Buddhism in Japan:
Pilgrimage, Ritual and Thought

Richard K. Payne

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This volume gathers together revised and expanded versions of four lectures given under the auspices of the Centre of Buddhist Studies at the University of Hong Kong in October of 2024. Chapters Two, Three and Four were given as the three public lectures of The 12th MaMa Charitable Foundation Lecture Series in Buddhist Studies. Chapter One was a lecture given for Dr. Tony Chui's class "Japanese Culture and Thought: The Buddhist Impact."

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Buddhism in Japan:
Pilgrimage, Ritual and Thought

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Cover image:
The cover illustration portrays the five great Wisdom Kings (*vidyarāja*, *go dai myōō*, 五大明王): the central figure is Acalanātha Vidyarāja (Fudō myōō, 不動明王, also known as Caṇḍamahāroṣaṇa); the lower right corner is Trailokyavijaya, the "Victor of the Three Realms" (Gōzanze, 降三世); the lower left is Kuṇḍalin, the "Serpentine Energy" (Gundari, 軍荼利), the upper left is Yamāntaka; the "Conqueror of Death" (Daiitoku, 大威徳); and the upper right is Vajrayakṣa, "Vajra Insight" (Kongōyasha, 金剛夜叉). Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

Dedication

To my wife, Bonnie Ann Payne,
whose support and wisdom have enriched my life.

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Introduction

This work revises and expands a set of four lectures given at the University of Hong Kong in 2024. One of the overall themes of those lectures was that the category of "Japanese Buddhism" is artificial, that is, it is a construct. The category is, in part, informed by modern, nineteenth century nationalism, which naturalized the notion of "nation-states." This is the conception that nations are, in some fashion, natural as a unity of geography, culture, language and ethnicity, combined then with the political status of states as domains of governance.

The second factor in forming this idea is the legacy of the academic category of "Japanese Buddhism." This implies a unity that is "Japanese Buddhism," as distinct from the Buddhisms of Japan. Japanese Buddhism is then thought to have some defining characteristics that can be identified and which distinguish it from other nationalistic categories, such as Chinese Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, Burmese Buddhism and so on. However, the category is an artifice, that is, it was made up in particular social, historical, and intellectual contexts. As such, it can be of use for particular kinds of inquiries, but it should not be treated as a default category that is based on a natural object of inquiry. The category becomes problematic when it is taken uncritically as the framework for all inquiries, and it then distorts and obscures the history. Before we know which category to use, we need to know what question we are asking; otherwise the category will predetermine the answer to the question.

As an alternative to drawing a border around our inquiry that is based on the modern nation-state of Japan, these chapters first provide a general overview, and then go on to examine three aspects of Buddhist practice in Japan, looking at how those connect to broader Buddhist traditions. The three aspects are pilgrimage, ritual and thought. These chapters are not presented as somehow comprehensive, but rather as topics of inquiry that are heuristically valuable for seeing continuities of the Buddhist tradition that cross political borders, geographic boundaries, cultural divisions and linguistic limitations.

Following the introductory overview, the second chapter discusses the pilgrimage route that encircles the island of Shikoku. Tradition associates this route of 88 stations with Kūkai (空海, 774–835), the founder of the Shingon (真言) tradition in Japan. The route is complexly layered with religious significance dating from before Kūkai, and connects to the wider history of Buddhism in Japan. Aspects of this pilgrimage serve to link it with other Buddhist pilgrimages and sacred sites across Asia. These aspects include

mountains, sacred sites resacralized (from Shintō to Buddhist, for example), deities, and the practices of pilgrims who travel the routes, who despite individual motivations and conceptions, collectively enact the pilgrimage.

The second chapter examines the tantric fire ritual (*goma*, 護摩). This connects tantric Buddhism as practiced today in Japan with the ancient Vedic ritual tradition. That tradition was the context within which Buddhism was established and grew, and is a pervasive background for the early tradition. Transformations of the Vedic tradition recorded in the Upaniṣads contributed to the renunciate social practices (*śramaṇa*), which were similar to Buddhism at the time of its origins and which continue into the present. Today, the *homa* is found throughout the tantric world.

The unity of the practitioner's body, speech, and mind with the body, speech and mind of the deity evoked in tantric ritual practice is central to tantric Buddhist praxis across its entire spread. It is at the heart of many of the ritual practices. It is key to the idea of "awakening in this lifetime" (*soku shin jobutsu*, 即身成仏), the ground upon which Buddhist tantra is described as the quick path to awakening, the vehicle of lightning—*vajrayāna*. The fourth chapter turns to doctrine or ideology, with particular attention to this idea that there is a quick path, a path that leads to awakening either in this lifetime, or in the very next. This teaching is not limited to the tantric strains in Japan, Shingon and Tendai, but is found in various forms and interpretations across the Buddhisms of Japan.

Critical to understanding the Buddhisms in Japan through these three dimensions is careful attention on the concepts employed in our study of religion and of Buddhism. Not only what do we mean by Buddhism and religion, but also the categories of pilgrimage, ritual and thought themselves.[1] All of these categories are, of course, not only found widely in popular religious discourse, but also serve as scholarly terms of art.

These essays are revisions of four topically distinct but interrelated lectures. The general overview of the Buddhisms of Japan, which focuses on tantric Buddhism as a shared grounding, revised my lecture given to Dr. Tony Chui's class on Japanese Buddhism on October 29, 2024.

The next three chapters are revisions of the three public lectures that made up the 2024 MaMa Lecture Series: Buddhisms in Japan. The first lecture on pilgrimage was given on October 23, the second on ritual was given on October 25, and the third on doctrine on October 30.

1 Note that my presentation refers to the Western academic tradition, which is not only an important constraint on my comments, but also itself a historico-cultural entity.

Pilgrimage

As an academic discipline, religious studies has long privileged an understanding of religions as having been established by the actions and teachings of a founder. In this understanding the event of the founder constitutes a rupture in history, and the life of the founder as the justifying moment for a religion's institutions. This complex of presumptions structures thinking about religions in the Western discourse on religion, both scholarly and popular.

That, however, has a distinctly theological orientation, taking the mythic structures of a religion as defining its study. A more historically oriented view would place the founder in an historical context, considering what went before and what was going on at the same time as the founder's lifetime. Thus, if we step back from the legends about the actions of Kūkai that serve to reify the Shikoku pilgrimage as a unitary institution, we find not the founding act of a founder, but rather countless layers of historical sedimentation.

This way of thinking about the pilgrimage is consistent with other (post-modern) ways of conceptualizing history found for example in literary history. In the introduction to her forthcoming study of Kabir for instance, Linda Hess has noted that "The old commitment to 'authenticity' that ruled Indology in the twentieth century and earlier is gone. Beyond recording the complex processes of change in texts, scholars and translators now often speak of the poet's tradition as a composite of many voices over many years."

The focus on historical ruptures created by religious founders is a lasting vestige of the "Great Man" theory of history—the idea that some individual is able to change the course of history through their individual force of will. This historiographic presumption is grounded in a Hegelian view of *Zeitgeist*, the motivating spirit of the times unfolding in history, and the Romantic idea that a "Great Man" is able to effect historical change by embodying the *Zeitgeist*. This idea is dead and buried for history and for literary history. Ending its domination of religious studies as well is long overdue.

Ritual

Since originating out of Christian theology in the 19th century, the discourse of religious studies has tended to treat ritual as a unique category of religious action, that is, ritual is distinct from other kinds of actions, and ritual is distinctly religious. From the last quarter of the twentieth century, this conception of ritual has fallen apart. Two sources that provide particularly important critical perspectives of the received view are anthropology and political theory. Anthropologists have looked at ritual in social terms, and

political theorists have promoted the idea of social rituals. In neither case is ritual treated as a subset of religion. And as the field of religious studies moved away from theology and increasingly incorporated a social science perspective, the usage of "ritual" as a cultural form became accepted in religious studies.

Doctrine

The emphasis on doctrine that has characterized both religious studies and Buddhist studies since the 19th century has been decentered. From about the last quarter of the 20th century, increasingly complementary approaches have added to the complexity of an academic understanding of Buddhism. Although a variety of different methodologies have contributed, the collective object of study may be called "lived Buddhism." This means expanding the scope of study beyond the doctrinal texts (or doctrinal contents of texts) written by elite, usually monastic, usually male scholastics.

In Western academia, doctrine has usually been framed by established fields, such as philosophy, religion, or psychology. Academic fields, such as these, are not context free and value neutral intellectual inquiries. They have histories which serve to demarcate what is legitimate for inquiry from what is not. Each of these three is not a perfect match for the study of Buddhism, and consequently I had in the past attempted to explain the complexity of Buddhist thought by saying that it is religion, and philosophy, and psychology. Instead, now I say that it is none of those, but that we have imposed each of those three familiar categories on it. By fitting Buddhism into any of these—or other Western academic categories—we selectively emphasized some set of aspects that fit into that interpretive frame, and ignored all the rest. And those judgements of inclusion and exclusion, of emphasis and marginalization, are not from the Buddhist tradition itself, but instead grounded in the history, values, and assumptions of these Western academic fields.[2]

Succinctly, one might say that the expansion of the study of Buddhism from the limitations of doctrine and doctrinal texts to lived Buddhism means that: The study of Buddhism now incorporates both what people should think (doctrinal studies) and what people actually do (lived religion). This expansion seems to have also been in part motivated by the popular interest in meditation, in conjunction with the new fields of the cognitive and neurosciences. This in turn allows us to return to familiar texts not only to glean doctrinal nuggets for philosophical reflection, but to see what they say about practice, that is, about meditation, ritual and yoga. In addition to

2 This is not limited to these three, as other categories can also be applied in the same way and with the same result.

different perspectives on familiar texts, other texts are also now relevant to the study of lived Buddhism. Any and all texts need to be understood in their own specific location—historical, social, sectarian, genre, function. For example, the historical pattern of conceptual proliferation (*prapañca*, *xilun*, *keron*, 戲論) is important to them because it helps to contextualize different teachings and practices. The early tantras are a case in point, as they largely focus on practice, rather than doctrine. As tantra became more established, the tantras became increasingly doctrinal.

Closing Summary

While the chapters here are intended to be informative, that information is intended to provide the ground for thinking through some issues in the study of Buddhism and in the study of religion. Those issues—intellectual, methodological, or epistemological—are not addressed here programmatically. Instead they came up in the process of writing about these different topics. Some are issues that I have written on previously, but the work here is not simply repetitious of those earlier inquiries.

These chapters were revised to give more flesh to the bones of my lectures. In doing so, I have encountered the kinds of difficulties that I imagine others who have worked to transform public presentations into written form. Annotations have been added, though not as fully as would be appropriate for an academic publication. In addition to the citations in the chapters, a list of selected further readings is appended. Despite the unevenness and repetitions that remain, I hope that readers find these reflections of value for their own understanding, not only of the Buddhisms of Japan, but of both Buddhism and religion more generally.

Chapter One

Vajrayāna in Japanese Buddhism

Introduction: Vajrayāna foundations of Japanese Buddhism

Vajrayāna is of central importance for understanding the Buddhisms of Japan from its introduction at the beginning of the ninth century, during the Heian era (794–1185, 平安時代, *Heian jidai*). This first chapter introduces the history of Vajrayāna in Japan, the variety of ritual and yogic practices of the tradition as it developed in Japan, some of the important symbolism, and the conceptual framework within which its practices are understood to be effective. Next, the value of studying the Japanese traditions of Vajrayāna is discussed, and the closing section considers methodological issues, including issues of definition, and suggest how to study the tradition.

Vajrayāna in Japan: history Heian era: 794–1185

There are two schools of Japanese Buddhism that are significant for the introduction and development of the tantric strains of Buddhism in Japan: Shingon and Tendai.

Kūkai (774–835, 空海, posthumous title Kōbō Daishi, 弘法大師) established the Shingon tradition in Japan. He trained in the mantra school (Zhenyan, 真言) in China. Its name, glossed as "true word", is the Chinese rendering of mantra. Kūkai arrived in China in 804, and in 805 he met Huiguo (746–805, 惠果, Keika). Huiguo, who was master at the Qinglong (青龍寺) monastery in Chang'an (長安, present day Xi'an, 西安), where he trained many monks from across East and Southeast Asia in two tantric lineages. Kūkai also studied Sanskrit with Prajñā (734–810?, 般若三藏), a monk from Gandhara. These studies were also important for the establishment of Shingon in Japan, where Kūkai emphasized the importance of proper pronunciation of mantra, and contributed to the widespread use of the Siddham script of Sanskrit in ritualized settings, a practice that continues into the present.[1] He returned to Japan in 809. However, he was not immediately received at the court. This appears to have been because the emperor at the time, Heizei (平城天皇, Heizei-tennō; 773–824), had already authorized Saichō to transmit Vajrayāna. In 809 Saga tennō (784–842) succeeded Heizei, and Kūkai was assigned to Takao-san temple (Takaosan-ji, 高雄山寺) near the capital, Kyoto.

Two sites are particularly important for Kūkai's propagation of Shingon. Mount Kōya (Kōyasan, 高野山, in Wakayāma Prefecture) was established as the main training center for Shingon by Kūkai in 819, and it continues

1 This use of Siddham has spread to the West as well, for example in the Sōtō school as established by Suzuki Roshi in California.

to serve this purpose today. Located on Kōyasan, Kongōbu-ji ("Temple of the Vajra Peak", 金剛峯寺) is the present head temple of the Chuin-ryū (中院流) sect of Shingon. Also important is Tōdai-ji (東大寺, "Eastern Great Temple") in Nara, which was placed under Kūkai's supervision in 810. Tōji Temple (東寺, "East Temple"), located in the southern part of Kyoto, was established in 796, during the Heian era (Heian jidai). Sai-ji (西寺, "West Temple"), established at the same time, but which no longer exists, stood as the two temples bracketing the entrance to Heian (present-day Kyoto). Commissioned at the end of the eighth century, construction was still not finished thirty years later, so in 823 Emperor Saga assigned Kūkai the task of completing Tōji, which became the first Shingon temple in Kyoto, the center of political power.

In Japan, the other sect in which tantric thought and practice plays a key role is Tendai (天台, Tiantai). The founder of Tendai is Saichō (767 to 822, 最澄, posthumous title Dengyō Daishi, 伝教大師), who because he wanted to study the Tiantai tradition of Zhiyi (智顗, 538–597)[2] more deeply, sought out the opportunity to travel to China. He was part of the same embassy to China as Kūkai, departing Japan in 803, arriving in China in 804. He was given permission to travel to Tiantai Mountain, where he received instruction from the seventh patriarch of Tiantai, Daosui (道邃, fl. 796–805). In his travels he received initiation into a tantric transmission, though the details remain in dispute. In 805 he returned to Japan, where Kanmu Tennō (桓武天皇, 735–806) gave official recognition to the Tendai tradition and awarded him two ordinands annually (*nenbundosha*, 年分度者).

The Tendai tradition combines two distinct strains of thought and practice. One is an exoteric teaching, centered on the *Lotus Sūtra* and the Tiantai lineage from Zhiyi. The other is an esoteric teaching that was further developed by his successors. Of these, Ennin (圓仁, 793 or 794–864), Enchin (円珍, 814–891), and Annen (安然, 841–889?) were especially important for the integration of the two dimensions of Tendai, promoting esoteric interpretations of the *Lotus Sūtra* teachings. Ennin is particularly prominent because, like Saichō, he also travelled to China. His stay there lasted from 838–847, deepening his understanding of both Tiantai and Vajrayāna.

Enryaku ji (延暦寺) monastery was established on Mount Hiei (比叡山) by Saichō in 788 as the main center for Tendai training. Located close to the capital at Heian (Kyoto), the monastery has played a leading role in the history of the Buddhisms of Japan. Prominent priests of the Kamakura era, such as Dōgen, Nichiren, Hōnen, and Shinran, were all initially trained in the Tendai tradition on Mount Hiei before leaving the mountain to establish their own

2 Zhiyi's major work has been translated into English by Paul Swanson, *Clear Serenity, Quiet Insight: T'ien-T'ai Chih-i's* Mo-Ho Chih-Kuan, 3 vols. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018).

sectarian teachings. Famously, because of the interference in government affairs by the large number of armed monks (*sōhei*, 僧兵) of the mountain, the monastic community there was destroyed by Oda Nobunaga (織田 信長, 1534–1582) in 1571.

Vajrayāna in Japan: ritualized practices

The Vajrayāna corpus of ritualized practices in Japan is quite large, and here we can only describe a representative few. One of the simplest is meditation on the syllable *A* (Ajikan 阿字観), a foundational practice that is available to lay practitioners and is actively promoted to groups of Shingon adherents. Explanations of the symbolic significance of this practice are usually limited to the syllable's threefold meaning: origination, duration, and cessation.[3]

Much more complex than Ajikan visualization is the two practice lineages that structure Shingon thought and practice. The origins of this dual system are the subject of continuing research, but there are indications that it may have originated in India, and then spread through the tantric Buddhist cosmopolis. The two ritual programs should in my opinion be viewed as primary, the other components, such as the mandalas and texts, playing supportive roles in the lineages of practice (*jisō*, 事相). These two ritual programs are integrated in Shingon practice, and the resulting system is often referred to as the "dual mandalas" (*ryōbu mandala*, 両部曼荼羅). Each of the two is not simply a mandala as a graphic representation of manifestations of Vairocana Buddha (Birushana butsu, 毘盧舎那佛, also, Dainichi, 大日), along with his retinue of buddhas, bodhisattvas and guardian deities. These two visual representations support the two systems of practices, and are recorded in two texts.[4] The two mandalas are the Womb Realm mandala (*Garbhadhātu mandala*, *Taizōkai mandara*, 胎蔵界曼荼羅), and the Vajra Realm mandala (*Vajradhātu mandala*, *Kongōkai mandara*, 金剛界曼荼羅). Practices associated with the two ritual programs are recorded in the *Vairocanābhisaṃbodhi tantra* (*Dainichikyō*, 大日経, T. 848) and *Vajraśekhara tantra* (*Kongōchōkyō*, 金剛頂経, T. 865).[5]

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3 These are similar to the significance attributed in some Hindu traditions to the syllable *oṁ*, as being of three parts—*a*, *u*, *ṁ*—and linked to three deities (the "*trimurti*"): Brahmā as the creator, Viṣṇu as the sustainer, and Śiva as the destroyer.

4 I purposely place texts last in this list so as to avoid the presumption found frequently in Western religious studies that practice is derivative of texts. Texts, practices, artworks, architectures all exist in dynamic interaction with one another, a system of complex dialectics in which each is semiautonomous—that is, have their own internal trajectories, but at the same time are in interaction with one another.

5 Two English translations of the *Vairocanābhisaṃbodhi Tantra*: Rolf Giebel, tr. *The Vairocanābhisaṃbodhi Sūtra* (Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2005; note: the print and online versions of this text differ, having different pagination), and Stephen Hodge, tr. *The Mahā-Vairocana-Abhisaṃbodhi Tantra with Buddhaguhya's Commentary* (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003). The *Vajraśekhara Tantra* is translated as "The Adamantine Pinnacle Sutra," in *Two Esoteric Sutras*, Rolf Giebel, tr., 3–107 (Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2001). The second text in this volume is "The Susiddhikara Sutra" (T. 893), which in the Tendai tradition of

This dual ritual program is reflected in the four training rituals: Jūhachidō ("eighteen stages", 十八道), Kongōkai, Taizōkai, and Goma (*homa*, 護摩).[6] The Jūhachidō is paradigmatic for the other rituals, providing the aspirant experience with the basic structure of the rest of the training rituals in a relatively short form. The Kongōkai and Taizōkai rituals establish the requisite karmic affinity between the practitioner and the two assemblies. These two ritual cycles are brought together as a unified practice in the Goma, which includes both of the two assemblies. Taken together, these four rituals constitute the foundational training of a Shingon priest.

The practitioner also engages in several ritual activities across the landscape of Kōyasan. Important amongst these during training are regular visits to the ritual center of Kōyasan, the Danjo Garan (壇上伽藍), which dates to the establishment of Kōyasan as the center of Shingon training by Kūkai. During training, practitioners also make visits to Okuno-in (奥之院, "innermost temple"). This is the site of Kūkai's mausoleum, and the large cemetery that has grown up around it. Sometimes practitioners will also follow the path that links the five peaks that encircle the valley in which Kōyasan is located, the Kōyasan Nyonin-michi (高野山女人道, "women's pilgrimage route," named for the fact that until 1872 women were not allowed into Kōyasan itself and some visited it by walking this path). In addition to some practitioners using this trail to circumambulate the valley, today this path serves as a hiking trail that visitors can follow, encompassing the entire temple complex.

Shingon: symbolism

The approach to symbolism that is most useful is not as an abstract representation of some doctrinal concept, nor as aesthetic or artistic expression. Instead, symbolism is meaningful by use in Shingon ritual. The Vajradhātu mandala (Kongōkai mandara) is symbolic of direct insight, or wisdom. The Garbhadhātu mandala (Taizōkai mandara), is symbolic of compassionate action. The pairing of wisdom and compassion runs through most of Mahāyāna thought, and in this way the symbolism of the dual mandala reveals the union of wisdom and compassion. From a different perspective, the two mandalas symbolize the two different ways in which Mahāvairocana Tathāgata can be experienced.

Mahāvairocana Tathāgata (Dainichi Nyorai, 大日如来) is the *dharmakāya* (*fashen*, *hosshin*, 法身) buddha who actively teaches the two tantras (*hosshin seppō*, 法身説法), and who is at the same time the body of all beings. This idea is a radical departure from much of Buddhist thought. Kūkai asserted

tantra is considered to be a third key tantra along with the *Vairocanābhisaṃbodhi* and *Vajraśekhara*.

6 Richard K. Payne, "The Fourfold Training in Japanese Esoteric Buddhism," in *Esoteric Buddhism and the Tantras in East Asia*, Charles D. Orzech, Henrik H. Sørensen, and Richard K. Payne, eds., 1024–1028 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011).

that this teaching distinguishes Shingon from all other schools.[7] In most cases, it has been held that the *dharmakāya*, because it is absolute, is passive, not active, and that therefore any teaching can only be done by a *saṃbhogakāya* (*baoshan*, *hōjin*, 報身) or *nirmanakāya* (*huashen*, *keshin*, 化身) buddha. Kūkai supports his argument by citing the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* to the effect that the dharma buddha (*hōbutsu*, 法仏) preaches "the realm of enlightened experience itself."[8] More fully, Kūkai's argument is that the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* explains that:

> the Saṁbhogakāya Buddhas extensively describe [in their teaching] the nature of things, which in truth are only illusory, and the Nirmāṇakāya Buddhas exhaust themselves in their work of saving beings and therefore deviate from preaching the Dharma as it truly is. These Buddhas speak of neither the Dharma of [the Tathāgatas'] innate enlightenment nor [their] realm of noble wisdom. It is the Dharmakāya alone who expounds the realm of his noble activity of innate enlightenment (*naishō shōgyō*) [rkp: 内證正行].[9]

Kūkai's argument for the distinctive and superior character of the esoteric teachings is based on the theory of the three bodies buddha (*trikāya*, *sanshen*, *sanshin*, 三身), shared by much of Mahāyāna thought. In contrast, the practice of the threefold mystery is not simply a doctrinal claim unique to tantric thought, but is also key to tantric Buddhist practice. It is, in other words, a formulation that manifests the dynamic and dialectic relation between thought and practice as found in tantric Buddhism.

Conceptual framework of Shingon: threefold mystery

The threefold mystery (*sanmi*, *sanmitsu*, 三密) is the identity of the body, speech and mind of the practitioner and the body, speech and mind of the deity--buddha, bodhisattva, protector—evoked in a ritual. Although some scholars might want to treat the threefold mystery as an abstract philosophical or doctrinal concept, that is, as an ontological assertion, comprehending it simply as a concept distorts its significance. Its meaning is in the context of practice, that is, it is an action to be done, not an idea to be thought.

Closely related to the threefold mystery is set of mudra, mantra, and mandala. In some cases, this set of three is presented as if these are three distinct things, each separate from the others. Mudra can be discussed as evident in statuary, artwork and dance, mantra as a kind of devotional recitation practice, and mandala as graphic representations of cosmic reality.

7 David Gardiner, "Transcendence and Immanence in Kūkai's Vision of Shingon," in *Esoteric Buddhist Studies: Proceedings of the International Conference on Esoteric Buddhist Studie*s, International Conference on Esoteric Buddhist Studies Editorial Board, eds., 21–29 (Kōyasan: Kōyasan University, 2008), 21.

8 David L. Gardiner, *Kūkai: Japan's First Vajrayana Visionary* (Berkeley: Institute of Buddhist Studies and BDK America, 2024), 37.

9 Ryūichi Abé, *The Weaving of Mantra: Kūkai and the Construction of Esoteric Buddhist Discourse* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 207.

Traditional representations of buddhas always show their hands in some identifiable mudra. Familiar ones are the meditation mudra, in which the hands are held in one's lap with the right hand resting atop the left, the tips of the thumbs touching so as to form an oval with the forefingers (also, index fingers). If we look at the Kamakura Daibutsu, that is, a seated figure of Amitābha Tathāgata (Amituo, Amida, 阿弥陀) located in the old capital city of Kamakura. This buddha's meditation mudra is different, as the fingers are interlaced rather than simply resting atop each other, and forefingers are upright from the first knuckle. There are three other versions of this meditation mudra in which the middle finger is upright, the ring finger is upright, or the little finger is upright. Each of these has a different significance.

Standing figures of Amitābha are often portrayed as holding the right hand up and open at about shoulder height. This is the mudra of fearlessness (*abhaya*, *wu wei*, *mu i*, 無畏). His left hand is held down and open at about the top of his waist. This is the mudra of generosity (*varada*, *shiyuan*, *segan*, 施願).[10] It is not entirely hyperbolic to say that mudras are uncountably many, since while many are shared across traditions, there are also many that are unique to different traditions.

