The Four Major Contemplations of the Nyoirin (Cintāmaṇicakra) Rite

All standard rites in the Shingon ritual tradition feature a set of four contemplations that are particularly long and elaborate. Due to the importance accorded these contemplations by both practitioners and scholars (who may, however, conceptualize them in vastly different ways!), I have provided an English translation of all four contemplations found in the single deity rite dedicated to Nyoirin Kannon that forms the initial section of the shido kegyō in the Sanbōin lineage. Since an analysis of these contemplations would constitute an article (maybe a dissertation) in its own right, I will not introduce them further, other than to note that extensive discussions (and alternative translations) may be found in Bob’s two articles.

The reason why I chose to translate the contemplations is because there are a number of small errors in Bob’s translations when the full range of commentaries, interlinear notes, and oral instructions I was given are taken into account. Note that in a ritual context, all of these contemplations are further contextualized with instructions for mudrās, mantras, and so forth. Since I consider a full translation of all of these instructions a violation of my samaya vows, I have not translated them here. I have also not supplied the original kanbun text for the same reason. Should anyone be interested, I would be happy to point out other translations (which unfortunately tend to be uniformly bad!).

The images are included because I thought they might be helpful in gaining some idea of what is going on. The line drawing of Nyoirin is taken from Mandara zuten. The representations of the various contemplations are taken from Roger Goepper, “Das Kultbild im Ritus des esoterischen Buddhismus Japans” (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1983). The two depictions of the syllable wheel were done by me.
Contemplation of the Place of Activity 道場観

“Contemplate [as follows]: In front [of me] there is the syllable ah (J: aku), which transforms into a pavilion [comprised of] bejeweled halls. In it there is a raised platform with stairways on [all] four sides. Surrounding it are rows of bejeweled trees with nets made of strings of jewels hanging down [from each]. On the platform is the syllable hrih (kiriku), which transforms into a crimson lotus blossom pedestal. On top of this is the syllable a (a), which transforms into a full moon disk. On top of this is the syllable hrih, while to the left and right of it are the syllables trah (taraku) and trah. These three syllables transform into a vajra jewel lotus (a bejeweled lotus supported by a vajra?). The jewel lotus transforms into the principal deity. He has six arms and a body the color of gold. On his topknot is a crown adorned with jewels. [In this crown] the King of Freedom (Amitābha Buddha) sits, abiding in the posture of preaching the Dharma. From the [principal deity’s] body a thousand rays of light flow forth, and behind his head and shoulders, there is a halo of light. His first right hand [makes a gesture of] thinking reflectively. His second [right] hand holds a wish-fulfilling jewel. His third [right] hand holds a rosary. His first left hand presses down on the mountain [beneath it]. His second [left] hand holds a lotus blossom. His third [left] hand holds a wheel. With his vast six-armed body, he is able to wander the six realms, and cut off the suffering of all sentient beings by means of the skillful means of great compassion. The eight great Kannons (i.e. manifestations of Avalokitēśvara), as well as innumerable followers from the Lotus Family are clustered around him.”

(Translation is my own. Compare with Sharf 2001:164-166 and Sharf 2003:66-67)
Entering Self and Self Entering 入我我入

“Contemplate [as follows]: The principal deity is respectfully seated on the maṇḍala. I also sit on the maṇḍala. The principal deity respectfully enters my body, and my body enters the honorable body of the principal deity. It is like multiple luminous mirrors facing each other with their images projecting into each other.”

(Translation is my own. Compare with Sharf 2001:183)
Formal Invocation 正念誦

“Contemplate [as follows]: On the moon-disk in the heart of the principal deity are the syllables of [its] dhāraṇī, revolving in a row in clockwise direction. On the moon-disk in my own heart there are also the syllables of [the principal deity’s] dhāraṇī, in the same fashion. The syllables of the mantra chanted by the deity leave its mouth, enter the crown of my head, [and travel down] until they reach the moon disk in [my] heart, [where they] revolve in a row in a clockwise direction. The syllables of the mantra I chant leave my mouth, enter the navel of the deity [and travel up] until they reach the moon disk in its heart [where they] revolve in a row in a clockwise direction. Circling [the mantra] around this manner, invoke it deliberately without slacking nor hurrying along, as though slipping a garland made of jewels [through your hands], thereby causing the path of the syllables to become clear.”

Note: Different manuals disagree on whether the last sentence is part of the contemplation proper, or whether it is a supplementary instruction for the practitioner.
Contemplation of the Syllable Wheel

“Contemplate [as follows]: In my heart, there is an eight-petalled white lotus blossom, on top of which there is a full moon disk. On top of this [disk] are the syllables on ba ra da han domei un (Skt. om varada padme hūm). Now contemplate the meaning of each syllable in a clockwise and counterclockwise direction.

The ceaseless flow of the syllable on is ungraspable. Because the ceaseless flow of the syllable on is ungraspable, the verbal expression of the syllable ba is ungraspable. Because the verbal expression of the syllable ba is ungraspable, the defilements of the syllable ra are ungraspable. Because the defilements of the syllable ra are ungraspable, the giving (as in “charity” or “making offerings”) of the syllable da is ungraspable. Because the giving of the syllable da is ungraspable, the ultimate meaning of the syllable han is ungraspable. Because the ultimate meaning of the syllable han is ungraspable, the self-attachment of the syllable domei is ungraspable. Because the self-attachment of the syllable domei is ungraspable, the causal activity of the syllable un is ungraspable. (This is called the clockwise contemplation)

Because the causal activity of the syllable un is ungraspable, the self-attachment of the syllable domei is ungraspable. Because the self-attachment of the syllable domei is ungraspable, the ultimate meaning of the syllable han is ungraspable. Because the ultimate meaning of the syllable han is ungraspable, the giving of the syllable da is ungraspable. Because the giving of the syllable da is ungraspable, the defilements of the syllable ra are ungraspable. Because the defilements of the syllable ra are ungraspable, the verbal expression of the syllable ba is ungraspable. Because the verbal expression of
the syllable \textit{ba} is ungraspable, the ceaseless flow of the syllable \textit{on} is ungraspable. (This is the clockwise contemplation. Sequentially linking [the syllables of the mantra] to each other, contemplate it/them)

(Translation is my own. Compare with Sharf 2001:184-185)