

FABIO RAMBELLI

LECTURE 7

TRANSMISSION OF THE ESOTERIC EPISTEME

In this lecture I address the ways in which the esoteric episteme was stored in texts and transmitted. I will attempt to answer questions such as who were the masters of esoteric semiotics, how they produced their texts, and how their notions circulated. I explore the boundaries of the epistemic field of esoteric Buddhism: the notion of esoteric secret itself, the rites of consecration, the social status of the initiates, and the translation of secret, initiatory notions in more popular, widely circulating texts (poetry, drama, literature). In particular, I will elaborate on the education process of scholar monks, the meanings and uses of their texts, and the ideological functions they played in the context of medieval Shingon.

Contrary to popular understanding, esoteric Buddhism is (was) not a form of occultism, in which its adepts receive secret initiations to abstruse doctrines through curious rituals, as is reported as happening in some strange sects today. Moreover, extant documents seem to indicate that received ideas about the paramount importance of one-to-one, master-disciple transmission are overstated. The training of Shingon clergy (in particular its intellectual elites, the scholar-monks) in the middle ages happened within the context of high education institutions. Young monks classes in a lecture-discussion format and studied assigned texts individually or in groups. They engaged in practical work (ritual, meditation, etc.). At the end, they received a diploma of attainment in a ceremony called "consecration" (*kanjō*), which most of the time gave the recipient the position of scholar monk. A few of these students inherited their teacher's position and, in some cases, also his possessions. Emphasis on a personal, master-disciple relation seems to be the result of literalist readings of the esoteric education rhetoric (which does to an extent stress master-disciple

relations) and, more directly, of the impact of Zen modernist ideas propounded for example by D.T. Suzuki.¹

In fact, esoteric Buddhist monks received a specialized training (most often, in a collective setting) in a number of philosophical issues and ritual matters. When the training in a particular subject was concluded, the student went through a consecration ritual known as *kanjō* (lit. “pouring water on the top of the head”), consisting in a kind of ointment, which sanctioned the level of education that had been attained. In fact, as we will see below, the term *kanjō* refers to both initiation ceremonies (in which a novice establishes a karmic tie with a Buddhist deity or begins a religious practice) and consecration rituals (which sanction the attainment of a religious goal); however, the most important rituals of this kind were patterned on consecrations, so I will use this term throughout this chapter. It is therefore important to understand consecration rituals not as ends in themselves but as important elements in a more general process of transmission of the esoteric teachings—which in some cases went beyond the original religious setting and influenced important aspects of economy and the arts.

In medieval Japan, in fact, the transmission of many important texts and knowledge in general was carried out through the performance of consecration rituals (*kanjō*). Originally, *kanjō* was a typical esoteric Buddhist ceremony that served to transmit doctrines and practices and to sanction a practitioner’s level of attainment. Around the end of the Heian period, and more frequently in the Kamakura period, different forms of *kanjō* began to appear; they concluded secret transmissions (*kuden* or *hiden*) concerning esoteric texts, doctrines, and rituals, often of a heterodoxical nature, such as those of the Tachikawaryū and Genshi kimyōdan ideas and practices.² Gradually, consecration rituals came to be performed also to transmit knowledge concerning literary texts such as

*Parts of this lecture were originally published as Fabio Rambelli, “In Search of the Buddha’s Intention: Raiyu and the World of Medieval Shingon Learned Monks (*gakuryō*),” in Sanpa gōdō kinen ronshū henshū iinkai, eds., *Shingi Shingon kyōgaku no kenkyū*. Tokyo: Daizō shuppan, 2002, pp. 1208-1236; and Fabio Rambelli, “The Ritual World of Buddhist ‘Shintō,’” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 29/3-4, 2002, pp. 265-297.

¹ On Zen modernism, see lecture 8.

² On Tachikawaryū, see Mizuhara 1981; Sanford 1991; Manabe 1999; on *genshi*

poetry collections and the *Ise monogatari* (*waka kanjō*), performing arts (Nō, music), professional tools and crafts, and so forth.³ The attainment of secret knowledge transmitted through initiation rituals was a soteriological goal, since it was equivalent to the attainment of salvation (becoming a buddha or, in the case of *shintō kanjō*, identifying oneself with the *kami*) and involved a promise of worldly benefits (outside of the religious world, this translated as professional and artistic success); it was also a moral obligation as the realization of the essential principles and duties of a specific craft or profession (and, at the same time, the attainment of the “trade secrets” of a specific family lineage). It is not by chance, then, that in medieval Japan *kanjō* became the template for procedures to transmit legitimate knowledge in general as part of certain hierarchical systems, such as family lineages dealing with specific literary and artistic texts, with technologies, and with extra-canonical teachings such as matters related to the *kami*.

The reason for the development of such a wide range of initiation rituals is not clear. I believe it was a consequence of the systematic “mandalization” that was carried out in medieval Japan by esoteric Buddhism as a way to establish a sort of cultural hegemony among the intellectual elites. In such a framework, each text, each cultural artifact, including non-religious ones, was understood as a potential esoteric symbol endowed with several levels of secret meanings. A particular role was played by texts concerning *kami* issues, with their emphasis on cosmology, cosmogony, and the specificity of Japan, also because they added a layer of localness and concreteness to highly metaphysical Buddhist speculations.

Strictly speaking, there is not a single transmission or consecration (in the singular), but a large number of separate transmissions (in the plural). In fact, transmission is not something that is achieved once for all, but a shifting element in an ongoing process combining study, education, teaching, and ritual activities leading one from disciple to master. In this sense, *kanjō* should be translated not as “initiation,” the training that precedes the change of status, but

kimyōdan and other Tendai initiation rituals, see Stone 1999, pp. 130-137.

³ On initiation rituals for professions, see Rambelli 2003. On *kuden* in general, see Ishida 1967; Kumakura 1988.

more exactly as “finalization” or “consecration”—since it follows a period of training (both education and religious practice) and constitutes the official sanctioning of knowledge/status acquired through study and practice. In rites of passage described by Van Gennep and later by Victor Turner as divided into three stages, *kanjō* corresponds to the third stage, that of “reintegration” in the clergy as a master, and in the mythical/ritual world of esoteric Buddhism as a “double” or an embodiment of the first master.

Because of the nature of such knowledge, not everyone was entitled to receive it; consecration rituals, with their strict regulations, functioned as devices to control meaning and limit access to knowledge. They were also ways to control legitimacy. Contrary to common understanding, consecrations (also as they are still performed today) do not generally reveal occult doctrines or “esoteric” truths. Those are (and were also in the past) relatively easily available in texts studied before the performance of the initiation ritual. What the ritual enacts is the sanctioning the legitimate belonging to a certain lineage, and the capacity to teach certain doctrines and to perform certain rituals. It also guarantees the soteriological attainment of the initiated, which was often related to his (more rarely, her) social position in the hierarchy of religious institutions. For these reasons, what the master reveals at consecration are *details* such as the order of utterance of a series of mantras, specific pronunciations or intonations, which mudras to perform and when—precisely, the kind of *knowledge* that distinguishes a true certified professional from the amateur. In other words, consecration rituals control the structuring and the reproduction of the Buddhist esoteric system—a system both of knowledge and of power.

Education Process of Esoteric Buddhism: The World of Scholar Monks

Research and recent “discovery” and publication of sources are making available much material on initiation rituals and other secret procedures for the transmission of the esoteric Buddhist episteme, but still comparatively little is known about education curriculum and training process of scholar monks in the medieval Shingon tradition. This section presents some features of the

world of medieval Shingon scholar monks: their social and cultural contexts, their intellectual production, and their textual universe. It can be argued that scholar monks were the leading political, intellectual and economic force behind *kenmitsu* institutions.⁴ Their intellectual environment is thus one of the privileged sites where to explore the developments of the esoteric episteme.

