

# NOTES AND DISCUSSION

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## THE TWENTY-FIVE-HUNDREDTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE BUDDHA

The full moon in May is the occasion of the greatest festival of the year in the Buddhist world, it being the triple anniversary of the birth of Sakya-muni, of his ascent to the omniscience of a Buddha, and of his final extinction in Parinirvana. Ceylon and the countries of southeast Asia, which adopted the Singhalese Buddhism in the thirteenth century—Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos—are monsoon lands where the month of May coincides with the beginnings of the rains, thus signaling great rejoicing exemplified by offerings to the monks, recitals of prayers, and nocturnal circumambulations of the temples by the faithful torchbearers.

This year the festival will be celebrated with unusual solemnity in Ceylon and Burma, and even in India, for the full moon of 1956 coincides with the twenty-five-hundredth anniversary of Parinirvana, fixed by tradition as the 544th year before the Christian Era and marking the beginning of the Buddhist Era. The Siamese, the Cambodians, and the Laotians, who calculate not by the current but by the elapsed year, have now entered upon their 2,499th year and do not celebrate the anniversary until next year. But for European Orientalists this is a matter of relative

Translated by F. Richter.

indifference, inasmuch as the traditional date, 554 B.C., is clearly inaccurate, and is perhaps the result of confusion between Parinirvana and the Nativity of Sakyamuni. The calculations of specialists antedate Parinirvana by about sixty-five years and place it at about 477 B.C. We are dealing, however, with very old traditions, and can readily grant that all Buddhists, depending on their method of figuring dates, are currently celebrating the twenty-five-hundredth anniversary of Parinirvana within the margin of perhaps a year.

I have made inquiries regarding the exceptional importance and solemnity which are attached this year to the celebration. The answers I received tended to be vague, asserting that this period marks a date after which the Buddhist religion would enter upon an era of great prosperity, bringing about the adoption by the entire world of a mode of life conforming to the Buddhist ideal and universal peace. A religious Singhalese, however, has written to me in more precise terms:

“According to an old tradition,” he says, “there is a firm belief in Buddhist countries that there will be a great renaissance of the religion and a great expansion of the Law in the world twenty-five-hundred years after the Parinirvana Buddha. The decline of the Law will take place much later, after a long period of renaissance. The twenty-five-hundredth year of the Buddhist Era marks the beginning of this renewal.”

What my correspondent does not mention is that it also marks the middle of the period of 5,000 years, at the end of which, according to tradition, the doctrine will fall into oblivion. There is in fact an old prophecy with which all Buddhists are familiar, even though they may choose not to speak of it, according to which Sakyamuni announced that the doctrine which he preached would disappear at the end of a period which is generally fixed at 5,000 years.

But, it may be said, how could the Buddha fix an end to the observance of his doctrine? On what does this tradition rest? In what measure has the doctrine exercised an influence on the history of Buddhism? How can one reconcile belief in a limited duration of the religion with the perspective, in a far-distant future, of the appearance of a Buddha who will be called Maitreya? Does not this Messianic hope imply belief in the permanence of the religion over countless millenniums?

In reality, in the realm of Buddhist philosophy it is a heresy to speak of permanence; the great law preached by Sakyamuni is the law of impermanence. Man is subject to transmigration in a cycle of innumerable rebirths. The cosmos is subject to destruction and periodic re-creation.

The only eternal truth is that of Nirvana, which is stability without place or shape. The religion itself, like everything else, is subject to decline and disappearance, only to be reborn in another period of the universe, through the preaching of a new Buddha.

Accordingly, the tradition of an ending which Sakyamuni himself implied in his doctrine is in full harmony with this conception, and one can give some credence to the passage in the Scriptures which attributes this statement to him. The passage is part of the most ancient expression of the tradition. It was accepted by all the Schools, and therefore antedates the first schism, which took place in the middle of the fourth century B.C. and is to be found in the first of the three Canons relating to the rules of monastic discipline. At the beginning of his career, the Buddha did not accept women in his community. But as the result of the repeated remonstrances of his cousin and faithful disciple, Ananda, he decided, against his own instincts, to admit them, though he imposed on them absolute submission to their male colleagues. But he could not refrain from remarking, with a sigh: "If, Ananda, women had not been authorized to leave their homes in order to adopt a life without protection under the aegis of the Doctrine and the discipline of the One who knows the truth, then, Ananda, the pure religion would have endured for a long time; the good Law would have lasted a thousand years. But inasmuch as women have now received this permission, the result will be, Ananda, that the pure religion will not last so long; the good Law will not last more than 500 years."<sup>1</sup>

