

# Thousand-Armed Kannon

## *A Mystery or a Problem?*

To my learned Japanese Colleagues  
in deep and grateful appreciation

Paul Mus

As his final word in a debate on Buddhism and its appeal to the Western mind, a well informed Dominican Father, an expert in Tibetan and Zen Buddhism, once said me "I will not deny that our earthly understanding may find strange the Scriptural Doctrine of the Fall of Man. But on the Buddhist side, what of the negation of the Self? When my contradictors and friends warn me that I do not exist, knowing that they do not themselves claim to exist either, what weight can I put in their words? Shall we discard all that our birth, circumstances and cultural background have made us familiar with, just to find ourselves facing, without such help, certainly no less embarrassing problems?"

This recalls Gabriel Marcel's definition: "A problem is what confronts me; a mystery includes me". The roots of the Buddhist negation of personality (*nairātmya*) do not reach deep enough in our mentality for us to feel involved. Such a proposition as "I do not exist" would seem to us self-destructive, even in its canonical shroud of dilatory, sophistical statements. Taking as a grammatical subject the *ātman*, Self or Soul, one proceeds to negate it, leaving the whole dictum without subject or object. How can an action imply responsibility and unequivocal sanction, where nobody exists to assume the responsibility or even the act? What benefit is there in inverting the fundamental article of Modern thinking, in order to proclaim *Cogito ergo desum*? If we simply do not exist, how can we think? It is not easy to understand what kind of comfort Ancient Bud-

dhism found in a Saviour who did not survive, although it would have been equally misleading, on the same Scriptural authority, to imagine him as non-existent, or both existing and non-existent, or neither existent nor not existing. To what needs of human nature do such propositions correspond?

Early Buddhist Art apparently conformed to that elusive kind of answers, as it abstained from representing its Master, even in elaborate illustrations of his Life and doings, where his seat or the place where he should have been standing, walking or preaching were paradoxically left empty. It is a far cry from such a treatment or from the austere, monastic iconography of the following period, to the cosmic display of Pure Lands, with their supra-human Buddha and Bodhisattva, in the perspective of Northern Buddhism.

Art, "a language Nations speak to and between themselves" (Alain), has been the powerful propagandist of the new ideal—at times even to the verge of absurdity. In our eyes, some images of the Great Bodhisattva or Archangel of Mercy, Avalokiteśvara, cannot but look teratological, at best a symbolic teratology. We are there facing a problem, rather than a mystery. How can Asian citizens of the present world, in which their achievements, in so many fields, stand second to none, still find an inspiration in aberrant figures, with pyramids of heads and a halo of radiating arms? As Burnouf once expressed it: "It seems that the Northern Buddhists have been punished for their leaning to the marvellous by the sheer nonsense of their inventions".

But should we rest satisfied with so absolute a condemnation? Does not the plethoric expressivity of those Buddhist "monsters" compare with some famous productions of Modern Western Art, disfigurative, even when still figurative, and at any rate vigorously anti-academic, in their interferences and superimpositions of forms? Shall we dismiss Picasso and Braque, Klee and Miró as unworthy of the long and glorious tradition of Western Art? The days are past when such a move could be seriously thought of. We are to face the fact that in that respect as in so many

others Modern Art and Thought revoke what was once considered a final answer to the question of the unity and meaning of our personality, Self and Soul, two notions Western thinkers have long been equating : “Moi, c’est à dire mon âme (*Myself, meaning my soul*)”, as Descartes had it.

Is there no resemblance between some extreme, abstract forms of the new trend and the way in which the analytic approach of Ancient Buddhism dissolved the erroneous assumption of a personality (*ātma-vāda*) in atomic elements, a direct reversal of the Brāhmanical belief in the absolute reality and universal extension of the Self ? As Figure (*saṃsthāna*) was explicitly denied ultimate reality in the ancient, Buddhist sanskrit Scriptures summarized in Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharmakośa*, their ontology and anthropology could legitimately be called non-figurative. On the other hand one may well assume that the profusion and complexity of the Mahāyānist Iconography betray some more or less covered reversion to the “heresy” of the Self. In his limitless compassion (*mahākaruṇā*) towards all Beings, Avalokiteśvara, eternally at work to protect and save them in this world and through infinite other worlds, is reminiscent of the Cosmic Soul of the ancient Upaniṣad or of the Īśvara of later traditions, more than of the analytical disintegration the old Buddhist Schools understood, under the key word of *nairātmya*. An Avalokiteśvara with eleven heads and a thousand hands clearly means to represent an inexhaustible repository of Protection and Donation (*abhaya, dāna*), the two main attributes of Sovereignty, terrestrial and heavenly.

But here the Southern Buddhists will raise the question : is that still Buddhism ? In his suggestive note *On the Buddha’s Bodies*, appended to his translation of Hiuan-tsang’s *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi*, Louis de La Vallée Poussin observes that the conception of a supra-natural personality of the Buddha and Bodhisattva “originated in a country which worshipped divine Avatars and was anxious of the Absolute”. He wonders whether the mythical personage of Viṣṇu “with a Thousand Rays” welcoming his elects in a fabulous White Island, should not be regarded as “either a copy or a draft” of Avalokiteśvara’s controlling Buddha, Amitābha, the

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Buddha of Infinite Radiance, in his Western Paradise.<sup>(1)</sup>

But such episodic comparisons with late Hindu myths and figures do not give a sufficient idea of the density and pertinence of the analogies that become manifest as soon as one proceeds to a systematic comparison of the whole layer of later traditions, Mahāyānist or Hindu, with their more ancient Indian antecedents, over and above the first Buddhist sources and doctrinal positions represented by the Pāli Canon and the corresponding Sanskrit Scriptures, on which was based Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa*. Of this, all critical reserves made, Avalokiteśvara's supra-human appearance promises to be a particularly instructive example.

The basic reference to that effect will be found in a chapter of the great Sūtra of the *Lotus of the True Law* ("the Bible of Mahāyāna Buddhism"), entitled "[Avalokiteśvara] Facing All Directions (*Samantamukha*)<sup>(2)</sup>". Now, this designation is the literal counterpart of a standard Vedic appellation and description of the Fire-altar (*agni*), as it faces all directions, with 360 enclosing stones and 360 special bricks disposed all around its elaborate structure. The god Agni and his materialization, the altar, were thus connected with the 360 degrees of the horizon and the 360 days and nights of the ritual year. Detailed commentaries and explanatory chapters, in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, allow to get a clear idea of what was meant by that Vedic symbol: it was essentially an image of the World, layer upon layer corresponding to this earth and the heavens above, as a support for the meditation of the Gods and of the Sages, who spiritually assembled there. Jointly built as an image of the world and of the year, the *agni* thus connected Space and Time in a kind of solid architectural calendar, with all the human implications of these two major sets of reference, at a level of culture and civilization where so much depended on the Seasons.

That we have not here to deal with a mere coincidence of names between the two Samantamukha will be easily ascertained when one takes into account a steady sequence of intermediary forms. The Spatio-temporal complex of the Vedic Agni, facing all Directions, has been

mythologically developed in another personification of the Year, Prajāpati, the Cosmic Lord of Creatures, and furthermore in his “reduction”, the later personage of Brahmā (msc.), as distinct from *brahman* (nt.), the sacrificial power, eternally active behind the Vedic Word. As “the [World’s] Forefather (Pitāmahā)”, Brahmā is usually represented with four arms and four faces, so as to be facing the Four Quarters and the Four Ages or Seasons of the Universe, the *samantamukha* style being less easy to carry on with the help of the chisel than with mere words, or counts of bricks. That same typical conflict between normality and a monstrous, multiform figure, which seems to be an essential feature of the theme, reappears in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, telling how Arjuna was once terrified by an apocalyptic manifestation of Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa, who had assumed, at the request of the prince, his cosmic body, a monstrous shape, in the multiple gaping mouths of which all creatures, all the worlds, one after the other, threatened to disappear: a motif, by the way, directly inherited from Prajāpati. Arjuna beseeches the god to resume his more gracious and “human” aspect, with four arms and one face.