The second of the set of three is mantra, verbal expressions recited in ritual settings. As with other components of Buddhist tantric thought and practice, these can be traced back to the Vedic era, long before the lifetime of Śākyamuni Buddha. Perhaps the best known mantra in the West is the six syllable mantra of Avalokiteśvara: *om mani padme hum*. This mantra is associated with the Dalai Lama, whom Tibetans regard as a living incarnation of Avalokiteśvara (Tib. Chenrezig, Guanyin, Kannon, 觀音), and the popularity of the Dalai Lama has contributed to this having become part of Western popular religious culture. One of the persistent issues relating to the study of mantra is whether or not it is "language."

Certainly they are not instances of language in the ordinary sense of verbal (or written) expressions that are intended to communicate information (of some kind) from one person to another, which is the way the term is generally used in contemporary linguistics.[11] In contrast to such ordinary language, mantras are better understood as instances of a different category, that is, extraordinary language in the limited and literal sense of language that is outside the ordinary functioning of language. The question of whether mantras are languages, therefore, is framed dualistically—are they languages, or are they merely strings of nonsense syllables?

10 This gesture was also explained to me as representing the way that the Buddha taught—with an open hand.

11 At least the discussions of the variety of different functions that language can fulfill with which I am familiar take this as the norm from which other uses vary. Functions such as interrogatives (questions), imperatives (commands), and exclamatives (expressives) are explained as transformations of a declarative (statement) function.

Sometimes scholars have attempted to answer the question about whether mantras are language by arguing that because they have semantic content, then they are language. Many mantras do have identifiable semantic content. For example, the Avalokiteśvara mantra, *om mani padme hum*, has been rendered into English as "hail the jewel in the lotus." But, as suggested by the longer characterization of language given above, semantic content alone is a problematic criteria for what is language.

The idea that there is a category that is neither ordinary language nor nonsense is influenced by Indic theories of language. According to these it is sound itself that is powerful or effective, and not the cognitive or semantic content (the "meaning"). The power of language is located in the sounding of individual syllables, such as those comprising a mantra, and not in some message conveyed. A particularly important instance for the Shingon tradition is the seed syllable *A*. The threefold symbolic associations that make this syllable so potent are that, as the first letter of the Sanskrit syllabary, it represents the beginning of the cosmos; as the vowel sound of each syllable, it pervades the cosmos; and, as the negative prefix, it marks the end of the cosmos.[12]

Many people have seen mandalas, whether in museums, or on book covers, or in discussions based on psychological theories about cosmic symbolism, or in decorative form of one kind or another. As an organizing principle, mandalas represent arrangements of buddhas, bodhisattvas, and protector deities in a standardized, symmetrical arrangement. Historically originating in Indic political theory of the medieval period, mandalas show a central figure surrounded by his retinue, and they in turn by their retinues. This hierarchical arrangement reflects patterns of political suzerainty, and the term is found with this explicitly political significance in discussions of the history of kingdoms in Southeast Asia.

The Shingon tradition knows several different forms of mandalas. There are mandalas that represent deities in their bodily forms, or iconographically by an implement that represents their special power. One kind of mandalas that overlaps with ideas of mantra are seed syllable mandalas (*dharma mandala*, *hō mandara*, 宝曼荼羅), in which each deity is represented by the seed syllable (*bīja mantra*, 種子) that is identical with it. In such a mandala, these seed syllables are written in Siddham script, and arranged in the same mandalic pattern of a buddha surrounded by another four buddhas or bodhisattvas, and each syllable makes the potency of one member of a group of five present.

Treating the three members of this set—mudra, mantra, mandala—in this fashion, however, abstracts them from the context of living Buddhist practice. If, instead of distinct abstractions, we consider them in the context of tantric practice, it becomes clear that these three are another way of expressing the

12 The function of "a–" as a negative prefix is shared by Sanskrit and English, found for example in words like "a-gnostic," not knowing, or "a-pathetic," not caring.

identity of the practitioner and the buddha. Mudra is the body, mantra is speech, and mandala is mind. Forming mudra, the practitioner takes on the physical form of a buddha. Reciting mantra is the speech of a buddha. And, the mandala is visualized, giving the mind the characteristics of a buddha.[13]

The ritual action is not simply visualizing the identity of the practitioner's body, speech, and mind with the body, speech, and mind of a buddha. That may be undertaken as a yogic or contemplative practice. But in the performance of Shingon ritual it is a three-part action of mudra, mantra, and mandala—taking on the bodily posture of forming a mudra, giving voice to the mantra, and visualizing the chief deity located at the center of the mandala. It is this three-part identity that is the central act of Shingon tantric rituals. Again, this is not a doctrinal claim, nor a philosophical assertion about the nature of reality, but rather what the practitioner does in the ritual—it is a ritual act to be performed, not an idea to be believed.

Value of Japanese Vajrayāna for the study of religion

There are two aspects of Japanese Vajrayāna that make it important for the fields of religious and Buddhist studies. The first is that until recently it has been overlooked both as an important tradition in the Buddhisms of Japan, and as a living tantric Buddhist tradition. The second is that ritual practice plays a much greater role in the tradition than does doctrine. It is a useful corrective then for us to make these two inquiries. Why was Shingon overlooked in Western study of Japanese religion? And, why has ritual been neglected in the study of Buddhism in Western scholarship? Answers to these two questions are in fact closely related to one another.

At the end of World War II, Japan was a defeated nation. Its efforts to reindustrialize made the country's recovery seem like a miracle. From the animosity of the war years, which lingered on through the 1950s, attitudes began to change in the 1960s. What came to be called the "Zen Boom" ran from the mid-60s through the 1980s, and fostered a positive cultural attitude toward not just Zen, but also Japanese aesthetics, and also by the late 70s Japanese practices of business management.[14] Like many, if not most, of my generation of Buddhist scholars, my first exposure in the 1960s and 1970s was through the writings of figures such as D.T. Suzuki, Alan Watts, Jack Kerouac, and Gary Snyder. And indeed, our first practice was one form of Zen meditation or another—both Sōtō and Rinzai having established a presence in American popular religious culture. This dominance of Zen in the *imaginaire* of American counterculture was one contributing factor to Shingon and the Vajrayāna in Japan were being largely overlooked.

13 See the Buddha Śākyamuni's rationale that he gives to Queen Vaidehi in the midst of the visualization sequence in the *Visualization Sūtra*.

14 Peter Drucker and other business management "gurus" promoted Japanese practices as models of success.

Not only was popular culture convinced that Zen was Japanese Buddhism, or at least the only valid form of Japanese Buddhism, but academic historiography, that is, how history is written, has itself tended to follow a retrospectivist orientation. In other words, what is important in the present day is taken as determinative of what should be studied about the past. In the case of Japan, the schools originating in the Kamakura era are important in the present day. They were consequently highlighted in the writing of the history of the Buddhisms of Japan, which then in turn suggests that they were equally important in the Kamakura era. Authors influential in religious studies seem to have reflected the values of a century of scholarship that considered tantra in all its forms decadent and not worthy of serious scholarly attention.[15] When histories of Japanese Buddhism did include mention, both Shingon and Tendai tended to be marginalized as having been important only in a particular historical era, the Heian, then ignored thereafter. Despite such representations, Vajrayāna teachings and practices continued to be an important and influential part of Japanese religions from their introduction at the beginning of the ninth century right up into the present.

While Yoshito S. Hakeda's groundbreaking work on Kūkai was published in 1972, that was just an initial push in a direction that would take decades before a more balanced understanding of the history of the Buddhisms of Japan was accomplished.[16] Similarly ground-breaking was Charles D. Orzech's 1998 publication highlighting the work of Bukong (Amoghavajra) in the formation of Chinese tantric Buddhism. In Western academic scholarship, despite Hakeda, Orzech, and a few other scattered works, the existence of tantric Buddhism in East Asia remained largely overlooked until into the twenty-first century.

Taking an historical perspective we can ask: How did a single small slice of the Buddhist tradition, Zen, become normative in the West? The identification of Buddhism as meditation has been hegemonic. And in this conception meditation is silent, seated, and individual—a purely mental practice that is context-free and value-neutral. In the construction of this understanding of Buddhism, Zen went from being a "model of" to being the "model for" the Buddhist tradition in its entirety.[17] This distinction was

15 In many cases this same prejudice marginalized Pure Land Buddhism as well. Huston Smith's unjustifiably widely read *The Religions of Man*, which was first published in 1958, only added a discussion of Pure Land towards the end of the twentieth century. For a fuller critique of Smith's treatment of Pure Land, see Richard K. Payne, "How Not to Talk About Pure Land Buddhism: A Critique of Huston Smith's (Mis)Representations," in *Path of No Path: Contemporary Studies in Pure Land Buddhism Honoring Roger Corless*, Richard K. Payne, ed., 147–172 (Berkeley: Institute of Buddhist Studies and BDK America, 2009).

16 Yoshito S. Hakeda, *Kūkai: Major Works* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972).

17 Although we are concerned in this chapter with the Buddhisms of Japan, this "model for" dynamic also affected the representations of Theravāda as mindfulness practice. That itself has a long and fascinating history that is outside the scope of this work. In this regard, see Sven Bretfield, "Theravāda Buddhism," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, Richard

popularized by Clifford Geertz, and provides a way of talking about the difference between descriptions and prescriptions—discussions of what things are like and discussions of how they should be. Because Zen was the first form of Buddhism to become widely popular outside of immigrant communities, it set the standard for what Buddhism is (model of) and ought to be (model for). That dual representation promoted not only the practice of silent, seated, individual meditation, but also a rejection of doctrine (the claim that Buddhism has no beliefs). This was promoted under the slogan that Buddhism is a direct transmission of mind outside the scriptures (教外別傳，不立文字，直指人心，見性成佛).[18]

This process can be analyzed in terms of two dynamics: push/pull and historical accident. The push is that silent, seated, individual meditation is congruent with Western popular religious culture that privileged silent prayer, and individual communion with God. This congruence contributes to the representation of Buddhism as meditation being overdetermined—similarities are found between the rich and complex practices of Zen, and the positive and negative ideas of American popular religious culture. At the intersection of the two is silent, seated, individual meditation.

The pull was Protestant Christianity's influence on American popular religious culture in terms of its own anti-ritual stance. From the second half of the nineteenth century, Protestant Christian ideas and values molded the academic study of religion, including a negative attitude toward ritual.[19] Complementing this was the Romantic movement's emphasis on direct, unmediated experience as both religiously transformative and epistemologically valid.

Historical accident also contributed to the predominance of Zen in popular understandings of Buddhism. At the Parliament of the World's Religions, held in Chicago in1893, Soen Shaku (釈 宗演, 1860–1919) was part of the delegation from Japan. He met Paul Carus, one of the organizers of the Parliament, and editor of Open Court Publishing Company. Shaku's assistant was D.T. Suzuki, who went on to work for Carus and whose role in representing Buddhism to Western audiences grew accordingly.[20]

K. Payne and Georgios T. Halkias, eds., 2394–2434 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024), and Mavis L. Fenn, "Global Theravada Buddhism: Asian Foundations," and "Global Theravada: Transmission beyond Asia," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, Richard K. Payne and Georgios T. Halkias, eds., 1094–1111, and 1112–1130 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024).

18 Although attributed to Bodhidharma, the slogan appears to have originated much later in China, around the eleventh century.

19 This attitude is evident in mid-twentieth century treatments of ritual in the psychology of religion, in which ritual is considered problematically unhealthy.

20 See James C. Dobbins, "D.T. Suzuki: A Biography," and "D.T. Suzuki: Ideas and Influences," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, Richard K. Payne and Georgios T. Halkias, eds., 701–714, 714–729 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024).

The other historical accident was America's wars in Asia. At the end of World War II, the American occupation led to the presence of many American servicemen and their families in Japan. At the same time, the G.I. Bill provided opportunities for those soldiers to go to college, and many of them were interested in understanding the culture of Japan, including its religious traditions. Similarly, the Korean War led to many servicemen transiting through Japan, and similarly Japan was one of the destinations for rest and relaxation for soldiers serving in Vietnam. These historical factors are significant, but it is also important that we step back to consider how history is written, that is, historiography.

The historiography of the Buddhisms of Japan has itself tended to follow a retrospectivist orientation. In other words, what is important in the present day is taken as determinative of what should be studied about the past. In the case of Japan, the importance of the schools originating in the Kamakura era in the present day resulted in them being highlighted in the writing of the history of the Buddhisms of Japan.

Historiographies can also adhere to narrative structures, such as those of rupture and continuity. For Buddhism, these two narrative structures might be called histories of "founders" and histories of lineages of transmission. Both popular and academic English language discourse on religion use the term "founder" with a particular significance. The contemporary connotations of "founder" are influenced by Romanticism, with its notion of the creative genius, who has a transformative experience giving them access to an especially valuable insight, which in turn is the basis for their teaching. It is this conception that informs a style of religious discourse that asserts a rupture in history created by the founder's experience and teaching.

This is basic for the religious studies model of what a religion is. That model has been abstracted from the history of Christianity in Europe, primarily Protestant history. In summary the model is that of a founder with an extraordinary status or transformative experience who gives a unique teaching, which is recorded in a book, and who established a church to propagate that teaching. This model of "what a religion is" as found in Western religious culture and the discourse of the academic study of religion has structured the representation of Buddhism in the West. This was not intentional, much less malevolent, but the presumed structure selected what was deemed significant about Buddhism. It is important to emphasize, however, that the "founder" model distorts by ignoring context, that is questions about what was happening before? What was happening then? And, what has happened between then and now?

Lineages of transmission provide an alternative to thinking of history as ruptures created by founders. For most of Buddhist history, the source of authority was a lineage, and a lineage has continuity of transmission over time, rather than a rupture. It is a teacher's place in a lineage that legitimates

the teachings and practices that they give. Though Western scholarship and popular discussions tend to focus on Śākyamuni as the "founder," from the earliest period, there is the idea that he is just the most recent Buddha in a lineage of Buddhas. That lineage traces back into the distant past, through seven buddhas of the past (*saptatathāgata*, *qifo*, *shichi butsu*, 七仏), leading through six to Śākyamuni. Another tradition identifies twenty-seven buddhas before Śākyamuni, including "Lamplighter" (Dīpaṃpkara, Ding guang rulai, Jōkō nyorai, 定光如来), the Buddha who upon meeting the mendicant Sumedha predicted that he would become Śākyamuni after another twenty-three buddhas appeared in our world system. And, in the future Maitreya will be the next Buddha of our world system. Buddhist thought is more complex than the narrative structure of founders who create ruptures imagines. Lineages of transmission stretch back into the indefinite past, and forward into the unimaginable future. And, at the same time what sets buddhas apart from arhats is that buddhas accomplish awakening on their own, while arhats had the benefit of a teacher, a buddha, to guide them.

In the midst of the Zen boom, in the late 70s, another lineage of teachings became accessible in the United States—Tibetan Buddhism. Some of the teachers who had fled Tibet during China's incursion in 1959, and first settled in India, began to expand onto the global horizon. Perhaps most famous, or infamous depending on your viewpoint, was Chögyam Trungpa. Perhaps equally important for the furtherance of an appreciation of Tibetan forms were Tarthang Tulku Rinpoche and Geshe Lhundub Sopa, the first creating an institution based in Nyingma tradition in Berkeley, and the latter grounding Tibetan studies in the Buddhist Studies program at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Émigré Tibetan teachers generally introduced the highly scholastic traditions of Tibet. The training at the Nyingma Institute in Berkeley, for example, began with the study of abhidharma teachings and then moved on to Madhyamaka and Yogācāra.

Beyond greater access to the scholarly traditions, Tibetan Buddhism made at least two additional significant changes to Western religious culture. First was the introduction of a variety of practices beyond silent seated meditation. Second was the legitimation of the academic study of tantric forms of Buddhism. That legitimation eventually opened the study of the tantric tradition in Japan as well, though the identification of tantra with Tibet in popular imagination still impedes that development—though as these lectures evidence, that too is changing.

One of the intellectual impediments to the academic study of tantra has been the problem of defining just what it is that is being studied—what is the object of inquiry? One approach is to attempt to identify specific components[21]

21 Such approaches seem to often employ the term "elements," either intentionally or unintentionally. I prefer the term components, since elements implies autonomous

of the tradition as defining the tradition, technically, finding the defining characteristic.[22] Alternatively, several typical components are identified as characterizing instances in the category, with the caveat that not every instance will necessarily have all or all of the same components, technically known as a polythetic definition.

The problem for such approaches to defining tantra is that individual components in isolation are not tantric in any essential or elemental sense. There is nothing inherently tantric about mudra, mantra, or mandala, as each has a separate history prior to tantra, and separate uses outside tantra. Nor is there anything essentially tantric about Mahāvairocana Tathāgata (Dainichi Nyōrai), nor about the Vajradhātu and Garbhadhātu mandalas. These are, for example, found in a variety of artistic and decorative uses having nothing to do with tantra directly. Nor is there anything essentially tantric about the fire ritual (*homa*, *goma*, 護摩), which not only evolves (apparently gradually) out of a non-tantric prehistory, and each of the components of which have other uses and associations.

Because "tantra" and "tantric Buddhism" are conventional categories, or social constructs, used in different discourses, both academic and popular, the terms work (are meaningful) within those conversations. We can point out instances of things in our shared experience—objects of one kind or another—that are "tantric," that is, stipulate what we mean by the term. But that does not mean that there is anything solid or enduring there other than our conventional usage of a term.[23] Since the meaning of the term follows from shared usage, there are no firm, sharp or clear boundaries around the concept—which is generally what scholars expect, even demand of definitions.

As much as sharp definitions, and clearly defined categories are desiderata for members of the scholarly community, thinking is sloppy, and categories are fuzzy—exactly because they are socially constructed. Instead of definitions with clear rules of inclusion and exclusion, tantra can instead be recognized by context, use, and designation. What does it mean to say, then, that "tantric Buddhism" is better understood as a category delineated through context, use and designation? Individual components become tantric in particular contexts, through use in particular ways, or by designation as such. Particularly significant is the context created by integrating components

existence—that such items are irreducible to any smaller constituent, and therefore provide a firm definitional grounding. Components, by contrast, is used specifically in the sense of being parts working together in a larger whole.

22 This approach to definition can be traced back to Aristotle's definition by genus and species, or genus and differentia. Patrick Hanks, "Definition," in *The Oxford Handbook of Lexicography*, Philip Durkin, ed., 94–122 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

23 This approach to understanding category terms is informed by the works of the Buddhist epistemologists, though applies those traditional ideas to this contemporary issue. It is also, of course, informed by the structuralism of Saussure (not Levi-Strauss).

into performative practices of cult—used in the specifically academic sense of a system of thought and practice organized around a specific centripetal figure. Other than a chief deity (*honzon* 本尊) that provides the organizing center, there is no specific set of what components are needed to constitute a cult. Often included, however, are such matters as: beliefs about that deity; artwork portraying the deity and architecture in which the deity is worshipped; specific rituals, celebrations, and other practices; texts, such as doctrinal texts, prayers, songs or chants; and teachings—this is not a definitive list, but rather suggestive of the kinds of components that may be found in the performance of cultic practices.

Cultic practices in tantra may be classed into two broad categories: as *sādhana* (*chengjiu fa*, *jōjuhō*, 成就法), and as yoga (*yuqie*, *yuga*, 瑜伽). Like cult, *sādhana* are ritual practices structured by a focus on a "chief deity" (*honzon*, 本尊), though more often individual practices than social practices, such as ceremonials or festivals. Yoga is interiorized practice, such as breath and visualization, and sometimes accompanied by physical postures (*āsana*, *zuo*, *za*, 座; as in *hatha* yoga). The Sanskrit derivation of yoga is from restraint, or binding, or union, all referring to the disciplines of practice, and in this sense *yuga* is used as one of the names of the tantric school in China.[24] In the context of Buddhist tantra, both *sādhana* and yoga are framed by conceptions of the ground, path and goal. This threefold system is widely familiar, being shared throughout the Buddhist tradition. The ground is the ordinary human condition of samsaric existence ruled by greed, hatred, and delusion. The path begins with the aspiration for change, for awakening from that ordinary condition. The goal is the state of freedom from the repetitious sequences created by the bonds of greed, hatred and delusion. This framework is the context that makes *sādhana* and yoga Buddhist.

Closing Summary: Buddhist tantra and the Buddhisms of Japan

The issues impeding the academic study of Buddhist tantra are rooted in a long history of dismissing tantra as decadent and unworthy of inclusion as a valid form of the Buddhist tradition. Also, meditation has been overdetermined as the only valid form of Buddhist practice by the similarity between silent, seated meditation in the Zen style and traditions of contemplative practice in the Western religious tradition. That similarity was reinforced by a prejudice against religious "enthusiasm," or expressive devotionalism, that seemed to have been held by many religious studies scholars from the nineteenth century origins of the field through the twentieth century.[25] The other dimension

24 Charles D. Orzech, "Esoteric Buddhism Under the Song: An Overview," in *Esoteric Buddhism and the Tantras in East Asia*, Charles D. Orzech, Henrik H. Sørensen, and Richard K. Payne, eds., 421–430 (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

25 On the issues related to religious enthusiasm and a cultural emphasis on moderation, see Rosemary R. Corbett, "Moderation in American Religion," in *The Oxford Research Encyclopedias: Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, online 2017; DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.384).

of the field as traditionally formulated was a privileging of doctrine over practice, evidenced by the assumption that doctrine determines practice, and a preference for the study of doctrinal texts.

Other issues have been more terminological. In this work the phrase "Buddhisms of Japan" is used purposely to avoid the essentializing to which the phrase "Japanese Buddhism" easily leads. To attempt to define "Japanese Buddhism" creates connections that are problematic, and obscures connections that are significant. Two rhetorical questions demonstrate the problems created by treating the phrase "Japanese Buddhism" as labeling a category of things sharing some essential, unique defining characteristic. First, what makes both Prince Shōtoku Taishi (593–622, 聖徳太子) and D.T. Suzuki (1870–1966, 鈴木 大拙 貞太郎) members of the class of Japanese Buddhists? The cultures within which they lived were radically different, the languages they spoke were not the same, the kinds of Buddhism with which they were familiar were far from identical, the sense of self-identity and of national identity were not the same, and the audiences to which they addressed themselves were fundamentally distinct. The category "Japanese Buddhism" is a construct that depends on an artificial ethnic designation, and naturalizing the contemporary nation-state of Japan as an enduring historical entity.[26]

Similarly, defining tantra by attempting to identify some unique characteristics is also problematic. Scholars have often cited a range of components as marking tantra, not only mudra, mantra and mandala, but also characteristics such as transgressive actions, guru devotion, rejection of the Vedas, and so on. All of these fail as defining characteristics because each has a history and scope beyond the tantric tradition, or is limited to some particular form of the tradition. In contrast to standard definitional approaches, an approach that employs context, use and designation can provide guidance for identifying tantra when we see it.

As early as the ninth century, the thought and practice of tantric Buddhism began to influence the Buddhisms of Japan. The idea of a sudden awakening, either in this lifetime or the next, evidences that influence. That idea, which became widespread throughout the Buddhisms of Japan, has a complex history with strains reaching back through China to India. What is central to tantric Buddhism, however, is not the concept in abstract, but that the idea is deeply enmeshed with yogic and ritual practices for attaining awakening. It was this complex of tantric teachings and practices introduced by Kūkai and

26 Basing the study of Buddhism on the categories of modern nation-states is also evident in such phrases as "Tibetan Buddhism," "Chinese Buddhism," "Cambodian Buddhism," and so on. Such terminology is appropriate when the object of study of inquiry is actually the form found within a modern nation-state, but otherwise imposes constraints and presuppositions that distort the study.

Saichō that were influential for the entire history of the Buddhisms of Japan into the present. Lack of familiarity with tantra, and sectarian interpretations have tended to obscure that grounding.

In the following chapters we consider three dimensions of the Buddhisms in Japan: pilgrimage, ritual and doctrine. The specific pilgrimage is the series of 88 temples that encircle the island of Shikoku. The ritual examined is the homa, a votive ritual rooted in the pre-Buddhist Vedic traditions of India, but which continues to be performed into the present day. And the chapter on doctrine will focus more specifically on the different inflections of the idea of awakening in this lifetime—or the very next—and the practices that are enjoined in that pursuit.

Addendum for Students: advice for the academic study of Buddhism

How then might one go about an academic study of tantric Buddhism and the Buddhisms of Japan?

In evaluating secondary sources, it is important to distinguish between interpretation and analysis. Although the two are often closely intertwined in intellectual practice, they are distinct. And lack of clarity about which is being done, on the part of either an author or a reader—can be misleading. For example, the reader may wind up believing that they have been given certainties that result from critical analysis, when instead they are holding cleverly constructed interpretations. Integral to distinguishing analysis and interpretation is identifying a thesis, that is, a claim that is being asserted, and analyzing the argumentation supporting that claim.

That critical perspective highlights methodology. For graduate students in the programs with which I have had experience "methodology" can be highly confusing and intimidating. "Methodology," however, should not be mystified, and is in fact quite a matter of common sense—it is simply a matter of asking good questions and figuring out how to answer them.

In more technical terms, what I am suggesting is inquiry-based research directed by hypothesis formation and testing. Inquiry based scholarship starts with clarifying the question you are wanting to answer. From a clear question one can then formulate a statement of how you think such matters work, a statement of a causal relation, that is, a theory. That then becomes the basis for what you want to demonstrate—one's thesis. And a thesis needs to be formulated in such a fashion that it can be tested. Such inquiry is open to further refinement by further questions.

A straightforward example that I have often used to explain this is wondering about the price of apples in the grocery store. The question: Why do apples cost more at some times than at others? One might then think about what one

already knows, and suggest that the difference is seasonal. A testable thesis would be that the cost of apples varies regularly over the course of a year.[27] The thesis is testable by going to the grocery store repeatedly throughout the year and checking the price of apples. The follow on inquiry might ask why are there these seasonal differences, is the fall when apples are being harvested and therefore plentiful, while the spring and early summer are when they are not plentiful? It is possible that at some point in the research process one has to rethink one's question. Speaking from personal experience, the final dissertation submitted to my doctoral committee was radically different from what I had originally proposed three years earlier. Of course, not all scholarship is of this kind. Translations, for example, and expository essay (such as this work), or interpretive works, would not be structured in this fashion.

