



# Amitabha Buddha's Twelve Kinds of Light: A Brief Explication

By Dharma Master Huijing

English translation by Sam Suen,  
edited by Householder Fojin



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# ***I***

## ***General Exposition***

### ***1. Light and Life***

“*Namo Amitabha Buddha*” is a Sanskrit term. Translated into English, “Namo” means “to entrust oneself to” and “Amitabha Buddha” stands for the “Buddha of Infinite Life and Infinite Light.” The term signifies that the Buddha we entrust ourselves to is a Buddha of infinite life and light.

Amitabha Buddha’s virtues are immeasurable and can be broadly categorized into those of light and longevity. In much the same way as humans have aliases, Amitabha Buddha is also known by thirteen other names. Of these, one is associated with lifespan: “Buddha of Infinite Life.” The other twelve names relate to light and are collectively known as “Buddha of Infinite Light.”



Of the 48 Vows made by Amitabha in the causal ground, the 12<sup>th</sup> is the Vow of Infinite Light and the 13<sup>th</sup> is the Vow of Infinite Life. In these two vows, he pledges to attain Buddhahood and forever deliver sentient beings of the three time frames (the past, present and future) through the name of “Infinite Life,” exemplifying untold compassion, and in the ten directions through the name of “Infinite Light,” encompassing inconceivable wisdom. His life and light are all-pervasive and limitless. Amitabha Buddha skillfully delivers and receives afflicted sentient beings from the ten directions with his great compassion and wisdom.

A Buddha’s virtues either “hold or are held.” The virtue of infinite life is one that holds, while all other virtues are held -- because the former holds the latter together. Without life, what would the various virtues of a Buddha be based on? What would support a Buddha’s countless and inconceivable merits -- such as his major and minor outstanding physical marks, his radiance, his ability to teach the Dharma and to benefit sentient beings? Accordingly, only the Vow of Infinite Life holds together and maintains all other Vows. This vow is also the embodiment of the Buddha’s great benevolence and

ingenious use of expedient means to save beings.

In the 13<sup>th</sup> Vow, Amitabha Buddha pledges that his lifespan, as well as those of the beings in his land, should be immeasurable. He does so not because he cherishes his life unduly and wishes for longevity as a karmic reward. It is simply an expedient and skillful measure he adopts for the sole purpose of delivering and benefiting sentient beings. Since all sentient beings desire longevity, this vow helps them develop a joyful aspiration for rebirth in Amitabha's Pure Land. Thus, it is indeed appropriate to translate the name of the Buddha "Amitabha" as "Infinite Life."

"Infinite Life," simply stated, is eternal life -- a life that lasts forever. It never decays or disappears. It is said to "embrace the three time frames vertically," transcending the past, the present and the future. Such a life exists in a perpetual state. With his infinite life, Amitabha Buddha delivers all sentient beings in any time from the past, present and future.

"Infinite Light," put simply, is radiance that permeates innumerable lands in the ten directions. Hence, it is called infinite. This light penetrates everywhere

and without interruption. It pervades the sphere of infinite space and is said to “permeate the ten directions horizontally.” It shines everywhere and throughout all four dimensions. With his infinite light, Amitabha Buddha rescues all sentient beings from any of the lands in the ten directions.

Infinite Life and Infinite Light are a single entity, inseparable. The former is the essence of the Buddha whose life provides the basis for his virtues, while the latter is the function -- the skillful manifestation of those virtues. Light is the supreme medium for such manifestation. When one recites the name of the Buddha of Infinite Life, one is also reciting the name of the Buddha of Infinite Light, and vice versa.

Infinite Life is the essence, while Infinite Light is the function. With essence comes function. This is like our physical body, which has eyes, ears, a nose, tongue, mind, and four limbs. With eyes we see, ears hear, nose smell, mouth eat and speak, legs walk, hands operate things, and our mind performs such roles as thinking, differentiating, memorizing and judging. These are the various functions of the body. If a body loses its uses, it

becomes incapacitated. Therefore, with the body must come function, and function must depend on the body in order to become apparent.

In short, life is the essence and light is the function of wisdom. Only with life can wisdom be manifested; and wisdom gives life its meaning. Life without wisdom is futile; likewise, wisdom without life is a shame. Life and light are mutually indispensable.

If Amitabha Buddha had an immeasurable life but only finite light, then sentient beings from far-away worlds could not avail themselves of his deliverance. On the other hand, if his light were infinite but his life limited, beings in the distant future would be deprived of the prospect of liberation. Since Amitabha Buddha has both infinite life and light, he is able to deliver sentient beings in the three time frames and in all lands of the ten directions with his vertical eternity in time and horizontal expanse in space. These two virtues of the Buddha must complement each other. If Amitabha possessed only one of them, he would have difficulty delivering the countless number of sentient beings from both the three time frames and the ten directions. Thus infinite life and infinite light

must be present together.

In a Buddha's eyes, sentient beings lead strikingly brief lives, just like those of mayflies. They are foolish, ignorant and have no wisdom at all. As a result, they are stuck in the eternal transmigration cycles, suffering from all types of karmic afflictions. Over inconceivable, countless eons, Amitabha cultivated and accumulated the virtues and merit needed to achieve unconditioned nirvana and supreme *bodhicitta* (gaining Buddhahood to save beings), thereby attaining unlimited life and light respectively. He then dedicated the merits of such infinite life and light through his Fundamental Vow to all beings. Thus, when sentient beings aspire to rebirth in Amitabha's Pure Land and recite his name, they will be embraced by his light. They will gain the same unlimited life of unconditioned nirvana, as well as the unlimited light of supreme enlightenment.

## ***2. Constant Light and Specially Emitted Light***

The virtue of a Buddha's radiance is to confer a multitude of unimaginably great benefits on sentient beings. There are numerous types of Buddhas' light but they can be broadly categorized into two kinds: Constant Light and Specially Emitted Light. The latter is also known as Light of Supernatural Power.

First, Constant Light. It is a steady and incessant radiance. Its characteristics vary from Buddha to Buddha, depending on their intents. It differs in distance and length. For example, the *Infinite Life Sutra* (or *Longer Sutra*) says:

***The light of some Buddhas illuminates a hundred Buddha-lands, and that of others a thousand Buddha-lands. Briefly, the light of some Buddhas illuminates the eastern Buddha-lands, as numerous as the sands of the River Ganges. In the same way, the light of others illuminates the Buddha-lands in the south, west and north, in each of the four dimensions, the zenith (above) and nadir (below).***

***Further, the light of some Buddhas extends seven feet; that of others, one yojana, or two, three, four or five yojanas; and the distance covered increases in this way until the light of some Buddhas illuminates an entire Buddha-land.***

However, the constant light of Amitabha illuminates countless Buddha-lands in all of the eight directions, and above and below. Thus Amitabha's light is exalted as "Infinite Light, Boundless Light and Unhindered Light."

Secondly, the Light of Supernatural Power. This is only emitted on special occasions. For instance, Shakyamuni Buddha emitted immense rays of light just before he spoke the *Lotus Sutra*. That light illuminated the 18,000 Buddha-lands in the eastern direction. This is supernatural-power light. In the *Longer Sutra*, it is stated that when Amitabha was about to teach the Dharma to reverent Bodhisattvas coming from all directions, the Buddha joyfully issued light from his mouth which permeated all lands in the ten directions. It also says:

***At this moment, Immeasurable, the Honored One, changes his expression and breaks into a warm smile. From his mouth come forth innumerable***

***rays of light, shining everywhere into the ten directions of the universe.***

This, too, is light of supernatural power.

While the various virtues of Buddhas extend all over the dharma worlds, with the exception of the virtue of light, their manifestations are less than apparent. Only light has the most distinctive display; thus light is the most extraordinary and magnificent merit. In turn, Amitabha's light is the most resplendent among the lights of all Buddhas.



### ***3. Physical Light and Light of the Mind***

Amitabha's light consists primarily of two types -- light from the Buddha's physical body and light of the Buddha's mind. Light from the physical body has a nurturing effect on all sentient beings and is known as "Ripening Radiance." Light of the Buddha's Mind embraces those who recite his name and is called "Embracing Radiance."

Ripening radiance is there to mellow sentient beings from the ten directions. This is like a brooding hen incubating her eggs with her own body heat until they are hatched. Likewise, Amitabha Buddha uses this light to constantly incubate those sentient beings who are still serving their time in the Three Wretched Realms so that they can be reborn as humans swiftly. For those human beings who have yet to come across the Dharma, Amitabha's ripening radiance nurtures them to gain such an opportunity. As for people who have not yet encountered the Pure Land path and practiced Amitabha-recitation single-mindedly, Amitabha will keep nursing them with his radiance until they do so. A good analogy

is fruits on the branches of a tree that ripen with sunlight, thereby turning their color from green to red, and their taste from tart to sweet. Amitabha's radiance has the same effect.

