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The Shingon *Ajikan*, Meditation on the Syllable ‘A’:  
An analysis of components and development.

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This paper examines what has been described as the most basic and essential element of Kūkai’s (774-835) religio-philosophical system (Yamasaki 1988:190), meditation on the Sanskrit syllable ‘A’. According to Shingon Buddhist tradition, Kūkai introduced the meditation on the syllable ‘A’ (hereafter referred to as the *Ajikan*) into Japan in the early 9<sup>th</sup> century, at the time he transmitted the Shingon Dharma to that country from China. Materials clearly showing the origin and development of the *Ajikan* before Kūkai’s time have either not been discovered or have not been analyzed in relationship to the *Ajikan*. Indeed, some researchers have argued that the use of ‘A’ as a device for meditation arose as either a Chinese or a Japanese mistranslation of the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra*.<sup>1</sup> The present paper is an attempt to contribute to research on the development of the *Ajikan* by pointing to related references in writings typically associated with earlier traditions.

First, by examining Kūkai’s own writings as well as those most important for Shingon, it will be shown that the *Ajikan* is part of the Tantric system believed to set Shingon apart from other traditions of Buddhism. Materials examined below suggest Kūkai believed that by means of the *Ajikan* meditation one could become a Buddha within this very lifetime. However, it will be noted that while Kūkai mentions the related Meditation on the Six Elements (*rokudai enyū*) of the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra*, which includes the syllable ‘A’, he makes no mention *per se* of the

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<sup>1</sup> T.18, 848.

*Ajikan*. Nevertheless, in a number of his writings, Kūkai refers to various combinations of components that make up the *Ajikan* practice.

This paper proceeds towards its goal by examining the constitute components or principal images (*honson*, 本尊) of the *Ajikan*. Specifically, the *Ajikan* involves concentration on a drawing.<sup>2</sup> This drawing depicts the Sanskrit syllable ‘A’ written in an Indian script (Siddham). The ‘A’ character is positioned within a moon disk and the moon disk sits upon a lotus flower base. By examining writings containing references to these components, this paper suggests scholars may locate the *Ajikan* firmly within traditions of Indian Buddhist Tantric practice as well as Indian non-Buddhist philosophical systems.

### 1. The Syllable ‘A’ in Kūkai’s Writings.

Kūkai’s masterpiece, the *The Mysterious Maṇḍala of Ten Stages of Mind* (秘密曼荼羅十住心論, *Himitsu mandara jūjūshinron*, hereafter, *Ten Stages of Mind*)<sup>3</sup> sets out to describe a great range of human behavior, from those driven by basic desires to that leading to the revelation of one’s innate pure consciousness or Buddha-mind (Sanskrit, *bodhicitta*, J. *bodaishin*, 菩提心). This revelation is typically represented in Kūkai’s writings and other Shingon doctrine as the practitioner’s integration with a harmony-interpenetrating body, that is, union with the deity Dharmakāya Mahāvairocana. Accordingly, this ultimate stage of human consciousness is connected with the experience of “absolute truth” (*paramārtha*), achievable through Shingon

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<sup>2</sup> This paper focuses on the elements of the *Ajikan*. For a description of the procedure of *Ajikan* practice, see Richard K. Payne, “The Shingon *Ajikan*: diagrammatic analysis of ritual syntax,” *Religion* v. 29, n. 3, July 1999 and Richard K. Payne, “*Ajikan*: ritual and meditation in the Shingon tradition” in *Re-visioning Kamakura Buddhism*, Richard K. Payne (ed). Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

<sup>3</sup> T. 77, 2425.

concentration exercises. Specifically, in the *Jeweled Key to the Mysterious Storehouse* (秘藏宝鈴, *Hizō hōyaku*)<sup>4</sup>, an abbreviated version of the *Ten Stages of Mind*, Kūkai names the meditation on the syllable ‘A’ in this context. Quoting from the *Bodhicitta-śāstra*,<sup>5</sup> Kūkai writes:

Those who understand the meanings of the letter A are to meditate on it resolutely; they should meditate on the perfect, luminous, and Pure Consciousness. Those who have had a glimpse of it are called those who have perceived the absolute truth (*paramārtha*). Those who perceive it all the time enter the first stage of Bodhisattvahood. If they gradually increase their competence in this meditation, they will finally be able to magnify it [the moon] until its circumference encompasses the entire universe and its magnitude becomes as inclusive as space. Being able freely to magnify or to reduce it, they will surely come to be in possession of the all-inclusive wisdom.

The student of the yoga should devote himself to the mastery of the Three Mysteries and the Five Series of Meditation. The Three Mysteries are: the mystery of body – to make mudrās and to invoke the presence of the sacred object of meditation; the mystery of speech – to recite the mantras in secret, pronouncing them distinctly without making the slightest error; the mystery of mind – to be absorbed in yoga, keeping one’s mind in a wholesome state like that of the bright, pure and full moon, and to meditate on the enlightened Mind. (Hakada 220).

Kūkai said his ten stages of consciousness were based on a passage from the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra* that states: “...[you have asked] what enlightenment is. It is to know your own state of mind as it really is” (Kiyota 1982:59). Accordingly, the process of rising from the lower stages to the higher is essentially that of awakening *bodhicitta*, spoken of in connection with the ‘A’ syllable and other syllables in the *Bodhicitta-śāstra* and to a lesser extent in the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra*. In the *Ten Stages of Mind*, Kūkai quotes the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra* saying, “Why is this the mantra teaching? Because the principle of the letter A is that all natures (*dharmas*) are fundamentally unborn...” (Todaro 92). The passage goes on to explain the

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<sup>4</sup> T. 77, 2426.

<sup>5</sup> T. 32, 1665.

principle of numerous other Sanskrit syllables of which ‘A’ is among. Following the quote, however, Kūkai returns to the ‘A’ syllable. He writes, “Again, the five types of letter A<sup>6</sup> are the mind of the highest enlightenment. That is, based on these letters sounds issue forth and Buddhism is taught, i.e., these are speakers and listeners. This is an affair of the Buddhas of the Law maṇḍala body...” (Todaro 89). It is interesting to note that while this is all the *Ten Stages of Mind* has to say about the ‘A’ syllable, Kūkai choose to expand upon the subject afterwards in the *Jeweled Key to the Mysterious Storehouse*. The latter was written in response to a request on the part of Emperor Junna (reigned 823-833) for clarification and a synopsis of the *Ten Stages of Mind*.

As primary written sources for his comments on observances of the ‘A’ syllable, Kūkai also relied on two documents of great importance to Shingon doctrine, the *Bodhicitta-śāstra* and the *Commentary on the Mahāvairocana-sūtra*.<sup>7</sup> Kūkai refers to these documents extensively in the *Ten Stages of Mind* and many of his other writings. The *Bodhicitta-śāstra* states:

In the minds of all sentient beings there is an element of pure nature...It is likened to one of the sixteen phases of the moon – that in which the moon appears brightest...Therefore, a mantra practitioner should, by means of ‘A’ –syllable visualization, awaken the inherent brightness within his mind, causing a gradual cleansing and brightening, and a realization of the knowledge of the non-arising of phenomena. The ‘A’ –syllable has the meaning of the originally non-arisen nature of all dharmas (White 238-9).

