

Kūkai's Soundscape of Reality and Language

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Towards a History of Sound-Symbolic
Theories

Université de Bourgogne, Dijon France
20 February 2014



Kūkai: Founder of Japanese Shingon Buddhism

空海

Kūkai (774-835)

[Kōbō Daishi]

弘法大師



Basics of Shingon (真言) Buddhism

Shingon = “Truth Word” or “Mantra”

Japanese Shingon Buddhism

Fundamental assumption:

Enlightenment through ritual engagement with cosmos

Came to Japan from India via China (where Kūkai studied it)

Akin to tantric traditions of India & Tibet

Shingon: “Esoteric” 密教 (*mikkyō*) over “Exoteric” 顯教 (*kengyō*)

Intimate engagement w/ reality, not detached objectivity

Esoteric (mitsu) implies intimacy, minutely detailed

Exoteric (ken) implies manifest, surface level

Exoteric refers to reality; Esoteric confers with reality

Such conference involves **body, speech, and mind**

Three Dimensions of Shingon Ritual--Mudrā

Body

Formulaic Gestures (usually of hands & fingers)

PATTERNS OF MOVEMENT



Three Dimensions of Shingon Ritual--Mantra

Speech

Chanted Expression of Basic Sounds – “Truth Words”

VOICED WORDS = RESONANCES FORMING ELEMENTS OF REALITY

Six “seed mantras”

A → Earth (*chi* 土)

Va → water (*sui* 水)

Ra → fire (*ka* 火)

Ha → wind (*fū* 風)

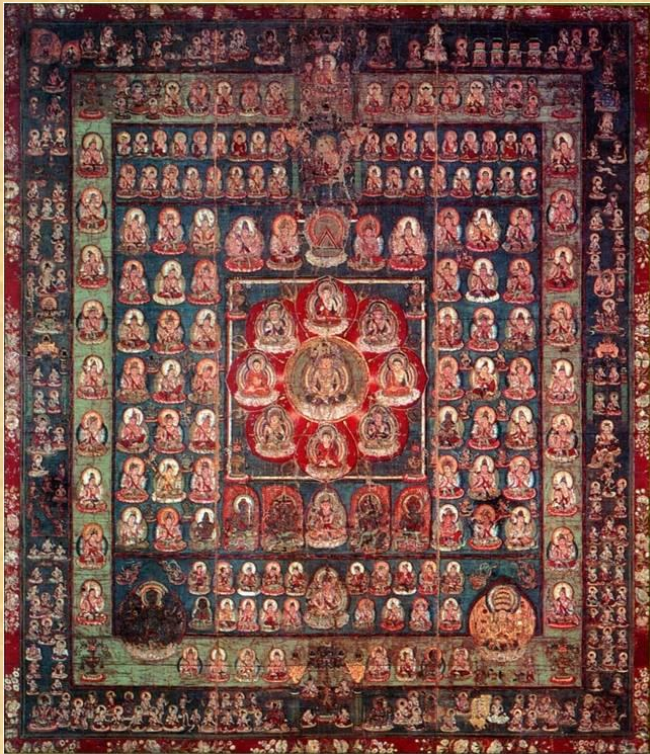
Kha → space (*kū* 空)

Hūṃ → consciousness (*shiki* 識)

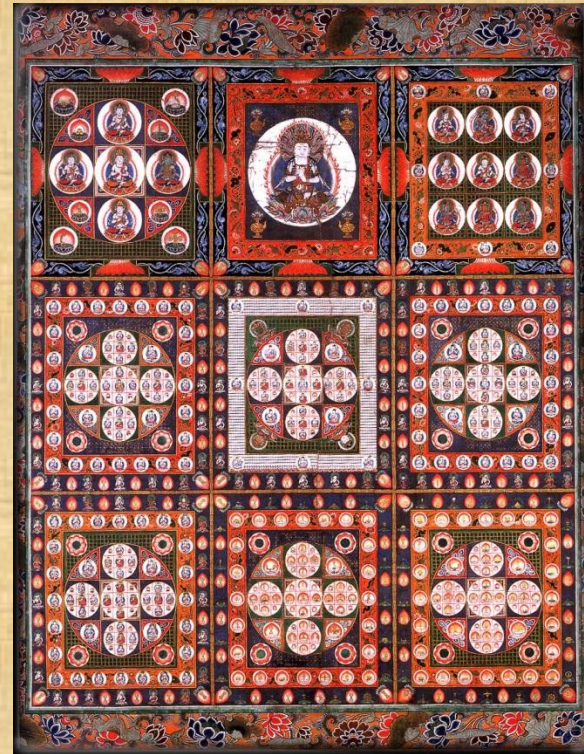
Three Dimensions of Shingon Ritual--Mandala

