PURE LAND’S CONTEMPLATION
IN SHINSHŪ

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The Pure Land tradition, especially in China and Japan, has a great deal of teachings concerning contemplation. To begin with the famous Sūtra of Contemplations on Infinite Life Buddha (T. 12, 365), one of the three main sūtras of the Pure Land, presents no less than thirteen contemplations dealing with the Pure Land itself and its inhabitants, especially the main one of them that is the Buddha Amida. Through generations many commentaries have been written on the topic including those by the Japanese master Genshin (942–1017) whose Ōjōyōshū provides various contemplative methods, from the detailed contemplation of forty-two marks of the buddha and the general contemplation of his three bodies together with the three truths of the Tendai, down to the simplified and the very simplified contemplation on the tuft of hairs between the eyebrow of the buddha (byakugō 白毫). All these contemplations share the same use of calculation (hakarai 計) from the practicant’s side to be accomplished. That means they are poles apart from Shinshū teaching which stresses birth in the Pure Land through faith (shinjin 信心) that is precisely the giving up of any calculation from the practicant’s side (cf. Shinran, Mattōshō, V).

Hence one may wonder how it is possible that some Shinshū masters are speaking about contemplation in Shinshū.

To try to understand that point we first have to examine what a “pure land” (jōdo 純土) is, and I mean here more specifically the pure land of the Buddha Amida which is called “Supreme Happiness” (Gokuraku 極楽).

A pure land is first of all a buddha land (butsudo 佛土) which may be defined as the field or sphere of activity of a perfectly accomplished buddha who has realized enlightenment and is preaching the Law.

According to the symbolical language of the mahāyāna sūtra, the bodhisattva’s career to enlightenment is compared to the building and ornamenting of a buddha land—or field—which is achieved at the moment when the bodhisattva awakes to buddhahood. All the ornaments of such a pure land are nothing else than the symbolical expression of the “pure karman” (jōgō 淨業) accomplished through the perfections and qualities gathered by the bodhisattva in order to realize the perfect enlightenment.

Hence this pure karman is nothing else than the gathering of merits (kudoku 功徳) acquired by the bodhisattva through his practice (gyō 行) and directed through his vows (gan 願) towards the realization of his pure land. In the Ōjōyōshū, Genshin quotes the Daichidoron, which states:

Merits alone are not able to realize a buddha land; they need the power of the vow (ganrikī 願力). It is like a bull which is able to pull a cart but still needs a driver who knows the direction. The merits [of the bodhisattva] are like the bull, his vows are like the driver.

Genshin also explains in his Ōjōyōshū that the bodhisattva produces two kinds of vows: general vows (sōgan 統願) and particular vows (betsugan 別願). The general vows are well known as the “Four Universal Vows” (shiguzeigan 四弘誓願) through which the bodhisattva commits himself to become a buddha in order to help all sentient beings to eventu-
ally become buddhas too. The particular vows are intended
to adapt the ultimate realization of buddhahood to the
needs and conditions of the beings to be saved. In the
case of the Buddha Amida these are the 48 vows as related
in the Sūtra on Infinite Life.

On the other hand, through his practice on the way to
buddhahood the bodhisattva is acquiring the perfect wis-
dom (prajñāpāramitā) through which he comes to know that
on the absolute truth’s level (paramārtha-satya) all things
and all beings are devoid of self-nature (svabhāva, jishō
自性) which eventually means that the bodhisattva advances
towards buddhahood in order to liberate sentient beings
while knowing simultaneously that there is no buddhahood
to be realized nor sentient beings to be saved. That is,
says Genshin, that “birth-and-death is equal to nirvāṇa,
passions equal to bodhi” (shōji soku nehan, bonnō soku bodai
生死即是烦恼即菩提).

It must be here remembered that when the bodhisattva
Dharmākara produced his vows he was not a newly entered
one on the bodhisattva’s career. This is testified by the
Sūtra on Infinite Life where it is related that after
having produced his particular vows Dharmākara received
the prediction (vyākaraṇa, juki 受記) that he would necessarily
reach the supreme enlightenment. Now this prediction
is scheduled to be received by the bodhisattva at a very
precise moment of their career. This moment is the eighth
of the ten stages of the bodhisattva career and this
level is called “Immovable” (acalā, fudō 不動). This stage
is also well known as the moment where the bodhisattva is
producing the insight of non-production (anuttarikā-dharma-
ksanti, mushōbōnin 無生法忍) that is when he discovers
through his perfect wisdom that nothing is produced in
absolute truth, so that eventually everything and everybody
are void (sūnyā, kū 空). Hence there is no subject nor
object, no hate, nor envy nor illusion. Accordingly the
three acts of the bodhisattva are purified, that is “with-
out passions’ flow” (anāsrava, muro 無濤) any more.

The Chinese commentator Tanluan (476–542), whom Shin-
rin considered as the main authority about the nature of
the Pure Land, wrote:

The pure land of Peace and Happiness has been set up
by the pure acts (jōgō 冥業) of the bodhisattva [Dhar-
mākara] in his insight of non-production.

And Tanluan adds:

Because the cause [i.e. the vow] is pure, the fruit
[i.e. the land] is pure.

He explains that birth in the pure land of Amida is
“birth to birthlessness” (mushō no shō 無生之生), while the
pure land is described as “the world of Birthlessness”.

