

Morrison, Barbara (2017). Kukai's Innovations and Efforts in Introducing Vajrayâna Buddhism in Japan. In Dasho Karma Ura, Dorji Penjore & Chhimi Dem (Eds), *Mandala of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Perspectives: Proceedings of the International Conference on Tradition and Innovation in Vajrayana Buddhism* (pp. 194-204). Thimphu: Centre for Bhutan Studies.

# **Kukai's Innovations and Efforts in Introducing Vajrayâna Buddhism in Japan**

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## **Introduction**

This paper was presented in Bhutan at the “International Conference on Tradition and Innovation in Vajrayâna Buddhism: A Mandala of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Perspectives” in July 2016. It is my fervent wish that this paper will provide an introduction to Buddhist Esoteric practice in Japan (namely Shingon Buddhism) as well as a point of departure for those interested in Vajrayâna practice as it has developed historically outside the borders of Central Asia. In my efforts to explore Shingon Buddhism this paper will begin to explain what I believe to be Kûkai's fundamental innovations regarding Vajrayâna Buddhism when he brought back esoteric teachings to Japan from China in the early 9<sup>th</sup> century at a time less than one hundred years after Padmasambhava's historic introduction of Vajrayâna Buddhism in Tibet and Bhutan. As the founder of Shingon Buddhism in Japan and an international figure who was proficient in both Chinese and Sanskrit, Kûkai established the Shingon center for Buddhist practice on Mt. Koya and his innovations have since been institutionalized in the vibrant practice of Shingon Buddhism as found on Mt. Kôya today.

With the understanding that a fundamental teaching of esoteric Buddhism lies in the realization that enlightenment can be achieved in this lifetime (in this very body), this paper will use the framework of the three mysteries (Jpn. *sanmitsu*); i.e. body (meditation practice), speech (preaching of the Dharmakâya) and mind (elemental consciousness) to think through the ways in which Kûkai's profound thinking on letters and language created a

particular interpretive lens that has since characterized the overall tradition of Vajrayāna Buddhism in Japanese culture. This paper will explore 1) Kūkai's notion of cosmic speech (*hosshin seppō*) as a means of sacralizing all phenomena, 2) Kūkai's conception of consciousness (mind) as a further addition to the five elements of earth, water, fire wind and space (*rokudai taidai*), and 3) Kūkai's synthesis of mantra and mandala as exemplified in the form of the Shingon practice of Aji-kan meditation. Central to all these innovations and to the overall practice of Shingon is the understanding that Shingon is, above all, an embodied practice. Because one's body is both the tool and the medium through which identification and unity (*yoga*) with the cosmos (mantra and mandala) occur, Shingon practices are extremely experiential in nature and rely on sensory input as provided by ritual practice to participate in an enlightened state.

### **Historical Background**

Shingon Buddhism, also known as Mantrayāna Buddhism (and popularly referred to as Vajrayāna Buddhism) came to Japan from China in the 9th century C.E. primarily through the efforts of Kūkai (posthumously known as Kōbō Daishi: 774-835) who established Shingon (Jpn. 真言) Buddhism in 816 C.E. on Mt. Koya (currently Wakayama Prefecture) in Japan. Kūkai's colleague Saichō (posthumously known as Dengyō Daishi: 767-822) also brought back Vajrayāna teachings from China to Japan and founded Tendai (Jpn. 天台) Buddhism on Mt. Hiei (currently Shiga Prefecture) in Japan. Kūkai's teachings remain fundamentally esoteric in nature while Saichō's more eclectic approach (including his exoteric emphasis on the teachings of *The Lotus Sutra*) enabled exoteric developments of both Pure Land Buddhism (Hōnen: 1133-1212) as well as New Pure Land Buddhism (Shinran: 1173-1263), among others.

