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The Iconography of an Aniconic Art

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# The iconography of an aniconic art

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PAUL MUS

Edited by Serge Thion

Before his unexpected death in 1969, Paul Mus devoted much of his attention to the dramatic events then taking place in Vietnam. Most of his reflections, lectures, or essays on Vietnam were published at the time, or shortly after his death. See, for instance, “Traditions asiennes et bouddhisme moderne,” published in the *Eranos Jahrbuch* 1968, printed in 1970, or *Hô Chi Minh, le Vietnam, l’Asie*, edited by Annie Nguyen Nguyet Hô (Paris, Le Seuil, 1971). But Vietnam was only a part and a facet of a global research, and his thinking never stopped dealing with the rich material he had brought together in his famous *Barabudur*, a study the subtitle of which may be rendered as “a tentative approach to a history of Buddhism based on the archaeological critique of the texts.” In fact, for him all these topics were interwoven as he went, from the texts to the stones to the people, and from these back to the great classics. In so doing and as if by chance, he solved many a riddle that had vexed archaeologists who had limited themselves to comparing monuments alone.

In the sixties he had been asked to write a book on Angkor, which was in a way the site from which his professional career had started. Before the work was entirely finished the publisher realized the work would largely go beyond the limits he had had in mind. So, as in many other instances, Paul Mus dropped the project altogether and the unfinished text went forgotten in the box of abandoned manuscripts. Recently, however, *Arma Artis*, a small French publisher, decided to publish it. The editorial work I undertook is in the process of completion, and we extracted from this forthcoming book, which the author had named *Les Masques d’Angkor*, a chapter we thought would be of particular interest for the readers of *Res*. As usual, Mus, who wrote his first drafts very fast, hardly quoted his sources; we have added footnotes to track them down whenever possible. The English-speaking reader who might find this text sometimes difficult to penetrate in all its implications may take some solace in the fact that French readers do not have a much easier task and must be very careful in picking their way through Mus’s effervescent thought, couched in a classical but complex style. Paul Mus was not only a great scholar but also a powerful writer.

The newly created *Société des Amis de Paul Mus* is undertaking the publication of several of Paul Mus’s important manuscripts. Applications for membership and other information can be obtained from the *Société des Amis de Paul Mus*, 1 Aubray, 91780 Chalo Saint Mars, France.

Serge Thion

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Architects—and preeminent among them Henri Parmentier, who was for so long head of architecture at the *Ecole Française d’Extrême-Orient*—have never had a high professional opinion of those of their Cambodian colleagues to whom we owe the Bayon, its conception and execution. They have seen in it “a typical architectural monster.” On this technical point, the learned author of *Pour mieux comprendre Angkor* [Coedès] has felt obliged to adopt the opinion of the specialists. And I am afraid that on this point alone, I shall have to differ with him. “To the keen eye of the architect,” he writes, “the Bayon in its present state appears to be the result of a series of transformations, most of which occurred in the course of construction. We owe this important discovery to Henri Parmentier.”<sup>1</sup> Here is the judgment of the professional on this point: “In its present state, the monument creates a strange impression of accretion and compression, towers and buildings huddled together with courtyards like airless, lightless shafts. . . .” Thus, Henri Marchal—who was perhaps closer than anyone else will ever be to these stones, given the length of time he was in charge of them and the life of labor he devoted to them—might have erred (according to Mr. Coedès) when he suspected an intention in the very oddity of the monument. In his *Guide archéologique aux temples d’Angkor*, Marchal wrote, “A muddled and strange mass,” adding, however, “presenting the aspect of a sculpted rock, rising up like a veritable crag hewn and carved by men.”<sup>2</sup>

Is this a relapse into “symbolism”? The generation of

1. Georges Coedès, *Pour mieux comprendre Angkor*, Paris, 1947, pp. 127–128, referring to Henri Parmentier, “Modifications subies par le Bayon au cours de son exécution,” *BEFEO*, 1927.

2. Henri Marchal, *Guide archéologique aux Temples d’Angkor*, Paris, 1928.



Face of a *devata*, a minor goddess. Bayon. Angkor.

our masters—that of Louis Finot, Sylvain Lévi, and Paul Pelliot—purged our sciences of such symbolism when it took over from reliable, although perhaps too imaginative, scholars such as Max Müller, Senart, or Kern, all of whom championed the “solar myth.” Actually, there are no myths to speak of which would call for such a term: in them the sun is a sign or an index of the cosmos. On a less scientific level, but with wider circulation, and with references readily borrowed from a rather “wild” Egyptology, one also had to be wary of what Littré, under the word “Symbolic,” defines as the “system which considers polytheistic religions as a collection of signs or symbols encompassing natural, physical, moral or historical truths.” Once this aspect of the findings of our disciplines had been appraised by philological rationalism—as enunciated in Renan’s *Avenir de la Science*, itself following in Burnouf’s tracks—the next step was easy: to exclude symbolism and the role of symbols, not only from the method but also from the very subject matter of our research. This meant, for example—and quite questionably, in this case—ascribing to ancient Indian religious art our own repudiation of symbols, in the name of rational principles that we regard, a little too hastily, as universal.

A striking example of this can be found in the great book by the famous archaeologist Alfred Foucher, *L’art gréco-bouddhique du Gandhāra* (as well as in a series of memoirs that preceded and followed it).<sup>3</sup> This penetrating scholar, who had acquired so much firsthand knowledge of Asia, where he had lived, in encountering at an early date a Buddhist art already fully figurative, even narrative, but in which the Buddha’s place is filled in by “symbols,” failed to recognize an evocatory cult that made use of the appurtenances of a being in order to convey his presence. That is, with the emblem of the stupa, the wheel, and so on, the Buddha was symbolized—at the peak not only of an evocation but also of a true collective incantation—on the major pilgrimage sites “blessed” in advance through his foreknowledge of what was to happen there. Thus pilgrims came in quest of something of him, through contiguity, in his footsteps.

Comparative ethnology demonstrates the identity

3. Alfred Foucher, *L’art gréco-bouddhique du Gandhara. Etude sur les origines de l’influence classique dans l’art bouddhique de l’Inde et de l’Extrême-Orient*, Paris, EFEO: I, 1905, XII–626 pp.; II, 1918, XI–400 pp.; II2, 1922, pp. 401–809; II3, 1951, pp. 811–923.

between this device and the one used in Asia in the past, and even today, by many a village evocatory cult with the “presence at a distance” of a spirit attached to a site, symbolized (there is no other word for it) in both its structural absence and its functional presence, by a concrete object in which it “participates.”

Nevertheless, as rationalism at the beginning of this century was naively projected onto the interpretation of the past of Asia itself—the very Mother of the Gods!—it led A. Foucher to write that while there were accurate and even vigorous representations of the other characters—kings, merchants, brahmins, courtesans, hunters, wild animals, and so on—the Buddha was represented only by symbols because there was no model for him, since India at that time and in the centuries immediately following did not have the use of images! This error has deprived us of what such a perceptive scholar might have told us of this remarkable piece of evidence that has come to us from the ancient past: the iconography of an aniconic cult. In fact, the imagery of Bhārhut or Sānchī shows us, in its compositions, a cult in which the sacred person was deliberately represented by “nonfigurative” symbols—doubtless so that it could be perceived only through a “communication” with it derived from the workings of Karmic Law, in accordance with past merits—a communication sustained, on the Master’s part, by prescience.

Understood in this way, symbolism bears no relation to the kind of “symbolism” from which our studies may have suffered for a time. In fact, we are brought back to its etymological meaning. In Bailly’s Greek dictionary, *Sumbolon* was originally “an object broken into two pieces of which a host and his guest each kept one half (cf. Lat. *tessera hospitalis*)”; the bearers could then be recognized by bringing together (cf. *sumballô*) the two parts, which served as proof of formerly contracted relations of hospitality. The workings of *Karman* are more subtle; they bring into play separations and encounters that can go on through an infinite sequence of lives for one being, unless he escapes from this cycle of transmigration through encounter with the Buddha and his teachings.

In strict doctrine, however, such a perspective makes use of formulas and modalities established earlier in Indian eschatology, particularly at the level of kinship. Among other things, each generation inherited previously established social relations of the kind transmitted and authenticated by the Greek *sumbola*. The whole cycle of the “Previous Lives” of the Buddha,

which predetermines, in his very life as a Liberated Being, his relations with his various companions and interlocutors, rests on this same principle: the Master and his listeners, by their very meeting, bring together the two halves of a *common karman*. Hence it is a personal relation, one that, properly viewed, is even more authentic than the person himself, since in this system it is literally the relation that constitutes the person, who will be nothing but this relation. As the Pāli canon teaches: "This, o disciples, is neither your body nor anyone else's body: it is rather to be considered as the work of the past, given shape, realized by the will, and become palpable." Each "being" progresses thus through Transmigration with a "Debit and Credit" account, that is, a complex of debts and credits toward other similar accounts, which plays its part in the predetermination of his lives and his social and physical position, without, however, relieving him of responsibility for the deeds carried out in each new instance. Personality is only a signature, but a valid one. The Buddha himself, in his last existence, is not totally exempt from the process of canceling out his previous faults. For example, the rock that Devadatta had rolled over him in order to crush him injured his foot lightly. Accordingly, one may wonder what will happen, after his *parinirvāna*, to the creatures—in other words, the "transmigrant series" toward which he had contracted obligations in the past—if their merits have not been extensive enough for them to meet him face to face in the course of his life so that they can receive the teaching that might liberate them. There are two answers to this: in a remote future, Maitreya, the Buddha-to-be, will take over from Çākṛyamuni and, on the other hand, the Community inherits his Law, which substitutes for his person ("he who sees the Law sees me"): these heirs "of his," in a spirit very near to that of ancient Roman law, are he—just as in ancient Roman law one is *heres suus*. They will enhance, in his name, the value of the gifts received, by offering the Law in turn. In this case, as in the case of Maitreya, the solution is expressed in accordance with contemporary juridical forms. But better still: we have seen that in this perspective the person extends to his "appurtenances" elements from his body and things he used: a hair, nail parings, a little ash from the funeral pyre, or a bowl, a beggar's staff, the Preaching Wheel, and so on, symbolize this person, of whom they are mandatory extensions—or here too, signatures. The merit that leads a creature to see these

objects—in default of the one whose trustees, one might say, they are—comes from the previous "karmic relation," so that the two series, that of the Master transferred on his witness-relics, and that of the beneficiary, literally "symbolize together" in this encounter. The remote presence, or participation, of the Buddha—a notion that could conjure up many ethnosociological analogies—is thus of an order that is juridical rather than mythic, given this karmic bookkeeping. "Symbol" is not necessarily synonymous with ideology.

