

Part I

# Buddhism in History





## — “Buddhism is both one and many — at the same time”

Many received ideas about Buddhism stem from a refusal to take the diversity of Buddhism as a living tradition seriously. Of course, all books which seek to popularize the subject are careful to state that Buddhism is both “one and many,” but they nevertheless go on to reduce this multiplicity to one fundamental unity by concentrating on so-called “primitive Buddhism.” Some such books jump directly from this “pure” Buddhism, i.e., that of the Buddha himself (as we imagine him), to Tibetan Buddhism, Zen, and Theravāda as if they are all directly derived from this original form. Unable to do justice to the rich diversity of Buddhisms which have evolved through the influence of the various host cultures, they focus upon a few of the simple ideas to which Buddhists of all denominations are supposed to adhere.

The Buddhist doctrine first developed in northern India towards the fifth century BCE and gradually spread its way across the rest of the subcontinent during the third century BCE following the conversion of King Ashoka, founder of the first Indian empire. During the same period, a schism occurred between the disciples of the Buddha that eventually led to a separation into the two main schools – the “Great Vehicle” (Mahāyāna) and the “Lesser Vehicle” (Hīnayāna). The name “Lesser Vehicle” was given to the more conservative of the schools by its critics and rivals of the “Great Vehicle.” It later became Theravāda. The distinction between these two “vehicles” is not always as rigid as we are led to believe. Some also distinguish a third school of Buddhism, known as the “Diamond Vehicle” (Vajrayāna), which is also referred to as or esoteric Buddhism or Tantrism (BF: after the name of its canonic texts, the Tantras).

Without King Ashoka, Buddhism may well have remained a minority religion rather like Jainism, with which it shares certain common features. Legend has it that Ashoka ordered the construction





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of 84,000 *stūpas* throughout India – and indeed beyond, given that some have been found in China – where relics of the Buddha could be deposited. Whatever the case, this model of the Buddhist sovereign embodied by Ashoka had a lasting influence upon the relationship between Buddhism and the state in all Asian cultures.

The spread of Buddhism in India led to a proliferation of schools (or “groups,” the *nikaya*), which is the reason why this form of early Buddhism is sometimes known as Nikaya Buddhism. However, this expression restricts Buddhism to doctrinal aspects and in doing so fails to take account of the popular religion which does not always stem directly from Nikaya Buddhism.

The factors that contributed to the diversification of Buddhism in India in the centuries following the Buddha’s death include the settling of the monks and the great distances between the centers of Buddhism. As the wealth of the monasteries grew, monks and nuns were able to live a more comfortable existence. Their tendency to specialize often led to a polarization between the ascetics, who practiced their religion in the solitude of the forests and the village, and city-based monks, who devoted their time to teaching or studying in the great monasteries. These different approaches to doctrine, ritual, and discipline became ever more established with each new religious council.

It was on the occasion of the third council that the first schism occurred between the group of the “Elders” (Pāli: Thera, Sanskrit: *Sthavira*), partisans of a strict interpretation of the Buddha’s teachings, and the majority – the so-called “Great Assembly” (*Mahāsanghika*) – which tried to adapt this teaching by relying on its spirit rather than on its letter. This schism paved the way to a new form of Buddhism, which named itself *Mahāyāna*, as opposed to the earlier form of Buddhism which, as we have seen, was referred to as *Hīnayāna*. The term “vehicle” here means “a way of going towards salvation.”

The origin of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism continues to be the subject of much debate. Some have claimed that it stems from the laypeople reacting against the elitism of the monks and the opulence



of the monasteries. Others point to the emergence of new forms of religious practice such as the worshiping of *stūpas* and relics, the worship of Scriptures, and, more generally, devotion to the Buddha. Some scholars have described Mahāyāna as a “fringe sectarian movement” trying to gain economic support. In fact, Mahāyāna seems to be an essentially monastic phenomenon and somewhat militant in nature. It could even be described as military in certain cases, if we are to believe the Mahāparinirvāna sūtra: “If a layperson observes the five precepts but does not bear arms to protect the monks, he does not deserve to go by the name of mahāyānist.”

Despite its polemic declarations, Mahāyāna complemented rather than excluded Hīnayāna: it considers salvation to be accessible to all, for example, and is more broadly accessible than Hīnayāna – which advocates the strict observance of an ascetic lifestyle.

While the reform of Mahāyāna may have introduced certain lax attitudes, it also developed the more ascetic tendencies of Buddhism, focusing on virtues such as compassion, wisdom, and a skillful means (*upāya*) to salvation. On a soteriological level, Awakening (*bodhi*) overrode the previous ideal of *nirvāna*. Where the conception of the Buddha was concerned, relative historicism was transformed into radical docetism and the Buddha, who had become purely “metaphysical,” was multiplied. The Buddha’s human form was now little more than a white lie intended to gradually guide people towards the truth. On a practical level, the emphasis was placed upon devotion to various buddhas (Amitābha, Akshobhya, Baishajyaguru, Mahāvairochana) and bodhisattvas (Avalokiteshvara, Mañjuśrī, Samantabhadra) as well as upon penitence and the transfer of merits.

Mahāyāna thought really took off with the tradition of the Perfection of Wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*), as expressed in the sūtras of the same name. The first of these texts dates from the beginning of the Common Era. They vary in length from one extreme (100,000 verses) to another (the Hridaya [Heart] sūtra) of around one page.



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Mahāyāna began to spread throughout central Asia and China around the start of the Common Era and then spread subsequently throughout Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. Hīnayāna (a term we are using here for want of a better one and which we do not intend to have any pejorative connotations whatsoever) was initially transmitted to Sri Lanka during the reign of Ashoka and then, from the tenth century CE, spread throughout Southeast Asia (Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia). It lives on today in the form of Theravāda, which has become the dominant form of Buddhism in the countries cited above.

Between the fifth and the seventh centuries CE, a third movement, known as Tantric or esoteric Buddhism, arose. For some scholars, it is a radically new form of Buddhism, a new “Vehicle,” known as the “Diamond Vehicle” (Vajrayāna), but in fact it simply adopts many Mahāyāna conceptions, while taking them to their extreme.

As in Mahāyāna, the identity between *nirvāna* and *samsāra* constitutes the basis for Tantric doctrine and practice. Based on this notion, all verbal, physical, and mental acts become acts of the primordial Buddha. Tantric rituals place a great deal of emphasis on symbols of all kinds: invocations (*mantra*, *dharānī*), hand gestures (*mudrā*) and geometric drawings (*mandala*). This predominance of ritual is one of the features that distinguishes Tantric Buddhism most clearly from previous forms of Buddhism.

This trend spread outside India during the eighth to ninth centuries in Tibet, China, and Japan, as well as in Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Myanmar, Cambodia). It failed to survive in the latter countries but was predominant in Tibet and Japan for many centuries. Even today, it remains the official religion of the small Himalayan state of Bhutan. While it has been heavily indebted to Indian Mahāyāna tradition, Tibetan Buddhism is the result of a specific development, a mix of Tantrism and scholasticism.

Theravāda, the dominant form in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, is a modern form of Hīnayāna or Nikaya Buddhism. While it is clearly more conservative than Mahāyāna, it has also considerably





*The Buddha is only a man who achieved Awakening*

evolved in the course of centuries, and cannot be considered to be more representative of “authentic” or “primitive” Buddhism. This tradition developed in Sri Lanka between the third century BCE and the fifth century CE. From here, it spread to Myanmar in the tenth century and then to Thailand and other Indianized states of the Indo-China peninsula (with the exception of Vietnam, which was influenced by Chinese culture) between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

Theravāda therefore served as a culture and religion common to the Indianized countries of Asia, in large part owing to the use of Pāli as a lingua franca. In all of these countries, the “historic” Buddha formed the main object of worship, although this worship was often closely interlinked with other local forms of worship. It should not be forgotten that Theravāda has not always been as “pure” and free from mystical and esoteric elements as we are often led to believe. There was, and still is, a “tantric Theravāda” that is strongly influenced by esoteric speculation.

Thus, in spite of all the talk about “pure” Buddhism, it is clear that Buddhism has constantly evolved, influenced as it was by the eras, places, and cultures which adopted it. It is both anchored in history through its secular roots and living in the world around us today

— “The Buddha is only a man who —  
achieved Awakening”

*In India, the Buddha is a historical person.*

Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, 1827

Without the “historical” Buddha, Buddhism wouldn’t exist. This may seem like stating the obvious, but is it really? If the Buddha hadn’t existed, perhaps he would have been invented anyway. This is undoubtedly what happened, regardless of whether or not



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he did actually exist. In any case, the historicity of the Buddha is hardly ever questioned today, even though we continue to question the historical basis of various events that happened during his long lifetime.

It is certainly easy to accept the notion that the legend of the Buddha is simply derived from an embellished image of a historical person. Pāli texts in particular seem to be based on certain historical facts and the Vinaya monastic codes contain clear attempts to present Buddha as an eminently pragmatic individual. Supporters of this historicist interpretation rightly stress that it is easier to “mythologize” a biography than to “demythologize” a legend.

So what do we actually know about the Buddha? It is fair to say that he was born, he lived, and he died. The rest remains lost in the mists of myth and legend: his immaculate conception his miraculous birth, and so on. The fact that some of these elements are also said to have occurred during the life of the founder of Jainism, Mahāvīra (another allegedly “historical” character), indicates that a degree of caution must be exercised.

Historians have focused on the circumstances surrounding the death of the Buddha in particular. They emphasize one detail which they claim could not have been invented: he is said to have died as a result of eating contaminated pork. It is nothing short of a scandal that such a pre-eminent figure should have spent his last moments crippled by terrible diarrhea as a result of eating meat. Buddhists, now proud of their vegetarianism, have subsequently been keen to reinterpret this tale by swapping the pork for a vegetarian dish. Historians, on the other hand, have sought to establish some kind of historical anchor point for the story and have argued, with a certain degree of sense, that this tale does not seem to be the result of hagiography – which usually seeks to embellish the life of saints.

Siddharta Gautama, the future Buddha, is said to have been born during the fifth century BCE as the son of a king of northern India. His conception and birth were allegedly immaculate. His mother, Queen Māya, dreamt that a white elephant pierced the





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side of her body; the next morning, she found herself to be pregnant. Nine months later, she gave birth to a child in a grove in Lumbini. The child immediately began to sing a “song of victory,” declaring “I alone am the honored one above earth and under heaven.” To prove this, he took seven steps in each of the four directions, a lotus flower blossoming with each step he took.

