

Ajikan: A Symbolism in Shingon Buddhism

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This paper is an attempt to elucidate the philosophical perspectives on “Aji kan” as the beginning of things, the being of things and the negation of things as the source found in Dainichi kyō¹. As a seed mantra the syllable “A” plays an important role in Buddhism. “A” syllable is rooted in Indian understandings of language and the associations that arise in relation to these.

The rumblings of the mind are a cause of perpetual anguish for the human being. Mind is the germinating point of distress, negativity, tentacles, in fact, all the troubles in the present life as well as the life hereafter. Yet, a pertinacious training of the mind offers a possibility of a calm mind.

The practice of the Ajikan denotes the letter in script and words in speech. These are the tools in communication with the environment, people, and specifically with oneself. Speech connotes inner thoughts and the breathing helps in transmission. Anger, dissatisfaction, disgust etc. increases the heart rate leading to faster breathing pattern. Thus, affecting the functioning of the mind. Similarly, a change in thought process coupled with peaceful environment and conducive sounds produce a calming effect. Therefore, letters, sound and visible pictures can be used as instruments to be used in controlling the mind. The practice of Ajikan is an ancient practice reflecting the deep insight into functioning of the mind and the interconnection of the letter, sound and visible picture as an illustration.

The philosophers have persistently endeavoured to churn the depths of theory and practice to seek solutions to this issue. Their effort resulted in turning to Ajikan as the focal point of rumination.

“Ajikan” 阿字観 is a Japanese term which provides the central point for the human mind to meditate and embark upon the journey for enlightenment. The meaning of “Ajikan” is “contemplation of the letter “A”. It is an extensive aid to be used in meditation and

¹ Taishō Vol. 39, No. 1796.

considered to be the “seed” of Dainichi Nyorai (Mahāvairocana Buddha) where the Buddha is the central divinity of the Shingon tradition. “Ajikan” connotes the seed syllable represented by the letter “A”. This is written on a scroll. “Ji” denotes Character, and “Kan” is the scroll. The letter “A” is the first letter of the “𑀅” Sanskrit Siddham alphabet (xi tan wen zi 悉曇文字 in Chinese and Bonji 梵字 in Japanese). A siddham is defined as “accomplished” or “perfected” and used for writing during the period 550 C or 600-1200 CE. Later, it is inspired Japanese Kana script. In India, the Siddham is the name of a script used for writing Sanskrit from the Brahmi script via the Gupta script and later it evolved into the Bengali alphabet and the Tibetan alphabet². To understand the concept of the syllable “A”, three types of features defined linguistically: first, it is the initial element of the Sanskrit syllabary. And is defined as all of the imagery of beginnings. This similarly is found in both Greek and English in the usage of the metaphors of Alpha and Omega and A to Z as representing “from beginning to end” or “the totality of things”. Hence, in the Indian context it lays emphasis on the first vibration, which gave rise to the universe, to existence. The word for beginning in Sanskrit is “adi” (the first phenomenon signified by syllable “A”). In Buddhist conception, especially in Tantrism, “Adi” is referred to as “Adi Buddha”, the primal Buddha, the basic, fundamental, originary Buddha; second, each of the syllables of Sanskrit is pronounced with the “A” as the vowel component. And third, “A” serves as the negative prefix. Thus, A-Ji indicates the three fold aspects of beginning, universal, and inexpressible. For example, A-ji stands for Dainichi Nyorai. It expresses life, death, and becoming a Buddha that is the emergence from the letter “A” and the return to the letter “A” serves as the negative prefix. Thus, A-ji indicates the three fold aspects of beginnings, universal, and inexpressible. For example, A-ji stands for Dainichi Nyorai (Mahāvairocana Buddha). It expresses life, death, and becoming a Buddha that is the emergence from the letter “A” and the return to the letter “A”. Dainichi Nyorai gives the light and chases away the darkness of the world by casting light everywhere³. He gives life to and cares for all living things. He continues life throughout the past, present, and future with a radiant light that is neither created nor destroyed and leads to all living beings to a state of

² Stanley Wolpert, *Encyclopaedia of India, Volume 3*, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2006, p.55

³ Taishō Vol.46, No.1911.

enlightenment. It expresses the law of Thermodynamics “Energy can neither be created nor destroyed”. It changes from one state to another⁴.

A scroll of Siddham script “A”



Scroll of Ajikan“A”⁵

A deep insight into the practice of Ajiikan can be found in “Precious Key to the Secret Treasury”. This was revealed by Kūkai (Kōbō Daishi), the founder of Shingon Sect in Japan during the Heian period from 794 C.E. to 1185 C.E.. A brief verse summary of the practice specifies that Visualize: A White lotus flower with eight petals, [above which is a full moon disc] the size of a forearm in diameter. [in which is] a radiant silvery letter “A” (shown in the above picture). Untie your dhyana [meditation] with prajna [wisdom] in an adamantine binding; Draw the quiescent Prajna of the Tathagata [i.e. Enlightened One] in [-to your mind]. This type of methods indicates that the direction to unite meditation i.e. Dhyana and Prajna can be understood in two ways: First, it can be understood as directing one to ‘enter into the state of unshakable concentration in the oneness of body (dhyana) and mind (Prajna); Second, it can be understood as directing one to make the Vajranjali mudra: ‘one should unite the right thumb (dhyana) with the left thumb (prajna) and form the [thunderbold, Sanskrit: Vajranjali] mudra.

