

**Words in silence**  
**Preliminary remarks on the use of *kôan***  
**in late medieval Japanese Sôtô Zen Buddhism**

Stephan Kigensan Licha

*My gesture was a word.*  
Gary Snyder, *No Nature*

I. Introduction

In the the present paper I would like to present an outline of the ontological status *kôan* held in medieval Japanese Zen Buddhism. Stated briefly, I will argue that they are similar to the mantra of the tantric traditions in so far as they partake in an ontological power which allows them to operate change in the world. Yet they crucially differ from tantric concepts of the word in that they remain dependent on the sphere of human meaning and action, on the intelligibility of language and the almost poetical practices attending their inspection.

In order to argue the case for such a strange breed of speech, my strategy will largely be twofold: In a logical analysis, I will seek to clarify the changes in the logical space surrounding the *kôan* as they move from a largely linguistic sphere of practice (though one not devoid of ritual elements) to a more fully ritual one (though one intimately tied to linguistic elements). The aim of this first inquiry is to come to a preliminary understanding of the difference in ontological status, and consequently efficacy which hold between mantra and *kôan*. In short, whereas I see the mantra empowered by a metaphysics of sound, I hold the *kôan* to descend from a ontology of language dependent on a realm of meanings. This argument is directed against any position which would seek to deny to *kôan* the power not only to speak of but to act on the world. The second

move, proceeding intertwined with the first consists mainly of an investigation into precisely this realm of meaning kôan practices draw on in medieval Japan. It is aimed at not only refining the conclusions arrived at in the attendance to logical space, but at the same time opposing those who would claim their unintelligibility, their being beyond understanding.

In textual terms, the strategy I will employ to make this argument is a simple one: In order to understand the kôan as used in late medieval Sôtô it is necessary to look at them as a phenomenon which transcends genres. A number of excellent studies have been devoted to the various genre comprising the so-called *shômono*, vernacular texts characterized best as “lecture notes” which are our main source for the study of late medieval kôan Zen. These include: On the *kirigami*, initiatory documents of ritual and kôan practices, the work of Ishikawa (collected in Ishikawa 2001); on *kikigakishô*, public lectures, *daigo*, collections of answers to kôan, and *monsan*, initiatory kôan documents the work of Andô (2000); finally on *monsan* the ongoing research of Iitsuka (for example, Iitsuka 2000 and 2001). However, perhaps due to philological hesitancy, no topical study of the kôan has emerged as of yet, although its prevalence in all the genre cited above has been noted. I can not claim that the present paper will satisfy this need. My aim is to add to the understanding of the role kôan played in medieval Japan, and especially its doctrinal and ontological foundation. I have thus chosen to strategically limit myself to mainly two sets of sources. Firstly, the *kirigami*, which present us with the inner workings of the rituals kôan have been employed in. And secondly, *monsan*, documents employed in the kôan training of medieval monks, which give ample expression to the conceptual networks which underlie both this process of training and the ultimate ritual use made of the *kôan*. This decision is justified on two grounds: Firstly, the *kirigami* and *monsan* where the main two genre transmitted together in secrecy between master and disciple. Whereas *kikigakishô*, for example where transcriptions of public lectures in principle available to a wide audience both lay and monastic which was able to attend these, the *kirigami* and *monsan* had a strictly limited circulation. It is thus reasonable to expect them to give the most detailed

account of how medieval masters understood their own practice. If thus the joint secrecy of *kirigami* and *monsan* constitutes the outer limit of my selection of sources and I hope justifies the exclusion of for example *daigo*, my decision to treat them as pertaining to a joint sphere of meaning is grounded in the fact that much material features almost identically in both. Concrete examples of this will be given as we progress in our exploration and begin to explore this unified universe of discourse. Generally speaking, it appears that what in one lineage was transmitted as *kirigami*, appears in another in the *monsan*.

It might be argued that the increasing ritualization of the use made of kôan is one of the most characteristic features of the late medieval Zen school in Japan. Kôan came to play the part of “ritual utterances” endowed with efficacy, the guise they appear in in the *kirigami*. At the same time, they came to be acquired in an increasingly ritualized way, through the set exchange of question and answers between master and disciple related to paradigmatic cases presented in the *monsan*. It is my contention that this increasing ritualization is based on, expresses and in turn engenders the unique ontological status of kôan in late medieval Japanese Zen. This status appears to be the outcome of a process of encounter between the literary style of kôan practice inherited from China and the contemporary Japanese intellectual landscape permeated by esoteric Buddhism.

## II. The variant kôan

One of the basic problems attending the study of kôan, especially but not exclusively in their late medieval guise is a lacking awareness of just how diverse practices relating to them where. Kôan can almost be said to have been “all things to all people”. In order to better appreciate their specifics in late medieval Sôtô Zen it might be useful to provide first an outline of the kind of kôan practices early Japanese Zen pioneers encountered in China. And secondly to cite some uses of kôan and kôan language which fall outside the role they are most closely associated with, namely as meditative device.

The first thing that needs to be understood about kôan practices in Song China, the period when Zen was first transplanted onto Japanese soil, is that by this time what has often been depicted as the rough and ready interaction between enlightened master and searching student was in fact a highly sophisticated literary artifact. Yanagida Seizan argued that the *kôan*, or rather the line of development at whose end they find themselves, have their origins in the lineage of Mazu Daoyi (709-788), in which the master's spontaneous behavior and expressions came to be seen as exemplifying the functioning of the mind as Buddha (see Yanagida 1983: 187). Whether or not there ever had been a time in which Chan was possessed of this spiritual spontaneity, and there appears to be ample ground to doubt even this image as a later literary convention (see McRae 2003, 99f.), it had definitely come to an end by the time Japanese monks encountered them. As McRae explains, the great kôan texts we have before us today are the products of a collaborative literary effort extending over several centuries (*ibid.*). At the end of this process stand the various “recorded sayings”, such as the *Rinzai roku* or the *Tôzan roku* as well as the great kôan anthologies, such as the *Hekigan roku* and the *Shôyô roku* which in turn form the basis of Japanese kôan Zen. Especially the latter were of staggering complexity and erudition. Let us consider the case of the lesser known *Shôyô roku*, associated closely with the revived Cao-dong line of the Song (for a brief overview Song-period Cao-dong see McRae 2003, 133-138). It consists of 100 cases (jap. *honzoku*) selected for special attention by Wanshi Shôgaku (1091-1157) to which he appended a poem (jap. *juko*) each. To these in turn Banshû Gyôshû (1166-1246) added interlinear capping words (jap. *jakugo*) and prose commentary (jap. *hyôshô*). Given Wanshi's reputation as an outstanding poet, the result can but be called one of the great achievements of Chinese literature. At the same time, it is a monument to learning. Anybody lacking a sound literary education would have a hard time coming to grips with it. In short, the kôan texts were the product of poetic artistry and refinement, both the creation and enjoyment of which required considerable knowledge both mundane and religious.

If the texts Japanese Zen monks encountered in China were thus far from the imagined spontaneity of “classic” Chan, the lectures during which they encountered their teachers were hardly likely to offer iconoclastic refreshment. Mario Poceski’s (2008, 99-106) study of the Song monastic ritual of “the abbot’s ascending the Dharma hall” in order to deliver a sermon, to quote his title, confirms this. Poceski views the increased formalization of Chan sermonizing as one aspect of the process through which Chan became the most powerful, though not the only lineage of Chinese elite Buddhism and thus places it in the context of the emergence of Chan literature, discussed in the preceding paragraph. This exalted status he ties to the wide spread acceptance of the school’s patriarchal myth of origin reinforced in both literature and sermons. He writes: “The abbot’s sermons were stylized public events that occupied a central place in the monastic calendar. They were replete with symbolism and infused with conventional ritual elements such as processions, bows, prostrations and invocations. While they were apparently organized as teaching venues for the resident monastic congregation, they were also a major draw for lay patrons, who attended the festivities and made generous monetary contributions to the monastery and the monks.”(100). He continues by pointing out that these “festivities” were related not only to the broader set of preaching rituals common to all lineages of Chinese Buddhism but as well to formal Chinese bureaucratic and court etiquette (101ff). He further elaborates on this important role the Chinese literati class played in Song era Chan by remarking on the content of Chan sermons: “The sermon revolved around a specific Chan case, typically a well-known encounter dialogue that featured a famous Chan preacher from the past [that is, a *kōan* ...] The sermons were also peppered with abstruse allusions and metaphors that appealed to a culturally sophisticated and classically educated literati audience, which was a key recipient of Chan teachings and important source of political and economic patronage.”(105). He finally concludes that “... there was little room for unscripted improvisation or spontaneous action in the Chan sermons of the Song era. They were highly formal events that reaffirmed the status of the abbot as a living patriarch,

legitimized existing institutions and the structure of the monastic hierarchy, underscored the central aspects of Chan ideology, attracted the laity and motivated it generous donations, and of course provided religious inspiration [...]” (106).