The auspicious nature of the Buddha’s birth seems to be contradicted by the death of his mother, seven days later. The orphan was then raised by his aunt, Mahāprajāpati. Following predictions that he would become either a universal monarch or a universal spiritual guide, his father decided to lock him away in the palace to protect him against harsh realities, thereby preventing him from any kind of spiritual pursuit.

At the age of 16, Prince Siddharta married Yashodhara and they had a child, Rahula (the name means “Obstacle” and speaks volumes about Siddharta’s paternal feelings). Other sources claim that he had three spouses overall and followed a traditional career path as monarch. At any rate, destiny had other plans for him in the form of four encounters that took place during an excursion outside of the palace: he met an elderly man, a sick man, a corpse, and an ascetic. The first three encounters made him aware of the transitory nature of existence, while the fourth brought him a sense of deliverance. As a result, at the age of 29, Siddharta fled from the palace and abandoned his princely duties and prerogatives. For six years, he practiced all kinds of austerities which almost got the better of him. Having finally realized the futility of these practices, he discovered the “Middle Way” – a pathway between hedonistic pleasure and asceticism – and came up against the Buddhist Devil, Māra, and his enticing daughters. Having successfully resisted this temptation, there was nothing more to block his pathway to Awakening. During this ultimate stage, he gradually passed through the four stages of meditation (*dhyāna*), became aware of his previous lives, and eventually realized the “Four Noble Truths.”



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This story of the Buddha's life, culminating in Awakening and the final *nirvāna*, is first and foremost a digest of doctrine and a paradigm of Buddhist practice. When it comes to Enlightenment (or Awakening), through which the Buddha is able to transcend his physical self, it is this same life – the same psychodrama or cosmodrama of Awakening – that is repeated in all past and future buddhas. This explains the extreme monotony of these lives, all based on the same model. The same can be said, in part, of the lives of the saints, which are also “imitations” of the life of the Buddha. All are said to have passed through the same stages as the Buddha: a spiritual crisis followed by a renouncement of the world, an ascetic existence leading to Awakening, the acquisition of extraordinary powers, preaching and gathering disciples, jealousy caused by success and criticism of a corrupt society, death foretold, and a funeral that gives rise to the worship of relics.

Interestingly, the life of the Buddha also had an influence upon the lives of the Christian saints. The main aspects of the Buddha's life were known to the West from an early point in time. They gradually infiltrated the medieval imagination through the “golden legend” of Christianity which was itself influenced by Arabic legend. This is reflected for instance in the story of Barlaam and Josaphat. The latter (whose name appears to be an adaptation of “bodhisattva”) was the son of an Indian king who persecuted the Christians, and he lived alone in his father's palace until one day he encountered a leper, a blind man, and an elderly man. These meetings enabled him to realize the evanescent nature of existence and he was then converted to Christianity by an ascetic named Barlaam. This conversion led to martyrdom (which does not feature in the original Buddhist version of events).

Early Buddhism centered around the worship of *stūpas*, memorials which focus on the main episodes of this unusual “life” – in particular the four *stūpas* which commemorate Buddha's birth, Awakening, first sermon, and final *nirvāna* which went on to become much-visited sites of pilgrimage. As a result, the life of the Buddha took a monumental turn, in every sense of the word.



*The Buddha is only a man who achieved Awakening*

By visiting these sites, followers were able to relive each and every glorious episode of the life of their master and fill their imagination with these places. However, these *stūpas* were more than just simple commemorative monuments; they were also primarily mausoleums or reliquaries containing parts of the body of Buddha. Contact with or proximity to these relics was said to bring magical powers, either increasing the chances of salvation in the other world or of happiness in this world. One of these pilgrims and builders of the *stūpas* went on to have a massive impact upon the development of the Buddhist religion. This person was King Ashoka, whose empire extended right across India. Ashoka went on a pilgrimage to the birthplace of the Buddha in Lumbini, where he erected a commemorative pillar. However, tradition has it that he also ordered the construction of 80,000 *stūpas* where relics of Buddha would be deposited. His role as a Buddhist sovereign played a significant role in the relationship between Buddhism and sovereignty in all the cultures of Asia. Without Ashoka, Buddhism would most likely have remained a minority religion, like Jainism, with which it shares certain common features. The history of early Buddhism is essentially one of a community of followers and pilgrims and this legend and its constant developments have had a far greater influence upon its rapid expansion than the actual “historical” individual – the Buddha himself.

Having increased the number of episodes relating to the life of the Buddha, legend then turned to the Buddha’s past lives. According to the Buddhist doctrine of karma, the Buddha’s present life was simply the result of a long series of previous lives which saw the Bodhisattva reincarnated as various different beings, both animals and humans. These past lives form the focus of texts known as Jātakas. This same model is applied to the existence of other past buddhas. There is also mention of the future buddha, Maitreya, who it is said will appear in several millions of years, although his “biography” remains somewhat vague. The Mahāyāna tradition in particular speaks of numerous metaphysical





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buddhas which are already present – although invisible to the human eye.

Initially presented as some kind of superhuman being, the Buddha is therefore gradually transformed into a god. Some of the Mahāyāna texts document this development. In the Lotus sutra, for instance, the Buddha himself calls his own historical authenticity into question. This coup de théâtre takes place in a text with wide-ranging influence across Asia. During a sermon, the Buddha declares to his disciples that he has already guided numerous beings towards salvation. Faced with their skepticism, he calls upon these beings to show themselves, and a multitude of bodhisattvas (“awakened beings”) suddenly spring up from the ground. While his disciples wonder how he has been able to carry out this task during his existence as a human, he reveals that his life is, in fact, eternal. He states that he employed “skillful means,” claiming to have been born in the form of Prince Siddharta, to have left his family, and to have spent six years of austerity to finally achieve Awakening – to convince those of weak capacity. He states that the time has come to reveal the truth of the situation, namely that he has essentially always been the Awakened One. The weak-spirited (which refers to the followers of Hīnayāna) will, he says, continue to believe in the conventional truth of the biography of the Buddha, whereas his most advanced disciples will know the ultimate truth – the transcendent nature of the Buddha.

So where does the belief in a “historical” Buddha come from? What does this belief signify and how can it be reconciled with the proliferation of “metaphysical” buddhas associated with the Mahāyāna tradition? Westerners (as well as certain “Westernized” Asians) first developed a firm belief in the historical authenticity of the Buddha during the nineteenth century at a time when triumphant rationalism was seeking an alternative to Christianity. The Orientalist scholars who discovered Buddhism wanted to see it as a religion which would tie in with their own views: rather than being a religion revealed by a transcendent God, this was





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seen to be a human, moral, and rational religion founded by an extremely wise individual. According to Michel-Jean-François Ozeray, author of a book entitled *Recherches sur Buddou ou Bouddhou, instituteur religieux de l'Asie Orientale* (1817): "Descended from the altar where he was placed through blind faith and superstition, Buddou is a distinguished philosopher, a sage born for the happiness of his fellow men and the goodness of humanity." The Buddha, remodeled to suit the cause, was henceforth considered to be a freethinker who opposed the superstitions and prejudices of his time.

Attempts were then made to apply to the "biography" of the Buddha the same methods of critical historical analysis applied to Christ (a process which continues even today). As a result, the "historical" Buddha began to overshadow all the "metaphysical" buddhas of the Mahāyāna tradition, thus relegating this tradition to the realms of fantasy while Theravāda, which is said to be alone in preserving the memory of its founder, found itself promoted to the rank of "authentic" Buddhism.

My purpose here is not to deny the authenticity of a man who once went by the name of the Buddha, but instead to highlight the fact that the question itself is irrelevant, except for a historian – that is, Western – approach. The question is certainly of little consequence for traditional Buddhists, who see the life of the Buddha, above all, as a model and an ideal to be followed. The "imitation" of this timeless paradigm is a fundamental fact of monastic life. It is not just about achieving Awakening for oneself by identifying the Buddha individually; it also involves re-creating the Buddhist community utopia of the early days: bringing the Buddha back to life not just on his own, but rather in close symbiosis with his disciples.

So why is establishing the historical authenticity of the Buddha of such great importance to us? Because the authenticity of the life of the "founder" is the only guarantee of the originality of the religion he founded. Without a concrete biography, the Buddha disappears into the mists of time, and without the





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Buddha, Buddhism itself seems to become dangerously plural. Indeed, what does the conservative and somewhat puritanical Hīnayāna (nowadays represented by Theravāda) Buddhism have in common with the abundance of images and mystical fervor of Mahāyāna Buddhism – and more specifically Tantric Buddhism, which is based on magic, sexuality, and transgression? In fact these two movements, while initially opposed, ended up complementing one another. While a religion based on orthodoxy (such as the monotheisms of the West) would have anathemas for heresy, Buddhism embraces more or less all of these competing or apparently irreconcilable trends. In this sense, it is perhaps preferable to talk of a Buddhist nebula rather than a unified religion. The image of the Buddha, which is constantly being renewed, is one of the elements that have enabled Buddhists of all denominations to identify with the same tradition. In this sense, the “historical” Buddha is simply another work of fiction, the most recent in a long line of tradition marked by constant reinventions of the image of the Buddha.



## — “Buddhism is an Indian religion” —

In 1935, the French scholar Paul Mus said of Buddhism that “India produced it, India will explain it.” Similarly, according to art historian Alfred Foucher, “As with all products of the Indian genius, Buddhism, for us, is both intelligible and inadmissible, near and far, similar and disparate.” (*Etude sur l’iconographie bouddhique de l’Inde*, 1900–5). Nevertheless, focusing solely on the Indian origins of the religion underestimates the fundamental contribution made by other Asian societies (of Tibet, China, Korea, and Japan, to name just the main ones) to the development of Buddhism. Paul Mus himself was well aware of the significance of local influences on the Buddhism of Southeast Asia, a subject which he wrote about at length.