Kūkai and Saichō were very different personalities though they were closely matched in their passion and integrity for Buddhist teachings. Both Kūkai and Saichō risked their lives making the dangerous sea journey to China, a trip they took together (though aboard different ships) when they left Japanese shores (from what is present day Kyushu) for China in 804 C.E. While both Kūkai and Saichō were deeply compassionate men, it is my sense that Saichō was more concerned with the exoteric aspects of Buddhist practice and the ways in which Buddhism could enhance the lives of ordinary men and women. Kūkai - while also deeply concerned with the plight of his fellow human beings - was more scholarly in nature, and more driven toward an integrity of learning and teaching that often served to distance him (both physically and emotionally) from quotidian concerns outside a monastic setting. This indeed became a pattern for Kūkai, a pattern that Yoshito Hakeda describes in his well-regarded study of Kūkai as "alternating between seclusion and participation in the world, the same pattern that is visible in his later travels between Mt. Kōya and Kyoto" (23). It is perhaps for this reason that Mt. Koya has remained consistently outside the warring alliances that characterize much of Japanese

history. Mt. Koya (approximately a two-hour train ride from Osaka) is still preserved today as an International Heritage Site where one can stay the night (*shukubo*) in temples amidst a temple complex that has remained a vibrant center for esoteric practice for more than 1200 years. In contrast, the temples on Mt. Hiei were burned to the ground by Hideyoshi Nobunaga in the 16<sup>th</sup> century to quell the activities of the “warrior monks” who continuously participated in regional conflicts.

### **Kūkai: Texts and Teachers**

Kūkai became a Buddhist novice at the age of 20 and entered the Buddhist order at the age of 24, though his first encounter with Esoteric teachings seems to have happened after Kūkai dropped out of college ~~at the age of 18~~ where he had been studying the Confucian Classics on track to become a government official since age of 18. In his early 20's, he became a wandering hermit and joined a group known as the Natural Wisdom School (*Jinnenchi-shū*) who devoted themselves to esoteric practices as they wandered and begged for food while immersed in profound relation with nature. It was during this time that Kūkai actualized his personal and profound ties with nature, ties that were no doubt a part of his early childhood years while growing up on the island of Shikoku. As a child Kūkai would have been fully acquainted with Shintō, a form of nature worship indigenous to Japan. During the time he spent with the Natural Wisdom School Kūkai experienced a profound revelation while meditating and reciting the mantra of Ākāsagarbha (Kokūzō). As Hakeda points out, it is important to note that Kūkai's quest for Esoteric Buddhist teachings was rooted in this experiential encounter with a profound revelation while immersed both physically and emotionally in nature. As Shingen Takagi and Thomas Eijō Dreitlein note, this profound experience:

Allowed Kūkai to escape from the world of superficially interpreting pages in books full of written letters to enter the great realm of empty space (*ākāsa*), where he learned to decipher the natural and inherent letters written on the pages of the book of the universe itself. (6)

After this initial revelation, Kūkai appears to have read the *Mahāvairocana Sutra* while in Japan and was unable to understand the text. This challenging textual encounter with esoteric doctrine was (according to Hakeda) the impetus for his trip to China where he intended to remain for 20 years immersed in esoteric study.

Instead, Kūkai remained in China for just two years during which time he was recognized and welcomed by Master Hui-kuo (746-805), the patriarch of Esoteric Buddhism and chosen disciple of Amoghavajra, or Pu-k'ung (705-74) who was one of the most respected and prolific translators of Esoteric texts in China. Vajrabodhi (d. 741), another prolific and respected teacher of Esoteric Buddhism arrived in China in 720. Amoghavajra was Vajrabodhi's chosen

disciple. Kūkai also studied Sanskrit and Siddham writing with the Indian monk Prajna (733 or 734 -?). Because of this remarkable convergence of events, teachers, and heart/minds, Kūkai became the Eighth Patriarch of Esoteric Buddhism during his two-year stay in China. On his return to Japan in 806 C.E. Kūkai brought with him the texts and mandalas for the Dainichi-kyô (*Mahāvairocana-sûtra*) lineage as well as the Kongochô-kyô (*Vajrasekhara-sutrâ*), two lineages that together form the basis of Shingon practice today. In addition to these lineages, and as noted in his “Memorial Presenting a List of Newly Imported Sutras and Other Items” (Hakeda 34) aka “Shôrai Mokuroku” and translated in Takagi and Dreitlein’s text, Kūkai also brought back ritual implements, objects, knowledge of yogic practice with all deities as well as portraits of patriarchs (200-232).