The salient features I would like to highlight in this brief discussion of two aspects of Song era kôan practice, composition of kôan literature and sermonizing, are two. Firstly, in both we find a high level of literary sophistication closely associated with elite culture. In other words, to a large degree kôan practice was not meditative but literary. There is no denying the use of kôan as a distinctive introspective technique of the Chan school. Dahui Zonggao's (1089-1163) *kānhua* (jap. *kanna*) style of instruction testifies to this fact (for a good and brief introduction, see McRae 2003, 123-133). It should be cautioned, however that its importance has been overstressed at the expense of the literary aspects of kôan practices. These, as we will see, came to play a major role in medieval conceptions of the kôan and their language. The second point to take note of is the close association of kôan practices with concerns that fall outside the need to provide instruction in the Chan teachings. Both kôan collections and sermons can be seen to respond to a plethora of needs, especially securing the support of a specific lay audience, in the case of Song China *literati* bureaucrats. Beyond this concern for securing support for the Chan cause, the role kôan practices played in preserving institutional integrity seems clear as well. The ability to perform the kôan in both writing and speech is the distinction of the Chan master. It confirms his status, and through him the status of the community he is heading. These two points, the literariness of kôan performance and their concern with matters of institutional conservation (and conservatism) will reemerge in medieval Japanese Zen. The first will concern us in the final stages of the present paper. The latter I would like to reserve for separate treatment later on.

Before moving to our next topic, I would like to make one final remark on the literary aspects of kôan practice as it relates to the transmission of Chan to

Japan. One important aspect of this transmission which has to be remembered is the fact that the Japanese adopted a tradition that was culturally and linguistically foreign to them. This rather obvious observation is often obscured by the firm association of Zen with Japanese culture, as promoted by much early scholarship. One of D.T. Suzuki's most widely acclaimed books is entitled "Zen and Japanese Culture". Such popular misconception notwithstanding, the adoption of Chinese Chan, with its strong ties to Song culture and literature to the Japanese environment must have been a mighty struggle. Even a monk as erudite as Musô Soseki (1275-1351) felt it to be a little daunting. In his *Seizan Yawa* he is asked by a monk why he, a descendent of Rinzai did not employ the techniques of Zen in teaching his students but rather quoted sūtra all the time. In his reply he said that he was "still a baby chick, strength not fully developed. [...] People today can not see with their own eyes, are not endowed with subtle activity (jap. *myōyō*). With their deluded minds, they merely remember the decorum of the ancients ..." (I rely on the text reprinted in Yanagida 1994, 182 and Yanagida's *kakikudashibun*, 99f. Interestingly, a similar charge was made against Chan masters in Ming China. They were accused by their critics of merely "putting on a show" without having true understanding of the essentials of Chan (see Poceski 2008, 108). Lamenting the passing of the good old days is of course a standard trope of the tradition). It must be remembered that in their zeal to emulate Chinese models, Japanese Zen monks were forced to express themselves not only in a language alien to them, but in a literary idiom that was considered elite and arcane even in its native country. This enterprise of emulation was centered on the official government sponsored monasteries associated with the *gozan* system, which had the monetary wherewithal not only to send monks to China, but to sustain the scholarly resources necessitated by such an endeavor. But as these lineages fell together with the central government supporting them as Japan moved into a period of civil war, it fell to rural lineages known as *rinka*, which relied on local war-lords and villagers to carry on the torch of Zen (for the classical formulation of the *rinka* concept, see Tamamura 1999). Needless to say, these had no recourse to either the learning nor the economic power that belonged to the *gozan* and consequently had to

abandon the model of emulation. Their circumstances forced them to adopt the practices of the kôan to their specific situation and needs. The result is the medieval kôan practice we are interested in. In this regard we can but agree with Ishikawa Rikizan when he states: “they [the goroku] are materials which show the Zen school arriving in the Japanese environment (jap. *nihon no fûdo*), the form of contemporary struggles and adoptions and how the essentials of Zen were adopted.” (Ishikawa 201: 230). Although he speaks with special reference to the *goroku* sub-genre of the *shômono*, his remarks apply equally to the whole, and consequently the *kirigami* and *monsan*.

The *gozan* lineages did play the important role of transmitting Zen texts to Japan and popularizing them on the elite level, both monastic and lay. Together with this occurred the transmissions of the two facets of Song kôan practice mentioned above, its literariness and concern with institutional integrity. Of this I would like to quote but one example. One hagiography of Rankei Dôryû (1213-1278), the Chinese monk who founded Kenchôji temple in Kamakura, contains the following episode: “One day Tokimune and the master, passing to Jôrakuji, arrived walking at the precincts of what is now Engakuji. The master pointed with his hand and said: ‘In this place one should build a monastery’. Thereupon Tokimune borrowed the caretaker’s hoe and had the master beat the ground three times. He himself followed suit. Is this not truly like the one stalk of grass of Indra and the World-honored one?” (*Nihon kenchô kaisan Daigaku Zenji Rankei ôshô gyôjô*). The Tokimune in this text is Hôjô Tokimune (1251-1284), regent of the Kamakura Bakufû and patron of Rankei. It was him through whose support Engakuji was built in 1282. What is interesting about this text is the fact that the last reference, to Indra and the Buddha as well as Rankei’s pointing to the ground are references to a kôan contained in the *Shôyô roku* as the fourth case. The case runs as follows: “The world-honored one was walking with the community. Pointing with his hand to the earth he said: ‘In this place should be built a monastery’. Thereupon Indra took a blade of grass, planted it in the ground and said: ‘The building of the monastery is completed’ The world-honored one smiled.” (I rely on the text reprinted in Ôda et. al., 2003,



38). This episode is almost certainly a fiction, yet even more interesting for being so. It unites in one brief passage both the features of Song *kôan* practice we have discussed above. The *kôan* not only serves as a literary template but helps frame the interaction between patron and monk by recasting it in terms of the relationship between Indra and the Buddha. Furthermore, it serves as the founding myth of the monastic institution of Engakuji, which is thus legitimized in at least four ways: the authority of Rankei the master, the propriety of his relationship with his patron, the political standing of the patron himself and finally the linkage to the couple Buddha / Indra. This is an exceedingly skillful and subtle exercise of *kôan* practice. The old Chinese cases had begun to penetrate Japan.

### III. How to do things with *kôan*

Having born witness to two important aspects of *kôan* practice in its transmission from China to Japan, we shall now set out on the main part of our argument. It is therefore a good moment to pause a little in order to recall the main stakes. The final goal aim of this paper is to draw attention to some aspects of ritual and linguistic practices relating to *kôan* practice in the late medieval Sôtô school of Zen Buddhism. In specific I want to make explicit the ontological ground on which the *kôan* rest. It is this grounding which informs virtually all uses the *kôan* have been put to in the medieval period. Furthermore, it is our first glimpse of the wider ontological structures which underwrite the monk's activities, from their interaction with the society around them to their most intimate concerns such as Dharma transmission. These wider structures are the concern of my ongoing research. For now, I would like to confine the investigation to the "being of the *kôan*", if such a preposterous phrase can be forgiven. The following investigation will be comprised of two parts. Stated briefly, first I would like to make explicit the logical outline of the process which led *kôan* language to make the transition from a textual to a ritual technique and exemplify some of its uses. This will result in me making the suggestion that the ontological status of medieval *kôan* language is more closely akin to a mantra

rather than, say, doctrinal or even literary discourse, although it does not entirely sever its ties with the latter. It is exactly this last point, the tenuous preservation of its ties with the sphere of literary discourse and thus meaning which constitutes its main difference from esoteric mantra. It is here that we shall uncover the subtle roots that lead from the language of the kôan again beyond words, to the being of the world. But before I am in any position to substantiate any of these vague notions, we will have to come to an understanding of the trajectory kôan language undertakes in logical space as it takes up residence in Japan. Before we undertake this task, there are two background factors which bear mentioning. The first one regards the relationship between Zen and the esoteric lineages it had to compete against, the second the institutional structure of the Sôtô school itself.

