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## Lecture 6

### The Status of the Mind in Esoteric Buddhism

Mind is an extremely complex and important subject in Buddhism in general and in esoteric Buddhism in particular.<sup>1</sup> It is partly due to the fact that Buddhism envisions liberation as based on the acquisition of a special wisdom, that is, a different cognitive approach toward reality. Such new cognitive approach is called in the Japanese tradition *satori* or *kakugo*, usually rendered in English as “enlightenment” or “awakening.” “Enlightenment” refers to the attainment of “light” as a new, and correct, vision that dispels the “darkness” of ignorance. “Awakening” is closer to the Buddhist original as the realization that ordinary, profane reality is just a dream and therefore is unreal. Here we should stress once more that *satori*/awakening is, contrary to common understanding, a cognitive state, not a mystical experience. Esoteric Buddhism builds up on previous theories of the mind and expands them to connect mind directly to the body on the one hand and to reality on the other. It also tries to develop in more concrete terms the mechanics of the transformation of the deluded mind that is necessary in order to attain awakening. In this respect, it is interesting to note that the sentence from the *Dainichikyō* “know your mind as it really is” (*nyojitsu chi jishin*) is considered to be the quintessence of the Shingon teachings.<sup>2</sup> This sentence has generated countless commentaries, including the monumental *Ten Stages of the Mind* by Kūkai.<sup>3</sup> In this work, Kūkai describes ten stages of

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<sup>1</sup> On a number of issues related to Buddhist visions of the mind and their complexity, see for example Alexander Piatigorsky, *The Buddhist Philosophy of Thought*. London and Dublin: Curzon Press, and Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes & Noble Books, 1984.

<sup>2</sup> *Dainichikyō*, in T 18 n. 848, p. 1c.

<sup>3</sup> Kūkai, *Himitsu mandara jūjūshin ron*, in Kawasaki Tsuneyuki, ed., *Kūkai* (Nihon shisō taikai 5). Tokyo: Iwanami, 1975; an abbreviated version is the *Hizō hōyaku*, in

awareness, which can also be characterized as ten modes of functioning of the mind, since they describe for each stage the mind's understanding of reality and awareness of itself, its moral outlook, and its soteriological implications.

From texts such as this, we realize that Shingon Buddhism develops its philosophical speculation on the problem of the mind in three different but related directions, namely, ontology, epistemology, and soteriology. In this respect, the esoteric approach to the mind is no different from its general semiotic outlook, in which semiotic issues are inextricably related to ontology and to the soteriological process. More specifically, the esoteric epistemology addresses the production of delusory knowledge (ignorance leading to suffering), the possibility to generate "true" knowledge leading to enlightenment, and the mental processes involved in it. Ontological arguments connect the mind with the body and with the universe in general. Finally, soteriology focuses on the mind as the primary and privileged topos of enlightenment. Esoteric exegetes were able to ground their theories and practices of knowledge (epistemology) in the nature of the mind itself as the essence of reality (ontology) and thus to define salvation as the transformation of one's mind (soteriology). In this lecture we will see how.

### **Yogācāra Doctrine of the Mind**

As we have already seen in Lecture 1, the most influential Buddhist model of the mind (and semiosis) is the one that developed within the Indian Yogācāra with Asaṅga (fourth century C.E.) and Vasubandhu (fourth-fifth centuries C.E.); it had a lasting impact on all Mahāyāna traditions. As is clear from its most common appellation, "Mind-only" (Sk. *vijñapti-mātratā*, Jp. *yuishiki*), the basic tenet of this tradition of thought is that only the mind "exists," and the world is the result of the mind's activity. In brief, external reality as it appears in our ordinary experience is in fact a projection of our deluded (non-enlightened) mind, which articulates what is de facto an unconditioned, absolute substance

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*Shingonshū zensho* vol. 11; partially translated into English in Hakeda 1972, pp. 157-224 as "The Precious Key to the Secret Treasury."

into objects, events, sensations, thoughts, and so forth. The Yogācāra school studies in detail this articulation process that produces our deluded world of suffering in order to reverse it. The goal of this tradition consists in achieving a radical transformation of the mind, so that it does no longer produce deluded representations of a fictional external world but reflects passively and accurately the unconditioned entity that constitutes absolute reality (Sk. *tathātā*, Jp. *shinnyo*).<sup>4</sup>

The absolute continuum is first divided into five major categories, for a total of a hundred constitutive entities (dharmas). The five categories are: mind (*shinnō*, lit. “mind-king”), mental factors (*shin shoyū hō* or *shinjo*, lit. “mind’s possessions”), matter (*shiki hō*, “entities endowed with form”), immaterial entities independent of the mind (*shin fusōō gyō hō*), and unconditioned entities (*mui hō*). Mind includes the eight consciousnesses (*hasshiki*), or sections of the mind. Mental factors include mental faculties such as perception, volition, and ideation, mental functions such as desire, memory, and meditation (*samādhi*), good mental states (faith, dedication, patience, etc.), bad mental states (afflictions, Sk. *kleśa*, Jp. *bonnā* greed, anger, ignorance, arrogance, doubt, and wrong ideas), secondary afflictions, and neutral mental states (such as regret and sleep). Material dharmas include the five bodily sense organs and the corresponding five realms of material objects (respectively, eye/forms, ear/sounds, nose/odors, tongue/tastes, body/tactile perception). Among the independent immaterial entities we find dharmas such as acquisition, life, meditation, names, impermanence, succession, direction, time, and number. Finally, unconditioned entities include space, immobility, the elimination of ideation, and the Tathātā. This typology disrupts facile dichotomies such as mind/matter and conditioned/unconditioned, but at the same time points to a complex series of interactions that gesture toward the overcoming of conditioned thought. For example, mental states are sort of bridges between the

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<sup>4</sup> On the Yogācāra tradition of thought, see for example Yokoyama Kōichi, *Yuishiki to wa nani ka*. Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 1986 (1993 reprint); Id., *Yuishiki: Wagagokoro no kōzō*. Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 1996 (2001 reprint); Takemura Makio, *Yuishiki no kōzō*. Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 1985 (2001 reprint); Id., *Yuishiki no kokoro*. Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 2001; Takasaki Jikidō *et al.*, *Yuishiki shisō*. Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 1982 (2001 reprint); Matsukubo Shūin, *Yuishiki shohō*. Tokyo: Suzuki shuppan, 2001

mind and material objects; some mental states defined as “purer” have the possibility to become a starting point toward the recovery of the original and unrepresentable unconditioned state. This state is represented in this typology by unconditioned dharmas, but as long as they are envisioned as elements in a typology they are precisely that, representations, not the “real thing.” On the other hand, the catalog of immaterial dharmas provides us with a list of basic entities that are necessary to think and act in the world—sort of fundamental categories of thought, distinct from the mind, from mental states, matter, and unconditioned entities.

