

WHAT'S WITH ALL THE SECRECY?
TOWARDS A MORE NUANCED UNDERSTANDING OF THE ROLE OF SECRETS IN
ESOTERIC BUDDHISM

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Introduction

This paper began as an exploration to examine the relationship between secrecy and power as it pertains to religion, and, like many explorations I entered into this one with preconceived notions. From preliminary readings of Paul Christopher Johnson and Hugh Urban, scholars who examine secrecy within two distinct religious traditions—Brazilian Candomblé and Hinduism, respectively—I was convinced that secrecy was first and foremost a strategy imposed to reify power and uphold hierarchical structures.¹ I took what might be called a suspicious approach, one concerned with exposing “secret institutions” for what they really are: A veiled attempt to consolidate power among a privileged elite.² Secrecy, then, becomes a tool to increase and maintain power, both of the individual within the tradition and of the tradition itself among its competitors.

No discussion of power is complete without a nod to the French philosopher Michel Foucault.³ As Jeremy Carrette writes, Foucault himself recognized the strong relationship between religion and power.

[Foucault] questions the hegemony of the religious discourse and reveals it excluded Other; he identifies the hidden currents of confessional practice and uncovers the silenced body. Religion in Foucault’s work was no longer allowed to exist in a neutral space; it emerged and evolved in a power dynamic of the said and the unsaid. Religion was seen inseparably to exist in the social,

¹ Paul Christopher Johnson, *Secrets, Gossip, and Gods* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Hugh Urban, “The Torment of Secrecy: Ethical and Epistemological Problems in the Study of Esoteric Traditions.” *History of Religions* 58, no. 3 (1998): 209-248.

² French philosopher Paul Ricouer writes, “Hermeneutics seems to me to be animated by this double motivation: willingness to suspect, willingness to listen; vow of rigor, vow of obedience.” See Paul Ricouer, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 27. Suspicion is thus a valid approach, but without a “willingness to listen” often leaves a hermeneutic method incomplete.

³ Notably, Foucault’s work features in both Hugh Urban and Paul Johnson’s discussions of religious secrecy. Citing Foucault, Urban demonstrates his commitment to examine the “forms and the strategies through which secret information is concealed, revealed, and exchanged,” similar to the methods employed by Foucault in his studies of power (“The Torment of Secrecy”, 218). Johnson includes Foucault’s theory on the “incitement to discourse” when he discusses the effects of the emergence of once-secret Candomblé practices into the public sphere (*Secrets, Gossip, and Gods*, 19).

cultural and political exclusions which attempt to control human experience through the values and ideas of religious beliefs.⁴

In refusing to allow religion to exist in a neutral space, Foucault places religion squarely in an environment of highly charged power dynamics. Through interactions with the social, cultural, and political spheres, religion established itself as a powerful institution capable of exclusion and control. Privileged information, guarded by the shield of secrecy, serves to perpetuate this exclusion, distinguishing not only between “the said and the unsaid” but also between those who know and those that do not.

Religion, as in the case of most institutions, invariably develops hierarchies that serve as systems of transmission and separate clergy from laity and teachers from students. However, as Mark Teeuwen notes, in the case of secrecy, “the machinery that surrounds the secrets is often out of proportion to their contents, and deserves an analysis in its own terms.”⁵ This machinery is clearly reflected in elaborate hierarchies with strict rules regarding the act of transmission of secret knowledge. Following this line of thought, secrecy seemingly becomes more closely related to consolidating power than with truly protecting “secret” information.

Georg Simmel discusses the role of secrecy in promoting hierarchical structures his influential paper “The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies.” Simmel, writing in the early twentieth century, is widely regarded as a pioneer in the academic study of secrecy and his work, although not specifically referring to religion, is helpful to understand the sociological aspects of religious secrecy. Simmel contends that the “gradual initiation of the members belongs...to a very far reaching and widely ramifying division of sociological forms...It is the

⁴ Jeremy Carrette, *Foucault and Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 129.

⁵ Mark Teeuwen, introduction to *The Culture of Secrecy in Japanese Religion*, ed. Bernhard Scheid and Mark Teeuwen (New York: Routledge, 2006), 5.

principle of the hierarchy, of graded articulation, of the elements of a society.”⁶ The “gradual” nature of initiation ceremonies contributes immensely to the complex hierarchies apparent in religious institutions. Beyond merely helping to construct hierarchies, secrecy continually reaffirms them and can easily be used to manipulate institutions into systems of oppression. As Hugh Urban has noted in his study of the Kartābhajā, a late eighteenth century religious community in West Bengal, secrecy was used as “a strategy of elitism and exploitation within the community itself—a means of obfuscating of inequalities, constructing new hierarchies of power, or concealing of more subtle forms of oppression.”⁷ Secrecy clearly has the potential to be wielded as a weapon of the elite, to guarantee power for some while contributing to the oppression of others.

