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HINDU DEITIES IN BUDDHISM

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Abstract

Hindu gods and goddesses are very much present in Buddhism. The proliferation of Hindu deities throughout the Buddhist conceptual landscape may surprise those who believed that the teachings of the Buddha are rational and that they must be viewed as an atheistic system of personal emancipation. From the point of view of the historian of religion, however, the presence of Hindu gods and supernatural beings is not to be discarded as a degradation of the Buddhist teachings or as a concession to the mental predispositions of the Buddhist followers. Neither should their presence be understood only in terms of a mythologization or psychologization of religious symbols. On the contrary, the inclusion of Hindu deities into Buddhist discourses may be viewed as a process of social reconciliation since the encounters between the Buddhist and Hindu modes of thinking and ways of viewing the world have most likely involved tensions and conflicts among people fully conscious of the traditions they identify with.

Key words: Hindu pantheon; Buddhist traditions; intercultural exchange; hermeneutic models (mythologization, psychologization of religious symbols); models of religious integration (syncretism, acculturation, inculturation).

1. A general overview

Hindu gods and goddesses are very much present in Buddhism. Just to name some of the most important figures, we have Brahmā, who forms with Viṣṇu and Śiva the cosmic triad or Trimūrti, Indra, the ruler of the Thirty-Three gods also known as Sakka/Śakra, and Sarasvatī, the goddess of knowledge, wisdom, and learning. We also find throughout the Buddhist canons and treatises mentions of demigods and ethereal beings of the Indian lore like the nāgas, yakṣas and the gandharvas. Not to be neglected are the numerous representations of the Hindu pantheon to be found at pilgrimage sites like Sarnath in India and Borobudur in Indonesia, in the cave temples of Ajanta and Ellora, the bas-reliefs of Gandhara as well as in the temples and monasteries of the major Buddhist traditions from Tibet to Japan.

This proliferation of Hindu deities throughout the Buddhist conceptual landscape may surprise more than one purist used to exclusively see in the teachings imparted by Gautama Buddha more than 2300 years ago an atheistic system of thoughts and practices by which we are all invited to liberate ourselves from this world of suffering. This system is viewed as a form of atheism since, following the Buddha's famous injunction "Be an Island onto yourself," we are fully responsible for what is happening to us and what will become of us. From this perspective, there is no room for any deity: they would simply distract us from

our spiritual endeavor. If such deities found their way into the Buddhist traditions, it is only because of a concession to human weaknesses. For instance, it is often argued that, due to their profound attachment to the things of this world, people find it difficult to follow a spiritual path without relying on external objects, real or imagined. It is believed that a right understanding of the Buddha's teachings and their purpose should scatter away all references to these gods and deities like the dust blown away from the cover of a book the moment we open it.

No matter how appealing this explanation of the presence of Hindu deities in Buddhism might be to a mind molded by rationalism and utilitarianism, it is nevertheless difficult to accept for the historian of religion who is interested in exploring the historical, social and doctrinal causes of such phenomena of interreligious as well as intercultural amalgamation. We can also speak of a process of social reconciliation as the encounters between different modes of thinking and ways of viewing the world have most likely involved tensions and conflicts among people fully conscious of the traditions they identify with. Although this situation is not unique, it nevertheless needs to be distinguished from cases where such amalgamation or reconciliation has not occurred or has been fiercely fought against. We can think in this regard about the commandments against idolatry in Judaism and Islam or the *imitatio diabolica* of the Church Fathers by which they qualified any similarity with Christian beliefs and practices as the works of the devil. This exclusivist attitude has apparently been carried over in many popular festivals called Fastnacht in which the ancient gods of pre-Christian Europe have been turned into demons.

It is relatively easy to identify the reasons that pushed a certain community of believers to adopt an exclusivist attitude toward the symbols of their faith. These reasons are most often related to the necessity to maintain a high degree of coherence within a community. Here, the introduction of foreign elements is always seen as a threat to the stability of the community and never as its enrichment. That reaction of intolerance usually comes from the guardians of the faith or from those whose power rests on having a homogenous community with regard to what its members believe, do and aspire to. Practically speaking, alien deities and their cults will be censured either by being demonized and vilified or by sanctioning and even expelling their worshippers from the community.

The causes underlying the phenomena of interreligious and intercultural amalgamation as well as the process of reconciliation are, however, more complex. They usually fall within two major categories. The first one follows the dynamic of acculturation and the second one, that of inculturation. The first type of dynamic is mostly characterized by the fact that it undergoes a process regulated by social and historical forces where no apparently conscious decision is involved. Thus, the dynamic of acculturation occurs quite slowly as it reflects the gradual transformation of a community that has been allowed to move into a new social environment or which has more or less welcomed in its midst a group of people with their own distinct beliefs and practices. Although the dynamic of acculturation is not without tensions and conflicts, it usually ends up smoothing its edges through social events like interfaith marriages or historical occurrences like wars where all the available gods are solicited for success. What may be viewed as examples of tolerance toward religious diversity is mainly the result of the necessity to harmonize human relations within a very eclectic community. In such a context, like the acceptance of foreign words in one's native language, it is very difficult, methodologically speaking and for an external observer, to

trace the shifts in the perception and understanding of the adopted deities or to determine whether we are dealing with a true case of syncretism when, for example, two deities, having their own distinct origins, are simultaneously invoked in a propitiatory sacrifice or in a ritual of exorcism.

With regard to the dynamic of inculturation, however, we are now dealing with a specific and, most importantly, conscious intention, an intention that is regulating the process of integration of the symbols issued from different religious or spiritual traditions. That intention is inherent to a given vision or an hermeneutical context which assigns to those symbols their position relative to each other and, by the same token, defines their significance within the problematics of liberation or salvation. The most dominant hermeneutical context underlying the process of inculturation, especially as far as Indian traditions are concerned, is what the German historian of religion Paul Hacker has defined as "inclusivism" (Inklusivismus).