Another connecting link is provided by the Śaiva tradition. It is a widespread practice to adjust, on top of the phallic symbols (*liṅga*) of Śiva, a sheath (*kośa*), usually made of precious material and decorated with faces of the God. As an old Cham inscription, in sanskrit, puts it, the multiplication of his faces gives the Īśvara power to bless not only one, but all the Quarters, simultaneously.

This plastic evidence is strongly supported by the fact that from the Vedic texts down to the Hindu Āgama and epigraphical documents, the structure and function of our composite images is philologically reflected in the current use of such characteristic epithets as *Samantamukha* or *Samantabhadra* or again *Viśvatomukha*, “Facing or Blessing all Directions” applied indifferently to Vedic or Hindu Symbols or divinities, or to the Bodhisattva of the Great Vehicle.

A point that should not be missed is that these forms are not, as a rule, monstrous, except by accumulation. This, in the above mentioned

context, points to some kind of succession in time, rather than to any real distortion of forms. In fact, the same could be said of many disconcerting productions of our modern artists. Time, in both cases, appears as an implied dimension, added to the explicit, spatial ones. Its specific feature is superposition. Such expressions as *Stone Movies* or *Solid Cinema* seem to convey a fair idea of what Hindu and Buddhist artists put in such compositions—compositions, so to speak, of the subject with itself. A sequence of aspects have been conventionally solidified in one central object and wait for the spectator to come, collect and animate them, as he circulates around them, either bodily or mentally.

The main difference is that with us full initiative in this decipherment rests with the connoisseur, whereas Indian tradition usually imposes the fixed pattern of the *pradakṣiṇā*, a circumambulation “keeping the object at right hand”, as a form of homage. Passages, stations, evocations, recitations, celebrations, the entire performance is pre-arranged, and conditions the aesthetic impressions of the participants.

The *pradakṣiṇā* thus coincides with another important Indian symbol, the *maṇḍala* or magic circle, an early instance of which is precisely to be found in the disposition of the Vedic altar, with its peripheral enclosing stones and bricks. Our composite images deliberately resemble the *agni* in that they never cease to “face” the progression of the devotee, as he performs the *pradakṣiṇā*—a symbol of the astronomical and climatic realization of Time in Space. The central image establishes itself as a universe in miniature, providing an axis for the ritual procession—or should we say an axle, keeping in mind the motif of the Turning of the Wheel (*cakra*), familiar to all Indian traditions?

It is assuredly worth noticing that in all the instances encountered in our brief survey, Mahāyāna Buddhism and Hinduism should be using the same language, having recourse to the same metaphors and often admitting fairly similar patterns of devotion. This is especially the case when it comes to the personal relations established, in both religions, between the worshippers and the Cosmic Supreme Saviour, continually

devoting himself to their preservation and final deliverance. The fact that the Hindu name of "the Lord" (Īśvara), appears as part of Avalokit-eśvara's usual appellation, has given rise to much speculation. He even has another of his names, Lokeśvara, "Lord of the Universe", in common with Śiva and in ancient Indochinese tradition, for instance, good Western authorities have been so far as to see in that aspect of the Bodhisattva "another form of Śiva".

The lateral, synchronic connexions are thus consistent and straight; in spite of quite evident dogmatic contrasts, both sides had in common much that was practical and popular. This seems to account for the analogies observed between Mahāyānist and Vedic forms, more easily than if one were to assume a direct diachronic filiation, as Mahāyāna Buddhism is not likely to have taken any special interest in Vedic lore and usage. The final explanation would seem to be that at an early stage, say at the level of the *Puruṣasūkta*, RV. X. 90, the first draft of an Indian constitution, as an adjustment of the Vedic outlook to local realities, physical and human, had supplied India—the India that was to emerge in the very process—with a set of cultural patterns, as a permanent acquisition, later filled in many different and even conflicting, but colourful ways, in the course of a complex and dramatic history. The persistence and durability of these early adjustments must be ascribed to the fact that they answered an urgent and lasting need of definite forms, wherein to fit the rich and heterogeneous ethnical and social elements involved. Special interest attaches, in that respect, to the interpretation of the key-word *brahman*, the magical power of Prayer and Sacrifice, if it is to be understood as connoting "Information (*Formung*, P. Thieme)" in the most constructive sense of the term, i. e. not *about* but only *into* a system, establishing it "in form of itself".

In the process two forms were to prove of outstanding importance: the process, *maṇḍala*, as the horizon and chronogram of a society or of a given cultural instance, and the (cosmic) Pillar or Prop (*stambha*, *skambha*) around which Time revolved and a social organisation and allotment of

Space took place—two patterns that we frequently meet, under various aspects, in sanskrit literature. In the broadest and, at the same time, is the most concrete acception of that pair of symbols, the one appears as a circle of given circumstances, in other words, as “the geographical matrix” required by all human undertakings, whereas the other consists precisely of what is established and develops in that setting. At three distinct—though cognate—levels, adjustment of the two leads respectively to cosmic order (specially the revolutions and yield of the seasons), social benefit and personal balance; with *Yoga* as the power to shift from one plane to another, this comes close to the sum of India’s wisdom.

Such a set of patterns accommodates facts and forces rather than ideas. As a common foundation for the various cultural activities and aspects of civilization that prevailed in turns in that Asian sub-continent, it contrasts sharply with our alternately inductive and deductive chains of reasons and positive applications; for, by its very nature, it does not build on general principles and rules, but on set instances and occasions. Each of these stands within its own “horizon” (*maṇḍala*; cf. the Existentialists’ use of the word horizon) and has, in order to be successful, to center on a leading, controlling element, at the very core of itself, as an axis or axle that turns the whole system into an organized construct, rather than into a concept. The final value would thus be that of a topological substructure, assembling a center and a dependent periphery. To quote the great *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, it is “[a filling] that fits the hole (<sup>(s)</sup> *samaṁbila*).”

This concrete trend of the Indian mind and practice, widely differing from our usual conceptualizations by abstraction and generalization, might call to mind what is known, in modern psychological terminology, as *situated analysis* (analyse “en situation”), an approach to any question systematically starting from its surroundings in the given instance. Such a method may help us to get a better idea of the constructive meaning of Hindu and Mahāyāna Buddhist composite works of art.

Without being clearly aware of it, we often fall victim, in that respect, to our custom of housing statues and paintings, whatever their origin,



in our Galleries and Museums, out of their original setting and consequently bereft of much of their meaning, especially in the case of Ancient and Mediaeval Art. On the contrary, Asian usage never separated the aesthetic and the religious values, as all aesthetic and religious objects were equally considered a mystical and magical outgrowth of the site and rites concerned with their production: preeminence of the matrix! There is good evidence for this in the presentation of Śiva's emblem, the *līṅga* or phallus. It emerges from a pedestal (*pīṭha*), assimilated to its feminine counterpart and ritually identified with the area or territory connected with the corresponding cult. Another example would be, in Hindu as well as in Buddhist iconography, the Lotus pedestal, as a symbol of a heavenly birth or supra-natural apparition—on the “spot”, thus converted into an allegorical Paradise or Pure Land.