This saying is well in keeping with the misogyny of Sakyamuni and I am inclined to believe that the text I have quoted relates to a definite event. Besides, when after his end on earth, the principal disciplines met in council to establish the forms of his teaching, the traditions of most of the sects are at one in depicting Ananda as being accused by his colleagues of various mistakes, among which is regularly quoted that of having persuaded his master to admit women into the community.<sup>2</sup>

In the second of the three Canons, that of the Discourses of the Buddha, the idea of the impermanence of the good Law is formulated in various places. This impermanence is attributed in part to the various imperfections of the faithful, such as negligence, laziness, arrogance, discontent, inattention, lack of intelligence, bad company, evil practices and lack of

1. *Vinaya*, H. Oldenberg, ed., II, p. 256; Eng. trans., Warren, *Buddhism in Translations*, pp. 441 ff.

2. A. Bareaux, *Les premiers Conciles bouddhiques*, Paris, 1955, pp. 7-15.

good practices, in part to misrepresentation of the doctrine in futile actions, and lack of consideration for the Master, for his Law, for his community, and to neglect of study and meditation.<sup>3</sup>

At the time of the compilation of his discourses, about the first century B.C., there was still no question of a definite period when the good Law would disappear, nor of the stages of its progressive decline. These notions appear for the first time in the famous conversations of the Indo-Greek King Menander (ca. 160–150 B.C.) with the Buddhist sage Nagasena, which are usually attributed to the first century A.D. King Menander points out the contradiction between two statements of the Buddha, who, on the one hand, says that the good Law will last only 500 years, and, on the other hand, that if the monks lead a life without reproach, the world will never lack saints to reach the stage of emancipation, this second affirmation appearing to imply an indefinite duration of the Law. To this the sage Nagasena replied, with some subtlety, that the two affirmations referred to two different things, the first speaking of the duration of the Law, and the second relating to religious practice, and that the King confused the limitation of the thing with its definition. Thereupon, the King replied, “Venerable Nagasena, when you speak of the disappearance of the good Law, what do you mean by ‘disappearance’?” Nagasena answered: “Oh King, there are three modes of disappearance of the Doctrine. You ask what are these three modes. They are, the disappearance of the acquisition of the degrees of sanctity, disappearance of the observance of the precepts and disappearance of the outward signs of the Doctrine.”<sup>4</sup>

Some centuries after these conversations of King Menander, certain commentaries of canonic texts, composed by Buddhaghosa in the first half of the fifth century, mention three further stages in the disappearance of the good Law, substituting for that of the outward sign that of knowledge of the sacred writings,<sup>5</sup> and it was this third item which was accepted in China, where they divide the time of the existence of the Law into three epochs: that of the true Law, that of the counterfeit Law, and that of the last Law. The durations of these epochs vary according to the schools of thought.

Another commentary of Buddhaghosa, however, describes the decline and disappearance of the doctrine in five stages: disappearance of the

3. *Anguttaranikaya*, I, pp. 17–18; *Samyuttanikaya*, II, p. 224.

4. *Milindapanha*, V. Trenckner, ed., pp. 130–134.

5. *Sammohavinodani*, pp. 431–433; *Sarathapakasini*, Bangkok ed., II, p. 254.

acquisition of the degrees of sanctity, disappearance of the observance of the precepts, disappearance of the knowledge of the Scriptures, disappearance of the outward signs, and, lastly, disappearance of the relics of the Buddha.<sup>6</sup> One thousand years after Nirvana, the faithful will become incapable of acquiring the various degrees of sanctity. The death of the last of the faithful who had entered upon the course leading to deliverance will mark this first disappearance. The second, that of the observance of the precepts, will begin when the minor prohibitions are ignored. The third stage, brought about by the impiety of the kings and their subjects, will cause droughts and famine, and thereby the death of the monks and disciples. It will be marked by the disappearance of the last text of the third Canon and end with the disappearance of the first text of the first Canon, just as if the progressive disappearance of the Bible began with the New Testament and ended with the Book of Genesis.

