

*The Narrow Door and the Great Vehicle,
from the early Christians to the Bodhisattvas,
Revelations on the Origins of the Mahâyâna*

extracts

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Introduction

"Southern Buddhism, it is true, comes from Buddha; but the Mahâyâna doctrine, which underlies northern Buddhism, only dates back to the 1st century after Christ. It developed in the frontier districts between India and Central Asia, where Greek and Brahmanic ideas intermingled and its doctrine are so much akin to Christianity than to the religion of the son of the Çakyas."

Herman de Keyserling, The Travel Diary of a Philosopher (I), during a trip to India in 1911,

History, archaeology, iconography, etymology, mythology, theology, buddhology, and intuition

Buddhism (or Buddha's Dharma): the way of salvation from the World's universal suffering brought by Buddha in the 6th century B.C.

Mahâyâna: Spiritual revolution occurred in Buddhism in the 1st century A.D. without official explanation.

In this book, I would like to expose a certain number of converging facts, whose archaeological, iconographic, etymological, theological and chronological elements available today demonstrate a wonderful similarity and simultaneity between the apparition of Buddhism of the Great Vehicle, or Mahâyâna (we will have ample time to present its fundamental values) in the first century A.D., within the Indo-Greek kingdom of Gandhâra that occupied a part of present-day Afghanistan and Pakistan, and that of Christianity in the Middle East. A process in which Zoroastrianism and Taoism also played an important role.

This volume is not a work of hijacking but of rehabilitation. Not the rehabilitation or the promotion of a particular church, but of men who spread a message of universal love that certainly reached the Indian world very soon and left, probably, traces there.

In a historical research, all the available means of investigation are necessary: archaeology, statuary, arts, texts, myths, oral traditions, ancient trade routes, but we also have to know how to both dive into details, and take distance again, to use both erudition and common sense, to keep in mind the historical trends in the medium and long term, the decisive moments and the strong markers of change. Intuition, now recognized by Science, was very important in my work, I will talk about it.

In the study of the relations and encounters between the Middle East and the Buddhist world, these landmarks will offer the right understanding, together with global views in time and in representations. It is not necessary to immerse oneself infinitely in the details in which we will obviously find differences, because the spaces, cults and local cultures crossed over the centuries are numerous and have necessarily generated the infinite nuances and versions that make us forget today the strong similarities between Christianity and Mahâyâna and the simultaneity of their births and their evolutions. More than ever, the analogy of the map or the kingdom imposes itself here: from afar, when one knows neither their history nor their architecture, Christianity and Mahâyâna seem absolutely opposed. And when we learn about the chronology and the cartography of the two ways, with a comparative study of arts, dogmas, creeds etc. it becomes evident that they are brothers and

sisters from the same lineage for half of their history. But someone looking for an identity in the smallest details, despite the changing backgrounds, languages, customs, modes in both cases, will logically lose the original process, because of the focus on the results of the necessary evolutions in many distant places in space in time: this is the consequence and unfortunately, I have to say, one of the hidden goals of hyperspecialization, that makes one forget to be in the middle, and to be a part, of a road and a novel... Even the study of American Protestantism and Russian Orthodoxy, for example, in the smallest details, by someone who would ignore their common origin, could lead to the conclusion that they are the cults of different gods, taking into account the differences in terms, iconography, or the absence of representation, internal organization, the presence or absence of the Virgin Mary, the cult of the saints, the differences in calendars...

With regard to the desire for an absolute and definitive demonstration, I would say that one must be careful not to accept too little evidence or clues, as well as to demand more than is possible, for the simple reason that an emerging religion, in search of respectability and a better equipped theology, when integrating elements of a previous cult, renaming them or repainting them with its own colours, will almost never keep their memory in its archives, and will rather prefer to rewrite a legend in which the gods, heroes or places of pagan worship will have the names, facts, deeds and forms of the new official faith.

The question of mutual influences between Christianity and Buddhism

When I sent Edgar Morin the result of my research on the subject of the possible influence of Christianity on the origins of the Great Buddhist Vehicle, the old philosopher asked his very kind secretary to reply to me: "Why not? And why not the opposite?": "Pourquoi pas, et pourquoi pas l'inverse?" Similarly, Robert Thurman, a former professor at the University of Columbia, the first Western monk ordained by the Dalai Lama (and father of the actress Uma Thurman), told me, after listening to my presentation in May 2018 in the Tibet House in New York that he had founded with the Tibetan spiritual leader and Richard Gere, : "Jesus and Avalokiteshvara are the same person, that's for sure. "Jesus and Avalokiteshvara are the same person, that's for sure," adding that it remained to determine the sense of influence.

I replied to Edgar Morin and Bob Thurman that the Kushan Empire, the syncretistic terrain of the apparition of the Great Vehicle, included Gandhâra, mentioned above, where Greek and Aramaic were spoken, an area strongly Hellenized by Alexander's conquests, while the Mediterranean world bore no sign of Buddhism. It was Raphaël Liogier's thesis that Buddhism could influence the message of Christ (*Jésus et Bouddha*, Calmann Levy, 1999, *untranslated*) but Guillaume Ducoeur (*Revue des sciences religieuses*, 2000, vol. 74, n°3 p.407), rightly pointed out the author's quotations that mixed the Vehicle of the Elderly, that is, the Buddhist schools in the historical continuation of the teachings and the first disciples of Buddha since the 6th century B.C. (with their already existing divisions), and the Great Vehicle, without taking into account the chronology of the texts, whose importance is paramount.

On the other hand, always with regard to the geographical and historical sense of the influences between Buddhism and Christian faith, when observing the birth of Christianity within Judaism, no Buddhist elements appear. Nor in the Qumrân manuscripts, when one thinks of an influence of the spirituality of the sect of the Dead Sea Essenes on Jesus and his cousin John the Baptist before him. Instead, what appears as innovative in Buddhism in the heart of the Kushan Empire in the 1st century A.D. resembles in a shocking way the history and message of Christ. And the Mahâsânghika and Sarvâstivâda schools in Gandhâra cannot explain the sudden and very rich emergence of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and the new Buddhist "theology" in the 1st century of the Christian era.

(...)

Buddhism : a philosophy, a spirituality and a religion

Because of the historical hegemony of the Roman Catholic Church and its alliances with secular powers, Buddhism has been indirectly and partly hijacked in the last decades as a means of fighting the catholic faith, using the qualities of rational and dialectical philosophy of the Buddha's Dharma, its "atheism", its "modernity", all of which are more compatible with the secular Republic. I am aware of such unformulated ideological struggles, which do more harm than good and generate stereotypes in both religious and secular sides.

Buddhism, as a way of Awakening and Liberation from suffering, is in fact usually considered by us, as rational and reasonable Westerners, an atheistic and esthetic philosophy or spirituality, and not a religion, which ensures its privileged respectability. Buddhists are generally careful not to contradict us, even if their texts and rituals are full of divinities, Buddhas, masters, invisible genies or guardians invoked by singing, prayer and incense, and sometimes interpreted as aspects, symbols of human energies and psychological tendencies to be coordinated within the practitioner to improve himself on the Way. But solipsism - a mental attitude consisting in considering our life and the universe as a projection of our individual mind - and anthropocentrism, threaten the exclusive use of this interpretation: the Buddhists cannot reasonably deny the existence of invisible forces independent of their own mind or the human mind in general without affirming once again Man's position as the only conscious and thinking creature of Creation... In the same way, even if Buddhism actually denies the existence of an anthropomorphic God and Creator, and moreover a God intervening in human affairs by giving us a unique Son from his chosen people. And Buddha is also supposed to have refused to answer metaphysical questions about the origins of the Universe... However, in Mahâyâna there are cosmologies, and also cosmogonies, sometimes beautiful and suggestive, as in Dzogchen, for which the Universe was at the beginning a vessel filled with Wisdom and Compassion, whose walls melted as the world manifested itself, while some consciences plunged into ignorance and desire when others remained aware of their own nature. On the subject of the connection between the person and the Universe, Roland Yuno Rech, a famous French Zen master I questioned during a sesshin (seminar of Zen practices and teachings), at the time of the Mondo (questions and answers in front of the sangha, the Buddhist community), finally granted me that one could speak of Cosmic Consciousness to designate the awakened Spirit, the Bodhi. Certainly, with Dzogchen, which appeared in the 8th century A.D., right in the ancient territories of Gandhâra, or with Zen (the Japanese form of Ch'an, whose birth is traced back to China in the 6th or 7th century AD), we are far in time from the birth of Buddhism in the 6th century B.C. Nevertheless, these two ways still belong to this vast field of Buddhism qualified with "philosophy" and are practised by millions of people worldwide.

The Transcendence of the Buddhist Dharma, from the beginning

But above all, if we consider the term *religion*, in its double and discussed etymology of *connecting* or *rereading*, Buddhism as a whole is truly a spiritual path that connects the human being to himself and to others, to the Creation and to a metaphysical dimension, Nirvâna, detaching him from the material dependencies and weaknesses of our condition, and proposing to follow a salvific path by escaping the eternal return of reincarnations. Samsâra, the flow of these rebirths, and Nirvâna, the extinction of the cycle of reincarnations, presuppose, since the Buddhism of the Origins, a metaphysics and a transcendence. The Noble Eightfold Path is generated as naturally by the understanding of the Four Noble Truths that we will soon discover. To remember if necessary these

two pillars of the Buddhist Dharma, and to confirm if one wanted the second sense of religion, there are fundamental texts surrounded by immense respect, transmitted orally, then in writing, and studied for two and a half millennia, from the brief collection of sayings of the Buddha - the Dhammapada - up to the enormous canon of the texts of the Mahâyâna and the Vajrayâna.

I

I century B.C. - I century A.D.,

the gradual emergence of the Mahâyâna in the Indo-Greek Gandhâra:
a general picture

From Buddhism of the Origins to Mahâyâna

According to Buddhist historians, the Mahâyâna or Great Vehicle appeared and developed between the 1st century B.C. and the beginning of the 1st century A.D., in the regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan, within the Kushan Empire. At the time of Buddha, according to the Mahâyâna, humanity was not yet ready to receive the teachings that the Great Vehicle took care of transmitting with the sūtras of the early centuries of our era, which we will see in this study. We can wonder, remaining in this logic, if Christianity has not contributed to this preparation.

Let us remember that the Buddhist Dharma, the teaching of the Law of Buddha, did not really enter Tibet until the 7th century A.D., more than a thousand years after the birth of Prince Siddhârtha Gautama Shakyamuni (circa 566 - 486 or 483 B.C.) in present-day Nepal. When we talk about Mahâyâna Buddhism, we think first of all of the Dalai-Lama and the various Tibetan schools, but Chinese Ch'an and Japanese Zen are an important part of it.

Mahâyâna differs from Hīnayâna - Small Vehicle - term to which we prefer Theravâda – the Way of the Elders - for its important corpus of texts, the new dogmas, the new Buddhas and the new deities, the messianism that suddenly arose in the mentioned period, the devotion that would allow salvation, and for the ideal of the bodhisattva that renounces Nirvâna out of compassion for Humanity and for all creatures. We have seen in introduction that Buddhism of the Origins is one of the terms for the tradition that goes back to the Buddha through Buddhist texts and schools. This very varied Buddhism, called Hīnayâna, Theravâda or even more recently Nikâya (Grouping, Volume), mainly set emphasis on individual salvation and on the ideal of the arhat to dissolve in Nirvâna. The new Mahayanistic aspiration and insistence to save all living beings must therefore never be forgotten and put in parallel with the advent of a new prophet and the simultaneous events in Palestine. On the other hand, as well in Theravada that in Mahâyâna, Buddhism has always been a spiritual way that led its disciples to proselytism understood as the will to save the soul - a questionable word for Buddhists - or the destiny of others.

The path of Buddha

Discovering, during a visit to his city, suffering, old age, illness and death, Siddhârtha Gautama Shâkyamuni, "He who achieves the goal, the ascetic who vows of silence, of the Muni clan", had left the royal palace where his father wanted him to spend all his life to become a great ruler. His father's palace was an illusory paradise very similar to the garden of Eden where Elohim had created man and

woman, without suffering, but forbidding them knowledge and life. After renouncing the kingdom, his wife and his son, Siddhârta imposed on himself the most difficult physical and mental challenges. In vain. He understood that he was perhaps going to die, and certainly fail, in his attempt to free himself from the fatality of the human condition. He sat under a tree, accepted the rice offer of the young Sujâtâ, took a bath and his beggar's bowl that went up the stream of the Naranjana river was for him the sign that he would reach the Awakening. He sat down again under the Pipal tree and swore not to get up until he had done so. In a scene from *Little Buddha* (1993), by Bernardo Bertolucci, a veena master, - veena a stringed instrument a little similar to sitar -, passes by at that moment with his disciple on a boat. The guru (master) teaches his seesha (disciple): "If the string of the instrument is not taut enough, the sound is not good. If it's too tight, neither." Getting he had done so with his body and mind, preventing his innate Nature to express, Siddhârta understood the Middle Way, the Madhyâmika. It was the second time that music had set him on the path: when he was still in his father's palace, he felt the nostalgia of the origins, the call for something greater than the pleasures of the court, when he heard a woman singing accompanied by the tempura, another Indian string instrument. *Little Buddha* again is staging this anecdote, and I haven't found a written trace of it. But many oral traditions were not, and the importance of art is never to be forgotten in the research as in the transmission of the Awakening: the monks of the sangha had a cyst to accompany their wanderings and their sermons...

Insensitive to the attacks of Mara, the god of death and desire, Siddhârta reached the Awakening in three nights. In the first, he saw all his previous lives; in the second, he understood the mechanism of Karma; and in the third, during the full moon of the month of Wesak (sign of Taurus in relation to Venus) he had a complete understanding of the impermanent and conditioned nature of all phenomena. He was still tempted by Mara not to reveal to men what he had understood, because he thought no one would have believed or followed him... but the gods told him to do it and so, after weeks of hesitation, he finally decided: "Everything I have understood, I will teach it".

The solution to universal suffering - Duhkha - discovered by the Buddha through the practice of meditation and the Eightfold Noble Path as a whole, this great medicine and this hope could not be kept secret. It was necessary to put an end to the thirst for existence in order to free Human kind from suffering and gain access to Nirvâna, the liberating Extinction.

The Four Noble Truths, common to the Mahâyâna and the Theravâda proclaim : everything is suffering; suffering comes from the thirst for existence: the thirst for existence comes from ignorance; and the solution to ignorance is the Noble Eightfold Path.

The Noble Eightfold Path, which is equally common to the two vehicles, consists of straight vision, straight resolution (or thought), straight word, straight action, straight means of subsistence (or livelihood), straight effort, straight awareness (or mental presence), straight concentration.

The monks, or Bhikshu (Bhikku in pâli, the language spoken in Nepal at the time) followed the example of Buddha, traveling the world to preach the Dharma, as Christ's disciples were sent everywhere to announce the Good News. So it is a mistake to say that Buddhism is not a way of proselytizing. One can refuse to call it religion to distinguish it from monotheistic or polytheistic religions, emphasizing its atheism, and recognizing the absence of violence in its proselytism – although we should ask the Bön tribes of Tibet, the shamans of China, Mongolia and other parts of the world what they thought about it in the early centuries of our era... But the Dharma of Buddha has been preached, and was supposed to be preached, from the beginning, to anyone who wanted to hear it.

Let us not enter into the debates that opposed through history the faithful of the Great Vehicle who reproached, among other things, their selfishness to those of the Little Vehicle, while the latter judged the new Mahâyâna less heroic and not in conformity with the Dharma... On the importance of bodhisattva, I remember a dialogue in Turin between Dai Do Strumia, disciple of the Zen Mahayanist

master Deshimaru, and sensei (elder, teacher) of the Cerchio Vuoto (The Empty Circle), the Zen center of the Piedmontese city, and Roberto Profumo, disciple of U Pandita, a famous Burmese master of Vipassanâ (Theravâda), a method of meditation dating back to the tradition of the Buddha himself. Both quietly dismissed the discussion saying that to reach Nirvâna, Mahayanists or Theravadists had to do many positive things by helping a lot of people or showing great compassion.

The Mahâyâna and the bodhisattva before and after Christ: the confusion between words and deeds

As mentioned above, the direct causes of the emergence of the Great Vehicle are not really known by the Buddhist historians, who are not satisfied even in general with the Mahayanist explanation of the need for a maturation of Humanity before the second turn of the wheel. In his sum *Le Grand livre du Bouddhisme* (Albin Michel, 2007, p. 160 and 161 - *The Great Book of Buddhism*, untranslated), Alain Grosrey writes:

"The Mahayana is not a movement within the Sangha. Rather, it is a new sensibility without a founder. It does not depend on a unique monastic community, nor on a specific geographical area. (...) The expression "Buddhism of the Origins" may at this point appear improper. It may let us think that Mahayana is truly posterior. Reality is less linear and more complex. When one is interested in dating texts, he notes the randomness of each form of close chronology. "

Le Dictionnaire de la Sagesse Orientale (Bouquins, Robert Laffont, 1989) a collective work, states in a little contradictory way, in the article *Buddhism* :

"I century A.D.: the advent of the Mahâyâna with the two currents of the Mâdhyamika and the Yogachâra"

And in the article *Mahâyâna* instead:

"The Mahâyâna (...) emerged in the first century B.C.

For the community of Buddhist teachers as a whole, the Great Vehicle would have begun to emerge in the first century B.C. within the Mahâsânghika and Sarvâstivâda schools, which we will discuss shortly. *Le Dictionnaire de la Sagesse Orientale* just cited thus recalls that the term *bodhisattva* already existed in the Hinayâna:

"The concept of Bodhisattva is certainly already found in the Hinayan writings that describe the historical Buddha Shâkyamuni in his previous existences (Jataka). In the Mahâyâna, the interpretation of the Bodhisattva is based on the belief in future Buddhas that exist and have been operating for some time as Bodhisattvas."

And the authors then distinguish the terrestrial bodhisattvas, notable for their mercy, their altruism and their aspiration to become Buddhas, on the one hand, and on the other hand, the transcendent bodhisattvas who have already reached the Supreme Wisdom, the condition of Buddha and dedicate themselves in many ways to helping beings. Among the transcendent bodhisattvas, there are those we will study in the following pages.

The distinction made by *Le Dictionnaire de la Sagesse orientale* as well as by Buddhist historians on the concept of bodhisattva should however also be applied to the Mahâyâna.

First of all, it has not been documented that the supposed "Mahâyâna" of the first century B.C. was called as such by the Mahâsânghika and Sarvâstivâda schools: the term Mahâyâna appears for the first time in the *Prajñâpâramitâ in 8000 lines*, whose dating, between the first century B.C. or A.D., is discussed.

And, even if the word Mahâyâna before Christ had existed, such Mahâyâna had not produced in a verifiable and documentable way, any historical sūtra, nor any mention, nor statue of Avalokiteshvara, Amitâbha, Maitreya before the middle of the first century of our era.

I seize the opportunity of this paragraph to clarify that, since the words *buddha* and *bodhisattva* are often used to designate Avalokiteshvara, Maitreya and other important figures of the Great Vehicle without distinction, I, too, will use both terms to vary the expression.

(...)

The beginnings of the Hellenization of the North-West Indian World, Ashoka and Darius

We have placed some chronological landmarks about the Mahâyâna before and after Christ. Let us now go back a little further in time to understand how the meeting between Greece and India had taken place.

After reaching the Indus River in 326 B.C., Alexander's armies quickly withdrew, leaving cities and men, an entire silt that would blend with the lands of the East. Several empires took advantage of the upheavals caused by the Macedonian and "Son of Zeus" according to the Egyptian oracle of Siwa. The first was the Maurya Empire, originally from Magadha, the current Bihâr. King Chandragupta defeated Seleukos Nikatôr, the direct heir to a part of Alexander's conquests, on the banks of the Indus. He ruled from 324 to 297 and continued to Afghanistan. Bindusara succeeded Chandragupta, then came Ashoka (circa 304-232) who converted to Buddhism after a last and terrible victory against Kalinga (now Orissa), a few hundred kilometers south of Kolkata. This battle morally destroyed the "son of the Maurya" who had fought with extreme violence to enlarge the territory of his dynasty, extending it from Afghanistan to Bengal and southern India. He was therefore also, let's stress it, the heir and the continuer of the junction between the Hellenistic, the Persian and the Indian worlds.

Ashoka, the Maurya emperor, prepared in some way, after Alexander, the meeting between Christianity and Buddhism, respectively departing from Palestine and Magadha, as Alexander had realized that of the Greek world with the Indian world. I am not Hegelian and I do not want to justify the wars of the conquerors. I prefer to them travel, human exchanges and trade when they are fair. But the empires of Alexander and Ashoka had, like rivers in flood, shifted the borders. Ashoka had probably been at the origin of the creation of the road that linked the two furthest points of his empire, namely Afghanistan and Bengal, through the mountains and then the Indian plains. This route would later become, under the English Raj, the Grand Trunk Road. In *Alessandro Magno e gli imperi ellenistici*, (Solferino, 2018 - *Alexander the Great and the Hellenistic Empires*, untranslated), Franca Landucci, professor of Ancient World History at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan, speaks of the removal of Hellenism in contemporary history, denouncing the forgetting of its enormous influence on subsequent centuries until today. The syncretism without domination desired by Alexander with all the same rights to the citizens of the Empire gathered by the Koyne, the Hellenizing cultural community, was a phenomenon never mentioned before, and prepared the ground for Christianity, explains the Milanese scholar. In reality, Darius the Great (circa 550-486 B.C.), the Achaemenid king, two centuries before, ruled an empire that stretched from the Indus valley to the Balkans, including Egypt, and had a conception of its subjects that for some aspects inspired Alexander who dreamt of a world without borders. And perhaps the Kushan Empire was its heir and passer-by with a Great Vehicle that integrated the best of every culture and to make it an instrument of peace.

(...)

The mutual influences between East and West and their lessons

The chronological and geographical sense of the genesis of the writings, from Aramaic to Brâhmî and Devanâgarî, is contrary to the idea that the most ancient influences would inevitably come from the East, because of the immemorial migrations of peoples. As in the case of Greco-Buddhist art, as in the case of the spoken use of Greek and Aramaic as languages of commerce, power and culture, we are therefore faced with an East-West direction documented by archaeology. It does not contradict, but relativizes the unilateral influence of thought as coming from the East, implying the possibility of a Buddhist influence on Christianity for some writers, and expresses for me this truth: the West has regularly sent back to the East its legacy, in a more material, documented and *concrete* form, in the almost geological meaning of the word. The tribes that left the Asian or Middle Eastern womb crossed continents, rivers, seas and returned to their origins, sometimes millennia later, in search of themselves, as demonstrated by the discovery and conquest of India by the westernmost countries: Portugal, Holland, England, France, who tried to fulfill the turn of the wheel They revealed to the World, centuries later, in the most scientific way possible, through the study of languages, myths, archeology, genetics, arts, what their Asiatic ancestors had preserved orally. Playing on words, without relation to etymology, I like to say that *bodhi*, thought, the awakened mind in Sanskrit, became *body* in English, on the other side of the world, in the materialistic West, which assumed - at a certain moment of Humanity, precisely - the mission of writing history and exploring the Earth and *Physis*, Nature, while the East remained the guardian of the Spirit and the memory of Eternity, Metaphysics and Infinity. Of course, I'm talking about what happened a few centuries ago, and I know very well that China and India have entered in some ways into the most unbridled modernity. However, both their spirituality and their medicine still preserve, for example, the memory of the bond between the One and the All, a whole that is natural and metaphysical, and the objective of the Reunification of Body and Spirit.

(...)

On the historical maps of the spread of Christianity in the first centuries of our era

I mentioned this point in the introduction: the maps depicting the spread of Christianity in the early centuries often stop at the borders of the Roman Empire and ignore the land trade routes that linked it to Persia and the Kushan Empire, among other things. In 314 A.D., when Constantine gathered a council in Arles, an ephemeral but influential primatial of Gaul, three Bretton bishops - from the island of Brittany, the future England - introduced themselves there, accompanied by a priest and a deacon. A bishop from Galicia also took part. These were very remote places, certainly included in the Empire, but it is impossible that Christian communities have not established themselves elsewhere. If Nero attributed the fire in Rome to the Christians in 64 CE, it means that this "Jewish sect" was already quite famous beyond the limits of Palestine, Egypt, Turkey or Syria. The fact that ancient Christian authors did not mention churches in Gandhâra does not mean absence, as we shall soon see. Today's scholars, who do not show great curiosity about the subject, prolong the ancient religious attitude.

(...)

The Sarâstivâdin or the simultaneous existence of all phenomena

At the time of the Kushans, the Sarvâstivâdin school was particularly present in Kashmir and Gandhâra where it had somehow taken refuge, after the preference given by Ashoka to the

"distinctiveness" of the Shtaviras in 244 BC, during the Patâliputra Council. We shall now try to understand whether the Sarvâstivâdin could really have a decisive influence on the transformation of the Mahâyâna and the great variety of cults and dogmas that appeared in the first century A.D.

The Sarvâstivâda doctrine was formerly included in the Theravâda and affirmed the simultaneous reality of all past, present and future phenomena. The *Dictionnaire de la Sagesse orientale* explains (p 354) :

"The doctrine of Sarvâstivâda professes a radical pluralism, based on the denial of the reality of a Self, of a substance or of a soul (...) and on the affirmation of the existence of simultaneous units, the so-called Dharmas. (...) these Dharmas are not born, but exist, always, and change only from one condition latent to a manifest condition. (...) In Sarvâstivâda there is, moreover, a first form of the Mahayan doctrine of the trikâya and faith in the future Buddha, which will become increasingly important."

Taking into account the Persian culture and Hellenism encountered by the Sarvâstivâda in their exile to the west of the Indian world, it is very likely that the rise and development in their bosom of the faith in Maitreya is the result of the aggregation of the cult of Mithra which they expected to return, with the growing expectation of the *parusia* of Christ that Christians spread everywhere with great exaltation in the first decades of our era. The direct influence of Mithra on the Sarvâstivâda can be affirmed, but as far as Christianity is concerned, one should be able to date precisely the texts or beliefs of the Buddhist school, which is not possible today, since the dates are estimated between the first century B.C. Let us anyway remember this "faith in the future Buddha that will become increasingly important" and that the inevitable presence of Christian missionaries in the Kushan Empire may have greatly helped. As Jesus said in the Gospel after describing the events of the last days:

"Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. » *Luke 21,32-33(New International Version)*

The common points between Persian and Christian eschatology are such that it was easy for the Sarvâstivâda to unite the two Messianic expectations with that of a Buddha of the Future with a Persian name and a characteristic, love and friendship, marked both by Mithra and by Christ.

