
The Music of the Mantra: Aural Efficacy and Aesthetics in Buddhist Esotericism

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A wide assortment of hermeneutical strategies have been applied by scholars toward the understanding of what in Sanskrit is known as a *mantra*.¹ Minoru Kiyota (1978, 169) has described the mantra as “The idealization of a Tantric Buddhist principle as an embodiment of sound. Therefore [it is] a sacred syllable or incantation which contains spiritual potential when utilized within Tantric Buddhist practices.” Alex Wayman, citing the elucidation of the mantra as given by Tsong kha pa (1357–1419), points to the “subitistic” aspect of tantrism in general and mantras in particular. He interprets the latter as the “effect”—i.e., the “effective ritual”—which finally actuates a tantric enlightenment that is preliminarily derived from an intimately related “cause”—namely, an investigation, an analysis, and an understanding of Mahayana teachings as they appear especially in the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras* (Wayman 1973, 3–11). In other words, “cause” (understanding) plus “effect” (mantric ritual) leads to tantric enlightenment. Other scholars, notably Evans-Wentz (1954),² Tucci (1961),³ Hakeda (1972),⁴ Snellgrove (1987),⁵ and Yamasaki (1988),⁶ while highlighting distinct concerns, agree on the primary importance of a *contemplative* understanding of the mantra.

All of the above surveyors, in attempting to explicate what, exactly, a mantra is and does, place heavy weight upon an intellectual grasp of either tantric theory or practice or both, while seemingly de-emphasizing the emotive qualities which are evoked upon actually *hearing* a mantra, whether by one’s own voicing or by that of another. It is one of the contentions of this paper that while understanding of any kind—be it of the *Prajñāpāramitā* texts, of tantric gnoseology, or of

other secretive knowledges pertaining to the qualities of *Mahāvairon-cana* or any related ontological paradigm which the esoteric aspirant is to imitate—is quite obviously central to a productive ritualistic usage of a mantra, scholarly examination of this aural expression appears to have eclipsed what must be for practicing tantrists the foundational, *emotive* motivation for or consequence of this activity.⁷

In other words, upon the hearing of a mantra, or any other formulaic or poetic forms of lyrical language, even the initiated and knowledgeable practitioner, as a “sentient” being, must derive a still deeper satisfaction from the way the mantra makes her feel, either because of or despite her understanding of it. Again, this is akin to any aesthetically evocative impression which is made when anyone, irrespective of her own musicological training, hears what to her is a particularly moving piece of music. While all types of Buddhism, to one degree or another, are concerned with logically deduced correct and incorrect perceptions of phenomenal existence,⁸ Buddhism also, at least as plainly, concerns emotivity and represents a path away from suffering and toward something better.

Mantrayāna (“Mantra Vehicle”) Buddhism may be viewed as one illustration of a synthesis of the phenomena of religion and music, either by the elimination of what is deemed negative emotivity or by virtue of enhancing the dynamic but inarticulate presence of emotion generally. In short, mantras are utilized in tantrism because they are counted as both aurally efficacious toward and representative of an aesthetical dimension of Buddhist esotericism, which I will (knowing the risks involved) frame with the term “emotional enlightenment.”

Mantra as Subitistic Utility toward Emotional Enlightenment

I have articulated the mantra, in distinction from the above surveyors, as an essentially aural utility which is inclusive of elements of religion, music or lyrical language of a less melodic nature, as well as theory or intellectual understanding, and which is vocalized for purpose of an immediate enhancement of one’s emotive state-of-being.⁹ As such, it may also be described, if rather awkwardly, as intoned esoteric doctrine, or perhaps as the inarticulate intoning of esoteric doctrine, emphasizing that although comprehension of tantric principles and methodology is certainly involved, the mantric experience is not centrally rational but *emotional*. A mantra, in other words, is conceptually embraced as one thing, but in greater measure is aesthetically embraced as another—two aspects of one “mutually unobstructed interpenetration,” to borrow the epithet of several *Avataṃsaka sūtras*.

Kūkai, the founder of Japanese Shingon, in his *Shōrai-mokuroku*, has spoken of the distinguishing aspects of Buddhist esotericism, relative to Buddhist exotericism (i.e., textually-based teachings), in the following way: “The Dharma is beyond speech, but without speech it cannot be revealed. Suchness transcends forms, but without depending on forms it cannot be realized. Though one may at times err by taking the finger pointing at the moon to be the moon itself, the Buddha’s teachings which guide people are limitless” (Hakeda 1972, 145). The Dharma for Kūkai is thus actualized preliminarily through either public teaching of doctrine—the favourite text of Kūkai is the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra*—or gnoseological transmission or assistance from either a tantric *siddha* (“Accomplished One”) or a *guru* (95, 206). This external guidance for him, however, is merely “the finger pointing at the moon.” It is the obligation of the tantric aspirant to ritualistically integrate his own being, as described above, with that of Mahāvairocana Buddha by way of an *internal*, mysterious process that must be more emotive and proximal than intellectual and distal. It is this aesthetical experience that is primary for Kūkai, i.e., “the moon itself.” In his *Sokushin-jōbutsu-gi* (Attaining Enlightenment in This Very Existence), Kūkai adduces the *Mahāvairocana* text in support of the possibility of a praxis-oriented, esoteric, and synchronic experience—i.e., *subitism*, or the “quick path” to enlightenment—in the face of the more textual, exoteric, and diachronic paths—i.e., gradualism, as was emphasized more heavily in the other major Japanese Buddhist sect of the Heian Period (794–1185), the Tendai school.

