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Visuality in Esoteric Buddhism – Awakened with a Single Glance?

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Abstract: In the year 806 CE the Japanese monk Kūkai returned from a journey to China and brought a large amount of visual artefacts with him. Commentators have wondered since what role these visual media play in Kūkai’s Buddhist thought. It has been speculated that the art works show that Kūkai values visual media higher when it comes to transmitting the teaching of the Buddha. Proponents of this view usually refer to a single passage from Kūkai’s writings to warrant their interpretation. By analysing the respective passage in detail and showing how it connects to Kūkai’s other writings, this article argues that Kūkai did not prefer the visual to the verbal in transmitting the dharma. Mandalas certainly play an important role in Kūkai’s thought, but their role differs from what these modern interpreters suppose: first, when Kūkai speaks about ‘mandalas’ he often does not refer to paintings, but to the structure of reality or to ritual procedures. Second, mandala paintings have an ambiguous role in esoteric ritual, because they were added rather late in the development of esoteric ritual. For Kūkai they serve primarily as storyboards for ritual performance. Third, the first glance at a mandala is an important moment during esoteric initiations, but it is only the beginning of a rigorous training. Moreover, the crucial moment in esoteric ritual is the union of the practitioner with the deity; glancing at the mandala has no role to play in this mystic union. Fourth, mandala paintings can be used, according to Kūkai, to reveal the deeper structure of texts, but in this role they are not superior to the written medium but rather play a helping role. Fifth, Kūkai believes that texts *as well as* paintings can be misleading whenever they are taken as representations of a rigid structure of reality. In Kūkai’s eyes, the visual cannot, therefore, solve the problem how the Buddha can transmit his dharma.

Keywords: Kukai, Mandalas, Esoteric Buddhism, Visuality

Introduction

In the year 806 CE the Japanese monk Kūkai 空海 (774–835) returned from a journey to China. He had spent 23 months in China’s capital Chang’an studying

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Esoteric Buddhism with his Chinese master Huiguo 惠果 (746–805). At that time Esoteric Buddhism in China comprised different elaborate systems of ritual¹ and a group of core texts.² Although there was not a fully institutionalized school of Esoteric Buddhism, Huiguo and other disciples of Amoghavajra had begun to propagate an esoteric lineage and a multilevel initiation system that would distinguish Esoteric Buddhism from other Buddhist traditions in China.³ Kūkai learnt about these systems and returned to Japan with the aim of establishing a new school of Esoteric Buddhism there.⁴ In order to do so he brought a large amount of esoteric texts with him, but also a number of visual artefacts. These included seven mandalas, five painted images of esoteric patriarchs as well as bells, vajras and other implements that are used in esoteric ritual. Back in Japan Kūkai sent the imported goods to the emperor and wrote an accompanying document listing all the items that he had purchased in China. This list, a text called *Shōraimokuroku*, also contains a short passage describing the value of the paintings that he imported. Many modern commentators see this famous passage as revealing an innovative attitude towards visuality in Japanese Esoteric Buddhism. Cynthea Bogel, for example, states that “the passage does indeed

1 Kūkai reports to have received “the ritual manuals in Sanskrit of the *Mahākaruṇāgarbhadbhava*” and the “Fivefold Initiation of the *Vajradhātu*”, i. e. to have been initiated into the ritual systems described in the *Vairocanābhisambodhi Sūtra* (*Darījīng/Dainichikyō* 大日經) and the *Sarvatathāgata-tattvasaṃgraha* (*Jingangdingjing/Kongōchōkyō* 金剛頂經); the quotation is from the *Teihon Kōbōdaishi Zenshū* edition of Kūkai’s works, vol. 1, pp. 35–36 (henceforth TKZ 1:35–6). Kūkai’s report is certainly rhetorically biased, but we have no reason to doubt the existence of these two ritual systems in Tang China. There is, moreover, evidence of them in independent reports about Huiguo’s initiations; see Orzech 2011a: 322; and Takagi and Dreitlein 2010: 227.

2 Kūkai has his own list of the Esoteric Canon – the *Shingonshū shogaku kyōritsuron mokuroku* – that comprises 424 titles; see TKZ 1:43–61.

3 In recent years several scholars have forcefully argued that Esoteric Buddhism was not a clearly distinguished tradition in Tang China and that we should not interpret Chinese esoteric texts, rituals and institutions according to parameters that were defined by Kūkai and later Shingon scholastics in Japan; see Sharf 2002: 263–278; McBride 2005; Orzech 2011a: 282–284. There is also some risk of overestimating Kūkai’s role in establishing the category of Esoteric Buddhism, however. Studies by Charles Orzech and Chen Jinhua have shown that Amoghavajra’s disciples tried to establish a canon, a lineage and an identity for Esoteric Buddhism in Tang China. Due to such attempts, Esoteric Buddhism continued to exist with some degree of independence in late Tang, even if it never gained the institutional status it achieved in medieval Japan; see Chen 2010; Orzech 2006 and 2011b.

4 Some authors have argued that Kūkai did not try to establish a new *school* of Buddhism in Japan; see especially Abe 1999: 187–204. It is clear, however, that Kūkai was aiming to establish new Buddhist doctrines, rituals and institutions in Japan and that he was seen as trying to do so by his contemporaries. Kūkai, moreover, mentions his teaching *as an alternative* to existing schools such as Hossō or Tendai; see e. g. TKZ 3:4, 5:3, 5:19–20.

present a radical new view regarding the power of imagery in the Japanese context".⁵

Some scholars have suggested that this *new power of imagery* consists in the power of visual representations to *transmit the Buddha's teaching*. Such visual means, it is argued, are superior to other media in conveying the truth of the Buddha. This interpretation usually relies on the following sentences from Kūkai's *Shōraimokuroku*:

The teaching originally has no words, [but] without words it does not manifest. True thusness is beyond visual form, but depending on visual form we awaken. [...] The Esoteric Canon is profound and dark, and difficult to carry over by brush and ink. But paintings provisionally reveal it to the unawakened. The various postures and the various mudras emerge from great compassion and one becomes a Buddha with a single glance.⁶

The first two sentences of this passage indeed express a central problem for all Buddhist thinkers, the problem of the transmission of the Dharma. It is part of the common ground of Buddhism that in his awakening experience the Buddha recognized an important truth and afterwards transmitted this truth to other sentient beings.⁷ In summary one might say that the Buddha found out that our lives are full of suffering because we are trapped in the cycle of rebirths. The reason for our being reborn again and again is that we cling to objects that do not really exist or that are very different from what we normally suppose. Our false ways of thinking and seeing the world only trick us into believing in their existence and attractiveness. The transmission *problem* consists in the presumed fact that the signs that the Buddha could use to communicate this discovery are themselves profoundly entangled with illusory cognitions. True thusness, it is said, must be beyond words and visual forms, because false ways of thinking generate misleading expressions, and misleading expressions in turn generate false ways of thinking. It therefore seems that as long as we are stuck within the normal illusory mode of thinking we cannot be led out of it by linguistic or other communicative means. It thus appears to be impossible for the Buddha to transmit his truth.

The next sentences in the above passage seem to contain an attractive solution to the transmission problem. Kūkai's statements that paintings reveal something that the written canon cannot convey and that a single glance at the

⁵ Bogel 2009: 42.

⁶ TKZ 1:31.

⁷ This belief is neatly expressed by the canonical story in which the Buddha first hesitated to transmit his insights, but was then convinced by Brahmā to teach; see e. g. Vin. I:4–7 or MN 26; for further appearances in the canon see Bareau 1963: 135–43; and Sakamoto 1992.

paintings can lead to buddhahood have been interpreted as saying that visual means are a better way to awakening than texts and teachings. Richard Hooker, for example, writes on his homepage:

Kūkai believed that the True Words transcended speech, so he encouraged the cultivation of artistic skills: painting, music, and gesture. Anything that had beauty revealed the truth of the Buddha.⁸

And Steve Odin says:

Kūkai declared that buddhahood is achieved only through the medium of symbols [...]. He further proclaimed that the secret teachings of Esoteric Buddhism are so profound that they cannot be imparted through the discursive signs of written texts, but only through the aesthetic symbols of mandala art.⁹

Pamela Winfield argues that in Kūkai's work in general,

images assume not only a theoretical, but also a ritual-functional priority over words. For Kūkai the state-protecting powers [...] can only be fully mobilized in image-filled ritual; for him only visible images and ritual performance can immediately make present the potency and protection of esoteric forces.¹⁰

And, finally, John Strong states that “mandalas, unlike texts, are efficient tools that can more readily transmit at least esoteric teaching *in toto*. Truly they are pictures worth a thousand words.”¹¹

These modern commentators agree that Kūkai favours visual means over words in the transmission of the Buddha's truth.¹² They thereby imply that Kūkai tries to solve the transmission problem depicted above by distinguishing between *two kinds* of signs: Signs can either be referential and pick out discrete objects in the world, or they can trigger aesthetic experiences in the person who perceives them. Signs of the first kind are indeed misleading as they suggest the existence of discrete objects in an outer world. Signs of the second kind – aesthetic signs – are not misleading, however. The Buddha thus has no problems in transmitting his truth if he confines himself to the use of aesthetic signs. According to this interpretation,

⁸ http://nsd.007.free.fr/A/Arch_histo/Regions/Asie/Japon/Religions/Bouddhisme_j/KUKAI.HTM; accessed on September 12, 2019.

⁹ Odin 1990: 195.

¹⁰ Winfield 2013: 86.

¹¹ Strong 1996: 303; for a further similar position see Matsunaga 1989: 25–27.