The fourth disappearance, that of the outward signs of the religion, is the occasion of a very interesting development. In the course of time, there will be great negligence in the wearing of the monastic robe and the manner in which the begging bowl is carried. In imitation of the heretics, the monks will substitute gourds for begging bowls and end up for convenience' sake by carrying them at the end of poles. As for their robes, they will no longer dye them, and in the end will keep only a small piece which they will bind around the wrist, the throat, or the hair. They will have wives and children and work for them. Finally they will remark: "What is the use of the piece of saffron cloth?" They will take it off and toss it among the nettles.

Lastly, the disappearance of the relics of the Buddha,<sup>7</sup> which marks the end of the religion, is to undergo a long development, the details of which I will quote in full, as they have inspired numerous writings.

"At first, the relics of the Buddha, when they have been deprived of honor and adoration, will repair to such place where they may still receive honor and adoration. In due course, they will not receive honor or adoration in any place. At the time fixed for the end of the religion, the relics will reassemble, first in the Island of Ceylon, at the Mahacetiya which refers to the great stupa of Anuradhapura, the ruins of which are known

6. *Manorathapurani*, I, pp. 87-91.

7. This disappearance is given in another commentary of the same epoch as achieving the Parinirvana of Sakyamuni—his complete annihilation—under the Tree of Knowledge, beginning with the destruction of his passions and continuing to his death, through the destruction of the various constituents of his body, but which will not be complete until the last corporeal relics are destroyed by fire.

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under the name of 'Ruanweli Dagoba,' then at the Nagadipacetiya, (another monument in the northwest of the Island) and from there to Bodhipallanka which is Bodh Gaya in India. The relics will leave the world of the Nagas, of the gods of Brahma and find a final resting-place in Bodhipallanka. None of the relics, even though they be the size of a grain of mustard seed, will be lost on the way. All the relics, having re-assembled on the throne where the Illumination took place, will take the shape of the Buddha and will reconstitute his body seated on the throne. The thirty-two characteristic signs of the great man and the eighty accessory signs will be visible as a unity and will produce an aureole of fire around the Buddha. Then they will reproduce the double miracle of emitting at the same time rays of light and springs of water. At that place there will be not a single creature in human form. But all the gods of the Ten Thousand Worlds will utter lamentations and say, 'Today He who possessed the ten intellectual powers has been extinguished; from now on there will be darkness.'

"There will follow a great fire issuing from the body made of relics. It will destroy them, and the flame rising from the body made of the relics will rise up to the sky of Brahma. The flame will consume all, even the smallest relics, though it be only the size of a grain of mustard seed. In this way, the relics will illustrate their great power and then disappear. And the assembly of the gods, as on the day of Parinirvana, will render homage with scents, garlands of flowers, and music and will take three turns round the place, turning their right side to it. And having rendered this homage, they will say, 'May we live to see the Buddha who is to come.' And everyone will return whence he came. In this way the disappearance of the relics will take place."

This apocalyptic vision of the end of the Buddhist Era has a certain grandeur and has inspired all the works that deal with the future of the religion. At the same time, the final wish expressed by the gods opens horizons of hope to which I will refer later. Moreover, the disappearance of the doctrine is postponed in this text to a far later date than that of five hundred years traditionally fixed by Sakyamuni, mentioned in the conversations of King Menander, and already passed when Buddhaghosa wrote his commentaries about nine hundred years after the Parinirvana. According to this author, it is not until the end of a thousand years, that is to say, a little after the time when he lived, that the first disappearance would take place. I refer to that of the acquisition of degrees of sanctity, of which no further examples could very likely have taken place during

his time. And if one is to assume that the five disappearances are equally spaced out in time, one arrives at a duration of 5,000 years. That is also the conclusion of a work of uncertain date, the *Anagatavamsa*,<sup>8</sup> or *History of the Times to Come*, which, inspired by the commentaries of Buddhaghosa and drawn from the same source, says textually that the end of the religion will take place 5,000 years after Parinirvana. And Buddhaghosa himself, in one of his commentaries of the *Abhidhamma*, says clearly that the result of the final council held shortly after the demise of the Buddha was to secure to the Doctrine the duration of 5,000 years.<sup>9</sup>