Background work complete, I now turned my attention to Esoteric Buddhism in particular, where I expected to see similar trends in the development of power structures.⁸ Esoteric Buddhism is widely regarded as a “religion of secrecy,” classified by controlled textual scarcity, physical inaccessibility, rigid formal and often hierarchical patterns of transmission, and the presence of exclusive rituals.⁹ Foremost among these exclusive rituals is the *abhiṣeka*, or the initiation ritual. Notably, the ritual initiations, which become increasingly complex as one progresses along the esoteric path, follow the “gradual” model outlined by Simmel. With the completion of each initiation, the esoteric practitioner ascends the hierarchy, gaining access to more privileged information and acquiring more power.

⁶ Georg Simmel, “The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies.” *American Journal of Sociology* 11, no. 4 (1906): 478.

⁷ Hugh Urban, “The Torment of Secrecy,” 245.

⁸ Although commonly known as “Tantric Buddhism,” I will be using the term “Esoteric Buddhism” due to the potential confusion with Hindu Tantra, closely related but noticeably different. Also, “Tantra” has become closely associated with transgressive practices which are not the focus of this essay. Christian K. Wedemeyer discusses the distinction between the terms Tantric and esoteric in his book *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013). For further information reference his introduction, pages 9-10.

⁹ Robert Ford Campany, “Secrecy and Display for the Transcendence in China ca. 220 BCE—350 CE.” *History of Religions* 45, no. 4 (2006): 302.

However, I was surprised by the overall lack of association between secrecy and power among scholarly discussions on Esoteric Buddhism. Clearly, the tradition emphasizes empowerment but power is discussed as a personal characteristic that is not necessarily exercised in relation to others. Socially, secrecy seems to play a different role, or perhaps has little role to play at all. I use a historical case that of the Chinese monk Amoghavajra, to elucidate these variegated roles below. But perhaps more notable and accessible to the modern reader, the mass “secret” initiations held by the Dalai Lama seem to dispel the perception of secrecy surrounding Esoteric Buddhism. These dramatic occasions, often held in front of thousands of recipients (sometimes even hundreds of thousands) do not frame esoteric practice as an elitist movement, concerned with the consolidation of power among a small group.¹⁰ The overall impression is not one of hostile concealment but of welcoming transparency.

However, secrecy nevertheless remains a dominant theme in Esoteric Buddhism. How to understand it then? While secrecy, as Hugh Urban and Georg Simmel shrewdly point out, can indeed be understood as a strategy of power accumulation and consolidation, there must be other formulations of secrecy. It is then the purpose of this paper to examine these various definitions of secrecy in an attempt to illuminate its role in Esoteric Buddhism. I begin by examining different conceptions of secrecy as a human construct, then turn to essentialist arguments (e.g. that the secret contains divine knowledge), and finally offer my own alternative view of secrecy, that of *unintelligibility*, that I think best explains the presence of secrecy in Esoteric Buddhism. By “unintelligibility” I mean that whatever is taken to be secret contains *information* that is not accessible to those without specific knowledge and training. Thus, information that is

¹⁰ The esoteric Kalachakra initiation has been presented in front of crowds reaching 200,000 individuals in India, 100,000 in Tibet, 10,000 in Europe, and 8,000 in the United States. For a complete table of the Dalai Lama’s teachings of the Kalachakra Tantra since 1954 and the number of people in the audience at each, reference <http://www.dalailama.com/teachings/kalachakra-initiations>.

traditionally termed “divine” or “secret” might be understood better as “unintelligible” and divinity itself might be better conceived as information that is potentially transformative when understood.

The Human Secret

The Case of Amoghavajra

Amoghavajra (Chinese: Pu-k’ung) was a Chinese monk who is widely credited with firmly establishing Esoteric Buddhism in China. At first glance, his rapid ascent to power through his unique access to secret esoteric practices seems supportive of my early model of secrecy’s role in consolidating power. While this model is certainly relevant to Amoghavajra’s circumstances secrecy can be understood in a multitude of ways that further illuminate Amoghavajra’s interaction with secret teachings. That is to say, framing secrecy within the context of power alone provides an overly-simplistic picture of the case of Amoghavajra.

Arriving in China in the early eighth century, Amoghavajra was ordained as a disciple of Vajrabodhi and initiated into the secret teachings of Esoteric Buddhism.¹¹ His arrival in China coincided with a period of unstable relations between Buddhism and the ruling T’ang dynasty. Imperial attitudes towards Buddhism ranged from general indifference to outright hostility. As scholar Stanley Weinstein notes, the sixth century was marked by constantly shifting perceptions of Buddhism on the part of T’ang emperors. By the seventh century Buddhism had gained a significant following in China, a country traditionally dominated by Taoism and Confucianism. Thus, Buddhism presented a problem for the imperial government: How to handle a religion with popular support that is perceived as a threat to traditional values?

¹¹ The following information regarding the T’ang dynasty in China is taken from Stanley Weinstein’s extensively researched *Buddhism Under the T’ang* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), an essential volume for anyone undertaking a study of T’ang-era Buddhism.

The government responded with a series of policies that appeared, at the surface level, to be supportive of Buddhism (thus catering to public opinion), but in reality subtly extended state control over the religion. For example, Emperor T'ai-tsung filled vacancies in the church administration with government appointees following the death of several church elders, effectively placing Buddhism squarely within state control. Interestingly, this move occurred in tandem with government sponsorship of the construction of monasteries across the T'ang Empire. The T'ang emperors were giving with one hand while taking with the other.

