

Language, Rules and Ritual: Semantics and the Indo-Japanese Fire Ceremony

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The Agnicayana ritual, which consists of the building up of a fire altar, the lighting of a fire, and the making of offerings to Agni, the Fire God, dates back to Vedic times. It is still practised in its original Vedic form by Brahmins in Kerala and several other places in India; it is performed in a modified form by Tantric Hindus in India, Kashmir and Bali; and it exists in a Buddhist form in Tibet and in the Shingon and Tendai sects of Japan.

STAAL'S THEORY OF THE ORIGIN OF LANGUAGE

Professor Frits Staal is prominent among contemporary scholars of the Agnicayana. In 1975 he recorded and filmed a performance of the ritual given by the Nambudiri Brahmins in Kerala. The result of this ambitious project was a massive study, *Agni: The Vedic Ritual of the Fire Altar*,¹ in which Staal gives his own detailed description and analysis of the ritual and gathers together a series of articles by other scholars. In the years since the appearance of *Agni*, Staal has produced more than ten books and some dozens of articles which develop a complex and sophisticated theory relating the ritual to the origins of language.² For reasons that will become apparent in the following,

¹ Frits Staal, *Agni: The Vedic Ritual of the Fire Altar*, 2 vols (Berkeley, 1983). The work comprises 1,540 quarto pages. Cf. *ibid.*, "An Outline of Vedic Ritual", in Michel Strickman, ed., *Classical Asian Rituals and the Theory of Ritual* (Berlin, 1988); etc.

² See, for example, Frits Staal, "Oriental Ideas on the Origin of Language", *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 99 (1979), 1-14; "Ritual, Mantras and the Origin of Language", in S. D. Joshi, ed., *Amṛtadhārā*:

the validity of his theory is entirely dependent on the assertion that the ritual and the verses continuously chanted during the twelve days of its performance have no meaning. The meaninglessness of the ritual and the accompanying chant is the indispensable underpinning of his arguments.³

In saying that the ritual and its mantras are meaningless, Staal is not simply repeating the popular prejudices inscribed in English idioms that equate the recitation of mantras and the utterance of sounds without sense. Being an erudite Sanskritist, Staal is aware that his positing of senselessness runs directly counter to the authority of the classical Sanskrit literature, where there is a general consensus that the ritual and its mantras are richly imbued with profound meaning. The *Mīmamsas*, the Upanishads and the Brāhmanas give detailed and extended interpretations of the Vedic verses, and the whole of the *Satapatha Brāhmana*⁴ is nothing other than an exegesis of the meanings of the ritual.⁵ Since Staal devotes four hundred and twenty pages

Professor R. N. Dandekar Felicitation Volume (Delhi, 1984), pp. 403–25; “The Concept of Metalanguage and its Indian Background”, *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 3 (1975), 315–54; etc.

³ The meaninglessness of the ritual and its verses is a recurrent theme in his writings, and is the focus of his book *Rules Without Meaning: Ritual, Mantras and the Human Sciences* (New York: Lang, 1993). See also “The Meaninglessness of Ritual”, *Numen, International Journal of the History of Religions*, 26 (1979), 2–22; “Rites That Make No Sense”, in J. S. Yadava and V. Gautam, eds, *The Communication of Ideas: 10th International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences* (New Delhi), 3 (1980), pp. 145–54; “The Ignorant Brahmin of the Agnicayana”, *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*, 59 (1978), 337–48; “Vedic Mantras”, in H. P. Alper, ed., *Understanding Mantras* (New York, 1988), pp. 48–95; etc.

⁴ *Satapatha-Brāhmana*, Julius Eggeling, trans., 5 vols (SBE vols 12, 26, 41, 43 and 44; London: Clarendon Press, 1882–1900, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1972).

⁵ The *Srauta Sūtras* give descriptions of the ritual, but without an accompanying interpretation of its meaning. It is claimed by the advocates of the meaninglessness of mantras that there have always been some Indian thinkers who denied that mantras have meaning. For example, Kautsa (c. 500 B.C.) is cited by the *Mīmāṃsā*, as having ridiculed the use of mantras (cf. Staal, *Agni*, Vol. I, p. 61; Staal, *Rules Without Meaning*, pp. 375 ff., citing *Mīmāṃsā Sūtra* 1.2.4.34–38); and the Buddhist monk Vasubandhu taught that the true meaning of mantras lay in their meaninglessness (Unrai Wogihara, ed., *Asanga's Bodhisattvabhūmi*, Leipzig, 1908, pp. 272 ff. Cf. S. B. Dasgupta, *An Introduction to Tantric Buddhism*, Calcutta, 1950, p. 66; Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, Willard R. Trask, trans. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), p. 216; and a

of his book *Agni* to his own translations of the Agnicayana chant into English that seems to make perfectly understandable sense, he is obviously not suggesting that the hymns themselves are gibberish. So what does “meaning” mean for Staal?

When Staal says that the ritual and the chant have no meaning, he means, firstly, that they have no relation to each other. The verses have no connection with the actions being performed. Secondly, he means that the ritual actions and the mantras chanted do not refer to something external. They have no referent external to themselves, they have no aim, and they perform no function. The actions and the verses exist for their own sakes.⁶ The ritual and chant are pure activity; they are not performed for the sake of something outside themselves, but constitute their own aim.

The hymns from the Rg Veda, which make up the greater part of the mantras, make sense when considered as isolated items of language, but have no relation to the actions they accompany,⁷ nor do their meanings relate to each other. Further, they include large numbers of *stobha*, that is to say, unintelligible phonemes such as *om*, *hūm*, *hrīm*, and so on, which are, Staal claims, gibberish.⁸ Hence, “mantras are ends in themselves”.⁹

passage from Shankara is held as expressing doubts about the meaning of mantras (Staal, *Agni*, Vol. I, pp. 61–2, citing *Brahma-sūtra-shankara-bhashya* 1.3.30). The citing of these authors is a ploy to give some traditional legitimation to a debate which only makes sense in the context of modern theories of language. The Mīmāṃsākās set up Kautsa as a straw man, ascribing to him patently shallow and trivial arguments, which they proceed to demolish. Vasubandhu uses the argument that mantras are empty to exemplify the virtues of seeking out the Voidness in all things; and the argument from Shankara is a patent misinterpretation. This “debate” never seriously engaged the classical writers. They took it for granted that both the rituals, and the mantras they comprise, are replete with meaning. As representative of contemporary scholars who accept that mantras have meaning, see W. T. Wheelock, “The Mantra in Vedic and Tantric Ritual”, in H. P. Alper, ed., *Understanding Mantras*, pp. 96–122; J. Gonda, “The Indian Mantra”, *Oriens*, 16 (1963), 244–97, and *The Mantras of the Agnyupasthāna and the Sautrāmani* (Amsterdam, 1980).
⁶ Staal, *Rules Without Meaning*, pp. 131 ff.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

⁸ Staal is by no means alone in thinking that the *stobha* are meaningless sounds. Eliade, for example, describes them as “unintelligible phonetic inventions”. In a prefiguring of Staal’s thesis, Eliade links them to the discovery of language, by relating them to shamanic experiences, “an ecstatic return to a primordial situation”, a reawakening of “a primordial

Then how to account for the fact that such a large part of the classical Sanskrit literature is given over to explaining the meanings of the ritual? Staal replies that the meanings are later accretions, added on to rituals as a priestly rationalization. Originally activity performed for its own sake, “[the ritual’s] meaninglessness became patent, and rationalizations and explanations were constructed to account for its persistence. The chief provider of meaning being religion, ritual becomes involved with religion and through this association, meaningful. Next, rites were attached to important [historical] events which thereby acquired religious meaning, too. In the course of time, rituals, instead of remaining useless and pure, became useful and meritorious.”¹⁰ That is, the meanings ascribed to the rituals are layers of *post facto* interpretation superimposed upon a primitive meaninglessness.

