



Richard K. Payne, *Language in the Buddhist Tantra of Japan: Indic Roots of Mantra*

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ALTHOUGH JUST 157 pages, Richard K. Payne's *Language in the Buddhist Tantra of Japan: Indic Roots of Mantra* is densely packed. As noted in the preface, the book draws on previous lectures, conference presentations, and publications, dating back to 1993. Rather than simply collecting the previous material, Payne has rewritten, expanded upon, and integrated recent research into this monograph. The result is a sleek volume containing critiques of "Buddhist modernism," a sustained investigation of Euro-American philosophy of language, detailed overviews of Indic and East Asian approaches to language, and an exploration of Buddhist epistemology (with references to Western epistemology). This lays the foundation for Payne's argument for a conception of language usage that he terms "extraordinary language use." Through his examination of extraordinary language use in Japanese Buddhism(s), Payne concludes that Buddhist attitudes toward language cannot be reduced to the view that Buddhism maintains a largely negative attitude toward language. Instead, he argues that in the traditions he examined, language is understood positively, and as potentially conducive to awakening.

The book displays three overarching concerns: (1) to show that contrary to popular conceptions of Buddhism as "anti-language," there is a complex range of Buddhist attitudes towards language, some of which are positive and view language as conducive to the goals of Buddhist praxis; (2) to demonstrate that the privileging of silent, seated meditation as exclusively exemplary of Buddhist practice is wrong and that there are many aural Buddhist practices; and (3) there is a category of language usage in Buddhist practice that is best described as "extraordinary language use." Payne did not coin the phrase "extraordinary language use." It was first used by Naomi Janowitz and Martin Schwartz at a conference titled, "Conference on Extraordinary Language" in 1993. Payne, building on their usage, defines what he means by "extraordinary language" in chapter 1, where he writes,

Ordinary language—language as it is ordinarily conceived—has as its essential characteristic the communication of information.... The phrase "extraordinary language" then refers to uses of language that are not communicative in the way that language is ordinarily understood to be; that is, such uses do not convey information, make requests, function ceremonially, act as expletives,

express poetically, or perform actions. Use of the term “extraordinary” should not, therefore, be taken to indicate such positive connotations as excellent, superlative, and so on. (8)

Payne offers *mantra*, *dhāraṇī*, *nenbutsu*, and *daimoku* as examples of extraordinary language use. As these examples are drawn from the Pure Land, *Lotus Sutra*, and esoteric traditions, they are “intended to help us avoid preinterpreting the significance of extraordinary language in the tantric Buddhist praxis of Japan” (12). Payne further explains that juxtaposing them “shows how four apparently different instances can be seen to constitute a coherent category, ‘extraordinary language,’ and raises the question of how, across different sectarian traditions, they were understood to be effective” (13). He provides a detailed discussion of each example, in the process showing that despite the range of meanings attached to these practices they each constitute an instance of extraordinary language. Payne notes that throughout his research, he experimented with various phrases to identify the category of language use that he has observed in Buddhism, such as “ritual language,” “efficacious language,” and “language conducive to awakening,” among others, before returning to “extraordinary language” (8). Payne also discusses his and other scholars’ attempts at defining this category of language. Among these, he mentions Donald Lopez Jr.’s usage of the phrase “ritual language” (LOPEZ 1996, 165) and Paul Copp’s usage of the word “spell” (COPP 2014, xvi). Ritual language proves too broad for Payne’s endeavor because multiple usages of language occur in a ritual, some of which is indeed ordinary. Thus, the phrase does not carry the specificity required. Spell has the opposite issue of being too narrow, as some of the examples Payne provides of extraordinary language do not function in the ways that spells are often discussed.

