

Mystery of the Bodhisattva

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There is a side of Buddhism which makes it akin not only to Christianity, but also to the Semitic religions in general — paradoxically so, considering its nontheistic character — in the sense that its starting point is related to a human point of view rather than to the metaphysical nature of things. Indeed, when it is said that Existence is but suffering and that the Absolute is the cessation of suffering, and further that human perfection lies in "compassion for all living beings," this opens up a perspective that corresponds to our human situation and to our ultimate interests, no doubt, but it does not straightaway give the most direct possible definition of "that which is," if one may thus express it when thinking of both the manifested Universe and that which transcends it. Such an observation is not, however, of a kind that logically need disturb Buddhists,¹⁷ and this for two reasons: firstly, because they are not unaware of the fact that the doctrines of the Buddhas are only "celestial mirages" intended to catch, as in a golden net, the greatest possible number of creatures plunged in ignorance, suffering and transmigration, and that it is therefore the benefit of creatures and not the suchness of the Universe which determines the necessarily contingent form of the Message; and secondly, because Buddhism, within the framework of its own wisdom, goes beyond the formal "mythology" or the "letter" and ultimately transcends all possible human formulations, thus realizing an unsurpassable contemplative disinterestedness as do the Vedanta, Taoism and analogous doctrines.

Hence the question that Shakyamuni might have asked himself — if he had needed to ask one — was, "Which is the most effective way of conveying the saving Truth to men — or to a specific group of men — in these Latter Times?" and not "Which is the most adequate — or

¹⁷ No more so than the anthropomorphism of the Semitic Scriptures need disturb Kabbalists, Gnostics, or Sufis.

least inadequate — formulation of the metaphysical nature of things?" Neither the Vedanta nor Neo-Platonism includes the possibility of usefully addressing all men and of serving as the vehicle of an integral tradition, nor indeed is this their purpose. But Buddhism wishes to and has to include this possibility, and cannot therefore fail to offer itself first of all as an *upaya*, a "provisional means," with an aim that is above all charitable, in the broadest and most complete sense of that word. Buddhists, it must be stressed, find it all the easier to recognize this in that they are — especially in Zen — far from claiming that the nirvanic Truth can be enclosed definitively within the mold of any dialectic. Nevertheless there results from this general situation — apart from any fluctuations of terminology — a certain difficulty in speaking of Knowledge in such a way as to satisfy at one and the same time the metaphysical truth and the voluntaristic and emotional side of Buddhism.

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Primitive Buddhism distinguishes extrinsically between a *Samyaksam-Buddha* and a *Pratyeka-Buddha*; the former corresponds to what Hindus would call a major *Avatara*, having by definition the function of "founder of a religion," and the latter to a *jivan-mukta* — a man "delivered in this life" — who has neither the quality of a major or plenary *Avatara* nor consequently the function attaching to such a one; and not having had a Buddha as master, neither does he have disciples.¹⁸ After this comes the *Shravaka*, who is a disciple — or the disciple of a disciple — of the Buddha; like *the Pratyeka-Buddha*, he is an *Arhat* or perfected saint, but is such thanks to the direct influence of the Master. Finally there is the Bodhisattva who, in principle, is a saint on the way to becoming a Buddha.

Now, when it is stated, as in the Mahayana writings, that the state of a *Pratyeka-Buddha* is inferior to that of a Bodhisattva because the realization of the former is selfish and lacks

¹⁸ It could be that the *Pratyeka-Buddhas* are in fact identical to the Hindu *Yogis* and *Avataras*, of whom earliest Buddhism could obviously not be unaware and whom it needed to "situate" in one manner or another. The saints of Brahmanism indeed "have no master" in the sense that they do not follow the Buddha, and they "have no disciples" because they do not teach Buddhism and do not address the Buddha's followers. But it might also be admitted — and one thing need not exclude the other — that the *Pratyeka-Buddhas* correspond to the category of saints whom the Sufis call "solitaries" (*afrad*, from *fard*) and who likewise have neither masters nor disciples. Be that as it may, the Sutra of the Rhinoceros (*Khaggavisana-Sutta*), where Shakyamuni has a *Pratyeka-Buddha* speak, seems to indicate that this type of sainthood is based essentially on the mystery of solitude (*mauna*), which calls to mind an inscription we once saw in a medieval hermitage: *O beata solitudo, o sola beatitudo*.

compassion for creatures, it seems to be forgotten — or at least this logical objection comes to mind a priori — that Nirvana implies by definition the abolition of all egoism and the realization of total charity. This is an objection which the Mahayana itself raises in its own way and in its sapiential dimension, without really contradicting itself since it recognizes two truths, the one being relative and provisional and the other absolute and definitive, and since its doctrinal form is essentially apophatic and antinomic. In other words, when it is said that the Mahayana is "great" (*maha*) for the sole reason that its aim is the salvation of "all sentient beings" — thanks to the sacrificial ideal of the Bodhisattva — and not the salvation of a single individual as is the case with the Hinayana, then it is proper to object, in accordance with the higher teaching of the selfsame Mahayana, that the alleged reason carries no weight with respect to Nirvana or, what amounts to the same thing, with respect to Knowledge; not to mention the fact that this world of ignorance and suffering — this samsara — is metaphysically necessary and must not be considered solely from a volitional and emotional angle.

Be that as it may, the sapiential Mahayana is bound to the heroic ideal of the Bodhisattva, but by bringing it back to a strictly metaphysical perspective: it specifies that compassion is a dimension of Knowledge, then it adds that the neighbor is non-real and that charity must therefore be exercised "quietly when the occasion arises" and without slipping into the dualist and objectivist illusion, for, it says, there is no one whom our charity could concern, nor is there a charity which could be "ours." Thus, on the very basis of the bhaktic interpretation of the Bodhisattva, mahayanic gnosis rejoins as if by a roundabout way the most rigorous and hence the most objective or most disinterested metaphysical positions.