Surprise at the powerful historical cohesiveness and wide appeal of a religion allegedly "of nothingness" derives from looking for its driving force (*dharma*) in a metaphysics, rather than in the way it has used contemporary human institutions to express its own originality. Of such fundamental realism, sustaining the boldest speculations to which the doctrine has lent itself in its time, there is however an identifying mark, which might have provided modern interpreters and translators with useful food for thought: in Buddhism, the canonic description of the status of the Community, in its relations with the world, with the Law, and with the Master, in the absence of a formally expressed constitution, is one expressed through images. It has been expressed juridically, in the terminology and the spirit of the Indian doctrine of inheritance. The Buddha's disciples, particularly the monastic Community of the four (or ten) cardinal points, inherit the Master's law—and since, even in the oldest canonic texts we have, the Law is identified with his person, not in a metaphysical sense, but in terms of law (that is the point!), thanks to such unquestionable evidence, one gets a direct view, in concrete terms, of the notion of Body of Law (*dharmakāya*), which was to become the keystone of Greater Vehicle speculation. Paradoxically, and from the origin, in a religion that left no room to *ātman*—which we have to translate, although approximately, by the Self—this notion of *dharmakāya* is a transposition, within a moral and mental frame of a new kind, of the pilot-image of the Mahāpurusha, the total Self that envelops all those who know and understand its meaning. "He who sees the Law sees me!" Let us not proceed here from term to term, projecting our own values on each, but rather let us accord to them as a whole the values implicit in the time and place of their own historical occurrence. As an imagistic canon, archaeology is, in the present case, a precious guide for our explanatory hypotheses—

provided one succeeds in experiencing them in the specificity of their own site, as, so often and so fruitfully, Alfred Foucher has done elsewhere.

Thus, whatever its ultimate meaning, the initial formula for Buddhist art appears as a partial aniconism, revealing a hierarchy among styles in which the aniconic is more sacred than the figurative. Everything is represented, save for the central character, the Buddha himself, although these are episodes of his life. From this to that other extreme, in Angkor Thom—where not only is the Buddha represented, notably by the large statue sheltered under the central Tower, but also everywhere on the monuments, where architecture becomes face—is there a correlation? And even if such a correlation can be established in theory, is there anything to be gained from the comparison, when there are so many differences? However, it is not only in the history of art that long-term perspectives, aiming at some realignment, lose nothing; quite the contrary, even if it entails a reconsideration of the intervening steps.

The problem of the first image of the Buddha—which a profuse bibliography and abundant polemics have not, apparently, brought us closer to resolving—may cease to be a problem once we have resituated its terms within the historical and semantic context. The curious mixtures and overlapping just mentioned, this disparate assemblage of the figurative and the nonfigurative, each with its own domain and task, this iconography of an aniconism, before the Buddha's image arose, without further explanation, there where it was missing, suggest at least that this may not be a naive art, one that later would make up for its backwardness on the essential point by drawing inspiration from Hellenistic Apollos.

There will be no way out, until we ascribe to these manifestations their corresponding intent. As I attempted to show about thirty-five years ago in a memoir on the adorned Buddha (*le Buddha paré*),<sup>4</sup> two characteristics distinguish it from our own ways of thinking and acting. First, this art is the exact opposite of what, in our own art, is decorative. This art is always totally in earnest, involved in what happens (*événement*); it is itself a happening, a tracing of the first event that it thus renders present in a secondary way, rather than represent it, in the sense we would

4. Paul Mus, "Le Bouddha paré. Son origine indienne. Çakyamuni dans le Mahayanisme moyen," *BEFEO*, 1928, no. 1–2, pp. 153–278.

give to this term. As Chavannes perceived with great insight, in the Buddha's image there is "something" of him; we shall return again later to this evidence and interpretation.<sup>5</sup> There are singular and instructive resonances with our expressionism: if the formula for Indian thought is that one understands only what one somehow becomes, then the corresponding formula for the artist is that he will create only what he has become "in spirit" or rather, through what Alain calls interior dance, outlining things within us by a movement that conjures up their presence. Lévy-Bruhl, for his part, in the most definitive aspects of his study of participation, clearly brought out the power of such a presence (which may be labeled affective) within the notion of representation.<sup>6</sup>

The second point—which, everything considered, can hardly be separated from the first—is that the iconography of the Buddha (first within India, later outside) has constantly referred to the great pilgrimage sites where, after a certain date, images of the Master replaced his scenic representation, with the nonfigurative restriction that testified to his presence where the composition as a whole was a projection of him in narrative form. For example, the two styles are juxtaposed in Amarāvātī. The collection of "explicit" images, as seen in Bodhgayā, Bénarès, Vaiçālī, and so on—in a way a map of those sites—fixed traditionally by what are called the stelae "of the Eight Miracles," served as a model for image-makers everywhere. Nonetheless, they did not draw inspiration from these models in order to represent in their own way the legendary scene that these prototypes commemorated. Striking details prove beyond question that their reproduction was only secondary; they consciously and deliberately represented, for example, not the Buddha triumphing over Māra in Bodhgayā but, almost as a tracing, the image which, in Bodhgayā, represented that scene at first hand. One cult—which is attested to by ancient images and is still alive in a country such as Siam, where "basic Buddhism" (known, rather inadequately, as "the Lesser Vehicle") lives on—included the adornment of the statues with detachable crowns, necklaces, and bracelets. The same images are represented sometimes with and sometimes without

5. Edouard Chavannes, *Mission archéologique dans la Chine septentrionale, II, la sculpture bouddhique*, Paris, EFEO, 1915, pp. 261–614.

6. This might refer to Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *L'Expérience mystique et les symboles*, Paris, 1938.

such ornaments; in traditional perspectives that have been preserved in the South, these could not be attributed to the Buddha himself in a direct representation of his life. While one may discuss the meaning of these ornaments, it is at the very least undeniable that they have to do with his images and not with his person. They are at the level of what I would call a secondary iconography—by repercussion or by rebound. Ancient Chinese inscriptions, studied by Chavannes in his *Mission archéologique dans la Chine septentrionale*, support this formulation.

It is essential to understand that—in relation to an art whose purpose is to place the viewer authentically in the presence of what it “represents”—all beings are classified according to the contact that they have deserved to entertain with the supreme model—the Buddha, in his glorious appearance marked by the thirty-two major, and eighty secondary, signs of the Mahāpurusha. In the forefront come the privileged ones who see him in person in the course of his last life; between him and them—if the person we understand, wrongly, as an “I” is at the least the symbol of his past actions, which make him that person today—there is, consequently, an encounter and an “adjustment” of their person to his, just as there was one between the two Roman tesserae that “symbolized” an alliance. All others will have to be content, at best, with the provisions, the “tokens” left by the Buddha for them—that is, the Law and the Relics corresponding, respectively, to the archetypal pair, *nāma*, the Word = the Law and *rūpa* = the visible Form. Further, and lower still, there is the crowd of those who have acquired no symbolic merit with respect to the Buddha’s person of the present period. According to the ancient doctrine, they will thus not meet him, even if he wished to go to them: the conditioning for a meeting must be mutual. They have no karmic consistence before him nor he before them. Perhaps our least inadequate terminology for discussing these perspectives is that of customary law in relation to a “household”—kin and in-laws, servants, and clients revolving around a *consortium* [a term comparable to *sambhoga*, which in Sanskrit denotes the common enjoyment of a “legal” base]: the *dharma*—throughout past existences there has never been any karmic hospitality between them, passed on from one existence to another. Hence nothing concerning him can touch them, as comprising “something” of him, neither his Law nor his name nor even, in any way, his image. For at this level the intervention of an “external force”

(*force étrangère*), one, that is, not rooted in the karmic connection between two transmigratory sequences, is not admitted; a force that, to the contrary, will radiate from the Boddhisattvas of the Greater Vehicle: in this sense, it has been compared to Grace. As early as 1924, Mr. Paul Demiéville’s fine memoir *Les Versions chinoises du Milindapanha* included all that was essential concerning this great turning point in the dogma and its consequences.<sup>7</sup>

In this field of study, one can thus come to a more reasonable understanding of the apparent paradox of an explicit iconography with regard to secondary characters, associated with an aniconism of the principal character. This imagery, rich and free though incomplete, shows us the Buddha’s contemporaries exercising their privilege, and in the very anecdote of their meeting with him. But we do not share this privilege of seeing him face to face: he is visible for them, not for us. Such an arrangement would be absurd if the purpose of this art were simply to draw an image, and not to make the scene “actually” present—an attenuated presence, as if through repercussion, but of the same nature as its model, the difference corresponding to different levels of karmic retribution. If we do not physically, as it were, see the physical person of the Buddha, it is because we have not merited it. In times of degradation of the Law, before the images themselves disappeared, they obviously were a substitute for his person. Various later legends, by trying to trace those images back to the actual period when the Master lived and could delegate “something” of himself to them, show quite well that, in this perspective (which justifies the image of the Buddha *a posteriori*), the image “occupies his place” in his absence, as the ancient Buddhist epigraphy of Northern China explicitly states. But what about the “intermediate” period when the Buddha had disappeared, after the *parinirvāna* and when these substitutes had not yet been established on his path—a phase corresponding to the most ancient Buddhist art? As the existence of statues has been justified by carefully tracing them back to the time when their model was still on earth, one must not seek in those apocryphs any information about the early style of Bhārhut or Sānchī or Amarāvātī. One has to judge on evidence, taking into account both the monuments and the texts that throw light on them directly and indirectly.

7. Paul Demiéville, “Les versions chinoises du Milindapanha,” *BEFEO*, 1924, pp. 1–258.

Let us follow this line of thought; it is revealing. Where indeed is this iconography to be found? Primitive aniconism is found on the sites, where the cult was addressed either to real objects taken as symbols of the corresponding event—such as the Bodhi tree or the *stūpa* of the Parinirvāna—or to symbols that were conventional figures of the Nativity—(a lotus), or of the Teaching (the Wheel of the Law), and so on. A second kind of aniconism then appears, as in the bas-reliefs on the oldest *stūpas*: at this level, the question arises of what is being expressed in this way. What is this that we are beholding? In the context of the time, there is no doubt about the answer: we are beholding the *dharma*. Indeed, one of the fundamental meanings of this term is “sacred text,” the “Scriptures.” In fact, this ancient iconography never is anything other than the direct and literal illustration—except for the omission of the Buddha’s person—of these Scriptures: it is a true publication for the eyes, unfolding, on the other hand, in close relation to the *stūpas*, around their bases, beneath the massive dome that is a symbol of the *parinirvāna* and in which the relics are enshrined; the images cover the base, the railings, the pillars, and the porches. Therefore, their interpretation must not be fragmentary and sculptural, but wholistic; dramatic, scenic, in a word, architectural, in harmony with the ordinary structure and function of Indian architecture. The order and meaning of the monument illuminate the order and meaning of the bas-reliefs, and vice versa.

