

Rebirth Through Eliminating Karma and Rebirth While Carrying Karma

Master Yuanyin, Included in Selected Writings of Guanghai

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Recently, a heated debate has arisen throughout the country over a distinctive expedient of the Pure Land school: "rebirth while carrying karma." One side maintains that, to attain rebirth, one must eliminate one's deluded karma; the other maintains that this is unnecessary, since one may attain rebirth while carrying karma. Each side has its own arguments, and neither can accommodate the other.

Those who advocate "rebirth through eliminating karma" say that "rebirth while carrying karma" is a harmful fallacy. It not only destroys Pure Land practitioners' hope of attaining rebirth at the end of life, but also damages the Pure Land school's solemn and pure image. For karma itself is defilement and an obstacle. It is incompatible with the Pure Land and constitutes a cause obstructing the Way. How, then, can one carry it into rebirth in the Western Buddha-land? Therefore, the Buddhas and bodhisattvas have never advanced this gravely mistaken claim of "rebirth while carrying karma" in any sūtra or treatise.

Those who advocate "rebirth while carrying karma," however, say: Although the phrase "rebirth while carrying karma" was not spoken directly by the Buddhas or bodhisattvas, the sūtras and treatises do contain this implication. For example, the Nāgaseṇa Bhikṣu Sūtra says: "It is like placing a large stone on a boat: through the power of the boat, the stone does not sink. Without the boat, even a small stone will sink."

The stone symbolizes the karma created by worldly people, and the boat symbolizes the Buddha's power. Does this not clearly say that, through the Buddha's power, one can attain rebirth while carrying karma? Therefore, we Pure Land practitioners need only have firm faith and earnest vows, and recite the Buddha's name with one-pointedness of mind. There is no need to eliminate any karma; at the end of life, we shall certainly attain rebirth. The claim of rebirth through eliminating karma is a demonic teaching: it cannot be trusted and must be thoroughly defeated and eradicated.

These two positions each cling to their own claims and remain deadlocked. They have caused great agitation within Buddhist circles, with no consensus possible, leaving later students without guidance and unsure how to practice in accordance with the subtlety of the Way. Therefore, eminent practitioners from all quarters should be invited to express their views and engage in vigorous discussion, so that a correct conclusion may be reached, the clouds of doubt cleared away, proper understanding restored, and later students spared from entering a wrong path.

To determine which position is right and which is wrong, we must first clarify the origins of these two views. Then, through comparison and discussion, it will not be difficult to see where their contradictions lie and thereby arrive at the correct conclusion.

The reasons these two positions each maintain their own view and oppose one another so fiercely are no more than the following:

A. Those Who Advocate "Rebirth Through Eliminating Karma"

1. They observe that recent Pure Land practitioners are unwilling to recite the Buddha's name earnestly. They merely drift along with the group in performing the morning and evening services, as if elementary-school students were handing in assignments. Once they have finished the daily recitation, they regard their Buddha-recitation as complete.

They no longer exert themselves in Buddha-recitation to transform their deluded habits of attachment and craving, alter their deluded thoughts and notions, and eliminate the defilements of their own minds. Instead, they shift the entire responsibility for their future rebirth in the Pure Land onto Amitābha Buddha alone. If, at the end of life, they do not see a Buddha or bodhisattva come to guide them, and fail to be reborn in the Western Pure Land, they mistakenly believe that this is the responsibility of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas.

Therefore, Master Lianchi lamented, "Many recite the Buddha's name, but few are reborn in the West." This is because practitioners of Buddha-recitation are neither focused nor earnest, seeking only convenience and thereby misleading themselves.

Thus, the alarm must be sounded loudly, and “rebirth through eliminating karma” must be advocated in order to awaken the confused and deluded masses who recite the Buddha’s name.

2. Many people who recite the Buddha’s name nowadays misunderstand the meaning of “rebirth while carrying karma.” They think that, so long as they have faith and vows and perform their morning and evening recitations, it does no harm even if they do some rather improper things. After all, they can attain rebirth while carrying karma.

At Shengjiamen, I saw many people drying fish and shrimp in the sun. I asked them, “Do not most people in the Zhoushan area believe in Buddhism?” They replied, “Yes, we are all Buddhists.” Unable to suppress my perplexity, I asked, “Then why do you still kill living beings?” They answered, “Because we will attain rebirth while carrying karma!”

If they interpret the phrase “rebirth while carrying karma” in this way, do they not destroy the sacred and pure image of the Pure Land school?

3. In order to clear away the recent corrupt and defiled unhealthy tendencies within the Pure Land school and revitalize Buddhism, they vigorously proclaim “rebirth through eliminating karma” as a thunderous wake-up call. They hope that Pure Land practitioners may truly attain rebirth in the West, rather than merely shout slogans, so that the profound intent of the Pure Land school will not be obscured and gradually perish.