To speak as precisely as possible, Buddhism can be said to present itself under the following fundamental aspects: first of all, primitive Buddhism; then Theravada Buddhism which is its continuation as to form if not as to all its content; finally, Mahayana (the "Great Vehicle") which qualifies the preceding as Hinayana ("Lesser Vehicle") and which in its general form exalts the heroic ideal of the Bodhisattva; then, within the actual framework of the Mahayana, a sapiential perspective which corrects and counterbalances the specifically bhaktic elements in the mahayanic ideal; and parallel with this perspective there is another which is devotional and centered particularly on the cult of the Buddha Amitabha. Therefore, if we admit the greatness of the "Great Vehicle," this is not because of the altruistic ideal which appears as its mythological mantle and its elementary thesis, but because of the two quintessences just

mentioned — the one sapiential and the other devotional — the ultimate crystallizations of which are, in Japan, Zen and Jodo.¹⁹

While sharing the sacrificial ideal of its basic doctrine, but without following it into its literal and too human interpretations, the sapiential Mahayana adopts the terminology of this doctrine and projects into it its own certitudes: consequently it will say, not that Nirvana requires charity, but that the state of the *Pratyeka-Buddha* is not Nirvana in the fullest sense, or that it is a Nirvana on a transitory level, comparable no doubt to the *Brahma-Loka* of the Hindu *Krama-Mukta*; in this case, the use of the designation "Buddha" seems to prove that there has been a change of terminology, for it is a priori abnormal to call a man "Buddha" when he is placed lower than a Bodhisattva. It is however possible to justify such a use of this designation seeing that it refers to a state which is already nirvanic in the sense that there is "extinction" at least in relation to the formal world, and that from this fact alone there is no obligatory return to the round of births and deaths.²⁰

These considerations bring up the matter of the authenticity of the mahayanic sutras, since these supposedly report — just as do the texts in Pali — the discourses of the Buddha. Now, it is not the authenticity itself which is in question, but the mode of authenticity: that is to say, these texts, or certain of them, while certainly based on the teachings of Shakyamuni — for otherwise they would not assert this²¹ — seem to present developments or commentaries rather than the sermons themselves, and they do so availing themselves of the terminology in use in the environment where they were put into writing.²² However, whether it is a question of the Buddha himself or of his inspired commentators, it is well not to lose sight of a principle to which we have already alluded and which finds an application in all sacred Scriptures, namely the distinction between two kinds of truth, the one relative or provisional and the other absolute

¹⁹ This juxtaposition may well appear paradoxical to many of the faithful of these two schools, although both were recommended by the great Nagarjuna himself, while Honen, the illustrious spokesman of Jodo, expressly admitted all the forms of traditional Buddhism.

²⁰ The mahayanist polemic against the *Pratyeka-Buddhas* should not astonish us unduly on the part of a perspective of sacrificial idealism; the Vishnuite *bhakti* readily represents the Shivaite *jnani* as a sterile and dreary rationalist, lacking what is essential until, touched by Grace, he discovers devotional love — as if the latter were not eminently comprised in *jnana*.

²¹ This argument will surprise those scholars who have no idea either of the nature of spiritual inspiration or of the organic laws governing — and guaranteeing — the Tradition.

²² On the other hand, it is not out of the question — or is even probable — that certain particularly homogeneous and concise texts, such as the *Maha — Prajna-Paramita-Hridaya* or the *Vajracchedika*, render faithfully, and without development or commentary, the sacred discourse word for word.

and definitive,²³ insofar as there can be anything definitive on the plane of verbal fixations.²⁴ Or again, from a more contingent point of view: the Buddha, in his long career, could have presented diverse perspectives to audiences of unequal levels, and could even have used varying terminologies.²⁵

As far as the mahayanic ideal of the Bodhisattva is concerned — an ideal of sacrificial compassion in the heroic Mahayana and a symbol of spiritual totality in the sapiential doctrine — account must be taken of the following fundamental situation: Buddhism unfolds itself in a sense between the empirical notions of suffering and cessation of suffering; now the notion of compassion springs from this very fact, it is an inevitable or necessary link in what might be called the spiritual mythology of Buddhism. To say suffering and cessation of suffering is to say compassion, given that man is not alone on earth. And this is where the Bodhisattva enters the scene: he incarnates the element compassion — the ontological link as it were between pain and Felicity — just as the Buddha incarnates Felicity and just as ordinary beings incarnate suffering; he must be present in the cosmos as long as there is both a samsara and a Nirvana, this presence being expressed by the statement that the Bodhisattva wishes to save "all beings."²⁶

From a more contingent point of view, it could also be pointed out that concern for personal deliverance, while irreproachable in itself, does involve a certain danger of egoism once it becomes the sole motive of a tradition lived by a large collectivity whose tendencies are bound to be exoteric; from this point of view, the intervention of the Mahayana appears to be

²³ When Christ strikes the Temple merchants, he manifests a partial and conditional truth, namely that there are phenomena — of the hypocritical or blasphemous type — which by their nature authorize or call for violence; but when he enjoins us to turn the left cheek to him who smites us on the right, he is teaching a total and unconditional truth concerning, as such, our inner attitude and hence also our general tendency, which means that holy anger and holy patience can and must be combined, the levels being different. The Scholastic distinction between a truth *secundum fidem* and another *secundum rationem* stops halfway between belief and intellection; it is more like a syncretism than a synthesis.

²⁴ This reservation brings into question, not the immutability of intellectual evidences or of sacred formulations, but the absoluteness of concepts as such from the standpoint of the Divine Aseity and in the context of direct Knowledge.

²⁵ For example, in presenting the *Shravaka*, the *PratyekaBuddha*, the *Arhat* and the *Bodhisattva*, in the latter sermons, as so many different degrees of realization.