However, awareness of inquiry based research is critical because "tantra" is a socially created, socially constructed concept. This means that, unlike the price of apples, tantra is not some stable entity in the world, existing independently from us. Instead, how we think about tantra as an object of inquiry can be sharpened by asking clear questions. With a good question, one can formulate a theory, and determine what method can be employed to test the theory, to answer the question.

In summary: a theory is an idea about how things work, a method is a way of determining the truth of the theory, and methodology is the discussion of how the method applies to the theory, that is, how is the method appropriate as the way to determine the truth of the theory?

The mnemonic formula: Theory + Method = Methodology

27 For the sake of the example, we are setting aside such issues as different varieties of apples ripening at different times, and imported apples from places where the seasons are the reverse.

Chapter Two
The Shikoku Pilgrimage
Esoteric Buddhism in Japan

Introduction[1]

Pilgrimage, understood as voluntary travel to a sacred site, is a very widespread practice, seemingly found in some form or other in all traditional systems of practice.[2] Among the several important pilgrimages in Japan, the pilgrimage route encircling the island of Shikoku is probably the best known internationally. For example, along with the other sacred sites in the Kii peninsula of Japan, Mount Kōya (Kōyasan, 高野山)—which anchors the pilgrimage route—has been designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.[3] There are no special qualifications required to follow the route, and anyone who wants to travel the route can do so. Consequently, today it exists in that wide grey definitional range between religious austerities and religious tourism. Its history reflects every aspect of Japan's religious history, and its practices provide important insights into the ways that ordinary people engage in a living form of esoteric Buddhism in Japan today. At the same time themes of death and purification, of vows and commitment that permeate the pilgrimage practices of Shikoku are ones shared with other traditions, not only in Japan but around the world.

The Shikoku pilgrimage route leads those who travel this path on a journey of 1,200 kilometers encircling the island of Shikoku (四国). In Japanese this is identified as the "Shikoku henro michi" (四国遍路道, or simply as the Shikoku henro[4]), and is commonly referred to eponymously in English as the "Shikoku pilgrimage." Kūkai (空海, posthumous title: Kōbō Daishi, 弘法大師, 774–835), who established the Shingon (真言) tradition of esoteric Buddhism in Japan, was born on the island of Shikoku and this is fundamental to treating the pilgrimage as part of the tantric Buddhist tradition of Japan.[5]

1 For a general overview of the study of pilgrimage in Japan, see Ian Reader and Paul L. Swanson, "Editors' Introduction: Pilgrimage in the Japanese Religious Tradition," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 24.3-4 (1997), 225–270.

2 The terms employed here are an attempt to be precise, and to avoid the circularity sometimes created by use of the concept of "religion." For example: the circularity of claims that a site is religious because it is part of a religion. Also note that "sacred" is used to identify places or objects that are set apart from ordinary life, usually for the use of the gods.

3 "Sacred Sites and Pilgrimage Routes in the Kii Mountain Range," https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1142, accessed Friday, July 4, 2025.

4 The polyvalent term "henro" can refer either to those who follow the pilgrims' route, or to the route itself.

5 Use of the term "establish" points to a theme that runs throughout these four lecture—that the concept of "founder" as used in both popular Western religious discourse and the

Zentsūji Temple (善通寺) is now located at the site of his birth, having been established by Kūkai in 807. Located in the city of Zentsūji, in Kagawa Prefecture (香川県), it is number 75 of the 88 temples along the route.

The route is circular, and in a technical sense, one may start and finish at any point, completing the circuit and returning to where one began. Today, however, the route conventionally begins and ends on Kōyasan (高野山), at Kūkai's mausoleum in the Okunoin (奥之院) cemetery. By public transportation, Kōyasan is located about two hours from Osaka into the mountainous center of the Kii peninsula. The mountain is a major training center for the Shingon tradition in present-day Japan, and is the location of Kongōbuji (金剛峯寺), the headquarters of one of the most prominent of present-day Shingon lineages, the Chūin ryū (中院流), and also, of Kōyasan University where many Shingon priests receive their academic training. In addition to Kōyasan as beginning and end, the route links together another 88 temples, and while most are Shingon, it is noteworthy that several are not. These temples are located both along the coast and deep in the mountains of the island. That is, while some temple sites are remote, others are to be found in the midst of cities and towns of present-day Shikoku.

In Kūkai's Footsteps

Today the route as a whole is associated with the figure of Kūkai, who is conventionally referred to respectfully as O Daishi sama (お大師様)—which can be glossed as the "honorable great teacher." Kūkai is most often identified in English language religious studies literature as the "founder" of the Shingon sect of Japanese Buddhism. While treated as unproblematic, there are reasons to reconsider the organizing principles employed in religious studies that this designation reflects.

To simply identify Kūkai as the founder of Shingon is part of an overly systematized approach common to much of religious studies scholarship. This approach structures a diverse variety of traditions according to a set of categories that are based on nineteenth century Protestantism. Those categories are then abstracted out of their historical context as if they could simply be treated as unproblematically universal, which in a Hegelian terminology would be called "sublated."[6] Although not usually actually presented in this form, religious studies implicitly systematizes its analysis according to a matrix structure,

academic field of religious studies entails ideas that contribute to a distorted understanding of history. That distorted view is referred to here as the "rhetoric of rupture," which in this case is the idea that the founder creates a sharp division in history, a breach between before and after their birth, or revelation, or new dispensation, or whatever it is that is promoted by a religious tradition as rupturing history. The rhetoric of rupture is fundamentally a religious conception of time, and a way of writing history. It is not based on objective causal understandings of events and consequences.

6 In the Hegelian usage, to sublate means to lift up, or abstract, a concept out of its historical context—but sublated concepts still entail the connotations of their original use.

with several “religions” along one axis, and characteristics that are presumed to be true of all religious traditions along the other. This way of systematically organizing information about different traditions is therefore not descriptive, but actually imposes a structure on them—a structure that, as noted, is based on nineteenth century liberal Protestantism. The items along both axes are merely conventional, that is, they are selected by (usually implicit) criteria that lie outside the structure of the matrix model itself. To highlight the implicit nature of this selectivity, we can ask of one axis: Why are the “religions” listed chosen? How many are there? Are there no other “religions” that could be listed as well? Of the other axis, we can ask: Why are these characteristics listed? What makes them important? To whom are these characteristics important? Are there no other important characteristics? What does it mean if one of the ”religions” does not have one of these characteristics? To what extent are items selected out of a tradition in order to fill one of the cells of the matrix?

The legends of Kūkai that populate the pilgrimage route, however, reveal that he is much more than just a filler in a matrix of analysis—what goes into the cell at the intersection of “Shingon” and “founder.” He may also be seen as a culture hero credited with having transformed Japanese society.

Religious studies scholarship also tends to focus on the new forms of Buddhism that arose in the Kamakura era. This is due in large part because in mid-twentieth century Western scholarship the era was equated with the Reformation. This meant interpreting figures such as Hōnen, Shinran, Nichiren and Dōgen, as reformers on the model of leading figures of Reformation Christianity. This equation was itself informed by the presumption that a Weberian sociology of religion, which developed descriptively on the basis of the history of Western Christendom, could be applied interpretively onto the history of Buddhism in Japan. As a consequence, such scholarly interpretations tended to leave the many other important actors in that history in the shadows—either as predecessors who were left behind, or as conservatives who were resistant to the reformist impulse.

An additional contributing factor in this interpretive process was the characterization of tantra as somehow a decadent form of Buddhism. This further reinforced the rhetoric equating Kamakura era Buddhism with Reformation era Protestantism. By casting both the earlier forms of Buddhism, Shingon and Tendai, with their tantric dimensions, as decadent they were then equated to the putatively decadent Catholicism. The analogy is then complete:

1. Tantric Buddhism (Tendai and Shingon) and Catholicism are similar in both being decadent.
2. Protestant Christians led a Reformation against the decadence of the Catholic Church.

Therefore, Kamakura era Buddhists led their own reform against Tendai and Shingon.

Despite this characterization, tantric practices permeated the entirety of Japanese Buddhism, often being carried into the new Kamakura forms by their founders who had studied Tendai on Mt. Hiei. And, Kūkai has remained one of the most widely–known and well–respected Buddhist figures right into the present day in Japan.

This association with Kūkai is evident at every temple along the pilgrimage route. In addition to a main hall devoted to the temple's central deity, each of the 88 also has an adjacent hall where Kūkai is the object of worship (*daishidō*, 大師堂).[7] There are also many additional sites along the route, which, although not counted among the 88 temples, are visited by pilgrims. In addition to the pilgrimage temples per se (*fudasho*, 札所: temples that issue pilgrimage name slips, that is, *fuda*), for example, the route comprises several other sites said to be locations of significant events in Kūkai's life. Where these additional sites are institutionalized, they are known as "sacred sites outside the ordered sequence" (*bangai reijō* 番外霊場; also "special-status temple" *bekkaku honzan* 別格本山). Not having the same official status as the 88 temples, these additional sites are conventional, numbering 20 to 23 depending on tradition or guidebook. Like the 88, these sites are also locations where pilgrims can receive stamps (*nōkyō*, 納経) on their clothing or in the record books that many pilgrims carry.

Kūkai has long been a legendary, saintly figure who worked miracles, both on the island of Shikoku and elsewhere in Japan.[8] There is something of a gap in Kūkai's autobiographical accounts from when he was twenty-four years old until thirty-one. Yoshito S. Hakeda suggests we can assume that during this time Kūkai "wandered widely and energetically in pursuit of the Buddha Dharma."[9] Further, Hakeda notes that there are numerous legends of Kūkai found widely in Japan, and that these probably can be dated to these early years of his mendicancy. He is credited both with expertise at calligraphy, and with inventing the *kana* syllabary for Japanese. This is plausible because proper pronunciation of mantra is emphasized in tantric practice—the oral/aural character of mantra being important for ritual performance, rather than the meaning. Being a syllabic system, the Siddham script provides a clearer guide to pronunciation than does the alternate system that employed Chinese characters phonetically to represent the sounds of Sanskrit (*yinyi*, 音譯 or *fanyin*, 梵音).

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7 Nathalie Koiuamé, *Pèlerinage et Société dans le Japon des Tokugawa: Le Pèlerinage de Shikoku entre 1598 et 1868* (Paris: École française d'Extrême–Orient, 2001), 14.

8 Joseph M. Kitagawa, "Master and Saviour," in *On Understanding Japanese Religion*, Joseph M. Kitagawa, ed., 182–202 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987). Reprinted from *Studies of Esoteric Buddhism and Tantrism*, Kōyasan University, ed., 1–26 (Kōyasan: Kōyasan University, 1965). Kitagawa's essay provides valuable references to sources for the study of the figure of Kūkai. However, as is typical of modern religious studies approaches, Kitagawa works to untangle the biography from the legends.

9 Yoshito S. Hakeda, *Kūkai: Major Works* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1972), 26.

Other stories associate Kūkai with providing water to farmers for irrigation, such as the story about the Manno dam. He is said to have completed the reconstruction of the dam in three months, after three years of the work being unfinished by a previous superintendent. Local legend, however, ascribes the completion to Kūkai's abilities as a tantric practitioner, including the performance of a secret *goma* rite on a rock in the middle of the dam, later the site of the Kanno Rock Shrine (Kanno–ji, 神野寺).[10] Rebuilt in 1953, the dam still exists today and provides a regular, year-round supply of water for the farming community. It is one of the extra sites along the route that is associated with events in the life of Kūkai. Seen as having created the entire pilgrimage route through his own travels, the legends and stories about him serve to unify and thematize the route.[11]

Popular legend is that Kūkai continually walks the route, assisting pilgrims, and assisting those who assist pilgrims. For the pilgrim, walking the route as a religious practice is referred to as "two people, one practice" (*dōgyō ninin*). That is, the pilgrim and Kūkai are walking together, and that they are together engaged in the same practice of austerities.

In his autobiographical comments, Kūkai tells us that as a young student of Buddhism, he had a dream in which he was told that the *Vairocanābhisaṃbodhi Tantra* (Jpn. *Dainichi kyō*, 大日経, T. 848) would give him access to the highest teachings.[12] But, when he was finally able to locate a copy, he was unable to understand it, and he could not find any scholars in Japan who could explain it to him. The desire to understand this text motivated him to go to Tang China.[13] When in 804 Emperor Saga (r. 809–823) authorized an official delegation to go to Tang, Kūkai was able to join that group. In another of the ships to make the crossing was Saichō (767–822; 最澄; posthumous title Dengyō Daishi, 伝教大師), an older contemporary who was seeking the Tiantai teachings of Zhiyi 智顗 (538–597), centered on the *Lotus Sutra*.

The four ships that made up the delegation became separated in the crossing. However, according to the story he recounted later, because Kūkai could write in Chinese characters, the crew of the ship he arrived on was made welcome. He was first granted residence in the Ximing Temple (西明寺), where he studied Sanskrit with the Gandharan priest Prajñā (734–810?). Pursuing his interest in the tantric teachings, he then made his way to Green Dragon (Qinglong, 青龍寺) monastery in Chang'an, where he was welcomed by Huiguo (Jpn. Keika, 746–805; 惠果). From Huiguo, he received transmission of the two ritual systems—the complex of practices, mandala,

10 Ronald Greene, "Kūkai, Founder of Japanese Shingon Buddhism: Portraits of His Life," dissertation (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2003), 208.

11 See Reader, "Miniaturization and Proliferation," 53–54.

12 Hakeda, *Kūkai*, 26.

13 Hakeda, *Kūkai*, 27.

and text associated with the Womb World Assembly (Garbhakoṣadhātu, Taizōkai, 胎蔵界), and those associated with the Vajra World Assembly (Vajradhātu, Kongōkai, 金剛界).

After returning to Japan, he was eventually permitted to establish the Shingon teachings there and founded the monastery on Mt. Kōya. Legends of his life and miracles inform the belief system that justifies the pilgrimage. For pilgrims, the most significant of these is probably the legend concerning what happened when at the end of his life in 835 he was entombed in the mausoleum at Okunoin. At the end of the 49 days following his death, his disciples went to prepare his body to be interred. The legend recounts that they found that his skin was warm and that his hair and beard had grown.[14] This gave rise to the legend that Kūkai had not actually died, but had entered into a deep state of meditation, a deep *samādhi*. According to this legend he is awaiting the coming of the Tathāgata Maitreya (Miroku nyorai, 弥勒如来), the next buddha in our world. This in turn provided a rationale for the burial of ashes from cremations in the cemetery that rose up at Okunoin (奥之院). To be buried near Kūkai meant that when Maitreya does arrive in our world, the deceased will also be born into his presence. In 921 Kūkai was awarded the posthumous title of Kōbō Daishi (弘法大師, "Great Teacher of the Expanse of the Dharma") by the court.

The pilgrimage route now starts and ends at Okunoin. Walking up the path from town, one enters a deep forest of immense cryptomeria trees. When I first came to Koyasan, riding the small cable car from Gokuraku bashi station (極楽橋駅) up to the mountain through the forest, I was reminded of the redwood forests of California—large majestic trees stretching up toward the sky above, with reddish bark, and a deep quiet. A closer look, however, revealed the brush under these trees to be bamboo instead of ferns.

Along the path within the Okunoin cemetery are countless five element stupas (*go rin tō* 五輪塔). The unique shape of these memorials represents the concept that there are five elements, an understanding brought from India to East Asia by Buddhist teachers. The five elements are represented by five different shapes, which are in turn associated with five different colors, and also by association with the five different buddhas of the mandala.

The base of the stupa is a yellow square, representing the earth element (*chirin* 地輪, *pṛthivī*). The second cakra is water (*suirin*水輪, *apas*), a light blue or white sphere. Fire is the element of the third cakra (*karin* 火輪, *tejas*), a red pyramid. The crescent or demilune above that is the fourth cakra, the wind element (*fūrin* 風輪, *vāyu*), represented in green. At the pinnacle is the space element (*kūrin* 空輪, *ākāśa*), a white *bindu* (tear drop). Each of the cakra is also

14 Philip L. Nicoloff, *Sacred Kōyasan: A Pilgrimage to the Mountain Temple of Saint Kōbō Daishi and the Great Sun Buddha* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 32.

associated with a seed syllable (*bīja mantra*) and a buddha. In order, the seed syllables are *a* (*a*), *vaṃ* (*ban*), *raṃ* (*ran*), *haṃ* (*kan*), and *khaṃ* (*ken*), and the buddhas are Mahāvairocana (大日如来, *Dainichi Nyorai*), Ratnasambhava (宝生如来, *Hōshō Nyorai*), Amitābha (阿弥陀如来, *Amida Nyorai*), Amoghasiddhi (不空成就如来, *Fukūjōju Nyorai*), and Akṣobhya (阿閦如来, *Ashuku Nyorai*). This set of five is drawn from the *vajradhātu* mandala. The five elements are not simply the basic components of our physical world, our *kamaloka*, but also the components of our human bodies. Each memorial stupa, therefore, serves as a symbolic stand-in for the person whose ashes are buried at that spot. In addition to Okunoin on Kōyasan, with its intense symbolism of physical proximity to Kūkai in meditation awaiting the coming of Maitreya, several specific sites along the route are significant as locations associated with Kūkai and his miraculous actions. Perhaps most significantly, Shikoku is his birthplace, and the island where he undertook formative yogic practices.

Shikoku as the Realm of Practice and Awakening

The name Shikoku (四国) means "four countries," referring to the four domains that historically divided the island. The symbolism of the pilgrimage organizes the four into a progressive sequence describing the path to awakening, from the initial formation of the thought of awakening to complete release from karmic entanglements.

The pilgrimage route begins in Awa Province (阿波国, *Awa-no kuni*), where the pilgrim begins by forming the intention to attain awakening, or giving rise to the buddha-mind (*bodhicitta*, *bodaishin* 菩提心). Known today as Tokushima Prefecture, this section of the route includes temples 1–23, and is called "the *dōjō* to arouse the mind" (*hosshin no dōjō*, 発心の道場). The very beginning of the path is when the pilgrim first forms the thought that awakening is possible. In other words, for any individual person, the pilgrimage path may begin long before they set foot in Okunoin, or on the island of Shikoku, and indeed even before they begin planning to undertake the pilgrimage. The initial thought of awakening must, however, be followed by establishing confidence (*sraddhā*, *shin* 信) that one can attain it, and also confidence that the teachings are an accurate way to understand one's life, one's relations to other people, and one's relation to the world around us.

Tosa Province (土佐国, *Tosa-no kuni*) is the second of the four, and having established the basis for practice, this stage symbolizes the point at which the pilgrim engages in practice. Today, Tosa is known as Kōchi Prefecture and includes temples 24–39. It is "the *dōjō* of self-cultivation" (*shugyō no dōjō*, 修行の道場), where the pilgrim engages in the practice of austerities (*shugyō*, 修行). Some practitioners may explicitly seek austerities, such as bathing in cold water. Although not explicitly part of the pilgrimage as such, cold water austerities and other ascetic practices are performed by Shugendō adherents (修験道, also *yamabushi* 山伏) at several locations

along the route. Following the pilgrim's path itself, however, is considered to be a form of self-cultivation. And, just as confidence is needed at the beginning of the path, now confidence in the path itself is necessary for practice to be effective. Having confidence that the path leads to one's goal, one's practice is then purposeful. Being directed toward a desired end, that sense of purpose maintains practice along the path through the inevitable difficulties one encounters along the path.

The third stage is Iyo Province (伊予国, *Iyo-no kuni*), representing the stage of awakening in this life, or opening the buddha-mind. Ehime Prefecture is the modern name for this stage, which encompasses temples 40–65. Here is the "*dōjō* of awakening" (*bodai no dōjō*, 菩提の道場). Awakening the buddha-mind involves a balance of wisdom and compassion. Wisdom (*prajñā*, *hannya* 般若) is insight into impermanence, inconstancy, or emptiness. That is, the realization that because everything exists as the result of causes and conditions, nothing is permanent, eternal, absolute or unchanging. This insight includes both oneself, other people, and everything else. Some people have concluded from this that there is no meaning or purpose or point to life. Such a nihilistic interpretation is, however, a profound mistake. Everything that exists as a consequence of causes and conditions does actually exist—including the suffering of others. Compassion, that is, action benefitting others is the appropriate response of the awakened. Thus, insight into emptiness promotes compassionate action. At this stage of awakening, because of the insight into emptiness and the spontaneity of compassion, the pilgrim no longer accrues additional karmic entanglements.

The fourth stage of the pilgrimage is final release from the cycle of existence, complete liberation, or cessation (*nirvana*, *nehan* 涅槃). The fourth of the "four countries" is Sanuki Province (讃岐国, *Sanuki-no kuni*), today designated as Kagawa Prefecture. It is here that temples 66–88 are located. This is "the *dōjō* of *nirvāṇa*" (*nehan no dōjō*, 涅槃の道場). Here the illusion of separate, independent, autonomous existence ceases. No longer acting as if they are an autonomous individual, the pilgrim is open and connected to all beings. As a consequence of this openness, karma is fully dissipated, and no longer clinging to the round of rebirth (*saṃsāra*, *shōjirinne* 生死輪迴), the pilgrim is completely liberated.

This is, of course, an idealized interpretation, rather than literally what happens to the individual pilgrim (at least in my own experience). It is, however, the interpretive framework within which the pilgrim undertakes the pilgrimage. This formalization of the meaning of the four sections appears to be a relatively modern invention of the temples and pilgrimage authorities.[15] However, the historical roots of the pilgrimage are in pilgrims' understanding of the route as an ascetic practice that contributes to their development.

15 Reader and Shulz, *Pilgrims Until We Die* (Honolulu: University of Hawaiʻi Press), 28.

And, despite the interpretive schema of the four stages, this pilgrim's journey is not a matter of understanding abstruse Buddhist philosophical ideas, no matter how lofty those ideas are or how elegantly expressed. The pilgrimage is a matter of actually doing something, of placing one foot in front of the other and walking to the next temple, of reciting mantra for the main deity and for Kūkai. The pilgrimage is simultaneously the embodied actions of the pilgrim, an enactment of the legend of Kūkai as fellow pilgrim, and a conceptual structure describing the practice as a movement from ignorance to release.[16] The pilgrimage shares this multiplicity of levels with ritual, the topic of the next chapter.

The record that pilgrims make of their visits extend the embodied experience of the pilgrimage into material culture. The material dimensions of the pilgrimage are important because, as David Morgan has expressed it, material objects "are not mere signifiers of value but the very medium in which religions take shape."[17] Material objects are sometimes referred to as "affordances," referring to the fact that they make actions and meanings possible. There are countless aspects of the material culture of the Shikoku pilgrimage, so we will confine our attention here to those that have to do with the records that pilgrims make of their journeys. There are several ways that pilgrims create records of their trip, and the practices focusing on these objects afford personal and collective memory making.

For instance, records of a pilgrim's journey are made by receiving stamps from the stamp office (*nōkyōjo*, 納経所) at each temple they visit. Such stamps are complex, being comprised of two red stamps (*shuin*, 朱印), together with characters written by hand (*sumigaki*, 墨書き). Some pilgrims have the stamps put into books (*nōkyōchō*, 納経帳), but scrolls that have a space for every temple along the route are also used as a means to gather stamps. And some pilgrims may also have the stamps put on their white pilgrim vest (*hakui*, 白衣). Pilgrims may indicate to their descendants that they wish to be cremated in their pilgrim's garb, or along with their book or scroll.

Another material record is created by leaving name markers at each site that they visit. Such paper name slips (*osamefuda* 納め札) are also given to anyone who assists the pilgrim or gives them alms (*settai*, 接待) along the way. An even more extensive form of the material culture of the Shikoku pilgrimage serving to record a pilgrim's travel around the island is the physical recreation of the route in miniature form in other locations.

16 One may align these three with body, speech and mind—the embodied acts of pilgrims, following the narratives and legends of Kūkai, and the broader set of ideas that give the pilgrimage meaning in a Buddhist conceptual context.

17 David Morgan, "Material Culture and Religion," in *The Oxford Research Encyclopedias, Religion*, John Barton, et al., eds, np: 1 of 30, published online 2022; https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.787.

Recreating the Pilgrimage: transporting the sanctity of Shikoku

The Shikoku route has been recreated many times in various locations, both recording that a pilgrim has completed the route, and as a way of making the benefit of pilgrimage more locally available to those who couldn't go. Such recreated pilgrimages are constructed by placing soil from each of the 88 temples in a new location, thus establishing a karmic connection between the route around the island and the new miniature route.[18]

In the early 1980s I visited one such miniature route located on the island of Kauai, Hawaii. That miniature had been constructed by a lay pilgrim in 1904 on a hillside on his property in the Lawai valley. At the time that I visited the site was in disrepair, overgrown with tropical vegetation, though still walkable. Its location was unmarked, and access was from a small wide spot on a narrow country road. In 1991, 32 acres that included the miniature pilgrimage were purchased to become the Lawai International Center, which includes several other shrines and temples.[19] The hillside has been cleared and the path has been refurbished, making the path of 88 miniature shrines both easier to find and to walk.[20]

Using soil from each of the 88 temples to transport the sanctity of the Shikoku pilgrimage to other locations can be seen as an extension of a precedent established by Ennin (793 or 794—864; 圓仁; posthumous title Jikaku Daishi 慈覺大師). Ennin was a Tendai monk who trained under Saichō on Mt. Hiei, and who travelled to China in the period of 838 to 846. In addition to studying Tiantai thought and practice, Ennin was also initiated into the Chinese tantric traditions of the time, which included not only the *Vairocanābhisaṃbodhi* and *Vajraśekhara* tantras, but also the *Susidhikara tantra* as well. This third text is the source of many of the significant differences between Tendai and Shingon practices.