Having established his case for the absence of meaning in ritual action and ritual chant, Staal goes on to construct his theory of the origins of language. To say that the ritual is meaningless is not to say that it proceeds in a chaotic and merely fortuitous fashion. Quite on the contrary, according to Staal, the ritual actions are arranged in ordered sequences. Further, the patterns formed by the actions of the ritual precisely follow the arrangements of repetition, embedding and transformation that Noam Chomsky claims are the syntactical “deep structures” innate within and common to all languages, structures that can be rendered into formulaic rules.

Staal finds other rule-based patterns in the sequences of sounds made in the mantras: these comply with the formal structures of music,¹¹ and with the structures of birdsong.¹² Mantras consist of language, in that they are expressions of Sanskrit, but they are not language, in that they are not chanted to convey meaning, but are recited as part of rule-based ritual action performed for its own sake. In this sense they are meaningless sounds, but sounds that are rule-governed. They are not language, but follow the rules of language.

These strands come together in Staal’s theory of the origins of language. Having posited that meanings were at some time attached to ritual actions which were originally (and still are) meaningless, he proceeds to extrapolate from this to develop a general theory of lan-

consciousness” and the rediscovery of “a state of completeness that preceded language”. See Mircea Eliade, *Yoga*, p. 214.

⁹ Staal, *Rules Without Meaning*, p. 224.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Ch. 19, “The Syntax of Stobhas”.

¹² *Ibid.*, Ch. 23, “Mantras and Birdsong”.

guage. Just as did ritual as a whole, so also did mantras acquire meanings at some stage in the evolutionary process. Mantras are akin to (or are?)¹³ the meaningless sounds that precede meaning. Those primordial sounds, however, were not uttered in a random manner, but formed patterns, arranged according to the syntactical rules that govern language. That is, in the process of human evolution a syntactical core, which humans share with animals and birds, was overlaid by a semantic accretion. Meanings are added onto sounds, which were in themselves meaningless, but which embodied the very basis of language, the rules that determine how language is constructed. Thus, the hymns recited in the ritual are pure embodiments of syntax, unencumbered by semantic connotations.¹⁴

In this view, syntax, the rules governing language, precedes semantics, and thus syntax, not semantics, must be the basis for any explanation of ritual and mantras.¹⁵ Rules are the key to explanation, not interpretation of meanings, since there are no meanings to interpret.

RULE-BASED LANGUAGE

Given that Staal claims his theory to be science, it leaves itself open to criticism for its failure to meet scientific criteria, such as verifiability¹⁶ and falsifiability¹⁷. It can also be accused of a misreading of

¹³ Staal does not make clear whether mantras represent, resemble, or *are* the sounds that precede the use of meaningful language.

¹⁴ Whence the title of Staal's book, *Rules Without Meaning*.

¹⁵ Staal, *Rules Without Meaning*, pp. 185, 188.

¹⁶ The scientific method requires that hypotheses be tested against various occurrences of the phenomenon under investigation. Staal bases his hypothesis on data collected from a single performance of the Agnicayana. He has not tested his findings against other related or derived rituals to see if the rules he codifies have a universal rather than circumstantial and occasional relevance. More specifically, he has not tested his theories against the forms of the Fire Ritual that are practised in many parts of India, among the Tantrics of Tamilnad and Kashmir, the Buddhists of Tibet, nor in the Mikkyō schools of Buddhism in Japan.

¹⁷ The criterion of falsifiability is aimed against hypotheses which are structured by way of a loop-logic, a self-referential and enclosed circularity that precludes any competing or contradictory hypothesis. Staal's hypothesis is of this type. The logic runs in an all-inclusive and impenetrable circle: rituals and mantras have no meaning; any meanings ascribed to them must have been added, because they have no meaning. There is no way of refuting the hypothesis, since the hypothesis has already ruled out, or subsumed, all contraries in advance.

Chomsky and Structuralism.¹⁸ This paper, however, is not intended as a critique of Staal's arguments, but aims to use his theory as a setting in which to develop alternative interpretations of the data he has collected and to suggest alternative ways of relating them to language.¹⁹

The word "interpretation" in the preceding sentence is used with the very specific sense invested in it by hermeneutical philosophy, the form of thinking that focuses on the dynamics of the event of interpretation and the attainment of understanding.²⁰ Staal, it should be noted, is explicitly hostile to hermeneutical philosophy, and a denial of its validity runs as a subtext throughout his writings.²¹ Staal seeks to establish a "science of ritual", as opposed to what he terms the

¹⁸ To appeal to structuralist rules in support of a theory of the origins of language is to confuse notions of synchronicity and diachronicity. Structuralism brought into focus the futility of attempting to get back to origins, and in its study of language specifically rejected the diachronic attempts of philologists to trace words and language to their beginnings. Post-structuralists, in their large numbers, have shown the difficulties that lie in the path of those trying to trace back to primordial sources. History is not a continuous and unbroken causal flow, but is interrupted by fracturing and slippages. Back in the days that now seem long past, at the same time that Kuhn was showing that the history of science is a succession of restarts, Foucault was unearthing the discontinuities in the history of the ways in which the things in the world have been categorized and understood.

¹⁹ The academic response to *Rules Without Meaning* has been quite voluminous, and in the main has ranged from warm to ecstatic. See, e.g., Allan G. Grapard, "Rule-Governed Activity vs. Rule-Creating Activity", *Religion*, 21 (July 1991), 207-12; Burton L. Mack, "Staal's Gauntlet and the Queen", *Religion*, 21 (July 1991), 213-18. Several writers have found minor fault in the absence of social and cultural context; Ivan Strenski in "What's Rite? Evolution, Exchange and the Big Picture", *Religion*, 21 (1991), 219-25 has questioned the manner in which Staal uses the concept of evolution; and R. Schechner in "Wrestling against Time: The Performance Aspects of Agni", *Journal of Asian Studies*, 45.2 (1986), 359-63, and "A 'Vedic Ritual' in Quotation Marks", *Journal of Asian Studies*, 46 (1987), 108-10 has criticized Staal's notions of "performance"; but on the whole criticism has been muted.

²⁰ See esp. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, translator's name not given (London: Sheed and Ward, 1979).

²¹ A whole section of his book, *Rules Without Meaning*, is subtitled *Ritual, Mantras and the Human Sciences* and is given over to an appeal to the notion of the unity of science, that is, the assertion that the human sciences are wholly subsumed within the natural sciences, and are only valid to the extent that they conform to the criteria of scientific method.

“meaning madness” of attempts to understand the rituals by way of interpretation and ascribing meanings.

