

## The Power of Truth Words: Kūkai's Philosophy of Language and Hermeneutical Theory

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The Dharma is beyond speech, but without speech, it cannot be revealed. Suchness transcends forms, but without depending on forms it cannot be realized. Though one may at times err by taking the finger pointing at the moon to be the moon itself, the Buddha's teachings which guide people are limitless.

*Shōrai mokuroku* (Memorial Presenting a List of Newly Imported Sutras and Other Items)<sup>1</sup>

In his *Sangō shiki* (Indications of the Goals of the Three Teachings), written when he was twenty four, Kūkai (774-835)<sup>2</sup> wrote that shortly after his eighteenth birthday he initiated his monastic career by undertaking a special practice called the Morning Star Meditation in the mountains of Yoshino outside Nara. Part of this discipline involved chanting a *darani* (*dhāraṇī*) to Kokūzō (*Ākāśagarbha*) one million times while visualizing the full moon hovering above the bodhisattva's heart. Kūkai, who had dropped out of Confucian studies at the government college in Nara to pursue this practice, believed it would give him the ability to remember and understand every Buddhist and non-Buddhist text he read. In other words, his religious search as a Buddhist began as an intellectual quest.<sup>3</sup>

Yet Kūkai also knew that the Dharma he sought was a reality beyond the charted coordinates of all words, even the words of Buddhist texts. Of course, what words and concepts are and how they relate to one another are analytical questions addressed by the intellect to formulate theories and doctrines that can be "skillfully" (*upāya*) used to bring unenlightened persons to the

practice of meditation—a common Buddhist understanding. Yet one great difficulty with theoretical formulations haunted him like a hungry ghost all his life. Whenever a theory is completed and rounded, the corners smooth and the content cohesive and coherent, it is likely to become a thing in itself, a work of art. It is then like a finished sonnet or a painting completed. One hates to disturb it. Even if subsequent information and experience shoot holes in it, one hates to tear it down because it was once beautiful, whole, and seemingly permanent.

But beyond this is the issue of why words—why language—at all? This question cannot be answered analytically. What is required is intuitive, nondiscursive, participative forms of wisdom that can only be found through the practice of meditation guided, paradoxically, by "words." Such wisdom Kūkai called "esoteric" (*mikkyō*),<sup>4</sup> and he regarded it as the fulfillment of not only the Buddhist Way, but of all religious ways. My thesis is that the heart of Kūkai's esoteric Buddhist Way is his public exoteric philosophy of language and hermeneutical theory. For him, linguistic theory and hermeneutics were so co-dependent that eso-

teric practice must be guided by exoteric teachings in order to awaken to enlightenment.

Since language theory and hermeneutical theory are mutually interdependent in Kūkai's view, either can be used to explain the structure and implications of the other. However, his views are grounded in—and go beyond—more general Mahayana Buddhist theories of language and interpretation. Consequently, it will be advantageous to briefly describe the generic features of Mahayana Buddhist hermeneutical theory as necessary background for discussing how Kūkai's specific theory of words and interpretation both assumed and expanded Mahayana tradition.

Luis Gomez characterizes both Theravada and Mahayana theories of interpretation as "hermeneutical pluralism" because of three issues that arose within the Samgha almost immediately after the Buddha's death.<sup>5</sup> First, if enlightenment is open to all sentient beings, what is the role of sacred words and texts? This question addresses the fundamental issues of Buddhist soteriology—the conflict between the ascetic-monastic ideals of the earliest community and the institutional realities facing the Samgha as it grew and expanded, between orthopraxy and orthodoxy.

Second, since Buddhists have always assumed that the Buddha skillfully taught (*upāya*) in different ways, adapting his language and teachings to the spiritual capacities and maturity of his audience, did he teach a single truth or a plurality of truths? If a plurality of truths, what are they and which must one choose? This problem has been the central issue of Buddhist textual exegesis. Buddhists textual authorities have always been aware of the late date and the "diversity of canonical sources" in Buddhist literary history. As Lewis Lancaster writes:

Simply put, the Buddhist sacred texts clearly resemble a library and bear very little similarity to scriptures of the Western Asian religions. And yet it is not size alone which characterizes

this compilation of sacred books; there is the equally outstanding feature that in Buddhism not one, but a multitude of separate canons have been assembled.<sup>6</sup>

It is this fact that generates what Gomez calls "hermeneutical pluralism," and makes it so difficult to comprehend the unity and diversity of the Buddhist Way.

Finally, since all Buddhist texts utterly reject all philosophical concepts of substance, permanence, selfhood, possession, and property, so important in most conceptions of the world, are there any linguistic expressions that accurately reflect reality, "the way things really are," from the perspective of the experience of enlightenment? This question summarizes the problem of Buddhist philosophical hermeneutics. What is the relation between the conventional language that undergirds everyday experience and the "silence of the Buddhas" about reality as experienced from the perspective of enlightenment.

Kūkai's solutions to these questions can be best understood by setting them in the context of representative traditional responses.

