

**THE *UNIVERSALISM AND GENEROSITY*
OF THE *LOTUS SŪTRA*:
AN EMBLEMATIC REACTION FOR A NEW WORLD**

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***The date of the Parinirvāṇa of the Buddha.
Early Buddhism***

There is not a general agreement about the date of the Parinirvāṇa of the Buddha. There are on this respect many opinions accepted by diverse Buddhist communities and by diverse scholars. Each one of these opinions is based in traditions, arguments and texts, according to which the date of the Parinirvāṇa should be located between the years 368 and 965 before the beginning of the Common Era. This fact indicates the importance of the divergences regarding the matter.

The great symposium celebrated at Göttingen in the year 1988, on *The Dating of the Historical Buddha* (whose Proceedings were published¹ in three volumes with a total of one thousand two hundred pages), reached no positive result. As a work hypothesis we fix for the Parinirvāṇa *circa* 480 before the C.E., and, as there is a general acceptance that the Buddha lived for 80 years, we fix the date of his birth *circa* 560 before the C.E. During great part of His life of 80 years the Buddha was dedicated to the preaching of his Doctrine.

We can give the name of “Early Buddhism” to that form of Buddhism as taught by the Buddha himself. This form is recorded in many of the texts written in Pāli included in the *Pāli Tipiṭaka*.

***The Nikāya Buddhism
(afterwards called Hīnayāna by the Mahāyāna)***

Great events that took place in the Buddhist Community after the Buddha’s death were the *compilation* of the Buddha’s Teachings, which till then remained only in the memory of his disciples and followers, the diverse *interpretations* of these teachings once compiled, and the *division* of the Community in Sects or Schools which reunited

¹ Edited by H. Bechert, in *Abhandlungen der Akademie der Wissenschaften*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1991, 1992 and 1997. See Tola and C. Dragonetti : “Fecha del Parinirvāṇa de Buda”, in *Revista de Estudios Budistas*, México 1994, pp. 89-106.

disciples and followers who coincided in an special interpretation of some teachings of doctrinaire or disciplinary nature.

The *compilation* of the Master's teachings was fundamentally done in the *First Council*, which took place shortly after the Buddha died. The doctrinaire teachings recited by Ānanda constituted the *First-Piṭaka*, the *Sutta Piṭaka*; the disciplinary teachings recited by Upāli constituted the *Second-Piṭaka*, the *Vinaya Piṭaka* - the First and the Second Parts of the *Buddhist Canon*.

These two *Piṭakas* became the common heritage of all Buddhists; they accepted it as the "*Word of the Buddha*".

But, as it happened in all religious, moral and philosophical schools, very soon there appeared different systematizations and interpretations of several doctrinaire tenets and several disciplinary rules. These systematizations and interpretations were not arbitrary and unfounded intellectual creations; they were supported by severe study and analysis of the texts containing Buddha's ideas.

The disciples and followers of the Buddha that maintained systematizations and interpretations different from the traditional ones or accepted by the majority gathered together into separate groups. In the course of time these groups received the name of *Nikāya*, Sects or Schools. *Nikāya* designates also the Pāli *Suttas* as a whole.

Each Sect or School, created in the indicated way, collected their own systematizations and interpretations of the transmitted Buddha's teachings in their so-called *Abhidhammas* (in Pāli; *Abhidharmas*, in Sanskrit). Each Sect added to the already existing *Piṭakas* (that of the *Suttas*, in Pāli; *Sūtras* in Sanskrit) and that of the *Vinaya*) a *Third-Piṭaka* under the name of *Abhidhamma-Piṭaka*. The difference of the Canon of each Sect in regard to that of the other Sects lays in their respective *Abhidhamma-Piṭakas*, which were considered as forming part of the Buddha's teachings, and even some times as having been composed by the Master himself.

Illuminating example of these processes of differentiation of opinion about doctrinaire tenets and disciplinary rules that lead to schisms in the Community, was the schism that occurred, according to tradition, in the *Second Council* that took place in Vaiśālī one hundred years after the Buddha's death. This schism was about ten norms that regulated the behavior of the monks; it provoked the division of the Community in two great Schools: the *Sthaviravāda* or *Theravāda* School (the Elders), of a conservative tendency, who accepted the ten disciplinary norms, and the *Mahāsaṅghika* School who opposed the norms.²

² See Akira Hirakawa, *A History of Indian Buddhism*, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1990, pp. 79-82.