¹² This thesis about the *superiority* of visual means should be distinguished from the weaker thesis that visual means are *as powerful as* linguistic means in transmitting the dharma. Cynthia Bogel who stresses the innovative understanding of visibility in Kūkai's thought does not explicitly commit to the stronger thesis; see, for example, Bogel 2009: 9.

mandalas, paintings and ritual performances are such aesthetic signs that can indeed transmit the insights of the Buddha and thereby lead to awakening.¹³

Kūkai's statements in the *Shōraimokuroku* seem to provide strong evidence for this interpretation. Moreover, the interpretation sounds plausible to our modern ears and looks like a handy solution to the transmission problem: Many modern readers would agree that works of art can convey experiences that words cannot adequately express. It thus seems natural that Buddhist authors make use of this capacity of the aesthetic to explain the Buddha's transmission. The initial plausibility of this interpretation notwithstanding, I believe that it actually turns out to be too modern and not to be supported by Kūkai's and other esoteric authors' texts.¹⁴ Although Kūkai's sentences about visual artefacts in the *Shōraimokuroku* look like straightforward statements, further consideration reveals a couple of puzzles and interpretational problems. In this article I will try to show that by looking more closely at the passage from the *Shōraimokuroku* and at its context we can solve some of these problems. We will also see, however, that the solutions I offer cast doubt on the aesthetic interpretation presented above. Kūkai's own writings make it clear, I believe, that he does not distinguish between referential and aesthetic signs in the way suggested and that he does not argue for the supremacy of the visual.

Problems of Interpretation

Kūkai summarizes the value of the visual artworks that he imported from China in a relatively short passage. The passage is rarely cited as a whole and it will be helpful to look at it, for once, in its entirety:

The essence of the teaching has no words, [but] without words it does not manifest. True thusness is beyond visual form, [but] depending on visual form we awaken. Although we confuse the moon with the finger [that is pointing at it], [the ways] to instruct people are limitless. If you do not value rare sights that strike our eye, they are in fact treasuries that

13 A parallel argument exists with regard to poetry. Gregor Paul and Ryūichi Abe argue that Kūkai distinguishes between a merely referential and a poetic use of language and says that whereas the referential use of language is an obstacle to awakening, poetry and other creative language forms can indeed promote one's spiritual goals; see Paul 1987 and Abe 2005. Kūkai's ideas were already understood in this way in medieval Japanese poetics, for example by Kamo no Chōmei; see Kimbrough 2005: 5–6. I believe, however, that these readings are as problematic as the aesthetic understanding of visual artefacts; see Kaufmann 2018a.

14 For a more detailed argument against an aesthetical reading of Kūkai, see Kaufmann 2015, and Goepper 1985: 230–231.

pacify the country and benefit the people. The Esoteric Canon is profound and dark, and difficult to carry over by brush and ink. But paintings reveal it provisionally to the unawakened. The various postures and the various mudras emerge from great compassion and one becomes a Buddha with a single glance. What is hidden and abbreviated in the sutras and commentaries is displayed in diagrams and paintings. The essentials of the esoteric canon are truly bound in them. Who would abandon these in transmitting and receiving the teaching? The origin of the ocean assembly corresponds to it.¹⁵

This passage may look like a straightforward plea for the superiority of the visual. It is, therefore, often cited in order to justify the interpretation that Kūkai believes in the superior power of the visual to transmit the dharma. At closer inspection we come to see a number of problems in that passage, however, that prevent a quick and easy interpretation:

We see in the first sentences that Kūkai is actually *equating* visual forms and verbal expressions. *Both* are said to be unable to amount to true reality.¹⁶ Only in the later sentences does Kūkai contrast written works (sutras and commentaries) with visual works (diagrams and paintings). It is not clear, however, where exactly in the passage Kūkai's exposition of similarities ends and the opposition of verbal and visual means begins.¹⁷ It is clear, however, that at some point in the text Kūkai clearly distinguishes between verbal and visual methods and we are led to ask how exactly he sees the relation between the visual and the verbal, both regarding their similarities and regarding their differences.

We also notice at the very beginning of the passage that it is apologetic in tone. Although the passage is usually read as a eulogy of visual forms in transmitting the dharma, it starts in fact with sentences that emphasize their expressive limitations. This invites us to question what Kūkai's criticism of visual media is. What are the limitations of visual media in his eyes?

Kūkai clearly contrasts verbal and visual means in the sentence in which he speaks about the profundity and darkness of the esoteric canon. This expression refers to written works like the sutras and commentaries that are mentioned a

¹⁵ TKZ 1:31.

¹⁶ Kūkai treats “essence of teaching” (法本) and “thusness” (真如) as parallel expressions and does not, it seems, intend to distinguish between their content in this passage.

¹⁷ Takagi and Dreitlein believe that when Kūkai mentions the “treasury that pacifies the country”, he is already referring to the paintings he brought from China. Their translation reads: “These *paintings* are not to be valued as rare and curious sights. Indeed, they are treasures that bring peace to the nation and benefit to the people”; Takagi and Dreitlein 2010: 217; my emphasis. I find it more likely that the word “treasury” refers to the different “ways to instruct” – mentioned in the preceding sentence – which in turn include both words and visual forms. The interpretation I favour is also reflected in Hakeda's translation of the passage which says that “the Buddha's *teachings* are the treasures which help pacify the nation and bring benefit to people”; see Hakeda 1972: 145; my emphasis.

few sentences later and the modern interpreters of this sentence read the words ‘profound and dark’ (J. *jingen* 深玄) as a critique of these esoteric texts. For Kūkai, to be profound is something positive, however, as is clear from the fact he uses this word as a synonym of ‘secret’ (J. *mitsu* 密),¹⁸ a word that he frequently uses to refer to his own teaching.¹⁹ When Kūkai says that the esoteric sutras are profound and dark he thus does not mean to condemn them. Nevertheless, the aesthetic interpreters seem right in reading Kūkai as saying that the scriptures’ profundity excludes them from specific functions that can be fulfilled by “diagrams and paintings” instead. It is thus of interest to know what profundity is and which functions it excludes.

The most famous phrase of the whole passage is Kūkai’s statement that with a single glance one can become a Buddha. This statement sounds hardly believable, however, and we wonder how Kūkai can suppose that a single glance at a picture can have us achieve buddhahood. In his other writings Kūkai stresses, of course, that we can become a buddha in this lifetime. But can we really awaken simply by looking at a picture? We should also notice that in our passage the observer is asked to glance at the “various postures and the various mudras” in the mandalas and not at the deities or at the picture as a whole.

Finally, the expression “diagrams and paintings” (圖像) supposedly refers to the mandalas and portraits of patriarchs that Kūkai imported from China and that are listed just before the passage under discussion. They are furthermore said to contain the essentials of the esoteric canon, to be indispensable for esoteric teachers, and to correspond to the ocean assembly, i. e. to the innumerable crowd of buddhas and bodhisattvas. But what exact functions are meant by these flowery expressions?

These considerations lead to the following five questions:

- How does Kūkai see the relation between the visual and the verbal?
- What are the limitations of visual media according to Kūkai?
- What is profundity and which functions does it exclude?

¹⁸ See, for example, TKZ 3:25 and 3:80. Kūkai also praises Buddhism for being ‘profound’ in the concluding verses of his early text *Sangōshiki*, see TKZ 7:86.

¹⁹ The second part of the expression, ‘dark’ (J. *gen* 玄), is used less frequently in Kūkai’s works. It is also used with a positive nuance, however, to denote something that cannot easily be understood by outsiders; see, for example, TKZ 3:133 or the characterization of Daoism as “dark” (positive), but “rarely in harmony” (negative) in the *Bunkyōhifuron*, TKZ 6:4. There are also passages where ‘dark’ is used to characterize teachings that are still inferior to the supreme teaching, see TKZ 3:169 and TKZ 3:80. These uses are quotations from the *Shimoheyānlun*, however, and might not represent Kūkai’s own terminology. It seems safe to suppose that in combination with ‘profound’ the adjective ‘dark’ also expresses a positive or, at least, neutral value judgment.

- How can a single glance lead to awakening?
- What kinds of paintings did Kūkai bring from China and what function do they fulfil?

In this article I will try to give answers to all these questions. It will prove helpful to start with the last question and go through this list of questions in reverse order.

1 What paintings did Kūkai bring with him?

The *Shōraimokuroku* is a particularly valuable source for the study of early Japanese Buddhism because it lists in detail all the items that Kūkai imported from China. This is also true for the paintings that he brought with him:

One *Mahāvairocana Mahākaruṇāgarbhodbhava Mahā-Manḍala*

大毘盧遮那大悲胎藏大曼荼羅一鋪

One *Mahākaruṇāgarbhodbhava Dharma-Manḍala* 大悲胎藏法曼荼羅一鋪

One abbreviated *Mahākaruṇāgarbhodbhava Samaya-Manḍala*

大悲胎藏三昧耶略曼荼羅一鋪

One *Vajradhātu Nine Assemblies Manḍala* 金剛界九會曼荼羅一鋪

One *Vajradhātu 81 deities Mahā-Manḍala* 金剛界八十一尊大曼荼羅一鋪

One portrait of *Ācārya Vajrabodhi* 金剛智阿闍梨影一鋪

One portrait of *Tripitaka Master Śubhakarasiṃha* 善無畏三藏影一鋪

One portrait of *Ācārya Great Wisdom [Amoghavajra]* 大廣智阿闍梨影一鋪

One portrait of *Ācārya Huiguo of Qinglong-Temple* 青龍寺惠果阿闍梨影一卷

One portrait of *Meditation Master Yixing*.²⁰ 一行禪師影一鋪

Kūkai tells us with regard to these paintings that his teacher Huiguo had them made for him so that he could bring them to Japan and spread Esoteric Buddhism there:

My master told me, that the secret mantra treasury is discussed in a concealed way in the sutras and commentaries and that without the use of diagrams and paintings it is impossible to transmit. He accordingly asked more than ten artists including the court-appointed artist Li Zhen and others, to paint for me the Mahā-Manḍala and so on, in total ten paintings.²¹

²⁰ TKZ 1:30–31. Kūkai also indicates the size of the paintings. It is not entirely clear how to reconstruct his measurements, but Takagi and Dreitlein suppose that the mandalas measured approximately 360 cm and the paintings approximately 70 cm in height (2010: 215).

