

TITUS BURCKHARDT

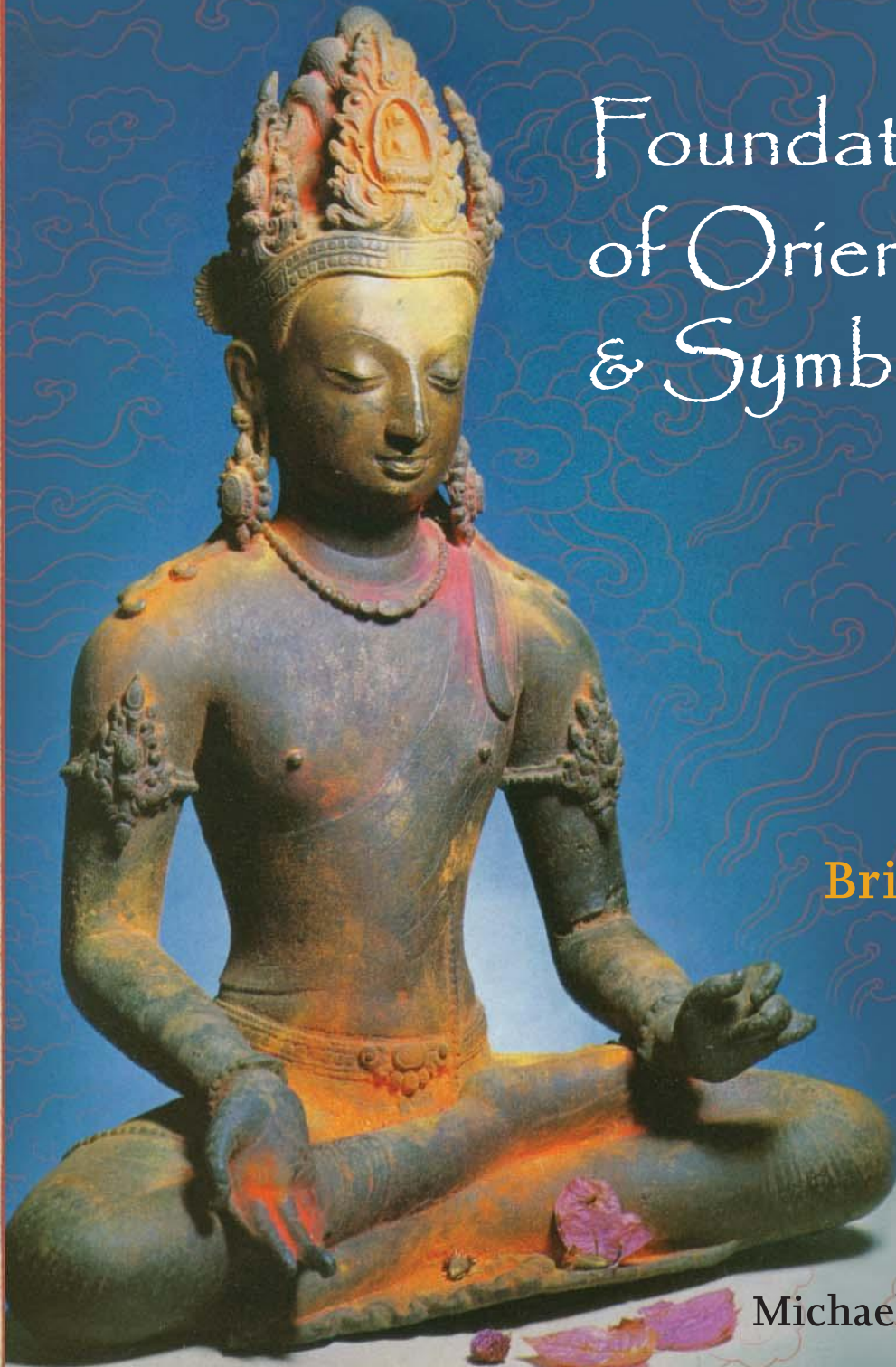
Foundations
of Oriental Art
& Symbolism

Foreword by

Brian Keeble

Edited by

Michael Oren Fitzgerald



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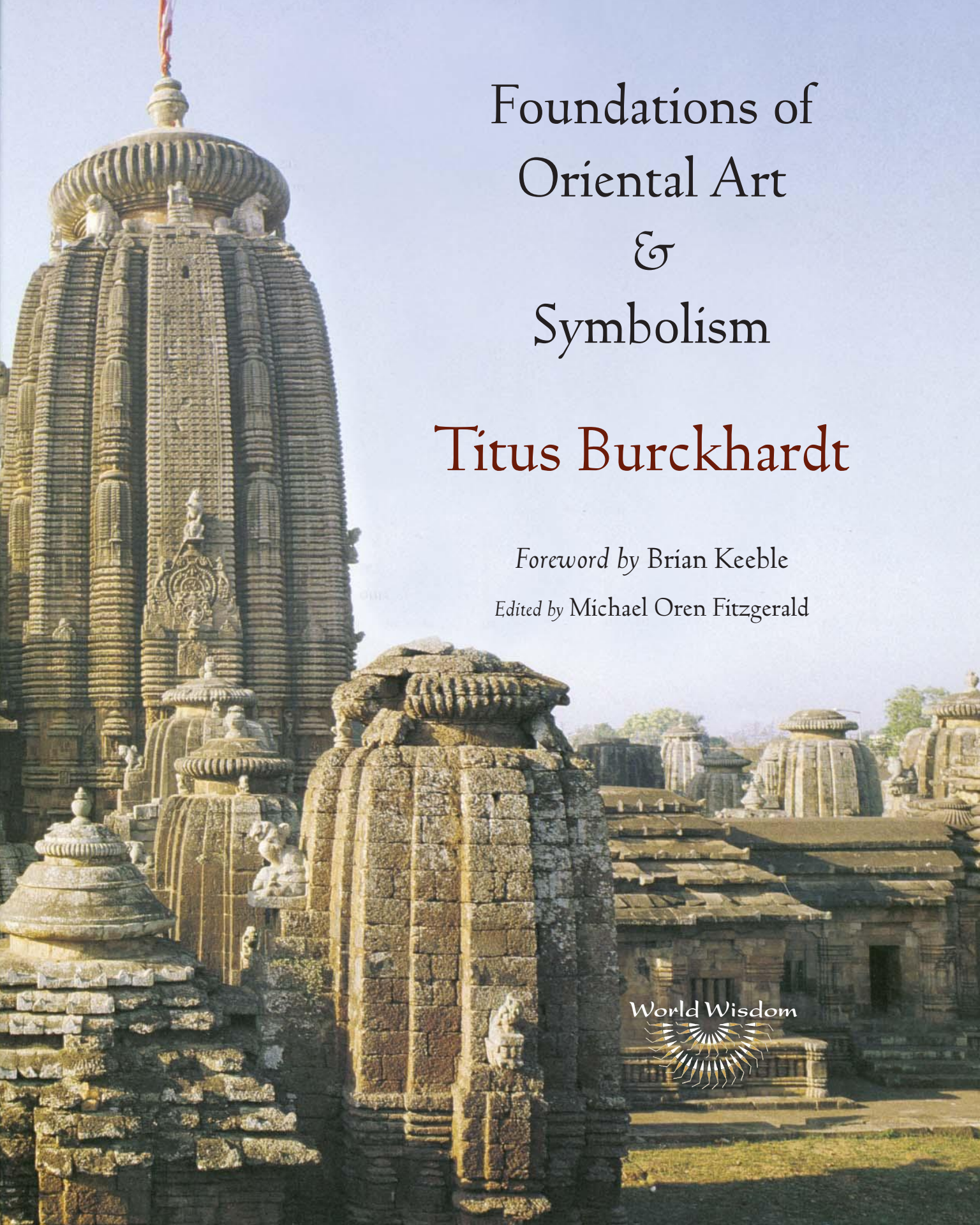
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&
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CONTENTS

Editor's Preface	<i>vii</i>
Foreword by Brian Keeble	<i>ix</i>

PART I: ORIENTAL ART

1. Introduction to Hindu, Buddhist, and Taoist Art	3
2. The Genesis of the Hindu Temple	13
3. The Image of the Buddha	49
4. Landscape in Far Eastern Art	75

PART II: SYMBOLISM

5. Selected Thoughts on Symbolism	91
6. Traditional Symbolism and Modern Empiricism	94
7. The Symbolism of the Mirror	96
8. The Sacred Mask	101
9. The Symbolism of Chess	109
10. The Primordial Symbol of the Serpent and Dragon	116
11. The Symbolism of Water	123
List of Illustrations	132
Index	135
Biographical Notes	137



In order to understand a culture, it is necessary to love it, and one can only do this on the basis of the universal and timeless values that it carries within it. These values are essentially the same in all true cultures, that is to say, in cultures which meet not only the physical, but also the spiritual needs of man, without which his life has no meaning...

Nothing brings us into such immediate contact with another culture as a work of art which, within that culture, represents, as it were a “center”. This may be a sacred image, a temple, a cathedral, a mosque, or even a carpet with a primordial design. Such works invariably express an essential quality or factor, which neither a historical account, nor an analysis of social and economic conditions, can capture. A similarly rich insight into another culture can be found in its literature, especially in those works that deal with eternal verities. But such works are by definition profound and symbolical, and are mostly unintelligible to the modern reader without the aid of a detailed commentary. A work of art, on the other hand, can, without any mental effort on our part, convey to us immediately and “existentially”, a particular intellectual truth or spiritual attitude, and thereby grant us all manner of insights into the nature of the culture concerned. Thus one can more readily understand the intellectual and ethical forms of a Buddhist culture, if one is familiar with the Buddha-image that is typical of it; and one can much more easily form a picture of the religious and social life of the Middle Ages, if one has first assimilated the architecture of a Romanesque abbey or a Gothic cathedral—always assuming, of course, that one is sufficiently sensitive to the forms of an authentic traditional art.

TITUS BURCKHARDT, *Moorish Culture in Spain*



EDITOR'S PREFACE

The epigraph to this book by Titus Burckhardt (1908-1984), the late Swiss art historian and philosopher of religion, expresses for us the key importance of understanding the authentic traditional art forms of each of the world's major cultures. Burckhardt was one of the twentieth century's foremost experts on the sacred forms of the traditional civilizations that surround each of the world's great religions. Three of his illustrated works focus on Christian art and culture¹ while another three illustrated works center on Islamic art and culture.² These books demonstrate Burckhardt's unique ability to communicate the spiritual essence of the traditional Christian and Islamic worlds as if we had actually lived during those times.³

But Burckhardt was also an acknowledged expert on the sacred art of the Orient, particularly in its Hindu, Buddhist, and Taoist forms. As Martin Lings has said of *Sacred Art in East and West*, Burckhardt's peerless work on the subject: "... again and again one has the impression that the author has 'said the last word' on this or that particular aspect. ... It is seldom that one has the privilege of reading a work by an author who has such mastery of his subject."⁴

Foundations of Oriental Art & Symbolism is an edited collection of Burckhardt's most important articles on Oriental art and symbolism, with page after page of illustrations from the traditional Oriental civilizations. These illustrations illuminate Burckhardt's insightful descriptions and explanations, providing the reader with a small taste of the beauty that permeated the traditional Hindu, Buddhist, and Taoist worlds—a beauty that has in large part been overwhelmed and swallowed by our modern era. Part I, "Oriental Art", begins with Burckhardt's introduction to traditional Oriental art. In the following three chapters he then explores the artistic foundations of each of the three great Oriental religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism, focusing particularly on the Hindu temple, the Buddha image, and Chinese landscape painting.

¹ Burckhardt's *Siena: City of the Virgin* depicts, in his own words, "the destiny of a town in which the spiritual development of the Christian Western world from the Middle Ages up to the present day is exemplified". Burckhardt's masterwork on Christian sacred architecture is also best described in his own words: "The purpose of my book *Chartres and the Birth of the Cathedral* was to evoke, as authentically as possible, the spiritual climate in which the Gothic cathedral was born. My aim is to show how the Gothic cathedral was the final fruit to ripen on the tree of an ancient tradition." The award-winning anthology, *Foundations of Christian Art*, is a complement to these books. Further bibliographical details of Burckhardt's writings can be found at the end of this volume.

² *Moorish Culture in Spain* presents central elements of the Islamic culture that ruled Spain for eight-and-a-half centuries. *Fez: City of Islam* presents the history of a people and their religion based upon Burckhardt's unrivaled knowledge of the city that he tirelessly helped to preserve under the auspices of UNESCO. Burckhardt's *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning* is considered by many to be the definitive study of the sacred art of Islam.

³ A selection of some of his other books on traditional art, science, culture, and spirituality is presented at the end of this volume.

⁴ Martin Lings, "In Memoriam: Titus Burckhardt", *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 16, No. 1, pp. 99-102.

Part II, “Symbolism”, begins with two chapters that answer the fundamental questions, “What is symbolism?” and “How are traditional symbols to be interpreted?” Burckhardt’s explanations provide insights that enable us to compare the underlying spiritual values that are the foundation for traditional cultures, with the quantitative analyses that are the starting point for today’s technological societies. In the following five chapters Burckhardt then explores examples of selected recurring symbols in the Oriental worlds, such as the mirror, the sacred mask, and the serpent and dragon. Also of particular interest is the symbol of the *mandala*, which Burckhardt analyzes extensively in his chapters on the Hindu temple and the game of chess.

An understanding of symbolism is integral to an appreciation of sacred and traditional art, for symbols manifest both Truth (through their doctrinal meaning) and Beauty (through their sacred presence). As Burckhardt says:

Every sacred art is . . . founded on a science of forms, or in other words, on the symbolism inherent in forms. It must be borne in mind that a symbol is not merely a conventional sign. It manifests its archetype by virtue of a definite ontological law; as Coomaraswamy has observed, a symbol *is* in a certain sense that to which it gives expression. For this very reason traditional symbolism is never without beauty: according to the spiritual view of the world, the beauty of an object is nothing but the transparency of its existential envelopes; an art worthy of the name is beautiful because it is true.⁵

The selections presented here are taken from four of Burckhardt’s books: *Sacred Art in East and West*, *Moorish Culture in Spain*, *Alchemy: Science of the Cosmos*, *Science of the Soul*, and *Mirror of the Intellect: Essays on Traditional Science and Sacred Art*, the latter being a collection of his essays published in various journals.⁶ Several of the articles on symbolism were edited to remove paragraphs that are devoted exclusively to Western traditions, as the focus of this work is on the Orient. However, short references to Western traditions remain throughout the text, providing readers with a glimpse of Burckhardt’s vast knowledge of many of the world’s spiritual traditions, while at the same time providing us with a deeper understanding of these subjects.

William Stoddart provided a fitting summary of his close friend in his editor’s Preface to *The Essential Titus Burckhardt*: “One of the things that strikes one most forcibly about Titus Burckhardt is the vastness of his range of interests. The world was indeed his parish.”

MICHAEL FITZGERALD
July 2008, Bloomington, Indiana

⁵ See chapter 1, “Introduction to Hindu, Buddhist, and Taoist Art”, p. 4.

⁶ The sources are noted in the respective chapters. The chapters “The Symbolism of Chess” and “The Sacred Mask” both appeared in the journal *Studies in Comparative Religion* and are available online at <http://www.studiesincomparativereligion.com>.

FOREWORD

Although, as its title announces, this is a book about Oriental art, it would be as well for the reader to recognize that it is, in effect, an introduction to art as such. That is to say, having read it, the reader has been told what art is (according to the time-honoured conception of art as the perfection of work); why art matters (in respect of the traditional conception of man's deiform nature); and in what the significance of art resides (in the light of the universal, metaphysical vision of the world as the manifestation of the eternal Reality of the Divine Principle). This may sound ponderous, but in fact the opposite is the case: in a style at once clear and accessible and which carries a profound understanding lightly, Titus Burckhardt touches effortlessly upon the essential, spiritual meaning of any given art form or work of art. It has been said of Frithjof Schuon that he had only to see a single work of traditional art in order to penetrate to the heart of the total spiritual ambience of a given sacred tradition. Burckhardt too possessed more than a little of this gift.

An important reason why Burckhardt wrote so tellingly of the arts (the present compilation is a companion to the earlier *The Foundations of Christian Art*) is that his approach to the subject is not limited to that of the academic historian. Burckhardt was certainly scholarly, but he does not speak of works of art as if they are an illustration of a cultural evolution whose significance relates to historical factors alone. This is in fact a betrayal of *how* we experience works of art in so far as we witness the qualities that are integral to their making. In the presence of an object of beauty, the soul is touched with immediate effect and to its spiritual benefit; but present before a work of merely human "art" it witnesses the manifestation of ego. The latter occludes and distracts with what is, spiritually speaking, superfluous; the former illuminates and enlivens our very being.

Burckhardt allows the reader to experience a work of art as a beautifully crafted object that plunges us immediately into the presence of Beauty Itself, not as an exclusively aesthetic emotion but as a profoundly integrative experience that has resonances for the total relationship of man to both his worldly and cosmic environment.

What helps to make Burckhardt's presentation so effective in this respect is that he takes account of the psychological "adjustments" needed for the modern mind to approach Oriental art of a traditional nature. The bias of the modern Western (but increasingly global) mentality associates art with the emotional reactions of personal sensibility that in turn are allowed to multiply in the service of a spurious innovative spirit in which the intelligence is more or less suspended in a debilitating limbo. Nothing could be further from what motivates the sensibility of the traditional craftsmen who have made the objects illustrated in these pages. Burckhardt, while taking account of this modernist bias, none the less "dissolves" its presuppositions and prejudices by virtue of his gift for describing the particular conjunction of the spiritual and the aesthetic in a given work of art.

In all likelihood Burckhardt wrote his books on art knowing that—with the exception of *Art of Islam*—he would not have the luxury of frequent illustration. In the present case he has been given the benefit of superb and plentiful pictures which present the reader with an opportunity to underscore an appreciation of the text with a direct reference to visual examples

of the objects under discussion. No doubt this facility would have met with the author's grateful approval.

Among the essential elements of Frithjof Schuon's exposition of the gnosis of realization is the necessity for a science of symbols based on the transparency of phenomena. Burckhardt's last chapter here on the symbolism of water perfectly exemplifies the content and applicability of this aspect of Schuon's teaching to every dimension of human life. And its closing lines are prescient of things to come—hardly yet taken fully into account—whose advent is nearer to us than it was to the author when he made these observations.

BRIAN KEEBLE



PART I: ORIENTAL ART



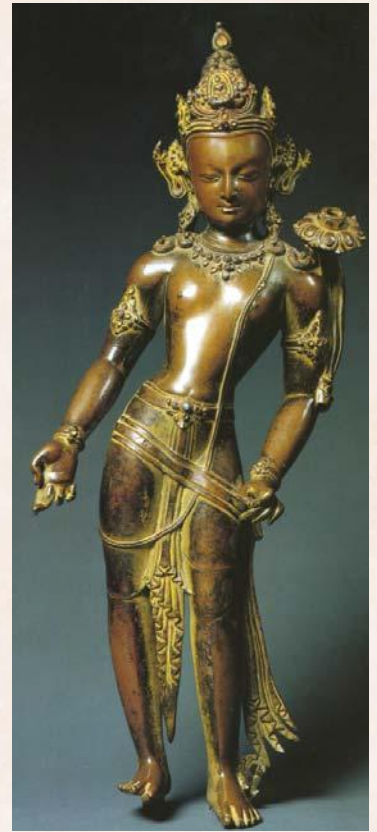
Vishnu, India, Chola period, c. 925

Introduction to Hindu, Buddhist, and Taoist Art¹

When historians of art apply the term “sacred art” to any and every work that has a religious subject, they are forgetting that art is essentially form. An art cannot properly be called “sacred” solely on the grounds that its subjects originate in a spiritual truth; its formal language also must bear witness to a similar origin. Such is by no means the case with a religious art like that of the Renaissance or of the Baroque period, which is in no way distinct, so far as style is concerned, from the fundamentally profane art of that era; neither the subjects which it borrows, in a wholly exterior and as it were literary manner, from religion, nor the devotional feelings with which it is permeated in appropriate cases, nor even the nobility of soul which sometimes finds expression in it, suffice to confer on it a sacred character. No art merits that epithet unless its forms themselves reflect the spiritual vision characteristic of a particular religion.

Every form is the vehicle of a given quality of being. The religious subject of a work of art may be as it were superimposed, it may have no relation to the formal “language” of the work, as is demonstrated by Christian art since the Renaissance; there are therefore essentially profane works of art with a sacred theme, but on the other hand there exists no sacred work of art which is profane in form, for there is a rigorous analogy between form and spirit. A spiritual vision necessarily finds its expression in a particular formal language; if that language is lacking, with the result that a so-called sacred art borrows its forms from some kind of profane art, then it can only be because a spiritual vision of things is also lacking.

It is useless to try to excuse the Protean style of a religious art, or its indefinite and ill-defined character, on grounds of the universality of dogma or the freedom of the spirit. Granted that spirituality in itself is independent of forms, this in no way implies that it can be expressed and transmitted by any and every sort of form. Through its qualitative essence, form has a place in the sensible order analogous to that of truth in the intellectual order; this is the significance of the Greek notion of *eidōs*. Just as a mental form such as a dogma or a doctrine can be the adequate, albeit limited, reflection of a Divine Truth, so can a sensible form retrace a truth or a reality which transcends both the plane of sensible forms and the plane of thought.



Avalokiteshvara, *bodhisattva* of Mercy,
Nepal, c. 12th century

¹ Editor’s Note: From the Introduction to *Sacred Art in East and West* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom Books/Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2002).



Bronze wine jar with dragon design, China, Shang Dynasty, c. 1523-1028 B.C.

Every sacred art is therefore founded on a science of forms, or in other words, on the symbolism inherent in forms. It must be borne in mind that a symbol is not merely a conventional sign. It manifests its archetype by virtue of a definite ontological law; as Coomaraswamy has observed, a symbol *is* in a certain sense that to which it gives expression. For this very reason traditional symbolism is never without beauty: according to the spiritual view of the world, the beauty of an object is nothing but the transparency of its existential envelopes; an art worthy of the name is beautiful because it is true.

It is neither possible nor even useful that every artist or craftsman engaged in sacred art should be conscious of the Divine Law inherent in forms; he will know only certain aspects of it, or certain applications that arise within the limits of the rules of his craft; these rules will enable him to paint an icon, to fashion a sacred vessel, or to practice calligraphy in a liturgically valid manner, without its being necessary for him to know the ultimate significance of the symbols he is working with. It is tradition that transmits the sacred models and the working rules, and thereby guarantees the spiritual validity of the forms. Tradition has within itself a secret force which is communicated to an entire civilization and determines even arts and crafts the immediate objects of which include nothing particularly sacred. This force creates



Illustrated frontispiece to the *Mabaprajnaparamita Sutra*, Japan, Heian period, late 12th century

the style of a traditional civilization; a style that could never be imitated from outside is perpetuated without difficulty, in a quasi-organic manner, by the power of the spirit that animates it and by nothing else.

One of the most tenacious of typically modern prejudices is the one that sets itself up against the impersonal and objective rules of an art, for fear that they should stifle creative genius. In reality no work exists that is traditional, and therefore “bound” by changeless principles, which does not give sensible expression to a certain creative joy of the soul; whereas modern individualism has produced, apart from a few works of genius which are nevertheless spiritually barren, all the ugliness—the endless and despairing ugliness—of the forms which permeate the “ordinary life” of our times.

One of the fundamental conditions of happiness is to know that everything that one does has a meaning in eternity; but who in these days can still conceive of a civilization within which all vital manifestations would be developed “in the likeness of Heaven”?² In a theocentric society the humblest activity participates in this heavenly benediction. The words of a street singer heard by the author in Morocco are worth quoting here. The singer was asked why the little Arab guitar which he used to accompany his chanting of legends had only two strings. He gave this answer: “To add a third string to this instrument would be to take the first step towards heresy. When God created the soul of Adam it did not want to enter into his body, and circled like a bird round about its cage. Then God commanded the angels to play on the two strings that are called the male and the female, and the soul, thinking that the melody resided in the instrument—which is the body—entered it and remained within it. For this reason two strings, which are always called the male and the female, are enough to deliver the soul from the body.”

This legend holds more meaning than appears at first sight, for it summarizes the whole traditional doctrine of sacred art. The ultimate objective of sacred art is not the evocation of feelings nor the communication of impressions; it is a symbol, and as such it finds simple and primordial means sufficient; it could not in any case be anything more than allusive, its real object being ineffable. It is of angelic origin, because its models reflect supra-formal realities. It recapitulates the creation—the “Divine Art”—in parables, thus demonstrating the symbolical nature of the world, and delivering the human spirit from its attachment to crude and ephemeral “facts”.

The angelic origin of art is explicitly formulated by the Hindu tradition. According to the *Aitareya Brāhmana* every work of art in the world is achieved by imitation of the art of the *devas*, “whether it be an elephant in terra-cotta, a bronze object, an article of clothing, a gold ornament, or a mule-cart”. The *devas* correspond to the angels. Christian legends attributing an angelic origin to certain miraculous images embody the same idea.

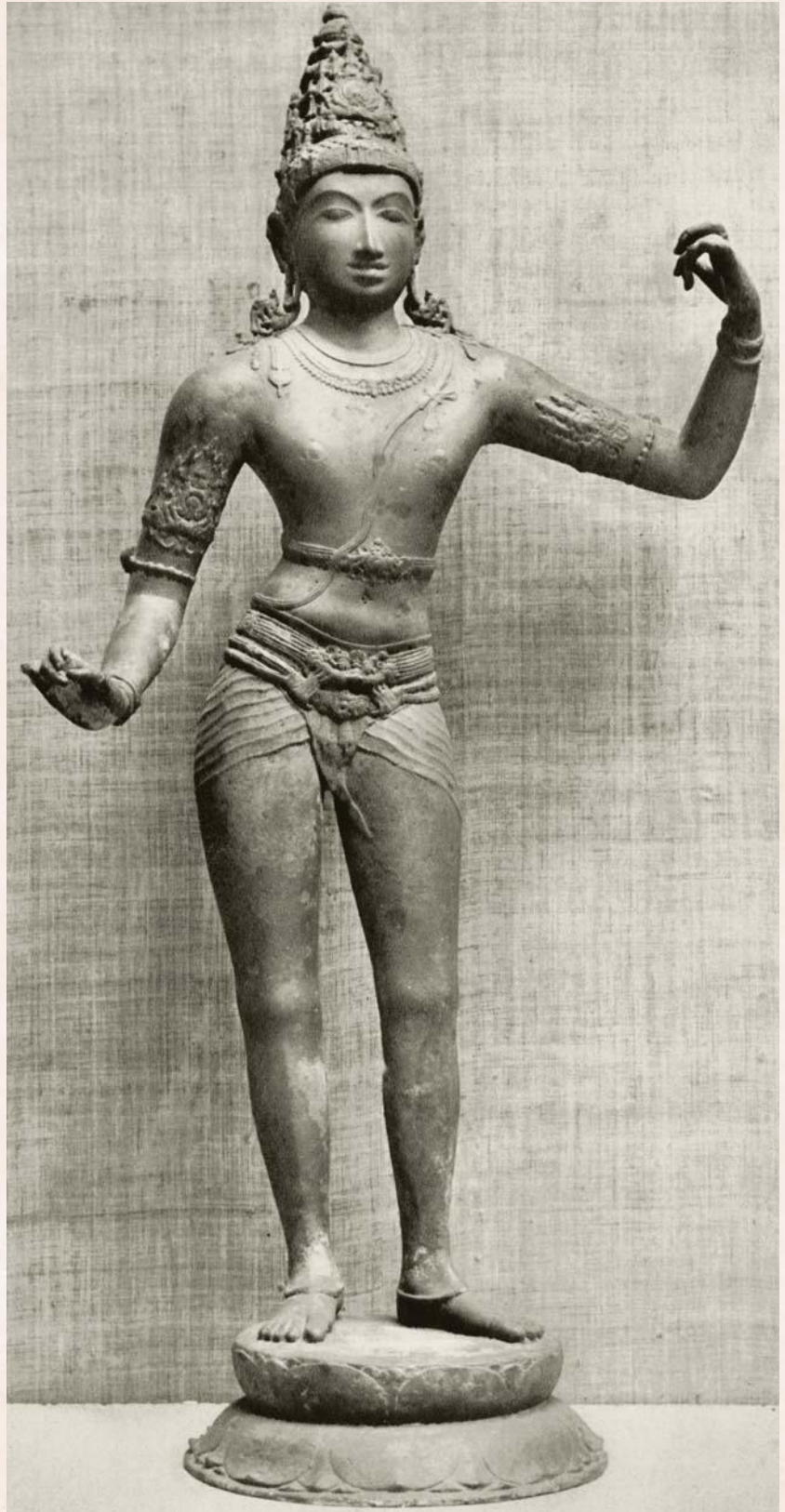


Uma worshipping Shiva, Indian miniature, 18th century

² “Do you not know, O Asclepius, that Egypt is the image of Heaven and that it is the projection here below of the whole ordering of Heavenly things?” (*Hermes Trismegistus*, from the French translation of L. Ménard).



Above: The Goddess Sita, India, Chola period, c. 985



Right: The God Rama, India, Chola period, c. 975

The *devas* are nothing more nor less than particular functions of the universal Spirit, permanent expressions of the Will of God. The doctrine common to traditional civilizations prescribes that sacred art must imitate the Divine Art, but it must be clearly understood that this in no way implies that the complete Divine creation, the world such as we see it, should be copied, for such would be pure pretension; a literal “naturalism” is foreign to sacred art. What must be copied is the way in which the Divine Spirit works. Its laws must be transposed into the restricted domain in which man works as man, that is to say, into artisanship.



In no traditional doctrine does the idea of the Divine Art play so fundamental a part as in the Hindu doctrine. For *Māyā* is not only the mysterious Divine Power which causes the world to appear to exist outside the Divine Reality, so that it is from her, from *Māyā*, that all duality and all illusion spring: she is also in her positive aspect the Divine Art which produces all form. In principle she is not other than the possibility contained in the Infinite of limiting Itself, as the object of Its own “vision”, without Its infinity being thereby limited. Thus God manifests Himself in the world, yet equally He does not so manifest Himself; He expresses Himself and at the same time keeps silence.

Just as the Absolute objectivizes, by virtue of its *Māyā* certain aspects of Itself, or certain possibilities contained in Itself, and determines them by a distinctive vision, so does the artist realize in his work certain aspects of himself; he projects them as it were outside his undifferentiated being. And to the extent that his objectivation reflects the secret depths of his being, it will take on a purely symbolical character, and at the same time the artist will become more and more conscious of the abyss dividing the form, reflector of his essence, from what that essence really is in its timeless plenitude. The creative artist knows this: this form is myself, nevertheless I am infinitely more than it, for the Essence remains the pure Knower, the witness which no form can compass; but he also knows that it is God who expresses Himself through his work, so that the work in its turn surpasses the feeble and fallible ego of the man.

Herein lies the analogy between Divine Art and human art: in the realization of oneself by objectivation. If this objectivation is to have spiritual significance and not to be merely a vague introversion, its means of expression must spring from an essential vision. In other words, it must not be the “I”, that root of illusion and of ignorance of oneself, which arbitrarily chooses those means; they must be borrowed from tradition, from the formal and “objective” revelation of the supreme Being, Who is the “Self” of all beings.



A celestial female, Madhya Pradesh, India, 11th-12th century



Amida Buddha, Kotoku-in, Kamakura, Kanagawa Prefecture, Japan, mid 13th century



According to the Taoist view of things the Divine Art is essentially the art of transformation: the whole of nature is ceaselessly being transformed, always in accordance with the laws of the cycle; its contrasts revolve round a single center which always eludes apprehension. Nevertheless anyone who understands this circular movement is thereby enabled to recognize the center which is its essence. The purpose of art is to conform to this cosmic rhythm. The most simple formula states that mastery in art consists in the capacity to trace a perfect circle in a single movement, and thus to identify oneself implicitly with its center, while that center remains unspecified as such.



In so far as it is possible to transpose the notion of “Divine Art” into Buddhism, which avoids all personification of the Absolute, it can be applied to the beauty of the Buddha, miraculous and mentally unfathomable as it is. Whereas no doctrine concerned with God can escape, as far as its formulation is concerned, from the illusory character of mental processes, which attribute their own limits to the limitless and their own conjectural forms to the formless, the beauty of the Buddha radiates a state of being beyond the power of thought to define. This beauty is reflected in the beauty of the lotus: it is perpetuated ritually in the painted or modeled image of the Buddha.



In one way or another all these fundamental aspects of sacred art can be found, in varying proportions, in each of the great traditions just mentioned, for there is not one of them that does not possess in its essentials all the fullness of Divine Truth and Grace, so that in principle it would be capable of manifesting every possible form of spirituality. Nevertheless, since each religion is necessarily dominated by a particular point of view which determines its spiritual “economy”, its artistic manifestations, being naturally collective and not isolated, will reflect this point of view and this economy each in its own style. It is moreover in the nature of form to be unable to express anything without excluding something, because form delimits what it expresses, excluding thereby some aspects of its own universal archetype. This law is naturally applicable at every level of formal manifestation, and not to art alone; the various Divine Revelations on which the different religions are founded are also mutually exclusive when attention is directed to their formal contours only, rather than to their Divine Essence which is one. Here again the analogy between “Divine Art” and human art becomes apparent.



Detail from a Japanese screen



Tang Yin, *Whispering Pines on a Mountain Path*, China, Ming Dynasty

Attention will be confined in the present work to the art of the great traditions already named, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism, since the artistic rules appropriate to each are not only deducible from existing works, but are also confirmed by canonical writings and by the example of living masters. Within this framework it will only be possible to concentrate on a few aspects of each art, chosen as specially typical, the subject as a whole being inexhaustible. Hindu art will be considered first, as its methods have shown the greatest continuity through the ages; by taking it as an example one can show the connection between the arts of medieval civilizations and those of much more ancient civilizations. As for the art of the Far East, the Buddhist and the Taoist, it must suffice to define some of their aspects, chosen as characteristic yet clearly distinguished from those of the arts dealt with earlier; the comparisons drawn will then serve to indicate the great variety of traditional expression.