The spirit and forms of Sarvâstivâda are found in the Tantrism of Kashmir, or Shivaism of Kashmir, a non-dualistic Hindu spiritual way that emerged precisely in the same region, unless we consider that the Sarvâstivâdin integrated and revealed to the world a vision that was earlier, inherited from the ancient tantra still secrets – it is the point of view of the French professor Târâ Michaël. Kashmir Tantrism was revealed in northern India when Buddhism was invaded by Islamic warriors from the 10th and 11th centuries. Two centuries later, the Ganges plain would be entirely under the Muslim rule, and the legendary University of Nâlânda would be destroyed around the end of the 12th century and the beginning of the 13th centuries. Unlike Vedânta, for whom everything is illusion and "reality" does not exist from the point of view of the Absolute, Kashmir Shivaism considers that all Dharmas, phenomena, have a degree of reality, relative but effective. Shivaism uses the same term, Dharma, and the same classification as Sarvâstivâda.

The Mahâsânghika School

The other current supposed to be fundamental in the rise of Mahâyâna is formed by the Mahâsânghika that came out of the third council of Pâtaliputra (circa 250 A.D.). Considered to be at the forefront of

idealistic ontology and Mahâyâna Buddhology, the Mahâsânghika schools taught that everything is illusion, both Samsâra and Nirvâna, and nothing has a substance in itself, which contradicts the realistic conception of Shtavira. For the Mahâsânghika, the Buddha is a supernatural being - Lokottara - with an absolutely pure body and spirit. According to the *Dictionnaire de la Sagesse Orientale*, this idea of the Buddha staying above the world is at the origin of the transcendental Buddha of the Mahâyâna. For the Mahâsânghika, the Buddha is endowed with an unlimited body, unlimited power and unlimited life, he is omniscient, he dwells in an eternal Samâdhi, and the bodhisattvas can decide to be reborn in a difficult condition to relieve the sufferings of the inhabitants of the Inferno and awaken with the Dharma the possibility of leaving this dimension.

The reasons for a fragmentation: some hypotheses on the processes of integration of Christianity into Mahâyâna

In Sarvâstivâda Mahâsânghika schools, there are certainly metaphysical concepts and the value of Great Compassion, present in Mahâyâna, but these are not the concepts and cults that will revolutionize the Buddhism of the Origins giving it the form it took in the first century A.D... In fact, the problem in assessing the influence of Sarvâstivâda and Mahâsânghika on the birth of Mahâyâna, after the Council of Patâlîputra, can be summarized as did the sinologist and Buddhist Bart Dessein of the University of Ghent in the online article of *oxfordbibliographies.com*, saying that of their later history until the holding of a famous council in Kashmir, during the reign of King Kushana Kanishka (2nd century CE), *our knowledge is only fragmentary*.

This knowledge is fragmentary for two reasons in my opinion: because there was a historical fracture and because this fracture was not written by a historiography, in the absence of a political or institutional will within the schools mentioned.

Let us ask ourselves a little more deeply. The real historical fracture, after the Sarvâstivâda and the Mahâsânghika, was that, clear and frankly innovative, documented by the sculptures and texts, of the blossoming of the new Buddhas, teachings and cults just recalled in the first century A.D. And the fact that this fracture was not written may derive from the somewhat embarrassing integration of external elements into the original Dharma and into the metaphysics of both schools. The first Christians, organized in missions or in their spontaneous sermons, had reached the Kushan Empire from the beginning, on the Silk Road, in the first half of the 1st century, through the caravans of merchants. Why Jesus, their Man and God (like other Indian or Greek heroes of Antiquity) wouldn't have been integrated into the vast pantheon of the Kushana where we should ask who did not have his place?

(...)

II

The Lotus Sûtra:

Avalokiteshvara and the first pillars of the Mahâyâna

between origins and eschatology

Before getting to know Avalokiteshvara through the Tibetan traditions that are now the most widespread, one cannot avoid the question of the texts and lands of appearance of the Buddha of Great Compassion, that is, the *Lotus Sûtra*, *the Heart Sûtra* and the Gandhâra. In this chapter, starting from the texts, we will discover the fundamental *Lotus Sûtra*.

The progressive elaboration of the Lotus Sûtra

There are many things that deserve to be noted in the *Lotus Sûtra*, a very long text in which every chapter has a part in prose and one in verse, more or less repeating the same teachings or prophecies or counting the same extraordinary scenes. In his introduction to the translation by Luciana Meazza, Francesco Sferra, of the Orientale - the University of Oriental Studies of Naples (*Il Sutra del Loto*, introduction by Francesco Sferra, translation and notes from the Sanskrit by Luciana Meazza, Bur, 2016, untranslated), confirms that the Mahâyânâ emerged "around the beginning of the Christian era" and puts the emphasis on the multiple versions of the text, sometimes contradictory: there were at least four successive revised versions, to which the prose was added. He concludes (I translate):

"Linguistic and historical considerations, as well as ancient testimonies and quotations, seem to confirm this hypothesis; in this way it is plausible that the oldest parts of the text were composed between the end of the first century B.C. and the end of the first century A.D. (chap. I-XIX, XVII), and that the sûtra has reached its final form around the end of the second century A.D., probably in the Gandhâra or somewhere near Kapiśa (now Begram), in Afghanistan. (p 18)

If this were the case, the *Lotus Sûtra* could confirm the meeting between the schools that came out of the Council of Patâliputra before Christ and the new Christian teachings after Christ.

(...)

The beginning of the Sûtra: the prophecy of Maitreya and the Future Land

In a quite relevant way, the first chapter of the Lotus Sûtra opens with the prophecy of the coming of Maitreya, the Buddha of the Future, who was once a disciple called Yaśaskâma, mediocre and greedy for fame, but who had met many buddhas and performed many good deeds. Maitreya, already present in the Sûtra however, questions Mañjushrî about the reason for the miracle of the Buddha in which a single ray of light comes out of the tuft of hair between his eyebrows. Let's notice this opening of the *Lotus Sûtra* with the presence of two very important Mahâyâna bodhisattvas: Mañjushrî for the revelation of the new Supreme Wisdom to the Buddha's disciples through lightning, and Maitreya for eschatology.

In chapter III, we find precisely the evocation of a Land of the Future that clearly evokes the Apocalypse with the heavenly Jerusalem, dotted with gems, home of God among men, and the Tree of Life with miraculous fruits.

"After an inconceivable and unmeasurable number of kalpa has passed, during the kalpa Prabhûtaratna, the world called Viraja, the pure field of the Supreme among men, will come.

Within a period inconceivable and immense there shall be an Æon rich in jewels (or, the Æon jewel-rich), and a sphere named Viraga, the pure field of the highest of men; 26. And its ground will consist of lapis lazuli, and be set off with gold threads; it will have hundreds of jewel trees, very beautiful, and covered with blossoms and fruits. 25-26 (*Saddharma-Pundarîka or the lotus of the Good Law*, translated by H. Kern (1884), Sacred Books of the East, Vol XXI)

The beginning of the devotion to a Buddha "father" and Protector as a means of Salvation

The Lotus Sûtra attributes enormous value to devotion through the recommendation of its infinite recitations which is fundamentally new in Buddhism. It is also entirely pervaded by the miraculous destined to arouse emotion and asserts that, in crisis situations, it is possible to have recourse directly to the Buddha, who explains himself in chapter III:

« In the same manner, Sâriputra, I, the great Seer, am the protector and father of all beings, and all creatures who, childlike, are captivated by the pleasures of the triple world, are my sons ». 85

“(...) This triple world is my domain, and those who in it are suffering from burning heat are my sons.”⁸⁷

The word *children* is repeated several times later in chapter III, and this this filial relationship is also an absolutely new thing in Buddhism, like devotion. Of course, Vishnu in Hinduism, was also the Creator and Protector but he didn't have this filial relationship with all men, and above all, even if it was not written, why didn't the Indian God influence the Buddha's Dharma before the Christian era? Moreover, in the sequel to the Lotus Sûtra, the "paternity" of the Buddha is expressed through parables with clearly evangelical accents...

The parable of the prodigal son in chapter XXIV of the Lotus Sûtra

As announced in the introduction to this chapter, it is in the *Lotus Sûtra* that Avalokiteshvara appears for the first time: the great bodhisattva is mentioned in chapter XXIV of the Sanskrit text and in chapter XXV of the Chinese tradition, which concern "the universal door of the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara", which will become in Chinese the feminine bodhisattva Guanyijin. With regard to these chapters, Philippe Cornu in his *Encyclopédie du Bouddhisme*, wishes to clarify the "remarquable" use, i.e. rare, of the parables. But other chapters do, and I emphasize it myself now: in chapter IV of the *Lotus Sûtra*, there is precisely the parable of the prodigal son who returns, ruined and aged after a long absence and does not recognize his father when he goes to beg at his home. The father thus gives him things to do progressively, taking him as he is so as not to frighten him, using the famous "skilful means" of Mahâyâna Buddhism, and little by little prepares him to inherit, in the end, all his fortune:

“The ignorant man, who is living outside the mansion, alone in a hovel, cherishes no other ideas but of poverty, and thinks to himself: Mine are no such possessions!

The rich man perceiving this of him (thinks): My son has arrived at the consciousness of being noble. He calls together a gathering of his friends and relatives (and says): I will give all my property to this man.

In the midst of the assembly where the king, burghers, citizens, and many merchantmen were present, he speaks thus: This is my son whom I lost a long time ago.

It is now fully fifty years-and twenty years more during which I have seen him-that he disappeared from such and such a place and that in his search I came to this place.

He is owner of all my property; to him I leave it all and entirely; let him do with it what he wants; I give him my whole family property.

And the (poor) man is struck with surprise; remembering his former poverty, his low disposition, and as he receives those good things of his father's and the family property, he thinks: Now am I a happy man.

In like manner has the leader, who knows our low disposition (or position), not declared to us: 'Ye shall become Buddhas,' but, 'Ye are, certainly, my disciples and sons.'" *IV, 31-36*

(...)

Mahayanists and Hinayanists and the persecutions of recent days

In chapter XII of the *Lotus Sûtra*, we discover that the Mahayanists criticize the Hinayanists in terms very close to those used both by Jesus against the Pharisees and by the apostles against the Jews who, according to them, remained prisoners of an ancient version of the Law. The Mahayanists, in the *sûtra*, speak of the Lord of the World - Lokeshvara - for whom they are ready to bear everything and describe themselves as indifferent to life and death. They announce events similar to the persecutions of the last days announced to the Christians. Very concretely, the persecutions were also going to be those of the Indian Buddhists in general and of the Tibetans with the Muslim invasions of the Middle Ages and the Chinese invasion of 1950. Here are some quotes from the *Sûtra*:

« In that dreadful, most terrible period of frightful general revolution will many fiendish monks stand up as our revilers.

Out of respect for the Chief of the world we will bear it, however difficult it be; girded with the girdle of forbearance will I proclaim this *Sûtra*.

I do not care for my body or life, O Lord, but as keepers of thine entrusted deposit we care for enlightenment.

The Lord himself knows that in the last period there are (to be) wicked monks who do not understand mysterious speech.

One will have to bear frowning looks, repeated disavowal (or concealment), expulsion from the monasteries, many and manifold abuses.

Yet mindful of the command of the Lord of the world we will in the last period undauntedly proclaim this *Sûtra* in the midst of the congregation.

We will visit towns and villages everywhere, and transmit to those who care for it thine entrusted deposit, O Lord. » *13-19*

Maitreya's prophecy and the bodhisattvas that emerge from the openings of the Earth

In Chapter XIV, we read that the magnanimous, powerful and heroic bodhisattvas arising in a dramatic way :

« Bursting forth at all points of the horizon through the whole extent of the earth they emerge, those great Sages endowed with magical faculty and wisdom. » *26*

Further down, in verse 42, Buddha explains that these bodhisattvas are living in a field of space beneath his own field and are incessantly seeking awakening. They are his sons who mature « for the supreme awakening ».

There are strange details: these bodhisattvas, despite being the sons of the Buddha, are wrinkled and gray hair. In this eschatological situation and with the presence of Maitreya in the chapter, they are even more reminiscent of the twenty-four elders of the John's Revelation, in chapters 4 and 5. These sages sing the glory of the Lamb, "the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David," explains the Angel to John, and they recognize him worthy of opening the Book:

« Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads. » 4, 4-5, NIV

The doctor's fake death for the sake of his children

Chapter XV talks about the unlimited life span of the Tathâgata - "the one who has thus gone (or come)" i.e. the Buddha - and tells the story of a father and doctor whose children were poisoned. He returns with a remedy pounded with a mortar, to be drunk in a cup:

“Now deliver us from our evil, be it poison or venom; let us live, dear father. And the physician, seeing his sons befallen with disease, overcome with pain and rolling on the ground, prepares a great remedy, having the required colour, smell, and taste, pounds it on a stone and gives it as a potion to his sons, with these words: Take this great remedy, my sons, which has the required colour, smell, and taste. For by taking this great remedy, my sons, you shall soon be rid of this poison or venom; you shall recover and be healthy.”

(...)

The Lotus Sûtra: the beginnings incredibly similar to the Gospel of the Mahâyâna

At the end of this chapter dedicated to the *Lotus Sûtra*, it is difficult not to admit that the first text officially recognized as part of Mahâyâna, and even founder of it, emerged in the Greco-Buddhist Gandhâra, between the 1st century B.C. and the 2nd century A.D., is bearing some disconcerting clues of a contact with the Gospels: it contains the first mention of Avalokiteshvara, Maitreya, Amitâbha, Mañjushrî, Mahâshtâmaprâpta, as well as of the Sukhâvâti Paradise. It teaches for the first time in the history of Buddhism the way of continuous devotion to reach this Paradise, and it will have a decisive influence on the great Buddhist schools of China and Japan. *The Lotus Sûtra* speaks in parables of the return of a prodigal son, and of the fake death and resurrection of a father who is also a doctor, to save his children thanks to a cup they have to drink. And the Sûtra announces the future persecutions suffered by the Mahayanists. We are at least three centuries before the attested presence of the Nestorians in China... but in times contemporary with Thomas' arrival in Kerala with his co-religionists Why were these things never written or explained?

III

The story and symbology of the greatest of the bodhisattvas

The simultaneous growth of the cult of Jesus and Avalokiteshvara

In the first centuries of the Christian era, as if spreading their wings eastwards and westwards, Mahâyâna and Christianity experienced a remarkable parallel and may be mixed growth, with the simultaneous extension of devotion to Christ and Avalokiteshvara. Constantine I and Licinius, with the edict of Milan (312-313 A.D.), allowed freedom of worship in both the Western and Eastern Roman Empire. Constantine, with his conversion to extremis in 337 A.D., helped Christianity to become the official imperial religion. A representation of Fausta, his wife, at the Louvres museum, dated 307, has strong similarities with some representations of Buddha and of the bodhisattvas of Gandhâra, testifying to the cultural links between civilizations.

Let's now learn more about the terrain and the chronology of expansion of Mahâyâna and Christianity in those times, to assess what could be the forms taken by the encounter of these two ways of Salvation and in particular the figure of Avalokiteshvara.

(...)

The emanation of Avalokiteshvara-Chenrezig from Amitâbha in the Mani bka'-'bum

Philippe Cornu writes that according to *Mani bka'-'bum*, or *The Hundred Thousand Words of the Jewel*, a founding tale of Tibetan legends - attributed to Song Tsen Gan Po (circa 605-650 A.D.), a great religious king himself considered as an incarnation of Avalokiteshvara - the Bodhisattva of Compassion was born from a ray of light emanating from Amitâbha's right eye after his deep Samâdhi, a ray directed towards the suffering world. We will dedicate a chapter to Amitâbha, the Buddha of the Infinite Light, and his mysterious origins, who also arose in the first century A.D.

Avalokiteshvara means "the Lord (Ishvara) who looks (avalokita)", or, when called Lokeshvara, as in Angkor, "The Lord of the World (Loka)". If written Avalokitesvara, the meaning becomes "the One who listens to the sound". Therefore, the name of the Buddha of Great Compassion is often translated as "The Lord who looks down on the world", or "The Lord who listens to the pleas of the world" as Guan-yin who will replace his worship in China. For this reason, he sometimes has the particular, as in the Indian Museum in Kolkata or in the Musée Guimet in Paris, of being represented with the face tilted down towards our world. In China and Tibet, his name is Chenrezig or Chenrezi, "He who continually listens to the pleas of the world with the eye of compassion," explains Bokar Rinpoche. From the 14th century onwards, taking the succession of other masters and assuming a Mongolian title, the Dalai Lamas were considered as his reincarnation.

Bokar Rinpoche (*Chenrezi, Lord of Love: Principles and Methods of Deity Meditation, Wisdom, 1991*) tells how Amitâbha manifested Avalokiteshvara with his right eye - together with the green Târâ with his left eye - making him miraculously appear seated on a lotus flower, in the form of a magnificent young man who seemed to be sixteen years old. A servant warned King Sublime Kindness that, despite his thousand consorts, he could not have a child. The king then begged

Chenrezig - the Tibetan name used by Bokar Rinpoche here - to come and live in his palace, and the bodhisattva agreed. Then, Sublime Goodness went to visit Amitâbha and informed him of Chenrezig's mission.

The vow to free all beings

Discovering the human condition, Chenrezig wept and from his tears were born white Târâ and Bhrikuti, the "Goddess with tangled eyebrows", considered as an aspect of Târâ. The Celtic goddess Brigit, associated with Minerva and Victory, is an ancient warrior goddess whose name means Very High and Bright, phonetically close to Bhrikuti, also a warrior goddess. Târâ and Bhrikuti promised to help Avalokiteshvara and plunged back into his eyes. Then, in front of Amitâbha, the Buddha of Infinite Compassion made this vow: "Until one being has achieved the Awakening, I will work for the good of all. And if I fail to make this promise, may my heart and head break into a thousand pieces. » It was, in the first part of the promise, the vow of the bodhisattva. For many ages, Avalokiteshvara worked like this and while he was one day on Mount Meru, seeing the number of people still to be freed, he doubted and thought that it was better to dissolve in Nirvâna. Immediately, his body burst into a thousand pieces and he felt intense suffering. Bokar Rinpoche concludes, telling how Amitâbha, with the power of his grace, reconstituted Chenrezig's body and gave him eleven faces, a thousand arms similar to the thousand spokes of the wheel of a universal monarch, and a thousand eyes, symbols of the thousand buddhas of the kalpa in progress. The Buddha of Infinite Light asked Chenrezig to respect his promise even more vigorously than before and transmitted him the six-syllable mantra: Om Mani Padmé Houm.

The Kârandavyûha sûtra, the crossing of the Avitchi and the cancellation of the Karma

Let us now add some elements taken from another founding story of the legend of Avalokiteshvara: the *Karandavyûha Sûtra*, which dates back to the 6th century A.D. In addition to the story of the saving horse, we find in this sûtra a detailed narration of the crossing of the Inferno, the "Great Avîci", characterized by the great light emanating from the bodhisattva when it entered to free all its souls. The guardians go to warn Yama that a wonderful and sublime person has arrived and has refreshed the air, making their work impossible. He carries heavenly treasures in his chignon, and precious crowns that adorn his body.

The Kârandavyûha Sûtra even presents Avalokiteshvara as superior to the historical Buddha in merits and spheres of influence, telling how, father and mother of all, he creates the world, the luminaries (the Sun and the Moon), the gods. In this way, he becomes a Demiurge and a Savior, a double value very far from the conception of Buddha in the Buddhism of the Origins for which the teachings of Siddhârta were just meant to escape from the illusory and suffering world. Instead of this, Avalokiteshvara creates the world, saves Humanity and even the Buddha in the episode of the flight from the island of the Rakshasi. This new statute is typical, in the history of religions, of the arrival of a cult that wants to integrate but also surpass local beliefs. The liberation of all beings from the Avîci means one thing: that Karma must no longer be suffered, through the compassion of Avalokiteshvara, and we are in a new paradigm similar to that of Christ who in the Gospel has the power to forgive sins and to go beyond the Law of the Torah, even though fulfilling it, to give a new start to Humanity.

The common elements between Avalokiteshvara and Jesus

Let's take stock. In the *Mani bka''bum*, we have the Sublime Goodness King, without son, who receives a Savior from Amitâbha. In the Gospel, Joseph is of the royal lineage of David, he was a good man (Matthew, 1, 19), it is not specified that he had children and angel Gabriel announces him that he

will have a son from the Holy Spirit. Avalokiteshvara doubted his mission on a mountain, suffered terrible pain when his body burst into a thousand pieces but was then reconstituted. This episode is very reminiscent of Christ's agony on the Mount of Olives when he asks the Father to remove the cup of the Passion from him and doubts to be able to sacrifice for Humankind. Immediately afterwards, he is arrested, judged and crucified, died, resurrected, but he is watching over Humanity until his return. There are also these two goddesses, Târâ and Bhrikuti, who remind of the Virgin Mary (« mother, daughter and spouse of her son » says the Catholic theology) and Mary Magdalene during his Passion. The torture of the cross could be understood by the Buddhists as an explosion of the body in all directions, and the death and resurrection willed by God are equivalent to the reconstitution of the body of Chenrezig in the *Mani bka'bum*.

(...)

The Buddha of the West

In his *Encyclopédie du Bouddhisme*, Philippe Cornu adds: "As a great bodhisattva, Avalokiteshvara has his own pure field, Mount Potalaka, which is said to be near Sukhâvati. In his representations of the Sukhâvati, he is depicted standing to the right of Amitâbha, (and) the other bodhisattva, to the right, is Mahâshtâmaprâpta. » This trilogy, consisting of a supreme Buddha, an emanation of Love and a spiritual power, was important in the early centuries of the Mahâyâna and also represented in the art of Gandhâra, although it is always delicate to interpret the triads of Buddhas or monks that appeared in the Greco-Buddhist sculptures and high reliefs. The pure field of influence or Paradise, on which Amitâbha reigns as Avalokiteshvara, is that of the West, precisely the direction from which the First Christians came with their King and Saviour, who became similar to his Father himself according to John 10:30: « My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one. » (NIV). The garden of Eden, Mesopotamia, was also to the west for the Buddhists, if they wanted to interpret the Genesis in a more terrestrial way. We will find this notion of Paradise, King and Kingdom again when we come to speak of Amitâbha and Maitreya.

The three turns of the Buddha's Dharma Wheel and the three Buddhist bodies

Mahâyâna has a total of three turnings of the Dharma wheel, given in three moments of history, which Alain Grosrey summarizes as follows. The first, "Anâtman" (Absence of I, of Soul) summarized in the introduction to our book, was the teaching of the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path to Solve the Suffering of the World, and is the basis of the Theravâda. The second, "Shûnyâta" (Vacuity), which we followed with the *Heart Sûtra*, was the teaching of the vacuity and interdependence of all phenomena, and is the basis of the Mahâyâna. The third, "Tathâgatagarbha", " Buddha Seed or Matrix", is the teaching of the universal nature of the Buddha, unaltered, in the heart of all that exists, of the three natures and of the "All is spirit", which we mentioned with the *Avatamsaka Sûtra*. This third turn of the wheel is the base of the Vajrayâna, whose geographical origin is also the Gandhâra with the mythical kingdom of Uddhyana and the Swat Valley from which Padmasambhava left for Tibet in the 8th century A.D.

In addition to these three turns of the wheel, the Mahâyâna also recognizes three bodies to the buddhas: it is the doctrine of the Trikâya. This point would be progressively elaborated through the Theravâda, the Sarvâstivâda of the Shtaviravada branch, the Mahâsânghika school and the Mahayanists of the 2nd and 3rd centuries. But it was a Mahayanist, Asanga, in the 4th century, who developed it for the first time in a comprehensive way. Asanga, born in Purûshapura, today's Peshawar in the heart of the Greek Buddhist world, was one of the founders of the school of Yogâchâra. We

already saw that there was in the Sarvâstivâda an anticipation of the Mahayanist doctrine of the Trikâya and an ever-increasing faith in the Buddha of the Future Maitreya.

In the classification of the three bodies of the Buddhas (dharmakâya – sambhogakâyâ – nirmânakâyâ) Amitâbha, the Buddha of the infinite Light, is logically associated with the dharmakâya, the body of the Dharma, of the absolute Truth, without manifestation. This puts him in perfect correspondence with the Father who is in the Heaven of Christianity, and does not physically appear in matter.

Avalokiteshvara, an emanation of Amitâbha, represents the sambhogakâyâ, the "body of all knowledge or all enjoyment" - *sambhoga* means *having pleasure together* in Sanskrit. The sambhogakâyâ is intended to help all beings and allows them to experience all the dimensions of the manifestation. We find again the double nature of Jesus, fully man and fully God, from his birth, or after baptism depending on the churches and sects that discussed for centuries his way of incarnation. Returning simply to the reading of the Gospel, we see and hear a prophet who experienced the most beautiful and difficult things, friendship, love and betrayal, and whose parables summoned the entire Creation, from the flower and the fox to the star. Jesus was also accused of eating, drinking, not respecting the rules, of being a friend of prostitutes and people of bad reputation.

The link between esoteric Christianity and Mahâyâna, clearly attested by the Gnostic texts found in Nag Hammadi, brings an erotic and mystical dimension to our subject with the union of Wisdom and Compassion, noticeable in the *Heart Sûtra* with Avalokiteshvara moving in the deep course of Wisdom. Wisdom is a feminine figure intimately connected to the Lord in the Old Testament with the Shekhina, and will remain so with the Sophia in Orthodoxy, with the notion of Grace in every sense of the word. We will explore the identity of Christian Sophia and Buddhist Prajña in the chapter on Supreme Wisdom, because sambhogakâyâ, or body of all enjoyment, has this meaning of union and shared pleasure - as demonstrated by etymology and iconography in the tantric mandalas - that we find in Gnostic Christian texts contemporary of the early years of Mahâyâna, even if considered heretical. But the accusation of heresy here does not matter: it matters that there has been a relationship between the early Christians, in their immense variety, and the Buddhists of the Origins, who are also followers of many different schools. And at the center of all, there was Compassion and Wisdom. The Fathers of the Church said: « What is not assumed is not saved ». It is the message of the sambhogakâyâ with Avalokiteshvara.

The third body of the Trikâya doctrine is the nirmânakâyâ, or body of physical manifestation (*nirmâna* means to measure, extension, creation, composition). It is represented by Padmasambhava. Tantrism and Dzogchen, which he revealed in Tibet, are part of the Vajrayâna. If I identify the dharmakâyâ to the Father, and the sambhogakâyâ to the Son, I see the relationship between the nirmânakâyâ and the Holy Spirit in the symbol of lightning and power immediately manifested upon the practitioner in the rituals or techniques of Vajrayâna. The diamond or lightning, symbols of the Vajrayâna, are together the purest, most transparent, brightest, and hard, powerful and dense manifestations, which can penetrate and destroy all the illusion of materiality. Mahâshtâmaprâpta, "Arrival of a Great Power", the third bodhisattva at the origins of Mahâyâna, has been progressively replaced by other cults, such as Mañjushrî or Padmasambhava, but always in relation to its symbolism of Power, Wisdom and Lightning.