Ennin also spent time on Mt. Wutai (Wutaishan, 五臺山), considered to be the dwelling place of the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī (Monju bosatsu, 文殊菩薩). Ennin's time in China was brought to an end by the Huichang era (841–845) persecution of Buddhism (会昌毀佛) by Tang Emperor Wuzong (唐武宗). When Ennin returned to Japan in 847, he brought with him twenty balls of earth from Wutaishan, perhaps intending to recreate on Mt. Hiei the abode of Mañjuśrī in Japan.[21]

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18 Nakayama Kazuhisa, "La Dynamique de Création, Réplication, et Déclin des Lieux de Pèlerinage: Le Nouveau Pèlerinage de Shikoku à Sasaguri," *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie* 22 (2013), 269–350. Ian Reader, "Miniaturization and Proliferation: A Study of Small-Scale Pilgrimages in Japan," *Buddhist Forum.*

19 https://lawaicenter.org/pages/site.html accessed Thursday, July 10, 2025.

20 A nearby Shingon temple, the Waimea Shingon Mission, also has a miniature Shikoku pilgrimage, as do several other Shingon temples both inside of Japan and outside.

21 Sachiko Usui, "The Concept of Pilgrimage in Japan," in *Pilgrimages and Spiritual Quests in Japan*, Maria Rogriguéz del Alisal, Peter Ackermann, and Dolores P. Martinez, eds., 25–36 (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 33.

The use of soil from each of the 88 pilgrimage sites as a means to relocate the power of the route elsewhere is also reminiscent of the use of soil sanctified by recitation of the clear light mantra (*kōmyō shingon*, 光明真言) for healing the sick and liberating the deceased. This practice is particularly associated with the medieval Japanese monk Myōe Kōben (1173–1232, 明恵高弁), who propagated it quite extensively. Myōe taught that by reciting the clear light mantra over sand or soil, the power of the mantra would be embodied there. By casting the empowered soil onto a corpse or grave, or giving it to someone suffering from sickness, the person would be released from "the burden of evil karma."[22] Although not identical, the idea that the potency of the pilgrimage site could be contained in soil from that site and carried back to the pilgrim's home or another temple, thereby making the pilgrimage route present in its new locale, indicates a symbolic conceptual similarity. Practices related to the clear light mantra were a well-established part of the religious culture of medieval Japan, and the idea of soil as transferring the potency of the mantra is, therefore, part of the cultural background to recreating the Shikoku pilgrimage in miniature even into the present.[23]

Thus, we can see that on the one hand, the sanctity of the Shikoku pilgrimage is fixed in the specific temples that constitute the route. And, on the other hand, the sanctity of the route is portable, and can be transported elsewhere, thereby making the pilgrimage route present in another locale. This distinction between fixed sanctity and portable sanctity originates from the work of Lionel Rothkrug, who employed the distinction between the localized character of shrines and the mobility of relics to understand the divide between Protestant and Catholic Europe at the time of the Reformation.[24] The fixed sanctity of each of the 88 temples—a specific cultural identity in a specific geographic location—can be transported elsewhere. The fixed/portable polarity is in this way a dialectic relation, each term of the polarity supporting the sanctity of the other.[25]

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22 Mark Unno, *Shingon Refractions: Myōe and the Mantra of Light* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2004), 35.

23 The motif of empowered soil as a means of conveying power is also found in a legend which recounts that the goddess Niu, daughter of the mythic creators of Japan Izanagi and Izanami, gave sacred red colored soil to Empress Jingū in the fourth century. This soil was to be rubbed on Japan's ships and soldiers, assuring a triumph over Korea. Nicoloff, *Sacred Kōyasan*, 152.

24 Lionel Rothkrug, "Religious Practices and Collective Perceptions: Hidden Homologies in the Renaissance and Reformation," *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* (1980) 7: 1–251; idem., "The 'Odor of Sanctity,' and the Hebrew Origins of Christian Relic Veneration," *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* (Summer 1981) 8.2: 95–142. On the first page of this second work, Rothkrug cites the work of Peter Brown for the pairing of shrines and relics, *The Cult of Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981).

25 For another instance of this dialectic, see Knut A. Jacobsen, "Pilgrimage Sites and Procession Rituals in the Hindu Diaspora," in *Hindu Diasporas*, Knut A. Jacobsen, ed., 328–353 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023; DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780198867692.003.0015).

This dynamic of fixed and portable is not unique to Shikoku but is instead also found in other sites. An historically important one for Buddhism is the Mahabodhi temple.[26] Located at Bodhgayā in northeast India, it is considered to be the physical location where the Buddha Śākyamuni attained awakening under the "bodhi tree." Pilgrims to the site of the Buddha's awakening carried miniature portable representations of the Mahābodhi temple back with them as they returned home across a wide range of South Asia.[27]

The fixed/portable distinction not only helps us to understand the recreation of the Shikoku pilgrimage in miniature, but the actual practices add an important nuance to our understanding of the distinction itself. Sanctity is not portable in the abstract, but requires some material substrate to carry it, objects such as relics, miniatures of the Mahābodhi temple, soil from Wutaishan or soil from the 88 temples, or soil that has been empowered with the clear light mantra.

Not Just Multi-Site but Circular

Another noteworthy characteristic of the Shikoku pilgrimage is that it is circular. It is not only composed of several sites, but those sites comprise a circuit. That circuit begins and ends at the same location, whether one starts at Okunoin or somewhere else along the circular route. This contrasts with many other multi-site pilgrimages in Asia. Bodhgayā itself is, for example, one of a set of four defined by the Buddha as marking particular events in the Buddha's life and noted by him as auspicious places to visit. The four sites are:

1. Lumbinī, the birthplace of the Buddha,
2. Bodhgayā, where the Buddha attained awakening[28]
3. Sārnāth, where the Buddha began his career of teaching, described as where he "turned the wheel of the Dharma" for the first time, and
4. Kuśīnagar, where the Buddha passed away, entering full and complete nirvana.

According to the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (DN 16) nearing the end of his life addressing Ānanda, these four sites are specified by the Buddha Śākyamuni as places that one should visit.

26 For a discussion of the complex religious identity of the location, see Jacob N. Kinnard, "When is the Buddha not the Buddha?: The Hindu/Buddhist Battle over Bodhgayā and its Buddha Image," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 66.4 (Winter 1998), 817–839.

27 John Guy, "The Mahābodhi Temple: Pilgrim Souvenirs of Buddhist India," *The Burlington Magazine* 133.1059 (June 1991), 356–367. Cf. Swati Chemburkar, "Mandalas and Monarchs: Tantra and Temple Architecture in Buddhist Southeast Asia," in *The Oxford Handbook of Tantric Studies*, Richard K. Payne and Glen A. Hayes, eds., 581–686 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024).

28 Janice Leoshko, "Time and Time Again: Finding Perspective for Bodhgayā Buddha Imagery," *Ars Orientalis* 50 (2020), 6–32. Also, Sun-ah Choi "Zhenrong to Ruixiang: The Medieval Chinese Reception of the Mahābodhi Buddha Statue" *The Art Bulletin* 97.4 (December 2014), 364–387, on variation of the replication of the Buddha image based on

> Ānanda, a faithful gentleman should go to see these four inspiring places. What four? Thinking: 'Here the Realized One was born!'—that is an inspiring place. Thinking: 'Here the Realized One became awakened as a supreme fully awakened Buddha!'—that is an inspiring place. Thinking: 'Here the supreme Wheel of Dhamma was rolled forth by the Realized One!'—that is an inspiring place. Thinking: 'Here the Realized One was fully quenched in the element of extinguishment with no residue!'—that is an inspiring place. These are the four inspiring places that a faithful gentleman should go to see.[29]

While in the past, during his life, mendicants visited the Buddha, after his death they should go to these auspicious sites.

Sachiko Usui has discussed several multi-site pilgrimages, suggesting that an important prototype of pilgrimage for the Buddhist tradition is the journey of Sudhana (Zenzai, 善財) in the *Gaṇḍhavyūha* section (羅摩伽經, T. 294) of the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* ("Flower Garland" *Sūtra*, *Huayan jing*, *Kegongyō*, 華厳経, T. 279). While the multiple teachers visited by Sudhana do comprise a "circuit" of sorts, it does not constitute a circle as such. Additionally, it is a literary journey, rather than an actual pilgrimage, like the one encircling the island of Shikoku.

While Usui suggests that a circular pattern is inherent in Indic pilgrimages, this argument seems to be more an interpretation based on ideas of the round of rebirth, rather than actual circular routes. There seems to be adequate reason to distinguish between multiple site routes and circular routes as such, the latter having a fixed order that comes back to its starting point. The travels of Sudhana as recorded in the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra,* for example, may be interpreted as a circuit, since Sudhana returns to the first teacher of his quest, but that completion by returning to the beginning is not an integral circularity of his travels as such.

The circular nature of the Shikoku pilgrimage is characteristic of other such routes in Japan. Sachiko Usui points to the Kannon 33 routes as the first such routes in Japan, a pattern motivated by the 33 different possible manifestations of Kannon as described in the *Lotus Sūtra*.[30]

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local understandings, an instance of semi-autonomous traditions. See also David Geary, "Rebuilding the Navel of the Earth: Buddhist Pilgrimage and Transnational Religious Networks" *Modern Asian Studies* 48.3 (May 2014), 645–692, on pilgrimage to Bodhgaya as being built on the basis of networks that cross national boundaries.

29 "The Great Discourse on the Buddha's Extinguishment," tr. Bhikkhu Sujato, §28. Sutta Central: https://suttacentral.net/dn16/en/sujato, accessed July 19, 2025.

30 Sachiko Usui, "The Concept of Pilgrimage in Japan," in *Pilgrimages and Spiritual Quests in Japan*, Maria Rogriguéz del Alisal, Peter Ackermann, and Dolores P. Martinez, eds., 25–36 (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 26.

Other pilgrimage routes go out and back, but Shikoku starts at Koyasan, circles the island and then comes back to Koyasan, making it possible to immediately start again. Some pilgrims choose to become perpetual pilgrims, circling the island repeatedly until their death. Such figures are thought to be particularly powerful, and people often request their blessing.

The distinction between lineal pilgrimages (out and back), pilgrimage circuits (several related sites), and circular pilgrimages (beginning and ending at the same site) requires additional research. Usui suggests a doctrinal causation, but groups together pilgrimage circuits and circular pilgrimages. The three categories suggested here may simply be a descriptive generalization, the particular instances resulting from historical accident, without further causal or consequential significance.

Landscape

A pilgrimage route is literally shaped by the landscape on which it is located, but at the same time the pilgrimage route redefines the meaning of that landscape. Tim Ingold has coined the phrase "dwelling perspective" as a way of understanding that "the landscape is constituted as an enduring record of—and testimony to—the lives and works of past generations who have dwelt within it, and in so doing, have left there something of themselves."[31] In the case of a pilgrimage route, such as that of Shikoku, the landscape records not only the lives and works of those who have literally dwelt there, but also those who have travelled over and across it.

A landscape is transformed into a pilgrimage in various ways, of which we can identify a few here.[32] A site may be the location of a cosmic rupture at that location. A well-known example is Palestine, which because of association with the life story of Jesus became the "Holy Land," and the goal of many pilgrim's journeys as early as the late fourth century.[33] Additional sites in the Holy Land, and in Egypt were considered sacred for the early church because of the lives and actions of holy people, or their relics.[34] A similar cosmic rupture is the source of the pilgrimages to the "seats of power" in India.

According to Hindu legend, the goddess Sati was the consort of Śiva. When her father insulted Śiva by not inviting him to a sacrificial ritual, she threw herself on the flames and died. In his rage Śiva became the destructive god

31 Tim Ingold, "The Temporality of the Landscape," *World Archaeology* 25.2 (Oct. 1993), 152–174: 152.

32 This is an impressionistic list, not intended to be either comprehensive or systematic. Simply a set of examples of the kinds of dynamics involved in the symbolic structures that constitute pilgrimages.

33 Andrew Cain, *The Greek* Historia Monachorum in Aegypto*: Monastic Hagiography in the Late Fourth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 125.

34 Henry Chadwick, *The Church in Ancient Society: From Galilee to Gregory the Great* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 684–685.

Mahārudra, whose anguish threatened to destroy the entire universe. He carried her corpse on his shoulders, but the other gods entered it and dismembered it. The places where parts of her corpse fell became places of great power, the "seats of power" (*śākta pīṭha*).[35] Different traditions in India count the number of such sites variously, from 3 to 108. But all are empowered by the vivifying female energy of the body of the goddess Sati.

Some pilgrimage locations are in cosmicized landscapes. An example is Mount Potalaka (Butuoluoshan, Fudarakusen 補陀落山), the dwelling place of Avalokiteśvara (Guanyin, Kannon 觀音). While Xuanzang identified the "original" mountain as located in Southern India,[36] many other locales have been identified with it. One instance is the famous Potala Palace, once home of the Dalai Lamas, in Lhasa. In this case the symbolic complex is doubled as not only is the palace identified with the mountain, but the Dalai Lama is identified with Avalokiteśvara (Chenrezig). Despite the presence of Chinese control of Tibet, the Potala Palace remains a prominent pilgrimage site for both Tibetans and foreign tourists.

Potala mountain is also known in Chinese as Putuoshan (普陀山). This is the name now given to a small island off the east coast of China, which is also identified with the dwelling place of Avalokiteśvara. In keeping with the popularity of the bodhisattva, several other sites, including temples, throughout East Asia are also known as Putuo.[37] The island has become intensely commodified as a location of pilgrimage tourism, and now accessible by package tour.[38]

The same locations, such as mountain tops, seem to be considered especially potent across many cultures. And such locations were often organized into symbolic systems. For example, in China the idea of five "agencies" (*wuxing*, *gogyō*五行) organized and gave meaning to five mountains—Mount Tai in the east, Mount Heng in the north, Mount Song in the center, Mount Hua in the west, and Mount Heng in the south. And a similar organization of locations, organized along both geographic and mandalic lines, was employed in Tibet.

This system placed the center at the Vajrāsana in Magadha, where the Buddha Śākyamuni lived and taught. Toni Huber explains that "The Vajrāsana not only served as a more or less universal geographical reference point for Tibet and its localities, it also came to be used in more general Tibetan schemes

35 Hugh B. Urban, *The Power of Tantra: Religion, Sexuality and the Politics of South Asian Studies* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2010), 34.

36 Marcus Bingenheimer, *Island of Guanyin: Mount Putuo and its Gazetteers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 56.

37 Bingenheimer, *Island of Guanyin*, 3,4.

38 Courtney Bruntz, "Commodifying Mount Putuo: State Nationalism, Religious Tourism, and Buddhist Revival," dissertation (Berkeley: Graduate Theological Union, 2014).

for classifying religious geographies of pilgrimage."[39] This system located four cardinal points around Magadha as "the mountain abode of Mañjuśrī on Wutai shan in China to the east, Avalokiteśvara's island paradise on Potala to the south, Uḍḍiyāna, the land of Tantric origins, to the west, and the millennial paradise of Shambhala to the north."[40]

Locations related to pilgrimages were organized into systems, such as mandalic and geographic ones. And different locations could be designated by the same significance, such as the multiple locations of Potalaka. Both of these facts indicate that the meaning of pilgrimage sites is not simply given, either as cosmic locations or as the locations of religious history. Instead, meaning is negotiated, and indeed constantly recreated.[41] And as socially constructed, subject to contestation.

Religious Identity is Fluid and Religious Significance is Fluid

Religious identity is not fixed. For example, Zhongnan Shan (终南山, "last mountain to the south") near Xi'an in Shaanxi province was claimed by both Daoists and Buddhists, and given different symbolic meanings.[42] In his study of Zhongnan shan, James Benn concludes by noting that "medieval authors presented Mount Zhongnan as a stage, a charnel ground, a place of danger and death, or somewhere that offered sanctuary and safety in times of persecution."[43] For Daoists, who in some instances referred to it as Taiyi Mountain (太乙山), it was the home of immortals and a site associated with the practice of internal alchemy (*neidan*內丹). Thus, the "same" mountain was viewed quite differently by different groups.

Jacob N. Kinnard has noted a related phenomenon when he encountered Śaivite pilgrims on Vulture's Peak. He was surprised and then chagrined when he understood that part of his surprise was "thinking these Śaivas didn't belong, that they were, essentially, trespassing on Buddhist ground."[44] Kinnard goes on to highlight the ambiguity, the "messiness" of religious identities attaching to places—ambiguity not simply because the "same" place can have multiple religious identities, but because of the societal complexity of

39 Toni Huber, *The Holy Land Reborn: Pilgrimage and the Tibetan Reinvention of Buddhist India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 81.

40 Huber, *The Holy Land Reborn*, 81–82.

41 For a parallel, see David Quinter, "Enacting Identities: Chōgen, Kujō, Kanezane, and the Tōdaiji Great Buddha," *History of Religions* 64.3 (Feb. 2025), 168–214.

42 James Benn, "One Mountain, Two Traditions: Buddhist and Daoist Claims on Zhongnan shan in Medieval Times," in *Images, Relics, Legends: In Honor of Professor Koichi Shinohara*, 69–90.

43 Benn, 84.

44 Jacob N. Kinnard, *Places in Motion: The Fluid Identities of Temples, Images, and Pilgrims* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), xi.

sacred spaces. Specifically mentioned are economic, social, and political, but to these we can add cultural, administrative, historical, legal, symbolic, and no doubt other categories further complicating any sacred place.

One possible outcome of such complexity is contestation over the putatively true religious identity of a place.[45] Is Zhongnan shan Buddhist or Daoist? Are such designations in any sense meaningfully exclusive of one another? Is Vulture's Peak exclusively Buddhist? Or is it also in some sense Śaivite, Vaiśnavite, or even Quaker or Theosophical? Similarly, Paul Donnelly notes that in Tibet many of the sacred sites to which pilgrimage is made are "understood differently by Buddhists and Bönpos, by local people and religious elites, or even by Buddhists and Hindus."[46]

These instances demonstrate that, like all meaning, religious affiliations attributed to religious sites are socially constructed at some particular time in response to a particular situation. Such meaning is not eternal, not absolute, not simply given. The sites of the Buddha's life are themselves examples of this. As Frederick Asher explains these sites cannot be reified as "stable entities, ones with an eternal appearance reflecting their most ancient and sacred past, but rather as continually evolving ones."[47]

Understanding Traveler's Motivations: pilgrimage, tourism, both, neither

The Western academic study of religion has at times imposed dualistic interpretive frameworks on many of the topics that are studied. Quite often that framework is not descriptive, but normative, that is, based on an oppositional valorization—not just that these two things are different, but opposed to one another, one being good, the other bad. Various sets of paired terms have been employed in the literature that make this opposition explicit: this-worldly versus other-worldly, material versus spiritual, kammic versus nibbanic, and in the study of pilgrimage: "tourism" versus "pilgrimage."

In other words, some authors employ tourism as a pejorative characterization contrasting with pilgrimage. By this is meant that the traveler does not have a religious motivation but is instead engaged in something more "this-worldly." According to this interpretive framing, a tourist's visit to Shikoku is no different from a visit to Tokyo. They are there to see the sights, take photos and be photographed, acquire experiences and collect memorabilia, and return home fundamentally untransformed by the trip. In this characterization, the pilgrim is instead motivated by a desire for personal self-transformation or, ultimately, awakening.

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45 Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories*, ch. Archeology and the Monument. Alan Trevithick, "British Archeologists, Hindu Abbots, and Burmese Buddhists"

46 Paul Donnelly, "Pilgrimage in Buddhist Tibet," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, Richard K. Payne and Georgios T. Halkias, eds.

47 Frederick Asher, "From Place to Site: Locations of the Buddha's Life," *Artibus Asiae* 69.2 (2009), 233–245: 233.

This simple dualism becomes problematized when we consider how frequently pilgrim's motivations are practical, such as seeking to cure an illness, or fulfill a vow. In other words, the simple dichotomy of pilgrimage and tourism obscures the complexity of individual motivations. As Ian Reader has summarized in regard to the Shikoku pilgrimage,

> Pilgrims have set out on pilgrimages to seek cures for diseases, to expiate sins, to venerate deities, Buddhas, and other holy figures of worship, and to petition them and pray for benefits and rewards, both in this life and in terms of salvation after death. At the same time many pilgrims have been motivated by more touristic motives and by the need or desire to escape from their everyday environment, travel, let off steam, and experience new places.[48]

Another dualistic interpretation that has been imposed is the dichotomy between mysticism which is described as having an interior orientation in contrast to pilgrimage which is described as having an exterior orientation. This distinction was made by Victor Turner and can be summarized as locating the center of sanctity inside versus outside. Or in Turner's words, "Pilgrimage may be thought of as extroverted mysticism, just as mysticism is introverted pilgrimage."[49]

This dichotomy between internal and external experience, however, imposes a particular conception of human existence onto the experience of both the pilgrim and the mystic. There is the further danger that the dichotomy may be employed to privilege the interior contemplation of the mystic over the exterior activity of the pilgrim. If we avoid presuming the artifice of a dichotomy between interior and exterior, then the interior experiences of the pilgrim are just as valid and significant as those of the mystic, and the activity of the mystic—whether just sitting still or engaged in contemplative reflection—is also exterior, a way of being and acting in the world.[50] In other words, employing this dichotomy requires acknowledging the complexity of lived practice in which pilgrims might have mystical experiences, and that mystics may undertake pilgrimages.

Such dualistic characterizations (pilgrim versus tourist, or mystic versus pilgrim) are at best "broad strokes," and at worst value-laden generalities. Each individual pilgrim on the Shikoku route walks in the frame of a personal quest guided by Kūkai's legend, even those who travel as a member of a group only complete their own journey. In this regard it is worthwhile highlighting

48 Ian Reader, "Legends, Miracles, and Faith in Kōbō Daishi and the Shikoku Pilgrimage," in *Religions of Japan in Practice*, George J. Tanabe, Jr., ed., 360–369 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 360.

49 See Victor Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (1978. Reprint. Columbia University, 2011), 33.

50 And we note in passing that both are also socially constructed identities.

that basic to tantric understanding of human existence is a nondual worldview, one that embraces a wholeness of person and world, a dynamic interaction between the lived reality of a pilgrim walking the route and the legend-soaked landscape within which they travel. The pilgrim is immersed in a sacred venture, no matter their motivation. In a very important sense, the impact of a practice cannot be predicted, nor should motivation be judged by others. The academic study of religion should not impose either ontological presumption (internal versus external experience) nor value judgments (pilgrimage as authentically religious versus tourism as mere consumerism). The Shikoku pilgrim is both in the world and also participating in a sacred space, that is, at the same time purchasing food, lodging and memorabilia, and engaging in following Kūkai as a model and companion.

Return to Kōyasan

At the end of the pilgrimage, the pilgrim comes back to Kōyasan, to Okunoin, to the mausoleum of Kūkai. Completing a circuit, the pilgrim may then have planned to return to their previous life and be expected to do so. Perhaps the vow taken that motivated the pilgrimage has now been fulfilled, or the period of personal reflection—needed for whatever reason—now comes to a close, or the vacation time taken from work is over, or the research project completed. But it is possible for the pilgrim, having gone around behind the temple to where one can see the mausoleum of Kūkai, to stand and wonder. What if I don't go back? What if life is more than work with little breaks for vacations? Is my life fulfilled with this period of reflection?

And some have answered 'No'. They choose to not go back, but instead go again on the route, following in the footsteps of Kūkai. And perhaps again after that. And some become "perpetual pilgrims," never going back. Some pilgrims take up a life on the route, walking the circuit of temples that make up the Shikoku pilgrimage repeatedly. Some have become quite well-known along the route, as for example, Nakatsukasa Mōhei, who in the latter part of the nineteenth century became a perpetual pilgrim. Beginning when he was about twenty years of age, he began a life of pilgrimage that only ended 56 years later, when he died in 1922. During that time, he walked the route 280 times.[51] Nakatsukasa walked the route, but more recently perpetual pilgrims have taken to driving, and in this way have completed many more circuits.

What does it mean? How do we think about it?

If we step back from describing the pilgrimage as such, its origins, history, and legends, we can ask How can we understand this complex and rich object of study? What approaches can we take toward understanding it?

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51 Ian Reader and John Shulz, *Pilgrims Until We Die: Unending Pilgrimage in Shikoku* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 2.

Note two methodologically important points embedded in these last two sentences. First, the idea of an "object of study," and the second is the idea that there are different "approaches" that may be taken to understand the object of study. The compound phrase "object of study" is intentionally formulated to indicate that the object is created in the study of it, and the way it is studied depends on what the object is thought to be. This is an epistemological dialectic, how the object of study is conceived and the way in which the object is studied interact with one another. Often in the academic field of religious studies—as in other academic fields—it is presumed that we know what we are talking about, and consequently the dynamic interplay between conception of the object and study of the object is rendered invisible. Or, alternatively, the method for study is presumed, and determines how the object of study is conceived. How the object of study is conceived is then in direct interaction with the approach taken to understanding it.

If we think of the Shikoku pilgrimage as religious, then we will study it one way. If we think it is an economic structure, then we will study it another way. If it is understood to be an instance of a universal type, then a third method of study will be employed. There is no inherent reason that any conception of the object of study or any method of study is inherently the best, or even inherently better than any other. What resolves both issues is clarity about the question being asked. Once clear about the question we want to answer, we can then be clear about how to answer that question.

When I began my doctoral work, a predominant approach was the phenomenology of religion. This approach is rooted in European scholarship dating from the nineteenth century and known as *Religionswissenschaft*. Rather than the more literal "science of religion," the phrase "phenomenology of religion" became the preferred rendering in English. This approach was most prominently promoted in the United States by Mircea Eliade.

Being inclusive of our understanding of the phenomenology of religion as an orientation toward universal essential forms and manifest instances of those forms, an ontology underlying the epistemology, we can consider three scholars' ways of understanding pilgrimage—Arnold van Gennep (1873–1957), Mircea Eliade (1907–1986), and Joseph Campbell (1904–1987).

As an approach to the study of religion, the phenomenology of religion by design shifts attention away from particular instances and toward sublated abstractions. Sublation, or "lifting up," is a concept borrowed from Hegel to identify the process of abstracting a concept out of its context of origin and universalizing it. This is a common conceptual strategy in Western scholarship, perhaps a consequence of the shared Aristotelian definitional strategy of genus and species. In this particular case, the idea of pilgrimage is abstracted out of particular instances and a more general concept claimed as the common, shared characteristics that make some phenomenon in the world a pilgrimage.

