

**Three Essentials
for Those close to Death**

by

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Death is the greatest tragedy in the world and yet no one on earth can avoid it. Thus if you wish to help both yourself and others, you need to plan and prepare for it in advance. “Death” is nothing more than a fake name. At death, as the retribution from past lives which brings about this one life-term ends, one’s consciousness leaves this body and takes on another body. Those who do not know Buddha-dharma have no way to deal with this problem, and must simply endure the process and be reborn according to their karma.

Since we heard about the Thus Come One’s (tathagata) Pure Land practice that can save all living beings, we should recite Amitabha Buddha’s name with faith and determination, so as to make appropriate provisions for our rebirth in the Pure Land. Then, when the time comes, we will be able to avoid the illusory suffering of the revolving cycle of birth and death and can realize the true bliss of eternal Nirvana.



When your father, mother, brothers, sisters, or other family members contract a serious illness and cannot be cured, you should be filial and compassionate and exhort them to recite Amitabha Buddha’s name to seek rebirth in the Western Pure Land. Moreover, you may help them recite with a Recitation Assistance Group. When the sick person dies in this situation, he or she can be reborn in the Pure Land. How can we ever give a name to this kind of benefit!

Now I will state three essentials as guidelines for a person near death to gain rebirth in the Pure Land. Although my writing lacks literally elegance, the principles are originated from the Buddha’s sutras. Having met these causes and conditions, let’s all put them into practice!

The Three Essentials are:

- **First:** Tactfully comfort the critically-ill person and lead him/her to right belief.
- **Second:** Recite the Buddha’s name in shifts to help the dying one keep pure mindfulness.
- **Third:** Refrain from crying and from moving the body of the dying one, so as not to ruin any chance for rebirth in the Pure Land.

If you can follow these three points, then you can definitely get rid of past karma, increase pure causes, be welcomed by Amitabha Buddha, and be reborn in the West . Once you have attained rebirth there, you will transcend the ordinary and enter the state of sage and end the cycle of birth and death with gradual progress in cultivation. Eventually you will accomplish the fruition of Buddhahood. All these benefits come from the effort of your family who assists you in reciting the Buddha’s name. If you can practice, then you are being truly filial to your parents; you are being truly friendly to your brothers and sisters; you are truly kind to your sons and daughters; and you are truly loyal and helpful to your friends or other people. By doing that, you are nurturing your own causes towards purity, and aiding other people to develop faith. Gradually, with everybody practicing in this way, it will soon become the accepted custom. Now I will discuss each essential in detail, so that you don’t have to worry about what to do at that moment.



The First Essential:

Tactfully comfort the critically-ill person and lead him/her to right belief. You should exhort the dying person to renounce everything and recite the Buddha’s name. If the dying person has something to say, tell him to do it quickly. Once everything is assigned, he/she must not think

about those things any more. He/she should simply contemplate: I am now following the Buddha and am going to be reborn in the Buddha's Land. All the states in this mundane world, such as worldly riches, pleasure and one's family are obstacles and bring calamity and harm. For that reason, we should not entertain even one thought that clings to these attachments. One should understand that the mind of one's true nature does not die. What we call death is the renouncing of this body and taking on a different kind of body. If you do not recite the Buddha's name, then you will be reborn in a good or an evil destiny according to the strength of your good or evil karma. (Good destinies are the realms of humans and heavens. Evil destinies are realms of animals, hungry ghosts, and hells. Asuras are found in all destinies, both good and evil, because they mix up in the practice of good and evil deeds, so it reflects on the effects of their causes.)

If at the time of death you single-mindedly recite *Namo A Mi Tuo Fo* (*Namo Amitabha Buddha*), then that recitation of the Buddha's name done with deepest sincerity will certainly move Amitabha Buddha, to show his great kindness and compassion. He will personally come and take you to rebirth (in his land). Do not have doubts like this, "I'm an ordinary person who must bear the consequences of the power of karma. How can my brief recitation of the Buddha's name transcend birth and death and help me gain rebirth in the West?" You should know that the Buddha has great kindness and compassion. Suppose a serious offender committed the Ten Evils Deeds and Five Rebellious Acts, but when he is close to death and the hells have already appeared before him, a Good and Wise Advisor teaches him to recite the Buddha's name. He may recite 'ten times', or even only once, he will be welcomed by the Buddha and gain rebirth in the West. If such a person can gain rebirth by reciting even a few phrases, then why should you have doubts about rebirth because of your own karma being heavy, or the fact that you have recited the Buddha's name only a few times.

You should know that we are all endowed with the true nature which is no different from the Buddhas. It is only because of heavy delusion and karma that we are unable to make use of it. Now that we have taken refuge with the Buddha, we are like sons going to our father and returning to our native village. How could we not have a share in this matter? Moreover, in the past, Amitabha Buddha made this vow, "There may be living beings who hear my name, devotedly believe and rejoice in it. If they were to recite it even ten times and yet were not to gain rebirth, then I will not attain Proper Enlightenment."

