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## **Paths across Borders: Comparative Reflections on Japanese and Indo-Tibetan Models of the Buddhist Path**

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### INTRODUCTION

The thrust of this paper is to urge students and scholars of Buddhist thought to think more broadly about the tradition in at least two ways. One is to see commonalities across sub-traditions, such as Japanese and Indo-Tibetan. Another is to appreciate more openly similarities in Buddhist thought with theistic, non-Buddhist traditions. It is my premise that in both these areas—comparative investigation within Buddhist traditions and between Buddhism and other religions—there are unfortunate prejudices that obstruct possibilities for deeper understanding of both “self” and “other,” whether these terms designate bodies of scholarly or of religious identification.

The first “broadening” I emphasize concerns understanding models of the Buddhist path (*mārga*) across Buddhist traditions. The second regards the exploration of how important aspects of Buddhist faith are more “substantialist,” with similarities to theistic traditions, than commonly acknowledged.

### JAPANESE AND INDO-TIBETAN VIEWS ON THE BUDDHIST PATH

Some people say it is odd that Japanese tradition uses the term esoteric Buddhism (*mikkyō*, 密教) for what Indian and Tibetan traditions call Vajrayāna or Tantric Buddhism. Yet there is nothing particularly eccentric about this usage. In the Indo-Tibetan traditions the term Secret Mantra Vehicle is virtually synonymous with either Tantrayāna or Vajrayāna. Furthermore, the Japanese tradition also commonly employs the term Vajrayāna (Kongōjō, 金剛乘) interchangeably with the

term esoteric Buddhism. Thus the terminology overlaps fully in the vast literature of these lineages.<sup>1</sup>

One aim of this essay is to depict some of the valuable contributions of Japanese esoteric or Vajrayāna Buddhist thought to the wider Buddhist tradition. I will emphasize similarities with Indo-Tibetan Buddhism in order to highlight key features of pan-Asian Vajrayāna and, by so doing, aim to offer Japanese Buddhism an honored seat (more so than it tends to get in scholarship on Buddhism) at the table of comparative Buddhist studies. Japanese (and Chinese and Korean, for that matter) contributions to Buddhist thought are rarely considered by scholars of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism to be comparable to those of the subcontinent. There seems to be an implicit disregard for the level of philosophical rigor demonstrated by Buddhist thought east of India, as if Indian and derivative Tibetan Buddhist traditions of thought express more sophistication in their intricate analyses of philosophical/theological issues. It is hard to provide evidence for my assertion since it stems from decades of observing in person the intellectual behavior of Buddhist scholars and is not specifically grounded in published statements. But I think anyone deeply engaged in the field of Buddhist studies is likely to acknowledge that in certain circles something like this prejudice operates as a steady assumption.

The first portion of this essay focuses on a comparative analysis of some related visions of the Buddhist path and its stages. For someone well versed in contemporary scholarship on Buddhism, the phrase “stages of the path” is likely to bring to mind the Tibetan model of religious development known as *lam rim* (literally, “path stages”). While this paradigm of Buddhist practice tends to surface more in the discourse of the Tibetan Gelug tradition, it is the inheritance of all the major Tibetan schools. The basic *lam rim* model derives from the ingenuity of the great Indian master Dīpaṅkara Atiśa (980–1054), who was instrumental in developing Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna doctrine and practice at a seminal point in Tibetan history.<sup>2</sup> The lineage of teachings descending from Atiśa is called the Kadampa tradition and is shared by all schools of Tibetan Buddhism. The Gelug school in particular, due to the contributions of its founder Tsongkhapa (1357–1419), seems to utilize the *lam rim* model, and its three-tiered path structure, most centrally. Tsongkhapa wrote multiple influential texts on this topic alone, his most extensive being the *Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path*.<sup>3</sup>

Further east, Kūkai 空海 (774–835) set the foundations for Vajrayāna Buddhism in Japan. He established the Shingon school (“*shingon*” means “mantra”) and wrote volumes on a myriad of topics, among which were influential treatises on the topic of the stages of the Buddhist path. Most notable is his ten-stage model put forth in both his *Treatise on the Ten Stages of Mind of the Secret Mandala* and a subsequent, shorter version, *Precious Key to the Secret Treasury*. At a first glance, Kūkai’s ten-stage model might appear to bear little resemblance to the *lam rim* one of Tsongkhapa and Atiśa, which presents only three distinct stages. However, I think the path put forward by Kūkai shares significant features with the Indo-Tibetan *lam rim* structure. And this similarity is fairly remarkable considering that Kūkai developed his model in the early ninth century, a full two hundred years prior to Atiśa.

#### TEN-STAGE MODEL OF KŪKAI

Before addressing some of the congruencies of these two models, I will offer an abbreviated outline of Kūkai’s ten-stage schema.<sup>4</sup> The first thing to note is that, like many “doctrinal classification” systems (Ch. *panjiao*, 判教, Wade-Giles *p’an-chiao*) in East Asian Buddhist history that preceded Kūkai’s, his schema places his own school at the summit of a proposed hierarchy of schools because in his view it represents the highest, truest, most effective Buddhist teaching. Also, like some of the prior Chinese doctrinal classification schemas, Kūkai’s model incorporates non-Buddhist religious forms at the “lower rungs,” then ascends through Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna teachings to reach his “peak.” However, Kūkai’s inclusion of Vajrayāna teachings (at the top) was a unique feature. Previous doctrinal classification systems did not touch on Vajrayāna Buddhism because it was new to China and thus to Japan.

