

“Nembutsu as the Ultimate Form of Meditation”

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Introduction:

There are many forms of meditation among various physical, mental, and spiritual activities in the world. Perhaps the most popular form of meditation in Buddhism is the sitting meditation (zazen). Zen Buddhists also carry out the walking meditation called *kin-hin* 経行, and practitioners of Yoga employ different bodily movements as inseparable activities from their mental training. The purpose of any kind of meditation seems to be to achieve a certain degree of mental or spiritual concentration based on the control of the body.

This paper is going to propose that the nembutsu of reciting the Name of Amida Buddha 称名念佛 is a form of meditation that is free from any bodily restrictions and that as the practice provided by the Buddha, it is the ultimate form of meditation that assures us of meeting the Buddha and attaining birth in the Buddha’s world.

1. Various Levels of Meditation

First of all, I would like to define the word “meditation.” According to *Oxford Dictionary of English* (Second Edition, Revised), to meditate means “to focus one’s mind for a period of time, in silence or with the aid of chanting, for religious or spiritual purposes or as a method of relaxation.” The primary purpose of meditation is to focus one’s mind—on the Buddha in the Buddhist circumstances. The definition of “meditation” in the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (5th Edition) is, “the practice of emptying your mind of thoughts and feelings, in order to relax completely or for religious reasons.” There are two similar English words expressing the mind quieting activity: contemplation and meditation. Contemplation is said to indicate concentrating one’s mind on a certain religious symbol, and meditation is said to mean a calm and stable state of mind. Maybe “focusing one’s mind” indicates contemplation and “emptying your mind of thoughts and feelings” indicates meditation.

With this preliminary knowledge about meditation and contemplation, we will proceed to consider various levels of meditation and contemplation based on Buddhist texts. For our convenience, we will mainly use the word “meditation” in the following discussion.

Historically, meditation has been used to deepen one’s understanding of religious truth. Śākyamuni Buddha is said to have gone through a great number of ascetic practices for seven years before he decided to abandon them. They were intended to purify his soul by trying to weaken the bodily passions that nested within him. At age 35, he finally realized that those practices of extreme self-mortification would only debase his personality and strengthen his attachment to life and decided to terminate them. Then he resolved to sit with his legs crossed under the bodhi tree “until he attained perfect enlightenment.” This level of meditation can be called the meditation of seeking.

The contents of his inner experience during his meditation are described in the story of his struggle with Demon Pāpīyas. As Śākyamuni was engaged in deep meditation, he was approached by the demon, who attempted to disrupt his concentration in various ways. First the demon brought his three young, beautiful daughters to have them seduce him, then threw a whirlwind, swords and spears, hot ashes, mud, pitch darkness, etc. at him, and then hurled a big boulder at him, but those hostile attempts all failed to cause any injury to him. After that, Pāpīyas offered to make him the ruler of the entire world in exchange for Śākyamuni’s giving up his pursuit of enlightenment, but all these attempts failed to cripple his determination. At the end, the goddess of the great earth appeared and attested the world surpassing virtue Śākyamuni had accumulated in his past lives. When Pāpīyas disappeared in defeat, Śākyamuni’s enlightenment was final. This is not just a fairy tale, but tells us the process of his realization. Those temptations and threats by the demon symbolize the clinging to carnal pleasure, wealth, power, and his own life that had been hidden within Śākyamuni. He was able to see the true nature of blind passions during the meditation and by rejecting them he attained true enlightenment.

Thus, this story shows that meditation is not just a physical and mental exercise, but a process of deepening one’s inner awareness and discovering the truth and reality

about life. Even after his enlightenment, Śākyamuni Buddha is said to have encountered Demon Pāpīyas (also called Māra, the essence of death) in different occasions, in which the demon challenged the Buddha in various ways and the Buddha repulsed him every time. Those episodes reveal that the Buddha continued to deepen his realization throughout his life. After all, clinging to a certain level of enlightenment brings about staleness and the old enlightenment eventually loses luster. The Buddha's last encounter with the demon and his final victory over all blind passions takes place three months before the Buddha's death, in which the demon tries to allure the Buddha into the pleasure of death. The Buddha resolutely declares that the enlightened one decides the time of entering *nirvāṇa* for himself and that his *nirvāṇa* will take place three months from then¹. Probably this story conveys to us that fatigued by old age and frailty, the Buddha was being allured by the beckoning of death. His rejection of death and determining the time of his *nirvāṇa* marked his final victory over blind passions and his attainment of *parinirvāṇa*.