### III.I Esoteric Background

The relationship between esoteric and Zen lineages is complex. Whereas tantric forms of Buddhism had been in decline in China after the fall of the Tang, they were still the dominant form of religious practice in Japan, both on the elite monastic and the more popular levels. Many of the features we today consider a fundamental part of Japanese religions, such as the doctrine of the combination of Buddha and kami (jap. *shinbutsu shûgô*) received their definite formulation in esoteric circles. Furthermore, Zen first appeared on Japanese soil not during the Kamakura, but during the Nara period. Gyônen's *Sankoku buppô dentsû enki* states that the Chinese Monk Dôsen (702-760) arrived in Japan in 736 and propagated the teachings of Zen and the precepts. His teaching was eventually passed on to Saichô (767-822), the founder of Japanese Tendai (quoted in Sueki 1997a: 77). Thus Zen became one part of the fourfold training of the Tendai school, alongside esotericism, the precepts and the Tendai Integrated Teaching. Eisai (1141-1215), who is generally considered the founder of Rinzai Zen in Japan, taught a combinatory practice of Zen and *mikkyô* (jap. *zenmitsu kenshû*, see Ogisube 1997: 291ff).

This combined practice would remain common in the government sponsored monasteries during the early Kamakura period, to be only gradually replaced by a more independent Zen institution following the arrival of Chinese monks (*ibid.*: 302-314). However, until well into the Muromachi period Zen continued to be defined in Tendai doctrinal terms (see Tamura 1997, 239). Outside the sphere of the *gozan*, rural Zen monks had to compete with esoteric lineages for local patronage and support. This, in combination with the fact that many early converts to Zen, such as Keizan Jôkin's heir Gasan had originally been trained as Tendai monks, meant an inevitable absorption of esoteric elements. To take but the example of Keizan himself, the monastery for founding which he is most well known, Sôjiji, was originally a Shingon temple turned over to him because of a prophetic dream of its then abbot (see Nakamura et al. 2002, 643). And the monastic code he wrote, now known as the *Keizan Shingi* (TS 82, 424-451) contains some esoteric ritual practices, although their importance has been overstated in sectarian scholarship. The ceremony for Feeding the Hungry Ghosts (jap. *segaki*) , for example is a clearly esoteric ritual, containing both mudra and mantra, described in detail in the text. Tantric terminology, such as the technical term for “empowerment” (jap. *kajô*) is employed to explain the proceedings of the ritual (see TS 82, 446a). This fluidity of the borders separating the tantric from Zen is no feature distinctive of the middle ages. As late as the 17<sup>th</sup> century a text such as the *Shûmon missan* would argue that the true Zen in the *kenmitsuzen* paradigm, which claims the identity of the exoteric (in this case Tendai), tantric and Zen teachings is in fact the Sôtô school, not Rinzai (see Iitsuka 2001, 304). In short, medieval Zen monks maintained extensive institutional and ritual contacts with their tantric brethren. They existed in a shared religious landscape that for centuries had been permeated with esoteric ideas and practices. It was to this the Zen monks had to adopt their school. They did so by rethinking it, as I hope will become clear, through esoteric categories, thereby transforming it, but preserving its uniqueness.

### III.II Institutional Background

As is well known, to describe the religious landscape of medieval Japan in terms of “schools” is a highly problematic anachronism. It would be more correct to speak of complex networks of interconnected lineages, related to each other on genealogical lines. In fact, Bodiford (2008, 262-269) has argued convincingly that the Chinese familial model had a major impact on the formation of Zen lineage ideology. In institutional terms, this family ideology was literally built on Japanese soil in the form of a branch like system of temples and sub-temples. As Bodiford explains: “These [Tsūgen Jakurai (1322-1391), Baisan Monpon (d. 1417) and Jochū Tengin (1365-1440)] are the three people who developed the institutional structure of Sôtō Zen in medieval Japan. Tsūgen and Baisan established rotating abbotship (*rinjū*) at the major monasteries [...]. From these [...] rotating abbotship became the norm for other [...] monasteries. Rotating abbotships link networks of temples together according to the dharma lineage of their [founding] abbots. [...] The abbotship of the head temple is passed in regular sequence among candidates who are promoted by the branch temples.” (Bodiford 2008, 272). The lineage structure is thus at the same time a institutional and a physical one.

Employing the metaphor of “family” and familial structures in this way it must be kept in mind, though, that these family units were not hermetically closed and there seems to have occurred extensive exchange of knowledge and technique among them. For instance, the ritual for granting the bodhisattva precepts used by the Hôtō branch of the Rinzai lineage was inherited from Keizan (see Hirose 1988: 424). In view of these porous borderlines, it comes as no surprise that preserving the integrity of their lineage, while avoiding closing them off completely and thus risk stagnation, was of the highest importance to medieval Zen teachers. In the case of the Sôtō school, this double requirement resulted in the creation of the *garanbō* system of Dharma transmission (see Hirose 1988: 177). Under this regime, a monk would not exclusively inherit his teacher’s lineage but rather the one of the temple at which he assumed the position of abbot. This would guarantee the continuity of a given lineage by immediately absorbing any outsider and thus maintain the stability of a temple’s position

within the system of head and branch temples. The textual substratum of the institutional structure outlined above are exactly the *monsan* and *kirigami*. In a future paper I hope to make clear how one of their main purposes was to bestow on it a legitimacy by tying it to the ontological structures they outline. Their secret transmission is thus the native Japanese heir to the Song period kôan practices connected to the stability of institutional structures we have outlined above.

### III.III

I have taken the space to outline the tantric and institutional against which, or rather together with which the *monsan* and *kirigami* arose so that we might have a sufficient grasp of their nature and importance. Ishikawa has cited the importance of the *shômono* as documents of the social history of Sôtô's conquest of the Japanese countryside (see Ishikawa 2001: 64-67 for a discussion of the role of the *kirigami* in the social interactions of medieval Zen). Although there is no doubting their importance to this task, this is not where it ends. When read as documents of intellectual rather than social history, they document the emergence of an uniquely Japanese understanding of Zen. It is the conceptual structures carried by them that inform the totality of the sphere of activities medieval monks undertook. Just as Buddhism had allowed itself to be transformed by Chinese thought, a process which begot the Chan tradition, Chan in turn underwent a transmutation at the hands of Japanese religious concepts to become Zen. One major component of these concepts had long been tantric. And as has been remarked by David Gordon White, tantrika are nor anti-ritualistic iconoclasts but überritualists (see White 2000). Japanese Zen masters borrowed some of the tantric thought they were immersed in and used it to adopt the tradition they had inherited. This involved utilizing the tantric understanding of ritual action grafting it onto the already rich culture of ritual present in Chan and early Zen. Their practice consequently become more focused on ritual, including the practices relating to kôan and kôan language. This shift I would now like to analyze logically.

All *kirigami* cited below are taken from a manuscript, currently in the possession of Komazawa University Library entitled simply *Shitsunai kirigami*. The text comes in one volume and collects a total of 120 individual *kirigami*. It is unclear who copied it or wrote it. We can tentatively date it to the middle or end of the Edo period, as no bound volumes of this kind dealing with *kirigami* material appeared before, and only a handful after this time.

I would like to begin our journey by casting a forward glance at its destination and present you with a *kirigami* entitled “Method for pointing in the eyes and enshrining a Buddha Bodhisattva image” (jap. *Butsu bosatsu sô anza tengen hô*). In terms of content, it gives exactly what it promises, the ritual for empowering and enshrining a sacred image. I would like to draw your attention to the part giving prescriptions for the ritual opening of the eyes of the image by painting in its pupils. The painting of each of the three eyes (the two normal ones and the wisdom eye on the forehead, symbolized by a tuft of white hair (jap. *byakugô*, skt. *uruna*)) is accompanied by a brief recitation. Let us ignore for the moment the eyes of flesh and focus on the wisdom eye. The quote used runs “One point of water and ink, in both places turning into dragons”. This priceless gem of wisdom is the final capping phrase in a piece of encounter dialogue involving Kyôsei Dôfu, a disciple of Seppô’s and consequently Dharma brother of Unmon’s, who will be joining us for a little while at a later stage. There is no need to quote the entire dialogue here, just to give its outline. A monk requests Dôfu’s help in attaining his original face. Dôfu compassionately points out that if its his original face he’s after, how could there be any help from Dôfu. After the monk departs, Dôfu’s attendant inquires after whether the monk got it or not. Dôfu’s rejoinder, that in both darkness and translucence dragons are born, is the quote employed in the ritual.