His model can be viewed from different angles, one of which sees his division of teachings into the two categories of exoteric and esoteric, with a surface interpretation of this division taking only the tenth level of Shingon to be esoteric. Alternately, he offers a “depth” interpretation that sees an esoteric dimension to every level. These two interpretative lenses derive from his vision, or premise, that all religious teachings, from whatever human tradition, that aim to draw people from a self-centered life toward the freedom that comes from wisdom and compassion derive from the same source: the spontaneous, effluent effulgence of the cosmic Buddha Mahāvairocana, the

Great Illuminating One, whose teachings guide beings by offering a myriad of skillful “patterned forms” (*mon*, 文).<sup>5</sup> He asserts that all religious lineages other than Shingon encounter the raw teachings that emanate directly from Mahāvairocana in only symbolic and indirect ways. Thus he designates them as “exoteric.” Shingon practices, on the other hand, bestow the capacity to enter into the very source of Mahāvairocana’s teaching, into the depths of His own profoundly enlightened *samādhi*, such that the practitioner unites directly with the spontaneous expression of this buddha’s body, speech, and mind. This is the “esoteric” approach, and its practice reveals that this deeper, hidden dimension is always present in any kind of teaching, provided one has the “precious key” to access it directly. The exoteric and esoteric approaches are often designated, respectively, as “vertical” and “horizontal.” While the vertical view of these teachings is that they are graded, with distinctions, the horizontal view is that they are all unified within the cosmic Buddha’s *samādhi*. Kūkai thus states that although from the vertical perspective there are nine exoteric stages (only eight of these represent teachings since the first level is beyond the pale; more on this below) and just one esoteric one, with accompanying stages of mind for each, from the horizontal perspective all these teachings are esoteric.

In brief, Kūkai’s ten stages are as follows. We can divide the ten into five ascending categories: the pre- or non-religious (just one); the non-Buddhist (two); Hīnayāna Buddhist (two); exoteric Mahāyāna Buddhist (four); Shingon Vajrayāna (one). The first stage comprises beings with no interests other than those of sensory- and self-gratification. Kūkai likens such beings to “rams.” While this is one of the ten stages of mind, unlike all the other stages it does not have a teaching that accompanies it because beings at this level have no aspiration for transcendence. The next two stages represent the first budding of spiritual awareness wherein inclinations toward morality emerge. Kūkai’s texts do not label these two as belonging to any particular religious tradition, but the language and citations he uses align them fairly unambiguously (but not exclusively) with Chinese Confucian and Daoist teachings. This “ranking” of placing Confucianism and Daoism, in this order, below Buddhism, appeared also in Kūkai’s very early essay, *Indications of the Three Teachings*, in which as a young man he laid out his reasons for devoting himself to the Buddhist path and for dropping out of the Confucian-based government college to do so. The inclusion

of non-Buddhist “stages of mind” in a map of human spiritual progress is, I think, worthy of note. Kūkai clearly acknowledges the spiritual efficacy, the real benefits, of non-Buddhist religious teachings, even if he places them at the bottom.

The first Buddhist “stages of mind” are the so-called Hīnayāna or “lesser vehicle” Buddhist teachings. It is commonplace in Mahāyāna literature to refer to the two vehicles of the *śrāvaka* and the *pratyeka-buddha* as Hīnayāna. From the Mahāyāna perspective these two types of Buddhist practitioner lack the deep compassion for all beings that characterizes the Mahāyāna bodhisattva path. Kūkai follows a traditional interpretive schema that takes the *śrāvakas* to focus on the teachings of the four noble truths and the *pratyeka-buddhas* to focus on the twelve links of dependent origination, both of which were foundational teachings from early in the historical Buddha’s career. While it might be difficult to establish that there were in fact communities of Buddhists who focused almost exclusively on these respective teachings, this portrayal is fairly standard in Mahāyāna Buddhist literature. As with the non-Buddhist stages, however, Kūkai readily points to what is deeply spiritually edifying about the teachings that accompany these stages. They provide the foundational philosophical outlook from which all other Buddhist practices follow by depicting the core truths of pervasive suffering, its causes, and the path to its elimination.

The next four stages are Mahāyāna ones and essentially represent four main schools of Chinese Buddhism that flourished during the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE), two of which were relatively direct imports from India and two of which were established by Chinese masters. The two Indian-based schools represent Mādhyamaka and Yogācāra traditions, while the two Chinese ones are Tiantai 天台 and Huayan 華嚴. Kūkai places the Indian ones as foundations for the Chinese, in a manner that reflects historical development but also his own philosophical vision. The Indian-based schools emerged during the Tang as Chinese Buddhist schools in their own right. Three important Mādhyamaka texts became the basis for the Sanlun (“three treatise”) school, while various Yogācāra texts were the core of the Faxiang (“phenomenal characteristics”) school. Both of these schools had Chinese masters who wrote commentaries on seminal Indian texts as well penning influential treatises of their own. The Tiantai and Huayan schools, on the other hand, were not based as strongly on Indian Buddhist *śāstra* literature as were the Sanlun and Faxiang schools. Their putative founders—Zhiyi 智顛

and Fazang 法藏—took much of their creative interpretive strategies from sutra literature: the *Lotus Sutra* for Zhiyi's Tiantai school and the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra* for Fazang's Huayan school. And while the Sanlun and Faxiang schools clearly had their own Chinese character, their basic doctrinal reliance on classical Indian *śāstra* literature marks them as quite distinct from the more originally Chinese ideas that grew in the Tiantai and Huayan schools.<sup>6</sup>

