

**Fabio Rambelli**

## **Lecture 5**

### **A Semiotic Soteriology**

We have seen many times throughout these lectures that the main soteriological goal proper to esoteric Buddhism consists in “becoming a buddha in this very body” (*sokushin jōbutsu*). Accordingly, one of the most important tasks of the Japanese exegetes was that of defining this elusive and radical conception. “Becoming a buddha in this very body” can be interpreted in at least two different ways: as the final stage of the liberation process of a bodhisattva, in which case “in the present body” means “in the present life” (the present life is seen as the last reincarnation); and as a radical idea in which ultimate attainment is not sanctioned by a visible and dramatic bodily transformation (the acquisition of the thirty-two signs of a realized Buddha), but by the realization that one’s ordinary body is itself the sublime body of the Buddha. Neither of these interpretations were absent in Indian Buddhism; however, present-life Buddha-hood was not presented as a suitable soteriological goal. Emphasis was placed instead on a slow process of accumulation of merit that would eventually result, after countless rebirths, in becoming a buddha. In contrast, East Asian Buddhism in general, and not only its esoteric tradition, began to pay attention to the final stage of soteriology, the moment in which a sentient being attains enlightenment and becomes a buddha. In Japan the possibility of attaining liberation in a single lifetime, the present one, was the basic tenet of practically all Buddhist denominations. Kūkai was the first to present an explicit treatment of the subject in a text written in 817 entitled *Sokushin jōbutsu gi* (The Meaning of Becoming a Buddha in the Present Body), which became the object of many commentaries. Kūkai presents this

soteriological goal as a profound awareness, the result of meditation and other religious practices, of the essential nature of the universe and the place of the practitioner in it. As we have seen in previous lectures, such awareness was related to semiotic issues as the understanding of the hidden nature and mechanisms of signs, language, and representational processes. However, Kūkai's text constituted a starting point, a clearinghouse of issues, rather than a systematic treatment of the subject, as is clear from the sheer number of direct and indirect commentaries. For example, it was necessary to clarify the ontological ground of becoming a buddha, the relation of an individual's becoming a buddha with Mahāvairocana's all-pervading Dharma body, and to define the actual result of becoming a buddha: was it a visible transformation or a purely mental one? Was such a buddha endowed with peculiar signs and supernatural powers or not? More radically, was it really a process of "becoming" a buddha, or rather a realization (sudden or gradual) of one's innate "always/already" being a buddha? These are some of the questions medieval commentators tried to answer to.

An esoteric tradition dating back to a variant of Kūkai's *Sokushin jōbutsugi* commonly known as *Ihon Sokushin jōbutsugi*, attributed to Kūkai but probably written later,<sup>1</sup> presents three modalities of "becoming buddha in this very body." Salvation can be understood as (i) a consequence of the innate principle of original awakening (*rigu jōbutsu*, lit. "becoming a buddha as an innate principle"), (ii) the result of empowerment and ritual action (*kaji jōbutsu*, lit. "becoming a buddha as due to ritual empowerment" [*kajī*]), and (iii) a miraculous phenomenon in which the ascetic manifests to everyone his Buddha-body (*kendoku jōbutsu*, lit. "becoming a buddha [in which its] virtues are manifest").<sup>2</sup>

The first modality is innately shared by all beings of the Dharma realm as their common ontological substratum, even though it is unknown to the deluded mind. In principle (*ri*), in fact, all sentient beings are already potential buddhas. The third modality, the display of the features (*kendoku*) of

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<sup>1</sup> In T. vol. 77 n. 2428: pp. 381-401. See James Sanford, "Wind, Waters, Stupas, Mandalas. Fetal Buddhahood in Shingon," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* vol. 24/1-2, 1997, pp. 11-12.

<sup>2</sup> See also Raihō, *Shingon myōmoku*, 731a.

Buddhahood, is clearly the most problematic one. As a matter of fact, very few narrations of Buddhist miraculous events describe beings actually becoming buddhas. The most famous example is an episode from the hagiography of Kōbō Daishi. The saint was participating in a monastic debate in front of the emperor, in which the most important members of religious establishment presented the doctrines of their respective sectarian denominations. Kūkai explained Shingon's soteriological goal by entering *samādhi* and displaying the features of a realized Buddha. This story was later taken as an example of *kendoku jōbutsu*. It is not clear, however, whether all practitioners could ever achieve the same effect in their present life.<sup>3</sup> In an indirect fashion, at least, the possibility of a manifest way of becoming a buddha was perhaps related to the production of relics, full-size statues, and even mummies of past masters. Particularly significant, and striking, in this respect, was the phenomenon of self-mummification, in which ascetics literally turned themselves into buddha images, "whole-body relics."<sup>4</sup> But again, original sources do not treat these cases as explicit forms of *kendoku jōbutsu*. The second modality of *jōbutsu*, the one achieved through ritual action and empowerment (*kaji*), is particularly relevant to this lecture because it involves the manipulation of signs and symbols in a ritual context. The scholar-monk Raiyu (1226-1304) wrote:<sup>5</sup>

*Sokushin jōbutsu* occurs when the object of worship (*honzon*, i.e., the main deity addressed the ritual) and the practitioner interpenetrate each other and become unobstructed. The three mysteries (*sanmitsu*)

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<sup>3</sup> There is a similar story in the hagiography of Kakuban. Attacked by monks of a rival temple while meditating, he became exactly like the image of Fudō myōō enshrined in the hall. His assailants thought that those two images were suspicious; when one of them made a cut in one leg of one of the statue (the "real" statue), it bled. Filled with awe, the enemy monks fled, and Kakuban was safe. See Bernard Frank, "Vacuité et corps actualisé. Le problème de la présence des 'Personnages Vénérés' dans leurs images selon la tradition du bouddhisme japonais," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 11/2, 1988, pp. 53-86. This narrative indicates that a santly being can become "almost" identical with a Buddhist deity, but there is no mention in the exegetical literature that this was an instance of manifest becoming a buddha. A more explicit instance of becoming a buddha is presented by the *Tsukumogami ki*, a late medieval story of inanimate objects becoming buddhas. The illustrated version ended with an image of those objects transfigured into buddha images enshrined on a temple altar. See Fabio Rambelli, *Vegetal Buddhas*. Kyoto: Italian School of East Asian Studies, 2001, pp. 60-63; Komatsu Kazuhiko, *Nihon yōkai ibunroku*. Tokyo: Shōgakukan, 1995, pp. 175-212.

<sup>4</sup> See Bernard Faure, *The Rhetoric of Immediacy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991, esp. pp. 148-178; Robert Sharf, "The Idolization of Enlightenment: On the Mummification of Ch'an Masters in Medieval China," *History of Religions* 32/1, 1992, pp. 1-31.

<sup>5</sup> Raiyu, *Sokushingi gūsō* p. 145.

of the deity empower (*kaji*) the three karmic activities (*sangō*) of the practitioner, which then turn into the three mysteries of the Tathāgata.

In other words, *sokushin jōbutsu* is the result of the process of ritual interaction of the practitioner with the object of worship (*honzon*) called *nyūga ganyū* (“[the object of worship] enters the subject, and the subject enters [the object]”). In this process, the practitioner becomes not just an “imitation” of Mahāvairocana, but a “sample” of the Dharma body of the Buddha—and therefore, a fully realized buddha him/herself. Becoming a buddha, thus, is the result of the transformation of the semiotic and ontological status of the practitioner, from a separate individual to a “double” of the Buddha, that is supposed to take place in esoteric ritual practice. In esoteric Buddhism, then, soteriology is a matter of semiotic operations on both the practicing subject and the signs and objects employed in the rituals.

In this lecture, I will describe the ways in which such a semiotic soteriology takes place by analyzing a number of rituals and their underlying conceptual principles.

### **The Esoteric Rhetoric of Vision**

It is important to emphasize since the beginning that esoteric Buddhism is characterized by a strong emphasis on what we could call today “visual culture”: becoming a buddha is the result of ritual processes (*kaji jōbutsu*) involving vision in a broad sense (in order to *envision* oneself as a buddha, one has to *visualize* representations of the buddha), and has to be *displayed* in some way (*kendoku jōbutsu*). In fact, many pre-modern Shingon texts describe and/or presuppose visionary experiences and the particular knowledge acquired through them. Esoteric practices are usually described as the controlled manipulation of images during meditation and as the gradual transformation of their meaning. The ritual/meditative mastering of vision and meaning is equated with mastery upon the self and reality, and the final outcome of such practices is the attainment of supernatural powers (*siddhi*) and buddhahood in the present body. Virtually all Shingon rituals require or presuppose one form

or another of visualization, and therefore it is important to understand the latter's epistemic assumptions, its rhetoric, and the ideological effects it may produce. In this section I will attempt to define the semiotic value of esoteric visualization and its "symbolic" dimension.<sup>6</sup>

What I call the Shingon "rhetoric of vision," is the idea that visualization (Jp. *kangyō*, *sanmai* or *sanmaji*, the latter two being transliterations of the Sanskrit *samādhi*), an altered, non-ordinary state of body-language-mind, would put the practitioner in contact with the "invisible world" (*myōkai* or *meikai*) of buddhas, bodhisattvas, *vidyārājas*, *kami*, and other kinds of supernatural beings (monsters, ghosts, dragons, and so forth). As explained by Raihō in his *Shingon myōmoku*, Shingon meditation was essentially eidetic and consisted in the visualization of particular images. Even signless or formless meditation (*musōkan*) acquires in Shingon the value of a contemplation of the ultimate semiotic nature of the Dharma realm. Whereas meditation based on images (*usō*, in themselves signs of a deeper, hidden reality) focuses on specific features of the Dharma realm as represented by particular, non-ordinary images (buddha images, Sanskrit syllables, etc.), in formless or signless meditation (*musō*) the practitioner has to see all things, thoughts, events, and actions in the ordinary world as aspects of the Dharma realm. Since "in each sign there are all signs," as Raihō wrote,<sup>7</sup> the highest form of meditation is the one that focuses on aspects of everyday reality. In fact, there were several positions concerning the status of semioticity and signlessness within the Shingon tradition (see also Lecture 4). Among the most representative interpretations, the one associated with the Kogi branch centered on Mount Kōya stated that absolute reality is ultimately semiotic and "marked" (*usō*), whereas the one associated with the Shingi branch at Negoroji maintained that absolute reality is ultimately signless and transcends representation. Since the realm of the unconditioned Dharma-essence (Skt. *dharmatā*, Jpn. *hosshō*) cannot be experienced, it stands as the ultimate a-semiotic substratum on which semiosis rests. However, even the Shingi branch concedes that the substance of

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<sup>6</sup> For an outline of the general epistemic framework of the esoteric Buddhist tradition (*mikkyō*) in medieval Japan, see Fabio Rambelli, "True Words, Silence, and the Adamantine Dance. On Japanese Mikkyō and the Formation of the Shingon Discourse," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* Vol. 21/4 (December 1994): pp. 373-405.

<sup>7</sup> Raihō, *Shingon myōmoku*, p. 734b.

the three mysteries (*sanmitsu*) is characterized by signs.<sup>8</sup>

Four points should be emphasized concerning the status of vision and visualization within the Shingon tradition. Firstly, Shingon visions and visualization were not forms of self-suggestion or individual fantasies and reveries as in common understanding. Ioan Couliano, for example, defines “visualization” or “inner perception” of a mandala as “the interiorization of mandalic schemas with the help of dramatic scenarios unfolding in the practitioner’s fantasy.”<sup>9</sup> On the contrary, meditation was to a large extent intersubjectively controlled, disciplined, and codified within a certain community (lineage), to the point that its contents (deities, concepts, etc.) often influenced (or determined) the practitioners’ dreams.<sup>10</sup> Secondly, visualization as a view on the “invisible world” of Mahāyāna mental states, “Shintō” lore, and Tantric mythology was not an exclusive characteristic of the Shingon tradition, but was common to all forms of Japanese institutional Buddhism (the so-called *kenmitsu* system); however, the Shingon and Tendai schools provided it with their own semiotics, ideology, and ritual procedures. Thirdly, the conceptual apparatus of visualization was not restricted to religious specialists. Far from it, with its emphasis on a hidden side of reality—the world of *ura* (what lies behind something) as opposed to the *omote* (the apparent aspects of things)—which manifests itself in dreams and visions, it eventually came to constitute one of the distinctive features of Japanese medieval mentalities.<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, the same dualism front/back and appearances/truth is often used even today to explain aspects of contemporary Japanese culture. Fourthly, as recently pointed out by Robert Sharf, “‘visualization’ is a dubious choice for an English equivalent of terms such as *kansō* and *kannen*” which are normally used

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<sup>8</sup> See *Mikkyō daijiten*, (original edition 1931). Revised edition by Chishakuin Daigaku Mikkyō Gakkainai Mikkyō Daijiten saihan iinkai, Kyōto: Hōzōkan, 1970 (reduced size reprint 1983) s.v. “Usō musō,” pp. 121b-122a.

<sup>9</sup> Ioan Couliano, “Le Mandala et l’histoire des religions” in Francis Edeline, ed., *Herméneutique du Mandala*, special issue of *Cahiers internationaux de symbolisme* 48-49-50, 1984-1985: 58.

<sup>10</sup> On the role and contents of dreams in the esoteric tradition in Japan, see for example Bernard Faure, *Visions of Power*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996; George J. Tanabe, *Myōe the Dreamkeeper*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992; Tanaka Takako, *Aihō to gehō no chūsei*. Tōkyō: Sunagoya shoten, 1993; Yamamoto Hiroko, *Henjōfu*. Tōkyō: Shunjūsha, 1993; Saigō Nobutsuna, *Kodaijin to yume*. Tōkyō: Heibonsha, 1993 (original edition 1972).