²¹ TKZ 1:36; the translation is from Takagi and Dreitlein 2010: 224–225.

We see that there are two types of paintings listed here, mandalas and portraits of esoteric patriarchs. One should note that apart from these paintings there are two more paintings that Kūkai brought with him from China, but that are listed in the *Shōraimokuroku* as “Items Handed Down by the Masters”²²:

A *Mahā-Manḍala* of 447 deities on white cloth 白繼大曼荼羅尊四百四十七尊

A *Samaya-Manḍala* of 120 deities on white cloth 白繼金剛界三昧耶曼荼羅尊一百二十尊

In addition to these further mandala paintings, Kūkai lists six more objects: *śarīra* relics, a sandalwood shrine, a *vajra*, a pair of bronze cymbals, a sitting platform and a shell. Of these objects Kūkai says that

[They have been] brought to China by *ācārya* Vajrabodhi from South India, who gave them to the *Ācārya of Great and Wide Wisdom* [Amoghavajra]. The *Tripitaka Master of Great and Wide* [Wisdom] in turn gave them to the *Ācārya of Qinglong-Temple* [Huiguo]. The *Ācārya of Qilong-Temple* in turn bestowed them on Kūkai. They are proofs of the transmission of the esoteric Dharma lineage. They are what all beings take refuge in.²³

In this passage Kūkai asserts a lineage of patriarchs and presents himself as a successor to this lineage and as being responsible for its transmission to Japan. The two mandalas and the other objects that he inherited from the former patriarchs are thus a material proof of his legitimacy. The import of the portraits of patriarchs that are listed in the “ Mandalas and Portraits ” section of the *Shōraimokuroku* basically fulfils the same purpose. By importing such paintings Kūkai introduces the *lineage* of his new school to Japan and the possession of the paintings helped him to pose as the legitimate heir to this lineage. Many years after his arrival, in 821, Kūkai ordered the creation of two further portraits, those of Nāgārjuna and Nāgabodhi, thus completing the lineage that Kūkai claims for the esoteric school. The portraits are said to have been hung on the walls of the temples that Kūkai oversaw in Japan. We can imagine that there they will remind all spectators of the history of Esoteric Buddhism and strengthen the feeling of identity among Kūkai’s followers who take “refuge in them” – as Kūkai expresses it.

It is, however, the other sort of paintings, the mandalas, which play the more important doctrinal role in Esoteric Buddhism. In the preface to the *Shōraimokuroku* Kūkai already mentions the mandalas and says that “the images of the deities [...] have crossed the sea to come to him [the emperor].” At many other places in his work Kūkai stresses that the use of mandalas is what

²² TKZ 1:33; see also Bogel 2009: 119.

²³ TKZ 1:34; the translation is from Takagi and Dreitlein 2010: 219.

distinguishes Esoteric Buddhism from all other Buddhist traditions.²⁴ We thus must discuss in more detail what mandalas are for him.

What is a mandala?

The Sanskrit word “maṇḍala” can be used in many different senses. Among other things, it can refer to a circular form, denote a specific spot or domain, or mean an assembly of deities. As the modern English word “mandala”, the Sanskrit term was also used to refer to concentrically organized two-dimensional pictures. This ambiguity of the term has been noted by many ancient and modern commentators²⁵ and there have been several attempts to trace these different meanings back to an original meaning of the term.²⁶ In the *Vairocanābhisambodhi Sūtra*, for example, Vajrapāṇi asks the Buddha what the meaning of the word ‘maṇḍala’ is. The Buddha answers: “This is called ‘maṇḍala’ which generates the buddhas. [...] Furthermore, Lord of Mysteries, because of pity for boundless realms of beings this is in a broad sense the maṇḍala ‘Born of the Matrix of Great Compassion’”.²⁷ In his comment on this passage *Śubhakarasiṃha*²⁸ explains that ‘maṇḍala’ means either ‘circle’, or ‘what gives birth to all buddhas’, or ‘ghee’, i.e. the supreme essence.²⁹ Proceeding from these explanations in the esoteric tradition, Kūkai offers a theory about the meaning of ‘maṇḍala’ in his text *Sokushinjōbutsugi*. In one of the longest continuous passages about mandalas in his work he says:

According to the explanation in the Vajraśekhara texts, the first of the four maṇḍalas is the mahā-maṇḍala. The mahā-maṇḍala consists of the bodies possessing all the excellent marks of each of the buddhas and bodhisattvas, and is also a painting showing their forms and appearances. Furthermore, union with a deity in yoga through the five-stage-meditation is also called the mahā-jñānamudrā. Second, the samaya-maṇḍala are the signs

²⁴ See e. g. TKZ 2:3–4, 5:7 and 8:4.

²⁵ For modern interpreters see e. g. Toganō 1982 [1927]: 1–6; Ishida 1987: 29–33; Snodgrass 1988: 121; and Ten Grotenhuis 1999: 2.

²⁶ The actual etymology is rather obscure, however; see Mayrhofer 1986, vol.2: 294; and Bühnemann 2003: 13.

²⁷ T848:5b27–c1; as usual I refer to texts from the Taishō canon by a ‘T’ followed by the text number, the page number and the line code that is composed of a letter for the column in the printed edition and a number for the line in that column.

²⁸ Śubhakarasiṃha’s commentary to the *Vairocanābhisambodhi Sūtra* exists in two versions. The first was composed by Śubhakarasiṃha (673–735) and Yixing 一行 (683–727). The second was a revised version by Zhiyan and Wengdu. Kūkai relied on the first version which he brought with him from China; see Kano 2015: 383.

²⁹ T1796:625a15–b11.

held by the deities, such as a sword, wheel, jewel, vajra, lotus, and the like. If these images are painted they are also called *samaya-maṇḍala*. Furthermore, forming a mudra by joining the two hands together to create a vajra-fist is also called the *samaya-jñānamudrā*. Third, the *dharma-maṇḍala* are the *bīja-mantras* of the deities. Writing those *bīja*-letters each in their proper position is a *dharma-maṇḍala*. It is also the *samādhi* of the Dharmakāya, and all the words, meanings, and so on of all the sutras. It is also known as the *dharma-jñānamudrā*. Fourth, the *karma-maṇḍala* are the postures, movements, and so on of all the buddhas, bodhisattvas, and others. A statue made by casting, molding, or otherwise is also a *karma-maṇḍala* and is also known as the *karma-jñānamudrā*.³⁰

In this passage Kūkai distinguishes between four kinds of mandalas: the *mahā*-, *samaya*-, *dharma*- and *karma*-type of mandala.³¹ Three of these four types of mandalas are also mentioned in the list of imported paintings. The *mahā-maṇḍala* (*dai-mandara* 大曼荼羅) is a geometrically ordered display of deities in anthropomorphic form. We have seen that Kūkai brought three such mandalas with him, one of the *Mahākaruṇāgarbhodbhava* type, one of the *Vajradhātu 81 deities* type, and one of an undefined type that Kūkai presumably received from the lineage of esoteric masters. The order of the deities in these mandalas was defined by different scriptures, in the first case by the *Vairocanābhisambodhi Sūtra* and in the second case by the *Sarvatathāgata-tattvasamgrāha*.³² A *samaya-maṇḍala* (*sanma-yamandara* 三昧耶曼荼羅) has the same geometrical design as the *mahā-maṇḍala*, but contains objects instead of human figures. These objects stand for a characteristic property of the deity; the vajra diamond, for example, stands for the indestructible wisdom of Vairocana Buddha. The *dharma-maṇḍala* (*hō-mandara* 法曼荼羅) contains Siddhaṃ letters instead of deities. According to his list, Kūkai also brought one such *dharma-maṇḍala* and two *samaya-maṇḍalas* back to Japan. The fourth type of mandala, the *karma-maṇḍala* (*katsuma-mandara* 羯磨曼荼羅) is not mentioned in Kūkai's list, because a *karma-maṇḍala* is three-dimensional and consists of statues of deities arranged in a similar way to the painted deities in the two-dimensional mandalas. Such *karma-maṇḍalas* were also erected in Japan shortly after Kūkai's death,³³ but they were, of course, too bulky and heavy to be transported from China.

³⁰ TKZ 3:24–25; Takagi and Dreitlein 2010: 54–55.

³¹ The four types of mandalas are also explained in many of Kūkai's commentaries; see e. g. TKZ 4:98, 4:113, 4:219.

³² There are, however, different theories about how to translate the descriptions in the sutras into two-dimensional paintings; see Toganō 1982 [1927]: 90–98 and 198–204; and Snodgrass 1988: 171–186.

³³ See Bogel 2009: 279.