*Buddhism is an Indian religion*

What is striking, however, when one reads books about “Indian” Buddhism, is the extent to which it is discussed outside of its particular cultural context. To be sure, Buddhist legend makes reference to various more or less historical events. We are also told that the Buddha rejected both the Indian caste system and brahmanic sacrifice. Western works on Buddhism rarely refer to the other great Indian religious movements (Jainism, Shivaism, Vishnuism). In these accounts, Buddhism is often presented as simply existing independently of Hinduism rather than contradicting it. You could almost believe that the first Buddhist monks lived on a different planet to the followers of other Indian religions, whereas they in fact came into contact with one another on a daily basis.

Western researchers quickly sought to establish a contrast between Buddhism, with its path to salvation open to all individuals making it essentially “universal,” and other religious movements of the day which were considered to be typically Indian and as such too embedded in local culture. They almost give the impression that Buddhism is first and foremost a reaction against Hinduism, a rejection of purely Indian values and an attempt at dispensing with any cultural or social conditioning. As a result, the Buddha is paradoxically presented as a thinker whose ideas strangely resemble those of a rationalist mind at the end of the nineteenth century.

At the other extreme, certain Indian publications on Buddhism focus on its Indian roots, and enroll the new religion in the cause of Indian nationalism. Historians researching Buddhism, while they have avoided these extremes, have nevertheless often presented Indian Buddhism as the Buddhism par excellence due to their innate tendency to trace everything back to its origins, the result being that other historical forms of the tradition (Chinese and Japanese Buddhism, for instance) have been depicted as mere by-products. There are a few notable exceptions to this: Theravāda, which allegedly preserved the purity of “primitive” Buddhism; Tibetan Buddhism, which can claim an eminent

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spiritual filiation owing to the Dalai Lamas; and Japanese Zen, which claims to be the essence of the Buddha's Awakening.

We are also often told that Indian Buddhism was a reform of Hinduism (or Brahmanism) – by which one means essentially that the Buddha reformed the caste system. But social reform is quickly identified with religious reform, leading to the claim that Buddhism was to Hinduism “rather like the Reformation in Europe was to Catholicism” (*Le Globe*, 25 November 1829). As a result, we forget all too quickly that the earliest form of Buddhism was, in principle, a new Indian religion: to make a valid comparison, you would have to compare the relationship between Buddhism and Hinduism to the relationship between Christianity and Judaism, or even Islam and Christianity.

Given the prestige accorded to its origins, it is surprising that Western Buddhists tend to favor Tibetan Buddhism. One of two things must be true: either the “true doctrine” of Buddhism is that of the Buddha and his closest disciples, making Tibetan Buddhism a distant and somewhat suspect derivative (with its Tantric rituals and imagery, and its theory of successive reincarnation), or else the orthodox form has developed and been enriched over the centuries, which would make Tibetan Buddhism only one of various possible scenarios to arise from this supple and multiple orthodoxy. The same reasoning applies to Theravāda, which despite its claims has come a long way from the “original” teachings of the Buddha.

Every time it has come into contact with a different Asian culture, Buddhism has undergone a unique evolution and adapted; while some of these adaptations may seem more interesting or attractive to us in the West than others, this does not mean that they are spiritually superior in any way (in fact, the opposite seems more likely). Whatever the case, it is essential to address all forms of Buddhism without adopting any attitude of sectarianism and without echoing national prejudices.

The most striking thing about current research in the field is the near-imperviousness of the various disciplines. With a few



notable exceptions, scholars of Indian culture have mostly ignored Buddhism while so-called Buddhologists have similarly chosen to overlook non-Buddhist India. These same specialists have also tended to disregard or devalue other forms of Buddhism, notably those of East Asia. However, these forms of Buddhism have no reason to envy Theravāda or Tibetan Buddhism in terms of doctrine of practice.

Just as it is said that Rome is no longer in Rome, it could also be said that India is no longer merely in India. It can be found at the extreme tip of Europe through Indo-European ideology as well as at the extreme tip of Asia in medieval Japan through the expansion of Buddhism. Georges Dumézil deserves a mention here. His work, more than any other, has made it possible to understand the extent to which ideological constructions of India have influenced the cultures of the Indo-European sphere. These ideas can still be found, sometimes virtually unchanged, as far away as the shores of the Atlantic and Baltic.

Somewhat paradoxically, Buddhism as we perceive it today is both too Indian and not Indian enough. It is too Indian in the sense that Indian Buddhism has come to be regarded as representing “classic” Buddhism, to the detriment of other equally significant forms of Buddhism. The importance of the Tibetan and Sino-Japanese canons relative to the Pāli and Sanskrit canons is often underestimated, in terms of both their volume and their doctrinal content. It is not Indian enough in the sense that this “classic” Buddhism has become a kind of “vacuum-packed” Buddhism, independent of its cultural and social background. Real-life Buddhism, Indian or otherwise, is a different story – a story which has still to be written and which will be very different.

Let’s pause a moment to consider this emphasis on Indian Buddhism – which is at first glance justified given the cultural significance it holds in both Asia and the West. On a specifically philosophical level, however, the primacy of Indian Buddhism is less justifiable, especially in relation to Jainism, another far-reaching religious, cultural, and philosophical system. Yet does



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our knowledge about the Jainist movement, which appears to have been founded by a contemporary of the Buddha, extend beyond a few vague clichés?

Furthermore, one Buddhism can conceal another. Interest in “classic Buddhism” – and its two forms known as the Great and Lesser Vehicles – has taken the spotlight away from other philosophical and religious movements such as Tantric Buddhism – which is often relegated to the ranks of magic or superstition. We need to move away from the notion that philosophical reflection peaked in Buddhism with the Indian Mādhyamika (“Middle Way”) tradition and that the remainder are merely footnotes in Nāgārjuna’s *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*.

Paradoxically, talking about the Western lack of awareness of India – as does Roger-Pol Droit in his stimulating book entitled *L’Oubli de l’Inde* – equates to discussing the West rather than India. Similarly, talking about Buddhist philosophy equates to discussing philosophy rather than Buddhism.

If we consider the Buddhist tradition in terms of its geographical expansion and the spread of its doctrine, and not just in terms of its ideal proximity to Indian sources, it becomes evident that it has suffered serious prejudice at the hands of historians. As mentioned previously, Buddhism emerged in the north of India around the fifth century BCE and spread throughout Asia over the course of the following ten centuries. With the exception of Zen, the Sino-Japanese Buddhist tradition had been strangely overlooked until recently by both Sinologists and Buddhologists alike.

Just as Western thought is based on Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian ideas, Buddhist thought has been able to assimilate two cultures as radically different as those of India and China, not to mention Indianized and Sinicized, yet original, cultures such as those of Tibet and Japan. In order to understand Buddhist thought and the ways in which it has been complicated and revived by local religions, we need to move away from India and take into account Asia as a whole.





*Buddhism is the cult of nothingness*

While developing the potential of Mahāyāna, Chinese Buddhism has opened up to the influence of various non-Buddhist trends, most notably Taoism and Confucianism. It is time to reevaluate the Chinese contribution to Buddhist thought, and notably the considerable philosophical contribution made by the various schools of Chinese Buddhism. By “forgetting” Chinese Buddhism as it did, “Buddhology” and Sinology have become heirs to a Chinese tradition (essentially Confucian) which considers this doctrine to be a “barbaric” religion. The influence of this conception can be found for instance in the works of Victor Segalen, who refers to the “Buddhist heresy” and its detrimental influence upon the China of the Wei dynasty. He even suggests that Buddhism in China is a disease of Chinese thought and Buddhist art in China a disease of Chinese Forms.

India alone is therefore no longer sufficient to explain Buddhism, even though it can explain *Indian* Buddhism – and even though other forms of Buddhism would be incomprehensible without India.

————— “Buddhism is the cult  
of nothingness” —————

*Buddhism is a cult of nothingness.*

*What a thing to worship! We’d say.*

*Yes, undoubtedly, it’s a strange but established fact.*

Victor Cousin, 1841

Up until the start of the last century, Buddhism was regarded as a nihilistic doctrine. The idea stemmed from an incorrect interpretation of the notion of *nirvāna* and was upheld, in one form or another, by virtually everyone who wrote on the subject of Buddhism during the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth century. The Catholic writer Paul Claudel, for example,





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stated, in *Knowing the East*: “The Buddha found only nothingness and his doctrine taught a monstrous communion.”

Discussion surrounding “Buddhist nihilism” in the nineteenth century reveals a dark side to European philosophical discourse, causing us to question our current interpretation of Buddhism. A negative Orientalism, which tended to demonize the Buddha, was replaced at the start of the last century by a positive Orientalism with a tendency to idealize Buddhism, without it really being clear how or why. However, it has become increasingly evident that Buddhism is not – and probably never was – the harmonious doctrine our media would have us believe.

It is now generally thought that “Buddhism” is a fairly recent construction, dating from the start of the nineteenth century. It was during this era that the neologism first began to appear in texts. However, the predominant impression of Buddhism held today – that of a therapeutic, rational, compassionate, and tolerant doctrine – was preceded by another, diametrically opposed, conception which depicted Buddhism as a formidable “worship of nothingness.”

*Nirvāna* is a Sanskrit word that refers to the ultimate state reached by the Buddha. It contrasts with *samsāra*, the cycle of life and death. While *nirvāna* in principle remains the ultimate goal of Buddhism, it has lost the negative connotations it held during the nineteenth century. In the Hīnayāna tradition, *nirvāna* was defined as the extinction of all desires, a pure absence.

The Mahāyāna tradition, however, went further, triggering a mental revolution: the indefinable *nirvāna* is now defined according to four terms: permanence, bliss, subjectivity, and purity. The ultimate goal is reinterpreted as “Enlightenment” or, better still, “Awakening” (a term used to translate the Sanskrit word *bodhi*, the experience whereby one becomes a “buddha” or “awakened one”). It is a pure experience which, rather than putting an end to the world of the senses, sanctifies it and assumes a place within this world. Far from rejecting the world, Awakening becomes a form of supreme bliss within this world, cleansed of all its negative





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aspects and false perceptions caused by illusion. As the layman Vimalakīrti says to the *arhat* Shariputra, who is complaining about living in an overly imperfect world: “When your mind is pure, the world becomes a Pure Land.”