Between Byzantium and Tibet:

memories of stones and voices

(...)

The mudrâs of Avalokiteshvara's iconography in Mahâyâna and the positions of Christ's fingers in Byzantine Orthodox art

In the most ancient statuary, in the first three centuries of our era, the hands of Avalokiteshvara - when seated - were represented together as in Christian prayer, in *namaskâra mudrâ* - the mudrâ of greeting, but also of prayer. Standing, he had his right hand in the gesture of the realization of the desires of others or charity - *varadâ mudrâ* - and his left hand in the position of the argument - *vitarka mudrâ* - with his forefinger and thumb forming a circle. According to Alfred Foucher, when he was standing on the paintings, Avalokiteshvara always made the mudrâ of charity with his left hand. We are therefore quite in agreement with the tradition of the eastern iconography of Christ in which the right hand is the emblem of priestly authority and « mercy », while the left hand is more representing rigor, and very often is holding the Gospel, the teaching, and therefore also symbolises the argument. Byzantine art portrays on the throne Christ Pantocrator - With All Power - while blessing, according to Byzantine custom, with the tip of the thumb touching that of the ring finger. The mudrâ of charity or Avalokiteshvara's argument is made with the index finger and thumb forming a circle. It's not exactly the same thing, but it's very similar. In other cases, returning to Christ in Byzantine art, the right hand is bestowing blessing by reproducing the Holy Trinity with three fingers (thumb, index finger, middle finger) and the double nature of Jesus with the ring finger and the little finger. The fingers of Jesus can also summarize his monogram ICXC (it is different from the Khi Rhô): the little finger symbolizes the I, the ring finger is for the C, the crossed thumb and middle finger draw the X and the index finger represents the second C.

The positions of the fingers are however very ancient and testify to relationships or immemorial common sources between East and West. In Christian representations, as well Jesus, as angels and saints use hand gestures and finger positions already present in Greek and Roman priests. In India mudrâs existed in Vedism and are found in the sacred Bharatanattiyam dance for example.

(...)

The Hesychasta Prayer of Orthodoxy: from the head to the heart

The Hesychasta Prayer « *of quietness* » or Heart Prayer, whose purpose is clearly union with God, deification, is here to remember the common process between mantra repetitions in Buddhism (and Hinduism), and prayers in Orthodoxy. In Hesychasm, there is no claim to be united with God's Nature, but with its attributes, such as Wisdom, Beauty, Love, which would represent Wisdom in the Mahâyâna or the Shakti (Energy, Power) and the Para Mâyâ, or Supreme - and positive - Mâyâ in Hinduism. The Orthodox specify one very important thing: it is necessary to bring the intellect down into the Heart... and it is precisely what Chenrezig's Meditation teaches with the HRI mantra going from head to heart. The prayer "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner", is said at

the beginning with the lips aloud and progressively internalized as one evolves spiritually. It is an ejaculatory prayer, associated with the breath, which must unify the whole human being, free him from his passions and lead him to a heavenly state in which all human functions rediscover their harmony. The sound that will come out of the mouth of the person in prayer or that he will hear in his mind and then in his heart, since we are in the Orthodox world that mostly speaks Greek or Russian, is the same: Khristos... so close to HRI. The fixation of the gaze on the icon is also a way of involving the body in adoration. Visualization and repetition: we find in the Hesychasta Prayer the two pillars of Chenrezig's Meditation.

It is certainly impossible, once again, to conclude in one sense or another on the hypothesis that HRI is an evocation of the Greek Khristos associated with the Sanskrit *hridaya*. Nevertheless, it is worth and necessary asking oneself the question and noting all the convergences between Buddhist and Christian symbology in Chenrezig's Meditation: Avalokiteshvara, KHRI, the heart that radiates a light that is confused with the syllable, and Chenrezig, compassion...

The Wheel of Dharma and the Wheel of Christ: from the Chakravartin to the Constantinian monogram

Just as the scenes of Buddha's life before the Mahâyâna did not directly represent him, but evoked his presence and emptiness, with a wheel, an empty chair, a tree or an umbrella, Christ was first depicted on early Christian sarcophagi of the 4th century only by the crown of the Resurrection, or Anastasi.

Eusebius, in *Vita Constantini (The Life of Constantine)*, explains that after the battle of Saxa Rubra against Maxentius in 312, Constantine would place the monogram of Christ on the top of his *labarum* (military standard), in a gold crown as a symbol of victory and had it engraved on his coins. The sign was thus named "Constantinian monogram", an emblem very similar to the Dharma wheel. The Constantinian monogram consists of six spokes made up of the initials of the Khi-Rhô, while the Dharma wheel has eight spokes, the eight right actions of the Noble Eightfold Path. But the Mahâyâna, already widespread two centuries after the missionary work wanted by Kanishka in territories bordering the Roman Empire or only in commercial and diplomatic contact, could have influenced Christianity on this precise point. His new protector, Constantine, tried to assume the status of a sort of messiah, and why not therefore of universal monarch, a Chakravartin, as were the Eastern rulers or the Buddhas who turned the Wheel of Dharma. The integration of the other cults was typical in Rome, and a guarantee of peace between the subjects of the Empire, as was Mahâyâna in the Kushan Empire. Nothing prevents us from thinking about the integration of a powerful oriental symbol, as Alexander orientalized himself in contact with Persia, or in more recent times, a sinister dictator made his own an ancient Tibetan symbol of life.

For a few centuries, at the beginning of the Christian era, the Wheel of Christ and the Wheel of Buddha were, however, the common symbol of a new law of Love, Wisdom and Universal Salvation, from Bengal, Asia, the Indian Ocean to the Atlantic Ocean and from Bhârat, India, to the Island of Brittany and Ireland. Taking into account all the other elements that appeared simultaneously in Christianity and in the Mahâyâna in the 1st century A.D., the wheel of Constantino's monogram, the first symbol chosen by the most powerful ruler of the West in his time, as soon as faith in Christ was officially tolerated, can reasonably raise questions.

Byzantine sacred opera music, Tibetan songs and musical notation

Still taking into account the ancient relations between the Hellenized and then Christianized Middle East, and the Buddhist East, with the subsequent arrival in Tibet of the Dharma from the Greco-Buddhist Gandhâra, let us now have a look at the similarity between the sound that supports the

Byzantine song, the *ison* and the very bass Tibetan songs. For an example, we could listen to the songs of nun Marie Keyrouz, or to the Megaloschemos, the Bulgarian Orthodox anthem.

Byzantine chant has been transmitted orally and without interruption from the beginning, but there are academic debates on the use of *ison* which is the characteristic bass sound of chant in churches, as well as the microtonal ornamentation, often rejected because it is judged as a late Eastern innovation. Byzantine music uses ranges that date back to sacred Greek music, with intervals other than those used in modern Western music. The language is Greek (or Arabic in the Antioch area) and is accompanied vocally by a low and maintained sound called *ison* or (*isocrátima*). The Byzantine *ison* sometimes strongly evokes the Tibetan chant but similarities exist not only in the style of singing, in both cases related to the sacred, but also in the musical notation, what seems unlikely. And yet... The Czech ethnologist and tibetolog René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1923-1959) left these notes in *Tibetan Religious Dances: Tibetan Text and Annotated Translation of the Chams Yig*, De Gruyter Mouton, 1976):

"The Tibetan rgyangs ∫ "distance" is similar in form to the Armenian jergar or jer'kar; a sign to say duration, the Tibetan gugs ring,∪, long curve, is similar in form to the Byzantine ecophonic Paraklitike, but the Tibetan sources do not say what this sign means. A similarity also exists between the Tibetan snar sign and the Armenian Sour. The Tibetan 'gugs ∩̄ŷ could be compared to the ripple or zigzag line as it is used for vibrato in India, Armenia, Jews etc."

René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz was a pupil of Giuseppe Tucci and the first foreigner to be immersed in the Tibetan cults of the protective gods. He wrote *Oracles and Demons of Tibet* in 1956.

In the explanations of Nebesky-Wojkowitz, it is easy to note the similarity of the names for the Tibetan *rgyang* and the Armenian *jergar* or *jerkar* as well as of snar and sour... Once again, we are on the Silk Road, on the link between a very early Orthodox culture (Armenia was the first kingdom to convert to Christianity in 301 AD) and the Mahayanist world...

(...)

VI

The Heart Sûtra

or the union of Avalokiteshvara,

with the Supreme Wisdom

The *Heart Sûtra* is the other fundamental sûtra of the Great Vehicle that appeared at the beginning of the Christian era in the Kushan Empire to give the second turning to the Dharma wheel with the *Lotus Sûtra*.

The *Heart Sûtra* is actually called *Heart Sûtra of the Supreme Wisdom (Prajñâpâramitâ Hridaya Sûtram)*. It is interesting for our times in search for a rightly claimed equality, since this is also the sûtra of the first documented encounter in Buddhism between the masculine and compassion aspect of Avalokiteshvara and the feminine aspect of Supreme Wisdom, which will not cease to assume importance in Mahâyâna.

Origin and dating of the Heart Sûtra: the contribution of the Karoshti Manuscripts or "The Dead Sea Scrolls of Buddhism".

I quickly mentioned before the *Heart Sûtra* with the *Prajñâpâramitâ in 8000 verses* - in which is found for the first time the term Mahâyâna - with the comments of Edward Conze who assumes a period of elaboration on a century or two and therefore possibly prior to our era. There is a controversy on the fact that the *Prâjñâparamitâ in 8000 verses (Ashtasâhasrikâ Prajñâpâramitâ)* may originate from the Mahâsânghika schools of central-southern India, but the comparison of the translations rather suggests now a Gandharan origin, just to the north-east of the ancient Buddhist world.

A document recently added to the dossier, and leading toward a Gandhari origin of the text, is the publication in 2012 by Harry Falk and Seishi Karashima of a manuscript in Kharoshî, although incomplete and damaged, of the *Prajñâpâramitâ in 8000 verses*, dated carbon 14 about 14 A.D. to 75 CE. It is the oldest known Buddhist manuscript, but still belonging to our era, and very similar to the first Chinese translation of the *Ashtasâhasrikâ Prajñâpâramitâ* by Lokakshema, itself dated 179 A.D., translation whose original is considered today as having been written in Gandhârî, the writing of the Gandhâra. Comparing this version of the *Ashtasâhasrikâ Prajñâpâramitâ* with the Sanskrit text takes to the near certainty that it is a translation from the Gandhârî.

Let us learn more about the Kharoshti Manuscripts. In 1994, eighty manuscripts later called Kharoshî Manuscripts, dated from the first half of the 1st century A.D., were acquired for the most part by the British Library, and said to come from Afghanistan, without further precision. Their writing was derived from Aramaic, which was used to write the Gandhârî language. Kharoshî, for this reason, is also sometimes called Gandhârî. Engraved in the birch bark, the Kharoshî Manuscripts were protected in terracotta jars like the Essene manuscripts of Qumran, and attributed to the school of Dharmaguptaka, a Buddhism of the Origins' school. The *Dictionnaire de la Sagesse Orientale* tells us that they considered indispensable, in their conception of charity - Dâna, the gift - to make offerings not to the Sangha, but to the Buddha, so that they might bear fruit. (...)

Avalokiteshvara in the Heart Sûtra and in the traditions

About the presence of Avalokiteshvara in the short version of the *Heart Sûtra*, we only read that the Noble Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva, the Great Being, was deeply immersed in the course of the Supreme Wisdom and then looked down and saw the absence of proper nature in all phenomena, and universal emptiness.

One can logically be disappointed by the absence of further details about Avalokiteshvara in the *Heart Sûtra* and ask this question: how was it possible to arrive at the very rich mythology and iconography that accompany him everywhere now in the Mahayanist world? The reason is that oral tradition prevailed for centuries, and was established in less cultivated environments than monasteries or Buddhist schools, in places where devotion was more important.

But five centuries before the Tibetan texts, in the Gnostic Middle East, like an underground and esoteric river coming up at a distance of thousand of kilometers and hundreds of years, Nag Hammadi's texts will show us word for word the space covered in the early centuries of our era by the common conception of esoteric Christianity and Mahâyâna, their teachings of an ultimate and transcendent Nature of reality constituted by Infinite Light and manifested by the union of the masculine principle and the feminine principle. Sometimes, in historical research, it is necessary to remember that the voluntary law of secrecy, or the persecutions that caused the disappearance of the texts for a very long time, do not allow us to find direct evidence of a relationship between two remote environments. Thus, the comparison of texts and chronology, and the knowledge of the trade, diplomatic and cultural routes between two regions of the world, are here to enlighten the thought between the two poles of a tradition of common origins.

But today, the Tibetan texts, largely inherited from the Indian tradition, are the richest because in the Middle Ages, as an Indian guide explained to me one day on the site of Nalândâ, the Mahayanist Canon was saved in the natural fortress of the Himalayas, the "Country of Bod", Tibet. In fact, Nalândâ, the largest university in Asia, was looted and burned by the hordes of Mohammad of Ghor (1149-1206) after many other Buddhist places. This spiritual centre is said to have hosted ten thousand monks, one thousand lamas, one million manuscripts. The fire lighted by Mohammad of Ghor did not stop for six months, but the museum of Nalândâ still contains a magnificent 9th century statue of Avalokiteshvara- "*Khasarpana Lokeshvara*", that is "the Lord of the world who comes from heaven". Buddhism almost disappeared from India but continued in Tibet. The immense corpus of the Great Vehicle, with its spiritual teachings, medicine, astrology, poetry... was jealously preserved until the Chinese invasion forced the Tibetan masters and lamas to turn the wheel of the Dharma again in the four directions, and to make the water of knowledge that removes all thirst, frozen in the Himalayan monasteries, flow with the exile of the Sâṅgha first in India in Dharâmsâla and then in the whole world. The Buddhist destiny, once again, reached that of the Jews with this diaspora, in a kind of drama or hidden Dharma.

This is the reason why the Tibetan tradition did not necessarily invent texts and legends about Avalokiteshvara, but many times rather probably translated and clothed in Tibetan way a history that already existed in India.

(...)

Shûnyâta, Wu, and Taoist Emptiness: unwinding the Heart of the Tao Te Ching

It seems evident that there is also a relationship between Shûnyâta in the Heart Sûtra and the Void of Taoism, celebrated in his most famous book, the *Tao Te Ching*. The translations of the *Tao Te Ching* sometimes diverge in a dizzying way, revealing a mystical or instead politically Machiavellian sense in the aphorisms of Laozi, but the notion of Taoist emptiness and that of the Heart to be emptied, are

admitted by all translators. Let's listen to the mythical Laozi in the short volume he accepted to leave to people before disappearing who knows where at the end of his life. Not only is the Void of the Heart present in the book attributed to Lao Tzu, but also the original feminine principle: the first chapter of the Tao Të Ching calls the Tao the Mother of the ten thousand creatures, which evokes Wisdom, associated with emptiness and called the Mother of all Buddhas, the Mother of All Wisdom, or even the Mother of All, in certain Gnostic texts. (...)

Chapter XVI evokes the fact that one is firmly established in the emptiness of the Supreme Wisdom as in the Heart Sûtra :

« Empty yourself of everything. Let the mind become still. The ten thousand things rise and fall while the Self watches their return. They grow and flourish and then return to the source. Returning to the source is stillness, which is the way of nature. »

Chapter XXI uses the typical expression of Taoism: The Empty Heart : Emptying the Heart / The Heart of Emptiness, with some paradoxes between intangibility and form, that resemble the *Heart Sûtra* with the dialectic of form and emptiness.

« Oh, it is intangible and elusive, and yet within is image. Oh, it is elusive and intangible, and yet within is form. »

(...)

An encounter in Athens and the source of the Heart

I want to insert here a memory in relation to the heart, more directly than to the *Heart Sûtra*, and to the encounter of Buddhism with the Greek world.

It is well known that, in ancient thought and up to the end of the Middle Ages, the heart was considered the source of thought. In 2000, while traveling to make reports in Italy and Greece for the french magazine *Bouddhisme Actualités*, I met Emilios Bouratinos in Athens, an enlightened intellectual and philosopher who had introduced Buddhism to the land of Socrates. We spent a wonderful evening discussing. Half a century earlier, Emilios had met Krishnamurti who was staying at his home, hosted by his mother while himself was doing his military service and studying Logic with Wittgenstein in Vienna. Jiddu Krishnamurti had warned Emilio against this *discipline*, a term, I might add, which has the double sense of learning and hurting one's body and mind with a whip. "*Logic makes violence to life*," the Indian instructor told him. During the interview, the Greek philosopher summarized the congress he had just attended in Scotland, among scientists, artists, philosophers, and at which he had learned that there were neuronal cells on the human heart that sent information to the brain, which functioned as a receiving organ and not an emitting one, in accordance with the medieval model. Only several years after this Athenian evening, I began to hear about other organs of the human body in possession of cells that made them secondary brains.

The words and life of Emilios Bouratinos established a bridge between many things: Greece and India, to take up the title of an essay by Sri Aurobindo (*De la Grèce à l'Inde*, Albin Michel, 1976), the brain and the heart, Western reason and Indian ecstasy, medieval scholasticism, the *Heart Sûtra* and modern science.

VI

Amitabha,

Infinite Light and Infinite Life

The first mention of the Buddha of the Infinite Light

(...)

Sometimes, the *Pratyutpanna Samâdhi Sûtra*, in which Amitâbha is mentioned for the first time, is estimated a little before the beginning of the Christian era, but without a precise text having been identified and dated. Maitreya is also mentioned in this sûtra translated into Chinese by Lokâkshema in the same year in which the famous Mahayanist indo-scito monk of Gandhâra also translated the *Heart Sûtra*: 179 A.D. Another important quotation from Amitâbha is in the Kushan Empire, under the reign of Huvishka (160-190 AD), in the inscription on the base of a statue discovered at Govind Nagar in 1977, much further east than Gandhâra, next to what is today Lucknow, between Varanasi (Benares) and Kolkata. The find, visible at the Mathurâ Museum, bears an inscription that dates from the year 28 of the reign of Huvishka – circa 188 A.D.) and was dedicated to Amitâbha Buddha by a family of merchants.

The Pratyutpanna Samâdhi Sûtra - whose title means *The Sûtra of Samâdhi to meet face to face with the Buddhas of the Present* - probably came out of the Gandhâra. To the bodhisattvas who ask him how to enter his Kingdom of the Pure Land of the West, Amitâbha teaches uninterrupted devotion to himself in a way very close to Jesus' injunction to love the Lord with all his heart, all his soul, all his mind and all his strength. In the Jungtu school, belonging to the Pure Land, which had spread to China since the fourth century A.D., it was necessary to show great fervour towards Amitâbha, "admit the power of his saving grace, recognize one's weaknesses and hope to obtain after death this life in Sukhâvati that would make possible the full awakening," explains Alain Grosrey (*Le grand Livre du Bouddhisme*, Albin Michel, Paris, 2007, p 283)

The mystery of the apparition of Amitâbha, the "Buddha of the Afterlife"

Despite the literary and archaeological traces found, the origins of Amitâbha remain quite mysterious. Louis Frédéric, author of a very well documented and illustrated book on the gods of Buddhism (*Les dieux du Bouddhisme, Guide iconographique*, Flammarion, 1992 - untranslated), writes:

"It has sometimes been attempted to find an Iranian origin for him, which seems plausible for the Western situation he occupies in the Buddhist space on the one hand, and for his solar appearance on the other. There was evidently a temptation to make it a "Buddhization of Mithra". But his real origin has yet to be determined. No other aspect of the Buddha raised so many questions under the pen of theologians, and exegetes, nor did it provoke so many different opinions on his personality as the figure of Amitâbha (...)."

(...)

The women-free Paradise of Sukhâvati and the Gospel of Thomas

The *Sukhâvati Sûtra* (also called *Sukhâvati Vyûhasûtra*) offers a description of the Pure Land of the West created by Amitâbha in virtue of its karmic merit, and over which he continues to reign, in a kingdom that is not of our world, but in the Afterlife. Sukhâvati means Country of Happiness, but the sûtra also has a third name: *Aparimitâyur Sûtra*, that is *Sûtra of Endless Life*, because immortality was promised to those who reached this paradise through the uninterrupted devotion to Amitâbha. The Buddha of Infinite Light entirely illuminates the Pure Field of the West, full of subtle scents, flowers, richness, trees studded with jewels. All the wishes of the Amitâbha' faithful are fulfilled but the greatest joy is to hear him teach, in the center of the village, surrounded by Avalokiteshvara and Mahâsthâmaprâpta. Only one pleasure is missing, and we could also say that half of humanity is missing in Sukhâvati: the reader will have understood it from the title of the paragraph: it is a paradise without women: they must be reborn males, that is, take a male body in an other incarnation, to enter it.

All the characteristics of the Sukhâvati in the Afterlife correspond to the Christian Paradise: the devotion to a supreme and benevolent Being of infinite Light and Life, the immortality of the rewarded faithful, the delights, a divine trilogy, the light, the wonderful trees... apart from the lack of women, so that we seem to be obviously facing a typical case of an Eastern patriarchal society, even if full of good intentions... But it is not so: in the Gospel of Thomas, written in Coptic, considered Gnostic because found in Nag Hammadi along with several other books from a Gnostic library of Upper Egypt, in 1945, we read, at the end of these "*Secret Sayings which Jesus the Living Spoke and Didymos Judas Thomas wrote down*" - is the true title of the collection of teachings: (from *The Gnostic Society Library*, Robert J. Miller, ed., *The Complete Gospels: Annotated Scholars Version*. Polebridge Press, 1992, 1994, translated by Stephen Patterson and Marvin Meyer):

"Simon Peter said to them, "Make Mary leave us, for females don't deserve life."

Jesus said, "Look, I will guide her to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every female who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of Heaven."
(114)

It is even the last *logion, saying*, of Jesus in this text entirely preserved, as if he or the editor of the gospel wanted to insist on the "Kingdom of Heaven" and on the possibility for women to access it, provided they become males. In the case of the Gospel of Thomas, Jesus does not speak clearly of a rebirth as a male, as in the Sukhâvati, but of attracting Mary (Mary Magdalene probably, taking into account other Gnostic gospels such as Philip's), so that she becomes a male. A possibly loving and mystical formula in which the fact of taking a man's body could also be joining to man, in the logic of other Gnostic texts on the Bridal Chamber where the Saviour and the feminine Wisdom are united, as in the Mahâyâna and in the tantric extensions of the Vajrayâna.

The oldest fragments of the Gospel of Thomas, prior to the discovery of Nag Hammadi, were found in Egypt, in the *Oxyrhynchus papyri*, in 1897, and date from the end of the 2nd or 3rd century of our era. But the content of Jesus' secrets sayings was spread, known and even fought since the beginning of the Christian adventure. For the composition of the text, opinions range from 60 A.D. to 160 A.D. Some issue the hypothesis that the text is prior to the other Gospels, and even written during the ministry of Christ, because it does not speak of the crucifixion... In any case, the Gospel of Thomas with its Kingdom of Heaven without women is at least contemporary with the *Sukhâvati Sûtra*.

(...)

The King, the Law and the Vow of Compassion of Dharmakâra-Amitâbha

We learn in the *Sukhâvati Vyûha Sûtra*, translated into Chinese by Sangavarman in 252 A.D. that Amitâbha was once a king called Dharmakâra, or the Bearer of the Law, who chose the life of a monk and refused Nirvâna out of compassion for all beings. He thus became Amitâbha. Afterwards, in his Samadhi, he created the Pure Field of the West. The story of Amitâbha clearly fits that of Christ who, king of the Hebrews of the tribe of David as master of the Law, refused the earthly kingdom for that of Heaven:

«Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself." *John: 6, 15*

"Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place." "You are a king, then!" said Pilate. » *John: 18, 36-37*

Jesus fulfilled all the Law and overcame it becoming a wandering ascetic or a scandalous outsider and eventually an outlaw to save all beings with his compassion. And he also promised to be with Humankind until the end of time, which is equivalent to a renunciation of Nirvâna. Through the stories of Avalokiteshvara and Amitâbha, we rebuild the path of Christ, who according to the First Christians assumed divine and human nature. Let us remember the first two bodies of the doctrine of Trikâya: the dharmakâya associated with Amitâbha, and the Sambhogakâya associated with Avalokiteshvara, that symbolize the Father and the Son, and the two natures of Christ. The third Buddha present in the *Sukhâvati*, Mahâshtâmaprâpta, associated with lightning, is here to symbolize the Holy Spirit, the third body, the nirmânakâya.

At the time of the Buddha and the birth of the Mahâyâna, there were many men of noble ascent who renounced their kingdom to seek the Absolute. So did the Buddha, but he did not promise to welcome his followers in a Kingdom of Heaven if they invoked his name. And why invent another Buddha with a similar path, with powers even greater than those of Siddhârta? And why didn't he emerge so many years earlier?

At the beginning of the present chapter, I quoted the Gospel of John, which associates the Word with the Life and Light that are then incarnated in Christ. Amitâbha, who is called Infinite Light and Infinite Life, and emanates Avalokiteshvara, "fills the conditions" word per word to represent Christ's divine father with which the Son will become one in return.

The Last Incarnation before the final Nirvana and the Resurrection of the Dead of the Christian Apocalypse

Another important point is that when Amitâbha renounced the throne, he made forty-eight vows, the twenty-fourth of which was that "after their rebirth in the Pure Earth, the beings would only lack one last rebirth before they finally entered Nirvâna," summarizes Alain Grosrey. This last point is remarkable and perfectly evokes the Kingdom of Heaven reached by the righteous and the martyrs, followed by the Resurrection of the Dead, the Last Judgment and finally by the descent of the heavenly Jerusalem, the new Heaven and the new Earth. But it also evokes Zoroastrian eschatology, so that I would clearly affirm an Iranian inspiration, in addition to the Jewish one of course, in the Christian Apocalypse, or the "shared vision" of a common archetypal plan of prophecy in John's experience, and then the transmission of the synthetic Christian eschatology to the Mahâyâna .

