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THE POLITICAL HISTORY OF MEDITATION AND YOGA IN JAPAN

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Introduction

Meditation and yoga are generally considered spiritual, peaceful and harmonic. So how does a meditation group become politically active and even engage in terrorism? For some, the subject of meditation and yoga in Japan may trigger memories of Aum-Shinrikyō. Originally a small yoga circle named Aum no Kai (later called Aum Shinse no Kai), it was founded by Asahara Shōkō (1955–2018) in 1984 and then rapidly grew into a conspicuous new religious group, constructing a doctrine based on Esoteric Buddhism and Hinduism. In 1990, it set up its own political party and ran for the House of Representatives election. After the complete defeat of the party’s candidates, the group turned to terrorism to achieve its goals. Nevertheless, Aum-Shinrikyō was continuously dedicated to meditation practice. Many scholars have analysed Aum-Shinrikyō from sociological and psychological perspectives. However, to properly supply a politico-religious perspective, we have to go back to the root of the question: What is the relationship between meditation and politics in the case of Aum-Shinrikyō?

Is Aum-Shinrikyō an exceptional case in the history of meditation? Many scholars of Japanese religious history may agree with its exceptionalism. Japan has traditionally been home to many kinds of meditation, including chanting, contemplation, breathing methods and sitting and lying techniques. Buddhism, Confucianism and Shintō all had such physical, mental and spiritual practices. These religions in Japan were close to centres of political power throughout Japanese history and usually played a subordinate or complementary role there; in contrast, Aum-Shinrikyō tried to subvert the state. However, I argue that this conclusion is based on erroneously applying modern assumptions about the nature of ‘state’, ‘politics’ and ‘religion’ (assuming, for example, a separation of religion and politics) to Aum-Shinrikyō and historical Japan. Even in the history of yoga in India, scholars also point out that ascetic groups were sometimes militarised, and yogic ideology was closely associated with the Indian independence struggle (see Voix Chapter 11 in this volume). Therefore, a critical review of these modern concepts and a better understanding of the role meditation techniques have played in Japanese history are essential in understanding the political aspects of yoga and meditation and the nature of Aum-Shinrikyō.

Foucault and Schmitt have re-examined the concept of ‘politics’, not based on the concepts in modern civil society, but by considering on what basis the modern state was established. By
applying Foucault and Schmitt’s conceptions of power, we can better understand the political nature of Aum-Shinrikyō as a yoga and meditation-focused group, by exploring three points: (1) meditation techniques are used to create (self) disciplinary power; (2) meditation techniques can be used as a channel for a sovereign (political) power; and (3) specific bodily techniques can be used in aid of us/them or friend/enemy distinctions which are inherently political.

Analysing Daoist meditation, Marcel Mauss, who recognised the social aspects of body techniques, suggested that ‘at the bottom of all our mystical states there are body techniques’ and that humans imitate actions that have been performed by people with authority and prestige (Mauss 1979: 122). Though Mauss focused on the sociocultural dimensions of body techniques, we can extend this discussion to the political, which Michel Foucault framed as ‘discipline’, as a form of modern power. According to Foucault:

[T]he procedures of power that characterized the disciplines, centred on the body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimisation of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls.

(Foucault 1978: 139)

In this sense, body techniques (including meditation) have a political function: disciplinary power. However, in most modern and contemporary contexts, meditation has rarely been employed by official institutions (e.g. army, schools, prison, etc.) as an explicit technique of power and has remained in unofficial, private or alternative spaces.

Aum-Shinrikyō intended not only to gain legal political power, but also to overthrow the state; its political vision went beyond politics within modern law. Schmitt defines a state ‘which is not codified in the existing legal order’ as ‘the exception’ (Schmitt 2005: 6) and asserts that the ‘[s]overeign is he who decides on the exception’ (Schmitt 2005: 5). Asahara, based on predictions from his meditation, judged contemporary society as being in an exceptional situation leading to ‘World War III’, and insisted that those who will be able to survive the coming war and become members of the next ‘millennial kingdom’ will be people who have acquired a virtue and a ‘transcendental power’ through meditative training. In other words, Asahara and Aum-Shinrikyō judged what ‘a state of exception’ was and identified themselves as the sovereign in the upcoming world. This ‘state of exception’ is not defined by any codified phenomena, but rather can only be recognised by visioning a world order outside of the visible one. For Asahara and Aum-Shinrikyō, meditation was the channel for that ‘outside’ order.

What the sovereign does in a state of exception is to establish and maintain order, and thus clarify the structure and limits of this new sovereignty, regardless of existing legal frameworks or national boundaries. In accordance with this order, the ‘sovereign’ educates and, if education fails, excludes people. Schmitt also argued that ‘the concept of the state presupposes the concept of the political’, and that the specifically political distinction is between ‘friend and enemy’, where antagonism has ‘the real possibility of physical killing’ (Schmitt 2007: 19). The political is thus differentiated from other categories, including the religious, the economical, the ethical and so on, and, at the same time, ‘[e]very religious, moral, economic, ethical, or other antithesis transforms into a political one if it is sufficiently strong to group human beings effectively according to friend and enemy’ (Schmitt 2007: 37). No matter how a meditation envisions a harmonious, peaceful and religious world, a religious movement reaches a friend and enemy antithesis, or ‘the political’, when it adopts an uncompromising opposition to the current order. Aum-Shinrikyō’s violence occurred when its religious distinction of good and evil had
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intensified to this extent. In this chapter, we examine how these three political natures, exemplified in the example of Aum-Shinrikyō, emerged in the history of meditation and yoga in Japan.

Before going into a detailed historical overview, I will briefly outline each historical period of Japanese history under discussion. The first period I will cover spans both ancient and medieval periods. The ancient period considered here is from the third to tenth centuries. During this time, Buddhism, which is closely related to meditation and yoga, was introduced from Korea and China. In the medieval era, between the eleventh and sixteenth centuries, the social system was based on feudalism and manorialism. In the next section I will cover the early modern era, from the sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries. During this period, one of the samurai families, the Tokugawa family, usurped the feudal system and ruled all over Japan, adopting a foreign policy of national isolation. Around the end of this period, the Tokugawa shogunate dropped its isolationist policy in response to strong demands from western countries. This led to a loss of Tokugawa’s authority and political turmoil in Japan. Marking the beginning of the modern period, the shogunate collapsed. A modern, centralised national system was established with a constitutional monarchy and a (restrictive) separation of religion and state. At this point, meditation, including Zen, became popular as a form of personal, spiritual cultivation. Also at this time, Japan embarked on colonial expansion. After World War II, in the midst of rapid economic growth, New Religious Movements (NRMs) flourished in Japan. Following student riots in the 1960s, modern yoga took root in Japan, together with influences from the New Age movement. Aum Shinrikyō was founded in this context.