These stories tell us the true nature of meditation; under the calm posture of the meditator, various blind passions that are normally hidden within him reveal themselves and make him realize the reality of himself, enabling him to overcome those desires and attain a higher spiritual stage. This level of meditation may be called meditation of non-seeking. The meditator only calms his mind and by dealing with whatever appears in front of him, he attains a higher level of realization.

Another level of meditation takes the form of communication between persons of deep spiritual attainment, or Buddhas. In the beginning part of the *Larger Sutra*, there is a verse in praise of the majestic figure of Śākyamuni Buddha (發起序) :

Today, the World-honored One abides in the most rare and wondrous Dharma.

Today, the World Hero abides where all Buddhas abide.

Today, the World's Eye abides in the activity of guide and teacher.

Today, the Preeminent One of the World abides in supreme enlightenment.

Today, the Heaven-honored One puts into practice the virtue of all the Tathāgatas.

The Buddhas of the past, future, and present all think on one another. Is it not also

¹ This story of Śākyamuni's meeting Pāpīyas is based on the *Mahāparinibbāna-Suttānta*.

the case that you, the present Buddha, think on all the other Buddhas now?² “The Buddhas of the past, future and present all think on one another” means that in the world of enlightenment, the barriers of space and time vanish and through meditation, they can communicate as if they were next to each other. When Shinran says, “As I deeply consider the Vow which Amida established after a five-kalpa-long contemplation, it was solely for myself Shinran alone” (*Tannishō*, Postscript), he is also in communication with Amida Buddha. On this level, the meditator perhaps does not need to take the set form of meditation, but every aspect of his life is meditation.

Thus, I have discussed four levels of meditation: first, the meditation for calming one’s mind and relaxing; second, the meditation of seeking some spiritual objective; third, the meditation of non-seeking; and fourth, the meditation of communication in the spiritual realm.

2. Nembutsu as a Form of Meditation

While “nembutsu” is the main and only practice in Jōdo Shinshū, many people, including Jodo Shinshu followers, tend to think that nembutsu and meditation are two different things. I do not deny the calming effect of the sitting meditation, but we should not forget that nembutsu is the practice that Amida Buddha has selected for all sentient beings. Earlier, I referred to the definitions of “meditation” in two dictionaries that meditation is characterized by “focusing one’s mind” and “emptying one’s mind of thoughts and feelings.” Based on these definitions, we will determine that the nembutsu is a form of meditation.

“Nembutsu” means “thinking on the Buddha 憶念” and the dominant form of nembutsu in early China and Japan was visualizing of and contemplating on the figures of Amida Buddha and Bodhisattvas Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta as well as various aspects of the Pure Land 觀想念仏. This type of nembutsu was closer to the original form of Buddhist meditation, so it was widely practiced, especially among monks who devoted their lives to the Buddhist training. The *Contemplation Sutra* gives a detailed account of those contemplative practices 定善.

² The Three Pure Land Sutras, Vol. II, p. 11. Jodo Shinshu Hongwanji-ha, 2009.

Another form of nembutsu is verbal nembutsu 口称念仏, in which the practitioner recites the Name of Amida Buddha 称名念仏. In a nutshell, saying *Namu Amida Butsu* with joy is simultaneously thinking on the Buddha with one's mind focused on the Buddha. However, in the early history of Pure Land Buddhism, it was not highly appreciated, as Nāgārjuna 龍樹 said, "It is a sign of weak mind and inferior ability to ask if there is an easy way to quickly attain the stage of *avaivartika* (non-retrogression),³" and yet he recommends to such "weak-minded people" the practice of reciting the names of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, especially of Amida Buddha with full trust in them. However, there is no doubt that Nāgārjuna revealed the path of verbal nembutsu as a replacement for more established meditative practices in seeking Buddhahood.

The *Contemplation Sutra* spares proportionately a small space for the practice of reciting the Name of Amida Buddha. It classifies ordinary persons incapable of pursuing the contemplative practices into nine ranks and relegates the verbal nembutsu to the lowest and most evil practitioners for attaining birth in the Pure Land. Obviously, this sutra was established when contemplative nembutsu was considered as superior to verbal nembutsu. In fact, before the advent of Shan-tao 善導 (613-681), a dominant idea about verbal nembutsu was that it would take many births and deaths to attain birth in the Pure Land through verbal nembutsu, and that although the *Contemplation Sutra* talks about an extremely evil person attaining birth in the Pure Land upon reciting Amida's Name ten times at the last moment of his life, it was to prevent lazy practitioners from getting slack in the pursuit of birth in the Pure Land.