Be that as it may, hermeneutics would question the validity of the proposal that meanings can in some manner be added to sounds. This presupposes that words and meanings are separate entities that can exist apart from each other. But what possible meaning can be ascribed to the word “meaning” in the absence of sounds, that is, in the absence of words? Meaning is a matter of words. It is, of course, possible to have “raw” sounds that carry no meaning; and it is possible to have “raw” experience of things by way of the senses; but there is no such thing as a “raw” meaning, existing by itself in some non-verbal, language-free zone.

Hermeneutics would also question the assumption that language conveys meaning because it is rule-based, that is, that it conveys meanings because words are strung together in sequences that conform to the rules of logic, and that sentences are meaningful when, and only when, they accord with a logical syntax that can be determined and expressed in quasi-mathematical formulae.

This is the concept of language that has driven a great deal of computer research in the areas of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and its offshoot, Computer-Aided Design (CAD). Artificial Intelligence researchers claim that language conveys meanings *because* it is rule-based, that the rules can be specified, and fed into a computer, which can thus be taught to think in the same manner as the human brain. In reverse, the brain works like a computer, in that it computes meanings by reference to rules. What this has in common with Staal’s thinking is its supposition that the rules of language are separate from the meanings of language. The rules come first, and then meanings follow. Computer research and Staal both take rules as the core of language, a core without which it could not convey meanings. In Staal’s way of putting it, meanings are added onto the rules.

The notion that meaning is dependent on rules derives from theories of language developed by logical positivist philosophers, theories which have been the focus of sustained and intense critique in the last decade. The arguments have been rehearsed in detail elsewhere and do not need to be paraded here. An important current in contemporary philosophy, reflected in the thinking of many disciplines, has been directed towards demonstrating the flaws in this concept of language.²² It must suffice here to say that while it is obviously true

²² See the series of articles which Professor Richard Coyne and I wrote in an attempt to resist the hegemonic ambitions of Computer-Aided Design

that we can specify syntactical rules for language, it does not necessarily follow that the rules go anywhere near giving a full "explanation" of how meaning arises nor how it is understood. The understanding of meaning relies on anticipations, interpretational fore-structures, functioning within a context, that is, on a complexity of factors interacting within the situation in which the language occurs. Semantics is not merely a matter of words and their grammatical arrangement, but involves the total person and the total environment of the lived world in which the language event takes place.

The importance of the play of context in understanding meaning is relevant to the study of ritual and mantras. Explanations of ritual and mantras based on rule-based language theory share in the limitations that are innate within that theory. In the same way that logical positivist or structuralist analyses of language rip it from the context of the lived-world, so likewise analyses of ritual and mantras based on such theories treat them as objects having no relationship to a complex interweaving of the ritual, the ritualist, and the setting of the ritual.²³ Such explanations are guilty of a two-fold reductionism: they reduce ritual to *nothing but* language, and in turn language is reduced to *nothing but* rules of logic. Meaning is not allowed to intrude.

THE GOMA RITUAL

This paper now turns in another direction and looks at the Goma rituals practised in Japan.²⁴ The change in the direction of viewing is introduced with a two-fold purpose: firstly, to test whether Staal's thesis that ritual actions and mantras are meaningless is borne out

in the design studios of architectural schools. Those articles catalogue the inconsistencies in rule-based analyses of language and semantics. See, for example, Adrian Snodgrass and Richard Coyne, "Is Designing Hermeneutical?", *Architectural Theory Review*, 2.1 (April 1997), 1-46; etc., where extensive bibliographies are given.

²³ "Setting" here does not so much refer to social factors (cultural, political, economic, psychological, etc.) as to the ritual enclosure and the objects it contains and uses in the ritual.

²⁴ On the Goma ritual, see Adrian Snodgrass, *The Matrix and Diamond World Mandalas in Shingon Buddhism*, 2 vols (Satapithaka Series Nos 354-5, New Delhi: Aditya Prakashan, 1988), Vol. 1, Ch. 6, "The Homa Rituals"; Richard K. Payne, *Feeding the Gods: The Shingon Fire Ritual* (University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, 1986); and for the equivalent ritual as practised in the Tendai school, see Michael Saso, *Homa Rites and Mandala Meditation in Tendai Buddhism* (Satapitaka Series, No. 362, New Delhi: Aditya Prakashan, 1991).

when tested against similar rituals performed elsewhere; and secondly, to provide a basis for the development of a hermeneutical interpretation of the Fire Ritual which is non-reductive in relation to language nor to the rituals themselves, and which suggests an interpretation of language which can stand as an alternative to the theories which explain meaning exclusively in terms of syntactical rules.

The Japanese Goma (Skt. *homa*, from \sqrt{hu} , “to pour into the fire”) is a derivative form of the Agnicayana and closely resembles it in many respects. It includes the main features of the Indian ritual: the construction of a maṇḍala, inviting the divinities (gods, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas) to take up their places in the maṇḍala, the lighting of a fire, and making offerings into the fire. The Goma is the Vedic ritual appropriated for Buddhist use.²⁵

The Japanese ritual is an extraordinary example of cultural influence and continuity. It is performed in Sanskrit, and involves the mental visualization of the written forms of Sanskrit syllables (*bonji*). As in the Agnicayana, all the actions performed throughout the ritual are accompanied by the recitation of Sanskrit mantras, consisting of an invocation of a divinity and sets of seed syllables (Skt. *bīja*, Jap. *shuji*), corresponding to the *stobha* of the Vedic ritual.²⁶

Even a cursory examination shows that Staal’s claim that the Agnicayana is meaningless does not even remotely apply in the case of the Goma. The actions performed in that ritual follow a straightforward sequence, and at no stage is there the slightest doubt about the precise meanings, aims and functions of the actions being performed. There is no shred of legitimacy to any claim that the actions are self-referential or are performed for their own sake.

Again, the mantras chanted in the Goma do not float free of the ritual, but either refer directly to the action being performed or to the

²⁵ The Buddhist texts specifically state that the Goma derives from the Vedic ritual. The core sūtra of the Shingon sect, the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra* (Jap. *Dainichi-kyō*), says that the Buddha Mahāvairocana (Jap. Dainichi Nyorai) practised the Fire Ritual in previous lives, but only when he achieved Awakening did he realize its true nature, which is not the making of offerings to the gods but the burning away of one’s own ignorance in the Fire of Knowledge. More specifically, the self-nature of the fire (*ka-jishō*) is the “light of (Mahāvairocana) Tathāgata’s Total Knowledge (*nyorai-issai-kō*)”. For relevant quotations from the Buddhist texts, see Snodgrass, *Matrix and Diamond World Mandalas*, pp. 82–3.

²⁶ In this Buddhist context the invocations are mainly to Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, but there are also invocations of the Indian gods, here incorporated into the Buddhist pantheon as guardians of the Dharma.

divinity being invoked. Not only do the Sanskrit sentences in the mantras make perfectly good sense, but so also do the accompanying seed syllables, each of which spells out a coded, but nevertheless decipherable meaning. Far from being unintelligible, the meanings of the seed syllables can be read with facility and without ambiguity, once the conventions governing their construction are understood. Each Sanskrit letter has precise connotations, and these meanings are combined in the seed syllable to form “clusters” of meaning.²⁷

Mantras are the focus of the doctrines and practices of the Shingon sect, the largest and one of the oldest of the Japanese Buddhist schools. “Shingon”, which translates as “True Word”, is a synonym of “mantra”, so that Shingon is the “mantra sect”. When not translated as *shingon*, “mantra” is usually given in Japanese as *darani*, which is the transliteration of Skt. *dhāranī*. The traditional kenning of “mantra” is “a container (*tra*) of thought (*man*)”, and one of the meanings of *dhāranī* is also “container”.²⁸ Mantras and *dhāranīs* are “containers”, and what they contain is meaning and, more specifically, the meaning of the Doctrine.