Such is the semantic and artistic background against which the multi-headed, multi-armed images of Avalokiteśvara call for a *situated* interpretation. Their composition cannot be properly understood, except as the last term in a long sequence, the *incipit* of which will be found where expected: in the Vedic text just mentioned, as the earliest landmark in the process of Hinduization, the *Hymn of the Cosmic Giant*, *Puruṣasūkta*. Puruṣa, the Cosmic Male, is exalted in the poem as the yardstick and repository of all that exists in the Universe; the world and all creatures, including the gods, stem from his immense body and everything is to be measured by reference to his limbs and parts, Sun and Moon being, for instance, a projection of his Eye and Mind etc. So much for pattern no. 2, the [Cosmic] Pillar. Puruṣa, Prajāpati, Agni are variants of the same symbol, explicitly called Stambha or Skambha in the *Atharva Saṃhitā*. As for its complement, pattern no 1, the *maṇḍala*, it is identified, in the same Hymn, with the Vedic Word, under the name of Virāj, a sacred metre: emitted by Puruṣa, it becomes all there is in the world, and out of this, Puruṣa rises again. The *līṅga* of Śiva, or the god himself, dancing the great Tāṇḍava dance, that creates, supports and resorbs the worlds, are other expressions, at a later date, of pattern no. 2, in close connection

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with the worldly and specially feminine symbolism of pattern no. 1. Non-anthropomorphic symbols, including Śiva's phallus, form a regular series: altar, pillar etc. A quasi-universal image of the cosmic axis and axle was presented by Mount Meru, culminating in the North Pole—the world as a mountain, in Buddhist perspective, rather than a mountain in this world. Sun and Moon revolved around it.

The composite figure of Avalokiteśvara may be said to be the intersection of all these symbolisms. Established above the stains of existence on the Lotus of Heavenly births and manifestations, the Bodhisattva is designated as the axis of the world by the presence, dominating the cluster of heads that properly belonged to him, of another smaller one (a sign of infinite distance), that has all the marks of a Buddha—the head of Amitābha, “on top of the world”; confirming this axial value, two of the many hands of the image usually hold symbols of the Sun and Moon. Another Īśvara, indeed, true to type, in his cosmic stature ! La Vallée Poussin quotes from the *Kāraṇḍavyūha* an inflated description of his mythical person: “In every one of his pores rise mountains and forests inhabited by gods and wise men exclusively absorbed in religious exercises<sup>(4)</sup>”.

This brings back, with aggravation, the ominous question raised by the Southern Transmission: is that still Buddhism? Between the Hindu and this Buddhist Īśvara, there exists nevertheless the—by no means unconsiderable—difference that the former is the Creator as well as the Regent of the world, whereas the latter has no use for his transcendent powers, except in his capacity as Universal Saviour. But does this preserve enough doctrinal unity for the Buddhist diverging sects to feel more attraction than repulsion between themselves? An answer to that kind of questions cannot be indefinitely postponed in a world where increase of communications and particularly the end of the Colonial period are likely to give Southern Buddhist much greater occasion to meet their Northern counterparts.

By a fortunate circumstance, the controversies out of which Mahāyāna Buddhism finally emerged have been, at two different levels, the object of a thorough investigation by two masterly minds, Vasubandhu and Hiuan tsang. Infinite merits accrue to the translator and annotator of their fundamental works, the *Abhidharmakośa*<sup>(5)</sup> and the *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi*, still extant in their Chinese and Tibetan versions.

Buddhism, at its first steps, fell out of the patterns of what we have here tentatively described as the common Indian language. On this dissidence, as already shown by Oldenberg, a comparison with Sāṃkhya or another diverging religion, Jainism, would give precious sidelights. The initial move was to confer full reality (*dravyasat*) to the atomic elements (*dharma*) into which the new line of thinking resolved "personality" i. e. the impermanent and finally selfless compounds that we erroneously conceive as subjects or creatures. The fundamental elements of such a reduction did not resemble the evidence of our senses and mind any more than do the elementary particles or forces of modern analytic Physics. However, this dissociation led to no anarchy. The *dharma* were "informed" or conditioned into unstable but well defined appearances and were further inescapably apportioned, from one atomic instant (*kṣaṇa*) to another by the Law of *Karman*, Act, and *Phala*, Fruit, as a consequence of good and evil actions previously accomplished in the sequences (*saṃtāna*, *saṃtati*) mistaken by immature, puerile minds (*bala*, children) for Selves, Souls or Subjects. Further reflexion led to differentiate two sets of consistent factors, the one external, the "Objects", and the other inside us (*adhyātmiḥ* "relating to the [illusory reality of our] self"), i. e. our impressions etc. This derivative use of the term *ātman*, in the very process of divesting it of all reality, clearly shows the persistence of a "common language" the patterns of which admitted of varied and even contradictory contents ("fillings"). Taking into consideration the non-existence of the Self (*nairātmya*), the distinction between the two sets of elements could by no means be held "real", yet it obtained the kind of pragmatic value that makes life livable, in common usage and with a common language as its indis-

pensable instrument.

Buddhism, in its bold dissidence, steered clear of absolute Idealism as well as of crude Materialism. However it appears to have come closer to the latter, by its destructive analyses of all compounds that “make sense” to the uninformed eye. In direct contrast with the major trend of Indian culture, at that level, it rejected all patterns of unity in favour of pluralism. There was no room, of course, in such a philosophy, for anything like an ultimate reality of the collective responsibility, built on the notion of an extended or joint personality—the very foundation of the Brāhmanical culture and civilization; of this, illustrative evidence will be found, for instance, in the definition of *puruṣa*, the full fledged, adult *ātman*, in the *Laws of Manu* IX 45, where he is given as made of self, wife and progeny; at an earlier date, the *Brhadāranyaka* added chattel and science, listed as human and divine acquisitions.<sup>(6)</sup>

The crucial problem Buddhism had to face was that of moral responsibility, where there was no “absolute” Self to shoulder it. In a pluralistic, atomic perspective, if man can no more trust the perception he thought he had of himself, as a personal unity, how can the world around still make sense for him? Where is it, if the “subjects” that live in it have no “where” left, from where to approach it? Would Buddhism be just an adventure in Erehwon?

One of the first vindications of common sense Indian thinking in the development of the doctrine concerned precisely that point. Vasubandhu, in his *Kośa*, strives to establish that many things in the world, and even the world itself as a whole, do not appear only in “atomic” connexion with specifically good or evil actions, although they are built and conditioned by the General Law of Retribution, so as to retribute separately all such actions. A neutral and quasi objective position came to be recognized to what was significantly called *Bhājanaloka*, the Receptacle-World, considered as the universal recipient of the transmigratory processes (“series”, *saṃtati* or *saṃtāna*).

This is not any more “a place of nowhere”. Through periodical re-

Creations, there arises a common cosmic mass, made of such an infinite accumulation and adjustment of circumstances, good and bad, that the individual sequences may be held to draw from it inexhaustibly during each cosmic period, somewhat in the way we consider the Earth to be an infinite storage of static electricity. Never perhaps did a prescientific culture come closer to our statistical modes of thinking, a statement that probably nobody with any familiarity with Vasubandhu's scope of mind will disown.