3. Shan-tao's Establishment of Verbal Nembutsu as the Path to Birth in the Pure Land

It was Shan-tao of the early T'ang dynasty who asserted that in the age of the Last-day Dharma, the sentient beings of the age of the Last-day Dharma could attain birth in the Pure Land only through reciting Amida's Name. Referring to the sentence at the end of the *Contemplation Sutra*, "Hold to the Name; to hold to the Name means to

³ *Commentary on the Ten Bodhisattva Stages (Daśabhūmikavibhāṣāśāstra 十住毘婆沙論)*, 『浄土真宗聖典 (七祖註釈篇)』 p. 5,

hold to the name of the Buddha of Immeasurable Life,” Shan-tao says, “Although the sutra expounds the benefits of the meditative and non-meditative good all the way from the beginning [almost to the end], considering the intent of the Primal Vow, the Buddha means to have sentient beings to solely and exclusively recite Amida’s Name.” In this way, Shan-tao elevated verbal nembutsu to the position superior to all other practices. In response to the question why Shan-tao recommended reciting the Name to his followers instead of contemplative meditation, he said,

Sentient beings are burdened with hindrances, and while the objects of observation are exquisite and fine, their minds are crude and coarse. Since their minds are always restless and scattered, it is hard to imagine that they can achieve what they aspire to. That is why the Great Sage (Śākyamuni Buddha) had pity on them and advised them to exclusively recite the Name”

(Hymns of Birth in the Pure Land 往生礼讚).

Shan-tao means to say that because the minds of the sentient beings are always scattered, the Buddha provided them with verbal nembutsu so that they could focus their minds on the Buddha. This is exactly what meditation is. Even one thought-moment of thinking on the Buddha is enough for them to attain close and inseparable connection with the Buddha. In this way, Shan-tao gave verbal nembutsu the same status as deep meditation leading to Buddhahood.

Shan-tao clearly recognized that through verbal nembutsu, one can attain right-mindedness 正念. He said:

Those who hold to the nembutsu every moment through the end of their lives attain birth in the Pure Land at the rate of ten out of ten nembutsu practitioners and a hundred out of a hundred. Why? Not obstructed by external influences, they attain right-mindedness 正念 because they comply with Amida Buddha’s Primal Vow, they accord with Śākyamuni Buddha’s teachings, and they obey the Buddha’s instructions. *(Hymns of Birth in the Pure Land 往生礼讚)*

Right-mindedness 正念 is the seventh of the Eightfold Noble Path 八正道, just a step before the final stage called right-settlement 正定. If the stage of right-settlement indicates the practitioner’s attainment of non-duality with the Buddha, or enlightenment,

right-mindedness is a condition of deep meditation leading to enlightenment.

What is important is that Shan-tao has inseparably connected verbal nembutsu with shinjin in the Buddha and the Buddha's teaching. The Name is the most condensed form of Amida's virtue, and the Buddha cannot help having those who say the Name, entrusting themselves to Amida's Primal Vow, attain birth in his Pure Land. This is the path leading to Buddhahood that began with Amida's establishment of the forty-eight vows and attainment of Buddhahood. It is closely related to Amida's reason of existence.

4. Hōnen's Movement of the Exclusive Practice of Nembutsu 専修念仏

Hōnen 法然 (1133-1212) was most strongly touched by Shan-tao's teaching of the exclusive practice of the nembutsu 専修念仏. He had studied and practiced Tendai 天台 Buddhism on Mt. Hiei until he was 43 years old. He was tormented by his inability to observe even a single precept 戒, perform deep meditation 定, and acquire Buddha-wisdom 慧. One night as he opened Shan-tao's Commentary on the *Contemplation Sutra*, he ran into the following passage and determined to take refuge in the exclusive practice of the nembutsu: "Single-mindedly and exclusively recite the Name of Amida Buddha. Whether you are walking, staying still, sitting, or lying down, regardless of the length of time, never abandoning it at any moment is called the truly settling act, for it complies with that Primal Vow" (*Commentary, on Non-Meditative Good*). This means that for Hōnen, saying the Name with faith (shinjin) in Amida's Primal Vow was superior to the three learnings.

