The Role of the *Contemplation Sutra* in the Formation of Pure Land Buddhist Practice in China: Contemplation and Recitation

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Preface

As a member of the International Association of Shin Buddhist Studies (IASBS) and its past president, I wish to begin by expressing my joy and appreciation to the Dharma Drum Institute of Liberal Arts for co-sponsoring and graciously hosting this conference in Taiwan. This is an epoch-making development for our association as we have, for the first time, ventured beyond the usual venues of Japan, Canada and the U.S. to hold our conference.

Co-hosting a conference with an institution based in another Buddhist tradition should be welcomed for it encourages us to bring out a dimension that is normally not actively addressed in Shin Buddhism. One such dimension is "meditation," which is why I was pleased with the theme of this year's conference, "Buddhist Meditative Traditions and Contemporary Pure Land Thought."

I have, therefore, decided in this keynote talk to address the topic of meditation in Pure Land Buddhism. In so doing, I will focus on the role that the *Sutra on Contemplation of Buddha Amitāyus*[1] or *Guān wúliángshòu fó jīng* (觀無量壽佛經, henceforth, the *Sutra* or *Contemplation Sutra*) played in China, especially during the 6th to 7th centuries.

As is well known, this sutra is one of the three canonical sutras (*sambukyo*) of Shin Buddhism along with the *Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha Sutra* (無量壽經) and the *Smaller Sukhāvatīvyūha Sutra* or *Amida Sutra* (阿彌陀經). However, in Shin Buddhism the *Contemplation Sutra* has attracted far less attention in comparison to the *Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha Sutra*, which Shinran determined to be of utmost importance.

In this talk, I shall define "meditation" in rather broad terms, as one of the Three Trainings (三學), which are, 1) morality, 2) meditation or concentration and 3) wisdom. This fundamental teaching is found in early Buddhism and acknowledged by virtually all traditions today. Moreover, under this definition, meditation will encompass both contemplation (*guān* 觀) and oral recitation (*chēng* 稱).

Some may question my inclusion of oral recitation within the category of "meditation," but I feel justified by the fact that recitation is intimately related to Buddha-recollection (*nianfo, nembutsu* 念佛), a form of meditative practice. Further, Shinran's teacher Hōnen is reported to have attained the state of Samādhi as a result of oral recitation. Plus, if meditation in the Three Trainings point to religious action that leads to the focusing the mind on what the seeker considers sacred, then I believe that oral recitation does exactly that.

Textual Background

Among the Mahayana sutras, the *Contemplation Sutra* requires added clarification with regard to its origin. Many Mahayana sutras are available in Sanskrit texts or in Tibetan translation of the Sanskrit original, thereby attesting to their Indian origin. However, no such Sanskrit text or Tibetan translation has been found for the *Sutra*. Hence, a long debate has ensued among specialists concerning the location of its composition.

The present Chinese text of the *Sutra* is said to have been translated by Kālayaśas (383?-442) sometime between 424 and 453. As mentioned above, a Sanskrit version of this sutra has not been found nor is the sutra cited by other Sanskrit texts. Also, the absence of a Tibetan translation from Sanskrit further casts doubt that there was a Sanskrit text. Thus, most scholars today are in agreement that this sutra was not composed in India. However, their views divide into two camps concerning its actual location of composition, one favoring Central Asia and the other China.

Those advocating the Central Asian composition argue on the basis of the origin of the translator and the iconographic descriptions found in the sutra. Kālayaśas, the translator, was from Central Asia as were the translators of other sutras that belong to the same genre of "contemplation sutras" that bear the term "contemplation" (*guan*) in their titles.

Further, the descriptions of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in the sutra reveal characteristics suggestive of actual images existing in central Asia. For example, the huge size of the Buddha's body may refer to the colossal Buddha statues like those of Bāmiyan that the Taliban destroyed. The advocates argue that these huge descriptions in the sutra would be highly unlikely to have been based on Buddha images in China, since prior to the 5th century the images in China were virtually all very small measuring only thirty to forty centimeters in height.

