

Fabio Rambelli

Lecture 4

Semantic Structure of the Esoteric Signs

So far we have discussed the first two types of the esoteric practices on signs (*gomitsu*), i.e., the recitation and memorization of mantric formulae and the study and writing of *shittan* graphs. These two kinds of practices, based on the manipulation of the phonetic and graphic signifiers of esoteric signs, are already endowed with salvational power; however, they also are the introduction to the entrance in the “third gate” of *gomitsu*, that is, the most secret and exclusive step of the esoteric episteme, consisting in “the understanding of the true meanings of each graph/syllable.”¹ Kakuban identifies two levels in this “gate.” The first level is the “general interpretation of the deep meaning of each graph”;² the second level is the “complete and correct understanding of the Dharma-realm and the Dharma-body.”³ The first level refers to the semantic structure of the esoteric expressions and the related interpretive practices; the second level consists in a sort of “mandalization” of esoteric signs by integrating them into a complex network of homologous series of cosmic elements. Such mandalization, which was systematized by Kakuban, operates on two different planes: on the one hand, esoteric expressions (*shingon* + *shittan*) are treated as minimal mandalas in which the entire Dharma-realm is condensed;⁴ on the other hand, the Mandala of the two realms (*ryōgai mandara*), the fundamental mandala of Shingon Buddhism, is reduced to the two mantric seeds (*shuji*) that generate it, namely, A for the Womb (*taizōkai*) mandala and *vaṃ* (Jp. *ban*) for the Vajra (*kongōkai*) mandala.⁵ In this

¹ Kakuban, *Gorin kujimyō himitsushaku*, in Miyasaka Yūshō, ed., *Kōgyō Daishi senjutsushū*. Tome 1: 181. Tokyo: Sankibō busshorin, 1989.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ The most obvious cases are the two main mantras (and their variants) discussed in Kakuban’s *Gorin kujimyō himitsushaku*, namely the five-syllable mantra (*a bi ra un ken*) and Amida’s *dhāraṇī* (*oṃ amṛta teje hara hūṃ*). Countless other texts, however, also carry out similar procedures of mandalization of single mantras or mantric seeds, especially A, *vaṃ*, *hūṃ*.

⁵ A good example of such reduction of mandala is presented by Kakuban in his *A ban*

lecture I will discuss the first level of the third gate of mantras, the “general interpretation of the deep meaning of each esoteric expression.” It is on this level that the nature of the esoteric signs, their semantic structure, and the interpretive strategies of Shingon Buddhism, among other things, are addressed and explained. The mastering of this theoretical background lies at the basis of the more complex meditative practices leading to becoming a buddha in this very body (*sokushin jōbutsu*)—⁶which correspond to the second level of the third gate, the “complete and correct understanding of the Dharma-realm and the Dharmakāya,” and which will be addressed in a subsequent lecture.

Inexhaustibility of Meaning, Mystery, and Secrecy

One of the most obvious features of the esoteric hermeneutics is the attribution to expressions of an endless number of meanings. As we have seen in the previous lectures, this is one of the fundamental features of the esoteric episteme. Certain contemporary interpreters tend to emphasize the mystical overtones of the inexhaustibility of sense of the esoteric expressions, since for them it is equivalent to the impossibility of grasping their meaning—an idea that is clearly alien to pre-modern Shingon authors. But despite such recent interpretations, the attribution of infinite meanings to the esoteric expressions in practice merely stresses ordinary language’s impossibility to fully describe an object or a concept in all their countless relations with the entire cosmos—a necessary consequence of a thought system that emphasizes the essential interrelationship of all phenomena as manifestations of a nondual universal substance. In other words, this is a different formulation of the principle of unlimited semiosis, initially theorized by Peirce and further developed by Eco. According to Eco, the drift of interpretants is only potential, because in the actual interpretive practice the interpreter (or the community of interpreters) tends to bring it to a stop at a certain point of the process;⁷ this is very similar to what happens in the exegetical processes of Shingon Buddhism. The true nature of language and the true, ultimate meaning can be known by the initiated, even though the benefits

kai mandara ryakushaku, in Miyasaka, ed., 1989: 61-69.

⁶ Kakuban, *Gorin kujimyō himitsushaku*, pp. 182-199.

⁷ Umberto Eco, *I limiti dell'interpretazione*. Milan: Bompiani, 1990.

deriving from using esoteric signs, as we have seen in lecture 3, are available to all those who have trust in their power.

The existence of numerous levels of sense and potentially infinite meanings can result in positing hidden, secret, initiatory aspects—features of all forms of esoteric knowledge. Umberto Eco has outlined the characteristics of the Western esoteric semiotics, which he calls “hermetic semiosis.” According to Eco, hermetic semiosis is grounded on an empty secret, the content of which can only be forever deferred.⁸ Initiation claims to provide instructions on how to get closer to finding out the content of that fundamental secret—one that is supposed to be related to the fundamental meaning of life and the universe, but can never be revealed.

In the case of esoteric Buddhism, however, the secret of the initiatory teachings is never absolute; in fact, it is a secret only to the non-initiated. Initiation consists not in a revelation of clues for the quest of the content of the secret in a continuous deferral of its final disclosure, but in the explanation of the hidden relations of reality on the basis of principles culturally accepted and of established practices that enable their inscription in the body of the ascetics. (Issues concerning the nature of secrecy in the Buddhist esoteric tradition will be addressed in lecture 7). In fact, the final initiation often refers not even to a conceptual content, but more prosaically to the explanation of practical ways of performing ascetic rituals proper to the initiatory lineage one belongs to; in other words, it consists in the revelation of the concrete, practical details that enable one to become a full-fledged esoteric priest, a recognized professional specializing in the teaching of Shingon doctrines and the performance of esoteric rituals. (On these aspects of the esoteric Buddhism, see Lecture 7).

In this way, the mystery of esoteric Buddhism is not idiosyncratic, subjective; it is defined and controlled by a centuries-old tradition which is textual, interpretive, and praxis-oriented. Despite its originally heterological nature,⁹ esoteric Buddhism was an important element of the dominant episteme of pre-modern Japan, and as such it cannot be assimilated to a marginal, mysteriosophic knowledge as the late esotericism that developed in early modern Europe and which Eco has described.

⁸ U. Eco, *Ibid*

⁹ Fabio Rambelli, “True Words, Silence, and the Adamantine Dance,” *Japanese Journal*

In this lecture I will not “explain” the meaning of esoteric expressions—not so much because it is inexhaustible, but because that would simply amount to provide a list of translated mantras, with effects such as indicated here below. For example, one of the most important mantras of the Shingon school, the Mantra of Light (Kōmyō shingon), can be translated as follows:

Om [expression of devotion indicating the beginning of a mantra]
 amogha [non-empty] vairocana [Buddha Mahāvairocana, lit. the
 “All-resplendent one”] mahā mudrā [great seal] maṇi [jewel]
 padma [lotus flower] jvala [light] pravartaya [unfold] hūṃ
 [expression of devotion indicating the end of a mantra]

A translation would be something like:

Hail! Oh non-empty all-resplendent [Lord]! Oh [Lord of the] great
 seal! Unfold the light of the jewel and the lotus! Hail!¹⁰

Edward Conze translated the famous mantra that concludes the Heart Sutra as follows: “Gone, Gone, Gone beyond, Gone altogether beyond, O what an awakening, All Hail!”¹¹

As we can see, a plain translation is not enough to understand what a mantra is and how it works. I will attempt to outline the organizing principles of the esoteric semantic system and its interpretive strategies by following the guidance of traditional exegetes with their own semiotic and ritual strategies.

The Interpretive Apparatus

The nondual cosmology of esoteric Buddhism stresses that phenomena are identical with the absolute; as a consequence, the universe is envisioned as a pansemiotic whole, in which each entity and each event are instances of a communicational activity that the Dharmakāya addresses to itself for the pure

of Religious Studies 21, 1994: 373-405.

¹⁰ Based on Shuchiin Daigaku Mikkyō gakkai, eds., *Bonji tairan*, p. 547.

¹¹ *Buddhist Scriptures*. Selected and Translated by Edward Conze. London: Penguin Books, 1959 (reprint 1987), p. 164.

pleasure of it and to sentient beings (*shujō*) in order to lead them to salvation. However, sentient beings are blind to the ultimate nature and significance of phenomena; ignorance and karmic conditioning prevent the beings from really knowing the intention of the Dharmakāya producing phenomena as salvational messages.

In order to understand the Dharmakāya's intention, it is necessary to acquire a knowledge of semiotic-interpretive kind of the communicational strategies employed by the Dharmakāya, the structure of the signs it involves and their uses in the ritual-communicative interaction with the deities. It is for this reason that esoteric Buddhism developed peculiar conceptions of signs and languages and produced complex strategies to interpret phenomena, concepts, expressions, texts, and images. There are several interpretive methods to determine the profound, esoteric meanings of signs (expressions and phenomena). Pairs of originally non-mantric terms are approached through a method based on the six kinds of compound words in the Sanskrit grammar (*roku rigasshaku*). As we have already seen in lecture 2 (pp. 37-38), this method analyses the syntactical relations between the terms forming a compound word in order to find out the "real" semantic relation uniting them. This method, as it is used in the grammatical analysis of Sanskrit, serves to determine the syntactical status, and therefore the sense, of the relevant terms. The underlying assumption of this method is that a syntactical, positional relation between words is always predicated upon a deeper, more "substantial" relation that establishes itself between the "things" those words stand for. In other words, there is an implicit relation between syntactical position, meaning of words, and the deep structure of reality. The most significant example of application of this method is Kūkai's analysis of the compounds *shō-ji* and *shōji-jissō*.

The most comprehensive set of esoteric interpretive strategies, however, is the so-called "sixteen gates of mystery" (*jūroku genmon*).¹² This set appears as such for the first time in the *Hokkekyō shaku* by Kūkai, in which the author brings together various elements of meditative hermeneutics scattered in a number of esoteric texts.¹³ It is a heterogeneous set of instructions concerning various

¹² Kakuban, *Hannya shingyō hiken ryakuchū*, in Miyasaka, ed., 1989, Tome 2: 215.

¹³ The ten items beginning with *ichiji shōta* are first mentioned in the *Ha jigoku giki* (on this text, see Fabio Rambelli, "Tantric Buddhism and Chinese Thought in East Asia," in David Gordon White, ed., *Tantra in Practice*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000,

aspects of meditation and in general the knowledge and practices that are necessary to penetrate the “mystery,” i.e., the Shingon system. Accordingly, only some of its components address explicitly the semantic structure of esoteric expressions and their interpretation. The sixteen gates of mystery are the following:

1. elimination of delusions (*shajō*);
2. manifesting the virtues of esoteric Buddhism (*hyōtoku*);
3. literal meaning of an expression (*jisō*), corresponding to the superficial truth (*sezokutai*) of Mahāyāna;
4. real meaning of an expression (*jigī*), corresponding to the deep truth (*shintai*) of Mahāyāna;
5. superficial interpretation (*senryakushaku*), limited to the exoteric level of the teachings;
6. esoteric interpretation (*jinpishaku*), that is, the semantic realm proper of esoteric Buddhism;
7. polysemy (*ichiji shō ta*), that is, the fact that each Sanskrit syllable contains many meanings;
8. synonymy (*taji ki ichi*): several expressions can be reduced to a single one;
9. the interpretation of a single expression can produce many meanings (*ichiji shaku ta*);
10. all expressions refer to a single principle, the same for all of them (*taji shaku ichi*);
11. proliferation: one syllable can generate many different others (*ichiji jō ta*);
12. reduction: several syllables can be reduced to a single one (*taji jō ichi*);
13. one syllable can destroy numerous deluded ideas (*ichiji ha ta*);
14. several syllables together can destroy one deluded idea (*taji ha ichi*);
15. meditation on the meaning of syllables in a sequence in the usual order (from the first one to the last one) (*junkan senten*);
16. meditation on the meaning of syllables in a sequence in the reverse order (from the last to the first one) (*gyakkan senten*).

pp. 361-380); the eight items beginning with *ichiji shakuta* correspond to the eight stages of a meditation on *dhāraṇī* expounded in the *Dainichikyōsho* fasc. 7 (“Sen darani jirin”).

