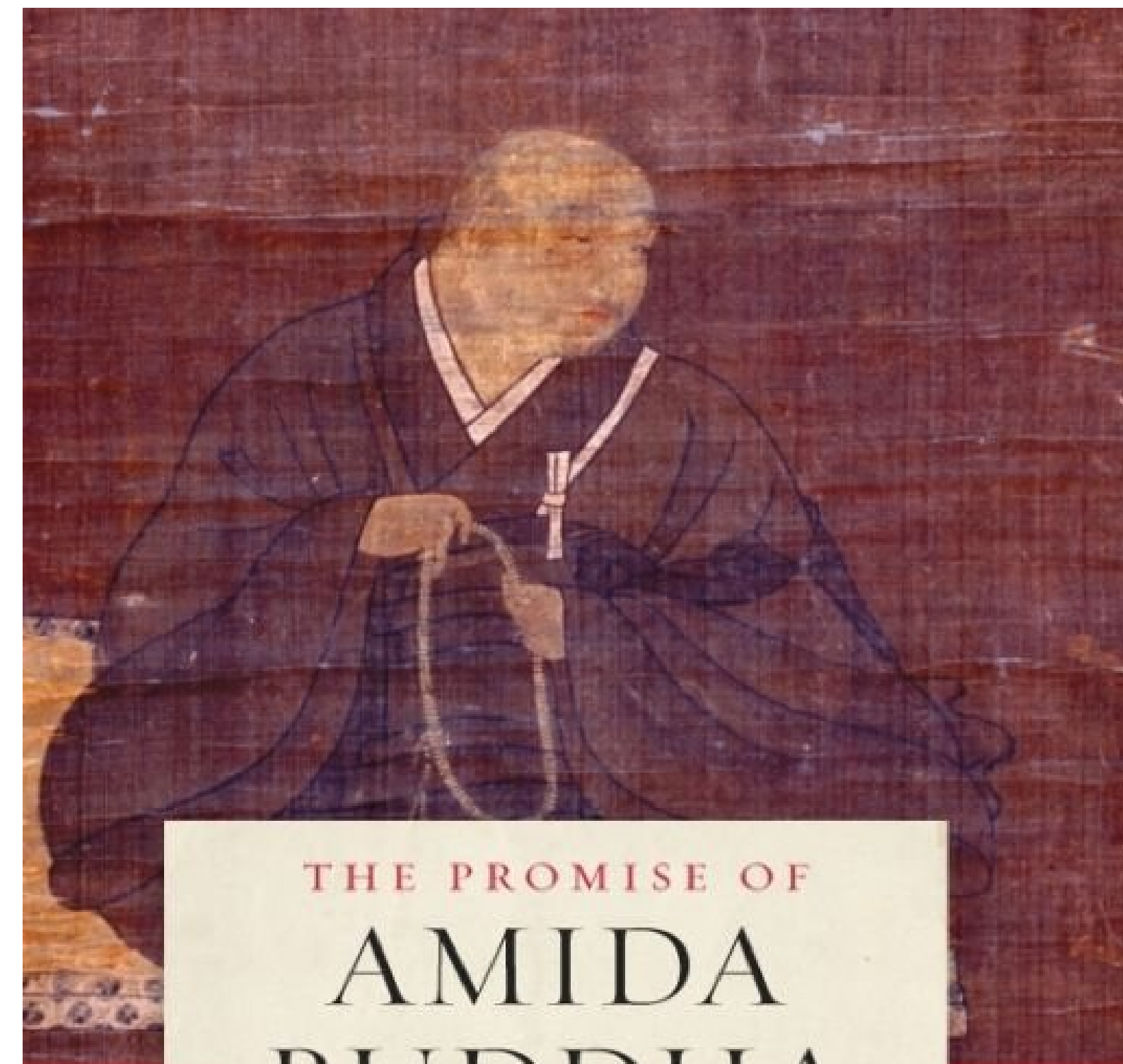


THE PROMISE OF
AMIDA
BUDDHA

HÖNEN'S PATH TO BLISS

TRANSLATED BY JŌJI ATONE & YŌKO HAYASHI



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The Promise of Amida Buddha

...

HŌNEN'S PATH TO BLISS

法然上人和語燈錄

Translated by

Jōji Atone & Yōko Hayashi



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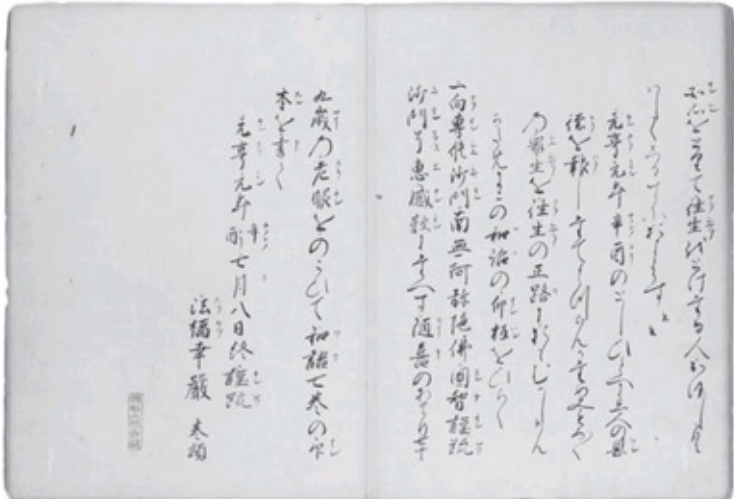
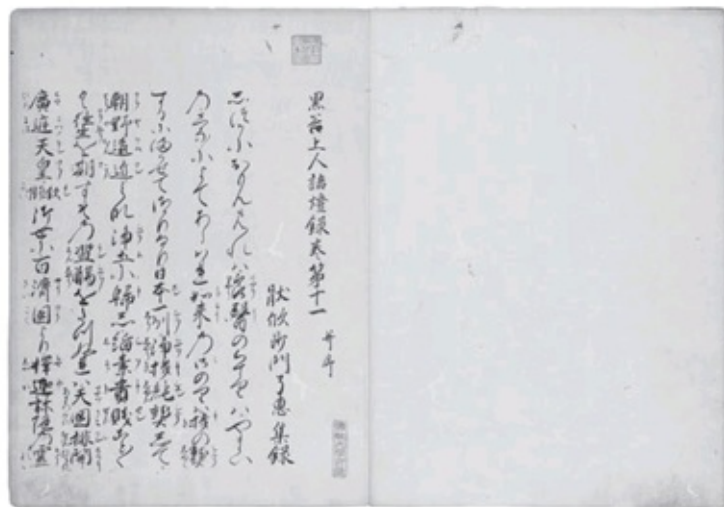
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In the collection of Bukkyō University in Kyōto, Japan.



