

VISUALIZATION AND MANDALA IN SHINGON BUDDHISM

Robert H. Sharf

One of the truisms in the study of East Asian Buddhist Tantra is that the depictions of deities associated with Tantric practice—notably the often complex geometric arrays of divinities known as mandalas (fig. 4.1 and pl. 7)—function as aids for visualization practices. Such practices, which are purportedly the mainstay of Tantric Buddhist meditation, are understood as exercises in which the practitioner attempts to construct an image of the “principal deity” (J: *honzon* 本尊) associated with a given rite in the “mind’s eye.”¹ Accomplishment at visualization is regarded as an essential step in the realization of the ultimate identity of the practitioner and the principal deity. Since the principal deity is invariably declared to be a manifestation or emanation of Mahāvairocana Buddha, and since Mahāvairocana is none other than the *dharmadhātu* (J: *hokkai* 法界), or absolute truth itself, identification with the principal deity is tantamount to the realization of the absolute within oneself. In another rubric, it is the affirmation of inherent “buddha nature.” The goal of Shingon *mikkyō* 密教 (“esoterism”), thus understood, is consonant with the aims of Mahayana soteriology in general.

The claim that mandalas function as aids for visualization can be found in a wide variety of works on Shingon and *mikkyō* mandalas. In his study of the Shingon fire sacrifice (*goma* 護摩), for example, Richard Payne writes that one

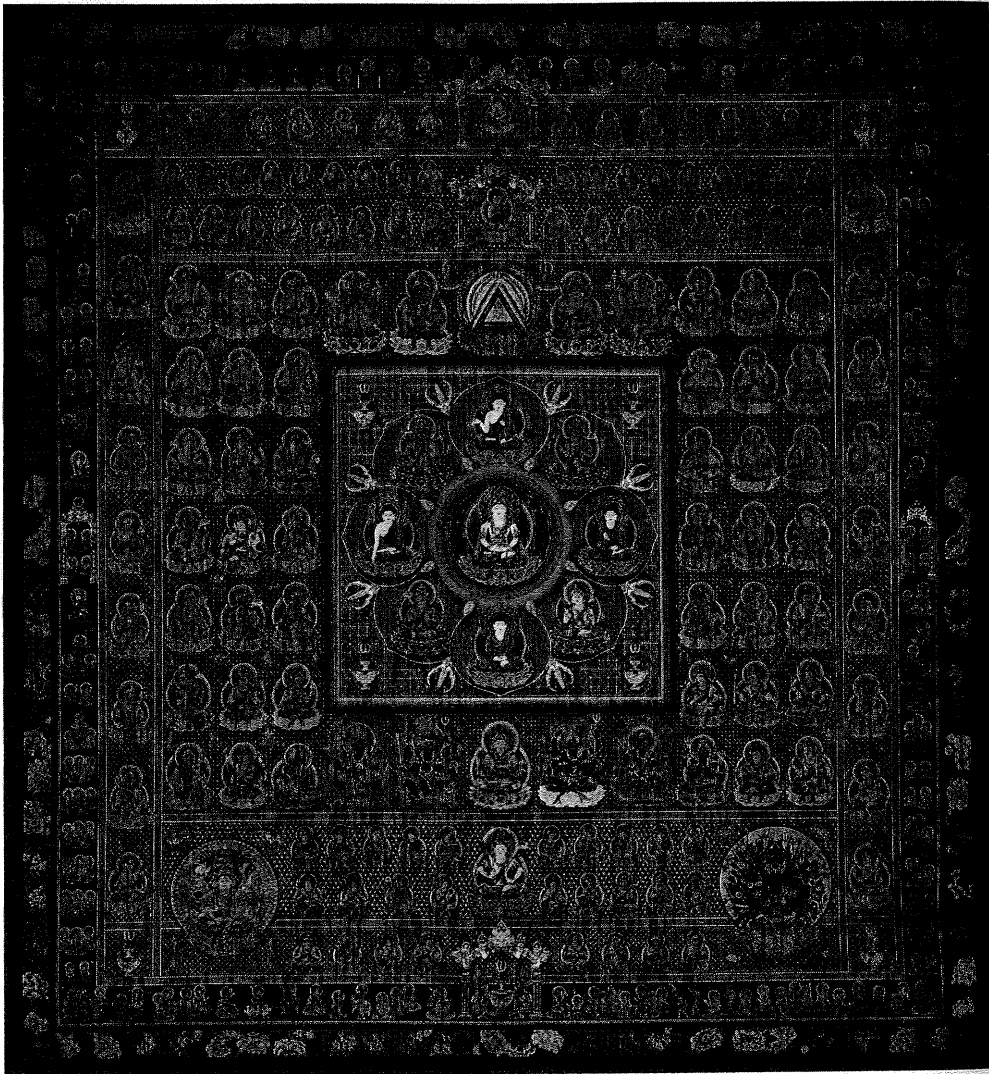


FIGURE 4.1 Taizōkai mandala (Sk: *garbhadhātu maṇḍala*, matrix-realm mandala). 1693. One of a pair of hanging scrolls (*Ryōgai mandara*, mandala of the two worlds), ink and colors on silk, 410.9 × 379.0 cm. each. Kanjōin, Kyōōgokokuji (Tōji), Kyoto Prefecture. Photo: Kyōōgokokuji.

characteristic feature of Buddhist Tantra is the use of “images, both paintings and sculptures, as a part of ritual and as the objective base for visualization.”² Ishida Hisatoyo, the preeminent Japanese scholar of East Asian Tantric mandalas, is even more explicit: “It is . . . extremely difficult to perceive the Buddha in one’s head by concentrating one’s thoughts. For this reason the image mandala [*gyōzō mandara*], in which objects or statues are placed or painted on the altar, was created to help the devotee experience the depths of contemplation and perceive the Buddha.”³

Statements to this effect are ubiquitous in the scholarly literature.⁴ Yet rarely, if ever, do scholars bother to substantiate the claim with historical or ethnographic evidence. The notion that mandalas function as aids for visualization seems to be one of those truisms so widely and unquestioningly held that corroboration of any kind is deemed unnecessary. Indeed, the complex epistemological problems entailed in the use of the term “visualization” are rarely, if ever, acknowledged.

As I began my own study of Shingon ritual systems I was, accordingly, surprised to find that Shingon rituals themselves offer little support for this view. To begin with, neither the manuals used for the performance of major Shingon rituals (*shidai* 次第, Sk: *vidhi*), nor the available “oral commentaries” (*kuden* 口傳) associated with various lineages or “streams” (*ryū* 流) of Shingon *mikkyō*, instruct the practitioner to use mandalas in such a manner.⁵ This might not be significant were it not for the fact that explicit instructions *are* provided for the use of virtually every other piece of ritual paraphernalia arrayed on and about the altar.

Even more striking is the fact that there is little obvious correlation between the elaborate graphic detail of the major Shingon mandalas, on the one hand, and the content of the specific rites with which they are associated, on the other. Finally, the commonly accepted understanding of “visualization”—the notion that Shingon rites involve fixing a technicolor image of one or more deities in the mind’s eye—is borne out neither by an examination of the ritual manuals, nor by ethnographic evidence pertaining to the utilization of such manuals.

Accordingly, my goal in this chapter is to raise some problems concerning the claim that (1) Shingon meditative practices center on the mental construction or inner visualization of mandala-like images, and (2) Shingon mandalas are used as aids in visualization exercises. I will hereafter refer to both

claims under the rubric of the “phenomenological model,” because they are enmeshed in an approach to the subject that privileges the “inner experience” of the practitioner over the performative and sacerdotal dimensions of the rite. I intend to cast doubt on the veracity of the phenomenological model by focusing on a sequence of Shingon initiations known as the Shidokeyō 四度加行, or “four emancipatory practices.” More specifically, my analysis will concentrate on the first two of these rites, namely the Jūhachidō 十八道 (eighteen-methods practice) and the Kongōkai 金剛界 (*vajra*-realm practice). My selection of these two complex rituals out of the dozens commonly performed in Shingon monasteries is not arbitrary: the Jūhachidō not only is the first major ritual to be mastered by Shingon initiates but also is paradigmatic for virtually all others; all subsequent ritual initiations are structured as variants or expansions of the “eighteen methods.” The Kongōkai is the second major practice to be undertaken. Because it is associated with the elaborate Kongōkai mandala, this practice is particularly well suited to serve as a test case for the relationship between rite and icon. Despite the need to restrict the scope of this study to this small corner of the Buddhist Tantric universe, I expect the methodological issues raised here will be of some interest to scholars working on other Buddhist ritual traditions as well.

Aids to Visualization

I certainly do not want to imply that the use of images or physical objects as foci for meditation is foreign to Buddhism. Indeed, a host of Theravādin concentration exercises, as systematized in the *Visuddhimagga* for example, use natural or fabricated objects as the subject of meditative visualizations, and there is no reason to doubt the antiquity of such practices.

Typical of the Theravādin exercises are the *kasīna* meditations, which use the four “physical elements” as a means of concentrating the mind and attaining absorption (*jhāna*). The meditation on the earth *kasīna*, for example, involves the use of a smooth clay disk “the color of the dawn.” Such a disk can be fabricated on a portable canvas made by “tying rags or leather or matting onto four sticks,” or alternatively constructed on a fixed spot “made by knocking stakes into the ground in the form of a lotus calyx, lacing them over with creepers.”⁶ Having made ready the *kasīna*, the practitioner cleans the surrounding area, takes a bath, seats himself on a raised chair a short distance from the disk, and proceeds to develop a mental image of the earth disk. He

does this by alternately gazing at the disk, then trying to visualize it with eyes closed. In order to keep the mind focused he may repeat a word to himself that characterizes the earth element, such as “earth, earth.” Eventually the disk will appear with eyes closed exactly as it appears with eyes open, at which point he is to withdraw to his own quarters and continue to practice there. Should his concentration flag, however, he must return to the place in which the *kasīna* is installed and begin again.⁷ Exercises on the other *kasīna* (water, fire, air, blue, yellow, red, white, light, and “limited space”) are developed in much the same manner: in each instance the practitioner begins by using a natural or fabricated object in order to develop a mental image.⁸

Kasīna practices are merely one group of concentration techniques that use physical objects as supports; one might also mention the meditations on foulness (*asubhabhāvanā*) in which the monk meditates on a corpse in one of ten specified stages of decomposition.⁹ Once the adept fixes the mental image, he uses the image to attain meditative absorption in much the same manner as a *kasīna* is used.

Neither the *kasīna* practices nor the meditations on foulness ever became popular in China. However, from the dawn of Chinese Buddhism devout Buddhists meditated upon Amitābha and his Pure Land, occasionally making use of iconographic depictions of Amitābha to engender faith and to inspire visions.¹⁰ Such practices, generally subsumed under the heading “recollection of the Buddha” (C: *nien-fo* 念佛, J: *nenbutsu*, Sk: *buddhānusmṛti*), may well have evolved from earlier exercises in which devotees would meditate on the qualities of the Buddha, a form of which is still practiced in Theravādin countries today.¹¹ In any case, scholars of East Asian Pure Land often depict such practices in terms reminiscent of the “phenomenological model”:

Amongst meditative types of buddha-reflection we may distinguish a form called buddha-contemplation [*kuan-fo/kanbutsu*]. This is the practice of gazing upon an image or painting of Amitābha or his land until a mental image of this can be retained in the mind’s eye when the eyes are closed. This vision is then developed—or develops—into a presence of the actual Buddha such that we may describe it as a “buddhophany,” a manifestation or appearance of the actual Buddha.¹²

It would move this discussion too far afield to chronicle the development and significance of Buddhist visualization techniques in East Asia. Suffice it to say that references to such practices are found in Buddhist literature associated with a variety of traditions, sects, and cultural spheres. All of this would be

pear to render the phenomenological model—the notion that Tantric mandalas are used as supports for visualization exercises—unproblematic.

Indeed, there are unambiguous references to the use of painted and sculpted images as props for meditation in a number of Chinese Tantric scriptures and commentaries. Typical is the following passage from fascicle 11 of the *Ta p'i-lu-che-na ch'eng-fo ching shu* 大毘盧遮那成佛經疏, I-hsing's 一行 (683–727) commentary to the *Ta-jih ching* 大日經:¹³

When the practitioner first cultivates the skillful means of the contemplation 觀 of the super-mundane he begins by contemplating the principal deity. Relying on a painted image 依畫像 he contemplates thoroughly. At first he attains illumination 明了 with eyes closed; later, gradually opening his eyes, he perceives [the deity and the deity becomes] fully manifest and illumined without any obscurity. [However] this is not yet absorption.¹⁴ Should he attain this [illumination] the mind will give rise to both faith and joy, and from this faith the mind is purified. Gradually he attains the [stage of] nonduality wherein the mind is free of all craving and attachment. But nonduality must also be relinquished in order to attain the apprehension of the non-distinction between the middle and the extremes. When all mental conditions have been relinquished the myriad dharmas are equal and the same; this moment is called the mark of absolute equality 等至相. But [prior to this], when the various marks are still manifest, although there is not yet consummation, one is still able to gradually attain consummation. Therefore this is called the stage wherein there is not yet absorption 未等引地.¹⁵

This passage goes on to describe the process of contemplation, wherein the image of the deity is manifest before the adept in fine detail, and the body of the practitioner becomes one with the body of the principal deity.

Such passages from the hands of authoritative Chinese masters, insofar as they explicitly enjoin the practitioner to “rely on a painted image,” would seem to offer unequivocal support for the phenomenological model. However, explicit directives countenancing the use of an image to assist in Tantric “visualizations” are not as common as one might suppose in the East Asian Buddhist corpus. One must also be cautious lest one ascribe undue authority to I-hsing's remarks; although there are scriptural precedents for such injunctions,¹⁶ I-hsing's commentary is nonetheless a scholastic compendium whose function vis-à-vis Tantric practice is prescriptive rather than descriptive.¹⁷ The evidence provided by Shingon ritual manuals, as well as the ethnographic data bearing on the performance of Shingon rites, suggests that the major Shingon mandalas were not necessarily employed in the manner described by I-hsing.

Shingon Ritual

The Shingon ritual tradition comprises a systematic if staggeringly complex system of invocation rites centered upon particular deities or families of deities. In order to better understand the nature of Shingon “visualization” we must turn directly to this ritual system as delineated in ritual manuals and liturgies, rather than rely on the theoretical and ideological formulations of the scholastic literature. Before turning to specific rites, however, a word of introduction is necessary for those unfamiliar with the structure of Shingon invocations.

When Kūkai 空海 (774–835) returned to Japan in 806 after spending slightly less than two years in China, he carried with him a substantial body of ritual manuals and implements associated with a multitude of invocation and empowerment (*kaji* 加持) rituals.¹⁸ He and his disciples are credited with systematizing this vast body of procedures and instituting a series of four initiations, the Shidokeyō or “four emancipatory practices,” as a common course of training for all Shingon monks.¹⁹ These rituals, mastered during the course of an ascetic retreat often lasting one hundred days or more,²⁰ constitute what is in effect a primer of ritual grammar, wherein the novice acquires proficiency in the underlying syntax and basic lexicon of the Shingon system.