VII

Mahâshtâmaprâpta, the elusive

third "Saint of the West", and Mañjushrî

So far we have learned of the three Buddhas of the Paradise of the Pure Western Land, Amitâbha and Avalokiteshvara, who arose in the early days of the Mahâyâna, just as Christianity was emerging and spreading in the Middle East, and in which I recognize the Buddhization of the Eternal Father and of Christ. The following chapters will show how the third bodhisattva of the Western Paradise - Mahâshtâmaprâpta -, as well as the Supreme Wisdom, present numerous common points respectively with the Holy Spirit on the one hand, and the Jewish Shekhinah, the Christian Wisdom, or Sophia, on the other. This immersion in the origin of the unwritten texts or traditions of Buddhism, and Judeo-Christianism will be the opportunity to go further, towards Hinduism, to see the importance of the feminine aspect of the manifestation, of the power and divine presence, remained hidden, confidential or esoteric for millennia, in the Eastern religious world at the origin of today's traditions. Under the apparent and very strong differences or incompatibilities of views and metaphysical practices, we will find ourselves faced with a convergence of the so-called monotheistic and patriarchal faiths with "atheist" Buddhism and "polytheistic" Hinduism, two oriental wisdoms so far considered not frequentable by the religions of the Book. We will also see that the frontiers between masculine and feminine representations or conceptions of a superior inspiring force in the manifestation - Mahâshtâmaprâpta, Supreme Wisdom, Shekhinah, Holy Spirit, Sophia and the forms they took - were much more open and mobile than they seem today, and push us towards a rehabilitation of a sacred Feminine creative and not only compassionate power, in perfect continuity with traditions.

"The arrival of a great power"

Mahâshtâmaprâpta is translated as "Arrival of great power", "He who has acquired great strength" - and is also understood as "He who makes the need for Salvation mature in men", the *Dictionnaire de la Sagesse Orientale* explains. These are qualities that refer directly to the inspiration and strength brought by the Holy Spirit. Mahâshtâmaprâpta is an important bodhisattva of the Mahâyâna frequently depicted in China with a pagoda in his hair, to the right of Avalokiteshvara whose Wisdom he represents, but in a masculine way. Louis Frédéric points out that in the paintings dedicated to Amitâbha, Mahâshtâmaprâpta is almost always on his left, and Avalokiteshvara on his right, as it is said that the Son is on the right of the Father.

(...)

Between male and female

We read in the *Wisdom of Jesus Christ* or *Sophia of Jesus Christ* the following verses, that will make us understand very well the oscillation between male and female in the third term of the Mahayanist and Christian trilogy.

"Matthew said to him: "Lord, Savior, how was Man revealed?"

The perfect Savior said: "I want you to know that he who appeared before the universe in infinity, Self-grown, Self-constructed Father, being full of shining light and ineffable, in the beginning, when he decided to have his likeness become a great power, immediately the principle (or beginning) of that Light appeared as Immortal Androgynous Man, that through that Immortal Androgynous Man they might attain their salvation and awake from forgetfulness through the interpreter who was sent, who is with you until the end of the poverty of the robbers. "And his consort is the Great Sophia, who from the first was destined in him for union by Self-begotten Father, from Immortal Man, who appeared as First and divinity and kingdom, for the Father, who is called 'Man, Self-Father', revealed this. » 94-95 (translation by Douglas M. Parrot, *The Gnostic Society Library*. Coptic Gnostic Library Project of the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, Claremont Graduate School. The Coptic Gnostic Library Project was funded by UNESCO, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and other Institutions. E. J. Brill has asserted copyright on texts published by the Coptic Gnostic Library Project.)

Carrying out an anamnesis of Christianity with the help of Mahâyâna

The Great Power that gave its name to Mahâshtâmaprâpta can be that sent by Christ in the form of the Holy Spirit, without allusion to any Gnosis. However, in the attempt to understand deeply what the Holy Spirit is, from the Jewish tradition, and from the contemporary traditions in which this Jewish tradition is inscribed, one understands that it is very much connected with a feminine energy intimately close to the supreme God. So that the feminine representations of the Great Power and divine manifestation on Earth are no longer naive or suspect metaphorical forms, but faithful transcriptions of texts and words emanating from above, both in the Old and New Testaments. And the more we enter the Mahâyâna, the more we encounter a Christianity coloured by Gnosis, which, given the long history of intellectual struggles but also of physical persecution and extermination that has marked the relations of the Great Church and the Catholic Church with the Gnostics, up to the massacre of the Cathars, certainly does not facilitate interreligious dialogue, and the healing of the memory. (...)

The bodhisattva Mañjushrî

We have already mentioned Mañjushrî several times. The successor of Mahâshtâmaprâpta in Tibetan Buddhism, Mañjushrî - *The One who is noble and tender*, translates the Dictionnaire de la Sagesse Orientale - personifies Wisdom, as one of his other Tibetan names testifies: Prajñâkâya, or *Body of Wisdom* in Sanskrit, which confirms the link, in the Trikâya doctrine, between Wisdom, Holy Spirit and Nirmânakâya. Mañjushrî's attributes are the sword and the book - that of the Prajñâpâramitâ - two weapons to fight the illusion of dense matter and ignorance. In his terrible and delirious form, his is Yamântaka, *The One who puts an end to the lord of death*.

Mañjushrî, like Avalokiteshvara, is sometimes considered as the successor of the Buddha, in the future world who will forget the Dharma before the descent of Maitreya and in this sense he could evoke the Holy Spirit sent by Jesus after his departure. Mañjushrî himself has the role of a savior in certain situations and among other Sanskrit names, he is called *The Young One*. But to emphasize his double polarity, a little elusive for us, he is also the *Mother of buddhas*, just like Wisdom, and the *Lord of the Word*, which puts him in relation to the Word of the Gospel of John, very similar to the biblical Shekhina. For this reason, of course, logically, Tibetan Buddhism confers on him as pãredra (consort) Sarasvatî, the Indian goddess of the Word, Vâc, who created the world by naming things. A sign that the time has come to really meet the Eternal feminine of the Mahâyâna...

IX

The Birth of an Eternal Feminine in the Mahâyâna: from Avalokiteshvara to Târâ to Guan Yin

Târâ, the Star

Let us now consider the centuries of evolution from Avalokiteshvârâ to Târâ and Guan Yin, in which Wisdom, Compassion and mystical eroticism are mixed, as we will explore in more detail with the Gnostic texts dedicated to the Bridal Chamber.

Târâ is etymologically *The Star* and *She who crosses the ocean of Samsâra*. In Tibet, she is Dölma, the *Saviour*. There was a goddess Târâ in ancient India: she was one of the ten Mahâvidyâ - *Great Wisdom*, and she also had the function of crossing the Samsâra. Kâlî, *The Black*, and Bhairavi, *The Terrible*, were also part of the ten Mahâvidya, all aspects of Durga, *The Inaccessible*, associated with Shiva, and we can note again the proximity of the cults of Shiva and Avalokiteshvara through their consorts. However, since Hindu texts, and especially tantric texts, are very difficult to situate in time, I will just state the identity of the name and function of the Buddhist and Hindu Târâ, together with the contemporary literary or iconographic manifestation of Hindu and Buddhist tantric cults in the second half of the first millennium AD. What I mean, of course, is that in the impossibility of dating the cult of Hindu Târâ, it is prudent not to suppose that it necessarily preceded Tibetan Târâ because Hinduism preceded Buddhism. In fact, Hinduism never ceased to evolve and integrate deities, and the cult of a savior star goddess has always existed in many ancient cultures far from India, we will see it soon. Instead, we did not have in a sure way a feminine goddess or bodhisattva to help the monks of the Buddhism of the Origins to reach Nirvâna.

Louis Frédéric situates the apparition of a feminine principle in the Mahâyâna in the 4th century, with the adoption of the Yogâcâra of Asanga, in which the notion of "Everything is spirit" and nothing but intellectual processes, and that of Vacuity, are fundamental. Then came the elaboration of the goddess Târâ in northern India, and its spread to Java and Tibet. However, it is impossible not to take into account the Supreme Wisdom evoked three centuries earlier in the *Heart Sûtra*, an indispensable aspect for the Liberation of the bodhisattvas, and already probably a feminine principle at least in part divinized, like in the Gnostic texts in the same years and many centuries before in the Old Testament.

The most beautiful representation of Târâ I could see is in the Indian Museum in Kolkata. In a statue of the XI-XII century, the goddess is sitting with two of her four arms raised, and in her hand an object that evokes certain representations of Ishtar with the caduceus. Her face has very large eyes and expresses simultaneously happiness and sadness, as if she were crying for Humanity, even if immersed in the Bodhi. Moving from the left to the right in front of her, the expression seems to change and makes us understand what can inhabit Wisdom or a bodhisattva, between bliss and compassion, like the sambhogakâya that feels all human condition. There is no eroticism in its beautiful curves but only nobility, as its full name expresses it: *Ârya Târâ, the Noble Târâ*. Another magnificent representation of Supreme Wisdom, very wrought and elaborate, is that of Java (XIII century).

(...)

Târâ and Aphrodite-Venus

If we now turn to the Greek world present through Hellenism in the regions we are talking about, the goddess Star is Venus-Aphrodite, also born from the waters as a daughter of Neptune-Poseidon. Plato imagines in the *Symposium* a spiritual Aphrodite, called Aphrodite-Urania, which is not the goddess of physical love or desire, but the goddess of pure love, devoid of Ubris. Her beauty is spiritual, she was born directly from Heaven, Uranus-the Sky, as Târâ was born from Amitâbha, and Mary was directly conceived from the womb of God according to the dogma of 1854 promulgated by the Church after the apparitions of La Salette in France (1846). Since the beginning of Christianity, the Gnostic *Proto-Gospel of James* (4th century) had contained the account of the miraculous birth of Mary, announced by an angel to Ann and Joachim who could not have children. The story passed down through the centuries, albeit Gnostic, until the apparitions in which the Virgin said to the French shepherds of the Alps: « I am the Immaculate Conception ». A Marian apparition confirmed a Gnostic gospel and the Church adopted a dogma.

Christ had called himself the Morning Star and could also play his part in the process of feminisation of Avalokiteshvara. We can read in the Apocalypse of John:

« To the one who is victorious and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations—that one ‘will rule them with an iron scepter and will dash them to pieces like pottery’—just as I have received authority from my Father. I will also give that one the morning star. » 2, 26-28

« I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star. » 22, 16

(...)

Inanna-Ishtar, the Great Babylonian Star Goddess

There is one goddess we can't help but talk about: Inanna-Ishtar, the ancient Great Goddess assimilated to Venus, who crossed the Inferno. She had been adored since the third millennium B.C when Târa arose. Her name means Lady Sky when she is called Inanna, and Star when she is Ishtar. She is the goddess of fertility, beauty and love, eroticism and even war. Her erotic figure will be accentuated over the centuries, and although Târâ is not the goddess of desire but of Compassion and Wisdom, of a spiritual Way that seeks awakening and exit from the cycle of rebirths, she has many forms, some of which are decidedly warlike and erotic. Ishtar appears on the first gandharan representations of the Buddha alongside Greek or Indian deities, so that it is impossible to deny his contact with the Mahâyâna along with the process of spiritualization in identifying with Târâ.

Ishtar's husband is Dumuzi, the shepherd god who joins her in a sacred marriage, *hieros gamos*. He takes his place in the Hells, dies symbolically and resurrects at the beginning of each spring, replaced by his sister. Together they form a couple very similar to Avalokiteshvara and Târâ and to the Gnostic version of Jesus and Mary Magdalene. And Ishtar is the star of the shepherd Dumuzi, as Venus is called the Shepherd's star, a Christic symbol. But the identification of Ishtar with Artemis in Greco-Buddhist art also introduces the link with Apollo, brother of the Great Goddess Diana whose importance was remarkable in Antiquity.

The Sarasvatî Upanishad, Brahma, Abraham and Sara.

Hinduism also has its primordial goddess born immaculate from the supreme Lord: Sarasvatî, in the upanishad that is dedicated to her, in the group of tantric upanishad, which first written versions date

of the late Middle Ages. In the *Sarasvatî Upanishad*, we read that Brahma created the Mâyâ, his Magic of the manifestation identified here in Sarasvatî, "pure and conforming to Being", translates Jean Varenne, (*L'enseignement secret de la divine Shakti*, Les Belles Lettres, 1995, untranslated) which I translate in my turn:

"Sarasvati said, " Even Brahma obtained knowledge of the eternal Self through my grace.

I am the Truth, the Knowledge, the Happiness, the eternal Brahman, without obstacles or interruptions. (...)

Prakriti shines triple in the reflection of awareness, and so I manifest Purusha.

The unborn is reflected in the projection (Mâyâ) in which pure virtue reigns, (...)

Isvara is the Lord of Mâyâ (...)

Mâyâ has two powers: projecting and hiding.

The first manifests all the worlds, subtle and coarse,

while the second lays a veil between who sees and what is seen, between Brahman and creation. Maya is the origin of the infinite cycle of the universe."

(...)

From Avalokiteshvara to Guan Yin: a progressive transformation

Let's get back to the Asian metamorphoses of Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of Great Compassion. In China and Japan, Avalokiteshvara took over the centuries very important feminine forms that will continue to enlighten us on the links between the cults brought by the early Christians and the elaboration of the rich Buddology of the Great Vehicle in Asia. Guan Yin (also Guan-yin or Kuan-shi-yin) is the most popular Chinese version of Avalokiteshvara-Chenrezig, who became Kannon, Kanzeon or Kwannon in Japan. In the *Sukhâvati Sûtra*, Guan Yin is a companion of Amitâbha. Progressively, under the influence of Taoism and Tantrism, he would acquire feminine features, definitive in China from the 10th century - or even earlier perhaps, as evidenced by the caves of Mogao. But the close union between Avalokiteshvara and the Supreme Wisdom obviously played its part. His Chinese name is identical to the Sanskrit one: "He or she who hears the pleas of the world". The word *Kuan*, as Rolf Stein points out, is masculine and feminine in Chinese.

Rolf Stein (1911-1999), honorary professor at the Collège de France and at the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales (INALCO), in the *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie (Notebooks of Extreme Asia)*, dedicated an article to the transformation of Avalokiteshvara into Guan Yin. About the date of her Chinese cult, Stein mentions a series of anecdotes that clearly suggest the sporadic and as yet unorganized worship of a salvific mother goddess between the 4th and 10th centuries: "Towards 483-493, a drunk emperor has the vision of a beautiful woman who turns into Guan Yin. At the beginning of the 7th century, a princess became a nun and took the name Kuan yin." Legends of the Six Dynasties also mention Guan Yin between the 4th and 6th centuries, illustrating the miracles of Avalokiteshvara in the *Lotus Sûtra*.

Rolf Stein attributes to Alfred Foucher and François Maspero the idea, only partially correct according to him, that the transformation of Avalokiteshvara into Guan Yin was due to the influence of the "Goddess dressed in white", Pândaravâsinî or Pai-yi. But he warns against confusion and also lists three forms of characters dressed in white not to be confused: the meditator, Guan Yin and the "Mother of Buddha". Pândaravâsinî is the wife of Amitâbha in Tantric Buddhism. In the ancient representations, she is sitting on a lotus, has a lasso in her left hand, and the Prâjñapâramita Sûtra in her right hand. Stein also points out that the Tibetan versions of a Târâ coming out of Amitâbha's eye are later than versions containing five hundred Târâ all born from Avalokiteshvara's left eye, and he

insists on the relations between Hinduism and Buddhism in the construction of the cults of Avalokiteshvara and Guan Yin.

(...)

From Kshitigarbha to Jizô: the filial love of the Bodhisattva

A photographer that had just travelled to Japan showed me one day images of statues, very present in the parks, of newborns or very young chubby and laughing children, that were representations of the bodhisattva Jizô. Immediately grasping the similarity of name and form with the Child Jesus, I became interested in his story and discovered through the *Dictionnaire d'ela sagesse Orientale* and *L'Encyclopédie du Bouddhisme* that Jizo was the Japanese version of the bodhisattva Kshitigarbha, or *Maternal Breast of the Earth*, white-skinned, revered by the people to save from the torments of hell and help dead children. He made a vow to free all souls, to relieve the suffering of all beings and not to reach Nirvâna until the advent of Maitreya. For all these reasons, he was identified with Avalokiteshvara. Called Ti-ts'ang or Dizang-wang in China, he was associated with Amitâbha-Amitufo and Guan Yin, but his cult was not very popular and in detail was actually very different from Kshitigarbha-Jizô in Japan. The latter has an immense love for his mother: to save her soul, he depopulated hell. Bodhisattva Jizo is also prayed by grieving mothers who have lost a child. Considered as the master of travelers, he is the only bodhisattva represented with an ûrna, that is, a spiral in place of the third eye.

Thus, going as far as Japan, we found the only childish form of Avalokiteshvara. Often, places very remote from the origins of a tradition are also those that have preserved it most faithfully, because isolation has reduced external influences. But Jizô could also be another protection for Christians against the persecutions of the 7th century. However, the extremely close relationship between Jizo and his mother, the name Kshitigarbha, which does not present the risk of recent changes, also in relation to a maternal symbolism, shows once again, thousands of miles from Gandhâra and many centuries after the *Heart Sûtra* of Supreme Wisdom, that Avalokiteshvara, the white Bodhisattva of Great Compassion is indissoluble from the feminine element: wife, sister, mother, polarity oscillating between masculine and feminine ... all the oriental cultures that welcomed the Mahâyâna expressed this rich and complex teaching, linked to the union of the masculine and feminine principle for individual realization but also the Salvation of all humanity. The feminine Wisdom that we will see now will be the opportunity to further deepen a "mystery" common to the Judeo-Christian tradition and to the Indian world, both Buddhist and Hindu.

X

The mysteries of the Supreme Feminine Wisdom

Avalokiteshvara and Târâ: a common passion for the East and the West

Let us enter the deep course of the Supreme Transcendent Wisdom - or in the Perfection of Wisdom, depending on translations - which gained always more importance in Mahâyâna, and in Tibet took shape of Târâ, popular today throughout the world.

I seize the opportunity to express a conviction, and here we return to talk about the intuition that captures and understands a lot of information at a time, or a single detail, and draws consequences that the reason will understand only much later, or never : it is no coincidence if Târa and Avalokiteshvara are figures so spontaneously loved and prayed with gratitude in all places where Tibetan Buddhism has spread. It seems to me that, through them, the West and the Westerners, to speak clearly, find the memory of the journey to the East, through their disciples, descendants or contemporaries, of their most beloved and inspiring figures: Christ, Mary and Mary Magdalene. And at the same time, thanks to them, they rediscover the inner certainty of a Wisdom and a Compassion freed from the pain and guilt on which twenty centuries of official Christianity have so much insisted. Târâ and Avalokiteshvara are the possibility of a liberation from suffering - it is the way of the historical Buddha Shâkyamuni offered to Humanity - but also of an inner realization, of a life definitively merged into these fundamental principles of peace, knowledge, love, and connection to the rest of the world - it is the essence of every religion - which represent Wisdom and Compassion. The couple Feminine Wisdom-Masculine Compassion is also the promise of the end of duality, and of the legitimacy of a reintegration of the primordial Unity that also leaves the two principles fully alive and reconciles the soul with body and spirit. The attraction for Tibetan Buddhism also comes from this: the prospect of a deep inner reconciliation, of reunification with oneself and with the other, a Nirvâna that allows the existence to continue, outside of time and Samsâra, but in relation with them through compassion that ensures a bridge with the suffering world, starting from the liberated world in which bodhisattvas are living. It is an aspiration to Unity, the desire to believe that there is a liberated but connected dimension where our dignity as a human person is fulfilled, because it has escaped the fatality of Duhkka, suffering, and Mara, desire and death. It is the aspiration to be a human person, master of his destiny in freedom, knowledge, compassion and solidarity, in search of the secrets of the Universe. This horizon of an end of suffering is not a way to depreciate Christ's sacrifice, which had to be. But Christ also said himself that his return would put an end to tears and death, as we can read in the Book of Revelation.

The Mâtika of all dharmas in Abhidharma : did a cult of Supreme Wisdom exist in Theravada before Mahâyâna ?

In May 2019, I could meet the Italian scholar Francesco Sferra at the Orientale, the University of Naples. He advised me to be very careful about the assertion that there was no worship of the personified female Wisdom or a messianic Buddha in Theravâda BC. I replied that if such teachings had existed, then current Theravadan Buddhism should still bear the trace of them.

Without directly contradicting me, he urged me to dig into the teachings of Theravâda where I was supposed to find traces of these two points generally recognized as innovative and fundamental in Mahâyâna. That's what I did a couple of weeks after. A keyword search took me to discover Kate Crosby's researches. A professor of Buddhist studies at King's College in London, and a member of the Theravâda Civilizations Project, Kate Crosby emphasizes in *Theravada Buddhism: Continuity, Diversity and Identity* (Wiley Blackwell, 2014), the presence in Theravâda of a feminine archetype similar to Supreme Wisdom in Mahâyâna: taking a broader vision at Theravada sources, it would be possible to find symbols of non dual transcendence through the union of masculine and feminine also in Theravada, and not only in Mahâyâna and Vajrayâna. The English scholar writes (chapter 11):

"Now Abhidhamma (pali), Abhidharma (sanskrit), has also a "mother of all dharma(s)", the mâtikâ (pali/sanskrit mâtrkâ), which literally means both "mother" and "creator"/,"constructor" (Gethin, 1992). The mâtikâ in abhidharma are the list of dharmas found at the start of abhidharma texts and that form the basis for analyses of reality in Abidharma texts. Thus, Abhidharma, including the Pali Abhidhamma tradition, has an antecedent of the feminine Prâjnapâramitâ of Mahâyâna. This notion of Mâtikâ as mother, creating all Dharmas, in the sense of the analytical components of reality, the truth taught by Buddhas and the true quality of Buddhahood, was not the preserve of scholastic and philosophical texts. It was drawn on in myths and meditation practices directed at enlightenment in non-reform Theravada (chapter 6). We noted the association of Abhidamma with the mother, in that case the Buddha's mother, in the story of its origins (chapter 7 and 10). »

This extracts rises questions like : what should be intended by *non-reform theravada*? Who brought these practices and myths in *non-reform theravada*? Hindu yogis, ascetics? Do we have to think such practises developed inside the sangha or some of its components ? And most of all: when did these practises develop ? Is the feminine mother of all the realities that preceded Mahâyâna, the Mâtika, precisely associated with *Prâjñâ*, Wisdom as in Mahâyâna?

Kate Crosby mentions the *Vishuddha marga*, a 5th century summary of the Theravada path, with practices aimed at developing compassion, one of the pair of perfect qualities of the Buddha, the other being wisdom. These practices to develop loving kindness, compassion, joy, equanimity, are very similar to the Mahâyâna Paramitas, and have been compared since the earliest texts, to the love of the mother for their children. Then follows the example of the Karaniyamettasutta, a discourse of Buddha and the earliest text in which mettâ, Loving kindness, is salvific, and Kate Crosby compares this feminine aspect of love in Theravada with Târâ and Guan-yin, although they are not divinized in Theravada.

Later, we read that « non-canonical theravada also offers models for gender-inclusive soteriological androgyny, which may provide parallels to those of Vajrayâna, the form of Tantra that developed within Mahâyâna, which have been so important for feminist buddhists. However, Vajrayâna uses sexual union to symbolize the realization of soteriological androgyny through the spiritual union of complementary male and female aspects. Theravada does not. In the non-reform Theravada meditation that has been likened to Tantra, sex is still seen very much as belonging to Mârâ. »

Summarizing the informations brought by Kate Crosby in *Theravada Buddhism: continuity, Diversity and Identity*, we learnt the existence of this Mâtikâ as feminine builder and mother, quite similar to feminine Shekina and Shakti that create the world with their action, which means that the concept was not original from Abhidharma, elaborated between the 3rd century BC and the 3rd century CE, with a definitive codification circa 400-450 CE (*Dictionnaire de la*

Sagesse Orientale, article *Abhidharma*). The Londinian professor precises that Abhidharma does not propose an iconographic or practical cult nor an eroticization of the Feminine Wisdom as Mahâyâna does. The androgyny proposed by Theravada reaches in no way the central value in Vajrayâna, and the names, legends and representations of Târâ and Guan-yin do bear stronger common points with more western goddesses. The question of a precise chronology of the emergence of the Mâtikâ and the techniques of developpement of Metta also remain decisive, with the very large period of composition of the Abhidharmabefore and after the Christian era. But even if these aspects developped before the Christian era, they did not possess, as today's theravadist cults show, the essential feminine personification that progressively grew in Mahâyâna and sometimes, with Gwan-yin and Kannon, replaced a great masculine Bodhisattva cult by a feminine one. Actually, the example of Avalokiteshvara being replaced by his feminine half shows that Mahâyânist Wisdom developped in a very special way, intimately linked with a primordial androgyny of the couple Compassion-Wisdom, originated from the Infinite Light of a new Buddha, Amitâbha. As a conclusion, the situation about the presence or not of a Feminine Wisdom before or after the Christian era in Theravâda is similar to that of the Bodhisattva or the term Mahâyâna : what happened and developped CE with the Great Vehicle at a very large scale represented an important and sudden mutation or emergence of what may have been present in Theravâda, where such aspects did not develop in such forms along the centuries until now (paragraph : 31/05/2019, waiting for an answer of Kate Crosby).

A journey within the Word: being, connecting and having faith in the Supreme Wisdom of the Heart Sûtra

In the Heart Sûtra, Avalokiteshvara *relies* on Supreme Wisdom to reach Nirvâna, according to Edward Conze's English translation, which uses the expression *to rely on* to translate the Sanskrit verb *âsritya*. *Âsritya* is a verb used in the *Bhagavad Gîta* to "take refuge", but the sense is also to stand firmly in something, engage, identify, accept, have recourse to, rely on...

To rely on is a translation that renders the richness of the Sanskrit root *sth*, which is found in many Indo-European languages to mean for example a *state, to stand, to stay: to stay* in English, *stehen* in German, *rester* in French. Conze does not use a straight etymology of the word like *stay* or *stand*. In fact, the oldest and narrowest etymology does not necessarily render the essential idea. Living only in the roots would make us *radicals*. forgetting the necessary evolution of things in the open air: the seed or the roots of a tree are not enough to know what it is, we have to see it grow, with the trunk, the branches, the flowers, the leaves, the fruits. In this way, we will understand its teaching, and we will reap its fruits. *To rely on* refers more to the root of *yoga*, which we find in *religion, yoke, junction* etc. In this way, Conze renders the relationship between Avalokiteshvara and the Supreme Wisdom, and the fact of being linked to each other and to the Buddha Nature or Matrix, the Tathâgathagarbha.

(...)

