

Japanese Tantra, the Tachikawa-ryū,
and Ryōbu Shintō

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Scholars have often tried to define Buddhism through its theory of causality. The Buddhist conception of karmic retribution, although derived from Brahmanic thought, is usually presented as the most significant advance, not only over Brahmanism but also over such other religious trends as Daoism and Confucianism, which emphasized a system of cosmological connections based on “correlative thinking.” In this respect, it is significant that Tantric Buddhism also emphasized cosmological connections rather than linear causality, and seems to have returned to the Vedic conception of man as a microcosm. This macro-microcosmic conception of the universe as emanating from a first principle is a major departure from early Buddhism which, never overly concerned with cosmogony, instead focused on ontogeny; that is, on the series of causes forming the so-called twelve-linked chain—from ignorance to birth and death—leading to the emergence of the individual.

Tantra, an offshoot of the Vedic-Brahmanic and yogic traditions, is first of all a system of correspondences between microcosm and macrocosm, man and the universe. Whereas early Buddhism was defined by its ascetic world rejection and its conception of man as an ultimately otherworldly being, Tantra may be defined as its reintegration of the world into the soteriological path—since man and the world are now fundamentally identical. By reintegrating the world into its practice, Tantra also reintegrated sexuality, one of the world’s main driving forces. Consequently, sexuality and fertility came to constitute basic elements of the Tantric worldview. If the return to primordial unity remains the distant horizon of this metaphysical teaching, Tantric practice is by contrast governed by a fundamental duality, usually defined in sexual terms. Thus, Tantra is in a true sense a nondual dualism: whereas the theory emphasizes nondualism, the practice is by and large characterized by dualism.

Tantric Buddhism is therefore not, as some still believe, a degeneration of Bud-

dhism caused by the deleterious influence of popular Indian culture. It is rather a highly philosophical and ritual synthesis, a development of the notion of the Two Truths (that is, ultimate and conventional truths). This feature accounts for the fact that Tantric Buddhism was readily able to integrate another complex cosmological system, the Chinese theory of yin and yang and of the five agents. It is this synthesis, effected during the eighth and ninth centuries in China and Japan, that became the core of Japanese Tantra. Japanese Tantra—or at least its mainstream, redefined as “esoteric Buddhism” (*mikkyō*)—attempted to “purify” itself of the sexual elements that characterized Indian Tantra; that is, to elude sexuality and return to the strictly ascetic conception of early Buddhism. This attempt was not entirely successful, however. In any case, it is important to see that sexuality in Tantra is of an eminently cosmological and ritual nature. The union of the male and female principles is seen as the source of all things, expressed in Tantric mythology as the sexual union of the god or buddha with his female partner, who represents his energy (*śakti*).

By becoming the main discourse of medieval Japanese ideology, Tantric Buddhism contributed to the “Indianization” of Japan. Matters were, of course, more complex, since in the meantime Japan had already integrated the principles of Chinese cosmology. This integration took another step forward with the rise of the Tachikawa-ryū. This branch of Shingon has been traced back to a priest named Ninkan (fl. twelfth century). After being exiled to the town of Tachikawa (in Izu province), Ninkan studied yin-yang cosmology (*onmyōdō*) and incorporated cosmological elements into Shingon doctrine. His teaching soon flourished, and, according to tradition, was systematized by Raiyu (1126–1304). However, the Tachikawa-ryū was eventually declared to be “heretical.” The reasons alleged were essentially doctrinal, having to do with the “immoral” elements in the Tachikawa teachings. This led to the interdiction of the Tachikawa-ryū and to the destructions of its scriptures, at the end of the Muromachi period. Nevertheless, Tachikawa ideas, which in some respects were a resurgence of Indian Tantra, continued to influence Buddhist discourse and even provided significant components for the late medieval and early modern worldview.

In India, Tantric Buddhism had already assimilated local Hindu gods into its pantheon. This synthesis was so successful that Buddhism, losing its sharp distinctive features, was eventually reabsorbed into the fold of Hinduism. On the contrary, in Japan, a similar synthesis triggered a reaction and led to the emergence of a distinctly “Japanese” religion named Shintō. This tradition, which emerged in centers like Ise Shrine, finds its origins in a particular brand of Japanese Tantra, the so-called Ryōbu Shintō. This new ideology, according to which Shinto deities were the local manifestations of “original” buddhas, led, for instance, to the identification of the sun goddess Amaterasu with the buddha Vairocana (Dainichi, “Great Sun” in Japanese), and of the two shrines of Ise with the two great maṇḍalas of Shingon (the Womb realm and Vajra realm maṇḍalas). These two maṇḍalas were used in the Tachikawa-ryū as symbols of sexual polarity, the Tachikawa influence being very strong in this Tantric Ise tradition.

