

PREFACE

My talk was based on my Chinese article titled 後生念佛. It was delivered to members of the Miami Buddhist Lotus Society on July 29, 1991 in Miami, Florida. Dr. Manli Peng kindly transcribed my talk for publication. When I reviewed her transcript I realized that my spoken English needed a lot of refinement. Hence, I started to rewrite it based on the transcript.

My sincere thanks to Dr. Manli Peng for her many days of hard work resulting in a very useful transcript, to Ann Klein for her improvement on my writing, to Chun Jane Chen for her typing, and to Andy Ellis for formatting and laser printing.

Yutang Lin
July 18, 1992
El Cerrito, CA

How to Teach Youngsters the Chanting of Amitabha

This is an interesting topic. I decided to write this Chinese article because I had experience in teaching my two sons to do Buddhist practices and wanted to share my experiences with other Buddhist parents. Another reason that prompted me to write this article was a dream I had a few days earlier. I saw in that dream a piece of paper that resembled the first page of an article. The title was clearly written in Chinese: 後生念佛 , and the text was marked by dots only. The title means youngsters chant *Amitabha*. Reflecting on the meaning, I took it to be a sign indicating that Buddha was assigning me the job of writing on this topic. Thus, I began to think about what I could say on this matter, and then I wrote this article in Chinese. This

2 Youngsters Chant Amitabha

topic is very important for bringing up Buddhist youngsters, so today I have chosen to talk about it in English, based on my Chinese article, thereby making it available to the English speaking world.

Generally speaking, the holy name chanted need not be restricted to that of Amitabha Buddha only. We may chant the name of other Buddhas or Bodhisattvas, or their mantras. Nevertheless, it would be more conducive to spiritual progress if we concentrate on chanting only one holy name or mantra as our main practice. The remarks made in this talk are applicable to Buddhist chantings in general. Hence, you do not need to switch to the chanting of *Amitabha* if you are already accustomed to chanting other holy names or mantras in Buddhism.

If you have not chosen a certain chant for your main practice, I would like to recommend that you choose a short one, for example, *Amitabha*. The reason being that a short one would be easier to maintain in our minds throughout the ups and

downs of life. Even when we become weak, sick, or are in a crisis we would like to be able to continue the chanting to maintain peace of mind and receive Buddha's blessing. A short one would be easier to recall and keep in mind.

My article begins with this question: How does one who practices the chanting of *Amitabha* induce the youngsters to do the same?

According to the Buddhist teaching, one's consciousness enters the mother's egg upon conception. Therefore we begin the teaching of chanting from the time of pregnancy. The parents should chant *Amitabha* or sing the five-variation chanting of *Amitabha*. You are welcome to write me for a free copy of this melodious chanting tape. The parents can also play this tape for the baby and themselves. These practices will reduce the Karmic hindrances and increase the merits and wisdom of both parents and child.

4 Youngsters Chant Amitabha

During labor the mother is advised to chant *Kuan-Yin Pu-Sa (Avalokitesvara)*. This will reduce her pain and help secure a safe delivery. Mrs. Pee-Zon Wang, a mother of three from Atlanta, Georgia, asked me to mention this application of the chanting practice because she herself had experienced its marvelous benefits. She had noticed that children thus born have a nicer temperament.

During infancy we show the baby images of Buddhas or Bodhisattvas by either carrying him to the altar or setting up some images in a place where he can often see them, for example, somewhere near the cradle. We can also play the tape of the melodious five-variation chanting of *Amitabha* often so that the baby lives in an atmosphere of peace and harmony. When we caress the baby or gently rock him to sleep, it would be nice to chant *Amitabha* softly or silently. While taking care of the baby crying in the middle of the night the parents might get upset sometimes, then they may want to chant to calm themselves down. Only when

the parents are at ease can the baby be calmed down by the peaceful feeling that they convey.

When we teach children with visual or auditory disabilities we need to make use of their remaining faculties. For example, we could show an image of Buddha to a deaf child and play the chanting tape for a blind child. (Of course, these suggestions apply to all deaf or blind persons, regardless of their ages.) In case the child is unfortunately both blind and deaf we can gently pat or caress him, carry him or lead his way in circumambulation (walking clockwise in a circle), while chanting *Amitabha*. In this way the child can sense the peace and harmony of chanting. Under such loving care of the parents, the child's temperament will become more gentle. Furthermore, we can give the child a string of beads and teach him to move the beads one by one with his fingers. This amounts to chanting by touching.