Numerically, the scholar monks were a small minority among the clergy. Documents on the clerical population of the Kongōbuji between 1310 and 1317, a few years after Raiyu's death, report that between 2,500 and 3,100 monks were officially residing on Mt. Kōya at the time. Of these, the scholar monks numbered about 400 (approximately 90 to 100 *ajari* and *sanrō*, 80 *nyūji* and *sanmai*, and 230-300 *shūbun*). Approximately 400 were clearly identifiable as worker monks (*azukari*, *shōji*, and *geshū*), while between 1700 and 2300 were *hijiri*.⁵ Itō Masatoshi interprets the data for 1310 in a different way: for him, 2,600 people can be considered as belonging to the general category of worker monks; the *hijiri* were only about a hundred, but it is possible that many more of them were travelling throughout Japan and thus were not present when that text was written.⁶ Setting aside the problem of which author is right, it is nonetheless clear that only a small fraction of the residents on Mount Kōya were scholar monks.

Education Process

Unfortunately, we only have a fragmentary knowledge of the education process of early medieval Shingon scholar monks.⁷ Evidence is scattered in a

⁴ By "*kenmitsu* institutions" I refer to the religious establishment of the Heian and Kamakura periods, as defined by Kuroda Toshio (*Nihon chūsei no kokka to shūkyō* Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1975), Satō Hiroo (*Nihon chūsei no kokka to bukkyō* Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1987), and Taira Masayuki (*Nihon chūsei no shakai to bukkyō* Tokyo: Hanawa shobō, 1992). See also James C. Dobbins, ed., *The Legacy of Kuroda Toshio*. Special issue of the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, Vol. 23/3-4, Fall 1996.

⁵ Hirase Naoki, "Chūsei jīn no mibun to shūdan: Kongōbuji no chūkasō mibun wo chūshinn ni," in Chūsei jīnshi kenkyūkai, eds., *Chūsei jīnshi no kenkyū* vol. 2, pp. 103-133 (the citation is on p. 113). Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 1988.

⁶ See Itō Masatoshi, *Nihon no chūsei jīn: Wasurerareta jiyū toshi*. Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 2000, p. 119.

⁷ On monastic education in Japan, see Hori Ichirō, "Wagakuni gakusō kyōiku seido," in Id., *Gakusō to gakusō kyōiku* (Hori Ichirō chosakushū vol. 3). Tokyo: Miraisha,

number of documents concerning several temples written over a period of three or four centuries. Moreover, temples often had different regulations. It is therefore particularly difficult to give a complete account, but in the remaining part of this section I will attempt to sketch a general picture.

In the middle ages there were very few “schools” open to the public, and most of these were affiliated with local temples. Education of noble and wealthy youth was essentially carried out in the family, with the development of textbooks of “family instructions” (*kakun*) that were handed down in private, oral transmissions (variously known as *hiden*, *denju*, *menju*). Such texts were often secret (*hisho*, *himon*).⁸ We observe here a striking structural similarity between secular and religious education, both based on models mediated from esoteric Buddhism. There were essentially two kinds of school curriculum: an elementary education for commoners, based on textbooks such as the *Senjimon* (a list of characters) and the *Ōraimono* (a sort of reading books with strong moral overtones), and a higher education for monks.⁹ The education of monks was, in turn, finely articulated according to the class background and the specific hierarchical rank, position, and task of the student. It ranged from semi-literacy, to memorization (more or less accurate) of scriptures and mantras, to highly sophisticated technical skills and philosophical learning. An example of the education curriculum for children at the Ninnaji in the late Heian period can be found in the *Uki*, the diary of monk-prince Shukaku. It consisted in worship of the protecting *kami* of the temple, reading short scriptures such as the *Heart sūtra*, and chanting *dhāraṇī* (*Kujaku myō shingon*) and the invocation to Kōbō Daishi (*Namu Henjō kongō*). Education proper consisted in learning how to read and write, to compose prose and poetry, and singing and music. Children also learned how to play *go*, *sugoroku* (a board game), *kemari* (a sort of soccer), and

1978, pp. 547-691; Toganoo Shōun, *Nihon mikkyō gakudō shi* (Toganoo Shōun zenshū vol. 6). Kyoto: Rinsen shoten, 1982 (original edition 1942). On the ancient and medieval Shingon education curriculum, see Saitō Akitoshi, *Nihon bukkyō kyōikushi kenkyū*. Tokyo: Kokusho kankōkai, 1978, esp. pp. 44-74; the curriculum during the Kamakura and Muromachi periods is discussed in detail on pp. 64-73.

⁸ Ishikawa Ken, *Nihon gakkōshi no kenkyū*. Tokyo: Nihon tosho center, 1977, pp. 86-89.

⁹ Ogata Hiroyasu, *Nihon kyōiku tsūshi kenkyū*. Tokyo: Waseda Daigaku shuppanbu, 1980, p. 83.

archery.¹⁰

We can easily imagine future famous monks such as Kakuban, Gōhō, and Raiyu learning to read and write in this way in their childhood, favored by their affluent background and the vicinity of their residence to a temple of some importance. There they met priests who taught them some basic Shingon teachings and gave them the tonsure. These novices' talent and wealthy backgrounds enabled them to continue their studies at major temples, where they received more specialized training.

We can glimpse what that training might have been like through the regulations of the Kyōō jōjūin, a center of advanced studies in esoteric Buddhism funded by retired emperor Go-Uda at Daikakuji in the 1280s. These regulations prescribed three major areas, each to be mastered in one year, for a total of three years. These areas were, respectively, the *Kongōchōgyō*, the *Dainichikyō*, and *shōmyō* Buddhist chanting along with *shittan* Sanskrit writing. Education consisted in listening to lectures by scholar monks for three months, followed by an individual study period of three months, at the end of which the student would receive the consecration (*kanjō*) by an *ajari* (esoteric Buddhist master) in the discipline.¹¹ Classes were usually held in a lecture-discussion format. The text constituting the main study material was addressed at the pace of one fascicle (*kan*) every ten days. For each assigned fascicle (*kōhon*), the master first read the text and indicated its pronunciation, intonation, and punctuation. He then proposed an interpretation of relevant terms and sentences by referring to previous scholarship. At that point, beginners at first and more advanced students later asked questions.¹² Information survives concerning the medieval Tendai tradition, according to which one or two lecturers (*nōke*) taught in front of forty to fifty students,¹³ in a situation that was probably not too different from that at the major Shingon temples at the time.

An important part of the training of Shingon scholar monks was a

¹⁰ Shukaku, *Uki*, "Dōgyō shōsoku no koto"; quoted in Saitō Akitoshi 1978, p. 87.

¹¹ *Go-Uda hōō goyūigō*, quoted in Saitō Akitoshi 1978, pp. 64-67; see also *Mikkyō daijiten*, s.v. "Kyōō jōjūin" pp. 290b-291a.

¹² Saitō Akitoshi 1978, p. 68; see also Tanaka Takako, *Muromachi obōsan monogatari*. Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1999, pp. 78-83.

¹³ Hirota Tetsumichi, *Chūsei bukkyō bungaku no kenkyū*. Ōsaka: Izumi shoin, 2000, p. 69.

period of study at some important temple in Nara. Usually Shingon disciples studied Hossō doctrines at the Kōfukuji and Kegon and Sanron doctrines at the Tōdaiji.¹⁴ The Nara Buddhist establishment had traditionally strong ties with Shingon; Tōdaiji in particular even claimed leadership in the Shingon tradition.¹⁵

The fundamental form of higher learning in medieval Japan was a dialogic model known as *dangi* or *rongi*, in which young scholar monks were asked to illustrate a doctrinal theme and respond to questions from senior monks who often upheld unorthodox views.¹⁶ In fact, many medieval texts were written in the context of such educational processes. Doctrinal debates have a long history in the Buddhist world. Aside from precedents in Chinese Buddhist commentaries, in Japan the first reference to a debate occurs in 652, when Eon and Eshi discussed the *Muryōjukyō*.¹⁷ Debates also took place at state sponsored ceremonies dating back to the Nara period such as the Misaie at the imperial palace, the Yuimae at Kōfukukuji, and the Saishōe at Yakushiji. Doctrinal debates gradually developed into an education system for scholar monks by the end of the Heian period.¹⁸ Several temples held these kinds of debates, both in the Kinai area and in the Kantō region.

It is possible to find a distant model of Japanese doctrinal discussions in the Buddhist scriptures themselves; sutras are in fact dialogues between Sākyamuni and his disciples (and opponents). In China this model interacted with another pedagogic paradigm, known in Japan as *sekiten* and associated with the Confucian tradition and its examination system. As a learning methodology, it generated a relentless investigation into the meaning of texts.

