Fabio Rambelli

Lecture 3

Gomitsu and the Structure of Esoteric Signs: Mantric Linguistics and Shittan Grammatology

Esoteric Buddhism has always given great importance to the use of language and particular signs in religious practice. This importance increased during the Japanese middle-ages to the point that linguistic practices became (and, in a sense, still are) the main focus of soteriological activity. The beginning of such enhanced attention for language in soteriology can be traced in particular to the work of Kakuban (1095-1143). Whereas for Kūkai the direct accumulation of wisdom and religious merit was still paramount, Kakuban emphasized symbolic practices, that is, the manipulation of specific signs and objects that were believed to possess special salvational power.[1] The soteriological preeminence of linguistic practices was systematized by Raiyu and Shōken in the fourteenth century.[2]

Traditionally, the practice of language (*gomitsu,* lit. "the secret of speech") constitutes one of the "three secrets" (*sanmitsu*), together with bodily practices (*shinmitsu,* the "secret of the body") and mental practices (*imitsu,* the "secret of the mind"). These three secrets are the "entrances" (*mon,* bodies of doctrines and practices) into the Shingon system. These three categories structure all possible sources of human activities, in particular those aimed at salvation. It is interesting that the Three secrets of esoteric Buddhism are a transformation of the "three karmic activities" (*sangō*) which, according to classical Mahayana, constitute the source of karma and, therefore, of

[1] On symbolic practices and the differences between the esoteric Buddhism of Kūkai and that of Kakuban, see Tsuda Shin'ichi.

[2] Of course, the direct accumulation of merit was not completely ignored, as for example in the Precepts (Shingon Ritsu) school of Eison and Ninshō, whose members engaged themselves in the performance of the bodhisattva practices.

suffering. In other words, esoteric Buddhism reverses the traditional Mahayana interpretation and reformulates karmic activities as soteriological practices.

Since the three secrets are interrelated, interdependent, and ultimately undifferentiated, Kakuban argued that the practice of just one among them is enough to secure liberation:

> For the Shingon practitioner, even though devoid of deep wisdom, if he has faith, it is sufficient to chant formulas, or compose seals [with his hands], or contemplate even for a short time the three kinds of shapes of esoteric deities, i.e., graphs, seals, images. Even though he is hindered by infinite grave impediments he has accumulated since the most remote past, by infinite grave sins he has committed in the present, and by delusions, caused by ignorance, as numerous as the grains of sand in the Ganges, which he has held in the past and he holds right now, thanks to the power of esoteric formulas and visualizations, for him everything becomes pure and incontaminated (Kakuban, *Gorin kujimyō himitsu shaku*, in Miyasaka, ed., 1989: 210).

More specifically,

> one becomes a buddha in his present body even without practicing two of the three salvific activities and without a vast knowledge of the teachings and a deep wisdom produced by meditation. It is enough to visualize just one principle, it is enough to understand just one aspect of the doctrines, provided that one is moved by the most profound and sincere faith…. One becomes a buddha even by chanting just one syllable of a spell (Ibid.: 216)

This position became the ground of a later doctrine called "the practice of just one 'secret' is enough for becoming a buddha" (*ichimitsu jōbutsu*). According to Kakuban, the religious practice of language can be divided into three groups (Kakuban, *Gorin kujimyō himitsu shaku*, in in Miyasaka, ed., 1989: 181):

1. "accurate memorization of formulae (*myō*) without making mistakes on the doctrinal passages." This practice consists in recitation and memorization of the sound

of formulae, privileging the vocal aspect of mantras (*shō*); it concerns a theory of mantras and dhāraṇī.

2. "visualization of the shapes of the graphs of the formulae as when, by visualizing on the tip of one's nose the graph *on*, before dawn one attains the *bodhi*": it consists in the contemplation of written graphs, that is, the graphic form of esoteric formulae (*ji*); this aspect concerns a theory of siddhaṃ Indian letters known in Japan as *shittan*.

3. "understanding the true meanings of each syllable": the investigation of the esoteric meanings and the understanding of the relations between signs and Reality (*jissō*); this aspect concerns a semantic theory of esoteric expressions.

As we have already seen in Lecture 1, in the semiotic system of esoteric Buddhism mantric signs are constituted, in Hjelmslevian terms, by two main planes of expression (phonetic and graphologic), each structured in a form[3] and a substance,[4] and by a plane of content, in turn articulated on several levels, and structured in form and substance of content. At the level of phonetic expression we have a substance of phonic expression (the linguistic sounds constituting the phonic signifier of mantras) organized in:

(i) a syntactic form which allows for the generation of sequences of terms of the mantric dictionary; scholars disagree on whether mantras are syntactically organized, but in Japan at least it is possible to identify at least some simple rules of juxtaposition that control the succession of mantric terms for the creation of a particular linguistic space;

(ii) a phonological form of syllabic kind that allows for the generation of the minimal terms of the mantric dictionary (matric seeds or *shuji* and mantras proper or *shingon*).

At the level of graphologic expression, we have a substance of graphologic expression (the total of graphic possibilities of the system, their materials, etc.), and a form that allows for the construction and recognition of Siddhaṃ characters (the

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[3] The form of expression is "a system of empty positions, a structure, through which the expressive occurrences... [of the substance of expression] acquire their positional and oppositional character" (Umberto Eco, *Trattato di semiotica generale*. Milan: Bompiani, 1975: p. 76).

[4] The substance of expression is a *set* of "concrete occurrences of expressive artifacts... representing elements selected from an original amorphous material," that is, the matter of expression. The matter of expression is a "continuum of physical possibilities that is used as amorphous material... for pertinent and discreet elements to be used as expressive artifacts" (Eco, ibid.).

particular writing system of Indian origin used in Japan to graphically represent mantric expressions) on the basis of minimal components (calligraphic strokes).

The plane of content is in turn articulated in substance (the terms of esoteric semantic system, but also objects, cosmic series, etc.) and form (the structure that organizes the units of content). For example, in the Shingon lexical system the semantic space occupied by a term such as *kū* (Skt. *śūnyatā*, "emptiness"), for example, is marked off in opposition with the semantic space of the term *u* ("positive presence," "[provisional] existence"), and the semantic space of both is in turn marked off in opposition with that of the term *honpushō* ("originally non-created," that is, unconditioned);[5] in addition, the content of these three terms is determined by the combination of other semantic units (*kū* = "absence of individual substance"; *u* = "conditioned existence"; *honpushō* = "absolute nature"), that are in turn further decomposable.

In other words, linguistic practices of esoteric Buddhism are a concrete example of the triad *shō-ji-jissō*, the core of Shingon semiotics (See lectures 1 and 2). This lecture will explore the esoteric Buddhist expressions: mantra and dhāraṇī formulae and the siddhaṃ script, and will conclude with an examination of a number of pragmatic aspects of these linguistic practices aimed at attaining liberation. (The analysis of the semantic universe represented by these expressions is the subject of the next lecture.)

1. Mantra: The Phonetic Signifier

1.1. The Mantric Field: Definitions

The term *mantra* refers to a loose set of peculiar Indian linguistic entities. Some have an ordinary meaning in Sanskrit, but in general they are used for their initiatory significance. Mantra is essentially a sound or a sequence of sounds functioning as an evocator of mystic energy. According to Indian Tantric doctrines, the vibrations constituting the universe manifest themselves as linguistic sounds, as "seed syllables"

[5] These terms constitute the esoteric meaning of the mantric expression A.

(*būja*, Jp. *shuji*) which combine to form mantras. It seems impossible to give a simple and exhaustive definition of mantra: the term refers to an enormously wide range of linguistic entities of various kinds, used in very different contexts, apparently sharing only an Indian origin and the fact that they constitute a non-ordinary use of language. Perhaps the most comprehensive definition, if not the most useful one, remains the one proposed by Harvey Alper: "a mantra is whatever anyone in a position to know calls a mantra" (Alper 1989a: 4).[6]

The concept and the uses of mantra are closely related to the Indian culture where it originally developed and in which it plays a very important role. This strong cultural characterization did not prevent mantras to spread throughout most of Asia with the propagation of Hinduism and Buddhism. Indian original mantric doctrines began to function on many levels within the cultures in which they penetrated, also contributing to change those cultures' philosophical outlook on language. Mantras themselves, in contrast, remained almost unchanged: their power abides in their sound, and their pronunciation has never been completely forgotten, as it was transliterated in numerous writing systems "in an effort to duplicate and thereby preserve the sound" of the voice of the deities proclaiming these sacred expressions (Lopez 1990: 359).

Mantras also arrived to Japan, brought by esoteric Buddhism. In Japan, *shingon* is the most common term used to refer to mantric expressions. This term was also used to define the most important branch of esoteric Buddhism, the Shingon school. We should note, however, that in Japan the original Indian matrix has been modified by the contributions of other East Asian religions and philosophies (in particular, Daoist and Confucian), in turn interacting with Japanese folkloric ideas and practices. Numerous mantric expressions, based on countless texts of the Buddhist Canon, are still used in Japan in various contexts ranging from meditation and ascetic practices to magic and folkloric rituals. Among the most significant examples, we could mention the mantric seed A, representing the Buddha Mahāvairocana in the Womb mandala, used in a widespread form of meditation (*ajikan*, the "visualization of the letter A"); the two seeds *a* and *un*, used in breathing techniques, but also common designations of the forceful deities protecting Buddhist and Shinto temples; the mantra *a bi ra un ken*, a representation of the tantric cosmos that is inscribed on many funerary steles at

[6] It is not possible here to outline the history of mantric doctrines and practices in India. For some general accounts, related to the subject of this lecture, see Toganoo 1927 (1982: 429-469); Bharati 1965; Padoux 1990; Miyasaka 1979: 97-113; Alper, ed., 1989. The latter includes the most exhaustive bibliography in Western languages.

cemeteries throughout Japan; the formula *oṃ maṇi padme hūṃ*, very popular in the West in its Tibetan form, but also widespread in Japan; and even imitation mantras that are used in traditional performing arts. Such variety of uses makes it difficult for scholars to provide a clear and systematic definition of mantras in Japan. Many terms refer to these non-ordinary linguistic expressions. Among the more common ones we find, in addition to *shingon, mantora, shuji, darani, myō, myōju, ju, shinju, himitsugo,* and *mitsugō*. Esoteric Buddhism considers all these terms more or less as synonyms, even though each has its specific connotations. Let us try a preliminary systematization and definition of this complex lexical and semantic field.

(i) *shingon* is a generic term signifying "mantra" in opposition to the words of ordinary language. Mantras are defined as "true words" (the literal meaning of *shingon*), in contrast with ordinary words that are considered "fallacious," as we have already seen in Lecture 1. Kakuban described the difference between ordinary speech and mantric language with the following analogy: ordinary words are as "illusory and without reality" as the image of the moon reflected on a river or on water in a vase, whereas mantras are true like the "full moon in the arcane sky" (Kakuban, *Shingachirin hishaku,* in in Miyasaka, ed., 1989: 250). Kūkai also emphasized the truthfulness of mantras by defining them as "non-deluded" (*fumō*), "true speech" (*shingo*), "words in conformity [with reality]" (*nyogo*). (Kūkai, *Dainichikyō kaidai,* in *Kōbō Daishi zenshū* 1: 672.) The term *shingon* refers to expressions that are relatively short (from a few syllables to a few words) and that are believed to embody the ultimate essence (Sk. *dharmatā,* Jp. *hosshō*) of a being or an entity; as such, they are the privileged instruments for the attainment of the soteriological goal of esoteric Buddhism, "becoming a buddha in the present body" (*sokushin jōbutsu*).

(ii) *Mantora* (o *mandara*) is the Japanese pronunciation of the transliteration in Chinese characters of the Sanskrit *mantra*. Kakuban and other authors further expand the range of significations of the term *mantra* as also referring to the mind (*citta*), *samādhi,* and the wisdom (*prajñā*) of the *bodhisattva*.[7] The polysemy of the term *mantora/mandara* leads the esoteric exegetes to suppose the existence of a deep connection between *shingon* (*mantra*) and *mandara* (*maṇḍala*), as instruments of practice,

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[7] Kakuban, *Shingachirin hishaku,* in T 79/2520: 37c-38a.

on the one hand, and *samādhi* (the practice), the mind of the ascetic and *prajñā*, as result of practice, on the other hand. The polysemy of the term *mandara* is a consequence of the fact that the Chinese transliterated both Sanskrit terms *maṇḍala* and *mantra* as *mantuoluo* or *mantuluo*; the reference to the mind and to *prajñā* is made through interpolation of Sanskrit *maṇḍa* ("essence"). Probably, such a polysemy is not fortuitous, and the deep relations it suggests are an intentional sense effect we will discuss in the next lecture.