The essential structure of the rites is mastered in the first practice, the Jūhachidō or “eighteen methods.”²¹ A tenth-century ritual manual for the eighteen methods articulates a sequence of seventy-one procedures; these component rites form the underlying structure for all subsequent initiations.²² An additional fifty to eighty rites are added with each of the three major rituals that follow the eighteen methods, namely the Kongōkai (*vajra*-realm practice), Tai-zōkai 胎藏界 (matrix-realm practice), and Goma (fire sacrifice). By the completion of the Shidokeyō and the anointment that follows (J: *kanjō* 灌頂, Sk: *abhiṣeka*), the adherent has learned literally hundreds of ritual segments, comprising a lexicon that is ideally at his or her beck and call.

All Shingon invocation rituals are structured around a narrative concerning a visit by an honored guest (the principal deity) who is entertained and feted by the host (the practitioner). According to tradition, this narrative has its roots in ancient Indian customs governing the manner in which one receives and treats a distinguished visitor.²³ The narrative functions as an overarching schema, lending coherence and narrative unity to the various isolated and often fragmentary units that comprise the rites. The schema is clearly manifest

The ritual day is broken into three periods, each marked by a single performance or “sitting” (*ichiza gyōbō* 一座行法) of the Jūhachidō.²⁴ Prior to each performance of the rite, the practitioner prepares the altar (*mitsudan* 密壇), setting out in carefully prescribed fashion fresh flowers, food (in the form of uncooked rice), candles, and censers prepared with pressed incense powder. The practitioner further prepares six small cups (*rokki* 六器) containing arrangements of cut *shikimi* 檜 leaves and water that will be offered to the visiting gods. (One pair of cups represents holy water [*aka* 闍伽] for bathing the feet of the gods, one pair represents unguents [*zūkō* 塗香], and one pair a garland of flowers [*keman* 華鬘].) The practitioner then purifies him- or herself by washing the hands, rinsing the mouth, and putting on clean robes prior to entering the practice hall.

What follows is an overview of the Jūhachidō ritual following a traditional method of parsing the ritual into nine sections.²⁵ This outline takes as its model the Jūhachidō used in the Sanbōinryū 三寶院流 initiatory line; the differences between the rites as performed by one Shingon lineage and another are, however, minor.²⁶

1. “Procedure for Adorning the Practitioner” (*shōgon gyōja hō* 莊嚴行者法). The ritual begins with a series of procedures that purify and empower the practitioner. One enters the hall chasing away demons with *mudrā* and mantra and then imagines it overflowing with tathāgatas. One anoints one’s body with incense and uses a variety of rites, each consisting of a *mudrā*, mantra, and contemplation, to purify mind and body.
2. “Samantabhadra’s Vows” (*Fugen gyōgan hō* 普賢行願法). This section opens with a sequence of rites that purify and empower the ritual implements themselves. Thereupon various and sundry divine spirits (*kami* 神) are invoked in two rites: the “declaration of intent” (*hyōhyaku* 表白) and the “supplication to the spirits” (*jinbun kigan* 神分祈願). In the former, done only during the first performance of the rite, the practitioner declares his or her mission to the *kami* and solicits their assistance. The latter consists of specific requests, covering everything from appeals for the salvation of all beings to entreaties for the health of the emperor and seasonal rains. Each request is followed by offerings consisting of the recitation of *sūtras* (done in most cases by intoning the title alone), and the recitation of the names of buddhas and bodhisattvas. This section closes with vows of repentance and refuge and further purifications.

3. “Procedure for Binding the [Sacred] Realm” (*kekkaï hō* 結界法). This consists of a set of three rites that prepare the sanctuary for the arrival of the deity. Using ritual gestures, mantras, and contemplations the practitioner drives a pillar from his or her seat to the center of the earth rendering it “immobile,” and an indestructible *vajra* wall is erected around the four sides of the sanctuary. The roof, through which the principal deity will later enter, is not yet sealed.
4. “Procedure for Adorning the Sanctuary” (*shōgon dōjō hō* 莊嚴道場法). This consists primarily of the *dōjōkan* 道場觀 (contemplation of the sanctuary), an elaborate meditation on the principal deity in his pure land. I will examine this segment in some detail below.
5. “Procedure for Inviting the Deities [into the Sanctuary]” (*kanjō hō* 勸請法). This segment uses *mudrā*, mantras, and contemplations to dispatch a carriage to pick up the principal deity and his retinue, entice them into the carriage, and convey them to the sanctuary. The deities are greeted with applause.
6. “Procedure for Binding and Protecting [the Sanctuary]” (*ketsugo hō* 結護法). Here one undertakes a series of procedures that complete the preparation of the sanctuary by ritually sealing it off from the outside world. A *vajra* net covers the roof and the entire sanctuary is surrounded by a ring of fire. Batō Kannon 馬頭觀音 (Horse-headed Kannon), a wrathful incarnation of Avalokiteśvara, guards the precincts.
7. “Procedure for Offerings” (*kuyō hō* 供養法). Various offerings are then made to the guests. Following what is taken to be Indian custom, one begins by offering water to wash the deities’ feet. The deities are then offered lotus thrones to sit upon and are entertained with music. This is followed by individual offerings of incense, unguents, flowers, food, drink, light, eulogies, and prayers.
8. “Procedure for Recitation” (*nenju hō* 念誦法). This is the centerpiece of all Esoteric rituals proper, in which one realizes the identity of the practitioner and the principal deity.²⁷ It consists of three procedures, punctuated by the invocation of the principal deity through his mantra(s). Some exegetes hold that this section of the rite effects a merger of the principal deity and the practitioner through the successive identification of the body, speech, and mind of the practitioner with the body, speech, and mind of the deity. However, it can also be seen as the ritual enactment of the fundamental unity or nonduality of deity and practitioner, rendering the term “merger” somewhat misleading. The “procedure for recitation” is broken down into the following segments:

- a. “[The Deity] Enters Me and I Enter [the Deity]” (*nyūga-ga'nyū* 入我我入). This enacts the merger or essential identity of the body of the principal deity and that of the practitioner. I will examine it in some detail below.
- b. “Empowerment of the Principal Deity” (*honzon kaji* 本尊加持), also known as the “three *mudrā* and mantra of the principal deity” (*honzon sanshuin shingon* 本尊三種印真言). In the *Jūhachidō* of the Sanbōinryū, in which Nyoirin Kannon 如意輪觀音 (Cintāmanicakra Avalokiteśvara, fig. 4.2) is the principal deity, this segment consists of multiple recitations of Nyoirin’s three mantras: the “great mantra” (*daiju* 大咒), the “middle” (or “heart”) mantra (*chūju* 中咒, *shinju* 心咒), and the “heart within the heart mantra” (*shinchūshinju* 心中心咒), along with a specified *mudrā* for each.
- c. “Formal Recitation” (*shōnenju* 正念誦). This contemplation focuses on the second of the “three mysteries,” that of speech. It involves the manipulation of an ornate rosary reserved exclusively for the performance of this rite. This rosary is first carefully removed from its lacquer box and put through a series of purifications and empowerments. The practitioner then makes 108 slow repetitions of the “heart mantra” of the principal deity, manipulating the rosary in such a fashion that his hands form the *mudrā* known as “teaching of the law” (*seppō no in* 說法之印). The mantra is accompanied by an elaborate contemplation wherein the syllables of the mantra are imagined to circulate through the body of the principal deity, emerge from his mouth, enter the head of the practitioner, circulate through his body, emerge from his mouth, and enter the belly of the principal deity, where the process begins all over again.
- d. “Empowerment of the Principal Deity” (as above).
- e. “Contemplation of the Syllable Wheel” (*jirinkan* 字輪觀). This represents the third of the “three mysteries,” that of the identity of the mind of the practitioner and the mind of the principal deity. Due to the importance of this segment, which is arguably the climax of the entire ritual, I will look at it too in detail below.
- f. “Empowerment of the Principal Deity” (as above).
- g. “Dispersed Recitations” (*sannenju* 散念誦). This is variously interpreted as “miscellaneous recitations,” “scattering recitations,” and so on. In the *Jūhachidō* manuals of both the Sanbōin and Chūin lineages it involves the repetition of twelve mantras of varying lengths, each repeated anywhere from seven to one thousand times. This sec-

tion of the rite can take up to one hour to complete, that is, one-half to one-third of the total duration of the ritual.

9. “Final Offerings” (*gō kuyō* 後供養). The ritual winds down with a repetition of many of the offerings and purifications found in the first seven sections of the rite, although they are subject to considerable abbreviation. Near the close of the performance the ritual seal around the sanctuary is broken, and the barrier of fire, the net over the roof, and the *vajra* wall are removed in the reverse order in which they were erected. The deities are sent on their way and the *goshinbō* 護身法 (protection of the body) purifications found in the opening section are repeated.

The outline above is sufficient to give a general idea of the structure of the *Jūhachidō*. At the completion of the *Jūhachidō* retreat, which typically lasts four weeks, one moves on directly to the Kongōkai practice. The underlying structure of the Kongōkai is precisely that of the *Jūhachidō*, although the overall sequence has been considerably expanded by the addition of dozens of other ritual segments (see below). Furthermore, the liturgical content of many segments common to the *Jūhachidō* is altered to reflect the fact that the principal deity is now Kongōkai Mahāvairocana. The result is a more complex and longer procedure.

After the Kongōkai the practitioner moves on to the Taizōkai, also structured as an expansion of the *Jūhachidō*. After four weeks spent on the Kongōkai and another four on the Taizōkai, one comes to the final and most arduous rite of the Shidokeyō, namely the Goma or fire ritual. The Shidokeyō Goma consists of a five-tiered fire sacrifice (it involves five rounds of offerings) devoted to Fudō Myōō 不動明王, which is inserted whole into the *Jūhachidō* sequence in the midst of the *sannenju*, or “dispersed recitations.”

Upon completing the four Shidokeyō initiations the practitioner is eligible to receive *denbō kanjō* 傳法灌頂 (consecration of dharma transmission) making him (or, more rarely, her) a “master,” or *ajari* 阿闍梨 (Sk: *ācārya*). Although this chapter focuses on Shingon *mikkyō*, that is, the *tōmitsu* 東密 tradition of Japanese Esoterism, it is worth mentioning that the *taimitsu* 台密 Shidokeyō initiations used in the Tendai school are essentially identical, the main difference being that in Tendai the Taizōkai practice precedes the Kongōkai.²⁸ In both the Shingon and Tendai schools it is highly unusual to perform the *Jūhachidō*, Kongōkai, or Taizōkai after receiving *denbō*. An abbreviated form of the Goma, by contrast, is performed regularly in Shingon and

Tendai monasteries. Should a practitioner wish to continue the ascetic training, he or she may seek formal initiation into one of the many supplementary *mikkyō* practices such as the *rishukyō bō* 理趣經法 or the *kōmyōshingon bō* 光明真言法.

Contemplation of the Three Mysteries

As should now be apparent, a Shingon ritual invocation is comprised of dozens, sometimes hundreds, of small ritual segments. Some of these are primarily liturgical recitations such as the *jinbun kigan* (supplication to the spirits), the *go daigan* 五大願 (five great bodhisattva vows), or the *ekō* 廻向 (transference of merit). Such liturgies are composed in classical Japanese or Chinese and are typically performed with palms joined together in *gasshō* 合掌 or with hands ceremonially clasping the *egōro* 柄香炉 (a hand-held censer) and rosary. Other ritual segments consist of combinations of a *mudrā* and mantra known as *inmyō* 印明 (literally “*mudrā*-mantra”). The segments that are of primary concern to this study, however, consist of three elements performed more or less in unison: (1) a *mudrā*; (2) an utterance, usually a mantra or *dhāraṇī* but sometimes a verse, vow, or prayer; and (3) a “contemplation.” These “tripartite rites” constitute the core of the Shingon ritual system: they incorporate the body, speech, and mind of the practitioner and thus ritually instantiate the “three mysteries” (*sanmitsu* 三密) of Shingon doctrine. When one talks of Shingon “visualizations” one is thus properly referring to the third component of these tripartite rites—the ritual procedure linked to the “mystery of mind” (*imitsu* 意密). In order to understand the nature of Shingon visualizations we must focus our attention on this specific component of the tripartite rites.

I will begin with a relatively straightforward rite, the *sanmikkan* 三密觀, or “contemplation of the three mysteries,” which appears in virtually all major Tantric rituals in the Sanbōinryū tradition. This segment is performed near the beginning of each sitting, after the practitioner has assumed his seat in the sanctuary, made final adjustments to the altar, and anointed his body with unguents. The instructions read as follows:

Place the palms together to form the lotus blossom *mudrā*. Then imagine 想 that in between the palms and on top of the tongue and the heart there is a moon disk. On the disk is an eight-petaled lotus blossom, on top of which is the syllable *un*. The syllable changes and becomes a five-pronged *vajra* emit-

ting rays of light that destroy the defilements and impurities of body, speech, and mind. Intone the syllable *un* three times.²⁹

Although relatively simple, the *sanmikkan* “contemplation” or “visualization” contains many characteristic elements found in more elaborate tripartite rites. First, note that the contemplation is introduced by the term *sō* 想, “to think,” “contemplate,” “imagine,” and so on. In fact, a wide variety of terms are used in Shingon materials to refer to the “mental component,” or *imitsu*, of the rite, including *kan* 觀, *kansō* 觀想, *kansatsu* 觀察, *teikan* 諦觀, *kannen* 觀念, *nensō* 念想, and *shii* 思惟. There is little to be gained by trying to distinguish the meaning of these terms in English, as Sino-Japanese Buddhist lexicons state that they are used more or less interchangeably—a position quickly borne out by a survey of Shingon ritual texts (see below).

Secondly, one finds that the contemplation of the *sanmikkan* is not static, but rather consists of a series of changing or mutating images: the final image of a *vajra* emitting light evolves from a “seed-syllable” (*shūji* 種子, Sk: *bīja*) sitting on a lotus blossom set upon a lunar disk. Such seed syllables figure prominently in many of the contemplations, especially in cardinal segments such as the *dōjōkan* and the *jirinkan*. Finally, note that the contemplation includes a “discursive gloss,” specifically the statement that the rays of light shining from the *vajra* “destroy the defilements and impurities of body, speech, and mind.” I characterize this phrase as “discursive” because it does not suggest any obvious visual or pictorial correlate.

Indeed, as will become evident below, “visualization” is a dubious choice for an English equivalent of terms such as *kansō* and *kannen*. These technical Sino-Japanese terms refer to procedures whose elements are often more discursive, literary, or tropical than they are visual or graphic. Accordingly, in the discussion below, in which I examine considerably more elaborate segments drawn from the Shidokeyō, I will avoid using the terms “visualize” and “visualization” in favor of “think,” “imagine,” “contemplate,” “discern,” and so on.

Contemplation of the Sanctuary

Certain segments of the Shidokeyō practices entail rather elaborate contemplations, including the *dōjōkan*, or “contemplation of the sanctuary,” found in virtually all Shingon invocation rituals. The *dōjōkan* occurs in the first half of the ritual sequence, after the practitioner’s final adjustments to the altar.

and the sanctuary have been individually purified and empowered, but prior to summoning the principal deity to the sanctuary. The *dōjōkan* consists of a meditation on the principal deity and his retinue emerging from a series of seed syllables. Since the contemplative element of this rite includes a graphic description of the principal deity in anthropomorphic form, this is a good place to begin to examine the relationship between a ritual procedure and a painted mandala.