Yogācāra Buddhism envisions the mind (“mind-king”) as a sort of mental hardware, distinct from its mental states and the mental entities (ideas, categories, words, signs) it manipulates. The mind is structured into eight levels or sections usually rendered into English as “consciousnesses” (Sk. *vijñāna*, Jp. *shiki*): five sense consciousnesses (one each for the sense organs), intellect (Sk. *mano vijñāna*, Jp. *ishiki*), ego-consciousness (Sk. *mano nāma vijñāna*, Jp. *manashiki*), and store consciousness (Sk. *ālaya vijñāna*, Jp. *arayashiki*). Perceptual data from the five sense organs (preceding the attribution of a name) are elaborated by the first five consciousnesses; the sixth consciousness unifies the data, attributes names and formulates judgements. Incidentally, the intellect is treated as another sense organ and sense consciousness: its perceptual realm is the thinkable, and its products are ideas. These six first consciousnesses are based on another consciousness, called *mano nāma vijñāna*, which is the center of self-awareness and creates the distinction between subject and object—thus, it makes knowledge possible. Beyond it there is a still deeper consciousness, the *ālaya vijñāna*, a store of sign-seeds (Sk. *bīja*, Jp. *shūji*), acting recursively on perception and volition, on the interaction of mind with the world. *Ālaya vijñāna* has been usually described by Western commentators as a sort of Jungian unconscious, but it is more accurate to consider it as the mental center of semiosis and world-construction, since it produces the imaginary realm in which we live our ordinary, non-enlightened lives. It contains the seeds of all perceptions, objects, thoughts, deeds, and volition; the past experiences influence the future ones, and the future experiences reorganize the deposit of

seeds. In this way, time and *karma* have a semiotic foundation. Sentient beings are not aware of the existence of these latter, deeper consciousness; therefore, they think that their perceptions are direct and true, and their thoughts correspond to and represent a reality that is objectively existing “out there.”

Thus, knowledge of the external world involves the interaction of several factors. Objects (material entities) stimulate sense organs (material entities); sense organs send their raw data to their respective consciousnesses (mind), which transform them into mental entities; mental entities are then synthesized by the intellect to produce ideas and acts of volition and thus further activities in the real world (mental factors). In fact, however, the process goes in the opposite direction. Movements in the absolute continuum stimulate the store-consciousness (*ālaya vijñāna*), which produces an idea of self and consequently ideas of separate objects as distinct from oneself; at this point ideation begins with the projection on the outside of seeds of various kind that had been stored in the *ālaya vijñāna*. The intuition of the distinctions self/others and subject/object is also at the source of ignorance and suffering, since it foments desire and anger and the other afflictions. It is only in meditation that one can overcome the power of afflictions and gain an experience of the unconditioned (*mui hō*). The discursivization of experiences, desires, and thoughts requires the activation of immaterial entities such as language, time, space, number, etc. It is these immaterial that de facto produce our symbolic realm, in the same way as ideation produces the imaginary realm and meditation enables one to attain the Real.

The Yogācāra tradition posits three different cognitive modes or attitudes toward reality known as the “three natures” (Sk. *trisvabhāva*, Jp. *sanshō*) because the nature of reality changes depending on our interpretive approach. The first mode is delusion—reality as the product of attachment to deluded views (Sk. *parikalpita*, Jp. *henge shoshū*). Things and events are seen as unproblematic, self-identical, and objectively existing. The second mode is based on the idea of co-dependent origination (Sk. *paratantra*, Jp. *etaki*): objects that appear to exist autonomously are in fact the products of causal chains; as a result, everything’s existence depends on something else’s, and thus everything is devoid of

substantial identity. The third mode understands reality as it really is, in its perfect and true form (Sk. *pariniṣpanna*, Jp. *enjōjitsu*); it is a glimpse on Tathāta, as it were.

There is a keep awareness of semiosis in the three cognitive modes above. They presuppose a distinction between an entity's mental image (*omokage*), its external appearance (*gyō*), its semiotic configuration (*sō*), its material substance (*tai*), and its essence or nature (*shō*). Deluded vision focuses only on appearance and signs; the co-dependent outlook goes beyond semiotic configurations to attain the substance; the perfect mode makes one realize the nature of things. A well-known example describes these issues very vividly. What happens when a person mistakes a rope for a snake? That person thinks that a mental image of a snake corresponds to a real state in the external world; the "snake" is an image, a semiotic configuration, and a material substance. This is the ordinary, unaware semiotic approach to things: images and signs are identical with their referents. However, in this case the image of the snake is the product of one's mind's delusion, thus it has no substance. The rope, however, is the result of processes based on the manipulation of straw. In this case, the rope is the semiotic configuration taken by the straw thus manipulated, and the straw is its essence.<sup>5</sup> This example, however, should not be taken literally because of its limitations. It does not suggest that straw is true reality in itself, which is beyond ordinary cognitive capacities, but it does indicate that our vision of the world is usually mistaken: there is no material substance, what exists is an unconditioned essence and its semiotic configurations. Quite literally, sentient beings live in a world inhabited with "snakes" everywhere—false visions, wrong ideas, misperceptions, which in turn produce fear and other afflictions that bind them to the cycle of rebirth and suffering.