I will underscore at this point that the utilization of mantras, as implied above by Kūkai and others, is only one aspect of the tripartite tantric ritual. Mantras, together with contemplative use of the human imagination via mandalas (by which the form of a god or goddess is mentally pictured by the practitioner in preparation for his ontological merger with the deity) and the physical assumption via *mudrās* of the beatific shape so imagined, comprise an extremely integrated ritual-praxis in Buddhist tantrism. It is, however, the *actual sound* of the mantra that is at least in one sense most conducive toward an immediate experience of identification with the mythologically visualized and physically imitated deity. The notion of sound as spiritually efficacious, of course, is not peculiar to tantric religion. The valorization of the oral and aural efficacy of sacred texts (that is, texts which are only in a secondary sense “scripture,” i.e., rendered as writing for purposes of silent study) not only stretches into antiquity but in many religio-cultural contexts flourishes to this day (see Williams 1989, 37–39). With specific regard to mantras, however, it is not a text that is valued

for its vocal and audible qualities; rather, mantras speak more to the valourization of sound itself.

To be sure, the arising of Mahayana Buddhism is more generally associated with an inflation of the human imagination—that is, with the literary, mandalic, devotional, or even quasi-recreational mythologizing of Buddhist gods, goddesses, demons, honoured teachers, and so forth, and with moments of visualization that often ensue, either by virtue of protracted, disciplinary meditation or the mere mental imaging that stems from the enjoyment of hearing a story about one of these exemplary figures—leaving most discussion of the oral and aural dimensions of Asian religion confined to India and Hinduism. The academic treatment of the valourization of sound in Buddhism, however, has not done justice to the contributive role aurality plays toward enlightenment—and the emotivity inherent therein—not only in Tibetan tantrism and Shingon, but also in Pure Land Buddhism and even in Zen (which particularly emphasizes that nirvana is “beyond words and letters,” that is, the power of the intellect to understand). Two of these non-tantric corollaries to the mantra will be briefly treated below.

Indeed, not only the mantra itself but a whole family of formulaic, liturgical, popular, and otherwise poetic epitheta or vocal vehicles must figure in an examination of aural efficacy within the wide range of Buddhist expression. Not all of the aural aspects of Buddhism, of course, have the same mystique as the mantra, a quality largely derived from the doctrinal framework within which it is performed; however, they all may be said to carry and conduct an aesthetical tenor, an emotional tonality, which immediately moves the listener—in the degree to which the particular “aural episode” has meaning or value for her—to a numinous place-of-feeling which otherwise goes unrealized.

It may have already occurred to the reader that the kind of subitism, or “sudden enlightenment,” that I am suggesting in connection with the hearing of a mantra implies an immediacy that belies the knowledge, training, practice, and time needed for such attainment even from the perspective of the tantric “quick-path” approach. Since tantrism emphasizes a directionality of enlightenment as an appreciation of one’s present ontological circumstances—that is, *being* in the here-and-now, a sort of “positive” notion of *sūnyatā* and what might be termed semi-phenomenalism¹⁰—instead of an aeons-long transmigratory and merit-driven progression toward enlightenment, it is typically termed a form of Buddhist esotericism. Yet even the tantric “quick-path” is self-effortive by nature. It takes time and determination, in other words, to ritualistically effect “in one’s body” or “in this very ex-

istence” an ontological integration with a deity and so actualize the experience of Buddhahood (cf. Hakeda 1972, 225–34).

The mantra, however, not only assists the tantric aspirant along the way toward his climactic esoteric merger, his “positive” experience of *śūnyatā*, but also must be interpreted for what it is in itself, namely, an *aesthetical* instrumentality—i.e., an emotively charged, “topological” practice which, much like music in other contexts, brings to the fore a “depth” which is right on the surface-of-things. The efficacious mystery inherent in the mantra thus not only has to do with its doctrinal presuppositions or environment but also with its naked sound, its texture, its tonality, its tenor—its *music*. It is the music of the mantra that is in large measure responsible for the tantrist’s detachment from the ignorance inherent in a subject-object view of reality, replete with its seductive call into the frenetic world of fear, control, and suffering, and for the consequent passive and blissful fusion with his particular “*śūnyatā*-deity” (Guenther 1972, 37–56).