<sup>11</sup> It is interesting to note that Raihō also uses the *omote/ura* metaphor.

in Shingon ritual manuals to refer to meditation. “These technical Sino-Japanese terms, continues Sharf, refer to procedures whose elements are often more discursive, literary, or tropical than they are visual or graphic.” Sharf suggests that more appropriate translations would be terms such as “‘think,’ ‘imagine,’ ‘contemplate,’ ‘discern.’”<sup>12</sup> At least in one case studied by Sharf, *kansō* (contemplation) was “treated liturgically,” that is, the scriptural passage to be visualized was “intoned quietly or vocalized inwardly,” indicating that “the execution of the *kansō* consists not in ‘visualization’ or even in ‘meditation’ so much as in recitation. And even if the practitioner did want to linger over or meditate upon the content of the liturgy he would find himself severely constrained by the need to finish the rite within the time allotted.”<sup>13</sup> Sharf is right in emphasizing the role of discursive thought and tropical imagery in meditation practice. However, the etymology of many Western terms referring to mental experiences (such as “imagine” and “contemplate”) do point to some visionary experiences, even though they need not be produced in meditation, but could be evoked by reading a scriptural passage, in dreams, or by looking at a sacred image. Therefore, whenever I refer to visualization, I mean it in this broader sense as a vision of the “invisible world” of the Tantric pantheon condensed in the mandala and diffused in countless pre-modern literary, visual, and ritual texts.

Visualization was not practiced only in order to become a buddha in this very body or to be reborn into a Pure Land. As synthesized by the expression *jiri rita* (benefits for oneself and the others), the soteriological power acquired by an individual through ascetic practices (in particular, visualization) could be channeled and oriented to the salvation of all sentient beings, by virtue of the peculiar recursive nature of Shingon soteriology. Some form of visualization, thus, lay at the background of every esoteric ritual. Esoteric rituals in general presuppose a vision of events occurring in the invisible realm of buddhas and *kami* and, as we have seen, texts such as Raihō’s *Shingon myōmoku* provide a general background for such visualizations. In a way, esoteric Buddhism

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<sup>12</sup> Robert H. Sharf, “Visualization and Mandala in Shingon Buddhism,” paper presented at the conference “The Japanese Buddhist Icon in Its Monastic Context,” 1994, pp. 13-14.

<sup>13</sup> Sharf, *Ibid*, p. 16. On these issues, see also *Ibid*, pp. 28-30.

created a virtual dimension of reality in which religious specialists manipulated symbols as *aliases* of certain entities and actions, in the belief that in this way they were able to affect their “real” correspondents. Here I use the term “alias” as a metaphor to suggest the analogy of esoteric processes with the manipulation of the alias of a file on a computer. In fact, it has been often pointed out that esoteric Buddhism considers *samādhi*, an altered state of consciousness in which differences are obliterated, as the original condition of the universe.<sup>14</sup> Visualization, in whatever forms it occurred, was a way to retrieve/restore such original state.

Meditative access to other levels of reality was not characterized as the static contemplation of the esoteric cosmic principles for individual salvation. As ritual texts describe, it often assumed a dramatic theatrical aspect. The passage translated below is from a ritual text describing the visualizations to be performed in order to become a buddha:

The five syllables *a vaṃ raṃ haṃ khaṃ* are the seeds of the five *cakra* rings [i.e., natural elements]—earth, water, fire, wind, and space. Above the earth ring is the water ring, above the water ring is the fire ring, above the fire ring is the wind ring, above the wind ring is the space ring. Above the space ring one should visualize the syllable *kaṃ* [Sk. *hāṃ?*]. This syllable, whose color is that of deep darkness, gradually expands and becomes bigger and bigger. On the wind ring one visualizes the syllable *vaṃ*. It turns into the water ring. On top of it one visualizes the syllable *haṃ* [Sk. *pra?*] in golden color. It turns into a golden turtle, on whose back one visualizes the syllable *so* [Sk. *su?*], which in turns transforms itself into Mount Sumeru, constituted by the seven precious materials.<sup>15</sup> Then, there is the syllable *kaṃ* [Sk. *khaṃ?*], which transforms itself into the seven golden mountains surrounding Mount Sumeru. One then visualizes the body of the Buddha Vairocana in the sky. His pores exude perfumed milk; like rain, it pours between the ranges of the seven golden mountains and becomes the milky sea of fragrant water of the eight virtues. In correspondence to the heart [of Mahāvairocana?], on Mount Sumeru is the syllable *hrīḥ*. It turns into an eight-petal lotus pervading the entire Dharma realm. On the lotus there is the

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<sup>14</sup> Tamaki Kōshirō, “Kūkai no shisō no kadai,” *Risō* 11 (1982): pp. 2-24; Yamaori Tetsuo, “Mikkyō ni okeru naizō ninshiki: Indo to Nihon no aida,” *Gendai shisō* vol. 11/9 (1983): pp. 114-120.

<sup>15</sup> The seven precious materials (Jp. *shichihō* or *shippō*, Skt. *sapta-ratna*) are gold (*kin*, *suvarṇa*), silver (*gin*, *rūpya*), glass (*ruri*, *vaidūrya*), crystal (*hari*, *sphaṭika*), mother of pearl (*shako*, *musāragalva*), coral (*sango*, *lohitamuktikā*), and agate (*menō*, *āsmagarbha*).

letter *a*. It turns into the precious hall [Mahāvairocana’s Palace] with eight flowers<sup>16</sup> and eight pillars, so high and large that it has no limits, and adorned with every sort of treasures of great beauty. A crowd of tathāgatas [i.e., buddhas] amounting to a hundred million times [*koṭi*] the number of grains of sand contained in sixty Ganges rivers, together with eight kinds of supernatural beings,<sup>17</sup> the inner and outer bodhisattvas of offerings—all of them are gathered around this Dharma realm Palace. Inside the palace there is another syllable *hrīḥ*. It turns into a big lotus flower, upon which is a mandala [altar?]. On the mandala there is the Lion Seat [representing the throne of the Buddha], on the Lion Seat there is another lotus, upon which is the pure circle of the full moon. Upon the moon disk there is another syllable *hrīḥ* which transforms itself into the great lotus of the sublime moon. On top of it is the syllable *vaṃ*. It radiates a great light illuminating the entire Dharma realm. When touched and illuminated by this light, all sentient beings bound to the suffering of the threefold conditioned world,<sup>18</sup> the Six destinations [of rebirth],<sup>19</sup> the four kinds of birth,<sup>20</sup> the eight difficulties [to perform Buddhist practices],<sup>21</sup> attain liberation. The syllable *vaṃ* turns into a *stūpa* constituted by a square, a circle, a triangle, a crescent, and a sphere, for it is made of the five elements—earth, water, fire, wind, and space. This *stūpa* turns into the Tathāgata Mahāvairocana. The color of his body is like that of the moon, on his head is a crown with the five Buddhas,<sup>22</sup> his heavenly dress is made with precious silk, his body is adorned with jewel laces; a light illuminates the ten directions of the Dharma realm. Abiding on the moon disk is Vairocana’s retinue constituted by the four buddhas,<sup>23</sup> the eight

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<sup>16</sup> Other versions of the text have “five” or “eight peaks.”

<sup>17</sup> The eight kinds of supernatural beings (*tenryū hachibushū*) are gods (*deva*), *nāga* (serpents or dragons), *yakṣa* (demons), *gandharva* (heavenly musicians similar to angels), *asura* (anti-gods, fighting spirits), *garuda* (supernatural birds), *kinnara* (heavenly singers), and *mahoraga* (a kind of giant snakes).

<sup>18</sup> Threefold conditioned world (Jp. *sangai*): the realm of desire (Jp. *yokukai*, Skt. *kama-dhātu*), the realm of forms (Jp. *shikikai*, Skt. *rūpa-dhātu*), and the formless realm (Jp. *mushikikai*, Skt. *arūpa-dhātu*).

<sup>19</sup> The six destinations (Jp. *rokushu*, *rokudō*, Skt. *ṣaḍ-gati*) are deities, humans, asura, animals, hungry ghosts, and denizens of hell.

<sup>20</sup> The four kinds of birth (Jp. *shishō*, Skt. *catur-yoni*) are in the womb, through an egg, out of humidity, and by metamorphosis.

<sup>21</sup> The eight difficulties (Jp. *hachinan*, Skt. *aṣṭa akṣaṇa*) refer to eight existential situations that hinder the performance of Buddhist practices and therefore the attainment of salvation. They are: being a denizen of hell, an animal, a hungry ghost (these are the three lowest levels of being characterized by extreme suffering and ignorance); living in the heaven of long life (a very pleasurable place that is not conducive to asceticism) or in a marginal land not exposed to Buddhism, having one’s sense organs impaired, a tendency to fall prey to wrong opinions, and living at a time when a Buddha is not in this world.

<sup>22</sup> The five buddhas are located at the center of madalic representations of the Dharma realm; they are: Akśobhya, Ratnasambhava, Amitābha, Sākyamuni, and Mahāvairocana himself.

<sup>23</sup> The four buddhas are: Akśobhya, Ratnasambhava, Amitābha, and Sākyamuni.

bodhisattvas of ritual offerings, the four bodhisattvas converting the living beings, the thousand buddhas of the present kalpa, the twenty heavenly deities [located on the margins of the Womb mandala], and countless bodhisattvas.<sup>24</sup>

This passage shows the complex set of images that was usually associated with a specific esoteric ritual. In it, boundaries between images and reality, sounds and graphs, buddhas and things, practicing subjects and the objects of their practice are constantly questioned and redrawn. Sanskrit letters transform themselves continuously into buddhas and entities of the esoteric world; they are at the same time the fundamental semiotic structures of the material world and the elements in the universal mechanism of salvation. The text attributes an important role to siddhaṃ letters in the creation of the esoteric universe, as in the case of the syllable *su* that produces Mount Sumeru, the cosmic mountain: here the initial syllable of the name of the mountain is treated as endowed with the power to literally “re-present,” make-appear, give shape to, the object it stands for. Similarly, *hrīḥ* becomes a cosmic lotus, the sublime shape of the Dharma realm; *A* becomes the residence of Mahāvairocana himself; *vaṃ*, another seed syllable of Mahāvairocana, is presented as the universal soteriological power of the esoteric Buddha. It is probably not necessary to “visualize” them in meditation, just to “imagine” or “think” about them in a discursive fashion. It is clear, though, that such a “vision,” however we want to call it, would be almost impossible without direct exposure to a visual mandala, which is the ultimate and underlying sacred space of esoteric rituals.

### **Semiognosis, or the Soteriologic Nature of Esoteric Signs**

According to the Shingon tradition the key to “becoming buddha in this very body” is the initiatory knowledge concerning structure, function, and power of the esoteric symbols. The cognitive, ritual and soteriological structures of

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<sup>24</sup> *Butchō sonshō shin ha jigoku ten gōshō shutsu sangai himitsu sanjin bukka sanshu shichiji shingon giki* (“Ritual Procedures of the Mantras of the Three Siddhis of the Three Secret Bodies of Buddhahood and of the Most Venerable Mind of the Buddhōṣṇīṣa for the Destruction of Hell, the Transformation of Karmic Hindrances, and the Liberation from the Three [Conditioned] Worlds”), in T. 18/906: 912c-913a. English translation and commentary in Fabio Rambelli, “Tantric Buddhism and Chinese Thought in East Asia,” in David Gordon White, ed., *Tantra in*

esoteric Buddhism are connected to logical devices whose function is the transposition of a cosmology of process into a cosmology of instantaneousness, or, in other words, the attribution to signs and ritual gestures of a “recursive,” circular soteriological value. In fact, Shingon texts establish a complex connection between cosmology, soteriology, and semiotics. Since phenomena are considered meaningful manifestations of the Dharma body, the universe as the totality of the Buddha is engaged in an endless salvational activity. It is a sort of fractal cosmos, in which each phenomenon is “formally” similar to all the others and to the totality. Such a recursive cosmology, peculiar to esoteric Buddhism, is related to a recursive soteriology based on ritual practices and visualization in which gestures, images, and words (signs) have an important status.<sup>25</sup> As Charles Orzech has written,<sup>26</sup>

in the performance of ritual, then, the attainment of *siddhi* is the realization of a soteriology in a “recursive” cosmos. The realization of one’s basic divinity is the realization of one’s own enlightenment and the simultaneous purification of one’s world.

Raihō presents a similar position in the *Shingon myōmoku*, according to which “becoming buddha in this very body,”<sup>27</sup>

whether innate or produced through practice, whether pertaining to inner realization or outer manifestation, is the result of unconditioned activities [taking place] within the undifferentiated Dharma realm; it is the becoming of non-becoming, an adamantite dance performance.

Salvation is never an individual affair, but a part of a more general soteric

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*Practice*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000, pp. 361-380.

<sup>25</sup> On recursive cosmology and soteriology, see Charles D. Orzech, “Cosmology in Action: Recursive Cosmology, Soteriology, and Authority in *Chen-Yen* Buddhism with Special Reference to the Monk Pu-k’ung.” Ph.D. diss.: University of Chicago, 1986; Id., “Seeing Chen-Yen Buddhism: Traditional Scholarship and the Vajrayana in China,” *History of Religions* 29/2 (1989): 87-114. On some semiotic implications of such a cosmology and soteriology, see Fabio Rambelli, *Segni di diamante. Aspetti semiotici del buddhismo esoterico di Kakuban*. Doctoral dissertation. Istituto Universitario Orientale, Napoli and Università degli studi, Venezia, 1992, pp. 105-107. On Buddhist cosmologies, see also Randolph Kloetzli, *Buddhist Cosmology*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1983.