In contrast, arguments in support of the Chinese composition theory come primarily from textual evidence. For example, some of the passages in the *Contemplation Sutra* are very similar to those found in the earlier Chinese translations of other sutras. This suggests that the Chinese composers of the *Sutra* adopted these passages during its composition. Another piece of evidence, on the basis of detailed textual analysis, argues that the *Sutra* is the result of an amalgamating of the four previously unrelated parts.

While both theories have substantial merit, neither side has had the decisive evidence in its favor. It appears safe to assume that the *Sutra* transmitted some core ideas, including the Queen Vaidehī narrative that was widely known among Buddhists in India as well as a form of contemplation that was actively practiced in central Asia, possibly in the Turfan area. The sutra probably was not in tact as one entity but was amalgamated into the present form in a cultural milieu outside India. And in the process of translation into Chinese, concepts and expressions assumed a Chinese coloring from the numerous Chinese scriptural translations that were consulted, including the other Pure Land texts and contemplation sutras.

Religious Tradition and Textual Corpus

As already mentioned, the *Contemplation Sutra* has long been considered in East Asia as one of the sacred scriptures of a tradition known as "Pure Land Buddhism." It requires mentioning that while no distinct Pure Land School or doctrinal lineage appears to have developed in India, the Pure Land teachings did exist in India.

In fact, the idea of the existence of "transcendent" realms (as Buddha realms) far beyond Sahā realm (this earthly realm) presided by "transcendent" Buddhas can be traced back as early as 2nd century B.C.E., having been advocated by pre-Mahāyāna schools such as the Mahāsaṃghikas and the Lokottaravādins. However, it would not be till the 6th century in China when we see the emergence of Pure Land Buddhism as a *distinct* tradition as one among the various schools of Buddhism.

Pure Land Buddhism can be defined as beliefs and practices that espouse for its aspirants the realization of the stage of non-retrogression (*avaivartika*) after death in a Pure Land called "Sukhāvatī" (Realm of Joy) or in the present life, as in the case of Shinran, who broke radically from the established Pure Land doctrine. When an aspirant attains this stage of non-retrogression one does not fall backwards to lower spiritual levels and is guaranteed eventual realization of full enlightenment, the ultimate goal of Pure Land Buddhists in keeping with the goal common of all Mahayana Buddhists.

The Pure Land sutras describe this Sukhāvatī Pure Land as being located billions of Buddha realms away in the western direction from this Sahā realm. Buddha Amitāyus or Buddha Amitābha is the "transcendent" Buddha, who presides over this Sukhāvatī Pure Land.

It needs to be qualified here that, Amitābha and Sukhāvatī are among innumerable transcendent pure lands and Buddhas in the Buddhist cosmology, including Buddha Akṣobhya and Abhirati Pure Land located in the eastern direction. However, on account of its unparalleled popularity in East Asia, "Pure Land Buddhism" normally refers to a tradition centered on a *specific* Buddha (Amitāyus) and a *specific* pure land (Sukhāvatī).

According to the central mythic narrative told in the *Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra*, Amitāyus established Sukhāvatī Pure Land as a result of fulfilling his vows (*praṇidhāna*) to lead all sentient beings to realize perfect enlightenment in the Pure Land. He made the vows when he was still a bodhisattva named "Dharmākara" (storehouse of Dharma); his vows were followed by innumerable eons of disciplined cultivation until all aims of his vows were consummated. Having fulfilled his vows, he became Buddha Amitāyus and has dwelt in Sukhāvatī for the past ten eons to guide the aspirants to reach full enlightenment.

Those born in Sukhāvatī Pure Land do not enjoy lives of luxury and bliss but acquire an ideal environment for consummating their Buddhist practices that they could not fulfill during their earthly life. In this sense, Sukhāvatī is not a "paradise" but more of an ideal "training center" for realizing enlightenment under the tutelage of a Buddha and bodhisattvas in an ideal environment freed from the trials and tribulations of earthly life. Birth in the Pure Land guarantees the attainment of the stage of non-retrogression and the eventual realization of perfect enlightenment.

Here for those in the audience not familiar with Shinran's thought, I feel compelled to mention that Shinran again broke radically from the above general Pure Land Buddhist

position. According to Shinran, with the realization of a spiritual realization called Shinjin in this very life, one automatically becomes a Buddha *immediately* upon death. Thus, one need not spend any time in the Pure Land. Instead, as a Buddha one elects to participate in the ongoing effort to lead others in the numerous defiled realms to supreme enlightenment.