We have now seen what the four types of mandalas that Kūkai described in the *Sokushinjōbutsugi* are. To understand what mandalas are for Kūkai it is even more important, however, to take note of a further distinction that is only implicit in the passage.³⁴ Kūkai tells us that all four types of mandalas exist in three different forms. The *mahā-maṇḍala*, for example, exists as “the bodies possessing all the excellent marks of each of the buddhas and bodhisattvas”. These bodies are the real bodies of beings in the world.³⁵ The two-dimensional paintings are images of these real bodies and only represent one form in which the mahā-maṇḍala can exist. Finally, the bodies of the buddhas can also be enacted in ritual, for example by means of the “five-stage-meditation”.³⁶ For the other three kinds of mandalas we find corresponding explanations in Kūkai’s text. *Samaya-maṇḍalas* are real objects in the world “such as a sword, wheel, jewel, vajra, lotus”; paintings of objects; and ritual enactments of objects by “forming a mudra”. *Dharma-maṇḍalas* are the sounds that are uttered by the buddhas; the written letters of these sounds; and they are also meditational states. *Karma-maṇḍalas*, finally, are ritual movements of the buddhas; three-dimensional representations of these buddhas; and the acts in ritual, in making statues and performing other devotional activities.³⁷ Kūkai thus distinguishes for each type of mandala a *real*, an *iconic* and a *ritual* form of existence.

34 This three-fold distinction has not often been noticed, but it seems to be the source of Gardiner’s distinction between mandalas as artistic representation, demarcated ritual space, or world of experience; see Gardiner 1996: 268. He also distinguishes between mandalas as “esoteric Buddhism as a whole”, “manifestations (not only paintings)”, and “places of religious practice” (254). This latter distinction seems to mix Kūkai’s threefold distinction with other disambiguations of the word ‘mandala’.

35 According to Mahāyāna buddhology, these bodies are certainly not real in the ultimate sense. They only appear to humans and other sentient beings in accordance with their respective capacities and needs, see e. g. Griffiths 1994: 87–97. In contrast to painted or sculpted bodies, they appear to us as real bodies, however.

36 For this esoteric practice, see Todaro 2006.

37 Kūkai’s understanding of the *karma-maṇḍala* is not clear in the above passage. In general, the relation of this mandala to the other three kinds of mandalas is puzzling, as Kūkai’s commentator Yūkai (1345–1416) has already pointed out; see Dreitlein 2015b: 53. In some of his commentaries he says, however, that “the hand and leg positions of the deities and their actions are called the *karma-maṇḍala*”; see TKZ 4:102 and 4:116. The acts of casting and moulding, i. e. meritorious acts of producing (and sponsoring) Buddhist statues seem to be further analogous actions. That the *karma-maṇḍala* displays meritorious acts is explicitly mentioned in the *Hokkekyōkaidai*; see TKZ 4:191.

Real form of existence

It is one of Kūkai’s central ideas that buddhas and bodhisattvas act in manifold ways from compassion with beings that are caught in the circle of life and death.³⁸ Taken in their original meaning, mandalas are these very acts. This corresponds to the *Vairocanābhisaṃbodhi Sūtra*’s characterization of mandalas as an assembly of buddhas that are “generated” because of “pity”.³⁹ The *tathāgatas* thus appear as buddhas with real bodies, take vows to relieve suffering, transmit their insights through teaching, and help sentient beings by merciful deeds.⁴⁰ Kūkai asserts that these four types of compassionate acts are what really make up the four kinds of mandalas. The *tathāgatas*’ manifestations as real bodies are the *mahā-maṇḍala*; the objects that manifest the buddhas’ vows to relieve suffering are the *samaya-maṇḍala*; the buddhas’ transmission of insights through teaching are the *dharmamaṇḍalas*; and their merciful deeds are the *karma-maṇḍala*. These real mandalas consist of events in the world, but they cannot be seen or touched as a whole and do not seem to be cohesive units. Kūkai uses the term ‘mandala’, however, to stress that the Buddha’s actions and manifestations in the world are not isolated events, but build up a comprehensive and dynamic system. ‘Mandala’ therefore means for Kūkai primarily the ordered system of the Buddha’s wholesome acting in the world.

38 In his commentary on the *Vajracchedikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*, the *Kongōhannya-haramitsukyō-kaidai* Kūkai says explicitly that “the forms appearing in the four mandalas are the accumulation of merit”; TKZ 4:262; the translation can be found in Dreitlein 2017: 31. Kūkai also often repeats a story according to which the four mandalas flow from the virtues of the Buddhas and help sentient beings to overcome their karmic condition; see e. g. TKZ 4:98, 4:114, and 4:219.

39 Kūkai also alludes to this understanding of mandalas when he says that the four *pāramitā* Buddhas bring forth all other Buddhas; see TKZ 4:256.

40 The four mandalas express the distinction between these kinds of acts: manifestation, intending good, preaching, helping. Kūkai characterizes the mandalas in this way in his commentary on *Brahma’s Net Sutra*, the *Bonmōkyōkaidai*: “*Mahā* is the person, both the preacher and the audience. *Samaya* is the fundamental expressive display. *Dharma* is the expressed teaching. *Karma* are the actions and postures”; TKZ 4:219; see also Dreitlein 2015a: 466. Gardiner offers a freer interpretation and sees the *maha-maṇḍala* as “the physical world around us: all the objects of our senses”, the *samaya-maṇḍala* as “the deity’s intention”, the *dharmamaṇḍala* as “all sounds and speech” and the *karma-maṇḍala* as “the actions of the deity”; see Gardiner 1996: 267.

Iconic form of existence

The mandala *paintings* or three-dimensional arrangements are the second form of existence of a mandala. It is this form of existence that we usually think of when we use the modern English word ‘mandala’. Many of these paintings survive until today and are still produced as ritual objects in Shingon temples. These paintings are indeed, as Kūkai tells us, images or representations (*zō* 像) of the real mandalas and thus *depict* the acts and manifestations of the buddhas.⁴¹ Later Shingon exegetes such as Raiyu 頼瑜 (1226–1304) have distinguished between a spontaneous mandala (*hōni mandara* 法爾曼荼羅), i. e. the esoteric cosmos, and conditioned mandalas (*zuien mandara* 隨緣曼荼羅), i. e. its reproductions. This distinction is not explicitly drawn by Kūkai, however, and it misses the third form of existence of a mandala.⁴²

Ritual form of existence

Third is the ritual form of existence of a mandala: It is one of the central ideas of Esoteric Buddhism that practitioners can ritually re-enact the acts of the buddhas. Kūkai expresses this idea at many places in his work by saying that everybody is equipped with the four mandalas.⁴³ This means that it is possible for a practitioner to re-enact a real mandala by performing the *ritual acts* that correspond to the *real acts* of the buddhas. These ritual acts are also called *jñānamūdras*.⁴⁴ It is thus easy to see why, for Kūkai, ‘mandala’ is a term that also refers to ritual systems: We have already seen that in the *Shōraimokuroku* Kūkai reports having received “the ritual manuals in Sanskrit of the *Mahākaruṇāgarbhodbhava*” and

⁴¹ See also Bogel 2009: 8: „Generally, mandalas are a painted or sculpted assembly of divinities that show the activities of the gods in the enlightened Dharmakāya realm.“ The understanding of four mandalas as four types of paintings or sculptures is also explicit in Amoghavajra’s commentarial text T1003 (610a), a text that strongly influenced Kūkai’s own commentaries on the *Rishūkyō*; see Takagi and Dreitlein 2010: 55.

⁴² Rambelli compares the difference between these two mandalas with the relation between an “abstract model” and its “concrete manifestations”; see Rambelli 2013: 40. This comparison is somewhat misleading, however, because neither the spontaneous nor the conditioned mandala is *abstract*. The painted mandala is not, moreover, a *manifestation* of the real mandala. It is an isomorphic image of it.

⁴³ See e. g. TKZ 5:8.

⁴⁴ For the relation between mandalas and *jñānamūdras*, see Takagi and Dreitlein 2010: 40 and 365–366.

the “Fivefold Initiation of the *Vajradhātu*”.⁴⁵ These terms are also the names of two types of mandalas and they refer here to the rituals that re-enact the acts of the deities of the corresponding mandalas.⁴⁶ It is the aim of the ritual imitation to transform one’s mind in accordance with the mind of the Buddha and to elicit the power that inheres in the Buddha’s acts.

Kūkai thus presents a sophisticated theory of mandalas that distinguishes between four types of mandalas in three forms of existence. Given the three forms of existence of mandalas, we must be careful to determine which form Kūkai is talking about when he mentions a mandala. When Kūkai asks in his commentaries on the *Vairocanābhisaṃbodhi Sūtra*, “who would be able to see the four mandalas if not of the capacity of a *cakravartin* or of the predisposition to Vajrayāna”,⁴⁷ for example, he is not talking about paintings, but about mandalas as real parts of the cosmic order. In the passage that accompanies Kūkai’s list of imported items it is evident, however, that he is talking about the mandala *paintings* that he brought from China. We should, therefore, analyse in some more detail how these paintings are seen and used in Esoteric Buddhism.

The development of the use of visual means in esoteric ritual

To better understand the role of mandala *paintings* it is necessary to look at the history of visual means in esoteric ritual. In his latest book Koichi Shinohara has analysed the development of esoteric rituals with special focus on the visual elements that became part of the ritual setting.⁴⁸ He argues that esoteric rituals began as rites of evoking the power of a specific deity. These rituals consisted of recitations of spells and performances of mudras that were believed to have been

⁴⁵ TKZ 1:35–6.

⁴⁶ Thanks to this understanding of mandalas as ritual programs Kūkai was able to explain the connections between various ritual elements that were already in use in Japan at his time; see Abe 1999: 128.

⁴⁷ TKZ 4:3. The following passage also clearly speaks about cosmic mandalas: “The four mandalas and the four *jñānamūdras* are infinite in number. Each of them is equal in volume to empty space. That is inseparable from this, and this is inseparable from that. It is just like empty space and light, which permeate each other and do not obstruct each other”; TKZ 3:25, the translation is Dreitlein’s (2015b: 65).

