaim the very deep and sublime nature of life's purpose.
2. There is rejoicing and the elimination of the consequences from the immoral acts that have been committed.
3. Afterwards there is the inspiration of an excellent state of mind that inspires a spiritual awakening (bodhicitta, 菩提心).

The general conclusion:

On this, the scripture says:

"This is called 'the lower level of spiritual rebirth for those with a lower grade of capacity.'"

This is the general conclusion.

**16d The Scriptures Words Concluding on the Visualization of Spiritual Rebirth
For Those with a Lower Grade of Capacity:**

On this, the scripture says:

“This sixteenth meditation is called ‘the visualization of spiritual rebirth for those with a lower grade of capacity’.”

是名下輩生想。名第十六觀。

**16d Shàndǎo’s Commentary Concluding on the Visualization of Spiritual Rebirth
For Those with a Lower Grade of Capacity:**

On this, the scripture says:

“This sixteenth meditation is called ‘the visualization of spiritual rebirth for those with a lower grade of capacity’.”

On this, Shàndǎo offers three stanzas of verse:

“People who practice this meditation with a lower grade of capacity
Commit the ten most unwholesome kinds of acts out of greed and hatred, including the
five most consequential acts of evil,
The four grave wrongs with conscious intent to do harm, stealing from the community of
faith (Saṃgha, 僧) and maligning teachings about the true nature of life’s purpose.¹⁸
They never have any shame or humility because of these transgressions.

At the end of their lives the signs of suffering gather like clouds
And the fierce fires of hell are before them.
Suddenly, they meet good acquaintances who guide them towards spiritual rebirth,
Urging them to focus their minds and call on this Buddha by name.

The manifestations of the Buddha and the bodhisattvas are sought through their voices,
And in a single moment they enter into bejeweled lotus buds.
There are serious obstacles that prevent these buds from opening up for many lifetimes.⁹⁴
But in time they will open up and they will be spiritually awakened.”

Although there are three levels of spiritual rebirth described above that are not the same, they generally explain its accomplishment by those with a lower grade of capacity.

In Summary:

The scripture explained the first thirteen meditations as describing the virtues of mental resolve (samādhi, 定) in response to Vaidehī’s request. Having answered her, The One Who Had Descended Into This World (Tathāgata, 如來) then explained the three blessings of merit and the nine grades of capacity by describing the virtues of mental dispersion (vikṣepa, 散). This was a teaching from the Buddha that was unsolicited. Although there are differences between these two gateways of mental resolve and mental dispersion, together they explain the different but complementary parts of this scripture’s primary methodology (siddhānta, 正宗).

On the Conclusion of the Scripture

3. The Scripture's Words on the Attainment of Spiritual Benefits:

On this, the scripture says:

When the Blessed One finished speaking and Vaidehī and her five hundred female attendants had heard the Buddha's teaching, Vaidehī saw all of the broad and far-reaching signs that are found in the World of Pure Bliss. In seeing the grace descending from the spiritual lives of the Buddha and the two bodhisattvas, her heart rejoiced and she offered up praise for that which she had never before seen. In an instant, she had a great spiritual awakening and attained an enduring meditation on the transcendental nature of purpose that neither arises nor perishes and went far beyond her life in this world. Her attendants also aspired to realize the supreme universal enlightenment and vowed to attain rebirth in this Nation of Pure Bliss. The Blessed One then prophesized that they would all attain this rebirth and that, upon doing so, they would all attain the meditation in which all the Buddhas appear standing before them. Countless divine beings in the heavens of meditation also aspired to realize this supreme spiritual awakening.

