Preaching Reality

A Philosophical Interpretation of Kōbō Daishi Kūkai

Davide Andrea Zappulli (candidate n. 5024)

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University of Oslo
Department of Philosophy, Classics, History of Art and Ideas

First Supervisor: Associate Professor Sebastian Watzl
Co-Supervisor: Professor Marcus Jacobus Teeuwen

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Preface

A few people have my profound gratitude for the invaluable help in working on this thesis. First of all, my supervisors Sebastian Watzl and Mark Teeuwen. Sebastian supervised me from October 2020 to the end of my studies (replacing professor Cappelen). I am extremely grateful to him for agreeing to supervise my thesis even though he does not work on Buddhist philosophy, and I cannot quantify the incredible help of his comments and suggestions. Mark has supervised me from April 2020 to the end of my studies, accepting to set up cross-faculty supervision to help me interpret Kūkai's philosophy, and he has my wholehearted gratitude for that. Moreover, without Mark's suggestions, I would not have discovered Kūkai and Shingon Buddhism in the first place, so I have been very lucky in meeting him. I also have a big debt to my undergraduate supervisor Elisa Paganini, who has helped me in many ways and found time to read my drafts and give very precious advice. Also, I want to direct a big thanks to Fabio Rambelli and Graham Priest: they read and appreciated some of my drafts, and that really motivated me. Finally, I want to thank my colleague Harry Ainscough: talking with them in the early stages of this work has been very helpful.

Abstract

This thesis has two main goals. First, it aims to interpret (part of) the philosophy of Kūkai—the founder of Shingon Buddhism in Japan—in terms familiar to the analytic philosopher (something that is unavailable in contemporary literature). Second, it aims to discuss how his doctrine provides an original response to a twofold philosophical problem: whether we are in a position to access reality in our experience and whether our language is capable of describing it. After providing an introduction to Buddhist thought in general and to the Shingon school in particular (Chap. 1), I will turn to formulate the latter problem through the philosophy of another Buddhist school, Yogācāra, particularly by referring to a text of one of its most influential philosophers: Vasubandhu. The formulation will require introducing the Buddhist doctrine of the two realities, which distinguishes between ultimate reality (reality in itself) and conventional reality (reality *qua* our experience). I will explain how, following the proposed interpretation of Vasubandhu's view, we are neither in a position to access ultimate reality with our senses nor in a position to describe it (Chap. 2). Then, I will turn to Kūkai, starting with a discussion of his metaphysical view interpreted on the basis of textual evidence. His metaphysics has two central characteristics: (1) it is a peculiar form of idealism according to which there is only one universal mental substance, and what we consider materiality is (roughly) nothing but its external aspect; (2) it conceives all events and transformations happening in the universe as actions of a pantheistic deity oriented to the revelation of reality itself to sentient beings. Both points will be useful to understand Kūkai's response (Chap. 3). The last chapter will provide a translation of the doctrine of the two realities in Kūkai's terms and interpret his claim that reality *is* the sermon of the universal deity Mahāvairocana. We will then formulate Kūkai's response to the Yogācāra challenge, which will articulate in two steps. First, Kūkai claims that, as the sermon of Mahāvairocana, reality reveals itself to us, so we are able to access it. Second, he claims that the semantics of our language is grounded in the semantics of the universal language of Mahāvairocana, and for this reason, our language can describe reality effectively (Chap. 4).

Introduction

Consider the following two views. Here is a commonsensical one: our senses give us direct access to reality, and ordinary language is perfectly capable of describing it. Now, here is another one decisively less commonsensical: reality is literally the sermon of a universal deity, through which the deity preaches to us. In this thesis, my aim is to analyse and interpret a doctrine that bases the former view on the latter and to contrast it with a doctrine saying that, on the contrary, we can neither perceive nor describe reality in itself. The first of the two will bring us to Japan and the second to India. Ultimately, my hope is to introduce a new voice in the contemporary philosophical debate.

In this work, we are going to analyse and discuss the philosophy of one of the most influential figures in Japanese history: Kūkai (774-835CE). Posthumously became known as '*Kōbō daishi*' (the great teacher who spread Dharma), he is the founder of Shingon Mikkyō, a school of Japanese Buddhism containing the striking claim that reality is literally the unfolding sermon of the universal Buddha Mahāvairocana (Jp. Dainichi). As we will see, on the basis of this claim, Kūkai puts forward the thesis that we have direct access to reality and that ordinary language can describe it, in opposition to schools like Yogācāra which hold, instead, that we are not in such a favorable position. An overview of his doctrine will be given in the first chapter. The goal of this introduction is to offer the reader a way into the essay by presenting its motivations, audience, and limits.

First of all, let us consider some motivations to engage with non-Western philosophy in general. Today, more and more philosophers are approaching non-Western philosophical traditions like the Indian, Chinese, and Japanese ones. However, looking for ways to solve philosophical problems outside the canon established by most history of philosophy books is still a marginal concern in quantitative terms. Given the state of the field, let us make the reasons for engaging non-Western philosophy explicit. To do that, I will ask the help of a pioneer of such an enterprise: Jay Garfield.

In his *Engaging Buddhism: Why it Matters to Philosophy*?, Garfield (2015) characterises the way philosophers often consider non-Western philosophical traditions in the following way.

> [W]e are accustomed to regarding "philosophy" as denoting *Western* philosophy, "metaphysics" as denoting *Western* metaphysics, "ancient philosophy" as denoting *Greek* philosophy, and so on. And to the extent that in our professional practice,

> either in scholarship, the organization of professional meetings and journals, or in curriculum, we recognize non-Western philosophy at all, it is marked: *Asian* philosophy; *Indian* Philosophy; *African* philosophy, or the like. European philosophy is just "philosophy," the unmarked, privileged case, the "core" as it is sometimes put.
>
> (Garfield 2015, *ix*; *original emphases*)

This way of conceiving philosophy is deeply problematic. In the first place, as Garfield points out, it is plainly false. Buddhism—to mention one non-Western tradition that is by no means more important than the others—has developed a vast number of reflections on all kinds of philosophical problems throughout its millennial history. A consequence of this undeniable fact is that parochial views of philosophy are simply false. Epistemology is not a prerogative of the Europeans, and neither are metaphysics and ethics. Accordingly, considering them a "Western thing" is just a research hindrance preventing us from gaining valuable insights from other traditions. Anyone interested in issues that have been addressed by Buddhist philosophy should be concerned with the theories, arguments, and concepts developed therein, and the same goes for any other tradition.

Examples in support of this view are not hard to find. Ganeri (2018) argues that the Sanskrit *pramā*, generally translated as 'knowledge,' has different properties from its English cognate (being a successful cognitive performance rather than a state) and better represents the object of investigation of many contemporary epistemologists. Taking another example, several works that analyse the logic employed by Buddhist thinkers contain the potentially revolutionary insight that paradoxicality does not necessarily amount to incoherence (see, e.g., Garfield and Priest 2009). Finally, making a non-Buddhist example, the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta has long been considered relevant to perfect being theology (Quinn and Taliaferro 1999).

It is worth pointing out an objection often raised against philosophical engagement with traditions like Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta, namely that they are *just* religions. The reasoning behind this objection, I suppose, is something like the following: while philosophy is based (and ought to be based) on rational arguments, religion is grounded on unsupported articles of faith, and that makes it of no interest to the philosopher as a philosopher. There are many ways of answering this objection. First of all, religion is a *Western* concept, having its roots in the Latin language, that has historically been used to refer to *Western* spiritual traditions like Christianity and Islam. Its applicability to non-Western traditions should not be taken for

granted, and the person advancing the objection in question must specify under what definition on the term she is operating under.

In any case, possible responses to this objection go beyond this terminological point. Many people in the Western tradition that we usually consider philosophers and whose works are studied in philosophy departments had religious concerns at the centre of their thought. The list is quite long and contains big names: Augustine, Boetius, Anselm, Aquinas, Ockham, Descartes, Leibniz, and Berkeley, to name a few. The same is true if we look at contemporary philosophy. John Hick, Alvin Plantinga, Eleonore Stump, Richard Swinburne, Keith Ward are all considered important *Christian philosophers*, and if we consider them philosophers, why not do the same with non-Western thinkers like Nāgārjuna, Dharmakīrti, Lao Tsu, or Dōgen?

Finally, why should one rule out Buddhism (or any other tradition) a priori? A more reasonable approach seems to try to approach it seriously and open-mindedly and only *then* decide whether it contains good philosophy or not. In effect, taking the claim that Buddhism is *just a religion* as an article of faith has an air of being self-defeating (and I do not know of anyone who dismissed the whole Buddhist tradition after engaging with it seriously). Overall, then, there seems to be no reason to dismiss non-Western traditions like Buddhism as non-philosophical.[1]

Once one realises that non-Western philosophy is just philosophy, it becomes clear that ignoring it amounts to arbitrarily ignoring a huge part of our field, a mistake that makes one's work (at best) partial.[2] Of course, one could reply that the work of any philosopher cannot but

[1] To add to my response a further point, I do not see good reasons even to rule out faith as unphilosophical. After all, we all start from some assumptions or postulates that we just believe to be true, and postulates with a religious flavour are among them.

[2] One might have some reservation here. What if the theories developed in the Western tradition on a particular issue exhaust the logical space or possible solutions to that issue? If that was the case, then it seems that engaging other traditions would be redundant since it would be impossible that alternative solutions to the problem had developed in these traditions. I believe that this objection is three times incorrect. First, even if it was true that theories developed in the Western tradition about *X* exhaust the possible solutions about *X*, in most cases, the debate will not be over. It would still be possible to formulate new arguments and objections for one position or the other, and those could be available in other traditions. More importantly—and this is the second problem of the objection—I would say that the idea of having exhausted the logical space of possible solutions about *X* is often very naive. That is because the set of possible theories is always considered *qua* a certain conceptual repertoire, and the conceptual repertoire(s) developed in the Western tradition is different from the conceptual repertoire(s) developed in Buddhism, Confucianism, and other non-Western traditions. Consider the question of the nature of reality. One may think that we have a grasp on all the possibilities: it could be mental, material, or both (perhaps also neither?). No other possibilities are available, one might say. That is incorrect for two reasons. First, other traditions might have developed alternative concepts to materiality and mentality, such that they cut the space of possibilities differently. Moreover, it could also be that our concepts of materiality and mentality left out something that we are not noticing. Again, this makes engagement with different traditions much valuable. Finally, the third problem of the objection is that it is assuming that it would make sense to start engaging only Western philosophy in the first place. Why should we assume that? There ought to be no such thing as turning to non-Western traditions only once we have done what we can with the Western one: philosophical research must overcome cultural borders from its very beginning.

be partial. Life is too short to give to all philosophical thought that has been produced until today the level of attention it deserves, even limiting one's areas of interest to two or three. In practice, the only possible choice is to confine ourselves to some works and philosophers—a choice that will always contain idiosyncrasies—and start our inquiry building on them. Eventually, we might be suggested that some other piece of philosophy is relevant for us, so we will turn to consider it. I think that all this may be true. However, even our initial choices, idiosyncratic as they could be, are based on some criteria and assessing the worthiness of entire philosophical traditions on the basis of whether they are Western or not can hardly be considered a good one.

What would we think of the philosophy of someone working on epistemology without knowing anything of Kant's thought? Probably, most of us would find this lack to jeopardise the efficacy of the research. But then why would one who works on epistemology without knowing anything about Dharmakīrti's thought would be in a better position? It seems clear to me that she would not. Hence, here is the strongest reason I have to engage non-Western philosophy: *there just isn't any plausible reason not to*.

Moreover, another reason for engaging non-Western philosophy is that doing so helps us to better understand our *own tradition,* as Garfield (2002) points out. Taking some hermeneutic distance from the tradition we have been educated into, it becomes easier to identify its assumptions and idiosyncrasies. For example, while philosophy is often considered in the West to be in some way a "disembodied" activity, stressing the need of taking distance from issues to look at them from the outside, Japan is characterised by the opposite tendency to stress our embodied condition and the non-duality of theory and practice (Kasulis 2019). Taking seriously alternative perspectives like this might revolutionise our way of doing philosophy and ignoring them cannot but lead to partial and biased views.

Following the outlined cross-cultural attitude, this work focuses on the thought of Kūkai. What is interesting about his philosophy is that—contrary to the doctrines developed in many other Buddhist schools—his model makes it possible for us both to access reality directly and describe it with ordinary language. My goal in the following chapters will be to interpret and present his view, based on textual evidence, and contrast it to another major Buddhist tradition: Yogācāra. I will base my interpretation of Kūkai on the translation of Hakeda (1984) and that of Shingen and Dreitlein (2010). The parts of Kūkai's texts translated in the works largely overlap but are not the same. In any case, whenever I will quote a passage from one of the two translations that exist in the other, I will refer to the latter in a footnote.

Let us go back to the content of the thesis. Without going too much into the details, let me give you a taste of the dialectic. According to the interpretation that I will propose, Yogācāra Buddhism advances what one could see as a Kantian picture.[3] The idea is that ordinary experience does not give us access to reality in itself (what in the Buddhist tradition is called 'ultimate reality' and that can be considered the world of noumena in Kantian terms), but to a mere phenomenal convention which conceals the world. Moreover, it is not only that reality in itself cannot be accessed in ordinary experience: it cannot even be described with our language. Ultimate reality is ineffable.[4]

This view has significant negative consequences. If yogācārins are right, then all our discourses and thoughts about the world are in principle unable to characterise reality in itself, and this is a potentially lethal threat for the metaphysician since the enterprise of metaphysics is precisely that of providing an account of the nature of reality. Further, this view should also worry the ordinary person. After all, we intuitively take ourselves to be immersed in reality and our language to pick it out quite well. If I say, "there is a table in front of me," I do not take myself to be saying merely that a mental image of a table is given in my awareness (or something like that), but that a table is *actually* there, present to me in all its objectivity.

Kūkai's doctrine is intended to give us reality back. His theory puts us in a position to access reality directly and describe it with ordinary language, and it does so in two steps. First, it makes it possible to access reality in itself by holding that *it is reality that comes to us*, intentionally revealing itself to all sentient beings. Second, it makes it possible to describe it correctly by holding that the semantics of ordinary language reduces to worldly semantic relations independent of us. As we will see, his view is rooted in a soteriological framework according to which reality is the sermon of Mahāvairocana Tathāgata, a universal being that can be interpreted as a pantheistic (or panentheistic) deity (Rambelli 2013, xvii; Sueki 1996, 113).

Let me give an overview of the content of the following chapters. Chapter one is intended to offer a very general introduction to Buddhism in general and Shingon in particular. I will present a few historical considerations and discuss some central pan-Buddhist doctrines and ideas, as well as others more peculiar to Shingon Mikkyō.

[3] I am aware that there are many interpretations of Kant, and it is not among my aims to argue for anyone in particular. I simply want to suggest that there are similarities between Kantian and Yogācāra philosophy, and I am bringing out the parallel as a hermeneutical device for the reader who is familiar only with the Western tradition.

[4] A discussion of what 'ineffable' means exactly shall be given towards the end of the second chapter.

Chapter two presents the Yogācāra view with textual evidence from one of the most important works of Vasubandhu, the *Treatise on the Three Natures* (Sk. *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa*). I will explain why ultimate reality is ineffable and beyond our experience according to the Yogācāra view.

Chapter three contains a presentation of Kūkai's metaphysics, which I will analyse through textual evidence. Part of the reason I decided to dedicate a whole chapter to Kūkai's metaphysics is that the absence of analytical literature on this topic makes it valuable. At the same time, it will help us to understand his response to the Yogācāra picture in the last chapter.

Chapter four presents Kūkai's linguistic understanding of reality—according to which reality is the unfolding sermon of the universal Buddha—and draws from it and the content of chapter three to provide his response to the Yogācāra's picture.

The core of this essay is contained in chapters three and four, where I will provide an interpretation of Kūkai's view in analytical terms and explain how it constitutes a valuable alternative model to the Yogācāra's one, which has the arguably good feature of putting us in a position to access and describe reality.

There are two further issues that I would like to address briefly in this introduction. The first one concerns the audience of the essay. While this work has a philosophical nature, I aim to make it readable and interesting not only for philosophers but also for scholars of Buddhist and Japanese studies. Philosophers shall be presented with a set of doctrines that are probably new to them and—as I will try to show—worthy of being taken seriously and explored further. On the other hand, scholars used to read about Kūkai from non-philosophical perspectives will be presented with a more philosophically informed way of looking at his doctrine. In other words, I will try to offer to the first kind of readers new contents in a familiar form, and to the second kind of readers a familiar content in a new form.

Writing for a twofold audience is not an easy task. However, a similar enterprise has been attempted and accomplished by Fabio Rambelli in his *A Buddhist Theory of Semiotics* (2011), a magistral work on Shingon Buddhism that he addressed to both Buddhism scholars and semioticians. His success made me optimistic. To make this essay readable to both audiences, I will define both philosophical and Buddhist terminology as much as possible. Moreover, as I have been suggested, I will adopt standard translations into English of Japanese and Sanskrit terms, where available, instead of their simple transliteration (with some exceptions for key terms). I hope that by employing these strategies, I will be able to make the text easier to follow.

Finally, I want to consider the limits of this research. In the first place, I want to highlight that the central contribution of this work lies in the interpretation of Kūkai's doctrine and the philosophical discussion of it. This is especially true given the fact that there are very few philosophical publications on Shingon Buddhism available in English (Ingram 1991; Kasulis 1982; 1988a; 1988b; Krummel 2018; 2019), which tend to be written in non-analytic jargon. (Of course, there is nothing problematic in that. It simply shows the need for an introduction more easily readable by the analytic philosopher.) Much of the efforts in researching for this work have been dedicated to the interpretation of Kūkai's writings, and while this led to what I take to be a valuable analysis of his philosophy, it has the drawback of not going as much into the philosophical details as a non-interpretative work would. Thus, my analysis of the Shingon doctrine will not be, at least at some points, as fine-grained as the content of philosophical works less concerned with hermeneutical issues.

A second limit has to do with the risk of anachronisms. I have been spending many hours on Kūkai works to reach a reasonable interpretation of them, and throughout the essay, I will be careful in backing up my claims on Kūkai's thought with textual evidence. Nonetheless, when one tries to make works of the past relevant to the present, the risk of anachronism can never be dismissed. However, as the great scholar of religion Toshihiko Izutsu said, "it is precisely through this process of [possible] misinterpretations that thinkers of the past revive in the present" (Izutsu 1985, 2; my translation). I hope that this essay will contribute to reviving one of the greatest thinkers in the history of Buddhism: Kūkai.

1. The Fundamental Concepts of Buddhist and Shingon Thought

In this chapter, I will introduce Buddhist thought by guiding the reader through some of its central ideas and tenets. The perspective will be philosophical, as we will focus on the theoretical framework rather than its historical development. In the first part of this chapter, I will introduce some pan-Buddhist notions. I will assume that the reader has no background in Buddhist philosophy, and you may want to skip the first section if you do. In the second one, I will present Kūkai's Shingon, giving particular emphasis to tenets that will be relevant to interpret the doctrines that we are going to confront in greater detail in the following chapters. Finally, I will also illustrate some characteristics of the way Buddhism was received in Japan and how they constituted a concern for Kūkai, giving rise to issues that his doctrinal system had to address.

1.1. Buddhism Fundamentals

1.1.1. The Four Noble Truths

The first thing to notice when one begins talking or writing about Buddhism from a Western perspective is a deceptively manifest one: 'Buddhism' is an English word. The term '*Buddha*' (Jp. *Butsu*) in Sanskrit means 'enlightened one' and is typically used to refer to the historical figure of Siddhārtha, also called 'Śākyamuni'. Accordingly, the term 'Buddhism' is used to refer to the teachings of the historical Buddha and the religious-philosophical tradition stemming from them, which extends in all Asia and beyond.

From an internal perspective, the minimal requirement to be a Buddhist is "taking refuge" in the three jewels (Sk. *triratna*; Jp. *sanbō*): Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Let me define these terms. Here, 'Buddha' does not refer to Śākyamuni but to the spiritual goal of Buddhahood or enlightenment. In this sense, to take refuge in the Buddha is to take Buddhahood as one's soteriological destination. Attaining Buddhahood means escaping from the cycle of rebirths (Sk. *saṃsāra*; Jp. *rinne*), and the liberation from it is known as '*nirvāṇa*' (Jp. *nehan*), literally meaning blowing out (suggesting the act of blowing out the tenuous flame of a candle). The Sangha is the spiritual community. Some traditions consider it to be constituted only by the ecclesiastic community, while other traditions see it more broadly. Either way, the idea is that one needs the support of other practitioners to pursue the path to enlightenment.

The concept of Dharma is the most challenging to explain. It existed in India before Buddhism, and it would not be an exaggeration to consider it the fundamental notion of Indian spirituality. The concept of Dharma conflates in itself two dimensions that—at least from Hume onwards—people in the West are used to distinguish rigorously: the dimension of what *is* and that of what *ought to be* (Williams 2000, 15). More specifically, in the Indian tradition, the Dharma was taken to be *both* the order and structure of reality and the moral law. (Moreover, the term comes to be used in Buddhism to refer to the ultimate constituents of reality—e.g. atoms if one takes an atomistic metaphysics. I will use 'Dharma' with the capital letter for the former and 'dharma' without the capital letter for the latter). It is in connection with such a history of the term that Śākyamuni chose it to refer to the Buddhist doctrine. Taking refuge in the Dharma is then to take refuge in the Buddhist doctrine (which is in accordance with the order or reality) and behaving in accordance with the Dharma is to act under the order of reality itself.

The notion of Dharma, then, assumes an intimate connection between the Buddhist teachings and the way reality is. Indeed, attaining an understanding of the way reality is, namely of the truth, is particularly important in Buddhist soteriology, which one could characterise as gnostic (Williams 2000, 17).

Let us turn to Buddhist soteriology and see what makes it gnostic. In brief, Buddhist soteriology develops around the doctrine of the four noble truths: 1) there is suffering; 2) there is an origin of suffering; 3) there is a cessation of suffering; 4) there is a path to the cessation of suffering.[5] The soteriological aim of the practitioner is to attain liberation from suffering (Sk. *duḥkha*; Jp. *ku*), and here is where Buddhist soteriology displays its gnostic character. The origin of suffering is considered *attachment* (Sk. *upadana*; Jp. *aiyoku*), which results from *ignorance* (Sk. *avidya*; Jp. *mumyō*).

Why does attachment generate suffering? And why does it come from ignorance? A widespread idea in Buddhism is that things are *impermanent*. Being so, they are incapable of offering us a safe soteriological harbour. Accordingly, our *attachment* to them (for example, our attachment to a social position, a car, or even a person) is inescapably bounded with suffering: we suffer from the perishing of what we are attached to, which is inevitable given impermanence. Here is where ignorance comes in: we develop an attachment to things despite their impermanence because we are ignorant.

[5] For more about the four noble truths see (Siderits 2007, chap. 2; Williams 2000, chap. 2).

The kind of ignorance Buddhism talks about is deeply rooted in our experience. Ignorance is what makes us *reify* things, and reification is a process our experience is completely soaked into. We just *see* a reality of enduring things. Moreover, reification is not only directed outwards: the very idea of a permanent self is an illusion. The picture Buddhism gives us is not that of an enduring subject that mistakenly reifies the external world. On the contrary, the self is part of the reification. There is just *no self* (Sk. *anātman*; Jp. *muga*). One can then interpret the standard Buddhist theory of mind as a Humean one: there is only a flux of experiences, and no enduring subject having or possessing those experiences.

Since ignorance is the ultimate origin of suffering, the ultimate origin of the elimination of suffering, *nirvāṇa*, is gnosis (Sk. *vidya*; Jp. *myō*), which is attained through the three orders or practices of knowledge (Sk. *prajñā*; Jp. *hannya*), morality or conduct (Sk. *śīla;* Jp. *kai*), and meditation (Sk. *samādhi*; Jp. *sanmai*).

1.1.2. Dependent Origination and Emptiness

In this subsection, we will consider the doctrine that motivates the claim that everything is impermanent, namely the theory of dependent origination (Sk. *pratītya-samutpāda*; Sk. *engi*). The fundamental metaphysical tenet of Indian Buddhism is that all phenomena are dependently originated, or more precisely, that they originate through causes (Sk. *hetu*; Jp. *in*) and conditions (Sk. *pratyaya*; Jp. *nen*). There are three kinds of dependent origination: dependent arising, dependent existence, and dependent designation. They are not equally important for all Buddhist schools, but considering all of them will give us a good grasp of the doctrine.[6]

The doctrine of dependent arising is one of the first teachings of the Buddha, and its point is that phenomena come into existence as a result of sequences of events in a causal nexus. Let us consider as an example Socrates. Of course, it is not the case that Socrates always existed, nor that he came out of nothing: he came into existence as a result of a particular chain of causes beginning with the emission of semen of Socrates's father and its encounter with an ovum in Socrates' mother. This shows that the existence of Socrates depends on the occurrence of all the causal events that lead to Socrates' birth. Moreover, his existence depends not only on such causes but also on many other conditions that accompanied them: the fact that his parents were in the right mood that night, the fact that his mother did not contract a severe illness during pregnancy, and the like.

[6] For more on dependent origination see (Garfield 2015, chap. 2).