Kūkai indicates meditation on the syllable ‘A’ in connection with attainment of the tenth stage of consciousness (*jūjūshin*, 十住心) in which one realizes buddhahood (*jōbutsu*, 成佛). For

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<sup>6</sup> Refers to *a*, *ā*, *aṃ*, *aḥ*, *āḥ* as elucidated in the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra* (Hakeda 220-1)

<sup>7</sup> T. 39, 723.

this reason, it is alternatively named in Shingon “Pure *Bodhicitta* Concentration” (淨菩提心觀) (*Mikkyō dijiten* 16).

In light of the fact that the *Ajikan* became so important to Shingon, it is interesting to note that in his writings, Kūkai made no specific mention of it *per se*. In *Meaning of Attaining Enlightenment in this Life (Sokushin jōbutsu gi)*,<sup>8</sup> Kūkai refers to the ‘A’ syllable only in relationship to five other syllables mentioned in relationship to the ‘A’ in the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra*. These are ‘A,’ ‘Va,’ ‘Ra,’ ‘Ha,’ ‘Kha’ and ‘Hūṃ.’ The significance of these syllables for Shingon will be taken up below. In his writing entitled *Meaning of Sound, Word, and Reality (Shōji jissō gi)*,<sup>9</sup> Kūkai uses the ‘A’ syllable as an example, seemingly chosen casually from among many candidates.

Again, if we interpret “sound, word, and reality” on the basis of a syllable, we can make the following analysis. Take, for example, the first syllable of the Sanskrit alphabet *A*. When we open our mouth and simultaneously exhale, the sound *A* [ə] is produced. This is the sound. For what does the sound *A* stand? It denotes a name-word (*myōji*) of the Dharmakāya Buddha; namely, it is sound and word (Hakeda 239).

Likewise, in the *Meaning of the Word HŪM (Ungi gi)*,<sup>10</sup> Kūkai writes of the ‘A’ syllable in the midst of others. In that work, Kūkai creates two categories for interpreting these syllables, the Invariant Meanings and the Ultimate Meanings. In the category of Invariant Meanings he writes:

The graphic form of the word *Hūm* can be divided into four components. In the *Vajraśekhara* it is interpreted as consisting of four letters [*H A Ū M*]<sup>11</sup> (Hakeda 246).

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<sup>8</sup> T. 77, 2428.

<sup>9</sup> KZ 1.

<sup>10</sup> KZ 1.

<sup>11</sup> *Ha, ū, ṃ*

Next, in the midst of describing each of these four letters, he writes,

The *A* [ॐ] is inherent in the letter *H*. The sound *A* is the mother of all letters; it is the essence of all sounds; and it stands for the fountainhead of all-inclusive Reality. ‘The very act itself of opening the mouth in order to utter any sound is accompanied by the sound *A*; therefore, apart from the sound *A*, no sounds are possible. The sound *A* is the mother of all sounds.’<sup>12</sup> If we see the letter *A*, we know that all things are empty and nil [as isolated individual entities apart from the all-inclusive Reality]<sup>13</sup>. This is the invariant meaning of the letter *A* (Hakeda 246).

In the category of Ultimate Meanings, he writes:

Three ultimate meanings of the letter *A* can be identified: a) being, b) empty, and c) uncreated.

The letter *A* in the Sanskrit alphabet represents the first sound. If it is the first [in contrast to others], it is relative. We therefore define it as “[relative] being.”

*A* also has the meaning of non-arising. If anything arises in dependence, it does not have its own independent nature. We therefore define it as “empty.”

By “uncreated” is meant the Realm which is one and real, that is, the Middle Way [Absolute]. Nāgārjuna said: “Phenomena are empty, temporal, and also middle.”<sup>14</sup> ...this single letter is the mantra of Mahāvairocana.

A sūtra states: “The letter *A* signifies ‘the enlightened mind,’ ‘the gateway to all teachings,’ ‘nonduality,’ ‘the goal of all existences,’ ‘the nature of all existences,’ ‘freedom,’ and ‘the Dharmakāya.’” These are the ultimate meanings of the letter *A*. The same sūtra further elucidates the letter *A* (Hakeda 249).

In the last paragraph above, the sūtra Kūkai refers to in his quote is the *Protection of the Country and King Dhāraṇī Sūtra*.<sup>15</sup> This sūtra lists a hundred meanings for the ‘*A*’ syllable.

While endorsing the sūtra by citing it, more so than Kūkai’s own words in this writing, the tone of the sūtra conveys a strong expression of a belief in the primacy of the ‘*A*’ syllable. It is not

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<sup>12</sup> Quoting from the *Commentary on the Mahāvairocana-sūtra*, T. 39, 656a.

<sup>13</sup> Comment in brackets here is that of Hakeda.

<sup>14</sup> From *Mādhyamika-kārikās*, T. 30, 33b.

<sup>15</sup> *Shouhukuojiechu jing*, T.19, 997.

until *Jeweled Key to the Mysterious Storehouse* that we find anything near this kind of enthusiasm for the ‘A’ syllable expressed in Kūkai’s own words, whether or not this is indicative of a development in his own philosophy. But even in the *Jeweled Key to the Mysterious Storehouse* Kūkai does not lay out the basis for the standardized features that have come make-up the *Ajikan*.

Chronologically, *Meaning of Attaining Enlightenment in this Life* appeared in 817, followed by *Meaning of Sound, Word, and Reality* in the same or the following year. *Meaning of the Word HŪM* appeared next, also in the same year, when Kūkai was 44 years old. The *Ten Stages of Mind* was written in 830 when Kūkai was 57, and the *Jeweled Key to the Mysterious Storehouse* appeared later that same year. Near the end of what may have been his last writing, *Secret Key to the Heart Sutra (Hannya shingyō hiken)*<sup>16</sup> from 834, the year prior to his death at 62 years of age, Kūkai seems intent on setting the record straight concerning the various interpretations of the ‘A’ syllable and the value of these. Kukai writes,

Among the sermons of the Tathāgata, there are two kinds. One is the exoteric; the other, the esoteric. For those of exoteric caliber he preached lengthy sermons containing many clauses, but for those of esoteric caliber, he preached the *dhāraṇīs*, the words that embrace manifold meanings. It was for this reason that the Tathāgata explained the various meanings of such words as *A* and *Om* (Hakeda 24).

The written elucidation of what became the fixed system in Shingon would have to wait for the writing of one of Kūkai’s direct disciples, Jitsue (実惠, 786-849), who attributed his work

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<sup>16</sup> KZ 1.

on the subject, *Record of Oral Instruction on the Ajikan (Ajikan yōshin kuke)*<sup>17</sup> to his master's personal tutelage.<sup>18</sup>

## 2. Standardized components of the *Ajikan*.

The single system of *Ajikan* that survives in Japan today is believed to have been systematized by Kūkai and transmitted through a series of instructional manuals beginning with that of his direct disciple Jitsue and continuing to this day (Nakamura 7). Since Kūkai's time, over one hundred such instructional texts on the *Ajikan* have been written (Yamasaki 1988:190). As we have seen above, scattered references to components of the *Ajikan* appear in those writings considered most important to Shingon, such as the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra*, the *Vajrasākhara-sūtra*,<sup>19</sup> the *Commentary on the Mahāvairocana-sūtra*, the *Bodhicitta-śāstra* and Kūkai's own works. Various symbols and elements of practice that have come to be identified as the *Ajikan* appear in texts from India and China. Even so, it is unclear whether either the individual components of the meditation or a combination thereof, occupied a position of central importance in Buddhist practice before the time of Kūkai. It is in Jitsue's instruction manual that we first find the formula that becomes standardized for use as the objects of the *Ajikan*. *Record of Oral Instruction on the Ajikan* contains a description of the three main components used in the meditation. These are the 'A' character drawn in Siddham script, the moon disk and the lotus

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<sup>17</sup> KKZ 1.