In this respect, two observations should be noted, their significance deriving from all that has preceded:

1. The pairing of the Word and the Form (*nāmarūpa*) is made all the closer, in the case of the *stūpas* and their illustration, as those monuments are related to the canonic writings, particularly in the Aśoka cycle, just as the altar of the Brahmanic fire had been with the *Rigvéda*: and also because “scriptural relics”—literally, relics “of the *dharma*,” texts or fragments of texts, which constituted the very “life” of these monuments—were enshrined in addition to the personal relics.

2. As already noted, the general disposition of the *stūpa* on its axis, which is in a way the essential part of it: symbolic worlds rise one above the other along an axial disposition, and surrounding it is the succession of the *Lives* that have led to the liberation. This general disposition reproduces the pattern that has remained the backbone of India’s conception of the universe. The general rule for such a pattern seems to be the projective identification of this axis and its periphery. In the most ancient architectural Buddhist version, this

comparison is one of the reserved mysteries, the Buddha having refused to reveal anything concerning the existence or non-existence of the Liberated One in the *parinirvāna*. In the plastic and architectonic order of the *stūpa*, the chain of the Buddha’s existences, including the last, leads visibly to the “informal” symbol of this state (the term “informal,” of the language of contemporary art, is useful here). Therefore, when the Greater Vehicle categorically formulated the equation Transmigration (*samsāra*) = *nirvāna*, it only stated openly what, in their way, the dispositions of the monuments had implied without explicit concepts. Let us not theorize on this point, but look instead at history!

In these two approaches, there thus appears an intimate relationship between the Law as Word on the one hand, symbolized, in the compact mass of the dome, by the enshrined *dharmāçarīra* and indeed by the architectural whole in its “cosmic” order; and, on the other hand, the Form deployed in a circle around the secret deposit of which these forms are but the illustration.

By reading the whole dramatically, one gets closer to the canonic proposition contained in it. According to a general rule of Indian artistic expressivity (a rule to which we will return, and which I have developed elsewhere),<sup>8</sup> in these traditions the ultimate artist, the one who puts the finishing touches to the work—just as, for instance, and even more so than today, the keyboard player in J. S. Bach’s time—is the spectator: it is he who, as he circumambulates a four-faced Brahma, transposes it from a four-headed monster into a sequence in four phases. Here, as spectator, he sees the Buddha’s contemporaries see him. And if the ultimate end is a communication with the Master, what is *his* part in this? He enters into the play, and as actor *he himself sees the dharma*. Then, not on the stone but on the site, dramatically, with his person and not as an image, he illustrates the fundamental text: “He who sees the *dharma* sees me.” It is an informal suggestive art akin to drama and, beyond the scenario, to the “figurative” power [*puissance* “figurative”] of *yoga*. However, on the canonic level which we consider, what is involved here is not—or not yet—a free exercise in *yoga*, but rather, the efficacy of *karman*, and of the classification of beings and their perceptions

8. Paul Mus, “Un Cinéma solide. L’intégration du temps dans l’art de l’Inde et dans l’art contemporain: pourquoi?”, in *Arts Asiatiques*, 1964, reprinted in *L’Angle de l’Asie*, Paris, 1977, pp. 141–154.



—or better, the classification of beings by their perceptions—which appraises their karmic standing [“balance”] and allows them to determine their position in *samsāra*.

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Consulting with Chinese pilgrims on these beliefs and practices is highly instructive, given their first-hand experience in front of the images and, I dare say, outside the text. No doubt in their time there had long been sacred statues everywhere. It is all the more remarkable that Fa Hian, for example, was able to note down the legend of the Buddha’s Bowl, which is to remain among us as a symbol of the juridical capacity of the Buddha and of the Community (*pātra*, bowl, hence *pātratva*, “the capacity to receive and to multiply the ‘merit’ of the gift”); we recall that the *stūpas* are in the shape of the Buddha’s bowl, upside down), until the other relics have disappeared. At that moment all the creatures that Çakyamuni was called to save (through the karmic correlation with him of their past lives) will have been saved, and the bowl will go to the Tushita heaven where the Buddha-to-be, Maitreya, awaits this sign that the times are ripe for him, in his turn. One can also read in the biography of the famous Hiuan Tsang a moving account of this great pilgrim’s visit to the Grotto near Nagarāhāra, known as the Cave of the Shadow Left Behind: the shadow of the Buddha could be seen on a wall of the cave, but only by those whose good *karman* allowed them this indirect communication with the Master; the distinctness of the shadow was the gauge of their merit. To his despair Hiuan Tsang almost failed to see it, and it was only with great difficulty that he finally distinguished anything of it at all.<sup>9</sup> The emotional intensity of such an impression on the part of this powerful defender and exponent of the Greater Vehicle is striking. There is no better way to understand—not at the level of scholarly polemics, but in actual religious and everyday life—that for those not linked to the Buddha by karmic “symbolism,” in times of Cosmic darkness the “external force” [*force étrangère*] itself at first appears only as a substitute for the historical Buddha’s power to save.

Father Lamotte writes: “In ancient times [before there

9. Hiuan Tsang, translated into French by Stanislas Julien, *Mémoires sur les contrées occidentales*, Paris, 2 vol., 1857–1858, and in English by Samuel Beal, *Si Yu Ki, Buddhist Records of the Western World*, Boston, 2 vol., 1885. Also in *Chinese Accounts of India*, vol. III, Calcutta, 1953.

were figurative images of the Buddha] the ‘joy one could derive from contemplating the Buddha’ came not from contemplating the images, as is the case today, but from contemplating attentively the *cetiya* [a commemorative, and in particular a funeral, monument] or the sacred tree.”<sup>10</sup> The fact is that the *nescio quid* that later on was found in the statues used to be encountered on the site formerly “impregnated” (in the exact spirit of the pre-Aryan and pre-Chinese cults of monsoon Asia) with the Master’s presence and related to him through some appurtenance of his. *Atharvaveda*, the Veda of Magic, is rich in such pre-Buddhist indications.

One sees the angle: one searches for oneself, one gauges oneself, one confirms one’s faith at the pilgrimage sites and in front of their monumental illustrations, which are at once the religious map of the country and the backbone of legend and history, and consequently of the religion itself. Collective and individual experiences of an obvious sincerity, on the other hand: see Hiuan Tsang and the Shadow! Doubtless it is here that we must look for the explanation of certain features—what I would call the art of polished stone, cave walls, or “Açoka pillars”—which are well attested to and still visible in continental India. The pilgrim’s training in aesthetics and in legend enabled him to play his part as the “ultimate artist,” fixing the indispensable affective impression of a real presence on the moving reflection that gradually, through attention and concentration, stabilized in front of him. It is a psychotechnical art. I would be inclined to carry thus far the remark so full of insight made by my learned colleague Father Lamotte. Clearly, he perceived the emotional values that became “liberated” in this way: Lucien Lévy-Bruhl’s affective category of the supernatural, but in keeping with a conception of nature that in India, particularly with Buddhism, is broad enough to integrate, in a sense, rationally, what we call the supernatural. What one comes to experience (if one can attain it) is not so much “the joy to be felt in contemplating the Buddha” as in this very joy, which acts as a detector of something of his presence, the certainty of having encountered him karmically. His prescience, and the projection of his acceptance of the homage, were sufficient, in such an emotional perspective, to ensure its canonic validity. Here perhaps, although not in the case of Hiuan Tsang—who was so direct and profound in everything he

10. Mgr. E. Lamotte, *Histoire du bouddhisme indien*, Louvain, 1958. Bibl. du Muséon no. 43.



A Royal Face. The four faces are meant to cover the entire horizon. Their measures are between 170 and 240 cm. Bayon. Angkor.

was and did—we may also consider the German tale of the *Emperor's New Cloak*, which was so wonderful that it was invisible, at least to the eyes of the crowd. No one dared admit that he could not see it. Thus it existed through the power of social hypocrisy, hence with a density and weight of human feeling, with a semantic realism that ordinary reality cannot approach—until the naiveté of a child revealed that there was nothing there. And all awoke to that truth. Buddhism, at least in its phenomenology, is expressed through this apologue. In the natural and human landscape of the great pilgrimages that constitute it, one was not judged solely through one's own eyes, but through one's reactions one was assigned a category in the eyes of other men. What a powerful source of conviction, even inwardly! Yoga has manifold aspects.

Let us proceed to analysis. If the artists of Sāncī and Bhārhut had represented the Buddha, they would have shown signs of a communication with him sufficient to

enable them to transpose him, with a lesser degree of reality but with reality all the same, to stone; in sum, as ultimate artists: it would have meant trespassing on the magico-religious attributions of their public. Leaving the place vacant, representing the Master by his absence, meant setting the stage for future viewers to attain, beyond the convention of the work of art, the realism of an evocatory religious act. Tree, rock, empty throne: this cultural material, it has often been noted, seems to have been borrowed by Buddhism from the immemorial heritage of monsoon Asia—so much so that the homage, in fact, to the Buddha, that early sculptors felt “sufficiently” represented, for example, by the Bodhi fig-tree, was interpreted by some as the adoration of a tree. We have just perceived what devices were used to extract him out of it.

At this ancient level of the traditions, however, all this is to be enunciated in values of karmic actions and reactions, if one may be allowed such a pleonasm. The

faith that comes to the site, and the material apparel that awaits it there—infused with the Buddha's anticipated blessing (*adhithāna*), addressed to those with whom, in the night of the past, he has contracted a karmic alliance—these are the two halves of a symbol that are brought together, testifying to the authenticity of the benefit thus acquired. One can be bold enough, then, to give its full force to the image drawn from customary law: it gives life to this semantic of the monuments and Scriptures. If everything that we are is accomplished by our past actions and if these are measured according to their repercussion on our partners in the action, and vice versa, then one may say that every being receives the others in himself, makes them be, and nourishes them into what they are and thus become through him, pending the reciprocal. The Buddha, however, destroys the house. This is the lesson of the *Dhammapada*:

I strayed vainly on the path of many a rebirth,  
Seeking the builder of existence; it is a great pain  
to be born ever anew.  
Now I have found thee, builder of the house;  
thou must not  
rebuild the house.  
All your beams are broken, and the ridge of the house  
is destroyed.  
Having escaped from this ever-changing world, the soul  
has reached the end of desire.