Although the phrase “one point of ink and water” might make the use of this kôan feel appropriate in the context of an eye opening ceremony, if we probe slightly beneath the reassuring facade, we come to understand that

something rather extraordinary has taken place. A piece of text has traversed, as Wittgenstein would have it, a border internal to language and taken up residence in a foreign landscape. In other words, a piece of literary dialogue has acquired ritual efficacy and the potential of operating upon a material object, elevating it to the new ontological position of being a living representation of enlightenment. The *kirigami* abound in cases like the one quoted above. In fact, with its straightforward, seemingly appropriate quote it is at first inspection a relatively unsophisticated specimen. We will encounter a more complex case below, as well as find deeper layers lurking beneath the surface of the one under consideration. For now, we are in a position to phrase our initial question more precisely: Which steps of transformation had kôan language to undergo in order to take its place in the economy of ritual efficacy, a tool empowered to operate on the world and change the relationships pertaining to phenomena within it? In order to answer this question, we have to acquaint ourselves with some of the properties of kôan and kôan language set in the context of Sôtô secret transmissions. For this purpose, let us look at some documents of kôan initiation.

In Sôtô lineages documents of kôan initiation are nowadays generally known as *monsan*. They come under a number of names and in various forms, ranging from a simple list of *kôan* to graded hierarchies of kôan instruction, complete with prescribed interaction between master and disciple, sometimes even offering graphic illustrations of varying complexity. These differences in form do not concern us here, as we will be working for heuristic purposes with a kind of Weberian ideal type. I take kôan instruction as it appears in the *monsan* at minimum to be comprised of the following two elements: Firstly a standardized hierarchy of cases through which the student proceeds, which might or might not be further differentiated into stages. And secondly, instruction in the form of ritualized and standardized interaction between master and disciple, consisting of the master raising a case and the student providing a predetermined *daigo* or alternative expression of the principle demonstrated in the kôan, which might be either verbal, non-verbal (a gesture, a shout or other forms of physical

action) or a combination of both. In the case of some *monsan* this dialogue may be supplemented by further discursive commentary on the fine points of the *kôan* under inspection. There exist also texts on *kôan* which were transmitted secretly, yet are fully discursive, similar to the *missanroku* of Rinzai lineages (as there are some *missanroku* which employ *daigo*). I will refer to these as *monsan* as well, as they often bear this title. I will however alert the reader that the term is used in a descriptive textual sense rather than the heuristic one defined above.

In order to put some flesh on this conceptual skeleton I would first like to present a text transmitted at Chônenji. I here rely on the photographic version of the text published by Kaneda (1976, no page numbers). The text is not titled, but it presents us with a collection of 118 *kôan* arranged into a hierarchy of 34 stages. Each stage is comprised of a number of cases ranging from 1 to 11, but most typically 3 or 4. The details of the hierarchy and the arrangement of cases do not concern us here, although we have to take them up at a later stage. Our aim for the present is to acquaint ourselves with to the techniques employed in *kôan* and we can choose one example virtually at random. Let us honor tradition and proceed in the correct order, starting with the very first phrase of the first stage, entitled “the beginning, first part” (jap. *saisho dai ichi*). The first case taken up is “Unmon penetrates the Dharma body” (jap. *Unmon tô hôshin*). As is common to virtually all *monsan*, the text abbreviates spelling out the full text of the case, presumably known to the student from the public *kôan* lectures recorded in the *goroku* genre he was exposed to from the beginning of his apprenticeship. The exchange proceeds by the teacher posing a phrase of the *kôan* to the student as a question, challenging him to give an appropriate response. In the case of the text presently under discussion, the interaction opens as follows: “Master says: “As for (jap. *wo*) the phrase 'piercing the Dharmabody'?” Substituting (jap. *dai*), put the robe’s sleeves in the mouth.” The parts of master and disciple are marked by the particle “*wo*” and the character “*dai*” (*kawaru*, substitute), respectively. In premodern Japanese the particle “*wo*” is used to reinforce or stress the word in front of it. Its presence thus clearly



implies a spur to action on the student's part. The "*dai*" indicating the student's response is an abbreviation of "*daigo*", "substitute word or phrase". In Chinese Chan this term has been part of a whole semantic network concerned with the various formal ways in which a teacher might express his understanding of a kôan. Another member of this class is the "*jakugo*", "capping phrase" amended, in the case of written texts often in an interlinear fashion to a phrase of the main body of a kôan (jap. *honzoku*) or earlier prose or poetic comment. One more close relative is the "*betsugo*", "separate phrase", which is used when the commentator exchanges an answer given in the course of a kôan dialogue with his own. *Daigo*, in this specific technical sense, is used for cases in which either partner of the kôan dialogue fails to answer and the commentator "substitutes" for him (or in rare cases her) and offers his own answer. In Japanese medieval usage, and specifically in the case of the Sôtô school these distinctions had been lost. I suspect that "*daigo*" became confused with "*jakugo*". The reason for this suspicion lies in the fact that Song kôan anthologies, which together with *goroku* where medieval monk's primary source of information on Chinese kôan practice display a use of *jakugo* almost identical to the *daigo* of interest to us at present. Consider for example the treatment given to the kôan of Indra planting a single blade of grass we discussed above. Bانشû, the compiler and sub-commentator of the anthology first breaks the case into single sentences. On each of these he then comments by amending his own *jakugo*, a brief phrase indented to illumine the principle underlying what is said. The first sentence of the main case "The world-honored one was walking with the community" is thus paired up with "following in the footsteps of others, you will fall". The second one, "Pointing with his hand to the earth he said: 'In this place should be built a monastery'" with "On this ground, it is not fit to move the soil" (see Ôda et. al., 2003, 38) and so on. In a similar manner, the common technique of kôan interpretation in medieval Sôtô was to divide the main case under consideration into segments and then have the student comment on each in turn. The main difference consists in the fact that whereas most *jakugo* commentary follows a division by sentences, the medieval *daigo* breaks the cases up conceptually. But the similarities are close enough to stipulate the relationship I have suggested above.

Let us return to our text. After the poor student presumably suffered the disgrace of having to chomp down on his robes, the teacher continues to probe him by demanding “a phrase” (jap. *ku wo*). The student replies “completely pierced (or penetrated)”. Here we have a prime example of a standardized, physical response followed by a verbal one being given to a kôan problem raised by the teacher. It is interesting to note that there is no apparent difference made between the bodily response and the verbal answer. We will return to this below, for now let us press further with our exploration of medieval kôan practices. Kôan instruction in late medieval Japan consisted of a ritual drama being acted out between master and disciple in the abbots quarters. A literary form of interpretation had been replaced by a dramatic, performative one. How was this possible? I would suggest an answer comprising two interwoven strands. Firstly, kôan interpretation and its language were never completely devoid of dramatic and ritual elements from the beginning, as we have seen in our discussion of Song period Chan lectures. The abbot ascending the high seat to raise a case, maybe in the presence of lay sponsors or officials, was a grand ritual occasion in the monasteries liturgical calendar. As for the performative aspect of kôan interpretation, one has but to read any *goroku*, with the abbot shouting, hitting the table (or some handy member of the audience) with his staff or whisk, flinging it about or preaching with “thunderous silence” to get a very clear impression of the sense of performance involved. Medieval masters but extended these features to actually involve an interlocutor of one in a private dramatic performance. The second possibility concerns the nature of the kôan, and in logical order precedes and makes possible the drama of kôan interpretation. Virtually all kôan are narratives, and thus depend on and invoke the conceptual network which allows us to understand human action and distinguish it from mere physical movement. Kôan narratives involve such concepts as actors, intentions, motivations &c. By thus inherently calling on our understanding of action, kôan language lends itself to performance and dramatization, as well as eventual ritualization, in a way doctrinal or philosophical language, for example do not. Through its connection to action,

kôan language carries within itself the potential to spill over into ritual.