Before the practitioner begins the Jūhachidō retreat he or she must prepare (more technically, “adorn,” *shōgon* 莊嚴) the sanctuary and its altar. As part of these preparations three icons (typically paintings) are installed in front of the altar: an image of the principal deity flanked by a portrait of Kūkai on the right, and a lineage patriarch on the left. The identity of the principal deity and lineage patriarch will differ depending on the lineage; the Chūinryū 中院流 popular on Mount Kōya, for example, uses Dainichi Nyorai 大日如來 (Mahāvairocana) as the principal deity, and the Sanbōinryū stemming from Daigoji 醍醐寺 in Kyoto uses Nyoirin Kannon (fig. 4.2).³⁰ Sanbōinryū monks will thus place an image of Nyoirin directly in front of the altar, with Kūkai to the right, and Shōbō 聖寶 (Rigen Daishi 理源大師, 832–909) on the left.³¹ The pictorial depiction of Nyoirin used in the Sanbōinryū will ideally conform to the description of the deity found in the *dōjōkan* of the Sanbōinryū Jūhachidō manual, which reads as follows:

Assume the “tathāgata fist *mudrā*” [*nyorai kenin* 如來拳印]. . . Contemplate 觀念 as follows: In front [of me] is the syllable *ah* (J: *aku*). The syllable changes into a palatial hall of jewels. Inside is an altar with stepped walkways on all four sides. Arrayed in rows are jeweled trees with embroidered silk pennants suspended from each. On the altar is the syllable *brīh* (*kiriku*) which changes and becomes a crimson lotus blossom terrace. On top is the syllable *a* (*a*) which changes and becomes a full moon disk. On top is the syllable *brīh* (*kiriku*), and to the left and right there are two *trāh* (*taraku*) syllables. The three syllables change and become a *vajra* jewel lotus. The jewel lotus changes into the principal deity, with six arms and a body the color of gold. The top of his head is adorned with a jeweled crown. He sits in the posture of the Freedom King (*jizai ō* 自在王), assuming the attribute of preaching the dharma. From his body flow a thousand rays of light, and his upper torso is encircled by a radiant halo. His upper right arm is in the posture of contemplation. His second right arm holds the wish-fulfilling gem. His third right arm holds a rosary. His upper left arm touches the mountain [beneath him]. His second left arm holds a lotus blossom. His third left arm holds a

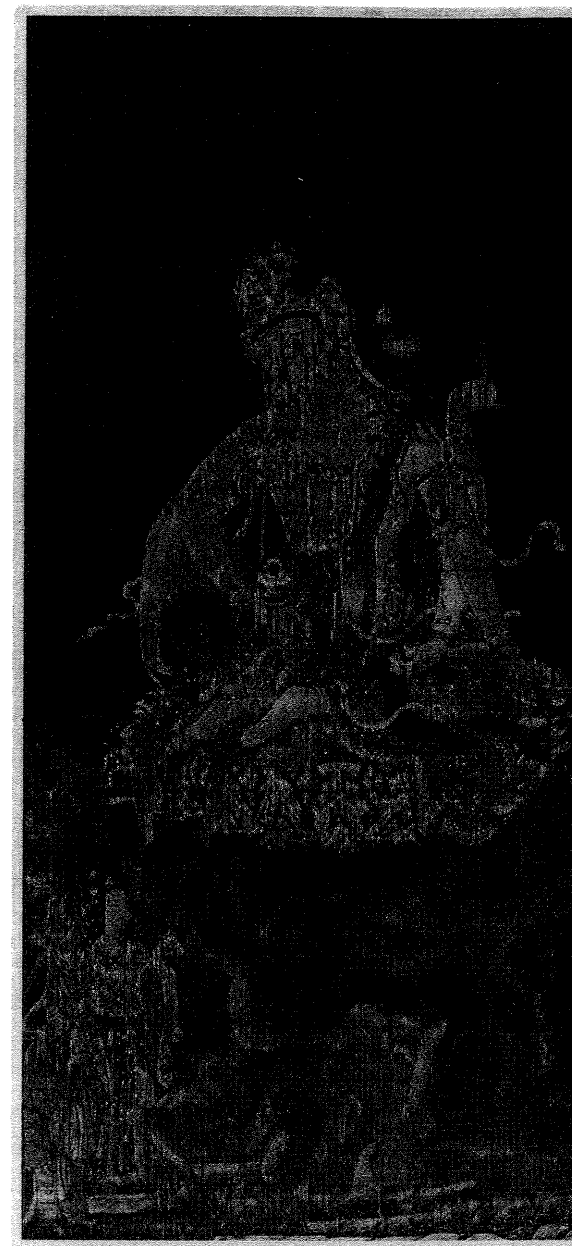


FIGURE 4.2 Nyoirin Kannon (Sk: Cintāmaṇicakra Avalokiteśvara). Twelfth century. Panel, ink and color on silk, 98.5 × 44.5 cm. Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (Fenollosa-Weld Collection 11.4032). Reproduced with permission. © 2000 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. All rights reserved.

wheel. His magnificent body of six arms is able to roam the six realms, employing the skillful means of great compassion to end the suffering of all sentient beings. The eight great Kannon and the innumerable members of the Lotus-realm assembly surround him on all sides.

When finished with this contemplation take the *mudrā* and empower the following seven spots [that is, touch each place on the body with the *mudrā*]: left knee, abdomen, right knee, heart, forehead, throat, and crown. [Recite] the mantra *ombokken* (seven times [along with each empowerment]). (This *mudrā*, mantra, and empowerment transforms this world into a pure realm.)³²

This is one point in the Jūhachidō where there is an undeniable correspondence between image and *kansō* or “contemplation,” where one seems to end up with the practitioner imagining, albeit after a complex series of morphing images, a golden, bejeweled, six-armed deity whose form precisely matches the iconography of the mandala (fig. 4.2). But it would be a mistake to make too much of this correspondence. Here, too, the contemplation culminates in a discursive gloss, namely the statement, “His magnificent body of six arms is able to roam the six realms, employing the skillful means of great compassion to end the suffering of all sentient beings.” The painting on the altar makes no more reference to this gloss than it does to the sequence of images leading up to the anthropomorphic appearance of the deity. Moreover, none of the many premodern and modern ritual manuals and commentaries at my disposal direct the practitioner to cast his gaze on the icon of Nyoirin Kannon during this (or any other) sequence. Even if the practitioner did attempt to use the painting to help him in his contemplation, it would ultimately be of limited value in his efforts to visualize this complex montage of rapidly mutating images and discursive contemplations.

Ethnographic evidence points to yet another problem with the phenomenological model: the model presupposes that practitioners approach the text of the *dōjōkan kansō* as a “guided contemplation.” When one looks at the manner in which contemporary Shingon monks actually perform this rite, however, one finds that the *kansō* is treated liturgically—it is intoned quietly or vocalized inwardly. This is a crucial point: the execution of the *kansō* consists not in “visualization” or even in “meditation” so much as in recitation. And even if the practitioner did want to linger over or meditate upon the content of the liturgy he would find himself severely constrained by the need to finish the rite within the time allotted. I will return to this issue below.

Moving Through the Vajradhātu Mandala

Although Shingon materials prescribe the use of an image of the principal deity during the Jūhachidō, they remain silent on the relationship between image and rite. The situation with the Kongōkai or “*vajra*-realm practice,” however, is considerably more complex, because there is in fact a tradition according to which the Kongōkai ritual moves the practitioner through the nine assemblies of the Kongōkai mandala that is used for the rite (pl. 7).³³ At first glance this might seem to constitute evidence for the phenomenological model, but once again a close examination suggests otherwise.

The locus classicus for this tradition is a tenth-century commentary by Gengō 元杲 (914–995), the *Kongōkai kuemikki* 金剛界九會密記.³⁴ According to Gengō’s analysis, the movement through the mandala takes place in a counterclockwise spiral toward the center (fig. 4.3), beginning with the *gōzanze sanmaya e* 降三世三昧耶會 (Trailokyavijaya-samaya assembly, fig. 4.4) in the lower right corner of the mandala, and ending with the *jōjin-ne* 成身會 (consummate body assembly, fig. 4.5) in the center. (There is an alternative but less common tradition wherein the practitioner begins with the central assembly and moves around the mandala in a clockwise movement ending in the bottom right corner—a movement known as the “descending rotation” [*geden* 下転] in contrast to the “ascending rotation” [*jōden* 上転]. I will return to this briefly below.)³⁵ Each assembly of the mandala is associated with one rite or a short sequence of rites, beginning with *gokki sanmaya* 極喜三昧耶 (*samaya* of ultimate bliss)—a “tripartite rite” that occurs well into the ritual sequence (see below). Thus, according to Gengō, the performance of the *gokki sanmaya* corresponds to the *gōzanze sanmaya e* (Trailokyavijaya-samaya assembly, fig. 4.4); and the next rite—the *gōzanze* 降三世 (Trailokyavijaya)—corresponds to the next assembly in the mandala, the *gōzanze e* 降三世會 (Trailokyavijaya assembly, fig. 4.6). The remaining correlations run as follows: the *dairaku fukūshin* 大樂不空身 moves one to the *rishu e* 理趣會 (*rishu* assembly, fig. 4.7); the *gosō jōjinkan* 五相成身觀 (contemplation of the attainment of the [buddha] body through the five marks) corresponds to the *ichiin-ne* 一印會 (assembly of the single seal, pl. 8); the *shibutsu kaji* 四佛加持 (empowerment of the four Buddhas) moves one to the *shiin-ne* 四印會 (assembly of the four seals, fig. 4.8); the *gobutsu kanjō* 五佛灌頂 (anointment of the five Buddhas), *shibutsu keiman* 四佛繫鬘 (offering garlands to the four Buddhas), *katchū* 甲冑 (armor and helmet), and *ketchū* 結冑 (fastening armor and helmet) correspond to the *kuvō*

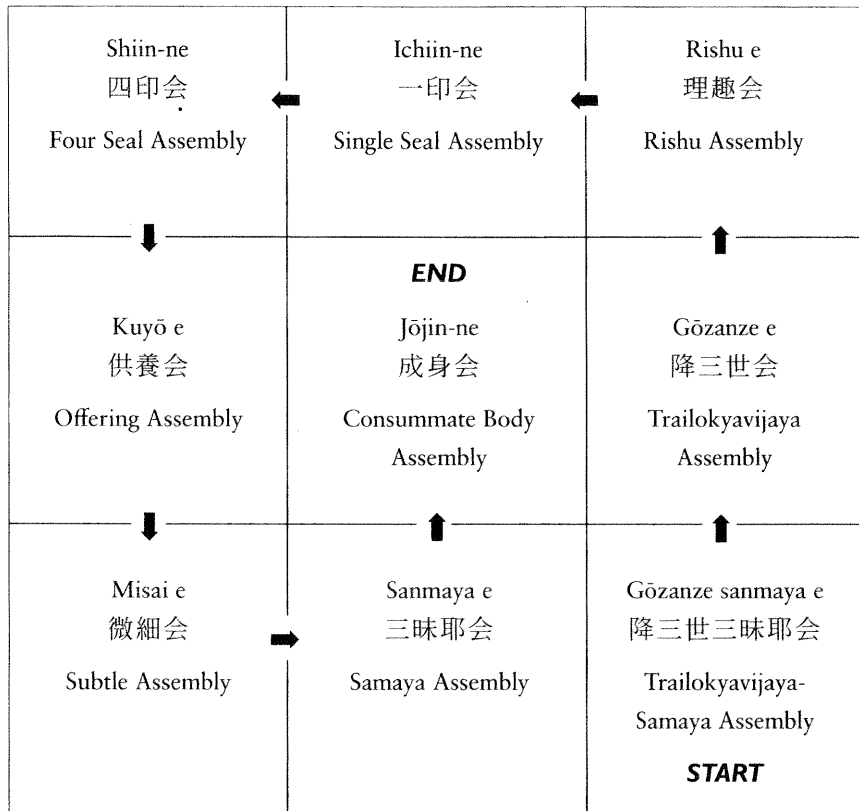
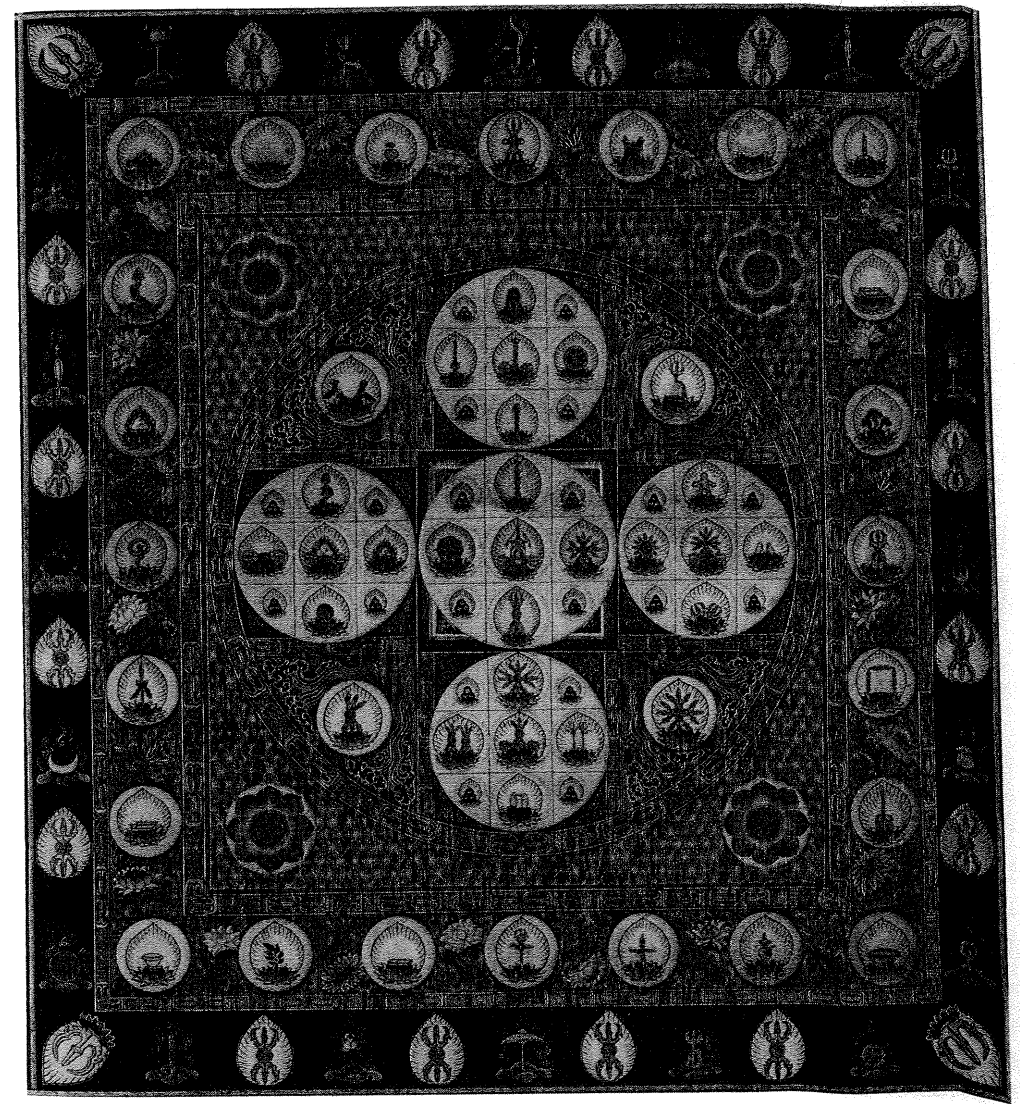


FIGURE 4.3 “Ascending rotation” through the Kongōkai mandala.

e 供養會 (offering assembly, fig. 4.9); the *genchishin* 現智身 (body of manifest knowledge) begins the *misai e* 微細會 (subtle assembly, fig. 4.10); the first half of the *dōjōkan* 道場觀 (contemplation of the sanctuary) corresponds to the *sanmaya e* 三昧耶會 (*samaya* assembly, fig. 4.11); and the latter half of the same rite corresponds to the central *jōjin-ne* (consummate body assembly, fig. 4.5).³⁶

However, neither the directions found in the ritual manuals nor the content of the contemplations or the recitations of the Kongōkai ritual give the least hint to the practitioner that the rites he or she is performing bear any relationship to the assemblies of the mandala. The correlations enumerated above can be ascertained only from written or oral commentaries to which the student may or may not have access; there would be simply no way to determine

FIGURE 4.4 Trailokyavijaya-samaya assembly (*gōzanze sanmaya e*), from the Kongōkai mandala. Kanjōin, Kyōōgokokuji (Tōji), Kyoto Prefecture. Photo: Kyōōgokokuji. Detail of plate 7.