"The Receptacle-World.....is a product of the good and evil actions of living creatures as a whole. It is 'undefined' [i. e. neither good nor bad in itself]. However it is not Retribution [*vipāka*, 'maturation' of an action so as to bring forth the corresponding 'Fruit' (*phala*) to be savoured in the *samtati* wherein the deed was done], for Retribution is a strictly personal asset of living Beings (*sattvākhyā*)<sup>(7)</sup>." The point here called in question is that Retribution is always "undefined", but that all the Undefined is not retribution. This is to say that the world as a whole integrates in its general structure all the sequences of actions, results of actions and actions again, that we consider so erroneously to be autonomous Subjects or Souls. The world is accordingly given the effective capacity of a Receptacle; it is not piecemeal integrated in the different series.

"Why should not one consider as Retribution the elements (*dharma*) that are not part of living creatures, such as mountains, rivers etc? Are not these produced in consequence of good and evil actions? —The elements that are not part of living creatures are by their very nature enjoyed in common and open to all, whereas Retribution, being a Fruit (*phala*), is, by definition, personal: no one but myself [*leḡe*: "my series"]<sup>(8)</sup> is to savour the fruit of what I have done".

A crucial point is thus reached in the history of Buddhist doctrines. Vasubandhu's statement explicitly projects in the world as a whole more than is to be found, analytically, in its constituents, as these can be nothing more, in strict orthodoxy, than the various retributions separately meted out to all creatures by the Law of Karman, each of them in its own

Destination (*gati*). This seems to come dangerously close to the Arch-heresy, the root of all Evil, viz. the "Belief in the reality of a Composite being (*satkāyadr̥ṣṭi*)", vigorously and irremissibly condemned in the case of the individual *ātman*. The same fallacy is no less harmful when it leads to confer to the world as a whole a kind of pancosmic if not even pantheistic status; it then falls little short of the belief in an *Īśvara*, Regent and Creator of the Universe.

To elude so momentous an objection, Vasubandhu has sought refuge in a subtle distinction between several types or aspects of Causation. His starting point was the principle of Universal Connexion. Except for a few (but all-important) "unconditioned" elements (*asaṃskṛta dharma*), the two Nirodha, one of which is Nirvāṇa (*nirodha*=blocking' or elimination of existence) and Space as pure Emptiness, all *dharma* are to be regarded as cause, in the widest acception of the term, of all *dharma*, except themselves (*svato' nye kāraṇahetuḥ*) ["tous les *dharma*s sont *kāraṇahetu* à l'égard de tous, eux-mêmes exceptés" La Vallée Poussin].

A comparison with our Theory of Form (*Gestalttheorie*) would here prove illuminating: all elements, except the one specially concerned, are thus established as a background leaving room for the latter and thus become coextensive with its contour. Taken as a whole, they delineate its "form" and, jointly with the object thus delineated, *constitute* that "form". Needless to say that in all his argumentation, Vasubandhu was implicitly appealing to the "common sense" pattern, familiar to Vedic exegesis, of the "matrix of the occasion" and its effective implementation (*samambilatva*).

The other categories of causation are more accessible, and are specially concerned with an interplay of constitutive forces and factors, according to the simultaneity, unity of purpose or organic correlation of these factors. It is, in fact a broad and discerning analysis of a vexed and difficult matter, forestalling at time, it would seem, as important and abstruse modern concepts as Kant's *a priori* synthetic unity of the aperception or the class that is not a member of itself, in Russellian terminology. From

that point of view, at least, Vasubandhu's account of Causality compares without too great disadvantage with Aristotle's famous analyses, though on quite other lines, as it derives much less profit from and lays much less stress on what Mathematics, Physics and Natural Sciences, even at an early stage, may contribute to the question. The *Kośa's* insistence and validity is mainly on the sociological and psychological plane; if it is by no means a substitute for the *Organon*, it may thus provide a useful complement to it.

But does not precisely this successful elucidation of some human, pragmatic aspects of the category of causality render all the more futile, by comparison, Vasubandhu's painstaking account of an alleged Permissive Causality? The mere fact of leaving room for something to happen can hardly be reckoned an authentic form of causation.

In fact the *Abhidharmakośa* warns that if "all conditioned elements are Cause-in-general (*kāraṇahetu*) insofar as they do not prevent the production of a *dharma*" this statement applies exclusively in case of the emergence of a *dharma* that is "impending (*anantārabhāvin*)", its own and immediate causes and conditions being complete. This, however, makes Vasubandhu's recourse to the notion of a General Permissive Cause sound rather perfunctory in the face of the formidable instrument of negations at cross-purposes devised to make Buddhism secure against all recurrences, at cosmic as well as at individual level, of the "Belief in the reality of Composite [Entities]", on which the Brāhmanical culture and way of life centered.

Would it be that the keen exegetist, even while "dryly" cataloguing (to quote the appreciation of a recent critic) "all the constituent parts of reality", as seen by the Little Vehicle, was more or less deliberately responsive to the urge for a new approach, already fully recognized, in his days, viz, the "Great Vehicle"? It meant falling back from the extreme of analytic, quasi-materialistic pluralism, marked, at first, by the simultaneous negation of the Self and admission of the ultimate reality of its atomic constituents. It favored instead a more unified and, what amounts

to the same, idealistic approach or *Weltanschauung*, the Bodhisattva Doctrine.

One of the antecedents of this renovation of the Faith would then be found at the level of the polemics concerning the Permissive Cause, in its cosmic context, as delineated in the *Kośa*. That controversy would have paved the way for the theory of "the mutual interreflexion of images", in the perspective of the *Avatamsaka* school of Mahāyāna Buddhism. The *dharma*, universally interrelated under the Law of Causation in a cosmic context, were in due time to become mere images, reflexions in a mirror.

Philosophy, mysticism, or both? I am quite prepared to endorse the first part of Father Dumoulin's suggestive exposition of the beginnings of the Great Vehicle, in his *History of Zen Buddhism*, English version, to the effect that "the power unleashing the movement"<sup>(11)</sup> did not stem from mere "philosophical speculation"<sup>(12)</sup>. I would further agree with the Jesuit historian, that mysticism had "a prominent position" among the directing forces then and there at work. But, keeping in mind, in the words of the learned author himself, that "all mysticism is conditioned in character by the spiritual setting in which it originated", the main impulsion should certainly not be restricted to the high inspiration of "spiritual men" as such. It embraced a pragmatic *Weltanschauung*, "Survey of the world as a whole", drastically manifested in the polemics concerning the Cosmic Permissive Cause, and included the action and development of Art, architectural, sculptural, pictural, narrative and dramatical. The pressure set-up was evidently being built at that level, not just among philosophers and articulate mystics.

Vasubandhu's strongest point is his keen awareness of the sociological background of the dogmatic problems—a nexus of patterns and analogies without due consideration of which little progress could be made in our interpretation of Buddhism. It would be tantamount to ignoring the common language the schools and sects had to resort to, in the world where they had to live.

There is in fact strong agreement between these conclusions and the



lesson conveyed by our composite images of Avalokiteśvara. The cosmic interrelation of *dharma*, causes and conditions (*hetu, pratyaya*), in the first case, and, in the second, the massive accumulation of forms and movements “facing all directions” and eternally at work throughout the worlds, may be held to betoken the same trend towards what Father Dumoulin aptly defines “a mystic, monistic vision, which promises to satisfy to a large extent the fundamental yearning of the human spirit for unity”.

A significant confirmation is to be found in the fact that in the *Abhidharmakośa*, the Cosmic Permissive Cause, first and foremost on the list, should be specifically called *adhipatipratyaya* “Cause or Condition of the Sovereign (*adhipati*)”, its fruit (*phala*) being “the Fruit of the Sovereign (*adhipatiphala*)”.

