

**A SINGLE GLANCE: THE MANDALA OF THE TWO REALMS AND  
THE *UPĀYA* OF AWAKENING**

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A Thesis  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
San Diego State University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
in  
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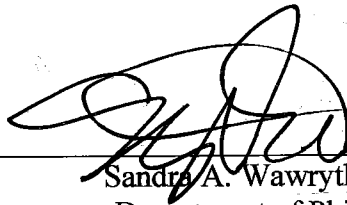
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Michael J. Tetreault  
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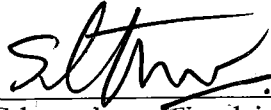
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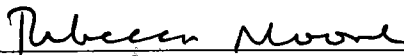
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## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

A Single Glance: The Mandala of the Two Realms and the *Upāya*  
of Awakening

by

Michael J. Tetreault

Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies  
San Diego State University, 2011

In Buddhism *upāya* is a skillful means or method adopted in order to end suffering and lead others towards enlightenment. The manifestation of *upāya* can vary among the various schools of Buddhism, however. This thesis explores the role of *upāya* in the Shingon School of esoteric Buddhism in Japan. I argue that the seeming inconsistencies within Buddhist doctrines that appear in the Shingon School are best understood, and removed, when viewed through the lens of *upāya*. Kūkai, the founder of the Shingon School, was convinced of the superiority of his methods above all others. The Mandala of the Two Realms (Ryokai Mandala) and the ritual performed by the Shingon practitioner is central to Kūkai's methods. Clearly aware of his Buddhist predecessors, Kūkai builds on the philosophy of Nāgārjuna, who is recognized as a patriarch of the Shingon School. In this way we will see how the Mandala of the Two Realms communicates to us iconographically what Nāgārjuna communicates epistemologically through his Twofold Truth and explore what this has to do with *upāya*.

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## INTRODUCTION

Kūkai, the founder of the Shingon School of Buddhism in Japan, said that with a single glance at the Mandala of the Two Realms one becomes a Buddha.<sup>1</sup> However, the idea of becoming something else can be a bit misleading. The focus in esoteric Buddhism is not so much an issue of becoming something else, but of transcending beyond what is apparent and realizing what you actually are. In this way, as we shall see, the Mandala of the Two Realms<sup>2</sup> functions to recreate the awakening experience of the historical Śākyamuni Buddha as he sat in repose beneath the Bodhi Tree. This awakening experience removed dualistic concepts of reality and revealed the interconnectedness among and oneness of all phenomena.

For Kūkai the mandala functions as an instrument of power that embodies the sacred and thereby facilitates the efforts of practitioners to awaken to their own buddha nature.<sup>3</sup> Buddha nature can be defined as our inherent wisdom to perceive the essential nature of the world around us.<sup>4</sup> In other words, we awaken to what lies behind mere appearances. In one instant the mandala communicates ideas and concepts to the viewer in a way that words or

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<sup>1</sup> Kūkai, *Shōraimokuroku*, as quoted in, Robert H. Sharf, “Visualization and Mandala in Shingon Buddhism,” in *Living Images Japanese Buddhist Icons in Context*, ed. Robert H. Sharf and Elizabeth Horton Sharf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 188.

<sup>2</sup> Also known as the Matrix and Diamond World Mandala(s). In Japan they are known as the Ryōkai Mandala (or mandara). The Matrix World is also often referred to as the Womb World, a term that will be used in this thesis.

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis, *Japanese Mandalas Representations of Sacred Geography* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1999), 49. She discusses the role of mandalas for Kūkai as “embodiments of the sacred, instruments of power that help them (the practitioner) realize their essential buddha natures.”

<sup>4</sup> In general, and for the purposes of this thesis, the terms ‘Buddha’ and ‘buddha-nature’ correspond to the realization of wisdom or the ability to see things as they really are in their true state or suchness (*tathātā*).



texts cannot and, as a result, enables us to become, as Kūkai believed, a Buddha in this very body.

Kūkai's belief that with a single glance at the mandala one can become a Buddha is, of course, contingent upon his confidence in his methods and also in the efficacy of the two mandalas to facilitate that objective.<sup>5</sup> A picture is, as they say, worth a thousand words. However, we have to assume that awakening to one's essential buddha nature via the mandala would entail some previous understanding of what various symbols in the mandala mean and how they relate to one another. How are those ideas transmitted? What did Kūkai mean when he stated that we could awaken to our innate buddha nature with a single glance at the Mandala of the Two Realms?

One of the goals of this thesis is to decipher and unpack the meaning behind Kūkai's cryptic statement and resolve some of the problems that arise along the way. In order to do this we will approach the topic from different angles, as reflected in the threefold division of the discussion. The first chapter focuses on the mandala itself. Why are images given a central role in Shingon practice? If a picture is worth a thousand words, what are the pictures telling us? What is depicted in the mandala and what concepts are being communicated to the viewer? Chapter two examines the ritual aspects of Shingon and how one interacts with the mandala. Special attention will be paid to the "Three Mysteries," or the ritual practices of body, speech, and mind (Skt: *tri-ghya*; Jpn: *Sanmitsu*). This practice exemplifies the idea in Shingon Buddhism that awakening (i.e. enlightenment) is not some far off abstract concept that will take many lifetimes to achieve, but something that is possible right here, right now,

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<sup>5</sup> Mandala and mandalas will be used interchangeably here, but combined the Mandala of the Two Realms represents two aspects of the same nondual reality, conditioned and unconditioned.

in this very body. This also underscores esoteric Buddhism's belief that one of the best ways to awaken to the ultimate is through physical, sensory experience. Chapter three surveys the epistemological aspects of Shingon practice. What is one awakened to? In other words, what is realized or understood when these images are viewed? How are these ideas embodied in the ritual image?

One of the problems that will become evident in chapter two is the implied anthropomorphism that seems to take place in the practitioner's mind. In Buddhism there is no room for an independent, personal sense of self because it contradicts the notions of *anātman* (no soul) and emptiness (Skt: *Śūnyatā*). On the other hand, Buddhists do talk about a provisional or upāyic notion of self. In an ultimate sense, however, this provisional or upāyic sense of self is found to be temporary (Skt: *anitya*) and empty of any eternal or lasting qualities. Things are empty because they are dependently originated (Skt: *pratītyasamutpāda*). Even the Buddha, for that matter, is said to be empty. In the mind of the Shingon practitioner, however, the main deity (Figure 1), Vairocana Tathāgata (Jpn: *Dianichi Nyorai*), appears to take on the ontological status closer to the Hindu view of Brahman in Advaita Vedānta philosophy. I will argue that the aforementioned questions and the seeming inconsistencies within the Shingon School are best understood, and removed, when viewed through the lens of *upāya*.

## UPĀYA

One of the main themes of this thesis, as the title suggests, is the Buddhist notion of *upāya*. An understanding of what *upāya* is and how it works will help us come to terms with some of the apparent problems encountered in our examination of Shingon art, ritual, and epistemology. *Upāya* addresses the methods or means by which an individual or a group is



**Figure 1. Mandala close up. Source: Bogel, Cynthia J. *With a Single Glance: Buddhist Icon and Early Mikkyo Vision*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2009.**

led to a particular goal. In the case of the Shingon School and Buddhism in general that goal would be awakening.<sup>6</sup> Like other schools, the Shingon School, employs various skillful means to disrupt discursive thought and peel away the veneer of the apparent to awaken us to what lies beyond. The skillful part is the ability to adapt the means by which awakening is initiated in accordance with the ability of the intended audience. This can often include some questionable practices. The problem is not so much appearance, which is part of the

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<sup>6</sup> The term awakening is used here rather than enlightenment. Awakening implies a realization of something that was there all along, as if awakening from a dream or coma. Enlightenment, at least in the opinion of this author, implies the acquisition of something that one does not already possess.

phenomenal content of Shingon, but conditioned responses and expectations that prevent us from seeing what is truly there.

Buddhism is full of colorful stories that demonstrate the concept of *upāya* in action. Skill-in-means is required to adapt the methods to those who are receiving the message. While compassion is an important characteristic of a successful bodhisattva, it takes wisdom to apply the compassion in a skillful manner in order to elicit the desired outcome. The Sanskrit term *Upāyakaushalya* (Jpn: *hōben*) used in Buddhism implies that even if the means by which an individual or group is brought closer to awakening is not literally true, it can be viewed as “expedient” that inspires that individual or group, who may not be ready for that highest truth, to move one step closer to the intended goal.<sup>7</sup> For those who do not understand the meaning behind *upāya* and how it works some of the means employed can seem somewhat Machiavellian. Under the umbrella of *upāya*, however, seeming contradictions are all legitimate techniques for the skillful bodhisattva if used compassionately and the ultimate goal is to bring about awakening. Edward Conze observes, “skill in means is the ability to bring about the spiritual potentialities of different people by statements or actions which are adjusted to their needs and adapted to their capacity for comprehension.” Conze argues that if one understands emptiness correctly, “there are no Buddhas, no Bodhisattvas, no perfections, and no stages. All these are products of our imagination, just expedients, concessions to the needs of ignorant people, designed to ferry them across to the Beyond.”<sup>8</sup> We need to keep this in mind as we peruse the art and ritual of

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<sup>7</sup> Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism* (New York: Oxford, 1998), 228.

<sup>8</sup> Edward Conze, *A Short History of Buddhism* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1980), 50.

the Shingon School. The rich display of images and emphasis on ritual are expedient vehicles to ferry us to the Beyond.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps the best place to begin a discussion about *upāya* is the *Lotus Sūtra* (*Saddharma Pundarīka Sūtra*), one of the most popular Mahāyāna texts, especially among the Tiantai and Nichiren sects in China and Japan respectively. What makes it so popular, as Sandra A. Wawrytko argues, is the *sūtra*'s notion of universal Buddhahood. Considered by some to be the Buddha's highest teaching, Wawrytko argues that the *Lotus Sūtra* presents itself, "as an extended inner dialogue between multiple manifestations of awakened buddha-nature on the one hand and the sleeping or deluded self on the other hand."<sup>10</sup> The question that is important in terms of how the *Lotus Sūtra* relates to our study of Shingon, is how do we awaken this deluded self from its slumber? Chapter two of the *sūtra* is entitled "Expedient Means" (*upāya*). An expedient, as mentioned previously, is a wise and compassionate means of attaining an end. In this case, that end is the realization of one's essential buddha-nature. In this chapter the use of expedient means in teaching Dharma is explained as a temporary provisional device. In his dialogue with Śāriputra the Buddha states:

Shariputra, the Buddhas of the past used countless numbers of expedient means, various causes and conditions, and words of simile and parable in order to expound the doctrines for the sake of living beings. These doctrines are all for the

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<sup>9</sup> We might view the "Beyond" as just another upayic term for emptiness (*śūnyatā*). This can be misleading however, because emptiness is not beyond anything or anywhere, it is everywhere. Conze further points out that, "everything apart from the One, also called Emptiness, or Suchness, is devoid of real existence, and what ever may be said about it is ultimately untrue, false, and nugatory. But nevertheless it is not only permissible, but even useful to say it, because the salvation of beings demands it," Edward Conze, *A Short History of Buddhism*. 50.

<sup>10</sup> Sandra A. Wawrytko, "Holding Up the Mirror to Buddha-Nature: Discerning the Ghee in the Lotus Sūtra," *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 6 (March 2007): 63-65.

sake of the one Buddha vehicle. These living beings, by listening to the doctrines of the Buddhas, are all eventually able to attain wisdom embracing all species.<sup>11</sup>

To achieve this objective the *Lotus Sūtra* utilizes the provisional (means) for the sake of the real (ends or awakening). However, the *sūtra* points out that if you begin by trying to explain the real many will simply not understand what you are talking about. The *Lotus Sūtra* tells us this is why the Buddhas of the Ten Directions<sup>12</sup> employ a provisional Dharma Door to lead you step by step towards the real:

The Buddhas, the World Honored Ones, wish to open the door of Buddha wisdom to all living beings, to allow them to attain purity. That is why they appear in the world. They wish to show the Buddha wisdom to living beings, and therefore they appear in the world. They wish to cause living beings to awaken to the Buddha wisdom, and therefore they appear in the world. They wish to induce living beings to enter the path of Buddha wisdom, and therefore they appear in the world. Shariputra, this is the one great reason for which the Buddhas appear in the world.<sup>13</sup>

Later in the *sūtra*, that provisional door will be opened to reveal the real. Wawrytko outlines the structured sequential awakening process of the *Lotus Sūtra* as such: “the first ten chapters of the *Lotus Sūtra* ‘open’ the door and ‘show’ Buddha wisdom; chapters 11 through 24 cause living beings to awaken to that wisdom. We are induced to ‘enter the path’ of this wisdom in chapters 25 through 28, culminating in the concrete embodiment of Practice in Bodhisattva Universal Worthy (aka Samantabhadra).”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *The Lotus Sutra*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia, 1993), 31.

<sup>12</sup> The Buddhas of the Ten Directions inhabit the eight points of the compass, plus up and down. This is simply meant to convey the idea that the Buddha is everywhere. This is very much like the Thousand Buddha motif common in Buddhist art. Iconographically it communicates the same message of the Buddha being everywhere.

<sup>13</sup> *The Lotus Sutra*, 31.

<sup>14</sup> Wawrytko, “Holding Up the Mirror,” 72.

To realize the real, or the One Buddha Vehicle (Skt: *ekayāna*), the *Lotus Sūtra* discusses how the Buddha employed the Voicehearer and Pratyekabuddha vehicles, and later the Bodhisattva vehicle in the doctrine of the Three Vehicles. To be clear, the *Lotus Sūtra* does not use these three vehicles but exposes their previous upāyic use by the Buddha. Again, the provisional is taught to prepare the way for the real, which is the One Buddha Vehicle. We might think of the provisional vehicles of voicehearer, pratyekabuddha, and bodhisattva as training wheels of sorts. We always have the one Buddha vehicle, but these provisional vehicles help keep us pointed in the right direction and keep us from crashing. Indeed, without the training wheels we can not only fall and hurt ourselves, but we can hurt and cause suffering to others as well. We might think of the one Buddha vehicle as our first real bike (without the training wheels) and imagine the joy we felt upon realizing that we had the ability to ride unassisted all along, it just took some practice.

The Parable of the Burning House contained in the “Simile and Parable” chapter three of the *Lotus Sūtra* is perhaps the most famous example of *upāya*. It metaphorically demonstrates how the provisional is employed as a stepping-stone. No discussion of *upāya* is complete without mentioning it. The story has multiple layers of meaning, which give us a good idea of how *upāya* works. In this story “white lies” or partial truths are employed to rescue children from a burning house. Here we have a metaphor that demonstrates why the *Lotus Sūtra* presents itself as the highest Buddhist teaching, and why earlier teachings were merely provisional. Those teachings were presented as stepping-stones until such a time came when the highest truth, in this case the *Lotus Sūtra*, could be understood.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *The Lotus Sutra*, xvii.

The Burning House parable is about a wealthy man who lives in a luxurious but decrepit house. This man has many sons and, because of his great wealth, he is able to give them anything their hearts desire. One day a fire breaks out in the house, but despite the father's pleas for his sons to come out they just go on playing their games, unaware that the house they were playing in was disintegrating around them. In spite of the raging fire the sons have no clue as to the suffering and pain that awaits them. There is only one way out of the house, through a small flaming gate (i.e. doorway).

Since the sons ignored their father's numerous pleas to come out of the burning house, the father had to employ *upāya* (expedient means) to get them out as quickly as possible. If he did not they would face certain death. The father devised a clever way to get their attention . He knew what sort of toys might help coax the sons to come out of the burning house, so he promised each of them they would be rewarded with a goat cart, a deer cart, or an ox cart if they came out.<sup>16</sup> “Why don't you come out and play with them,” the father asked? This caught their attention and they pushed and fought each other in order to get to the prizes that awaited them outside the burning house. Upon exiting the burning house, however, the sons find that instead of the carts the father had promised, he gave each of them a larger carriage, much better than the carts he described. These carriages were draped with an array of precious stones and pulled by white bullocks.<sup>17</sup> The carriages

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<sup>16</sup> The goat cart, deer cart, and ox cart refer to the vehicles of the voicehearer (*śrāvaka* or disciple), pratyekabuddha (lone practitioner, concerned with their own solitary path to enlightenment or Buddhahood), and bodhisattva (who postpones realization of Buddhahood for the sake of all sentient beings) respectively. Moreover, the father is the Buddha and the sons sentient beings. The burning house represents samsara Samsāra, the world of old age, sickness, and death, or suffering (*dukkha*). The sons can stay in the burning house and enjoy their temporary pleasures or they can experience a far greater joy via awakening.

<sup>17</sup> The bejeweled cart pulled by white bullocks, represents the power of *The Lotus Sutra* to bring about awakening (Buddhahood).



represent the One Buddha Vehicle, in contrast to the three vehicles of the goat, deer, and ox carts. These three function as expedients or provisional stepping stones to the One Vehicle. The important thing, however, is that because of the lure of the carts the sons were freed from the dangers of the burning house (Skt: *dukkha* or suffering) and now they each have a beautiful (and better) carriage.<sup>18</sup>

While the *upāya* employed by the Shingon School is quite different from what we find in the Burning House Parable, the two techniques are similar in that they are designed to rescue us from the burning house by means deemed appropriate. The practices are different but the goal is still the same – awakening. Chapter two of the *Lotus Sūtra* actually explains the upāyic strategy in detail with regard to the limits of language and how images hold the potential to get us around those limitations, which is central to our study of Shingon:

If there are persons who for the sake of the Buddha  
fashion and set up images,  
carving them with many distinguishing characteristics,  
then all have attained the Buddha way.<sup>19</sup>

Further on we find out how images can get us around the limitations of language, which is especially relevant to the topic at hand:

If someone with a confused and distracted mind  
should take even one flower  
and offer it to a painted image,  
in time he would come to see countless Buddhas.  
Or if a person should bow or perform obeisance,  
or should merely press his palms together,  
or even should raise a single hand,  
or give no more than a slight nod of the head,

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<sup>18</sup> *The Lotus Sutra*, 55-62. This is an adaptation of The Parable of the Burning House from the chapter entitled “Simile and Parable.”