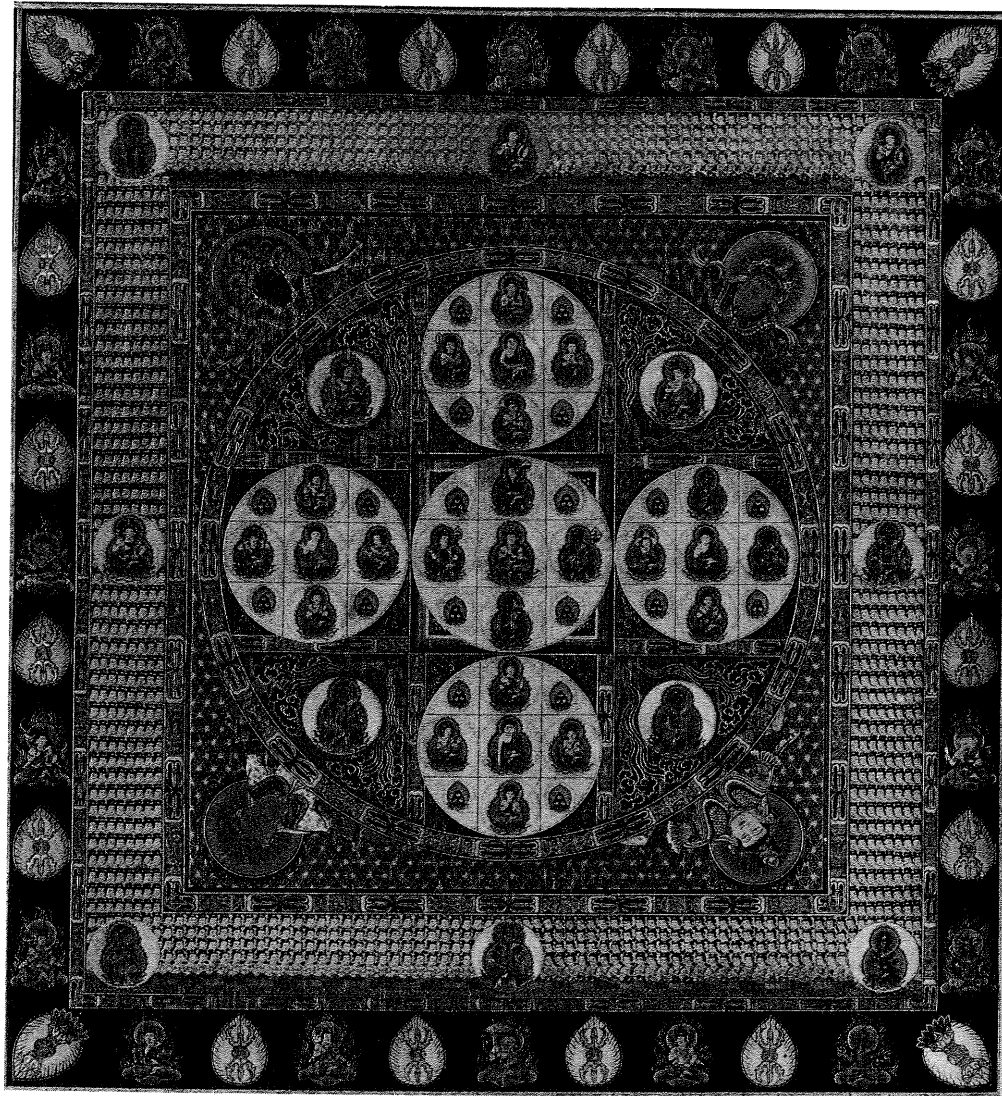


FIGURE 4.5 Consummate body assembly (*jōjin-ne*), from the Kongōkai mandala. Kanjōin, Kyōōgokokuji (Tōji), Kyoto Prefecture. Photo: Kyōōgokokuji. Detail of plate 7.

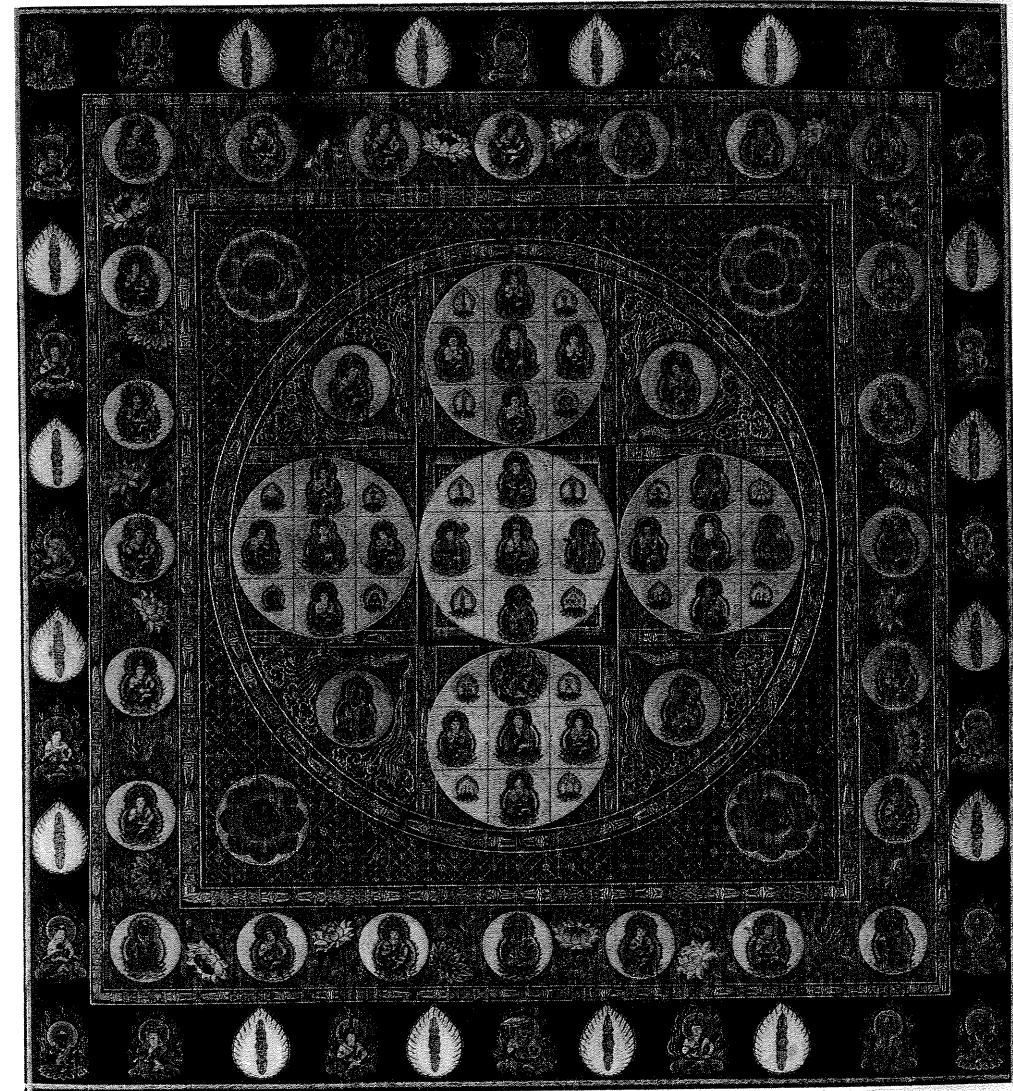


FIGURE 4.6 Trailokyavijaya assembly (*gōzanze e*), from the Kongōkai mandala. Kanjōin, Kyōōgokokuji (Tōji), Kyoto Prefecture. Photo: Kyōōgokokuji. Detail of plate 7.

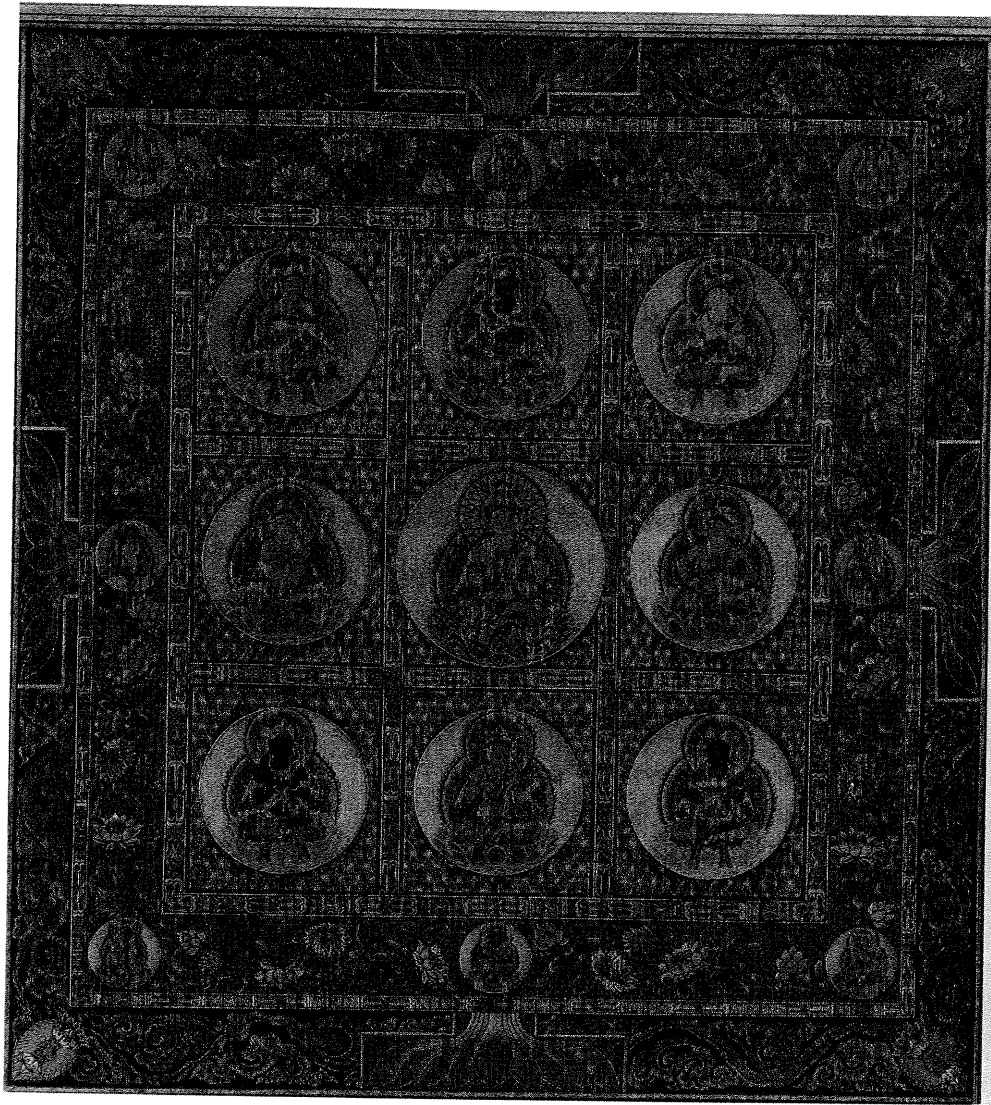


FIGURE 4.7 Rishu assembly (*rishu e*), from the Kongōkai mandala. Kanjōin, Kyōōgokokuji (Tōji), Kyoto Prefecture. Photo: Kyōōgokokuji. Detail of plate 7.

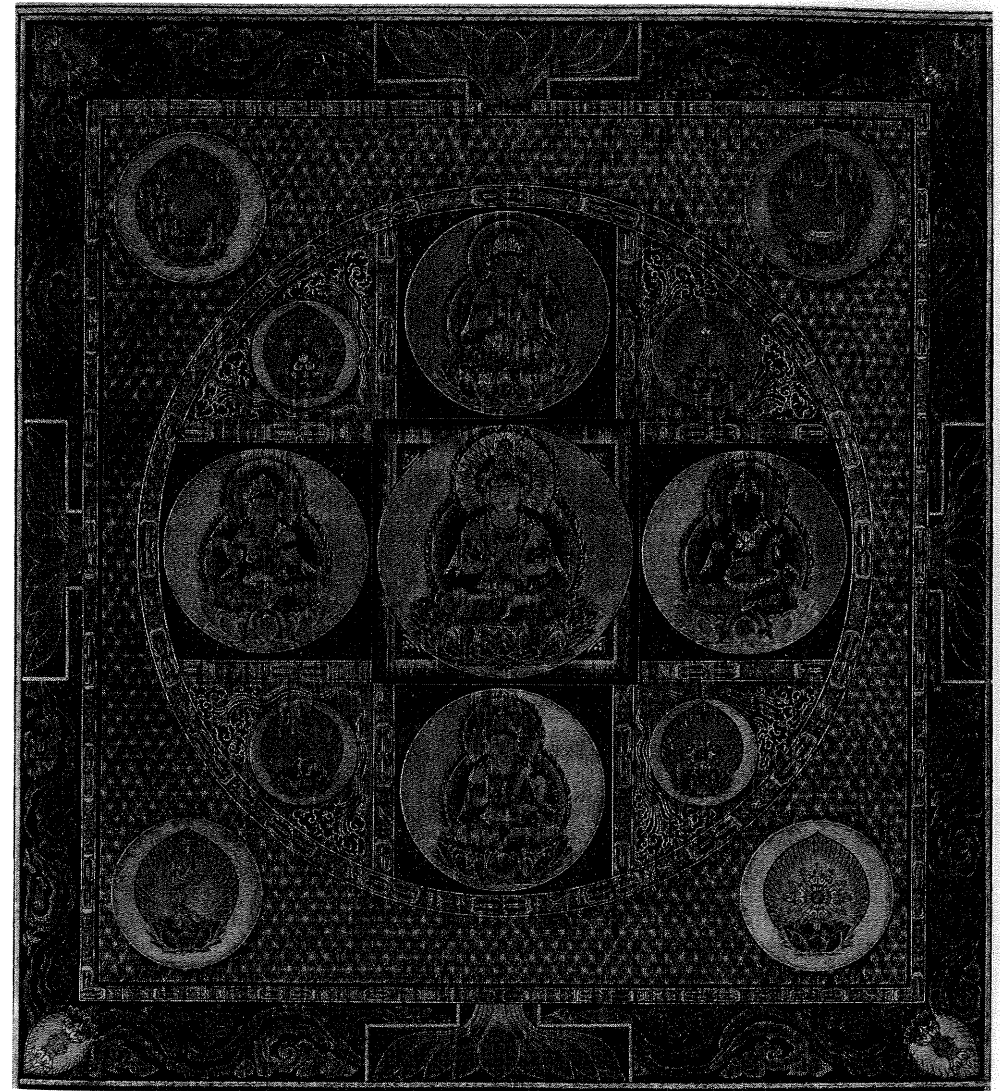


FIGURE 4.8 Assembly of the four seals (*shiin-ne*), from the Kongōkai mandala. Kanjōin, Kyōōgokokuji (Tōji), Kyoto Prefecture. Photo: Kyōōgokokuji. Detail of plate 7.