⁴⁸ Shinohara 2014; a concise summary of Shinohara’s book can be found in Verellen 2015; for a critique of the book see Kaufmann 2018b.

revealed by the Buddha or Bodhisattva who is the addressee of the rite. Rites of evoking a deity originally did not make use of images of any sort, but in the course of time painted images or statues of the deity were used and worshipped during the ritual.⁴⁹ These combined rituals of spell recitation and image worship were performed at a particular place that was called ‘mandala’, but in the beginning these mandalas were nothing more than marked spaces on the floor. Before the actual rite began the practitioner marked off an area on the ground and then ritually invited the deity to appear in this purified space. In some early rituals a water pot was placed in the middle of the mandala space,⁵⁰ later a painting or a statue of the invoked deity was added. This iconic representation fulfilled different functions at the same time: first, it indicated the seat reserved for the deity; second, it served as an object of worship during the rite; and third, the icon was believed to signal the success of the rite by some kind of image miracle, for example by sudden movements or by emitting rays of light. This straightforward and smooth extension of a simple invocation rite into a ritual of image worship was superimposed by further developments. Because the recitation of powerful spells was restricted to initiates, the original recitation of spells was combined with an initiation ritual. In an early period these two rituals were performed in neighbouring, yet separate areas. The initiations also used mandalas, but these were mandalas of a different sort that contained the seat of not only a single deity but of a group of deities or the whole esoteric pantheon. Such “all-gathering mandalas” still played a specific role in the esoteric initiation ceremony that is described by Kūkai when he reports on his own initiation in the *Shōraimokuroku*:

In the early part of the sixth month [of 805], I received a consecration permitting the study of the esoteric Dharma. On that day, I faced the *mahā-maṇḍala* of the *Mahākaruṇā-garbhodbhava*. In accordance with the teachings, [blindfolded] I threw a flower onto the mandala that by chance landed on the body of the tathāgata Vairocana in the very centre. Ācārya Huiguo praised this, saying, ‘How marvellous, how marvellous!’ He repeated this praise a second and a third time. I was then anointed with waters of the five buddhas from the five altar vessels, and received the empowerment of the three mysteries. I subsequently received for the *Mahākaruṇāgarbhodbhava* mandala the ritual manuals written in Sanskrit, and studied the yogas for attaining the wisdom of all the deities. In the early part of the

49 The recitation of spells in front of statues and paintings is also attested in Japan, even before Kūkai; see Hori 1958: 144–145 and Bogel 2009: 32. Kūkai’s biographer Shinzei reports that he also practised invocations of individual deities in front of Buddha statues before he encountered Esoteric Buddhism in China, see Bogel 2009: 64, and the *Kūkai sōzuden* in the *Kōbōdaishi Zenshū* edition of Kūkai’s works from 1923 (henceforth KZ), KZ 1:2.

50 Interestingly, the tradition of marking the seats of deities with objects also survived in mandalas with more than one deity. One may speculate that this triggered the emergence of painted *samaya mandalas* that represent the deities with painted objects.

seventh month, I furthermore faced the *Mahā-Mandala* of the *Vajradhātu*, and again received the consecration of the five buddhas from the five altar vessels. I again threw a flower that landed on Vairocana. The master was amazed, and praised this as before.⁵¹

In this passage Kūkai mentions a *Mahākaruṇāgarbhadbhava* and a *Vajradhātu* mandala that are spread on the floor and used for a peculiar initiation ceremony. This ceremony is already described in relatively old texts that became part of a compilation called ‘*Collected Dharani Sūtras*’ when they were translated into Chinese by Atikūṭa in 654. According to Shinohara’s analysis, this compilation contains texts that clearly distinguish between the role of all-gathering mandalas for initiation and mandalas of individual deities for rites of invocation. The all-gathering mandalas, i. e. the floor-painted mandalas of a great number of deities, have the specific function of introducing the novice to the esoteric pantheon. At the same time, they offer him a place within this divine cosmos by identifying a tutelary deity that is chosen by blindly throwing a flower onto the mandala. The tutelary deity will then be the buddha or bodhisattva that the practitioner addresses in his ritual training.

The *Sarvatathāgatatattvasaṃgrāha*, the *Vairocanābhisambodhi Sūtra* and Yixing’s commentary to the latter text no longer contain the distinction between two kinds of mandala fields. They only speak of *one* mandala that is drawn by the ritual master on the floor and destroyed after the ritual is finished. Shinohara concludes that the all-gathering mandala, which was initially only used for initiations and served the purpose of preparing the acolyte to perform invocation rites on the main mandala, in the course of time itself became the main mandala field for all kinds of invocations.

This development of the ritual space goes hand in hand with an altered interpretation of the content of the mandala. The *Sarvatathāgatatattvasaṃgrāha* tells us that in order to help sentient beings the Buddha releases bodies of buddhas from his mind that realize specific forms of knowledge and are endowed with specific kinds of powers.⁵² This process of emanation is an ordered process and the esoteric practitioner can ritually re-enact this process by either following the order of emanation or by starting with the most remote emanation. This progression can be a sequence of mudras as described in the *Sarvatathāgatatattvasaṃgrāha*: The practitioner starts with the hand gesture that is identified as the mudra of the deity depicted at the bottom of a square of the mandala and from there forms new mudras in the order of the deities in the mandala until he reaches the central Buddha Vairocana in the middle of the

⁵¹ TKZ 1:35–36; Takagi and Dreitlein’s translation slightly changed (2010: 222–223).

⁵² This process is described in T865.208b–216a.

central platform of the mandala. In general, the ordered re-enactment and moving through the mandala works by means of a combination of mudras, spells and visualizations.⁵³ These three forms of ritual acts are called the “three mysteries” in Esoteric Buddhism and are believed to be imitations of the Buddha’s bodily, verbal and mental behaviour. The practitioner thereby elicits the knowledge and power of the buddhas. In this description we clearly recognize Kūkai’s three forms of existence of a mandala: The *ritual mandala* re-enacts the *real mandala* that is formed by the acts of the Buddha. The second form of mandala, the *painted mandala*, is the spot where the ritual is performed. As the ritual re-enactment follows the order of the Buddha’s emanations and as the mandala painting depicts the process of emanation, the painting also depicts the order of the ritual re-enactment. The painted mandala thereby achieves the further role of a *storyboard for ritual performance*.⁵⁴

If we suppose that the mandalas in Kūkai’s eyes serve as storyboards for ritual performance, we can also understand why he asks the novice to look at the postures and mudras and not at the deities or paintings as a whole: the postures and mudras are what the practitioner can re-enact in his training.

It may be in part due to this new interpretation of the principal role of the mandala that a further change in the use of mandalas in esoteric ritual occurred. According to the descriptions in the esoteric *sutras*, the mandala paintings were drawn by the ritual master on the floor and destroyed after the ritual. The mandalas that Kūkai brought from China were not such provisional drawings, however, but elaborate artworks. We thus see that the habit of creating the painted mandala as a part of the ritual procedure and destroying it after use changed into the creation of enduring artworks.⁵⁵ A new way of displaying mandala paintings accompanied this development: mandalas that were spread on the floor could now also be hung on a wall.

The fact that no Chinese mandala paintings are preserved from this period may invite the hypothesis that this innovation of mandalas as enduring paintings was invented by Kūkai. Kūkai’s own reports suggest, however, that this habit was already established in China at that time. In the *Shōraimokuroku* Kūkai tells us that for his initiation he entered the “hall of consecration” and in another report he describes this hall in more detail:

⁵³ The processes of re-enactment are described in T865.220a–222b.

⁵⁴ Kūkai accordingly says that “the forty mind-grounds [i. e. the deities of the mandala] are one, yet there is a progression through them”, TKZ 4:220–221; see also Ten Grotenhuis 1999: 50, and White 2000: 9–12.

⁵⁵ See Shinohara 2014: 201.

Everywhere inside the *abhiṣeka* hall, under the *stūpa* on the altar, and on all the interior and exterior walls were paintings of the two great mandalas of the *Vajradhātu* and *Mahākaruṇāgarbhodbhava* and the mandalas of each individual deity. The grandeur of that scene with all the deities present made me feel as if the world of the lotus-treasury of Vairocana had just newly opened before my eyes.⁵⁶

This passage clearly indicates the existence of mandalas as permanent paintings that were hung on walls in China.⁵⁷ The change from provisional floor paintings to permanent wall paintings again altered the meaning and function of the mandalas.⁵⁸ For Kūkai and his Chinese predecessors, mandala paintings now seem to serve primarily as representations of doctrinal content. They still retain their earlier functions as markings of a sacred space, as objects of worship, and as displays of the esoteric pantheon. We have seen that even the initiation ceremony on a mandala painting is preserved in later forms of ritual, although the role of tutelary deities seems to have decreased.⁵⁹ Above all, however, mandala paintings now convey the message that the Buddha manifests in manifold forms. These forms emerge in an ordered process and can therefore be re-enacted in esoteric ritual.

2 Awakened with a single glance?

After we have seen what mandalas are and how they are used in esoteric ritual we can tackle why Kūkai asserts that a single glance at them can lead to buddhahood. Is it really possible to become a Buddha by merely looking at a picture? When trying to answer this question we should first note that Kūkai had strong personal reasons for talking up the pictures that he brought from China: On his journey to China Kūkai participated in an official mission and received an

⁵⁶ TKZ 1:111; the translation of this passage is adopted from Takagi and Dreitlein 2010: 12.

⁵⁷ See also Bogel 2009: 246–247; it is, of course, possible that Kūkai forged his report in order to make his readers believe that the tradition of creating permanent mandala paintings was already established in China and to conceal his own invention. At Kūkai's times of intense exchange with China there were other eye witnesses living in Japan who could report on the religious situation on the continent, however, and it seems unlikely that he would make something up that could easily be proven to be wrong by his contemporaries.