As for him, nothing holds him back any longer:

Disciples, the body of the Perfect One endures without  
communication with the power that leads to becoming.  
As long as his body endures, the men and the gods will  
see him; if his body be broken and his life gone, the  
gods and the men will no longer see him.

While everything is *karman* and the product of *karman*, and *karman* binds the future inevitably, this is no longer so for the Buddha; his balance "closed" on a credit; on the debit side, however, there is still a remainder. It is on this very point that the infinite capital of merit accumulated and still surmounted by the Bodhi concentrates, so that there can be no further accounting of this credit. Yet certain beings—some of the karmic series that we hold as beings—still have an open account with the series that ended with the Buddha, and they carry it forward. It is this that enables these beings, and no others, to encounter the Buddha, or his path—that is, the various expressions of the Law inherited by the community, which must see to it that these debts of reciprocity (*hospitalité*) are gradually extinguished.

Following this line of thought, one may perceive the meaning of a text in the *Mahāvamsa* capital: the dialogue between King Dutthagāmanī and the head of the Sinhalese community on the occasion of the erection of the Mahāthūpa, Ceylon's great "metropolitan" *stūpa*. The king orders it built, but the Church alone can provide the relic, the "life" of the monument. All the world's merit lies in building this *stūpa*, which is in itself a world, the world, in Ceylon. On a relatively minor scale, it evokes the famous example of Aṣoka. The building is one half of the symbol; the relic is the other half—the Buddha's part, given by the Church, his heir, in this solemn karmic alliance of the temporal and the spiritual, or better still, of the brahmanic "dual" of religion and politics, as it appears in brahmin and king, each being his partner's other self. The Vedic texts have an expression in which this reciprocal causality—a single existence between two or more beings—is, typically, condensed: *anyonyayonitva*, the capacity, in each, to form the others into what they become in the totality. Before and beyond all metaphysics, it is a juridical category, denoting solidarity, but of a singularly intimate and creative nature; Aristotle's *philotès* is, in our world, a beautiful and profound parallel to this. Buddhism has preserved and in many ways strengthened this category, through the reciprocal symbolic play of *karman*, while it eliminated the belief in *ātman*, which had been its support during the preceding period.

"An object cut in two, of which two hosts each preserved one half, which they passed on to their offspring." Isn't all the secondary aniconic art there, that of the images in Sānchī and elsewhere, where the earth's part is represented exactly while the Buddha's part, facing it, is not? The object here, the concrete object, is the tale, consigned to the texts—that is, to the *dharma*—where the Master's place is always explicitly designated, with a detailed explanation of his relations with each of his listeners, often going back to their past contacts, which "inform" the present encounter. But this total object is cut in two in the "symbolic" imagery. The other half is missing. The other side of the implicit karmic contract is not the material tokens left by the Buddha, but the life which, projected by him in advance, can come to give them life. And in accordance with the very rules of the genre, this can happen only as an answer, destined for the rightful receiver and shaped to his just measure. This eliminates the sculptor and awaits the pilgrim. All this is second to the event represented, and rests both on the invitation to the "concerned" viewer to put

himself in the place of the Buddha's interlocutors, and on the idea of an analogy between their situation, requests, needs, and so on, and the pilgrim who, as his *karman* summons him before these images, and one image in particular, receives from it, according to a sort of rule of three, a blessing proportionate to theirs. The Buddha then comes to him, in thought, through the force of the solidarity of the *karman*, as once he went to his interlocutors. The term that expresses all this, *upāya*—a "device," a "practical approach," even a "stratagem"—is pre-Buddhist, and it will become one of the major articulations of the Greater Vehicle, covering all the compassion and activity of the great Bodhisattvas, the peers and emulators of Avalokiteçvara. But already the Pāli canon said:

If three things did not exist in the world, o disciples, the Perfect One would not appear in the world, he who is the Saint, the supreme Buddha; the Doctrine and the Rule [*dharma* and *vinaya*] that he announces would not shine in the world. What are these three things? Birth and old age and death.

As Louis de la Vallée Poussin has shown, such texts take us close to what the West calls Docetism—the heresy according to which the Lord was born, lived, and died only in appearance, symbolically, so that his coming and going should edify the souls of men.<sup>11</sup> But this parallel also points to all that separates us from ancient Asia: our approach, here as elsewhere, remains essentially individualistic; for us the theme is the encounter between Christ and the faithful, each in person. The "opinion" (*doxa*, *dokêsis*), which the Christ intentionally arouses in the faithful, is at the same time a personal affair for each believer. Because of its own historical and sociological heritage, India, on the other hand, reabsorbs all persons within the "envelope" of cosmic *ātman* or Man, or it dissolves them all in the *karman* network, in this case objectively founding their existence on their relationships, which are considered to be more real than they themselves, and not the reverse. The Buddha during his life, and afterward, the Law and the Discipline which represent him, with the full juridical force of that term, exist only in correlation with one's need of them, within the infinite development of beings who make each other be, for better and for worse: that is, *samsāra*. By definition, such solidarity is also discriminatory. Even when the Buddha intervenes in a retributive series to amplify its "fruit," through his capacity to receive and multiply what he gives in exchange, it is impossible, at that level

11. Louis de la Vallée Poussin, *Bouddhisme*, Paris, 1925.

of the beliefs, that anyone other than the initial doer should taste of this fruit. Through the social and psychological realism of this adjustment, Buddhism thus introduced into the history of India a doctrine of collective salvation, that of the community of the Buddha, in the Law it inherits from him; a religious practice that confirms and guides the social and political collectivities, particularly at the level of the kingdom, but also, with Açoka and Harsha, of the Empire; and, on the other hand, in the absence of any metaphysical or divine personality, an ethics based on strict individual responsibility, with everything obviously proceeding from a deliberate referring of beings to their reciprocal conduct—more real than themselves, as it involves others, weaving everyone in a common web: that is *samsāra*, attachment and "flow" all at once. At this point of doctrinal development, the dominant characteristic is the personal specificity of the benefit that the world, the laity, find by the force of their own merits, in the encounter which these made possible for them with varying degrees of intensity and presence, with the Buddha, in his person, his Church, or his Law. Only the revolution marked by the adoption of the Greater Vehicle could break up these compartments and spread salvation and charitable assistance like a radiant light; but even so, such an action will remain an *upāya*, a "skill in the use of appropriate means," and will define its orientation according to the final goal. The big difference will be that past *karman* is no longer taken into account as such. Ultimately, this guiding of the "external force" by and toward each creature's need of it will lead to the famous paradox of Japanese Buddhism—the key to which seems to lie in this very word of "guiding"—i.e., that "if even the virtuous are saved, how much more surely [*a fortiori*] the wicked." Grace, and its peculiar logic toward sinners? "There is more joy in my Father's house. . . ."

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Let us return to the iconography of the ancient *stūpas*. The specific reward of the Buddha's listeners and contemporaries was that they heard him in person; as for him, he undertook to be there. The two could be joined like mortise and tenon. The specific reward of those who, emerging from the formidable sea of transmigrations, set out on India's great pilgrimages and gain access to the monuments, which are the "effects" ("*effets*") of the Law—is that they see, secondarily, the iconography, although incomplete as to the essentials of the ultimate Life in which the Master found his



Cham warriors. They took and looted Angkor in 1177, about twenty years before the building of the Bayon began. Bayon, external gallery. Angkor.

realization, he who is their immemorial and thenceforth sublime karmic correspondent. Thus they see the *dharmā*. In the admirable human balance [*équilibre*] of this ancient confession one should not see a seeking for magical help. The authentic teaching is formal, reconciling reason with the most powerful movements of affectivity, this magic of crowds. Here is the famous instruction from the *Majjhima Nikāya*:

If now you know thus and see thus, o disciples, will you go and say: "we honor the Master and out of respect for the Master we speak thus"?—We shall not do so, Lord.— . . . What you say, disciples, is it not what you have recognized by yourselves, understood by yourselves?—It is indeed, Lord.

Although the conclusions may not reinforce the text dramatically, the prescription remains essential nonetheless.

Facing a First Preaching (identified by the first five regular Listeners, or by the symbol of the Wheel) the pilgrim—in the exaltation, often collective, often also felt at the end of a long journey, his mind full of the text, reciting it and hearing it recited—was familiar enough with the scene to follow it on the image. He saw, recognized, and grasped it by himself. Everything in these texts refers to the Buddha, is regulated and measured in relation to him, finds its meaning in him, in the attitudes described and in the words reported, all

closely adapted to the specific situation that occasioned them. To thoroughly understand this theory of *upāya* and karmic symbolism, one can doubtless do no better than draw a parallel with the basic concept of *Gestalttheorie*, that is, that the contour of an object or of an event belongs both to the figure and the ground: another adaptation of the joining principle of the *sumbola*. The five listeners and the background of the first preaching, then, are at once half of it and the whole of it; for this receptacle awaiting the teaching totally determines the teaching, which responds to it; and reciprocally, the teaching bears, defines, and molds all that it causes to be what it alone could cause it to be. The incomplete Image is the container (*contenant*) awaiting the contained (*contenu*), the mortise awaiting the tenon. This contour is enough for one who understands the whole. This is as far as the sculptor and the viewer can go, the one helping the other along. The Buddha is present, since seeing the Law, understanding its application and applying it to oneself, is seeing the Buddha. Better still, such a vision prevails over that of his material body. Father Lamotte, in summing up the *pāli* doctrine, writes: "It is no use seeing the Buddha in his material body, in his body of putrefaction, one must see him in his *dharmakāya*, that is, in his Teaching."<sup>12</sup> But this classification, in its

12. Op. cit., p. 689.

materiality, is related to the object of such a perception, and not to the event of which this perception is a consequence: everything changes and takes on greater dramatic value and meanings when appraisal is made on the level of action. Seeing the physical body of the Buddha then is no longer anything but the sign of a merit great enough, of a karmic “alliance” close and potent enough, for him who has this privilege, to deserve this face-to-face encounter. In this presence there is more than can be gained through a clear understanding (essential though this may be) of his Body of Doctrine. Indeed, being a universal reference—as is shown in the majestic theme of the rays of light emanating from his smile, like a counterpart to the *Purushasūkta* of the Rigveda, the Buddha measures all other beings, but no one has ever taken his measure. There is something there that we could call an irrational residue, beyond all conception; and it is not only with the *Parinirvāna* that this problem arises, as the dialogue between Ćāriputra and the monk Yamaka shows:

What do you think, Yamaka, my friend? Is the Perfect One contained in the Name and Body . . . ?—It is not so, my friend.—Is the Perfect One distinct from the Name and Body . . . ?—It is not so, my friend.— . . . Thus Yamaka, my friend, even in this very world the Perfect One cannot be understood in truth and in essence. . . .