Dependent existence is a mereological matter. The idea is that the existence of all composite things depends on the existence of their parts. Take, for example, the existence of the laptop I am using to write this chapter. It has been constructed out of many components (a hard disk, a graphic card, a monitor) organised in a certain way and many of which are themselves composite objects. The existence of this laptop depends on that of its parts—it could not exist without a keyboard, for example—and, therefore, it has dependent existence. The parts-whole distinction is used in Theravāda Buddhism (one of the first Buddhist schools still practiced today in Sri Lanka) to articulate the distinction between conventional reality (Sk. *saṁvṛti-satya*; Jp. *shintai*) and ultimate reality (Sk. *paramārtha-satya*; Jp. *zokutai*). According to this view (which is different from both the Yogācāra and the Shingon ones), only *dharmas*, which in this context are non-divisible fundamental particles, really exist: they are the ultimate reality while composite objects are merely conventional.

Finally, the idea with dependent designation is that the existence of the phenomena we encounter in our experience depends on our language and concepts. This doctrine takes different forms in different Buddhist denominations, and it is also used to articulate the distinction between conventional and ultimate reality. For example, considering Theravāda Buddhism again, the idea is that composite phenomena are merely useful fictions that we reify through designation. In other words, while fundamental particles exist independently of our practices, the existence of the table (since it reduces to its parts) is a convention determined by our use of language and concepts. (According to the interpretation of Yogācāra Buddhism proposed in the next chapter, instead, everything we can describe, entities at the alleged fundamental level included, is merely conventional.)

The notion of impermanence that we considered in the previous section is deeply connected with the doctrine of dependent origination. The reason things are impermanent is that they are immersed in dependent origination: the arising and subsistence of any phenomenon depends on that of other phenomena; they contingently originate and eventually vanish. Moreover, there is a third fundamental Buddhist concept deeply related to those of impermanence and dependent origination: emptiness (Sk. *śūnyatā*; Jp. *kū*).

A central Buddhist thesis is that all phenomena are empty. The question is empty of what. It must be borne in mind that emptiness is never understood as emptiness of *existence*, and in this sense, it is wrong to interpret Buddhist metaphysics as a kind of nihilism; the view is subtler than that. Phenomena are considered empty of *self-nature* (Sk. *svabhāva*; Jp. *jishō*). What is self-nature? Garfield (2015, 61) points out that while the Sanskrit term '*svabhāva*' has sometimes been rendered in English as 'substance' or 'essence,' it has, unlike these English

terms, an opposite: *'parabhāva'* (Jp. *tashō*) which can be rendered as '*other-nature*'. The existence of two opposite terms helps to understand both. We can say that an object has *self-nature* if and only if its nature does not depend on anything but itself. Conversely, an object has *other-nature* when its nature depends on other objects.[7]

Denying that phenomena have self-nature does not amount in any way to denying that they have nature *simpliciter*. Indeed, they do have one, the other-nature. The Buddhist philosopher does not deny that, for example, it is part of Socrates' nature to have intelligence. Of course it is. However, the claim that Socrates is intelligent is not true in virtue of some soul-like permanent self who possesses the property of being intelligent independently of everything else. We immediately see how these notions of self-nature and other-nature are profoundly intertwined with the doctrine of dependent origination. Because phenomena are immersed in dependent origination, they are empty of self-nature: within dependent origination, all there is to any phenomenon depends on *other* phenomena, and, therefore, its nature must be other-nature.

There is a last pan-Buddhist doctrine that I would like to introduce before closing this section, which I already mentioned above: the doctrine of the two truths or the two realities. From all the considerations that we have made about dependent origination, impermanence, and emptiness, we can see that a key feature of the Buddhist worldview is a distinction between the way things appear and the way things are. Buddhist philosophers hold that our ordinary consciousness reifies phenomena, making us see things as permanent when they are impermanent and as having self-nature when they are, in fact, devoid of it. The way we see reality is not the way reality is. However, interestingly, Buddhism does not entirely dismiss our ordinary view of reality. It treats it as fictional, for sure, but a useful kind of fiction. We can keep it for everyday purposes, provided we bear in mind that it is not the way the world actually is; in other words, we must bear in mind that such fiction is not the *ultimate reality* but only a *conventional reality*.

We will consider the doctrine of the two truths in great depth in the next chapter. For now, let me turn to the second half of this chapter and introduce the main character of this essay: Kūkai.

[7] Both 'self-nature' and 'other-nature' are calques on the Sanskrit and Japanese terms (of course, the Japanese term is itself a calque) and might sound odd in English. Indeed, many have preferred to opt for 'intrinsic nature' and 'extrinsic nature' as translations (e.g. Garfield 2015, 61; Siderits 2007, 111). However, I prefer the former two because they do a better job in preventing the reader from projecting Western concepts that might be misleading. For this reason, I will keep using these odd English neologisms.

1.2. A Sketch of Kūkai's Shingon

1.2.1. Esoteric, Exoteric Teachings, and Truth Words

Shingon Mikkyō is the school of Buddhism founded in Japan by Kūkai during the early ninth century. In *Nihon bukkyō shi* (History of Japanese Buddhism), Sueki (1996, 106) writes that it is debatable whether Shingon can be entirely considered a Buddhist school and that, if so, it would be a very peculiar one. That is to say that the ideas and theories that we are going to consider will often differ considerably from classic Buddhist doctrines. They might even sound bizarre; however, convincing you that they are worth being taken seriously is one of my aims. Now, one way to approach the doctrine of this fascinating tradition is by asking what the terms '*shingon*' and '*mikkyō*' mean and how they are related.

Let us begin with the latter. The term '*mikkyō*' can be translated as 'secret [*mitsu*] teaching [*kyō*]' or 'esoteric teaching.' The English term 'esoteric' has an antonym, 'exoteric,' and so does the Japanese '*mikkyō*,' which opposite is '*kengyō*,' meaning apparent (*ken*) or exoteric teaching. This distinction is crucial for Kūkai, as he introduced it in his *Ben kenmitsu nikyō ron* (Treatise on the difference between the exoteric and esoteric teachings) to provide a framework that justified the claimed superiority of Shingon to the other Buddhist schools that existed in Japan at the time. The distinction he drew is foundational to what is sometimes called the 'exo-esoteric' (*kenmitsu*) system of Buddhism in Japan. Kūkai drew an association between being apparent (*ken*) and superficial, on the one hand, and between being secret (*mitsu*) and being profound and true on the other (Rambelli 2013, 6). Kūkai considered the esoteric teaching to be more profound than the exoteric ones and the only one capable of reaching the ultimate truth.

Kūkai's distinction between the esoteric and exoteric teachings is grounded in the doctrine of the three bodies of the Buddha (Sk. *trikāya*; Jp. *sanjin*). In the previous section, we have been talking about the Buddha as the historical figure of Śākyamuni. However, things become more complicated in the developments of the Buddhist doctrine. In particular, in the context of Shingon, the Buddha becomes a universal entity of which the historical Buddha was nothing but an earthly manifestation. According to the doctrine under consideration, there are three bodies of the Buddha: *ōjin* (Sk. *nirmāṇakāya*), *hōjin* (Sk. *saṃbhogakāya*), and *hosshin* (Sk. *dharmakāya*). The first two are non-absolute manifestations of the Buddha (in particular, *ōjin* is the "transformation body" that appears in the world to teach the Dharma to sentient beings,

like Śākyamuni), while the third one, *hosshin*, is considered the absolute embodiment of the Dharma itself.[8]

Moreover, *hosshin* is equated with the *Dharmadhātu* (Jp. *hokkai*), which is the cosmos. Accordingly, claiming that the *hosshin* is the embodiment of the Dharma implies that the *universe itself* is the embodiment of the Dharma. In other words, the world is the embodiment of the Buddhist teaching. As we will see in more detail below (and in the fourth chapter), this is a central point of the Shingon pantheistic view.

In Kūkai's view, the main difference between the exoteric teachings and the esoteric one—and so between Shingon and other Buddhist schools—is that the exoteric teachings have been expounded by and come from Śākyamuni, a non-absolute manifestation of the Buddha. In contrast, the esoteric teaching (and we will go into further details in the next section) is directly expounded by the *hosshin*. Accordingly, in the *Ben kenmitsu nikyō ron*, Kūkai writes:

> There are three bodies of the Buddha and two forms of Buddhist doctrine. The doctrine revealed by the Nirmanakaya Buddha [Shakyamuni Buddha] is called Exoteric; it is apparent, simplified, and adapted to the needs of the time and to the capacity of the listeners. The doctrine expounded by the Dharmakaya Buddha [Mahāvairocana] is called Esoteric; it is secret and profound and contains the final truth.
>
> (Hakeda 1984, 151)

There are two other points connected to the notion of esoteric teaching. The first one is the necessity of initiation and of having a master (Sk. *ācārya*; Jp. *ajari*). In Shingon Buddhism, it is not enough to study *sūtras* and commentaries: the practitioner has to be initiated through the ritual of *abhiśeka* (Jp. *kanjō*). The ritual has to be performed by a master, who can transmit to the disciple important oral teachings. The second point is highlighted by Rambelli, who notices that "[t]he first character *mitsu* in the term *mikkyō*, commonly translated as "secret" or "esoteric," suggests, rather than an empty secret, *density and superimposed layers of meaning"* (Rambelli 2013, xvi; my emphasis). Thus, there is also a semantic flavour in the notion of *mikkyō*: the path towards enlightenment passes through a careful and detailed analysis of signs

[8] The three bodies of the universal Buddha are usually referred to with their Sanskrit names. However, in this essay I will refer many times to the Shingon doctrine of *hosshin seppō* (explained below), which has no standard Sanskrit translation, and to make the connection between this doctrine and the third body of the universal Buddha manifest (Sk. *dharmakāya*; Jp. *hosshin*), I will use the Japanese version of the term '*hosshin*'.

that deals with a multiplicity of levels of meaning. As we will see, this idea will be central in the development of Shingon's metaphysics.

Let us now turn to the second term: *'shingon*.' '*Shingon*' is the Japanese word for the Sanskrit '*mantra*.' In the first instance, mantras can be thought of as forms of ritual language. According to Richard Payne (2018, 15), there are two major conceptions of mantras within Buddhist thought: one sees them as powerful formulas capable of producing certain effects as, for example, invoking a deity; the other conceives mantras as objects of concentration to be used in meditative practices.

While both these meanings are kept in the school founded by Kūkai, the Japanese term '*shingon*'—which literally means true (*shin*) words (*gon*)—acquires further shades of meaning. In the first place, it hints at the concern that Kūkai had for the ultimate truth, a concern that has been identified as central in his thought (Gardiner 1992; Izutsu 1985; Kasulis 1988). In particular, according to Gardiner, one of the fundamental issues for Kūkai was "whether or not the absolute realm of ultimate truth is accessible to/compatible with the linguistic and conceptual apparatus of the conventional world" (1992, 200). From the name 'Shingon,' then, it emerges an emphasis on truth and our capacity to grasp it, which will be relevant to the opposition between Kūkai's and the Yogācāra doctrine.

Indeed, as pointed out in the introduction, a distinctive feature of Kūkai's model is that it makes it possible to describe reality in itself (that is, ultimate reality) with ordinary language. One way in which this doctrine is elaborated by Kūkai and Shingon philosophers more generally is as the thesis that the final soteriological result, *nirvāṇa*, is accessible through our ordinary words and concepts. This thesis—that Kūkai advances in his *Ben kenmitsu nikyō ron* (Treatise on the difference between the exoteric and esoteric teachings)—is known as '*kabun kasetsu*' (the result is expressible), and it is opposed to the thesis of *inbun kasetsu, kabun fukasetsu* (the practice leading to the result is expressible, the result is not expressible) which is attributed to exoteric Buddhism.[9] [10]

A second important meaning of '*shingon*' is connected to the doctrine of the preaching activity of the *hosshin* mentioned above. Indeed, it is not only the formulas used in esoteric rituals that are mantras or *shingon*, but also the very words of the *hosshin*. In order to preach,

[9] Cfr. (Izutsu 1985, 5; Veere 2000, 67).

[10] It could be argued that Kūkai did not think that *any* ordinary language was equally capable of capturing the truth, as he thought that Sanskrit had a special role, being the language used by the universal Buddha himself himself to reveal the *Mahāvairocana sūtra*, one of the two central scriptures of Shingon Buddhism. However, the exceptionality that he attributed to Sanskrit is hard to defend philosophically. Accordingly, I prefer to focus here on the wider view that human language in general (including Sanskrit, Japanese, Chinese, English, etc.) is capable of describing ultimate reality.

the *hosshin* needs to use words, and such universal and absolute words will have a special status. Such words are, at least in a sense, more profound than those of human language and are, therefore, *shingon*.

As we will see in great detail in the fourth chapter, the doctrine that the *hosshin* preaches the Dharma is connected with Kūkai's interpretation of reality as language. Indeed, I pointed out that the *hosshin* is taken to be 1) the embodiment of the Dharma (i.e. the Buddhist teaching); 2) identical with the universe itself. The immediate consequence of this is that the universe is the embodiment of the Dharma, and since the Dharma is taken in Shingon to have linguistic nature, so does the universe.

1.2.2. The Central Tenets of Kūkai's Shingon

If there is one idea that permeates Kūkai's thought in all its ramifications, that is *nonduality* (Sk. *advaita*; Jp. *funi*). In his enterprise of developing a general metaphysical doctrine, Kūkai avoids endorsing either pole of a number of dichotomies, affirming instead both poles as fundamental aspects of a more profound unity in a synthetic process. According to Krummel (2019), the main dualities that Kūkai surpasses are the mind-body, subject-object, and individual-universe ones, but the list could include the dichotomies of *saṃsāra-nirvāṇa*, conventional-ultimate reality, theory-practice, and others.

Accordingly, the Shingon doctrine presents itself as pervaded by a peculiar tension. On the one hand, it contains many complicated concepts and fine-grained distinctions; on the other, dichotomies are ultimately negated in the affirmation of a deeper unity. However, the tension is only superficial: dualities are not negated *simpliciter* (at least most of the times); they are reinterpreted as characterising two sides of the same coin. Here we start seeing how Shingon differentiates itself from traditional Indian Buddhism, taking its distinctions as indicating different aspects of a single unity. Of course, not everything is a Shingon innovation: syntheses had been progressively developed in the elaborations of Buddhist philosophy from India, through China, and then in Japan. However, Kūkai's emphasis on nonduality is particularly strong. Consider the following passage of Kūkai's *Sokushin jōbutsu gi* (The meaning of attaining Buddhahood in this very body):

> Differences exist between matter and mind, but in their essential nature they remain the same. Matter is no other than mind; mind, no other than matter. Without any obstruction, they are interrelated. The subject is the object; the object, the subject. The seeing is the seen, and the seen is the seeing. Nothing differentiates them.

> Although we speak of the creating and the created, there is in reality neither the creating nor the created.
>
> (Hakeda 1984, 229-230)[11]

Kūkai is not grossly rejecting the distinction between matter and mind or between subject and object. On the contrary, he is willing to admit that there are differences. However, one must not remain stuck in the duality: in the end, "matter is no other than mind" and "the subject is the object." They are aspects of a single underlying unity. Instead, the creating-created duality seems negated more strongly than the others because Kūkai frames it as a mere verbal distinction. In other words, the creating and the created—which are to be interpreted on the cosmological level—are not two *real* aspects of the same thing: they are just two ways of speaking of the same thing.

This last point, I believe, is connected to the identity of Mahāvairocana—the creating deity—with the universe as a whole. The figure of Mahāvairocana (Jp. Dainichi) is the pivotal element of the Shingon's worldview; it is what keeps all the pieces together. Mahāvairocana is the universal Buddha, an absolute entity that has been interpreted as a pantheistic deity (Izutsu 1985; Rambelli 2013, xvii; Sueki 1996, 113).[12] Let us pause for a moment and consider this notion of pantheism.

The term 'pantheism' is a modern construction made with ancient Greek material: the word '*pan*,' which means 'all,' and the word '*theos*,' meaning God (Mander 2020) or deity. We can then loosely define pantheism as a family of views affirming, in one sense or the other, that everything is the deity. Pantheism is clearly at odds with classical theism, which insists on the total transcendence of the deity, conceiving it as utterly separate from the reality we experience. Another view or family of views often contrasted with pantheism is panentheism (Culp 2020), this one defined as the view that everything is *in* the deity, without being identical to it. There is no doubt that Kūkai does not see Mahāvairocana as completely separate from the world, so we can drop classical theism. Moreover, for our purposes, it is unnecessary to bring the distinction between pantheism and panentheism further, so I will use the term 'pantheism' from now on.[13]

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[11] Cfr. (Shingen and Dreitlein 2010, 51).

[12] Actually, Izutsu never uses the word 'pantheism' explicitly ('*hanshinron*' in Japanese), but his interpretation of Kūkai is clearly pantheistic in my view.

[13] In effect, the distinction may be largely terminological. As Mander points out, while pantheists are happy to affirm that everything is God and God is everything, it is also very common for pantheists to reject the standard logic of identity (2020, §3). Indeed, hundreds of pages could be written in interpreting what 'everything is God, and God is everything' means. What does 'everything' means? The universe? What is *the universe*? Is it a single

Let us consider the figure of Mahāvairocana more extensively. As mentioned in the previous section, while in the context of classical Indian Buddhism, the term 'Buddha' usually refers to the historical Śākyamuni, in the development of Buddhist thought the doctrine of the Enlightened One becomes more complex and articulated. The theory of the three bodies (Sk. *trikāya*; Jp. *sanjin*), which I referred to in explaining the meaning of '*mikkyō*,' was elaborated well before Kūkai, and stated that there are three bodies of the Buddha, and Śākyamuni was only one of these: the transformational body.

Before Kūkai, the body of Dharma (Sk. *dharmakāya*; Jp. *hosshin*)—the most important body among the three—was considered merely an abstract principle or idea (Rambelli 2013, xvii; Shingen and Dreitlein 2010, 396).[14] Kūkai, instead, gives substantiality to *hosshin*, interpreting it as the actual embodiment of the central deity of the *Mahāvairocana sūtra*, namely Mahāvairocana, an embodiment identical to the universe itself. We must not interpret the thesis that the universe is the *body* of Mahāvairocana as suggesting a mind-body duality. As mentioned above, and as we will see in more details in the third chapter, mind and body are considered by Kūkai nondual; thus, the claim that reality is the body of Mahāvairocana should, in Kūkai's doctrine, be read as the claim that reality is the body-mind of Mahāvairocana. The thesis that reality is *hosshin*, the body-mind of Mahāvairocana, makes Kūkai's view clearly pantheist.

A question arises about the role of the other bodies, given that reality is identified with *hosshin*. Of course, they can only be part of the *hosshin* itself. Indeed, on the basis of the identification of the *hosshin* with the world, the doctrine of the three bodies is completely reframed in Shingon as the doctrine of the fourfold *hosshin*. From the perspective of the previous theory, only the *hosshin* remains; it is said to have four different aspects, and the other two bodies in the doctrine of the three bodies are reinterpreted as two of these four aspects. The four aspects are: 1) *jishō shin* (Sk. *svabhāvakāya*), the body of suchness; 2) *juyū shin* (Sk. *saṃbhogakāya*), the body of bliss; 3) *henge shin* (Sk. *nirmāṇakāya*), the transformation bodies; 4) *tōru shin* (Sk. *niṣyandakāya*), the harmonised emanations.[15]

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universe? A multiverse? Does it have many dimensions? Do mere possibilities count as part of the universe? What do we mean by saying that God *is* everything? Is God *constituted* by the totality of what exists? Is it the case that *each* phenomenon is God or only their sum? I will not bore you further, but the list could be much longer, and before having taken a stance on many of these issues, any distinction between pantheism and panentheism seems to me completely pointless.

[14] It might be useful here to consider Williams' point that the Sanskrit term 'kāya' "can refer to an actual physical body possessed by living beings, or a body similar but perhaps rather less obviously 'physical' (such as, perhaps, an 'astral body'). It can also refer to any collection of things classed together by some principle of classification, as in the case of a body of texts or a body of people" (Williams 2000, 172).

[15] For more on this, see (Shingen and Dreitlein 2010, 366-368; Veere 2000, §3.3).

This pantheistic framework is connected to the most distinctive doctrine of Shingon Buddhism, the doctrine of *hosshin seppō* (*hosshin*'s sermon). In discussing the meaning of '*mikkyō*,' we considered that the claimed superiority of Shingon rests on the idea that the esoteric teaching comes directly from the *hosshin*. Indeed, according to Kūkai, the universal body-mind of Mahāvairocana is not immutable; it actively preaches to all sentient beings. (Since sentient beings are also part of reality, there is a sense in which this amounts to Mahāvairocana preaching the Dharma to himself.)

In his *Shōji jissō gi* (The meaning of sound, word, and reality), Kūkai claims that reality is made of *monji*, signs of the sermon of Mahāvairocana. The whole universe is taken to be the unfolding preaching activity of Mahāvairocana for the liberation of sentient beings. Getting into the details of all this will be our goal in the fourth chapter. However, it is worth highlighting here that this view leads to the consequence that (at least in some sense) Mahāvairocana *is* his sermon, or, in other words, that the deity *is* language (Izutsu 1985) since reality is both the body-mind of Mahāvairocana and his text.

There is one last important Shingon doctrine that I want to mention: the doctrine of *sokushin jōbutsu* (attaining Buddhahood in this very body). We saw in the previous section that the soteriological goal of Buddhism is attaining enlightenment. Indian Buddhism develops the doctrine of enlightenment around the notions of *saṃsāra* (Jp. *rinne*) and *nirvāṇa* (Jp. *nehan*). The idea is that we are trapped in a cycle of rebirths (*saṃsāra*) and that the soteriological goal (*nirvāṇa*) is the liberation from such a cycle. Deliverance from *saṃsāra* is typically taken to require a very long time (see, e.g., Rambelli 2011, 25; Williams 2000, 176), where 'very long' means something like thousands of millions of years.

That might sound discouraging, but Kūkai has very different ideas on the matter. Indeed, the doctrine of *sokushin jōbutsu* says that we can attain enlightenment in this existence and without further rebirths. The doctrine of *sokushin jōbutsu* is connected with the doctrine of *hongaku* (original enlightenment), which says that we are *already* enlightened. Now, advancing these two claims together might sound pointless. After all, if we are already enlightened, what is the point of saying that we can attain enlightenment in this existence? However, as Hakeda notices, an idea that we find in Kūkai is that "unless a man is enlightened from the very beginning he has no way to reach enlightenment" (Hakeda 1984, 6).

In my view, one way of making sense of this claim is by bringing in a distinction that has proved philosophically valuable many times: that between the epistemic and the metaphysical level. When Kūkai says that we are already enlightened, I think he makes a metaphysical claim. The suggestion here is that the doctrine of *hongaku* can be read as a metaphysical doctrine: the

fact that we are already enlightened reduces to the fact that we are metaphysically part of the body-mind of Mahāvairocana. The stuff constituting us is the same stuff that constitutes the universal Buddha, and in this sense, we are metaphysically enlightened. However, most of us do not realise—at least, not deeply enough—that we are part of Mahāvairocana, and this makes us unenlightened from an epistemic perspective. But the situation could be worse; the fact that we are already metaphysically enlightened makes it possible to reach also epistemic enlightenment, and even more, it makes it possible to reach it in *this* life.

Realising one's identity with Mahāvairocana, one also realises the nonduality of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* (a kind of nonduality that is also affirmed in other Buddhist schools like Tendai). It is only from the epistemically unenlightened point of view that they are distinct, but once one comes to understand her identity with Mahāvairocana, also *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* appear like two ways of looking at the same thing: the afflicted way and the non-afflicted one. In the end, our afflictions in *saṃsāra* are nothing but enlightenment (Jp. *bonnō soku bodai*). We just have to realise it. In the end, everything comes about through realising our identity with Mahāvairocana, as this is the goal towards which many of the practices we find in Shingon are oriented. To conclude this chapter, let us turn to them.

1.2.3. Theory and Practice

To have a complete overview of Shingon Buddhism, dedicating a few pages to its practice is mandatory. In accordance with nonduality, Kūkai held that theory and practice constitute two sides of the same coin. In his view, a theoretical system that does not flow into practice is of no use at all, and practice not supported by theoretical understanding is shallow and incapable of bringing the desired effects. Indeed, one of the main problems that he thought were plaguing the Buddhist schools of the Nara period (i.e. the Buddhist schools that existed in Japan before Shingon) was the lack of a connection between theory and practice (Abe 1999, 270). Thus, the Shingon system had to bring theory and practice together. Yamasaki gives a good sense of the centrality of ritual practice in the following passage:

> Shingon Buddhism has a wealth of traditional ritual practices. Some sense of their number may be had by considering that the Kongo-kai and the Tai-zo mandalas contain some eighteen hundred deities, all of which, either individually or in groups, have associated practices. Shingon rituals, therefore, exist in great numbers, although relatively few of them are practiced regularly.
>
> (Yamasaki 1988, 152)

The practice of Shingon Buddhism was taken to serve two primary purposes. First, that of enabling people to attain (or realise) enlightenment in this existence (Jp. *sokushin jōbutsu*); second, that of pacifying and defending the nation (Jp. *chingo kokka*) and obtaining worldly benefits (Jp. *genze riyaku*) (Hakeda 1984, 6; Rambelli 2013, 9). While the first one is theoretically important, the role of the second order of purpose was much more prominent. Let us consider both of them.