The sûtra-text-texture of everything, the dialogue of the Wise and the courtesan and the Heart- Universe of Prajâpati

A few word about the notion of interdependance, noticeable, even in the word *sûtra* which means *suturing*, being sewn, woven together, like tantra: texts and man are considered in the antique conceptions as woven by the Universal Mind. In *Ka*, Roberto Calasso magnificently spoke of the *Brihadâranayaka Upanishad* that goes to the origin of the manifestation and the veil of Mâyâ, through a dialogue between Yajñâvalkya and Gârgî, a courtesan two questions the sage on the ultimate secret of Consciousness. He warns her against the risk of her head exploding, as happened to others, but he also tells her what she wanted to hear in front of the taciturn Brahmins who listen to their verbal jousting: "Verily, O Gargi, if one performs sacrifices and worship and undergoes austerity in this

world for many thousands of years, but without knowing that Imperishable, limited indeed is that [work] of his. Across this Imperishable is the unseen, O Gargi, is space woven, warp and woof” (Denise Carmody, T. Brink, *Cengage Advantage Books: Ways to the Center: An Introduction to World Religions*, 2013)

Once again, in this upanishad, we find Yajñavalkya, the future White Horse- Kalki Avatar, now with a courtesan who asks him for the last secrets, like Mary Magdalene receiving the teachings of Christ at the foot of her rabies, and it is the translation of *Upanishad: Sitting at the feet (of the master)*.(...)

Gnostic Wisdom in the Pistis Sophia

In languages like Italian, *Sapienza*, Wisdom comes from *sapere*, in the twofold sense of the word: knowing and tasting, but also demanding, weighing, examining with caution. *Prajñā* has the same sense of knowing and discerning. The Greek *gnōsis* shares its radical. There is also in *prajñā* an idea of practical action, as in *Sophia* in Greek, which means knowledge and ability to act morally with wisdom.

The document known as *Pistis Sophia (Faith-Wisdom or Faith of Wisdom)* is a fragmentary Gnostic text actually entitled *The Scrolls of the Lord*. Found in Egypt in the 18th century, it contains the teachings that Jesus would have transmitted to his disciples after the Resurrection, from thirty-three to forty-four years old. The Coptic text dates back to the mid-4th century A.D. The version of Dr. Askew's collection was bought and kept very discreetly by the British Museum since the 1760s, which were the beginning of the reappearance of the Gnostic writings. But the basilica of Santa Maria Assunta in Aquileia, in Friuli, had, since the Middle Ages, preserved in a part of its mosaic (the "crypt of the excavations"), the oldest and largest in the West, a probable representation of the Gnostic myth of the Pistis Sophia.

The Sophia is presented as the parda of Christ who came to save her as Mary Magdalene freed from the seven demons. The Gnostics affirmed in fact that Wisdom, daughter of Barbêlô, the supreme feminine principle, the first emanation of God, had fallen into the depths of matter when she had wanted to rise to the Pleroma. She had been deceived by the lion-headed Power that the Archonts had made appear down here. Repentance and the lamentations of Wisdom decided Christ to come down to us to save her and restore their primeval unity, since in Gnostic thought, the Manifestation took place for couples of syzygies, especially of twin souls, a notion very similar to Yab-Yum and Prajñā-Karunâ.

The Wisdom of Jesus Christ, the primordial bisexual Savior and Guan Yin

Another Gnostic book, quoted in the chapter on Mahâshtâmaprâpta, *The Wisdom of Jesus Christ*, speaks of the Wisdom as the daughter of the light, Christ's parda, endowed with the power to veil the world, thus bringing together the characteristics of Târâ, Sarasvatî and Mâyâ. Discovered in the Gnostic library of Nag Hammadi and dated to the II or III century A.D., we read that the primordial man, Saviour and bisexual, was assigned Wisdom as a syzygy by the autogenic Father...:

“The perfect Savior said: "I want you to know that he who appeared before the universe in infinity, Self-grown, Self-constructed Father, being full of shining light and ineffable, in the beginning, when he decided to have his likeness become a great power, immediately the principle (or beginning) of that Light appeared as Immortal Androgynous Man, that through that Immortal Androgynous Man they might attain their salvation and awake from forgetfulness through the interpreter who was sent, who is with you until the end of the poverty of the robbers. "And his consort is the Great Sophia, who from the first was destined in him for union by Self-begotten Father, from Immortal Man, who appeared as First and divinity and kingdom, for the Father, who is called 'Man, Self-Father 1 , revealed

this. And he created a great aeon, whose name is 'Ogdoad', for his own majesty.” *The Wisdom of Jesus Christ*, (translated by Douglas M. Parrott, see note upper)

In this passage, we may find one of the keys to the gender change of Avalokiteshvara - Guan Yin, the bodhisattva manifested by the infinite light of Amitâbha: like the Gnostic bisexual Savior, Avalokiteshvara-Guan Yin could become the white Chinese goddess to whom more orthodox and Catholic Marian characteristics were added as the Nestorian or Jesuit missionaries arrived in the Middle Kingdom.

(...)

The Gnostic Wisdom, mother of all, of disciples and angels, and the Buddhist Wisdom mother of all Buddhas.

In other passages of the *Wisdom of Jesus Christ*, Wisdom is also called *agape*, the most spiritual love, as Târâ is Compassion:

“His male name is designated 'First Begetter, Son of God', his female name, 'First Begettress Sophia, Mother of the Universe'. Some call her 'Love' 100 (The Gnostic Society Library, translated by Douglas M. Parrott)

In the Heart Sûtra, all those who manifest themselves as Buddhas in the three times, and the bodhisattvas, rely on the Perfection of Wisdom and reach Enlightenment. For this reason, Wisdom is called the Mother of all Buddhas - an expression that is like a direct mirror to the Gnostic texts – and it is paid homage to her as a beautiful woman in the Tibetan tradition. Orthodoxy and Gnosis certainly helped greatly in the fortune of Wisdom as the Mother of all Buddhas.

(...)

At the beginning of this paragraph, the Wisdom « Mother of all » also desires that the Savior's disciples come into existence. We recognize in her the Prajñâpâramitâ, "Mother of all Buddhas" and also of the bodhisattvas who go to preach Salvation in the world. The curtain between the immortals and those who came into existence is also very similar to the veil of the feminine Mâyâ created by Brahman in the *Sarasvatî Upanishad*. But the Greeks also talked about the Dokos, the veil that hides us reality.

In *The Gospel of Philip*, let us remember:

“Wisdom, who is called “barren,” is mother of the angels. The companion is Mary of Magdala. Jesus loved her more than his students. He kissed her often on her face, more than all his students, and they said, “Why do you love her more than us?” The savior answered, saying to them, “Why do I not love you like her? If a blind man and one who sees are together in darkness, they are the same. When light comes, the one who sees will see light. The blind man stays in darkness. »55 (translation by Marvin Meyer, *The Gnostic Society Library*)

Here, Sophia becomes the mother of the angels, etymologically "the messengers", the heavenly messengers. Their mission agrees with that of the disciples and bodhisattvas generated in the Mahâyâna. Without the previous text of the *Wisdom of Jesus Christ*, we could interpret the expression in continuity with the designation of the Virgin Mary as mother of John in *John, 19, 26-27*. Mary was also sometimes called Mother of the Apostles, Queen of the Apostles, Queen of Angels and Heavens. But Jesus speaks clearly here of Mary Magdalene who is not only the first of the apostles because she was the first to see the risen Jesus.

"But then the bridegroom, according to the will of the Father, went down to her in the bridal chamber, which was prepared. And he decorated the bridal chamber. That is why, since then, that union has not been like a carnal union; those who have gone through it will be satisfied. And as if it had been a burden, they will leave the bother of physical desire and turn their faces from all such things. But this union [...]. But once they are united, they are transformed into a single life. » Gospel of Philip, 60-65, (translation by Marvin Meyer, *The Gnostic Society Library*)

(...)

Orthodox Sofiology or Wisdom as ideal femininity, mother, bride and radiation of the Holy Spirit.

In an article published in 1997 in the magazine *Resurrection*, Jesuit Jean-Paul Maisonneuve, translator of Sylvan of the Athos, who died in 1938, made a synthesis about Sophia in Russian Orthodoxy in particular. After having warned against what he considers the risk of returning to Paganism or Hellenism, but taking into account the Hokma or Shekhinah in the Old Testament, that we are obliged to consider, he continues - I translate:

"Russian Sofiology comes neither from Jacob Boehme, nor from Schelling's second philosophy, nor from Vedic anthropology (...), nor from German or English-speaking theosophical circles, nor from Hebrew Kabbalah, nor from neoplatonism or Gnostic substitutes, nor from the influence of the mystics of India or Asia. She has her particular place in all these currents, which she certainly does not ignore, and from which she has drawn, but her source is directly biblical and liturgical (...). The relationship between the Platonic tradition discovered and assimilated in exile or occupation, and the inspired Revelation, a relationship which highlights the sapiential books themselves, should not be silenced or suspected, since it benefits from this Old Testament canonization. Moreover, Wisdom finds in the Gospel and in Saint Paul its New Testament titles of nobility. By now, we will have to count with her. »

« The Sophia is, Jean-Paul Maisonneuve continues, neither a figure of rhetoric, nor a Fourth Person of the Trinity, but the Church itself and the Virginity, the "divine substance itself" (we recognize the Mâyâ of Sarasvatî). Wisdom must therefore be incarnated after a long time of preparation, it is accomplished "in the immaculate" so that in the "hypostatic union" (Jesus, true God and true Man) that spreads through the Church and all Creation, the union of man and the Divine in the world and the "Wedding of Wisdom" can be realized. » After eliminating Neoplatonism in favor of the people of believers, the Jesuit lists the characteristics of Sophia:

- femininity, grace, purity and ideal beauty, adornment of gems of the world (here, we think of the Starry Cosmos which was intended as the adornment of gems by the Greeks);
- bride of Christ of whom she is the mystical body, eternally young and mother of many children;
- radiation of the Holy Spirit in the flesh of Christ;
- essence of the goodness of the Father that penetrates and enlivens everything;
- beauty of the world full of God and of all the divine energies of the visible world and of the invisible worlds.

Jean-Paul Maisonneuve confirms after my deductions: for Russian Sofiology, Wisdom is the Holy Spirit, the messianic anointing of Jesus, the world invested with the Glory, the Spirit and the Bride of the Apocalypse, Mary, the Incarnate Word.

We note that the terms in which Orthodox Wisdom is described are identical to the divinization of Wisdom in the Mahâyâna and in the *SarasvatîUpanishad*. Louis Frédéric also writes of the Prajñâpâramitâ: « This divinity therefore represents the divine Word incarnate ».

In listing all the forms that Wisdom took in the religions that preceded or accompanied Christianity, Jean-Paul Maisonneuve spans twenty-five centuries. Let us cite Philon of Alexandria (20 B.C. circa - 45 A.D. circa), an excellent representative of the Hellenistic period in the Middle East: a Jew, he commented on the Bible in Greek from Plato's philosophy. Wisdom became for him the Platonic Logos, which refers us back to the prologue of the Gospel of John with the Word that accomplished all that exists in the world. Plotinus (205-270 A.D.) will make Wisdom the creative force of the universe, the exact translation of the Shakti, the Indian Power.

Ten centuries later, Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) had a vision of Sophia. Proclaimed Doctor of the Church by Benedict XVI in 2012, the "nun of Dresden" represented the Sophia as crowned and winged. Even in Protestantism, which suppressed the cult of the Virgin, Jane Leade (1624-1704), the animator of the Philadelphia movement, in the continuation of Jacob Boehme, said she had a vision of the Virgin Sophia. In the Eastern Church, Wisdom never disappeared, and one can still hear beautiful songs dedicated to Sophia represented on an icon brought by the pope during the Orthodox services.

As far as the subject of our book is concerned, from what we have learned in the previous paragraphs, the same observation always emerges: for centuries, perhaps for millennia there has been the cult of Wisdom or Shakti, in the Indian and Middle Eastern world and in the Jewish world in particular, in which Christianity appeared. But Buddhism, until the apparition of the Christian faith, had remained outside these cults, and saw their blossoming and importance grow simultaneously with Christianity and Gnosis and in similar ways.

From the Old Testament to the Gospel and the Diaspora

Jean-Paul Maisonneuve alludes to the Gospels that gave Wisdom noble titles. In fact, Jesus has this word:

"(...) For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.'¹⁹ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.' But wisdom is proved right by her deeds." *Matthew, 11, 18-19, NIV*

Other translations prefer: "by his children", and the double translation reveals the double aspect of femininity-maternity, and Creator of Wisdom.

But to understand what Christ may refer to, one must go through a few centuries of Jewish tradition, and keep in mind the Gnostic and Oriental resurgences of Wisdom to perhaps have access to things never written but present in Christic teachings. Three synoptic Gospels that repeat almost word for word the same facts, a fourth difficult to interpret and sometimes even suspect... Could it be everything? It is also necessary to immerse in the very particular context of the ministry of Jesus, who chose to incarnate himself in a dramatic period in which all peoples and all cultures mingled and also allowed an open mind. And even if we place ourselves in a more materialistic perspective, not in the idea of a providence but in causality, if the man Jesus - to speak like Ernest Renan - was in cultural terms only the "product" of his time, this time being itself the product of many other times and of many other places, if Jesus was reflecting his time and extending it, then it is worth entering deeper in what he carried inside, as a Jew of Galilee, Palestine and Judea, at the crossroads of Heaven and Earth, of Law and Love, of the West of Greece and Rome and of the East of Persia and India. And we must ask ourselves whether, either for purpose or causality, some of those who followed his teachings may have continued in the opening of the times they were living in, towards the East, while the second Temple was falling under Titus and the Jewish diaspora was beginning for almost two thousand years.

The origins of Gnosis

Ioan P. Couliano writes in *The Tree of Gnosis: Gnostic Mythology from Early Christianity to Modern Nihilism* (HarperCollins Publishers, Australia, 1992) that the origin of Gnosticism is unknown and the history of its beginnings is controversial, but a date of birth after 70 A.D., connected or not with the fall of the Second Temple, is likely. And, listing various Gnostic systems and insisting on the verb, he adds that Manichaeism derives from a form of Gnosticism, as well as Byzantine Paulicianism.

Having said this, it is nevertheless equally indispensable to remember the proximity of the very earlier dualistic worldview of Mazdeism and Zoroastrianism with its two principles of Light and Darkness, with that of Gnosticism in general. Nevertheless, it is not the subject of this book to resolve the question of the origin of Gnosis, but to understand how, together with the most classical Christianity of the Gospel, Buddhism of the Origins, Zoroastrianism, Taoism and Hinduism, Gnostic esotericism may have contributed to the elaboration of Mahâyâna or shared common origins with it, and how all the spirituality mentioned, and their cosmologies, help us to understand the world we live in and to live in as free as possible.

Edward Conze, and the "impressive similarities between Buddhism and Gnosticism"

Born in Germany in 1904, Edward Conze was very interested in oriental studies and languages. In his autobiography, *Memories of a Modern Gnostic*, (1979, on behalf of the author, sold out), from which only the first two volumes were published, the third being considered too risky by his lawyer concerned by some people involved, Conze tells us that at the age of twenty-four he knew fourteen languages. He had to exile from Germany before the Second World War because of his communist positions and for the same reason he could never reach the United States. His "Communism" did not prevent him from looking to the world in an elitist, sometimes racist and misogynist and from dividing it between two categories of people, he himself representing the most evolved part. And he was not, logically, a democrat. Conze was deeply interested in Astrology, he had attended Theosophy and had converted to Buddhism in 1941, so that his commitment to studies on Prajñâpâramitâ was not only, indeed it was not at all, intellectual. I had wondered why the almost systematically quoted translation of the Heart Sûtra was his, but I later understood it knowing how much he had immersed himself in the literature of the Wisdom of the Mahâyâna. Conze considered himself a representative of a kind of superior world whose mission was to sweeten and ennoble the West with the teaching of the Prajñâpâramitâ. Before Conze, the first known author to have published a comparison between Gnosticism and Buddhism was Isaac Jacob Schmidt (1779-1847) in his short essay, *Über die Verwandtschaft der gnostisch-theosophischen Lehren mit den Religionssystemen des Orients, vorzüglich dem Buddhismus* (Leipzig, 1828). "Of the kinship of the Gnostic and theosophical teachings with the religious systems of the East and in particular with Buddhism". Conze resumed his work in the Colloquium of Messina (Sicily), held from 13 to 18 April 1966, dedicated to Gnosis and its relations with Judaism and Early Christianity. Conze's work was continued by Elaine Pagels in *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York, Random House, 1979). The appeal to broaden the field of research between Gnosticism and Buddhism remained in vain both in the university field and in the general public and the very fact of the success of the book by Elaine Pagels was put on account of demagogy.

(...)

Conze, Edward (1967), *"Buddhism and Gnosis"*, in Bianchi, U., *Origins of Gnosticism: Colloquium of Messina*, 13-18 April 1966

Bennett, Clinton (2001), *In search of Jesus: insider and outsider images*

Conze on similarities between Mahayana Buddhism and Gnosticism

Conze, 15-32 (*"Buddhism and Gnosis"*); 207 ff.

Conze, Edward. *"Buddhism and Gnosis,"* *Further Buddhist Studies* (1975)

The Jewish Wisdom: from Proverbs to Sirach, Enoch and the Pharisees

The Book of Proverbs dates back to the royal age of the Old Testament (1000-587 B.C.). Its sentences are part of the sapiential or gnomic literature and has strong similarities - and even direct casts - with the equivalents of the Sumerians, Assyrians and Babylonians, Canaanites, Hittites and Egyptians. "In short, proverbs participate in an international literary life", summarizes the introduction of the *Traduction Oecuménique de la Bible*, which does not mention the Indian world yet in that time in the orality of transmission. Here are some verses of the *Proverbs*:

The LORD brought me forth as the first of his works,
before his deeds of old;
I was formed long ages ago,
at the very beginning, when the world came to be. 22-23

Then I was constantly at his side.
I was filled with delight day after day,
rejoicing always in his presence,
rejoicing in his whole world
and delighting in mankind. 30-31(NIV)

In an introduction to the book of Wisdom, written at most around the year 50 B.C., but most likely after the Roman invasion (30 B.C), the *Traduction Œcuménique de la Bible* notes the similarity of thought with Philon of Alexandria and explains:

“Personifying Wisdom, the author takes up and extends the text of *Pr. 1-9*. However, he emphasizes the creative activity of Wisdom (...) and its cosmic function. Wisdom, because she shares the life of God and governs the world (...), is the Divine Revelation: she unveils the Will of God. On the other hand, she is the source of all science and knowledge (...). This personification of Wisdom raises a delicate question: is it a literary process or does the author consider Wisdom as an intermediate reality between God and man, or even a divine person? The text does not allow us to decide.”

In the following lines, the commentators specify that the relationship of Wisdom with the Spirit could "incite us to recognize in her a foreshadowing of the Holy Spirit", but this interpretation is "difficult to establish", even considering that the goodness with which Wisdom governs the Universe would rather announce the "divine grace which is incarnated in Jesus Christ. ». A way to stay in a fully masculine conception while the precedent lines showed how the Sacred Feminine was important in the Old Testament's Wisdom.

(...)

XI

Nâgârjuna and Shântideva:

The Hymn to the Lord that have transcended the world and

The Way of the Hero of Awakening

As Maitreya is the Buddha of the Future, even if his cult is attested before the apparition of Nâgârjuna and Shântideva, I have chosen to make acquaintance in this chapter with these two very important masters of Indian Mahâyâna. Some aspects of their work, that decisively oriented the Great Vehicle, especially in Tibet, will be particularly instructive in the research that interests us, (...)

In a very lyrical style, the Indian historian K.R. Subramanian calls the "bodhisattva Nâgârjuna" : "the king of monks", "the Aristotle of Buddhism", "The Christ of Mâdhyamika", "The Saint Paul of Mahâyâna" in his essay *Buddhist Remains in Andhra and the History of Andhra Between 225 and 610 a.D.* (1932). Born into a Brahmin family in southern India in the 2nd century AD. (his dates are much discussed), legend has it that he was ordained a monk at the age of seven to avoid the realization of a prediction about an early death. The goddess Târâ would have made him a Siddhi - owner of the magical powers - according to a version of his life. Quite interesting for us, to answer the suspended question at the end of the previous chapter, is the fact that the Mahayanist tradition attributes to Nâgârjuna the privilege of having revealed the complete Prajñâpâramita. The monk, having dropped

his bowl at the bottom of a river, jumped to retrieve it and found himself in front of the King of the Nâgas, the demigods-snakes that traditionally are the custodians of underground and underwater treasures and secrets, and are sometimes at the service of the mission of some men they protect. According to another version, the meeting would have taken place during a sermon. Nâgârjuna would have spent six hundred years in Nâgalôka, the world of the snakes, benefiting through the Nâgas from the teachings of the Prajñâpâramitâ. (...)

The four lauds of Nâgârjuna

The Catuhstava (The Four Lauds) is a collection of four non-dualistic hymns in which Nâgârjuna deepens and systematizes the doctrine of the emptiness of the Prajñâpâramitâ to demonstrate the unreality of the material world. But the words of the Mahayanist master are addressed to a kind of transcendental divinity or consciousness. And the importance of translation appears here in a very bright way. Geshe Thupten Jinpa, one of the translators to English of the Dalaï Lama and founder of Intitute of Tibetan Classics, translates the title and the first two verses of the first hymn as following :

Hymn to (the Buddha,) the world transcendent

Homage to Manjushri!

I bow to you, the world transcendent,
You who're versed in the gnosis of absence.
For the benefit of the world
You've suffered long with great compassion

That apart from the mere aggregates
No sentient being exists, you uphold.
Yet, great sage, you continue to remain
Perfectly immersed in the welfare of beings.

But Peruvian scholar of University of Buenos Aires, Fernando Tola (1915-2017) and his Argentine wife, philologist and orientalist Carmen Dragonetti (1937-2018), preferred in their 1954 version:

To him who has gone beyond the world

O you who have gone beyond the world,
homage to you versed in pure knowledge,

who have suffered pain, out of compassion, during long time,
only for the benefit of all living beings. 1

For the second verse, Geshe Tubthen Jinpa translates :

*That apart from the mere aggregates
No sentient being exists, you uphold.
Yet, great sage, you continue to remain
Perfectly immersed in the welfare of beings. 2*

While Tola and Dragonetti prefer :

Your opinion is that a living being does not exist,

liberated just from the skandhas
nevertheless you have suffered extreme pain,
o great muni, for the sake of living beings. 2

As we see, in the title, Geshe Tubthen Jinpa logically assumes the hymn is dedicated to the Buddha and dedicates it to Mañjushrî, which is not written in the original Nagarjuna's text. He translates « transcendent » and doesn't insist on the extreme pain suffered in the second verse.

Tola and Dragonetti translate in a “chronological” way: “who have gone beyond the world”, as if there had been a process of liberation of the world during the life of the Supreme Being Nâgârjuna is paying homage to. And the Argentine scholars write again on the salvific pain suffered by this Being who should of course be Siddhârta... but the insistence of Nâgârjuna on the pain suffered and the fact that this hymn appeared just at the beginning of the Christian era leave a legitime doubt. I and Pierre-Jean Laurent analyzed word per word the beginning of the laud with all the possibilities which resulted in this translation:

« Tribute to you, who have crossed the worlds, and who know the pure knowledge
To you who have suffered for a long time and compassionately for the sole benefit of living beings. »

The term *buddha* is used six times in the *Catuhstava*, but never in direct relation with the historical Buddha, while the Being the hymns are dedicated to is called *Lord* : *nâtha*, fourteen times, among which we find the expression *vâcaspathi*, - Lord of the words - and *jagannâth* : Lord of the World. Furthermore, when we listen to the illusion of the existence of this Lord, from the transcendental point of view, we are not far from Docetism that denied the real and physical existence of Christ, and we find again this idea of the mirage-body of a transcendental Being who was Avalokiteshvara in the *Lotus Sûtra*, and is the « Lord » of the *Catuhstava*. Furthermore, this Being is called Lord of the World in the *Catuhstava* as Avalokiteshvara will become Lokeshvara, the Lord of the World. All these details to which we must add compassion, suffering etc... can legitimately lead us to establish a relation between Avalokiteshvara, the Lord and Buddha of the *Catuhstava* and the docetic image of Jesus that could arrive in the Indian world in the 1st century A.D. The Cathars were considered not only as heretics but also heirs of Mânîand Docetics. Of course, the idea of the world as a mirage existed since time immemorial in Oriental thought, even more than in the West as far as we know, but there could have been a turning movement. Let us listen to other extracts of the *Catuhstava* in the Tola and Dagonetti' version:

“The teaching about the ambrosia of voidness is for the destruction of all mental creations, but also who holds to it has been blamed by you”. *I, 23*

“Let all living beings be liberated from the bonds of what has characteristics, through the merit I have obtained by praising you, receptacle of praises!” *I, 28*

From the third hymn, or *To the Unthinkable One*:

“Whoever manages to reach the shore of the sea of the Perfection of Wisdom by himself - rich in the precious virtues of his spiritual merits - reaches, O Lord, the shore of your virtues.” *III, 56*

The following verses are the beginning of the fourth hymn, dedicated to the Supreme Reality in Tola and Dragonetti' translation:

Hymn according to the Supreme Truth

“How shall I praise you, the Lord who has not been born, who remains no where, who is beyond all comparison proper of the world, something beyond the path of words.” 1

“Any how - be you whatever you may be in the sense of the true reality - I, abiding by the world's conventions, shall praise the Master out of devotion.” 2

“Since there is not a forthcoming with an own being, there is not forth- coming for you, neither going nor coming, o Lord. I pay homage to you devoid of an own being.” 3

“You are neither an existing being nor a non existing being, nor (liable to) destruction nor eternal, nor permanent nor impermanent. I pay homage to you devoid of duality.” 4

Nâgârjuna praises a Lord beyond words, with human feelings, while fighting as a Buddhist the Hindu idea of an Atman and a Brahman. His lyricism is ardent of Bhakti but it could also be a Christian mystic who loves God with all his heart, all his thought..., or a psalm of David with the doctrinal language of Mâhâyana, and why not - centuries after - a Muslim laude towards a single Lord without attributes. It is a single Lord who brings together all faiths and experiences. But if there had not been, a few decades earlier, the arrival of the First Christians in Gandhâra, or Kerala, since Nâgârjuna is originally from southern India, are we sure that the "king of monks" would have addressed the same lauds to the same Supreme Reality? And can we say that Mahâyâna would have appeared to welcome him?

Nâgârjuna also wrote *Counsels to the king*, in which he addresses to a sovereign to help him govern his kingdom in accordance with the Dharma for the good of all beings. It is possible that Khmer King Jayavarman VII, whom we will see shortly, was inspired by this treatise to govern Angkor.