(iii) *Shuji* is the translation of the Sanskrit *bīja* ("seed"), and refers to minimal mantric expression composed of only one syllable that represents deities and sacred entities in general. The idea behind these expressions is that the essence of a deity is "symbolized" (represented/embodied) by its linguistic "seed." For example, the Buddha Mahāvairocana is represented by the seed *a*, Amida by *hrīḥ*.

(iv) *Darani* is the Japanese pronunciation of the transliteration in Chinese characters of the Sanskrit word *dhāraṇī*. It is usually defined as referring to longer mantric formulae which in origin had a primarily mnemonic function. Dhāraṇī is also an ancient, and important, concept in Mahāyāna Buddhism, as we will see below.

(v) *Ju* ("spells") and *shinju* ("sacred spells") refer to mantras as used as magic formulae and as amulets and talismans. These terms were originally employed to indicate spells used in the *zhoujindao* (Jp. *jugondō*, lit. "the Way of spells and taboos"), magic practices of the ancient Chinese popular religion that spread in Japan during the Nara period (eighth century). The translation of the term mantra as *ju* indicates a functional, if not theoretical, similarity between these linguistic expressions.[8]

(vi) *Myō* ("brighteness, intelligence") is a translation of the Sanskrit *vidyā*; it indicates that mantric formulae represent (and reproduce) the wisdom (*prajñā*) of a buddha or a bodhisattva; as such, it is able to eliminate all obstacles on the path toward liberation. The magical character of these expressions (or, at least, of some of their possible uses) is stressed by the alternative translation *myōju*, in which the formula of wisdom (*myō*) is combined with that of magical power (*ju*).

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[8] See *Dainichikyōsho* fasc. 1; *Hizōki*; on *jugondō* see Komatsu 1988: 128-139.

(vii) *Himitsugo* and *mitsugō* are translations of the Sanskrit terms *saṃdhābhāṣha* ("words with a dense meaning") and *saṃdhyābhāṣā* ("twilight language"). These terms refer to the initiatory, secret aspects of mantric language, as characterized by agrammaticality, its peculiar semantic structure, and its power. (See Bucknell and Stuart-Fox 1986, Bharati 1965, etc.)

There are many cases in which these categories overlap. We could say that in esoteric Buddhism, mantras/shingon are formulae that condense the characteristics and powers of all the above non-ordinary linguistic expressions. At this point, it is necessary to outline the history of the development of non-ordinary linguistic expressions in the esoteric Buddhist tradition in East Asia, in order to better understand the ideas that ground Shingon semiotics.

1.2. Developments of Mantric Conceptions

As we have seen, the general term referring to mantric expression of the absolute language of the Buddha is *shingon* (Ch. *zhenyan*). This term surfaces rather late in the history of East Asian esoteric Buddhism. It appears for the first time in texts that are considered by the Shingon school as manifestations of a "pure esotericism" (*junmitsu*), that is, those that were translated since the end of the seventh century by Subhakarasiṃha (Ch. Shanwuwei, Jp. Zenmui; 637-735). In fact, mantras are the product of a peculiar episteme and present themselves as the condensation of an entire range of non-ordinary entities and uses related to ritual practices (magic, meditation, liturgy, etc.), as the result of centuries of Buddhist linguisitic and semiotic elaborations.

The process of emergence of shingon and of the esoteric Buddhist episteme in China, and later in Japan, has been described by Ujike Kakushō (Ujike 1984, 1987). According to Ujike, the identification of several non-ordinary linguistic forms as mantra/shingon is the culmination of a long process of linguistic speculation and practice that took place in parallel with the development of Buddhism in East Asia. In particular, the identification of shingon and darani as synonyms, often taken for granted today, presupposes a complex intellectual elaboration. Ujike showed that different conceptions concerning dhāraṇī and mantra in Mahayana and Vajrayana depend on the

respective, and different, ways to understand Buddha-nature and salvation. What follows is a brief account of the development of Buddhist mantric ideas on the basis of Ujike's research.

Apparently, there are no doctrines concerning dhāraṇī in Pāli texts, traditionally considered to be the oldest Buddhist scriptures. Dhāraṇī seems to be a concept that arose with the Mahayana. Originally it referred not to specific linguistic formulae, but to one of the virtues of the bodhisattva, namely, the capacity to remember perfectly all the sayings of the Buddha, in particular the doctrines concerning the transcendental wisdom (*prajñā pāramitā*). In this interpretation, memorization presupposes understanding and implies the capacity and will to transmit to others the wisdom of the Buddha (internalized through memorization), for the soteriological benefits of both transmitters and receivers.

Ujike notes that in China a relationship establishes between *nianfo* (Jp. nenbutsu) and dhāraṇī, two important elements of Mahayana. *Nianfo* (lit. "thinking of the Buddha" or "remembering the Buddha") was originally a form of meditation (*samādhi*) known as *banzhou sanmei*; it was practiced as a means to transcend ordinary reality and establish a visual contact with the Buddha after the extinction of Sākyamuni. In this context also dhāraṇī (Ch. *tuoluoni*), as the capacity to listen to, understand, and remember the lofty doctrines of Emptiness (*kong*, Jap. *kū*), took on supernatural connotations (Ujike 1984: 19 *et passim*).

Mahayana texts variously define dhāraṇī and related practices. Among the numerous texts on the subject, the *Dazhidu lun*, with its typology of five hundred major kinds of dhāraṇī, is perhaps the most exhaustive.[9]

Among these various kinds, a central role is played by the "dhāraṇī of remembering all things one has heard" (Jp. *monji darani*), which refers to memory. Memory is not understood here as the ordinary faculty to keep things in mind, but in a technical sense as the capacity to remember all Buddhist doctrines one has learnt—a memory that prevents the arising of negative mental states (Sk. *kleśa*, "afflictions"), and thus constitutes one of the virtues acquired through meditation (*samādhi*) (Ujike 1984: 38). Closely related to memory is eloquence, that is, the capacity to transmit the Dharma correctly and effectively. We can thus summarize the original meaning of dhāraṇī as the capacity to master the Buddhist teachings. Particularly significant in this respect is the *Huayan jing* (*Flower Garland Sutra*), which identifies dhāraṇī with the practices of the

[9] T. 25 no. 1509:. Dhāraṇī are also addressed in the *Da banruo boluomiduo jing*, in T. 7 no. 220.

Buddha (Ujike 1984: 106). Later, the term dhāraṇī was extended to signify tools and methods that were used to enable or facilitate the mastering of the Dharma. It is at this point that dhāraṇī came to refer to formulae and linguistic expressions used with mnemonic purposes.

Dhāraṇī are not only tools for acquiring wisdom and purifying the mind; they also allow for the acquisition of supernatural powers (*jinzū*) as a side effect of *samādhi* meditation. These powers can be employed to attain worldly benefits (*genze riyaku*), and dharanic expressions used to this end were called "divine spells" (Jp. *shinju*). This seems to be a belief and practice common throughout Mahayana. Ujike writes that the status of "divine spells" did not change even with the development of the early forms of esoteric Buddhism (known in Shingon scholasticism as *zōmitsu*, "miscellaneous esoteric teachings"). In fact, *zōmitsu* texts, constituted mostly by formulae, might be a development of the "Dhāraṇī chapters" contained in many Mahayana scriptures (Ujike 1984: 21). If this is the case, the rise of esoteric Buddhism would testify to an increased importance of magical linguistic formulae in Buddhism. Essentially, dhāraṇī in both Mahayana and early esoteric Buddhism serve to facilitate the mastering of the Buddhist teachings *and* to secure material benefits. As tools of the incessant bodhisattva practices, they operate on the causal level (*in'i*) but are not directly related to the attainment of enlightenment and liberation, which is, according to Mahayana, the final result of an infinite ascetic process. (Ujike 1984: 21).

Significantly, Ujike argues that the development of esoteric Buddhism from Mahayana through an earlier, miscellaneous form (*zōmitsu*), can be better understood through the study of the development of conceptions concerning esoteric linguistic expressions (Ujike 1984: 31), as represented by the transformation of dhāraṇī into mantras/shingon. In this process, perhaps the most important step was the qualitative transformation of dhāraṇī. From a faculty of the bodhisattva first, and a tool to attain it later, dhāraṇī subsequently turned into a goal in itself (Ujike 1984: 47). This transformation occurred thanks to the mediation of so-called *mitsugo*, words that were endowed with secret, initiatory meanings.

Beginning with the *Shugokyō*, dhāraṇī as a faculty was equated with the expressions on which that faculty was grounded (Ujike 1984: 117-129); at that point, mantric formulae in general came to be considered as the wisdom of the buddhas. Mature esoteric Buddhism (*junmitsu*) presents itself also as a new episteme that systematizes non-ordinary linguistic expressions and encompasses them within its teachings and practices. A wide range of non-systematic spells (*ju*) and dhāraṇī thus

became entities of a structured linguistic field called *shingon* (mantras). According to Ujike, at the basis of this different investment of value in these kinds of formulae lies a profound change in esoteric Buddhist soteriology, in particular concerning the idea of "becoming a buddha" (*jōbutsu*).

Mature esoteric Buddhism as it developed in China during the Tang dynasty since the seventh century maintained in fact that the recitation of zhenyan (shingon), associated with the performance of mudra and visualization, produces the same level of attainment as that of Mahāvairocana. We find here the most important difference between Mahayana dhāraṇī and Vajrayana mantras/shingon. Whereas dhāraṇī are one of the virtues of the bodhisattva, who is engaged in a virtually endless ascetic practice, shingon are the primary instruments to becoming a buddha in the present life-time. Even though these formulae kept their functions related to the acquisition of worldly benefits, in this new context the worldly powers of magic spells were justified as produced by linguistic expressions that are the very essence of Mahāvairocana's enlightenment and soteriological power. As Satō Ryūken writes, esoteric Buddhism gives language an absolute value (Satō 1981); however, the supernatural power of certain linguistic expressions must be grounded on their different status and structure. (In the next lecture I will show how esoteric Buddhism operated on the mantric language to "re-motivate" it in order to ground its alleged powers.)

The origin of mantras

The origin of mantras and their constitutive processes are unknown. Scholars in general tend to recognize in them the presence of phonosymbolic elements, synesthesies, and association of ideas (see for example Bharati 1965 [1977]).

Frits Staal has proposed a challenging view. According to him, mantras might be a kind of fossil evidence of the process that resulted in the formation of human language, as fragments of very old protolinguistic expressions (Staal 1989), "remnants of something that preceded language" (Staal 1985a: 550). This view is undoubtedly fascinating and seems supported by Indian myths on the mantric origin of language, echoes of which lingers also in esoteric Buddhist scriptures translated into Chinese, as we have seen in Lecture Two. For example, the *Dainichikyō* defines shingon as "spontaneous and unconditioned" (*hōni jinen*) entities, independent even from the Dharmakāya itself (T18: 10a); the Dharmakāya merely uses mantras to "express" or "represent" its own enlightenment. Statements like these support the Tantric vision of

language as the phono-linguistic form/substance of the Absolute—and, on another level, Staal's idea of mantras as the prototype of language. Kakuban also describes the origin of language in the following way:

> When we investigate into the origin of names and things, [we find out that] they all come from shingon; those who do not know this principle are pitiable […] Since worldly beings, including Brahmā, even though they do not realize the true reality at least they understand words and names, the Tathāgata, out of compassion, taught them the brāhmī script (*bonji*). Brahmā learnt it first and then transmitted it to the other beings. Humans, gods, demons, and animals, all used those sacred words (*shōgo*) (*Kenmitsu fudōshō*, in Miyasaka 1989, ed.: 5).

In this passage it is striking that Kakuban does not distinguish between the "language of Brahmā" (*bongo*, i.e., Sanskrit) and "Brahmā's writing" (*bonji*, i.e., the writing system of Sanskrit known as brāhmī); thus, it is not clear whether the Tathāgata taught Brahmā a written or a spoken language. But in any case, according to Kakuban "secret words" (mantras) were the first language used by sentient beings. Other accounts explain that, while supernatural beings have preserved their original mantric language, human beings, because of their delusion, have turned it into a degenerated form of communication—the various languages spoken in the world today. Among them, only Sanskrit was able to preserve some connection with the original "sacred words."

1.3. Does a *Shingon* Language Exist?

The complexity of mantric phenomena, as we have seen, also makes it difficult to understand their theoretical status. In particular, scholars have been debating whether mantras can be considered a language or not. While some deny such a possibility upfront, others have proposed various theories to justify mantras' supposed linguistic nature. In any case, there is a wide agreement on the importance of the context, of the actual situation in which mantras are used.