This “nondual dualism” is illustrated in such works as the *Ise denki*, or, to give its full (and rather enigmatic) title, the *Ise shōsho Nihongi yūshiki honshō nin denki* (Transmitted Record of the *Nihongi*, of the Consciousness, Fundamental Nature, and Humanity, produced by I-Se). According to its colophon, this work was copied in 1537 at the Myōō-in, a temple near Ise, after being transmitted by the priest Sonkai (1472–1543) to his disciple Ryōkan. The *Ise denki* is divided into ten sections, which treat of various aspects of the esoteric Buddhist tradition with regard to Ise. Here we will present the first three sections, describing the main phases of the cosmic emanation process—which are also, in reverse order, those of the soteriological process. Even so, it will be difficult to provide a simple idea of the text’s intricate symbolism, encoded in multiple layers of meanings that appear at first blush to be mere repetitions of numerical symbols (sets of polarities, triads, and pentads). On closer examination, the text describes a maṇḍala, that is, in a dynamic form, the cosmogonic or psychogenic process of emanation (and resorption). The following is but a preliminary attempt to decode some of these meanings.

The name Ise is interpreted here in a very idiosyncratic fashion, typical of medieval exegesis. The two graphemes (Sino-Japanese characters) of this compound are used to symbolize the fundamental polarity out of which everything arises. Thus, “I” and “Se” become the Tantric and Shintō equivalents of the Chinese yin and yang. They are also symbols of (and symbolized by) the two great Shingon maṇḍalas. In other Ryōbu Shintō texts, the two principles of yin and yang (and the two maṇḍalas) are associated with the two primordial Shintō deities Izanami and Izanagi, whose lovemaking brought about a Genesis of sorts. This is why, in the following translation, I will read the term as I-Se, to emphasize that it is the cosmological polarity, more than the geographical toponym in the Kii peninsula, that is being referenced.

1. ON THE HARMONIOUS UNION OF HEAVEN AND EARTH OF I-SE

In the so-called harmonious union of Heaven and Earth of I-Se tradition, beings are the flower, earth is the tathāgata Vairocana of the two Womb and Vajra realms; and beings are the fundamentally unborn calyx of the letter *a*. Thus, it is written: “If your own mind is pure, all the buddhas dwell in it; when the mind with a single voice recollects the letter *a*, all the buddhas constantly preach the Law.” The letter *a* in question is none other than the two characters I-Se, and it is the origin of man and woman. This is why it is said in the esoteric teaching: “All beings have in their chest a letter *a*, whose sequence is as follows: within the lotus appears the moon disk; and within the moon disk appears the letter *a*, which transforms into five colors: blue, red, yellow, white, and black.” Under this letter *a* is a three-pronged vajra, representing the six sense faculties of beings. It is also said that the two buddhas and the four bodhisattvas dwell there, sharing the six kinds of ritual implements. . . . Thus, the one-pronged

vajra is the stem of the lotus flower; it is the body of all beings. The five-pronged vajra is the root of the lotus flower; it is the right and left feet of beings. The three-pronged vajra is the petals of the lotus flower; it is the right and left arms of beings.

In I-Se, we find the gate of the letter *a*, the first of the forty-two letters. The five-pronged vajra is the great earth of the Dharma realm; it is called the “Palace of Suchness.” The three-pronged vajra is the unborn principle and wisdom inside the mind; it is the retribution earth of the retribution body. The one-pronged vajra is the essence of the principle outside the body; it is the wonderful domain of ultimate reality.

It is also said: “The letter *a* is the bodily karma of the dharma body; the moon disk is the verbal karma of the retribution body; the lotus is the mental karma of the metamorphosis body.” These three bodies of the fundamental essence of the three periods are also symbolized as follows: the one-pronged vajra is the bodily karma of dharma body; the three-pronged vajra is the verbal karma of the retribution body; the five-pronged vajra is the mental karma of the metamorphosis body. When above and below unite harmoniously, one speaks of the dharma body of the six great elements. All classes of beings without exception are endowed with this nature. Thus, in the interval of the unconditioned sound, the phoneme *a* arises and the fruits of buddhahood are perfected. If one knows and realizes this letter *a*, even the four serious offences and the five transgressions turn into the merits of the maṇḍala. If one cultivates this letter, the three poisons—ignorance, greed, and hatred—are transmuted into the secret practices of yoga.