Given the historical importance of the “nihilistic” conception of Buddhism in the West, it would be useful to quickly trace the development of this idea. While it was generally recognized that Buddhists consider *nirvāna* to represent deliverance, the end of a painful transmigration, opinions were divided as regards the nature of this deliverance. Some thought that the Buddhist rejection of the soul and of God mean that *nirvāna* must involve total destruction and that Buddhism is therefore nihilism, a somber form of pessimism. Others have wisely sought to define Buddhism as agnosticism, arguing that the Buddha did not comment on the nature of this deliverance. Both sides evidently considered it difficult to understand why Buddhists equate *nirvāna* with beatitude and immortality and why they claim that the Buddha overcame death.

There can be little doubt that the person who contributed most to the nihilist interpretation of *nirvāna* during the nineteenth century was the German philosopher Hegel. For him, the Buddhist *nirvāna* is simply nothingness, “which Buddhists make the principle of everything, the final goal and the ultimate end of everything.” He therefore considered it completely natural that the Buddha should be represented adopting a “thinking posture” in which “feet and hands are intertwined with a toe entering the mouth.” This is the perfect expression of a “withdrawal into oneself, sucking on oneself.” However, according to Hegel, Buddhist nothingness is not the opposite of being, as it becomes later, but is instead the absolute, free from all determination. Shifting to the absolute destroys one’s relative and conditioned individuality; the emptiness that results is not nothing, it is merely another name for plenitude.

Unfortunately, heirs of Hegel have only retained the formulation and not the subtle nuances. Even the eminent French scholar Eugène Burnouf, the first translator of the Lotus sutra, stated that



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the Buddha “saw supreme good in the annihilation of the thinking principle.” His disciple Jules Barthélemy Saint-Hilaire went one step further, stating: “If there were ever anything in the world which goes against Christian doctrine, it is this deplorable idea of annihilation which forms the basis of Buddhism.” This is why the Buddha was subsequently referred to as the “great Christ of emptiness” (Edgar Quinet) and Buddhism as a “Church of nihilism” (Ernest Renan).

The German philosopher Schopenhauer brought a more fundamentally pessimistic slant to Buddhism. He considered Buddhism to be an atheistic religion. All the same, *nirvāna* is not a nothingness in itself; it only appears that way to us due to the powerlessness of language and thought. Schopenhauer’s views, in *The World as Will and Representation*, are similar to those of Hegel on this point when he writes: “Defining Nirwana [*sic*] as nothingness amounts to saying that *samsāra* does not contain a single element which could serve to define or construct Nirwana.” Nietzsche, on the other hand, sees in Buddhism a “nostalgia for nothingness”, an “asthenia of the will” and states that “tragedy must save us from Buddhism.”

The nihilist theory rests on two fallacies: one is an error regarding the goal, namely *nirvāna*, the transcendental nature of which falls beyond any possible formulation yet has been interpreted as simple inexistence or annihilation; the other is an error relating to the dialectical method of the Mādhyamika which proceeds according to negation, but does not stop at negation, and which dismisses all notions, even that of emptiness. This simply means that we cannot say anything about ultimate reality; it does not mean that reality does not exist beyond or outside of what we can say.

According to Roger-Pol Droit, this misunderstanding, which lasted throughout the nineteenth century and beyond, is symptomatic of the evils of Western society; it reveals in particular the fears of Western philosophers when faced with the specter of nihilism. This extended beyond a simple yet regrettable inability to understand a doctrine too different from our own; it also represented an



*Buddhism is a philosophy, not a religion*

actual political strategy, an active form of resistance against the radical evils which appeared to be threatening Western society. The European conscience projected its own fears onto Buddhism due to the “death of God,” a loss of metaphysical anchorage in post-Kantian philosophy, uprisings among the working classes, and the “decline of the West,” amongst other things.

Other socio-political factors have also played a part, most notably the rise of colonialism and of the missionary spirit. According to Droit, the philosophical judgment about India seems to reach a turning point with Barthélémy Saint-Hilaire, the author of a virulent pamphlet against Buddhism entitled *The Buddha and his Religion*. It is no coincidence that this scholar was also Minister for Foreign Affairs in the cabinet of Jules Ferry during the Third Republic and France’s colonial expansion.

The growing indifference to India during the second half of the nineteenth century – after the enthusiasm of the “Oriental Renaissance” in the first part of that century – is a mystery to historians. The change brought about by the gradual idealization of Buddhism from the start of the twentieth century should, logically speaking, have sparked renewed interest in the philosophy of India. However, this did not occur, perhaps because the Buddhism in question was no longer perceived to be Indian, first and foremost. The debate surrounding *nirvāna* therefore seems to be a symptom as well as a cause of misunderstanding where Buddhism is concerned.

————— “Buddhism is a philosophy, —————  
not a religion”

*Buddhism is essentially an attitude to life, what you could call, for want of a better phrase, a philosophy, but a philosophy that tends towards the absolute.*

Michel Malherbe, *The Religions of Mankind*, 1990



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This is undoubtedly the most widespread idea relating to Buddhism, even among academics. According to Jean-François Revel in *The Monk and the Philosopher*, “This is a philosophy comprising a particularly important metaphysical dimension. This metaphysical dimension, however, forms part of the philosophy and does not derive from a revelation, even though it does involve ritualistic aspects which are associated with religious practice.”

For many, however, the essence of Buddhism boils down to a singular “logical revolt” against revelation or metaphysics in any form. However, what applies to certain schools of Buddhism, which have rather too quickly been labeled as “primitive Buddhism,” does not necessarily apply to Buddhism in its entirety. Even early Buddhism is always derived and plural.

Buddhist philosophy, of course, boasts names such as Nāgārjuna or Chandrakīrti (sixth century) in India, Tsongkhapa (fourteenth century) in Tibet, Jizang (549–623), Fazang (643–712) or Zongmi (774–841) in China and Kūkai (774–835) or Dōgen (1200–53) in Japan. The arguments put forward by Buddhist scholars are certainly no less valid than those proposed by their Western colleagues. However, they always fall within a particular framework which is more a framework of Buddhist deliverance than of universal reason. As the Belgian scholar Louis de la Vallée-Poussin notes, Buddhism “was born of and has lived on the sentiment of the afterlife and retribution for actions, on faith in eternal salvation ... To make it a form of rationalism would be to prevent oneself from understanding anything about it” (*Bouddhisme: Opinions sur l’histoire de la dogmatique*, 1925).

Some have avoided the two terms “religion” and “philosophy” altogether by using the words “spirituality” or “wisdom” instead. And, for others, Buddhism is first and foremost a path that leads to Awakening, or a moral doctrine founded on compassion. In reality, these definitions are anything but neutral: it is always about claiming, in all innocence, that Buddhism is *not* a religion or at least that its specifically religious aspects are of secondary importance.



*Buddhism is a philosophy, not a religion*

When addressing the philosophical aspect of Buddhism, it is often said that “reality is unknowable.” This negative statement relates both to the nature of things or reality and to knowledge. If things do not exist in themselves, as stated by the Mahāyāna tradition, can the nature of things really be the object of knowledge? If the ultimate truth is ineffable, and cannot be conceptualized, knowledge must be non-conceptual and non-linguistic.

At the moment of Awakening, the Buddha is said to have achieved omniscience, a knowledge of all the *dharma*s or elements constituting reality. In early Buddhism, this knowledge is based on a discursive approach. There is, however, an “inconceivable” domain (*achintya*), which thought cannot reach. This may explain why the Buddha rejected certain questions relating, for example, to the origin of the world, which have no soteriological value. The term *achintya* was therefore originally used to refer to badly formulated questions. It subsequently came to denote the very nature of reality and the paradoxical perception of nature within Awakening.

The epistemological status of knowledge in the most ancient of the texts is somewhat ambiguous. Numerous texts state that there are two kinds of obstacle to Awakening – passion and knowledge. All empirical knowledge, being conditioned, bears the stamp of illusion. As an element of personality, consciousness (*vijñāna*) is transitory and painful. Rational thought is therefore not a supreme faculty that legislates on all things, as claimed by Descartes.

There is, however, an intuitive form of knowledge which is not subject to these limitations. Since the earliest centuries of Buddhism, certain texts have deemed thought to be more stable, describing it as “luminous” and as the *dharma* that encompasses everything. During the development of Mahāyāna over the first few centuries of the Common Era, this knowledge came to be defined as a kind of gnosis (*prajñā*). The question is therefore to identify whether it prolongs discursive knowledge or whether it in fact contradicts it.

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More specifically, the idea emerges that the apprehension of the absolute is achieved through a particular form of knowledge known as *prajñāpāramitā* or Perfection of Wisdom. This paradoxical knowledge is, in fact, non-knowledge. The apophatic or negative approach sees Awakening as inconceivable, inexpressible, and unreachable. It can only be approached through a dialectical double negation (neither this nor that) or, ultimately, through silence.

In the Vimalakīrti sutra, the layman Vimalakīrti declares: “All *dharmas* are devoid of marks and as such are inexpressible and unthinkable. Being inexistent, they are devoid of marks. We cannot say anything about them or, if we do, it is solely through convention. To know them is not to think about them.” As a result, practitioners are supposed to perceive all things like a reflection in a mirror, water in a mirage, sound in an echo, vision in a dream – or, more metaphorically, like the erection of a eunuch or the pregnancy of an infertile woman. Awakening, says Vimalakīrti, is not confirmed either by the body or by thought; it is the end of all false views.

The same idea can be found in a famous *prajñāpāramitā* text, the Hridaya sutra. In this very short text, recited daily by Buddhists from Tibet to Japan, the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara explains emptiness to the Arhat Shariputra. The latter represents the naive viewpoint of the Hīnayāna and learns, to his great surprise, that all of the traditional dogma is null and void when it comes to the ultimate reality. This is notably the case with the Four Noble Truths (relating to suffering, the origin of suffering, the extinction of suffering or *nirvāna*, and the path to achieving this), pronounced by the Buddha during his first sermon. Somewhat paradoxically, this eminently philosophical text ends with a *mantra*. This has not escaped the attention of commentators: some have seen this as simple interpolation and others as a new form of language adapted to Emptiness, a foretaste of the “intentional” language of Tantric Buddhism.