However, Amoghavajra was instrumental in shifting this pattern. His magical powers supposedly caught the eye of Emperor Hsuan-Tsung who, in 742, invited Amoghavajra to the imperial palace. From that point forward, Amoghavajra became a fixture among the imperial court, frequently called upon for his knowledge of protective rituals when the state was threatened. These rituals were primarily esoteric in nature and proved very valuable to the T'ang Empire in winning battles and suppressing rebellions. In 746 Amoghavajra was given permission to build a Buddhist altar in the imperial palace where he subsequently performed the emperor's consecration. Soon after, Amoghavajra established a more permanent chapel where he continued to perform rituals for the benefit of the state. In return, the state increased sponsorship of Buddhism, providing significant sums of money for the construction of lavish monasteries such as that at Wu-t'ai shan. Amoghavajra was particularly influential in disseminating the worship of Wen-Shu (Sanskrit: *Mañjuśrī*), successfully petitioning the government to require images of the deity in all Chinese monasteries.

Interpreted in one way, Amoghavajra's knowledge of "secret" esoteric practice raised him to significant levels of power, guaranteeing him a position where he was able to help inform

imperial opinion concerning Buddhism while shaping religious discourse throughout the empire.

As Martin Lehnert writes:

...Amoghavajra was able to monopolize three functions of religious authority, namely (1) the master who is the authority of transmission of the Dharma and guarantor of its authenticity, (2) the priest who is the director of the liturgy and its doctrinal representation, and (3) the hierophant who presents himself as a mediator of the divine sphere, of numinous empowerment and ultimate realization of truth. These three functions came into operation by means of secrecy...¹²

Central to this understanding of secrecy is the implicit intention to use secrecy on the one hand as a means to acquire power, and, on the other, as a method to maintain those structures of power. Amoghavajra held his position in the imperial court until his death in 774, over thirty years after he was first invited to the royal palace. However, the rituals were usually carried out in plain sight of the public; these weren't performances happening behind black curtains or closed doors. Weinstein also mentions the frequent initiations that Amoghavajra gave to the emperor and other imperial officials.¹³ These freely shared initiations, along with the very public nature of the rituals, seem to suggest that secrecy played a different role, one not entirely related to the exercise of power.¹⁴ I now turn to some alternative formulations of secrecy, providing discussions of each, before returning to Amoghavajra with new lenses to examine the role of secrecy in Esoteric Buddhist practice during the T'ang dynasty.

¹² Martin Lehnert, "Myth and Secrecy in Tang-period Tantric Buddhism," in *The Culture of Secrecy in Japanese Religion*, ed. Bernhard Scheid and Mark Teeuwen (New York: Routledge, 2006), 93.

¹³ Stanley Weinstein, *Buddhism Under the T'ang*, 58.

¹⁴ I recognize the potential for a counter-argument here concerning the interior characteristics of the ritual that are certainly more concealed than the external. These include the visualization of the deity and mandala and the development of divine embodiment. However, these characteristics will be discussed in my third section so I will not discuss them further here.

Samuel's subversive model

Remaining within the realm of secrecy and power, Geoffrey Samuel provides some valuable insights into secrecy's power as a subversive movement. In his book *Tantric Revisionings*, Samuel traces Esoteric Buddhism from its roots in Indian Tantric practice to the dissemination of Vajrayana teachings in Tibet.¹⁵ Samuel identifies the origins of Esoteric Buddhism among a group of wandering ascetic yogis called the *siddha* living in India between the seventh and twelfth centuries CE.¹⁶ He identifies the *siddha* as a marginal group engaging in a dissenting practice, but nonetheless an increasingly attractive alternative to monastic Buddhism.

Samuel describes these patterns of dissent as directly opposed to the normative structures of power as represented by the monasteries. The Buddhist monasteries, because of the significant patronage they received from the state, were likely centers of state power. At the time, monasticism was essential in maintaining what Samuel refers to as the "hegemonic order," that is, the social norms most closely aligned with the established regime.¹⁷ In this context, scholarship and monastic code flourished, leaving little room for the magical and ecstatic practices that would come to define the *siddha*.

The *siddhas* marginality was physically reflected in their gatherings, which Samuel states "ideally took place in dangerous and marginal sites and times such as cremation-grounds at

¹⁵Geoffrey Samuel, *Tantric Revisionings* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005).

¹⁶ The origin of Esoteric Buddhism remains a contentious subject among scholars of religion. Samuel, along with scholars such as Ronald Davidson and David Snellgrove identify the roots of Esoteric Buddhism among ancient Indian tribes and Śaivite communities. Others claim that esoteric practice originated among degenerate monks who were rebelling against rigid monastic codes. This being said, I feel that Samuel, Davidson, and Snellgrove provide a compelling argument so for the purposes of this paper I will use their model. For an in depth discussion of the debate surrounding the origins of Esoteric Buddhism along with Christian Wedemeyer's alternative theory employing semiotics, see Wedemeyer's book *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism*.