The “harmonious union of heaven and earth” is the union of I-Se. “I” is the tathāgata Vairocana of the Womb realm; “Se” the tathāgata Vairocana of the Vajra realm. It is also said: “When one consider the origins of the letter *a*, it is the tathāgata Vairocana of the Womb realm; it is heaven. It is none other than I-Se. With the letter *ba* (*va* in Sanskrit), again: it is the tathāgata Vairocana of the Vajra realm, the earth; it is also I-Se. If one divides the human body into five sections, the top of the head corresponds to the realm of the buddhas; the right arm to that of the bodhisattvas; the left arm to that of the pratyekabuddhas; the right leg to that of the devas; the left leg to that of the śrāvakas. When one thus unites the heaven and earth of I-Se, the letter is on the tip of each of the fingers of the four hands and each of the toes of the four feet. These letters correspond to the bodhisattvas of the forty-two stages. The two highest stages are those of the two buddhas of I-Se, who are man and woman. The man’s stage is always that of a buddha body. Man is ruled by heaven, woman by the earth. This is what is called the union of heaven and earth. The seed-letters born from “I” are red; those born from “Se” are white. . . . This is called the harmonious union of heaven and earth, of the two Womb and Vajra realms.

Because Indian metaphysics takes the Word or Speech (*vāc*) to be the ultimate principle, we need first to explain briefly Indian conceptions regarding language.

Most significant in this respect are the forty-nine or fifty phonemes of the Sanskrit phonetic system, called *mātṛkāś* or “little Mothers” because they are seen as the source of all sounds—hence of all things. Incidentally, these phonemes served as model for the Japanese kana syllabary, attributed to Kūkai (774–835), the founder of Shingon. There is another arrangement of forty-two phonemes, called *a-ra-pa-ca-na* after the sequence of its five first phonemes. It is this arrangement that is mentioned here in association with the forty-two stages of the bodhisattva’s career. In both cases, the first of these phonemes is the syllable *a*, which came to take on mystical values, not only as the symbol of all beginnings but also as constitutive of all other syllables; and furthermore, as the marker of the negative (as in English and French, two other Indo-European languages). This phoneme thus came to express the ultimate principle, from which everything emanates. As a vowel, *a* is also the first of the sixteen vowels of the Sanskrit “garland of letters,” which includes *ṁ* (the anusvāra or bindu) and *ḥ* (the visarga), two phonemes said to give birth to the series of consonants, from *ka* to *ha*. If this vocalic-consonantal sequence is perceived in cosmogonic terms as symbolizing the emanation process, the reverse sequence indicates the resorption process, which is that taken by the Tantric practitioner who is intent on returning to its source. This is why our text emphasizes the uttering of the single sound: this inarticulate sound is the *nāda*, the primal manifestation of the absolute, the knowledge of which is tantamount to deliverance. This is the sound that corresponds to the phoneme *ṁ*, the bindu (“dot” or “drop”), marked graphically by a dot above the syllable. This bindu is a “drop” of phonic but also photic, or luminous, energy, that is temporarily collected before again dividing itself to create the multiplicity of consonants and the totality of things. This nasal resonance is said to be born from the union of the god and his śakti, an idea expressed graphically by two bindus, red and white, fusing to form a “mixed bindu.” The bindu, in short, is the point of convergence and expansion; it symbolizes, therefore it is, the Absolute; or rather, it represents the point of contact with the source of energy. Hence the importance of mantras, and their magical but also cosmogonic efficacy, uniting sound and breath, and the cosmic and human planes.

To summarize: from the phonetic standpoint, the energy of sound, born from the sexual union of the god and his consort, first creates the sixteen vowels, before concentrating into the bindu, and then disseminating, through the visarga (graphically represented as two bindus) into the consonants. In cosmogonic terms, the initial duality first expands, forming a first level; then concentrates into a drop, which subdivides into three or five elements to form a second level, before further engendering the multiplicity of things. From the standpoint of generic Tantric meditation, this may be visualized as the generation of three maṇḍalas: the practitioner first visualizes the god and his śakti in sexual union. This vision merges into a single point of pure light (the bindu), from which another maṇḍala arises, divided into five colored sectors. At the center is an eight-petaled lotus, which serves as a dais for the god, from whom emerge the four deities of the cardinal directions, who in turn produce the four subordinate deities of the four inter-

mediate directions. The practitioner then visualizes another maṇḍala, the jewel palace, representing the human world, at the center of which the god and his consort are engaged in sexual union, surrounded by lesser deities.

This dynamic may also be expressed in terms of the mantra *Oṃ* (*a-hūṃ*, in Japanese *a-un*). Here again, the emanation process starts with a duality, or rather the union of two principles, and resorbs into unity with the “adornment” of the bindu. For reasons that have little to do with phonetics, the two phonemes and the bindu, *a-u-n*, are replaced in the *Ise denki* by the two ideograms I-Se. The “harmonious union” of these two principles is not only phonetic but also sexual, and indeed the sexual metaphor pervades our text, giving some credibility to the claim that Tachikawa rituals involved sexual intercourse between the priest and his female partner. Whatever the case, the phoneme *a* is said to change into five phases (and five colors), giving rise to a fivefold symbolism that is another leit-motiv of this text. These “five *as*” (called the “five turns” or the “five dots” of the *a*, because they are expressed graphically by dots) are: the short *a*, the long *a* (*ā*), the bindu (*aṃ*), the visarga (*aḥ*), and finally the synthesis of all these: *aḥṃ* (or *āḥ*).