Cause that provoked the fragmentation of the Community

Which was the cause of this fragmentation of the original Community into diverse groups that, notwithstanding their different interpretations of teachings of the Master, maintained their essential unity under the triple emblem of the *Buddha*, the *Dharma* and the *Community*?

The cause of this differentiation was the universal, always working law of *evolution*, i.e. of *change, transformation, creation of new forms that replace the old ones*. Evolution displays its power in all the aspects of reality: the biological species, including man, the diverse creations of human culture, as ethics, law, philosophy, religion, politics, customs and habits, art, poetry, the relation between individuals and social classes, etc. All is submitted to a permanent change, transformation, evolution. Buddhist teachings did not escape this universal law.

Buddhism was well aware of this evolutive characteristic of all that exists:

- The *First Noble Truth*, for instance, mentions among the forms of suffering *old age*, which arrives little by little, destroying the energy and the possibilities of man, transforming the individual in a living being different from what he has been before.

- Also the theory of *dharmas* presents reality as constituted by a huge accumulation of *dharmas* (or factors of existence) in a constant universal process of vertiginous replacement of one *dharma* by another, always different one another, since they are produced by diverse causes and conditions.

- The cosmological Buddhist conception asserts that the universe is in a beginningless process of alternance of creations and destructions.

The result of the *dharmas* theory and this cosmological conception, according to D.N. Shastri, is that the universe is not static, but dynamic, that it is not being, but becoming.³

- The *denial of substance (nairātmya)*, central principle of Buddhism, also contributes to create the awareness of the *changing nature* of all existing being or thing, since *substance* -for those who accept it- is the *solid and unchanging* kernel of everything in the world.

- Finally, let us mention, as a testimony of this Buddhist awareness of the *universal evolution*, the fact that many times the *ālayavijñāna*, the basic layer of human mind or personality, is compared to a river that flows perpetually changing.

³ *The Philosophy of Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika and its Conflict with the Buddhist Dignāga School*, Delhi: Bharatiya Vidya Prakashan, 1972, p. 189.

***Evolution from Early Buddhism
to Nikāya Buddhism, and in Nikāya Buddhism***

According to the previous remarks, there was evolution from *Early Buddhism* to *Nikāya Buddhism*. The simple fact of *compiling* and *systematizing* the Buddha's teachings, that existed till then under the form of improvised sermons and dialogues, was already a *process of evolution*. This evolution affected the essence of *Early Buddhism*, transforming it into a new form of Buddhism, the *Nikāya Buddhism* that afterwards was also called *Hīnayāna Buddhism*.

The schisms, the Sects and the composition of the *Abhidharmas* of many Sects are an eloquent testimony of the evolution that has taken place inside the *Nikāya Buddhism* itself - evolution that continued in the centuries that followed the Buddha's death.

If evolution is a process imposed by the nature of things, the intensity it assumed in the *Nikāya Buddhism* is a proof of the richness, variety and force of the Buddhist intellectual activity at that epoch.

The origin of Mahāyāna Buddhism

If it is possible to follow with more or less certainty the birth and development of schisms and Sects inside the *Nikāya Buddhism*, thanks to the Pāli, Chinese, and Tibetan sources that give information on this subject, it happens not so in relation to the birth and development of the *Mahāyāna Buddhism*. There is no possibility to establish on firm ground *when* and *how* *Mahāyāna Buddhism* did appear and *which was the process* that it followed in its coming to be.

Anyhow it is reasonable to affirm the following facts:

- The *Mahāyāna* was the result of a development or evolution of the thought and beliefs of all or some of the Sects of the *Nikāya Buddhism*, of some or all of his monks, and of all or a part of its laity. *Mahāyāna* was a Buddhist product of the Buddhist Community. Among the Sects that contributed the most to the coming forth of *Mahāyāna* form of Buddhism it is necessary to mention those of the Mahāsaṅghika, Sarvāstivādins, Mahīśāsaka, Dharmaguptaka, Sammatīya.

- Most probably the process that resulted in *Mahāyāna Buddhism* was not a short one; it must have taken some centuries, taking into account the huge number of doctrines, different from those of the *Nikāya Buddhism*, that were elaborated constituting *Mahāyāna Buddhism*.