¹⁷ Geoffrey Samuel, *Tantric Revisionings*, 52.

night.”¹⁸ Unable to practice in public areas because of the assumed threat to state power, the Indian *siddha* were forced to practice at the fringe of society, often quite literally as Samuel suggests. With these practices the *siddha* established themselves as a subversive movement with sources of power that lay outside of state control. For this reason they made sure to practice in secret.

Apparent in Samuel’s discussion is the subversive potential of secrecy. As Johnson, who worked extensively with the “secret” Candomblé religion in Brazil, points out, “secrecy may leave hermeneutic space for multiple interpretations and thereby invite pluralism and resistance to monolithic authority, just as it may occlude and mystify the equal status of human beings and reify hierarchies of power as natural or inevitable.”¹⁹ Urban espouses a similar sentiment in his analysis as he traces the evolution of the Kartābhajās from a subversive movement with egalitarian goals to a rigid, hierarchical organization with power consolidated among the elite Gurus.²⁰

Where secrecy can construct it can also destroy. Interestingly enough it can do both simultaneously. Important here is the distinction between the inside and outside. Outwardly, secrecy can be destructive—it provides a space for dissenting movements and allows those movements to continue undetected. Such is the case with the dissenting practice of the *siddhas*. Secrecy prevents normative structures from extending too far by guaranteeing an off-limits area, one that is always a secret. Secrecy allows traditions to outwardly subvert established norms while building structures of power within. As discussed above, secrecy can be an equally effective tool in consolidating power and maintaining an elite class.

¹⁸ Geoffrey Samuel, *Tantric Revisionings*, 60.

¹⁹ Paul Christopher Johnson, *Secrets, Gossip, and Gods*, 5.

²⁰ Hugh Urban, “The Torment of Secrecy,” 222, 225.

Secrecy's alluring power

Yet secrecy can also serve social purposes outside the exercise of power. Creating artificial scarcity through constructing and maintaining an aura of secrecy serves to elevate the value of the secret's contents, effectively increasing demand. Part of what makes secrecy so compelling is the fact that not everyone knows the secret, promoting a sort of overinflated perception of importance. By maintaining this atmosphere of secrecy, the hidden knowledge at once becomes very desirable. A perception of importance, born from limited access, creates an irresistible draw *to know*.

Secrecy becomes, in this way, an effective advertising strategy. Of course the *existence* of the secret must be known, revealed through periodical exposure. Paul Johnson provides a helpful perspective here. He coins the term "Secretism," which he defines as "*the active milling, polishing, and promotion of the reputation of secrets...* Secretism does not diminish a sign's prestige by revealing it, but rather increases it through the promiscuous circulation of its reputation."²¹ Through limited revelation or discussion, a secret's reputation develops, and as more people hear of the existence of a secret, the perceived importance of the secret increases. As Mark Teeuwen points out, secrecy can also be a tool for enhancing experience once granted access to the secret.²² That is, the perceived value of the secret, prior to being known, makes the secret that much more important when it is fully revealed.

Thus, secrecy can be an effective tool for increasing the membership of a religious tradition.²³ The fact that the secret is itself a human construct, an artificial designation, makes no difference. It is the allure of the secret, not the content of the secret itself, that makes people want

²¹ Paul Christopher Johnson, *Secrets, Gossip, and Gods*, 3

²² Mark Teeuwen, introduction to *The Culture of Secrecy in Japanese Religion*, 2.

²³ Many institutions, most notably secret societies, rely on secrecy as a core principle. Georg Simmel's essay is a good starting point in exploring the phenomenon of secrecy outside of religion. See Works Cited page for a full citation.

to participate. The promise of secret knowledge, known only to a limited group of privileged humans is a significant motivator indeed.

Barriers and boundaries

Secrecy is also frequently used to establish barriers or boundaries in an attempt to protect, limit misuse, and ensure wellbeing. In the case of protection, secrecy is often used to remove “sacred” information from contact with the impurities of the material world and to protect against the human afflictions of corruption and greed. Thus, the emphasis on purification so dominant in Esoteric Buddhist ritual, which requires cleanliness in the most extreme sense: To be clean in body, speech, and mind. Purification extends beyond a simple washing of a monk’s body to ridding the mind of impure thoughts and speech of vulgar language.

The content of the secret is also understood as powerful, endowing the possessor with magical abilities. Amoghavajra was frequently called upon by the Emperor to control weather and divert dangerous comets and asteroids.²⁴ By ensuring powerful information remains secret, the potential for misuse is greatly reduced. Misuse, as I define it here, includes both intentional abuse and unintentional misapplication. The secret information presents a possibility for both to occur: Misuse that is not a result of malicious intent but is instead bred from ignorance as well as misuse that is intentional and malevolent. The worry that these powers were going to be misused was apparently a real concern for esoteric gurus.²⁵

As a barrier, secrecy serves yet another purpose: To ensure well-being. Here, secrecy is designed to protect an individual from harm. Without the proper training such secret practices can cause impediments, and in some cases physical damage, along the path to enlightenment. For

²⁴ Charles D. Orzech, *Politics and Transcendent Wisdom: The Scripture for Humane Kings in the Creation of Chinese Buddhism* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 195 n. 63.