The fact that we are born as human beings in this lifetime, and are able to study the Dharma to the point of developing faith in Amitabha and reciting his name, is not our own accomplishment. It is because Amitabha has nursed us over ten *kalpas* with his ripening radiance, and matured our faith to recite his name. This is why Honen Shonin (founder of Japanese Pure Land Buddhism, 1133-1212) called it "the grace of the Buddha's other-power." The moment our faith to recite the name of Amitabha arises, the Buddha at once emits the light of his mind to embrace us. This radiance protects us during our lifetime, and receives us at the point of our death, leading us to Buddhahood after our rebirth to his Pure Land. Such Dharma benefits are described in the *Contemplation of Infinite Life Sutra* (*Contemplation Sutra*, for short) in this way:

***The light [of Amitabha] permeates all worlds,  
always embracing those who recite his name.***

## ***4. Amitabha Buddha's Twelve Kinds of Light***

Apart from Physical Light and Light of the Mind, there are twelve other light-related nomenclatures that illustrate the Buddha's merits. These dozen types of light originated from Amitabha's 12<sup>th</sup> Vow, "the Vow of Infinite Light." They penetrate the innumerable worlds of the ten directions and embrace sentient beings who recite his name. The merits of Amitabha are immeasurable and cannot be described exhaustively. The twelve types of light to be elaborated here are only a summary of the Buddha's major merits, epitomizing the various aspects of majesty of Amitabha's light. Says the *Longer Sutra*:

***The Buddha pronounced, "The majestic glory of the light of Amitabha could not be exhaustively described even if I praised it continuously, day and night, for the period of one kalpa."***

Buddha of Infinite Life and Buddha of Infinite Light both refer to Amitabha's true self. Infinite Light, however, is an all-embracing term used to cover all other types of the Buddha's illumination. Since the functions and power

of the Buddha's light are immeasurable, so are its names. When it comes to the amazing power of a Buddha's light, no one, except other Buddhas, can discern it fully. Not even Sravakas (direct disciples of the Buddha who listened to his teachings), Pratyekabuddhas (individually enlightened ones), or Bodhisattvas understand completely, let alone ordinary beings. As the *Longer Sutra* says:

***Even sages of the Lesser Vehicle cannot fathom it; only Buddhas clearly know it.***

However, in the interest of delivering all sentient beings, Shakyamuni Buddha extols the compassion, wisdom and supernatural power of Amitabha Buddha so as to instill a heartfelt joyousness, yearning and faith in Amitabha and, accordingly, a genuine wish to recite his name. In the *Longer Sutra*, Shakyamuni Buddha sums up Amitabha's innumerable merits in twelve kinds of light which he praises. In some Buddhist scriptures, thirteen types of light are listed as the subject of exaltation, while others refer to fourteen and even 20 different forms of illumination. However, we simply cannot do justice to Amitabha's radiance no matter how many types of light

we direct our acclamation to. For present purposes, let us use the twelve types of light enumerated in the *Longer Sutra*. They are as follows:

Infinite Light, Boundless Light, Unhindered Light, Incomparable Light, Light of the Flame King, Pure Light, Joyous Light, Wisdom Light, Unceasing Light, Inconceivable Light, Ineffable Light and Light Surpassing the Sun and Moon.

## ***5. Virtues of Essence and of Function***

The luminous virtues of a Buddha's twelve types of light can be broadly divided into those of Essence and those of Function. Essence refers to the most crucial element of being, while function is the manifestation and application of the uses of essence. Their relationship resembles that of the human body and the four limbs. There must first exist a body before there can be limbs. With limbs, a person can walk and operate (i.e., function).

If we compare the Buddha of Infinite Life and the Buddha of Infinite Light, the former is essence while the latter is function. When it comes to the comparison of the twelve types of Amitabha's light, the first two types, Infinite Light and Boundless Light, are essence as they are the true core and substance of Amitabha when he attained perfect enlightenment. The next nine kinds of light, starting from Unhindered Light to Ineffable Light, represent his nine virtues of function. They arose from the essence of Amitabha's supreme enlightenment.

## ***6. General and Specific Functions***

Virtues of function can be further broken down into general function and specific function. General function encompasses all virtues while specific function relates to the role of individual types of virtue. The Buddha of Unhindered Light is a general-function virtue, while each of the other eight types of light has its own specific function.

## ***7. Virtues of Cessation, Accomplishment and Metaphor***

Individual virtues of function perform two different roles: cessation and accomplishment. With cessation virtues, the Buddha extinguishes the causes and effects of sufferings of sentient beings. The Buddha of Incomparable Light and the Buddha of the Flame King's Light exercise this function. With accomplishment virtues, the Buddha helps sentient beings accumulate merits. The Buddha of Pure Light, Joyous Light, Wisdom Light, Unceasing Light, Inconceivable Light, and Ineffable Light belong to this category. Their main purpose is to bring us happiness. In short, cessation virtues are to end our sufferings and accomplishment virtues are to give us joy.

Lastly, there is the Buddha of the Light Surpassing the Sun and Moon. This is a metaphor used to highlight the transcendent nature of the previous eleven kinds of light of a Buddha.



## ***8. Hope for All Sentient Beings***

The Buddha of Infinite Light relates to time while the Buddha of Boundless Light relates to space. Both surpass time and pace, and cannot be impeded. As elaboration normally follows a chronological order, let us start with Infinite Light. Infinite Light surpasses time, exists eternally and delivers sentient beings from any period of time. It illuminates the past, the present and the infinite future. Amitabha Buddha vows to deliver all sentient beings from the ten directions with this light, giving hope to those born in any time, any period.

No one is left without hope, even those who have, up to the moment of their death, never encountered this Dharma path. One can still be reborn in the Land of Bliss, even though one recites Amitabha's name but once, with one's dying breath. Even beings who were not born as humans in this life, so long as they are so born in the future, can still have the chance of coming across this Dharma path. This is because Amitabha is the Buddha who has pledged to deliver all sentient beings for ever and ever.

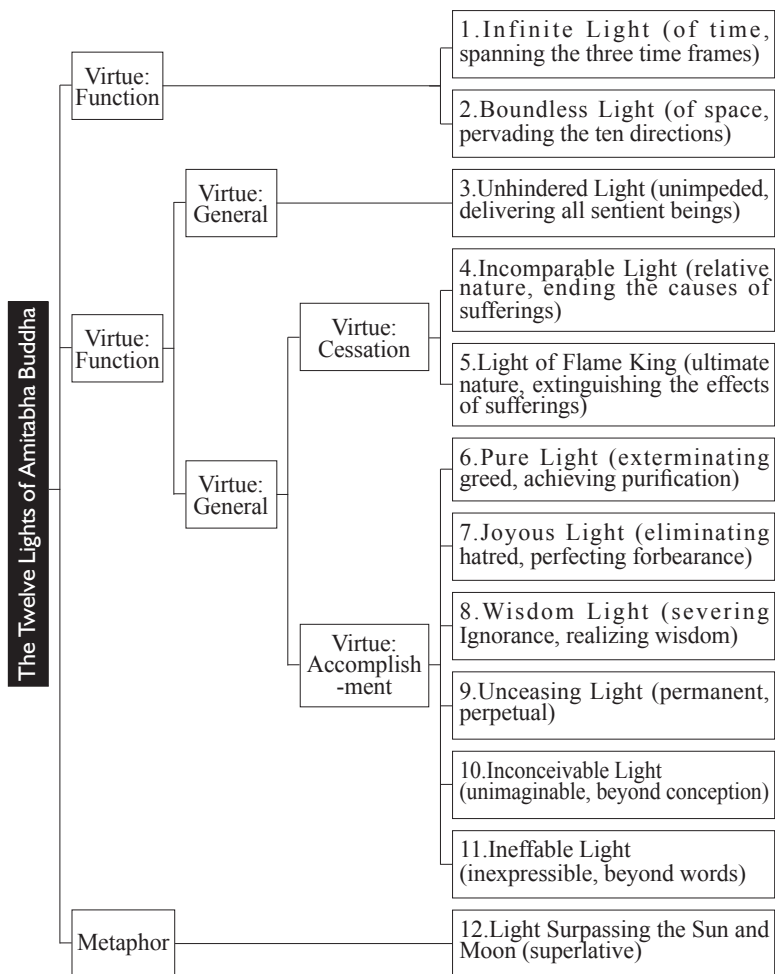
Therefore, as far as human beings in this world are concerned, whether or not they have started learning the Dharma, or if they have started but not yet entered the Pure Land Dharma gate, Amitabha Buddha will still be waiting for them and embracing them with his radiance.

# *II*

## *The Twelve Kinds of Light*

In this section, I will briefly explain the meaning of the twelve kinds of light of Amitabha Buddha. Each explanation will be followed by a relevant quote from the “Gatha in Praise of Amitabha Buddha” (the Gatha) by Master Tanluan (476-542).

The following is a table illustrating the meaning of the twelve kinds of light, based on the praises in the Gatha.



Let us start with the acclamation by Master Tanluan:

To the West of where we are, past this world,  
Beyond ten thousand *kotis* of Buddha-fields,  
There is a land of peace and joy.  
There the Buddha, the World-Honored One, is  
called Amitabha.  
In him I take refuge, vowing to be reborn.  
Ten *kalpas* have expired since he became a Buddha,  
His lifespan from then on is without any measure.  
The perfect light of his truth body pervades all  
realms,  
Illuminating the darkness of the world,  
and thus I prostrate myself to Amitabha.

## ***1. Buddha of Infinite Light (of time, spanning the three time frames)***

The name “Buddha of Infinite Light” refers to Amitabha’s immeasurable wisdom and radiance which penetrate deeply the past, present and future, cutting through the three periods vertically. What this means is that no sentient beings will be left out of Amitabha’s deliverance, no matter which period they are born in. This light is able to nurse and save sentient beings of any time.

Ordinary beings have very limited knowledge. They don’t know about things which are long gone, nor can they tell what is going to happen in the distant future. Amitabha, on the other hand, has unconditioned Dharmakaya (i.e., his Buddha body is of ultimate reality beyond all causes and conditions), unlimited true wisdom and is able to discern everything from the three time frames. Hence, he is called Buddha of Infinite Light.