Mind

Mandala → MAP OF STRUCTURE



Womb (Matrix) Mandala



Diamond Mandala

Kūkai: The Man

Kūkai's Status in Japan

Japan's first (and perhaps greatest) systematic philosopher

Founded Japanese Shingon: trained in China by Huiguo 惠果

Accomplished in the cultural arts: calligraphy, sculpture

Poetry and poetic treatises recognized even in China

Encyclopedic knowledge of all East Asian philosophies

Legendary thaumaturgical powers

Kūkai's Linguistic Milieu

1. Japanese language: everyday affairs, poetry, ritualistic prayers
2. Standard written language: classical Chinese
3. No standard orthography yet for writing Japanese
Process to develop orthography began in early 8th century
Kojiki and *Man'yōshū*
Mixed use of sinographs
semantic (ideographic) & phonetic

Hybrid way of reading Chinese style text as Japanese
4. Because of interest in Buddhist mantras—studied Sanskrit
Purely alphabetic, phonetic orthography

Kūkai's Background

Upbringing in rural Shikoku

Nature, animism, kami worship

Aristocratic education

Study at *daigaku* in capital, Nagaoka

Academy of Chinese studies for aristocratic young men

Preparation for civil service exam

Presumably also studied at Nara Buddhist study centers

Dropped out of *daigaku* and left capital after a few years

Into the mountains and the wilds

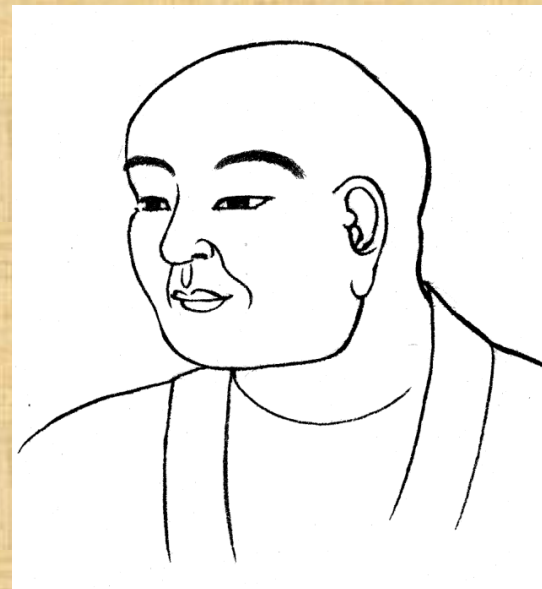
Centers of unsystematic spiritual praxis, not intellectual study



In cave on coast of Shikoku

Late 8th century

College drop-out in cave, chanting one million times
mantra to Bodhisattva Kokūzō



Kūkai's Personality

Two great ambitions

Desire to understand everything

Hope to unite Chinese learning and Japanese animism; unite mountain praxis and urban systematic study centers

Purpose of practice in cave

Ability to understand every passage in every Buddhist text

Why ritual praxis instead of studying in urban educational centers?

To understand everything, need to understand basis of everything—need a metaphysical vision of reality

**Reality as a Field of Resonance:
Analogy for Kūkai's Worldview**

Analogy of the Field

Reality = single field of subatomic resonances of matter-energy
Fluidly interacting with itself, forming temporary clusters
Those clusters are items in our macro reality
Including tangible objects, mental, affective phenomena

Micro level (esoteric):

Single field of same inter-resonating “stuff”

Macro level (exoteric):

Subject/object; thought/word/object; I-you; mind/matter

Analogy of the Field

Reality

Micro (esoteric):

Self-structuring, self-expressive

Macro (exoteric):

Clusters of “I” use “words” to resonate with “object”