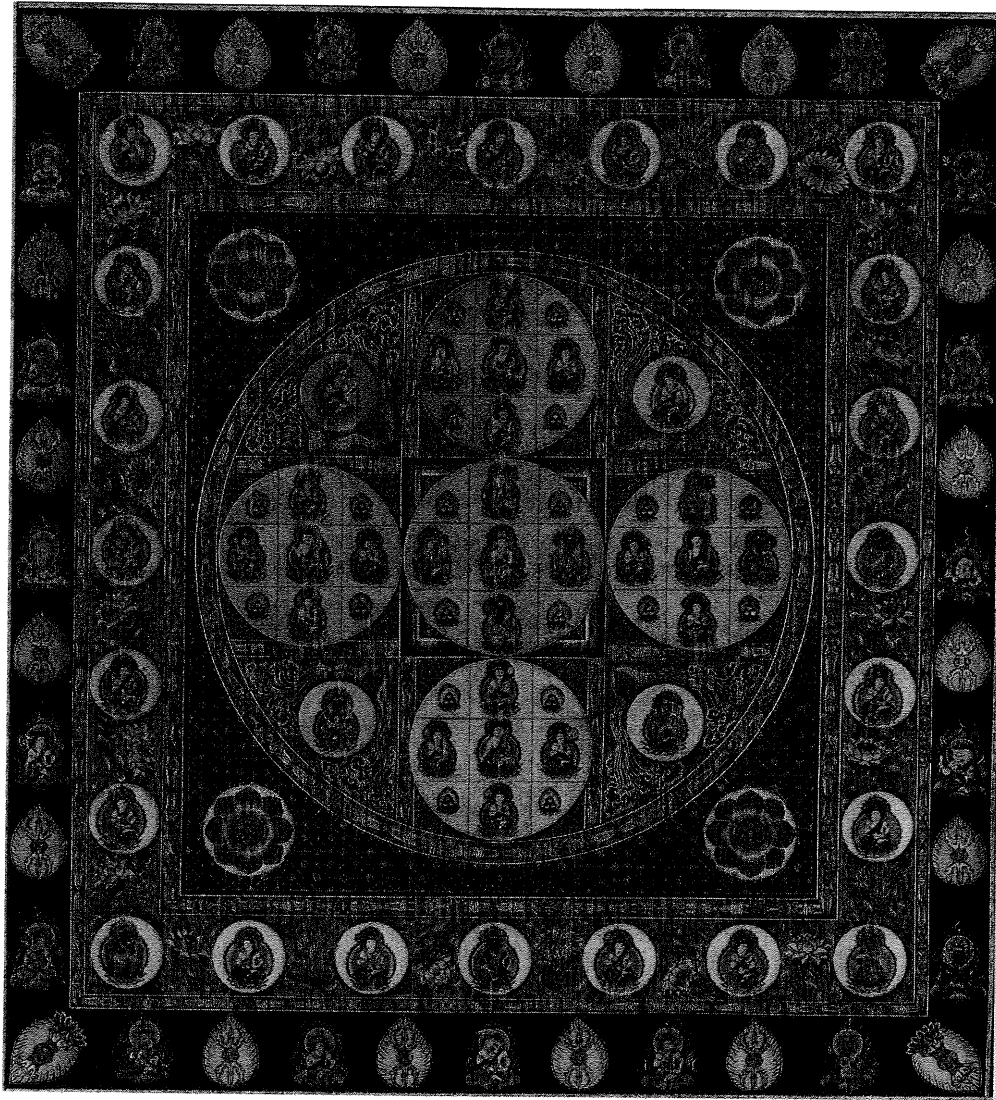


FIGURE 4.9 Offering assembly (*kuyō e*), from the Kongōkai mandala. Kanjōin, Kyōōgokokuji (Tōji), Kyoto Prefecture. Photo: Kyōōgokokuji. Detail of plate 7.

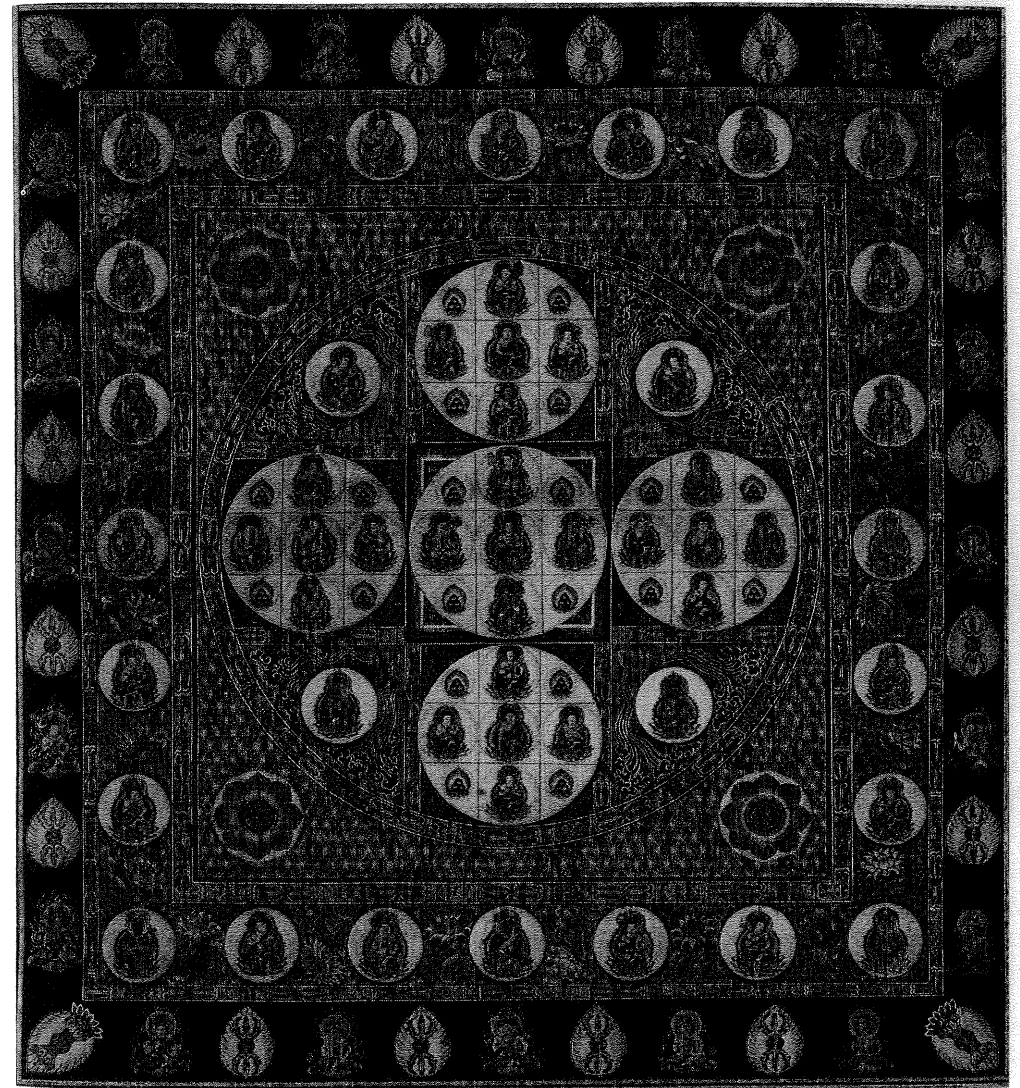


FIGURE 4.10 Subtle assembly (*misai e*), from the Kongōkai mandala. Kanjōin, Kyōōgokokuji (Tōji), Kyoto Prefecture. Photo: Kyōōgokokuji. Detail of plate 7.

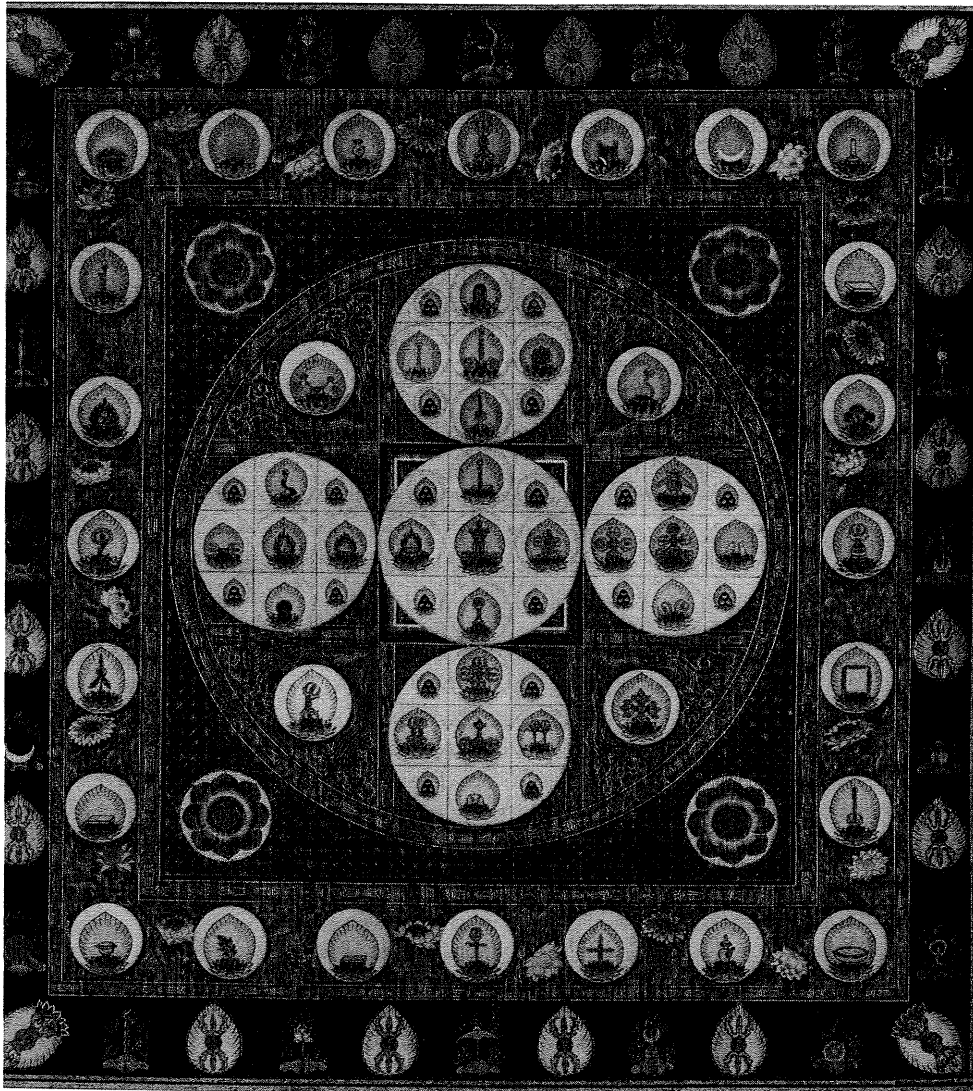


FIGURE 4.11 Samaya assembly (*sanmaya e*), from the Kongōkai mandala. Kanjōin, Kyōgokokuji (Tōji), Kyoto Prefecture. Photo: Kyōgokokuji. Detail of plate 7.

these correlations through a comparison of the iconographic content of the mandala with the liturgical content of the ritual.

To illustrate the incongruity between rite and mandala I will examine the first of the above correspondences in detail, that is, the relation between the *gōzanze sanmaya* assembly of the mandala (fig. 4.4) and the rite known as *gokki sanmaya* or “*samaya* of ultimate bliss.” The *gōzanze sanmaya* assembly, situated in the bottom right corner of the mandala, consists of the *samaya* form of the Trailokyavijaya assembly that is placed immediately above it. In other words, where the Trailokyavijaya assembly consists of seventy-three deities represented in anthropomorphic form, the *samaya* version of the same assembly represents these deities by symbols such as a lotus, *vajra*, pennant, or various weapons, placed on a lotus within a lunar disk. The principal figures comprising both the Trailokyavijaya and the Trailokyavijaya-*samaya* assemblies are the five Buddhas (Mahāvairocana, Akṣobhya, Ratnasambhava, Amitābha, and Amoghasiddhi), the four *pāramitā* bodhisattvas, and the sixteen great bodhisattvas—that is, the same figures that appear in the central *jōjin-ne* group (fig. 4.5). There are, however, a number of differences. For example, Vajrasattva, who normally appears in Akṣobhya’s group, here manifests in the wrathful form of Trailokyavijaya Vidyārāja. In addition, the four “Mantra Queens” replace the tridents of wrath (*funnu-sanko* 忿怒三鉗) in the corners, and the four gods of the elements are replaced by lotuses.³⁷ The buddhas and bodhisattvas of the *gōzanze sanmaya e* are understood as manifest in their wrathful forms, represented in the *gōzanze e* by the use of the *funnuken in* 忿怒拳印 (wrathful fist *mudrā*) in which the deities’ hands are clenched into fists crossed at the wrists. These two assemblies are the only ones in the Kongōkai mandala that depict buddhas, bodhisattvas, and other deities in their wrathful forms—forms assumed by the deities in order to conquer greed, hatred, and delusion in the three worlds. However, as the deities of the *gōzanze sanmaya e* assembly are represented in *samaya* form, this assembly ends up looking rather similar to the *samaya* assembly situated directly to its left (fig. 4.11).