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

and if this were done in offering to an image,  
then in time he would come to see countless Buddhas.<sup>20</sup>

### KŪKAI AND THE SHINGON SCHOOL

Buddhist literature is full of myths and legends; it is not always clear how much these colorful stories are embellished or how much is based in fact. As we have seen, part of the *upāya* of the *Lotus Sūtra* is demonstrated in the many ways themes and metaphors are employed in order to free the mind from discursive thought. In reading the *Lotus Sūtra* it becomes evident very quickly that we have left the world as we know it behind, as varieties of beings, human and nonhuman, converge in one great assembly to hear the words of the Buddha. To appreciate what the *Lotus Sūtra* is attempting to convey it is necessary that we suspend all of our preconceived notions of space and time, because this is a realm where all boundaries that delineate such concepts are no longer applicable. In this view space and time are mere human constructs and do not represent reality in an ultimate sense. Indeed, since space and time are human constructs they only offer us a partial view of reality.

The *Lotus Sūtra* treats us to stories of events that happened countless kalpas ago, beings that are as numerous as the grains of sand that are in the Ganges River, and jeweled paradises that dazzle us with their opulence. The point of all this, as Burton Watson writes, is to “impress on us the impossibility of measuring the immeasurable.” Indeed, the descriptions are simply an *upāyic* device that is, “not meant to convey any statistical data but to boggle the mind and jar it loose from its conventional concepts of space and time. For in the realm of emptiness, time and space as we conceive them are meaningless; anywhere is

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 40.

the same as everywhere, and now, then, never, forever are all one.”<sup>21</sup> The Mandala of the Two Realms serves a similar purpose in Shingon Buddhism as it too is an upāyic device that serves to jar our mind loose from its conventional concepts of space and time, assisting us in dissolving dualistic concepts of reality.<sup>22</sup>

Shingon, like many Buddhist schools, is a lineage-oriented sect in which teachings are transmitted from master to disciple. There is a story of how the Mandala of the Two Realms made its way to Japan that reflects this lineage oriented master to disciple ideal. The sage Vajrasattva is said to have dwelt in an iron tower in the south of India where he received the transmission of the secret doctrine of the Mandala of the Two Realms from Vairocana Tathāgata.<sup>23</sup> Ultimately, the secret doctrine was transmitted to Nāgārjuna, who figures prominently in our study. Nāgārjuna presented the theory of the Twofold Truth, which corresponds epistemologically to the Mandala of the Two Realms. Nāgārjuna transmitted the doctrine to his disciple Nāgabodhi, who passed it on to his student Vajrabodhi. Then it was passed on to Amoghavajra, who founded the Esoteric sect (*mi-zong* or “School of Secrets”) in China.<sup>24</sup> This is where Kūkai comes into the picture.

Kūkai (774-835 CE), also known as Kōbō Daishi, was born in a wealthy family of declining influence and fortune. He originally studied to become a government bureaucrat but gave up this endeavor to study Buddhism. Eventually he made his way by sea to the

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., xvi.

<sup>22</sup> This does not make any question of historicity moot or irrelevant because until we are awakened the upāyic bells and whistles are necessary.

<sup>23</sup> Vajrasattva is viewed as the second patriarch of Shingon, while Vairocana Tathāgata (Great Sun Buddha) is the first.

<sup>24</sup> E. Dale Saunders, *Mudra – A Study of Symbolic Gestures in Japanese Buddhist Iconography* (Princeton:Princeton University, 1985), 18.

Tang capital of Xian, where he met Hui-guo (746-805 CE), a disciple of Amoghavajra. It is believed that Kūkai had intended to stay in China, but upon the death of Hui-guo he returned to Japan in 806 to found the Shingon School of Esoteric Buddhism. Later he was involved in the construction of the main headquarters of Shingon on Mount Koya in 819.

Kūkai was primarily concerned with the systemization of Shingon Teachings, and much of his effort centered around clarifying the differences between Exoteric and Esoteric Buddhism. Kūkai proclaimed the superiority of the esoteric Shingon teachings over all other forms of Buddhism. For Kūkai esoteric Buddhism was not the doctrine expounded by the historical Buddha:

The doctrine revealed by the Nirmanakaya Buddha [Shakyamuni Buddha] is called Exoteric; it is apparent, simplified, and adapted to the needs of the time and to the capacity of the listeners. The doctrine expounded by the Dharmakaya Buddha [Mahāvairocana] is called Esoteric; it is secret and profound and contains the final truth<sup>25</sup>

In this view we understand the historical Buddha (Nirmanakāya) as being one manifestation (or aspect) of the Buddha who, as stated above, preached a message adapted to the needs of the time and to the capacity of the listeners (*upāya*). By contrast, the Dharmakāya Buddha (body of dharma or suchness) simultaneously transcends time yet exists in it. The Dharmakāya Buddha is impersonal and is not identified with other particular buddhas because Dharmakāya is beyond conceptualization, but Dharmakāya is also not separate from the others as it is the basis for universal awakening. We find this idea of the universal Buddha in the *Lotus Sūtra*.<sup>26</sup> The Trikāya (three bodies) doctrine conceives of the

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<sup>25</sup> Yoshito S. Hakeda, *Kūkai Major Works Translated, With an Account of His Life and a Study of His Thought* (New York: Columbia, 1972), 63.

<sup>26</sup> Chapter sixteen of the *Lotus Sūtra* highlights the concept of universal buddhahood.

Buddha as having different aspects, the Dharmakāya, Sambhogakāya (body of bliss), and Nirmanakāya. Kukai actually takes the Trikāya theory one step further in his theory of the Dharmakāya in four forms. To the three aforementioned forms, Kūkai adds the Dharmakāya of Emanation (Skt: Svabhavakakāya). In this aspect the Dharmakāya is envisioned as an “expression of the impartial compassion and wisdom in skillful means of Mahāvairocana to help develop the original enlightenment of all beings.”<sup>27</sup> This aspect simply holds that the other three are not separate from one another (i.e. non-dual). In fact, the Sanskrit term *svabhava* literally means own being. It refers to the essential nature shared by a group of entities (i.e. sentient beings).

By practicing Shingon methods of esoteric meditation Kūkai believed that we can become a Buddha in this very life:

The Esoteric teachings are so profound and mysterious that they are difficult to record with quill and ink [that is, in writing]. Thus we resort to the expedient of diagrams and paintings to reveal them to the unenlightened. The various postures and *mudrā* [depicted in the mandalas] emerge from [the Buddha’s] great compassion; with a single glance [at them] one becomes a buddha. The secrets of the *sūtras* and commentaries are recorded in a general way in diagrams and images, and the essentials of the Esoteric teachings are actually set forth therein. Should these be discarded there will be difficulty in transmitting and receiving the dharma, for they are none other than the foundation of the ocean-like assembly [of enlightened ones].<sup>28</sup>

In 823 Kūkai was appointed to build Toji Temple on Mount Kōya, the imperial temple in the capital, Kyoto, which became the official headquarters of the Shingon School. Yoshito S. Hakeda explains Kūkai’s vision and the significance of Mount Kōya:

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<sup>27</sup> Hakeda, *Kūkai Major Works Translated*, 83-84.

<sup>28</sup> Robert H. Sharf, “Visualization,” 187-188. Sharf is citing Kūkai’s *Goshōrai mokuroku*, an annotated catalog of texts, icons, and ritual implements that Kūkai brought back from China. See footnote 1 for full citation.

Kūkai saw Mt. Kōya as the Matrix Realm, whose symbol is a lotus flower: the eight petals surrounding the central plateau were the eight petals of the lotus. He named the temple complex in the center of the consecrated ground Kongōbuji, Vajra or Diamond Peak temple, representing the *vajra-dhatū*, the Diamond Realm of eternity and of infinite activity and wisdom. Thus, Mt. Kōya consists of two circles, the circle of the Diamond Realm within the circle of the Matrix Realm. Within the Diamond Realm, that is, within the Diamond Peak Temple, Kūkai laid out the Grand Pagoda (*dāito*) representing the Diamond Realm. Seated in the center of the pagoda is the ultimate Reality, the Mahāvairocana of the Diamond Realm, surrounded by the four Buddhas of the Matrix realm placed to the east, south, west, and north. The entire mountain with the central pagoda symbolizes the nonduality of both realms, which is, according to Kūkai, the order of the world of Dharma. To the south Kūkai placed the Lecture Hall (*kōdō*; presently called *kondo*, the Golden Hall) where the monks practice meditation and study the teachings. Behind the Lecture Hall, to the north, still on consecrated ground, Kūkai situated the monks quarters.<sup>29</sup>

As we can see in Hakeda's description, Mount Koya is essentially a three dimensional representation of the Mandala of the Two Realms. Ultimate reality, as represented by a massive statue of Mahāvairocana, is at the center with its various aspects radiating outward. Unfortunately, Kūkai never saw the completion of his vision. Due to his declining health he passed away on Mount Koya in 835.<sup>30</sup> However, according to Thomas P. Kasulis, if you ask any ardent Shingon practitioner Kūkai is alive and well and presently resides in Okunoin, his mausoleum at Mount Koya. Here he sits, as Kasulis further writes, "in a permanent state of meditation, merged with the Buddhas dharmakāya, the embodiment of the entire cosmos as identical to the Buddha. Kūkai's body is the Buddha's body. The body of the cosmos is the body of the Buddha. Kūkai interpenetrates the cosmos, acting within it and as it."<sup>31</sup> This may seem to border on superstition to some, but the idea that Kūkai's body interpenetrates

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<sup>29</sup> Hakeda, *Kūkai Major Works Translated*, 50.

<sup>30</sup> Rolf W. Giebel, *Shingon Texts* (Berkeley: BDK/Numata, 2004), 3-4.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas P. Kasulis, "Reality as Embodiment - An Analysis of Kukai's Sokushinjōbtsu and Hosshin Seppō," in *Religious Reflections on the Human Body*, ed. Jane Marie Law (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1995), 169.

the cosmos and acts within it is key to our understanding of what embodiment, discussed further in chapter two, really means.

The notion of embodiment closely parallels Shintō views on *kami* or nature spirits, and was no doubt influenced by them. Natural processes such as wind, rain, sunshine, are identified with human attributes (anthropomorphism). Humans, for instance, can become *kami* after they die and are frequently objects of ancestor worship, as is the case with Kūkai. The Sun Goddess Amaterasu-ōmikami is the most important Shintō deity in the *kami* pantheon and is believed by Buddhists to be the incarnation of Mahāvairocana, further underscoring the fusion between Shingon and Shintō beliefs.<sup>32</sup>

This is probably a good place to delve into the Shingon/Shinto synthesis a bit further. Although, we see a fusion between Shintō and Buddhism very early in the Nara Period (710-794 CE) this fusion reaches its zenith during Heian (794-1185) and Kamakura (1192–1333) periods. This syncretism is underscored in a 794 temple (*jingū-ji*, shrine/temples) document in which a localized *kami* known as *Tado-no-kami*<sup>33</sup> wishes to become a Buddha:

It is my fate to have been born a *kami* but I wish straightaway to practice the Buddhist oath, shed my *kami* body and become a Buddha. But I am troubled, without the ability to receive the necessary (good) karma. For this reason I desire that a place of Buddhist practice be established.<sup>34</sup>

Later, a more sophisticated theory of *Honji-Suijaku* (Original Essence or Descended Manifestation) developed. This theory posits that *kami* and buddhas are one and the same.

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<sup>32</sup> Hakeda, *Kūkai Major Works Translated, With an Account of His Life and a Study of His Thought*, 8. It should be noted that Mahācairocana (Dianichi) means “Great Sun.” Hakeda points out that it no coincidence that the Great Sun Goddess Amateratsu and Mahāvairocana parallel one another, 81.

<sup>33</sup> To be specific this *kami* is of the *Tado-Jingū-ji* in *Tado-machi*, Kuwana, Mie Prefecture.

<sup>34</sup> Stuart D. B. Picken, *Essentials of Shinto: An Analytical Guide to Principal Teachings* (Westport: Greenwood, 1994), 20. Picken indicates that the document dates to around 801.

Because of the vast nature of the Shinto pantheon, indeed many *kami* are specific to a particular local, elaborate lists had to be drawn up so that the community would properly understand the way in which *kami* and buddhas correspond.<sup>35</sup> The *Lotus Sūtra*, has figured prominently in our study, so it should perhaps come as no surprise that the notion of *honji-suijaku* sounds very much like the *sūtra*'s idea of universal buddhahood. This idea that Buddhist deities and *kami* could be combined was expressed in the *Sandai-jitsuroku* (Chronological Description of the Three Generations of Emperors), written around 859. The document reveals the upāyic aspect of Buddhism in the way it adopts local culture, customs, and beliefs, reappropriating them for its own purposes:

When the Buddha leads existence he sometimes uses *jitsu* (truth) or *gom* (manifestation). The Nyorai reveals *jaku* (*suijaku*) and sometimes becomes a king or *kami*. Therefore, when the noble king governs the nation, surely he will rely on the help of the *kami*.<sup>36</sup>

Ryōbu Shintō (Dual Aspect Shintō or Shintō of the Two Parts) is also known as Shingon Shintō because its dual aspects are based on the dual aspect of The Mandala of the Two Realms. This is where we see the full synthesis between Esoteric Shingon and Shintō. The Ryobū school took previous ideas further in that the Japanese concept of Shintō deities (*kami*) were actual manifestations of Buddhist divinities. This Shintō/Shingon synthesis is primarily associated with Kūkai. The name Ryobū probably did not come into use until after the death of Kūkai, however, pointing to the Shingon Mandala of the Two Realms. Here the Womb World (Jpn: *Taizōkai*) is representative of the world of embryonic truth, and the Diamond World (Jpn: *Kongōkai*) represents the world of unshakable truth. We find a

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 22.



similarity here between the idea of embryonic and unshakable truth on the one hand and Nāgārjuna's conventional and ultimate truth on the other. In terms of iconographic content, various *kami* are envisioned to represent particular bodhisattvas (Jpn: *boatsu*) as depicted in the mandala. *Kami* were given envisioned as avatars to further absorb them into the Buddhist pantheon and underscore their importance.<sup>37</sup> Most important was the identification of the sun goddess Amaterasu Omikami with the Buddha Mahāvairocana (Jpn: *Dainichi Nyorai* or Great Sun Buddha). The Ryobū School conflated the Shingon belief in the two realms of Dainichi with the two *kami* enshrined at the Ise Shrine.<sup>38</sup> Amaterasu was considered to be the equivalent of *Taizō-kai* (Womb World), while Toyouke no Ōmikami, was equated with *Kongō-kai* (Diamond World). Their respective shrines at Ise were identified with the mandala of the Two Realms and repurposed to represent the dual nature of Dainichi Nyorai.<sup>39</sup> Ise is also home to the sacred mirror, which is part of the Imperial regalia of Japan. In Shintō the mirror represents truth because it reflects what it is shown in a non-discriminating fashion. However, the capacity to reflect depends upon the cleanliness of the mirror. We will see in the following chapters how this idea of reflection is another important parallel to Shingon ritual, and yet another reason why Shintō beliefs and practices were so easily melded to those of Shingon Buddhism.<sup>40</sup> This underscores the ability of Buddhism to

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 299.

<sup>38</sup> Ise Shrine is perhaps the most important Shintō Shrine in Japan. It is dedicated to the sun goddess Amaterasu. While it is a complex of shrines, the primary shrines are the Naikū (inner shrine) and Gekū (outer shrine).

<sup>39</sup> Picken, *Essentials of Shinto*, 300.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas P. Kasulis. *Shinto: The Way Home* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 23. Kasulis further elaborates on the reflective capacity of the mirror in terms of Shintō ritual. Upon entering a Shintō Shrine people “are expected to wash their hands and mouth, cleansing themselves of any pollution from physical or verbal misdeeds. Washing away dirt from the journey, they are ready to be at home in the *kami*-filled, *tama*-empowered shrine” (*tama* = spiritual power).

adapt to indigenous beliefs and customs as an upāyic device tailored to the needs of a particular audience to facilitate awakening, in this case the Japanese people who were already familiar with Shinto anthropomorphic concepts.

In Shingon embodiment is a way by which the microcosm (the practitioner) comprehends or participates in the macrocosm (ultimate reality) through the dissolution of barriers. If the microcosm (perceived differentiation) and the macrocosm (underlying nature of all phenomena) are essentially one, then ideas such as death and birth, beginning and end, are merely mental constructs. In other words, the Nirmanakāya (the historical Buddha's physical body) and the Dharmakāya (the embodiment of Buddha's message) are essentially different expressions of reality. While change may be evident on a conventional level, it is resolved and subordinated to a greater truth on an ultimate level. The epistemological implications of this will be further elaborated upon in chapter three.

The main texts associated with the Shingon School are the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra* (also known as the *Mahāvairocanaabhisambodhi Tantra*), the *Vajrasekhara Sūtra* (also known as the *Sarvatathāgatatattvasamgraha Tantra*), and *Susiddhikara Sūtra*. The *Mahāvairocana Sūtra* forms the theoretical basis for the Womb World Mandala (Skt: *Garbha Dhatu*; Jpn: *Taizōkai*) while the *Vajrasekhara Sutra* grounds the Diamond World Mandala (Skt: *Vajra Dhatu*; Jpn: *Kōngokai*). The *Susiddhikara Sutra* is primarily concerned with the proper performance of ritual activity, by which the perceived boundaries between microcosm and macrocosm are dissolved. Ritual activity is very important to Shingon and Tantra in general because it is the mechanism or expedient means by which the ineffable is communicated, allowing one to become, in a single glance, a Buddha in this very body. Again, these ideas of non-duality were not unfamiliar to the Japanese populace. The idea of

an underlying oneness (non-dualism) connecting humans and nature was already prevalent in Shintō, along with ideas of consecrated realms, and magical formulas similar to mantras. It was only natural that Shingon would adapt many of the existing Shinto beliefs and repurpose them.<sup>41</sup> This further underscores Buddhism's flexibility and adaptability to the indigenous cultures it encountered during its development, not only in Japan but everywhere it went. We see this syncretism and synthesis in sites such as the Mogao Cave Temples in Dunhuang, China, where the artistic paradigms of Buddhism evolved to suit the tastes of a Chinese populace. Similarly, Buddhist art in Japan reflects its own unique accommodation to Japanese aesthetics and concepts.