Parents who work hard to take care of children, especially those with a disability, would find chanting *Amitabha* very helpful in freeing their minds

6 Youngsters Chant Amitabha

from worries and complaints, and in inducing a pure, fresh and peaceful state of mind. Consequently, the chores become easier to handle, and the parent-child relationship becomes smoother and sweeter.

Since our goal is to help develop the habit of doing a practice rather than to provide the excitement of stimulations, the emphasis is not on showing a lot of variety. We simply provide in a natural way the same image for the child to look at frequently. For example, place or hang an image of Amitabha Buddha in the child's room, on his desk, or on the wall facing his seat. Likewise, we choose one chanting tape and play it most of the time; and we give him a string of beads to chant by hand.

Communication between minds are not limited to our usual senses of sight, hearing, etc. Occurrences of supernatural communication are frequently experienced by spiritual practitioners. Therefore, when we chant *Amitabha* for a blind and deaf child we should not hold on to the mistaken notion that

he cannot sense it. We need to chant with the understanding that the child can fully *sense* it. In fact, the effect of chanting is not limited by space or time. The touch of a person worrying is very different from that of a person chanting. When we are in the presence of a person who has been doing Buddhist practices for years we will sense that there is a difference. It is a harmony of serenity, clarity and profound compassion that permeates the atmosphere. Therefore, it is very helpful to others that we do chanting daily so that when we need to convey our love and sympathy through touch, the receiver will greatly benefit.

We need physical exercise to keep our bodies in good health. Similarly, we need mental exercise to keep our minds in good spirit. Chanting *Amitabha* is a simple practice which helps to keep our mind active in a pure and concentrated way. Ordinarily, if we do not use our minds regularly, they will become dull and scattered; and if we use our minds for worldly activities, it is inevitable that we will become entangled in self-centered thoughts. There-

8 Youngsters Chant Amitabha

fore, in order to maintain our mental equilibrium, it is of great benefit to adopt a simple practice like the chanting of *Amitabha* for daily spiritual exercise.

Once a blind and deaf child is accustomed to moving the beads, he will gradually enjoy doing it because his mindfulness is constantly working while he moves the beads. Furthermore, this is a simple activity which is intuitive and direct, i.e. without the involvement of conceptual framework. Therefore it induces the growth of one's inner purity. The blind and deaf children are fortunate in that they are not subject to pollution by human conceptualizations. Their natural purity is intact, and hence what they need is simply some repetitive activities to keep their minds active. Moving the beads is their chanting of Buddha because Buddhahood means returning to our original purity and they stay in touch with that purity through this activity.

On a daily basis set a definite time for the whole family to get together to chant *Amitabha* or sing the

five-variation chanting of *Amitabha*. It is very beneficial to form such a habit in educating youngsters. Unless they are taught ways to maintain their purity of mind there is no telling what they might pick up from the schools, the streets and their friends. They are constantly under the surreptitious influences of television, radio, movies, magazines, newspapers, etc. If the parents do not set good examples for them and give them proper instructions along the way of their growth, it is very likely that they could be led astray by pursuits of vanities and pleasures. It is important to start forming these habits while they are still very young, otherwise it may be too late when they get older.

Sometimes children might be reluctant or do not want to join the family service. The parents should not force them to do the practice or punish them for that, but rather simply insist on having their presence in the room. The very young ones can be allowed to have food or toys with them. In this way they will not develop repulsive feelings toward the practice; besides, their presence makes it a passive

10 Youngsters Chant Amitabha

participation, and they will not feel that they are entitled to ignoring these gatherings. If parents do not insist on the minimum requirement of the child's presence, then as he grows older it will become even more difficult to introduce the practice to him. For these family practices it would be better to do only those that are simple or attractive to the children, for example, singing *Amitabha*, chanting and circumambulating, making offerings, prostrations and playing musical Dharma instruments.

If the children become restless or noisy while they are attending the family service, the parents should gently tell them to quiet down, and such admonishing should be given just a few times. If they do not obey, the rest of the family should simply continue the practice without stopping to correct them. Thereby the family service will not turn into chaotic shouting and frenzied crying. Nevertheless, they are not allowed to leave the room; otherwise they will have learned that making a fuss is a sure way to avoid the gathering. After the rest of the family

nas completed the routine practices, the parents should comfort the ones who misbehaved with gentle advice and encouraging words, trying to persuade them to do at least a little bit of the practice together with the parents. Such a gentle and gradual approach will in the long run prove to be effective and without backlashes. Since it is a daily task that will continue for years, it takes a lot of patience and kindness on the part of parents. And we, as parents, can improve our own patience and kindness through such endeavors.