⁵⁸ This change also meant that mandalas were now works of art produced by renowned artists; see also Shinohara 2015: 201. Kūkai explicitly mentions the artist Li Zhen who produced the mandalas and portraits that he brought from China; see TKZ 1:36. This observation weakens Matsunaga Yūkei's hypothesis that esoteric art is not seen as the work of individual artists; see Matsunaga 2012: 189–191.

⁵⁹ See Shinohara 2015: 166–167.

imperial scholarship. Contrary to the message of his hagiographers, Kūkai was not the central personality of the Japanese mission to China in 804, however. He was still an unknown figure and was only chosen as a substitute for monks who had to leave the mission due to bad omens.⁶⁰ The scholarships were officially expected to allow the stipendiaries to stay in China for almost twenty years,⁶¹ but Kūkai returned to Japan after only 23 months having spent his entire scholarship already. In his list to the emperor Kūkai therefore admits that “my crime in not staying the required length of time in China deserves worse than death”. To prevent this unpleasant result Kūkai adds an apology: “Yet I venture to say I am happy, because alive I have brought to Japan the teachings that are hard to receive”.⁶² The rhetorical situation of the whole text can thus be characterized as follows: Kūkai is trying to convince the emperor that the things he brought from China are indeed so valuable that they justify a reduction of his sojourn by 18 years. We thus have to expect that Kūkai will praise all of his imported items as priceless treasures. And indeed, Kūkai adds eulogistic passages to his lists of new translations, Sanskrit mantras, commentaries and ritual implements as well. Given these circumstances, Kūkai’s statement that one can become a Buddha by a single glance at a mandala will most likely be exaggerated.

In a later text in which Kūkai reports having repaired one of the mandalas that he brought from China he accordingly repeats the single-glance claim in a more modest way. With regard to the deities of the *vajra-maṇḍala*, he says that “if [a practitioner] worships [them] once or looks [at them] once, their sword of wisdom will cut through his karmic hindrances”.⁶³ In another short text written on the occasion of the dedication of a mandala painting Kūkai similarly says that “the karmic hindrances accumulated in aeons will melt away with a single look [at the mandala]”.⁶⁴ These claims are more reserved than the claim that a single look at a mandala will lead to buddhahood. We see, on the other hand,

⁶⁰ See Fujii 2008: 28–29; and Borgen 1982: 9–10.

⁶¹ TKZ 8:81. Kūkai was not the only stipendiary who did not stay the officially determined span of 20 years in China. The number of 20 years might actually have been a mere formality and Ian Astley suggested to me that it might have to do with Confucian ideas about major junctures in the standard human lifespan. However that may be, Kūkai refers to this regulation and humbly apologizes for his early return.

⁶² TKZ 1:4.

⁶³ TKZ 8:109. A similar passage can be found in Kūkai’s report about his initiation in the *Himitsu mandara-kyō fuhō den*: “By looking at them once or prostrating to them once, wrongdoings are eradicated and merits accumulated”; see TKZ 1:111 and Takagi and Dreitlein 2010: 12.

⁶⁴ TKZ 8:113.

that Kūkai holds fast to the idea that glancing at a painting can have significant salvific effects on the spectator. We also find this claim in Kūkai's famous text *Sokushinjōbutsugi*:

Glimpsing the mandala even for the briefest moment, immediately pure faith arises. Because the disciple looks at it reverently with the mind of joy, the seeds of the Diamond World are planted in his storehouse consciousness.⁶⁵

This description places emphasis on the mandala generating faith in the onlooker. This faith can then become a seed for further religious progress. It is important to note that Kūkai is quoting here from a ritual commentary by Amoghavajra.⁶⁶ He thus did not invent the idea of the single glance but refers to an older tradition.⁶⁷ A single glance at the esoteric canon reveals that there are indeed numerous passages mentioning this idea. One passage from the *Sarvatathāgatātattvasaṃgrāha* is particularly close to Kūkai's own wording:

Then after duly removing the blindfold he should show him the Great Mandala [*mahā-maṇḍala*]. As soon as he has seen it he is freed of all his sins.⁶⁸

This passage also describes the effect of glancing at the mandala as an elimination of sin in the practitioner. It also makes it clear that the moment of looking at the mandala is a particular moment in the initiation ceremony, the moment just after the blindfold has been removed.⁶⁹ The same moment is also described in another passage from the same text:

Then he makes the disciple look at the Great Mandala in the proper order. As soon as he has seen [it the disciple] is empowered by all the Tathāgatas and Vajrasattva dwells in the disciple's heart. He sees various visions of orbs of light and miraculous transformations.

65 TKZ 3:27.

66 T1125.535c7–9.

67 Alexis Sanderson has argued that this tradition goes back to the *Mahāmanivipulavimāna* (T1007) which is said to have been translated into Chinese in the early sixth century. Sanderson's translation does not contain an expression that corresponds to Kūkai's term 'single glance', but idea of a sudden elimination of karmic hindrances is obvious: "Then he should introduce him into the mandala after consecrating him with a mantra [...]. Merely through this consecration the obscurations of all his sins, the obscurations of his actions committed in previous lives, are eliminated. He possesses all purity. He has been entered-and-empowered by all the Tathāgatas. All the Tathāgatas have consecrated him"; see Sanderson 2009: 234.

68 Sanderson 2009: 234, fn. 539.

69 With regard to Hindu mandalas, Bühnemann stresses that while today we can see pictures everywhere, the moment of seeing a monumental mandala painting and its deities was a very special moment for a practitioner, because the "deities become visible to the initiate for the first time" (2003: 14).

Because he has been entered and empowered by all the Tathāgatas sometimes the Lord Vajradhara or the Buddha appears to him in his true form. From that time forth he attains all his goals, every desire of his mind, all Siddhis, up to the state of Vajradhara or the Tathāgatas.⁷⁰

In this passage we see two interesting novelties: first, the glance has to be “in the proper order”, i. e. the disciple is urged to move his gaze over the painting, presumably in the order of the emanation of deities that is depicted in the mandala.⁷¹ Second, the effect of glancing at the mandala is not described as an elimination of sin, but as an entrance of deities into the practitioner’s heart. In some other passages both effects are mentioned together and thus seem to be related: when the sins and karmic hindrances have been ritually removed, the deities can enter the purified vessel of the practitioner.⁷² We can now see that the “single glance” is not just a short look at a painting. It is rather part of an elaborate ritual process that results in a spiritual union with the deity.⁷³ Alexis Sanderson has shown that in the Indian esoteric canon this union was conceived of as a state of possession (*āveśa*). As the above passage shows, the possession by the deity results in various forms of visions and in seeing the deity “in his true form”. This vision of reality can finally lead to attaining “all Siddhis, up to the state of Vajradhara or the Tathāgatas”, i. e. buddhahood. There is thus canonical support for Kūkai’s claim that a single glance at the mandalas can lead to buddhahood. We should be aware, however, that nothing has been said so far about the length of this process. Kūkai’s own report of his initiation actually shows that the first glance is only the beginning of an extended training program. He tells us that after his first consecration he “received for the *Mahākaruṇāgarbhadbhava* mandala the ritual manuals written in Sanskrit, and studied the yogas for attaining the wisdom of all the deities”. The initiation thus passes over into a period of intense study of texts and further practices. We have already seen that a second initiation to another mandala follows and Kūkai also

⁷⁰ T865.218b28; the translation is adopted from Orzech 2017: 35; see also Sanderson 2009: 135.

⁷¹ A similar idea is expressed in Rambelli 2013: 66: “The mandala may represent an itinerary toward salvation, and therefore a temporal succession.”

⁷² In this aspect the whole process resembles eye-opening-ceremonies for statues and paintings. Just as a statue is prepared and purified for the entrance of the deity, so the practitioner is removed of sins so that he can receive the deity; cf. Orzech 2017: 33.

⁷³ This also seems to fit with Kūkai’s use of words: he does not usually speak of “a single glance” (一見), an expression that suggests a short moment of time, but says “once” instead. By this he seems to mean that the ritual is effective even if it is only performed once, but not that this event is over soon. He also uses, as we have seen, the expression “either looks once or worships once” (一礼一瞻) which also points to a ritual context.

mentions a third consecration ceremony.⁷⁴ All these ceremonies are interrupted by extended periods of study. Finally one becomes a ritual master which, of course, is not the end of one's striving to become a Buddha. When Kūkai and his Chinese sources say that a single glance at the mandala can result in buddhahood, they thus forget to mention that between both events lies a period of rigorous training.

It is also important to note that the main visual element in the process of esoteric training is not the glance at the mandala, but the mentioned vision of the deity. The content of these possessed visions is not directly related to what is depicted in the paintings, however. So again, when Kūkai and his sources say that a 'single glance' can lead to awakening, the glance at the paintings is only a preparatory step that frees the practitioner from sin and arouses faith so that he is ready to receive the deity. It is only in this resultant state of possession that the practitioner "sees" the true nature of things. The actual looking at the painting does not show anything that is deliberating in this sense.

Robert Sharf has pointed to the important but often neglected fact that many Buddhist paintings and statues were understood as possessing magical powers.⁷⁵ Kūkai's model can give a rationale for this well-documented understanding of Buddhist art works⁷⁶: Every Buddhist would agree that the Buddha's acts are powerful. Therefore, the mandalas in their *real form of existence* are powerful because they consist of the Buddha's acts. By way of a "logic of imitation" according to which faithful representations contain the same properties as the things or events they represent, *mandalas as paintings* also have the powers that inhere in the Buddha's acts.⁷⁷ One could read Sharf as suggesting that glancing at the mandala elicits these powers of the painting.⁷⁸ I have not

⁷⁴ See Takagi and Dreitlein 2010: 224.