Van Gennep is best known for the three-part structure that he abstracted as true of initiations, that is, separation, liminality, incorporation. With this initiatory model in mind, pilgrimage has been interpreted as an instance of a broader category of initiation.[52] In this analysis, the pilgrim separates from their home society, exists in a liminal, transformative state outside the ordinary activities of their lives, and then returns home to be incorporated back into their home society with a new identity—that of someone who has completed the pilgrimage. The common British name Palmer, for example, derives from someone who had completed the pilgrimage to the Holy Land/ Jerusalem, and returned with a palm frond as evidence of their successfully completing the journey.

While Eliade did not write an extensive study of pilgrimage as such, his ideas, such as those regarding sacred space and time, the *axis mundi*, and the ritualized reenactment of myth, are all interpretively applicable to pilgrimage. According to Eliade certain places and times are set aside from the ordinary in such a fashion that the sacred can emerge there. Related to the concept of sacred space is that there is a center point for our world—the *axis mundi*—around which everything else is organized. Whether a cosmic mountain, or the navel of the world, such places seem to often be the goal of pilgrimage. In the medieval period Kōyasan, for example, was identified as the "land of bliss" (*gokuraku* 極楽), another name for the pure land of Sukhāvatī. Arriving by train from Osaka, the final station is at the bridge to the land of bliss (*gokuraku bashi* 極楽橋).

Kōyasan is also identified as the site where Maitreya, the future Buddha of our world would arrive. As one walks through the cemetery, just over the bridge that leads to the Lantern Hall in front of Kūkai's mausoleum is a black stone, probably a meteorite. One legend is that Kūkai lowered it from Maitreya's Tuṣita heaven. When Maitreya appears on earth as the next Buddha this stone is identified as the site upon which he will deliver his first teaching—comparable to the Buddha Śākyamuni's first teaching, "the first turning of the wheel of the Dharma" (*Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, SN 56.11).[53] These aspects of Kōyasan—identification as the pure land of Amida, and as the site of Maitreya's future incarnation as the buddha of this world—can be interpreted as instances of Eliade's axis mundi.

Similarly open to interpretation as an instance of a more general type is the idea that the Shikoku pilgrim is walking the same route as that established by Kūkai and visiting the same sites of significance in Kūkai's biography. On the kind of scale suggested by Catherine Bell, pilgrimages are not as

52 For example, Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969. Reprint. New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1995).

53 Philip L. Nicoloff, *Sacred Kōyasan: A Pilgrimage to the Mountain Temple of Saint Kōbō Daishi and the Great Sun Buddha* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008), 223.

highly ritualized as other kinds of rituals. To the extent that the Shikoku pilgrims' actions are ritualized, however, the pilgrimage can be interpreted as a reenactment of myth. That reenactment is strongly reinforced by the stories about Kūkai that are linked with the different sites—his birth, his meditation on the morning star, and so on. And, on the clothing that pilgrims wear is inscribed the idea that the pilgrim and Kūkai are walking together. It is as if the pilgrim, by walking on the path valorized by Kūkai's life, Kūkai becomes a felt presence, and one can almost hear his footsteps, just behind, or around a corner, or just up ahead, echoing in time with one's own.

Originally a literature scholar, Campbell's contribution to the study of religion is known as the hero's journey. At its core this is the idea that the figure of the hero is known by having gone on a quest, that is, left his home, gone somewhere else, accomplished something or acquired something, and then returned home with the benefits of his accomplishment or acquisition. This might be seen as an expression of nostalgia on the part of settled agrarian societies for the lifestyle of the hunter–gatherer. In terms of understanding Campbell's theory, the clearest instance is the Arthurian legends regarding the quest for the Holy Grail. While Kūkai's trip to China may be interpreted as a hero's journey, the pilgrim similarly ventures forth, overcomes obstacles and returns home having visited the places made sacred by Kūkai's life.

Foucault

Max Moerman, in his study of the Kumano pilgrimage, has referred to Foucault's idea of a "heterotopia."[54] As described by Foucault, some sites are simultaneously characterized as mythic and real, characteristics that are therefore in contestation with one another.[55] For Foucault heterotopia are places that exist in relation to all other places, and he identifies two kinds—utopian and crisis. Utopian have no actual existence, no actual location, but are instead abstract, idealized conceptual locations—though a cultural geography may include them. There are stories, for example, of Amida devotees setting off in small boats from the western shores of Japan and sailing off in expectation of arriving at Sukhāvatī, the Western Pure Land of Amitābha Buddha.

Though not necessarily fixed places, crisis heterotopia are marked by being places of transition, which means that they are another way of conceptualizing the liminal, transformative spaces described by van Gennep and Turner. The liminal space is outside the ordinary social order, and it is therefore the space in which a transformation of social identity is possible.

54 D. Max Moerman, *Localizing Paradise: Kumano Pilgrimage and the Religious Landscape of Premodern Japan* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Asia Center, 2005), 2.

55 Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," Jay Miskowiec, tr. *Diacritics* 16.1 (Spring 1986), 22–27: 24.

In itself, that is, as an abstract concept, heterotopia fits into the intellectual style of the phenomenology of religion. Foucault claims that there are five principles that apply to heterotopias. First, that every society has them, and second, that although they "have a precise and determined function within a society," their functions change over time. Third, that heterotopia allow for several otherwise incompatible cultural sites to be juxtaposed in a single real physical space.[56] The fourth principle is that as sites heterotopias are conjoined with times that are similarly complex—heterochronies.[57] The final principle is that heterotopias open up either as illusions that exaggerate or distort a particular characteristic of ordinary space in some fashion, or as utopias that are well–organized, well-structured, smoothly operating. If we set aside the neologisms, and consider the fourth of Foucault's five principles, we find simply a version of Eliade's sacred time and sacred space which are conjoined in ritual reenactment of myth.

But what possible purpose does this concept, heterotopia, serve? Heterotopia may be an interesting concept, a catchy neologism, but more importantly, what does it help us to understand about actual phenomena, such as the Shikoku pilgrimage? Or is it just another abstraction that can be interpretively imposed onto the pilgrimage?

I would distinguish between deploying heterotopia as a universal interpretive category, like others in the phenomenology of religion, and what I think of as a postmodern emphasis on the local and specific. It is this latter that serves as a basis for understanding the unique characteristics of some religious phenomenon before going on to inductively generalize from that information.

Helpful in understanding the epistemological distinction is whether or not the concept is being employed in attempting to answer a well-formulated question so that it can elucidate new information, new understandings. From a clearly stated question one can propose possible answers, that is, assert a claim that can either be confirmed or refuted.

Specifically, then, does the concept of heterotopia help us to see something about the Shikoku pilgrimage that we otherwise would have not seen? Is there any possible analytic utility that can be revealed by applying the concept to the Shikoku pilgrimage? Or is it simply an interpretive device?

Instead of heterotopia *per se*, a different concept from Foucault's essay offers an analytic category more relevant to the Shikoku pilgrimage—making here a distinction between a universal interpretive category and an analytic one. That is the idea that space in our present understanding is not "desanctified" in the way that the modern view of space as undifferentiated indicates. The

56 Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 24–25.

57 Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 26.

modern conception may be generalized as a uniformity of extension, as suggested by the mechanical universe as perhaps first conceptualized by Galileo, Newton, and Descartes. Instead, as Foucault indicates, the lived space of our present is (still) divided into separate categories—I am taking "sanctified" in this case more literally in the sense of "to be set apart," rather than "holy."

Contrasting space as lived from the conception of space as an abstract Newtonian geometric space, Foucault says of the former that, "we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another."[58]

For the Shikoku pilgrimage, it becomes clear that these relations are not simple polarities, between for example, the pilgrimage route and the rest of the island of Shikoku. There are instead nodes that structure the relations—the temples and to a slightly lesser degree the other biographically significant sites. The different strands connecting the nodes are also not simply uniform. An old trail through forest and field, marked by stones dating from the nineteenth century, is experientially very different from a section of modern freeway that must be traversed in the company of fast-moving cars and trucks.

The phenomenology of religion moves at the level of generality. At that level, not only are the specifics of place, history, and personal experience obscured, but for the academic project as defined by the phenomenology of religion, they are rendered irrelevant. In contrast, the proper formulation of a question, and a hypothesis that makes it possible to answer that question, is a very different intellectual project. Many questions can be asked, and their value can only be judged by their heuristic benefit—what additional, new and interesting insights do the answers give us?

58 Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 23.

Chapter Three

Studying the Tantric Fire Ritual (Homa)

Esoteric Buddhism in Japan

Introduction

The homa (*goma*, 護摩) is a tantric practice that ritualizes making offerings into a fire. Its origins root it in ancient Vedic ritual, and in the early medieval period, the tantric traditions of India developed their own forms of fire ritual. Today the homa is practiced throughout the tantric world: Hindu, Jain and Buddhist, and is found in Tibet, Nepal, Mongolia, China, Japan, and in some temples in Europe and the Americas. This essay first introduces the homa ritual (Jpn. *goma*, 護摩; Tib. *sbyin sreg*, སྦྱིན་སྲེག་), traces its origin in pre-Buddhist India, and its global spread. Next, we might ask: What is the traditional understanding of ritual efficacy in the tantric tradition? One answer involves the idea of ritual identification, and we explore that dimension of tantric Buddhist thought. And, in closing we will consider the question: Why ritual?

With roots in the ritual culture of Indo-European religion, the homa was integrated into the medieval tantric traditions of India and is today found throughout the world of tantric practice.[1] It therefore provides a focal point for a variety of different kinds of inquiries into Buddhist history as such and religious studies more generally. Originally growing out of Biblical studies, today Buddhist studies have a well-developed philological methodology.[2] However, neither Buddhist studies nor religious studies have yet to develop an equally sophisticated methodology for the study of Buddhist practices. Those practices have clear and regular structures, and many have detailed textual histories, and as such they can shed light on important dimensions of Buddhism not revealed by only attending to doctrine. The homa provides opportunities for developing methods appropriate to balancing the study of Buddhist doctrine with the study of Buddhist practice—that is, complementing the study of what people should think with the study of what people do.

One of the enduring questions in the study of ritual is its origin—where and why does ritual originate? Or in a different formulation, why do people engage in ritual? The first may be framed as an historical or anthropological

1 Richard K. Payne, “Homa: Tantric Fire Ritual,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, Richard K. Payne and Georgios T. Halkias, eds., 1198–1218 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024).

2 K.R. Norman, *A Philological Approach to Buddhism* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1997).

question, while the second as a pragmatic or psychological question. I would like to start with clarifying these questions because the way that a question is asked determines what counts as an answer.

For example, one might ask: What caused the differences between Indian and Chinese forms of Buddhism? The presumption implicit in this question is that each of these two categories is in some sense uniform and marked by a set of characteristics unique to itself and distinct from the other. There is an additional assumption that these differences can be explained by the same set of causes, and a third assumption that there is a determinative essential character of "Buddhism," even if that differs from one cultural locale to another. At a broad level, one way that the difference between the two has been "explained" is by claiming that the religious culture of India promoted the asking of epistemological questions, while that of China promoted asking ontological questions. This kind of answer itself entails two presumptions. The first is that there is something called "culture" that has a causal efficacy, and second, that the focus of our attention should be on the conceptual and doctrinal aspects of the tradition.

Looking at the complex of presumptions concealed in a seemingly simple and straightforward question indicates that starting directly from a question that is not well-formulated will not yield meaningful answers.[3] Indeed, it suggests that at least some questions, upon closer examination, are incoherent and should be abandoned. For the study of Buddhist ritual it is useful to next articulate the significance of the concept of religion, which has long been treated as the conceptual container within which Buddhism and the other "religions" are held.

Conceptualizing Religion: doctrine, practice

There is an enduring tendency in religious studies generally, as well as in Buddhist studies, to privilege doctrine in the study of religion, to allow ourselves to accept the idea that what a religion "is," is a set of beliefs. The rise of emphasis on lived religion[4] has challenged the idea that religion is primarily a conceptual matter requiring correct beliefs, despite which it is still very pervasive in both popular understandings and academic inquiries.

If we step back from presuming that religion is first and foremost a belief system, we may consider thinking of Buddhism (and by extension any religion) as a (somewhat[5]) integrated system in which both doctrine and practice play important interrelated roles. Not that doctrine determines practice,

3 This will be developed more fully in the next lecture on tantric Buddhist doctrine.

4 See the very important collection by Courtney Bruntz and Brooke Schedneck, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Lived Buddhism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2025: https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780197658697.001.0001).

5 The qualifier "somewhat" is included here to indicate that as historically ongoing systems,

as is commonly assumed in Western religious studies, but rather that the two are informed by one another. In their interaction with one another they constitute what can be called "Buddhist praxis." The term "praxis" is used here to label, to give us a way of talking about, the relation between doctrine and practice. Neither is the full and exclusive cause of the other—doctrine is not the cause of practice, and practice is not the cause of doctrine. Nor is this relation exclusive, there are other causal factors involved as well. But, given the long history in religious studies of privileging doctrine as primary and causal in its relation with practice, it is particularly important to examine the relation between the two. The relation identified by the term praxis is a dialectic one—each of the two terms engages the other, creating an ongoing process.

As emphasized in the previous lecture on the Shikoku pilgrimage, tantra is a praxis in which the doctrinal system employed is almost entirely constituted of quite familiar Mahāyāna teachings, though of course deployed in relation to one another in distinctly tantric configurations.[6] What most clearly marks it as different from mainstream Mahāyāna is the way that practices were deployed in a tantric framework, nuancing the teachings into different conceptual constellations. Some of the practices employed in tantric forms of Buddhism, e.g., visualization and *dhāraṇī*, were already well established within Mahāyāna, while others were apparently marginal or were in fact entirely new additions to the panoply of practices employed in the tradition.[7] One of these latter is the homa.

While I would emphasize that doctrine and practice are dialectically related to one another as praxis, we can also choose to focus on practice as such, just as doctrine has been a central focus for so long. In other words, practice is as valid a focus of scholarly attention as is doctrine. In order to do so, however, we have to ask the question: How do we study practice?

This does not mean that we do not study texts, but rather that because our questions are different, which texts we consider important and which sections of texts we examine will likewise be different. In addition, however, we

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religions are never systematic and logically coherent. They are constantly developing and changing as a result of and in response to changing conditions in the social order in which they are embedded.

6 See Richard K. Payne, "Practicing the 'Threefold Mystery': Rethinking a Shingon Ritual from Dichotomy to Dialectic," in *Journal of Contemplative Studies* 19.4 (Nov. 2024), 1–29.

7 I have argued elsewhere that the idea of the threefold mystery (*sanmitsu*, 三密), which is the central action in many tantric rituals, is a distinctly tantric doctrinal concept. This idea extends the widespread analysis of human existence into the three parts of body, speech and mind by making the three parts of the practitioner identical with the three parts of the Buddha or other deity evoked in tantric ritual. It would be presumptuous to claim that the doctrinal idea came first and was then expressed in ritual practice. Although reflected in early tantric texts such as the *Vairocanābhisaṃbodhi Tantra*, those texts themselves are primarily prescriptive of practice, not doctrinal arguments.

also have the opportunity to supplement textual information about practice with observation of those practices that are still in use. On both counts, the homa provides a wealth of sources of information. It has been a central part of tantric Buddhist practice for a millennium and a half, and there is, therefore, quite an ample textual record available. At the same time, as pointed out by Michel Strickmann several decades ago now, there is also an active living tradition of homa practice that continues into the present day. While Strickmann was pointing specifically to the tantric traditions of Japan, the same is true of Tibetan communities, and Nepalese Buddhists as well.[8] In Hindu tantric traditions it also remains a present practice, as well as having a long textual record. And it is also part of the much less studied Jain tantric tradition as well.[9]

Ritual Studies, History, Syntax

Considering the range of activities that scholars identify as ritual leads one to the disheartening conclusion that there is no coherent object of study. If everything from funerals and weddings on one hand to forms of speech, gift-giving, greetings, seating arrangements, or medical treatments[10] are to be discussed under the same category, it must be a very odd category indeed. Resolving this means that the category of "ritual" is a social convention, that is, it lacks any objective referent, and conversely that ritual is not an empirical object at all. It is better understood as shorthand for the process identified by Catherine Bell as "ritualizing," that is, a range across which actions may be more or less ritualized.[11] In addition to there being different degrees of ritualization, there is a range of possible actions or components that can be employed in the performance of ritualized activities.[12] Thus, understanding of the category "ritual" as a range of different actions and components that are ritualized in different degrees can be further nuanced by pointing out that ritualizing is a process. That is, rituals are composed of ordinary pragmatic actions that are ritualized. The process of ritualizing may include ritual practitioners following certain behavioral restrictions, appearing in certain

8 A Tibetan homa was performed in conjunction with the Buddhist–Christian dialogue conference in Hawai'i January 3–11, 1984, and a Nepalese homa at the conference in October, 2010, at Harvard University. This latter is closely detailed in a joint essay by Naresh Bajracharya, who performed the ritual, and Todd Lewis. See "Newar Buddhist *Homa* Ritual Traditions," in *Homa Variations: The Study of Ritual Change across the* Longue Durée, Richard K. Payne and Michael Witzel, eds., 291–313 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

9 Ellen Gough, "Homa in Jain Traditions," in *The Oxford Handbook of Tantric Studies*, Richard K. Payne and Glen Hayes, eds., 125–149 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024).

10 Susan Sered, "Taxonomies of Ritual Mixing," *History of Religions* 47.2/3 (Nov. 2007/ Feb. 2008), 221–238.

11 Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

12 This specific aspect of Bell's theory is polythetic. While many scholars have leaned on polythetic definition as adequate and complete, it is important to note that this is but one dimension of the understanding of ritual being described here. The others are degree and process.

kinds of dress, employing certain styles of language, using certain kinds of implements, objects, and substances, and so on. In other words, attempts to define what is or isn't a ritual is an endlessly futile undertaking because the category is not a bounded set—there is no clear boundary that includes some set of objects, and at the same time excludes others. These theoretical considerations constitute the background for the following discussion of the homa. They do not, however, help us to understand the socially constructed category of "ritual," but do provide us with methodological reflections regarding how to study "rituals."

Homa

The homa (*goma* 護摩) is a very dramatic ritualized performance, one that involves constructing a fire on an altar, and the making of offerings into that fire. That the roots of Buddhist tantra are in the Vedic tradition is highlighted by the fact that the first deity evoked in the Shingon homa is Agni (Katen; 火天), the Vedic fire god who receives and purifies offerings, and then transmits them to the gods.

From Vedic India to the modern world

The Vedic era refers to the period from about 1500 BCE to about 500 BCE. The end of this period is marked by the rise of a culture of renunciates, *śramaṇa*, and it is in this transitional period that Śākyamuni taught and formed his community. Though originating in this period, Vedic practices and knowledge have continued into the present. The Vedic ritual system provides the cultural background for the tantric homa.

The classic Vedic system identifies two categories of sacrifices, both involving fire. The first follows the instructions of the Vedas which are said to have been heard (*śruti*) by the sages (*ṛṣi*), and these rites are then called *śrauta* rituals. Such rites are communal (sometimes also called the "solemn rites"). These communal rites require three altar hearths. The first is a circle, identified as the domestic fire, and located in the western part of the ritual enclosure. The second is a half-moon (demilune), and is a protective fire located in the southern part of the ritual enclosure. The third of the three altar hearths is square, and it is in this altar hearth that the fire for the deities is built, located in the eastern part of the ritual enclosure.

In contrast to the communal rites are those categorized as domestic rites (*gṛhya*) generally performed by a householder (*gṛhastha*), or their household priest (*purohita*). These domestic rites are those marking significant transition events in the life cycle (*saṃskāra*s): birth, naming, initiation, marriage, death. In contrast to the three altar hearths of communal rites, such domestic rites require one altar hearth. Although speculative, it seems plausible that originally this was the cooking fire itself, but that later as the ritual culture promoted

purity and added complexity, the practice of maintaining a "domestic" altar hearth in a shrine room separate from the cooking area became normative.

Beyond the range of complexity running from the domestic to communal sacrifices are some even more extensive rituals. One of these that has been studied in great detail is the *agnicayana*, or the "piling of the fire," the piling up of the layers of the altar hearth.

A Vedic Fire Ritual: the *agnicayana*

The version of this rite that has been studied most extensively was found in Kerala State in southwest India. Here knowledge of Vedic ritual long lost in other regions of India had been continuously maintained.[13] The *agnicayana* ritual requires a covered shelter that extends the ritual enclosure further east from the altar hearth of the deities used in the communal rites. The covered shelter and the altar on which the sacrifice is offered are both temporary and will be abandoned after the completion of the ritual.[14] The altar for the *agnicayana* is in the shape of a bird and is constructed of five layers of baked clay bricks. At the end of the several days of ritual performance, the covered shelter is burned and the site abandoned.

The archeological record includes three *agnicayana* altars dating from the third century CE.[15] Three performances of the *agnicayana* in Pañjal, Kerala, have bridged the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The first in 1956, again in 1975, and the most recent in 2011. Two additional performances are recorded in other locations in Kerala, both in 2012.

Agni is Fire, Fire is *Agni*

One of the difficulties for understanding the ritual culture of tantric Buddhism in Japan is the pervasive assumption in modern culture that religious praxis is symbolic and referential—that everything is a symbol referring to something else, especially to some abstract transcendent. This kind of interpretive approach has a long history in Western theological reflection, particularly the discourse regarding idolatry. In the modern era, this symbolic orientation has been reinforced by the prevalence of psychology as a discourse structuring contemporary religious culture more generally—at least in the United States, and I presume in other societies with exposure to Western culture.

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13 This according to Frits Staal. The claim has, however, been called into question with the suggestion that it was not continuous but the result of a later revival. While this critique is attributed to Kim Plofker, *Mathematics in India: 500 BCE to 1800 CE* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), I have not been able to locate the work in order to evaluate the critique.

14 Hans Teye Bakker, *Holy Ground, Where Art and Text Meet: Studies in the Cultural History of India* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 447.

15 In Jagatgram (Bakker, *Holy Ground*, 452), and in Purola, c. 150–250 CE. Though similar altars have been found in Harappan sites (Kalibangan, Lothal, and others), the continuity with Vedic culture is problematic.

In the case of the Indian background and its inflection in tantric praxis, fire is not an abstraction—what is built on the hearth altar is not a symbol of fire, but a fire itself. This is one of the things that struck me quite strongly the first time I was able to observe a Shingon homa. Conversely, the fire is not a symbol of something else, it does not reference some abstract entity that is somehow more real than the fire. It is not a symbol of *Agni*, it is *Agni*. And, likewise, *Agni* is fire. *Agni* is the fire of wildfires, domestic fires, cremation fires. *Agni* is the metaphorical fires of transformation, such as the fire of digestion, and the fire of wisdom. This Vedic religious culture of fire offerings is the context from which the tantric homa developed.

Homa in Japanese Tantric Buddhism

Esoteric Buddhism in Japan has two major forms, Shingon (真言, also known as Tōmitsu, 東密), and Tendai (天台, also known as Taimitsu, 台密), and both date from the Heian era (794 to 1185). While the Shingon tradition is exclusively esoteric, the Tendai has a two-part identity. Those two parts are an exoteric program that is centered on the *Lotus Sutra*, and an esoteric program that is similar to that of the Shingon tradition. For our purposes here, I will be focusing on the Shingon tradition.

The ritual program of Shingon is structured by two mandalas. The Taizokai mandara (胎蔵界曼荼羅, Garbhadhātu mandala) is the manifestation of compassion. The Kongokai mandara (金剛界曼荼羅, Vajradhātu mandala) is the manifestation of wisdom. These two forms constitute more than a simple pairing; they are interpreted as a nondual whole unifying wisdom and compassion. The two mandalas are assemblies of buddhas, bodhisattvas and guardian deities forming the retinue of Mahāvairocana Buddha, though differing in details and symbolism. Both of the tantric traditions of Japan—Shingon and Tendai—practice homa, and the rituals are very similar to one another, incorporating references to the deities found in the two mandalas. And integrating the assemblies of both mandalas, the homa is the final of the sequence of four rituals that comprise the training program for a priest.

Other traditions in Japan that practice homa include Shugendō (修験道), Shintō (神道), and some of the new religious movements. Shugendō practitioners engage in austerities in the mountains, and different Shugendō groups are associated with different mountains where they practice. Shugendō is known for large, outdoor homa fires (*saitō goma*, 柴灯護摩). For several centuries the Shugendō traditions were subsumed under either Shingon or Tendai authority, which tended to give Shugendō greater doctrinal systematization. While groups still retain affiliations with esoteric temples, following the establishment of religious freedom with the new constitution in 1947 Shugendō groups reasserted autonomy. The Shugendō tradition continues to be an active part of present-day Japanese religious culture.

During the late medieval and premodern periods, several Shintō traditions integrated homa into their ritual practices. One of these was the Yoshida tradition (Yoshida Shintō, 神道, also known as Yuiitsu Shintō, 唯一神道, the "one and only Shintō"). Yoshida Kanetomo (吉田兼倶, 1434–1511), the founder, created a hybrid form by bringing together tantric Buddhist ritual components with Daoist symbolism and Shintō deities.[16] Other Shintō traditions also adopted the homa ritual, but, with the "separation of kamis and buddhas" (*shinbutsu bunri*, 神仏分離) in Meiji Japan (1868), all Shintō shrines stopped performing homa. Today, no Shintō shrines perform the homa, and the Shintō homa is only an important historical artifact which reveals the complexity of Japanese religion as a combinatory system.

The new religious movements of Japan (*shinshūkyō*, 新宗教), defined as those established from the middle of the nineteenth century, include at least two that have adopted the homa as part of their ritual practice. One of these is Shinnyo-en (真如苑), which was established in 1936. Headquartered in Tachikawa, Tokyo, this tradition is rooted in Shingon and employs a homa ritual that is a modified form of the Shingon version. Perhaps the most visually evident modification made by this lineage is the use of a unique five-sided altar. Another of the new religions to employ the homa is Agon-shū (阿含宗, established 1954). This tradition uses an outdoor fire based on Shugendō and incorporates Tibetan tantric imagery as well.