In traditional Indian treatises, mantras never seem to be defined as a real independent language, in spite of their nature as peculiar linguistic objects situated outside the rules and conventions regulating ordinary language. Even though some mantras may have a conventional meaning, it is largely irrelevant for their ritual and religious uses (Alper 1989a: 11). In contrast, the Tantric tradition, especially in East Asia, explicitly considers mantras as the components of a particular language. As we have seen in lectures 1 and 2, in fact, mantras enjoy a peculiar status as the absolute language of the cosmic Buddha Mahāvairocana. Notwithstanding, and aside from internal, "emic" considerations of various indigenous traditions, it is not easy to decide whether mantras are a particular language, a specific linguistic form, or just a particular usage of language; in all these cases, mantras would need to follow established and recognized linguistic rules. According to Frits Staal, the most authoritative critical voice in the field, mantras are mere pieces of texts; they are devoid of meaning and play the function of ritual objects. Staal follows here a centuries-old Indian tradition; within Buddhism, Asaṇga was perhaps the most famous representative of this position. According to him, the lack of meaning of mantras constitutes in fact their significance, because only meaningless signs can somehow represent emptiness (*Yuga shichiji ron*, "Bosatsu ji,"; quoted in Ujike 1984: 135).

In a form or another, authors who deny the semanticity of mantras argue that these particular expressions are only endowed with phonological and pragmatic properties and lack syntax and semantics. Accordingly, mantras conform neither to Western nor to (non-esoteric) Indian theories on language, and therefore cannot be considered as linguistic entities or even as speech acts. (For a discussion of this position, see also Alper 1989a). According to Staal, mantras are not linguistic entities but ritual elements. As a ritual activity, determined as it is by obscure biological constrains, mantric practice is a behavior defined by rules but lacking meaning and well-defined goals (Staal 1985a, 1986). Staal thinks that meaning is an exclusive property of ordinary language used denotatively; ritual, and mantras as ritual objects, are devoid of it. He explains: "like rocks or trees, ritual act and sound may be provided with meaning, but they do not require meaning and do not exist for meaning's sake" (Staal 1986: 218). Incidentally, here Staal assimilates mantras to natural objects (rocks, trees), indicating that for him mantras are not human products, but natural, unconditioned entities—thus echoing ancient Indian doctrines.

However, scholars have also proposed a different approach from Staal's. According to it, everything that is part of a culture is significant, and can be interpretable and explicable. In a semiotic perspective, in fact, there are no entities that can be characterized a priori as signs or as significant. On the contrary, any object can become a sign of something else to someone under "some respect or capacity," as the well-known definition by Peirce puts it. In the same way, mantras can be regarded as signs, and therefore as interpretable cultural entities. More specifically, mantras must have been created with special purposes and significative goals. A possible objection to this standpoint is that the listeners (including many officiants) of mantric expressions almost never understand their meaning. Now, as Wittgenstein argued, the meaning of linguistic expressions is their use, therefore it is not necessary to understand the meaning of an expression in order to use it correctly. However, we can also argue that users of mantras believe that mantras have a meaning, even though they do not know it. In other words, the epistemes of cultures employing mantras assume that mantras have meaning. In fact, many esoteric texts presuppose a model-reader who is able to understand the meanings of mantras. As Stanley Tambiah has written in a different context, the structure of the expression of "magic" formulas and their meaning

> must of course be separated from the problem of whether the exorcist actually understands all the words contained in the spell. From his, as well as the audience's, point of view, the spells have power by virtue of their secrecy and their capacity to communicate with demons and thereby influence their actions. However, *mantra* do not fall outside the requirements of language as a system of communication, and their intelligibility to humans is not the critical factor in understanding their logic (Tambiah 1985: 21; see also Tambiah 1970: 195-222).

In other words, correct usage and shared assumptions about their validity as communication tools should be enough to consider mantras as endowed with linguistic nature; as such, they should also be endowed with signification (the signification of the mantric expressions will be the subject of the next lecture).

The Japanese case is more complex than the Indian one, for the reason that mantras are elements from a foreign culture, with a different phonological system, specific ritual uses, and meanings that require initiation (for example, even those mantras that in

Sanskrit possess an ordinary meaning end up losing it when used in Japan). In spite of these obvious difficulties, premodern Japanese Buddhist exegetes did not hesitate to attribute to mantras the status of the absolute language. And this is what matter to us. Rather than argue whether mantras conform to modern Western linguistic conceptions or not, we will focus on the "emic" positions of the actual users and theoreticians of their uses. We will see that in the Japanese esoteric Buddhist context, mantras could be used as ritual objects, as Staal rightly argues, precisely because they have been given a particular semiotic status, which we will investigate.

The lingua franca of the *Rokudō* System

As Stanley Tambiah has suggested (see previous citation), mantras in all their forms were considered by the Asian cultures in which they spread (thus, including Japan) as a sort of foreign language to communicate with the invisible world of the Buddhist pantheon. Mantras were prayers, exhortations, orders to buddhas, deities, and demons. As such, they enabled an effective communication among the various beings inhabiting the Buddhist universe in a system known as the "Six destinations" (*rokudō*). In its standard form as it came to be known in Japan, the Six Destinations include all forms of life recognized by the Buddhist cosmology: in order, from top to bottom, deities (*ten*), humans (*nin*), anti-gods (*ashura*), animals (*chikushō*), hungry ghosts (*gaki*), and denizens of hell (*jigoku*). Above these six levels there are other realms, variously described, inhabited by buddhas, bodhisattvas, self-enlightened ascetics, and the disciples of Buddha Sākyamuni. Together, these ten levels of existence form the Ten Realms (*jikkai*) of standard Mahayana cosmology.

The hypothesis according to which mantras were the language of the invisible realm of the deities is less far-fetched than it may appear. As we have seen in Lecture 1, Buddhism recognized the existence of different languages according to the existential state of a being. The *Vimālakirti nirdeśa sūtra* (*Weimajie suoshuo jing*, T. 14/475), for example, mentions other languages, superior to that of the humans, that are employed by buddhas in other cosmic systems in order to give a better representation of the Dharma. (On this subject, see also the *Huayan jing*, T. 10/279). On a different cultural level, Stanley Tambiah reports that mantras are commonly called in Srū Lāṇka the "language of demons" (*yaksā bāsāva*), as distinguished, thus, from the human language (Tambiah 1985: 20). Research has shown in fact that Sinhalese mantras contain a

hierarchy of differentiated languages according to the supernatural entity they address (Tambiah refers to research by Wimal Dissanayake, in Tambiah 1985: 20). It would be well worth pursuing and deepening this line of investigation, also in other cultural contexts. In any case, in the Japanese arena mantras were usually considered the language of the Buddha, but it is not clear whether there were hierarchical differences among them according to the level of the invisible presence they were used to communicate with. The particular status of mantras in East Asia can also be inferred from the symbolism traditionally associated with the first Buddhists who brought them there.

The first people who propagated Buddhism in China were called *dharmakathika* or *dharmabhāṇaka* (Ch. *fashi*, Jp. *hosshi*). Mostly originary from Central Asia, one of the principal crossroads of the ancient world, these Buddhist "missionaries" may have made a strong impression in China (not always and not necessarily in a positive sense...) also because of their mastery of several disciplines, their memory, the ease with which they handled often abstruse doctrines, and the eloquence they displayed (Ujike 1984: 77-81). The oldest Mahayana sutras present *fashi* as envoys of the Buddha, sacred people, sometimes even as "living buddhas" (see for example the *Lotus Sutra*, chapter "Hosshibon"). Ujike Kakushō has showed that those scriptures were influential to establish a close relationship between these preachers and mantric expressions. Ujike even argues that the conceptual core of dhāraṇī, as they are understood in East Asia, may have been elaborated precisely by the *fashi* in China (Ujike 1984: 80).

In order to protect themselves *fashi* used charms and spells to summon the deities. This practice is described in detail in the Daijikkyō (Ch. *Daiji jing* fasc. 5, T. 13 nr. 397). Now, one of the possible ways to communicate with the deities is to speak their own language. In fact, one of the skills that were originally defined as dhāraṇī was the capacity to understand the tongues of the deities (On this point, see in particular *Daiji jing* fasc. 2, "Darani jizaiō bosatsu bon"). It was easy, thus, to see mantras as expressions of a "foreign language"—the language of the supernatural world. This attitude was later transmitted to Japan with the arrival of Buddhism (Ujike 1984: 86). It is perhaps worth noting that, in the collective imaginary of China and Japan, foreigners were often envisioned as not clearly distinct from beings from the other world, of which they could be the messengers and with which they might communicate. (On the ideas concerning foreigners (*ijin*) in traditional Japanese folkloric culture, see for example Komatsu 1985, 1989; Yamaguchi 1975.) In other words, the boundaries between the other world (*takai*)

and the elsewhere (*ikai*) were often blurred. A study of the communication processes with the supernatural could offer important insights on the ways in which Japanese culture employed signs and language to interact with the sacred.

1.4. The *Gomitsu* Language-Game

Esoteric Buddhist culture in Japan considered mantras as endowed with meaning; they were (and, to an extent, still are) used in religious rituals as ways to communicate with other beings within the Buddhist cosmos and to attain non-ordinary states of wisdom and awareness. We could say with Alper that mantras are "machines" producing particular states of consciousness, a transformation of knowledge, a different image of reality (Alper 1989b: 258). Their use is constrained by epistemic rules and principles.

In order to overcome the impasse to which discussions on mantras' linguisticity lead, it may be useful to reformulate the entire question in semiotic terms. Semiotics in fact deals with the abstract structure of signification systems, but also with processes in which users apply rules from these systems in order to communicate, and to criticize and modify the structure of signification systems itself. It is possible to show that mantric expressions are not just mere semiosic devices, but constitute a semiotic system. Within the semiotic system of esoteric Buddhism, for instance, mantric signs are constituted, in Hjelmslevian terms, by two main levels of the expression (a phonological and a graphic levels), each organized into a form and a substance, and by a plan of the content, in turn articulated on many levels each of which is structured in form and substance of the contents.

Phonology

Despite the importance attributed by esoteric Buddhism to the study of Sanskrit for a correct pronunciation of mantras, the custom to transcribe them in Chinese characters read in the Japanese fashion resulted in the fact that at the basis of Japanese shingon/mantras today lies not the Sanskrit phonological system, but that of the Japanese language.

The phonology of shingon/mantras includes a whole range of principles, handed down form master to disciple, which govern for each linguistic entity not only

pronunciation, intonation, intensity of voice, rhythm and melodic structure of the utterance, but also breathing and bodily posture of the performer. These rules are much stricter and more detailed than those of ordinary language. Frits Staal proposes to take into account "the importance of musical categories for explaining some of the characteristics that distinguish mantras from language," since, according to him, "mantras cannot be understood unless their musical character is taken into account" (Staal 1989: 65). This is obviously true in the case of Japanese Buddhist music known as Shōmyō. The term *shōmyō*, a translation of the Sanskrit *śabda-vidyā*, "body of knowledge concerning language," originally indicated grammar in general, and the rules for the correct pronunciation of mantras in particular. However, in Japan it developed into a full-fledged musical genre with its own theory, repertoire, and performance techniques. (On Shōmyō, see Harich-Schneider 1973; Kushida 1964: 409-480). The approach suggested by Staal is very useful to understand the functioning of shingon in complexs rituals integrating liturgical, musical, linguistic, and artistic-visual elements. However, it should be emphasized that music explains only some aspects of mantras.

Syntax

It is not clear whether mantras follow syntactical rules. Also in this regard, interpretations vary widely. On one side, Frits Staal denies such a possibility, while on the opposite side Donald Lopez and Stanley Tambiah are ready to admit it. Buddhist mantras and dhāraṇī constitute a fixed repertoire of expressions that has not been changed for centuries. (In the past, new rituals and new formulae kept proliferating: see Hayami 1975, 1987; many premodern rituals, however, are now obsolete and are usually not performed.) Linguistic categories such as competence and performance lose, in this context, their relevance: in the case of mantras competence consists in the knowledge of the status of mantras and the rules for their correct performance, whereas performance is in turn simply the capacity to perform already existing formulae correctly in codified contexts. There is usually no margin for linguistic creativity and performing originality in mantra rituals (even though, however, the voice of the performer can be a factor of aesthetic enjoyment). Perhaps a taxonomical, distributive and componential study of mantric formulas could contribute to determine whether structural and distributive regularities also correspond to functional and semantic ones.

In any case, in East Asian, and in Japan in particular, the fact that lexicons existed without extensive grammatical information suggests that knowledge of Sanskrit was almost non-existent.[10] Even passages written by Kūkai in Sanskrit contain mistakes. As Thomas Hare wrote, summarizing the opinions of many scholars, "despite… his impressive accomplishment with the Sanskrit lexicon, Kūkai seems never to have gained a solid understanding of Sanskrit grammar" (Hare 1990: 265).