The primacy of ritual activity and the employment of images as upāyic devices becomes evident early on in chapter one of the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra*. In this short chapter, “The Stations of the Mind When Entering the Mantra Gateway,” we are treated to a scene not unlike one we would find in the *Lotus Sūtra* focused on a great-jeweled pavilion without a center or perimeter. In other words, this is a place that has no boundaries, a place where dualistic concepts of reality cease to exist. Here, a great assembly of vajradharas, bodhisattvas, and various other-worldly beings as innumerable as sands in the Ganges is gathered to hear Vairocana Tathāgata expound the Dharma. A conversation ensues between Vajrasattva<sup>42</sup> and Vairocana Tathāgata about how Vairocana obtained “the knowledge of an omniscient one?” Further on Vajrasattva asks, “World-honored One, what is the cause, what is the root, and what is the culmination of this knowledge ?” The Buddha replies, “the bodhi-mind is its cause, compassion is its root, and expedient means is its culmination.” Vairocana

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<sup>41</sup> Hakeda, *Kūkai Major Works Translated*, 7.

<sup>42</sup> In Sanskrit Vajrasattva is also known as Vajrapani.

Tathāgata points out that “bodhi has the characteristic of empty space, and there is no one to comprehend it, nor is there any understanding of it” and “Bodhi has no [differentiating characteristics] . . . all *dharmas* are without characteristics. That is to say, they have the characteristic of empty space.”<sup>43</sup>

Since this is a profound and difficult teaching for those gathered, Vairocana Tathāgata utilizes a mandala and ritual to explain these ideas. In other words, the mandala serves as an upāyic device to facilitate awakening. Vajrasattva, however, cannot understand why Vairocana Tathāgata would resort to the use of images and ritual to convey bodhi-mind if bodhi-mind has no differentiating characteristics and has the nature of empty space. If ultimate truth is beyond form, why do we need form to understand it? Vairocana Tathāgata explains that bodhi-mind is indeed beyond forms, however without depending on them bodhi-mind cannot be realized. Therefore, forms are necessary in that they serve as a gateway or expedient means that guide the individual in the right direction.<sup>44</sup>

This is reminiscent of the ever-present image of the lotus blossom utilized in various sects of Buddhism, on which Kūkai, in part, modeled the Mt. Koya temple complex after. The lotus blossom appears delicate, yet it is a hardy plant able to flourish in the most inhospitable conditions. The lotus rises above the muddy waters of samsāra towards the light/enlightenment, but remains rooted within it, for it is precisely the muddy waters that sustain it, allowing it to bloom and grow towards the light. Likewise, when Vairocana Tathāgata tells us that bodhi-mind is indeed beyond forms, but without depending on them

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<sup>43</sup> *The Mahāvairocanābhisaṃbodhi Sūtra*, trans. Rolf W. Giebel (Berkeley: BDK/Numata, 2005), 5.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-7. The rest of the chapter, as Giebel notes, deals with the “the bodhi-mind in its twin aspects of the aspiration for enlightenment and the mind whose intrinsic nature is enlightenment,” *The Mahāvairocanābhisaṃbodhi Sūtra*, xv.

bodhi-mind cannot be realized, he is essentially stating epistemologically what the lotus blossom image conveys metaphorically. Indeed, the image of the lotus blossom captures the essence of the Mandala of the Two Realms. We might view the muddy waters as the Womb World, the place where we learn and grow, while the blossom moving towards the light as the Diamond World is the place where we awaken to our true nature. Each aspect is inseparable from the other, just as the lotus cannot thrive without the nutrients from the muddy waters. Therefore, it is no surprise that the central arrangement of the Womb World takes on the shape of an eight-petaled lotus flower with Vairocana Tathagāta at its center and the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas blooming outwards or emanating from the center (Figure 1).

It should be abundantly clear at this juncture that Vajrayāna Buddhism, of which Shingon is certainly a part, has at its base a belief that the realm of sensory perception is the preferred means for awakening. However, we should not conclude that this is an outright rejection of other schools of Buddhism and the expedient means that they employ to initiate awakening. Vajrayāna Buddhism in general, and Shingon in particular, does not seek to compete with other schools of Buddhism. Kūkai does, however, recognize a definite hierarchy, based on what he sees as stages of enlightenment, as we shall see further on in his *Precious Key to the Secret Treasury*. Shingon attempts to bring the other schools into the fold, just as the *Lotus Sūtra* collapses the voicehearer, pratekyabuddha, and bodhisattva vehicles into the One Buddha Vehicle. Vajrayāna Buddhism is one of the Three Vehicles or yānas of Buddhism. Theravada Buddhism, the individual vehicle focused on the Four Noble Truths and individual liberation, is also pejoratively referred to as Hinayāna, literally the “lesser vehicle.” The focus here is on controlling how we react to the world of phenomena. Second, is Mahāyāna Buddhism, or the “great vehicle,” the universal vehicle, focused on

emptiness (Skt: *Śūnyatā*), great compassion, and the awakening of all beings. The arhat's goal of individual awakening is expanded into the bodhisattva's concern with awakening for all sentient beings. We should not interpret the Mahāyāna focus on emptiness as subordinating the relative to the ultimate, however. This problem is well recognized in the *Diamond Sūtra* and other Mahāyāna sutras. For example, the Buddha resolves this issue in chapter six of the *Diamond Sūtra*:

. . . we should not get caught up in dharmas or in the idea that dharmas do not exist. This is the hidden meaning when the Tathāgata says, “Bhikshus, you should know that all of the teachings I give to you are a raft.” All teachings must be abandoned, not to mention non teachings.<sup>45</sup>

What the Buddha is saying here is that we should not get so caught up in the teachings that we use them as a crutch. Ideas like emptiness and impermanence are helpful, but can cause harm and suffering when unskillfully applied. Getting back to our bicycle metaphor we see that training wheels are not only necessary, but desirable until you learn how to master your inherent abilities. However, you would not keep the training wheels on your bike once you find you no longer need them. With that in mind, what do we do when we have to get back to the relative aspects of our lives? Are we to dwell in concepts like emptiness or being and non-being forever?

Vajrayāna, the Diamond or Thunderbolt Vehicle that swiftly cuts through illusion in an instant, does not claim that the other schools are necessarily wrong. However, they suggest that they have not gone far enough and thus turn the whole idea of the relative on its head. Here, thanks to non-dualism, the relative is not something to escape from or

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<sup>45</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh *The Diamond that Cuts Through Illusion – Commentaries on the Prajñāparamita Diamond Sūtra* (Berkeley: Parallax, 1992), 57.

subordinate. As seen in the passage from chapter one in the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra*, the relative is the very means by which we facilitate awakening. This is an upāyic device by which one school of Buddhism can present itself as a higher teaching compared to other schools, while still affirming their value and bringing those followers into the fold, thus increasing their numbers--a strategy not limited to Buddhism.

From the Vajrayāna perspective the problems that arise in our daily lives have less to do with the relative than the way in which our minds perceive the relative. Therefore, our problems all start in the realm of relative or worldly phenomena, as represented by the Womb World. Without it there is no awakening. The old saying, that “it’s all in your head,” is quite appropriate from the Vajrayāna or Shingon perspective [and Buddhist philosophy in general] because that is precisely where the views that color our everyday experiences originate. From this perspective the challenges we face are opportunities for growth, not as illusions. Indeed, the ultimate is not found anywhere else, except in the relative. Once we understand this and master our own minds, we are called upon to guide others, as seen in the bodhisattva ideal.

The need to master our own minds highlights Kūkai’s ideas about how we get there. Just as the *Lotus Sūtra* offers a step-by-step process to guide us towards awakening, Kūkai assumes his own approach is superior to all others. In 830, shortly before his death, he produced his most ambitious work *The Ten Stages of Development of Mind* (i.e. bodhisattvahood), which was summarized in *The Precious Key to the Secret Treasury* (*Hizō hōyaku*). Here Kūkai outlines a ten-step process, with the previous nine steps serving as provisional stepping-stones towards the tenth and last. It is important to note that Kūkai does not view the preceding nine stages of development of the mind as stagnant. He lists the

ten stages to Enlightenment in *The Precious Key* running from "the mind of desires" through Confucianism, basic Buddhism, and ending with esoteric Buddhism. Why Nāgārjuna is number seven in Kūkai's schema will be analyzed in chapter three. According to Kūkai the deeper we penetrate, the more profound our mind will become. Kūkai outlines the stages for us:

1. *The Mind of a Lowly Man, Goatish in Desires.* The ignorant, ordinary man, in his madness, does not realize his faults. He thinks only of lust and hunger like a goat.
2. *The Mind That is Ignorant and Childlike, Yet Abstemious* Influenced by external causes, a man suddenly thinks of moderation in eating. The will to perform charity sprouts, like a seed of grain which has encountered the proper conditions.
3. *The Mind that is Infantlike and Fearless.* A non-Buddhist hopes for rebirth in heaven, in order to gain peace there for a while. He is like an infant or a calf that follows its mother.
4. *The Mind That Recognizes the Existence of Psychophysical Constituents Only, Not That of a Permanent Ego.* This mind recognizes the existence of components only and denies a permanent ego. The Tripitika of the Goat-cart of Hinayana is entirely included herein.
5. *The Mind Freed from the Seed of the cause of Karma.* Having mastered the Twelve Links of causation, the mind extirpates the seed of ignorance. Rebirth necessitated by karma comes to an end; even though one does not preach, the fruit is obtained.
6. *The Mahayana Mind with Sympathetic Concern for Others.* Compassion arises unconditionally; this is the first instance of great compassion. Recognizing phenomena as illusory shadows of mind, [a student of Yogācāra who believes that] what exists is mind only negates the validity of the world of objects.
7. *The Mind That Realizes that the Mind is Unborn.* By means of the Eightfold Negation, useless arguments are ended. When an insight into the truth of emptiness is gained in a moment of thought, the mind becomes serene and undefinably blissful.
8. *The Mind that Is Truly in Harmony with the One Way.* He who knows that the true nature of mind is one and originally pure and that both subject and object interpenetrate is called Vairocana.
9. *The Profoundest Exoteric Buddhist Mind That is Aware of Its Nonimmutable Nature.* Water has no immutable nature of its own. When it meets with the wind waves appear. The World of Dharma (*dharmadhātu*) is not yet ultimate. One must proceed further by receiving revelation.



10. *The Glorious Mind, the Most Secret and Sacred*. When the medicines of exoteric Buddhism have cleared away the dust, Shingon opens the Treasury. Then the secret treasures are at once manifested and one realizes all values.<sup>46</sup>

The idea of medicine is important here as many Buddhist texts depict the historical Buddha to a healer of sorts; a cosmic physician with a satchel of prescriptive remedies for every possible malady. In *The Precious Key*, however, the medicines of exoteric Buddhism lead to Kūkai’s cure at stage ten. This harks back to one of the parables in the *Lotus Sūtra*, “Former Affairs of the Bodhisattva Medicine King.” Here, the superior physician or Medicine King [bodhisattva] only dispenses what the patient can handle at any given time.<sup>47</sup> Sometimes diseases cannot be cured in one instant, or with one pill. Once a diagnosis is made a strategy needs to be developed and mapped out by the doctor to facilitate a desired outcome. Hence, one of the insider sayings among contemporary doctors in their quest to treat cancer, a disease in which we have made great strides but still have no cure, is that, “we cured the cancer but killed the patient.” Thus, treatment of cancer must be approached carefully and tailored to each individual, as each body responds to treatment differently. Too much of a good thing can end up being very bad. This parallels the dilemma we find in Kūkai’s *Precious Key*, where he compares the preceding nine stages to nine kinds of medicine:

. . . the nine kinds of medicine for the diseases of the mind sweep away the dust covering the surface of the mind and dispel its delusions. Only in the Diamond Palace [Shingon] are men able to open the inner treasury and to receive the treasures therein. To gain or not to gain them, to enjoy or not to enjoy them is for

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<sup>46</sup> Hakeda quoting Kūkai, *Kūkai Major Works Translated, With an Account of His Life and a Study of His Thought*, 163.

<sup>47</sup> Iconographically we can generally recognize the Medicine King (*Bhaisajyaguru*) by the sprig of medicinal myrobalan he holds in his right hand along with the nectar laden medicine bowl in his left.

everyone to decide; it is not for one's father or mother to decide; [the inner treasury] must be realized by oneself.<sup>48</sup>

The tenth and final stage as outlined by Kūkai, *The Glorious Mind, the Most Secret and Sacred* states: “When the medicines of Exoteric Buddhism have cleared away the dust, Shingon opens the Treasury. Then the secret treasures are at once manifested and one realizes all values.”<sup>49</sup> Today, realizing the toxic nature of cancer therapy, many doctors prepare the patient for the treatment in a variety of ways. What Kūkai is describing is similar in that each stage is viewed as a preparation for what is to come. Once the therapy has done its job the patient (i.e. deluded mind) is able to move on to the next step in the treatment plan. Returning to our bicycle analogy we might think of the previous nine stages as the training wheels and the tenth stage as the real bike, or better yet, a brand new shiny ten-speed-racing-bike.

How does one know where to begin in Kūkai's Ten Stage schema? This is where the teacher (guru or Medicine King) comes into play. They will carefully guide the patient, or student, towards the appropriate treatment. Certain patients may find that they can tolerate the strongest medicine, while for others a gradual therapeutic approach works best. Whether the therapy is sudden or gradual, however, it is Kūkai's belief that one can be cured of whatever deludes our mind in this very life and in this body.<sup>50</sup> Again, we see yet another parallel with the *Lotus Sūtra* in the chapter entitled, “The Parable of the Medicinal Herbs,”

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<sup>48</sup> Hakeda, *Kūkai Major Works Translated*, 161.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>50</sup> Please refer to Hakeda's translation of Kūkai's *Precious Key to the Secret Treasury* for a more exhaustive outline of the Ten Stages, 157-224. This text actually devotes several pages to the *Lotus Sūtra*.

which shows that although many different plants grow in the same ground and receive the same rain (i.e. Dharma teaching), they respond to it in different ways.

Returning to Kūkai’s assertion of the superiority of the Esoteric-Shingon-Treatment-Plan for deluded mind in the *Kōbō daishi zenshū*, he points out the differences between esoteric and exoteric Buddhism and how they facilitate the process of awakening:

The doctrine revealed by the Nirmanakāya Buddha [Shakyamuni Buddha] is called Exoteric; it is apparent, simplified, and adapted to the needs of the time and to the capacity of the listeners. The doctrine expounded by the Dharmakāya Buddha [Mahāvairocana] is called Esoteric; it is secret and profound and contains the final truth.<sup>51</sup>

In terms of *upāya*, the last line from the above quote should give us pause. Shingon, with all its imagery and emphasis on elaborate practice is no doubt secret and profound, but is it final? This final destination, of course, refers to the tenth stage in Kūkai’s schema; as pointed out previously—“only in the Diamond Palace are men able to open the inner treasury and receive the treasure therein.” Michael Pye argues that this poses a problem for Shingon Buddhism because “Shingon Buddhism by contrast to others is the supreme truth revealed by the Dharmakāya Buddha. It is this emphasis no doubt which makes it difficult for Shingon Buddhists today to conceive of the central Shingon concepts and practices themselves as being skillful means.”<sup>52</sup> How do we resolve this seeming contradiction that Pye brings up? The solution might be to view Shingon from the perspective of the outsider, so that what

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<sup>51</sup> Hakeda, *Major Works Translated*, 63. From the *Kōbō daishi zenshū*.

<sup>52</sup> Michael Pye, *Skillful Means: A Concept in Mahayana Buddhism* (London: Duckworth, 1978), 155. Hakeda further underscores this radical point when he acknowledges Kukai’s view that “Esoteric Buddhism was not the doctrine expounded by the historical Buddha,” and, “the historical Buddha is but one manifestation of Mahāvairocana, who exists in time and yet at the same time transcends it,” Hakeda, *Major Works Translated, With an Account of His Life and a Study of His Thought*, 63. In other words, everything is an emanation of Mahāvairocana. Mahāvairocana is everywhere and nowhere all at once. This is also a common assumption in Mahāyana, the doctrine of the universal Buddha in *Lotus Sutra*, chapter 16.

practitioners see as reality is regarded as a skillful means by the uninitiated. For Kūkai, however, it is not entirely clear that he even thinks *upāya* is necessary. However, if we are not yet awakened, then it seems as if the bells and whistles are *upāyic*. For Kūkai *upāya* seems to be affirmed and denied simultaneously, an issue we will explore further in chapter three.

Before we end this section we must address the type of Vajrayana that the Shingon school is aligned with, which relates directly to the figures in the mandala. There are two main forms of Tantrism--Left-handed and Right-handed. Left-handed Tantrism, the most familiar version, associated with Vajrayāna, places special emphasis on female manifestations or aspects of the Buddha(s). Some of the earliest tantric texts by Yogācāra master Asanga Asaṅga (c. 350 CE) focus on what seems to be a form of goddess worship. Green Tara, savior of Tibet, is believed to come to the assistance of sentient beings in times of difficulty or danger. The Dalai Lama is believed to be an incarnation of the transgendered bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara. The union of opposites via the sexual act (Yab-Yum in Tibetan) is central to Left-handed tantra, representing the mystical union of compassion and wisdom through the copulating couple, male and female respectively. Awakening is not possible unless both aspects are seamlessly joined. This echoes Kūkai's view of knowing one's originally unborn mind as it really is.