In this context, the alien symbols are redefined in such a way that they are subordinated to the native ones. This process of subordination is valid for the types of spiritual practices, our ideas of the world, scriptures as well as gods and deities. For example, in a spiritual path based on intense concentration and meditative techniques, devotional practices, whether indigenous or foreign, will not be discarded, but rather considered as subsidiary to those techniques or as preparation for one's exercises in intense concentration. Certain spiritual traditions, for example, the Advaita Vedānta School of Hinduism, will go as far as affirming that the entire conceptual apparatus underlying such devotional practices, that is, the *saguṇa* (with characteristics) vision of the universe is subordinated to the *nirguṇa* (without characteristics) understanding of the ultimate reality, an understanding that is based on pure abstractions and which is constitutive of its experience of liberation. To use a concept dear to Buddhism, such devotional practices, and the conceptual apparatus they are based on, are *upāya-kauśalya* or Skillful Means. This concept has been fully developed in the Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra (Sūtra on the White Lotus of the True Dharma or Lotus Sūtra), one of the most influential texts of Mahāyāna Buddhism. In this text, not only the various Buddhist paths toward emancipation are being ordered in a hierarchy of spiritual significance, but also the various texts of Buddhism themselves are being assigned a position into what may be viewed as the evolution of Buddhist thoughts and practices.

As another example of this process of integration through symbolic subordination and redefinition, we find the acceptance of the historical Buddha as the ninth avatar of Viṣṇu. The reasons why the incarnation of the ideal of Buddhism found a place in the Hindu pantheon are diverse: they ranged from the positive understanding of being the person who put an end to animal sacrifices to the negative depiction of being the false teacher who misled the people away from the Vedas (sacred texts of Hinduism). We will see that this second interpretation will also be used by the Buddhists to belittle or denigrate the sacred figures of Hinduism. The integration of the Buddha into the Hindu pantheon could also be a strategy to deny the particularity of Buddhism by indirectly saying that the latter is just another form of Hinduism. This is a form of apologetics that Buddhism will also make use by transforming the Hindu deities into preachers of the Dharma.

In addition to the inclusivism model, other mechanisms of integration may be at work. These mechanisms are the articulation of specific doctrines like the *Trikāya* or Three Bodies

of the Buddha as expounded in the Mahāyāna text called Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā (The Perfection of Wisdom In Eight Thousand Verses). According to this doctrine, the historical Buddha is one of the many earthly manifestations or *Nirmaṇakāya* of the embodiment of truth itself, that is, the *Dharmakāya*. Connecting the world of manifestations or transformations, a reality that could be assimilated to that of the avatars of Hinduism, with the ultimate reality, that which is pure being itself akin to the very abstract notion of *Nirguṇa Brahman*, we have the *Saṃbhogakāya* or Enjoyment Body. This intermediary reality is that of the divine Buddhas like Amitābha of Pure Land Buddhism and of the many celestial Bodhisattvas. It is a reality akin to *Saguṇa Brahman* and as such, it can accept a great diversity of deities no matter their origin as there is, in principle, no constraint as to the ways one may bridge the gap between the human world and that of the one's emancipation. For example, it is according to the *Trikāya* doctrine that the ḍākinī—a type of sacred female spirit in Hinduism that has been assimilated as a Tantric deity embodying the energy of enlightenment—is described as a *Saṃbhogakāya* ḍākinī to be used as a meditational deity for Tantric practice or as a *Nirmaṇakāya* ḍākinī where it is known as an earthly woman who, having special potentialities, can act as a spiritual master.

Such models may also be issued from a deeper understanding of space and time. For example, the presence of a deity brings about a space or a realm in the Buddhist cosmological system. That space may be breathtaking, but it is qualitatively not to be confused with the world of a Buddha like a dream is different from a waking state. Indeed, such a space created by the fact that it is inhabited by a god or any celestial being is still part of *saṃsāra*, a reality that is generated by desires no matter how subtle and refined those desires may be. Even the realms of formlessness that transcend our usual spacial dimensions are still objects of a mind not fully purified. This is so because such worlds are still subjected to the flow of time, that is, there are impermanent. Any being who has reached those realms may be liberated or slide back into less subtle realities. This notion of space and time is certainly intertwined with doctrines like the *Trikāya* and *upāya-kauśalya*. As such, they form a conceptual environment out of which no object of the mind, whether a view of reality or a deity, can last forever. These objects and their worlds are bound to be dissolved the moment a person becomes awakened or Buddha.

Finally, to account for the presence of Hindu deities in Buddhism, we may have recourse to a historical interpretation of the development of Buddhism independent of what the Buddhist scriptures are directly revealing us. This is what has been suggested by Akira Sadakata in his book *Buddhist Cosmology: Philosophy and Origin* when we said: "We have seen how the Buddhist conception of the universe underwent numerous changes over time. If we view those shifts as changing responses to the problem of human suffering, we can see a steady progression in one direction: Buddhists gradually ceased to regard life as suffering" (Sadakata, 1997: 173). Although that interpretation is not likely to be readily accepted by the Buddhists themselves, it is nevertheless worth exploring to understand the process of religious and cultural integration, a process that occurred, following Sadakata's thesis, on account of the mythologization of the concept of suffering. More precisely, he said: "Inevitably the Buddhist worldview, originally based on the idea that suffering was inescapable, became increasingly irrelevant and eventually entered the realm of myth" (Sadakata, 1997: 173).

To support his thesis, Sadakata argues that the change of perception regarding the notion of suffering occurred in three stages. The first stage corresponds to pre-Mahāyāna Buddhism, a tradition dominated by the Pāli canon and its commentators like Vasubandhu. During that stage, suffering, as mainly defined by the doctrine of the Four Noble Truths, was at the center of one's understanding of the world with all its manifestations. The second stage was marked by the depiction of the various Buddha realms and the idea of paradise that took place with the rise of Mahāyāna Buddhism around the first and second centuries C.E. According to Sadakata, "[b]y this time people no longer felt suffering to be so cruel, having discovered the possibility of pleasure even within a life of suffering" (Sadakata, 1997: 174). Following the religious outlook of the Pure Land Buddhist traditions, Sadakata adds that the desire for a rebirth in the Buddhist paradise or *Sukhāvatī*, a state depicted as an expansion of the pleasures of secular life, encouraged people to now view life in the world in a more positive light and no longer as "the painful force that compelled [them] to religious training" (Sadakata, 1997: 174). This period also coincides with the development of esoteric Buddhism, a tradition that teaches that enlightenment can be reached through the unity of male and female. As it has been greatly influenced by Hinduism, it is on account of this new development that a great number of Hindu deities entered Buddhism. For example, Lord Gaṇeśa, a god symbolizing, among other things, the idea that a practitioner could experience the oneness of Brahman and Ātman by means of the rapture of a sexual act, has found his way into Japanese Buddhism, especially its esoteric branch.