The efficacy of the mantra, ultimately by virtue of its sound and its music, eclipses in the mind of the practitioner all duality, all conceptualizations of time and space, leaving him in one respect alone in the eternal but evanescent moment yet in another respect intimately in touch with his own emotive nature, with that of his paradigmatic god, and with the emotivity of all sentient beings and of phenomenal life itself. The sound of the mantra thus at once existentially separates him from and integrates him with the universe. It of course preliminarily takes knowledge, guidance, and discipline to gain skill in Mantrayāna and to correctly vocalize and appreciate its mysteries, but in the end it is not the tantrist who sings the mantra, but the mantra which sings and hears him. It is a siren both from without and from within, which lifts him to an authentic experience of his own inner, aesthetical core. In this moment of surrender to the mantra, of psychological vulnerability and authenticity, or aurally realized being, an immediate emotional enlightenment may be said to accompany any incremental movement toward the attainment of nirvana in the traditional sense.

The Nature and Efficacy of Sound

In a global culture which has long accustomed itself to the written word and to the intellectual and experiential distance that writing puts between author and reader, it is at first difficult to submerge oneself into the world of sound. We have grown used to or have forgotten the fact that writing was no doubt in large part invented those millennia ago in Sumer (and elsewhere) to circumvent the need for individual

proximity and in order to culturally and religiously set one's own people apart from one's neighbours. In addition, writing was much better suited than memory and word-by-mouth to approximation and record-keeping of one's fluctuating but calculable wealth. When language was taken, as it were, out of the air and set down in writing, identity began to become silent—and exact, settled, and static. Fixity and permanence slowly became a necessary component of civilization, and we have grown used to the perdurant and pervading qualities of written language. It was writing which in a real sense created “truth” and aggrandized the notions of time and space: once something is written it is in the past and thus distant from both the moment-at-hand and the reader. As such, writing encourages the intellectual processes and thus a subject-object worldview, while it discourages and makes strange and difficult an introspective focus upon how one is presently *feeling* as well as any sense that the ostensibly separate exterior objects of one's scriptively conditioned consciousness might in fact be more interconnected than they appear.¹¹

The dynamics of both the pre-scriptive and contemporary oral-aural consciousness, by virtue of their reliance upon sound, differ profoundly from the permanent, distil, spatiotemporal, dogmatic, dualistic, and intellectual qualities inherent in a scriptive consciousness. If writing is by its nature permanent, sound is impermanent; the awareness of its presence, in other words, is quickly followed by an awareness of its absence. Sound *flows*, and is therefore intimately engaged with the present and atemporal sequence of moments, within which it is an “experiential” and aesthetic reality. Almost paradoxically, it is because sound flows that it is unconcerned with time; its quality is therefore simultaneously continuous and transitory, elastic and evanescent. Because sound is aural—because it is *heard* instead of silently seen—its presence is more immediately made plain. In contradistinction to writing, which slowly summons the reader *toward* a rational understanding, sound quickly subsumes the hearer *in* an essentially arational and emotive event. Whereas writing and reading are essentially intellectual exercises, the hearing of sound is an affective actuality and by its nature calls one away from a dualistic, subject-object point of vantage and towards a spontaneous merging with the sound itself and also with the emotivity which the sound evokes within the individual hearer. Moreover, in addition to the *intra*-personal emotion which sound brings to the psychological surface, sound provides an immediate *inter*-personal monism, a moment of mutuality, drawing all who hear it into a rather involuntary collective, in touch with each other

not only because of what they hear but because of the fact that the sound makes them all, as sentient beings, feel.

It is precisely because sound discourages and deflates the activity of the intellect, on the one hand, and encourages and inflates an arational experience of “pure” emotion, on the other, that esoteric Buddhism makes use of it. Just as exoteric Buddhism is more textually inclined and therefore more attuned with the intellect—if only as the vehicle toward an ultimate detachment from rational discourse—so esoteric Buddhism is more attuned with the emotive function. While it is true, as we have seen above, that in Tantric Buddhism one can hardly say that the mind of the practitioner is inactive, it nevertheless is the *sound* of the mantra that sublates the precise and disciplined observances in a way that does not negate them but synthesizes them and elevates them beyond exactness into an indeterminate but subsuming aesthetical state.¹²

In short, in Mantrayāna it is the *sound* itself that is paramount, and is thus primarily responsible for the more subitistic and “realizable” inflection of esoteric enlightenment. It is the sound of the mantra that is the tantric medium which finally collapses the distance between the paradigmatic *sūnyatā*-deity and the aurally receptive *sūnyatā*-aspirant, and aurality is the vehicle by which time past and future lose their place. Like an alchemical catalyst, it is the mantra-sound and not the mantra-meaning that causes to materialize a refined quiescence within the practitioner. The music of the mantra picks her up and bears her lightly in its flow, and thus itself makes for the intimately close interplay between tantric enlightenment and the immediacy of *being* in the here-and-now.