<sup>18</sup> We might speculate that Kūkai does not mention the *Ajikan* because it is a part of an 'esoteric' system available only to initiates. Kūkai is known to have valued a 'mysterious' mind-to-mind transmission above textual study alone. This can be seen most emphatically in Kūkai's admonition to Saichō examined by Ryūichi Abé in "Saichō and Kūkai: A Conflict of Interpretations," in *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 22 (1-2):103-138, 1995. However, if Kūkai did not write about the *Ajikan* for this reason, we must wonder why Jitsue did.

<sup>19</sup> T. 18, 865.

base. As a part of the meditation, we also find the set interpretation of the moon disk as the mind (Sanskrit, *citta*) and the lotus base as the physical heart (Sanskrit, *hrdaya*).

In *Record of Oral Instruction on the Ajikan*, the ‘A’ character, the moon disk and the lotus flower are all interconnected. In regards to the relationship of the ‘A’ character to the moon disk it says, “The character ‘A’ becomes the seed of the moon disk and the moon disk becomes the radiance of the character ‘A’. Therefore, the moon disk and the ‘A’ character become completely one.”<sup>20</sup>

As for the relationship with the lotus flower, *Record of Oral Instruction on the Ajikan* says,

The eight petals of the lotus flower are exactly *Hṛdaya*. *Citta* abides on the lotus flower. These two minds cannot be separated at any time. Therefore, upon the lotus flower, the moon disk is seen. The moon disk becomes *citta*. *Citta* looks exactly like the moon disk. So that the circle form of the moon disk looks like a crystal jewel and the seed of the lotus becomes the character ‘A’. Therefore, in the middle of the moon disk, the ‘A’ character is observed.<sup>21</sup>

Yamasaki explains this passage as follows. “That is to say, the original mind of the sentient being is divided into two minds: *hrdaya* and *citta*. In the *Ajikan*, the lotus flower represents *hrdaya* while the moon disk represents *citta*. The character ‘A’ is the seed for both of them. *Hṛdaya* and the lotus flower, *citta* and the moon disk and, the character ‘A’, all five are completely non-dual and completely one” (Yamasaki 1982:32).

Kūkai’s own written references to the inter-relationship of the ‘A’ character, the moon disk and the lotus flower, along with their interpretations as *citta* and *hrdaya* respectively, are

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<sup>20</sup> KKZ 1:470.

<sup>21</sup> KKZ 1:475.

less concrete.<sup>22</sup> In his *Lectures on the Mahāyāna for Emperor Kanmu*,<sup>23</sup> Kūkai writes, “The lotus principle (saturates) *hṛdaya* like wetness to a bamboo fishing basket.” In *Introductory Explanation of the Meaning of the Lotus Sūtra* Kūkai writes, “*Hṛdaya* is in the exact center of the sentient being. In the future, (practitioners) will realize Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva. Then the form of the lotus flower will be known” (Yamasaki 1982:32). In both passages the images of *hṛdaya* and the lotus flower appear together.

In *Shūhiron*<sup>24</sup> Kūkai writes, “The moon arrives at the dirty pond, like the lotus flower it is not polluted.” In the *Epitaph for Deceased Disciple Chisen* he writes, “(Chisen) proved non-origination in the single character ‘A’ and the five wisdoms were obtained in murky water. He long studied the *samādhi* of *dharmadhātu* and he will be eternally idle in the four mysteries of *Cana* (i.e., Mahāvairocana). As for the moon realm, the mind lotus was contemplated, and deep-rooted delusion was burnt by the flames of wisdom.” In this last passage, we find in Kūkai’s own writing what might be construed as a cryptic reference to a disciple’s devotion to the *Ajikan*. Although there is no mention here of *hṛdaya* or *citta*, the three material components of the practice are present. In addition, Kūkai begins a prayer to commemorate the anniversary of the death of Emperor Kanmu by speaking of the lotus at the center of the physical heart (Sanskrit, *hṛdaya*).<sup>25</sup>

Again, in *Introductory Explanation of the Meaning of the Lotus Sūtra*, Kūkai writes,

As for the bright shining jewel pagoda, heaven’s shore is pointed to by the parting moon. As for the colorful colors of the lotus ceremony, the edge of

<sup>22</sup> I am indebted to Yamasaki (1982) for pointing out the following references in Kūkai’s writings.

<sup>23</sup> *Kanmu kōtei no ontame ni daijō gyōsho no kinji no hokke o kōzuru dasshin*, KKZ 3.

<sup>24</sup> *Gobu darani mondō ge san shūhiron*, KKZ 2.

<sup>25</sup> KKZ 6:368.

land is passed through by means of the writing of stars. How much more, in the pond of many answers, the eight petals of the lotus flower open wide and float completely ordinarily, and three flat moon disks radiate in the emptiness of self nature, and the light of complete knowledge shoots forth (Yamasaki 1982:32).

In this passage, moon disks, the lotus flower and emptiness (one of the characteristics of ‘A’), are brought together. But in no way is this passage sufficient for establishing the fixed relationship of these components found in the *Ajikan*.

Such fragments are all that Kūkai left in writing to vaguely suggest a systemized connection among the components that became the fixed form of the *Ajikan*. For this reason, Yamasaki cautiously notes sufficient evidence does not exist to conclude Kūkai is the voice behind the *Record of Oral Instruction on the Ajikan*. More compelling is Yamasaki’s observation that in the *Record of Oral Instruction on the Ajikan* the words “Explanation of Meaning” appear as what seems to be a heading, halfway through the writing. This may signal that what follows are the comments of Kūkai’s disciple, Shingon Master Jitsue. Indeed, following this sentence is the section on what became the fixed forms for the objects of meditation in the *Ajikan*. The section preceding this contains the information on the three aspects of the ‘A’ character quoted by Kūkai from the *Commentary on the Mahāvairocana-sūtra*.

3. The five-syllable mantra used in the *Ajikan* and its relationship to the Shingon Meditation on the Six Elements.

The *Record of Oral Instruction on the Ajikan* gives the following instructions for performing the *Ajikan*.

First, if you desire to visualize this syllable, find a place where the ceiling and the four walls do not seem cramped and it is neither too dark

nor too light, and sit there. If it is too dark, deluded thoughts will arise, and if it is too light, the mind will be distracted. At night, sit with a dim lamp hung behind you.

Place a cushion and sit in full or half lotus. Form the Dharma Realm Samādhi Mudrā and have your eyes neither fully open nor closed. If they are open, they will move and distract you, while if they are closed, you will sink into sleep. Narrow your eyelids without blinking and fix both eyes on the bridge of the nose. If the tongue is put to the palate [just behind the teeth], the breath will quiet of itself. Do not shift or bend the lower back, but sit straight to aid the circulation. If the blood circulation is impaired, illness may arise, or the mind may become disturbed.