The third stage corresponds to a development that seems to be specific to Japanese Buddhism as it occurred during the Edo period (1603-1868). During that time, still according to Sadakata, "when material life became easier and rationalism gained influence, there appeared a completely new understanding of the nature of hell, involving a dilution of its terrors. Suffering was not so much personal as an abstract condition that was the fate of all humankind" (Sadakata, 1997: 175). As a result of this shift in the understanding of the significance of that cardinal principle of Buddhism, "[d]epictions of hell became mythological and were experienced as literary romanticism rather than as the stark truth of human existence" (Sadakata, 1997: 175). In this context, the god Yama, Lord of the underworld and known as Emma in Japan, will rise to prominence as a judge to whom one can appeal for a better rebirth in this very world.

The process of mythologization of the Buddhist pantheon with its Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and Hindu deities, is a plausible explanation of the development of Buddhism as a whole. It is not unheard of in the history of religion as the Greek pantheon underwent a similar process as well. The main point to remember from Sadakata's explanation is the fact that Buddhist cosmology has become, spiritually speaking, irrelevant. More precisely, he says: "Buddhist cosmology is a spiritual legacy of the past, yet it remains a force capable of stirring the imagination of people today. Like old ceremonial garments no longer worn, it retains an attraction for us and can transport our minds to the spiritual world of ancient and medieval people" (Sadakata, 1997: 177). Such an explanation may be viewed as a subtle form of the purist reaction mentioned at the beginning of the present article. Indeed, it assumes that either contemporary Buddhist practitioners have moved toward a more rational understanding of their tradition or they were able to sort out its mythological components from its practical applications as taught by Gautama Buddha.

At this point, it may be interesting to note that the explanation of any cosmological tradition through the mythologization paradigm was often paralleled with that of the psychologization of religious symbols. Although the latter process could be considered as an attempt at salvaging the relevancy of those symbols, it was nevertheless supported by a rational discourse reducing concepts like heavens and hells to psychological states of mind. The cosmologies thus become the projections of our mental tendencies and aspirations which are, in this context, also attainable in this world. Liberation from the sufferings of our present realities is no longer something to aim at for the simple reason that the state of being corresponding to it has now been fused with the here-and-now of our earthly lives. To put it bluntly, gods and their abodes do not exist: they are the figment of our imagination and desires. We should thus forget them and concentrate our attention on the mental processes and desires that created them in the first place.

In spite of its high degree of attractiveness in a world obsessed by rationality and practicality, one may not be entirely satisfied with an explanation that relegates to the past or undermines the reality of worlds with which our ancestors have constantly been communicating through rituals, prayers, spiritual exercises, etc. The moment we accept that the gods, deities or even demons are forces having their own intentionality, no matter the nature of the symbols used to interact with those forces, we are obliged to consider their objective existence. Then, if the supernatural realities are not to be negated or explained away, an important paradigm that remains to account for the development of a spiritual tradition like Buddhism is one based on some sort of a process of reconciliation. We will see that, not only this explanation appears more plausible from a scientific point of view, but it is not without a major precedent in the history of religion. Indeed, with its reliance on the Vedas and its formulation of the doctrine of the *Puruṣārtha* or Objects of human pursuit, Hinduism has shown that spiritual or mystical movements, which usually have a tendency to be antagonistic with the world, can be integrated with religious beliefs and practices dealing with the material, interpersonal, social, and cosmological realities of men. The process of reconciliation to explain the presence of Hindu deities in Buddhism is even more plausible as it is precisely in Japan, where Buddhism has learned to peacefully coexist with the native Shintō traditions, that its presence is most conspicuous.

Akira Sadakata's model explaining the evolution of the Buddhist pantheon across three stages is not without its merits. It is very probable that the integration of Hindu deities can be corroborated by the development of three distinct conceptual environments within Buddhism, namely the Indian pre-Mahāyāna traditions based on the Pāli Tipiṭaka, the Mahāyāna schools issued from a variety of scriptures principally produced in Sanskrit, Tibetan and Chinese, and the Esoteric or Tantric traditions that flourished from Tibet to Japan. To complete the present study on the significance and perception of Hindu deities within Buddhism, the same divisions will therefore be used. However, not to make this article longer than it should be, it will focus on the pre-Mahāyāna and the Japanese periods or conceptual environments. This is justified by the fact that the Esoteric environment is highly complex and as such, one requires an intimate knowledge of its rituals to have a clear idea of the significance and role of the deities associated with those rituals. Moreover, as Esoteric Buddhism also influenced the development of the Japanese conceptual environment, its most obvious contributions will anyway be discussed in the context of the Japanese period. This presentation of the presence of Hindu deities within Buddhism for

the selected conceptual environments should also be sufficient to show how this phenomenon underwent an evolution following some sort of reconciliation between a spiritual tradition whose ultimate goal is located outside this world and the world itself.

2. The pre-Mahāyāna period

The Buddhist traditions that emerged from the Indian Peninsula prior to the common era are known—together with Jainism, Cārvāka, Ājīvika, and Ajñana—as the *nāstika* schools. What justifies the inclusion of all these schools into one single category is principally their negation of the validity and authority of the Vedic literature. But what exactly is being negated by Buddhism and the other schools? As far as the texts of the Buddhist Pāli Tipiṭaka reveal, it is above all the efficacy of the various Vedic rituals and, by extension, the type of knowledge generated by those who performed such rituals, namely the Brahmins. From this perspective, the encounters between Gautama Buddha and those "who knew the mantras, perfected in the Three Vedas, skilled expounder of the rules and rituals, the lore of sounds and meanings" could also have taken place between the mystics of the Upaniṣadic traditions and the Mīmāṃsā philosophers who privileged the prescriptive nature of the Vedic passages over what these passages could say about the ultimate realities of the universe. As such, the *āstika* traditions of India, that is, the ones based on the acceptance of the validity of the Vedas, have a lot in common with a *nāstika* school like Buddhism which, even if it refuses to explicitly refer to an ultimate reality, nevertheless aims at "something" that is beyond the objects of this world.