Buddhism and meditation from the ancient to medieval periods

Buddhism is an important genealogical source of meditation in Japanese culture. Buddhism was officially introduced through China and Korea in the sixth century. However, during the mid-seventh century full-scale meditative Buddhist philosophy, and most likely its associated practices (Minowa 2015: 75), arrived in Japan by Dōshō (道昭, 629–700), who had studied within the Chinese Buddhist school Fǎxiàng (法相). Fǎxiàng is based in the Indian Yōgačāra lineage and is characterised by an epistemological analysis of the means of attaining enlightenment. During the eighth century other Buddhist traditions arrived in Japan, later called Nanto Rokushū (南都六宗). Supported by the Japanese government, these traditions established schools which mainly studied imported Buddhist texts and prayed for the protection of the nation.

Meditative practices have flourished in Japan since the ninth century. Zhiyi (538–597), the founder of the Chinese Buddhist school Tiantai, wrote two influential texts of meditation, Mohe Zhiguan (摩訶史観) and Xiao Zhiguan (小止観), which were imported by the founder of the Japanese Tiantai (Tendai in Japanese pronunciation) school, Saichō (767–822), into Japan. The Tendai school became the biggest and most integrated centre of Buddhism in the medieval period. At the same time, the founder of the Shingon school, Kūkai (774–835), energetically introduced Esoteric Buddhism, the newest theory in China at that time, which developed by incorporating aspects of Hinduism. In Japanese Esoteric Buddhism, meditative practices including yoga (generally called yuga 瑜伽) were the way to secret truth. By reaching the truth, it was said that the monks were able to obtain supernatural powers, especially the ability to fulfil people’s wishes. Their practices of praying for spiritual merit (and thereby health, safety and prosperity) were called kaji, a term that originally came from Sanskrit adhisṭhāna, which refers to the Buddha’s power to help people. As a response to this orientation towards meeting people’s desires, Esoteric Buddhist meditative kaji prayers became popular. The Tendai school and Nanto Rokushū also incorporated this practice, and Esoteric Buddhism flourished in medieval Japan.
Esoteric Buddhist ideologies deeply influenced Japanese thought. Through one of the ideologies, the theory of honji suijaku (本地垂迹, which positions Japanese gods as local manifestations of buddhas, bodhisattvas and Buddhist deities), Japanese local gods were for the first time systematically classed as Shintō from the tenth century. What is called Shintō was originally ancestor worship, shamanism, animism various practices (including something meditative) in the Japanese islands and local myths and national myths including Kojiki (古事記, Japan’s Ancient Chronicle) and Nihonshoki (日本書紀, the Chronicles of Japan). After Esoteric Buddhist ideologies prevailed, Shintō theories and practices were interpreted using Buddhist, or sometimes Daoist, terminology; there was a close syncretism between Japanese gods and buddhas. Therefore, Buddhist influence is pervasive in the development of Shintō’s practices and meditations.

Zen schools also appeared in close relationship to Esoteric Buddhism. Yōsai (栄西, 1141–1215), the founder of the Japanese Rinzai (臨濟) school of Zen studied in Japanese Tendai schools as well as in the Zen school of Linji (臨濟) in China. He was not only a Zen master but also an Esoteric Buddhist monk and, as his writing named Kozen gokoku ron (興禅護國論) shows, set up Japanese Zen Buddhism more for publicly protecting the state than for privately reaching Buddhist truth. Dōgen (道元, 1200–1253), the founder of the Japanese Sōtō school, learned Zen under Yōsai, studied abroad in the Song dynasty and brought a purified Zen style to Japan. Dōgen’s Sōtō school is now one of the largest Buddhist groups in Japan, but this achievement is attributed to the second great founder, Keizan Jōkin (愛山紹鏡, 1268–1325), who also adopted Esoteric Buddhism kōji prayers and greatly proselytised to the lower samurai class.

These Zen schools were regarded as heresies in Kyoto (the Japanese capital at that time) by the Tendai school. They therefore courted the patronage of the samurai class, which had recently become dominant in the Kantō district (around Tokyo at present). Since the mid-thirteenth century, leaders of rising military families had founded and patronised the Five Mountain System (a conglomerate of Zen Buddhist temples appointed and sponsored by the government) in the Kantō and Kyoto regions as the centres of Japanese Rinzai Zen Buddhism (imitating the Chinese Five Mountain System). Buddhist monks who studied in and migrated from China (the Southern Song and Ming dynasties) were often appointed as chief priests of these temples and also played a role as diplomatic consultants.

In the medieval era, there was also the development of the meditative practice of Pure Land Buddhism, nenbutsu (念仏 in Chinese, chanting and recollecting the name of Amitābha). In the Pure Land teaching, if one practices nenbutsu, one can rebirth in the Pure Land, equivalent to the attainment of Buddhist enlightenment. The groups of nenbutsu monks, who had drifted all over Japan, solicited incentives while spreading nenbutsu among the populace in the form of dances and songs, and grew by taking in wanderers who had been driven into giving up their land by poverty. Shinran (親鸞, 1173–1262) emerged from one of those groups (Sueki 1992: 206) and established the systematic doctrine on nenbutsu. Shinran’s group also became one of the largest Buddhist groups in Japan today, which is called Jōdo Shinshū (Shin Buddhism).

Generally speaking, the ultimate goal of Buddhism is to reach nirvana, understood as a state of freedom from desire and suffering. Accordingly, Buddhism is often considered to be detached from this-worldly things, including politics. Considered from this soteriological end, Buddhism in Japan seems ‘this worldly’. However, we have to understand the multi-layered experience of the medieval world. Buddhism also had detached aspects, not only theoretically but also practically. Buddhist temples and territories often had the function of asylum (asile). Temple properties had not only the privilege of immunity from taxation but also the privilege of being able to cancel debts and crimes in the secular world (outside the Buddhist temple). From the perspective of secular people, Buddhist temples seemed to enjoy a kind of extraterritorial power and
freedom. The historian Amino has argued that at the basis of these functions was the Buddhist principle of ‘muen’ (無縁) – detachment, non-possession, no-masters and the Buddhist ultimate goals (Amino 1996: 110–124). Under the name of this principle, alliances were formed between the lower class, fugitives and some schools of Zen and Pure Land Buddhism.