Being careful in these things, first form the Vajra Añjalikarma mudrā<sup>26</sup> and recite the Five Great Vows. Next recite the five-syllable mantra of the Tai-zō one hundred times. Then perform the visualization. First, visualize the syllable in its ultimate, essential aspect, then contemplate the truth of its limited, phenomenal aspect...(Yamasaki 1988:196).

In this passage, *Tai-zō* refers to the *Garbhakośadhātu maṇḍala*. The five-syllable mantra used at the beginning of the *Ajikan* (*A, VA, RA, HA, KHA*) appears in the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra*, in which that maṇḍala is described. The five-syllable mantra is explained in relation to five constitute elements of the material world. In the *Meaning of Sound, Word, and Reality*, Kūkai writes, “The exoteric five elements are as commonly explained. The esoteric five symbolic elements are the five syllables, the five Buddhas, and the entire oceanic assembly of deities” (Yamasaki 1988:68). To these five elements in the *Ajikan*, Shingon adds a sixth in a related practice known as the Meditation on the Six Elements (*rokudai enyū*). These two meditation practices believed to have been indicated by Kūkai, are the most important ones practiced in Shingon today (Yamasaki 1988:68).

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<sup>26</sup> Japanese, *Kangō Gasshō-in*; Chinese, *Jingang Hezhang Yin*. Formed similar to the *Añjali mudrā* but, as Frédéric writes, “with the thumbs crossed over each other and the tips of the fingers interlaced, the arm projected slightly forward instead of adhering to the breast” (Frédéric 1995:48).

The term “*rokudai enyū*” literally means “the harmonious interpenetration of six elements.” In the context of this meditation, “interpenetration” refers to co-arising, while “harmony” refers to the orderly arrangement of what has co-arisen within *dharmadhātu*. The Shingon practitioner meditates on the six elements in order to integrate with Dharmakāya Mahāvairocana. These elements are earth, water, fire, wind and space, all of which are reflected within the sixth element, consciousness (Sanskrit, *vijñāna*).

The creation of the physical universe based on the elements is basic to Indian and other religious thought. In hymn 10.90 of the *Ṛg Veda* (c. 1200-900 BCE), to create the elements, the primordial man, Puruṣa, performs a sacrificial dismemberment of his own body, which thus form the constituents of the universe.

The moon was born from his mind; from his eye the sun was born. Indra and Agni came from his mouth, and from his vital breath the Wind was born. From his navel the middle realm of space arose; from his head the sky evolved. From his two feet came the earth, and the quarters of the sky from his ear. Thus they set the worlds in order (O’Flaherty 31).

Here in an early Indian text we find the equation of the moon and the mind as in the *Ajikan*. This dismemberment of Puruṣa into creative elements became the basis for Vedic sacrifice. Related to this, Vedic sacrifice seeks to ritually transform the spirit of the deceased (*preta*) into an ancestor (*pitṛ*) and reintegrate the various elements of the body into the universe. This dissolution into parts is described in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (3.2.13), “The voice of the dead man goes into fire, his breath into wind, his eye into the sun, his mind into the moon...”

(Smith 90). Similar descriptions are found in the *Ṛg Veda* (10.16.3) and the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (10.3.3.6) (O’Flaherty 31).<sup>27</sup>

Likewise, in the *Aitareya Upaniṣad*, the beginning of the world and humankind is described as follows. “–a heart was hatched; from the heart sprang the mind, and from the mind, the moon” (Olivelle 195).

Upaniṣadic, Sāṃkhya and Vaiśeṣika traditions all supported theories of various elements comprising the physical universe. Early Buddhism is thought to have borrowed the concept of the five elements, which appears in the texts of these various Indian schools as four, five or six elements.

In the *Meaning of Becoming a Buddha in this Life*, Kūkai explains the Shingon observance of the elements as follows. “In the various revealed teachings, the four elements are considered to be non-sentient. But, the mysterious teachings explain that they are the Tathāgata’s *samaya*<sup>28</sup> body. The four elements are not apart from the heart. Though heart and form may be said to differ, their nature is the same. Form is the heart; the heart is form.”<sup>29</sup> Contrary to the sound of this theory as philosophical speculation, for Kūkai it is meant to indicate the opposite. That is, the Tantric interpretation of the elements as the Buddha’s mysterious all-pervading body

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<sup>27</sup> Also see, David M. Knipe, “Sapīṇḍikaraṇa: The Hindu Rite of Entry into Heaven,” in Frank E. Reynolds and Earle H. Waugh, eds., *Religious Encounters with Death: Insights from the History and Anthropology of Religions*, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press 1977, p. 111.

<sup>28</sup> “In *Mikkyō*, it (*samaya*) can hold a variety of meanings, such as ‘equality’ or ‘vow’ or the realm in which distinctions of ‘the real’ and ‘phenomenon’ are transcended” (Kiyota, 1983:149).

<sup>29</sup> *KZ* 3:95-6.

(*dharmakāya*) removes them from the realm of the philosophical speculation of other traditions, and has them express the concrete reality of the here and now (*tathatā*).<sup>30</sup>

As in the story of Puruṣa quoted above from the *Ṛg Veda*, for Shingon the first five elements are not conceived of as stationary, but sources of creation. Likewise, Kūkai personified *tathatā* as a living organism, *dharmakāya* Mahāvairocana. Mahāvairocana as the elements is represented in Shingon as mantra seed syllables (*bīja*). Concerning this identification, the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra* says,

I am of the mind, self-abiding in all places and pervading the states of sentient and non-sentient beings, [because:]

- 1) ‘*A*’ represents the essence of life;
- 2) “*VA*” represents the water element;
- 3) “*RA*” represents the fire element;
- 4) “*HA*” represents the wind element;
- 5) “*KHA*” represents the space element (Kiyota 1982:98)<sup>31</sup>

This important identification for Shingon is also described in the *Commentary on Mahāvairocana-sūtra*, in the *Bodhicitta-śāstra*, and in Kūkai’s own writings. In a section entitled “The Meaning of ‘Becoming a Buddha in this Life’” in the *Meaning of Becoming a Buddha in this Life*, Kūkai quotes the passage above, explaining the elements and adding consciousness as a sixth element, complete with a seed syllable. Kūkai writes,

The *Bīja* [also known as the Dharma] Mantra is recited as follows: “*A, VA, RA, HA, KHA, HŪM*” [to convey the meaning of “original non-arising”] which is beyond words.

‘*A*’ indicates [the truth] that all elements are originally non-arising. It is [symbolically] represented by the element earth.

“*VA*” indicates that [truth] is beyond words and speeches. It is

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<sup>30</sup> In a forthcoming publication on Shingon theory and practice, Minoru Kiyota expresses the opinion that since no immediate model for this idea has been found, it appears likely that the explanation of *tathatā* in terms of the six elements is Kūkai’s own innovation.

<sup>31</sup> Translating *T. 32*, 1665:573c.