One thing that is worthy of attention is that during the Heian period (794-1185), it was commonly believed that a dying person must attain right-mindedness 正念 to make sure that Amida Buddha would come with a host of sages of the Pure Land to receive him. In order to make Amida's coming 来迎 certain, they developed elaborate end-of-the-life rituals with fevered chanting of the nembutsu. However, Hōnen taught that Amida would come not because the dying person had attained right-mindedness, but to have the person acquire right-mindedness. In order to make this happen, Hōnen emphasized, people must do the nembutsu regularly in everyday life; then they would

not have to worry about Amida's coming (*Saihō-Shinan-shō* 西方指南抄 I-2). In this way, Hōnen connected the daily reciting of the nembutsu with Amida's coming. This type of nembutsu, with complete trust in Amida's Primal Vow, connected its practitioners directly with Amida Buddha. As I discussed earlier, it is a condensed form of meditation through which the practitioners experienced oneness with the Buddha. Hōnen enumerates the superior qualities of the nembutsu in comparison with other practices:

1. The nembutsu is based on the Primal Vow that Amida had established during his causal stage. This means that our saying the nembutsu and Amida's salvation are directly connected.
2. Amida saves us through his light. When sentient beings recite the Name, the Buddha, emitting his light, grasps us and never abandons us.
3. Amida himself said, "In order to attain birth in my land, you should say my Name without interruption" (based on the *Sutra of the Samādhi of All Buddhas' Presence* 般舟三昧經).
4. Śākyamuni Buddha asked Ānanda to transmit the nembutsu to posterity (based on the *Contemplation Sutra*). The Buddha did not entrust other practices to Ānanda.
5. All Buddhas in the six quarters attest the truth of the teaching of birth through the nembutsu (based on the *Amida Sutra*). They did not offer such attestation to other practices.
6. The nembutsu continues to maintain its efficacy even during the age of the Extinct Dharma. Shan-tao said, "Even after the ten thousand years of the age of the Last-day Dharma, and after the three treasures of the Buddhism has perished, this sutra (the *Larger Sutra*) will continue to live for a hundred years and those who hear and say the Name will attain birth in the Pure Land." (*Saihō-Shinan-shō*, I-8. Translated by Arai)

Especially, the first and second articles are important. The first article says that our saying the Name directly involves Amida's salvific work with us. The second article says that Amida saves us with his light. Amida's light is the working of his wisdom and compassion. This means that as soon as Amida hears our nembutsu, he extends his light over us, and we are embraced in the Buddha's meditation. Our nembutsu turns into Amida's meditation.

5. Shinran Further Clarified the Tariki Factor of the Nembutsu

Shinran (1173-1263) further clarified this *tariki* 他力 factor of the nembutsu. For example, the passage declaring the fulfillment of the eighteenth vow is usually read: “All sentient beings, having heard the Name, rejoice with shinjin and say even one utterance of nembutsu; as they sincerely direct their virtue and aspire to be born in that land, immediately will they attain birth there and abide in the stage of non-retrogression. Excluded are those who have committed the five grave offenses and those who slander the right Dharma.⁴” Shinran expressed his understanding of the deep meaning of this passage by presenting his unique way of reading it as follows:

“All sentient beings, having heard the Name, rejoice with even one thought-moment of shinjin, which is directed to them from Amida’s sincere mind; as they aspire to be born in that land, immediately will they attain birth there and abide in the stage of non-retrogression....”

This is an example of Shinran deliberately changing the reading of the original text in order to emphasize the working of Amida’s other-benefiting power (*tariki*). The original phrase for “even one utterance of nembutsu” and “even one thought-moment of shinjin” is “*shinjin-kangi-naishi-ichinen* 信心歡喜乃至一念.” The word *ichinen* can be interpreted as one utterance of the nembutsu or one thought-moment of shinjin. Since true shinjin always contains the Name⁵, this difference is not very important. However, in the traditional reading, both shinjin and one utterance of nembutsu may sound like the practitioner’s own mental and verbal actions. On the other hand, in Shinran’s reading, it is implied that as soon as the practitioner hears the Name, shinjin arises with joy in the practitioner’s mind as a result of Amida’s directing of virtue with sincere mind. This means that the practitioner’s nembutsu is the manifestation of Amida’s sincere mind. Also, the directing of virtue is Amida’s action, not the practitioner’s.