First, traditional Theravada and Mahayana understandings of the role of sacred texts assume that the Dharma is not dependent on historical events, even the event of Śākyamuni Buddha's enlightenment. Whether or not a Buddha arises in the rough and tumble of historical existence, the foundational teachings of the Buddhist Way—impermanence, non-self, suffering, and liberation from suffering—remain ontological facts of life. Therefore, even though the tradition initiated by the historical Śākyamuni is a necessary aid to the achievement of enlightenment for all sentient beings, it remains only a skillful device (*upāya*). His teachings were, in the metaphor of the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, like a mirror reflecting all images and colors.<sup>7</sup> The mirror is always there, reflecting images as they are, whether or not anyone sees the mirror or its reflected images. But

the mirror is not its images. Similarly, Buddhist texts and doctrines point to the Dharma, but should not be confused with the Dharma.

Nevertheless, Theravada Buddhists usually insist on the historical significance of Śākyamuni's discovery of the Dharma and his life and teachings this discovery engendered. There can be no path to enlightenment apart from an historical individual Buddha who first discovers it. Thus Theravadin teachings insist on the close connection between the exact literal meanings of canonical statements and effective practice than is usual among Mahayana Buddhists.

Second, the diversity of Buddhist teachings and practices is not due to confusion or weakness in their historical transmission. Buddhist "hermeneutical pluralism" is, on the contrary, viewed as proof of Śākyamuni's enlightened compassion, of his ability to "skillfully adapt" (*upāya*) his teachings to the exact needs and capacities of all sentient beings. For example, according to the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-upadeśa-sūtra*, he taught four types of teachings and practices, each adapted to the capacities of various types of beings: (1) "worldly" (*laukika*) or surface teachings for those of inferior capacities at the beginning stages of their journey on the Buddhist Path; (2) "therapeutic" (*prātipakṣika*) teachings intended as an antidote for mental afflictions and passion; (3) personal (*prātipauruṣika*) teachings intended for particular individuals; and (4) absolute (*pāramārthika*) teachings that fully express the truth from the standpoint of enlightenment.<sup>8</sup>

However, the fact of Buddhist hermeneutical pluralism is further complicated by the Mahayana conception of multiple Buddhas and the doctrine that all Buddhas participate in a timeless *dharmakāya* (Dharma Body) that eternally preaches in the heavens, and is heard in the meditative experiences of Bodhisattvas and sages. Nonetheless, Theravada Buddhists emphasize canonical integrity as rigorously as Jews, Christians, and Muslims emphasize the canonical integrity of their respective scriptures. Consequently, Theravadins

reject the doctrines of multiple meanings and multiple Buddhas.

Third, Buddhist attitudes toward sacred texts and teachings are inseparable from Buddhist conceptions of levels of linguistic meaning necessary to communicate the Dharma. Speculation about the nature of the experience of Nirvana and the relation of Nirvana to samsaric experience, along with extensive discussion of the nature of the Path to Nirvana and whether there are degrees of enlightenment, led to a theory of linguistic levels of meaning. Progress toward enlightenment occurs in stages of awakened insight, and this was taken to imply varying degrees of ability to penetrate behind the literal meaning of the words of texts.

Mahayana teaching especially insists that the highest levels of enlightenment are embodied in the silence of the *āryas*. That is, the highest stages of the Path to Enlightenment, and therefore the highest order of meaning, can only be linguistically expressed in such apophatic statements as "appeasing all discursive thinking" and "cutting out all doctrines and practices"—verbal insistence that finally and ultimately, the highest level of enlightenment cannot be expressed verbally at all. It can only be known in the "silence" of Buddha-awareness.

Still, all traditions of the Buddhist Way have developed a language of the sacred. For after all, it still remains necessary to explain the "silence of the Buddhas" in order to bring unenlightened beings to it. Accordingly, the culmination of Buddhist linguistic and hermeneutical theory is that language, with all its limitations, is a primary vehicle for the achievement of enlightenment. Like much in Buddhist teaching, language too is an *upāya*, which if used properly can point seekers to the Dharma that, ultimately, is beyond all verbal pointers, including Buddhist pointers.

It was Kūkai's early wrestling with an obscure Buddhist text that motivated him to the study of esoteric Buddhism in China for two-and-a-half years, after which he returned to Japan as the eighth patriarch of a Buddhist lineage known as

Shingon. Historically, *shingon* is a Sino-Japanese translation of *mantra* or "sacred incantation." When written in Chinese ideographs, the two characters composing *shingon* literally mean "truth word." Consequently, as Kasulis writes, "Kūkai's personal quest ... can be understood in terms of his search for the truth of words."<sup>9</sup>

According to the Shingon teaching Kūkai inherited from his master, Hui-kuo (746-805), each and every thing in the universe at every moment of space-time, is an "expressive symbol" (*monji*) of the Dharmakāya, Dainichi Nyorai (Sanskrit, Mahāvairocana Buddha).<sup>10</sup> In fact, the universe as such is the "symbolic embodiment" (*sammayashin*) of Dainichi. Thus, contrary to exoteric schools of the Buddhist Way,<sup>11</sup> which interpret the Dharmakāya as the ultimate reality embodied by all Buddhas, including Dainichi, Kūkai (1) personified the eternal Dharmakāya by identifying it with Dainichi; (2) taught that all Buddhas are interrelated expressions or forms of Dainichi; and, therefore, (3) everything in the universe at every moment of space and time is a concrete manifestation of the Dainichi. To understand what Kūkai's conception of the Dharmakāya means, it will be useful to discuss Shingon conceptions of Dainichi as operating on three interdependent levels: cosmic, microcosmic, and macrocosmic.<sup>12</sup>