To understand what is involved in the notion that mantras are containers, it is necessary to be aware of the common Buddhist practice of condensing the sūtras. Thus, to take a famous example, the 8,000 stanzas of the *Astasāhasrika-Prajñā-pāramitā-sūtra* are compressed into the *Shorter Prajñā-pāramitā-sūtra*, which in turn is compressed into the *Prajñā-pāramitā-hridaya-sūtra* (“Heart sūtra”), the one-page text that is recited daily in Zen temples. This, finally, is contained in the one-line statement, “Form is Void, and Void is Form”, and again in the mantra “*gate gate pāragate pārasamgate bodhi sāhā*”.²⁹

In many of the schools of Japanese Buddhism a similar principle of condensation inheres in the notion of the *hongan*, usually translated as “Original Vow” or “Fundamental Vow”. The *hongan* is a promise

²⁷ Lucid and detailed statements of the meanings of the mantras and *stobha* are recorded in a large body of literature, including the seminal sūtras of Esoteric Buddhism (*mikkyō*), the commentaries on the sūtras, the writings of monks such as Kūkai and Kakuban, and the works of scholars accumulated over twelve hundred years of scholarship.

²⁸ For a full analysis of mantra and their relation to Shingon doctrine, see Snodgrass, *Matrix and Diamond World Mandalas*, Vol. 1, pp. 44 ff.

²⁹ For a Shingon interpretation of this mantra, see Kūkai’s *Hannya shingyō hiken* (Secret key to the Prajñā Heart Sūtra), *Kōbō daishi zenshū*, I, pp. 554–62, Yoshita S. Hakeda, trans., *Kūkai: Major Works* (Columbia University Press, 1972), pp. 262–75.

in two senses: it is the promise made by the Buddha or Bodhisattva specifying the particular manner in which he or she will aid beings to attain Awakening; and it is the promise, in the sense of the potential, for revealing its own true nature innately possessed by every being. In one way of viewing them, the sūtras simply indicate the various ways whereby this inherent promise may be realized. Each sūtra teaches a particular way of fulfilling the potential beings possess to manifest themselves as they really are, and each of these ways is associated with a particular Buddha or Bodhisattva, who personifies a particular method for attaining liberation (*gedatsu*). The Buddhas and Bodhisattvas express the particular mode of action leading to Awakening with which they are associated by an Original Vow. Thus, for example, the Original Vow of Amitābha Tathāgata is to grant rebirth in a Pure Land, where conditions are conducive to the attainment of Buddhahood, to anyone who invokes his name.

The Original Vow contains all that is taught in a sūtra; and the mantra contains the Original Vow. To recite the mantra is to reaffirm the Vow and to activate its potential; and it is to encapsulate the teachings contained in the Canon.³⁰

There is yet a further step in this process of compression. The Original Vow can also be contained in a single syllable, a *stobha*, in Shingon called a “seed syllable” (Skt. *bīja*, Jap. *shuji*) because it contains the potentiality of the Original Vow, in the manner of a seed which contains the potential of the fully grown plant.

SEED SYLLABLES AND THE SANSKRIT ALPHABET

If the seed syllable is thought of as a shorthand version of larger texts—the mantra, the Vow, a sūtra—it is one that is codified in a very strict manner, so that its meanings can be read without ambiguity. Seed syllables are “informed” by the meanings of the Original Vow and the Doctrine, not in any vague and general fashion, but by

³⁰ This is the basis of the teachings of the Japanese schools of Buddhism that arose in the thirteenth century: the Jōdo (Pure Land) school focuses on the Original Vow of Amida Butsu to grant rebirth in the Pure Land to anyone who recites the Nembutsu, the mantra of his Name; the Jōdo-shin, which teaches that a single calling of the Name will gain this rebirth; the Nichiren, which focuses on the efficacy of chanting the Mantra of the Lotus Sūtra; and so on. Zen employs mantra as a support for meditation. No history or commentary on Japanese Buddhism could be written without a recognition of the central importance of the practices and doctrines associated with mantra.

way of an explicit calculus of correspondences. The system of correspondences is based on the Sanskrit alphabet and the way it is ordered.

The meanings of the seed syllables relate to the sounds of the Sanskrit language and the sequence in which they are organized in the Sanskrit alphabet. Briefly stated, the letters of the Sanskrit alphabet are arranged according to the way in which the organs of speech modify the “primordial” sound “a”, the sound made when the throat is in its most relaxed position. This sound is changed, firstly, by constrictions of the larynx and positions of the mouth to form the vowels (“ā”, “ī”, “ī̄”, “u”, etc.); and then by further modifications of the throat, tongue and lips to form the various consonants (the gutturals, palatals, labials, sibilants, and so on). In this schema the sounds of the Sanskrit language are thought of as the voicing, carried by the breath, of potentialities contained in the “original” sound “a”.³¹

In several places the Exoteric Sūtras correlate the letters of the Sanskrit alphabet with aspects of the doctrine. The *Gandavyūha* and the *Prajñā-pāramitā-sūtra*, for example, establish analogies between the forty-two letters of the alphabet and stages on the way to Awakening, arising from the first letter, “a”;³² the *T'ai-chi t'u-lun* says that “a” is the basis of all words;³³ and both the Sanron and Tendai sects correlate the forty-two letters with the forty-two stages in the path of the Bodhisattva, which starts with the quickening of the potentials contained in the letter “a”.³⁴

³¹ It would lead too far afield to develop the place breath plays in the mythology, doctrines, rituals and meditational practices of the Hindu and Buddhist traditions. There is a pneuma-physiology in which each part of the body is related to breath patterns. One of the main functions of breath is to activate the organs of speech, and to “carry” the sound. This requires a whole chapter on its own. This also relates to the locating of *bījas* in the body. These indicate nodes of breath, and also nodes of sound. Cf. Adrian Snodgrass, *Symbolism of the Stupa* (Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1985), Ch. 7, “The Deployment of Space and the Solar Breath”, and pp. 111–14; 301–4.

³² *Gandavyūha-sūtra* (*Mahāvaiṣṭya-buddha-avatamsaka-sūtra*), *Taishō* 9, 278, p. 765, Thomas Cleary, trans., *The Flower Ornament Scripture: The Avatamsaka Sūtra*, 3 vols (Boston and London: Shambhala, 1987), Vol. III, pp. 316–18; *Mahā-prajñā-pāramitā-sūtra*, 8, 223, p. 256.

³³ *T'ai-chi t'u-lun*, *Taishō* 25, 1509, p. 408.

³⁴ Minoru Kyota, *Shingon Buddhism: Theory and Practice* (Los Angeles and Tokyo: Buddhist Books International, 1978), p. 71.

The Shingon takes this teaching much further, and makes the Sanskrit alphabet the basis for a richly complex network of analogical correspondences, a network which comprises the doctrine of mantras and seed syllables and the practices associated with them in the performance of ritual. The doctrine of the syllable “a” (*aji*), treated in detail in the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra*³⁵ and the *Bodhisattva-shastra*, is of crucial importance in the Shingon teachings, and the meditation on the syllable “a” (*ajikan*) is a fundamental practice, the first undertaken by the neophyte. It is the practice from which all else develops.