Amitabha's 12<sup>th</sup> Vow in the *Longer Sutra* says:

***If, when I attain Buddhahood, my light should be limited, unable to illuminate at least a hundred***

***thousand kotis of nayutas (hundreds of thousands of millions of trillions) of Buddha-lands, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.***

Upon fulfillment of this compassionate vow, Amitabha attained immeasurable and boundless radiance.

The *Amitabha Sutra* has this to say:

***This Buddha's light is boundless, illuminating the lands of the ten directions without obstruction. This is why he is called Amitabha.***

In the *Amitabha Sutra* translated by Master Xuanzang (602--664), the following appears:

***The Tathagata constantly emits boundless and innumerable rays of wondrous light, illuminating all the Buddha-lands of the ten directions and performing Buddhist acts unimpeded. For this reason, the Tathagata of that land is called Infinite Light.***

The *Longer Sutra* reads as follows:

***The Buddha of Infinite Life emits a resplendent light, illumining all the Buddha-lands.***

The *Contemplation Sutra* also says:

***Amitabha Buddha has eighty-four thousand physical characteristics, each having eighty-four thousand secondary marks of excellence. Each secondary mark emits eighty-four thousand rays of light; each ray of light permeates all worlds, always embracing those who recite his name.***

The above excerpts from the various sutras clearly establish that Amitabha's light is infinite, boundless, transcending past and present, incessant throughout the three time frames, and permeating realms of the ten directions. It delivers sentient beings forever and nothing can obstruct it.

Amitabha's radiance has unlimited power and surpasses all worldly might. It can liberate and enlighten all sentient beings and free them from multitudes of sufferings.



Amitabha's light is measureless and boundless, lasting forever to warm our fearful hearts. It is a beacon showing us the way back "home." The infinite light of Amitabha caresses us, like a loving mother comforting her children. It brings solace to those who are deprived and humble. It brings peace and joy to all beings.

Says the Gatha:

**The radiance of his wisdom cannot be fathomed,  
And so this Buddha is also known as Infinite Light.  
Finite beings are awakened by this illumination;  
Thus I prostrate myself to Amitabha, the true and  
real light.**

## ***2. Buddha of Boundless Light (of space, pervading the ten directions)***

The name “Buddha of Boundless Light” signifies that Amitabha’s light of deliverance is without physical boundary. It illuminates all lands, pervading the ten directions. That being the case, it can deliver all beings from the never-ending cycle of life and death in the Six Realms of the three time frames regardless of where they are born.

Amitabha’s radiance is not only infinite in time, but also endless in space. The area of his illumination knows no bounds. This is why he is called the Buddha of Boundless Light.

Shining on all and saving all, Amitabha’s light reaches all realms. There isn’t a single person he cannot deliver. The Buddha will surely nurture, embrace and protect sentient beings from any quarter of the ten directions and receive them to be reborn into the Land of Bliss. And so Infinite Light and Boundless Light, which transcend time and space, represent the true essence of

the Buddha. This true essence is revealed through the time-space transcendent nature of his light.

What's more, Amitabha's Boundless Light can eliminate our extreme views of "existence" and "non-existence." Those who hold the view of existence believe that all things have a permanent and abiding nature which can exist forever, and that man can live the eternal life by continuing to be reborn as human from one life to another. This doctrine is called eternalism. People who are of the view of non-existence claim that the self is annihilated at death and there is no rebirth. They do not accept the validity of moral cause and effect (karma) and the three time frames. This belief is called nihilism.

Yet eternalism, nihilism, existence and non-existence are all erroneous views. Human beings suffer from a great number of wrong ideas which basically belong to either the extreme view of "existence" or that of "non-existence." If we can destroy these two extreme views, we can be free from all fallacious notions.

Since sentient beings are mired in various extreme views, they are stuck in the transmigration of life and death. However, if one aspires to be reborn in the Pure

Land and recites Amitabha's name, one will be in the embrace of Buddha-light which keeps the wrong views at bay. Once reborn in the Pure Land, all extreme views will be totally eradicated.

In his *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra*, Master Shandao (613-681) says:

**In the nirvana of the West, what bliss!  
Finally, free from the two extreme views;  
With great compassion, visiting all dharma realms,  
Benefiting others with different manifestations, the  
same as the Buddhas.**

Says a verse in the Gatha:

**The perfect light of liberation knows no bounds and  
cannot be matched,  
And so this Buddha is also known as Boundless  
Light.  
Those touched by it have no more extreme views,  
Thus I prostrate myself to Amitabha, the  
enlightenment of non-discrimination.**

The next nine types of light -- Unhindered,

Incomparable, Flame King, Pure, Joyous, Wisdom, Unceasing, Inconceivable and Ineffable -- are all related to the virtues of function. In a nutshell, Unhindered Light represents the general virtue as it encompasses the functions of the other eight kinds of light, each of them performing its own specific virtue.

### ***3. Buddha of Unhindered Light (unimpeded, delivering all sentient beings)***

“Buddha of Unhindered Light” means that Amitabha’s light cannot be impeded by anything, either people or dharma (things), whether from within or outside, tangible or intangible. In the Saha world, the illumination coming from the sun and the moon, or from a lamp or candle cannot shine through when obstructed. However, Amitabha’s light passes through all worlds in the ten directions unhindered.

“Unhindered” means without obstruction. Unhindered Light is light that cannot be impeded. Obstructions may be caused by people or things, or can be discernible or invisible. In short, they are the darkness of ignorance, afflictions and evil karma. According to the *Nirvana Sutra*, sentient beings “face three kinds of obstacles to the Right Way and to the wholesome mind.” They are the impediments of affliction, of karma, and of karmic results (hindrances from retribution):

1. Hindrances of afflictions: greed, hatred, ignorance, pride and doubt.
2. Hindrances of karma: the Ten Evil Actions and the Five Gravest Transgressions.
3. Hindrances of karmic results: rebirth to the three Wretched Realms, namely the animal, hungry ghost and hell domains.

Hindrances of afflictions are the root of all obstacles. Due to the various afflictions caused by ignorance, we commit the Ten Evil Actions and the Five Gravest Transgressions, which in turn produce evil karma. Karma acts as impediments to our liberation. As a result of our bad karma, we have to taste the bitter fruits of retribution: falling into the Three Wretched Realms of animals, hungry ghosts and hell. When trapped there, we cannot be reborn as humans and therefore have no access to the Dharma. Consequently, we have no way to practise the Buddha's teachings in order to be enlightened.

Yet Amitabha can remove the darkness of ignorance in sentient beings from the ten directions, and deliver all of us, who are iniquitous and heavily burdened with evil

karma, to be reborn in his Pure Land. His deliverance is not impeded at all by the three kinds of hindrances of sentient beings. And this is the function and power of Unhindered Light.

The *Contemplation Sutra* reads:

***The light [of Amitabha] permeates all worlds, always embracing those who recite his name.***

Master Tanluan's *Commentary on the Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land* says:

**This light is unhindered in illuminating all the worlds of the ten directions.**

**It can remove the darkness of ignorance of sentient beings throughout the universe.**

Master Shandao also says:

**The Buddha's light is immeasurable, illuminating the lands of the ten directions without obstruction;**

**Always embracing and delivering only those who recite the Buddha's name. And so he is named Amitabha Buddha.**



The major function of Unhindered Light is to always embrace those who recite the name of Amitabha Buddha. His deliverance of sentient beings is unfettered by afflictions arising from the darkness of their ignorance.

Why do sentient beings of the ten directions commit evil acts and create karma? Why are sentient beings trapped in the endless cycle of transmigration? It all stems from their ignorance. If the darkness of their ignorance is dispelled, the purpose of Amitabha's radiating his light is achieved.

Master Shandao continues:

**Sentient beings who recite Amitabha's name can immediately clear the offenses of many *kalpas*. When they die, Amitabha and the sacred assembly will appear spontaneously to receive them. This cannot be impeded by any negative karma.**

“Sentient beings who recite Amitabha's name can immediately clear the offenses of many *kalpas*.” Here, Master Shandao is telling us that as long as we recite the name of Amitabha Buddha, our karmic hindrances will naturally be removed, regardless of how virtuous or

iniquitous we are, how many transgressions or merits we have, or how long we have been practicing Amitabha-recitation. This is true even if we are not aware of such benefits, or whether we ask for them or not.

“When they die, Amitabha and the sacred assembly will appear spontaneously to receive them.” This exposition is the same as what appears in the *Amitabha Sutra*:

***...when that person approaches the point of death, Amitabha Buddha and the sacred assembly will appear before him.***

Since Amitabha and the sacred assembly appear, we will be delivered by Amitabha’s Unhindered Light which will not be impeded by our negative karma. Thus our rebirth in the Pure Land is assured.

It is clear that anyone who recites the name of Amitabha is constantly embraced by his light, without any hindrances.

In the Gatha, Master Tanluan says -

**His cloud-shaped light is vast and unobstructed like  
open space,  
So this Buddha is also known as Unhindered Light.  
All afflicted beings are nurtured by this radiance,  
And so I prostrate myself to Amitabha, the one  
beyond conception.**

#### ***4. Buddha of Incomparable Light (relative nature, ending the causes of suffering)***

“Comparable” means “can be compared with something.” Incomparable means peerless and unparalleled. Buddha of Incomparable Light means no other light can compare with the light of this Buddha. No light of any other Buddha or Bodhisattva is equal to it.

A Bodhisattva’s light is obviously incomparable with Amitabha’s. Even the light of all other Buddhas cannot equal it. This is why Amitabha is called the Buddha of Incomparable Light.