So on this point Shinran is in accord with the general Pure Land teaching of "returning from the Pure Land." That is to say, after attaining enlightenment, many go forward as bodhisattvas to other realms, including back to this earthly Sahā realm, to carry out the bodhisattva task of leading others to birth in Sukhāvatī and ultimately to enlightenment. This is explained in Bodhisattva Dharmākara's 22nd vow:

> For they will wear the armor of great vows, accumulate merits, deliver all beings from birth-and-death, visit Buddha-lands to perform bodhisattva practices, make offerings to Buddhas, Tathāgatas, throughout the ten directions, enlighten uncountable sentient beings as numerous as the sands of the River Ganges, and establish them in the highest, perfect Enlightenment. (*Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra*)*

The above descriptions, based on the mythic narrative, refer primarily to how the Pure Land was created and what happens to the aspirants *after* they are born in the Pure Land. However, the Pure Land sutras also discuss at length the practices needed while in this Sahā realm *before* they gain birth in the Pure Land. These include a wide range of practices from contemplation, to observation of precepts, to virtuous acts and to oral recitation. The *Contemplation Sutra*, in particular, focuses on this point by exhorting the aspirants to engage in various practices, most notably contemplation, which shall be explained next.

Contemplation

The *Sutra* advocates two categories of practices. I classify the two as, 1) "morality" or "ethical" and 2) "meditation" as in the Three Trainings mentioned at the outset.

The ethical or moral practice is termed the "Three Felicitous Acts" (三福 *sanfu*). The Buddha prescribes to Queen Vaidehī the Three Felicitous Acts as a means of being born in the Pure Land in response to Queen Vaidehī's plea to be born in a better place. They are, 1) to care for one's parents, attending to one's teachers and elders, out of compassion refraining from killing, and carrying out the Ten Virtuous Acts,[2] 2) to take refuge in the Three Treasures, keeping the various precepts, and refraining from breaking the rules of conduct, and 3) to raise the aspiration for enlightenment, believing in the law of causality, reciting the Mahāyāna sutras and encouraging those who practice the teachings.

The Buddha, then, proceeds to prescribe the second category of practice, which I am calling "meditative," the focus of my talk today. They are, 1) contemplation and 2) oral recitation. The primary concern of the *Contemplation Sutra* is the practice of contemplation, for it devotes the bulk of the sutra to it. On the other hand, it refers to oral recitation only briefly, but its significance lies in the fact that this sutra is the *earliest* known Pure Land sutra to mention this form of practice, which became the more dominant

and pervasive form of practice within Pure Land Buddhism in the subsequent centuries and even to this day.

Let us first examine the practice of contemplation. The sixteen contemplations discussed in the sutra are essentially distinguished on the basis of the various objects being visualized. The sixteen contemplations are, 1) on the setting sun, 2) water, 3) ground, 4) trees, 5) pond, 6) towers, etc., 7) lotus throne, 8) the images of Amitāyus and two Bodhisattvas, 9) actual Amitāyus, 10) Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, 11) Bodhisattva Mahāsthāmaprāpta, 12) aspirants being reborn into the Pure land, 13) the images of Amitāyus and two Bodhisattvas in a comprehensive manner, 14) the aspirants of the highest grade, 15) the aspirants of the middle grade, and 16) the aspirants of the lowest grade.

In performing contemplation, a practitioner generally undergoes four stages in its deepening process. Dr. Julian Pas describes the four stages as follows: 1) forming of image (想 *xiang*), 2) inspection (觀察 *guancha*), 3) vision (見 *jian*), and 4) Samādhi (三昧 *sanmei*).[3]*

First at the stage of forming the image, the practitioner takes any one of the sixteen objects and forms its image in one's mind. Secondly, once the image is clearly formed in the mind, one carefully and meticulously inspects the features of the formed image. Thirdly, when this inspection is properly carried out, the vision of the object appears clearly before the practitioner, whether the eyes are open or shut. And as the vision is fully consummated, it leads to Samādhi, whereby the practitioner experiences psychological and spiritual tranquility and resolve.

