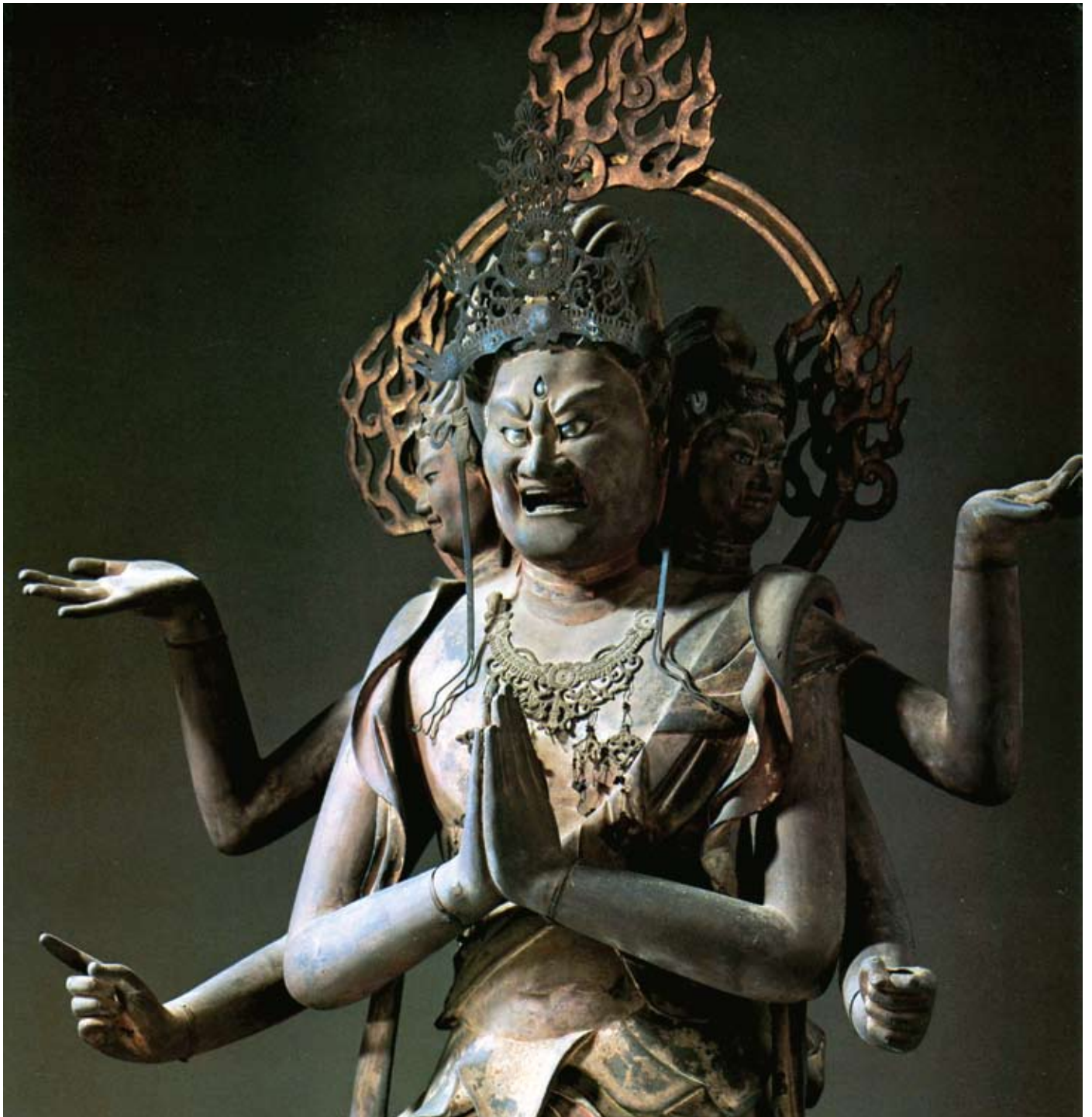


# Burning with the Fire of Shingon

BY Richard Payne



SANJU SANGENDO TEMPLE

From the first time I saw it, I knew what I wanted. The raw emotional power of the Shingon fire ritual was so moving that it has given definition to my practice and study of Shingon ritual since that New Year's morning in 1982.

