

Meditation and Honen's Pure Land Buddhism

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Abstract

This presentation aims to clarify the role of meditation in Honen's Pure Land Buddhism. Although Buddhist meditation can be interpreted in various ways, I will focus on contemplation and observation (*shikan* 止観).

Honen Shonin (法然上人 1133-1212) was undoubtedly well acquainted with the four types of *samādhi* (*shishu zammai* 四種三昧) and in visualizing Buddha (*kansō nenbutsu* 観想念仏). However, he established Jodo Shu from his awareness that one cannot achieve the three disciplines (*sangaku* 三学). Therefore, Honen is considered to have avoided practicing meditation aimed at attaining enlightenment in this secular world.

Nevertheless, miscellaneous practices (*zōgyō* 雑行) other than the five correct practices (*goshu shōgyō* 五種正行) are recognized as a different kind of auxiliary karma (*irui no jogō* 異類の助業) in the *Passages on the Selection of the Nenbutsu in the Original Vow* (*Senchaku hongan nenbutsu shū* 選択本願念仏集). If meditation is included in these miscellaneous practices, Honen apparently concluded that meditation was a different kind of auxiliary karma.

While the nenbutsu has a meditative element, Honen's nenbutsu is non-contemplative and recitative (*mukan shōmyō* 無観称名). We should note that this is the practice specified in the Eighteenth Original Vow (*dai jūhachi gan* 第十八願).

1. Introduction

Buddhist meditation can be interpreted in various ways. There would be no objection to the inclusion of *śamatha* (奢摩他) and *vipaśyanā* (毘婆舍那). *Śamatha* is meditation aimed at achieving inner calm. *Śamatha* is translated as *zhi* (止) in Chinese and means contemplation. *Vipaśyanā*, on the other hand, is meditation aimed at realization of wisdom. *Vipaśyanā* is

translated as *guan* (觀) in Chinese and defined as observation. *Śamatha* and *vipaśyanā* can be combined, which is often referred to as *zhiguan* (止觀) in Chinese commentaries on the Buddhist sutras.¹

Honen Shonin (法然上人 1133-1212) was a monk who played an active role in Japanese Buddhism from the late Heian period to the early Kamakura period and established Jodo Shu in 1175. Contemplation and observation (Ch. *zhiguan*, *shikan* 止觀) had already taken root in Japanese Buddhism by his time, yet Honen emphasized the single-minded recitation of the nenbutsu (*senju nenbutsu* 專修念佛).

So, what was the role of meditation in Honen's Pure Land Buddhism? In this presentation, I would like to elucidate a part of the answer by considering Honen's experiences with *shikan* and his thoughts about that practice.

2. Inability to Achieve the Three Disciplines

Honen was well acquainted with *shikan* and the practices based on it. Daigoji Temple's *Biography of Honen* (*Honen Shonin denki* 法然上人伝記) says the following about Honen's activities:

Honen climbed up the mountain when he was a child. He understood the sixty volumes deeply by the age of seventeen and secluded himself from society at the age of eighteen. The purpose of the seclusion was to renounce the desire for fame and greed, and to learn Buddhist teachings. For approximately forty years, he studied Tendai Shu and became well acquainted with its doctrines.²

This passage indicates that, on Mt. Hiei (比叡山), Honen studied sixty volumes of text, which would have included the *Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra* (*Hokke gengi* 法華玄義), *Phrases on the Lotus Sutra* (*Hokke mongu* 法華文句), and *Great Contemplation and Observation* (*Maka shikan* 摩訶止觀).³ He must have learned about *shikan* from reading the *Great Contemplation and Observation*, and it is speculated that he probably practiced the

four types of *samādhi* (*shishu zammai* 四種三昧) described in the same text.