<sup>26</sup> Orzech 1989, p. 100.

<sup>27</sup> Raihō, *Shingon myōmoku*, p. 731a.

activity of the cosmos, in which each being (sentient and non-sentient) is engaged; “becoming a buddha” (*jōbutsu*) is therefore the result of an unconditioned, natural, and spontaneous function of the Dharma realm triggered by ritual action centered on a mandala. Individual salvation is only possible because one is already saved, the totality of the universe is already saved, and by saving oneself one also saves all the other beings. At the basis of esoteric ritual is the usage of certain symbolic entities which embody the deep structure and the power of the universe. These symbols accurately reproduce absolute and unconditioned cosmic structures only known to the buddhas. Once used in the proper ritual and initiatory contexts, they enable the practitioner to gain control over reality and ultimately to become buddha himself.

At this point, I would like to introduce three orders of significance that seem to summarize the fundamental attitudes towards signs and semiosis that take place within the esoteric episteme. I call these three orders, respectively, semiagnosis, semiosophia, and semiopietas. Semiagnosis refers to specific doctrines and practices that are claimed to be extracted from signs themselves and that can produce either religious salvation or material benefits in this world. The initiatory knowledge concerning structure, function, and power of the esoteric symbols is the intellectual content of esoteric initiation and the key to religious attainment. Semiagnosis is the esoteric addition to what I call “semiosophia,” the exoteric vision according to which signs are arbitrary and illusory but can be used for religious purposes as skilful means (*upāya*). Semiagnosis is also at the basis of “semiopietas,” non-initiatory and uninformed beliefs and practices concerning esoteric signs.<sup>28</sup>

As we have seen many times throughout these lectures, Shingon Buddhism carried out a radical reformulation of signs through processes of “re-

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<sup>28</sup> On these three orders of significance, see also Rambelli 1994, esp. 393-397. The basic principles of semiosophia can be found, for instance, in Gyōnen, *Hasshū kōyō* in Suzuki gakujutsu zaidan, ed., *Dainihon bukkyō zensho* vol. 29: pp. 11-25. Tōkyō: Suzuki gakujutsu zaidan, 1970 (see also Hirakawa Akira, *Hasshū kōyō*, 2 vols. Tōkyō: Daizō shuppan, 1981); Raiyu, *Shoshū kyōri dōshaku*, in *Ibid.*, pp. 4-10; Ryōhen, *Hossō nikanshō*, ed. by Kamata Shigeo, in Kamata Shigeo and Tanaka Hisao, eds., *Kamakura kyūbukkyō* (Nihon shisō taiki vol. 15), Tōkyō: Iwanami, 1971, pp. 125-158. Attitudes related to semiopietas are described, for example, in Rentai, *Shingon kaikoshū*, in Hase Hōshū, ed., *Shingonshū anjinsho*, vol. 1, pp. 90-137. Kyōto: Rokudai shinpōsha, 1913.

motivation” aimed at overcoming the arbitrariness of language and signs by finding a special “natural” relation between expression, meaning, and referential object.<sup>29</sup> Re-motivation involves the reorganization of a sign’s semantic field to make meaning (the signified) “similar” to its expression (signifier). Through re-motivation, esoteric symbols thus become a kind of *replica* of their objects, and the practices in which they occur are considered identical with their goals. Signs thus become reproductions of their objects and inscriptions of soteriological processes—as we will see in detail below. Language dissolves into a network of polymateric signs, minimal mandalas able to represent/manifest the absolute. Doctrinal claims that there exists a special language that speaks the Buddha’s absolute and unconditioned enlightenment, as we have seen in Lecture 1, thus refer to such re-motivated signs. In other words, Shingon practices consist mainly of visualization and manipulation of mantric expressions (*shingon-darani*) and other complex symbols (*mudrā*, ritual implements, images, space...) of various kinds. The structure of these symbols is organized on three deeper levels of significance (*jinpi*, *hichū no jinpi*, *hichū no jinpi*), and appears to the initiated as an inscription of the path to salvation and the attainment of perfection (*siddhi*) (See Lecture 4). In this way, salvation is “extracted” from the signs in which it is inscribed—as we have seen, a characteristic of semiognosis; the visualization of certain ritual signs according to the proper initiatory rules *is* becoming buddha in this very body.

In fact, according to the Shingon pansemiotic perspective, signs and things are not separate and there is no essential distinction between expression, meaning, referents, the one who employs them (the ascetic), and the goals for which they are employed. Thus, each entity is a “sign of itself,” as Pier Paolo Pasolini would say (see Lecture 2), but at the same time it contains everything else as one of the countless manifestations or transformations of the Dharma realm as Mahāvairocana’s cosmic body. Signs are combinations of several configurations of the cosmic substance and, at the same time, inscriptions of soteriology. This is the main reason why ritual manipulation (visualization, chanting, and so forth) of esoteric symbols ensures one’s salvation: salvation *is* the initiatory knowledge and the related practice of those esoteric signs. Thus,

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<sup>29</sup> A.J. Greimas and J. Courtés, eds., *Sémiotique*. Paris: Hachette, 1979, s.v. “Motivation.”

language is a network of polymateric signs, minimal mandalas that semiotically embody the absolute. Enlightenment (*satori*), then, is not an ineffable and transcendent experience, but the awareness of the entire network of cosmic similarities acquired through initiatory knowledge and rituals. In Kūkai's words, it is the full understanding of the interdependence of language and reality (*shōji jissō*), and can be described only vis-à-vis its opposite, ignorance or delusion (*mayoi*)—a proof that the former is a different cognitive attitude towards the same reality. Kūkai explained: “The Buddha Mahāvairocana, by expounding the meaning of [the relations between] language and reality, arouses the sentient beings from their long slumber.” Esoteric semiotics, thus, has a direct soteriological relevance: “Those who understand this [the relations between language and reality] are called Great Enlightened Ones, those who are confused about it are called ‘sentient beings.’”<sup>30</sup> It is clear, then, that salvation is the result of semiotic manipulations, and that individual soteriological potential (*kikon*) reveal epistemological differences. Enlightenment is the result of a radical transformation of human cognitive apparatus. Consciousness turns from a discriminative ideational device into the “pure mind,” a clear mirror of the universe; the ascetic is then in total control of “skillful means” (Jp. *hōben*, Sk. *upāya*).<sup>31</sup>

The motivation existing between expression and meaning is owing to the fact that both are considered two different epiphenomena of a single nondual reality. Rituals and soteriological practices are necessarily connected in some way to their supports, to the spaces in which they take place, to the processes in which they are articulated. In this way, their efficacy is assured. As a consequence of this, there is no clear-cut distinction between “meaning” and “power” of the expressions. In fact, esoteric signs do not simply stand for a sense or a possibility of action: they *are* that sense or that action. Accordingly, expressions are, on a certain level, not merely and no longer signs: they are receptacles of knowledge, *power spots* where that knowledge changes into

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<sup>30</sup> Kūkai, *Shōji jissō-gi*, T. vol. 77 n. 2429: p. 401c. See also Rambelli 1992, pp. 163-185, and 1994.

<sup>31</sup> The five wisdoms (*gochi*) represent such a cognitive state.

operational force.<sup>32</sup>

As is clear from the preceding discussion, esoteric semiotic entities have a complex status. Firstly, they function as signs, in the sense that they can stand for something else, namely a representation of the Dharma realm, of Mahāvairocana's enlightenment, or more generally a set of doctrines or rituals; however, this is not their primary function. Secondly, they are constructed through operations of re-motivation, which makes them into semi-symbolic entities: siddham and mantras are in an important sense *similar* to their substance. Thirdly, siddham and mantras embody what they signify. As Patrizia Violi has noted about esoteric semiotic expressions in general, "they resemble more than anything else that peculiar type of sign described by [Umberto] Eco... as *samples*, signs which are homomaterial, and produced by ostension."<sup>33</sup> In other words, esoteric signs are made of the same substance of what they signify, and signify it by displaying it on the basis of a synecdoche (a part signifying the whole). As microcosms, they are related to the underlying macrocosm by a relationship that is not only of analogy and similarity, but also of identity: they are at the same time *similar to* and *parts of* the Dharma realm they signify.

### Visualization of Siddham graphs (*jrinkan*)

We have seen that there is a semantic core of esoteric expressions that is constituted by concepts and interpretations traditionally recognized and accepted (semiosophia). However, this semantic core has almost exclusively propedeutic functions as a conceptual introduction to the esoteric episteme, and remains an abstract, useless form of knowledge as long as it is not put to

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<sup>32</sup> Stanley Tambiah has pointed out that in cultural practice, Buddhist transcendent thought produces concrete transformations of mundane, non-enlightened reality: Stanley Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970. Sasaki Kōkan develops this point and stresses that the knowledge contained in Buddhist texts is able to transform in active power upon reality: Sasaki Kōkan, "Sō no jushika to ō no saishika. Bukkyō to ōsei to no musubitsuki ni kansuru ichishiron," in Kuroda Toshio, ed., *Kokka to tennō: Tennōsei ideorogī to shite no bukkyō* (Bukkyō to nihonjin 2). Tōkyō: Shunjūsha, 1987: 49-91. Esoteric expressions, in particular, are endowed with such an active power: one of the aims of the present paper is to show how this transformation occurs.

<sup>33</sup> Patrizia Violi, "A Semiotics of Non-ordinary Experience: The Case of Japanese Culture," *Versus* 83/84, 1999, p. 269. On samples, see Eco 1976, p. 226.

practice in rituals and in meditation (through, respectively, semiagnosis and semiopietas). We have also seen that there exists a correlation, or more precisely, a relationship of conformity between the structure of a mantric expression, the structure of the salvation process in which it occurs, and the meditative “meaning” of its (of the mantra) elements.<sup>34</sup> In this section I will describe the mechanisms on the basis of which in the salvation process of esoteric Buddhism cosmology collapses onto soteriology. It is not enough that a sign be recognized as a microcosm (a “symbol”) for the establishment of symbolic practices; it is necessary that the sign is itself the inscription, the holograph as it were, of the soteriological itinerary.

As we have seen before, Raiyu wrote that the becoming a buddha in this very body occurs when a deity and a practitioner interpenetrate during the performance of a ritual: “The three mysteries (*sanmitsu*) of the deity empower (*kaji*) the three karmic activities (*sangō*) of the practitioner, which then turn into the three mysteries of the Tathāgata.”<sup>35</sup> In other words, esoteric rituals (in particular, visualization) operate on the three centers of karmic activity (*sangō*: speech, body, and mind) to turn them into the Buddha’s three foci of salvation and bliss (*sanmitsu*). This is what medieval Shingon exegetes defined “becoming a buddha as the result of ritual empowerment” (*kaji jōbutsu*). But how was this process actually envisioned to take place?

There are three sets of practices that enable this transformation. First, meditation ensures the physical identification of the practitioner (*shingō*) with the body of the deity (*shinmitsu*), in a process known as *nyūga ganyū* (lit. “[the deity] enters me, and I enter [the deity]”). At this point, the practitioner is physically identical to the deity. Second, the practitioner recites the deity’s mantra, thus realizing the identity of his/her karmic speech (*gogō*) with the deity’s mystery of speech (*gomitsu*). At this stage, the practitioner becomes a buddha through the mystery of speech. This set is called *shōnenju* (correct memorized chanting). Finally, the ascetic visualizes a set of mantric syllables ordered in a circular, mandalic pattern (*jirinkan*). At this stage, the practitioner

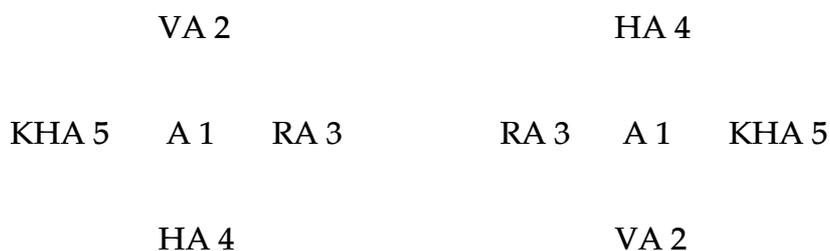
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<sup>34</sup> This seems to counter Frits Staal’s theory on the “meaninglessness of ritual” (Staal, “The Meaninglessness of Ritual,” *Numen* 26/1, 1979, pp. 2-22).

<sup>35</sup> Raiyu, *Sokushingi gūsō*, 731a.

realizes the original nondualism of his/her own karmic mental activity (*igō*) and the deity's mystery of the mind (*imitsu*).