Shântideva and the Way of the Bodhisattva

Centuries after Nâgârjuna, Shântideva - the Deity of Peace -, circa 685-763 A.D., became famous for his treatise *The Way of the Bodhisattva* (Bodhischaryâvatâra or Bodhisattvacharyâvatâra), a guide for aspiring bodhisattvas, monks or lay people who want to acquire the Bodhicitta, or Mind of awakening to Wisdom. The Bodhicitta means the desire to reach the Awakening for the good of all beings, and is necessary in the Mahâyâna. *The Way of the Bodhisattva* all oriented this spirit together with Compassion, presents two methods of meditation that the *Dictionnaire de la Sagesse Orientale* summarizes as follows:

"On the one hand it is the exercise of the identity of the other with the Self (parâtmamasamatâ), on the other hand it is the exercise of the exchange between the other and the Self (Parâmaparivartana). »

This double contribution also strongly evokes Christianity and its :

“What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?”

He answered, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind”; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

“You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”

In *Luke, 10, 26-28*, preceded by *Leviticus, 19, 18*. Let us also think of *Matthew, 7, 12*:

"So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.”

Shântideva would have been the son of a king of southern India, destined to succeed his father. But the day before the crowning, according to one version, his mother asked him to bathe in boiling water,

after which she told him that it was nothing compared to what he would experience as a king. According another version, Mañjushrî appeared in a dream to Shântideva who then decided to leave the kingdom and went to live at the University of Nalandâ, like a *bhusuku*: he ate, slept and did his business. All the monks made fun of Shântideva and at a certain point they challenged him: he was supposed to explain a sûtra the next day. He meditated all night with the mantra of Mañjushrî, who appeared to him again. The next morning, he asked if the monks wanted to be presented a teaching they already knew or not. They laughed, and he expounded the *Bodhicharyâvatâra*, which really evokes the words of Christ when we read it.

In the introductory chapter, we have a question similar to the Gospel:

« If whoever repays a kind deed
Is worthy of some praise,
Then what need to mention the Bodhisattva
Who does good without its being asked of him ? » 31

“And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full.” *Luke 6:33-35*

Chapter II consists in confessing negativity. Chapter III is the one most cited with famous words that closely evoke the Passion of Christ and the Last supper :

"May a rain of food and drink descend
To clear away the pain of thirst and anger
And during the aeon famine
may I myself change into food or drink, 9

Without any sense of loss
I shall give up my body and enjoyments
As well as all my virtues of the three times
For the sake of benefitting all

By giving up all, sorrow is transcended
And my mind will realize the sorrowless state
It is best that I (now) give everything to all beings
In the same way I shall (at death)
Having given this body up
For the pleasure of all living beings
By killing, abusing or beating it,
My they always do as they please

Although they may play with my body,
And make it a source of jest and blame
Because I have given it up to them
What is the use of holding it dear?

« If in those who encounter me
A faithful or an angry thought arise
May that eternally become the source

For fulfilling all their wishes

May all who say bad things to me
Or cause me any other harm
And those who mock and insult me
Have the fortune to fully awaken.

May I be protector for those without one
A guide for all travellers on the way ;
May I be a bridge, a boat and a ship
For all who wish to cross (the water). 11-18 (*A guide to the bodhisattva way of life*, translated into English by Stephen Batchelor, Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, Dharamsala, 1979)

Chapter X concerns the dedication of merits:

Through my merit, may all those in all directions who are afflicted by bodily and mental sufferings obtain oceans of joy and contentment. 2

As many hells as there are in the worlds, may beings in them delight in the joys of contentment in Sukhavati.4

The following verses of chapter 10 evoke the crossing of the Hell by Jesus and Avalokiteshvara-Padmapani :

May the horrifying agents of Yama, crows, and vultures suddenly watch here in fear. Those looking upward behold blazing Vajrapani in the sky and wonder: "Whose is this brilliant light that dispels darkness all around and generates the joy of contentment?" May they depart together with him, freed of vice through the power of their joy.

Friends, come, come quickly! Cast away fear! We are alive! A radiant vanquisher of fear, a certain prince in a monastic robe, has come to us. By his power every adversity is removed, streams of delight flow, the Spirit of Awakening is born, as is compassion, the mother of protection of all beings. 13-15

(...)

A guide to the bodhisattva way of life (Bodhicaryavatara), by Santideva, translated from the Sanskrit and Tibetan By Vesna A. Wallace and B. Alan Wallace, Snow Lion Publications Ithaca, New York US, 1996

XII

"The One who loves"

"We can become the closest friends of the future perfectly accomplished Buddha; we can then, having drunk the ambrosia of his doctrine, reach the goal of the incomparable path: the bodhi. »

Song of an Hymn to Maitreya discovered in 1914 next to the Khotan in Chinese Turkestan by A.H. Francke.

(...)

Mithra the Persian

The French historian and archaeologist Robert Turcan (1929-2018) dedicated an essay to Mithra (*Mithra et le Mithriacisme*, Éd. Les Belles Lettres, 2014, untranslated) in which he clearly lists common points today quite well known between Jesus and the Persian god : Mithra was born of a virgin on December 25, he died and rose again, he was a regenerator and a Savior of the world thanks to the blood of the bull he sacrificed, he brought the resurrection and eternity to the initiates of his cult, was worshipped under the name of Sol invictus in the Roman Empire and his return was announced for the triumph of the forces of Light, with an army of white horses. Alain Hus writes in *Greek and Roman religion*, (Hawthorne Books, 1962):

"Once he accomplished his mission, after celebrating a banquet with his companions, he went back to heaven and from there protected his faithful. He was the god of alliances and friendship, at the centre of a Persian religious system in which Good and Evil were permanently opposed (...)"

(...)

The Indian Mithras

In India, the spiritual function, associated with the Brahmins, was assured by Mithras, god of the universal alliance. Always conciliatory and benevolent, Mithra had to compensate him Varuna, dedicated to the payment of sins, necessary, but without mercy, terrible. Mithra gave the impulse at dawn and a white victim was sacrificed to him. Instead, Varuna benefited from a black victim. Georges Dumézil dedicated an essay to the Mithra-Varuna couple (*Mitra-Varuna, essai sur deux représentations indo-européennes de la souveraineté*, Bibliothèque de l'École des Hautes Études, Sciences religieuses, LVIIe vol, 1940)who were also invoked under a single name in India: Mithravaruna. At the sides of the priestly function of Mithra, Varuna ensured the royal function. Krishna and Arjuna, Merlin and Arthur, Samuel and Saul, the shaman and chief of the tribes, the pope and emperor of the Holy Roman-German Empire represented these two basic functions of traditional societies. The Indian cult of Mithra teaches us several things not to be forgotten during this chapter. The first is that Mithras, as god of the universal alliance, explains to a large extent the hopes focused on him from Antiquity to the present day and the reconciling function spontaneously attributed to him by both the processors and the faithful of the Mahâyâna from the beginning, as well as by the New Agers of the 20th century: he undoubtedly lives in our collective unconscious. The second is that of course, between Mithra the Persian and Mithra the Indian, there are differences, but they share the same origin. The Indian Vedic pair Mithra-Varuna reflects the unconscious aspect of Mithra and also

Maitreya, that of executioner, who in the future will unite only men of good will. Varuna as "Mithra's unconscious" helps to explain the eternal oscillation of Maitreya between a religious Messiah and prince, and principle of justice used by revolutionary groups in history. Christ and many early Christians seem to have been fought inside of them by this double aspiration.

The debate on the antiquity of the expectation of Maitreya in the Theravâda and the analysis by Richard Gombrich

Some historians of Buddhism: Alain Grosrey, Philippe Cornu, the authors of the *Dictionnaire de la Sagesse Orientale*, have taken up the idea that Maitreya was a buddha already present in the Theravâda but without specifying if it had preceded the Mahâyâna.

(...)

To clarify the presence of Metteya in the theravadist *Cakkavatti-Sihanada Sutta*, the German Richard Gombrich, former professor of Sanskrit in Oxford and president of the Center for Buddhist Studies of the English city, has devoted himself to an in-depth study of the texts and in particular of chapter XXVIII of the *Buddhavamsa*. Gombrich is considered one of the greatest living specialists of early Buddhism. His methodology, which earned him the « gombrichian » neologism, is based on the comparison between the Buddhist writings and the history of other Indian religions. According to Gombrich, the date of Buddha's death should be shifted, taking into account the Sri Lankan Pâli texts, to 404 B.C. Although he was a collaborator of the Austrian Karl Popper (1902-1994), the mathematician of the Vienna School whose totalitarian scientific pretensions in the field of research I denounce, Gombrich cannot be ignored. His analysis of *Cakkavatti-Sihanada Sutta* and Chapter XXVIII of the *Buddhavamsa* (*Theravada Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1988, p.83 – 85) has shown that the structure of the texts changes completely when they talk about Metteya: there are no longer questions and answers but a long paragraph, like a new piece of sewn clothing, so that the scholar states that the whole sūtra is apocryphal or has been largely retouched. The demonstration of Gombrich is convincing for me also because it is consistent with the other ways of knowledge that are the iconography and the comparative history of religions.

(...)

In his monumental *Histoire du bouddhisme indien*, Etienne Lamotte mentions the Vedic Mithra alongside the Iranian one, since the Persian and Indian civilizations were sisters. The "benevolent and juridical" divinity of the contracts would later be inserted in the form of Maitreya in numerous Buddhas of the past and the future. In the text of the Pârâyana, for example, there is a man called Maitreya or Tisaya Maitreya, and in the end it is up to him to restore the Dharma. In the *Maitreyavyâkarana*, we found the evocation of these future times. The Buddha declares that he would have been Maitreya the buddha in charge of the final mission, accompanied by his faithful friend Ajita, the Undefeated, or Invincible, who certainly reminds of the Sol Invictus, the Roman cult of Mithra. From a doctrinal point of view, we could add that Love, *Maitri*, made Mithra invincible as the latin proverb says: *Omnia vincit amor*, Love conquers all. Étienne Lamotte writes:

"Because of his name, Maitreya the Invincible or the Unbeaten, the buddha of the future, became the equivalent or replica of the Iranian god Mithra - Sol invictus - and was dragged by the great Messianic current which, under various symbols, crossed the entire East at the end of the ancient era. The syncretism that reigns as a master leads, in the Manichaean texts in the Uyghur language, to a vast synthesis in which both the "Mithra invictus", "Jesus son of God", and "Maitreya Ajita" merge.

(...)

Maitreya-Metteya, the only bodhisattva recognised by the Theravâda: an explanation

Louis Frédéric, in the chapter dedicated to Maitreya (*Les dieux du Bouddhisme, guide iconographique*, Flammarion, 1992, p.130) recalls that he is the only bodhisattva recognized by the sects of the Hinâyâna. I interpret this exclusivity in the sense that the hope for a Buddha of the Future, which could also be considered as Siddhârta himself, did not contradict the original doctrine and did not force to accept the other bodhisattvas nor the idea of a second turn of the wheel with new teachings. If there was only one Buddha or Bodhisattva to wait for in the future, and not to imitate, without new sutras that may question the Buddha's Dharma and bring the doubt it was incomplete, then the hope brought by Maitreya-Metteya was more likely to be welcome, and it provided an eschatology, a hope and a way of worship to Theravâda.

Mânî and the Manichaeian synthesis of the 3rd century A.D.

Thus, as Étienne Lamotte confirms in a precedent paragraph, there had been a real meeting, in Asia, between two religions established a long time ago, Buddhism and Zoroastrianism, and another, very new, Christianity. And such an encounter had happened in the Kushan Empire, of which the south of the immense territory populated by the Uighurs was part. There is the famous painted cave of Bezeklik, with the representation face to face of an oriental monk and a white monk, bearded, with clear eyes, perhaps Tokarian. Each of them makes a different mûdra, like an echo of the similarities between the positions of the fingers in Byzantium and the mudras of the Buddhas.

At the same time and in the same environment as Mahâyâna, the mixture of cults and cultures had its most obvious and famous expression in the West with Mânî or Manes, born in Mardinu, not far from Seleucia, on the Tiger, in 215 or 216 A.D. The vast Seleucid empire lasted from 312 B.C. to 63 B.C. and served as a link, with the Greek, between East and West. Mânî first joined the sect of the Baptists - or Baptistai in Greek. Similar to the Elcasaiti that, with Christian and Gnostic sensibilities, and like the Ebionites, they refused the authority of Paul. The future prophet then left them on the injunction of an angel and preached the doctrine of Christ, up to the Indo-Greek kingdoms of the Kushan Empire and the Indus River, progressively achieving a synthesis between Buddhism, Mazdeism and Zoroastrianism, Christianity and Christian Gnosticism. For Mânî, there should not be a contradiction between reason and knowledge in the search for Liberation. Protected by Sassanide king Shahpur I, he spread his spirituality in Aramaic with great success in all social classes of Persia, while his disciples touched Middle Eastern territories (Syria, Egypt). But when king Bahram I returned to Mazdeism, Mânî was imprisoned and died after a long martyrdom, in 276. The adjective *Manichaeian* expresses the dualism described by Mânî, together with the Zoroastrians and the Gnostics, between the forces of Light and Knowledge on the one hand, and those of Darkness on the other. I mentioned the Cathars: they were the last survivors in the West of Manichaeism. They spoke of an ancient war lost by the armies of Light and the need to escape from the world of the evil Demiurge. They testified to the attempt to unite the best of all ancient faiths. Despite their fundamental pessimism about this earthly existence, their lives were in many ways much closer to that preached by Jesus than that of their persecutors, i.e. the kingdom of France and the Catholic Church. The refusal to reopen the dialogue about the Cathar and Manichaeian teachings, both by lay intellectuals and by religious, was confirmed by the reactions to the studies of Conze and Elaine Pagels, in the perfect continuity of the persecutions of the past: the questions raised by the Gnostic teachings are too embarrassing.

(...)

The questions of André Migot in Le Bouddha

The French traveller and tibetolog André Migot (1892-1967), an adventurous war doctor, went to India by bicycle and tried in vain to enter Tibet disguised as a beggar in 1947, despite his oral and written knowledge of the Tibetan language. In *Le Bouddha* (Club Français du Livre, 1957), he emits

an opinion very close to mine, although more centred on Zoroastrianism, but never taken up by scholars:

"It is reasonable to see in the salvation religions of ancient Zoroastrian Iran, Asia Minor and Palestine, one of the origins of the notion of the bodhisattva savior of beings, and some of the great bodhisattvas of the Mahayanist pantheon clearly reveal this influence. This is the case of Manjousri (...), of Avalokiteshvara, of Amitabha, also gods of light, essentially compassionate, messiah and mediators between Buddha and men. Avalokiteshvara is often assisted by Târâ the savior, a feminine deity who is also the supreme wisdom (Prajñâpâramitâ), the goddess-mother from whom all Buddhas proceed. How can we not see in these deities reminiscences of Ohrmazd, the god of the Pure Light of the Iranians, of the Syrian, Greek, Roman mother goddesses, of the Sophia (the latter could not exert an influence that on the late Mahâyâna)? How can we not bring the Buddhist Trinity Amitâbha-Avalokiteshvara-Târâ closer to the Gnostic Trinity that united God the Father, Jesus the Son and Sophia the Wisdom? »

(...)

The precociousness of the representation and worship of Maitreya in the Gandhâra

I consider the very early emergence of Maitreya's iconography in Gandhâra, perhaps even before Buddha Shâkyamuni, as a convergent sign of the expectation of Christ's return announced by the First Christians, and the identification of the Future Buddha with Mithra. His long, loose hair on the shoulders evoke Jesus, even though it is characteristic of the nomadic peoples and Kushan kings who could serve as models. Louis Frédéric suggests that Maitreya was the first human representation of Gandhâra art, putting an end to the aniconic tradition. A Maitreya cult independent of that of the Buddha has also been suggested, which would not be surprising and would find an equivalent in the new religion of Christ that did not even require to enroll in the Jewish tradition. Neither Judaism nor Theravâda represented their prophets or spiritual masters, but the Greeks and the Persians (and the Indian of course) instead had a very rich iconographic tradition that Christianity and Mahâyâna pursued, another point in common that should not be underestimated. In the West, more than three centuries were necessary for the representation of Christ in the Roman Empire. Instead, if Maitreya, the future version of Christ, immediately appeared in the Kushan Empire, it may be because, contrary to Rome, Christianity was not apparently persecuted, as I already mentioned. During the reign of Shapur II, however, in Persia, from 340 A.D., many Christians were killed, but Christianity had already become the official religion of the Roman Empire. The first representations of Maitreya could also mean that, through Love, God had become man, or a man had become God and he would return. Moving from the flesh to the stone, down here in matter, there could be a representation of this Hero, in the ancient sense of half man and half god, realized through the union of a god with a mortal woman.

(...)

The difficult iconography of Mahâyâna

Another interesting point is the difficulty in distinguishing the representations of Avalokiteshvara and Maitreya in the sculpture of Mahâyâna. Not only in the early days of Gandhâra art, but also afterwards, in Nepalese bronzes. I noticed that at the Shivaji Museum in Mumbai (the former Prince of Wales Museum) in front of a beautiful 12th century Nepalese bronze representing Maitreya, very similar to Avalokiteshvara. We can make the same comparison with the Mañjushrî of the Guimet museum, also very similar to both Avalokiteshvara and Maitreya, while Indian gods for example always have very clear distinctive signs. But there is a logic in this apparent confusion: while Christianity represented only Christ in the Trinity, with very different forms, and the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove, Mahâyâna seems to have represented not only both past and future Christ under the features of Avalokiteshvara and Maitreya, but also the Holy Spirit and Wisdom under the forms of

Mahâsthâmaprâpta, Mañjushrî and Târâ, and the Father in the form of Amitâbha. Son of Amitâbha under the name of Avalokiteshvara, Buddha of the Future called Maitreya, invested by the Holy Spirit so close to Wisdom, Jesus was represented with the three forms of his past and future manifestations, not to mention Kuan-yin for the formal ambiguity of the androgyny of the primordial Savior in Gnosis.

Let's add one more thing, considering the proximity of Gnosis and Mahâyâna: according to the doctrine of Marcion, Ioan P. Couliano writes in *The Tree of Gnosis : Gnostic Mythology from Early Christianity to Modern Nihilism* (HarperCollins Publishers, Australia, 1992), the Jewish Messiah was yet to come, since Jesus had not been accepted as such. Marcion certainly considered Christ as Savior, but he also integrated the expectation of the Jewish Messiah in his doctrine. Thus, let us not exclude the possibility of a Jewish and Marcionese influence on Maitreya's expectation, despite this Gnostics' opposition to the Jews.

(...)

A messianic wave in China at the time of Jesus, Avalokiteshvara and Maitreya

There were in Palestine, at the time of Jesus, a series of characters who proclaimed themselves the Messiah, because of the Roman domination unbearable to the Jews. But a surprising expectation for salvation, contemporary, also touched China. Étienne Lamotte alluded to it above. Let us now listen again to Gérald Messadié in his iconoclastic *Histoire générale de Dieu*:

"One of the first Messianisms we know appeared in China in the year III B.C. The Taoists put back on the centre of the stage Xiwangmu, the Queen Mother of the West, one of the most important goddesses of their pantheon (...). They announced a liberator, but he left no memory, because there is no trace of a Chinese Messiah in the first century A.D. But at the end of the fourth century and the beginning of the fifth, a new messianism appears: it is apocalyptic. Its accents are strangely close to those of the "apocalypics" of the New Testament. (...). The image of a Messiah is formed: surprise, it is Laozi, the archivist who died nine centuries before [*It is proposed rather generally a period between the middle of the sixth century B.C and the middle of the fifth century, A/N*] and is now divinized under the name of "Perfect Lord". This apocalyptic fever will be tenacious; it will last for centuries, fuelled by the currents of Christianity and Buddhism. » (*Chapter: La dynamique des messies, p. 361-362*)

(...)

The Princeton Maitreya Project

In 1979, an anodyne conversation between Alan Sponberg, professor at Stanford University and Jan Nattier, professor at Harvard, during a conference at the American Academy of Religion, gave rise to the desire to bring together a research program around the figure of Maitreya. Soon, Alan Sponberg and Jan Nattier realized that although many developments in the Buddhist tradition had been more prominent than the legend of Maitreya, in so many moments and in so many places, perhaps no one else, apart from the cult of Shâkyamuni, was so universal and omnipresent (p xi). In 1980, Helen Hardacre, a member of the Department of Religion at Princeton and a specialist in Japan, joined the project, bringing this essential question about « the power of the Maitreya theme even among popular religious groups that often explicitly reject the Buddhist establishment and its concerns for orthodoxy. » (p xi)

The program was launched with the participation of various university specialists of Buddhism in the world and resulted in a conference in Princeton, New Jersey at the origin of a book now sold out even second-hand but whose PDF can be found in English: *Maitreya, the Future Buddha* (Edited by Alan Sponberg and Helen Hardacre, Cambridge University Press, 1988).

The book offered the general public all the speeches of the speakers except three: Stanley Tambiah's research on Maitreya in Thailand, Masatoshi Makatomi's on the *Maitreya-Vyākaraṇa*, and Mickael Stickmann and Robert Thorp' on Maitreya in early Chinese Buddhism. In the following lines, I will present and discuss the work of some participants in relation to the question of the origin of Maitreya.

Maitreya, the active and passive Apocalypics and the emergence of the confession

In the introductory chapter, *The Many Faces of Maitreya*, Joseph M. Kitagawa, professor of History of Religions at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, after having insisted on the Zoroastrian influence on Jewish eschatology, and Christian as a result, explains the process of secularization of religions whose saving expectations do not come true after a few generations, as it was the case with Christianity. Then, Jan Nattier, in a typological analysis of the *Meanings of the Maitreya Myth*, presents the four versions of the hope of the encounter with Maitreya: here and now, in this life, during the life of the faithful; here but later, in future times and in the future of humanity; there, now, in a vision of Maitreya residing in the sky of Tushita; there, later, meeting Maitreya in the life after death. Jan Nattier evokes the transformation of the "passive" expectation of a Saviour in Taoism into a revolutionary activity with the arrival of the Maitreya cult, and attributes it to the difficult context of the time. But: « The canonical texts are unanimous in stating that Maitreya will not personally bring about the Golden Age; rather, he will appear when that era has already (and gradually) come into being. » Nevertheless, there is generally a critique of temporal powers in texts where Maitreya is present, as for example in the *Maitreyāvadāna* where we can read: " O sakra, kings are those who do filthy things". In the same text, the great king renounces the throne when Maitreya begins to preach, so that there is really a replacement of temporal power by spiritual power. For this reason, such temporal power sought to appropriate Maitreya, as did Empress Wu (683-705). The expectation of Maitreya aroused two types of Apocalypics. The passive Apocalypics, whose identity was often threatened by the context, excluded from power the most of the times, reluctant to commit themselves to a rebellion, suicidal in some ways. The active Apocalypics, on the other hand, wanted to participate in the advent of the superior force on Earth, and were the conjunction of elites who had lost their position and of lower oppressed social classes. But, according Jan Nattier, and this is an important fact, Maitreya is not a product of the Mahāyāna: it comes from elsewhere, and this desire for social revolution, far from the necessary acceptance of a deserved Karma, a perfect Dharma or Tao, could in fact come from the west of India, or even more Gnostic or Prometheans horizons. Neither in Lao Tzu, nor in Confucius, nor in Zhuangzi have I found revolutionary accents. In Central Asian texts, particularly the Uighurs', Maitreya is very much connected with the ritual of confession of sins. But there is a debate on this point as to whether Manichaeism may have influenced Buddhism or whether Mahayana did so. Whatever the answer, it is interesting to note that confession is also common with the third religion present in Manichaeism, but prior to it: Christianity.

Maitreya, "The Anointed One": the mysteries of an election

In the chapter *Stages in the Bodhisattva Career of the Tathāgata Maitreya*, Padmanabh S. Jaini, professor of Buddhist Studies at the University of Berkeley, gives some anecdotes about the previous lives of Maitreya, such as his difficulty in sacrificing himself to feed a tiger on the point of eating her puppies, and the Buddha, of whom he was the brother, offers his life before him. In the *Lotus Sūtra*, we had seen his fame for glory in the past, but also his devotion. It is in the same sūtra that he is instructed by Mañjushrī, which evokes the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus, taking into account all the similarities between Mañjushrī, Wisdom and the third Person of the Christian Trinity. We also learn that Maitreya will be the family name of the Future Buddha who will educate thousands of "tens of millions" (koti) of creatures."

About how the Buddha and Maitreya came in contact, Padmanabh S. Jaini states: "The precise circumstances leading to their meeting, however, as well as the crucial scene of Gautama's public anointment of Maitreya as his immediate successor, are for some reason never revealed in any canonical text." (p 61)

(...)

Messenger, Messiah and Revolutionary for two thousand years

Another chapter of *Maitreya, the Future Buddha* is dedicated to the Buddha of Love in the literature of the Chinese popular religions of the 17th and 18th centuries, when, I might add, the Jesuits arrived in China. Daniel L. Overmyer, professor at the University of British Columbia based his researches on the *pao-chüan*, "precious volumes", composed by the leaders of the popular religious sects that emerged from the 14th century in their very organized modern form. There, we find the association of Maitreya to a king, but it also sometimes assumes both the royal and religious functions.

In the 6th century, in non canonical texts, Maitreya or militant saviors could also rise to rid the world of evil and establish a community of elected representatives.

The cosmic war between demons and bodhisattvas eventually included a "magical city" that appeared, where the pious people would live, ruled by the Buddha. We are in an eschatological tale close to the Christian Apocalypse with the arrival of the heavenly Jerusalem. From the 6th to the 14th century, several groups rebelled regularly invoking the Buddha of the Future, or with leaders who proclaimed themselves Maitreya. Some participated in the civil wars that in 1368, caused the fall of the Mongol Yüan dynasty.

There are very few popular legends about Maitreya, but the groups he inspired were numerous and active. There is a logic to this, since he is a Messiah whose history belongs to the future. Those who believe in him want first of all to be freed from a suffering or iniquitous world. An illustrated book of 18th century cartoons tells how Maitreya leaves his Venerable Mother and becomes incarnate.

In spite of the "few popular legends" about Maitreya, Daniel L. Overmyer concludes on the richness of his Chinese mythology, which reflects the universal complexity of the character in the Buddhist world:

« He is neither just a savior nor simply a revolutionary, but a potent combination of both, and the particular role he plays depends on the interests of the preachers and writers who have formulated the ongoing Maitreya tradition. Those of us whose spiritual roots are in Judaism or Christianity should take special care in treating a symbol from another culture like Maitreya, who in some of his roles is related to world renewal at the end of a cycle of time. Such dramatic hopes for the future are a central theme in the Judeo-Christian tradition and can easily lead us astray in our evaluation of what appears to be an analogous belief. The temptation is to read in too much, to respond instinctively, particularly in an age when our own technology makes the end of human time more possible than ever before. »
(p. 131)

(...)