Thus one perceives what the Buddha puts into, what he alone can put into, and even conceive of putting into a real encounter—which, however, at this level in the system, the play of karmic retribution alone assigns to such or such a beneficiary. Then what about the second category of privileged beings, those who have not met him in all his glory, but come, however, to seek something of him, something like their karmic due, from the liberating instruments he predestined for them, in *pranidhāna*? Will the symbol which they bring on the site and which is themselves, not attain to something of him, that may be connected to it?

A textual fact, that has, surprisingly, gone unnoticed, to me seems to end the debate here. While everywhere the ancient monuments show us, in close connection with the *stūpa*, an iconography with blanks or a partial reserve awaiting the principal character just where he is known to sit or stand, walk and teach—in parallel fashion, all the traditions relating to the *stūpa* explicitly and solemnly give the relics the power to soar into space, out of the dome where they are enshrined, to manifest the Great Miracle of Crāvastī: assuming the

Buddha’s appearance, they display his four basic attitudes as, later, the iconography represented them in the different episodes of his life: standing, walking, sitting, and lying. Let us look at the setting and the scenario, the stage and the action all together: this miracle is precisely the one called for in ancient times by the blanks on the bas-reliefs, or the symbols that filled them—figure and ground, tenon and mortise, act of faith and corresponding *upāya*. This is the part that the Buddha alone could fill in, at a distance and through foreknowledge. It is, literally, a form of expressionism: the believers as well as the object of worship must put something of “themselves” into it. It is a realistic (*réel*) art, in its way: entirely gauged in terms of karmic values, it distributes only on their account, with the addition, however, of the multiplying coefficient introduced by the Buddha—once again in the true line of Brahmanic antecedents: indeed, the *Doctrine du sacrifice dans les Brahmana*, by Sylvain Lévi, presents an admirable analysis of what the eminent Indianist called precisely “the coefficient of posthumous nourishment” (in the other world) of the sacrifices carried out in this world; by addressing them not to such and such a god but to the *ātman*, one achieves a final and fathomless liberation; ultimately, also, such is the retributive capacity of the Buddha.<sup>13</sup> Is he not “the true *brahman*,” the ultimate form of *ātman*? In this, also, ancient Buddhism spoke the language of pre-Buddhist India—but to say something else.

To shed more light on this ancient aniconism we have had to bring together the doctrinal, artistic, and sociological elements (understanding by the latter a kind of psychology of social organization that orients personal reactions) in order to arrive at a more general view and interpretation of the whole. This was necessary because the intervening centuries were silent on this issue, even ignoring it, historically, in order to substantiate the various legends. Even though these were contradictory, they were nonetheless convergent in their effect, tracing the first image of the Buddha back to his own lifetime—thus enabling the Master to impress upon it, directly or indirectly, but always miraculously, a resemblance that artists reduced to their own resources could not have obtained, but which they had the leisure to copy later on.

As for the amazing growth of the cult of the Buddha’s images after the first (doubtless evocatory) aniconism of the sites, which was, in turn, followed by

13. Sylvain Lévi, *La Doctrine du sacrifice dans les Brahmana*, Paris, 1898, 183 pp.

an iconography that enchased, as more precious than itself, an aniconism of the Buddha onto a representation where he alone was missing—the history of the religion and of its propagation has no difficulty in accounting for it. One must bear in mind that in India itself Buddhism announced its own disappearance, so much so that the course of events on several occasions compelled it to postpone the date, which it had considerably outrun. As we have seen, the heritage that the Buddha of our time left to his Church, for the good of the entire community of the faithful, gradually dwindled. Recourse to a karmic currency of himself, relics and so on, which constituted this provision, became more and more necessary, and more and more dramatic: toward the beginning of the Christian era and later on as the Greater Vehicle developed, century after century lived in the midst of historical disasters in an end-of-the-world atmosphere. This explains the prestige that the replicas of his person—which were deemed to derive, in active value, from this very person—acquired once they were established on the sites consecrated by his passage and prescience. Words such as *image*, *portrait*, *statue*, are inadequate in such a context. The Indian word, and at that level of the tradition the concept as well, was *pratimā*: “measure,” literally “counter-measure.” Imbued with the magical principle that the measure of a being is, secretly, this being himself (the notion on which rested the entire ritual of the vedic altar of fire), ancient Buddhist India could not think of anything other than a “presence” or a nonformal representation of the Buddha, in front of some pillars of Sānchī I, which are exactly the size supposed to have been that of the historical Master—that is, theoretically, twice the human size: evidently the legend was already flourishing, before it materialized in a formal iconography. In his valuable studies on the origins of Buddhist art,<sup>14</sup> Ananda K. Coomaraswamy effectively brings into evidence the silhouette—which was perhaps all the more real, in ancient Buddhist perspective, since it was mental. “All that one is, is the fruit of the mind, has mind for its essence, is made of the mind,” the *Dhammapada* symbolically teaches—that seems to have been projected before pillars, in front of which the Buddha’s footsteps were represented, carved in a stone, level with the ground, while behind the top of the pillar a

14. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *History of Indian and Indonesian Art*, London, 1927. See also *Elements of Buddhist Iconography*, Cambridge, 1935, reviewed by Paul Mus in *BEFEO*, 1935, pp. 391–397.

stone rosace, in the shape of a solar wheel, surrounded and identified the head, majestic at that size, of the invisible character. Everything was ready for the image to become embodied—or perhaps we could say, borrowing from the language of existentialism—for the imaging of the imaginary (*imager l’imaginaire*). In the land of Yoga, such expressions carry weight. Reread Heinrich Zimmer!<sup>15</sup> “Life” (*jivita*) comes from the relics entrusted under the *stūpa* (the “container,” in the shape of a bowl, of the exchange of symbolic gifts), first to the bas-reliefs with their illustrated aniconism images, to make the Master present, and then to his images, once they are established, in order to consecrate them. This is, indeed—but framing it within the complete setting, including architecture, sculpture, and “pictorial” elements (taking this term in the sense we have sketched earlier)—a transposition of a direct statement made by Father Lamotte, outside this “historical” setting: in Ceylon, as late as the fifth century A.D., that is, when the use of statues had spread everywhere, the worship was still addressed essentially to the *stūpa* and the *Bodhi* tree. “Damaging them would be a serious fault, whereas there is no threat of punishment against those who would destroy or damage a statue. The image is sacred only insofar as it contains a relic.”

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But here the entire principle of interpretation defended in these pages is at stake: that is, through the general scenario, all arts united not simply under the aegis of architecture, but also of the image of the world it reflects; functionally, in fact, beyond architecture, the structural framework. In this perspective the relics were not to be inside the statue, as they eventually were; more concretely, they were in the *stūpa* for the statue, giving it life, just as the statue, after the bas-reliefs, was added to the *stūpa* (notably in niches around it) in order to give body to the life that was inside them, in, and by the relics.

This general scenario can be found, decisively I believe, on the stelae known as the stelae “of the Eight Miracles.” Two main topics—which, when better understood, are but one—overlap on these works, some of which are of remarkable composition and beauty: a map of the sacred places of Buddhism, identified by the corresponding statues, and, if we have seen rightly, facing the pilgrims, the soaring of the Buddha toward them (*upāya*, “approach”) in these

15. Heinrich Zimmer, *The Art of Indian Asia: Its Mythologies and Transformations*, New York, 2 vol., 1955.

images — or yet more precisely, the motion of *something* of the Buddha, in them, through his foreknowledge (*pranidhāna*), a blessing from a distance (*adhishthāna*) and symbolic karmic conformity. There we have an explanation for something that has puzzled M. Foucher. On these stelae, which are a veritable catalogue of the sacrosanct models in the iconography of the Master, the images have become essential. The historical sequence is clear: these are ancient representations of the sites — originally essentially four: those of the birth, the enlightenment, the great miracle of the multiplication of the bodies, and the *parinirvāna* — through their symbols, in a fully developed iconographic style in which eight images speak through and for themselves, with the addition of four secondary scenes to the principal ones. However, a discordant element upsets this progression: after all the others, one symbol remains, extending the aniconism (which we have called secondary) into the very midst of a flourishing iconography: it is, crowning the stelae, the *stūpa* — nonfigurative expression of the *parinirvāna*.

It all becomes clear, as soon as one has learned to recognize that the nonfigurative, in this powerful strain of Buddhist expressionism, is not an inferior form, but the highest aspect of a *realistic* nondecorative art. Compare the traditions and the monuments. The stelae, crowned by the representation of a *stūpa*, and surrounded by the succession of the “miraculous” images of the Buddha, are the direct translation of the “Great Miracle” attributed to the relics; under the dome of the *stūpa*, these await their time to soar forth in the open sky, assuming all the forms and attitudes that the Master assumed in this world. What else does one see on these stelae? They have been designated “stelae of the Eight Miracles,” but this conventional expression is fundamentally related to some confusion: there are eight sites and eight sacred images, but ultimately, only one miracle, if one wishes to call this a miracle: it covers the eight places, which are sacred; or rather, it “fills” them.

Let us go further. Does not the procession (in an almost Plotinian sense) of these forms, from the hidden shrine that contains them potentially (*en puissance*) also correspond to an architectural disposition of major importance in the development of symbolism and the plastic arts? I mean the representation, around the base of the *stūpa*, of images of the Buddha that “seem to come out of it.” This leads regularly to a type of architecture in which four niches, at the four cardinal points, will contain four Buddhas, at first apparently in

the same attitude, but to which finally the sculptors will attribute the four *mudrā*, or symbolical hand-gestures, called Earth-witness, Setting the Wheel of the Law in motion, Protection, and Gift.

R. D. Banerji has given a clear summary of this evolution in his article “*Stūpas or Chaityas*,” published in the *Modern Review* of Calcutta in February 1928:

The addition of images of the Buddha or Bodhisattvas on the bases, pedestals and tambours of the Gandharian *stūpas* has to do with the history of Indian plastic art rather than architecture. But the addition of niches and chapels at the four cardinal points led to a truly architectural alteration of the aspect of the medieval *stūpa*. The first example of such niches on the four sides is a specimen of *stūpa* from Mathura, going back to the Kushana Period. The tambour is circular; around it there are four niches, each containing a small statue of Buddha sitting cross-legged. . . . Most of the time those niches were occupied by images of Buddha in a uniform posture, but gradually the gestures were differentiated and the four Buddhas had their hands in the conventional positions that Buddhists call *bhumisparça*<sup>o</sup>, *dharmaçakra*<sup>o</sup>, *abaya*<sup>o</sup>, and *varadamudrā*<sup>o</sup>.