Homa Outside Japan

The first homa that I observed was held early, beginning about 5 am, on New Year's morning, in the Sacramento Shingon temple. Dark inside, the priest began the ritual and then, lighting the fire, a taiko drum began sounding loudly from alongside the altar. The sangha of about 150 people began chanting the *Heart Sūtra* (*Hannyaharamitagyō*, *Prajñāparamitāhṛdaya Sūtra*, 般若波羅蜜多心經) in unison, while flames from the hearth on the altar alternately flared up and died down, and then repeated. It was only later that I understood that this cycle had repeated five times and was the result of there being five subrituals. Although differing in the deity evoked, each of the five has basically the same ritual structure. In each additional subritual kindling was first added to the fire, and then oil poured onto it causing the flames to light up the dark room. After about 45 minutes the ritual was finished. The priest rose from his place in front of the fire, and left the inner altar space (*naijin*, 内陣). By this time the sun had come up, and the temple was opened to allow the smoke to clear. The priest returned, having changed out of the formal robes of the ritual performance, and gave a short greeting. We were then all given a handful of dry soy beans and three times on the count of three shouted "Oni wa soto, fuku wa uchi" (demons out, good luck in; 鬼は外、福は内), a traditional Japanese way to greet the new year.

16 Richard K. Payne, "A Pragmatics of Ritual: The Yoshida Goma at the Interface of Shintō and Shingon," *Religions* 12.10, 884 (2021), doi.org/10.3390/rel12100884.

In each of the five subrituals different deities or sets of deities were evoked. The first is *Agni*, the Vedic fire god, while the second is referred to as the "Lord of the Assembly". Which deity functions as the "Lord of the Assembly" varies depending on who the next deity, the "chief deity" (*honzon*, 本尊) of the ritual performance, is. This third figure, the chief deity, is the main figure of the ritual. In the case of the new year's ceremony at Sacramento, the homa was a protective one for which the chief deity was Fudō Myōō (Acalanātha Vidyāraja, 不動明王). Protective homas are probably the most commonly performed kind in present day Shingon, and Fudō one of the most popular chief deities. The fourth subritual is for the celestial deities, that is, asterisms, houses of the moon, and so on, while the fifth is for the worldly deities, a group that includes a number of Vedic gods, and in some performances Shintō deities as well.

While the Sacramento new year's ritual was a protective one (also, "pacification," *śāntika*, *sokusai*, 息災), in contemporary Shingon tradition five different ritual functions (*goshuhō*, 五種法) are identified. The four additional functions are "enriching": increasing merit and prosperity (also "augmentation," *pauṣṭika, sōyakuhō/zōyakuhō*, 增益法); "drawing": summoning sentient beings (*aṅkuśa*, *kōshōhō/kōchōhō*, 鉤召法); "gaining" love and respect (*keiaihō*, 敬愛法); and subduing adversaries or destroying demonic forces (also "subjugation," *abhicāraka*, *gōbuku/jōbukuhō*, 調伏法), and for generating emotional affinity (*vaśikarana*, *keiai*, 敬愛). Different functions require different shaped hearths, different colored dress, different times of performance, different endings to the mantras, and so on.

Ritual Efficacy

Every system of ritual practice has some conception of how it is that rituals are effective. Prominent for tantric Buddhist ritual practice is the logic of ritual identification. Two phrases help us to understand this idea, the first being the merging of deity and practitioner (*nyūga ganyū*, 入我我入),[17] and the second the threefold mystery (*sanmitsu*, 三密). The merging of deity and practitioner refers to the moment at the heart of most tantric rituals when the practitioner visualizes being identical with the deity, and this is also expressed in terms of union, that is, yoga (*yuga*, 瑜伽, also, 踰伽). This union is explained in terms of the practitioner's body, speech and mind being identical with the body, speech and mind of the deity, and it is this that is the threefold mystery. This practice is known in the Tibetan tantric context as "deity yoga," or as "buddha yoga."[18]

17 Sanskrit: "ahaṃ tasmin sa ca mayi," meaning "I am in him, and he is in me." The phrasing in Chinese (我入彼　彼入我) is literally equivalent to the Sanskrit formula.

18 David Gray, *The Buddhist Tantras: A Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 80.

In terms of what we might call the ritual logic of the merging of practitioner and deity, the central moment of the ritual is when the chief deity of the ritual, having become present in the altar, the practitioner can then visualize their own body, speech and mind as forming an identity with the body, speech and mind of the deity. Known as the "threefold mystery" *sanmitsu* (三密), identifying the practitioner's body (*shin*, 身) with that of the deity is done through making mudrā, identity of speech (*ku*, 口) is done by reciting mantra, and the identity of mind (*i*, 意) by visualizing mandala. Tantra has at times been characterized by the set of mudrā, mantra, and mandala, which refers to body, speech, and mind, which are the threefold mystery. It is important to emphasize that "ritual identification" is a practice to be done, not a doctrine to be believed. To think that it is simply an ontological claim is to deracinate it, that is, to remove it from its meaningful location as a visualization practice. It is not something to be asserted, or denied, argued for or against, but a practice to be engaged in, something to be done, rather than something to be thought.

Ritually, the deity's mouth, the mouth of the hearth, and the practitioner's mouth are one. The deity, having been brought into the ritual enclosure, now receives offerings. The offerings represent the practitioner's own mistaken conceptions (*jñeyāvaraṇa*, *suozhi zhang*, *shochishō*, 所知障), and misplaced affections (*kleśāvaraṇa*, *fanao zhang, bonnōshō*, 煩腦障). Just as the mouth of the altar hearth, the mouth of the deity and the mouth of the practitioner are ritually identical, the fire is at the same time the offering fire in the altar hearth, and both the deity's and the practitioner's own wisdom energy, purifying these mistaken conceptions and misplaced affections. Just as the Vedic tradition considers the offerings being purified, and transported to the gods by *Agni*, making offerings into the wisdom fire transforms and purifies the thoughts and emotions of the practitioner. It is the identity of practitioner, deity and fire that makes this visualized transformation possible.

The chief deity for the new year's homa in Sacramento, and for many of the protective homa offered in Japan is the "Immoveable Wisdom King," Fudō Myōō.[19] Fudō Myōō is widely found in association with the performance of cold-water austerities, such as those undertaken by Shugendō practitioners. Iconic forms represent Fudō standing or seated. In both cases he is shown holding a lasso in his left hand, and a sword—usually with a dragon entwined—in his right. He is surrounded by garuda-headed flames that burst out from his body because of the intensity of his meditation. The garuda is significant as pointing to the transformative power of Fudō, because the garuda is able to consume poisonous snakes, and neutralize their poison.

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19 Acalanatha is also known as Candamahārosana, who is the main figure in the *Candamahārosana Tantra* (Toh. 431). Dharmachakra Translation Committee, tr., Introduction to "The Tantra of Caṇḍamahāroṣaṇa" (84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha, https://84000.co/translation/toh431), i.1. See also, Tsunehiko Sugiki, "On the Chronology of the Buddhist Tantras," in *The Oxford Handbook of Tantric Studies*, Richard K. Payne and Glen A. Hayes, eds., 1057–1082 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024), 1074.

More generally important to the whole of the Shingon tradition is the "Great Sun Buddha," Dainichi Nyōrai (Vairocana Tathāgata, 大日如来). Dainichi is the chief deity (本尊) in many Shingon rituals, and is the central figure of the two mandalas. And altars in the Shingon tradition are both ritual enclosures, and mandala. The altar at Yochi in temple where I studied on Kōyasan had a stupa at its center. Stupas originate as funerary mounds, the symbolism of which is the five elements constituting the body of the Buddha whose relics were entombed there. The five elements, earth, water, air, fire, empty space, are what comprise both the body of the Buddha and the body of human beings. The significance of having a small stupa present at the center of the mandala altar is then that it is the physical presence of Dainichi. In this complex fashion, involving several symbolic associations, the Buddha is present in the stupa at the center of the mandala that is the altar and hearth, and by visualizing identity with the Buddha in the ritual, the practitioner realizes their own always and already awakened state.

Why Rituals?

Scholars have made repeated efforts to define ritual. However, "ritual" is a social category, constructed at particular times and places in response to the interests and agendas of different people. This was most clearly evidenced to me by a work that sought to address the category of ritual, which began from the Christian sacraments as its understanding of what a ritual is. The fundamental issue is that the very idea of defining ritual presumes the ability to draw a boundary within which are those things that are rituals and outside of which are those things that are not.

Ritualizing as a Process

Rather than attempting to define "ritual" as a category, Catherine Bell has argued for thinking in terms of "ritualizing." Any activity can be ritualized, and this can be done in any number of different ways. It is important to note that this is not a system for the production of rituals. That is, it is not the case that this is an attempt to describe a process at the end of which an activity has been turned into a ritual, a member of a distinct category. Instead, it is simply that there are many different activities that have been ritualized in different ways to different degrees. It is useful, therefore, to distinguish between "ritual" as a category term, "rituals" as several things that are activities that have been ritualized, and "a ritual" which is a specific activity that has been ritualized.

Ritualizing Important Activities

Humans have a very successful strategy for important activities. They can be made systematic, repeatable, and distinct. Systematic in the sense that they are done in the same fashion each time, repeatable so it can be done again and again, and set apart, or made special, making it distinct from

other activities. The more importance given to an activity, the more these qualities are strengthened. These are the ways that an activity is ritualized, forming a continuum, a range of degrees of ritualization, and not two separate categories: rituals and other activities. The interpretation of a ritual comes after ritualization; it is the attribution of meaning to a ritualized activity.

Freeing "Ritual" from "Religion"

Western religious studies scholarship often treats ritual as a subcategory of religion, so much so that it has struck some as odd to use the term "ritual" to describe activities other than religious ones. However, ritualized activities are not inherently religious. Any important activity becomes ritualized to some degree or other. The checklists used by pilots of airplanes before take-off, and the protocols of medical procedures before surgery are just two examples of important activities that have been made systematic, repeatable, and distinct, that is, ritualized.

It has been claimed that the ability to control fire is what made us human, an importance reflected for example in the myth of Prometheus who is condemned by Zeus to eternal suffering for having given humans fire. The ability first to maintain, and then to create fire have been very important activities for humans—we are able to consume a greater variety of foods, stay warm in cold climates, keep predators at bay, and form communal groups. Another important activity is feasting an honored guest, whether a family member, a political leader, or a deity. The homa exists in the intersection of these two ritualized activities.

However, the ways that ordinary activity can be ritualized is not fixed or limited to some particular set of characteristics. Ritualization may include a special time or place, the officiants and participants wearing special dress, the use of special language, or special implements. An example that is highly relevant for contemporary Buddhism is the integral relation between ritual and meditation.

Ritualizing Buddhist Practice

Buddhist meditation (or cultivation, *bhāvanā*, *xiuxi*, *shujū*, 修習) is widely classed into two basic categories: concentration and insight.[20] Concentration (*samatha*, *śamatha*, *zhi*, *shi*, 止), or "calming the mind", a state of calm focus on the present moment. The second is insight (*vipassanā*, *vipaśyanā*, *guan*, *kan*, 観), or "discerning the actual". This emphasizes a steady alertness, open rather than focused, which allows the practitioner to discern what is actually

20 These two are found for example in the glossed titles of major works by figures such as Dzong kha pa, *Calming the Mind, Discerning the Real*, Alex Wayman, tr. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), and Zhiyi's *Clear Serenity, Quiet Insight*, Paul L. Swanson, tr. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018).

the case. Both of these descriptions emphasize a mental characterization of the practice. We can, however, consider asking a question about perspective: Should the perspective be body or mind?

This question may seem irrelevant to understanding meditation, which is so "obviously" a mental practice. Considering perspective is important, however, because contemporary English terminology, both ordinary and scholarly, tends to dichotomize meditation and ritual, treating them as two distinct and separate categories. If, however, we take into account this perspectival consideration, then the two categories are actually looking at different things. In other words, to call a Buddhist practice meditation is to focus on its mental aspects, and to call a Buddhist practice ritual is to focus on its physical aspects. But it can be the same practice just being considered from the two different perspectives of mind and body. Zen "meditation," for example, is called meditation and most attention is therefore given to the mental aspects of the practice. However, watching Zen meditation practice, one sees a highly ritualized activity.[21]

The practice of a ritual, such as the homa, creates the opportunity for developing both concentration and insight. In addition to visualization practices within the ritual performance, there is also the opportunity to maintain a calm, concentrated awareness through the activity of the ritual. Conversely, the practice of meditation generally requires making one's activity regular, repeated, and set apart. It is regularized by being done, more or less, the same way each time. Being done, more or less, at the same time and place on schedule, it is repeated. And it is distinct from other activities by being set apart from the "busy-ness" of life. There is, in other words, both meditating in ritual, and ritualizing of meditation.

Ritual Studies

The long-standing distinction between an academic discipline and a field of study defines the former as involving the interaction between theory and method. In a discipline, hypotheses are formed on the basis of theories and then tested. In contrast, a field of study is defined by a shared subject matter. The study of ritual has no unifying theoretical system nor any collectively accepted method. As noted above, the diversity of objects of study labeled "ritual" does not allow for any theory about "ritual" or any explanatory system of "ritual". Ritual studies is a very loose field of study, no fences enclose its boundaries, it is instead open and expansive. As a consequence, different scholars bring different methodologies to the study of some more delimited portion of this wide-ranging subject matter. This has the benefit

21 See for instance, Taigen Dan Leighton, "Zazen as an Enactment Ritual," in *Zen Ritual: Studies of Zen Theory in Practice*, Stephen Heine and Dale S. Wright, eds., 167–184 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

of providing opportunities for creative interactions that would not otherwise take place but also means that there are many research undertakings that are not connected with one another in any particularly coherent fashion.

Social Scientific Approaches

Social scientific approaches consider ritual primarily as a social phenomenon, something that is done by people within a group setting. It is worth noting in this connection that the image of a solitary meditator, or an isolated yogic practitioner is a selective representation that, while highlighting a heroic stance, ignores the social support system that makes such practice possible. A well-known and often idealized instance is the Tibetan yogi Milarepa. Even at the most extreme of his yogic practices, alone in a cave, wrapped in a thin cotton cloak, eating thistles, he was supported by a local village. The social is always the context of practice.

The field of ritual studies is only loosely unified by its subject matter.[22] This distinguishes it from academic disciplines, which are unified by a shared methodology, that is, the dialectic relation between theory and method. As a field ritual study instead draws on several different disciplines, including the major social sciences. In brief these are archaeology, anthropology, sociology, and psychology.[23] The archaeological study of ritual examines the material record of the past as a means to understand the ritual practices of past cultures.[24] An anthropological approach examines both material and cultural records as a way of understanding ritual practices of foreign cultures. A sociological approach employs much the same range of approaches to examine the ritual practices of our own cultures.[25] The psychological study of ritual, while focusing on the individual and their cognitive processes, locates a person in relation to a religio-ritual culture.[26] These disciplinary approaches seek to develop explanations of ritual behavior. Explaining ritual is different from interpreting it, and interpretive approaches may be broadly characterized as theological, or as symbolic.

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22 See Paul Post, "Ritual Studies," in *The Oxford Research Encyclopedias, Religion*, John Barton, ed., n.p. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015: https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.21).

23 Economics is another of the relevant social sciences. However, the economic study of religion in general is as yet a developing field, and I have been unable to identify any work on the economics of ritual per se.

24 See Timothy Insoll, "Introduction: Ritual and Religion in Archaeological Perspective," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of Ritual and Religion*, Timothy Insoll, ed., 1–5 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

25 One example of this kind of approach at a general level is Douglas A. Marshall, "Behavior, Belonging and Belief: A Theory of Ritual Practice," *Sociological Theory* 20.3 (Nov. 2002), 360–380.

26 See for example, Rachel E. Watson-Jones, Nicole J. Wen, Cristine H. Legare, "The Psychological Foundations of Ritual Learning," in *Handbook of Advances in Culture and Psychology*, vol. 8, Michele J. Gelfand, ed., 163–194 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021; https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190079741.003.0004).

Theological interpretations see ritual as referring to the divine, transcendent, or ultimate. Such interpretations often seem to see ritual as a metaphoric "doorway". Those who are properly qualified can open the doorway, and on the other side is the sacred, divine or ultimate. Performing the ritual properly makes the power of the sacred present.[27] Symbolic interpretations on the other hand, disaggregate rituals into those components that can be seen as referring to something else—often a doctrinal abstraction. Such an approach would focus on the symbolic valences of the components of a homa, such as the preceding discussion regarding the symbolism of the fire as *Agni*, the hearth as the mouth of the deity, the offerings as the practitioner's mistaken conceptions and misplaced affections. This sort of approach has affinities to the study of religious iconography, which sometimes focuses on specific elemental items, noting their meaning within a larger manifold as if by jotting up the cumulative total of meanings, one had an understanding of the religious significance of the whole.

Speculatively, perhaps this is a consequence of museums, where objects are deracinated, and then abstract meanings attributed to them. Or perhaps it is just a standard intellectual strategy for mastery of the object—control it by controlling its partial representations. Or perhaps it is the consequence of the ways in which the ritual of the mass or Eucharist—central to Christendom for centuries—was understood, debated, and reinterpreted. The very contestations of the Reformation were in large part focused not only on the symbolic interpretation of the mass, but more generally in the issues surrounding the sacraments—which ones were sacraments as such, that is, efficacious ways of accessing or making present divine sanctity, and which were only symbolic in nature.

With a different conceptual framework, a symbolic interpretive approach to ritual might be called an iconography of ritual actions. Just as in the study of religious art, this kind of analytic–interpretive approach has value as a reference tool. But that value is constrained if the reductionistic cataloging of details is taken as the end in itself. And for the study of ritual, an analytic-interpretive approach can tend toward just the same kind of reductionistic decontextualizing as can iconography, becoming lost in details that remain disconnected from any larger dynamically integrated whole. For example, something like a mirror held in the hand of a statue takes on a fuller significance when it is understood not simply doctrinally as "accurately reflecting what is actually the case," but as one of the 42 hands of Eleven-Headed Kannon. In the same way a ritual component's meaning goes beyond its reference to an abstract symbol. While indeed a symbolic significance of fire in the homa ritual is its interpretation as purifying offerings, the homa as a whole

27 This is essentially the approach employed by Mircea Eliade, as in his *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1987).

cannot be reduced to purification. Instead, the fire of the ritual is part of an integral whole of activities located in an historical continuity, and in a particular present moment.[28]

Historical Study of Ritual

One of the misleading characteristics of the familiar formulaic representations of Buddhisms is the tendency to very neatly identify a tradition not only with a founder and text and church and teaching, but also with a unique form of practice. Thus, for example, Pure Land is formulaically identified with Hōnen (1133–1212, 法然) and Shinran (1173–1262, 親鸞), their major texts, the *Senchakushū* (選擇集) and the *Kyōgyōshinshō* (教行信證), the schools of Jōdoshū (浄土宗) and Jōdo shinshū (浄土真宗), and with the practice of buddha name recitation (*buddhānusmṛti, nianfo, nenbutsu*, 念佛). Similar treatments lead to the identification of Zen with seated meditation (*zazen, zuochan*, 坐禪), Nichiren with reciting the title of the *Lotus Sūtra* (*daimoku,* 題目), and so on. Formulaic simplification is natural in an academic context, both because this kind of basic information is essential for a working literacy in the field, and because of the constraints of a 16-week semester.

And, in some cases, the characterization matches the self-characterization promoted by a tradition about itself. This is itself a result of the need to differentiate one sectarian identity from another. For example, the Shin tradition asserts that *nenbutsu* is not the same as mantra recitation in the Shingon tradition. Further, the prevalence of this neat sectarian description also apparently follows from the influence of Japanese sectarian scholarship, which Charles Orzech has also noted as contributing to the formation of modern Western conceptions of Buddhism.

Nonetheless, like all such reductions, much that is important is obscured or pushed to the margins by such characterizations. The work of Orzech on Chenyen makes it clear that a focus on specific formulations of sectarian identity can distort our understanding of historical process. One of the claims regarding Chenyen is that it disappeared from China following the transmission of the dual initiation of Kūkai by Huiguo. Orzech has outlined several factors leading to this characterization. These include Shingon rhetorics claiming authority (Kūkai as the sole legitimate heir of the two lineages), as well as Neo-Confucian disdain for both Buddhism and Daoism. There are also the academic preconceptions of "Western sinology and Confucian orthodoxy with their focus on great men and schools of philosophical discourse rather than on popular movements and ritual."[29] On the Western side of this dynamic,

28 Some of the psychological approaches employ an analytic–interpretive approach as well, seeing the referent as located in the psyche. There is, however, a long-term trend away from reductionist interpretation; interpretations of dreams, for example, has not been credible for a long time.

29 Orzech, "Seeing Chen-Yen Buddhism," 94.

modern religious studies itself derives from nineteenth century comparative theology, the heritage of which is the focus on founders (historicality of Jesus), institutions (churches and lineages), texts (Bibles and *sūtra*s), and theology (debates were central to the Reformation). These are what religion comprised as far as religious scholars in the West were concerned, and it is only gradually through the influence of social science paradigms that the model of religion has been called into question (though I would maintain that it still remains implicitly formative for much of religious studies).

Orzech further points out that the elitism of the Buddhist monastic system with its imperial and aristocratic patronage itself "despised or at best ignored"[30] popular teachings, including Chan and Pure Land as well as Chenyen. During the Song, Chenyen practices came to be maintained by other lineages. "Given taxonomic categories based on great men, on schools, and on lineages, the standard evaluation of Chen-yen [as having declined and disappeared] is perfectly understandable. Chen-yen's formal lineage vanished, and therefore it ceased to exist as a 'school' in the eyes of Asian and Western high culture."[31] He goes on, however, to point out that "if we set aside the notions that Chen-yen disappeared or degenerated and consider instead the nature of Vajrayāna practice and the rites prominent in a Chinese context, we gain a very different, and challenging view of Chen-yen Buddhism."[32] In other words, if instead of looking for founders and the churches, i.e., lineages, they established and instead focus our attention on practice, we get a significantly different historical conception. If we think of practice as set of learned skills, then its appropriation into other institutions is part of its history.

Also, if we look at practice, then the familiar categories become less comfortable. For example, almost three decades ago now, John C. Huntington pointed to the importance of the *Suvarnaprabhasasottama Sūtra* (T. 663, Toh. 555) as what we might call a transitional text[33]. In the the Taishō canon it is not included in the section of tantric texts, but rather in the section called "miscellaneous," while in the Tibetan canon it is included among the tantras.[34] It includes a four-directional mandala meditation, about which Huntington emphasizes the fact that it is a meditation that the practitioner performs *in* a mandala, and not a visualization of a mandala.[35] Though Huntington does

30 Internal quote from Stanley Weinstein, *Buddhism under the T'ang*, 63, Orzech, "Seeing Chen-yen Buddhism," 95.

31 Orzech, "Seeing Chen-Yen Buddhism," 96. Note that in n. 25 in that page, Orzech calls attention to the lack of clarity about when the decline and disappearance is supposed to have taken place. He cites Chou, p. 306.

32 Orzech, "Seeing Chen-Yen Buddhism," 97.

33 Burnouf, *Introduction to the History of Indian Buddhism*, 484.

34 See https://84000.co/translation/toh555.

35 Huntington, "Note on a Chinese Text Demonstrating the Earliness of Tantra," *JIABS*, 10.2 (1987), 91.

not explain the significance of the distinction, this is important as it indicates that the practitioner is identified with the central deity of the mandala, a key ritual concept for tantric Buddhism, which simply visualizing a mandala does not indicate.

The section of the *sūtra* that Huntington calls attention to is at the beginning of ch. 2:

> the floor of the room he was in suddenly became filled with gems and, as in *buddhakśetra*s, the room became filled with clouds of fragrance. From the four walls, there appeared the four Buddhas—Aksobhya on the east, Ratnaketu on the south, Amitayus on the west and (?)—Susabda (Ch. Wei-miao-sheng, "Torrent of Excellent Sound") on the north. [The four Buddhas] radiated great light over Rājagṛha, the three thousand great chiliocosms, and all buddhakśetras in all directions. At that time, because of the [four] Buddhas' divine power, the people in the three thousand great chiliocosms gained heavenly happiness; and, even those possessing not a single virtue, attained all virtues. All the benefits of the world were distributed. The Mahasattva, seeing the four Buddhas, piously made *añjalimudrā* and prayed to them.[36]

The argument here needs to be given in greater specifics than Huntington does. In the *sūtra* the mandala imagery is presented as a visionary experience—beheld by the Bodhisattva Śraddhakētu. Huntington interprets it as a visualization practice, however, saying that "the practitioner, in this case the Bodhisattva Śraddhakētu, is to envision himself in the center of the *maṇḍala*—identical to Vairocana—where he receives the 'offering' of the *jñāna* of the Buddhas."[37] Huntington's assertion that this is a visualization practice is based on its similarity to contemporary Shingon practices. Although Huntington does not discuss this, there is a different theory regarding the origin of such practices, which is that they begin with visionary experiences and are then routinized as practice so that they can be passed on to others, so that they too may share in the vision.[38] In this understanding the very fact that the *sūtra* describes the appearance of the mandala as a visionary experience reinforces Huntington's argument from its similarity with the Shingon rituals of the present-day.

The routinization of visionary experiences also suggests that what we see in the *sūtra* is far from a literal report of a visionary experience, but rather a literary form that has been edited and revised over time. The specific names of the four buddhas and their associations with the cardinal directions, for example, have probably become conventional by the time of the compilation of the text.

36 Huntington, 92.

37 Huntington, 92.

38 Demieville, 1951. Also, Beyer xxx.

Huntington's argument goes on to suggest that because a tantric ritual—visualizing oneself at the center of a mandala, identical with the chief deity, and surrounded by four buddhas in the four directions—is found in the *Suvarṇaprabhāsa*, and that its Chinese translation dates between 414 and 421, practices of this kind—whether thought of as tantric at the time or not—were in circulation sometime around the mid-third to mid-fourth century in India. Increasingly speculatively, he suggests a date as early as the early third century for the formulation of such practices.