Consequently, what should be the purpose of one's religious endeavor is also a major point of contention between pre-Mahāyāna Buddhism and the ritual practices of the Brahmins or the religious tradition known as Brahmanism. The goals that are promoted by the latter are life-affirming, that is, they are performed for the birth of a son, success in this life, protection from diseases and curses, etc. If sacrifices are conducted for obtaining a stay in the abode of the ancestors (*pitṛloka*), it is nevertheless a state where one enjoys pleasures similar to the ones of this life and more importantly, it is a state that can only be sustained by the continued performance of rites by one's descendants. In this context, desires are, following a conception suggested in the Nāsadīya Sūkta of the Ṛg Veda, creative forces of the world. Such is not the case for Buddhism where desire is the universal cause of suffering, thus rendering any desired object a source of a negative experience of the world. This means that this world is something one should not rely on for one's ultimate happiness, that it is, from that point of view, just an illusion. However, if suffering is not exclusively defined as a psychological reality of human experience, but also in ontological terms, then it acquires a notion of duration. Suffering is thus what is not permanent, and so is the world, including supernatural beings, with which we, as human beings affected by desires, may have commerce.

In theory, schools of pre-Mahāyāna Buddhism and the Upaniṣadic traditions, including the mystical Gnostic sects of the West, would completely reject the world and its objects for the reasons just mentioned. However, by defining this world in terms of a time scale, they may allow some degree of tolerance for the enjoyment of pleasures—usually related to spiritual and mystical achievements—or states of being that could extend beyond one's worldly lives. It is to be noted that this extension beyond the limits of one's earthly existence makes it possible to integrate the notions of *karma* and rebirth into a spiritual practice that is very

difficult to bring to fruition in one single life. These notions thus become the foundation of a very stable ethical system in which ethereal states of being are rewards to obtain or punishments to avoid.

Defining the suffering of the world in terms of duration also opens the door to attributing a positive value to its objects when viewed as instruments to bring about a spiritual goal. In this sense, the proverbial raft that is bringing us from our disillusioned realities to the shore of awakening is something to be appreciated while it is carrying us through the uncharted waters separating those two states of being. Although that raft could be the teachings of a spiritual master or the beneficial support from any compassionate being, either present in this world or existing in other states of being, it is nevertheless something impermanent and as such, it will have to be given up. Indeed, the state of full awakening, being also a state of complete aloofness and self-reliance, does not admit of any permanent connexion with the ephemeral realities of this world.

Thus, taking into consideration the two ways one can positively reevaluate a world that can only be viewed as negative on account of its intrinsic suffering, namely, by identifying temporary states of being worth reaching and by intrumentalizing the world for the attainment of a spiritual goal accepted as ultimate and definitive, we unveil two important conceptual environments in which Hindu deities could find a legitimate place in a spiritually austere tradition such as the pre-Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition. Let's now examine the major Hindu deities that play a role in this tradition according to the two conceptual environments just mentioned.

2.1. Brahmā

At the outset, we have to say that Buddhism recognized the existence of more than one Brahmā. On many occasions, the Buddha is introduced as a teacher of gods and humans who "proclaims this world with its gods, māras, Brahmās" (Soṇadaṇḍa Sutta, DN: I-111). These Brahmās or Great Brahmās are to be found in the 14th world of form (*rūpaloka*), that is, relatively at a low rank in this category of worlds and at about the middle level of all the 31 abodes acknowledged in pre-Mahāyāna Buddhist cosmology. It is also said that all the Brahmās form one of the eight kinds of assemblies (Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, DN: II-110). From this point of view, it may be more appropriate, when mentioning Brahmā, to refer to a Brahmā as though we were talking about a particular state of being among many.

Brahmā as the creator of the world is also mentioned in a context that is rather critical of his status. Indeed, Brahmā is a being who, on account of exhausting his lifespan or his merits, has fallen from the Ābhassarā Brahmā abode (17th) to end up in an empty Brahmā-palace where he now "dwells, mind-made, feeding on delight, self-luminous, moving through the air, glorious" (Brahmajāla Sutta, DN: I-17). Having stayed there for a very long time all by himself, there arose in him unrest, discontent, worry and, characteristically of his status, a desire for the presence of other beings. Not only this passage is critical of a state of being that is still marked by a lack of equanimity and self-reliance, but it somewhat subverts the belief that Brahmā is the creator of mankind, that "he is permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change, the same forever and ever," by further giving an account, in an almost derogatory manner, of the circumstances by which Brahmā came to attribute to himself the role of a creator. What is derogatory in the Buddha's account is the fact that

Brahmā is portrayed as a deluded being who believed that, after other beings fell down from the Ābhassarā Brahmā abode, these beings were created by him just because he desired them. Not only is Brahmā deluded, but he is also presented as someone having a heightened sense of self-importance when he says as a result of this episode: “I am Brahmā, the Great Brahmā, the Conqueror, the Unconquered, the All-Seeing, the All-Powerful, the Lord, the Maker and Creator, Ruler, Appointer and Orderer, Father of All That Have Been and Shall Be” (Brahmajāla Sutta, DN: I-18).

Another story, taken from the same body of Buddhist scriptures, refers to Brahmā in quite a satirical way by presenting him as someone who gave, when asked by a monk where the four great elements cease without remainder, the same reply as the one just mentioned, that is, “I am Brahmā, the Great Brahmā…” Upon being asked for a third time, then the Great Brahmā took that monk by the arm, led him aside and said: “Monk, these devas believe there is nothing Brahmā does not see, there is nothing he does not know, there is nothing he is unaware of. That is why I did not speak in front of them. But, monk, I don't know where the four great elements cease without remainder” (Kevaddha Sutta, DN: I-222). It may be possible to argue that this rather negative depiction of Brahmā as a being that takes pride in his ignorance and delusion is meant as a gibe aimed at the Brahmins, whom the Buddha encountered during his teaching career. They were also very proud of their origin—they consider themselves as the true children of Brahmā—their status—they believe to be the highest caste—and, most importantly, their knowledge of the Three Vedas. If such is the case, the real purpose of such passages would then be to establish the authority of the Buddha as the previous passage ends with the following: “And therefore, monk, you have acted wrongly, you have acted incorrectly by going beyond the Blessed Lord and going in search of an answer to this question elsewhere. Now, monk, you just go to the Blessed Lord and put this question to him, and whatever answer he gives, accept it” (Kevaddha Sutta, DN: I-222).