The dhāraṇī of Amida is a good example of the transformation underwent to in Japan by Indian mantras. In the original Sanskrit form, the dhāraṇī has an ordinary language meaning and can be understood, at least on a superficial level, even without esoteric instructions:

> Oṃ amṛta teje hara hūṃ (Sanskrit original)
> On amirita teizei kara un (Japanese transliteration)
>
> "Oh venerable one who are endowed with the qualities of the amṛta (i.e., the food of immortality), take us away (=save us)!"[11]

Japanese commentators, however, faced with an esoteric formula they had to interpret without a clear knowledge of its original language, attributed a series of meanings to each sequence of syllables, usually corresponding to one or two Sanskrit words. These meanings appear to be devoid of clear syntactic connections.

In any case, it is possible to identify some syntactic patterns in mantric formulas. The shingon linguistic space is generally marked by formulas such as *namu* or *nōmaku* (Sk. *namaḥ*) or *on* (*oṃ*) at the beginning, and *un* (Sk. *hūṃ*) or *sowaka* (*svāhā*) at the end. Within these sacred linguistic boundaries, linguistic "seeds" (Sk. *bija*, Jp. *shuji*) of deities, invocations and concepts and images are inserted, more or less connected by a single theme. Shingon are a sort of "scrap-book language," in which a series of concepts and doctrinal elements are juxtaposed and/or superimposed. Not at random, though. The meanings that are attributed to each single term are used in order to give a sense of necessity to the succession of syllables. As we will discuss in detail in the next lecture, the mantra *a bi ra un ken* corresponds to the soteriological phases of becoming a buddha

[10] Of course, there were exceptions, even notable ones such as Xuancang. On the study of Sanskrit in China and Japan, see van Gulik 1980; see also Boden 1978.

[11] Translation based on Takubo and Kanayama 1981: 219. A full analysis of the esoteric meaning of the mantra in Japan will be presented in the next lecture.

in the present body (*sokushin jōbutsu*), whereas the two dhāraṇī of Amida become vocal and grammatological inscriptions of the process leading one to be reborn in Amida's Pure Land (*gokuraku jōdo*).

We could say that the syntax of shingon and darani consists in a set of rules establishing a sacred linguistic space through the use of particular and fixed expressions, as well as a code associating by analogy a sequence of sounds to a meditative or salvational process. Sounds and the steps of soteriology are identified through the mediation of their content that is attributed to the elements of the mantras. In this manner, it was (is) not impossible to create new mantras on the basis of a set of doctrines, deities, and soteriological goals.

Semantics

Frits Staal drastically denies that mantras have a meaning (Staal 1986, 1989). In the case of shingon, however, each expression is endowed with a definite, albeit complex, meaning. According to Hjelmslev, the two planes of a verbal language are not in conformity, that is, they are not in an isomorphic relation. In other words, the correlation between units of the expression and units of the content that establishes the sign is not term to term and is, in any case, arbitrary. Hjelmslev excludes from the semiotic field those systems, known as monoplanary or symbolic, in which the form of the expression coincides with the form of the content. (Hjelmslev 1943). Umberto Eco, in contrast, argues that that which characterizes a semiotic system is not monoplanarity, but interpretability (Eco 1975: 128-129). Now, mantras show many cases of conformity. A good example has been offered by Lopez, according to whom the famous mantra that concludes the *Heart Sutra* (Sk. *Prajñā pāramitā hṛdaya sūtra*, Jp. *Hannya haramitta shingyō*, commonly known as *Hannya shingyō*, might constitute "an encoded summary of the preceding sutra" (Lopez 1990: 367). Lopez calls it "an allegory," since it "simulates the path by providing an encoded narrative" (Ibid. 368). (For a detailed analysis of this sutra based on Tibetan commentaries, see also Lopez 1997). In rigorously Hjelmslevian terms, this is enough to deny their linguisticity. Nevertheless, if we follow Eco, the denial of linguisticity does not affect their interpretability and therefore their nature as a semiotic system.

Pragmatics

Mantric expressions are not used in everyday communicational interactions; their field of use is ritual, meditation, and magic. Mantras are tools for the production, conservation and transmission of the esoteric knowledge; they also concur in the transformation of such knowledge into power upon reality through illocutionary and performative acts. Stanley Tambiah was perhaps the first to emphasize this important fact in his studies on formulas of potency in Thai Buddhism (Tambiah 1985, 1970). More recently, Sakaki Kōkan has pointed out that, to the ancient Japanese, ritual recitation of sutras and the exegetical explanation of their contents were ways to transform into magical potency the fundamental concepts of Buddhism (Sasaki 1987: 54). The same is true also for shingon, signs that are "receptacles of magic power" (Ibid.: 62). Robert Duquenne has also indicated that the power attributed to sutra chanting is the result of a process of "daranization" of texts, that is, the attribution to an entire scripture of the features of the mantras it contains.[12]

The practice of shingon does not take place in a spontaneous or random fashion, but is, at least in principle, a rule-governed behavior: (i) it is intentional, endowed with meaning, and the result of learning; (ii) it depends on the context and on rules, both tacit and explicit; (iii) it can be compared to a move in board game: it presupposes knowledge and acceptance of rules and principles, and it is carried out by performing codified actions aimed at certain results, codified as well. More specifically, in religious rituals in general the role of shingon is based primarily on their sound and the contact that through it they establish with the invisible world of the deities, as a sort of lingua franca of the Buddhist cosmos. The concepts and the forces that they evoke and the results they aim at depend both on mantras' direct relation with the absolute reality and the fact that they can be understood (and obeyed) by beings in the Six Destinations and the Ten Realms. In meditation, shingon are decomposed in their constitutive entities, each of which is analyzed according to its multiple esoteric meanings. In other cases, shingon can be used as supports for mediation and trance-like states, as talismans (as in the Tibetan *gzuns*), or for apotropaic purposes (protection from diseases and evil spirits). For all these reasons, we can reformulate the esoteric position on the issue by considering shingon as part of the language game—or, more precisely, of the "semiotic

[12] Robert Duquenne, lecture given in Samsoe, Denmark, August 1989.

game" incessantly played on a cosmic level by the Buddha Mahāvairocana in what is known as "the preaching by the Dharmakāya" (Jp. *hosshin seppō*, see Lecture 2).[13]

2. Shittan: The Graphologic Signifier

2.1. Shittan, the Esoteric Script

In origin, mantric expressions only had a vocal function; they were chanted, recited, mumbled, or their pronunciation was simulated in one's mind, but in any case it was their sound that had a primary importance. When Buddhist texts containing mantras, dhāraṇī, or other spells, where translated into Chinese, these formulae were left untranslated; their pronunciation was preserved as much as possible through transcription employing Chinese characters used phonetically. Mantric expression were thus, for the Chinese, the Koreans, and the Japanese, the sounds of a foreign language that was used primarily in order to communicate with the Buddhist deities.

With the development of esoteric Buddhism, the Indian script in which Buddhist texts were written began to acquire importance in China and especially in Japan. *Shittan* (Ch. *xitan*) is the phonetic transcription of the Sanskrit *siddhaṃ*, nominative singular neuter of the passive past participle of the verbal root *sidh*, "to complete." According to as common etymological explanation, *siddhaṃ* means "that which has been completed," "that which is complete," but also, by extension, "something perfect." Within esoteric Buddhism "that which is complete, perfect" refers to that which is expressible linguistically through the siddhaṃ writing system, as opposed to "that which is not complete," which as a consequence is deemed "incomplete," "imperfect." Another etymology, more prosaic (but perhaps closer to the truth…), is reported by van Gulik. According to it, *siddhaṃ* was originally a popular term used to refer to the alphabet. It derived from the custom of ancient calligraphy teachers to encourage their pupils by inscribing on their writing tablets the augural expressions *siddhaṃ*, "may you be successful!" or *siddhir-astu*, "good luck!" (van Gulik 1980: 54-55).

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[13] Harvey Alper was perhaps the first to apply to mantric phenomena the idea he took from Wittgenstein of language game: Alper 1989.

Shittan refers to a Gupta variant of the Brāhmī writing system that was used in India between the fourth and eighth centuries; today it is preserved and used only in Japan. In fact, the oldest texts in siddhaṃ characters existing today in the world are the *Heart Sutra* (*Hannya shingyō*, Sk. *Prajñā-pāramitā-hṛdaya-sūtra*) and the dhāraṇī of the Top of Buddha's Head (*Butchōson darani*, Sk. *Uṣṇīṣavijayā dhāraṇī*), dating from the seventh century; they are written on palm-tree leaves and are preserved at the Hōryūji temple near Nara in Japan.[14] The Japanese government has officially designated them as National Treasures (*kokuhō*). Strictly speaking, shittan only refers to vowels (Jp. *mata*, Sk. *matṛkā*) as they are classified in the *Xitan zhiji* (Jp. *Shittan jiki*), a text of the Tang period (618-912). In time, however, shittan also came to designate the consonants (Jp. *taimon*, Sk. *vyañjana*) and the compounds of two or three phonemes; at that point, all possible combinations of this script were called shittan. The shittan alphabet was composed of forty-two, forty-six, forty-seven, forty-nine, fifty, or fifty-one fundamental graphs. In particular, the most common versions were forty-two or forty-seven syllables in Mahayana schools, and fifty syllables in esoteric Buddhism. It is in this sense, as a general appellation for the graphic units of the Indian alphabet used in East-Asia an in particular in Japan, that the term shittan is commonly used today by scholars and practitioners.

For several centuries, Chinese translations of Buddhist texts did not include any non-Chinese character; even those words that were deemed as untranslatable were transliterated by using Chinese characters not for their meaning but for their sound. The term *xitan* does appear in some texts dating back to very early history of Buddhism in China; a few of them, describe features of the Indian language and writing system. Even in these cases, however, no siddhaṃ character was ever printed.[15]

The situation did not change with the new translations of the Tang period. Differently from earlier translations, which were often based on texts in vernacular languages and in Central Asian scripts, the Tang translations were carried out almost exclusively on Sanskrit sources written in Gupta characters; the translators had a greater knowledge of the Indian classical language. Yet, no Brāhmī character appears in the Chinese versions. The first Chinese-Sanskrit lexicon, entitled *Fan'yu qianzi wen* (Jp. *Bongo*

[14] For a reproduction of these texts, see Takubo and Kanayama 1981: 55-57.

[15] For a list of early Buddhist texts translated into Chinese dealing with Indian linguistic issues, see Takubo and Kanayama 1981: 61-66.

senjimon), was compiled by Yiijing (635-713) toward the end of the seventh century. However, this important work is a list of Sanskrit words (it does not contain sentences) written in Chinese transliteration: again, no Sanskrit letters were used. We may conclude that during all these centuries, Indian and Central Asian characters were treated, coherently with standard Buddhist conceptions of language, as mere tools to transmit the sense of the spoken words of Buddha and other masters or to reproduce the sound of mantras. Indian characters do not appear to have had any specific significance beyond these purely instrumental functions.

This situation began to change with the emergence, toward the end of the seventh century, of a more systematic form of esoteric Buddhism, known in Chinese as the Zhen'yan school (Jp. Shingon). The esoteric teachings, diffused in China by the three charismatic figures of Subhakarasiṃha (Ch. Shanwuwei, 637-735), Vajrabodhi (Ch. Jinggangzhi, 669-741), and Amoghavajra (Ch. Bukong, 705-774), attributed a new and special status to writing. To them, the transliterated sound of mantras was no longer enough; they required a higher phonetic accuracy that could only be guaranteed by the study of original texts—and, therefore, of the Sanskrit writing system. One of the most striking features of the texts in the esoteric canon, in fact, is the presence of several passages written in Siddhaṃ characters, either mantric seeds or longer dhāraṇī, together with their transliterations and explanations in Chinese. Furthermore, the Zhen'yan school developed religious practices which integrated mantra chanting and the visualization of Siddhaṃ characters in which the mantras were written. Thus, Siddhaṃ, which until that moment were known only to a limited circle of experts engaged in translations, became an indispensable subject of study for monks in general (at least, those interested in esoteric Buddhism).

The term xitan seems to have been used predominantly during the Tang period; the most common appellation in the Northern Song dynasty was *fanzhi* (Jp. *bonji*), a translation of the Sanskrit Brāhmī. During the Song period, however, the most used Indian characters in China were no longer the Gupta, but the Nagarī. Even though the use of Gupta-type xitan is reported until the Ming period (1368-1644), the Llan-tsa script of Indo-Tibetan origin began to gain prominence since the Yuan period (1271-1341), to the point that by the Qing period (1662-1912) it was the only writing system used in Buddhist ritual in China.[16] Significantly, however, Indian characters used in China after

[16] On the history of the developments of Buddhist esoteric scripts in China, see Takubo and Kanayama 1981.

the Tang period had only a limited impact in Japan where, as I have already mentioned, Gupta-type shittan have always been the most widely used.