These sixteen elements constitute eight pairs of contrastive items concerning various aspects of meditative practice; the goal of practice, in fact, is precisely that of overcoming these contrasts aiming for the middle path (*chūdō*). In detail, 1. and 2. refer to the general Buddhist stances concerning liberation: while Mahāyāna points to the emptiness of all phenomena, esoteric Buddhism shows the virtues of phenomena and appearances. Next, 3. and 4. concern the semantic structure of esoteric signs, in particular the combination shingon + shittan (especially in the form of mantric seeds, *shuji*); 5. and 6. refer to kinds of interpretive approach to texts and concepts; 7. and 8. refer to the status of esoteric signs; 9. and 10. indicate the results of interpretive activity; 11. and 12. deal with the form of the expression; 13. and 14. refer to the esoteric syllables' power to destroy the veil of ignorance and dissolve wrong ideas; finally, 15. and 16. indicate how to actually perform the meditation on mantric expressions.¹⁴

The elimination of deluded states of mind (*shajō*) is a sort of *via negativa* that denies commonly held, non-enlightened ideas; in contrast, the active manifestation of the power of esoteric Buddhism (*hyōtoku*) constitutes Shingon's *via positiva*, through which the salvational power of esoteric Buddhism can be enacted and displayed. These terms are interpreted in many ways within the various Shingon lineages, but the elimination of delusions is often made to correspond to the superficial teachings of the Buddha (*kengyō*). Some authors associate these two methods with different epistemic attitudes. For instance, Raihō wrote:¹⁵

Elimination of delusions [*shajō*] consists in eliminating common folks' deluded states of mind in order to have them realize the signlessness of the Dharma-essence [*hosshō*, Dharmatā]. It consists in not abiding in any single dharma, in not attaching oneself to any single sign; thus, free from attachment, one can practice the Way of the Buddha.

Manifestation of virtues refers to [the method of] not arguing about any dharma's right or wrong, because all dharmas are

¹⁴ On this typology, see *Jūroku genmon gi*.

¹⁵ Raihō, *Shingon myōmoku*, T 77 n. 2449, p. 730.

originally non-created; all visible objects manifest the Shingon virtues.

As we will see at the end of this lecture, for Raihō signlessness means a particular cognitive dimension in which no single sign exists independently, but all signs are interrelated—an other way to describe the interconnectedness of the semantic space or, in other words, unlimited semiosis. As such, these two methods combined enable the practitioner to contemplate each dharma as condensations of the semantic universe and, thus, as micro-cosms in which all features and powers are condensed. In this way, the practitioner lives literally in a mandalic world in which everything is a manifestation of the absolute Buddha's salvational power and activity. Reliance on either of these two methods also affects one's soteriological path. Again, Raihō wrote:¹⁶

According to the superficial interpretation, the elimination of delusions is used in [the process of enlightenment leading] the practitioner from [initial] cause to [final] result [*jūin shika*], while the manifestation of virtues is used by the buddhas [in the process of manifestation in this world] when from their original ground they leave their traces [in this world] [*jūhon suijaku*]. According to the profound interpretation, these two methods refer to the two [processes of] upward and downward transformations [*jōge niten*]. [In other words,] according to the superficial interpretation, one first abides in the elimination of delusions and then contemplates the manifestation of virtues. According to the profound interpretation, one first abides in the manifestation of virtues, and then contemplates the elimination of delusions.

In this way, the manifestation of virtues, in its deep, true meaning, is the original condition of sentient beings from the perspective of the doctrines of original enlightenment; once they realize their condition they are also able to eliminate delusions—a process that is the opposite of the received soteriological path. I will

¹⁶ Ibid.

return to issues of soteriology in the next lecture. Let us now turn our attention more in detail to the semantic structure of the esoteric signs.

The Meaning of the Esoteric Expressions

As we have seen in Lecture 3, individual shittan characters can be either minimal units of graphic expression as homologous to the minimal units of the phonetic expression (alphabetic syllables), or their combinations in a single graphic expression, as for instance the cases of *hṛīḥ* (Jp. *kiriku*) and *hūṃ* (Jp. *un*). The interpretation of the meanings of signs and linguistic units is based on the analysis of sound, shape, and sense of each syllable, of each constitutive unit of mantric sentences. As we have seen in Lecture 3, in fact, shittan have three components: graphic form (*gyō*), sound (*on*), and meaning (*gi*). In this lecture we will discuss in particular the structure of meaning as envisioned by esoteric Buddhism.

The third, fourth, fifth, and sixth gates of mystery define the structure of esoteric semantic system and the fundamental interpretive strategies involved with it. Sanskrit characters, objects, and concept have two basic orders of significance, defined as, respectively, superficial/exoteric and profound/esoteric. The standard, “superficial” meaning (*jisō*, lit. “character’s aspect”) corresponds to the superficial truth (*sezokutai*) of Mahāyāna. The deep, esoteric aspect (*jigi*, lit. “character’s meaning,” i.e., the true, deep meaning) refer to the deep truth (*shintai*) of Mahāyāna. As we will see later, some authors further articulate the secret level in three increasingly esoteric isotopies. To these levels of significance correspond different interpretive attitudes. “Superficial and abbreviated interpretation” (*senryakushaku*) produces the superficial meaning, while the “deep and secret interpretation” extracts the profound meaning of signs and objects.

The esoteric attribution of a complex meaning to Sanskrit sounds and shittan graphs is a peculiar development of Buddhist practices dating in China from at least the third century C.E. Originally, Sanskrit syllables had a mnemonic function: each was given a “meaning” constituted by a key term or expression from a *sūtra* or a school. These meanings thus formed the units of content, sort of basic vocabulary, of a Buddhist tradition. Examples of these mnemonic

repertoires appear in various Chinese translations of scriptures.¹⁷ Meaning was not attributed in a totally arbitrary way, since the sounds of the syllabic alphabet usually formed the initial element of the term to be memorized. Originally born as semiotic devices, some mnemonic techniques in some cases attained a high degree of systematicity, as for example in the *Kegonkyō*, which makes one hypothesize the underlying existence of a full-fledged semiotic system (in the sense of Hjelmslev-Eco).¹⁸

However, the most systematic mnemonic systems belong to esoteric Buddhism, in particular those listed in the *Dainichikyō*¹⁹ and in the “Shaku jimonbon” chapter of the *Yuga kongōchōgyō* (see list below). They systematically apply for the first time the principle of the double truth (*nitai*) to the letters of the alphabet (and no longer just to the phonemes), which thus acquire two mutually contradictory levels of sense. Scriptural commentaries further complicated the situation, because they projected onto the syllables/graphs the grid of the threefold truth (*santai*: respectively, emptiness, provisional being, and absolute), thus resulting into a complex semantic structure articulated in three different levels of sense.

As it has been explained by Ujike Kakushō, Mahāyāna mnemonic techniques were related to the capacity of memorization (*dhārāṇī*), one of the virtues of the bodhisattva.²⁰

LIST OF SANSKRIT SYLLABLES AND THEIR MEANINGS

(from the sutra *Kongōchōgyō* “Jirinbon” and Kūkai’s *Bonji shittan jimo narabini shakugi*)

syllable	Sanskrit term it stands for	translation
a	ādyanutpāda	original uncreatedness, unobtainability

¹⁷ Takubo Shūyo and Kanayama Shōkō, *Bonji shittan*. Tokyo: Hidakawa shuppansha, 1981: 167-172. The most influential Buddhist mnemonic lists are the ones included in *Hōkō daishōgon kyō* 4, *Manjushiri mongyō* 1 (TSD), *Nehan gyō* 8, and *Kegonkyō*

¹⁸ On the semiotic import of mnemonics, see Eco 1990: 57-61.

¹⁹ See Takubo and Kanayama 1981: 172-176.

²⁰ Ujike Kakushō, *Darani no sekai*. Ōsaka: Tōhō shuppan, 1984; *Darani shisō no kenkyū*. Ōsaka: Tōhō shuppan, 1987. See also Lecture 3.

ā	āraṇya	quiescence (nirvana)
i	indriya	organs of sense
ī	īti	calamity
u	upamā	parable
ū	ūna	loss
e	eṣaṇā	quest
ai	aiśvarya	freedom
o	ogha	impetuous flow
au	āupapāduka	change
aṃ	aṃta	limit
aḥ	astaṃgama	distance
ṛ	ṛiddhi	magical powers
ṛ̣	?	classification
ḷ	?	contamination
ḷḷ	?	submerging
ka	kārya	activity
kha	kha	emptiness
ga	gati	action
gha	ghana	union
ṅa	aṅga	repartition
ca	cyuti	movement
cha	chāyā	image
ja	jāti	life
jha	jha-mala?	enmity
ṅa	jñāna	wisdom
ṭa	ṭanka	pride
ṭha	viṭhapana	growth
ḍa	ḍamara	rivalry
ḍha	ḍhaṅka?	firm hold
ṇa	raṇa	argument
ta	tathātā	suchness
tha	sthāna	abiding
da	dāna	giving
dha	Dharma-dhātu	Dharma realm
na	nāman	names
pa	paramārthasatya	absolute truth
pha	phena	non-solid??
ba	bandhana	bondage
bha	bhava	being

ma	mama	myself
ya	yāna	vehicle
ra	rajas	defilement
la	lakṣaṇa	aspect (sign)
va	vāc	words
śa	śānti	original quiescence
ṣa	?	bluntness??
sa	satya	truth
ha	hetu	cause
llaṃ	?	elimination
kṣa	kṣaya	exhaustion

This virtue had numerous applications: it was particularly useful to remember complex doctrines, long and difficult texts, abstruse terminologies; it helped develop eloquence, related to the linguistic and semantic mastery of doctrines; it was associated with mastery upon reality, based on the mastery upon the Dharma; it also implied excellence in meditation, as it was based on a systematic knowledge of the principal notions to be contemplated upon in the religious practice. Esoteric Buddhism in particular emphasized the relation connecting mnemonic techniques, meditation, and mastery upon reality. It was thus necessary to develop mnemonic tools easy to use and at the same time apt to become supports of meditation. They had to be easy to visualize, but also easy to produce, hand down, and transport from one place to another.

Nothing better, then, for these purposes, than the sounds and letters of the Sanskrit alphabet, as the linguistic material bases of the doctrines they enabled to remember, and as related to their content not arbitrarily but by some form of motivation (as we have seen, most concepts to remember actually began with a letter of the alphabet). According to the esoteric doctrines, sounds and graphs are not only vehicles of knowledge but also, and primarily, tools for action as entities endowed with particular power upon reality; this fact made them particularly attractive for use in meditation and esoteric rituals.

I prefer to translate *ji* as shittan graphic units because the Japanese phonetic transliteration does not always correspond to the number of syllables in the Sanskrit original; in the case of a complex syllable/graph, its Japanese transliteration does not necessarily reveals all its original components. For

example, *un* is the Japanese phonetic transliteration of the Sanskrit complex syllable *hūṃ*. From the Japanese transliteration it is practically impossible to identify the four components that the Indian classical doctrines identify in the syllable *hūṃ* (namely, *ha, u, a, ma*), which are on the contrary easily detected by the analysis of the corresponding shittan graph. In the same way, *kiriku*, the three-character phonetic transliteration of the mantric seed *hrīḥ* obscures the fact that it derives from one shittan graph and it does not allow one to know at once its original components, clearly visible in the original shittan character. In the case of a sequence of two or more shittan (*ku*), the interpretation of the meaning of the entire sequence precedes the semantic analysis of each syllable. The term “sintagmatic meaning” (*kugī*) refers to the sense of both an entire sequence and its individual Sanskrit components in combinations that usually ignore, as we have seen in Lecture 3, their original Sanskrit grammar and syntax.