Foreword

• • •

The Promise of Amida Buddha: Hōnen's Path to Bliss is the first English translation of the Genkō edition of the works of Hōnen-shōnin composed in Japanese. This collection, generally known as the Japanese Anthology (Wagon Tōroku), was compiled by Ryōe Dōkō in 1275. I congratulate Bukkyō University Los Angeles Extension for introducing this tremendously important work to Western readers.

Traditionally, Buddhist practitioners have attempted to seek inner truth through various types of meditation, such as concentration and insight (śamatha-vipaśyanā). These meditative practices are extremely difficult for lay people to pursue, for they were originally designed for monastics and other full-time practitioners. Pure Land Buddhism, in contrast, was designed for the deliverance of the masses. Hōnen (1133-1212), founding master of the Japanese Pure Land school, closely observed human nature, and he became convinced that all mortals are filled with worldly passions and negative karma binding them to the perpetual transmigration of birth and death. He surmised that most people do not have the capacity to awaken through their own efforts. Relying instead on the powerful compassion of Amida Buddha, however, allows people to attain deliverance through birth in his Pure Land. For this reason, Hōnen encouraged busy lay people to rely on Amida Buddha's compassion and recite his name so as to attain birth in the Pure Land.

This publication is significant and timely for Bukkyō University because its spiritual foundation is based on the teaching of Hōnenshōnin. We are celebrating the eight-hundred-year memorial anniversary of Hōnen-shōnin this year, and in the following year commemorating the one hundredth anniversary of the founding of Bukkyō University. This precious and arduous work by Jōji Atone and Yōko Hayashi will be cherished by all.

Ryūzen Fukuhara, Litt.D., Former President
Nobuyuki Yamagiwa, Litt.D., President
Bukkyō University, Kyōto, Japan
Twenty-fifth of January, 2011

Preface

• • •

The Promise of Amida Buddha: Hōnen's Path to Bliss introduces Hōnen's compassionate and humanistic Pure Land thought to Western readers. Originally composed over eight hundred years ago in Japan, translation of Hōnen's enormous work into straightforward modern English was a challenging task that required more than ten years of effort and investigation. I believe this work will greatly benefit scholars, students, and religious practitioners, as well as the more general audience of those interested in Eastern thought.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the professors, friends, and associates who made the completion of this work possible. The late Prof. William R. LaFleur of the University of Pennsylvania, Dr. Alfred H. Bloom of the University of Hawai'i, and Dr. Glenn T. Webb of Pepperdine University gave me valuable suggestions regarding the usage of both Buddhist and Christian terminology. Dr. Jack D. Van Horn of the College of William and Mary, Dr. Minoru Kiyota of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and my Japanese teachers gave me special guidance in the importance of critical examination of the subject matter.

In addition, Mrs. Yōko Hayashi, M. Ed., co-translator of this work, provided invaluable expertise, and I am grateful to David Kittelstrom of Wisdom Publications for proficiently editing this work. Finally appreciation goes to my wife, Lori Atone, who supported me in many ways to accomplish this project. Without their encouragement and help this publication would not have come to fruition.

Joji Atone, Ph. D.

Introduction

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AT THE RISE of the Kamakura period, Hōnen-bō Genkū (1133–1212, hereafter Hōnen or Genkū) established his distinct Pure Land school of Mahāyāna Buddhism called Jōdo Shū in Japan. It was based upon the Pure Land tradition of the Chinese monk Shan-tao (613–81), the systematizer of Chinese Pure Land Buddhism. Hōnen's teachings drew strong resistance from the established Buddhist schools of his time, but today the Pure Land practice descending from Hōnen and from his disciple Shinran (1173–1262) is the most widespread form of Buddhism in Japan.

Buddhism teaches the way to awaken to universal truth in order to realize buddhahood. Buddhist practitioners are traditionally said to pursue over many lifetimes the highest religious states of either an arhat (one who has eliminated all worldly passions and attained nirvāṇa) or, in Mahāyāna Buddhism, a bodhisattva (one who strives for enlightenment in order to save all suffering beings). Hōnen had followed the Mahāyāna tradition, observed the bodhisattva perfections, and experienced the state of samādhi, or tranquility full of insight. But he became dissatisfied with leaving the pursuit of enlightenment to an elite who were able to endure the rigorous discipline of the bodhisattva perfections, and he turned his efforts instead to the deliverance of the populace, who did not have the opportunity or will to engage in long term austerities or studies. After coming upon the teachings of Shan-tao, Hōnen became convinced that the masses could realize deliverance by merely reciting the sacred name of Buddha Amida (Sanskrit: Amitābha or Amitāyus).

