

## Shinzei's *Discourse on Practicing the Samādhi of Meditating on the Buddha*

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### INTRODUCTION: VISUALIZATION PRACTICE

Although the term nembutsu (S: *buddhānusmṛti*) is used today almost synonymously with the recitation of the name of Amida Buddha, in the history of Buddhism it has comprised a large number of different practices. In *The Discourse on the Pure Land*<sup>2</sup> attributed to the famous fourth century Buddhist thinker Vasubandhu (J: Seshin), nembutsu practice—the practice of meditating on the Buddha, or keeping the Buddha in mind—is organized under five headings. One of the main reasons that Vasubandhu's *Jōdo-ron* became important in East Asian Pure Land thought is the attention given to it by the Chinese Pure Land master T'an-luan (J: Donran, 488-554), who produced his own commentary on the work.

According to Vasubandhu and T'an-luan, nembutsu practice is organized into five components: (1) worship, which employs one's own body, such as bowing; (2) the verbalization of praises directed toward Amida Buddha, such as the invocation of his name; (3) establishing a clear resolution to be reborn in the Pure Land of Amida Buddha; (4) visualizing Amida Buddha as present in the Pure Land; and (5) the turning over of the merit of one's practice to the benefit of sentient beings, as well as the intent that, once one has been born in the Pure Land, one will devote one's efforts to the liberation of all other sentient beings.<sup>3</sup>

Vasubandhu's "five-fold nembutsu" is usually treated as simply a list of five different kinds of nembutsu practice. However, when compared with other specifically ritual practices

from the Buddhist tradition, it is clear that the "five-fold nembutsu" forms a single ritual, a *pūjā* or *sādhana*. Seeing the "five-fold nembutsu" as a single ritual gives a new significance to the practices as forming an integrated whole, rather than simply being a listing of five kinds of nembutsu practice, each of which may be practiced in isolation from one another. Central to such a ritual would be the fourth of the five components: *nembutsu zammai* (S: *buddhānusmṛti samādhi*), or the "samādhi of meditating on the Buddha." *Samādhi* is a term having many subtly different shades of meaning in different contexts. Here, however, it is best understood as visualization. How Vasubandhu would have understood such a practice to be effective has been discussed by Edward Conze: "when in a prescribed and disciplined manner and with spiritual intent we move in a trance away from the empirical reality of a given stimulus, we do not thereby move off into a realm of mere phantasy, but come into contact with something—truer to what is really there than that which we found in the sensory world."<sup>4</sup>

This understanding of the efficacy of visualization practice is not limited to the Yogacara school, however. *The Meditation on the Buddha of Infinite Life Sutra* (J: *Kanmuryōju-kyō*; S: title reconstructed as *Amitāyurbuddhānusmṛtisūtra*, T 365) has sixteen different meditations on Amitāyus Buddha. The eighth and ninth of these sixteen are very close in content to the kinds of visualizations employed in Vasubandhu's "five-

fold nembutsu." Śākyamuni Buddha explains the purpose of the eighth and ninth meditations, saying that:

...each *buddha-tathāgata*, as the body of the dharma-realm, pervades the mind of all sentient beings. Therefore, when you perceive a buddha in your mind, it is your mind which possesses the thirty-two prominent features and the eighty secondary attributes; your mind becomes a buddha; your mind is a buddha; and the wisdom of the buddhas—true, universal, and ocean-like—arises from this mind. Therefore, you should single-mindedly fix your thoughts and clearly perceive the Buddha, Tathāgata, Arhat, and Samyaksambuddha.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, enlightened consciousness—the “*buddha-tathāgata*, as the body of the dharma-realm”—is already present in the minds of all sentient beings. Visualizing a Buddha, therefore, manifests that enlightened consciousness. One realizes enlightenment, in the literal meaning of “to make real,” through visualization.

This understanding of the soteriological efficacy of visualization practice is in marked contrast with modern, Western approaches to Buddhist practice. For example, Allan A. Andrews in his excellent work *The Teachings Essential for Rebirth* says that “The Buddha (who was not always Amitābha) was often treated as a focus of concentration rather than an object of devotion.”<sup>6</sup> These two categories—devotion and concentration—are not the only two forms of Buddhist soteriology, and to limit our understanding of how Buddhists have themselves understood the efficacy of practice to these two is a false dichotomy. Visualization as the means by which one manifests one’s already enlightened consciousness offers a third possible way of understanding the efficacy of practice. Additionally, it serves to shed light on the complexity of the visualizations employed. Devotional practice *per se* does not require visualiza-

tion, and concentration may be improved through focusing attention on any object. Further, it is not clear that improving one’s abilities to concentrate is itself conducive to enlightenment. If, however, the point of the practice is to experience directly the presence of the Buddha in the Pure Land, then the more accurately the mental visual image fully manifests that experience, the better. It is this practice of visualizing the Buddha which Shinzei discusses in his *Discourse on Practicing the Samādhi of Meditating on the Buddha*.