The Kushan Maitreya

With all the cults and versions of Maitreya that reached us through history and the countries we have met, while recalling the constants just underlined by Alan Sponberg, it is also useful to take a look at the first iconography of Maitreya to try to understand how men, artists and princes represented him at the dawn of Mahâyâna, inspired by the stories they were in contact with and which may have left no written traces. Anticipating a little bit on the chapter dedicated to Gandhâra art, I will integrate, in the following lines, the teaching of the Bodhisattvas of Gandhâra of the Indian Museum of Kolkata that I loved to go and contemplate in the easternmost point, Bengal, of the journeys I used to guide in India. These beautiful stone bodhisattvas looked at me, a Westerner, and I looked at them, as in a mutual mirror of our common origins.

In the first Greco-Buddhist representations, the impression of solar force of Maitreya both seated or standing prevailed. And so are the other bodhisattvas: peace, non dualism, depth, impassibility. A warrior, a king, a judge coming from elsewhere, who seems not moved by the duty of accomplishing his difficult mission. His hair falls on his shoulders like rays of the Sun falling to the Earth or the water of a waterfall, as in the miracle of Shrâvastî or the parable of the Lotus Sûtra. The head and hair form a triangle in the circle of the halo. The robe and folds look like waves emitted from the great cosmic Emptiness, from the Ocean of Bodhi. The Indian or the Greek gods hover and smile above our terrenal condition, many of them only share with the men their wives and the smoke of their sacrifices and fear both the saints who threaten their Mâyâ and the demons who make their order tremble. The bodhisattvas of Gandhâra I could contemplate in Kolkata do not smile or they hardly do, because, not duals, at the end of the duels, they share the human condition made of difficulties. Buddha as well as Jesus were totally human, triumphing over Passion or suffering, and they know the long journey of those who follow them. The large and round sculpted torsos of the heroes of the Awakening are decorated with pearls and necklaces, their hands are laid in each other, the soul is calm and the arms are like rivers whose fingers are converging deltas joining East and West. Expressions of the sambhogakâya, they are the unified man, magnified and ennobled by his Liberation and by the sacrifice of his Nirvâna out of compassion for Humanity. Everything cohabits in the form of their body and in the space of their spirit. Their moustache is a calm wave emanating from the lips or the nostrils. The bodhisttava is the pneumatic man, that is, for the Gnostics, the man established in the divine Pneuma, in inspiration and exhalation, spiritual. The toga is attached from one side to the shoulder like the veil raised on a rite, like the Mâyâ unveiled by the Buddha, like the curtain of the Temple was torn when Jesus passed away. On the other hand, bracelets wrap the powerful arms of the bodhisattvas like the reward of a battle, the symbol of a sacred or the gift of a consort who would not like to be forgotten, the loving Wisdom that revealed to him in her deep course the secrets of Shûnyâta.

(...)

XIII

Stone stars and star dust:

from Gandhârâ to Serindia,

some aspects of the art of the first Mahâyâna

« Truth did not come into the world naked, but it came in types and images. The world will not receive truth in any other way » Gospel of Philip, 67 (*Translated by Wesley W. Isenberg*)

"The "Gandhara" phenomenon was a central event in the history of Buddhist art and Asian culture in general." Laura Giuliano (*Arte del Gandhara*, a cura di Laura Giuliano, Artemide, Roma, 2010, p 48)

Alfred Foucher: from Lorient to the Orient, between Brittany and Bharat

Alfred Foucher was born in Lorient, Brittany, in 1865. There was probably a bit of predestination to come to the world in the place more to the West of Europe and Asia, in a city called Lorient, and to devote a whole life to demonstrate and try to explain the links between the worlds and between the civilizations. Probably also, the Briton and the Celt that he was kept the memory, the certainty of ancient migrations and of common sources between Brittany and Bharat, India. In *L'art gréco-bouddhique du Gandhara (Étude sur les origines de l'influence classique dans l'art bouddhique de l'Inde et de l'Extrême-Orient*, 2t. [t. 1: 1905; t.2: 1918, 1922, 1951], Paris, Imprimerie nationale), Foucher presents a double illustration: that of a Greco-Christian Christ next to a Greco-Buddhist Buddha. The Christ is a fragment of a sarcophagus from Asia Minor, and the Buddha was photographed in the museum of Lahore (Pakistan). Christ and Buddha have the same position of the right arm inside the toga that has the same folds, both have a halo... In short, they resemble each other as brothers.

(...)

A reversal of the process of the spirit from Heaven to Earth

Theravâda Buddhism did not place great trust in art and beauty, impermanent phenomena aimed at identifying man with illusory forms and then abandoning him at the same point where they had found him, with a few more years and a little more bitterness. From Duhkka's world, our Land of Suffering, one did not come out with romanticism, but with the loss of all illusions, opening the doors of Liberation to leave forever the cycle of predation of life. Beauty existed, but it carried within itself the seed of its own death. The great, true beauty was in Nirvânâ, in the extinction of suffering. Life in nature, however, offered the monks constant contemplation of the metamorphoses of Mâyâ and Samsâra. In Mahâyâna, the sûtras full of wonders and miracles, the myriads of bodhisattvas, the encounter with Greece and Persia, the irruption of the Bhakti... and the protection of powerful sovereigns that were lovers of Beauty, all this contributed to the development of artistic production and to the flourishing of countless works. In Buddhism of the Origins, the movement was from Earth to Heaven, in a certain way: the dissolution in Nirvâna was sought. In Mahâyâna, Amitâbha sends to the Earth and to the humans a ray of light that becomes Avalokiteshvara, who looks at us and listens to the world down here. Nirvâna is renounced to alleviate the suffering of the world. Beautiful feminine deities take on the features of the Supreme Wisdom and the consorts of the bodhisattvas. One has

access to magnificent paradises. And Maitreya will descend in thousands of years for the golden age on Earth. Art takes the form of heavy and powerful "stereometric" statues that express the stability of the winners and masters - *guru* designates the master, the planet Jupiter but also means serious, heavy in Sanskrit - in a state that nothing can now affect or destabilize, in beauty, peace and harmony. And they are the Gandhâra Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, carved in the schist. Elsewhere, art becomes painting on the walls of Serindia, we are with the Sarvâstivâda between Therâvada and Mahâyâna, and hundreds of caves are covered with buddhas and figures of all colors, as if the Heart of the rock revealed in its Vacuity all the secrets of Supreme Wisdom, Mother of the bodhisattva in her deep course established. *Rûpam shûnyâta, Shûnyâtaiva rûpam*: form is emptiness, emptiness is form, the Heart Sûtra hammers like a sculptor of our mind. And the rock takes the form of a vase with all the forms that one day or the other will dissolve anyway. But in the meantime, as Saint Irenaeus said: "God became man so that man might become God" And the bodhisattva works to make the world better. Greek values have been infused into the Indian world, A new Beauty has arrived first, it brings the Good and the Truth. According to the philosopher Abhinavagupta (X-XI secc.), in the current of Shivaism of Kashmir: "the aesthetic experience can coincide with the mystical-religious one, allowing the momentary exit from Samsâra, or from the phenomenal world, from the space-time reality" explains Adriano Olivieri in *La scultura del Gandhara*. Perhaps the Greek influence had its role in the elaboration of the Kashmirian aesthetic thought.

Greco-Buddhist art or Gandhâra art

Gandhâra art was born not far from Bamyan, where the Taliban shot at the beginning of the 2000s with an automatic weapon on the immense statues of the Blessed in the cliff. After Alexander's conquests, Gandhâra was a Buddhist kingdom whose borders went from the north-east of Pakistan to the south-east of present-day Afghanistan. It included the Kabul and Swat valleys, next to Peshawar where most kings had their capital. There took place the first example of real cultural interpenetration in the figurative arts between Europe and Asia. The region possessed under the Kushan Empire almost a thousand and six hundred monuments, including monasteries rich in statues and stupa decorated with bas-reliefs of stone and stucco. Corinthian columns, centaurs, garlands with vine motifs and atlases emerged from the ruins. Urbanism itself has been influenced by the Hellenistic world. But neither architecture nor urbanism were the most famous and creative fields of Gandhâra art, but human representations of Buddha and Bodhisattva.

(...)

Apollo's simultaneous influence on the first Christian and Buddhist iconography

Apollo* inspired the first representations of Christ, beardless, very young, with curly hair, in the 4th century A.D. as shown for example by the early Christians Roman sarcophagi found up in Provence, in Arles, or in Saint-Maximin-la-Sainte-Baume, in the crypt of Mary Magdalene's tomb. Thousands of kilometres to the east, in the Kushan Empire, the Greek god had already been the source of some of the first representations of Buddha, Avalokiteshvara and Maitreya, according to the most accepted opinion. The scenery, the figures, the symmetry of the reliefs and bas-reliefs are incredibly similar. Pandit Nehru explains in his great book written in prison with the help of his companions, *The Discovery of India*: (John Day, New York, 1946) :

"Even so, no statues of Buddha were made to begin with, but Apollo."

As the cult of Mithra and then Maitreya revealed the spread of Persian influences thousands of miles away, Apollo's double influence on the dawn of Buddhist and Christian iconography puts the emphasis on the common Hellenistic culture that pervaded the world from the westernmost parts of the Roman Empire to the eastern borders of the Kushan Empire. And the fact that Apollo, the luminous son of Zeus, inspired the aesthetic and religious model of Buddha, Maitreya, Avalokiteshvara and Christ, is certainly not due to chance and shows that these Saviors of the World were united in the ancient mind

by something very similar: the link to a supreme and luminous Heavenly Father: Jupiter, Jehovah, God, Amitabha...

(...)

When the Buddha becomes Logos: the halo and the almond

Sometimes the toga of the Buddha or the bodhisattva, like on a standing Buddha of Pakistan of the 2nd or 3rd century A.D. with Apollonian traits, or the whole body, like the Buddha of the Kanishka stater (127-153 A.D.), is inscribed in the form of an almond, symbolizing the light. We will evidently find the almond in cathedrals with Christ in the center, illustrating how Hellenism was the link between the two spiritualities. In confirmation of this, Laura Giuliano writes, faithful to her idea of an Indian origin of the art of Gandhâra but now integrating the Hellenistic thought, that « this work, with its slender appearance, the pure oval, the drapery that follows the forms of the body, shows - in respect of the iconography of Indian derivation - accentuated classical stylistic features, which are not always simple expression of an aesthetic taste, but which perhaps imply values connected to the bond Buddha-logos. » (*Art of Gandhara*, edited by Laura Giuliano, Artemide, Rome, 2010, p 24, fig 13 and p 19, fig. 10) Nor should we forget that the Greek almond was formed by the crossing of two circles, as in the Pythagorean figure of Vesica Piscis. And, prolonging the lines of the almond, two fishes with their tails up and down appeared like those formed by the Early Christians on the ground as a sign of mutual recognition. The Buddha is also sometimes represented as a philosopher or an orator togated or covered by the Greek Himaton, like the Lateran Sophocles, explains Laura Giuliano who again assimilates him here to the Logos. The bodhisattvas are often represented in princely robes, unlike the Buddha, perhaps to remember that Amitâbha had been a king, that Avalokiteshvara was his emanation manifested in a king's palace and that these heroes of the Awakening were fully incarnated on Earth, as a king-Messiah or universal ruler. And it was a way for the Kushan emperors to be identified with the bodhisattvas of generous intentions, as later Jayavarman VII in Angkor.

The Buddhas of Gandhara were distinguished from the Indian princes by their urn and limbo. The limbo's first apparitions in art date back to the Greek gods and were transmitted to the representations of Mithra, in which it took the form of a star or a sun - Sol invictus. We will also find him in Serindia, like the Avalokiteshvara/Guan-yin of the silk painting of a manuscript discovered by Aurel Stein. (*Serindia, Vol. IV, Plates: Silk painting* (Ch. xxviii 006) representing thousand-armed Avalokitesvara (Kuan-Yin) with attendant divinities, from 'Thousand Buddhas', (Tun-Huang... Stein, Aurel. Serbian. Detailed Report of Explorations in Central Asia and Westernmost China. 5 vols. Oxford (Clarendon Press) 1921. [46224])

It therefore seems that, in the case of the limbo, the sense of influence was from west to east.

(...)

The Serindia

“Vast territory with mobile borders, the Serindia extended from Persia to China and from Mongolia to the Himalayas. Alone or in community, the monks dug out the cliffs, hitting the caves, the only cool places in those desert regions. The roads are very busy, because you do the trade in everything, and especially the precious silk. By now, there will be trade in ideas. Mazdeans and Nestorians flank the Buddhists during that golden millennium. In the oases, five languages are spoken and even more is exchanged and debated. Of these multiple influences, there remains a wonderful artistic heritage, hundreds of ornate caves, statues, manuscripts mostly ignored until the beginning of this century (the twentieth). Many political ups and downs agitated the Serindia. Kushani, Kotani, Ephthalite Huns,

Chinese of the Northern Wei Dynasties and Tang, Tibetans and Uighurs will later exercise power."
Jean-Paul Ribes, Journalist and Tibetolog (*Geo magazine*, no 236, October 1998)

In 1998, after three years of negotiations with China, the Franco-Iranian reporter Reza had access to the site of the Thousand Caves, in the mountains of the Xinjiang of Turkestan annexed by the Chinese Republic, on the edge of the Takla Makan desert. It is perhaps no coincidence that Reza, cultural heir to ancient Persia, was able to photograph the beautiful Buddhist caves of the Silk Road where Uighur myths sometimes mixed with episodes from the life of the Buddha.

From the 4th to the 6th century, the walls of the caves were decorated with Persian, Afghan, Indian and Chinese scenes. Neither precision nor formal perfection seem to have been the aim of the artists in these works, which may recall medieval Italian paintings. Reza, after visiting 363 caves, chose to portray eight in Khizil and two in Kumtura, among those that had escaped the Muslims.

(...)

The omnipresence of Maitreya in Serindia

At Kyzil, cave 17 presents Maitreya on the threshold, on the tympanum, seated on the throne. On his right, a dark-skinned bodhisattva, on the left, another bodhisattva, light-skinned. His legs are crossed in the Sassanid style, his seat is carved in the Gandharian tradition. In the same cave, another Maitreya has his face decorated with an urn and surrounded by a halo. He is represented in his lower paradise of Ketumati (Varanasi), where he will appear. Often, in the caves that date back to the Wei Dynasty, Maitreya will take the place of the Buddha at the entrance. In cave 224 of Kyzil, we are in the hypothetical presence of disciples with different skin colors, long hair. Flames come out of their shoulders. Riding on sacred animals, they arrive at the wedding of a girl. Two faces are close, one is white, the other is dark blue like Krishna or Shiva.

In 1906, Von le Coq discovered in ruined temples dating back to the 8th and 11th centuries, north of the Sangim Gorges, near Quarakhoja, Xinjiang, two libraries with fragments of manuscripts describing Maitreya's encounter with the faithful but also with the damned. They were part of a holy book, the *Maitrisimit*, which resumed the development of the events of Maitreya in future times when the duration of human life would reach eighty thousand years. The German archaeologist of French origin writes in *Manichaica, I*: "Documents show, next to Mitrii Burqan, a meřika burqan, that is, the divine messenger, the Buddha who is Jesus." (T.P., III, 6). *Buried Treasures of Chinese Turkestan: An Account of the Activities and Adventures of the Second and Third German Turfan Expeditions*, Albert von Le Coq Routledge, 2018). It is the interpretation of Von Le Coq for this last sentence, but the fact remains.

In all temples and caves where the Sarvāstivādin lived, explored by the German mission of Von Le Coq at the beginning of the 20th century, a Maitreya was discovered. The Buddha of Love was represented with the parivāra (the collection of the texts by Theravāda) and the water jug. The inscriptions do not specify that it is a bodhisattva, contrary to Shākyamuni for which it is systematic. It could signal a particular statute with respect to Buddhism by the Sarvāstivāda.

Maitreya was the object of a great devotion in the kingdom of Khotan. He was embodied in several kings, including Vijayasambha. Mañjushrī was incarnated in the monk Aryā Vairocana. The monks of Kyzil remained faithful to the Theravāda until the middle of the 7th century. The strong bond between the Sarvāstivāda and Maitreya confirms that between this school and the Mahāyāna, and is not contradicted by the presence of the parivāra, since the Buddha of Love, we have seen, was also integrated by the schools of the Buddhism of the Origins.

XIV

The bodhisattvas, the mountain kings and the karma of the peoples

A summer at the end of the millennium

In the summer of 1999, at the end of a two months trip started in Kashmir, I arrived in Siem Reap, Cambodia, by the road and then the track from Thailand. I was lucky enough to discover Angkor in silence and peace. A maximum of sixty tourists visited the hundreds of square kilometers of the site just reopened after the genocide committed by the Red Khmers who had taken the power in Cambodia, helped by China, in reaction, among other things, to the American bombardments of Viet Cong rear bases. We could be alone for hours sometimes in Angkor vat, in the Ta Phrom or in the Bantea Srey, among some wandering cows and and the young boys for whom the city was a playground, as many orphaned Mowgli adopted by the Buddhas. I met a French photographer that had been travelling from Vietnam and the Philippines and we published some articles and a portfolio. The most famous and fascinating Buddhist site in the world, with its incredible beauty, is now immersed in a Cambodia plunged into poverty and the most ruthless human exploitation by those who hold its reins, despite the presence of monks and countless non-governmental organizations.

And it is remarkable, as far as our topic is concerned, that Angkor is totally connected to Avalokiteshvara, the Buddha of infinite compassion, called here the Lord of the World, Lokeshvara.

When Cardinal Ratzinger declared that the greatest danger to Christianity in the 20th century would not be Communism but Buddhism, he identified two enemies, and he was wrong in his diagnosis. Because Buddhism, between Tibet and Cambodia, suffered, over thirty years, persecution by the armies of Communist China, or by the Red Khmers financed and led by the Middle Empire, China. The Great Vehicle, which Communist China wanted to eliminate from China and Cambodia, as the Nazis shortly before wanted to eliminate the Jews and Judaism, experienced persecution forgotten by the Indian Middle Ages, in a manner very close, albeit on a much greater scale for Buddhism, to that which had known Christianity in Antiquity, before subjectin the same persecutions to heresies, pagans and the Americas. Demonstrating knowledge and compassion would have allowed the future pope not to try to divide all those who actually work towards the same ideals.

Let us now immerse ourselves in the history of Angkor and another sacred and mythical city that unites and divides the worlds: Jerusalem. We will see that, once again, the same being seems to be remembered and prayed among the venerable medieval stones that attract us there.

Jayavarman VII, the leper king of Angkor...

The Great Vehicle did not only depart towards the north and east of Asia, but also towards the South-eastern part of the continent. Angkor, because of the ancient Indian influences on this area of Asia through the maritime conquests of the Subcontinent's southern dynasties, presents an alternation of Hindu and Buddhist periods and sometimes a certain syncretism. With its towers, equipped with the

four faces of Avalokiteshvara-Lokeshvara, symbolizing Mount Kailash and the center of the Universe, Angkor Thom is an example of the archetype of the mountain-king: an axial sovereign who takes over the destiny of his people and his land, assuming their physical and spiritual responsibility. In the Bayon temple of Angkor Thom, Lokeshvara is everywhere, repeated two hundred and sixteen times – i.e twice one hundred and eight times, on fifty-four towers, and the Lord of the World has the features of Jayavarman VII (1120 A.D. approx. - 1220 A.D. approx.), the leper king, the most famous Khmer prince.

Sovereign of numerous concubines and great power, Jayavarman VII had embraced the spirit of the bodhisattva and identified himself at Avalokiteshvara, in the continuity of the teachings of Nâgârjuna and Shântideva. He was the king of the *City* - it is the translation of the word Angkor - par excellence, as if Angkor represented the pure Idea of the City, contraction of all Civilizations, mixing of Art, Knowledge, Compassion, Beauty, Health, Harmony between citizens, Nature and the Cosmos ... Although Angkor Vat, for example, was only for the Khmer legend the modest reproduction of the stables of the palace of the god Indra, of which one of the founders of Angkor was the son, according to the legend.

Of royal family, retired from the battles, Jayavarman VII was touched by leprosy but cured by the Ganges during a pilgrimage in Varanasi. He adopted Buddhism, returned to Cambodia and, yielding to the Queen's prayers, gathered the Khmer provinces and organized them to free the country from the Cham, the Muslim invaders. After that, he was sacred as a Chakravartin and he rebuilt his capital, Angkor, and Angkor Thom in particular. The sovereign had been struck by the misery of his people. The kingdom he administered, which had become an empire, was inspired by the desire to relieve its suffering and enoble it through hospitals, border protection, art, spirituality and justice, which were his constant concerns. The sufferings of his people, he said, were his own.

(...)

... *Baudouin IV, the leper king of Jerusalem*

Baudouin IV, the leper king of Jerusalem (1161-1185), was strangely the perfect contemporary of Jayavarman VII, the leper king of Angkor. Perhaps a common epidemic had contaminated the two capitals. Baudouin IV hardly reigned over another mythical city and kingdom in the Holy Land, and like Jayavarman VII, he fought the Muslims, those of Saladin. I absolutely do not want to stigmatize, once again, a religion. I know the state of physical destruction and moral suffering of the Arab Middle East, in the wars that for seventy years now seem to have decided to turn it into a field of ruins and death, for nationalist, economic, geopolitical or communitarian interests, and I want to repeat that through History, all religions, including Tibetan Buddhism, took up arms and shed blood, convinced of the superiority of their people or their faith. The wars of yesterday and today, and not those of tomorrow, demonstrate the ignorance and blindness of many believers. The prophecy of the Muslim Mahdi who will prepare the way for Christ, with whom he will defeat the Antichrist, obliges morally Muslims and Christians and all men of good will to unite against the forces of division and destruction of the Earth. The strong probability of the direct link between Christianity and Mahâyâna, and the expectation of Maitreya common to all Buddhism, double this first duty with that of recognizing the presence of the values of the Bible and of Christ in Buddhism. The convergent prophecy of the Hindu Kalki avatar and of Christ is a third absolute incentive to recognize the common goals of Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. Finally, all common points seen through our research, between Judaism and other religions, include the Jewish faith.

Returning to the Frankish Kingdom of Jerusalem, we recall that the Crusades began with a desire to defend Christian pilgrims attacked by the Seljuk Turks on their way to the Holy Sepulchre. The Turks had before the Franks massacred part of the Hierosolomitans at the time of their taking of the city three times holy. In 1099, the Crusaders literally drowned Jerusalem in blood.

Balduin IV never recovered from leprosy, he died very young and Jerusalem fell into the hands of Saladin in 1187. Richard the Lionheart (1157-1199) could not take it back, but he also happily massacred Muslim prisoners. In Angkor as in Jerusalem, at the end of the 12th century, bloody battles were fought, while other people exchanged wisdom and limbs.

A warning from Christ resounds, announcing a second coming that would gather everyone together... whatever they want:

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’” (*Luke, 13, 34-3, NIV*)

(...)

XV

Let's summarize

In the 1st century A.D., the immense Kushan Empire stretched from the centre of China to the plains of northern India a few steps from the Ganges Delta, including most or all of today's Afghanistan, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Nepal. Purûshapura, now Peshawar in Pakistan, and Mathurâ, south of Delhi, were its capitals. Its territory was bordered and mixed with Taoism, the Persian religions of Zoroaster and Mithra, the Greek religions of Heracles and Apollo, the religions and ways of Salvation of India, including Buddhism of the Origins, strongly implanted since the time of Ashoka (3rd century B.C.), with its many schools.

Located in the heart of this Empire, on the Silk Road where Greek and Aramaic, the languages of trade, culture and diplomacy, and two of the supposed languages of Christ, were spoken and written, Gandhâra was composed of today's Afghanistan, Pakistan, Punjab and Kashmir. Strongly Hellenized, it was the heir of Alexander's Empire from 326 B.C., and of the Indo-Greek Kingdoms, and also owned one of the two capitals of the Kushana, Purûshapura.

Suddenly, in the first decades of our era, at the precise moment when a new religion of Salvation was preached by a Jewish prophet in the Middle East, at the other end of the Silk Road, and without official explanation by the Buddhist historians, new written and iconographic traditions witnessed new Buddhas without historical existence, new dogmas, new cults, which took the name of Mahâyâna, the Great Vehicle. A buddha of the infinite Light emerged, Amitâbha, formerly Dharmâkara, the Bearer of the Law, who had renounced his earthly kingdom to embrace the life of a wandering monk, out of compassion for Humanity. The constant and fervent repetition of his name allowed his faithful to enter his Paradise of the Pure Land of the West and inaugurated a way of devotional Salvation, hitherto unknown in Buddhism from the time of Shâkyamuni.

Amitâbha had manifested, to relieve Human kind's sufferings, a Bodhisattva of Compassion, Avalokiteshvara, "the Lord who looks down to the World" or "He who hears the pleas of the World". White with skin, endowed with all the knowledge of Amitâbha and participant in his Light, Avalokiteshvara had made the vow to save all beings. He received and spread the teaching of the Supreme Wisdom of the Heart, visited and emptied Hell of its souls. His body, when he expressed the doubt of making his vow, burst into a thousand pieces but was reconstituted by Amitâbha next to whom he reigns, standing at his right hand, in the Western Paradise. Bodhisattva of the thirty-three major forms, whose mantra is Khri, Avalokiteshvara has been in charge in the Mahâyâna, since the first decades of the 1st century A.D., to watch over Humanity until the coming of the messianic Buddha Maitreya.

Another bodhisattva appeared in the same period, Mahâshtâmaprâpta - "Arrival of a great power" -, completed Amitâbha and Avalokiteshvara, forming a triad associated with the West, which was transmitted to Tibet and China where it was called "The Three Saints of the West".

New fundamental Sûtras rose and spread in a quick way in the Kushan Empire in the first decades A.D. The *Lotus Sûtra* mentioned Maitreya, Avalokiteshvaran, Amitâbha, the Paradise of the Pure Land, Mahâshtâmaprâpta, Mañjushrî and had parables extremely similar to the Gospel: a prodigal son, a father and doctor that gives a cup to drink to his sons, dies and resurrects. The *Heart Sûtra* mentioned the Supreme Wisdom and Avalokiteshvara deeply moving in her course with the teaching of Emptiness.

A new art, the first example of direct fusion between civilizations, the Greco-Buddhist art or Gandhâra Art, also emerged in the 1st century of our era, demonstrating the link between Greece, and the Kushan Empire thousands of miles away through the Hellenized Silk Road. In the first representations of the Buddhas transmitted to us by Greco-Buddhist art, as in later sculptures and representations, it would have been difficult to distinguish between Avalokiteshvara, Maitreya and Mañjushrî, as if they were a single person.