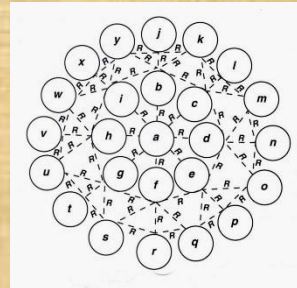
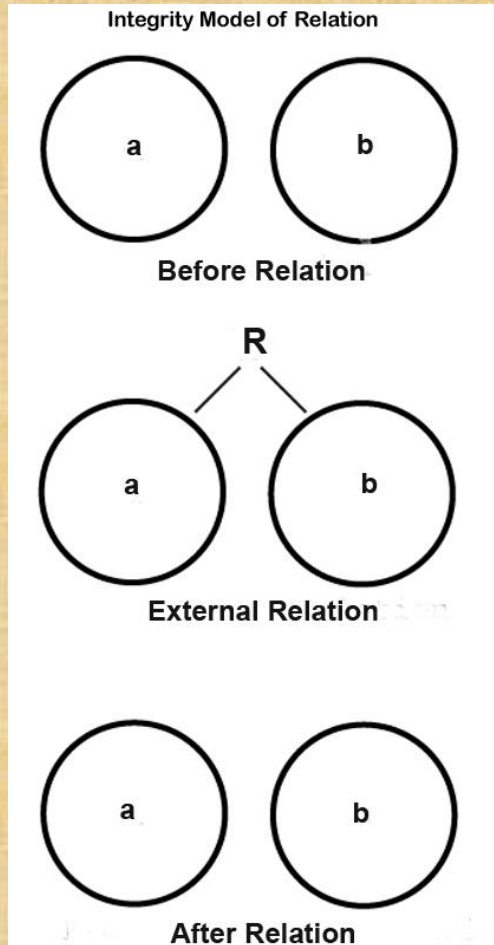
Communication = “I” “you” “object” “words” = temporary clusters of resonance in same frequency, vibrating together

Examples: Opera singer’s tone in resonance w/ crystal goblet

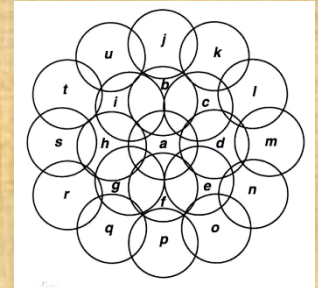
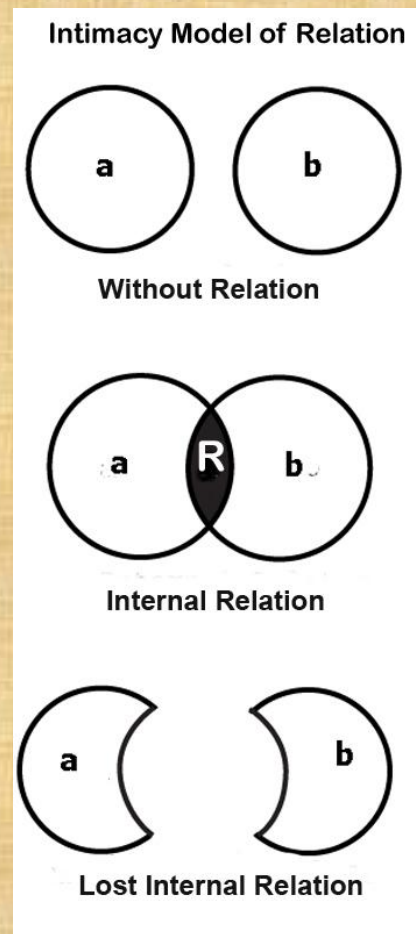
Transfer of resonance between two tuning forks

Structure of Field: Internal Relations

External Relations



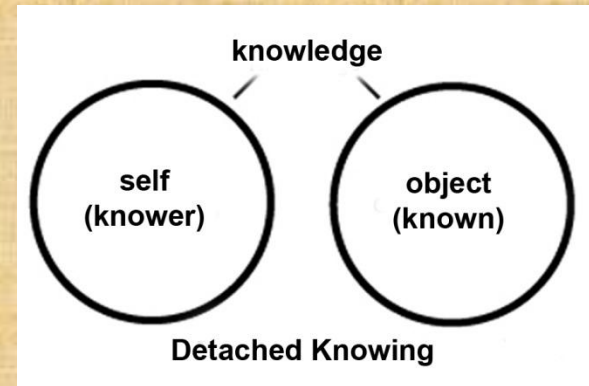
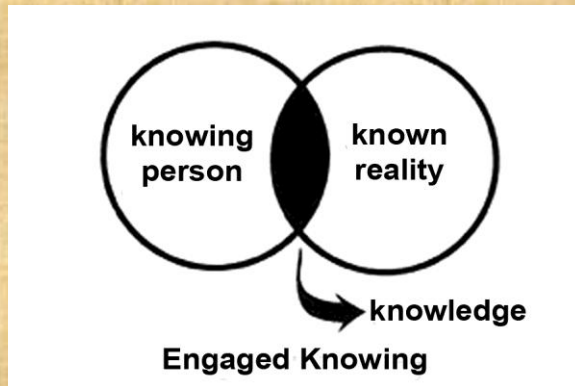
Internal Relations