All these three rituals involve manipulation of semiotic entities (images, sounds, and graphs), but it is the third stage, the visualization of siddham graphs, that is most relevant to our discussion here as a sum and culmination of the entire soteriological process. Each siddham graph is envisioned as the mantric seed of a buddha or of one of its essential features; meditation consists in visualizing the actual transformation of each graph into a buddha and in the concentration on the various semantic isotopies that each graph presupposes. In particular, the mantric seeds of the five elements are arranged in a circular, mandalic structure at the center of the moon-disk (*gachirin*) representing the pure, enlightened mind (*bodai shin*). The practitioner contemplates the superficial meaning (*jisō*) and the deep meaning (*jigi*) of each graph in clockwise (*jun*) order and/or in counter clockwise (*gyaku*) order. The scriptural basis for this ritual is to be found in the *Ashuku ki* and the *Rengebu shin ki*.<sup>36</sup> Ritual manuals present two different placements of the characters, which are to be read in a prescribed order (usually, clockwise). The first example is from the *Ishiyama shidai* and relates the five graphs to the five buddhas of the Womb realm; the second example is from the *Toganoo ki* and relates the five graphs to the five buddhas of the Vajra realm:<sup>37</sup>



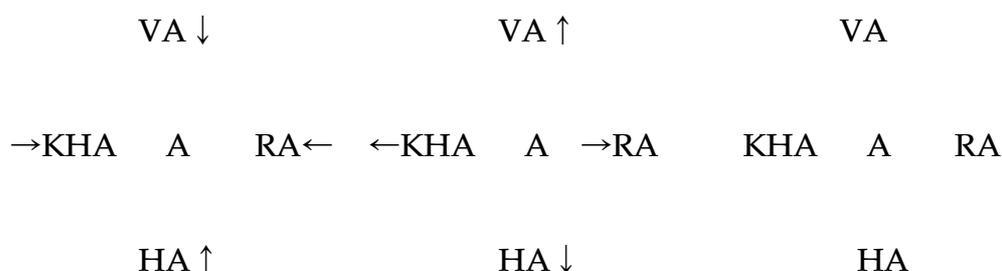
Furthermore, the orientation of the graphs in the diagrams indicated the goal of

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<sup>36</sup> *Ashuku ki* (full title: *Ashuku nyorai nenju kuyō hō*), in T 19 nr. 921, pp. 15-20, esp. p. 19c; *Rengebu shin ki* (full title: *Kongōchō renebu shin nenju giki*), in T 18 nr. 873 pp. 299-310.

<sup>37</sup> See *Mikkyō daijiten*, s.v. "Jirinkwan" 1238c.

the ritual as, respectively, self-enlightenment (*jishō*), guidance to others (*keta*), and the combination of these two (*jitakenzai*). In the case of the *Ishiyama shidai*, we have the following three patterns:



Self-enlightenment is represented by graphs oriented toward the center of the diagram; guidance to others is represented by orienting the characters toward the outside of the diagram; finally, the combination of the two salvation processes is represented by characters written in the usual form on the page. We can consider the position and the orientation of the characters in the diagram as semiognosic devices, since the textual expression is directly related to its content and its performative effect. Visualization is further articulated in several forms and steps.<sup>38</sup>

### The Inscription of the Soteriological Path

I have mentioned that in the esoteric episteme and its related practices siddham graphs were treated as minimal mandalas, as embodiments of the totality of the Dharma realm. Let us now see two examples of such a mandalization process drawn from Kakuban's *Gorin kujimyō himitsu shaku*. The first example is Mahāvairocana's mantra *aḥ vi ra hūṃ khaṃ* (Jp. *a bi ra un ken*); the second is Amida's *dhāraṇī oṃ amṛta teje kara hūṃ* (Jp. *on amirita teizei kara un*). We will see that mantras are not simply chanted, but used in meditation in a complex way. Their isotopies are contemplated and then dissolved (in what I defined in

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<sup>38</sup> See *Mikkyō daijiten*, s.v. "Jirinkwan" 1238b-1239b; see also "Shishu jirinkwan" 938.

Lecture 4 as the process of proliferation and dissolution of sense), as the practitioner gradually realizes that the graphs are “doubles” or “samples”—in any case, ostensive signs—of the Dharma realm in its totality. When the ascetic attains such supreme knowledge concerning the nature of signs, s/he has de facto “become a buddha in the present body.” Thus, the soteriological process is inscribed in the very structure of each graph’s semantic isotopies, and going through them in meditation amounts to attaining salvation.

### 1. *Mahāvairocana’s Mantra*

#### A. *The Original Utterance*

The *Mahāvairocana Sutra* describes the context of the original utterance of this mantra as follows:

The Dharma body in his original and absolute modality of being (*honji hosshin*) entered the “powerful and quick *samādhi* of the interpenetration of all Tathāgatas” and explained the *samādhi* of the substance of the Dharma realm with these words:<sup>39</sup>

I understand the original uncreatedness  
I have transcended the path of language  
I have attained liberation from all wrong ideas  
Causality is now far away from me  
And I now know that emptiness is like the sky

Here, Mahāvairocana in his absolute modality of existence as the Dharma body in his original ground (*honji hosshin*) describes the essence of his wisdom: he understands perfectly the fundamental nature of the universe and cannot make mistakes, he is free from all conditionings, included those of karma, and abides in a realm beyond the reaches of ordinary language. Next, Mahāvairocana enters a more “concrete” variant of such absolute state, the “*samādhi* of the adamantine pleasure of subjugating the four demonic entities,” and utters his principal mantra:

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<sup>39</sup> Kakuban, *Gorin kujimyō himitsu shaku*, in T. 79 nr. 2514 p. 12b. It quotes the *Dainichikyō* in T 18 nr. 848 p. 9b.

*Namaḥ samantabuddhānāṃ aḥ vi ra hūṃ khaṃ*

[Jp. *nōmaku samanda bodanan a bi ra un ken*]

An approximate translation would sound like “Hail to all buddhas, [in particular those represented by the five syllables of the Womb mandala, namely] *aḥ vi ra hūṃ khaṃ!*”

These original (and mythical) utterances by Mahāvairocana to himself in a semi-conscious state constitute the beginning of the esoteric semiosis and of the attempts to define it theoretically. By referring to these utterances, Kakuban’s text establishes a “veridiction contract” between author and reader and offers the fundamental proof of the truth and efficacy of the mantra *aḥ vi ra hūṃ khaṃ*. Truth and efficacy are also sanctioned by an unidentified citation attributed to Amoghavajra (Ch. Bukong), the most influential patriarch of East Asian esoteric Buddhism, placed at the end of the discussion of the mantra: “The teachings concerning these five syllables were transmitted to me by Vajrabodhi (Ch. Jinggang zhi) Tripitaka. I aroused faith in them and practiced them for a thousand days. In an autumn night with the full moon I attained the *samādhi* that wipes away all impediments.”<sup>40</sup> With this quotation, Kakuban traces a lineage of this mantra going back to India through China and thus to the mythical origin of esoteric Buddhism itself. The patriarch of the tradition himself stated that this mantra enabled him to attain a *samādhi* that opened him the gate to liberation.

The mantra has a particular status because it was uttered by the Dharma body in person in a quasi-absolute state of being at the border between signlessness and semioticity. This mantra has the power to eliminate all obstacles to the attainment of liberation, as is clear from the name of the *samādhi* (“of the original undifferentiatedness of all Tathāgatas”) in which it was originally uttered. Its power is guaranteed by the fact that the utterer of the mantra has personally succeeded in eliminating all conditionings; the formula is thus a distillate of Mahāvairocana’s wisdom. Finally, the mantra is true and efficacious because Mahāvairocana utters it out of compassion for the suffering

of sentient beings. In fact, the fundamental assumptions of the esoteric soteriology can be summarized as follows:

1. Mahāvairocana exists
2. Mahāvairocana is enlightened and has compassion for sentient beings
3. Mahāvairocana has the power to save sentient beings
4. Beings can be saved
5. Teachings exist that can save beings
6. Mahāvairocana guides beings with appropriate and efficacious teachings in order to save them
7. The most secure way to attain salvation is to follow Mahāvairocana's teachings.

If one accepts these presuppositions, then mantras have a self-evident salvific power.

#### *B. The meaning of A bi ra un ken*

After the description of the original utterance and of the efficacy of the mantra, Kakuban begins to analyze it. Kakuban envisions the mantra as structured into two semantically and functionally well distinct portions, respectively /Nōmaku samanda bodanan/ and /a bi ra un ken/. *Nōmaku* (Sk. *Namaḥ*) is a common initial marker of the mantric linguistic space, and is translatable as “hail” and “praise be to...” *Samanda bodanan* means “all buddhas” but Kakuban translates it as “Three treasures,” i.e., the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Saṃgha. As we can see, even the experts in some cases did not interpret mantras literally. Thus, the first segment is a sort of act of faith, sanctioning the practitioner's trust in the mantra—and ultimately, in Buddha and Buddhism (therefore, the reference to the Three treasures). Actually, most mantras include a portion indicating trust or faith; unfaithful usage makes mantras useless or even sources of disasters.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Kakuban, *Ibid*, p. 14a.

<sup>41</sup> Kakuban explains that if one does not believe in the esoteric teachings after they have been transmitted to him/her, as a karmic consequence that person will be hurled into the Uninterrupted hell from where s/she will not be saved, not even by the buddhas. See Kakuban,

The second segment is the actual spell, *a bi ra un ken*. The text then moves to the analysis of the sequence, described as the “spell appropriate to all buddhas,”<sup>42</sup> a sort of universal prayer.

The seed *ah* (*aku*)

The graph *ah* means “practice” and represents the original uncreatedness. The two dots to the right [in the Sanskrit graph] mean “purification.” The graph subjugates the four demonic entities and thus eliminates all suffering... As the earth generates the ten thousand things, so the graph A, the element earth, produces infinite practices of the six *pāramitā*. “Earth” means “solid, homogeneous.” The noble *bodhicitta* is resistant and indestructible, therefore it produces the fruit of ten thousand virtues. If Shingon practitioners, when throwing of the flower (in the initiation ritual) plant the seed of *bodhicitta* of initial enlightenment on the graph A—the innate *bodhicitta* of the pure mind, they will be freed forever from all diseases and they will quickly attain the supreme *bodhi*... These are the reasons why the graph A also means “increase [of benefits].”<sup>43</sup>

This is a typical example of esoteric semiotic interpretation. The meaning of an expression is the result of the analysis of the shape of the graph (here for example we find the reference to the dots, known in Sanskrit as *visarga*, that transform A into *ah*), its superficial and deep meanings in their various ramifications—all made into a more or less coherent whole suggesting that the principles of salvation are already included in the shape and meaning of the sign employed in the religious practice. Let us try to unpack the above passage by outlining the trajectories followed by Kakuban. His interpretation seems to be based on the following fundamental axes:

original uncreatedness vs practice:

original uncreatedness (the innate, absolute and unconditioned aspects of entities) and practice (the religious processes involved in the attainment of salvation and worldly benefits) are the primary meanings of the graph *ah*; they are two contradictory terms between which Kakuban establishes a relation of nondualism

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*Ibid*, p. 17a.

<sup>42</sup> Kakuban, *Ibid*, p. 15a.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, p. 12b.

practice vs attainment:

practice—purification of body-mind—subjugation of demons<sup>44</sup>—elimination of diseases (suffering)—attainment of the supreme *bodhi* (liberation). These series represents the salvation process

Another important axis is the correlative association between A and the element earth, which is integrated with elements from the previous axis:

A—earth—solid, homogeneous—>produces all things

including the practices of six paramita

—>resistant and indestructible *bodhicitta*—virtues

—>“increase [of benefits]”

A is the first sound of the Sanskrit alphabet and is present in all syllables of the siddham graphic system; in order to eliminate it, one has to add a particular sign called *virama*. This fact is perhaps at the origin of the association of A with the element earth. As the earth, characterized by solidity, homogeneity and indestructibility, is the mother of all things, so the sound/graph A is at the source of all Buddhist practices, of *bodhicitta*, and of liberation. This close relation between A and earth can be explained through the application either of *jigasshaku* (*karmadhāya*) or the *ringonshaku* (*avyuyūbhāva*) modes analysis of Sanskrit compound terms known in Japanese as *rokurigasshaku* (“analysis of six combinations”).<sup>45</sup> These modes sanction the ultimate continuity between names and things (*nāma* and *rūpa*), typical of some schools of Indian classical philosophy (see Lectures 1 and 2). The expression “ten thousand things,” indicating “all things,” is written here with two characters *mangyō*. Now, in the Buddhist terminology *gyō* also means “practice,” in particular “religious practice.” It is in this sense that Kakuban uses it here, thus drawing a directly linguistic relation between a characteristic of the earth and one of the letter A. A’s connection with religious practice is also emphasized by its traditional

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<sup>44</sup> On subjugation of demons as a form of purification, see also *Ibid.*, pp. 20c-21b.

<sup>45</sup> On the six kinds of compounds (*sat-samasa*) in the Sanskrit analysis system (*vigraha*), see Lecture 2.

association with the *bodhicitta*, as in the moon-disk visualization.

On a deeper level, A represents the principle of original uncreatedness of all things—or, in other words, the immovable center of the transformations of all things and at the same time the core of the practices necessary to reach it. According to the Mahāyāna, the arousal of the *bodhicitta*, that is, of the desire for enlightenment, is the beginning of a long journey through countless lives toward liberation. In contrast, esoteric Buddhism envisions *bodhicitta* as the very substance (as the earth, solid and indestructible) of enlightenment. In the realm of original enlightenment, the itinerary toward enlightenment takes always place in a space that coincides with the substratum of enlightenment itself: in other words, the ascetic process and the ascetics themselves coincide with the final goal.

Such immovable center is free from conditionings and has the power to eliminate them wherever they are present. This fact is represented in the text by the image of Mahāvairocana uttering the mantra *a bi ra un ken* in his semi-absolute condition: the mantra has power because the utterer is free from conditionings, has himself power upon reality (through empowerment, *kaji*), intends to use such power, and importantly, is trustworthy.

For these reasons Kakuban writes that the ascetics who establishes a special relation with the seed A in the initiation ceremony will be set free from all diseases and will attain the supreme *bodhi*. Suffering, diseases, and karmic conditionings in general are represented by Māra and his four retinues of demons—accordingly, the text says that A subjugates the four demonic entities. A's beneficial power is indicated by the two dots on its right (Skt. *visarga*) and by the meaning of "increasing benefits." In this way, Kakuban is able to bring together the three levels that, according to Melford Spiro, characterize Buddhism: soteriology aiming at the attainment of the ultimate, a series of process aimed at the accumulation of merit, and magical practices of protection.<sup>46</sup> In any case, it is clear that meaning is constituted by a description of the characteristics and the powers of the expression.