This argument pushes the date for the beginnings of Buddhist tantra much earlier than is generally employed today, and Huntington's argument seems to have been almost universally disregarded.[39] Perhaps because the *Suvarṇaprabhāsa* is not classed as a tantra in the Taishō, this mandala practice has not been taken into consideration as a part of the history of tantra. Or perhaps, because the argument depends upon the understanding of a practice, rather than a doctrine or text, it has been marginalized. The complexity of tantric practice reflects a conception of existence as more complex and more malleable than the easy dichotomy of mundane and transcendent, material and spiritual.[40]

The pervasive tendency of Western religious studies to bifurcate this-worldly and other-worldly forms of religion is another important factor identified by Orzech. Although the distinction as used in contemporary religious studies is itself based in the sociology of Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch, it reinforces the tendencies to privilege theology mentioned above. Thus, much of Western Buddhist studies research has tended to construct dualistic representations of Buddhism in general, and Vajrayāna in particular, by treating the pursuit of unexcelled full awakening (*anuttarasaṃyaksaṃbodhi*, *wushang zhengden jue*, *mujōshōtōgaku*, 無上正等覺) as the proper goal of Buddhists, the direct correlate to salvation in Christian theology. From this perspective all other practices and goals are secondary or insignificant. Indeed, this promotion of full awakening is overdetermined since it has a long history in Buddhist polemics as a way of asserting the superiority of one system of praxis over another.

The ideological foundations of tantric Buddhism are usually interpreted to be the widely familiar teachings of Mahāyāna Buddhism. This includes the teaching of the two truths, which continues to be the source of great difficulties given its interpretation under the dualistic bifurcation of this-worldly/other-worldly categorizations. Perhaps the most common misunderstanding of the two truths is to see it as a dualistic metaphysics identical with Platonic conceptions. This points to the larger issues in the way that Buddhism is constructed in much of religious studies discourse as a reflection of Protestant

39 I am not suggesting here a futile "search for origins" but an examination of the history.

40 See David Shulman, *More than Real: A History of the Imagination in South India* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

Christian religiosity. If one projects a Platonic dualism onto Buddhism to begin with and then interprets the two truths as a hierarchical system of lower and higher truths, then that carries over to interpreting Chenyen/esoteric Buddhism in the same fashion—a view that is then self-reinforcing, a result of the sociology of knowledge.

If we step back from the Western preconceptions, however, and see the two truths in the fashion described by Nagarjuna, that is as synonymous with one another, then the nature of the two kinds of *siddhi*s, mundane (*sādhāraṇsiddhi*) and supreme (*uttamasiddhi*), can also be seen as part of a single process, rather than as a disjunction. As Orzech explains,

> In the performance of ritual, then, the attainment of *siddhi* is the realization of a soteriology in a "recursive" cosmos. The realization of one's basic divinity is the realization of one's own enlightenment and the simultaneous purification of one's world.[41]

Syntax

If we wish to trace the history of a practice as such, that research will benefit from employing a consistent method, so that comparisons and contrasts between different studies can be undertaken. In the particular case of the homa, one of the questions that has interested me is that of the creation of the homa as a distinctly identifiable ritual practice. Two possible approaches to answering that question seem to exist. The first is the well-established textual approach. Under such an approach one would search for the earliest references to the homa, identify their context, and examine the relevant texts for information regarding the initial developments of the homa. A contrasting approach would be to examine rituals as such—which, of course, we do know through texts—to understand how they are organized and performed.

Although it is perhaps a rather simplistic concern regarding textual approaches, it seems that it is possible to miss historical relations in instances when different terms are used for the same or closely related practices. Were someone for example, to undertake a textual study of Buddhist meditation practices someone, eight centuries from now, would they miss connections between vipassana, mindfulness, sitting, the Goenka method, Zen, and so on? An examination of how such practices are done, however, would reveal additional historical relations that a textual study alone might overlook—supplementing or amplifying, not displacing. Indeed, were we to look at how such practices are performed without limiting the field of study to practices identified as Buddhist as such, even more historical relations might be drawn into consideration.

41 Orzech, "Seeing Chen-Yen Buddhism," 100.

Historically, one of the possible sources that provided the basic form for the homa might have been the *agnihotra/agniṣṭoma*. If one were to depend on a symbolic analysis alone, the latter might well be considered a progenitor of the homa. Both involve making offerings into fires. However, a syntactic analysis shows that the two are rather different one from the other. In fact, the structures of the two are so different that the *agnihotra* could not be the direct progenitor of the homa. While one might hope for a positive outcome from a study of this kind, as with other scientific endeavors a negative outcome is also significant. One of the possible direct progenitors has been eliminated, and effectively so, on the basis of a difference in ritual syntax.

The Shingon Homa

The Shingon homa originated from the Vedic religious culture of fire rituals, developed as a tantric form in early medieval India, and has spread throughout the tantric world. It has taken a variety of forms in Japan and involves the practice of ritual identification characteristic of the entirety of the tantric Buddhist tradition. More broadly, Buddhist practices are both ritualized meditation and meditative rituals. These practices reveal the way that important activities are ritualized. The field of ritual studies is an important framework within which the study of Buddhist practice can be extended and deepened.

As indicated above, ideology and practice do not exist in isolation from one another. The meaning of fire offerings is different in a Vedic ideological context or a tantric one, in a Hindu ideological context or a Buddhist one. The next chapter looks directly at how practice is a key context for understanding doctrine.

CHAPTER FOUR

Buddhist Thought in the Context of Practice

Introduction

For two and a half millennia Buddhist thinkers have operated in intellectual contexts quite different from the context in which the Western tradition of philosophy has developed and continues to operate. In order for us to think about both the issues raised by and the consequences of this situation, we can employ a threefold analytic structure of concepts, categories, and concerns. Intellectual contexts are systemic in nature, that is, the concepts, categories and concerns that characterize a context are integral to one another—they form an interconnected whole and it is that interconnected whole that gives them meaning. Analyses that treat a concept such as karma, or a concern such as rebirth, or a category such as buddha as abstract, isolated entities that can be compared and contrasted with abstract, isolated entities such as morality, or heaven, or savior are inherently flawed.

The issues involved in this discussion are important because Western religious studies have long given primacy to doctrine. In that intellectual setting, to be a religion meant to have a particular set of doctrines, and a religion was understood to be defined by its doctrines. Doctrine was given this primacy both in the sense that it was seen as causally determinative of action, but also as the solid foundation for interpreting action. In our present time, however, both assumptions have been reconsidered. In light of developments in cognitive science, thought is no longer considered to determine action. And, in light of developments in the social sciences, theological and philosophical interpretations are no longer considered to be final.

The particular point that we are drawing from this here is that concepts, categories and concerns do not exist in abstract isolation. They are necessarily enmeshed in complex relations with each other, and with the concepts, categories and concerns of other systems. When stated so baldly, this may seem obvious. It is, however, at least in my opinion, important to emphasize it given the long history of the Western academic study of religion that has been based on a comparative method that often decontextualized and dehistoricized concepts, categories and concerns. We will return to an explicit discussion of the comparative method at the end of this chapter.

The Importance of Context—Key to Interpretation

Rather than being isolated abstractions, doctrinal claims are one term in a three-way relation, the other two being interpretation and context. Whether the interpretation is explicit or implicit, and whether the context is

acknowledged or not, both are at work in any expression and understanding of a doctrinal claim. The direct consequence of this is that there is no one "right" interpretation, that is no right way to understand a doctrinal claim. Different contexts provide different ways of understanding, that is interpreting doctrinal claims.

To develop this thesis we will consider here two examples. The first is the context that tantric Buddhism (Shingon and Tendai) gives to three of the Kamakura schools—Sōtō Zen, Nichiren shū, and Jōdo Shinshū. The second is the context of Western academic disciplines for the study of Buddhist thought and practice.

Contexts in the Study of Japanese Buddhism

Under the influence of nineteenth century Romanticism, there are sectarian contexts in which the founder is considered in isolation, as an individual "religious genius." Alternatives are to consider them in relation to their location in a specific lineage, and to the historical and intellectual antecedents more broadly.

Kamakura Era—"New" Developments? Or Not?

One of the standard ways that the Buddhisms of the Kamakura era (鎌倉時代, *Kamakura jidai*; 1185–1333) is characterized is by the adjective "new." This way of describing the Buddhisms of the era plays on the notion of a rupture in the ongoing history of Japanese Buddhist thought and practice and connects to the now outdated equation of the Kamakura era in Japan with Reformation era Europe. Here we will examine three important figures, Dōgen, the founder of Sōtō Zen (*Sōtō-shū*曹洞宗) in Japan, Nichiren, the founder of Nichiren shū (日蓮宗), and Shinran, the founder of Jōdo Shinshū (浄土真宗).

Dōgen Zenji (道元禅師, 1200–1253) is known for his teaching that just sitting (*shikantaza*只管打坐) is awakening. Similarly, Nichiren (日蓮, 1222–1282) taught that chanting the name of the *Lotus Sūtra* (*O daimoku*, お題目) in the form "*namu myō hō renge kyō*" (南無妙法蓮華経) assures awakening. And also similarly, Shinran (親鸞, 1173–1263) taught that reciting the name (*nenbutsu* 念佛; from Skt. *buddhānusmṛti*, "buddha recollection") of Amida (Amitābha buddha, Amida butsu 阿彌陀佛) in the form "*namu Amida butsu*" assures awakening.

Highlighting the similarity of these three teachings is not a claim that they are "the same." There is, however, an important similarity that seems to be too often obscured by exclusivist sectarian interpretations ("that's not what we do," "what we do is very different from that," or "we are unique"). Pulling back from the details of fine-grained sectarian distinctions, however, it is possible to see a more fundamental shared ground of thought. These

three and other teachings of the era are not grounded on traditional Buddhist characterizations of the path as gradually accumulating insight and merit for countless lifetimes—the accumulation of requisites. Each in their own unique fashion instead offer an alternative, short path to attaining awakening quickly, if not in this very life, then assuredly in the next.

Dōgen—Sitting Itself is Awakening

One of the phrases summarizing Dōgen's teaching is "just sitting", asserting an identity between sitting in meditation and awakening. In sitting one is already awakened—there is nothing further to achieve. This identity means that sitting in meditation is not instrumental, it is not an action taken toward the accomplishment of some other end, some other goal. Another phrase found in Dōgen's writings that expresses this is sometimes glossed in English as "practice-awakening" (*shushō ittō* 修証一等), or more fully, the idea that practice and awakening are a unity.

Although seemingly less frequently highlighted in the English language literature on Dōgen's Zen, we also find him employing the phrase "this mind is buddha/awakened" (*sokushin zebutsu* 即心是佛). This is the title of one of the lectures recorded in the *Shōbōgenzō.*[1] The phrase is traced back to a *kōan* (公案) by the Chinese teacher Mazu Daoyi found in the *Wu-men kuan* (*Mumon kan*, 無門關), a collection of *kōans* from the early 13th century compiled by Wumen Huikai (Mumon Ekai 無門慧開). When Ta-mei asks Mazu "What is buddha?" and the answer is "This mind is buddha."[2]

We note that although the second *kanji* in the phrase is *hsin* (*shin* 心) mind, and in the phrase summarizing Kūkai's tantric teaching, *soku shin jo butsu* (即身成仏), it is body (身), it is significant that the Japanese pronunciation is the same, such that the two resonate with one another—the kind of homophony that is important in understanding how ideas were associated or juxtaposed in Japanese culture.

Nichiren—Chanting the Name of the *Lotus Sūtra* Assures Awakening

For Nichiren, reciting the name of the *Lotus Sūtra* (*daimoku* 題目, as in the formula "*namu myōhō renge kyō*" 南無妙法蓮華経) is a single practice

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1 Dōgen directly addresses this *kōan* four times in his *Extensive Record* (*Eihei kōroku* 永平広録): vol. 1, no. 8 "A Plum's Ripening," vol. 4, no. 319 "Mind is Walls; Buddha is Mud," vol. 5, no. 370 "Not Mind, Not Things, Not Buddha," and vol. 9, no. 75, "The Cool Wind of Buddha," See Taigen Dan Leighton, ed., & with Shohaku Okamura, trs., *Dōgen's Extensive Record: A Translation of the* Eihei Kōroku (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2004), 79, 292–293, 325, 588.

2 Several translations and commentaries of this collection are available in English. For three instances presenting this *kōan*, see Zenkei Shibayama, *The Gateless Barrier: Zen Comments on the* Mumonkan, Sumiko Kudo, tr. (Boston: Shambhala, 2000), 214–222; Robert Aitken, tr., *The Gateless Barrier: The* Wu-men Kuan (Mumonkan), (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990), 189–194; Kōun Yamada, *The Gateless Gate: The Classic Book of Zen Koans* (1990. Reprint. Boston: Wisdom, 2004), 148–152.

adequate for attaining awakening. It is (perhaps all too) easy to interpret this recitation as a devotional expression, either to the *Lotus Sūtra*, or to Nichiren and his teachings. And indeed, the devotional attitude is a possible one, particularly in Western religious cultures where it is a predominant religious stance. But the medieval Japanese Buddhist culture was one in which the dualistic relation implicit in devotionalism was not the only way of understanding practice.

Importantly for our discussion here, Nichiren promoted recitation of the *daimoku* as a means by which anyone could attain awakening in this lifetime, explicitly invoking the phrase *soku shin jō butsu*. The power of the *Lotus Sūtra* is such that reciting its name makes that power present, enabling the practitioner to realize (make real) their own inherent buddha nature (*fo xing* 佛性). This practice of reciting a verbal formula, the ostensibly Sanskritic structure of the formula, the idea that naming makes a deity or power present is also shared with the *nenbutsu* promoted by Shinran. Although sectarian interpretations may assert that the *daimoku* and *nenbutsu* are not mantra, all of these characteristics—practice, structure, name—are what make for mantra.

Shinran—Reciting the Name of Amitābha Assures Awakening

For Shinran it is reciting the name of Amida in the form "*namu Amida butsu*" (南無阿弥陀仏) that is the effective practice to engage—the single practice needed to attain awakening. What is commonly referred to as "the three Pure Land *sūtra*s" are the Longer and Shorter Pure Land *sūtra*s and the *Visualization Sūtra*. While the texts themselves are traced back to India and Central Asia, this grouping only dates from the time of Shinran's teacher Hōnen (1133–1212, 法然).[3] It was Hōnen who designated these three texts as the authoritative source of his teachings regarding the Buddha Amida and the Pure Land (*chingtu*, *jōdo* 浄土, also "land of bliss" *jile jingtu, gokurakujōdo* 極楽浄土). Following the teachings in these *sūtra*s, it is held by many in the Pure Land tradition that as few as ten recitations of the name of Amida assures birth in the Pure Land, "immediate achievement of birth in the Pure Land" (*sokutoku ōjō* 即得往生).

Shinran employs the idea of the decline of the Dharma, "disappearance of the true dharma" (*saddharmavipralopa*, *mofa*, *mappō* 末法), specifically that our present world either has already or is about to enter the final of four stages of decline. Accordingly, in our own present world it is not possible to hear the teachings accurately, nor to practice them effectively, nor therefore to attain awakening. This teaching of *mappō* is shared with Nichiren, whose solution is the *Lotus Sūtra*, though Dōgen explicitly rejects it.

3 Fujita Kōtatsu, "Pure Land Buddhism in India," tr. Taitetsu Unno, in *The Pure Land Tradition: History and Development*, James Foard, Michael Solomon, and Richard K. Payne, eds. (Berkeley: Berkeley Buddhist Studies Series, 1996), 1–42: 6; the textual history of the three *sūtra*s is quite complex, see 7–8.

For Shinran and his school, given the hopeless status of our present world, the Pure Land of Amida is the solution. It is traditionally understood as a realm in which one can accurately hear the teachings, effectively put them into practice, and thereby attain awakening. In this conception, the Pure Land is a transitional existence between this world and awakening. However, Shinran interprets birth in the Pure Land as identical with awakening. This interpretation is key to understanding the Shin teaching as a "path of no path," similar to both the idea that sitting in meditation is itself already awakening and that reciting the name of the *Lotus Sūtra* leads to awakening in this lifetime.

It is important to note that all three of these teachers trained in the Tendai tradition on Hieizan. We can, therefore, also take into account the direct influence of Saicho's teachings and the tantric dimension of Tendai in the formation of the systems of thought propounded by these teachers. We find that, like Kūkai, Saichō used the phrase *soku shin jō butsu*. Saichō, however, placed the idea in the context of Chinese Tiantai doctrine, with its emphasis on the *Lotus Sutra* and the single vehicle (*ekayāna*, *ichijō*, 一乗).

Another key similarity between these three teachers is their emphasis on the efficacy of a single practice for attaining awakening. For Dōgen it is just sitting, for Nichiren it is reciting the name of the *Lotus Sūtra*, and for Shinran it is reciting the name of Amida. On the face of it, this may appear quite distinct from the tantric traditions with their plethora of yogic and ritual practices. However, looking more closely at Shingon practice, what we find is that the threefold unity of the body, speech and mind (mudrā, mantra, and mandala) of the practitioner and the body, speech and mind of the chief deity (*honzon* 本尊) is the moment of practice that manifests the awakened nature of the practitioner. The idea that there is a single practice, simple enough for anyone to perform, is found in several other Kamakura era teachers, many with strong ties to the tantric tradition.

One is the clear light mantra (*kōmyō shingon* 光明真言) which was promoted by Myōe Koben (明恵高辨, 1173–1232), and others during the era. While the clear light mantra is a verbal formula, similar to both *daimoku* and *nenbutsu*, single practice also included visualization of the syllable *A*. Written in Siddham script, this links medieval Japanese tantric practice to Indic theories of the power of language. Again, these are not the same, but the idea of a single effective practice is shared across these traditions. How do we understand each of these? As the unique insight of a religious genius or as having been developed in a particular intellectual and social context?

Context: frameworks by which we understand—a theory of interpretation

Everything that exists has a context. One of the places in which this is evident is in the very discourse that promotes the idea that Buddhist practices

can be separated out of their historic-cultural settings as simply a kind of mental technology—context-free and value-neutral. In this discourse a technology is held to be separate from any ideology, any supporting belief-system, and to be effective simply as such, independently from that belief-system. The modernist discourse that promotes the idea of Zen as a "direct mind to mind transmission outside the teachings" has been deployed in support of this claim.

Mindfulness has frequently been represented in Buddhist modernist discourse as just such a context-free and value-neutral mental technology, one that works the same whether being done in the setting of a staff lounge at a hospital, a church basement, or a local YMCA.[4] However, technology is never in fact context-neutral and value-free. Its significance—its meaning or value—changes when it is deployed in different settings. A hospital setting, for example, gives mindfulness a medical flavor, while a church or yoga studio gives it a flavor of spirituality or of personal growth. Such variation, however, problematizes the notion that these are all the same practice.

Context defines meaning, because it is the relation between things that give those things meaning. This is a fundamental insight of Saussure's structuralism. More generally than the linguistic matters identified by Saussure, our thought processes work on the basis of similarities and differences. Anything we know, we know in a particular context: no context—no meaning. From the perspective of Buddhist thought, the teaching of interdependent origination, or interconnectedness means that nothing exists in isolation. This is the obverse of the meaning of the teaching of emptiness. Since all existing things have no essence in themselves, they are only the result of causes and conditions, and are empty of any essential, unchanging nature.

This approach to interpretation and understanding does not derive as such from any particular strain of Buddhist thought but is instead an attempt to explicate the relation between interpretation and context by reference to Buddhist ideas about conditioned coproduction and emptiness. It is in other words not an application from Buddhist thought but rather congruent with it.

Tantric Buddhism: the context of Kamakura era doctrines

Three systems of Indian Buddhist thought played important roles in the historical development of Japanese Buddhism: Madhyamaka (San lun zong, Sanronshū, 三論宗), Yogacara or Vijñaptimatrata (Yuqiexin pai, Yugagyōha, 瑜伽行派), and *tathāgatagarbha* (*rulaizang, nyoraizō*, 如来蔵). Looking backwards from Japan to India, we can understand that each of these contributed to the conceptual context of the tantric teaching of Kūkai.

4 Consider, for example, the mid-80s rhetoric around "Catholic Zen" which treated Zen meditation as simply a non-religious practice. And thus, we find "dual-belonging"—a Catholic priest who is also a Zen teacher—cloaked by a rhetoric that would suggest that this is no different from a Catholic priest who also leads a bicycling club.

Madhyamaka: the middle way: emphasis on "emptiness"—*śunyatā* 空

One of the teachings of the Madhyamaka is that there are four stages of realizing emptiness.[5] The first is emptiness of self (*pudgala-śūnyatā*, or *pudgala-nairātmya*, *renwuwo*, *ninmuga*, 人無我). The realization at this basic level is that there is no permanent, eternal, absolute personal self. The psychological interpretation of *anātman* that is so prevalent in contemporary popular Buddhist discourse indicates this first level of realizing of emptiness.

The second is emptiness of phenomena (*dharma-śūnyatā*, or *dharma-nairātmya*, *fawuwo*, *hōmuga*, 法無我). This expands on the understanding that persons have no permanent, eternal, absolute essence to the realization that no existing thing has such an essential nature. The next, third stage is that of great emptiness (*mahā-śūnyatā*, *da kong*, *dai kū*, 大空). This is in a sense a further expansion, now from phenomena to the entirety of being as such, or of the entire cosmos, including nirvana. This is like the Western interpretation of Buddhism as a nihilistic teaching common from the nineteenth through to the last quarter of the twentieth century.

The fourth stage of realization is that of non-dual emptiness (*paramārtha-śūnyatā*, *wu chabie kong, musabetsu kū*, 無差別空, or *bu er kong*, *funi kū*, 不二空). While great emptiness may itself be reified (e.g., the Void), that is itself a mistaken view. Nāgārjuna described such a view as like grasping a poisonous snake by the tail. Instead, this fourth stage highlights the emptiness of emptiness. "Emptiness" is just a label identifying the absence of any permanent, eternal, absolute character of anything, and that includes emptiness itself. This is what is behind the widely known expression that "form is emptiness, emptiness is form," which is found in the *Heart Sūtra*. This is also significant in understanding that the teaching of the two truths is not the same as Platonic dualism.

Explanatory Aside: Buddhism is the opposite of Platonic Dualism

For Plato there are two kinds of existence, absolute and relative. The absolute realm of existence is that of the ideal forms, the transcendent, and in addition to being absolute the ideal forms are permanent, eternal, and unchanging. Everything of this world in which we live is a mere "shadowing forth" of that higher reality. Everything here is transitory and impermanent, though the ideal forms are the essences of these things, and determine what they are. The form of the table is what makes some object of wood or metal a "table." For shorthand, we will here call this the "real," in the strong sense that something that is real is absolute, eternal, permanent, unchanging. This use of the term real is used in contrast to what may be called the "actual," in other words, actually existing things that we encounter in our lived present. By focusing

5 There are some similar sets of four describing emptiness, such as fourfold dependent arising (四重縁起), and the four stages of the two truths (四重二諦).

on the actual, Buddhist thought is not based on a dualistic distinction between absolute and relative, between the "real" and the transitory. It is instead based on the pairing of two descriptors applied to every existing thing, conditioned and empty. These are two faces of what actually exists. What are called in the context of Madhyamaka the "two truths" are not two different truths, but two ways of expressing the same truth about what actually exists.

For the sake of ease, what are called the two truths can be reduced to a two-part slogan: everything exists, nothing is real. Amplifying this we can say that everything that actually exists exists as the result of causes and conditions, and nothing is permanent, eternal, absolute, unchanging. In this way, Madhyamaka may be characterized as rejecting metaphysics, while embracing ontology.

Yogācāra, Vijñaptimātratāvāda

The second major stream of Indian Buddhist thought that can be educed out of the background of Kamakura era Buddhisms is the Yogācāra tradition. Sometimes it is equated to Western philosophical idealism, however, it is worth emphasizing that it is primarily an epistemological system of thought, and not metaphysical. The teaching of "mere representation" is not that only representations exist (or that in the strong version of Western philosophical idealism, things exist because we think of them), but rather that all we can know are representations.[6]

Western philosophy seems to set materialism as the alternative to idealism, and the claim might then be made that if Yogācāra is not idealism, it must be (some form of) materialism. Yogācāra is not, however, simply an Indian inflection of Western philosophical materialism. Both idealism and materialism are metaphysical claims, while Yogācāra is exploring epistemological categories. Indeed, Yogācāra thinkers do sometimes sound as if they are saying that things don't exist independently from us. However, this is better understood as a claim that what we experience as existing arises in a dialectic between sensed objects and our perceptual capacities.

Tathāgatagarbha: two interpretations

Tathāgatagarbha (*rulaizang*, *nyoraizō*, 如來藏) identifies an influential teaching, rather than a school, like the Madhyamaka and Yogācāra. The term combines "*garbha*" meaning womb or embryo, and "*tathāgata*," meaning "thus come/gone," which is an epithet for a Buddha. The significance of the term is much debated, and variously interpreted, and in East Asian contexts it is also equated with "buddha nature" (*buddhadhātu*, *foxing*, *busshō*, 佛性), yet another polyvalent term.

6 There seem to be similarities and differences with Kantian epistemology, but exploring those beyond the scope of this essay.

There are two predominant interpretations of the idea. First, that like an embryo, it is a present actuality that develops, grows, and matures. In this understanding *tathāgatagarbha* is already present but requires propagation or cultivation through practice. The second interpretation is that it is a possibility that becomes actual—it is something that one creates through practice. This understanding draws on the second connotation, that of womb as potentiality. These two can also be understood as structurally parallel to the two conceptions of the process of awakening as either a gradual path of accumulating insight and merit, or a sudden leap of insight that changes in a moment the way one lives in the world.