My wife and I had driven up to Sacramento from our home in the south San Francisco Bay Area in time for the first service of the New Year. Rev. Taisen Miyata—who recently retired as bishop of the North American Shingon Mission in Los Angeles—had invited us to come and participate. The temple, dark at this early morning hour, began filling up until there were about a hundred people, and the service began. As Rev. Miyata lit the fire on the altar of the temple, a *taiko* drum began a steady rhythm, leading all of us in chanting the *Heart Sutra*: “*Kanji zai bosai gyojin, Hannya Haramita ji...*” (“The Great Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, while practicing the perfection of wisdom...”) As my own voice joined with the voices of a hundred others in the predawn darkness, the sounds of the *Heart Sutra* completely replaced my thinking mind.

The ritual of making offerings to deities through the medium of a fire characterizes tantra in all of its forms, both Hindu and Buddhist. With its roots in the practices of Vedic India, the history of the fire ritual extends over perhaps as much as five thousand years. This was the practice I wanted to pursue. To do so, however, I would have to

travel to Koyasan in Japan, the main center of the Shingon tradition, and complete a full course of training. I would have to become a Shingon priest.

The history of the Shingon tradition begins in early medieval India, when tantric Buddhism was first taking shape. Two early sets of practices based on two Buddhist tantras (texts that describe a particular deity ritual) and two mandalas (symbolic representations of the world of a particular central deity) were transmitted to China in the eighth century and then to Japan at the beginning of the ninth century. Known in India as the “way of the mantras,” the tradition’s name was rendered into Chinese as *zhenyan*, meaning “true word,” a translation of one of the definitions of mantra. The Japanese pronunciation then rendered this as *shingon*.

In China, tantric practices came to permeate Buddhism, and no separate, distinct lineage was formed. In Japan, however, Shingon received imperial recognition as a distinct form of Buddhism, and it developed as an autonomous tradition within the variety of different forms of Buddhist practice. Until the seventeenth century, sectarian identity in Japan was not as exclusive as it is today. Throughout the medieval period, many priests engaged in a variety of different practice traditions, much as today someone might train in mindfulness practice under a Theravada master, then spend some time sitting zazen, and finally engage in a Tibetan Dzogchen practice—all the while taking

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classes on Buddhism and Asian taught at a local college, as well as studying and reading on their own. The freedom that medieval Buddhist priests felt to work with a variety of Buddhist forms facilitated the spread of tantric ideas and practices into other Buddhist lineages, where they can still be found today.

The ninth-century monk Kukai—posthumously given the title *Kobo Daishi*, meaning “Great Teacher Ocean of Dharma,” and commonly referred to by the honorific expression “O Daishi sama”—is revered as the founder of Shingon in Japan. He was placed in charge of Toji Temple in Kyoto, which is still an important center for Shingon. The five-story pagoda at Toji used to mark the southern entrance to the city, and it was, prior to the modernization of Kyoto, one of the most prominent buildings in the entire city.

In addition, Kukai was given permission to set up a training center on Koyasan (meaning “high, wild mountain”), which was several days journey from the capital. The training program he established for monks on the mountain was increasingly codified over the centuries.

I had already been introduced to Rev. Miyata by one of my teachers at San José State University, and he later agreed to interview me and my wife regarding my desire to study Shingon. His support and the introductions he could make would be crucial for any success I might hope to eventually achieve. One of the first things he asked me about was the extent and character of my study of Buddhism. Little did I realize at the time the importance of this question, as the Shingon tradition balances education in the history and teachings of Buddhism with practice.

Unlike many in my generation, my first exposure to Buddhism was not through Zen or Tibetan Buddhism, but rather through Jodo Shinshu, the Japanese Pure Land tradition. Growing up near San José in the fifties and sixties, I was taken by my parents to O Bon celebrations at the San José Buddhist Temple, and I remember going to bonsai shows at the Palo Alto Buddhist Temple. It was only later, as the Beats gave way to the hippies, that I began to hear about Zen, reading Paul Reps’ *Zen Flesh*, *Zen Bones* and listening to Alan Watts’ lectures on KPFA, back when FM radio could still be described as underground.