Oral Recitation

Now, let us look at the other meditative practice, oral recitation. Compared to contemplation, oral recitation is more accessible to the aspirants for it can be carried out by virtually anyone without any discipline, even by those who are spiritually inferior. In fact, the *Contemplation Sutra* does exactly that. Those on the lowest level of the nine grades of birth are instructed one on one by their virtuous teachers to simply recite with sincere mind the name of Buddha Amitāyus. In so doing, they are said to eradicate their karmic retribution of eight billion eons and are assured of birth in the Pure Land.

Examples of the prototype of recitation are also found in earlier pre-Mahāyāna Buddhist scriptures, but they in most cases involved elements of magical nature that warded off imminent dangers. In one of the major early texts, *Mahāvastu*, for example, five hundred merchants in a boat were devoured by a giant fish but were saved when collectively they recited aloud: "We take refuge in the Buddha."

In contrast, the type of recitation found in the *Contemplation Sutra* differs in its nature and application from the earlier *Mahāvastu* type of worldly, self-serving form. Rather, it is related to a genre of sutras that dealt primarily with the practices of recollection (*anusmṛti*, 念) and with the Buddha names (*Buddha-nāma* 佛名). Invariably these sutras closely associated oral recitation with the practice of repentance (*chanhui* 懺悔). Recitation and repentance together led to the elimination of karmic retribution. In some instances, these practices also led to the realization of some levels of Samādhi.

However, in the case of *Contemplation Sutra*, recitation led not necessarily to Samādhi but to the aspirants' sense of confirmation in their eventual birth in the Pure Land. In either case, recitation had the capacity to lead the aspirants to some form of spiritual transformation or deep faith that their karmic retributions have been eliminated and that their birth in the Pure Land was assured. Thus, this extremely accessible form of practice helped to draw and include a much broader range of seekers to the Pure Land Buddhist path.

Legacy and Influence

The practices of contemplation and oral recitation that the *Contemplation Sutra* advocated had an enormous influence on the subsequent development of Pure Land Buddhism in China as well as in the rest of East Asia. Within this context, past scholars have shown that Shandao (613-681 善導), the eminent Pure Land master in Tang China and the 5th among Shinran's lineage Seven Pure Land masters, was a key figure in the successful propagation of Pure Land Buddhism.

While I do not deny Shandao's importance, my research has shown that Jingying Huiyuan (淨影慧遠 523-592) also played a critical role in the development of Pure Land Buddhism in China, a point that is rarely made among modern scholars. This is noteworthy since Huiyuan belonged not to the Pure Land lineage but to the Dilun School (地論宗). He was an exegete, a lecturer of the highest caliber, and an ecclesiastic leader of distinguished prominence within the Buddhist community of his time. When Emperor Wu of Northern Zhou instigated the severe persecution of Buddhism starting in the year 577, Huiyuan exhibited bravery even in the face of penalty of death when he debated and criticized the emperor for his actions.

Huiyuan lived approximately a century earlier than Shandao, but ironically the proponents of the later Japanese Pure Land orthodoxy regarded Huiyuan as the representative of the "masters" (*shoshi* 諸師), who advocated an *incorrec*t understanding of the *Contemplation Sutra*. Despite this evaluation, Huiyuan played a significant role with regard to the *Sutra*. Here I wish to focus on two of his contributions.

In China, from the sixth century to the 13th century, at least forty commentaries were written on the *Contemplation Sutra*. Most of them were compiled prior to the year 800 C.E. Huiyuan's commentary is the *oldest* extant commentary and was followed by those by such luminaries as Tiantai Zhiyi (538-97), Jizang (549-623) and Shandao. More commentaries were also composed in Korea and Japan.

I have argued that Huiyuan's commentary played a pivotal role in helping to bring attention to the *Sutra*, which, by all accounts, was not very well known within the Buddhist community at the time. It was a "minor" text compared to the likes of *Nirvana Sutra* and the *Lotus Sutra.* Huiyuan, thus, helped to bring the *Sutra* out from the back stage closer to the center stage of the Buddhist community.

