

From Meditation and Wisdom to Chanting and Wisdom

Jonathan A. Silk*

Part I

Scholars and practitioners alike have argued, probably since the earliest days of Buddhism, about the best ways to articulate the central teaching of Buddhist traditions, discussions which sometimes, but not always, are cast in terms of the central teaching of the Buddha Śākyamuni. From a scholarly point of view, it is clear that, whatever the teachings of the Buddha Śākyamuni may have been, there were many and often profound changes and evolutions over the course of the 2,500 years of the history of Buddhism. Therefore, in different times and places, different topics were considered more central or received more attention. Some points, however, could probably be generally agreed upon as important.

Throughout Buddhist communities from earliest times, there has been common agreement that life in the world - life in *our* world - is

* Professor of Leiden University

life in *samsāra*, the beginningless cycle of transmigration. That is, all living beings experience a cycle of birth, death and rebirth; our present life is only one in an unimaginably vast series of such lives. Though this cycle is beginningless, it is not endless. According to tradition, what the Buddha taught was a way to become free of this imprisoning cycle, a way to end the cycle of *samsāra*. One - though not the only - term for this freedom is *nirvāṇa*. This, then, forms one fundamental pair in Buddhist thought: *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*.

Another highly influential idea is that it is essential to purify one's mind, though certainly not all Buddhist traditions would articulate the idea in exactly these terms. What holds beings - the tradition would say all beings, though in fact the focus is nearly entirely on human beings - to the cycle of transmigration is *karma*, that is, actions and their results. What is most important about *karma* for Buddhists - and this sets them apart from some other Indian religious traditions - is that action is defined as intention. In other words, what holds human beings to the cycle of birth, death and rebirth is that we act with intention. What does intention mean here? Intention means acting oriented toward a goal; we want to *gain* something. This, it is important to say immediately, is certainly not only positive: what we aim to gain can also be negative - for example, we can aim to gain freedom from pain, we can aim, that is, at the absence of pain, a negative state.

So, we are trapped in repeated cycles of *samsāra* because we act with intention: we want things, both to bring certain things close

toward ourselves and to push other things far away from ourselves. We want to gain possession of the desirable and gain freedom from the nondesirable. Buddhist texts often speak of these two extremes with a pair of terms, lust and hatred, though the categories are much vaster than these categories might suggest.

Given this analysis, it should be clear that the path toward freedom from *samsāra* requires that we - that humans - learn to act without such intentions, without the idea that we acquire something through our actions, whether that acquisition be positive or negative. This is our only way forward because we certainly cannot stop acting all together. Let us remember that even if we were to decide to “stop acting,” such as by sitting in a corner with eyes closed, not eating, not speaking, and so on, the only result would be our physical death. But then we - that is to say, our identity, who we are - would simply be reborn, and the entire cycle would begin again. There is clearly no way to avoid acting *per se*; therefore, given the fact that conceptions of profit from actions bind us to *samsāra*, the only remaining course is to act *without intention*.

How does intention work? Intention, as noted above, is end-oriented action: I act with the idea of gaining some result. But who gains that result? I do, I myself, no one else. When I act, even if I act toward another, only *I* receive karmic results of my actions. If I help an elderly person across the street, I acquire a good karmic seed, as Buddhist technical language would term it, but the elder whom I help does not thereby acquire any *karma*. Why is this so important? It is

crucial because we have, then, reduced the problem of the intention of action to this “I”, to the self, as Buddhist tradition teaches. Next comes one of the most crucial steps in our chain of reasoning: I believe that I act for some benefit for myself. This belief is what makes my actions *intentional*, and therefore what produces *karma*, and the production of that *karma* is what binds me to continued rebirth.

