

## Kukai and Esoteric Buddhism

This essay will explore Japanese esoteric Buddhism, the Shingon sect and Kukai's (空海) idea of Sokushin Jobutsu (即身成佛). Sokushin Jobutsu means the possibility of attaining enlightenment in one's current body. It means that while still in this physical body, one can achieve Buddha-like perfection in all of the qualities. Kukai rejected the idea that a Buddhist practitioner needs to practice for three aeons before attaining enlightenment. His understanding of non-duality led him to reject all the dualities: the duality of a Buddha contrasted with an ordinary person; the differing states of nirvana and samsara; enlightenment in opposition to the mindset of ordinary delusional thinking.

The Three Mysteries are a goal of perfection a Buddhist devotee can cultivate throughout life and ultimately reach. These purify body, speech and mind and they reach a threshold point where the great spirit of Mahavairocana will suddenly emerge with great clarity. This outcome establishes the devotee as having become a fully awakened Buddha. What has surfaced in this person is evident to all and gains the respect of others. So where do we find examples of this kind of enlightenment? Sakyamuni Buddha and Kobo Daishi (弘法大师, Kukai's title received after death was "Great Master Who Spread the Dharma") were able to manifest this state of enlightenment in their own lives and were revered by many. With our own persuasion that we are in possession of these attributes, the Buddha-nature becomes our experience from birth, and the potential is there for us to become a Buddha. At that moment our deeds, what we say and what we think are all totally purified. The only thing remaining for us to do is to lead on from this and establish a life full of faith.

Now let us reflect on what the Mahavairocana Sutra spoke to us about. In it was written "How do we become enlightened?", to which it replied, "It is by knowing our mind as it truly is." As human beings, we possess all of the Buddha's values in our minds, and it is this mind that can be motivated to achieve enlightenment. It's the first step to reaching the goal of enlightenment.

Aspiring to realise enlightenment? Then take a look at the Shingon sect of Buddhism with its doctrines and mix in to that the teachings of Kobo Daishi. They are said to be the beginning and end of the subject. (Yamasaki, 1988) The Mahavairocana Sutra clarified Mahavairocana Buddha's virtues, and the Sanskrit letter "A" ( अ ) was used to express those virtues, with the

pronunciation "Ah." It means that the mind aspires to be enlightened, and that understanding one's mind is to know whether or not that aspiration has been realized.

(Yamasaki, 1988) As detailed in the Mahavairocana Sutra, the realisation of enlightenment is a process of development and has three stages to follow: 1) Make the aspiration for realising it your main goal; 2) Make the foundation of all your actions to show great compassion; 3) Perfect skilful means.

The process for becoming a Buddha in the now starts by raising one's aspiration. It is built up by being immersed in his plentiful compassion. How we choose to take action affects whether the aspiration is nurtured or not, so we need the safeguarding that compassion brings. This is then a strong standpoint to embark on fulfilling our objectives. The last stage of perfecting skilful means is about benefitting others at its heart. It reaches a crescendo of perfection as we join in with the Bodhisattva practice and contribute to the well-being of others, and in a broader scope, bring benefit to the world.

The entire Shingon Buddhism teachings focus us on how central this aspiration is, and we can see the importance of our oneness with the Buddha. As we think about our own life, contemplating our mind and body, we can see that we are not distinct from the Buddha but in fact have equality, and hence there is nonduality in this. With the belief of "be kind to all life" we see the pure dignity of life itself and the importance of our own life. You can feel the lifeforce emanating from that statement of Buddha.

(Yamasaki, 1988) The Dainichi-kyo sutra and Kongocho-gyo sutra are of great significance in the developmental path of esoteric Buddhism, naming Dainichi Nyorai as its central Buddha. It paints mandala systems that show this core Buddha as the source of many different independent Buddha manifestations. With regards to practicing esoteric teaching, the sutras structure the ritual activities of body (mudra), speech (mantra) and mind (visualisation), and presents them as an integrated whole, inseparable and leading to rapid attainment of enlightenment.