At this point, Yogācāra speculation indicates a method to overcome cognitive delusion. Since everything is produced by seeds stored in the *ālaya vijñāna*, it is necessary to control the seeds' operations. Buddhist practice consists precisely in the control and purification of seeds, so that they stop producing a false reality and enable the mind-king to reflect absolute reality as

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<sup>5</sup> Ryōhen, *Hossō daijōshū nikanshō* p. 127.

it really is. In short, the ideative action of the seeds is based on two kinds of factors: afflictions (*bonnō*), resulting from attachment to the idea of a self (*gashū*), and cognitive factors (*shochi*), resulting from attachment to the idea of an external reality (*hōshū*). There are two kinds of seeds as well: pure (*muro*) and impure (*uro*). Impure seeds reproduce the previous two factors of delusion, whereas pure seeds are conducive to enlightenment. Yogācāra practice, based on study and meditation, is meant to reduce the production of impure seeds and their effects, and to increase the production of innate, pure seeds. The function of the seeds issuing forth from *ālaya vijñāna* consists essentially in providing designations of portions of the absolute continuum, thus articulating it into distinct objects (again, as separate from the designating and desiring subject). Seeds articulate reality either through words or by indices: in the first case, their activity is called “expressing meaning” (*hyōgi*), a clear reference to a distinction between signifier (the expression) and signified (its meaning); in the second case, their activity is called “expressing an object” (*kenkyō*) without the use of words.

A gradual reduction of seed production results in the decrease of semiotic activity and in the purification of *ālaya vijñāna* and the mind apparatus in its entirety. By dismantling the symbolic realm, also the imaginary realm gradually disappears and the Real begins to surface to consciousness. This purification of the mind is called “transformation of consciousness to attain wisdom” (*tenshiki tokuchi*): the eight sections of the mind-king turn into “four wisdoms” (*shichi*), which constitute the mental apparatus of enlightenment—or, in other words, the mind of the Buddha. The five sense consciousnesses turn into the “wisdom that carries out completely what needs to be done” (*jō shosa chi*), that is, the ability to bring benefits to sentient beings. The intellect (*ishiki*) turns into the “wisdom to observe the sublime aspect of things” (*myōkanzatchi*)—the capacity to transcend superficial aspects of things to reach their essence. The ego-consciousness (*manashiki*) turns into the “wisdom of the undifferentiated nature of all things” (*byōdoshōchi*). Finally, *ālaya vijñāna* becomes the “wisdom of the great, perfect mirror” (*daienkyōchi*), a clear mirror that reflects without alterations the ultimate nature of the Dharma realm. At that point, *ālaya vijñāna*

reveals its true aspect as “pure consciousness” (Sk. *amala vijñāna*, Jp. *amarashikā*), envisioned as a clear mirror. As we can see, the transformation of the mind is a veritable reversal. The former center of delusion becomes a perfect mirror reflecting absolute reality; what was the center of the self understands the fundamental undifferentiatedness of all things; the previous intellect, which manipulated superficial impressions about things, is now able to reach the essence of things; finally, what functioned as the interfaces between the mind and reality, the five sense consciousnesses, now are the tools to carry out salvific activity in favor of sentient beings.

Of course, this transformation process is not easy. The Yogācāra tradition envisions it as requiring three great kalpas, a non-specified, almost infinite span of time.<sup>6</sup> During that time, the practitioner would perform the preparations necessary to walk along the bodhisattva’s path, and then proceed along the ten stages of the bodhisattva’s career.

### **The Esoteric Transformation of Yogācāra Epistemology**

As I mentioned before, the Shingon school is built upon the acceptance of the basic structure of the mind as developed by the Yogācāra tradition. However, it also operated a number of changes and additions/deletions to it: the nature of the mind (*shinnō*, mind-king) and its connections with the body and reality in general, the methods to awaken the deluded mind to wisdom, and the time-span required to attain the transformation of the mind. The most striking change is perhaps the radical reduction of the time-span required to attain the transformation of the mind into a wisdom-producing apparatus. As we have seen in Lecture 5, authors such as Raihō interpreted *kalpa* (“aeon”) as *vikalpa* (“discrimination”), so that duration is reduced to the instantaneous activity of the mind. Once a practitioner overcomes discrimination, his/her mind is free from conditioning and attains wisdom; this process does not necessarily

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<sup>6</sup> Sources define a great *kalpa* as the time necessary for a heavenly being to reduce to dust a stone block of eight hundred leagues by touching it slightly with its cloths once in three years: Ryōhen, *Hossō nikanshō* p. 152-153; a scriptural source can be found in *Rōkaku kyō*, final fasc., T. 14, p. 1019a.

requires countless aeons—in fact, Shingon claims that through its practices it can be achieved in one or two lifetimes. Analogously, the Yogācāra ten stages of the bodhisattva’s path is reduced to the visualization of the deities in the mandala—in this case, time is reduced to space.<sup>7</sup> Of course, Shingon’s intervention did not limit itself to claim that its soteriology was quicker than the Yogācāra’s, but proposed a set of practices to prove its claim. Ritual and meditation on the mind in particular were supposed to directly enact the transformation of one consciousness. In this respect, an important element is represented by the concept of *bodhicitta* (Jp. *bodaishin*). This key concept, literally meaning “the mind (*citta*) of enlightenment (*bodhi*),” usually refers to the “thought of enlightenment,” that is, the desire to be saved and to engage in Buddhist practice. This is the very beginning of the individual process of salvation, and therefore it is a very important moment. In Japan, however, in the context of the doctrines on the original enlightenment of beings, *bodhicitta* was often interpreted literally as “the enlightened mind.” In this case, the implication was that one can arouse the desire of enlightenment because the principle of enlightenment is innate to all sentient beings—in other words, we are “always-already” enlightened, just don’t know it. Practice thus becomes a process of self-awareness to one’s innate Buddha-nature. Tantric Buddhism added a further important layer of meaning: in a coherent nondualistic fashion, it stressed that if everyone is innately enlightened, then the initial desire for enlightenment (*bodhicitta*) is already the final goal of practice. This move enabled tantric Buddhism to emphasize the possibility to attain salvation in the present life—or, as the well-known Japanese definition has it, to “become *buddha* in this very body.”<sup>8</sup>

Another important Shingon contribution to the theory and practice of the mind is the identification of the “mind-king,” e.g., the mental hardware of sentient beings, with Dainichi Nyorai. The Buddha at the center of the two fundamental mandala manifests all other beings and entities, in the same way

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<sup>7</sup> Raihō, *Shingon myōmoku*, pp. 731-732.