Let us take care however not to accept here too lexical a translation. In our usage, on the strength of our historical and political background, the word Sovereign indicates a supreme ruler invested with such powers that there be nothing and nobody in the extent of his authority that does not come into complete subjection to him. If the sanskrit words *Adhipati* and *Īśvara* had exactly the same connotations as “Sovereign”, the composite iconography of Avalokiteśvara and the theory of *Adhipatipratyaya* and *Adhipatiphala* would tally in confirming Father Dumoulin’s reference to a direct “monistic” vision. Does however the semantic background admit unreservedly of such an interpretation? Louis de La Vallée Poussin had apparently misgivings about the validity of the equation *adhipatipratyaya*=Cause or Condition of the Sovereign as a definition of the “General [Permissive] Cause (*kāraṇahetu*)”, for in his later translation of Hiuan-tsang’s *Vijñaptimatratāsiddhi*, he shifted first to “Condition in the Capacity of Sovereign or Regent”, then to “Auxiliary Sovereign Condition”—whatever meaning such conflicting terms may amount to—and finally reverted to “Sovereign Condition”, while still translating *adhipatiphala* by “Fruit of the Controlling Cause (la cause directrice)”.

Describing the “final effect” of the “Cause-in-General (*kāraṇahetu*)”,

Vasubandhu offers two alternatives to *adhipatiphala*: *adhipaja* "Born from the Sovereign" and *ādhipata* "Belonging to the Sovereign", with the following comment :

" Bearing in mind that the plain condition of Not-being-an-obstacle (*anāvaraṇabhāvamātrāvasthāna*) is sufficient to establish the Cause-in-General (*kāraṇahetu*), one will ask why the latter has come to be called Sovereign".

" The Cause-in-General is called Sovereign

(a) either, as non-efficient causality (*upekṣaka*), in that it is not an obstacle,

(b) or, as efficient causality (*kāraka*), in that it has superiority and a generating, predominant activity (*pradhāna, janaka, aṅgibhāva*)".

As for instance "the collective action of all living Beings is Sovereign with regard to the Receptacle-World<sup>(18)</sup>".

Should one infer from these statements that non-Efficiency ranks with or even, being first mentioned, preceeds Efficiency, in Vasubandhu's eyes, as a major qualification of Sovereignty (*ādhipatya*)? In fact, the real meaning of *upekṣā* (hence the derivative forms *upekṣaka*) is here "indifference", with a connotation of "impartiality". Furthermore, in our own usage, "non efficient", said of a cause, qualifies it as the contrary of an "efficient" cause, i. e. of the cause "that makes the thing what it is". *Kāraṇahetu*, in this acception, does not act as a substitute for the efficient, specific causes required to make a conditioned (*samskrta*) *dharma* what it is, in a given situation. It is rather established, at a higher level as the "Regent" (*adhipati*) of such causes. The *upakṣaka* clause, in the Buddhist notion of Sovereignty, would thus approximate the constitutional axiom that "the King reigns and does not govern".

There exists however a momentous difference in stress and in application. The Western-Style constitutional Monarch is personally divested of all or practically all effective action. Quite to the contrary, when direct intervention of a traditional Asian Sovereign was called for by exceptional and thus ominous circumstances, his quasi-divine aloofness gave way to

the most abrupt and often deadly efficacy. It is characteristic of that conception, that the Indian Symbol of Sovereignty should have been Indra's thunderbolt and not a mere sceptre—and this in turn would evoke the connected notions of a threshold and a breaking point, in some kind of differential situation.

In fact, the consideration of such differential levels is likely to become more and more essential, in the field of Asian Humanities, as Sociology, going beyond its classical view points, promises to develop in the line fruitfully opened by George Gurvitch's works. Throughout the general context of Monsoon Asia, the threshold will usually be found at the level where the Sovereignty of a centralized State, with its legal apparatus, comes into contact with the dense nexus of local, "cadastral" cults and unwritten practice. In that vast area, plural communities have, in that way, gradually evolved unifying patterns in a differential setting that resemble our conception of a Division of Social Labour. The main purpose of State Religion—Hinduism or Buddhism or, in other quarters, Confucianism and Taoism—seems to have been the authentication of the whole system, enlisting, as it did, at ground level, the tutelary spirits and genii of the common folk. Kingship, with its dependent officialdom, was thus built above the plane of cleavage, in a kind of higher world of the gods, symbolized, with a great variety of myths and images, by the sacred City, the temples and the palace. Direct contacts with that superior world, when neither called for by the periodicity of the official calendar, nor explicitly sought after, in a well defined intention, were portents of trouble. Something had to be out of order to call for such unseasonable interventions.

One has to keep in mind that differential context in order to understand the commentary on *Kośa* 11. 50. a : "What, having had the possibility of becoming an obstacle [nuisance], yet did not turn out to be so, may well be called 'cause', as villagers whose lord (*bhojaka*) happens not to be oppressive, will say 'we are happy, thanks to our lord'. But is it advisable to apply the same term to what, turning out not to be an obstacle, in

fact never had the capacity of becoming one ?—Yes, just as villagers, even when effectively their lord would lack the capacity of oppressing them, and in fact does not oppress them, will still use the same words ; but not about a non-existent lord<sup>(14)</sup>”.

The last statement, awkward as it may seem at first sight, refers to the function as such, and what it typically implies, and not to the personal qualifications or shortcomings of the holder. This becomes clearer against the background

(1) of the universal interconnexion, and

(2) of Transmigration, as submitted to the Law of Retribution.

To paraphrase a comparison frequently met in Mahāyāna Buddhist texts, the Universe, in every one of its points, may be considered as emitting a profound, limiteless musical note (the ‘voice of the Dharma’) carrying then and there the echoes and impact of all in all, so that, from any given point, the Universe can be reconstructed either by Absolute Knowledge (*jñāna*, *prajñā*) or by Supreme Meditation (*bhāvanā*). It is thus found to be regularly ordained.

All this was more or less part of the common language of India as well as of China. In India, the controlling power was, at first, the magical power of the Vedic Sacrifice. Later, the reference is to the Will and Love of a Sovereign Īśvara. In the eyes of the Buddhists, the Supreme authority was initially to be found in the impersonal, automatic action of the Law of Retribution—so that no transmigratory sequence could be allowed to act as an efficient cause at a given point, if not fitting into the local and momentary pattern, the “note” or chord of the situation. A limit is thus practically put to the shortcomings of any lord (*bhojaka*) : had he entirely lacked the capacity of “filling” the post, even with small success, he simply would not have been there—except, perhaps, as a punishment for his retainers, deserving such treatment in the last and darkest period of the cyclic Ages.

Conversely, the action of such office-holders as befit the situation and harmonize with the moment, filling the “matrix” of the situation, requi-

res very little effort from them—as would be the case of a singer or lecturer, in a hall of which he had no previous experience, as soon as “finding his voice”, he strikes the right note. The remark admits of a wide application, as, in the full perspective of Retributory Transmigration, there is hardly any station in life, including animals, that is not to some extent “official”, save perhaps creatures reborn in Hell.

It becomes thus easier to understand how, in India, the “non-efficient” style of sovereignty came to be considered as the most effective—a striking parallel to “the Government with hanging hands and loosened girdle” in the Chinese theory of the Imperial Power. In both instances, the irresistible efficacy of such an attitude comes from the “harmony” of the person in charge with the Law of the Universe (*Tao, Li* or *Dharma*), as applying there. By a direct consequence, Cosmology, as all Abhidharma unmistakably attest, constitutes the basis of the Buddhist revelation—roughly accepting the Brāhmanical, or rather the common Indian image, but discovering another meaning in it and, as the next step, the way out of it.