The phoneme *a* is also said to be “the jade gate” of a woman; that is, her vulva, the source of all buddhas and human beings. As we will see, the female womb is assimilated to the ultimate principle, the primordial chaos, before the emergence of the buddhas and of the world. This image is reminiscent of Courbet’s famous painting of a woman’s vulva, entitled “The Origin of the World.” In Japanese Tantra, this letter *a*, as ultimate principle, is also the cosmic buddha Vairocana, represented at the center of the maṇḍala (or cosmic realm) that emanates from him. In Indian Tantra, the deity is often represented in cosmic union with his śakti (or female energy), whereas in Japanese Tantra this element is often downplayed (it is implied, however, in the fact that Vairocana is androgynous). This conception of the deity as a polarized (and sexualized) couple, masculine and feminine, is the central characteristic of Tantra. Here, the reference to the “two buddhas of I-Se” in the context of sexual union is more in line with the Indian conception.

Whereas Indian culture favors orality, Chinese and Japanese cultures emphasize the written letter—as shown by this text. Thus, the grapheme *a* (together with its phoneme) comes to play an important role in the Shingon meditation known as “Aji-kan” (contemplation of the grapheme *a*). In this meditation, the practitioner is told to visualize the clear white disk of the full moon, and in this disk the letter *a* (written in a particular script known as Siddham) on a lotus. This visualization is a dynamic creation process, the creation of a mental maṇḍala from the central buddha Vairocana, through the four buddhas of the cardinal directions (in the sequence E, S, W, N) and the four bodhisattvas of the ordinal directions (SE, SW, NW, NE), down to the peripheral deities and the multiplicity of sentient beings. Our text merely alludes to the principal phases of this process, as they are visualized—that is, enacted—by the practitioner. But here, instead of the emanation process—from unity to multiplicity—we are dealing with a resorption

process in three phases—from multiplicity (symbolized by the lotus and its petals), through oneness (symbolized by the moon disk), to the ultimate principle (the letter *a*). The basic schema—simply alluded to here, but more explicit in Indian sources—remains the same: the energy of the two principles is first re-sorbed into one point (*bindu*), before evolving into a pentad, from which multiplicity evolves. In the embryological terms of section 3, the drops (red and white) of mother and father unite to form a bindu, which evolves into a formed embryo possessed of five limbs; the subsequent birth of this pentadic being marks the emergence of another level of reality or consciousness: the creation of a new world, the “jeweled palace,” which the *Ise denki* calls the “Palace [or Capital] of Suchness.”

The phases of emanation are often described as being three or five in number. The three phases are here described in terms of the three most common types of vajras, a ritual instrument used in Shingon ritual. The number of prongs of the vajra (one, three, or five) lends itself to all kinds of symbolism. This is particularly true of the five-pronged vajra, called the “human-shaped vajra” owing to its vague resemblance to the human body. Our texts manipulate these numerical categories ad nauseam, in order to reinforce the equivalence between macrocosm (the universe) and microcosm (the human body). Here, the three types of vajras first correspond to the three parts of the lotus (the stem, the root, and the petals), as well as to the three sections of the human body (the head and torso, the legs, and the arms). They also represent the three types of karmic retribution caused by acts of the mouth, body, and mind. Thus, reaching the level of the letter *a* means returning to the source of everything, the stage before anything whatsoever arises; and it cancels all the evil karma one may have accumulated in the past. Likewise, the three symbols of the lotus, the moon, and the letter *a* correspond to the three bodies of the Buddha, from its most down-to-earth form, the metamorphosis body (*nirmāṇa-kāya*) to the most absolute, the dharma body (*dharmakāya*)—with both relative and absolute being mediated by the retribution body (*sambhoga-kāya*), seen only by beings who have acquired merits through practice.

The text mentions six buddhas; that is, the two buddhas of I-Se and the four buddhas of the cardinal directions. Here, as in Indian Tantra, Vairocana is represented as a divine polarity. These six buddhas, symbolizing the six elements of Shingon Buddhism, are also represented by ritual instruments, namely, two sets of three vajras, symbolizing, respectively, the microcosm (the human body) and macrocosm. These three vajras also represent the three levels of reality, the three maṇḍalas: the five-pronged vajra symbolizes the pentadic human world (the “Palace of Suchness”); the three-pronged vajra the intermediary level of the duality of the two principles; and the one-pronged vajra the ultimate reality. Thus, the sequence from five-pronged to three-pronged to one-pronged vajra represents the cosmic resorption from pentadic reality to duality to unity, as experienced symbolically by the practitioner. Again, the two series of three bodies symbolized by the three symbols (the letter *a*, the moon disk, and the lotus on the one hand; and the three types of vajra on the other) represent the bodies of the buddha

Vairocana and of sentient beings, whose “harmonious fusion” constitutes the “dharma body made of the six elements”—that is, the body of the enlightened being, or of the embryo in the mother’s womb.