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<sup>46</sup> See Melford E. Spiro, *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes*. New York: Harper and Row, 1971.

The seed *vi* (Jp. *bi*)

The graph *vi* means “tie,” and its graph represents the unobstructed *samādhī*, that is, liberation transcending comprehension. The graph *va* is associated to the element water, therefore it washes away the impurities of afflictions, so that body and mind can devote themselves to the thousand practices of the *bodhi* without losing concentration. The graph *va* means that the element water enables one not to lose concentration, therefore it represent the vast ocean of all virtues [that can be acquired thanks to it].<sup>47</sup>

On a superficial level, *vi* stands for “tie,” “bondage,” impediment in general, from the Sanskrit *bandhana*. It is worth noting that here the initial phoneme /b/ of *bandhana* has been transformed into a /v/; this is not particularly surprising since in Japanese the distinction between /v/ and /b/ is not pertinent. Thus, a phonetic peculiarity generates a semantic short-circuit connecting two semantic fields (impediments and ultimate liberation) that are originally different and unrelated. In fact, on a deeper isotopy, *vi* indicates “liberation transcending comprehension.” This latter meaning is based, perhaps, on the main esoteric meaning of *va*, that is, a condition transcending language and discursive thought, therefore beyond comprehension. Liberation is produced directly by the syllables *va* and *vi* because of *va*’s correspondence with the element water. As water refreshes and washes away all physical impurities, so the graph *va* washes away the impurities of mind (i.e., afflictions: Sk. *kleśa*, Jp. *bonnō*) and facilitates the practices for the attainment of the *bodhi*. Here, we have to note a shift between body (washing the body) and mind (purifying the mind). Furthermore, since *va* enables the practitioner not to lose concentration during meditation, it also indicates/represents/produces the infinite merits resulting from religious practice, traditionally represented by the metaphor of the ocean and strengthened here by its semantic connection with the element water.

It is not clear what is the basis for the correlation between *vam* and water. The *Nirvana Sutra* associates the syllable *va* to the rain;<sup>48</sup> in Japanese esoteric Buddhism, this correlation is based on the homology associating the five mantric seed to the five elements and the five geometrical forms. In any case, it

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<sup>47</sup> Kakuban, *Ibid.*, p. 12b.

is interesting to note Nasu Seiryū's comment that the symbolic action of the syllable *vaṃ* could be based on the refreshing feeling caused by rain (water) pouring over a meditating ascetic in the heat of tropical India.<sup>49</sup> Whether this is true or not is of course open to disputation; in any case, it is possible that some of the symbolic powers attributed to esoteric expressions might have had an immediate experiential basis.

#### The seed *ra*

The graph *ra* symbolizes the purification of the six sense organs. By burning the wood of the afflictions (Sk. *kleśa*, Jp. *bonnō*), it eliminates sins and impediments of the six sense organs and enables one to experience the fruit of the *bodhi*.<sup>50</sup>

The syllable *ra* is the beginning of the Sanskrit word *rajas* meaning "dirt, dust." On a deep level, it represents the purification of the six sense organs contaminated by the afflictions. On a cosmological level, *ra* corresponds to the element fire and as such it has the power to "burn" (destroy) the impediments of the perceptual apparatus and thus to attain the *bodhi*. Here is metaphorical associations at the basis of the above citations are clear: Physical, material "dirt" (*rajas* → *ra*) is associated with psychophysical impurity (afflictions); in the mantric system, the initial syllable of the word "dirt" turns into a spell that can destroy mental impurities. This is strengthened by the esoteric association of *ra* with fire, employed in Tantric rituals (such as *goma*) to purify but also to sanctify material substances. Once impurities have been transformed into pure stuff, one attains enlightenment.

#### The seed *hūṃ* (Jp. *un*)

As explained in detail in Kūkai's *Unjigi*, the graph *hūṃ* contains three elements, respectively *ha*, *ū*, and *ma*. They refer to the three gates of liberation. As the wind sweeps away the dust, so the

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<sup>48</sup> *Nehangyō* (fasc. 7), T. 12 nr. 374.

<sup>49</sup> Nasu Seiryū, *Gorin kuji hishaku no kenkyū*. Original edition 1936. Reprint: Tokyo: Rokuyaon, 1970, pp. 60-61.

<sup>50</sup> Kakuban, *Ibid.*, p. 12b.

element wind represented by the syllable *ha* sweeps away all afflictions of the mind and enables one to attain the four kinds of nirvana. When the wind of causes represented by the graph *ha* is extinguished, one attains the great quiescence and bliss of nirvana.<sup>51</sup>

The seed *hūṃ* is one of the most complex siddhaṃ units. It is perhaps for this reason that Kakuban does not expand on it, but refers instead to Kūkai's classic text on the subject.<sup>52</sup> The three gates of liberation (*san gedatsu mon*), that is, the three meditative states that lead one to nirvana (respectively, emptiness, *kū*; formless, *musō*, and absence of vows, *mugan*), are represented by the three graphic components of *hūṃ*, namely, *ha*, *ū*, and *ma*. The seed *ha*, the matrix of *hūṃ*, corresponds to the element wind. On the superficial level it means "cause," from the Sanskrit *hetu*; on the deep level, it is associated with nirvana. As the wind sweeps away the dust, so the graph *ha* sweeps away the afflictions and opens the way to nirvana. Here it is interesting to note that etymologically nirvana is interpreted as "cessation of the wind"; Kakuban associates the attainment of nirvana ("cessation of wind"), here represented by the esoteric isotopy of the graph *ha*, to the "cessation of wind" of causality and of afflictions represented by its superficial level. The semiotic operations beneath Kakuban's interpretation can be identified as follows: the meaning of a complex mantric seed is based on the meanings of its matrix (in this case, *ha*). The two main isotopies, the superficial one and the profound one, are essentially opposed principles: here we have "cause" versus "nirvana," further strengthened by "wind" versus "cessation of wind." It is also interesting to note the use of concrete, material metaphors (water, wind, etc.) to indicate abstract doctrinal and soteriological principles.

The seed *khaṃ* (Jp. *ken*)

The graph *khaṃ* represents the sky/space, the Dharma realm

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*. The four kinds of nirvana are: (i) the original condition of purity of all beings; (ii) a condition in which the effects of the afflictions (*klesha*) have been neutralized, but still one's physical body (an impure entity) is still present; (iii) stage in which beings, now without body, transcend the suffering caused by the cycle of rebirth; and (iv) level in which even mental obstacles are finally overcome and one attains the supreme enlightenment.

<sup>52</sup> Kūkai, *Unjigi*, in T 77; partial English translation in Yoshito S. Hakeda, *Kūkai: Major Works*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1972, pp. 246-262.

pervading all things without impediment like space. As the element space enables all things to grow without hindrance, so the element space represented by the graph *kham* pervades all lands, pure and impure, and constitutes the karmic environment (*eshō*) of both laypersons and priests.<sup>53</sup>

The seed *kham* is the fifteenth transformation of the syllable *kha*, which as a noun means in Sanskrit “sky” and “empty space.” The sky and the element space are associated with the seed *kham*, referring to the final attainment of wisdom. The last syllable of Mahāvairocana’s mantra thus represents the ultimate awareness that emptiness is all-pervading and therefore it is the foundation of everyday reality as well.

### C. Summary

From our analysis, it is clear the complexity of the manifold relationships that establish between the planes of expression (phonetic and graphic) and the plane of content, as well as between the various “meanings” of the mantric seeds. This complexity is due to processes of re-motivation of language and signs that characterizes the semiotics of esoteric Buddhism. Re-motivation turns mantric expressions (and esoteric symbols in general) into inscriptions of the salvation process. We can thus define the practice of esoteric Buddhism as a “symbolic practice” consisting (also, and perhaps primarily) in the ritual and/or meditative manipulation of particular semiotic entities.

In his discussion of Mahāvairocana’s mantra, Kakuban describes the complex semantic network associated with each of the five syllables, and turns them into representations/actualizations of the standard ascetic path in five steps:

- (i) the arousal of the desire for enlightenment (*bodhicitta*), understood here as the innate and indestructible substance of the original enlightenment which ensures the attainment of the soteriological goal (graph *a*);

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<sup>53</sup> Kakuban. *Ibid.*, p. 12b-c.

- (ii) religious practices (*bi*), in which the ascetic's concentration and resolve are threatened by doubts, afflictions, and karmic obstacles;
- (iii) purification produced by meditation, which enables the attainment of the fruit (*ha*);
- (iv) nirvana, envisioned here as a state of absolute calm which constitutes the moment of liberation from afflictions (*un*);
- (v) the ensuing transformation of the consciousness apparatus and the related wisdom, which enables the practitioner to view ordinary reality (to the enlightened one, the *only* reality) with different eyes (*ken*).

Thus, the formula *a bi ra un ken* encompasses the ascetic journey toward salvation; as such, it is similar to the mantra that concludes the *Heart Sutra*.<sup>54</sup> The mantra *a bi ra un ken* is a sort of recording of the original voice of the Buddha Mahāvairocana, as well as a reproduction of the ascetic's itinerary toward buddhahood. The certainty of salvation to be attained through the practice of this mantra is guaranteed, as we have seen, by the initial veridiction contract (the original utterance of the mantra by Mahāvairocana) and by the final sanctioning by Amoghavajra; moreover, the formula contains—not in mystical and ineffable ways, but in theoretically describable terms—the totality of the esoteric wisdom and the salvation process.

The conformity of expression, meanings, and soteriological purport is not purely theoretical. If the very form of the mantra is homologous to the path toward liberation, chanting and visualization of that mantra is in itself walking on that path. Accordingly, mantras are not just supports for practice or “symbols” of enlightenment: they are the very substance of the enlightenment process. An important consequence, from the standpoint of the Shingon teachings, is that all those who chant or visualize a mantra will experience its power and attain its purported goal—in other words, all initiated will become

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<sup>54</sup> See Donald S. Lopez, Jr., “Inscribing the Bodhisattva's Speech: On the *Heart Sutra's* Mantra,” *History of Religions* 29/4, 1990, pp. 351-372; see also his *Elaborations on Emptiness: Uses*

buddhas in their present bodies. In this sense it is possible to talk about “symbolic omnipotence” of Tantric Buddhism: symbols are not just indications or representations, but, literally, the very essence of that which they stand for. This is the reason why, as Kakuban writes, meditation of the mantra *a bi ra un ken* is equivalent to the performance of the bodhisattva practices for countless eons. Symbolic practices are efficacious in and of themselves; deep knowledge of the exoteric Dharma and direct practice of the six paramitas are not necessary in order to becoming a buddha in the present body by following Mahāvairocana’s teachings.

#### *D. The Journey through the Mandala*

After explaining the equivalence of the mantra *a bi ra un ken* with the path toward buddhahood, Kakuban addresses the relation between that mantra and the five-element mandala (*gorin mandara*)—a relation based on a complex network of cosmic homologies. In this section of the *Gorin kujimyō himitsushaku*, Kakuban’s prose is extremely dense, as to inscribe directly in the text the interdependence of concepts and the interrelation of phenomena that characterize the Dharma realm. Again, such interdependence and interrelation are not the result of an individual’s mystical visions, but they are grounded in and sanctioned by the entire esoteric episteme and world-view. Below I present a summary of the principal features of the symbolic practices related to the five-element mandala.

The five-element mandala is an allomorphic representation of Mahāvairocana based on his fundamental mantra *a va ra ha kha*, of which *a bi ra un ken* is a transformation. As such, this mandala originates from the core of the mandalas of the two realms: in the Vajra realm the five elements come from the seed *vaṃ*, while in the Womb realm they proceed from the seed *aḥ*. These two graphs are the mantric seeds of Mahāvairocana in each of the two mandalas. The five-element mandala is thus a condensation of the entire Dharma realm and its two main modes of semiotic manifestation.

The seed of the five elements, that is, the substance of both the Dharma

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*of the Heart Sutra*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.

realm and Mahāvairocana's body as articulated inside the ascetic's body into their fundamental material categories, is constituted by the pure *bodhicitta*, i.e., the originally enlightened mind in its innate form. "Understanding one's mind as it really is" (*nyojitsu chi jishin*) is in fact, according to the *Mahāvairocana Sutra*, the key and true content of enlightenment.<sup>55</sup> (Kakuban finds such unconditioned modality of the mind in all the ten stages of the mind as described by Kūkai, a further manifestation of Kakuban's acceptance of the doctrines of original enlightenment).<sup>56</sup>

The main protagonists of this visualization are the five buddhas located on the lotus flower at the center of the Womb mandala and, in various combinations, also in the Vajra mandala. Each represents/embodies some characteristics of the soteriological processes at play in Tantric Buddhism, especially the steps leading to enlightenment and the five types of wisdom acquired through it. Mahāvairocana, the cosmic Buddha of East Asian tantric Buddhism, is the most important among them. Situated at the center of the mandala, he represents both the principle of enlightenment and the whole range of powers associated with it. All around him are the so-called four buddhas. Below him, to the east, is Akṣobhya, to the south is Ratnasambhava, to the west is Amitābha, and to the north is Amoghasiddhi. The five buddhas serve as the reference point for a number of five-elements cosmic series that structure the tantric universe and guide the practitioners in their meditations. As we will see, the practices described in the text enable the practitioners to identify themselves with Mahāvairocana, the paradigmatic Buddha of esoteric Buddhism.

The practices described here consist in visualizing the universe as a five-element *stūpa*, also called *caitya* in the text. In India the *stūpa* is a funerary monument, sometime of large dimensions, that enshrines relics of the Buddha. It symbolizes the formless body of the Buddha and the essential structure of the cosmos. The East Asian equivalents of *stūpas* are towers, known in English as pagodas, which enshrine relics or other sacred objects. The *stūpa* described in this text, however, is a vertical object in the form of a pagoda composed of five geometrical elements used as support for meditation. They are, respectively,

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<sup>55</sup> *Dainichikyō*, T. 18, p. 1c.