The reader will have understood that no sacred art exists which does not depend on some aspect or other of metaphysic. The science of metaphysic is itself limitless, like its object which is infinite, so that it will not be possible to specify all the relationships which link together the different metaphysical doctrines. It will therefore be best to refer the reader to other books which set out as it were the premises on which this book is based; the books in question make accessible the essence of the traditional doctrines of the East and of the medieval West in a language that can be understood by a modern European. In this connection the first to be named must be the works of René Guénon,³ of Frithjof Schuon,⁴ and of Ananda Coomaraswamy.⁵ In addition, and as being concerned with the sacred art of particular traditions, the book by Stella Kramrisch on the Hindu temple,⁶ the studies of Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki on Zen Buddhism, and the book by Eugen Herrigel (Bungaku Hakushi) on the knightly art of archery in Zen.⁷ Other books will be mentioned in their place, and traditional sources will be quoted, as occasion demands.



Lotus in Full Bloom, China, Song Dynasty, 12th-13th century

³ Editor's Note: See *The Essential René Guénon: Metaphysics, Tradition, and the Crisis of Modernity*, edited by John Herlihy (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2009).

⁴ Editor's Note: See Frithjof Schuon, *Art from the Sacred to the Profane: East and West*, edited by Catherine Schuon (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2006) and *The Essential Frithjof Schuon*, edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2005).

⁵ Editor's Note: See *The Essential Ananda K. Coomaraswamy*, edited by Rama P. Coomaraswamy (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2004).

⁶ *The Hindu Temple* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1946).

⁷ *Zen in the Art of Archery*, translated from the German by R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953).



*The Genesis of the Hindu Temple*¹

I

Among settled peoples the sacred art *par excellence* is the building of a sanctuary, in which the Divine Spirit, invisibly present in the universe, will “dwell” in a direct and as it were “personal” sense.² Spiritually speaking, a sanctuary is always situated at the center of the world, and it is this that makes it a *sacratum* in the true sense of the word: in such a place man is protected from the indefinity of space and time, since it is “here” and “now” that God is present to man. This is expressed in the design of the temple; its emphasis on the cardinal directions co-ordinates space in relation to its center. The design is a synthesis of the world: that which is in ceaseless movement within the universe is transposed by sacred architecture into permanent form. In the cosmos time prevails over space: the great rhythm of the visible cosmos, symbolizing the principal aspects of an existence disjoined and dispersed by becoming, are re-assembled and stabilized in the geometry of the building. The temple thus represents, through its regular and unalterable form, the completion of the world, the timeless aspect or final state of the world, wherein all things are at rest in the equilibrium that precedes their reintegration into the undivided unity of Being. The sanctuary prefigures the final transfiguration of the world—a transfiguration symbolized in Christianity by the “Heavenly Jerusalem”—and for this reason alone it is filled with the Divine Peace (*shekhina* in Hebrew, *shānti* in Sanskrit).

Similarly the Divine Peace descends into a soul whose every modality or every content—analogous to those of the world—reposes in an equilibrium both simple and rich, and comparable in its qualitative unity to the regular form of a sanctuary.

The edification of a sanctuary, like that of a soul, has also an aspect of sacrifice. The powers of the soul must be withdrawn from the world if it is to become a receptacle of Grace, and for exactly analogous reasons the materials for the construction of a temple must be withdrawn from all profane use and must be offered to the Divinity. We shall see that this sacrifice is necessary as a compensation for the “divine sacrifice” which is at the origin of the world. In every sacrifice the substance sacrificed undergoes a qualitative transformation, in the sense of its be-

¹ Editor’s Note: From *Sacred Art in East and West*, chapter 1.

² In primitive civilizations every dwelling is regarded as an image of the cosmos, for the house or the tent “contains” and “envelops” man on the model of the great world. This notion has survived in the language of the most diverse peoples, who speak of the “vault” or the “tent” of the sky, and of its “summit” to signify the pole. When a building is a sanctuary the analogy between it and the cosmos becomes reciprocal, because the Divine Spirit “inhabits” the sanctuary just as It “inhabits” the universe. On the other hand the Spirit contains the universe, so that the analogy is also valid in an inverse sense.

ing assimilated to a divine model. This is no less evident in the building of a sanctuary, and in this connection a well-known example may be cited, that of the building of the Temple at Jerusalem by Solomon in accordance with the plan revealed to David.

The completion of the world prefigured in the temple is symbolized in the rectangular form of the temple, a form essentially opposed to the circular form of a world driven onward by the cosmic movement. Whereas the spherical form of the sky is indefinite and is not accessible to any kind of measurement, the rectangular or cubical form of a sacred edifice expresses a positive and immutable law, and that is why all sacred architecture, whatever may be the tradition to which it belongs, can be seen as a development of the fundamental theme of the transformation of the circle into the square. In the genesis of the Hindu Temple the development of this theme is particularly clearly seen, with all the richness of its metaphysical and spiritual content.

Before pursuing this matter further it must be made clear that the relation between these two fundamental symbols, the circle and the square or the sphere and the cube, may carry different meanings according to the plane of reference. If the circle is taken as the symbol of the undivided unity of the Principle, the square will signify its first and



Kailasanatha Temple, Cave 16, Ellora, Maharashtra, built between the 5th and 10th centuries

changeless determination, the universal Law or Norm: and in this case the circle will indicate a reality superior to that suggested by the square. The same is true if the circle is related to the heavens, the movement of which it reproduces, and the square to the earth, the solid and relatively inert state of which it recapitulates; the circle will then be to the square as the active is to the passive, or as life is to the body, for it is the heavens that engender actively, while the earth conceives and gives birth passively. It is however possible to envisage an inversion of this hierarchy: if the square is considered in its metaphysical significance, as the symbol of principial immutability, which in its turn contains and resolves within itself all cosmic antinomies, and if the circle is correspondingly considered in relation to its cosmic model, which is endless movement, then the square will represent a reality superior to that represented by the circle; for the permanent and immutable nature of the Principle transcends the celestial or cosmic activity, which is relatively exterior to the Principle itself.³ This last symbolical relationship between the circle and the square predominates in the sacred architecture of India. This is both because the quality that belongs specially to architecture is stability—it is through its stability that architecture reflects the Divine Perfection most directly—and also because the point of view in question is essentially inherent in the Hindu spirit. The Hindu spirit is in fact always inclined to transpose terrestrial and cosmic realities, divergent though they be, into the non-separative and static plenitude of the Divine Essence. This spiritual transfiguration is accompanied in sacred architecture by an inversely analogous symbolism, wherein the great “measures” of time, the various cycles, are “crystallized” in the fundamental square of the temple.⁴ We shall see later how this square is arrived at by the fixation of the principal movements of the heavens. In any case the symbolical predominance of the square over the circle in sacred architecture does not exclude, either in India or elsewhere, manifestations of an inverse relation between the two symbols, wherever such inversion becomes appropriate in view of the analogy between the various constructional elements and the corresponding parts of the universe.

The “crystallization” of all cosmic realities in a geometrical symbol, which is like an inverted image of the timeless, is prefigured in the Hindu tradition by the construction of the Vedic altar. Its cubical shape, built up from bricks laid in several courses, represents the “body” of *Prajāpati*,⁵ the total cosmic being. The *devas*⁶ immolated this primordial being at the beginning of the world; his disjointed limbs, which constitute the multiple aspects or parts of the cosmos,⁷ have to be symbolically reassembled.

Prajāpati is the Principle in its manifested aspect; this aspect includes the totality of the world, and appears as if fragmented by the diversity and changeability of the world. Seen in this way *Prajāpati* is as it were torn by time; he is identified with the solar cycle, the year,

³ This view of things corresponds to the Vedantin point of view, which attributes dynamism to the passive substance, the *Shakti*, while the active Essence remains motionless.

⁴ Similarly the design of the Christian temple symbolizes the transmutation of the present “age” into a future “age”: the sacred edifice represents the Heavenly Jerusalem, the shape of which is also square.

⁵ The reader to whom the Hindu terms used in this chapter are unfamiliar need not try to memorize those that are enclosed in parentheses. The inclusion of the latter is necessary both for the sake of accuracy, since in most cases no short form of words in English can be exactly equivalent to the Hindu term, and also in order to facilitate reference to other works dealing with the Hindu tradition.

⁶ According to the terminology of the monotheistic religions the *devas* correspond to the angels, in so far as the latter represent divine aspects.

⁷ This recalls the dismemberment of the body of Osiris in the Egyptian myth.



The Ashvamedha Yajna tank, Nagarjunakonda, 2nd century

⁸ The myth of the immolation of *Prajāpati* by the *devas* is analogous to the Sufic doctrine according to which God manifested the multiple universe by virtue of His multiple Names, the diversity of the world being as it were “necessitated” by the Names. The analogy in question becomes still more striking when it is said that God manifests Himself in the world by virtue of His Names. See the author’s book, *Introduction to Sufi Doctrine* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2008) and his translation of the *Wisdom of the Prophets (Fusūs al-Hikām)* of Muhyi-d-dīn ibn ‘Arabī (Sherbourne: Beshara, 1975).

⁹ Although man is superior to the animal by virtue of his celestial “mandate”, the animal shows a relative superiority to man in so far as man has lost his primordial nature, for the animal does not fall away in the same way from its cosmic norm. The sacrifice of an animal in place of a man is ritually justified only by the existence of a kind of qualitative compensation.

¹⁰ Union with the Divine Essence always comprises, as phases or aspects of a single spiritual act, the reintegration of all the positive aspects of the world—or of their interior equivalents—in a symbolical “hearth”, the sacrifice of the soul in its limited aspect and its transformation by the fire of the Spirit.

also with the lunar cycle, the month, but above all with the universal cycle, or with the totality of all cosmic cycles. In his Essence he is not other than *Purusha*, the immutable and indivisible Essence of man and of the universe; according to the *Rig Veda* (X.90) it is *Purusha* whom the *devas* sacrificed at the beginning of the world, in order to constitute the various parts of the universe and the different kinds of living beings. This must not be understood as “pantheism”, for *Purusha* is not divided in himself, nor is he “localized” in ephemeral beings; it is only his manifested and apparent form that is sacrificed, while his eternal nature remains as it ever was, so that he is at the same time the victim, the sacrifice, and the goal of the sacrifice. As for the *devas*, they represent divine aspects, or more exactly modalities or functions of the Divine Act or Intellect (*Buddhi* corresponding to the *Logos*). Multiplicity is not in the nature of God but in the nature of the world; it is none the less prefigured principally by the distinctions that can be made between the various aspects or functions of the Divine, and it is these aspects or functions that “sacrifice” God in manifesting Him in separate mode.⁸

Thenceforward every sacrifice reproduces and in some degree compensates the pre-temporal sacrifice of the *devas*; the unity of the total being is symbolically and spiritually reconstituted by the rite. The officiant identifies himself with the altar which he has built in the likeness of the universe and to the measurements of his own body; he identifies himself also with the sacrificial animal, which replaces him by its possession of certain qualities;⁹ and finally his spirit is identified with the fire which reintegrates the offering in principal illimitation.¹⁰ The man, the altar, the holocaust, and the fire are alike *Prajāpati*, who is himself the Divine Essence.

The analogy between the universe and the sacrificial altar is expressed in the number and the arrangement of the bricks of which it is built. The analogy between the altar and the man is expressed in the proportions of the altar, which are derived from the measurements of the human body. The side of the base corresponds to the stretch of a man with arms extended, the bricks are a foot long, the navel (*nābhi*) of the altar is a span square. In addition, the “golden man”, a schematic figure of a man which must be walled into the altar with the head turned to the East—the holocaust being always in this position—indicates the analogy between man and the sacrificial victim. We shall see later on that these same symbolical features are implicit in the construction of a temple.

II

The altar exists before the temple. In other words the art of building an altar is more ancient and more universal than is sacred architecture properly so called, for altars are used both by nomadic and by settled peoples, whereas temples exist only among the latter. The primitive



Brick arrangement for performance of *homa* (Vedic sacrifice)



Altars for performance of *puja* (ritual worship)

¹¹ The patriarchs of the nomadic people of Israel built altars under the open sky, from unworked stones. When Solomon built the temple in Jerusalem, thereby consecrating the sedentary condition of the people, the stones were worked without the use of iron tools, in memory of the manner of building the primitive altar.

¹² See *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk's Account of the Rites of the Oglala Sioux*, recorded by Joseph Epes Brown (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1953 and 1989).

¹³ See Frithjof Schuon, *The Feathered Sun* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom Books, 1990) and *Language of the Self* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom Books, 1999), the chapter "The Sacred Pipe of the Red Indians".

¹⁴ "Everything the Power of the World does is done in a circle. The sky is round, and I have heard that the earth is round like a ball, and so are all the stars. The wind, in its greatest power, whirls. Birds make their nests in circles, for theirs is the same religion as ours. Our tepees were round like the nests of birds, and these were always set in a circle, the nation's hoop, a nest of many nests, where the Great Spirit meant for us to hatch our children" (Hehaka Sapa in *Black Elk Speaks*, related by John Neihardt [New York: William Morrow, 1932], p. 198).

¹⁵ The same is the case with the prehistoric sanctuaries called "cromlechs", in which the circle of upright stones reproduces the cyclical divisions of the heavens.

¹⁶ Sometimes the static perfection of the square or the cube is combined with the dynamic symbolism of the circle. Such is the case with the Kaaba, which is the center of a rite of circumambulation, and is without doubt one of the oldest of sanctuaries.

sanctuary is the sacred area surrounding the altar; the rites employed for consecrating and delimiting this area were later transposed to the founding of a temple (*templum* in Latin originally meant the sacred precinct set apart for the *contemplation* of the cosmos). There are many indications to support the conclusion that these rites constitute a primordial inheritance linking together the two great currents of nomadic and settled peoples, in other respects so different in their styles of living.¹¹

A particularly eloquent testimony to this primordial legacy is presented by the following quotation from a priest and sage belonging to the nomadic Sioux Indians, Hehaka Sapa (Black Elk). He describes the consecration of a fire altar thus: "Taking the axe, he (the officiant) pointed it towards the six directions, and then struck the ground to the West. Repeating the same movement he struck the ground to the North, then in the same way to the East and to the South; then he raised the axe skywards and struck the ground twice in the center for the earth, and then twice for the Great Spirit. Having done this, he scratched the soil and, with a stick which he had purified in the smoke and offered to the six directions, he drew a line running from the West to the center, then from the East to the center, then from the North to the center and finally from the South to the center; then he offered the stick to the heavens and touched the center, and to the earth and touched the center. In this way the altar was made; in the manner described, we fixed in this place the center of the world, and this center, which in reality is everywhere, is the dwelling-place of the Great Spirit."¹²

As this example shows, the consecration of the altar consists in the evocation of the relationships which connect the principal aspects of the universe with its center. These aspects are: heaven, which in its generative activity is opposed to the earth, the passive and maternal principle, and the four directions or "winds", whose forces determine the cycle of the day and the changes of the seasons; they correspond to as many powers or aspects of the Universal Spirit.¹³

Whereas the normal shape of a temple is rectangular, the nomadic altar such as has been described is not square in outline, even though its origin is the quaternary of the celestial regions. This is explained by the "style" appropriate to the nomadic life; to nomads buildings that are rectangular in shape express the fixation of death.¹⁴

Nomadic sanctuaries, made like tents or cabins of live branches, are generally round;¹⁵ their model is the dome of the sky. Similarly nomadic encampments are arranged in circular form, and the same practice is sometimes found in the cities of nomadic peoples who have become sedentary, like the Parthians. Thus it is that the cosmic polarity of the circle and the square is reflected in the contrast between nomadic and sedentary peoples: the former recognize their ideal in the dynamic and limitless nature of the circle, whereas the latter see theirs in the static character and the regularity of the square.¹⁶ But apart from these dif-



Jagannath Temple, Puri, Orissa, 12th century

ferences of style the conception of the sanctuary remains the same; whether it be built of solid materials like the temples of sedentary peoples, or whether it be no more than a *sacratum* established temporarily like the nomadic altar, it is always situated at the center of the world. Hehaka Sapa says of this center that it is the dwelling place of the Great Spirit, and that it is in reality everywhere; that is why a symbolical point of reference is sufficient for its realization.

The ubiquity of the spiritual center also finds an expression in the sensible order in the fact that the directions of space, which diverge in accordance with the motionless axes of the starry sky, converge in the same way on every point situated on the earth; the visual axes of two terrestrial observers looking at the same star are in fact practically parallel, whatever may be the geographical distance separating them. In other words, there is no “perspective” from the point of view of the star-

It has been many times rebuilt, but its shape, which is that of a slightly irregular cube, has not been altered in historical times. The four corners (*arkān*) of the Kaaba are oriented towards the cardinal regions of the sky. The rite of circumambulation (*tawāf*) is a part of the pilgrimage to the Kaaba and was simply perpetuated by Islam. It expresses with precision the relationship existing between the sanctuary and the celestial movement. It is accomplished seven times, to correspond with the number of the celestial spheres, three times at racing speed and four times at walking pace.

According to legend the Kaaba was first built by an angel, or by Seth, son of Adam. It was then in the shape of a pyramid; the deluge destroyed it; Abraham rebuilt it in the shape of a cube (*ka'bah*). It is situated on the axis of the world, its prototype is in the heavens, where the angels perform the *tawāf* around it. Still according to legend, the Divine Presence (*Sakinah*) appeared in the form of a serpent which led Abraham to the place where he must build the Kaaba; the serpent coiled itself round the building. This recalls in a striking way the Hindu symbolism of the serpent (Ananta or Shesha), which moves round the precinct of the temple.

We shall see later that the Hindu temple is also the center of a rite of circumambulation.

ry sky: its center is everywhere, for its vault—the universal temple—is measureless. Similarly, anyone watching the sun rising or setting over a surface of water sees the golden path of the rays reflected in the water leading straight towards him. If he moves, the path of light follows him; but every other observer sees the path leading no less directly to himself. These facts have a profound significance.¹⁷

III

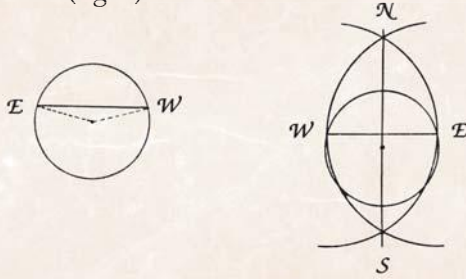
The basic plan of the temple is derived from the procedure of its orientation, which is a rite in the proper sense of the word, for it connects the form of the sanctuary with that of the universe, which in this case is the expression of the divine norm. A pillar is set up in the place chosen for the building of the temple, and a circle is traced round it. The pillar serves as gnomon, and its shadow thrown onto the circle marks, by its extreme positions in the morning and in the evening, two



¹⁷ In this connection the Hindu symbolism of the *sushumnā* may be recalled, the ray which joins every being to the spiritual sun.

Vedagiriswarar Temple, Tirukkalukundram, Tamil Nadu

points that are connected by an East-West axis (figs. 1 and 2). These two points are taken as centers for marking out, with a cord used as a compass, two circles that intersect to form the “fish” which gives the North-South axis (fig. 2).¹⁸



Figs. 1 and 2. Circles of orientation, from the *Mānasāra Shilpa Shāstra*

The intersections of other circles, centered on the four ends of the axes thus obtained, afford the means of establishing the four corners of a square; this square then appears as the “quadrature” of the solar cycle, of which the circle round the gnomon is the direct representation (fig. 3).¹⁹

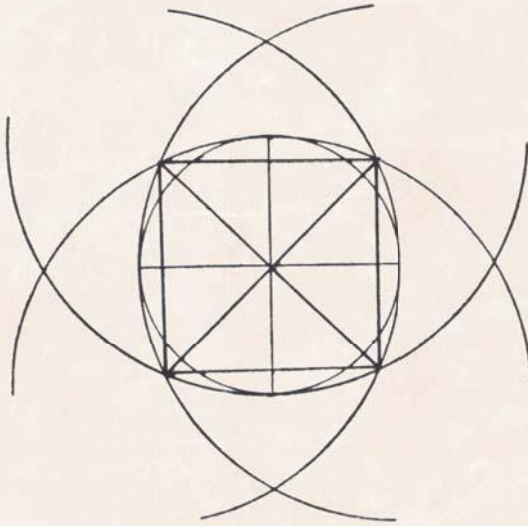


Fig. 3. Circle of orientation and the fundamental square

The rite of orientation is universal in its range. We know that it was used in the most diverse civilizations: it is mentioned in ancient Chinese books, and Vitruvius tells us that the Romans established the *cardo* and the *decumanus* of their cities in this way, after consulting the augurs on the place to be chosen; there are also numerous indications that the same procedure was used by the builders of medieval Europe. The reader will have noticed that the three phases of this rite corre-

¹⁸ The motive of the fish formed by the intersection of two circles, as well as the pattern of the triple fish formed by three intersecting circles, are found in the decorative art of various peoples, notably in Egyptian art, and in the Merovingian and Romanesque arts.

¹⁹ See *Mānasāra Shilpa Shāstra*, Sanskrit text edited and summarized in English by P. K. Acharya (London: Oxford University Press).

spond to three fundamental geometrical figures: the circle, image of the solar cycle, the cross formed by the cardinal axes, and the square derived from it. These are the symbols of the Far Eastern Great Triad, Heaven-Man-Earth (fig. 4): Man appears in this hierarchy as the intermediary between Heaven and Earth, the active principle and the passive principle, just as the cross of the cardinal axes is the intermediary between the limitless cycle of the heavens and the terrestrial “square”.



Fig. 4. Chinese ideogram of the Great Triad: Heaven-Man-Earth

According to the Hindu tradition the square obtained by the rite of orientation, which summarizes and circumscribes the plan of the temple, is the *Vāstu Purusha mandala*, that is to say the symbol of *Purusha*, in so far as he is immanent in existence (*vāstu*), or the spatial symbol of *Purusha*. *Purusha* is pictured in the shape of a man stretched out in the fundamental square, in the position of the victim in the Vedic sacrifice (Fig. 5): his head is to the East, his feet to the West, and his two hands touch the North-west and South-east corners of the square.²⁰ He is none other than the primordial victim, the total being, whom the *devas* sacrificed at the beginning of the world and who is thus “incarnated” in the cosmos, the temple being the crystalline image of the cosmos. “*Purusha* (the unconditioned essence) is by himself the whole world, the past and the future. From him was born *Virāj* (the cosmic Intelligence), and from *Virāj* was born *Purusha* (in his aspect as prototype of man)” (*Rig Veda* X.90.5). In its limitative and as it were “arrested” form the geometrical diagram of the temple, the *mandala*, corresponds to the earth; but in its qualitative form it is an expression of *Virāj*, the cosmic Intelligence; and finally in its transcendent essence it is none other than *Purusha*, the Essence of all beings.

²⁰ In the building of the Vedic altar, *Agni-Prajāpati* as sacrificial victim is represented with the face turned towards the sky. The crucifix incorporated, according to Honorius d’Autun, in the plan of a cathedral is in the same position.

²¹ The *asūras* are the conscious—and therefore in a sense personal—manifestations of *tamas*, the “descending” tendency of existence. See René Guénon, *The Symbolism of the Cross* (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2004).

IV

The fundamental diagram of the temple is thus a symbol of the Divine Presence in the world; but from a complementary point of view it is also an image of existence, brutish and “asuric”,²¹ but overcome

and transfigured by the *devas*.²² These two aspects are in any case indissolubly linked together: without the “seal” impressed on it by the Divine Spirit, “matter” would have no intelligible form, and without the “matter” that receives the divine “seal” and so to speak delimits it, no kind of manifestation would be possible. According to the *Brihat Sambhita* (LII.2-3) there was formerly, at the beginning of the present cycle, an undefinable and unintelligible thing which “obstructed the heavens and the earth”. Seeing this, the *devas* suddenly seized it, and laid it on the ground face downwards, and established themselves on it in the positions they were in when they seized it. Brahmā filled it with *devas*²³ and called it *Vāstu Purusha*. This obscure thing, having no intelligible form, is nothing but existence (*vāstu*) in its tenebrous root, in so far as it is opposed to the Light of the Essence, of which the *devas* are as it were rays. Through the victory which the *devas* win over undifferentiated existence it receives a form; chaotic in itself, it becomes the support of distinct qualities, and the *devas* in their turn obtain a support of manifestation. From this point of view the stability of the temple comes from the direction “existence” (*vāstu*), and rites are addressed to *Vāstu Purusha* to secure the stability of the building: the patron (*kāraka*) of the temple, its builder or its donor, identifies himself with the *asūra* who became a victim of the gods and who supports the form of the temple.

Thus the *Vāstu Purusha mandala* is conceived from two different and apparently opposed points of view. The Hindu spirit never loses sight of the duality of the root of all things, for things proceed at once from the infinite Beauty and from the existential obscurity that veils it, this obscurity being in its turn a mysterious function of the Infinite,

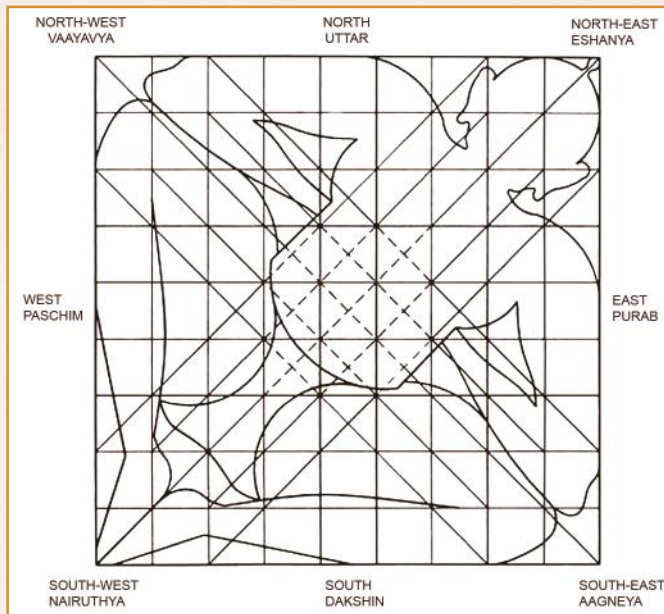


Fig. 5. *Vāstu Purusha mandala*, symbol of *Purusha*

²² A Westerner would speak of “brute matter” transformed into pure symbol by Divine or angelic inspiration. The Hindu idea of existence (*vāstu*) implies to some extent this conception of “brute matter”, but it goes much farther, existence being conceived as the metaphysical principle of separativity.

²³ This is the transformation from chaos to cosmos, the *fiat lux*, whereby the earth “without form and void” is filled with reflections of the divine.



Goddess from a frieze in the Keshava Temple of Somnathpur, Karnataka, 13th century

²⁴ *Prakriti* is the passive complement of *Purusha*, and the *Shakti* is the dynamic aspect of *Prakriti*.

for it is nothing other than the universal plastic power, *Prakriti*, or the *Shakti*²⁴ that clothes beings with limited forms. Hindu art does no more than imitate the work of the *Shakti*. The *Shakti* is directly present in architecture and sculpture: a cosmic power, generous like the earth and mysterious like the serpent, appears to flow through the most insignificant of forms, it fills them with its plastic tension, while itself it is obedient to the incorruptible geometry of the Spirit. It is the *Shakti* that dances on the motionless body of Shiva, who represents Divinity in its aspect as transformer of the cosmos.



Sculptures from the Kandariya Mahadeva Temple at Khajuraho, Madhya Pradesh, 10th century

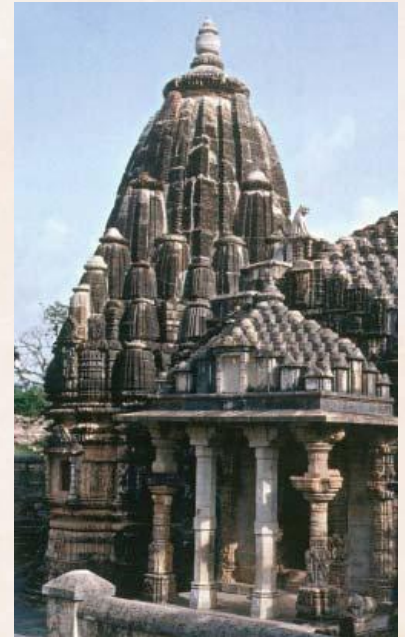
According to the point of view chosen, the victim incorporated in the *mandala* will represent either *Purusha*, the universal Essence, or the *asūra* overcome by the *devas*. If it is *Purusha* who is seen in the victim, the point of view carries with it an illusion, for the Divine Essence which as it were “descends” into the forms of the world is not in reality subject to their limitations; on the other hand, its “incorporation”—or what appears to be such—is the prototype of all sacrifice, by inverse analogy. It is however only the passive nature of existence that can really *undergo* the sacrifice; it is that nature, and not the Essence, which is *transformed*, so that from this point of view it is not *Purusha* who is imprisoned in the plan of the temple as sacrificial victim, but the *asūra* divinized by his sacrifice.

The symbolism of the *Vāstu Purusha* is found among peoples who are not attached by any historical link to the Hindu world. For instance, the Osages, a tribe of the plains of North America, look upon the ritual arrangement of their camp as “the form and the spirit of a perfect man” who faces the East in times of peace; “. . . in him is found the center, or the innermost place, the common symbol of which is the fire that burns in the middle of the medicine-lodge.”²⁵ The important thing is that the encampment, arranged in a “camp-circle”, is a picture of the whole cosmos: the half of the tribe which is situated to the Northward represents Heaven, while the other half living on the South side symbolizes the Earth. The fact that the ritual bounds of the area are in this case in the shape of a circle and not, as in the case of a temple, a square or a rectangle, is explained by the “style” of the nomadic life, and in no way invalidates the analogy in question. The assimilation of the form of the temple to that of the human body is moreover to some extent paralleled in the sacred calumet which itself was “a sort of corporeal type of that ideal man who becomes the gnomon of the sensible universe. . . .”²⁶

The same symbolism is found elsewhere in the idea that a durable building must be founded on a living being; hence the practice of walling a sacrificial victim into the foundations. In some cases it is the shadow of a living man that is “caught” and symbolically incorporated into the building.²⁷ Such things are doubtless distant echoes of the rite of the stabilization of the temple (*Vastushānti*), or of the idea of a victim at once divine and human incorporated into the temple of the world. An analogous conception is that of the Christian temple as the body of the Divine Man.²⁸

V

The *Vāstu Purusha mandala*, the outline of which is derived from the rite of orientation, is subdivided into a number of lesser squares; they form a network within which the foundations of the building are laid



Samiddheshvara Temple, Chittorgarh, Rajasthan, 11th century

²⁵ See Hartley Burr Alexander, *L'Art et la Philosophie des Indiens de l'Amérique du Nord* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1926).

²⁶ See *ibid.*

²⁷ This custom is still found in Rumanian folklore.

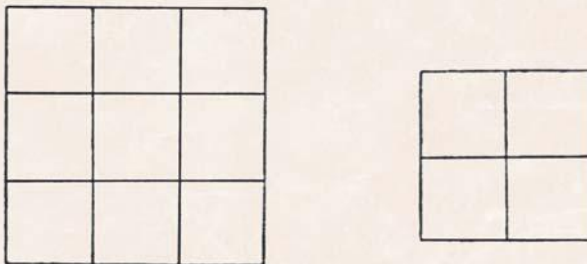
²⁸ See especially section II of the chapter “The Foundations of Christian Art” in the author’s *Sacred Art in East and West* and *The Foundations of Christian Art* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2006).



Brihadishwara Temple in Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu, 11th century

out. The analogy between the cosmos and the plan of the temple is carried right through into the plan of the internal arrangements, in which each lesser square corresponds to one of the phases of the great cosmic cycles and to the *deva* who rules over it. Only the central area, consisting of one or several lesser squares, is symbolically situated outside the cosmic order: it is the *Brahmāsthana*, the place where Brahmā dwells. Over this central area the “chamber of the embryo” (*Garbhagriha*) is erected, in the form of a cube; it will hold the symbol of the Divinity to whom the temple is consecrated.

There are 32 types of *Vāstu Puruṣa mandala*, distinguished by the number of their lesser squares. These types are divided into two groups, those with an odd number of lesser squares, and those with an even number of internal divisions. The first series is developed from the fundamental *mandala* of nine squares which is more particularly a symbol of the earth (*Prithivī*) or of the terrestrial environment; the central square corresponds to the center of this world and the eight peripheral squares to the cardinal regions and the four intermediate regions of space; it could be said to represent the “rose of the winds” with eight directions in a square form (fig. 6). As for the *mandalas* with an even number of divisions, their central feature is a block of four squares (fig. 7): it constitutes the symbol of Shiva, Divinity in its aspect of transformer. We have seen that the quaternary rhythm, of which this *mandala* is as it were the spatial fixation, expresses the principle of time; it may be looked on as the “static” form of the cosmic wheel with four spokes, or divided into its four phases. It will be observed that this type of *mandala* has no central square, the “center” of time being the eternal present.



Figs. 6 and 7. *Mandalas* of nine and of four divisions

There are two *mandalas* that are specially favored for the symbolical plan of the temple, one with 64 lesser squares and one with 81. It should be noted that the numbers 64 and 81 are sub-multiples of the fundamental cyclical number 25,920, the number of years comprised in a complete precession of the equinoxes: $64 \times 81 \times 5 = 25,920$. The factor 5 corresponds to the cycle of five lunar-solar years (*samvatsara*). The precession of the equinoxes is the ultimate measure of the cosmos, and in itself it is only measurable in terms of lesser cycles. Each of these



The *garbhagriha* of the Lakshmana Temple in Khajuraho, holding the image of Vishnu, 10th century

mandalas thus represents an “abbreviation” of the universe conceived as the “sum” of all the cosmic cycles.²⁹

It has already been indicated that the central “field” of the *mandala* represents the *Brahmāsthana*, the “station” of Brahmā; in the *mandala* of 64 squares it occupies four central squares, in the *mandala* of 81 squares, nine. In this field is erected the chamber of the center, which houses the symbol of the titular divinity of the temple and is analogous to the “golden embryo” (*Hiranyagarbha*), the luminous germ of the cosmos (figs. 8 and 9).