Now let us dig a little deeper and discover more about who the Kobo Daishi really was. (Abe, 1999) In medieval literature, he is described as a miracle-working mendicant who travelled across Japan's islands, healing the ill, punishing the wicked, and rewarding the righteous. Kukai had a background of learning from Confucius and originally his intention was to serve

within government. Kukai wrote the Sango Shiiki (三教指歸, Indication of the Basis of the Three Teachings) when he was about 24 years old, proclaiming Buddhism's dominance over Taoism and Confucianism. After that, he encountered a priest who taught him esoteric Morning star meditation. He decided to devote himself to Buddhism after immersing himself in this challenging activity for some time. When Kukai was 31 years old, he took formal Buddhist vows. Kukai was allegedly led by a prophetic dream in which he discovered a copy of Dainichi-kyo in a pagoda at Nara's Kumedera Temple. This sutra emphasized instant enlightenment, and he couldn't find anyone in Japan who could describe it to him, so he decided to travel to China to learn more. On the 6th of June, 804 Kukai, accompanied by an official delegation, set sail from Kyushu by ship. Kukai then traveled by land to Ch'ang-an, where he arrived in December of 804.

In May of 805, he had a dramatic first meeting with Hui-kuo, who proclaimed that he had been waiting for Kukai's arrival for a long time. Kukai got the mandala teaching quickly, followed by the Dharma succession not long after. Before his death on December 15, 805, Hui-kuo ordered Kukai to bring the esoteric teaching to Japan. Despite the fact that Kukai had come to China with the intention of staying for 20 years, he wasted no time in carrying out his master's orders. In October of 806, when he returned to Kyushu, he sent the Emperor a memoir detailing his activities in China. He also provided an inventory listing all the objects he had collected and brought back with him, which included 142 sutras in Chinese translation, 42 books of Sanskrit incantation, 32 commentaries, ten mandalas and paintings, nine ritual instruments, and various Mikkyo masters' relics. In 810, Kukai petitioned the Emperor for permission to conduct an esoteric rite for the state based on new sutras he had brought back from China. Kukai sought imperial permission to establish a meditative practice centre on Koya-san in 816.

Mikkyo proclaimed the Dharma Body to be a real-life being. Following the historical Shakyamuni's nirvana, the Buddha's Dharma Body existed eternally and continues to shape everything. The central Mikkyo god, Dainichi Nyorai, came to embody the universe's unborn life-energy. The originally unborn is that which has never been produced and can be found in anything. This, according to Mikkyo, is the Dharma Body's hidden teaching, which can be regulated through the elements of wind, space, fire, water, earth, and consciousness. These six are considered fundamental elements of the phenomenal universe as well as the very nature of things. This is shown in Mahayana by concepts like "dharma-nature," "true-

thusness," and "and emptiness." The first five are physical ones, and the final one is mental element. In Kukai's view the six elements are the universe's essence, being identical to the Dharmakaya Buddha Mahavairocana and are the embodiment of Mahavairocana's wisdom.

The Dharma Body was personified by Dainichi Nyorai and when this was perceived the great and wise facets of the many Buddhas contained within esoteric Buddhism became united. Importantly, this singular and all-encompassing representation of the nature of Buddha was the first time it was personified this way and initiated the early development of the Mikkyo esoteric system.

How were they able to unite? (Yamasaki, 1988) To begin with, all sentient beings embody all of the merit of the mandalas intrinsically and naturally, with their bodies containing the five elements and their minds containing the enlightened knowledge of the consciousness part. As a result, they are dharmakaya buddhas in and of themselves. Second, through the three mystic practices of empowerment and response, one can achieve harmony with Mahavairocana Buddha. When the practitioner is in the mystic samadhi of yoga, he is similar to Mahavairocana, but when he leaves it, he returns to the condition of an average man still bound by evil passions and desires. Finally, if the practitioner proceeds further in following the three mystic rituals, he will completely realise buddhahood in his being, with all of his acts in perfect accord with those of the Buddha. As he has clearly and obviously realised Mahavairocana's inherent virtue, his body has become the buddha's body, and the buddha's body has become his body.