Doctrinally, the *gōzanze sanmaya e* represents, in general terms, the “mind aspect” of the wrathful emanation of Mahāvairocana, capable of vanquishing evil and bringing particularly recalcitrant beings to enlightenment. Snodgrass summarizes the technical literature as follows:

The Trailokyavijaya Assembly represents the actions of the [Buddha’s] Body

Samaya Assembly represents the original vows that embody the actions of the Buddha's Mind. The former is the mandala of the Tathāgata's Body Mystery expressed as the wrathful forms of the Doctrine Command Cakra Body, and the latter is the mandala of the Tathāgata's Mind Mystery expressed in the same way.³⁸

The *gokki sanmaya* rite—the rite said to correspond to the *gōzanze sanmaya e* and its seventy-three major divinities—is short. As is usual with the tripartite rites, the manual begins with a description of the *mudrā*: “The two hands are clasped with fingers on the outside, and the tips of the little fingers and thumbs touching and extended out straight. The middle fingers are crossed and folded into the fist, and the *mudrā* is held in front of the face. The two middle fingers pierce the heart, as the arrow of great compassion.” Having formed the *mudrā*, one then repeats the mantra *sanmayakoku sorata satoban* and contemplates as follows: “Not wearying of *samsāra* I abide peacefully in the mind of awakening. I shoot the arrow of great compassion into the mind that wearies and seeks escape [from *samsāra*].” The mantra is repeated three times, and with some experience the entire rite can be performed in no more than ten or fifteen seconds.³⁹

Note that there is simply no clue in the rite itself as to its relationship with the *gōzanze sanmaya e* of the mandala, and the contemplation of the “arrow of compassion piercing the mind that wearies of *samsāra*” bears no obvious connection to the iconography of the Kongōkai mandala. Indeed, this is really not a “visualization” at all—the “arrow of great compassion” is again more of a literary trope than a graphic image, and neither the ritual manuals nor the commentaries offer any clue as to how the practitioner is to visualize the “mind that wearies and seeks escape [from *samsāra*].”

Another instructive example is the simplest of the nine assemblies, the *ichiin-ne* (pl. 8), found at the top center of the mandala. This assembly consists of a single anthropomorphic image of Mahāvairocana sitting on a lotus, wearing a crown of five buddhas, hands clasped in the “knowledge fist *mudrā*” (*chiken in* 智拳印), surrounded by water pots and lotuses.⁴⁰ One might expect this assembly to correspond to the *dōjōkan* examined above. But such is not the case; according to Gengō's commentary, the rite corresponding to the *ichiin-ne* assembly is the *gosō jōjinkan* (contemplation of the attainment of the [buddha] body through the five marks), a complex meditation involving, among other things, a dialogue between the practitioner and all the tathāgatas of the world, and various contemplations of an expanding and contracting *stūpa*.⁴¹ There is

no obvious allusion to Mahāvairocana in anthropomorphic form at all in this particular ritual sequence. Indeed, later commentators admit confusion over the textual antecedents, iconography, and ritual procedures associated with this particular assembly.⁴²

It would take too much space to examine in detail all nine assemblies of the Kongōkai mandala and the ritual segments to which they supposedly correspond. Suffice it to say that in each and every case the practitioner would be hard pressed to match the liturgical content of the rite to the iconography of the mandala. I have already mentioned an alternative *geden* tradition, in which the practitioner moves through the mandala in reverse (clockwise) direction beginning with the *jōjin-ne* assembly in the center, and ending at the *gōzanze sanmaya e* in the bottom right-hand corner. The existence of two alternative paths through the mandala underscores the post hoc nature of the correlations between rite and image. Indeed, as Todaro has argued, Gengō's attempts to relate the Kongōkai rite with the nine-assembly mandala was likely a response to the recognition of a more general problem: the manuals then in circulation did allude to the deities of the Kongōkai, but only to those associated with six of the nine assemblies. Gengō's strategy involved viewing the preeminent assembly—the *jōjin-ne*—as encompassing the remaining eight, and he developed a creative if ad hoc series of correspondences to make his point.⁴³ Gengō's opaque if not outright arbitrary scholastic correlations are ultimately of little consequence to this analysis, however, because there is no hint in either the ritual manuals or the ethnographic evidence that they play any effective role in the performance of the rite itself.

This is not to deny a connection between the Kongōkai rite and its mandala. There is one section of the ritual that does bear a clear and comprehensive relationship to the iconography of the mandala. This is the *sanjūshichison ingon* 三十七尊印言 (*mudrā*-mantra for the thirty-seven deities), a sequence consisting of the invocation of the thirty-seven figures featured in the central *jōjin-ne* (fig. 4.5).⁴⁴ Here each of the thirty-seven main deities is individually invoked in rapid succession by means of the single repetition of a short mantra and *mudrā*. The *sanjūshichison ingon* sequence is immediately followed by the invocation of the “sixteen worthies of the [present] auspicious *kalpa*” (*gengō jūroku son* 賢劫十六尊),⁴⁵ and the twenty deities of the “outer *vajra* realm” (*gai kongōbu nijū ten* 外金剛部二十天),⁴⁶ which complete the invocation of the central assembly.

The *sanjūshichison ingon* is thus the one segment of the Kongōkai rite where

one finds a more or less precise correspondence to one of the assemblies of the mandala. However, somewhat surprisingly, this is one of the few *ingon* or *inmyō* segments that does not include any *kansō* or “contemplative” component whatsoever.⁴⁷ Moreover, the invocations in the two segments devoted to the sixteen worthies and twenty deities are perfunctory to say the least; none of the individual figures are specifically identified. Rather, the mantra *un* is repeated sixteen times for the worthies, then twenty times for the deities, to the accompaniment of a single up-and-down motion of the *mudrā* with each repetition. The contemplation, or *kansō*, for both rites reads in its entirety as follows: “Think of encircling the four sides of the altar.”

It should now be clear that the relationship between the complex contemplations found in the Jūhachidō and Kongōkai practices, and the iconography of their respective mandalas, is tenuous at best. The same turns out to be true of the latter two rituals of the Shidokeyō: the Taizōkai and the Goma.⁴⁸ In each case the mandala or icon represents or “embodies” the principal deity to whom the rites are directed, but this fact alone does not render the icon of much help to a practitioner bent upon “visualizing” the dozens of elaborate *kansō* scattered throughout these rites.

Visualization or Contemplation?

In the end, the most compelling evidence against the phenomenological model is provided by the content of the *kansō* themselves. As seen above, the discursive character of many Shingon contemplations renders them poor subjects for “visualization” as the term is commonly understood. This becomes increasingly obvious in looking at the more complex and soteriologically cardinal sections of these invocation practices. Accordingly, I have translated below the *kansō* from three such segments: the *gosō jōjinkan* found exclusively in the Kongōkai practice, and the *nyūga-ga'nyū* and *jirinkan* found in virtually all Shingon invocation rituals.

CONTEMPLATION OF THE ATTAINMENT OF THE BUDDHA BODY THROUGH THE FIVE MARKS

Nowhere is the discursive nature of Shingon *kansō* more apparent than in the “contemplation of the attainment of the [buddha] body through the five marks,” or *gosō jōjinkan* found in the Kongōkai practice.⁴⁹ This sequence involves some standard contemplations of an expanding and contracting lotus

blossom situated on a lunar disk in the heart, as well as more unusual passages in which the practitioner converses directly with the tathāgatas of the *dharmadhātu*. Because this is one of the more fascinating sections of the Kongōkai from both a narrative and doctrinal perspective, I have translated the Sanbōinryū version in full:

First: The Wisdom of Marvelous Contemplation 妙觀察智:

Form the Amitābha *samādhi mudrā* and say the mantra *on sanmaji handomei kiriku*.

Contemplate [as follows] 諦觀: The nature of all things 諸法性 arises from one's own mind. The afflictions, defilements, aggregates, realms, all the sense fields, and so on are like a magical illusion or a flickering flame, like the castle of the Gandharvas, like a whirling wheel of fire, like an echo in an empty valley. [Thereupon] all the Buddhas who abide in ultimate and true knowledge of quiescence, extinction, and sameness, and who pervade and fill the realm of space startle [you] awake by snapping their fingers and saying: “Good son, that which you have realized is the purity of the single path, but you are not yet able to realize the knowledge of the *vajra*-like *samādhi* and full omniscience 薩婆若, and thus you must not rest content with this. You must still perfect the way of Samantabhadra and attain supreme awakening.”

Next: Penetration of the Bodhi Mind 通達菩提心 (meditation *mudrā*):

Hearing this the practitioner is startled out of his meditation and pays homage to all the Buddhas reciting the mantra of universal homage as before [*on saraba tatagyata hannamannanō kyaromi*]. [The practitioner then addresses the Buddhas:] “I only wish that all the Tathāgatas would appear here in my place of practice.” All the Buddhas respond in unison: “You must contemplate 觀 your own mind. In accordance with the teachings when discerning your own mind do not view 見 its distinguishing marks.” [The practitioner] recites the mantra of universal homage once again and says to the Buddhas: “I am unable to see my own mind. What are the distinguishing marks of this mind?” All the Buddhas respond: “The distinguishing marks of the mind are difficult to fathom. The mind is like a moon disk in a fine mist.” Say the mantra: *on a sowaka; on shitta harachibeitō kyaromi*.

Next: Cultivation of the Mind of Bodhi 修菩提心 (meditation *mudrā*):

The storehouse consciousness is essentially unstained, pure, and without blemish. Because it is endowed with merit and knowledge, one's own mind is like a full moon. Seeing the pure moon disk one is able to realize the *bodhi* mind. Say the mantra: *on bōchishittabadayami*.

Next: Consummation of the Vajra Mind 成金剛心 (meditation *mudrā*):

Again all the Buddhas say: “Now that *bodhi* is stable, receive this heart mantra and imagine 觀 a *vajra* lotus blossom; that is, imagine an eight-petaled lotus blossom on the moon disk at the heart.” Say the mantra: *on chishuta bazara handoma*.

Next: Expanding the Vajra 廣金剛 (meditation *mudrā*):

Think 想 of an eight-petaled lotus blossom on the heart moon disc. Gradually it opens and expands to fill the three-thousand realms all the way to the dharma realm bringing material abundance and joy to all living beings. Say the mantra: *on sohara bazara*.

Next: Contracting the Vajra 斂金剛 (meditation *mudrā*):

Think of this lotus blossom at the heart gradually contracting and becoming smaller, returning to its previous size. Say the mantra: *on sōkara bazara*.

Next: Realizing the Vajra Body 證金剛身 (meditation *mudrā*):

Know that one’s own body is the realm of the *vajra* lotus blossom. All the Buddhas pervading the dharma realm enter the lotus blossom of one’s own body, just as myriad images appear in a [single] mirror. Say the mantra: *on bazara handoma tamakukan*.

Next: Perfection of the Buddha Body 佛身圓滿 (meditation *mudrā*):

All the Buddhas further say: “Contemplate your body as the principal deity and receive this mantra.” Say: *on yata saraba tatagyata satatakan*.

Next: The Empowerment of All the Buddhas 諸佛加持 (meditation *mudrā*):

Having become the body of the principal deity I receive the empowerment of all the Tathāgatas; all the worthies of the *vajra* realm envelop me. Say the mantra: *on saraba tatagyata bisanbōji jiricha bazara chishuta*.⁵⁰

The textual antecedents and doctrinal significance of the “contemplation of the attainment of the [buddha] body through the five marks” has been examined by a variety of Japanese Buddhist scholars, but these complex issues need not be of concern here.⁵¹ For the purposes of the present argument I would note only the elaborate narrative structure and discursive content of the rite that renders much of it inappropriate for “visualizing in the mind’s eye.” It is particularly striking that the Tathāgatas featured in this contemplation do not appear in physical form; according to the narrative they make their presence

known only through their spoken discourse. Indeed, the gist of their teaching is that one “sees” the Tathāgata only when one is able to “see” the nature of one’s own mind—a venerable Buddhist tenet found in a host of Mahayana scriptures.

MERGING WITH THE PRINCIPAL DEITY

The climax of virtually all Shingon invocation practices is found in the “procedure for recitation” (*nenju hō*) section comprising three main rites: the *nyūga-ga’nyū* ([the deity] enters me and I enter [the deity]), the *shōnenju* (formal recitation), and the *jirinkan* (contemplation of the syllable wheel). As mentioned above, these three rites correspond to the three mysteries of body, speech, and mind respectively; that is to say, these rites enact the identity of the body, speech, and mind of the practitioner with the body, speech, and mind of the principal deity.

Considering the significance of the *nyūga-ga’nyū*—it is here that the practitioner affirms his or her identity with the Buddha or absolute truth itself—the *kansō* of the rite is relatively simple. Since the rite is short and differs slightly from one practice to the next, I have translated the *nyūga-ga’nyū* from both the Jūhachidō and Kongōkai practices taken from the same set of Sanbōinryū ritual manuals. I begin with the Jūhachidō version:

Assume the Amida meditation *mudrā* . . .

Contemplate [as follows] 觀念: The principal deity sits on a mandala. I sit on a mandala. The principal deity enters my body and my body enters the body of the principal deity. It is like many luminous mirrors facing each other, their images interpenetrating each other 如多明鏡相對互影現涉入也.⁵²

Commentators note that the body of the principal deity does not actually “enter” the practitioner, as there is ultimately no original duality between the two. This is seen by some commentators as the significance of the mirrors: one must look upon the principal deity as if one is looking at one’s own reflection in a clear mirror.⁵³

The contemplation from the Kongōkai *nyūga-ga’nyū* adds an interpretative gloss reflecting further on the relation between practitioner and deity:

Assume the meditation *mudrā*.

Contemplate [as follows] 觀想: Facing the principal deity I have now become the body of Tathāgata Mahāvairocana. The principal deity enters my

body empowering me. I enter the body of the principal deity taking refuge in him. We are of one body, not two. Because [this rite] manifests the meaning of both the root and the traces 本迹, it constitutes a contemplation of empowerment and refuge.⁵⁴

CONTEMPLATION OF THE SYLLABLE WHEEL

With the *jirinkan*, or “contemplation of the syllable wheel,” one arrives at the climax of the rite—the ritual identification of the mind of the practitioner and the mind of the deity. Here, too, the structure of the rite is more or less the same from one practice to the next, although the specific “seed syllables” featured in the *kansō* will differ depending on the identity of the principal deity. I have translated the *jirinkan* from the Sanbōinryū Jūhachidō, in which Nyoirin Kannon serves as principal deity.

Form the Amida samādhi *mudrā* and contemplate 觀 as follows:

In my heart there is an eight-petaled white lotus blossom, on top of which is a full moon disk. On top of the disk there are the syllables *on ha ra da han domei un*, along with each syllable’s meaning.⁵⁵ Contemplate 觀 [the disk] rotating once clockwise and once counterclockwise.

The ceaseless flow (*rushū* 流注) of the syllable *on* cannot be obtained. Because the ceaseless flow of the syllable *on* cannot be obtained, the speech (*gonzetsu* 言説) of the syllable *ha* cannot be obtained. Because the speech of the syllable *ha* cannot be obtained, the defilements (*jinku* 塵后) of the syllable *ra* cannot be obtained. Because the defilements of the syllable *ra* cannot be obtained, the charity (*seyo* 施與) of the syllable *da* cannot be obtained. Because the charity of the syllable *da* cannot be obtained, the supreme principle (*shōgi* 勝義) of the syllable *han* cannot be obtained. Because the supreme principle of the syllable *han* cannot be obtained, the self-attachment (*gashū* 我執) of the syllable *domei* cannot be obtained. Because the self-attachment of the syllable *domei* cannot be obtained, the conditions and karma (*ingō* 因業) of the syllable *un* cannot be obtained. (This is called the clockwise contemplation 順觀.)