Accordingly, our teacher Shakyamuni Buddha, the World-Honored One, expresses his praise in the *Longer Sutra* as follows:

***The majestic light of the Buddha of Infinite Life is the most exalted. No other Buddha’s light can match his.***

His praise continues:

***The magnificence, splendor and wondrousness of the light of Amitabha could not be exhaustively described even if I were to expound it, day and night, for a kalpa.***

And again:

***Amitabha Buddha's light is most exalted, superior and incomparable. The radiance of other Buddhas cannot compare with it.***

Such acclamation indicates the supremacy of Amitabha's light over that of all other Buddhas.

All Buddhas radiate light, but their light cannot compare with or match that of Amitabha. Their light cannot even be regarded as in the same rank as Amitabha's. When Amitabha's light is described as the most exalted, it naturally means it is number one. Not only is it number one, it is the only one.

Perhaps one may ask, "Since all Buddhas are equally enlightened and their lights are also unobstructed, why is it that Amitabha's light is said to have no peer?"

The reason why Amitabha's light far surpasses that of all other Buddhas is due to the karmic effect of his intention and the vows he made in the causal ground to deliver sentient beings. He was practicing on the Bodhisattva path as Bhikkhu Dharmakara, in the time of Lokeshvararaja Buddha, who revealed to him the radiance of twenty-one billion Buddhas. He reflected deeply for five *kalpas* and decided on the practices to establish his Buddha realm. Then he made this vow :

***If, when I attain Buddhahood, my light should be limited, unable to illuminate at least a hundred thousand kotis of nayutas of Buddha-lands, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.***

Having made this and other great vows, he cultivated and accumulated merits and virtues over inconceivable, countless eons. As the vows and practice were accomplished, Amitabha Buddha attained the most supreme, inimitable and magnificent illumination.

Therefore one should know that after Amitabha attained perfect enlightenment, his light surpasses that of other Buddhas because of the extremely profound 48 Great Vows he contemplated for five *kalpas* and the

immeasurably virtuous Bodhisattvas practices he amassed over an unimaginably long period of time.

The *Sutra of Equal Awakening* (an alternative translation of the *Infinite Life Sutra*) reveals this vow made by Amitabha when he was practicing in causal ground:

***When I become a Buddha, let my light be a hundred million times more brilliant than that of the sun, the moon and all the Buddhas.***

Says the *Longer Amitabha Sutra* (another alternative translation of the *Infinite Life Sutra*):

***Let the light from the crown of my head absolutely outshine the light of all Buddhas.***

Further, it says:

***Why are there such differences in the distance covered by the Buddhas' lights? Viewed in relation to the vows they made while practicing to become Bodhisattvas, the scales of their merits naturally differ from each other. Afterwards, when they attained Buddhahood, they each actualized what***

***they had vowed. Thus their lights are unequal.***

In other words, different vows made in the causal ground yield different results.

Furthermore, radiance is the outward appearance of wisdom or, put another way, the condition and the function for delivering sentient beings -- the so-called “karmic power of the Great Vows.” Thus, Amitabha Buddha's Incomparable Light is able to eliminate our greed, aversion and delusion, thereby ending the causes of our sufferings.

In the *Contemplation Sutra*, it is stated that when Queen Vaidehi first saw the beams settling on Shakyamuni Buddha's head as a golden platform on which appeared all the Buddhas in the ten directions, she chose Amitabha's Pure Land and said:

***These Buddha-lands are pure and free of defilement, and all of them are resplendent. But I wish to be born in the Land of Bliss, the abode of Amitabha.***



Not only is the wholesomeness and luminosity of Amitabha's person incomparable, the purity and brilliance of the environment of the Pure Land also stand out among all Buddha-lands. That is why Vaidehi preferred Amitabha's Pure Land to those of other Buddhas.

The relevant verse in the Gatha reads:

**The light of purity is beyond compare;  
Hence, this Buddha is called Incomparable Light.  
Those who encounter it are rid of all karmic bonds;  
Thus, I prostrate myself to Amitabha, the ultimate  
refuge.**

## ***5. Buddha of the Flame King's Light (ultimate nature, extinguishing the effects of suffering)***

The name “Buddha of the Flame King’s Light” signifies absolute supremacy. The status of a king is most exalted and unfettered. Of all lights, Amitabha’s is supreme, superlative, unique and free from all obstacles in delivering suffering sentient beings from the Six Realms (including the Three Wretched Realms) to be reborn in the Pure Land. Therefore, the Flame King is a fitting association with Amitabha’s light.

Shakyamuni Buddha expresses the highest praise in the *Longer Amitabha Sutra*:

***Amitabha Buddha is the king of all Buddhas and his light is the most glorious of all radiances.***

The essence of Amitabha’s radiance is kingly: supreme and unequalled. While there can be more than one chief minister or commanding general, and comparisons can be made among them, there can only be one king, who has no peer. Amitabha’s light, like a king,

is majestic, in its own league, unmatched. The previously mentioned Buddha of Incomparable Light is viewed from a relative perspective. The Buddha of the Flame King's Light is a step beyond comparison, seen from an absolute point of view. He is superior and beyond compare.

“[Amitabha's] light is the most glorious of all radiances”: Buddhas from the ten directions emanate brilliance. Bodhisattvas, devas, virtuous and non-virtuous human beings also have their own corresponding luminosity. Even animals, flowers and plants all glow. Among these luminosities, Amitabha Buddha's is the most esteemed. The magnificence of his radiance is most exalted, supreme, unique and surpasses the light of all other Buddhas. No other Buddha's light is comparable.

The light of Amitabha has a rather extraordinary function: it searches for, pursues, protects and delivers anyone who recites the Buddha's name.

Physically, light pierces the darkness and illuminates the surroundings. No obscurities, filth or impurities can escape or be hidden from light. Metaphorically, light stands for compassion and wisdom. It denotes tolerance, acceptance, warmth, consolation, protection and salvation

of all suffering sentient beings.

When we mention light, we tend to associate it with sunlight or illumination from electric lights. But such lights are only physical phenomena perceived by our naked eyes. In the Dharma, light represents a Buddha's imperceptible qualities such as wisdom, mindfulness, great compassion and the power of great vows.

Why does Shakyamuni Buddha describe the power of Amitabha's compassionate vows as light? It is because the power of a thought has the speed and function of light. For example, if a person concentrates his mind exclusively on an object and projects it towards a photographic film placed in a distant dark room, in an instant, the object in his mind will be captured on the film. This is called "thoughtography" (or psychic photography).

The great power of Amitabha's thoughts permeates all dharma realms in the universe. Instantaneously, it lights up the lives of those who are afflicted with darkness and suffering; it warms and comforts those who are lonely and helpless. There is no other word except light that can describe its speed and function. So it is called light.

What I just portrayed may be difficult for some to comprehend fully. Let me explain it with a real-life example. During my stay in Japan some years ago, I rarely watched TV except programs of a curious nature, the so-called “supernatural power” or ESP shows. One time, a person was performing “psychic photography.” A special camera was used to “burn” on the film an image the performer visualized intently. Did it work? Well, the TV station had a reference point to test if the image burnt on the film corresponded with what the performer had in mind. They had prepared a number of objects and asked the psychic performer to choose one of them to contemplate. In this way, the audience could tell if the image shown up on the film was actually the object in the mind of the psychic. They found that when the psychic focused on an object with total concentration, it always appeared on the film.

In the *Longer Sutra*, the following appears:

***It is like the king of flames burning the firewood of all evil passions.***

This praises the virtue of Amitabha Buddha's light, likening it to a fire burning wood to ashes. It is the fire

of wisdom setting the firewood of afflictions aflame until it is completely burnt out. Sentient beings in the gloom of the Three Wretched Realms are sure to be liberated when lit by the Buddha's light, with the bad karma keeping them in the Six Realms of reincarnation instantly extinguished. Such is the benefit of the Flame King's Light.

Acclaims the Gatha:

**His light, shining in splendor, is supreme;  
Hence, this Buddha is called King of Flame Light.  
It dispels the darkness of the Three Wretched  
Realms;  
Thus, I prostrate myself to Amitabha, the great one  
worthy of offerings.**

## ***6. Buddha of Pure Light (exterminating greed, achieving purity)***

The name “Buddha of Pure Light” arises from Amitabha Buddha’s pure heart which is devoid of desires (greed). With this light, transgressions of greed by those who recite Amitabha’s name are exterminated, placing them on a par with those who observe with purity the precepts.

Purity means being wholesome in one’s intrinsic nature and far removed from depravity. The light of Amitabha is not only that, it can also destroy sentient beings’ defilements. It is pure itself and purifies others. As the *Longer Sutra* says:

***If sentient beings encounter his light, their three defilements (greed, aversion and ignorance) are removed.***

Nothing is more defiled than greed, which takes many forms. Lust and avarice are the major types, with the former being the most unwholesome root. Sentient

beings are trapped in the cycle of samsara because of their burning and insatiable craving for sexual satisfaction and their avarice. Shakyamuni Buddha in the *Lotus Sutra* has this to say:

***The cause of all sufferings is rooted in greed. If greed is extinguished, there will be no place for suffering.***

Since all sufferings stem from greed, eradicate greed completely and affliction will disappear. As the proverb goes: “With the skin gone, what can the hair adhere to?”

Shakyamuni Buddha says in the *Surangama Sutra*:

***If one does not exterminate lustful passion, one is certain to enter demonic paths.***

If we do not cut off sexual desires we will undoubtedly fall into the evil path, even with cultivation, and have no hope of getting liberated. We must try to understand that sentient beings are afflicted by greed and desire not only in this lifetime, but will suffer in the endless cycle of samsara forever.