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Inspired by the idea that one could achieve a kind of heroic perfection by way of meditation, I began practicing and studying, first Zen and then other forms of Buddhism as well. Over the years I explored several kinds of practice, including not only Zen but also yoga, TM, and vipassana, until I finally learned about Tibetan Buddhism. Although it is now seriously outdated, the movie *Requiem for a Faith* exposed me to the art of Tibetan Buddhism, whose intensity and power I found fascinating. The idea of transforming negative energies

into positive ones, portrayed in the form of wrathful bodhisattvas, held much more appeal to me than the idea of overcoming or repressing my own desires—strategies too clearly identifiable in the moralistic culture of America at the time. After learn-

ing about the Nyingma Institute, the center near Berkeley founded by Tarthang Tulku, and its first Human Development Training Program, I began a more systematic study and practice of Tibetan forms of Buddhism, a path I would follow for another seven years.

Shingon appealed to me, however, as a combination of the tantric Buddhism I had found in the Tibetan traditions and the Japanese cultural context that I felt quite comfortable in, given the mix of ethnicities I had grown up with in California. Rev. Miyata’s interview explored this range of study and experience and was the gateway that led me to study on Koyasan the following year.

By train, Koyasan is about two hours from Osaka’s Nanba station. Gazing out the window, one first sees industrial Osaka, but fairly soon this begins to give way to suburban Japan and eventually to areas with houses surrounded by small rice paddies. About halfway to Koyasan, as the line begins to climb toward Hashimoto—the largest city between Osaka and Koyasan—the countryside becomes more and more agricultural, the rice fields larger, the houses farther from one another. Finally, one is in rural Japan, where the land is mountainous with only scattered houses set far back at the edges of fields to maximize the space available to grow rice. Emerald green in the spring and summer, the paddies change to tawny brown in autumn, when the plants are cut and hung upside down for the rice to dry before threshing. Here train stations may only be a concrete platform with a single bench, no building, and no staff; you might see one or





*Bishamonten* (Jpn., Tamon-ten)  
Kamakura period, Japan

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Struggling with the backpack and duffle bag that contained all my worldly possessions, I exited the upper station and splurged on a taxi. Soon I had my first glimpse of the town of Koyasan and the temple where I would begin the hundred days of training to become a Shingon priest.

The town of Koyasan is nestled in a small mountain valley, surrounded by five peaks, and is home to the main lineage of Shingon Buddhism, the Chuin-ryu. At one end of town is the Great Gate (*Daimon*), which seemed to be perpetually under reconstruction while I was training on the mountain. As is commonly the case in Japanese Buddhism, the Great Gate marks the boundary between the outer world and the domain of practice, or the domain of at least making a serious attempt to pay attention to the reality of the dharma. Although the Great Gate was traditionally the main entryway into Koyasan, today most travelers come via the rail and cable-car line, and the station is located on a different side of town.

In the middle of the town is the Garan, a large complex of buildings that includes the Golden Hall (*Kondo*) and the Great Stupa (*Daito*). The Garan as a whole serves as the central ritual space for Koyasan. Close by is the head temple, called Kongobu-ji. This is the ecclesiastical and administrative center for the Chuin-ryu lineage. At the far end of town is Kukai's mausoleum.

Opposite the Garan is Yochi-in, the temple where Rev. Miyata sent me to study under the guidance of Rev. Chisei Aratano. There are two large temples specifically devoted to training, Senshugaku-in and Shinbe-sho. However, temples with properly qualified leadership may also undertake the individual training of priests. With two generations of masters who have served in the United States, Yochi-in was an ideal site for study. Indeed, Yochi-in continues to have an active commitment to training foreign priests; in addition to

two people get off or on, or perhaps in the late afternoon a few students reading *manga* (comic books) coming home with their backpacks and school uniforms.

The end of the line is known as *Gokuraku bashi* station—the “Bridge to the Land of Bliss,” referring to the old idea that Koyasan is Amida's Pure Land, Sukhavati, here on earth. This station is on an old pilgrims' trail that led to the mountain, and at this site there is a bridge over a stream, where pilgrims left the world of defilements and entered the world that purifies.

Hastening through the station, one next boards a cable car that climbs the side of the mountain, often through fog, that affords occasional glimpses of massive trees and forests. On my first trip I felt like I was back home in California, but then I realized these were not redwoods but Japanese cypress, and the underbrush was bamboo.

myself and others from the United States, I know of priests from Taiwan and Germany.

The training to become a priest (Skt., *acarya*; Jpn., *ajari*) is called the “training in four stages,” referring to the four rituals one learns to perform in the course of the training, which lasts one hundred days. Prior to beginning the training, however, one must receive a lay initiation, which “establishes a karmic connection” between the individual and the deities of the two main mandalas of the Shingon tradition: the Matrix World mandala and the Vajra World mandala. These mandalas provide the organizing symbolism for Shingon practices.