Furthermore, Honen seems to have intensively studied Genshin's (源信 942-1017) *Collection on the Essentials for Birth* (*Ōjōyōshū* 往生要集) after he began living at Kurodani (黒谷). Several commentaries on the *Collection on the Essentials for Birth* said to be the work of Honen are extant; one such commentary describes visualizing Buddha (*kansō nenbutsu* 觀想念仏) thus:

There are three practices for visualizing Buddha. The first practice is individually observing each mark on Buddha's body (*bessōkan* 別相觀). The second practice is collectively observing all the marks on Buddha's body (*sōsōkan* 総相觀). The third practice is observing the white curl between his eyebrows and his radiant light (*zōryakukan* 雜略觀). Furthermore, there are two acts within the first practice. First, there is observing the flower seat. Then, there is distinctly observing the marks on Buddha's body. This means observing these marks from the top of his head to the bottom of his foot or in reverse order. This can be described in a broad sense or in a narrow sense. Moreover, there are two acts within the second practice. First, there is observing the marks on Buddha's body and his radiant light through the *Visualization of Immeasurable Life Sutra* (*Kan muryōjyū kyō* 觀無量壽經). Then, there is observing three bodies (*sanjin* 三身) in a single essence through these marks. In addition, there are two acts within the third practice. First, there is observing the white curl between his eyebrows (*byakugōkan* 白毫觀). Then, there is observing Birth in the Pure Land (*ōjōkan* 往生觀). Additionally, there is extremely simple observation (*gokuryakukan* 極略觀). It is simply observing the white curl between his eyebrows. As mentioned above, the sutras expound on these passages of visualization in detail.⁴

In addition, Honen said that he once attempted to observe Buddha's body and the Buddha land, which demonstrates that he practiced visualizing Buddha in a manner similar to what is

written in the *Collection on the Essentials for Birth*.⁵ Clearly, he studied *shikan* practices in depth. However, he gradually began to ignore the four types of *samādhi* and Buddha visualization. Honen describes the three disciplines (*sangaku* 三学) as follows:

When I was eager to get rid of my sufferings, I believed in various teachings and carried out practices. First, Buddhist teachings are vast, but they are ultimately within the range of the three disciplines: *śīla* (戒), *samādhi* (定), and *prajñā* (慧). In other words, there are the three disciplines of Hīnayāna, the three disciplines of Mahāyāna, the three disciplines of exoteric Buddhism (*kengyō* 顯教), and the three disciplines of esoteric Buddhism (*mikkyō* 密教). However, I did not keep even a precept, did not reach *dhyāna* (禪定), and did not have the wisdom to remove affliction. A monk who strictly keeps the precepts states the following: If we do not keep the precepts properly, we will never attain *samādhi*. In addition, the mind of sentient beings is easily changed by objects. It is like a monkey. It is very easy to distract and move, and it is difficult to keep calm. How should I gain wisdom? If I do not have the sword of wisdom, the ties of affliction that are the root of evil karma (*akugō* 惡業) will not be severed. If I do not sever the ties of affliction that are the root of evil karma, I will not be able to emancipate my body, which is bound to the world of life and death. This condition is very tragic. What should I do in this situation? Clearly, I cannot achieve the three disciplines: *śīla*, *samādhi*, and *prajñā*. Is there an ideal path other than the three disciplines? I asked a great many wise people whether there was a practice suitable for me and inquired of many scholars, but none could teach me or show me the path.⁶

Achieving the three disciplines was considered essential for enlightenment. Therefore, Honen desperately strove to achieve them while keeping the precepts and practicing *shikan*, which is equivalent to *samādhi* and *prajñā*. Nevertheless, the harder he tried, the more he felt unable to achieve them. In these circumstances, he encountered the writings of Shandao (善導

631-681) and the teachings on nenbutsu as specified in the Original Vow (*hongan* 本願). Honen abandoned the practices of *shikan* and the hope of enhancing concentration after he realized that he could not achieve the three disciplines. In other words, Honen did not practice meditation aimed at attaining enlightenment. We can infer from Honen's thoughts that he maintained this attitude until his death.

3. A Different Kind of Auxiliary Karma

After Honen realized that he could not achieve the three disciplines, he devoted himself to the nenbutsu specified in the Original Vow. However, a problem arose over the relationship between nenbutsu and all other practices, leading Honen to lay out the concept of auxiliary karma (*jogō* 助業).