B. Those Who Advocate “Rebirth While Carrying Karma”

1. They fear that people will become intimidated by its difficulty, not dare to enter into faith and practice, and thereby damage the Pure Land school and cut off the wisdom-life of sentient beings.

2. They misunderstand the difficulty of “rebirth through eliminating karma” and do not know what qualifies as eliminating karma before rebirth can be attained. People generally believe that one must completely eradicate ignorance, with karma exhausted and emotional attachment emptied, before karma can be said to have been eliminated. Is that not far too difficult? How many people could accomplish it? Therefore, they firmly oppose it.

3. They do not truly understand the essential meaning contained in “rebirth while carrying karma.” They know only that carrying karma seems convenient, but do not know what karma is carried. Still less do they understand that, whenever one recites the Buddha’s name with each thought of mind, one is eliminating one’s own mental

karma at the most immediate point, thereby creating the primary cause for future rebirth.

From the two views above, it is clear that both those who advocate “rebirth through eliminating karma” and those who advocate “rebirth while carrying karma” begin from good intentions. Both seek to ensure that Pure Land practitioners can indeed attain rebirth in the West and avoid being misled into failure. Since their ultimate purpose is exactly the same, and there is no irreconcilable opposition between them, it should not be difficult to reconcile what they share, integrate their differences, and arrive at a unified conclusion.

To reach a unified conclusion, we should first investigate and examine the word “karma,” for karma is the central issue in both positions. What, then, is karma? Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna says: “Ignorance as cause gives rise to the three subtle characteristics.” The first of these three subtle characteristics is the characteristic of karma.

What is the characteristic of karma? From beginningless time, we human beings have failed to abide in the self-nature of suchness. Deluded by ignorance, we are unaware, and the mind stirs: this is karma. Thus, karma has the meaning of “action” and is called “deluded karma” in the sūtras.

What is meant by “characteristic”? Because the mind stirs and loses its original perfect luminosity, the originally formless suchness gives rise to the deluded appearances of empty space and the four great elements. This is what the Dharma Characteristics School calls the object aspect. The originally inherent wisdom-light becomes the deluded faculty of seeing; this is the perceiving aspect. All phenomena possessing appearances in the worlds of sentient beings are established in dependence upon these two aspects, perceiving and object. These two aspects are also the second and third of the three subtle characteristics in Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna: the characteristic of the perceiving subject and the characteristic of the realm of objects.

From this we can know that karma is action. Since sentient beings differ in delusion and awakening, the karma they create differs, as do the karmic results they experience. Ordinary beings create defiled karma and experience the retribution of segmented birth and death in the three realms and six realms. The two vehicles create undefiled karma and experience the karmic result of the Land of Expedient Means with Residue. Bodhisattvas create neither-defiled-nor-undefiled karma and experience the karmic result of the Land of True Reward and Adornment.

Ordinary beings are deeply deluded: they cling to illusory circumstances as truly existent and mistake false appearances for reality. To satisfy their own selfish desires, they do not hesitate to create much evil karma. Therefore, they cannot

transcend birth and death, and their cycle of rebirth never ceases. If they now wish to attain rebirth in the Pure Land and achieve horizontal transcendence of the three realms, how can they fulfill their original aspiration and truly realize their wish for rebirth in the Pure Land without eliminating this root of birth and death—the karma of deluded attachment to appearances and vain action?

Someone may say: “Rebirth in the Pure Land depends on Amitābha Buddha’s vast and profound compassionate vow-power to guide us. Why must one eliminate karma in order to attain rebirth?” The answer is: “If deluded karma is not purified, one will inevitably remain attached to all the false appearances of the Sahā world. Even if the Buddha comes to guide one, one will not see the Buddha because the mind is deluded and defiled by karma, and one will miss the precious opportunity for rebirth.” Chan Master Yongming Shou said: “The Buddha is like the moon in the sky, whose reflection appears in a thousand rivers and myriad waters; yet it cannot be seen in muddy water. When the mind of one who recites the Buddha’s name is impure, it is like muddy water that cannot reflect the moon, and thus one does not see the Buddha.” If one does not see the Buddha at the end of life, how can one attain rebirth?

Many people who recite the Buddha’s name become wealth-guarding ghosts because they crave gold, silver, and treasures; or house-guarding ghosts because they are attached to wives and children; or corpse-guarding ghosts because they crave their physical bodies and are enamored of the fine and magnificent objects buried with them in their graves. The ancient worthies said: “Clutching a post while rowing the oars—there is no possibility of getting anywhere.” That is to say, if we wish to be reborn in the West but remain attached to the Sahā world and refuse to let it go, we are like people clutching a post on the shore while rowing. No matter how hard they exert themselves, the boat cannot move forward. How, then, can rebirth in the West be attained?