1.2.3.1. Ritual Practice Oriented to Enlightenment

At the beginning of a paper on the hermeneutical method for cross-cultural philosophy, Garfield reports the following considerations made by Tsongkhapa after a discussion on meaning and representation: "[b]ut of course the point of all of this is to attain enlightenment. Otherwise philosophy would be just for fun" (Garfield 2002, 229). This statement helps to point out that Buddhist philosophers develop philosophical theories with special attention to their soteriological implications. Epistemological or metaphysical theories that render enlightenment impossible are non-starters.

As we have seen, that of *sokushin jōbutsu* is a massively important doctrine in the Shingon tradition. According to the Shingon doctrine, we should distinguish three ways of becoming a Buddha: "as a consequence of the innate principle of original awakening (*rigu jōbutsu,* "becoming a buddha as an innate principle"), as a result of empowerment and ritual action (*kaji jōbutsu*, "becoming a buddha due to ritual empowerment"), and as a miraculous phenomenon in which the practitioner publicly displays his Buddha-body (*kendoku jōbutsu*, "becoming a buddha [in which its] virtues are manifest")" (Rambelli 2013, 126). We are going to focus on the second way.

Three kinds of elements are particularly central in Shingon ritual practice: making mudras (i.e., seals made with one's hands), reciting mantras, and mentally visualising deities and other entities. The theoretical framework that makes these practices relevant is given by two Shingon notions: *sanmitsu* (three mysteries) and *sangō* (three karmic activities). In the Shingon doctrine, the claim that the universal Buddha Mahāvairocana engages in activity to preach the Dharma to sentient beings is further specified in saying that there are three aspects of this activity: the three mysteries. They are the physical (Jp. *taimitsu*), mental (Jp. *imitsu*), and verbal (Jp. *gomitsu* or *kumitsu*) activities of Mahāvairocana. Moreover, they correspond to the three karmic activities of sentient beings—the physical (Jp. *taigō*), mental (Jp. *igō*), and verbal (Jp. *gogō* or *kugō*).

The reader might have noticed that the three practices of mantras, mudras, and visualisation maps onto the three mysteries and three karmic activities. Making mudras is a bodily activity, visualising images is a mental activity, and reciting mantras a verbal one. The idea, then, is that by making mudras, one can realise the identity of her body with the body of Mahāvairocana, reciting mantras one realises the identity of her discourse with Mahāvairocana's one, and practising visualisation, one realises the identity of her mind with that of the cosmic Buddha. In sum, by engaging in these three kinds of activities in ritual practice, the practitioner comes to realise her identity with the universal Buddha Mahāvairocana.

The Shingon term to refer to all kinds of ritual practices is '*kaji*' (Sk. *adhiṣṭhāna*). Furthermore, the term has also a more specific meaning, referring to what is sometimes translated as 'empowerment.' Being constituted of two components—'*ka*,' which means grace, and '*ji*,' which means retention—the term expresses the twofold idea of the grace of Mahāvairocana being given to the practitioner and of the capacity of the latter to retain it. The concept of *kaji* introduces then in the ritual practice a dimension of active help on the part of Mahāvairocana, as he endows the practitioner with the power to realise her identity with him.

Here, we can see the intimate connection of theory and practice by noticing that what we have been saying in the previous section offers the perfect theoretical framework to think about this process of realising one's identity with the Buddha. One can come to understand her identity with Mahāvairocana because she was identical with him from the very beginning. Reality itself is the embodiment of Mahāvairocana, and the fact that we are parts of reality makes us non-separate from Mahāvairocana himself. The practices of reciting mantras, making mudras, and visualising images do not bring about a metaphysical identity that did not exist already; they only make us understand an identity that was originally there.

1.2.3.2. Ritual Practice Oriented to the World

Since this is a philosophical essay, we are mainly interested in the theoretical framework developed by Kūkai. However, we must not forget that since its establishment in Japan and for most of its history, the central concern of Shingon practice has been that of producing worldly benefits for the state, lords, and so forth. It is important for us to bear this in mind because *this* is the primary terrain where Shingon had to demonstrate its legitimacy and efficacy. Accordingly, also the theories of Kūkai that we are concerned with had to be capable of motivating why Shingon more than other Buddhist denominations was in a position to achieve these worldly purposes.

When, in the eighth century, Buddhism became official in Japan, it acquired the function of performing rituals for the pacification and protection of the state (Jp. *chingo kokka*). Shingon was established within this framework, and it was particularly well-suited to thrive in it. That is because esoteric *sūtras*, like the *Suvarṇaprabhāsa Sūtra*, provided a basis for rituals oriented to the obtainment of various worldly benefits (Jp. *genze riyaku*), among which one can classify the protection of the state itself. This fact confirms a tendency that has been widespread in the whole tantric-esoteric tradition, which, since its Indian origins, had been mainly concerned with the performance of powerful rituals (Williams 2000, 195). Such interest for worldly goals is also reflected in the division of roles of the two main temples of Shingon: while the monastic centre on Mt. Kōya was considered by Kūkai a place where to meditate without the concerns of secular life, the Tō-ji in Kyoto was named '*kyōō gokoku ji*' (the temple for the defence of the nation by means of the king of doctrines).

In Shingon Buddhism, the basis for the possibility of acting on the social and physical reality is given by the *mandalisation* of the world it enacts. To interpret reality as the unfolding sermon of Mahāvairocana also means to consider it a mandala; "[i]n such a framework, each text and each cultural artefact, including non-religious ones, was understood as a potential Esoteric entity endowed with several levels of secret meanings" (Rambelli 2013, 30). But not only texts and cultural artefacts,

> By the end of the thirteenth century, everything in Japan had been mandalized in more or less explicitly terms: space, time, salvation, cosmic movements, everyday practices, artistic and intellectual production, birth, death, physiologic activities such as breathing were all described as particular instances of larger cosmic processes. It is not surprising that such a generalized mandalization also played an ideological role for the legitimization of the political and economic role of Shingon and Tendai religious institutions and their attempts to strengthen domination over the lands they managed and the people living there.
>
> (Rambelli 2013, 78)

Such mandalisation of the world is particularly important when it comes to performing rituals that are supposed to produce worldly effects. In order to justify their efficacy, the world itself has to be reinterpreted under a model capable of allowing that efficacy: seeing it as the universal text of Mahāvairocana, or in other terms as a universal mandala, serves this role.

We have previously seen how mantras, or *shingon*, constitute a language of a special kind, according to Kūkai. This claim is particularly accurate when the term is used to refer not to formulas recited in rituals by practitioners but to the words of Mahāvairocana, that is, the words constituting his universal sermon itself. It is important to notice that with the language of Mahāvairocana, the ordinary conception of language as something dealing with an already existing reality ceases to work. The words of Mahāvairocana *are* the reality, and since the preaching activity of Mahāvairocana is conceptually and ontologically prior to the ordinary world, such words are cosmogenetic; that is, they are what creates the universe.

Now, stressing this idea of powerful words, of words capable of producing effects on reality, Kūkai had a basis for motivating the power to produce worldly benefits of the formulas employed in Shingon rituals. Shingon's mantras can be seen as human-size versions of Mahāvairocana's universal mantras and, in virtue of a special connection to the latter, able to produce the desired worldly effects. This idea is related to the fact that mantric formulas are claimed to become identical with deities—a claim of identity that deserves to be taken seriously (Payne 2018, 98)—and so capable of exercising the power of a deity.

The mandalisation of the world also allows for the cultural hegemony of Shingon Buddhism, for if the world is a mandala in which everything is endowed with multiple layers of meaning, esoteric Buddhism clergy acquires the role of interpreting and analysing such mandala; in other words, everything become of competence of Shingon's priests. Many Shingon priests had competencies that today we would consider very distant from those typical of the clergy. They were, for example, experts in medicine, architecture, and agriculture. Kūkai himself projected an important irrigation system in the island of Shikoku. All these activities were read under the model of the mandala. On this understanding of reality, the exo-esoteric distinction becomes particularly important for motivating Shingon's superiority because, once reality is understood as a mandala, a question arises about who has the role of interpreting it, and those who have access to the esoteric teachings are the obvious answer.

We have reached the end of this chapter. The last considerations on the power of mantras to produce worldly effects might have sounded very outlandish to the philosopher reading them. It is important to realise that the central philosophical claims that we are going to consider can be accepted without buying the ritual framework, so there is no commitment to all this. However, it was essential to highlight that these concerns were not secondary for Kūkai himself, and he had them in mind in the development of his philosophical doctrine.

2. The Case for the Illusoriness of Conventional Reality

As pointed out in the previous chapter, one of the central tenets of Kūkai's doctrine is that ultimate reality can be accessed with our senses and described with ordinary language (Gardiner 1992; Payne 2018). Kūkai considers this the fundamental differences between exoteric and esoteric Buddhism: according to him, while the former embraces the doctrine of *inbun kasetsu, kabun fukasetsu* (the practice leading to the result is expressible, the result is not expressible), esoteric Buddhism is characterised by the doctrine of *kabun kasetsu* (the result is expressible).[16]

In his *Ben kenmitsu nikyō ron* (Treatise on the difference between the exoteric and esoteric teachings), Kūkai makes the following point about Vasubandhu (whose view will be discussed in this chapter) and Nāgārjuna, considered here representants of exoteric Buddhism:

> It is therefore said in the commentary on the *Daśabhūmika Sutra* written by Vasubandhu that "only the way to enlightenment can be talked about [and not the enlightenment itself]," and also in the commentary on *The Awakening of Faith* written by Nāgārjuna that "the perfect sea of enlightenment cannot be talked about." These works were based on the [provisional] sutras and were not intended to advocate the final truth.
>
> (Hakeda 1984, 154)

Kūkai is saying that according to exoteric Buddhism, the final result of Buddhist practice, and so ultimate reality, cannot be expressed in ordinary terms. However, he holds that such a view is merely provisional and must be surpassed. Indeed, in the same treatise, Kūkai writes that ultimate reality is transcendent only "from the viewpoint of those who have not yet been enlightened and not from the point of view of enlightened ones" (Hakeda 1984, 152), and we know the Shingon doctrine says that we are all *already* enlightened, since we are all non-separate from the body-mind of the universal Buddha. Therefore, ultimate reality is not transcendent for us. We have to realise that *the very experiences we are having* are experiences of enlightenment, and ordinary language is perfectly capable of describing them.

[16] On the differences between exoteric and esoteric Buddhism (from a Shingon point of view), you can also see (Veere 2000, §3.4).

In this chapter, I will first define the notions of conventional reality (Sk. *saṁvṛti-satya*; Jp. *shintai*) and ultimate reality (Sk. *paramārtha-satya*; Jp. *zokutai*). Then, drawing from Yogācāra Buddhism—and particularly from the thought of Vasubandhu—I will formulate the case that ultimate reality is beyond our reach: it cannot be described with ordinary language and concepts, nor cognised in ordinary experience (however, as we will see, the claim that we cannot describe ultimate reality does not mean that we cannot even *refer* to it; the last section of the chapter will provide a more precise definition of ineffability). The Yogācāra school represents the perfect starting point since, as Rambelli (2013, chap. 1) points out, the Shingon's theory of the mind starts from the Yogācāra's one.[17] I will then highlight the consequences of the Yogācāra's view: the very fact that describing ultimate reality with ordinary language and concepts becomes impossible, that our direct-realist intuitions end up being wrong, and that we must be antirealist about metaphysics. The following two chapters will present Kūkai's alternative.

2.1. The Yogācāra's Case

2.1.1. Conventional and Ultimate Reality

In Buddhist philosophy, there is an important distinction between the way things *are* and that in which they *appear* to be. This distinction is what underlies the theory of the two truths or the two realities. Two clarifications are in order.

First, a terminological one. Why two realities *or* two truths? Are these alternative versions of the doctrine? The thing is that the Sanskrit language has only one word for both truth and reality, '*satya*.' For this reason, English writers variously talk about two truths or two realities.

While the two terms for conventional and ultimate reality have a standard translation in Chinese characters, Shingon thinkers prefer to talk about principle (Ch. *li*; Jp. *ri*) and phenomena (Ch. *shi*; Jp. *ji*), two notions introduced in the Chinese Huayan (Jp. Kegon) tradition (Hakeda 1984, 86) to refer to the nature of ultimate reality and phenomena respectively (Van Norden and Jones 2019; §2). Indeed, Kakuban (1095-1143CE), who is perhaps the most important Shingon philosopher after Kūkai, explains many of the differences between exoteric and esoteric Buddhism—which, as we have seen, Kūkai articulates in terms of access to ultimate reality—precisely around the notions of principle and phenomena (Veere 2000, 73-4). Moreover, as we will see in the fourth chapter, the Shingon tradition considers a third notion

[17] The *Vajraśekhara Sūtra*, one of the two fundamental *sūtras* of Shingon Buddhism, is closely connected to the Yogācāra doctrine (Hakeda 1984, 84).

in addition to principle and phenomena: wisdom (Jp. *chi*)—a concept that we find in the Chinese translation of the *Mahāvairocana sūtra* (Veere 2000, 87).

Since the distinction between principle and phenomena is metaphysical, in what follows I will mainly talk about ultimate and conventional reality rather than ultimate and conventional truth. (However, in the fourth chapter we will see that the identification of the principle with ultimate reality and phenomena with conventional reality is too rushed.)

Second, we should bear in mind that the theory of the two realities has been developed with soteriological concerns in mind. Consequently, while there is uniformity in the soteriological role of the distinction across Buddhist schools, its metaphysical and epistemological import in the different doctrines varies considerably. Again, the idea is that there is some difference between the way reality is and that it appears to us, and the soteriological significance of this putative fact is that ultimate reality is stable, something one can rely upon in the path towards enlightenment. Conventional reality, on the other hand, is a precarious terrain. Thus, the red thread uniting the theory of two realities across different Buddhist doctrines is soteriological, and the non-soteriological considerations we will make in what follows should not be taken as applicable to Buddhism universally.

In this chapter, we will focus on the theory of the two realities developed in Yogācāra Buddhism, especially considering Vasubandhu's *Treatise on the Three Natures* (Sk. *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa*). Let us be guided into the technicalities by an illustrating metaphor. Imagine you are in the desert, walking under the rays of a very unmerciful sun. There, you see the mirage of a limpid lake. We can try to apply our concepts of conventional and ultimate reality to this scenario. When you see a mirage, what you experience is not what is there; the water your experience presents to you and reality are distinct. Indeed, there is no water out there at all. The mirage is empty of water; however, it *deceptively* presents itself as water. We can think of the illusory water as conventional reality. On the other hand, ultimate reality is the chain of actual causes and conditions leading to the experience of the mirage. The idea the Yogācāra doctrine puts forward is that *all* our ordinary experience is like that: all the tables, chairs, trees, and buildings we see are illusory like the water in the mirage, and the world lies ineffably beyond these illusions.

The metaphor can be used to illustrate one more important point. The illusoriness of conventional reality does not imply that anything goes. That is, also within conventional reality, we can distinguish between truth and falsity. Consider the mirage again. We know that the water is merely illusory (there is no water there); however, a person experiencing that mirage would be wrong if she affirmed to be seeing a tree or a rock. She sees water. Real water? No.

However, the illusion is an illusion of water and not of something else. Furthermore, the Buddhist philosopher is willing to accept that the distinction between truth and falsity in conventional reality is crucial in our everyday lives. We just have to come to realise its illusory nature.

In holding that all our ordinary experience is illusory, the Yogācārin comes to a position similar to the Kantian one (Gold 2021, §5; Trivedi 2005). The idea is that what we directly access in experience, namely phenomena, are distinct from noumena, namely reality in itself. In what follows, I will present this view through the theory of the three natures of Vasubandhu. Then, I will draw some consequences of the theory, also by invoking the help of works in contemporary meta-metaphysics.

2.1.2. Vasubandhu's Theory of the Three Natures

Vasubandhu (4th-5th century CE) is often considered a supporter of some form of metaphysical idealism, namely the view that reality has a mental nature (see, e.g., Siderits 2007). However, I will follow a different strand of interpretations that takes his views to be a form of *epistemic* idealism[18] (Kochumuttom 1982; Trivedi 2005). I will now introduce the doctrine of the three natures of Vasubandhu and then model on it the theory of the two realities.

Let us consider the initial three verses of Vasubandhu's *Treatise*:

> The imagined, the other-dependent and
> The consummate:
> These are the three natures
> Which should be deeply understood.
>
> Arising through dependence on conditions and
> Existing through being imagined,
> It is therefore called other-dependent
> And is said to be merely imaginary.
>
> The eternal non-existence
> Of what appears in the way it appears,
> Since it is never otherwise,
> Is known as the nature of the consummate.

[18] For a detailed map of the myriad different positions that are often called 'idealism' see (Chalmers 2009).

(Garfield 2009, 41)

According to Vasubandhu, we can analyse the objects of our experience in terms of three natures, which are listed in the first verse: the imagined nature, the (other-)dependent nature, and the consummate nature. Let us define them one by one. The imagined nature (Sk. *parikalpita*) is the way in which objects are experienced in our ordinary consciousness. If I turn my head on the left of the screen, I see a notebook. I *perceive* it as an external, enduring object with certain qualitative properties existing independently of my experience of it. This is the imagined nature, which, Vasubandhu says in the second verse, exists "through being imagined." The externality and independence of the object are merely imagined.

Then, the dependent nature (Sk. *paratantra*) is described in the second verse as "arising through dependence on conditions." The dependent nature is the dependence on causes and conditions of the objects of experience. Finally, there is the consummate nature (Sk. *pariniṣpanna*). It is the trickiest to get one's head around and is defined in the third verse as "the eternal non-existence of what appears in the way it appears." In other words, the consummate nature is defined as the absence of the imagined nature in the dependent nature.

To obtain a better understanding of the consummate nature and its relationship with the other two, Garfield (2015, 73) makes what I see as an illuminating point. The Sanskrit words for the three natures are not grammatically equivalent: while '*paratantra*' (dependent nature) is a nominal construction, '*parikalpita*' (imagined nature) and '*pariniṣpanna*' (consummate nature) are past participles. According to Garfield (and I agree with him), this shows that the dependent nature has a unique, pivotal role in Vasubandhu's theory. The Yogācāra picture is that there are dependently originated percepts (dependent nature), which can be experienced either by constructing and reifying them (imagined nature) or without doing that (consummate nature).

Let me now give you a taste of how the theory of the three natures relates to the theory of the two realities. The first thought many people may have is that the imagined nature corresponds to conventional reality and the consummate nature to the ultimate. However, this cannot be the correct interpretation, or at least it should not be put in this way. As I have just highlighted, the imagined and the consummate nature are ways of grasping the dependent nature. Hence, they cannot correspond to the two realities in this straightforward way because the two realities are not ways of grasping something. Accordingly, a better way to define the two realities could be the following: conventional reality is the dependent nature *as imagined* and ultimate reality the dependent nature *as consummate*. Is this the correct interpretation? I

think it is. However, we have to proceed step by step, gradually acquiring a deeper understanding of the doctrine. Let us start with a different interpretation.

One way to understand the doctrine of the two realities in terms of the three natures is to say that the whole framework of the three natures is conventional reality and that ultimate reality lies beyond it. Here is a more fine-grained way to put it: 1) the dependent nature is conventional reality; 2) the imagined nature is the fact that we take conventional reality to be more than conventional (we take it to be bedrock, stable reality); 3) the consummate nature—which, again, is the dependent nature without the imagined nature—is the experience of conventional reality, the dependent nature, *as conventional*. According to this interpretation, the goal of Yogācāra's practice is not to experience ultimate reality in a metaphysical sense but to deeply realise the mere conventionality of the conventional (see Williams 2000, 158).

To reach a deeper understanding of this interpretative proposal, let us consider a metaphor that Vasubandhu employs at the end of the treatise, in verses 27-30, to give a comprehensive picture of the three natures:[19]

> Like an elephant that appears
> Through the power of a magician's mantra—
> Only the percept appears,
> The elephant is completely non-existent.
>
> The imagined nature is the elephant;
> The other-dependent nature is the visual percept;
> The non-existence of the elephant therein
> Is explained to be the consummate.
>
> Through the root consciousness
> The nonexistent duality appears.
> But since the duality is completely non-existent,
> There is only a percept.
>
> The root consciousness is like the mantra.
> Reality can be compared to the wood.

[19] You can confront my explanation of these four verses with the one of Garfield in (Garfield 1997, 149-150; Garfield 2015, chap. 6).

Imagination is like the perception of the elephant.
Duality can be seen as the elephant.

(Garfield 2009, 44)

In this metaphor, Vasubandhu invites the reader to imagine being under the illusion of a magician. The magician displays some sticks of wood on the floor in front of us and, by pronouncing a mantra, makes us perceive the sticks of wood as an elephant.

The first thing to notice is that "the elephant is completely non-existent." That is, there is just no elephant in front of us. We are hallucinating that there is an elephant where there is none. Accordingly, the elephant can be compared to the imagined nature. Then, the dependent is the percept. Let us consider what Vasubandhu is saying very carefully: "only the percept appears, the elephant is completely non-existent." These two lines perfectly match the considerations we were making on the dependent and the imagined nature. In the metaphor, there is a percept, but *the percept itself* is not an elephant. Hence, the percept is the dependent nature, and the elephant the imagined, the reification we are enacting on the dependent nature. Finally, the consummate nature is the absence of the imagined in the dependent, that is, as Vasubandhu writes in the second of these four verses, "the non-existence of the elephant" in the percept. Following this interpretation, the goal of the practitioner is to attain an experience of the percept *qua* percept, avoiding seeing it as an independent and enduring elephant.

In this sense, then, the dependent nature without the imagined nature is not ultimate reality in a metaphysical sense. As the fourth verse says, "[ultimate] reality can be compared to the wood," and what we have to attain is not an experience of the wood but an experience of the percept as a mere percept.

Let us now take a step back and consider the third verse. Here, Vasubandhu says that "through the roots of consciousness the non-existent duality appears." What does it mean? Vasubandhu is here referring to the Yogācāra theory of the mind, which provides an account of how the hallucination of conventional reality originates. From the fourth verse, we can see that, in the metaphor, it is the magician's mantra that plays this role, generating the elephant's illusion. However, to merely say that the mantra (in the metaphor) or the roots of consciousness (outside of metaphor) creates the illusion of the elephant is at least incomplete. Vasubandhu says that a non-existent *duality* appears, so it is not only the elephant that is imagined: the subject is just as illusory as the elephant. The whole fact of the *subject experiencing the elephant* is merely imagined.

In light of the claim that the whole subject-object duality is merely imagined, we can make one more step towards a deeper understanding of the connection between the theory of the two realities and that of the three natures. Although following Vasubandhu in the fourth verse, I compared the ultimate reality to the wood, that comparison was not precise enough. If the whole subject-object duality is imagined, then there is no ultimate difference between inside and outside, between what is contained in one's head and what is outside of it. Therefore, we should see *both the wood and the mantra*—which, outside of metaphor, corresponds to the "roots of consciousness" generating the "nonexistent duality"—as ultimate reality. Our illusory experience is the joint product of transcendental mental processes and a transcendental reality that are ultimately the same thing. Putting this view in Kantian terms (although this view differs from Kant's one in that he believed in selves), we should say that the phenomena-noumena distinction starts at home, so to speak, and there is no ultimate difference between an outside world and a subject inhabiting it.

This is a complex but essential point. The error one must avoid is to conceive ultimate reality within a subject-object or inside-outside dichotomy. As Garfield (2015, 191) says, this error may stem from the fact that we take ourselves to have privileged access to the content of our heads, thinking that while the external world is never experienced directly, the inner world is. However, according to Vasubandhu, it is not that while we cannot access the external world, we can access the internal, mental reality directly.

One may think that it is only true with respect to the external world that just conventional reality can be accessed and ultimate reality lies beyond it because we have direct access to the *internal* ultimate reality. However, this cannot be correct because the whole subject-object duality, the whole inside-outside duality is illusory. Accordingly, there is no distinction between an external world that is never accessed and an internal one that is accessed directly: ordinary experience (which encompasses both what we may call 'external' and 'internal' experience) is conventional, and ultimate reality lies beyond the whole of ordinary experience. Like the phenomena-noumena one, the conventional-ultimate reality distinction is widespread. There is no such thing as special direct access to internal reality because there is no real distinction between the internal reality and the external one.

Thus, there is no relevant distinction between the mantra and the wood (inside the metaphor) or the transcendental external reality and the root consciousness that originates the nonexistent duality (outside of the metaphor). They are the same. There is only one transcendental ultimate reality that underpins the whole subject-object or inside-outside distinction, which is taken to be entirely conventional.

If these considerations are correct, there is some tension here. On the one hand, the yogācārin believes that ultimate reality is ineffable and impossible to describe with our ordinary concepts and words because that would mean imagining it. On the other, once we see that the transcendental consciousness is ultimate reality because of the ultimate nonduality of subject and object, we seem to run into a contradiction because Yogācāra philosophers do describe how the transcendental consciousness works. Let me dedicate now a brief subsection to presenting the Yogācāra theory of the mind. Having done that, we will try to figure out how to get out of this tension.