²⁶ The Buddhist adage "May all beings be happy," or the will of the Bodhisattvas to save "all sentient beings," has its equivalent in the Islamic "Blessing on the Prophet" (*Salat 'ala 'n-Nabi*), which proceeds from above to below in the sense that Muhammad, who is mentioned first, is the center of the cosmos, upon which all other creatures depend, these being designated — in descending order — by the terms "Family" (*al*) and "Companions" (*sahb*). But even if it were not specified that the blessing extends to the "Family" and the "Companions," the graces would reach the totality — or a totality — of mankind by virtue of the avataric character of the name *Muhammad*, which includes all human beings while at the same time indicating their summit; for he is at once summit and circumference. In the Buddhist perspective, the blessing — actualized, to take one example, by the prayer wheels — concerns all sentient beings without exception.

providential. At the time when it first asserted itself, the Buddhist tradition had doubtless given rise to all kinds of narrow and pharisaical perspectives; the same had been the case with Brahmanism in the Buddha's time as also with Judaism at the time of Christ, which does not mean that these crises involved either of these traditions in their entirety or in their subsequent life: thus there is no need of taking up the polemic of the early Mahayanists against the Theravadins of Ceylon and Indo-China. Or again, in a more fundamental sense concerning religion as such: the very necessity of an emotional element — in the absence of a theism properly so called and given the conditions of the "Latter Times"²⁷ — explains the opportuneness of the cult of the Bodhisattva in its connection with the path of works and the path of love; in this respect, the difference between the Buddhism of the North and that of the South is no more than one of style and mythology, without prejudice of course to their supraformal essences. Be that as it may, it can be admitted that if in the climate of the Mahayana the Buddha Amitabha is the object of a special cult, this is a priori because, as Bodhisattva, he was able to accumulate the merits capable of creating a "Buddha-field" and a "Pure Land." But this retrospective motive evidently need not concern contemplation, whether devotional or other, especially since the same causal connection may also be conceived in the opposite way: this is to say that the prime mover is not a contingency like the merit accumulated by an individual, or by a "karmic nexus" if one so prefers, but a principle of Mercy that creates at the same time both the merit itself and the saint who accumulates the merit. The principle of Mercy results from the very nature of the *Adi-Buddha*, the Absolute who is at once Knowledge and Love.

The doctrine of Shinran provides a wonderful synthesis between the devotional and the sapiential paths: to start with, it envisages the "Pure Land," the *Sukhavati* Paradise, in its aspect of transcendence, hence of identity with Nirvana; similarly, it reminds us that by virtue of universal analogies, death can serve to rend the veil of Maya, and hence can be an occasion for

²⁷ According to the *Nirvana Sutra*, "Those who despise the Dharma will then be like the volume of earth of the ten directions, and those who remain faithful to it will be like the crumb of earth that can be put on a fingernail." And similarly according to the *Saddharma-Pundarika Sutra*, "At the horrible time of the end, men will be malevolent, false, evil and obtuse and they will imagine they have reached perfection when it will be nothing of the sort." According to the caliph Ali: "The inhabitants of the here-below are like barking dogs and ferocious beasts howling at one another; the strong devour the weak and the great subjugate the small . . ." Under such circumstances, a spiritual treasure can no longer be imposed collectively except by means of a sentimental, even a passional, element, which alone is capable of acting effectively in a milieu of this kind.

Illumination and Deliverance,²⁸ provided that we are in a spiritual situation that allows this junction to be effected or this analogy to be actualized, and this precisely is made possible by the Grace of Amitabha and by our trust in it. The whole stress here is laid on the element faith, which is not without analogy, *mutatis mutandis*, with the satori of Zen,²⁹ and this faith is a trust which, by its quality, coincides with the forgetting of the ego. The Absolute — which has revealed itself under the particular name of Amitabha — is essentially Wisdom and Compassion, Knowledge and Mercy; that is to say, in the symbolism of the Buddha Amitabha, the "original vow" to enter Nirvana only on condition that all those who invoke the sacred Name with faith be saved, is in fact the Absolute's aspect of Mercy; it is as if the Absolute were paraphrasing the vow and saying: "I would not wish to possess Beatitude if there existed between Me and contingent beings an insurmountable barrier preventing them from drinking deeply of my Beatitude"; or again: "I would not be the Absolute were I not blissful and merciful."³⁰

But this path of Amitabha of which Shinran, after Honen, was the last great spokesman, likewise includes, short of the nirvanic miracle of which we have spoken, a properly human finality: it opens out onto the *Sukhavati* Paradise where the faithful will await Nirvana till the end of the cycle. This Paradise — which Hinduism, analogically speaking, also knows since that is the condition of the *Krama-Mukta* — is of quite a different order from the ones comprised in the round of transmigration; it is the exact equivalent of the Paradise of the Semitic religions, in which "eternity" means precisely this nirvanic conclusion and the ceasing of samsara.³¹

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²⁸ This is the case with the Hindu *Videha-Mukta*.

²⁹ It has been possible to say in Zen: "If you meet the Buddha, slay him." This means, paraphrasing the first phrase of the *Tao Te Ching* ("the Tao that can be grasped is not the real Tao"): the Buddha whom you can meet is not the real Buddha. This is the point of view of the absolute, thus infinitely transpersonal subject, and of perfect non-objectivation. It is met with also in Western gnosis, for example when it is said that God could not "live a single instant" without us: what then is meant by "God" is only the mental objectivization — hence the relativization — of the Ineffable which, for Its part, is beyond all polarity.

³⁰ In Christianity, the Name of the Virgin signifies Mercy, and it is joined with that of Christ, which is an indirect Name of the Absolute. In Islam, the Name of the Absolute — *Allah* — is followed immediately by the Names of Mercy, *Rahmin* and *Rahim* — the one intrinsic and the other extrinsic — in the formula of consecration at the beginning of every Revelation and every rite.

³¹ If in the Semitic monotheisms there is no place for the concept of the Bodhisattva, it is because these perspectives take into consideration neither what is before birth nor what may be situated outside the human Paradise. The function of the celestial and compassionate Bodhisattva is nonetheless represented, in the West, by the "apotropaic" saints or "Holy Helpers" (in German *Nothelfer*), not to mention the guardian or protecting angels.