<sup>56</sup> Kakuban, *Ibid.*, p. 13a-b.

from bottom to top, a square, a triangle, a circle, a crescent, and a sphere. Interestingly, this kind of *stūpa* is still used in Japanese cemeteries as a memorial monument in tombs. Through the visualizations presented in this ritual, the ascetic is supposed to reconfigure his/her body as a *stūpa*, envisioned here as the mystical cosmic body of Mahāvairocana, thus becoming a buddha him/herself.

Kakuban introduces several visualizations, which, on the basis of Chinese correlative principles, dissolve the distinction between the practitioner's self and external reality—in other words, the distinction between subject and object. In the process, the practitioner, after s/he has inscribed within his/her own body the five-element mandala, is meditatively decomposed into the constitutive elements of reality; thus, s/he can realize his/her own essential identity with the entire macro-cosm. As Kakuban wrote, “since the object of worship (*horizon*) and the practitioner are originally the same, each of us is always/already enlightened. I am the buddhas of the past.”<sup>57</sup> The mystery of the body (*shinmitsu*) is perfected, thus, through practices aimed at producing the awareness of such an original identity.<sup>58</sup>

More specifically, such a goal is achieved through complex visualizations, based on multiple interrelations of several subtle substances (breath, light, sound, writing, etc.), in which the hidden structure of the entire universe is recreated and embodied by the ascetic through meditation his body. The universe is organized on interconnected series of five elements forming closed causal chains. For example, Kakuban correlates the five Buddhas, the five stages of the enlightenment process, and the five wisdoms thereby attained, with the cosmic elements (earth, water, fire, wind, and space), the five directions, the five seasons (the four usual seasons plus an intercalary period), the five aggregates (*skandha*, psycho-physical constituents of reality), the five viscera, the five souls, the five phases (*wuxing* in Chinese: the five natural elements according to the Chinese cosmology, namely, earth, fire, water, wood, and metal), and so forth. The body is the privileged site for experiencing such a

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15b.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

cosmic structure. Once mastered and embodied through initiation, knowledge, and ritual action, cosmology opens the way to liberation.

The structure of the visualization ritual of the mantra *a bi ra un ken* and the five-element mandala it generates can be described as follows. First, the Tantric-Daoist cosmology of the human body is presented, with all the complex correlations governing it and the practices necessary to maintain balance. Then, three levels of attainment (*siddhi*) and the respective mantras are introduced. The text then describes the production of the “living-body relic”—the meditative destruction of the ascetic’s ordinary body and the creation of a *stūpa*-like cosmic body. As it is indicated in an apocryphal ritual text, very influential in Japan and which constitutes the main source of Kakuban’s treatment of the subject:<sup>59</sup>

From the letter A comes out the syllable *ra*, which burns one’s body and reduces it to ashes. From the ashes the syllable *va* is generated [...] From it, [...] the mantra of the five elements [of the cosmic *stūpa*] is produced. This mantra takes its place on the five parts of the body [...] This is the pure *bodhicitta*.

The visualizations result in the embodiment of both Womb and Vajra mandalas. The ritual finally ends with a vast cosmic vision of absolute nondualism. In a way, the text reproduces the meditative process and its results.

This ritual is essentially a set of ritual instructions concerning mantras; as such, the text is characterized by the intermingling of the language of commentary and the language of ritual. It outlines the conceptual background and describes the ritual procedures that may enable one to afford the ultimate soteriological goal of esoteric Buddhism, namely to identify oneself with the Buddha Mahāvairocana. To this purpose, Kakuban gives a list of the cosmic correlations at the basis of the five-element mandala. These correlations include the following five-unit series: the mantra we are discussing here, cosmic elements, viscera, central buddhas of the mandala, five agents of the Chinese cosmology, seasons, fundamental colors, steps in the soteriological process,

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<sup>59</sup> *Sanshu shichiji ha jigoku ten gōshō shutsu sangai himitsu darani hō*, in T 18 n. 905 p. 911 b. English translation in Fabio Rambelli, “Tantric Buddhism and Chinese Thought in East Asia,” pp. 370-380.

planets, directions, Chinese and Indian deities, wisdoms.<sup>60</sup> These correlations are based on the *Ha jigoku giki* and other texts;<sup>61</sup> later, in medieval Japan, this list was increasingly expanded.<sup>62</sup> In this way, the mantra *a va ra ha kha* and its variant *a vi ra hūṃ khaṃ* are envisioned as a condensation of the entire encyclopedia of the esoteric knowledge.

The visualization process aims at establishing a connection between the syllables of the mantra and their multiple meanings on the one hand, and the parts of the human body and the elements in the external world they correspond to by virtue of the correlative logic of the East Asian esoteric episteme. According to both Indian Tantrism and traditional Chinese medicine, the human body is a microcosm. The ritual privileges the Chinese vision of the body as the locus for enlightenment. The central apparatus of the body, the five viscera (liver, lungs, heart, kidneys, and spleen) is directly related to the five phases (wood, metal, fire, water, earth) on the outside and control five souls or spiritual functions of the human organism, corresponding to the essences of the *qi* (breath/energy): the celestial soul (*hun*, in Chinese), the terrestrial soul (*po*), the superior soul (*shen*), the will (*shi*), and the ideas (*yi*). Another important network of organs in the body, mentioned only in passing in the text, is constituted by the six receptacles (*liufu*, in Chinese). While the five viscera are basically depots of breath/energy, the six receptacles function as centers of consumption. By becoming aware of the profound relation between the individual and the universe, the initiate is able to control the cosmic forces and, as a consequence, to embody the cosmos—which, as we have seen, is actually a *stūpa*, a reliquary body. It should be noted that the soteriological transformation of the practitioner's body into a buddha-body is described in the text as an effect of an "empowerment" (*adhiṣṭhāna*, Jp. *kaji*) resulting from the ascetic's interaction with the Buddha.

At this point, Kakuban introduces the visualization on the mandala of the

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<sup>60</sup> Kakuban, *Ibid.*, pp. 12c-15a.

<sup>61</sup> T. 18 nr. 905, p. 909-911; nr. 906 pp. 911-914.

<sup>62</sup> Eisai (or Yōsai), *Kissa yōjōki*, in *Dainihon bukkyō zensho* vol. 115; Raihō, *Shohō bunbetsu shō*, in T 79/2448: 714-730; *Gozō mandara wae shaku* (by an anonymous author), and Dōhan, *Gochi gozō tō himitsushaku*, both manuscript copies preserved at Kanazawa Bunko, Yokohama, Japan. I am currently engaged in a study of the connections between correlative cosmology and the teachings concerning the mandala in medieval Japan.

seed *āṃḥ*. It results in the dissolution of all distinctions between the human flesh-heart and the sublime lotus, the symbol of the Dharma realm and of enlightenment. In this visualization, one realizes that all forms are identical with the fundamental emptiness, and reaps the benefits of wisdom and power that this realization implies.<sup>63</sup>

In this case as well, the relation between the support of meditation and the goal of meditation is not random or arbitrary. The seed *āṅku* (*āṃḥ*) is the fifth and last of the five transformations (*goten*) of the Sanskrit letter A, that is, the total sum of all previous four transformations (*a*, *ā*, *aṃ*, *aḥ*). Esoteric graph par excellence (it does not exist in the ordinary Sanskrit graphic system), *āṃḥ* represents the Dharma realm in its totality and enlightenment in its most complete form. In this case, the five transformations of Sanskrit syllables are equivalent to the five steps of the enlightenment process, as we have seen above. In the case of *āṃḥ*, these five steps coincide in one point, so that the mantric seed is the mystical representation of original enlightenment and of the certainty to attain the buddhahood. In other words, this is another example of the fact that, in the esoteric episteme, the semiotic expression is related to its contents and its effects by a relation of motivation.

Liberation is envisioned as the dissolution of sense, as the realization of the provisional nature of distinctions and articulations produced by the deluded mind.<sup>64</sup> Becoming a buddha, then, is the result of the use of motivated signs, essentially identical with both their referents and the ascetics employing them, in which the ascetic itinerary (and the certainty of attainment) is inscribed. As represented also by the graph *āṃḥ*, the practice of esoteric Buddhism is an enormous circuit of sameness; to enter the circuit means to be saved. This is perhaps the meaning of Kakuban's sentence "I am the buddhas of the past." Such fundamental circularity is also expressed by the mantra of the Vajra realm *vaṃ hūṃ traḥ hrīḥ aḥ* [Jp. *ban un taraku kiriku aku*], in which each syllable is both the basis of original enlightenment at a given level of attainment and the power that destroys the conditionings still present in the previous syllable (and in the practitioner meditating on it). The final syllable *aḥ* represents the original

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<sup>63</sup> Kakuban, *Ibid*, p. 15b.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, p. 15b-c.

enlightenment of Mahāvairocana; as such it coincides with the initial syllable *vaṃ*, representing Mahāvairocana's enlightenment as the result of practice. In other words, the ascetic follows a reverse path from that of Mahāvairocana: from the realized buddha to original enlightenment; but once one realizes original enlightenment, one is necessarily already enlightened. At this point, the ascetic identifies him/herself with Mahāvairocana.

Based as it is on the manipulation of images, signs, and ritual objects, this bodily and mental soteriological process described in the text is primarily semiotic, culminating in the production of a perfect body, a "living-body relic" which, as we have seen, is a condensation of the entire universe.<sup>65</sup> The meditative technology described in the text implies a particular kind of semiotics, in which there is no distinction between the practitioner, the signs and symbolic objects he employs, their meanings, and the external reality (the deities of the mandala and, ultimately, the entire Dharma realm) to which they refer. The characteristic circularity of esoteric Buddhist practices is particularly apparent in the text: the tool of meditation (the moon disk mandala) is equivalent to the part of the body it affects (the heart/mind), to the mental functions on which it operates (the apparatus of consciousness), and finally to the results achieved (the three *siddhis* and the three bodies of the Buddha); on the other hand, as a mandala it is coextensive with the entire universe (Dharma realm), with the mind, and with the substance of semiotic activity (the Sanskrit letter A). As a result of such circularity, salvation is continuously produced and certainly realized. This ritual is a good example of the fact that the soteriology of tantric Buddhism in East Asia is based on semiotic practices, in which symbols are manipulated in meditation and ritual action. The text attributes an enormous importance to language, especially the absolute language of mantras, and to the development of particular macrosemiotic formations composed by several different semiotic substances and objects organized in quinary series (see above), in which each component is an alloform of all the others. The previously mentioned *stūpa* (or *caitya*) is one of these macrosigns. Another macrosign,

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<sup>65</sup> It is possible that the teachings in the ritual and other cognate texts were connected to East Asian practices of self-mummification performed by ascetics to achieve the *buddha*-body in the present lifetime. These ascetics, called *sokushinbutsu* ("buddhas in their present body") in Japanese, aimed to turn their body into the ultimate *stūpa*-like, whole-body relic.

related to the previous one, but based on a nine-element system, is the mandalic complex of "moon-heart-lotus" (see Lecture 6) which constitutes a rich support for the practices described in the text. It is precisely the mastering of these macrosemiotic formations that enables one to attain the goals of practice, be they salvation or this-worldly benefits. This circuit is based on trust (*shin*); it is not by chance that Kakuban ends his discussion with a reference to Kōbō Daishi,<sup>66</sup> extra-textual proof to the efficacy of these practices to become a buddha in one's present body, and with a hymn praising these practices. However, as Kakuban also makes clear, if one does not trust in these practices, but performs them nonetheless, that person will fall into the Uninterrupted Hell and no buddha will save him/her from there.

## 2. Amida's Dhāraṇī

After discussing the process leading to becoming a buddha in the present body based on Mahāvairocana's mantra, Kakuban presents Amida's *dhāraṇī* that is supposed to cause rebirth into Amida's Pure Land. The formula is the following:

oṃ amṛta-tese hara hūṃ  
[on amirita teizei kara un]<sup>67</sup>

In this case, Kakuban does not report on the context of the original enunciation of this formula. This is due perhaps to the lack of solid textual proofs.<sup>68</sup> Instead, he begins with the analysis of this mantra in nine syllables.<sup>69</sup>

This mantra is marked by the two esoteric indicators *oṃ* and *hūṃ*, signaling respectively the beginning and the end of a mantric linguistic space. Each of the three units included between them, respectively *amṛta*, *tese*, and *hara*, has

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<sup>66</sup> Kakuban, *Ibid.*, p. 16a-b-c.

<sup>67</sup> As Nasu Seiryū points out, the Sanskrit original is different: it is not *tese* but *teje* (Nasu 1936 [1970: 193]).

<sup>68</sup> This *dhāraṇī* seems to have appeared for the first time in a ritual manual, the *Muryōju giki* (full title: *Muryōju nyorai shu kangyō kuyō giki*, in T 19 nr. 930 pp. 67-72), and not in a sutra.

<sup>69</sup> Kakuban. *Ibid.*, pp. 17a-19b.

meaning in Sanskrit ordinary language: *amṛta* means “immortality” and refers metonymically to the *soma*, the divine food of immortality; *tese* means “light” and “high-pitched”; finally, *hara* means “take away.”<sup>70</sup> The entire mantra, then, is not a purely esoteric formula, but is endowed of a superficial meaning that was at least partially comprehensible in ordinary language. A translation sounds as follows:

Oh venerable one (*om*), who are endowed with the light (*tese*) of immortality (*amṛta*), take us away with you (*hara*)! So be it!<sup>71</sup>

These three meaningful units are taken as representing the main features of Amida and his typical way of salvation. Amida is in fact the Japanese rendering of two Sanskrit terms, *Amitāyus* and *Amitābha*, referring respectively to “eternal life” and “glorious light”; furthermore, according to standard Pure Land doctrines, Amida will appear to each dying individual and take him/her away with him to his paradise. Accordingly, we could say that also in this case, the mantra presents/embodies the main features of both the agent and the process of salvation it invokes.