Recall that the process of emanation begins with the sexual union of the two polar opposites, the male deity and his female śakti (energy) or, in Ryōbu Shintō terms, the “I” and “Se” of Ise (the character *se*, not so incidentally, happens to mean “energy”). This union is presented in Chinese cosmological terms as a union of heaven and earth, of yin and yang. In Tantric terms, the emanation process is first a phonetic one, from the first to the last of the forty-two phonemes of the *a-ra-pa-ca-na* sequence. In the translated passage, the first two letters *a* and *va* (or *vaṃ* with the bindu) symbolize the “two buddhas of I-Se,” that is, Vairocana in his two aspects, in the Womb and Vajra realms. The remaining forty letters are associated (and written on) the twenty fingers and toes, realizing a microcosmic/phonetic body, as well as the soteriological path of the bodhisattva’s career, with its forty-two stages. These letters are said to be either female or male, arising from the female principle (“I”) or the male principle (“Se”). Their respective colors, red and white, refer to the Indian (and Sino-Japanese) belief that the human embryo is formed by the union of the blood of the mother and the semen of the father. The two letters *a* and *va* are also the first of the sequence *a/va/ra/ha/ka*, representing the syllables of the five elements (earth, water, fire, wind, space).

2. ON THE EIGHT-PETALED LOTUS OF I-SE

The “eight-petaled lotus” is the great earth of the dharma realm of the harmonious union of the two Womb and Vajra sections. The above-mentioned “harmonious union” of the two male and female bodies, with their four arms and four feet, is this “eight-petaled lotus.” It is the source of all things. Thus, “capital of the suchness of innate awakening” refers to the gate of the letter *a*, the first of the forty-two letters. One also calls this the making of the Tathāgata. The two dharmas of consciousness and body are called “unborn.” The Dharma gate of the two truths, conventional and ultimate, means that all things under heaven are the body of the Buddha; everything contains this lotus. You must inquire well into this and realize its truth. Without the ultimate reality of the suchness of ultimate and conventional truths, in which concentration and wisdom are harmoniously united, nothing could come to life. Like the forms of the seeds of the five wheels, the Buddha’s mind sustains the sweet and wondrous practices of the Three Secrets. All the actions of sentient beings, without exception, are contained in the sound of the wisdom of ultimate reality. What a pity! Failing to realize this from lack of wisdom we are born in this world, and in the end we die, having forgotten the great merits of innate awakening. It is a shame not to have realized I-Se until now. The resonance of the voice at the moment of birth, all this is the suchness of I-Se. This is why it is said in

the scripture: “The actions truly manifested by all beings, the awakening realized by the buddhas, the wondrous and subtle practices: all of these have to be like what the Buddha spoke.” It is also said: “He explained that verbal characteristics, words and speech, are all mantras; corporeal characteristics, actions and movements, all are secret seals (*mudrās*); mental characteristics, thoughts, all are secret contemplation.” This is why, when sentient beings are born, the eight-petaled lotus of the mind/heart is the great earth of the fundamentally unborn letter *a*. When one is born, one expresses through words the wondrous practice of I-Se; when one dies, too, one returns to the great earth of the suchness of innate awakening. “Fundamentally unborn” means that one must realize the principle, for a long time constantly playing on the terrace of the secret words; “to obtain the wondrous practice of Sha-na” simply means that one must become the mind described in this teaching. The eight petals are the letter *a*, and this letter *a* is the jade gate of woman.

In this second section, the symbolism of the lotus is brought to the forefront. The eight-petaled lotus in question is that found at the center of the Womb realm maṇḍala. It represents the emanation process of the world, but also, in human terms, sexual union—and the Tachikawa-ryū did in fact graphically represent a man and woman making love on a giant lotus as an expression of its ultimate secret. This lotus also represents the mother’s womb, the source of all beings, whence the phoneme *a*. It finally expresses, in ontogenic terms, the mind/heart of the embryo, from which various types of consciousness arise. The sexual union is further expressed by various polarities such as consciousness and body, ultimate and conventional truth, or concentration and wisdom—the two main elements of Buddhist practice. One such polarity seems to imply a play on words on the expression *sha-na*, which is an abbreviation for Vairocana, but also a reference to the two Chinese demonstrative pronouns: the “this” and “that” that symbolize duality.

