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Introduction to Buddhist Semiotics

Course Description

As is well known, at the core of Buddhism are the notions that life is suffering, and that suffering is the product of ignorance. Buddhist philosophers and theologians discussed several ways to defeat ignorance and acquire knowledge—what they called “awakening” or “enlightenment”—as a necessary step for the elimination of suffering. It is not surprising then that a number of central themes in Buddhist thought have semiotic relevance. What is the status of the form of fallacious knowledge called “ignorance”? What is the status of the liberating knowledge of awakening? What is the role of language and signs? Can they be used in order to attain enlightenment? If so, how? And in what does enlightenment consist? How is it possible to tell an enlightened person from one who is still lost in ignorance? In other words, what are the signs of awakening? These are only some of the main questions that Buddhist texts address. It is important to realize that large part of Buddhist intellectual speculation about enlightenment is not a form of irrational mysticism, but is carried out in often explicitly semiotic terms. Furthermore, ritual techniques such as meditation are often directly connected to semiotic doctrines: meditation is a sort of applied semiotics aimed at the production of an alternative practice of signs. In fact, Buddhism is not just a form of philosophical investigation: Buddhist semiotic doctrines have performative effects aimed at the transformation of individual consciousness and reality. Also, Buddhist philosophy is not a sort of Oriental positivism in quest for the absolute truth. Buddhist traditions were very aware of the limits of their own philosophical endeavors and developed forms of deconstruction aimed at received notions of truth and philosophical argumentation. In this course, we will explore these issues and their most relevant ramifications.

There are several forms of Buddhism, with different semiotic paradigms. This course will focus in particular with the semiotic doctrines and practices developed in Japan within what is known as “esoteric Buddhism” (*mikkyō*, lit.

“secret teachings” of the Buddha). As the East Asian form of Tantric Buddhism, Mikkyō was established at the beginning of the ninth century and became the dominant intellectual and ritual discourse of pre-modern Japan. It produced a sophisticated and highly systematic semiotic field that includes also other forms of Buddhist semiotics. This course is based on an investigation of primary materials composed in Japan between the ninth and the seventeenth centuries, and on Indian and Chinese sources.

The course in general presupposes a basic understanding of the most important Buddhist notions and of Japanese history.

Course Outline

Lecture 1. Introduction: Buddhist Ideas on Language and Signs

This is a sort of conceptual map of Buddhist semiotics: the most influential theories of language, and the role of signs in Buddhist philosophy and religious practice. I will also introduce the main tenets of esoteric Buddhist semiotics.

Lecture 2. The Ontology of Language and Signs

An analysis of theories on the origin of language is helpful to better understand the particular status of language in Buddhist thought and practice. Authors debated whether language was produced by some supernatural entity (a god, or the cosmic Buddha), and if so, with what purposes, or whether it was instead a natural, spontaneous entity in the universe.

Lecture 3. *Gomitsu* and the Structure of Esoteric Signs: Mantric Linguistics and Shittan Grammatology

Japanese Buddhist authors agree that linguistic signs have three components: sounds, writing, and meaning. In addition, linguistic signs are connected in various ways to their referents. This lecture explores these issues through an analysis of influential texts.

Lecture 4. Semantic Structure of the Esoteric Signs

This lecture explores the structure of the semantic space as it is conceived in esoteric Buddhism.

Lecture 5. Semiotic Soteriology

This lecture addresses the role of semiotic ideas in Buddhist ritual and meditative practices aimed at the attainment of awakening and liberation.

Lecture 6. Signs and Body-Mind Transformations: The Esoteric Epistemology

This lecture outlines the most influential epistemology in Japanese Buddhism, based on the Indian school known as *yogācāra* or “Mind-Only”. We will see how Japanese Buddhist exegetes were able to connect epistemology to cosmology (the mind as the essence of reality) and soteriology (salvation as the transformation of one’s mind)

Lecture 7. Masters of Signs: For a Socio-Semiotics of Esoteric Buddhism

Who were the masters of esoteric semiotics? How did they produced their texts? How did their notions circulate? This lecture addresses the boundaries of the field of esoteric Buddhism: the notion of esotericism, the rites of initiation, the social status of the initiates, and the translation of secret, initiatory notions in more popular, widely circulating texts (poetry, drama, literature).

Lecture 8. Religion, Semiotics, and Cultural Identity in Japanese History

After our historical excursus, this final lecture addresses what is left today of traditional Buddhist semiotics. We will see the effects of modernization and the diffusion of Western religious and philosophical ideas as new paradigms for intellectual (and specifically semiotic) discourses in Japan. Essentially, the semiotics of esoteric Buddhism today is articulated in two different ways: (i) through the language analogous to that of “pop” Zen enlightenment as developed by D.T. Suzuki et al. (ineffability, mystical experience, etc.); or (ii) through the language of occultism (magic, ritual, secret, etc.). We will explore the implications of these two different discourses.

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Biographical Note

Fabio Rambelli was born in Ravenna, Italy. He received his BA in Japanese Studies from the University of Venice, and his doctorate in East Asian Studies from the Italian Ministry of Scientific Research in 1992 after carrying out research at the University of Venice, the Oriental Institute in Naples, and Tokyo

University of Foreign Studies. He is currently professor of semiotics of culture and Japanese religions at Sapporo University, Japan.