The basis of the Shingon doctrine is the teaching that the syllable “a” is the source of all the sounds of the Sanskrit language and, by extension, the source of its written texts. From this derives the Shingon doctrine that the syllable “a” is the Matrix which gives birth to all the words spoken by the Buddhas, and recorded in the sūtras. The syllable “a” is therefore identified with Mahāvairocana Tathāgata, whom the Shingon regards as the source of all Doctrine. Just as the sound “a” pervades all the sounds of language, so the Dharma Body (Skt. *dharmakāya*, Jap. *hosshin*) of Mahāvairocana pervades all things. Further, in Sanskrit the letter “a” as a prefix denotes negation, and so the letter “a” is the Void, the Matrix of all existences; it is the source of co-arising. All words, and thus all “things”, are distilled into “a” and also emerge from “a”.³⁶

The syllable “a”, as the source of all the sounds having meaning, is also the origin from which all seed syllables derive. Each seed syllable is identified with the Original Vow of a particular Buddha or Bodhisattva. The manner in which this identification is established is not arbitrary, but correlates with the patterns of order codified in the

³⁵ *Mahāvairocana-sūtra* (Jap. *Dainichikyō*), 7 fasc., *Taishō* 18, 848.

³⁶ This is not to be taken to mean that “a”, Mahāvairocana or the Void are a first cause. The concept of co-origination from the syllable “a” is to be read in the context of “original non-origination” (Skt. *akāra-ādyanutpāda*, Jap. *honpushō*). This is the doctrine of the non-duality (Skt. *advaita*, Jap. *funi*) of Being (co-arising) and Emptiness (Skt. *sūnyatā*, Jap. *mu*). This is discussed in detail in Kakuban’s *Aji-hishaku* (Secret interpretation of the syllable “A”) and *Aji-kan* (Meditation on the syllable “A”). Cf. Kusuda Ryōkō, *Shingon mikkyō seiritsu kotei no kenkyū* (Studies in the evolution of Shingon Esoteric Buddhist thought; Tokyo: Sankibo, 1969), pp. 201 ff.; and Matsunaga Yūkei, *Mikkyō no rekishi* (History of Esoteric Buddhism; Kyōto: Heiraku-ji shoten, 1969), pp. 224–6. The question of the relation of words and sounds cannot be looked into here. On the official Shingon view on the matter, see Kūkai’s *Shōji jissō gi* (The meanings of sound, word and reality), *Kōbō daishi zenshū*, I, pp. 521–34, Hakeda, trans., *Kūkai: Major Works*, pp. 234–45.

alphabet. Each seed syllable is a letter of the Sanskrit alphabet, modified in accordance with the particularities of the Vow it encapsulates.

THE MEANINGS OF SEED SYLLABLES

A relatively simple example of how modifications of the syllable “a” are brought into correspondence with Original Vows is provided by the seed syllables of the five Buddhas in the Matrix Maṇḍala.³⁷ The Original Vows of these Buddhas represent stages in the attainment of Buddhahood. The five Buddhas are Mahāvairocana, Ratnaketu, Amitābha, Samkusumita-rāja and Divyadundubhi-meghanirghosa.³⁸ Their Vows respectively concern the first quickening of the seed of Awakening³⁹ in the mind; the cultivation of the seed by practice; the attainment of Awakening; the entry into Nirvāna; and Method, in which the perfected Buddha works to awaken all beings. Their seed syllables are “a”, “ā”, “am”, “ah” and “āh”, that is, the syllable “a” and four modifications of that letter. In this “a” is the seed of Buddhahood lying innate within the mind, and containing the potential of Awakening, just as “a” contains the potential of all language. The syllable “ā”, which draws out the first potential contained in the primordial sound by lengthening it, is the unfolding of the potential of Awakening brought about by practice.

The next syllable, “am”, is the attainment of Awakening. In written Sanskrit, it is formed by adding a “void point” (*kyūden*), that is, a dot or semi-circle and dot, above the syllable “a”.⁴⁰ This is called the *anusvāra*, the “following sound”, and indicates that the syllable to which it is added loses itself in a final “m” sound, never being suppressed entirely, but prolonging itself indefinitely even when it has become indistinct and imperceptible. It signifies that the concept conveyed by the syllable is absorbed into the Void. Here, added to “a”, it signifies that Awakening has been actualized by a transposition into the Void, which is synonymous with Awakening. It is the

³⁷ See Snodgrass, *Matrix and Diamond World Mandalas*, Vol. 2, pp. 741 ff

³⁸ In Japanese, these are Dainichi, Hōdō, Amida, Kaifuke-ō and Tenku-raion.

³⁹ This seed of Buddhahood is called *bodhicitta* in Sanskrit, which translates into Japanese as *bodaishin*, “Mind of Awakening”.

⁴⁰ In Sanskrit the semi-circle and dot are the *nāda* and *bindu*, called the *anunāsika*; in Japanese it is the *gyōgatten*, the “upturned moon and point”.

absorption into Silence of the potentialities contained in the syllable “a”.⁴¹

The fourth stage in the ascent to the perfection of Buddhahood is entry into Nirvāna (*nehan*), which is represented by the syllable “ah”. In the written form of the syllable, this is made by adding two dots to the right of “a”. These dots are called *visarga* in Sanskrit, which means “liberation” or “extinction”: the verbal preposition *vi-* expresses separation, dispersion or privation, as in “asunder, apart, off, away, without”; and *sarga*, from *√srig*, means “to discharge, utter, let go, release”. The word *visarga* is, therefore, practically synonymous with Nirvāna, which is likewise “liberation, extinction, a blowing out or an expiration”. The addition of “h”—written in the form of the Nirvāna points—after the syllable “a” indicates that the potential it contains, the seed of Awakening, has been transposed to the level of Nirvāna. Buddhahood has been attained.

Finally, the syllable “āh” comes to represent the operation of Method, which is the highest stage in the perfecting of Buddhahood, because it is the summation and container of the four syllables that precede it. The texts say that it is the wheel of Method, with the Void as its nave. The nave of the wheel is a dimensionless point and also a plenum, principally containing the whole wheel.⁴²

To take another example, at random, in another context in the rituals the seed syllable of Amitābha Tathāgata is “hr̥h”, comprising the syllables “ha”, “ra”, “ṛ” and “h”.⁴³ The syllable “ha” is the initial syllable of the Sanskrit word *hetu*, “cause”;⁴⁴ “ra” is that of *rajas*, “brilliant” and “red”, and is thus identified with fire; and “ṛ” is the initial of *īsa*, “spontaneity, freedom” (Jap. *jizai*). The syllable “ha”, as was shown before, indicates that the notions that precede it have been transposed to the state of Nirvāna. In this case it represents the state of Nirvāna in which causality (*ha*) is transcended; where ignorance has been burnt away in the Fire of Knowledge (*ra*); and where the Freedom of the Void (*ī*), that is, “ungraspable spontaneity

⁴¹ See Snodgrass, *Matrix and Diamond World Mandalas*, p. 55, and fn. 64, where references are given.