爾時世尊說是語時。韋提希與五百侍女。聞佛所說。應時即見極樂世界廣長之相。得見佛身及二菩薩。心生歡喜歎未曾有。豁然大悟得無生忍。五百侍女發阿耨多羅三藐三菩提心。願生彼國。世尊悉記皆當往生。生彼國已。獲得諸佛現前三昧。無量諸天發無上道心。

3. Shàndào's commentary on Attainment of the Scripture's Benefits:

On the attainment of benefits, again first there is bringing up the subject and then there is a distinction of its characteristics. This is in seven parts:

a. *On the previous words leading to the appearance of benefits:*

On this, the scripture says:

When the Blessed One finished speaking and ...

b. *Those who were able to hear about the transcendental nature of life's purpose:*

On this, it says:

Vaidehī and her five hundred female attendants had heard the Buddha's teaching

c. *Vaidehī saw the signs of ultimate contentment atop a radiant pedestal:*

On this, it says:

Vaidehī saw all of the broad and far-reaching signs that are found in the World of Pure Bliss.

d. *In the seventh meditation (on the lotus seat), she first saw the Buddha of Infinite Life and attained an enduring meditation on the true nature of life's purpose that neither arises nor perishes and went beyond her in this world.*

On this, the scripture says:

In seeing the grace descending from the spiritual lives of the Buddha and the two bodhisattvas, her heart rejoiced and she offered up praise for that which she had never before seen. In an instant, she had a great spiritual awakening and attained an enduring meditation on the transcendental nature of purpose that neither arises nor perishes and went far beyond her life in this world.

This is about the meditation (on the lotus seat), where Vaidehī first saw the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛) and attained the benefit of an enduring meditation on the transcendental nature of purpose that neither arises nor perishes and went beyond her life in this world (anutpattika dharma kṣānti, 無生法忍).

e. *Aspiring to realize the supreme spiritual awakening and seek rebirth in the Pure Land:*

On this, the scripture says:

Her attendants also aspired to realize the supreme universal enlightenment and vowed to attain rebirth in this Nation of Pure Bliss.

This is on each of them seeing these distinguished signs, aspiring to realize the supreme spiritual awakening and seeking rebirth in the Pure Land.

f. *Receiving a prophecy of spiritual rebirth:*

On this, the scripture says:

The Blessed One then prophesized that they would all attain this rebirth and that, upon doing so, they would all attain the meditation in which all the Buddhas appear standing before them.

This is on the female attendants receiving prophecies of spiritual rebirth from the Blessed One. They would all attain rebirth in this nation and attain the resolve of meditation in which all the Buddhas appear standing before one (pratyutpanna buddha saṃmukha avasthita samādhi, 現前三昧).

g. *The divine beings who protect the world descended from the sky to be with the Buddha within the royal house and listened to him teach about this transcendental nature of life's purpose:*

On this, the scripture says:

Countless divine beings in the heavens of meditation also aspired to realize this supreme spiritual awakening.

This is like the previous passage found in the part on Vaidehi's loathing of the bitter conditions of suffering, in which the Lord Almighty (Śakra, 帝釋)⁵³ over all sentient beings in the sphere of desire, the Creator of the Universe (Brahma, 梵王),⁵³ the Guardians of this World (Lokapālas, 護世)⁵³ and all the other gods in the heavenly host⁵³ descended from the sky to hear the Buddha teach about the transcendental nature of life's purpose.

- * Some saw the radiance emanating from the whorl of hair between the brows⁸⁵ of the Buddha Śākyamuni.
- * Some saw the golden color from the holy presence of the Buddha of Infinite Life.
- * Some heard about the differences in the nine grades of capacity for spiritual rebirth.
- * Some heard about the two gateways of mental resolve and mental dispersion.
- * Some heard about good and evil conduct and the payback from the scales of karma.
- * Some heard of the western Pure Land not being far from that before one's very eyes.
- * Some heard of being focused with resolve and determination for one's whole life, and forever being freed from attachments to the stream of life and death (saṃsāra srota, 生死流).

When these gods heard The One Who Descended Into This World (Tathāgata, 如來) broadly teach about this, they attained rare benefits, and each of them aspired to awaken to the supreme nature of life's purpose. And so the Buddha was the most noble among them, creating inspired words that became scripture. Even ordinary beings saddled with emotional attachments (kleśa, 惑)¹ who received this meal were able listen to its words and attain spiritual benefits.