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A distinction must be made between the personal and transmigrating Bodhisattva and the celestial or universal Bodhisattva endowed with ubiquity; the former, if he is not simply a manifestation of the latter, accumulates merits by his virtues and actions;³² the latter is the cosmic emanation of a Buddha, or, in Western terms, he is the Archangel who manifests a given Divine Quality; his reintegration into Nirvana coincides with the *Mahapralaya*, the Apocatastasis which effects the return of all manifestation to the Principle or of all contingency to the Absolute.³³ The human Bodhisattva can be — to use Hindu terminology — either a *bhakta* or a *jnani*: in the former case the path evolves between devotion and compassion — devotion towards the Buddhas and celestial Bodhisattvas and compassion towards the creatures wandering in samsara — while in the latter case it is gnosis that takes precedence over everything else: compassion is not something added in sentimental fashion to an imperfect mode of knowledge but is on the contrary the secondary dimension or internal complement of a knowledge which is virtually or effectively perfect, because it is situated on the axis of Buddhahood or is identified with Buddhahood itself.³⁴

Some will doubtless object that the gnosis of the Bodhisattva is not that of the Buddha: namely that the compassion of the latter is intrinsic in the sense that he carries all things in

³² "A hundred beatitudes of the *Gandharvas* are as one beatitude of the *Devas* who have attained to their divinity by the accumulation of meritorious works, and a hundred beatitudes of the *Devas* by merit are as one beatitude of the *Devas* by birth . . ." (*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, IV, 3, 33). The personal Bodhisattvas, as to their samsaric situation, belong in the category of *Devas* by merit; these have less beatitude than the *Devas* by origin because merit can always be exhausted and cannot be maintained save by means of new merits. As to the *Gandharvas*, they are "celestial musicians," creatures that are more or less "peripheral," and in certain respects comparable, perhaps, to our terrestrial birds, or on the contrary incomparable in relation to the things of this world.

³³ Saint Gregory of Nyssa alludes to the Apocatastasis in speaking of the demons: "And these, it is said, the Apostle accounts as subterranean beings, wishing to indicate by this turn of phrase that no creature will remain excluded from the Kingdom of Good when, after long periods of centuries, all evil shall be destroyed . . ." (*Conversation with Macrina*, IX. 2.)

³⁴ A Buddhist has rightly pointed out to the author that the merits, compassion and knowledge of the Bodhisattva correspond respectively to *karma*, *bhakti* and *jnana* and consequently are addressed to those who follow those ways; for each of them the Bodhisattva reveals himself under a particular aspect. To use Buddhist terms, these are the three aspects called *upeksha* (impassivity), *maitri* (love of one's neighbor) and *prajna* (knowledge). In the framework of gnosis, compassion however changes its mode: Jacques Bacot was justified when, in his introduction to *Le Poète tibétain Milarepa*, he declared that "Buddhic pity has no relationship with sensibility. It is entirely objective, cool and connected with a metaphysical conception. It is not spontaneous, but the outcome of long meditations. The idealism which tends to no longer differentiate between 'me' and 'not-me' is the generator of this pity for all that lives and is the victim of illusion." It is the compassion comprised in *prajna*.

himself,³⁵ whereas the universal pity of the Bodhisattva is extrinsic and therefore still situated under the sign of duality. But this would not do full justice to the nature of the great Bodhisattvas, for the sacrificial sojourn in the world necessarily combines with Nirvana; it is a way of realizing Nirvana in a certain sense also "outwardly," within the samsaric condition itself.³⁶ This must needs be so, for the simple reason that a being cannot deprive himself, from life to life, of that very Enlightenment which constitutes the meaning and the end of all his efforts, all his virtues and all his merits. It is neither possible to persist in an exclusively negative situation nor to regard the ultimate Wisdom merely as a means of coming to another's aid, which would amount to making a means of the end or a contingency of the Absolute; Knowledge as such cannot be an instrument designed for charity any more than the Real can be subordinate to the illusory.³⁷ The condition of the gnostic Bodhisattva would be neither conceivable nor tolerable if it were not a manner of contemplating the Absolute at once in the heart and in the world; and above all it must be stressed that Knowledge, by definition, has no connection with the quantity of merits or the number of incarnations.³⁸ Only a bhaktism with an exoteric bias could imagine perfect Knowledge as being the fruit of a process of accumulating elements of one kind or another, even be they sublime from the human point of view;³⁹ in short there is nothing quantitative or moral about the Spirit. And the following should also be stressed: Nirvana seen or lived from the standpoint of the formal condition — as is the case with the Hindu *Jivan-Mukta* and the Buddhist *Arhat* — is not absolutely the same as the Nirvana experienced beyond all

³⁵ But at that degree the samsara cannot oppose Nirvana or be associated with it in any manner whatsoever, which means that the opposition "existence-Void" has no meaning except at the degree of existence and is resolved in the principal Void.

³⁶ This brings to mind the Arabic Divine Names "the Inward" and "the Outward" (*Al-Batin* and *Az-Zahir*) and the mystery of the Divine "outwardness," in connection with the concepts of the "metaphysical transparency of phenomena" and the "relatively absolute."

³⁷ As the Tibetan Arhat Milarepa put it, "One should not show oneself rash and hasty in the intention to serve others as long as one has not realized the Truth oneself; otherwise one risks being a blind man leading the blind."

³⁸ This is what *Dhyana* — Zen — teaches in the most uncompromising manner: texts like the Diamond Sutra or the Chinese Sutra of Huang-Po formulate the decisive truth in the most explicit possible fashion and thereby express, in terms of doctrine, the very quintessence of Buddhism. In the same vein of thought, the Lankavatāra Sūtra and other texts establish a distinction between a progressive realization and a realization that is immediate, the former concerning the rooting out of vices and illusions and the latter the assimilation of nirvānic Light; according to this distinction, there are two kinds of saints or, within the same being, two degrees of sanctity, or two stages.