When small children approach the altar, they tend to touch objects on the altar and play with them, and the adults out of cautiousness will tell them to stop playing or stay away. Consequently, children may get the wrong impression that they are not supposed to be near these objects, or they may develop a sense of uneasiness toward the Dharma instruments or images. We certainly do not want to have this kind of result. We would like them to feel dear and natural toward the Dharma. Therefore, first of all, our attitude should be gentle and encouraging. Al-

12 Youngsters Chant Amitabha

though we still need to be aware of the possibility of accidents, we should not automatically stop them in a stern manner. Instead, we should teach them the proper way to use these objects, allowing them to play with the Dharma instruments as long as nothing is damaged, and telling them the significance or related stories in terms that they can understand. If they want to have Buddha images or Dharma instruments for themselves, we should try to make these available for them. If what they desire is too costly or impractical, we should try to satisfy them with substitutes, for example, a small statue in place of a big statue or a poster in place of a statue.

When children are taught to use the musical Dharma instruments to accompany chanting, it will increase their enthusiasm in the practice. When I gave lectures in Austin, Texas, the children of the members of the local Buddhist group were gathered in the adjacent room. They tapped the wooden fish and the Ching (metal musical bowl) while singing the five variation chanting of *Amitabha*. Their

tempo was clear and their singing was full of devotion and absorption. I believe that Buddhists who had the chance to see their performance would enjoy having their own children do the same; it was so lovely!

The lady who taught these children the chanting told me an anecdote: Once she reminded the children that while chanting they should not think of anything else. A three-year old replied, "I cannot think of anything else while chanting." Concentration is a natural quality of a pure mind, and adults tend to lose it owing to the accumulation of their attachments. Chanting practiced on a daily basis will gradually bring back our natural purity and its accompanying merits.

As soon as your child is old enough to do certain Dharma activities, let him participate in them. When Howard, my first son, was five-years old, my late guru Yogi Chen told me to help him set up his own small altar so that he could practice the daily offerings of incense, water and candles. When

14 Youngsters Chant Amitabha

Frank, my second son, was five-years old, Howard taught him how to empty, clean and set up the offering cups at the end of a day. Howard started to string prayer beads and duplicate singing *Amitabha* tapes for free distribution at age seven. He started the chanting of the hundred-syllable mantra of Vajrasattva even earlier, at age three and half. These are some examples of what kind of Dharma activities that children can do as they grow up.

Now Howard is fourteen years old and in charge of duplicating tapes for free distribution. He makes sure that we always have ten copies of the chanting *Amitabha* tape available. Whenever people who have received the books and tapes we sent write back to thank and tell us how helpful those materials have been to them, I share this feedback with my sons so that they understand that their participation actually helps people. Once they understand the benefits, they would like to help with Dharma service. Do not ask them to work for the Dharma in an authoritarian way. Not understanding the signifi-

cance may cause them to resent the extra work asked of them.

Try to connect the family activities with the Dharma. For example, when reading to children, use books on the past lives of Buddha or other children's books that contain Buddhist teachings on impermanence, tolerance, compassion, giving and sharing, etc. Take children to Dharma activities such as releasing of turtles, birds and fish, Dharma talks, group practices, visiting monasteries or cemeteries, going on pilgrimages, etc. Encourage them to participate in charity activities or community services.

Once my son Frank asked me, "Why do we chant 'Amitabha'?" My answer was as follows: Occasionally we are sick and feel uncomfortable, we run into something and get hurt or feel pain, we feel lonely, we are scared of darkness, or we are angry. At times like these when our body is in discomfort or our minds are not at ease, if we remember to chant *Amitabha* and repeat it for a while, gradually

16 Youngsters Chant Amitabha

our minds will calm down, and then the bodily pains will not feel so bad or the darkness will become less scary. As we chant *Amitabha* we have Amitabha's company in our hearts, so we are no longer alone and need not feel lonely. Everyday we need to eat, drink and exercise to keep our bodies in good health; similarly, everyday we need to chant *Amitabha* because it is both a wonderful spiritual food and a purifying exercise for our mind. It will naturally lead us to live a peaceful and happy life.

I hope that my answer to Frank's question given above will serve as an example of how to explain the meaning of chanting to children.

The next question is—is there a need to teach children the chanting of *Amitabha*? Yes, indeed, there is such a need. It is never too early to start this education because children also have emotional ups and downs, and hence they also need to learn how to maintain their mental balance. Besides, the practice can be taught without resorting to abstract words. We can simply let them start by listening to

the melodious five-variation chanting of *Amitabha*. If we play this chanting tape often, the family is bathed in a harmonious atmosphere. This will help the children to grow robustly in body and mind.