Huiyuan accomplished this by constructing an acceptable Mahayana doctrinal framework that placed the teachings of this sutra within a wider Buddhist context. Huiyuan's work, then, went on to serve as a basic referent for subsequent commentaries, so that, for example, the commentary by Shandao a century later did not have to explain or

justify its categories and issues, because they had already gained legitimacy with the commentarial tradition that Huiyuan had established.[4]

One such doctrinal category was that of the stages of the cultivation path culminating in the Ten Bhūmis, in which the "nine grades of birth in the Pure Land" were ranked.[5] This ranking of the nine grades of birth captured the imagination and the interest of many commentators through the centuries, who vied to put forth their own version of the ranking. Among them, the commentary by Shandao played a vital role not only for the Chinese but also for the Japanese Pure Land tradition.

Huiyuan and Oral Recitation

As mentioned previously, the *Contemplation Sutra* advocated recitation for those of the lowest of the nine grades of birth. A good teacher tells a person in this group that if he cannot concentrate on the Buddha, he can recite with sincerity the Buddha's name:

> The good teacher then advises him, "If you cannot concentrate on the Buddha then you should say instead, 'Homage to Buddha Amitāyus.' In this way, he sincerely and continuously says, 'Homage to Buddha Amitāyus' (*na-mo-A-mi-tuo-fo*) ten times. Because he calls the Buddha's Name, with each repetition the evil karma that would bind him to birth and death for eighty *koṭi*s of *kalpa*s is extinguished..(*)

It is in regard to this passage that Huiyuan made the second of his two contributions. Here, prior to Shandao's widely acknowledged effort to prioritize oral recitation, Huiyuan had already, a century earlier, clearly recognized it as one of the legitimate methods for gaining birth as follows:

> According to the *Contemplation Sutra*, there are also numerous causes, of which there are roughly four categories. The first cause is birth by cultivating contemplation (修觀 *xiuguan*). … The second cause is birth by cultivating [pure] acts (修業 *xiuye*). … The third cause is birth by cultivation of the mind (修心 *xiuxin*). … The fourth cause is devotion (歸向 *guixiang*), on account of which one is reborn, … As forms of devotion, those who contemplate (念 *nian*), worship (禮 *li)*, praise (歎 *tan*), or <u>recite his (Buddha Amitayus) name</u> (稱其名 *chengqiming*) shall all gain birth. (*Taisho* vol. 37, pp. 183a-b) (underline by present author)

Despite what Huiyuan clearly stated above, the bias of sectarian Shin scholars, is clearly evident. For example, Ōhara Shōjitsu writes:

> In Jinying [Huiyuan's] explanation found in his commentary, he sets forth three kinds of methods for birth in the Pure Land: 1) birth by cultivating contemplation, 2) birth by cultivating [purified] acts and 3) birth by cultivating the mind.

There is no mention at all of the *fourth* cause, in which oral recitation was included. Since Huiyuan clearly states four methods, I cannot help but to feel that Ōhara's omission was

intentional. In my view, he was perpetuating the image of Huiyuan as the representative of the difficult Path of the Sages, as a way of elevating Shandao as the "champion" of the ordinary seekers. But in fact, Huiyuan preceded Shandao in acknowledging oral recitation as one of the methods for gaining birth in the Pure Land.

Shandao's Legacy in East Asia

There is no denying that Shandao was instrumental in promoting oral recitation as the most efficient practice for gaining birth in the Pure Land. It was Shandao who interpreted "ten recollections" (*shinian* 十念) in the 18th Vow of the *Larger Sutra*, not as recollection or contemplation as was the norm up to that time but as "oral recitation or voices" (*shiseng* 十聲).* And it was Shandao who elevated oral recitation as the *main* practice over other practices including contemplation, which he enumerated in his teaching of the Five Correct Practices (五正行).*

Shandao's legacy remained significant in the subsequent centuries of Chinese Buddhism leading up to the present. Since the 10th century on, the Buddhist practice came to be limited to Chan meditation or Pure Land regardless of their doctrinal affiliation. Most monastics carried out Chan practices, consisting mostly of sitting meditation, but some of them also engaged in the Pure Land practices of contemplation and oral recitation. In this instance, oral recitation sometimes served as a preliminary practice prior to entering the deeper levels of meditative concentration.