¹⁴ On the monastic curriculum in Nara, see Yamazaki Makoto, "Gakuryō to gakumon," in Honda Yoshinori *et al.*, eds., *Setsuwa no ba: dōshō, chūshaku* (Setsuwa no Kōza 3). Tokyo: Benseisha, 1993, pp. 85-111.

¹⁵ See Nagamura Makoto, "'Shingonshū' to Tōdaiji: Kamakura kōki no honmatsu sōron wo tōshite," in Jiinshi kenkyūkai, eds., *Jiinshi no kenkyū ge*. Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 1988, pp. 47. See also Ryūichi Abé, *The Weaving of Mantra*, 1999.

¹⁶ On *rongi*, see Chisan kangakukai, eds., *Rongi no kenkyū*. Tokyo: Seishi shuppan, 2000. On Tendai *jikidan* (*dangi*), see Hirota Tetsumichi, *Chūsei Hokkekyō chūshakusho no kenkyū*. Tokyo: Kasama shoin, 1993; Tanaka Takako, *Muromachi obōsan monogatari*. Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1999, especially pp. 78-114.

¹⁷ *Nihon shoki* fasc. 25, in Sakamoto Tarō *et al.*, eds., *Nihon shoki ge* (Nihon koten bungaku taikai 68), p. 318. Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1965.

¹⁸ Nagamura Makoto, *Chūsei jiin shiryō ron*. Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 2000, pp.

In this sense, it is a dialogue with a text and his author, and a conversation with previous masters. The significance of this textual interrogation is however not just speculative, since the understanding of the meaning of a text is directly connected with the understanding of the intention of its author—and, ultimately, of the Buddha—an endeavor with important soteriologic consequences. Texts were treated as clues, traces to the intention of the Buddha, but also as “relics” of previous masters, signposts on the itinerary to the Buddha’s mind and by extension to one’s own salvation. Commentaries (other texts) resulting from this investigation into the intention of the Buddha were considered in turn soteriologic instruments to spread the Dharma. They were thus used as lecturing material, to both disciples and even to the *kami*. Within the Shingon tradition, in fact, these kinds of lectures/discussions were held regularly for the protecting deities of the major temples: Kiyotaki Gongen, Niu Myōjin, Sannō Gongen. We find here a close relation between scholarship and salvation. Texts were used and produced in a ritual dimension. In some cases, they acquired a magic, talismanic status as “relics” of their authors and embodiments of enlightenment. After all, already in India scriptures were considered the *dharmakāya* of the Buddha, that is, quite literally, what is left of Śākyamuni in this world after his disappearance into *nirvāṇa*.

The Role of Commentaries

Many clues help us reconstruct the way in which scholar monks worked and the function they attributed to their texts. Let us follow in detail the case of Raiyu. His ritual procedures were usually recorded after he received an initiation into some specific ritual and had access to its manuals. In these kinds of writings, Raiyu wrote references to the original text (which was often, in its turn, a commentary on some other text), comments by his master, and his own comments, in the form of questions, annotations, and thoughts. Raiyu’s ritual texts were instruction manuals for the performance of rituals and, at the same time, studies of the ritual manuals themselves that constituted the root texts of his own writings. By analyzing the nature of his work in this way, we can

identify a strong and characteristic relationship between textual study, ritual activity, and oral instructions that constituted the core of the education process and the professional duties of scholar monks.

Raiyu envisioned his commentarial activity as related to divine benevolence and as a source of soteriologic merit. He wrote several of his texts after revelatory dreams in which bodhisattvas and other holy figures appeared to him. For example, in a dream, a high priest accompanied by two acolytes appeared in Raiyu's room and asked to see his writings. The priest ordered Raiyu to write a new commentary for Mañjuśrī (*Monjusho*). Raiyu complied by producing the *Hiken kaizō shō*.¹⁹ In 1274 Raiyu also wrote about his overwhelming happiness upon receiving initiation on the teachings of the monk-priest Shinkaku accompanied by a large set of volumes. In a dream he was told that his good fortune was due to the protection given to him by Kōbō Daishi, Niu Myōjin, and Kiyotake Gongen.²⁰ Some texts directly discuss the promise of future salvation. For example, Raiyu wrote that the merit he accumulated for composing the *Ya kon kuketsu shō* would cause his rebirth in the Pure Land (*kubon ōjō*), even though writing is of no more value than picking up a single hair from the hair of nine cows, or taking up a single drop of water from the ocean.²¹ One day, Raiyu dreamt that Mañjuśrī appeared to him and praised his *Ajikan hishaku* saying that it was the best preparation for rebirth in the Pure Land he could perform. Mañjuśrī also congratulated Raiyu's scholarship, saying that his commentaries (*shōnomono*) well represented the intention of the Buddha (*butsui*).²²

This elusive and endless quest for the "intention of the Buddha," through extensive analysis of scriptures and commentaries by past masters, seems to have been a primary aim of scholar monks' activity. By discerning this intention, it was theoretically possible to continue transmitting the "lantern of the Dharma." Identifying the "intention of the Buddha," that is, the real

¹⁹ *Hiken kaizō shō*, in *Shingonshū zensho* vol. 16 p. 56. The dream is reported in *Sokushin jōbutsu gi kentoku shō*, in SZ vol. 13 p. 77.

²⁰ Raiyu, *Shinzoku zakki mondō shō*, pp. 346-347; on similar dreams in which Raiyu was assured that his study and writing activities were enabled through protection by the deities, see for example Raiyu, *Shinzoku zakki mondō shō*, pp. 257, 258, 261.

²¹ Kushida 1979 p. 176.

²² Raiyu, *Shinzoku zakki mondō shō*, p. 425.

meaning of what the Buddha had said, the key to the path of salvation he had opened, was by no means an easy task. As is well known, the Buddhist Canon is composed of a large number of scriptures, many of which are in open contradiction with each other. To render matters even more complicated, the two major scriptures of esoteric Buddhism as they were known to the medieval Japanese scholar monks, that is, in Chinese translation, were believed to be nothing more than a summary of a larger written text, unavailable in this world, which was in turn a short version of a cosmic text constituted by the entire universe. The real intention of the Buddha could be understood only through full access to that cosmic text—something that by definition was only possible to buddhas and bodhisattvas. Medieval Japanese commentators were therefore forced to work by approximation through studying scriptures, classical commentaries, and the work of past masters. Raiyu was no exception. In some cases, this was an end in itself; in other cases, as we will see below, the understanding of Buddha's intention was related to issues of legitimacy and power.

Initiatory Transmission: The Status of the "Secret"

As we have seen so far, secret rituals of consecration were performed at the end of a specific training that involved taking classes, studying, and performing rituals. In this section I will discuss in detail the features of some representative consecration rituals.

Consecration (Jp. *kanjō*, Sk. *abhiṣeka*) is a ritual in which a master (Jp. *ajari*, Sk. *ācārya*) sanctions the transmission to a disciple of the essence of esoteric Buddhism. Literally, the term means "pouring (water) on (someone's) head," from the central part of the ritual. Originally, *abhiṣeka* was performed in India as the enthronement ceremony for a new king or for the proclamation of the heir to the throne. Water especially drawn from the four oceans was aspersed on the head of the new ruler (or the prince) signifying his legitimate control over the entire world. The adoption of this ritual within the esoteric tradition to signify the transmission of doctrines and practices indicates a constant circulation of religious and imperial imageries in Buddhism. In Japan, a *kanjō* ceremony was

first performed by Saichō (767 [or 766]-822) at Takaosanji in 805; the first complete *kanjō* of the two mandalas was carried out by Kūkai (774-835) at the same temple in 812.