This potential is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for the use of kôan language we have encountered in the *kirigami* cited above. At present it is still tied to the interpretation of cases. In order to proceed in our analysis, we have to show how kôan language succeeds in expanding its linguistic domain to cover interpretive acts unrelated to the stories about the old worthies. In order to do so, I will have to make explicit a distinction I have tacitly maintained throughout the present discussion: That between kôan and kôan language. In a way, this distinction is analogous to that between linguistic content and form, respectively. By “kôan” I mean precisely what one would suspect: the traditional yarns recounted, interpreted, commented and meditated upon by Zen monks. By “kôan language” I mean the techniques employed in, and the rules governing the language game, to borrow a phrase of Wittgenstein of interpreting them. For example, the case relating to Unmon cited above is a kôan. The *daigo* technique or form of commenting upon it belongs to the realm of kôan language, it is a possible move under the rules of kôan interpretation. This separation of content and form is what allowed kôan language to conquer territories originally beyond its reach. The simple use made of a kôan in the *kirigami* cited above is an interesting curiosity, but of rather limited utility. But once *kôan* language succeeded in transcending its own subject matter, much more powerful re-configuration became possible.

That this is no mere theoretical fiction can be demonstrated by offering the example of a text known as “The Circle *monsan*” (jap. *ensô monsân*), housed at Fudaji temple. Again I rely on the photograph of the text published by Kaneda (1976, no page numbers). The text is comprised of 97 “cases”, none of which is a *kôan*. The cases are treated in the fashion typical of *kôan* language as I described it above, that is as an exchange between student and master, involving both verbal and non-verbal interactions in the form of *daigo*. What is striking about this text is that above each case is placed a circle, offering some idea of the theme or “flavor” of the exchange. In some cases, this is done through purely graphical means, in others single characters are written in the circles. As to the

nature of the “cases”, they cover a wide range of Buddhist concepts. To mention but a few, the six realms of existence, the six senses, various kinds of Buddha bodies and the prominent couple of form and emptiness all make an appearance. Each is appended with its graphical interpretation in the form of the circle, each given the *kôan* treatment. We need not go over them in detail, let two examples suffice. The very first case is “the formless Dharma Body” (jap. *musô hôshin*), the graphic clue to which is the empty circle. The exchange then opens: “As for the Formless Dharma body.’ Substitute, fold the hands. [jap. *shasshu*] ‘As for this phrase?’ Substituting. ‘The formlessness of the Dharma body ought to be known in manifestation (jap. *gegyô*)...” and so on. Note again the free alteration between verbal and non-verbal responses. The 23<sup>rd</sup> case is the eye as sense organ. Its graphic interpretation is the character for eye (jap. *me*, *gan*) in a circle. The caption reads: “Form of no-eye” (jap. *mugen sô*). The encounter that follows it: “Seeing, seeing is exhausted. Hearing, hearing is exhausted. (Offer) a word. ‘Substituting. “Eye sees, ear hears, no exhaustion and drain”. All other concept undergo like interpretations. In brief, the world and its constituent parts have taken the place of the classical *kôan*. The novelty and originality of this usage of *kôan* language has to be emphasized. By transcending its original subject matter, *kôan* language attained the power to respeak and regesture the world. It now stood in a position to tell things what they truly are. The old worthies of the *kôan* had used material objects, a shit scraper, three pounds of flax, a plum tree to clarify Buddha. Their deeds and words had been passed on, first by word of mouth, then recorded and commented upon in a highly sophisticated literary discourse. This discourse in turn had begotten the *kôan* language emerging from the medieval Sôtô school’s documents of *kôan* initiation, the *monsan*. Finally, in an discursive rupture, it transcended itself, the confines of language, and learnt to manipulate the world. In this sense, the language of the *kôan* exemplifies what Paul Ricoeur claimed to be language’s highest ontological calling: to be in being in order to bear on being.

Before we move on in our investigation, I would like to make a few brief remarks on the use of the circle in Sôtô secret transmissions. The empty circle

is of course a time honored symbol of the tradition in both China and Japan. Another prominent example for the use of circles, originating in China but most popular in Japan are the *go i* the “five positions” created by Tōzan Ryōkai, which will concern us below in more detail. These five positions constitute one of the main structures of meaning in both the *monsan* and *kirigami*. The Japanese have, however, in a number of cases added some quirky twists. As will be remembered, the 23<sup>rd</sup> case of the Circle *monsan* described above began with the encircled character for “eye”, followed by the exchange: “Seeing, seeing is exhausted. Hearing, hearing is exhausted. (Offer) a word.’ Substituting. “Eye sees, ear hears, no exhaustion and drain”. The other senses are treated in a similar fashion. The respective character is encircled and captioned “Form of no eye”, “Form of no ear” (jap, *muji sō*) and so on. The dialogues that follow circle and caption are similar in structure as well. First the master poses them exhausted, then the student returns them to their free functioning. What interests us here are the circles and their description. The phrase “form of no-x” almost seems to suggest that the object in question had been restored to some state of indifference, yet without losing its form. I will try to shed some light on this strange state of being by presenting a text entitled “The radiant brightness of one stage passes through past and present” (jap. *Ichidan kōmyō sen ko kon*. Alternatively, the title could be translated more literally as “The radiant brightness of one stage circles from past to present (and back)”. I will rely on the version published by Iitsuka (2000, 259-264). One part of this text is called “Secret writ on the five positions” (jap. *goi missho*) (*ibid.*, 261f). Although it does contain some material on the traditional five positions, or rather on one of their numerous variants, it is in the main concerned with matters of far more immediate interest. The text opens with the character for Buddha (jp. *Butsu*) in a circle, then explains: “The circle of this time (jap, *toki*, I have translated literally as time, but the context suggests “stage”, “point of time”), is the circle of the time when Buddha, sentient beings and oneself all are covered intimately in the mother’s womb [...]”. The next circle has the character for cow, bull or ox (jp. *ushi*) inscribed in it. The main part of the attending text reads: “Even Buddhas are ignorant of the inside of the womb, how much more so is it beyond oxen

and horses.” The third circle contains the character for water (jp. *mizu*). The text goes: “The circle of this stage is the stage where one seed [jp. *ichiyô*. The phrase describes the first stir of masculine warmth during the dominance of feminine cold, as in the phrase *ichiyô raifuku*. Given the context, I have decided to translate it as “seed”.] falls towards the womb. The reason for employing water [i.e. the character in the circle], male sexual defilement is black, female sexual defilement is white, white water, black water, these two merge, pointing to heaven, pointing to earth [a reference to the story that the Buddha right after his birth pointed one hand to heaven and the other to earth, proclaiming himself the World-honored one.] The series continues, first describing the increasing differentiation of becoming, culminating in the fifth circle. It is vertically divided into two parts, the left white and the right black. It represents the sphere of duality: “[...] again it is as well called father and mother, again it is called sky and lake, self and what is in front of the eyes [jap. *jiko mokuzen*. This phrase is widely employed throughout medieval Sôtô kôan hierarchies to describe the duality of self and other] they all have this meaning.” From here onwards a return is initiated. What is interesting, though, is that the final conclusion of this drama is not a reaffirmation of simple unity. The last circle contains a second, smaller circle. The text which accompanies them runs: “This stage is the circle containing the crooked (jp. *hennai ensô*). At the time of great harmony, this stage is used. Day means taking away the person, taking away the environment is night. [... The last phrase is a reference to Rinzai].” The text then continues to give brief definitions of the *go i* in a fairly straightforward and orthodox manner. The stage of the crooked is defined as “the world of form, there are ten thousand shapes.” The resolution to which the process leads is thus not unity, but a sort undifferentiated plurality. The texts achieves this symbolically in five stages: first, the inscribed circle is identified with the womb, which is the place of complete non-differentiation. Then a process towards plurality is initiated, culminating in the symbolical birth of the fifth stage. Note that at this point the device of the inscribed circle is abandoned and replaced with purely graphical symbolism. The journey towards the great harmony of the final stages ensues, expressed through means of dotted circles, black circles, black circles containing a white

space &c. Finally, we encounter again an inscribed circle in the penultimate, eleventh stage. Its character is the sun, and the commentary states: "This circle is used at the time the sun comes out in space". In other words, the womb is converted into space as a fellow symbol of non-differentiation. The last step reveals the ten thousand forms harmonically standing in space, differentiation in the non-manifest. To return to the Circle *monsan*, we can now better understand the symbolism of the word "eye" in a circle and the dialogue relating to it. To encircle is to "enwomb". To "enwomb" is to restore to space. Thus seeing is exhausted, returned to what is not manifest, to the womb, to the equality of space. But this return at the same moment is a restoration. Thus the eye sees, the ear hears. In space, neither exhaustion nor drain.