But what is this “I” for the benefit of which I am acting? When we try to locate an “I,” we discover that there is no unique, independent, unchanging essential and identifiable entity that could be understood to be “I,” “me” or “myself.” When one understands - not only intellectually, but entirely - the reality that there is no self, understand the fact that no “I” actually independently exists, then one understands that it is impossible to act for one's own benefit. The action exists, certainly, but there can be no real recipient of the intention. And again, acting without intention is the only way to stop the creation of *karma*, the results of which hold us in the cycle of *samsāra*. The only path toward freedom from *samsāra*, in this understanding, runs through the dissolution of the idea of the existence of an “I”, that is, through the dissolution of the illusion that “I” exist.

This is rather dense reasoning, though it lies at the heart of virtually all versions of the Buddhist teaching.

But now we come to the key point here: How do we come to understand that it is, in reality, actually not possible to act intentionally? The logic runs that acting intentionally is to act for some gain, and

gain by definition means acting in a manner that brings a benefit for the actor. But the erasure of the self, the recognition that there is no actually existent “self,” means that it is not actually possible to act intentionally. Understanding reality correctly, understanding the fact of non-self, means that one cannot act for the benefit of oneself.

This recognition of the reality of the non-existence of self is termed by Buddhist traditions “wisdom.” And now it may have become clear why we began with this doctrinal sketch, for “wisdom” is one of the key themes of the 5th Seoul International Meditation Expo, dedicated to the theme of “Meditation and Wisdom.” From my perspective, this pair of terms, “Meditation and Wisdom,” lies as one of the most central dynamics of Buddhist traditions. I will explain below why this short contribution bears the title “From Meditation and Wisdom to Chanting and Wisdom,” but that will come later.

In Indian Buddhist literature, it is not only the texts of monastic discipline, the Vinaya, but also the scriptures, *sūtra* (經), and treatises, *śāstra* (論), which very clearly were composed with a monastic audience in mind. While in later Buddhist traditions of East Asia non-monastics came to study the scriptures in particular, in India there is no evidence that this was the case, and as for treatises, the theoretical works of Buddhist theology, so to speak, I believe it was only in modern times that non-monastics came to read and study these works. This question of audience will become important in a few moments.

For us, therefore, when we struggle to understand what is written

in these holy books of Indian Buddhism, whether we are lay persons or monastics ourselves, we must begin our attempts by adopting the point of view of monastics.

Now, it is certainly true that considerable attention is given in many Buddhist scriptures to meditation, and there is no question that meditation was understood, in general, to be a valuable means of access to wisdom. Aspects of this dynamic have been discussed by many others; my approach will generally be slightly different, but I feel it helpful to begin with some background.

The early corpus of treatises - of theoretical Buddhist texts - is termed in Sanskrit the Abhidharma (阿毗達磨), and this is the genre that later became expanded into a broader collection of commentaries and independent works, the *śāstras*. The original conception justifying the compilation of the Abhidharma was that the Buddha presented his teachings in his sermons, collected in *sūtras*, in an unsystematic way; the Buddha preached, according to the tradition, to suit the situation of his audience in each individual case, and the corpus of scriptures preserves certain instances of these preachings. As a result, the scriptures are not overall presented in a *systematic* way. Therefore, to simply study the Buddha's sermons, the scriptures, presents a great challenge, since in order to obtain an overview one would have to extract from these diverse presentations a coherent system. But this task was accomplished already long, long ago within the tradition itself. Those scholars who compiled the Abhidharma undertook, that is, to carry out this task of extraction and organization. The result is

that it is possible for us to imagine the Abhidharma as a *map* of the vision of reality as sketched by the Buddha in his sermons. We might think of the situation as follows: if I take a journey, I might write a diary of the individual days of my journal, but if I write those notes on note cards, and the cards are not preserved in order, someone will have to come along and put them in order to produce a map of my journey. We can think of the Abhidharma as similar to this creation of a map.

Why is this important to us now? If the Abhidharma systematizes the Buddha's picture of reality, and if understanding reality is essential to learning how to act without intention, and subsequently to become free of *samsāra*, then the Abhidharma can provide the necessary guidance for anyone who wants to attain this goal, namely, to attain *nirvāṇa*.