In the *Gorin kujimyō himitsushaku*, Kakuban examines first the sintagmatic meaning of the two fundamental mantras of the text, and then he analyses the meaning of their individual components. The two fundamental mantras are:²¹

Namaḥ samantabuddhānāṃ aḥ vi ra hūṃ khaṃ

(Jp. Nōmaku samandabodanan akubiraunken) (pp. 40 e segg.)

Oṃ amṛta teje hara hūṃ

(Jp. On amirita teizei kara un) (pp. 81 e segg.),

However, Kakuban presents only the sintagmatic meaning of the more complex Amida’s *dhāraṇī*.²²

The pansemiotic nature of the esoteric cosmos reveals itself already in this particular semantic structure. Traditional Buddhist linguistics considers to be endowed with meaning only sentences (*ku*) and nouns (*myō*), that is, phrastic entities and first articulation units, and not syllabic phonemes (*mon* or *ji*), that is, second articulation units. Esoteric Buddhism, in contrast, in particular beginning with Kūkai’s philosophical speculations, attributes meaning to every expression and phenomenon, thus abolishing the distinctions between levels of articulation

²¹ Kakuban, *Gorin kujimyō himitsushaku*, respectively pp. 182-199 and pp. 199-208.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 208-209.

of signs and reality (see Lecture 2). More than that: meditative-hermeneutical practices of esoteric Buddhism focus especially on the minimal units of language and writing (syllables and graphemes), as a further proof that secret knowledge is to be found below ordinary communicative activities.

It is not by chance, thus, that Kakuban considers such semantic approach to linguistic units and articulations one of the peculiarities differentiating the esoteric teachings from the exoteric ones. He writes that “while exoteric teachings explain the meaning of words and sentences, esoteric Buddhism also explains the meaning of their articulations.”²³ In other words, the esoteric teachings present a fuller, more complete meaning, and are therefore able to relate expressions to their referents in a much better way than ordinary Buddhism.

The “atomic” meaning of the units of the expression articulates itself on two main levels: a superficial one, called *jisō*, and a deep, esoteric one, called *jigi*. *Jisō* refers to a sense based on the appearances, the shape of a sign: the primary meaning at this level is usually a term that begins with the same sound of its expression. For example, the *jisō* of the expression *va* is *vāc*, that is, “word, language.” In this way, the syllable *va* is treated as a condensation of another sign, which it stands for, namely, *vāc*, whose meaning is illustrated according to mainstream exoteric teachings.

The structure of the true meaning, *jigi*, the one on the deep, esoteric level, is very complex. *Jigi* can be a contradictory term of the superficial meaning: in the case of the syllable *ha*, whereas the *jisō* is “cause” (from the Sanskrit *hetu*, “cause”), the *jigi* is “no causation” or “uncausedness.” *Jigi* can also be—and this is more interesting in a semiotic perspective—a meta-term transcending the dichotomy (as such, fallacious because it is the result of attachment to false ideas) between the *jisō* and its contradictory situated on a deeper level. This meta-term is defined as “unobtainable” (*fukatoku*), an expression defining a situation of conceptual nondualism: the real meaning is “not obtainable” within ordinary language (any concept could be denied by its contradictory), whose dichotomic nature it transcends. Once one reaches the semantic level of “unobtainability,” one knows the real nature of language, and therefore has reached enlightenment. In the case of the mantric seed *ha*, the ultimate *jigi* is something such as “cause is

²³ *Kenmitsu fudōju*, in Miyasaka, ed., 1989, Tome I: 8. On the differences between exoteric and esoteric Buddhism, as conceived of by the Shingon tradition, see Rambelli

unattainable.” One should note that in this way the concept is not denied following the Buddhist traditional strategy established by Nāgārjuna. On the contrary, “unobtainability” presupposes the coexistence of all terms and concepts related to the original expression being analyzed, as the ultimate consequence of esoteric polysemy. In other words, “unobtainability” renders absolute the concepts it applies to, as elements of the unconditioned Dharma-realms.

Raihō defines in the following way the differences between *jisō* and *jigi*:²⁴

According to our school, whenever ones uses characters there is a difference between their aspect and their meaning. As for character aspect [*jisō*]: when one does not know the principles of the characters, names and meanings are distinct. One pronounces the characters on the basis of a provisional convention [*konryū*, Sk. *samaropa*]; but this refers only to the [superficial] aspects of the characters and is not identical [*sōō*] to their meanings. This is called “aspect of characters.”

As for character meaning [*jigi*]: since linguistic expressions [*shōji*] are the true aspect [of reality, *jissō*], each single character is the [ultimate] essence and substance [*shōtai*] of reality. Both sound [*shō*] and graphic form [*ji*] of every character have meaning: the character is the meaning, therefore it is called “character meaning.” Let us make an example.

The graphic form and the sound of [the *siddham*] character *ha* (Jp. *ka*) are not meaningful. Intonation and length resonate in vain and have no meaning. On the basis of an ordinary, provisional convention the character *ha* is said to mean “activity”: this is a linguistic expression at the level of the character aspect. Let us now consider the character meaning. The same syllable *ha* is a word [*shōji*] whose sound [*shō*] is meaningful [*gi*]. Its meaning is “activity” because the five senses are the sources of creation. Therefore the syllable is action, and apart from it [and the action it produces] there is no meaning of “activity.” In other words, the sound in its totality is the meaning of “activity.” Since there is no meaning apart from the

1994.

²⁴ Raihō, *Ibid.*

character [embodying and performing it], this is called character meaning.

When one uses the character aspect, one is using the four kinds of fallacious ordinary speech. When one uses the character meaning, one is using the speech that conforms itself to meaning as used by transcendent beings.

Question: it is usually said that “activity” is the character aspect, while “unobtainable [*fukatoku*]” is the character meaning. Why is this different from your explanation?

Answer: There are many different interpretations concerning character aspect and character meaning. I explained the character aspect as a graph without meaning [*umon mugī*], and the character meaning as a graph with meaning [*umon ugi*], as it is stipulated in the *Shōjigi* and the *Unjigi*. Now, concerning the meaning “activity” as character aspect and “unobtainable” as character meaning, when one enters Shingon and understands the difference between semioticity [*usō*] and signlessness [*musō*], s/he realizes that [the realm of] signs is the character aspect and that signlessness is the character meaning. Actually, there are four kinds of aspect and meaning of characters, as explained in the commentaries.

This distinction between the structure of meaning of esoteric Buddhism was first defined by Kūkai in his *Bonmōkyō kaidai*, in which he associated *jisō* with exoteric Buddhism (*kengyō*) and *jigi* with esoteric Buddhism (*mikkyō*); while the theoretical background can be found in the *Shōji jissō gi*, similar arguments are made in many texts discussing the differences between exoteric and esoteric Buddhism. However, Kūkai also put forth another interpretation, according to which the idea that each character (sign) has only one, well-specified meaning, is the *jisō*, whereas the idea that each character (sign) has numberless meanings is the *jigi*. For example, in the case of the syllable *ha*, the *jisō* is “operation,” whereas the *jigi* is the unobtainability of operation (*sagyō fukatoku*). *Fukatoku* is a synonym of middle path (*chūdō*). “When one contemplates unobtainability [one sees that] all characters have penetrated the profound principle of the Dharma-nature; being

all undifferentiated and homogeneous, one does not see individual meanings and features/signs.”²⁵

In this way, the pair *jisō/jigi* is almost interchangeable with another pair, *senryakushaku* (superficial meaning) and *jinpishaku* (profound meaning), constituted by gates of mystery nrs XX and XX. Raihō gives the following definition of these two levels of meaning:²⁶

Superficial [meaning] is like that of provisional words provisionally uttered by common folks and holy people. When one interprets them, their meaning is shallow; sentences are long but their meaning is simple. (...) Profound [meaning] refers to the external manifestation by the mind of profound matters. Since these matters cannot be transmitted to unworthy people, they are called profound and secret.

This definition presupposes that different cognitive attitudes toward language and signs result in different semiotic practices. Those for whom language is a merely conventional means of communication can only say and understand “shallow things” (obviously, from an ontological and soteriological point of view). However, in the case of those who understand the ontology of language and its role in the process of salvation, their utterances and semiotic activity in general constitutes “the external manifestation by the mind of profound matters.” This is a form of unconditioned activity in which the enlightened mind, essentially identical with Mahāvairocana’s mind, free from conditionings, puts forth micro-cosmic semiotic formations that embody the structure and the power of the universe (on the basis of mechanisms we will discuss in this and in the following two lectures).

Kakuban explains that the superficial level is necessary for the comprehension of the deep truth (see below)—a further confirmation that signifiers, both superficial and esoteric, are codified, that there is a relation between them, and a method to move from one level to another. Kakuban also says that meaning (*gi*) conforming to appearances (*sō*) is called “great meaning”

²⁵ Quoted in *Mikkyō daijiten*, p. 959a.

²⁶ Raihō, *Shingon myōmoku*.

(*taigī*), whereas appearances conforming to meaning produces the “true aspect of reality” (*jissō*), that is, ultimate reality (see below). In other words, the “great meaning” is the final interpretant of ordinary cognitive experiences, whereas the “true aspect of reality” constitutes reality as it is experienced by the enlightened ones who abide in nondualism and see no differences between underlying principles and their phenomenal manifestations.

In terms of the semiotic approach we have already outlined in the previous lecture, we can reformulate the esoteric semantic system in the following way. The plane of content is constituted by a form (a structure organizing the units of the content) and by a substance (the total sum of the semantic units contained by the esoteric encyclopedia). Form and substance of the content parallel form and substance of the expression (both verbal and graphic); its units are not just words and sentences, as in ordinary linguistics, but also syllables, phonemes, and other units of second articulation. As such, the totality of the expression is constituted by the Sanskrit phonetic system and the shittan graphemic system. The substance of the content, at the *jigi* level, is constituted by a limited, if varying, set of concepts based on the Sanskrit alphabet (see list above). Units of content can be further decomposed in smaller units such as semantic markers, but always in a controlled fashion determined by the fundamental esoteric vocabulary. Thus, units of the content on the *jigi* level are directly connected with the less numerous units at the *jisō* level. Underlying all this is the matter of content, constituted by the totality of the thinkable, dicible, and representable within the esoteric episteme. When one looks at it in this way, from the perspective of its constitutive system, the esoteric episteme, in spite of claims to unlimited polysemy, multiplicity of signification, etc., appears as strikingly structured, limited, and predictable in its conceptual outcomes. Interpretive creativity finds its place in the application of the system to new areas, not yet covered by traditional exegesis and in the usage of alternative ways to define the conceptual units on the various semantic levels.

For example, the syllable/graph *ha* (Jp. *ka*) is, as we have seen, mainly associated on the superficial level (*jisō*) with the concept “cause.” “Cause” is distinguished from “action,” “soteriological practice,” or even “nirvana” (and the structure that organizes the relations between these four terms is precisely the form of the content) by the semantic markers differentiating these terms from

each other. Now, *ha* can also be associated, on the deep level (*jigi*), with the unobtainability of causation, but also with the element wind, the geometric form of the half-circle, and so forth: the form of the content is in fact structured along subsets (semantic fields and axes).

This kind of hermeneutic approach aiming at extracting esoteric Buddhist truths out of signs was also applied to non-religious texts. A famous example is represented by the poem *Iroha uta*:

Iro wa nioedo, chirinuru wo	Even though the colorful flowers are perfumed, they will fall
Waga-yo tare-zo tsune-naran?	In our world, who lives forever?
Ui no okuyama kyō koete	Let us cross today the deep mountain of the conditioned world
Asaki yume miji, ei mo sezu	No more superficial dreams, no more intoxication

This poem has is well known to linguists as an early example of alphabetic poetry, since it is made of all forty-seven syllables of the Japanese phonetic system. The syllables are arranged in a way that can be interpreted as showing a Buddhist outlook of life, with its reference to impermanence, awakening from a dream-like, ebb state (ordinary, non-enlightened reality). Traditionally attributed to Kūkai, it is thought today to have been composed in the second half of the tenth century.²⁷ Some authors even suggest that it might be the work of the priest Kūya (903-972) or of the priest Senkan (918-983). A priestly authorship would explain the Buddhist overtones, and also perhaps the linguistic awareness that lies at the basis of the poem. The oldest extant version is in a manuscript copy of the *Konkōmyō saishō kyō ongi* dated 1079 (Shōryaku 3), classified by the Japanese government as an Important cultural property (*jūyō bunkazai*) and preserved at Daitōkyū Kinen Bunko, written in a combination of *man'yōgana* and *katakana* characters (there appear to be no versions of the Heian period written in *hiragana*).