It appears that texts written in Indian characters were brought to Japan at least at the beginning of the seventh century. In particular, the two scriptures on palm-tree leaves preserved at the Hōryūji temple are reported to have arrived in 607. (For photographic reproduction of these two texts with transliteration in Roman characters, see Takubo and Kanayama 1981: 44-45.) Other material was later brought by the Chinese monk Jianzhen (Jp. Ganjin, 688-763) when he arrived in Japan in 754. In any case, the Indian script most likely arrived to Japan from China, and there are no records of a direct transmission from India. However, chronicles report that a monk from South India, Bodhisena (Jp. Bodaisenna) came to Japan in 736, in occasion of the inauguration ceremony of the Tōdaiji temple in Nara. Bodhisena was accompanied by one of his disciples, a musician from south-east Asia named Fozhe (Jp. Buttetsu). Little is known about these two men, but it is certain that they came to Japan from China and not directly from India. Bodhisena was asked to teach a Sanskrit course at the university of the Japanese capital, Heijō (present day Nara); we know that he actually taught a few dhāraṇī.

The study of shittan in Japan began with the introduction in the archipelago of the new form of esoteric Buddhism that was developing in China in the mid-Tang period which, as we have seen, gave great importance to the original characters in which mantras were written. According to the tradition, the Tendai monk Saichō (767-822) was the first to bring to Japan esoteric Buddhist texts written in shittan characters with Chinese transcription. However, shittan did not play a major role in his thought and religious practice. In fact, many works on shittan attributed to Saichō are most likely apocripha written centuries after his death.

The Shingon patriarch Kūkai (774-835) is unanimously considered to have been the real founder of the Japanese tradition of siddhaṃ studies, a field known today as *shittangaku*. Kūkai understood it as a full-fledged scholastic and religious discipline dealing with the pronunciation, the writing methods, the esoteric meanings and ritual uses of the Indian graphs used to write mantras.. A section of his *Go-shōrai mokuroku*, an annotated list of the texts and all the items he brought back to Japan from his study travel to China, is entitled "Shittan" and contains forty-two titles; in it, the author explains the importance of shittan for a correct pronunciation and a full understanding

of mantras.[17] Kūkai also authored an important theoretical text on shittan, entitled *Bonji shittan jimo narabini shakugi*, and of manuals on the writing and pronunciation of the Indian characters.

After Kūkai, all the most important Japanese monks who went to China to study went back to their country with several texts written in shittan characters. All the material concerning shittan existing in Japan at the end of the ninth century was collected and systematized in 884 by the Tendai monk Annen (ca. 841-915) in the shittangaku encyclopedia entitled *Shittanzō* (T. 84). Subsequently, the increasing importance of esoteric Buddhism determined the rapid diffusion of shittan, as an indispensable component of Tendai and Shingon teachings and practices. (See van Gulik 1980 and Iyanaga 1983). The diffusion of these characters is also testified by their increasing presence in texts. Even Kūkai wrote only a few shittan characters in his works; but since the end of the Heian period there was the tendency to write most (if not all) mantras and dhāraṇī in shittan script, often without transcription. Shittan were commonly used in esoteric Buddhist texts and ritual manuals until the end of the Edo period (mid-nineteenth century). In fact, it is at that time that the most complete collection ever of shittan-related documents was compiled: the monumental *Bongaku shiryō* ("Documents on Sanskrit Learning") in one thousand scrolls compiled by the Shingon monk Onkō Jiun (1718-1804) at the end of the eighteenth century. (On Jiun see Watt 1984).

Knowledge and practices concerning the shittan spread also outside the religious milieu and influenced the philosophical and cultural world of premodern Japan. Even though a cultural history of Shittan studies in Japan is still to be written, the phonetic structure of Sanskrit (*varṇapāṭha*) influenced the development of Japanese *kana* phonetic scripts. Shittan studies were also directly connected with the philological and philosophical discussions of the Edo period and the birth of the Nativist movement with Keichū (1640-1701). A general cultural trend considered shittan characters as microcosms, condensations of the esoteric universe. A good example of this intellectual attitude is the Kamakura texts entitled *Shittanrin ryakuzu shō* by Ryōson (T 84). Furthermore, since the Heian period shittan characters began to be written on funerary monuments, pagodas, and amulets; in this way, they also spread outside of monastic and intellectual circles into the general populace. Even today, funerary tablets (*ihai*) and

[17] Kūkai, *Shōrai mokuroku*, in DNBZ 2: 16-28. A portion of the text is translated in Yoshito S. Hakeda, *Kūkai: Major Works*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1972, pp. 144.

monuments carry inscribed shittan characters as apotropaic formulae to secure that the deceased person will attain ultimate Buddhahood.

However, despite the importance of shittan studies in Japanese culture, very few works have been dedicated to it in modern times. Several reasons can be adduced to explain the oblivion of shittangaku. Firstly, as an initiatory and ritualized discipline, it was considered unworthy of study and preservation by modern Japanese Buddhology. After the anti-Buddhist persecutions that marked the beginning of Japanese modernity, the new, reformed Buddhism struggled to re-invent itself ex novo by concealing the most "uncomfortable" aspects of its past; shittangaku was one of the elements that were actively forgotten. Secondly, as suggested by the proverb "shittan and shōmyō are the businesses of ignorant monks," the "study" of shittan was often the province of monks who were able to carry out only those ritual activities that did not require profound learning or earnest dedication. This negative sociological situation has perhaps contributed to modern scholars' marginalization of shittangaku in general as something not worthy investigation. As a paradoxical consequence of this situation, while the intellectual aspects of shittangaku have been neglected or forgotten today, only its ritual aspects still survive. In fact, most modern texts on shittangaku consist in manuals teaching how to write shittan characters and formulae.[18] Thirdly, modern research on the philosophy of language of Japanese esoteric Buddhist is deeply indebted to research on Indian mantras. However, research on Indian mantras traditionally focus almost exclusively on their linguistic-phonetic aspects, ignoring or overlooking the complex nature of the signs used by Japanese esoteric Buddhism which, as we have seen, always involve phonetic (shingon) and graphic (shittan) aspects. The dominant traditions of Indian thought have tended to give preeminence to oral language and ignore or downplay writing as an inferior and impure medium (Staal 1979b: 6). In contrast, the study of mantric expressions in East Asian cannot overlook graphologic aspects, also by virtue of the importance that writing has always had in the Chinese cultural sphere. [As Staal notes, there are numerous Chinese legends on the origin of writing, but apparently none on the origin of speech: Staal 1979: 7-8. This situation is diametrically opposed to that of India, where myths only concern the origin of speech.] Fourthly, the intellectual

[18] Very little exists on the history and the intellectual assumptions of shittangaku. Van Gulik 1956 still is the best work in any Western language. Takubo 1944 and Takubo and Kanayama 1981 are the most systematic treatments in Japanese so far; Iyanaga 1983 is an interesting article discussing the subject from a new and original perspective.

nature itself of shittangaku is problematic for modern scholarship. Briefly put, most of shittangaku was essentially "wrong." Not just its mythological assumptions, but also and especially its knowledge of Sanskrit, too vague or simply mistaken, make shittangaku a sort of "imaginary science," [check book by Mandel, invented script] rather than a discipline to be undertaken scientifically.

However, in spite of these problems and objective limitations, it would be wrong to ignore or dismiss a discipline that played such an important role in esoteric Buddhism and Japanese culture in general. In particular, Japanese esoteric Buddhism has developed numerous and highly systematic doctrines and practices concerning the shittan characters. In fact, most sources existing today on shittan characters and shittangaku come from Japan, where this writing system obviously played a role much more important than it did in China or Korea. It is the intellectual world of shittangaku that will be the main subject of this section of the present lecture.

2.2. An Esoteric Grammatology

Originally, the study of shittan was meant to give indications on the pronunciation of the Indian characters in which mantras were written and on the grammar of Sanskrit as a tool to understand their meaning. Esoteric Buddhism turned Shittan studies into a mystical linguistics, estranged from the living language of India and with increasingly important ritual and initiatory features. Scholars stress that shittangaku is useful to learn ancient and medieval Indian and Chinese glottology (see for example Bodman 1978); however, few have emphasized the fact that the Shittan script was used to write, to give a visual, "physical" shape to the absolute language which is the subject of esoteric Buddhist semiotics. Here precisely lies our interest in Shittan studies.

The limits of ordinary language and the essentially non-linguistic nature of Dharma make it impossible to explain the contents of the esoteric enlightenment in everyday words. Esoteric thinkers, however, thought that it was possible to give shape to the reality of the esoteric universe by employing particular signs and images, in particular the mandala and the representations of the deities it contains. Shittan, when treated as esoteric "ideographs," that is, iconic signs of an absolute nature which are characterized by the identity of their shapes, sounds, meanings, and referents, can fill the gap separating language (which explains superficially but does not "represent") from visual signs (which represent but do not explain). The Shittan esoteric script thus

constitutes a powerful symbolic instrument to give shape and to explain absolute reality as it is experienced through enlightenment.

The history of the developments of the Indian scripts in China and in other East Asian cultures is closely related to the history of Sanskrit studies, a vast and obscure subject which van Gulik has been one of the few scholars to address in the West (and in Asia as well) (van Gulik 1980). The Chinese, and the other peoples who had adopted their writing system, thought that the study of the Indian script was no different from the study of Sanskrit (van Gulik 1980: 13); there was never any attempt to produce a Sanskrit grammar in China (Ibid.: 21). In other words, Chinese monks were not interested in reading Buddhist texts in original or in studying Sanskrit. In fact, "most Chinese monks who were interested in Sanskrit limited their activity in this field to a study of the Indian script and its pronunciation" (Ibid.: 22). A good example of this attitude is the already mentioned *Xitan zhiji* by Zhiguang (T 84 nr. 2132): the goal of this work was to enable the readers to pronounce correctly mantras and dhāraṇī, not to read and interpret Sanskrit texts. This attitude cannot be explained only by the desire of Chinese and Japanese Buddhist to chant mantras correctly, since transcriptions in Chinese characters were written with different pronunciations in different regions of China and in other countries. Rather than such practical and ritual concerns, the identification of deciphering the script with knowledge of the language was made possible by the Chinese conception of language. As Frits Staal explains:

> These later efforts of the Chinese to understand Sanskrit throw much light on the way they conceived of language. Their predominant desire was to find out how written characters should be pronounced. In an empire with a highly developed system of writing, and numerous mutually unintelligible dialects, the first challenge is to master the system of writing by relating it to one's own speech; the next, when meeting with another dialect, is to learn its meaning by relating its pronunciation to the script (Staal 1979a: 7).

Since literate cultures seem to develop a conceptual system different from that of oral cultures (see Goody 1986, 1987; Cardona 1987), one can argue that mental and cognitive processes related to an ideographic (or, in any case, non-alphabetic) writing such as the Chinese one may be different from those related to an alphabetic script such

as Siddhaṃ (see also Shirakawa 1976, 1978). Accordingly, within the Chinese cultural sphere the Siddhaṃ script was treated not as an alphabet, but as another set of ideograms; furthermore, those "ideograms" had a peculiarly mystic nature. Staal also writes:

> The Chinese were not only ready to receive such sacred noises [sic; he refers here to Buddhist mantras of Indian origin] because they sounded mysterious, resembled the magical formulas of popular Taoism, and were suitable for recitation and meditation; but they also conformed precisely to their own idea of language (Staal 1979b: 7).

As van Gulik explains: "when confronted with the Indian script, the Chinese decided that each Indian syllables was an ideograph in itself, with its own independent meaning," and found a confirmation in the fact that "in Indian mysticism every letter has indeed its own meaning" (van Gulik 1980: 39). As a consequence, religious practices developed based not only on chanting of mantras but also on the writing and visualization of Siddhaṃ characters.

The Chinese graphic system, in particular its oldest characters, was considered not as a mere transcription of verbal language (as in fact it is), but as a full-fledged system of representation of reality, constituted by expressive forms harmonizing sounds and colors. On this subject, Kūkai wrote:

> When [the ancient rulers] had observed the changing of the seasons in the sun, moon, and stars, and the process of transformation at work on the nine continents, then with the sounds of metal and jade, of pipes and reeds, they forged their patterns (*wen*, Jap. *mon*) in order to nurture the common man (Kūkai, *Bunkyō hifuron*, in *Kōbō Daishi Zenshū* vol. 3: 1. English translation in Bodman 1978: 162).