Does this mean that rebirth in the West is very difficult? No, not at all. Did the Buddha not say, “Reciting a single utterance of Amitābha Buddha’s holy name can eliminate the grave offenses of birth and death accumulated over eighty billion kalpas”? We recite the Buddha’s name every day and at every moment; we do not recite it only once. What karma, then, need we fear cannot be eliminated, and what offense need we fear cannot be removed? Therefore, rebirth through eliminating karma is not difficult.

As long as we see through all sounds, forms, wealth, profit, wives, riches, children, and emoluments in this Sahā world as dreams, illusions, bubbles, and shadows—unobtainable things—and cease pursuing and craving them, then turn around and wholeheartedly apply ourselves, diligently and earnestly, to reciting the Buddha’s

name through the method of mind reciting and ear hearing, even the greatest karma will not be difficult to extinguish in the realm of utter nonexistence.

Someone may ask, “Why is it so easy?” Because karma arises from the mind; it does not come from elsewhere. Now our mind is undivided and every thought is on the Buddha. The Buddha is mind, and mind is Buddha; the whole mind is Buddha, and the whole Buddha is mind. Where, then, can karma find a foothold?

Moreover, at the moment when we attain rebirth at the end of life, we see only Amitābha Buddha and the assembly of holy beings coming to guide us; we see nothing else. What karma is there then? Is this not precisely because the power of our ordinary Buddha-recitation has eliminated karma? Is it not also because the compassionate power with which the Buddhas and bodhisattvas embrace us enables us to eliminate karma?

With this explanation, the position of “rebirth through eliminating karma” seems to stand. Does this mean, then, that “rebirth while carrying karma” is mistaken? No. “Rebirth while carrying karma” is not mistaken either, for we are able to attain rebirth entirely because our skill in Buddha-recitation has become mature and we are no longer attached to the Saha world. In technical terms, this is called the maturation of pure karma. This pure karma, though not defiled karma, is still karma, is it not? To carry it into rebirth—is this not “rebirth while carrying karma”?

Those reborn in the lower grades have minds not yet empty and pure. They still cling to appearances, still have a place, and still undergo birth; therefore, they can be reborn only in the Land of the Common Residence of Ordinary Beings and Sages. The word “ordinary” refers precisely to sentient beings who carry karma. Those of the highest grade, however, are born yet unborn, and unborn yet born; one direction is the ten directions, and the ten directions are one direction; purity and defilement are undifferentiated, east and west are not distinguished. Their minds are empty and their thoughts pure, yet they do not perceive emptiness or purity; they are beyond learning and contrivance, yet do not know that there is non-contrivance. Thus, there is no longer any question of carrying karma or not carrying karma. Is not not carrying karma simply the elimination of karma?

Perhaps some may say that calling the maturation of pure karma “rebirth while carrying karma” seems somewhat forced. Let us therefore discuss further the defiled karma that people generally mean by rebirth while carrying karma. Since beginningless kalpas, we sentient beings have been deluded and unaware, deeply habituated to clinging to appearances, with defilements accumulated thickly upon us.

Although one may now diligently practice Buddha-recitation and gain some awakening, understanding that both worldly and supramundane dharmas are

unobtainable, and that karmic obstacles and sinful karma are, like flowers in empty space and the moon reflected in water, fundamentally nonexistent, one may have deeply awakened to the principle but still find old habits difficult to eradicate all at once. They must still be swept away and polished over a long time before one gradually reaches the highest vehicle. It is certainly not possible to eradicate ignorance and habitual obstacles completely in a single stroke.

In the Chan school, one who awakens is said to enter the first bhūmi, the stage of seeing the Way. In the Dharma Characteristics School, this is the stage of thorough realization. Beyond it lie the stages of cultivation from the second through the tenth bhūmi, and then the ultimate stage from above the tenth bhūmi to Buddhahood. Practitioners must strive diligently to remove ignorance and habitual obstacles bit by bit before they can ascend stage by stage. Who can accomplish this in a single lifetime, eradicate all ignorance, and suddenly realize Buddhahood?

The sūtras say that even an equal enlightenment bodhisattva still has one final portion of ignorance not yet exhausted. Is not this remaining portion of ignorance karma? If even an equal enlightenment bodhisattva still has karma, who can realize the stage of an equal enlightenment bodhisattva in one lifetime? Is not being reborn while carrying this remaining, unexhausted karma precisely rebirth while carrying karma?