One can never escape from the Three Realms of samsara so long as one's lustful desires remain. The amazing power of Amitabha's merit can absolve our transgression of greed and sever the root of desire. We only need to aspire to be reborn into Amitabha's Pure Land and recite the Buddha's name, and all our offenses from avarice accumulated through countless eons will be removed. The cleansing effect is just like water-purifying pellets. Once reborn to the Land of Bliss, the root of avarice in sentient beings will be severed automatically.

A licentious person may have trouble undertaking the precepts of avoiding "sexual misconduct" and "taking things not given." However, if he recites the name of Amitabha single-mindedly, the Buddha will emit his pure light to embrace him so that the filth of his lust and greed will be cleansed. The iniquity from his failure to undertake or observe the relevant precepts will also be extinguished. He will be endowed with the virtuous root of having no greed, and that places him in the same rank as a pure precept observer. And such is the remarkable power and function of pure light.

In the Gatha, Master Tanluan acclaims this light by

saying:

**The radiance of enlightenment, in its brilliance,  
transcends all limits;**

**Thus is this Buddha also named Pure Light.**

**Once illuminated by this light, sentient beings are  
freed from karmic defilements,**

**And all are liberated; thus I prostrate myself to  
Amitabha.**

## ***7. Buddha of Joyous Light (eliminating hatred, perfecting forbearance)***

The name “Buddha of Joyous Light” originates from Amitabha Buddha’s mind of compassion which knows no aversion. Those who recite the name will have their karmic offenses of wrath destroyed by Amitabha’s Joyous Light, thereby possessing the same virtues as those who have cultivated the perfection of forbearance.

The *Contemplation Sutra* says:

***The Buddha’s mind is great compassion. It embraces sentient beings with unconditional kindness.***

Ordinary beings are all stricken with greed, anger and ignorance. We invariably desire favorable things and resent unfavorable ones. Due to our ignorance, we lack understanding of the law of cause and effect. There are a couple of sayings – “The fire of wrath can burn up an entire forest of merits,” and “As an angry thought arises, a million doors to evil karma are swung open.”

Often, rage blinds us and makes us lose our reason. It compels us to say things or act in a totally objectionable manner without regard to the consequences. As a result, we create a multitude of unwholesome karma which causes us sufferings, not just in this life, but in future lives where the three poisons of greed, anger and ignorance persist. The anguish of such a vicious cycle is unspeakable. The Buddha of Joyous Light destroys the bad karma caused by anger of Amitabha-reciters, transforming their wrathful minds into joyous ones. Consequently, they lead a pleasant and happy life and are graced with the blessings of the Dharma. As the *Longer Sutra* says, “They feel tenderness, joy and pleasure; and good thoughts arise.”

If a person is filled with much hatred and cannot practice the perfection of forbearance, he only needs to recite Amitabha’s name exclusively. In this way, he will be caressed by Amitabha’s compassionate joyous light, which can eliminate the defilements of his anger and bestow the same virtue as those who have attained perfection of forbearance. While the pure light just mentioned can eradicate greed, the joyous light can eliminate wrath. This particular function and ability of

Amitabha gain him the epithet “Buddha of Joyous Light.”

Says the Gatha:

**His light of compassion pervades far and wide,  
bestowing peace and joy.  
And so this Buddha is also known as Joyous Light.  
In the places where that light reaches, the Dharma  
is enjoyed,  
Thus I prostrate myself to Amitabha, the great  
consoler.**

## ***8. Buddha of Wisdom Light (severing ignorance, realizing wisdom)***

The name “Buddha of Wisdom Light” comes from Amitabha Buddha’s mind of wisdom which is free of any *avidya* (delusion, ignorance). With this light he eliminates name-reciters’ karmic offenses as a result of ignorance, so that they become as virtuous as those with infinite wisdom.

There are two kinds of ignorance -- ignorance of doubt (skeptical about Amitabha’s deliverance) and ignorance of delusion (afflictions caused by greed, hatred, ignorance, arrogance, etc.). If ignorance of doubt is removed, immediately in the present lifetime “one’s rebirth in the Pure Land is assured and one will dwell in the stage of non-retrogression.” After rebirth, one’s ignorance of delusion will be destroyed and one’s Buddhahood will be realized. These are the function and power of Amitabha Buddha’s Light of Wisdom.

We iniquitous human beings stuck in samsaric existence are all ignorant and lack wisdom. However, if we recite the name of Amitabha with sincerity and single-

mindedness, we will be blessed by the Light of Wisdom which will eliminate the transgression of our ignorance and delusion. Our minds will be the same as those who have attained infinite wisdom. Just like the previously described pure light and joyous light that destroy the offenses of greed and anger respectively, the function and power of this light are to overcome ignorance. Hence, the name Buddha of Wisdom Light.

To recap: The Buddha of Pure Light removes our transgression of avarice, the Buddha of Joyous Light our transgression of anger, and the Buddha of Wisdom Light our transgression of delusion.

The *Questions of Brahmaviseṣacintin Sutra* says:

***Moreover, the Tathagata with his light named Tranquility severs sentient beings' lust.***

***Moreover, the Tathagata with his light named Joy severs sentient beings' anger.***

***Moreover, the Tathagata with his light named Enlightenment severs sentient beings' ignorance.***

Ordinary beings are full of craving due to the ragingly troubled Five Aggregates (i.e., form, feeling,

perception, mental formation and consciousness, which constitute one's body and mind). It is impossible to expect us to be able to cut off our greed. Such uncurbed desires lead us to iniquitous acts which, however, can be eliminated by the light of Amitabha. As a result, we are endowed with the merits of purity, even though we still have desires.

We are also unable to get rid of anger and delusion. They both lead to unwholesome acts. However, Amitabha Buddha, with his Joyous Light and Wisdom Light, eliminates the offenses created by our anger and delusion respectively. Consequently, we will be more joyful and wise. Even though we may still be beset with wrath, our minds are filled with greater joyfulness and our wrongdoings due to anger are absolved. Amitabha's light further gives us the wisdom to truly understand the workings of cause and effect, to discern the truth, and be able to differentiate right from wrong. In the end, the way we think and speak, and our deportment will be more fitting and wholesome.

Although we cannot sever or subdue the Three Poisons of greed, anger and delusion, if we recite



Amitabha's name, the consequent sins are cleared by the Buddha's light and we are bestowed with purity, joyousness and wisdom. Hence, these blessings are called the "Pure Light," "Joyous Light" and "Wisdom Light."

We learn from the *Sutra of Contemplation on Bodhisattva Samantabhadra's Dharma Deeds* that –

***All wrongdoings are just as frost and dew, so the sun of wisdom can dissolve them.***

And an old saying goes: "The intense heat from the furnace melts the snow and the sun thaws the ice." The illumination of Amitabha Buddha's name is the bright sun of wisdom. When sentient beings recite it, they will have their three defilements dispelled and be granted the three virtues. Relating to the eradication of the three defilements, the *Longer Sutra* tells us that Bhikku Dharmakara said this after he proclaimed his 48 Vows:

***And [I will] dispel the darkness of the three defilements;  
Thus I will deliver all beings from misery.***

The three virtues are a Buddha's three merits. They are the virtue of the Buddha's eternal, spiritual body, the Dharmakaya; the virtue of wisdom, knowing all things in their reality; and the virtue of his liberation from all fetters.

Master Yinguang (1861-1940) once said:

**The august name of Amitabha Buddha which has  
myriad virtues, is like a large smelting furnace;  
Our offenses, innumerable from countless lifetimes,  
are like snowflakes in the air.**

**We iniquitous human beings can have our karmic  
sins eliminated by simply reciting the name of  
Amitabha;**

**Just like the falling snow which evaporates  
immediately when getting close to the hot furnace.**

And Master Daochuo (562-645) noted:

**Even though we have been doing wrong our whole  
life,**

**So long as we dedicate ourselves exclusively to  
Reciting Amitabha's name often,**

**All our hindrances will be swept away naturally,**

**And we will definitely be reborn in the Land of Peace and Joy.**

Affirmed Master Shandao (613-681):

**Amitabha's name is the sharp sword of power and wisdom,**

**Reciting it but once will eradicate all karmic offenses.**

**Even those who slander the Dharma, or are *icchantika* (beings that refuse to accept the law of causality, and are antagonistic to Buddhist scriptures), or commit the Ten Evil Actions, will have their grave transgressions eradicated if they have a change of heart and recite Amitabha's name.**

The *Contemplation Sutra* says:

***Your offenses are expunged because you recited [Amitabha] Buddha's name, and so I have come to receive you.***

It goes on:

*[He] sincerely and continuously recites, ‘Namo Amitabha Buddha’ ten times. Because he calls the Buddha’s name, with each repetition the evil karma that would bind him to birth and death for 80 kotis of kalpas is extinguished.*

The *Longer Sutra* reads:

*If someone, upon hearing the name of that Buddha, rejoices greatly and recites it even once, then you should know that this person has gained great benefit. In other words, he has possessed unsurpassed virtue.*

States the *Contemplation Sutra*:

*You should know that all who recite the name of that Buddha are like pundarika flowers (rare, big white lotus flowers) among humankind. Bodhisattvas Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta become their good friends. They will dwell in the seat of enlightenment and be born into the family of the Buddhas.*

We learn from the above sutras and teachings of various lineage masters that by practicing Amitabha-recitation single-mindedly, our karmic offenses that bind us in the cycle of birth and death in the Six Realms will be eradicated, and we will enjoy the most beneficial Dharma fruit of Buddhahood. Accordingly, Shakyamuni Buddha first predicts our attaining Buddhahood by likening us to “*pundarika* flowers,” and then declares that the great Bodhisattvas Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta will be our good friends.