Hōnen taught that all ordinary men, women, and children—even wrongdoers—without distinction as to sex, age, status, or education would be able to be born in the Pure Land through reciting “Homage to Amida Buddha” or *Namu Amida Butsu*. This recitation is called *nembutsu*. Once born in the Pure Land, practitioners could complete the bodhisattva perfections without difficulty, realize enlightenment, and eventually attain buddhahood. Unlike other traditional Buddhist schools, Hōnen's Pure Land Buddhism articulates a posthumous enlightenment: the attainment of birth in the Pure Land presupposes eventual enlightenment there. He encouraged each individual to develop deep faith in Amida Buddha and recite *nembutsu* continually until his or her last moment.

The consistent theme of Pure Land Buddhism is the acceptance of human fallibility. Both Shan-tao and Hōnen, despite reaching the highest religious state through ascetic exercises, professed to still being common mortals with worldly passions. Those passions had caused their endless rebirths in the six delusory worlds of the cycle of birth and death, or *samsāra*, and they were unable to detach

from those illusory worlds without relying on the compassionate power of Amida Buddha. ~~The understanding that human nature is weak, ignorant, and karmical~~ burdened is a basic tenet of the Pure Land faith, and this recognition in turn nurtures unshakable faith in the compassion of Amida Buddha. For if one is not able to attain enlightenment through one's own efforts, it becomes essential to rely on the power of a compassionate force greater than oneself. Aspiration for birth in the Pure Land and the recitation of Amida's name are based on a deep understanding of this.

A unique feature of Hōnen's Pure Land Buddhism is the full inclusion of women in the attainment of buddhahood. Like all major religions, Buddhism has a history of discriminating against women. Even though Buddha Śākyamuni preached that there is no distinction between men and women in the fulfillment of the path leading to buddhahood, discrimination arose due to the historical, social, cultural, and racial norms of the time period. In India, 250 precepts were prescribed for a monk but 348 for a nun. In China and Japan, the concepts of the five hindrances for a woman to realize enlightenment and the three types of obedience for a woman were incorporated into Buddhist thought. In Japan, menstruation was regarded as impure and by extension, the whole female body. Against these beliefs, Hōnen stated, "Believe that five recitations of nembutsu destroy the five hindrances for a woman, three recitations of nembutsu eliminate the three types of obedience, and a single utterance of nembutsu will result in one being welcomed by Amida Buddha into the Pure Land at the time of one's death" (chapter 4 of the present work). Further, Hōnen once said to an infamous woman, "Amida Buddha established the universal vow in order to embrace an undesirable person such as you. Rely implicitly upon his essential vow and never disparage yourself. Once you recite the name of Amida Buddha and rely on the essential vow, birth in the Pure Land will definitely be achieved" (chapter 34 of Shunjō Illustrated Biography of Hōnen-shōnin). Likewise, before the sixteenth century in Japan, it was unusual for women to know how to read Chinese, the language of almost all Buddhist scriptures. That Hōnen composed his teachings in Japanese further accentuates his commitment to women and to the masses more generally.

The recitation of nembutsu is the easiest and simplest form of Buddhist practice. Even a single utterance of nembutsu at the time of death makes it possible for one to be born in the Pure Land. By encouraging even a faint hope for deliverance at the very last moment, the teaching of nembutsu eases one's fear of death. Hōnen said, "In life we should accumulate all the merit of nembutsu so that when death comes, we will be welcomed by Amida Buddha into the Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss. In essence, if we recite nembutsu believing that no matter what comes or goes, there is no anxiety in this life, we will be free from the worry of birth and death."

Before presenting an outline of Hōnen's teachings contained in the present volume, let us look at the historical origins of the central practice of the Jōdo school, the recitation of the name of Amida Buddha.

THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF NEMBUTSU: FROM MEDITATION TO RECITATION

Hōnen's greatest religious contribution to the development of Pure Land Buddhism was his espousal of the primacy of nembutsu, the act of reciting Nam Amida Butsu, "Homage to Amida Buddha." The word nembutsu translates the Sanskrit *buddhānusmṛti*, which means "mindfulness of a buddha." Traditionally, it indicates a kind of meditation where one stabilizes a mental image of the Buddha's form and qualities. Neither it, nor its Chinese translation, *nien-fo*, connoted any kind of vocal component; both were simply mental functions.

The transformation of nembutsu from mental to vocal was made by Shan-*tao* in China and Hōnen in Japan, and they defended this dramatic change with the rationale that the recitation of the name of Amida Buddha is not only easy for everyone to perform but also possible to continue throughout life. They cite several key sutras to show that the recitation of nembutsu accords with the compassionate teachings of Buddha Śākyamuni and Amida Buddha. Through the earnest devotion of Shan-*tao* and Hōnen, the attainment of birth in the Pure Land and thereby enlightenment (or buddhahood), became possible for the first time for every man, woman, and child.

In the sections below, we will review the historical development of nembutsu from India through China to Japan. In the passages relating to the precursors to the Japanese Pure Land tradition in India and China, Amida is rendered as *Amitābha*, the well-known Sanskrit version of his name, which means "infinite light."

1. Indian Foundation: Pure Land Texts and Commentaries

The origin of nembutsu is uncertain due to insufficient textual data. The Indians left scant historical records to document its early development. However, the widespread Buddhist practice of taking refuge in the Three Jewels—the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha—may have been a precursor to nembutsu recitation.

In early Buddhism, the recitation of the formula for refuge in the Three Jewels was the initial act in the Buddhist ordination ceremony. In front of the assembly of the Buddhist Sangha, those who desired to become monks or nuns thus invoked "Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi (I take refuge in the Buddha); Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi (I take refuge in the Dharma); Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi (I take refuge in the Sangha)." Taking refuge here in the "Buddha" refers to the historical Buddha Śākyamuni, not Buddha Amitābha, but no distinction was reflected in the vocal delivery, and for Buddhists the qualities of enlightenment inhere in all buddhas equally.