Therefore, there is nothing wrong with saying “rebirth while carrying karma.” One simply must not misunderstand its meaning and suppose that, while practicing Buddha-recitation, one may still do some bad things because one can, in any case, be reborn while carrying karma.

To sum up, when we practice Buddha-recitation, we are doing the work of eliminating karma. Rebirth in the Pure Land originally means going there after delusion and karma have been eliminated, and this karma is eliminated through reliance on the Buddha’s compassionate power. There is nothing difficult about it. There is no need to fear or doubt the proposition of “rebirth through eliminating karma,” much less to rise in a clamor of opposition because of such doubt and fear.

At the same time, those who uphold the theory of “rebirth through eliminating karma” need not oppose rebirth while carrying karma, denounce it as demonic teaching, and leave everyone unsettled and at a loss merely because the sūtras contain no direct pronouncement from the Buddha’s own lips using the expression “rebirth while carrying karma.”

As everyone knows, times differ, and so do the grammar and modes used to express ideas; naturally, the vocabulary used also differs accordingly. More than two thousand years have passed since the Buddha entered parinirvāṇa. Although the

expression “rebirth while carrying karma” did not exist at that time, it is sufficient that the sūtras contain this meaning.

From the foregoing argument, carrying karma and eliminating karma may seem different on the surface, but in substance they are exactly the same. Eliminating karma includes carrying karma, and carrying karma includes eliminating karma. They are one yet two, two yet one; there is no contradiction. Why argue endlessly over minor details?

Moreover, in this debate, some have maintained that in rebirth while carrying karma, one carries only past karma, not present karma. This view of course arises from good intentions, for they fear that people may misunderstand and continue doing bad things after practicing Buddha-recitation, thereby losing the opportunity for rebirth. Yet in terms of the substance of this argument, it seems somewhat inappropriate.

For so-called past karma and present karma mean nothing more than karma created in the past and karma being created now, or karma created over kalpas and many lives and karma created in this present life.

From the perspective of the three divisions of time—past, present, and future—as manifested by the deluded thoughts of ordinary beings, this may seem entirely reasonable. But from the standpoint of the reality of suchness, past, present, and future do not exist at all. The Diamond Sūtra says: “The past mind is unobtainable, the present mind is unobtainable, and the future mind is unobtainable.”

This means that the minds of the three divisions of time are all illusory manifestations of deluded thought and are in reality unobtainable. The so-called three divisions of time are distinguished into past and future by taking the “present” as their point of reference. But the “present” has no place on which to stand: as soon as one speaks of the present, it has already become the past.

Look at the second hand on a clock: it turns without stopping even for an instant. When has there ever been a “present”? Since the present itself has no foothold, where could past and future be found? Therefore, the Avataṃsaka Sūtra says: “The ten periods of time, ancient and present, beginning and end, never depart from the present thought.” When the mind of this present thought is empty, so-called past and future both vanish like flowers in empty space. Where then can one seek the three divisions of time? Since the three divisions of time are unobtainable, one should not say that only past karma may be carried and not present karma.

Furthermore, as stated above, karma means action. It is not only doing bad deeds that constitutes karma; doing good deeds is also karma.

Over the course of our lives, we do not know how much karma we have created. And since no one is a sage, who can be without fault? Occasionally doing some bad deeds is probably unavoidable. At times, one intends to do good but instead harms others, turning it into a bad deed; or one may do a bad deed without realizing it at the time. If rebirth while carrying karma means carrying only past karma and not present karma, would not all such people—whether they do good deeds or bad deeds—be unable to attain rebirth?

If this were truly so, why does the Contemplation Sūtra of Amitāyus Buddha also say, “Even those who have committed the five heinous offenses and ten evil acts, if at the time of death they encounter a spiritual friend who instructs them, wholeheartedly repent, and recite ten times, may also attain rebirth”?

The Buddha speaks no false words, and the sūtras contain no deceptive speech. If people who have committed the five heinous offenses and ten evil acts can attain rebirth through ten recitations at the time of death, does this not prove that they can also attain rebirth while carrying what the proponents of this view call “present karma”? From this we can see that rebirth while carrying karma does not distinguish between past karma and present karma.

Moreover, karma originally results from the ignorant and deluded stirrings of our minds. Once we awaken and illuminate it with the light of true wisdom, both present karma and past karma immediately perish. As it is said, “mind empty, karma disappears.” Thus, people who have committed the five heinous offenses and ten evil acts may attain rebirth through ten recitations at the time of death. This is like a dark room: whether it has been shut up for many years or closed only recently, once the door and windows are opened or an electric lamp is lit, the darkness immediately vanishes. Where is there any distinction between present and past?