The methods employed in teaching children the chanting of *Amitabha* should be carefully chosen; our attitude should be kind and gentle; and we must be patient. Only then can we expect and get good results. When a child is angry or upset, we need to comfort him and talk to him to calm him down. We talk to him to find out what is upsetting him, and then we try to lead him to look at things from many angles. Thereby we may be able to bring him out of his entanglements. We can suggest an activity that the child would like to do and join him in doing it. Only after the child has calmed down or become happy can we play the chanting tape or ask him to join us in Dharma activities.

While teaching children we should not be confined to using only Buddhist terminology. It would be

18 Youngsters Chant Amitabha

better to exemplify humbleness and care for others in our lives rather than repeating idealistic talks.

Do not force children to do Dharma practices. Right now they have to listen to the parents, but when they grow up they will not do it unless they want to. If children are forced to do Dharma practice, they will resent it and associate Dharma practices with oppression. Then it is inevitable that they will want to discard these practices as soon as they are on their own. Such cases would be, in my view, tragic.

Another reason for teaching children the chanting of *Amitabha* is that youngsters are also not free from impermanence. Death comes to people of all ages! If you visit a cemetery and read the tombstones, you will see many who died in the womb, in stillbirth, in infancy, in childhood or in their teens. Accidents may happen to anyone. In Miami many people have a swimming pool in their backyards, and there are young children who have drowned in these swimming pools. By teaching children the chanting of *Amitabha* we could help

them to obtain a better rebirth in case they die young.

Now and then I go to cemeteries to pray for the dead, and read the inscriptions on the tombstones, thereby learning of many short life-stories and gaining an intuitive sense of the transience of life. I have invited my sons to go with me on these visits, but I have never ordered them to come along. Sometimes they joined me, and we walked among the tombstones and chanted. I asked them to read the tombstones to find out how long the deceased have lived, how long one of a married couple out-lived the other, etc. I especially pointed out to them the fact that there were even babies buried here, not to mention children and teens. Thus, they have witnessed and learned that death is a natural part of life, that life is short and hence precious. Therefore, we should make good use of it while we are still alive. Visits to the cemetery and praying for deceased ones have not produced a fear of death in my sons. Instead, when they hear in school that

20 Youngsters Chant Amitabha

someone has passed away, after they return home they ask me to pray for the deceased.

Generally speaking, older people are more likely to turn to religion because they have gone through life and encountered many situations, and thus realize how limited we all are. We need the teachings and practices of religion to help us maintain at least a balanced mentality, or even achieve inner tranquility and happiness. Youngsters, except those who have been reared from a religious background, are less likely to be even interested in religious practices or theories. How are we going to show them the benefits of chanting *Amitabha*?

The first and foremost point is that we need to do the practice diligently ourselves; we teach others by setting examples ourselves. No one can persuade others the value of a practice without doing the practice himself.

The second point is that we give advice only when the time is right. We should not keep repeating our

views or try to indoctrinate the youngsters if they are not interested in the subject. If we keep advising people who are not interested, they will become resistant or feel offended. It simply will not work. Next time they will even avoid getting close to us. It is better to wait until they ask what we are doing and why, then it is their question and we are not forcing our views on them.

Another opportunity to talk to them about chanting is at a time when they are suffering from worldly sorrows. Then we should first analyze their situation for them, pointing out the sources of their problems and give advice on practical solutions. We can then recommend that they try the chanting practice as a means to release their worries and tensions. We also explain the long term benefits of a daily chanting practice, emphasizing its merits based on our own experiences.

For example, if a youngster is in a difficult situation we can show our empathy by sharing our experiences of such difficulties with him. Further, we can

22 Youngsters Chant Amitabha

mention many other difficult situations that people have gone through; thus we help him enlarge his views, and his situation becomes more tolerable. We advise him on how to handle the situation so that the result will be better for all involved. Finally, we recommend the chanting practice, explaining that without such mental exercises it would be very difficult for us to keep our heads above the muddy water of worldly sorrows.

The central theme of our advice is the Buddhist teaching that egoism is the root of all our sorrows. A life free from the slavery of egoism is peaceful, harmonious, open and delightful. In order to enjoy such a life, we all need to work on the elimination of our self-centeredness. When we are not blinded by our self-centeredness, we will see the obvious fact that we are all very fragile and we all want love, peace, and all the good things that life may offer. Nevertheless, the resources are limited, so we simply have to save and share. Overpowering others by force will bring us only temporary advantages at the expense of others' miseries, and then we live in fear

of losing our possessions and become enslaved by our possessions.