I have included this lengthy meditation on the circle for two reasons. The first is to make good on my promise to demonstrate that kôan language, at least in the case of medieval Japan has not to be considered inherently incomprehensible. It draws on a sphere of meaning that is foreign, involved, often convoluted, even contradictory (or at least it appears to be). Yet no matter how tenuous the ties that bind it to meaning, they can be elucidated. The second reason for our excursion lied in the fact that it gave me the opportunity to introduce some of the key concepts we will encounter again and again in our exploration of the ontology of kôan and their language. I will elaborate them as we move along. For now, let us resume our main journey. We have now, I hope, clarified the properties which allowed kôan language to intrude on ritual, the conditions which endowed it with the potential to be ritually effective. Firstly, the dramatic and performative elements it carried in itself from its very inception. Secondly, the narrative resources of the kôan themselves, calling on the conceptual framework of human action. And finally its transcendence of its own subject matter. But we still have to make good on our original promise, of unearthing the connections between the two genre of *monsan* and *kirigami* and to thus complete the trajectory which flung the kôan and their language into the sphere of ritual action.

The present investigation was instigated by the surprising appearance of *kôan*, and consequently *kôan* language, in the ritual prescriptions of the *kirigami*. We have consequently investigated the properties of *kôan* language which conditioned it for this crossing between two genre. Now we have to find the bridge they used. I would like to suggest that they used two of them. Firstly, I propose that in terms of *kôan* language *monsan* stand to *kirigami* as training does to application. And secondly *kirigami* stand to *monsan* as meta-language to language. Let us examine these propositions in turn.

The first stipulates that the *monsan* serve to train the student in the language-games relating to *kôan* interpretation, in other words to teach him the rules which define valid and effective moves. By progressing through the *kôan* prescribed by the curriculum and the attendant ritualized interaction with the master, the student acquires the skills involved in using them in a thoroughly psychosomatic way. This could be imagined akin to the way traditional martial arts are still taught in Japan today, through the repeated practice of a fixed curriculum of techniques arranged into hierarchies. This suggestion is borne out by the order in which the two sets of texts were acquired, namely *monsan* prior to and *kirigami* after *inka*. That this was the case can be understood from glancing at contemporary *inka* documents. I would but give one example, the license granted by Gakusô Sôshun (1516-1614) to one of his disciples. The most important part can loosely be paraphrased as follows: "The instruction of my school-iron silver, gold-these the excellent student has completed". The "iron, silver, gold" mentioned here correspond to the most prominent of Sôtô systems of building a hierarchy of *kôan*, the one known as the "three positions" (jap. *san i*), as will become clear shortly when discussing meta-interpretation of *kôan* hierarchies in the *kirigami* (see Sahashi 1980). The same system, with slight variations, was employed in the *monsan* featuring Unmon described above. Conversely, that the *kirigami* were acquired after *inka* is easily understood from the fact that some collection of *kirigami* are prefaced by a note explicitly instructing that they are not to be shown to anybody who had not yet received *inka*, which of course meant anybody who had not yet completed the *kôan* curriculum. It is thus clear that the *monsan* were considered the prerequisite



for the study of *kirigami*.

My second proposition stipulates that the *kirigami* offer interpretation of the system of the *monsan* taken as a whole. In other words, once the student has mastered how to work inside the system, he is taken to a higher level and shown the nuts and bolts of it from the outside, as it were. It must be carefully emphasized here that this is not a general feature of all *kirigami* but of only a small number of them. My claim, however, is that this establishes structures which are then able to transmigrate into other topics treated in the *kirigami*, including but not limited to ritual. Before we proceed to these, allow me now give one example of such meta-interpretation as it is offered in a *kirigami* entitled "Diagram of the three positions" (jap. *sani zu*). The three positions are those of the *kôan* hierarchy called *san i* mentioned above. They are, firstly, "self" (jap. *jiko*) or the initial stage of practice when one comes to realize one's original face. Secondly, "the unknowable" (jap. *chi futô*), or the realm of the inter-penetration of all things. And thirdly "when" (jap. *naji*) or the attainment of complete enlightenment. In the *kirigami* the *sani* appear inside a circle, together with their symbolical interpretation as iron, silver and gold. Underneath the circle is a poem reading: "One person establishes (or arranges) three positions, three positions return to one circle". Note that the circle here plays again a role akin to the one I have outlined above. Here, in the hermeneutical equivalent of a cartoon character swallowing itself, it is the hierarchy of the *kôan* itself that is restored to its undifferentiated plurality. Thus not only things but words, or at least the structures which govern them are subjected to the process we have outlined above. Beneath this, in turn, appears an interpretation of each of the three positions in almost comprehensible language, utilizing the metaphor of space. We will not concern ourselves with it in detail here, merely quoting the commentary on the second one, as it will reappear shortly. It reads: "Not to divide level space, this is the space of the unknowable". It is thus clear that some of the *kirigami* busy themselves with commenting on the system of *kôan* interpretation. In other words, they relate to it as does meta-language to language. Meta-*kôan* language, one is tempted to call it. Below we will again

encounter the *san i* in their second guise, as the most fundamental arbiters of Sôtô ontology.

I claim that these two propositions, *monsan* as required training for the study of *kirigami*, and *kirigami* as meta-interpretation of the system of the *monsan*, delineate the connection between the two genre, the bridges relating them to each other. Once it had crossed over, kôan language was free to roam the realm of the *kirigami*. I would like to indicate the roads it traveled now, raising a especially rich example.

Among the many deities Sôtô absorbed as it spread throughout the Japanese country side, Hakusan is one of the most eminent, and one of the earliest. We know that Dôgen revered her, and Keizan even called himself her child. Not surprisingly, she is thus one of only two deities, the other being the Dragonking (jap. *Ryûten*) singled out for personal treatment in the *kirigami*. This is done in a document entitled “Diagram of Hakusan Myôri”. At the top is a figure of interweaving white and black lines. Out of this a red line appears and divides into two branches. The one on the left first leads to a white circle, then branches again in two. On the left of this sub-branch appear the words “realm of Fûgen”, on the right “Hakusan gives birth to one color”. The two sub-branches re-unite into a single line, on which the three characters “crooked (jap. *hen*), things (jap. *ji*) and noon (jap. *chô*) appear. The line then circles back upwards, above the black and white figure, turns downward and disappears into it. The branch on the right is exactly the same in structure, but on its subbranches there appear the words “The true principle does not turn (or change) black things” on the left and “The realm of Monjû” on the right. On the single line of the reunited sub-branches appear the characters “straight” (jap. *shô*), “principle” (jap. *ri*) and “night” (jap. *ya*). The presence of the circles and the words “straight” and “crooked” suggest that the conceptual scheme invoked here are the *go i*, the five positions originally posed by Tôzan Ryôkai and used extensively in various stages of completeness all throughout the *kirigami*, in the present case filtered through the paradigm of principle and things (jap. *ri* and *ji*). Now let us turn to a second specimen of the Hakusan diagram, this one housed in Tokuninji