How does this bring us to meditation? This topic is complex, and I present it here in only a superficial manner here. But roughly speaking - and finally we come to meditation - there are two approaches to meditation in Indian Buddhist traditions, namely those called in Sanskrit *śamatha* and *vipaśyanā*. The former refers to “calming,” the latter to “insight.” This is overly simplified, but for our purposes it will suffice to understand that it is necessary in the first place to settle the mind. One of my favorite images of the mind is that it is like a monkey, namely, that just as a monkey swings from branch to branch among the trees, so the mind jumps around from object to object constantly. In other words, it is very difficult, at least for the

untrained mind, to concentrate.

There is good evidence that originally it was not imagined that one would first engage in “calming” practice and then only later in “insight,” but this idea seems to have developed and came to dominate the tradition. Be that as it may, this brings us back to the Abhidharma and its maps of reality. For what is the point of insight meditation? It is to develop within oneself the same understanding of the nature of reality as that attained by the Buddha, such that one will ultimately understand the fictional nature of the self, and the true nature of reality.

Now, whenever one sets out on a journey, one requires a map to tell one where to go. Nowadays we rely on Google maps, but I grew up with paper maps and atlases, and thinking of these objects might be slightly more helpful, because while Google maps actively tells one what to do - when to turn and when to go straight, without one having to plan much or make strategic decisions - a map or atlas requires the traveler to study the route in advance and actively decide how to proceed. This small difference aside, if one is on a journey, or let us say at least a journey with a specific goal, one needs to know what lies ahead in order to know how to proceed. The map of reality which guides the meditator who seeks to understand the nature of reality is that map provided by the teaching of the Buddha, as systematized in the Abhidharma. We might - going back to the image suggested above - imagine that the Buddha in his sermons, in his *sūtras*, gave indications about specific small parts of the journey,

while the task undertaken by the scholars who compiled the Abhidharma was to take all those small route advisories and put them together into a universal atlas.

Therefore, for insight meditation, the Abhidharma offers a road map of the journey that one wishes to take, and that road map offers the seeds of the wisdom which help one to proceed along the way.

In Mahāyāna Buddhist traditions, there are somewhat different concepts deployed to refer to this road map, and the insight is understood in somewhat different terms, for example using the concept of “emptiness” (*śūnyatā*, *kong* 空). But I think that generally speaking the basic message is the same: the fundamental meaning of “emptiness” is absence of self, such that a true understanding of emptiness, which is called wisdom, is equivalent to the true understanding of non-self.

Now, there is no question that Buddhist traditions and Buddhist textual sources have devoted much attention to both the theory and the practice of meditation. Authors of East Asian traditions such as the Tiantai (天台) and Huayan (華嚴), not to mention the Chan (禪) school, have offered elaborate theories refining and expanding basic Indian insights, and providing how-to manuals for meditation practices.

While there is a great deal to say about these traditions, and the connection of meditation and wisdom in various traditions, in these remarks I would like to discuss a somewhat different approach.

Part II

Indian Buddhist texts, as mentioned above, were composed with an intended audience of monastics, monks and nuns. Therefore, one of the questions that they consider is the role of the individual monastic: what should such a person do in his or her monastic life? Now, aside from considering the necessity of administrative roles - some monks, of course, have to actually organize the monastery, make sure that there is bedding for the monks to sleep on, monastic cells for them to put that bedding in, and so on - monks and nuns are imagined as taking on one of two main roles: meditator or text specialist.¹⁾ There is a great deal to say about what being a meditation specialist might have meant, but for the present, we can leave that aside, and think about the other major category, the text specialist. Such specialists no doubt included those who memorized texts and those who expounded and preached them to an audience, as well as those who studied them academically, so to speak.

But it is also clear that some - and perhaps even most - of these text specialists are understood to be persons who *recite* texts. It is unfortunate that we have little information from India about how texts were recited, though we do know that it was a practice - we do not know if it was a common practice, as it was later in East Asia, but certainly it was *a* practice - to memorize texts. What we especially would like to know about India, however, is *how* texts were recited.