Here again, we have an emphasis on the identity between the microcosm and the macrocosm, between the various phenomena and the cosmic buddha Vairocana. This identity is expressed in terms of the five wheels (*cakras*) of the Indian tradition, or of the “three secrets” of the Shingon tradition. The primal cry of the child at birth is said to be the primordial name of I-Se. In other sources, the two phonemes *a-un* (or *a-a*, *ha-ha*) are the orgasmic sounds uttered at the peak of sexual union. Not only these sounds, but all others, are seen (or heard) as mantras; that is, as expressions of ultimate reality, as the voice of the cosmic Buddha. Likewise, all gestures are *mudrās*, symbolic gestures, gestures of Vairocana; and all thoughts are Vairocana’s contemplation. In the Shingon tradition, these represent the “three mysteries” of speech, body, and mind. Thus, this section illustrates the reintegration of the world into the soteriological path.

3. METHOD OF INITIAL COMPLETION OF I-SE

The first stage is illustrated by a circle, in which are written two letter *a*'s in Siddham script, above two Sino-Japanese characters meaning red and white; and, at the center, Mind and Lewdness.

The essence and flesh of the mother, symbolizing the Womb realm (eastern direction), represent the mind of one suchness of the harmonious union of I-Se. The essence and bones of the father, symbolizing the Vajra realm, are the virtue of energy of the harmonious union of heaven and earth. This is the essence of the five limbs [according to the I-Se teaching]; it is the primordial body, the seed-syllable *ran*, the beginning of the passions of greed and love, when father and mother have intercourse, and the two drops, red and white, unite harmoniously. The red letter *a* is the efficiency of the mother's emission; it is the seed-letter that constitutes the flesh of beings. The white letter *a* is the breath of the father's emission; it is what constitutes the bones of beings. These two letter *a*'s, red and white, are the universal body of the Vairocana of the two Womb and Vajra realms; they constitute a buddha body in which causes and effects are constantly abiding. This is why the Vairocana of the two realms as well as the five hundred Worthies and the seven hundred Worthies are enshrined in the body of beings. This awakening of I-Se means to become a buddha in this very body.

The second stage is illustrated graphically by a kind of vessel with two horns, in which are inscribed the letters *a* and *ban*.

It corresponds to the tathāgata Ratnasambhava. It is called Wisdom of the Equal nature. It is the buddha of the south, the gate of practice. In two seven-day periods, the embryo's body become like this. It is called "three-pronged vajra." Its right and left extremities are the Vairocana of the two Womb and Vajra sections. Its seed is called abudon. The two red and white colors merge. It is the stage of the two moons.

The third stage is illustrated by a kind of trident, in which are inscribed the letters *a*, *ban*, *un*.

It corresponds to the buddha Akṣobhya of the western direction. It is called Wisdom of Wondrous Contemplation. It is the bodhisattva gate. It is the stage called *peṣi*. After three seven-day periods, the body thus has the shape of a three-pronged vajra. The bones harden, and on each side two arms appear. The three-pronged vajra shape symbolizes the three secrets; it is also the three bodhisattvas, the three bodies, and the form of the three-petaled lotus. "Three seven-day periods" means that, in the matter of harmonious union, one spends three months in the womb; thus it is called "three sevens." The soul is now

present and active: this is when the divine power of I-Se begins. This is the initial stage of awakening.

The fourth stage is symbolized by a five-wheel stūpa, inscribed with the five Siddham letters *a*, *ba*, *ra*, *ha*, *kha* in ascending order.

This shape represents the Buddha Śākyamuni of the northern direction. [As wisdom,] it is called Wisdom of the Perfection of Action. It is also what one calls the nirvāṇa gate. It is the stage called ghana. In the fourth seven-day period, the embryo already has a body like this. This shape is the tathāgata of innate awakening, the body which produces the wisdom of the buddhas of the five sections. The four Confucian virtues—humanity, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom—also correspond to this.

The fifth stage is illustrated by a small buddha, with two letter *a*'s in Siddham script, above two Sino-Japanese characters meaning red and white.

This stage is that of the buddha Vairocana at the center. It is the wisdom of the nature of the dharmadhātu body. It is the buddha with the ten thousand perfected merits. It is the stage called bano bonga. During the fifth seven-day period, such a body is formed. This form is the perfectly completed body of the effects of buddhahood. By focusing one's contemplation on the bodhisattva who aspires upward, one comes to dwell in the unconditioned, where one no longer knows even the beginningless self. However, as a result of the contemplation of the bodhisattva going downward to convert beings, one becomes a buddha endowed with the ten thousand practices, according to the right principle of I-Se.

The fifth seven-day period is the fifth month. It represents the totality of the nine months. The number of days now exceeds 38 days, and when 275 days have elapsed, birth takes place. In this, there are differences, based on the poverty or wealth of that person. When nine months have been spent in the womb, nine full moons disks have appeared, and one leaves the fundamental nature of I-Se.