²⁵ Mark Teeuwen, introduction to *The Culture of Secrecy in Japanese Religion*, 11.

example, deity-yoga, a process in which an individual imagines herself as a specific Buddhist deity, can foster the development of a personal ego in individuals lacking sufficient training. This is the opposite of the intended result to dismantle the personal ego in recognition of a more developed awareness.²⁶

Important to this discussion of secrecy is the Mahayana principle of skillful means (*upāya*), which dictates the use of appropriate “tools” for specific stages of development. A jackhammer is not given to an untrained worker on her first day of work; similarly a high-level initiation is not appropriate for an individual who has not yet developed sufficient capacities.²⁷ Therefore the high-level initiations, useless and potentially dangerous to the untrained, are “off-limits,” kept “secret,” just as the jackhammer remains under lock and key—reserved for those who are trained in its use. Discussions focusing on such concerns appear in primary Buddhist texts, most notably the *Skill-in-means Sutra (Upayakausalya-sutra)* and *Lotus Sutra (Saddharmapundarika-sutra)*. Mark Teeuwen notes the emphasis on skillful means in both, arriving at the conclusion that “secrecy is an intrinsic element of the bodhisattva’s skillful strategies to lead all sentient beings to enlightenment.”²⁸

A return to Amoghavajra

Each of these alternative understandings of secrecy helps to clarify the case of Amoghavajra. First, Buddhism, for much of the T’ang dynasty was considered a subversive religion, secondary to the state religions of Taoism and Confucianism.²⁹ Thus, the secret practices of Esoteric Buddhism provided a separate space outside of state control. Amoghavajra

²⁶ Thubten Yeshe, *Introduction to Tantra* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1987), 137.

²⁷ Rupert Getin, *The Foundations of Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 269. Getin offers a short, basic, yet nevertheless helpful description of Esoteric Buddhism and notes its complexities.

²⁸ Mark Teeuwen, introduction to *The Culture of Secrecy in Japanese Religion*, 11.

²⁹ Stanley Weinstein, *Buddhism Under the T’ang*, 8.

continued to act subversively in his position in the imperial court, constructing a more independent and powerful Buddhist church by removing state control. Granted, he was still acting in the service of the state on the one hand, but on the other he was building a source of power that increasingly lay outside of state control.

Second, in a state where Buddhism was given a secondary status, the well-advertised, yet secret, ritual ceremonies would have been effective in promoting the religion. As discussed above, the artificial scarcity imposed by secrecy is often successful in creating an atmosphere of allure. In this light, Amoghavajra's strategy of "Secretism," to borrow Johnson's language, can be seen as an attempt at expanding Buddhism in China. Third, Amoghavajra, as an advanced practitioner of Esoteric Buddhism, would have been aware of the potential for misuse of magical powers as well as the emphasis on purity in esoteric practice. Both would likely lead him to keep the powerful information secret. It cannot be said for sure exactly what Amoghavajra's intentions were, but it is clear that many more possibilities exist than the desire for and consolidation of power. Thus, secrecy presents itself as a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon that is not easily distilled into single formulations.

All the understandings of "secrecy" I have presented in this section have the effect of reducing the term to a human construct, to merely a method to acquire power; hide transgressive practices; produce the illusion of scarcity and thus build an aura of allure; and to protect specific information from abuse, misuse, or to guard against impurities. The view here is that there is nothing about the secret that inherently produces secrecy; rather the secret is secondary to the underlying goals of secrecy. These models tend to devalue the content of the secret by dismissing secrecy as a human construct with ulterior motives.

I'm uncomfortable with the direction of these arguments, which to me all seem to amount to a "debunking" of secrecy. I'm hesitant to relegate secrecy entirely to the human realm, and in doing so discount the traditional understanding of the divine aspect of secrecy. Divine, as I define it here, means the basis for salvific power, whether that be the ontologically separate God of traditional monotheistic traditions or the enlightened Buddhist mind that knows the Dharma and is therefore liberated from the suffering of *samsāra*. In my reading it has become clear that the process of restriction is not understood within the tradition to be one at all controlled by humans. Is it possible that the secret information contained in Esoteric Buddhist rituals was not concealed by Amoghavajra at all and instead was in fact divine and thus inaccessible to most? Could Amoghavajra's unique access to this knowledge be a result of a rare glimpse of the divine?

The Divine Secret

Kukai, who studied with a disciple of Amoghavajra, was exposed to Esoteric Buddhist teachings in China and is credited with bringing the tradition to Japan where it would soon become known as Shingon Buddhism. Writing in the ninth century, Kukai emphasized the divine nature of the secret teachings. In his esoteric treatise titled *Distinguishing the Two Teachings of the Exoteric and Esoteric*, Kukai terms this divine secret the "preaching of the Dharmakaya" (Japanese: *Hosshin Seppo*), suggesting that it forms the secret treasury to which esoteric practice provides the key. The Dharmakaya, traditionally understood by Mahayanists as "the sum (*kāya*) of perfected good qualities (dharma) that constitute a Buddha," is not associated with any type of agency, that is, it does not "do anything at all."³⁰ However, Kukai denies the mere abstraction of

