

The Heart of Keeping the Light

A selection of teachings from the

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who edited forty-eight methods of Amitabha repetitions (known in Chinese as Nienfo Su Shih Pa Fa) and translated to English Great Master Suddhisukha, under direction of Great Master Lok To.

Part 1

1) Buddha Recitation and the Mind

Having made up your mind to engage in Pure Land practice by reciting the Buddha's name, you should not dwell on sundry good or bad actions once they have been performed. In other words, everyday activities should be carried out in a matter-of-fact way, and once finished, be let go. Do not hold on to them - or they will disturb your peace of mind.

In fact, the reason you fail to let go of sundry good or bad actions is that your mind has not yet been tamed. If you have recited the Buddha's name to the point where the mind-ground is bright and clear, the mind in samadhi has no room for sundry thoughts.

You should realize that Buddha Recitation can turn ordinary persons into sages. It is the most important means of liberation in this world and the worlds beyond.

2) Watch the Mouth during Buddha Recitation

Having decided to practice Buddha Recitation, do not be reckless or inconsiderate with words, nor let your speech be tainted by the bad karma of killing, stealing, sexual misconduct and dishonesty. If you have erred, remind yourself immediately that Pure Land practitioners should not utter inconsiderate words, and then recite the Buddha's name aloud a few times to quell the mind and immediately wash away the unclean words.

3) Regulating the Body during Buddha Recitation

Having decided to practice Buddha Recitation, you must keep your body pure at all times and in all movements and gestures - whether walking, standing, sitting or reclining. When the body is pure, the mind will also be pure.

The Pure Land practitioner should ponder this teaching. It is never wrong.

4) Buddha Recitation with a Rosary

With this method, the rosary is fingered with each recitation of the Buddha's name. The word "Amitabha" may be recited, rather than the long formula "Namo

Amitabha Buddha", as it is very easy to achieve singlemindedness with the shorter expression.

You can finger the rosary upon the first or third syllable of the word "Amitabha", but whichever you decide, you should stick to it and not make mistakes. This is the method of using the rosary to focus the mind.

5) Reciting Aloud

When your mind is in a state of torpor or when delusive thoughts arise unchecked, compose yourself and recite the Buddha's name aloud a few hundred times. You will then naturally experience a pure, peaceful state. This is because the faculty of hearing is very keen and therefore people are easily influenced by external factors which disturb the mind and lead to errant, delusive thoughts. Thus, you need to recite aloud to control the faculty of hearing and enlighten the mind. When the mind hears only its own sounds, each sound in its totality following upon the one before, all thoughts of right and wrong, what should and should not be done, are naturally abandoned.

6) Buddha Recitation in a Low Voice

When the mind is scattered, or when you are tired and weighed down by many pressing tasks, you need not recite aloud. You need only focus your mind and thoughts and recite carefully in a low voice.

Only when your breath returns to normal, your spirits rise, and your mind is calm and at peace, should you recite aloud.

7) Diamond Recitation

If the mind is agitated and the breath uneven, something is bothering you, or reciting the Buddha's name either aloud or in a low voice is inconvenient, you should just move your lips, practicing silent recitation (Diamond Recitation). With this method, the number of recitations does not matter; the essential condition is that each word, each recitation should come from the mind.

8) Silent recitation

There are instances when it is not appropriate to recite either aloud or in a low voice. There are times when it is awkward to finger a rosary. There are still other times when even Diamond Recitation may be inappropriate. For such instances, the ancients have devised an excellent expedient. It is not to move the lips, not to utter a sound, but merely to concentrate mind and thoughts on recitation, silently touching the upper front teeth with the tongue, or alternatively, to visualize this

action. The only condition is that the Buddha's name be clear and distinct, though it is uttered not from the mouth but from the Self-Nature. The faculty of hearing and the inner mind interpenetrate, the inner mind is stamped on the tip of the tongue, the tip of the tongue pulls along the faculty of recitation, the faculty of hearing hears the Self-Nature - the three (inner mind, hearing, recitation) form one unit. Recitation interpenetrates with recitation -- in time the visualization of "everything as Mind-Only" is realized.

9) Regulating the Breath

When the mind is at peace and the breath is regular, you should first visualize yourself seated in a circular zone of light, then visualize the breath going in and out of your nose as you silently recite the Buddha's name once with each breath. You should regulate the breath so that it is neither slow nor hurried, the mind and the breath reinforcing each other, following each other in and out. Whether walking or standing, reclining or sitting, proceed in this manner without interruption.