1) See Silk 2008, esp. 17-37.

This is because we know that in East Asia it became a practice to *chant* texts. In fact, when one looks at the daily lives of monks and nuns in most Buddhist institutions of the present day, one finds that a great deal of their time is taken up by chanting, and we need hardly mention that lay practice, the daily or the occasional practice of non-monastic Buddhists, on the whole consists almost entirely of chanting.²⁾

Now, there are different types of texts, and therefore different forms of recitation and chanting. There is some discussion of the appropriate way to recite the *Prātimokṣa* (婆羅提木叉), the list of monastic rules which is recited two times per month in the monastic assembly at the *uposatha* (Sanskrit [u]poṣadha) ritual, so that all monastics can acknowledge that they have not violated the rules. Furthermore, at least later in the tradition (and perhaps earlier as well) there are texts called *stotra* or *stava* in Sanskrit, hymns of praise, and these are often highly poetic texts which would be recited as poetry.³⁾ This, further, is not to mention famous texts such as the *Buddhacarita* of Aśvaghōṣa or the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* by Śāntideva, both of which would perhaps frequently have been memorized and recited. Here we are not very concerned with such literature, but rather instead with scriptures, and especially a particular genre, which I will come to in a

2) See in this context the views of Sharf and Gyatso quoted in Silk 2008, 11-12.

3) Chapter 32 of Yijing's Record of his travels in India and beyond (T. 2125 [LIV] 227a3-228a18; trans. Takakusu 1896, 152-166) offers nearly unique evidence of recitation and chanting in Indian monastic contexts, including reference to the recitation of texts by the poet Mātṛceṭa.

moment. For it is clear that ritual recitation, whether through chanting or otherwise, is important in Buddhist traditions.⁴⁾

For me, all this raises a question: what possible role does chanting play in the attainment of progress in the Buddhist path. Put in other words, if we accept - as I think we generally do - that within Buddhist frameworks it is nearly universally believed that a central path toward spiritual progress runs through the practice of meditation, can we also say that the even more common practice of chanting likewise leads to such progress?⁵⁾

Let us now take a step backwards, and remember that we, perhaps

4) Some research has been published on chanting in an Indian Buddhist context, but almost nothing in Western languages. See Liu 2018, esp. 724-739, who cited of course the seminal Lévi 1915. Among the Japanese studies also to be noted are Ishigami 1968 and Aohara 1992; too recent for Liu to have consulted are Hirabayashi 2018a, 2018b, 2020, 2021a, 2021b, 2023.

5) Having mentioned poetry (in the Indian sense of *kāvya*, and more broadly as *belles lettres*), we should not ignore the fact that a good deal has been written about Japanese poetry and Buddhism, including observations on the tension between critiques of poetry and affirmations of its practice as a path to liberation (Plutschow 1978). What is more, since medieval times there has been an explicit equivalence posited by some between *waka* 和歌, Japanese poetry, and *dhāraṇī*, on which see below. In his *Shasekishū* 沙石集, completed in 1283, for instance, Mujū 無住 (1227-1312) explicitly identifies *waka* and *dhāraṇī*. For some considerations see Kimbrough 2003, 2005, who also refers to authors such as Shunzei (俊成, 1114-1204), for whom “the contemplation of poetry was equivalent to meditation” (Kimbrough 2005, 4), a position held also by others, including Shunzei’s contemporary Saigyō 西行 (1118-1190). What is of note for what follows below is that in these Japanese considerations, it appears that it is not only the production of poetry but its recitation that was felt to be religiously efficacious.

too quickly, mentioned that there are two kinds of meditation, calming and insight. It is generally felt, as I mentioned, that calming precedes insight, and that the former does not have intellectual content, while the latter does. In other words, calming meditation aims to quiet the mind and serves as a preparation for the analytical activity of insight meditation.

But this opinion is certainly not universal, by which I mean that not everyone thinks that insight meditation is essential. Let us consider for a moment the role of calming meditation, and let us connect this with chanting. And can we understand chanting to be essentially equivalent to calming meditation? And what, then, might be the connection between calming and wisdom?