⁷⁵ Sharf 2001: 188–189. In this article, I do not discuss the idea that mandalas served as *aids for visualization practices* in the sense that practitioners were asked to produce eidetic images of the buddhas and objects depicted in the mandalas. I believe that Sharf 2001 and Shinohara 2014 have shown that we have no evidence that mandalas were actually used in this way. This does not mean, however, that mandalas did not function as *ritual aids* in a different sense, namely as storyboards for ritual performance; see above.

⁷⁶ There are, for example, many stories of magical acts performed by statues in the contemporary *Nihonryōiki* collection.

⁷⁷ I explain the idea of imitation in more detail in Kaufmann 2019; Tsuda Shin'ichi speaks in a similar way about a 'logic of yoga'; see Tsuda 1977. Cynthea Bogel uses the term 'logic of similarity'; see Bogel 2009: 35.

⁷⁸ Sharf does not say this explicitly, but writes: "But clearly Kūkai believes that Shingon images are more than mere 'illustration'; note his striking statement that 'with a single glance one becomes a buddha'. Here Kūkai points to a 'magical' dimension of Tantric art that modern commentators are seemingly unable or unwilling to confront directly"; see Sharf 2001: 188.

found a textual confirmation for this interpretation, however, and I think it makes more sense for Kūkai to suggest that the glance itself does not elicit magical powers. For Kūkai the *ritual acts* that represent and imitate the Buddha's acts also contain the same powers as the acts of the Buddha. Therefore, the practitioner does not need a powerful picture in order to tap the Buddha's reservoir of power. The only sense in which a painted mandala helps to elicit powers in Kūkai's understanding is that it is the protected and purified ground on which the ritual union between Buddha and practitioner can take place.⁷⁹

3 Are esoteric texts too profound?

One function of the painted mandalas is to impress the acolyte and strengthen his commitment to the esoteric path. His ceremonial glance at the mandala frees him of sins and makes him ready to receive higher forms of teaching. We have seen that this does not render visual means superior to written works, but only makes them better tools for beginners. When Kūkai remarks that “what is hidden and abbreviated in the sutras and commentaries is displayed in diagrams and paintings”, he seems to be referring to yet another function of them, however. In a similar passage from the same text Kūkai reports that “the master told me, that the secret mantra treasury is discussed in a concealed way in the sutras and commentaries and that without the use of diagrams and paintings it is impossible to transmit.”⁸⁰ He thus stresses that mandalas and other paintings do also play an important role in the *correct reading* of the esoteric texts and help us to decipher the canon. This reading also fits well with another passage from Kūkai's work in which he reports on his own religious career:

I, disciple of the Buddha Kūkai, was spurred on by the urge to attain awakening, and set my mind on returning to the source. I did not yet know which path to take, and standing at the

Rambelli proposes the further interpretation that “special semiotic operations were carried out in order to remotivate the mandala and change it into an icon containing the characteristics of the cosmos”; see Rambelli 2013: 78. He seems to suppose that these operations were necessary in order to elicit the powers that are inherent in the painting. I haven't found evidence in Kūkai's writings that he understands rituals performed in front of or on top of painted mandalas in this way. But Rambelli may be referring to later developments.

79 This role is also mentioned by Sharf when he says that “like all Buddhist icons, a Shingon mandala is not so much a representation of the divine as it is the locus of the divine – the ground upon which the principal deity is made manifest”; see Sharf 2001: 189.

80 TKZ 1:36.

crossroads often shed tears of despair. However, the Buddha was perhaps moved by my devotion and sincerity and I was able to obtain this secret gate. Yet, reading the words of the esoteric texts, their true meaning still eluded me. I finally resolved to journey to China to seek out one to instruct me. The emperor responded to my petition, and I could enter great Tang. I met with a teacher and I could draw a painting of the *mahā-mandala* and also learned the mantras and mudras of the deities. Thenceforth eighteen years passed.⁸¹

Here again Kūkai recounts that at the beginning of his path he could not practice in the right way and was unable to read the essential scriptures that were granted to him by the Buddha. It was only by learning mantras and mudras and by being instructed to draw a mandala that Kūkai finally managed to grasp the profound message of Esoteric Buddhism. It is also important to notice that Kūkai does not directly speak of mandalas in the *Shōraimokuroku* passage but of *diagrams*. This term appears in another text from his work. When talking about the ritual text *Rite of Mañjuśrī's Praises of the Dharmakāya* he says:

The text is brief, but the meaning is expansive. Each phrase is like gold or jewels, and the characters perfectly combine [to create infinite meanings]. [...] Reading the text over and again continuously through the night, I came to a realization. The text is easy to decipher, but the profound meaning is difficult to grasp. I have attempted to explain it more fully for the sake of those who do not know it. To explain the profound meaning, I extracted 120 phrases of refuge, then made two kinds of diagrams – squares and circles – and also wrote a commentary on the meaning.⁸²

At the time of writing this text Kūkai is already advanced in his spiritual career and feels responsible for transmitting the esoteric message to his disciples. In this passage he says explicitly that he created diagrams in order to explain the deeper meaning of a text. We also see that the profundity of the text has to do with its 'expansive meaning', which seems to mean that beneath the easily understandable surface of a text lie numerous semantic connections that form a hidden and very complex structure of meaning. The diagrams are meant to lay bare this deep structure. Unfortunately, the diagrams mentioned in this text did not survive and we do not know exactly what they looked like. Takagi and Dreitlein point to diagrams in the *Hosshin sanmitsukanzu*, a text that was traditionally attributed to Kūkai, but is nowadays thought to be of later origin.⁸³ These pictures share the geometrical design of mandalas and the lotus flower arrangement, but they do not consist of an ordered group of Buddhist deities. In his extant commentaries Kūkai mentions conventional mandala paintings as tools to understanding a text. In the *Kyōōkyōkaidai*, for

⁸¹ TKZ 8:108; the first part of the translation is taken from Takagi and Dreitlein 2010: 6.

⁸² TKZ 8:43, Takagi and Dreitlein 2010: 236–238.

⁸³ KZ 4:839–843, Takagi and Dreitlein 2010: 239.

example, he says that the *Sarvatathāgatattvasaṃgrāha* can be read in four different senses, as a *mahā-maṇḍala*, a *samaya-maṇḍala*, a *dharma-maṇḍala* or a *karma-maṇḍala*.⁸⁴ The painted mandala can thus, as a structured representation, help to show the deeper structure of the esoteric texts. To better understand how this is possible, we must consider Kūkai's understanding of text. In his commentaries, Kūkai also distinguishes between three forms of existence of a sutra. The *Vairocanābhisaṃbodhi Sūtra*, for example, exists – according to Kūkai –

in three versions. One is the eternal text of thusness. It is the dharma-mandala of the buddhas. The second is the large text that circulated in the world. It is the sutra in 100,000 verses transmitted by Nāgārjuna. The third is an abridged text in approximately 3,000 verses.⁸⁵

The sutra text thus also exists as a cosmic entity that spreads over the world and in this form of existence it is identical with the dharma-mandala in its real form. The concrete text of the sutra and the dharma-mandala as a painting are just two different forms of manifestation of the same cosmic phenomenon. It is thus not surprising that a mandala painting can help to decipher a sutra text because both are representations of the same structure. There are two important differences between a sutra and a mandala, however: First, the text's structure is hidden, whereas the mandala's structure is obvious. Second, the text is profound, i. e. its meaning is ambiguous whereas the mandala does not have a hidden semantic layer. These differences have soteriological consequences: If we only look at the single, superficial meaning of the text, we are prone to be misled and to cling to the doctrines that we read about. If we work out the hidden structure of the text, however, we start to see its multiple meanings. As the mandala has a clear structure we can employ it in the process of structuring the text. This is why Kūkai says in the *Shōraimokuroku* that “the essentials of the esoteric canon are bound” in diagrams and paintings. Besides the mandala's role in initiation and its serving as a map for ritual training, this exegetical function seems to be Kūkai's main reason for praising the mandala as an indispensable means to transmit the teaching.

84 TKZ 4:98. Kūkai also interprets a sutra according to the four kinds of mandalas in TKZ 4:113, 4:201 and 4:219.

85 TKZ 4:4. Note that only two of the three forms of existence of sutras are related to those of mandalas. The third form of the sutra is a legendary larger version of the same text and not a ritual enactment as with the mandalas.

4 The Dharma beyond speech and form: Iconoclasm in China

When Kūkai starts to talk about the paintings that he imported from China, he does not begin by listing their merits: “The essence of the teaching has no words, [but] without words it does not manifest. True thusness is beyond visual form, but depending on visual form we awaken.” He thus aligns words and visual media and stresses that both are unable to express ultimate reality. For this reason, one cannot really say that Kūkai wholeheartedly praises the value of Buddha images in this passage. But what is the reason for his reservation?

To answer this question it is helpful to note that the first sentences of the passage relate to another corpus of texts, as Cynthia Bogel has shown. Kūkai’s statement has much in common with inscriptions that can be found on Chinese Buddhist steles and statues from the sixth to the eighth century.⁸⁶ A particularly close wording can be found on an Amitabha statue from 746 that is now located in Berlin’s Museum für Asiatische Kunst. The inscription says:

While highest truth is devoid of any image, without images there would be nothing to make visible its [being the] truth; and while highest principle is devoid of all words, how, without words, would its [being the] principle be made known?⁸⁷

Although Kūkai’s wording differs from this and other inscriptions in some details, the striking similarity suggests that Kūkai directly or indirectly quotes from such inscriptions or that his words and the inscriptions have a common source.⁸⁸ Claudia Wenzel and John Kieschnick have argued that the inscriptions on Buddha steles and statues have to be read in the context of contemporary iconoclast discussions in China. Vinaya master Daoxuan 道宣 (596–667) reports in his *Further Biographies of Eminent Monks* on such an iconoclast discussion between Emperor Wu and the monk Huiyuan. In this discussion, which is said to have taken place in 577 CE, the emperor threatens to destroy all Buddha images. He argues that “the true Buddha is beyond representation for he resides in the great void” and concludes that there is no need for Buddha images. Huiyuan admits that the true Buddha is indeed beyond representation, but he objects that “with the aid of images, the truth is made manifest” and that images are necessary to arouse devotion. The makers or promoters of Buddha images seem to refer

⁸⁶ Bogel 2009: 42; see also Kieschnick 2002: 74–75.