If you always "secretly recite" in the above manner, focusing the mind over a long period of time, there will no longer be a distinction between the breath and the recitation - your body and mind merging with empty space. When recitation is perfected, the mind-eye will open up and samadhi is suddenly realized. This is the state of Mind-Only Pure Land.

Part 2

10) Buddha recitation Can Be Practiced Anywhere

Whether you are in a clean or a dirty place, a quiet, out-of-the-way location or the marketplace, a place you like or a place you abhor, you need only engage in introspection and "return the light inward", thinking thus: I have encountered situations like this countless times throughout numerous lifetimes, yet there is one thing I have not been able to do: it is to recite the Buddha's name and achieve rebirth in the Pure Land. Therefore, even now I am still subject to the cycle of Birth and Death. By now I should not worry about where recitation takes place. I need only hold securely to this 'mind of Buddha Recitation' - even if it costs my life. I must recite without interruption, one recitation after another without a single gap.

Why is this? It is because if there is a single interruption, all kinds of sundry thoughts - good, bad or neutral -- will arise. For this reason, even when in the bathroom, even in the process of giving birth, you should concentrate on reciting the Buddha's name. The greater the hardship, the greater the suffering, the more you need to recite - just as an infant cries out for his mother, unafraid that she will become upset or angry...

11) Fixed Periods of Buddha Recitation

With the previous method, you are enjoined to practice Buddha Recitation at all times without interruption. However, because there are no definite periods for Buddha Recitation [the method demands a good deal of self-discipline]. Few people can therefore practice it.

With this method, the expedient of fixed periods of recitation is introduced. There should usually be two periods per day, in the morning and in the evening, and these periods should be strictly observed every day, without fail, throughout life.

Furthermore, if during the twenty-four hour period, you can recite the Buddha's name one additional time, do it once; if you can recite it many times, do so many times. It does not matter whether the recitation is audible or not. The ancients had a saying:

Utter one fewer idle phrase;

Recite the Buddha's name one more time;

How wonderful it is!

12) Facing an Image or not, during Buddha Recitation

When facing a statue of the Buddha, consider it as a real Buddha. There is no need to get attached to any particular direction or to any of the Three Bodies of the Buddha. [\(9\)](#) You should think thus: I must achieve singlemindedness, and that singlemindedness must be about the Buddha. My eyes should be focused on the Buddha's image, my mind should recite the Buddha's name with utmost sincerity - with utmost sincerity, a response is guaranteed.

If you do not have a statue, just sit straight facing west. As soon as you begin reciting, visualize the Buddha's light shining on your head, recitation following recitation without a break. If you practice this way, even the heaviest karma can be dissipated.

13) True and Earnest Buddha Recitation

To eschew wealth and fame, to avoid showing off one's capacities, but merely to practice sincerely - this is something very few can achieve.

The ancients taught that it is difficult to find a "dull and ignorant" Zen practitioner, even if we go out of our way. Yet, a practitioner of Buddha Recitation need only worry that he is not "dull and ignorant".

The two words "true and earnest" are a straight highway leading to the Pure Land. Why? It is because when Buddha Recitation is true and earnest, there are only the words "Amitabha Buddha", and not a single deluded thought.

14) Buddha Recitation and Offerings

In everyday life, on the occasion of a seasonal festival or the festival of a Buddha or Bodhisattva, it is customary to make offerings, according to one's means, of incense, lights, flowers and fruits. However, these are merely material offerings -- not offerings of the Dharma. Dharma offerings relate to the mind and are on a much higher plane than any material offering.

In recent times, because of the popularity of non-Buddhist beliefs, [we can witness all kinds of deluded practices, such as making offerings of non-vegetarian foods on the Buddha's altar or conjuring up ghosts and spirits in search of health and riches]. Such practices are wasteful and deceptive.

Only Buddha Recitation can eliminate all ills and it costs nothing. Yet, few people bother to learn about it. I sincerely hope that the wise will not allow themselves to be misled.

Part 3

15) Self-Nature Recitation, Self-Nature Listening

The mind begins to think, which moves the tongue; the tongue in turn moves, producing sound, and that sound returns to the Self-Mind. This is the method of "mind reciting, mind listening."

If the mind recites and listens, the eyes cannot see wrongly, the nose cannot smell wrongly, the body cannot move wrongly because the master(the mind) has been "kidnapped" by the words "Amitabha Buddha".