There are several forms of *kanjō*, classified in a number of ways and levels by various texts.²³ The most common typology consists of five categories (*goshu sanmaiya*, “five kinds of *samaya* [symbolic activities leading to salvation]”). The first *samaya* is the worship of and giving offerings to a mandala. This category corresponds to the rituals performed to a mandala (such as the *mandaraku*), and is not, properly speaking, a form of initiation. The second *samaya* is the initiation in which a karmic relationship with an aspect of esoteric Buddhism is established (*kechien kanjō*). In it the initiand, with his/her eyes covered, has access to a mandala, throws a flower on it, and on the basis of the deity on which it lands, the master teaches him/her a mantra and a *mudrā*. The third *samaya* is performed when one becomes a disciple of a master (*jumyō kanjō*, lit. “initiation in which a formula is bestowed [upon the disciple]”); in it, a specific meditation object (mantra, *mudrā*, and visualization), among other things, is taught to the initiand. The second and the third *samaya* are, properly speaking, “initiations”—since they initialize a person’s contact with Buddhism through a specific practice. The fourth *samaya* is the most important one: called *denbō kanjō* (“consecration ritual of the transmission of the Dharma”), it takes place after the disciple has completed a certain curriculum of study and religious practice and thereupon becomes a new master himself. As such, as we have already indicated before, this is not an “initiation,” but a ritual of completion and attainment. A fifth *samaya* exists, a “secret initiation” (*himitsu kanjō*) performed on particular occasions and for special recipients. Since the *denbō kanjō* is the most systematic and complete, let us examine it more in detail.²⁴

The consecration proper is preceded by a phase of purification of body and mind articulated in four kinds of practices (*shido kegyō*, literally “four additional practices”) that can last from one week to a hundred days. These four

²³ For an overview, see *Mikkyō daijiten* pp. 409c-410c.

²⁴ In the description of this ritual, pronouns are usually in the masculine case only; this is because there is no proof that these rituals were ever performed to women in

kinds of activities are the *jūhachidō hō*, the *kongōkai hō*, the *taizōkai hō*, and the *goma hō*. The *jūhachidō hō* consists in the basic practical notions on the performance of esoteric worship (*kuyō*). The *kongōkai hō* and the *taizōkai hō* are the ceremonies based on the two fundamental Shingon mandalas. Finally, the *goma hō* is the esoteric sacrifice ritual. When these four propedeutic practices have been completed, consecration (*denbō kanjō*) is performed.

At the time of consecration, the body is cleansed by bathing in perfumed holy water and by wearing a white robe. The mind is purified by receiving the *samaya* precepts (*sanmai yakai*), by taking refuge in the three jewels, and by pledging allegiance to a number of Buddhist ethical propositions.

The space where the consecration ceremony is to take place is divided into an outer and an inner area (respectively, *gejin* and *naijin*). In the inner area there are two altars on which are placed the Vajra and the Womb mandalas used for the flower-throwing ritual (see below); there is also another altar, called “altar of true awakening” (*shōgakudan*), where the *kanjō* proper is performed. On the eastern and western walls of the inner area are the portraits of the eight Shingon human patriarchs: Nāgārjuna, Nāgabodhi, Vajrabodhi, Amoghavajra (Bukong), Subhakarasiṃha (Shanwuwei), Yixing, Huiguo, and Kūkai. The setting is thus a replica of the entire Shingon tradition; the ritual aims at putting the initiand on the same level as those patriarchs in an operation that denies history and emphasizes instead unchanging continuity.

The initiand enters the inner area with his face covered, reaches one of the altars with the mandala and throws a flower on it to determine the deity to whom he is karmically related. After that, the cloth covering his face is removed, in a gesture representing the final separation from the delusory world of everyday reality and the opening of the eye of wisdom to the absolute realm of mandala. The initiand is then led to the altar of true awakening (*shōgakudan*), where the initiation proper is to take place. He sits on a mat representing an eight-petal flower—Mahāvairocana’s own seat in the mandala, and receives the initiation from the master. The actual content of initiation varies, but in general it consists of very specific and practical instructions on how to perform certain rituals and how to interpret certain texts (what mudras to employ, the

succession of mantric formulae, etc.). The master also gives the disciple a series of sacred objects (a crown, a *vajra* club, a *horagai* shell trumpet, a mirror, etc.) to certify the successful completion of the initiation. These objects symbolize the transformation of the initiand into Mahāvairocana’s adamantine body-mind. The initiated then pays homage to the images of the patriarchs to inform them of his newly attained initiation. Finally, the master hails the former disciple as a newly born master and shades him under his parasol to signify respect and equality. The ritual ends here.

Kanjō rituals were a natural complement to the semiotics of esoteric Buddhism, which configures itself as a form of salvific knowledge extracted directly from the signs. A semiagnosis of consecration is indicated in the *Keiran shūyōshū*, a Tendai encyclopedia composed in the late Kamakura period. As in all semiagnosis exegeses, the meaning of the event or object (in this case, transmission) is envisioned as being inscribed in its name. In this case, the first character, *kan* (“pouring water”) refers to wisdom attained through practice; the second character, *chō* (“top of the head”) refers to the realm of the eternal principle (*ri*) of original enlightenment. In other words, consecration rituals made practice and original enlightenment coincide. Together, these two characters mean that in the initiation ceremony, the wisdom of the past buddhas in the form of water is poured on the head of the new buddha.²⁵

After this description of the general and paradigmatic form of consecration rituals, let us investigate the ritual that sanctions the transmission of *shittan* learning (*shittan kanjō*), and a little known ritual that used to conclude the transmission of *waka* poetic art.

Shittan education and Transmission Rituals

The study of *shittan* consists in mastering the Sanskrit syllabary (*mata taimon*) and the most common ligatures as listed in manuals called *Shittan jūhasshō*. The actual study ends with the transmission of the *Jūhasshō*, however, the acquisition of the status of “master” (*ajari*) of *shittan* is sanctioned by the *shittan*

²⁵ Kōshū, *Keiran shūyōshū*, 609b. See also Lecture 5 on the initiatory symbolism of water in this context.

consecration (*shittan kanjō*) in which the deep meaning of this characters is handed over to the disciple (who thus becomes a new master). It is a specialized ritual for only those interested in *shittan*; it is modeled after the *denbō kanjō* and started in medieval Japan (it does not seem to have existed in India or in China). Today, *shittan kanjō* is based on the procedures of the Kojima-ryū (also known as Tsubosaka-ryū) established by Shingō (934-1004). The ritual consists in a propedeutic stage (*shittan kegyō*) in two main sections and in the consecration proper.²⁶

Propedeutic stage

A. Preliminary section (*shittan zen-gyōhō*):

It consists in making offerings to the main deity (*honzon*), bow twenty-five times, performing mudras and mantras as prescribes in ritual manuals, protection ritual (*goshinbō*, in which the practitioner purifies himself and protects himself with mantras and mudras), mantras to the main deity (five times), chanting the complete list of the fifty-one basic *shittan* syllables from a to kṣa (five times), final bow (five times). All this is performed three times a day for a seven-day period, which ends with issuing a vow (*kechigan*). Then, the ritual to Fudō Myōō (*Fudō-hō*) is performed, again three times a day for seven days. Fudō's protection is invoked upon to secure a smooth performance of the consecration without interference from demonic forces.

B. Preparation for the *shittan* consecration (*shittan kanjō kegyō*):

It consists in memorizing and writing down the entire *Jūhasshō* once a day for seven days. Once the basics of *shittan* are mastered, the consecration takes place. In detail, the ritual consists in: making offerings to the main deity, protection ritual, performing mudras and mantras, chanting the complete list of the fifty-one basic *shittan* syllables from A to kṣa (seven times), mantras to the main deity

²⁶ This section is based on *Mikkyō daijiten*, s.v. "Shittan kwanchō," p. 995b; Kushida Ryōkō, *Zoku Shingon mikkyō seiritsu katei no kenkyū*. Tokyo: Sankibō busshorin, 1979, pp. 544-584; Kodama Giryū, *Bonji de miru mikkyō*. Tokyo: Daihōrinkaku, 2002, pp. 22-23, 91, 104-108.

(three times), chanting the *Heart Sutra* (seven times). Also in this case, all this is performed three times a day for a seven-day period.