²⁹ In the solstitial rite of the “Sun Dance” the Arapaho Indians build a great lodge, in the middle of which stands the sacred tree, representing the axis of the world. The lodge is constructed of twenty-eight pillars erected in a circle, and sustaining the rafters of the roof which meet the tree in the center. On the other hand the lodge of the Crow Indians is open above, while the space surrounding the central tree is divided into twelve sections in which the dancers take their places. In both cases the form of the sanctuary is related to two cycles, that of the sun, and that of the moon. In the first case the lunar cycle is represented by the twenty-eight pillars of the enclosure, corresponding to the twenty-eight lunar mansions; in the second case it is represented by the twelve months.

The rites accompanying the erection of the tree for the “Sun Dance” show striking analogies with the Hindu rites connected with the erection of the sacrificial post, which is also the axis of the world and the cosmic tree.

³⁰ In certain cosmological diagrams met with in Islamic esoterism, the phases of the celestial cycles are ruled over by angels, who in their turn manifest Divine Names. On this subject see the author’s study, *Mystical Astrology according to Ibn Arabi* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2002).

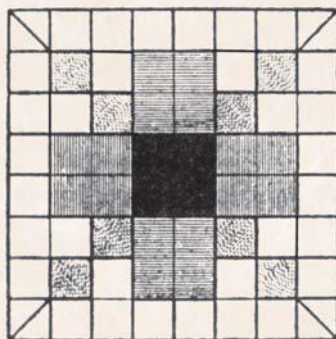


Fig. 8. *Mandala* of 64 divisions after Stella Kramrisch

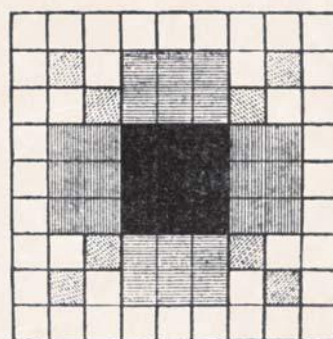


Fig. 9. *Mandala* of 81 divisions after Stella Kramrisch

The squares surrounding the *Brahmāsthana*, with the exception of those at the outer edges of the *mandala*, are assigned to the twelve solar divinities (*Adityas*), whose number is reduced essentially to eight, since eight of them make up hierogamic couples. Thus the divine powers radiating from the station of Brahmā diverge along the eight principal directions of space. The eight directions again are associated with the eight planets of the Hindu system: the five planets properly so called, the sun, the moon, and the demon of the eclipse (*Rāhu*). As for the outside squares, they represent the lunar cycle: in the *mandala* of 64 squares the border of 28 divisions corresponds to the 28 lunar mansions; in the *mandala* of 81 squares the “domains” of the four guardians of the cardinal regions are added. In both cases the cycle of the border is dominated by the 32 regents of the universe (*Padadevatās*) who are reflected in the qualities of space. Their hierarchy is derived from the quaternary division of space, expanded in the series 4-8-16-32; in the *mandala* of 64 squares four pairs of the said regents occupy the corners of the principal square.³⁰ The difference between the two *mandalas* of 64 and of 81 squares is thus essentially the same as that which distinguishes the two simplest *mandalas*, respectively dedicated to Prithivī and to Shiva, or to the principle of extension and the principle of time. The first named marks the cross of the cardinal axes by bands of squares, the second indicates it only by lines.

Regarded as a cosmological diagram the *Vāstu Purusha mandala* fixes and coordinates the cycles of the sun and of the moon;³¹ the divergent rhythms of these two fundamental cycles could be said to reflect the infinitely varied theme of becoming. In a certain sense the world endures for as long as the sun and the moon, the “male” and the “female”, are not united; that is to say, for as long as their respective cycles do not coincide. The two types of *mandala* are like two complementary figurations of the resolution of the two cycles into a single timeless order. Through this cosmological aspect the *Vāstu Purusha mandala* reflects the hierarchy of the divine functions. The various “aspects” of Being, as well as the diverse functions of the Universal Spirit, the cosmic manifestation of Being, can indeed be conceived as so many directions comprised in the totality of space, or as so many “facets” of a regular polygon, their symmetry betraying the unity of their common principle. That is why the *Vāstu Purusha mandala* is also the seal of *Virāj*, the cosmic intelligence issuing from the supreme *Purusha*.³²

An effective transformation of the cosmic cycles, or more precisely of the celestial movements, into crystalline form is also found in the symbolism of the sacred city. The *mandala par excellence* containing 64 squares is compared with the unconquerable city of the gods (Ayodhya) which is described in the *Rāmāyana* as a square with eight compartments on each side. This city holds in its center the abode of God (*Brahmapura*), just as the plan of the temple contains the *Brahmāsthana*. In



The Heavenly Jerusalem, the Morgan Beatus, Spain, 10th century

ROGA	AHI	MUKHYA	BHALLATA	SOMA	BHUJAGA	ADITI	DITI	AGNI	E
PAPA-YAKSHMAN	RUDRA						APA	PARJANYA	
SHOSHA		RAJA YAKSHMAN	P R T H	I V I D H	A R A	APA VATSA		JAYANTA	
ASURA		M				A		INDRA	
VARUNA		I				R		SURYA	
KUSUMA-DANTA		T				A		SATYA	
SUGRIVA		A				M			
		INDRA				A			
						N			
DAU-VARIKA	JAYA						SAVITR	BHRSHA	
							SAVITRA	ANTAR- IKSHA	
PITARAH	MRGA	BHRNGA- RAJA	GAN- DHARVA	YAMA	BRHAT- KSHATA	VITATHA	PUSHAN	ANILA	

Diagram of the *Vāstu Purusha mandala* of 81 divisions

³¹ It is worthy of note that the traditional diagram of the horoscope, representing the ecliptic, is also square.

³² The directions of space correspond very naturally to the Divine Aspects or Qualities, for they are the result of the polarization with respect to a given center of a space that as such is limitless and undifferentiated. The center chosen then corresponds to the “germ” of the world. It may be observed in passing that the “magic square”, which serves to “coagulate” subtle forces for the performance of a predetermined operation, is a distant derivative of the *Vāstu Purusha mandala*.

Christianity also the changeless and celestial synthesis of the cosmos is symbolized as a city, the Heavenly Jerusalem; its bounds are held up by twelve pillars and are square, and in its center dwells the Divine Lamb.³³ According to the Fathers of the Church the Heavenly Jerusalem is the prototype of the Christian temple.³⁴

VI

We have seen that the construction of a temple is the expression of a cosmology. It carries as well an “alchemical” significance, in so far as it is the support of an inward realization in the artist himself. This “alchemical” significance first becomes apparent in the rite of orientation, which may be compared to a procedure of “crystallization” or of “coagulation”. The indefinite cycle of the heavens is “fixed” or “coagulated” in the fundamental square, with the cross of the cardinal axes as connecting link; the cross thus plays the part of a crystallizing principle. If the world, carried onwards by the indefinite cyclical movement of the heavens, is in a sense analogous to the soul in its state of passivity and unconscious of its own essential reality, the discriminating cross is then the spirit, or more exactly the spiritual act, and the square is the body “transmuted” by this operation and henceforth the receptacle and the vehicle of a new and superior consciousness. The body is then the alchemical “salt” that unites the active and the passive, the spirit and the soul.

From another point of view the “alchemical” significance of the construction of the temple springs from the symbolism of the *Purusha* incorporated in the building and considered in this case in its microcosmic aspect. This aspect is based more particularly on the *mandala* of 81 squares, which corresponds to the subtle body of *Purusha*, represented therein as a man lying face downwards³⁵ with his head towards the East (see Fig. 5). In a general way, discounting any anthropomorphic figuration, the lines that make up the geometrical diagram of the *Vāstu Purusha mandala* are identified with the measures of *Prāna*, the vital breath of *Vāstu Purusha*. The principal axes and diagonals denote the principal subtle currents of his body; their intersections are the sensitive points or vital nodes (*marmas*), which must not be incorporated into the foundations of a wall, a pillar, or a doorway. The exact coincidence of the axes of several buildings, such as those of a temple and its dependencies, must be avoided for similar reasons. Any transgression of this rule will be the cause of trouble in the organism of the donor of the temple, who is regarded as its real builder (*kāraka*) and is identified in the rites of foundation with *Purusha*, the sacrificial victim incorporated in the building.

A consequence of this law is that certain architectural elements are slightly displaced with respect to the rigorous symmetry of the design.

³³ Attention must be called in passing to the astonishing phonetic and semantic analogy between, on the one hand, *agnus* and *ignis*, and on the other, *ignis* and *Agni*; and in addition, to the analogy between the English word “ram” and the *Ram*, whose name in Hindu symbolism is a sacred word corresponding to fire, and is represented as a ram.

³⁴ The altar then corresponds to the center of the Heavenly Jerusalem, the center occupied by the Lamb. The terrestrial symbol of *Purusha*, the *Vāstu Purusha mandala*, is at the same time the plan of the temple, of the city, and of the palace in which a consecrated king lives. It also defines the place of the throne, around which are represented in certain cases the 32 gods (*Padadevatās*), acolytes of Indra, who denote the 4 x 8 directions of space. The reader will have noticed that the *mandala* of eight times eight squares corresponds to a chessboard. The game of chess, which comes from India, where it is played by the noble and warrior castes, is an application of the symbolism inherent in the *Vāstu Purusha mandala*. See the author’s study, “The Symbolism of Chess”, in *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 3, No. 2, Spring, 1969. [Editor’s Note: chapter 9 of the present volume.]

³⁵ This position corresponds to the “asuric” aspect of the victim incorporated in the *mandala*.

The geometrical symbolism of the building as a whole is not thereby obscured; on the contrary, it retains its character as principial form while avoiding confusion with the purely material form of the temple. This brings into special prominence the extent of the difference between the traditional conception of “measure” and regularity, and the conception which finds its expression in modern science and industry; for what has been said about Hindu architecture is equally valid in principle for every traditional art or craft, whatever may be its religious foundation. The surfaces and the angles of a Romanesque church for example are always found to be inexact when strict measurements are applied to them, but the unity of the whole imposes itself all the more concisely: it could be said that the regularity of the building is released from the bonds of mechanical control in order to become reintegrated in the intelligible.



Brihadishwara Temple in Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu, 11th century

Most modern constructions on the contrary can show only a purely “additive” unity, while they present a regularity in their detail that is “inhuman”—because it is apparently absolute—as if it were a question, not of “reproducing” the transcendent model using the means available to man, but of “replacing” it by a sort of magic copy in complete conformity with it, which implies a Luciferian confusion between the material form and the ideal or “abstract” form. Because of this, modern buildings present an inversion of the normal relationship between essential forms and contingent forms, the result of which is a sort of visual inactivity incompatible with the sensitiveness—one would like to say with the “initiable substance”—of the contemplative artist. This is the danger that is forestalled in Hindu architecture by prohibiting the “obstruction” of the subtle currents of the sacred building.

The corporeal form of the temple must be distinguished from its subtle life, woven of *Prāna*, just as *Prāna* is distinguished from its own intellectual essence, which is *Virāj*. Together these three existential degrees represent the total manifestation of *Purusha* the Divine Essence immanent in the cosmos.



General view of Arunachaleswara Temple in Tiruvannamalai, Tamil Nadu

In other words, the temple has a spirit, a soul, and a body, like man and like the universe. The Vedic sacrificer identifies himself spiritually with the altar, which he builds to the measure of his body and thereby also to the measure of the universe of which the altar is a model; in exactly the same way the architect of the temple identifies himself with the building and with that which it represents; thus each phase of the architectural task is equally a phase of spiritual realization. The artist confers upon his work something of his own vital force; in exchange he participates in the transformation which that force undergoes by virtue of the sacramental and implicitly universal nature of the work. It is in this connection that the idea of *Purusha* incorporated into the building acquires a direct spiritual import.

VII

The base of the temple does not necessarily cover the whole extent of the *mandala*. The foundation walls are usually built in part inside and in part outside the square of the *mandala*, in such a way as to emphasize the cross of the cardinal axes or the star of the eight directions. This flexibility in the contour of the temple stresses its resemblance to the polar mountain (Meru). The lower part of the temple is more or less cubical and carries a series of diminishing storeys, giving a pyramidal effect.



Angkor Wat, a Vishnu temple that symbolizes the mythic Mount Meru, Cambodia

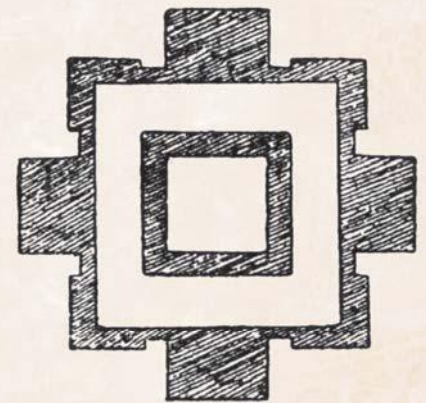


Fig. 10. Foundation of a Hindu Temple, after Stella Kramrisch

The pyramid is crowned by a conspicuous cupola, pierced by a vertical axis, the “axis of the world”, which is considered as passing through the body of the temple, starting at the center of *Garbhagriha*, the cavern-sanctuary in the heart of the almost completely solid building (Fig. 10).

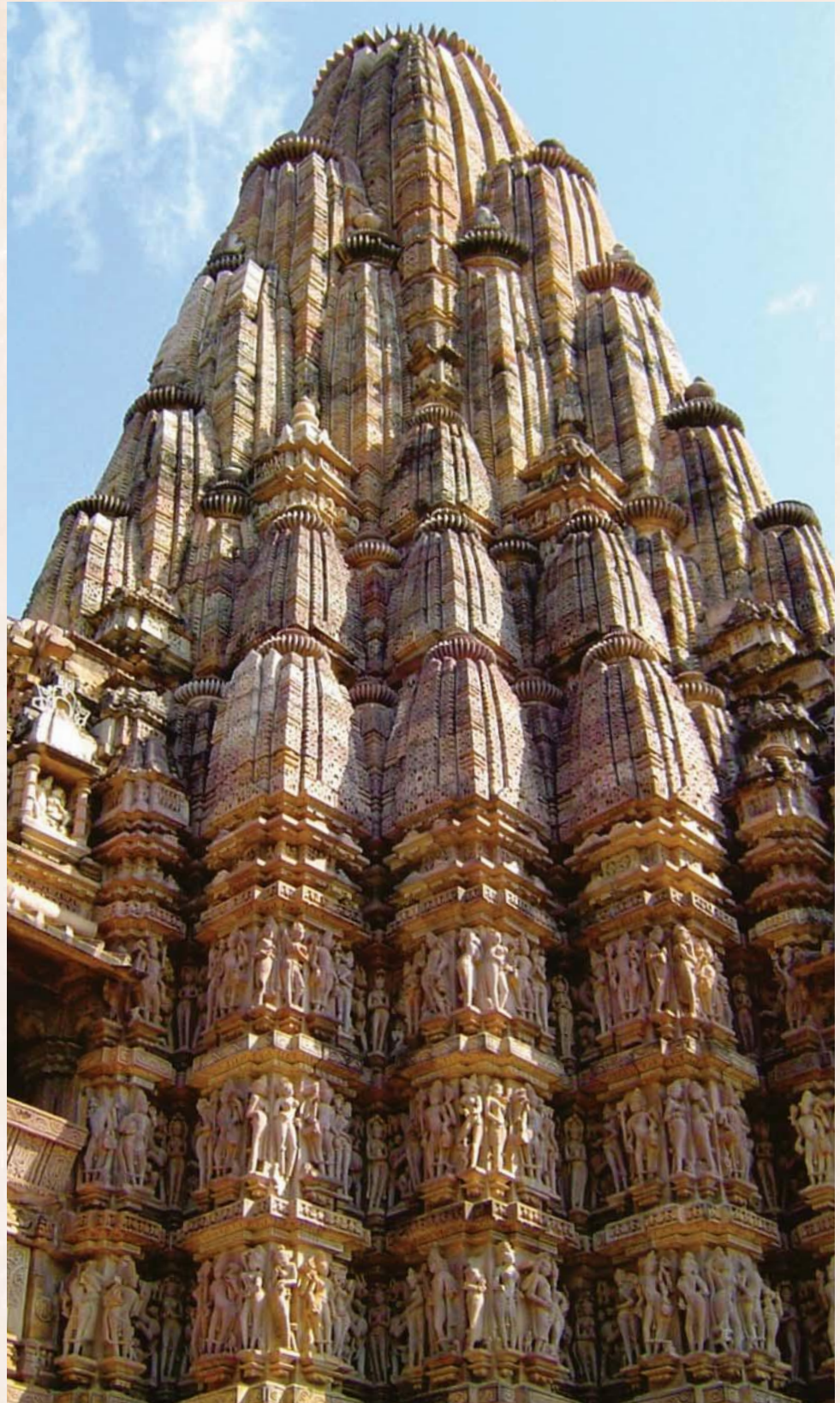
The axis of the world corresponds to the transcendent reality of *Purusha*, the Essence that passes through all the planes of existence, linking their respective centers with unconditioned Being, situated symbolically at the highest point of the axis, clear of the pyramid of



Galganatha Temple, Pattadakal, Karnataka, c. late 7th century



Surya Temple, Jhalarapatan, Rajasthan, c. 12th century



The central *sikhara* of the Kandariya Mahadeva Temple at Khajuraho, Madhya Pradesh

existence, the likeness of which is the temple with its many storeys.³⁶ This axis is represented in the Vedic altar by a channel of air which passes through three courses of bricks and ends beneath at the “golden man” (*hiranya purusha*) immured in the altar. The axis is represented in this case by a void; this is because it is not only the motionless principle around which the cosmos revolves, but also the way which leads out of the world towards the Infinite.

The Hindu temple carries a sort of massive cupola (*sikbara*) from which the end of the axis projects. This cupola, which is sometimes like a thick disc in shape, corresponds naturally to the dome of the sky; it is the symbol of the supra-formal world.

The Hindu temple—which must not be confused with the buildings that surround it, the halls and the pavilions of the gates—has usually no windows lighting the sanctuary, which communicates with the outer world only through the passage leading to the entrance. Instead, the outer walls are generally ornamented with niches which enclose carved images of the *devas*, as if they were solid windows through which the Divinity present in the sanctuary shows himself to the worshippers who are accomplishing the ritual circumambulation of the

³⁶ See René Guénon, *The Symbolism of the Cross*.



The two *sikbaras* of the Keshava Temple at Somnathpur, Karnataka



Temple at Chidambaram dedicated to Lord Shiva, Tamil Nadu

temple. As a general rule the central chamber of the temple, situated over the *Brahmāsthana*, contains only the symbol of the Divinity, all other figurative representations being dispersed over the vestibule and the outer walls. Thus the Unique Divinity is manifested on the outside only in anthropomorphic and multiple forms, which become visible to the pilgrims in the course of their progress round the mass of the sacred building with its promontories and its ravines.³⁷

In the rite of circumambulation the architectural and plastic symbolism of the temple, which “fixes” the cosmic cycles, becomes itself the object of cyclical experience: the temple is then the axis of the world around which the beings subject to the round of existence (*Samsāra*) revolve; it is the entire cosmos in its aspect of immutable and divine Law.

VIII

Hindu architecture tends to envelop its verticals in compact masses with prolix outlines; on the other hand it emphasizes the horizontal lines as

³⁷ See Stella Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple*. In all matters concerning the relation between the symbolism of the Hindu altar and of the Hindu temple the author has consulted this excellent work, which has drawn abundantly on the *śāstras* of sacred art, and refers to the writings of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy.



Temples in the holy city of Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh



Lakshmana Temple, Khajuraho,
Madhya Pradesh

if they were sheets of water. This is because the vertical corresponds to the ontological unity, the essence, which is interior and transcendent, whereas the horizontal symbolizes the existential plane. The repetition of the horizontal, with the help of a massive construction in superimposed layers, suggests the indefinite multitude of the degrees of existence, their infinity being in a sense the reflection in manifestation of the Divine Infinity. Hinduism is as it were haunted by nostalgia for the Infinite, which it envisages both in the absolute, in its aspect as undifferentiated plenitude, and in the relative, as the inexhaustible richness of the possibilities of manifestation, the latter point of view being effaced in the former. This is the spiritual foundation of that pluralism of forms which confers on Hindu art, despite the simplicity of its basic themes, something of the exuberant nature of a virgin forest.



Above: Vidyashankara Temple, Sringeri, Karnataka
Below: The temple-city of Sri Ranganatha on the island of Srirangam, Tiruchirapalli, Tamil Nadu



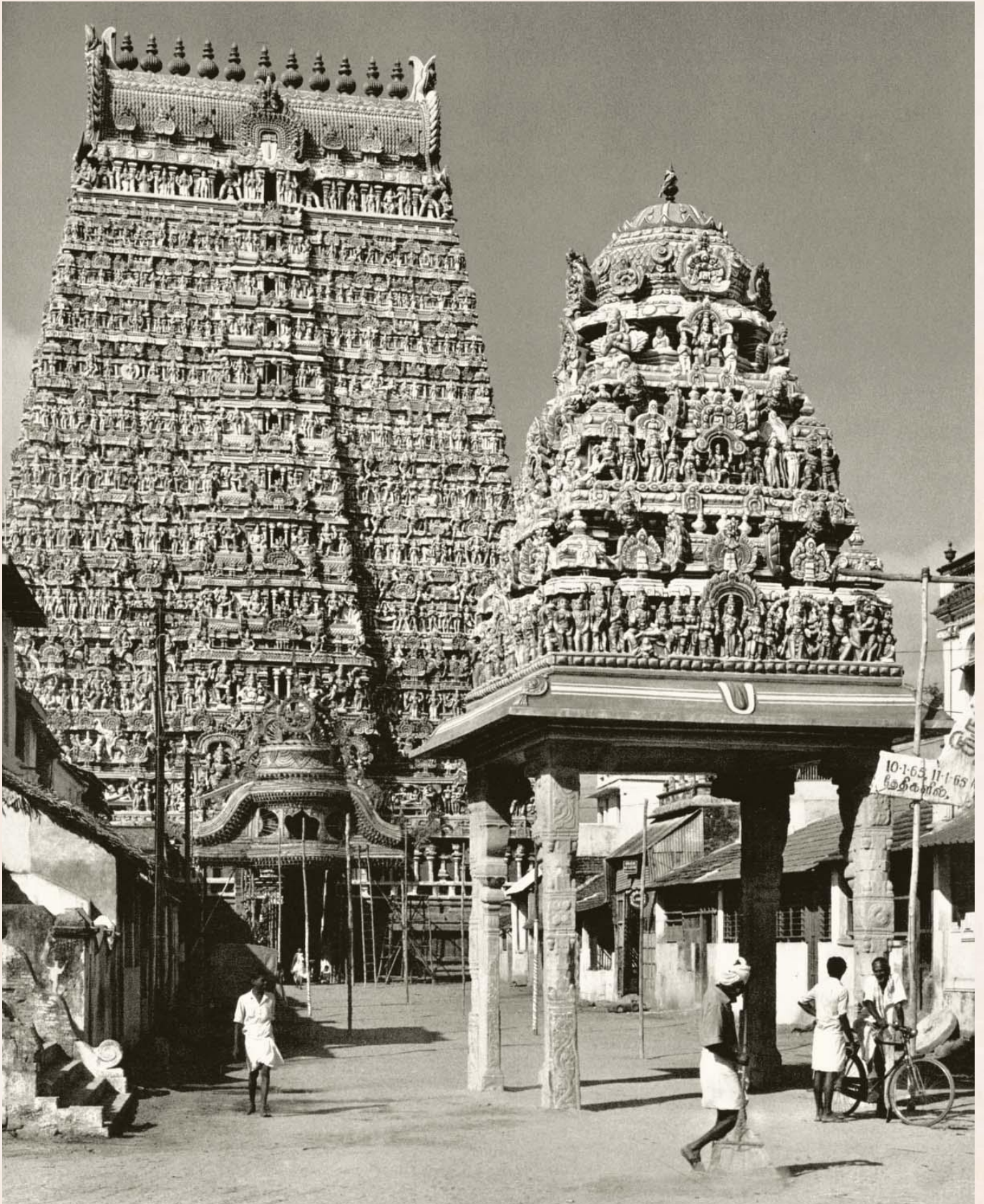
Maharaja's Temple, Jeypore, Orissa



Kailasanatha Temple, Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu



Gopurams (temple gateways) and Tank of the Meenakshi Temple in Madurai, Tamil Nadu



Entrance to the Sarangapani Temple of Lord Vishnu, Kumbakonam, Tamil Nadu, Chola period, 11th century

This same pluralism is strongly marked in the carving of figures; in the statues of *devas* with multiple limbs, in the combinations of human with animal shapes, in all the protean profusion that oscillates—in the eyes of the West—between beauty and monstrosity. In fact such transformation of the human body, which seems to make it almost like a multiform organism such as a plant or marine animal, have as their object the “dissolution” of all affirmation of the individual in a universal and indefinite rhythm; this rhythm is the play (*līlā*) of the Infinite manifesting itself through the inexhaustible power of its *Māyā*.

Māyā represents the productive or maternal aspect of the Infinite, and its power is equivocal in itself: it is generous in its fundamental maternal aspect, producing ephemeral beings and protecting them, and compensating all disequilibria in its boundless amplitude; but it is also cruel in its magic, which draws them into the inexorable round of existence. Its dual nature is symbolized in the iconography of the Hindu temple by the protean mask of time, *Kāla mukha* or *Kirtti murkha*, which crowns the arches of the doorways and niches (fig. 11). This mask looks something like a lion and something like a marine monster. It has no lower jaw, as if it were a skull hung up as a trophy, but its features are none the less animated by an intense life; its nostrils fiercely suck in the



Top: Carved figures at Sri Ranganatha Temple, Srirangan, Tamil Nadu
Bottom: Corridor of the Kailasanatha Temple, Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu

air, while its mouth spits forth dolphins (*makaras*) and garlands which hang between the abutments of the arches. It is the “glorious” and terrible face of the Divinity considered as the source of life and death. The divine enigma, cause of this world at once real and unreal, is hidden behind this Gorgon’s mask: in manifesting this world the Absolute reveals Itself and hides Itself at the same time; It endows beings with existence, but at the same time deprives them of the vision of Itself.³⁸

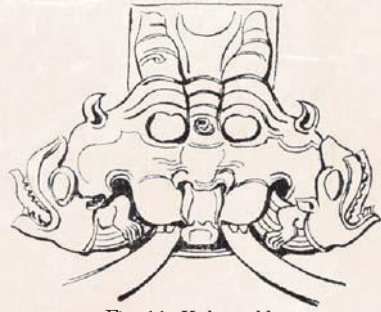
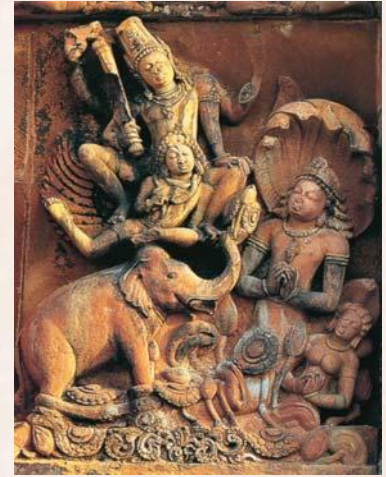


Fig. 11. *Kāla mukha*



Top: Carved figures on the Dashavatara Temple, Deogarh, Orissa

Bottom: Detail of carved figures on the Kailasanatha Temple, Kanchipuram



Lion-guardians at the Temple of Konarak, Orissa

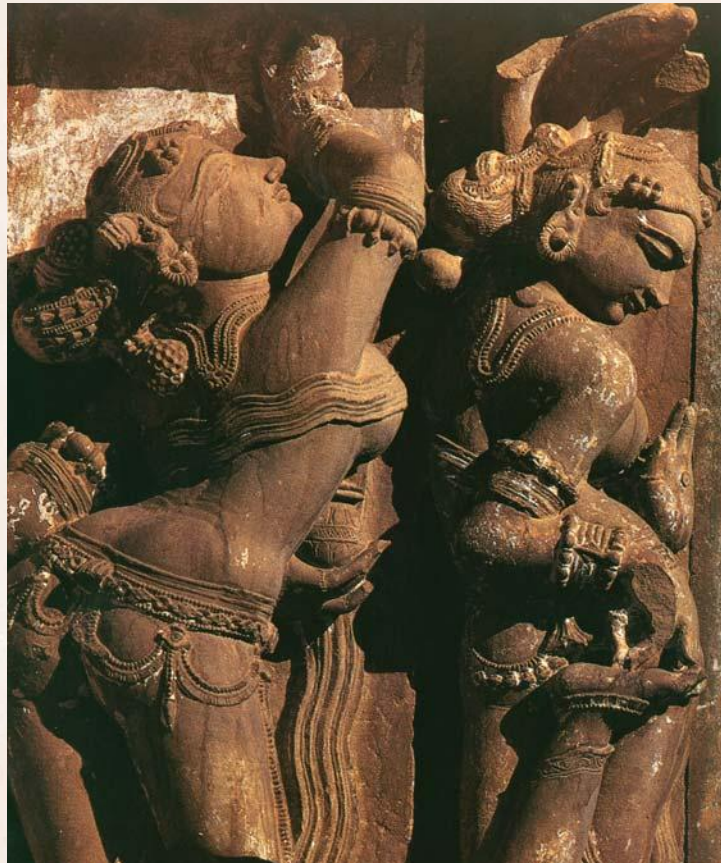
³⁸ The *Kāla mukha* is also the face of Rāhu, the demon of the eclipse. See Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, “*Svayamātrinnā: Janua Coeli*”, in *Coomaraswamy, Vol. 1, Selected Papers: Traditional Art and Symbolism*, edited by Roger Lipsey (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977).

In other places the two aspects of the divine *Māyā* are represented separately: the lionesses or leogryphs which prance along the pillars and niches symbolize her terrible aspect, while the young women of celestial beauty incarnate her beneficent aspect.

Hindu art far surpasses Greek art in its exaltation of feminine beauty. The spiritual ideal of Greek art, progressively lowered towards a purely human ideal, is the *cosmos* as opposed to the indefiniteness of the *chaos*, and therefore the beauty of the male body, with its decisively articulated proportions; the supple and unified beauty of the feminine body, its richness here simple and there complex, like that of the sea, is missed by Greek art, at least on the intellectual plane. Hellenism remains closed to the recognition of the Infinite, which it confuses with the indefinite; not having the conception of the Transcendent Infinity, it catches no glimpse of it on the “prakritic” plane, that is to say, as the inexhaustible ocean of forms. It is not until the period of its decadence that Greek art becomes open to the “irrational” beauty of the feminine body, by which it is drawn away from its *ethos*. In Hindu art on the contrary the feminine body appears as a spontaneous and innocent manifestation of the universal rhythm, like a wave of the primordial ocean or a flower of the tree of the world.



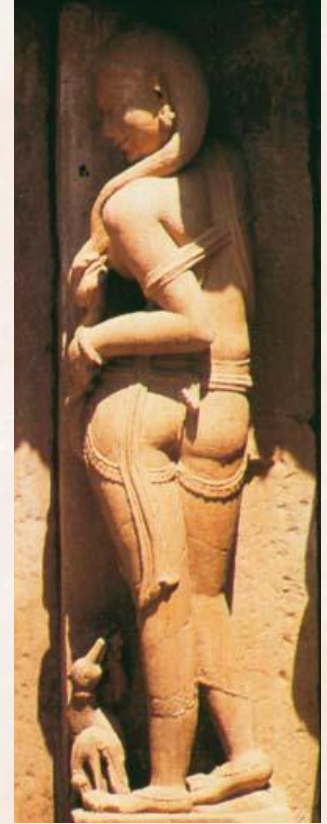
Girl playing with balls, Nagda,
Rajasthan, 11th century



Sculptures from the complex of temples at Khajuraho, Madhya Pradesh

Something of this innocent beauty also surrounds the representations of sexual union which adorn Hindu temples. In their most profound significance they express the state of spiritual union, the fusion of subject and object, of the interior and the exterior in ecstatic trance (*samādhi*). At the same time they symbolize the complementarism of the cosmic poles, the active and the passive; the passional and equivocal aspect of these representations is thus effaced in a universal vision.

Hindu sculpture assimilates without effort, and without losing its spiritual unity, means which elsewhere would lead to naturalism. It transmutes even sensuality by saturating it with spiritual awareness, expressed in the plastic tension of the surfaces which, like those of a bell, seem to be designed to make a sound that is pure. This quality in the work is the fruit of a ritual method, which consists in the sculptor touching the surface of his own body, from the head to the feet, with



Left and above: Sculptures from the complex of temples at Khajuraho, Madhya Pradesh



Shiva *Nataraja*, detail, Chola period, c. 990

the aim of raising the clarity of his consciousness right up to the extreme limits of psycho-physical life, with a view to its integration in the spirit.³⁹

On the other hand bodily consciousness, directly reflected in the sculpture of figures, is transmuted by the sacred dance. The Hindu sculptor must know the rules of the ritual dance, for it is the first of the figurative arts, since it works with man himself. Sculpture is thus attached to two radically different arts: through the technique of the craft it is related to architecture, which is essentially static and transforms time into space, whereas the dance transforms space into time, by absorbing it into the continuity of the rhythm. It is therefore not surprising that these two poles of Hindu art, sculpture and dancing, should together have engendered what is perhaps the most perfect fruit of Hindu art, the image of Shiva dancing.

The dance of Shiva expresses at once the production, the conservation, and the destruction of the world, considered as phases of the permanent activity of God. Shiva is the "Lord of the Dance" (*Natarāja*). He himself revealed the principles of the sacred dance to the sage Bharata-muni, who codified them in the *Bharata Nāṭya Shāstra*.⁴⁰

The static laws of sculpture and the rhythm of the dance are combined to perfection in the classic statue of Shiva dancing. The movement is conceived as a rotation round a motionless axis; by its decomposition into four typical gestures, following one another like phases, it reposes so to speak in its own amplitude; it is in no way rigid, but its rhythm is held in a static formula, like the ripples of a liquid in a vessel; time is integrated in the timeless. The limbs of the god are arranged in such a way that the worshipper who sees the statue from in front seizes all the forms at a glance: they are contained within the plane of the flaming circle, symbol of *Prakṛiti*, but their spatial polyvalence is in no way impaired thereby. On the contrary, from whatever side one contemplates the statue, its static equilibrium remains perfect, like that of a tree outspread in space. The plastic precision of the detail is in tune with the uninterrupted continuity of the gestures.