<sup>8</sup> On the Shingon doctrines concerning *bodhicitta*, see *Mikkyō daijiten*, s. v. “Bodaishin,” p. 2051. The scriptural bases for the Shingon exegesis of *bodhicitta* can be found in the *Dainichikyōsho* fasc. 1 and 3; in the *Bodaishin ron*, an apocryphal attributed

as the mind produces mental states.<sup>9</sup> If our mind is already the Buddha Dainichi, then our afflictions and other negative states of mind are just illusions—or, more exactly, are no different from enlightenment. This is another way to express the famous tenet that “afflictions are themselves enlightenment” (*bonnō soku bodai*). This connection with Dainichi also resulted in the positing of a fifth form of wisdom to be achieved with the transformation of one’s mind apparatus: the “wisdom of the substance-nature of the Dharma realm” (*hokkai taishōchi*). In the Shingon epistemology, this is the fundamental wisdom, the real understanding of the nature of reality—something that goes beyond the mere unaltered reflection of the “great and perfect mirror (of the mind)–wisdom” (*daienkyōchi*) that grounded the Yogācāra enlightenment. This wisdom is produced by *amala vijñāna*. As we have seen, according to the Yogācāra definition, *amala vijñāna* was not a separate consciousness, but an attribute of *ālaya vijñāna* that emphasized its original purity and therefore the innate possibility to transform itself into a pure mirror of the Tathātā. Esoteric Buddhism, however, gives an ontological ground to *amala vijñāna* as the real foundation and essence of the mind, as a synonym with original enlightenment (a text defines it the “consciousness of original enlightenment, “*hongakushiki*”), Tathātā and Dharma realm. With this move, absolute reality comes to constitute the mind of sentient beings; soteriology (religious practice) consists then in acquiring awareness of this fact.<sup>10</sup>

One of the ways in which the transformation of the consciousness apparatus was believed to occur also through the manipulation of specific mantras. For example, a ritual commentary by the Pure Land and Shingon monk Shōgei (1341-1420) suggests that the transformation of the mental apparatus from discriminative machinery into a clear and undifferentiated pure mirror usually referred to as the five wisdoms (*gochi*) takes place thanks to the mantra *vaṃ hūṃ trāḥ hrīḥ aḥ*, representing the state of enlightenment associated

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to Nāgārjuna, in T 32; and Kūkai’s *Sanmayakai nojō*, in *Teihon Kōbō Daishi zenshū*.

<sup>9</sup> See for example, *Dainichikyōsho* fasc. 1, in T 39, p. 580a; Kūkai, *Jūjūshin ron* fasc. 10, pp. 284-285; see also *Mikkyō daijiten*, s.v. “Shin’ō,” p. 1243a-b.

<sup>10</sup> Particularly important for this doctrinal developments concerning the status of *amala vijñāna* in East Asia was the apocryphal *Shaku makaen ron* attributed to Nāgārjuna (T 69); see *Mikkyō daijiten*, s.v. “Anmara shiki,” p. 52a-b.

with the Vajra realm. The mantra stands for the five buddhas (respectively, Mahāvairocana, Akśobhya, Ratnasambhava, Amitābha, Sākyamuni), the five directions (center, east, south, west, north), and other correlative series based on them, in particular the five wisdoms. Let us follow Shōgei’s exegesis.

The seed *aḥ* represents the transformation of the five sense consciousnesses into the “wisdom that carries out completely what needs to be done” (*jōshosachi*); *hṛīḥ* indicates the transformation of the sixth consciousness (*ishiki*) into the “wisdom to observe the sublime aspect of things” (*myōkanzatchi*); *trāḥ* indicates the transformation of the seventh consciousness (*manashiki*) into the “wisdom of the undifferentiated nature of all things” (*byōdōshōchi*); *hūṃ* stands for the transformation of the eighth consciousness (*arayashiki*) into the wisdom reflecting all things as a perfect mirror (*daienkyōchi*); finally, *vaṃ* represents the ninth consciousness (*amarashiki*). Because of its particular status, *amarashiki* is not subject to transformations, but constitutes the nondual and signless mandala of the Dharma-world or, in another terms, the wisdom of the original nature of the Dharma realm (*hokkai taishō chi*). Shōgei defines these five syllables as the mantric seed of the single mind of sentient beings because they represent the universal, pure and undefiled mind pervading the Dharma realm (both sentient beings and buddhas) in the form of the five wisdoms.<sup>11</sup>

In this way, enlightenment (the transformation of the consciousness apparatus), which required such a long endeavor according to the Yogācāra tradition, in esoteric Buddhism becomes almost mechanical and, in any case, certain. In Shōgei’s case above, even visualization is no longer necessary, since the understanding of the deep meaning of the mantra and of its salvific effects is enough to trigger its mind-transforming power.

### *The Heart/Mind/Lotus Complex*

As we have seen before, the soteriology of esoteric Buddhism can be defined as a set of semiotic practices aiming at the transformation of the ordinary body-language-mind complex into forms of altered states that are defined as

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<sup>11</sup> Shōgei, *Reikiki shishō*, pp. 30-32; see also Ogawa 1997, p. 154.

“becoming a buddha.” The privileged locus of Shingon practices is the mind, or more precisely, the heart/mind complex. First of all, we should mention that Buddhism traditionally associates the mind (Sk. *citta*) and mental states (*caitta*) with the heart (*hr̥dāya*). In other words, the mind was not located in the brain, as in contemporary understanding, but in the heart. The Sino-Japanese word *shin* (read *kokoro* in *kun’yomi*) means both heart and mind, but esoteric Buddhist texts distinguish between the heart, variously called *karidaya*, *kiridaya*, *karida*, *karidashin* from the Sanskrit *hr̥dāya*, also translated as “eightfold flesh-lump heart” (*hachijū nikudanshin*), from the *shittashin* (Skt. *citta*), the mental functions which are rooted in that bodily organ. Symbolic practices (mantras, visualization) operate a transformation of the heart that results in the awakening of one’s *bodhicitta*, thus in enlightenment; the transformation of the mind (from nine consciousnesses to five wisdoms) also affects the body (attainment of whole-body relic, becoming a buddha in the present body).