Auxiliary karma is based on the system of practice found in Shandao's *Commentary on the Visualization of Immeasurable Life Sutra* (*Kan muryojyu kyō sho* 觀無量壽經疏). Here, Shandao defined practices whose purpose was to attain Birth in the Pure Land as correct practices (*shōgyō* 正行), whereas all others were considered miscellaneous practices (*zōgyō* 雜行). Moreover, he stated that correct practices specified in the Original Vow, such as nenbutsu, were rightly established karma (*shōjōgyō* 正定業), whereas correct practices not specified in the Original Vow were auxiliary karma.⁷

Honen accepted these explanations. The *Passages on the Selection of the Nenbutsu in the Original Vow* (*Senchaku hongan nenbutsu shū* 選択本願念仏集), which is Honen's major work, describes auxiliary karma as follows:

There are two meanings to the concept that the aforementioned practices other than nenbutsu are expounded to encourage nenbutsu. The first is that nenbutsu is encouraged by the same kinds of good acts (*dōrui no zengon* 同類の善根). The second is that nenbutsu is encouraged by the different kinds of good acts (*irui no zengon* 異類の善根). The first is that nenbutsu is encouraged by the five kinds of auxiliary practices (*jogyō* 助行) in Shandao's *Commentary on the Visualization of*

Immeasurable Life Sutra. The details are described in the above correct practices and miscellaneous practices. . . . The next implication is that the manifold practices are explained for the sake of auxiliary karma and rightly established karma. In other words, the auxiliary karma of various acts is taught to encourage rightly established karma, namely recitation nenbutsu (*shōmyō nenbutsu* 称名念佛).⁸

Because there is a transition in Honen's understanding of auxiliary karma, this definition is not uniform.⁹ Nevertheless, in the first part of the passage, Honen mentions the same and different kinds of good acts, whereas in the latter half, these become the auxiliary karma of various acts, that is, the same and different kinds of auxiliary karma. Clearly, then, the same kind of auxiliary karma (*dōrui no jogō* 同類の助業) refers to the five kinds of auxiliary practices, and the different kind of auxiliary karma (*irui no jogō* 異類の助業) refers to miscellaneous practices. In other words, Honen regarded reciting Buddha's name as rightly established karma, the correct practices other than rightly established karma as the same kind of auxiliary karma, and the miscellaneous practices as different kinds of auxiliary karma.

So, into which category did Honen classify *shikan*? He wrote as follows:

Those who have a different view are those who study and practice the eight schools, such as Tendai Shu and Hosso Shu. Those who have a different practice are all those who chant mantras, practice *shikan*, and so on. Undoubtedly, these are the views and practices of the Gateway of the Holy Path (*shōdō mon* 聖道門). Because they are distinguished from the views and practices of the Gateway of the Pure Land (*jōdo mon* 浄土門), they are called different views and practices.¹⁰

The practice of the Gateway of the Holy Path includes miscellaneous practices and different kinds of auxiliary karma. Therefore, if *shikan* is a practice of the Gateway of the Holy Path, then Honen classifies it as a different kind of auxiliary karma. This indicates that so-called meditation was considered a different kind of auxiliary karma in Honen's Pure Land

Buddhism.

4. Non-Contemplation and Recitation

As I discussed in the previous section, Honen regarded *shikan* as a different kind of auxiliary karma to encourage reciting the Buddha's name. However, the following passage illustrates that the recitation nenbutsu has its origins in observing Amida Buddha and the Pure Land (*kanzatsu mon* 觀察門) described in Vasubandhu's (世親 5th century) *Treatise on Birth in the Pure Land* (*Ōjō ron* 往生論):

First, I consider the chapter of rightly practicing nenbutsu (*shōju nenbutsu mon* 正修念仏門). It mentions five acts (*gonen mon* 五念門). The first is offering prostrations before Amida Buddha (*raihai mon* 礼拝門), the second is praising Amida Buddha (*sandam mon* 讚歎門), the third is desiring Birth in the Pure Land (*sagam mon* 作願門), the fourth is observing Amida Buddha and the Pure Land, and the fifth is dedicating the merit thus acquired to all beings (*ekō mon* 廻向門). Of these acts, only observing Amida Buddha and the Pure Land is important. In addition, although the other acts, such as offering prostrations before Amida Buddha and so on, are explained, observing Amida Buddha and the Pure Land is clearly admitted to be the nenbutsu, and so observing Amida Buddha and the Pure Land is important. In observing Amida Buddha and the Pure Land, there are two kinds of nenbutsu: visualizing the Buddha and reciting the Buddha's name.¹¹

This passage makes it clear that reciting the Buddha's name contains many elements of observation. In addition, since observing Amida Buddha and the Pure Land is a practice based on *shikan*, it should be understood, then, that reciting Buddha's name has *shikan* at its foundation.