Anecdotes in the early Buddhist scriptures describe the relief brought about by

invoking the name of Buddha Śākyamuni. Recitation of the name Buddha Amitābha is known to do the same; both were designed for saving people. Perhaps the notion of birth in the Pure Land through reciting the name of Buddha Amitābha arose from this early Buddhist exercise of the vocal praise of Buddha Śākyamuni.

It is said that there are more than two hundred Mahāyāna texts dealing with Buddha Amitābha and his Western Pure Land of Sukhāvātī, or Ultimate Bliss. Very few, however, directly deal with the issue of the recitation of the name of Buddha Amitābha. These include:

1. The Sutra of the Samādhi of All Buddhas' Presence (Pratyutpannasamādhi Sūtra)
2. The three sutras of Pure Land Buddhism
 - a. The Smaller Sutra (Smaller Sukhāvātīvyūha Sūtra)
 - b. The Larger Sutra (Larger Sukhāvātīvyūha Sūtra)
 - c. The Meditation Sutra (Amitāyurdhyāna Sūtra)
3. Two Indian commentaries
 - a. The Commentary on the Ten Bodhisattva Stages (Daśabhūmivibhāṣa Śāstra) by Nāgārjuna (ca. second century)
 - b. The Treatise on Birth in the Pure Land (Sukhāvātīvyūha Upadeśa) by Vasubandhu (ca. fourth century)

The Sutra of the Samādhi of All Buddhas' Presence, translated into Chinese by Lokarakṣa in 179, is considered the oldest of the Pure Land scriptures. It consists of sixteen chapters and describes a method for contemplating Buddha Amitābha. "Buddha Śākyamuni said to Bodhisattva Bhadrāpāla: 'If a bodhisattva in this world were to devote himself to being mindful of Buddha Amitābha, he will see him.' Bodhisattva Bhadrāpāla asked: 'Through which teaching are we able to achieve birth in the Pure Land of Buddha Amitābha?' Buddha Śākyamuni answered: 'If you wish to be born in the Pure Land and are incessantly mindful of the name of Buddha Amitābha, then you will be born in the Pure Land.'"¹

Though this text mentions the name of Buddha Amitābha, the phrase "being mindful of the name of Buddha Amitābha" clearly denotes a mental practice, one probably involving visualizing the physical virtues of the Buddha Amitābha. While there is no particular indication of vocal recitation in this work, its significant influence on the later development of Chinese Pure Land Buddhism is undeniable.

The Smaller Sutra is the shortest of what are called the three sutras of Pure Land Buddhism. In this text, Buddha Śākyamuni holds a discourse with Śāriputra, one of the ten outstanding disciples of the Buddha, along with 1,250 other disciples, in the monastic residence at Jeta Grove. This text discusses nembutsu in the following three passages:

1. "Those who have been born in that buddhaland all meditate on the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha..."
2. "In those who have heard the exquisite sounds of the trees and neighborhoods decorated with precious jewels, there arises naturally the thought of the mindfulness of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha."
3. "If good men and good women, who upon hearing the teaching of Buddha

Amitābha, keep his name in their minds with utmost concentration and without distraction for one day, two days, three days, four days, five days, six days, or seven days, Buddha Amitābha, accompanied by his assembly of holy beings, will appear before them when their lives are at an end. With their minds free from distraction, they will be born in the Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss of Buddha Amitābha.”²

Both “meditate on the Buddha” in the first passage and “the mindfulness of the Buddha” in the second clearly relate to meditation. The original Sanskrit terms for these two are buddhamanasikāra (reflecting on the Buddha) and buddhānusmṛti (mindfulness of the Buddha); both are confined to the mental sphere. In the third passage, the statement, “keep the name of Buddha Amitābha” is frequently interpreted as “reciting the name of Buddha Amitābha” by Chinese and Japanese Pure Land masters, including Shan-tao and Hōnen, but its original meaning was a mental act. In short, although the Smaller Sutra is one of the core Pure Land texts and teaches the attainment of birth in the Pure Land, vocal nembutsu is not addressed.

The Larger Sutra was first translated into Chinese by a Persian monk, An-shih-kao, who came to China in the year 148 and later by Saṅghavarman in the year 252. There were another ten Chinese translations made since then and several more in Tibetan. Voluminous manuscripts, translations, and commentaries also proliferate today, demonstrating how widely the Larger Sutra pervaded India, Central Asia, and China.

The Larger Sutra has seven principal headings: (1) the practice and enlightenment of Bodhisattva Dharmākara, (2) the glories of the Pure Land, (3) the splendid physical features of Buddha Amitābha, (4) the special virtues of those who have been born in the Pure Land, (5) the practice for attaining birth in the Pure Land, (6) the bodhisattva’s praise of the Pure Land, and (7) the defilement of this world of suffering. In the conclusion, Buddha Śākyamuni proclaims to Bodhisattva Maitreya that the Larger Sutra alone will remain for another one hundred years after the disappearance of every other teaching of Buddha Śākyamuni in order to lead all remaining sentient beings to deliverance.

The Japanese translation of the Larger Sutra employs the term nembutsu many times as a translation for the Sanskrit terms smṛti (mindfulness), manasikāra (reflection), and citta (thinking or mind). Note that all three Sanskrit words apply to mental function. One of the features of this text is the set of forty-eight vows made by Buddha Amitābha concerning his Pure Land, and of these, the eighteenth vow is considered the essential one. The essential vow, described in the first fascicle, reads: “If, when I [Buddha Amitābha] am to attain buddhahood, all sentient beings in the ten directions who rejoice in faith with genuine hearts and who wish to be born in my buddhaland are not born there within just ten moments of mindfulness of me, I will not realize enlightenment.”