Although there are seven parts described above that are not the same, collectively they explain the part on the attainment of benefits.

4. The Scripture's Words on its Propagation:

On this, the scripture says:

Ānanda then arose from his seat and spoke before the Buddha, saying:

"Blessed One, what should we call this scripture and why should we faithfully accept it and keep its essential purpose in mind?"

The Buddha then addressed Ānanda:

"This scripture is called:

'Meditation on the Nation and Land of Pure Bliss,

'The Buddha of Infinite Life,

'The Bodhisattva 'Beholding the Cries of This World' &

'The Bodhisattva 'Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength'.

It is also called:

'On the Purification and Elimination of Karmic Obstacles' and

'The Attainment of Spiritual Rebirth Before the Buddhas'.

You should faithfully accept and keep it in mind so that you never forget or forsake it.

Those practicing with this resolve of meditation will see the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life and the two bodhisattvas in this very life. Even if virtuous sons and daughters only hear the names of the Buddha and the bodhisattvas, they will eliminate the consequences that have resulted from the immoral acts they have committed along the stream of life and death over a countless number of lifetimes. How much more will they realize if they remember these names and keep them in mind? You should know that those who recall this Buddha will become the white lotus blossoms among humanity, with the Bodhisattvas 'Beholding the Cries of This World' & 'Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength' as their distinguished friends. They will be seated at the very place of enlightenment and be reborn in the family of the Buddhas."

The Buddha again addressed Ānanda, saying:

"You should keep these words in mind well, for those that do so keep in mind the name of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life."

After the Buddha spoke these words, the venerable Maudgalyāyana, the venerable Ānanda and Vaidehī had all heard this teaching of the Buddha and rejoiced greatly.

爾時阿難。即從座起前白佛言。世尊。當何名此經。此法之要當云何受持。佛告阿難。此經名觀極樂國土無量壽佛觀世音菩薩大勢至菩薩。亦名淨除業障生諸佛前。汝等受持無令忘失。行此三昧者。現身得見無量壽佛及二大士。若善男子及善女人。但聞佛名二菩薩名。除無量劫生死之罪。何況憶念。若念佛者。當知此人即是人中芬陀利花。觀世音菩薩大勢至菩薩。為其勝友。當坐道場生諸佛家。佛告阿難。汝好持是語。持是語者即是持無量壽佛名。佛說此語時。尊者目連。尊者阿難。及韋提希等。聞佛所說。皆大歡喜。

Shàndào's commentary on the Scripture's Propagation:

In this part on the propagation of the scripture, there are two parts:⁵²

- a. The propagation at The City of the Royal House (Rājagṛha, 王舍城)
 - b. The propagation at Vulture's Peak (Gṛdhra Kūṭa, 耆闍)
- a. *On the propagation at The City of the Royal House*, there are seven parts.
 1. Bringing up questions related to the propagation of the scripture
 2. Establishing the scripture's name based on the dual grace of The One Who Has Descended Into This World (Tathāgata, 如來)

3. Answering Ānanda's question on why to faithfully accept it and keep it in mind
4. Making a comparison to demonstrate its excellent virtues and encourage people to cultivate its practice
5. The efficacy of acquiring the resolve of meditation through recalling the enlightened being (buddha anusmṛti samādhi, 念佛三昧) surpasses the virtues which can be attained from disparate practices (miśra caryā, 雜行).
6. Transmission of the name and the title of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛) and its propagation to generations in the distant future
7. Those who are able to request it and transmit it will hear that not yet heard, see that not yet seen, receive the meal of sweet dew, and jump for joy upon attaining that which was not created through their own merit

1. Bringing up two questions related to the propagation of the scripture:

On this, the scripture says:

Ānanda then arose from his seat and spoke before the Buddha, saying:

"Blessed One, what should we call this scripture and why should we faithfully accept it and keep its essential purpose in mind?"

These are the questions brought up by Ānanda related to the propagation of the scripture.