On the other hand, many lay people engaged in Pure Land practices consisting primarily of oral recitation of the name of Buddha Amitāyus, "Na-mo-A-mi-tuo-fo." This practice can be seen today in Taiwan Buddhism where many lay visitors to the temples are heard orally reciting this sacred phrase. In fact, the popularity of this phrase has become one of the main forms of greeting each other in ordinary daily context as people put their palms together to utter "[Na-mo-]A-mi-tuo-fo."

In turning briefly to Korea, Pure Land practice of oral recitation has had a long history. As a case in point, Wonhyo (617-686), who continues to be revered today as the preeminent Buddhist figure in Korean Buddhist history, made enormous contributions to the propagation of Pure Land practice of oral recitation. As the well-known story of his life shows, Wonhyo left the monastic life on account of having broken the monastic precepts when he fathered a son. He then traveled throughout the country, teaching the people to orally recite the name of Amitāyus for gaining birth in the Pure Land. His propagation effort was enormously successful as a modern historian, Lee Ki-baek, has gone so far as to postulate that eight or nine of every ten Koreans were converted to Buddhism as a result of Wonhyo's effort. (Lee 1984, 83)* Thus, Pure Land practice would end up becoming extremely popular in Korea, not only as a pervasive mode of practice for the lay people but also as vital elements in the practices of many of the monastics, very much similar to the pattern we saw in China. The sounds of oral recitation "Amit'a bul" (Buddha Amitāyus) can be heard today in many of the temples in Korea. (Tanaka 2005, 59-60)*

A similar situation is evident in Vietnam. Oral recitation is a practice also found in contemporary Vietnamese Buddhism. Even though Pure Land Buddhism did not come to be recognized as a doctrinal lineage as in China or as an independent school as in Japan, it nevertheless has enjoyed broad support through the centuries. This has led Cuong Nguyen, a scholar of Vietnamese Buddhism, to make the observation that, "Pure Land is probably the most common form of practice in Vietnamese Buddhism."[6] It is, therefore, not surprising to hear today a resounding melodic reciting of A-di-da Phat (Buddha Amitāyus) by the devotees at Duc Vien Temple in San Jose, California. That the recent immigrants to the U.S. exhibit the oral recitation of the name of Buddha Amitāyus is a testimony to the ongoing popularity of this form of Pure Land practice in Vietnam that harkens back to the *Contemplation Sutra*.[7]

With regard to Japanese Pure Land Buddhism, Shandao's influence on Hōnen (1133-1212) and Shinran (1173-1263) was paramount. As is well known, Hōnen was a prominent monk of the Tendai School. Despite his enormous effort, he failed to find spiritual resolution but within his intense spiritual struggle he came upon a passage from Shandao's commentary to the *Contemplation Sutra*, which read as follows:

> Only repeat the name of Amitabha with all your heart. Whether walking or standing, sitting or lying, never cease the practice of it even for a moment. This is the very work, which unfailingly brings about salvation, for it is in accordance with the Original Vow of that Buddha.*

This was the very answer Honen was searching for, prompting him to leave Mt. Hiei to focus on the Pure Land teachings. And in 1175, Hōnen and his disciples proclaimed themselves as an independent school of Buddhism centered exclusively on the Pure Land teachings and practice of oral recitation. Hōnen struck a responsive chord, especially among the masses that had been relatively ignored by the older schools. Hōnen's success in gaining new followers made the older Buddhist schools, including Tendai, nervous as they petitioned the civil authorities to restrict the new movement.

One of Hōnen's disciples, Shinran, continued the legacy of oral recitative *nembutsu* but placed greater emphasis than his teacher on the transformative experience in this life of Shinjin realization, which assured one's birth in the Pure Land immediately upon death. However, it is vital to remember that this focus on Shinjin has in no way eliminated oral recitation. For Shinran and Shin Buddhists through the centuries, oral recitation has continued to be the primary form of religious *act,* individually in privacy or collectively in ritual settings. Further, it is intimately related to Shinjin, since oral recitation also serves as an expression of gratitude that accompanies the realization of Shinjin.