Kūkai's unique, or idiosyncratic, framing of the relative philosophical and religious “levels” of these four Mahāyāna schools has been an issue of doctrinal importance in the history of Japanese Buddhism. Naturally there have been criticisms of the criteria he used for his hierarchy, criticisms that often derived from scholars/practitioners aligned with one of these four “lower” Mahāyāna schools. Such sectarian doctrinal disputes have a long history in most Buddhist traditions. While we cannot dismiss that competitiveness might be one source, serious philosophical differences also emerge in such debates, differences with considerable spiritual implications for some practitioners. Disputes over how best to interpret even the earliest Buddhist teachings are as old as the religion, and hermeneutical principles such as criteria for classifying “definitive” versus “interpretable” teachings, or for distinguishing “conventional truths” from “ultimate truths,” have held tremendous weight in every Buddhist tradition.<sup>7</sup>

In Kūkai's case, his writings were produced in the environment of late Nara-period scholarship that was dominated by schools of Buddhist textual study imported from China and Korea. He was widely read in the major texts of all the Chinese Buddhist schools and was likely influenced by the classification systems created by their masters, especially those of the Tiantai and Huayan schools. One of these systems, by the Huayan master Zongmi 宗密, included at its lowest rank non-Buddhist ideas, which he labeled “teachings of men and gods.”<sup>8</sup> Much like Kūkai's second and third stages of mind, Zongmi's classification (which includes just five levels) of non-Buddhist teachings affirms that outside Buddhist traditions there exist effective instructions and practices for improving one's lot in this life and in future lives. I shall comment more on this important topic below when introducing the Indo-Tibetan models. For now it should suffice to conclude this section by noting that the unique quality of Kūkai's schema lies not so much in his ranking of various Buddhist teachings (stages four through nine) but rather in (1) his addition of the category esoteric or Vajrayāna

Buddhism and (2) his assertion that all religious teachings derive from the Buddha Mahāvairocana. The broad sweep of his vision of human spiritual development ranges from the bluntly animalistic to the incipience of moral urgings, to the wish for individual liberation, to the generation of a compassionate aspiration to liberate all beings, to a multitude of philosophical positions aimed at furthering this aspiration, to the final stage of esoteric Vajrayāna practice where, he claims (along with his Indo-Tibetan counterparts), this aspiration can be fulfilled in a single lifetime. It appears that he was the first in Buddhist history to articulate a sophisticated model of human religious development based on the perspective of Vajrayāna practice.

It is not easy to gauge the impact of Kūkai's model on the growth of Buddhist thought in Japan. The genre of doctrinal classification to which it belongs was a product of Nara and early Heian period Japan (eighth through tenth centuries). This sort of scholastic exegesis was less popular in the late Heian, Kamakura, and subsequent periods in Japanese history.<sup>9</sup> It is clear that within the confines of sectarian scholarship concerning the relative merits of the teachings of the various Japanese schools, debates over Kūkai's classification maintained some force over the centuries, and does so even today as critiques of his assessment still appear in Japanese scholarly journals. But the impact of his hierarchical paradigm in terms of any prevalent acceptance in particular of the sequence of the four Mahāyāna schools seems doubtful, outside, that is, the domain of Shingon apologetics. Elements central to his ten-stage model did, however, have influence on general modes of thinking about the relation between theory and practice in Japanese Buddhism, influence that probably lasted for many centuries. Of particular significance is Kūkai's theory of the "esoteric within the exoteric," where all teachings are seen to possess hidden dimensions (made knowable through the regime of Shingon practice) that ultimately originate from Mahāvairocana Buddha. It seems that this theory, coupled with the complex beauty and perceived power of Shingon rites of initiation and invocation, contributed to the centrality of Shingon esoteric ritual practices in all schools of Japanese Buddhism for many centuries after Kūkai's death in a pattern commonly referred to as "shared practice" (*kenshū*, 兼修) of both the exoteric and esoteric. Kūkai's socio-political savvy also secured prestigious court aristocrats as sponsors for elaborate Shingon rituals, private and public alike.<sup>10</sup> A combination of ritual expertise, creative theological interpretation, and a skillful social life



brought Shingon Vajrayāna practice into the mainstream of Japanese Buddhism. In fact a term coined by the noted Japanese historian KURODA Toshio, “the exoteric-esoteric system” (*kenmitsu seidō*, 顯密制度), points to the overwhelming dominance of a paradigm of Vajrayāna practice that allowed for the “exoteric” schools to use Shingon ritual and theory, for the entire medieval period of Japanese Buddhist history.<sup>11</sup> Thus while the vertical dimension of Kūkai’s ten-stage model might be rightly critiqued for its exclusivist inclination, the horizontal aspect allowed room for a broad vision of shared religious practice, a “mandalic” or inclusive vision in which all religious teachings have a rightful place. In this and in the above senses, Kūkai’s contributions to Japanese Buddhist thought were immense.<sup>12</sup>