Kukai's Shingon Mikkyō, however, belongs to the Right-handed form of Tantrism. While both Left and Right handed Tantrism stress similar means (the ritual use of mantra, mudra, etc.) of unifying with the one underlying reality, they differ in that Shingon places emphasis on male deities. Right-handed Tantrism spread to China and to Japan via the Shingon School. Magical formulas or *dhāranīs* are employed along with the symbolic

gestures called *mudrās*, and visualization, so the practitioner becomes one with Vairocana Tathagāta.<sup>53</sup> In Japanese Shingon means mantra, while *mikkyō* means esoteric or secret, a reference to the special lineage described earlier whereby teachings are transmitted from master to student (*kanjo*). Therefore, Shingon Mikkyō is the “secret mantra” school. The bodhisattva Vajrasattva, as described by Marilyn M. Rhie and Robert A. F. Thurman, exemplifies the “archetypal male practitioner” who receives the teachings from a master (Vairocana Tathagāta). Thus any tutelary deity depicted in the mandala can be seen as Vajrasattva in that they represent the expedient means by which we awaken.<sup>54</sup>

Secret or “esoteric” teachings are generally misunderstood. Most Buddhists contend that the teachings of the Buddha are open to all and hence there are no hidden teachings. Esoteric Buddhism, which assumes a unique relationship between teacher and student, involves the transmission of certain mantras and mudras for use during visualization. The mantras and *mudrās* vary from student to student, which is perhaps where the idea of secrecy originated. The *guru* or *lama* (teacher) is central to this unique personal relationship as the one who transmits the mantras and mudras. The *guru* prescribes the medicine, if you will. Choosing a qualified teacher is, therefore, of extreme importance since having the wrong teacher can lead to undesirable consequences. Assuming one finds the right teacher, Minoru Kiyota observes that esoteric Buddhism (Shingon Mikkyō),<sup>55</sup> “remains a secret only to those who are incapable of understanding the true nature of existence but no longer remains so to

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<sup>53</sup> Saunders, *Mudra*, 17-18.

<sup>54</sup> Marilyn M. Rhie and Robert A. Thurman, *Worlds of Transformation Tibetan Art of Wisdom and Compassion* (New York: Tibet House, 1999), 501.

<sup>55</sup> *Mikkyō* is the Japanese term for “secret teaching” or “secret Buddhism.”

those who have understood that nature.”<sup>56</sup> However, in Shingon Buddhism one must be initiated (Skt: *abhiseka*), so the special relationship between teacher and student is unique to them and that is the difference between exoteric and esoteric.<sup>57</sup> It is also why, as we shall see, why Kūkai deems his methods superior.

So far we have covered the role of *upāya* in Buddhism, as well as the historical background of Kūkai and the formation of the Shingon School. We now move on to the main icon of the Shingon School, The Mandala of the Two Realms. Why are images given a central role in Shingon practice and what are the pictures telling us? What is depicted in the mandala and what concepts are being communicated to the viewer?

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<sup>56</sup> Minoru Kiyota, *Shingon Buddhism: Theory and Practice* (Los Angeles: Buddhist Books International, 1978), 137.

<sup>57</sup> Hakeda, *Kūkai Major Works Translated*, 32. Hakeda further defines *abhiseka* as a Sanskrit word literally meaning “sprinkling of water.” As part of Shingon initiation ritual water is sprinkled on the forehead of those to be initiated.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE *UPĀYA* OF THE MANDALA

A mandala is a visual representation of a perfected realm or buddhaverse. Just as the phenomenal world that we experience is based on appearance or partial truth, the perfected realm of the Buddha reflects perfect wisdom or transcendental truth.<sup>58</sup> These perfected environments or sacred landscapes are often similar to a blueprint or floor plan with various deities and symbols revolving around a central axis or focal point.<sup>59</sup> Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis points out that, although mandalas are presented as two-dimensional configurations, like architectural ground plans seen from an aerial perspective, they are meant to be “transformed into a three-dimensional realm, usually a palatial structure, by means of contemplation and ritual.”<sup>60</sup> Being “designed for mental journeys and interior pilgrimages,” in the case of esoteric mandalas “pilgrims leave behind their ordinary structures and journey into circular and square cosmic realms. The outer halls or courts of these Esoteric mandalas often house figures and portals who bridge the everyday world of humans and the sacred world of the deities.”<sup>61</sup> The portals of these cosmic realms are often

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<sup>58</sup> Perfect wisdom, at least from a Buddhist perspective, is best explained in the *Heart Sūtra*, which is one text in a collection known as the *Prajñā-pāramitā*. It states: “Form is Emptiness, Emptiness is Form.” The ‘perfection’ in this lies in the fact that nothing is ever created or destroyed. The Phenomena we perceive are simply unique moments or a partial view of the total picture (*svalakshana*). Everything is interdependent with other causes and conditions for its arising and ceasing (non-dualism). Therefore, for Buddhists there is nothing with an eternal self-nature. All differences are dissolved in emptiness (*Śūnyatā*).

<sup>59</sup> Denise Patry Leidy and Robert A. F. Thurman, *Mandala – The Architecture of Enlightenment* (New York: Shambhala, 1998), 168.

<sup>60</sup> ten Grotenhuis, *Japanese Mandalas Representations of Sacred Geography*, 2.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

guarded by wrathful deities whose purpose is to prevent negative forces from entry, by facilitating our ability to recognize these aspects of our own mind and thereby assisting us to transform the negative into its corresponding positive. By analyzing our own mind we transform negative emotions such as hatred and greed into love and generosity. As we gain wisdom, we find that all these diverse aspects are manifestations of the same reality that underlies everything. In sum, sensory objects (expedient) facilitate an interior pilgrimage of awakening to one's true mind.

Vajrayāna Buddhism conceives of the Buddha as having different aspects, both the unchanging cosmic principle of the transhistorical Tathāgata and the active, physical manifestation of the historical Buddha in the phenomenal world. The Mandala of the Two Realms, as previously mentioned, simultaneously represents embryonic truth and unshakable truth, or passive reasons and positive wisdom. While seemingly separate, these different aspects are manifestations of the same reality.<sup>62</sup> The Shingon School utilizes these mandalic cosmograms to express symbolically this concept and the order of the universe as it relates to the cosmic Buddha. In other words, the mandala facilitates our ability to transcend the apparent dualism around us and perceive things as they really are in their non-dual state (Dharmakāya). Here form is utilized to go beyond that which form cannot express. This sounds somewhat paradoxical, but what is really going on here?

What is ground-breaking about Kūkai and his philosophy is his identification of Mahāvairocana with the Dharmakāya. The Dharmakāya is beyond all designations and concepts. The Dharmakaya represents our true nature. The identification of Mahāvairocana

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<sup>62</sup> Picken, *Essentials of Shinto*, 299.



with the Dharmakāya is directly linked with Kūkai's assertion that we can realize enlightenment in this very existence, and, indeed with a single glance. Mahāvairocana represents the unity (non-dualism) that underlies the perceived variety. Mahāvairocana is just an anthropomorphized expedient for our original mind. For Kūkai Mahāvairocana is the truth that the Gautama Buddha realized as he sat in repose under the bodhi tree, and the truth that we all have within us. Kūkai suggests that our search for truth is not far off: "Where is the Dharmakāya? It is not far away; it is in our body. The source of wisdom? In our mind; indeed, it is close to us!"<sup>63</sup>

Kūkai is letting us know that the search for what we are looking for is right here, right now. This is where Vajrayāna in general and Shingon in particular take things go further than other forms of Buddhism in discussing realizing one's true nature. Vajrayāna is Sanskrit for the Diamond Vehicle or Thunderbolt Buddhism because it is swift and cuts through illusion. Like Mahāyāna it is universal in its scope with regard to buddhahood and, as was pointed out, subscribes to the bodhisattva ideal. However, it differs somewhat in the way that buddha nature is realized. While we all possess the ability to see things as they really are, there are different opinions as to when such a realization might occur. The Mahāyāna Pure Land sect, for example, holds that one can work on ensuring rebirth in Amitābha's Pure Land (Skt: *Sukhāvatī*), which functions as a pleasant interlude before rebirth in the human realm, where the only chance for enlightenment exists (or so some believe). By contrast, the Vajrayāna tradition promises enlightenment in this life. What makes Shingon unique is that it is viewed by Kūkai as being the culmination of all other

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<sup>63</sup> Hakeda, *Kūkai Major Works Translated, With an Account of His Life and a Study of His Thought*, 82. Here Hakeda is quoting Kūkai from the *Kōbo daishi zenshū* III, 483-484.

vehicles. The idea that Shingon represents the “final” word on awakening was underscored in the *Precious Key*. The tenth step in Kūkai’s schema was the “key” that opened the door to the “Secret Treasury.” In this way Kūkai does not exclude the other vehicles, but instead brings them into the fold and places them under the umbrella of what he sees as a greater truth.<sup>64</sup>

The idea of overcoming dualistic concepts of reality through the use of devotional imagery such as the mandala is key to seeing things as they are. Kūkai, who brought the Shingon tradition and mandala icons to Japan from China, viewed imagery, with all its deities and symbolism, as central to practice and was convinced of their enormous power to uncover our innate buddha nature. The following passage attributed to Kūkai is telling:

The Dharma is beyond speech, but without speech it cannot be revealed. Suchness transcends forms, but without depending on forms it cannot be realized. Though one may at times err by taking the finger pointing at the moon to be the moon itself, the Buddha’s teachings are indeed the treasures, which help pacify the nation and bring benefit to people.

Since the Esoteric Buddhist teachings are so profound as to defy expression in writing, they are revealed through the medium of painting to those who are yet to be enlightened. The various postures and mudras [depicted in mandalas] are products of the great compassion of the Buddha; the sight of them may well enable one to attain buddhahood. The secrets of the sutras and commentaries are for the most part depicted in the paintings, and all the essentials of the Esoteric Buddhist doctrines are, in reality, set forth therein. Neither masters nor students can dispense with them. They are indeed [the expressions of] the root and source of the ocean-like assembly [of the enlightened ones, that is, the world of enlightenment].<sup>65</sup>

We should note here Kūkai’s strong belief that “suchness transcends forms, but without depending on forms it cannot be realized.” This is an important claim in that

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 164

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 145-6. As an artist himself, Kūkai understood quite well the power of images and words. Kūkai was highly regarded for his poetry. See Kūkai, *Tantric Poetry of Kukai* (Kobo Daishi) – *Japan’s Buddhist Saint*, trans. Morgan Gibson and Hiroshi Murakami (Buffalo: White Pine Press, 1987).

Shingon Buddhism does not view the phenomenal world as something to escape from.<sup>66</sup>

Kūkai is saying that we need the phenomenal world, or the world of forms, in order to awaken, just as the lotus needs the muddy water to survive and grow. While suchness may indeed transcend forms, we need them in order to understand what suchness is, at least according to Kūkai. Awakening, from this perspective, is not possible without them. The phenomenal world is not something to be avoided or rejected, rather we are nourished by it. This speaks to the principle of non-dualism that is central to Shingon thought and practice. The phenomenal world is the ground for the experiences that lead to awakening. Without the apparent there would be no ultimate to realize as both are two sides of the same coin. This underscores Nāgārjuna's concept of the Two-fold Truth, which will be discussed further in the following chapters. Kūkai uses the body to transcend the body, language to transcend language, and images to transcend images. The phenomenal world facilitates our quest to rediscover our forgotten nature. This explains the interdependent nature of both the Womb (phenomenal) and Diamond (ultimate) World mandalas.

The *Mahāvairocana Sūtra*, which serves as the doctrinal basis for the production of the Mandala of the Two Realms, tells us what it means to uncover our Buddha nature or Tathāgata. In chapter twenty-six the Bhagavan Vairocana explains to Vajradhara, master of mysteries:

Bodhi has the form of space, far away from all discrimination. One who aspires for bodhi is called the Bodhisattva. He accomplishes the *daśa-bhūmi*<sup>67</sup> etc. and is well versed freely. The dharmas are vacant like an illusion. He knows that everything is the same. He understands the phase of all the worlds. So he is

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<sup>66</sup> This thinking is not exclusive to Shingon; other sects of Buddhism also share this view. The differences, again, lie in how one reaches the understanding (means or methods).

<sup>67</sup> *Daśa-bhūmi* refers to the ten stages of bodhisattva realization.

called the Samyak-sambuddha.<sup>68</sup> The dharma is just like the form of space. It has not two forms, but only one. He realizes the ten kinds of wisdom of the Buddha. So he is called Sambuddha. He breaks avidyā (ignorance) by his wisdom. His original nature (svabhāva) is far from speech. It is the self-realized wisdom. So he is called Tathāgata.<sup>69</sup>

From this passage we might conclude that nirvana is simply saṃsārā correctly perceived. In other words, our own backyard or even the most unpleasant of places can be a ‘buddhaverse’ if we perceive it correctly.<sup>70</sup> The distinctions that make us uncomfortable are products of our deluded mind. They do not come from outside because there is no outside in terms of Buddha mind.

### THE WOMB REALM

Since Vairocana Tathāgata (Jpn: Dianichi Nyorai), the central deity from which all others emanate, plays a key role in perceiving reality clearly, an explanation of who Vairocana is and his ontological status is important. In the Womb World Mandala (Figure 2) we see Vairocana seated in the center of the Hall of Eight Petals. Arranged around Vairocana in a concentric pattern are the buddhas of the four directions (Akshobhya = east, Ratnasambhava = south, Amitābha = west, Amoghasiddha = north) and the four great bodhisattvas (Samantabhadra = south-east or upper right, Manjushri = south-west or lower right, Avalokiteśvara = north-west or lower left, Maitreya = north-east or upper left). The

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<sup>68</sup> *Samyak sambuddha* is a perfectly awakened being, differing from a *śravaka* or ‘hearer,’ a disciple of the Buddha, and the *pratyekabuddha* or solitary Buddha (seeking enlightenment for themselves). A *Samyak sambuddha* is one of ten titles for a buddha, referring to a being who has ‘awakened’ to the non-dual nature of all phenomena, who is motivated by limitless compassion to bring this truth to others for the sake of all sentient beings.

<sup>69</sup> Chikyo Yamamoto, *Mahāvairocana Sūtra* (New Delhi: Aditya, 1990), 166.

<sup>70</sup> Hence many traditions (not limited to Buddhism) recommend meditating in seemingly impure places such as charnal grounds to confront our greatest fears. This assumes that to come to terms with the true nature of things we need to face them, rather than avoid them. Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön uses the term, *Shenpa* (attachment, or how we react to what we perceive as negative).



**Figure 2. Womb World. Source: Mason, Penelope. *History of Japanese Art (Second Edition)*. Upper Saddle River: Pearson Prentice Hall, 1993.**

bodhisattvas represent the preliminary stages of awakening, having postponed their entry into nirvana out of infinite compassion to facilitate the awakening of others. They are arranged closely to Vairocana because they are one step away from being a Buddha themselves. Each bodhisattva plays a symbolic and key role for the practitioner. Samantabhadra opens the gate of the quickening mind, Manjushri the gate of practice, Avalokiteshvara the gate of

awakening, and Maitreya the gate of nirvana. The buddhas of the four directions, along with Vairocana, represent mirror images of our human failings, not unlike mirrors reflecting back to us our own psychological qualities. Through practice human shortcomings can be transformed into positive attributes, symbolized by the buddhas leading the way to nirvana. Together these buddhas represent knowledge and the five-stage progression towards “perfect buddhahood,” right here, right now, and in this very body.<sup>71</sup> Vairocana represents the collective sum of the cosmic buddhas, combining the attributes of all the buddhas and their transformative power. Vairocana is the ground of everything we see in the mandala(s). As such the color of Vairocana is white, all the colors of the other buddhas being combined.<sup>72</sup>

It does not seem accidental that the Mandala of the Two Realms correlates with the ideas put forth by Nāgārjuna. In the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* Nāgārjuna uses the idea of the Twofold Truth to help us distinguish different aspects of the same reality. Just as the Mandala of the Two Realms postulates a conventional (embryonic) and ultimate realm (unshakable), Nāgārjuna postulates a truth of worldly convention and an ultimate truth:

The Buddha’s teaching of the Dharma  
Is based on two truths:  
A truth of wordly convention  
And an ultimate truth  
  
Those who do not understand  
The distinction drawn between these two truths

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<sup>71</sup> Miyeko Murase, *The Written Image – Japanese Calligraphy and Painting from the Sylvan Barnett and William Burto Collection* (New York: Yale University Press, 2002), 79.

<sup>72</sup> Each Buddha represents a different color as well: *Akshobhya* = blue, *Ratnasambhava* = yellow, *Amitabha* = red, *Amoghasiddha* = green. For a more exhaustive analysis of how the five buddhas correlate with various aspects (such as direction, time of day, emblem, family, Pure Land, etc.) see Vessantara, *The Mandala of the Five Buddhas* (Birmingham: Windhorse, 1999), 74-75. Vessantara provides a very helpful chart.

Do not understand  
The Buddha's profound truth <sup>73</sup>

The Mandala of the Two Realms seems to express to us symbolically what Nāgārjuna is relating to us epistemologically. The Shingon School utilizes images as the upāyic vehicle to transmit these truths and thereby facilitate awakening. In this we see that Kūkai is fully aware of his predecessors, and builds on their insights. This is evident as we saw in the sequential structure of the *Precious Key to the Secret Treasury* where Nāgārjuna (Mādhyamaka philosophy) is number seven.