Yet, the world of muen (detachment) should not be understood as a paradise of freedom or liberation; it was also a world bound by strict disciplines like a ‘prison’ (Amino 1996: 26–27). In addition, the privilege of muen was obtained not only from the patronage of the secular powers but also by the substantial power of the temples themselves. In the medieval era, the political power of temples surpassed that of the samurai and aristocrats. For example, Enryakuji temple, the centre of the Tendai school, had more territory than the Kamakura family, a top samurai family at that time (Itō 2008). Temples’ incomes were not only from their agricultural lands, but also from tolls on roads which were constructed by Buddhist monks and their followers as part of relief work; they made enormous profits. In order to extend and protect this land income and privilege, they maintained a large military power composed of sōhei (monk soldiers). The Emperor Shirakawa (1053–1129) cited ‘monks in Mr. Hiei (the mountain where Enryakuji temple built)’ as being beyond his control (Unknown 1623: lvs. 34). The Honganji temple, one of the head temples of Shin Buddhism, organised and led groups of nenbutsu (Pure Land) and lay people. Under the leadership of Shin Buddhist priests, these groups took up arms, rioting and setting up independent states in several districts.

In short, Buddhism in the medieval era had an autonomous political power – i.e. sovereign power. Its authority was embodied in authentic texts, sacred places, symbolic rituals, magical prayers and meditative practices. Buddhism also served as a window for Chinese civilisation, a symbol related to dynastic power. Therefore, the universal state of nirvana, or Buddhist truth, can be understood in the Japanese context as a channel for outside authority. Although the kingship, the ruling power of the Kyoto court, accommodated Esoteric Buddhist activities, protecting these activities was also a way of legitimising the monarch’s power by referring to outside authority. Simultaneously, Buddhist monks were understood to maintain the stability of the kingdom through the magical power generated by monks’ meditations. Therefore, even in the ancient era, Emperor Shōmu (701–756) regarded himself as ‘the slave of the Three Treasures’ (i.e. the Buddha, dhamma and sangha). From around the medieval to the early modern era, an Esoteric Buddhist Anointment rite was part of the enthronement rites of the Emperor of Japan (Taira 1992: 462). The authority of Buddhism even surpassed the kingship authority in some regards, because although Buddhism was legally under the domestic rule of the kingship, it had authority more widely over Asia. Therefore, it was politically advantageous for the kingdom to favour Buddhism. In other words, Buddhism in Japan’s medieval period reciprocally supported and was supported by the kingship. For the kingship, Buddhism was a channel for the ‘outside’ order and, acknowledging the importance of the ‘outside’ authority, the kingship had to be subject to Buddhism as a ‘state of exception’.

**Transformations in the early modern era**

In the late fifteenth century, shortly before the Ōnin War (1467–1477), the power balance of the ruling families who sustained the unified state collapsed definitively. This marked the beginning of the Sengoku (Warring States) period. Many local warlords arose, and some Buddhist temples strengthened their forces of sōhei (warrior monks). At this time the Honganji (a denomination of Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism), defending its autonomous state, organised guerrilla armies of supporters to attack territories ruled by warlords. It was said that the Honganji group was one of the most formidable enemies of Oda Nobunaga (1534–1582), the most powerful warlord of the
time who almost unified and ruled all of Japan. Sueki points out that some schools of Buddhism at this time, including Shin and Nichiren, rejected the existing view that the kingship (which ruled this world) and Buddhism (which had sovereignty over the other world) should maintain mutually complementary relations. This supported a monistic and autonomous view that Buddhist dharma should rule both this and other world orders (Sueki 2010: 22–26). This period was, as Schmitt (2007) describes, ‘a state of exception’ in which one’s own ability to wield power was more important than power derived from acknowledgement by an accepted authority.

However, during this period, Buddhism’s military autonomy declined. Eventually, Oda Nobunaga made the Buddhist groups surrender and his successor, Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536–1598), issued a ‘sword-hunting order’ to disarm the Buddhist temples. After this, the Tokugawa shogunate ruled local lords in a unified state, marking the beginning of the early modern period, the Edo period, from 1603. The Tokugawa shogunate controlled the Buddhist temples, but entrusted them with the administrative functions of keeping family registers and enforcing anti-Christian edicts. For this reason, Buddhism in the early modern era did not decline, but gained institutional stability and even prospered in its economic and cultural aspects. The Buddhist temples became local ‘cultural centres, providing education, entertainment and healthcare’ (Sueki 2010: 39). Buddhism became deeply rooted in people’s lives, such that even in contemporary Japan funerals are generally held in Buddhist ceremonies. In this way, Buddhism became part of disciplinary power and biopower, which Foucault discusses as a modern technology of power for managing large populations. Buddhism underpinned the Tokugawa regime by playing a part in the education and management of people.

Simultaneously, the political function of Buddhism as a sovereign power was significantly weakened as the Tokugawa shogunate did not rely on an ‘outside’ power to justify its authority. The Tokugawa shogunate maintained a stable, autonomous and semi-centralised government for almost 250 years. Although it did not totally centralise, it had authority and power over local lords in a kind of absolute monarchism, as well as adopting a foreign policy of national isolation (sakoku, 鎖国) (Toby 1984; Ōshima 2006). On the pretext of prohibiting Christian missionary activity, the Tokugawa shogunate banned trade with almost all foreign countries and overseas travel by the Japanese. As exceptions, China and the Netherlands were trading partners, but there was no opportunity to study abroad as medieval Buddhist monks had done. The Tokugawa shogunate cut off its connection with the ‘outside’ world and Buddhism lost the physical reference of transcendental power. As a result, Buddhism was incorporated into the Tokugawa regime and was ‘secularised’. The Tokugawa shogunate did not require acknowledgement from Buddhism, but it desired an enhancement of its own authority. Therefore, a Tendai monk, Tenkai (1536–1643), worked to enshrine the founder of the Tokugawa shogunate, Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542–1616) as a god (Sonehara 2008). Buddhism took a subordinate role in the regime. Meanwhile, Confucianism and Kokugaku were emerging as new ideologies of politics and anti-Buddhism.