#### INDO-TIBETAN “STAGES OF THE PATH”

As noted earlier, there is also a deeply inclusivist orientation to the model of the Buddhist path developed by the eleventh century Indian master Atiśa, a model that became the foundation for the *lam rim* (“path stages”) tradition prevalent in Tibetan Buddhism. Atiśa’s *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* (*Bodhi-patha pradīpa*) conveyed his vision of “three capacities/perspectives” in religious life that follow one another in a sequence on the Mahāyāna Buddhist path. While in theory each of these “capacities” can stand alone as a distinct and valid approach to religious life, it seems that Atiśa’s intent in presenting them together was to inculcate an understanding of how one can develop the highest Buddhist aspirations on top of the strongest possible foundation. Atiśa’s three-tiered model uses the labels of “lower,” “middling” and “highest” (or depending on the translation, something like “inferior,” “average,” and “superior”). Basically it is a division among stages of religious life that might also be rendered beginner-intermediate-advanced. While the beginning stage (or capacity) is understood to be the ideal place for a Buddhist to begin the path, it can also serve as the founding religious perspective for anyone who is not Buddhist. Much like Kūkai’s second stage, this beginning marks the emergence of a desire to transcend the ordinary limitations of worldly life by engaging in disciplines of mind and body that will enhance one’s potential for experiencing genuine and lasting contentment. The impulse to practice ethical, intellectual and contemplative disciplines to weaken the quantity and intensity of one’s suffering is understood in this model to be a profoundly healthy motivation toward freedom.

In Atiśa's vision, the "lower capacity" person is not inferior in any intrinsic way but merely has what he deems to be an elementary level of spiritual development, in particular of motivation. And his presentation of a person at this level is of one who seeks to improve his or her station in life, a station not limited to social status but rather more broadly conceived as an overall ratio of happiness to suffering. From his Buddhist perspective, this person aims to improve his station both in this life and in future lives, and in terms of future lives is particularly concerned to avoid the unfortunate rebirths of the lower realms of the animals, hungry ghosts and hell beings. Thus such a person is motivated by the laws of karma to increase performance of virtuous action and to decrease that of non-virtuous action. For Atiśa, this approach to spirituality is not necessarily Buddhist because in his Indian culture many non-Buddhists also believed in the reality of rebirth and of the force of karma that directs the process (though there were differences of opinion about specifics). And, incidentally, the fact that there is nothing particularly Buddhist about this spiritual "stage" is mainly what marks it as "lower." However, a very important feature of Atiśa's model is that this lower level is also an essential stage through which any Buddhist who wishes to effectively pursue the Buddhist path must pass. It is thus *both* a Buddhist and a non-Buddhist stage. Although the inclusivism here does not share the conceptually complex twists of Kūkai's "esoteric within the exoteric" view, it is still similarly inclusive. It affirms that spiritual stages designated as elementary are nonetheless intrinsically edifying, whether they lead into the Buddhist path or not.

What characterizes the second or "middling" level for Atiśa is the characteristic Buddhist attitude of renunciation of attachment to any state in the cycle of rebirths no matter how exalted. This includes renunciation not only of high status within the human realm, such as might assure comforts of good health, wealth, fame and long life, but as well of the delights of the godly (*deva*) realms. Thus the person of "middling" spiritual capacity recognizes the inherent instability and insecurity of any station within samsara and, consequently, desires complete liberation from all conditioned states in the final freedom that is nirvana. Similar to Kūkai's treatment of stages four and five, Atiśa designates this attitude as essentially that of (what he considers to be) the Hīnayāna Buddhist practitioner. And just like the first or

“lower” stage, Atiśa understands this stage to be an essential developmental step toward his vision of a fully mature spirituality.

The assumption here is that unless a practitioner wishes for increased well-being within the realms of rebirth—a wish that reflects both a genuine desire for fulfillment and an understanding of the karmic principles that can lead to improved conditions—and then goes beyond such a desire to achieve an even wiser intention to be free of all the vagaries of samsaric states, the person will not be able to authentically and effectively generate the highest attitude of the third Mahāyāna stage. For Atiśa sees the aspiration of the bodhisattva as a combined aspiration for (1) the fulfillment of the wishes of all beings (2) in their complete liberation from all samsaric states. The uncommon desire to free all beings is the highest aspiration, but it can only grow well in a soil moistened by a sincere concern for beings’ happiness (stage one) and a profound recognition of the limits of all temporal forms of such happiness (stage two). This unique combination of compassion and wisdom, of attention both to the conventional and the ultimate truth, characterizes the bodhisattva attitude. For Atiśa this is the highest of all possible religious orientations and represents the culmination of our human capacity for spiritual growth.

So the highest perspective is one fully imbued with *bodhicitta*, or the altruistic aspiration to awaken to buddhahood. In the Mahāyāna tradition this is the standard bodhisattva motivation: to pursue the path toward complete enlightenment in order to be of maximal benefit to living beings. Attaining buddhahood fulfills the aims of the “middling” perspective by effectively liberating one from the cycles of samsara, yet goes further by extending the wish to include the liberation of all beings, not only oneself. By definition a buddha has perfected both wisdom and compassion and thus possesses the highest possible degree of skillful capacities (*upāya*) to guide other beings to a similar state of perfect freedom. What higher state could there be than this win-win position of having fully benefited oneself *and* being fully, selflessly dedicated to benefiting others? Thus in terms of perspectives on spiritual growth, Atiśa’s three-tiered model culminates here.