Because the conditions and karma of the syllable *un* cannot be obtained, the self-attachment of the syllable *domei* cannot be obtained. Because the self-attachment of the syllable *domei* cannot be obtained, the supreme principle of the syllable *han* cannot be obtained. Because the supreme principle of the syllable *han* cannot be obtained, the charity of the syllable *da* cannot be obtained. Because the charity of the syllable *da* cannot be obtained, the defilements of the syllable *ra* cannot be obtained. Because the defilements of the syllable *ra* cannot be obtained, the speech of the syllable *ha* cannot be ob-

tained. Because the speech of the syllable *ha* cannot be obtained, the ceaseless flow of the syllable *on* cannot be obtained. (This is called the counterclockwise contemplation 逆觀. Contemplate the sequence clockwise and counterclockwise.)⁵⁶

According to Shingon doctrine, the mantra of a particular deity is consubstantial with the deity itself (that is, it bears the same relationship to the deity that, according to certain Mahayana scriptures, the title of a *sūtra* bears to the *sūtra*). Thus to grasp the mantra is to grasp the deity, just as to intone the title of a *sūtra* is tantamount to reciting the entire *sūtra*. The “heart within the heart mantra” is the essence of all the mantras associated with a particular deity. In the *jirinkan* procedure this core mantra is made the subject of a Mādhyamika-like critique that renders it empty of “own being.” This is accomplished by disassembling the mantra into its component parts or syllables and then contemplating the individual “attributes” of each syllable. Since the syllables are meaningful only in dependence upon one another, once the mantra is disassembled the meaning of each syllable, like the mantra itself, proves “impossible to obtain.” In short, the realization of the mind of the principal deity consists in contemplating the constructed, contingent, or “empty” nature of the deity’s mantra, which is to realize the emptiness of the deity itself.

The Jūhachidō thus culminates in a ritualized deconstruction of the principal deity. And yet, according to the narrative logic of the rite, to deconstruct the deity in this manner is precisely to become one with the mind of the deity. The deity’s mind *is* the pure contemplation of emptiness. The performance of the syllable wheel discernment is thus the ritual instantiation of the identity of the practitioner’s mind and the mind of the principal deity. And this is precisely the mind of Mahāvairocana—the *dharmadhātu* itself.

Having examined in detail some key sections from Shingon invocation rituals it should be clear that they offer little support for the widespread assumption that such rites involve the mental construction of mandala-like images. What one finds instead is that the contemplative elements are often discursive meditations with little or no “visual” component. Moreover, they are typically treated as liturgies to be verbalized softly or silently. Indeed, nowhere is the liturgical nature of Shingon *kansō* more apparent than in the repetitive phrasing and parallelism of the syllable-wheel contemplation.

The notion that Shingon contemplations are essentially discursive is con-

firmed by a casual glance through some of the standard East Asian Buddhist encyclopedias and Shingon lexicons. The entry for *kansō* in the *Mikkyō daijiten* 密教大辭典, for example, reads:

Kansō: *Kannen, teikan, kansatsu, kan, sō, shii*, and so on all have roughly the same meaning. They mean to bring to mind and reflect upon; that is to say: to contemplate the meaning of the mutual interpenetration of the practitioner and the principal deity or saint, or to contemplate the real characteristics of a syllable wheel, or to contemplate the true significance of forming the *mudrā* and intoning the mantra, and so on. Among the three mysteries [*kansō* corresponds to] the operation of the mystery of mind. If one were to speak generally, any contemplation of the phenomena and principle of all dharmas is called a *kansō* 觀念、諦觀、觀察、觀、想、或は思惟等粗同意なり。心に想ひ浮べ念ずる義にして、行者が本尊聖者と相應渉入する義を觀じ、或は字輪の實相を觀じ、或は印明を結誦して其眞意義を觀ずる等を云ふ。三密の中の意密の作業なり。若し廣義には諸法の事理を觀ずるを皆觀想と稱す。⁵⁷

A similar set of definitions can be found in the *Bukkyōgo daijiten* 佛教語大辭典, where the relevant terms are glossed with phrases such as “fully concentrating one’s thoughts” 深くおもいをこらすこと, “bringing to mind” 心に思い浮かぶ, “thinking precisely and clearly” 細かに明らかに考えること, “careful deliberation” and “careful consideration” よく熟思すること; よく熟考すること, and so on.⁵⁸ And the detailed treatment of *kansō* in Mochizuki’s *Bukkyō daijiten* is explicit concerning the continuity between Shingon *kansō* practices and earlier Buddhist meditation exercises in which the practitioner concentrates his mind on various “correct thoughts” in order to avert or expunge mental defilements such as lust and desire.⁵⁹ Thus, according to the lexicons virtually all of the terms that might qualify as Japanese equivalents of the English “visualization” are perhaps better understood as “thinking,” “contemplation,” “discernment,” and so on.

There are additional factors in the Shingon treatment of mandalas that mitigate against their use as “aids to visualization.” To begin with, many temples use *shūji*, or “seed-syllable,” versions of the Kongōkai and Taizōkai mandalas in which each deity is represented by a single *siddham* (Sanskrit) character. (The popularity of such *shūji mandara* 種子曼荼羅, also known as *hō mandara* 法曼荼羅, may be due in part to the fact that they are easier and cheaper to produce than full-blown polychrome *daimandara* 大曼荼羅.) Such seed-syllable mandalas would be of little help in visualizing the complex

iconographic detail of the deities. Besides, many Shingon trainees are not sufficiently proficient at *siddham* to be able to decipher the seed-syllable mandalas in the first place.

In addition, although it is traditional for a practitioner to undergo Shidokeyō training in cloistered isolation, nowadays many Shingon novices undergo training in groups at headquarter monasteries (*honzan* 本山) such as those at Kōyasan or Daigoji. Such monasteries offer instruction to as many as several dozen monks or nuns at a time who perform the practices together in a single large hall. Each trainee has his own ritual altar, but only a single set of mandalas is installed at the front of the sanctuary—a situation that renders the mandalas of limited value as visualization aids. Group training also obliges the monks to move through each section of the rite more or less in unison, because all must wait for the slowest to finish before leaving the hall. Peer pressure thus tends to ensure the expeditious performance of the rites and to discourage lingering over the contemplations.

But even before the group training of priests became commonplace, monks would have been under considerable pressure to hasten through the rites; the practices are so involved and time-consuming that a conscientious monk practicing in isolation who tarried over sections would soon find himself seriously deprived of time for meals and rest. Indeed, no matter how expeditiously the rites are performed, priests still find themselves forced to survive on little or no sleep during the final week of the Shidokeyō devoted to the Goma—an onerous practice that can take as many as four or five hours per sitting. All of these factors would mitigate against the development of visualization skills, if the development of such skills were in fact the goal of the training.

Mandala as Divine Presence

In questioning the supposition that Shingon mandalas are used as aids to visualization, I do not mean to detract from their significance in the Shingon tradition. The following oft-cited passage from Kūkai’s *Goshōrai mokuroku* 御請來目錄, an annotated catalog of the texts, icons, and ritual implements that Kūkai brought back from China, readily attests to the cardinal role accorded such images:

The Esoteric teachings are so profound and mysterious that they are difficult to record with quill and ink [that is, in writing]. Thus we resort to the expedient of diagrams and paintings 圖畫 to reveal them to the unenlightened.

The various postures and *mudrā* [depicted in the mandalas] emerge from [the Buddha's] great compassion; with a single glance [at them] one becomes a buddha. The secrets of the *sūtras* and commentaries are recorded in a general way in diagrams and images 圖像, and the essentials of the Esoteric teachings are actually set forth therein. Should these be discarded there will be difficulty in transmitting and receiving the dharma, for they are none other than the foundation 根源 of the ocean-like assembly [of enlightened ones].⁶⁰

Similar sentiments are reiterated later in the same text: "The master [Hui-kuo] said that the scriptures and commentaries of the Mantrayāna Esoteric teachings are so recondite that without the expedient of diagrams and paintings they could not be transmitted."⁶¹

These well-known passages do not explicitly countenance the use of images for "visualizing" deities. They do, however, suggest alternative ways of understanding Shingon mandalas. The first is that of *hensōzu* 變相圖, or "transformation images," a term used for visual representations of regions of the Buddhist cosmos derived from written *sūtras* and commentaries—that is, what one might simply call "illustrations."⁶² As scholars of Shingon know all too well, Tantric scriptures typically contain extended lists of buddhas, bodhisattvas, and other deities, along with descriptions of their physical attributes and symbolic accouterments. Indeed, it is easy to find oneself overwhelmed in an exasperating accumulation of detail. One obvious but nonetheless noteworthy function of mandalas is that of visual commentary: they are capable of representing a vast number of polychrome deities on a single, albeit often rather large, expanse of silk or paper. Looking at a mandala, one is able to grasp at a glance not only the color, posture, demeanor, and ritual implements associated with each of hundreds of depicted deities but also the hierarchical and spatial relationships that exist between them (fig. 4.1 and pl. 7).

But clearly Kūkai believes that Shingon images are more than mere "illustrations"; note his striking statement that "with a single glance one becomes a buddha" 一觀成佛. Here Kūkai points to a more "magical" dimension of Tantric art that modern commentators are seemingly unable or unwilling to confront directly. Hakeda Yoshito, for example, modifies the passage in his translation by the insertion of a potential verb: "The sight of [the images] *may well enable* one to attain Buddhahood."⁶³ Such a translation mutes the force of Kūkai's original statement, which unequivocally attributes transformative or salvific powers to the sacred images he carried back from China.

There is nothing particularly revolutionary in Kūkai's attitude toward Bud-

dhist sacred images. As I argued in the Introduction to this volume, Buddhists have, throughout history, regarded icons of buddhas and saints as animate entities possessed of considerable apotropaic and redemptive powers. This attitude is well attested in textual, archaeological, and ethnographic sources; the completion of a painted or sculpted Buddhist icon, for example, typically involved an elaborate "eye-opening ceremony" in which the pupils of the icon were "dotted" to the accompaniment of invocation rites and offerings.⁶⁴ Such ritual consecrations, still widely performed today, were intended to transform an inanimate image into a living presence, and icons thus empowered were worshipped with regular offerings of incense, flowers, food, light, and *sūtras*. Chinese Buddhist biographies and temple records are replete with tales of miraculous occurrences associated with such images; images were known to fly through the air, to sweat, to communicate in dreams, to prophecy, and so on.⁶⁵

The treatment of sacred images as animate beings applied not only to images of buddhas, bodhisattvas, and other deities but also to portraits of eminent Buddhist masters. Funerary practices and memorial rites for Chinese and Japanese Buddhist patriarchs reveal that their spirits were believed to cohere to their portraits long after death, rendering such portraits sacred icons to be worshipped in the same manner as a buddha image or relic.⁶⁶ This is true of Shingon as much as of any other Buddhist school: Kūkai returned with five such patriarchal portraits and grouped them together with mandalas in his *Goshōrai mokuroku* (fig. 4.12).⁶⁷ His comments cited above on the power of *mikkyō* images thus refer not only to the Kongōkai and Taizōkai mandalas but also to these patriarchal portraits. Furthermore, portraits of Shingon patriarchs are hung on either side of the central mandala during the Shidokeyō practices. Each portrait then functions as the "principal deity" of separate self-contained rites—the Daishi hōraku 大師法樂 (or Daishi mimae 大師御前) and the Sonshi hōraku 尊師法樂—performed daily during the Shidokeyō retreat.⁶⁸

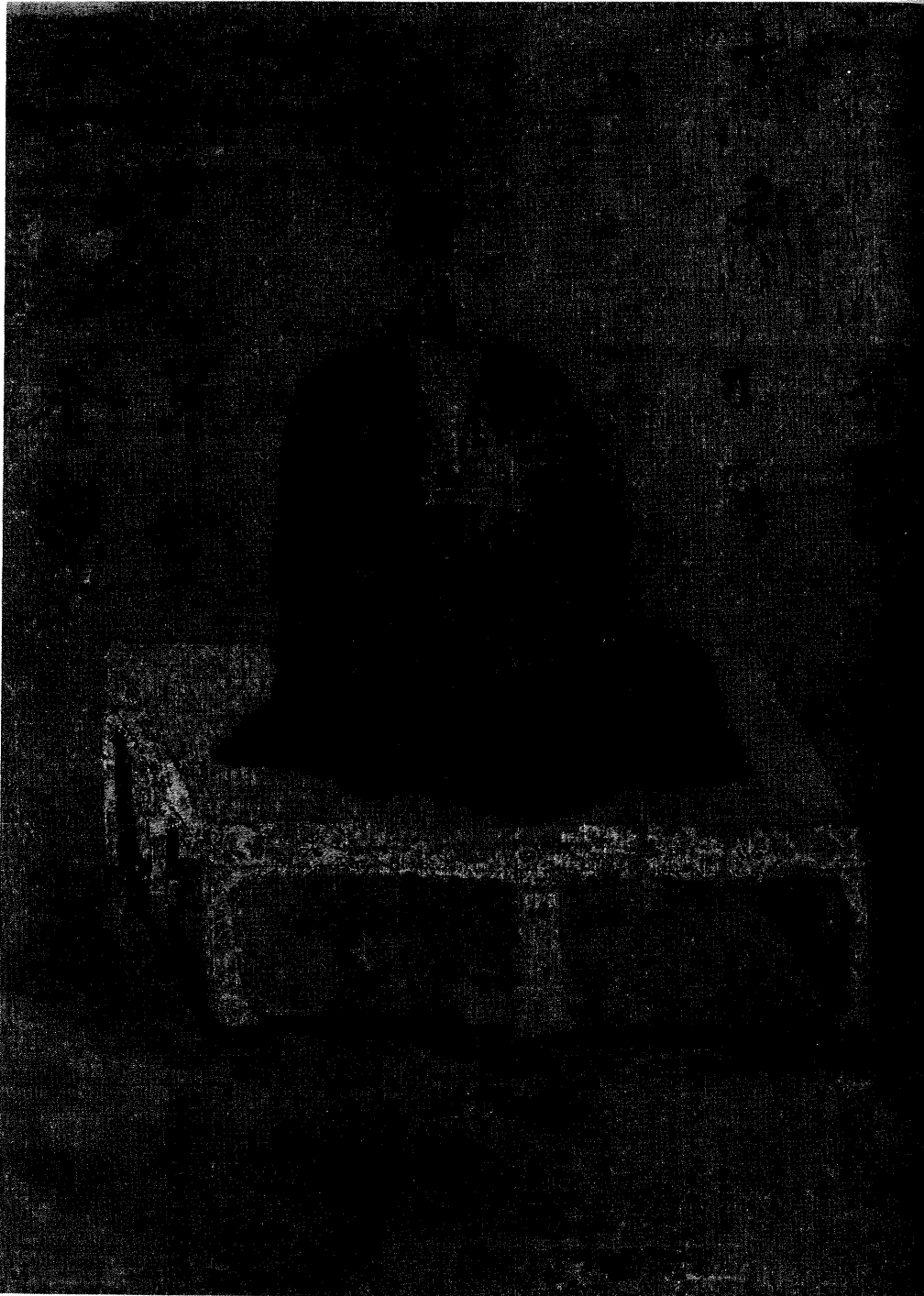
Like all Buddhist icons, a Shingon mandala is not so much a representation of the divine as it is the locus of the divine—the ground upon which the principal deity is made manifest. Scholars believe that painted mandalas originally evolved from mandalas set upon the earth—geometrically arranged altars that functioned as the earthly abodes of divine beings. The power or "charisma" believed to cohere to mandalas is mentioned explicitly in a variety of Tantric sources, including the commentary to the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra* by

Śubhakarasiṃha and I-hsing, which explains that a mandala is called an “assembly” 聚集 because “the actual meritorious power of the Tathāgatas is now gathered together [there] in a single place” 今以如來真實功德集在一處.⁶⁹ To come into the presence of a mandala is to enter the presence of the Tathāgata—one literally “sees the Buddha” and partakes of his *kaji*, or empowerment. According to Shingon doctrine, such empowerment is no more and no less than the realization of one’s essential identity with the Tathāgata, a realization ritually reaffirmed or instantiated every time one takes a seat before the *honzon*. This, then, is the doctrinal basis behind Kūkai’s bold claim that one becomes a buddha through a single glance at an Esoteric icon.