Here, the phrase “ten moments of mindfulness” is important. The original Sanskrit for this is daśacitta, literally “ten minds.” Some have said that the idea of daśacitta derives from the ten types of meditative practices in early Buddhism, ten objects of mindfulness meditation: (1) the Buddha, (2) the Dharma, (3) the

Sangha, (4) the vows, (5) generosity or almsgiving, (6) the divine, (7) tranquility, (8) breathing, (9) the body, and (10) death. Of these, numbers 4, 6, and 8—mindfulness of the Buddhist vows, divinity, and breathing—while prominent in early Buddhism, are at odds with the Pure Land approach, which says that nembutsu alone is sufficient. Faced with this, the Chinese Pure Land patriarch T'an-luan (476–542) interpreted the term *daśacitta* in this way: “The term *citta* here does not indicate a span of time but rather mindfulness of Buddha Amitābha...*Daśacitta* does not indicate a specific number but indicates the perfection of mindfulness of Buddha Amitābha.” It is still uncertain precisely what the “ten” alludes to in the context of the Larger Sutra, but the Sanskrit denotation of the term *citta* as well as T'an-luan's interpretation of the term concurs that it signifies a mental action.

It was Shan-tao who later interpreted *daśacitta* to mean ten recitations. His *Methods of Contemplation on Buddha Amitābha* illustrates this view of the essential vow of the Larger Sutra as follows: “If, when I [Buddha Amitābha] am to attain buddhahood, all sentient beings in the ten directions who wish to be born in my buddhahood recite my name at least ten times are not born there through the power of my vow, I will not realize enlightenment.” Thus, Shan-tao changed the statement, “just ten moments of mindfulness of Buddha Amitābha” in the Larger Sutra to “recite my name at least ten times.” This is the crucial interpretation for nembutsu. Following this, Hōnen proclaimed: “*nen* (being mindful) and *shō* (voice) are really one and the same.” This transformation of nembutsu from mental to vocal offered by Shan-tao and Hōnen was a key shift for Pure Land Buddhism.

The last of the three sutras of Pure Land Buddhism, the *Amitāyus Meditation Sutra*, or *Meditation Sutra* for short, is a one-fascicle text. *Amitāyus*, or “Infinite Life,” is an exalted manifestation of Buddha Amitābha. There once existed two Chinese translations of this text—one translated by Kālayaśas (383–442) and the other by Dharmamitra (fifth century). While the former work is extant, nothing remains of the latter work, and there are no Tibetan or Sanskrit manuscripts of this sutra, which leaves open the possibility it could be Chinese in origin. This text unfolds the tragic story of Queen Vaidehī and describes sixteen types of meditative practices as a means for achieving birth in the Pure Land. In its conclusion, it states that even the most defiled can attain birth in the Pure Land through reciting the name of Buddha Amitābha. Unlike the Larger Sutra or the Smaller Sutra, the *Meditation Sutra* twice mentions vocal nembutsu:

1. A virtuous teacher makes practitioners utter *Namu Amida Butsu* with the palms together, and because they invoke the name of Buddha Amitābha, the negative karma binding them to *saṃsāra* for five billion eons is eliminated.
2. The life of a very ignorant person is about to end. He meets a virtuous teacher who comforts him in various ways, expounding on flawless teachings and urging him to be mindful of Buddha Amitābha. However, he is too tormented by pain to be mindful of Buddha Amitābha. The virtuous teacher then says, “If you cannot be mindful of Buddha Amitābha, say that you take refuge in Buddha Amitābha.” With a genuine heart and an uninterrupted voice, the ignorant person recites the name of Buddha

Amitābha, manifesting ten thoughts. Because he recites the name of Buddha Amitābha in every moment of thought, the negative karma binding him to saṃsāra for eight billion eons is eliminated.”³

The Meditation Sutra further teaches that there are nine grades of aspirants for birth in the Pure Land, and that their birth in the Pure Land depends on the individual potential and depth of practice. There are three classes of birth—low, middling, and high—and these three are further subdivided into three levels each. The first quote above comes from the description of the high level of the low class of birth, and the second quote describes the low level of the low class of birth. Note that the vocal nembutsu is introduced only in the low class and is regarded as the practice performed when a practitioner cannot carry out meditative practices due to a lack of ability or serenity. Based on this, it appears that the recitation of nembutsu was meant for ordinary people and not for the elite.

The doctrine presented in the Meditation Sutra is more developed than that in either the Larger Sutra or the Smaller Sutra, and consequently it is considered the most recent work of the three. In addition, its commitment to Pure Land Buddhism, exemplified by the story of Queen Vaidehī as well as by important Pure Land instructions, including the theory of the threefold devotional heart, made it popular among Chinese Buddhists, particularly after the sixth century. Thus Shandao and Hōnen based their Pure Land thought primarily on this Meditation Sutra.

In addition to the three sutras of Pure Land Buddhism, the Pure Land thought was greatly furthered in India by two commentaries (śāstras): Commentary on the Ten Bodhisattva Stages and Treatise on Birth in the Pure Land.

Commentary on the Ten Bodhisattva Stages was composed by Nāgārjuna,⁴ the forerunner of the Indian Middle Way, or Madhyamaka, school. The commentary focuses on the first two of the ten stages (bhūmi) of the bodhisattva practice presented in the Flower Garland Sutra (Avataṃsaka Sūtra). Chapter 9 of the commentary, entitled “The Easy Practice,” is significant because it serves as the basis for the doctrinal foundation of Pure Land Buddhism in India.

Nāgārjuna distinguished between easy and difficult avenues to the state of nonregression (avinivartanīya) at the eighth of the ten bodhisattva stages. In the easy practice, a practitioner relies completely, by means of faith, upon the compassionate power of the buddhas; in the difficult practice, a bodhisattva attains nonregression through austerities and the bodhisattva perfection. Nāgārjuna articulated the vocal nembutsu for use in the easy practice as follows:

1. One who listens to the names of various buddhas will receive infinite merit immediately; one who invokes their names will attain the state of nonregression all at once.
2. In accord with the essential vow of Buddha Amitābha, one who is mindful of him and recites his name will immediately attain the stage of perfect enlightenment.⁵

Nāgārjuna here identifies recitation as a viable practice in a context that addresses both listening and reciting. Nevertheless, he undoubtedly portrays the easy practice as a means for the “inferior” and never expressly endorses it as an ideal. Note, too, that citation of the essential vow here signifies that Amitābha

worship and recitation practice were already exercised in India prior to Nāgārjuna's time.