In terms, however, of concrete methods of practice the highest capacity has one additional twist. Because the bodhisattva seeks to aid all sentient beings, and because the transformative path to buddhahood is said to take the average practitioner three incalculable eons to complete (which translates to an enormous number of lifetimes),

the bodhisattva of this highest aspiration, who is truly motivated by the strongest compassion, will seek to enter the Vajrayāna or Tantric path of practice. This final turn is necessary because according to the Vajrayāna tradition, only its methods—of “deity yoga” that include visualization exercises employing *mudrā*, mantra, and mandala (the three mysteries of body, speech, and mind that unite the practitioner with the Buddha)—can bring buddhahood to fruition within a single lifetime. This final “capping” with Vajrayāna practice parallels Kūkai’s schema perfectly.

Two centuries apart, with thousands of miles and many cultures and languages in between, the overall patterns of these two models of the path indicate striking similarities. Kūkai’s vision of spiritual development ascends from the non-Buddhist to the Hīnayāna Buddhist to the Mahāyāna Buddhist. While he divides each of these into subsections, from two to four (adding complexity perhaps at the cost of the elegance of Atiśa’s trimmer model), the basic shape remains the same. Moreover, both models share an inclusivist orientation that affirms the values of their so-designated “lower” stages of spirituality. And the movement within each schema from exoteric Mahāyāna to the esoteric teachings of Vajrayāna seals the congruency.

Scholarship in Buddhist studies tends to maintain a divide between the East Asian and South Asian traditions. There is often an assumption that when Buddhism left the subcontinent and migrated into China (and from there to Korea, Japan, and Vietnam), it took on the cultural trappings of lands so radically different from that of its origin that comparative studies are unlikely to be fruitful. Even though a few careful scholars have pointed out the shortcomings of holding such a blanket assumption, reminders of the deep continuities across the continent need repeating.<sup>13</sup> Sure, native Chinese Daoist influences on the Chan Buddhist tradition, for example, are indeed evident. But such blending occurred in every stage of Buddhism’s growth, even in its homeland, India. Developments in Japanese Buddhism are not only worthy of study in their own right, and for an understanding of Japanese religious history; they are also valuable for the comparative light they can shed on other Buddhist developments. It is remarkable that two hundred years before Atiśa, Kūkai penned “stages of the path” treatises bearing a profoundly similar pattern. It is also noteworthy that Kūkai presented what was probably the first attempt in Buddhist history to systematically distinguish exoteric and esoteric

Buddhism (what Tibetan traditions later called, respectively, the Sutra and Tantra traditions, and Kūkai called the “Perfections Vehicle” and the “Vajra Vehicle”).<sup>14</sup> While his chief arguments in favor of this distinction differ somewhat from those that developed later in India and Tibet, it is of great value for an understanding of the history of Buddhist thought to observe the shape that his theories took around the year 815. Interestingly, one key feature to his view of Buddhist teachings, as noted above, is that they all emanate from the Buddha Mahāvairocana. While his assertion that this Buddha is the *dharmakāya*, and that it “preaches,” naturally received criticism from some other Buddhists in Japan, it not only became the foundation for a model of Buddhist practice that dominated the subsequent near-millennium of Japanese history but also bears resemblance to some Indian and Tibetan theories.<sup>15</sup> Before concluding, I will reflect briefly on some aspects of Kūkai’s understanding of Mahāvairocana Buddha. I will also suggest that his explicitly monistic view of this Buddha as “source” shares elements with other Buddhist teachings and represents a fruitful point of comparison with non-Buddhist theistic traditions.

#### THE COSMIC BUDDHA

The claim that all religious teachings aiming to help people move beyond blind attachment to afflictive emotions derive from a single source can sound almost theistic. Yet Mahāvairocana as source is not a creator God, nor is he an entity external to the world and who intervenes in it. Leaving aside whether Kūkai’s view could possibly be classified as either pantheistic or panentheistic, it is certainly not monotheistic in the traditional sense. Mahāyāna Buddhist systems of thought developed a variety of theories such as that of the storehouse consciousness, buddha-nature, Adi-Buddha, and so on, all of which can sound at times as if positing some single substance as the basis of all existence, or at least as the basis of all conscious experience including the supreme consciousness of enlightenment. It is sometimes said that the Mahāyāna tradition moved closer to Hindu (Upanishadic or Vedantist) modes of thinking in this regard, and there can be no doubt that Mahāyāna thinkers took pains to clarify how they felt their philosophy/theology differed from these non-Buddhist ones. However, it is not only in Mahāyāna thought that one finds discourse with intimations of a “single source,” even though this source might be expressed more as a principle than as a substance. The earliest Pali *suttas*