Although the elimination of one's ego is very difficult to achieve, it is not impossible. When we look at the whole human race, progress toward the elimination of the ego seems like it could never become a reality. Nevertheless, if we do not advocate and practice this ideal of non-egoism, whatever we are enjoying now may soon be lost. (added later: Looking at the riots in Los Angeles in April 1992 one immediately realizes the often overlooked importance of religious teachings and practices. There are limits as to what the law and police can do. The best solution to the problems of our world does not lie in laws and powers, but in the good will among people.)

Chanting *Amitabha* is a practical method for eliminating our self-centeredness. It is a slow, sure and safe practice. It will enhance the clarity of our minds because it helps to pacify our scattered thoughts. It will open up our minds because basi-

24 Youngsters Chant Amitabha

cally we are limited only by our self-centeredness. Chanting *Amitabha* also trains us to concentrate.

From the above it becomes obvious that chanting is not a passive way to escape from the world; rather, it is a practice for purifying our minds. Only with a clear and pure mind can we render excellent services to people. As we concentrate on repeating the holy name *Amitabha* our minds become free from selfish desires and obstinate prejudices. Thus our minds return to their original intuitive and dynamic state. We employ this method daily to purify our intentions so that we may actively serve people with a pure and empathic mind.

There is an old Chinese saying: “Youngsters are formidable; how do we know that the coming ones are inferior to the present ones?” Youngsters are less deeply entangled in the worldly ways, and hence have a simpler outlook on things. Once they have learned the significance of the chanting practice, quite often they will diligently practice it and

even become very devoted. Therefore, we should not look down upon young practitioners.

In a classic Chinese book on military strategy it is said, "Put the army into a dead spot, then it will survive." That means once the army is in a desperate situation, it will exert its maximal force for survival and consequently come through. Similarly, in order for our chanting practice to bring about a spiritual renaissance we need to learn, first of all, the fragility and transience of our lives.

In our daily lives we are accustomed to unconsciously assuming that life will go on as usual. We make so many plans for next year, five years, ten years, retirement and old age. However, there is no guarantee that we will live that long. When we drive a car on the streets we do not know if the other drivers are drunk, senile, absent-minded, angry, etc., hence our lives are not completely in our hands. We can easily get sick and we do not know when we will encounter a deadly fire, a flood, a hurricane or an earthquake. We are all on nature's

26 Youngsters Chant Amitabha

death roll and we do not know when our time will be up.

Even if we are lucky enough not to encounter any major personal disaster in our lives, eventually we will have to face death alone. We are deeply attached to living; while death means the unknown, fear and grief. The more wonderful our lives are, the harder it is for us to give them up. Nevertheless, an instant and complete relinquishment of possessions and separation from dear ones awaits every one of us. Hence we need to prepare for our death by practicing renunciation.

Chanting is a training on renouncing our attachments and prejudices. If we build it into a daily exercise, then gradually we will sense the openness, freedom and relaxation that comes as a result of our spiritual growth. Furthermore, we will be able to face death, be it our own or others', with ease and understanding. Reflections on death will sober our minds and show us what is more important in our lives than our worries and fights.

Death may knock on our door at any moment. When we do our chanting practice, we should be aware that death may be already on the doorstep outside. In this way our practice will become pure and sincere. Also we may use our daily chanting practice as a rehearsal for our final exit from the stage of the world of the living. This will help reduce the wild chases in our minds and add concentration to our practice because when we look back from the moment of death, things are simply either insignificant or helplessly unchangeable. At the moment of death we want to rely on chanting *Amitabha* because the only thing available to us is our consciousness and we use it to communicate with Buddha by calling his name for his compassionate help.

If we chant *Amitabha* daily with the awareness of death's approaching, then we will surely gain the benefits of this practice; consequently, we will live in happiness and die in peace. My best wishes to you and may Buddha bless you all!

As this is a Dhamma text,
We request that it be treated with respect.

If you are finished with it,
Please pass it on to others or
offer it to a monastery, school, or library.

Thanks for your co-operation.

Namo Amitabha!



美國中佛州淨宗學會 印贈
Amitabha Buddhist Society of CF
Phone:4074083359
Email: amtbflorida@gmail.com
Website: whatbuddhataught.org

This book is for free distribution, it is not for sale.