Sound, Indeterminacy, and Ambiguity in Buddhism

Before discussing specific aural corollaries to the tantric mantra in other, non-tantric dimensions of Buddhism—specifically the Pure Land *nembutsu* and the Zen *kōan*—a word must be said regarding the particular efficacy which in Buddhism is often associated with both indeterminacy and ambiguity.

Two of the three “marks” or “seals” (*trilakṣana*, Jp. *sambōin*) of Buddhism are *anitya* (Jp. *mujō*—“impermanence” or “transience”) and *anātman* (Jp. *muga*—“no self” or “no substance”). These two notions are obviously interrelated: *anitya* not only connotes that all phenomenal realities are temporally conditioned, i.e., in a constant state of change, but also thereby reflects something of its correspondent, *anātman*, in that it underscores the insubstantial tenor that runs throughout Bud-

dhism. Together, these two subsuming marks provide the ground out of which has sprung all Buddhist philosophy, doctrine, myth, and ritual across the centuries and in continents. It is from these that has emerged the multivocal attempt to either eliminate or alleviate *duḥkha* (Jp. *ku*—"suffering" or "dis-ease"), which is the third and final mark in the *trilakṣana*. Of course, that all phenomenal reality is deemed to be "empty" or "devoid" (*śūnya*, Jp. *kū*) of permanent, substantial essence is a closely related Buddhist theme. In other words, at its ephemeral, intangible and empty "core," Buddhism is about indeterminacy (a notion that is emphasized especially in Asia; see n. 8).

In its emphasis upon mediating between concepts that are conventionally understood as oppositional, Buddhism is also very much about ambiguity. That is to say, the many and variegated Buddhist paths that lead away from suffering are not ultimately about precision, fixity, epistemology, understanding and the intellect—indeed, making a paragon of these would effectually turn Buddhism into something else. Rather, these paths are ultimately about nonattachment to any single, apotheosized point-of-view; in Buddhism this is called the Middle Way, a purposefully exclusive and inclusive—and thus ambiguous—vehicle. Through the accommodation provided in the notion of an *upāya* (the use of any and all "skillful means" by a teacher toward the enlightenment of differently gifted and ever-changing individuals), the Buddhist paths individually and corporately validate the incessant and varied ebbs-and-flows of human experience and thereby encourage an infinitely wide range of natural, emotive responses to them. In this manner Buddhism not only valorizes the fascinating variety of phenomenal existence but celebrates the mysterious and affective interconnectedness of all of its component parts. Indeed, the Buddhist dharma itself is generally considered a dynamic that is finally encountered *aesthetically* since, regardless of any sectarian overlay upon it, the dharma is regarded as beyond the range of the intellect and is thus ungraspable, unfathomable, and uncapturable.

The nature of sound is especially conducive toward realization of enlightenment within such an essentially arational, indeterminate, ambiguous, and emotive frame of reference. Like the dharma, sound is indeterminate. It is not something that is fixible or static. Nor is its effect likely to be understood as much as it is to be simply *encountered* or experienced. As mentioned above, when a tantric aspirant chants a mantra, in the end it is not the tantrist "doing" a mantra but the mantra which "does" her. Like the dharma, it is the sound itself that is finally in charge. In addition to the dominant and fluidic, and thus indeterminate, nature of sound, it is in the efficacy of integration, of

fusion between god and human, or merger between the “perceiver” and the “perceived,” that sound reveals itself as a medium of fundamental ambiguity. Sound bends—or inflects—subject and object into one another; it blurs their respective distinctness as well as any sense of distinction on the part of the practitioner or listener; and it fills an otherwise vacuous continuum. Whereas a written text under examination by a scriptively conditioned consciousness is distant and conductive towards duality—and thus makes for a *confrontation* between polarities—sound conversely collapses duality and eclipses polarities, making for an interrelated whole between what was, prior to sound, a mere proximity of disconnected and determinate parts.

Finally, sound has no self, no tangible substance: sound is *anātman par excellence*, and it is perhaps the most obvious and ubiquitous manifestation of *anitya*. If the source of any sound is by definition a phenomenal entity, and if this entity in reality has no permanent self or substance, then neither is any audible issuance within phenomenal reality possessed of an immutable nature.¹³ Likewise, since phenomenal reality is by definition ever-flowing and changing, so must be any sound that is emitted by any phenomenon. In this fashion sound may be said to demonstrate the dynamic interrelationship between the first two Buddhist seals.