According to the Dainichi kyō (Mahāvairocana sutra), the letter “A” has the five meanings: 1) “A” stands for the enlightened mind (bodhicitta); 2) “AA”, for practice to bring out enlightenment; 3) “AM”, for realization of enlightenment; 4) “AH” for Nirvāṇa; and 5) “AAH”, for wisdom perfectly provided with skilful means.

According to Record of Oral Instruction on the Ajikan, the “A” character, the moon disk and the lotus flower are all interconnected. The relationship of the ‘A’ character to the moon disk it seems “the character ‘A’ becomes the seeds of the moon disk and the moon disk becomes the radiance of the character ‘A’. Thus, the moon disk and the ‘A’ character

⁴ RC Dubey, *Advanced Biotechnology*, S. Chand Limited, 2014, p.239.

⁵ https://www.aetw.org/jsp_ajikan.htm

become completely one⁶. The detail instructions for performing the Ajikan which is mentioned in the Record of Oral Instruction as follows: First, if you desire to visualize this syllable, sit in a place with the four walls with ceiling, appears with not too dark nor too light. However, deluded thoughts will arise if it is too dark⁷, and the mind would be distracted if it is too light. And to place a cushion and to sit in full or half lotus posture with dim lamp hung behind oneself during night time. Whilst sitting in full or half lotus posture, form the Dharma Realm, Samādhi mudrā with eyes are neither fully open nor close. If they are open, they will move and distract you, whilst if they are closed, practitioner will sink into sleep. And a practitioner's eyelids should be narrow without blinking and point the eyes on the bridge of the nose. Secondly, if the tongue is put to the palate [just behind the teeth], the breath will quiet of itself. Whilst practicing, body not supposed to be move nor bend the back. However, to sit straight to aid the circulation in the body. In case of blockage in circulation leads to be impaired, illness may arise or the mind can be disturbed⁸.

Being careful in these things, first form the Vajra Anjalikarma mudra (Japanese, Kangō Gasshō-in; Chinese, Jingang Hezhang Yin) make or formed similar Anjali mudra i.e. thumbs touched each other hands and the tips of the fingers interlaced, the arm projected slightly bend forward with reciting the Five Great vows⁹: Reciting the five-syllable mantra i.e. 1) ‘A’ represents the essence of life¹⁰; 2) “VA” represents the water element¹¹; 3) “RA” represents the fire element; 4) “HA” represents the wind element; 5) “KHA” represents the space element of the Tai-zō one hundred times¹².

In later periods in Japan, various Shingon buddhist masters followed the same methodology from generation to generation which was first introduced by the founder of the Shingon Buddhism, Kukai for the practice of Ajikan. For a few examples of masters named Kakuban and Dohan, the masters of the Shingon Buddhism. These masters are from the Kamakura period (1185 C.E- 1333C.E.) has written several works and implementation of the new

6 KKZ 1:470. Kōbō daishi kukai zenshū:the Complete Works of Kōbō Daishi Kūkai)

⁷ David Kidd, Yasuyoshi Morimoto (editors), Taiko Yamasaki, Richard Peterson, *Shingon: Japanese Esoteric Buddhism*, Shambhala, 1988, p.196.

⁸ Ibid.loc.cit.

⁹ Louis-Frédéric, Jean Claude, Armen, Nissim Marshall, *Buddhism*, Flammarion, New York, 1995, p.48.

¹⁰ Richard K. Payne, *Language in the Buddhist Tantra of Japan, Indic Roots of Mantra*, Bloomsbury Publishing, New York, 2018, p.143.

¹¹ Ibid.p.131.

¹² Minoru Kiyota, *Shingon Buddhism: Theory and Practice*, Buddhist Books International, Tokyo, 1978, p.98.

manuals with the description on the practice of the Ajikan. During the early periods of the Tokugawa or Edo (1603 C.E. -1868 C.E.), the priest Zoei compiled a manual entitled “Procedures for Visualising the Syllable “A”, of the Chuin lineage. The Chuin lineage predominates in contemporary Japan. Zoei’s interpretation on the practice of the Ajikan sets out the eleven steps of the ritualistic practices as follows:

1. **Prostrations**¹³ deals that the practitioner performs three full prostrations i) touching the five points—knees, elbows, and forehead—to the floor. With each prostration the practitioner recites “On saraba tatagyata hana mana, nau kyaromi¹⁴ (Sanskrit Om sarva tathagata pada vandanam karomi);

2. **Take One’s Seat**¹⁵ stands the practitioner sits down in half-lotus posture, and forms the mudra of contemplating the entire cosmos (Dharmadhatu Samadhi mudra);