In the Gatha, Master Tanluan says:

**The Buddha’s light dispels the darkness of  
ignorance;**

**Thus this Buddha is also called Wisdom Light.**

**All the Buddhas and beings of the Three Vehicles,  
Together acclaim that too, so I prostrate myself  
before Amitabha.**

## ***9. Buddha of Unceasing Light (permanent, perpetual)***

The name “Buddha of Unceasing Light” means that Amitabha Buddha’s light is incessantly illuminating throughout the Three Time Frames. In the present lifetime it always embraces, forever without any interruption, those who recite Amitabha’s name. It does so day and night, now and hereafter until our final moments. It embraces us when we are reciting his name, as well as when we are not.

Why is that? It is because we are dedicated Amitabha-reciters who wish to be reborn in the Pure Land. As ordinary beings we need sleep, during which we do not recite. We resume reciting when we are awake. Our minds, being deluded and agitated, are full of distractions. When distracted, we forget to recite. Well, this is fine and normal, so long as we recite again when we remember to do so. Typically of indolent human beings, sometimes we are too lazy to recite even when we have the time to do so. That is all right too. We just resume the practice when we are in a more diligent state. But Amitabha Buddha

constantly embraces with his light those who recite his name, regardless of whether or not we are aware of it or can see it. He protects us unceasingly and untiringly.

Regarding the blessings of the Buddha of Unhindered Light and the Buddha of Unceasing Light, Master Genshin (942-1017), a Japanese Pure Land master, reassures us this way:

**No skillful means of liberation can save us  
iniquitous beings with the grimmest evil acts,  
Only by reciting Amitabha's name will we be reborn  
in the Land of Bliss.**

**Blinded by our afflictions and unable to see the  
Buddha's light,  
We are nevertheless constantly embraced by his  
great compassionate and tireless brilliance.**

What is meant by "Though blinded by our afflictions and unable to see the light of Amitabha, we are nevertheless constantly embraced by his great compassionate and tireless brilliance"?

We ordinary human beings have only physical eyes which are clouded by our afflictions. We have no

Dharma eyes, Wisdom eyes, not even Heavenly eyes. We just cannot see the Buddha's light. However, Amitabha Buddha does not forsake us simply because we cannot see. He still embraces and protects us.

It is like a child who was born blind. Although he cannot see his parents, they love him all the more and stand guard around him. He may not be able to see them, but his loving parents will never desert him. They want to make sure he is fine and without fear. By the same token, we may not see the Buddha's light due to our defilements, but that light never abandons us.

“Continuity” has two meanings -- “successive continuity” and “uninterrupted continuity.” As an analogy, “successive continuity” is like the bloodline of father and child, each having his own physical body: the lineage is the same but the physical features are not. It is consecutive but not uninterrupted. Another example is underground water which comes from the sky above. The condensation process is a successive one between water vapor and liquid water, but it is interrupted because the form changes. These two cases are of “successive continuity” nature.



Only Amitabha Buddha's light is of "uninterrupted continuity." It shines upon and protects us without breaks or changes, and leads us to rebirth at our deathbed. People who are intensely tormented, or are lonely and weary will be most comforted if they are mindful of Amitabha's unceasing light.

An old saying goes, "Rise with a Buddha each morning, embrace a Buddha in slumber every night." It would be more in line with the Pure Land teaching if we change the expression "Embrace a Buddha every night" to "a Buddha [Amitabha] embraces us every night." Being embraced by Amitabha Buddha all the time, we reciters are protected by his light in our daily activities and under any circumstances. What peace and joy!

Shakyamuni Buddha teaches us in the *Longer Sutra*:

***A life of addiction to desires or a life of pomp and vainglory cannot last long. All must pass; there is nothing you can truly enjoy.***

He continues:

***In the midst of worldly desires and attachments one comes and goes alone, is born alone and dies alone.***

We are all born alone and die alone. We are loners wandering in the transmigration of the Six Realms of existence, our destinies being dictated by our karmic force. When we bid farewell to this world in the final moment, none of our family members or relatives can depart with us. The only thing that we have in tow at that point is our karma, which tails us like our own shadow. We cannot be born or die with others, nor can they share our pains and illnesses. Contemplating this deeply, we realize that our life is a solitary journey. The only dependable and unfailing company is the compassion of the Buddha of Unceasing Light, which never gives up on us.

If we Amitabha-reciters can pause to reflect on the constant and tireless care and protection given to us by the Buddha of Unceasing Light, a joyous faith will arise in our hearts. We will be grateful to Amitabha Buddha for never ceasing to watch over us. We will naturally think of the Buddha and recite his name always, without

interruption.

In the Gatha, we are told that --

**This bright light is at all times universally  
illuminating,**

**And so this Buddha is also known as Unceasing  
Light.**

**Upon hearing about the power of this light,  
our mindfulness is enduring; and we all attain birth.**

**I thus prostrate myself before Amitabha.**

## ***10. Buddha of Inconceivable Light (unimaginable, beyond conception)***

The name “Buddha of Inconceivable Light” reflects Amitabha Buddha’s unfathomable virtue, which sentient beings of the Three Vehicles cannot imagine. It is beyond the capacity of understanding of ordinary beings to gauge it. In the *Larger Sukhavativyuha Sutra*, “Buddha of Inconceivable Light” is defined as “Buddha of Unimaginable Light” since it cannot be fathomed by our contemplation, nor imagined by any forethought. The virtue of the Buddha of Inconceivable Light is not only beyond the comprehension of ordinary beings, but also beyond that of Bodhisattvas. Only Buddhas can discern it. As the *Longer Sutra* notes, “Even sages of the Two Vehicles cannot fathom it. Only Buddhas clearly know it.”

Master Shandao has this to say about the unthinkable power of the radiance in Amitabha Buddha’s name:

**If all ordinary beings, regardless of the amount or the time period of their wrongdoings or merits,**

**would only exert themselves as much as a whole lifetime, or as little as one day to seven days, single-mindedly and without variation, to reciting the name of Amitabha, they would certainly be reborn [in the Pure Land]. There is no doubt about it!**

Therefore it matters not how virtuous or iniquitous a person is, so long as she recites the Buddha's name, she will be embraced by the Buddha's light and be reborn to the Land of Bliss and attain perfect enlightenment. Talk about something inconceivable — this is it.

Master Daochuo explains in his *Collection on the Land of Peace and Joy*:

**What is a Buddha's inconceivable power of wisdom? It can turn a few to many and vice versa; it can make something nearby become faraway and vice versa; it can render an effortless act to have a most significant outcome and transform a very heavy burden into a light one. Such is this kind of wisdom: boundless, immeasurable and inconceivable.**

The power of Amitabha's radiance "can turn a few

to many and vice versa; it can make something nearby become faraway and vice versa; it can render an effortless act to have a most significant outcome and transform a very heavy burden into a light one.” This power enables sentient beings from the ten directions, be they sages or ordinary beings, virtuous or evil, to be reborn to the Pure Land. Here lies the inconceivability of Amitabha’s light which is extolled by Shakyamuni Buddha and all other Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

The *Longer Sutra* puts it this way :

***I am not the only one who now praises his light.  
All the Buddhas, Sravakas, Pratyekabuddhas and  
Bodhisattvas praise and glorify it in the same way.***

The relevant praise in the Gatha reads -

**This light cannot be fathomed except by Buddhas,  
So this Buddha is also known as Inconceivable  
Light.**

**All the Buddhas, in acclaiming sentient beings’  
rebirth in his Pure Land,  
Extol Amitabha’s virtues,  
Thus I prostrate myself before him.**

## ***11. Buddha of Ineffable Light (inexpressible, beyond words)***

The name “Buddha of Ineffable Light” signifies that the power and virtues of Amitabha Buddha are indescribable. They are beyond the words of sentient beings of the Three Vehicles, and well outside the expressive faculty of language known by ordinary beings. The *Longer Sukhavativyuha Sutra* refers to the Buddha of Ineffable Light as “Buddha of Immeasurable Light.”

The virtues and power of the Buddha of Ineffable Light can neither be measured nor described. Bodhisattvas cannot cogitate on this light, nor find the right expression to praise it, not to mention ordinary beings. Amitabha’s light is ineffable, indefinable and transcends the sphere of language. In short, it is beyond conception, deliberation and discourse.

The Inconceivable Light is unfathomable in thought while the Ineffable Light is inexpressible in speech. Together, they summarize and compliment the merits of Amitabha Buddha’s twelve kinds of light. Previously, the merits and functions of Amitabha’s light have been

praised using a variety of expressions. Yet, when it comes to describing the marvels of Inconceivable Light and Ineffable Light, all depictions fail. Here, “the paths to our language are totally cut off and such a description is beyond the reach of our mental activities.” The names Inconceivable Light and Ineffable Light are deployed to illustrate the transcendent and absolute nature of Amitabha Buddha.

Amitabha Buddha possesses the above-mentioned virtues and power, which enable him to deliver all sentient beings absolutely, thus surpassing all Buddhas in the ten directions. To deliver “absolutely” means to save any sentient being with great ease. If it were easy for him to deliver a sage, but not an ordinary being, his power would not be absolute. If he could save a virtuous person without problem, but could not do so with an evil person, his power would not be absolute. Again, if delivery of practitioners who have renounced secular life were possible, but impossible of secular non-practitioners, his power would not be absolute either. All beings -- be they enlightened or unenlightened; good or evil; during their lifetimes or at the moment of death; even in the intermediate existence between death and reincarnation;



and within the Three Wretched Realms -- will naturally be delivered by Amitabha Buddha as soon as they encounter his radiance.