2. Answering the first question: establishing the scripture's name based on the dual grace of The One Who Has Descended Into This World (Tathāgata, 如來):

On this, the scripture says:

The Buddha then addressed Ānanda:

"This scripture is called:

'Meditation of the Nation and Land of Pure Bliss',

'The Buddha of Infinite Life',

'The Bodhisattva Beholding the Cries (Prayers) of This World' &

'The Bodhisattva Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength.'

It is also called:

'On the Purification and Elimination of Karmic Obstacles' and

'Attainment of Spiritual Rebirth Before the Buddhas'.

This is on establishing the scripture's name based on the dual grace of The One Who Has Descended Into This World (Tathāgata, 如來):

a. The environment, the consequences the Buddha depends on (parakarma phala, 依報)

b. The person, the consequences of the Buddha's own actions (svakarma phala, 正報)

In being able to depend on the scripture to start one's practice, the clouds from the three kinds of heavy obstacles disappear, answering the first question on what we should call this scripture.

These three heavy kinds of obstacles are described in Shàndào's commentary about the last meditation on those with the very lowest capacity (see page 294).

3. Answering the second question about why to faithfully accept it and keep it in mind:

On this, the scripture says:

"You should faithfully accept and keep it in mind so that you never forget or forsake it."

This answers the second question on why we should faithfully accept it and keep it in mind.

4. *Making a comparison to demonstrate its excellent virtues and encourage people to pursue its practice:*

On this, the scripture says:

“Those practicing with this resolve of meditation will see the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life and the two bodhisattvas in this very life. Even if virtuous sons and daughters only hear the names of the Buddha and the bodhisattvas, they will eliminate the consequences that have resulted from the immoral acts they have committed along the stream of life and death over a countless number of lifetimes. How much more will they realize if they remember these names and keep them in mind?”

This is making a comparison to demonstrate its distinguished virtues and encourage people to pursue its practice. This is in four parts:

- a. Generally indicating the virtues of mental resolve (samādhi, 三昧) attained through hearing the names of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas
- b. Depending on this resolve to cultivate the practice and describing the benefits that are attained through visualizing the Buddha’s three-fold spiritual life (tri kāyāḥ, 三身)
- c. Further bringing up the capacity to practice it
- d. Making a comparison to demonstrate its distinguished virtues; In just hearing the name of the Buddha’s three-fold spiritual life, there is the elimination of the consequences from the immoral acts committed over many lifetimes. How much more is realized through taking refuge in it with proper remembrance and attesting to its grace?

5. *The efficacy of the resolve acquired through recalling the name of the enlightened being (buddha anusmṛti samādhi, 念佛三昧) surpasses the virtues attained from disparate practices*

On this, the scripture says:

“You should know that those who recall this Buddha will become the white lotus blossoms among humanity, with the Bodhisattvas ‘Beholding the Cries of This World’ & ‘Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength’ as their distinguished friends. They will be seated at the very place of enlightenment and be reborn into the family of the Buddhas.”

The efficacy of this resolve of meditation acquired through recalling this enlightened being (buddha anusmṛti samādhi, 念佛三昧) surpasses the virtues which can be attained through other, disparate practices. There are five parts on this:

- a. Focusing on recalling the name of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛)
- b. Praise for those who are able to recall the Buddha this way
- c. Those who are able to continuously recall the Buddha are incomparably rare beings who are compared to a white lotus blossom (puṇḍarīka, 芬陀利花), said to be the finest flower in this world, the rarest and most sublimely distinguished blossoms found among humanity. In China it is also traditionally called the ‘cai blossom’ (蔡華). Likewise, those who recall the Buddha’s name are said to be the finest people in this world, the rarest and most sublimely distinguished people among humanity.
- d. Those who are focused on recalling the name of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛) will be followed and protected by the Bodhisattvas ‘Beholding the Cries of This World’ & ‘Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength’, just as a shadow follows form. These bodhisattvas will become their intimate friends and their good spiritual acquaintances (kalyāṇa mitra, 善知識).