Mantric Corollaries: The Pure Land *Nembutsu* and the Zen *Kōan*

To say that the utilization of liturgical or ritualistic sound toward an ideal religious purpose is not peculiar to Tantric Buddhism or to Buddhism generally would be to state the obvious. That realization notwithstanding, however, it certainly appears that even when scholarship has brought under examination the efficacies involved with oral media in Buddhism, it has bent most of its effort toward an understanding of such vocal utilities in relation to the doctrines of the Buddhist sect in question, and has left largely untreated the specifically aural benefit that is derived not only from chanting and hearing a tantric *mantra*—and other tantric devices related to it¹⁴—but from vocalizing and hearing non-tantric and even non-esoteric oralities as well. In this section I will identify the *nembutsu* and the *kōan* as non-tantric aural analogues to the *mantra* and, consequently, argue for their value quite apart from any *meaning* or philosophical framework that is traditionally attached to them.

The origins of Mahayana Buddhism can be traced to a matrix of developments that occurred shortly before and after the beginning of the Common Era. One of the most significant factors in the evolution

of Mahayana in India was the competitive socio-religious context offered by the Hinduism of the period, which was experiencing a popular rise in the role of the human imagination and, consequently, impelled Buddhism in the same direction. In short, the aetiology of Mahayana, though complex, must be intimately related to the introduction into Buddhist literature and ritual of associated oral recitation-praxes that were deemed to be highly conducive toward enlightenment (Williams 1989, 17f., 25–33, 39).

The *nembutsu* (literally, “thought of the Buddha”) refers primarily to the formulaic utterance of *Namu-amida-butsu* (“Taking Refuge in the Amida Buddha,” or “Praise to the Buddha Amida”). This specifically Mahayana recitation-practice diffused through similar indigenous Indian, Tibetan, Chinese, and Korean religious practices into the Pure Land schools of Japan, especially in the Heian (794–1185) and Kamakura (1192–1333) periods. The utilization of the *nembutsu* in Japan may be divided, roughly, by these two eras, with Hōnen Genkūbō (1133–1212), the founder of Jōdo-shū (the Japanese “Pure Land Sect”), as the transitional figure. Prior to Hōnen, the use of the *nembutsu* was fairly interconnected with Tendai meditative practice (*shikan*), though the inception of its emergence in Japan as a “single-practice” (or *Igyōdō*, “Easy Path”) utility toward enlightenment may be seen in the *Ōjōyōshū* (Essentials for Birth in the Pure Land) of the Tendai-Amidist monk Genshin (942–1017). With Hōnen and his *Senjaku-hongan-nembutsu-shū* (Passages on the Selection of the Recitation of Buddha’s Name according to the Original Vow), prompted by the increasing pessimism within Japanese society for how the dark, latter days (*mappō jidai*) of humankind were finally coming to fruition, the *nembutsu* assumed an even more central place within Amidism as the subsuming Buddhist practice toward salvation. In other words, the recitation of the *nembutsu* in the age of *mappō* became increasingly utilized as a main salvatory vehicle in order to leverage (or release oneself into) the *traiki* of Amida and thus gain a place after death in his Western Paradise. Shinran Shōnin (1173–1262), the founder of Jōdo Shinshū (the “True Pure Land Sec”), in his *Shōzōmatsu-wasan* (Hymns on the Last Age) and elsewhere further pronounced the *nembutsu* as the sole “true” Buddhist practice—i.e., as the only vehicle capable of carrying what was regarded by Shinran as one’s utterly degenerate or “sinful” personality into the post-mortem bliss of Amida’s Pure Land.

Intellectually, then, the *nembutsu* and the mantra may be said to be in one sense oppositional: the mantra, as part of the doctrinally-grounded tantric praxis, is used to intimate conjunction with the imaginative self-effort of the tantrist, while the *nembutsu*, especially as

practiced in Shin Buddhism, radically discounts any such ability. Yet both are oral events, and so both at least implicitly incorporate the importance of aurality. Therefore, I would argue, both mantra and *nembutsu* share a related efficacy which is at essence an “aesthetics of surrender.” Though in tantrism “self-power” is deemed paramount and in Shinshū “Other-power” dominates, in both cases the central medium of efficacy is aural and therefore is by nature emotive, not rational. It is the sound of the ritualistic mantra-chant that integrates the tantrist with his deity, and it is the sound of the liturgical *nembutsu*-recitation that reconciles the faith-filled and “sinful” Shinshū believer with his Lord Amida. During the oral praxis of unison, the doctrinal framework in both of these Buddhist paths is ultimately relegated beneath the aesthetical efficacy that only aurality can provide.

Though the *kōan* (literally, “public notice”) might well be traced to such Indian poetics as *samādhyā bhāṣā*, its earliest fame is associated with the twelfth-century Chinese Buddhist polemic that occurred between the Lin-chi school—the so-called “Southern tradition” which advocated the use of the *kōan* and thus a “sudden” realization of enlightenment; and the Ts’ao-tung school—or “Northern tradition,” which opted for “silent illumination” and thus a more gradual cultivation toward enlightenment (cf. Bielefeldt 1988, 2, 101, 104–5; Kalupahana 1976, 163–76). The subitistic Rinzai sect was founded by Eisai (1141–1215) and the latter, “silent” methodology is primarily known as Sōtō Zen and was developed in Japan by Dōgen (1200–53), who favoured a protracted process of enlightenment via the practice of *zazen*, the disciplinary ritual that completely identifies meditative “sitting” with Buddhist enlightenment.