2.1.2.1. The Yogācāra Theory of the Mind

The process of articulation of phenomenal reality is explained within a theory of perception and the mind. Starting from perception, Yogācāra philosophers conceive the existence of six sense faculties. They are the usual ones of sight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste together with a sixth sense, the intellect (Sk. *mano vijñāna*; Jp. *ishiki*). The faculties have the role of gaining data from the respective perceptual fields: that of the visible, the sounds, smells, tactile qualities, flavours, and the thinkable.

Concerning the mind, Yogācāra philosophers talk about eight consciousnesses (Sk. *vijñāna*; Jp. *shiki*). Nevertheless, as we will see in a moment, there is a big jump from the first seventh consciousness and the eighth one, which is on an entirely different level. The first five are related to the five ordinary senses: sight-consciousness, hearing-consciousness, smell-consciousness, touch-consciousness, and taste-consciousness. These consciousnesses have the role of unifying data gained from the corresponding perceptual faculty. The sixth consciousness is the intellect itself (Sk. *mano vijñāna*; Jp. *ishiki*), which is treated both as one of the consciousnesses and as a perceptual faculty. As a perceptual faculty, it has the role of acquiring data from the thinkable; as one of the consciousnesses it unifies the data already elaborated by the first five sense-consciousnesses, attributes names and formulates judgements. The seventh is the self-consciousness (Sk. *mano nāma vijñāna*; Jp. *manashiki*) which has the role of creating the subject-object distinction. Without it, conventional knowledge would not be possible.

Finally, the eighth consciousness is the most important one. With it, we are making a big leap from the first seven consciousnesses. Variously translated as ‘substratum consciousness’ and ‘store consciousness,’ and in other ways (Sk. *ālaya vijñāna*; Jp. *arayashiki*), the store consciousness is said to contain seeds (Sk. *bīja*; Jp. *shuji*) from which all our experience is generated. The store consciousness is also related to the other ones in a circular process. On the one hand, the seeds in the store consciousness give origin to conventional reality, creating

the phenomena that we mistakenly take to be the reality; on the other hand, the unenlightened dual experience of subjects taking themselves to be perceiving independent objects sows new seeds in the store consciousness, which generate modifications in it.

Now, why is there a leap from the first seven consciousnesses to the store consciousness? The explanation of this point is contained in the considerations we made on the conventionality of the subject-object and inside-outside distinction. In considering the first seventh consciousness, we are reasoning within a subject-object duality, that is, we are considering a picture where there is an experiencing subject provided with certain senses, sense consciousnesses, and so forth, and *there*, outside her mind, is the world. Considering the store consciousness, we are jumping out of this subject-object duality: the store consciousness is the transcendental consciousness underlying the subject-object convention as a whole.

In the sixth verse of the *Treatise*, Vasubandhu writes:

> Because it is a cause and an effect,
> The mind has two aspects.
> As the foundation consciousness it creates thought;
> Known as the emerged consciousness it has seven aspects.
>
> (Garfield 2009, 42)

As Garfield (1997, 141-2) explains, Vasubandhu distinguishes between the mind as a transcendental entity and the mind as a phenomenal object. Vasubandhu's picture is *not* one in which there are *subjects* whose minds are constituted by eight layers, from the sense consciousnesses to the store consciousness. We know that ultimately there are no subjects at all. Therefore, this cannot be the correct characterisation. Consider the distinction between conventional and ultimate reality again. We have seen that conventional reality, or phenomenal reality, is the joint product of a transcendental and inaccessible reality and the transcendental workings of consciousness (and that the two are ultimately the same thing). The store consciousness is this transcendental consciousness. On the other side of the distinction, we can as (conventional) subjects consider the structure of our (conventional) inner life. Following that route, the yogācarin arrives at a theory of mind that analyses it as articulated in seven levels: the five senses' consciousness, the intellect, and the self-consciousness. However, all this is merely conventional.

A final word should be spent on how the classification of the objects of experience is mapped on the six senses since this is a point that Kūkai will use. Objects of experience in the Yogācāra

and the Shingon traditions are divided into six categories corresponding to the six sense faculties: objects of sight, hearing, smell, touch, taste, and intellect. These objects are taken to have a number of characteristics (Sk. *nimitta*; Sk. *sō*) which are their properties. We can see these characteristics as connected with seeds stored in the store consciousness: the seeds determine the properties of phenomena, and, in turn, the unenlightened experience of these characteristics sows new seeds in the store consciousness.

2.1.2.2. Layered Conventions

Yogācāra philosophers theorise about the transcendental consciousness. How can we reconcile this with the ineffability of ultimate reality? One natural way to get out of this impasse is understanding conventional reality in a stratified way. The idea is that what we have is a *provisional* theory of ultimate reality: it helps us for a while in our path towards enlightenment, but it has to be rejected in the end.

There would not be anything strange if this were what is going on here. Indeed, developing theories layered in this way is a propaedeutic strategy widespread in Buddhism. It is the strategy of using *expedient means* (Sk. *upāya*; Jp. *hōben*), initially developed to account for apparent contradictions in the discourses of Śākyamuni (see, e.g., Williams 2000, 169). In order to make sense of contrasting claims in his teachings, Indian philosophers came up with the idea that the historical Buddha was adapting what he said according to the knowledge and the abilities of his listeners, thereby providing them with what they needed at their level of intellectual and spiritual development. For this reason, Buddhism is full of doctrines that are considered to be helpful up to a certain point but that have to be dropped ultimately.

With this in mind, we can refine our understanding of the two realities relatively to the theory of the three natures. The idea is that, ultimately, all we said about the workings of the transcendental consciousness is imagined as well; it only is a deeper level of imagination, at least in a sense.

We can understand this by going back to the definition of conventional reality and ultimate reality in terms of the dependent nature *as imagined* and the dependent nature *as not imagined*. The reasoning articulates in three steps. First, we recognise that our ordinary experience of independent and enduring subjects perceiving independent and enduring objects is mere imagination. Second, we describe how all this illusion emerges in terms of the workings of the transcendental consciousness, which helps us to understand the illusion as an illusion. Since the workings of the transcendental consciousness are taken to be responsible for the emergence of the illusion, that is, for how it emerges from causes and conditions, they can be considered

as an explanation of the *dependent* nature from a global perspective. Indeed, the dependent nature of a phenomenon is its dependence on causes and conditions, and according to the theory of the outlined model, it is the store consciousness that ultimately causes the emergence of all phenomena; therefore, explaining the dependent nature of conventional reality as a whole, we have to provide an account of the operations of the store consciousness. However—and this is the third point—by explaining the workings of the transcendental consciousness, we automatically *imagine* it. Therefore, our explanations lead us *not* to the dependent nature as empty of imagination but to the dependent nature *as imagined*. Hence, we ultimately have to get rid of our theory of the transcendental consciousness as well. In this way, we finally get to the dependent nature as empty of the imagined nature, namely to the unimagined causal ground of conventional reality, which is the ineffable ultimate reality.

Going back to the *Treatise on the Three Natures*, when Vasubandhu talks about the soteriological consequences of the theory of the three natures he says:

> Through the non-perception of the elephant,
> The vanishing of its percept occurs;
> And so does the perception of the piece of wood.
> This is how it is in the magic show.
>
> (Garfield 2009, 44)

In the enlightened experience, Vasubandhu says that it is not only the perception of the elephant that vanishes: the percept itself and even the piece of wood (which was taken in the metaphor to be reality itself and so ultimate reality) go away. It is clear then that considering the piece of wood or, out of metaphor, the transcendental consciousness as the ultimate reality is a mere provisional interpretation of the theory. Ultimately, they have to be rejected in favour of the final attainment of the indescribable and non-conceptualizable ultimate reality.

2.1.2.3. Arguments for the Yogācāra View

In this subsection, I want to consider some of the arguments that Vasubandhu puts forward to motivate his theory that we do not have access to ultimate reality. As you will see, these arguments are stunningly similar to the familiar ones developed in the Western tradition. Of course, there is a big debate around them, and I have no space to consider it here.[20] I will remain in the dialectic internal to the Buddhist tradition, providing a sketch of some arguments put

[20] For an overview of the discussion, see (Crane and French 2021; Huemer 2019).

forward by Vasubandhu in support of his view. Further discussion could, of course, as we will not discuss all possible objections to these arguments. My goal here is just to make them reasonably strong from a perspective internal to the Buddhist dialectic. Then, I will address them again in the fourth chapter, when I will consider how Kūkai's model provides means for an alternative account of these cases.

In opening his *Twenty Stanzas* (Sk. *Vimśatikā*), Vasubandhu writes:

> All this is perception-only, because of the appearance of non-existent objects, just as there may be the seeing of non-existent nets of hair by someone afflicted with an optical disorder.
>
> (Anacker 2013, 161)

This passage suggests a familiar argument for the claim that we only have access to appearances and not the world in itself. Consider someone with an optical disorder looking at the moon. Because of this optical disorder, she sees the moon covered in hairs; that is, she sees the moon *as having hairs on it*. However, of course there are no hairs on the moon. Hence, because what the subject is seeing has the property of being covered in hairs while the moon itself does not, they must be two different things (since one object cannot possess and lack the same property at one time). Therefore, what the subject has direct access to is not the external world but only an appearance detached from it. Moreover, the supporter of this view argues, we do not want to give an *ad hoc* explanation for cases where "what you see is *not* what you get," so we must assume that perceptual experience is *always* indirect, and not only when one has an eye's disease.

One might be unconvinced by this argument. A possible response to it can attack the initial premise that the person with the eyes' disease sees such an object as *the-moon-with-hairs-on-it*. Perhaps that is not true. A better description of the subject's perception might be that she sees the *real* moon, and unreal hairs obstruct her view of it. After all, if I put my hand between my eyes and the moon, we would not say that what I see is not the moon because what I see has the property of having a hand on it while the moon does not. Arguably, the hairs in the eyes are like the hand.

The argument can be easily adjusted to address this response. We can do that by taking as an example, not a person with an eyes' disease that makes her see unreal hairs but something everyone can do right now. If you look at an object, put your fingers at the extremes of your eyes and stretch your skin, you will see the object doubling. From this fact, we can run the

same argument: what you see in perception is double, but the object itself is not. Therefore, what you see and the object are two distinct entities.

This version of the argument seems immune from the description given in response to the first version. However, one might still be unconvinced. Maybe, this person could say, an *ad hoc* explanation is legitimate after all. Perhaps when I stretch my eyes and see two cups of coffee on my two desks, I am directly aware only of mental representations, but one could insist that that is not usually the case. In ordinary perception, we are just aware of the world as it is. The philosopher who decides to take this path might well admit that there is some cost in buying an *ad hoc* explanation for the deceptive case, but she will hold that the cost of giving up direct realism altogether is even greater. Thus, costs and benefits assessed, direct realism is still safe.

Let us concede this to the opponent. We can still run arguments that undermine the directness of our perception in a pervasive way. Garfield (2015, 34) considered one argument of this sort. Modernizing an old Buddhist argument, he asks us to consider different species' perceptual systems, let us say humans and bees. We have reasons to believe that bees' visual perception is quite different from ours: their eyes have four colour cones instead of three like humans', so they can arguably perceive more frequencies than we can. If that is true, we can run an argument like the following.

Consider a daisy, a human's perception of it, and a bee's perception of it. Let us call the daisy 'D,' the percept of the human 'H' and the percept of the bee 'B'. If our considerations are correct, the perception of the human is qualitatively different from that of the bee, at least colour-wise, so we can infer that H is different from B. Now, if H and B are different, it cannot be the case that they are *both* identical with D because identity relations are transitive. Hence, either only one between H and B is identical to D or neither is. However, taking the former alternative in either direction is completely unwarranted: why should we think that humans have direct access to the world while bees do not (or *vice versa*)? Therefore, we must conclude that neither H nor B is identical to D and, accordingly, that our perception of the world is indirect.

Thus, the idea is that all we have access to in ordinary experience are appearances. However, even if we concede that to Vasubandhu, we may still think that these appearances are accurate representations of reality, so that even if we have no *direct* access to reality, we have *indirect* access to it.

Vasubandhu's response to this objection in the *Twenty Stanzas* appeals to dreams. When we experience a dream, the mental images we encounter in that dream do not *represent* an isomorphic real thing behind it. Suppose that dreams are caused by neural activities in the brain.

If that were the case, then behind images in dreams there would be neural patterns; but no one would say that the image in a dream is a *representation* of the neural pattern, and indeed there is arguably no way to *infer* from the phenomenal experiences one has in a dream the neural patterns causing those experiences.

The Yogācāra philosopher, then, makes two points. First, we have no reason to think that our experience is unlike dreams; second, if we have no reason to think that our experience is unlike dreams, we should not think it is. Vasubandhu is putting the burden of proof on the realist: why should we think that our experiences accurately represent the reality behind them? Vasubandhu holds that no satisfying reason can be given.

In his *Twenty Stanzas*, he considers and rejects various reasons that the opponent could rise to hold that the appearances we access accurately represent reality. For example, he considers and rejects the claim that in order to account for spatial and temporal determinations we have to assume representationalism: we have spatio-temporal determinations in dreams even if appearances in dreams do not resemble the reality behind them. Another objection the opponent could raise is that we need representationalism to account for intersubjective agreement. Vasubandhu thinks that this objection does not work either. It is not that I have my dream, you have your dream, and everyone else has his or her own dream, and they happen to match; we are all in a massive collective hallucination. Moreover, selves are merely conventional, and there is only one ultimate reality causing all the illusion. Thus, from a Yogācāra perspective, we can conclude that there is no reason to think that the appearances we access accurately represent reality. Conventional reality is merely imagined, and ultimate reality lies inaccessible beyond it.[21]

2.2. Thoughts on the Yogācāra View

In this final section, we are going to do two things. First, I will quote and interpret a passage from Kūkai's *Hizō hōyaku* (The precious key to the secret treasury) to have a clearer understanding of his view on Yogācāra's philosophy. Then, I will explore further the idea that ultimate reality is ineffable.

[21] Siderits (2007) interprets Vasubandhu appeal to dream scenarios as a defence of metaphysical idealism. According to that interpretation, the argument uses the internal coherence of dreams to conclude that we do not need to posit an ultimate reality beyond the mental one to make sense of our experience, and Ockham razor to conclude that if that is the case, we should not posit it. As I said above, there is a long tradition of interpretations of the philosophy of Vasubandhu as a form of metaphysical idealism, and following that road, it makes perfect sense to read Vasubandhu's arguments in the *Twenty Stanzas* in the way Siderits does. However, assuming the Kantian interpretation of Vasubandhu that I have been putting forward, we should try to reinterpret the arguments in the *Twenty Stanzas* as supporting this view, as I am doing here.

2.2.1. Kūkai on Yogācāra

As we have seen, one of the distinctive features of the Shingon doctrine is the claim that ultimate reality can be described with ordinary language. Since it is on this ground that Kūkai claimed the superiority of Shingon over other schools, he needed to show that the doctrines of other Buddhist denominations, including Yogācāra, make it impossible to do that. In his treatise *Hizō hōyaku*, Kūkai summarise in verses his interpretation of the Yogācāra doctrine:

> The sea of Mind is forever tranquil
> Without even a single ripple;
> Stirred by the storm of discriminations,
> Billows rage to and fro.
>
> Men in the street are deluded;
> They are fascinated by phantomlike men and women.
> Heretics are crazed;
> They adhere to the grand tower of mirage.
>
> They do not know
> That heaven and hell are fabricated by their own minds.
> Do they come to realize
> That "mind-only" will free them from their tragedies?
>
> Be that as it may,
> By practicing the Six Paramitas for three aeons,
> By practicing the fifty-two stages for enlightenment,
> They will uncover One Mind.
>
> When they become prehearted,
> Cutting off their emotional and mental obstacles,
> They will find their own Treasury—
> Enlightenment, or Nirvana. [...]
>
> That which is beyond speech and conception
> Pervades the entire universe;
> Alas, not knowing this,
> A son drifts like duckweed in the water of samsara.

(Hakeda 1984, 199-200)

Let us analyse this poem. In the first three stanzas, we can recognise the Yogācāra theory that we only have access to an imagined convention. This is particularly clear in the second and third stanzas. In the second, Kūkai describes "men in the street," that is, ordinary people as deluded. They are fascinated by things, including their own bodies, that are nothing more than fleeting images: non-substantial phantoms. Moreover, Kūkai also invokes the metaphor of the mirage, which I used to introduce the theory of the two truths (§2.1.1.). Again, the idea is that the things we perceive and automatically take to be enduring objects are, in fact, like mirages, appearances of water in the desert where there is no water at all.

The first and third stanzas build on the theory of *ālaya vijñāna*, the store consciousness taken to be the transcendental origin of our deceptive experiences. We have seen that this consciousness is analysed as containing seeds that generate conventional reality, including heaven and hell, as the third verse specifies. However, this is what the store consciousness does in a condition of unenlightenment. The enlightened transcendental consciousness is compared to a sea that is "forever tranquil" and "without even a single ripple." For the store consciousness to be tranquil is for it to stop generating conventional reality, to cease the process of creation of the illusion. However, in the condition of unenlightenment, the store consciousness is "stirred by the storm of discrimination." In other words, it articulates the conventional reality we experience, full of mutually distinct particular objects which we describe with our language.

Beyond all this illusion, there is the ultimate reality—One Mind—which is experienced in enlightenment (verses four and five). One may think that this is a problematic way of referring to ultimate reality because it implies that it has a mental nature, a claim that we are supposed not to be in a position to make. However, there is no such implication. Here, Kūkai is reading the Yogācāra doctrine through the lens of the *Awakening of Faith in Mahāyāna*, a Chinese text that he probably encountered in his early twenties (Hakeda 1984, 23) in which One Mind is posited as the foundation of reality (Van Norden and Jones 2019, §1.2). As the Huayan philosopher Fazang (643-712CE) explains in his commentary on the text, the concept of One Mind refers to the metaphysical foundation of reality, the source of existence, without implying that it has a mental nature (Van Norden and Jones 2019, §4.2). Indeed, from the perspective of enlightenment, One Mind is described as *suchness* (Sk. *tathatā*; Jp. *shinnyo*), indicating that it is something that transcends our capacity to characterise it as mental, material, or anything else (Hakeda 1984, 150).

Turning to the last stanza, we see Kūkai writing that "that which is beyond speech and conception pervades the entire universe." Kūkai is stating here the Yogācāra conception of the ineffability of ultimate reality. It cannot be described through our speech, and our concepts cannot capture it; accordingly, we cannot even say that its nature is mental.

2.2.2. The Inaccessibility and Ineffability of Ultimate Reality

According to common sense, 1) our senses offer us direct and transparent access to reality, and 2) our language and concepts can represent it objectively. The theory of the three natures outlined in the previous section undermines both these claims. Kūkai sees these as negative consequences of the Yogācāra view, and this is, at least partially, what motivates his proposal of an alternative model. In this final section, my aim is to express the consequences of the Yogācāra view more clearly. In the following chapter, we will finally turn to the interpretation of Kūkai's view.

The first major consequence of the theory of the three natures is what I will call 'Inaccessibility,' namely the claim that ultimate reality cannot be accessed through our senses. Let me state this point in slogan form.

Inaccessibility: We have no access to ultimate reality.

Inaccessibility follows from the theory of the three natures. We have understood ultimate reality as reality *empty of imagination*. On the other hand, conventional reality is merely imagined; it is the illusory product of the workings of the store consciousness (which also is merely imagined). Now, all ordinary experiences are experiences of conventional reality, and since ultimate reality is beyond it, we have no access to it. In other words, we never access the world in itself.

Concerning the second consequence of the theory of the three natures, we may call it 'Ineffability'. I will now state it in condensed form as above and then turn to explain it in detail.

Ineffability: Ultimate reality cannot be described with ordinary language.

Ineffability also follows from the theory of the three natures. The idea is that to describe something, we have to imagine it, and since ultimate reality is beyond imagination, it cannot be described. However, we need to be more precise on what is meant here by 'describing'. There are three possibilities: 1) ultimate reality cannot even be referred to; 2) we can refer to ultimate reality, but we cannot provide *any* description of it; 3) we can refer to ultimate reality and also provide *some* descriptions, but not descriptions of its nature.

In what follows, I will argue for the third interpretation: ultimate reality can be referred to (indeed, we have been referring to it all the time), and there are *some* descriptions we can give of it. For example, we can say that ultimate reality is ineffable. However, we are not in a position to characterise ultimate reality *intrinsically*. For example, we cannot say that it has a material or mental nature, that it is simple or structured or what constitutes it.

Indeed, it is by characterising something intrinsically that we construct it in our imagination. Merely saying that 'ultimate reality' refers to ultimate reality or that ultimate reality is ineffable does not require us to imagine it. However, we do imagine it if we say, for example, that ultimate reality is made of particles or that it is a continuum. In effect, a stronger understanding of ineffability would render the Yogācāra position on our interpretation self-defeating, as we do refer to ultimate reality and do provide non-intrinsic characterisations of it, for instance making the very claim that it is ineffable.

The question is whether all this makes sense. Can we sensibly hold that reference and at least some non-intrinsic descriptions are possible while denying that intrinsic descriptions are? Some insights we can take from one of the most influential works of contemporary analytic philosophy—Saul Kripke's *Naming and Necessity*—suggest that we can.

In his work, Saul Kripke (2001 [1980]) made clear that we can successfully refer to something even if the descriptions we give of it are entirely wrong. Imagine that all Paul takes himself to know about Kurt Gödel is that he is the man who proved the incompleteness of arithmetic. Moreover, imagine that, in fact, Gödel is not the man who proved the incompleteness of arithmetic and that he stole the proof from a certain Schmidt. In this case, Kripke says, we would say that Paul believes something false about Gödel and not that he believes something true about Schmidt. Therefore, it is possible to successfully refer to something even if the descriptions we take to be true of it are entirely wrong.

I hold that the same goes for ultimate reality: we can refer to it even if we are not in a position to describe it. Take Vasubandhu's metaphor of the magician and the elephant again. A magician reciting a mantra made someone, Paul, perceive some sticks of wood as an elephant. Now, imagine that Paul pointed his finger towards the elephant and said, "I hereby call this thing 'B'." On a Kripkean account, we could say that the name 'B' succeeds in referring to the sticks of wood, even if Paul described them as big, grey, and considerably pachydermic.[22]

[22] To be precise, the success in referring to the sticks of wood seems to depend on the intention of Paul. If his intention were, for example, to give a name to the image he is seeing, then the name would attach to the imagined elephant and not to the sticks of wood. However, supposing that Paul had the intention to introduce the name to refer to *whatever is out there*, then I would say that he succeeded in picking out the sticks of wood. Of course, all

There are two points that we need to address. The first one is an objection to this application of the Kripkean model to ultimate reality. There is an important difference between the wrong descriptions one may give of Kurt Gödel and the wrong descriptions one may give of ultimate reality. While the formers are only contingently wrong, the descriptions we give of ultimate reality are *in principle* unable to characterise it, and—the imaginary opponent holds—perhaps we cannot refer to something we are unable to characterise even in principle.

I do not find this objection persuasive. A possible response consists in stating that when theoretical physicists and metaphysicians talk about parallel and spatiotemporally inaccessible universes, although we are not in a position to describe these universes even *in principle* (since it is impossible to access them), it seems that we *can* refer to them. Therefore, since we can refer to parallel universes despite their being in principle indescribable, we can also refer to ultimate reality.

This response may be too weak. Parallel universes might be inaccessible, but if so, they are only epistemically inaccessible *from our universe*. Ultimate reality is different: it is not merely epistemically inaccessible given certain spatiotemporal limitations; it is inaccessible because of the very nature of our experience. If God created a passage to let me enter a parallel universe, I would access that universe, but not ultimate reality in that universe; that is, I would still experience only conventional reality. The two cases seem different.

Fair enough. Our ability to refer to parallel universes, if they existed, does not imply that we can refer to ultimate reality. A better example can be constructed considering the experiences of a bat. Arguably, we are *in principle* unable to describe the perceptual experiences of a bat, and this is not only an impossibility due to our spatiotemporal limitations; it is due to the very nature of our human experience. However, even if we are unable to describe the perceptual experiences of a bat, we are clearly able to refer to them. Therefore, we can conclude that it is possible to refer to epistemically inaccessible realities, and this is strong evidence for the claim that we can also refer to ultimate reality.

The second point that I want to address is connected with the claim that there are some descriptions we can give of ultimate reality beyond mere reference. Let us consider the following question: what makes reference to Kurt Gödel successful even if the descriptions we give of him are wrong? According to the Kripkean view, the fact that there is a causal chain that connects Paul's use of 'Kurt Gödel' with an initial baptism of the man Kurt Gödel in which

I want to show is that it is *possible* to refer to ultimate reality, so even if you consider the intention to refer to 'whatever is out there' too bizarre, the example is still successful.

the name was introduced. The idea is that someone in the past baptised Kurt Gödel 'Kurt Gödel,' and that our use of the name 'Kurt Gödel' successfully picks out Kurt Gödel because of a connection with that initial event. However, this picture does not seem to work for ultimate reality. It is not that someone in the past pointed her finger to ultimate reality calling it so, and now we can refer to it in virtue of a connection to that event.