³⁹ According to the *Lankavatara Sutra*, the Bodhisattvas, while holding back from entering into Nirvana, are there already in fact, "for in their love and compassion there is no cause for illusory distinction and consequently no intervention of such distinction." The Diamond Sutra mentions this saying of the Buddha: "A Bodhisattva who would say: 'I will deliver all beings' — do not call him a Bodhisattva."

form; the refusal on the part of the great Bodhisattvas to enter Nirvana — and here we have in mind not only their celestial prototypes, where the thing is self-evident — is not a refusal, in itself impossible, of total Knowledge, but a merciful hesitation to cast off the final veil and definitively leave the formal Universe.⁴⁰

Here one has to insist on the difference between Nirvana and *Parinirvana*: only death allows of a total reintegration — for those who in their lifetime have realized "Extinction" — in that "Supreme Extinction" which is none other than the Vedantic "Self." Living beings, whatever their degree of spirituality, remain of necessity linked with Being, which belongs to the realm of Nirvana, since it represents a perfect transcendence in relation to all manifestation and to the whole cosmic enmeshment, but which, being still of the realm of Maya whereof it is the summit or quintessence, is not yet the Self. If in a certain respect death brings no change for one who has realized Nirvana—the Hindu *Jīvan Mukta* or the Buddhist *Arhant*—in another respect it nonetheless effects a considerable change, so that it can be said that death for the "living liberated one" is neither a modification nor a non-modification, or that it is both at once. However: if we say that the Buddha, in dying, entered *Parinirvana*, this is again only an earthly way of speaking: in reality, he was always there as *Dharmakaya*, "body of the *Dharma*"; similarly he did not cease to dwell in Heaven in his manifestation as *Sambhogakaya*, "body of Bliss," even while manifesting himself among mortals by virtue of *Nirmanakaya*, the "body of supernatural metamorphosis." In monotheistic terms, we would say that to every Prophet or *Avatara* there corresponds an Archangel and, beyond creation, a divine Name, and that every divine Name reflects in its own way the whole Divinity.

A question that might be asked about the supreme Bodhisattvas — given the virtually divine cult surrounding them — is the following: can they not be more than archangels, that is to say, do they remain at the summit of the cosmos, thus below Being, or can they be situated at the summit of Maya, thus at the degree of Being and below Beyond-Being? To the latter part of this question the reply must be negative, despite certain hyperboles or verbal syntheses that could suggest the contrary; for the "Divine Names" or Qualities of Being are represented, in Buddhism, by the different Buddhas — notably the "*Dhyani-Buddhas*" — or in other words, by absolute

⁴⁰ The attitude of the great Hindu *bhakta* Shri Chaitanya is akin to the ideal of the Bodhisattva: "Lord, I desire neither riches, nor servants, nor a beautiful damsel, nor the poetic muse. Let me, O Lord, from birth to birth, have only devotion to Thee — a devotion which seeks nothing in return." (*Shri Shri Shikhsastakam*)

Buddhahood envisaged under the aspect of differentiation, which — being already contingent — is specific to Maya. Let us add that for the celestial Bodhisattva, who even while becoming "incarnate" does not leave his Paradise, "to become incarnate" may also mean "to delegate a power," and it is in this sense that a particular saint or great lama may be described as an "incarnation" of Avalokiteshvara or of Manjusri.⁴¹

Another question that may be asked is this: whence originates the initiative for the coming into being of a Bodhisattva and a fortiori of a Buddha? Does it come from man or from the heavenly Logos? The two things coincide: once the human support is ready and has attained a degree of perfection, the Logos descends upon him and dwells in him, just as light automatically dwells on a clear and smooth surface; but precisely, the ripening of the human support is in its turn and by anticipation an effect of the Logos — which is at once Wisdom and Mercy, Knowledge and Love, light and warmth — so that we are obliged to admit that the original initiative comes from Heaven and that the support has been brought forth in the realm of the cosmic play solely in view of the manifestation of the Logos and by the Logos itself. It is in an analogous sense that it has been paradoxically affirmed, in the language of various traditions, that the world has been created for the Prophet or *Avatara* or for the sake of his manifestation.

An important point touching the mystery of the "virtual Buddha" is the comprehension of the nirvanic essence of the samsara: just as we have said elsewhere that the finite is a sort of internal dimension of the Infinite — an indispensably necessary dimension, obviously, by reason of infinity itself or the intrinsic character of infinity — so could we define here the samsara as a sort of dimension of Nirvana, or as an "ignorant" manner (in the sense of the term *avidya*) of envisaging it, the factor "ignorance" occurring as a result of the very infinity of the divine "Void." The actual substance of this "reality in reverse" is constituted by those countless "grains of sand" which are the dharmas — the elementary qualities — these being like the segmented, innumerable and "inverted" crystallizations of the Void or of the pure nirvanic Substance. The impermanence of things is none other than their own relativity.

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⁴¹ The terrestrial charity exercised by the celestial Bodhisattva brings to mind a Saint Theresa of Lisieux wanting "to spend her time in Heaven doing good on earth" — symbolized by the "shower of roses" — although in this case the intention is situated in the context of an altogether different eschatology.

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To sum up what has just been explained and at the same time to complete it, it is necessary to distinguish between three Nirvanas—or three degrees of Extinction—two of which are still in the order of Maya or contingency, while the third, *Parinirvana*, is the Absolute; if another Nirvana were the Absolute there could not be a question of a *Parinirvana*. The first Nirvana is ontologically that of the Bodhisattva: it is extinction in relation to formal manifestation and corresponds to the degree of the Archangels, Heaven, Existence; we say "ontologically" because the Bodhisattva "lives" at this level even if he has already realized the second Nirvana, the one which coincides with the state of the terrestrial Buddha, that is to say with extinction in regard to universal manifestation, which corresponds to the degree of Being. The third Nirvana, beyond Maya, is that of the celestial or absolute Buddha: this is *Parinirvana*, extinction in relation to Being or to Maya and which corresponds to the supreme Self of the Vedantists.⁴² Now to say that the Bodhisattva renounces Nirvana is to say that he intends to remain, not in formal manifestation alone, but in transmigration, whatever the degree of extinction he may inwardly have attained. What the Bodhisattva desires is a perfection that is cosmic and not divine, one which will result in the obtaining of a divine message; now this function — that of the *Samyaksam-Buddha* — requires a perfection of cosmic Knowledge which the *Pratyeka-Buddha* does not possess and which moreover is — like the fact of Revelation itself — devoid of importance in regard to absolute Knowledge.⁴³ In Islamic terminology, we would say that the Prophet is sublime, not by virtue of his prophetic mission (*nubuwwah*), but by virtue of his perfect sanctity (*wilayah*), which has led certain people to claim that saints are superior to Prophets, whereas in reality prophecy, without being in itself a degree of sanctity, requires or implies total sanctity.⁴⁴ The Bodhisattva can "renounce" Nirvana only on condition of having attained it in the mode accessible within formal existence, and it is only then that his aspiration to

⁴² The point at the lower extremity of what could be called the "nirvanic axis" is the heart or the pure Intellect, or again the mind in a state of perfect truth and purity, or the *mantram*, the *nembutsu*. In monotheistic, or simply theistic, language we would speak of the "heavenly" or "divine axis."