In terms of realizing this truth, the Womb World,<sup>74</sup> where we develop universal compassion for others represents the world of physical phenomena, is placed on the west side of the temple. It is the place where we strive and learn to develop sensitivity and compassion toward others and relieve the suffering of other beings. Not unlike the arrangement the rose window of a medieval cathedral, Vairocana sits in the center of his various manifestations, which are arranged in four courts radiating outward from him. This mandala reflects our quest in the phenomenal world to become a Buddha. The Shingon School (and Tantric Buddhism in general) along with Mahāyāna, believe that we all have an innate Buddha nature that we must rediscover. In other words, we are asleep and have to wake up. The mandala also can be said to represent the conditioned realm of appearances. Getting back to our lotus metaphor, the realm of appearance is simply a continuum or a partial view of ultimate reality. However, without it there would be no ultimate (unconditioned) to realize.

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<sup>73</sup> Jay L. Garfield, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way – Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (New York: Oxford, 1995), 68.

<sup>74</sup> Jpn: *Taizōkai*; Skt: *Garbhadhatu*.

Indeed, to again refer to the words of Nāgārjuna, he tells us that “without a foundation in the conventional truth the ultimate cannot be taught.”<sup>75</sup>

The embryonic nature of the Womb World certainly has deep symbolic significance. A womb is a place where one is protected and nurtured until such an environment is no longer necessary and we have awakened. In terms of implementing compassion, we should view each and every being with equanimity and as our own child. It also can be viewed as a place of origination or birthing ground for the experiences that allow us to grow, gain wisdom, and understand the true nature of reality. Without these experiences the compassion we extend towards others might be misdirected. The concentric arrangement symbolically reminds us of the many manifestations of the Buddha’s compassion, manifested as deities with multiple heads and arms able to reach out to the multitudes and lift the veil of illusion. While seemingly distinct, they in fact represent various aspects of the same underlying reality.<sup>76</sup>

### THE DIAMOND REALM

The Diamond World Mandala<sup>77</sup> (Figure 3) would be placed on the east side of the temple, representing the world of the cosmic or transcendental Buddha (*Dharma-kāya*). The diamond is hard and can swiftly cut through illusion. Hence the Diamond World embodies an eternal, crystal clear, and adamant truth of the universe or the ground of reality underlying the Womb World. The Diamond World is *Prajñāpāramitā* (also known as the Mother of all Buddhas), the Perfection of Wisdom, where we develop the ability to direct our

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<sup>75</sup> Garfield, *The Fundamental Wisdom*, 68.

<sup>76</sup> Penelope Mason, *History of Japanese Art*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Upper Saddle River: Pearson, 2005), 128.

<sup>77</sup> Jpn: *Kongokai*; SKT. *Vajradhātu*.





**Figure 3. Diamond World. Source: Mason, Penelope. *History of Japanese Art (Second Edition)*. Upper Saddle River: Pearson Prentice Hall, 1993.**

compassion, like an arrow hitting a target. Wisdom is an indispensable means to alleviate suffering, for understanding the nature of reality is a means to that end. The Cosmic Buddha Vairocana Tathāgata (Jpn: Dainichi Nyorai) sits in the center of the Buddha assemblies arranged in a three by three square mandala. We might view Vairocana (literally, “Shining

One”) as the ultimate guru<sup>78</sup> who dispels darkness (ignorance) and illuminates the universe with all pervading wisdom.<sup>79</sup> This notion of all pervasiveness was touched upon in the introduction. There is a distinct connection between Vairocana and the sun, and the principal *kami* of the sun, the Japanese Shinto sun goddess Amaterasu. When we think of the sun we think of that which keeps us warm and provides the light from which things grow and are sustained. This has much to do with the popularity of Shingon among the Japanese.

Both iconographically and epistemologically the Diamond World represents the other side of the coin of the Womb World, reality as it is revealed and understood in the realm of the unconditioned where dualistic concepts of reality are dissolved and we gain unshakable wisdom. By contrast, the Womb World is reality revealed in the conditioned. However, we should not misunderstand these as being separate from one another. On the Womb World level we see reality as it appears (conditioned); on the Diamond World level we understand reality as it is, what lies behind the appearances. The Womb World represents a partial view of reality, whereas the Diamond World represents the big picture, or the true nature of all phenomena, which is empty (*Śūnyatā*) because there is nothing lasting or eternal behind the appearances we see.

At first glance the Diamond World appears to be far less complicated than the Womb World in terms of iconographic content, with its simple arrangement of nine assemblies. This in itself is revealing because it suggests that underneath the multiplicity we perceive there is a less complex order that underlies and unites this perceived multiplicity. It is often called the mandala of the nine assemblies because the Diamond World mandala is really nine

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<sup>78</sup> From the Sanskrit *gu*, “darkness” and *ru* “that which dispels.”

<sup>79</sup> Mason, *History of Japanese Art*, 128.

different mandalas, like a quilt of cosmic squares meticulously stitched together. It is the perfected body of Mahāvairocana understood in its true nature (Skt: *tathātā* or suchness). Much like the various aspects of Mahāvairocana radiating outward from a central point in the Womb World, the Diamond World depicts Mahāvairocana in his unconditioned manifestation at center. The eight assemblies surrounding this central deity are simply its various aspects. Japanese scholar Toganoo assists us in understanding the implications of the mandala: “the Diamond World is, therefore, the all-containing Dharma body of Mahāvairocana, the Diamond World Tathāgata (Jpn: *hokkai-nyorai*), who is the essence of all the innumerable Tathāgatas because he contains their Bodies.”<sup>80</sup> In other words, the universe is a manifestation of the cosmic Buddha Mahāvairocana’s body. Mahāvairocana is the embodiment of emptiness (*Śūnyatā*). There is no difference between subject and object besides their fluctuating appearances; their true essence is Mahāvairocana.<sup>81</sup>

The Perfected Body Assembly, as central axis point, is in the middle of nine assemblies. Hence, the Diamond World in its entirety is also referred to as the “Perfected Body Assembly;” everything else we see is simply an expression of Mahāvairocana because the body of Mahāvairocana “brings together all the innumerable essences of adamant knowledge.”<sup>82</sup>

There is a prescribed order by which one contemplates and enters the Diamond World Mandala. One should first contemplate the middle square or the Perfected Body Assembly.

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<sup>80</sup> Quoted by Adrian Snodgrass, *The Matrix and Diamond World Mandalas in Shingon Buddhism* (New Delhi: Aditya, 1997), 558. Here Snodgrass is quoting Toganoo in *Mandara no Kenkyū*, op. cit., p. 197. Toganoo is referring specifically to the *Ryanushutsu-nenju-kyō* 1.

<sup>81</sup> The distinction between Vairocana and Mahāvairocana should be pointed out in that “Maha” simply means great. They are not different Buddhas.

<sup>82</sup> Snodgrass, *The Matrix and Diamond World*, 558.

From there the practitioner moves to the square below, The Sammaya Assembly, then towards the left, The Subtle Assembly, and then up the left side of the mandala, passing through the Offerings Assembly and the Four-Seals Assembly. Next the practitioner moves across the top border of the mandala towards the right, passing through the One-Seal Assembly and the Rishi (Guiding Principle) Assembly. Lastly, the practitioner moves down the right border of the mandala through the Gosanze Assembly and the Gosanze-Sammaya Assembly. Conversely, the process of entering the mandala can be initiated in the opposite direction.<sup>83</sup> Again, each assembly we pass through is an expression of the central square, a different aspect of the same underlying reality.

One of the things that differentiates the Diamond World from the Womb World is the nature of the symbols that we see. In the Womb World we see a pattern of concentric squares, with figures occupying the central square being much larger than the multitude of other figures. As we move farther away from the central square the figures become even smaller. This is not the case with the Diamond World; all the figures, except for the top squares, are proportionate to one another. In each mandala, however, Mahāvairocana is the central deity. If we look closely we notice differences in ritual hand positions, or mudras, among the figures inhabiting the Diamond World. In the Womb World Mahāvairocana is seated, exhibiting the dhyāna mudra or the mudra of contemplation. In the Diamond World Mahāvairocana is depicted with the mudrā of spiritual action and will, the vajramudrā,<sup>84</sup> the mudra of supreme wisdom. E. Dale Saunders points out that this mudrā is associated with

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<sup>83</sup> ten Grotenhuis, *Japanese Mandalas*, 38. ten Grotenhuis does not clarify under what conditions entering the mandala in the reverse order would take place. Presumably this undertaking, or any order of meditating on the mandala, would be prescribed and initiated under the guidance of one's teacher.

<sup>84</sup> Takaaki Sawa, *Art in Japanese Esoteric Buddhism*, (New York: Weatherhill, 1972), 137-139.

Vairocana as an Adi-buddha.<sup>85</sup> Each part of the hand carries its own symbolism. Specific to the Diamond World, the vajramudrā signifies “the power to destroy the passions of this world; it is also an intellectual force which gives the power to all beings to attain Buddha Knowledge; for, as the *Hokkegisho* notes: possessing a seal, a man enters a country in peace. If he does not possess a seal he may not enter.”<sup>86</sup> As such the vajramudrā is an exclusive passport to the Diamond World, as the “seal” of authenticity<sup>87</sup>

### ENGAGING SYMBOLS

In approaching the mandala(s), a student guided by a teacher (or guru) would be instructed to contemplate or meditate on each of these mandalic images. First she would study and absorb the various symbolic meanings, while focusing on how various deities are related to one another and how those relationships are represented visually. This process would be repeated with each mandala, beginning with the Womb World Mandala (Jpn: *Taizōkai*) and then the Diamond World Mandala (Jpn: *Kongokai*).<sup>88</sup> In addition, she would be given a mantra<sup>89</sup> to recite and certain mudrās<sup>90</sup> to perform during the visualization. This approach reflects the esoteric belief that reality is best understood through sensory experience – mudra for body, mantra for speech, and mandala for mind (i.e. meditation). Once this process is complete an understanding of how all the Buddhas and the various symbols create

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<sup>85</sup> The Adi-buddha or primordial Buddha is the underlying aspect from which all else is derived, as will be discussed in chapter two. This is where we can see how some can conflate Buddhist and Hindu views regarding the nature of ultimate reality.

<sup>86</sup> Saunders, *Mudra*, 104. *Hokkegisho* is a commentary on the *Lotus Sūtra*.

<sup>87</sup> Mudra can be translated as “seal.”

<sup>88</sup> Mandala = Mandara.

<sup>89</sup> A mantra is a group of sacred syllables whose recitation invokes a particular deity or concept.

<sup>90</sup> A mudrā is a ritual hand gesture that often recalls certain momentous events in the life of the Buddha or special qualities such as supreme wisdom, etc.

a unity between the two worlds arises, and the student becomes one with Vairocana Tathāgata, the Cosmic Buddha. There is no distinction between opposites; there is no subject or object; only emptiness. It is the mergence of duality and non-duality. As Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis notes, the Three Mysteries of body, speech, and mind are central to breaking down “illusory barriers between profane and sacred.”<sup>91</sup> At this point the practitioner experiences enlightenment as one transcendent non-dual reality. Novice students would be asked by their teacher to throw a blossom at each of the two mandalas; the deity that the blossom landed on would be adopted as that person’s tutelary deity for the course of her study.<sup>92</sup> Legend holds that when Kūkai tossed his blossom at the mandala it landed on Vairocana.<sup>93</sup>

In contemplating the mandalic images function dominates over style. These images, as beautiful as they are, are used exclusively for practice and not for enjoyment. Unlike artists in the west, in Buddhist devotional images the painter does not have the freedom to portray the subject matter in a manner that is representative of their own personal style.<sup>94</sup> Indeed, the act of painting a mandala can also be a form of meditation, especially in Vajrayāna Buddhism. Strict guidelines are adhered to when creating images of the Buddha or, in this case, a mandala. Those who use the mandala as a meditational aid are only interested in its spiritual aspects. The idea of ‘art’ is not especially relevant. Since these

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<sup>91</sup> Ten Grotenhuis, *Japanese Mandalas*, 34.

<sup>92</sup> Mason, *History of Japanese Art*, 123.

<sup>93</sup> The idea that Kūkai’s blossom landed on Vairocana could also be part of the mythology surrounding him. As with many religious figures, the legends often make key players larger than life.

<sup>94</sup> Medieval European artists, of course, were often quite constrained. In orthodox Christianity there are strict guidelines for painting icons in terms of forms, colors, symbols, etc. But as western art developed artists had more freedom to exhibit their own personal style. We would never see a mandala painter sign their work, for instance.

images are used for meditation, deviating from prescribed norms could conceivably conjure up harmful forces.<sup>95</sup> When discussing a mandala, while certain regional and sectarian differences relating to style may be of note, function dominates over style.

Symbolism plays a key role in the mandala and here we can see how the application of symbols transcends geographic and cultural boundaries. Both Asian and Amero-eurocentric religious thought, despite their differences, are similar in that they seek a transformation of the individual through purification, and consequently their ability to transcend what is apparent to approach some ultimate truth or realization. The idea of opposites – good versus evil and real versus illusion – are themes in many religions. Shingon is no exception. C. G. Jung said that opposites must be transcended and held in creative balance and that the union of opposites on a higher level of consciousness is not rational in terms of how we normally perceive things in the phenomenal world. He argued that this transformation is a process of psychic development that is nurtured through the use of symbols.<sup>96</sup> The symbolism contained within Buddhist mandalas enable us to become aware of and register meaning. These images convey the message in a way more accessible to the viewer by communicating an entire story, or concepts, through a single image or, in the case

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<sup>95</sup> Generally the production of a devotional image such as a deity begins with the laying down of a grid pattern. Then the artist begins mapping out the attributes of the deity at particular coordinates. Things like body parts have a standard size and the distance from, for example, the nose to the chin are set. The main deity always occupies the center and hierarchic scale is observed. Modern Buddhist devotional images, however, are becoming a bit more flexible with regard to the placement of certain figures, like bodhisattvas, and details. It is important to note that the image-maker is viewed as a painter, not as an artist. This is evidenced by the fact that Buddhist devotional images are seldom, if ever, signed. For further information on Buddhist devotional image production see David Paul Jackson, *Tibetan Thangka Painting: Methods and Materials* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1999).

<sup>96</sup> Harold Coward, *Jung and Eastern Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), 9.

of the Mandala of the Two Realms, a single glance.<sup>97</sup> Symbolism is a powerful tool that “draws together events or truths so that they can be grasped by us in an intelligible unity.”<sup>98</sup>

Taking the idea of the symbol a bit further, Susan K. Langer gives us a glimpse of how the varied symbols contained within a mandala may be understood by the viewer. For Langer symbols are critical for thought; their meanings are not essences in and of themselves, but rather function as part of a larger event. They allow us to see the big picture, not just what is right in front of us. A good way to understand mandala symbolism is to ponder Langer’s example of a musical chord, which, “may be treated as a function of one note.” The note is only understood in relation to all the other notes. In other words, it is part of a pattern or a bigger picture.<sup>99</sup> Likewise we might view the various deities and symbols contained in the mandala as the many notes that make up a particular musical score, which can only be understood in relation to one another. Sthaneshwar Timalisina, in his study of language and images, echoes a similar sentiment in that, “deciphering the meaning of an image is integral to the ritual and contemplative processes given within that system. Just as an utterance cannot be a ‘word’ in the absence of meaning, a form cannot be an image in the

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<sup>97</sup> The efficiency of communicating stories and concepts through imagery is especially useful when dealing with illiterate populations or populations who communicate in different languages. Moreover, as Richard C. Foltz, there is a correlation between a religion winning converts and commonality of language. Likewise, images would seem to make this process easier because they transcend intellectual and linguistic barriers. In some ways we might view a mandala (and rose window) in much the same way we view the universality of sign language. The varied symbolism associated with Buddhist art is intentional. When Buddhism made its way along the Silk Road symbolism was key to transmitting the message due to the diverse cultures and languages encountered. Richard C. Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1999), 52.

<sup>98</sup> Ernest F. Johnson, *Religious Symbolism* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1955), 3.

<sup>99</sup> Susan K. Langer, *A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Michael Lambek (Malden: Blackwell, 2008), 131-3.



absence of imagination.”<sup>100</sup> In contemplating the various symbols in Shingon imagery the imagination of the practitioner connects the symbols and integrates them into a larger whole. In other words, images function to integrate the microcosm and macrocosm.

These views on the function of symbols reinforce the Buddhist idea concerning the interdependence of all phenomena as central to their view on reality. As such, the symbolism contained in the mandala functions as an upāyic mechanism that underscores Kūkai’s belief that, “suchness transcends forms, but without depending on forms it cannot be realized.”

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<sup>100</sup> Sthaneshwar Timalina, *Language of Images - Visualization and Meaning in Tantra* (unpublished manuscript, July 28, 2010), Microsoft Word File, 83.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE *UPĀYA* OF EMBODIMENT

The many varied sects under the umbrella of Buddhism can seem daunting to explore. The Shingon School, with its elaborate use of images and complex rituals, is no exception. Each school has its own set of practices and deities, which in turn can be culturally specific. For instance, a deity from one region can appear completely different from a deity in another region, even though they serve the same function. As we should now understand, it is all related to *upāya*. Adapting the tools that lead to awakening to the audience allows them to receive the message. To someone unacquainted with basic Buddhist philosophy and beliefs, this may seem very confusing. Different schools of Buddhism have different methods that equip us to understand the true nature of reality. Therefore, while practices and paths may differ, the destination (awakening) is the same. However, for the Shingon disciple we now know that awakening is not an abstract concept that takes many lifetimes to achieve; but is something that is possible right here, right now, in this very body.

When Siddhartha Gautama sat beneath the bodhi tree and went into deep meditation he realized enlightenment. He saw things as they really are in their non-dual state. However, it is important to make the distinction that was touched upon in the beginning of this thesis-- Siddhartha Gautama did not attain anything he did not already have. Realizing the true nature of things was like awakening from a dream.