At this point, someone may ask: if present karma and past karma can be eliminated all at once, why did the foregoing discussion say that one is reborn carrying residual karma? This is a good question. If all karma has been eliminated, what residual karma remains to be carried? You should understand that although the darkness in a room is dispelled all at once, if the room has been sealed up for many years, its moldy and foul odors cannot all be removed at once. It must be aired for a long time and gradually swept, scrubbed, and wiped before it can slowly be restored to its former state.

These moldy and foul odors that have not yet been entirely removed are like our remaining, unexhausted karma. This is why it is carried into rebirth.

Finally, now that we have clarified these questions, we hope that those who formerly mistook the recitations of the morning and evening services for the completion of Buddha-recitation will correct this error. In addition to the morning and evening

services, they should sit upright and practice Buddha-recitation just as they would practice Chan meditation.

The ancient worthy ones taught us to recite the Buddha's name one hundred thousand times each day, hoping that we would not let our minds become heedless, but would transform the deluded mind into the mind of Buddha and thereby prepare provisions for genuine future rebirth. If we can truly do this, practicing all good and refraining from all evil, then all who practice will attain rebirth. What doubts or fears could remain? May you all be peaceful and at ease, and attain rebirth in the highest grade in the Pure Land of Peace and Nourishment!

A. Proponents of "Rebirth Through Eliminating Karma"

I. In recent times, I have seen practitioners of the Pure Land school unwilling to recite the Buddha's name earnestly. They merely go through the morning and evening services along with the assembly, casually and perfunctorily, like elementary-school pupils handing in their assignments. Once the service is over, they consider their Buddha-recitation complete.

They make no further effort in Buddha-recitation to transform their deluded habits of attachment and craving, to redirect their delusive thoughts and notions, and to eliminate the defilements of their own minds. Instead, they often shift all responsibility for their future rebirth in the Pure Land onto Amitābha Buddha. If, at the time of death, they do not see a Buddha or bodhisattva come to guide them, and are not reborn in the Western Pure Land, they mistakenly believe that this is the responsibility of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas.

Therefore, Master Lianchi once lamented, "Many recite the Buddha's name, but few are reborn in the West." This is because practitioners of Buddha-recitation are neither single-minded nor earnest, but seek only what is convenient and thereby mislead themselves. Thus, a great warning must be sounded, and "rebirth through eliminating karma" must be advocated to awaken the confused and deluded masses who recite the Buddha's name.

II. Many people who recite the Buddha's name today misunderstand the meaning of "rebirth while carrying karma." They believe that so long as they have faith and vows and perform the morning and evening services, it does not matter even if they do some rather improper things; after all, they can be reborn while carrying karma.

In Shenjiamen, I saw many people drying fish and shrimp in the sun. I asked them, "Are not most people in the Zhoushan area believers in Buddhism?" They replied, "Yes, we are all Buddhists." Unable to suppress my puzzlement, I asked, "Then why

do you still kill living beings?" They answered, "We are to be reborn while carrying karma!"

If they interpret the term "rebirth while carrying karma" in this way, do they not destroy the sacred image of the Pure Land school?

III. In order to clear away the recent decadent and corrupt trends that have polluted the Pure Land school, and thereby revitalize Buddhism, we must loudly proclaim "rebirth through eliminating karma," sounding a call that awakens the deaf. We hope that Pure Land practitioners may truly be reborn in the West, rather than merely shouting slogans, so that the essential teachings of the Pure Land school will not be obscured and gradually disappear.

B. Proponents of "Rebirth While Carrying Karma"

I. They fear that people may feel intimidated by the difficulty, dare not place faith in and undertake the practice, and thus damage the Pure Land school and cut off sentient beings' wisdom-life.

II. They misunderstand the difficulty of "rebirth through eliminating karma," not knowing what counts as eliminating karma and what enables one to attain rebirth. People generally suppose that one must completely eradicate ignorance, with karma exhausted and emotional attachment emptied, before karma can be said to have been eliminated. Is this not far too difficult? How many people could accomplish it? Therefore, they resolutely oppose it.

III. They have not truly understood the profound meaning inherent in "rebirth while carrying karma." They know only that carrying karma is convenient, but do not know what karma is carried. Still less do they understand that, when one single-mindedly recites the Buddha's name, one is precisely eliminating one's own karmic activity of mind at its most immediate source, thereby establishing the direct cause for future rebirth.

From the above two viewpoints, whether one advocates "rebirth through eliminating karma" or "rebirth while carrying karma," both begin from benevolent intentions. Both seek to ensure that Pure Land practitioners can indeed be reborn in the Western Pure Land, so as to avoid error and failure. Since their ultimate aim is entirely the same, and there is no irreconcilable conflict between them, it should not be difficult to reconcile their common ground and differences and arrive at a consistent conclusion.