²⁷ There are mainly two reasons for this attribution: the poem there is only one graph indicating the sound E; now the distinction between the sounds (and graphs) E and YE disappeared during the Tenryaku era (947-957). Furthermore, the poem is in the so-called *imayō* style (four lines of 5five and seven syllables), a style that became very popular after the mid-Heian period.

Since towards the end of the Heian period it was used to indicate the order of dictionaries and in the practice of penmanship.

Japanese commentators have interpreted this poem as a “translation,” line by line, of four lines expounded by Sākyamuni in the *Parinirvana Sutra* known in Japanese as “Sessenge” (Snow Mountain Poem, Sk. Himavat Gatā),²⁸ namely

All things are impermanent,
 Things that are produced are destined to extinction: this is the fundamental
 law
 When the cycle of birth and extinction is itself extinguished
 Nirvana is the ultimate bliss.

To Kakuban are attributed two esoteric interpretations of this poem, entitled respectively, *Iroha shaku arubeki kitora* and *Iroha ryakushaku*.²⁹ The author first posits an allegoric meaning and an interpretation according to the Dharma. Allegoric meaning: “color” (*iro*) expresses the impermanence of life (*shisō*) and implies the idea that all things are doomed to extinction. “Perfume” (*nioi*) refers to the first two phases of life (birth and stability); “fall down” (*chiru*) refers to the last two phases of life (alteration and extinction). Dharmic meaning: “color” has four meanings: (i) apparent reality (which is actually impermanent, empty, and destined to extinction); (ii) the realm of material forms (*shiki*, written with the same Chinese character); (iii) the first of the five aggregates (*goun*), matter; (iv) the totality of beings (objects and beings). Subsequent verses of the *Iroha* poem are variations, further elaborations of the theme of impermanence stated in the first verse. The second verse represents the impermanence of sentient beings and their ordinary reality. The third verse (crossing the deep mountain of the conditioned world) represents the path toward enlightenment, the actual content of which is indicated by the last verse.

In the esoteric treatment of the *Iroha uta* we can identify a double reversal typical of the esoteric episteme: on the one hand Japanese everyday language is employed to proclaim the ultimate Buddhist truth by revealing the true reality underlying the impermanent world of flowers and beauty; on the other hand,

²⁸ *Nehangyō* 14.

²⁹ In Miyasaka, ed., 1989, Tome 2, pp. 84-86 and pp. 86-88.

this profound Buddhist statement is made in a literary genre, poetry, which used to be criticized by Buddhism as not serious enough to convey deep doctrinal truths.³⁰ Thus, esoteric commentaries of the *Iroha uta* are examples of the positive overcoming of the issue of the fallacy of everyday and poetic language (*kyōgen kigyō*)—or, more generally, of the overcoming of the ontological and epistemological barrier opposing ordinary language to the absolute language of the Buddha. It is worth mentioning here that in medieval Japan, *waka* poetry became part of esoteric rituals: poems were used to transmit Buddhist doctrines, and *waka* itself was transmitted according to esoteric initiation rites (*kanjō*).³¹

But let us now return to more specifically initiatory, esoteric texts. There are several levels of sense or isotopies. Kakuban points out that in the esoteric episteme *jisō* and *jigi* are just used to represent numberless levels of sense related to the inexhaustibility of the meaning of each single expression and to the infinite variety of the psycho-physical states of the practitioners interpreting them. These isotopies regulate the homogeneity of interpretation, on both planes of *jisō* and *jigi*; the ultimate, more profound isotopy is, as we have already seen, the level of “unobtainability” (*fukatoku*). The term “isotopy” was introduced in semiotics by the so-called “School of Paris” and its meaning is based on the medieval European doctrine of the multiple senses of the Christian scripture.³² In semiotics, isotopy refers to a homogeneous level of sense of a term or even of a text, chosen on the basis of pragmatic decisions.³³ For instance, once it has been established that in a certain context the syllable/graph *va* in the sequence *a va ra ha kha* corresponds to the element water, all the other terms in the set should be interpreted according to the series of cosmic elements. The semantics of esoteric Buddhism recognizes the existence of numerous isotopies for each expression.

³⁰ On the ambivalent attitude of Japanese Buddhism toward literature, see in particular Herbert Plutschow, *Is Poetry a Sin?*, *Oriens Extremus* 25, 1978, pp. 206-218; *Chaos and Cosmos: Ritual in Early and Medieval Japanese Literature*. Leiden and New York: E. J. Brill, 1990; Susan Klein, “Wild Words and Syncretic Deities: *Kyōgen Kigo* and *Honji Suijaku* in Medieval Literary Allegoresis,” in Mark Teeuwen and Fabio Rambelli, eds., *Buddhas and Kami in Japan*. London and New York: Routledge/Curzon, 2003, pp. 177-203.

³¹ On *waka kanjō* see Kushida Ryōkō, *Zoku Shingon mikkyō seiritsu katei no kenkyū*. Tokyo: Sankibō busshorin, 1979, pp. 523-530.

³² U. Eco, *Sugli specchi e altri saggi*. Milan: Bompiani, 1985: pp. 215-241.

³³ A.J. Greimas and J. Courtés, *Sémiotique: Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage*. Paris: Hachette, 1979 [Italian translation: Florence, 1986, pp. 187-189]; A.J. Greimas and J. Courtés, *Sémiotique: Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage*. Tome 2. Paris: Hachette, 1986: 127-128. See also U. Eco, *Lector in fabula: La cooperazione interpretativa nei testi*

The goal of the initiation and meditative practices is that of penetrating deeper and deeper into the meaning of a mantric text from one level of sense to the next until one paradoxically reaches “unobtainability.”

A good example of the isotopic structure of the esoteric sense is provided by the meaning of the three syllables of the name Amida as described in Kakuban’s *Amida hishaku*. I have summarized Kakuban’s exegesis in the diagram below.³⁴

This diagram illustrates the correlation of the three syllables making up Amida’s name with concepts and stages of the Shingon soteriological process. The underlying idea is that all the elements in this diagram are always/already present in the name of Amida; uttering it or thinking of it amounts to actualize those features, thus triggering their salvific power.

The isotopies of “Amida” are not, properly speaking, homologous or isomorphic, despite their tripartite structure, because they refer to doctrines originally independent and/or unrelated to each other. However, it is possible to recognize a structural regularity. The series of three items, to which the syllables of the name Amida are associated (indicated, in the diagram above, in the three elements forming each line), constitute successive steps in a process toward liberation and the attainment of Buddhahood. In particular, the third term in each three-item series represent a feature of the absolute goal—the goal of salvational practices.

We have thus the following interpretive process. First, the name Amida is decomposed in its three constituting syllables, each of which is treated as a full-fledged mantra in its own. Interpretation begins with the signifier and becomes increasingly deeper, identifying in each syllable the signifier of a conceptual element of increasingly esoteric and complicated doctrines.

narrativi. Milan: Bompiani, 1979; Eco 1990.

³⁴ Based on *Amida hishaku*, in Miyasaka, ed., 1989, Tome 1, pp. 151-152. For an English translation of the entire text, see Hisao Inagaki, “The Esoteric Meaning of ‘Amida’ by Kakuban: An annotated Translation with Introduction,” *The Pacific World*. New Series Nr. 10, Fall 1994, pp. 102-115.

A	MI	DA
The undifferentiated single mind is originally uncreated	The undifferentiated single mind is without self (<i>muga</i>) and at the same time it is the Great Self (<i>taiga</i>)	In the undifferentiated single mind all dharmas are unconditioned, absolute, and quiescent
Buddha Section: nondualism of principle (<i>ri</i>) and wisdom (<i>chi</i>), of substance and semiotic appearance in the Dharma-realm of the undifferentiated single mind	Lotus Section: such as the lotus flower, so the emptiness of beings and dharmas according to the wisdom of sublime contemplation (<i>myōkanzatchi</i>) is never polluted by the six sense objects (<i>rokujin</i>)	Vajra Section: the wisdom of sublime contemplation (<i>myōkanzatchi</i>) of the Tathāgata is compact and absolute, and destroys the enemies represented by delusions
Emptiness (<i>kū</i>): the Dharma-essence of the undifferentiated single mind is forever devoid of unreality and delusion	Conditioned Existence (<i>ke</i>): the dharmas of the undifferentiated single mind are like mirages and constitute conditioned existences	Middle Path (<i>chūdō</i>): the dharmas of the undifferentiated single mind transcend the two previous categories
Being (<i>u</i>): substance and semiotic appearance of the single mind are by nature innate and uncreated, and therefore not subject to extinction	Emptiness (<i>kū</i>): the Dharma-essence of the single mind is unattainable	Non-emptiness (<i>fukū</i>): all dharmas of the single mind constitute the virtues of the Dharmakāya and are infinite
Cause: the realm of the buddhas and the realm of sentient beings depend on the single mind's enlightenment or delusion	Practice: when the attachment to the self of beings and dharmas ceases and emptiness is understood, one attains buddhahood	Buddha: it represents nondualism and the absolute nature of principle (<i>ri</i>) and wisdom (<i>chi</i>) of the single mind, that is, the Buddha-nature

In this way, the overall structure of the interpretive process of the name Amida reproduces, almost iconically, the ascetic itinerary toward salvation. One starts with the absolute single mind, the cosmic substratum of original enlightenment and warranty of secure attainment; it proceeds through the mandala, represented here by its three main sections (*sanbu*), the three truths of Tendai Buddhism, the three truths of esoteric Buddhism, and finally reaches to

the salvational process itself (cause, practice, and ultimate Buddhahood). Moreover, this interpretive process simulates the actual education curriculum of learned monks (*gakuryo*), going from the study of classical Mahāyāna, to that of increasingly complex esoteric Buddhist teachings, and culminating with ritual practices ensuring the becoming buddha in the present body of the ascetics. (On the education system of esoteric Buddhism, see Lecture 7).

In other words, the isotopies of sense represent the soteriologic trajectory proper to esoteric Buddhism: in the name of a deity, as is the case of Amida in this example, is already present the salvation, and practices cannot turn out to be nil. This is a peculiar esoteric strategy of salvation. These isotopies function as “esoteric interpretive grids.” They give a soteriological value to words, concepts, and phenomena, and therefore play a fundamental role in esoteric Buddhism. I will deal with this subject more in depth in Lecture 6. One should remember, however, that the process of distinguishing the various isotopies involved in each mantric expression, being a discriminating activity, still belongs to an initial, superficial interpretive level (*jisō*). After his exegesis, Kakuban adds that the meanings of Amida are actually not separate and distinguished, and that the semantic structure of “Amida” in fact reproduces Indra’s net (which, as we have already seen, is a Buddhist model to represent unlimited semiosis). It is also important to notice that the complexity of the superficial meaning of mantric terms involves mnemonic techniques, a subject we will address in the next section.

Proliferation and Dissolution of Sense

Within the episteme of esoteric Buddhism the Sanskrit phonological and graphological systems are not only endowed with a mnemonic function, as in earlier Mahāyāna. As we have already seen, the mnemonic aspects proper of practices on language (*gomitsu*), that is, the recitation and memorization of shingon and the study and writing of shittan, are propedeutic to interpretive practices that are directly related to meditation and ritual. The most complex meditations, the ones reserved to ascetics endowed with the highest capacities (*kikon*), are based upon a deep understanding of the esoteric semantic system and its mechanisms. Indeed, the increasing importance of easy practices (which, as

we have seen, usually can do without complicated semantic considerations) within the Shingon tradition was never meant to devalue meditative actualizations of the esoteric semantic system. In fact, Shingon exegetes often state that if even easy practices produce great benefits, the merits resulting from difficult practices will be numberless and inconceivably richer.