Here is where descriptions come in. The term 'ultimate reality' does not look like a proper name as 'Kurt Gödel.' While there would not have been anything strange in introducing the name 'Kurt' to refer to something different from Kurt Gödel, there would be something wrong in introducing the term 'ultimate reality' to refer to, say, the tree in my backyard. (To be precise, there is of course no impediment towards using the sequence of letters 'u-l-t-i-m-a-t-e r-e-a-l-i-t-y' to refer to the tree in my backyard or to anything else for that matter, but there is an important sense in which even if I called the tree 'ultimate reality,' it would not be ultimate reality.)

Indeed, unlike 'Kurt Gödel' the term 'ultimate reality' is, in fact, a description: 'the reality that is ultimate'. It is a description analogous to other ones like 'reality in itself' or 'reality *qua* reality'. In this sense, the term 'ultimate reality' shares important similarities with the term 'God'. While nothing prevents me from using the sequence of letters 'G-o-d' to refer to the tree in my backyard, there remains an important sense in which calling it as such would not make it God. Indeed, the term 'God' is usually associated with descriptions like 'the greatest possible being' or 'that of which nothing greater can be thought,' and anything that does not satisfy these descriptions does not deserve the name 'God'. In the same way, anything that is not reality in itself or reality *qua* reality cannot be called 'ultimate reality' properly.

Descriptions like 'reality in itself,' 'reality *qua* reality,' or maybe 'reality empty of imagination' does not require us to imagine ultimate reality. Hence, they are not ruled out by the Yogācāra picture. Moreover, once we accept that 'ultimate reality' is what we may see as a descriptive name referring to ultimate reality, the same reasoning we applied to 'Kurt Gödel' in order to show that reference is independent of descriptions applies. Apart from the description(s) fixing the referent, all others can be wrong or even meaningless in principle. Thus, we have our picture of ineffability: ultimate reality can be referred to, and there are also some descriptions we can give of it (including those fixing the referent and other ones like 'ultimate reality is ineffable'), but we cannot describe its nature.

2.2.2.1. Ineffability and Metaphysics

In the foregoing, I tried to give a clear explanation of Inaccessibility and Ineffability in the Yogācāra picture. Now, I would like to consider the specific consequence that metaphysics becomes an impossible enterprise in further detail. In a few words, the idea is the following. A metaphysics is a theory of the nature of reality in itself; however, ultimate reality in itself cannot be characterised with language and, therefore, metaphysics is impossible.

In order to give a more precise explanation of this impossibility, I will now turn to considering works in contemporary meta-metaphysics, namely on the foundations of metaphysics. The logic underlying what is below is the following: 1) a meta-metaphysical model is a model of how metaphysics has to be done; 2) according to the Yogācāra picture, meta-metaphysical models are only conventionally applicable and ultimately have to be rejected; therefore, 3) the Yogācāra picture renders the enterprise of metaphysics impossible.

I will consider the meta-metaphysical framework developed by philosophers like Kit Fine (2001) and Jonathan Schaffer (2009). In their works, they propose to understand metaphysics in a hierarchical way, the idea being that the final metaphysical theory must comprise two things: a set whose members are *all* existing entities and a relation specifying the hierarchy, namely a relation of grounding.

The notion of grounding is primitive (Schaffer 2009, 364) and we all have an intuitive grasp of what it means. To make some examples, tables are grounded in tables' parts, drops of water are grounded in water molecules, and facts about what is legal and what is not are grounded in law. According to Fine (2001, 21-22), there are two main ways of settling questions about what grounds what (although there is no commitment to accept both). The first is intuitive, the idea being that we have intuitive evidence, for example, that the truth of a conjunction is grounded in the truth of the conjuncts. The second source of evidence is explanatory; for instance, explaining facts about inflation in terms of facts about demand and offer, we have good evidence for the claim that facts of the former category are (at least partially) grounded in facts of the latter.

Now, how would a Yogācāra philosopher apply this model within the Yogācāra doctrine? The answer is pretty simple. We can consider our experience and identify all phenomena we encounter as members of the set of existent entities. Then, by appealing to intuition and explanation we specify relations of grounding among these entities. The picture we will obtain is one in which at the most superficial level of the grounding hierarchy there are phenomena that we encounter in everyday experience (both internal and external), such as tables, chairs,

memories, and so on. Conversely, at the bottom level of the hierarchy there will be the store consciousness, which is supposed to be responsible for the creation of conventional reality.

However, we have seen that, ultimately, all our discourse on the philosophy of mind, the seven consciousnesses and the eight transcendental consciousness was nothing but a useful fiction to put us in the right direction in the path towards enlightenment. Not only the superficial phenomena in the hierarchy, but the store consciousness itself is imagined, and so full-fledged ultimate reality lies beyond all this, and it is ineffable.

We see then that the outlined meta-metaphysical model is only conventionally applicable within the Yogācāra picture, and ultimately has to be rejected. This extends to weaker meta-metaphysical models, such as Quine's, where all what we do is determine the set of existing entities without specifying a hierarchy (Schaffer 2009), and that is because entities in the set will nonetheless be taken as imagined by the Yogācāra philosopher. Therefore, it is clear how metaphysics becomes an impossible enterprise according to the doctrine explained above.

3. The doctrine of *Sandai*: a Shingon Metaphysics

In this chapter, we are going to explore Shingon metaphysics, especially as developed by Kūkai in his *Sokushin jōbutsu gi* (The meaning of attaining Buddhahood in this very body). The following chapter will turn to what we may call the linguistic reading of this metaphysics, which is essential to Kūkai's response to the yogācārin. Notice that, if Yogācāra philosophers are right, Kūkai is not in a position to develop a metaphysics, and so the ideas that we will explore in this chapter cannot be directly taken as Kūkai's response. However, they will be useful to understand the response that we will consider in the next chapter.

The best starting point to approach the metaphysical view of Shingon Buddhism is the doctrine of the three greats (Jp. *sandai*), which provides a model of reality based on three notions: essence (Jp. *tai*), manifestations (Jp. *sō*), and functions (Jp. *yū*). Faithful to the Buddhist tradition, Kūkai offers in the *Sokushin jōbutsu gi* a presentation of the doctrine condensed in verses:

> The Six Great Elements are interfused and are in a state of eternal harmony;
> The Four Mandalas are inseparably related to one another:
> When the grace of the Three Mysteries is retained, [our inborn three mysteries will] quickly be manifested.
> Infinitely interrelated like the meshes of Indra's net are those which we call existences.
>
> (Hakeda 1984, 227)[23]

Let me start with a very general presentation of these four verses. Immediately after the stanza, Kūkai explicitly states that the first line corresponds to *essence* (Jp. *tai*), the second to *manifestations* (Jp. *sō*), the third to *functions* (Jp. *yū*) and the fourth to interpenetration (Jp. *muge*) (Hakeda 1984, 228; Shingen and Dreitlein 2010, 38). Essence is what makes up the cosmos, so the six elements Kūkai refers to in the first line are taken to be what fundamentally constitutes reality. Moreover, the claim that they are interfused and in harmony suggests there is an intimate relationship between them, which we will explore in the following section. Manifestations are the way reality manifests itself, with a particular emphasis on the objects of

[23] Cfr. (Shingen and Dreitlen 2010, 37).

the six senses: whatever the six elements are, they generate the reality we experience in our ordinary lives. The third verse is about functions, which govern the transformations happening in the universe. In the first chapter, we saw that the cosmos is understood by Kūkai as *hosshin*, the embodiment of Mahāvairocana. Accordingly, all events and transformations in the universe are interpreted as activities Mahāvairocana enacts for a soteriological purpose—the enlightenment of sentient beings.[24] Thus, they have a salvific *function*. Finally, the fourth verse presents an image of reality in which all things are infinitely interrelated; that is, a picture where, in some sense, everything depends on everything else.

Let us turn to a more in-depth analysis of all the verses. Section 3.1. will consider the first one, section 3.2. the second and third ones, and section 3.3. the last one.

3.1. The Six Elements

The six elements (Jp. *rokudai*) are fire, water, earth, wind, space, and consciousness, and are often divided into two categories: the material elements (fire, water, earth, wind, and space) and the mental element (consciousness) (e.g., Abe 1999, 281; Hakeda 1984, 89; Rambelli 2013, xvii). If we take the claim that there is the mental on one side and the material one the other at face value, it is easy to end up interpreting Kūkai as a dualist. Nevertheless, the considerations we made in the first chapter about nonduality in Shingon Buddhism suggest that this cannot be the correct interpretation. Hence, this picture needs refinement.

I will proceed as follows. First, I will consider different senses in which a metaphysics could be read as embracing matter-mind dualism appealing to the distinction between substance and properties. Second, I will turn to textual evidence to show that Kūkai subscribes to the substance-properties distinction and builds the mind-matter distinction on it. We will see that his view is (roughly) that there is a single mental substance and what we consider materiality reduces to properties of that substance, thereby being a kind of idealism. Before turning to the analysis of the second and third verses of the quoted stanza, two subsections will be dedicated to considering how the various distinctions Kūkai makes fall within the scope of nonduality and to connect his metaphysics with contemporary idealist theories.

Let us start with the different ways of understanding duality. Matter-mind dualism can be spelt out in different ways depending on whether we think that reality is only made of bundles of properties or whether we think a substance instantiates those properties. In the first case, one can only be a property dualist. In the second case, one can be a property dualist without being

[24] See (Krummel 2018, §3.4.3; Rambelli 2013, 40).

a substance dualist or being a dualist both about properties and substance. (However, arguably, one cannot be a substance dualist without being a property dualist.)

Consider the existence of an ordinary object: your desk, for example. According to the supporter of the first view, there is nothing to the existence of that desk besides the sum of its properties; that is, there is no further *thing* left out once we have listed all its properties. This property-reductionism goes all the way down to the fundamental level of existence, which is the one at issue when we consider the six elements. Following this interpretation, duality about the six elements can only be dualism about the fundamental properties making up reality, the view that there is a categorical distinction between mental properties on one side and material properties on the other. According to this interpretation, the consciousness element stands for a fundamental mental property (or a set of mental properties), and the other five elements stand for fundamental material properties (or sets of material properties).

Some people are unsatisfied with property-reductionism and think that properties are instantiated by substances. You can think of substances as *thin particulars*, that is, particulars in abstraction from all their properties, or as a substratum, a sort of ontological "clay" that constitutes all existing things (Robinson 2020, §3.2.2.). According to this view, if we take an object and remove from it all its properties, we end up having the bare stuff that was instantiating all the properties. The philosopher who thinks there are both substances and properties can apply matter-mind dualism to both substance and properties, only properties, or neither substance nor properties. Hence, to read the doctrine of the six elements as dualist, we have two alternatives. First, we could say that there is only one kind of substance and that the six elements are six fundamental properties or sets of properties of this substance which must be divided into the two categories of the mental and the material. Second, we could say that the two categories of the six elements correspond to two kinds of substances at the foundations of reality.

In what follows, I will show that Kūkai accepts none of these views. As mentioned above, I will argue that he indeed subscribes to a substance-properties distinction, but without building on it any sort of matter-mind dualism of the kind we have seen. Instead, my interpretation is that he holds that there is only *one* mental substance that instantiates *mental* properties, and materiality reduces to what we may call the 'external aspect' of these properties. For simplicity, we can start calling the view that there are both substances and properties 'substance-properties dualism.' However, I will also argue that Kūkai's view is better characterised as substance-property nondualism (which is in turn different from what we might call 'property monism'

and ‘substance monism,’ the views that there are only properties and only substance respectively).

In his *Sokushin jōbutsu gi*, Kūkai quotes a passage from the *Mahāvairocana sūtra* regarding the six elements and comments on it.

> I am precisely positioned in the heart,
> Unimpeded everywhere,
> Universally pervading all the sorts
> Of sentient and non-sentient beings.
> The letter *a* is the primary life-breath.
> The letter *va* is the name for water,
> The letter *ra* is the name for fire,
> The letter *Hūṃ* is the name for the wind,
> The letter *kha* is identical with empty space.
>
> The “heart” in the first line of this *sūtra* passage, “I am precisely positioned at the heart,” refers to both consciousness and wisdom. The final five lines refer to the five great elements.
>
> (Shingen and Dreitlein 2010, 43-44)[25]

The verses are Kūkai’s quotation of the *sūtra* and what follows his comments on it. Here, we begin to see that the element of consciousness is not like all others and that it fulfils some unique role. Indeed, the heart, which corresponds to *consciousness* and wisdom (Jp. *chi*), is said to pervade everything, and the very association with the term ‘heart’ suggests a special role of consciousness. The ‘I,’ instead, refers to the universal Buddha Mahāvairocana.

This picture of consciousness as pervading everything might already be taken to suggest its metaphysical role as substance. One could read Kūkai as saying that consciousness is the bare stuff at the heart of everything, without which nothing could exist. This view seems to be also reinforced by considering the connections drawn between the other elements and *siddhaṃ* letters. Consider the claim (which we will see in greater detail in the next chapter) that reality is the unfolding sermon of Mahāvairocana. According to this view, the fundamental elements are, in some sense, letters. Letters are differentiated with respect to their shape and so with respect to their properties, but they all have in common that you need ink to write them. In

[25] Cfr. (Hakeda 1984, 229).

other words, you need substance for the properties to be instantiated. If this were the correct reading, we would have a theory that comprises both substance and properties, with the mind element identified with the substance and the material elements with its fundamental properties.

This way of reading an endorsement of substance-properties dualism through the metaphor of letters and the ink can be justified considering how similar metaphors are read in the Buddhist tradition. Fazang (643-712 CE)—one of the most influential philosophers of Huayan (Jp. *Kegon*) Buddhism, which is the school regarded by Kūkai as the closest to Shingon—explained his doctrine by employing some famous metaphors, one of which is that of the golden lion. I will not get into the details of the metaphor here, but in brief, it is about a lump of gold (the stuff or substance) which instantiates some properties when it is shaped in the form of a lion but (the idea is) could have taken different properties if shaped in some other way. In a Buddhist spirit, Fazang also held that the substance is, in an important sense, empty (as we will see, this is true for Kūkai as well). Still, the idea is that there is some stuff (the lump of gold) that instantiates some properties and could have instantiated different ones, just as the ink that has been used to write a letter (and thereby instantiates certain properties) could have been used to write a different letter.[26]

Notwithstanding all these considerations, the quoted passage seems insufficient to establish that Kūkai believed that the consciousness element is the substance of all things and the material elements are the basic properties of this substance. After all, the association of consciousness with the heart could mean that the element of consciousness is a particularly important *property*. Moreover, also the idea that consciousness pervades everything can be explained with consciousness being a property: if we entered a room where everything is red, we could probably say that the colour red pervades everything without implying that the colour red is more than a property. Perhaps the consciousness element just indicates a property that all things have, like that of being identical to themselves.

To give more evidence to our interpretation, consider this other passage that Kūkai quotes from the *Mahāvairocana sūtra* in his *Sokushin jōbutsu gi* and his comment on it.

> [The six great elements] produce, according to the needs of each kind,

[26] The metaphor of the golden lion is strikingly similar to the metaphor of the statue and the clay used in the Western tradition. The metaphor goes back to Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (where he, however, talked about bronze instead of clay) and has to be used throughout the whole history of Western philosophy to argue precisely for substance-properties dualism. One way of constructing the argument has been the following. Imagine Paul has a lump of clay at a time *t*. Then, at a time *t1* successive to *t*, he shapes the lump of clay into a statue. One may want to say that at *t1*, the statue is identical to the lump of clay. However, that seems wrong, for the statue came into existence at *t1* while the lump of clay already existed at *t*, and an object cannot exist before itself. Therefore, we have to distinguish the substance and what it constituted by it (see, e.g., Thompson 1998).

All dharmas and the marks of dharmas, [...]
All dharmas that arise, abide, and so on
Are constantly produced in this way.

What meaning does this verse reveal? [...] "All dharmas" means mental dharmas, and "the marks of dharmas" means physical dharmas. "All dharmas" also is the general category, and "the marks of dharmas" reveals how they differ.

(Shingen and Dreitlein 2010, 44-46)

In this passage, the term 'dharmas' means existences. Among these dharmas produced from the six elements there are things like me, you, your desk, your favourite mug, and so forth.

In his comment on these verses, Kūkai says something interesting: that 'all dharmas' means mental dharmas and that 'the marks of dharmas' means physical ones. In my interpretation, Kūkai is saying that the materiality of existences is made of their marks—which is a way of saying their properties—while existences in themselves are made of a mental substance. From Kūkai's perspective, if we take an object and remove from it all its marks, we end up having bare consciousness. Consciousness is the substratum that constitutes all existences and instantiates the properties (to which materiality is reduced) that make one existing thing different from the others.

Other passages in Kūkai's work support this reading. In the *Unji Gi* (The meanings of the letter *hūṃ*), he writes, "[k]now this: the infinite dharmas are manifestations of mind alone. The true nature of mind [lies in] the knowledge of all aspects [of dharmas]" (Shigen and Dreitlein 2010, 134-5).[27] In this passage, Kūkai explicitly states that dharmas are manifestations of mind alone, which I read as the claim that the properties constituting existences (i.e. dharmas) are manifestations of a unique substance which is mental. Moreover, his claim about the knowledge of all aspects of dharmas (another way of saying their properties) connects to the first passage quoted in this section where Kūkai referred to both consciousness and wisdom. In fact, given that the cosmos is considered *hosshin*, the mental substance can only be the mind of Mahāvairocana himself, who, as the universal deity, possesses omniscient *wisdom*.

Thus, Kūkai's metaphysics encompasses a distinction between substance and properties and builds on it the distinction between mind and matter: consciousness is the substance and matter its properties. I will now turn to consider two potential issues with the proposed view. The first

[27] Cfr. (Hakeda 1984, 248).

is an interpretative one and will be dismissed; the second is an objection directed to the theory itself and will require us to make some adjustments.

The first problem is the following. Kūkai says that the six elements produce dharmas and the marks of dharmas, and this could be taken to imply that the six elements are *not* dharmas themselves: they only produce them. Accordingly, the consciousness-marks and substance-properties "duality" that Kūkai is putting forward perhaps does not apply to the six elements because it only applies to dharmas, and the six elements are not dharmas but what constitutes them.

There are at least three reasons that make me think this is not a sensible interpretation. First, it is both inelegant and uneconomical to treat the bottom level of reality as fundamentally different. Unless there is some specific reason not to, one should preserve uniformity in a theory, and we can suppose that this is what Kūkai did. Second, in theories it is often the case that the extremes are just a notable instance of the general rule, not full-fledged exceptions. For example, in Kolmogorov probability, the values 0 and 1 have something special (they seem connected to *truth* values in a way probability values in between are not). However, they are not *exceptions* in the sense that probability theory needs to treat them in a fundamentally different way from other values. Similarly, we should not treat the six elements as exceptions: it is more sensible to treat them as dharmas like everything else; the only difference is that they are a notable case.

Third, and finally, substance-property dualism does not seem the kind of thing that can emerge at a certain level of reality and be absent before that level. If we are realists about substance and think that there is such a thing as a substance in abstraction from all properties, then this must go all the way down. In other words, it cannot be the case that the bottom level of reality is only made by properties and that substance pops into existence at some level of aggregation of those properties. Conversely, it cannot also be the case that the bottom level of reality is constituted only by substance and that properties emerge at some later point: precisely because substance *qua* substance is devoid of any kind of property if properties were not there from the beginning there is no way it could produce them later.

The second is a theoretical problem that demands some adjustment. The problem is that a straight association of substance with consciousness and properties with materiality seems too simple, and the reason is the following one. The six elements are supposed to create reality, and in reality we find both material and mental *properties*. For example, in Shingon Buddhism there are many visualisation practices, one of which consists of visualising the Sanskrit syllable *A* (Yamasaki 1988, 190). *Prima facie*, there must be a categorical difference between the

property to be solid instantiated by a stone and the property of visualising the syllable *a* instantiated by a Shingon practitioner. Of course, we expect the difference to be ultimately encompassed in a deeper nonduality, but we need some way of making sense of the difference. How can we understand the relationship between material and mental properties on Kūkai's account?

One could try to account for the difference by arguing that what the terms 'material' and 'mental' mean when used at the ordinary level is different from what they mean at the fundamental level. However, such a solution is inelegant as well as *ad hoc*. A better solution is to introduce an internal-external distinction as an interpretative device to read the mind-matter one.[28] From a hermeneutical point of view, I am going into slightly more speculative terrain here, since Kūkai does not talk explicitly about an internal-external distinction in the texts I read. Nevertheless, as I will try to show in a moment, the proposal is not only explanatorily powerful, but it is also a natural way to interpret Kūkai's talk of different aspects of Mahāvairocana, which also allows to encompass them in nonduality. Moreover, my interpretation has an antecedent in Izutsu (1985), who also analyses Kūkai's linguistic reality as having an internal mental aspect connected with our minds.

The Shingon doctrine analyses the presence in the world of sentient beings like us in terms of three karmic activities (Jp. *sangō*), which are the activities of the body, speech, and mind (Shingen and Dreitlein 2010, 396). We need not consider the activity of speech here (we will do that in the next section), but those of the body and the mind allow us to think that there is an (ultimately nondual) distinction between an internal aspect, our mind, and an external aspect, which is our body. Moreover, the three karmic activities are taken to correspond to the three mysteries (Jp. *sanmitsu*) of Mahāvairocana: his body, speech, and mind (Shingen and Dreitlein 2010, 397), and indeed the esoteric practice is precisely aimed at the unification of the three activities of the practitioner with the three mysteries of Mahāvairocana (Yamasaki 1988, 106).[29] Following the correspondence, we can apply the internal-external distinction not only to ourselves but to Mahāvairocana himself, who, as *hosshin, is* considered identical with reality.

We have thereby a picture of reality that allows us to account for the intuitive difference between, for example, the property of visualising the syllable *A* and that of being tall 175

[28] We find such a distinction in (Shani 2015).

[29] This point is to be thought within the distinction between epistemic and ontological enlightenment outlined in the first chapter. Our body, speech, and mind are *already* part of those of Mahāvairocana, and the Shingon practice puts us in a position to realise that.

centimetres instantiated by a Shingon practitioner: we can understand the first property as internal and the second as external.

Moreover, as we will see in the following subsection, the mental and the material are ultimately nondual, that is, they are two aspects of the same reality. According to this picture, then, our bodies are the external manifestation of our consciousness; in the same way, at the fundamental level, the elements can be seen from an internal and an external perspective. The external aspect is what we consider their materiality, and the internal aspect is the conscious experience of Mahāvairocana's conceiving those properties, which from a Buddhist perspective should be called Mahāvairocana's *samādhi* (Jp. *sanmai*), his meditative absorption (Shingen and Dreitlein 2010, 385). From a global perspective, what we see as the whole universe is nothing but the external manifestation of the universal consciousness of Mahāvairocana.

The internal mental aspect must not be confused with the sixth element: the conscious substance. When we talk about the external aspect of the elements, we are talking about external *properties*, and when we talk about the internal aspect, we are still talking about *properties*. Then, as explained above, these properties are considered the marks of a universal mental substance, which is the sixth element. Hence, talking about the external properties as material is nothing but a convenient way of speaking that does not throw away our everyday vocabulary. In the end, everything is consciousness and there is an external aspect to it which is what we may call 'materiality'.

In considering this distinction between an internal and an external aspect, we should also bear in mind that, as previously said, Kūkai adopts the Yogācāra theory of the mind in his doctrine (Rambelli 2013, chap. 1; Yamasaki 1988, 90). Indeed, Izutsu makes the internal aspect ultimately corresponding to nothing but the store consciousness (Izutsu 1985, 12). I think that this interpretation makes good sense. In discussing the Yogācāra theory of the mind, I pointed out that there is a leap from the first seven consciousnesses to the store consciousness, as the latter transcends the subjective mind. Following this line, we saw how—going back to the metaphor of the elephant—the mantra causing the illusion (corresponding to the store consciousness) was in a relation of nonduality with the wood the deceived person sees as an elephant (corresponding to reality). Now, in light of the distinction we made between the internal and the external aspects of reality, it is natural to see the store consciousness as the internal aspect of reality, that is, as Mahāvairocana's mind. The store consciousness transcends subjective minds and is thereby a cosmic mind: *hosshin*'s mind.

3.1.1. Distinctions and Nonduality

In discussing Kūkai's metaphysics we have considered various distinctions: substance and properties, matter and mind, internal and external. Are we sure that no dualist tendency is lurking here? I think Kūkai successfully interprets these distinctions in a nondual framework. Consider this passage from Kūkai's *Sokushin jōbutsu gi*:

> The four great elements are not independent of the mind. Differences exist between matter and mind, but in their essential nature they remain the same. Matter is no other than mind; mind, no other than matter. Without any obstruction, they are interrelated.
>
> (Hakeda 1984, 229-230)[30]

Kūkai says that the four great elements (why four and not five will be explained at the end of the section)—by which he means fire, water, earth, and air—are essentially the same as the consciousness element, the substance of reality; however, at the same time, there are differences between them. This idea that two things are *the same but not the same* is the gist of nonduality. Dualism says that things are different, period. Monism says that things are identical, period. Endorsing nondualism means believing that they are different in a sense, but the same in another: this is the relationship we find between substance and properties and between matter and mind.

In what sense are substance and properties nondual? To see that, we have to identify a sense in which they are the same and one in which they are not. They are the same because there is no such thing as a substance without properties or properties without substance. It is necessary that wherever there are properties, they are instantiated by substance and that wherever there is a substance, it instantiates some properties. In this sense, they are also mutually dependent: properties could not exist without substance, and substance could not exist without properties. However, at the same time, they are not entirely the same because properties depend on substance in a way substance does not depend on properties: while it is true that substance could not exist without properties, it could indeed have existed with *different* properties. Conversely, the particular properties that are instantiated by a substance could not have existed without that substance.