This somewhat negative depiction of Brahmā in the pre-Mahāyāna Buddhist literature may be viewed as the lower end of the Buddhist perception of foreign deities. In other passages, this Hindu deity is associated with positive qualities and enjoyed a relatively high status. For a start, we learn from the enumeration of the virtues of the Reverend Soṇadaṇḍa that Brahmā is a model of countenance (Soṇadaṇḍa Sutta, DN: I-114) and to have a Brahmā-like voice is one of the thirty-two marks of a Great Man (Mahāpadāna Sutta, DN: II-20). Moreover, the Brahmās form one of the eight assemblies and to be reborn in the Brahmā-world, as it was the case for King Mahāsudassana, is the greatest spiritual achievement possible in a period when no Buddha has manifested himself (Mahāsudassana Sutta, DN: II-195).

More than just being of a bearer of qualities or an example of a spiritual state, a Brahmā can also play an active role in the process of Buddhist emancipation. We have, for example, the Brahmā Sanankumarā who, in addition to praising the Tathāgata and Dhamma’s truth to the Thirty-Three Gods, is also teaching them how to develop, perfect and practice the four roads to power, namely, “concentration of intention accompanied by effort of will, concentration of energy …, concentration of consciousness …, and concentration of investigation accompanied by effort of will” (Janavasabha Sutta, DN: II-214). Not only does he impart those spiritual virtues, but also the four foundations of mindfulness and the Buddha’s Eightfold Path. As such, Brahmā assumes the role of a full-fledged Buddhist disciple and teacher.

We find again Brahmā Sanankumarā in the next sutta (Mahāgovinda Sutta, DN: II-220ff) where, after having read the thoughts of the Great Steward who wished to see him with his own eyes, discuss or consult with him, he disappeared from the Brahmā world "as swiftly as a strong man might stretch out his flexed arm or flex it again" to reappear in front of his devotee who "felt fear and trembling, and his hair stood on end at such a sight as he had never seen before." Having been well received by the latter, Brahmā Sanankumarā offers him a boon, something of profit in this life, or in the next. Thereupon, the Lord Steward asked the one who has no doubts how to reach the deathless Brahmā world. He will understand, after what Brahmā has told him about the stench of the world, that this is possible only if he decides to go forth into homelessness. Of course, this decision is met with some resistance by the King and the six nobles. The latter even tried to bribe him with money and women into renouncing his project. Not only did the Great Steward resist the tentation, but he also managed to convince the King, "the seven anointed Khattiya kings, the seven wealthy and distinguished Brahmins with their seven hundred advanced pupils, his forty equal wives, several thousand Khattiyas, several thousand Brahmins, several thousand householders, even some harem-women" to follow him into homelessness.

This last episode, which echoes the dialogue between the young Brahmin Vāseṭṭha and the Reverend Gotama about the way to the world of Brahmā (Tevijja Sutta, DN: I-235ff), clearly presents Brahmā as a trigger for the conversion of people to the Buddhist path. This role is even more obvious in his appeal to the Lord Buddha Vipassī as reported in the Mahāpadāna Sutta (DN: II-1ff). It is indeed on account of the Great Brahmā's persistence—he repeated his appeal three times—that the Buddha has been convinced and moved by compassion to teach the Dhamma. One will recall that the Buddha, for fear of trouble, did not wish "to open the doors to the Deathless." To some extent, it is possible to say that without the intervention of the Great Brahmā, the world would not have known about the Buddha and his teachings.

Despite this extraordinary and privileged role that the Great Brahmā played in the emergence of Buddhism, he nevertheless belongs to a world that is less than what may be achieved by following the teachings of the Buddha all the way beyond birth in the Brahmā world, that is, to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to super-knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbanā. It is, however, not a waste of time to strive for this lesser state of accomplishment, nor to be reborn among the "Paranirnmita-Vasavatti devas, among the Nimmānarati devas, among the Tusita devas, among the Yāma devas, among the devas of the Thirty-Three Gods, or among the devas of the Four Great Kings." Not even for the very lowest realm of the gandhabbas, "the going-forth of all those people was not fruitless or barren, but productive of fruit and profit." These intermediary states of being may be viewed as preparation for the Buddhist holy life which consists in the Noble Eightfold Path. This hierarchical view of one's spiritual goals is an example of the inclusivist understanding of the Buddhist path. It is also an illustration of the process of inculturation if we accept that the Great Steward was once the Buddha who taught those disciples the path to the union with the Brahmā-world (Mahāgovinda Sutta, DN: II-249-51).

Before moving on to the other important Hindu deities of the Buddhist cosmology during the pre-Mahāyāna period, one key point is worth mentioning regarding Brahmā. The fact that he has been the cause of the Buddha preaching the Dhamma reveals that the world, with its limitations and suffering, does have a special relation with the state of

enlightenment. Indeed, what is going to trigger the Buddha's compassion will be the basis of a full reconciliation between a state of mind that is inclined to shun what this world has to offer and the world itself, a reconciliation that will come to fruition in the context of the Japanese Buddhist traditions.

2.2. Sakka

Sakka is the chief of the world or heaven occupied by the Thirty-Three Gods. As such, he is mostly described as devānam indo, a description also used for the Hindu deity Indra (Pāli Inda). Like Brahmā, he is one of the protectors of Buddhism (dharmapāla), a role that will be made more explicit with the help of the iconography of Tibetan and Japanese Buddhism. Throughout the Pāli Buddhist scriptures, Sakka is referred to by various other names as well. For example, in the Sakkapañha Sutta, he is mentioned as Vāsava while being addressed as Lord Indra (DN: II-274) or Venerable Kosiya (DN: II-274). Another epithet is Purindada, which means "the generous giver in former births," occurred in the Mahāsamaya Sutta (DN: II-260). According to the Buddhist scholar Rhys Davids, this name is a deliberate alteration of Purandara, that is, "the destroyer of cities," a description of Indra. In line with his suggestion that the Buddhist Sakka and the Vedic Indra are two independent conceptions, this change of name is justified by the desire to make Sakka more respectable from a Buddhist perspective. If this is the case, we would have another example of the process of inculturation where an ancient symbol has been infused with a new meaning or purpose.

Looking at the passages of the pre-Mahāyāna literature, especially in the Jātaka stories, where the character of Sakka, whether identified as such or by another name, is staged, two important roles have been assigned to this Hindu deity in the Buddhist conceptual landscape. Indeed, the ruler of the Thirty-Three Gods, a leader among gods (devas) sharing more or less the same status, who on many occasions has decided to come down from his heavenly abode to meet the Buddha—as is it the case in the Sakkapañha Sutta (DN: II-263ff)—is a good example of the ideal devotee or upāsaka seeking spiritual instruction and guidance. In this regard, it is interesting to note that the ruler of gods may have experienced some fear or hesitation to approach the Buddha directly and that his request for instruction had to be conveyed by the gandhabba Pañcesikha. His request will be granted by the Buddha who thought: "Sakka has lived a pure life for a long time. Whatever questions he may ask will be to the point and not frivolous and he will be quick to understand my answers" (Sakkapañha Sutta, DN: II-275).