- It can be admitted that already around the beginning of the Common Era the *Mahāyāna* already existed in its essential lines, taking into account that the translation of the *Mahāyāna Sūtras* into Chinese began in the first century of the Common Era.

Conflict between Nikāya Buddhism and Mahāyāna

All evolution of ideas and beliefs implies a *change* in these ideas and beliefs, and almost always this change is accompanied by *confrontations*, *frictions* and *conflicts* between those believers that continued adhering to the ancient ideas and beliefs, as they presented themselves before the change, and those that gave their adherence to them after this transformation.

This was also the case with the *Mahāyāna* and the *Nikāya Buddhism*, to which the *Mahāyāna* gave the name of *Hīnayāna*.

We have written three articles on the conflicts that arose between the *Mahāyāna* and the *Hīnayāna*, presenting as testimonies of the conflict a good number of different texts of the *Hīnayāna*, of the *Lotus Sūtra*, and of the Mahāyānist author Bhavya.⁴ Happily this conflict never assumed the violent and bloody character exhibited by similar religious conflicts in Europe.

Fundamentally, the *Hīnayāna* accused the *Mahāyāna* of introducing into Buddhism new ideas that were not of the Buddha, that have been invented by cunning monks or even by the evil Māra himself. The *Hīnayāna* argued that these ideas were contrary to the basic teachings of the Master, that these ideas were deforming His message, that they were not “the Word of the Buddha”.⁵

The teachings of the Hīnayāna and the Mahāyāna are all the “Word of the Buddha”

The scientific philological-historical description of the Buddhist development, presented in the previous pages, prevents considering the *Mahāyāna Sūtras* as composed

⁴ Cf. F. Tola and C. Dragonetti, “The Conflict of Change in Buddhism: the Hīnayānist Reaction”, in *Cahiers d’Extrême-Asie*, 1996-1997; “The Conflict of Change in the Lotus Sūtra: The Hīnayānist Reaction”, in *Hokke-Bunka Kenkyū*, 1998; and “Apologetics and Harmony in the Lotus Sūtra and Bhavya”, in *Kokoro: Journal of The Essential Lay Buddhism Study Center*, Vol. 2, 2007.

⁵ Cf. F. Tola and C. Dragonetti’s articles quoted in the previous note.

by the Buddha, since their composition, took place several centuries after the death of the Buddha. Several facts support this assertion that is generally admitted.⁶

But nevertheless we can say that the Sūtras of the Mahāyāna are the *Word of the Buddha*. They express Buddha's thought. In its long and dynamic existence Buddhism has evolved. In some aspects *Nikāya* Buddhism, taught by the Buddha himself, and *Mahāyāna* Buddhism are the same; in some aspects *Mahāyāna* Buddhism is nothing else than the normal legitimate evolution of the *Nikāya* Buddhism. It could be said that all that the *Mahāyāna* teaches, and may seem different from the *Nikāya* teachings, is already in them, as a *garbha*, as a *bīja*, as a *śakti*, as an *effect* that is really existent in its cause. In due moment, thanks to the action of time, changes and progress of humanity, it blossoms as a *Mahāyāna* doctrine.

This idea existed already in the first epochs of Buddhism. In the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*, *Taishō* N° 374, p. 449 a lines 6-12 (cf. N° 375, p. 690 c line 28-p. 691 a line 5) is said:

譬如從牛出乳從乳出酪。從酪出生酥。從生酥出熟酥。
 從熟酥出醍醐 . . .
 . . . 佛亦如是。從佛出生十二部經。從十二部經出修多羅。
 從修多羅出方等經。從方等經出般若波羅蜜。從般若波羅蜜出大涅槃。
 猶如醍醐。言醍醐者喻於佛性。佛性

“For instance: From a cow comes out (*niṣKRAM*-) milk, from milk comes out coagulated milk, from coagulated milk comes out butter, from butter comes out clarified butter, from clarified butter comes out cream.

... The same happens also with the Buddha. From the *Buddha* comes out the *Twelvefold Sūtras of the Sects*⁷, from the *Twelvefold Sūtras of the Sects* come out the *Sūtras* (of the Mahāyāna in general), from the *Sūtras* (of the Mahāyāna in general) come out the *Vaipulya Sūtras*, from the *Vaipulya Sūtras* come out the *Prajñāparāmitā* (Sūtras), from the *Prajñāparāmitā* (Sūtras) comes out the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* (Sūtra).”