⁴³ Shri Shankara realized this Knowledge without having produced the Veda; and in an analogous sense, Mary Magdalene was perfectly holy without possessing the cosmic and quasi-divine greatness of the Virgin Mary.

⁴⁴ A further distinction must be made between minor Prophets (*nabi*, plural *anbiya'*), who have a limited mission within a given tradition, and major Prophets (*rasul*, *rusul*) who have a universal mission and are founders of a religion.

become a *Samyaksam-Buddha* has an intrinsic meaning; prior to that, his desire even to "become a Buddha" or to "save all sentient beings" is at the same time a stimulus and an obstacle, depending on whether his path is primarily related to *bhakti* or *jnana*. On attaining Nirvana he will know whether the *Adi-Buddha* — the supreme Buddhahood, identified with the nirvanic Infinite — has chosen him or not; or in other words whether the universal economy, or the equilibrium or rhythm of the Cosmos, has decided whether he is to be a Messenger or whether he is finally to be integrated — until the exhaustion of the "life of Brahma" — into the state of an Archangel, such as Avalokiteshvara or Manjusri. All that has just been pointed out implies that the specific Knowledge of the *Samyaksam-Buddha* is "neither superior nor inferior," but simply "other" — although in a certain sense more "ample" — than the Knowledge of the *Arhat*; it is a kind of existential penetration of worlds and creatures, a dilation in the direction of the samsara — which is as a projected shadow, so to speak, of his dilation in Nirvana or *Parinirvana*; and this is doubtless connected with the "remembrance of former births," for the penetration in question simultaneously embraces both "time" and "space," symbolically speaking.

The Enlightenment which occurred in the lifetime of Shakyamuni beneath the Bodhi tree is none other than what in more or less Western parlance would be called "Revelation," namely the reception of the Message or of the prophetic function:⁴⁵ just as the soul descends suddenly on the embryo once it is sufficiently formed — neither before nor after — so Bodhi descends on the Bodhisattva who has acquired, outside his Knowledge and his Nirvana, the cosmic perfections required for the prophetic radiation.

At the risk of repetition it is necessary to return here to a particularly important point: if there is in the Mahayana an element which is problematical from the metaphysical point of view, it is not the path of the Bodhisattva but, what is quite different, the ideal of the Bodhisattva insofar as it is polemically opposed to the "non-altruistic" spirituality of the pure contemplative, as if, firstly, all true spirituality did not necessarily include charity, and secondly, as if the consideration of some contingency or other could rival pure and total Knowledge. But if the wish to deliver all beings, as expressed under this elementary and even sentimental form, is of

⁴⁵ This Revelation is summed up in the highly elliptic formula of the *Bodhi* of Shakyamuni: "This being, that becomes, from the becoming of that which becomes; this non-becoming, which does not become, from the cessation of that which ceases." Here is the commentary on it by one of the Buddha's disciples: "Of those things which proceed from a cause the *Tathagata* has explained the cause, and likewise their cessation he has explained. This is the doctrine of the great *Shramana*."

necessity opposed to Knowledge — since it is here a question of "interested disinterestedness"⁴⁶ — one may well ask what, from the point of view of tradition, can be the profound meaning or the alchemical function of a desire objectively so disproportionate and subjectively so contingent? The answer is that here is a means of “canalizing” certain mentalities towards Virtue and Truth: it is this idealism of heroic abnegation, this heroism at once karmic and bhaktic — and nothing else — which will attract goodwill and enflame it, and this is a factor that tradition must take into account in its many-sided formulation. As for the Bodhisattva himself, his refusal of Nirvana — not of the "nirvanic axis" which passes through him, but of the repose in Extinction — is simply the will to be reborn despite the possibility of not being reborn; since this possibility exists and is offered to him, he has a right to it consonantly with his own vocation and destiny.⁴⁷ What then the Bodhisattva lacks is not the formless, nor even the supra-existential Nirvana — that which the terrestrial Buddha enjoys — but solely the mandate of prophecy which would make him into a *Samyaksam-Buddha* and the retirement into unmanifest, hence extra-samsaric Reality. The absence of such a mandate is evidently involuntary, whereas staying in transmigration is vocational and aims either expressly at obtaining the mandate or mission, or else at a state of beneficent and angelic presence in the samsara. It is this and this alone which is meant by the refusal to enter into Nirvana, since it is obvious that no one can prevent—or could wish to prevent—the flowering forth of Knowledge.

Humanly speaking, the Bodhisattva is an altogether extraordinary being owing to the acuteness, amplitude and scope of his faculties, something which, on this scale, cannot be the case with the *Pratyeka-Buddha*, who, while "delivered in this life" and possessing supreme Knowledge to the extent that it can be imparted to one still bound to the earthly or formal condition, may only be endowed with individual faculties which — apart from intellectuality and contemplativity — do not really go beyond the general norm, as the example of a Ramakrishna or of a Ramana Maharshi goes to show; leaving aside their inner realization, their human breadth — which is the sole consideration here — is obviously less than that of a Rama or a Krishna, or of the young prince Siddhartha, the future Buddha; there is here no common measure, and even

⁴⁶ In a parallel and inverse manner, the actionless solitude of the contemplative could be described as "disinterested interest," at least from a certain point of view.