This discussion could become quite technical, so I will offer a brief suggestion: although they often articulate it in different terms, most Buddhist traditions understand ultimate reality to be obtained by the mind having unmediated access to the ultimate. In other words, the mind, when free of delusions and defilements, free of lust and hatred and confusion, the so-called three poisons, directly confronts reality as it is. Calming meditation is understood not only as a precursor step to insight meditation, but also on its own, so to speak, as a direct path to rendering the mind pure and unobstructed. The mind is often understood in Buddhist rhetoric as a mirror, and the mirror par excellence is a completely placid body of water, a pond, for instance, without a single ripple on its surface. This is precisely the imagery that corresponds to the goal of calming meditation.

This calming is attained by seated meditation and other similar techniques, but also, I would suggest, by another form of Buddhist practice.

Part III

If we are concerned with chanting, where would we look in Buddhist India? One answer lies in the extremely large corpus of texts which are commonly called *dhāraṇī* (陀羅尼) *sūtras*. These are scriptures which contain formulas, *dhāraṇī*, which - while they are in Sanskrit - have a mystical meaning that transcends their language. In many ways we might think of them as very close to the more familiar *mantra*, a syllable or string of syllables thought to be endowed with mystical properties. When such texts were translated into Tibetan and Chinese, the *dhāraṇī* were transcribed, because it was the *sound*, and not any possible *meaning*, that was considered important and powerful. These texts commonly advocate the almost endless repetition of their particular *dhāraṇī*, some of which are relatively short, some of which can be quite lengthy. As the *dhāraṇī* are not meant to be sensible, what this requires of the practitioner is the memorization of a meaningless series of sounds. In fact, this is quite similar, or even identical, to what takes place when contemporary Koreans or Japanese - or of course Europeans - recite Buddhist texts in Chinese. The Chinese language in which the translation of, for

example, the *Heart Sūtra* (般若心經) or the *Amituo jing* (阿彌陀經) are written in a way that is not understandable to most untrained Korean or Japanese Buddhists, not to mention Europeans, and therefore the practice of recitation of such texts is essentially the same as the recitation of a *dhāraṇī*.⁶⁾

There is as yet very little serious study of recitation or chanting and trance in Buddhism, but I think it is a promising hypothesis to suggest that ritual chanting can induce the same sort of mental concentration as that achieved in some forms of meditation, particularly calming meditation, in which what is aimed at is the removal of the discursivity of the mind.

Why is it, then, that Buddhist *dhāraṇī* texts do not list wisdom as among the positive results of the ritual recitation of *dhāraṇī*? What they offer instead is a list of very material benefits, which, however, one will achieve only in the life to come, that is, after death in one's subsequent birth. The reason for this seems obvious to me, namely, that if I were to promise you some result in the present life, you could easily see whether that would come true or not. No one can know what will happen in the next life. And the promised results listed in the *sūtras* might seem somewhat surprising to us, if we are looking forward to abstract spiritual gifts. In exchange, so to speak, for the ritual recitation of the *dhāraṇī*, the scriptures promise the practitioner a future life of good health, long life, wealth, having an attractive appearance, freedom from negative rebirths, such as in hell or as an

6) See Silk 2021.

animal, as well as a number of accomplishments generally thought to be reserved for those of advanced spiritual attainments, such as having memory of one's previous lives. The last is particularly important since having memory of previous lives makes it possible for one to directly observe the truth of the workings of *karma*: one sees precisely which actions in the past led to which results.

There is more, however. A number of texts maintain that the actual content of the *dhāraṇī* is the essential teaching of the Buddha, however much it might appear superficially that it is nothing other than a sequence of nonsense syllables. A number of texts elaborate on this essential insight in quite some detail, and in very technical terms. In sum, we can say that for some texts, mastery of the *dhāraṇī* is equivalent to the mastery of the entirety of the Buddha's teaching. But what, then, is mastery of the *dhāraṇī*? It is nothing other than its complete internalization, something achieved by repeated practice of recitation - chanting, if you will.