Thus the Buddha will not fail to compassionately welcome any living being who, at the time of death, sincerely recites the Buddha's name and seeks to be reborn in the Western Land. Do not doubt it at all. Doubts will hinder you and the harm will not be slight. Moreover, the happiest thing that can happen is to leave this world of suffering and to be born in that World of Bliss. You should be happy. You really should not fear death. Fear of death does not help you escape it. It just ruins your chances of being reborn in the West. If your mind denies the Buddha, then even though he is compassionate, he will have no way to help those who do not follow the Buddhist teachings.

Amitabha Buddha's great name, endowed with myriad virtues, is like a huge smelting furnace. The many karmic offenses that we, living beings, commit are like snow flakes falling through the air. When ordinary beings laden with karma recite the Buddha's name, their karma melts away without a trace, just like snow flakes near a furnace disappear. Moreover, since the power of karma is melted away, all the good roots naturally flourish. Why doubt that you cannot be reborn there or that the Buddha will not come to welcome you?

Instruct dying ones, teach and comfort them with skillful, tactful exhortations such as these, so that they will bring forth their proper belief. These are instructions for the sick person. Your duty of filial piety and sincerity will also be fulfilled in this way.

Don't follow customary practices and seek medicine from the spirits. When a person's life is about to end, how can the medicines of ghosts and spirits help keep him from dying? If you put your hopes in such fruitless things, then the sincerity of your recitation of the Buddha's name will lose its focus, and you will get no response from your efforts.

When the time of death of parents approaches, many people often will pay any amount in exorbitant fees for medical specialists. This is called buying filial piety. They seek the reputation of being filial to parents. They are unaware that the ghosts and spirits on earth and in heaven can detect their actual intentions. Thus people who make ostentatious funeral arrangements for their deceased parents may in fact bring on either natural disasters or personal misfortunes. Sons and daughters should be concerned about the destiny of their parents' souls. Those who seek praise from the world will not draw as much as a smile from the wise. Seeking desperately to be known as a devoted child is actually making the grave mistake of being unfilial.



The Second Essential:

Recite the Buddha's name in shifts to help the dying one sustain pure mindfulness. We have already exhorted the patient to bring forth the proper belief, but the dying person's mind may be too weak to maintain concentration. Not to mention someone who ordinarily does not recite the Buddha's name having trouble reciting continuously, even those who constantly take recitation of the Buddha's name as their daily business will need the strength of others' assistance to make things successful. Therefore, family members should exercise filiality and compassion by reciting the Buddha's name at the side of the dying one.

Prior to the event of death, divide the recitation groups into shifts. Make three shifts, and assign certain people to each shift. The first shift recite aloud while the second and the third shifts recite silently. After one hour, the second shift takes over, then the first and the third shifts recite silently. If someone has things to take care, he can go during the periods of silent recitation. When your shift is on duty, you must not leave. When the second shift is over, the third shift picks up the recitation. Thus alternating, from the first shift to the last, everyone recites aloud for one hour, and then silently for two hours. So everyone can continue day and night and still not feel tired.

You know that if you can aid a person to obtain rebirth in the West with pure mindfulness, you yourself will also receive the reward of being aided in the future. Do not say that this is done only when fulfilling one's filial duty to one's parents, for if you help others in this way, you are nurturing your own field of blessings. You are increasing your own good roots as well. This not only benefits others, in fact, it also helps you along. Helping someone to be reborn in the Pure Land ultimately helps one living being to accomplish Buddhahood. Imagine how inexpressibly great this merit and virtue is!

As the three shifts alternate, the Buddha's name is being recited without stopping. If the dying person has enough strength, he can join in the recitation with a soft voice. If he cannot recite, then he should listen attentively and single-mindedly. In that way, he will gain a response from the Buddha. Do not make the pitch too high when reciting the Buddha's name. If it is too high, it will hurt people's breathing, and make it difficult to recite for long. On the other hand, if the pitch is too low, then the dying person will not hear it clearly. Make it neither too fast nor too slow. If it is too fast, the dying person will be unable to follow along, and it will be hard for him to hear it clearly. If it is too slow, the sound will be broken and it will be hard for the recitation to work. It must be neither too high nor too low, neither too fast, nor too slow.

Recite every word distinctly and every phrase clearly, so that the dying person can hear every word and every sentence and take it through the ears into his consciousness. Then it is easy to be active.

The hand-bell is the only Dharma-instrument to use when reciting the Buddha's name. Do not play other instruments. The sound of the hand bell is sharp, and when people hear it, their mind-ground becomes pure. The sound of the wooden fish is heavy, and unsuitable to accompany the recitation at the time of death.

It is more appropriate to recite the four syllables of the Buddha's name. First, start by reciting the six syllables, *Namo A Mi Tuo Fo* several times, and then switch to reciting the four syllables, *A Mi Tuo Fo* (*Amitabha Buddha*), omitting "Namo". The fewer the words, the easier the recitation will be. The dying person can either join in the recitation or listen while gathering it into his or her mind. In either case, everybody saves energy. Family members should recite like this, and if other good friends are invited, they should also recite in this way. No matter how many or how few people there are, everybody should recite in this way. They must not all recite for a while, and then slack off and then recite again. That will interrupt the dying person's mindfulness of the Buddha.