Nevertheless, a disciple referred to Honen's nenbutsu as non-contemplative, recitative (*mukan shōmyō* 無觀称名) nenbutsu and assessed it as dissimilar to *shikan*.¹²

Although reciting Buddha's name can be considered a kind of *shikan* from a superficial standpoint, Honen's perception was very different.

So, how did Honen treat the elements of *shikan* that mixed with reciting Buddha's name and how did he discriminate between them? The following passage helps to answer this question:

Honen also spoke to the monks who remained after the priest left: "All living things born in this secular world have a distracted mind. Just as, for example, all living things born into the human realm have eyes and a nose. It is not necessary to remove distraction from the mind and only then aspire to be born in the Pure Land, because even people who are distracted can surely attain Birth in the Pure Land. The Original Vow is superior. It is only natural that this priest asked how he should deal with the distracted mind while reciting Buddha's name."¹³

According to the passage, Honen realized that it was not necessary that reciting the Buddha's name be accompanied by *dhyāna*, which is the aim of *shikan*. In other words, Honen believed that solo recitation was the only practice included in the Original Vow of Amida Buddha, and hence, there was no need to consider the elements of *shikan*.

Honen distinguished the recitation *nenbutsu* specified in the Original Vow and the *shikan* not specified in the Original Vow thus:

The recitation of Buddha's name is indeed a superior practice for Birth in the Pure Land. I can claim this because reciting Buddha's name is the practice specified in the Original Vow of Amida Buddha. Other practices are the venerable practices of mantra and *shikan*, but they are not specified in the Original Vow of Amida Buddha.¹⁴

In this way, Honen put reciting Buddha's name at the center of the Buddhist stage. Therefore,

we can conclude that Honen's Pure Land Buddhism did not advocate the need for deeply pursuing elements of meditation.

Incidentally, as reciting Buddha's name includes elements of *shikan*, we may expect that sentient beings who practice recitation sometimes reach states similar to those obtained through *shikan* or meditation; still, such phenomena are only secondary and can arise even without pursuing *samādhi*. The reason they are considered secondary is because *samādhi* is not specified as a requirement for salvation in the Amida Buddha's Vow.

5. Conclusion

In this presentation, I have considered the role of meditation in Honen's Pure Land Buddhism. Honen clearly kept his distance from practices of meditation aimed at enlightenment in the secular world. Based on the Amida Buddha's Vow, the *nenbutsu*, the focus of which is reciting the Amida Buddha's name, is advocated as a superior practice for Birth in the Pure Land. He understood that reaching the state of *dhyāna* or *samādhi* had nothing to do with the confirmation of Birth in the Pure Land.

The relationship between meditation and Honen's Pure Land Buddhism is an important issue that needs to be considered periodically. How is the unique recitation, which is expressed as the *nenbutsu* selected by the Buddhas and specified in the Original Vow (*senchaku hongan nenbutsu* 選択本願念仏), understood in relation to meditation? This question holds infinite possibilities.

Notes

- ¹ Minowa (2008).
- ² *SHZ* 435.
- ³ Nakanishi (2000, 685).
- ⁴ *SHZ* 5.
- ⁵ *SHZ* 466.
- ⁶ *SHZ* 459-460.
- ⁷ *JZ* vol.2, 58b.
- ⁸ *SHZ* 323-324.
- ⁹ Adachi (1991).
- ¹⁰ *SHZ* 581.
- ¹¹ *SHZ* 5.
- ¹² *HDZ* 994.
- ¹³ *SHZ* 693.
- ¹⁴ *SHZ* 533.

Abbreviations

- HDZ* *Honen Shonin den zenshū* 法然上人伝全集. Ed. Ikawa Jōkei 井川定慶. Osaka: Honen Shonin den zenshū kankōkai, 1952.
- SHZ* *Shōwa shinshū Honen Shonin zenshū* 昭和新修法然上人全集. Ed. Ishii Kyōdō 石井教道. Kyoto: Heirakuji Shoten, 1955.
- JZ* *Jodo Shu zensho* 浄土宗全書. Tokyo: Sankibō Busshorin, 1970-1972.

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