On the cosmic "supersensible" level, the universe is Dainichi's "action" or "function" (*yū*). That is, as enlightened, personal—rather than abstract—ultimate reality, Dainichi is in a continuous meditative state, mentally envisioning the universe (*maṇḍala*), verbally chanting sacred sounds or "truth words" (*mantra*), and physically enacting sacred gestures (*mudrā*). From this perspective, everything in the universe is constituted by, and is part of, the "three mysteries" (*sanmitsu*) of Dainichi's enlightened mental, verbal, and bodily activity. Since Dainichi is fully enlightened, each entity in the universe is a direct manifestation of Dainichi's "self-expression and enjoyment" (*jijuyū-sammai*).<sup>13</sup>

From the microcosmic level, Dainichi's enlightened activity is manifested as supersensible "resonances" or "vibrations" (*kyō*). It is these resonances that coalesce into structural configurations that underlie the perceptible realities of human experience, such as the five elements (earth, water, fire, wind, and space),<sup>14</sup> the five mental wisdoms (and the Five Buddhas associated with each),<sup>15</sup> and the five configurations of sound as the basis of all languages.<sup>16</sup> Regarding the five configurations of sound, at the supersensible level every word is a "truth word" (*shingon, mantra*) in that it is a surface (macrocosmic) manifestation of a microcosmic expression within Dainichi's enlightened activity.

This brings us to the macrocosmic level, reality perceived in ordinary human experience of the world. Although in a cosmic sense, the whole universe is the supersensible expression of Dainichi, and although in a microcosmic sense, the universe is constituted by supersensible resonances manifesting Dainichi's enlightened activity in the world, human beings are ordinarily oblivious to these dimensions of reality. At the macrocosmic level, we are generally aware of only everyday mundane things and events. Through Shingon meditative practice, however, we can train ourselves to not only become aware of the macrocosmic reality of things and events, but also the deeper microcosmic world in which each thing and event ceaselessly expresses Dainichi's enlightened activity. One aspect of Shingon meditative practice is especially relevant for understanding Kūkai's theory of language.

According to Kūkai, reality, "the way things really are," is ontologically constituted by Dainichi through the Three Mysteries: physical gesture (*mudrā*), meditative thought or visualization (*maṇḍala*), and speech (*mantra*). For each mystery, Shingon meditative discipline specifies specific ritual contexts for re-enacting, and thereby becoming aware of, the enlightened physical-mental-verbal action of Dainichi. In the area of language, for example, Shingon ritual recognizes five "seed

*mantras*: A, Va, Ra, Ha, and Kha.<sup>17</sup> By intoning these *mantras*, with proper meditative technique and physical posture, the practitioner is said to become attuned to the basic resonances or "sound forms" constituting all language. Stated differently, through mantric practice the seeker knows the "truth words" (*shingon*) inaudible to ordinary hearing.

Kūkai believed this insight establishes the enlightenment of the seeker in two ways. First, it leads to the recognition that the "sound forms" or "truth words" constituting all languages are the elemental ontological constituents of the entire universe. As such, the ordinary macrocosmic world is suddenly experienced as the surface feature of a deeper, linguistic reality. Secondly, this deeper microcosmic level of reality is not experienced as the linguistic building blocks of an atomic universe, but rather as the symbolic "self-expression" or "sound forms" of Dainichi's own enlightened experience.

Kūkai's metaphysics generally, and his metaphysics of language in particular, is extraordinarily complex. But knowing the type of language use that most interested him makes it easy to summarize his philosophy of language. For him, the paradigm of language was the *mantra*, a speech-act with which most Westerners have little experience or interest. But the following narrative should demonstrate how Kūkai's views relate to linguistic experiences we have all had,<sup>18</sup> and in turn should clarify his world view.

Last April I flew from Seattle to Palm Springs to visit my father in Joshua Tree. As I went through the security check, an attendant looked through my brief case and I said, "Just a few books and papers." "I see," she replied. She waved me through the security gate and I headed for the boarding area. Something was wrong with the central heating system in the terminal, and when I arrived at my gate an extraordinary rush of dry heat struck me in the face. "Uggh!," I exclaimed softly to myself. I took off my coat, sat down, and watched the people gathering in the waiting area.

Across from me a man read nursery rhymes to his small daughter. He read with a precise rhythm that enunciated the last word of every line: "Mary Mary, quite *contrary*! How does your garden grow?" Twenty minutes later I boarded the plane and took my assigned seat next to a nervous man who intoned over and over, in a low voice while gazing at a rosary, "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus."

There are several utterances in this scene, each different from the rest.

(1) "Just a few books and papers."

This sentence is a proposition and its only purpose is to relay information to the security attendant. Since my statement corresponded to an actual state of affairs, it was "true."