A remarkable fact is that an Eternal feminine immediately saw the light of day in Buddhism, until now exclusively masculine: Wisdom and Târâ, the Star, She who crosses the ocean of Samsâra, also born from Amitâbha and then from Avalokiteshvara, of whom she was sister and consort in Great Compassion and Love. Identical to the Sophia of the Gnostics who was united with the Savior in the Bridal Chamber, and very close to the Orthodox one, Wisdom was called the "Mother of all Buddhas". In China and Japan (under the name of Kannon), the fortune of Guan-yin, the feminine form of Avalokiteshvara, the white goddess dressed in white, sitting on a throne with a child on her knees, became immense and has lasted until today.

Furthermore, around the year zero of our time, at the same time as the Middle East and the Roman Empire, Messianic fevers had crossed China and the Far East waiting for a Savior, restoring great strength to the cult of the Great Mother of the West.

In the new traditions of the Mahâyâna, the aim was no longer as in the Buddhism of the Origins to become an arhat to dissolve in Nirvâna, but now to take the path of the bodhisattva who renounced dissolution to stay in Samsâra and save all beings. Sacrifice, including one's own body, out of compassion, was proclaimed the supreme value of the Great Vehicle and the bodhisattva surpassed the arhat of the Buddhism of the Origins in this regard, which was later called Hinayâna (Small Vehicle) or Theravâda (Vehicle of the Elders).

If Zoroastrianism had a role with Mithra and his eschatology, as well as Hellenism, Taoism and Hinduism, present for centuries in the Gandhâra or in contact with this region, it seems difficult to attribute to these cultures and religions the sudden revolution of Mahâyâna in Buddhism, with its profound transformation in the sense of devotion to the new Buddhas, the compassion for all humanity and the new sûtras that gave another two turns of the wheel to the Buddha's Dharma. Despite the multiseular presence of these traditions, nothing in the Buddhist schools in Gandhâra or India, a few decades earlier, could have foretold the wave of the Great Vehicle and the new turnings of the Dharma Wheel. Even if the term Mahâyâna could have existed before Christ in the Buddhism of the Origins, none of the points just mentioned was present in it.

From the beginning, instead, the new Great Vehicle possessed incredible points in common with the Good News preached simultaneously in the Middle East and throughout the Roman Empire by the proselytized and very active apostles and disciples of a prophet with subversive and peaceful accents at a time, despite the persecutions they had begun to suffer. A few years after the crucifixion and resurrection of their Savior and God, Jesus Christ, who had sacrificed his life out of love for humanity, their faith had already spread to southern India, probably through the Spice Road, with his direct disciple, Thomas, and to Provence and the island of Brittany, along the Tin Road. On the Silk Road, Christians, as they were called, necessarily left for the East, Persia and the Kushan Empire, but curiously, there is no mention of any mission or diocese before the 5th century in Sassanid Persia or gupta India, while it is well known that countless branches and preachers of Christianity spread throughout the world, founding communities.

But, in the 1st century of our era, in the Kushan Empire, the Mahâyâna was born with stories, values and dogmas extremely similar to Christianity and to the life and prophecies of Christ. The two new religions, addressed to the whole of Humanity and to the Salvation of all beings through devotion to a being of infinite Compassion, to his heavenly genitor, or to his feminine form, quickly spread to touch after a few decades the Atlantic Ocean and the Chinese Sea, converting two continents. Even where, in

Asia, the Theravâda did not give way to the Mahâyâna, it integrated the cult and expectation of the Buddha of Love or Buddha the Future, Maitreya, whose eschatology was extremely close to that of the Apocalypse of John, largely inherited from Zoroastrianism (Mithra) and the Old Testament.

Is it possible that a single being is at the origin of the double revolution of Christianity within Judaism, and of the Mahâyâna within Buddhism, fundamentally transforming the spirit and the map of the world religions until today? Is it conceivable that the meeting of the Great Buddhist Vehicle and the Christian West, which has taken place in recent years, is the meeting of two family members with different languages and roles, but from the same father, who have always ignored each other's existence? I believe so.

XVI

In the guise of leave:

from Jerusalem to Dharamsala

December 2000. During the same trip that allowed me to meet Emilios Buratinos in Athens, I was in Jerusalem during the Second Intifada. On the Mount of Olives, on the day of my arrival, I happened to meet the Japanese monk Horikoshi while he was completing a week of fasting and singing for peace, to the sound of the drum, reciting the mantra *Om Namu Myôhō Renge-Kyô*, Homage to the Lotus Sûtra of Good Law. Horikoshi was following the way of the reformer Nichiren (1222-1282). Convinced during the Kamakura period with all of Japan that he had entered the Last Days, the medieval mystic had taught how to find the Paradise of the Pure Land within oneself. His Millenium disciple Horikoshi had made pacifist marches in Israel, for which he had been in prison. I could see, walking with him in East Jerusalem for an interview, crossing Bethany and passing in front of the tomb of Lazarus*, at what point he was loved in this part of the thrice holy city, populated by Palestinians. His asceticism challenge ended on 8 December, the Japanese anniversary of the Enlightenment of the Buddha, the day of our Immaculate Conception of the Virgin, and also the festival of the Lights of a great French city dedicated to Mary. The Japanese bodhisattva Horikoshi prayed and suffered where, two thousand years before, Jesus had lived his agony before being arrested, crucified and resurrected. Like Christ, Avalokiteshvara, from a mountaintop, had cried and doubted, and his body exploded from pain contemplating the human condition to be saved, and he had lost courage, before being recomposed by Amitâbha. The white Buddha of the West, Avalokiteshvara, appeared for the first time in the 1st century of our era, in the Lotus Sûtra, to which Horikoshi paid homage, with parables identical to the Gospel. Below us, the december sweet winter sun of the Holy Land slowly descended on another day of Ramadan among the moons of the mosques, the stars of the synagogues and the crosses of the churches while two peoples coming out of the same father and book faced and fought each other every Friday near the Temple and the esplanade of the Mosques, where El Mujahidin Street became the Via Dolorosa, along the traditional route of Christ's ascent to Golgotha.**

A few days later, in a cyber-café in the Old City, a few steps from the Holy Sepulcher, I met Jo Kan Ta Bin Tendun, a young Tibetan monk from Dharamsala. He was a teacher at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. When, during our conversation, I asked him how he considered Moses, King David and Jesus, he spontaneously replied that for him they were great saints, great bodhisattvas. In the lecture hall of the Jewish University, I realized again the sympathy that Jews had for Tibetans, for their shared dramatic destinies. Ta Bin Tendun's answer returns to my memory as I finish this book. His lama had sent him to turn the Dharma wheel in the Holy Land, and he had gone, unwillingly, as it happened to many early Christians. His words and spiritual openness to the tradition of Jewish and Christian prophets probably reflected the state of soul of the Buddhists of the Kushan Empire in the 1st century of our era. It was so, without doubt, that Jesus, the Great Bodhisattva of the West, God and man destined to return, had taken the form of Amitâbha, Avalokiteshvara and Maitreya, that the Shekina, the Sophia, and Mary had become Târâ... that the Kingdom of Heaven had become the Pure Land of the West, that the Love of Christ had met the Wisdom of Buddha.

*According to another tradition, he would have died as a martyr in Marseille

**El Mujahidin is now Sha'ar ha-Arayot, because it leads to the very famous Lion Gate, still called Sheep Gate or Saint Stephen Gate

The riddles of the Ishâ Upanishad, namely

"Upanishad of the Lord and of Jesus"

Ishâ: Sanskrit, 1. Hindu name for Jesus; 2. Name of an Upanishad of the white Yayurveda.

Dictionnaire de la Sagesse Orientale

(...)

The stages of the upanishad

We'll talk later about the issue of dating the Upanishad. It is not enough, for now, to suppose an integration of Christ into the metaphysics of the Hindu world, the identity of the name Lord with Jesus in Sanskrit, perhaps only due to the respect that the Indian culture had for the faith of Christians. But there are other things in the text. For having studied and translated it word for word, and compared it to several other translations, I know that it is delicate in some passages, but very clear in others.

The upanishad begins with the invocation to the supreme Lord over all creatures, followed by the advice to be happy with what is due to us, without envying anyone. Then, the text explains that even if the righteous acts to live a hundred years are rightly performed, in reality this does not change the essence of our deep state, unaltered by actions. In the following verses the upanishad warns against the killing of one's own soul and the sunless worlds where those who did so go. The following verses, typically non-dualistic and paradoxical, say how the Âtman, without moving, moves more quickly than the thought, the gods, and is interior and exterior to everything, near, far... It is in him that Mâtariśvan deposed the action. Mâtariśvan means "He who grows inside the Mother", one of the names of Agni, the Fire. The upanishad then teaches to see the Soul in all beings, and all beings in the Soul, so as never to separate from it anymore and achieve perfect happiness. It enumerates the qualities of light, purity, and clairvoyance of the Atman and reveals that it is beyond knowledge and ignorance, beyond becoming and not becoming. But it specifies that both knowing, not knowing, becoming and not becoming, are necessary to reach the Self. In fact, the upanishad proclaims it, This - the Supreme - is both knowledge and not knowing, together becoming and not becoming.

The paten or the golden bowl

The last verses are much more lyrical, metaphorical and praiseworthy. I translate them into English from Jean Varenne translation and my own analysis :

"The face of truth is covered by a golden paten,
Remove it for us, that we may see Him who reigns over the Truth. 15
O Pushan, You the Unique Seer, Yama, Surya, son of Prâjâpati,
Put your light in us, spread your gathered rays for us,
This shape of you so beautiful that I see up there, up there on top of it.
Yes, whatever this Purûsha is, I am Him, I am Him." 16

Vâyu, it is (or should be) ambrosia, the Breath we should breathe in, now (or soon) this body will end up in ashes,

Ôm Kratu, remember what was done, remember. Ôm Kratu, remember what was done, remember what was done. 17

O Agni, lead us on a good path to wealth (or possessions, happiness)

O wise deity who has known all the ways

Remove deflection and evil (or sin) from us

"We should give you the most abundant tributes." 18

Stephanie Simoes translates on scribd website (<https://fr.scribd.com/document/287553162/Isha-Upanishad-Word-for-Word-Translation-with-Transliteration-and-Grammatical-Notes>):

« By a golden goblet is covered the face of the Real » (15), « descendant of Prajapati » (16) and Intelligence (Kratu, a son of Brahma, 17)

Let us now summarize, using the nearest etymology, and the most precise sense, the end of the upanishad. I translated the text for several weeks, word for word, with grammar analysis, comparing the translations and getting help from a Sanskrit friend, Pierre-Jean Laurent, a disciple of the Yoga teacher Saccidanânda, a renowned mathematician at the Polytechnic Institute of Grenoble, a translator of the Yoga Sûtra and the Sâṅkhya. (*Yoga Sûtra de Patanjali*, traduction et commentaire grammatical (second revised edition), India Universalis, 2017, untranslated)

I have chosen to make the Sanskrit *pâtra* per paten, which designates in the west the tray or plate that serves to collect the host and is placed on the chalice of the mass. The paten is also called *diskos*. I have not found this translation anywhere else, but it is the most etymologically and rigorously suitable, and also unintentionally puts it in relation to the Îshâ Upanishad with the Gospel. In use since the early Christians, to remind the most precise of the Last Supper, the paten is generally of precious metal, or gold, like the *pâtra* of the upanishad under which there is the face of Truth, like the chalice, the cup of the blood of Christ covered by the paten. We find ourselves in the Upanishad in front of a form of Grail, the vase of immortality also present at the origin of the Hindu myths of the fraying of the ocean of milk, in the form of the Kumbha. But the *pâtra* could also be translated as a bowl, as we have seen in the chapter on Greco-Buddhist art, remaining in the same analogies.

Pushan, guardian of the flocks, solar son of the first Father, god of love and death

A premise: the many names of the upanishad must not deceive us: Shri Aurobindo, like many others, pointed out that the multiple appeals of Hindu deities were only aspects of a single divinity. By choosing his Îshtadevatâ, the Hindu knows well that he does not exclude the others but goes towards the form that suits him to worship the Supreme through a support, as a saint prays in Christianity without denying God or Christ.

(...)

I am Him

The light that Pûshan must spread is a universal symbol. Then comes the affirmation of the identity of the locutor of the upanishad with the Purûsha. The Purûsha is the supreme Male, etymologically, the "Person", who forms with Prakriti, Nature, from the feminine symbology, the eternal couple between unmanifested Divinity and manifested Creation. This statement of the identity of the Âtman and the

Brahman has become a mantra: "So' ham", "I am Him", which seems typically oriental, with the couple Individual Soul-Universal Soul : no Christian, Muslim or Eberian, in fact, would have the idea of proclaiming himself similar to God. Jesus and Sufi Hallaj, a thousand years later, paid for it with their lives. Nevertheless, in the Gospel of John, we read :

“ So Jesus said, “When you have lifted up^[a] the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me. » 8, 28

And :

“Very truly I tell you,” Jesus answered, “before Abraham was born, I am!” At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds. » 8, 58-59

We therefore find in common with the Îshâ Upanishad, in John, 8, 28 and 58, the Son, the Father and the statement "I am". And let us remember in *John 10:34-35* after *Psalms 82:6* :

“ Jesus answered them, “Is it not written in your Law, ‘I have said you are “gods”’? If he called them ‘gods,’ to whom the word of God came—and Scripture cannot be set aside. »

Vâyû, the nectar of immortality, imminent death and Kratu

Then we find the god of the wind Vâyû or, according to the translations, the injunction to breathe in the breath, in the wind, *ambrosia*, exact translation of the nectar of the amrita, the immortality of the Hindu gods. Breath and immortality are two elements present in the Gospel with the baptism of the Spirit, both breath and soul, and the cup of the Last Supper. The prospect of the death of the body, either immediately or soon, strengthens the link with the last ritual that Christ celebrated before being arrested and crucified.

Kratu, whose name means Strength (like the Greek *kratos*), was also a Rishi, one of the Prâjapati, the primeval Creative Fathers and a son of Brahma. But it also represents Intelligence and Wisdom, which must be remembered what was done. This is in agreement with Luke, 22, 19 :

“ And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.”

(...)

But Kratu is also a god of sacrifice, as O' Flaherty points out in his *Hindu Myths* (Penguin Books India, 1994, p 124), since Kratu is the sacrifice, he replaces here Prâjapati, whose act of incest (he mingled with his daughter) was punished by Kratu with the castration, also provided for by law ancient Hindu law. Furthermore, Kratu also assumes here a similarity with Saturn, the god of Death whose zodiacal period began with the Capricorn, the goat, under whose sign Christ, the future scapegoat, was born. The proximity of the names: Kratu and Khristos, can also be mentioned, as the Greek *krater*, the large earthen vase or metal in which water and wine were mixed, remembering the paten and the bowl. The vase then went around the table passing from guest to guest.

Although the etymology is different, the choice of Kratu may have been motivated by the similarity of the name with Khristos, in the event of a drafting of the upânishad at different times in history, with the integration of other cults like the Christians'. We are only here totally in research and questions, and for now in the observation of a constellation of archetypes and words very close to the Gospel in this Îshâ Upanishad. However, can one only invoke the statistical probability of coincidences in this convergence of precise words and symbols between Îshâ Upanishad and the Gospel, and forget the

ambiguity of the title: Upanishad of the Lord, or Upanishad of Jesus? So far, we have had the golden paten that hides the face of truth. Then Pushan, the guardian of the flocks, solar son of the first Father, god of love and death, followed by the statement: I am Him, the supreme God. He arrived after Vâyu and the nectar of immortality, with the body promised to death, immediately or the next day. Finally, the invocation to remember Kratu, son of Brahma, the first Father, god of sacrifice. Let us continue.

The god Agni, the Agnus dei and the fire, alpha and omega of the world

The Ishâ Upanishad ends with an invocation to Agni:

"O Agni, lead us on a good path to wealth (or possessions, happiness)

O wise deity who has known all the ways

Remove deflection and evil (or sin) from us

"We should give you the most abundant tributes." 18

Agni, god of fire, is the son of Father Sky, Dyaus, and of Mother Earth, Prithvî. Dyaus Pitar, the Heavenly Father, is the Indian equivalent of Zeus, the Bright, with an etymology similar to the Latin Deus, of which the Spaniard has kept the *s* in Dios. Let us therefore remain in the Children of God and Heaven, like Christ and Apollo. Buddha was also represented going to school on horseback on a ram, we have seen him in the art of Gandhâra. It may be a coincidence, but certainly not in contradiction with what follows.

Agni is the first sung word of the first hymn of Rig Veda. Element and primordial god, Fire is the alpha of everything. For this reason it is also associated with the ram, an animal of sacrifice since Abraham and Isaac (...)

(...)

God Agni is both a messenger and a king because his fire brings the smoke to the gods and, besides the fire of sacrifice, it is also the fire of war and the end of time. These are strictly all characteristics of the ministry of Jesus, divine messenger in the Gospel, and future Lord of the War of Light against Darkness, and of Justice, in the Revelation. Fire and war are also part of his strongest words:

"I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! But I have a baptism to undergo, and what constraint I am under until it is completed!⁵¹ Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division.⁵² From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. *Luke, 12, 49-51*

And the famous:

"Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn

“a man against his father,

a daughter against her mother,

a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—

a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.”*Matthew, 10, 34-36*

God Agni, Agnus Dei... can we only invoke coincidence if Christ is symbolized by the Lamb of God, who takes the place of the Jewish Passover sacrifice for Christians? Christ has been associated with God's lamb and fire since the designation by John the Baptist:

« The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! » *John, 1, 29*

"And I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’ *John, 1, 33*

The Holy Spirit who descends upon Jesus at baptism is also associated with fire for Pentecost and the tongues of fire that will descend upon the apostles.

And we will find the lamb of God in the Apocalypse of John, at the end of the New Testament: the fiery animal is like in the Vedas the beginning and the end.

The Lamb of God

The Agnus Dei is represented ardent at the base of some crosses with the seven seals of the Apocalypse that he alone will be able to open, because he is the Alpha and the Omega:

« He went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God’s people. And they sang a new song, saying:

“You are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
because you were slain,
and with your blood you purchased for God
persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. » *Revelation, 5, 7-9*

« I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End. » *Revelation, 22, 13*

Beyond the astrological sign of Aries, beyond the common sacrificial function of the fire lamb, between India and the Judeo-Christian world, beyond the identity of the homophony between god Agni and Agnus Dei, may there be a common etymology between the two animals and gods? In his *Vocabolario Etimologico*, strangely enough, Ottorino Pianigiani emphasizes the obscure etymology of lamb, from the Latin *agnus*... and mentions only at the last line the ancient Slavic *agne*, or *jagne*, lamb... The lamb, christic symbol of purity and primordial innocence because it was just born and because it purifies with fire, leads the armies in the Apocalypse of John to renew the world to a new heaven and a new earth, like the fire of Agni, the ram that guides all the other signs at the beginning of spring, purifies and brings offerings to the gods.

The question of dating and the mystery of the author and the recipient of the Īshâ Upanishad

Dating the *Ishâ Upanishad* is difficult: even based on the historical evolution of Sanskrit, different periods are proposed. It would be located between the beginning and the middle of the 1st millennium B.C., or perhaps just a little later, but in any case therefore far from the Christian era. Of course, the first Hindu manuscript ever found is a *Vedânta Sûtra* from the first century A.D., but just as in the West, the written traces found are almost always later than the oral tradition, exclusive for anything else in India for millennia.

Another question: the Hindus ask themselves to whom the upanishad is addressed precisely at the beginning... In the end, given the many names of gods listed, it is not necessarily clearer, but let us repeat that the diversity of names is not contradictory with the explanation of a unique Divinity under different names.

The question of the Rishi author of the upanishad is not clear either, as for other Upanishads, but the Îshâ would have a very different origin from *all* the others, because it is not a supplement or a comment: it is part of the Samhitâ themselves, the "collections" of songs and prayers for offerings. To be precise, it is the fortieth adhyâya - reading, chapter - of the Vâjasaneyi Samhitâ, of the white Yajurveda, as seen in the introduction. For many Hindus, it means that the hymn was heard directly by the gods. Perhaps, like all the rest of the Vâjasaneyi Samhitâ, the Îshâ Upanishad was received by Yâjñavalkya, who will reincarnate in the last white horse avatar Kalki... so that we fall back once again unintentionally on the Christian symbolism of the Apocalypse and on the convergence of the Indian, Zoroastrian and Christian prophecies.

Attempts to explain

Is it possible to imagine an influence of the Gospel on the Upanishad, or vice versa, without forgetting the Old Testament, with the cited passage of the Genesis? Some upanishads were composed very late, such as the Allah Upanishad, under the emperor Akbar (1542-1605). Why not then an upanishad dedicated to Jesus, even if only partially related to him? Some things date from before Christ, such as the sacrifice of the lamb or ram, common to shepherds from half the world... Even the ritual of bread and wine existed in the Jewish tradition since Abraham's encounter with Melchizedek, and we find the formula "I am who I am", proclaimed by the Eternal in the Old Testament ...

God said to Moses, « I AM WHO I AM » This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'” *Exodus, 3, 14*

Every religion has a part of its heritage and direct inspiration from the past, within its tradition: Buddhism retains many aspects and teachings of Hinduism, as Christianity has retained Jewish rites, values and teachings. But the contributions to a tradition also come from outside. The careful study of the etymologies and symbology of non-abramitic religions demonstrates this. And there are historical fractures and evolutions at certain times.

Where, then, do the many similarities between the Gospel, the Old Testament and the Îshâ Upanishad, but also other aspects of the Indian tradition come from? Here, there is not anymore a 1st century A.D. documented with new Buddhas, new texts, new common cults, on a Silk Road traveled, between East and West, by traders, invaders or pilgrims who spoke common languages. We are far behind in the centuries, and with only common fragments, though absolutely similar, within very long texts. Does it reveal an eternal common Truth? A shared historical origin? A universal reserve of archetypes in the collective unconscious, as Carl Gustav Jung used to say? A common perception of events in the future, explaining the similarities between John's text and Agni's function? These eventualities do not exclude a loss of memory and direct influences in certain moments of history through decisive encounters.

From the couples Brahma-Sarasvatî and Abraham-Sara, to the god Agni and Agnus dei and the white horse of recent times: the need for a mutual knowledge of traditions

(...)

That is why I have entitled this final paragraph: *From the couples Brahma-Sarasvatî and Abraham-Sara to the god Agni and the Agnus dei*. It is not enough to say that we Hebrews, Christians and Muslims are worthy sons (implied to the exclusion of others..) of Abraham, even if not too good among us. Instead, we must look at the origin of Hinduism to realize that the same couple is present there with the god Brahma and his wife Sarasvatî, the primordial couple, who echoes, as necessary, with Abraham and Sarah. And if neither knowledge nor common sense teach us tolerance, we should meet the many wise men – the real ones - of the world, to realize that the mystical experience and the proximity to the Divine, which inhabits us all, are not a question of beliefs, texts, rites and exclusion, but of the life of the Spirit lived in accordance with the physical and metaphysical Universe. The Îshâ Upanishad is there to remind us of them with great beauty and ambiguity:

« He who knows That as both in one, the Knowledge and the Ignorance,

By the Ignorance crosses beyond death and by the Knowledge enjoys Immortality. » 11, (translated by Sri Aurobindo, in *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, volume 17, Sri Aurobindo Ashram trust, 2003)

The Gospel, Vedânta of the West

Jean Varenne writes in the introduction to his translation, in *Sept Upanishads* (Points, 1981, untranslated):

"The transition to metaphysics is made in the Upanishads that are classified at the end of the Veda. (...) the upanishads have only metaphysics as matter, which is easily condensed in some short formulas, in prose or in verse. Progressively, however, the Upanishads tried to become independent of the Brâhmana and the rest of the Vedic canon. They multiplied then and never ceased to compose, while the Veda in the strict sense ceased to evolve towards the seventh century of our era. »

The teaching of Christ in the Gospel can be considered in many ways as the Vedânta of the West, or the "End of the Veda", i.e. etymologically of the "Knowledge" and of the Law of the Veda. In fact, the Gospel proposes to go beyond knowledge, rite and fulfillment of the Law of the Old Testament, towards a new Law made only of Love of God and men, of a direct search for a libertating Truth, with sacrifice as the way of Salvation. The Gospel proclaims the bliss of the poor in spirit, and the revelation made to the little ones and hidden from the wise and intelligent:

"At that time Jesus said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children.²⁶ Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do. » *Matthew, 11, 25-26*

(...)

Kali Yuga and Râja Yoga of Ishâ

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." *Matthew 11:29-30*

Yoga and *yoke* have the same etymology. Did Christ allude to any oriental yoga in this word, or did he just allude, in opposition to it, to the "heavy yoke" of the Law of *IKings, 12, 10-14* ?

What Îshâ-Gesù proposed was both a Jñâna Yoga - Yoga of Knowledge - and a Bhakti Yoga, a Yoga of Devotion, of God's unconditional Love. But we also find in the Gospel Karma Yoga, the Yoga of

selfless action of fruits for the benefit of all and dedicated to God, and the need for commitment like the Indian Seva. A Râja Yoga, a regal Yoga in short, to unify the human being. All these new values, these new ways pushed to explode the infinite interpretation and observation of the texts, the attachment to complicated rules. Bouddha also came to scandalize the Brahmins, to then be integrated as the ninth and penultimate avatar of Vishnu because he reminded them that texts, law and rituals were not everything. Krishna - Vishnu's eighth avatar, in the *Bhagavad Gîta*, often makes fun of the Brahmins who are proud of the Vedas, sure that nothing else exists, while their destiny is ignorance and death. The influence of the upanishads and Vedânta is remarkable in the *Bhagavad Gîta*, which realizes a synthesis of the evolution of the Dharma. The *Bhagavad Gîta* will also give a new spin of the Hindu Dharma wheel, with a teaching for all, which will be called Hinduism, leaving Vedism and Brahmanism behind. Like Christ in the Gospel, like Avalokiteshvara and Amitâbha in the Great Vehicle, Krishna teaches, in the *Bhagavad Gîta*, the Bhakti as the way of Salvation in our Kali Yuga. The Iron Age, Ovid would say, but Kali actually designates, not the goddess Kâlî as is often believed, but the fallen musician Kali. Kali is a beggar dressed as a king, the demon of discord, death and violent pleasures, who will possess the world with his music before the return of the Kalki avatar. The Hindu prophecy of Kali finds for us very strong echoes with the use of music today by singers and musicians, who come from very low conditions often (which is certainly not a problem in itself, only a common point with the prophecy), dressed and behaving like princes, world-famous, dragging crowds into atmospheres of chaos and violence, with concrete consequences on the lives of their faithful, on society and on the Earth in which we live. (...)

What made it possible to imagine certain aspects of the musical revolution of the 20th century, hundreds or thousands of years ago, when the prophecy of Kali Yuga and the advent of the Kalki avatar was made? A further sign of the mysteries of human conscience and its destinies, connected with an eschatology common to the East and the West, like that of Maitreya.

François-Marie Périer, may 2019