While this conception of language has affinities with conceptions found in the Western philosophy of language and linguistics—such as referential theories of meaning, performatives, pragmatics, and metaphor theory—these do not adequately capture extraordinary language because of their implicit assumptions about language being communicative and an obstacle. Payne explains that two views about language have dominated Western debates: Enlightenment views of “religion as a fundamentally rational system of morality” or Romantic views of “religion as fundamentally nonrational, that is, affective, or emotional, and rooted in transformative experience” (23). As he understands it, by the middle of the twentieth century the neo-Romantic side of the debate had promoted a particular conception of Buddhism. In this neo-Romantic conception, silent meditation and a view of language as counterproductive to practice came to dominate. Payne tracks the major proponents of this view and its implications. Responding to these implications is, as noted above, two of the three major concerns of this book. Payne does however find an affinity with conceptions found

in Western mysticism as studied by Michel De Certeau. For Payne, the oscillation that de Certeau notes in early Christianity between language as obstructive and language as revelatory and liberative can also be applied to Buddhism.

Each of Payne's four examples of extraordinary language has a history rooted in conceptions of language in India (chapter 3) and in China (chapter 4). Chapters 3 and 4 draw on an impressive range of materials to trace Indic and East Asian understandings of language, respectively. Chapter 3 examines conceptions of mantra in the *Vedas*, *Upaniṣads*, *Śaiva Siddhānta*, *Kaula Tantra*, and Kashmiri Śaivism. In this context, he discusses Mīmāṃsā conceptions of *śabda*, Bhartṛhari's *spoṭa* theory, and *śabdapramāna*, before turning to Buddhist conceptions of language found in Abhidharma literature, *paritta* collections, and Mahāyāna works such as the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* and the *Mañjuśīmūlakalpa*. For Payne, this examination is crucial because the ideas fomented in these contexts were carried over to East Asia by Buddhist practitioners. Chapter 4 considers Confucian and Daoist conceptions of language and the influence of Buddhist thought on Chinese conceptions of language. To do so, he provides a discussion of *mantra*, *dhāraṇī*, and recitation practices in China. He argues that with the introduction and development of Buddhism in China, new ways of understanding language arose that were more than an outgrowth of indigenous conceptions.

With extraordinary language defined, and the Indic and Chinese backdrops fleshed out, Payne turns in chapter 5 to extraordinary language usage in Japanese Shingon. In this chapter, he places Kūkai's view of text and Shingon conceptions of emptiness in the context of his foregoing discussions about Indic conceptions of language. Specifically, he shows that the "ritual use of the *akṣaracakra* in the Shingon tradition brings together pan-tantric speculations on the function of speech as creatrix with pan-Buddhist conceptions of emptiness, conventionality of existence, and dependent co-origination" (90). In the remaining chapters of the book, Payne broaches important discussions about religious agency in Japanese Buddhist ritual (chapters 6 and 9), aurality and epistemology in Buddhism (chapter 7), and the liberative power of *dhāraṇī* as an instance of extraordinary language in the *Lotus Sutra* (chapter 8). These chapters provide specific applications of the theoretical frameworks that Payne has set up in the foregoing chapters.

Naturally, any work covering such wide ground is bound to skim on the details in some places. One such place is the transmission of ideas. The book sometimes presents as if there were a direct line of transmission from Buddhist ideas developed in India, into China, and finally into Japan. The picture is of course much more complex, with many cultures and lands intervening in this transmission. To his credit, Payne offers an important acknowledgment that "such broad, sweeping kinds of inquiry are out of fashion." He adds, though, that "hopefully scholarship can be capacious enough to include both attention to detailed specifics and also attempts to see how those specifics fit together into

a larger, contextualized whole” (80). And indeed, given the state of a field that grows ever more specialized, he is to be commended for trying to cover a general context. The breadth of the book’s scope is one of the most valuable aspects of the work, because, while the book is titled *Language in the Buddhist Tantra of Japan*, it is about significantly more than just language in Japan. Payne devotes nearly half of the book to providing a survey of the conceptions of language that form the backdrop to the extraordinary language usage that occurs in the Buddhist Tantra of Japan. As a result, for a specialist in East Asian Buddhist traditions, this book is a valuable catalog of resources on conceptions of language in South Asia. For a specialist of religious praxis in South Asia, the book is a valuable source for showing how ideas originating in South Asia made their way to China and Japan, growing and developing in the process.

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Ralph H. Craig III  
Stanford University