Like the mantra and the *nembutsu*, the *kōan* is utilized within its own idiosyncratic and doctrinal framework—namely, the esotericism of Zen—that, generally speaking, has as its aim the actualization of an absolutely non-intellectual and thus nondualistic and sufferingless consciousness—a state that is “found” only in one’s deep psyche or “essence of mind” or “true self.” This experience, though engendered in Rinzai with the aid of the *kōan*, is deemed external to any dependence upon “words and letters,” being instead an event that occurs between the mind of the student and that of his *rōshi*, or “master.” Though the *kōan* is obviously an instrument of language, it is not a tool used to sharpen one’s rational thinking process but is in fact used to tax, and thus shut down or circumvent, the intellect and its proclivity toward the categorization of phenomena. The *kōan* is therefore not a puzzle or riddle to be “solved”; rather, it is an oral proffering that is intended to engage and activate what in the West is known as cona-

tion and intuition. In one's personal *re*-solution of the *kōan* "the calculating mind"—i.e., discriminatory awareness—is said to die, and with its death all suffering that arises as a result of bifurcating the world into experiences of "good" and "evil" is annihilated (cf. Konishi 1973, chs. 2, 4).

But the fact remains that the *kōan*, as a central, oral aspect of the "mind-to-mind" interactive process between the *rōshi* and the student, is utilized aloud and so is an aural episode in the psychological training of the Zen monk. This aurality is vitally important: in order for the *kōan* to be of assistance in the spontaneous manifestation of the Zen goal of cessation of judgement, it must be used in a way that is detached from the scriptively conditioned consciousness. It must, in other words, be heard and responded to, not read and analyzed. Sound—even in the form of a rationally structured *kōan*-question—is a most effective medium of immediacy and nonduality and so the *kōan*, as oral event and as aural episode, encourages a "mindless" and intuitive response. The aural nature of the *kōan* is in fact an invitation to *not listen*, as it were, to the words of its interrogatory; that is, in the usual sense of attempting to decipher a syntagmatic meaning so that a "correct" answer can be given. On the contrary, *kōan*-answers are often paradoxical precisely because they do not logically address the *kōan*-question. Rather, the successful answers are aesthetical, conative, and self-assured responses that issue not from the intellect but from the moment; or, more precisely, they are statements that issue from the point of intersection between the individual and the moment. Responses indicative of *satori* are thus not thought to be "correct" as much as they are perceived by the *rōshi* to be *authentic* and arational reflections of just "where" the trainee happens to "be" at the time.

The actual sound of the *kōan*—by virtue of its aurality and the qualities of immediacy, indeterminacy, ambiguity, and emotivity that inhere in its aurality—is thus highly encouraging of and conducive toward the unison with one's "true self" that is necessary for the sudden enlightenment of Rinzai Zen. Whereas in Tantric Buddhism it is the mantra that encourages and inspires a "positive" *sūnyatā*-experience which culminates in an ontological fusion with the cosmic Mahāvairocana, in Rinzai Zen it is the *kōan* that attempts to integrate the monk-trainee with his own "essence of mind" and so to engender a perhaps less imaginative and musical but still powerful *sūnyatā*-experience that is neither "positive" nor "negative." Clearly, the subitistic enlightenment-realizations of both Tantric and Zen Buddhism are similarly induced—and thus are not wholly dissimilar in their aesthetical orientations—due to the correlative usages of efficacious ritual sounds.

Conclusion

I have interpreted the aural efficacy of the tantric mantra and of two non-tantric corollaries—the Pure Land *nembutsu* and the Zen *kōan*—in terms which indicate a tension. On the one hand, all schools of Buddhist thought, whether more exoterically, esoterically, or even aesthetically inclined, are just that: schools of *thought*, i.e., doctrinally grounded epistemic systems which typically require a substantial degree of intellectual understanding in order to master both rubric and ritual so that an experience of enlightenment may be attained. In tantrism, as in esotericism as a whole, there are certainly at least some textual and philosophical understandings to be “achieved” en route to an enlightenment-realization that is generally thought to be sudden in nature. In addition, this tantric intellectual goal of achieving a certain level of understanding, whether impersonally from sacred texts or in more personal fashion from one’s *bLama*, is supplemented by the rational, imaginative, and imitative effort employed during tantric rituals. On the other hand, however, in Buddhist esotericism the countervailing dynamic that is at work has nothing at all to do with categories of thinking, rife with duality as they are. Rather, esotericism by definition deals more basically with the pure, arational emotions that are generated during the various and respective ritual-praxes and that carry over into ordinary life as well. As I have argued, sound is perhaps the most forceful medium by and through which emotivity and “unity” arise, and in Tantric Buddhism the mantra, of course, is the aural centerpiece by and through which the tantrist is ontologically merged with his god. The mantra, however, is not only sound, it is music—or at least musical—and so perhaps bears in even greater degree than “prosaic” sound the dominant, indeterminate, ambiguous, and affective qualities that are also held to characterize nothing less than the dharma itself.