This passage—and the one where we learn that Sakka has attained stream-entry status following his encounter with the Buddha—may be contrasted with that of the Saṃyukta-āgama in which Sakka is visited by the monk Mahāmaudgalyāyana to be found with heavenly maidens who are entertaining him with songs. The purpose of Mahāmaudgalyāyana's visit is to instruct Sakka on the destruction of craving. Instead of paying attention, Sakka tries to change the topic of the conversation by showing off his divine palace. Mahāmaudgalyāyana does not let himself distracted from his mission and decides to shake the divine palace with his toe, that is, the lowliest part of his body. On account of this event, Sakka is brought to his senses, gets rid of his self-indulgent and forgetful attitude to finally remember the Buddha's teaching on the destruction of craving. If we consider that Mahāmaudgalyāyana had once received that teaching and made good

use of it, the contrast with Sakka in the present story highlights two different ways of being a Buddhist upāsaka. It also shows that there is a high degree of ambiguity with regard to the nature of the character embodied by Sakka in pre-Mahāyāna Buddhist literature. More so, when other passages are depicting him as being a faithful minister to the Buddha. For example, we find him performing, in Buddhaghosa's Commentary on the Dhammapada (Dhammapadatthakathā), the most menial tasks like carrying the vessel of excrement during the Buddha's last illness. He was also present at the Buddha's death where he uttered, in full recognition of the Four Noble Truths, the following verses: “Impermanent are compounded things, prone to rise and fall, Having risen, they’re destroyed, their passing truest bliss” (Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, DN: II-157).

The second purpose of Sakka’s presence in the Buddhist cosmology is similar to that of St John the Baptist who prepares the people for Jesus’ ministry. For example, in the Vinaya piṭaka, Sakka, who is disguised as a young man, preceded the Buddha by signing his praise. In the Commentary on the Dhammapada, he orders the gods of Wind and the Sun to uproot the pavilions of the heretics. When the Buddha resides at Vesāli, he visits it to rid it of its plages. We are also told that his presence drives away the evil spirits so that the Buddha may easily fulfill his mission. He also helps the disciples of the Buddha, monks, nuns as well as laymen in their practices and efforts to attain awakening. In the Uraga Jātaka, Sakka, who identified himself as the king of Heaven, filled the house of laymen disciples with countless wealth so that they may abstain from manual labor and concentrate their efforts on giving alms, keeping the moral law, and observing holy days. Sakka is even consulted by the lesser gods in their difficulties and he even intervened to resolve their disputes. In fact, in the Commentary on the Dhammapada, he has been on many occasions identified as a Bodhisatta (or Bodhisattva, a person who makes the vow to become a Buddha) who not only teaches moral lessons, but also provides material assistance as it was the case in the Bhadraghaṭa-jātaka where he gives a wishing-cup to a poor man. As it is customary in the pedagogy of the Bodhisattas, Sakka also tests the resolve of other Bodhisattas. This is what he does in the Śibi-jātaka where he, disguised as a blind Brahmin, asked the king of the Śibis, a Bodhisatta well-known for his generosity, whether he will be willing to part with his eyes. As such, having Sakka assume the role of a Bodhisatta anticipates the Honji suijaku doctrine of Japanese Buddhism where Bodhisattvas choose to appear as native gods or kami.

These two roles assumed by Sakka in the pre-Mahāyāna Buddhism are certainly the result, as mentioned previously, of the process of inculturation. His transformation has erased all traces of the ancient Indian warrior god, the slayer of Vṛtra. If we consider, however, that the gods of the world are somewhat impersonal forces or tendencies, the conversion of a Sakka is a sign that the emergence in the world of a Tathāgata, a fully-enlightened Arahant Buddha has put into place beneficial conditions for one’s emancipation. The world is no longer to be viewed negatively, as many mystics do, but as a source of altruism and benevolence. Like a master who is ready to give everything he has, even when it is limited, to his disciple so that the latter may surpass the former, the world is capable, once “fertilized” by the seed of the Buddha, of being an important actor in the awakening of humanity. As it is the case with Brahmā, the presence of Sakka in the Buddhist cosmology, would point toward a reconciliation between the world and a spiritual tradition whose success is predicated on its negation.

2.3. Yama

Undergoing a similar transformation as the Vedic god Sakka is Yama, the god of death and the ruler of the underworld who will also be promoted in Buddhism to the status of Protectors of the Dharma (*dharmapāla*). However, his mentions in pre-Mahāyāna literature are very limited and most of the time occurred in conjunction with other Vedic gods, for example, in the Tevijja Sutta (DN: I-244) where a group of Brahmins not doing what a Brahmin should do are invoking Indra, Soma, Varuṇa, Isāna (Īśāna/Śiva), Pajāpati, Brahmā and Mahiddhi in order to attain the union with Brahmā. This is, by the way, another Buddhist example of denigrating the significance of the Hindu deities. In this regard, it has been argued that Yama "has been reduced in Buddhism to a mere passive onlooker at the uninfluenced operation of the law of karma" (Marasinghe, 2002: 631). This is, for example, the case in a passage of the Majjhima Nikāya where Yama asks a person who has been sent to him on account of his ill-conduct whether that person has considered the consequences of his actions. Upon failing to do so, he is sent to hell to expiate the fruits of his karma while Yama does nothing to influence his destiny.

It would not be surprising to find references to Yama in pre-Mahāyāna non-canonical literature and popular stories and lores circulating in Buddhist countries in which he is playing an active role in warning people of their bad behavior, either with explicit messages or by sending such calamities as old age, disease, and similar punishments. As this role is to be found in many religious and spiritual traditions, I would argue that the fact that Yama is also assuming it is an example of acculturation, that is, a process of integration in which no central entity is in control of how the symbols of a foreign system of beliefs are defined and interpreted. This is not the case in later Buddhism where the spiritual significance of Yama will be enhanced on account of the explicit contribution of Buddhist thinkers like Kūkai in Japan. The transformation of Yama would thus be an instance of inculturation as defined previously.