⁶ See F. Tola and C. Dragonetti, “Apologética y armonía en el Budismo: el *Sūtra del Loto y Bhavya*”, in *Boletín de la Asociación Española de Orientalistas*, Madrid, 2005, pp. 138-140.

⁷ I.e. of the Hīnayāna.

The two Chinese characters (*t'i hu*), that we have translated by “cream”, mean also, the *first*, “the essential oil of the butter” (used with the second “to describe the goodness of the Buddha”), the *second*, “the oiled scum which floats on boiling butter”⁸. Hirakawa⁹ gives for both characters together the following Sanskrit correspondence : “*maṇḍa, sarpis, sarpi-maṇḍa, sarpir-maṇḍa, amṛtā*”. We think that what is important in this comparison is the fact that *from one thing, milk, derive many different products, all of them have one thing, milk, as their origin and essence*. In the same way, *from the Buddha derive all Buddhist Scriptures ; all of them have the Buddha as their origin and essence*.

Traditional Mahāyānist conception of the development of Buddhism

The traditional point of view, generally accepted by Mahāyānist authors, maintains a complete different idea, according to which the Buddha preached during the 80 years of His life, first, the *Hīnayāna*, and, then, the *Mahāyāna*, and in the course of these 80 years the *Hīnayāna* and the *Mahāyāna* treatises were made known. All the five or six centuries described by the scientific view are compressed into the 80 years of the Buddha’s life. Chih-i’s *P’an Chiao* or “Division of the Doctrine” system is constructed on the basis of this traditional conception, which is referred to also in the *Lotus Sūtra*. According to it the Buddha began preaching the contents of the Mahāyānist *Avatamsaka Sūtra*, under the Bodhi-Tree during the three weeks immediately following the attainment of His Enlightenment. But the Buddha perceived that his teaching was beyond the acceptance of His followers. It was a message too new and bold for them. Thus He desisted from this purpose, moved to the Deer Park and during twelve years He preached to them the Doctrines contained in the *First Piṭaka* or *Sutta-piṭaka* of the Pāli Canon. This long introductory teaching prepared the mind of His followers, and after it the Buddha preached to them, during the rest of His life, in a gradual way, the doctrines contained in His Mahāyāna great Sūtras.¹⁰

The Lotus Sūtra attitude

⁸ Cf. Mathews’ *Chinese-English Dictionary*.

⁹ *Buddhist Chinese-Sanskrit Dictionary*.

¹⁰ Leon Hurvitz, *Chih-I*, Bruxelles: Institut Belge des Hautes Études Chinoises, 1980, pp. 231-246.

regarding the conflict between Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna.

Universalistic Inclusivism

Now we shall refer to the attitude assumed by the *Lotus Sūtra* in front of the conflict that arose between the Hīnayāna and the Mahāyāna, to which the *Lotus Sūtra* belongs, in order to see which aspects of this attitude could be useful for a better coexistence of human beings at present.

The attitudes of the *Lotus Sūtra* in face of this conflict is characterized by a noble feeling of *universalistic inclusivism* that does not wish to exclude from Buddhism any person or group that belongs to the Community. The cruel practices of excommunication and anathematization were not adopted by Buddhism, always eager to avoid whatever violent or discriminative form of behavior. Buddhism as a whole was in reality an association of diverse *Nikāyas*, Sects or Schools, maintaining each of them different views on several Buddhist tenets, but adhering to the basic principles of Buddhism. Buddhism gives in this way a most eloquent testimony of the possibility, for human beings, to live under the emblem of *unity in diversity* and to be able to accept the differences of ideas without intolerance and violence.

An instance of this universalistic inclusivism is already given by the *Lotus Sūtra* in its first pages in the description of the Great Assembly, which reunites monks and Arhants of the Hīnayāna and Bodhisattvas of the Mahāyāna, besides other human, divine, and extraordinary beings.

In the following pages of the *Lotus Sūtra* the Arhants, monks, and lay devotees, who belong to the *Nikāya* branch of Buddhism are frequently referred to as Disciples of the Buddha, and are treated in the same way as the followers of the Buddha that belong to the Mahāyāna branch.