Kakuban expanded this ancient Chinese idea in his mandala of the five-element stupa (*gorin mandara*), in which the five syllables of the mantra *a bi ra un ken* are part of a rhyzomatic network of cosmic codes based on Chinese traditional cosmology and the world view of esoteric Buddhism (on this subject, see lecture 4). In this way, Shittan were definitively consacrated as "multivalued icons" (Luis Gomez), microcosms,

absolute entities, as a confirmation of the traditional view about their origin. In fact, esoteric Buddhism considers shittan as absolute, unconditioned, non-created entities, a graphic correspective of the eternal linguistic sound (*śabda*) of the Indian grammaticians. The *Dainichikyō* states that these letters are spontaneous and unconditioned (*hōni jinen*), and not the result of conditioned creation; they were not made by the Buddha and apparently they have their own independent and absolute existence within the universe (*Dainichikyō*, in T 18: 10a). This is clearly in contrast to exoteric doctrines on the origin of language, according to which Indian writing was invented by the god Brahmā. (On this subject, see lecture 2). For example, Kūkai wrote:

> According to the *Mahāvairocana sūtra*, these characters are the product of the spontaneous, unconditioned principle; they were not made by the Tathāgata, Brahmā or other deities. Even if there were a producer, that would not be the Tathāgata. The buddhas contemplate these spontaneous characters through their Buddha Eye (Kūkai, *Bonji shittan jimo narabini shakugi*, in T. 84 nr. 2701: 361a.)

Other sources describe Shittan as spontaneous entities that manifested themselves autonomously in the sky.[19] This idea of writing as a spontaneous, unconditioned entity was perhaps also influenced by Daoist elements, such as the "heavenly talismans" (*tianfu*) and the "cloud seals" (*yunzhuan*), particular symbolic graphs that developed before the flourishing of esoteric Buddhism.[20]

2.3. The Structure of Shittan Graphemes

The semiotic study of ideographic writing systems has been hindered by the fact that most conceptual tools that are available were in fact designed to explain alphabetic scripts. In particular, no semiotic approach has been attempted yet to analyse the shittan script. The interpretive hypothesis outlined below is consciously tentative and provisional.

In a sense, it is not correct to consider Shittan characters as "ideograms," because in fact they do not normally represent ideas or concepts. Originally they were used as

[19] See for example Kūkai, *Bunkyō hifuron*; see also *Rishukyō*, T 8: 789c.

[20] On talismans, see below; see also Rambelli 1998.

signs (expressions) of their respective linguistic sounds (contents), as in the case of the graph //a// which stands for the sound /a/. At this level of use, shittan graphs are not ideographs but "phonographs" (representation of vocal sounds). In esoteric Buddhism, however, this is just the most superficial usage of the mystical script.

However, Buddhist texts also treated the Shittan graphs as vehicles of conceptual meaning, such as the main tenets of Buddhism, which was usually indicated in Chinese characters. In this case, the shittan were identified, structurally at least, with the Chinese language and graphic system, since they were considered as expressions of a certain conceptual content—in other words, as ideographs. The supposed similarities of the shittan letters with the Chinese characters were further strengthened by legends on the origin of writing systems we have already discussed in lecture 2.

In any case, esoteric Buddhism treated shittan as representations of certain linguistic sounds and, at the same time, of certain meanings; both sounds and meanings were believed to be connected in a direct, unconditioned way, to the deities of mandala and, by extension, to features of the absolute reality experienced in religious practices. This can be considered the paradigmatic use of shittan within the esoteric episteme. We will discuss the structure of the semantic system (the system of the content) of the esoteric episteme in the next lecture. Here I will outline the structure of the esoteric signs, in both its phonetic (shingon) and graphologic (shittan) aspects. I will also discuss some of the pragmatic aspects of these signs.

The shittan graphs, as visual, graphic signifiers of a multimateric sign (which, as we have seen, also includes sounds), are structured on several levels, each in turn articulated in both a substance and a form: a graphologic level (the "calligraphic" aspects of each graph), a combinatorial level (as related to the "syntax," the combinatory possibilities of each graphs), and a grammatological level (controlling certain accepted, standard semantic associations of the calligraphic strokes). The graphologic substance includes the total sum of the figures and pertinent features of which they are composed (calligrams); these are the minimal elements, that is, the basic brush strokes that are used and composed in various ways when writing the graphs. (These elementary calligraphic figures are reproduced and discussed in van Gulik 1980: 66-71). The graphologic form of the shittan characters gives a positional and oppositional structure to the elementary graphic figures, on the basis of categories such as main body of the character (*a*, *ka*, *sa*, etc.), additional strokes (needed to represent other vowel sounds, or compound sounds: *oṃ*, *hrīḥ*, etc.), but also more abstract elements such as direction

(verticality, horizontality, obliquity, circularity, etc.), width and energy of strokes, and so forth. The combinatorial level is articulated in a substance and in a form. The combinatory substance includes the total sum of shittan graphs, which, as we have seen, varies according to the school: in general, from forty-two to fifty-one. The combinatory form, which gives each actual shittan letter a positional and oppositional status, decides the "alphabetical" order in classification systems, and also rules to combine individual graphs in a larger unit. Finally, the grammatological level controls standard significations commonly associated with calligraphic strokes. A typical example are the so-called "five points" or "five transformations" (*goten*), in which calligrams were added to the basic character <a> in order to represent the altered sounds *ā, aṃ, aḥ, āṃḥ*. These "five transformations" were normally associated with the esoteric Buddhist process of attaining enlightenment (I will discuss this process in a subsequent lecture). To make the grammatological level even more complicated, all minimal graphologic figures (strokes) were indicated by a Chinese character, to which they were related by formal similarity or other, more complex relations of analogy. In this way, each stroke was de facto associated to a dictionary and a semantic system, albeit simplified and rudimentary. (See van Gulik 1980: 67-71). At this point, we should stress that shittan graphs were not just written in ink. The were sculpted, printed, even visualized in meditation, as in the practice to visualize incense smoke in the form of written mantric seeds.

Even though the shittan semantic system was clearly related to the Sanskrit language—or, more precisely, to the mantric sub-system, it had its own autonomous existence, as indicated by the practice, still alive in Japan today, of the ritual copying of shittan characters; in some cases, copying a shittan was even considered as more meritorious a practice than mantra chanting. In this respect, we should remember that shittan graphs were considered as the graphological modality of the cosmic Buddha, and as such they were part of mandala; in particular, they constituted the so-called Dharma mandala (Jp. *hō mandara*), in which written mantric seeds replace the traditional iconographic rendering of the various deities. In other words, the construction of a mandala, a highly meritorious activity in esoteric Buddhism, could also involve, in some cases, complex writing operations. On the basis of the suggestions by Giorgio Raimondo Cardona, (Cardona 1987) a complete semiotic study of the shittan script should include an analysis of all phases and processes of grammatological semiosis: the status of the writer and the reader, the modes of graphologic production, the materials

used, and so forth. Such a study would certainly bring a major contribution to the understanding of the esoteric Buddhist episteme in premodern Japan and its actual devotional practices involving signs and semiotic substances in general. We will return to this subject in a subsequent lecture.

3. Pragmatic Aspects of the "Secret of Language"

3.1. *Gomitsu* Practice as Speech Act

The use of magic and ritual languages such as shingon and darani is often explained, still today, by recourse to the concept of "sympathetic magic" as defined by Frazer in the nineteenth century. This concept presupposes a systematic confusion, on the part of the performers of magical utterances, of words and things and the superstitious belief in the action of ineffable and mysterious potencies. In Japan, scholars often explain shingon's alleged power upon reality as the result of belief in *kotodama*. The term, meaning "the spirit of words," appears for the first time in the *Man'yōshū*, a collection of poems compiled in the second half of the eighth century. As far as we know, the ancient Yamato term *kötö-tama* referred to the belief that words were receptacles of supernatural power; accordingly, the utterance of certain words in certain cases could affect reality. As Herbert Plutschow has written,

> *kotodama*… indicates the belief that word and thing are ontically identical, that a word contains the power of the thing it stands for and if used in an appropriate manner and setting this sound would be uttered in order to summon the power of that thing to control it or to appropriate its vital energies for the benefit of humans (Plutschow 1990: 11)

This belief was related to an ancient world view that has not been yet clearly explained. Scholars usually interpret *kotodama* as a form of sympathetic magic (see Miller 1977: 275), since a word could cause the event or produce the object it referred (Yanabu 1972: 101). However, it is probably time to go beyond Frazer and reconsider/reinterpret *kotodama* in more complex terms. New approaches are therefore

necessary. An interesting suggestion has been recently proposed by Herbert Plutschow, who wrote: "A *kotodama* word is not only powerful in itself but also in its place in a system of associations. The power of a word extended therefore to the power of poetry" (ibid.) Plutschow argues that the concept of *kotodama* played an essential role in the development of Japanese poetry. In this context, *kotodama* would refer not to vaguely defined (and, frankly, incredible) magical effects, but more interestingly to symbolic associations and the capacity to induce emotions and recall memories proper to poetic expression.

It is however important to emphasize, following Roy Andrew Miller, that contemporary interpretations of the concept of *kotodama* are based on the discussions by Edo and Meiji periods Nativist scholars (*kokugakusha*), which had very little to do with the ancient conceptions of the Nara period. In particular, *kotodama* is often mentioned in nationalistic discussions about the uniqueness of Japanese language (Miller 1977, 1982), and therefore the term, rather than describing an historical intellectual formation, is rather prescribing an agenda for cultural nationalism. Another, more fundamental problem arises when trying to interpret esoteric Buddhist shingon and darani through *kotodama*. The term *kotodama* does appear in a few texts dating to the eighth and ninth centuries, but only very sporadically and in a non-systematic fashion. It is hard to believe that it was used at the time to designate a coherent and important intellectual formation—and in any case, the information we have is not enough to make any sound inferences. What is significant, though, is that no mention of *kotodama* ever occurs in the major Buddhist works on the philosophy of language written in medieval Japan, so that it is possible to doubt that medieval author even knew the term. *Kotodama* begins to be mentioned and discussed in a systematic fashion only in the Edo period. The Shingon monk and early Nativist scholar Keichū (1640-1701) was perhaps the first, as far as we know, to make an explicit connection between shingon/mantras and kotodama. His ideas were later developed by other authors from the standpoint of Japanese cultural supremacism. For all these reasons, the received idea that *kotodama* has always been at the basis of the Japanese attitude toward language, and that among other things it has allowed the adoption in Japan of shingon and other foreign mantric expressions, appears questionable.[21]

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[21] For example, Toyoda Kunio summarizes the general position of scholarship, according to which the facility with which the Japanese accepted shingon doctrines was due to the preexistence of similar, autochthonous conceptions concerning kotodama: Toyoda 1980: 163. Hori Ichirō argued that the intersection of ideas about Indian darani on a kotodama-like background was at the origin in Japan of

On a different context, Stanley Tambiah (1985) has convincingly criticized the presuppositions behind Frazer's idea of sympathetic magic, and has shown that a magic language, or a language used for magic purposes, is not "mumbo-jumbo shot through with mystical ideas resistant to rational examination" (Tambiah 1985: 35). On the contrary, the magic use of language reveals the working of metaphoric thought and a complex association between the semantic properties of the objects evoked in magic and the participants to those rituals. Tambiah's interpretation can be heuristically useful to interpret ancient Japanese uses of language in ritual and magical contexts, including the issue of *kotodama*.

As we have seen at the beginning of this lecture, the first *gomitsu* practice described by Kakuban, the simplest one, consists in chanting and memorizing shingon. Let us investigate the theoretical presuppositions of this kind of "easy practices" through the instruments given us by modern philosophy of language.

Mantras serve to create a sacred communicational situation; in addition, they are also used in ritual interaction to address the deities by asking, making statements, praising, ordering, promising—in other words, they essentially an illocutionary purpose. The use of shingon generates (or is believed to generate which, for our purposes here, amounts to the same thing) effects that are well-defined and known in advance, such as entering *samādhi*, receiving worldly benefits, to be reborn in a Pure Land, or to become a buddha. These effects can be attributed to mantras' perlocutionary force. In this sense, the chanting (voiced or mental) of shingon and darani is not just an utterance or an act of thought, but a full-fledged activity that produces effects on reality.

This particular power of mantras is based on Indian traditional linguistic doctrines. As Frits Staal writes, "in India language is not something with which you *name* something. It is something with which you *do* something" (Staal 1979b: 9); also for this reason, in India "language was generally approached within a ritual perspective" (10).