(2) "I see"

This is not a statement about the attendant's visual abilities. The attendant informed me that she understood my comment after making a cursory inspection of my briefcase and was inclined to believe me. She was also giving me permission to proceed to the boarding area unmolested. To this degree, the attendant's utterance had a performative force as well as a propositional meaning.

(3) "Uggh!"

This is a nonreferential exclamatory utterance, a psychological response to unexpected heat, as if my body was somehow speaking, or that the experience of heat was speaking through my body. Speech acts of this sort are common in English, but are not generally found very interesting in Western philosophical analysis. But for Kūkai, who viewed *mantra* as the paradigm of language, utterances of this sort were of central importance.

The first thing to note about the exclamation "Uggh!" is that it is not learned. Consider the following example. If I suddenly fall and break my arm I might cry "Aaaa!," and it is equally likely that a Japanese in the same circumstances would do the same. However, if I run a splinter into my hand when cutting wood, I might yell "Ouch!" whereas my Japanese friend might yell "ittai!" "Uggh!" is a purely physiological expulsion of air, "Ouch!" and "ittai!" are culture-bound expres-

sions; they have no referent, so their usage can only be learned through mimicking the verbal exclamations of other people in a particular society. Moreover, lacking reference, exclamatory words have no precise meaning at all, yet they do have a correct and incorrect use. For example, someone touching an ice cube and exclaiming "Uggh!" is not using standard English.

Second, in an utterance like "Uggh!" there occurs a fusing of mental, physical, and verbal experiences. It is almost a conditioned response, where somatic and mental experiences—the phonetic and the semantic—are unified. From a physiological standpoint, "Uggh!" somehow more effectively confronts heat than "Brrrr!" Also "Ouch!" and "ittai!" have a similar abruptness and sharpness in their sounds. Thus, it seems that the sounds forming the utterance of these words is not completely arbitrary; here sound *is* meaning.

Third, expressions like "Uggh!" may serve as a clue to understanding the "origin" of language, since they are situated halfway between physiologically determined sounds and words with culturally defined meanings. Specifically, if such expressions are taken as paradigmatic of the most primitive form of language, then a theory about the origin of language should fuse mental, physical, and verbal experience. This is exactly what Kūkai's theory of language tries to do.

(4) "Mary, Mary, quite *contrary*! How does your garden grow?"

Speaking also involves the enjoyment of, and participation in, the sounds and rhythms of words. Children, for example, learn nursery rhymes before they understand their meaning. Part of the meaning, perhaps the major part, of a poem is conveyed in the rhythm and sounds of its words. More importantly, the resonance of words, especially if expressed with style and sensitivity, has an uplifting effect on the audience, as any good actor knows. In Western culture, this fact is mostly discussed in terms of rhetoric or in studies of the ritual traditions of preliterate cultures or in acting classes. Seldom, however, does this character of

spoken language become the special object of philosophical or linguistic inquiry.

In Kūkai's philosophy of language, however, the sounds of words are of central importance. The grunt of a weight lifter, the focusing *kiai* of a martial artist, the cry of delight when a person witnesses a creative act of great beauty attest to the importance of the sounds of words. In Kūkai's opinion, to think of words independently of their sounds is to rationalize away the somatic physicality of language. In his view, language *is* speech, and speech involves bodily movement and the vibration of air.<sup>19</sup>

(5) "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus."

Under the right conditions, a word can evoke psychological states to which the word refers. As the history of religions has taught us, the idea that words can bring realities into being is a major premise of premodern societies. This notion is opposed to modern Western linguistic theory and philosophy of language, which assumes with Plato that reality has a structure independent of human consciousness and the words persons use to name reality. That is to say, language has only referential use: the referent of a word pre-exists the naming of it; reality possesses a structure independent of human consciousness of its referent; and the origin of language is pragmatic.<sup>20</sup>

Kūkai would have disagreed with Plato and modern Western linguistic theory. For him, the primary function of language is *symbolic*, not referential, for a word and its external referent are two sides of the same ontological coin. Thus, the meaning of a word depends on its external referent; the being of an external referent is constituted by the sound of its defining word. Accordingly, reality, "the way things really are," expresses itself in language (as in "Uggh!"), while language simultaneously evokes reality (as in "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus").<sup>21</sup>

In summary, the metaphysics underlying Kūkai's theory of language posits no sharp ontological distinction between mental, physical, and verbal experience—the Three Mysteries. They are

"mysteries" insofar as they can be directly and immediately experienced, but not completely expressed in normal discursive language. They are also "mysteries" because they are expressed as *language*. Since for him, body, speech, and mind interpenetrate, they must have a common structural element. Kūkai called this common element *kyō*, "resonance" or "vibration," i.e., "sound."

Furthermore, like all Buddhists, Kūkai maintained that there are no permanent, unchanging substantial entities in the universe. What we superficially interpret to be independently existing permanent entities are actually processes existing interdependently with other processes. Since every thing and event we experience is a process, every thing and event we experience is constantly undergoing change, as are we who experience things and events. Kūkai called the element energizing all change and becoming *kyō*, "resonance." Resonance makes sounds, and sounds make words. To what do words refer? Reality—the Dharmakāya personified as Dainichi ceaselessly expressing itself to itself for itself.