3. **Utter the Mantra**¹⁶ HUM indicates that the practitioner forms the thunderbolt (Vajra Anjali) mudra by bringing the hands together, palm facing palm, cupped so that there is a slight gap in between them, with the tips of the fingers interlaced, fingers of the right hand on top. Afterwards, chanting the mantra ten times the seed syllable (beej mantra) i.e. HUM (Japanese UN)¹⁷;

4. **To Protect the body with meditation (Sadhna)**¹⁸ exhibits by the practitioner, making the mudra of inner fist three pronged thunderbolt along with chanting the mantra five times On bazara gini harachi hataya sowaka (Sanskrit Om vajragini pradiptaya svaha), by visualising the mantra its vibrates into the five places on the body: forehead, left and right shoulders, chest, and throat;

5. **To chant the Five Great Vows with Vajra Mudra**¹⁹ performed by the practitioner and recite the five great vows with holding the same mudra: ‘Sentiment creatures are innumerable; I vow to save them all. ‘Meritorious knowledge are innumerable; I vow to

¹³ Richard K. Payne, *Re-Visioning ‘Kamakura’ Buddhism*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1998, pp.229-232.

¹⁴ Richard K. Payne, *Language in the Buddhist Tantra of Japan, Indic Roots of Mantra*, Bloomsbury Publishing, New York, 2018, p.143.

¹⁵ Richard K. Payne, *Re-Visioning ‘Kamakura’ Buddhism*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1998, pp.229-232.

¹⁶ Ibid.loc.cit.

¹⁷ Richard K. Payne, *Language in the Buddhist Tantra of Japan, Indic Roots of Mantra*, Bloomsbury Publishing, New York, 2018, pp.132-135

¹⁸ Richard K. Payne, *Re-Visioning ‘Kamakura’ Buddhism*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1998, pp.229-232.

¹⁹ Ibid.loc.cit.

accumulate them all. The innumerable Dharma teachings; I vow to master them all. ‘The Tathagatas are countless; I vow to serve them all’²⁰. ‘Enlightenment is unsurpassed; I vow to attain it.’ May I and others in the Dharmadhatu receive equally the ultimate benefit’;

6. Garbhadhatu Mantra or the Five Syllable Womb Realm Mantra²¹—the practitioner next recites the mantra of the main Buddha of the Shingon Buddhism, Dainichi Nyorai atleast one hundred times On a bi ra un ken (Sanskrit Om a vi ra hum kham);

7. To Concentrate on the Chief Deity²²—the Syllable A—a) In one’s heart: ‘First visualize the syllable A, a lotus, and the disk of a full moon within your heart. Imagine that within your heart there is full moon, bright shining and white in colour. A white lotus flower can be seen in the middle of in a shape of full moon. The dimension of the syllable “A” is about 40 cm²³. It is lying on the surface of open lotus flower. The practitioner concentrates on the syllable “A” and in the heart respectively. Which has been repeated frequently. It seems to expand the entire cosmos [dharmadhatu], contracting and returning to one’s hear i.e. expanding to fill the entire cosmos by concentrating on the syllable “A”. On this particular phase, the syllable “A” contracts to its original size and is then placed through the heart of the practitioner. The practitioner is advised to ‘forget the differences between your body and your heart, and abide for a while in the state of non-difference’²⁴;

8.Repeating the Practice [Sadhna] for Protection of the Body²⁵—practitioner repeats the actions described in the number 4, above;

9. Return of the Buddha²⁶—Bringing the hands together in front of the chest, the practitioner is directed to ‘image that the Buddha that you invited to attend your meditation is now returning to his palace in your heart;

²⁰ Richard K. Payne (1999) *The Shingon Ajikan: Diagrammatic Analysis of Ritual Syntax*, Religion, 29:3, 215-229, DOI: [10.1006/reli.1998.0179](https://doi.org/10.1006/reli.1998.0179)

²¹ Ibid.loc.cit.

²² Ibid.loc.cit.

²³ Richard K. Payne, *Language in the Buddhist Tantra of Japan, Indic Roots of Mantra*, Bloomsbury Publishing, New York, 2018, p.134.

²⁴ Ibid.loc.cit.

²⁵ Ibid. loc.cit.

²⁶ Ibid.loc.cit.

10. **Stand Up and Three Prostrations**²⁷—the Three prostrations are accompanied by the same mantra as in the opening of the practice, one recitation per prostration;

11. **Great Compassion**²⁸—Zoei closes with advice concerning the practitioner's state of mind outside of the practice session per se: abide in the thought of Great Compassion, and perfect this thought in respect to yourself and in respect to all other persons and living beings. To do the meditation of syllable "A" in your own heart which can be done whilst by doing your own personal work, or by walking, or by standing still, or by sitting or lying down. If you are able to do this, then what knowledge you have and what ignorance you have will altogether be one in their Dharma-nature. This way, the practitioner will understand the notion about the syllable "A" is identical and during this current life of one's own life. Which will soon attain to the unsurpassed state of Enlightenment.

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²⁷ Ibid.loc.cit.

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