Hermeneutic-meditative practices of esoteric Buddhism constitute a process of gradual proliferation and dissolution of sense. From the starting point, at a relatively superficial level, the ascetic proceeds through the semantic encyclopedia of esoteric Buddhism, gradually penetrating the initiatory mysteries. The final point of this process is, paradoxically, the dissolution of sense in the *samādhi*, the complete relativization of the apparatus that articulates and categorizes signs—as represented by the ultimate stage of unobtainability (*fukatoku*).

Proliferation of sense aims at displaying similarities and interrelations connecting all phenomena as micro-cosms, essential parts of the Dharma-realm. We find here one of the fundamental principles of the esoteric logic (see lecture 7):

For any A and B, if A is similar to (i.e., possesses at least one quality of) B, then A is identical to (i.e., possesses all qualities of) B.

This principle is particularly significant when applied to explain the relationship between a specific phenomenon and the Dharma-realm or the Dharmakāya:

For any phenomenon A, if A is similar to (i.e., possesses at least one quality of) the Dharma-realm (or the Dharmakāya), then A is identical to (i.e., possesses all qualities of) the Dharma-realm (or the Dharmakāya).

The fundamental goal of the proliferation of sense is that of making the practitioner experience directly the substantial identity of all phenomena and of each phenomenon with the absolute of the Dharma-realm and the Dharmakāya. In other words, each sign, expression, concept, or phenomenon contemplated upon in meditative practice is inflated to make it identical with the absolute. The

unobtainability of a specific sense effect and the total undifferentiatedness (*byōdō*) that characterize the Dharma-realm are formalized through the use of the expression *soku*, meaning “is essentially identical to,” as in the formula /A *soku* B/.³⁵

To sum up, we can identify four phases in the process of proliferation and dissolution of sense:

1. if the case, decomposition of a mantric seed in its constituting elements (in the case of *hrīḥ*, respectively: *ha*, *ra*, *ī*, *ah*);
2. attribution of the superficial meaning (*jisō*);
3. attribution of various esoteric meanings (*jigi*);
4. since the ultimate esoteric meaning marks the realization of unobtainability (*fukatoku*) of discriminations, every thing is considered as nondual (*funi*), absolute and unconditioned, intentional and meaningful manifestation of the Dharmakāya, a kind of indexical expression produced by an original act of ostension.

Here it is important to note that dissolution of sense does not mean the dissolution of all phenomena into emptiness or undifferentiatedness; in fact, these terms never occur in esoteric Buddhism if not referred to the exoteric teachings (*kengyō*). Goal of meditation and visualization, practices that are rigorously codified in the slightest details, and whose results are predetermined, is the interpretive actualization of pre-defined similarities and of semantic interconnectedness of all phenomena, as a way for the ascetic to embody the cosmos and, at the same time, to identify with it. Such an experience is defined by Shingon exegetes as “becoming a buddha in the present body” (*sokushin jōbutsu*).

As we have seen, the dissolution of sense is the result of the realization of “unobtainability” (*fukatoku*), the attainment of a meta-level no longer linguistic through the meditative experience of the interconnectedness of all things. *Fukatoku* in fact means that a term cannot be interpreted from a partial,

³⁵ Hōjō Kenzō has made some interesting considerations on the esoteric concept of *soku* (substantial identity) and its importance in Kūkai’s thought, which are important also for the understanding of the esoteric episteme in general. See Hōjō Kenzō, “Sokushin jōbutsu gi ni mirareru gengokan no shiza,” *Mikkyō bunka* 150 (April 1984), pp. 74-93.

discriminating standpoint. In other words, when an expression is judged as *fukatoku*, it stops being a sign since it no longer stand for something else under some respect or capacity. Unobtainability can thus be understood as the ultimate goal of the interpretation process. It is situated outside semiosis, and it corresponds to the point in which a sign ceases to be a sign. An unattainable term transcends the articulations of sense and resists interpretation, situating itself at the level of nondualism.

Some medieval authors, most notably Raihō and Gōhō, carried out this proliferation of sense in a more systematic way by developing a fourfold system of semantic isotopies known as *shijū hishaku* (lit. “four levels of secret interpretation”). By expanding on the double structure of meaning (superficial/deep) I mentioned previously, these authors envisioned each sign as endowed of four levels of sense: a superficial one (*senryakushaku*) and three secret ones (respectively, *jinpishaku*, *hichū jinpishaku*, *hichichū jinpishaku*). By following the interpretive process from one level to the other, the practitioner is able to realize the absolute and unconditioned nature of signs and, consequently, their salvific power.

The doctrinal basis of these four levels of meaning can be found in passages from the *Dainichikyōsho* and the *Fushigisho*. The *Dainichikyōsho* says: “This scripture [i.e., the *Mahāvairocana sutra*] has two interpretations, one superficial and one profound. The profound interpretation has, in turn, a superficial and a profound interpretation.”³⁶ The *Fushigisho* says that Mahāvairocana’s original uncreatedness has three levels of esoteric meaning, respectively, the secret meaning (*himitsushaku*), the secret among secret meanings (*himitsuchū hishaku*), and the most secret among secret meanings (*hichichū hishaku*).³⁷ It appears that the combination of these two passages is at the origin of the medieval Shingon four-level exegesis. Let us look at it more in detail.³⁸

³⁶ *Dainichikyōsho* fasc. 4.

³⁷ *Fushigisho* final fasc..

³⁸ These four isotopies are discussed at length by the Tōji school of medieval Shingon centered on the scholar monks Raihō and Gōhō; the Mount Kōya’s lineage of Yūkai only distinguishes between a first, superficial level, identified with exoteric teachings, and a second, profound level, identified with the esoteric doctrines of the Shingon tradition. See Kūkai, *Unjigi*; *Unjigi myōsoku shō* (a collection of oral instructions by Yūkai, 10 fascicles in 5 booklets); Gōhō, *Gōhō shishō* 9 (in 12 fascicles, written in 1340 [Ryakuō 3]); Raihō, *Homnoshū* fasc. 19, *Denbōki* 5 (oral instructions by Gōhō); Gōhō, *Sokushingi Tōmonki* fasc. 4 (probably Gōhō’s transcription of Raihō’s oral instructions written in 1327

We have already discussed the first two levels of sense of esoteric expressions. The superficial level (*senryakushaku* or *jisō*) is related to the shape or the sound of a Sanskrit character, or in any case is part of the received, non-esoteric Buddhist conceptual system. The deep, or secret, level (*jinpishaku*, or *jigi*) constitutes a radical negation of the previous meaning. As we have already seen, if the superficial meaning of *vāc* is speech, its deep meaning is the unobtainability (*fukatoku*) of speech; if the superficial meaning of the siddham character *ha* is “operation,” its deep meaning is the unobtainability of operation. Unobtainability means here “middle path” (*chūdō*) and refers to the fact that signs interpreted at this level are beyond dualistic distinctions. The third level is the secret among secret meanings (*hichū jinpishaku*). The unobtainability we reached at in the previous level is defined as the superficial meaning (*jisō*) of this level, the deep meaning (*jigi*) of which is “perfect and pure” (*enmyō*). At the previous stage we learned that the profound meaning of each sign is unobtainable. However, there remained a distinction between signifier (*nōsen*) and signified (*shosen*). Accordingly, this is still a superficial meaning (*jisō*). The profound meaning is attained when one contemplates that there is no signified outside the signifier and that the sign as it is perfect and pure (*kyotai enmyō*). In other words, at the third level of sense we overcome the distinction between signifier and signified and reach a stage in which signs are “perfect and pure” (*enmyō*). This term is explained as meaning “a perfect circle containing all virtues” (*rinnen shutoku*, a definition of *en* in *enmyō*) and “pure and undefiled” (definition of *myō*). We encounter here a reference to a mandalic formation: a perfect circle containing all virtues is, in fact, a definition of mandala.³⁹

The fourth and last level is the most secret among secret meanings (*hichichū no jinpishaku*). The previous meaning, “perfect purity” (*enmyō*) is the superficial level (*jisō*) of this stage, and a different distinction between signifier and signified is the new, and ultimate deep meaning (*jigi*). At the previous level, the distinction between signifier and signified was forgotten by a return to the homogeneous perfect purity of the only mind (*isshin*). Thus, the third level corresponds to the stage of eliminating delusions (*shajō*) to realize the principle of the single Dharma realm (*ichi hokkai*). However, characters are signifiers; the

[Karyaku 2].

³⁹ See Rambelli 1991.

principles they signify are the substance (*tai*) of the universe; within perfect purity there is an additional pair of signifier and signified, and the three mysteries (*sanmitsu*) are evident. This is the true meaning expressing the virtues (*hyōtoku*) of the multiple Dharma realm (*ta hokkai*). Accordingly, at this ultimate level the superficial meaning (*jisō*) is the provisional doctrine of the single Dharma realm (*ichi hokkai*); the deep meaning (*jigi*) is the ultimate doctrine of the multiple Dharma realm (*ta hokkai*).⁴⁰

From this treatment, we learn that, according to medieval Shingon exegetes, within the four levels of sense, the previous level's deep meaning (*jigi*) becomes the next level's superficial meaning (*jisō*); we are thus dealing here with a connotative semiotics. The categories of *Jisō/jigi* and *shajō/hyōtoku* are used together in order to represent the semantic system of esoteric Buddhism; at the end, we find an ontological and epistemological distinction between a single Dharma realm (*ichi hokkai*) and a multiple Dharma realm (*ta hokkai*). We also notice that the final, most secret isotopy is virtually identical with the first, superficial level of sense. Distinctions (including that between signifier and signified) are no longer denied, but on the contrary they are rendered absolute as manifestations of the innate multiplicity of the Dharma realm. At this level, thus, we realize that each sign, each entity, is an absolute and unconditioned entity.

We could summarize the fourfold isotopic structure in the following way.

First level (*senryakushaku*): denotative meaning (common sense, or received Buddhist meaning)

Second level (*jinpishaku*): beginning of esoteric connotations: underlying doctrinal principles of a certain sign, concept or object; "unobtainability" (*fukatoku*)

Third level (*hichū jinpishaku*): beyond the opposition of semioticity and signlessness (*usō/musō*), this level indicates a fundamental principle of the Dharma as it is indicated by that specific sign, concept or object; the sign embodies the single Dharma realm (*ichi hokkai*)

⁴⁰ On the doctrines concerning the status of the Dharma realm, whether it is a single, unified macro-cosmic entity (*ichi hokkai*), or a manifold and multiple entity (*ta hokkai*), see *Mikkyō daijiten*, "Ichi-ta hokkai," p. 92.

Fourth level (*hihichū jinpishaku*): indication that the essence of the Dharma does not exist apart from each single concept or object—this is the level at which each concept or object is realized as being absolute and unconditioned, and that its peculiarities are absolute and unconditioned as well as part of the multiple Dharma realm (*ta hokkai*); this is the ultimate meaning of unobtainability.

In order to clarify further this interpretive structure, let us now see two concrete examples as provided by the *Mikkyō daijiten*. The first example is the offerings of flowers and incense to the buddha.

1. superficial level: offerings are made to please the buddha
2. secret level: flowers represent the totality of good deeds, and incense represents earnest devotion (*shōjin*)
3. secret among secrets level: each flower and each incense stick are produced by the combination of the six cosmic elements and are therefore differentiated aspects of Mahāvairocana and the Dharma Realm
4. most secret level: there is no all-pervasive Dharma realm outside of each single flower and incense stick; accordingly, offering one to a buddha means to offer them to the entire Dharma realm.

The second example is the status and significance of Bodhisattva Maitreya (Jp. Miroku):

1. superficial level: he is the lord of Tuṣita Heaven
2. secret level: Maitreya connotes a particular form of one aspect of the enlightenment produced by Mahāvairocana's samādhi of great compassion
3. secret among secrets level: Maitreya is Mahāvairocana in his complete form
4. most secret level: Maitreya is one of the innate virtues of the practitioner.