It is then clear that the pure land of the Buddha
Amida is designed as the representation of the highest
reality. Shinran explains that in his famous text about
“jinen hōn” 自然法爾, where he states:

A supreme buddha (mujō butsu 無上佛) has no form what-
soever. Because he has no form he is said jinen (nat-
ural, spontaneous, automatic). [...] The Buddha Amida
is the means [れう, ryō 料] to make us know the way of
jinen.

If the pure land is such a high spiritual reality one
may wonder why this land is located in the west and is
not to be sought inside our own mind. Especially a pas-
sage of the Contemplations Sūtra may seem to support such
an idealistic view. This is the famous passage of the
eighth contemplation, where it is said: “ze shin sa butsu,
zeshin ze butsu” 是心作佛是心是佛. This passage could mean:
“This mind becomes a buddha, this mind is a buddha”. But
Shandao rejected the opinion of the Vijnānavāda school
which interprets this passage as the contemplation on the
dharma-body (dharmakāya) of the Buddha penetrating into the practitioner's mind; Shandao also rejected the interpretation which states that the Buddha Amida and his Pure Land are to be contemplated as the pure buddha-nature inside the practitioner himself, as stated in the Platform Sūtra of Huineng/Enō 慧能 (638-713), the sixth patriarch of the Chan/Zen school.

According to Shandao this passage of the Contemplations Sūtra simply means: “This mind creates a buddha; such mind, such buddha”. Hence this contemplation is but a mental construction bound to the practicant's abilities. Generally speaking, according to Shandao, all the contemplations provided by the Contemplations Sūtra aim simply to “establish marks to fix the mind” (risō jūshin 立相住心 SSZ l, p. 519) because to meditate without marks at all in a purely abstract way—as in the case of the dharma-body—would be far too difficult “as a man building a house in the sky”.

In his Kyōgōshinshō, Shinran also criticizes those who believe that their own nature is the Buddha Amida or that the Pure Land is in their mind only (yuishin 唯心). Shinran also quotes Shandao—both directly and indirectly—to warn against the meditation of no-image or no-thought (musō rinen 無相如念) used in the Zen tradition. Eventually, Shinran states that the buddha described in the Contemplations Sūtra is the body of transformation (keshin 化身) and not the true body of Amida who is a reward body (hōjin 報身) due to the accomplishment of his vows. Thus all the beautiful descriptions of the Sūtra are eventually but skillful means (hōben 方便) using the language of relative truth (samvrti-satya) in order to impress the mind of the practicant.

Shandao himself states meaningfully that the contemplation provided by the Contemplations Sūtra are but skillful means devised in order for the sentient beings to “get birthlessness because they rejoice in their minds as they see these marvellous things”.

Still these contemplations are basically rejected by Shinshū as the height of “self power” (jiriki 自力), which is defined by Shinran (Ichinen-tanen-mon’i SSZ 2, p. 614; Matōshō II, id. p. 658) as “trusting myself” (wagami o tanomu) instead of trusting the Buddha's vows. Such a choice means that one dares to calculate (hakarai) the Buddha’s wisdom which has designed and accomplished the vow to liberate all the sentient beings who have faith in the transference of the Buddha's own merits through his Name.

Again, when the practicant gives himself up to Amida’s vow he will exactly answer the intent of the Buddha and share accordingly his realization of the supreme enlightenment by going to be born in his Pure Land. Such an entrusting has been defined by Shandao as the “twofold deep faith” (nishu jinshin 二乘深信) where one realizes both that he is too weak—especially in this period of decreasing dharma (mappō 末法)—to gather any merit and that the Buddha's vows answer perfectly his needs. In some way this twofold faith arises from a spontaneous contemplation of the practicant's own situation together with the awareness to the Buddha's vow.

But the true contemplation will be realized at the time of birth in the Pure Land as Shinran says in his Kyōgōshinshō.

Upon our reaching the Buddha Land of Peace and Bliss, our buddha-nature (bussō 佛性) will reveal itself through the transfer of the power of the original vow.

Also, according to Zonkaku (1290-1373), one of the benefits gained through birth in the Pure Land is the “samādhī of nembutsu” (nembutsu samnai 念仏三昧).

Nevertheless from the very moment one realized the nembutsu's faith until he is actually born in the Pure Land, he is not without dwelling in a kind of contempla-
tion which is spontaneous and effortless. This state of mind has been precisely described by Genchō 玄智, a Shinshū master in the 18th century. His Kōshinroku 考信録 states20:

Even if they try the people of our time do not realize true contemplation. Nevertheless in the nembutsu we think of the Pure Land's marks and our confused thoughts stop by themselves, and then the pure mind shines alone.

Notes

1. Fasc. 1b; SSZ 1, p. 796.
3. Fasc. 1b; SSZ 1, p. 783.
5. Ronchū, Vol. 1; SSZ 1, p. 290.
6. id., Vol. 2; SSZ 1, p. 336.
7. id., Vol. 2; SSZ 1, p. 327-328.
8. SSZ 2, p. 530-531, 664; Shinshū shirō shūsei 1, p. 623a-624a.
9. SSZ 1, p. 55-56.
10. Kangyōshō, Fasc. 3 (Jōzenji); SSZ 1, p. 519.
12. Chapter. 3, preface; SSZ 2, p. 47.
13. Chapter. 6, § 34; SSZ 2, p. 154.
14. Chapter. 6, § 1; k, 2, § 101 (SSZ 2, pp. 143 and 43).
15. Kangyōshō, Fasc. 7 (Gengibun); SSZ 1, p. 461.
17. Kangyōshō, Fasc. 4 (Sanzengi); SSZ 1, p. 534.
18. Chapter. 5, § 37; SSZ 2, p. 140.