Implications of Internal Relations

Knowledge = overlap of knower/known

Not: what connects knower/known



Speaker/Words/Object = overlapping resonances

Not: words are external connector between knower/known

“Holographic” Relation of Whole/Part

Whole consists of its parts
But also parts contain pattern
of whole

Example: DNA

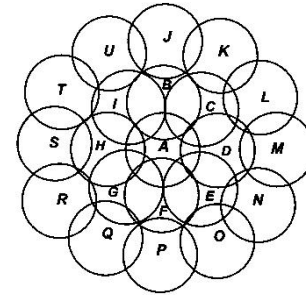


Figure 4. Internally Related Whole

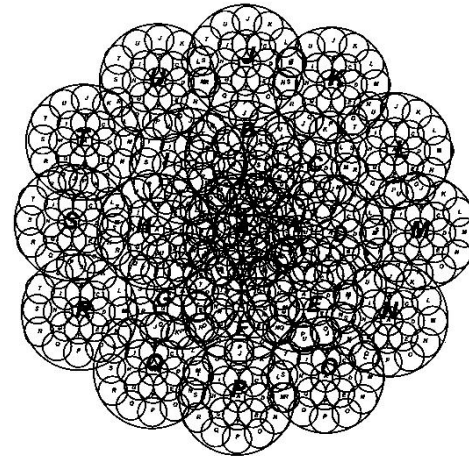


Figure 5. Holographic Whole

Kūkai's System

Foundation of Kūkai 's Metaphysics

The cosmos itself is a person, the Buddha Dainichi 大日

Danichi Buddha is not creator of cosmos but *is* the cosmos

Person= 3 karmas (volitional actions): thought, word, & deed

No self behind activities; person is activities themselves

Therefore, cosmos is three activities of Dainichi

We are persons, so we too are three activities

Understanding=harmonizing our activities with reality's

activities—not a matter of standing back and knowing reality

Kūkai's correlations

3 Karmic functions of person	3 constituents of reality	3 ritual practices	3 intimacies 三密
Thoughts	Structure	Mandala	Mind 心 or 意
Words	Vibration/ Resonance 響音	Mantra	Speech 口
Deeds	Patterns of Change	Mudra	Body 身

**Kūkai's General View of Language:
Esoteric & Exoteric**

“On Distinguishing Esoteric and Exoteric Teachings”

“Whereas the Buddha has three bodies, there are two kinds of teachings. Those delivered by the celestial (*ō* 應) and historical (*ke* 化) embodiments are “exoteric teachings” (*kengyō*). Being publicly expressed and abridged, those words are suited to the [audience's] circumstances. The speeches of the cosmic embodiment (*hosshin* 法身), on the other hand, are “esoteric teachings” (*mikkyō*). Obscure and interior, those words are the authentic exposition. (KKZ, 2:149; see also BDKST *Shingon Texts* 17)

The Three Intimacies (mysteries) 三密

“Accompanied by his retinue of celestial buddhas, the cosmic embodiment in itself and for itself preaches—for their own enjoyment of the truth—entrance into the "three intimacies" (*sanmitsu*). This is the esoteric teaching. This entrance to the three intimacies is the so-called realm of the buddha's innermost wisdom.” (KZZ 2:150; *Shingon Texts* 17-18)

The intimacy of speech: Buddha entering us 入我 (*nyūga*)

cosmic

Dainichi's Words (six "seed mantras")



microcosmic

Vibration/Resonance 響 (*kyō*)



macrocosmic

The Elements



Compounded Elements as Our World

The intimacy of speech: We entering the Buddha 我入
(*ganyū*)

macrocosmic

Ritual chanting (mantra)



microcosmic

Vibrations/resonances of chant



cosmic

Words of Buddha

Kūkai's Shōjijissōgi

Analysis (*gi* 義) of (somewhat rare) Buddhism compound term:

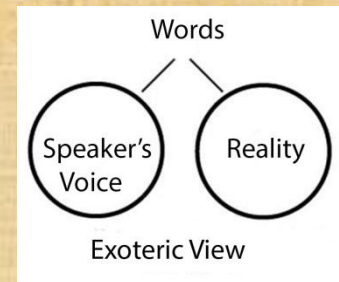
Shōjijissō 声字実相

Shō = (voiced) sound

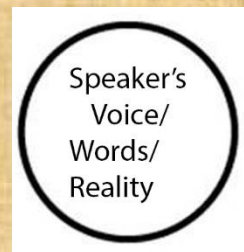
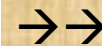
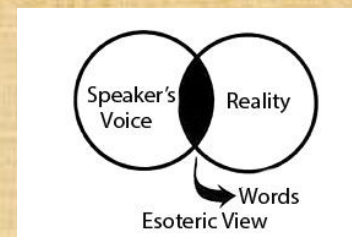
Ji = semiotic sign, word

Jissō = manifest reality

Exoteric (macro level) understanding



Esoteric (micro level) understanding



Consequences of Kūkai's Theory of Language

Micro/macro levels of language

Micro level known through ritual direct engagement

Involves Body, Speech (mantra), Mind

On micro level, language is cosmos' auto-expression

“Dainichi preaches for own enjoyment”

As part of cosmos, through ritual, we are part of that
auto-expression

So, *all* words are *shingon* (truth words, mantras)

All language arises from resonances set by 6 seed
mantras

Consequences of Kūkai's Theory of Language

Micro/macro levels of language

Macro level: stratum of ordinary discourse

Arises from mantric field of resonance, but functions exoterically, adapting to audience & context

Meanings established by human conventions

Hence can be “true” or “false”

Basically heuristic in purpose; pragmatic

Most “true” exoteric discourse: heuristic for explaining esoteric

Consequences of Kūkai's Theory of Language

Phonetic/Semantic Relation

Semantic (as referring words) is derivative of phonetic (as resonant sounds)

Macro level:

Conventionalized sequence of sounds used to refer to realities

Micro level:

Phonetic sounds arise from resonances of six mantras
“Elements” of sound-word-reality as harmoniously,
internally inter-related

Consequences of Kūkai's Theory of Language

Implication Phonetic/Semantic Relation

If one understands the micro level within every macro-level word spoken, every word has same structural ground

Holographically, structure (DNA) of all language is in resonances of any of six seed mantras

Consequences of Kūkai's Theory of Language

Implication Phonetic/Semantic Relation

Paradigmatic case: seed mantra “A” (similar to Indian theory)

Beginning of sound—breath escaping open mouth and setting off vibration

Auto-structures as element of reality (in this case, “earth”)

Semantic meaning—Sanskrit prefix for not- or non-

Hence, signifier of emptiness

Auto-emptying semantic function leads one to esoteric level below

Opening function is typical of religious and poetic language

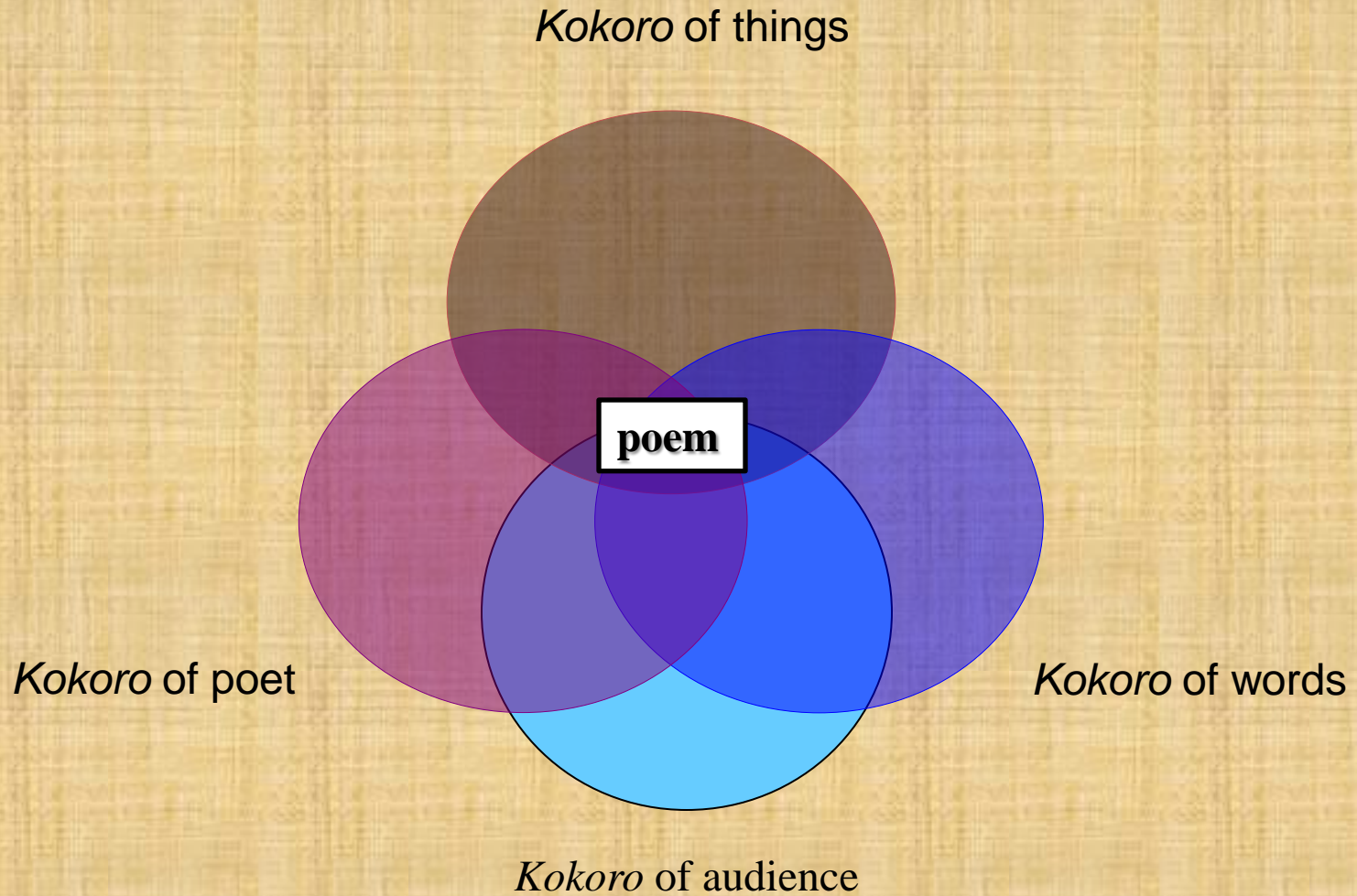
Creation of meaning is not restriction/delimitation but instead is an emptying or opening