In this paper I have obviously taken for granted that human beings are not only sentient beings—i.e., aware, conscious—but also, more specifically, emotional beings. I have also taken for granted that enlightenment is not something that can ultimately be categorized, described, or “figured out.” Buddhism generally appreciates, to paraphrase T. S. Eliot, that words only bend and break when we attempt to apply them to what is at essence a nondualistic, inarticulate, and thus fundamentally emotive reality. Enlightenment rather, in my understanding, and despite any knowledge or learned worldview that assists in its actuation, is an indefinable, aesthetical experience that seizes, possesses or “comes over” an individual in a way for which words are

but metaphors, or as Kūkai would have it, “the finger pointing at the moon.” Due to the emphasis in Tantric Buddhism on aural efficacy through the vehicle of the mantra, this particular school provides exemplary illustration of the importance of sound as a central conductive agent not only toward an immediately felt enlightenment in Buddhism but also, by inference, toward a spontaneous sense of fulfillment in the many varieties of religious experience. The music of the mantra, apart from its epistemic tantric components, in a real sense may be considered part of a universally pervading interconnectedness between sound and religion. And when sound is framed within an intellectually inclusive, goal-oriented system of value such as Tantric Buddhism, it becomes the paradigmatic and subsuming medium by which an aspirant may leave behind the finger pointing and become one not only with the moment but even, perhaps, with the moon itself.

Endnotes

1. Ch. *chen-yen*; Jp. *shingon*. Both are usually translated as “true word.”
2. In the classic Tibetan studies by Evans-Wentz the centrality of what might be called mantric gnoseology or gnosticism is brought to the fore (Evans-Wentz 1954, esp. 220–21).
3. Tucci, providing an Indian etiology for the Buddhist tantric episteme, emphasizes the intimate interrelationship between the mantra and the mandala, indicating that visualization of a particular symbol of a deity conditions a natural emission of a “seed-sound” (*bija-mantra*), which in turn further assists in the visualization exercise and generates a “mysterious power” associated with Tantric Buddhism (Tucci 1961, 60–61; see also 32–38, 85–107, 122–23).
4. Hakeda appears to emphasize practice somewhat more than—but not at the expense of—a theoretical understanding of Shingon Buddhism as it was brought to Japan in the ninth century by Kūkai (774–835). The mantra (Jp. *shingon*), in Shingon tantrism as well, is one facet of a tripartite ritual of integration with Dainichi (Mahāvairocana). According to Hakeda’s elucidation of the thought and work of Kūkai, a praxis of “imitation,” obviously based on some degree of knowledge and understanding, is essential (see Hakeda 1972, 97–99).
5. Snellgrove, distinguishing the mantra from other vocalizations of a similar nature, and indicating the intimacy between mantras and *mudrās* (ritual hand-gestures of an effective nature), says that, “[it] must be conceded that even when the words themselves are normally intelligible...a mantra can have no essential meaning outside the prescribed ritual. Thus normal intelligibility is of secondary concern. What is primary is the spontaneous significance of a par-

ticular mantra to those who have been initiated into its proper use" (Snellgrove 1987, 1:122, cf. also 1:130ff., 1:141–44).

6. Yamasaki 1988, 77, cf. also 116–19. Taikō Yamasaki reminds us of the etymology for the Sanskrit "*mantra*," which originally connoted "a vessel heaped up with sacred thoughts."

7. Two possible exceptions to the standard approach to understanding the mantra are Stephan Beyer (1973) and Herbert Guenther (1972). Beyer speaks of the "magical" and volitional regard in which mantras are held by tantric aspirants or worshippers (see Beyer 1973, 94, 119, 135ff., 143ff., 231ff.). Guenther reminds us of what might be called the *phenomenalistic* suppositions in Tantric Buddhism, through which there inheres a high degree of appreciation for the sensations of physical, bodily existence and by which "body, speech and mind" (the three "teaching-practices" of the Buddha) play an important role. Thus one articulation of the goal of tantrism may be framed by his term "aesthetic union," in which emotivity or feeling is emphasized, especially vis-à-vis the ontological integration with the particular paradigmatic deity at hand (Guenther 1972, 84).