The transcendence of all language and knowledge is at the heart of the exoteric Buddhist view of enlightenment. It is considered beyond the ability to express it by mere word or thought. Phrases such as "words are cut off and the mind perishes" or "words die, and thought is eradicated" are concluded on this matter. Here we can see enlightenment painted as being egoless, without any enduring self-nature. Any delusional blocker to enlightenment gets analysed in exoteric teaching. It is not direct, with discussion about enlightenment focused on what it is not.

According to Mikkyo, ordinary everyday language, known to be dualistic in content, is incapable of defining enlightenment. Instead, enlightenment speaks for itself and this is at the epicentre of esoteric teaching. Enlightenment's own language embraces artistic representations that collaborate to describe its mysterious properties that are however real.

Mikkyo seeks to find truth expressed and finds it in mantras, Sanskrit syllables, mudras, mandalas, and pictures depicting deities, to mention a few examples. By following this pattern of practice, the esoteric building blocks are firmly put in place.

Mikkyo meditative methods concentrate on Buddhahood by using all of the capacities and energies of the body-mind blend within the human form. The three secrets (sanmitsu), the foundation of the esoteric way, summarise the capabilities to think and know, perceive and feel, and act. These secrets are the deeply-penetrating enlightened practices of the Buddha's body, voice, and mind embodied in the person. Simply put, one becomes Buddha by taking those three actions of body, voice, and mind and aligning them against the plumbline of those of the Buddha.

Any possible means are used by Mikkyo to rework the “deluded” individual into a Buddha transformation. Regarding the body component, the mudra means following agreed hand gestures, along with movements of the entire body. For speech, the mantra means a practitioner will recite agreed chants as well as related verse in prayer form. Considering the mind, visualisation of symbolic representations and all deities, involving colours, movements, thinking processes, what is felt, and the practitioner’s free imagination.

(Yamasaki, 1988) The full moon is often used in esoteric texts as a symbol for all beings' pure and ideal Buddha-nature, and delusions are clouds that obscure the moon. When the clouds disperse, the full moon will show a white and soothing glow. According to the Dainichi-kyo, these clouds (delusions) are divided into three layers, each containing three different forms of delusions known as kalpas in Sanskrit. In Buddhism, this term usually refers to a very long period of time. The term kalpa therefore has two meanings: a unit of time or a delusion. According to conventional wisdom, true awakening can be attained by completing three kalpas of practice. The practitioner will achieve an insightful Buddha-mind after removing the coarse layer of delusion, the delicate layer of delusion, and the subtle layer. As a result, it's known as being the Buddha in three kalpas. If all three delusions are eliminated in one lifetime, the practitioner is transformed into a Buddha.

To become a Buddha, you must transcend these three kalpas, the coarse, perfect, and subtle layers of illusion. Attachment to the self is the most basic level of delusion: the illusion that a permanent, unchanging self resides within the individual body-mind. It is the simplest and most primitive of the three illusions, but it is deeply embedded in the consciousness. The

body-mind, according to early Buddhism, is nothing more than the temporary union of five sense-aggregates. As the causation of sense-aggregates decreases, the self is annihilated, and the source of pain is removed, according to the teachings of no-self.

The connection to things is represented by the fine delusion layer. Despite the fact that the "self" is the product of a temporary union of the five aggregates, the aggregates themselves exist. The underlying, deep-seated ignorance, embedded in the depths of consciousness, from which all illusion is thought to emerge, is known as the Subtle delusion.

What the sutras call the "transformations of earth" refers to earth, water, fire, wind, and space, says a passage from the commentary on the Dainichi-kyo. There are those who identify with one of these and declare it to be the truth. Since all living beings and matter are born from the earth, some people believe that it is the root cause of everything. They also failed to recognise, however, that the world exists only as a result of the convergence of several interdependent causes. Those who hold such beliefs also believe that by performing earth rituals, they can achieve true freedom. Others believe that water, fire, or wind, among other things, give birth to all.