**Confucianism and the imperial family line in Japan**

Confucianism itself is an ideology for governance. Its political ideal is typically shown by a phrase in the Lìjì (礼記, the Book of Rites): ‘those who wish to rule the land must first cultivate their own characters, then manage their families, then govern their states, then bring peace to the world’. Therefore, the goal of Confucianism is to raise the virtue of rulers. Zhu Xi (朱熹, 1130–1200) synthesised the concept of Confucianism, and his philosophy was often called neo-Confucianism. Zhu Xi reinterpreted cultivating one’s character as seeking the perfect knowledge of li (理), the metaphysical law which is consistent between nature and society,
and then controlling \( qi \) (気), the matter which composes the physical world. The proper state of consciousness was called \( gyeong \) (敬), meaning reverence, respect or modesty. The investigation of \( li \) (窮理) and the maintenance of \( gyeong \) (居敬) were like two sides of the same coin. To achieve these goals, Zhu Xi advocated both reading Confucian texts and practising meditation, or \( jìngzuò \) (静坐, quiet sitting). Neo-Confucianism became the subject of the higher civil service examination in Chinese regimes.

In medieval Japan, the Rinzai founder Yōsai introduced neo-Confucianism in Rinzai temples. But in the early Edo period, Japanese Confucianism became independent from Buddhism through the work of Hayashi Razan (1583–1657). Razan regarded \( li \) as the fixed relationship between superiors and inferiors and conceptualised the class system as the ideal social regime. Since it had the capacity to justify the relationship between ruler and ruled under the Tokugawa shogunate, neo-Confucianism was supported by the government. Therefore, Confucianism became a basic educational subject for the ruling class (now the samurai class) and quiet sitting was often practised. For example, Satō Issai (1772–1859), a son of a chief retainer’s family and a famous Confucian teacher, recommended quiet sitting for personal cultivation. Confucian teachers often criticised Buddhism, warning against indulgence in meditation; they emphasised not transcending but staying in, supporting and reforming this secular world (Nakajima 2012). Therefore, meditation in Japanese neo-Confucian contexts strove to cultivate dutiful and loyal members of the ruling class. Unlike Buddhism in previous generations, neo-Confucianism did not facilitate charismatic authority within the privileged elites through association with an ‘outside’ authority.

Hayashi Razan argued for the unification of Confucianism and Shintō, thereby separating Confucianism from Buddhism. The founder of the Kimon School, Yamazaki Ansai (1618–1682), went further and developed a neo-Confucian–Shintō theory (垂加神道, Suika Shintō). Focusing on \( gyeong \), he interpreted this as the maintenance of Shin (神, god), an ideal unification of \( li \) and \( qi \). Moreover, Ansai drew upon the Japanese creation myth in the Nihon Shoki to develop an ideal ‘way of Shin’. According to Ansai, maintaining the genealogy of the Emperor of Japan was the ‘way of Shin’, therefore it was not only the Confucian ideal action but also the Japanese people’s ultimate ethical action, i.e. Shintō (the way of gods). The Emperor of Japan began to be viewed as the focus point of Shintō, and the Confucian practice of quiet sitting (\( gyeong \)) was transformed from an abstract personal cultivation to a concrete ethical action of Shintō which upholds the order of the world (Ushio 2008).

Japanese Confucianism was primarily educational and ethical; it did not have a well-established independent organisation or military authority. However, when its ideology reached the Emperor of Japan, it quickly came into contact with sovereign power. During this period, the Emperor of Japan, who used to be the most powerful and the most elite of the noble families, had been weakened and was under the control of the Tokugawa shogunate. Yet, to preserve appearances, the head of the Tokugawa family was appointed as commander-in-chief by the Emperor. Therefore, the Emperor’s authority indirectly appeared to transcend and legitimise Tokugawa’s shogunate, even though the Emperor’s authority was not directly based on military power. In other words, at the level of Schmitt’s ‘sovereign power’, early modern Japan potentially had a dual power structure. Ansai’s Suika Shintō created the possibility of exposing this duality and promoting the cause of the Emperor against the Tokugawa shogunate. Japanese Confucianism, especially the Kimon school, became a source of a political radicalism called \( sōnomūji \) (尊皇攘夷, ‘revere the Emperor and expel the barbarians’) through the Mitogaku (an influential school of Japanese historical studies). Its ideology was broadly shared among those working to overthrow the Tokugawa shogunate at the time of national crisis (another ‘a state of exception’) at the end of the Edo Period.
Kokugaku and Daoism

In Japan, the majority of Confucian scholars ran private schools (Unoda 2007). Some of them criticised neo-Confucianism as a concoction by Zhu Xi and different from real Confucianism from the ancient period. After the appearance of Ito Jinsai’s Kogigaku (study of ancient meaning) and Ogyu Sorai’s Kobunjigaku (study of ancient rhetoric), some scholars questioned the mediating role of language. In other words, the study of Confucianism began to seek ‘true’ meanings in the more classic texts and, sometimes, beyond the texts themselves. Meditation was often attributed importance for seeking direct truths thought to lie beyond texts. For example, Shingaku (心学, heart learning) was founded by Ishida Baigan (1685–1744) and popularised among the merchant class and wealthy farmers that rose from the mid-to-late Edo period. Shingaku blended Shintō, Confucianism and Buddhism and highly regarded quiet sitting for self-cultivation. The core of its ethics was simple honesty, frugality and diligence – and it was easily adapted to business ethics rather than politics (Bellah 1957), but it was also a practical pursuit of Confucian truth. Takahashi Kōsetsu (1819–1876), the president of the Shingaku association in Edo, went on to the direct pursuit of li, and finally approached the Rinzai Zen school (Sawada 2004).

The Rinzai school had stagnated in the early Edo period, but Hakuin (1685–1768) revived it, renewed its training system and widely promoted its Zen ideas. The revival of Rinzai Zen corresponded with a growing interest in valuing truth lying outside of texts. Hakuin is also well known for his books on self-care: Orategama (遠羅釜) and Yasenkanna (夜船閑話). These books proposed meditative breathing methods as a way to contribute to good health and composure of mind. Hakuin’s medical instructions, which often included ethical and spiritual dimensions, were based on the traditional Chinese concepts of yin-yang (陰陽) and qi (氣) and used in Daoism, Confucianism and some Buddhist contexts. Hakuin’s meditative breathing was the mainly Daoist technique of generating tan (丹, dān in Chinese), understood as a kind of elixir inside the human body that can be manipulated by controlling qi with breathing; internal tan is said to be mainly stored in the lower abdomen and called Tanden (丹田). However, Hakuin, probably to enhance his credibility, claimed Tanden breathing techniques were taught by a hsiens or mountain hermit, Hakuyū (?–1709), who lived in a mountain near Kyoto. This episode shows that although the ‘outside authority’ was still useful in enhancing legitimacy, this now came from mysterious neighbouring mountains rather than another country with more historical links to Buddhism.