"Becoming a buddha in this very body" (*sokushin jōbutsu*) is a fundamental conception of Tantric Buddhism, popularized in Japan by Kūkai. After describing in symbolic terms the sexual union that is the source of both the cosmogonic and the ontogenic processes, the text proceeds to describe the transition from duality to multiplicity as a process of embryonic gestation in five stages. The five gestation stages in Indian medicine are *kalalaṃ* (*gararan* in Japanese), *arbudaṃ* (*abudon* in Japanese), *peśī* (*heishi* in Japanese), *ghana* (*kennan* in Japanese), and *praśākha* (*harashakya* in Japanese): these correspond to five periods of seven days each, after which the embryo is said to be completely formed. According to Indian (as well as Chinese and Japanese) embryology, the flesh of the embryo comes from

the mother, and the bones from the father. The two elements (blood and semen) are here represented graphically by two letter *a*'s, one red, the other white, symbolizing the two *maṇḍalas*, the two realms of reality. The Womb realm corresponds to the mother (blood, the flesh, the red letter *a*), the truth of Suchness; whereas the Vajra realm corresponds to the father (semen, bones, the white letter *a*), to energy. Note here the inversion from Indian Tantra, in which the male element—the god—is the unmoving principle, whereas the female element—the goddess, his *śakti*—symbolizes his energy.

This embryo is, literally, a “buddha in this very body”—and the five stages correspond to the five “wheels” (*cakras*) and the five elements that constitute the body of the cosmic buddha Vairocana, as well as of all beings. Childbirth was traditionally perceived negatively as a fall into the world of suffering, produced by karmic retribution—and the second part of the text will develop this notion. But in the first part, the gestation process and the birth that ensues are sanctified as a process of awakening, and they are those of the bodhisattva who, instead of wishing to rise toward *nirvāṇa*, decides in his compassion to be reborn in this world, in order to save sentient beings. To illustrate that this gestation process is also a process of awakening, the five embryonic stages are identified with the five gates of Buddhist practice (production of the thought of awakening, cultivation of practice, bodhi, *nirvāṇa*, and *upāya* or skillful means), the five directions (east, south, west, north, and the center), and the five buddhas.

Vairocana, endowed with the five buddha wisdoms, is the beginning and end of this process. As we saw earlier in the vajra symbolism of the human body, each stage is now symbolized by a different type of vajra. Thus, the human embryo is none other than Vairocana. But just as the five buddhas first emanate from Vairocana, so too, when this body becomes differentiated, the five buddhas first appear at each stage of its gestation. The gestation process is thus a sort of temporal *maṇḍala*. Out of these buddhas and their wisdoms, the entire world will appear, and this is tantamount to the birth of the child, the creation of another *maṇḍala*. These five stages are sometimes followed by others, but usually the remainder of the gestation process is implied. Sometimes the nine months are represented by the phases of the moon, illustrated by nine superimposed moon disks—an echo of the *cakras* of the subtle body of human beings.

Thus, the new human being is the perfect Vairocana, the coming together of the Womb and Vajra realms, of the two *maṇḍalas*. In this body reside all the gods—that is, all the energies—of the universe. It is a divine body, a perfect microcosm. The idea was already found in such Hindu texts as the Upaniṣads, according to which “the gods dwell in the body, like cows in a stable.” This equivalence of the body of Vairocana with that of sentient beings is also achieved ritually through the practice of *nyāsa*, “imposition.” *Nyāsa* is the cosmologization or divinization of the body (or of an object), which is effected by touching its various parts, depositing the corresponding deities or energies in them, and “sealing” them with appropriate *mudrās* (symbolic gestures). Through these macro- and microcosmic correlations, which allow for the superimposition of a cosmic

diagram on the grid of the body, man is cosmicized, while the cosmos is divinized (and ultimately, humanized). Man becomes a universe in expansion (and resorption), that is, a living maṇḍala.

The five wheels (cakras) or elements (earth, water, fire, wind, space) are symbolized by the five seed-syllables (*bījas*): *a*, *va*, *ra*, *ha*, *kha*. The practitioner contemplates these five wheels and their *bījas* on his own body: the section below the hips corresponds to the earth wheel, and its seed-syllable is *a*; the navel corresponds to the water wheel (*va*); the heart to the fire wheel (*ra*); the space between the eyebrows to the wind wheel (*ha*); the top of the head—and the twelve-inch space above it—to the space wheel (*kha*). Thus he becomes Vairocana. These five wheels or elements evolved in ancient India as a combination of the five shapes of the Vedic fire altar (square, circle, triangle, half-moon, dumpling), the five colors (yellow, white, red, blue, black), and the five cakras and sections of the human body, according to the spiritual physiology of yoga.