Consecration

The consecration hall is adorned with peculiar versions of the two Shingon fundamental mandalas represented by *shittan* seeds (*shuji*), hanging scrolls with the names of the Shingon patriarchs written in *shittan* characters, and the mantras of deities such as Kannon to the west and Mañjuśrī to the east. The presence of these two deities is not by chance. Kannon is associated with the syllable *si-* (also associated with compassion, principle, nirvana, and the Womb mandala), while Monju is associated with the syllable *-ddham* (also associated with wisdom, enlightenment, and the Vajra mandala).²⁷ Thus, the term *siddham* is envisioned in the context of consecration ritual as a representation of the twofold mandala, enlightenment and the principal virtues of Buddhism, iconographically embodied by the couple Kannon and Manjusri.

The Vajra realm is synthesized by a version of the Jōjinne section, with the *shittan* seeds of the five buddhas at the center surrounded by those of the four *pāramitā* bodhisattvas and the sixteen great bodhisattvas—all envisioned inside a lunar disk (*gachirin*). This hanging scroll is placed on the west. The Womb mandala contains the vowels (*mata*) on the upper part and the consonants (*taimon*) on the lower part. The five *mata* are structured according to a square with A at the center, whereas the *taimon* are structured based on Dainichi's eight-petal lotus with the syllable MA at the center. This hanging scroll is placed on the east.

The master transmits orally all these *shittan* seeds to the disciple during the ritual. At this point, the disciple performs a meditation called *fujikan* ("spreading the syllables"). The disciple visualizes *shittan* over his body and meditates on their esoteric meanings, as a way to embody the deities through their seeds. For example, in the *fujikan* based on Fudō Myōō the practitioner, in order to identify himself with the deity, visualizes nineteen *shittan* seeds on various parts of his body from the top of the head all the way down to his feet.

In this meditation, the *shittan* characters clearly function as symbolic shifters operating the transformation of the disciple into the deity.²⁸

At this point the consecration proper takes place. The master imparts the disciple certain instructions, in the form of *injin* (transmission documents), collected in a document in twelve parts entitled *Shittan jūnitsū kirigami daiji*. Instructions concern issues such as the pronunciation of *shittan*, ligatures, variant writing styles, portions of their esoteric meaning, and the origin of these graphs.²⁹ Importantly, the master also gives the disciple a lineage chart describing the transmission of *shittan* from Dainichi Nyorai to the disciple being consecrated.

The *Shittan jūnitsū kirigami daiji* contains a section entitled “Shittan jū fuka no koto” (“ten prohibitions”) indicating the basic attitude of *shittan* students and masters. Here is a translation:³⁰

1. Do not burn Sanskrit letters. This action results in the destruction of one’s Buddha seeds.
2. Do not write (*shittan* characters) on impure wood, stone, paper or other material.
3. As is also the case for Chinese characters, do not write over other characters, do not erase nor omit characters.
4. Do not write Sanskrit characters in non-Buddhist texts.
5. Do not copy or explain *shittan* letters if you do not know how to write them. They will not be effective.

²⁷ See Jōgon, *Siddham sanmitsu shō*, in T 84 nr. 2710 p. 722a.

²⁸ The *fujikan* meditation, with its emphasis on the body, is a ritual proper to the Womb system; its correlative in the Vajra system consists in visualizing *shittan* characters on the moon disk (*gachirin*) representing the enlightened mind. There are several set of characters to be used in *fujikan*, one of which is composed of nineteen characters (as the one dedicated to Fudō Myōō in our example). The scriptural grounds for meditation are in the *Dainichikyō* (fasc. 5) and *Dainichikyōsho* (fasc. 14, 27); the *fujikan* in nineteen syllables is described in the *Kongōshu kōmyō kanjō kyō saishō ryū in shō Mudōson daiinuō nenju gikihō hon* (T 21; also known as *Fudō ryūin ki*, the basic text for the *Fudō-hō*). See also *Mikkyō daijiten*, s.v. “Fujikwan,” pp. 1921c-1922a.

²⁹ For details, see Kushida Ryōkō, *Zoku Shingon mikkyō seiritsu katei no kenkyū*. Tokyo: Sankibō busshorin, 1979, pp. 565-579.

³⁰ Based on the text in Kushida Ryōkō, *Zoku Shingon mikkyō seiritsu katei no kenkyū*. Tokyo: Sankibō busshorin, 1979, p. 578; see also Kodama Giryū, *Bonji de miru mikkyō*. Tokyo: Daihōrinkaku, 2002, pp. 21-22.

6. Do not copy or chant *shittan* characters if you do not wear a clerical robe (*kesa*).
7. Do not explain the wondrous meanings of Sanskrit characters to people who will not believe them.
8. Do not begrudge teaching *shittan* to the ones who are worthy of it.
9. Do not turn you back on your master. Do not raise doubts on writing methods, pronunciation, and the ligatures (as taught by your master).
10. Do not create your own personal interpretation against what written in the texts by past authorities and in the teachings of the masters.

In other words, this document defines, literally, a *discipline* of *shittan*. It defines them as sacred entities of a specifically Buddhist nature with particular ritual (6) and soteriological power (1). Thus, they should be treated with respect (1, 2), they should not be mixed up with non-Buddhist writings (4), and in general they should not be fuddled with (5). The document also attempts to enforce a strict control of *shittan* learning (7) also in order to prevent the development of new interpretations and of different ways to write and use these characters (9, 10). Finally, it stresses the fundamental moral attitude toward *shittan*, one of caution (7) and generosity (8) at the same time, and of respect toward the discipline (especially 3).

Waka kanjō

There is another consecration ritual that dovetails with the previous two. It is called “*waka* consecration” (*waka kanjō*) and was used to teach *waka* poems used in kami-related rituals together with their esoteric meanings. In it, *waka* poems are systematically grounded on the philosophical attitude toward *shittan* graphs that characterizes esoteric Buddhism in Japan. *Waka* consecration is a little studied subject, since the few authors who have ventured in this territory have focused primarily on the doctrinal aspects of the identification of *waka* with mantric expressions,³¹ rather than on the actual disciplinary practices that were

³¹ See Herbert Plutschow, “Is Poetry a Sin? Honjisuijaku and Buddhism versus Poetry,” *Oriens Extremus*, 25, 1978, pp. 206-218; Id., *Chaos and Cosmos: Ritual in Early and*

involved in the production and the transmission of such doctrines. This section is a preliminary investigation on these obscure issues.

Waka kanjō was, like the other consecration rituals we have discussed, a “graduation exam together with a graduation ceremony” for those who had received the transmission of the esoteric principles underlying *waka* poetic compositions.³² At the basis of *waka kanjō* is the idea that *waka* poems are the language of Japanese local deities; thus, they are not pieces of “literature,” as we think of them today, but segments of a ritual language that enables human beings to communicate with the gods. As such, *waka* are essentially the same as the Chinese *shi* and the Indian mantras and *dhāraṇī*. As we have seen in a previous chapter, Dainichi speaks absolute and true words—mantras. These words gradually degenerate into human languages. Japanese language, and in particular its *yamato kotoba*, the ancient language primarily used to compose *waka*, is no else than a local manifestation of Dainichi’s mantras—in the same way as Japanese deities are local manifestations of Buddhist entities. In other words, *waka* consecration is the result of the application of the *honji suijaku* model to literary texts. There are very few materials on *waka* consecration, and it is not yet clear when this practice began, but it can be traced back to at least the Kamakura period. Kushida Ryōkō reproduces a consecration certificate from the Hōbodaiin at Tōji dated 1384 (Shitoku 1), signed by a Jōken, in which the two fundamental mantras of Tenshō Daijin are associated with two *waka* poems:

a	sono kami no	vam	motoyori mo
ā	ukarin koto mo	hūm	hikari ni sakeru
aṃ	wasurarete	traḥ	hachisuha wa
aḥ	ana uren sa zo	hrīḥ	kono mi yori koso
āṃḥ	mi ni amaritaru	aḥ	mi ni hanarikere

Medieval Japanese Literature. Leiden and New York: Brill, 1990; Susan Blakeley Klein, “Allegories of Desire: Poetry and Eroticism in *Ise monogatari zuinō*,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 52/4, Winter 1997, pp. 441-465; I., “Wild Words and Syncretic Deities: *Kyōgen kigo* and *honji suijaku* in Medieval Literary Allegoresis,” in Mark Teeuwen and Fabio Rambelli, eds., *Buddhas and Kami in Japan*. London and New York: Routledge/Curzon, 2003, pp. 177-203.