Indian and Chinese physicians noted a morphological resemblance between the lotus with the heart. The lotus is a very important metaphor in Buddhism; the fact that the lotus has its roots in the mud of putrid ponds but develops into a beautiful and pure white flower was primarily used to represent the process of enlightenment. The lotus was later associated with the human heart (*hr̥dāya*), the bodily location of the mind (*citta*) and the physical site where enlightenment takes place. According to a theory that can be traced back to the *Commentary to the Mahāvairocana Sutra (Dainichikyō sho)* written by Subhakarasiṃha and Yixing, the heart of sentient beings has the shape of an eight-petal lotus.<sup>12</sup> Whereas a man’s heart is turned upwards, a woman’s is turned downwards. Countless exegetes have referred to this source. Kakuban for example wrote:

The heart is the *punḍarika* [lotus flower] inside the human body, a relic of the Dharmakāya. It contains Mahāvairocana’s four bodies and is identical to all buddhas’ supreme wisdoms in their originally pure

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<sup>12</sup> *Dainichikyō sho (Dapiluzhena chengfojingshu)*, T. 39/1796: p. 579.

substance.<sup>13</sup>

Gōhō said that in the chest of sentient beings there is a sphere of flesh consisting of eight parts. Men have it vertical, women have it horizontal.<sup>14</sup> In visualization one should open one's heart to form a white lotus with eight petals.

#### *Visualization as Mind Transformation*

Let us see more such visualization more in detail. The *Ha jigoku giki* states:<sup>15</sup>

The shape of the *hr̥dāya*-heart of ordinary people is like a closed lotus. Its muscles form eight sections. In men it is turned upwards, in women it is turned downwards. In visualization one should open one's heart to form a white lotus with eight petals. Upon it as a platform one should see the letter A in golden color. The letter A is like a square, yellow altar, and the practitioner sees oneself on it. 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, of a pure white color. From it, *A vaṃ raṃ haṃ khaṃ*, the mantra of the five elements [of the cosmic *stupa*], is produced. This mantra takes its place on the five parts of the body, from the waist to the top of the head. This is the pure *bodhicitta*. These five syllables concur in the creation of the roots of great compassion.

Kakuban also addressed the subject:

The *hr̥dāya*, the heart of common human beings, has the shape of an eight-petal lotus flower. [...] In meditation one has to transform the heart-lotus into an eight-petal white lotus in full blossom. You should

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<sup>13</sup> Kakuban, *Gorin kujimyō himitsushaku*, 15b.

<sup>14</sup> Gōhō, *Hizō shiki honshō*, Nihon daizōkyō 84. Tōkyō: Suzuki gakujutsu zaidan, 1976. Tome 4, p. 309.

<sup>15</sup> *Ha jigoku giki*, T 19; for a commentary and English translation, see Fabio Rambelli

then visualize on it the character *āṃḥ* in the color of a *vajra*. This corresponds to the ultimate perfection of skilful means, to Mahāvairocana Tathāgata, to the wisdom of Dharmadhātus's essence, to the original state of the Dharmakāya in its aspect of quite extinction [...] Only buddhas can understand this.<sup>16</sup>

As mentioned before, the Five Buddhas are located on the eight-petal lotus at the center of the Womb mandala. Enlightenment results from opening one's heart by means of meditative practices, to reveal inside of oneself the shape of the eight-petal lotus we find at the center of the mandala. As a support for meditation, the practitioner used a white disk representing both the moon as a metaphor for the eight-petal lotus (which is painted in an almost circular way) and the heart of the practitioner himself, as well as the pure enlightened mind achieved through such a practice. More precisely, in the Womb system (*taizōkai*) the heart of sentient beings is visualized precisely as an eight-petal lotus; whereas when it is closed it symbolizes "the cause containing the principle," its opening reveals the attainment of buddhahood. On the other hand, in the Diamond system (*kongōkai*) the heart is contemplated as the lunar disk, the symbol expressing the substance, circular and luminous, of the enlightened mind (*bodhicitta*). These two sets of symbols correspond to two fundamental practices of esoteric Buddhism, namely the visualization of the letter A (*ajikan*) and the visualization of the lunar disk (*gachirinkan*).<sup>17</sup> Thus, the ascetic modified his body/mind through visualization to embody enlightenment. In this practice soteriology merges with physiology: indeed, bodily metaphors of the heart became an important part of the doctrines of *bodhicitta*.

The ritual universe of Shingon's subjectivity, as we have seen, is organized on the basis of interconnected quinary series (elements = seasons = directions = colors = viscera = stages in the process of enlightenment = buddhas = wisdoms = mantric seeds = planets = cereals = souls, and so forth), in a systematic

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<sup>16</sup> Kakuban, *Gorin kujimyō himitsushaku*, 15b.

<sup>17</sup> See Yamasaki Taiko, *Shingon. Japanese Esoteric Buddhism*. Boston and London: Shambhala, 1987.

correlative cosmology. Kakuban explains: “He who understands the true nature of the five elements and constructs the four kinds of mandala that reproduce them, through the five buddhas and the five wisdoms, experiences nirvana. This is the original essence.”<sup>18</sup>

The body is the privileged site for the experience of such cosmic structure. Once mastered and embodied through initiation, knowledge, and ritual action, cosmology opens the way to liberation.

In East Asia, the esoteric Buddhist identification of the heart with the mind assumes even stronger materialistic orientations because of the role played in it by Chinese cosmology. The already mentioned *Ha jigoku giki*, extensively quoted by Kakuban in his *Gorin kujimyō himitsushaku*, proposes a set of correlations associating among others the five viscera of the human body (liver, lungs, heart, kidneys, spleen), the five agents of Chinese cosmology (wood, metal, fire, water, and earth), in which elements are variant forms of each other, the five seeds of Mahāvairocana’s mantra (*a vaṃ raṃ haṃ khaṃ*) and, significantly, the five kinds of soul of the Daoist psychology. These are: the celestial soul or *hun* (Jp. *kon*), the terrestrial soul or *po* [*haku*], the superior soul or *shen* (*shin*, i.e., the mind), the will or *shi* (*shi*), and the intellect or *yi* (*i*). What follows is an abbreviated synthesis of the relevant passage from the text.