From the tantric perspective that I am familiar with, these are two different ways of attempting to express the identity of practitioner and Buddha as both empty. Like the concept of emptiness, the idea of buddha nature is simply the absence of any fixed, unchanging essence. If we did have a fixed unchanging essence, then we would either be already awakened, or we never could become awakened. This absence of any fixed nature is key to the efficacy of tantric practices, both ritual and yogic. As David Gray has summarized,

> Tantric visualization implies at least an understanding of reality as not 'solid' and unpliable but rather transformable and deeply interrelated to one's own body, mind, and imaginative powers, which from a certain perspective create one's perception of it.[7]

The Context for Kamakura is the Immediacy of Awakening

Shingon

Kūkai (空海, 774 to 835) established the Shingon tradition in Japan after receiving initiation into the Vajradhātu and Garbhadhātu lineages of practice. Key to the promotion of Shingon as it spread widely through Japan was the idea of "awakening in this body" (*soku shin jo butsu*, 即身成仏). This is the teaching that awakening occurs in this lifetime, not in some future birth after aeons of effort. Awakening also can be interpreted to mean "to become buddha" and tantric ritual practice allows the practitioner to experience their always and already awakened nature. In the Shingon tradition this involves a balanced view. On the one hand practice is necessary. On the other, when it happens, awakening is instantaneous.

Tendai

Saicho (767–822 最澄) is the founder of the Tendai tradition in Japan. Like Kūkai, he also travelled to China, though his primary interest was the Tiantai tradition. At a point in his travels, before returning to Japan, he did have contact with a tantric teacher and claimed that he'd received tantric initiation—though the nature of this initiation is highly contested. Later members of the Tendai tradition also travelled to China, obtaining further

7 David Gray, *The Buddhist Tantras: A Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 80.

initiations, and were then able to develop the tantric half of Tendai more fully. Today, the Tendai has a two-part training program, one exoteric focusing on the *Lotus Sūtra*, and the other esoteric and very similar to that of the Shingon tradition.

Saichō promoted the idea of "original enlightenment" (本覚, *hongaku*), the idea that all sentient beings are already awakened. Thus, for Tendai as well, awakening is already present for the practitioner. Awakening is not a potential to be developed or a goal to be achieved, but a reality to be recognized—because awakening is simply the recognition of the emptiness of self and others.

The Context of Kamakura Buddhism

These ideas, Saicho's original awakening and Kūkai's awakening in this lifetime, form the historical and intellectual background for the rise of the Kamakura era teachings. They are the frame within which the Kamakura teachers did their own creative work, developing their ideas that "just sitting" is awakening (Dōgen), birth in the Pure Land is awakening (Shinran), and reciting the name of the *Lotus Sūtra* realizes inherent awakening (Nichiren).

Founder? Transmitter? Or Culturally Located Teacher? No One Correct Interpretation

The organizational structures of contemporary Japanese Buddhist sects have a common structure, including an emphasis on the legitimating role of their founders (*soshi*, 祖師).[8] While the cult of founders was present in the Buddhisms of Japan from very early, it became particularly emphasized in the Kamakura era.[9] How we characterize the different Kamakura leaders depends upon the perspectives taken and is limited by those perspectives.[10] Is, for example, Nichiren only to be understood as the founder of Nichiren shū, or as the transmitter of a particular version of Tendai Lotus teachings, or in his own historical and cultural location? Similarly, is Dōgen only to be

8 It is not historiographically acceptable, however, to project these structures backwards in time—what I have called the fallacy of retrospectivist historiography. See also, David Quinter, "Eison, Preaching and Performance in Medieval Japan", in *The Oxford Handbook of Lived Buddhism*, Courtney Bruntz and Brooke Schedneck, eds., np (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024, online: doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780197658697.001.0001).

9 David Quinter, "Eison, Monkan, and the cult of founders in medieval Japan: On the construction of narrative and material selves in East Asian Buddhism", in *Studies in Chinese Religions* 7.4 (2021), 390–416: 393.

10 Corrective aside: this provides an opportunity for me to provide better clarity and nuance to my own earlier claims regarding the formative role of the model of Christianity in Meiji era efforts to modernize Japan. The influence of Christianity as the model of what a modern religion should be cannot be doubted, but at the same time the current forms draw on both existing founder cults and the model of Jesus as founder. The contemporary version of founders is in this sense then overdetermined, it is the confluence of both native Japanese practices dating from before the Kamakura, and imported conceptions of the nature of religion in the modern world.

understood as the founder of Sōtō Zen, or as the transmitter of the Caodong school (曹洞宗) from China, or in his own historical and cultural location? And, is Shinran only to be understood as the founder of Jōdoshin shū, or as the transmitter of Shandao's (善導大師) Pure Land teachings from China, or in his own historical and cultural location? Each of the three ways of understanding, of interpreting these teachers and their teachings provides a different perspective, allowing us to see different aspects of their contributions. In other words, no one of these is the single correct perspective, and there may be other perspectives that would provide additional ways of understanding these three figures. More generally, we can also suggest that there are a variety of different perspectives that one may take on Buddhist thought. Each of these provides some understanding, but each differs from the others.

Is Buddhism Philosophy? Or Religion? Or Psychology?

In western religious discourse, both academic and popular, Buddhism has been characterized as philosophy, and as religion, and as psychology. All three claims have been made, and Buddhism has been made to fit into each of these three discourses—each of these three ways of talking about Buddhism. However, each of the three only looks at part of the Buddhist tradition, and in doing so, each acts as a filter, selecting out particular aspects as important. The selective process, however, is never neutral. Selection is itself guided by the expectations of the discourse from which the inquiry is posed, regardless of whether it is philosophy, religion or psychology. By asking the questions, the discourse determines the answers. In this way what is important about Buddhist praxis is determined by each of these three disciplines, that is, not by the Buddhist tradition itself. Selection is interpretation.

Philosophy

The historical development of Western academic philosophy has led to it being structured into established areas of inquiry. These are the standard topics of the philosophical curriculum, such as, metaphysics and ontology, axiology (ethics & aesthetics), epistemology, and logic. In addition, there are the various "philosophies of"—such as the philosophy of language, the philosophy of science, the philosophy of religion, and so on. There are other ways of organizing philosophy, which are according to different schools and time periods. Schools would include those such as phenomenology, existentialism, logical positivism, and so on. And time periods would look at groups such as Greek philosophy, Roman, medieval, Renaissance, and the like.

Of these various organizing schemas, it might seem that the first is abstract enough to apply to Buddhist thought, and the fourth expansive enough to include Buddhist thought. These four are not, however, as autonomous as this summary might be taken to imply. For example, the concepts, categories and concerns of axiology grow out of a history reaching back to Aristotle's

Ethics. Likewise, metaphysics is rooted in Platonic and neo-Platonic thought. Conversely, what is thought of as the "philosophical" portion of Greek thought is retrospectively defined by the concepts, categories and concerns of contemporary academic philosophy.

Consequently, two approaches might be to apply the structure of contemporary philosophy to Buddhist thought, or to expand the field of academic philosophy so as to include Buddhist thought. In both cases, however, the concepts, categories and concerns of an historical tradition of which Buddhist thought has not been a part, are being imposed upon it. That process restructures Buddhist thought so as to fit into the preexisting expectations of Western academic philosophy, and in so doing necessarily distorts Buddhist thought.[11]

Religious Studies

The historical development of the study of religion in Western academia follows a similar trajectory to that of philosophy. In particular, today in the United States, what the field of religious studies understands as something being "a religion" derives largely from the history of Protestant Christianity. As a consequence, religions are assumed to have a set of characteristic practices, such as, devotion, and prayer. The structures of a religion are likewise assumed to include a founder, a unique set of teachings, a book that records those teachings, and a church that propagates devotion to the founder and promotes the teachings as universally valid. Other characteristics influencing the definition of a religion are that belief is salvific, and therefore central to understanding a religion, and that membership ought to be exclusive.

Talal Asad has summarized the issues here very succinctly.

> My argument is that there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes.[12]

We can generalize this to say that the problematic character of universal definitions is not only the historical locatedness of the object being defined, but also the historical locatedness of the attempt to define. As suggested above already, this compound problematic is also true of attempts to give a universal definition for ritual and for religion.

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11 The important qualifying exception here are detailed and historically informed studies of specific actual interactions between thinkers. A prominent example of this kind of work are the studies by Christopher Beckwith, such as *Greek Buddha: Pyrrho's Encounters with Early Buddhism in Central Asia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), and *Warriors of the Cloister: The Central Asian Origins of Science in the Medieval World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

12 Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 29.

Psychology

Psychology likewise suffers from the same constraints in its attempt to incorporate Buddhist thought. It takes as its object of study not "the mind" *per se*, but rather an historically located conception of the mind, and offers historically located theories of how the mind works.[13] Thus, like both philosophy and religious studies, psychological understandings are constrained by their historical locatedness.[14] In general, psychology presumes that mind is the center of human existence, having a controlling function whether that control is theorized as conscious, or unconscious. Much of psychology, particularly in the therapeutic forms most often employed in conversation with Buddhist thought, focus on thoughts, feelings, motivations, and in some cases adding symbolic interpretation of actions, and dreams. The therapeutic framework often drawn into comparison with Buddhist praxis structures human existence into problems and solutions. It is in this way that the adaptation of meditation as medicalized mindfulness presents itself as addressing a large variety of life problems.[15]

These characterizations of philosophy, religious studies, and psychology are only intended to be indicative, not comprehensive. Each of these three discourses is of course more complicated and multi-faceted than can be presented in short summary here. The discussion intends to indicate how the discourse acts as a filter—selecting particular aspects of Buddhist thought, and distorting those by making them fit a pattern of understanding informed by the different theories of the three fields. That then means that Buddhist thought is being framed within a context different from that of its origin and history. While this is not intentionally malign, most scholars being sincere in their inquiries and studies, such uprooting (deracination) is inevitable when Buddhist thought and practice are treated as an object contained within a field of study.

Buddhism is a tradition with a 2,500-year history, across all of the cultures in Asia, and now globally, a canon of thousands of texts, in Pāli, Sanskrit, Chinese, Tibetan, and several other languages, and with many different lineages of teachings, practices, and authority. Parts of Buddhism do match what each of the three Western academic discourses consider important, and because they do match, those selective interpretations are overdetermined.

13 An early introduction to cognitive science made this clear by identifying the object of study as the normal adult brain—clearly an abstraction, though a usefully delimited one for scientific theory formation. See Barbara von Eckardt, *What is Cognitive Science?* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995) Many strains within cognitive science have the benefit of scientific clarity, despite which I remain concerned that when it is used to address Buddhist thought, it shares being constrained by its historical location.

14 For example, the location of Freudian psychology initially in Victorian Vienna determined not only the characteristic issues being addressed, but also the theories regarding causation and cure.

15 Wonderfully detailed by Jeff Wilson, *Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

The match means that the representation of Buddhist thought and practice within any of these three is often uncritically considered to be accurate and legitimate. This dynamic by which an overdetermined representation appears to be valid is a consequence of the processes of selective interpretation found throughout comparative projects in the humanities and social sciences.

The Comparativist Project

My own experience with the problems of the comparativist project began when I was an undergraduate. For a senior seminar in philosophy, way back in the early 1970s, I wrote a paper comparing "Nietzsche and Zen." While it got me a decent grade, it has lingered in my mind as a touchstone of the failings of the comparative method. Many years later, when I began teaching religious studies, the comparative method was one of the main ones that we examined in classes. Indeed, the entire field of study had for many decades been called "Comparative Religions." My own experience as a teacher at the undergraduate level was to leap right into the material without engaging students with questioning the purpose of making such comparisons. The course was simply a given of the curriculum, and as a part-time, temporary and very anxious member of the faculty, I was not ready to question such a well-established field of study.

One reason not to question applying the comparative method to the study of religions is that the comparative method has a long and successful history in a variety of scientific projects. Comparative anatomy, for example, was fundamental to the early development of evolutionary theory. It has been equally important in the development of historical linguistics.

We want to note at this point that a comparative method can be employed whether the theory being proposed is one of diffusion or of convergence. Theories of diffusion are based on the idea that similarities point back to a common origin. As the things being compared spread out from that shared source, variation began to create differences. As a method, comparison can make it possible to identify common characteristics within the range of variation that indicate a shared origin.[16] Theories of convergence are based on the idea that in similar settings things that had different origins will begin to look alike. For convergence theories, the idea is that in similar settings, or situations, things that were originally at variance from one another will begin to look more alike. An instance is that the beaks of different species of birds who fit into similar ecological niches look alike, such as the long beaks of nectar feeding birds, whether hummingbirds in the Americas

16 At the time that I was trained in Buddhist studies, it was for example assumed that the different versions of a text could be traced back to an original from which they derived, what is known as the *Urtext*. The diffusionist preconception for texts has now been almost entirely abandoned. Textual histories are in fact much more complex and intertwined than the presumption of diffusion from an *Urtext* can accommodate.

or sunbirds in Africa and Asia. While diffusion is a much more common approach to understanding similarities, convergence is an equally valid explanation. "Diffusion" and "convergence" are not causal per se, but instead are descriptive categories that identify ways of thinking about change over time. Neither is automatically true, but instead they are descriptive of theories of causal relations. Such theories require confirmation in specific instances by formulating hypotheses and testing them. By identifying what to examine more closely, the comparative method can be heuristically important to such critical inquiries.

However, when I began teaching methods in the study of religion as a doctoral seminar, three specific problems with the comparative method became increasingly clear to me. The first is the problem of the equivalence of the terms of the comparison. The second is selective interpretation of the terms of the comparison. And the third is an often-implicit theory of triangulation toward a hypothetical third term.

First, the two terms of the comparison need to be equivalent. This was the problem with my comparison of Nietzsche and Zen. One term of the comparison being made in this instance was a specific nineteenth century German philosopher. The other term was a tradition spanning three different religious cultures and languages, across a millennium and a half. Any comparison like the one I had should have attempted would need first to identify a specific figure from the Zen tradition, someone like say Wang Yangming (王陽明, 1472–1529) or Dōgen Zenji (道元禅師, 1200–1253). That specificity alone, however, is not an adequate solution to making the two terms equivalent. How is a fifteenth century Chinese neo-Confucian, or a thirteenth century Japanese Buddhist equivalent to a nineteenth century German Romantic philosopher? It should be evident that they are not equivalent, and therefore not comparable in any meaningful fashion. Such tempting comparisons need to be constrained by seriously asking: So what? Not in the flippant, dismissive sense, but in a critical stance seeking to understand what value such a comparison might have, what new knowledge it might generate.

Selective interpretation is the second issue that complicates applying the comparative method. Unlike the beaks of finches or hummingbirds, the objects of study in religious studies (and philosophy and psychology) are social constructs (inter-subjective rather than empirical objects). This means that the comparative method, which has been so successful with empirical objects, is now being applied to a different ontological category, that is, entities that are abstractions. Ontologically, inter-subjective objects are neither exclusively objective nor exclusively subjective. Because they are socially constituted, they are more enduring and resistant to change than ideas that are strictly those of one person (subjective). Conversely, they do not simply reference external objects (objective), that is, they are not observable in such a fashion that they can be confirmed by examination.

Abstract concepts, that is, inter-subjective objects, can be interpretively molded by selecting particular aspects, and by doing so can be made to appear either similar or different from one another. For example, for many decades Zen has been represented as a practice of solitary seated meditation and often given an anti-intellectual interpretation under the slogan of "a transmission beyond words and letters," which is attributed to the legendary founder of Chan in China, Bodhidharma. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) can also be interpreted as anti-intellectual by highlighting particular selections from his *oeuvre*. Such selective representations pre-interpret the terms of comparison, and so in this case Nietzsche and Zen can be made to appear similar.

One of the assumptions that underlays many comparative projects is what I refer to as "triangulation". This is the idea that if two entities are found to be similar in some way, they may be taken as identifying or describing some third term. For example, if a Christian mystical experience of some transcendent entity is similar to a Tibetan Buddhist mystical experience of some transcendent entity, then these two—seemingly independent—mystical experiences are thought to be about the same transcendent entity. Perhaps with the further conclusion that it is that third term that is not simply a constructed theoretical object, but that it actually exists and is the cause of the similarities. This conclusion could be reinforced by arguing that the fact that one is called "God" and the other "emptiness" is simply a cultural or linguistic artifact, and thus that despite the difference in terminology they are "really" experiences of the same thing, therefore confirming the existence of that third thing, or *tertium quid*, that is the object of both experiences.

Three aspects of this example reveal the problematics of such comparisons. First, both instances are categorized as "mystical experiences," a category that is not a simple descriptive category, but one laden with implicit connotations. Second, there is a simplistic presumption of empiricism, that is, that an "experience" is not itself constructed.[17] Third, the argument that linguistic differences are "merely cultural accretions" obscuring the fundamental unity of all mystical experience is itself merely an ungrounded presumption. It cannot be demonstrated and indeed suffers from being unfalsifiable—the argument is constructed in such a fashion that there is no possible counterevidence. It is merely a bit of sophistry. The manifold problems here are not limited to this specific example.

Comparisons between pre-interpreted entities, such as the instance of Zen and Nietzsche discussed above, do not demonstrate anything, and they are empty expressions of a commitment supported by faith rather than by evidence. For comparisons to be meaningful, they need to be motivated by some question, which has then itself been turned into a hypothesis that

17 One not uncommon extension of this idea is that experiences are necessarily valid, or irrefragable.

the comparison can test. That hypothesis needs to be specific as to why the specific characteristics that form the basis of the comparison are significant as having identifiable causes.[18] Similarities may suggest causal relationships, but establishing such relations requires more than identifying similarities.

(Technical Aside: Comparative approaches may be reframed as arguments by analogy, making the relationships that may be causally relevant clearer. The basic frame of an argument by analogy is:

1. X and Y share attributes P, Q, R.
2. X has attribute K.

Therefore, Y also has attribute K.

For an argument by analogy to be convincing, there needs to be some causal relation between the shared attributes (P, Q, R), and the inferred attribute (K). Argument by analogy is the weakest argument form, which is why the need for establishing a causal relation between the shared characteristics and the characteristic being extended from X to Y).

Some comparisons assert a hierarchy of value. At one time for example it was common for Christian apologists to assert that Christianity is superior to all other religions because it was established by an actual human being, not a mythic or legendary figure. Although it is no longer fashionable to make such explicitly hierarchical comparatives central to the study of religion, the field is still molded by an inheritance of just such ways of conceiving of religions. This is reflected, for example, in almost any introductory textbook in the study of world religions. There are the five or seven or nine archetypal religions, of which Protestant Christianity is usually the implicit prototype. Effectively, the closer a religion is to that prototype, the more likely it is to be allowed entry into the realm of the "higher" religions, that is, the world religions that are most worthy of study and which constitute the structuring categories of the field of religious studies.

In such a hierarchical organization, the status of a religion depends in part on the nature of its beliefs. Whether for example they form a rationally integrated, coherent system, or derive from a written text that claims the status of revelation .[19] This double inheritance from the Protestant Reformation—doctrine and text—continues to structure the field of religious studies, and form a dialectic that reinforces the centrality of each. The content of texts and the kind of texts that are considered worthy of study are those from which doctrines and—even more highly valued—doctrinal systems can be drawn. Thus, the doctrines that define the religion are found in the religion's

18 This is why comparisons based on actual historical contact are more informative—the causal connection between the terms of the comparison has historical grounding.

19 One textbook in which I encountered a claim regarding the superiority of text-based traditions made it quite clear not only that oral traditions were inferior to written ones but that they would soon die out.

texts, and the texts chosen as representative of a religion are those that are considered to contain the doctrine. Simply by fore-grounding doctrine in representing religions, religious studies discourse reinforces the idea that doctrines are what are important about religions.[20]

Not only does the heritage of the Protestant Reformation condition the focus on texts and doctrines, but it further conditions the doctrines that are taken to be most important or most representative of a religion—chapters in textbooks becoming a secularized catechism constructed around the topics most central to Protestant theology. Thus, no matter whether it played a central role or not in the lives and practices of Buddhist adherents over two and a half millennia and across different Asian societies, the teaching of *anātman* (the absence of any permanent essence) is taken as one of the keys for understanding Buddhism. In large part this would seem to be a consequence of the centrality of such issues as the immortality of the soul in Christian theology, and—itself derivatively from Christianity—the nature of the person in psychotherapy. These are central issues in forming coherent, systematic doctrinal systems—either theological or psychological—and it seems to have been assumed that the Buddhist analog, the teaching of *anātman*, must be equally central to Buddhist belief.

In a very important sense, this is quite a natural process. We, with our cultural heritage, are asking questions of Buddhism. In some cases, such as the "new comparative theology," this is made explicit.[21] We are looking for answers to our questions in new places, feeling that the answers we have already are for one reason or another inadequate. This same process also marks much of the present push to "globalize" philosophy.[22] While, as I say this is in a sense quite a natural process, this does *not* justify it as a scholarly method for religious studies, or for philosophy. The problematizing issue is that by being the ones to ask the questions, we are the ones who determine what answers are meaningful, or even possible.

This is perhaps most evident in the areas of engaged traditions, which often employ a rather simplistic method. It is not at all uncommon, and seemingly unproblematic for example, to hear discussions framed in such terms as "What is the Buddhist position on the death penalty?" Since it is not adequate in such a situation for Buddhism to not have a position on the death penalty, one has to be created in order to answer the question. Perhaps more subtly, one sometimes sees scholars making arguments about such

20 This emphasis may be traceable to the educational program of missionaries in the late nineteenth century who were being prepared to convert others by debating doctrine with them. Conversion to Christianity was expected to follow from losing the debate.

21 Hugh Nicholson, "The Reunification of Theology and Comparison in the New Comparative Theology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 77.3 (Sept. 2009), 609–646.

22 Danielle Macbeth, "The Place of Philosophy," *Philosophy East and West* 67.4 (Oct. 2017), 966–985.

issues as authorship on the basis of the presumption that doctrine determines behavior. Analogously, although not the sole factor involved, discussions such as the arguments suggesting that there are two (or more) Nāgārjunas or two Vasubandhus are seemingly motivated by expectations of doctrinal consistency.[23] But why should we presume, for example, that a Yogacara author cannot also be a Pure Land practitioner?

A theological emphasis on doctrinal consistency is but one aspect of the way in which Christianity has been taken as the norm for what constitutes a religion. Based on one interpretation of Revelation, known as "post-millennialism," the Second Coming of Jesus was prophesied to follow on a thousand-year period of peace and righteousness. In the second half of the nineteenth century these ideas contributed to the social justice movement in liberal Protestantism, including the abolition of slavery, women's suffrage, an international peace movement, and prohibition. Although the unique theological basis now seems to be largely forgotten, the presumption that religion is naturally involved in social reform remains. Perhaps an anecdote at this point will help to clarify the way that this presumption plays out: When I attended the conference on Buddhist–Christian dialogue on Oahu in the mid-80s, I was struck by one participant who criticized analytical psychology (Jungian) for not having an emphasis on social justice. In other words, a psychotherapeutic practice was found wanting for not being equally committed to social reform as late 19th century liberal Protestantism. The presumption seemed to be that Jungian psychotherapy was something that could reasonably be compared with religion, and that as it lacked something that the speaker thought essential to religion, it was therefore inferior.

In Closing: the indefinite malleability of doctrine

As noted here, one of the problems with the comparative method is selective interpretation. There is a closely related issue in attempts to base religious practice, religious identity, religious ways of being in the world on doctrine. Doctrine is indefinitely malleable. This is fundamental to the issues discussed in this chapter—doctrine is not stable, it is not dependable, it is not some kind of solid foundation upon which one's way of being in the world can be based. Instead, doctrine is malleable, and in fact indefinitely malleable. Those who created the academic study of religion in the West presumed to know what religion is—it is the concepts, categories and concerns that remain when Christianity is stripped of the most specific aspects of the tradition.[24] Or in Hegelian terms, it is the concepts, categories and concerns

23 Padmanabh S. Jaini, "On the Theory of Two Vasubandhus," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 21.1/3 (1958), 48–53; Jan Yün-Hua, "Nāgārjuna, One or More? A New Interpretation of Buddhist Hagiography," *History of Religions* 10.2 (Nov. 1970), 139–155.

24 This threefold set of ideas is employed in order to distinguish different aspects of systems of thought. Concepts are the ideas that are basic to a system of thought, for example, heaven and hell. Categories identify the regular ways in which systems of thought group things

of Christianity sublated (lifted up) out of historically unique contexts and treated in the abstract as universal characteristics of religion as a general category. The process of sublation, however, never completely sanitizes a concept, category or concern of its earlier significance, its connotations remain. This same dynamic characterizes the philosophy of religion. That academic field suffers from mistakenly thinking that if you stop talking about Christianity and instead talk about "religion"—even though you are using the same set of concepts, categories and concerns—you are now somehow doing philosophy. No, you are simply doing crypto-theology. The indefinite malleability of doctrine means that to understand it, the particular context in which it is located must be made evident. Doctrine is never without a context—philosophy, religious studies, psychology discuss Buddhist ideas in their own context.

Japan has long been my area of special focus and is the unifying topic of the lectures that became this book. The emphasis on analyzing context applies to understanding not just Japanese Buddhist teachings, or only Buddhist teachings, but all discourse. For example, context applies to everything that someone tries to convince you of—and a basic analytic for context is to ask three questions:

Who is saying it?
Why are they saying it?
How can you evaluate its truth?

Some Indian Buddhist teachers suggested that there are only two ways to know what is true: experience and reason.

I would like to leave you with my own twisted version of the overworked analogy about looking at the moon, not the finger pointing at the moon. Because distraction is key for both magicians and pickpockets, my version is: Don't look at the moon, watch the person who's pointing it out to you.

together, or separate them from one another, for example, sacred and profane. Concerns are the issues that motivate thought, such as, salvation and damnation. These are not hard and fast distinctions, but rather fuzzy sets. The value of the distinction, however, is to assure the inclusion of different aspects of a system of thought.

Suggested Readings

Note: this is a very abbreviated list of works that are in my mind particularly important for understanding the Buddhisms of Japan, and the contributions of tantric Buddhism to the history and development of those traditions.

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