³⁰ Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, 233. Gethin contrasts the Dharmakaya body with the other two bodies constituting the three bodies of the Buddha (*trikāya*), the Nirmanakaya and the Sambhogakaya. The latter

the Dharmakaya by suggesting that the Dharmakaya actively preaches the Dharma (Buddhist teachings) in the world.³¹ For Kukai, all things are “expressive symbols (*monji*)” and the universe itself is a “symbolic embodiment (*sammayashin*)” of the Dharmakaya.³²

Within Kukai’s Shingon tradition, the content of the Dharmakaya’s preaching, as well as the preaching itself, is understood to be divine. This divinity is not understood as distinctly separate from the human realm, but is instead conceived of as the innermost wisdom and virtue of the Buddha that makes up the invisible layer that underlies all of reality. The *Hizoki*, a record of the teachings given to Kukai by his teacher Hui-kuo, states “...the practitioner’s mind that understands [the preaching of the Dharmakaya] underlying all the sights and sounds of the world is the reality that is the divinities of the mandala. The reality is the divinities; the divinities, the practitioner’s own minds.”³³ Abé goes on to write:

According to Hui-kuo, the entirety of the universe is the Dharmakaya and all the sights and sounds of the universe—as long as they demonstrate the Buddhist truth of impermanence of all things, or emptiness—are the Dharmakaya’s revelation of the Dharma. However, precisely because of this identity of the Dharmakaya with nature...the cosmic Buddha’s “natural language” remains both transparent and hidden. Therefore, esoteric scriptures claim that the Dharmakaya also reveals the ritual language of the three mysteries, mudra, mantra, and mandala, by means of which the divinities in the mandala communicate with one another to illumine the universe as a realm saturated with the Dharmakaya’s language.³⁴

bodies are understood to be more easily accessible while the Dharmakaya consists of abstract, unembodied characteristics.

³¹ Ryūichi Abé, *The Weaving of Mantra* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 267.

³² Thomas K. Kausulis, “Truth Words: The Basis of Kukai’s Theory of Interpretation,” in *Buddhist Hermeneutics*, ed. Donald S. Lopez Jr. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988), 262.

³³ Cited in Ryūichi Abé, *The Weaving of Mantra*, 130. Also see page 487 n. 60 for a discussion of the contentious origins of *Hizoki*. Although attributed to Kukai, the text is often claimed to have been composed after Kukai’s death. While this brings into question the historical accuracy of the text, the descriptions of core teachings are consistent with accepted Shingon tenets and I will use it here.

³⁴ Ryūichi Abé, *The Weaving of Mantra*, 130.

Thus, the secrecy surrounding the preaching of the Dharmakaya might be better understood as a “mystery”, only penetrable by those that have received esoteric initiation and have had a direct experience with the divine. This is consistent with the view espoused by Mircea Eliade, whose work, while much contested in contemporary academia, remains valuable in examining the phenomenon of secrecy. Viewed through an Eliadian lens, the initiation rite becomes at once a learning process, gradual revelation, a symbolic repetition, and an encounter with the sacred.³⁵ Rather than an artificially-imposed boundary separating the initiated from the uninitiated, the rite is a necessary step for a real encounter with the divine. The initiation becomes the “symbolic repetition of creation” that implies a literal “reactualization of a primordial event” and “the presence of the Gods and their creative energies.”³⁶ Once initiated, the individual is able to access a new existence (one closer to the divine) that is unavailable to the uninitiated. Thus, the divine secret is intrinsically exclusive and restrictive—creating a structure of secrecy—instead of artificially designated as such.

The initiation marks the transition between the profane and transcendent, providing participants with the opportunity to transcend humanity through an experience of the divine.³⁷ Thus the material of the initiation as might be better understood as “mysterious,” rather than secret in the social sense of the word, a line of thought that is picked up and more clearly articulated by Eliade’s student Kees Bolle in his edited volume *Secrecy in Religions*.³⁸ Bolle makes a distinction between the concealed secret—a sociological construct and more importantly, something that can be disclosed—and the mystery which can only be revealed.

³⁵ Mircea Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958). Eliade makes a distinction between the “puberty rites of primitive religions” (30-35) and the “initiatory death” rites of “higher religions” (130-131). The initiation rites of esoteric Buddhism fall under the latter categorization.

³⁶ Mircea Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation*, xii.

³⁷ Mircea Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation*, 102.

³⁸ Kees W. Bolle, “Secrecy in Religion,” in *Secrecy in Religions*, ed. Kees W Bolle (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1987).