8. It is important to acknowledge, here as elsewhere, that the "traditional" Buddhisms of both the Southern and Northern persuasions emphasize the importance of intellectual precision in order to make progress toward the "correct" view of phenomenal existence, and thus enlightenment, while Eastern Buddhism, which assimilated into itself the phenomenalistic or immanent tendencies of such worldviews as Taoism and Shintō, has better appreciated a nondiscriminatory perspective with regard to such things as "correct" and "incorrect," "sacred" and "profane." Cf. the *hongaku* ("inherent enlightenment") controversy that has been reintroduced by the "Critical Buddhist" (*Hihan Bukkyō*) movement; see Hubbard and Swanson 1997.

9. "Emotional state-of-being" is for me an almost redundant term, but I use it in order to bring attention to the pronounced reason(s) for which Buddhism generally arose and has evolved over the centuries, namely, either the minimization—through acceptance, appreciation, and embrace—of suffering (e.g., the "aesthetical" Buddhist poet-monks of Kamakura Japan, such as Saigyō, 1114–1204, Teika, 1162–1241, and Chōmei, 1156–1216); or the virtual elimination of unrest, psychological pain, dis-ease (as characterized by gross generalizations of Buddhism as a whole and by fairly accurate portrayals of Zen specifically).

10. "Semi-phenomenalism" is here used to distinguish *esoteric* Buddhism—e.g., Tibetan tantrism, Japanese Shingon, Ch'an and Zen, all of which in variegated fashion tend toward a tradition-generated, disciplinary approach to *attaining* a prehension of "the depth on the surface-of-things"—from what I have found most useful to call *aesthetical* Buddhism, most apparent or evolved in the Kamakura-era poet-monks of Japan (see n. 9), in which an absolute phenomenalism or immanence supersedes any sense of duty toward the traditional

vinaya path. The nirvanic “goal” of aesthetical Buddhism is thus not so much attainable as it is *realizable*. Aesthetical Buddhism, to be held in some distinction from esoteric Buddhism, focuses its attention on “the surface of the depth-of-things.” Colloquially or conventionally speaking, nirvana is “closer” to *saṃsāra*, and *bodhicitta* (enlightenment) to *avidyā* (ignorance) in aesthetical Buddhism than in esoteric Buddhism, the pan-Mahayana equation of the two realms notwithstanding.

11. C. G. Jung dealt at length with the evolution of consciousness from a primitive, original, sensory and emotive but unilateral (and relatively sufferingless) state into an evolved, complex-filled, intellectualized, bilateral, and thus confused and low-grade schizophrenic and numina-resistant state. For a summary of Jung’s position, see Jung 1964, 18–103. Superimposing my current thesis upon Jung’s thought, written language provided further impetus for the bifarious nature of the modern human mind. In other words, the arising of consciousness was *ipso facto* the arising of the intellect and the invention of writing only served to further distance us not only from our original, orally and aurally and thus aesthetically inclined, unified psyche, but from each other as well. For a similar notion of a unitive theory of “mythical consciousness” see Cassirer 1955, v. 2; cf. Eliade 1954.

12. I have found “sublate” to be a good approximation for the ontological transmutation that is the goal of tantrism—the dualistic awareneses “merge” or synthesize into “something” that is neither an objectively oriented consciousness nor a subjectively oriented consciousness; rather, it is an inflection of *śūnyatā*, “emptiness,” which is beyond the perception of subject and object yet inclusive of them as well.

13. I am at this point leaving aside the most interesting and widespread evolution in Buddhist thought, as represented in many strains of Mahayana, regarding an “underlying” and rather ātmanistic phenomenal concretum which is, in varying fashion, supposed to *really* exist. Cf., e.g., Harvey 1990, 52ff., 55–56, 58, 107, *et passim*; Williams 1989, 60–63; Guenther 1972, 100–16.

14. In esoteric Buddhism, several oral/aural devices are closely linked to the mantra, including *dhāraṇī* (“mystical words”), *paritta* (protective chants), the *hṛdaya* (Tb. *snying-po*, translated by Snellgrove as “quintessence” and “seed-syllable,” thus a synonym for mantra), and *vidyā* (“knowledge,” and the “magical power” inherent in any vocalization attendant to such knowledge). See Snellgrove 1987, 122, 134–47; Yamasaki 1988, 75ff.; Graham 1987, 66–77; Tucci 1961, 9; Harvey 1990, 180ff., 209f; Eliade 1969, 68, 212–19.

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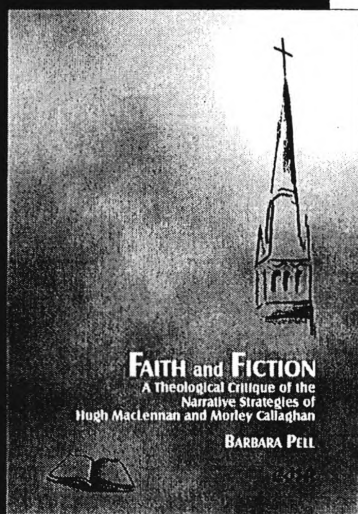
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