The *Longer Sutra* says:

***If sentient beings in the three realms of suffering  
see his light, they will all be relieved and freed  
from affliction. At the end of their lives, they will be  
liberated.***

The *Avatamsaka Sutra* reads:

***It emits a light named 'Seeing the Buddha,'  
This light can awaken those about to die;  
It causes them to think of the Tathagata,  
So when their lives end they can be born in the  
Buddha's Pure Land.***

It continues:

***To exhort the dying to recite the name of Amitabha,  
And show them his image for them to revere;  
Enabling them to take refuge in the Buddha,  
This is how this light is accomplished.***

It further states:

*From each and every pore (of the Buddha)  
appears a luminous cloud,  
Filling all space, emitting loud sounds;  
All dark realms are illuminated,  
Causing all suffering in hell to dissolve.*

Says the *Sutra of Contemplation of the Mind Ground*:

*As their sons and daughters pursue great merits,  
Resplendent golden light shines through hell,  
Within this light, the profound wonderful Dharma  
is heard,  
Upon seeing the Buddha and hearing the Dharma,  
They attain Buddhahood.*

Honen Shonin (1133–1212), founder of Japanese Pure Land Buddhism, explains the above sutra excerpts as follows:

**When we dedicate the merits of Amitabha-recitations to the departed, Amitabha Buddha emits his illumination to shine through the Three Wretched Realms of animals, hungry ghosts and**

**denizens of hell. As a result, sentient beings there get reprieved from their sufferings and are liberated when their times in these realms are up.**

From the above-quoted five sutra passages and the elaboration by Master Honen, it is clear that if someone's relative is at her life's end or has already fallen into hell, and if her descendants on earth recite the Buddha's name and dedicate the merits to her, Amitabha Buddha will radiate "resplendent golden light that shines through hell." She will see Amitabha's light, which instantly transforms the hellish flames into a red lotus flower. She then climbs onto the flower and leaves the inferno sitting on the lotus. This is the absolute power and function of the "Unhindered, Inconceivable and Ineffable" lights of Amitabha Buddha.

Thus we know that Amitabha Buddha's Ineffable Light enables sentient beings to become Buddhas and, after realizing Buddhahood, attain that same light as Amitabha Buddha's. The Land of Bliss is a realm of unconditioned nirvana. As such, both its environment and the beings there are perfect, the Buddha and all inhabitants there are equal, and the life and light of the

latter are as infinite as Amitabha's. The Buddhas from the ten directions praise the exalted virtues of Amitabha endlessly.

In the Gatha, Master Tanluan says:

**His majestic light, transcending form, is beyond description;**

**So this Buddha is also known as Inexpressible Light.**

**With this light as cause, Buddhahood is attained;**

**Its resplendence is praised by all Buddhas.**

**Thus, I prostrate myself before Amitabha.**

## ***12. Buddha of Light Surpassing the Sun and the Moon (superlative)***

The last one of the twelve Buddha Lights is called “Surpassing the Sun and the Moon.” It is a metaphor used to illustrate the superlative nature of Amitabha Buddha’s light, which is not equaled by any other light.

Sunlight has three characteristics:

1. It shines on the outside of things, but not the inside;
2. It shines on only one world system, and not on the others;
3. It shines only during the day, but not at night.

Amitabha Buddha’s light has the following features:

1. It illuminates everywhere (universally);
2. It illuminates all the time (eternally);
3. It penetrates the bodies and minds of sentient beings, and removes their inner darkness.

In the physical world, the brightest and most blazing light is that of the sun and the moon; yet Amitabha's illumination outshines them. The lights from the sun and the moon can only illuminate the four continents of the world system. Upward, they cannot reach the heavens in the Desire Realm, the Form Realm and the Formless Realm; downward, they cannot light up the hell domains. Sunlight only appears in the daytime, not nighttime, while moonlight only comes at night but not during the day. Neither the sun nor the moon can simultaneously shine on the outside and the inside of things. This is of course looking at things from the perspective of our earth.

Amitabha Buddha's light pervades all the Three Realms and the ten directions, illuminating even sentient beings down in the Avici Hell (the last and the deepest of the eight hot hells) and inside the Cakravada (the eight ranges of metallic mountains surrounding the world system of the Desire Realm). Amitabha's light radiates at all times and everywhere, without any obstructions. It shines clearly and infiltrates our inner hearts to remove our doubts. Hence, Amitabha Buddha's light surpasses any worldly light and the brightness from the sun and the moon.

According to the sutras, the solar and lunar lights become dim and even as dark as ink when placed under Amitabha Buddha's light. This is not to say that the sun and the moon suddenly lose their brightness, but that they are outshone and overshadowed by the Buddha's light. It is analogous to lighting a candle in a dark room to produce some light but, as soon as a fluorescent lamp is turned on, the candle light becomes very dim. Yet, if we open the windows and doors wide during daytime and let in the sunlight, the fluorescent light will likewise be dimmed. In short, "the Light Surpassing the Sun and the Moon" is employed to express the blazing brightness of Amitabha Buddha's light.

In the Gatha, it is stated:

**The brilliance of his light outshines the sun and moon,**

**So this Buddha is called the Light Surpassing the Sun and the Moon.**

**Even Shakyamuni Buddha's praise cannot capture all its virtues,**

**And that is why I prostrate myself before Amitabha, the one without equal.**

The power and virtues of Amitabha Buddha's radiance are immeasurable. Shakyamuni Buddha outlines the above twelve lights in the *Longer Sutra*. These twelve lights engage and complement one another. They also epitomize all other Buddhas' lights. They are unfathomable.



## ● ***The Light of Amitabha Embraces Those Who Recite the Buddha's Name***

Amitabha-reciters are immersed in the twelve lights of the Buddha no matter what circumstances they are under, just like a newborn baby being embraced by her mother. Amitabha Buddha's light is his embrace. When we are enveloped by Amitabha's light, we are within his embrace. The function and meaning of the name of Amitabha Buddha are the same: to embrace with his radiance those who recite his name. Shakyamuni Buddha explains Amitabha Buddha's radiance in the *Amitabha Sutra* as follows:

***That Buddha's light is boundless, illuminating the lands of the ten directions without obstruction. This is why he is called Amitabha.***

Adds the *Contemplation Sutra*:

***The light [of Amitabha] permeates all worlds, always embracing those who recite his name.***

Master Shandao amalgamates the above two sutra excerpts and gives the following interpretation:

**That Buddha's light is immeasurable, pervading the lands in the ten directions, without obstruction. It observes and tracks only those who recite the Buddha's name, and embraces them always. And for this reason he is named Amitabha.**

The purpose of Amitabha's boundless and unhindered light is to embrace those sentient beings who recite his name. Is it not true then that Amitabha is so called because the Buddha himself, and what the name Amitabha represents, are both about embracing those who recite his name? It follows that sentient beings who do not recite Amitabha's name will not be so embraced. This is why Master Shandao makes the point:

**The light of that Buddha's mind and heart illuminates only those sentient beings who single-mindedly recite the name of Amitabha, embracing and protecting them and never abandoning them. Nothing is said about it enveloping those who engage in any of the other, miscellaneous, practices.**

This is to say that only those who recite the Buddha's name exclusively will be embraced by Amitabha's light. No one else will be embraced by Amitabha Buddha's light, regardless of what school of practice they are cultivating. Thus Master Shandao says again:

**Those engaging in myriad practices can also be reborn in the Pure Land only if they dedicate the merits of those practices towards their rebirth. While the Buddha's light shines everywhere, it only embraces those who practice Amitabha-recitation.**

He adds:

**Amitabha Buddha's body is like a luminous golden mountain,**

**The light from his major and minor marks illuminates the ten directions.**

**Only those who recite his name are embraced in his light,**

**One should realize that the Fundamental Vow is the most powerful.**

Again:

**Amitabha possesses 84,000 marks of perfection,  
Within each mark there are rays of light that  
illuminate the ten directions.**

**They shine all over for no other reasons,  
Except to seek those who are to be reborn [in the  
Pure Land] by reciting his name.**

Where then is Amitabha Buddha's light? It is in Amitabha's physical body. Then where is the Buddha's physical body? It is in his name. Therefore, Amitabha Buddha is radiance, and his epithet is also radiance. His name is radiance with sound, and radiance is his silent name. When we single-mindedly recite Amitabha Buddha's name, we are naturally immersed in Amitabha's light. Otherwise, we are not.

As Amitabha-reciters, we benefit fully from the virtues and power of the radiance of Amitabha as long as we devote ourselves to reciting his name. It makes no difference whether we understand where the light comes from.

## ● ***Enjoying the Same Light and Life as Amitabha Buddha***

When we have single-mindedly recited the name of Amitabha Buddha, he becomes part of us. That is to say our lives have become infinite already, because when we approach the point of death, Amitabha Buddha and the sacred assembly will come to receive us, freeing us from the cycle of samsara. This being the cause, the effect is that we are no longer bound to predetermined birth and death (the repeated birth and death undergone by ordinary sentient beings whose lifespans and life forms are governed by karma), or the changeable birth and death (birth and death experienced by Arhats or Bodhisattvas whose lifespans and mind-created bodies are changeable at will).

Put differently, we will enjoy immeasurable life from now on. Since life and light go hand in hand, as from now we will also possess infinite light. However, we cannot emit this light until we are reborn in the Land of Bliss. The infinite light of ours is being kept in Amitabha Buddha's custody. It is the same as saying that a father's property is also the child's property, but since the child is

of a tender age, the father will take care of it on her behalf in the meantime.