The ideas of the Vimalakīrti sutra have been adopted and systematized by the so-called Middle Way school or Mādhyamika, as

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expressed by Nāgārjuna during the third century CE. Nāgārjuna inherited the *prajñāpāramitā* literature and is considered to be its first systematizer. He was very influential, and his work constitutes an essential and unavoidable reference point for many commentators, the ultimate orthodoxy in Mahāyāna doctrine.

Nāgārjuna logically demonstrates the futility of any particular knowledge. He presents the unthinkable nature of reality in the form of a classic tetralemma. As the etymology of the word indicates, this tetralemma is composed of four propositions: affirmation ( $X = A$ ), negation ( $X = \text{non-}A$ ), synthesis of the two ( $X = A$  and non- $A$ ) and dialectical negation of the two ( $X = \text{neither } A \text{ nor non-}A$ ). The third statement clearly contradicts the law of non-contradiction as defined by Aristotelian logic. Whatever the case, absolute reality, by definition, escapes these four propositions insofar as they define all possible relationships.

The agnosticism of Mādhyamika Buddhism is not simply Pyrrhonian-like skepticism. Neither is it nihilism, as its refutation of existence does not imply non-existence. The value of this intellectual deconstruction is expressed in colorful terms in a later text, the *Hevajra tantra*. In D. L. Snellgrove's translation: "Just as a man who suffers with flatulence is given beans to eat, so that wind may overcome wind in the way of a homoeopathic cure, so existence is purified by existence in the countering of discursive thought by its own kind" (p. 93) Even since the publication of T. R. V. Murti's classic book, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (1955), Mādhyamika Buddhism has been considered the ultimate outcome in Buddhist thought. This has encouraged a purely philosophical reading of early Buddhism that tends to reduce the Buddha to a precursor of Wittgenstein or, in other words, to someone who rejects metaphysical questions by demonstrating that they are poorly formulated and boil down in general to grammatical error.

By denying the real existence of the self and of things, Mādhyamika seemed to be undermining one of the fundamental aspects of the Buddhist doctrine – the principle of retribution of



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acts or karma. To avoid this pitfall, Nāgārjuna resorts to the notion of the Two Truths. Insofar as the conventional truth represents the only means of accessing the ultimate truth (Emptiness), all traditional practices retain their *raison d'être* for the time being. However certain epigones of Nāgārjuna, taking the logic of Emptiness to its limit, have purely and simply denied all forms of mediation and most notably all values in their cognitive approach to reality. This applies, for example, to the most radical forms of Chan Buddhism.

In theory, Chan (Zen) derives from Mādhyamika. An early Chan text refers for instance to Nāgārjuna's tetralemma as follows: "Can Awakening be obtained through being?" – "No." – "Through non-being?" – "No." – "Through being *and* non-being?" – "No." "Through *neither* being *nor* non-being?" – "No." – "So how can we grasp its meaning?" "Nothing can be grasped; this is what we call obtaining Awakening."

The ninth-century master Linji Yixuan, founder of the Linji (Japanese: Rinzai) sect that went on to become one of the two largest schools in Japanese Zen, described knowledge as a "cataract on the eye" and its objects as "flowers in the sky," that is, ophthalmological illusions. He provides his own version of the tetralemma, describing the relationship between the knowing subject and the object as follows: "At times one takes away the person but does not take away the environment. At times one takes away the environment but does not take away the person. At times one takes away both the person and the environment. At times one takes away neither the person nor the environment." When a disciple asks him to elaborate on this first point, he responds with a cryptic poem: "Warm sun shines forth, spreading the earth with brocade. The little child's hair hangs down, white as silk thread." He does the same for the other propositions. While his replies are subject to doctrinal hermeneutics, this change in register radically modifies the "philosophical" value of Nāgārjuna's tetralemma by allocating an oracle-like value to the language.



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Although it is important to view Buddhism within a general philosophical framework, the cost of doing so should also be questioned. In fact, by failing to question the privilege granted to a certain type of Western rationalist discourse, we risk contributing to a new and more subtle form of exclusion, again shifting the question to the West. By placing Buddhist thought within a philosophical context, we are making a choice which – however justifiable – has various consequences. For one thing, it implies an exclusion of the non-philosophical – which is judged to be less relevant in terms of understanding another culture or at least in evoking Western sympathy towards other cultures.

This exclusion undoubtedly aims to avoid labeling Buddhism as a trend in spirituality, wisdom, or religiosity or, worse still, a cult. Although driven by different motivations, our distinct preference for a philosophical Buddhism links in with attempts by Asian elites to present a purified, “demythologized,” and rational form of Buddhism – in short, a doctrine perfectly adapted to modernity. This minimal doctrine also offers a means of controlling the proliferation of discourse. It involves a certain rejection of the diversity of practices and beliefs in the name of intellectual orthodoxy.

It is undoubtedly neither possible nor desirable to settle the question once and for all. If we limit ourselves here to traditional Buddhism or, in other words, Asian Buddhism, this could be defined as a religion, despite being quite different from the types of religion we are used to, a religion with important philosophical, spiritual, and magical components – all terms which our Western logic would deem to be mutually exclusive.

If we stick to the definition proposed by sociologist Émile Durkheim in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912), Buddhism is indeed a religion in terms of being a “system of beliefs and practices relating to the sacred which produces social behaviors and unites all the individuals who adhere to it within the same community.”

Why not simply stick to Buddhist “thought” – a broader term which has the advantage of including ritual logic and mythology?



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We are indeed dealing here with thought in its broader sense. True, it is a form of thought determined by a given society and culture, yet what thought isn't? All philosophy, however pure, is cultural in the sense that it reflects the linguistic categories of the language in which it is expressed.

# ————— “All Buddhists are seeking to achieve Awakening” —————

*The spiritual goal which Buddhism strives to achieve is Awakening.*  
Matthieu Ricard, *The Monk and the Philosopher*, 1997

With Mahāyāna Buddhism emerges a new ideal, that of the bodhisattva, that is, the practitioner who seeks to reach the awakened state, or has already reached it. The ultimate goal of Buddhism – Awakening – does not imply, like the *nirvāna* before it, a withdrawal from the sensory world; quite the contrary. The term “bodhisattva” now signifies an awakened being who is currently alive, in this world or in others.

The ideal of the bodhisattva has come into competition with that of the *arhat*: from the ascetic living outside this world to the saint living in it. This new ideal evidently implies a critique of the ancient. According to the tenants of Mahāyāna Buddhism, the *arhat* practices only for himself, to reach *nirvāna* as quickly as possible, while the bodhisattva, in his great compassion, aspires to become a buddha only to guide all other beings towards Awakening, and refuses salvation if it is only individual. There is an emphasis, now, no longer on a sort of passive sainthood characterized by renunciation, but on active virtues (the Six Perfections: generosity, patience, energy, morality, concentration, and wisdom) that are more actively adapted to the needs of ordinary people. As such, the “career” of bodhisattva is no longer limited to monks, but is also open to laypeople, men and women





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alike. The ultimate goal has also been modified: it is no longer sainthood resulting in *nirvāna*, but a perfect and supreme awakening put to the service of attaining salvation for everyone in this world.

According to certain Mahāyāna texts such as the Lotus sutra, the path of the bodhisattva is the only true one: all others are simply expedients, pious lies that allow one to reach this unique reality. And so there is only one true “vehicle,” the Great Vehicle: all others are only illusions. There are two crucial moments in the “career” of a bodhisattva: the initial thought of Awakening (*bodhicitta*) and the final stage at which supreme Awakening is obtained. Although these two moments can be separated by fantastically lengthy intervals of time (in the scale of many lives), the final moment is already contained in the initial moment. This initial moment is therefore extremely important, because it is then that the believer makes the wish, not only to reach Awakening, but to push it back until all beings are saved. It is this spirit of compassion which will guide the believer in his practice, thus flattening out all difficulties.

Although the term “bodhisattva” can in theory be applied to any adept of the Mahāyāna, it primarily designates those particularly glorious beings who, after long periods of practice, have accumulated many merits that can now be put to the service of others. These bodhisattvas have the power to manifest themselves in any form (divine, human, or animal) to help those in need. They appear even among the damned in hell or take an animal form to help animals. For this reason, bodhisattvas quickly became the object of a cult that transformed Buddhism into a religion based on faith and devotion.

But let’s come back to the topic of “ordinary” bodhisattvas. With the development of the Mahāyāna school in China or in Japan, the Mahāyāna monks came to redefine monastic discipline to adapt it to new cultural conditions. The emphasis was now placed on interiorized ethics based upon faith and altruism. It was no longer sufficient to simply avoid evil: one must now be good.



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There has developed, as a result, a new type of ordination, founded on the precepts called “Bodhisattva precepts” and open to laymen (and particularly to the great patrons of Buddhism). These newly ordained bodhisattvas turn to social works, such as the construction of temples, hospices, roads, and bridges.

There is no shortage of canonical texts or established practices to confirm that Awakening is the ultimate goal of the practice of Buddhism. Some would say that this goal is far from reach given the weaknesses of humans, yet that, in the short term at least, practicing Buddhist virtues, even in an imperfect state of mind, enables the individual to accumulate certain merits. This positive karma, it is said, translates into certain benefits in the present life or a better rebirth in the future. An individual may, for example, be given the chance to be reborn as a human, preferably a male and born into a good family.

The idea that Awakening is the ultimate goal boasts a certain degree of nobility compared to the popular conception of karma. Nevertheless the fact remains that, for the vast majority of Buddhists in Asia, this notion of Awakening is too often used as a convenient alibi to disguise the fact that the real practice seeks first and foremost to obtain worldly benefits, whether material (such as prosperity) or symbolic (such as prestige). We risk not understanding anything about real-life Buddhism if we underestimate these “human, too human” motivations. Buddhists often live according to expedients which are said to be “salvific.” These expedients, or “skillful means” (*upāya*), tend to become an end in themselves, while Awakening recedes into an increasingly more distant future.

Laypeople primarily seek to obtain tangible benefits such as happiness, prestige, or wealth, or to obtain slightly less tangible benefits immediately: the salvation of a loved one in the afterlife, for example. Awakening remains the confessed goal of clerics although, in practice, most monastic troops are also seeking material prosperity or renown in this world and greater recognition in the next. Add to this a number of “superpowers”: the ability to



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read other people's thoughts, clairvoyance, and so on. Those who possess these "powers" are accorded greater respect, thus indirectly making a significant contribution to their material prosperity.