The elements, looking at them in their solid form, came to represent how consciousness is experienced by the senses in the Buddhist philosophy of Consciousness-Only—hard or soft, whether hot, cold or warm, and so on. The mind perceiving physical forms no longer did so seeing them as objective "material", but rather transformed them so that attention was drawn to the essence of consciousness. As a result, mind was regarded as necessary, while matter, which was impermanent and transitory, was regarded as nothing more than a mirage to be seen through.

(Yamasaki, 1988) When we examine the Shingon cosmology we find out that everything is devoid of self-nature that lasts, according to the teachings of the Void (ku) academy. All types were transient, constantly coming into being and ceasing to be due to ever-changing complexes of interdependent causes. The void's essence pervaded all and was therefore linked to universal Truth. This theory was successful in revealing erroneous perceptions of truth, but it also appeared to ignore any phenomenal reality at all.

The esoteric teaching found consciousness still present in material forms that are not inferior to mind, based on the Consciousness-Only perception that everything is actually mind. Each

of the five esoteric elements was thought to have a consciousness component. As a result, matter forms were more than just “things”; they were also a part of the highest truth of consciousness, or Buddha-nature. Since mind and matter were seen as inseparable aspects of overall existence, every action that unfolds in the universe can therefore represent the enlightened mind’s secret. (Yamasaki, 1988) The Sokushin Jobutsu-gi (“The Meaning of Becoming a Buddha in This Body”) contains the following that Kukai wrote: “In the various exoteric teachings, the elements are considered to be non-sentient, but the esoteric teaching explains that they are the Buddha’s secret all-pervading body. These... elements are not apart from consciousness, and though mind and form may be said to differ, their nature is the same. Form is mind and mind is form without obstruction or limitation.”

The Mikkyo system affirms that what is called "Suchness" or "Reality" in words is, in fact, nothing other than the world, using the symbolic structure of elements. As a result, they came to portray tangible aspects of the environment and the human body as part of the web of meaning alluded to by the elements. Mountains and land masses, as well as bones and muscles, include the element earth. Oceans and rivers, as well as body fluids, contained the element water, while sunlight and lightning, as well as body heat, contained the element fire. The universal nature alluded to by the elements could thus be more readily imagined as residing in the self and its immediate surroundings. The macrocosmic and microcosmic dimensions are inextricably linked.

(Yamasaki, 1988) In the book “The Meaning of Becoming a Buddha in This Body”, Kukai wrote: “The six symbolic elements interpenetrate without obstruction and are in eternal union. They are not apart from any of the Four Mandalas (forms of existence). Through practice of three-secrets empowerment, they are made manifest immediately: The universal web is what we call this body.”

The six esoteric elements that make up the common material of all objects and beings, and which are further penetrated by the same universal life-energy, are referred to as the universal body. As a result, Shingon considers actual physical beings to be inextricably linked to the entire universe. While exoteric teachings say that the human body is inherently impure, polluted by its material substance, esoteric teachings hold that the human body-mind being is equivalent to Dainichi Nyorai, the personification of the enlightened universe. There is no Dainichi Nyorai without human beings, and there is no reality without matter and things.

We fear that the thoughts arising in our minds will tempt us, so we obey our breath and maintain a state of no-thought, considering this to be the supreme experience, according to the book "Essential of meditation." We believe we should progress in this way, but we are unable to do so. It goes on to say that we have two types of thoughts: negative and optimistic. We must eliminate all negative and delusory thinking, but we must not extinguish the good Dharma's right thoughts. Exoteric samadhi methods emphasise sensory control and focus on a passive state of no-mind, whereas esoteric methods cultivate productive mental activity. This approach is passed into a no-mind state and results in the cessation of negative thinking. Staying in the single-mind experience is how esoteric samadhi is represented. According to the Dainichi-kyo, "the mind itself proving the mind, the mind becoming aware of itself".