### **Establishment of Mt. Kôya**

In his own words, the area of Mt. Kôya was known to Kūkai before his departure to China as he had come upon the site while bent on ascetic practice while wandering through natural settings (Hakeda 47). It was in 816 that Kūkai officially requested permission to open a monastery on Mt. Kôya, then amid the forest wilderness only accessible to hunters. With a length of approx. 3.5 miles and width of 1.5 miles, the plateau on Mt. Kôya where temples and accommodations are to be found is said by some of those currently living on Mt. Koya to be the result of a meteor impact. This otherworldly explanation is useful in accounting for the odd and mysterious phenomenon that occurs there. As Mt. Kôya is also surrounded by eight mountain peaks, one as high as 3,230 feet above sea level, this geographical feature lends itself to representations of an eight-petal lotus and is used particularly in images (Aji-kan) for Shingon meditation. Significantly, Mt. Kôya still preserves these early syncretic influences of Shintô (nature worship) and Buddhist (esoteric doctrine) that were such a compelling mix for Kūkai’s spiritual development. To this day, representations of Buddhas, bodhisattvas and kami blend seamlessly in daily worship on Mt. Kôya. Myths regarding the founding of Mt. Kôya by Kūkai also attest to Kūkai’s abiding respect for Shintô gods and goddesses (kami) as well as an appreciation for powerful manifestations of natural forces.

### **Kūkai’s thought: Cosmic Speech**

My first introduction to Kūkai and his thought was many years ago on reading Yoshito S. Hakeda’s book *Kūkai: Major Works* during my Master’s studies at Columbia University. Recently two books have been published that I have found to be extremely useful: one by Fabio Rambelli titled *A Buddhist Theory of Semiotics: Signs, Ontology and Salvation in Japanese Esoteric Buddhism* and the second (already mentioned) by Shingen Takagi and Thomas Eijô Dreitlein titled *Kūkai on the Philosophy of Language*. It is not by accident that both these more recent works focus on Kūkai and his notions of sound, letter and

meaning, for it is precisely in these areas that Kūkai made his far-reaching innovations to traditional esoteric modalities of Buddhist thought. While Esoteric Buddhism claims that their teachings come directly from the cosmic Buddha (Mahāvairocana) her/himself and not the historical buddha (Shakyamuni Gotama), Kūkai went as far as to claim that consciousness (mind) itself is a universal property inherent in the cosmos. In addition, this cosmic mind is continuously ‘speaking’ the extralinguistic preaching of the Dharmakāya.

According to Kūkai’s doctrine known as *hosshin seppō*, “the cosmic Buddha as *dharmakāya* is engaged in an endless and universal semiotic activity; each single thing in the universe is part of this ongoing self-referential and cosmic speech act called “preaching by the *dharmakāya*” (Rambelli 8). As such, and in this “pansemiotic vision” each linguistic unit (Sanskrit syllable) is a minimal mandala that enables direct communication with the absolute because these Sanskrit syllables (mantra/mandala) share enlightened awareness (Ibid). This cosmic speech is done for pure pleasure in an act of pleasurable self-awareness. Enlightenment under these conditions is not so much a mystical experience as it is cognitive state wherein one realizes an understanding of the language of absolute meaning. The practice of Shingon, as formulated by Kūkai, accounts for a modality of training through body, speech and mind that allows certain human beings who have become accomplished in Shingon practice to recognize their existence in an identification with the deity Dainichi (Mahāvairocana) who is at one with the Dharmakāya. Through this identification (yoga), Shingon practitioners realize the powers this absolute entity provides for both salvation and worldly benefits through the contemplation and articulation of mantra and mandala in ritual settings.