People should eat in shifts, so that the recitation of the Buddha's name is continuous. When the dying person is just about to take his last breath, it is appropriate for everyone in the three shifts to join together and recite aloud. After the breathing stops, everyone can again divide into shifts, recite for three more hours and then stop, so as to make funeral arrangements.

While the Buddha name is being recited, tell the relatives and friends not to approach the dying person to offer their regards, or to chat with him, or to speak words to comfort him. If they really want to express their feelings of fondness for the dying one, they should follow along and recite the Buddha's name for a certain time. That is genuinely offering true affections to the dying person, and it will truly help him/her. If they use the layman's customary sentiments, they are like pushing a person into the deep waters. Their emotions may be touching, but such actions cause irrevocable harm. The person in charge of the household should understand this principle and make it clear to everyone beforehand, so that they will not be embarrassed. Thus they will not cause harm to the dying person by distracting him, making him unable to gain rebirth in the West.



The Third Essential:

Refrain from crying and from disturbing the body of the dying one so as not to ruin any chances of rebirth in the Pure Land.

It is decided at the time near death whether a dying person will become a common person or a sage, a human or a ghost. It is the most critical time: the moment when his destiny hangs by a thread. The only thing you should do is to recite the Buddha's name in order to guide that person's consciousness. Do not bathe the person, change his clothes, or move the bed where he is lying. Leave him in whatever position he is in, sitting or lying down. Do not move him, or display grief or weep in his presence. At that time, he is not in control of his body. If you move him, his hands and his feet or his body would experience excruciating pain. The pain will vex his mind, and mindfulness of the Buddha will cease. If the dying person dies with hatred in heart, he may fall into the realm of poisonous creatures upon rebirth. How frightening! If the dying person sees others grieving and weeping over him, he could become emotional, and his mindfulness of the Buddha would cease. With emotion and feelings of love on his mind, the

dying person might not be able to get liberated life after life. The most beneficial thing to do at this moment is to recite Buddha's name single-mindedly. The most harmful thing to do is to move his body without reason or to weep. Then the person would not have one chance in a million of gaining rebirth in the West because of the hatred or passion that arose in his/her mind due to your moving him/her or crying over him/her.

Furthermore, when a person dies, if the warmth leaves the lower part of his body first and the upper part of his body last, then that is a sign of higher rebirth. If the warmth leaves the head first and the toe last, then that is a sign of rebirth in the lower regions. (It is said that if the final warm spot is on the top of the head, the dead person will be reborn as a Sage; on the eyes indicates rebirth in the heavens; on the heart, indicates rebirth as a human; on the belly, indicates rebirth as a hungry ghost; on the knees indicates falling into the path of animals; on the feet indicates falling into the hells). But if everyone sincerely recites to aid the dying person, he can straight away be reborn in the West. Therefore, do not keep trying to find the warm spot before the dying person's consciousness has left, for that will only cause him/her to become angry, vexed or hurt and thus prevent him/her from gaining rebirth in the West. The offenses incurred by doing such a thing would be infinite.

So I hope all relatives and friends will sincerely recite the Buddha's name and not search for the warm spot or the place on the body ends up cold last. To pay close attention to this point with regard to one's own parents is to be truly filial. If you follow worldly sentiments, then you are deliberately pushing your parent into the sea of suffering. Such behavior earns you praise for being filial only from people lacking in knowledge and understanding. Such filial piety is not at all different from the love displayed by rakshasa women. The Sutras tell us that while a rakshasa woman devouring a person, she will say, I love you, that's why I have to eat you. Ignorant people who practice filial piety in the above way destroy their parent's chances of attaining bliss and destine them to suffering instead. Isn't that the same as the rakshasa woman's love towards a human being? I don't want to sound inhumane by saying these things. I only want people to do what is practical, so that the deceased will be reborn in the West and the living will receive blessings. Hoping that the utmost sincerity of the filial children and worthy grandchildren will not be in vain, I may be too unintentionally over exuberant in my speech. People who truly love their parents will surely understand my intent.

The matter about the warm spot on the top of the head or on the eyes or other places to verify rebirth for sages and heavenly beings, etc. is to ascertain that once the breathing has stopped, if the whole body is cold but the top of the head is warm, then the dead has certainly transcended the ordinary and become a Sage, ending birth and death. As for birth in the Heavens based on the eyes, this means that if his eyes and forehead are still warm, then he will be reborn in the heavens. If the warm spot is on the heart, then he will be in the human destiny. If only the belly is warm, then he will be born as a hungry ghost. If only his knees are warm, then he will be reborn as an animal. If only the bottom of his feet are warm, then he is in the hells. This is a manifestation of good and evil karma that people create during their lives. It is not something that one can fabricate or force. However, sincere mindfulness of the Buddha at the time of death, aided by the recitation of his relatives and friends, will certainly deliver the dying person to the West, carrying his karma along with him. He can transcend the mundane world and enter the realm of Sages. Do not experiment to prove this or you will make mistakes. This is my advice and my wish.

