The “Buddha recitation device” (nianfo ji 念佛機) is a small plastic box that plays a looped chant of Amitābha Buddha’s name. With the size and appearance of a transistor radio, the “Buddha recitation device” is an object that is easy to overlook. But this device, its packaging, and its usage presents an opportunity to think about modern transformations of religious technologies and the role of oral recitation in a multi-media world. The “Buddha recitation device” automates religious practice, allowing for repetition beyond usual human capabilities. This in turn raises questions about the relation between mechanical recitation and that offered by the practitioner. To assert the “Buddha recitation device” as a replacement for an individual’s own recitation practice would trouble conventional Buddhist understandings of recitation. Such a mechanical substitution for human vocalization, however, has its place in hospice care and other settings in which a practitioner is unable to carry out recitation. This presentation will discuss how premodern practices are reshaped by modern technologies.

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