Shiva dances on the vanquished demon of chaotic matter. In his outermost right hand he holds the drum, the beat of which corresponds to the creative act. By the gesture of his uplifted hand he announces peace, protecting what he has created. His lowered hand points to the foot which is lifted from the ground, in sign of deliverance. In his outermost left hand he carries the flame which will destroy the world.⁴¹

Images of Shiva dancing show sometimes the attributes of a god, sometimes those of an ascetic, or of both together, for God is beyond all forms, and He assumes form only that He may become his own victim.

³⁹ This is not unrelated to the meaning of "fixation" in alchemy.

⁴⁰ The "celestial" origin of the Hindu dance is indirectly proved by its spatial extension through the centuries. In a form adapted to Buddhism it has influenced the choreographic style of Tibet and of all Eastern Asia, including Japan; in Java it survived the conversion of the island to Islam; and through the medium of Gypsy dancing it seems even to have set its seal on Spanish dancing.

⁴¹ See Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *The Dance of Shiva* (London: Peter Owen, 1958; New York: Farrar, Straus, 1957).





*The Image of the Buddha*¹

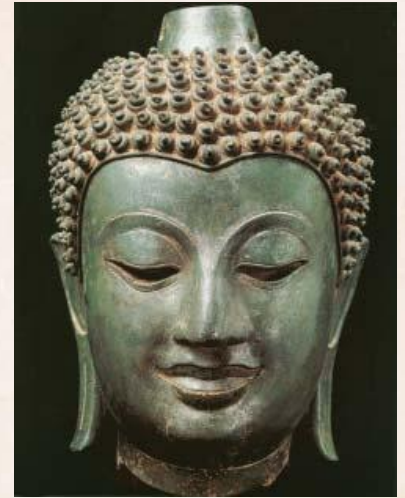
I

Buddhist art springs from Hindu art by way of a sort of alchemical transmutation, which could be said to have “liquefied” the cosmic mythology of India and turned it into images of states of the soul, while at the same time “crystallizing” the subtlest element in Hindu art, namely, the quasi-spiritual quality of the human body ennobled by the sacred dance, purified by the methods of Yoga, and as it were saturated with a consciousness not limited by the mind. It is this quality that is condensed into an incomparable formula in the sacred image of the Buddha, which absorbs all the spiritual beatitude inherent in the ancient art of India, and becomes the central theme round which all other images revolve.

The body of the Buddha and the lotus; these two forms, taken from Hindu art, express the same thing: the immense calm of the Spirit awakened to Itself. They recapitulate the whole spiritual attitude of Buddhism—and one might add also the psycho-physical attitude which serves as its support for spiritual realization.

The image of the Divine Man enthroned on the lotus is a Hindu theme. We have seen that within the Vedic altar is immured a conventional image of a golden man (*hiranya purusha*); the image rests on a disc of gold which in its turn rests on a lotus leaf. It is a symbol of *Purusha*, the Divine Essence in its aspect as eternal essence of man, and it is also an image of Agni, the son of the gods, through whom *Prajāpati*, the universe, is realized in his original totality. *Purusha* has all these aspects; He manifests Himself on every plane of existence in a manner that conforms to the laws inherent to that plane, without Himself undergoing any change. Agni is the spiritual germ from which springs the universal nature of man; that is why he is hidden in the altar, just as he is hidden in the heart of man; he is born of the primordial waters, which are the totality of the virtual potentialities of the soul or of the world; hence the lotus that supports him.

Buddhist art has perpetuated the symbol of the golden man, though it appears nevertheless to deny that which Hinduism affirms through this same symbol. The Hindu doctrine affirms above all an infinite



Lan Na bronze Buddha head,
Thailand, 15th century

¹ Editor's Note: From *Sacred Art in East and West*, chapter 5.



Buddha, Sarnath, India, Gupta period

² Each of the great spiritual traditions of humanity has a characteristic “economy” of its spiritual means, for it is out of the question that man should make use of all possible supports at the same time, or that he should follow two paths at once, despite the fact that the goal of all paths is fundamentally the same. A tradition guarantees that the means which it offers are sufficient to guide men towards God or out of the world.

³ The Buddha or the *tathāgata* is he who has attained to total deliverance; the Buddha Shākyamuni is the personage of history, whose individual name was Gautama. The appellation chosen depends on the aspect of Buddhahood under consideration at the time.

Essence, of which all things are but a reflection—it is of *Purusha* that all things are made, says the Veda—whereas the Buddhist doctrine has nothing to say about the Being or the Essence of things; it appears to deny all divinity. Instead of starting its exposition from a supreme principle, which could be likened to the apex of a pyramid made up of all states of existence—and this is what the universe looks like from a theocentric point of view—it proceeds only by way of negation, as if it were taking man and his nothingness as starting point, and building thereon a pyramid with its apex downwards and expanding indefinitely upwards, towards the void. But despite the inversion of perspective, the quintessence of the two traditions is the same. The difference between their respective points of view is this: Hinduism envisages divine Realities in an “objective” manner, by virtue of their reflection in the mind, such a reflection being possible, outside and independently of their immediate spiritual realization, because of the universal nature of the Intellect. Buddhism on the other hand lays hold on the Essence of man—or the Essence of things—only by way of a “subjective” path, that is to say, by the spiritual realization of that Essence and by that alone; it rejects as false or illusory every purely speculative affirmation of supra-formal Reality. This attitude is justified² by the fact that the mental objectivation of Divine Reality may often constitute an obstacle to its realization because every reflection involves an inversion with respect to that which it reflects—this is demonstrated by the above example of the pyramid narrowing towards its apex, symbol of the principle—and because thought limits consciousness and in a sense congeals it; at the same time thought directed to God appears to be situated outside its object, whereas God is infinite and nothing can really be situated outside Him; all thought about the Absolute is therefore vitiated by a false perspective. For these reasons the Buddha says that he teaches nothing about the origin of the world or of the soul, and is only concerned with suffering and the way of deliverance from suffering.

Seeing that this negative attitude is adopted in its doctrine, Buddhist art could never in principle depict more than the human appearance of Gautama,³ characterized by all the signs of his renunciation of the world. Stripped of his royal attributes and seated in the attitude of meditation, he holds in his left hand the wooden bowl of a beggar, symbol of his surrender to the Non-Ego, while his right hand touches the earth in witness of his lordship over it; such is the fundamental image of the Buddha. Nevertheless this ascetic figure, so notably reminiscent of some of its ancient Hindu predecessors, finally absorbs, despite its lack of adornment, all the solar powers of ancient Hindu art. It is as if an ancient god of light were incarnated in the image of Shākyamuni renouncing the world; the Buddha of history did in fact integrate in himself, through his victory over becoming, all the undivided plenitude of existence.





In some representations of the Buddhist paradise the lotus throne of the *tathāgata* rises out of a pool just as Agni is born from the primordial waters. Together with the human image of the Blessed One, the lotus becomes the principal theme in Buddhist art which, in a certain sense, is thereafter wholly contained within these two poles. The form of the lotus expresses in a direct, “impersonal”, and synthetic manner what the human form of the Buddha manifests in a more “personal” and more complex manner. Moreover this human form, through its symmetry and static plenitude, makes an approach to the form of the lotus; it will be remembered that the Buddha is called “the Jewel in the Lotus” (*mani padme*).

In Hinduism the lotus primarily symbolizes the universe in its passive aspect, as throne or receptacle of the divine Manifestation, whereas Buddhism compares it in the first place to the soul which is born out of a dark and formless state—the mire and the water—and expands in the light of *Bodhi*;⁴ the universe and the soul are however in correspondence one with the other. The fully expanded lotus is also like a wheel, and the wheel is also a symbol of the cosmos or of the soul; the spokes united by the hub signify the directions of space or the faculties of the soul united by the Spirit.

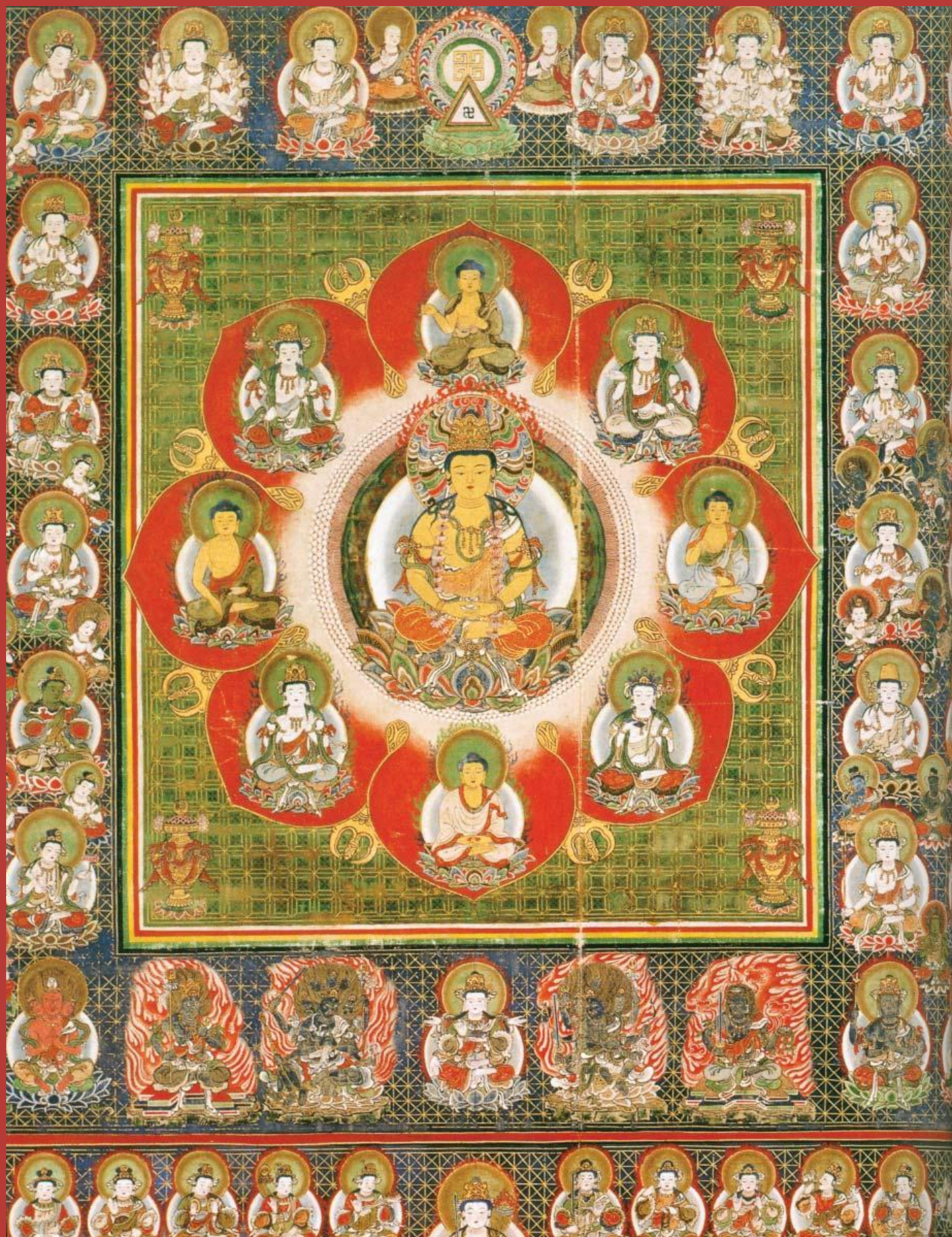
When the Buddha Shākyamuni rose from his seat under the tree of *Bodhi*, after the long meditation which delivered him from the dominion of life and death, miraculous lotuses blossomed under his feet. He took a step in each of the four directions of space and turned towards the zenith and the nadir,⁵ smiling; immediately the numberless heavenly beings came near to offer him their homage. This story prefigures implicitly the triumph of Buddhism over the Hindu cosmos, a triumph that is reflected in the domain of art: the ancient Hindu divinities leave their thrones on the eternal mountain and thereafter gravitate, like so many satellites, around the sacred icon of the *tathāgata*; thus situated they represent no more than psychic realities, or “magical” and more or less ephemeral emanations from the Buddha himself.

By way of compensation a generalized type of Buddha makes its appearance, and it acquires a non-historical and universal significance, until it sets its mark, like a divine seal, on all aspects of the cosmos. For instance, the celestial Buddhas of the *Mahāyāna*,⁶ sometimes called *dhyāni*-Buddhas, rule over the ten directions of space: the eight directions of the “rose of the winds” and the two opposed directions of the vertical. Physical space is here the image of “spiritual” space; the ten directions symbolize the principal aspects or qualities of *Bodhi*; the center, from which these directions all radiate, and with which they are all in principle identified, is the Inexpressible. For this reason the celestial Buddhas are spiritual projections of the single Buddha Shākyamuni—and in this relation they are sometimes represented as springing from his head—and at the same time prototypes of all incarnate Buddhas. These various relationships are by no means mutually exclusive, for each

⁴ *Bodhi* is the totally awakened state of being, usually referred to as “Enlightenment”. The Tree of *Bodhi* is the world tree under which a Buddha attains to the Supreme Knowledge.

⁵ See Paul Mus, *Barabudur* (Hanoi: Imprimerie d’Extrême-Orient, 1935). The “seven steps” of the Buddha, directed towards the different regions of space, recall the movements which the Sioux Indians execute in the *Hanblecheyapi*, the rite of invocation accomplished in solitude on the peak of a mountain (See *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk’s Account of the Rites of the Oglala Sioux*).

⁶ *Mahāyāna* means “Great Way” and *Hinayāna* “Lesser Way”. These are the two main divisions of the Buddhist world, the former including China, Japan, and Tibet and the latter the more southerly countries. Both accept all the fundamental doctrines of Buddhism, but they differ in their respective “ideals”. The Mahayanic ideal is represented by the *bodhisattva* (see note 9 below) whose perspective combines the ideas of ascent towards Enlightenment and sacrificial redemptive for the sake of redeeming all suffering beings. In the Hinayanic perspective only the first phase is explicit. The difference of emphasis has conditioned the spiritual method, devotional life, and art of each school.



Buddha necessarily “contains” all Buddhahood, while manifesting more particularly one or other of his permanent aspects: “one single person of the Buddhas becomes several, and several become one”.⁷ On the one hand the various *dhyāni*-Buddhas correspond to different spiritual attitudes of Shākyamuni; on the other hand Shākyamuni is himself integral with the spiritual cosmos which they constitute: according to one point of view, he is an incarnation of the Buddha Vairocana who is situated at the center of the cosmic rose, and whose name means “he who spreads the light in every direction”; according to another point of view, he is an incarnation of the Buddha Amitābha, the All-Compassionate, who rules over the Westerly direction and has as his satellite or analogue the *bodhisattva* Avalokiteshvāra, whom the Far East knows by his Taoist name of Kwan-yin or Kwannon.

In their representation of the spiritual cosmos the Buddhist *mandalas* follow the age-old design of the open lotus-flower, thus recalling the multiple manifestation of the Vedic Agni. The images of the Buddhas or *bodhisattvas* who rule over the different sectors of the “rose of the winds” all bear an iconographic resemblance to the classical type of Shākyamuni, from which they are usually distinguished only by their respective colors and attributes; they can also be identified by their gestures (*mudrās*), but these same gestures are also characteristic of the various attitudes of Shākyamuni, or of the different phases of his teaching. Although the ten directions of space correspond to particular *bodhisattvas*,⁸ there is no limit to the number of the latter; they are as numberless as the grains of the sands of the Ganges, say the *Sūtras*, and each of them presides over thousands of worlds: and besides, each Buddha is reflected in a constellation of *bodhisattvas*⁹ and is possessed as well of innumerable “magical bodies”: thus it is that the fundamental image of the Buddha seated on a lotus and surrounded by an aureole is susceptible of infinite variation. According to a symbolical conception developed in certain speculative schools of the *Mahāyāna*, the limitless compassion of the Buddha is present in the smallest particles of the universe in the form of so many *bodhisattvas* enthroned on lotuses; and the same idea of a manifestation endlessly renewed is expressed in some classical representations of the Buddhist paradise, in which numerous Buddhas and *bodhisattvas*, analogous one to the other, rest on a lotus arising from a celestial pool or flowering on the branches of a great tree.¹⁰

This galaxy of Buddhas is as it were a compensation for the absence of a “theory” in the real sense of the word, that is to say, of a theocentric view of the world. It is not a question of an ontological principle differentiating itself through a descending hierarchy of reflections, but of the ascetic as a type, or more exactly of the *muni*, of one freed from the flux of existence, who makes an opening on to the void and diversifies himself in accordance with the possible modes of his deliverance.



Nyoirin Kwannon (Avalokiteshvara),
Daigo-ji, Kyoto, Japan, Heian period,
10th-11th century

⁷ Inscription of Longmen, quoted by Paul Mus, *Barabudur*, p. 546.

⁸ According to a Shingon iconography, reproduced by Ananda K. Coomaraswamy in *Elements of Buddhist Iconography* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935), four *tathāgatas* occupy the cardinal regions and four *bodhisattvas* the intermediate regions. The names of the regents of space may vary according to the spiritual plane envisaged.

⁹ A *bodhisattva* is a being qualified to attain to *nirvāna* in this life.

¹⁰ See Henri de Lubac, *Amida* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1955), the chapter, “Amitābha et la Sukhavati”.



Buddha Vairocana by Zanabazar,
Mongolia, 17th century



The five great Buddhas, Japanese Buddhist pantheon

The multitude of the Buddhas and *bodhisattvas* indicates the relativity of the human receptacle: in his manifested personality the Buddha is distinct from principal Unity; there is nothing absolutely unique in manifestation, so that the indefinite differentiation of the type or model of all Buddhahood is like an inverted reflection of the non-differentiation of the Absolute.

From another point of view, to the extent that each *bodhisattva* is released from becoming, he takes to himself its underlying qualities; his “body of fruition” (*sambhogakāya*) becomes a synthesis of the cosmic qualities, while his “body of essence” (*dharmakāya*) is beyond all qualification. “The *bodhisattvas* as a whole emanate from the earth and together they express the cosmic body of the Buddha”, says Chia-Siang Da-Shi;¹¹ the receptivity of the Buddha expands until it embraces in a qualitative sense the whole manifested universe; and at the same time it is through him, and by virtue of his receptivity alone, that the Infinite assumes a “personal” aspect. This is where the Buddhist perspective meets the Hindu, and the meeting cannot but take place, for the two perspectives interpenetrate one another like the two inversely analogous triangles of the “seal of Solomon”.

The meeting of the two perspectives is responsible for the wide use in Mahayanist iconography of symbols which in Hinduism are associated with different divine aspects, including for example, divine

¹¹ Commentary on the *Lotus Sutra*, quoted by Henri de Lubac, *Amida*, p. 284.



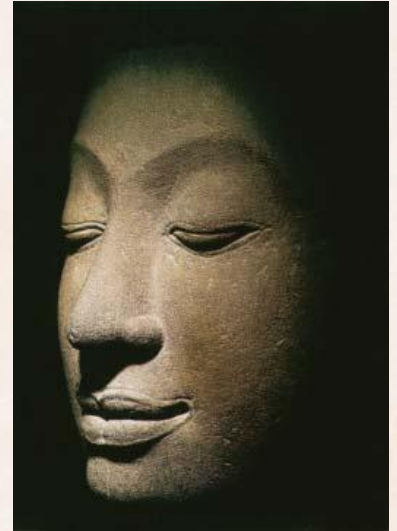


instruments like the *vajra*, and even the multiplications of heads and arms in a single *bodhisattva*, not forgetting the Tantric aspect of lamaist art. On the other hand it is also possible that Hindu iconography was influenced by Buddhism, for its anthropomorphism was developed after the Buddhist invasion of India.

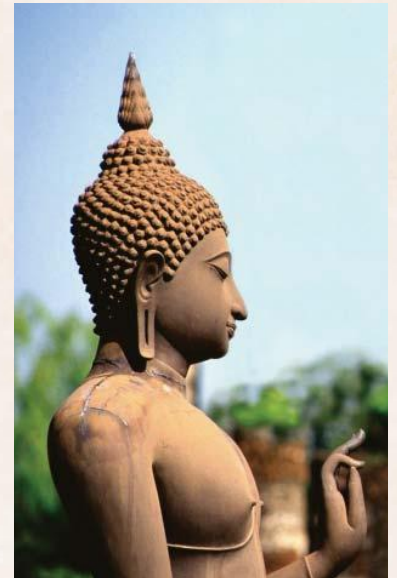
In the art of the *Hinayāna*, in Ceylon, Burma, and Siam, there is nothing but an indefinite repetition of the image of the earthly Buddha, Shākyamuni. In the absence of a metaphysical symbolism—which the *Mahāyāna* borrowed from the Hindu tradition—the icon of the *Hinayāna* tends to become reduced to a formula of extreme simplicity and soberness, as if it were confined to a narrow region half-way between image and non-image, between iconolatry and iconoclasm. Its repetitiveness seems to recall the serene and majestic monotony of the *Sūtras*.

II

The image of Shākyamuni, in becoming a model for other images, assumed a character of universality; nevertheless it retains to a greater or less degree a resemblance to the Shākyamuni of history, if only because he necessarily manifested in all aspects of his sojourn on earth the idea of Buddhahood in every aspect of his being. According to tradition the *tathāgata* himself bequeathed his image to posterity: according to the *Divyāvadāna*, King Rudrāyana or Udāyana sent painters to the Blessed One to take his portrait, but while they were trying in vain to capture the likeness of the Buddha, he told them that their (spiritual) laziness was preventing them from succeeding, and he caused a canvas to be brought, onto which he “projected” his own likeness.¹² This story is very directly reminiscent of the Christian tradition of the *acheiropoietos* image of the Christ on the Mandilion, where it is said that Jesus gave his image, miraculously imprinted on a fabric, to the messengers of the King of Edessa, Abgar, who had asked him for his portrait. Another story is that a disciple of the *tathāgata* tried in vain to draw his portrait; he could not manage to seize the right proportions, every measurement turning out to be too small; in the end the Buddha commanded him to trace the outline of his shadow projected on to the ground. The important point in these two stories is that the sacred image appears as a “projection” of the *tathāgata* himself, and we shall return to this aspect of the tradition; as for the “measure” that eludes human art, it corresponds, like the measure of the Vedic altar, to essential “form”. In this connection too there is a parallel between the Buddhist conception and a certain Christian conception: in the Middle Ages the “true measure” of the body of Jesus was handed down, inscribed on strips of cloth or on columns. Finally from another source we learn that King Prasenajit of Shravasti—or King Udāyana of Kaushambi—caused a



Sandstone Buddha head from Lop Buri, Thailand, 14th century



Buddha, Sukhothai Historical Park, Thailand

¹² See Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Elements of Buddhist Iconography*, p. 6.



Carvings from the Great Stupa of Sanchi: Buddha represented as a stupa (left), as the sacred tree (center), and as the wheel of the Law (right)

¹³ Here again there is a parallel with the oldest emblems of the Christ. On the tympana of church doors the ancient symbolical iconography persisted up to the Romanesque period; there was a reluctance to represent the Christ in human form in such places, but on the other hand the monogram in the shape of a wheel and the tree of life were freely used. The symbol of the “throne made ready” is also found in some Byzantine icons.

¹⁴ The notion that the painted image of the Buddha conforms more nearly to the sacred Law than does the carved image recurs in Japan, in the *Jōdo-shinshū* school.

¹⁵ Sculptured representations of the Christ appear much later than painted ones.

¹⁶ See Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Elements of Buddhist Iconography*, p. 4.

statue to be carved in sandalwood from the living Buddha himself.

Here a few words may be said about the apparently “non-iconic” character of primitive Buddhist art. On the bas-reliefs of Sanchi and Amaravati, which are among the earliest sculptured monuments of Buddhism, the *tathāgata* is not represented in his human likeness; his presence in the midst of his disciples and worshippers is indicated only by emblems such as the sacred tree adorned with jewels or the wheel of the Law (*dharmachakra*) placed on a throne.¹³ However, the absence of portraits carved in stone does not necessarily involve the absence of portraits carved in wood nor *a fortiori* of painted icons. It is as if these were different degrees of artistic exteriorization, a traditional image is to a certain extent tied to a regularly transmitted technique. The transposition of a plane image into a carved image involves an increased “objectivation” of the symbol which is not always desirable;¹⁴ this remark applies equally to Christian art.¹⁵

It is true that an attitude of relative iconoclasm might be expected to follow from the preaching of the Buddha himself, at least from his first sermon, which was public and insists only on the rejection of passions and of their mental concomitants: it outlines Buddhahood, that is to say the transcendent and superhuman nature of a Buddha, only indirectly and by the clash of negations. The *Kālingabodhi Jātaka* moreover relates that the Blessed One forbade the erection of a monument (*chetya*) to which worship and the gifts of the faithful might be offered during his absences.¹⁶ But the image given by the Buddha himself, through his miraculous “projection” of himself, is in quite a different category, and the sacred narrative that speaks of the inability of painters to capture by their own efforts the likeness of the *tathāgata*, or to lay hold on his measurements, answers in advance the iconoclastic argument. The sacred icon is a manifestation of the grace of the Buddha; it



emanates from his superhuman power, in that it is an expression of his vow not to enter into *nirvāna* without having first delivered all beings from the *samsāra*.¹⁷

The statement just made appears to be contradictory to the doctrine of *karma*, according to which salvation is to be found only in the inward denudation that arrests the wheel of births and deaths; it is not possible to lay hold of *Bodhi* from without, by speculation or by the mental assimilation of symbols, but when the waves of passion die, *Bodhi* will shine forth of itself. This however is only one "dimension" of Buddhism, for Buddhism would be neither conceivable nor efficacious without the fascinating example of the Buddha himself, and without the spiritual perfume that emanates from his words and his actions, in short, without the grace which the *tathāgata* spreads abroad in sacrificing his own merits for the good of all beings. This grace, without which it would be impossible for man to surpass himself, is an effect of the original vow of the Blessed One; through this vow his own will broke all its ties with the individual will.¹⁸

Yet if one considers the matter fully one can see that the two aspects of Buddhism, the doctrine of *karma* and its quality of grace, are inseparable, for to demonstrate the real nature of the world is also to transcend it; it is to manifest by implication the changeless states, and it is a breach made in the closed system of becoming. This breach is the Buddha himself; thenceforth all that comes from him carries the influx of *Bodhi*.

In the "golden age" of Buddhism a plastic representation of the *tathāgata* may have been superfluous; it may even have been inopportune in an environment still strongly impregnated with Hinduism. But later on, when the spiritual understanding and the wills of men were weakening, and when a certain cleavage took place between their thoughts and their wills, every means of grace, including the sacred image, became opportune and even indispensable. Such is notably the case with certain formulae of invocation, which are as it were enshrined in the canonical texts; they were, generally speaking, only brought into use at a particular time and under the stimulus of an appropriate inspiration. Similarly, we learn from certain Buddhist sources that such and such an artist, having gained great spiritual merit, was transported into the paradise of Shākyamuni or of Amitābha so that he might record and transmit his image.¹⁹

The impossibility of proving the historical authenticity of a sacred portrait such as that of the Buddha must be admitted, but this in no way invalidates the truth that the image in its traditional form expresses the very essence of Buddhism; one could even say that it constitutes one of the most powerful proofs of Buddhism.

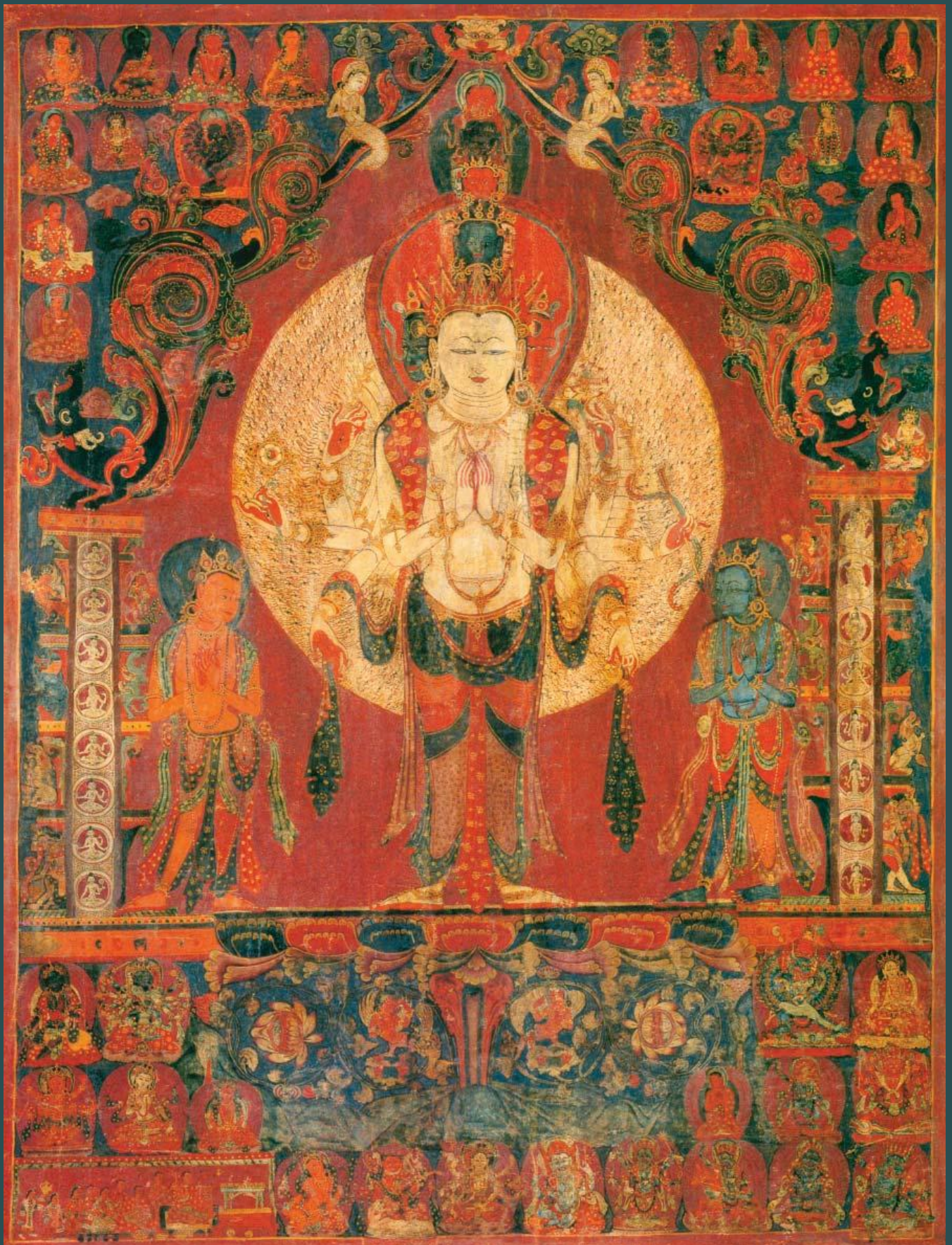
¹⁷ Anyone who is surprised at the idea that the Buddha's vow can save "all beings" may well be equally surprised at the dogma according to which the Christ died "for all men". The universal grace actualized by a supreme sacrifice cannot however become operative in either case except where it is welcomed.

¹⁸ In theological language one would say that by his vow his will became identified with the Divine Will.

¹⁹ See Henri de Lubac, *Amida*.



Amoghasiddhi, one of the five wisdom Buddhas of the Vajrayana tradition, Central Tibet, c. 1200-1250



Eleven-faced, thousand-armed Avalokiteshvara, Guge, Western Tibet, second half of the 15th century



Shakyamuni Buddha at the Vulture Peak Paradise, Central or Eastern Tibet, 18th century

III

The traditional portrait of the Buddha Shākyamuni is founded partly on a canon of proportions and partly on a description of the distinguishing marks of the body of a Buddha derived from the Scriptures (Fig. 13).

A diagram of the proportions in use in Tibet²⁰ shows the outlines of the seated body, not including the head, enclosed within a square that is reflected in the square framing the head; similarly the outline of the surface of the chest, measured from the level of the shoulders to the navel, is reflected, on a scale reduced by a simple proportion, within the square enclosing the face. Measurements on a descending scale regulate the height of the torso, the face, and the sacred protuberance on the crown of the head. The proportions prescribed in this diagram, of which variants may exist, ensure the static perfection of the figure as a whole, and an impression of unshakable and serene equilibrium. There is a hidden analogy between the human image of the Buddha and the shape of the *stūpa*, the shrine holding a relic. The *stūpa* may be con-

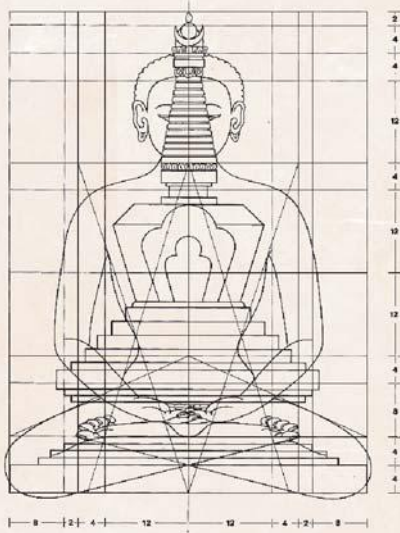


Fig. 12. Diagram of the relationship between the Buddha image and the *stūpa*

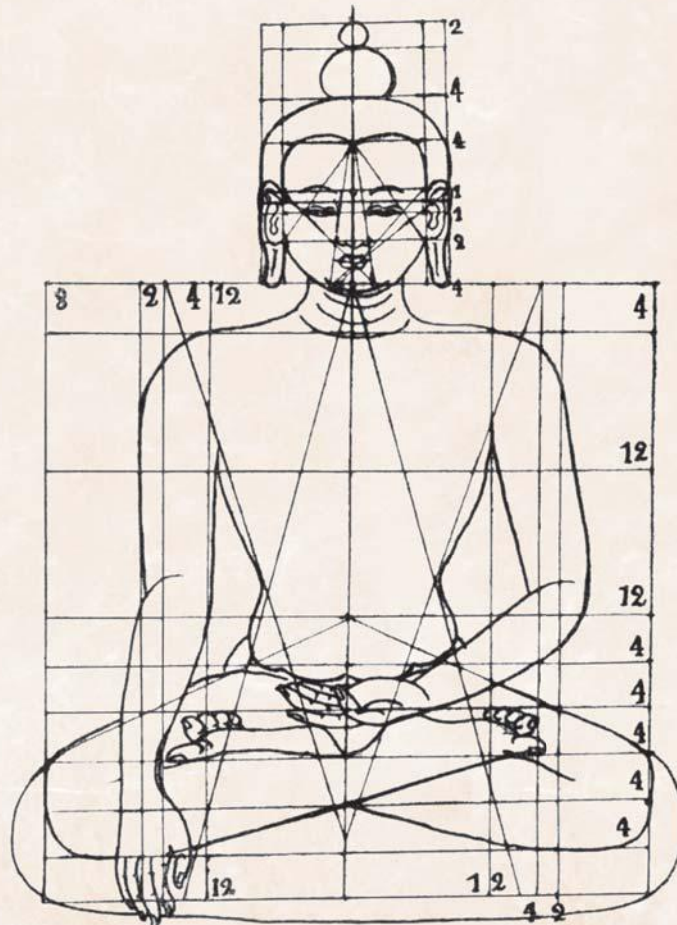


Fig. 13. Diagram of the proportions of the "true image" of the Buddha, from a drawing by a Tibetan artist

²⁰ Reproduced in *Peaks and Lamas* by Marco Pallis (London: Cassell, 1939).