16) Recitation within Recitation

Once recitation of the Buddha's name is perfected, of the Six Dusts only the "dust" of hearing remains. All six faculties are entirely concentrated in the faculty of hearing. The body no longer feels any coming or going, the tongue no longer knows how to move, the mind how to discriminate, the nose how to breathe, the eyes how to open and close. The two supreme methods of cultivation, of the Bodhisattvas Avalokitesvara and Mahasthama, are but one; nothing is not round and perfect. This is because sense organ is sense object, sense object is sense organ, and both organ and object are consciousness. The Eighteen Elements are all gathered in one element. Although at the outset they do not penetrate one another, in time they will gradually do so.

Usually, a clean, quiet corner should be selected for Buddha Recitation, about fourteen to seventeen square feet in area. You should circumambulate once, moving clockwise, and then slowly recite the Buddha's name with your voice growing louder and louder. As you recite this way for three or more circumambulations, you will feel your mind and voice becoming clearer, filling the universe, encircling the Ten Directions, encompassing the whole Dharma Realm. This is the method of resting body, mind and realm in the sound of the Buddha's name, and it is to rest body and mind in the sound of the Buddha's name that you recite. This is the supreme realm, which erases the polluted mind full of

afflictions, and which the practitioner should endeavor to reach.(This method needs no further clarification.)

17) Recitation in the Light of the Self-Mind

If [all] sounds are the sound of the Self-Mind, then [all] lights are also the light of the Self-Mind. If the sound of the Self-Mind exists anywhere, the light of the Self-Mind also shines from that place. If you rest in the sound of the Self-Mind to recite the Buddha's name, you are resting in the light of the Self-Mind as you recite. This is also the supreme realm where the polluted, afflicted mind has been eliminated. The practitioner should strive to cultivate this method.

18) Recitation in the Nature of the Self-Mind

As the sound of the Self-Mind surrounds you and the light of the Self-Mind shines upon you, the Mind-Nature naturally reveals itself. This True Mind is like a huge, round, bright mirror that nothing can obstruct. The Ten Directions, the Three Periods of Time, ourselves, the Buddhas and sentient beings, the cycle of suffering in the impure world, the lotus seat in the Pure Land - all are but images in the mirror. Thus, to recite aloud is to recite in the light, to recite in the mirror; it is neither the same nor different. This is the ultimate auspicious realm, completely free of the deluded mind. You should strive with all your might to attain it.

19) Uninterrupted Recitation

Recite in the morning, recite in the evening, recite when you are at leisure, recite when you are busy, recite in clean places, recite in unclean places - there should not be a single thought which is not of the Buddha. Even if you have to entertain friends and serve guests every day and thus have to interrupt your recitation, only vocal recitation should be interrupted, not mental recitation. Practicing with such constancy, you can easily achieve samadhi.

20) Recitation without Sundry Thoughts

The absence of sundry thoughts is "stopping". Stopping is the cause of samadhi. If you can put a stop to sundry (impure) thoughts, correct thoughts (samadhi) will naturally appear.

Sundry thoughts fall into three categories: good, bad and neutral. To eliminate all three is to eliminate sundry thoughts. [\(16\)](#) The mind requires stillness. With stillness, neither good nor bad thoughts arise. The mind requires clarity. With clarity, there is no "neutral" thought.

There is no recitation except recitation of the Buddha's name. Therefore, the mind is always still. In recitation, there is [only] Buddha, therefore, the mind is always bright and clear.

21) Uninterrupted Recitation

Reciting the Buddha's name without interruption is visualization, and visualization is the cause of wisdom. The previous utterance of the Buddha's name has gone, the next one has not come, the present utterance is not static. [\(17\)](#) Practice visualization in this manner -- clearly but without attachment, without attachment but clearly. Proceeding continuously in this way, you will arrive at the truth that "everything is made from Mind alone" -- Buddha is Mind, Mind is Buddha.

22) Zen is Buddha Recitation

Meditation based on a koan [\(18\)](#) is called koan meditation. Meditation in which the practitioner sits and stops the thought process is referred to as sitting meditation. Koan and sitting meditation are both Zen. Zen and Buddha are both Mind. Zen is the Zen of Buddha. Buddha is the Buddha in Zen. Buddha Recitation does not conflict with koan or sitting meditation. Moreover, the meditator can use the words "Amitabha Buddha" as a koan, reciting forward, reciting backward, reciting in one direction, reciting in another, upside down, turning around, without leaving his current thought. Even if it is not called Zen, Zen is still part of it.