⁴² Subhākarasimha, *Dainichikyōsho*, quoted in the *Mikkyō daijiten* (Dictionary of Esoteric Buddhism, 6 vols; Kyoto, Hōzōkan, repr. 1971), p. 1629, s.v. *Tenkuraion-butsum*.

⁴³ The following exegesis is taken from Snodgrass, *Matrix and Diamond World Mandalas*, p. 54, and is based on an analysis of the syllable “hr̥h” given in the *Mikkyō daijiten*, s.v. *Amida Nyorai*.

⁴⁴ “He” is the syllable “ha” with a stroke at the top left-hand corner to indicate “e”.

(r)" (*jizai-fukatoku*),⁴⁵ is attained. Taken as a whole, the syllable "hrīh" is thus the syllable of the attainment of Nirvāna, which is a transcendence of causality and ignorance, and the attainment of the freedom of the Void (*kokū-jizai*).⁴⁶ In this manner the syllable "hrīh" is a concise summation of Amitābha's Original Vow to bring all beings to Nirvāna by freeing them from the causal net of karma.

In the "syntax" of seed syllables each letter of the Sanskrit alphabet is connected with a major theme of the Doctrine. Thus "a", "va", "ra", "ha" and "kha", the first letters of the seed syllables making up the mantra of Mahāvairocana, "a vi ra hūm kham", are those of the five "elements", Earth, Water, Fire, Air and Ether respectively, the components of Mahāvairocana's Dharma Body of Form.⁴⁷ In this context "a" is identified with Earth because, like the earth, it is the container and support of all things. The letter "va", the seed syllable of Water, is the initial letter of *varsa*, "rain", and of Varuna, the name of the god of water. The letter "ra", as stated above, is the initial letter of *raja*, with the two meanings of "brilliant" and "red", epithets

⁴⁵ "Ungraspable" (*fukatoku*) serves as a technical term which is synonymous with "Voidness" (*sūnyata, kokū*). For further details, see Snodgrass, *Matrix and Diamond World Mandalas*, p. 55.

⁴⁶ In a complementary interpretation, also based on etymological analogies, the syllable "ha" is greed, "ra" is anger and "r" is ignorance, so that the first three syllables correspond to the three poisons of covetousness, anger and delusion. The syllable "h" is Nirvāna, so that the seed syllable as a whole is the identity of the three poisons and Nirvāna, and liberation from delusion and ignorance.

⁴⁷ See Snodgrass, *Matrix and Diamond World Mandalas*, pp. 747 ff. These seed syllables form part of the mantra that invoke Mahāvairocana Tathāgata in the form associated with the Matrix Mandala: *Namah samanta-buddhānām ah vi ra hūm kham*. This is called "the mantra that perfects the Knowledge of All Knowledges" (*issaichichi-jōju-shingon*). For the manner in which it relates to and encapsulates the doctrine of the Knowledge of All Knowledges (*sarva-jnana, issaichichi*), see Snodgrass, *Matrix and Diamond World Mandalas*, Vol. 2, pp. 749 ff. In brief, *namah samanta-buddhānām* means "I take refuge in all the Buddhas everywhere". This phrase, which appears in a large number of the mantras of various Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, is in itself the focus of a large body of exegesis. In summary, *namah=namas* is "bowing, obeisance, adoration"; *samanta* is "on all sides, in all directions, all round"; and *buddhānam* is "Buddhas" in the plural. Cf. Megukō Toshida, *Kontai Ryōbu Shingon Kaiki* (Analysis of the mantras in the Two Sections, Diamond and Matrix; Osaka, 1971), pp. 367-8. It is to be noted that the phrase is typical of the thousands of similar ones that exist in the ritual texts in being wholly intelligible and in following all the rules of Sanskrit grammar.

of Fire.⁴⁸ The letter “ha” is *hamsa*, “goose”, in Vedic symbolism cognate with the breath and hence with Air.⁴⁹ The final letter, “kha”, is itself the Sanskrit word for Ether or Space.⁵⁰

In this it will be noticed that the principle of contraction or concentration of meaning is again at work, in that the seed syllable is the initial letter of the Sanskrit word it denotes. This use of initials also often operates with the names of divinities, which are not arbitrary but always have reference to the particular virtues he or she embodies. Thus, to take an example at random, “ta” is used to designate Tāra, which means “pupil (of the eye)” in Sanskrit, which refers to her manifestation from a beam of light that issues from the pupil of the all-seeing eye of Avalokitesvara, thus manifested to focus Avalokitesvara’s function of looking down and seeing the sufferings of beings.⁵¹

These exegeses of seed syllables are summaries of more extended interpretations given in the Shingon literature. They could be matched by similar analyses of each and every seed syllable that is chanted in the Goma rituals. Enough examples have been given, however, to show that seed syllables are amenable to precise, detailed and extended kenning.⁵²

Not only do the seed syllables have meaning when taken alone, but, they also form part of an inter-reflecting system of correspondences with all other seed syllables. Like the jewels in the Net of Indra, each reflects all the others and is itself reflected in all of them.⁵³ They also form part of a wider network, in which they are connected

⁴⁸ The term *raja* is used repetitively as an epithet of Agni, the god of Fire.

⁴⁹ See Snodgrass, *Symbolism of the Stupa*, p. 301.

⁵⁰ See A. K. Coomaraswamy, “*Kha* and Other Words Denoting ‘Zero’, in Connection with the Indian Metaphysics of Space”, in Roger Lipsey, ed., *Coomaraswamy*, 2 vols (Bollingen Series LXXXIX, Princeton University Press, 1977), Vol. II, Selected Papers—Metaphysics, pp. 220–30. For the significance of the Five Elements and an analysis of the mantra of Mahāvairocana that develops from the five syllables, namely, “a vi ra hūm kham”, see Snodgrass, *Matrix and Diamond World Mandalas*, Appendix 5, “The Mudrās and Dhāranīs of the Five Buddhas and Four Bodhisattvas”, Vol. II, pp. 747 ff.

⁵¹ See Snodgrass, *Matrix and Diamond World Mandalas*, pp. 290–4.

⁵² An exegesis of some of the main seed syllables is given in the *Mikkyō daijiten*. See also Toshida, *Kontai Ryōbu Shingon Kaiki*, *passim*. As an example of an exegesis in the canonical literature see Kūkai’s *Ungi gi* (Meanings of the syllable hūm), *Kōbō daishi zenshū*, I, pp. 535 ff., Hakeda, trans., *Kūkai: Major Works*, pp. 246–62.

⁵³ A full description of the doctrinal implications of this metaphor is given in Francis H. Cook, *Hua-yen Buddhism: The Jewel Net of Indra* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977).

to the fifty-two stages of the Bodhisattva, stages in the ascending and descending transformations of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, events in the life of the "historical" Buddha Sākyamuni, the Original Vows of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and so on to include the totality of the general and specific teaching of the Doctrine.⁵⁴

So tightly are mantras and seed syllables woven into the fabric of Shingon doctrine that to deny their meanings is to deny the existence of meaning in the Shingon doctrine as a whole. Many people, undoubtedly, will find many of the tenets of Shingon arguable, but this is quite another thing to saying they are meaningless. You cannot enter into argument with the meaningless.

MANTRAS, MUDRĀS AND VISUALIZATIONS

The seed syllables correlate with the manner in which sounds are produced by the bodily organs of speech. They also relate to the body in another, fundamentally important way.