Gilded bronze *stupa* by Zanabazar, Ulan Batar, Mongolia, late 17th century



Amida Buddha by Kaikei, Japan, Kamakura period,
13th century

sidered as representing the universal body of the *tathāgata*: its various levels or storeys, square below and more or less spherical above, symbolize the multiple planes or levels of existence. The same hierarchy is reflected on a smaller scale in the human image of the Buddha, whose torso is like the cubical part of the *stūpa*, while his head, crowned with the protuberance of “Buddhahood”, corresponds to the cupola surmounted by a pinnacle.

The gestures of the hands are derived from the science of *mudrās*, inherited by Buddhism from Hinduism.



Different *mudras* of the Buddha

Generally speaking the symbolism of gestures is based on the fact that the right hand corresponds quite naturally to the active pole of the universe or of the soul, while the left hand represents the passive or receptive pole. The polarity is that of essence and substance, of *Purusha* and *Prakriti*, of Heaven and Earth, of Spirit and psyche, of will and sensibility, etc. The relation of the positions of the two hands can therefore express at the same time a fundamental aspect of the doctrine, a state of the soul, and a phase or an aspect of the cosmos.

The image of the Buddha retains some of his personal characteristics, scrupulously preserved by tradition; these are superimposed on a hieratic type, the general form of which is more or less defined or fixed, and is more in the nature of a symbol than a portrait. In the eyes of Far Eastern peoples, who received the traditional image of the Buddha from India, that image always retains certain specifically Indian racial characteristics, even though Chinese and Japanese replicas of the very same icon betray their Mongol origin. Moreover an assimilation to the Mongoloid type detracts in no way from the original expression of the image, quite the contrary: its look of imperturbable calm, of static plenitude, and of serenity is reinforced by this reconciliation of races. It could also be said that the spiritual norm of which the sacred image of the Buddha is the vehicle, is communicated to the spectator as a psycho-physical attitude highly characteristic of the congenital demeanor of Mongol peoples of the Buddhist faith. In all this there is something like a magical relationship between the worshipper and the icon: the icon



Dainichi Buddha, Japan, Heian period



Nyorai (Tathagatha) Amida Buddha looking back for any stragglers to take to the Pure Land, Zenrin-ji, Kyoto, Japan



Shaka Rising from the Golden Coffin (detail), Japan, 11th century

penetrates the bodily consciousness of the man, and the man as it were projects himself into the image; having found in himself that of which the image is an expression, he transmits back to it a subtle power which then shines forth on others.

Before closing this chapter a further word must be said about the Hellenic influence on the sculpture of the school of Gandhara. The im-

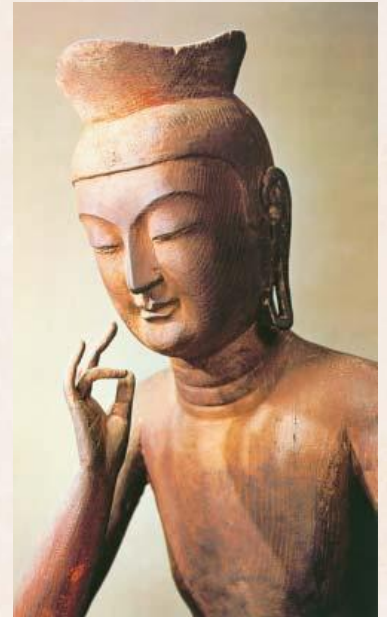
portance of that influence has been often exaggerated, and such effect as it had can only have been towards naturalism; naturalism did indeed threaten at first to overwhelm the hieratic models, but its onset was soon stemmed. Thereafter naturalism survived only within a strictly traditional framework, in the shape of a delicate richness of line or surface, enlivening the work as a whole without disturbing its essential quality in any way. If the Hellenic influence was anything more than a passing accident, it is only in so far as it slightly displaced the artistic plane of expression without altering its essence; it may have been responsible for the change from the painted to the carved sacred portrait.

The door through which Hellenism effected an entry was the apparently philosophical character of Buddhism in its analysis of the world. The teaching of Shākyamuni on the inexorable concatenation of causes and effects, desires and griefs, appeals *a priori* to reason alone; but the theory of *karma*, which is not unrelated to stoicism, is but the shell of the Buddha's message; its kernel is accessible only to contemplation and is out of the reach of all rational thought. The rationalizing shell is more pronounced in the *Hīnayāna*; in the *Mahāyāna* it is as if the presence of the supra-formal kernel had burst the shell. Moreover the sacred images of the *Mahāyāna* have more spiritual breadth than those of the *Hīnayāna*, which tend towards formality and grace of ornament.

The painting of the *Mahāyāna* profited to some extent from the subtle techniques of Taoist art: the drawing at once concise and fluid, the restrained delicacy of coloring, and the characteristic treatment of clouds and the backgrounds of the landscapes that surround the apparition of a Buddha, confer an almost vision-like quality on these pictures; some of them show evidence of a direct intuition, an intuition that is "personal" or "lived": they had moreover an effect as of inspired preaching.²¹ The Japanese genius, which so easily reconciles spontaneity and severity, has contributed to the creation of some of the most marvelous of works, such as certain images of Amida (Amitābha) appearing above a lotus like the disc of the sun in an unsullied dawn, or of Kwannon gliding over the waters like the full moon at twilight.

The "sacramental" function of the image of the Buddha derives from the fact that the image perpetuates the bodily presence of the Buddha himself, and that it constitutes in a certain sense the indispensable complement of a doctrine made up of pure negations; for if Shākyamuni avoided all mental objectivation of the transcendent Essence, it was because he was thereby enabled to express it all the more fully in the spiritual beauty of his mere existence. Like his revelation of the Way, the economy of his means is also a grace.

Bodhidharma, the patriarch of *Dhyāna*, said: "The essence of things is not describable; to express it words are used. The royal way that leads to perfection is not marked out; in order that initiates may be able to recognize it, forms are used."



Miroku (Maitreya) *bosatsu*, Koryu-ji, Kyoto, Asuka period, 7th century

²¹ Particularly the images of Amitābha painted by Genshin in the tenth century of our era. See Henri de Lubac, *Amida*, p. 143.



Greeting picture of Amida Buddha and twenty-five *bodhisattvas*, Kongobu-ji, Japan, Muromachi period



Amida Buddha rising from behind the mountains like a sun of compassion, Japan, 13th century

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Landscape in Far Eastern Art¹

I

The subject of Far Eastern landscape painting inevitably brings to mind the masterpieces of the “Southern School”, which are distinguished by an exquisite economy in the use of resources and a “spontaneity” in execution, as well as by the use of Indian ink and a technique of washes. The term “Southern” applied to this school carries no geographical implication, it is merely a label for a particular tendency in Chinese Buddhism, and its products really represent Taoist painting in the form in which it was perpetuated within the framework of Chinese and Japanese *dhyāna* Buddhism.² The “Northern School” will not be considered here. It makes use of precise and detailed outlines, bright opaque colors, and gold; in this way it approaches the Indo-Persian miniatures in style.

Far back in Chinese antiquity the whole of Taoist art was summarized in the emblem of a disc perforated in the center. The disc represents the heavens or the cosmos, the void in its center the unique and transcendent Essence. Sometimes these discs are decorated with the symbol of the two cosmic dragons, analogous to the complementary principles *Yang* and *Yin*, the “active” and the “passive”; the dragons circle round the hole in the center as if they were trying to lay hold on the unseizable void. The point of view is the same in landscape paintings of Buddhist (*ch’an*) inspiration, where all the elements, mountains, trees, and clouds, are there only in order to emphasize by contrast the void, out of which they seem to have arisen at that very instant, and from which they are detached like ephemeral islets.

In the earliest Chinese representations of landscapes, engraved on metal mirrors, on bowls, or on funereal slabs, beings and objects seem to be subordinated to the play of the elements, wind, fire, water, and earth. To express the movement of clouds, water, and fire, various kinds of curvilinear meander are used; rocks are conceived as an ascending movement of the earth; trees are defined less by their static outlines than by their structure, which reveals the rhythm of their growth. The cosmic alternation of *Yang* and *Yin*, the active and the passive, is apparent in every form or composition. All this accords with the six maxims formulated in the fifth century of our era by the famous painter



Openwork disc with a pair of dragons, China, Han Dynasty, 206 B.C.-220 A.D.

¹ Editor’s Note: From *Sacred Art in East and West*, chapter 6.

² The Sanskrit word *dhyāna* means “contemplation”. Its Chinese equivalent is *ch’an-na* or *ch’an*, and Japanese *zenna* or *zen*. See Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, Third Series (London: Rider, 1953); and E. Steinilber-Oberlin, *The Buddhist Sects of Japan: Their History, Philosophical Doctrines, and Sanctuaries* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1938).



Landscape of the Four Seasons, attributed to Tensho Shubun (1414-1463), Japan, Muromachi period



Shen Zhou (1427-1509), *Scholar and Crane Returning Home*, Ming Dynasty



Hsia Kuei (active c. 1200-1240),
Streams and Mountains, Pure and Remote

Hsieh Ho: 1. The creative spirit must identify itself with the rhythm of the cosmic life; 2. the brush must express the intimate structure of things; 3. the likeness will be established by the outlines; 4. the particular appearances of things will be conveyed by color; 5. the groupings must be coordinated according to a plan; 6. tradition must be perpetuated through the models it provides. From this it can be seen that it is rhythm and its primary expression as linear structure that are the foundations of the work, rather than the static plan and plastic contours of things, as is the case in the traditional painting of the West.

The technique of painting in Indian ink was developed from Chinese writing, itself derived from a real pictography. A Chinese calligraphist uses his brush with his hand unsupported, modulating the line by a movement that starts from the shoulder. It is this method that gives to the painting its quality of fluidity combined with conciseness.

In this style of painting there is no strict perspective, centered on a single point, but space is suggested by a sort of "progressive vision". When looking at a "vertical" picture, hung on the wall at the height of a seated observer, the eye as it were climbs up the steps of the distance, from bottom to top; a "horizontal" picture is unrolled from one end to the other as it is examined, and the eye follows the movement. This "progressive vision" does not separate space completely from time, and for that reason it is nearer to the truth of experience than is a perspective artificially arrested on a single "viewpoint". Moreover all traditional arts, whatever their methods, work towards a synthesis of space and time.

Although Tao-Buddhist painting does not indicate the source of light by the play of light and shade, its landscapes are none the less



Chao Meng-fu (1254-1322),
Old Tree, Bamboo, and Rock



Dai Jin (1388-1462),
*Seeking the Tao in a
Cavern-Heaven*, Ming
Dynasty, 15th century



filled with a light that permeates every form like a celestial ocean with a pearly luster: it is the beatitude of the Void (*shūnyā*) that is bright through the absence of all darkness.

The composition is made up of allusions and evocations, in accordance with this saying from the *Tao Te Ching*: “The greatest perfection must appear imperfect, and then it will be infinite in its effect; the greatest abundance must appear empty, and then it will be inexhaustible in its effect.” Never does a Chinese or Japanese painter represent the world in the likeness of a finished cosmos, and in this respect his vision is as different as possible from that of a Westerner, even of a traditional Westerner, whose conception of the world is always more or less “architectural”. A Far Eastern painter is a contemplative, and for him the world is as if it were made of snowflakes, quickly crystallized and soon dissolved. Since he is never unconscious of the non-manifested, the least solidified physical conditions are for him the nearer to the Reality underlying all phenomena: hence the subtle observation of atmosphere that we admire in Chinese paintings in ink and wash.

Attempts have been made to relate this style to European impressionism, as if the starting points of each were not radically different, despite certain accidental analogies. When impressionism relativizes the characteristic and stable contours of things in favor of an instantaneous effect of atmosphere, it is because it is seeking, not the presence of a cosmic reality superior to individual objects, but on the contrary a

Attributed to Wu Yuanzhi (1126-1233), illustration to *Ode to the Red Cliff* (detail)





Shen Zhou, *Poet on a Mountain Top*,
Ming Dynasty

subjective impression as fleeting as it could be; in this case it is the ego, with its wholly passive and affective sensibility, that colors the scene. Taoist painting on the contrary avoids from the start, in its method and in its intellectual orientation, the hold of mind and feeling, avid as they are of individualistic affirmations; in its eyes the instantaneity of nature, with all its inimitable and almost unseizable qualities, is not in the first place an emotional experience; that is to say the emotion found in nature is not in any way individualistic nor even homocentric; its vibration dissolves in the serene calm of contemplation. The miracle of the instant, immobilized by a sensation of eternity, unveils the primordial harmony of things, a harmony that is ordinarily hidden under the subjective continuity of the mind. When this veil is suddenly torn, hitherto unobserved relationships, linking together beings and things, reveal their essential unity. A particular painting may represent, for instance, two herons on the bank of a stream in springtime; one of them gazes into the depths of the waters, the other holds up his head listening, and in their two momentary yet static attitudes they are mysteriously at one with the water, with the reeds bent by the wind, with the mountain tops appearing over the mist. By way of a single aspect of virgin nature, the timeless has touched the soul of the painter like a lightning stroke.

II

Though full of suggestiveness this art exists in the first place for the painter himself; it is a method for actualizing contemplative intuition, and it is as such that it has been assimilated and developed by the *dhyāna* Buddhism of the Far East, which can itself be regarded as a synthesis of Taoism and Buddhism. *Dhyāna* Buddhism can however be acquitted of eclecticism, because the confluence of the two traditions is based on a fully orthodox identification of the Buddhist notion of universal Void (*shūnya*) with the Taoist notion of Non-Being; this Void or Non-Being leaves its mark at different levels of reality as non-determination, non-form, and non-corporeity.

The technique of painting in Indian ink, with its calligraphy made up of flowing signs that are perfectly crystallized only through the workings of a superlative insight, is in harmony with the intellectual “style” of *dhyāna* Buddhism, which seeks with all its resources to provoke, after an internal crisis, a sudden release of illumination, the Japanese *Satori*. The artist following the *dhyāna* method must therefore practice calligraphic painting until he has mastered it, and then he must forget it. Similarly he must concentrate on his subject, and then detach himself from it; then alone will intuition take charge of his brush.³

It should be noted that this artistic procedure is very different from that adopted in the other and hieratic branch of Far Eastern Buddhist art, which derives its models from India and concentrates on the sacred image of the Buddha. Far from postulating a sudden flash of intuition, the creation of an “icon” or a statue of the Buddha is essentially founded on the faithful transmission of a prototype; it is well known that the sacred image incorporates proportions and special signs attributed by tradition to the Buddha of history. The spiritual efficacy of this art is safeguarded by the singleness of its aim and the almost changeless character of its forms. The intuition of the artist may bring out certain qualities implicit in his model, but adherence to tradition and faith suffice to perpetuate the sacramental quality of his art.

To return to the painting of landscapes, the unalterable rules of the art are less concerned with the object to be represented than with the artistic procedure as such. Before concentrating on his work, or more exactly on his own essence empty of images, the disciple of Zen must prepare his instruments in a particular way and arrange them as for a rite; the formality of his gestures precludes in advance the intrusion of any individualistic “urge”. Creative spontaneity is thus actualized within a consecrated framework.

The two figurative arts just mentioned have this in common, namely that they both express primarily a state of being at rest in itself. This state is suggested in the hieratic art by the attitude of the Buddha or *bodhisattva* and by forms that are saturated with an interior beatitude, whereas the landscape paintings express it through an “objective”



Black ink landscape by the Zen Buddhist priest Sesshu Toyo (1420-1506), 1495

³ A similar method is applied in the art of archery. See the excellent book by Eugen Herrigel (Bungaku Hakushi), *Zen in the Art of Archery*.



Soami (1485-1525), *Li Bai Viewing the Waterfall*, Japan, Muromachi period. The painting depicts Li Bai (701-762), a renowned poet of Tang China, gazing at the waterfall at the foot of Mount Lu-Shan, one of four famous mountains in China

⁴ See Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *Essais sur le Bouddhisme Zen*, collection *Spiritualités Vivantes* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1953), vol. 1, p. 215ff.

⁵ See Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *The Zen Doctrine of No Mind* (London: Rider, 1949).

⁶ There is a modern psychological school which defines the “collective subconscious” as an entity not directly accessible to scientific investigation—since the unconscious cannot as such become conscious—but such that its latent propensities, improperly called “archetypes”, can be inferred from certain irrational “outbursts” of the soul; the “abrupt” illumination of Zen seems to corroborate this last definition. Using this hypothesis, the “collective subconscious” has been made into a sort of elastic container, wherein everything that does not simply belong to the physical or rational orders can find a place, even intuition and faculties such as telepathy and premonition. At least that is the idea; but in reality psychological research still continues to be restricted, in this case as in others, by the point of view adopted by psychologists. Anyone who scrutinizes, dissects, and classifies cannot but place himself, with or without good reason, “above” the object of his study; for this reason his object is necessarily less than himself, that is to say, less than his mind, which in its turn is limited by the categories of science. If the “subconscious” were really the ontological source of individual consciousness, that consciousness could never put itself into the position of a detached and “objective” observer with respect to its own source; the “unconscious” that can become in an indirect way an object of scientific investigation will therefore always be a “subconscious”, that is to say,

content of consciousness, a contemplative vision of the world. This “existential” quality in Buddhist art could be said to counterbalance the negative form of the doctrine.

Meditation on the visible earth and sky is no doubt an inheritance from Taoism; under the changing face of the elements lies hidden the great Dragon who rises from the waters, leaps towards the sky, and is manifested in the storm; nevertheless visual meditation as such has a starting-point in Buddhism which indeed is the same as the starting-point of *dhyāna* itself. According to the particular tradition associated with that way, the *dhyāna* method arose out of the “sermon of the flower”: appearing one day before his disciples as if intending to expound the doctrine to them, the Buddha held up a flower without saying a word. The monk Mahākāshyapa alone, the first patriarch of *dhyāna*, understood his purpose and smiled up at the Master, who said to him: “I hold the most precious treasure, spiritual and transcendental, which at this moment I transmit to you, venerable Mahākāshyapa”.⁴

III

The method of *dhyāna*, which finds its direct reflection in art, comprises an aspect that has given rise to many false assimilations: namely, the part played in it by the unconscious, or more precisely “non-conscious” modalities of the soul. It is important not to confuse the “non-consciousness” (*Wu-nien*) or the “non-mental” (*Wu-hsin*) of *dhyāna* Buddhism⁵ with the “subconscious” of modern psychologists, for the state of intuitive spontaneity actualized by the *dhyāna* method is evidently not *beneath* normal individual consciousness, but is on the contrary *above* it. The true nature of being is “non-conscious” because it is neither “conscious” in the sense of possessing a distinctive intelligence nor “unconscious” and obscure like the inferior prolongations of the soul which constitute the subconscious. Nevertheless, from the point of view of method, the domain of “non-consciousness” includes by virtue of a certain symbolical relationship, the “unconscious” in its aspect of potentiality; this aspect is situated on the same level as instinct. The individual polarization of the intelligence creates a contrast between the fragmented and changing daylight of distinctive consciousness and the undifferentiated night of “non-consciousness”, and thereafter “non-consciousness” covers the degrees of unitive knowledge (*Prajñā*) as well as the subtle affinities that exist, on a lower plane, between the soul and its cosmic environment. It is not the passive and obscure sub-conscious—the domain of chaotic residues⁶—that concerns us here, for the psychological “non-conscious” is in this case identified with the plastic power of the soul; this plastic power is in a sense related to nature conceived as the great material storehouse of forms. Engrossment by

the mind, or more exactly by interested and anxious thought, prevents the “instinctive” faculties of the soul from unfolding in all their original generosity;⁷ it will be seen that this touches closely on artistic creation. When sudden illumination, *Satori*, pierces the individual consciousness, the plastic power of the soul responds spontaneously to the supra-rational action of *Prajñā*, just as in nature at large all movements are apparently unconscious, while in reality they are obedient to universal Intelligence.

Nature is like a blind man who acts in the same way as a man gifted with sight; its “unconsciousness” is but a contingent aspect of universal “non-consciousness”. In the eyes of a *dhyāna* Buddhist the non-mental character of virgin nature, of minerals, plants, and animals, is as it were their humility before the unique Essence, which surpasses all thought. That is how a natural landscape with its cyclical transformations unveils for him the alchemy of the soul; the motionless plenitude of a summer day and the crystalline clearness of winter are like the two extreme states of the soul in contemplation; the tempest of autumn is the crisis, and the glittering freshness of spring corresponds to the spiritually regenerated soul. It is in this sense that one must understand the paintings of the seasons by a Wu Tao-Tsu or a Hwei-Tsung.

IV

The sister art to landscape painting in the Far East is the art of siting houses, temples, and cities in the most propitious manner in any particular natural setting. This art, which has been codified in the Chinese doctrine of “wind and water”, the *Feng-shui*, is a form of sacred geography. Based on a science of orientation, it is a complete art in itself, directed to the conscious modification of certain elements in the landscape, with a view to actualizing its positive qualities and neutralizing evil influences arising out of the chaotic aspects of nature.

This branch of the ancient tradition of China was also assimilated by *dhyāna* Buddhism, which becomes Zen in Japan, where it has been developed to a state of perfection, and where interiors of an extreme sobriety are set against the natural variety of gardens and hills, which can be excluded or admitted by moving light side-walls. When the side-walls of a pavilion or a room are shut, there remains nothing to distract the mind; a diffused light filters through the paper windows; the surroundings of the monk sitting on his mat are harmonious and simple, and lead him towards the “void” of his own Essence; by contrast, when he moves the walls aside, his attention is turned towards his natural surroundings, and he contemplates the world as if he were seeing it for the first time. He will then see the original formation of the landscape and its vegetation combined with the art of the gardener, who knows how to efface himself before the genius of nature while at



Emperor Hwei-Tsung (1082-1135),
Birds in a Blossoming Wax-Plum Tree

a subhuman reality, normal or unhealthy as the case may be. If this “subconscious” contains any ancestral psychic tendencies, they can only be purely passive in character; they must not be confused with the supra-mental sources of traditional symbolism, of which they are at most shadows or residues. A psychologist who seeks to study the “religious phenomena of the soul” by reference to the subconscious will therefore only get hold of their inferior psychic concomitants.

⁷ Thus it is that in the art of archery inspired by Zen the target is hit though the archer has not directed his aim at it. The interference of discursive thought clogs natural genius; an illustration of this is the Chinese fable of the spider who asks the millipede how he manages to walk without tangling up his feet; the millipede begins to think, and suddenly he cannot walk any more.



A Japanese house

the same time shaping it according to an overriding inspiration. Inside the room, where order and cleanliness prevail, every form bears witness to that intellectual objectivity which sets things in order while respecting the nature of each; to each of the primary materials, cedar wood, bamboo, reeds, and paper, is accorded its proper value with a judicious discrimination; the geometrical rigidity of the general effect is mitigated here and there by a pillar roughly shaped with an axe or a curved beam like an untamed mountain tree; by these means poverty is allied to nobility, originality to clarity, primordial nature to wisdom.

In such an environment the arbitrariness of individuality, with its passion and its boredom, have no place; here the changeless law of the Spirit prevails, and with it the innocence and beauty of nature.

V

Landscape in the eyes of a Chinese is “mountain and water”. The mountain or the rock represents the active or masculine principle, *Yang*, and the water corresponds to the feminine and passive principle, *Yin*. The complementary nature of the two is expressed most plainly and richly in a waterfall, the first choice of *dhyāna* painters as a subject. Sometimes it is a cascade of several stages, hugging the side of a

mountain in springtime, sometimes a single jet dropping from the cliff's edge, or a strong spate, like the famous cascade of Wang-Wei which appears from the clouds and disappears into a veil of foam in one great leap, so that the spectator soon feels that he is himself being swept onwards in the swirl of the elements.

Like every symbol, that of the waterfall veils Reality while at the same time revealing it. The inertness of a rock is the inverse of the immutability appertaining to the celestial or divine act, and similarly the dynamism of the water veils the principal passivity of which it is the expression. Nevertheless, through an attentive contemplation of rock and waterfall, the spirit eventually brings about a sudden integration. In the endless repeated rhythm of the water, hugging the motionless rock, it recognizes the activity of the immutable and the passivity of the dynamic; from that point it lifts its gaze, and in a sudden illumination it catches a glimpse of the Essence which is at once pure activity and infinite repose, which is neither motionless like rock nor changeable like water, but inexpressible in Its reality empty of all forms.



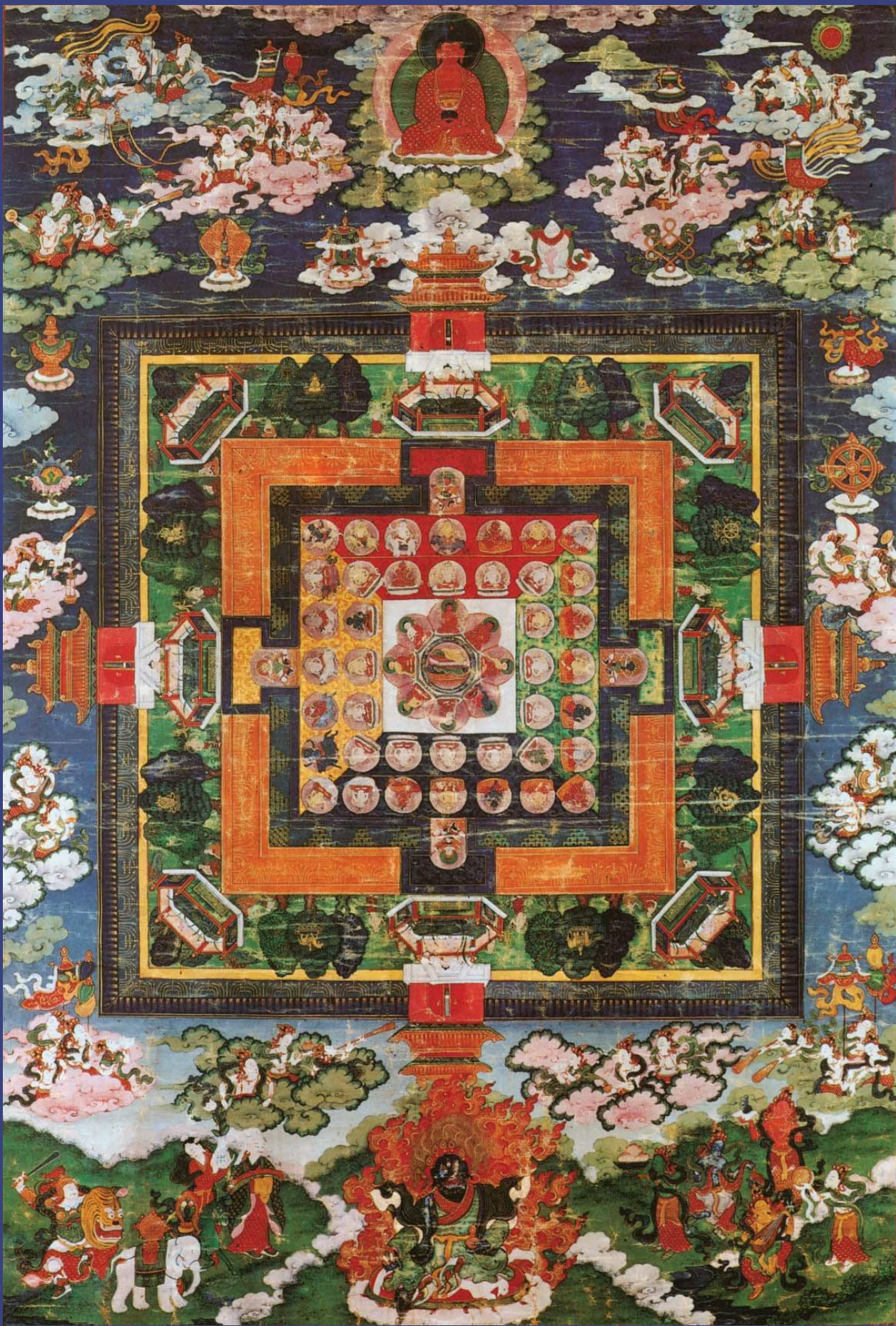
Wang-Wei (699-761), *Waterfall*, Tang Dynasty



Thangka of the Kalachakra mandala, Tibet, late 15th century



PART II: SYMBOLISM



*Selected Thoughts on Symbolism*¹

I

One must not confuse a symbol with a mere allegory, nor try to see in it the expression of some misty and irrational collective instinct. True symbolism depends on the fact that things, which may differ from one another in time, space, material nature, and many other limitative characteristics, can possess and exhibit the same essential quality. They thus appear as diverse reflections, manifestations, or productions of the same reality—which in itself is independent of time and space. It is thus not quite right to say that gold represents the sun, and silver the moon; rather is it the case that the two noble metals and the two luminaries are both symbols of the same two cosmic or divine realities.²

II

According to the modern point of view science is built up exclusively on the basis of experience. From the traditional point of view, experience is nothing without that core of truth which comes from the Intellect, and around which individual experiences can crystallize. Thus Hermetic science is based on certain traditional symbols which derive from a spiritual revelation. The expression “revelation” is used here in a somewhat wider sense than that usually given to it by theology, but is not intended in a purely poetic sense. In Hindu terms, the spiritual process in question would be regarded as a revelation “of second rank”, that is to say, as *smriti* rather than *shruti*. In Christian terms, one would speak of an inspiration of the Holy Spirit, intended not for the whole community of the faithful but only for certain people capable of a particular mode and degree of contemplation.

The immutable possibilities contained in the Intellect cannot be grasped immediately by the reason. Plato called these possibilities ideas or archetypes, and one would do well to preserve the true meaning of these expressions, and not apply them to mere generalizations—which at best are no more than reflections of true ideas—nor to the purely psychological realm known as the “collective unconscious”. The latter misuse is especially misleading since it involves a confusion of the in-



Tomoye, a symbol related to *Yin–Yang*, representing the play of forces in the cosmos, Futarasan Shrine, Nikko, Japan

¹ Editor’s Note: Excerpts from *Alchemy: Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1997).

² An excellent description of what a symbol means is to be found in the ethnological study by E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*, chapter entitled “The Problem of Symbols” (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956).

divisibility of the Intellect with the impenetrability of the passive and darksome depths of the soul. The archetypes are to be found not below, but above the level of reason, and so it is that whatever the reason can discern regarding them is never more than a severely restricted aspect of what they really are in themselves. Only in the “one-ing” of the soul with the Spirit—or its return into the undivided unity of the Spirit—does a certain reflection of the eternal possibilities in the formal consciousness take place. The contents of the Intellect, which is, as it were, the “faculty” of the Spirit, thus suddenly “congeal”, in the form of symbols, in the reason and the imagination.

A symbol is whatever, on the planes of the soul and the body, reproduces spiritual prototypes. In connection with this reflection of higher realities on lower planes, the imagination possesses a certain advantage over abstract thought. In the first place, it is capable of multiple interpretation; furthermore, it is not so schematic as abstract thought, and also, in so far as it “condenses” itself into a pure image, it relies on the inverse correspondence that exists between the corporeal and spiritual realms, according to the law that “whatever is below resembles that which is above”.



Yin-Yang and the Eight Trigrams, China

III

In so far as the human intellect, as a result of a more or less complete union with the Universal Intellect, turns away from the multiplicity of things and so to say ascends towards undivided unity, so the knowledge of nature which a man obtains from such an insight cannot be of a purely rational or discursive kind. For him the world has now become as if transparent: in its appearances he sees the reflection of eternal “prototypes”. And even when this insight is not immediately present, the symbols which spring from it nevertheless arouse the memory or “recollection” of these prototypes.

What is decisive for such a view is not the measurable and enumerable nature of things, conditioned as it is by temporal causes and circumstances; rather is it their essential qualities, which one can imagine as the vertical threads (warp) of a woven material, taken as representing the world, round which the shuttle alternately winds the horizontal thread (woof), thus making the woven material a unitary and compact material. The vertical threads are the immutable contents or “essences” of things, while the horizontal threads represent their “substantial” nature, dominated by time, space, and similar conditions.³

Modern science “dissects” things, with a view to possessing and mastering them on their own level. Its aim is above all technology. Rationalism clung to the belief that by means of material and quantitative analysis it could discover the true nature of things. Characteristic of this point of view is Descartes’ opinion that the scholastic definition of man



Sri Yantra, India

³ On the symbolism of woven material, see René Guénon, *The Symbolism of the Cross*, chapter 14, “The Symbolism of Weaving”.

as “an animal endowed with reason” tells us nothing about man unless, by the study of his bones, tendons, tissues, etc., we know what the word “man” really means.⁴ As if a definition were not all the nearer to the essential, the broader it is! Analytical understanding is ultimately nothing more than the knife which probes into the joints of things. By so doing, it permits a clearer view of these. But the essence is not accessible to mere dissection.