The letter A... controls the liver. [...] The liver controls the celestial soul (*hun*). The breath/energy (*qī*) of the *hun* becomes the east and wood. [...] Wood controls the spring, and its color is green/blue. [...] The liver protrudes outside and becomes the eyes; it also controls the muscles. The muscles stretch out and become the nails. [...]

The syllable *vaṃ*... controls the lungs. [...] The lungs control the terrestrial soul (*po*)... It controls the nose and corresponds to the west and to metal. Metal controls autumn, and its color is white. [...]

The syllable *raṃ*... controls the heart. The heart controls the

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<sup>18</sup> Kakuban, *Gorin kujimyō himitsushaku*, 15b.

superior soul (*shen*)... South is fire, and fire controls the summer. Its color is red. [...] The heart protrudes outside and becomes the tongue; the heart further controls the blood; the blood stretches outside and becomes milk. It also controls the ear, and turn into the nostrils, the septum of the nose, the jaws, and the chin. [...]

The syllable *ham*... controls the kidneys. [...] When they stretch out they become sperm. The kidneys control the will (*shi*), and correspond to the north and water. Water controls winter, and its color is black. [...] [The kidneys] control the ear. The kidneys protrude outside and become the bones which control the marrow. The marrow stretches out and becomes the ear holes. The bones in turn stretch out and become the teeth. [...]

The syllable *kham*... controls the spleen. [...] The spleen controls the ideas (*yi*), and becomes the center and earth. Earth controls the summer and its color is yellow. [...] The spleen... controls the mouth and becomes the *yi* soul.<sup>19</sup>

From this passage we can glimpse the recursive cosmology at the basis of the East Asian tantric universe, with its ceaseless circulation between inside and outside, mind and body, and body and reality. Such a recursive cosmology is directly reflected in soteriology. The characteristic circularity of esoteric Buddhist practices is particularly apparent in correlative texts: the main tool of meditation (the moon disk mandala) is equivalent to the part of the body it affects (the heart/mind), the mental functions on which it operates (the consciousness apparatus), and ultimately to the results achieved (*siddhi* and the Buddha-body); on the other hand, as a mandala it is coextensive with the entire universe (Dharma realm), together with the substance of mental activity (*amala vijñāna*) and the substance of semiotic activity (the Sanskrit letter A). As a result

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<sup>19</sup> *Ha jigoku giki*, in T 19; the translation is from Fabio Rambelli, "Tantric Buddhism and Chinese Thought in East Asia," in David Gordon White, ed., *Tantra in Practice*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000, pp. 371-373. See also Kakuban, *Gorin kujimyō himitsu shaku*, in T 79 pp. 14a-15a.

of such circularity, salvation is continuously produced and certainly achieved. This fact explains the centrality of the heart/lotus/moon disk complex for these rituals. This symbolic complex is another esoteric macrosign, derived like the Five-element mandala from the central part of the mandala of the two realms (*ryōbu mandara*)—the eightfold lotus flower where Mahāvairocana, the four buddhas, and the four bodhisattvas tending at them abide. The Dharma realm, first condensed in the five-element mandala (*gorin mandara*), is then embodied by the ascetic; the transformation of one's mind that signals the attainment of enlightenment takes place only when the heart/lotus opens as in the mandala. Thus, salvation is attained when one sees in *samādhi* the shape of one's heart change. From a closed lotus, the heart becomes an open lotus, the form of the central part of the mandala, and the practitioner sees him/herself at its center. In this form of visualization, all boundaries are dissolved. The practitioner's body becomes his heart (the outside merges with the inside), the heart is a lotus, the lotus is a mandala, that is the entire universe, and the practitioner is Mahāvairocana (the inside merges with the outside).

To summarize, Shingon soteriology (what we have called symbolic practices) is the result of a number of operations on the body (heart)-language (mantra)-mind (mandala) complex of the practitioner. To attain enlightenment one has to transform one's mind. To transform one's mind, one has to act upon one's heart, the material basis of the mind. The easiest way to do that is to visualize symbolic representations of the enlightened heart/mind, namely the lotus and the moon. These images are considered representations of the *bodhicitta*; by holding them firm in one's mind in visualization, the mind becomes the visualized image—the *bodhicitta*, Dainichi, the entire Dharma realm. If we analyze this process more in detail, we find the following procedures. The heart, as a physical entity, is the central part of the body (in particular, of the set of five organs that constitutes the micro-cosmos inside one's body); as such, it is related to matter (the five material elements) and is represented by the lotus (one of the most physical symbols of Buddhism); the lotus in turn is the central element of mandala and as such it refers to Dainichi's Dharma body. On the other hand, the mind constitutes the consciousness apparatus and controls

mental functions; it is represented through the moon disk as a pure mirror reflecting reality as it is without alterations; as such, it is the primary symbol of enlightenment.

### *The Mind as a Snake*

Kōshū, a Tendai scholar monk working as an archivist during the late Kamakura period, developed an even more concrete, and very surprising understanding of the transformation of the mind leading to enlightenment. He wrote:<sup>20</sup>

in our water wheel there are the lungs; in them there is gold-colored water; in it there is a three-inch snake: it is our sixth mind [*dairoku no shinnō*]. The lungs correspond to the West and are the location of the wisdom to observe the sublime aspect of things [*myōkanzatchi*]. This wisdom is [the transformation of] the sixth consciousness, the one which discriminates between right and wrong. This [consciousness] is our thinking mind [*shiryō (shin)*]. Its mantric seed is *hūṃ*. This syllable is the seed of Benzaiten. In other words, our unconditioned and innate substance [*musa honnu no tai*] has the shape of a snake.