In the Goma, mantras and seed syllables do not stand as isolated speech acts, but are always accompanied by hand gestures, called mudrās, and by mental visualizations. The chanting of each mantra is intimately correlated with a bodily action, that is, with the making of a hand gesture, and with a mental action, the imagining of the written form of the seed syllable of the divinity being invoked. The ritual involves speech, body and mind, acting simultaneously.

As do the mantras and seed syllables, the hand gestures form part of a calculus of correspondences. Each of the fingers of each of the hands has meanings which are the exact homologues of those of the letters making up the corresponding seed syllable. It should also be noted in passing that the shapes of the written forms of the letters of the Sanskrit alphabet also correlate, firstly, with the meanings given their sounds and, secondly, with the mudrās. There is a three-way homology between the sound made by the organs of speech, the hand

⁵⁴ It is possible that a comparable case could be assembled to support the argument that the seed syllables in Hindu Tantrism also have meaning. Tārānātha Vidyaratna, ed., *Tantrābhidāna, with Vījanīghantu and Mudrānīghantu* (Calcutta, 1913), is a compendium of the meanings of the seed syllables according to Hindu Tantrism. Cf. Raghu Vira and Shodo Taki, eds, *Dakṣiṇāmūrti, Uddhārakosa: A Dictionary of the Secret Tantric Syllabic Code* (Lahore, 1938). Umesha Mitra, "Physical Theory of Sound and Its Origins in Indian Thought", *Allahabad University Studies*, II, 1926, gives an account of the Mīmāṃsā doctrines of sound.

gesture which accompanies that sound, and the shape of the seed syllable visualized in the mind.

The positions of the fingers in the hand gestures form a somatic language which expresses the same meanings as the accompanying mantra. Mudrā is a “binding of the fingers” that attests the binding nature of an Original Vow. The mudrā affirms that the potentiality (the *hongan*) contained in phenomena is “bound” to be revealed. It is also “binding” in that it ties the body to the accompanying sound of the mantra and the seed syllable, and to the accompanying mental visualization. It is also a “seal”, a mark or sign that affirms the Vow.⁵⁵

Like mantras and seed syllables the hand signs are not arbitrary, but are strictly governed by a syntax of correspondences. Each of the fingers of each of the hands is linked to a series of significances which are the exact homologues of the meanings contained in the corresponding seed syllable. In some cases the shapes formed by the hands and fingers are those of the written form of the Sanskrit syllable.

At the same time as the ritualist pronounces a mantra and makes the corresponding hand gesture, he also visualizes a *siddham* (Jap. *bonji*, “Sanskrit syllable”), that is, the written form of the Sanskrit seed syllable.⁵⁶ By this mental action, the meanings of the mantra,

⁵⁵ The Japanese translation of mudrā is the compound *ingei*, in which *in* is “seal”, referring to a seal impressed on a document to authorize it; and *gei* is “vow” or “pledge”, so that the compound means “the seal of the Vow”. In the manner of a seal attached to a document, it certifies a pledge. It confirms—that is, makes firm or “fixes”—a compact, and is invested with the power and authority of the Vow.

⁵⁶ Adepts who have perfected the techniques of visualization will mentally change the *siddham* into an anthropomorphic image of the divinity. There are four types of images used for visualization, which relate to four ways of embodying an Original Vow: *ṣamaya maṇḍalas*, which show Original Vows as symbols, such as the Wheel, the Vajra, and so on; *dharma maṇḍalas*, which show seed syllables in their written forms; “action” *maṇḍalas*, which show Vows in the form of three-dimensional images; and “great” *maṇḍalas*, which shows the Original Vows painted in the form of anthropomorphic images. The *ṣamaya-maṇḍalas* are made up of symbols; the *dharma-maṇḍalas* are made up of the sounds of the Vows; the action *maṇḍalas* are the bodily gestures that embody the Vows; and great *maṇḍalas* are representations of the forms of the world suffused by the Vows in their aspects pertaining to mental visualization, speech and bodily action. These four means of representation are interchangeable and are wholly interfused one with the other. See Snodgrass, *Matrix and Diamond World Mandalas*, pp. 22 ff.

which are reflected in the bodily action of forming the hand gesture, are also reflected in the mind of the ritualist.

According to the ritual texts, a necessary precondition for the successful performance of the Goma is a fusion of speech, body and mind. With practice, the actions of pronouncing mantras, making gestures with the hands and forming mental images of the Sanskrit characters become effortless and spontaneous. The ritual adept is one who has wholly fused the actions of the hands with the uttering of the mantras and the visualization of the written form of the Sanskrit sound, so that they can be performed together, without thought and as a single action. The attainment of this integration of body, mind and speech, comes as the result of many performances of the ritual, repeated until it becomes effortless and spontaneous, like the use of language itself in everyday situations. This process of fusing body, mind and sound into a seamless whole is like that of learning to play a musical instrument. In the early days of learning, the musician must concentrate on where the fingers are placed, but with a great deal of repetitive practice the fingers automatically hit the right notes without prior thought, allowing the musician to be absorbed in the music. This is what Polanyi calls "tacit understanding".⁵⁷

The ritual practice is an intensification of what happens in every event of language, namely, a simultaneous merging of body, mind and speech. Under normal circumstances we do not need to think about what our organs of speech are doing. If we do we quickly become tongue-tied. Nor do we normally think what we are going to say and then say it. There is a perfect fusion of mental, bodily and linguistic actions.

The fusion of body, mind and speech in the person of the Goma ritualist thus "resonates" together with a fundamental hermeneutical understanding of language, namely, that the way we understand meaning in language is not solely a matter of word meanings and syntactical rules, but involves the whole person, in a merging of words, body and mind.

LEARNING THE CHANT BY THE BODY

Support for these observations is found in the manner in which the ritual chant is learned by the Nambudiri Brahmins. The Nambudiri ritualist learns the chant, an incredible feat of memory, not "by

⁵⁷ Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (University of Chicago Press, 1958), and *Knowing and Being* (University of Chicago Press, 1969).

heart", if this is taken to mean by an effort of memory located exclusively in the mind; nor "by ear", which is to say by listening and repeating. These two ways of learning undoubtedly do play an important part in the learning process, but there is another process involved as well, learning "by body".

The Nambudirir child spends hours each day learning the chant, not from a written text, but sitting face to face with his instructor, who not only teaches him the verses, but at the same time instructs him in the mudrās that accompany the chant. Performed by the right hand alone, they often come into play during the performance of the ritual. Unlike the mudrās of the Japanese Goma, or those performed in the Tibetan and Balinese forms of the Fire Ritual, the mudrās that accompany the chant in the Nambudiri Agnicayana are not connected to the meanings of the mantras, but to the sounds of the Sanskrit alphabet. There is a series of mudrās for the vowels and another for the consonants, but they are not simply one-for-one representations of the letters, they also correspond to the ends of words and are used to distinguish sound differences dictated by the rules of *sandhi*, that is, the rules governing the phonetic conjunction of words. There are also four positions of the hand—palm up, down, facing left and facing right—which correspond to four accents.⁵⁸ Some of these mudrā correspond to the shape of the mouth or vocal tract that produces the corresponding sound. For example, the mudrā for the vowel "u" imitates the rounding of the lips that accompanies its pronunciation.⁵⁹

One of the several important implications of this is that by way of the mudrā the mantras are connected back to the production of the sounds by the organs of speech—another bodily activity. We have seen that in the Indian tradition language, whether in its spoken or written form, is directly related to the positions of the organs of speech, as codified in the Sanskrit alphabet. This connection is not only inscribed in the alphabet, however, but is inculcated by, imbedded in, the learner in and by the very process of learning.