⁴ Descartes, *La Recherche de la vérité par les lumières naturelles*, mentioned in Maurice Daumas, “Histoire de la science”, Encyclopédie de la Pléiade, p. 481.



Stone Wheel of the Law (*Dharmachakra*), Thailand, 7th-8th centuries. The wheel represents the Buddha's doctrine and the deer symbolizes Deer Park in Sarnath where Buddha delivered his first sermon



Ritual *dorje* (left) and bell (right), symbols of *Prajna* (Wisdom) and *Upaya* (Method), China, Yuan to Ming dynasties

*Traditional Symbolism and Modern Empiricism*¹



Sukhavati, the Western Paradise of
Amitabha, Tibet, 18th century

If the ancient cosmogonies seem childish when one takes their symbolism literally—and this means not understanding them—modern theories about the origin of the world are frankly absurd. They are so, not so much in their mathematical formulations, but because of the total unawareness with which their authors set themselves up as sovereign witnesses of cosmic becoming, while at the same time claiming that the human mind itself is a product of this becoming. What connection is there between the primordial nebulae—that vortex of matter whence they wish to derive earth, life, and man—and this little mental mirror that loses itself in conjectures (since, for scientists, intelligence amounts to little more) and yet feels so sure of discovering the logic of things within itself? How can the effect make judgments regarding its own cause? And if there are constant laws of nature—those of causality, number, space, and time—and if there is something within ourselves which has the right to say “this is true and this is false”, where is the guarantee of truth, either in the object or in the subject? Is the nature of our mind merely a drop of foam on the waves of the cosmic ocean, as evolutionism maintains, or, on the contrary, is there, deep within it, a timeless witness of reality?

Some protagonists of the theories in question will perhaps say that they are concerned only with the physical and objective domain, without seeking to prejudge the domain of the subjective. They can perhaps cite Descartes, who defined spirit and matter as two realities, coordinated by Providence, but separated in fact. In point of fact, this division of reality into watertight compartments served to prepare people’s minds to leave aside everything that is not of the physical order, as if man were not himself proof of the complexity of the real.

The man of antiquity, who pictured the earth as an island surrounded by a primordial ocean and covered by the dome of heaven, and medieval man, who saw the heavens as concentric spheres extending from the earth (viewed as the center) to the limitless sphere of the Divine Spirit, were doubtless mistaken regarding the true disposition and proportions of the sensible universe. On the other hand, they were fully conscious of the fact—ininitely more important—that this corporeal world is not the whole of reality; that it is, so to speak, surrounded and pervaded by a reality that is both greater and more subtle; that this, in

¹ Editor’s Note: From *Mirror of the Intellect: Essays on Traditional Science and Sacred Art*, chapter 2 (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1987).

turn, is contained in the Spirit; and that, indirectly or directly, the universe, in all its extension, disappears in the face of the Infinite.

Modern man knows that the earth is only a ball suspended in a bottomless abyss and carried along in a dizzy and complex movement, and that this movement is governed by other celestial bodies incomparably larger than this earth and situated at immense distances from it. He knows that the earth on which he lives is but a grain of sand in comparison with the sun, that the sun itself is but a grain of sand amidst other incandescent stars, and that all is in motion. An irregularity in this assemblage of sidereal movements, an interference from a star foreign to our planetary system, a deviation of the sun's trajectory, or any other cosmic accident, would suffice to make the earth unsteady in its rotation, to trouble the course of the seasons, to change the atmosphere, and to destroy mankind. Modern man also knows that the smallest atom contains forces which, if unleashed, could involve the earth in an almost instantaneous conflagration. All of this, from the "infinitely small" to the "infinitely great", presents itself, from the point of view of modern science, as a mechanism of unimaginable complexity, the functioning of which is only due to blind forces.

In spite of this, the man of our time lives and acts as if the normal and habitual operation of the rhythms of nature were something that was guaranteed to him. In actual practice, he thinks neither of the abysses of the stellar world nor of the terrible forces latent in every particle of matter. He sees the sky above him, with the sun and the stars, as any child sees it, but the remembrance of the astronomical theories prevents him from recognizing in them divine signs. The sky for him is no longer the natural expression of the Spirit that enfolds and illuminates the world. Scientific knowledge has substituted itself for this "naive", yet profound, vision, not as a new consciousness of a vaster cosmic order, an order of which man forms part, but as an estrangement, as an irremediable disarray before abysses that no longer have any common measure with him. For nothing now reminds him that in reality this whole universe is contained within himself, not of course in his individual being, but in the spirit or intellect which is within him, and which is both greater than himself and the whole phenomenal universe.



Lord Vishnu reposing on the serpent Shesha, floating on the cosmic waters, Indian miniature, 18th century



Thangka of the Wheel of Life (Bhavachakramudra), Tibet

*The Symbolism of the Mirror*¹

From the rich reservoir of symbols that are used to give expression to the mysticisms of the various world religions, we select here the symbol of the mirror, for it, more than almost any other, is fitted to express the essence of mysticism, and at the same time its essentially gnostic or sapiential character. The mirror is the most immediate symbol of spiritual contemplation, and indeed of knowledge (*gnosis*) in general, for it portrays the union of subject and object.

At the same time this example serves to demonstrate how the various meanings of a symbol, which refer to so many different levels of reality and which may sometimes seem contradictory, are inwardly coherent, and harmoniously contained within the total meaning of the image, which itself is purely spiritual.



¹ Editor's Note: From *Mirror of the Intellect: Essays on Traditional Science and Sacred Art*, chapter 10.

Multiplicity of meaning inheres in the very essence of a symbol; and this is its advantage over rational definition. For, whereas the latter organizes a concept in respect of its rational connections—at the same time fixing it on a given level—the symbol, without losing an iota of its precision or clarity, remains “open upwards”. It is above all a “key” to supra-rational realities.

For “supra-rational realities” we could equally well say “supra-rational truths”, and we emphasize this point, for it has for long been the custom to explain symbolism in purely psychological terms. Not that a psychological interpretation is necessarily wrong in every case, for it could be a possibility. What is absolutely false is the view that the origin of the symbol is to be found in the so-called “collective unconscious”, in other words, in a chaotic substratum of the human soul. The content of a symbol is not irrational, but supra-rational, that is to say, purely spiritual. This is no new thesis, but pertains to the science of symbolism that is present in every genuine spiritual tradition.

Our approach here is purely principial: the symbolism of the mirror is as illuminating as it is because, in a sense, the mirror is the symbol of the symbol. Symbolism indeed can best be described as the visible reflection of ideas or prototypes that cannot be fully expressed in purely conceptual terms. In this sense, St. Paul says: “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known” (1 Cor. 13:12).

What is the mirror in which the symbol appears as the image of an eternal prototype? Firstly the imagination, if one is thinking of the visual or “plastic” nature of the symbol in contradistinction from abstract concepts. But in a wider sense, it is the mind which, as the faculty of discrimination and knowledge, reflects the pure Intellect. In an even wider sense, the Intellect itself is the mirror of the divine Being. Plotinus says of the Intellect (*Nous*) that it contemplates the infinite One, and from this contemplation, which can never completely exhaust its object, the world proceeds as an ever imperfect image which may be compared to a continually broken reflection.

According to the following teaching from Northern or *Ch’an* Buddhism:

Just as it is in the nature of a mirror to shine, so all beings at their origin possess spiritual illumination. When, however, passions obscure the mirror, it becomes covered over, as if with dust. When false thoughts, under the direction of the master, are overcome and destroyed, they cease to proclaim themselves. Then is the Intellect illumined, in accordance with its nature, and nothing remains unknown. It is like the polishing of a mirror.... (*Tsung-mi*)

This passage might equally well have come from a Sufi treatise.



Oracle mirror (*melong*), Tibet

When the heart has become a pure mirror, the world is reflected in it as it really is, namely, without the distortions due to passionate thought; in addition, the heart reflects Divine Truth more or less directly, firstly in the form of symbols (*ishārāt*), then in the form of spiritual qualities (*sifāt*) or essences (*a'yān*), which lie behind the symbols, and finally as Divine Realities (*haqā'iq*).

This recalls the sacred mirror that plays such an important role in Taoism and Shintoism. The sacred mirror of Shintoism that is conserved in the shrine at Ise signifies both truth and truthfulness. According to the legend, the gods made this mirror in order to entice the sun-goddess Amaterasu out of the cave into which she had angrily withdrawn, and so restore light to the world. When the goddess peeped out of the cave, she saw her own light in the mirror, thought it was a second sun, and, out of curiosity, came out of the cave. Amongst other things, this indicates that the heart, through its reflective capacity—its truthfulness—attracts the divine light.

Everything that lies within the law of reflection, can also be applied to the corresponding spiritual process. It is important here to remember that the reflected image is inverted in relation to its ob-



A Shinto mirror, symbol of Amaterasu

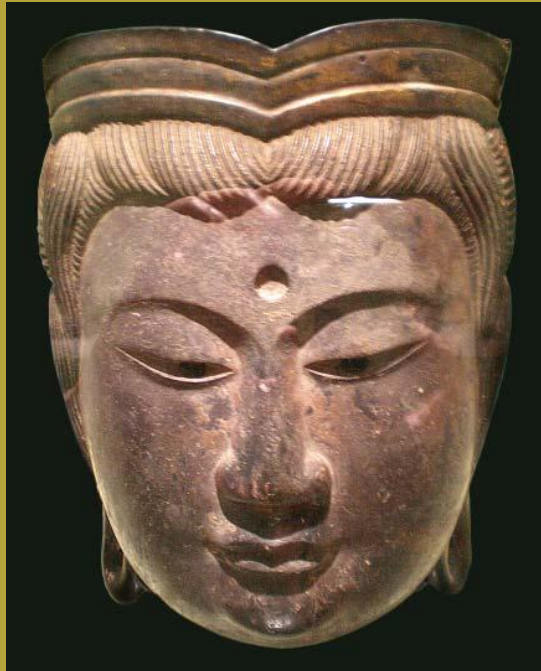


Ise Jingu's Inner Shrine, which houses the sacred mirror of Shintoism, Naiku, Mie Prefecture, Japan



ject. Thus, for example, when divine Reality, which contains everything, is reflected, it appears as an ungraspably minute center; the bliss of pure Being, when reflected, appears as an annihilating rigor; eternity appears as a sudden moment; and so on. To the law of reflection also belongs the fact that, while a reflection is qualitatively similar to its object, it is materially different from it. The symbol *is* the thing symbolized only when one abstracts it from its material, or otherwise conditioned, limits, and perceives only its essence.

Painting by Catherine Schuon
inspired by a traditional Japanese
representation of the myth of the
sun-goddess Amaterasu



Top: Mask of Bhairava, a manifestation of the fierce aspect of Shiva, Nepal
Bottom: Processional wooden mask of a *bodhisattva*, Japan, Heian period, 12th century

*The Sacred Mask*¹

The mask is one of the most widespread and doubtless one of the most ancient modes of sacred art. It is to be found as much in the most elaborated of civilizations, such as those of India and Japan, as among the so-called primitive peoples. The only exception is that of the civilization attached to Semitic monotheism.² Indeed, the tenacity of their survival in the face of all modern thought proves indirectly their sacred origin.

For Christianity, as for Judaism and Islam, the ritual use of the mask can only be a form of idolatry. But in fact the mask is linked not with idolatry but with polytheism, if one understands by this term not paganism, but a spiritual vision of the world that spontaneously personifies cosmic functions without ignoring the single and infinite nature of Supreme Reality.

This vision implies a conception of the “person” that is somewhat different from that familiar to us from monotheism. It derives from the expression *persona* itself. We know that in the ancient theater, derived from the sacred theater of the Mysteries, this word designated both the mask and the role.³ Now the mask necessarily expresses not an individuality—whose representation scarcely requires a mask—but a type, and hence a timeless reality, cosmic or divine. The “person” is thus identified with the function, and this in turn is one of the multiple masks of the Divinity, whose infinite nature remains impersonal.

There is a hierarchy of functions and thus of divine “persons”; but their very multiplicity means that no single one of them can be regarded as the unique and total mask of the infinite Divinity. The Divinity can clothe itself in one mask or another in order to reveal itself more directly to the worshipper; or alternatively the latter can choose one particular mask as his support and way of worship; he will always end by finding in it every celestial dignity, for each of the universal qualities essentially contains the others. This explains the apparently fluctuating character of the ancient pantheons.⁴

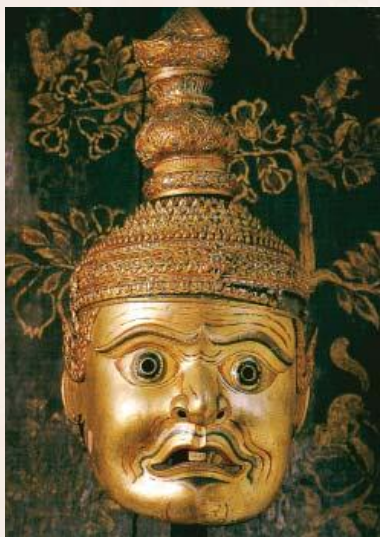
The essence of the universal qualities is one; this is what monotheism seeks to affirm when it proclaims the unicity of the divine “person”. It is as if it made use of the idea of the person—the only idea that a polytheism that has become forgetful of the Absolute can still grasp—in order to affirm the unity of the Essence. On the other hand, monotheism had to make a distinction between the person and his various functions and

¹ Editor’s Note: From *Mirror of the Intellect: Essays on Traditional Science and Sacred Art*, chapter 14.

² Although in fact the mask has been preserved in the folklore of Christian peoples as well as among certain Muslim peoples, especially among the Muslims of Java and Black Africa. The mask is also to be found among the Berbers of North Africa, where it has a carnivalesque character. The grotesque mask—of an “apotropeic” character and used above all in the solstitial masquerades—as well as the fairy mask, and even the heroic mask, are to be found among the Germanic peoples. The heroic mask also features in Spanish folklore.

³ *Persona* has been derived from *personare*, “to sound through”—the mask being literally the mouthpiece of the cosmic Essence that is manifested through it—but according to Littré this etymology is doubtful for phonetic reasons. Even so it retains a certain value from the point of view of significant coincidences—which are by no means accidents—in the sense of the Hindu *nirukta*.

⁴ We have in mind the fact that a subordinate god can sometimes “usurp” the highest role.



Mask of a sage (*rusi*) used in the *Khon* dance-drama, a Thai version of the Hindu *Ramayana*, Thailand

qualities, a distinction that is indeed evident since it is similar to that which exists between the human subject and his faculties. Nonetheless it remains true that the personal divinity is always conceived by means of one or other of His qualities, which on the plane of manifestation are distinguishable and even sometimes mutually exclusive. They can never all reveal themselves at the same time, and where they coincide—in the undifferentiated plenitude of their common essence—one can no longer truly speak of a person, since this essence is beyond all distinctiveness, and thereby beyond the person. But the distinction between the personal God and the impersonal Essence pertains to the domain of esoterism, and thus rejoins the metaphysics that underlies traditional polytheism.⁵ Be all that as it may, by denying the multiplicity of persons, monotheism also had to reject the ritual use of the mask.

But to return to the sacred mask as such: it is above all the means of a theophany; the individuality of its wearer is not simply effaced by the symbol assumed, it merges into it to the extent that it becomes the instrument of a superhuman “presence”. For the ritual use of the mask goes far beyond mere figuration: it is as if the mask, in veiling the face or the outward ego of its wearer, at the same time unveiled a possibility latent within him. Man really becomes the symbol that he has put on, which presupposes both a certain plasticity of soul and a spiritual influence actualized by the form of the mask. In addition, a sacred mask is generally regarded as a real being; it is treated as if it were alive, and it is not put on until certain rites of purification have been performed.⁶

Moreover, man spontaneously identifies himself with the role that he plays, one that has been imposed on him by his origin, his destiny, and his social ambience. This role is a mask—most often a false mask in a world as artificial as our own, and in any case one that limits rather than liberates. The sacred mask, on the contrary, along with all that its wearing implies as regards gestures and words, suddenly offers one’s “self-consciousness” a much vaster mold and thereby the possibility of realizing the “liquidity” of this consciousness and its capacity to espouse all forms without being any one of them.

Here we should make an observation: by “mask” we mean above all an artificial face that covers the face of its wearer. But in many cases—for example in the Chinese theater or among the North American Indians—a simple painting of the face has the same function and the same efficacy. Usually the mask is complemented by the dressing or ornamentation of the whole body. Furthermore, the ritual usage of the mask is mostly accompanied by sacred dancing, whose symbolic gestures and rhythm have the same purpose as the mask, namely the actualizing of a superhuman presence.

The sacred mask does not always suggest an angelic or divine presence: it can also be the support of an “asuric” or demonic presence, without this necessarily implying any deviation; for this presence, malefic in itself, can be tamed by a higher influence and captured with a view to

⁵ In Muslim esoterism, for example, the multiple gods of the polytheists are often compared to divine names; paganism, or polytheism in the restrictive sense of the term, thus corresponds to a confusion between the “name” and the “named”.

⁶ The same is true for the making of masks among most of the African peoples: the sculptor of a sacred mask has to undergo a certain ascetic discipline. See Jean-Louis Bédouin, *Les Masques* (Paris: Les Presses Universitaires, 1961).

expiation, as in certain lamaist rites. Also worthy of mention, as a well-known example, is the combat between the Barong and the sorceress Rangda in the sacred theater of Bali: the Barong, who has the form of a fantastic lion, and is commonly considered as the protective genius of the village, is in reality the solar lion, symbol of divine light, as is expressed by his golden ornaments; he has to confront the sorceress Rangda, personification of tenebrous forces. Both of these masks are supports for subtle influences that are communicated to all who participate in the drama; between the two a real combat develops. At a given moment, young men in a trance throw themselves upon the sorceress Rangda in order to stab her; but the magical power of the mask forces



Mask of Barong, Bali



Mask of Rangda, Bali



Kala head, Candi Kidal,
East Java, 13th century

them to turn their *kris* [daggers] on themselves; finally the Barong repulses the sorceress Rangda. In reality she is a form of the goddess Kali, of the divine power envisaged in its destructive and transforming function, and it is by virtue of this implicitly divine nature of the mask that its wearer can assume it with impunity.

The grotesque mask exists at many different levels. It generally possesses an “apotropeic” power, for, in unveiling the true nature of certain evil influences, it puts them to flight. The mask “objectivizes” tendencies or forces whose danger is increased to the extent that they remain vague and unconscious; it reveals to them their own ugly and despicable face in order to disarm them.⁷ Its effect is thus psychological, but it goes far beyond the plane of ordinary psychology, since the very form of the mask and its quasi-magical efficacy depend on a science of the cosmic tendencies.

The “apotropeic” mask has often been transposed to the sculptural decoration of temples. When its grotesque and terrifying character is conceived as an aspect of the divine destructive power, it is in its turn a divine mask. The Gorgoneion of archaic Greek temples must no doubt be interpreted in this way, and this is also the meaning of the *Kāla mukha*, the composite mask that adorns the topmost point of the niches in Hindu architecture.⁸

The sacred mask necessarily borrows its forms from nature, but it is never “naturalistic”, since its purpose is to suggest a timeless cosmic type. It achieves this purpose either by emphasizing certain essential features or by combining different but analogous forms of nature, for

⁷ The healing masks of the Iroquois—called “false faces”—are a well known and very typical example of the function in question; strangely enough, they recall certain popular masks of the Alpine countries.

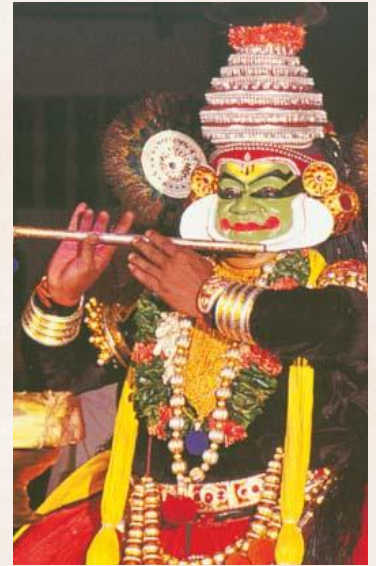
⁸ See A. K. Coomaraswamy, “*Svayamātrinnā: Janua Coeli*”, in *Coomaraswamy, Vol. 1, Selected Papers: Traditional Art and Symbolism*, edited by Roger Lipsey, and also my book *Sacred Art in East and West*.

example human and animal forms, or animal and geometrical forms. Its formal language is much less often addressed to the emotive sensibility than one might be tempted to think: the ritual masks of the Eskimos, for example, or of the Indians of the north-west coast of America, or of certain African tribes, are intelligible only to those who are familiar with all their symbolic references. The same can be said about the masks of the Hindu sacred theater: the mask of Krishna, as it is represented in southern India, is like an assemblage of metaphors.

As regards masks of animal form, the following may be said: the animal is in itself a mask of God; what looks at us from its face is less the individual than the genius of the species, the cosmic type, which corresponds to a divine function. One might also say that in the animal the different powers or elements of nature assume the form of a mask: water is “personified” in the fish, the air in the bird; in the buffalo or bison the earth manifests its generous and fertile aspect, and in the bear it shows its darker face. Now these powers of nature are divine functions.

Nevertheless, dances with masks of animal forms can have a practical purpose, namely that of conciliating the genius of the species hunted. This is a magical action, but one that can well be integrated with a spiritual vision of things. Since subtle links between man and his natural ambience exist, one can make use of them just as one makes use of physical conditions. What is important from the spiritual point of view is an awareness of the real hierarchy of things. Certainly the ritual use of the mask can degenerate into magic pure and simple, but this happens much less frequently than is generally assumed.

Likewise the anthropomorphic masks of “ancestors” do not merely evoke an individual; they represent the cosmic type or function of which the ancestor was the human manifestation: in the case of peoples where the spiritual filiation coincides in practice with an ancestral descent, the ancestor who is at the origin of this descent necessarily assumes the role of solar hero, half-human, half-divine.



Mask of Krishna from Kerala,
South India

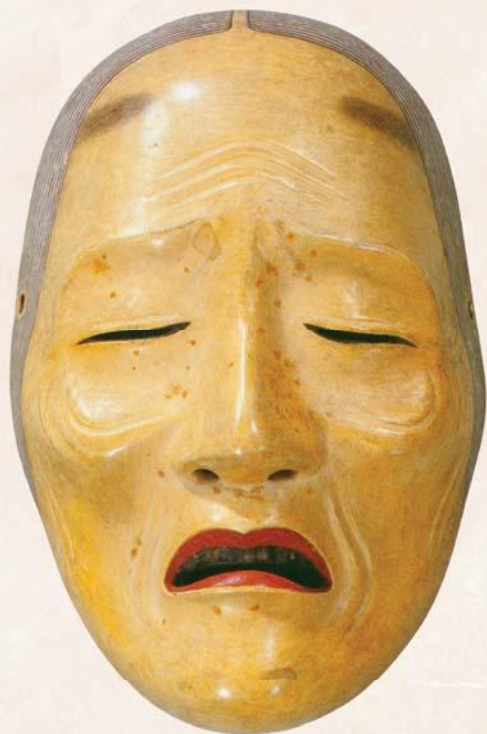


Barong masks from Bali: *Left*: mask of a boar's head; *Right*: mask of an elephant's head

In a certain sense, the sun is the divine mask *par excellence*. For it is like a mask in front of the divine light, which would blind and consume earthly beings if it were unveiled. Now the lion is a solar animal, and the mask in the form of a lion's head is the image of the sun. This same mask is also to be found on fountains, and the jet of water that gushes from it symbolizes the life that comes from the sun.

Typical stylization of the human face is also to be found in the masks of *Nō*, the ritual theater of Japan, where the intention is both psychological and spiritual. Each type of mask manifests a certain tendency of the soul; it lays this tendency bare, showing what is either fatal or generous within it. Thus the play of the masks is the play of the *gunas*, the cosmic tendencies, within the soul.

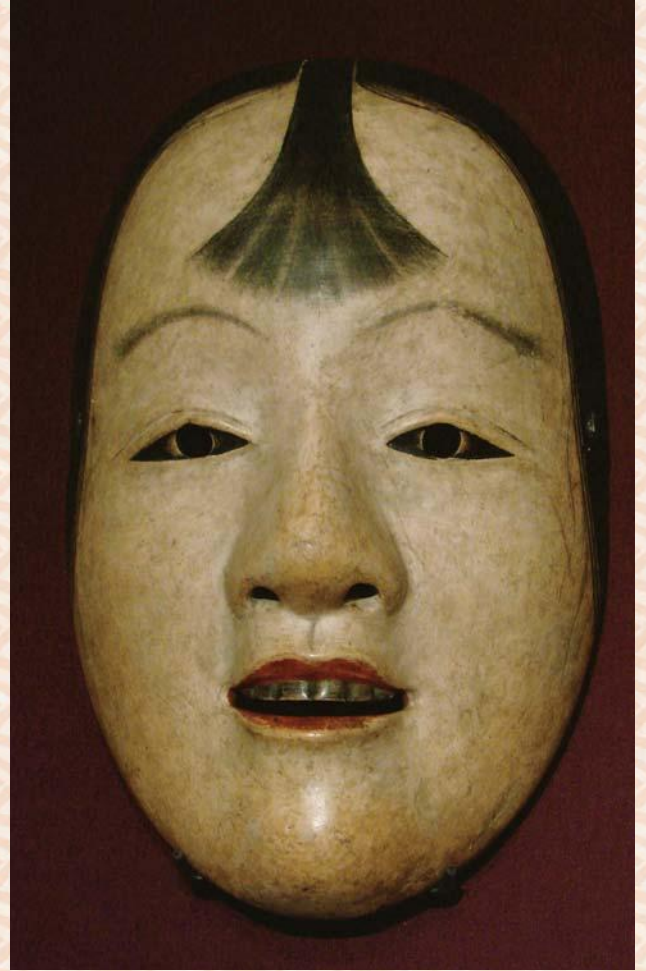
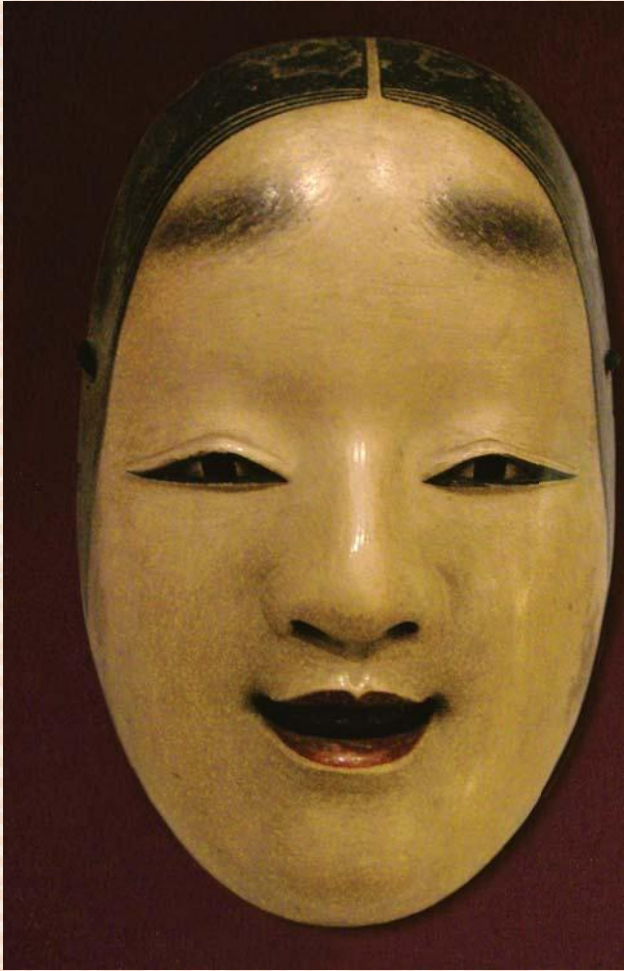
In *Nō*, the differentiation of types is obtained by extremely subtle methods; the more the expression of a mask is latent and immobile, the more it is living in its play: each gesture of the actor will make it speak; each movement, causing the light to glide over its features, will reveal a new aspect of the mask; it is like a sudden vision of a depth or of an abyss of the soul.



Uba Nō mask, representing an old woman, Japan, Edo period



Okina Nō mask, representing the joyful face of an old man, Japan, Edo period, 17th century



Left: Ko-omote Nō mask, representing a young woman, Japan, Edo period, 18th century

Right: Kasshiki Nō mask, representing a young priest, Japan, Edo period, 18th century



Above: *The Wise Men Present the Chess, Dice, and Tables to the King of India*, miniature from *The Book of Chess, Dice, and Tables* by Alfonso X the Wise, Spain, 13th century; Below: *Consulting a Manuscript of Arabic Characters on a Chess Problem*, miniature from *The Book of Chess, Dice, and Tables* by Alfonso X the Wise, Spain, 13th century

*The Symbolism of Chess*¹

It is known that the game of chess originated in India. It was passed on to the medieval West through the intermediary of the Persians and the Arabs, a fact to which we owe, for example, the expression “check-mate” (German: *Schachmatt*), which is derived from the Persian *shāh*: “king” and the Arabic *māt*: “he is dead”. At the time of the Renaissance some of the rules of the game were changed: the “queen”² and the two “bishops”³ were given a greater mobility, and thenceforth the game acquired a more abstract and mathematical character; it departed from its concrete model, strategy, without however losing the essential features of its symbolism. In the original position of the chessmen, the ancient strategic model remains obvious; one can recognize the two armies ranged according to the battle order which was customary in the ancient East: the light troops, represented by the pawns, form the first line; the bulk of the army consists of the heavy troops, the war chariots (“castles”), the knights (“cavalry”), and the war elephants (“bishops”); the “king” with his “lady” or “counselor” is positioned at the center of his troops.

The form of the chessboard corresponds to the “classical” type of *Vāstu mandala*, the diagram which also constitutes the basic layout of a temple or a city. It has been pointed out⁴ that this diagram symbolizes existence conceived as a “field of action” of the divine powers. The combat which takes place in the game of chess thus represents, in its most universal meaning, the combat of the *devas* with the *asūras*, of the “gods” with the “titans”, or of the “angels”⁵ with the “demons”, all other meanings of the game deriving from this one.

The most ancient description of the game of chess which we possess appears in *The Golden Prairies* by the Arab historian al-Mas‘ūdī, who lived in Baghdad in the ninth century. Al-Mas‘ūdī attributes the invention—or codification—of the game to a Hindu king “Balhit”, a descendant of “Barahman”. There is an obvious confusion here between a caste, that of the brahmins, and a dynasty; but that the game of chess has a brahmanic origin is proved by the eminently sacerdotal character of the diagram of 8 x 8 squares (*ashtāpada*). Further, the warlike symbolism of the game relates it to the *kshatriyas*, the caste of princes and nobles, as al-Mas‘ūdī indicates when he writes that the Hindus considered the game of chess (*shatranj*, from the Sanskrit *chaturanga*)⁶ as a “school of

¹ Editor’s Note: From *Mirror of the Intellect: Essays on Traditional Science and Sacred Art*, chapter 13.

² In Oriental chess this piece is not a “queen” but a “counselor” or “minister” to the king (in Arabic *mudaffir* or *wazīr*, in Persian *fersan* or *fars*). The designation “queen” in the Western game is doubtless due to a confusion of the Persian term *fersan*, which became *alferga* in Castilian, and the old French *fierce* or *ferge* for “virgin”. Be that as it may, the attribution of such a dominant role to the king’s “lady” corresponds well with the mentality of chivalry. It is significant also that the game of chess was passed on to the West by that Arab-Persian current which also brought with it heraldic art and the principal rules of chivalry.

³ This piece was originally an elephant (Arabic: *al-fīl*) which bore a fortified tower. The schematic representation of an elephant’s head in some medieval manuscripts could be taken either for a “fool’s cap” or a bishop’s miter: in French the piece is called *fou*, “fool”; in German it is called, *Läufer*, “runner”.

⁴ See the author’s *Sacred Art in East and West*, chapter 1, “The Genesis of the Hindu Temple”. [Editor’s Note: chapter 2 of the present volume.]

⁵ The *devas* of Hindu mythology are analogous to the angels of the monotheistic traditions; it is known that each angel corresponds to a divine function.

⁶ The word *chaturanga* signifies the traditional Hindu army, composed of four *angas* = elephants, horses, chariots, and soldiers.

government and defense". King Balhit is said to have composed a book on the game of which "he made a sort of allegory of the heavenly bodies, such as the planets and the twelve signs of the Zodiac, consecrating each piece to a star..." It may be recalled that the Hindus recognize eight planets: the sun, the moon, the five planets visible to the naked eye, and Rāhu, the "dark star" of the eclipses;⁷ each of these "planets" rules one of the eight directions of space. "The Indians", continues al-Mas'ūdī, "give a mysterious meaning to the redoubling, that is to say to the geometrical progression, effected on the squares of the chessboard; they establish a relationship between the first cause, which dominates all the spheres and in which everything finds its end, and the sum of the squares of the chessboard..." Here the author is probably confusing the cyclical symbolism implied in the *ashtāpada* and the famous legend according to which the inventor of the game asked the monarch to fill the squares of his chessboard with grains of corn, by placing one grain on the first, two on the following, four on the third, and so on up to the sixty-fourth square, which gives the sum of 18,446,744,073,709, 551,616 grains. The cyclical symbolism of the chessboard resides in the fact that it expresses the unfolding of space according to the quaternary and octonary of the principal directions ($4 \times 4 \times 4 = 8 \times 8$), and that it synthesizes, in crystalline form, the two great complementary cycles of sun and moon: the duodenary of the zodiac and the 28 lunar mansions; furthermore, the number 64, the sum of the squares on the chessboard, is a sub-multiple of the fundamental cyclic number 25,920, which measures the precession of the equinoxes. We have seen that each phase of a cycle, "fixed" in the scheme of 8×8 squares, is ruled by a heavenly body and at the same time symbolizes a divine aspect, personified by a *deva*.⁸ It is thus that this *mandala* symbolizes at one and the same time the visible cosmos, the world of the Spirit, and the Divinity in its multiple aspects. Al-Mas'ūdī is therefore right to say that the Indians explain,

⁷ Hindu cosmology always takes account of the principle of inversion and exception, which results from the "ambiguous" character of manifestation: the nature of stars is luminosity, but as the stars are not Light itself, there must also be a dark one.