While these goals may seem somewhat less ambitious than Awakening, we should not be too hasty and condemn them as reflecting a decline or degeneration of the primitive ideal. Instead, we should consider them a sort of ruse of Buddhist reason, a means of Buddhism establishing itself in the long term. In fact, ever since it was first established, Buddhism has had to make compromises to survive as an institution. Judging by the Vinaya texts, which give a detailed account of the disciplinary rules decreed by the Buddha, the first community was not a gathering of glorious *arhats* but rather a group of quite ordinary people. Nevertheless, this group formed the basis for an institution which has survived for centuries and kept the flame of Awakening alive, albeit somewhat dimmed.

However, it is not simply resignation or the abandonment of an overly ambitious or far-removed ideal that drives most Buddhists to concentrate on the present or near future. There are also spiritual reasons for this in many cases. In fact, by concentrating too heavily on Awakening and the brighter future it offers, we risk bypassing what is most important – the present and the human condition. In certain schools of Mahāyāna Buddhism, Awakening is no longer a goal in itself; it is more a question of achieving balance between Awakening and skillful means. After all, the Vimalakīrti sutra states that wisdom without expedients is no better than expedients without wisdom. Wisdom without expedients remains a dead letter; it is no longer able to help others. The reverse is also true.

So what are these pervasive expedients? Ritual, first and foremost. Ritual is even omnipresent within sects that claim to be anti-ritualistic, such as Zen. Zen ritual refers, not only to rites in the literal sense of the word (prayer, reciting the scriptures, icon worship, etc.), but also the smallest of actions in everyday life (meals, work, etc.). This blurring of distinctions between the

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sacred and profane spheres is the sought-after goal. As one Zen master puts it: “Awakening that is aware of itself is awakening in a dream.”

Awakening continues to be presented in canonical texts as the mark of “authentic” Buddhism while worldly concerns are seen to be the mark of a “corrupted” Buddhism, a sort of lame compromise with local culture. It would perhaps be rather presumptuous to assume that we can easily identify or rediscover true Buddhism after centuries of lost memories and deviations when even the people of Asia themselves have misunderstood or forgotten it.

It was not the expectation of Awakening that convinced Chinese, Tibetan, and Japanese leaders to convert to Buddhism but rather the protection Buddhism appeared to offer them against evils of all kinds, both individual and collective (epidemics, invasions, etc.). The success of Buddhism in Asia is primarily due to its presumed effectiveness in protecting the state. An essential part of the monks’ activities was to pray for the health of the emperor and the prosperity of the people.

We often hear that Awakening is the sign of “authentic” Buddhism while other more worldly concerns are the sign of “inauthentic” Buddhism, a kind of clumsy compromise with local culture. It would be presumptuous, however, to think that we, as Westerners, have immediately identified or rediscovered true Buddhism after centuries of oblivion and deviation while the people of Asia, who have been practicing Buddhism for such a long time, have not understood anything correctly.

Incidentally, what Awakening are we talking about here? Is it, as is often said, a sort of rediscovery of our profound inner self or, on the other hand, the realization of its inexistence? In Zen, in particular, all beings are essentially awakened by virtue of their buddha nature. Nothing can be done to enhance their perfection: Zen masters say that the hope of achieving Awakening through practice is a bit like wanting to add a head on top of one’s own head.



*Buddhism teaches the impermanence of all things*

The very notion of Awakening has evolved considerably. To cite one example: the Buddhists of East Asia add the patronym Shākya before their religious name to indicate that they are, symbolically, the sons and daughters of Shākyamuni (the “Sage of the Shākya”), i.e. the Buddha. In other words, once they have undergone ordination they are ritually affiliated with the lineage of the Buddha, their common ancestor (and their ordination charter bears the name of “blood line” – despite the fact that this is mostly a purely symbolic affiliation). In that sense, Awakening is not so much the result of a spiritual quest but of their inalienable heritage as descendants of the Buddha. Buddhist sects and movements in China and Japan were once called “families.” In this family context, it is ordination and not practice which provides an entitlement to Awakening.



————— “Buddhism teaches the  
impermanence of all things” —————



*The Dhamma, the universal moral law discovered by the Buddha, is summarized in the Four Noble Truths.*

Mahathera, “The Essence of the Buddha’s Teachings,” in  
*Présence du Bouddhisme*, 2008

The search for a core universal Buddhism tends to focus on the Four Noble Truths pronounced by the Buddha during his first sermon in Benares. Those who claim that Buddhism represents a kind of stoic wisdom based on asceticism refer to these truths.

The first truth relates to suffering (*dukha*, a term which designates the acute feeling of universal impermanence) and is described as follows: birth is suffering, old age is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering, contact with something one does not like is suffering, separation from something one does like is





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suffering, failure to achieve one's desire is suffering; to summarize, the five types of object of attachment are suffering.

The second truth teaches the origin of suffering: "thirst" (*trishna*) which leads us from life to life, accompanied by pleasure and desire: a thirst for pleasure and thirst for existence as well as thirst for non-existence.

The third truth teaches the suppression of suffering through the complete destruction of desire. This suppression of all desire and all pain is known as *nirvāna*.

The fourth truth teaches the Eightfold Path (*marga*) to stopping pain. It constitutes the Buddhist soteriology or "doctrine of salvation." The Eightfold Path that makes it up was defined by the Buddha as a middle way that avoids the two extremes: the pleasures of the senses and asceticism. The route comprises eight branches based on morality or *shīla* (pure language, pure action, pure means of existence), concentration or *samādhi* (pure application, pure memory, pure meditation), and wisdom or *prajñā* (pure faith, pure desire).

In short, the desire or "thirst" for living and being happy clashes with the impermanence of all things and as such is a source of pain. This desire, based on ignorance – the unrealistic perception of a substantial and autonomous self – leads us to commit acts for which there is an automatic retribution (karma) which causes us to constantly fall back into the painful cycle of birth and death, or *samsāra*. The only way of breaking this vicious cycle is to cut the root of desire. To achieve this, a long process of purification is required. The state thereby achieved, the total extinction of the fires of desire, is *nirvāna*.

The formulation of the Four Noble Truths, initially judged too simple in its pragmatism, soon developed in a complex doctrinal system, primarily psychological and moral. The world in which we live, our environment, and our selves are determined by our karma – our past actions – as well. Between our past, present, and future lives exists a causal chain, ordinarily described as consisting of twelve links whose root is ignorance. From this we successively derive the psychic constructions, consciousness, the





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“name-and-form” (or personality), the six sensorial domains, touch, sensation, the “thirst” (particularly sexual desire), attachment to the self, existence, birth (or rather, rebirth), old age, and death. This twelve-link chain describes the evolution of five aggregates in three existences: the first two describe the past existence, the next seven the present existence, and the last three the future existence. This series, however, is reversible: while the series described above represents the normal process of existence, the inverted sequence describes a return to the source which allows one, by reaching back to the causes, to suppress the effects and end the process.

This essentially psychological schema of the “dependent origination” is accompanied by another, of a more cosmic and mythological nature: that of the six possible destinies which await us after the present life – that of the damned (the Buddhist hells), of the animals, of the hungry ghosts, of the *asura* (a kind of Titan), of humans, and of the *devas* (celestial beings). It is always a human, in the end, who is reborn in an infernal, animal, or celestial state, only human life, with its mix of suffering and joy, can break with the vicious cycle of births and deaths. Indeed, only in human form can one’s karma be radically modified – all other forms are subject to the retributions of past karma. It is primarily this second schema that influenced the ulterior development of Buddhism, notably in China and in Japan, by allowing the emergence of a mythological description of the afterlife (with hells and paradises).

There is no denying the fact that these Four Noble Truths summarize the philosophy of the earliest form of Buddhism, if not that of the Buddha himself, and that they continued to play an important role in the two main forms of Buddhism which developed subsequently, the Mahāyāna and the Hīnāyana. Despite this, these Four Truths were quickly relativized in various schools of the Mahāyāna, most notably in the tradition known as the Perfection of Wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*). This tradition teaches that everything is empty and devoid of its own substance. In this



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emptiness, suffering does not exist in itself, which is therefore all the more reason to eliminate it.

In one of the most widely regarded texts of this tradition, the Hridaya sutra, these Four Noble Truths are actually called into question. In this text, the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara declares to the *arhat* Shariputra that in ultimate reality, or emptiness, all things are empty of their own nature – starting with the self. As a result, there is neither ignorance nor an extinction of ignorance; no ageing or death and no elimination of aging or death. This boils down to saying that in emptiness, the Four Noble Truths are no longer relevant: there is no suffering, no origin of suffering, no extinction of suffering, no pathway to extinguishing suffering.

What seems to be questioned in this text, in the name of a superior truth, is the very existence of Hīnayāna Buddhism. Likewise, the great Mahāyāna thinker Nāgārjuna claims to prove the unrealistic nature of karmic retribution, transmigration (*samsāra*), suffering, and deliverance. He does not consider the Four Truths to be noble truths but rather insufficient half-truths that must be transcended through his dialectical method. Yet they remain indispensable as a preliminary approach, just like the conventional truth is indispensable to reach the ultimate truth. Because, he adds, “emptiness, when misunderstood, destroys those whose intelligence is mediocre, much like a weakly held snake or poorly applied magic.”

A radical change of ideal is therefore evident within the Mahāyāna: the ultimate goal is no longer *nirvāna*, which is considered to be too negative and individualist; instead it is Awakening or *bodhi*, which enables bodhisattvas to “leave the world” while still remaining in it and to work with compassion towards the salvation of all beings.

This Awakening is possible because all beings possess a buddha nature. We therefore arrive at the notion of “fundamental Awakening” (in Japanese *hongaku*) according to which every being is essentially perfect and pure and therefore purification is



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useless or even harmful. Purification, in fact, contributes to the illusion and therefore to suffering, whereas the only thing which matters is to dissipate this illusion at once.

This illusion is the result of dualist thought. Conversely, the non-dualist thought of Mahāyāna Buddhism denies any duality between *samsāra* and *nirvāna* or between passion and Awakening. In the Hīnayāna, *nirvāna* is defined as the opposite of *samsāra*, whereas in Mahāyāna it is identified with *samsāra*. According to the latter view, this world is only a “valley of tears” on the face of it; in reality it is perfect *nirvāna*. Similarly, there is no longer any distinction between laypeople and buddhas. All beings are already buddhas in terms of their actions and powers.