This all leads us to the conclusion that ritual, mantric-like recitation of even superficially nonsense texts is seen as a vital and powerful path toward awakening. The same appears to be true, moreover, for recitations of texts which could have conventionally understandable content, such as the earlier mentioned *Heart Sūtra* and *Amituo jing*, the latter the most popular Amitābha scripture in East Asia.

How might this work? Now, I am not a specialist in cognitive sciences, and I therefore base the following on what I have read of the work of others expert in this field. It is well known that considerable

attention has been given to the study of the mental states of meditators, with the use of fMRI, EEG and so on. However, it would appear that almost no attention has been given to chanting, and the few studies I have seen appear to be to have serious, and indeed often essentially fatal, methodological problems. One basic problem with such studies, it seems to me, is that they are willing to alter natural conditions in order to make their experiments possible. For instance, it is not uncommon to read of meditators placed inside MRI machines. Now, it is well known that many traditions maintain that the strict physical posture of meditation is essential, relating this to ideas about the flow of *prāṇa* or *qi* (氣), in any event, the flow of bodily energy. However, it is impossible to be seated inside an MRI scanner, and so the subjects are examined lying down. I am not aware of this being explicitly taken into account, although as mentioned, I am not a specialist in this field, so perhaps I have overlooked important considerations.

When it comes to research on chanting, things are also problematic.⁷⁾

7) One source of trouble is the lack of sophistication of the researchers, evidenced by statements such as “Religious chanting is as common in Eastern cultures as praying is in Western” (Gao et al 2019, 1). This contribution goes on to say that “scientific studies on religious chanting are surprisingly scarce. The neurophysiological mechanisms underpinning the positive effect that religious chanting has been claimed to exert have not been illustrated by any decisive evidence.” The authors further identify the *nembutsu* as a meditational practice, before saying “Being a religious meditative practice, religious chanting can be regarded as both meditation and prayer.” The confusion here only increases when we read that “Practitioners of religious chanting are encouraged to chant the name of the Buddha Amitābha as an object of meditation, while practicing

One Japanese study attempted to examine the utility of Buddhist chanting on those experiencing grief - except, of course, it is impossible to plan to have grieving people available for your study, and also doubtless unethical. So the authors of the study artificially imitated grief (with goldfish!) - I consider the results of such a study essentially useless.⁸⁾

All this said, we must then conclude that at the present we are very hard pressed to make progress scientifically with the study of the possible effects of ritual chanting. But we can at least identify groups which might, in future, be studied, and these include those who ritually recite the *Daimoku*, that is to say, the title of the *Lotus Sūtra*, as promoted by Nichiren traditions, the repeated utterance of the expression *namu myōhōrengekyō*. A close parallel to this, at least typologically speaking, is the ritual recitation of the *nembutsu*, the name of the Buddha Amitābha, namely *namu amida butsu*.⁹⁾ Further, the entire Heart and Amitābha *sūtras* are also ritually recited, the latter in devout households at least two times every day, morning and

the development of two equally important mental processes: samatha which corresponds to concentration and vipassana which corresponds to mindful observation,” this at best conflating what are generally considered distinct traditions. It should be clear that from a Religious Studies point of view there is a fundamental lack of clarity here. Specialists in brain sciences should evaluate this and similar studies from their own perspective, but it seems evident that the fundamental framing is based on some serious misunderstandings.

8) Taniyama et al, 2019.

9) Recitation of the *daimoku* certainly did not originate with Nichiren, and in fact earlier evidence shows that its recitation coexisted with the *nembutsu*; see the very interesting and rich study of Stone 1998.

evening, by lay persons. In temples the liturgical days are filled with recitations.