One last point regarding Yama, the king of the underworld. It appears that he should not be confused with the gods (devas) of the Yāma abode located in one of the Worlds of form (*rūpaloka*) just above that of the Thirty-Three Gods and below that of the Contented gods (*tusitā devas*). Their worlds are often mentioned, together with that of the Paranirmmita-Vasavatti devas and the Nimmānarati devas as possible destinations for those who have not fully mastered the teachings of the Buddha (Mahāgovinda Sutta, DN: II-250).

Other Hindu deities are to be found in pre-Mahāyāna Buddhist literature together with non-human beings like Asuras, Gandhabbas, Garuḍās, Nāgas and Yakkhas. They all play minor roles like being attendants on the devas, being present at assemblies to which the Buddha teaches, or simply being examples of the power of the Buddha as it is the case in the truce reached between the Garuḍās and the Nāgas who are normally considered to be enemies. Like human beings, they could be ambivalent in their commitment to the goal of emancipation and as such are good or bad examples of Buddhist devotee or *upāsaka*. In this category we have the Yakkhas who have faith in the Buddha and those who have no faith depending on whether they follow the five precepts or not (Āṭānāṭiya Sutta, DN: III-194ff). As it is the case with the previous Indian deities discussed so far, their status will somewhat increase in the context of esoteric traditions and Japanese Buddhism. It will thus be more appropriate to present them in these contexts.

3. The Japanese period

Buddhism started as a struggle between the awareness that “Everything is suffering” and the tendencies which make us forgetful of that awareness. As these tendencies are triggered by the realities of the world, it is quite normal for that world to be seen in a negative light. However, that struggle, which usually takes place in such physical environments as the family or one’s immediate community, plays itself out at the mental level. In fact, it was realized that the mind is the real battlefield in which the Buddhist disciple, holding tight to his salutary awareness, has to face the attacks originating from the deepest corners of his mind. It was also realized that the mind was structured, like any battlefield, with favorable and unfavorable positions to engage the enemy. These positions are the states of mind that have been associated with stages of being with its corresponding worlds, that is, the various heavens and hells and their respective inhabitants. Despite the fact that the stage of being human was considered the most auspicious position to practice the Buddhist path, it was nevertheless realized that the beings residing in the non-human worlds could also be of assistance. In the language of modern psychology, we could then say that these beneficial beings are the positive psychic powers that can carry us to better vantage points. It is thus the desire to harness those forces—instead of neglecting them on account of a negative prejudice toward what is produced by the unawakened and limited world—that Buddhism is going to open the door to the ritualization of its practices and to the development of the arts. To some extent, Buddhism is rediscovering the intuition of the Vedic sages who decided, when mapping out their paths of emancipation, to maintain a continuity with the tradition that shaped their worldview.

It is not by chance that what appears to be a reconciliation between two different aspirations—one that seeks to enjoy the pleasures of this world, the other that wants to renounce all those pleasures—occurred in Japan. When Buddhism entered the land of the rising sun in the sixth century, it encountered indigenous traditions that were essentially oriented toward this world and consequently were very much life-affirming. In order to gain a permanent foothold in its new environment, it had to assimilate the symbols of what came to be identified as Shintō, the Way of the Gods. The culmination of this assimilation is certainly the *Honji suijaku* doctrine of Japanese Buddhism where the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are the original substance of reality (*honji*) and the native gods or kami, the manifested traces (*suijaku*). This doctrine came to be fully formulated during the Kamakura period (1185-1333), a period also known for the development of medieval Shintō. It is to be noted that this phase in the evolution of the native religious traditions of Japan has been described by the Japanese scholar Iyanaga Nobumi as a form of “Japanese Hinduism.”

The reconciliation between the aspiration of Buddhism and the Hindu deities has a history. It most probably started in Kashmir during the reign of the emperor Kanishka the Great (120-140 CE). Kanishka was a patron of Buddhism, advocated the transmission of its teachings as he was the head of the 4th Buddhist Council in Kashmir. He also encouraged the development of Greco-Buddhist art as well as the Mathura School of Hindu art thus favoring an environment of cultural and religious exchange between Buddhism and Hinduism. Kashmir is also known for being important for the development of the Tantric or esoteric traditions of both Buddhism and Hinduism. These traditions, with their subtle teachings, complex rituals, elaborate forms of art, and most importantly, their inclusivist attitude with regard to Indian pantheon, left Kashmir to move to Tibet, China, and

eventually Japan where they left their marks on the already established Buddhist schools and the native religious traditions like Bön, Daoism and Shintō. More precisely, and as far as Japan is concerned, it is thanks to Kūkai, the founder of the esoteric school of Buddhism known as Shingon that the Vedic gods entered Japan. It is therefore appropriate to start this brief survey of the Japanese period with Kūkai's contribution to the presence of Hindu deities in Buddhism.

In addition to introducing the use of mystic diagrams and syllables or mantra—in Japanese, *Shin-gon* from the Chinese *Chen-yen* which means "true word"—into Japanese Buddhism, Kūkai, also known posthumously as Kōbō Daishi, is credited for having developed the fire rite called *goma*, which is believed to be related to the Vedic homa ritual where the fire god Agni plays a central role. If this Vedic deity is conveying to the gods, by consuming the various offerings, the wishes of the sponsor of the homa ritual in the context of the Brahmanic religion, it is now the fetters of the practitioners that are being consumed and transformed. The goma fire rite is thus another example of the dynamic of inculturation in which Buddhism infused a new meaning into the cosmological realities acknowledged by the Hindu religious and spiritual traditions. That new meaning also determines the performance of the rite. For example, in the Vedic homa rituals, no statues or images are used while in the Shingon goma, it is not usual to have a statue of the deities involved in the ritual like Acalanātha Vidyarāja—another name for the god Rudra—and even Agni himself. The main reason for this is again the fact that the performance of the fire ritual has been assigned a new purpose. In the present case, this purpose is to serve as support in the practice of visualization (*sādhana*), a practice which aims at the union of the practitioner with the deity that has been evoked. Being able to see that deity facilitates that practice. To some extent, this dynamic of inculturation has made it possible for originally minor deities like Acala to gain in significance in the context of the Buddhist pantheon.