Overcoming the Conflict

The *Lotus Sūtra* goes beyond the conflict that opposed the Hīnayāna and the Mahāyāna; denies it introducing a new concept: *Ekayāna*, the *One Vehicle*.

For the *Ekayāna*, the *Nikāya* (or *Hīnayāna*) *Buddhism* and the *Mahāyāna Buddhism* are *one and the same teaching*; all of it is the *Word of the Buddha*, although presented under different forms, but always “*beautiful at its beginning, beautiful in its middle, beautiful at its end*”, and coherent with itself at every part.

The *Ekayāna* harmonizes, unifies these two great forms of Buddhism, the *Nikāya* and the *Mahāyāna*, instead of presenting them as two different, opposed, contradictory systems of thought, each one of which discards the other.

The will to harmonize, which is inherent to the *Ekayāna*, is an old tradition in Buddhism. Already in *Dīgha Nikāya* I, *Sāmañña-phala-sutta*, p. 64 (PTS edition) to promote *harmony* is extolled by the Buddha as one of the virtues that must be cultivated by those that want to obtain moral progress:

Iti bhinnānaṃ va sandhātā sahitānaṃ va anuppādātā samaggārāmo samagga-rato samagga-nandī samagga-karaṇiṃ vācam bhāsītā.

“Thus he reconciles those who have grown apart, he encourages those who are united to continue being so, he rejoices in harmony, he delights in harmony, he is glad with harmony, he speaks words that make for harmony.”

In order to realize its task of harmony and unification the *Ekayāna* has recourse to several devices to eliminate any doctrinaire opposition that may seem to exist between them, as for instance, explaining that seemingly opposed doctrines found in them, when well analyzed, agree between them, and that doctrines of the *Mahāyāna*, that appear at first sight as novel, have their antecedent in the oldest texts.¹¹

But the most effective and general method to show the complete agreement between the *Nikāya Buddhism* and the *Mahāyāna Buddhism* is the didactic method adopted by the Buddha: the *graduality method*.

Graduality method

The Buddha, owing to His great compassion, wanted that all people heard His Doctrine and adopted it, but he perfectly knew that His Doctrine, because of its novelty and audacity, could disturb the minds of His listeners, educated in other ideas; could scare them away, and thus they would be deprived of a great benefit for their good and their happiness.

Thus He skillfully adapted his discourse to the psychological and intellectual conditions, to the most or less receptivity of those persons who were to receive His teaching, to the more or less confidence they had in Him. It was a wise decision inspired in *didactic* and *methodological* reasons.

¹¹ This is, for instance, what Bhavya does. See article by F. Tola and C. Dragonetti (2007) quoted in note 4.

The first and most important norm He adopted for this effect was that of *graduality*. Adopting this norm of procedure it was possible to Him to impart to His audience those teachings which were within the limits of its comprehension and acceptance, even if this meant to give His doctrine only in a *partial form*, but anyhow without contradicting or deforming it when considered in its entire form. When with the course of the time His disciples became more receptive, acquired more confidence in Him, and were more capable to receive a novel message that contradicted their acquired ideas, then He could impart to them His Doctrine in its *authentic complete form*, filling the silences to which He had recourse before.

For instance, why to scare his audience referring to the *unreal nature* of our world? He could grant many new ideas to His listeners without touching this difficult point. There would be time to do that. It was also possible to begin teaching that any of us possesses the *capacity to become a Buddha*, leaving for a future opportunity to complete this teaching asserting that that capacity was really existing, because *all human being possesses the Tathāgatagarbha, the Essence of a Buddha*, as a part of his own concealed identity.

This norm of *graduality* also advised Him to explain to His followers, at a first stage, many ideas that they could easily accept, avoiding to refer to all the important consequences that it was reasonably allowed to deduce from them, but that were still beyond His followers' understanding. These complementary consequences could remain for a second stage, when their mind had acquired the mental openness and intellectual docility (*adhimuktī*) necessary for the acceptance of the new message, thanks to the teaching they had already received.