have the Buddha describing the “unconditioned” (*asamskrta*) and the “deathless” (*amṛta*) as final, or primary, states of reality. If it were not for the existence of the unconditioned, the Buddha asserts, there could be no liberation or enlightenment, no freedom from the conditioned, no attainment of the “deathless” that is nirvana. He also mentions an essential purity of mind (*pabhassara citta*) that is undefiled by all our ignorant states.<sup>16</sup> This notion of an innately pure mind was controversial within the Theravāda tradition and commentaries on the subject proliferated.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, the universal Buddhist concept of dharma—in the sense of “truth” rather than as “teaching” or “practice,” three of its standard denotations that can at times overlap—is most certainly resonant with the meaning of the deepest reality discovered (and then taught) by Buddha and is, accordingly, a sustained object of profound faith for all believing Buddhists. It does not require fancy theological maneuvering to be able to claim that, when a practicing Buddhist takes refuge in the three jewels of the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha, the core refuge is the dharma. Buddha became Buddha only because he realized this dharma, a “truth” he asserted to exist always whether a buddha awakens to it or not. Thus there indeed exists some kind of permanent object of faith for Buddhists. One traditional definition of the dharma realized by Buddha is the principle of dependent origination. Now while this is commonly taught as a principle that describes how nothing in the world, material or mental, exists on its own (nor permanently) but only in dependence upon certain causes and conditions (and thus impermanently)—the deep and direct realization of which principle brings liberation—dependent origination is at the same time understood as an eternal truth and thus as an enduring object of faith. Granted, as such the dharma is not a primordial or eternally existent substance. But it is something understood as centrally existent, and as the deepest reality one can know. Thus practically speaking the existence of dharma functions in the minds of Buddhists in ways that share features with the existence of a God in more theistic traditions.<sup>18</sup> And when one looks at the role of buddhas and bodhisattvas such as Avalokiteśvara and Tārā in the developed Tantric traditions of India and Tibet, the quasi-theistic elements are exceedingly prominent. This is similar with Mahāvairocana for Kūkai. For him this buddha is perhaps like a combination of three things: the truth of dependent origination itself, the glory of the mind that realizes this truth, and the

power of the Buddha who teaches it. Mahāvairocana Buddha's name itself means "great illuminating one," and as such the name points both to the innate purity of mind *and* to the being who makes this purity known to the world. These two coalesce as something akin to a single object of religious faith.

My assertion here is not that Buddhist philosophical texts make strong claims for any permanent or substantially existent substance as the basis for all reality. On the contrary, the texts often take great pains to distance themselves from such a stance. Nonetheless, I think in the arena of the mentality of a practitioner that certain beliefs, or conceptions about what is real and what is possible, loom like fairly solid objects in the landscape of faith. Neither am I intending, however, to make a simple distinction between theory and practice. Rather, I want to highlight how certain theoretical assumptions about the origins and destinations of one's practice undergird and sustain the practice. These assumptions might be tentative and provisional "conventional" mental constructs that will dissolve when one experiences ultimate reality directly. But until then, their force is considerable and even indispensable.

The axial locus of Buddha Mahāvairocana undergirds Kūkai's vision of unity across a variety of religious teachings. This feature of his model of stages of the path distinguishes it from that of Atiśa, and of the subsequent Tibetan traditions that relied upon Atiśa's model. Thus there are significant similarities as well as differences between these models. Without developing an argument at length, I would like to suggest that Kūkai's quasi-theistic understanding of the foundation of all religious teachings—indeed of the foundation of all reality—is not as idiosyncratic a Buddhist interpretation as it might on the surface appear to be. In fact I think he very keenly points to some fundamental orientations in Buddhist thought that too often get brushed aside in mainstream discourse out of a concern for sounding substantialist or theistic.<sup>19</sup> But as I have indicated, although Buddhist philosophy/theology has fairly successfully avoided positing a substantialist ontology or metaphysic, in the realm of the discourse of Buddhist faith, of the all-important movements of the heart-mind that can keep one grounded on a religious path, there seems to be something substantially present as a light at the end of the tunnel. Perhaps this light functions actually as a great *upāya*, or expedient/skillful means, and not as an intrinsic end (or beginning) in itself. Either way the light shines brightly and,

if it shines as long as anyone is on the path (that is, as long as the *buddhadharma* exists and beings follow the teachings), then it would certainly seem to be ever-present, or at least temporally coterminous with the existence of *samsara*. Emphasis here is on “seems,” for I want to highlight the normative and formative content of experience of the believer/practitioner, who thinks of *dharma* as real and of enlightenment as the truly existent terminus of its practice. To conceive of these things as “merely conventionally real” (a common exhortation based on the teaching of emptiness) is, for an unenlightened being, the equivalent of an afterthought, and one that had better not undermine the force of one’s *faith* in the path and its goal.<sup>20</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

The two commonalities illustrated here are not unrelated. Recognizing overlaps between doctrines in different sub-traditions of Buddhism, and between Buddhist and non-Buddhist traditions, can bring new insights into the nature and function of Buddhist beliefs and practices. Both intra- and inter-religious dialogue can foster increased understanding of “self” as well as of “other.” We dialogue with others (or just study them) not only to learn more about others but also to learn better how to understand our own pursuits in the process. Studying a tradition outside the bounds of one’s main field of learning can shed great light on one’s usual focus (I refer here to the virtue of crossing boundaries in academic study where one’s object of study might not be one’s personal system of belief, but the same holds true for believers/practitioners). It can fulfill the precept to “make what is familiar strange,” which is an invaluable aim for various forms of human learning.