This process, however, does not exhaust the bodily involvement in the learning of the chant. The instructor, sitting opposite the child, places his hand upon the head of the student and gently manipulates it, pulling it forward and back, to left and right, not in time with the

⁵⁸ The four accents are the "raised" accent (*udātta*), the "lowered" or "not raised" accent (*anudātta*), the "sounded" accent (*svarita*), and the "accumulated" accent (*pracaya*). See Staal, *Agni*, Vol. II, pp. 360–1.

⁵⁹ Staal, *Agni*, Vol. II, p. 362.

rhythm of the chant, but in accordance with its accents.⁶⁰ As training continues, these movements are internalized by the student and are not detectable in the movements of the priest when performing the ritual.

In both the Agnicayana and the Goma the chant is intimately and inextricably involved with bodily movement, firstly with the manner in which the sounds of language are produced by the organs of speech; and secondly with the movements of the hands.

THE GOMA AND HERMENEUTICS

The merging of language, mind and body in the Goma accords with the hermeneutical understanding of language, which posits that meaning is not solely a matter of logical relationships worked out in the mind, but involves the entire being and the situation in which it is placed. In this view the ritual practice of the Goma can be interpreted as an intensification of what happens in every event of language, namely, a simultaneous merging of body, mind and speech.

In greater detail, the Goma, firstly, accords with the hermeneutical position that language is not, as Staal and Artificial Intelligence researchers would have it, exclusively a function of the mind. The understanding of language involves “non-mental” or “extra-mental” as well as mental processes; it involves tacit understandings, pre-understandings and the interpretation of cues and clues which are as much a matter of the body and context as the mind.

Secondly, the Goma ritual and hermeneutics are in accord concerning the non-separation of language and meaning. In the hermeneutical view the understanding of meaning is not a matter of the mind working in the manner of a computer, which first receives words (either as sounds or signs) and then deciphers their meaning by correlating their patterns with sets of rules stored as templates in a memory bank. On the contrary, in everyday usage the understanding of language is not something that follows after we hear or read words. Language is always already understood, at the very moment of its happening, and as it happens. Hearing or reading and understanding coalesce. In the same way, thinking and saying go together.⁶¹

⁶⁰ The student’s head is kept straight for the “raised” accent, bent down for the “lowered” accent, and bent to the pupil’s right for the “sounded” accent. See Staal, *Agni*, Vol. I, p. 174, and plates 15A–B.

⁶¹ One of the arguments Staal uses to support his assertion that ritual and mantras are without meaning is that the Nambudiri ritualists are not thinking about meanings when they perform the ritual (Staal, *Agni*, Vol. I,

Thirdly, the same notions of cohesion apply in the case of the relationship of rules and meanings in language. Nobody doubts that rules exist and can be formulated. Countless texts on grammar, logic and linguistics attest to this. As useful as they might be in some contexts, however, the rules are not language itself, but derive from language. Given the presence of rules does not necessarily entail, as Artificial Intelligence researchers and Staal would have it, that meanings depend on or derive from rules. We do not refer to the syntactical rules of language when we are in conversation, any more than we refer to the mathematical rules governing balance when we ride a bike. Reference to such rules would make practice impossible. Rules can only be specified when language is treated as an object that stands over against us, that is, when it is removed from the circumstances of its use, from the context of its occurrence in the lived-world, and relocated in an artificial realm of "objective" separation. Rules do not belong to the world of language practice, but to a transcendent metaphysical realm. Staal's thesis that meanings were added to rule-governed sounds at some point in the evolutionary process only makes sense in an abstracted world of formulaic paradigms.

Fourthly, the fusion of speech, mind and body in the Goma accords with the hermeneutical positing of the indispensable part played by the body in the understanding of language. This is in contrast to the mainstream Western philosophical and religious traditions which, until recently, have privileged the mind and language at the expense of the body. The indissoluble connection of language and the body has dropped out of sight in the mentalist and logocentric view of language that has long been prevalent in the West.

LANGUAGE, BODY, AND METAPHOR STRUCTURE

Recent developments in linguistics, however, are beginning to break down the barriers erected by mentalist and logocentric biases. They demonstrate that the body is inextricably involved in the understanding of language and that without the body, language would be meaningless.

Lakoff and Johnson have demonstrated the ubiquity of spatial metaphors in language. They claim that spatial metaphors are so all-pervasive that language would be unintelligible in their absence.

p. 60.) However, this applies equally to language. In normal language usage we do not think about meanings as we speak, listen or read, but understand as we speak, listen or read.

Spatial metaphors are meaningful, Lakoff and Johnson say, because they are linked to the bodily awareness of space, such as the experience of things being inside or outside the body; of movement from one place to another; of balance, involving a bodily awareness of verticality; of opposition, involving the bodily experience of left-right, up-down and back-front; of things being contiguous with or separate from the body; of the body having a centre and a periphery; and so on. We are able to understand language because of the spatial metaphors it embodies, and we are able to understand spatial metaphors because we have bodies that are aware of space.⁶²

Johnson takes this further. Drawing on hermeneutical notions of forestructures of understanding, that is, the pre-assumptions and anticipations that are involved in understanding, he posits that the bodily-based spatial configurations that manifest in metaphor are "image-schemata" which come into operation in all language. The image-schemata, that is, spatial metaphor-schemata, render language intelligible by linking it to the body and thereby to the world. In this view it is not logic nor rules that make it possible for us to understand language, but bodily awareness of space.⁶³

It is important to note that the bodily-based image schemata have nothing in common with the structure of language rules.⁶⁴ Unlike rules they are neither fixed nor removed from particular instances of their functioning in our experiential world. They continually transform in accordance with the particularities of the situation in which the language event occurs. They are not unchanging formulae which

⁶² See, e.g., George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago University Press, 1980); Adrian Snodgrass and Richard Coyne, "Models, Metaphors and the Hermeneutics of Designing", *Design Issues*, 9.1 (Fall, 1992), 56-74, which appends an extensive bibliography on the hermeneutical account of metaphor.

⁶³ Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Base of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason* (University of Chicago Press, 1987).

⁶⁴ They have nothing in common with Chomsky's "deep structures". Nor do they have anything in common with the sorts of language structures promulgated by Structuralists such as Lévi-Strauss. Unlike these, the image-schemata are not foundational structures which govern the functioning of language. They do not relate to the syntactical rules which are deemed to control language and its meaning, but are akin to what Heidegger calls "forestructures of understanding" and Gadamer terms "prejudices", by which he means the preassumptions deriving from our past experiences that we bring into play in every event of interpretation and understanding. See Snodgrass and Coyne, "Is Designing Hermeneutical?", *passim*.

are intended to *explain* how language is meaningful, but flexible schemata which enable us to *interpret* language and its applications. In the present context they function, on the one hand, to destabilize the hegemony of theories of language based on logico-syntactical rules and, on the other, to open ways of interpreting rituals and mantras that lead to a fusion and expansion of horizons of understanding, rather than reduce them to mere meaninglessness.