These five disappearances spaced a thousand years apart henceforth figure in all the writings dealing with the future of the religion. They are to be found, though in a slightly different sequence, in a treatise written in Ceylon in the reign of Bhuvanekabahu (1277 to 1288) by Siddhatthathera, the *Saratthasangha*,<sup>10</sup> as well as in another work dating from the first half of the fifteenth century, the *Saddhammaratnakara*, of which Spencer Hardy makes considerable use in his classic works on Buddhism.<sup>11</sup>

In the Indochinese Peninsula, one finds them in an inscription of one of the first Kings of Siam in 1357<sup>12</sup> and in a work on the history of the religion written by Chieng Mai at the beginning of the sixteenth century.<sup>13</sup> As for the term of 5,000 years, that is a notion so widespread that there exists hardly a dedication of a statute or final sentence of a manuscript which does not refer to it and express the hope that the work of the faithful, in dedicating a statute or writing a treatise, will contribute to the prosperity of the religion and its duration for 5,000 years.

It appears therefore that the ideas about the progressive decline of the Buddhist doctrine of five stages, spaced a thousand years apart, go back to an epoch between the conversations of King Menander, composed at the beginning of the Christian Era and which fix the duration of the good Law at five hundred years<sup>14</sup> with three stages for its decadence, and the composition of the commentaries by Buddhaghosa during the fifth cen-

8. *Journal of the Pali Text Society*, ed. Minayeff, 1886, pp. 84–86.

9. Maung Tin and Rhys Davids, *The Expositor*, I, 35.

10. Edition singhalaise, XXII, 30.

11. *Eastern Monarchism*, London, 1850, pp. 427–430; *A Manual of Buddhism*, London, 1860.

12. See below, note 18.

13. *Mula sasana*, Bangkok edition, 1939, p. 263 ff.

14. This perhaps constitutes an argument tending to prove that the work had been composed prior to that period, i.e., before the beginning of the Christian Era rather than after.

ture, giving the good Law a duration of 5,000 years and envisaging five stages in its decline.

These views were clearly influenced by the decline of Buddhism in India. Eugene Burnouf has made this point with his customary perspicacity.<sup>15</sup> He wrote, "It is easy to see that this division in the duration of the law of Sakya into periods which differ from each other in their degree has a genuine foundation in the history of Buddhism in India. It represents, in a general form, the tradition of the establishment of Buddhism, its duration, and the persecutions which led to its being driven out of India." Burnouf interprets the tradition "in this sense that the Buddhists, after having been driven from India, retained remembrance of the epoch when their belief flourished, and that for them this epoch was naturally divided into periods, more or less numerous, which, commencing with the death of the founder of the doctrine, extended until the time of its decline and came to an end when they were expelled from their native country."

In fact, it was about the time of the fifth century A.D., between the nine-hundredth and one-thousandth year of the Buddhist Era, that the doctrine of Sakyamuni began to show in India clear signs of decline. Thus one may ask if the threats, which at the approach of the one-thousandth year began to weigh down on Buddhism, did not exercise a decisive role in the revival of sacred writings during the fourth and fifth centuries. These dangers may have stimulated on the one hand the great commentators Asanza and Vasubandhu in the north, Buddhadatta, Buddhaghosa, and Dhammapala in the south, and, also on the other hand the establishment during the first half of the fifth century of the celebrated monastery of Nalanda, which was destined to exercise such a great influence on Buddhism outside India. It is certain that in China during the sixth century it was believed that the third and last stage of the decline, that of the last Law, had come. As a result, a sect known as the Sect of the Third Degree was formed and played a great part in China and the countries of Chinese culture between the sixth and eighth centuries.<sup>16</sup>

Already in the second half of the first century B.C., the approach of the expiration at the end of five hundred years, traditionally fixed by the Buddha himself, had, according to the Singhalese Chronicles, brought about a Council in Ceylon under King Vattagamani. Here for

15. *Lotus de la Bonne Loi*, I, pp. 366-367.