To reach a consistent conclusion, we should first investigate and demonstrate the meaning of the word "karma," for karma is the central issue in both positions. What,

then, is karma? Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna says, “Ignorance as cause gives rise to the three subtle characteristics.” The first of these three subtle characteristics is the “characteristic of karmic activity.”

What is the “characteristic of karmic activity”? Since beginningless time, we human beings have failed to abide in suchness’s own nature, become deluded by ignorance, and, without awareness, stirred the mind. This is karma. Thus, karma means “activity” or “movement,” and the sūtras call it “deluded karma.”

What is called a characteristic is this: because the mind moves and loses sight of its originally perfect luminosity, it transforms the inherently formless suchness into the delusive appearances of space and the four elements—what the Dharma Characteristics School calls the object aspect. It also transforms the inherent light of wisdom into the delusive seeing that can perceive; this is the perceiving aspect. All the myriad phenomena with appearances in the worlds of sentient beings are established through these two aspects, perceiving and object. These two aspects are also the second and third of the three subtle characteristics in Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna: the “characteristic of perceiving” and the “characteristic of objects.”

From this we can know that karma is activity. Since sentient beings differ in delusion and awakening, the karma they create differs, and so do the karmic results they experience. Ordinary beings create defiled karma and experience the retribution of segmented birth and death within the three realms and six realms. Those of the two vehicles create undefiled karma and experience the karmic result of the Land of Expedient Means with Residue. Bodhisattvas create neither-defiled-nor-undefiled karma and experience the karmic result of the Land of True Reward and Adornment.

Ordinary beings are profoundly deluded. They cling to illusory circumstances as truly existent and mistake false appearances for reality. To satisfy their own selfish desires, they do not hesitate to commit extensive evil karma. Thus, they cannot bring birth and death to an end, and their rebirth in saṃsāra never ceases. If we now wish to be reborn in the Pure Land and horizontally transcend the three realms, how can we fulfill our original resolve and truly attain rebirth in the Pure Land unless we eliminate this root of birth and death—the karma of deluded attachment to appearances and misguided activity?

Someone may say: “Rebirth in the Pure Land depends on Amitābha Buddha’s vast, profound, compassionate vow-power to guide us there. Why must one eliminate karma before attaining rebirth?” The answer is: “If delusion and karma are not purified, one will inevitably remain attached to all the false appearances of the Saha world. Although the Buddha comes to guide one, because the mind is deluded and defiled by karma, one does not see the Buddha and misses the precious opportunity for rebirth.” Chan Master Yongming Yanshou said: “The Buddha is like the moon in

the sky, whose reflection appears in a thousand rivers and myriad waters; yet it is not seen in filthy water. When those who recite the Buddha's name do not have a bright and pure mind, they are like filthy water that cannot reflect the moon and therefore does not see the Buddha." If one does not see the Buddha at death, how can one attain rebirth?

Many people who recite the Buddha's name fall into becoming wealth-guarding ghosts because they cling greedily to gold, silver, and treasures; or become house-guarding ghosts because they are attached to their wives and children; or become corpse-guarding ghosts because they covet their physical bodies and are fascinated by the beautiful adornments buried with them in their graves. An ancient worthy said: "Holding fast to a post while rowing—there is no way this can work!" That is to say, if we wish to be reborn in the Western Pure Land but still cling to the Sahā world, it is like holding onto a wooden post on the shore while rowing a boat. However great one's effort, the boat cannot move forward. How could one be reborn in the West?

Does this mean that rebirth in the West is very difficult? No—not difficult at all! Did the Buddha not say, "Reciting one utterance of Amitābha's sacred name can eliminate the grave offenses of birth and death accumulated over eighty billion kalpas"? We now recite the Buddha's name every day and at every moment. We do not recite only a single utterance of the Buddha's name. What karma need we fear cannot be eliminated, or what offenses cannot be removed? Therefore, rebirth through eliminating karma is not difficult.

As long as we see through all the sounds, forms, wealth, profit, spouses, riches, children, and emoluments of this Sahā world, recognizing them as dreams, illusions, bubbles, and shadows—unobtainable—and cease pursuing and craving them; and, instead, wholeheartedly and diligently apply ourselves to reciting the Buddha's name through the method of "mind reciting and ears listening," then even the greatest karma will not be difficult to dissolve into the realm of nonexistence.

Someone may ask, "Why is it so easy?" Because karma arises from the mind; it does not come from elsewhere. Now our mind never departs from the Buddha, and every thought is directed toward the Buddha. Buddha is mind, and mind is Buddha. The whole mind is Buddha, and the whole Buddha is mind. Where, then, could karma find a foothold?