Let us try to unpack this dense citation. Kōjū refers to the esoteric physiology of the human body that was based on a quinary correlative system ultimately derived from the Chinese (mainly Daoist) cosmology—the same that was employed before him by Kakuban, among others. As a microcosm, the human body is a replica of the mandalized universe of Tantric Buddhism. The five elements are embodied in the five organs, and in particular the lungs are the site of water. In the Buddhist tradition, water is a highly ambiguous symbol: it is associated with serpents, but at the same time it is also a representation of purification and wisdom. Kōshū's reasoning is as follows: as at the bottom of

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<sup>20</sup> Kōshū, *Keiran shūyōshū*, in T 76 n. 2410, p. 623b.

the macrocosmic sea there are the nāgas serpents, so in the microcosmic sea of the human body there should be a miniaturized nāga—a small snake. As the Nāgas are the keepers of the Dharma, and therefore the masters of ignorance and awakening, so the little snake in the body controls the sixth consciousness (*ishiki*), the mental center in which perceptual data are organized and cognitive judgements are formulated.<sup>21</sup> In ordinary, non-enlightened condition the sixth consciousness is the origin of dualistic, deluded knowledge. In this esoteric characterization the sixth consciousness acquires a serpent-like ambivalence. The ordinary cognitive mechanism can be transformed into a contemplative device of awakening (*myōkanzatchi*). But medieval texts also emphasize a negative transformation: if a practitioner is not able to control the functions of the sixth consciousness he will turn into a Māra, a *tengu* or a heretic (*gedō*)—the main figures inhabiting the realm of anti-Buddhism. The *Heike monogatari* states: “one should know that King Māra looks like a sentient being. One becomes Māra after a transformation of the sixth consciousness, and therefore also the appearance of Māra resembles that of every sentient being.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, the everyday mind also has a dark side, a threatening aspect—a possibility of negative reversal undoubtedly connected to its serpent-like substance. However, Kōshū’s main concern here is the fact that Buddhist practice can turn the sixth consciousness into one of the five esoteric wisdoms (*gochi*), the “wisdom to observe the sublime aspect of things” (*myōkanzatchi*), associated in the esoteric combinatory paradigm with the Buddha Amida, the West, the element water, the lungs, and the mantric seed *hūṃ*. Among others, *hūṃ* is the seed of Benzaiten, who is a serpent-like female deities. Therefore, a ritual consisting in the visualization of correlative series centered on the identification of the practitioner with Benzaiten can bring about the transformation of the bodily snake into awakening. The last sentence of the previous citation is particularly

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<sup>21</sup> A Shingon Shinto texts, the *Tenshō daijin kuketsu*, presents a different interpretation: Kurikara Myōō represents the Three Poisons, whereas Gundari Myōō stands for the non-enlightenment of *ālaya vijñāna*. Obviously there was no agreement among the various esoteric tradition as to the various dragons and their functions.

<sup>22</sup> *Heike monogatari*, Enkei version, fasc. 2; quoted in Yamamoto Hiroko, *Henjōfu*. Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 1993, p. 240.

significant: “our unconditioned and innate substance has the shape of a snake.” Kōjū further expands on the concept:<sup>23</sup>

the unconditioned [*musu*] and innate [*honnū*] form of sentient beings is that of a snake. This unconditioned body [*taī*], without changes [*aratamezu*], discloses the innate Dharma body. In the sea of principle [*rishō*] of sentient beings there is a snake of about three inches.

The implications of this statement are manifold: the underlying substance of the universe takes a well-defined shape; the serpent, symbol of darkness and ignorance is defined as the material out of which all sentient beings are made; the very “stuff” of ignorance is the instrument of awakening; awakening is the result of ritual interaction with the goddess Benzaiten, one which is characterized by heavy sexual features.<sup>24</sup> It is obvious that such a ritual, based on the manipulation of and intercourse with the feminine, was meant for men. It is also significant that two body organs are particularly relevant to the present discussion: the heart and the female sexual organ, both associated with the serpent and both represented by another multi-faceted symbol, the lotus flower. In this way, a religious practice that began with the Yogācāra tradition as focusing on the mind through a sustained meditation on consciousness apparatus and its functioning, developed in esoteric Buddhism in very symbolic and concrete terms. On the one hand, it became a manipulation of expressions and representations (mantras, images); on the other hand, the focus on the mind gradually shifted to the lotus and to its sexual symbolism. In fact, it is not unusual to find sexual references in texts describing the attainment of enlightenment. Two discourses that were originally quite distinct, sex and mind, were brought together by esoteric Buddhism in one, unified field.

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<sup>23</sup> *Keiran shūyōshū*, in T 76 p. 517c.

<sup>24</sup> The dragon-like nature of Benzaiten, and her role for human salvation is also emphasized by Shingon Shintō texts, such as the *Bikisho* (or *Hanakaeshisho*), in *Shintō taikai* (Ronsetsuhen vol. 2 Shingon shintō ge), pp. 507-508. Tōkyō: Shintō taikai hensankai, 1992. In particular, this work states: “The gist of the Shingon teachings is that the word ‘Benzaiten’ refers to our mind intoxicated by the Three Poisons” (p. 508).

*Further Developments: The Mind and Sex*

The most striking example of the unification of mind and body, visualization and sex, is represented by a medieval Shingon movement known as Tachikawaryū (the Tachikawa school). Tachikawaryū is a little studied phenomenon in spite of its importance in the history of Japanese religiosity and culture. Extant sources report that the founder of this heretical movement was the monk Ninkan (active 1101). When he was exiled to Izu for *lèse majesté* he changed his name into Rennan and began to practice heretical teachings, especially after his encounter with an *onmyōji* (a ritual specialist of *yin-yang* doctrines) from Tachikawa in the Kantō region, who became his disciple with the name Kenren.