Secrecy is “less and less a matter of privacy, or concealment of information, and more and more the wellsprings of real life, real knowledge, real behavior.”³⁹

The initiation is concerned with accessing this mystery and “implies an existential experience—the experience of ritual death and the revelation of the sacred; that is it exhibits a dimension that is metacultural and transhistorical.”⁴⁰ The sacred exists outside of ordinary structures of access: It is in a realm entirely its own. Ritual death is thus a central event in the initiation process as it marks the transition from the human to divine, a process taken to completion with the ritual rebirth into the supernatural sphere.⁴¹

Eliade and Bolle’s line of thought mark a departure from the sociological perspectives provided by Simmel, Urban, and Johnson. Eliade is concerned with the nature of the secret itself and less preoccupied with examining the social structures of secrecy that are constructed around the secret. Bolle sums up the concept nicely: “A social function bridging two groups is highlighted at the expense of the roots of the entire tradition; we are tempted to believe the latter is only incidental.”⁴² In this manner, the secrets produce secrecy; that is, secrecy is secondary to the secret itself. By emphasizing the social function of the secret, one risks completely overlooking the deeper meaning of the secret—a meaning that is foundational for a tradition. These views constitute an “insider perspective” in which “secrets are indeed glimpses of divine higher truth.”⁴³ It is clear from the language of Eliade and Bolle that both regard this “divine nature” as ultimately grounded in reality instead of rooted in human construct. However, neither offers compelling evidence to support his case. Their arguments merely take religious claims at face value and are irrefutable because they presuppose the real, concrete existence of the divine

³⁹ Kees W. Bolle, “Secrecy in Religion,” 3.

⁴⁰ Mircea Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation*, 130.

⁴¹ Mircea Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation*, 132.

⁴² Kees W. Bolle, “Secrecy in Religion,” 3.

⁴³ Mark Teeuwen, introduction to *The Culture of Secrecy in Japanese Religion*, 5.

which cannot be empirically proved. However, I believe the Eliadian model remains helpful in our analysis and has something to offer our developing understanding of secrecy.

The Unintelligible Secret

Merely conceiving of secrecy in an artificial, human-controlled sense has the effect of devaluing the secret content and its importance to a religious tradition. Once again relying on Bolle's language, information possibly constituting the "roots of the entire tradition" is overlooked as it becomes merely "incidental" to "social functions." This pattern of thought continually undermines a full appreciation for a given religious tradition and discounts the claims made by its adherents as ungrounded in reality. In the case of Esoteric Buddhism, doing so disregards the often inherently restrictive qualities of secret information.

Ryūichi Abé notes in his introduction to his monumental book *The Weaving of Mantra* that "contrary to the forbidding image associated with the term *esoteric*... Mikkyo (literally, secret teaching) enjoyed a wide diffusion throughout all walks of medieval Japanese society."⁴⁴ As I noted in the case of Amoghavajra, the "secret" information was widespread and rituals were commonly carried out entirely in the public sphere. Where, then, is the intention that is implicit in discussions of secrecy as a human construct? Here, the information need not be entirely understood as being kept artificially scarce with the intention of advancing certain goals such as the consolidation of power or the construction of a context of allure. No, information can be widely available yet remain restricted.

Might not a better understanding of the status of any "secret" content regard it as largely unintelligible to all but an advanced few? In this way, there is something inherently distinctive that sets the "secret" apart from other commonly accessible forms of information. But, unlike

⁴⁴ Ryūichi Abé, *The Weaving of Mantra*, 1.

Bolle and Eliade, I do not intend to make claims about the divinity of this information; rather I would like to frame it as “secret by default.” By using this designation I am attempting to attribute some inherent quality that sets information apart as “secret.” In doing so, I am consciously altering the common definition of secrecy. By deemphasizing the traditional emphasis on intentional concealment, I am attempting to highlight the intrinsic inaccessibility of the “secret” information. That is, something that is secret need not be intentionally concealed; its mere unintelligibility to the large majority of the public is enough to make it “secret.” Something that is considered “secret” can be widely available, such as Esoteric Buddhist teaching and practices, but remain unintelligible to most, thus creating the perception of secrecy.

Adding credence to this view of secrecy is the vast structure of gradual initiation rites and the emphasis on rigorous trainings. The initiation rites provide opportunities to learn, gradually rendering unintelligible information fully intelligible. Rather than preventing individuals from accessing secret knowledge, the rigid structure of initiation enables them to access the content by developing the necessary tools and capacities to approach an understanding. The complex nature of the initiations suggests that this learning process is an in-depth and lengthy affair. It might be useful at this point to step outside of Esoteric Buddhism and include an analogy to elucidate my line of thinking.

The analogy that comes to mind is that of quantum physics, or any advanced field or study. High level knowledge is certainly not “secret” in the conventional sense, it is not intentionally concealed from the public for the implementation of specific goals, but its advanced nature means it might as well as be a secret to most. The only thing “keeping” this information “secret” is its advanced content. Similarly, the only thing restricting access to the “secret” is the extensive training that is required to understand the seemingly unintelligible material.

Information that can only be understood by the few is necessarily information belonging to the few. This information, understandably conceived of as “secret” due to its overall unintelligibility to most, is only made intelligible to those with uncommonly advanced intellects and abilities or those that have received extensive training. Like experts in any field, Esoteric Buddhist practitioners can fall into either category.