For instance, the Buddha could insist on the *importance of mind*, could point to the *nominal existence (prajñaptisat)* of beings and things already explained by Nāgasena in the *Milindapañha*, to the *erroneous perception of objects* as that produced when there are eye disorders, to the *theory of dharmas* which disappear as soon as they have been produced, but it was not necessary for Him to mention the consequences these facts impel to draw, as that of the *illusory nature of our world and things* it contains, the principal tenet of the idealistic trend of Mahāyāna Buddhism.¹²

All the didactic skill of the Buddha was directed to this aim. Really it is not enough to want to transmit a salvific doctrine. It is also necessary to be able to make people accept it. Therefore one must train oneself to acquire the skill to present, in full honesty, the excellences of the new Doctrine, in order that people, with full freedom and

¹² Cf. F. Tola and C. Dragonetti, *Being as Consciousness. Yogācāra Philosophy of Buddhism*, Delhi : Motilal Banarsidass, 2004, pp. XXIV-XXVI.

knowledge, agree with it. This ability in the teaching method excludes violence, imposition and fear, to which people, in old and modern epochs, has resorted in order to impose a new doctrine.

***The Buddha's teaching,
an entrance to an extraordinary destiny.
Generosity of the Buddha***

If the *Lotus Sūtra* manifests, as we have said, a noble feeling of *universalistic inclusivism*, now we must add that it manifests also thereby a noble feeling of *generosity*. The Buddha wishes to benefit all people with His new Doctrine. The teaching of the Buddha is immensely valuable, because of its contents and its form of presentation, and also because, once it is grasped and accepted as a model of life that takes possession of oneself, it opens the entrance to an extraordinary destiny. He who hears it in its ultimate and definitive form is sure to attain Enlightenment and Buddhahood, the Supreme Aim of human life. The extraordinary destiny of becoming a Buddha is within the reach of every living being, without difference of sex, social status, and activity, if he submits to the intellectual and moral Buddhist Discipline. In several passages of the *Lotus Sūtra* (I, 82; II, 51, 121, 142; IV, 39) the Buddha announces to many of His followers - many of whom belonged or had belonged to the Hīnayāna - that they will attain the *anuttarasamyaksambodhi*.

The *generosity* of the Buddha in the *Lotus Sūtra* magnificently shines in the last pages (*Anuparīdanāparivarta*, Chapter xxvii of the Sanskrit text, H. Kern and Bunyiu Nanjio edition) where He presents His Bodhisattvas with the message of the *Sūtra*: the *anuttarasamyaksambodhi*, intended for all beings:

... bhagavān sarvāvantam bodhisattvagaṇam dakṣiṇena pāṇinādhyālambyaitad
avocat / imām ahaṃ kulaputrā asaṃkhyeya kalpakoṭīnayutaśatasahasrasamudānītām
anuttarām samyaksambodhiṃ yuṣmākaṃ haste parindāmyanuparindāmi
nikṣipāmyupanikṣipāmi / yuṣmābhiḥ kulaputrā udgrahītavyā dhārayitavyā
vācayitavyā paryavāptavyā deśayitavyā prakāśayitavyā sarvasattvānām ca
saṃśrāvayitavyā / amātsaryo'haṃ kulaputrā aparigṛhītacitto viśārado
buddhajñānasya dātā tathāgatajñānasya svayaṃbhūjñānasya dātā / mahādānapatir
ahaṃ kulaputrā yuṣmābhir api kulaputrā mamaivānuśikṣitavyam amatsaribhir
bhūtvemaṃ tathāgatajñānadarśanam mahopāyakaśalyam āgatānām kulaputrāṇām
kuladuhitṛiṇām cāyaṃ dharmaparyāyaḥ saṃśrāvayitavyaḥ / ye cāśrāddhāḥ sattvās
te 'smin dharmaparyāye samādāpayitavyāḥ/

“The Bhagavant, to the entire host of Bodhisattvas, taking their right hands by His right hand, said these words: ‘O sons and daughters of virtuous families, in your hands I present, I give over, I deposit, I entrust the Supreme Perfect Enlightenment attained by Me after incalculable hundred of thousands of *koṭīs* of *nayutas* of Cosmic Periods. It must be grasped by you, it must be preserved by you, it must be recited by you, it must be mastered by you, it must be taught by you, it must be revealed by you, it must be proclaimed by you to all beings.