[symbolically] represented by the element water.  
 “RA” indicates that [truth] is pure and undefiled. It is [symbolically] represented by the element fire.  
 “HA” indicates that [truth] is beyond causes and conditions. It is [symbolically] represented by the element wind.  
 “KHA” indicates that [truth] is emptiness. It is [symbolically] represented by the element space.  
 “HŪM” indicates enlightenment [symbolically] represented by the consciousness element. From the perspective of the causal aspect of enlightenment, it is called the discriminating consciousness [*viññāna*]; but from the perspective of the resultant aspect of enlightenment, it is called wisdom [*jñāna*]. Wisdom is enlightenment (Kiyota 1982:97-8).

While there is no written evidence from Kūkai that he endorsed what became the standardized form of the *Ajikan*, it is clear from the passage above that Kūkai is presenting the Meditation on the Six Elements with the corresponding mantra as a means for attainment of buddhahood in the present body. Again, the first five of the elements are used as a mantra in the Meditation on the Six Elements and one has to speculate as to why the sixth element is not. While Kūkai quotes the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra* as a source for the first five elements, the ‘HŪM’ syllable can be found to be exalted in the *Vajraśekhara-sūtra*. Yamasaki explains the use of ‘HŪM’ to express consciousness.

...universal Buddha-mind, personified in the deity Dainichi Nyorai (Mahāvairocana), also manifests as Kongōsatta (Vajrapāṇi). This bodhisattva, who represents the enlightened individual, is associated with the consciousness element. The mantra associated with Kongōsatta is the syllable UN (HŪM), and this same syllable is also used, therefore, to symbolize the sixth element, consciousness (Yamasaki 1988:67).<sup>32</sup>

A meditation scheme based on integrating with a harmony-interpenetrating body is by no means original to Kūkai’s thought. The Chinese Tiantai (Japanese, Tendai) tradition postulated

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<sup>32</sup> Parenthetical clarifications in this passage are mine.

the “three-thousand worlds immanent in an instant thought” (Chinese, *Yinian sanqian*, 一念三千), meaning all elements of existence (referring to *tathatā*, not the *Abhidharmakośa*’s dharma concept), which dependently co-arise, are immanent at any one given state of mind (*yi nien*). The Japanese Tendai tradition also maintains observances of ‘*A*’ based on the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra*. In one such observance, the practitioner is to “picture at one’s heart a moon one inch in diameter. In the center of the moon visualize a lotus. In the center of the lotus place the Sanskrit letter *AH*” (Saso 38).

Likewise, the Chinese Huayan tradition holds that all the elements of the world are interrelated<sup>33</sup> and reflected in the enlightened mind (*yi xin*).<sup>34</sup> This interrelatedness is found illustrated throughout the main sūtra for Huayan philosophy, the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra*. The final book of that sūtra, the *Gaṇḍhavyūha*, describes the physical and spiritual journey of Sudhana, a seeker of truth and enlightenment. Sudhana visits fifty-three spiritual teachers and eventually, reaching Maitreya, becomes integrated with Samantabhadra, the bodhisattva of Universal Good and the embodiment of enlightenment. Throughout the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra*, the moon appears as “a symbol of truth or reality, being reflected everywhere while itself remaining undivided” (Cleary 1987:1637). The *Avataṃsaka-sūtra* was also revered and quoted by Kūkai. Related to this, in the Shingon ‘moon visualization’ (月輪觀, *Gachirin-gan*), the moon is likened to the mind of Samantabhadra.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Huayan uses the Chinese term *fajie yuanji* to refer to the elements within *dharmadhātu*, which dependently co-arise.

<sup>34</sup> Kiyota notes, “although the former leans toward an ontological theory and the latter toward a causal theory, what they are describing are ontological harmony and causal harmony respectively” (Kiyota, forthcoming).

<sup>35</sup> “*Gachirin-gan* (月輪觀). Known as the ‘moon visualization,’ this technique is employed for visualizing one’s pure *bodhicitta*. The moon is likened to the mind of Samantabhadra, and this potential is found to inhere in all

It may also be possible to infer a Taoist influence in the Chinese Buddhists' predilection for this harmony-interpenetration concept found in the Meditation on the Six Elements. Yet, the Chinese development of this idea is not a deviation from basic Mahāyāna doctrine, although the Chinese terms *yi nien* and *yi xin* are found in non-Buddhist classical Chinese writings. It is a widespread Mahāyāna tenet that all things that exist in the realm of the dharma (*dharmadhātu*) are interrelated and interdependent because they dependently co-arise.

The Tiantai and Huayan notions of *yi nien* and *yi xin* respectively, both emphasize direct perception of truth. To this extent, the influence of the Chinese Buddhist apocryphal text, *Awakening of Mahāyāna Faith* is likely. In the Meditation on the Six Elements, Shingon follows this tradition developed in China. The practitioner faces an image or a picture of Mahāvairocana and attempts to integrate with that deity, i.e., with all elements in the realm of the Dharma.

At least doctrinally, the ultimate goal of Shingon practice may be summed up as to realize buddhahood (or human-Buddha integration) in this lifetime (*sokushin jōbutsu*) (Murakami 23). In the case of both the *Ajikan* and the Meditation on the Six Elements, this means the mantra practitioner should realize a harmonious-interpenetration with the elements or, following the explanation in the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra*, “to know the self as it truly is” (Kiyota 1982:14). Yamasaki describes what this means in the context of *Ajikan* practice.

The practice has many forms of varying complexity, emphasizing different techniques and aspects of Mikkyo doctrine, but in all case centers on the sound, the form, and the meaning of the syllable A as a way to experience suprapersonal reality...Mikkyo sees this syllable as an embodiment of the true nature of the myriad phenomena of the universe, transcending birth and death, ephemerality and permanence, the one and

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sentient beings. This is the method whereby the ‘pure mind’ of sentient beings can be revealed. Mention of it is made in *Bodhicitta-śāstra...*” (White, II, 473).

the many, past and future, in a single symbolic form (Yamasaki 1988:190).

#### 4. The ‘A’ character used in the *Ajikan*.

As we have seen, the Shingon tradition values ‘A’ as the first letter of the Sanskrit alphabet and the basic vowel in all Sanskrit syllables. In Sanskrit, ‘A’ (‘an’ when preceding a vowel) can also be a negative prefix. In relation to this, Shingon defines ‘A’ as *anutpāda* (*honpushō*, 本不生), a term meaning non-arising (Nakamura 7). Many Shingon commentaries have been written on *anutpāda*. Perhaps the most representative one is that of Kakuban (1095-1143), the founder of New Interpretation Shingon (*Shingi shingonshū*). In a work entitled *The Secret [Tradition’s] Interpretation of “Aji” (Aji hishaku)*, Kakuban says ‘A’ is a verbal representation of emptiness and signifies eternal truth, the non-creatable, and the indestructible. As such, all things are distilled into and emerge from ‘A’ (Kushida 210ff). One of the most fundamental ideas in Shingon is that *anutpāda* is the state ascribed to *dharmakāya* Mahāvairocana (Nakamura 7; van der Veere 94). The goal in the *Ajikan* being becoming a Buddha in this lifetime, is to join with the deity in the sense of experiencing the state of original emptiness. ‘A’ here symbolizes the seed (*bīja*) of Mahāvairocana. Kakuban wrote at least ten manuals and treatises on the *Ajikan*.<sup>36</sup> In these writings, Kakuban explains that the ‘A’ syllable represents *anutpāda*, *bodhicitta* and that it is a symbol of the earth, upon which all things are based (van der Veere 96).