Three Later Japanese Extensions of Kūkai's Theory

MOTOORI Norinaga 本居宣長 (1730-1801): Poetics

Based on interpretation of classical idea of *kokoro*

Creation of Artwork — *Kokoro Model*



Three Later Japanese Extensions of Kūkai's Theory

UEDA Shizuteu 上田閑照 (1926-)

Analysis of famous Zen statement of Qingyuan:

“Thirty years ago, before I began practicing Zen, if I saw a mountain I thought, this is a mountain; and if I saw water I thought, this is water. Later, when under the guidance of a wise master I reached an initial stage of insight: if I saw a mountain I thought, this is not a mountain; and if I saw water I thought, this is not water. Now that I have attained the ultimate resting abode, I resort back to where I was before: if I see a mountain I think, this is just a mountain; and if I see water I think, this is just water.”

Sequence:

- (1) mountain is a mountain
- (2) A mountain is not a mountain
- (3) A mountain is a mountain

Ueda's Philosophy of Language—Basic Scheme

- (1) mountain is a mountain
- (2) A mountain is not a mountain
- (3) A mountain is a mountain

Statement (1): Language is sign for thing existing in “world”
But (1) is located within a greater emptiness, a “hollow”
expanse; (2) therefore negates (1) [the “not” is a
hollow[ing] word]

Statement (3) differs from (1) because (1) has been hollowed out
by (2); So, statement (3) is world/hollow together
(“actuality”)

Statement (3) is “suchness words”

Poetic function in language

Words more than signs pointing to things in the world

Words open up language into suchness

Three Later Japanese Extensions of Kūkai's Theory

SAKABE Megumi 坂部恵 (1936-2009)

Praised linguistic theory of TOKIEDA Motoki 時枝誠記

Tokieda had developed modern grammar based on traditional Japanese categories, not western categories of grammar
“language process theory”

Sakabe's criticism of Tokieda

The traditional grammars were works in *poetics*

Poetry, not referential language. was paradigm

But Tokieda gave no special place to poetry in his theory

For Sakabe, linguistics should begin w/ poetic expression as its paradigm—importance of sound and therefore body

Conclusions

1. Resonance more fundamental than phonetics; phonetics more fundamental than semantics
2. Language as having micro level engaged through ritualized praxis and macro level used for conventional pragmatics
3. If reality is ultimately one kind of “stuff” (matter-energy), then relations among voiced sounds, words, and reality must be internal and holographic
4. On macro level, poetic and spiritual language best reveal true basis of language--resonance