16. A. Waley, review of Yabuki Keiki's work on that sect in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies*, V, 1928, pp. 162-69.



the first time were written down the texts of the Canons “so that the religion may remain a long time” (as the oldest chroniclers, Mahavamsa and Dipavamsa, expressly say)<sup>17</sup> and “so that the religion may last five thousand years” (as is stated in later works,<sup>18</sup> which, while basing themselves on these periods of time, add that the end of the religion foreseen in the commentaries of Buddhaghosa would take place after five thousand years).

However that may be, after the disappearance of Buddhism in India, the thoughts of the Buddhists of Ceylon and other countries turned to the five successive phases of the decline of the doctrine which were to take place at the end of each period of one thousand years. This is the thesis laid down with precision and with supporting dates by King Lüt'ai who reigned at Sukhodaya, the first capital of independent Siam, during the middle of the fourteenth century and whose name appears in an inscription commemorating the installing of a relic, and the planting of a shoot of the sacred fig tree from Ceylon.<sup>19</sup> This foundation, it should be noted, dated from 1357 A.D., that is to say in the nineteen-hundredth year of the Buddhist Era and one hundred years before the beginning of the second phase in the decline of the religion. The king, who was a fervent Buddhist and a well-read person, very knowledgeable in the Scriptures and author of a treaty on cosmology,<sup>20</sup> was regarded as an authority in Cambodia and Siam before the introduction of western science. He does not speak of an ending in the year 1000, i.e. 457 A.D., which had passed long ago and which marked the end of the acquisition of the degrees of saintliness. On the other hand, he foresees the coming disappearance of knowledge of the Scriptures.<sup>21</sup>

As the disappearance of the Holy Scriptures was to occur only one

17. *Mahavamsa*, XXXIII, 100–101; *Dipavamsa*, XX, 20–21.

18. *Saddhammasangaha*, *Journal of the Pali Text Society*, 1890, p. 49; *Sangitivamsa*, Bangkok, 1789; Siamese ed., 1923, p. 96.

19. G. Coëdès, *Recueil des Inscriptions du Siam*, I, pp. 83–87.

20. *Traibhumikatha*, Bangkok, 1913.

21. If someone asks, he says, “how much time will elapse before the doctrine of our Master will disappear, this is what one must reply: it will be 3099 years after the year when this great relic was installed.”

As its foundation dates from 1357 A.D. it would be in 4456 A.D., that is, in the 5,000th year of the Buddhist Era, that this disappearance of Buddhism should take place, in accordance with the tradition established in the fifth century, by the *Commentaries of Buddhaghosa*.

“On the other hand,” the inscription continues, “in ninety-nine years after the foundation of this great relic, in the year of the hog (1456 A.D. or 2000 in the Buddhist Era), the three collections of the Scriptures will disappear.” The details of that disappearance follow:

“After another one thousand years (2456 A.D. or the 3,000th year of the Buddhist Era)

hundred years after King Lüt'ai, he was no further interested in this subject. What seemed to him to be of far greater concern was the observance of moral precepts, the disappearance of which was not to take place until one thousand years later: *Sic grande mortali aevi spatium!* Not, apparently, that he considered it possible to delay this extinction, which was ineluctable, or to postpone the decline of the religion. But in a short admonitory phrase following his prediction, he exhorts his subjects to profit by their good fortune of having been born at a period when the doctrine still existed.

"From today onwards," he preached to his subjects, "it is essential that all people of good character should hasten to accomplish works regarded as meritorious in the Buddhist religion during the period in which the religion still exists. Our generation, at the present time, enjoys great benefits because it came into the world while the Buddhist religion is still in existence. Everyone should hasten to pay homage at the stupas, at the cetiyas and at the Tree of Enlightenment, for such veneration is equivalent to paying homage to the Master in person. Whoever formulates a wish believing in this equivalence, even if he only once formulates the wish to be reborn in heaven, to wait until Sri Arya Maitreya descends to become Buddha, and then to be reborn on earth, he will certainly have his wish granted."