Shingon ritual manuals say virtually nothing with respect to the use of mandalas during the course of the initiatory practices. In fact, the only section of the manuals that specifically mentions the mandalas is the set of preliminary instructions for “adorning the sanctuary” (*dōjō shōgon* 道場莊嚴).⁷⁰ Here detailed directions are given for the construction and preparation of the altar, the arrangement of various ritual implements, and the installation of the icons, all of which must be completed prior to beginning the rites proper.

In Buddhism the expression *shōgon*, or “adornment,” functions as a technical term, often used as an equivalent to the Sanskrit terms *alamkāra* or *vyūha*.⁷¹ In *sūtra* literature these terms are associated with the magnificence, splendor, and supernal adornments of a “pure land,” which include a resplendent array of exquisite pennants and banners, rare jewels, precious metals, exotic flowers, and so on. Shingon practice halls, like their architectural counterparts in other Buddhist traditions, are accordingly decorated with silk brocade hangings, ornate altar pieces and implements of fine lacquer and gold, fresh flowers, and incense, all of which are intended to reflect the glory of a pure buddha realm. The “adornment of the sanctuary” is thus a formal procedure wherein the place of practice is ritually transformed into the world of enlightenment—the instantiation of the Mahayana tenet that *nirvāṇa* is *samsāra* correctly perceived. This transformation of the sanctuary into a pure land is effected in large part through the agency of the image that constitutes the sacred presence of the principal deity.⁷² If anything, the presence of the man-

FIGURE 4.12 (Opposite) Amoghavajra (C: Pu-k’ung), one of five portraits of patriarchs of Shingon Buddhism painted by Li Chen in the early ninth century and imported from China to Japan by Kūkai in 806. Hanging scroll, ink and colors on silk, 212.1 × 150.6 cm. Kyōōgokokuji (Tōji), Kyoto Prefecture. Photo: Kyōōgokokuji.



dala—an eminently visible supernatural being positioned directly in front of the practitioner—does not so much serve as an aid for visualizing the deity as it abrogates the need for visualization at all.

Shingon Apologetics and the Hermeneutic of Experience

The “supernatural” or “magical” properties of Buddhist icons should be evident to all those familiar with the treatment of such images in Japan. Yet all too often this aspect of Buddhist images is overlooked by contemporary apologists, art historians, and buddhologists alike. Rather than treat icons in the context of the miraculous powers attributed to them, contemporary writers tend to emphasize their didactic function, as if Buddhist images were intended merely to symbolize the virtues of buddhahood, or to nurture a sense of reverence toward the Buddha’s teachings. Alternatively, belief in the power of icons is often dismissed as a popular accretion antithetical to the tenets of “true Buddhism.”

The tendency to disregard or dismiss the Buddhist veneration of images is yet another manifestation of what has become known as the Protestantization of Buddhism: the widespread penchant to present “real Buddhism” as a rational and humanistic creed that rejects sacerdotalism, magic, idolatry, and empty ritual.⁷³ Thus Theravādin apologists will insist on the Buddha’s “humanity” and the purely pedagogical role of images, despite extensive ethnographic and textual evidence that suggests otherwise.⁷⁴ Some advocates of Zen have gone even further, propagating the fiction that Zen eschews the use of images altogether. In the case of Shingon, however, where the invocation and veneration of deities constitutes the heart of clerical practice, modern commentators are unable to avail themselves of these defensive strategies. One finds instead the reconfiguration of image worship in psychologistic terms, such that the elaborate rituals revolving around the invocation of deities and the worship of icons are construed as meditative exercises intended to inculcate a mystical or transformative “religious experience.”

I have discussed the roots of the Japanese Buddhist “hermeneutic of experience” elsewhere and thus will limit myself to the briefest overview here.⁷⁵ In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Buddhism was the subject of a sustained critique by Japanese intellectuals, many of whom were schooled in Western thought. Japanese opponents of Buddhism adopted many of the arguments used by European Enlightenment critics of Christianity; Buddhism

is denounced as a “primitive,” “illogical,” and “unscientific” creed propagated by a self-serving, morally degenerate priesthood. Buddhism—construed as a foreign import at odds with the genuine spiritual and ethical values of the Japanese—was even held responsible for Japan’s technological and scientific “backwardness.”⁷⁶

In response, Buddhist leaders, many of whom were versed in Western philosophy, invoked the traditional rhetoric of *upāya*, or “skillful means,” in defense of their faith. They argued that Buddhist ritualism must not be seen as an end in itself, nor as a primitive method of manipulating natural forces, but rather as a means of engendering a profoundly liberating, nonsectarian spiritual experience. In short, Buddhism was not so much “bad science” as it was “enlightened mysticism” or “transformative psychology.” Apologists for the Zen and Pure Land schools would thus emphasize the centrality of “personal experience” (*keiken* 經驗, or *taiken* 體驗) in their respective traditions, a strategy that had the felicitous result of rendering Buddhism intellectually respectable and immune to external critique at one and the same time.

Shingon was particularly vulnerable to Western-influenced critiques of religion due to the emphasis it placed on sacred icons and the sacerdotal powers of the priesthood. Following the lead of their Zen and Pure Land counterparts Shingon exegetes—including such eminent authorities as Toganoo Shōun, Yamasaki Taikō, and Matsunaga Yūkei—accentuate the “meditative,” “experiential,” and “psychological” dimensions of Shingon practice. Matsunaga is unequivocal in this regard; in a short talk on the meaning of the word *mikkyō*, he says, “Esoteric Buddhism is not theory but religious experience, the intuition of the essential oneness of the macrocosm and microcosm. Through religious experience one gains direct intuition of the fact that the macrocosm—the universe of Mother Nature—and oneself are essentially one.”⁷⁷ And in his recent general introduction to Buddhist Esoterism Matsunaga writes:

In Buddhism the realm of religious experience 宗教体験 is called the “inner witness” [*jinaishō* 自内証], and as is understood from the fact that the common Japanese word “private” [or “secret,” *naisho* 内緒] is derived from it, it lies within the domain of personal experience that is impossible to communicate to others. While we may grasp it with our ordinary sense faculties, it is not something that can be transmitted by usual modes of communication such as speech or writing. . . . In order to acquire it we cannot rely on others, but must experience it personally by mystical intuition which remains the only means of comprehending it.⁷⁸

According to Matsunaga, the “privacy” of the world of inner experience explains the ubiquitous Buddhist rhetoric concerning the “inexpressibility” of absolute truth. Matsunaga goes on to say, however, that this is one area in which Esoteric Buddhism parts ways with exoteric Buddhism, for although the latter insists that the realm of absolute truth is utterly beyond expression, Esoteric Buddhism holds that the absolute can indeed be expressed in sacred signs (*hyōji* 標幟), sacred speech (mantra), and above all sacred art. Citing the same passage from Kūkai’s *Goshōrai mokuroku* that I discussed above, Matsunaga argues that Shingon art must thus be understood in the context of religious experience—Esoteric images both express and elicit the experience of the absolute.⁷⁹

The same claim is made by Yamasaki Taikō, who says, “The source of the Mikkyō mandala is Shakyamuni’s experience at Buddhagayā, where he realized enlightenment through meditation under a bodhi tree. Mikkyō seeks to convey this experience of the source of the self by means of painted and sculpted forms, and by meditation and ritual employing these forms. This is the inner meaning of the mandala.”⁸⁰ Ishida Hisatoyo concurs, appealing to the hermeneutic of experience to explain certain stylistic and iconographic features of the mandalas such as the frontal presentation of deities.⁸¹ Ishida writes:

As long as contemplative experience is a living, meaningful one for Esoteric master and painter, it generates the creative impulse. As a result Esoteric paintings possess a vital power that is not present in those of other types of Buddhism. Indeed, if Esoteric images are executed mechanically according to the manuals, their essential life is lost, and they turn into facile formalizations. . . . Ultimately, the mandala is a symbolic and concrete representation, through images, of the process of human enlightenment.⁸²

The questionable claim that Shingon mandalas function as aids for meditation is then simply one facet of an all-encompassing approach to *mikkyō*, an approach that privileges inner experience over public performance. The problem with this exegetical strategy is that traditional Buddhist sources, whether esoteric or exoteric, simply fail to provide support for it. The roots of the Japanese Buddhist “hermeneutic of experience” lie rather in the writings of twentieth-century Buddhist exegetes who found themselves forced to respond to powerful rationalist or empiricist critiques of their faith. These exegetes adopted in part the Western rubric of “religious experience” in formulating their response, drawing on sources such as Rudolph Otto and William James

as mediated through the writings of Nishida Kitarō, D. T. Suzuki, and their intellectual heirs.⁸³

Japanese Shingon exegetes were not the only ones to tout the experiential or psychological dimensions of Tantric art. The preeminent and still influential early Western scholar of Tantric art, Giuseppe Tucci, taking Carl Jung and his theory of archetypes as his point of departure, refers to mandalas as “psycho-cosmogrammata” and as a “way to the reintegration of consciousness.”⁸⁴ For Tucci the mandala is an external representation of the psychospiritual forces that lie in the depths of human consciousness, and each feature of the mandala corresponds to some specific psychological aspect of the self and the process of spiritual evolution. Tucci was also instrumental in popularizing the notion that mandalas serve as aids to visualization: “The *mandala* born, thus, of an interior impulse became, in its turn, a support for meditation, an external instrument to provoke and procure such visions in quiet concentration and meditation.”⁸⁵ Here, too, in promoting the mandala as a sophisticated means of occasioning psychological and spiritual transformation, Tucci successfully masks the patently “idolatrous” nature of Buddhist icon worship; nary a mention is made of the soteriological, apotropaic, and redemptive powers that traditional Buddhist sources categorically attribute to Tantric rites and images.

Conclusion

I have examined in considerable detail some of the problems with the notion that Shingon mandalas are used as aids to visualization. For one thing, there is surprisingly little correlation between the iconographic content of the major Shingon mandalas—the Kongōkai and Taizōkai—and the liturgical content of the invocation rituals with which they are associated. For another, the *kansō*, or “contemplative,” material in the rites is often more discursive than visual. These contemplations are treated not so much as guided meditations, but rather as liturgical recitations that constitute the ritual enactment of the “mystery of mind.”

In emphasizing the performative dimension of Shingon rites, my “etic” analysis is largely commensurate with orthodox “emic” doctrinal formulations. As is evident from central tenets such as “becoming buddha in this very body” and “the nonduality of practitioner and deity,” the prescribed sequence of ritual acts that comprises a Shingon invocation ritual was not traditionally understood as leading to some private mystical experience. Rather, they were

viewed as the enactment of buddhahood—the practitioner literally mimics the body, speech, and mind of the Tathāgata, thereby attaining his *kaji*. (Shingon *kaji* might then profitably be analyzed under the rubric of “sympathetic magic.”)

Be that as it may, there is no denying the many patently visual or pictorial elements in the ritual contemplations. The *kansō* found in Shidokeyō invocations contain numerous references to lunar disks, lotus blossoms, mutating seed-syllables, *stūpas*, and, of course, a wide variety of anthropomorphic deities. It is certainly possible, if not probable, that this store of visual imagery would contribute to the construction of an elaborate imaginative world in which the sanctuary is construed as a pure buddha field populated by a host of benevolent deities. In entering the sanctuary and undertaking the rites a priest learns to behave *as if* he were dwelling in a sacred realm, *as if* he were in the presence of the principal deity, *as if* he had merged with Mahāvairocana. No doubt, sustained training in these arduous practices would effectively alter one’s affective response to the liturgies, the implements, and the images used in the rites. But at the same time, this imaginative “as if” aspect of Shingon performance demands that the practitioner, like any accomplished stage actor, remain fully cognizant of his immediate physical environs. As such my analysis stands in contrast to the phenomenological model, which holds that Shingon meditations involve the psychological projection or “inner visualization” of an alternative universe.

This chapter raises many issues that I am unable to pursue here, perhaps the most conspicuous being the disparity between the iconography of the mandalas and the content of their respective rites. It is almost as if the conjunction of rite and image were the result of a not-altogether successful attempt to synthesize two independent traditions—one liturgical and the other iconographic.⁸⁶ Speculation on this issue would be premature, however, as the historical development of Shingon rites and images is still poorly understood. The orthodox Shingon position has always been that the Kongōkai and Taizōkai lineages, including their scriptures, images, and rituals, were independently transmitted in unadulterated form from India to China. In China, the theory goes, they were finally brought together into a single unified system of doctrine and practice, which was then transmitted directly to Japan. Scholars are now beginning to appreciate, however, the extent of the East Asian contribution to the tradition now known as Shingon. Indeed, the fundamental categories used to delineate and define the Shingon school—that is, the

opposition between “esoteric teachings” (*mikkyō*) and “exoteric teachings” (*kengyō* 顯教), and that between “pure” versus “mixed” esoterism (*junmitsu* 純密 and *zōmitsu* 雜密)—are not attested in India and may well have been Japanese innovations. Kūkai appears to have been responsible for the notion of a lineal genealogy of *mikkyō* masters originating with Mahāvairocana, and his disciples were the first to systematize the major invocation rites into the Shidokeyō sequence. Scholars are also beginning to scrutinize the pedigree of the Taizōkai and Kongōkai mandalas; it now appears likely that the configuration of the two mandalas, as well as some of the iconographic detail, evolved in China rather than India.⁸⁷ In short, scholars are starting to grasp the significant part played by Amoghavajra, Hui-kuo, Kūkai, and their followers in shaping East Asian *mikkyō*, but much work remains to be done on the specific role played by each of these figures and the sources on which they drew.⁸⁸

These issues lie well beyond the modest scope of this study. It should now be clear, however, that speculation as to the conception and function of Buddhist mandalas—and indeed all Buddhist religious icons—is of limited value unless predicated on the critical analysis of their ritual and institutional deployments.