This nondual relationship between substance and properties is important to make sense of passages where Kūkai seems to agree with other Buddhist schools that ultimate reality cannot

[30] Cfr. (Shingen and Dreitlein 2010, 51).

be described. For example, in the *Sokushin jōbutsu gi*, Kūkai quotes a verse from the Vajraśekhara Sūtra that recites:

> All things are originally unborn; their intrinsic nature is beyond any verbal expression; it is pure and clean, being free from all defilements and causality; it is equal to empty space.
>
> (Hakeda 1984, 229)[31]

This passage refers to the mental substratum and claims that it is beyond any verbal expression. Is Kūkai subscribing to the exoteric doctrine that ultimate reality is ineffable? No, because ineffability and expressibility are nondual as well: we cannot describe substance *qua* substance. At the same time, though, we have to appreciate that there is nothing to say about substance *qua* substance. Properties are always properties *of the substance*, and all we have to say about a substance is exhausted by what there is to say about its properties. Thus, the nonduality of substance and properties allows explaining also the nonduality of expressibility and ineffability.

What about mental and material properties? Or in other words, what about the distinction between the body and the mind of Mahāvairocana? The idea is that they are nondual because, in my interpretation, they reduce to the distinction between an internal and an external aspect of *the same* reality. Looking at *hosshin* from an external perspective we find the body of Mahāvairocana, while looking at it from an internal perspective we find his mind, but these are just two ways of looking at the same thing.

Finally, consider the internal-external distinction. Notice that to understand it as nondual it does not suffice to say that the internal and the external are two perspectives on the same reality because this only shows the nonduality of the reality and not of the perspectives. To see the nonduality of these two perspectives we have to think about ourselves, and that is because the internal-external distinction comes from the existence of sentient beings. We experience the world as subjects instantiating mental (and so internal) properties accessing through our senses material (and so external) properties. In the same way, we consider the aspect of *hosshin* that we experience as the external world to be the body of Mahāvairocana and the aspect of *hosshin* that we partially access by taking an internal perspective to be his mind. The distinction makes sense insofar as there are sentient beings like us, but what we see as externality we experience is nothing but *internality turned on itself*. Our experience of the external world reduces to one

[31] Cfr. (Shingen and Dreitlein 2010, 51).

part of Mahāvairocana's mind looking at another; hence, also the internal and the external are nondual.

Before turning to the following subsection, one last comment should be spent on the element of space (Jp. *kū*). Why does the quoted passage on the nonduality of the material elements and the mental element exclude the element of space? The reason, I think, lies in the fact that while space counts among the fundamental properties—together with fire, water, wind, and earth—it does not contribute to the creation of the signs of the universal sermon of Mahāvairocana (which is identified with reality) in the same sense as the other four.

Let me be more explicit. In the following chapter (and partially in the last section of this one), we will consider at length the idea of Kūkai that reality is the universal language of Mahāvairocana. One crucial point of the theory is that all things are signs (Jp. *monji*) of the cosmic sermon. We will not get into the details here, but Kūkai thinks that a necessary condition for something to be a sign is possessing a pattern (which is a set of properties) that differentiates it from other signs (e.g., the letter 'A' has a pattern that differentiates it from the letter 'B'). Since *worldly* objects are considered signs in this view, their pattern must be constituted by worldly properties, which ultimately must be grounded in the fundamental elements. Thus, my suggestion as to why space is not included in the passage above is that space does not contribute to making patterns of worldly signs in the same way as the other fundamental properties.

Let us consider how space can be interpreted in Kūkai's metaphysics. There are three directions one can go: understanding space as a relational property, as a further fundamental substance, and as a monadic property.

Following the first alternative, we interpret space as a mere conventional way of speaking of spatial relations between entities or property instances. There is no such thing as absolute space, but only relational positions of one entity or property instance with respect to another one. This alternative, however, does not make justice to the inclusion of *kū* as space among the six elements.

The second alternative consists of considering space as another substance, in addition to consciousness. This interpretation vindicates the inclusion of space among the six elements, but it has the opposite drawback of undermining the centrality of the mind element, which is clearly emphasized in Shingon metaphysics.

Therefore, the most plausible alternative seems to be the third one: space is a monadic property of the universal substance, just like fire, water, space, and wind. According to this picture, space is the property of the mental substratum to be extended. This interpretation makes Kūkai's metaphysics more elegant—encompassing only one substance—and it also makes

sense of the traditional way of dividing the six elements putting consciousness on one side and the remaining five elements on the other.

Now, if this is correct and space is a monadic property of the mental substratum, then we can appreciate why it plays a different role from the other fundamental properties when it comes to producing the signs of the universal sermon. Space makes the substance extended, it makes it a sheet of paper where signs can be written, but it does not constitute the signs themselves. Thus, we see the reason for excluding space from the so-called 'material' elements in the passage above.

There is one last thing connected to the element of space that I want to point out here. The character for *kū* in Japanese, which is often translated as 'space', is, in fact, polysemic, and it has the additional meaning of 'void' or 'emptiness'. We will explore this additional meaning of the word in the last section of this chapter, which is about the doctrine of interpenetration—as Huayan Buddhism interprets emptiness in terms of interpenetration (Van Norden and Jones 2019) so does Kūkai, and it does so by giving to it a peculiar linguistic taste (Abe 1999, 279). Now, let me turn to some comments on the connections between Kūkai and contemporary metaphysics.

3.1.2. Kūkai and Contemporary Idealism

The outlined view has similarities with some forms of contemporary idealism, and in this subsection, I will briefly explore some connections with them. In the history of Western philosophy, idealism has often been understood as the view that there is no reality independent of the subject, and so as opposed to realism, the view that the world is objectively out there. However, in recent years there has been a revival of what we might call "realist idealism," the theory that reality has ultimately a mental nature. In this sense, idealism opposes not realism but materialism.

This is a weaker view, and probably also a more sensible one. The claim that reality is nothing but a creation of our subjective mind implies that its nature is mental, but the claim that reality has a mental nature does not imply that it is a creation of our subjective minds. Indeed, some versions of realist idealism could even be compatible with physicalism,[32] the

[32] The claim that reality is physical has to be understood here as different from the claim that reality is material. Physicality is defined in terms of what the science of physics studies or could study; to say that that is material is a further claim about the nature of the physical world which physics does not imply.

view that everything is physical or supervenes[33] on the physical. The realist idealist would simply claim that the physical world has a mental nature.

The similarity with Kūkai is evident. He is an idealist because he holds that reality is constituted of a mental substance, and he is a realist because this reality is not the product of our subjectivity but of the six elements, whose existence does not rely on that of any individual like me and you. True, the universe is the body-mind of Mahāvairocana, and he can be seen as a universal *subject*. However, arguably, this is not a kind of subjectivity that constitutes a problem for realism in any relevant sense.

To assess Kūkai's metaphysics with respect to the current debate, let us follow the taxonomy put forward by Chalmers (2019). He focuses on the distinction between subjective and objective idealism (setting aside transcendental and absolute idealism) and holds that it can be further spelt out in three different ways.

> As for subjective and objective idealism, these labels correlate with at least three different distinctions. First is a version of the anti-realist/realist distinction above: reality is wholly constituted by the way things appear to be (subjective), or it has some mental nature external to how things appear to be (objective). A second distinction concerns whether the fundamental mental states are had by a subject (subjective) or by some other sort of entity or no entity at all (objective). A third distinction concerns what sorts of minds constitute reality: for example, human minds like ours (subjective) or a cosmic mind (objective).
>
> (Chalmers 2019, 5)

What is Kūkai's view concerning the three ways of understanding the distinction? Starting from the third one, Kūkai believes that reality is constituted by a cosmic mind: that of Mahāvairocana. Of course, there are also human minds like ours, but they are ultimately grounded in the cosmic one. In the contemporary debate, views close to Kūkai's are held, among others, by Goff (2019), Kastrup (2018), and Shani (2015) who hold that only the cosmic mind is fundamental and that our minds depend on it. In particular, Kastrup holds that limited minds like ours are *dissociative alters* of the cosmic mind. According to this view, it is as if Mahāvairocana had some kind of dissociative disorder and we were all alters resulting from this condition. Let me bring back the distinction I made between ontological and epistemic

[33] Supervenience can be defined as follows: *A*s supervene on *B*s if and only if there cannot be a difference in *B*s without a difference in *A*s.

enlightenment. Following this picture, we are already *ontologically* enlightened because we are nothing but dissociative alters of the cosmic Buddha; in other words, we are all *henge shin* (Sk. *nirmāṇakāya*), provisional manifestations of the universal Buddha like the historical Śākyamuni. However, we are *epistemically* unenlightened because we do not realise this (at least not deeply enough).

The second distinction concerns whether fundamental mental states are held by a subject or by something else. In Kūkai's view, the fundamental mental states correspond to the elements, or more precisely to the internal aspect of the elements. Should we consider them as held by a subject? I think both answers are viable. One option starts from the fact that the fundamental mental states are the fundamental mental states of Mahāvairocana to hold that they are held by a subject, namely Mahāvairocana himself. The second option begins from the consideration that the distinction between subject and object makes sense only insofar as there is an internal-external distinction to conclude that, since at the fundamental level there is no external-internal distinction, we should not apply either of the concepts of subject and object.

Finally, we have to consider whether reality is *entirely* constituted by how things appear to be, or there is some reality beyond it. First of all, we have to distinguish between the possibility that reality is entirely constituted by how things appear *to us* and the possibility that it is entirely constituted by how things appear to Mahāvairocana himself. Surely, the former alternative is ruled out by Kūkai's picture: we could all cease to exist, and reality would not. In other words, even if all the alters of Mahāvairocana disappeared, Mahāvairocana himself would not. This does not automatically mean that reality is not entirely constituted by appearances to Mahāvairocana. However, even if we understood all *properties* as appearances to the universal deity, substance itself cannot be reduced to appearance. Hence, we can conclude that, according to Kūkai, there is something beyond the way things appear.

3.2. Manifestations and Functions

We considered that the stanza quoted at the beginning is a condensed explanation of the doctrine of the three greats—essence (Jp. *tai*), manifestations (Jp. *sō*), and functions (Jp. *yū*). As Kūkai explains (Hakeda 1984, 228; Shingen and Dreitlein 2010, 38), the second and third verse are about manifestations and functions respectively and recite as follows: "The Four Mandalas are inseparably related to one another: / When the grace of the Three Mysteries is retained, [our inborn three mysteries will] quickly be manifested." (Hakeda 1984, 227). In what

follows, I will interpret both verses, starting from the second about manifestations and concluding with the third about functions.

Mandalas (Sk. *maṇḍala*; Jp. *mandara*) are symbolic depictions of the universe, which constitute an essential component of the ritual practice of esoteric Buddhism (Rambelli 2013, 60). The four mandalas (Jp. *shiman sōdai*) in the stanza are the four most important types of mandalas in Shingon, identified by Kūkai in the *Sokushin jōbutsu gi* (Hakeda 1984, 230; Shingen and Dreitlein 2010, 53) as the Great Mandala (Sk. *mahā maṇḍala*; Jp. *dai mandara*), the *Samaya* Mandala (Jp. *sanmaya mandara*), the Dharma Mandala (Jp. *hō mandara*), and the Karma Mandala (Jp. *katsuma mandara*).

While these mandalas are all employed as ritual objects in Shingon, in light of the fact that the stanza we are considering is about the doctrine of the three greats—which is Kūkai's metaphysics—it is clear that they have to be interpreted at a cosmological level. We do not need to get into the details of each of the four mandalas; however, if the interpretation of Kūkai's metaphysics that I have proposed makes sense, we should expect them to fit quite naturally in the picture. I will show that that is the case by briefly explaining what characterises each mandala and then draw upon that to make them fit our picture.

Three of the four mandalas correspond to three kinds of signs (Jp. *monji*), which are letters (Jp. *ji*), seals (Jp. *in*), and images (Jp. *gyō*). Corresponding to letters is the Dharma Mandala, which depicts letters of the *siddhaṃ* alphabet; corresponding to seals is the *Samaya* Mandala, which depicts symbolic tools and objects such as swords and vajras; finally, corresponding to images is the Great Mandala, which represents images of the body of the buddhas. Instead, the Karma Mandala has the peculiarity of representing *movements* and *activities* of buddhas and bodhisattvas (see, Rambelli 2013, 64; Shingen and Dreitlein 2010, 363-4).

How can we understand these four mandalas at a cosmological level, given our interpretation of Kūkai's metaphysics? We can interpret the Dharma Mandala as elegantly corresponding to the internal aspect of reality that is the mind of Mahāvairocana. What motivates this correspondence is that the *siddhaṃ* letters are called in Shingon 'seeds' (Sk. *bīja*; Jp. *shuji*), and that is the same term used for the seeds of the store consciousness, which following Izutsu's interpretation, we have identified precisely with Mahāvairocana's mind. Turning to the Great Mandala, I interpret it as corresponding to the external aspect of reality. The reason is that the Great Mandala depicts images of the *bodies* of the buddhas, and the body of Mahāvairocana is the external aspect of reality.

The *Samaya* Mandala is the hardest to interpret since it is not *prima facie* clear what symbolic tools like vajras and flowers can correspond to in the presented metaphysics. We can

rely here on the interpretation of Veere, who says that one of the tenets of the Shingon doctrine of originally non-arising (Jp. *honpushō*) is that "the totality of existence is contained in the *samaya mandara* of Dainichi Nyorai" (Veere 2000, 85). Following this line, we can interpret the *Samaya* Mandala as the union of the internal and the external aspect, or in other words, of the Dharma and the Great Mandala. Finally, being a representation of the activities of the buddhas, the Karma Mandala naturally corresponds to the transformations happening in the cosmos as part of the preaching activity of Mahāvairocana. (We will see in a moment that this relates to the third verse of the stanza about functions.)

As said above, concerning the doctrine of the three greats, the four interrelated mandalas are *manifestations*. The natural way to read this is that the four mandalas are four dimensions of manifestation of the universal substance: as the external and internal aspects of reality, as the union of the two, and as the activity through which all this articulates. For our purposes, what is important to highlight is that the manifestations are quite literally the text of Mahāvairocana's *hosshin seppō*, namely, what Mahāvairocana employs to preach the Dharma. Humans, and sentient beings more generally, access the various dimensions of this revelation in their lives: through our first five senses, we access the external aspect of reality (Great Mandala), though our sixth sense, the internal aspect (Dharma Mandala), and doing so we are thereby partially accessing the *Samaya* Mandala. Finally, the Karma Mandala represents the activities that make the other mandalas accessible to us, which brings us to discuss the third verse of the stanza.

According to the doctrine of the three greats, again, the third stanza corresponds to functions. Functions are the activities and transformations happening in the universe as part of *hosshin seppō* (Rambelli 2013, 40)—or, better, the laws governing such transformations. The concept of function goes hand-in-hand with that of *purpose*, which makes perfect sense given that the cosmos is a sermon having as its aim (or one of its aims) the enlightenment of sentient beings. Functions, then, make Kūkai's theory in one way Aristotelian. Aristotle believed that things have a final cause: an end they are for (*telos*). To give an example, teleology in metaphysics is clear in the case of artefacts. Consider a watch. Intuitively, one of the causes for which all the watch's components—its gears, needles, and so forth—come together is the function of the watch, namely indicating time. In other words, the purpose of the artefacts plays a role in its very constitution. According to Kūkai, this kind of final cause is not limited to artefacts but widespread in the universe: the purpose for which manifestations are for—i.e. preaching the Dharma—is the fundamental cause of the movements and operations leading to their formation.

Let us return to the text. The verse corresponding to functions says: "when the grace of the Three Mysteries is retained, [our inborn three mysteries will] quickly be manifested." (Hakeda

1984, 227). We know that the three mysteries are the body, mind, and speech of Mahāvairocana, and the idea is that they correspond to three aspects of his activity, namely of functions. We have also seen that the three mysteries correspond to the body, mind, and speech of sentient beings—the three karmic activities—and that the three karmic activities of sentient beings are ultimately part of the three mysteries of Mahāvairocana.[34] On the basis of these considerations, we can identify the meaning of the verse straightforwardly: the idea is that it is through the activity of the three mysteries that we can realise (epistemic enlightenment) the original condition of identity of our body, mind, and speech with those of Mahāvairocana (ontological enlightenment).

The three mysteries are three dimensions of the activity of Mahāvairocana. The mystery of body corresponds to the activities of the external aspect of reality, which is indeed the body of Mahāvairocana, while the mystery of mind corresponds to the activities of the internal aspect. What about the mystery of speech? My interpretation is that the mystery of speech is to the mysteries of the body and the mind as the Karma Mandala is to the Great and the Dharma Mandala. In other words, the speech activity of Mahāvairocana encompasses the activities of the body and the mind. One more time, this goes in the direction of Izutsu's interpretation of Kūkai, as he says that the most important meaning of '*hosshin seppō*' is not that the *hosshin* preaches, but that he *is* his preaching (Izutsu 1985, 14).

Moreover, this interpretation finds support in Kūkai's *Shōji jissō gi*, where he says:

> The five great elements of sentient and insentient beings are endowed with [the power of producing] vibrations and sounds, for no sounds are independent of the five great elements; these are the original substance, *and the sounds or vibrations are their functions*.
>
> (Hakeda 1984, 240; *my emphasis*)[35]

In this passage, Kūkai is taking the sounds (or vibrations)—which from the point of view of the three mysteries correspond to the speech—as *the* function of the five great elements, which, according to the proposed interpretation, in their internal and external aspect are at the foundation of the internal and external aspects of reality. Hence, the passage supports an interpretation of the mystery of speech as encompassing the mysteries of the mind and the body.

[34] The reason why Hakeda calls the body, mind, and speech of sentient beings 'three mysteries' (with lower-case letters) instead of 'three karmic activities' is that in the context of this verse he is considering them already from the enlightened perspective and so as part of the three mysteries of Mahāvairocana.
[35] Cfr. (Shingen and Dreitlein 2010, 94).

3.3. Interpenetration

In conclusion of this chapter on Kūkai's metaphysics, we have to consider the last verse of the stanza quoted above: "Infinitely interrelated like the meshes of Indra's net are those which we call existences" (Hakeda 1984, 227). This sentence is basically an affirmation of the doctrine of emptiness as understood in Huayan Buddhism, which interprets it in terms of interpenetration (Van Norden and Jones 2019). In this section, I will first advance an interpretation of the doctrine of interpenetration in Shingon—which we can see as a linguistic interpretation draws in that it draws from the claim that reality is the language of Mahāvairocana—and then move to a few further considerations concerning the special role that Kūkai gave to Sanskrit in opposition to other languages.

The doctrine of interpenetration is usually presented through the metaphor of Indra's net, which a commentator describes as follows.

> Far away in the heavenly abode of the great god Indra, there is a wonderful net which has been hung by some cunning artificer in such a manner that it stretches out indefinitely in all directions. In accordance with the extravagant tastes of deities, the artificer has hung a single glittering jewel at the net's every node, and since the net itself is infinite in all dimensions, the jewels are infinite in number. There hang the jewels, glittering like stars of the first magnitude, a wonderful sight to behold. If we now arbitrarily select one of the jewels for inspection and look closely at it, we will discover that in its polished surface there are reflected all the other jewels in the net, infinite in number. Not only that, but each of the jewels reflected in this one jewel is also reflecting all the other jewels, so that the process of reflection is infinite.
>
> (Priest 2015, 113)

In Indra's net, all nodes are jewels having a perfectly reflecting surface like a mirror. As such, they infinitely reflect each other: each jewel contains in itself all other jewels, which in turn contain in themselves all other jewels, including the first one, and so on in an infinite fractal process or reflection. Since the jewels of Indra's net *contain one another* infinitely, we say that they *interpenetrate*.

According to Kūkai, reality is like Indra's net: there is some sense in which existences mutually contain one another. Interpenetration starts at the level of the six elements. Indeed,

the first verse of the stanza recited, "[t]he Six Great Elements are interfused and are in a state of eternal harmony" (Hakeda 1984, 277), and the term that Hakeda translates here as 'interfusion' is the same one that he translates in the fourth verse as 'interrelation' (cfr. Shingen and Dreitlein 2010, 36), which I am rendering here as 'interpenetration'.

Kūkai's view of reality as a language offers a natural way to interpret the claim that all existences interpenetrate. Accordingly, I will now present the doctrine of interpenetration in this linguistic way, also providing a first introduction to the Shingon doctrine that reality is the sermon of Mahāvairocana, which we will see in the next chapter.

Let us take the claim that reality is the sermon of Mahāvairocana seriously. Starting from this point, we can draw some interesting consequences. For reality to be the sermon of Mahāvairocana is for it to be his language, and language has the interesting property of being structured in multiple levels of articulation. In other words, there are in language multiple levels of combinations of signs: roughly, phonemes are combined in words, which then can be further combined to generate sentences, which can form paragraphs, which can form chapters, and so forth. The combination of linguistic units articulates on many levels.

If reality were the language of Mahāvairocana, we would expect it to have a similar structure, and Kūkai thinks it does. Indeed, while it is the phenomenal reality that ultimately delivers the sermon of Mahāvairocana to sentient beings, we have seen that it is created through functions from the fundamental level of the six elements. The picture I am suggesting, then, is one in which reality is structured in multiple levels of articulation, starting from the fundamental elements and arriving at the phenomenal level, that is the level of the objects of the six senses.

According to this model, the bottom level of articulation is that of the fundamental *properties*, which are, of course, properties of the universal mental substance. Using Kūkai's terminology, these are the properties of fire, water, air, and earth (more on space below). However, to make the picture scientifically acceptable, the most reasonable way to go is to say that the fundamental properties are the properties discovered by the ultimate physical theory. (It must be added, though, that according to Kūkai, these properties also have an internal aspect which is not studied by physical science.) The fundamental properties articulate in more complex units, which combine in more complex ones; for instance, in living organisms, cells combine to constitute tissues, which constitute organs, which constitute organ systems.

All this layered articulation is, in Kūkai's view, nothing but an enormous universal linguistic process. Izutsu (1985) analyses Kūkai's metaphysics as semantic articulation: all movements and operations that, according to functions, generate phenomenal reality starting from the

fundamental elements are nothing but a process of linguistic articulation involving a number of levels of composition.

How is this relevant to the doctrine of interpenetration? Let us consider a system of signs like the Latin alphabet, and for brevity, let us also suppose that it comprises only three signs: 'A,' 'B,' and 'C.' What is interesting about signs in a system like this is that they have *oppositional value*. In other words, within the system, what it is to be 'A' is to be different from 'B' and 'C.' We can say that 'A' is defined in relation to 'B' and 'C.' But, of course, that is not only true for 'A:' 'B' is defined in relation to 'A' and 'C,' and 'C' is defined in relation to 'A' and 'B.' Accordingly when we look at the definitions of these letters we see that they *interpenetrate*: the definition of 'A' contains 'B' and the definition of 'B' contains 'A,' which definition contains 'B' and so on in an infinitely fractal process, just like in Indra's net.[36] Furthermore, basic signs aggregate to form more complex units: words. With words, we find a higher-level version of the same phenomenon: each word in a language is defined in terms of other words in that language. Again, we have interpenetration in that the definition of a term contains other terms whose definitions contain other terms, and moving forward in this process we will eventually go back to the first word defined.

Shingon metaphysics identifies the same holistic structure in reality. As a sign of Mahāvairocana's sermon, every entity has an oppositional value determined with respect to all other entities and is thereby immersed in a holistic net of relations. For example, what it is for the tree out of my window to be a sign of Mahāvairocana's sermon depends on oppositional relationships that the tree entertains with other trees of different species, which are in turn defined as signs in relation to other entities.

Enough for interpenetration. As anticipated, there is one last issue I want to mention before closing this chapter. It should be pointed out that while I have taken as an example the Latin alphabet here, Kūkai thought that there was something unique to the Sanskrit alphabet, the *siddhaṃ* script. While this is an important idea within Shingon Buddhism, it seems at least partially related to idiosyncrasies of the tantric tradition that it is hard to see as philosophically interesting. For example, it is connected to the fact that the *Mahāvairocana sūtra*—originally written in Sanskrit—is considered a condensation in the human language of the universal sermon of Mahāvairocana, which is reality itself (Abe 1999, 276).[37]

[36] Cfr. Priest 2015

[37] It should also be pointed out that *siddhaṃ* letters are all associated with esoteric meanings. For instance, the letter 'A' stands for 'originally nonarising,' 'U' for 'metaphor,' 'Ka' for 'action,' 'Gha' for 'whole' (Abe 1999, 291-2).

Two more philosophically interesting reasons for which Kūkai believed in the superiority of the *siddhaṃ* script (which, of course, in his mind was not contrasted to the Latin alphabet but Chinese characters) are the following. First, Kūkai thought that Chinese characters are based on the wrong assumption that the world antecedes language (Murphy 2009, 80): according to him, they had been developed as signs representing a language-independent reality. Sanskrit, instead, is connected to the opposite view that language comes (in an ontological sense) *before* reality. This idea is clearly of central importance for Kūkai since he holds that reality is the language of Mahāvairocana.