The other commentary, *Treatise on Birth in the Pure Land*, is a short discourse on the Larger Sukhāvativyūha Sūtra attributed to Vasubandhu, the fourth-century master of the Yogācāra school. *Treatise on Birth in the Pure Land*, translated into Chinese by Bodhiruci in 529 and known in Chinese as the Wang-sheng-lun, includes both poetry and prose. The verse section enumerates the seventeen merits of the Pure Land, the eight merits of Buddha Amitābha, and the four merits of bodhisattvas. Vasubandhu also presents the five aspects of contemplation, that is, the five practices for birth in the Pure Land. They are (1) worshipping Buddha Amitābha, (2) praising his virtues by invoking his name, (3) aspiring for birth in the Pure Land, (4) meditating on the glories of the Pure Land, and (5) dedicating merit to save sentient beings. The second practice may at first appear to mean the vocal nembutsu, but in fact it has a different meaning. "Invoking his name" here refers particularly to praising the twelve different names of Buddha Amitābha presented in the Larger Sutra.

Thus, although their teachings were in general too scholastic for the masses, Nāgārjuna and Vasubandhu's commentaries became a bridge between the Mahāyāna bodhisattva and Pure Land ideals, contributing greatly to the transformational stage in Buddhist history. It was on this basis that later Chinese Pure Land masters, concerned about the practicality and accessibility of the religion, adapted the Pure Land tradition to broaden its appeal.

2. Shan-tao and the Development of the Vocal Nembutsu in China

The history of Pure Land Buddhism in China begins with the translation of Mahāyāna texts relating to the Pure Land of Buddha Amitābha. These Pure Land Buddhist texts were taken from India to China through Central Asia; however, complete infiltration of Pure Land Buddhism as an organized unit or school did not happen in China until later. It was only in the Eastern Chin dynasty (317–420) that Hui-yüan (334–416) of Mount Lu first established a religious group dedicated to worshipping Buddha Amitābha.

Hui-yüan's early training was in Confucian classics and Taoism, but at the age of twenty-one, he, along with his brother, became a pupil of Tao-an (314–85), one of the leading Chinese Buddhist monks. He and Tao-an eventually parted, and Hui-yüan went on to lead a secluded life in Tung-lin Temple on Mount Lu in southern China. There he organized the White Lotus Society, which consisted of 123 monks and lay people, a group thought to be the first organized Buddhist institution in China.

Hui-yüan believed deeply in Pure Land Buddhism, strictly observed the Buddhist precepts, and remained on the mountain until his death. Due to his educational background, he relied heavily on Taoist terminology to express

Buddhist concepts.⁶

Hui-yüan derived his notion of nembutsu from the Sutra of the Samādhi of All Buddhas' Presence, in which an aspirant realizes wisdom through meditation on Buddha Amitābha. It is uncertain whether Hui-yüan's nembutsu took a vocal or mental form. One may assume, however, that since the Meditation Sutra, which first articulated the recitation of the name of Buddha Amitābha, was only translated into Chinese between 424 and 442, it would have been impossible for Hui-yüan to have seen it. If this speculation is correct, his nembutsu was likely based on meditation.

During this period, the most significant event in China regarding the development of Pure Land Buddhism was the translation or retranslation of the three sutras of Pure Land Buddhism. The Smaller Sutra was translated into Chinese by Kumārajīva in 402, the Larger Sutra by Buddhahadra in 421, and the Meditation Sutra by Kālayaśas between 424 and 442. On the basis of these translations, Pure Land Buddhism was introduced gradually to the Chinese people, particularly in northern China. The situation in southern China, however, was different. A scholastic Buddhism had penetrated southern China, and intellectuals there utilized such Mahāyāna texts as the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra (Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra), the Nirvāṇa Sutra (Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra), the Vimalakīrti Sutra (Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra), and the Lotus Sutra (Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sūtra).

It was T'an-luan (476-542) who finally systematized Pure Land Buddhism for the Chinese. T'an-luan was born in Yen-mei in Shan-hsi Province in 476 and entered religious life at the age of fifteen. He first focused on the Madhyamak doctrine and then studied the Taoist way to longevity. After receiving Taoist instruction, he met Bodhiruci, a northern Indian monk who arrived in Lo-yang in 508 and was famous for translating Vasubandhu's Treatise on Birth in the Pure Land. Bodhiruci presented the Meditation Sutra to T'an-luan as the sole teaching for achieving enlightenment. T'an-luan immediately discarded his Taoist texts and became an ardent Pure Land practitioner. His major work, Commentary on Treatise on Birth in the Pure Land, a commentary on Vasubandhu's earlier commentary, powerfully shaped Pure Land Buddhism in China.

