

Conference by Philippe CORNU

Ist Conference

Buddhism, as a practice, has been established in the West for no more than fifty years, but it has been known in the West for longer. In the Middle Ages, some missionaries knew it, we even have a golden legend of Jacques Voragine, 13th century, who mentions a certain St Josaphat which is a deformation of the word “boddhisattva”, a Christianized life of the Buddha.

There have been fairly old exchanges with Christians. Nestorian churches went to India and China quite early. The Syriac churches were in contact with Asia quite early, 6th, 7th etc. centuries, we already have Nestorians. The Silk Road will further promote their diffusion towards China in particular.

There were also exchanges with the Greek world, with the Indo-Greek kingdoms which were located in the west of India, Bactria, Gandhara, different names, which belonged sometimes to Satrapites (Persians), sometimes to Greek kingdoms who had been founded by Alexander or his descendants.

We have in particular a dialogue between a Greek king of these regions and a Buddhist sage of the ancient school, the questions of Milinda Panias, a text curiously recorded in Pali canon, but in fact of Sanskrit origin since this school used Sanskrit .

In any case, a certain King Menander asked questions to a certain Nagasena, a Buddhist sage, the Greeks were always curious about philosophy, and this gave the “Milinda dialogue”.

Marco Polo mentions the lamas he met at the court of Kubilai Khan, a Mongol who became emperor of China, and there we have descriptions too. But we have to wait for the 1st translations from Sanskrit and other oriental languages, translations which start from the 18th century approximately, and then, there is contact among scholars through texts.

Buddhism was taken over by scholars in the 19th century, with sometimes also an already important will of Westerners to instrumentalize Buddhism which they hardly knew. We are going to see, for example among anti-Christians, Buddhism as an example of a non-rational religion that could counter Christianity. We also have Christians who, at the beginning, will love it and then quickly, on the contrary, consider that Buddhism is a danger and call it a religion of nothingness.

We have the case of Nietzsche, sympathizer of Buddhism until he put it in the same basket as Christianity as a morality for slaves, etc.

So there were reversals. It was a Western-style projection of Buddhism which was represented and we are still in this kind of scheme, even if the scheme has changed, but Westerners cannot help but pounce on everything that moves which is not western and make it their gadget. If it is an instrument, it is not a spiritual path.

However, Buddhism is a spiritual path, not an instrument. Not a wellness tool. Buddhism does not seek well-being. We are not there to have fun but to find our true nature of existence, the deepest one. This implies a great questioning about oneself, the world, others. It's a task of a lifetime or even quite a few lives.

Buddhism aims for a definitive eradication of suffering, i.e. to demolish all the mechanisms that lead to suffering.

When we see the current *mindfulness*, its positive aspect is that it makes it possible to de-stress people, to relieve certain deep pains, but it is a preliminary part of meditation, a kind of simplified shamata, for Westerners who are in a hurry, and don't want to get into a spirituality.

It therefore becomes a so-called secular meditation, as if meditation could be secular or religious. It has been sanitized from all spiritual content. Therapeutic applications, I understand them, but the worst is their use in companies. It is not employee's well-being that is targeted, but profitability. From spirituality to the profitability of the company we still have trouble making the link!

Originally, the word **religion** was not intended only for monotheisms, it was born in the polytheistic Roman world who had an extremely ritualistic religion. There are two etymologies, *religare*, to relate to a transcendent principle, which goes beyond our horizontal level, and to have it shared horizontally by a community.

So there is a connection to a verticality through a horizontality, it is the symbol of the Cross. It's not just the cross of suffering. And in Buddhism there is also a transcendence from

existence, just it is in us. Immanent, so there is no distance. We are not going to privilege the relationship with an external god, who would be the creator. So we are not in a theist system. However, you will see that Buddhism has all the elements of a religion: faith, offerings, rituals, prayers, repetitions.

The 2nd meaning of the word *religion*, evoked by Cicero is *relegere*, which means to read again the texts carefully. The Romans, when they were doing a ritual, if ever a word was wrong, would start the whole ritual again, otherwise it would not bode well. The Romans were very superstitious.

St Augustine hesitated a lot to use the word religion for Christianity and from the moment when Christianity finally triumphed, the word Christianity became synonymous with THE religion. Until Islam showed up. Torah is also a religion, Jews practice Torah, not Judaism, just as Buddhists do not practice Buddhism but Buddha-dharma. The -isms are recent and Western. Torah, dharma mean "the order of things". The word religion is a trap. Buddhism is a religion.

Let us look at the Indian context in which Buddhism was born. Buddha dharma was born in India which did not exist at the time, India is a completely modern creation, the Indians never knew to be an Indian nation before the English occupy this territory. They were separate kingdoms, sometimes fighting against one another not. There was a civilization around a language like Sanskrit for example, there were *prakrits*, spoken languages derived from Sanskrit, therefore an ambient culture, but not the concept of nation.