These tendencies were brought into the Kokugaku (the study of Japanese classics) movement. The founder of the movement, Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801), sought to uncover the true meaning of Japanese classics as such Kojiki, removing the influences of Buddhism and Confucianism. He identified the Ancient Way (古道), or Shintō, in the first volume of the Kojiki. This was understood as just to let it be, throwing away any contrived action, including meditative self-cultivation and governing the state. Thereby, an ideal society, where all people are harmonised around the Emperor of Japan, the scion of the universal god Amaterasu, could naturally appear (Motoori 1991). However, in times of serious national crisis, the conservative attitude was able to induce political radicalism beyond Motoori’s position.

Hirata Atsutane (1776–1843) described a more concrete worldview of Shintō within the Kokugaku movement. Hirata’s worldview had a motley ‘outer’ world, in which gods, the dead (ancestors), monsters and so on also reside, as in fairy tales. He insisted that the other world adjoined this world through various neighbouring places, especially mountains. Unlike Confucian rationalism, which dismantled wonders, his affirmation of the existence of such things appealed to much of the populace. At the same time, Hirata tried to demonstrate the existence of these non-human forces/beings in the world. To this end, he focused on hsiens
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The mountain hermits) and interviewed someone who claimed to have lived with a hermit. Hirata argued that hsien were living gods who had supernatural abilities, could move between worlds and had been living in the Japanese mountains since before the arrival of Buddhism (Hirata 2000).

As a doctor Hirata also had interest in hsien’s meditative arts for longevity and immortality. As mentioned, hsien and these techniques of meditation stemmed from popular Daoism. However, Hirata reinterpreted these techniques as the ‘way of gods’. He understood the original Tanden breathing technique as nothing less than the uncontrived, natural breathing of gods. However, he saw his contemporary world as confused by foreign influence; therefore people had to intentionally use the Tanden breathing technique to access ‘the way’. Hirata regarded yoga in India, Buddhist asceticism, Daoist practices and other religious beliefs as a partial record of the Tanden breathing technique. In his view, Tanden techniques would produce more than individual longevity and immortality; it was the technique for manifesting an ancient utopia through our bodies.

Thus, during the Edo period, the Hirata School’s philosophy reconstructed an external Shintō worldview and positioned Shintō practices, including meditation, as its channels. Through meditative philosophy, Yamazaki Ansai constructed Shintō as a personal ethical system, while Hirata constructed a Shintō worldview of utopian powers and a more-than-human Japanese community. The Kokugaku movement fashioned a utopian social image out of Hirata’s worldview and influenced the sonnōjōi (‘revere the Emperor and expel the barbarians’) movement. Moreover, though Hirata’s worldview was clearly different from the modern nation state, it became the foundation of the Great Promulgation movement after the Meiji Restoration, as I will describe below. Hirata’s utopian philosophy, closely linked to meditative and breathing techniques, continued to inspire a passionate justification for sovereign power at the root of the Japanese modern nation state.

Meditation and yoga in the modern period

The Meiji Restoration in 1868 had two contradictory aspects: the Restoration of Imperial Rule (王政復古) and Westernisation (文明開化). During the 1850s, western countries pressed the Tokugawa shogunate to stop the national isolation policy and to sign unequal treaties. After the shogunate submitted to this pressure, an extensive anti-foreign movement emerged. Leaders of the movement, who mostly came from the low-level samurai class, supported the Emperor of Japan in order to justify attacking the shogunate, and the idea of sonnōjōi became popular. However, leaders of the movement were aware of the powerful military force of western countries and strongly felt a need for westernisation. Modernising their military capability, the anti-foreign factions overthrew the shogunate and established a new centralised administrative framework called the Meiji government.

The Meiji government therefore had to execute both modernisation and restoration – and did so in a dictatorial fashion. In 1868 it established a separation of Shintō and Buddhism and promoted the Great Promulgation campaign, advocating Shintō as a national moral ideology for unifying national identity and facing off against foreign beliefs, especially Christianity, in the tradition of the Hirata School. In 1872, the Meiji government took advantage of Buddhist infrastructure to promote its ideological agenda with the Shintō–Buddhist Joint Propagation (神仏合同布教) – a movement not without its tensions.

Other leaders of the Meiji Restoration believed that a ‘modern’ model of separation of church and state was necessary in order for Japan to be recognised as a civilised nation. As a result, the Great Promulgation campaign collapsed, and the hard-line followers of Hirata School were purged from the nucleus of the educational (religious) ministry. The government
pushed westernisation and even recommended Christianity during the 1880s. Finally, the Meiji Constitution, which was granted by the Emperor in 1889, stipulated religious freedom. The government administratively decided that Shintō was not a religion but national rites. Therefore, official priests in Shintō shrines could no longer be permitted to propagate their teaching. To proselytise, Shintō officials had to operate as one of Shintō’s sects (Kyōha Shintō) without direct official support.

It was in this context that the Empire of Japan was established, with the Emperor of Japan as a nominal sovereign. However, the leaders of the most powerful regions at that time, Chōshū and Satsuma, administered power in practice. Additionally, state sovereignty had been limited by the unequal treaties and pressures from ‘western’ nations. Dissident movements of this time focused on the question of who had sovereignty – the Emperor of Japan, the leaders of Chōshū and Satsuma, or European and US powers? An anti-government movement named the Liberty and Civil Rights movement (自由民, 権運動) gained ground in the 1880s. This movement was highly critical of the despotic government led by Chōshū and Satsuma and demanded civil rights and popular suffrage; it is therefore often viewed as a democratic movement. However, this movement saw suffrage as a means, not an end. The ideological focus was actually on sovereignty, and in the beginning there were also advocates of a direct rule by the Emperor in this movement.

A Rinzai Zen abbot, Imakita Kōsen (1816–1892), had been a key player co-operating with the post-Meiji Great Promulgation campaign, and Okunomiya Zosai (1811–1877), an officer of the educational (religious) ministry, supported Imakita’s activities. Okunomiya was an intellectual from the Tosa region (Kōchi prefecture at present) who had been influenced by Confucianism, Kokugaku and western political thought. In 1875, Okunomiya and Imakita began a zazen meditation meeting named Ryomokai (両忘会) (Sugiyama 2013; Kurita 2019). Imakita emphasised the importance of seeking non-textual truth and insisted on a Great Way (大道), which he claimed was coincident with Shintō, Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism (Imakita 1935: 44–45). In this context, meditation was presented as transcending the doctrinal differences of religions. It likely attracted people who had been sympathetic to the ideals of the Great Promulgation campaign but had become disappointed by internal conflicts.