Moreover, at the instant of rebirth at death, we see only Amitābha Buddha and the assembly of sages coming to guide us; we see nothing else. What karma could there then be? Is this not the elimination of karma through the skill developed by our ordinary practice of Buddha-recitation? Is it not also the compassionate power by

which Buddhas and bodhisattvas embrace and receive us, enabling us to eliminate karma?

With this explanation, the position of “rebirth through eliminating karma” seems to stand. Does this mean that “rebirth while carrying karma” is mistaken? No, “rebirth while carrying karma” is not mistaken either. We are able to attain rebirth wholly because our Buddha-recitation has become mature and we no longer remain attached to the Sahā world. In technical terminology, this is called the maturation of pure karma. Although this pure karma is not defiled karma, is it not still karma? If we carry it into rebirth, is this not “rebirth while carrying karma”?

Those reborn in the lowest grade have minds that are not yet empty and pure. They still cling to appearances, still have a sense of place, and still take birth as real. Therefore, they can be reborn only in the Land of the Common Residence of Ordinary Beings and Sages. The word “ordinary” here refers precisely to sentient beings who carry karma. In the highest grade, birth is no birth, and no birth is birth; one direction is the ten directions, and the ten directions are one direction; purity and defilement are undifferentiated, east and west are not distinct; the mind is empty and the intention pure, yet one does not see emptiness or purity; one is a carefree person of the Way, beyond learning and contrivance, without knowing of non-contrivance. Then there is no longer any question of carrying or not carrying karma. Does not not carrying karma mean that karma has been eliminated?

Perhaps someone may say that calling the maturation of pure karma “rebirth while carrying karma” seems somewhat forced. Let us therefore further discuss what people generally mean by the defiled karma carried into rebirth. Since beginningless, vast kalpas ago, we sentient beings have been deluded and unaware, deeply habituated to clinging to appearances, with accumulated defilements dense and heavy.

Although we may now have diligently applied ourselves to Buddha-recitation and attained some awakening, understanding that both worldly and supramundane dharmas are unobtainable, and that karmic obstacles and offenses are even more like flowers in empty space and the moon reflected in water—fundamentally nonexistent—this is only a profound awakening at the level of principle. Old habits are still difficult to remove suddenly. They must be swept away and polished over a long time before one gradually reaches the highest vehicle. One certainly cannot eradicate ignorance and habitual obscurations completely all at once.

In the Chan school, one who has awakened is said to enter the first bhūmi, the stage of seeing the Way. In the Dharma Characteristics School, this is the stage of thorough realization. There then remain the stages of cultivating the Way from the second through the tenth bhūmi, and the ultimate stage from beyond the tenth

bhūmi to Buddhahood. Practitioners must strive diligently to remove ignorance and habitual obscurations bit by bit before they can ascend stage by stage. Who can complete this in a single lifetime, eliminate all ignorance, and suddenly realize Buddhahood?

The sūtras say that even an equal enlightenment bodhisattva still has one final portion of ignorance not yet exhausted. Is not this remaining portion of ignorance karma? Even an equal enlightenment bodhisattva still has karma, so who can realize equal enlightenment bodhisattvahood in a single lifetime? To attain rebirth while carrying this remaining karma is precisely rebirth while carrying karma, is it not?

Therefore, there is nothing wrong with rebirth while carrying karma. One simply must not misunderstand its meaning and suppose that, while reciting the Buddha's name, one may still do some evil, since in any case one can attain rebirth while carrying karma.

To summarize: when we recite the Buddha's name, we are precisely undertaking the work of eliminating karma. Rebirth in the Pure Land is originally attained after one has eliminated deluded karma, and this karma is further eliminated through the Buddha's compassionate power. There is nothing difficult about it. There is no need to fear or doubt the proposition of "rebirth through eliminating karma," nor to rise up in a tumult of public indignation and hasten to oppose it because of such doubt and fear.

At the same time, those who uphold "rebirth through eliminating karma" need not oppose rebirth while carrying karma, denouncing it as demonic teaching and leaving everyone unsettled and at a loss, merely because the Buddhist sūtras contain no direct pronouncement from the Buddha's own lips using the expression "rebirth while carrying karma."

Everyone knows that different times employ different grammar and modes of expressing ideas, and naturally the vocabulary used also differs accordingly. More than two thousand years have passed since the Buddha entered parinirvāṇa. Although the expression "rebirth while carrying karma" did not then exist, it is sufficient that the sūtras contain this meaning.