A version of the *Infinite Life Sutra* says:

***If I attain enlightenment,  
Let me be named Infinite Life.  
Sentient beings, upon hearing this name,  
Will all come to my Pure Land;  
Like the Buddha, their bodies will be golden in  
color,  
And their forms perfect.  
They will also possess the same great compassion to  
benefit all sentient beings.***

This *gatha* tells us that unless Amitabha failed to attain enlightenment, he is to be called the “Buddha of Infinite Life” when he becomes a Buddha. Since infinite life encompasses infinite light, sentient beings who, upon hearing the name of the Infinite Life Buddha, aspire to be reborn to Amitabha’s Pure Land, and recite single-mindedly Amitabha Buddha’s name, will definitely go to the Land of Bliss. They will have a pure golden body, like that of Amitabha Buddha; their marks and brilliance are as inconceivable as Amitabha’s, perfect and complete.

Even their compassion will be like the Buddha's, delivering sentient beings of the ten directions with loving kindness and great benevolence. And like Amitabha, they will eliminate the karmic anguish of suffering sentient beings, giving sentient beings from the ten directions the joy of attaining Buddhahood.

Master Shandao says in his *In Praise of Pratyutpanna*:

**Amitabha-recitation is the gateway to nirvana.**

To recite the name of Amitabha enables one to be reborn into the Land of Bliss, a realm of unconditioned nirvana. Therefore, to recite the Buddha's name is to enter the gateway to nirvana where there is no birth and no death. Once one enters this gate, one is bestowed with immeasurable light and immeasurable life.

In his *In Praise of Dharma Practices*, Master Shandao reaffirms:

**Abiding [in the Pure Land], immovable in absolute truth,  
His radiance pervades endless future times constantly;  
With august and graceful bearing, perfect physical marks and pure golden color,  
He sits alone majestically, delivering sentient beings.  
Ordinary and sacred beings alike from the ten directions  
Who want rebirth [in his Pure Land],  
Are received by his transformed bodies;  
With a single recitation of the Buddha's name, they join the Buddha assembly instantly,  
Begetting forms and lives the same as the Buddha.**

Sentient beings from the ten directions, be they ordinary or sacred beings, as long as they recite the name of Amitabha resolutely, will be met by Amitabha Buddha and the sacred assembly at the end of their lives. After they are reborn in the Land of Bliss, their excellent physical appearances, radiance and lives will be completely equal to those of Amitabha Buddha.



Master Ouyi (1599-1655) also says:

**Those who invoke the name of Amitabha will be no different from him either in their light or in their lifespan.**

In holding fast the name of Amitabha, our light and lives will not be different from his infinite light and infinite life.

Master Yinguang affirms:

**If one is reborn in the West, one will see oneself being the same as the Buddha's light and life: immeasurable and boundless.**

Only when we are reborn in the Land of Bliss in the West will our own illumination and lives be the same as Amitabha Buddha's immeasurable and unlimited light and life.

Why is it that Amitabha-recitation can generate such immense merits with so little effort? The answer lies in Amitabha Buddha's inconceivable light: it can turn few into plenty, small to huge, light to heavy, heavy

to light, short to long, long to short, existence to non-existence, and non-existence to existence. All that is indicative of how inconceivable the Buddha's light is. Amitabha's compassionate and wise illumination, being inconceivable, is able to transform ordinary beings into sacred beings. It works like an elixir that transmutes iron into gold.

## ● ***Emanation Buddhas From Lotus Light***

The functions of a Buddha's illumination, like a Buddha's virtues, are immeasurable. In addition to enumerating the functions of the Buddha's twelve lights, the *Longer Sutra* reveals the "Buddhas from Lotus Light." It says:

*Each flower emits thirty-six hundred thousand million rays of light. Each one of these rays emits thirty-six hundred thousand million Buddhas. Their bodies have the color of purple gold and in them the major marks and minor signs that adorn Buddhas are rare and extraordinary. Moreover, each one of these Buddhas emits hundreds of thousands of rays of light that spread out everywhere in the ten quarters and proclaim the subtle and sublime Dharma. In this way, each of these Buddhas firmly establishes innumerable sentient beings in the Buddha's correct path.*

The *Contemplation Sutra* also mentions the "Emanation Buddhas from Light":

*The aureole of that Buddha is as vast as a hundred kotis of universes, each containing a thousand million worlds. In this aureole reside emanation Buddhas numbering as many as a million kotis of nayutas, multiplied by the number of grains of sand in the Ganges River. Each Buddha is attended by an innumerable multitude of emanation Bodhisattvas.*

The above passage is the origin of the general "Gatha in Praise of the Buddha," which also says: **"Within the light emitted are emanated Buddhas incalculable in number, and also countless assemblies of emanated Bodhisattvas."**

Master Honen explains the above two passages from the *Longer Sutra* and the *Contemplation Sutra* as follows:

**Amitabha's 'light permeates all worlds, always embracing those who recite his name' -- this represents embrace by the real Buddha. Apart from that, the Buddha also has emanation bodies that can equally embrace sentient beings. Each of the 'thirty-six hundred thousand million emanated Buddhas,' like the real Buddha, has his light permeating all worlds and embracing Amitabha-reciters.**

Master Honen also says:

**Within the embracing lights, there is an innumerable host of emanated Buddhas and Bodhisattvas protecting this person, surrounding him in hundreds and thousands of rows.**

It is clear that Amitabha Buddha, apart from fully possessing Immeasurable Light himself, also issues forth an infinite number of emanation Amitabha Buddhas with that light. Each of them in turn emanates countless Bodhisattvas.

Amitabha-reciters are not only embraced by the Buddha's illumination, they are also blessed and protected by the infinite number of emanation Buddhas and Bodhisattvas who surround them tier upon tier, giving them peace and security in the present life. When they die, they are naturally reborn in the Land of Bliss, attaining the same immeasurable light and immeasurable life as Amitabha Buddha.

## ● ***The Realm of Immeasurable Light***

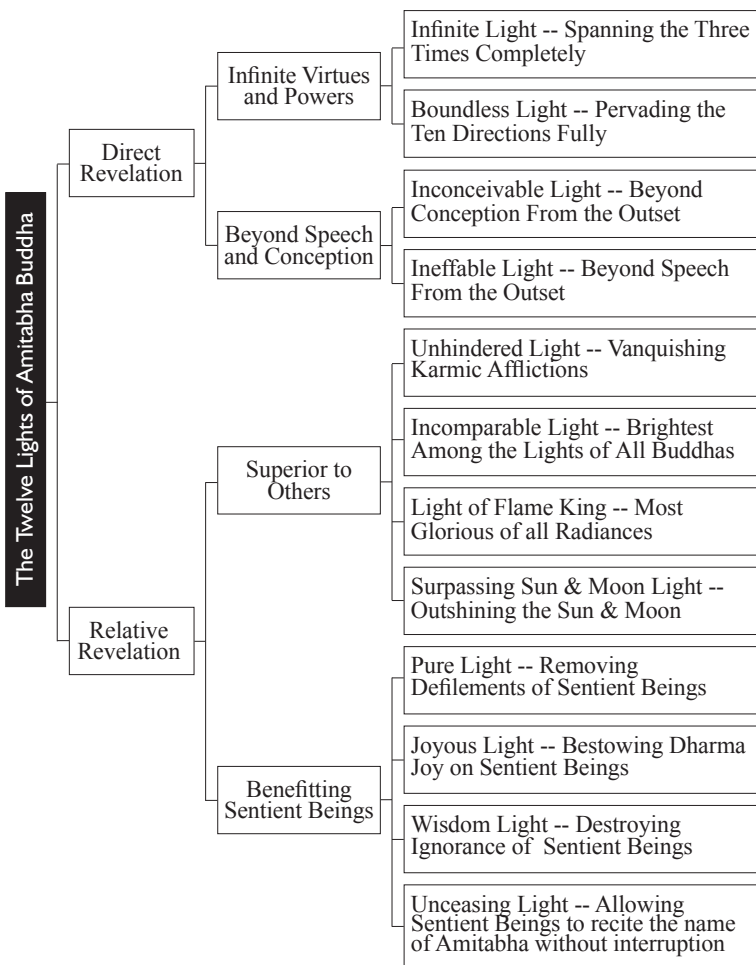
There are two forms of karma resulting from one's past. They are the reward body of an individual's previous existence (the being) and the dependent condition (the environment). In a Buddha-realm, there is a "non-duality of the environment and the being." In other words, there are no differences between the environment and the individual beings. Since Amitabha is the Buddha of Immeasurable Light, his Land of Bliss is naturally a realm of immeasurable light as well. Says an alternative translation of the *Longer Sutra*:

***With super meteoric speed,  
One can reach the Land of Peace and Joy,  
A realm of Immeasurable Light,  
And make offerings to numerous Buddhas.***

The Land of Bliss is filled with brilliance. It is a land that knows no sufferings but only a multitude of joys. Sentient beings reborn there have the same infinite light and life as Amitabha Buddha. Thus --

*May all sentient beings recite the name of  
Amitabha,  
At life's end, they go to the paradise of extreme  
bliss;  
Reunite with their families and kinsmen, forever,  
Their radiance and lives are the same as that of the  
King of the Great Vow.*

Dharma masters in the past categorized Amitabha's twelve kinds of lights differently. If we adopt as the basis Master Tanluan's "Gatha in Praise of Amitabha Buddha," they can be grouped into four categories as illustrated in the following chart:









## GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Faith in, and acceptance of, Amitabha's deliverance

Single-minded recitation of Amitabha's name

Aspiration to rebirth in Amitabha's Pure Land

Comprehensive deliverance of all sentient beings