Interestingly, some of these lay Buddhists later led the Liberty and Civil Rights movement during the 1880s. Important figures were Nakae Chōmin (1847–1901), a famous translator of Rousseau’s Social Contracts, and Torio Tokuan (1847–1905), a dissident army lieutenant and later pioneer of the Japanese conservative movement. These men were influenced by French political theories, but interpreted them in Confucian and Buddhist terms. For example, Nakae regarded liberté morale in French as the idea of the great and prosperous qi of The Discourses of Mencius, which also corresponded to the ‘unyielding mind’ in Japanese neo-Confucianism (Kajita 1992). Torio’s interpretation of liberté was as a moral decision derived from Buddhist and Confucian perspectives (Manabe 2001). Nakae and Torio appealed to the government to establish an elected legislature, introduce civil rights and revise unequal trading treaties. But additionally these political theorists encouraged the population to recover an energetic qi of the nation, which was regarded as the foundation of an independent state. In this spirit, the Liberty and Civil Rights movement encouraged the formation of a unified national identity. Imakita’s meeting for Zen meditation functioned as an incubator of the new intersectional politico-religious promulgation. For these political leaders, meditation practices function as an independent source of the truth and an ideal of the unified nation, beyond the existing authority or written texts.

This indicates that even in the modern era, meditation has a theoretical and ideological function that was closely associated with ‘this worldly’, sovereign power. However, the
establishment of a modern sovereign state and the modern separation of religions and politics have weakened the power of individual religions to claim political sovereignty. In addition, general acceptance of modern natural science has undermined beliefs in myths and non-human entities. The sovereign power of meditation, however, continued to develop – not through association with individual religious ideologies, but by universally transcending them.

Psychologisation and universalisation of meditation

Though it had political meaning for some leaders as mentioned above, generally speaking, meditation was often closely associated with self-cultivation and self-care, namely 禪 (zen). But westernisation and the introduction of western science changed the context. In 1874, the Japanese government adopted the National Medical License Examination, based on western medicine; religious practices for healing were prohibited if they were regarded as hindrances to medical practice. Historical medical ideas were replaced by biomedical ones and the credibility of qi-based theories was radically undermined. Moreover, the Meiji government abolished the class system and asserted that people were able to succeed economically and socially according to their effort. Meditation seemed to decline among ‘civilised’ people and a translation of Self Help (1859) by the Scotsman Samuel Smiles was popular.

However, feeling intensely competitive against Christianity, Buddhist intellectuals presented Buddhism as a rational, scientific or philosophical religion. By doing so, they argued for the usefulness of Buddhism in ‘civilising’ the population. For example, Inoue Enryō (1858–1919), a Buddhist reformer who graduated from the first modern university of Japan (later called the University of Tokyo), energetically defended Buddhism from philosophical and scientific standpoints, simultaneously criticising Christianity and opposing superstition. In 1887 he established an educational institute named Tetsugakukan (meaning philosophical academy, later named Toyo University) and taught philosophy, psychology and pedagogy for educators and religious leaders (Shimizu 2008).

The curriculum at Tetsugakukan included a course on hypnotism. This was important for Inoue as he saw that hypnotism not only offered psychological explanations for superstition, but also criticised medical materialism and mind–body dualism. He insisted that the mental side of disease should also be treated by religious practitioners who have mastered psychology (Inoue 1923: 34). For Inoue, this was a reformation of Buddhist practices, including meditation and kaji. In other words, kaji was reframed as hypnotism and Buddhist meditation was reframed as self-hypnotism. In the process, the mixture of psychology and religious explanation brought about a new spiritual movement: the Japanese Popular Mind Cure movement (民間精神療法) (Kurita et al. 2019). As elsewhere in the early twentieth century, New Thought, meditation and breathing techniques were gaining popularity as a way to overcome materialism and mind–body dualism (Albanese 2007; Schmidt 2005).

The international physical culture movement was also influential. Eugen Sandow’s (1867–1925) books were translated and sold well in Japan (Zōshikai 1900). Significantly, Paul von Boeckmann, another American physical culture author, influenced the revival of breathing meditation. Boeckmann criticised Sandow’s method and insisted that one should train internal organs and muscles rather than external muscles though a breathing method which emphasises controlling the diaphragm (Boeckmann 1906). As tuberculosis and neurasthenia were widely experienced but untreatable with biomedicine at the time, Boeckmann promoted his breathing method as an effective treatment. Boeckmann’s book was translated into Japanese by a journalist, Sugimura Sojinkan (1872–1945). Its explanations of breathing methods were completely different from traditional ideas on breathing in Japan.
Sugimura was a lay Buddhist and practised Zen under the instruction of Imakita Kösen’s disciple, Shaku Sōen (Soyen Shaku, 1860–1919). His pupil, Suzuki Daisetsu Teitarō (D.T. Suzuki, 1870–1960), promoted Zen meditation as efficacious not only from a religious perspective, but also as promoting psychological, physiological and ethical growth (Shaku, Suzuki and Seigo 1908). In addition to translating Boeckmann’s work, Sugimura also translated excerpts from the American Elizabeth Towne’s *Just How to Wake the Solar Plexus* (1907). Sugimura speculated that the solar plexus was equivalent to the Tanden in Hakuin’s writing and saw her writings as a scientific explanation of Hakuin’s ideas (although Sugimura only partially agreed with Towne).³

Fujita Reisai (1868–1957) was another influential figure in the reformist movements of this period. He proposed and systematically propagated what he understood as the original Tanden breathing techniques under the name *sokushinchōwahō* (the way of harmonising mind and breath, 心調和法). His teachings were synchronistic and universalistic: e.g. Jesus was equated with one of the ‘Shinjin’ (the Daoist spiritual masters) in the ancient Chinese text *Zhuangzi*. Fujita proposed that his breathing techniques not only maintained health and healed disease but also enabled people to become Shinjin, reaching the Universal Spirit and grasping the essence of religion. His group, Yōshinkai (later Chōwadōkyōkai),⁴ was also influenced by foreign spiritual movements, including New Thought (Kurita 2016). His disciple Matsuda Reiyō, a businessman and a leader of the Vancouver branch of Yōshinkai, introduced modern yoga to Japan by translating Yogi Ramacharaka, a pseudonym of the American New Thought writer William Walker Atkinson (1862–1932) (Deslippe 2019).