The teachings of the Tachikawaryū are characterized by a radically materialistic cosmology: texts present the universe as a transformation of a golden turtle drifting in the vast ocean, which respectively became the two fundamental fluids (blood/female and semen/male), the lotus and the *vajra*, and the other elements of esoteric cosmology.<sup>25</sup> Tachikawaryū attempted to make salvation natural, necessary, and automatic.<sup>26</sup> They carried to the extremes the Shingon tenet that to the initiate each word spoken is a mantra and each gesture is a mudra.<sup>27</sup> In particular, everything is explained in sexual terms. As Yūkai critically argued in his *Hōkyōshō* (“The Precious Mirror”), an anti-Tachikawa pamphlet, adepts to this school “consider the path of *yin* and *yang*, of man and woman the secret technique to become a buddha in this very body, and [think that] there is no other doctrine to attain Buddhahood outside of this.”<sup>28</sup> An example of this fundamental attitude is offered by one of the few extant Tachikawa texts, the *A-un jigi* (“The Meanings of the Syllables A and UN”) In it, complex Shingon doctrines are reduced to breathing and sexual intercourse, which thus gain cosmological connotations and soteriological

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<sup>25</sup> See the text quoted in Mizuhara Gyōei, *Jakyō Tachikawaryū no kenkyū* in *Mizuhara Gyōei zenshū* vol. 1. Kyōto: Dōhōsha, 1981 (or. ed. 1923), p. 122.

<sup>26</sup> See for example the *Kakōe menju ki*, quoted in Mizuhara, p. 128.

<sup>27</sup> Mizuhara, p. 96.

value.<sup>29</sup> Similar ideas were also presented in texts which developed in other sectarian traditions.

For example, the *Hachimanchō no nukigaki: Ajikan no honmi* (“Excerpts from the Eighty-Thousand Doctrines Notebook: The Original Flavor of the Letter A Visualization”), an apocryphal attributed to Shinran,<sup>30</sup> presents a systematic interpretation of the formula “Namu Amidabutsu” on the basis of Tachikawaryū pansexualistic logic. Amida, as the Buddha of the Eternal Life, is directly connected to the principle of life (breath) and the generation of life (heterosexual intercourse). In particular, the Dharmakāya of skilful means generates the two letters A and UN, representing the two phases of breathing (respectively, inspiration and expiration) and the two fundamental cosmic principles (respectively, *yang* and *yin*). A and UN together further generate the name Amida, which in turn is interpreted according to Shingon’s pansexual logic by mobilizing breathing techniques lying at the source of life principle and heterosexual sex. The text also says that the place where a man and a woman have a sexual intercourse is the threefold Buddha body. Furthermore, *namu* is explained according to the same logic as symbolizing the two sexes: *na* is the father and *mu* the mother.<sup>31</sup> *Namu*, probably in the sense of “faith” or “devotion,” is understood an unconditioned (*jinen*) entity. And the term *jinen* (natural, unconditioned) is interpreted according the two series:<sup>32</sup>

*ji*=water=moon=night=*yin*=menstruation=mother  
*nen*= fire=sun=day=[*yang*]=sperm=father

The *Nukigaki* engages in complex semiotic plays to show the unconditioned nature of *nenbutsu* and the necessity of salvation: “Namu Amidabutsu” contains all the principles of life and the order of the cosmos; birth is equal to rebirth into

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<sup>28</sup> *Hōkyōshō* T 77; Mizuhara, *cit.*, p. 95.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Igishū* in *Shinshū taikai* vol. 36: pp. 213-216; see also James H. Sanford, “Shinran’s Secret Transmission to Nyoshin: Esoteric Buddhism in a Pure Land Context”, unpublished manuscript.

<sup>31</sup> *Igishū*, *cit.*, p. 213.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 214.

Amida's Pure Land; sexual intercourse is equal to the recitation of the *nenbutsu*. Accordingly, there is no need for specific religious practices, and salvation can be achieved in this very body, here and now, without efforts (actually, in a rather pleasurable way):<sup>33</sup>

Man and woman are originally nondual; therefore, *samsāra* is pure and there are no defilements to purify; there are no passions to despise; there is no Buddha to pray to for his advent. Therefore, the enlightenment of the Buddha and the rebirth [in the Pure Land] of sentient beings are nondual, both in name and in substance.

The collection *Misōde no shita* ("Under the Sleeves") is very similar in content.<sup>34</sup> Several sections delve deeply into Shingon esoteric grammatology to expose the deep, hidden principle of things and the essential identity of names and things. In particular, the section entitled "Sokushin buttai shō" interprets Amida and the *nenbutsu* on the basis of the Shingon mandala of the five viscera.<sup>35</sup> As a result, the substance of Namu Amidabutsu is located in the five viscera—at the very center of the human flesh-body.

In this way, liberation (*gedatsu*) is no longer based on the transformation of the mind, but is produced by bodily practices—actual or imagined sexual intercourse. This radical shift was made possible by the general nondualistic outlook of the esoteric episteme (mind and body are nondual, therefore they can replace each other in soteriology), but also by the fact that the mind had a physical ground (the heart as one of the five viscera); the symbolism of the lotus also played an important role.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 215.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., pp. 364-367.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp. 369-372; the mandala of the five viscera (*gozō mandara*) is also present in another text, the *Shōbushū*. Ibid., pp. 404-405.

## Conclusion

In this lecture we have outlined the status of the mind in esoteric Buddhism and its role in soteriology. We have seen that the mind has a strong material basis—to the point of being in practice identical with its bodily organ, the heart. As a consequence, the transformation of the mind that is necessary in order to attain enlightenment is carried out through operations on the body—the heart in particular. The esoteric practice consists in literally embodying the visions that are produced in meditation. Furthermore, because of the peculiar unconditioned nature of the esoteric signs employed in these rituals, visualizations are considered to have concrete effects in reality. Thus, a transformation of the heart that occurs in visualization was considered to actually transform the physical heart; this change in the heart would also affect the mind that, from an impure dichotomic device would rediscover its original essence as a pure mirror. Visualizations were based on the imagery of the mandala, in particular the lotus, which was associated with the heart (and, thus, the mind). Another important image was the mirror, identified with the moon disk—the mirror representing the originally pure substance of the mind. In other words, we could say that the symbolic practices of Shingon semiotic soteriology aimed at transforming one's body-language-mind through operations on the related symbolic apparatuses. Once one's mind is perceived as a pure mirror, ordinary thought activity was believed to stop, to be replaced by a pure and unattached reflection of reality as it is. Needless to say, this constituted a powerful legitimizing tool for the clerical elites, who could claim that their intellectual (and political) ideas were not “ideological,” that is, motivated by concrete interests, but unaltered reflections on the nature of absolute reality.