The Vajra mandala and the Matrix mandala are associated with wisdom and compassion, respectively. The deities represented in the two mandalas are based on the families detailed in the two main texts of the Shingon tradition: the *Great Illuminator Sutra* (Skt., *Vairocanabhisambodhi Sutra*; Jpn., *Dainichi kyo*) and the *Vajra Crown Sutra* (Skt., *Vajrasekhara Sutra*; Jpn., *Kongo cho gyo*). Blindfolded, the initiate is given a flower to throw onto each of these mandalas, an ancient tantric rite that Kukai experienced during his stay in China.

In addition, one needs to enter the Buddhist order and receive a dharma name. I was given the name *Chien*, meaning something like “fully rounded wisdom.” After that, one is ready to take the three sets of vows required of those entering the tantric path. These are the familiar vows of a monk, the vows of a bodhisattva, and the tantric vows. This is done over a three-day period, with the tantric vows first, then the bodhisattva vows, and finally the monastic vows. This is not so much a progressive accumulation of vows as a process of learning to hold each set of vows within the container of the more encompassing vow; monastic vows are held within the context of the bodhisattva vows, and both of these are held within the context of the tantric vows.

Having established a karmic connection, received a dharma name, and taken the vows, I was then ready to be given three practices that are preliminary to entering the hundred days of training: breath-counting meditation, meditation on the full moon, and meditation on the syllable A.

Breath-counting meditation is found throughout the Buddhist tradition. Buddhaghosa, perhaps the most revered medieval scholastic of the Theravada tradition, includes breath counting as one of the forty kinds of meditations he discusses in his *Path of Purification* (*Visuddhimagga*). Most of these

forty meditations are prescribed as a corrective for a practitioner’s predominant emotional issue—greed, hatred, or delusion (the three poisons)—and, just as with medicine, not every kind of meditation is appropriate for everyone. Breath counting, however, is one of the few considered safe for any practitioner to employ. The specific form I was taught on Koyasan was just like what I’d experienced in the introduction to Zen meditation: seated on a cushion, you cross your legs, fold your hands in your lap, sit up straight but relaxed, close your eyes halfway, and begin counting each breath. And, just as in the introduction to Zen practice, you all too quickly discover that your attention has wandered off and gently come back to counting the breath.

For the full-moon meditation, the practitioner sits before a hanging scroll displaying a simple white moon disc resting on a lotus blossom. By alternately gazing on the moon disc and then closing your eyes, you gradually learn to form a mental image of the visual one. With practice, the mental image becomes increasingly stabilized and independent of the visual image. This is very similar to the meditation devices also described by Buddhaghosa—circular images of uniform color and substance that one gazes upon, forming a mental image. The forty meditation objects presented by Buddhaghosa include ten such devices: earth, water, air, fire, blue, yellow, red, white, enclosed space, and bright light.

The meditation on the syllable A employs a similar white moon, but this time it has the syllable A written in the Siddham script of Sanskrit, an ancient script predating the contemporary Devanagari script. The practitioner visualizes this expanding to fill the universe, and then contracting back to the image in front. The syllable A has a complex of symbolic significances in Sanskrit. As the

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first syllable of the Sanskrit syllabary, it signifies beginning. Considered to be present within all Sanskrit syllables, it is universal. As a negating prefix, it represents ending. Meditations on the syllable A are also found throughout Tibetan tantric Buddhism as well.

These three are “open-ended” practices in the sense that you continue with them until your teacher feels you are ready to begin the formal training. The actual training to become a priest includes four parts: the practice in eighteen stages, Vajra World practice, Matrix World practice, and the fire ritual. The practice in eighteen stages in its early form included eighteen mantra and mudra (hand gestures). Within Shingon ritual practice, mantra and mudra always go together, and indeed the mudra are considered to be in some senses more secret, because it is the mudra that actually make the mantra effective. This appears to be why some of the earliest Chinese ritual texts recorded the mantra but did not show the mudra, apparently relying on teacher-to-disciple transmission of this knowledge.

The most important part of Shingon practice is ritual identification, which refers to the identification of the practitioner’s body, speech, and mind with the body, speech, and mind of the Buddha. This allows the practitioner to experience directly the awakened nature of their own natural consciousness (consciousness as the totality of body, speech, and mind, and not purely mental). While Mahayana thought includes the understanding of natural consciousness as already awakened, tantric Buddhism adds ritual practice as a means of actualizing this naturally awakened consciousness.