Fujita’s activities went beyond spiritual healing to political activism. In 1917, an auxiliary organisation of the Ministry of Justice asked him to teach his techniques to help prisons reform inmates. From then onwards he observed prisoners’ abdomens when he visited prisons and theorised that their belly shape related to character. He said that those with bellies in poor condition had ‘abdominal induration’ and insisted that they were improved through his breathing techniques. In the 1920s and 1930s, Fujita and his fellows petitioned the Ministry of Education and National Diet to establish a physical education course based on his techniques: the Movement for National Practices of Chōwahō (調和実修国民運動). This group strongly criticised the Great Japanese Calisthenics (*Dainihon kokumin taisō*), promoted by the Ministry of Health and Welfare, as a ‘western’ physical education which put too much importance on developing the chest. This framework provided an us/them or ‘friend/enemy’ opposition by simplifying the West into a ‘chest culture’ and the East (Japan) into a ‘belly culture’. His propagation also extended to China; Fujita hoped that by establishing the Chinese branch of Chōwadōkyōkai in 1925 his techniques would provide East Asian people with the driving force needed to gain prosperity. Needless to say, this vision overlapped with the ideology of ‘the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere’ promoted by the Empire of Japan during its colonising period.

In 1946, Ruth Benedict mentioned that, as the Japanese self-discipline ‘builds up the belly’, ‘enlarges life’, and enables one to ‘enjoy life’, it is totally different from stoic training in the United States and ascetic yogic disciplines in India (Benedict 1946: 227–241). However, in practice, meditation, yoga and belly breathing were already in the United States through New Thought literature; the monistic philosophy of New Thought had travelled across the Pacific. Historical evidence shows that these generalisations were gross simplifications and products of a particular time. Japan was seen as ‘the most alien enemy’ (Benedict 1946: 1) of the United States in a time of war.

**Political theology on meditation**

Other reformers directed their attention to analysing breathing methods from a more universal standpoint. Okada Torajirō, for example, frequently referred to western thinkers and adopted
the terms ‘inner breathing’ and ‘outer breathing’ from the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772). In spite of the fact that he placed importance on the lower abdomen (tanden) as well as on bodies with big bellies (unlike Sandow), he idealised the physical condition of Germans. Though Okada’s bodily technique was similar to Zen in several ways, he preferred to identify it with Quaker worship. Simultaneously, he deeply admired Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882), who wrote an essay titled ‘The Over-Soul’ that is said to have been influenced by Vedānta philosophy. Okada used the concept of selflessness (muga 無我), which is usually considered to be a Buddhist term, but he also favoured terms such as ‘non-being’ and ‘zero’ to avoid relying on a specific school of thought. Eventually, he advised his disciples just to practise his technique, called seiza, without engaging in theoretical discussions (Sasamura 1974).

Although Okada did not write any books, he gained popularity through his adherents’ writings. In the background of the popularity of Okada’s seiza was a period of social disturbance in the late Meiji period – including a pollution scandal at the Ashio Copper Mine and government crackdowns on socialists. There was a tension between questioning modernisation and asserting that traditional ways had to change. Through his meditative method, Okada provided a possibility between the binaries of ‘modernisation vs tradition’ and ‘western vs eastern’. His techniques attracted a wide spectrum of adherents: from students and teachers in universities, to socialists and right-wing activists; from artists and journalists to politicians and zaibatsu (financial business conglomerate) families. Among his disciples was Sahoda Tsuruji (1899–1986), one of the earliest promoters of yoga in modern Japan.

Okada’s quiet sitting was believed to enable autonomy – that is, to practise by oneself the way (rule, order). During World War II, the leader of a war-time national education centre, Satō Tsūji (1901–1990), thoroughly developed Okada’s practical philosophy of autonomy and, like Yamazaki Ansai, interpreted loyalty to the Emperor as Japanese autonomous action (Satō 1941). According to him, the ultimate identity of Japan transcended modernisation and tradition and was not about the people, constitution and lands, but hinged upon loyalty to the Emperor. Therefore, even as other Japanese leaders secretly began to work towards ending the war from 1944, he became part of a group that planned to launch a coup d’état and exercise the Emperor’s prerogative in fighting out the Decisive Battle in mainland Japan (Akazawa 2017: 84–105). As shown by his close connection to a German psychologist of meditation, Karlfried Dürckheim (1896–1988), who was an ex-member of Nazi Germany’s Sturmabteilung and lived in Japan during World War II (Baier 2013), he also had an international or universal standpoint through meditation. He no longer directly adopted a dichotomy between ‘modernisation and tradition’ or ‘western and eastern’, but, in terms of how much a nation state is ruled by economic desire which is supposed to be overcome by meditation, he created another antithesis of ‘friend and enemy’: the Axis and the Allied powers between capitalism and communism.

Postmodern meditation and yoga

After Japan’s 1945 defeat in World War II, the ideal of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere collapsed. General Headquarters (GHQ) occupied Japan and put responsibility for the Asia–Pacific War on ‘State Shintō’, banning official support for Shintō shrines. In 1952 the occupation ended; Japanese state sovereignty was ‘recovered’, nominally shifting from the Emperor to the Japanese people under a new constitution. But this sovereignty is different from Schmitt’s sovereignty: Schmitt’s sovereign ‘stands outside the normally valid legal system’ and is the entity which ‘all tendencies of modern constitutional development point toward eliminating’ (Schmitt 2005: 7). From the normal legal standpoint, no one knows where sovereignty in this sense lurks now or will appear in the future.
After World War II, new religious groups flourished in Japan, termed by the American scholar McFarland ‘the rush hour of the gods’ (McFarland 1967). There were many conspicuous groups, such as Soka Gakkai, Rissho Kosei-kai and the Church of Perfect Liberty. However, Seicho-no-ie, founded by Taniguchi Masaharu (1893–1985) has been particularly important as a trans-sectarian group for meditation and self-cultivation, promoting a meditation technique for healing called shinsōkan (Seicho-no- ie-honbu 1959). The group also operates a religious publishing house producing Taniguchi’s own books as well as translations of New Thought literature, and it introduced Paramahansa Yogananda’s writings to Japan. It also actively promotes anti-communist and nationalist policies.