Eminent Western scholars such as Hermann Oldenberg and Sylvain Lévi have rightly insisted on the impersonal, abstract character gradually assumed by the Brāhmanical theory and practice of Sacrifice, to the prejudice of the once so colourful personality of the Vedic gods: the magical, quasi-automatic action (*karman*) of the Rites and of Prayer (*brahman*) had become supreme. The real power at the back of the development was of course that of the Brāhmanical class, and then caste, as such.

Here, we should take into account the three main levels, referring respectively, throughout Vedic culture and teachings:

- (a) to the world or to the gods (*adhibhūtam*, *adhidevatam*)
- (b) to [the] Self (*adhyātman*) i. e. Man (*puruṣa*) and
- (c) to Sacrifice (*adhiyajñam*),

the latter term intervening as an operational intermediary between (a) cosmos and (b) microcosm. It might be defined (c) a mesocosm,

magical and religious in its aspect, but, at closer examination, deeply social and even political in its reality. In that setting, Rites and Prayer directly or indirectly controlled all human and even divine interests and activities.

The inevitable reaction appears to have taken principally two turns. On the one hand, the cosmological term (*adhibhūtam*, *adhidevatam*) of the Vedic syllogism, enriched with all India knew or in due time came to learn or imagine about herself and the world around, finally developed, with the support of popular and often anāryan forms of worship, into Temple Hinduism (still objected to in the *Institutes of Manu*), theistic, mythological, iconic and devotional (*bhakti*). On the other hand, Buddhism, in its early stages, relying on communities of monks who had deliberately and institutionally stepped out of the social conventions approved and controlled by the Brāhmins, started a fierce attack against the monistic principles of Vedic and incipient Hindu orthodoxy: World Soul, Sacrifice and Individual Self.

The target chosen was, it would seem, first and essentially the Doctrine of the Self—the one which, for us, would look by far the less vulnerable, on account of its common sense references and implications. But the paradox is reduced, when greater account is taken, in this case as often elsewhere, of the projective logic, proceeding on differential levels, of Ancient Indian thought and social construction. Referred to its proper antecedents, the controversy on the *ātman* will cease to appear an unsubstantial equivocation on the entity or non-entity of the Self: far more extensive and realistic interests were at stake. The concept, better called construct, of *ātman* was but the projection, on the individual plane (*adhy-ātman*) of a specific sociological pattern, that of a closely united “joint family”. Mind (*manas*) was figuratively said to govern Speech (*vāc*), Breath (*prāṇa*) etc. in the same way as the head of the complete (*kṛtsna*) Social unit (= *maṇḍala*) controlled wife (*jāyā*=*vāc*), dependents (*prajā*=*prāṇa*) etc. In that light, starting from the very foundation of the human personality, the authentication of all ranks and social situations implied obligatory recourse to qualified Brāhmins and to their exacting and costly

program: one could not even become oneself, in one's own eyes and in the eyes of the others, wife and dependents included, save for their rites. Such was the way and sense of life they had established in their proud and lucrative monopoly as Instructors and Sacrificial experts, conferring or denying to all individuals, as they allowed them or did not permit them to receive Vedic instruction and ritual qualification, the religious, moral and legal disposition of themselves. And so, half way between the Cosmic climate of the World and the level of individual Consciousness, an elementary social unit, based on Sacrifice, acted as a formal middle term, capitalized, under the guise of the *ātman* theory, on its leader and controller, the Puruṣa or Gṛhapati ("householder"; *pāti* "chief" from the same root as Lat. *potestas*, Gr. *despotēs*). In the "joint personality" thus created and socialized, the other members of the "body politic" or "corporate" were deprived of all rights "as against" the *pāti*. He was their very *ātman*, more themselves than themselves. Enjoying no personal property, they were entitled exclusively to shares (*bhāga*) allotted to them by the *pāti* and revocable at will. To him, in the legal phraseology of the time, the rites made them to be food (*anna*)

A similar pattern was established at State level, on a much larger scale, as was but natural, and with greater, often extravagant elaboration and expenditure. It was above all a norm of adjustment and unification applied in common to the various elements and levels of a differential system. By a bold and constructive move, taking advantage of the previously described plane of cleavage, it centralized and capitalized on a typical Hindu monarch, supported by the Brāhmins and supporting them, the endless variety of the local geographical, ethnical, linguistic and historical circumstances. The *Institutes of Manu*, that textbook of Medieval and Colonial Hinduism—still true, in many respects, to the Vedic ideal—describe Sovereignty as a multifarious Sacrifice, perpetually carried on, not only by the Royal Chaplain (*purohita*) but by all the subjects in their very lives and ordinary deportments. The protection (*abhaya*) given to them by the King was the equivalent and symbol of a ritual honorarium (*da-*

*kṣiṇā*), in exchange of which the general benefit and benediction of the allegorical sacrifice could accrue to the Monarch ; in the terminology of the Brāhmaṇa, his subjects became part of him or other Selves of him (*anya ātman*), while he enjoyed (*bhuj-*) them as his proper food (*anna* cf. *annādyā*). Magically and juridically, such was the foundation of his right to levy taxes.

The whole enterprise thus definitely rested on the Brāhmanical use of the theory of the *ātman*, in its sociological and constructive, rather than just psychological and philosophical aspect. This will make easier to understand why and how Ancient Buddhism, when it substituted its own Moral and Cosmic Law (*dharma*) for the abstract *brahman* of the Brāhmins and for the personal *Īśvara* of the Hindus, denounced so radically the practices of the established religion as an instance of the "Fallacy of the Self (*ātmavāda*)". Controlling, on the strength of their rites, all social and political institutions, the familial autarcies as well as the State autarchy, wily Brāhmins were making a living of such Chimeras. It was autarcy under conditon of a tithe, or in India one should rather say, at least one sixth, at all levels !.

The incentive was not just philosophical and personal, for it was not only in one's "self" by an introspective disquisition and proper meditation of the Four Noble Truths, but in the others as well, or even more, that the delusion had, practically, to be exposed and eliminated. As the scope and weight of the Brāhmins' activity increased, leading more and more to a stereotyped, casted social order, any cultural and political reaction such as the one to which the teachings of the Buddha gave voice was assured to find support in the social and political elements at the expense of which that first and not yet entirely Hinduized, sub-vedic type of Hinduization threatened to develop. Under colour of the *ātman*'s prerogatives, established as the corner-stone of the system, too much was being capitalized on the few, too little was to be left to the many, at all structural and functional levels, for undisputed success to be achieved, in the absence of the strong emotional compensations, collective and personal,



later provided by Temple and Devotional Hinduism.

The theory of the non-existence of the individual self has been generally considered, by the Western historians of Buddhism, as the fundamental message of the Enlightened One; from it, all the rest of the doctrine stemmed. It is out of the question, here, to contest the central importance of the tenet. A more attentive restitution of the historical and cultural circumstances would nevertheless incite to see in it rather an argument or a means than a final principle.

The canonical description of the Buddha's first experiences as well as the terms in which his initial teachings have been committed to writing are distinctly situated on the cosmological, not on the individual plane. Buddhism, in its full historical significance, is not just a psychological and somewhat paradoxical revelation, curiously developing into a world religion, although it would have had to rely on little more than "the giddiness of annihilation"! In fact, it proved a social as well as a moral revolution. It had enough practical efficacy not only to renovate for a period of several centuries the style and sense of life in India, but to expand all over Central, Eastern and Southeastern Asia, inserting finally so much of its own values in the new forms of Hindu and Brāhmanical thinking that they were able to displace, in India by taking care of the popular needs to which, in living contrast to previous Brāhmanical formalism, the dissentient religion had been, at first, a welcome answer.