Finally, we are in a position to understand how Kūkai understood the symbolic use of language. In my narrative, the "Uggh!" experience posits no sharp distinction between physiological, psychological, and verbal (body, mind, and speech) realities. For the father reciting "Mary, Mary, quite contrary. How does your garden grow," and for the child hearing it, what the rhyme "means" is ultimately the rhyme itself. For the nervous passenger reciting his Jesus "*mantra*," where is Jesus? Is Jesus only a state of the passenger's mind? Is Jesus physically present in the ambiance of the plane's interior? Is the reality of Jesus *only* verbal?

The point of these examples is to show that "truth words" (*mantra*, *shingon*) "are designed to make us plumb the macrocosmic level of expression until we reach the depths of the microcosmic."<sup>22</sup> For, if a verbal expression leads us to direct encounter with the reality at the foundation of ordinary experience, and if it causes us to change our behavior and undertake Shingon practice,

those expressions are true macrocosmically as well as microcosmically. It is possible, therefore, to make this understanding of language into a hermeneutical criterion for interpreting various religious teachings, practices, and texts. That is, the more an exoteric or esoteric teaching, practice, or text leads us to recognize the microcosmic and macrocosmic dimensions of reality, the more true that teaching, practice, or text is.

This is exactly what Kūkai had in mind when he spelled out his hermeneutical strategy in 830 in his *Ten Stages of Mind* (*Jūjūshinron*) and in an abridgment written the same year entitled *Precious Key to the Secret Treasury* (*Hizōhōyaku*).<sup>23</sup> These two works were written as a response to an imperial order for doctrinal summations from each of the recognized Buddhist schools of Kūkai's time. Kūkai went beyond mere summation of Shingon teachings and practices by evaluating all Buddhist teachings known to him from a Shingon perspective. In fact, he set up a hierarchy of all the religious teachings and practices known to him. For each, he wrote a poem summarizing the teaching, followed by a prose description of the teaching combined with extensive quotations from scriptural and nonscriptural literary sources, and an evaluation of the teaching's strengths and weaknesses. A brief summary of each of the "ten stages of mind" should reveal the structure of Kūkai's hermeneutics.

One: The Deluded, Goat-like Mind. This is a non-religious, sub-human mental state in which some persons possess no moral or religious sensibilities, and therefore can neither regulate nor morally discipline their natural desires.

Two: The Ignorant, Childlike, but Tempered State of Mind. In this state human ideals are followed in a mechanical, rule-structured way. This state of mental development is beyond the first level because it evinces awareness of others and a sense of moral and social responsibility. Kūkai regarded it

- as the lowest state of moral consciousness, and identified it with Confucianism.
- Three: The Infant-like, Fearless State of Mind. Persons evolved to this stage perceive the limitations of the secular world and renounce it in hopes of attaining something transcendent that can serve as a source for serenity and immortality. Like newborn sucklings, such persons are oblivious to the rough and tumble of historical existence and find peace in something beyond. Kūkai identified this state of mind with Taoism.
- Four: The State of Mind that Recognizes the Existence of Psycho-physical Constituents Only (the Five *Skandhas*), not the *ātman* (Self). Persons at this stage understand Śākyamuni's teaching about impermanence, recognize the reality of the Five *Skandhas*, and therefore the emptiness of Self. Consequently, the personal gain sought at level three is overcome by the elimination of ignorance and desire for permanence. Kūkai identified this stage with the most primitive understanding of Buddhist teaching, the Śrāvaka or Theravada disciple of the Buddha.
- Five: The Mind Freed from the Seeds of the Law of Karma. Without hearing the teachings of any teacher, persons at this stage discover within themselves that the karmic roots of suffering are delusions. Breaking free from ignorance, such persons also break free from the karmic recycling of birth and death, and achieve enlightenment on their own. Such persons Kūkai identified with the Pratyek Buddha.
- Six: The Mahayana Mind with Compassion for Others. Recognizing that all *dharma*s, the microcosmic constituents of reality, are actually manifestations of mind, persons at this stage know by experience the emptiness (*śūnyatā*) of all things and events, as well as the emptiness of Self. Thus, they teach the universal enlightened compassion of the bodhisattvas. Kūkai identified this mental state with the Hōso (Yogācāra) lineage of the Buddhist Way.
- Seven: The Mind that Realizes that the Mind is Unborn. Through Nāgārjuna's eightfold negations, insight into the two levels of truth, and acceptance of the dialectical logic of the Middle Way, persons having this state of mind realize that the mind itself is unborn. Therefore, they realize that the distinction between mind and non-mind (subject and object, mind and body) is relative truth, not absolute truth. Kūkai identified this state with the Sanron (Mādhyamika) School of Buddhism.
- Eight: The Mind Truly in Harmony with the One Way. In this state, one rejects the exclusiveness of the dialectical logic of the Mādhyamika because one apprehends the unity of all approaches to enlightenment. Beyond sheer emptiness, the truth of enlightenment is also a "skill-in-means" (*upāya*) which depends on the audience hearing it. One mind contains all things. Kūkai identified this mental state with the Tendai teachings of his older contemporary, Saichō (767-822).
- Nine: The Highest Developed Exoteric Mind Aware of its Nonimmutable Nature. At this state, one recognizes the total interpenetration and interdependency of all things and events in space-time. Kūkai identified this state with the Kegon (Hua-yen) Buddhist lineage.
- Ten: The Glorious, Most Esoteric and Sacred Mind. This state of mental development subordinates all exoteric teachings and practices to the immediacy and comprehensiveness of esoteric Shingon teachings and practices. At this state, one does not merely know the interpenetration of all things and events, one participates in this interpenetration through esoteric ritual. The Dharmakāya, Dainichi, is directly experienced and is no longer a speculative, philosophical abstraction.