Nihon Shingaku Renmei (the Japanese Shinto Theologians League), which publishes The Japanese Shinto Theology journal, also introduced a form of yoga into Japan in the 1950s. Sekiguchi Nobara (1888–1967), a Christian socialist, was a particularly influential member of this group who developed a theology uniting Christianity, Shintō, New Thought and the teachings of Yogananda, arguing that meditation was the core of all religions’ esoteric roots. An important aim of Sekiguchi and the group has been to positively revive Shintō, reversing the negative associations as being the ideology of the Asia–Pacific War. Until the 1970s, especially from a standpoint of reformists, meditation might be understood as having an affinity to conservative or reactionary political movements.

Another interesting figure was Oki Masahiro (1921–1985), who was actively teaching in the late 1950s and 1960s. He practised a disciplined communal life incorporating yoga and meditation – arguing that Buddha, Jesus and Muhammad were enlightened by yoga. He was originally an intelligence agent and insisted that he, through these activities, learned yoga from the leader of the Myanmar independence movement, a Buddhist monk Sayadaw U Ottama (1879–1939) and Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948). His yoga connoted a close relationship with the pre-war Pan-Asianist network and also attracted a small number of followers in Britain.

As the global counter-culture encouraged a widening interest in yoga and meditation, a similar influence was felt in Japan. In the late 1960s and 1970s, the Japanese New Left (shin-sayoku, 新左翼) sought a third way against the United States and the Soviet Union and also opposed the Japanese conservative party and the communist party. After New Leftists were defeated in student riots, some of the New Leftists, especially Maoists and non-sectarian radicals, theoretically turned their backs on modernism and soviet Marxism. Influenced by the American New Age movement, practices of ‘eastern’ medicine and meditation were often combined with social reformation beliefs. Some of these activists gained popularity in the media: for example, Nakazawa Shin’ichi (1950–), whose book Niji no kaitei (The Step of the Rainbow (1981)) became one of the publications that deeply influenced Asahara Shōkō, the guru of Aum Shinrikyō, and his leading disciples.

As Suga has argued, in the postmodern and postcolonial situation, boundaries between right-wing and left-wing discourses have blurred, and thick subculture discourses have emerged (2006: 192). The post–World War II New Age and indigenous Japanese movements were broadly critical of modernism and had affinities to both postmodernism and reactionary nationalism. From the 1970s, meditative and yogic practices gained popularity among young people critical of aspects of modern Japanese society and a new wave of religious innovation occurred – i.e. the “new” new religions’ (新新宗教), including the GLA (God Light Association), Agon Shū and Aum Shinrikyō (Shimazono 2001: 13).

The year 1995 was pivotal in Japan. In this year, Aum Shinrikyō committed the Tokyo subway sarin gas attack, retrospectively seen as the beginning of ‘a fight against terrorism’. However, since this period, yoga and other meditative practices have become overwhelmingly associated with private, apparently apolitical practices for promoting health and fitness.
Neoliberal capitalist ideology appears to be expanding across the globe, relegating both religion and physical embodiment to the personal. Yoga and meditation are now seen as primarily providing possibilities for psychological resilience within the system rather than revolution. As elsewhere in the world, the popularity of the mindfulness movement suggests that meditation is a universal way of approaching personal knowledge rather than a resource for political power.

**Conclusion**

Meditation in Japan has a long and complicated history, and is intimately entwined with politics. Buddhism was a significant autonomous ‘worldly’ power in the medieval era which competed against (and was interdependent with) other secular powers. In the early modern period, meditation was understood not only as a disciplinary power but also as a way of criticising textual knowledge, including scriptures, laws and treaties. In this capacity, its deconstructive character critiqued the established order and encouraged change.

In modern Japan, meditative self-cultivation has been associated with various practical ideologies, including anti-American, anti-British, anti-communist thought, Asian solidarity, loyalty to the Emperor and the Pact between Japan and Germany, as well as having been strongly recommended as a practice during the Asia-Pacific War. After World War II, self-cultivation became a channel for the ‘third’ political standpoint and was associated with reactionism, the New Left and the New Age. In this chapter, I have argued that this link between politics and meditation in Japan can be better understood by exploring how meditative traditions have served as a channel for ‘sovereign power’, justifying and giving authority to political sovereignty.

To conclude, we find that the political development of Aum-Shinrikyō is, in light of the political history of meditation in Japan, not a deviation from meditation’s inherent nature, but an intensification of its political nature. Aum-Shinrikyō tried to establish an alternative power with violence and to confront global capitalism by relying on the function of meditative techniques as a channel for sovereign power. Its indiscriminate terrorism was inextricably linked to the fact that modern society has evolved to thoroughly eliminate ‘a state of exception’. Since Aum-Shinrikyō’s incidents, the manifestation of the ‘sovereign’ and ‘a state of exception’ through meditation seems totally suppressed in most advanced countries.

It could be argued that the effect of meditation is not to create in the practitioner harmony with the world and the universe, but rather to separate practitioners from the existing world, and then to manifest another world in their disciplined bodies. In this sense, meditation is a form of elitism. If the division between this meditative elite and the other is ideologically emphasised, the more clearly the practitioner-elite perceive their autonomy, and a corresponding right to sovereignty. Conversely, if this division is less marked, the elitism of the practitioners can be incorporated as part of a hierarchical discipline reinforcing the authority of the existing society. Aum-Shinrikyō appears to be a definitive example of the former. Now that ideology of ‘freedom’ and ‘diversity’ is sweeping globally through modern society, meditation and yoga is primarily providing a tool to discipline subjects within society and to maintain the existing social order.

**Notes**

1. I would like to make a most cordial acknowledgement and appreciation to my reviewer and editors.
2. A historian, Kuroda Toshio, theorised this Japanese medieval ruling order as *kenmon taisei* (system of ruling elites), in which powers of military families, noble families and temple families were mutually dependent and sometimes conflicted (Kuroda 1994).
3. The lay Buddhist Katō Totsudō (1870–1949) was also influenced by Boeckmann and Towne’s breathing methods: his book *Meisōron* (1905) proposes meditations for self-cultivation and self-care called *shūyō* (修養).
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4 Members of Yōshinkai included Murai Tomoyoshi (1861–1944), a Christian sociologist; Ōkuma Shigenobu (1838–1922), the ex-Prime Minister of Japan; and Ōkawa Shūmei (1886–1957), an activist of Pan-Asianism.

5 Emanuel Swedenborg was influential in western esotericism and New Thought. From 1910 to 1914, T. D. Suzuki translated Swedenborgian books into Japanese and wrote a biography of Swedenborg (Yoshinaga 2014).

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