In the case of the boundaries of Japanese and Indo-Tibetan Buddhist traditions—with particular reference to Vajrayāna Buddhism—there is a tendency for scholars of the latter to see Japanese Vajrayāna as somehow inferior due to its not having reaped the benefit of influence from late Indian traditions of Unexcelled (*anuttara*) Yoga Tantra. Thus the Japanese Vajrayāna tradition is seen to represent only an earlier stage of esoteric Buddhism, and as such is viewed as being comparatively stunted or immature in its growth. It is true that the majority of Japanese esoteric Buddhist traditions stem from earlier stages of the development of Indian esoteric Buddhism. As for what, therefore, is “superior” or “inferior” in this regard, one criterion would be to rely



upon the traditional Indo-Tibetan insider's view that only the later Unexcelled Yoga texts and their related transmissions provide an adequate vehicle for full enlightenment. And as some representatives of this tradition claim, even Śākyamuni Buddha's own enlightenment was achieved by such practices. Naturally, based on this criterion (that later is better), Japanese Vajrayāna is less "advanced" than that taught, say, in modern Tibetan communities. I do not wish to quibble with such a view now, but only want to record it and to note that I believe it is one reason why scholars of Indo-Tibetan traditions of Vajrayāna tend not to take East Asian versions of Vajrayāna very seriously and, as a result, are liable not to learn of some of the very creative and powerful turns of thought that grew from this tradition. Granted, the most rewarding serious study of East Asian traditions requires the ability to read texts in Chinese (and ideally Japanese commentaries), and it is not reasonable to expect many scholars to add one or two additional languages, and textual corpuses, to their already impressive repertoires (although a few scholars have). But there are abundant resources even in Western languages today for pursuing such study if one is so inclined. Therefore my appeal is to urge further comparative studies of Buddhist philosophical/theological traditions, in particular within the Vajrayāna. In addition, I urge more serious critical reflection on the monistic and quasi-theistic tendencies within Buddhist traditions. At least from the perspective of religious psychology, it seems clear that comparisons along these lines hold much promise. In sum, I hope that my observations here will convince some readers that these two sorts of border-crossings are eminently worthy of pursuit.

#### NOTES

1. For a recent example of good contemporary scholarship on Indian Vajrayāna that regularly employs the term "esoteric Buddhism," and that reflects on its meaning, see Vesna A. Wallace, "The Provocative Character of the 'Mystical' Discourses on the Absolute Body in Indian Tantric Buddhism," *Pacific World*, 3<sup>rd</sup> series, no. 4 (Fall 2004): 245–256.
2. On Atiśa, see Ruth Sonam's, translation (with commentary by Geshe Sonam Rinchen), *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1997).
3. For an excellent survey of models of the Buddhist path, see Robert E. Buswell and Robert M. Gimello, eds., *Paths to Liberation: Marga and Its Transformation in Buddhist Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1992).

4. For detailed treatments of his ten-stage model, see Yoshito Hakeda, *Kūkai: Major Works* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972); Rolf W. Giebel, *Shingon Texts* (Berkeley, CA: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation & Research, 2004); and Ryūichi Abé, *The Weaving of Mantra: Kūkai and the Construction of Esoteric Buddhist Discourse* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), esp. 323–334.

5. *Mon*, or “patterned forms,” can mean written language but has a broader semantic range that for Kūkai includes all signs of a sensory or cognitive nature from which humans derive meaning. See Thomas Kasulis, “Truth Words: The Basis of Kūkai’s Theory of Interpretation,” in *Buddhist Hermeneutics*, ed. Donald S. Lopez (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1988), 257–272.

6. Since the aim of this essay is broadly comparative, those seeking more detail on Kūkai’s classification of these schools might benefit from reading my “Transmission Problems: Kūkai and the Early Dissemination of Esoteric Buddhist Texts,” *Japanese Religions* 28, no. 1 (January 2003): 5–68, and my “Kūkai and the Beginnings of Shingon Buddhism in Japan” (PhD diss., Stanford University, 1995).

7. For more on the tradition of doctrinal classification in East Asian Buddhism, see essays in Lopez, ed., *Buddhist Hermeneutics*; Robert E. Buswell and Robert M. Gimello, *Paths to Liberation: The Mārga and Its Transformation in Buddhist Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1992); Robert M. Gimello, ed., *Studies in Ch’an and Hua-yen* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1983), Peter N. Gregory, ed., *Sudden and Gradual: Approaches to Enlightenment in Chinese Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1991), and Stanley Weinstein, “Imperial Patronage in the Formation of T’ang Buddhism,” in *Perspectives on the T’ang*, ed. Arthur Wright and Dennis Twitchett (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1973). Also there is a fine essay by Peter N. Gregory on the Chinese practice available online at <http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/core9/phalsall/texts/doctrina.html>. In it Gregory notes:

In the fifth and sixth centuries Chinese Buddhists like Hui-kuan employed *p’an-chiao* as a hermeneutical strategy to reconcile the discrepancies among the different teachings believed to have been taught by the Buddha. By resorting to the doctrine of expedient means, they were able to create a hierarchical framework within which the entire range of Buddhist teachings could be systematically organized into a coherent doctrinal whole. But *p’an-chiao* was not a neutral methodology. Nor did the rubric of expedient means offer any basis on which to decide the order in which the various teachings were to be classified. The order in which the teachings were ranked was a matter of interpretation that called for value judgments in regard to which scripture or scriptural corpus was to be taken as authoritative. Thus,

in addition to providing a hermeneutical method by which the diverse teachings put forward in different scriptures could be harmonized, *p'an-chiao* also furnished the structure according to which the different traditions of Chinese Buddhism advanced their own sectarian claims for being recognized as the true, ultimate, or most relevant teaching of Buddhism.