In Japan, the communicative value of this mantra is obviously different, since its components do not make sense in ordinary language but require instead a specific competence of an initiatory kind. However, the signification associated with this mantra and its interpretation and ritual uses are remarkably similar to its Sanskrit original. To the Japanese practitioners as well, the two esoteric markers /on/ and /un/ serve to delimit a mantric utterance; as we have already seen in Lecture 3, /on/ signifies a statement of trust or faith, whereas /un/ sanctions the completion of the ritual utterance and, as a consequence, the realization of the request accompanying the mantra.

The linguistic space delimited by these two units loses any relation with ordinary language, but acquires, through commentaries, a direct relation of motivation with the entities it signifies/evokes/embodies, much in the same way as in the Sanskrit case. In Japan as well, then, this mantra evokes the main

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<sup>70</sup> My interpretation follows Nasu 1936 [1970: 193-194].

<sup>71</sup> See also Takubo-Kanayama 1981: 219.

features of Amida and the modalities of salvation Amida ensures. Such transformation of the mantric linguistic space also utilizes modifications in the plane of expression, so as to conform it more closely to the nebula of content that the Sanskrit original wants to convey.<sup>72</sup> Thus, the original word *teje* is turned into *tese*, in order to include in the mantra the concept of “truth” (*satya*) based on the syllable *sa*, its initial portion, that resonates in the second syllable /*se*/ of *tese*. In the same way, the Sanskrit *hara* is interpreted in Japan as *kara*, meaning “action,” to emphasize Amida’s salvific action.<sup>73</sup> To sum up, the semantic structure of Amida’s mantra in nine syllables (*kujimyō*) as it is presented in the *Gorin kujimyō himitsushaku* is as follows:

*on*: the three bodies of the Buddha; faith and devotion; offerings. In other words, it is a declaration of faith, stating the utterer’s devotion to Amida and trust in his powers in general and in this specific *dhāraṇī* in particular; Amida is understood here not as a separate, distinct buddha, but as a manifestation of the absolute Buddha (thus, the reference to the three bodies); the utterance of this mantric seed is in itself an offering to the buddha.

*amirita*: “sweet dew” (Jp. *kanro*), the supernatural drink of immortality, an indication of one of Amida’s main features.

*teizei*: it refers to Amida’s great power, his all-pervading light, his supernatural power to transform things, his embodying the force of the six elements, his courage to destroy the enemies, his anger that punishes even the bodhisattvas who violate the precepts.

*kara*: it represents Amida’s salvific action toward the utterer: it means: creating buddhas (through the attainment of original enlightenment), action (soteriologically oriented), operation (through unlimited supernatural

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<sup>72</sup> According to Umberto Eco’s theory of the modes of semiotic production, such transformation of the mantric linguistic space constitutes an instance of *ratio difficilis*. See Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, 1975, esp. pp. 183-184.

<sup>73</sup> See also Nasu 1936 [1970: 193-194].

powers), devotional practices to Amida, meditation, and the utterance of the forty-eight vows to save all beings.

*un*: it guarantees the result, also in terms of symbolic violence; it means: destruction of the enemies of Buddhism, creation of absolute entities (*shinnnyo*), and fear (it terrorizes demons and non-Buddhists).

Thus far we have focused our discussion on the syntagmatic analysis (*kugi*), term by term, of Amida's nine-syllable formula. The atomic analysis of its meaning, graph by graph (*jigi*), further elucidates the salvific power of this *dhāraṇī* and emphasizes its structural homology with the soteriological path leading one to rebirth into Amida's Pure Land. In other words, the inscription of salvation occurs on all levels of esoteric signs on the basis of the peculiar recursive structure of the esoteric universe. Each syllables embodies the entire formula and thus the entire salvific process it entails; but the inscription of soteriology also takes place at the level of single words, sentences, and even of entire texts.

After inscribing the soteriological itinerary (and the certainty of its success) in Amida's *dhāraṇī*, Kakuban turns the formula into a mandala (*kuji mandara*)—in a process similar to what he had done before to the five-syllable mantra, which he related to the five-element mandala. I will not discuss here the technicalities of the visualization involved in the mandala of Amida's *dhāraṇī*; I will instead try to shed light into the basic principles of such mandalization of esoteric signs. For Kakuban the mandalic representation of Amida's mantra in nine syllables represents the ascetic itinerary that turned the bodhisattva Dharmakāra into the Buddha Amitābha through a purification process that took place over five kalpas, as explained in the *Muryōjukyō*.<sup>74</sup> Kakuban homologates this process to the transformation of the graph *ha*, the symbol of Dharmakāra at the moment he uttered the forty-eight vows, into the graph *hriḥ*, the symbol of

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<sup>74</sup> T 12 nr. 360, pp. 265-279; English translations: Inagaki Hisao, *The three pure land sutras : A Study and Translation from Chinese*, in collaboration with Harold Stewart. Kyoto: Nagata Bunshodo, 1994; Luis O. Gómez, *The Land of Bliss: The Paradise of the Buddha of Measureless Light: Sanskrit and Chinese Versions of the Sukhavativyuha Sutras*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996.

Amitābha as a fully realized Buddha. In turn, *hrīḥ* is the mantric seed of Amitābha’s Great *dhāraṇī*. The choice of the graph *ha* is not the result of chance. *Ha*, as we have already seen in Lecture 4, represents the cessation of karmic conditionings and the attainment of nirvana. This produces a series of implications:

- (i) it is not possible for Dharmakāra not to become Amitābha, as it is not possible for the graph *ha* not to become the graph *hrīḥ*;
- (ii) the transformation of one syllable into another, carried out by the practitioner in meditation, reproduces and is fully equivalent to all practices performed by the bodhisattva Dharmakāra for five kalpas—a good indication of the purported superiority of the esoteric practices vis a vis those of traditional Mahayana;
- (iii) this transformation—not just of one syllable into another, but more essentially, of a practitioner into a Buddha—is easy and possible for anyone. Thus, those who perform these symbolic practices cannot fail to repeat Dharmakāra’s itinerary.

The nine-syllable mandala, in turn, produces the Great *dhāraṇī* of the sweet dew (*Amirita dai darani*), that is, the extended mantra of Amida.<sup>75</sup> It follows in Kakuban’s text the formula we have just discussed and is another example, much more detailed and articulated, of the peculiar nature of the mantric linguistic space, in which the salvation process is inscribed and enacted:<sup>76</sup>

segment	original meaning	Kakuban’s interpretation
Namo ratna-trayāya	Hail to the Three jewels	deep devotion, the three bodies of the buddha, the three jewels, personal salvation, faith and worship
Namaḥ āryā-	Hail to the perfectly enlightened one, the saint, the arhat, the Tathāgata of Infinite Light	without doubts, great saint

<sup>75</sup> Kakuban, *Ibid*, p. 19c.

<sup>76</sup> This diagram is based on Nasu 1936 (1970: 241-244) and Takubo and Kanayama 1981: 222-224.

(a)mitabhāya		endless life; infinite light; numberless disciples; sweet dew, the heavenly medicine
tathāgatāyā-		thus come, thus gone
(a)rhate samyak-saṃbuddhāya		assassin, non-born, <i>arhat</i> , enlightened one
tad yathā	The formula says:	Utters the spell
Om		the three bodies of the Buddha, enlightened one, ritual offerings, devotion
amṛte	O amṛta!	sweet dew, continuity, life, non- aging, non-death
amṛtodbhave	O amanator of amṛta!	precious seat, blissful existence, pleasure, calm
Amṛta-saṃbhava	O producer of amṛta!	rebirth, advent (of Amida), accompanying (the dead into the Pure Land)
amṛta-garbhe	O receptable of amṛta!	deposit, sky womb (Kozō), earth womb (Jizō), diamond womb (Kongōzō)
amṛta-siddhe	O you who have attained the amṛta!	attainment, dispersion, achievement of the effect, achievement of the cause
amṛta-teje	O you who have the splendor of amṛta!	power, light, force, strictness
amṛta-vihṛte	O you who possess the courage of amṛta!	paradise, Tuṣiṭa heaven, pleasure, nirvana
amṛta-vihṛta-	O you who possess perfectly the courage of amṛta!	utmost bliss ( <i>gokuraku</i> , i.e., paradise)
gāmine		rebirth in heaven, a world without suffering as final result of religious practice, calm state of mind produced by the rightful thinking
amṛta-gagana-kīrtikare	Your glory is like the sky of amṛta!	like emptiness, without conditionings, without contrasts, easy rebirth (into the Pure Land)
amṛta-duṃḍubhi-svare	Your voice is like the drum of amṛta!	nice voice, expounding the sublime teachings, nice music, the Dharma as personal pleasure
sarvā-(a)rtha-sādhane	You who master the principles of things!	the utmost attainment, satisfaction, the samādhi of the utmost bliss
sarva-karma-kleśa-kṣayaṃ-kare	You who estinguish all consequences of karma and	universal karmic activity, the wondrous place where life is

	afflictions!	protected (perhaps, a place where negative karma is erased), the growth of sentient beings, an encounter resulting in bliss, the end of time
Svāhā	Hail!	The ascetics who practices with pure faith, setting the ground for his/her rebirth (into the Pure Land), has his/her desire to see Amida's advent realized; the criminal responsible for the most serious crimes has his/her desire to be taken to Amida's paradise realized

A detailed analysis of this mantra and Kakuban's analysis would require several pages. Suffice to note that Amida's Great *dhāraṇī* begins with the marker and invocation *namu* (Skt. *namo*, "hail!") and includes *om* (*oṃ*); it continues with the enumeration of merits, powers, and characteristics of Amida and his paradise (through repetition of the term *amṛta* and the development of related metaphors), and concludes with the final invocation /*sowaka*/ (Sk. *svāhā*) as guarantee of rebirth in Amida's Pure Land.

At the end of this process of manipulation of esoteric signs, Kakuban achieves a surprising result. The practices for rebirth into Amida's Pure Land coincide with the practices that led the bodhisattva Dharmakāra to become the Buddha Amitābha. In other words, becoming a buddha in the present body is identical with successive rebirth into a Pure Land (*junji ōjō*). Visualization based on semiotic manipulations of esoteric entities allows one to experience two doctrinally different and irreconcilable phenomena as identical. Such identity of soteriological goals is also emphasized by another factor. The graph *ha*, the seed of the nine-syllable mandala and symbol of Dharmakāra's transformation into Amitābha, is the last syllable of the Sanskrit alphabet. It traditionally represents the outcome of a salvific process that follows a reverse path as to the one originating with the syllable *A*, the first letter of the alphabet and symbol of

Mahāvairocana.<sup>77</sup> Kakuban gives a more direct salvific relevance to the meanings traditionally attributed by esoteric Buddhism to the graphs A and *ha*. For Kakuban, the practices centered on Mahāvairocana, based on the five-element mandala (*gorin mandara*), and the practices centered on Amitābha, based on the nine-syllable mandala (*kuji mandara*), even though originally heterogeneous and aiming at different forms of salvation, lead the practitioner to the same ultimate goal. Becoming a buddha in the present body and being reborn into Amida's Pure Land after death are two identical processes, and their differences are thus only superficial. Also in this case, then, the fundamental nondualism underlying Kakuban's esoteric teachings is reaffirmed.

### **Final Considerations: The Logic of Semiotic Soteriology**

In this lecture we have seen that esoteric Buddhism envisions soteriology as the direct result of the ritual manipulation of the semiotic values of mantras and siddham graphs structured as mandalas. In visualization (which, as we have seen, does not need to be a meditation, but can simply constitute a form of reflection) these entities are examined from a point of view that closely resembles semiotic analysis: their signifier(s), their signified(s) (levels of meaning), and their performative effect upon reality in general. Esoteric Buddhism emphasizes that the entities it employs in its soteriological project are not just "pointers" (such as the famous "finger pointing at the moon") or "symbols," but full-fledged embodiments of the principles they signify. It is possible to envision at the basis of such semiotic attitude a particular logic of identity ensuring that "signs" are "identical" to their meanings and "referents." Tsuda Shin'ichi has already pointed to the existence of such a logic, which he calls "logic of *yoga*"; he thinks it is based in a verse of the

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<sup>77</sup> This treatment of the two extremes of the Sanskrit alphabet appears already in Kūkai's *Unjigi*. The esoteric meaning of A is centered on the concept of "original non-creation" (*honpushō*), thus on the undoing of causality. In contrast, the deep meaning of *ha* concerns the "unobtainability of cause," that is, on the absolute and unconditioned of causality. In this way, the semantic fields of these two terms appear irreconcilable. However, meditation on the letter A reveals that all things come out of the originally uncreated, whereas meditation on the syllable *ha* results in the idea that "the uncaused cause is the first cause of all things" (Kūkai, *Unjigi*, in turn based on *Dainichikyō sho*, T 39: 656a). Esoteric meditative practices serve to overcome differences in meaning as a method to represent the unconditioned reality.