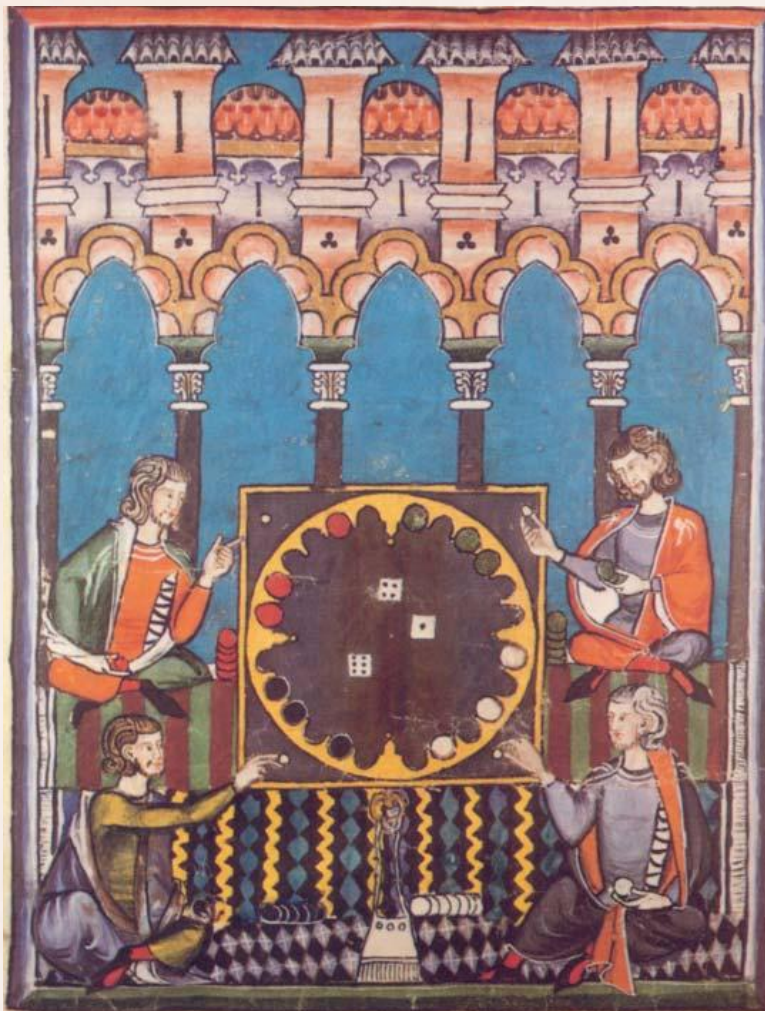
⁸ Certain Buddhist texts describe the universe as a board of 8×8 squares, fixed by golden cords; these squares correspond to the 64 *kalpas* of Buddhism (See *Saddharma Pundarika*, Burnouf, *Lotus de la bonne Loi*, p. 148). In the *Rāmāyana*, the impregnable city of the gods, Ayodhya, is described as a square with eight compartments on each side. We also recall, in the Chinese tradition, the 64 signs which derive from the 8 trigrams commented on in the *I Ching*. These 64 signs are generally arranged so as to correspond to the eight regions of space. Thus we again encounter the idea of a quaternary and octonary division of space, which resumes all the aspects of the universe.



Clay play board from India, Harappa excavations, Indus River Valley civilization

“by calculations based on the chessboard, the march of time and the cycles, the superior influences which are exerted on this world, and the bonds which attach them to the human soul...”

The cyclical symbolism of the chessboard was known to King Alphonso the Wise, the famous troubadour of Castille, who in 1283 composed his *Libro de Acedrex*, a work which draws largely from Oriental sources.⁹ Alphonso the Wise also describes a very ancient variant of the game of chess, the “game of the four seasons”, which takes place between four partners, so that the pieces, placed in the four corners of the chessboard, move in a rotatory direction, analogous to the movement of the sun. The 4 x 8 pieces must have the colors green, red, black, and white; they correspond to the four seasons: spring, summer, autumn, and winter; to the four elements: air, fire, earth, and water; and to the four organic “humors”. The movement of the four camps symbolizes cyclical transformation.¹⁰ This game, which strangely resembles certain “solar” rites and dances of the Indians of North America, brings into relief the fundamental principle of the chessboard.



The Game of the Four Seasons, miniature from *The Book of Chess, Dice, and Tables* by Alfonso X the Wise, Spain, 13th century



The Great Game of Chess, played on a board of 12 x 12 squares, miniature from *The Book of Chess, Dice, and Tables* by Alfonso X the Wise, Spain, 13th century

⁹ In 1254 St. Louis had forbidden chess to his subjects. The saint had in mind the passions which the game could unleash, especially as it was frequently combined with the use of dice.

¹⁰ This variant of chess is described in the *Bhawisya Purāna*. Alphonso the Wise also speaks of a “great game of chess” which is played on a board of 12 x 12 squares and of which the pieces represent mythological animals; he attributes it to the sages of India.

The chessboard can be considered as the extension of a diagram formed by four squares, alternatively black and white, and constitutes in itself a *mandala* of Shiva, God in his aspect of transformer: the quaternary rhythm, of which this *mandala* is, as it were, the spatial “coagulation”, expresses the principle of time. The four squares, placed around an unmanifested center, symbolize the cardinal phases of every cycle. The alternation of the black and white squares in this elementary diagram of the chessboard¹¹ brings out its cyclical significance¹² and makes of it the rectangular equivalent of the Far Eastern symbol of *Yin-Yang*. It is an image of the world in its fundamental dualism.¹³

If the world of the senses in its integral development results to some extent from the multiplication of qualities inherent in space and time, the *Vāstu mandala* for its part derives from the division of time by space: one may recall the genesis of the *Vāstu mandala* from the never-ending celestial cycle, this cycle being divided by the cardinal axes, then “crystallized” in a rectangular form.¹⁴ The *mandala* is thus the inverted reflection of the principial synthesis of space and time, and it is in this that its ontological significance resides.

From another point of view, the world is “woven” from the three fundamental qualities or *gunas*¹⁵ and the *mandala* represents this weaving in a schematic manner, in conformity with the cardinal directions of space. The analogy between the *Vāstu mandala* and weaving is brought out by the alternation of colors which recalls a woven fabric of which the warp and the woof are alternately apparent or hidden.

Moreover, the alternation of black and white corresponds to the two aspects of the *mandala*, which are complementary in principle but opposed in practice: the *mandala* is on the one hand a *Purusha mandala*, that is to say a symbol of the Universal Spirit (*Purusha*) inasmuch as it is an immutable and transcendent synthesis of the cosmos; on the other hand it is a symbol of existence (*vāstu*) considered as the passive support of divine manifestations. The geometric quality of the symbol expresses the Spirit, while its purely quantitative extension expresses existence. Likewise its ideal immutability is “spirit” and its limiting coagulation is “existence” or *materia*; here it is not *materia prima*, virgin and generous, which is being referred to, but *materia secunda*, “dark” and chaotic, which is the root of existential dualism. In this connection one may recall the myth according to which the *Vāstu mandala* represents an *asūra*, personification of brute existence: the *devas* have conquered this demon and have established their “dwelling-places” on the stretched-out body of their victim; thus they confer their “form” upon him, but it is he who manifests them.¹⁶

This double meaning which characterizes the *Vāstu Purusha mandala*, and which, moreover, is to be found in every symbol, is in a sense actualized by the combat which a game of chess represents. This combat, as we have said, is essentially that of the *devas* and the *asūras*, who dispute the chessboard of the world. It is here that the symbolism of

¹¹ Given that the Chinese chessboard, which likewise had its origin in India, does not possess the alternation of the two colors, it is to be assumed that this element comes from Persia; it nevertheless remains faithful to the original symbolism of the chessboard.

¹² It also makes of it a symbol of inverse analogy; spring and autumn, morning and evening are inversely analogous. In a general manner the alternation of black and white corresponds to the rhythm of day and night, of life and death, of manifestation and of reabsorption in the unmanifest.

¹³ For this reason the type of *Vāstu mandala* which has an uneven number of squares could not serve as a chessboard: the “battlefield” which the latter represents cannot have a manifested center, for symbolically it had to be beyond oppositions.

¹⁴ See the author’s *Sacred Art in East and West* and *The Foundations of Christian Art*, the chapter, “The Foundations of Christian Art”.

¹⁵ See René Guénon, *The Symbolism of the Cross*, chapter 5, “Hindu Theory of the Three *Gunas*”.

¹⁶ The *mandala* of 8 x 8 squares is also called *manduka*, “the frog”, by allusion to the “Great Frog” (*māha-manduka*) which supports the whole universe and which is the symbol of obscure and undifferentiated *materia*.



Ladies playing chess, Indian miniature, Kangra school, 18th century

black and white, already present in the squares of the chessboard, takes on its full value: the white army is that of Light, the black army that of darkness. In a relative domain, the battle which takes place on the chessboard represents, either that of two terrestrial armies each of which is fighting in the name of a principle,¹⁷ or that of the spirit and of darkness in man; these are the two forms of the “holy war”; the “lesser holy war” and the “greater holy war”, according to a saying of the Prophet

¹⁷ In a holy war it is possible that each of the combatants may legitimately consider himself as the protagonist of Light fighting the darkness. This again is a consequence of the double meaning of every symbol: what for one is the expression of the Spirit, may be the image of dark “matter” in the eyes of the other.



Chessboard from India,
late 17th century

Muhammad. One will see the relationship of the symbolism implied in the game of chess with the theme of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, a book which is likewise addressed to *kshatriyas*.

If the significance of the different chessmen is transposed into the spiritual domain, the king becomes the heart, or spirit, and the other pieces the various faculties of the soul. Their movements, moreover, correspond to different ways of realizing the cosmic possibilities represented by the chessboard: there is the axial movement of the “castles” or war chariots, the diagonal movement of the “bishops” or elephants, which follow a single color, and the complex movement of the knights. The axial movement, which “cuts” through the different “colors”, is logical and virile, while the diagonal movement corresponds to an “existential”—and therefore feminine—continuity. The jump of the knights corresponds to intuition.

What most fascinates the man of noble and warlike caste is the relationship between will and destiny. Now it is just this that is so clearly illustrated by the game of chess, inasmuch as its moves always remain intelligible without being limited in their variation. Alphonsus the Wise, in his book on chess, relates how a king of India wished to know whether the world obeyed intelligence or chance. Two wise men, his advisers, gave opposing answers, and to prove their respective theses, one of them took as his example the game of chess in which intelligence prevails over chance, while the other produced dice, the symbol of fatality.¹⁸ Al-Mas‘ūdī writes likewise that the king “Balhit”, who is said to have codified the game of chess, gave it preference over *nerd*, a game of chance, because in the former intelligence always has the upper hand over ignorance.

¹⁸ The *mandala* of the chessboard, on the one hand, and dice, on the other, represent two different and complementary symbols of the cosmos.

At each stage of the game, the player is free to choose between several possibilities, but each movement will entail a series of unavoidable consequences, so that necessity increasingly limits free choice, the end of the game being seen, not as the fruit of hazard, but as the result of rigorous laws.

It is here that we see not only the relationship between will and fate, but likewise between liberty and knowledge; except in the case of inadvertence on the part of his opponent, the player will only safeguard his liberty of action when his decisions correspond with the nature of the game, that is to say with the possibilities that the game implies. In other words, freedom of action is here in complete solidarity with foresight and knowledge of the possibilities; contrariwise, blind impulse, however free and spontaneous it may appear at first sight, is revealed in the final outcome as a non-liberty.

The “royal art” is to govern the world—outward and inward—in conformity with its own laws. This art presupposes wisdom, which is the knowledge of possibilities; now all possibilities are contained, in a synthetic manner, in the universal and divine Spirit. True wisdom is a more or less perfect identification with the Spirit (*Purusha*), this latter being symbolized by the geometrical quality¹⁹ of the chessboard, “seal” of the essential unity of the cosmic possibilities. The Spirit is Truth; through Truth, man is free; outside truth, he is the slave of fate. That is the teaching of the game of chess; the *kshatriya* who gives himself over to it does not only find in it a pastime or a means of sublimating his warlike passion and his need for adventure, but also, according to his intellectual capacity, a speculative support, and a “way” which leads from action to contemplation.

¹⁹ We may recall that the Spirit or the Word is the “form of forms”, that is to say the formal principle of the universe.



Buzurjmibr Masters the Game of Chess, from an illustrated manuscript of the *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings), dedicated to Shah Tahmasp (1524-1550), Persia, Safavid period

*The Primordial Symbol of the Serpent and Dragon*¹



Sculpture of a snake spirit
(*naga*), India

When the immutable Divine Act which governs the cosmos is symbolically represented by a motionless vertical axis, the “course” of Nature, in relation to it, is like a spiral, which winds itself around this axis, so that with each encirclement it realizes a new plane or degree of existence. This is the primordial symbol of the serpent or dragon, which winds itself round the axis of the tree of the world.² Almost all the symbols of Nature proceed from the spiral or the circle. The rhythm of the successive “unrollings” and “rollings” of Nature, of the alchemical *solve et coagula* is represented by the double spiral, ☯☯ whose form also lies at the basis of the zoomorphic representations of the *Shakti*. Also related to this is the representation of two serpents or dragons winding themselves in contrary directions round a staff or tree. These correspond to the two complementary phases of nature or the two fundamental forces.³ This is the ancient heritage of images of nature on which both alchemy,⁴ and certain traditions of the East (especially tantrism) draw.

It should also be noted here that the use of a serpent or dragon as the image of a cosmic power is to be found in all parts of the world. It is especially characteristic of those traditional arts, such as alchemy, which are concerned with the subtle world. A reptile moves without legs and by means of an uninterrupted rhythm of its body, so that it is the incorporation, so to say, of a subtle oscillation. Furthermore, its essence is both fiery and cold, conscious and elemental. The resemblance in question is so real that most if not all traditional cultures have regarded serpents as the occasional carriers of subtle or psychic powers. One need only think of the serpent as the guardian of tombs in Western and Far Eastern antiquity.

In *laya yoga*, a spiritual method belonging to the realm of tantrism, whose name signifies union (*yoga*) achieved through solution (*laya*), the awakening of the *Shakti* within the human microcosm is compared with the awakening of a serpent (*kundalinī*), which until then had remained coiled up in the subtle center known as *mūlādhāra*. According to a certain correspondence between the subtle and corporeal orders this center is located at the lower end of the vertebral column. *Kundalinī* is awakened by certain exercises in spiritual concentration, by means of which it gradually ascends, in spiral fashion, the spiritual axis of man,

¹ Editor’s Note: From *Alchemy: Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul*, chapter 9.

² See René Guénon, *The Symbolism of the Cross*.

³ See *ibid.*

⁴ Editor’s Note: Burckhardt’s book on alchemy provides a comprehensive explanation of his references to alchemy in this chapter.



Dragons guarding the entrance of the Wat Phra Keo Pagoda, Vientiane, Laos



Section of the Wall of the Nine Dragons, Central Datong, China, 14th century



Naga and nagini, central India, c. 10th century



Fig. 14. The staff of Hermes, or caduceus, from a drawing of Hans Holbein the Younger

bringing into play even wider and higher states of consciousness, until it finally restores the plenitude of consciousness in the supra-formal Spirit.⁵ In this representation, which must not be conceived literally, but as a symbolical—though logical and consequential—description of inward processes, one will again recognize the image of Nature or *Shakti* twining round the world-axis. That the developing power should come “from below” is in keeping with the fact that potency (*potentia*)—like *materia prima*—in its passivity represents the “base” of the cosmos, and not the summit.

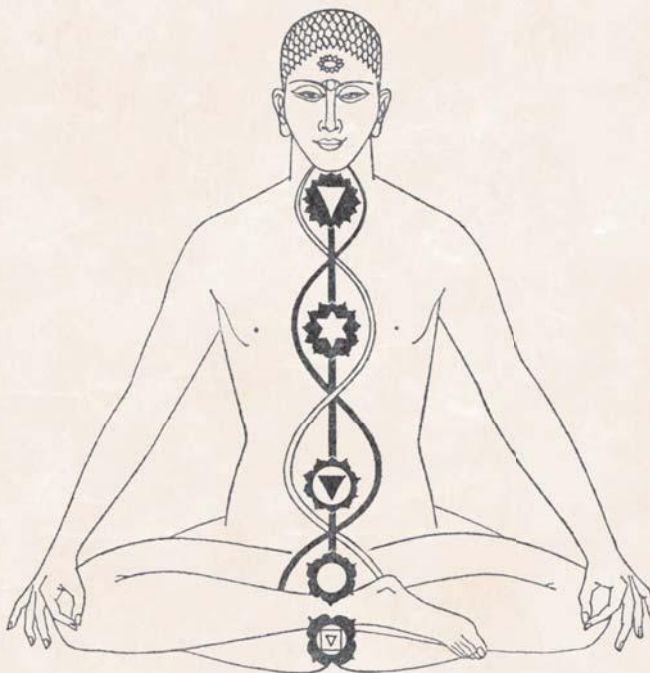


Fig. 15. The seven *chakras* or power centers in the subtle body of man, with the two power-streams *Idā* and *Pingalā*, which wind round the central axis. Tantric representation from *The Serpent Power* by Arthur Avalon. The leaf design on the head represents the highest *chakra*: “the lotus with the thousand petals”.

In the Hermetic tradition, Universal Nature in her latent condition is likewise represented as a coiled-up reptile. This is the dragon Uroboros which, curling into a circle, bites its own tail.

Nature in her dynamic phase, on the other hand, is portrayed by means of the two serpents or dragons, which, in the form of the well-known model of the staff of Hermes or caduceus, wind themselves round an axis—that of the world or of man—in opposing directions. This duplication of the primordial serpent has also its counterpart in *laya yoga*, for *Kundalinī* is likewise divided into two subtle forces, *Idā* and *Pingalā*, which in opposite directions wind themselves round *Meru-danda*, the microcosmic prolongation of the world-axis. At the begin-

⁵ See Arthur Avalon, *The Serpent Power* (Madras: Ganesh, 1931).

ning of the spiritual work, the *Shakti* is present in this divided form, and only after the two forces are activated alternately by means of a form of concentration based on breathing, does *Kundalinī* awake from its sleep and start to ascend. As soon as it has reached the highest threshold of ego-consciousness, the two opposing forces become completely dissolved in it. For alchemy the two forces represented as serpents or dragons are Sulfur and Quicksilver. Their macrocosmic prototype is the two phases—increasing and decreasing—of the sun's annual course, separated from one another by the winter and summer solstices.⁶ The connection between the tantric and alchemical symbolisms is obvious: of the two forces *Pingalā* and *Idā*, which wind themselves round the *Merudanda*, the first is described as being hot and dry, characterized by the color red, and, like alchemical Sulfur, compared with the sun. The second force, *Idā*, is regarded as being cold and humid, and in its silvery pallor is associated with the moon.

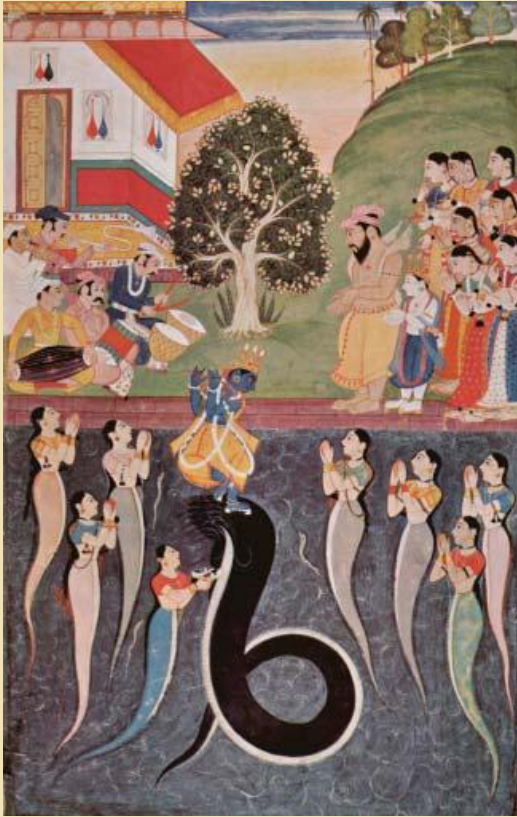
Finally, the dragon alone can represent all phases of the work, depending on whether it is provided with feet, fins, or wings, or is without any limbs whatsoever. It can be considered as able to live either in water, air, or on the earth, and, as a salamander, even in fire. The alchemical symbol of the dragon thus closely resembles that of the Far Eastern world-dragon, which first lives as a fish in water, and then, as a winged creature, soars into the heavens. It also recalls the Aztec myth of Quetzalcoatl, the plumed serpent, which successively moves under the earth, on the earth, and in the heavens.



Quetzalcoatl, the plumed serpent (on the left), *Codex Borbonicus*, p. 22

⁶ See Julius Schwabe, *Archetyp und Tierkreis* (Basel: Verlag Benno Schwabe, 1951).

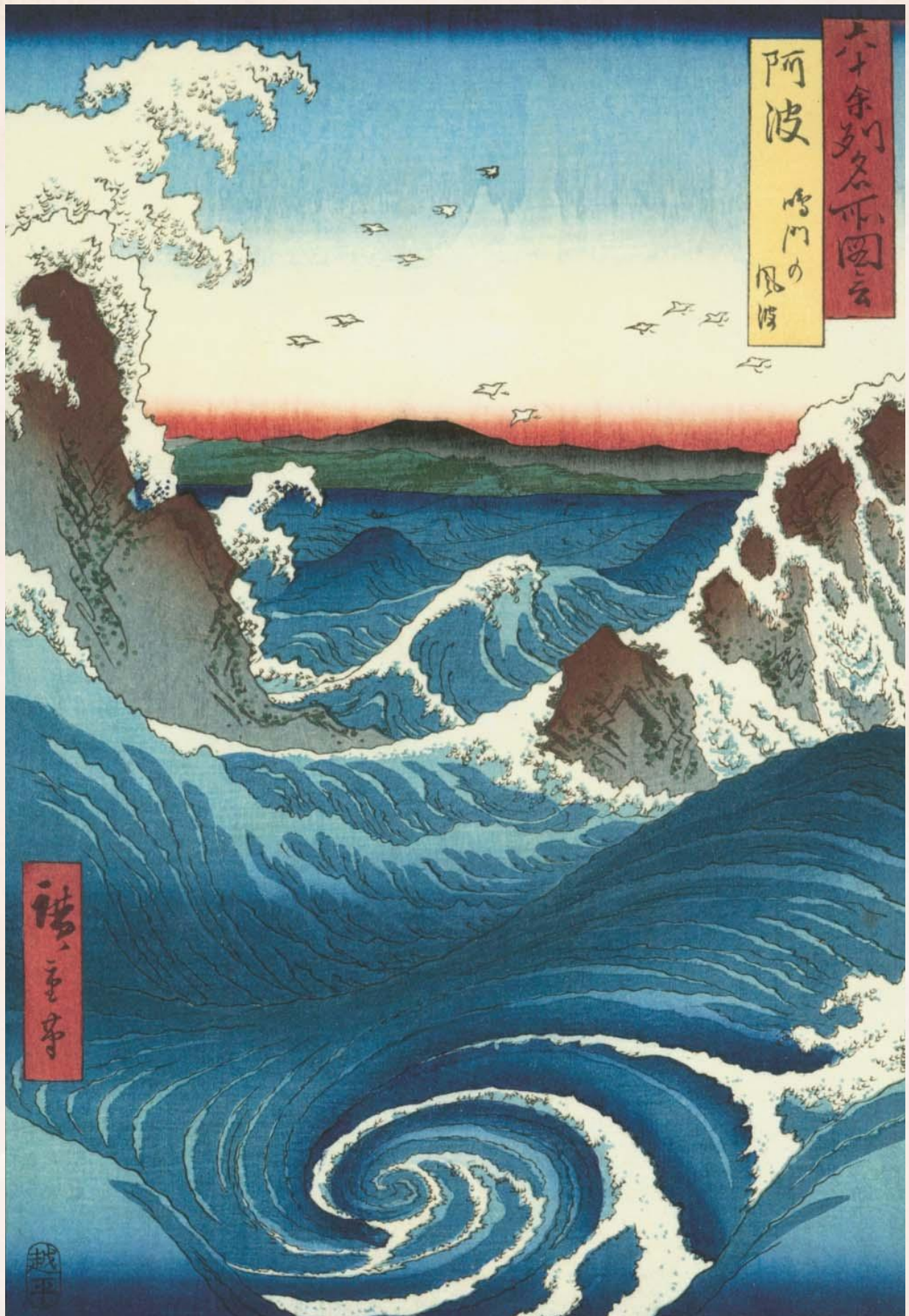
RECURRING APPEARANCES OF THE SERPENT AND THE DRAGON



Editor's Note: These illustrations demonstrate that the same symbol may be integrated into diverse objects in the material culture of different religious civilizations; *Above left*: Krishna dancing on top of the serpent Kaliya, Indian miniature, 18th century; *Above right*: Buddha sheltered by Mucalinda, the serpent king, Cambodia, early 12th century; *Below*: Vishnu reposing on the serpent Shesha, Deogarh Temple, India



Above: Emperor's yellow court robe (*chaofu*) (detail), China, Kang-hsi period; Below left: Emperor's semiformal court robe (*jifu*), China, 18th century; Below right: Manchu woman's formal court coat (*chaogua*), China, mid 18th century



六十余の各所圖云
阿波 鳴門の
風情

諸
名所

越平

Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858), *Whirlpool and Waves at Naruto, Awa Province*

*The Symbolism of Water*¹

The modern economy, in spite of all the research findings at its disposal, has for a long time almost completely left out of account one of the most important bases of our life as well as of its own existence, namely the living purity of water. This fact bears witness to a unilateralness of development which, quite apart from the question of water, is also harmful to many other things, not the least of which is the psyche or soul. When the balance of Nature is not disturbed, the earth's waters themselves continually re-establish their purity, whereas, when this balance is lost, death and pollution are the result. It is thus not merely a coincidence that the "life" of the waters is a symbol for the "life" of the human soul.

When one considers whether there is anything that could possibly alert non-scientifically minded people to the menace of water pollution, one quickly realizes that the natural sense of beauty that enables us spontaneously to distinguish a diseased tree from a healthy one, should also be able to sound a warning here. That it has not done so—or hardly done so—comes from the fact that modern man completely separates not only "the beautiful" from "the useful", but also "the beautiful" from "the real". This way of thinking is like a split in one's consciousness, and it is difficult to say whether it is cause or effect of a state of affairs which, on the one hand, drives man systematically to destroy, on an ever-widening front, the natural balance of things and, on the other, impels him periodically to flee the artificial world which in this way he creates. Never before have there been such enormous concentrations of buildings of stone, concrete, and iron, and never before did city-dwellers, in such enormous numbers, periodically leave their homes in order to rediscover Nature at the seaside or in the mountains—that very Nature which they themselves have so inexorably banished. It would not be true to say that, in so doing, people are merely seeking to preserve their health. Many, if not all, are at the same time seeking a relaxation of soul that is accorded only by surroundings whose still unspoiled and harmonious state has ensured the preservation of such beauty as gives peace to the soul and frees the mind from the pressure of calculating thoughts. However, the same people who, when on holiday, consciously or unconsciously seek this beauty, quickly reject it as "romanticism" whenever it stands in the way of their utilitarian interests. In this, the good or bad



The garden and pond of Heian Jingu Shrine, Kyoto, Japan

¹ Editor's Note: From *Mirror of the Intellect: Essays on Traditional Science and Sacred Art*, chapter 11.



Pura Ulun Danu Bratan Temple, Bali



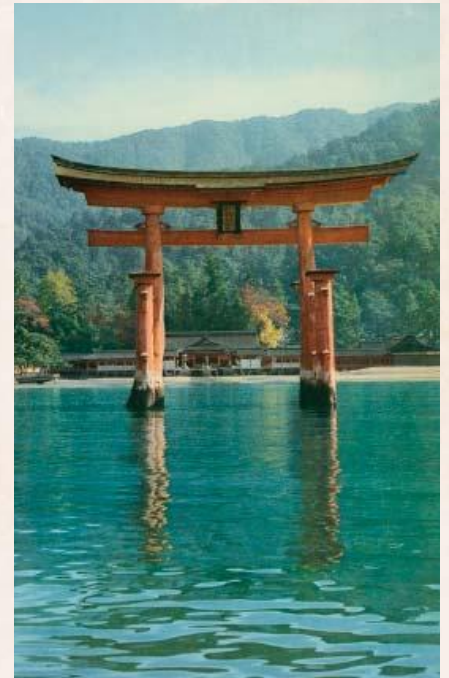
Inle Lake Monastery, Myanmar

intention of the individual scarcely plays a role; everyone is under the pressure of economic forces, and it is usually unconscious self-defense if one hides from oneself the destructive consequences of certain developments. In the longer view, however, such an attitude is disastrous.

Beauty always represents an inward and inexhaustible equilibrium of forces; and this overwhelms our soul, since it can neither be calculated nor mechanically produced. A sense of beauty can therefore permit us the direct experience of relationships before we can perceive them, in a differentiated manner, with our discursive reason; in this, incidentally, there is a defense for our own physical and psychic well-being, something that we cannot neglect with impunity.

To this it may be objected that men have always distinguished between the useful and the beautiful; a pleasure-grove was always a luxury, while a wood was usually viewed in a utilitarian manner. It might even be said that it took modern education to create the desire to protect a given piece of nature on purely aesthetic grounds.

However, in earlier times there were also sacred groves, which no axe might fell. They catered neither for use in the usual sense of this word nor for luxury. Beauty and reality—two qualities which the modern world spontaneously separates—were (and, for men who have a pre-modern view regarding the sacred, still are) united. Even today there are sacred woods in Japan and India, just as there were in pre-Christian Europe; we mention them here only as one example of sacred nature, for there are also sacred mountains, as well as—and this touches us more closely—sacred springs, rivers, and lakes. Even within Christendom, which generally avoids the veneration of the various phenomena of Nature, there were and are springs and lakes—for example, the well at Chartres and the spring at Lourdes—which, because of their connection with miraculous events, have come to be regarded as sacred. What is important here is not that some particular mountain or spring is regarded as sacred, and therefore inviolable; but that one particular phenomenon is invariably an example of a whole range of related things, of a complete order of Nature, which for a larger or smaller community of men is of vital importance, and expresses a higher or supernatural reality: thus, for the ancient Germans, the forest was the indispensable basis of their very life, and at the same time something of a temple, a place that harbored the Divine Presence. All forest had this quality and, in this sense, was inviolable. Since, however, the forests also had to be used, there were special sacred woods whose function was to recall the principial and spiritually significant inviolability of the forest as such. The case of the sacred cow among the Hindus is similar: in reality, for the Hindus, everything living is sacred, in other words, inviolable and symbolical, for, according to their doctrine, all consciousness participates in the Divine Spirit. Since, however, it is impossible everywhere and always to avoid the killing of living creatures, the law of inviolability was in practice limited to a few symbolic species, amongst



Torii at Itsukushima Shrine, Miyajima,
Hiroshima Prefecture, Japan

which the cow, as the incarnation of the maternal mercy of the cosmos, assumes a special position. By renouncing the slaughtering of cows, the Hindu in principle venerates all life and at the same time protects one of the most important bases of his way of life, which for thousands of years has depended on cultivation and the raising of cattle. Likewise the sacred springs, of which there were many in medieval Christendom, drew attention to the sacredness of water as such; they were a reminder that water is a symbol of grace, something that can readily be seen in the symbolism of baptism. The sacred is that which is the object of veneration and awe; it is the reflection of something eternal, and therefore indestructible; and the inviolability which it enjoys stems directly therefrom.

Depending on which faith a people adheres to, and depending on their hereditary mentality, there are other natural or artificial things that they may regard as sacred. The four elements—air, fire, water, and earth—which are the most elementary modes of manifestation of all matter to offer themselves to our senses, are almost everywhere—with the exception of the modern, rationalistic world—endowed with the quality of sacredness; from this point of view, earth is illimitable, air is ungraspable, fire in its very nature is undefilable; only water is open to violation, and therefore commended to special protection.

To recapitulate: for pre-modern cultures, there are realities which transcend the level of mere utilitarianism and have precedence over



Kinkaku-ji, the “Golden Pavilion Temple”, Kyoto, Japan

them. These realities are in themselves of a purely spiritual or divine nature. They are however reflected in certain sensory appearances, which may consequently become the object of veneration and awe. These are then, either completely or in part (as representative symbols), withheld from the violent interference of men. Such an attitude is naturally very different from that of aesthetic sensitivity, which may also cause us, all considerations of usefulness apart, to admire and protect a natural phenomenon. But the sense of beauty is somehow contained within the veneration of the sacred; for the truly beautiful is that which lies hidden in the inexhaustible richness of harmoniously united possibilities. The same holds true for the sacred, and indeed for all phenomena and elements pertaining to the very bases of life, so that awe of the sacred also more or less directly contributes—not always in a predictable way—to the maintenance of life itself.

A few remarks should be made here regarding the elements: these have naturally nothing to do with what are called elements in modern chemistry but, as we have already said, represent the most elementary modes of manifestation in which the “stuff on which the world is made” communicates itself to our five senses: the solid, the liquid, the aerial, and the fiery modes of manifestation. There are indeed other liquids besides water, but none has for us the same aspect of purity, and none plays such an important role in the preservation of life. Likewise there are other gaseous substances besides air, but none of them can be breathed.

Cosmically, then, the four elements are the simplest manifestational modes of matter. From an inward point of view, on the other hand, they are also the simplest images of our soul, which as such is ungraspable, but whose fundamental characteristics can be likened to the four elements. “The soul of man resembles water”, said Goethe, thereby reiterating an image that occurs in the Scriptures of both Near and Far East. The soul resembles water, just as the Spirit resembles wind or air.