### **Kūkai’s Thought: Consciousness (Mind) as One of Six Elements**

In his work *Sokushin jōbutsu Gi* (*Buddhanood Immediately and in This Body*) Kūkai makes an effort to include consciousness among the 6 elements when he writes:

The *bija*-mantras [of the six great elements are: *a vi ra hūm kham hūm*. The letter *a* means that fundamentally no dharmas arise [*ādyanutpāda*], and is the earth element. The letter *va* [contained in the letter *vi*] transcends speech (*vāc*), and is the water element. Purity without stain or blemish (*rajas*) is the letter *ra*, the fire element. The ungraspability of cause (*hetu*) is the gate of the letter *ha* [contained in the letter *hūm*], the wind element. Identity with empty space is the gate of the letter *kham* and the form of this letter is the element of space. “I awaken to” refers to the element of consciousness. (Takagi and Dreitlein 40)

The Buddhas themselves have “awakened” and it is within our power to share in this enlightened state as this enlightened state is in the natural order of things. Below (see fig. 1) is a visualization I have created for Kūkai’s text as quoted above.



a	earth	yellow	square
bi/vi/va	water	white	Circle
ra	fire	red	Triangle
un/ha	wind	black	Crescent: Semi-circle
ken/kha	space	all colors: blue/ green	Sphere: Jewel
hûm	consciousness		"I awaken"

*Fig. 1: Six elements.*

According to Kûkai, the cosmos (Dharmakayâ) is constituted by the six elements (earth, water, fire, wind, space and mind/consciousness) and these elements are in a state of unity (yoga). We too, as human beings, are constituted by these elements and as such are fully interpenetrated with cosmic forces including cosmic 'mind'. These forces constitute us and we are they. This is Kûkai's reality. Realizing this fundamental state of truth is what accounts for Shingon practice – an "awakening" to the "mind" of what is already a part of our being, and indeed, is a part of all beings, and of all worlds, at all times.

When visiting Mt. Kôya and as one walks the path to Kobo Daishi's tomb one can see hundreds, if not thousands, of stupas that encapsulate this teaching (see below Fig. 2).



*Fig. 2: Sanskrit letters are visible on the stone face and indicate the corresponding element: from the bottom: square=earth/a, circle=water/bi/vi/ra, etc (see previous diagram). Consciousness itself is not represented as such but is actualized in the mind of both the Buddha and the beholder.*

Given this state of affairs – that the cosmos is pansemiotic and is in a continuous process of articulating the ‘preaching’ of the Dharmakāya, it is reasonable to expect that Kūkai would be preoccupied with sound and with the nature of sound/vibration as well as how sounds articulate relations with particular deities and ultimately, with salvation. In accordance with the lineages Kūkai brought back from China, Kūkai conceives of each Buddhist deity as either a part of the Womb Mandala (re)presenting compassion and unfolding along the “y” axis of the conditioned, phenomenal world (as represented by the bell), or the Diamond Mandala (re)presenting wisdom and unfolding along the x axis of the unconditioned, noumenal world (as represented by the vajra). Each deity has a “bija” or a Sanskrit seed syllable that gives ‘voice’ to that deity’s state of enlightened existence. Below (see Fig. 3, 4 and 5) are three images of the Diamond Mandala, the first of the mandala itself, is followed by an image containing the names of the deities represented, and the third is an image showing the *bija* (Sanskrit seed syllable) for each deity.





*Fig. 3, 4 and 5: Taken from Universe of Mandalas*

Contemplating and articulating these seed syllables provides a 'gate' (*monji*) through which a human being can commune with a deity to experience that deity's enlightened awareness – a contemplation that calibrates our cellular energies with vibrational fields of enlightened modalities of existence. In what some have described as Kūkai's 'mantrification' or 'mandalization' of the cosmos, Kūkai calls attention to the inadequacies of ordinary language by claiming that signs (here specifically Sanskrit sounds and letters) are inscriptions of soteriological processes and that these signs must be symbolically assimilated, entered and absorbed via our own desires and our own energies to present us with true reality.