This transformation is the starting point of one of the major developments of the iconography and Buddhology of the Greater Vehicle: the group and the transcendent category of the (five) Jinas or Buddhas of the Pure Lands, eternal elements ruling everything in the universe, from high and from afar, in the same way as planets in an astrological system; indeed they even control our senses and our “humours” — a term that corresponds approximately to what in India was successively called *pranas*, “breaths” (organic powers, J. Filliozat)<sup>16</sup> or *indriyas*, ruling or sovereign functions (as in our psycho-physiological notion of “capacity” [*ressort*]). On two levels of belief, one attested to in the representations of Gandharā and Mathurā mentioned by Banerji, and the second, the soteriology and mythic cosmology of the Greater Vehicle, the *stūpa* is, concretely, a common denominator. As for the Mahāyānist dogmas, there is no difficulty in this: while in the most ancient times the images issuing forth from the *stūpa* naturally recall the historical Buddha, whose relics, personal or symbolic, give life to the edifice, the “flamboyant” Buddhology of the *Lotus of the True Law* teaches that the “celestial” Buddhas in their remote heavens are in the end nothing but

16. In section “Anatomie et physiologie spéciale du Yoga,” *L’Inde classique, manuel des études indiennes*, II, Paris, EFEO, 1953, p. 161. Filliozat had been a physician himself.

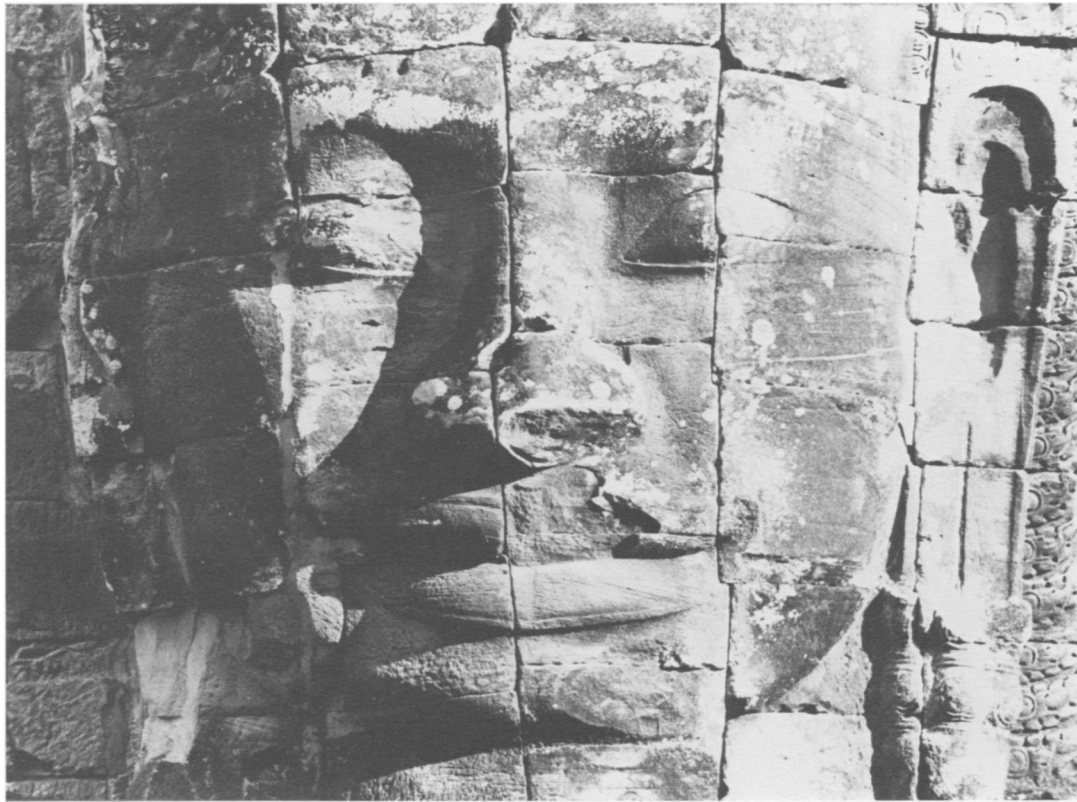


manifestations, processions (*vigraha*) emanating from his body (*ātmabhāvanirmita*); in the customary style of these esoteric teachings, this formulation must be interpreted in direct relation with the symbolism of the *stūpa* as it appears in this capital work. Indeed, the miraculous *stūpa* of a Buddha “nirvanaed” from time immemorial, *Prabhūtaratna*, is described there as circulating invisible, underground, in order to “assist” in and to all the manifestations of the Dharma. An example (but in no way a limiting one) is the teaching of this same Lotus of the True Law by the Buddha of our time, *Çākya*muni. Through the latter’s supernatural virtue the dome splits in two, the extinct Buddha appears “in person,” *Çākya*muni sits down by his side, and from then on they stand, act, and speak together, each one half of the account, Buddhas in the “dual” form—a symbolism (and here it is indeed appropriate to use this term in the etymological sense) in two pieces, thus reunited.

This central miracle of the *Lotus of the True Law* is equivalent to a transfiguration of the historical Buddha. From the heights of the marvelous throne that he shares with *Prabhūtaratna*, in the *stūpa* that has been opened by the prodigy just described, he glorifies this new persona, which, as he himself proclaims, he has assumed at the end of his earthly career in order to deliver the supreme teaching. The dramatic narrative of this preaching—in the middle of Heaven, far from the reach of ordinary listeners who have not gone beyond the teaching of the Lesser Vehicle—shows the universe as full of Buddhas coming from the far end of *nirvāna*, to hear the *Sūtra*, like *Prabhūtaratna* himself. The interpretation of this element has been seriously distorted by our translators and interpreters, because the text presents these Buddhas as “factitious” (*factice*) (*nirmita*, *nirmāna*) forms created by the Tathāgata *Çākya*muni; but this is only a kind of *rebus*, a discursive code for the message emanating from the whole scenario, that is, that at the precise moment when *Çākya*muni attributes this miracle to himself, he is on a different level. He now speaks as the immemorial Buddha, the mythic “envelope” of all, himself included. It is one of the instances in which contemporary thought, art, and especially poetry, in formulating the paradoxes of a very new kind of anxiety, have brought us singularly closer to a more human comprehension of Asian expressionism. There is no better way to read the text of the *Lotus* (whose meanderings were regular stumbling blocks for Hendrik

Kern as well as Burnouf, to mention only these two) than to bear in mind the expressive dislocation of language resorted to by Arthur Rimbaud in his famous formula of transpersonalization: “*Je est un autre.*” We must understand that *Çākya*muni becomes everything and everyone as he towers over himself and the rest of the world from this *stūpa* where we are told, significantly, that “the Buddha’s whole body is gathered”—meaning *this* Buddha who is all the other Buddhas and finally everything, as everything in the world is potentially Buddha. Spaces and Times then are but one, and so is their content. What has happened, what will happen, happens here at the same time: thus it is the relics enshrined in the mysterious *stūpa* which “soar” into space and display the phantasmagoria of the numberless Buddhas. Apart from the mythology, it is once again—but with limitless expansion—the miracle of the relics, near the *stūpas* of the Lesser Vehicle—or rather the *stūpas* as they are seen; for in fact on the great classical pilgrimage sites they remained common to the two schools of thought, as did the imagery itself, at least within the limits of this scene. The difference is that the Greater Vehicle named and personalized these wondrous forms.

Is there a more conclusive example than that of the Five Jinas or transcendental Buddhas who tower above everything from the pantheon? Their origins have been sought for everywhere but in India, with Iranian affinities attributed, perhaps a little too specifically, to one of them: *Amitābha*. When analyzing more closely their respective traditions and the making of their character, it is difficult not to recognize the divinization of the five major images that looked out over the near and closely associated sites of *Bénarès* and *Bodhgayā*. These are five episodes, five attitudes, five functions, one might say, and crowning all, five appellations of *Çākya*muni (as for example, *Akshobhya* the Imperturbable, taking up the whole cycle of the *Vajrasana* and of the Victory over *Mara*) who have been made Buddhas, each in his own universe, like lesser currencies of our own Buddha in whom, according to the *Lotus*, all times and all regions had converged. Before that, they are to be found around the *stūpa*, where the *Mahāyāna* concretely translated its views on them—how can we fail to evoke the scenario of this great *Sūtra*, where, from mysterious “ashes” or “relics” that retain the shape of the whole body of the “total” Tathāgata (including, by anticipation, *Çākya*muni, as well as *Prabhūtaratna*, by recurrence: for a Buddha,



Compassion is the main attribute of Lokeshvara (or Avalokiteçvara), the main bodhisattva (near-Buddha) of the Greater Vehicle.

these three moments [*temps*] are all together), spring up all around, in all the regions of space, not anonymous vain forms but—and the text is positive—the Buddhas of all the Lands of Buddha in the Universe, and among them precisely Akshobhya and Amitābha?

The doctrinal paradoxes, the breaks and returns marked by the development of dogmas, become reconciled, then, through the course of history, which is retraced through the endurance of the images (even before there were any in stone) and the succession of texts—not of course with a unity that the Church itself failed to maintain, but with enough coherence and semantic affinities for there to be, in the end, only one Buddhism, and with a greater unity still when paired with Brahmanizing Hinduism.

The crucial moment—if one takes in this way the Buddhist happening [*événement*], where the Scriptures coincide with the archaeology—would lie in three stanzas, which sum up both the doctrine of the *Lotus* and the changing interpretation, from the Lesser to the

Greater Vehicle, on the same sites and before the same sacred apparatus:

I make the site of my extinction appear, [thus] I present beings with a device the aim of which is to instruct them, although it is not true that I then become extinct and although on this very site I am [secretly] teaching the Law.

On this site I exert my power, on all beings and on myself. But mortals with deformed minds are deceived and do not see me though I am standing here.

Persuaded that my person has entered total extinction, they honor my relics, in many ways, but do not see me. [Yet, by this means] they get an impression which turns their minds towards the Good and the Truth.