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<sup>36</sup> See van der Veere, 95.

Following the *Commentary on the Mahāvairocana-sūtra*, in both the *Ten Stages of Mind* and the *Jeweled Key to the Mysterious Storehouse* Kūkai identifies ‘A’ with five separate sounds. These are, *a* (阿), *ā* (阿長), *aṃ* (暗), *aḥ* (噫), *āḥ* (噫引)<sup>37</sup>. In a related way, many Indian texts, Hindu and Buddhist alike, describe how the syllable “OM,” considered sacred, is comprised of the three parts, ‘A,’ “U” and “M.” These parts are sometimes symbolized Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva respectively, or male, female and both genders (Kiyota, forthcoming).

The representation of the ‘A’ character that has become standardized in the Shingon *Ajikan* practice is written in Siddham lettering. Siddham, a variety of the Brāhmī script, was popularly used in the fourth and fifth centuries in India, the Gupta period. “The Siddham script owed its popularity in China and Japan especially to the rise of Mantrayāna, the esoteric School of the True Word. It was used in particular for writing *dhāraṇī* and mantra, and for the magic syllables known as *bījākṣara* or ‘germ-letters’” (van Gulik 7). The Shingon patriarch Amoghavajra and other Indian Tantric masters developed a variety of methods for transliterating Sanskrit by using Chinese graphs. However, the Indian Tantric masters who came to China in the fifth - sixth centuries, Śubhakarasiṃha, Vajrabodhi, and Amoghavajra, wrote using the Siddham script. For this reason and because the script was thought to render the syllables more powerful than if represented in Chinese, it was the Siddham script that became the style of writing favored by Chinese Buddhists above all others for Sanskrit mantra and *dhāraṇī*. It remains in use for that

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<sup>37</sup> Nakamura, 7.

purpose today in both China and Japan.<sup>38</sup> Siddham is believed to have still been in use in India around the year 1000 (van Gulik 7).

Since the Siddham script was used for transliterating Sanskrit words, especially mantras and *dhāraṇī*, it was considered a sacred script. The Tantric reverence for mantra syllables, both chanted and written, matched well with the long history in China of veneration of writing, for purposes from divination to government documents. Van Gulik observes, "...until recent years the Chinese considered it a sin to throw away scraps of paper bearing some written characters" (van Gulik 52). He describes the Chinese adaptation of writing Siddham characters that is used in the *Ajikan* in Japan today as follows.

After their arrival in China the Tantrik masters wrote Siddham with the ordinary Chinese writing brush rather than with the Indian reedpen; the latter was meant primarily for writing letters of small size dictated by the limited size of the palm leaf and the Chinese liked larger letters which do more justice to the calligraphic possibilities of Siddham...At the same time, however, they also employed on occasion a kind of wooden stylus, in Chinese called *mu-pi* "wooden brush"...a thin flat piece of wood shaped like a wedge...In Japan it is used to the present day for writing Siddham letters...Since in Chinese texts the characters are written in vertical columns, from top to bottom and from right to left, Chinese monks wrote Siddham texts as a rule in the same way (van Gulik 56-62).

Both 'A' and 'OM' appear as important syllables in ancient India texts. In the *Bhagavadgītā* (10:33), Kṛṣṇa says to Arjuna, "Of sounds I am the first sound, A" (Mascaró 87).

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<sup>38</sup> In these countries, it is referred to by the term *xitan* (Chinese, 悉曇) and *shittan* (Japanese), transliterations of Siddham. This name has given rise to some discussion in Buddhological literature. Van Gulik gives the following explanation for the term *siddham*. "When the Indian children were being taught the *varṇapāṭha*, the teacher would distribute among them small wooden writing boards where he had written out the letters...Now every time the teacher wrote a new paradigm on the writing board he would first write at the top the word *siddham* "success", *siddhir-astu* "may there be success!" p. 55.

In Vedic literature the syllable ‘*OM*’ is frequently used as an interjection. Ancient Indian yogins focused on ‘*OM*’ for concentration.

One theory claims that the composite of ‘*A*’ and ‘*OM*’ corresponds to *namo* (according to Kiyota (forthcoming), not an exact equivalent but close enough in sound when chanted that this association has been made). *Namo* is a term most commonly observed as an invocation in Buddhist services (e.g., *namo ratna-trayāya*, obeisance/salutation to the three jewels). In Shingon, these two syllables are connected to breathing, ‘*A*’ representing inhalation and ‘*OM*’ exhalation (Kiyota, forthcoming). Dōhan (1178-1252), a medieval Shingon monk, described these two syllables symbolically, identifying ‘*OM*’ as that which eliminates delusion (*shajyō*), and ‘*A*’ as that which reveals truth (*hyōtoku*).<sup>39</sup> As such, ‘*OM*’ and ‘*A*’ supplement one another, are frequently used individually as incantations and are sometimes conceived of as identical insofar as the purpose for which they are chanted is concerned. This identity issue was intensively studied and most popularly articulated from around the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries by scholars such as Dōhan, In’nyu (1435-1519) and Yusei (1562-1639). In 1966, Sakai Shinten, referring to the Tibetan translation of the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra*, asserted that ‘*OM*,’ rather than ‘*A*,’ is the basic syllable, and claimed that the employment of ‘*A*’ in Shingon is a revision made sometime in the past.<sup>40</sup> In fact, around the same time as Sakai’s assertion, pictures using the syllable ‘*OM*’ were found in the Kōyasan University Library, one drawn in 1772, another in 1799 and still another in 1801. Based on this evidence, Ono Junran, then also a

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<sup>39</sup> “*A-ji kan sho*,” in Mitsu’un’s *Ajikan hiketsu-shu*, p. 21. A private collection of the late Nakagawa Zenkyō.

<sup>40</sup> *Kōya-san jihō* (Kōya-san Newsletter), No. 1791, October 11, 1966.

professor at Kōyasan University, wrote an essay contending ‘OM’ preceded ‘A’ as a meditation devise.<sup>41</sup>

According to van Gulik, the *Ajikan* was already being taught in China by the Indian Tantric master Śubhakarasiṃha (van Gulik 72). Śubhakarasiṃha is believed to have been a missionary from the famous Indian institute of Tantric Buddhism, Nālandā. Since he first translated the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra* into Chinese shortly after its believed origin at that same Indian institution, it is difficult to accept the notion that ‘A’ was mistaken for ‘OM.’ Likewise, a subsequent Chinese translation made by Amoghavajra, also of India, yielded the same results: the ‘A’ character is used. Calligraphic renderings of the ‘A’ character attributed to both Kūkai’s direct master, Huigou (746-805), and Huigou’s master, the aforementioned Amoghavajra, still exist in preservation. For these reasons alone, the discrepancy between the Chinese and Tibetan versions concerning ‘OM’ as opposed to ‘A’ in the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra* can conservatively only be attributed to variations in lineage and more boldly characterized as an error on the part of the Tibetan version. Nevertheless, the ‘A’ is inherent in ‘OM’ and the present study finds no Indian traditions of meditation on the syllable ‘A’ as there are concerning ‘OM.’