T'an-luan's view of Pure Land Buddhism was slightly different from that of Hui-yüan on Mount Lu. Hui-yüan emphasized meditation as a means to realize the wisdom of emptiness, while T'an-luan stressed faith in the compassion of Buddha Amitābha to attain birth in the Pure Land. In his commentary, T'an-luan defended this view:

With respect, I studied the Commentary on the Ten Bodhisattva Stages of Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna. It states, "A bodhisattva has two different paths to the state of nonregression; one is the path of the difficult practice and the other is the path of the easy practice." It is very hard to reach nonregression through the difficult practice in the era marked by the five defilements or in the era when Buddha Śākyamuni does not exist . . . The easy practice to birth in the Pure Land is simply faith in the essential vow of Buddha Amitābha. One can be born in the

Pure Land and will immediately become characterized as being in the state of certain attainment of birth in the Pure Land by relying on the power of his vow. The certain attainment of birth in the Pure Land leads inexorably to the state of nonregression. This is as pleasant as voyaging in a ship. The Treatise, the ultimate teaching of Mahāyāna Buddhism, is propelled by the winds of nonregression.⁷

T'an-luan employs Nāgārjuna's easy/difficult presentation as his starting point in his Commentary, adding his own unique interpretation. There are three basic differences between the theories of these two masters. First, for Nāgārjuna, enlightenment (or attainment of nonregression) through both the easy and difficult practices is realized in this world; for T'an-luan, it is achieved in the Pure Land only. Second, according to Nāgārjuna, enlightenment is possible by praising the names of various buddhas in the ten directions, while T'an-luan emphasizes faith in Buddha Amitābha alone. Third, Nāgārjuna's understanding of Pure Land Buddhism is based on the notion of a Mahāyāna bodhisattva. T'an-luan rejects this and articulates birth in the Pure Land by ordinary believers through faith.

T'an-luan also interprets Vasubandhu's theory of the five aspects of meditation and advocates Nāgārjuna's idea of the power other than self, saying, "Any practice pursued by bodhisattvas and celestial beings in the Pure Land is informed by the essential vow of Buddha Amitābha. If these practices were not due to his compassionate power, his forty-eight vows would be meaningless." T'an-luan emphasizes total reliance on the compassionate power of the vow of Buddha Amitābha. He does not value the bodhisattva perfections—in other words, enlightenment through self-power (tzu-li, svabala). To support his power other than self (t'a-li, parabala) theory, he further quotes the eleventh, eighteenth, and thirty-second vows of Buddha Amitābha to prove that one can realize birth in the Pure Land (or the state of nonregression) through faith in Buddha Amitābha.

T'an-luan taught that the three sutras of Pure Land Buddhism were designed for common people, excluding no one, even one who had committed the five grave offenses or the ten transgressions. His strong conviction in saving the masses was remarkable for his time, for until then, it had always been held that enlightenment was effectively unattainable for some—offenders who were destined for hell, then to suffer immeasurable pain for an immeasurable span of time. T'an-luan was the first to portray Buddha Amitābha and the Pure Land as a refuge for all people.

T'an-luan's method relied on faith in Amitābha, but it is unclear how nembutsu was included in this practice. In his Commentary, he mentions nembutsu, saying, "If people in the low category of birth hear the name of Buddha Amitābha, which is as pure and beautiful as the jeweled trees, they abandon unwholesome thinking. If they meditate on him, their karmic defilements are eliminated, and immediately they attain birth in the Pure Land."⁹ Based on this statement alone, T'an-luan's nembutsu seems to consist of hearing and thinking. At the other point in the Commentary no distinction is made between meditation and recitation. For instance, he asserts, "Praising the name of Buddha Amitābha is the same as being mindful of him," and "Daśacitta does not indicate a particular number but only the perfection of being mindful of Buddha Amitābha."¹⁰ He clearly considered

meditation and praising the name of Buddha Amitābha to be identical. Given the overall emphasis on meditation, however, nembutsu to T'an-luan probably means meditative nembutsu.

Tao-ch'ō (562-645) followed the Pure Land tradition of T'an-luan. Tao-ch'ō was born in Shan-hsi Province in northern China and entered religious life while still a boy. His studies began with the Nirvāṇa Sutra, which elucidates the notion of buddha nature, the idea that although the minds of sentient beings are generally considered to be defiled, inherently they are pure, and that buddha nature becomes apparent through the cultivation of purity.

At the age of forty-eight, Tao-ch'ō converted to Pure Land Buddhism after seeing the monument memorializing T'an-luan in the environs of Hsüan-c'ün Temple, where T'an-luan had resided. This conversion turned Tao-ch'ō away from a belief in reliance on self-power to a belief in reliance on a power other than self. In other words, he saw both the arduousness of the bodhisattva practices and people's weak capacity for attaining enlightenment through those means. He then linked his awareness of this human weakness to a particular understanding of negative karma, the outlook later adopted by Shan-tao and Hōnen.

The political situation in China changed dramatically over Tao-ch'ō's lifetime. The frequent wars during the Northern Ch'i (550-577) and Northern Chou (557-81) dynasties threatened many lives with violence, famine, and disease. Emperor Wu (r. 560-78) of the Northern Chou dynasty began to suppress Buddhism as a defensive action against the Buddhist organizations' potentially dangerous accumulation of wealth. Conflict also flared between Buddhism and China's two indigenous religions, Taoism and Confucianism. This "second persecution of Buddhism in China," as it was later called, resulted in widespread destruction of Buddhist monasteries and statues as well as the elimination of many monks and nuns, who were killed or forced to return to lay life. This upheaval and its attendant tragedies critically shaped Tao-ch'ō's Pure Land thought. He saw the historical forces at work as a manifestation of the era of the Dharma's decline. Having experienced these tragedies firsthand, Tao-ch'ō must have been keenly aware of the mutability of life and thus developed a strong compassion for the populace in their continual suffering.