Thus, on this essential point, on which all the artistic expression as well as the basis of the dogma revolve, there is no division between the two Vehicles but a partial overlapping. The transformation has been framed within a belief common to all the schools: the universal degradation of beings and of things, which announces in the convulsions of history and nature the end, if not

of a world, at least of a cosmic era—which is about the same thing for those being then affected by it.

The final failure in Cambodia of the “revolution” signified by the Greater Vehicle and its replacement by the Sinhalese Theravāda obedience prevents its ways and means from being studied over a period as extensive as in India itself—with its abundant but erratically dated documents, or in China and Japan, with their much more accurate and reliable chronological apparatus. However, from the accumulation of facts—opinions and events—an impression emerges enabling us to correct what we might have thought of it at first approach. One might sense, for example, that the Greater Vehicle’s apparatus of recourse and salvation, its promise of final liberation for all beings, the beauty, the marvels of its Heavens and Saviours who bring them within our reach, are signs of a change in perspective and imply a view of the world that is singularly more optimistic. In a museum, looking at the paintings and sculptures, and the literature, especially the Amidist texts—if one is particularly sensitive to this accumulation of Saviours and recipes for salvation—then those of the Lesser Vehicle as they are seen and still experienced in the South, from Ceylon to Thai, Burmese or Khmer Indochina, may seem narrow and restricted essentially to those whose firm vocation is sheltered by convents, already out of the world.

This would be overlooking a fundamental fact, or even two: the notion of karmic retribution, without which there are no Buddhists at all and, closely related to this, the consideration and interpretation of the signs, too often resorted to in Asia, of an oncoming “end of the world,” with horrific detail, in the text and works of art. In this connection, the precise content of the documents—ranging from the Pāli canon and the basic *sūtra* of the Greater Vehicle to the Buddhist inscriptions of Central Asia and Northern China as well as the abundant Chinese and Japanese exegetic production—shows that in many respects the multiplication of those devices corresponds, on the contrary, to the ominous darkening of immediate and concrete perspectives. Everything was much simpler when the whole Law, concentrated in one person, spoke on earth and saved those whom it reached through the natural play of *karman* and the wondrous merit of the historical Master. Clearly, this is a striking example of psychosociological compensation. The development, the very extravagance of the promises of liberation, come as a response to the desperate need for these promises in

times of crisis, when such times were worsened and multiplied in the course of history, as was predicted in the ancient canonic prophecies. In a word, this is romantic excess, replacing a classical balance: such a change is not generally marked by social optimism. It is rather a semantics of crisis. Practically, the recourse of the Buddhist of the Lesser Vehicle lies in regulated behavior, the observance of the rule of the *dharma* in this world. In the hierarchy of beings (that is, the hierarchy of future rebirths) there are enough spiritual rewards that one can virtuously desire, such as the fruit of good deeds to be performed immediately for everyone—in a community oriented by a few saints guaranteeing the system from above, all the way down to the levels with which common beings must still content themselves—to draw moral inspiration, each according to his own worth. The game remains open as to the supreme fruit; [the Buddha], by ordering all other beings, determines the places and values within reach of those who cannot yet aspire to rise up to him. Contrarily, the Amidism of difficult times—before a society recovers its stability—as it occurred in Japan, compensates, by the splendor and universality of its promises, for the dramatic darkening of the immediate perspectives offered to the contemporary world. Such wonders, however, are within the reach of those who “have faith”—those whom Amitābha or Avalokiteṣvara—his universal “right arm” everywhere secretly stretched toward us (symbolized in the images of the Great Compassionate One, under and in the radiance of his Buddha)—choose to inspire with this faith. But in the contemporary evidence of the dramatic centuries that are the origin of everything, the romanticism of the solution offered is revealed precisely in that the fruit enjoyed in its present reality, at the start, by such a small number, was called, in anticipation, the Greater Vehicle. Such apparent contradictions—with all the compensations, conscious or subconscious, that they released—explain better than a supposed metaphysics of nothingness or of total salvation, universally promised or even guaranteed, the force and human reach of this religion, whatever the school.

The real shift in points of view from one Vehicle to the other is indeed coherent with this: it concerns the intervention of what has been called “the external force” to make up for insufficient karmic merits in hard times. The concrete sequence whose artistic expression we have followed around the *stūpas* sustains and clarifies this historical evolution. To those who deserved it, and only to them, did the ancient

reliquaries (the “life” of which lay in the personal relics, whether symbolic or “textual”) open up to release for these privileged ones a blessing projected there in advance, which took the shape of the Master, seen in his *dharma*—all this without a tangible image, but by being inscribed in the “blanks” of an iconography of this spiritual aniconism. The next step was to give the miracle concrete form by showing, by an opening door or a niche, this transparency of the *stūpa* to its wondrous content. Here too there would be grounds for speaking of a secondary iconography: there is evidence that *stūpas* that opened were represented by these figurative means, before one built the *stūpa* in which the architectural disposition could make the event materialize, thenceforth permanently figured, and which then became a new type of monument. In the face of the stabilization of these apparitions, gathering reality and presence of themselves, and no longer the result of a mysterious symbolism between the *karman* of those who obtained them and the debit-and-credit handed down by the Master to the Church, its monasteries and *stūpas*, one came to a deification of these statues, sprung from the cosmic symbol to fill the world with images of their Heavens. As an answer to an inevitable question in the controversies raised by this stunning innovation, and actually recorded in the *Kathāvatthu* of the Pali canon, the Greater Vehicle conferred name, legend, and attributes to these multiplications of the historical Buddha. We have noted that in what concerns the most famous of these, the Five *Jinas*, a cycle was born, to this effect, on the holy site which drew pilgrims from the other end of the Far East from Bodhgayā to Bénarès—names, forms, and legends transposing five episodes of the Life of the Buddha and marking out five statues, which were worshiped and copied throughout the Buddhist world.

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These ideas, adumbrated in a study of the great Javanese *stūpa*, the Barabudur, and familiar to my audience at the Institute of Art and Archaeology around 1937–38,<sup>17</sup> seem to have since received full confirmation in comparative Indian archaeology, in the great monograph of the Hindu Temple which we owe to Professor Stella Kramrisch.<sup>18</sup> On the field, and

17. *Barabudur, esquisse d'une histoire du bouddhisme fondée sur la critique archéologique des textes*, Hanoi, EFEO, 2 vol., 1935, 1100 pp. Reprinted 1978, in one volume, by Arno Press, New York.

18. Stella Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple*, Calcutta, 1946, 2 vol.

consulting the texts, in front of the great monuments of continental India and among the architects and the faithful who have received the meaning of it, both technical and doctrinal, our learned colleague has shown how the exterior iconography, on the walls of those splendid monuments, springs from the image, figurative or symbolic (as, for example, the *çivaite phallus*), preserved in the secret cella at the heart of the temple; the niches, materialization of this miracle of the temple that opens—our “Open, Sesame!”—bear the significant name of *Ghanadvāra* “compact doors” (i.e., “openings that are not so”). If further argument were necessary, we could point out that in the case of the *stūpas*, the “miracle” that permits an exterior manifestation of the secret power of the “relics” (whatever their nature) is but the repetition—in reverse—of the miracle that in many a legend allowed their subsequent introduction into this solid mass.

Such are, in the end, the remote antecedents of the art of the Bayon. It remains true, as Mr. George Coedès wrote in 1943, that “before Jayavarman VII no one had thought of . . . ornamenting the towers of the central temple with the portrait of the King in order to affirm his omnipresence.” But the formula that “paints” on the walls of an edifice the miraculous apparition of the god it contains has ancient and attested parallels in Indian art: on this common theme, the two presentations with their technical difference, one in symbolic niches (“solid openings”) framing the miracle, the other as the direct representation in stone, constituting the raw miracle, correspond mainly to a classical formula and its romantic replica. In the doctrine and, one may add, in practical politics the striking feature is the personalization of this miraculous apparition of the Buddha in the actual proportions and features of the king; but here too this intercession is not without antecedents in India or even in Ceylon, where kings were seen to have statues of the Master made exactly in their own size (“the size is the man,” and “image” in Sanskrit is *pratimā*: “counter-measure” rather than “counter-appearance”), or others appear among their court or their kin as earthly replicas of either Maitreya or *Çākyamuni*. The chronicle of the reign of *Buddhadāsa* in Ceylon, toward the end of the fourth century A.D., tells how he had given his eighty sons the names of the eighty disciples of the Buddha.

“Surrounded by his sons, who bore the names of *Sāriputa*, etc., *Buddhadāsa* [“the Buddha’s slave,” an expression of complete self-renunciation, in order to assume, by the loss of a minor individuality, at least the

aspect of a superior being, to whom one thus becomes “transparent”] shone as if this king had been the Perfect Buddha himself.”

The architectural expressionism of the Bayon, even if it is particular to the Khmer style and is legitimately its pride, is therefore at the crossroads of traditions that, far from diminishing its significance, ought to enhance it for us. For instance, they could suggest a slight amendment to the conclusions reached by Mr. Coedès in the chapter called “Le mystère du Bayon” in *Pour mieux comprendre Angkor*: “What the architect meant to represent is not so much a real being, an individual, as an abstraction . . . —it is ‘royal might blessing the four orientes of the country.’ . . . ”<sup>19</sup>

Certainly this interpretation, which I had a share in, is acceptable as a first approximation; these are not portraits at all in our sense of the word. This is a powerful kind of expressionism, in which abstraction plays a part, reacting in and on reality with its entire weight, with its maximum historical density. “Royal might”? We would tend to see a concept in this, and this kind of abstraction is, I believe, as far as it can be from the symbol’s active, functional intent. Indeed, by means of the symbol it is quite a real being, an individual, who with his whole person projected in the open, facing his kin, confronts all the perils and tragedies of the time. Sanskrit is rich in semantic detours that act massively as proof and testimony: I cannot see the individualized portrait of the king—raised, as on an elephant throne, at the five gates of Angkor Thom, facing the world from where the Cham invasion had come—without considering the structure of his very name (Jayavarman). As Mr. Coedès has observed, it is applied to his monuments “whose ancient names when they are known to us always begin with *jayā*°, victory, a term meant to mark them as with a seal bearing the name of the founding king:”<sup>20</sup> *jayasindhu*, “ocean of victory,” for the moats of the town; *jayagiri*, “mounts of victory,” for the ramparts, and so on. Under the general symbolism of Indra’s bow, rainbow, and bridge, or the gods’ “causeway” to go up to Heaven or come down from there, the causeways with *Nāgas* are the king’s bow, brandished against a possible enemy—all this for the benefit and protection of the kingdom, the sole preoccupation of the reign. Now, the sovereign’s personal name completes adequately this panoply of symbols: the concrete meaning of *varman* is “armour,” “coat of

mail,” as well as “rampart” or, more abstractly, “protection.” Placing the Armour of Victory near the Bow on the rampart in front of the Moat of Victory: does not this complete the political and military, as well as religious, sense of this architectural sentence in which names and shapes reciprocally assume and clarify each other? It is not only the king’s person but the whole kingdom that is “shielded” by the “Armour of Victory” in this scenario. It transposes the negation of the Self (*ātman*)—now no longer accomplished through emptiness, with the individual purifying himself from this “false vision” (*satkayadrsti*) as ancient Buddhism contented itself with saying; but in full, by identification with him of all creatures whose charge one assumes, in a world whose saviour one claims to be: one and the same symbolic armour will shield the whole. Such is the case in stanza XXV in the TA Prohm stela, mentioned less often than the Edict of the Hospitals, but equivalent to it in doctrine as well as in intention. One can easily recognize in it the ancient theme of the Purusha, colored by Buddhist charity:

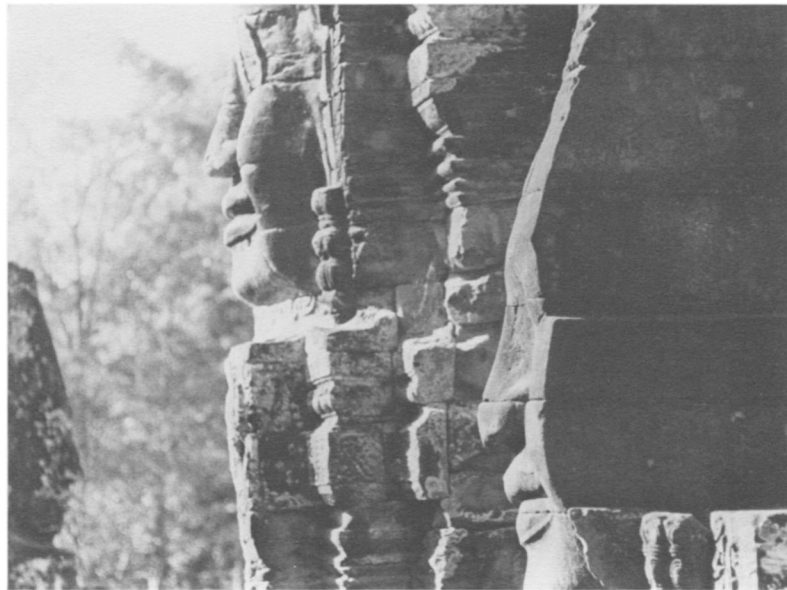
Although the *ātman* was linked in various ways to the various beings, he nevertheless realized their unity in a manifest way, as he absorbed in his compassionate *ātman* [i.e., in himself] the joys and sorrows of those who have an *ātman*.

Thus the involved personality, individuality—as that of the Khmer people itself at that moment of its history—remains, contrary to any too abstract interpretation, the true meaning of the adventure. This is what, if one understands them correctly, the towers proclaim rather clearly, in contrast to so many kings who, for reasons of personal magical security, had hidden themselves so that they would become gods, at the heart of the powerful fortifications of their magic and their architecture.

If on the other hand, in the light of what was just said, we should reconsider the expressionist sequence—which goes from the ancient aniconism of the sites to the secondary aniconism of the ancient iconography, then to the fully figurative iconography of the Buddha and the Buddhas—but without losing sight of the relationship between this exterior imagery and the secret deposit of the Law with the monuments, and in the memory of men, and finally into a broad interpretation of the Supreme Unity of the Universe, we would find that, at each step, there is reason to talk of extraction, rather than of abstraction. The miraculous event that makes a Buddha or his glorious vision soar

19. G. Coedès, op. cit., p. 140.

20. Idem, p. 192. See also p. 102.



Some of the fifty-two towers, each bearing four faces. Bayon. Angkor.

forth from the varying kinds of deposits we have just discussed is all the less abstract, in fact, as it is strictly related to the person for whose benefit it occurs—either in ancient times and in the Lesser Vehicle tradition, through *karman* and its cosmic accountancy with the Buddha and the heritage held by his “sons,” his “own” heirs—or, with the Greater Vehicle, through the Buddha’s “devices” (*stratagèmes*) (*upāya*) of which ultimately the blossoming of the transcendent Buddhas and of the Pure Lands, in the depth of Heaven, is the final bouquet in an apocalypse of pure light,

*Empruntée au foyer des rayons primitifs.*<sup>21</sup>

It is this eternal source of light that the Greater Vehicle, taking up and magnifying a more ancient term, names the Body of Law, common to all Buddhas, hence ultimately to all beings, as they gradually realize, in widening circles as the revelation gains ground, over the repentances, the relapses, and the tragedies of history. Thence come, and thither return, the forms of the Buddhas who appear in this world—as, for instance, through a great king entirely devoted to his task, that is, to the beings who are in his charge, within the province of his authority. Is this not a way of devoting oneself to the Buddha, and even being Buddha oneself, in the fulfillment that one provides for everything one touches? Through eight centuries and

21. Charles Baudelaire. From “Bénédiction,” the second poem of *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Quoted from memory.

doctrinal disagreements that, as we may see now, are more apparent than real—the very name of the Sinhalese sovereign, Buddhādāsa, echoes the active thought of his great Khmer parallel. The turn that Jayavarman gives to his personal onomastics and what it symbolizes is quite revealing of the disparity in problems and destinies between the two forms of worship and their circumstances.

These remarks could allow closer analysis of a name Mr. Coedès identifies as being that of a series of portrait-statues of Jayavarman VII with a particularly close relation to Khmer territory: *Jayabuddhamahanatha*.

Their name is made up on the one hand of the term *jayā*, “victory,” which is Jayavarman’s very name and marked all his foundations as with a seal, and on the other hand with the expression *mahānātha*, “the Great Saviour,” which could apply to no one better than to Jayavarman VII since he had, ten years before [i.e., ten years before the erection of the Prah Khan stela, where these images are mentioned] saved the country by repelling the Cham invaders and carrying war into their own land.<sup>22</sup>

But this leaves the term *buddha* untranslated, even though it is very likely to be one of the principal elements—if not the essential element—in the combination. But in “the Great Protector with the

22. G. Coedès, op. cit., p. 198.

Buddha of victory" — *nātha* being the "refuge," the "protector" rather than the "saviour" (*trātar*), one fully recognizes the style of the reign and of its system of titles. The Protector adds a palladium, the Buddha, to his magical instruments, bringing him dramatically before his subjects, devoting himself jointly to them and to him; such a cult is transpersonal. At this point in the interpretation, by way of a parallel that does not seem hazardous, there appears a means of resolving the ambiguity that still marks the supernatural identification of Jayavarman VII, represented in the aspect of a Buddha under the central tower of the Bayon, but rather with the features and ornaments of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteçvara on all the external apparel of the temple and on the gates of the sacred town. Everything confirms the appellation Buddha-King chosen by Mr. Coedès for this great image. But how does it stand in the religious perspective of the reign and of the "cosmic" city? On the whole, despite a few secondary developments, the character of a Buddha preserves its original primacy over that of the Bodhisattvas. But is it necessarily so in the Angkor Thom setting? All this apparatus has a common denominator: the King. This, then, is no Buddhology in the absolute, but a local application; it is not doctrine, but action in line with this doctrine. Now, it is quite remarkable that Amitābha, the Buddha from whom Avalokiteçvara can be said to emanate, should not have a preeminent position in the epigraphy and the iconography of Jayavarman VII's reign: he is, for instance, second by far to the Buddha of Medicine, Bhaishajyaguru. Therefore, in this case the sequence Buddha more than Bodhisattva is not prescribed by the context. Is the reverse order, Bodhisattva more than Buddha, in which the Bodhisattva as a basic principle would "emit" the Buddha, more likely to have been adopted locally with reference to the later magnified forms of belief, in which Avalokiteçvara becomes the Supreme Being? Here too epigraphic evidence hardly confirms the hypothesis, and nothing can be inferred from the material place granted to the Bodhisattva in this architecture-portrait since no other historical examples have been found. Yet the determining argument, which sets these various elements in proper perspective, is to be found in Chapter XXIV of the *Lotus of the True Law*, devoted, as the very title proclaims, to the metamorphoses of Avalokiteçvara, "turned towards all directions (*Samantamukha*)." He assumes at will all the shapes in which it is in the *karman* of beings to receive instruction or help. Thus he will appear under the features not only of Brahma, Indra, a King with the

Wheel (*çakravartin*), the head of an army, even a demon, but also of a "Buddha-for-Oneself" (*pratyekabuddha*) or of a perfectly accomplished Buddha. The unlimited efficacy of this universal compassion draws out of the sea of existences, for the benefit of creatures engulfed in it, precisely the appearances from which they can profit, thanks to this device (*upāya*) as much as, or even more than, to their own *karman*, which compels Avalokiteçvara to make such a choice.

We have just said extraction, and not abstraction: surely this is what one can see in Angkor, where all the material and moral conditioning of a redemptive victory is gradually "churned"!—according to a great Vishnuite image expressing the action of royal Buddhism—out of a formerly desperate situation, through the transcendent merit and total devotion of the king: the ramparts, the causeways, the gates, the town, and finally the victory and the Buddha whose majesty consecrates it, come out of the symbolic sea of milk which has become a figure of *samsāra*. The truth which lies at the limits of these teachings can be glimpsed here: *nirvāna* is *samsāra* but it must be seen and acquired in *samsāra* through an external force that suddenly reveals itself as one's own. The fantastic artistic and mythological adventure of the Greater Vehicle, then, cancels itself by returning to the common good. Few epics have had such scope.

From Vedism to Buddhism and medieval Hinduism, from partially Iranized North-Western India, to the Hinduized kingdoms on the Pacific shores, these symbols have come a long way. It is their persistence more than the evolution of the forms of their expression which is puzzling, under the evolution of ideas and of history that is reflected in them. At the end of the series: symbols, visions, images—each step pointing less to a giving up of the previous pattern than to its readjustment—undoubtedly, we are beginning to be better prepared to approach the Angkor Thom of Jayavarman VII functionally and no longer only archaeologically. Under many guises, a face spontaneously appears everywhere, on the stone surface, just where nothing after all calls for it; this, for the external force is the surest way of being all gathered there, when the eyes turn to the symbolic edifices, with a prayer, in times of peril—whose extent had just been measured—or with thanksgiving in times of triumph and joy. The aegis of victory!

(Translated from the French by Martine Karnouh-Vertalier)