

## ***Meditation in Shin Buddhism***

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We are all aware of the popularity of the practice of meditation in contemporary society irrespective of religious affiliation. Though meditation has a prominent position in Buddhist practice from its inception, the Shinran has generally rejected the practice as self-striving and contrary to trust and reliance on Amida's Vow as the path to enlightenment. As a consequence, Shin Buddhism loses the chance to share its spiritual insight with many seekers in contemporary society who seek spiritual relief through meditation. We need to understand the basis for the Shinran's view concerning meditation practice.

When we consider the spiritual world in which Shinran (1173-1263) lived in early mediaeval Japanese society, we can understand better why this practice was set aside. Shinran himself practiced meditation as part of the Tendai monastic system for 20 years from the age of 9 years to 29. Tendai meditation had numerous stages of practice in which the ultimate was the 1000 day spiritual endurance practice, testing the physical and mental strength of the devotee. During this time Shinran despaired at ever realizing enlightenment and spiritual emancipation from the stream of births and death or transmigration through such difficult and strenuous monastic practices, including meditation. The problem was his strong passions and the self-righteousness that often results from determined religious practice. Such practice leads to comparison with others and self-justification.

We should note, however, that Shinran did attain visionary experiences through meditation that led him to Honen. He eventually found release from his spiritual disillusionment under the Honen's tutelage of Honen (1143-1212), the most famous Pure Land teacher of the time. Shinran became an ardent disciple and eventually developed his own distinctive interpretation of the teaching stressing trust and reliance on Amida Buddha's Vow and the recitation of the Buddha's name in gratitude as the all-sufficient means to attain enlightenment. Meditation was not the source or means, however, of his spiritual emancipation.

At that time meditation was part of an entire program of religious discipline aimed at focusing and purifying the mind to experience the non-dualistic truth of Buddhism in the depth of one's being. It was the practice that contributed to the attainment of enlightenment and hence the fundamental practice of Buddhism. It was a religious and spiritual endeavor as part of a sacred regimen.

From Shinran's personal and Pure Land teaching point of view, the goal of meditation was essentially impossible for ordinary people because it required the ego to overcome itself by its own power or effort. Meditation, as other monastic practices, was, for Shinran, self-contradictory as means to purify oneself by oneself. Therefore, he left the monastery and studied and practiced under Honen who taught that Amida Buddha vowed to embrace and liberate all beings from their entrapment in passion and ego. To do this Honen gave the Nenbutsu, the recitation of the name of Amida, as an easy way for people in the degenerate age to be reborn in the Pure Land where they could then attain enlightenment.

Amida Buddha created the Pure Land where conditions were right for attaining enlightenment. The precondition to be born there was trust in Amida's Vow and recitation of his name. Through the power of the name which embodies Amida's virtue, the passion-ridden individual could be born into that land. Consequently, the traditional monastic practices including meditation were not necessary for the ordinary person to have the hope to realize enlightenment and be free of all karmic bondage. The movement became very popular and has remained so in Japan.

When we turn to modern times and our contemporary religious situation, the situation has fundamentally changed. In effect, the current stress on meditation in the West draws from a variety of traditions. There are Indian or yogic forms of meditation, Vipassana, based in Theravada Buddhism, Ch'an, Son or Zen practice originally from China, Korea and Japan. There is also Tibetan Buddhist meditation and the contemporary practices of Mindfulness, advocated by Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh. Each tradition has its own style. These forms of meditation as religious practice presuppose the teaching and the goals of their respective traditions. Practicing in these traditions is believed to enable a person to be aware of ultimate reality. The consequence of practice transforms personal life, spiritually, as well as in value priorities and human relations. A new view of one's sense of Being would arise by overcoming the dualisms that afflict our minds and understanding through the consciousness of the deeper reality.

In the contemporary situation, meditation also has been detached from religious beliefs and secularized in the West as a means to peace of mind, a personal psychic liberation or personality development. The contemporary mindset has moved from salvation to improvement. From religion to therapy. People undertake meditation for health and happiness. Recently it was reported that the military will use meditation to calm soldiers and strengthen their minds for the stress of battle. Such use is aimed at enabling the soldier to kill more efficiently. The idea that meditation is a practice for realizing one's relation to spiritual ultimate reality is not raised in the secular form, that is, Being, the source of our lives, is not questioned and can be practiced by people in any tradition.

Because there are a multiplicity of approaches to meditation, Shin Buddhists are asked what form do they employ? We can say that Nenbutsu is a form of meditation through focusing our minds on Amida Buddha and the meaning of his Vows for our lives. Nen means thinking on or recalling. Butsu is the Buddha. It is contemplation or reflecting on the Buddha and our lives.

Through the personal, private or communal recitation of the Name, the mind can become focused on the nature of the reality that embraces our lives. Amida's name means Infinite; it is not a label but points to something beyond our ordinary conceptions or perceptions. Through the contemplation of the deeper reality undergirding our lives and our sense of oneness, we may live with more assurance, strength and tranquility, despite the raging turmoil of the world about us. Nenbutsu or meditation is not practiced to gain enlightenment but to deepen our awareness and understanding of the Vow. It can also express our gratitude to the Buddha for the life that we have been given. It should be noted that traditionally in Shin Buddhism there has been a practice of Seiza or quiet sitting which is consistent with Shin teaching.

The general practice of meditation in our modern, secular context says nothing about spiritual reality as understood by Shinran. It is spiritually neutral as a practice for self-development, rather than an ultimate realization. Consequently, meditation can be practiced by Shin Buddhists as a means to calm and clear the mind in the turmoil of the world within and about us. The practice could be used to prepare the mind to hear, listen and question, the Dharma or contemplate Amida Buddha. We can become more understanding of the Now and grateful for the life we have been given. It is Presence.

Shinran declared that the Nenbutsu was neither a practice nor a good deed. It was not a practice by which we get enlightened, nor is it a good deed or do-gooding as a means for merit and acclaim. He rejected them in principle, noting that any practice we may undertake is not a means to win our own calculated enlightenment. Rather, when we are inspired and drawn by Amida's compassion and wisdom, such practices can help us see our dysfunctional unconscious as the muddy pond within the stillness of the ocean of Light and Life. Whatever can help us in the process of our spiritual consciousness is to be affirmed.