- e. Those who now live in this world and have received these benefits will ultimately renounce attachments to them all and enter into the house of the Buddhas, which is the Pure Land. Upon arriving here, they will listen to the teachings about the transcendental nature of life's purpose for a long time, serving and making offerings to a succession of enlightened beings. Because their practice will be perfected here, the fruits of their enlightenment will become full. How can the very place of enlightenment (bodhi maṇḍa, 道場) be far away?

6. *Transmission of the name and the title of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛) and its propagation to generations in the distant future:*

On this, the scripture says:

The Buddha again addressed Ānanda, saying:

“You should keep these words in mind well, for those that do so keep in mind the name of the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life (Amitāyur Buddha, 阿彌陀佛).”

This is on the Buddha Śākyamuni's transmission of the name and the title of this Buddha to Ānanda so that its embrace could be propagated to other generations in the distant future. Although the scripture taught earlier about the benefits attained from the two gateways of mental resolve and mental dispersion, the Buddha Śākyamuni's main intent in teaching of this Buddha's (eighteenth) original vow was to make sentient beings earnestly focus on invoking the Buddha's name.

7. *Those who are able to request it and transmit it will hear that never before heard, see that never before seen, receive the meal of sweet dew, and jump for joy upon attaining that which was not created through their own merit:*

On this, the scripture says:

After the Buddha spoke these words, the venerable Maudgalyāyana, the venerable Ānanda and Vaidehī had all heard the teaching of the Buddha and rejoiced greatly.”

This is on those who are able to request the transmission of this name. They will hear that not yet heard, see that not yet seen, receive the meal of sweet dew and jump for joy upon attaining that which was not created through their own merit.

Although there are seven parts described above that are not the same, collectively they explain the part on the propagation of the teaching at the City of the Royal House.

When Buddha concluded these words, the worthy disciples Mahā Maudgalyāyana, and Ānanda, Vaidehī and all the others were all enraptured by a boundless joyfulness.

5. **The Scripture's Words on the Return to Vulture's Peak** (Gṛdhra Kūṭa, 耆闍):

On this, the scripture says:

The Blessed One then walked back through the emptiness of space and returned to Vulture's Peak. Ānanda later told the great assembly about the events that had transpired. Countless people, divine beings in the heavens of meditation, dragon spirits in the waters, spirits in the earth and other supernatural beings then also heard the Buddha's teaching. They all rejoiced, worshiped the Buddha and then departed to propagate it.

爾時世尊。足步虛空還耆闍崛山。爾時阿難。廣為大眾說如上事。無量人天龍神夜叉。聞佛所說皆大歡喜禮佛而退。

5. **Shāndào's Commentary on the Return to Vulture's Peak** (Gṛdhra Kūṭa, 耆闍):

On the propagation of the teaching to the assembly at Vulture's Peak, there are also three parts:

a. *The introduction:* On this, the scripture says:

The Blessed One then walked back through the emptiness of space and returned to Vulture's Peak.

This is the introduction to the part on returning to Vulture's Peak.

b. *The main teaching:* On this, the scripture says:

Ānanda later told the great assembly about the events that had transpired.

This is the part on the main teaching upon returning to Vulture's Peak.

c. *The propagation:* On this, the scripture says:

Countless people, divine beings in the heavens of meditation (devas, 天), dragon spirits in the waters (nāgas, 龍), spirits in the earth (yakṣas, 夜叉) and other supernatural beings⁶⁵ then also heard the Buddha's teaching. They all rejoiced, worshiped the Buddha and then departed to propagate this teaching.

This part is on the propagation after departing from Vulture's Peak.

Although there are the three different parts described above, they generally explain the Buddha's return to Vulture's Peak, the hearing of the teaching by those with faith and the dispersion from Vulture's Peak to propagate it.

