

numerous rebirths in the cycle of the 6 realms of existence: heavens, humans, asuras, animals, hungry ghosts, and denizens of hell. The realms of heavens and humans are good destinies, and the realms of animals, hungry ghosts, and hell are evil destinies. Asuras are found in all destinies, both good and evil, because they are mixed up in the practice of good and evil deeds. The 6 realms of existence and the concept of rebirth comprise the Buddhist's observation of the mundane world and life, which is tightly connected with the notion of karma. Karma is the force of one's thoughts, words, and deeds. Its operation follows the law of causation, which is that good karma, generated from meritorious thoughts, words, and deeds, results in good consequences, while bad karma, produced from inappropriate intentions, speech, and behaviors, on the contrary results in harmful consequences. The last thought before death, namely the karma it produces, determines the rebirth realm of the dying. One might think this is as easy as a matter of self-control: a good rebirth realm can be gained as long as one thinks good thoughts at the last moment. However, the real situation is far more complicated. In the last moments, the most likely situation is that the mind of the dying person is inundated by subliminal karmic propensities or "memories" that manifest as visions in front of him or her. In this way, this person will literally be drawn toward his/her future destiny by the power of the habits and events of his/her current and previous existences.<sup>9</sup> According to this understanding, "'death' is nothing more than a fake name, for 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"<sup>10,11</sup> to experience another round of suffering caused by attachments to the notion of self and the illusory world as well as all kinds of desires developed from those attachments. That is why Buddha Sakaymuni considered that staying in the chain of birth and death is pain. Nonetheless, according to the third and fourth Noble Truths taught by the Buddha, suffering is suppressible. The way to suppress suffering is the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path, which consists of right views, right intentions, right speech, right actions, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.<sup>12</sup> There-

fore, the aim of his teachings is to transcend the cycle of rebirths and attain a complete cessation of suffering, which is a state called nirvana.<sup>13-19</sup>

Pure Land Buddhism is one of the Buddhist schools established in China. Its practice for attaining nirvana centers on recitation of Buddha Amitabha's name, which can be interpreted as Infinite Light or Infinite Life, 2 significant characteristics of this Buddha.<sup>14</sup> According to the fundamental sutra of this school, the *Infinite Life Sutra* (*Wu-liang-shou-ching*), there was once a monk named Dharmakara, who vowed to establish a perfect Buddha Realm without even the tiniest bit of evil or misery but one which was full of beauty, joy, and other miraculous and wonderful characteristics. All who were reborn there would be able to stay indefinitely and to attain their nirvana. Also, as indicated in Dharmakara's vow, anyone could be reborn there as long as he or she called upon his name 10 times, or even once only. After making his vow, Dharmakara went on to become the Buddha Amitabha, and his Buddha Realm was thereby created. This realm, lying in the West, was usually known as the Western Paradise. Moreover, since it was without pain or sin, it was also called the Pure Land. It is believed that Amitabha still presides over it, assisted by 2 Bodhisattvas known in Chinese as Kuan-yin (Avalokitesvara) and Ta-shih-chih (Mahasthamaprapta).<sup>20,21</sup>

Recitation of the name of Buddha Amitabha consists of repeating the words "homage to the Buddha Amitabha" (*Nan-mo-A-mi-t'o-fo*) or "Buddha Amitabha" (*A-mi-t'o-fo*). Its practice guideline is to devotionally and consistently recite the name to make one's mind undisturbed.<sup>22-24</sup> That is, one should be totally absorbed in the name of Amitabha while doing the recitation and have nothing but Amitabha in one's mouth, ears, and mind.<sup>19</sup> This is a practice of concentration. By doing so, one will be able to conquer afflictions, discard discriminations, and detach one's mind from all delusions to reach utmost tranquility and purity. The pure state of mind generates pure karma, which belongs to neither good nor bad karma and thus is irrelative to the existence realms they correspond to. It is but connected to the Pure Land and the cause to be reborn there. The recitation practice has many forms, such as the 10-recitation method (*shih-nien-fa*: a prac-