If we look at Hinduism we also see that it is full of different expressions to the point that we do not really know how to classify it: is it polytheism? A monotheism, a pantheism, a monism? There is all that.

And Buddhism will be quite unclassifiable too. In India, the Buddha arrived in a context. Its historical existence is attested, we doubted certain dates in his life, among various possibilities. It's around the 6th century BCE. The dates given by the Pali Theravadin School are 566-486 BCE. There are corrections: 559-478. The Lumbini excavations of 2013 showed with C14 that certain traces of vegetable carbon bring us back to the 6th BCE. It's in one region, the modern Terai, so it would be Nepalese now.

A plain full of mosquitoes well east of the Indian subcontinent. It is an eastern region. The question comes: because of certain Brahmanic theses which circulate since the will of independence of India and especially since independence, some say Buddhism as well as Jainism would come from Hinduism. It's wrong. Total counter-truth.

It took time to persuade some. Buddhism owes nothing to Hinduism because modern Hinduism only dates from the 1st century CE. Before that, we have to say *Brahmanism* for this religion, and Brahmanism had several phases.

The 1st phase is Vedism, the Vedas era; then the Upanishads; then a whole epic literature, and little by little we are moving towards a form that evolves, the gods also change. The old gods, we keep mentioning them but they lose a lot of ranks and there are new gods who become more important.

Then we have a more devotional form with *bhakti* which will popularize thereafter by being translated into Tamil and other languages stemming from Sanskrit. This only concerns Sanskritized populations. So that slows down the diffusion. But when the competition from Buddhism and Jainism comes, the Brahmins say to themselves, let's yield some ground and the texts will be translated into other Indian languages as well as into Southeast Asian languages (Mahabharata, Ramayana).

Buddhism did not originate from Hinduism, which did not form until much later, and precisely with the influence of Buddhism and Jainism on the Brahmins and not vice versa, I will prove it to you.

Vedic Brahmanism arises from a migration that arrives to India from the West. The "land of the nobles", Aryavarta, is on the west. Terai is really on the east, in the region called Great Magadha at the time, but the region where this migration arrives is West in a region between the Yamuna, the Saraswati, a river that has dried up following earthquakes, and the Ganges.

There there is a penetration with this Indo-Aryan migration which ends up in the Aryavarta (region), and that is 2000 BCE approximately.

The Vedas can be said to settle in India around 1500 BCE. There are already civilizations in the west, with cities like Mohenjodharo and Harrapa, whose origin was Sumerian, which dates back to 3000-3500 BCE. We found Sumerian objects in the excavations of these 2 cities. These

are extremely urbanized cities with hot water, sewage system, etc. These are extremely advanced cultures but nothing is known about their religion, because the pictograms of Mohenjodharo have never been deciphered.

But in these pictograms we have a character in a sitting position, legs crossed, surrounded by animals, and which was thought as a prototype of Siva. I think that's totally wrong.

We can draw a parallel between Siva and Dyonisos of the Greek world, who too was a foreign god. Shiva will later become the patron of yoga, which is not Brahmanic either. The Brahmins arrive with a civilization of the horse, and from breeding, the cow is bred, probably unknown in India, and the horse is imported.

It was never an invasion but a migration. There is no trace of violence. In archeology you can date battles because there are always traces of fire, etc. For example, the Battle of Jericho in the Bible. Archeology has proven that Jericho at that time was just a small town that had no walls and that this battle never took place, it was invented in the Bible to justify a political conquest which took place a few centuries later. It's a legend. Israeli archaeologists have shown it, they are not much loved by traditionalists.

The Brahmins settle in Aryavarta, it is a hierarchical society with at least 3 functions, but the castes will not be formalized until around the 4th-3rd centuries BCE, not before. But there are already "functions".

There are the Brahmins, there are warriors who will later be called *kshatriya*, and producers of wealth, *vaisya*, those who produce the economy, pastors, pastoralists, farmers, merchants, and artisans, and the people; and the peoples who are conquered. When there is a 4th varna, the *shudras*, it will be the servants, generally people who will be assimilated. Those who will never be assimilated are the outcasts. But systematization will come later.

The first three functions already exist. Dumézil has shown that this existed in the Indo-European world, for example in Greece, we had priests, and those who most resembled Brahmins in France were the Druids. They spoke before the king, gave their opinion on the war, and if the king bothered them, he was deposed and sometimes executed in Celtic societies. Brahmins also have much more duties than the other functions. The Brahmins do not move too much, they stay in the villages. The warrior *kshatriyas* move more. And the *vaisyas* make the population prosper.