One of the tools used by Chan/Zen Buddhists that nudges the disciple to an awakening state is the *gongan/kōan*. A koan is a question for which there is no right or

wrong answer. The idea is to detach the mind from conditioned constructs. In this way the koan has the power to dislodge the mind from thinking and thereby reveal reality's true nature. The answer given can often sound as meaningless or crazy as the koan itself, but is revelatory for the disciple's level or stage of awakening. This is a technique used by the Rinzai Zen School to realize enlightenment. The technique used by the Shingon School involves the Three Intimacies (Jpn: *san-mitsu*) of body (mudra), speech (mantra), and mind (visualization). The rituals surrounding the practice of the Three Intimacies and how this practice serves as a vehicle for awakening in the Shingon School is the topic for this chapter.<sup>101</sup>

Before discussing the specifics of ritual practice in Shingon Mikkyō we need to have a good understanding of what one is awakening to.<sup>102</sup> This requires an understanding of what the Shingon disciple realizes in terms of the Three Intimacies. For the Shingon practitioner the ritual performative actions of body, speech, and mind are tools “to approaching the ONE and are inseparable aspects of the Great Unity.”<sup>103</sup> In other words, the Shingon practitioner is said to be awakened when the perceived distinction between subject (practitioner) and object (the ONE) are dissolved. This points to the meditational practice known as *dhāranā* (concentration), in which the practitioner fixes their attention on an object, corresponding to the Buddhist Eight Fold Path where Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Effort form

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<sup>101</sup> Shingon, of course, predates Zen but the idea here is to give the reader a feeling for how different schools utilize different techniques as a means to awakening.

<sup>102</sup> The Japanese term *Mikkyō* and the Sanskrit term *guhya* roughly translate as secret or mysterious.

<sup>103</sup> Saunders, *Mudra*, 19.

the mental development aspect.<sup>104</sup> In the Yoga Sūtras of Patanjali, dhāranā is the sixth limb in Patañjali's Eight Limb schema. The object of focus can be many things. Breath control is one that is very common to a variety of meditational practices and is indeed the fourth limb in Patañjali's schema.

The object for the Shingon practitioner is the ritual of body, speech, and mind (Jpn: *sanmitsu*). Regardless of the object of focus, however, the goal is essentially the same. Dhāranā<sup>105</sup> is intended to function as a way to train the mind to focus on one thing and avoid thinking about other things. Dhāranā comprises the first stage in the last three limbs of Patanjali's schema. Dhāranā is followed by Dhyāna (meditation), and lastly Samādhi (ecstasy, moksa, nirvana). In this last stage the yogi is no longer even conscious of meditating. In a sense the practitioner forgets the previous stages that brought them to this point, such that the distinction between meditating subject and object are lost. This, is also the goal of Shingon practice, where the perceived distinctions between subject and object are dissolved. It also further underscores the close similarities many aspects of Shingon Buddhism has to Hindu concepts and ideas.<sup>106</sup>

As was mentioned earlier, the variety of practices in schools of Buddhism are different means to bring about awakening. Saunders argues that the doctrine of the Three

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<sup>104</sup> The preceding stages being, right view and right intention (wisdom); right speech, right action, and right livelihood (ethical conduct), followed by right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration (mental development).

<sup>105</sup> *Dhāranā* is cognate with *samatha*.

<sup>106</sup> The last three limbs of Dhāranā, Dhyāna, and Samādhi are collectively known as Samyana. For a more exhaustive analysis of these last three limbs see Edwin F. Bryant, *The Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali*, (New York: North Point, 2009), 303-315.

Mysteries<sup>107</sup> “maintains that thought, word, and activity are only different ways to express the same reality, for in the great Oneness reigns equality and identity in the same way that the ocean has everywhere the same salty taste.”<sup>108</sup> The ocean is an effective metaphor for communicating what is intended to take place in the practitioner’s mind when performing the Three Mysteries. It is used to describe non-duality in other Buddhist traditions, such as Yogācāra:

This is like the relationship that exists between the water of the ocean [i.e., enlightenment] and its waves [i.e., modes of mind] stirred by the wind [i.e., ignorance]. Water and wind are inseparable; but water is not mobile by nature, and if the wind stops the movement ceases. But the wet nature remains undestroyed.<sup>109</sup>

We have used the word “performance” to describe the rituals of body, speech, and mind. In terms of theater, performance brings to mind someone becoming something they are not, becoming another character. However, this does not appear to be the case in Shingon ritual. Through their performative actions the practitioner awakens to the reality that there is no subject or object, only emptiness, which is embodied by Vairocana. In this sense, ideas are the problem, not the solution. “Awakening” to who you are or peeling away the veneer that makes you something other than that would seem to be a more appropriate way to describe this process because that is precisely what is happening. In performing the ritual activity the practitioner is not really becoming something else, they are instead realizing, or awakening to, who they really are.

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<sup>107</sup> Three Intimacies and Three Mysteries are different terms describing the same thing.

<sup>108</sup> Saunders, *Mudra*, 19.

<sup>109</sup> Yoshito S. Hakeda, trans. *The Awakening of Faith – Attributed to Asvaghosha* (New York: Columbia, 2006), 46-47.

Saunders goes on to demonstrate how essential the doctrine of non-dualism is to esotericism in general, and Shingon in particular. Regarding the activity of the Three Mysteries, “it alone permits one to consider as equivalent, or even identical, meditative imaginations, mystical formulas, and exterior, material things; such is the condition required for all practical activity of a magical nature.”<sup>110</sup> What is unique about esoteric Buddhism is that the unitary nature of reality is symbolized in a variety of ways to keep the practitioner constantly immersed in a world of sensory cues. These cues take the practitioner on a visual journey of discovery from one cue to another cue.<sup>111</sup> The three-pronged vajra (Jpn: *Sanko-sho*), for instance, is typically used in ritual consecrations, representing the Three Intimacies. All three points are attached to a single handle, which in turn symbolizes the non-dualism that underlies the apparent differences we perceive around us. If a practitioner does not have a specific vajra needed for a particular ceremony, then they can replicate the ritual implement with a mudra (Jpn: *sanko-in*). This gesture requires placing the two erect middle fingers together while leaving the two index fingers standing separate, forming three points like the vajra. The remaining fingers are folded down.<sup>112</sup> The fact that somatic gestures can replace actual ritual objects underscores the belief in Esoteric Buddhism that, while external props can facilitate internal pilgrimage by their representation of certain experiences, they are simply mirrors reflecting qualities and abilities we already possess.

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<sup>110</sup> Saunders, *Mudra*, 19.

<sup>111</sup> This is especially noticeable in the case of mandalas, as elaborated in section one.

<sup>112</sup> Saunders, *Mudra*, 187-188.

Vairocana Tathagāta as we now know is the main deity in Shingon ritual and is regarded as the cosmic or adi-Buddha.<sup>113</sup> This identifies Vairocana as the substratum or first principal that underlies everything. On one level we perceive relative or conditioned phenomena with all their apparent differences. On an ultimate level these differences are resolved and are unconditioned as emanations of Vairocana. Therefore, when the Shingon practitioner performs the activities of body, speech, and mind (Three Mysteries) they are in fact acting as Vairocana. As Kūkai notes, they are harmonizing their performative activity with the grounding of reality that Vairocana represents:

As manifestations of the Dharmakāya, each and every one of the divinities who fill the mandala is endowed with the three mysteries. As a result, the three mysteries of the divinities intertwine with one another, multiply, and permeate the universe. The permeation is also true for the three mysteries that inhere in the body, speech, and mind of every sentient being. Therefore the three mysteries of the Dharmakāya and sentient beings correspond, making it possible for sentient beings to be blessed and empowered by the Dharmakāya. When having observed this meaning, the practitioners of Mantrayāna form mudras with their hands, recite mantras with their mouths, and fix their minds in Samadhi, then their three mysteries become immersed in those of the Dharmakāya, resulting in the attainment of great perfection.<sup>114</sup>

In this description Vairocana/Dharmakāya is beginning to sound very much like the Hindu idea of Brahman. This all encompassing, non-dual nature of Vairocana certainly speaks to the close relationship Vajrayāna Buddhism has to its Indian roots. Although Buddhism does not subscribe to the idea of an eternal supreme deity, the similarities between Vairocana and the Hindu god Brahma are clear. As Taiko Yamasaki observes, “the Hindu

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<sup>113</sup> Adi-Buddha is a self-emanating Buddha, an uncaused cause from which everything emanates, in this case, Vairocana. We should not confuse emanationism with creationism, however. Creationism assumes a chief creative deity, such as the Christian God, while emanationism implies a transcendent or first principle from which everything else emanates.

<sup>114</sup> Kūkai, *Sokushin jobutsugi*, KZ 1:513, as quoted by Ryuichi Abe, *The Weaving of Mantra Kūkai and the Construction of Esoteric Buddhist Discourse* (New York: Columbia, 1999), 129.

view of a central, cosmic deity no doubt influenced the esoteric view of Dianichi Nyorai as the symbolic all-embracing being of the mandala and of the universe itself. Inseparable from all that exists, this central Mikkyō deity came to represent the originally unborn life-energy of the universe. The originally unborn is that which was never created and which exists in all things.”<sup>115</sup> The difference from Hinduism, however, is “that which was never created and exists in all things” is identified as emptiness in Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna Buddhism. Therefore, it can be said that Vairocana represents pure emptiness. A practitioner who understands this important concept understands that there can be no room for dualistic concepts of reality when all differences are resolved in emptiness. Emptiness or voidness (*Śūnyatā*) is the quality and nature of all phenomena according to Buddhist ontology. All beings and things thus are empty of intrinsic reality, objectivity, substantiality, self, identity, and so on. This implies that reality as we know it is entirely dependent on other causes and conditions for its arising and ceasing (Skt: *pratītyasamutpāda*) – even the Buddha is said to be empty of ‘self-nature’ as set forth in the doctrine of no-self (Skt: *anātman*).<sup>116</sup>

There is much debate as to what emptiness really means and this thesis is not intended to put an end to that debate. However, the Buddhist idea of emptiness is often misunderstood as ‘nothingness,’ leading it to be viewed as nihilistic and derogatory. The Buddhist, however, would argue otherwise. As Kenneth K. Inada claims, “*śūnya* is far from this; it is only a descriptive term depicting the true, pure nature of the enlightened state, which is full and significant rather than empty and meaningless. Thus, the real character of *śūnya* is fullness of being rather than emptiness.” Further on Inada sums up what an

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<sup>115</sup> Taiko Yamasaki, *Shingon – Japanese Esoteric Buddhism* (Boston: Shambhala, 1988), 63.

<sup>116</sup> Rhie and Thurman, *Worlds of Transformation*, 495.



understanding of *śūnya* really means for the Buddhist: “it is nothing but a synonym for buddhahood, the state of the perfected one whose essence is beyond all forms of defilements.”<sup>117</sup> Therefore, we should conclude that without emptiness there can be no existence, in the Buddhist view. What we call existence is simply the culmination of various causes and conditions. The phenomena that we observe do not become what they appear to be on their own accord, and they do not independently cease to exist. Because the arising and ceasing of phenomena are dependent on other causes and conditions we say that they are empty (*śūnya*) of self nature (*anatman*). Hence, as the *Heart Sūtra* states “All dharmas are marked with emptiness; they are neither produced nor destroyed, neither defiled nor immaculate, neither increasing nor decreasing.”<sup>118</sup> In sum, when we experience the phenomenal world around us we speak of contingency (or conditionality). We are witnessing the temporary substitution of one phenomena for another, nothing is really created or destroyed. When we look deeper and investigate the reality of things we speak of emptiness. Each aspect, conditionality and emptiness, like the Mandala of the Two Realms, are two sides of the same coin and exist simultaneously in all phenomena.

In an ultimate sense Vairocana may indeed be said to represent emptiness in that all things are interdependently originated, and therefore empty of self-nature. However, in terms of the performative activities of body, speech, and mind, anthropomorphism seems to come into play. From the Shingon practitioner’s perspective Vairocana ultimately may be understood as emptiness, but on a relative level, in terms of practice, Vairocana seems to be

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<sup>117</sup> Kenneth K. Inada “Some Basic Misconceptions of Buddhism,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 9 (March 1969), 101-119.

<sup>118</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of Understanding – Commentaries on the Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra* (Berkeley: Parallax, 1988), 1.

someone we are intended to imitate. This, no doubt, is an upāyic device intended to communicate abstract concepts and ideas to an audience that is already culturally predisposed to anthropomorphism as has already been discussed in terms of Shintōism. To come to grips with this seeming inconsistency we turn to a passage from a treatise written by Kūkai, “On the Significance of Attaining Buddha in, with, and through this very body” (Jpn: *Sokushin jobutsugi*):

The word “body” (shin) refers to one’s own body, the [cosmic] Buddha’s body, and sentient beings’ bodies; these are called “body.” There are four kinds of bodies: the self-nature body, the enjoyment body, the transformed body, and the emanating body. Also there are three kinds (of bodies): letter, mudra, and pattern. These bodies are in manifold relationships and are like a lamp and its images in [offsetting] mirrors, each penetrating the other. That body is this body; this body is that body. The Buddha’s body is sentient beings’ bodies; sentient beings’ bodies are the Buddha’s body. They are the same and not the same, different and not different.<sup>119</sup>

According to Thomas P. Kasulis, Kūkai uses the term “body” in a polysemous fashion. “Body” refers to our own physical bodies and the body of Vairocana as the body [embodiment] of the cosmos as one and the same. This is where the anthropomorphized aspect of Vairocana comes into play. Kasulis points out that the term body not only refers to the manifestation of the body, whether physical or cosmic, but also what emanates from that body. Therefore, Kasulis’ interpretation of Kūkai’s view on the body “also includes the products of thought, word, and deed – that is pattern, letter, and gesture. These in turn correspond to the ritual forms centering on the geometric mandalas, the incantational mantras, and the sacred postures or hand gestures called mudras.” The property of

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<sup>119</sup> Kūkai’s *Sokushin jobutsugi*, as quoted by Kasulis, “Reality as Embodiment - An Analysis of Kukai’s Sokushinjōbtsu and Hosshin Seppō,” 168. Kasulis uses the translation of Hisao Inagaki, substituting certain words for clarity. For example, “emanating” for Inagaki’s “homogenous,” “pattern” for “figure,” and “the same and not the same, different and not different” for “not identical and identical, not distinct and distinct.”

interpenetration is key to understanding this point, in that the performative activities of body, speech, and mind are not separate but interpenetrate one another. This is further underscored by the previous passage from Kūkai. Kasulis uses the metaphor of the lamp, frequently applied in Buddhism and Hinduism in different ways. Here we imagine a lamp surrounded by eight mirrors. The light from the lamp is reflected infinitely in every direction. Each mirror holds within it the reflection of all the others. Vairocana is the lamp and everything else is an emanation, including us, of the lamp or Vairocana. Embodiment for Kūkai means that a single thing (Vairocana or ultimate reality) is reflected as interdependent multiplicity (conditioned or relative reality).<sup>120</sup>

The reality of interpenetration is echoed in the ritual itself. In the performance of body, speech, and mind there is a point in the Shingon ritual when the practitioner affirms her identity with Vairocana. A text called the “Procedure for Recitation” is included in Shingon invocation rituals:

Assume the Amida meditation mudra . . .

Contemplate as follows: The principal deity sits on a mandala.

I sit on a mandala. The principal deity enters my body and my body enters the body of the principal deity. It is like many luminous mirrors facing each other, their images interpenetrating each other.

Facing the principal deity I have now become the body of Tathāgata Mahāvairocana. The principal deity enters my body empowering me. I enter the body of the principal deity taking refuge in him. We are of one body, not two . . .

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<sup>120</sup> Kasulis, “Reality as Embodiment - An Analysis of Kukai’s Sokushinjōbtsu and Hosshin Seppō,” 168.

<sup>121</sup> Sharf, “Visualization and Mandala in Shingon Buddhism,” 183-184. Sharf is citing Miyano and Mizuhara, *Shidokeyō shidai*, “Kongōkai,” 59; cf. Ozawa, *Shido shidai*, “Kongōkai,” 116-117. We also find a similar discussion in chapter 10 of the *Lotus Sūtra* which speaks of entering the Tathāgata’s room, donning his robe, and sitting on his seat. See *The Lotus Sutra*, 166.

The idea of reflecting mirrors is important here. When one gazes at the deity it is as if one is gazing into the mirror and seeing one's own reflection. This is the true meaning of non-duality and what Kūkai meant when he said that one can become a Buddha through a single glance at an esoteric icon.<sup>122</sup> It also demonstrates Tantric Buddhism's affinity with Indian philosophical concepts.

Reflection also appears in the Buddhist image of the Net of Indra, expressing the interrelationships among all phenomena.<sup>123</sup> Described as an infinite net with jewels positioned at each point of intersection; the net represents the oneness and interconnectedness of reality as each jewel reflects of all the others. Look at any one and you see the entire system. This is similar to the lamp example cited above in that, like the mirrors, each jewel not only reflects everything else but is everything else.<sup>124</sup> The difference is the anthropomorphized aspect of the lamp (Vairocana) representing the point of origination. Here we begin to understand the Sanskrit term "*Tat Tvam Asi*" (you are that); beholding the image (through visualization) of Vairocana is, to the awakened mind, the same as beholding an image of yourself.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Kūkai, *Shōraimokuroku*, as quoted in, Sharf, "Visualization and Mandala in Shingon Buddhism," 188.

<sup>123</sup> The image of Indra's Net and its notion of interpenetration is mentioned in the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* or *Flower Garland Sutra*. The Vedic God Indra resides in his palace atop Mount Meru, the *axis mundi* of Vedic cosmology. Above the palace is suspended a jeweled net (like a spider's web). The sutra was especially important to the Huayen School in China and the Kegon School in Japan.

<sup>124</sup> Minoru Kiyota, *Shingon Buddhism*, 165-6.