Ritual identification becomes more prominent as the practitioner progresses through the sequence of four rituals. The second of the four rituals, the Vajra World ritual, focuses on the pantheon of thirty-seven buddhas, bodhisattvas, and other deities of the Vajra World mandala. In the same way, the third ritual, the Matrix World practice, focuses on the Matrix World mandala, and the pantheon of deities found there. Physical representations of these two mandalas are usually hung in the training hall. They represent the two cosmic forms of awakened consciousness: wisdom and compassion. The buddhas, bodhisattvas, and other deities that one evokes in the ritual practice arise from these cosmic mandalas of wisdom and compassion.

The fourth and final ritual in the training is the fire ritual. Symbolically, this includes the deities from both mandalas, and it adds to the structure a series of five fire offerings. The implements held by the chief deity, Fudo, hold special significance. A lasso catches those who would run away from being fully who they are, and a sword cuts away their most prized possessions, their delusions. Fudo’s primary quality, however, is immovability or steadiness. In the face of whatever personal issues a practitioner brings to the practice, Fudo is unmoved and implicitly demands an equal solidity on the part of the practitioner. It is the very character of awakened consciousness to be unmoved by greed, hatred, and delusion, and to transform them into positive energies.

I finally finished the training in September, when days were beginning to get shorter and nights on the mountain quite noticeably colder. It was one of those moments in life when, having completed some very intense undertaking, one is suddenly finished and wonders, “What now?”

There was, of course, more to be done. The final initiatory ritual, known as the dharma-transmission ceremony, which bestows the title of *ajari*, enabling one to act independently as a Shingon priest, followed in a couple of weeks. This was soon followed in turn by a move from Koyasan to Kyoto.

Many years later, I was finally able to go on a pilgrimage route around the island of Shikoku, a journey usually undertaken by new Shingon priests fairly soon after completing their training. And now, suddenly it seems, twenty-six years have gone by. My teacher, Chisei Aratano, himself attained the status of “Dharma-seal Great Master,” which required him to lead all the ritual activities conducted on Koyasan for a full year. Shortly thereafter, he passed away. His temple, Yochi-in, remains and continues to be a place of training for aspirants from outside Japan.

What seems most important to convey to Western Buddhists who have not trained in tantric rituals (*sadhana*) is that the common understanding of the categories of meditation and ritual is inaccurate. Most Westerners learn that meditation is something internal, a mental undertaking, and in our society it’s generally looked upon as having a positive value. Ritual, on the other hand, is often viewed negatively, as something *merely* external, mere form, and our religious culture tells us fundamentally that it is empty of meaning.

This opposition to ritual grows out of a long history in the West, one that goes back most significantly to the Protestant Reformation. Much of the focus of dispute during this period in European history concerned the status of religious ritual. In large part, the reformers wanted to reduce the number of rituals of the medieval church, and some of them wanted to eliminate rituals entirely. In place of rituals,

*Misshakongo*  
Kamakura period, Japan

which were under the control of priests who mediated between the individual and the divine, practices of a contemplative nature became the way for the individual to directly relate to the divine. One of the consequences of the Protestant Reformation for Western religious culture has been the markedly negative attitude toward rituals of any kind that we see today.

However, this favorable view of meditation and unfavorable view of ritual is merely the consequence of that history and does not reflect the nature of Buddhist practice. While Zen practice is called meditation, anyone who has experienced a basic introduction to the tradition is struck by the highly ritualized character of the practice. In Zen, one is directed on how to sit, how to hold one's hands, even which foot to enter the meditation hall with first. Eating is also highly ritualized in Zen monasteries.

Conversely, Shingon ritual practice is filled with meditative elements. Not only the preliminary practices described above, but in the course of each ritual performance the practitioner engages in a series of visualizations. Thus, the distinction between meditation and ritual is for Buddhism not one of conflict or opposition, but rather more a matter of emphasis.

What is to my mind even more important is that all Buddhists—East and West, native-born and convert—come to acknowledge that we all share the same goal, and that we respect one another in our differences. Koyasan, that high, wild mountain, offers one understanding of the nature of the ground, path, and goal. For myself, I found that the understanding offered there reaches deeply down through my delusions, encouraging me to act from within the state of naturally awakened consciousness. **BD**