This conception, while it confirms everyday realities, contrasts with the negation of the world which characterizes early Buddhism. When it comes to iconography, this is reflected in the contrast between the Indian Buddha, emaciated and somber, and the popular “Laughing Buddha” of the Chinese, who is obese and beaming. The contrast is evidently less entrenched in practice, although the two images reveal a major change in the Mahāyānist conception of man and the world, compared to the Hīnayāna conception.

The development of Tantric Buddhism takes things a step further still. In fact this tradition, strongly influenced by Indian yoga, ends with the human body becoming sacred and a reevaluation of desire. Man, like all things, emanates from a divine principle, a cosmic Buddha, to whom it is sufficient to return. Nature is no longer regarded as a world of illusion which should be rejected at all costs, but rather a world of realization, the river of bliss in which we all, as living beings, bathe. Instead of being based on illusion and suffering, which are wrongly held to be real, it is sufficient to focus on Awakening, which is our source, so that suffering loses all substance, all ontological reality. This notion is far removed from the ascetic vision of Buddhism and the Four Noble Truths, which continue to be cited as if through a misguided sense of obligation.



————— “The belief in karma leads  
to fatalism” —————

*Everyday experience familiarises us with the facts which are grouped under the name of heredity ... The Indian philosophers called character, as thus defined, “karma.” It is this karma which passed from life to life and linked them in the chain of transmigrations.*

Aldous Huxley

The term “karma” is one of the very few Sanskrit terms to have passed into common vocabulary. According to the *Petit Robert* French dictionary, it means “act” and designates the “central dogma of Hindu religion according to which all actions and intentions are inscribed in the destiny of living beings (a sort of predestination).” According to this view, Buddhism has therefore borrowed one of its central concepts from Hinduism, modifying the concept somewhat over time.

Buddhist karma is the law of retribution for acts. Every action is perceived as a cause that brings about an effect: the effect will follow on irreversibly from the cause. It is, however, the intention that determines the act. Each one of us is responsible for his or her own actions and each current action is itself determined by a long series of past acts. It is this which gives the notion of karma a hint of fatalism. However, the action is never entirely determined; there is always an element of free will involved. The individual is always faced with a choice that will have good or bad consequences. Nothing is ever entirely determined.

In the earliest Buddhist texts, karmic retribution was portrayed as being inevitable and highly individualized. The individual faces his actions alone and cannot escape their consequences, whatever he does. Karma, in particular, explains the requirement for rebirth: the weight of one’s actions constitutes an individual’s destiny and affects his or her rebirth on one of the Six Paths (*gati*).





*The belief in karma leads to fatalism*

In the Samyutta nikaya, the Buddha states: “The death of a mother or a sister, the death of a father, a son, a daughter, the loss of relatives, of possessions, all this you have experienced over the long ages. *Samsāra* is without beginning and without end ... So over the long ages you have suffered pain, misfortune and you have nourished the ground of cemeteries; long enough, in truth, to become tired with existence, long enough to want to escape from all this.”

The principle of karmic retribution is clear: humans are invariably followed by their actions which catch up with them sooner or later – “just as the calf finds its mother in a herd of a thousand cows.” The mechanisms of karma, however, are somewhat complicated. At first sight, karma seems to involve a degree of fatalism given that psychic inertia leads some to perdition and others to divine joy. However, the structure of the system ensures that a degree of karma remains at all times which leads back to the human condition sooner or later – perceived to be the center of gravity for the system. Suffering eventually drives beings away from evil, whereas too much pleasure causes them to succumb to the temptations of evil.

Living beings go from one existence to another and their condition is determined by the merits or faults of their actions and not, as stated in Brahmanism, by sacrifice and ritual in general. Early Buddhism focuses on the moral value of the action and rejects ritualism and the worshiping of gods. Each individual is responsible for his or her actions and no one can do anything to help anyone else. This austere notion underwent fundamental modifications with the emergence of the transfer of merits theory, which has become an important feature of Mahāyāna Buddhism. In the latter, those who have accumulated a surplus of merits can share these merits with other less perfect individuals. This conception underlies the worshiping of the bodhisattvas, compassionate beings who delay their entry into *nirvāna* in order to save others.

The keystone of the system – the notion of deliverance – is situated outside of the logic of retribution. Salvation is not achieved through merit alone; it involves the radical abandonment of all





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acts, both religious and profane. According to this viewpoint, *samsāra* and *nirvāna* – life, death, and immortality – are merely false notions. This view of the ultimate truth is summarized in the Hridaya sutra, the epitome of Mahāyāna doctrine.

The Buddhist dogma relating to the absence of a soul or self makes transmigration something of a paradox: what is it that transmigrates if the self is simply an illusory series of states of consciousness which disappear into death? What is the point in practicing and accumulating merit if this self does not reap the rewards? Clearly this notion goes against the notion of karmic retribution. To rectify this, the notion of an “intermediary being” was developed, a sort of personal conscience at the junction between two existences. The orthodox solution, however, consisted in stating that, while there are actions, there is no agent or subject, no permanent entity behind them.

The conception of the afterlife presented by Buddhism was undoubtedly one of the main contributors to its success in Asian societies. In early Buddhism, retribution for acts was a semi-automatic process which could affect an individual during his or her lifetime as well as determining subsequent rebirths. This theory was subsequently subject to heavy modification as part of the general development of the Buddhist doctrine. The idea is that humans can influence their destiny through their efforts and the acts they commit during life on earth. Retribution for actions remains one of the key elements of the system, although the individual is no longer solely responsible. Others can also use merits they have accumulated to benefit the deceased, hence the increasing importance of rituals in generating benefits which can easily be transferred to another person. This is notably the case with funeral rituals which enable the deceased to be assigned merits which they did not manage to accumulate during their life on earth, therefore ensuring the deceased final deliverance, entry into paradise, or simply a better rebirth.

In Tibetan Buddhism, the deceased has to wander in the intermediate world (*bardo*) for some time before being reborn. The





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famous *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, which was read at the bedside of the deceased to guide them during this journey and explain to them the dangers and temptations they would encounter on the way, sought to ensure the deceased the best possible rebirth. Where Chinese Buddhism is concerned, the conception of the other world underwent a significant development with the theory of the Ten Kings of Hell and in particular the court of King Yama, where the deceased are judged based on their past actions and have to undergo a kind of purgatory before they can be reborn. The funeral rituals carried out in the name of the deceased by descendants play a crucial role at this stage and can influence the judgment passed. These rituals lead the deceased towards rebirth over a period of seven weeks during which they roam between the two worlds.

In Mahāyāna Buddhism in particular, salvation can also be obtained through the intercession of bodhisattvas who have accumulated various merits during their lifetime. The intercession of Avalokiteshvara (known as Guanyin in Chinese and Kannon in Japanese) and Kshitigarbha (Dizang in Chinese, Jizō in Japanese) is said to be particularly effective.

Salvation can also be provided by certain buddhas, such as Amitābha, who, before achieving Awakening, vowed to save all beings who invoke him. Finally, in certain schools of Buddhism, karmic retribution is sometimes undermined by the notion of effective ritual or by certain practices such as meditation. The Zen school, for example, often features accounts of conversion whereby a demonic spirit is converted by the teachings of a Zen master and suddenly realizes the truth of emptiness, thereby escaping his bad karma.

Indian Buddhism saw deliverance at the end of many of rebirths during which individuals would gradually accumulate merits enabling them to be reborn in human form initially and then to convert to Buddhism so as to progress toward the goal. Chinese and Japanese Buddhism come to assert the notion that Awakening or deliverance is possible in this very life and that everyone can “become a buddha in this very body.”



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Another trend which has developed in Mahāyāna Buddhism with the notion of Emptiness is the idea that sins are empty and devoid of reality, in other words, that all karma is null and void. All that is needed is to realize its true nature, its fundamental non-existence, to rid oneself of all defilements. “In the absolute, karma is empty.” The problem is that people live in the relative, and here, karma is indeed real. Tradition warns us against the dangers and deviations that could be caused by the notion of an empty karma. This notion was indeed blamed for legitimizing a transgression of traditional morals in the name of a practice allegedly transcending good and evil.

Buddhism has sometimes been accused – in particular during the colonial period – of encouraging social immobility or economic stagnation. The notion of karma can indeed have social side-effects. In Japan, for example, it has been used to justify social discrimination against certain groups of individuals previously known as *eta* (“impure”) and nowadays referred to as *burakumin*. Yet the notion of karmic retribution has made a broad contribution to moralizing life in society and encouraging individuals to improve their social standing. Karma leads to everything, even to Awakening – provided that one can put an end to it.

### “Buddhism denies the existence of a self”

*Buddhism stands unique in the history of human thought in denying the existence of such a Soul, Self, or Atman.*

Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 1959

*The buddhas spoke of the self as well as teaching about the non-self. They also taught that there is neither a self nor a non-self.*

Nāgārjuna, sixth century

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*Buddhism denies the existence of a self*

The denial of the self, ego, or of the individual soul (*an-ātman*) is the touchstone or perhaps rather the stumbling block of the Buddhist doctrine. This may appear to present a paradox, given that this is a religion which claims to be based on individual salvation. In a special issue of *Le Nouvel Observateur* on Buddhism, Frédéric Lenoir noted that “the vast majority of people involved in Buddhism claim that it provides them with the means of developing their individual potential. The emergence of this subject is an ultra-western idea.”

Of all the dogmas of canonical Buddhism, *an-ātman* is undoubtedly the one which has been the greatest cause of debate as it seems to go against common sense. The majority of commentators feel that this dogma is the most striking indicator of the originality of Buddhism compared to other religions. The significance and impact of this doctrine should also be questioned by placing it in its original context as well as the context of its subsequent development.

According to Buddhist scholasticism, the self is purely the result of physical and mental processes, a sort of “mental fabrication” which has no ultimate reality. Awakening involves becoming aware of this illusory nature of the self. As the monk Nāgasena (second century BC) put it in his famous apologue: “Just as, when certain pieces of wood are assembled, we talk of a chariot; in the same way, when the five physical and mental components are present, we talk of the ‘Self’.” These five groups or “aggregates” (*skandha*), are impermanent and therefore contribute to the impermanence of the self. They are: perceptible appearances, sensations – which are indissociable from the sense organs, mental ideas, psychological subconscious constructions, and discriminatory knowledge.

