



Amidadō 阿弥陀堂

Buddhism without Meditation

Many people imagine Buddhism as a way of self-improvement through meditative practices. When they become interested in Buddhism, they often visit a temple with the goal of learning meditation.

In the different schools of Buddhism the forms of meditation are manifold, all with their own focuses and purposes. In the just sitting meditation of the Sōtō school of Zen Buddhism you just do that. You just sit, until you are able to cast off body and mind, and have a direct experience of emptiness.

In the moon disc meditation of the esoteric Shingonshū, you visualize a pure white moon disc within your own heart. You become one with this moon disc, which then expands more and more, until it encompasses the whole universe, thus making also you one with the whole universe.

In the shikan meditation of the Tendai-shū, you first calm your mind and then contemplate the oneness of provisional existence, emptiness of all things, and the fact that both of these are true at the same time.

These are just a few examples of the many forms of meditation that exist. Although they are quite different in their methodology, they all share the same goal of leading the practitioner to the realization of absolute truth. In other words, the goal of these meditations is enlightenment. Achieving enlightenment means to get rid of all your illusions and attachments, which is of course an extremely difficult task.

Accomplishing this through regular meditation takes quite some dedication and also an environment that enables the practitioner to continuously meditate without distractions, which is why Buddhism has always been a mainly monastic religion in Asia.

But what is with the people who are not able to follow such a strict routine? Either because their private circumstances do not allow them to take some quiet time out of their busy schedule or because they are just not able to sit still and concentrate for a long time.

Actually, not all schools of Buddhism practice meditation. The Shin Buddhist path does not require the follower to do meditative practices.

The image of Buddhism as a way of self-perfection through meditative practices is so strong, that some people are quite surprised when they hear that we do not meditate. So what do we do if we do not practice meditation?

In Shin Buddhism, listening to the Buddhist teachings is very important. Not just listening with our ears, but listening with our whole hearts. We then reflect on the teachings in our everyday lives. When we do so, we become aware of our sufferings and that of our fellow beings, and recognize the difficulty of overcoming these sufferings by our own willpower. This awareness helps us to let go. Let go of our ego, our self-centeredness, our desire to have everything going exactly the way we want it to, and our attachments.

This is when, for the first time, we are able to truly entrust ourselves to absolute reality, or suchness, which is embodied by Amida Buddha, when we call upon his name. As simple as this may seem, it can actually be very difficult to truly let go.

(Thomas Siebert)



“Whenever I am not sure whether something is true or not, I make a serious effort to find out what is true and what is not.”

— Yasuda Rijin, modern philosopher

As a child, if there was something I did not know or had doubts about, I would always ask my mother and father or my teachers “Why is that so?” or “Is this really true?” and so on, wishing to know the real meaning of things.

But, as I got older, I wouldn't always go to the trouble of verifying the truth of the matter. I would just

arbitrarily decide what was “true.” I would assume things were true, to the point I came to mistakenly believe in things like fortune-telling and false rumors.

As to whether we should take something seriously or not, we should note that we are heavily influenced by the working of our own mind. Buddhism teaches us to take the working of our

own mind into consideration, and to question our hidden assumptions toward things.

By knowing ourselves in this way and being more honest with our own mind, wouldn't we be in a much better position to know what is “true” and what is not?

(Minamimidō, November 2015. Osaka: Shinshū Ōtani-ha Nanbabetuin)



Otoki

Origin of the Term

Otoki refers to the meal offered at a Buddhist service.

The Ancient History of Japan says people were served otoki during Buddhist ceremonies. This was a time when Buddhist monks and Buddha statues first appeared in Japan. The traditional otoki meal has thus been a

part of traditional Buddhist services ever since the religion first came here.

Otoki is not simply a meal. Rennyō Shōnin would heartily say, "Let us all put our hands together and receive this wonderful otoki meal as if we were receiving the blessings from the Tathāgata and Shinran Shōnin

themselves!" Buddhism teaches us that otoki is a time when we receive the energy to live from the living vegetables that have been prepared for our meal. It is also an opportunity to sit quietly and reflect on the nature of our own heart of faith.

What's in the Meal?

Otoki is a wholly vegetarian meal, centered mainly around rice and vegetables, with no meat, poultry, or seafood used. This comes from the Buddhist teaching to refrain from the taking of life. Although the custom of otoki is becoming increasingly rare, even today there are still some

temples and communities that prepare the traditional otoki meal from farm produce that has been brought in by people to serve as the meal. At the Higashi Honganji's major Hōonkō service in November each year, our guests are served a simple otoki meal made up of three small vegetarian

dishes, soup, rice, and pickles. All the ingredients needed such as lotus root and shiitake mushrooms are brought by Shinshū followers from throughout Japan for this special service.

Mealtime Benedictions

In our Shinshū Ōtani branch (known as Higashi Honganji), the following words are recited at mealtime.

Before meal: "Under the Buddha's guiding light, how fortunate we are to receive this wonderful blessing of food." After meal: "We have just

received this wonderful blessing of food that now fills our entire body and soul."

We receive the energy to live by receiving the energy from the lives of other living things such as vegetables. Having an otoki meal provides us with

the opportunity to reflect on the true significance of what it is we are eating and the sheer preciousness of the life we are all sharing.

The People who Support Higashi Honganji

Goeidō Hall decorating and other various preparations for Buddhist ceremonies are made possible thanks to the help of followers and businesses. For example, the altar flowers offered in the hall are from Hanako Shōten, which has been providing Higashi Honganji with meticulously cared-for flowers for over two hundred years. Also, otoki meals are served with the help of the Ōtani branch's Hoshinkai, comprised of people from a total of fifty-nine businesses, such as goods procurement. The caterer Izusen, a member of the Hoshinkai, cooks the food.

The religious associations called *kō* that assist the Ōtani branch with the Hōonkō and other affairs are said to have begun during the time of Rennyo Shōnin, when followers would come together to spend time with each other, talk, and reconfirm their faith on a specific day of the month. Since then, these gatherings have provided organizational support to the school's head temple. Let's take a look at what happens behind the scenes at Higashi Honganji.

Ceremonies and Daily Services: Who's Involved?

Q: Who rings the temple bell every day?

A: The nakaban. Rung one hour in advance, the temple bell is a sign for people to gather for a Buddhist service. For the 7:00 AM service, it is sounded eleven times at 5:20 in the spring and fall, 4:50 in the summer, and 5:50 in the winter. It's also rung for Hōonkō and the spring Buddhist services.

Q: Who serves the food after services and ceremonies?

A: Members of the Ōtani's school's Hoshinkai. This group was formed after business owners, who came together to help rebuild Higashi Honganji along with priests following the 1864 Kinmon incident, started to do business rooted in their Buddhist faith.

Q: Who oversees the flames in the temple's halls?

A: The kōkaban. He or she lights the charcoal used for incense, oversees and prepares the candles and lamp oil used during services, and also helps take care of the statues.

Q: Who prepares the ingredients for otoki?

A: Members of the Shin school associations throughout Japan called *kō*. For example, the Ren'yū-kō (Nagoya) provides lotus roots, the Okesoku-kō (Nagoya) daikon radish, and Shiitake-kō (Nippō) dried shiitake. There are many other kinds of *kō*, such as the Hoshino Ocha-kō (Kurume), and the Siba-kō (Osaka). Followers from throughout Japan also donate rice, burdock root, and so on.

(Dōbō, April 2014. Kyoto: Higashi Honganji Shuppanbu)