⁴⁷ We may recall here the text of Chaitanya, already cited, according to which he has a sole desire — to "have only devotion to Thee, from birth to birth."

the mightiest genius is nothing in comparison with this order of greatness, speaking uniquely from the point of view of human constitution and without bringing in any later spiritual consequences. Or let us take the example of the Mother of Jesus: tradition tells us that in a natural — or "supernaturally natural" — manner she possessed every virtue and all knowledge in the fullest possible degree of development; this supereminent perfection was indispensable for her role as "Co-Redemptress," but it is a case of providential ordering or cosmic bountifulness which, while necessarily joined at a certain point to Knowledge, is nonetheless not the prerequisite for it, otherwise it would be useless to speak of gnosis and to teach it to mere mortals. The "superhumanly human" perfection of the Bodhisattva is necessary, not for Knowledge as such and thus for leaving this world, but for the earthly manifestation of the Divine Principle, of the liberating Truth, of Nirvana — which is an altogether different matter; far from being exclusively directed towards the unmanifest, the properly angelic human nature of the virtual Buddha on the contrary unfolds in the cosmos, as the sun illumines the night. This, we repeat, is what renders his nature capable of transmitting that crystallization of the Infinite — or that Truth "become flesh" — which is Revelation, the seed and nourishment of a universal and millenary tradition.

To the question of whether this perfection, combined with the *Bodhi* for which it is the predisposed receptacle, constitutes a degree of Knowledge, the answer is both yes and no; it is as if one were to ask whether the samsara is real; the answer can be either affirmative or negative, depending on the viewpoint, provided that the absolute truth be acknowledged. "Every thing is Atma," no doubt, but "the world is false, *Brahman* is true," and "there is no divinity save the one Divinity." The problem basically amounts to what the "divine character" of Maya is, or the nature of Maya as "modality," "play," "unveiling" or "aspect" of the ineffable Self, of Paramatma. The supreme Knowledge attributed to the *Samyaksam-Buddha* comprises essentially three factors: the unimaginable cosmic deployment of the perfection of the Bodhisattva, then the Nirvana comprised in that perfection, and finally the "celestial weight" of Revelation, of the Dharma. As for knowing whether extra-nirvanic factors, however incomparable they may be at their respective levels, add something to Nirvana or constitute an element of principal Knowledge, this seems to be a question which metaphysically answers itself.

There is nonetheless a factor which allows one to accept, with the necessary reservations, the interpretation of the specific Illumination of the *Samyaksam-Buddha* as a degree — or as the supreme degree — of Knowledge, and it is the following: in the Bodhisattva ready to receive it, Revelation coincides with the “recollection” of the Wisdom “previously” acquired, but transitorily "forgotten" through the fact of incarnation. This "forgetfulness" or this initial opacity occurs for the simple reason that it is not in this new world of forms that the Bodhisattva had acquired his Wisdom. The passing obscuration in question is in a way comparable, in the natural order, to infancy which also transitorily veils faculties which are nonetheless pre-existing. Under the Bodhi tree there was therefore a double Illumination: On the one hand the “recollection” which was bound to occur after the inevitable gropings in a new body and in a new space, and on the other hand the Revelation accompanied by the samsaric Knowledge which characterizes the *Samyaksam-Buddha*. If we admit that the term "Buddha" can have two or more meanings, as the Mahayana obliges us to do, we must equally admit two or more kinds of *Bodhi*; there is one *Bodhi* which belongs to every Buddha, be he externally Bodhisattva or not, and there is another *Bodhi* which concerns solely the Buddha as Revealer and in which an extrinsic dimension is blended with the intrinsic *Bodhi*.⁴⁸

As we have remarked, the Bodhisattva who has become Buddha possesses absolute Knowledge not by virtue of his quality of *Samyaksam-Buddha*, but by virtue of his quality of *Arhat* or fully perfected saint; that is to say he can be — but does not have to be — a *Samyaksam-Buddha* because he possesses this Knowledge. We also pointed out that the altogether illusory opposition samsara-Nirvana exists only from the point of view of the world and is resolved in and by Nirvana and not otherwise, for there is here no possibility of any reciprocity or symmetry, so that the particular Knowledge of the Buddha in his capacity of Revealer could add nothing whatever to nirvanic Knowledge. Now it must not be lost sight of — and we have already alluded to this — that it is possible to consider the samsara under its aspect of indirect "Nirvanahood," in other words as an internal dimension of the Void or of the Infinite, and in that case one may — if need be, by observing the proper precautions and evidently in a

⁴⁸ A distinction is made, moreover, between the unconditional *Bodhi* of the Absolute and its heavenly and earthly reflections, the three levels belonging to every Buddha, according to the theory of the three "bodies" of the "Awakened."

relative sense — speak of a supreme Knowledge belonging to the *Samyaksam-Buddha* alone.⁴⁹ We will say no more of this, if only for the simple reason that it is impossible to speak adequately of the dimensions of space in planimetric terms.

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The Buddha wished at first to keep the Revelation — or the corresponding Knowledge — to himself, and it was only after the thrice repeated insistence of the gods⁵⁰ that he decided to communicate it. This initial hesitation is deeply symbolic, for it manifests an aspect of the very process of Revelation, rather like the breaking of the first Tables of the Law by Moses on Sinai. Later, the Buddha declared that he had hidden nothing, but had on the contrary made the Truth radiate as the daylight which illumines everything. These words, far from contradicting the graded plurality of meanings in the sacred teaching, as some imagine, really affirm the universality and totality of the Dharma: even the most subtle aspects of the Truth have been expressed with a clarity sufficient for "those who have ears to hear"; the Teaching has yielded all the keys necessary, if only in the form of a flower in the hand of the *Tathagata*.⁵¹ Moreover, no truth is esoteric in itself; it is so only in relation to a particular degree of understanding; now the source of incomprehension resides more often in the will than in the intelligence, which is to say the obstacles are above all of a passionate order taken in the broadest sense; and this brings us back in fact to the distinction between two kinds of limitations, the one fundamental and the other accidental, and to the problem of their entanglement within human nature, or again, in other words, to the question of knowing to what extent an apparent substance is accidental or whether an appearance of accident denotes on the contrary a substance.

⁴⁹ *Samyak* means "upright," "perfect" or "whole," while the prefix *sam* — as in the Latin words *summum* and *summa* or the German words *samt*, *zusammen*, *sammeln* — expresses the related ideas of "summit" and "totality." The scientific transcription attaches this prefix to the following word, which renders the familiar terms of *Buddha* and *Bodhi* visually somewhat indistinct. A term such as *Sambodhi* well brings out the "synthetic" character — both supreme and non-supreme — of the Enlightenment of the Founding Buddha.