"Shin Nembutsu Meditation" in Contemporary Context

In this final section, I wish to shift gears by focusing on a description of my efforts, particularly in North America, to present what I am calling "Shin Nembutsu Meditation" based on the *Contemplation Sutra*. My reason for doing this is the need for Shin Buddhism

in the contemporary religious environment to offer some form of "oral and bodily action" as upāya or skillful means that involves meditation.

In reality, my proposal constitutes one of many similar attempts by Pure Land Buddhists outside Japan to be engaged in various forms of meditative practices. In fact, Enrique Galvan-Alvarez in England recently reported on such forms of Pure Land meditation in the United States, Brazil and Argentina.[8]

The first half of my Shin Nembutsu Meditation calls for contemplation. One is asked to sit in aSeiza position in a chair. Seiza simply means, "quiet sitting." Our hands can rest on our laps or held with left hand over the right hand with thumbs touching each other in the traditional meditative style. Your eyes can be half-opened or be fully closed. As for our breath, we breathe naturally through our nose as is done in the most basic style of Buddhist meditation, such as mindfulness meditation.

In our contemplation, we visualize "objects" which belong to what I am calling the "four nurturing dimensions of our lives," which are, 1) the physical, 2) the mental, 3) the social and 4) the spiritual.

The objects of contemplation in the physical realm, the first of the four, include, for example, the air that we breathe, the food that we partake, the water that we drink and wash with, the medication that keeps us healthy, the eye-glasses that allow us to see better, and the sunlight that generates energy that makes our very physical existence possible. They nurture and sustain the physical dimension of our existence.

The objects of contemplation in the mental dimension include, for example, the unspoken love of our family, the unflinching support of true friends, the nurturing guidance of our teachers, the assurance of belonging as a member of a community, and the enthralling sense of the breathtaking beauty of nature.

The objects of contemplation in the social arena include, for example, the hospitals that are ready to take us in when we become sick, public schools that educate the young, the fire stations manned by firefighters 24 hours a day, and the social security or pension system that provides basic income for the retirees and those in need.

The fourth nurturing dimension, the spiritual, differs in nature from the former three, for the object is none other than Amida. In other words, Amida itself is not tangible or accessible in the same manner. Nevertheless, we can spiritually "be in touch" with Amida through our deeply-felt sense of being nurtured and sustained by the life-giving compassionate workings that we felt through our contemplation of the three dimensions of the physical, the mental and the social. This deepened realization of being embraced, sustained and nurtured fosters within us a richer awareness of support and gratitude.

We, then, take our deeply felt appreciation of being embraced and direct it to Amida by reciting "Namo Amida Butsu" or "Namanda" in a rhythm, with which we feel most comfortable. We can recite quietly or loudly by oneself or in a group. We do so because we see Amida as the compassionate spiritual working, which we appreciate as the *source* as well as the life-giving force that *infuses* the three dimensions.

After reciting for however long we feel comfortable, we then recall and contemplate on the meaning of the 18th Vow in the *Larger Sutra*. We do so in order to connect our cultivation of contemplation and recitation with the ultimate goal of all Buddhists, that of attaining supreme enlightenment or becoming a Buddha. The 18th Vows states:

> If when I attain Buddhahood, the sentient beings of the ten quarters, with sincere mind entrusting themselves, aspiring to be born in my land and saying my Name perhaps even ten times, should not be born there, may I not attain the supreme enlightenment. …[9]

We continue to recite the Name as we contemplate deeper on the meaning of this Vow. The Vow should not be understood merely intellectually but be appreciated *existentially* as words of truth that was meant just for person such as I. This is in the spirit of Shinran, who uttered:

> When I ponder on the compassionate vow of Amida, established through five kalpas of profound thought, it was for myself, Shinran, alone. (*Tannisho*)[10]

As we recite the Nembutsu we can visualize Amida in ways that one best feels comfortable with. Therefore, it can take a few different forms: 1) as an anthropomorphic Amida as in the statues and pictures that make up the main object of reverence in the Shin Buddhist altars, 2) the Chinese characters that make up "Na-mo-A-mi-da-Butsu" (南無阿彌陀佛), 3) or as any of the deeply-felt objects from the three nurturing dimensions of the physical, the mental and the social. However we envision Amida, we are encouraged to experience with our total being the meaning of Amida's Vow in order to be open to the endowed realization of Shinjin in this life. This, then, increases inner peace and happiness for not only ourselves but also for others as we work in the spirit of "benefitting oneself and benefitting others" (自利利他).