In the 6th century BCE, a small region of the Great Magadha is Brahmanized, it is Koshana, but other than that there is not really any influence. The Buddha was not in contact with the Brahmins, despite of this, they are often mentioned, which is quite disturbing, but the sutras were written much later, that's why anachronisms crept into the stories.

The *kshatriyas* move and are going to radiate everywhere to conquer territories and they are the ones who will be in contact with the Grand Maghada.

In the 6th century BCE they will meet followers of the Buddha, and especially of the Jains who predate Buddhism, whose religion was born in the same region.

We have two religious poles, the Brahmins, who follow what is called Vedism because it is based on the Vedas, which is a religion purely of sacrifice: the Brahmins know how to make very learned, very complicated sacrifices, for example the *ashwamedha* which is a sacrifice of the horse. It is prepared a year in advance, where a horse is pampered before being sacrificed. A royal coupling of the queens with the dead horse is mimicked, etc. it's told in quite a few stories and no longer exists nowadays.

There were also the great soma rituals, which were extremely complicated and lasted for weeks and required dozens of Brahmins. This for the very large rituals, and then there were the rituals, let's say for the village and the domestic rituals.

It was a very ritualized religion, and they shouldn't make mistakes, that's why the Brahmins were specialists. They spoke ancient Sanskrit, Vedic Sanskrit, not yet classic Sanskrit, but an archaic one.

A parenthesis: there was a second wave of migration that took place more to the west and which would have given Persia, migration of the same people. The Avestan language, ancient language of Persia is very close to the old Sanskrit. The ancient Persian is an Indo-European language very close to Sanskrit, it is in fact the closest. Later it was mixed with Arabic.

There are several hypotheses on these Indo-European migrations.

Let's not say that Sanskrit is the mother of all Indo European languages, but it is the one that comes closest to the Indo-European trunk and therefore our languages have a lot in common.

There is a mother tongue older than Sanskrit.

The Brahmins' religion is very ritualized, they sing hymns to the gods: Indra, the chief, Agni, the god of fire who is the messenger who transports the offerings to the gods, through the smoke. The sacred fire is very important as it is in Persia and in the Roman religion with the Vestals, the sacred fire must never be extinguished.

The word *karma* in old Sanskrit does not mean "the act that has consequences for oneself", it means "the ritual act well done". There are words like *samsara* which never appears in the three ancient Vedas, never the word migration or re-birth, we are not in a re-incarnationist context nor a context based on individual morality. It is a collective religion as many polytheisms are. They don't care if people believe it or not. They must perform the rites as citizens, members of the city.

The Greeks had to have piety, not faith, they had no sacred books, the Iliad & the Odyssey are not sacred books, not like the Bible or the Veda.

The kshatriyas went in contact with the Great Magadha and will meet forest ascetics who practice either the beginning of Buddhism or Jainism, and they will intervene in a literature which is the *end of the Vedas*, added to the Veda, Knowledge. The end is the Veda-anta.

And it will be the Upanishad, and it is above all a group of 14 Upanishad that can be dated between the 7th and 4th centuries BCE, in which very often we find dialogues between a Brahmin and a Kshatriya. The world upside down, the Kshatriyas now teach the Brahmins. The Kshatriyas have been imbued with ideas that came from elsewhere, and the Brahmins will absorb these ideas and transform them as they please.

So we see kings who teach Brahmins. New principles enter, like rebirths, the fact that the world is suffering - whereas the Vedas celebrate the world through sacrifices, and seek prosperity, the victory of kings, etc. Brahmanism, the Veda, is not a religion of salvation, of liberation. On the other hand, the Upanishads become that. One must free oneself from suffering, from illusion and all this mystical vocabulary appears in the Upanishads. Where is that from?

Probably from the great Magadha, the Jains and the Buddhists, who consider that there is a cycle of successive rebirths, which are linked to an illusion, to ignorance, and that because of this we act inadvertently, which leads us to suffer, and that is a common background of the religions of the ancient Magadha. The word *samsara* is then used. And the word *karma*, when used by these people, has the meaning of an action which has a moral impact on the one who produces it.

There we find an important individual ethics and an interiorization of religion in these currents and which does not exist in original Brahmanism. It will contaminate Brahmanism which will begin to consider that on the one hand, it is necessary to preserve the sacrifices - you can see it in the Bhagavad Gita, when Krishna mentions it, but at the same time He speaks from a much more interiorized point of view. The Bhagavad Gita is in the straight line of the Upanishad.

There we see a shift from a purely ritual religion to a religion of liberation and this is what will gradually become Hinduism.

So have the Brahmins assimilated foreign religions? Yes, because there was competition, because they were not established in the Great Magadha where a very powerful dynasty manifested itself from the 5th century BCE, beginning of the 4th, that of Mauryas.