The Zen practitioner, to succeed in his cultivation, must practice to the stage of "one thought in resonance with the Mind" (samadhi), and enter suddenly into the realm of Emptiness.

To recite the Buddha's name to the level of one-pointedness of mind - if this is not resonance (samadhi) what else can it be? To recite to the point where the mind is empty, is it not perpetual samadhi?

In alert, focused Buddha recitation there is samatha, vipassana, samadhi, wisdom - each recitation is perfect. Where else can Zen be found if not here?

23) Precepts are Buddha

To keep the precepts is to rein in the body; to recite the Buddha's name is to rein in the mind. Keeping the precepts for an extended period of time rectifies the body; reciting the Buddha's name for an extended period of time leads to an empty mind. The nature of the precepts and the nature of recitation are not two different things. Constantly keeping the precepts prevents transgressions and mistakes; constantly reciting the Buddha's name enables the cultivator to overcome "near-death karma" [\(20\)](#) and transcend the Triple Realm. If your precept-keeping has reached a high level and you dedicate these virtues toward rebirth in the Pure Land, you are bound to achieve rebirth in the middle Lotus Grades. [\(21\)](#) If, on the other hand, you cannot do both, then try to recite the Buddha's name assiduously, as though you were extinguishing a fire burning on your head.

24) Sutras are Buddha

The entire Buddhist canon comes from the Mind; if the Mind is not Buddha, the teachings are just a waste. However, is there anyone's mind which is not Buddha? [If so], it is only because he does not stop and think.

Mahayana cultivators who have studied the Dharma must have read the Surangama Sutra, and among them there are some who belittle the Bodhisattva Mahasthamaprapta while praising the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara. A tiny bit of attachment on this point is enough to plant a seed of Birth and Death. All their learning, farsighted views and profound understanding serve merely to strengthen the seeds of suffering; they are of no help at all toward the goal of escaping Birth and Death. I urge you to let go quickly, let go of everything and

concentrate on Buddha Recitation, seeking rebirth in the Pure Land and the company of Amitabha Buddha.

Otherwise, if you cannot let go of these attachments immediately, then dedicate the virtues of studying and explaining the sutras toward rebirth in the Pure Land and fulfilment of the Four Great Vows. This will bring rebirth in the Pure Land. If, moreover, you can spread the Pure Land teachings, making others understand the benefits of Buddha Recitation, then even a wink or a thought will adorn the Pure Land. Thus, there is no doubt that your rebirth will be at the highest Lotus Grade! [\(22\)](#)

25) Not Reciting is Reciting

As soon as any action is completed or a word is uttered, and there has not even been time to think of reciting the Buddha's name, yet the Buddha's name has already appeared - this is the state leading to samadhi.

26) Reciting but not Reciting

This means reciting without growing weary or bored, while feeling better and better.

It means reciting the words "Amitabha Buddha" in a very clear, distinct way, without interruption and finding that these words have suddenly, temporarily, become frozen in your mind. It is to have no thoughts of the word "Amitabha" and no thoughts other than this word. This can provisionally be called attaining an auspicious realm, but not truly the state of Empty Mind. However, if you are diligent in reciting the Buddha's name, the realm always appears and in time you will achieve the state. If because of a thought of Empty Mind, you succumb to drowsiness and lethargy, you are lacking in wisdom.

You should realize that the more empty your mind is, the more wondrous and pure your recitation will be. When you use the self within the Buddha Mind to recite the Buddha in your own mind, neither Emptiness nor Non-Emptiness can be found. It is as though the sun or moon, while shining on the Jade Palace, were revolving around the Polar Mountain and shining on the whole world.

Indeed, what can be better than Wonderful Enlightenment becoming Perfect Enlightenment (Buddhahood)? [\(23\)](#)

Part 4

27) Reciting the Buddha's Name in Isolation

When cultivating, a Bhiksu/Bhiksuni does not require the presence of fellow-cultivators. The more isolated his place of practice the better! He may recite in either a loud or a low voice, as he pleases, slowly and deliberately, or with utterances following one another in rapid succession. The only important condition is to achieve singlemindedness. He should tell himself "my body is alone but my mind is not, because the Mind of Amitabha Buddha and of all the Buddhas has never left me, even momentarily. The Buddhas know immediately what is going through my mind. If I give rise to even a single thought, the Buddhas know it. How can I be isolated?"