*Sarvatathāgatatattvasaṃgraha*, namely *yathā sarvatathāgatās tathā haṃ* (“as all the Tathāgatas, so am I,” that is, “I am identical to all Tathāgatas”). According to Tsuda, adepts of Tantrism interpreted this verse in two ways: (i) “if the individual existence and the ultimate reality are homologous, then they are identical,” and (ii) “if the individual existence successfully reorganizes itself to be homologous with the ultimate reality, then the former can unite itself with the latter.”<sup>78</sup> Tsuda attempted to express in various ways the principle of *yoga* identity that underlies the Tantric system.<sup>79</sup> In my view, the fundamental logic postulate of the Shingon epistemic field can be formulated as:

For any entity 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 Dharma body:

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

Such logic of undifferentiatedness, albeit domesticated and neutralized in order to dilute its antinomian potential,<sup>80</sup> also lies at the basis of Shingon ritual practices, often ignored or despised by scholars as a degeneration of “true” esoteric Buddhism<sup>81</sup>—thus forgetting that ritual aimed at cosmic integration and political and ideological legitimization displayed and enacted the

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<sup>78</sup> Tsuda Shin'ichi, “A Critical Tantrism,” *The Memoirs of the Toyo Bunko* no. 36, 1978, pp. 167-231; the citation is on p. 171.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198, p. 203.

<sup>80</sup> This postulate had in fact a potentially disruptive character because of its antinomian radicalism.

<sup>81</sup> Such an attitude reveals a traditional approach to the study of religions which emphasizes doctrinal aspects to the detriment of practices and rituals. For a critique to this approach, see Stanley J. Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality*. Cambridge: Cambridge

fundamental principles underlying the esoteric episteme. Ritual is not a degeneration of so-called “pure” esoteric Buddhism (*junmitsu*) or a remnant of earlier “miscellaneous” forms (*zōmitsu*),<sup>82</sup> as many scholars insist, but on the contrary it is directly related to the postulates of the esoteric episteme itself. The *Shingon naishōgi*, written by Kitabatake Chikafusa (1293-1354) in 1345, describes the practices leading to buddhahood in the following way:<sup>83</sup>

The fundamental principle of the [Shingon] school is that one can become a buddha in this very body. All sentient beings... have a body, language, and a mind—the three centers of karmic activity [*sangō*]. When these are not active, they become the three Secrets [*sanmitsu*] of the Tathāgata. When one composes a mudra with one’s hands, one’s body becomes identical [*sōō*, Skt. *yukta* or *yoga*] with the body of the [corresponding] deity [*honzon*]: this is the Secret of the body [*shinmitsu*]. When one chants a mantra with one’s mouth, that comes to coincide with the speech of the [corresponding] deity: this is the Secret of the Language [*gomitsu*]. When the mind abides in *samādhi* and I visualize the deity undisturbed by random thoughts, my mind coincides with the mind of the deity: this is the Secret of the Mind [*imitsu*].

This passage describes the process to become a buddha in the present body. The practitioner must perform a set of expressions that are conventionally considered to be equivalent, on the basis of the logic indicated above, to the buddha or bodhisattva they stand for. However, as we have seen in this lecture and in the previous one, the chanting of mantras and visualization in particular presuppose (at least, in theory) a complex semiotic labor aimed at the identification and dissolution of their various levels of meaning. At that point, the ascetic is virtually identical with his/her object of worship. As Kakuban wrote:<sup>84</sup>

Since ignorance and enlightenment are [originally] within myself, there is no buddha-body outside of [my own] three centers of karmic activity [i.e., body, speech, and mind]; since truth and delusion are

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University Press, 1990.

<sup>82</sup> On the *junmitsu/zōmitsu* distinction, see Rambelli 1994.

<sup>83</sup> Kitabatake Chikafusa, *Shingon naishōgi*. Critical edition by Miyasaka Yūshō in *Kana hōgoshū* (Nihon koten bungaku taikai vol. 83). Tōkyō: Iwanami, 1964, pp. 226-240; the citation is on pp. 229-230.

<sup>84</sup> Kakuban, *Amida hishaku*, in KS I: 149.

identical and undifferentiated, one can attain [rebirth into] the Pure Land within the five destinations.

In other words, salvation is not the attainment of a state different from and outside of own one present condition. Becoming a buddha does not mean abandoning the human condition to turn into a buddha; rebirth into the Pure Land does not mean to abandon one's present conditioned in the five or six destinations. One's body, speech and mind are already the hardware necessary for salvation. The importance of semiotic manipulation as the most prominent feature of esoteric Buddhism was explicitly recognized already at the beginning of the ninth century by the Hossō monk Tokuitsu in his polemic against the new teachings established by Saichō and Kūkai.<sup>85</sup> More recently Tsuda Shin'ichi developed Tokuitsu's position and maintained that the ascetics are not required by the Tantric tradition to engage themselves in direct and concrete activities for the benefit of other sentient beings in order to become Buddhas. Through the identity (*yuga*) of the three mysteries (*sanmitsu*), the ascetics restructure themselves as embodiments of the deities which are their objects of cult on the basis of the above-mentioned logic of *samādhi*; ultimately, the ascetics identifies himself with the Dharma body.<sup>86</sup>

As Tsuda Shin'ichi has explained, meditation on mandala and other semiotic practices translate the *bodhisattva's* career into mental states and kinds of visualizations. Whereas the *bodhisattva* practices in the "classical" Mahāyāna traditions, that is, the perfection of the *pāramitās*, are direct, concrete, and virtually endless efforts aimed at the actual salvation of actual beings, in esoteric Buddhism practices are essentially symbolic, such as chanting of *shingon*, visualization of images, performance of rites. This is particularly evident in the examples we have discussed in this lecture, in which the ritual/meditative manipulation of certain semiotic entities (mantras, images, etc.) is considered equivalent to the actual process of enlightenment. It is possible that the paradigmatic example of such symbolic practices is the *gosō jōshingan* (five-phase visualization of the bodily transformation into a buddha) described in the

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<sup>85</sup> See Rambelli 1994.

<sup>86</sup> Tsuda Shin'ichi, "Mikkyō kenkyū no hōkō: Mikkyō shisō no hihanteki rikai wo mezashite," *Tōyō gakujutsu kenkyū* 20/1, 1981, pp. 117-136 (the citation is on p. 124).

*Jinggangdingjing*.<sup>87</sup> As pointed by Tsuda Shin'ichi, the *Jinggangdingjing* explains (i) the method to attain a certain level of enlightenment, (ii) the mantra that can replace such direct method, and (iii) the resulting experience—a state of awareness and the concrete image symbolizing and replacing it, such as the moon-disk (*gachirin*) or another symbolic form (*sanmayagyō*).<sup>88</sup> In this manner, visualization of a certain esoteric symbol directly results, on the basis of initiatory conventions, the attainment of *siddhi*. However, Tsuda's reference to the "symbolic" nature of the esoteric practices remains rather vague and even suggests that they are not "real" Buddhist practices but mere simulations or counterfeits. In my discussion, on the contrary, I showed that esoteric practices are based on the use of particular semiotic expressions based on a coherent epistemic system which is in turn related to the cosmology and soteriology of esoteric Buddhism. Semiotic practices are believed to activate invisible entities and forces summarized in various Shingon mandalas. Such an operation is carried out through its inscription in esoteric (or esotericized) texts. Salvation is not something to be achieved in mystical, ineffable experiences transcending the ordinary world, but through manipulation of semiotic entities envisioned as *doubles* of their referents. Since this kind of practices were believed to bestow numberless powers upon the ascetic practicing them, we can call their result with Tsuda Shin'ichi a case of "symbolic omnipotence."<sup>89</sup>

Raihō's *Shingon myōmoku* clearly explains the particular status of esoteric practices as different from their "classical" counterparts.<sup>90</sup> Two passages are particularly significant in this respect. The first is the reduction of the ten stages of the Bodhisattva's path to the visualization of the deities of the mandala: "according to the real meaning of the sutras, the Ten stages correspond to the position of the sixteen great bodhisattvas [in the central sector of the mandala]."<sup>91</sup> In this case, a dynamic ascetic process developing in time (the ten

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<sup>87</sup> *Jinggang ding jing*, T 18. See *Mikkyō daijiten* p. 613. The five phases of the ritual are the attainment of the *bodhicitta* (the desire for enlightenment), the practice of the *bodhicitta*, the production of the adamantine mind, the experience of the adamantine body, and the omnipervasivity of the Buddha-body.

<sup>88</sup> Tsuda Shin'ichi, "Tantora bukkyō ni okeru yōga no ronri," *Risō* no. 535, 1977: pp. 134-135.

<sup>89</sup> Tsuda Shin'ichi, "Mikkyō kenkyū no hōhō."

<sup>90</sup> Raihō, *Shingon myōmoku*, pp. 731-732.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 732b.

bodhisattva stages) is reduced to a spatial position (that of the sixteen great bodhisattvas) within a fixed framework, the mandala; time-span is erased and reduced to a spatio-temporal moment. The second move indicated by Raihō is the re-interpretation of the span of time traditionally deemed necessary to attain enlightenment, the three countless kalpas (Jp. *san daiasogi kō*), to forms of non-ordinary awareness:<sup>92</sup>

*Kalpa* is a Sanskrit word. The exoteric teachings interpret it as a span of time and accordingly [conceive of liberation as a] progress over time from a stage to another; after three great *asamṣkhyeya* [countless] kalpas have elapsed, one attains the true awakening. The Shingon [tradition,] [in contrast,] interprets *kalpa* as “false views” [*mōju*, Sk. *vikalpa*] and overcomes them accordingly. The three delusions are transcended in the moment of a single thought.

When *kalpa* is understood “vertically” as discrimination between before and after, it is called “time,” but “horizontally” it refers to coarse and fine discriminations, so that an entire unaccountable [*asamṣkhyeya*] kalpa is disclosed in the moment of a single thought. As the result of “vertical” discrimination, the three times [*sanze*] amount to an infinite time span. According to the Shingon “horizontal” sense, however, one should know that in the mind there is no discrimination, and therefore all the deities of the three sections [of the mandala] manifest themselves in the instant of a single thought. The Exoteric Vehicle understands the Dharma-nature [*hosshō*, Sk. *dharmatā*] in a “vertical,” differentiated way. Therefore, the thousand buddhas appear in the three times, and many kalpas are needed in order to attain the enlightenment.

In this passage, Raihō displays once more the logic underlying the esoteric episteme. A slight shift in signifier produces a great difference in signified with an enormous impact on practice. Thus, by manipulating the signifier one can achieve unconceivable practical effects. In this case, *kalpa* (“aeon”) is interpreted as *vikalpa* (“discrimination”); time is reduced to the operation of the mind. Accordingly, whereas the exoteric teachings take a literalist approach and state that the attainment of liberation requires the performance of religious practices extending over numberless kalpas, esoteric Buddhism starts from the signified, as it were; by treating *kalpa* as *vikalpa*, “discrimination,” salvation only requires a correct thought process—literally, it takes place in the “instant of a single

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<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 731b-c.

thought.”

As a consequence of the attitude toward salvation indicated by Raihō, we can detect with Hirosawa Takayuki in the esoteric tradition a “structural necessity of becoming a buddha in the present body”;<sup>93</sup> in other words, salvation is a necessary outcome of the structure of the soteriological process. This is perhaps the meaning of a short dialogue attributed to Kakuban entitled “Instructions for the Shingon Practitioner in the Final Age [of the Dharma]”:

If one arouses the desire for enlightenment, does s/he necessarily attain it?

Yes, the one with profound faith attains the *siddhi*.

What do you mean by “profound faith”?

Even though one does not achieve results after performing religious practices for a long time, one should not doubt, one should not give up. If one holds on, *siddhi* will be attained without fail. The buddhas or the deities, in order to try the ascetic and the depth of his/her faith, may prevent him/her [from attaining the result]. Or, perhaps because of serious karmic impediments, the ascetic may think s/he has failed; however, s/he has really attained the *siddhi*, s/he just does not realize it. Furthermore, demons can also erect obstacles and hide [the attainment of the result]. Because of all these reasons, one should never doubt [the efficacy of teachings and practices].<sup>94</sup>

The author of this passage emphasizes the “structural,” almost mechanical nature of attainment. To practice is to attain the result—even if one may not be aware of it... This is in line with our discussion so far of the semiotic nature of the esoteric practices.

Esoteric texts aim at the elimination of all forms of dualism opposing words and things, study and practice, practice and its description—ultimately, signifier and signified, sign and reality. Thus, ritual texts present themselves as isomorphic with the cosmos and as simulations of religious practice; they are thus representations of the ultimate nondualism envisioned by the esoteric world-view. Paradoxically, this inscription within language and texts of the Buddhist esoteric cosmology and soteriology takes place while the authors

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<sup>93</sup> Hirosawa Takayuki, “Shūkyōteki ken’i he no taiō: Kakuban Shōnin ni miru kyōgaketeki tachiba he no kaishaku,” *Gendai mikkyō* 2, 1991, pp. 9-22 (the citation is on p. 20).

<sup>94</sup> *Matsudai shingon gyōja yōjin*, in KS II: 64-65.

emphasize the impossibility for ordinary language to tell the truth about the world. The linear surface of the text denies what is nevertheless achieved at the level of the structure of the text and of the semantic system it mobilizes. We could say that texts of esoteric Buddhism are somehow similar to René Magritte's "logograms," such as the famous drawing representing a pipe in which the contour of the subject was marked by the sentence *ceci n'est pas une pipe* ("this is not a pipe").<sup>95</sup> Douglas Hofstadter develops the same paradox in his own "ambigrams."<sup>96</sup> In both cases we have a text in which a message contradicts the translinguistic form in which that message is constructed. In other words, language denies something that actually takes place at the level of the semiotic structuring of the text.

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<sup>95</sup> See Michel Foucault, *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*. Paris: Fata Morgana, 1973.

<sup>96</sup> Douglas R. Hofstadter, *Ambigrammi: Un Microcosmo Ideale per lo Studio della Creativita'*. Florence: Hopeful Monster, 1986.