The Mauryas, and the grandson became very famous as a Buddhist emperor, Ashoka. But the founder is Chandragupta (reign: 321-298 BCE) and his son Bindusara. Chandragupta was a conqueror but always supported the Jains who were well established. The son supported a faction from the Jains, the Ajivikas, another religion, a variant. And the grandson, Ashoka, will spread Buddhism throughout the Indian subcontinent.

As a result, the Maurya empire grows and reaches its maximum size with Ashok who ends the conquests by conquering the Kalinga region of southern India. There is a terrifying massacre of enemies, more than 100,000 prisoners, and he realizes this when he has the report of these massacres and the condition of the prisoners and the suffering it has caused.

And under the influence of a monk, he will convert to Buddhism, and will erect pillars written in the languages of the kingdom. We have Ashoka's pillars in the Aramaic language (present day Syria), in Greek and in Brahmi, script created for the Indian languages. And there he has roads built, trees planted along the roads, created a Justice that did not exist, he did a very important social work.

This means that these religions were flourishing, and the Brahmins were withdrawn. So they assimilated these ideas, and thus, they will rebound. They are priests, they are educated, they are literate and have understood that it was necessary to master grammar to master the people. And they imposed their vision of reality.

Buddhism does not depend on, has never been a branch of Hinduism. So why did this idea spread? And why is it so difficult to eradicate? Because it was the Hindu nationalists who broadcast it. At the time of independence, because they had to found their Indian state, and they founded it on Hinduism. As a religion they identified with Hinduism which is the dominant religion.

The Buddha must have been strongly influenced by the Jains who were his predecessors, but he organized his teaching very differently. He directed many critics less at the Brahmins than at the Jains in the sutra. For example when the Buddha said, "I advocate a middle way", it means that he does not advocate that of the householders' engrossed by their fortune, family, reputation, etc. and who are often in luxury, in a mundane life, and on the other hand the ascetic life, which the Buddha does not advocate either.

And who is it targeting? Jains! who are super ascetic. Brahmins are not at all. They ate meat, and even a lot, it was later that they adopted practices that came from elsewhere. We see it in Java where Brahmins are laughed at as well as their voracious appetite for meat. It was after being influenced by ascetic Jainism that they produced vegetarianism, but not initially. A religion can change a lot in the long run.

Hinduism is the last phase of a religion that has slowly evolved in contact with its neighbors. You know that at the moment there is a somewhat fundamentalist Hindu party that holds India. The dialogue between Hinduism and Buddhism has always been difficult. It is easier for Buddhists to interact with Catholics. Because the Hindus are convinced that the Buddhists are offspring and they hold on to that.

It is also believed that the birth of Jainism probably dates from a few centuries before Buddhism, 9th-8th century BCE. We have lines of Mahaviras before The Mahavira who lived at the time of the Buddha, who did not meet Him but who discussed with his disciples. This last Mahavira was contemporary with the Buddha. For example, they disagree totally on the concept of *karma*. And they don't see liberation the same way. The Buddha has very specific ideas on this subject.

What is still disturbing, if you go to a Jain temple, in India, you may believe that it is a Buddhist temple, because the representation of a Jina, a Winner, a Mahavira, resembles that of the Buddha. In general, he is naked, because part of the Jain ascetics walk naked so as not to have clothes which would be linked to agriculture and in which animals would have been killed. They are obsessed with the slightest act contrary to life. They sweep in front of their feet, wear a mask. Buddhists also respect life, not to this extreme.

The Jains consider that karma is stopped by ceasing to do negative acts towards life, but that does not purify the karma accumulated in past lives. This requires maceration, mortifications. They vow to keep an arm in the air for 10 years, for example, they fast. Gandhi was Jain!

Jains mainly work in jewel trading because it is mineral, they are quite rich as a result.

But almost everywhere in India there were forest ascetics and probably populations settled with this migration which had started very long ago, which must have included several populations, with Sanskrit and popular languages, *prakrits*.

So these Indo-Europeans settled but they weren't necessarily Brahmanized, and there were certainly some also in the great Magadha, and also previous local populations who are believed to have been essentially Dravidian, black-skinned, who they were driven back to the south. It gave Tamils, and they are not Indo-Europeans since their Tamil-type languages, Malayalam, etc. have nothing to do with skrt.

It is not clear where the old background of yoga comes from, but yoga is certainly old in India, perhaps earlier than Brahmanism, Buddhism and Jainism. It was the forest ascetics who found techniques, probably of shamanic origin, because shamanism is found almost everywhere as a religious background. The sushumna nadi is a shamanic theme, we find the symbolism of trees in the life of the Buddha, this verticality which reminds us of shamanism. Thereafter, yoga will be borrowed by Buddhists and Hindus as methods of achieving liberation.