Dale Allen Todaro includes a valuable discussion of high-level ritual in Shingon Practice that is worth including here. He describes the ritual process of the *Garbha Vidhi* introduced to Japan by Kukai. Todaro outlines the stages of the ritual: Purification, recitation (*mantra*), visualizations, hand gestures (*mudra*), and offerings. He examines the visualization practices in detail and describes their complex and elaborate nature.⁴⁵ In his concluding remarks he states, “the five *vidhis* judged to representative of this system are long manuals, and without some knowledge of their structure and components the rationale behind the ritual-meditation process is otherwise difficult to understand.”⁴⁶

It is thus clear that the high level rituals are exceedingly complex. Foremost among these complexities are the detailed visualizations that are understood as taking years to perfect.⁴⁷ Thus, the secret information revealed by the initiation rituals remains unintelligible to all uninitiated into Esoteric Buddhism. The articulation of *mantra* (“secret language”) in the *abhiṣeka* ceremony provides the necessary technology to become aware of the Dharmakaya Preaching, transforming the “illegible Dharmakaya” into “the legible world-text.”⁴⁸ The concept of *mantra* is central here and through its correct usage the participant is “attuned to basic resonances

⁴⁵ Dale Allen Todaro, “A Study of the Earliest *Garbha Vidhi* of the Shingon Sect.” *The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 9 no. 2 (1986): 123. Todaro is citing the *Taizo Bonji Shidai* here.

⁴⁶ Dale Allen Todaro, “A Study of the Earliest *Garbha Vidhi* of the Shingon Sect,” 133.

⁴⁷ Rupert Gettin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, 269.

⁴⁸ Ryūichi Abé, *The Weaving of Mantra*, 282. Abé uses the term “world-text” to describe the patterns of worldly phenomena that Kukai suggests comprise the Dharmakaya Preaching. Everything, from the sound of a bird to the physical shapes of objects, is made up of this sacred “text” “written” by the Dharmakaya.

constituting all language” and “knows directly the ‘truth words’ (*shingon*) inaudible to ordinary hearing.”⁴⁹

Kukai provides an outline of the progression of the path to esoteric “secret” knowledge in his treatise titled *The Precious Key to the Secret Treasury*. He breaks the progression into ten distinct stages that mark advancement from the teachings of Confucianism to Taoism then beyond to Hinayana, Mahayana, high-level Mahayana, and finally to Esoteric Buddhism. This hierarchy of teachings suggests an evolution from superficial, misguided tendencies to a fully developed understanding of esoteric teachings ultimately leading to enlightenment. Inherent within this structure is the requirement of spiritual development which necessarily grows more nuanced and subtle as the participant ascends the hierarchy. To ascend a level is to master the material of that level, a process which requires reading and meditation, and, with the higher levels, formal ritual training. It is only through this rigorous training process and the increased capacities for understanding that one begins to strip the layers of unintelligibility from the esoteric “secret,” unlocking the treasury door and releasing the transformative power of the information.

Conclusion

As I have demonstrated throughout this paper, secrecy, as it occurs in religion, is a complex phenomenon. Thus, it cannot be understood merely as a tactic to consolidate power—although sometimes this is certainly its role—and it cannot be claimed “divine” under any empirical system. Although Eliade and Bolle present compelling arguments for the “divine mystery,” their essentialist claims cannot and should not merely be taken at face value. However, though both scholars’ arguments crumble in the discerning gaze of critical analysis, they

⁴⁹ Thomas K. Kausulis, “Truth Words: The Basis of Kukai’s Theory of Interpretation,” 263.

demonstrate that these “divine” experiences *matter* to individuals within the tradition. This, alone, is sufficient grounds to re-examine religious rituals before merely shrugging them off as fantasy and ultimately meaningless.

Rather, the fact that certain information is “secret,” whether concealed by an elite, divine in nature, or unintelligible to all but the most advanced, is highly suggestive of the information’s value. So far I have developed the view that a useful way to interpret secrecy in religion is to understand the concealed contents of the secret as a type of information different from that contained in standard teachings, information that can only be understood through rigorous training and highly detailed ritual practice. Also essential in this view is the recognition of the transformative power of the information, thus the information must be understood as important to those within a given religious tradition.

William James offers a similar argument in his *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, where he suggests religion be evaluated on the transformation it prompts in individuals. James does not concern himself with the origins of religious information, an exercise he deems irrelevant in his analysis. His argument is one that emphasizes the “fruits” of a religious life over the “roots” in theological truth claims concerning divinity. Thus, for James, as for me, the divine is understood as some type of information. He writes that religion “is not a mere illumination of facts already elsewhere given...but it is something more, namely, a postulator of new *facts* as well.”⁵⁰ That is, religion not only helps to understand information that has been acquired previously but provides the potential for an encounter with new information as well. Secrecy becomes more frequently and emphatically emphasized as one approaches the core of a religious tradition where the information becomes harder and harder to grasp yet simultaneously more transformative if correctly understood.

⁵⁰ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Penguin Group, 1985), 518.

So, then, secrecy resides at the fringes of the innermost circle of religious practice, distinguishing important and powerful teachings from the ordinary and mundane. This secrecy can certainly be artificially imposed for specific goals, but I suggest that, within Esoteric Buddhism, the secrecy comes along with the territory. The highly advanced nature of Esoteric Buddhist teachings effectively makes them “secret by default,” understood by so few and thus perceived as “secret” by so many. The secret’s power resides not in its inherent unintelligibility, but ultimately in its potential to be understood. The preaching of the Dharmakaya, returning to Kukai’s Shingon School, only becomes meaningful when there is someone to listen, and, more importantly, when that person begins to understand what is being said and who is saying it.

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