Concerning Amida’s coming (*raikō* 来迎), as we discussed it earlier, Hōnen taught

⁴ 「諸有衆生 聞其名号 信心歡喜 乃至一念 至心回向 願生彼国 即得往生 住不退轉 唯除五逆 誹謗正法」

⁵ 「真實信心必具名号、名号必不具願力信心」(『教行証文類』信文類)

that Amida's coming would unfailingly occur to those who said the nembutsu regularly in daily life at the end of their lives. Shinran further advanced this line of thought and said,

Concerning Amida's coming (*rai-kō*), *rai* (to come) means to have the practitioners come to the Pure Land.... It means to have the practitioner abandon this defiled world and come to the true fulfilled land. It reveals Amida's working to benefit sentient beings (*tarikī*).... *Kō* (to welcome) means Amida receiving us and Amida waiting for us.... When we receive true and real shinjin, Amida unfailingly grasps us and never abandon us. Then, we attain the stage of the truly settled. Since shinjin is, like a diamond, never broken, shaken, or disturbed, it is called diamond-like shinjin. This is what is called *kō*"

(*Notes on Essentials of Faith Alone* 唯信証文意).

In short, Shinran's viewpoint about Amida's coming is that as soon as we receive diamond-like shinjin, that shinjin is Amida's coming and our birth in the Pure Land is certain.

Returning to Shan-tao, in response to the criticism that the Name, *Namu Amida Butsu*, was only a greeting to the Buddha and lacked the aspiration as well as the practice needed for attaining birth in the Pure Land, Shan-tao said:

Namu means to take refuge (*kimyō* 歸命). It further signifies *aspiring for birth and directing virtue* (*hotsugan-ekō* 發願回向). *Amida Butsu* 阿彌陀仏 is the practice 行. Because of this import, one necessarily attains birth.⁶

Shan-tao asserted that *Namu Amida Butsu* is filled with the virtue of the Buddha; saying it comes from the practitioner's aspiration for birth and is the practice enough for attaining birth. Shinran made a more pointed argument about the Name. He completely reversed the direction of the *directing virtue*. The meaning of *Namu Amida Butsu* is "I take refuge in Amida Buddha," and it still sounds as if the practitioner took refuge in the Buddha as his self-power action of directing his virtue to the Buddha. But Shinran interpreted it to mean:

⁶ Shan-tao, *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra*, Essential Meaning of the Sutra『觀經疏』玄義分. *The Collected Works of Shinran*, Vol. I, p. 37.

Namu means to take refuge (kimyō 歸命)... *Kimyō* is the command of the Primal Vow calling to and summoning us 本願招喚の勅命.... *Aspiring for birth and directing virtue* 發願回向 indicates the mind of the Tathāgata who, having already established the Vow, gives sentient beings the practice necessary for their birth.... *The practice* is the selected Primal Vow⁷.

This means that due to the directing of virtue of Amida Buddha, we sentient beings are guided to take refuge in Amida Buddha with aspiration for birth in the Pure Land; we are made to say *Namu Amida Butsu* thanks to the working of the selected Primal Vow. Going back to our original discussion about meditation and *nembutsu*, this means that that our saying the Name is the manifestation of the working of the Primal Vow; as soon as we say the *nembutsu*, we are embraced in Amida's meditation.

Conclusion:

We have examined various stages of meditation: first, meditation as a mental and physical exercise; second, meditation of seeking a certain spiritual objective; third, meditation of no seeking, in the completely settled condition; fourth, meditation of non-duality, "When sentient beings meditate on the Buddha, the Buddha also meditates on them⁸." This is also a stage in which Buddhas communicate with each other unhindered by the barriers of space and time.

We have also examined various stages of verbal *nembutsu*: first, the *nembutsu* as an expression of reverence to the Buddha; second, the *nembutsu* as a practice for accumulating merit; third, the *nembutsu* of no seeking, expressing gratitude to the benevolence of the Buddha; fourth, the *nembutsu* of non-duality, "When sentient beings say the Name of the Buddha, the Buddha immediately hears them."⁹

In both cases, the practitioner has attained the level of awakening equal to the Buddha, but as discussed earlier, the verbal *nembutsu* (saying *Namu Amida Butsu*) is a much faster and easier way to reach there and it is the ultimate form of meditation.

⁷ Ibid. p. 38.

⁸ Shan-tao, *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra*, On Meditative Good)

⁹ Ibid.

I would like to conclude this paper by referring to the following poem by Myōkōnin Saichi, which seems to vividly portray a nembutsu practitioner in the fourth stage discussed above:

How wondrous the mind of the Buddha is!
Although he is invisible, I can talk with him.
When I talk with the Buddha,
Namu Amida Butsu—this is the talk!

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