The fight against the Brāhmanical system had to be carried on at the three above mentioned levels, but in very different conditions. The weapon with which early Buddhism had armed itself, i.e. a thorough reduction of all appearances or phenomena (the word would not be out of place here) to constituent, non-perceptible elements, applied fully *adhyātmam*, at the level of the individual self: a strictly descriptive, pluralistic logic dissolved and dispelled the delusive pattern on which the Brāhmanical "heresy", now boldly called that name, had cast its lot. This, then, disposed of Vedic Sacrifice, *adhiyajñam*, as the doctrine of *ātman* had become the pretext and support

of the whole ritual. As for the world-picture (*adhibhūtam*), the gods once desacralized, it raised the problem of the practical setting of daily life and common sense reactions to it: here, the explosive theory of *nairātmya* had to be reconciled with objective realities, at the price, of course, of denying the latter an absolute, metaphysical authenticity. The fundamentally negative approach established at the level of the individual *ātman* thus gave way—as the theory of the Receptacle-World in Vasubandhu demonstrates—to a more or less covered relapse to a pragmatically “monist” perspective: an accomodation of theoretical destruction to a workable construction. There is a long and eventful interval between the Vedic *adhibhūtam* and the last word of Mahāyānist philosophy, *bhūtatathatā*, “absolute identity as a self contained, factual qualification”, yet the recourse to the same root, akin to Greek *physis* (hence our “physics”), denotes a natural, original and objective “aspect”: what may have been subjective in the first Brāhmanical approach to the *ātman* is there finally eliminated, as well as all reference to the gods (*adhidevatam*).

Buddhist cosmology, especially in its cosmogonic chapters, was thus devised so as to meet the challenge of the common sense and of the common language of India. The description of the periodical creations and resorptions of the universe illustrates a well ordered set of events that presents a full practical solidity and coherence of purpose, not to be mistaken, however, for a system of ideas that could be true independently of its process of realization (the Platonician “participation”) or for the assertion of a gross existence, that would be independent of what we may know, or not, of it. This set of events, the ultimate import of which is covered by the Four Noble Truths—Suffering, the Origin of Suffering, the Removing of Suffering and the Way to remove Suffering—follows, in Vasubandhu’s presentation, the following lines:

- (1) The collective action of all living beings produces the world as a whole.
- (2) This production is gradual and admits of
  - (a) a progressive increase in the density of the setting (*bhāga*=

allotment, same root as in *bhājanaloka*), starting from a level which is nearly pure spirituality, down to the deepest and darkest “materiality” in Hell.

- (b) a progressive deterioration of the enjoyment (*bhoga*) of their corresponding lots (*bhāga*), experienced by the various creatures, at their respective levels of Retribution.
- (3) The final resorption of the world follows the same steps in inverted, i. e. ascending order.
- (4) During the second period (2, a, b) a selective and corrective factor asserts itself and comes into play, that might be called, in the common language of the period, the Order (*dharma*) of the World —as much order as the world, at a given moment, would admit of, as an Economy of its degradation.

Such periods start not indeed from complete annihilation, but rather from an annulation, on a zero quotation, a notion manifestly derived from the well known Vedic Hymn of Creation: “Darkness in Darkness veiled .....” A cosmic wind (=first motion), produced by the previous *karman*, of all creatures (or “series”) starts the whole process all over again. This cosmic evolution manifests itself as a Fall not only of Man but of all Beings. Greed or Thirst (*lobha tṛṣṇā*), in direct connexion with the Fallacy of a Self, leads to the appropriation and consumption, as food (*anna*) for the Self, of all that exists in the world: such is the Root (*mūla*) of Evil.

Yet, as things grow worse and creatures degenerate, the corrective factor makes itself felt as a consequence and collective reward of whatever may have been good in the previous activities of all Beings. For instance, as darkness in the outer world deepens, Sun and Moon appear and partially dispel it, revolving around the cosmic mass and axis of Mount Meru, around which the tangible world organizes itself as a general lot (*bhāga*), to be enjoyed in common. A selective though impersonal power, closely connected with the *adhipatipratyaya* “conditioning as by a

Sovereign", is at work in the whole process. Thus emerges, in this canonical account of the Creation, a mass of common use and usage, a kind of Commonwealth of Transmigration, transient but certain. This stabilizing factor, the central element of which remains the massive presence of Mount Meru, recalls inevitably the Prop or Pillar of the early Vedic tradition. The external world is in that way set as a stage for the scenario of Transmigration (*saṃsāra*).

It is thus made, in a limited but unequivocal sense, *intentional*, though nobody's intention appears in it. By a clever internal arrangement of the Law of Causation, adjusting it to the common sense and language of the Indian context as such, the world, if still not ordained, i. e. informed into the right form, by any Lord or Creator (*Īśvara*), becomes an ordinating set of circumstances, a selfless but self-ordinating process. There is no absolute Creation, but just an Awakening, taking stock of what is going on. And that is precisely why the Brāhmanical picture has been so readily accepted, on account of its objective, descriptive value. There was no point in going against its common use and current acceptance. It was sufficient to divest it of what in it was "sectarian" and interpretative, along the lines of the Vedic system: an instance of derivation by contrast or, to quote Sartre's favourite phrase 'position in opposition'! This would take care of the still unanswered question, which has so seriously hampered the Western interpretation of the Buddhist venture: if all we can imagine or undertake is pronounced to be bound to come, at best, to nothing, what is the use of it all? What is left for us to put our stakes on? What moral values and incentives are likely to survive, in the face of ultimate annihilation, set as a goal? On the other hand, even the broadest-minded Buddhists find extremely difficult to understand how such a question can come to our mind. To them, the earnestness and consistence of purpose of their faith is not just a philosophical topic, but the very evidence of history, covering more than two thousand and five hundred years—and in this they cannot be but right: there is good evidence that the system, initially, has been built on moral values derived not from subjective,

arbitrary or supranatural assumptions, but from a direct and deep analysis of things “as they are” (*yathābhūtam*).

It is quite evident that the language and set of metaphors in which that positive revelation has found its canonical expression has become obsolete: who could now consider Mount Meru and the Four main Continents around it, with seven circular seas and ranges of cosmic mountains, as a pertinent description of our geographical circumstances? Yet the human truths underlying such conventional knowledge and metaphorical details subsist—and when all is said, what are words, not excepting our modern usage, but attrited metaphors? Let us give a thought to the generations to come, who will have to reconstruct what we put of ourselves in such terms as Relativity, Surrealism and Existentialism. What of “ek-sistence”? Reference to an artistic line of productions, from Monet or Cézanne, for instance, to Picasso and Braque, may prove of invaluable assistance in the attempt. The same has good appearance to be true of the plastic sequence that we have tried to trace here, from the still outwardly aniconic *agni* “facing all directions” to our “teratological” images of Avalokiteśvara, with their increasing number of supererogatory limbs and heads—just, it would seem, better to support the same conception of “a lord of all he surveys”, and “has a hand” in.