Second, *siddhaṃ* letters and the Sanskrit language are directly connected to the theory of phonetic emanation of the universe, developed in the Indian Vedic tradition (Payne 2018, 46-9). Even if not entirely absorbed by Tantric Buddhism in East Asia, they had undoubtedly influenced it (Payne 2018, 69), and we know that Kūkai was familiar with these theories since he comments on them (Rambelli 2013, 85). In the theory of phonetic emanation, cosmogenesis is described as the utterance of the sounds of Sanskrit, and the articulation of reality is then the progressive differentiation of the emitted sound. As the following chapter will make more evident, Kūkai adopts a very similar cosmogenesis, and this might well be intimately connected to the superiority he attributes to Sanskrit.

In sum, Kūkai believes that reality is the language of Mahāvairocana, that cosmogenesis is a linguistic process—Abe (1999, 279) characterises Kūkai's cosmogenesis as *semio*genesis—and that all entities that are part of this universal sermon interpenetrate.

4. Mahāvairocana's sermon: Gaining Ultimate Reality Back

We have reached the final part of this journey. This chapter has two sections: the first one will present Kūkai's linguistic understanding of the metaphysical picture outlined in the previous chapter, and the second one will draw on it to reconstruct Kūkai's response to the Yogācāra view.

4.1. *Hosshin Seppō*: Reality as Language

Shingon metaphysics is teleological. Reality is created with the six elements through functions, which Mahāvairocana enforces for the purpose of revelation. This whole process is *hosshin seppō*, the preaching activity of the universal Buddha, which can be understood in two ways: as a sermon Mahāvairocana directs to himself, for his own enjoyment, or as a sermon directed to sentient beings for their liberation. Of course, these two interpretations are ultimately nondual: we ourselves are part of Mahāvairocana, which means that directing the sermon to us amounts to directing the sermon to Mahāvairocana himself.

We will now explore this view of reality as language, probably the most original part of Kūkai's doctrine. In order to do so, we will proceed as follows. First, I will use textual evidence to give an overview of what the claim that reality is the sermon of Mahāvairocana means. Then, I will turn to a precise formulation of the theory in terms of the idea that all existences are signs of the universal language.

4.1.1. Existences as *Monji*: the Universal Language

At the beginning of his *Shōji jissō gi*, Kūkai writes,

> The Tathagata reveals his teachings by means of signs [*monji*]. These signs have their constituent elements in the six kind of objects. These objects have their origin in the Three Mysteries of the Dharmakaya Buddha.

(Hakeda 1984, 234-5)[38] [39]

Manifesting a widespread feature of Kūkai's writings, these few lines already contain the text's whole point. Let me give a brief explanation of them and then focus on the concept of *monji*, which will be our primary concern in this section.

The idea expressed in these lines is that the Tathāgata, namely Mahāvairocana, reveals his teaching, which is the ultimate truth. In order to do that, he must employ signs, if only because whatever delivers semantic content is *eo ipso* a sign (but we will see in a moment that the concept of *monji* is more articulated than this). As I said above, there is a sense in which Mahāvairocana's sermon is directed to himself—and it could not be otherwise given that Mahāvairocana *is* reality—but there is also a sense in which the teaching is directed to sentient beings for the sake of their liberation. This fact makes it necessary for the teaching to be based on the six kinds of objects (the objects of the six senses) because all sentient beings have in their ordinary experience are these objects: if the teaching has to reach sentient beings, it has to pass through the objects of the senses. Finally, Kūkai's claim that the six kinds of objects have their origin in the three mysteries expresses the idea we saw in the previous chapter that phenomenal reality (and so the objects of the six senses) are created with the six elements through functions, which are the three mysteries (and in particular the mystery of speech).

Let us focus on the concept of *monji*. At Kūkai's time, the term '*monji*' had a broad meaning in Japanese: it was used to refer to written characters but also decorative patterns like those employed in rituals (Rambelli 2013, 37). Kūkai appropriates the term and makes it a technical notion in the Shingon doctrine. The term '*monji*' has two components: '*mon,*' which means pattern, and '*ji*,' which means letter, word, or character. Kūkai uses both components of the term in selecting it to mean the signs of Mahāvairocana's sermon. The notion is defined in the following passage of Kūkai's *Shōji jissō gi*:

> Thus all colors, forms, and movements having to do with the working of the eyes are the objects of the eyes. [...] We call these the categories of differentiation. They are signs (*monji*), for the characteristics [which differentiate one from another] are

[38] In the original translation, the term '*monji*' is rendered as 'expressive symbols'. I will use passages both from the translation of Hakeda and the translation of Shingen and Dreitlein (2010), where '*monji*' is translated as 'letter(s)'. I will adjust the translations, using 'sign' in place of 'expressive symbol' and 'letter'. There are two reasons for doing this. One is simplicity: dealing with different terminologies might complicate things beyond necessity. Second, since the term 'sign' is more general in meaning than 'expressive symbol' and 'letter,' I hope it will deliver better the idea that all existences are *monji*.

[39] Cfr. (Shingen and Dreitlein 2010, 80).

patterns (*mon*). Each pattern has its own designation. Thus we call them signs (*monji*).

(Hakeda 1984, 243-4)[40] [41]

Kūkai says three important things: 1) that *monji* have patterns; 2) that they are mutually differentiated; 3) that they take part in semantic relations.

I will now proceed as follows. First, I will argue that these three are singularly necessary and conjunctly sufficient conditions for having a system of signs or *monji*. Second, I will show that, according to Kūkai, *everything* satisfies these conditions. The consequence of this will be that everything is a *monji* in Kūkai's view. (Notice that in the passage, he is taking as an example one of the six kinds of objects: the objects of the sight. However, these considerations extend to the other kinds of objects.)

The first necessary condition to be a sign is to have patterns. Intuitively, the pattern of an object is its motif or design: the pattern of a necktie is its design, and interestingly (and this starts to show the connection with the second point), it is something that *distinguishes* it from other neckties. However, we do not want to limit our understanding of what a pattern is to the objects of the sight. We can identify patterns in what we hear, touch, smell, taste, and think: in other words, all the six domains of perception in Shingon understanding. Generalising, then, we can see patterns as the forms or configurations of objects.[42]

If you consider any system of signs you know, you will immediately realise that that system of signs could not exist if its components did not exhibit patterns. For example, every letter of the Latin alphabet and every Chinese character has a shape and so a pattern, braille signs have tactile patterns, and spoken language has aural patterns. In effect, the idea that patterns are a necessary condition for having signs is, in the end, the idea that there cannot be signs in a complete blank. Why not? Because patterns are necessary for *differentiation*.

These considerations bring us to the second condition. Kūkai holds that *monji* are different from one another: you cannot have signs without differences. Consider this text that you are reading right now. What makes it interpretable is the existence of differences among the signs that constitute it, namely Latin letters. There is a reason if the signs of the Latin alphabet are

[40] In the original translation, Hakeda renders '*monji*' as 'expressions of patterns' here, instead of his usual 'expressive symbols'.
[41] Cfr. (Shingen and Dreitlein 2010, 109).
[42] Recently, I started to think about potential connections between Kūkai's view of reality as language and issues in the philosophy of information. Indeed, *prima facie*, the claim that reality is made of *monji* might be rendered as the claim that reality is made of *information*, an idea that finds support in contemporary scientific research. It is a point that I am willing to research further, but I have to put it aside for the space of the present work.

‘a,’ ‘b,’ ‘c,’ ‘d,’ etc. and not ‘a,’ ‘a,’ ‘a,’ ‘a,’ etc. Words written with the second system would be completely unintelligible, and in fact the system composing them would not be a system of signs at all. A necessary condition for something to be a sign is being part of a system containing at least another element distinguishable from it. Of course, while the Latin alphabet uses visual shapes for differentiating signs, other means could be used: spoken languages use aural patterns, sign languages use motor patterns, braille uses tactile patterns, and in principle, we could create systems of signs based on smell or taste patterns. In all cases, we need differences to have the system.

The third and final condition for something to be a sign is taking part in semantic relations. Imagine finding somewhere a stone with many lines carved on it in the desert; what do you have to ask yourself in order to decide whether what you are looking at are signs or not? You already know that there are certain patterns on the stone and that these patterns are mutually distinct. But are they signs? To answer this question, you need to determine whether they express some meaning or not; that is, whether what there is to the lines you are looking at is exhausted by their patterns or not. (Interestingly, this is connected to determining whether those lines have formed randomly or have been carved by someone.)

Although the point is not central to present Kūkai’s alternative to the Yogācāra position, it is worth considering that I interpret Kūkai as taking semantic relations to be symmetric. The reason is that symmetry allows to extend the nonduality framework to semantics (since there would be no fundamental difference between the signifier and the signified). Moreover, and perhaps more conclusively, one should consider that the logic of the relationships between signs in Shingon Buddhism draws massively from Chinese’s correlative thinking (Rambelli 2013, 54), a system that understands entities as part of series where they become “each other’s signs” (Rambelli 2013, 14).

The idea here is that the distinction between signifier and signified is just a matter of perspective. Consider the relationship between written and spoken English and forget for a moment what we consider the semantics of English; just consider the relationship between sound patterns of spoken English and visual patterns of written English. Which of the two is to be considered on the side of the expression and which on the side of content? Clearly, it is just a matter of perspective. If you have to read a text, you will take written words as expressions and sound patterns as content, while if you have to transcribe an oral presentation, you will do the opposite.

The same goes for entities we are used to considering only on the side of meaning. For example, you usually take your desk to be a possible meaning (referent) of the term ‘desk,’ and

not the term ‘desk,’ to be a possible meaning of your desk. However, in my interpretation of Kūkai, the asymmetry is just an illusion coming from the fact that we usually consider meaning from the perspective of words. Indeed, you *do* use the semantic link between the term ‘desk’ and your desk in the other direction whenever you look at your desk and the word ‘desk’ pops out in your mind.[43]

We have seen that the three conditions of having patterns, being mutually differentiated, and being part of semantic relations are necessary conditions for creating a system of signs. But are they conjunctly sufficient? I hold that they are. In effect, these three are the steps we follow to create a formal system of signs. First, we specify a set of symbols and, even if this is often not explicitly stated, the symbols have to be distinguishable; second, we indicate a meaning for these symbols (for example, in propositional calculus, meanings are truth values), and as a result, we have our system of signs. Of course, one can go further, for instance by specifying rules of compositions of basic signs to obtain more complex units. However, this goes beyond what is intuitively necessary and sufficient to have a sign system.

Kūkai claims that these three conditions are satisfied by all objects of the six senses. Before showing why that is the case according to his theory, it is worth pausing for a moment to generalise his claim. Indeed, while Kūkai limits himself to saying that *the objects of the six senses* are *monji*, in what follows, I will show that the three conditions are satisfied by *all existences*, that is, *dharmas* all the way down to the six elements. Of course, we have seen that since *monji* are signs of the sermon of Mahāvairocana and the sermon is supposed to reach sentient beings like us, it makes sense to hold that the phenomenal level is the most important one, and that is why Kūkai focuses on the objects of the six senses. Still, the three conditions apply beyond the phenomenal level, and so in what follows I will be concerned with this generalised version of the claim.

In effect, applying the term ‘*monji*’ to all existences makes sense also in light of our considerations about interpenetration (§3.3). Kūkai takes language (especially Sanskrit) to be a model of the structure of reality; following this line, just as there are multiple levels of articulation in language, there are also going to be multiple levels of articulation in reality. In written language, words patterns are grounded in letters patterns. In the same way, in Kūkai’s metaphysics, the patterns of higher-level *monji* or existences are grounded in the patterns of

[43] This could already be used as an argument for the claim that everything (or at least all things we can refer to) are signs and so *monji*. However, we will see in a moment that what Kūkai means by saying that phenomena are *monji* goes beyond such a symmetry.

more fundamental *monji*. Ultimately, all patterns are grounded in the fundamental properties represented by the elements.

Let us see whether the three conditions apply to existences. Concerning the first condition—having patterns—we can say that existences have them because they have properties. Patterns are constituted by nothing but the properties objects have, which allows for distinguishing them from other things.

That Kūkai takes objects' properties to constitute their pattern becomes clear when we consider the passage containing the definition of '*monji*' quoted above together with this other passage from the *Shōji jissō gi*.

> "Form (*rūpa*) has such qualities as color, shape, and movement." There are three aspects of form: first, color; second, shape; and third, movement.
>
> (Shingen and Dreitlein 2010, 105)[44]

We have previously noticed that the Shingon doctrine classifies phenomenal objects in six categories corresponding to the six senses. In this passage, Kūkai considers one particular domain of objects, that of the objects of sight, and he analyses these objects in terms of the *kinds of properties* they exhibit. What is interesting about these kinds of properties is that they correspond to the domains along which phenomena can differ. (Of course, colour, shape, and movement are domains along which *visual* phenomena can differ, but these considerations can be extended to the other domains.)

Indeed, if we look again at the passage where Kūkai states the conditions for being a *monji*, he says, "[t]hus all colors, forms, and movements having to do with the working of the eyes are the objects of the eyes. [...] We call these the *categories of differentiation*." (Hakeda 1984, 243; *my emphasis*).[45] He identifies the categories of differentiation of *monji* precisely in the kinds of properties considered. Hence, it is clear that the pattern of an object is nothing but the set of its properties, and since all objects have properties, they all satisfy the first condition.[46]

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[44] Cfr. (Hakeda 1984, 243).
[45] Cfr. (Shingen and Dreitlein 2010, 109).
[46] It might be that Kūkai has a conception of what counts as a genuine property more limited than the one we find in contemporary philosophy. In the first place, since the point of patterns is to ground differentiations, trivial properties satisfied by everything, like the property of being something, are arguably not pattern-making properties, according to Kūkai. Moreover, he probably believes there is an important metaphysical distinction between intrinsic and relational properties. This follows from two considerations: 1) intuitively, we do not consider relational properties pattern-making properties (e.g. it is not part of the pattern of a necktie to be *n* centimetres distant from another necktie); 2) the classification of objects on the basis of the six senses suggest that he focuses on non-relational properties here (e.g. he does not consider the relative position of an object to be a parameter of the sight).

Not only the objects of the six senses exhibit properties: the so-called material elements are fundamental *properties*, and all existences between the phenomenal level and the fundamental one have properties grounded in those of the fundamental level. Thus, the first condition is satisfied by all existences.

In order to satisfy the second necessary condition, things have to be differentiated. This condition is easy to establish. Clearly, objects are distinguished by their properties. I can distinguish the socks in my wardrobe from their colour and motif, for example. Of course, some objects can be mutually indistinguishable, like 1 euro coins produced in the same year. However, this is what we would expect since there are both signs' types and tokens: types must be different, but there can be isomorphic tokens of the same type.[47] Again, this goes all the way down to fundamental entities, which can be distinguished on the basis of their fundamental properties.

The third and final necessary condition for being a *monji* is to be part of semantic relations. I think there are at least two senses in which this condition is satisfied according to the proposed interpretation. The first is a stronger sense that makes existences part of semantic relations in the universal language of Mahāvairocana; the second is a more trivial (but in a way important) sense that considers existences to be *monji* in virtue of their being part of semantic relations in human language. I will now consider both of them and finally turn to some further considerations on the relationship between *monji* and substance.

The first way in which existences are part of semantic relations has to do with distinguishing between the internal and external aspects of reality introduced in the previous chapter (§3.1). According to this picture, what we experience as the "world out there" is the external side of reality, Mahāvairocana's body, which corresponds to an internal one understood as Mahāvairocana's mind. Now, concerning the semantics of the universal language, the idea will be that *monji* on the external side are semantically linked to *monji* on the internal side.

Consider any particular phenomenon, say a tree in a garden. The tree is a *monji* that we ordinarily perceive in its external aspect. Moreover, this particular tree also has an internal aspect which can be defined as what it is like for Mahāvairocana to think of that particular tree, and this internal aspect is semantically linked to the external one: each of them means the other. Furthermore, the tree is a member of a particular species. If the species is not just something that we have made up but has a basis in reality, there must also be something that is like for

[47] That does not apply only to 1 euro coins produced in the same year. Trees of the same species or pieces of the same chemical substance can be considered tokens of the same type from the perspective of the universal language.

Mahāvairocana to think of that particular *species*, and this means that there is also an internal *monji* corresponding to the species, which also is semantically linked to the tree. This process can go on until we reach the most general *monji* in the mind of Mahāvairocana, which arguably correspond to the fundamental elements.

In sum, external *monji* are semantically connected to various internal *monji* with relations that, as seen above, Kūkai takes to be symmetric. The cherry tree in the garden as an external *monji* is semantically linked first to the cherry tree in the garden as an internal *monji*, and then to the internal *monji* corresponding to the species of cherry trees, to the one corresponding to trees in general, and so forth. In general, it will be semantically connected to an internal *monji* for any objective category that it is part of, that is, for any category that is not a mere creation of human conventions. According to this understanding of the semantics of the universal language, all existences are indeed *monji*: they satisfy the first two conditions of having a pattern and be differentiated as well as the third one of being part of semantic relations.[48]

The symmetry of semantic relations allows for a second (and maybe trivial) sense in which all existences are *monji*. In effect, given that existences satisfy the first two conditions, the simple fact that our ordinary language refers to them makes them satisfy the third condition. The moment we use our language to refer to worldly objects, these objects automatically take part in semantic relations and are thereby *monji*. For example, since trees are all meant by the term 'tree,' they are part of semantic relations; moreover, satisfying the first two conditions, they are *monji*.

The outlined picture of semantics might be seen as problematic for two reasons. One problem is that the second sense in which existences are part of semantic relations sounds excessively trivial. Another problem is that we might be mixing two senses of semantics here, so that what we mean when we say that cherry trees are semantically linked to the internal aspect of cherry trees and when we say that they are semantically related to the English term 'cherry tree' we are meaning different things by 'semantics'.

Why should relations between *monji* of the external and internal sides of reality be regarded as *semantic*? Aren't we changing the sense of 'semantics' in the two interpretations of *monji*'s semantic relations? These two issues have a common answer that I will explain in the following

[48] It should be pointed out that Kūkai thought that existences could be (and typically are) semantically related to other existences whose connection with the former is less evident. For instance, Rambelli (2013, 54) takes as an example a correlative chain that comprehends earth, spring, east, yellow, and other elements. The idea here is that these things are semantically correlated because they play a homologous role in their respective categories (those of the elements, seasons, directions, colours). Understanding these type of correlations goes beyond our purposes in this essay.

section when we will consider the relationship between the human and the universal language (§4.2.3). The answer will draw on the nonduality of the human and the universal language. Indeed, according to my interpretation of Kūkai's theory, semantic relations in the human language reduce to semantic relations in the universal language. This claim makes it false that the sense of 'semantics' changes when we consider the human and the universal language since the former becomes nothing more than a special case of the latter. (Moreover, the connection between the human and the universal language makes the second sense in which existences are part of semantic relations less trivial.)

Before closing this section, I would like to consider the relationship between *monji* and substance. In effect, here, we can find a third sense in which *monji* are *expressions* of something. This third sense might not be strictly speaking semantic—that is, not semantic in the same way as we talk about semantics in ordinary language—but it has a central role in Kūkai's theory. This third sense has to do with the idea, seen in the doctrine of the three greats, that substance manifests itself through properties. It is precisely this role properties have of being *expressions* of the substance that, once we notice that properties constitute the patterns that make *monji*, we can interpret as the idea that *monji* are expressions of substance. Consider the following passage from the *Shōji jissō gi*.

> [I]f we interpret "sound, word, and reality" on the basis of a syllable, we can make the following analysis. Take, for example, the first syllable of the Sanskrit alphabet *A*. When we open our mouth and simultaneously exhale, the sound *A* is produced. This is the sound. For what does the sound *A* stand? It denotes a name-word (*myōji*) of the Dharmakaya Buddha; namely, it is sound and word. What is the meaning of the Dharmakaya? *The so-called Dharmakaya stands for that which is originally the uncreated [quality] of all dharmas [existences], namely, for reality*.
>
> (Hakeda 1984, 239; *my emphasis*)[49]

In this passage, Kūkai is talking about the relationship between human language and universal language. First, he says that the words we utter *denote the words of the hosshin*, which is to say that since the tree out of my window is a word of Mahāvairocana, by referring to that tree, I am referring to a sign of Mahāvairocana's sermon. Then, he further asks the meaning of the latter, namely, the meaning of the word of Mahāvairocana (that is a part of his very body-

[49] Cfr. (Shingen and Dreitlein 2010, 92).

mind), which is a *monji*. He answers that the word stands for reality in itself, which is the substance: the uncreated consciousness of which form is a manifestation.

In this third sense, then, the universe is a massive self-revelation of existence itself by means of *monji*, which are nothing but the form taken by the substance for the very sake of that self-revelation. Moreover, given the nonduality of form and substance, we can ultimately say that Mahāvairocana's *monji* are in a sense self-referential: entities as *monji* are expressions of substance, but all there is about substance is the set of properties it instantiates, which are the *monji* itself.

4.1.2. Kūkai's Pantheism

These last considerations make Kūkai's pantheism very similar to the kind of *process pan(en)theism* presented by Mark Johnston (2009). Johnston gives the following definition of 'The Highest One.'

> The Highest One = the outpouring of Existence Itself by way of its exemplification in ordinary existents for the sake of the self-disclosure of Existence Itself.
>
> (Johnston 2009, 116)

According to the interpretation of Kūkai that I have presented, all existences—all *monji*—are indeed *the outpouring of existence itself*; they are manifestations of the universal substance that presents itself through properties. Mahāvairocana is not a deity wholly detached and independent of reality like the Abrahamic God. On the contrary, he is constantly acting—or better, preaching—through the cosmos and as the cosmos.

In a sense, he does so for the very sake of this self-revelation. The Shingon tradition distinguishes between many kinds of *hosshin*, and an important distinction is that between the *hosshin* as *jishō shin* and *hosshin* as *juyū shin* (Shingen and Dreitlein 2010, 366-8; Veere 2000, 66). *Juyū shin* is the hosshin seen as preaching for a purpose, and it is further distinguished between *jijuyū shin* and *tajuyū shin*, the former being the *hosshin* seen as preaching for his self-enjoyment and the latter being the *hosshin* seen as preaching for the sake of sentient beings. However, more fundamental than both is the *jishō shin*, which is the *hosshin* as revealing the truth for the very sake of the revelation of truth, that is, as revealing it for the sake of no one in particular (included himself). This is the outpouring of existence for its own sake.

The gist of process pan(en)theism is, for Johnston, the idea that "God is no longer in the category of substance, as in traditional theology, but in the category of activity" (Johnston 2009,

120). I will not take a position on this point, but it is worth noticing that the claim can be taken to apply to Mahāvairocana. Following Izutsu's interpretation (Izutsu 1985, 14), the most important meaning of '*hosshin seppō*' is not that Mahāvairocana preaches, but that he *is* his preaching. Following this line, Mahāvairocana is not identified with the substance but with the whole process of articulation of reality and revelation of the substance through properties.

We will return to these reflections in considering Kūkai's response to Yogācāra philosophy, which it is finally time to turn to.

4.2. Getting Ultimate Reality Back

First of all, let us recap briefly what the problem is. We have a distinction between ultimate reality—namely, reality in itself—and conventional reality—that is, reality *qua* our linguistic and cognitive capacities. In the thought of Vasubandhu, in accordance with the theory of the three natures, the latter is spelt out as *imagined*: conventional reality is mere imagination, and ultimate reality lies beyond it, independent of imagination. Accordingly, in the second chapter, I presented the first consequence of the Yogācāra model on the proposed interpretation as Inaccessibility, which is worth repeating here.

> ***Inaccessibility:*** We have no access to ultimate reality.

Inaccessibility states that we do not have experiential access to reality in itself. Moreover, we have seen that Inaccessibility is not the only consequence of the proposed view. There is a second one, which is Ineffability.

> ***Ineffability:*** Ultimate reality cannot be described with ordinary language.

In the second chapter, we did some work to understand what it means that ultimate reality cannot be *described*. There is no space to repeat the arguments here, but the proposed conclusion was that we can refer to ultimate reality, and we can also give some "trivial" descriptions of it. However, it is beyond our capacities to describe its intrinsic nature.

Thus, we have a theory according to which ultimate reality can neither be accessed through our senses nor be described with ordinary language. This is the view that (particularly with respect to ineffability) Kūkai identifies as characteristic of exoteric Buddhism—*inbun kasetsu, kabun fukasetsu* (the practice leading to the result is expressible, the result is not expressible)—and to which he opposes the theory of *kabun kasetsu* (the result is expressible).

In the following pages, I will proceed as follows. First (§4.2.1), I will consider the notions of conventional and ultimate reality within Shingon Buddhism, which derive not from Yogācāra but from another school of Eastern Asian Buddhism: Huayan (Jp. Kegon). Having done that, I will turn to Kūkai's answer to Inaccessibility and Ineffability. We will see that he has a response to Inaccessibility based on his idea that reality is the sermon of Mahāvairocana (§4.2.2). I will notice that this answer addresses Ineffability only partially and turn to some final considerations to address Ineffability as well (§4.2.3).