temple and documented by Ishikawa Rikizan (2001, 523). Here the initial black and white figure is abbreviated, leaving the circles of the two positions to stand for themselves. What is important about this text is that the name of the deity, Hakusan Myôri Gongen, is then subjected to an interpretation in *kôan* language, the first part of which runs as follows: “Master says: ‘As for Hakusan?’ Substituting says: ‘One color appearing is Hakusan.’ ‘As for Myôri?’ Substituting ‘Myôri is the not white place.’ ‘As for Daigongen?’ Substituting: ‘It is the time of birth and death being one.’” Hakusan can thus be seen to be subjected to the symbolic order of Sôtô by undergoing interpretation in terms of the two stages of the *go i* (and their union in the case of the dialogue). This identification of aspects of the deity with the straight and the crooked (or principle and things, black and white, Monjû and Fûgen, death and birth etc.) is carried out explicitly in the first document, implicitly, and to my mind more forcefully, in the second through the application of *kôan* language. This application is possible because the system of the *kôan* curricula, specifically the *san i* themselves could be interpreted using the concepts and symbolism of the *go i*. For example, a text entitled *Sôtô san i no chûkyaku* (reprinted in Andô 2000, 647-652) states, discussing the “Unknowable”: “This (the stage of the unknowable), if put in terms of the *go i*, is “arriving together in the middle”. As for diagrams, it is this empty circle. (in the original a circle replaces the words “empty circle”) Is it not white of one color?” (649f). We can see all three equivalences drawn with the Unknowable, the one color white, the circle and the stages of the *go i* emerge again in both the diagram and the dialogue version of the *kirigami*. Seen in this context, it would perhaps be not too risky an assumption to think of the *go i* as the conceptual conduit used by *kôan* language to insinuate itself into the symbolic space of Hakusan. To use the terminology employed above, it gained the power to tell Hakusan who she, really, is.

We have come to the end of the trajectory along which *kôan* language traversed the logical space between linguistic interpretation of old cases and ritual. Our first move was to indicate the inherent relation *kôan* as stories have to the realm of human action. This allowed medieval masters to turn them

into standardized performances of quasi-ritual character. We then saw them transcending their own subject matter and applying themselves directly to the phenomenal world through the disjunction of kôan language as a way of speaking from kôan as a subject. We should be careful, however, not to over stress this heuristic move. In actual practice, meaning and form can never be clearly separated from one another, as even the builders of entirely formalized mathematical systems had to come to realize. It should thus not surprise us that in our initial example, it is an actual kôan that is used to open the wisdom eye. It might be said to be a case of subject following form. Once the path is laid, mass migration becomes possible. Next, we traced the links between the genre of *monsan* and *kirigami*, which we found to be twofold: *monsan* as prerequisite, and *kirigami* as documents of meta kôan language. Finally, inspecting the case of Hakusan, we saw kôan language exploit the links pertaining between different conceptual schemes, in this case the *san i* and the *go i* to conquer new territories. To return to our first example, the eye-pointing ceremony, it is but the last step taken in this journey. Once all the previous moves had been made, it became possible to generalize the principles involved and thus freely use the kôan, now empowered with ontological force and capable of ritual efficacy, in rituals.

I now want to make good on my promise to complicate this seemingly straightforward case. Shôsan Zenju wrote a text entitled *Kengo Fuken*. Again, I will rely on the version reproduced by Iitsuka (2000, 201-214). Doctrinally speaking, it proclaims a radical form of *hongaku* thought, as the author immediately declares: “The halls of heaven and hell, Buddhas, patriarchs and sentient beings, are all of one nature.” As he expands on this theme, we come to the following passage: “Although it be crooked position [jp. *hen*], when seen from the straight position, all is enlightenment, the deluded are all Buddha, the crooked position is in its entirety the straight position. Heaven’s hall is all hell. Hell is all Heaven’s Hall. Heaven is Earth, Earth is Heaven. Water is fire, fire water. [...] Therefore, one point of water and ink, in both places transformation”. The last phrase is familiar to us from the *kirigami*. It is simply that the last

character for dragon is omitted here. This must have been an oversight on Shōsan's part, for he then proceeds to give us an interpretation of this phrase in which it reappears. He says: "As for places, this is here and there. As for the dragon, this is the middle." What is striking about this passage is that Shōsan here moves from a simple monism of the "all is one" kind to a tripartite structure. This three-way process is constituted by the very same *san i* we have encountered above in their guise of kōan hierarchy. Shōsan elucidates their structure in his interpretation of both places turning into dragons. "Here" and "there", two opposite terms, are harmonized in the "middle", the dragon. Notice how this spatial metaphor in itself underlines the fact that neither of the three terms exists independently. Without "here" and "there" there could be no middle. Their resolution therefore does not mean their abolishment. This is re-enforced by the fact that the middle stage, the Unknowable, is specifically associated with the harmony, not the unity of opposites. The *Sûtô san i no chūkyaku* defines it as the stage in which "the sky is reflected in the water, the water reflected in the sky". (Andō 2000, 647). Furthermore, as we recall it associates the Unknowable with the stage of the *go i* called "arriving together in the middle" which signifies the harmonization of the three members, not their dialectical *Aufhebung*. Their uniqueness remains untouched by their non-differentiation.

With these relations in mind, let us now consider one more time the Hakusan *kirigami* I presented above. In the case of the graphic scheme I outlined, the two branches flow from one figure of intertwining black and white. They branch into a multiplicity which again involves night / day, straight / crooked, principle / things. Note that the line connecting them is never broken, so that the figure as a whole could be said to achieve integration of and mediation between three terms, the initial black and white diagram and its branches. Now let us turn to the *kirigami* featuring the kōan dialogue related to Hakusan. First the master poses Hakusan. The student substitutes by referring to the one color white. The next phase of the encounter poses Myōri and defines it as black. Finally, in the concluding movement, the harmony of opposites is indicated as the time of the oneness of life and death. In short, the same three-way mediation has been

performed yet once more, Hakusan / white / things, Myôri / black / principle, Daigongen / harmony. The crooked, straight and the middle have appeared in yet another guise. Finally, I would like to recall our discussion of circles. Although no clear tripartite scheme can be pointed to in this case, a similar mediation seems to take place. We begin with the womb which even the Buddha can not know, complete non-difference. This stage resonates well with the abiding association between principle and darkness or night. Then occurs a continued differentiation until a duality is reached. Our text here implies the metaphor of birth, but equally well we could speak of day, the emergence of the ten thousand things. At the end, the duality is not abolished, but harmonized. Both principle and things, night and day arrive together in the middle. Again and again we encounter an undifferentiated plurality, a pluralistic unity mediated by a tripartite structure. When the master speaks the words that in both water and ink dragons are born it is to this reality the kôan restores the Buddha image. Together with the ten thousand things it becomes most vibrantly alive in the equality of emptiness.

#### IV. Conclusions

Let us finally work out the suggestion relating the ontology of the kôan and the mantra made at the beginning. Ontologically, I have suggested that medieval Japanese kôan are more akin to mantra than say doctrinal or even literary discourse. The reason I have for forwarding this proposition lies in the ontological force kôan language gathered when it transcended the realm of textual interpretation. It became able to act directly on the world by telling things what they are, thus irrevocably changing their position in the order of things. Mantra achieve a similar feat. The practitioner uttering a mantra is no longer a mere human. His ontological status has changed. The same phenomenon can be approached from a slightly different angle as well. To utter a mantra is to evoke and affirm a total world. It means to take one's place in a world in which certain necessary relationships pertain between deities, sounds, colors. A world in which every thing comes to express something else, in which

there hold different laws of identity. In short, by the simple act of an utterance, one implicitly calls on the whole of the world as envisioned by tantra. To use a *kôan* in a ritual has a similar effect. It calls on the whole system of the world as established by the Zen tradition. The piece of *kôan* dialogue relating to Hakuin called into action a related process. It had to draw on and activate the entirety of the Zen school's ontology, the structures holding between phenomena and principle encoded in the *go i*, the very relationship between life and death. In short, both mantra and *kôan* pack an ontological punch by calling on a world. They do so, however, in a slightly different way, and this is the reason *kôan* can not completely sever their ties to discourse. The force of mantra results from their ontological motivation, a status conferred upon them by mark of forming the Dharma mandala, the sonic manifestations of the deities of the mandala and of course ultimately Dainichi Nyôrai itself. Their effectiveness does not depend on any mediation by spheres of meaning (or at least meaning as recognized by us. They might very well be, and indeed are meaningful to Dainichi) but derives from the tantric metaphysics of sound. A mantra is associated with a certain entity simply by virtue of the fact that this is how the deity appears in sonic form. The syllable "ra" is associated with fire simply by virtue of being the sound of that element. No symbolic mediation occurs or is necessary. The force exhibited by the *kôan* is more derivative. We have in the course of our investigation again and again entered the nets of meaning upon which they depend to achieve their goals. To take our constant example, that in both water and ink dragons are born. Had Dofu simply answered "yes" or "no" to the attendant's question, the *kôan* simply would not do for the purposes of the ritual. There would be nowhere for the tripartite structure to latch on to, so to speak. In other words, the linguistic, literary and metaphorical structures of a given *kôan* are integral to the ontological force they unfold. In this aspect, which is the first and more superficial way of speaking of their efficacy, they could perhaps be fruitfully compared to the power of metaphor as explored by Paul Riceour (1977), the power of being-as which complements the epistemological seeing-as.