tion. Kūkai identified this state with his system of Shingon teaching and practice.

Several features are obvious in this scheme, but nevertheless should be summarized. First, this classification scheme is unique with Kūkai.<sup>24</sup> At least there are no similar examples in Chinese Buddhist tradition, even in the tradition of Shingon Kūkai introduced from China. However, there were various *p'an-chiao*<sup>25</sup> classification systems in China, especially in the T'ien-t'ai (Tendai) and Hua-yen (Kegon) schools. Also, texts such as the *Lotus Sutra* had developed the idea that the Buddha intended certain teachings for specific audiences as a "skill-in-means." But Kūkai's hermeneutical system classifies states of mental development, not teachings in sacred texts. That is, he understood specific teachings and practices as parts of different world views, or ways in which people lived in and interacted with reality. Furthermore, this idea is found in his earliest work, *Indications of the Goals of the Three Teachings* (*Sangō shiki*),<sup>26</sup> written long before his journey to China and before the Chinese sectarian *p'an-chiao* systems were known in Japan.

Accordingly, Kūkai stressed what religious teachings do to and do for people, rather than on what they say—their logic, consistency, and coherency. For example, at the lowest level, there are philosophies that portray people as driven primarily by instinctual desires and unconscious forces. In Kūkai's view, such teachings are false—not because of empirical evidence to the contrary, but because such teachings lead human beings to live their lives in an inhuman, animalistic world. Because the teachings and practices pointed to in levels two through ten all produce humane human beings, they are, in ascending degrees, more true than level one.

Second, Kūkai's hermeneutical theory assumed that a person's view of the world is confirmed by that person's own experience. One who is driven by instinctual desires and unconscious forces believes all human beings are so driven.

That is, a person's mind dwells in a world fitting that person's world view. This is the basic meaning of the "ten minds" (*jūshin*). His point was that it is possible to see the limitations of our known worlds only when we look beyond the worlds in which we dwell to other states of mind open to further dimensions of human development. Only then can we see the limits and falsehood of our previous conceptualities. Once more, in Kūkai's view, being aware of possibilities beyond our present state of awareness occurs only because of Dainichi's grace (*kaji*), understood as the spiritual resonance between Dainichi and us that makes us conscious of all worlds as expressions of Dainichi's own reality.

Third, the highest level, Shingon teachings produce individuals who directly and immediately know ultimate reality, Dainichi, at the microcosmic level. They also know, through symbolic imitation—through *mudra*, *mantra*, and visualization techniques of meditation—the cosmic Dharmakaya. However, all other teachings and practices—states two through nine—are exoteric religious Ways strictly limited to the macrocosmic level of reality. Kūkai ranks these exoteric teachings according to how readily they help their followers apprehend the existence of the microcosmic depths of experience and reality.

For example, Confucianists, unlike the lowest level of people, recognize the need for moral ideals. Yet they are only interested in maximizing social harmony while failing to see other dimensions of experience and reality. Kūkai placed the Taoists above them because, in their childlike dreaming of immortals and heavens, they recognize the possibility of dimensions of reality beyond the merely ethical and social. Theravadin Buddhists—states four and five—are superior to Taoists because they recognize the reality of impermanence and reject the idea of an immortal self. Still, Kūkai thought they fell short because they try to achieve enlightenment for themselves as if they were separate from the rest of the world.

States six through nine represent various Mahayana exoteric teachings and practices that all

accept the principle of universal enlightenment. This perspective is a step forward for Kūkai because it recognizes the "non-duality" of the Dharmakāya at the microcosmic and macrocosmic levels. That is, all four Mahayana states of mind emphasize their own particular conceptions of non-duality, their degree of adequacy increasing as one moves up the hierarchy to stage ten. Hōso, for example, stresses the non-duality of compassion and wisdom, Sanron the non-duality of *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra*, Tendai the non-duality of the various paths to enlightenment, and Kegon the non-dual interpenetration of all things and events at every moment of space-time.

But what distinguishes Level Ten, Esoteric Buddhism, from Levels Seven, Eight, and Nine? In what, in other words, lies the superiority of Shingon teachings and practices from the Sanron, Tendai, and Kegon lineages of the Dharma? Kūkai believed that Kegon, and to a lesser extent Sanron and Tendai, developed the highest levels of understanding possible through exoteric teachings and practices. That is, strictly through analysis of phenomenal existence—the macrocosmic level—followers of Sanron, Tendai, and Kegon have *partially* apprehended the transcendental microcosmic reality "in, with, and under" phenomenal existence as a logical *a priori* reality. But, Kūkai claimed, Sanron, Tendai, and Kegon lack experiential verification of this apprehension, which he believed was only available through the Shingon esoteric teachings and practices.