³² Katagiri Yōichi, *Chūsei Kokinshū chūshakusho kaidai* vol. 5, p. 187. Kyoto: Akao Shōbundō, 1986.

This is presented by the document as the content of a revelation to Kōbō Daishi by the Ise goddess. It also mentions the fact that the Japanese *waka* correspond to the Chinese shi and the Indian *shittan* and *dhāraṇī*.

Another document by Jōken dated 1386 states that *waka* should be read (*ei*) while chanting *shittan* characters and composing mudras. The same document was transmitted to a Yūen in 1436. Kushida also mentions another text from the Hōbodaiin, dating perhaps toward the end of the Muromachi period, entitled *Waka gyokuden hishō*. The text applies the correlative cosmology typical of esoteric Buddhism to define the ontological status of *waka*. It says that *waka* are the response body (*ōjin*) of the heavenly deities and the sublime substance (*myōtai*) of all beings (*manpō*). The two stanzas composing a *waka* correspond to heaven and earth, yin and yang, and the Womb and the Vajra realms. Its five verses correspond to a number of five-element series of the esoteric cosmos, such as the elements, the buddhas, the supreme wisdoms, the seasons, the directions, and the phases of the enlightenment process. In each of the thirty-one syllables of a *waka* resides a deity, so that when one chants a *waka* he or she is protected every day and every season. This text is attributed to the god Sumiyoshi; in 857 it was transmitted to Ariwara no Narihira, who in turn offered it to Ise Shrine. Ise sent it to Emperor Daigo. The text also contains a lineage chart that appears to be the mythological genealogy of the Hōribe family. The content of *waka* consecration deals with several theoretical aspects underlying *waka* literary practice—the status of poetry and the meaning of poetic activity from the perspective of a general economy of salvation.

Like other forms of esoteric consecration, *waka kanjō* also produced the identification of the initiand with past masters and protecting deities of poetry, as is clear from the fact that these rituals took place in front of painted images of Sumiyoshi and Kakinomoto no Hitomaro, among others.

A document from the late Muromachi period entitled *Kokin sōden kanjō shidai* (this is in fact a portion of a larger text describing a Kokinshū consecration) enables us to get an idea of what *waka kanjō* probably looked like. It took place in a sanctified hall (*dōjō*) in which the images of two gods, Sumiyoshi Daimyōjin and Tenshō Taijin (Amaterasu) and of the famed

poet Kakinomoto no Hitomaro, functioned as objects of cult (*honzon*). Offerings to the deities include fruits, coins, stack of paper, silk, clothes, swords, fans; to the master performing the ceremony should be given five coins, clothes, silk, a horse, two swords, stacks of paper, five *to* (more than a hundred kilos) of white rice. The text specifies that the consecration should be performed only to the worthy ones. The initiand should sign a pledge document (*kishōmon*) in which he swears not to violate the initiatory secret. The violators shall be punished by Amaterasu, Sumiyoshi, and Hitomaro in the present life, and shall be hurled to the bottom of the Uninterrupted Hell in the next life.³³ This document is particularly significant because it shows us the economic importance of consecration rituals. As we can see, such ceremonies probably constituted an important source of income for the masters. Since the cost of the ritual for the initiand was far from insignificant, receiving a consecration was definitely a source of symbolic and cultural capital and, perhaps, also the starting point of a career as a teacher. The economic aspects of consecration rituals is an important subject that requires further investigation.

Waka kanjō in its entirety included discussions on the identity of *waka* poetry with mantras, discourses on various Shintō deities (such as Kunitokotachi), ideas on the sacredness of Japan, esoteric descriptions of Kakinomoto no Hitomaro and Ariwara no Narihira, and commentaries on poems.³⁴

Kushida emphasizes that such *waka* consecration was part of *jingi* consecration, but this is not certain.³⁵ Rather, it was part of a more general discourse aimed at the legitimation of literary arts and then pursuit of entertainment activities in general, by the clergy and the laity alike. The reference to Ariwara Narihira in *waka* consecration documents should perhaps be read in this way, as related to the esoteric interpretations of *Ise monogatari* that flourished in medieval Japan.³⁶ It is possible to see some similarities also

³³ Katagiri Yōichi, *Chūsei Kokinshū chūshakusho kaidai* vol. 5, pp. 186-187. Kyoto: Akao Shōbundō, 1986. The entire text is on pp. 485-519.

³⁴ See *Kokin wakashū kanjō kuden*, in Katagiri Yōichi, vol. 5, pp. 485-519; *Gyokuden jinpi no maki*, in *Ibid.*, pp. 521-587.

³⁵ Kushida 1979 p. 526-527.

³⁶ See Susan Klein, 2003; Richard Bowring, "The *Ise monogatari*: A Short Cultural History," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 52/2, December 1992, pp. 401-480.

with another medieval text, the *Kokinshū kanjō*, which develops in a fragmentary but wide-ranging way many of the themes we have discussed so far, namely, the relationship between particular linguistic forms such as mantra, *shittan*, and *waka*, and the nature of reality, the status of the Buddha's bodies, and the esoteric Buddhist soteriological process.³⁷ By treating literary arts in particular as sacred endeavors and ritualized activities related to the general soteriological project of esoteric Buddhism—or, in other words, by providing a semiagnosis reading of these texts—it was possible to transform secular literary texts into messages from the deities first and, ultimately, from Dainichi himself. This was perhaps the ultimate significance of Shingon semiagnosis: a systematic and generalized sacralization of the profane that was a direct consequence of pansemiotic assumptions underlying the esoteric cosmos. It should be noted that such sacralization of the profane was not limited to the literary arts, as the usual understanding today goes. Other forms of art and spectacles were also subjected to this kind of semiognosic treatment. For example, even classical Japanese football (*kemari*) was presented in initiatory documents as a form of asceticism, in which the mind controls the body in a framework in which profane passions are in fact forms of sacred attainment.³⁸

Conclusion

So far, we have seen the structure of some of the most representative consecration rituals in medieval and pre-modern Japanese esoteric Buddhism. Based on the ritual that sanctions the ultimate transmission of the esoteric teachings, the *denbō kanjō*, they presuppose a period of training (both physical and mental) and open the way to a future as a master in their specific fields. It is interesting to note the absence of ordeal elements—tests of endurance, physical resistance, and so forth, which on the other hand characterize some Shugendō rituals. Some features that might remind one of ordeal-like experience can perhaps be found in the preliminary exercises—several weeks of intense ritual,

³⁷ *Kokinshū kanjō* in Kondō Yoshihiro, ed., *Chūsei shinbutsu setsuwa* vol. 2 (Koten bunko vol. 99). Tokyo: Koten bunko, 1955, pp. 159-214.

³⁸ See for example Murato Yayoi, *Yūgi kara geinō e: Nihon chūsei ni okeru geinō no*

devotional, and study activity that produces a high emotional pressure and precedes consecration proper. This fact can be explained by the essentially cognitive nature of esoteric consecration rituals; what matters here is not physical endurance (which is in contrast very important to Shugendō ascetics), but the capacity to master and absorb the esoteric world view.³⁹

The Meaning of the Esoteric Secret

As we have often mentioned so far, consecration rituals and, more in general, the education process of esoteric Buddhism were in fact carried out in a regime of secrecy—as the term “esoteric” itself implies. However, what does “secret” mean in this context? What does it refer to?

As we know, esoteric Buddhism claims to teach the content of Buddha’s enlightenment; in this respect, it is very different from other forms of Buddhism for which the content of Buddha’s enlightenment is beyond representation and understanding. Thus, esoteric Buddhism would seem to reveal things that are secret (enlightenment), not to hide them. This is the first, and most obvious problem we face when we translate the Sino-Japanese term *himitsu* (“secret”). Here we can find a clue to address the issue. In the Buddhist tradition, secret is essentially contextual: it refers to something that is unknown to someone but known to someone else. From the perspective of a self-defined “profound” doctrine, its content is “secret” (e.g., unknown) for a more superficial doctrine. Thus, the Buddhist precepts are “secret” for the non-Buddhists, in the same way as the *Lotus Sutra* is “secret” for the members of the Lesser Vehicle. What is “secret” (unknown) to one tradition is the actual content of the teachings of another tradition. It is the duty of the depositaries of this “secret” knowledge to reveal it to what they consider as the right (worthy) people. In this way, we have two different regimes of secrecy: one that defines Shingon vis a vis the outside (what it knows in relation to whom) and one that organizes internal levels of instruction and attainment.

hen'yō. Tamachi (Tokyo): Tamagawa Daigaku shuppanbu, 2002.