Mikkyo may be referring to being a bodhisattva in this body when he says he wants to become a Buddha in this body. The esoteric teachings emphasise how wisdom works in the individual, rather than any distinctions between Buddhas and bodhisattvas, enlightened or unenlightened. The unmoving centre of the true self is represented by the mandala's centre, whose personified name is Dainichi Nyorai, which also means universe. The infinite human representation of the enlightened self is expressed in all other facets of complexity.

In Kukai's "Meaning of Becoming a Buddha in This Body," he instructs the Shingon practitioner to repeat mantras from the mouth, use the hands to form mudras, and stay lodged in samadhi with the mind, and as a result of the three secrets, the practitioner easily attains great enlightenment.

(Yamasaki, 1988) During meditation, the meditator looks at a Buddha image in front of him and imagines a lotus inside the deity, whereupon a moon disk becomes apparent. The syllables of mantra become visible inside the moon disk, emitting light. One by one the practitioner visualises the syllables, noticing that their radiance increases, and then visualises them entering through the topmost part of his head to journey around his own body, eliminating all and sundry obstructions and impurities. Following that, the practitioner imagines each syllable making a sound like bells in the wind. This sound travels across the practitioner's body, purifying and illuminating him even more. The syllables and their sounds are then combined to form words and phrases that convey the mantra's true meaning. This is visualised by the practitioner as the mantra itself, which is Dainichi Nyorai, the body of knowledge that encompasses the entire universe.

After the mantra's shape, sound, and context have been established, the practitioner visualises mantric phrases moving in and out of his body with his own breath. They enter the deity's abdomen through his mouth, circulate through the deity's breast through the moon disk, leave through the mouth of the deity, and re-enter the practitioner via the very top of the head. After the moon disk has been passed through, he visualises the energy flowing through his own breast, out through his mouth, and back into the deity's abdomen in an unbroken river. The sutra claims that by repeating this practice over and over thousands of times, the practitioner will obtain phenomenal powers to bring good fortune and avoid dissatisfaction. This meditation is of the mystical kind that esoteric Buddhism uses to serve others for this purpose. "Mantras are mysterious," Kukai wrote in the "Secret Key to the Heart Sutra." We may eliminate ignorance by visualising and reciting them. Every syllable encapsulates a thousand realities, bringing universal reality into this body."

After visualising his true self, the practitioner steadily increases the size of his true self until he is united as one with the Dharma Realm, achieving oneness between the universal Buddha-body and his own body. Before the meditation is over, he is contracted down to his original size.

The meditative phase of the Buddha's power entering the self and the self's power entering the Buddha often visualises union. The practitioner visualises himself as a reflection from the deity while still visualising the deity as a projection of himself. The practitioner visualises the self as the god and the deity as the self, just like a mirror represents what is in front of it. This method is used to achieve esoteric union in the hidden body in the central portion of full-scale Mikkyo practice.

Another form of visualisation involves the practitioner visualising his exhaled breath leaving his body through all of his pores and expanding out into the world. The universe's energy then reaches the practitioner through every pore, permeating his body with each inhalation. As one exhales, universal life force flows out through every part of the body, and when one inhales, it comes in through the nose and circulates around the body, filling every vein and fibre, according to the book "Essential to Meditation." According to the Dainichi-kyo, this life force reaches the entire body from every pore and flows across it, making it completely pure. The practitioner uses this approach to connect with the cosmic force that pervades all.

In conclusion, Buddhahood is usually attained after three "incalculable aeons" of steadily accruing merit, purging evil passions, and cultivating wisdom. All exoteric teachings, for the most part, follow this practice pattern, but esoteric teaching, which is a clear and spontaneous connection of the ultimate truth by the Dharmakaya, does not. Buddha reveals a mystical, transcendental path to Buddhahood that can be attained very easily, even in this life.

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