⁵⁰ The *Devas*, who correspond to the angels of monotheism.

⁵¹ "He who has thus gone," a name of the Buddha.

When we say that the Buddha's Revelation is accompanied by a concrete and penetrating consciousness of the rhythms of the samsara — of the world as an indefinite chain of causes and effects — it must be clearly understood that the kind or style of this knowledge depends on the style of the Revelation which it accompanies: whatever the Revelation declares becomes immediately known to the *Avatara* without its being always possible to assign a priority, in the avataric soul, to the Knowledge itself or to the "divine fact" of the Revelation. As for the question of spiritual style, it is for example possible to know space in diverse ways and starting from different symbolisms by applying different measures: it can be known in terms of a circle, a cross, a star or a spiral and it is thus that the samsara can be known according to diverse perspectives, analogically speaking; but this science will always have a character which is no more than a "relative absoluteness," like every reflection of the absolute in the contingent.

Monotheism seems to teach that the world has a beginning and not an end whereas Buddhism seems to assert no less paradoxically that the world has an end, but had no beginning. The above remark made by a Buddhist to the writer calls for the following comment: the answer to both difficulties is contained in the idea of Apocatastasis, which satisfies the demands of both the above metaphysics by bringing creation to an end — but without annihilation, quite the contrary — and by realizing the humanly impossible ideal of the Bodhisattvas. When Buddhists admit that the samsara will come to an end thanks to the Bodhisattvas and Buddhas who will have saved "all sentient beings" down to the last one, they implicitly attribute the final reintegration to the *Adi-Buddha*, the universal or divine Buddha whose Act is in effect identified with the transmutative Logos. In other words, the Apocatastasis or *Mahapralaya* is the *Bodhi* — the passage to the state of Buddha — of all celestial Bodhisattvas, such as Avalokiteshvara, Manjusrî, Kshitigarbha, Akâshagarbha; the nirvanic light which submerges, penetrates, transmutes and devours the samsara is their Enlightenment saving the Universe; and in fact it is through the celestial Essences that this Light will act, before reabsorbing them in their turn in its infinite Silence.

In Buddhism, which is refractory to speculations of a cerebral literalism, language seeks to communicate or catalyze a state of "being" rather than of "thinking": understanding and being tend to merge as far as this is possible, whence the wide use of *upayas*, "instrumental concepts," the justification of which is not so much a truth conceived in the abstract as an inward transformation and a kind of existential intuition, if such a paradox be permissible. Thus the idea

of the Bodhisattva has for its aim above all to destroy egotism and then the ego itself; perhaps the Mahayana at bottom reproaches its Southern opponents less with an imperfection of doctrine than with one of method; that is to say it considers that the ideal of *Bodhi* is in practice unrealizable without the ideal of the Bodhisattva which alone is capable of cutting the Gordian knot of egoity. Other views can assuredly be held on this point, but however that may be, if the Bodhisattva is supposed to save all sentient beings, this indicates above all a total gift of self, hence a perfect victory over the ego. Compassion then appears as the criterion of authenticity of Knowledge, as is the case with love in Christian gnosis,⁵² for which wisdom without love is but "sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal." Love is that which enables "understanding" to pass into "being," or that which attaches us ontologically to Truth and thus opens us to the transforming magic of the Symbol.

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By way of conclusion, let us return and give precision to some fundamental ideas. The Bodhisattva could not accumulate innumerable merits and thereby an inexhaustible karma if he were not inwardly a Buddha and freed, as such, from transgression; it is because he can no longer fall into sin or passion that the Bodhisattva gains uninterrupted merits and realizes sublime perfections; the sacrificial actions attributed to him symbolize both his perfections — the *Paramitas* — and the sacrifice which his samsaric condition represents. What distinguishes the Bodhisattva from the Buddha is not necessarily an inferior knowledge — as we have said — but the fact of being in the samsara, or more precisely of being there in a certain fashion and as a matter of principle. The terrestrial Buddha is distinguished from the Bodhisattvas by the fact that a celestial "Word" has become incarnate in him and that he has thus obtained the function of founding a religion — to use Western terms — and of leaving transmigration thereafter; the one does not go without the other, for he who has effected an "exit" out of this world must henceforth

⁵² We specify that here it is a question of gnosis, since for the way of love, which more often than not coincides with a relative exoterism, this is self-evident.

keep watch over this Path and has no further function to exercise with regard to "sentient beings."⁵³

There are, in short, four realities to be envisaged: Samsara, Nirvana, the Bodhisattva and the Buddha; the latter may be described, in his capacity of *Tathagata* as "Samsara entered into Nirvana," while the Bodhisattva is on the contrary and in principle "Nirvana present in Samsara." It has also been said that the Buddha represents the contemplative aspect and the Bodhisattva the dynamic aspect of Nirvana, or that the former is turned towards the Absolute and the latter towards contingency. The Buddha is a ray coming forth from the Center and returning to it, and the Bodhisattva is a circle projecting the Center into the periphery; the Buddha enlightens or saves by radiation, while the Bodhisattva saves by a spiral movement. Or again, the Buddha transmits Light or Knowledge "vertically," while the Bodhisattva manifests "horizontally" Warmth, Compassion, Mercy.

The Buddha manifests the truth that "samsara is Nirvana"; and the Bodhisattva the truth that "Nirvana is samsara"; but it could also be said that each manifests both truths after his own fashion, according to the aspect or function which is dominant in each case. This amounts to saying that Bodhisattva and Buddha alike are manifestations at once free and necessary of the *Adi-Buddha* or of *Maha-Vairochana*.

⁵³ The Mahayana is sometimes presented as being the doctrine, not of the earthly Buddha — hence in the *Nirmanakaya* — as is the case with the Hinayana, but of the "divine Buddha," in the *Dharmakaya*. What is absolutely certain is that in no case could the Mahayanic sutras be of human origin and reflect an "evolution" of any kind, whatever their dialectical means may be.