Recapping the Five Parts of the Scripture's Text:

1. *The Introduction:* From "Like this I have heard . . ." to "after the Buddha's passing how will sentient beings who are tormented . . . be able to see the Enlightened Being of Infinite Life and the World of Pure Bliss" there is the introductory part of the scripture.
2. *The Main Teaching:* From the visualization of the setting sun to the visualization of the lowest level of spiritual rebirth for those with a lower grade of capacity, there is the part on its main teaching.
3. *The Attainment of Benefits:* From "When the Blessed One spoke, Vaidehī and her five hundred attendants heard the Buddha's teaching and then saw the broad and far-reaching signs . . ." to "Countless divine beings also aspired to realize this supreme awakening", there is the part on the attainment of its benefits.
4. *The Propagation:* From "Ānanda then arose from his seat and spoke" . . ." to "the venerable Maudgalyāyana, the venerable Ānanda and Vaidehī had all heard the teaching of the Buddha and rejoiced greatly", there is the part on its propagation.
5. *The Return to Vulture's Peak:* From "The Blessed One then walked though the emptiness of space and returned to Vulture's Peak . . ." to "countless people . . . and other supernatural beings then also heard the Buddha's teaching. They all rejoiced, worshiped the Buddha and then departed to propagate this teaching", there is the part on returning to Vulture's Peak.

Although there are five parts described above that are not the same, collectively they explain the meaning of the entire text of The Meditation Sūtra.

Shàndào's Closing Remarks

Through this explanation of the proper methodology, I have humbly discovered the essence of the Pure Land teaching that is difficult to encounter. I desire to similarly make all those born of the five spiritual destinies (hells, ghosts, animals, humans & gods)¹⁶ be able to encounter it, and I also want to encourage those of later generations to hear of it. Only through the power of grace from The One Who Has Descended Into This World (Tathāgata, 如來) is there the true ability to spiritually transform sentient beings beyond the limits of space and time. With both hidden and revealed teachings the Buddha adapted to the different capacities (of Vaidehi and Ānanda)⁷⁴ during his secret appearance in the City of the Royal House (Rājagṛha, 王舍城)⁵². The host at Vulture's Peak (Gṛdhra Kūṭa, 耆闍)⁵² with their knowledge of lesser purposes harbored doubts about this teaching. Afterwards, upon returning to the mountain, the Buddha did not delve into it any further, but Ānanda proclaimed the teaching on the dual gateway of mental resolve and mental dispersion that had been revealed at the Royal House. Because of this, the different audiences (of the lay and the ordained) were all able to hear about it, and they were not without the ability to follow the practice and wear its realization on the crowns of their heads.

With reverence, I make the following declaration to all with whom I have a connection or acquaintance: I have just been an ordinary person in the stream of life and death with narrow and shallow wisdom. The teachings of the Buddhas are sublime and profound, and I do not dare to presume that somehow, all of a sudden, I have produced an understanding that is any different from them. I am merely trying to express my heart's preoccupation through having prayed about it and requested signs of affirmation. This way I have spoken my mind.

In saying "Namo", I devote my life and take refuge in the Three Treasures that everywhere pervade the emptiness of space and time in the transcendental sphere of life's greater purpose (dharma dhātu, 法界). This includes the Buddha of Infinite Life (Amitāyus, 阿彌陀佛), the Bodhisattvas 'Beholding the Cries (Prayers) of This World' (Avalokiteśvara, 觀世音菩薩) & 'Endowing Sentient Beings With Great Spiritual Strength' (Mahā Sthāma Prāpta, 大勢至菩薩), this Pure Land with its great ocean of bodhisattvas and all of the other signs that adorn it. I now wish to reveal the essential meaning of this Meditation Scripture, modeled on the teachings of the past and the present but correcting certain misunderstandings about it.⁵⁶ I call on the Buddhas of the past, present and future, the Buddha Śākyamuni, the Buddha of Infinite Life and the rest, and if this wish is in accordance with the great compassion of their vows, may I get to see all of the signs of this sphere that I have seen in my dreams.