Meditation on a given syllable can be found in many Mahāyāna texts. For example, the *Gaṇḍavyūha-sūtra*<sup>42</sup> and the *Great Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*<sup>43</sup> refer to the “forty-two syllable *dhāraṇī*,” beginning from ‘A.’ The *Dazhitulun* states that the forty-two syllables are the basis of

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<sup>41</sup> *Mikkyō bunka*, No. 80:1967, 29-40.

<sup>42</sup> *Mahā-vaipulya-buddha-avatamsaka-sūtra*, T. 9, 278.

<sup>43</sup> T. 8, 223.

all words.<sup>44</sup> In addition, Sanlun (the Chinese version of Indian Mādhyamika) and Tiantai texts describe the forty-two stages of bodhisattva practices in terms of forty-two syllables.

Likewise, in Shingon the *Ajikan* is just one of a number of very similar meditations using other syllables. Sharf observes, “Shingon ritual invocation is comprised of dozens, sometimes hundreds, of small ritual segments” (Sharf 12). Quoting a ritual text, he describes, for example, the Contemplation of the Three Mysteries (*sanmikkan*), which sounds very close to the *Ajikan*. “...imagine 想 [C. *kiang*, J. *sō*] that in between the palms and on top of the tongue and the heart there is a moon disk. On the disk is an eight-petaled lotus blossom, on top of which is the syllable *un*. The syllable changes and becomes a five-pronged vajra” (Sharf 13).

Likewise, Sharf quotes another ritual text describing the Contemplation of the Syllable Wheel (*jirinkan*). “...contemplate 觀 [C. *guan*, J. *kan*] as follows: In my heart there is an eight-petaled white lotus blossom, on top of which is a full moon disk. On top of the disk there are the syllables *on ha ra da han domei un*” (Sharf 26).

## 5. The Moon Disk and transformation of images.

Significantly, the ‘A’ character in the *Ajikan* is used as a beginning focal point, which then transforms in the mind of the practitioner, becoming a part of a series of changing images. Such transformation was mentioned above as also occurring in the Shingon Contemplation of the Three Mysteries (*sanmikkan*). Quoting a ritual manual, Sharf describes a similar change of images during the Shingon Contemplation of the Meditation Hall (*dōjōkan*).

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<sup>44</sup> T. 25, 1509.

Contemplate 觀念 as follows: In front [of me] is the syllable ah<sup>45</sup> (Japanese, pron.: aku). The syllable changes into a palatial hall of jewels... On the altar is the syllable hrīh (kiriku) which changes and becomes a crimson lotus blossom terrace. On top is the syllable a (a) which changes and becomes a full moon disk (Sharf 15).

Transformations of meditation objects similar or identical to that occurring during the *Ajikan* also appear in texts from other Indian traditions. Such is found in the second *sādhana* of the *Sāadhanamālā*, attributed to the Indian Tantric master Anupamarakṣita (fl. 1165) but containing passages traceable to as early as the seventh century (Gómez 319-20). One of several relevant sections in regards to this, reads as follows.

[Then] one should mentally perceive, [as if present] in one's own heart, the first vowel, "A" which gradually turns into the orb of the moon. In the middle of this moon one should see a lovely blue lotus. On the filaments of this lotus one will see the spotless orb of [a second] moon, upon which [appears] the yellow seed-syllable (*bīja*) *Tāṃ*" (Gómez 321-2).

In this passage, the syllable 'TĀM' represents the principle deity of visualization in the *sādhana*, Tārā. This is similar to the representation of Mahāvairocana with the syllable 'A' in the *Ajikan*. The *Sāadhanamālā* continues, describing the changes in the objects of meditation.

Thereupon, one should bring to mind [a] detailed [visual image of the] blessed holy Tārā. [One should see her as] proceeding from the yellow germ-syllable Tāṃ [one had previously visualized] resting on the spotless orb of the moon within the filaments of the full-blown blue lotus [growing] in the middle of the lunar orb [on the syllable A] originally visualized in one's own heart (Gómez 325).

Here in one short passage of a Sanskrit text, possibly existing before the time of the writing of *Record of Oral Instruction on the Ajikan*, we find more of the standardized components for concentration used in the *Ajikan* than in any of Kūkai's own writings. These

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<sup>45</sup> *āh*

include the mind, the heart, the moon disk, the lotus, the syllable ‘A,’ the identification of the visualized deity with a seed syllable, and the progressive transformation of these components one into the other. These same images occur repeatedly throughout the *Sādhanamālā*. Not only does this similarity lend evidence of a relationship in lineage, but it also reaffirms the point that the ‘A’ was not a mistake in translation of the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra* into Chinese.

It will be remembered from the discussion above that the ‘A’ syllable is also a symbol for earth. This is true in Kūkai’s discussion of the six elements as it is in Kakuban’s writings on the *Ajikan*. Similar to the observation of the moon disk in the *Ajikan, The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)* by Buddhaghosa (fl. early fifth century), revered by Theravāda Buddhists, describes the “earth *kaṣiṇa*,” a disk used as an object of meditation. Fashioned smooth from clay or earth, the disk is concentrated upon and begins to change into a “counterpart sign” in the mind of the practitioner. The text (IV 31) reads, “The difference between the earlier learning sign and the counterpart sign is this. In the learning sign any fault in the *kaṣiṇa* is apparent. But the counterpart sign appears as if breaking out from the learning sign, and a hundred times, a thousands times more purified...like the moon’s disk coming out from behind a cloud...(Ñanamoli 125). Later (in IX 121), we find another transformation of the earth *kaṣiṇa*. The practitioner’s experience is described as follows. “...well knowing the danger in materiality, when he removes whichever *kaṣiṇa* [concept he was contemplating], whether that of the earth *kaṣiṇa* or another, and applies his mind to the space [that remains], which is the escape from materiality, then his mind enters into that [space] without difficulty. So compassion is the basic support for the sphere of boundless space, but not for what is beyond that” (Ñanamoli 317). Likewise (in X 6), “Then, when he has spread out the *kaṣiṇa* to the limit of the world-sphere, or

as far as he likes, he removes the *kaṣiṇa* [materiality] by giving his attention to the space touched by it...” (Ñānamoli 321). It will be remembered from the passage from the *Bodhicitta-śāstra*, quoted by Kūkai above, that the Shingon practitioner of concentration on the ‘A’ character (if not the *Ajikan per se* in that document) is instructed to magnify the “moon until its circumference encompasses the entire universe and its magnitude becomes as inclusive as space” (Hakeda 220). It is believed that the author of these similar passages in the *Visuddhimagga*, Buddhaghosa, came from India, traveling to Sri Lanka, in the early 5<sup>th</sup> century, where he consulted early Buddhist Pāli texts as the basis for his writing.