<sup>125</sup> *Tat Tvam Asi* is a term originally found in the *Chandogya Upanishad* 6.8.7. Yet another example of the similarities between Indian philosophical concepts and Buddhist concepts, the idea is that the Self in its original and pure state is identical with ultimate reality, or Brahman, the substratum of all phenomena (Advaita Vedanta). The departure for Shingon is the nature of that ultimate reality, which is emptiness. This term will be elaborated on more in chapter three.

Esoteric practice is predicated upon the belief that ultimate reality, or awakening, is best understood or realized through sensory experience. The previous passage stated that, “the Buddha’s body is sentient beings’ bodies; sentient beings’ bodies are the Buddha’s body. They are the same and not the same, different and not different.” It is stating that the ultimate cannot be realized without the relative. In other words, Nirvana is immanent within samsāra. It is not a transcendent reality in some far off place. It is right here this very moment and we have the tools to realize it via our own body. The difference between Nirvana and Samsara is simply a matter of perspective.

If the difference between samsāra and nirvana is how we perceive phenomena this underscores the emphasis that Esoteric Buddhism in general, and Shingon in particular, places on the power of the relative or conditioned realm of reality to awaken us from our delusionary slumber. The thoughts, emotions, and feelings that we experience on a daily basis can all be viewed as expedients. All experiences are opportunities for awakening, whether they are good or bad. Indeed, the notions of good or bad are designations conjured up by our minds. The difficulties that we encounter in our lives are the result of our attitudes and beliefs, not reality itself. Therefore the only place that Nirvana and Samsāra exist is in our own mind.

To resolve the apparent conflict of Vairocana’s ontological status and the way Vairocana is viewed in terms of ritual performance from the practitioner’s perspective we need to make the distinction noted by Kasulis:

Dianichi (Vairocana) is not an agent who acts but the act itself. Dianichi, like any other person, is not what has a body; he is the corporeal process. Dianichi is not what has speech; he is the verbal process. He is not what has a mind but the

mental process itself. In short Dianichi is not a thing but an event. But since Dianichi is a person and that person is the cosmos, the universe is a personal event. We can say the universe is Dianichi's style.<sup>126</sup>

Since the universe is Dianichi's style, by harmonizing the activity of our body, speech, and mind with Dianichi's activity of body, speech, and mind we are in essence taking on a role. We are performers and just like any performer studying for a role, it is important to note that this process of harmonization must be practiced. Dianichi is defined by the Three Intimacies of body, speech, and mind, and so are we according to the Shingon view. When our performative activity is harmonized with the activity of Dianichi we are in alignment with "the universe as an intimation of Dianichi's personal style." This performative activity is what awakens the practitioner to the fact that there is no subject or object, only emptiness as embodied by Vairocana. This interpersonal process of harmonization is the foundation of Shingon practice.

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<sup>126</sup> Kasulis, "Reality as Embodiment," 172.

## CHAPTER 3

### EPISTEMOLOGICAL *UPĀYA*

When discussing Buddhist devotional painting much emphasis is placed on the idea of internalizing images. But is this what is really happening when one contemplates the Mandala of the Two Realms? Robert H. Sharf argues against the prevailing view that Shingon mandala imagery is something internalized or carried around in your head as a visualization aid. Instead, “a detailed examination of the ritual manuals used in Shingon practice fails to support this notion as there is surprisingly little correlation between the iconographic content of the major Shingon mandalas and the liturgical content of the invocation rituals with which they are associated.”<sup>127</sup> In sum, “the mandala is not so much a representation of the divine as it is the locus of the divine – an eminently visible animate being possessed of apotropaic and redemptive powers.”<sup>128</sup> It is a living image.<sup>129</sup> As previously mentioned, there is a point in Shingon ritual in which the practitioner affirms her identity with Vairocana. But what is the nature of this identity? The implied anthropomorphism that takes place in Shingon ritual activity would seem to pose a problem. We already know that there is no room for a self or a unique eternal essence in Buddhism,

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<sup>127</sup> Sharf, “Visualization and Mandala,” 17-18.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-18.

<sup>129</sup> It would seem that when one first becomes acquainted with the Shingon tradition the idea of internalizing the image would be key to eventually realizing, as Sharf argues, that the images are essentially living and a reflection of the disciple. Both theories are correct, depending on one’s stage of practice.

yet the Shingon School seems to imply just that through the personalized nature of the chief deity Mahavairocana (Jpn: Dianichi Nyorai).

Chapter two pointed out the observation of Taiko Yamasaki that the Hindu view of a central cosmic deity from which all else emanates influenced the Shingon view of Dianichi Nyorai as the symbolic all-embracing being of the mandala and of the universe itself. Is this implied anthropomorphism really a problem for Shingon? Buddhism does not allow for an independent, separate self because it contradicts the notion of anatman (not atman) and Śūnyatā (emptiness or void). Things are empty because they are interdependently originated (Skt: pratīyasamutpāda). In the mind of the Shingon practitioner, however, the main deity Mahāvairocana Tathāgata seems to take on an ontological status closer to what we might find in Hinduism with regard to Brahman (Advaita Vedanta). Section two dealt with the issues surrounding embodiment and what is realized or understood when one performs the ritual of body, speech, and mind. This section will explore the epistemological implications of that exercise through the eyes of Nāgārjuna, attempting to come to terms with what the practitioner is really identifying with.

“*Tat Tvam Asi*” or “You are That” is the central dictum of the *Upanishads*, a collection of texts composed between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE.<sup>130</sup> The Upanishads were central to later Hinduism. During this chaotic period ideas about religion were changing rapidly, at least in part due to the rise of Buddhism and Jainism. The Upanishads embody this transformation. The authority of Brahmin priests and sacrificial rites eroded as people sought for answers within. The notion that the macrocosm, or universal soul (Brahman = That) is a

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<sup>130</sup> This phrase is found primarily in the *Chandogya Upanisad*, 6.8.7.



force that lives in all things and is reflected in the microcosm, or individual soul (atman = Thou) was an important shift. Union with this ultimate reality was no longer realized through external devices (ritual) but by a reinterpretation of ritual that facilitated internal transformation.

The idea of “*Tat Tvam Asi*,” or “You are That,” is a way by which we can understand how the microcosm relates to the macrocosm. This section will creatively utilize “*Tat Tvam Asi*” to do just that. Nāgārjuna was a second century (150-250 CE) Indian philosopher who is credited with the founding of the Madhyamika School (Middle way) of Mahāyāna Buddhism and, as noted earlier, one of the patriarchs of the Shingon School.<sup>131</sup> This school asserts that all phenomena are empty of ‘self-nature’ or intrinsic essence (Skt: *svabhava*), meaning that phenomena have no independent reality apart from the causes and conditions from which they arise. In other words, the microcosm (apparent or conditioned reality) is just a temporary manifestation of the macrocosm, (ultimate or unconditioned reality).

In discussing Nāgārjuna we will look at what the “you” and the “that” is for him. Most importantly, what does it mean when the “you” finally comes to the realization that it is indeed “that” (i.e. nirvana)? On a relative level of truth Mahāvairocana metaphorically may seem to represent the view put forth by Advaita Vedanta, where Mahāvairocana represents the substratum of reality. On an ultimate level, however, we find that this Mahāvairocana is empty or void of any single or separate existence.

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<sup>131</sup> It should be noted that the Madhyamika School is a philosophical tradition within Māhāyāna Buddhism. The Madhyamika was never a school in the sense of the Mahāsamghika, Theravada, or Sarvāstivāda, etc. It is a philosophical tradition that goes beyond any distinctions among the various schools.

The *Lotus Sūtra* sought to harmonize earlier teachings and bring others into the fold in a non-confrontational manner. Shingon texts attempt to do the same. The *Mahāvairocana Sūtra* is one of the earliest Tantric texts in India, so it is not difficult to imagine that in an atmosphere where the popularity of Hindu beliefs abounded some attempt would be made to use those beliefs to appeal to those who were culturally accustomed to them. With that in mind, it is not unexpected that Mahāvairocana resembles Brahman much in the same way that Mahāvairocana mimics the sun kami Amaterasu. However, when we examine the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra* itself we will see that while Mahāvairocana may seem similar to Brahman, Mahāvairocana is not Brahman.

Nāgārjuna<sup>132</sup> stated “For him to whom emptiness is clear, everything becomes clear. For him to whom emptiness is not clear, nothing becomes clear,” arguing against critics who claimed his views were negative or nihilistic. However, for Nāgārjuna, emptiness is anything but nihilistic. What we call existence is simply the culmination of various causes and conditions, the substitution of one phenomenon for another. One side of the coin is conditioned; the other side is unconditioned and represents things as they really are in an ultimate sense, empty of anything permanent or unchanging.<sup>133</sup> For Nāgārjuna, those who misunderstand the idea of emptiness as some kind of nihilism have a faulty view of emptiness—“by a misperception of emptiness a person of little intelligence is destroyed. Like a snake incorrectly seized or like a spell incorrectly cast.”<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> This section, and the entire thesis, deals with the Nāgārjuna who authored the *Mūlamadhyamakārikā*. In Hakeda’s book, *Kūkai – Major Works* he refers to five different Nāgārjunas related to Kūkai.

<sup>133</sup> Garfield, *The Fundamental Wisdom*, 69, 301-302.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

We may say that for Nāgārjuna understanding emptiness (*sunyata*) is one way to understand “You are That.” Existence, or what appears to us, arises from emptiness. Conditionality and emptiness are simultaneously present. While there is no doubt that things may appear to us in a certain way, there is nothing eternal behind the appearances. In other words, emptiness is the macrocosm or “that” and the appearances are the microcosm or “you.” The “you” and the “that” for Nāgārjuna are two aspects of reality. However, these two levels are one and the same. As stated in the *Mūlamadhyamakārikā*:

The Buddha’s teaching of the Dharma  
Is based on two truths:  
A truth of worldly convention  
And an ultimate truth.

Without a foundation in the conventional truth  
The significance of the ultimate cannot be taught.  
Without understanding the significance of the ultimate,  
Liberation is not achieved.<sup>135</sup>

This passage underscores the belief of Kūkai that while language and form are wholly insufficient vehicles for describing what is beyond any and all descriptions, this is what we as humans have at our disposal. Indeed, the *Heart Sūtra* (part of the *Prajñāparamitā* or wisdom gone beyond) states succinctly: “form is emptiness, emptiness is form.”<sup>136</sup> This is neither an affirmation of the world nor a denial of the world; hence Nāgārjuna’s path is referred to as the Middle Way (Skt: *madhyama pratipadā*) between affirming and denying. Everything is just as it is, in a state of suchness (*tathātā*). In terms of Shingon metaphysics, we can say that Mahāvairocana represents this suchness. Therefore, the anthropomorphic expedient of Mahāvairocana is just a means (*upāya*) of transmitting the same truth. However, as Michael

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>136</sup> Hanh, *The Heart of Understanding*, 1.

Pye points out, “the practices and ideas otherwise current in the Buddhism of the time were fitted in by Kukai with the later stages of the scale, but the final conclusion is that ‘the Shingon teaching is the ultimate truth, transcending all other teachings.’” Other teachings were viewed as ‘stepping stones,’ whereas Shingon Buddhism was viewed as the ultimate truth revealed by the Dharmakaya Buddha. As was pointed to earlier in the background section, Pye argues that this emphasis makes it difficult for Shingon Buddhists to conceive of the central Shingon practices and concepts themselves as being skillful means. Herein lies the problem, or what appears to be a problem, for the Shingon School, which we will address next.

The idea of emptiness (Śūnyatā) has been misunderstood not only during our own time, but also during the time of Nāgārjuna. In turning towards the *Vigrahavyāvartanī* we not only get a clarification of what ‘empty’ (or void) really means, we also get a glimpse of how Nāgārjuna approached this topic in debate. Nāgārjuna argues against his Naiyayika opponent: “you have not understood the meaning of the voidness of things.”<sup>137</sup> Nāgārjuna attempts to refute the misunderstanding of emptiness as a form of nihilism. In what appears to be a negation in the doctrine of voidness, the objectors point out that if it is true, as Nāgārjuna argues, that “all things are devoid of an intrinsic nature” or “the things have no intrinsic nature” or “all things are void,” then it must also be true that the enunciation of voidness itself is equally void or lacking an intrinsic nature. They further point out the apparent inconsistency of Nāgārjuna’s position by asking how an empty statement can deny

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<sup>137</sup> Kamaleswar Bhattacharya, *The Dialectical Method of Nagarjuna – Vigrahavyāvartanī*, (Delhi: Motilal, 2005), 89.

the other things that are also empty, arguing that if the negation is valid, then the enunciation itself is not empty:

Since it is nowhere, it is devoid of an intrinsic nature, and since it is devoid of an intrinsic nature, it is void. For this reason, it is incapable of denying the intrinsic nature of all things. A fire that does not exist cannot burn, a weapon that does not exist cannot cut, water that does not exist cannot moisten; similarly a statement that does not exist cannot deny the intrinsic nature of things. In these circumstances, your statement that the intrinsic nature of all things has been denied, is not valid.<sup>138</sup>

Nāgārjuna's response is key to understanding emptiness as he would have us understand it. Moreover, it is key to our misunderstanding of what Mahāvairocana represents from an ontological perspective and how the Shingon School seems to contradict this. To be fair, Nāgārjuna admits that his debate opponents have some good points. Indeed in his *Mūlamadyamakakārikā* he admits that a negation is not possible if the object to be negated is not real in any sense. However, what he is attempting to help his opponents understand is that he is not negating anything:

The statement: 'All things are devoid of an intrinsic nature,' does not make all things devoid of an intrinsic nature (*nihsvabhāvāh sarvabhāvaity etat khalu vacanam na nihsvabhāvān karoti*). But since there is no intrinsic nature (*asati svabhāve*), it makes known (*jñāpayati*) that the things are devoid of an intrinsic nature (*bhāva nihsvabhāvā*) . . . . In these circumstances your statement: 'If there is no intrinsic nature, what purpose is served by the statement "There is no intrinsic nature"?' The absence of an intrinsic nature is established even without words, is not appropriate (*na yuktam*).<sup>139</sup>

Nāgārjuna is arguing that the objections they are making, that if the negation is valid then the enunciation itself is not empty, do not apply to him. Why? Because Nāgārjuna is arguing that he not negating anything (i.e. he has no thesis). He is instead deconstructing the

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 95-96.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 132-133.

notion (thinking and language) that there is something to deconstruct. He is simply presenting the notion of emptiness or voidness in the sense that all things are interdependently originated (Skt: *Pratītyasamutpāda*). In other words, things are empty of a single, separate existence because they are interdependently originated. Emptiness is not a thing in and of itself. Neither is the central Shingon deity Mahāvairocana, when understood correctly.

For Nāgārjuna causation and being must be viewed as conventional manifestations. To view them as real is a logical error that is the product of ignorance. If causation and being were real they would contradict the basic Buddhist tenet of anatman (not atman). Dependent origination, as the *Heart Sūtra* underscores, does not imply that what is defiled or immaculate, arises or ceases, increases or decreases is real in any sense. Since one thing gives rise to the next and all phenomena are interdependent, Nāgārjuna is merely pointing out that it is inappropriate to speak of anything eternal as factual because there is nothing that exists separately in and of itself in his schema.

This last point requires further elaboration. For example, what we think of as existence is the culmination of various causes and conditions. Is a river really a river? On the phenomenal level it is, but on an ultimate level it is not. On a phenomenal level we only see the river at a unique moment in time. However, on an ultimate level the river is subject to various causes and conditions and, as a result, is in a constant state of change. This twofold truth prompted the Pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Heraclitus (535-475 BCE) to

claim that “you cannot step twice into the same river.”<sup>140</sup> Reality, in an ultimate sense, is merely a succession of transitional states. In other words, in one sense the river can never be the same river at different points in time. Heraclitus, like the Buddha, recognized change as a pervasive reality. What we perceive is not ultimate, but only apparent reality. Just as there is no single, separate independent object as other in the external world, there is no single, separate independent self in our internal world. Interdependent origination is all-encompassing. Thus for Nāgārjuna it is a logical error to assume that an eternal unconditioned entity underlies or serves as the basis of everything. Reality is in a constant state of flux.

Nāgārjuna’s *Madhyamaka*, literally the middle path between affirming and denying, articulates the middle between such extremes as eternalism and nihilism. Not surprisingly, this is where we find *Mahāvairocana*. The *Mahāvairocana Sūtra* underscores Nāgārjuna’s realization that, “one should realize that emptiness is dissociated from annihilation and permanence.”<sup>141</sup> Rupert Gethin puts this idea into perspective for us:

... one who claims that the dharmas ultimately exist in themselves must either fall into the trap of eternalism by denying the possibility of real change, or, if he nevertheless insists that change is possible, fall into the trap of annihilationism since, in changing, what existed has gone out of existence.<sup>142</sup>

Getting back to how *Tat Tvam Asi* (You are That) can be applied to Nāgārjuna’s schema, when we look at the phenomenal world, we speak of conditionality (You), but when we investigate the reality of things, we must speak of emptiness (That). The conditioned and

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<sup>140</sup> T. M. Robinson, *Heraclitus: Fragments* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 84. To be clear, it is debatable as to whether or not Heraclitus ever uttered these exact words, however, in the case of our study the idea is more important than the exact words he used to communicate this process of change.

<sup>141</sup> Rolf W. Geibel, *The Vairocana Abhisambhodi Sutra*, (Berkeley: Numata, 2005), 10.

<sup>142</sup> Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, 238.

the empty are two sides of the same coin. The conditioned, however, only offers a partial view of the truth and in this way the conditioned is not equal to the empty but merely a glimpse of it. Getting back to our river, we understand that when we step into it we are experiencing various causes and conditions that have come together at a unique moment in time (Skt: svalakṣana). A river on an ultimate level, however, does not have a self nature of its own because its existence is interdependent on various causes and conditions. For Nāgārjuna, nothing escapes the idea that everything is empty of its own inherent existence, like anatman. This would apply even to Mahāvairocana.