One day, after reciting the Shorter Scripture on the Buddha of Infinite Life (Amitāyus Sūtra, 阿彌陀經) three times and recalling this Buddha's name thirty thousand times, I made the above prayer before an image of the Buddha with a sincere heart. That night, in my dreams, I saw many signs of this sphere of the Pure Land being revealed in the western sky. There were hundreds and thousands of mountains made of jewels of different colors, with their various kinds of light and splendor illuminating the golden ground below them. There were also many Buddhas and bodhisattvas in this sky.

- * Some were seated while others were standing.
- * Some were speaking while others were silent.
- * Some were walking about and making gestures while others remained motionless.

After seeing these signs, I stood up and meditated on them with my palms pressed together for a long time before I woke up. Upon awakening, I rejoiced greatly and recorded this experience

and its meaning. After this, every night in my dreams, a member⁹⁷ of the community of faith (Saṃgha, 僧) visited me and revealed the profound meanings from different sections of this scripture's text. After he had gone through the entire text with me, I did not see him anymore. After I finished composing this commentary that was based on this revelation, again I resolved that for seven days I would recite the Shorter Scripture on the Buddha of Infinite Life ten times each day and call on the name of the Buddha of Infinite Life thirty thousand times each day with a sincere heart. On the first night and each night thereafter, I visualized and meditated on this Buddha and the signs of adornment in this nation and land, offering up my life and taking refuge just as before.

1. On the first night I saw three stone mortar wheels (具磴輪道)⁹⁷ turning by themselves. Suddenly I saw a person riding on a white camel⁹⁷ who came up to encourage me, saying: "Master, in making a great effort to attain spiritual rebirth with determination and resolve, you must never turn back. The stream of life & death is tainted with corruption, evil and much suffering. Do not trouble yourself with desire for its pleasures."

I answered by saying:

"I am greatly blessed to receive the favor of instruction from such a virtuous man as yourself. For the rest of my life, I will not dare to bear an attitude of laziness or pride."

2. On the second night I saw the Buddha of Infinite Life with a body of a pure golden color, seated on the adamant pedestal of a lotus blossom under a tree composed of the seven treasures.¹⁴ Ten members of the community of faith (Saṃgha, 僧) surrounded this Buddha, with each of them also seated under a bejeweled tree. On these trees there were divine raiments draped around the branches. I meditated on this, seated westward with my palms pressed together.⁹⁷
3. On the third night I saw two extremely tall flagpoles, each with five colored banners⁷⁰ hanging from them. There were roads going to and from them in each direction of the compass and it was clear to see that there were no barriers to be found on these roads.⁹⁷

Having seen these signs, my practice was completed, even though seven days had not yet transpired.⁹⁷ My original intention in writing about all of these holy signs was not for my own benefit but rather to benefit others. Having experienced these signs, I did not dare to conceal them. With reverence I declare that, after having been presented with the true meaning of this scripture, my hope is that it will be heard by those of later generations. I pray that those who harbor the holy spirit will bear faith upon hearing it, and that those who are aware of what they see will take refuge in the Pure Land found in the west.

I hereby dedicate the merits and virtues from this work, offering them up to sentient beings everywhere so they may all inspire the mind that awakens them to the transcendental nature of life's purpose, face one another with hearts of loving kindness and see one another with the eyes of the Buddha.⁷³ As members of the retinue that are awakening to this purpose (bodhi parivāra, 菩提眷屬), may they all become good spiritual acquaintances (kalyāṇa mitra, 善識知) to sentient beings, similarly devoted to this nation that is pure of affliction, and may they all realize the path to enlightenment (buddha mārga, 佛道) together. In answer to my prayers, the meaning of this teaching has already been attested to by the Buddhas. Not one phrase or character should be added to or taken away from it, and one should understand that anybody who desires to copy this commentary should do so as if he were doing so to the scripture itself.

Commentary on the Scripture About Meditation on the Buddha of Infinite Life

**End of Volume 4, on The Teaching About the Virtues of Mental Dispersion (vikṣepa, 散善),
The Conclusion of the Scripture and Shàndào's Closing Remarks**