Kūkai's point was that non-esoteric followers of the Buddhist Way can only speculate about the microcosmic level of reality without truly knowing it by experience; only esoteric practices can engender direct experiential participation in the microcosmic dimension of ultimate reality from which all macrocosmic things and events at every moment of space-time flow and to which they all return. Through the practice of Shingon ritual, the seeker is able to effect epistemic, experiential *a posteriori* saving knowledge of the microcosmic.

This understanding is the center of Kūkai's hermeneutical circle. Once one has experienced the Dharma through the Shingon world view, one apprehends the microcosmic and macrocosmic dimensions of existence—in more common Western expression the transcendent and the immanent—as "symbolic expressions" (*monji*) of Dainichi. For Kūkai, there is no other way to achieve full enlightenment.

Accordingly, Kūkai's hermeneutical circle closes on a paradox: from the esoteric standpoint of Shingon teachings and practice, there are in fact no non-esoteric states of mind. This is what Thomas Kasulis had in mind in referring to Kūkai's hermeneutic as a "mandalic hermeneutic:"<sup>27</sup> all teachings and practices, whether exoteric or esoteric, emanate from Dainichi as the Dharmakāya itself. This can be seen in the full title of the *Ten Stages of Mind*, *Himitsu mandara Jūjushinron* or *The Secret Maṇḍala's Ten Stages of Mind*. Like the "Womb" or "Matrix Maṇḍala" Kūkai brought back from China, with Dainichi portrayed in the center of all the diverse realms of existence in the universe, Esoteric Shingon is at the center of Dainichi's "preaching." But as this preaching radiates out from this center, it is viewed differently according to different stages of mental development. It takes form not only as different forms of the Buddhist world view, but also as different worlds.

Interpreting the ten stages of mind as a mandalic hermeneutic brings two aspects of Kūkai's understanding of Buddhism into clearer focus. First, the *Ten Stages* and the *Precious Key* were written to show how there can be so much diversity in a single Buddhist Dharma.

Second, Kūkai's mandalic hermeneutic allowed him to appeal to esoteric texts of the Buddhist Canon as a scriptural foundation for his evaluation of esoteric lineages of the Buddhist Way. Not only did this give his mandalic hermeneutic "orthodox" legitimacy, its effect was to remind his readers that all schools of Buddhism can be viewed from an esoteric perspective—and

should be. Within themselves all schools of Buddhism have their own coherency and consistency; yet only the Shingon standpoint reveals that the unity behind the different versions of the Buddhist Way originate from a single source, the Dharma-makāya Dainichi Nyorai.

It is here that Kūkai's mandalic hermeneutic and his theory of language meet. Kūkai often explained complex points of his teachings by writing a poem. The truth of a religious teaching does not depend on the ontological status of its referent, but on how it affects us. For enlightened beings, the truth may be expressed through any medium, but for most of us who are unenlightened, a medium more suggestive and less explicit might be more effective. Kūkai often favored art over words as the best "skill-in-means" for communicating his teachings.

Still, we cannot do without words, so Kūkai also wrote long, involved, complex explanations of Shingon teachings and practices. He remained a religious teacher whose quest for liberating truth began with questions about the meaning of a sacred text. Or as he wrote to Emperor Heizei (reigned 806-809) upon his return from China in 806, cited in the quotation with which I began this essay, "The Dharma is beyond speech, but without speech it cannot be revealed."

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Yoshito S. Hakeda, tr., *Kūkai: Major Work* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), 145. All citations from Kūkai's works in this essay are from Hakeda's translation, although I have checked them against the original Chinese texts in Yoshitake Inaba (ed.), *Kōbō Daishi Zenshū* (*The Complete Works of Kōbō Daishi*), 3rd edition revised (Tokyo: Mikkyō Bunka Kenkyūsho, 1965). Although Hakeda's work is not a translation of Kūkai's complete works, it is the best English translation of the most influential of Kūkai's writings in print. Since I cannot improve on Hakeda's translation, I have used it with gratitude.

2. Kūkai, "Empty Sea," is commonly known as Kōbō Daishi, an honorific title posthumously awarded to him by the Heian Imperial Court. "Kōbō" means "to widely spread the Buddha's teachings, and "daishi" means "great teacher." He is still revered today as both a Buddhist master who widely spread the Buddha's teachings and as a culture hero.

3. This point has been eloquently made by Thomas P. Kasulis, "Truth Words: The Basis of Kūkai's Theory of Interpretation," *Buddhist Hermeneutics*, edited by Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988), pp. 257-58.