From these examples we see that the esoteric interpretive practice consists in proliferating sense in order to bring signification to a stop. When a sign is expanded into an embodiment of the entire universe, then there is nothing more

to interpret. Semiosis is brought to a final stop, what remains is the ritual contemplation of reality as it is in its absolute and unconditioned essence.

It is worth noting that the above fourfold structure was mostly employed to interpret concepts and objects, rather than for the contemplative analysis of mantric expressions. Mantras were subjected to analogous processes of proliferation and dissolution of sense that did not necessarily involve a systematic fourfold typology. Rather, the absolute nature of siddhaṃ graphs was attained through vertiginous raids across the entire semantic encyclopedia of the esoteric episteme.

Proliferation and Dissolution of Sense: The Case of the Mantric Seed *Vaṃ*

Let us now discuss in detail a concrete example of the way in which the complex semantic network associated with a shittan character unfolds in esoteric interpretive visualizations by analyzing the mantric seed *vaṃ* (Jp. *ban*) as presented by Kakuban in the *Ban ji gi*.⁴¹ The text opens with a statement outlining the general characteristic of this syllable, described as the “wondrous substance of Mahāvairocana Dharmakāya, the esoteric designation of the All-illuminating absolute Buddha, the emperor of secret mantras, the main object of worship (*honzon*) of the profound principle and of true wisdom.”⁴² In a dense and complex prose, Kakuban continues by enumerating the characteristics and virtues of the syllable *vaṃ* in a list that mobilizes a number of exoteric and esoteric teachings such as the ten stages of mind, the mandala of the two realms, and the relation between language (*shōji*) and true reality (*jissō*). These virtues are at source of the seed’s incomparable power that enables one to easily attain liberation in the form of either rebirth in a pure land or enlightenment in the present body. Next, Kakuban lists the principal sixteen profound meanings (*jigi*) of the seed *vaṃ*.⁴³

1. a condition separate from language

⁴¹ Kakuban, *Ban ji gi*, in Miyasaka, ed., 1989, Tome 1, pp. 98-103.

⁴² Ibid., p. 98.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 99. See also Kakuban, *Rishukyō shuji shaku*, in Miyasaka, ed., 1989, Tome 2, pp. 97-101.

2. element water
3. *stūpa*
4. great compassion
5. *vajra*
6. wisdom body (of the Dharmakāya)
7. initiation
8. most excellent
9. all-pervading
10. enlightenment
11. single mind
12. the two mandala realms
13. the three secrets (*sanmitsu*)
14. the four kinds of mandalas
15. the five buddhas
16. the six elements

A full analysis of this series would require a lengthy treatment. I will limit myself to note a few significant points. To begin with, the first meaning, “a condition separate from language” is the negation of the superficial meaning (*jisō*) of the syllable *va* (“speech”), which constitutes the graphic and phonetic basis of the seed *vaṃ* and the starting point of the esoteric system of semantic isotopies. In the cosmology of esoteric Buddhism, *vaṃ* is associated to the element water (second meaning), and constitutes the seed of the five-element mandala in the Vajra system, a mandala that takes the shape of a five-element *stūpa* (third meaning). The seed *vaṃ*'s association with the Vajra system is reflected by the fifth and sixth meanings (the wisdom body of the Dharmakāya being the modality of the Buddha in the Vajra mandala). The fourth meaning is one of the attributes of Mahāvairocana. Next, meanings seven through eleven represent in a sense the soteriological path that takes place when one is initiated to the seed *vaṃ*: it begins with initiation to the most excellent teachings about the all-pervading Buddha, and it ends with enlightenment and the realization of the single mind. Finally, the last five meanings present an overview of the esoteric universe, from its appearance (the mandala) to its substance (the five buddhas and the six

elements).⁴⁴ We can also notice that the deep structure of this semantic series: it ranges from the meaning of a specific Sanskrit syllable (*vam*) to increasingly larger conceptual formations such as soteriology and the structure of the universe. Significantly, the last meaning is the substance of the universe—a further indication that esoteric semantics aims at creating a systematic continuity between a signifier and the cosmic substance, as we have seen in our previous discussion of proliferation and dissolution of sense.

Kakuban proceeds by arguing that it is possible to analyze each of the above sixteen “meanings” on the basis of ten categories:⁴⁵

1. negative method to attain the truth
2. differences in the esoteric designations
3. true meaning of the negative and the positive paths
4. visualization of signs
5. cancellation of sins and cessation of ignorance
6. rebirth in the Pure Land
7. becoming a buddha in the present body
8. the all-pervading Dharma-realm
9. performing practices to bring benefits to other sentient beings
10. dialogue to dissolve doubts

Again, a full discussion of this list would take us too far. I would like to stress that these ten categories correspond to stages in the ascetic-meditative process. It begins with the negative method, that is, exposure to the exoteric teachings; it continues with entrance into the esoteric path, the practice of meditation on *siddham* and *mantra*, and the attainment of salvation (rebirth and becoming a buddha), followed by the performance of the activities of a fully enlightened buddha. The list ends with a clarifying dialogue—precisely as in the esoteric education process I will discuss in Lecture 7.

Kakuban lingers in particular on the first category, consisting in a method to evaluate teachings. He lists Kūkai’s ten stages of the mind, a general schema encompassing all possible soteriological paths: “the last stage, the secret one, is

⁴⁴ On the structure of the esoteric universe, see Lecture 2.

⁴⁵ Kakuban, *Ban ji gi*, p. 99.

like the moon in the sky; the previous nine superficial stages are like its reflection on water.”⁴⁶ Kakuban then mentions the existence of thirty differences between the esoteric teachings and their exoteric counterparts, but does not expand on them.⁴⁷

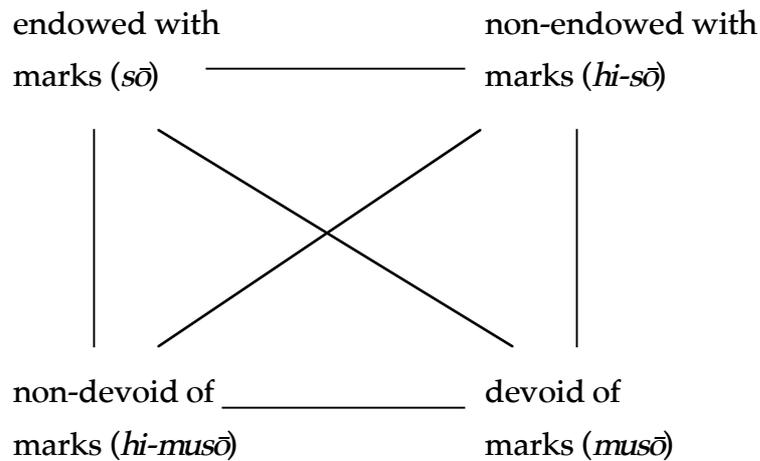
Next, Kakuban discusses the first of the sixteen meanings of the seed *vaṃ* previously listed, “a condition separate from language.” Kakuban’s reasoning is articulated in the following way. In Sanskrit, *vakalpa* (transliterated in Japanese as *bakōha*) means “language.”⁴⁸ Meditation on the seed *vaṃ* makes one realize that no dharma, as the product of causes, is separate from language. This is the superficial level of meaning of the seed, the esoteric isotopy (*jisō*). However, since dharmas are originally uncreated (*honpushō*), they transcend all causes; for this reason Buddhism teaches the “interruption of the way of language” (*gogon dōdan*). At this point, Kakuban begins to meander through the deep levels of initiatory meaning at the esoteric isotopy (*jigi*). If dharmas were produced by causes and therefore empty, characterized by incessant transformation and by their reproducibility into images, it would be possible to talk about them in the ordinary language. Instead, dharmas are uncreated, they have no marks, they are not in continuous transformation and cannot be reproduced into images. As such, they transcend all signs and cannot be shown or taught to human beings.

To sum up, dharmas transcend all dichotomic categorizations: they are at the same time endowed with marks (*sō*) (on a superficial level), devoid of marks (*musō*) (on a deep level), neither endowed with marks (*hisō*) nor devoid of marks (*hi-musō*) (on the ultimate level). In this case, Kakuban builds a semiotic square starting from the primary semantic axis /“endowed with marks (*sō*)” vs “devoid of marks (*musō*)”/, and affirms the simultaneous truth of all four components of the tetralemma. This semiotic square can be represented in the following way:

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Kakuban addresses the issue in other works, such as the *Kenmitsu fudō ju*. On the differences between exoteric and esoteric teachings, see also Rambelli 1994.

⁴⁸ *Vakalpa* is the transliteration suggested by Miyasaka Yūshō for *bakōha*, an unknown term used by Kakuban. The Sino-Japanese character *ba* is often used to render the initial sound of *vāc*, “speech.” The Sanskrit *kalpa* (“aeon”), also transliterated as *kōha*, is sometime interpreted as *vikalpa* (“discrimination”). It is possible that Kakuban used the term *vakalpa* to indicate wrong ideas based on discrimination and attachment to ordinary, fallacious language.



Semiotic square of semioticity

In this case, the semiotic square, a general schema representing all possibilities of production of sense, collapses into a non-formalizable point, what esoteric texts define as “unobtainable” (*fukatoku*). This is the reason why dharmas are said to transcend the way of language. In other words, the contradictoriness of the esoteric meaning (*jigī*) vis a vis the superficial sense (*jisō*) is justified by recourse to a sort of implosion of meaning (ultimate “unobtainability”).

Next, Kakuban mentions the existence of six interpretants associated with the seed *vaṃ*'s transcendence of language, but only mentions the first, that is, *vaṃ*'s distance from discriminative discourses of human beings still prisoners of karma.⁴⁹ Here ends the doctrinal information on the meaning of the seed *vaṃ*. Subsequently, Kakuban adds instructions on an “abbreviated” contemplation of the seed, which is based on ten semantic fields:

1. *Stūpa*, matrix of the Dharma-realm
2. Dharmakāya of absolute wisdom
3. Great compassion
4. Uncontaminated

⁴⁹ Kakuban, *Ibid.*, p. 100.

5. Purifying
6. Homogenizing
7. Incessant continuity
8. Harmonizing
9. Revitalizing
10. Indestructible destroyer

The mantric seed *vaṃ* is to be contemplated on the basis of each of these ten characteristics. I will not discuss each of them in detail. Suffice it to say that *vaṃ* is the seed of the entire Dharma-realm and of the Dharmakāya as seen from the Vajra mandala (this is why the latter is characterized by “absolute wisdom”); as such, *vaṃ* is endowed with the eight features of the element water, to which it is traditionally related (meanings three to ten). These features are semantic markers that the esoteric Buddhist encyclopedia attributes to water. These features of water are metaphorically associated with the power that meditation on *vaṃ* bestows upon the ascetic. Thus, what Stanley Tambiah has written concerning the meaning of the religious language of mantras in South and South-east Asia also seems to apply to the case of Japanese esoteric Buddhism:⁵⁰ the portion of the semantic encyclopedia and the series of interpretants activated, and the function of each element depend on the context in which it appears and the circumstance in which it is used. The seed *vaṃ* appears countless times in the Shingon exegetical and ritual production, but it can play numerous functions ranging from magical protection to the acquisition of merit to the attainment of Buddhahood. All these functions are defined in texts such as the one I discussed above, but only some of them are activated in each specific use of the seed.

Kakuban’s text concludes with some considerations on the esoteric teachings concerning the Dharmakāya and the indication of some sources on the subject written by Kūkai.⁵¹

In the *Ban ji gi*, which is representative of Kakuban’s production and also of the textual strategies of many Shingon texts, the author starts with the analysis of the superficial meaning of a mantric expression and gradually expands the

⁵⁰ Stanley J. Tambiah, “The Magical Power of Words,” *Man* 3/2, 1968, pp. 175-208; *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970.