In Closing

I believe that the current worldwide interest in meditative practice constitutes the dominant form of skillful means of this century. So, from the standpoint of presenting Shin Buddhism in particular and Pure Land Buddhism in general, we should take the contemporary religious climate seriously and address it earnestly. My talk today was an attempt to do so.

I hope I have succeeded in showing that Zen and Theravada traditions with their *zazen* and mindfulness do not have monopoly on Buddhist meditation. As was discussed in my talk, the Pure Land tradition has had a vibrant meditative tradition throughout its history in China, Vietnam, Korea and Japan, aided by the enormous contributions made by the likes of Huiyuan and Shandao.

Although Shinran relegated the *Contemplation Sutra* to a lesser status in deference to the *Larger Sutra*, the *Contemplation Sutra* should remind us of the energetic meditative dimension in Pure Land Buddhism. After all, Shinran himself practiced a form of contemplation for up to 20 years on Mt. Hiei as Tendai monk and carried out oral recitation for over 80 years of life.

It is within this legacy that I propose the Shin Nembutsu Meditation comprised of contemplation and oral recitation. It is certainly not meant to be *mandatory* for all Shin Buddhists but constitutes one of many skillful means for those who seek a meditative approach to Shin Buddhism. This does not in anyway alter the basic Shin doctrinal structure centered on Shinjin realization, rooted in the Other Power that is Amida.

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[1] The other usual English renderings of *guan* in the title of this sutra are *Visuualization* and *Meditation,* but I have elected go with *Contemplation*.

[2] The Ten Good Deeds alluded to above are refraining from 1) killing, 2) stealing, 3) committing sexual misconduct, 4) telling lies, 5) being duplicitous, 6) slandering, 7) equivocating, 8) being covetous, 9) being hateful, and 10) holding wrong views.

[3] Julian Pas, "The *Kuan-wu-liang-shou Fo-ching*: Its Origin and Literary Criticism," in Leslie Kawamura and Keith Scott, *Buddhist Thought and Asian Civilization* (Dharma Publishing, 1977): 174.

[4] Kenneth K. Tanaka, The Dawn of Chinese Pure Land Buddhist Doctrine (The State Univ. of New York Press, 1990), pp. 108-112.

[5] In the *Contemplation Sutra*, the nine grades of birth are distinguished based on the quality of practice and the level of attainment. The highest is the "highest level of the highest grade of birth," and the lowest being the "lowest level of the lowest grade." Huiyuan proceeded to rank these nine grades within the broader well-known Buddhist doctrinal framework, rendering the highest level of the highest grade as being equal to the Fourth Bhūmi Stage. On the other hand, the middle level of the middle grade was seen to be equal to the Outer Pṛthagjanas (ordinary beings), while the lowest level of the lowest grade was deemed to be "those who have begun to train in the Mahāyāna path."

[6] Cuong Nguyen, *Zen in Medieval Vietnam* (Univ. of Hawaii Press, 1997), p. 359.

[7] Kenneth K. Tanaka, *Pure Land Buddhism: Historical Development and Contemporary Manifestation* (Dharmaram College, 2005), pp. 72-75.

[8] A paper presented at the Conference of the European Branch of the International Association of Shin Buddhist Studies held August, 2018 entitled , "A Practice That is not Our Practice: Ritual Experimentation in American Jodo Shinsnhu."

[9] Dennis Hirota et al. *The Collected Works of Shinran* (Jodo Shinshu Hongwanji-ha, 1997), p. 80. This quote is found in Shinran's *magnum opus*, *The Teachings, Practice, Shinjin and Realization*.

[10] Taitetsu Unno, trans. *Tannisho: A Shin Buddhist Classic* (Buddhist Study Center Press, 1984), p. 35