Tao-ch'ō's main work, *Collection of Passages on the Blissful Land*, divides Buddhism into two categories: the holy gate and the Pure Land gate. In the former, a bodhisattva realizes enlightenment through austere self-discipline, while in the latter, an ordinary person attains birth in the Pure Land with ease through the compassion of Buddha Amitābha. Tao-ch'ō's idea of nembutsu is expressed in the first fascicle of this text:

The era in which we sentient beings live is the fourth five-hundred-year period after the death of Buddha Śākyamuni. We must repent of our karmic wrongs, exercise wholesome deeds, and recite the name of Buddha Amitābha. If someone meditates on and utters A-mi-t'ō-fo [Buddha Amitābha] once, the negative karma binding that person to saṃsāra for eight billion more eons is eliminated.¹¹

Tao-ch'ō alludes to the vocal nembutsu here, although he discusses it in

conjunction with meditation. He later clarifies himself stating, "The essence of the Meditation Sutra is the samādhi in which a practitioner visualizes the physical features of Buddha Amitābha."¹² Despite this clarification, Tao-ch'ō's notion of nembutsu seems to combine both meditation and recitation, and for his own practice, Tao-ch'ō was known to have a commitment to recitation. Tao-hsüan' (596–667) Further Biographies of Eminent Monks mentions that Tao-ch'ō recited A-mi-t'o-fo seventy thousand times a day, and that he urged his followers to use beans as an aid in counting the number of times they chanted the name of Buddha Amitābha. As a result, every person over age seven in his province chanted the name. Clearly Tao-ch'ō's vision of nembutsu established a foundation for Shan-tao's Pure Land thought.

Shan-tao (631–81) was a disciple of Tao-ch'ō, and he based his idea of nembutsu upon the works of both T'an-luan and Tao-ch'ō, but each of these three masters had his own interpretation of nembutsu. As the concept of nembutsu evolved through these proponents, one sees the practice go from ambiguity to clarity, from subordinancy to centrality. Whereas T'an-luan only indirectly alluded to nembutsu as a kind of meditation and Tao-ch'ō referred to it equally as both meditation and recitation, Shan-tao was the first to put nembutsu recitation at the center. Initially, he recognized equally the importance of both meditation and recitation, but eventually he came to advocate solely the vocal nembutsu, with saving the masses as his expressed objective.

Shan-tao was born in Shang-tung Province in 613, entered religious life at the age of nine, and studied primarily the Lotus Sutra and the Vimalakīrti Sutra. He later found Pure Land Buddhism and strictly observed the meditative practice described in the Meditation Sutra. Sometime between 629 and 636, after hearing the name of Tao-ch'ō, Shan-tao went to the Hsüan-chung Temple in Shan-hsi Province to meet with him. Shan-tao's meeting with Tao-ch'ō is described in Further Biographies of Eminent Monks:

Recently, there has been a monk called Shan-tao living on the mountain. He traveled through various provinces searching for the true teaching of Buddha Śākyamuni. One day, he went to Hsi-ho and met the religious group headed by Tao-ch'ō. From then on, Shan-tao only practiced the recitation of nembutsu, the essential practice of Buddha Amitābha.¹³

Around the age of thirty-two, Shan-tao returned to Ch'ang-an, the cultural, economic, political, and religious capital of the Sui and T'ang dynasties. He devoted himself to spreading the teaching with great industry, producing his five major works including his Commentary on the Meditation Sutra, making tens of thousands of copies of the Smaller Sutra, and painting three hundred Pure Land pictures. At the age of forty-nine, Shan-tao supervised the carving of the great image of Buddha Vairocana in Lung-men. And in 681, at the age of sixty-eight, he died.

Shan-tao established the vocal nembutsu by re-interpreting the eighteenth vow of Buddha Amitābha. His Hymns in Praise of Birth in the Pure Land reveals the reason for his shift from mental to vocal practice:

Stay alone in a quiet place and free yourself from all wayward thoughts. Then focus your mind on the single Buddha and, instead of being mindful of his physical features, only recite his name. If this is done, you can perceive Buddha Amitābha and all other buddhas.

Question: Why is the exclusive recitation of the name of Buddha Amitābha urged instead of meditation?

Answer: Sentient beings are burdened with weighty karmic obstacles; their conscious worlds are limited; their minds are unrefined; their senses are disturbed; their spirits are frivolous. Therefore, the Great Sage [Buddha], with sympathy, urged them to recite the name of Buddha Amitābha exclusively. Because the recitation of his name is easy, they can do so continuously to attain birth in the Pure Land.¹⁴

This passage is seminal for understanding Shan-tao's notion of nembutsu. Reciting the name of Buddha Amitābha is not only "easy" for everyone to perform but also possible to do "continuously" in order to realize birth in the Pure Land.

Shan-tao unmistakably valued the vocal nembutsu more than meditation. Presumably, this transformation in thought was inspired by his own religious experiences. The rigor of his discipline during his stay in Ch'ang-an is well documented:

Even in the cold season, Shan-tao practiced to the extent that he perspired... For more than thirty years, he had no particular place to sleep, nor did he take robes off except when bathing... He stringently observed the precepts without breaking a single one. He neither raised his eyes to look at a woman nor entertained any desire for fame or wealth.¹⁵

Shan-tao's austere religious discipline astonished even his fellow monks. His contemporaries respectfully referred to him as "Meditation Master" or "Precept Master." Nonetheless, he often confessed, "I am a common mortal with worldly passions."¹⁶ Because of his deep awareness of human nature, he recognized that he, like other ordinary people, was weak and karmically unvirtuous.

This kind of moral introspection is apparent in his interpretation of the threefold devotional heart, the three being the genuine heart, the profound heart, and the heart that seeks birth in the Pure Land through the dedication of merit. The threefold idea was originally introduced in the Meditation Sutra, where the term threefold devotional heart originally meant the three aspects of faith indispensable for attaining birth in the Pure Land. According to the Meditation Sutra, however, the threefold devotional heart applies only to superior beings. Shan-tao, on the other hand, regarded them as applying equally to every sentient being aspiring for birth in the Pure Land. Among the three hearts, the profound heart was particularly significant to him. Shan-tao describes the profound heart in his Commentary on the Meditation Sutra:

The profound heart is the heart filled with profound faith. This has two aspects. First, we must firmly believe that we are unwholesome common mortals who have wandered through the delusive triple realms of saṃsāra for innumerable eons and

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