³⁹ I am grateful to Massimo Lorigi for directing my attention to the role of ordeal in initiation and consecration rituals.

Kūkai in the *Ben kenmitsu nikyō ron* defined two fundamental forms of secrecy: the “secret of sentient beings” (*shujō himitsu*) and the “secret of the Tathāgata” (*nyorai himitsu*). Sentient beings are part of the twofold mandala and are innately endowed with its principle and with the wisdom to realize it; however, being hindered by ignorance, they do not know it. This is the “secret of the sentient beings”—or, more accurately, what is “secret to sentient beings.” In contrast, Mahāvairocana preaches the superficial teachings as skillful means according to the capacities and the situation of the audience, therefore he does not reveal the most profound doctrines concerning his enlightenment: this is the “secret of the Tathāgata.” However, Mahāvairocana does transmit the profound teachings to people with the right capacities—to whom the “secret buddha” (*mitsubutsu*) is thus revealed and therefore is no longer “secret.”⁴⁰ In Kūkai’s treatment, “secret” is the unknown, the unthought of, what is ignored—the outside of a system. The opposite of “secret” is “evident” or more precisely, “revealed,” “made-known.” Secrecy is organized along a downward vertical axis—or, more exactly, a reversed pyramid. On the surface are the evident truths, the exoteric teachings; secret teachings are situated deeper and deeper, and access to them is more and more limited. Thus, the secret of the Tathāgata is revealed to some but kept secret to others; the secret of (to) sentient beings is revealed to all but unknown to most.

The Tendai monk Annen two more detailed typologies of secrecy, respectively in four and six forms. The *Shingonshū kyōji gi* describes four kinds of secrets:⁴¹

1. things kept hidden by the buddhas: buddhas preach only doctrines that can be understood by their audience as a strategy to spread Buddhism; it corresponds to Kūkai’s secret of the Tathāgata;
2. things secret to sentient beings: for example, ordinary people do not know that all sounds are mantras, but their ignorance is not due to the fact that the buddha hides this truth to them: their limited capacities prevent them to

⁴⁰ Kūkai, *Ben kenmitsu nikyō ron*, T 77 n. 2427 p. 381c; English transl. in Yohito Hakeda 1972, pp. 156-157.

⁴¹ Annen, *Shingonshū kyōji gi* (fasc. 4): T 75 n. 2396, p. 449b.

knowing what is in this case self-evident; this secret corresponds to Kūkai’s “secret of sentient beings”;

3. linguistic secret: words spoken by the buddhas have a meaning that is deeper than it appears; “if one interprets them according to their written expression (*mon*), the intention of the Buddha (*butsui*) is lost.” This is a reference to linguistic intension, in particular to the connotative aspects of signs, and to the existing of levels of meaning (isotopies).
4. the secret of the Dharma-substance (*hottai*): the enlightenment of the buddhas transcends the capacities of people only exposed to exoteric teachings—even bodhisattvas can only experience it not directly but through empowerment (*kaji*). This is a sort of ontological dimension of secrecy: only those who have undergone a certain training and have achieved the consequent bodily and cognitive transformations, can understand this secret.

This is a development of Kūkai’s ideas on the subject. Particularly relevant here are the recognition of the existence of semantic isotopies in language, so that each expression has several meanings that are usually unknown, thus “secret”; and the positing of a fundamental “secret” related to the ontological nature of the Dharma itself and which can be known only to those who have attained enlightenment.

In the *Bodaishingi*, Annen posits a different typology consisting of six kinds of secrets.⁴²

1. the subtle secret of the Dharma-substance (*hottai*): the fact that the three secrets of the Tathāgata and those of sentient beings are originally one and the same. This is the basis of the doctrines of original enlightenment (*hongaku shisō*); of course, ordinary people are not aware of their innately enlightened nature and therefore do not know this secret.
2. the content of the enlightenment of the buddhas: this is at the basis of the distinction between exoteric and esoteric teachings. As we have seen before, while the exoteric Buddha does not explain the content of his enlightenment, which thus remains a secret for his followers, Dainichi teaches (only to

- some) his enlightenment;
3. things that cannot be taught to lowly, unworthy people: this kind of secret presupposes a sociology of esoteric transmission: underclasses (*hisen no hito*) cannot have access to it;
 4. things that ordinary people cannot comprehend because their lack of enlightenment (or awareness): this level posits the existence of epistemological limits; even if thought, they would not understand. This corresponds to Kūkai’s secret of sentient beings;
 5. things that cannot be transmitted to those who have not yet practiced meditation (*samādhi*); this category presupposes steps in the education process; at each stage, the next stages are unknown, thus “secret”;
 6. things that the practitioners keep secret (violations are a very serious sin): rules related to the management of initiatory.

In this typology, Annen emphasizes the rules and presuppositions of initiatory lineages—issues related to the social control of meaning. Thus, there are things that cannot be revealed openly not just because they would not be understood, but because the social status or the level of the curriculum of some among the possible recipients; thus, the initiated should internalize this policing attitude toward “secret” meanings.

Transmission Lineages of the Esoteric Episteme

Section 10 of the *Shittan jūnitsū kirigami daiji* contains four explications about the origin of the *shittan*. The first says that in the initial *kalpa* (*jōkō*) after the creation of this universe the deities of the Light-Sound Heaven (Sk. *Ābhāsvara*, Jp. Kōonten: the highest heaven of *dhyāna* in the Realm of Forms) descended on earth and took the names of Brāhma, Shōkara and Makeishura and taught forty-seven Sanskrit syllables.⁴³ The reference to *Ābhasvara* Heaven is interesting, since the language (Sk. *svara*) of the deities residing there was believed to

⁴² Annen, *Taizō kongō Bodaishingi ryaku mondō shō*, fasc. 2, T 75 n. 2397 p. 492b.

⁴³ The original texts contains references to the *Abhidharmakośa* (*Kusharon*, in T 29 n. 1558) and the *Kanbutsu sanmaikai kyō* (in T 15 n. 643).

consist in modulations of light (Sk. *ābhā*) they put forth by their mouths. The second explanation says that twelve centuries after the extinction of Sākyamuni, Nāgārjuna entered the Dragon Palace (*ryūgū*) on the bottom of the ocean and had access to many Mahāyāna scriptures. Among the various subjects he taught in Central India afterwards there were also the *shittan*, called the “writing of the Dragon Palace.” The third explanation says that Sākyamuni himself taught the *shittan* toward the end of his life: first, he taught the fifty syllables in the *Monju mongyō*, then the forty-two syllables in the *Kegonkyō*, and finally the forty-six syllables in the *Hōkō daishōgon kyō*. The fourth and last explanation says that Dainichi Nyorai in person, after attaining enlightenment in Akanistha Heaven, taught the *Kongōchōgyō*, one of its chapters, the “Shaku jimo bon,” lists fifty syllables that were transmitted to Kongōshu from which originated the esoteric scriptures and the mantric seeds known in our world.

The latter lineage seems to have been the most influential, since it was the basis of lineage charts given to the disciples at the performance of the *shittan* consecration. By the Muromachi period there seem to have been two different such lineage charts. One has:

Danichi Nyorai ⇒ Kongōsatta ⇒ Nāgārjuna ⇒ Nāgabodhi ⇒
 Subhakarasiṃha ⇒ Yuanchao ⇒ Huiguo ⇒ Kūkai ⇒ Shinga ⇒ Gennin
 ⇒ Shōbō and further to Eison and Raiken.

A different chart dated 1503 (Bunki 3) has the following series:

Danichi Nyorai ⇒ Kongōsatta ⇒ Nāgārjuna ⇒ Nāgabodhi ⇒
 Amoghavajra ⇒ Huiguo ⇒ Kūkai ⇒ Shinga ⇒ Gennin ⇒ Yakushin and
 further to Saisen, Jōson all the way to Seison.