⁵¹ Kakuban, *Ibid.*, pp. 102-103.

interpretive scope, turning the mantras into mandalas. The definition of mantra provided by Luis O. Gómez, a “multivalued icon embodying a system of sacred identities,”⁵² perfectly fits the interpretive usage of Japanese shingon as well.

To conclude this section, I would like to stress that the standard meanings of both superficial and esoteric isotopies have no immediate practical value in ordinary language, but were only studied as epistemic presupposition and theoretical justification of esoteric visualizations. Many of these “meanings” are “interpretants” in the Peircian sense, rather than Saussurian signifiers. They are not always directly related to the expression, but often indicate semantic fields in which the meanings are to be found, objects and phenomena associated to them, and degrees of embodiment by the practitioners. In this way, esoteric signs, even the most simple and minimal ones, acquire enormous semantic dimensions: it is thus possible to define them “macro-signs,” coagulations of numerous denotative and connotative levels.⁵³ Macro-signs are open-ended clusters of *alloforms*, objects, actions, states, and qualities—distinct occurrences of the different modes of the cosmic substance. A macrosign is always unconditioned, since it transcends any definition that is not a mere list of some of its more elementary components; as such, a macrosign is the matrix of esoteric system of meaning. Their components can indifferently be signifiers or signifieds to each other, as a particular case of denotative semiotics: as Pier Paolo Pasolini wrote, “in reality there is no ‘signified’: because the signified is also a sign.”⁵⁴ Every meditational object or image represents, as Umberto Eco put it, “an organic *imago mundi*, an image of the world that is the result of a divine textual strategy.”⁵⁵ The best example of macrosign is perhaps the five-element mandala, more commonly known as *sotoba*, a stylized model of a *stūpa*, the real “trade mark” of Japanese Buddhism. *Sotoba*, as a powerful model of the cosmos and of the ascetic’s body, summarizes a potentially open-ended series of cosmic correlations. Meditation thus consists in identifying the right interpretants for each mantric expression and in

⁵² Luis O. Gómez, “Buddhist Views of Language,” in Mircea Eliade *et al.*, *Encyclopedia of Religion*. New York: MacMillan, 1987, vol. 8, p. 449.

⁵³ Louis Hjelmslev, *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*, 1943 [Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1961] as revised by Roland Barthes, “Elements de sémiologie,” *Communications* 4 (1964), defines these formations “meta-signs.”

⁵⁴ Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988 (original Italian edition 1974), p. 262.

⁵⁵ Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press,

contemplating in it the relevant features of each interpretant. In this way, meditative techniques are described as resulting in the transformation of mantras and secret images into a kind of black hole in which the entire esoteric encyclopedia collapses. As Yamasaki Taikō writes, “in the mantric dimension, a single syllable can represent the totality of meanings that exist as the background to any single meaning.”⁵⁶ At this point, each syllable becomes a mandala.

Mandala is a circular design (in Sanskrit *maṇḍala* means “circle”) representing a symbolic matrix of the universe, often depicted as a complicated icon with many deities. Among the many definitions of mandala perhaps the more suggestive has been proposed by Giuseppe Tucci, who called it a “psychocosmogram”⁵⁷—a graphic representation of the cosmos and the individual spirit of the ascetics. According to Yamasaki Taikō, “the esoteric *mandala* illustrates enlightenment, and so the true self... [It] symbolically represents the ‘universal form’ of all things and beings.”⁵⁸ Although its theory and practice developed within the esoteric tradition of Tantric Buddhism, mandala is not (or not just) the arrangement of mystical visions and enlightenments guided by a universal and mysterious inner necessity of human spirit, as it has been suggested by Giuseppe Tucci under the influence of Carl Gustav Jung. Received definitions as these raise interesting problems: which are the codes of this representation? What is its underlying semiotic system? Usual psychological and iconographic approaches ignore these questions and fail to explain the epistemic nature of the relations connecting the esoteric cosmos with the mandala. In fact, the mandala is the result of a more or less conscious material (and semiotic) effort to create a definite object as an answer to doctrinal, historical and cultural impulses.

A mandala is essentially a sacred space where rituals and religious practices are performed. The model of this sacred space is the area surrounding the tree under which Śākyamuni, the historical Buddha, attained enlightenment. Pictorial and sculptural mandalas developed as variants or representations of ritual platforms and spaces. Later, also the ascetic's body and the everyday world filtered through meditation came to be recognized as mandalic spaces. The

1990, p. 25.

⁵⁶ Yamasaki Taiko 1988, p. 79.

⁵⁷ Giuseppe Tucci, *Theory and Practice of Mandala*. London: Rider & Co, 1961.

practice of mandala consists in manipulating signs in order to affect reality and to produce in the ascetic altered (non-ordinary) states of consciousness with a different perception of reality.

As a systematic model of the cosmos, a mandala is a powerful device for absorbing heterogeneous elements, providing them with well-defined status within the Buddhist esoteric tradition. At the background of every mandalic object lay one or more texts, a set of doctrines, a certain cosmological and soteriological outlook, knowledge of religious and ritual practices, and social and political ideas.⁵⁹

A mandala is a structured and articulated set of various semiotic systems, rooted in an organic correlative principle. It is all-encompassing, self-sufficient, and recursive; nothing exists outside of it. Thus the mandala is able to completely represent the episteme of the esoteric Buddhism, and can be defined as a sort of polymateric semiotic system.⁶⁰ As such, mandala presupposes peculiar laws of organization, semiotic concepts and semiotic practices yet to be studied in depth to better understand esoteric Buddhism. This unique character makes the mandala the closest possible human representation of the absolute world, of the substratum-space in which semiosis takes place. If meditation on mandala is an immersion into the space of enlightenment, this is made possible not just by an attribution of value but, most importantly, also by virtue of the structure of the mandalic sign itself. Thus, special semiotic operations were carried out in order to remotivate the mandala and change it into an icon containing the

⁵⁸ Yamasaki 1988, p. 126.

⁵⁹ In the course of time, mandalic practices were projected onto geographical space, thus giving new meanings to pilgrimage and changing the use of space (Grapard, Allan G., "Flying Mountains and Walkers of Emptiness: Toward a Definition of Sacred Space in Japanese Religions," *History of Religions* 21/3 (February 1982): 195-221). Furthermore, as an epitome of a certain knowledge, the mandala presupposes and represents multi-leveled political conceptions and structures of power. A mandala can also function as an amulet or a talisman, protecting its owner from illness and misfortune; but it is used also as a summary of doctrines and practices for the memorization and the transmission of the esoteric knowledge.

⁶⁰ Among the numerous books on mandala, see for example Tajima Ryūjun, *Les deux grands mandalas et la doctrine de l'ésotérisme shingon*. Tokyo: Maison Franco-Japonaise; Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1959; Toganoō Shōun, *Mandara no kenkyū*, in Toganoō Zenshū Vol. IV. Kyōto: Rinsen shoten, 1982 (original edition 1927); Rambach, Pierre, *The Secret Message of Tantric Buddhism*. Geneva: Skira - New York: Rizzoli International, 1979; Yamasaki Taiko, *Shingon. Japanese Esoteric Buddhism*. Boston and London: Shambala, 1988; Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis, *Japanese Mandalas: Representations of Sacred Geography*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999.

characteristics of the cosmos. Once expression and meaning, sign and reality, means and ends of meditation have been made essentially identical, through a relation of motivation, also the practitioner and the deity (the object of meditation) become identical. Salvation reveals itself as the result of peculiar semiotic conceptions and practices.

Externally, a mandala appears as an abstract scheme made of arbitrary signs, while the exegetic tradition stresses their esoteric and ineffable meanings. A historical analysis shows that this is not the case.⁶¹ It is clear that all elements of the mandala were chosen in order to express a certain content. The form of the content determined the form of the expression. It is the structure of reality itself that determines the expression, since the ascetic's meditative journey and its goal influenced the choice of the signs with which they are represented.

The essential identity between expression and meaning in mandalic signs is a consequence of their both being considered as different epiphenomena of a single, nondual reality. In order to assure their efficacy, rituals and soteriologic practices were connected in some way to their supports, the spaces in which they take place, and the processes in which they are articulated. As a consequence, in the religious practice there is no clear-cut distinction between the "meaning" and the "power" of a mandala. In fact, the signs of esoteric Buddhism do not simply stand for a meaning or a possibility of action: they *are* that meaning or that action. Accordingly, expressions are not real signs: they become receptacles of knowledge, *power spots* where that knowledge is supposed to change into operational force.

Thus, on a certain level of consciousness, a mandala is not just a representation; the unconditioned reality is itself a mandala and the mandala is also the general shape of phenomena. Everything is meaningful, a figure in the picture of the universe. Within mandala, with its polymatericity and polysemy, ordinary language is subordinate to a plurality of systems of representation. In the Tantric tradition, in fact, also written texts tend to be mandalized and transformed into a salvational journey. While a long Western tradition compares

⁶¹ Edeline, Francis, ed., *Herméneutique du mandala*, special issue of *Cahiers Internationaux de symbolisme* 48-50, 1984; Rambelli, Fabio, "Re-inscribing Mandala: Semiotic Operations on a Word and Its Object," *Studies in Central and East Asian Religions* 4, 1991, pp. 1-24.

the world with a Book, esoteric Buddhism understands the universe as an immense mandala.

In the Tantric Buddhist episteme, the mandala seems thus to constitute the principal model and metaphor for interpreting reality, a primary modeling system of the cosmos and human experience. This hypothesis has been already suggested by Giorgio Raimondo Cardona regarding the Tibetan mandala, an “expressive form” that “is not immediately translatable in the forms of language.”⁶²

Nondualism and the Absolute Nature of Signs

One of the most striking characteristics of Shingon doctrinal texts, is that their nondualistic position is grounded on a proliferation of dualisms, all of them being a sort of displacement of the fundamental distinction between exoteric and esoteric (*kenmitsu*) truths.⁶³ Raihō wrote on nondualism:

The doctrines of nondualism [*funi*] of our lineage are different from those of the other lineage [Tendai esotericism]. In that other lineage, Annen stated that each of the two mandalas is nondual, whereas Jikaku Daishi established nondualism outside of the two mandalas. The teachings of [Kōbō] Daishi are different. According to him, two is non-two, and there is no one apart from two. Nondualism exists neither in each of the two mandalas nor outside of it. One is two. This is extremely profound and difficult to understand, and should be pondered well.

Rather than an explanation, this is the establishment of a sectarian boundary, a Shingon trade mark. Mandala was not an exception; as a nondual combination of two quite different elements, the “two” of “Two Realms” (*ryōkai* or *ryōbu*) was

⁶² Cardona, Giorgio Raimondo, *I sei lati del mondo*. Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1988, p. 10.

⁶³ The *Shingon myōmoku* deals with the following dualisms: signs and signlessness, elimination of passions and valorization of virtues, superficial and profound meanings, innate and produced through practice, superficial and profound signifieds. Not treated as independent items but present in the text are also classic distinctions such as ordinary truth/absolute truth, and gradual/sudden enlightenment.

subjected to the standard remotivation processes. Raihō's idea of nondualism can perhaps be better understood through one of Kakuban's texts on mandala. Given the importance of the document, I have translated the entire passage.⁶⁴

Kakuban on Nondualism

If one examines with accuracy the character *ryō* ["set of two elements"], one realizes that it contains numberless meanings. Now we shall trespass the threshold of this esoteric number in order to expose its deep and important meaning.

The Nondual One-Mind

The character *ryō* means "unit" or "one." As a matter of fact, it is called "pair" [*ryō*] a unit of two elements [or, two ones], and it is called "two" [*ni*] [the combination of two characters] "one" [*ichi*] superimposed. Without the one the two cannot be produced. All doctrines of the Shingon school are articulated into superficial meaning [*jisō*] and deep, true meaning [*jigi*]. Consider for instance the syllable *vaṃ*, to which this principle also applies. "Discourse" is its superficial meaning, "distant from words" is its deep and true meaning. The other meanings also follow this rule. The same is true for the other letters. Now, "twofold world" [of the *maṇḍala*] [*ryōgai*] has the meaning of "nondual" [*funi*]: this is its true meaning. "Two realms" [*nikai*] is a superficial interpretation, while "nondual" is a deep interpretation. [In the case of the syllable *vaṃ*], only starting from the superficial level of "discourse" is it possible to attain the level of "distance from words." If the term "two worlds" did not exist who could ever express the principle of nondualism?