4.2.1. The Two Realities in Shingon

The doctrine of the two realities entered in Shingon Buddhism under different notions from the Indian ones. Kūkai's starting point are the concepts of *ri* (Ch. *li*) and *ji* (Ch. *shi*), usually translated as 'principle' or 'pattern' and 'phenomena' respectively. These two notions began to be used to articulate the distinction between conventional and ultimate reality in Huayan Buddhism, introduced by the philosopher Dushun (Van Norden and Jones 2019, §2).

Let us confront these two notions with those of conventional and ultimate reality. The starting idea is that *ri*, the principle, corresponds to ultimate reality, and *ji*, phenomena, to conventional reality. However, this goes a little bit too fast, and indeed the Yogācāra philosopher would never accept it. The reason is that it is part of the notion of *ri* to be something with a structure or pattern. Thus, if we characterised ultimate reality as *ri*, we would be taking a position on its intrinsic nature, and that is forbidden by Ineffability.

More sensibly, in Yogācāra's terms, *ji* corresponds to the things we encounter in ordinary experience and *ri* to the store consciousness or to ultimate reality *as imagined*. As we have seen, the store consciousness is not ultimate reality: in the end, we have to drop our theory of the store consciousness because our description of it inevitably comes with imagining it. Accordingly, ultimate reality is beyond that, and so an immediate identification of *ri* with ultimate reality that aims to end up in the rejection of the ineffability of the latter begs the question against the yogācārin.

We have now considered how the yogācārin would build the *ri-ji* pair in her picture. How does Kūkai build the pair on his one? *Ji* are phenomena, namely the objects of the six senses. For what concerns *ri*, one may be tempted to draw a correspondence with the six elements immediately. However, this also goes too fast. Again, the term '*ri*' denotes a structure, a pattern, and that makes it corresponding not to the six elements simpliciter but to the fundamental *properties*. In other words, consciousness is excluded. What about consciousness, then? The

mental substance is understood as a third notion, which then becomes very important in the Shingon theory of the two realities: *chi* (wisdom).

With the three notions of *ji*, *ri*, and *chi*, we can give a translation of the Yogācāra view in Japanese terms: the objects we encounter in ordinary experience are *ji*, the fundamental material elements that produce them, in their external and internal aspect (which is the store consciousness), are *ri*, and ultimate reality is the ineffable suchness lying beyond all this: *chi*. The fundamental difference between Kūkai and the yogācārin, then, is that while the latter holds that *chi* is ineffable, Kūkai says that *chi* and *ri* are nondual (Jp. *richi funi*) (Veere 2000, 86).

4.2.2. The Self-Revelation of Ultimate Reality

In this section, we are going to see how Kūkai answers to Inaccessibility. In order to do that, I will first present an argument that can be extrapolated from Kūkai's doctrine and then defend it from various objections. As we will see, the main premise of Kūkai's argument is quite strong, and one may think that it would not be accepted by a person who is not already willing to accept the conclusion. That is a possible way of going. However, I will try to present reasons to accept it, also by discussing different ways in which it is possible to understand the dialectic between Kūkai and the yogācārin.

Let us start with some preliminaries. In Shingon metaphysics, the nonduality of *ri* and *chi* reduces to the nonduality of the substratum and the properties it instantiates. At the fundamental level, that is, at the level of the six elements, there is a substance—the mental element—that manifests itself in four primary ways corresponding to the properties of water, fire, earth, and wind (space adds to this as the property of the substratum to be extended). Nonduality lies in the fact that, on the one hand, these fundamental properties are *nothing but* the presentation of substance itself and, on the other, there is nothing to say about substance beyond what there is to say about its properties. Moreover, nonduality goes up to *ji*, namely phenomena or the objects of the six senses. Properties at the phenomenal level are taken by Kūkai as the revelation of substance as well; they are the revelation of substance at a higher level of articulation.

Accordingly, taking the whole *ri-ji* pair, in Yogācāra terms, as conventional reality, the fundamental difference between Kūkai and the yogācārin is the following. The Yogācāra philosopher thinks that all our inquiry into reality at all levels of articulation is an inquiry into *conventional* reality, and ultimate reality remains inaccessible beyond it. On the contrary, the Shingon philosopher takes what the yogācārin sees as conventional reality to be nothing but

the self-revelation of ultimate reality. We have access to reality in itself, and that is because what we have in our experience is nothing but the very revelation of ultimate reality.

What argument does Kūkai put forward to motivate his view? We can approach it in terms of the different aspects of the *hosshin* we were considering at the end of the previous section. The first aspect of the *hosshin* is *jishō shin*, which can be equated to ultimate reality itself, already seen as preaching. Shingen and Dreitlein describe it as "[t]he Dharmakāya body of Mahāvairocana's own-nature as the truth of suchness itself, preaching and revealing the complete truth eternally through the inherent three mysteries" (Shingen and Dreitein 2010, 367). In this respect, the revelation of ultimate reality is better understood as being for its own sake, as noticed above. However, there is a second important aspect of the *hosshin*, the *juyū shin*, which is the *hosshin* seen as preaching for the sake of sentient beings. With this idea in mind, we can run an argument as follows.

Sermon Argument:

Premise 1: Mahāvairocana reveals ultimate reality to sentient beings;
Premise 2: Sentient beings only have access to conventional reality;
Lemma: Mahāvairocana reveals ultimate reality through conventional reality;
Conclusion: Conventional reality is the revelation of ultimate reality.

The logic of the argument is the following. First, we assume that Mahāvairocana reveals ultimate reality to sentient beings and that all that sentient beings have in their experience is conventional reality. If this is correct, then it must be the case that Mahāvairocana reveals ultimate reality to sentient beings through conventional reality because there is no other possible way of doing so. Accordingly, we conclude that conventional reality is itself the revelation of ultimate reality, which challenges Inaccessibility.[50]

Let us discuss the argument and its consequences. I will consider three orders of problems that Kūkai's opponent could raise. First, we will discuss whether the argument begs the question against the Yogācāra doctrine; second, we will discuss whether the resulting view is capable of accounting for the arguments used by Yogācāra philosophers to argue for their theory; finally, we will turn to consider why one should believe that the argument is not merely

[50] While following Kūkai's thought and the Shingon doctrine, I constructed the argument with Mahāvairocana revealing ultimate reality to sentient beings, the argument could be generalised putting 'the deity' in place of 'Mahāvairocana'.

valid but also sound, and examine three ways of understanding the dialectic between Kūkai and the yogācārin.

First, consider the premises of the argument. The second premise that sentient beings only have access to conventional reality is undoubtedly okay, and indeed the Yogācāra philosopher accepts it. Moreover, if we accept the first premise as well, the conclusion seems to follow. So let us concentrate on the first premise: is it question-begging? More specifically, because the conclusion of the argument put forward by the yogācārin is that ultimate reality is ineffable (i.e. that we cannot describe it, at least in non-trivial ways), we have to ask whether the first premise *assumes* that the conclusion of the Yogācāra argument is false. I will now argue that it does not.

One way the yogācārin could argue that the first premise begs the question is the following. Mahāvairocana *is* the ultimate reality. If that is the case, then the claim that Mahāvairocana reveals ultimate reality to us is just a way of saying that ultimate reality reveals itself to us. However, that is a claim about ultimate reality, and they were forbidden by the Yogācāra's conclusion. Therefore, Kūkai's argument is question-begging.

As considered in the previous section (§4.1.2), Mahāvairocana can be considered not so much as ultimate reality but as the preaching process itself, and so as the process of revelation of ultimate reality. However, let us set this aside for the moment. In my view, it is excessively uncharitable to say that Kūkai is begging the question. Ineffability says that we cannot describe the intrinsic nature of ultimate reality, and indeed, claiming that ultimate reality reveals itself, we are not trying to characterize its nature. In effect, to me it is not obvious that Kūkai's claim goes beyond the claim we attributed to Yogācāra that ultimate reality is ineffable. It is hard to see the claim that ultimate reality is such that it cannot be accessed as a more legitimate claim than the one Kūkai is making: either both are okay, or neither is.

Moreover, there is also a sense in which Kūkai *accepts* the conclusion of the Yogācāra argument. His metaphysics ends up identifying ultimate reality or *chi* with the sixth element, which is the substance or substratum, and there is a clear sense in which the substratum *is* ineffable. Everything we say about the substance is exhausted by what we can say about the properties it exemplifies, and so we do not say anything about substance *qua* substance except that it reveals itself in form. In this sense, Kūkai agrees with the Yogācāra philosopher. However, in his view, the reason we cannot say anything about ultimate reality *qua* ultimate reality is that *there is nothing to say about it*. In conclusion, Kūkai does not seem to make a claim about ultimate reality stronger than the one the yogācārin makes.

What about the interpretation of Mahāvairocana as being not ultimate reality but the very process of its revelation and articulation? Following this path, a different way of formulating the first premise is the following: there is a process of revelation of ultimate reality, which is Mahāvairocana. Is it question-begging? That is, does the revised premise assume that the conclusion of the Yogācāra argument is false? I think that the answer is negative again. Indeed, the only reason this claim could be considered question-begging is that it implies the claim that ultimate reality reveals itself, which is the one we just considered.

The second order of problems concerns the arguments used by the yogācārin to argue for the claim that conventional reality is imagined. We considered two arguments. The first was about seeing the moon double, and it goes like this. If you look at the moon, put your fingers at the extremes of your eyes and stretch your skin, you will see it doubling. From this fact, we can run the following argument: what you see in perception is double, but the object itself is not. Therefore, what you see and the object are two distinct entities. Of course, if what we see in perception is not reality in itself, then it cannot be the case that what we have in perception is the revelation of ultimate reality. So the argument threatens the Shingon picture.

The second argument we saw in chapter two started from the purported fact that sentient beings of different species experience the same part of reality in different ways. The argument goes as follows. Consider a daisy, a human's perception of it, and a bee's perception of it. Let us call the daisy 'D,' the percept of the human 'H' and the percept of the bee 'B'. The perception of the human is qualitatively different from that of the bee, so we can infer that H is different from B. Now, if H and B are different, it cannot be the case that they are *both* identical with D because identity relations are transitive. Hence, either only one between H and B is identical to D, or neither is. However, taking the former alternative in either direction is completely unwarranted: why should we think that humans have direct access to the world while bees do not (or *vice versa*)? Therefore, we must conclude that neither H nor B is identical to D and, accordingly, that our perception of the world is indirect. Again, if this is correct, then conventional reality cannot be the revelation of ultimate reality, and the Shingon picture results threatened.

Can Kūkai answer these arguments? Although he does not address them explicitly in the texts considered, I believe that he can. Concerning the first arguments, a possible response is the following. Kūkai's theory says that conventional reality is the revelation of ultimate reality, and so that we have direct access to reality, but that does not imply that there are not possible conditions under which our access to reality can be obstructed or corrupted. If our sensory organs are functioning properly, we can access reality directly and as it is. However, why

should one assume that that must be true even if we do something to temporarily or permanently damage our organs? No one ever thought of using the story of Oedipus blinding himself to run a similar argument, saying that after he blinded himself, he saw black, but the world is not black, and so there is a separation between his experience and reality. More simply (and sensibly), if we do something that damages our perceptual apparatus, our perception comes out damaged as well. Accordingly, Kūkai could interpret the moon's case simply saying that when we stretch our skin and see the moon doubling, what we see is indeed *the moon*, but due to our action on our sensory apparatus, we see it in a perverted or corrupted way.

Second, the species' argument. There is a passage in it that I believe Kūkai could focus on, which is where the argument says that if the percept of the human is different from the percept of the bee, they cannot be both identical with the daisy. Indeed, it could be that they are both identical with the daisy if the bee's and the human's percept captured different *aspects* of the daisy. To make a parallel, if two people were looking at the two sides of the same coin, we would not argue that their percepts do not capture the same coin because they are different: the difference in their perception is compatible with the perceived object being the same because they are accessing different aspects of it. The same description can be provided for the species argument. Indeed, Kūkai's claim that conventional reality is the revelation of ultimate reality does not imply that ultimate reality is *fully* revealed to all sentient beings: perhaps different aspects (that is, properties) of reality in itself are revealed to different sentient beings with different perceptual apparatuses, and the species' argument suggests precisely that's the case.

Finally, a pressing question for Kūkai is the following. Let us agree that the first premise does not beg the question against the yogācārin. Why should we believe that the premise is true? Why should we believe that ultimate reality *does* reveal itself to us? Why should we believe that this process of revelation called '*hosshin seppō*' actually occurs?

Probably, the main reason Kūkai himself had is that the claim that ultimate reality reveals itself in the process of *hosshin seppō* could be deduced from the *Mahāvairocana sūtra*, which he considered the direct revelation of Mahāvairocana himself. According to the Shingon tradition, indeed, the esoteric teaching had been transmitted through a lineage of eight esoteric patriarchs starting with Mahāvairocana himself: Mahāvairocana, Vajrasattva, Nāgārjuna, Nāgabodhi, Vajrabodhi, Amoghavajra, Huiguo, and Kūkai. Motivating Kūkai's claim of the first premise in terms of revelation is perfectly coherent, and it is a strategy that we find, for example, in many Western Christian philosophers. However, that is a solution that works only for the adherent to Shingon Buddhism. Let us look for ways to understand the dialectic between

Shingon and Yogācāra Buddhism that does not appeal to revelation. I will consider three of them.

One way to understand the dialectic is the following. We know that the Yogācāra position has some arguably negative consequences following from its claims that ultimate reality is ineffable and conventional reality is illusory. The most immediate one is that the basic intuition that we have access to reality has to be thrown away, and a second one is that doing metaphysics becomes impossible. In light of these negative consequences, we may ask ourselves what we transcendentally need to gain reality back, and Kūkai's answer to this question is that we need ultimate reality to reveal itself. Once we have this answer, we can proceed by assessing costs and benefits of the two alternatives (the Shingon and the Yogācāra ones), and if we find reasons to think that believing in the self-revelation of ultimate reality is less costly than believing in its ineffability (which seems rather obvious), then we have a good reason to endorse Kūkai's premise.

Still, you might be unsatisfied with this way of reading the dialectic. Some people will be inclined to think that in order to be a viable alternative, Kūkai's one must be based on premises which motivations are independent of what we take to be good or costly *for us*. A possible way of taking this direction is the following.

Looking at the Yogācāra claim of the inaccessibility of conventional reality, one may think that there is a gap between conventional reality and ultimate reality in the sense that they are utterly separate. However, even if conventional reality is illusory, it must be the case that the illusion comes from ultimate reality itself. After all, only ultimate reality ultimately exists, so there is nowhere else the illusion could come from. Now, if that is correct, then the Shingon and the Yogācāra philosopher agree that there is a process of creation of conventional reality from ultimate reality, and their disagreement reduces to the fact that the latter claims that the process is a process of generation of an illusion and the former claims that it is a process of *revelation*. Accordingly, the question for Kūkai is not why we should believe that the process occurs at all, but only why we should believe that the process is a process of revelation.

Kūkai's answer to this question lies in the notion of function that we considered above (3.1.2). He claims that the process of generating what we consider conventional reality is neither an unguided nor a purposeless process. On the contrary, it is oriented to the very purpose of the revelation of existence itself, which is ultimate reality. This is a postulation on Kūkai's part, but one that has nothing to do with revelation. Some people will have the strong intuition that there is no purpose in reality, and that is fine; they will not accept Kūkai's theory (at least on this interpretation). However, those who have the intuition that reality is purposeful can

accept Kūkai's postulation of the purpose of the revelation of ultimate reality, and they will then have a starting point to endorse the Shingon alternative to the Yogācāra claim of ineffability.

Finally, a third way of looking at the dialectic is to think that Kūkai is putting the burden of proof on the opponent. After all, our intuitions tell us that we have direct access to reality and that it is possible to develop a metaphysics, so why should we begin from a position according to which we do not have access to reality and developing a metaphysics is not possible? According to this understanding of the dialectic, Kūkai can simply work out a metaphysics that explains our fundamental intuitions, and it is a problem of his opponent to find counter-arguments to that metaphysics. As long as Kūkai's theory can account for the arguments advanced by the opponent, he is safe, and in considering his answer to the argument from the "double moon" and the species' argument above, we have begun to see that his metaphysics has the explanatory power to answer many of these objections.

4.2.3. Universal Language and Ordinary Language

The foregoing has presented how Kūkai can effectively respond to Inaccessibility, but has he answered Ineffability as well? Arguably, not completely. The argument gives us that the reality we have in our ordinary experience is not an illusory elephant created by a magician: it is reality itself at a certain level of articulation. However, perhaps our language cannot describe this reality that we access through our senses in a completely accurate way. This is a problem for ontology, understood as the study of what exists. Indeed, it might be that our language is irremediably flawed for the ontological enterprise in that its grammar is irremediably different from the grammar of reality. In this final part of the chapter, I will first frame this issue more precisely and then turn to consider a passage from Kūkai's *Shōji jissō gi* to extrapolate his answer to this problem.

Consider the following metaphor. Philosophers of perception are familiar with images that we can see in different ways. For example, a famous one is a drawing that can be seen either as a duck or as a rabbit, depending on how you look at it, and another famous one can be seen either as a horse or as a frog. Well, one could say that maybe reality is like *that*. Maybe the reality that Mahāvairocana reveals to us is, so to speak, the *drawing qua drawing*, and with our language, we end up describing it *as a* duck or *as a* rabbit. If that were the case, then there is an important sense in which ordinary language would not be able to describe reality.

Of course, you could say that the point of Kūkai is not that all terms in ordinary language are capable of describing reality; the claim is simply that ordinary language can do that *in*

principle. That is correct. Nevertheless, it is not incoherent to suppose that we do not just contingently describe the drawing as the drawing of a duck or a rabbit but that we *have to*. Perhaps it is impossible for our language to describe the drawing of reality in itself. I am not saying that that is the case, only that it could, and so Kūkai has not shown us that ordinary language can describe ultimate reality yet.

Let me put the problem in terms of *monji*. We considered two ways in which *monji* can be part of semantic relations (plus a third sense in which they are expressions of the universal substratum). The first was the sense in which existences are *monji* because they are part of semantic relations that connect them to ordinary language, and the second sense was that in which external *monji* are semantically connected to *internal* ones.

Now, the problem is that it could be that while ordinary reality is the revelation of existence itself through patterns, the way in which these patterns are organised in semantic relations in the first and the second sense is different. That is, perhaps *monji* that are semantically connected to ordinary language are not the same *monji* that are part of semantic relations between the internal and the external side, and that is because our language organises the gestalt of the patterns Mahāvairocana reveals to us in a different ways from that in which Mahāvairocana organises it.

Kūkai's solution to this problem is fundamentally based on a central point of his metaphysics: that we are part of the *hosshin*, and in particular that our minds are connected to Mahāvairocana's mind so that we have at least partial access to the internal aspect of reality. This idea influences the relationship between the ordinary and the universal language. Consider the following passage from Kūkai's *Shōji jissō gi*.

> 3. If one were to say that outside of sound there are no letters, and that letters are nothing other than sound, then that would be an appositional (*karmadhāraya*) compound. If one were to say that outside of sound and letters there is no reality, and that sound and letters are nothing other than reality, then that would also be such a compound. [...]
>
> 4. If one were to say that sound, letters, and reality are mutually and fully identical and inseparable from each other, then that would be an adverbial (*avyayībhāva*) compound.
>
> 5. If one were to say that sound and letters are provisional and do not extend to truth or reality, and that the characteristics of reality are that it is silent, still, and beyond language, then sound and letters would be other than reality. Sound then

> reverberates uselessly and senselessly, and the high and low or long and short letters simply express [phonological] patterns. [...]
>
> (Shingen and Dreitlein 2010, 87-88)[51]

In this passage, Kūkai is considering the relationship between ordinary language and reality. The first two ways of understanding the relationship stated in the passage are considered *esoteric* interpretations, and the third an *exoteric* one. (Before these, Kūkai presented in the text other two interpretations that he says could be read either esoterically or exoterically, which I have omitted for brevity.) Accordingly, it is the first two explanations of the relationships that reflect Kūkai's view.

Looking at them, it is clear that Kūkai is affirming that, at least in a sense, language and reality are *identical*. In the first paragraph, he says that "outside of sound and letters there is no reality" and that "sound and letters are nothing other than reality". In the second, he states that "sound, letters, and reality are mutually and fully identical and inseparable". On one interpretation, this is not the same claim we considered in the previous section that reality is the language of Mahāvairocana: here, Kūkai is saying that *ordinary* language is identical with reality. That is, *our language is in some sense identical to the language of Mahāvairocana*.

This claim can be understood precisely by considering that we are not separate from Mahāvairocana himself according to the purported metaphysical view. Indeed, as I remarked, our consciousness is connected to the consciousness of the *hosshin*, and therefore also to the internal aspect of *monji*. If that is the case, the identity of human and the universal language can be understood as follows: human language is the way in which the universal language of Mahāvairocana makes itself present to human consciousness *from the inside*. Conversely, the objects we encounter in our experience are the way in which the language of Mahāvairocana makes itself present to human consciousness from the outside. Therefore, of course the grammar of the human language matches the grammar of the world: they are two perspectives on the same thing.

This interpretation is supported by various scholars who interpret Kūkai's picture as making the human language nothing but a special case of the universal one (Abe 1999, 289; Izutsu 1985, 7). Indeed, in his *Shōji jissō gi* Kūkai explicitly states that "The Dharmakāya is the source at the root of these names. They flow from the Dharmakāya, *and eventually transform to become the common speech of the world*" (Shingen and Dreitlein 2010, 102).[52] Moreover, he

[51] Cfr. (Hakeda 1984, 237).
[52] Cfr. (Hakeda 1984, 242).

explicitly gives this explanation in the context of a discourse where he was asked how can mantras (i.e. truth words) *refer* to objects (Hakeda 1984, 241; Shingen and Dreitlein 2010, 100), and rises this as an explanation of why that is possible. Hence, Kūkai thinks that our ability to employ our language to refer to reality accurately depends upon its having roots in the universal language of Mahāvairocana.

This solution to the problem also addresses the question we left open in the previous chapter of whether the word 'semantics' has two different meanings when applied to the human and the universal language. The answer is that it does not because, according to the proposed picture, the semantics of the human language is grounded in the semantics of the universal language. In effect, the former is just a special case of the latter. It is a subset of the universal language, and in particular, the subset of the universal language used in their everyday lives by the dissociated alters of the universal deity Mahāvairocana.

Moreover, and finally, the interpretation of Kūkai I have proposed offers a good way of understanding the Shingon practices of so-called 'remotivation of signs,' extensively analysed by Rambelli (2013). As he notices, for Kūkai's theory to really motivate, in the eyes of people in Medieval Japan, the capacity of language to affect reality, it was not enough to merely state that language and reality are identical. The identity "must be self-evident from the structure of language itself, as a way for Tantric practices to result really as efficacious and instantaneous as they claimed to be" (Rambelli 2013, 9). This aim was pursued through processes of remotivation of signs, that is, processes oriented at "overcoming the arbitrariness of language and signs by finding a special, "natural" relation between expressions, meanings, and referential objects" (Rambelli 2013, 14).

The framework I have outlined is perfect for doing so. In my interpretation, the point of the remotivation of signs is understanding how the relationship between ordinary language and reality reduces to the relationship between the external and the internal aspects of reality, and so understanding how the semantics of human language reduces to the semantic of the universal one. This makes clear that, in Kūkai's theory, ordinary language is perfectly able to describe reality as it is.

4.3. Conclusion

We have finally reached the end of the journey. In this essay, I have been interpreting and presenting the response of Kūkai to the claims of Inaccessibility and Ineffability that we found in Yogācāra Buddhism.

I started by discussing Vasubandhu's doctrine of the three natures, which I used to frame the distinction between conventional and ultimate reality. Then, I inferred from that interpretation the claim that ultimate reality cannot be accessed in ordinary experience and the claim that it cannot be described with ordinary language. The challenge for Kūkai was providing an alternative to this picture. In order to present his alternative, I considered relevant passages from Kūkai's text and provided an interpretation of the metaphysical picture there contained. On the basis of it, I reframed the distinction between conventional and ultimate reality in Shingon terms and provided an interpretation of Kūkai's response to the Yogācāra picture. According to Kūkai, first, we can access ultimate reality because the conventional reality we experience is nothing but the manifestation of ultimate reality and, second, we can use our ordinary language to describe it because the semantics of our language is grounded in the semantics of the universal language of Mahāvairocana himself.

Of course, as noticed in the first chapter, we should never forget that Kūkai's concerns were not merely philosophical but also eminently practical. He was concerned with justifying the existence of Shingon Buddhism in the social context of Heian Japan, and the texts that we discussed had in part that purpose. I pointed out above how the Shingon texts—the *Mahāvairocana sūtra* in particular—are considered by Shingon practitioners the direct translation in the human language of Mahāvairocana's universal revelation. Accordingly, Kūkai's philosophical framework also had the purpose of motivating the absolute value of the Shingon teachings: following his line, the Shingon lineage had a privileged and privately owned access to the esoteric teachings, which also justified the existence and effectiveness of Shingon practices of manipulations of *monji* to obtain worldly benefits.

While all these were very central concerns from Kūkai's perspective, as a philosopher interested in philosophical issues, I have tried in this essay to interpret the doctrine elaborated by Kūkai from a philosophical standpoint. Hopefully, I succeeded in showing that there is a lot we can learn from Kūkai and, more generally, from non-Western philosophers of all traditions, giving a little contribution to making philosophy more cross-cultural.

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