### Kūkai's Thought: Aji-kan Meditation

Meditation on the letter *a* (pronounced 'ah') is a Shingon meditative practice that has been described at length elsewhere (see Yamasaki), but whose meaning is best appreciated in the context of Kūkai's overall profound experience and thought regarding the nature of the cosmos and the 'speech of suchness' (T&D 103). The Sanskrit letter *a* is the seed syllable for Dainichi Nyorai (Mahāvairocana Buddha) and therefore instantiates the fundamentally non-arising reality, neither male nor female, that provides us with an opportunity for inner mental continuity in an experience of the unity of our nature with the nature of existence and the nature of enlightened mind. Elsewhere Kūkai calls the letter "*a*" the "sound of origin" as well as the "meaning of non-arising" (T&D 136). On superficial level, English speakers will recognize the letter *a* as both the beginning of the English alphabet and as a means for elucidating the meaning of 'not' – as in 'atypical' or 'amorphous'. As such, we can perhaps begin understand to some degree why Kūkai calls *a* "the mother of all letters, the essence of all sounds, and the fountainhead of every aspect of reality" (130-131).

Furthermore, and according to Kūkai in *The Meanings of Sound, Letter and Reality*:

The root sound of the Sanskrit alphabet is the sound of the letter *a*. It is present in all sounds, from the moment of opening the mouth to speak. That is called *sound*. The sound of *a* calls the name of *a*, and reveals the name of the Dharmakāya. This is *sound* and *letter*. Dharmakāya has the meaning *a*. (92)



Fig. 6: Six great elements

From the above visualization that I have created, it is perhaps possible to envision one interpretation of what is contained in the absolute meaning of the (Sanskrit) letter *a*. The articulation of 'ah' begins with the mouth opening to

express the sound 'ah' – a sound that contains within it all the following five elements of the cosmos (earth/*a* water/*va*/*bi*, fire/*ra*, wind/*ha*/*un* and space/*kha*/*ken*). Finally, one closes one's mouth while iterating the last of the six elements to pronounce the sound of *hum*, meaning consciousness or mind. As *a* is the origin and nature of the cosmos, *a* (cosmos) is that which contains all the elements (earth, water, fire, wind space and mind) and is vibrationally imaged above as one sound that encompasses the articulated sounds of all six elements: *a-va-ra-ha-kha-hum*.

In Shingon practice, meditation using the Sanskrit letter *a* is widely practiced and uses some variation of the image as shown below (see Fig. 7):



*Fig. 7: Sanskrit letter A*

As you can see from the above (photo mine), the eight peaks surrounding Mt. Kôya are represented as the petals of a lotus. This meditation is closely proscribed and involves a visualization through which the letter *a* as presented above is contracted and assimilated into the heart/mind of the practitioner, then expanded into the cosmos and finally contracted once again, back into the image as found in the picture plane. For a more detailed explanation refer to Taiko Yamasaki in his text, *Shingon: Japanese Esoteric Buddhism*, pages 190-215.

## **Conclusion**

The Sanskrit and Siddham writing systems are central to Kûkai's thought. In his thinking regarding the 'speech of suchness' Kûkai ultimately collapses the meaning of mantra and mandala into one sensory apprehension. While exoteric interpretation understands that sound, letter and reality are entities that can be understood separately, Kûkai bases his thinking in an esoteric

interpretation whereby sound, letter and reality are equated as one. This gestalt of awareness is no doubt grounded in Kūkai's own personal experience, an experience he systematized into a coherent epistemic system. Shingon practice seeks to ensure identification (yogic union) with ultimate reality through 1) meditative states (body), through 2) recitation of mantra (speech) and through 3) visualization of mantra in mandalic patterns (mind) so that one's own mental activity is identified with the mind of a deity, and one physically merges with the deity in an energetic state of enlightened awareness. In this way, one's body is a privileged site where breathing itself becomes a symbolic practice in sacred communion with universal sentience.

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