The French philosopher Blaise Pascal sounded like a Buddhist when he said that the self is detestable or when he demonstrated the impossibility of locating this self in any particular part of the body. Today, in the light of recent scientific discoveries in neurology, we know that the self is merely the result of a group of



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mental or neurological structures and that a brain tumor or cell degeneration is enough to have a profound effect on this self. Similarly, psychoanalytical research into the subconscious mind has dealt a swift blow to the Cartesian notion of an independent and rational self. In this sense at least, Buddhist psychology appears to be compatible with the modern way of thinking. Nevertheless, the denial of the self does not have the same meaning in an individualist society like those of the West as in a traditional society like India's at the time of the Buddha, where the individual, according to our understanding of the word, was the exception and not the norm.

Taken back to its original Indian context, the Buddhist notion of *an-ātman* is the opposite of the Hindu belief in the existence of the *ātman* or self in each being and is perhaps, first and foremost, a claim to doctrinal originality, a kind of attempt to outdo the dominant religion. Actually, the Hindu notion of the *ātman*, a spark of the absolute or brahman within each being, is in fact impersonal. This is therefore relatively different from the personal *ātman* denied by Buddhism. Living beings can perish but this piece of divinity within them does not die. Instead it transmigrates from life to life before returning to its source. To deny the *ātman* is thus to deny the very foundations of the Hindu religion.

How can we continue to say that Buddhism is a religion of individual salvation if the individual (or the self) does not exist? And if those bodhisattva-practitioners, while rejecting the dualist distinction between self and other, are committed to saving all beings before saving themselves?

The Buddhist position on this issue is therefore distinctly more complex than the dogma of the absence of self would seem to imply. Furthermore, the concept of self has to retain a slight element of reality if the notion of karmic retribution is to be retained, upon which the Buddhist moral doctrine is based. If, for example, there is no one there to pay for a broken pot, how do we dissuade someone from breaking it in the first place? The notions of the "self" (*ātman*) and person (*purusha*) therefore remain in use when



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it comes to the conventional truth even if they are denied, in principle, in the name of ultimate truth. No matter how often we hear that the self is empty, it remains no less real when it comes to beliefs and everyday practices.

By emphasizing questions of ethical responsibility, early Buddhism tended to favor the individuality of its followers. The very notion of responsibility implies that an individual is responsible for his actions. The self is, amongst other things, a juridical fiction, but is nevertheless a necessary fiction for life in society. Buddhist discipline as a whole, based on the notions of confession and repentance, can be seen as a method of attributing blame, i.e. of individualizing. This method appears, in practice, to deny the theory of *an-ātman* which, literally speaking, boils down to a denial of all individual responsibility or even a denial of all spiritual progress or deliverance. We therefore arrive at the paradox, expressed by the Mahāyāna, that there is a path but nobody who follows it.

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The fact that the five physical and mental components of personality do not include a substantial or permanent self does not prevent us from seeking one outside of these components, beyond our ordinary consciousness. This is why Buddhist introspection sometimes defines itself as a search for the true self which is no longer the narrow ego but rather a superior reality, for example the buddha nature. The interest shown by various schools of the Mahāyāna in notions such as “pure mind” and “storehouse consciousness” is sometimes, and quite justifiably no doubt, denounced as a return to the belief in a notion of the same type as the Brahmanic *ātman*. But we must keep in mind that the subject in question is no longer the shallow ego, but rather the real self, the dreamer finally awoken from his long dream.

The emphasis the majority of scholars have placed on the orthodox dogma of the *an-ātman* again reflects an elitist or even ideological vision of Buddhism: in fact, it is clear that the majority of followers of mainstream Buddhism believe in the existence of a self and that their observance of the religion is based on this



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very belief. The so-called “orthodox” or rather monastic conception of the inexistence of the self fails to take account of the complexity of the Buddhist tradition and the diversity of its responses to the serious question of subjectivity.

### — “Buddhism teaches reincarnation” —

*Everything seems to indicate that your little Jesse is the reincarnation of the sacred lama Dorje ...*

Gordon MacGill, *Little Buddha*, 1994

The question of the reincarnation of Tibetan lamas has long fascinated Westerners. It always forms a focal point in any discussion on the rational or irrational nature of Buddhism. This also explains the appeal of films like *Little Buddha*.

Bertolucci’s film interweaves two stories: the story of the Buddha and that of a child living in Seattle with his parents at the end of the twentieth century whom two Tibetan monks in exile identify as the reincarnation of one of their eminent lamas. The viewer has the definite impression that the same protagonist is being reincarnated from one life to another, from ancient India through to modern-day America, just as if the Tibetan dogma of reincarnation were directly descended from the teachings of the Buddha.

It is, however, necessary to distinguish this Tibetan type of reincarnation from the Buddhist dogma of transmigration which is merely a consequence of the doctrine of karma. Transmigration is, in fact, the passing of any being from one life to another, at a level of existence determined by his or her karma, whereas Tibetan reincarnation implies the rebirth of a charismatic individual: certain beings can choose the form in which they wish to reappear to pursue their mission.

It takes an excessive shift in meaning to present this relatively late and purely Tibetan institution as stemming from orthodox





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Buddhism. In fact, the notion only developed at the end of the twelfth century in the Karmapa school when one of the great lamas of the school, Düsüm Khyempa, had the idea of foretelling his own rebirth. This notion had the advantage of keeping the prestige of a charismatic master alive within the school after death. The idea spread like wildfire to the other schools, notably the Gelugpa, which used it to establish the lineage of the Dalai Lamas.

The phenomenon of reincarnation should therefore be viewed within its cultural context – that of the Tibetan culture. Until recently, it was in fact limited to Tibet and the surrounding kingdoms (Bhutan, Sikkim, Ladakh, Mongolia) and barely played any part in Indian Buddhism itself, nor in other Indianized or Sinicized forms of Buddhism which developed in Asia.

The geographical area which upholds this belief in reincarnation has extended gradually from Tibet towards Mongolia. Thus, when the third Dalai Lama died – the first to have been given the title of Mongol leader Altan Khan – his reincarnation, the fourth Dalai Lama, was discovered in Mongolia in the body of a child who, by some happy coincidence, turned out to be the great grandson of Altan Khan. More recently, following the exile of many Tibetans, it has started to spread to Europe and North America – as shown precisely by *Little Buddha*. As noted by the Tibetan lama Daggyab Rimpoche: “The number of lamas in exile has increased like an inflation!” However, no reincarnated lama as yet been found among Afro-Americans or Latinos, let alone among the communist Chinese. Without dwelling too much on the ethnic criteria for Awakening, the distinct political nature of certain reincarnations has undoubtedly called the validity of the institution into question. The media have reported on the rivalry between the Chinese and Tibetans concerning the reincarnation of the Panchen Lama (the other great spiritual authority of Tibetan Buddhism, along with the Dalai Lama) and that of the sixteenth Karmapa.

The matter becomes all the more complicated when it emerges that it is not just the lama as a whole who can be reincarnated into another person; the lama’s body, his verbal principle, and his

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mind can also be reincarnated separately. This may or may not occur within the same lineage and may take place simultaneously or at different points in time.

The system of reincarnation has existed in Tibet for centuries and its benefits have never been questioned either by the Tibetans themselves or by Westerners. The Chinese too have not questioned these benefits and have managed to turn the charisma of certain lamas to their own advantage. The question remains to be asked what other Buddhists think of this system, since they evidently do not hold it in sufficiently high regard to make it an article of faith, despite its apparent advantages.

There is nothing new in political appropriation of this kind; indeed, it was the notion of reincarnation which enabled the Gelugpa schools to seize the main monasteries of the other schools and allowed their leader, the fifth Dalai Lama, to become a sort of divine king of Tibet with the benediction of the Mongols. However, there are drawbacks to this system: ever since it came into existence, the succession of Dalai Lamas has been little more than a long series of schemes in the monasteries or at the palace. During the period from the discovery of a new reincarnation to the maturity of the new Dalai Lama, the government was controlled by a regent who often sought to remain in power. Thus, during the nineteenth century, four Dalai Lamas died before ascending the throne, some in mysterious circumstances. Fortunately, this state of affairs ended with the thirteenth Dalai Lama.

The current Dalai Lama is more than just the reincarnation of his predecessor; he is also, in principle, one of the many manifestations of Avalokiteshvara, one of the great bodhisattvas of Mahāyāna and the mythical parent of the Tibetan race. When asked why Avalokiteshvara had chosen to appear in masculine form in Tibet, thereby forgoing a chance to promote the feminine cause, the Dalai Lama replied that this was to avoid clashing with Tibetan prejudices relating to male supremacy. This response is somewhat surprising, given that some of the other great divinities of Tibetan Buddhism are feminine (such as Tara) and that in

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China and Japan – two countries not exactly renowned for their feminism – this same bodhisattva (known as Guanyin in Chinese and Kannon in Japanese) appears in feminine form.

Perhaps this system has now served its time. In an age when Chinese communists are actively seeking to find reincarnated lamas among their supporters, for the Tibetans the disadvantages are beginning to outweigh the advantages. The present Dalai Lama's declaration that he would not be reincarnated is perhaps best interpreted within this context.

The system of reincarnation has also played an important part in the history of Bhutan, a royal kingdom which borders Tibet. Bhutan became an independent political unit in the seventeenth century thanks to Ngawang Namgyel, a Tibetan monk who took refuge here when the prince of Tsang refused to recognize him as the legitimate reincarnation of a master of the Drukpa sect. As head of the Bhutanese Drukpa, he imposed himself as the first sovereign (*shabdrung*) of Bhutan, having resisted attacks by Tibet. Legend has it that, when he died in 1705, three rays of light left his body corresponding to three lines of reincarnation: that of his body, his verbal principle, and his mind. These multiple lines of reincarnation led to ongoing quarrels about succession. The body line quickly died out. That of the verbal principle died out in 1918. The mind line, the most noble of all, successfully asserted itself in 1734, allowing a certain degree of political stability. It died out with the death of the sixth and last *shabdrung* in 1931.