8. Zongmi was Kūkai's Chinese contemporary and it is not likely that Kūkai read his works, though he clearly read those of the earlier Huayan master Fazang. On Zongmi and the non-Buddhist teachings, see Peter N. Gregory, "The Teaching of Men and Gods: The Doctrinal and Social Basis of Lay Buddhist Practice in the Hua-Yen Tradition," in *Studies in Ch'an and Hua-yen*. Gregory also treats this same teaching of Zongmi in his *Inquiry into the Origin of Humanity* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1995), 110–127.

9. Classification schemes continued to be produced, but in general they were not of the "classical" sort of the Nara and Heian periods. See Carl Bielefeldt's "Filling the Zen shu: Notes on the *Jishu Yodo Ki*," in *Chan Buddhism in Ritual Context*, ed. Bernard Faure (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 179–210.

10. See my "Japan's First Shingon Ceremony," in *Religions of Japan in Practice*, ed. George Tanabe (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

11. On Kuroda's term, see James C. Dobbins, "Exoteric-Esoteric (Kenmitsu) Buddhism in Japan," in *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, ed. Robert E. Buswell, Jr., vol. 1 (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004), 271–275. Note that Kuroda's term refers not only to a style of combined religious practice but beyond that to the entire system—ideological and institutional—of medieval Japanese Buddhism. For articles on Kuroda and his theory, see "The Legacy of Kuroda Toshio," special issue, *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 23, nos. 3–4 (Fall 1996), available online at [http://nirc.nanzan-u.ac.jp/publications/jjrs/jjrs\\_cumulative\\_list.htm](http://nirc.nanzan-u.ac.jp/publications/jjrs/jjrs_cumulative_list.htm). And on Kūkai's legacy in terms of choreographing (both literally and figuratively) the fusion of the exoteric and esoteric teachings, see my dissertation and Abé's *Weaving*.

12. While the fact is often neglected in the abbreviated title of Kūkai's great treatise on the ten stages in both Japanese and English renderings, the full name of his text is *The Ten Stages of Mind of the Secret Mandala* (*Himitsu-mandala jūjūshinron*). The term "mandala" here represents the entire world/palace/tapestry (many metaphors will work and Kūkai employs them) of Mahāvairocana's teachings as they have manifested in our world in order to help liberate sentient beings. The term "mandala" has also often been used in contemporary Japanese discourse about Shingon teachings to express the tradition's support for a pluralistic religious vision.

13. Gregory Schopen, "Archeology and Protestant Presuppositions in the Study of Buddhism," *History of Religions* 31, no. 1 (August 1991): 1–23.

14. See for example not only his *Ten Stages* but also his earlier *Treatise Distinguishing the Two Teachings, Exoteric and Esoteric*. The former has not been fully translated into English. The latter is available in full translation in Rolf Geibel's *Shingon Texts* (Berkeley, CA: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation & Research, 2004) and partially in Yoshito Hakeda's *Kūkai: Major Works* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972).

15. While it seems not to be the case that Indian esoteric Buddhist texts state that the *dharmakāya* actually communicates, the “gnostic body” or *jñānakāya* in these texts holds a place similar to that of the *dharmakāya* in Mahāyāna literature and is said to “express itself in linguistic forms.” See Vesna Wallace, “The Provocative Character of the ‘Mystical’ Discourses on the Absolute Body in Indian Tantric Buddhism.”

16. See Thanissaro Bhikkhu's translation, and his comments, of the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* (A.1.8–10) at <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an01/an01.049.than.html>

17. For references, see Ru-nien Shih, “The Concept of ‘Innate Purity of the Mind’ in the Āgamas and the Nikāyas,” *Journal of World Religions* 13 (2009): 117–176. Also see the Wikipedia article “Luminous Mind” at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Luminous\\_mind](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Luminous_mind).

18. Paul J. Griffiths alludes, albeit it with a different focus from mine here, to monistic tendencies in mainstream Mahāyāna thought in his *On Being Buddha: The Classical Doctrine of Buddhahood* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 199 *passim*. In the final sentence of the same book (p. 202), he refers to the theological problem of “the subsumption of dharma into Buddha.” Had this position been avoided in Mahāyāna thought, Griffiths argues, the tradition would have been able to successfully “preserve a critically realist, non-monistic metaphysic.”

19. Note the rich controversy over substantialist perspectives in Buddhist thought as accounted in Jamie Hubbard and Paul L. Swanson, eds., *Pruning the Bodhi Tree: The Storm over Critical Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997).

20. Note Śāntideva's luminous comment on this problem of the two truths in vv. 75 and 76 in the tenth chapter, on “Wisdom,” in his *Bodhicaryāvatāra*. A hypothetical critic in the text asks who it is that has compassion, and for whom, if beings are “empty.” The author responds by saying that the construct of “being” is preserved out of the need to eliminate suffering and that the ultimate truth of emptiness is not allowed to undermine this task.