If you have questions about the Pure Land method, you should consult Pure Land sutras and treatises for clarification. There are many such sutras and commentaries, such as the Shorter Amitabha Sutra, the Longer Amitabha Sutra, the Meditation Sutra, Patriarch Chih-i's Treatise on Ten Doubts about the Pure Land, Master T'ien Ju's Doubts and Questions about Pure Land, etc. [\(24\)](#) I am merely covering a few easily understood Pure Land teachings in this book. There are many more interesting teachings to be found throughout the above-mentioned books. Furthermore, you should also try to study at the feet of masters who understand the Pure Land method in depth.

28) Organizing a Buddha Recitation Retreat

A Buddha Recitation retreat usually lasts seven days. If you are in retreat alone [you should see to it that all the basic necessities of life are available.] During the retreat, you should discourage others from moving about in the general area, so as to reserve the entire time for Buddha Recitation.

If there are five or six persons who wish to go into retreat together, you should plan to have a retreat attendant, as well as to establish strict rules and affix them to the door. All comings and goings, meals, offerings of flowers and fruits should be handled by the attendant, so that the participants can concentrate on reciting the Buddha's name throughout the seven-day period.

If you are still constrained by family obligations and do not know the pros and cons of serious cultivation, you should not rush into organizing retreats.

29) Group Recitation

If four or five persons decide to meet as a group to engage in Buddha Recitation, they should establish the rules and agree on the order of seniority at the outset, before beginning to practice.

From the beginning of each session, each time the wooden fish is struck, each time the Buddha's name is recited, one person should take the lead, while everyone else follows in a regular, even manner, without confusion - as otherwise, the minds of the participants could be disturbed.

30) Recitation for the Purpose of Helping Others

The following activities are wholesome and conducive to accruing virtues: reciting the Buddha's name peacefully in one spot and dedicating the merits and virtues to others; joining in a retreat with other persons; propagating the Pure Land method; lending Pure Land texts to others; dispelling other people's doubts about this method; and counseling others to recite the Buddha's name steadfastly.

However, if you can practice supportive recitation [\(25\)](#) at the bedside of the dying, helping them to keep the Buddha's name continuously in mind so that they may be reborn in the Pure Land - you will be helping to realize the Dharma Body Wisdom-Life (Pure Mind) of others. The virtues of such action are on a higher level than all other activities.

31) Buddha recitation at the Time of Death

At the time of death, make the effort to remember the words "Amitabha Buddha", never letting them slip away from your mind. If you can recite aloud, by all means do so. If not, then recite softly. If you are too weak to recite at all, think of the words "Amitabha Buddha", engraving them in the depths of your mind - and never forget them.

Those who attend the dying should counsel them, continuously urging them to remember the Buddha, to recite the Buddha's name.

You should realize that because of scattered, deluded thoughts at the time of death, you have been wallowing in the Triple Realm throughout many lifetimes, many eons. Why? It is because Birth and Death are governed by your last thought at the time of death. If that single thought is focused on the Buddha, your body may be dead but your mind, being undisturbed, will immediately follow that single thought toward rebirth in the Pure Land. [\(26\)](#) Therefore, remember to recite the Buddha's name, always, without fail!

32) Vows, Repentance and Buddha Recitation

Alas! There are countless people who are unaware of Buddha Recitation. There are those who think Buddha recitation is akin to superstition and refuse to recite. There are monks and nuns who recite the Buddha's name as a matter of routine without knowing the true reason why. There are persons with "deluded wisdom" who believe in the Buddha yet refuse to recite. There are ignorant persons who do not know about the Buddha and therefore do not recite. These are but a few examples. In addition, there are ordinary people who, upon learning about cause and effect, recite the Buddha's name. However, they do so with the expectation of receiving merits and blessings in future lifetimes. Thus, they, too, cannot escape the seeds of Birth and Death.

It is truly difficult to find anyone who recites the Buddha's name for the sake of transcending Birth and Death - perhaps one or two out of a hundred! We should realize that to recite the Buddha's name is to be in unison with the compassionate Mind of the Buddha - it is to make the great vow of rescuing all sentient beings [Bodhi Mind]. [\(27\)](#)

"All offenses and past wrongs done to others, I now repent; all virtues and good roots, large and small, I now dedicate to rebirth in the Pure Land."

This is the principal cause (motive) of Buddha Recitation.

Sources :

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<https://www.ymba.org/books/taming-monkey-mind-guide-pure-land-practice/forty-eight-aspects-buddha-recitation>