Tantric Buddhism recognizes not only five elements, but six; the sixth element, represented by the seed-syllable *vaṃ*, is consciousness. Kūkai was apparently the first to assert that the six elements are the permanent, nonborn realities of the Dharma realm (and no longer simply the composite, impermanent elements of the phenomenal world). In the Vajra realm, the five wheels are formed by the turning of the letter *va*, whereas in the Womb realm they are formed by that of the letter *a*. In both realms, they are also formed or symbolized by the *a*, *va*, *ra*, *ha*, *kha* sequence. In the *Mahavairocanasūtra*, one of the principal scriptural authorities of East Asian Tantra, we already find the five great elements associated with the five shapes and the five seed-syllables (*a vaṃ*, *raṃ*, *haṃ*, *khaṃ*). This synthesis allowed for the development of the five-wheel stūpa (*gorintō* in Japanese). In this stūpa, which is unique to Japanese Tantra, the seed-syllables *a*, *va*, *ra*, *ha*, *kha* are inscribed on the front of each element (the five building blocks of different shapes of the stūpa), whereas *vaṃ* (consciousness), placed on the back, pervades all five elements.

The embryo, once fully formed with its five limbs, is an eminently pentadic being. Because, according to Buddhist notions of transmigration, its gestation takes place in the liminal phase between a previous life/death and a subsequent rebirth, it came to be assimilated to the early Buddhist notion of “intermediary being” (*antarābhava*), the paradoxical entity surviving after death to form a link with the next life—whence, perhaps, the association with such a prominent funerary symbol as the stūpa. Whereas the fivefold gestation process served to emphasize the temporal aspect of cosmogonic emanation, the five-wheel stūpa served as a convenient mnemonic device for summarizing the structural relationships between various elements of reality—at the pentadic stage of its emanation.

The five-wheel stūpa is described in the fourth section of the *Ise denki* in terms of the grapheme *a*, whose five constitutive elements (brush strokes) are used to illustrate various pentadic series (the five buddhas, the five directions, the five aggregates of personality, and so forth). This equivalence is also represented diagrammatically at the end of the text. Other sections elaborate specific points.

Section 5, which marks the beginning of the second part, discusses the impurity of the human body. Now described in more physiological terms, it is no longer the “subtle body” of yogic physiology but rather the mortal body, made of flesh and bones, bound for the cemetery. However, the microcosmic interpretation is not entirely absent, since its twelve great bones and 354 small bones are said to represent the twelve months and 354 days of the lunar year. But we are now in the realm of conventional truth, and the text itself emphasizes its use of the Two Truths theory when it refers to the twofold gate of purity and impurity. Section 7 discusses the ultimate principle of I-Se, the suchness to be realized by buddhas and sentient beings alike. It emphasizes the identity between buddhas, kamis, and humans; or, in more Confucian terms, between buddhahood and “humanity.” Section 8 is an explanation of ultimate awakening (*sambodhi*) in terms of the three Sino-Japanese characters that form the name of the buddha Amida. Its identification of these characters with the three bodies of the cosmic buddha Vairocana suggests an influence from the work of the Shingon reformer Kakuban (1095–1143), who identified Vairocana and Amitābha (Amida). Section 9 deals with the “eight sufferings” of the human body (birth, old age, and so on), and describes human life in rather grim terms. These sufferings, however, can be voided when one realizes the ultimate truth of the mantra of I-Se. Section 10 concerns “empowerment” (*adhiṣṭhāṇa* in Sanskrit; *kaji* in Japanese), the ritual through which humans are metamorphosed into buddhas, merging the two great maṇḍalas within their own body. Such mystical/sexual union of the androgynous practitioner is what one calls “becoming a buddha in this very body.” Once this is achieved, nothing more needs to—or can—be said.

The *Ise shōsho Nihongi yūshiki honshō nin denki* passage translated above is taken from the following published edition: *Shintō taikai: Ronsetsu-hen 2, Shingon shintō 2*, edited by Shinto taikai hensankai (Tokyo: Shinto taikai hensankai, 1992), pp. 555–77.

Further Reading

Additional sources on Japanese Tantra and the Tachikawa-ryū include Bernard Faure, *The Red Thread: Buddhist Approaches to Sexuality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); Michel Strickmann, *Mantras et mandarins: Le bouddhisme tantrique en Chine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996); Susan Blakeley Klein, “Allegories of Desire: Poetry and Eroticism in *Ise Monogatari Zuinō*,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 52.4 (1997): 441–65; James H. Sanford, “Wind, Waters, Stūpas, Maṇḍalas: Fetal Buddhahood in Shingon,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 21.1–2 (1997): 1–38; and Sanford, “The Abominable Tachikawa Skull Ritual,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 46.1 (Spring 1991), pp. 1–15.