⁸⁷ Quoted in Wenzel 2011: 266.

⁸⁸ As the wording is not exact it is also conceivable that both utterances reflect a widespread way of thinking at the time. In this case, the common source would not be any written text.

to such discussions when inscribing them: they admit that the images are not able to express the Buddha's truth, but they argue that it is worthwhile to produce such images as they can raise an interest in this truth and are the only means to make the Buddha's message visible.⁸⁹

One might suspect that Kūkai refers to such inscriptions and discussions because they were also common in Japan at the time. According to Bogel's survey there were no such inscriptions in Japan, however.⁹⁰ And although the iconoclast discussions were probably known in Japan because the texts that report on them were circulated there,⁹¹ they did not play a great role in Japanese doctrinal debates at that time.⁹² It is thus far from obvious why Kūkai quotes from inscriptions that were not well known at his time. We can only look at the text of the *Shōraimokuroku* itself to find further hints about his position. In our passage Kūkai goes on to say:

Although we confuse the moon with the finger [that is pointing at it], [the ways] to instruct people are limitless. If you do not value rare sights that strike the eye, they are in fact treasuries that pacify the country and benefit the people.

Kūkai alludes here to the famous simile of the moon and the finger. This simile expresses the idea that taking a teaching for reality is like confusing a finger with the moon at which it is pointing.⁹³ Kūkai thus seems to be saying that when reading a text or looking at a picture we must be aware that these media are only pointers and not reality itself. In a further step, language and visual media might be seen as mere *means* to grasp the Buddha's message that can be discarded after use, as in many other Buddhist traditions. This, however, *cannot* be Kūkai's considered position, because throughout his work he defends the idea that the Buddha's meditative insights can be expressed directly.⁹⁴ We have to conclude that he does not condemn words or images per se, but only criticizes certain ways of using them.⁹⁵ The following sentence points to the ways of using words which Kūkai is actually criticizing. It contains the two expressions 'striking to

⁸⁹ See Wenzel 2011: 288–90; and Kieschnick 2002: 69–80.

⁹⁰ Bogel 2009: 42. For the Japanese conventions for inscriptions in the seventh century that significantly differ from the Chinese examples, see Walley 2015: 17–41.

⁹¹ The *Guanghongmingji* e. g. also reports on these discussions and is often alluded to in Kūkai's text *Rishūkyōkaidai*.

⁹² See also Rambelli and Reinders 2014: 53.

⁹³ The simile appears at different places in the Buddhist canon, including in the *Śūraṅgama Sūtra* and the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*.

⁹⁴ See e. g. TKZ 3:35 and 3:75.

⁹⁵ Kūkai makes this position explicit when he says that the same substance can be medicine or poison depending on our way of using it; see e. g. TKZ 3:48–49 or 5:8.

the eyes' (驚目) and 'rare sights' (奇觀). Both these terms do not often appear in the Buddhist canon, but can be found in the Chinese Classic *Lunheng*. In both passages the author Wang Chong criticizes people who take a book at face value without trying to get at its deeper meaning. Wang still expresses a positive attitude towards writing, however, when he says that "recondite truth can still be found out, and profound meanings be determined".⁹⁶ This position resembles that of Kūkai who also criticizes the superficial understanding of texts, but believes in their deeper message. We have already seen that for him the right way of reading basically means that we are aware of a text's multiple meanings and employ the right techniques to uncover this hidden layer.⁹⁷ As Kūkai aligns words and visual means in the *Shōraimokuroku* we can conclude that he has similar worries with regard to paintings. Diagrams do not have multiple meanings, but they can still be misunderstood as pointing to a single fixed structure of reality. It fits well with this interpretation that Kūkai emphasises the fact that there are multiple mandalas. He does not only distinguish between the four types of mandalas and the *Mahākaruṇāgarbhodhava* and the *Vajradhātu* forms, but asserts that there are uncountable types of mandalas.⁹⁸ The idea behind these statements seems to be that we should not look for a single structure of reality. Just as texts do not have a single meaning that we can rely on, so a mandala does not display the one and only structure of reality. The concrete structure it displays is only a means to awaken to the variety of underlying processes and structures. Both media, the verbal and the visual, thus share a common problem: in both cases we are tempted to focus on static content instead of seeing them as presenting a dynamic model that we can use to broaden our minds.⁹⁹

96 Wang and Forke 1962: 240.

97 See also Kūkai's often repeated credo that whereas exoteric authors "use many words to determine a single meaning", esoteric interpreters believe that "one word contains many meanings"; see e. g. TKZ 4:199 4:255, 3:11, and 2:190. This technique cannot be found in the *Lunheng*, of course.

98 See, for example, TKZ 2:96, 2:307, or 3:25.

99 Rambelli similarly stresses that Esoteric operations are attempts to "impose an order, albeit fragmentary, upon reality (the Dharmadhātu), but this order was never fixed, but fluid, ever-shifting, polymorphous"; see Rambelli 2013: 33.

5 The verbal and the visual

Finally, we should conclude by answering the question how Kūkai judges the relation between the verbal and the visual. We have seen that verbal and visual media share the problem of all signs: due to our karmic condition we are tempted to see their meaning as reducible to singular structures. In this regard visual signs do no better than verbal ones. Mandalas differ from texts in that they do not have hidden layers of meaning, but this does not save them from being misunderstood as representing a singular and static order of reality. They can thereby become objects of clinging and reasons for intellectual rivalry. Therefore, we do not find a hierarchy among verbal and visual means in Kūkai's work.¹⁰⁰ He does not, moreover, distinguish between them by contrasting a referential and an aesthetic function.

When Kūkai stresses the merits of the visual he does so in only two contexts: initiation and exegesis. The moment in which a person decides to follow the path of the Buddha is crucial in all Buddhist traditions, because it involves the insight that the mundane life is unsatisfactory. The decision for Buddhism must contain a firm commitment that is necessary to overcome the many hardships and challenges that await the practitioner on his way to awakening. In Esoteric Buddhism this moment of *bodhicitta* achieves particular weight through the initiation ceremony. In this ceremony the novice is confronted with a huge mandala painted on the floor. By throwing a flower onto the picture the acolyte creates a special bond to one deity and this will certainly strengthen his dedication and devotion. Seeing the mandala as a ritual program furthermore creates confidence, because it works like a map that shows the hiker that the way he has taken will finally lead to the destination at which he is aiming. The esoteric tradition furthermore describes the moment of glancing at the mandala for the first time as an extinction of sins. This glance, it is said, purifies the novice in order to prepare him to receive the deities. This purification is certainly also an important step in the ritual. We should be aware, however, that it is the entry of the deities that is crucial for changing the practitioner's mind. The mystical union with buddhas and bodhisattvas does not directly rely on paintings or other visual media.

The second role of pictures is to serve as diagrams that can be used as hermeneutical models for the exegesis of texts. A mandala has a structure that is

100 In contrast to iconoclast authors in China, Kūkai does not argue for the superiority of the written word either; for examples of iconoclast positions, see Wenzel 2011 and Rambelli and Reinders 2014.

written on its surface. It can thus be used to re-construe the structure of a text that is hidden under its superficial layout. In this regard visual media may be very useful, but Kūkai also describes other models for reading texts and these other methods are not primarily visual. It should be noted, moreover, that in exegesis the visual is employed as a *means* to better understand the verbal. So it is certainly not superior to it, but rather plays an auxiliary role.

We thus come to see that Esoteric Buddhism integrates several visual elements and assigns important roles to mandalas and other paintings. Some of the roles for the visual have to do with the transmission of the teaching, because they help to attract novices to the esoteric system and they serve as hermeneutical tools in dealing with the scriptures. Visual media do not, however, solve the transmission problem for Kūkai. What enables the Buddha to transmit his insights is the fact that practitioners can act in the same way as the Buddha. An awakened one can express his insight in various bodily, verbal and mental acts and sentient beings can re-enact these salvific deeds. Thereby they overcome their karmic hindrances and gain the Buddha's insights. The transmission of the teaching, therefore, does not directly involve visual media.

We have also seen that the role of mandalas in Kūkai's doctrinal system is linked to the larger history of visual media in Esoteric Buddhism. Esoteric ritual was built around rites of invocation that involved the performance of the three mysteries, i. e. of mudras, mantras and visualizations that re-enact the Buddha's cosmic behaviour. Visual elements were added to this principal rite, but they never replaced the original elements and did not achieve a central function in the transformation of the performer.

Kūkai can be seen as trying to reconcile the textual tradition with the esoteric ritual systems in which visual means play diverse and sometimes even contradictory roles. The result is a model in which the verbal and the visual support each other. Kūkai's dealing with visual media is thus not innovative in the sense that he integrates new ritual elements, sees visuality in a different way, or adds fresh interpretations. He instead systematizes what the tradition has to offer and puts things together in a creative way. Visuality has an important role in the resultant type of Esoteric Buddhism, but it does not render the verbal superfluous, nor does it enable sentient beings to recognize the world as it really is. This world is beyond our karmically formed senses and needs to be recovered by ritual practice.

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