Another Vedic ritual that has been integrated into the Shingon esoteric school of Buddhism is the *abhiṣeka* ritual. It is usually performed to confirm the passage of a disciple to a higher level of practice. In this ritual, two maṇḍalas are used, namely, the *garbhadhātu* (womb maṇḍala) and the *vajradhātu* (diamond maṇḍala) in which the elephant god Gaṇeśa—known as Kangiten in Japan—plays a role as a minor guardian. To describe the evolution of this Hindu deity in the Buddhist pantheon of Japan would exceed the scope of the present article. Suffice to say that Kangiten was later promoted to the status of an independent deity worshipped throughout Japan in many temples not necessarily affiliated to the Shingon tradition and for very concrete benefits like success in business enterprise, the most important of these temples (among more than 250) being certainly the Hōzan-ji located at the summit of Mount Ikona in the Kansai region (Osaka). As it is believed that Kangiten is endowed with great power, he is also regarded as a protector of temples.

The transformations and uses of the elephant god from India in the Japanese religious landscape are indeed quite diverse. In this regard, it could be argued that they have been the result of the process of inculturation as well as that of acculturation in which, through the dynamic of religious and cultural syncretism, Gaṇeśa has assumed the function of the indigenous gods of Japan, the kami who are contributing to the valorization of this world by allowing the Japanese through petitions and offerings to make the best of that world. Other Hindu deities have joined Gaṇeśa in this role of a purveyor of material benefits. To name the most important, we have Kubera/Vaiśravaṇa known as Bishamonten and

Sarasvatī (Benzaiten, Benten, Bentensama), who is considered to be one of the most revered deities in Japan. These two Hindu deities—sometimes three when Lakṣmī (Kichijōten) is included—are part of the Seven Gods of Fortune (shichifukujin in Japanese) who are believed to grant good luck and are patrons of many trades and professions. We also find Varuṇa who is worshiped in many temples to prevent droughts, taifun and floods. Kāmadeva is venerated by many young couples. We also have Yama, better known as Emma who, like many of the deities just mentioned, has his dedicated temples and cults. In fact, the list of Hindu gods goes even longer to include Indra, Brahmā, Śiva, Vāyu, Skanda, Mahākāla, Hārītī, Bhudevi, ḍākinī, etc. Not to be neglected as examples of the presence of Hindu deities in Japanese Buddhism is the worship of stars, most particularly, the Pole Star (Sudṛṣṭi/Sudarśana) and the Navagraha. A better understanding of the evolution of the integration of those Hindu deities into Buddhism as well as Shintō would not be possible without the help of the anthropologists and the art historians. It would require, as mentioned earlier, a thorough study that exceeds the scope of the present article.

One last point of interest regarding the Hindu deities in Japanese Buddhism. Many of those deities are mentioned as a group. I just mentioned Gaṇeśa, Sarasvatī and Lakṣmī as members of the Seven Gods of Fortune (shichifukujin) and Brahmā, Sakka and Yama as *dharmapāla* or Protectors of Buddhism. To this second group, we may add Mahākāla, Yamāntaka, Ekajaṭī and many other deities originally found in Hinduism. These groups are also characterized by the fact that they are combined with deities of different origins, for example, Begtse, a pre-Buddhist war god from Mongolia with regard to the *dharmapāla* as worshiped in Tibetan Buddhism or Ebisu, one of the shichifukujin whose origins are purely Japanese. Ebisu is very popular among fishermen, sailors, farmers, and people in the food industry. This regrouping of deities of different origins may be the result of the dynamic of acculturation in so far as they are individually invoked for more or less similar benefits. We can also speak of a dynamic of inculturation when, as a group, they serve a new purpose. This is particularly the case when the deities are part of a maṇḍala as mentioned above with regard to the *abhiṣeka* ritual or the temple complex of Mt. Kōya which Kūkai designed as a twofold maṇḍala as a means to save the people in Japan. More specifically, Kūkai stated that it is by enhancing the power of the five devas, namely, Brahmā, Indra, Yama, and the various nāgas and asuras as well as the sun, moon, and other heavenly bodies issued from the religious cults of India, that he will save the people in Japan (Bushelle, 2020: 75).

As far as Japanese Buddhism is concerned, there are other important groupings to be considered as examples where the role of Hindu deities has been redefined. We have, for example, the Twelve Guardians of All Directions (*dikpāla*) or the Twelve Deities (deva) or Celestial Beings (Jūniten in Japanese) where all deities are of Hindu origins, more precisely, from the Hindu guardians of the four cardinal and four intermediary directions. In this group, we find, among others, Brahmā and Indra. Their main function is to protect Buddhism and crush the evil demons. Performing a similar function, we find the Four Heavenly Kings (Shitennō). They originated in India as deva protecting Indra. We also have the Twelve Heavenly Generals of Yakushi Buddha (the medicine Buddha) consisting of twelve Hindu yakṣas who were incorporated into Buddhism as protective warriors. One unusual grouping of Buddhist protectors is that of the Eight Legions (Hachi Bushū) composed of devas, nāgas, yakṣas, gandharvas, asuras, garuḍas, kinnaras, and mahoragas. Finally, we have the twenty-eight Attendant Deities or Legions (Nijūhachi Bushū) whose

function is to serve the thousand-armed Kannon. One important member of this group is Lakṣmī. All those groups of deities are mentioned in scriptures, depicted in maṇḍalas and sculptures to be found in many temples throughout Japan. They have also been subjected to transformations and changes in significance following the evolution of Buddhism resulting from contact with other religious and spiritual traditions on its journey from India to the land of the rising sun.

4. Conclusion

To conclude this article on Hindu deities in Buddhism, I would like to reiterate the idea that the extent to which the gods and goddesses of India were integrated into the Japanese Buddhist traditions would not have been possible without a radical change of perspective toward the world. Indeed, from a purely mystical point of view, a spiritual path of liberation as revealed by the Buddha should be in principle always antagonistic against realities that are obstacles to one's emancipation. If those realities are not outright decried and censured, they are derided and made fun of by masters and disciples who have inherited a type of teachings that exclusively rely on commitment, personal strength, self-confidence and, to some extent, rationality. It is thus from this purist approach that Buddhism has moved to adopt an understanding that this world, in spite or because of its limitations, can be a powerful allied in one's quest for liberation. A good example of that radical change is perhaps Kūkai's project of transforming Mt. Kōya into a maṇḍala through which, with the help of not only the Buddhist divinities, but also the gods and goddesses of India as well as the kamis of Japan, Mahāvairocana's wish for universal awakening may be realized. We can thus speak of a process of reconciliation between an intention to be free from the world and that very world.

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