#### SHINZEI, JISHŌ DAISHI

Shinzei was born in 1443 and died in 1495, placing him in the middle of the Muromachi era (1336-1573). His major residence was the temple of Saikyō-ji in Shiga, and he received the titles Enkai Kokushi and Jishō Daishi. The tradition of his teaching was maintained by the branch of Tendai known eponymously as the Shinzei-ha. Two of his works are to be found in the Taishō edition of the canon: the *Sōshin hōgo* (T 2420) and the *Nembutsu zammai hōgo* (T 2421).<sup>7</sup> It is the latter of these two which is translated below under the title *Discourse on Practicing the Samādhi of Meditating on the Buddha*.

Shinzei was a Tendai monk and his work represents a dual response to the developments of Kamakura and Muromachi Buddhism. On the one hand he is part of the continuing reform efforts which went on within the older sects, while on the other, he attempts to rebuild nembutsu practice as a part of Tendai, responding to the splitting off of the single-practice nembutsu sects. Robert E. Morrell has pointed out that the typical image of the older sects during the Kamakura era as being composed “of an enervated, corrupt clergy pandering to a frivolous aristocracy and attacking the new movements merely because (they) feared a loss of power and prestige” is not an accurate one, but rather a “caricature.”<sup>8</sup> Morrell discusses several other figures who were also active in reforming the older Buddhist traditions from within the tradi-

tions. Shinzei is himself in line with these internal reformers.

Shinzei's efforts to revitalize nembutsu within the context of Tendai are based on Saicho's own understanding of Tendai as a universal form of Buddhism which integrated the Lotus teaching of the Chinese master Chih-i (538-597), Buddhist Tantra, Ch'an style meditation, *vinaya*, Pure Land style devotion to Amitābha, and elements from Shinto.<sup>9</sup>

Shinzei's *Discourse* reflects the traditional view of the efficacy of the "*samādhi* of meditating on the Buddha," which as we have seen above dates back to the *Meditation Sutra* and Vasubandhu. The opening statement is an assertion of the identity of entering the "*samādhi* of meditating on the Buddha" and entering the Pure Land of Amida, *Sukhāvatī*. He goes on to assert that repeated practice of the visualization is what produces the desired benefits, and that to seek such benefits through any means other than this visualization practice is pointless. He closes with a vow that he will assist future practitioners of the meditation on the Buddha.

Shinzei's effort to reform Tendai and to stimulate nembutsu practice produced a movement which became a significant part of the Tendai tradition. Today, after almost five centuries, the Shinzei-ha is the third largest subsect of Tendai. The Saikyō-ji remains the headquarters of the Shinzei-ha, and there are "approximately 430 branch temples in Ōmi, Ise and Echizen regions."<sup>10</sup>

#### FOOTNOTES

1. The following abbreviations are employed in the essay: "S" for "Sanskrit," "J" for "Japanese," "T" for "Taishō canon number."

2. J: *Jōdo-ron*, or more fully, *Muryōjūkyō-ubadaisha-ganshōge*, S reconstruction: *Sukhāvatīvyūhopadeśa*, T 1524.

3. *Encyclopedia of Religion*. S.v. "T'ian-luan," by Roger Corless.

4. Edward Conze, *Buddhist Thought in India*, p. 254.

5. Ryukoku University Translation Center, *The Meditation on the Buddha of Infinite Life Sutra*, p. 51.

6. Allan A. Andrews, *The Teachings Essential for Rebirth*, p. 57.

7. Paul Demiéville, et al., *Répertoire du Canon Bouddhique Sino-Japonais*, p. 277.

8. Robert E. Morrell, *Kamakura Buddhism*, p. 22.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

10. Daigan Matsunaga and Alicia Matsunaga, *Foundation of Japanese Buddhism*, 2:292.

#### TRANSLATION

*Discourse on Practicing the Samādhi of Meditating on the Buddha* (Nembutsuzammaihōgo, T 2421)

by Shinzei, Jishō Daishi (1443 to 1495); translated by Richard K. Payne<sup>1</sup>

When one enters the *samādhi* of meditating on the Buddha, the Land of Extreme Bliss (*Sukhāvatī*) is immediately revealed, (and one may) revere the many Buddhas of the three times both day and night (i.e., continually). Many gods (i.e., *kami*) will come together<sup>2</sup> where (Amida Buddha's) name is continually recited. Gracious deities of one's own good fortune<sup>3</sup> will gather, joining the assembly. Frequently repeating these mental images over and over produces the benefits of meditating on the Buddha. Those people who look elsewhere—in the world of suffering (*samsāra*)—are like (those who) enter the Mountain of Treasures, but return empty-handed.

I will guide all sentient beings eternally, coming near the seat of future practitioners of the meditation on the Buddha. Whenever thoughts of doubt arise, entering into concentration should

produce the mind of great faith for the practitioner. If having mentally concentrated on Amida, the practitioner's mind (is still) distracted, (then) I shall become a Buddha (only after) a long time.

# TRANSLATION FOOTNOTES

1. I wish to express my appreciation to Carl Bielefeldt, Alfred Bloom, and especially to Kenneth Tanaka, each of whom assisted me with this translation. Any errors are of course my own.

2. Reading "*tamæ* collect, gather" for "*tamæ* jewel."

3. *Go nikki myōjin*. The compound *nikki* is problematic. It comprises "*nitsu*: sun, day" and "*ki*: good luck." It is translated here as "good fortune," although the presence of the character for sun may indicate an astrological significance as well. Also, "*go*: one's own" may also be a substitution for the honorific prefix.

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