There is a second, deeper layer to the ontological power of the *kôan*, which is

related to the process of threefold mediation we have encountered above. We turn once more to the *Shūmon missan*. In the afterword, the author states: “The 27 stages completely return to the *go i*, the *go i* to the *san i*, the *san i* to the one position. The one position is the body of emptiness.” (Iitsuka 2001, 305). The 27 stages referred to are those of the *yazan*, the “Nightly Attendance” which was one of the main forms of advanced kōan instruction in medieval Japan. During the three-month *ango*, a student would visit the abbots quarters 27 times, each time being instructed in one the 27 stages of kōan inspection alluded to above. Each of these stages is identified with one or more kōan and their respective *daigo* exchanges. The number 27 is derived from the *san i*. Each of the three stages is taken to again contain the three others. Thus we arrive at nine stages. Each of these in turn again contains each of the original three stages, thus making up a total of 27 stages. But to use the word “stage” is deceptive in this concept, for the structure we are looking at is hierarchical only on a surface level. It has to be seen in the light of the *San i kirigami* outlined above. Consider the phrase: “One person establishes (or arranges) three positions, three positions return to one circle”. In other words, it is human activity which calls forth the three positions. And in the case of the 27 stages of the *yazan*, what could this human activity be but the inspection of kōan through the mutual interaction of master and disciple in the drama of *daigo* exchange? Yet at the same time, the three positions always, in the very same instant, I am tempted to say, return to the one circle. Thus we can see that there is a hierarchical aspect on the surface. On the underside there is the equality of the circle, the womb. If in this way the twenty seven stages return to or are based on the *san i*, the *san i* in turn return to the one stage. And the one stage is the body of emptiness, the undifferentiated. We have again encountered the threefold mediation. The differences inherent in the kōan as gradual hierarchy, but even more so as language it could be argued, are joined to the undifferentiated body of emptiness through the mediation of the *san i*. Let me immediately dispose with two possible criticisms before I continue. Firstly, yes, this is a circle. The *san i* end up mediating the very structure that constitutes them. But in the light of our discussion of the formation of the 27 stages above, in which each stage is again mediated by the totality of the three,



and thus partly by itself, this does not constitute a major problem. And secondly, the observant reader might object that I have dropped the *go i* mentioned in the original quote. This is because in medieval Sôtô Zen they are viewed as composed of the *san i*. The reason for this is immediately clear if we remember that they are made up not of two, but three members, the straight, the crooked and the middle. In other words, the *san i*. Their omission thus might be an abbreviation, but I do not think it a distortion. With these objections answered to, let me make one final observation.

Throughout our discussion I have emphasized again and again that the *daigo* can be both verbal and non-verbal. In the case related to Unmon, the disciple answers the master's challenge by putting his sleeves into his mouth. Again, in the Circle *monsan* the first *daigo* enjoins the student to fold his hands. In both cases, after the initial silent gesture the teacher then demands a verbal answer. It would of course be perfectly possible to interpret these silent gestures in paralinguistic terms. In this interpretation, the basic model is linguistic, to which paralinguistic signs such as gestures, movements of the body or facial expressions are added as contributing to but not determinative of meaning. To my mind however, there is a second way of interpreting the relations between the words and gestures, one that allows for more exciting possibilities. What if we were to reverse the relationship? Language itself would become a gesture. But what is a gesture but that which stands on the very borderline between the mediate and the immediate, between meaning and meaninglessness, the world and the world? Gesture continually calls back to the word, even while hurling itself beyond it into the world. Similarly, *kôan*, as mediated through the *san i* are rooted on the one hand in the multiplicities of meaning while reaching back towards the simplicity of emptiness. In this sense, they themselves are the "middle", the womb of space.

We have reached the end of our journey, and the deepest layer of the ontological motivation of the *kôan*. They are constantly caught up in a tripartite process of mediation between themselves, the undifferentiated silence of

emptiness and the space in which they are harmonized into a pluralistic unity. Yet as we have seen in our final discussion, they themselves contain this process. It keeps them constantly on the cusp of night and day, silence and speech, a gesture made with words. This tripartite process is, as we have seen, the very structure of reality. And thus they gain the power to bring to life, as in the eye opening ceremony or to absolve from the duality of life and death, as in the case of Hakusan. The most beautiful metaphor describing them has been handed down by the tradition itself: They are the flowers that grow on the iron rod of “no mind”.

### Bibliography

Andô, Yoshinori (2000) *Chûsei Zenshû bunken no kenkyû* Tôkyô: Kokusho

Bodiford, William (2008) 'Dharma Transmission in Theory and Practice', in Heine and Wright (2008)

Heine, Steven and Dale S. Wright (2008) *Zen Rituals*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press

Hirose, Ryôkô (1988) *Zenshû chihô tenkai shi no kenkyû* Tôkyô: Kitsukawa Kôbunkan

Hirose, Ryôkô and Ishikawa, Rikizan (1999) ed., *Zen to sono rekishi*, Tokyo: Perikan

Iitsuka, Naganobu (2000) 'Chûsei Sôtôshûni okeru honzan kenkyû josetsu (san)' in *Komazawa Daigaku Bukkyôgakubu ronshû*, 30, 173-264

Iitsuka, Naganobu (2001) 'Chûsei Sôtôshûni okeru honzan kenkyû josetsu (yon)' in *Komazawa Daigaku Bukkyôgakubu kenkyû kiyô*, 58, 251-306

- Ishikawa, Rikizan (2001) *Zenshû sôden shiryô no kenkyû*, Tokyo: Hôzôkan
- Kaneda, Hiroshi (1976) *Chônenji zô monsan; Chôkôji zô jôjô no sandoku; Daichûji zô ensô monsan*, Tokyo: Ôfûsha
- Lai, Whalen W. and Lancaster, Lewis, ed. (1983) *Early Chan in China and Tibet*  
Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press
- Lakoff, George and Johnson, Mark (1980) *Metaphors we Live By* Chicago:  
University of Chicago Press
- McRea, John (2003) *Seeing through Zen*, Berkeley : University of California  
Press
- Nakamura, Hajime et.al. (2002) ed., *Iwanami Bukkyo Jiten* Tokyo: Iwanami
- Oda, Daijô et.al. (2003) *Hômon jirei daikei*, Tokyo: Seikisha
- Ogisube, Jundô (1997) 'Nihon chûsei zenshisô no hatten', in Sueki (1997)
- Poceski, Mario (2008) 'Chan Rituals of the Aboot's Ascending the Dhama Hall to  
Preach', in Heine and Wright (2008), 83-113
- Riceour, Paul (1977) *The Rule of Metaphor*, Toronto and Buffalo: University of  
Toronto Press
- Sahashi, Hôryû (1980) *Zen-Kôan to zazen no sekkai* Tôkyô: Jitsugyô no  
Nihonsha
- Sueki, Fumihiko. ed. (1997), *Zen to shisô*, Tokyo: Perikan
- Sueki, Fumihiko (1997a) 'Narajidai no Zen', in Sueki (1997)

Tamamura, Takeji (1999) 'Nihon chûsei zenrin ni okeru Rinzai-Sôtô ryôshû no idô', in Hirose and Ishikawa (1999)

Tamura, Yoshiro (1997) 'Nihon Tendai Hongaku Shisô no keisei katei', in Sueki (1997)

White, David Gordon (2000) *Tantra in Practice* Rinceton, Oxford: Princeton University Press

Yanagida, Seizan (1983), tr. John Mc Rae, 'The "Recorded Sayings" Texts in Early Ch'an Buddhism, in Lai and Lancaster (1983)

Yanagida, Seizan (1994) *Musô Sôseki*, Tokyo: Kôdansha