O sons and daughters of virtuous families, I am not selfish, nor ungenerous; full of confidence, I am a donor of the Buddha’s Knowledge, a donor of the Tathāgata’s Knowledge, of the Self-dependent. O sons and daughters of virtuous families, I am the Master of the Great Donation. By you also, O sons and daughters of virtuous families, this Vision of the Tathāgata’s Knowledge, this Great Skillful Means, must be disinterestedly learnt from me; and this Exposition of the Doctrine has to be taught by you to the sons of virtuous families and to the daughters of virtuous families who gather around you; and even those beings, who are deprived of faith, must be incited towards it.”

The case of the icchantikas

The preceding section poses serious questions: What happens with the *icchantikas*, those persons dominated by evil, who reject Buddhist Scriptures, despise ethical norms, and consider, adopting a hedonist attitude, that to follow one’s own desires is the supreme aim in life? Are they deprived for ever of the Buddha’s Nature and will never attain Buddhahood and the Supreme Enlightenment? Or, due to a lucky change in their *karman* or under the beneficial influence of the Buddha, will they modify their destiny and attain the Supreme Aim of all the other living beings?

The answers of authors and texts were diverse: some asserted that the *icchantikas* have no possibility of being saved and are condemned for ever, some had a contrary view: the *icchantikas* are not fatally condemned, they possess the Buddha’s Nature, they can become Buddhas, like the rest of humanity.

We think that the *Lotus Sūtra* adheres to this second interpretation, taking into account its universalistic attitude and generosity to which we have referred before. Cf. Tsugunari Kubo’s paper, “*Bodhi* and *Anuttarāsamyak-sambodhi* in the Lotus Sūtra”, presented at the panel organized by Joseph Logan: “Recovering Anew the Lotus Sūtra’s Originality as a Religio-Philosophical System”, CIABS 2008.

***A Western parallel
to the icchantikas' problem of Salvation***

The interest of the *icchantikas* problem increases if we think that in the West happened a similar situation, to which we shall briefly refer. In the Christian tradition there was a current of thought named “Universalism”, according to which the entire mankind would be “restored” into the moral and spiritual perfection that it possessed before the Fall of Adam, provoked by his original sin, the fatal source of all the misery of man.¹³ This *restoration* implied *the final Salvation for everybody*. According to some members of this current of thought, *Salvation would be attained even by demons*.

Origen, an important Christian philosopher, who belonged to this current and lived from 185/186 to 254 of the Common Era, is the author of a treatise, *On principles*, in which he sustained that *the punishment in hell of demons and impious men is temporary* and that after some time there will be a *restoration* (*restitutio* in Latin, which corresponds to the Greek word *apokatastasis*) *of all the sinners to the Grace of God* and to the state of divine Beatitude. This doctrine was condemned by the Christian Church in the 6th century of the Common Era.

To this *Universalism* doctrine belongs also Johann Wilhelm Petersen (1649-1727), a prominent dignitary of the Lutheran Church, who wrote a treatise on “*Restoration*” in this salvific and religious meaning. This doctrine of Petersen was condemned by the German Church in 1692, and he was removed from his official position in the Church in the same year.

Universalism, with its *religious apocatastasis* or *restoration* doctrine, had wide diffusion in Germany and in the Anglo-Saxon world: England, Scotland, United States of America and Canada.

Final remark

Universalistic Inclusivism – not to leave anyone outside – and *Generosity* - not to keep for oneself alone the riches of any nature one possesses – these are the two messages that we have examined in this paper. These messages were delivered by the Buddha in the *Lotus Sūtra* twenty centuries ago. Twenty centuries afterwards they maintain their full validity and actuality. Our world is facing many tragically distressing

¹³ See the article “Universalism” by James Edwin Odgers in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, edited by J. Hastings, vol. XII, pp. 529-535; and the Sermon, “Lotus Sutra Universalism” delivered in Japan by Gene Reeves in 1996.

problems that affect millions of persons: lack of food, water, housing, medical services, knowledge, education; it is suffering from violence and exploitation in manifold ways, without hope, without future, without having access to more dignified, surer and happier forms of life. All these evils are fundamentally provoked by *exclusion* and *selfishness* rooted both attitudes in a poor concern for other living beings – not only humans, but also animals and plants. Thus, it seems that the only possible solution (*niḥsarāṇa*) for all these problems are the moral values of *universalistic inclusivism* and *generosity* exalted by the *Lotus Sūtra*.

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