In the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (XXIV 10ab) Nāgārjuna tells us that “without a foundation in conventional truth the significance of the ultimate cannot be taught.” This does not say that they are equal, but only that the teaching process requires the conventional truth; the enlightened only need the conventional truth to teach others, not for themselves. In other words, there is no way of teaching the ultimate apart from the conventional. Going beyond language and thought is only possible through conventional tools such as language and forms, as they are the tools of conditioned beings.

This also explains why the performance of body, speech, and mind plays such a central role in Shingon practice. To understand ideas like emptiness we need to use words and concepts, which are conventional phenomena.<sup>143</sup> Mark Siderits goes even further in his interpretation of Nāgārjuna’s passage MMK XXIV 10ab, stating that Nāgārjuna’s dialectic is not intended to imply that there is a separate anything that transcends conceptualization, indeed, as Nāgārjuna claims, concepts are the problem:

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<sup>143</sup> Garfield, *The Fundamental Wisdom*, 298-299.



Those who develop mental fabrications with regard to the Buddha,  
 Who has gone beyond all fabrications,  
 As a consequence of those cognitive fabrications,  
 Fail to see the Tathagata.<sup>144</sup>

The reference to Nāgārjuna's Two truths does not mean there are two realities. That would be a fabrication. We should not mistake his epistemology for metaphysics. Even if a separate reality were to exist we can only make sense of it through conventional tools, including sense data and language. Siderits argues that "the Mādhyamika thus escapes the charge of nihilism about rationality by embracing a kind of conventionalism. Our conventional or customary standards of rational acceptance are the only game in town, and this is as it should be given that these develop out of the need to interact with our environment and with one another."<sup>145</sup> Nāgārjuna wants to put an end to the fabrication game (i.e. the logic game and the language game).

Siderits employs the phrase anti-realist to describe the implications of Nāgārjuna's philosophy in terms of its soteriological import because "he neither asserts nor intimates any claims about the ultimate nature of reality, for he takes the very notion of a way that the world is independent of our cognitive activity to be devoid of meaning."<sup>146</sup> In other words, there is no truth available that is apart from human practice, which signals an end to philosophy because it implies "the cessation of all thought." The soteriological implications of this, Sideritis argues, is that it "deflates the pretensions of philosophical rationality," thereby allowing us to become truly selfless. To become selfless we need to abandon our

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>145</sup> Mark Siderits, "Thinking on Empty: Madhyamika Anti-Realism and Canons of Rationality" in *Rationality in Question*, ed. S. Biderman and B. A. Schaufstein (Dordrecht: Brill, 1989), 238-239.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 236.

selfish “desire” to arrive at some ultimate truth. We also need to be skeptical of our ability to arrive at ultimate truth. Searching for ultimate truth gives rise to clinging and attachment, and hence cultivates a sense of self.<sup>147</sup>

In this view there is no truth to be thought of or discussed independent of human practice. This helps us to understand what Mahāvairocana represents from a metaphysical perspective. Similarly, the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra* warns that the Shingon practitioner needs to be careful that the expedient is not misunderstood as something eternal and ultimate:

Lord of Mysteries, ordinary people, foolish and childlike, [who have been dwelling in] beginningless birth-and-death, cling to the notion of ‘self’ and to the possessions of the self, and differentiate among immeasurable distinctions of the self. Lord of Mysteries, if they do not discern the own-nature of the self, then [notions of] ‘I’ and ‘mine’ are born. Others again imagine that there exists [as the prime cause] time, the transformation of earth and other [elements], the self of yoga, established purity, unestablished non-purity, or the god Īśvara, or emanation, or time, or the revered, or the spontaneous, or the inner self, or [self in] the measure of man, or the completely adorned, or life-force, or pudgala (person), or consciousness, or ālaya (store [-consciousness]), the knower, the seer, the grasper, the grasped, what knows internally, what knows externally, jñātvam (intelligence), mind-born, youngster, what is eternally and determinately born, sound, and non-sound. Lord of Mysteries, such distinctions of the self have since times of yore been associated with [false] differentiation, and [the adherents of these views] hope for liberation in accordance with reason.<sup>148</sup>

The “self of yoga” and the “god Īśvara,” corresponding to Brahman, are touched upon in such treatises as Patañjali’s *Yoga Sūtra*. They represent the original unborn substratum of reality that underlies everything. We must not confuse the idea of god as it is used here with a creator god in the Jewish and Christian sense. Instead, Barbara Stoler Miller describes this conceptualization of god as “a representation of the omniscient spirit (*purusa*) as the archetypal yogi (*yogesvara*),” the realization that the microcosm (you) is the same as

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 247.

<sup>148</sup> Geibel, *Vairocanabhisambhodi Sutra*, 8.

the macrocosm (that) “does not germinate in the Lord of Yoga (Īśvara), since he is self contained and omniscient. This would be the case for a yogi who has realized the true nature of his spirit.”<sup>149</sup> A similar process appears to occur in the mind of the Shingon practitioner when they affirm their non-duality with the main deity Vairocana. While the path may seem similar, the destination, as evidenced by the Shingon texts themselves, clearly is not. In sum, while Shingon may appear to resemble the views of Advaita Vedanta on the surface, when we get down to the base we find that they are in fact quite different in an ontological sense. The path may seem similar, but the destinations are light years apart.

The observations of Cynthia Bogel help us to further distance ourselves from conflating Shingon with Advaita Vedānta:

Mikkyō images were not only illustrations of the divine agents of power, but were the power of divinity itself. According to Kūkai, a single glance at the images was the same as direct experience of the dharma – not a reflection of it.<sup>150</sup> Kūkai claimed the same potential for language. Doctrinally, ‘skillful means’ (*upāyakauśalya*), the notion that the Buddha gave his teachings many forms to be comprehended according to the ability and grace of the individual, implies that language and image are imperfect but necessary representations of reality. In Mikkyō, “skillful means’ is acknowledged at the same time it is erased: language and image are one and the same reality. Theoretically, the absolute relationship between sign and signifier is dissolved.<sup>151</sup>

What Bogel is suggesting would seem to be fairly significant for our study. “Skillful means is acknowledge at the same time it is erased: language and image are one and the same reality.” What does this mean? Yoshito S. Hakeda again comes to our rescue in helping us to understand what is going on here according to Kūkai:

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<sup>149</sup> Barbara Stoler Miller, *Yoga – Discipline of Freedom* (New York: Bantam, 1995), 36.

<sup>150</sup> East Asian religious traditions refer to this as *Darśana*.

<sup>151</sup> Cynthia J. Bogel, *With a Single Glance*, 5.

The Tathāgata reveals his teachings by means of expressive symbols.<sup>152</sup> These expressive symbols have their constituent elements in the six kinds of objects.<sup>153</sup> These objects have their origin in the Three Mysteries of the Dharmakāya Buddha.<sup>154</sup> The universal Three Mysteries pervades the World of Dharma and are perpetual. The existence, with the Fivefold Wisdom and the Four Forms, comprises the ten worlds and misses nothing.<sup>155</sup>

In Shingon, we can, therefore, conclude that language and images instantiate the absolute, they do not represent it. As Sthaneshwar Timalina, in his study of language and images, observes, “visualization is naming the unnamable and placing it within a frame that is beyond form.”<sup>156</sup> The problem brought up earlier by Robert Pye, that Shingon Buddhists do not conceive of the central Shingon concepts and practices themselves as skillful means, seems to be resolved through the simultaneous affirming and erasing of these concepts and practices.

The close relationship between the thought of Nāgārjuna and Shingon are apparent. However, we are still left with the issue of Nāgārjuna being relegated to stage seven in Kūkai’s *Precious Key to the Secret Treasury*. Since Kūkai and Nāgārjuna seem to be on the same page and agree on the nature of ultimate truth, the difference appears to be in how one gets there. In other words, the true nature of the “you” and the “that” are the same thing for

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<sup>152</sup> Hakeda notes that “the Tathagata is the Dharmakaya Mahāvairocana Buddha. The original of “expressive symbols” is *monji*, which normally means a letter, character, or ideograph. Kūkai’s use of *monji* in this treatise is not restricted to these ordinary meanings; objects of sight, hearing, smell, touch, taste, and thought are regarded as *monji*,” *The Awakening of Faith – Attributed to Asvaghosha*, 234.

<sup>153</sup> Hakeda lists “the totality of the world of objects – objects of sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, and thought,” *The Awakening of Faith*, 234.

<sup>154</sup> “The Mystery of the Body includes the objects of sight, smell, taste, and touch; the Mystery of Speech, the objects of hearing; and the Mystery of the Mind, the data of mind,” Hakeda, *The Awakening of Faith*, 235.

<sup>155</sup> The ten worlds include “all the realms of living beings: hell, and the worlds of hungry ghosts, beasts, asuras, men, heavenly beings, śrāvakas, pratyekabuddhas, bodhisattvas, and Buddhas,” Hakeda, *The Awakening of Faith*, 235.

<sup>156</sup> Timalina, *Language of Images*, 100.

Nāgārjuna and Kūkai. Kūkai, however, wants to take things further. As a logician Nāgārjuna, takes an epistemological approach to understanding the true nature of things via his Eight Fold Negation.<sup>157</sup> The Eightfold Negation is synonymous with the Middle Way. Master Ji-zang (Chi-tsang; 549-623) unravels the meaning behind the Eightfold negation:

. . . The sharp sword of the Eightfold Negation cuts off all idle speculations;  
The five one sided views<sup>158</sup> will be resolved of themselves, and man can gain some genuine peace.

Thus he enters the Way of the Buddha, his mind being free and unobstructed.

He is now ready to advance to the next station from this preliminary gate [of negation].<sup>159</sup>

The notion that there is a “next station” suggests that Nāgārjuna has not emptied out emptiness. Even Nāgārjuna suggests that his methods have not gone quite far enough. When asked if the state of mind cultivated by the Eightfold Negation can be called the culmination of enlightenment, Nāgārjuna explains why it is not:

The pure state of enlightenment, from the beginningless beginning, is not something that can be acquired by discipline or by the aid of some other power. Intrinsicly one is endowed with perfect attributes and with original wisdom. Original enlightenment is also beyond the four modes of description<sup>160</sup> and the five one-sided views. To define it as natural is not natural; to define it as pure mind is also not proper. It can only be expressed by negation. Such a state still belongs to the realm of ignorance and not to that of enlightenment.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> The Eightfold Negation of Madhyamaka are: no elimination, no production, no destruction, no eternity, no unity, no manifoldness, no arriving, no departing. At the beginning of the MMK Nāgārjuna describes *prañīyasamutpāda* as having the characteristics of the Eightfold Negation. See Garfield, *The Fundamental Wisdom*, 3-5.

<sup>158</sup> The theory of being (realism), the theory of nonbeing, the theory of both being and nonbeing, the theory of neither being or nonbeing, and the theory of not neither being or nonbeing.

<sup>159</sup> Hakeda, *The Awakening of Faith*, 204.

<sup>160</sup> Being, nonbeing, both being and nonbeing, and neither being nor nonbeing.

<sup>161</sup> Hakeda, *The Awakening of Faith*, 205.

Here we can see that even Nāgārjuna implies his method of negation does not get us all the way to where we need to be and we are still in a state of ignorance. However, he does make known what the true nature of reality is. All that seems to be lacking is how to actually experience it for ourselves.

Whereas Nāgārjuna takes an epistemological approach to understanding reality, Kūkai is taking a phenomenological approach via the esoteric ritual (i.e. experience) in order for the practitioner to awaken to their true nature, that being one (non-duality) with Mahāvairocana. Herein, lies Kūkai's reason for asserting that his methods are superior. At the seventh stage in the *Precious Key* we unlock the door to wisdom via Nāgārjuna's Eightfold Negation. Kūkai argues that this stage correlates with the Samadhi of Manjusri, the wisdom of Mahāvairocana. At the eighth stage we unlock the door to compassion, as underscored in the discussion of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Kūkai argues that this state of mind (*samadhi*) is synonymous with Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva of compassion but also implies the need for further development:

The bodhisattvas in former stages engage in groundless speculations. The experience of this mind is not yet genuine. The One Way, unconditional and signless, is spotless; It unfolds the teaching of nonduality of neither being nor nonbeing. When both the seeing and the seen are negated, the eternal ground of quiescence will be found. When all thought determinations are exhausted, one will meet with Mahāvairocana. He, like vast space, knows no duality of body and mind. Adapting himself freely to all beings, He manifests himself forever and ever.<sup>162</sup>

The ninth stage unlocks the door to practice, but here we are still dealing with exoteric Buddhism. Here Kūkai likens this state of mind to that of Samantabhadra, who exemplifies the experience of practice. It is very close, but not quite close enough, not for

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 73. Hakeda is quoting Kūkai from the *Kobo diashi zenshū*, I, 459.

Kūkai at least.<sup>163</sup> Each stage complements the next. Wisdom is imperative, however, from a Buddhist perspective it is useless unless accompanied by compassion. Likewise, wisdom and compassion are not much good in and of themselves either unless put into practice. The tenth stage provides the *Precious Key* to the *Secret Treasury*. The difference for Kūkai, as already pointed out, is that Shingon Esoteric Buddhism is the truth revealed by the Dharmakaya Buddha. The reason for anthropomorphized expedients are explained by Kūkai:

Without origin, without conditions, it [the Dharmakāya] is vast, limitless, and formless, just like empty space. This is called the Dharmakāya's great body. The Dharma of the Dharmakāya is naturally such. However, if only its great body were manifested, sentient beings would not give rise to faith, would not practice worship, for they would not see clearly the Buddha's face and body. For this reason, provisionally, the Dharmakāya manifests its small bodies [of anthropomorphic form] to illuminate sentient beings' minds, to plant faith in their minds, and to rouse their resolve to realize enlightenment.<sup>164</sup>

For Kūkai the Dharmakāya Buddha represents “the supreme truth, the most secret and imperishable, like a diamond,” and as such, transcends all other teachings.”<sup>165</sup> Whether or not we could have gained all we needed to know about the true nature of reality at stage seven with Nāgārjuna, somewhere before, in between, or with Kūkai's “supreme” methods of awakening to the truth will be left for the reader to decide.

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>164</sup> Abé, *The Weaving of Mantra Kūkai*, 287. Ryūichi Abé is quoting Kūkai from the *Issaikyō kaidai*, KZ (*Kōbō daishi zensū*) 1:850.

<sup>165</sup> Hakeda, *The Awakening of Faith*, 217.

## CONCLUSION

In our exploration of Shingon Buddhism we now have an understanding of why perceptions are given a central role in Shingon practice. We also have an understanding of what ideas the mandalas are transmitting to the viewer. Kūkai was convinced of the efficacy of the sacred images in helping those who viewed them realize their inherent Buddha nature when he stated, “the Dharma is beyond speech, but without speech it cannot be revealed. Suchness transcends forms, but without depending on forms it cannot be realized . . . . Since the Esoteric Buddhist teachings are so profound as to defy expression in writing, they are revealed through the medium of painting to those who are yet to be enlightened.”<sup>166</sup> Images, along with mantra and mudra, as the Shingon Schools believes, are the most effective expedients towards awakening. They constitute a whole package and should not be viewed as separate entities. In other words, one can say the *upāya* of awakening is contained within the Three Mysteries of body, speech and mind. Indeed, Shingon, as Kūkai would have it, literally means true words, in contrast to the untrue other kinds of words that may be considered *upāya*.

The practice of body, speech, and mind is given a central role and underscores the primacy of sensory experience and how the practitioner interacts with the images they visualize. This practice reflects the assumption that for unenlightened human beings the ultimate cannot be realized without the relative. In other words, nirvana is found in samsarā. It is not a transcendent reality in some far off place. It is right here this very moment and the

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 145-146.



most effective expedient means to realize it is our very own body. The difference between nirvana and samsarā, between sentient beings and the enlightened, is simply our point of view.

We have also explored the paradox of anthropomorphism that Shingon practice implies in the focus on human forms, a paradox because Buddhism has no room for an eternal, non-changing entity as this contradicts the notion of no self or anatman. We found that from the practitioner's perspective an understanding of the ultimate may seem to have more in common with Hindu concepts of ultimate reality, but in fact does not, at least when examined more closely. The Shingon School resolves this problem of an overly Vedantic interpretation by acknowledging the *upāya* of language and images at the same time they are erased. On a relative level language and images are what we use to understand the ultimate because as humans they are upāyic. However, on an ultimate level we find that they are the finger pointing at the moon, because the Dharma is beyond language and images, unless, of course, they are true words, as Kūkai says. Indeed, as Nāgārjuna stated, "Without a foundation in the conventional truth. The significance of the ultimate cannot be taught." The key term here for our purposes is "taught" as it relates to our discussion of *upāya* in Shingon as an alternative means to awakening.

This thesis may raise more questions than it answers. The study of the rich display of images and elaborate ritual that encompasses Shingon Buddhism could leave one feeling as if they are descending into a black hole of sorts. In this sense, we have only scratched the surface in our study here. Moreover, the author is not a practitioner of Shingon Buddhism, so many aspects of Shingon from an insider's point of view were likely overlooked. Indeed, practitioners of Shingon might take issue with much of what has been discussed here.

However, in spite of all that was left out of an extremely complex topic, we at least have an idea of what the ultimate goal is when one views the Mandala of the Two Realms and what it means to realize one's inherent buddha nature and the methods Kūkai's Shingon deem appropriate. Certainly ideas like unity and oneness have no inherent wisdom or usefulness in their own right unless they can be put into context or applied to a particular set of circumstances. Wisdom and compassion, for instance, are not very important unless skillfully directed. With that in mind, there seems to be much potential good in embracing non-dualistic concepts of reality. We are well aware that dualisms such as us versus them and mine versus yours have been the flashpoints for war and conflict. With a single glance the Mandala of the Two Realms may awaken us to the idea that in spite of our perceived differences we are all part of the same reality.

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