⁶⁴ Kakuban, *Himitsu shōgon funigi shō*, in Miyasaka, ed., 1989, Tome 1, pp. 46-53. The section translated here is on pp. 51-53.

The true meaning [*gi*], when it conforms to the appearance [*sō*], is called “great meaning” [*daigi*]; when the appearance [*sō*] conforms itself to the real meaning [*gi*] we have the “true aspect of reality” [*jissō*]. Thus, each component of the twofold world [of the *maṇḍala*] is nondual. The character *ni* [“two”] means precisely this, for it represents the unity of two elements. Concerning the nondualism of two, [the two elements] are not separate; therefore, the character “two” is produced by the combination of two characters “one.” Moreover, “pair” [*ryō*] means “one [set of] two,” that is, the one within the one [the perfect unity]. Therefore the nondualism of the twofold *maṇḍala* is nondualism within nondualism [i.e., perfect nondualism]...

Countless, Numberless

“Pair” [*ryō*] is a set of two, and “one” means “numberless.” As a well-known verse says, “one is not one, therefore it is called one.” The manifold constitutes the one [i.e., the totality]. Even one is numberless; how can a pair of ones be calculable? Moreover, two means “numberless,” “infinite,” and so forth. If one writes a character twice one expresses the sense of multiplicity; the repetition of the same word twice expresses the sense of numberlessness. For example, when one writes a pair of characters *moku* [“tree”] close to each other the character *rin* [“forest”] is produced, which expresses a luxuriant ensemble of many trees; two characters *seki* [“evening”] superimposed form the character *ta* [“many”], which expresses the non-singularity of all things. There also are several other cases [in which repetition of two characters is used to signify multiplicity]. This is the reason why a text states: “because of multiplicity they are called quiddities [*nyonyo*].” There are several proofs for this; may a single example suffice in order for you to understand all applications of this rule; you just have to apply the same principle to the other cases.

“Pair” also means “countless words,” “numberless meanings.” Let me explain why. “One” means “numberless” as I have shown before. “Two” is formed by a pair of ones, therefore it is doubly infinite. Pure

mind and mental states are so numerous as to transcend the possibility of being counted. In the same way, true wisdom and true reality are more numerous than the grains of dust of an entire country. The One Mind, the One Thusness, is boundless: who could ever measure its virtues and its knowledge? Each of these beings is perfect and unconditioned. They all interpenetrate without blend, each is one but not quantifiable. All the more, the infinite ensemble of all these units is incalculable. Who could ever give a number to this sum of infinities? This is why “pair” means “numberless.”

Both One and Many

This is the combination of the two preceding cases. Moreover, “one is not one, therefore it is called one”—thus, “pair” means “many.” [In the same way,] the many are not many, therefore they are called many: “pair” thus means “unit.”

Both Non-One and Non-Many

[“Pair”] means “many,” “non-one” [“pair”] also means “unit” and thus “non-many.” Moreover, the character “two” refers to a number different from one, therefore it is called “non-one”; “pair” is less than three, therefore it is called “non-many.” Since it means “non-many,” it transcends the attachment to the notion of “increase” [*zōyaku*, i.e. belief in substantial existence]; since it means “non-one,” it erases the attachment to the notion of “decrease” [*genmetsu*, denial of substantial existence]. The myriad dharmas are immobile; they constitute the One Mind. The One Mind is unchangeable and is identical to the myriad dharmas. The one does not increase [*zōyaku*] but becomes the manifold; the manifold does not diminish [*genmetsu*] but becomes the one: this is the meaning of “non-one” and “non-many.”

Moreover, the one is the unity of many, not the unity of one, therefore it is called “non-one”; the manifold is constituted by many units, not by many manifolds, therefore it is called “non-many.” The

nondual middle path does not belong to the realm of discursive thought: who can ever discuss about the identity and the difference of the perfect sea of the twofold *maṇḍala*? The Dharmakāya alone preaches the Dharma; its lower manifestations keep silent. Only the school of the Three Secrets speaks, the other schools, all of them, say nothing. How could one ever talk about unity and multiplicity of the secret treasure without opening its secret casket? This is the distance from language of the esoteric masters, the negative way of the positive way.

Perfect Circle, Totality

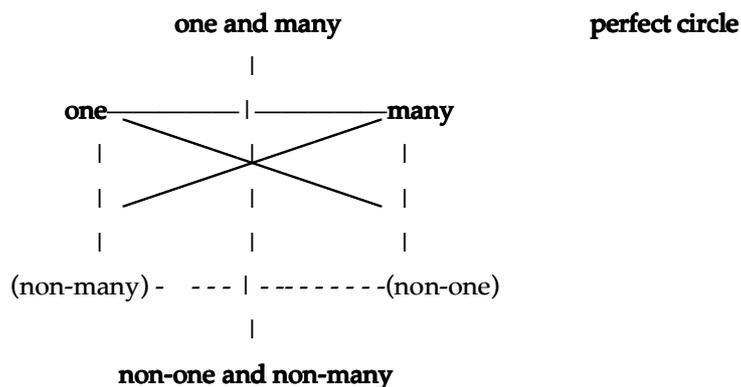
In its turn, this means two different things, namely, the character *ryō* [pair] includes at the same time the four cases above; *ryō* means “pair,” “to put together,” “circle,” “to be endowed with” [that is, “that which is endowed with a pair of circles”—the *maṇḍala* of the Two Realms]. In other words, *ryō* means “that which possesses principle [*ri*] and wisdom [*chi*], that which is endowed with *samādhi* and *prajñā*, that which integrates abstract principle [*ri*] and its phenomenal manifestations [*ji*], fullness of fortune and wisdom.” Thanks to its two wings a bird can fly in the pure circle of the sky, thanks to its two wheels a cart can move on the great square cart of the earth (...)

This document has an incantatory, vertiginous character that certainly contributes to its rhetorical power. Let me try to unpack it. Kakuban envisions nondualism as a deep correlate (*jigi*) of the superficial meaning (*jisō*) of the term “two”—in this case expressed by the character *ryō*, “pair, set of two elements.” In order to represent a concept resisting formalization such as “non-two,” Kakuban first established the semantic axis /[one] vs [numberless]/ and analyzed its two poles. Starting from this first semantic opposition, reformulated as /[one] vs [many]/, Kakuban then builds up a semiotic square with the inclusion of a related axis of sub-contrary terms ([non-one] vs [non-many]). We have thus four terms (tetralemma) in their three fundamental logic relations: contrary,

contradictory, implication.⁶⁵ Up to this point, Kakuban follows the classical logic of Nāgārjuna. However, there is an important difference. The Mādhyamika tradition uses the semiotic square in order to negate one by one all its terms; such a strategy aims at showing the causal interrelationship of all things and, at the same time, the impossibility for language and discursive thought to positively represent such interrelationship.

Kakuban follows a different procedure. Far from denying the terms of his semiotic square, he ends up affirming all of them. Whereas the first axis is made by the relation */[one] vs [many]/*, the second axis connects the meta-relation */[one and many] vs [non-one and non-many]/* created by fusing the two relations of contrary terms in the primary tetralemma (namely */[one] vs [many]/* and */[non-one] vs [non-many]/*). At this point, Kakuban adds another layer of significance by further uniting the two relations of his meta-semiotic square: such fullness of meaning is reached in the fifth section of his text (perfect circle, totality), which is synonymous with mandala. At this stage, the absolute nature of the term “two” is explained. Two, as in “mandala of the Two Realms,” is not just an attribute of mandala, but one of its constitutive, essential qualities. Mandalas cannot but be twofold, because that word encompasses the totality of meaning. At the same time, “two” cannot but be a mandalic expression. The term ‘ryō’ becomes coextensive with the very semiotic space in which the semiotic square is established—with that particular *topos* where meaning springs forth; as such, “two” is endowed with infinite qualities and powers, perfect as a circle, a mandala in itself. At this point there is nothing more to say, since Kakuban has reached the source of sense itself, the stage of unobtainability (*fukatoku*) of meaning; and yet at the same time everything can be said about mandala as the totality of reality. In this way, Kakuban helps the ascetic to realize through semiotic procedures the absolute value of each phenomenon—and of mandala in particular.

⁶⁵ On the semiotic square, see Greimas and Courtés 1979 [1986, pp. 274-278] and 1986, pp. 34-39.



A striking consequence of all this is that we are dealing here with a sort of self-defeating semiotics. If, from the unconditioned point of view, an object does not “stand for something else” but only for itself as a “natural” manifestation of the Dharmakāya, as a microcosm, all categories of the semiotic metalanguage disappear. Everything becomes a reflection of everything else. In the realm of *samādhi*, that is the production of signs and the interpretation of the world, is brought to a complete stop. What remains is the ritual reiteration of the (supposedly) original intention of the Dharmakāya. Reflections reflecting reflections, the cosmos is reduced to an infinite and vertiginous play of mirrors, as represented by the well-known metaphor of Indra’s Net, in which each pearl reflects all the other pearls. At that point, catroptics takes the place of semiotics for, as suggested by Umberto Eco, “the catroptic realm is able to reflect (without modifying it) the semiotic realm which exists outside of it, but cannot be ‘reflected’ by the semiotic (...) These two realms, the former being a threshold to the second, do not have intermediate points, and limit-cases... are points of catastrophe.”⁶⁶ In any case, it is important to emphasize that this ultimate dimension of “un-signification” is not necessarily a state in which meaning is centralized, unified, homogeneous. On the contrary, as Kakuban makes clear, each semiotic unit is an irreducible multiplicity of objects and meanings, and this seems to be the fundamental paradigm of esoteric Buddhist semiotics and ontology.

⁶⁶ U. Eco 1985, p. 36. See also Fabio Rambelli, “Il gioco linguistico esoterico,” *Versus* 54 (1989), pp. 92-94.

At this point, we can address the issue of semioticity (*usō*) and signlessness (*musō*) as it is discussed within the Shingon tradition. As we have already seen in lectures 1 and 2, Mahāyāna Buddhism is generally suspicious of signs: as conventional communicative and significative artificats, they are not the “real thing” and therefore they are part and parcel of the cycle of suffering and rebirth. Shingon, in contrast, reverses this traditional position by attributing signs a fundamental ontological, epistemological, and soteriological role. As a consequence, the received relation opposing semioticity (as the realm of delusion and suffering, a synonym of *saṃsāra*) with signlessness (as the realm of emptiness and enlightenment). Raiho wrote:

There are many kinds of semioticity [*usō*] and signlessness [*musō*]. According to the superficial and abbreviated interpretation, semioticity refers to the apparent, phenomenal aspect of material and mental dharmas as they are understood by common folks; signs appear before the mind and are easy to know and understand. Signlessness refers to the fact that substance and essence of the dharmas are illusory, empty, and provisional; individual substance [*jishō*, Sk. *svabhāva*] is empty, without materiality and without shape; no single semiotic aspect exists. According to the deep and secret interpretation, semioticity refers to the fact that each individual sign among all dharmas is clear and abiding. Signlessness means that in each sign are all signs, and each sign is not static. Since [each sign] is endowed with the totality of signs, [properly speaking] it is “not one sign [*mu-issō*],” therefore it is called no-sign [*musō*]. This does not mean that it is without materiality and without shape. The former meaning is the ordinary interpretation according to the exoteric teachings, the latter refers to the Shingon “positive” interpretation [*hyōtoku*].

As we can see, according to Raihō signs are not just entities in a semiotic simulacrum of real: each sign is “clear and abiding,” that is, absolute and unconditioned, embodying “the totality of signs” yet endowed with materiality

and shape. It is their peculiar status that makes esoteric signs direct and necessary vehicles of salvation, as we will see in the next lecture.