We cannot understand the attribution of this kind of illocutionary power to shingon without reference to the Buddhist concept of karma and the esoteric doctrine of the Three Secrets (*sanmitsu*) we have discussed before. The presence of language among the factors of rebirth/suffering and liberation indicates an underlying theory of language as activity. As an activity, language is not independent from karma and is

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new linguistic practices such as the Nenbutsu recitation (in Toyoda 1980: 180). The Shingon scholar Hōjō Kenzō, after an initial skepticism, has recognized the possibility that Kūkai's linguistic thought might have been influenced by kotodama conceptions: Hōjō 1984a: 69-70.

always the cause of effects of various nature (karmic retribution), not necessarily linguistic. In the esoteric Buddhist context, speech is one of the universal activities of the Dharmakāya, the Buddha in its absolute modality, and brings benefits to all beings. Being based on a philosophical theory, the illocutionary use of shingon is not a form of "superstition" or erroneous ideas, but on the contrary a direct consequence of the general assumptions of the Buddhist (and in particular, esoteric Buddhist) episteme.

Speech as Action

Some philosophers of language, in particular John Austin and John Searle, have studied the performative function of language. They have pointed out that often to say on the basis of certain norms and conventions amounts to, or is part of, doing something—and not in the trivial sense that to say something requires the act of uttering something. (Austin 1975; Searle 1969.) When a priest says "I pronounce you husband and wife" or "I baptize you X," or when the judge pronounces the verdict "Guilty!," they, by uttering these words in specific situations, perform specific actions that affect reality in some way.

The speech acts theory deals precisely with this important aspect of language. John Austin in particular distinguishes between three kinds of speech acts: locution, the act of say something; illocution, the act of saying something with a certain "force" that determines a change in reality; and perlocution, the achievement of certain conventional effects through saying something (Austin 1975). According to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, proponents of a radical theory of speech acts, to speak always constitutes an illocutionary speech act because language is the instrument of "incorporeal" transformations of things and events (Deleuze and Guattari 1980: 101).

Various scholars, such as Wade Wheelock, Donald Lopez, and Stanley Tambiah among others, have attempted to apply the speech acts theory to mantric phenomena in South and South-east Asia. Such an approach has yet to be employed for the East Asian context, in which mantras have different cultural status and functions.[22] When one tries to use the speech acts theory, one should not forget that, as is the case with most Western philosophy of language, it has been developed in order to study ordinary language in its communicative function, whereas esoteric Buddhist thought and

[22] A tentative attempt to interpret the meditative use of shingon as described by Kūkai as a kind of speech act appears in Rambelli 1989: 85-87. The present section is a revision of this article.

practices do not share this concern. If communicative interaction occurs at all, in fact, it happens between the ascetics and the divinity he/she addresses and with whom he/she identifies him/herself. In any case, the purely communicative-conversational aspect of mantras is almost completely uninfluential in their ritual use.

A shingon/mantra can be assimilated to an illocutionary expression endowed with performative function as it produces something or concurs in transforming reality. This transformation, however, is not merely incorporeal, but dramatically bodily and material, since it is believe to concern phenomena such as healing diseases, the acquisition of worldly benefits, rebirth in paradise or fall into hell, and becoming a buddha. Kakuban for example wrote:

> This five-syllable mantra [*a bi ra un ken*] is the general spell of all buddhas of the Ten directions… By chanting it one can be reborn in the Pure Lands of the Ten directions, in the realm of Maitreya [the future Buddha] or in the cave of the Asura, according to one's desire. (Kakuban, *Gorin kujimyō himitsu shaku*, in Miyasaka 1989, ed.: 219).

However, there are several problems with a use, even merely heuristic, of the speech acts theory, mostly caused by the fact that the latter has been conceived to explain uses of ordinary language that have little in common with the chanting of mantras. Let us see some of the major difficulties:

(i) whereas for Austin performative expressions are neither true nor false but simply correct or incorrect, shingon can be pronounced correctly or incorrectly (and, on the basis of this, they will be efficacious or not), but in any case they are posited to be always and absolutely true.

(ii) Even though the perlocutionary force of shingon is based, at least in part, on pragmatic decisions (in general, an investment of faith) of the performing subject and on cultural and epistemic assumptions, it is believed to function in an essentially automatic and necessary way because it is directly related to the shingon's very nature (their content and their direct relation with reality).

(iii) Not all participants in rituals understand shingon, also because the latter have an initiatory status: according to Austin's theory, their utterance would often be "unfelicitous," ineffective. However, it is possible to detect within the Shingon tradition a tendency to reduce the conditions of felicity for mantric acts to the sole

belief in their effectiveness, that is, to an investment of a specific value in them. Kakuban, for example, wrote: "it is enough to open one's mouth and issue forth the voice for the sounds thus uttered, as mantras, to erase one's sins" (*Gorin kujimyō himitsu shaku*, in Miyasaka, ed., 1989: 210). In this way, it is not necessary to understand the meaning of the expressions that are being uttered.

(iv) Shingon chanting is the accurate performance of a ritual according to a script written on texts and handed down from master to disciple. As such, it is a depersonalized use of language (and, we may add, to complete the triad of mantric activities, body and mind) that is very similar to what Austin calls a parasitic employment of ordinary language, as in the case of public text reading or theatrical performances (Austin 1975: 104); according to Austin, his speech acts theory does not apply to those cases. The problems with Austin's metaphysical and logo- (phono-) centric conception have already been pointed out by Jacques Derrida (Derrida 1988: 13-19). We could also say that many examples employed by Austin to illustrate his theory are in fact standardized and ritualized formulas—thus not very different, in a sense, from mantras. However, one of the problems of esoteric Buddhist exegetes was that of (re-) constructing the appropriate context and attitudes for the accurate (and therefore effective) chanting of mantric expressions as they appear in canonical texts (see also Lopez 1990: 369-371). Esoteric commentators try to solve the problem by expanding the context of use to include all possible contexts by making such context coincided with the entire universe (the Dharmadhātu) and by emphasizing that all speech acts, all linguistic expressions, uttered in any possible state of mind, are de facto mantras and therefore have their illocutionary and perlocutionary power.

Further objections to the application of speech acts theory to mantric expressions have been raised by Frits Staal (Staal 1989). For example, he points out that, whereas speech acts theory presupposes the co-presence of at least one speaker and one listener, in the case of mantras the presence of one person (the utterer) is enough. We can easily object to this that esoteric doctrines always presuppose the interaction of the practitioner with a deity, who is at the same time the source and the ultimate addressee of all mantras and as such is an active, even though invisible, participant in the ritual. Actually, the very term "invisible" might even be inappropriate. The deity is "present" as a sacred image (a painting, statue, or other symbolic representations), and even in

absence of a material representation the ascetic can visualize the deity in meditation (see for example Yamasaki 1988, in particular pp. 154-162).

In addition, Staal continues, "mantras need not have an effect, or a visible effect" (Staal 1989: 69). In this case to counter Staal we could easily refer to Lévy-Strauss and his principle of "symbolic efficacy." But Staal's statement is in contrast with the assumptions of esoteric rituals. Rituals, in addition to inducing in the ascetic altered states of consciousness, whose effect on the radiation emitted by the brain is measurable (Fischer 1981: 286-305)), have the power to transform "a mundane setting into a precisely and minutely conceived replica of a sacred cosmos" (Wheelock 1989: 102). We could also add that esoteric exegetes such as Kakuban emphasize that even though the practitioner is not aware of having attained the *siddhi* (the final goal of esoteric rituals), that does not mean that the goal has not been achieved. In other words, attainment is always automatic and necessary, independently of the awareness (or lack thereof) of the practitioner.[23]

As a conclusion of this discussion, we could say that objections to the application of the speech acts theory to mantras arise from a narrow and dogmatic definition of that theory. But if we employ that theory heuristically in a field that was not originally considered by Austin, that of mantric expressions, we need to expand it to be able to address other issues that are specific to the mantric usage. In particular, we should take as our starting point an "emic" perspective, internal to the tradition we study. Accordingly, mantras are not idle utterances, mere *flatus vocis*, but effective interactions with deities. In particular, in ritual mantras do not describe or represent reality; they are used to address the deities in a performative way in order to produce, linguistically,

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[23] A short text attributed to Kakuban, entitled *Matsudai shingon gyoja yojin* ("Precautions for the Shingon practitioner in the final age of Dharma"), is very significant and explicit in this respect. Here is the integral translation:

"Precautions for the Shingon practitioner in the final age of Dharma"

(as in accordance with the explanations in the scriptures)

[Question:] Does the one who arises the desire for enlightenment (*bodaishin*) necessarily attain the *siddhi*? [Reply:] Yes, the person with deep faith attains the *siddhi*. [Q.:] What do you mean exactly? [R.:] Even though after long practices one cannot see the results, one should not give in to doubt, one should not give up. The one who holds forth will certainly attain the *siddhi*. The main deity of a ritual (*honzon*), in order to test the ascetic, or the various deities, in order to test the depth of the ascetic's faith, may prevent him/her [from attaining the expected result]. It may also happen that, because of serious karmic impediments, the ascetic thinks he/she has not succeeded. However, he/she has really attained the *siddhi*, but he/she is not aware of it. Furthermore, demons can also create impediments and hide (the attainment of) the result. Since (the apparent failure to attain the *siddhi*) could be due to one of these factors, one should not give in to doubt. (in Miyasaka 1989, ed.: 2/64-65).

effects on reality. As such, they can be studies with the help of a modified theory of speech acts.

The "Conditions of Felicity" of Mantric Acts

According to Austin, the performatives of ordinary language, to be effective, must be uttered according to certain rules, which he calls "conditions of felicity" (Austin 1975: 14-15):

(i) There should exist a conventional procedure that is considered to be able to produce a determined effect and which implies the utterance of certain words by certain people in certain circumstances.
(ii) People involved and the circumstances of the utterance should be the appropriate ones.
(iii) The procedure should be carried out correctly and
(iv) completely.
(v) If the procedure requires of the participants to have certain thoughts and states of mind, the participants should have those thoughts and states of mind and
(vi) they should behave accordingly.

Let us now examine, point by point, to what extent Austin's rules can be applied to a description of the performative effect of mantras such as they are defined and employed by the Shingon tradition.

(i) The conventional procedure controls esoteric rituals and practices and determines their effects (altered states of consciousness, different relation with reality, transformation of knowledge, magical effects, etc.). It is not necessary to *utter* certain mantric words, though, since shingon are considered more effective when they are mentally visualized in meditation. Mantric expressions used in a ritual are not chosen at random; in principle, they are given individually by the master to each disciple on the basis of certain criteria, during a secret initiation ceremony (*kanjō*). Furthermore, each ritual has its own specific mantras. This includes also formulas that were not originally mantras, such as the invocation of Amida's name (*nenbutsu*: Namu Amidabutsu). Of course, shingon are not expressions of ordinary language, but terms of a mantric dictionary; the relation that establishes

itself between shingon and their effects (or their symbolic efficacy) is of an analogic and motivated character, as we will discuss in subsequent lectures.

(ii) In the esoteric system, the persons involved are obviously the ascetics, practitioners, and the performers of the ritual (including meditation) in general; the circumstances are primarily meditative and ritual. Many exegetes, however, extended these categories to commoners (people not formally initiated) and to everyday situations (outside of a strictly defined ritual context). In this way, all possible contexts and all beings (not just humans) turn to sacred entities as part of the esoteric universe.

(iii and iv) The Shingon teachings presuppose the correct and integral performance of the procedure in the scrupulous respect of all its rules as the essential condition for triggering the power of mantras; as we have seen, the rules of the performance control a number of parameters. However, simplified uses of mantras were gradually recognized and encouraged: they were based on simple formulas (such as the two syllables *a* and *un*, associated with the two phases of breathing), and the procedures were easy and short.

(v and vi) The Buddhist tradition describes minutely the psycho-physical state that the practitioner must assume in order to participate in a ritual or a religious practice. Ignoring these norms makes practice useless or, in certain cases, even dangerous. In the middle ages, religious doubt and disbelief become serious sins that in some cases could result in rebirth into the Uninterrupted Hell. Consider for example this passage from a text by Kakuban:

> In the case of people of no wisdom who engage themselves in practices and devotions in a superficial way, if they have faith the merit they acquire are far superior than the merit acquired even by practitioners of the esoteric teachings over infinite kalpas. If a Shingon practitioner arises a religious doubt even only once in a lifetime, that is a crime that determines fall into the uninterrupted Hell as karmic retribution (*Gorin kujimyō himitsu shaku*, in Miyasaka, ed., 1989: 210).