It would lead us too far to mention all the myths and customs in which water appears as an image or reflection of the soul. An awareness that the soul recognizes itself when it beholds water—finding animation in its play, refreshment in its rest, and purity in its clarity—is perhaps nowhere more widespread than amongst the Japanese. The whole of Japanese life, to the extent that it is still formed by tradition, is penetrated by a sense of purity and pliant simplicity that finds its prefiguration in water. The Japanese make pilgrimages to the famous waterfalls of their country and will gaze for hours at the unruffled surface of a temple pond. Significant is the story of the Chinese sage Hsuyu—a recurring theme of Japanese painters—who received a message that the Emperor wished to hand over his kingdom to him; he fled to the mountains and washed his ears in a waterfall. The painter Harunobu represented him allegorically in the form of a young and noble maiden who, in the solitude of the mountains, washes her ear in the vertical fall of water.



Kano Eitoku (1543-1590), *Xuyou and Chaofu* (detail). The sage Hsuyu (Xuyou) washes his ear in a waterfall, Japan, Momoyama period, 16th century



Ganga (celestial Ganges river), Mahanad, West Bengal, India, Sena Dynasty, 12th century

For the Hindus, the water of life finds embodiment in the Ganges which, from its source in the Himalayas, the mountains of the Gods, irrigates the largest and most populous plains of India. Its water is held to be pure from beginning to end, and in fact it is preserved from all pollution by the fine sand which it drags along with it. Whoever, with repentant mind, bathes in the Ganges, is freed from all his sins: inner purification here finds its symbolic support in the outward purification that comes from the water of the sacred river. It is as if the purifying water came from Heaven, for its origin in the eternal ice of the roof of the world is like a symbol of the heavenly origin of divine grace which, as “living water”, springs from timeless and immutable Peace. Here, as in the similar rites of other religions and peoples, the correspondence of water and soul helps the latter to purify itself or, more exactly, to find anew its own—originally pure—essence. In this process, the symbol prepares the way for grace.

Water symbolizes the soul. From another point of view—but analogously—water symbolizes the *materia prima* of the whole universe. For, just as water contains within itself, as pure possibilities, all the forms which, in flowing and sparkling, it may assume, so *materia prima* contains all the forms of the world in a state of indistinction.

In the Biblical story of creation it is said that, in the beginning, before the creation of the earth, the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters; and the holy books of the Hindus tell us that all the inhabitants of the earth emerged from the primordial sea. In these myths, water is not meant in the ordinary sense of the word; and yet the picture they create in our imagination is in its own way correct, and as apt as possibly can be, for nothing conveys better the undifferentiated and passive unity of *materia prima*.

The myth of the creation of all things from the primordial sea finds an echo in the Koranic words: “We have created every living thing from water”. The Biblical allegory of the Spirit of God moving upon the waters has its counterpart in the Hindu symbol of the divine swan Hamsa which, swimming on the primordial sea, hatches the golden egg of the world; and each of these allegorical representations is finally echoed in the Koran, where it is said that, at the beginning, the Throne of God was upon the water.



Lotus shrine for Vishnu, India, 10th-12th centuries

The opened lotus flower, the seat of Indian divinities, is also a “throne of God” floating upon the water of *materia prima*, or upon the water of principal possibilities. This symbol, which was transmitted from Hindu to Buddhist mythology and art, brings us back from water as the image of the primordial substance of the world to water as the image of the soul. The lotus-stream of the Buddha or *bodhisattva* rises up from the waters of the soul, just as the spirit, illumined by knowledge, frees itself from passive existence. Here water represents something which has to be overcome, but in which nevertheless there is good, because in it is rooted the flower whose calyx contains the “precious jewel” of *Bodhi*, the Divine Spirit. The Buddha, the “jewel in the lotus”, is himself this Spirit.

That must suffice as a survey of the meanings which water can have as a symbol, though many other examples of this kind could be mentioned. But



Kongo Satta (Vajrasattva) *bodhisattva* by Koshun, Enkyo-ji, Himeji City, Hyogo Prefecture, Japan, Nanbokucho period, 14th century

it is not merely a question of demonstrating that in all cultures that can be called pre-rationalist—and the term is not used pejoratively—water has more than a purely physical or biological meaning; the spiritual realities, of which it is the symbol, are never attached to it arbitrarily, but are directly and logically derived from its essence. The contemplative beholding of Nature which, through essential and constant appearances, perceives the timeless prototypes or causes of these appearances, is not something that is merely sentimental, nor is it bound to time and place, and this despite the fact of the modern world, from which this kind of contemplation seems to have been banished. We say “seems”, for such a contemplation of things is too deeply rooted in the human heart to be able to disappear completely. It even continues unconsciously, and it would not be difficult to show how the mysterious attraction of water as something sacred, as a symbolic and manifested expression of a psychic or cosmic reality, lives on in art, especially in painting and poetry. Who, when confronted with a pure mountain lake or with a spring gushing forth from the rock, has never felt at least something of the awe and veneration that are inseparable from anything sacred? The people of earlier times knew better than we that one does not disturb the balance of nature with impunity. Our superior scientific knowledge is totally insufficient to protect us from all the effects of a disturbed nature; and even if we could insure ourselves against every negative reaction on the part of the physical environment, we would still have no guarantee that the psychic or subtle world would not take its revenge on us. A glance at Asia and Africa, where the spiritual equilibrium of ancient cultures has been disturbed on all sides, and their very existence called into question, is sufficient to let us sense that it may still come to a destruction of “living waters”, in comparison with which the pollution of our physical waters will seem harmless.



Katsura Garden, Kyoto, Japan



Cherry Tree Beside a Waterfall, exterior of a writing box cover (detail), Japan, late 18th century

ILLUSTRATIONS

- Frontispiece: Lingaraja Temple, Bhubaneswar, Orissa, India.
- p. 2 Vishnu, India, Chola period, c. 925.
- p. 3 Avalokiteshvara, *bodhisattva* of Mercy, Nepal, c. 12th century. The Cleveland Museum of Art.
- p. 4 Bronze wine jar with dragon design, China, Shang Dynasty, c. 1523-1028 B.C.
Illustrated frontispiece to the *Mahaprajnaparamita Sutra*, Japan, Heian period, late 12th century. Honolulu Academy of Arts.
- p. 5 Uma worshiping Shiva, Indian miniature, 18th century.
- p. 6 The Goddess Sita, India, Chola period, c. 985.
The God Rama, India, Chola period, c. 975.
- p. 7 A celestial female, Madhya Pradesh, India, 11th-12th century.
- p. 8 Amida Buddha, Kotoku-in, Kamakura, Kanagawa Prefecture, Japan, mid 13th century.
- p. 9 Detail from a Japanese screen.
- p. 10 Tang Yin, *Whispering Pines on a Mountain Path*, hanging scroll, China, Ming Dynasty. Taipei, National Palace Museum.
- p. 11 *Lotus in Full Bloom*, China, Song Dynasty, 12th-13th century. Beijing, Palace Museum.
- p. 12 The Shore Temple, Mahabalipuram, Tamil Nadu, 7th century.
- p. 14 Kailasanatha Temple, Cave 16, Ellora, Maharashtra, built between the 5th and 10th centuries.
- p. 16 The Ashvamedha Yajna tank, Nagarjunakonda, 2nd century. Archeological Survey of India.
- p. 17 Brick arrangement for performance of *homa* (Vedic sacrifice).
Altars for performance of *puja* (ritual worship).
- p. 19 Jagannath Temple, Puri, Orissa, 12th century.
- p. 20 Vedagiriswarar Temple, Tirukkalukundram, Tamil Nadu.
- p. 21 Figs. 1 and 2. Circles of orientation, from the *Mānasāra Shilpa Shāstra*.
Fig. 3. Circle of orientation and the fundamental square.
- p. 22 Fig. 4. Chinese ideogram of the Great Triad: Heaven-Man-Earth.
- p. 23 Fig. 5. *Vāstu Purusha mandala*, symbol of *Purusha*.
- p. 24 Goddess from a frieze in the Keshava Temple of Somnathpur, Karnataka, 13th century.
Sculptures from the Kandariya Mahadeva Temple at Khajuraho, Madhya Pradesh, 10th century.
- p. 25 Samiddheshvara Temple, Chittogarh, Rajasthan, 11th century.
- p. 26 Brihadishwara Temple in Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu, 11th century.
- p. 27 The *garbhagriha* of the Lakshmana Temple in Khajuraho, holding the image of Vishnu, 10th century.
Figs. 6 and 7. *Mandalas* of nine and of four divisions.
- p. 28 Fig. 8. *Mandala* of 64 divisions after Stella Kramrisch.
Fig. 9. *Mandala* of 81 divisions after Stella Kramrisch.
- p. 29 Diagram of the *Vāstu Purusha mandala* of 81 divisions.
The Heavenly Jerusalem, the Morgan Beatus, Spain, 10th century. Pierpont Morgan Library.
- p. 31 Brihadishwara Temple in Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu, 11th century.
- p. 32 General view of Arunachaleswara Temple in Tiruvannamalai, Tamil Nadu.
- p. 33 Angkor Wat, a Vishnu temple that symbolizes the mythic Mount Meru, Cambodia.
Fig. 10. Foundation of a Hindu Temple, after Stella Kramrisch.
- p. 34 Galganatha Temple, Pattadakal, Karnataka, c. late 7th century.
Surya Temple, Jhalarapatan, Rajasthan, c. 12th century.
The central *sikhara* of the Kandariya Mahadeva Temple at Khajuraho, Madhya Pradesh.
- p. 35 The two *sikharas* of the Keshava Temple at Somnathpur, Karnataka.
- p. 36 Temple at Chidambaram dedicated to Lord Shiva, Tamil Nadu.
- p. 37 Temples in the holy city of Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh.
- p. 38 Lakshmana Temple, Khajuraho, Madhya Pradesh.
- p. 39 Vidyashankara Temple, Sringeri, Karnataka.
The temple-city of Sri Ranganatha on the island of Srirangam, Tiruchirapalli, Tamil Nadu.
- p. 40 Maharaja's Temple, Jeypore, Orissa.
Kailasanatha Temple, Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu.
Gopurams (temple gateways) of the Meenakshi Temple in Madurai, Tamil Nadu.
- p. 41 Entrance to the Temple of Vishnu-Sarangapani, Kumbakonam, Tamil Nadu, Chola period, 11th century.
- p. 42 Carved figures at Sri Ranganatha Temple, Tamil Nadu.
Corridor of the Kailasanatha Temple, Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu.
- p. 43 Fig. 11. *Kāla mukha*.
Lion-guardians at the Temple of Konarak, Orissa.

- Carved figures on the Dashavatara Temple, Deogarh, Orissa.
Detail of carved figures on the Kailasanatha Temple, Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu.
- p. 44 Girl playing with balls, Nagda, Rajasthan, 11th century.
Sculptures from the complex of temples at Khajuraho, Madhya Pradesh.
- p. 45 Sculptures from the complex of temples at Khajuraho, Madhya Pradesh.
- p. 46 Shiva *Nataraja*, detail, Chola period, c. 990. The Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution.
- p. 47 Shiva *Nataraja*, Chola period, c. 1100. Dallas Museum of Art.
- p. 48 Buddha Amitabha, Byodo-in Temple, Uji, near Kyoto, Japan, Heian period, 1053.
- p. 49 Lan Na bronze Buddha head, Thailand, 15th century.
- p. 50 Buddha, Sarnath, India, Gupta period.
- p. 51 Shakyamuni Buddha with scenes from his life, Guge, Western Tibet, 15th century. Robert Hatfield Ellsworth Collection.
- p. 52 Buddha Amitayus, China, Qing Dynasty. Asian Art Museum of San Francisco.
- p. 54 Dainichi (Mahavairocana) Buddha seated on the calyx of the eight-petaled lotus, surrounded by four Buddhas and four *bodhisattvas*, Japan, Muromachi period, 15th-16th century. Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria.
- p. 55 Nyoirin Kwannon (Avalokiteshvara), Daigo-ji, Kyoto, Japan, Heian period, 10th-11th century.
- p. 56 Buddha Vairocana by Zanabazar, Mongolia, 17th century. Ulan Batar, Musée de Beaux-Arts.
The five great Buddhas, Japanese Buddhist pantheon. Paris, Musée Guimet.
- p. 57 Kwannon *bodhisattva*, Sanjusangen-do, Kyoto, Japan, Kamakura period.
- p. 58 U Thong bronze Buddha, Thailand, 14th-15th centuries. Ayutthaya, Chao Sam Praya National Museum.
- p. 59 Sandstone Buddha head from Lop Buri, Thailand, 14th century. Bangkok, National Museum.
Buddha, Sukhothai Historical Park, Thailand.
- p. 60 Carvings from the Great *Stupa* of Sanchi: Buddha represented as a *stupa*, as the sacred tree, and as the wheel of the Law.
- p. 61 Buddha head, Sarnath, India, Gupta period.
- p. 63 Amoghasiddhi, one of the five wisdom Buddhas of the Vajrayana tradition, Central Tibet, c. 1200-1250. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
- p. 64 Eleven-faced, thousand-armed Avalokiteshvara, Guge, Western Tibet, second half of the 15th century. Robert Hatfield Ellsworth Collection.
- p. 65 Shakyamuni Buddha at the Vulture Peak Paradise, Central or Eastern Tibet, 18th century. The Shelley and Donald Rubin Collection.
- p. 66 Fig. 12. Diagram of the relationship between the Buddha image and the *stupa*.
Fig. 13. Diagram of the proportions of the "true image" of the Buddha, from a drawing by a Tibetan artist.
- p. 67 Gilded bronze *stupa* by Zanabazar, Ulan Batar, Mongolia, late 17th century. Ulan Batar, Musée de Beaux-Arts.
- p. 68 Amida Buddha by Kaikei, Japan, Kamakura period, 13th century.
Different *mudras* of the Buddha.
- p. 69 Dainichi Buddha, Japan, Heian period. Important Cultural Property of Japan.
Nyorai (Tathagatha) Amida Buddha looking back for any stragglers to take to the Pure Land, Zenrin-ji, Kyoto, Japan.
- p. 70 *Shaka Rising from the Golden Coffin* (detail), Japan, 11th century. Kyoto National Museum.
- p. 71 Miroku (Maitreya) *bosatsu*, Koryu-ji, Kyoto, Asuka period, 7th century.
- p. 72 Greeting picture of Amida Buddha and twenty-five *bodhisattvas*, Kongobu-ji, Japan, Muromachi period.
- p. 73 Amida Buddha rising from behind the mountains like a sun of compassion, Japan, 13th century.
- p. 74 Ma Yuan (active c. 1190-1225), *The Song of the First Spring Blossoms*, hanging scroll, Southern Song, Beijing, Palace Museum.
- p. 75 Openwork disc with a pair of dragons, China, Han Dynasty, 206 B.C.-220 A.D.
- p. 76 *Landscape of the Four Seasons*, attributed to Tensho Shubun (1414-1463), Japan, Muromachi period. Tokyo National Museum.
Shen Zhou (1427-1509), *Scholar and Crane Returning Home*, Ming Dynasty. Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.
- p. 77 Hsia Kuei (active c. 1200-1240), *Streams and Mountains, Pure and Remote*. Taipei, National Palace Museum.
Chao Meng-fu (1254-1322), *Old Tree, Bamboo, and Rock*. Taipei, National Museum.
- p. 78 Dai Jin (1388-1462), *Seeking the Tao in a Cavern-Heaven*, Ming Dynasty, 15th century. Beijing, Palace Museum.
- p. 79 Attributed to Wu Yuanzhi (1126-1233), illustration to *Ode to the Red Cliff* (detail). Taipei, National Palace Museum.
- p. 80 Ma Yuan, *Herons on a Snowy Bank*. Taipei, National Palace Museum.
- p. 81 Shen Zhou, *Poet on a Mountain Top*, Ming Dynasty. Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.
- p. 82 Black ink landscape by the Zen Buddhist priest Sesshu Toyo (1420-1506), 1495. Tokyo National Museum.
- p. 83 Soami (1485-1525), *Li Bai Viewing the Waterfall*, Japan, Muromachi period. The Asian Arts Museum of San Francisco.
- p. 85 Emperor Huei-Tsung (1082-1135), *Birds in a Blossoming Wax-Plum Tree*. Taipei, National Museum.
- p. 86 A Japanese house.
- p. 87 Wang-Wei (699-761), *Waterfall*, Tang Dynasty.
- p. 88 *Thangka* of the *Kalachakra mandala*, Central regions, Tibet, late 15th century. Private collection.
- p. 90 *Mandala* of Bhaisajyaguru, Tibet, late 18th century. Gerd-Wolfgang Essen Collection.
- p. 91 *Tomoye*, a symbol related to *Yin-Yang*, representing the play of forces in the cosmos, Futarasan Shrine, Nikko, Japan.
- p. 92 *Yin-Yang* and the Eight Trigrams, China.

- p. 92 *Sri Yantra*, India.
- p. 93 Stone Wheel of the Law (*Dharmachakra*), Thailand, 7th-8th centuries.
Ritual *dorje* and bell, symbols of *Prajna* (Wisdom) and *Upaya* (Method), China, Yuan to Ming dynasties. Kongobu-ji. Mount Koya, Japan.
- p. 94 *Sukhavati*, the Western Paradise of Amitabha, Tibet, 18th century. Gerd-Wolfgang Essen Collection.
- p. 95 *Thangka* of the Wheel of Life (*Bhavachakramudra*), Tibet.
Lord Vishnu reposing on the serpent Shesha, floating on the cosmic waters, Indian miniature, 18th century.
- p. 96 Cosmological mirror, China, Western Han Dynasty, 1st century B.C. Cleveland Museum of Art.
- p. 97 Oracle mirror (*melong*), Tibet.
- p. 98 A Shinto mirror, symbol of Amaterasu.
Ise Jingu's Inner Shrine, which houses the sacred mirror of Shintoism, Naiku, Mie Prefecture, Japan.
- p. 99 Painting by Catherine Schuon inspired by a traditional Japanese representation of the myth of the sun-goddess Amaterasu.
- p. 100 Mask of Bhairava, a manifestation of the fierce aspect of Shiva, Nepal. Les Musées de la Ville de Paris.
Processional wooden mask of a *bodhisattva*, Japan, Heian period, 12th century. Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts, Stanford University.
- p. 102 Mask of a sage (*rusi*) used in the *Khon* dance-drama, a Thai version of the Hindu *Ramayana*, Thailand.
- p. 103 Mask of Barong, Bali.
Mask of Rangda, Bali.
- p. 104 *Kala* head, Candi Kidal, East Java, 13th century.
- p. 105 Mask of Krishna from Kerala, South India.
Barong mask of a boar's head.
Barong mask of an elephant's head.
- p. 106 *Uba Nō* mask, representing an old woman, Japan, Edo period. Tokyo National Museum.
Okina Nō mask, representing the joyful face of an old man, Japan, Edo period, 17th century. Tokyo, Esei Bunko Museum.
- p. 107 *Ko-omate Nō* mask, representing a young woman, Japan, Edo period, 18th century. Berlin, Museum für Ostasiatische Kunst.
Kasshiki Nō mask, representing a young priest, Japan, Edo period, 18th century. Paris, Musée Guimet.
- p. 108 *The Wise Men Present the Chess, Dice, and Tables to the King of India*, miniature from *The Book of Chess, Dice, and Tables* by Alfonso X the Wise, Spain, 13th century. Madrid, Biblioteca del Monasterio de El Escorial.
Consulting a Manuscript of Arabic Characters on a Chess Problem, miniature from *The Book of Chess, Dice, and Tables* by Alfonso X the Wise, Spain, 13th century. Madrid, Biblioteca del Monasterio de El Escorial.
- p. 110 Clay play board from India, Harappa excavations, Indus River Valley civilization.
- p. 111 *The Game of the Four Seasons*, miniature from *The Book of Chess, Dice, and Tables* by Alfonso X the Wise, Spain, 13th century. Madrid, Biblioteca del Monasterio de El Escorial.
The Great Game of Chess, played on a board of 12 x 12 squares, miniature from *The Book of Chess, Dice, and Tables* by Alfonso X the Wise, Spain, 13th century. Madrid, Biblioteca del Monasterio de El Escorial.
- p. 113 Ladies playing chess, Indian miniature, Kangra school, 18th century.
- p. 114 Chessboard from India, late 17th century. Peabody Essex Museum.
- p. 115 *Buzurjmihr Masters the Game of Chess*, from an illustrated manuscript of the *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings), dedicated to Shah Tahmasp (1524-1550), Persia, Safavid period. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
- p. 116 Sculpture of a snake spirit (*naga*), India.
- p. 117 Dragons guarding the entrance of the Wat Phra Keo Pagoda, Vientiane, Laos.
Section of the Wall of the Nine Dragons, Central Datong, China, 14th century.
- p. 118 *Naga* and *nagini*, central India, c. 10th century.
Fig. 14. The staff of Hermes, or caduceus, from a drawing of Hans Holbein the Younger.
Fig. 15. The seven *chakras* or power centers in the subtle body of man, with the two power-streams *Idā* and *Pingalā*, which wind round the central axis. Tantric representation from *The Serpent Power* by Arthur Avalon. The leaf design on the head represents the highest *chakra*: "the lotus with the thousand petals".
- p. 119 Quetzalcoat, the plumed serpent (on the left), *Codex Borbonicus*, p. 22. Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Assemblée Nationale.
- p. 120 Krishna dancing on top of the serpent Kaliya, Indian miniature, 18th century.
Buddha sheltered by Mucalinda, the serpent king, Cambodia, early 12th century.
Vishnu reposing on the serpent Shesha, Deogarh Temple, India.
- p. 121 Emperor's yellow court robe (*chaofu*) (detail), China, Kang-hsi period.
Emperor's semiformal court robe (*jifu*), China, 18th century.
Manchu woman's formal court coat (*chaogua*), China, mid 18th century.
- p. 122 Utagawa Hiroshige, *Whirlpool and Waves at Naruto, Awa Province*.
- p. 123 The garden and pond of Heian Jingu Shrine, Kyoto, Japan.
- p. 124 Pura Ulun Danu Bratan Temple, Bali.
Inle Lake Monastery, Myanmar
- p. 125 Torii at Itsukushima Shrine, Miyajima, Hiroshima Prefecture, Japan.

- p. 126 Kinkaku-ji, the “Golden Pavilion temple”, Kyoto, Japan.
 p. 127 Kano Eitoku (1543–1590), *Xuyou and Chaofu* (detail). Momoyama period, 16th century. Tokyo National Museum.
 p. 128 Ganga (celestial Ganges river), Mahanad, West Bengal, India, Sena Dynasty, 12th century.
 p. 129 Lotus shrine for Vishnu, India, 10th–12th centuries. Oxford, Ashmolean Museum.
 Kongo Satta (Vajrasattva) *bodhisattva*, by Koshun, Enkyo-ji, Himeji City, Hyogo Prefecture, Japan, Nanbokucho period, 14th century.
 p. 130 Katsura Garden, Kyoto, Japan.
 p. 131 *Cherry Tree Beside a Waterfall*, exterior of a writing box cover (detail), Japan, late 18th century. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

INDEX

- Abraham, 19n
acheiropoietos, 59
 Adam, 5, 19n
Adityas, 28
 Agni, 22n, 30, 49, 53, 55
Aitareya Brāhmana, 5
 alchemy, 46n, 85, 116, 119
 Alphonse X the Wise, King, 111, 114
 altar, 17, 18, 19, 33
 Hindu, 18n, 30, 37
 sacrificial, 16, 17
 Vedic, 15, 22, 35, 49, 59
 Amaterasu, 98
 Amida (Amitābha), 71
 archery, 11, 82n, 85
 archetype, 4, 9, 84n, 91, 92
arkān, 19n
ashtāpada, 109, 110
asūra, *asūras*, 22n, 23, 25, 109, 112
 Avalokiteshvara, 55
a'yān, 98
 Ayodhya, 29, 110n

 Balhit, King, 109, 110, 114
 Barong, 103, 104
 Baroque, the, 3
Bhagavad Gītā, 114
Bharata Nāṭya Shāstra, 46
Bodhi, 53, 53n, 62, 129
 Bodhidharma, 71
bodhisattva, 53n, 55, 56, 59, 82, 129
 Bodhi tree, 53, 53n
 Brahmā, 23, 27, 28
Brahmāsthana, 27, 28, 29, 37
Brihat Sambhita, 23
 Buddha, 9, 82, 84, 129
 Amitābha, 55, 62, 71
 image of, 9, 82; *see* chapter 3
 Shākyamuni, 50n, 53, 59, 62, 66, 71;
 see also Gautama
 Vairocana, 55
 Buddhahood, 50n, 55, 56, 59, 60, 68
Buddhi, 16; *see also* Intellect
 Buddhism, 9, 11, 49, 50, 53, 59, 60, 62,
 68, 71, 82, 84, 110n
Ch'an, 97; *see also* Zen
 Chinese, 75
dhyāna, 75, 75n, 82, 85
Hinayāna, 53n, 59, 71
Mahāyāna, 53, 53n, 55, 59, 71

cardo, 21
ch'an, 75, 75n
chaos, 44
 Chia-Siang Da-Shi, 56
 Christ, 59, 60, 62
 Christendom, 125, 126
 Christianity, 13, 30, 101
 Coomaraswamy, Ananda K., 4, 11, 37n,
 43, 46
 cosmos, 13, 13n, 15, 18, 22, 23n, 24, 25,
 27, 28, 30, 32, 35, 37, 44, 53, 55, 68,
 75, 79, 110, 112, 114n, 116, 118, 126

 David, 14
decumanus, 21
 Descartes, 92, 94
devas, 5, 7, 15, 15n, 16, 23, 25, 35, 42,
 109, 110, 112
dharmacakra, 60
dharmakāya, 56
dhyāna, 71, 82, 84, 86
dhyani-Buddhas, 53, 55
 Divine, 16
 Art, 5, 7, 9
 creation, 7
 Essence, 9, 15, 16, 16n, 25, 32, 49
 Lamb, 30
 Law, 4, 37
 Man, 25, 49
 Names, 28n, 102
 norm, 20
 Peace (Arabic: *sakīnah*; Hebrew:
 shekhina; Sanskrit: *shānti*), 13
 Perfection, 15
 Power (*Māyā*), 7
 Presence, 19n, 22, 125
 Qualities, 29
 Reality, 7, 50, 99
 Revelation, 9
 Spirit, 7, 13, 13n, 23, 94, 115, 125, 129
 Truth, 3, 9, 98
 Will, 7, 62n
 Divinity, 13, 24, 27, 35, 37, 43, 101, 110
Divyāvadāna, 59

eidōs, 3
 Eskimos, 105
ethos, 44
 Europe (Christian), 125

Feng-shui, 85

 Gandhara, school of, 70
 Ganges, 55, 128
Garbhagrīva, 27, 33
 Gautama, 50, 50n
gnosis, 96
 Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von, 127
 Gorgoneion, 104
 Greek art, 44
 Guénon, René, 11, 22n, 92, 112, 116

Hamsa, 128

- haqā'iq*, 98
 Harunobu, Suzuki, 127
 Heavenly Jerusalem, 13, 15n, 30
 Hehaka Sapa (Black Elk), 18, 18n, 19
 Hellenism, 44, 71
 Hermetic tradition, 118; science, 91
 Herrigel, Eugen (Bungaku Hakushi), 11
 Hinduism, 11, 38, 49, 50, 53, 56, 62, 68
Hiranyagarbha, 28
hiranya purusha, 35, 49
 Hsieh Ho, 77
 Hsuyu, 127
 Huei-Tsung, 85
- I Ching*, 110n
Idā, 118, 119
 Impressionism, 79
 Intellect (Greek: *Nous*; Sanskrit: *Buddhi*), 16, 50, 91, 92, 94, 96, 97, 101, 109, 123
 Iroquois, 104n
- Jewel in the Lotus, 53, 129; see also *mani padme*
Jōdo-shin-shū, 60n
- Kaaba, 18n, 19
Kāla mukha, 42, 43n, 104
 Kali, 104
Kālingabodhi Jātaka, 60
kāraka, 23
karma, 62, 71
 Kramrisch, Stella, 11
kris, 104
 Krishna, 105
kshatriya, 109, 114, 115
kundalinī, 116, 118, 119
 Kwan-yin. See Kwannon
 Kwannon, 55, 71
- laya yoga*, 116, 118
Libro de Acedrex, 111
līlā, 42
Logos, 16; see also *Buddhi*
- Mahākāshyapa, 84
Mānasāra Shilpa Shāstra, 21n
mandala, 22, 25, 27, 28, 29, 30, 30n, 33, 55, 110, 112, 114
mani padme, 53
 Mas'ūdī, al-, 109, 110, 114
materia, 112, 112n
- materia prima*, 112, 118, 128, 129
Māyā, 7, 42, 44
 Meru, Mount, 33
Merudanda, 118, 119
mudrā, 55, 68
mūlādhāra, 116
- nābbi*, 17
Natarāja, 46
 naturalism, 7, 45, 71, 104
 Nature, 85, 116, 118, 123, 125, 130
nirvāna, 55n, 62
Nō, 106
 nomadic sanctuaries, 18
 North American Indians, 102, 111
Nous, 97; see also Intellect
- Padadevatās*, 28, 30n
 Parthians, 18
 Paul, St., 97
persona, 101, 101n
Pīngalā, 118, 119
 Plato, 91
 Plotinus, 97
Prajāpati, 15, 16, 16n, 22, 49
Prajñā, 84, 85
Prakriti, 24, 24n, 46, 68
Prāna, 30, 32
Prithivī, 27, 28
Purusha, 16, 22, 25, 29, 30, 30n, 32, 33, 49, 50, 68, 112, 115
mandala, 112
- Quetzalcoatl, 119
- Rāhu, 28, 43n, 110
Rāmāyana, 29, 110n
 Rangda, 103, 104
 Renaissance, the, 3, 109
Rig Veda, 16, 22
- sacratum*, 13, 19
sakinah, 19n
samādhi, 45
sambhogakāya, 56
samsāra, 37, 62
satori, 82, 85
 Schuon, Frithjof, 11, 18n
shakti, 15n, 24, 116, 118, 119
shānti, 13
shāstras, 37n
shekhina, 13
- Shintoism, 98
 Shiva, 24, 27, 28, 46, 112
Natarāja (Lord of the Dance), 46
sbruti, 91
shūnya, 79, 82
sifāt, 98
sikhara, 35
 Sioux Indians, 18, 53n
smriti, 91
 Solomon, 14, 18n
 seal of, 56
solve et coagula, 116
 Spirit, 24, 49, 53, 86, 92, 95, 112, 113n, 115, 118, 127, 128, 129
stūpa, 66, 68
 Sun Dance, 27n, 28
sushumnā, 20n
Sūtras, 55, 59
 Suzuki, Daisetz Teitaro, 11
- Taoism, 11, 82, 84, 98
 Taoist art, 9, 75
 painting, 77, 81
Tao Te Ching, 79
tathāgata, 50, 50n, 53, 55n, 59, 60, 62, 68
tarwāf, 19n
 Temple
 Christian, 25, 30
 Greek, 104
 Hindu. See chapter 2 of Jerusalem, 14, 18n
- vajra*, 59
vāstu, 22, 23, 23n, 112
Vāstu Purusha mandala, 22, 25, 27, 29, 29n, 30, 109, 112, 112n
Vastushānti, 25
 Veda, Vedic, 15, 16, 22, 33, 35, 49, 50, 55, 59
Virāj, 22, 29, 32
 Vitruvius, 21
- Wang-Wei, 87
Wu-hsin, 84
Wu-nien, 84
 Wu Tao-Tsu, 85
- Yin-Yang*, 75, 86, 112
 Yoga, 49, 116
- Zen, 11, 75n, 82, 84, 85

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

TITUS BURCKHARDT, a German Swiss, was born in Florence in 1908 and died in Lausanne in 1984. He devoted all his life to the study and exposition of the different aspects of wisdom and tradition. In the age of modern science and technocracy, Titus Burckhardt was one of the most remarkable of the exponents of universal truth, in the realm of metaphysics as well as in the realm of cosmology and of traditional art. He was a major voice of the *philosophia perennis*, that “wisdom uncreate” that is expressed in Platonism, Vedanta, Sufism, Taoism, and other authentic esoteric or sapiential teachings. In literary and philosophic terms, he was an eminent member of the “Perennialist” or “Traditionalist” school of twentieth century thinkers and writers.

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Titus Burckhardt lived for many years in Fez, Morocco and was an integral part of the Moroccan government’s successful preservation of the ancient medina of Fez as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1981. Burckhardt’s work has also provided a blueprint for the preservation of other Islamic cities of great historical interest. In 1999 the Moroccan government sponsored an international symposium in Marrakech in honor of Burckhardt’s work entitled, “*Sagesse et Splendeur des Arts islamiques—Hommage à Titus Burckhardt*”. The proceedings were published with the financial assistance of UNESCO in 2000.

Burckhardt was fluent in German, French, Arabic, and English and wrote seventeen books in German, eight books in French, translated three books from Arabic into French, and wrote numerous articles in various languages. Some fifteen of his books have been translated and published in English. A selection of his English-language writings is presented on the next page and a complete bibliography is available on <http://www.worldwisdom.com>.

MICHAEL OREN FITZGERALD is an author, editor, and publisher of books on world religions, sacred art, tradition, culture, and philosophy. He has composed over a dozen books that have received more than fifteen prestigious awards. Eight of his books and two documentary films produced by him are used in university classes. Fitzgerald has taught Religious Traditions of the North American Indians in the Indiana University Continuing Studies Department at Bloomington, Indiana. He holds a Doctor of Jurisprudence, cum laude, from Indiana University. Michael and his wife, Judith, have spent extended periods of time visiting traditional cultures and attending sacred ceremonies throughout the world. They have an adult son and live in Bloomington, Indiana. Fitzgerald is the editor of Burckhardt’s double award-winning volume, *The Foundations of Christian Art* (2006).

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Other Books by Titus Burckhardt

The Best Summary of Burckhardt's Life & Writings

The Essential Titus Burckhardt: Reflections on Sacred Art, Faiths, and Civilizations,
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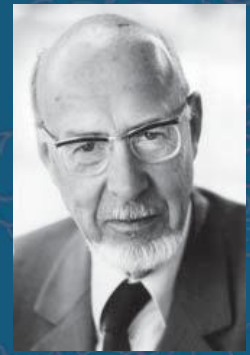
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