A decisive cross-checking is provided by the part assigned in the cosmogonic process, according to all Abhidharma, to the constructive pattern associated with the name and image of Mount Meru. Facing all the directions assembled under its “polar” supremacy, that controlling center cybernetically conditions them to what they have to be, in order to provide the creatures reborn there with a fitting set of Retributions. All peripheral circumstances refer to this distributivity. Even the fact that to us the sky looks blue is an allotment of ours, a signal of our “situation”, because Mount Meru’s slope facing us is made of lapis-lazuli (*vaiḍūrya*). There is intimate harmony between the aspect of the Four Continents, likened to four petals of a gigantic lotus, and the character of the beings who come to be born there, at the apposite time and place. In

such a distributive and controlling capacity, this rich, fully developed version of the Cosmic Pillar remains like a mechanical, automatically operated transposition of the Cosmic, "polar" Giant, to whom, since *R̥gveda* X. 90, Vedic, then Hindu India, never ceased to refer as to the ordinator and surveyor of the material world—its axis and axle. The comparison gives full strength to the fact that in Vasubandhu's vocabulary, Mount Meru should constitute the central effect and support of the "Conditioning as by a Sovereign" (*adhipatipratyaya*). Do we need too to recall the grandiose description, in what could properly be called full *baroque* style, of Avalokiteśvara's body, an immense block, in every pore of which the *Kāraṇḍavyāha* sees a universe, with mountains etc.?

As an intermediary step, it will be found highly significant that, in Vasubandhu's account of creation, as well as in Ancient Buddhist canonical literature in general, the next move, from cosmology to socio-political order or *dharma*, should essentially refer to the notion of Man Total (*Mahāpuruṣa*), as the sum and standard of all that exists and revolves around him, reflecting his Actions and his very Proportions (cf. once more *RV* X. 90). The Buddha is *par excellence* the Mahāpuruṣa; yet his real rôle in the cosmogonic process is to reveal it, not to be part of it. But this makes all the more revealing the fact that virtuous kings should appear as a projection of the same incomparable perfection. In their most exalted capacity as Mahāpuruṣa, they maintain, in human affairs, as much of the Law as is in them and in the corresponding circumstances, amidst the general degradation of things. Mount Meru's massive presence, stabilizing the world, is explicitly likened to the throne and power of the Cakravartin, who makes the wheel of Righteousness to revolve round that center. His rule thus appears, in the Buddhist image of the world, as a moral and "ordinating" service of the Community—a fit substitute for the Vedic Sacrifice and sacrificial power (*brahman*); it is well worth noticing that Buddhist *dharma* remained, throughout the canonical literature, equated to *brahman* (*dharmacakṣus*=*brahmacakṣus* etc.). Destructive even of common sense notions, at the level of the theory of the human personality,

as the latter was seen by the Brāhmins, but destructive chiefly, as we have observed, to oust them from the picture, Buddhism, on the contrary, established itself, instead of them, as a most constructive concern, on the social (formerly *adhiyajñam*) and cosmic (*adhibhūtam*) planes.

Strict orthodoxy must nevertheless have been sometimes endangered by the divine or even more than divine exaltation of the Kingly office, in that cosmic perspective. The Sovereignty (*ādhipatya*) conferred to the collective *karman* of living beings risked also to lead to some kind of reversion to the theistic heresy. Right in the middle of the last century, a special Council had to be held in Burma, in order to forbid the kings styling themselves Buddha—a term which still appears among the official titles of the Thai Monarch.

But the *Abhidharmakośa* goes to the root of the problem. When a Cakravartin King appears in this World, seven jewels (*ratna*) are born with him: the Wheel, the Elephant, the Adviser (*mantrin*=Minister) etc., just as seven luminaries revolve round Mount Meru. There upon Vasubandhu: "Should we believe that those among the 'jewels' that are living beings are thus born by the act of another [i. e. by the transcendental power of the King]? Certainly not! A being (= *saṃtati*, "series") has stored up actions that have to be rewarded by a birth connected with [the presence of] the Cakravartin, i. e. as his Elephant etc. When the Cakravartin appears, the stock of actions of that Being will result in his being born in that capacity<sup>(15)</sup>".

And so, *adhipatipratyaya*, "the conditioning as by a Sovereign power" can be professed to remain impersonal as resulting from an adjustment of things; but it is there. The practical value and use of the Buddhist revelation, apart from the monastic institution dependent upon it, is to reveal how that karmic adjustment operates. In that light, creatures are given some power of orientation concerning their "own" future, as "nobody but themselves is to enjoy the fruit of what they have sown". One may behave, in his present existence, so as to prepare a future rebirth as one of the "jewels" of the Cakravartin, if not as the Cakravartin in person;

or, with less exaltation but not necessarily less utility, as their counterparts, in darker times, when protection and correction is most needed. This kind of choice was evidently part of and confluent in the corrective power discernable in the cosmogonic process : i.e. the “Complex” of the Meru, in the many meanings of the word. Prospective devotion to the public weal, preparing in advance operational teams through the development of the Retributory Scheme—and approximating, in a sense, a feed-back device—was thus one of the angles under which Buddhist kingship, in the common perspective and language of contemporary India, could present itself less as a privilege than as a service, making for the best and economizing the worst, on behalf of what may be called the Commonwealth of Transmigration.

Let us boldly enlarge the perspective and amplify that style of projective choices : the whole comes more than half way to the Bodhisattva ideal. This philosophy of cosmic service and devotion may be safely said to stem not perhaps exactly from the theory of a General Cause as a Sovereign Condition (*adhipatipratyaya*), in the creation and conservation of the world, but certainly from deep religious and social motivations at the back of it.

After having run the risk of a complete disintegration, at the level of the individual *ātman*, reduced to imperceptible elements, the human person thus appears to have been reestablished as a social function, but not just as a capacity to take and command. Its higher vocation made it to participate in the corrective and protective side of the Transmigratory process, as a power to shelter and donate (*abhayaṃ[dā]* ; *dāna* proper), the two virtues so profusely illustrated in the thousand hands of Avalokiteśvara, with the meaningful poses (*mudrā* “seal”) they assume and the attributes they hold.

The serial correlation, from the Vedic rites to such figures, speaks for itself. Particular attention should be paid to the symbols of the Sun and Moon, invariably supported, on both sides of the colossal personage, by one of the five hundred symmetrical pairs of hands—in fact, in that light, an impressive cosmogonic construction of the inexhaustible body of the Archangel of Mercy, as a counterpart and superior model, not simply of



Mount Meru, but of the Indian Tree-of-Life as well, *kalpavṛkṣa*, “the Tree-that-grants-all-wishes”.

Are the eloquent images and durable human values implied in that series and in its last plethoric term, close enough to us to involve, on our part, more than mere curiosity or artistic appreciation? At any rate, if the thousand handed Kannon does not impress us as a mystery, in the sense attributed to the word by Gabriel Marcel, having replaced it against its true historical and sociological background may render it for us less of a problem.

#### NOTES

1. Louis de La Vallée Poussin, (trsl.) *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi* : La Siddhi de Hiuan-tsang, traduite et annotée. p. 812
2. H. Kern, B. Nanjio, *Saddharmapuṇḍarika* pp. 438-56, XXIV Samantamukhaparivarta; Avalokiteśvara-vikurvaṇanirdeśaḥ; Max Müller. (trsl.) Ch. XXIV “The all Sided One” (*Samantamukha*) pp. 406-18 (SBE vol. XXI).
3. *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*. vi. 3. 3. 26
4. Loc. cit. p. 812
5. Louis de La Vallée Poussin, (trsl.) *L’Abhidharmakośa* de Vasubandhu traduit et annoté.
6. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 1. 3. 17
7. Loc. cit. Vol. 1, p. 288 n. 1
8. Ibid. p. 290
9. Ibid. p. 246
10. Ibid. p. 247
11. Heinrich Dumoulin S. J. *A History of Zen Buddhism* (translated from the German by Paul Peachy), New York, Pantheon Books. 1963, p. 21
12. Ibid. p. 22
13. *Abhidharmakośa*, Vol. 1, p. 288
14. Ibid. p. 247
15. Ibid. Vol. 2, p. 203