For, as the foregoing discussion shows, carrying karma and eliminating karma may appear to differ on the surface, but in substance they are entirely the same. Eliminating karma includes carrying karma, and carrying karma includes eliminating karma. They are one yet two, two yet one, and contain no contradiction. Why argue endlessly over minor details?

In addition, during this debate some have maintained that rebirth while carrying karma involves carrying only past karma, not present karma. This position, of

course, arises from good intentions: they fear that people may misunderstand and continue doing evil after beginning Buddha-recitation and cultivation, thereby losing the opportunity for rebirth. Yet in the substance of its argument, this position seems inappropriate.

For so-called past karma and present karma mean nothing more than karma created in the past and karma being created now, or karma created over countless kalpas and lives and karma created in this present lifetime.

From the perspective of the three divisions of time—past, present, and future—as displayed by the deluded thoughts of ordinary beings, this seems entirely reasonable. Yet from the standpoint of the actuality of suchness, past, present, and future do not exist at all. The Diamond Sūtra says: “The past mind is unobtainable, the present mind is unobtainable, and the future mind is unobtainable.”

That is to say, the minds of all three divisions of time are illusory manifestations of deluded thought and are in reality unobtainable. The so-called three divisions of time are distinguished into past and future by taking the “present” as their foothold. But the “present” has no foothold: the moment one speaks of it as present, it has already become the past.

Look at the second hand on a clock: it turns without pause from instant to instant. Where has there ever been a “present”? Since the present has no foothold, where can there be a past or a future? Thus the Avatamsaka Sūtra says, “The ten periods of time—past and present, beginning and end—never depart from the present thought.” When the mind of this present thought is empty, the so-called past and future are both like flowers in empty space, vanishing as illusions. Where, then, can the three divisions of time be found? Since the three divisions of time are unobtainable, one should not say that only past karma, and not present karma, is carried along.

Furthermore, as stated above, karma means action. Karma is not created only by doing bad deeds; doing good deeds is also karma.

Throughout our lives, we do not know how much karma we have created. Moreover, who among us is a sage or worthy person and without fault? Occasionally doing something bad is perhaps unavoidable. At times, one may intend to do good but instead harm others, turning it into a bad deed; or one may do something bad without realizing it at the time. If rebirth while carrying karma means carrying only past karma and not present karma, would not all such people—whether they do good or bad deeds—be unable to attain rebirth?

If this were truly so, why does the Contemplation Sūtra of Amitāyus Buddha also say, “Even those who have committed the five heinous offenses and ten evil acts, if

at the time of death they encounter a good spiritual friend who instructs them, wholeheartedly repent, and recite ten times, may also attain rebirth”?

The Buddha speaks no false words, and the sūtras contain no deceptive statements. If people who have committed the five heinous offenses and ten evil acts may attain rebirth through ten recitations at the time of death, does this not prove that they may also attain rebirth while carrying the “present karma” spoken of by those who advance this argument? From this we know that rebirth while carrying karma does not distinguish between past karma and present karma.

Moreover, karma originally arises from our ignorant and deluded activity. Once we awaken, the light of true wisdom shines forth, and both present karma and past karma immediately perish. As it is said, “Mind empty, karma disappears.” Therefore, those who have committed the five heinous offenses and ten evil acts may attain rebirth through ten recitations at the time of death. This is like a dark room: whether it has been shut for many years or only recently sealed, once the door and windows are opened or an electric lamp is switched on, the darkness immediately vanishes. Where is there any distinction between present and past?

At this point, perhaps someone may ask: since present karma and past karma can both be eliminated at once, why did the preceding passage say that one attains rebirth while carrying residual karma? This is a good question. If all karma has been entirely eliminated, what residual karma remains to be carried? You should understand that although the darkness in a room is dispelled all at once, if the room has been shut up for many years, its moldy and foul odor cannot be completely removed immediately. Only after it has been aired out for a long time and gradually swept, scrubbed, and wiped can it slowly be restored to its former state.

The moldy and foul odor that has not yet been fully removed is like the residual karma that remains unfinished in us. This is why it is carried along in attaining rebirth.

Finally, having clarified these questions, we hope that those who previously mistook the morning and evening services for the completion of Buddha-recitation will correct their error. In addition to the morning and evening services, they should also sit upright and practice Buddha-recitation, just as they would practice Chan meditation.

The ancient masters taught us to recite one hundred thousand Buddha-names each day, hoping that we would, without letting the mind become lax, transform the deluded mind into the mind of Buddha and thereby prepare provisions for genuine future rebirth. If we can truly do this, practicing all good and doing no evil, then surely all who cultivate will attain rebirth. What doubts or fears could remain? May

you all be peaceful and at ease, and attain rebirth in the highest grade in the Pure Land of Peace and Nourishment!