3.2. Talismanic Usages of Mantric Expressions: The Illocutive Linguistic Space

The conditions of felicity discussed above are valid in two different situations: (i) the use of mantric expressions by those who know their grammar and syntax and understand their meaning; (ii) talismanic uses by people who do not know practically anything about them. Stanley Tambiah has studied and discussed a similar context of use in northern Thailand (Tambiah 1970). The second case is not particularly problematic: anyone can chant or listen to a mantra even without a previous knowledge of its theoretical presuppositions. All is needed is for that person to believe, up to a certain extent, in the power of that mantra and to know that in a certain context a certain formula produces a certain effect. Such an unlearned use makes it possible to translate the meaning of unknown mantras into ordinary language as prayers or invocations, as is described in a number of stories (*setsuwa*) from the *Nihon ryōiki*, a text compiled in the early ninth century. The first case, in contrast, is more problematic in Japan. The insufficient knowledge of Sanskrit by Japanese monks in general throughout history cased a transformation in the original linguistic space of mantras: they were no longer illocutionary acts translatable into well-formed sentences of ordinary language. As we have seen, mantras in Japan turn into an esoteric enunciation of the virtues and powers of the deity to which they refer, in tools for the construction of a sacred linguistic time-space in which the ascetic can identify him/herself with the deity. In this case, the medium really becomes the message, which makes the ritual integration of subject and object easier.

We should note that a more effective application of speech acts theory to ritual uses of language within the Buddhist tradition (and, presumably, also within other traditions as well), should take into account other phenomena that were ignored by Austin's original formulation. Particularly important in Buddhist practice are what we could define "transitive speech acts," in which the effects of mantra utterances are transferred to a different person than the utterer, as when monks perform a ritual for others; and also linguistic acts that do not involve *speech* but are centered instead on writing, as in the case of illocutionary (performative) transcription of written formulas done in order to modify reality. In other words, we should consider the performative aspect both of speech (the phonetic signifier) and writing (the grammatological signifier) of mantric signs.

Shittan, either individually or in sequences, are also used as talismans and amulets, and as powerful salvific devices in cemeteries, where they are inscribed on funerary steles called *sotoba* and in tablets known as *ihai*. Kakuban in fact includes the

"visualization of graphs" among the practices of the "secret of language" (*gomitsu*). This practice does not necessarily require the understanding of the deep meaning of the graphs, but nevertheless generates a great salvific power.

According to explanations that Kakuban scatters in various parts of his *Gorin kujimyō himitsu shaku*, this kind of visualization may only consist in looking at shittan characters, and can therefore be performed by anyone, independently from the situation, the context, and the performer. This practice constitutes a magical use of writing that is of great theoretical interest because, while being homologous to the magical use of speech as in the case of mantras, it does not seem to be explicable only by considering writing a mere graphic occurrence of speech.

Giorgio Raimondo Cardona made important considerations on the subject, and it seems appropriate to quote him extensively:

> If the one who carries the amulet with him were also able, if he wanted to, to pronounce or chant by himself the formula that is inscribed in it, the magic of writing would just be a particular, delayed case of the magic of words. The amulet would be… a shortcut through which the protected person uses the magical power of formula not by chanting it himself, but by showing it, carrying it on his body, by letting it act by itself through writing.
>
> [In many cases,] the text is completely opaque to the users, because they ignore the language [of the amulet] or writing in general, or just those particular characters, obsolete and unusual. [Here Cardona refers to the Tibetan equivalent of shittan, the characters known as *ranja* or *lan-tsa*.] In this case, the circuit excludes completely the subject: the inscription acts on its own… and brings benefits to those who carry it with them but without their participation except than their mere carrying it.
>
> One could argue that in this case the circuit has been activated by the writer of the formula…, even though he asked not for himself but for others. This is true in many cases…; but often the inscription can be copied, it can be written without being understood, or it can be incorrectly reproduced and still continue to be active…

> Those who chants or transcribes a formula shows that, whether he understands it or not…, he wants not its content (the propositional content of speech acts), but certainly its effects (the illocutionary goal…), but in this case a fundamental requisite of verbal recitation would be missing, namely… the exactness of the rendering. Since a formula can be written even in a defective way without losing its efficacy, one must conclude that the circuit is no longer linguistic… what matters here is writing.
>
> The magical illocutionary act, if it is possible to establish such a level, has writing itself as a propositional content. A magical goal is achieved not by speaking and uttering formulas with one's voice, but by performing operations that have as their content writing as a whole. Since this is not a linguistic circuit, such writing can be showed, displayed, applied [onto surfaces], touched, worn… (Cardona 1987: 176-178).

Of course, this "circuit," this process going from the performance of a magical act to its effects, is at the basis of the practices related to the shittan we have described above. What is essential, but Cardona does not indicate, is an act of faith, or at least, an investment of value by the participants, who agree to immerse themselves in this magical-communicative space where the forces triggered by writing operate by virtue of its (writing's) own special relations with the structure of the esoteric cosmos. It is at this point that shittan acquire the value of pentacula,

> magical objects built upon a play of correspondences between microcosm and macrocosm. These correspondences ensure the control over forces that cannot be governed otherwise, but that can be appropriately bridled and directed by a model… (Cardona 1987: 181).

As in the case of shittan, a pentaculum can be used as an amulet, as a support for meditation, as a talisman marking a sacred space such as a temple or any place where religious practices are performed. Here lies perhaps the key to understand the power of writing. Writing is a microcosm in which the structure of the world is inscribed; it is a

model that "reproduces force lines, condenses events, makes everything smaller and ciphered—but does not hide [that which it stands for]" (Cardona 1987: 188).

Appendix: Esoteric *Nenbutsu* As *Gomitsu* Practice

We have already mentioned the *nenbutsu* several times in this lecture. The Shingon school developed a distinctive theory of *nenbutsu* that differed from the normative one as it developed within the Tendai school first and the various Pure Land traditions later. The Tendai priest Genshin (942-1017) was among the first in Japan to propose a doctrinal systematization of *nenbutsu*. In his view, the invocation of the Buddha Amida's name was a minor, subsidiary practice to the meditation on Amida's Pure Land. More than a century later Hōnen (1133-1212) launched an alternative interpretation of the *nenbutsu*, which became an easy salvation practice for all. Shinran (1173-1262) further developed Hōnen's formulations. According to them, and other thinkers of the Pure Land tradition, the *nenbutsu* was neither a subsidiary practice, as was argued by Genshin, nor a minor practice for the unlearned, as was the tenet of many Buddhist schools. For them, on the contrary, the *nenbutsu* was the only effective practice that could save the human beings living during the Final Age of the Dharma (*mappō*). Hōnen encouraged long chanting sessions involving one million repetitions of Amida's name. Shinran, in contrast, argued that the *nenbutsu* is not, properly speaking, a religious practice aimed at the performer's salvation. In Shinran's radical view, salvation is only possible thanks to Amida's grace; the practitioner cannot lure him into intervening on their behalf just because they engage in religious practice. In fact, practices performed with this assumption are a certain way to be damned, sine they assume righteousness on the part of the practitioner and a sort of power to control the deity. For Shinran, the nenbutsu was just an act to express the practitioner's spontaneous and unconditioned gratitude toward Amida. By that as it may, in all of these interpretations the nenbutsu is not configured, strictly speaking, as a mantric practice. It is not part of an esoteric, non-ordinary language; it is not used in meditative visualizations, except perhaps in Genshin's case—who however only acknowledged it as a support for meditation, not as a full-fledged subject of meditative activity; it is not believed to have a salfivic power in itself—at most, it generates merit as any other Buddhist practice; there is also an apparent lack of systematic investigation on the

nature of the semiotic status of the nenbutsu (or, in any case, the semiotic status of the nenbutsu is not usually discussed in modern Buddhology). Accordingly, the nenbutsu seems to constitute a specific case of language use. However, we can also interpret it through the heuristic lenses of a speech acts theory, as a form of "doing things (thanking Amida, etc.) with words."

In a different attempt to conceive of and use the nenbutsu, the Shingon school developed, between the end of the twelfth century and the fourteenth century, what is known as "secret nenbutsu" (*himitsu nenbutsu*), that is, a reinterpretation of the nenbutsu according to the principles and practices of esoteric Buddhism. The most important exponents of *himitsu nenbutsu* were Kakuban and Dōhan (1178-1252).[24] As we have already seen, the normative attitude of the Shingon school is that of considering all words, all sounds as shingon—elements of the absolute language of Buddha Mahāvairocana enjoying special semiotic status and endowed with particular powers. In addition, we should take into account that for the Shingon tradition the Buddha Amida is a manifestation of Dainichi (*Gorin kujimyō himitsu shaku*, in Miyasaka, ed., 1989: 176-177). Thus, the nenbutsu can be also considered a mantric practice:

> The practitioners of the nine-syllable mantra [i.e., the nenbutsu] should not arouse superficial thoughts when chanting the formula "Nōmaku Amitabutsu." Once the threshold of Shingon has been crossed, all words turn into mantras. How could not "Amita"? (Kakuban, *Gorin kujimyō himitsu shaku*, in Miyasaka, ed., 1989: 219).

In the passage above, Amida is called "Amita" (a Sanskritism: the Sanskrit term is Amitābha); the invocation to Amida and the name of Buddha itself are written in Shittan characters, as to emphasize the mantric nature of the formula also on the plane of the signifiers.

> The names of all buddhas and bodhisattvas of the Ten directions [i.e., the eight directions plus the zenith and the nadir] and the Three times [i.e., past, present, and future] are different denominations of the single, great Dharmakāya. In the same way, the buddhas and bodhisattvas of the Ten directions and the Three times are all the seal of the differentiated

[24] On *himitsu nenbutsu*, see Kushida 1964: 181-232; Sanford 1994.

> wisdom of the Tathāgata Mahāvairocana. Among all words uttered by all beings, there is not one which is not an esoteric designation. Those who are confounded by this are called "sentient beings"; but to understand this means to possess the wisdom of the Buddha. Therefore, the chanting of the three syllables of Amida's name erases numberless serious sins committed since a time with no beginning; by thinking of the Buddha Amida one achieves infinite merits of wisdom, much as in each pearl of Indra's net infinite pearls reflect themselves (Kakuban, *Amida hishaku,* in Miyasaka, ed., 1989: 151).

The above citation mentions the "differentiated wisdom" of the Buddha, according to which all individual buddhas and bodhisattvas are part of the universal body of Mahāvairocana. This wisdom is symbolized by a "seal," that is, a combination of mudra and mantra; the mantra is the name of the buddhas themselves. Amida is singled out as a particular manifestation of the universal Buddha; his mantra, that is his name, is thus especially powerful. However, we should not forget that all mantras have the same power of erasing past sins, granting worldly benefits, and leading one to salvation.

To admit the possibility of becoming a buddha through the sole chanting of mantras, and the nenbutsu in particular, was not fully orthodox for the Shingon teachings, since they identified the process of becoming a buddha with the complete practice of all of the three secrets (*sanmitsu*: as we have seen, performing mudras, chanting mantras, and visualizing mandalas). Kakuban justified the salvific value of the single practice (nenbutsu chanting) by arguing that the supernatural power of *kaji* (the direct intervention of the buddha in ritual settings) produces the virtues of the two missing practices (Kakuban, *Gorin kujimyō himitsu shaku,* in Miyasaka, ed., 1989: 216). It is important to stress that Kakuban's was not a mere escamotage, but an important development of the esoteric doctrines of language.

The importance of nenbutsu chanting was considered heterodoxical also by the entire Buddhist establishment. In a petition written in 1205 by the Kōfukuji scholar-monk Jōkei (1155-1213) in the name of all recognized Buddhist schools of the time, thus including Shingon, that asked the emperor to ban Hōnen's doctrines, the seventh article entitled "The error of misunderstanding the nenbutsu" stated that "to intone the name of the Buddha with the mouth is neither meditation nor concentration. This is the most

coarse and shallow of the methods of *nenbutsu*" (Jōkei, *Kōfukuji sōjō*, English translation in Morrell 1987: 83).

It is important to read the above passage in its context, as a document of the religious establishment against a heretical movement. In its logic, the nenbutsu practices within the establishment was correct, however its form and motivation, while Hōnen's nenbutsu was by definition wrong. To us, this document is significant in that it shows us indirectly that mantric doctrines and their underlying episteme were part of the Buddhist orthodoxy of the time; alternative forms of religiosity that presupposed a different semiotics were in danger of being accused of heresy and thus been banned. Analogous petitions were issued by representatives of the Buddhist establishment also against the Zen school (at least in its initial stages)—which, as we already know, also had a different semiotic outlook. In a sense, persecutions against Nichiren as well had in part semiotic motivations, as they tried to prevent an alternative, and competing, reading of the scriptures: as such, they were also, at least in part, about the politics of meaning of Buddhist texts.

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