#### 6. The Lotus Flower of the *Ajikan* and *Hṛdaya*.

In China, before Kūkai’s arrival, such renowned masters as Zuen, Fazhang, Won-cheuk and others had composed written commentaries on the *Heart Sūtra*. In Japan, Chigon wrote such a commentary and Saichō wrote his own *Commentary on the Heart Sūtra*. The original Sanskrit word used for “the mind” in the *Heart Sūtra* is *hṛdaya*. In the Chinese rendering of that sūtra, this has been understood to mean the deep mind (心要, Chinese, *xinyao*) (Yamasaki 1982:33). While the *Heart Sūtra* is widely regarded as a summarization of the *Great Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, in his *The Secret Key to the Heart Sūtra*, Kūkai considers the entire *Heart Sūtra* a mantra. He writes, “*The Heart Sūtra of the Prajñāpāramitā* is the dharmic gate for the great heart mantra and *samādhi* of the *Great Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*.”<sup>46</sup> According to Yamasaki, in this passage *hṛdaya* is understood as the heart mantra of the *Great Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* (Yamasaki 1982:33). The *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* is symbolic of human wisdom and Tantric practice. At the same time,

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<sup>46</sup> See Hakeda 264.

*hṛdaya* is also the physical heart of the bodhisattva. This is to say, through Tantric practice, such as the *Ajikan* meditation, the wisdom (*prajñā*) of the physical heart becomes activated.

From a Shingon point of view, the ‘revealed teachings’ of Buddhism (*kengyō*) speaks the philosophy of the Dharma while mysterious teachings (*mikkyō*) explain the human side (Yamasaki 1982:33). Indeed, this depiction is in line with Kūkai’s thought. Accordingly, *kengyō* interprets the *Heart Sūtra* as a means towards manifestation of the non-tangible mind (*hṛdaya*), while Kūkai interprets it from the perspective of the activation of the human heart (also *hṛdaya*). Moreover, by setting a formula of five components comprising the *Ajikan* (*hṛdaya*, *citta*, the ‘A’ character, the lotus flower and the moon disk) not only are the pre-existing separate components systematized, but they are also solidified in terms of what Kūkai saw as concrete physical reality (*tathatā*). We find this idea expressed as follows in Kūkai’s *The Secret Key to the Heart Sutra*. “The Buddha Dharma is nowhere remote. It is in our heart; it is close to us. Suchness is nowhere external. If not within our body, where can it be found?” (Hakeda 263).

In the *Upaniṣads*, a variety of terms are used in relationship to “mind.” These include *manas*, *citta*, *viññāna* and *hṛdaya*. In a sense, the mind became itemized by means of these terms. For example, the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* says, “The mind (or intention: *manas*) is clearly greater than speech...intention is clearly greater than the mind...thought is clearly greater than intention, deep reflection (*citta*) is clearly greater than thought...perception (*viññāna*) is clearly greater than deep reflection...” (Olivelle 158-160). The same *Upaniṣad* is greatly concerned with speculation on the syllable ‘OM’ being the High Chant (*Udgīta*) of the *Sāmavedic* Soma sacrifice.

The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, thought to have been subjected to the same editors as the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* due to many similarities (Olivelle 95) says, “Heart (*hṛdaya*) becomes king of life, who is Brahman, who is everything and who is the three sounds of *huri, da, yamu.*”

Thus, *hṛdaya* is interpreted in many *Upaniṣads* as the heart within which abides the *ātman*. The *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* expresses this well known idea, “That which exists in the middle of the heart becomes *ātman*.” In addition, the heart is seen as a lotus flower, “now, that which exists in the middle of the body of the Brahman becomes the house (the heart), which is a lotus flower” (Yamasaki 1982:34).

In Buddhism, particularly Yogācāra doctrine, which analyzes the world from a perspective of “mind only,” the terms *hṛdaya*, *citta*, *manas* and *vijñāna* are used as designations. For the activities of the mind, the term *citta* is mainly used (Yamasaki 1982:34). In comparison, *hṛdaya* is not often used. For example, in the *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra* the following statement occurs, “This is the nature of all Buddhas of the three periods, past, present and future, and the mind of the absolute aspect of nature.” The editors of the *Taisho Tripiṭaka* append the following note to this passage, “Mind here is from *hṛdaya* in Sanskrit. *Hṛdaya* is called the mind in the Song Dynasty. That is, it is like the mind of a plant. It is not different from the mind of mindfulness. Mind of mindfulness is called *citta* in Sanskrit.”<sup>47</sup>

Zhiyi (538-97), a Chinese patriarch of the Tiantai tradition, writes in his famous work *Stopping and Seeing (Mohe zhiguan)*,<sup>48</sup> “*Citta* is a Sanskrit word. It is called mind, which is mind of mindfulness. In India mind is also called *hṛdaya*. This becomes the mind of a plant” (Cleary

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<sup>47</sup> T. 16, 483b.

<sup>48</sup> T. 46, 1911.

1997:151). While Zhiyi here has considered *hṛdaya* to be the mind for plants, he does not connect that term to beings with personality.

The *Commentary on the Mahāvairocana-sūtra* says, “This is the location of the mind, that is to say, the physical mind of sentient beings exists in the middle of them. This mind is *hṛdaya*.”<sup>49</sup> In Kūkai’s *Secret Storehouse Record* he writes, “That called *hṛdaya* is in the middle of (a being)...*Citta* is a term used for mindful knowledge as well as the mind for sentient beings. The mind becomes that located in the center of beings, *citta* also took on the name *hṛdaya*” (Yamasaki 1982:34). Here, *hṛdaya* and *citta* are represented as being identical. In the same writing Kūkai says, “the mind of sentient beings is like a closed lotus flower. The mind for holy beings is like the opening (of the lotus flower)” (Yamasaki 1982:34).

In Sanskrit, *hṛdaya* is a part of the physical body, the heart organ. In some Indian writings, the mind (*citta*) may be seen as residing within the heart (*hṛdaya*). In Buddhism, rather than considering the mind a part of the physical heart, emphasis is typically placed on its non-material aspect or spiritual function. For this reason, in Buddhist texts, *citta* often became the main theme and the physical heart (*hṛdaya*) with characteristics was forgotten. However, in the tradition of Kūkai and others of Tantric lineage, ‘thusness’ of the here and now (*tathatā*) is emphasized. Accordingly, Buddhist philosophical speculation is all but prohibited and once again the flesh and blood of *hṛdaya* is emphasized.

Conclusion.

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<sup>49</sup> T. 39, 705c.

This paper has identified several components of the *Ajikan* of shared importance with various traditions and central to each. Such components include the primacy of the ‘*A*’ syllable, identification of the ‘*A*’ syllable with a deity or *ātman*, the appearance of the moon disk as an object of meditation, mental transformation of the moon disk and the written ‘*A*’ character during meditative practice, identification of the moon disk with the mind and the lotus with the heart of the practitioner. While Kūkai’s writings indicate he advocated Meditation on the Six Elements, there is insignificant evidence therein to show with certainty that he promoted the *Ajikan* as such. Nevertheless, materials examined in this paper suggest the components of the Shingon *Ajikan* can be located within earlier traditions of Indian Buddhist Tantric and non-Buddhist meditation practice. For this reason, it is unlikely that the *Ajikan* was of Chinese origin or that ‘*A*’ was a mistaken reading of ‘*OM*’.

#### ABBREVIATIONS

- KZ.* *Kōbō daishi zenshū* (the *Complete Works of Kōbō Daishi*).  
*KKZ.* *Kōbō daishi kukai zenshū* (the *Complete Works of Kōbō Daishi Kūkai*).  
*T.* *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* (the *Taishō Tripiṭaka*, i.e., the complete Chinese Buddhist Canon compiled in Japan during the Taishō era).

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