We must here make an important observation: until now we have assumed that the recitation in question is performed by the practitioner, but this is of course not always the case. Every morning in Nichiren sect temples, for example, significant portions of the *Lotus Sūtra* are recited by the monk or monks of the temple, and these recitations can be and often are attended by the devout lay community. While they may have in hand the Chinese text the monks are chanting, with accompanying indications of the pronunciation of each character, their interaction can often be passive, so to speak. And this is an important consideration: while there is no passive interaction with meditation - no one watches monks meditate - we need to devote attention to the fact that some or even many of those “involved” in recitation or chanting do not perform the chanting themselves, but serve, as it were, as an audience.

This is exemplified by the existence of mechanical devices which perform recorded chants, one variety of which are called in Chinese *nianfo ji* (念佛機), Buddha's name recitation machines.¹⁰ These are essentially small speakers with an endless loop of chantings or recitations. Typologically we might certainly compare them to the so-called prayer wheels, which also mechanically reproduce the action which is said to produce merit or spiritual benefit to the faithful.

10) Heller 2014, with illustrations.

I will not speculate whether and if so how passive listening to someone else's recitation or chanting is meant to produce spiritual progress, although certainly many in the Buddhist tradition would strongly insist that it can and does.¹¹⁾ Rather, I would like to return to the central topic, namely wisdom.

I would like to suggest, in closing, that the focus entirely on meditation, to the apparent exclusion of other forms of Buddhist practice, such a chanting, may be too narrow. There is no question that meditation, in all its vast variety of forms, has been held by Buddhist traditions essentially from the beginning to be the key means to attain wisdom, that is, to attain the insight which will free one from one's bondage. At the same time, however, there has also been a recognition within the tradition that this is not the only path.

One difference in the modern world might be that meditation has been widely understood, perhaps since the 1960s in the West, as a not necessarily religious practice, and there are many today who promote the practice of various forms of meditative cultivation as a secular endeavor. This allows those who do not wish to be identified with religion (who would deny, that is, any religious affiliation or connection) to nevertheless engage in meditation, including what we might otherwise understand as "Buddhist meditation," without feeling they are compromising their secular commitment. At the same time, if persons are firm in their commitment to a particular non-Buddhist religion, they too may nevertheless engage in Buddhist-derived meditation

11) See above for the remarks on Japanese poetry.

practices, if they are convinced that these practices are not in conflict with their own religious commitments, something possible (only) if they deem Buddhism to be a non-religion.¹²⁾

Given this, it might be possible - indeed, there is ample evidence that it *is* possible - to engage in Buddhist meditation practices while not identifying oneself as a Buddhist believer. This sort of dissociation is much more difficult with chanting practice. One can hardly commit to the ritual recitation of the name of Amida Buddha, for instance, if one does not have a faith commitment to the so-called Pure Land traditions or another form of devotion, and one cannot recite the *Daimoku* or chant portions of the *Lotus Sūtra* without a parallel faith commitment.¹³⁾ This may be the reason that considerations of meditation practices tend to predominate over those of recitation and chanting when reaching out to those without a Buddhist faith commitment, while the fact remains that, emically

12) To clarify: a Catholic, let us say, will not attend services at a mosque while retaining or maintaining a Catholic identity, because of a perceived incommensurability between Catholic and Islamic identities. But by denying Buddhism status as a religion, it becomes possible - or so it is felt - both to maintain a Catholic identity and at the same time to participate in *zazen* meditation sessions. Were *zazen* meditation recognized as an essentially *Buddhist* practice, this duality would not be possible. Of course, the question of multiple religious belonging a complex issue, and in many contexts the stark dichotomy I sketch here does not apply, such as in Japan, where religious identity is essentially situational. Further considerations would lead us far from our central topic. Concerning the broader question, see for a start Cornille 2002, 2016.

13) How this would be processed in, for instance, a Japanese context of “situational religiosity” would require further consideration.

speaking, it would certainly appear that there are close parallels between the respective practices.

While perhaps even leaving more questions unanswered than answered, I hope that with this short presentation I succeeded in having suggested a possible widening of the attention heretofore given centrally to meditation as the primary avenue for the acquisition of wisdom within Buddhist traditions.

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