4. The term "esoteric" refers to "secret" oral instruction in the practice of Shingon rituals and forms of meditation transmitted from teacher to disciple only after the disciple has undergone the proper ritual initiation. For Kūkai's discussion of the differences between "esoteric" and "exoteric" forms of Buddhism, see his *Benkenmitsu nikyōron* (*The Difference between Esoteric and Exoteric Buddhism*), Hakeda, *Kūkai: Major Works*, 151-57. Also see Taiko Yamasaki, *Shingon: Japanese Esoteric Buddhism* (Boston: Shambala, 1988), 3-4.

5. Luis Gomez, "Buddhist Literature and Hermeneutics," *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan Free Press, 1987), 529-40.

6. Lewis Lancaster, "Buddhist Literature: Its Canons, Scribes, and Editors," *The Critical Study of Sacred Texts*, ed. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty (Berkeley: Berkeley Religious Studies Series, 1979), 215.

7. D. T. Suzuki, tr., *The Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1932), 82.

8. Edward Conze, tr., *The Larger Sūtra on the Perfection of Wisdom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 404-14.

9. Kasulis, "Truth Words," *Buddhist Hermeneutics*, 262.

10. *Shōjijissōgi* (*The Meaning of Sound, Word, and Reality*) in Hakeda, 234-35.

11. Kūkai's conception of Dainichi, and subsequent Shingon doctrinal formulation, is based on standard Mahayana "three-body" Buddhology (Sanskrit, *trikāya*; Japanese, *sanshin*). Prior to Kūkai's teacher, Hui-kuo, Dainichi was regarded as one of a number of *sambhogakāya* (body of bliss) form of the eternal reality called *dharmakāya* ("Dharma" or "Teaching Body") that all buddhas comprehend when they become "enlightened ones." But in exoteric Buddhist teachings and esoteric Buddhist tantra prior to Hui-kuo and Kūkai, the *dharmakāya* is ultimate reality, beyond names and forms, utterly beyond verbal capture by doctrines and teachings, while yet the foundation of all Buddhist thought and practice. *Sambhogakāya* forms of Buddhas are not "historical buddhas" (*nirmāṇakāya*), of whom the historical Śākyamuni is an example; they exist in non-historical realms of existence, forever enjoying their enlightened existence, as objects of human veneration and devotion. Normally, all bodhisattvas and non-historical buddhas, including Dainichi, were represented as *sambhogakāya* forms of the eternal *dharmakāya*.

12. *Sokushin jōbutsu gi* (*Attaining Enlightenment in This Very Existence*), Hakeda, 225-39. Also see Yamasaki, 57-64.

13. *Sokushin jōbutsu gi*, 226.

14. *Shōjijissōgi*, 240-46.

15. That is: (1) "Wisdom Perceiving the Essential Nature of the World of Dharma" (*hokkai taishō chi*), represented by Dainichi seated in the center of the Womb *Mandala*; (2) "Mirror Like Wisdom" (*daienyō chi*), associated with Akṣobhya (Asuku) seated in the East; (3) "Wisdom of Equality" (*byōdōsho chi*), symbolized by Ratnasambhava (*Hōsho*) seated in the South; (4) "Wisdom of Observation" (*myōkan zatchi*), represented by Amitābha (Amida) seated in the West; and (5) "Wisdom of Action" (*jōsosa chi*), represented by Amoghasiddhi (Fukūjōju) seated in the North.

16. That is: (1) *A*, associated with the element Earth and the Buddha Mahavairocana; (2) *Va*, associated with the element Water and the

Buddha Amoghasiddhi; (3) *Ra*, associated with Fire and the Buddha Ratnasambhava; (4) *Ha*, associated with the Wind or Air and the Buddha Amitābha; and (5) *Kha*, associated with Space and the Buddha Akṣobhya.

17. *Hizō hōyaku*, Hakeda, 219-24.

18. After writing this section, I discovered an essay written by Thomas P. Kasulis that offers a more complete example and fuller analysis of these linguistic experiences than I have. After reading his essay, I revised what I had written to follow his format. The narrative and examples are my own and reflect my experience. See "Reference and Symbol in Plato's *Cratylus* and Kūkai's *Shōjijissōgi*," *Philosophy East and West* 32 (October 1982): 393-405.

19. *Shōjijissōgi*, Hakeda, 240-45.

20. See Kasulis, "Reference and Symbol in Plato's *Republic* and Kūkai's *Shōjijissōgi*, 400.

21. *Shōjijissōgi*, Hakeda, 245-46.

22. Kasulis, "Truth Words," *Buddhist Hermeneutics*, 264. Also see Ian Astley-Kristensen, "Shingon Buddhism: This Body and the West," *Japanese Religions* 16 (January 1990): 28-30.

23. For a complete English translation of *Hizō hōyaku*, see Hakeda, 157-224.

24. See Adrian Snodgrass, "The Shingon Buddhist Doctrine of Interpenetration," *Religious Traditions* 10 (1987): 1-6 and Kasulis, "Truth Words," *Buddhist Hermeneutics*, 265.

25. The system devised by the schools of Buddhism in China to arrange Buddhist texts in an ascending hierarchy to the particular text or group of texts they regarded as the "final" teaching of the Buddha. Different schools of Chinese Buddhism had different versions of this hierarchy of texts.

26. Hakeda, 101-39.

27. Kasulis, "Truth Words," *Buddhist Hermeneutics*, 269.