Like all lineage charts of this kind, the two examples above produce several sense effects. For example, they connect the transcendent and the immanent, the original moment out of ordinary space-time in which Dainichi transmitted his enlightenment to Kongōsatta with the determined historical

spatio-temporal situation in which transmission occurs in the present. They reproduce and reenact historical narratives of the propagation of Buddhism through the Three Countries (India, China, and Japan). They create a communion between venerated patriarchs of the past and contemporary monks. They also point to the existence of a continuous and unbroken chain of signification, in which signifiers, signifieds, and pragmatic instructions for their interpretation and use are transmitted from one generation to another, from one country to another, from one ontological dimension to another.

The continuity and unbroken nature of the transmission line connecting masters to disciples is also underscored by the root metaphor for esoteric transmission rituals, namely, decanting (Jp. *shabyō*, lit. “decanting a bottle”), that is, the act of pouring the content of one bottle into a different one. Its scriptural source is a passage from the *Nirvana Sutra*: “Ānanda has been with me for more than twenty years. [...] Since he joined me, he has memorized the twelve-division teachings I have taught; once a teaching entered his ear, he did not ask [to be reminded about it] any more. It has been like pouring the content of one bottle into another.”⁴⁴ Kūkai also used this metaphor in his *Fuhōden*, a work on the Shingon lineage: “receiving the transmission is not different from decanting a bottle.”⁴⁵ This metaphor serves to emphasize continuity going all the way back to the original transmission by the Buddha. In this sense, transmission rituals do more than transmit teachings: they sanction that transmission is complete and unaltered (unadulterated). However, we should note an important difference separating the transmission inside the Iron stupa and Japanese practices. According to the legend, in the Iron stupa the esoteric episteme was transmitted entirely, whereas in Japan esoteric knowledge is transmitted little by little, in a fragmented way.

This kind of transmission is obviously related to the nature of the esoteric Buddhist episteme. As we have seen throughout these lectures, from an *internal* point of view (that is, from the perspective of the exegetes developing the semiotic field of esoteric Buddhism), esoteric signs are not arbitrary but microcosms, unconditioned condensations of the universe and the soteriological

⁴⁴ *Daihatsu Nehangyō* (transl. Donmuseu) fasc. 40, in T 12 n. 374, p. 601b-c.

⁴⁵ Kūkai, *Himitsu mandara fuhōden*, p. 112.

processes taking place within it; as such, no arbitrary act of interpretation changes their innate and absolute signification. Their transmission from master to disciple avoids conventions stipulated for ordinary semiotic acts and is secret and initiatory. The first ring of this initiatory chain is Dainichi Nyorai: signs and practices related to his teachings are born in the self-presence of the Unconditioned.⁴⁶ The myth of the appearance in the sky of *shittan* texts and mandalas to Nāgārjuna and Subhakarasiṃha, and the unconditioned transmission in the Iron stupa are part of this general framework.⁴⁷ It is not by chance that esoteric expressions were copied by these two patriarchs: Nāgārjuna operates a junction between the transcendent and the immanent, mythical and historical chronotopes, while Subhakarasiṃha, the one who brought the esoteric teachings to China, connects the Indian mythological past with the East Asian historical present. The expressions they faithfully transcribed and transmitted to their disciples were subsequently brought to Japan and constituted the bases for the Shingon and esoteric Tendai traditions. The *shittan* characters play an important role in this image of transmission, similar to that of the “original” mandalas known as *genzu*. Even today, *genzu* mandalas are considered to be perfect copies of the original and unconditioned mandala, whose images and whose meaning are strictly transmitted by means of a causal chain.⁴⁸ Furthermore, the connection between the mythical and historical dimensions of the transmission makes possible a claim such as that by Kūkai, according to which Dainichi keeps preaching his doctrines (*hosshin seppō*) with true words (*shinjitsugo, nyogigo*), whereas the lineage of Sākyamuni is de facto extinct with

⁴⁶ See the sections on *hosshin seppō* and the author of the esoteric teachings (*hanjishin* vs *kajishin*).

⁴⁷ The legend of the appearance in the sky of the original *mandala* to Shanwuwei is reported for the first time between the end of the Tenth and the beginning of the Eleventh century. According to another tradition, the original *mandala* appeared in the sky when *bodhisattva* Nagarjuna opened the Iron tower where he was to be initiated into esoteric mysteries. On the origin of this legend and on the meaning of the term *genzu*, see Toganoo Shōun, *Mandara no kenkyū*, pp. 99-104.

⁴⁸ The term *genzu mandara* refers only to the Tōji's *ryōgai mandara* (twofold mandala) and its copies. According to the tradition, the original set of *ryōgai mandara* was brought to Japan by Kūkai. In this case, the idea of the perfect reproduction of the Original *Mandala* overlaps with the idea of the direct, unaltered transmission of Chinese esoteric tradition to Kūkai.

the Buddha's entrance into nirvana.⁴⁹ Thus, esoteric consecration rituals reenact in our historical time-space the original and eternal utterance of Dainichi. These traditions and legends further reinforce the idea that esoteric expressions are unconditioned entities transcending the arbitrariness of signs, cultural codes, and everyday semiotic strategies.

An important element in this characterization of esoteric expressions is the stress on the fidelity and accuracy of initiatory knowledge—thus, on the fidelity and accuracy of everything concerning signs. According to the esoteric episteme, its initiatory signs cannot lie and cannot be used to lie. We find here the paradoxical idea of an absolute sign, directly and ontologically connected to the object or the event for which it should stand. The problematic of the absolute sign is developed on three different levels: the internal structure, as motivated and analogic; the power of which these signs are endowed; their transmission by way of a rigid causal chain. As we have seen, esoteric signs are semiotic modalities of the Dharma realm's being, and their direct tie with reality is envisioned an analytic property. The active power on reality of which the esoteric signs are endowed derives from this direct connection with the Unconditioned. The non-initiated, uninformed use of esoteric signs as amulets or talismans, use that leaves meaning out of consideration, is grounded on their secret nature of these signs, on the weight of tradition, and on an unchanging transmission.

To summarize we could say that, in general terms, the transmission of esoteric knowledge is articulated in three steps.

1. At first, there is the occurrence of a primary "speech" act (actually, as a polymateric performance, it cannot be reduced to mere speech), in which Dainichi Nyorai, in his original modality of existence and immersed in the supreme *samadhi*, expounds the Dharma (including teachings about semiotic entities); this "speech" act is reinforced by the appearance in the sky (pure *topos* by excellence) of important expressions and texts. Subsequent

⁴⁹ Kūkai, *Himitsu mandarakyō fuhōden*, pp. 66-67. On the transmission of Shingon Buddhism, see Matsunaga Yūkei, *Mikkyō no sējōsha: Sono kōdō to shisō* (Tōyōjin no kōdō to shisō 3). Tokyo: Hyōronsha, 1973.

reproductions of these expressions are thus based on a primary, unconditioned display.

2. Then, sacred words and signs, with their meanings and their uses, are preserved in a corpus of revealed texts and their commentaries, which are the results of a secret knowledge going back directly and without changes to Dainichi Nyorai himself.
3. Finally, there is a group of men and women who put these teachings into practice and transmit them; these are the people who have been initiated to the secret teachings of esoteric Buddhism.

It is interesting to note that the three steps above correspond to the Three Jewels, the core of Buddhism and the foundation of the supernatural power of its practices and its signs.⁵⁰

The expressive forms of esoteric Buddhism are not just instruments for the interpretation of reality, vehicles of a lofty and sublime communication. Esoteric signs are unconditioned and absolute: this paradox is at the core of the Shingon nondualistic system. Thus, properly speaking, esoteric expressions lose their status as signs, since they do no longer “stand for something else under some respect or capacity,” according to the well-known definition by Charles S. Peirce. Shingon esoteric episteme, in which signs are microcosms, holographs of the Dharma realm, is a complex semiotic system organized in order to abolish itself and dissolve into the Absolute reality.

⁵⁰ See Stanley Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand*, cit. (in particular, 197-198); Id., , now reprinted in Id., *Culture, Thought, and Social Action: An Anthropological Perspective*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press: 22-28.