This little homily reveals the perspectives offered to adepts, in spite of the threat of the disappearance of the doctrine at the end of five thousand years of existence, and how this pessimistic view of the future could be reconciled with the hope that they would be able to obtain salvation dur-

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there will still be some monks who will observe the four great precepts, but they will not increase in number.

"After another one thousand years (3456 A.D. or the 4,000th year of the Buddhist Era) there will no longer be any monks wearing the monastic robe, but there will still be a tiny piece of yellow cloth, just enough to fill the cavity of the ear, and it is by that sign that one will be able to recognize unmistakably the adepts in the doctrine of the Master.

"One thousand years later (4456 A.D. or the 5,000th year of the Buddhist Era) no one will any longer be able to recognize the monastic robe or to know what a monk is. The relics of the Master, whether it be the one installed here, or those installed elsewhere, will still be in existence. In the last year, when the doctrine of the Buddha, our Master, definitely disappears, in the Year of the Rat, during the full moon of the sixth month, on a Saturday, in the lunar house of Vaisakha, all the saintly relics, including not only the relics on the earth, but also the relics in the world of the gods, or in the world of the Nagas, will rise in the middle of the firmament, reassemble in the Island of Ceylon, and enter the great stupa Ratanamalika. Then they will be wafted up and enter the sacred Tree of Enlightenment underneath which the Master attained the omniscience of a Buddha. Thereupon, fire will devour all the saintly relics and the flame will rise up to the world of Brahma. On that day the doctrine of the Buddha will disappear. From that time no man will know of works which generate merit. Man will commit bad actions and will assuredly be reborn in hell."

ing the course of their future rebirths. If the doctrine, like everything else, is subject to the law of impermanence, and thereby threatened with decline and annihilation, there is also a promise that it will be renewed and revived in the course of time. In the Buddhist cosmology and in Indian cosmology in general, time is divided into long cycles. The great years, called "yuga" and "kalpa" "are eternally renewed in great cycles which include groups of smaller cycles."<sup>22</sup> The largest cycle is divided into four incalculable periods, which are subdivided into twenty intermediary periods, each of which embraces eight ages of the world: Kali where human life spends normally a minimum of ten years; Dvapara, Treta, Krita where human life acquires incalculable duration; then again, but in reverse order, Krita, Treta, Dvapara, and Kali (the age in which we live at present). In these stages life, diminishes progressively, to return to ten-year periods.

The incalculable periods constituting the great period consist of successive involution and evolution. They are separated by intermediary periods of stability in the states of involution or evolution. During the period of involution, beings cease to be born and, being emptied of living creatures, the world destroys itself in stages by fire, water, and wind.<sup>23</sup> During the period of evolution, there is re-creation, or rather a return of the world and beings to a differentiated and organized state.

The Buddha Sakyamuni who died 2,500 years ago, was not, according to this outlook, the first sage to be conscious of the principles constituting the essence of the doctrine. According to the teachings of the schools, he was preceded by six or by twenty-four Buddhas whose careers had been

22. L. Renou and J. Filliozat, *L'Inde classique*, II, p. 528.

23. These notions of the limited duration of Creation are very widespread. Not to mention the Judeo-Christian apocalypse there is the Etruscan cosmology as it is briefly stated in a passage of Suidas: "The Demiurge has determined for the world a time span of twelve millennia; each of these 1,000 years being placed under the domination of one of the signs of the Zodiac. The Creation itself would take six millennia. During the first millennium the Demiurge will make the Sky and the Earth and, during the second, the Firmament; in the third, the sea and the rivers, then the two great stars, then the souls of animals, and last, man, who would have only six millennia remaining to him" (A. Grenier, "Les Religions étrusque et romaine," in *Mana*, II, p. 25). We know that in the old Germanic faiths explained in the Scandinavian *Edda*, men, gods, giants, and demons are destined to perish in a great catastrophe. "The stars and the sun disappear; the earth falls into the sea, and great tongues of flame leap toward the sky. It is the end of a world, but not of all possible worlds. The universe over which Odin ruled foundered, finally, in moral abasement and in indignity. That is perhaps why it had to disappear. But now a new era begins. The beings who peopled the universe have not all disappeared. The earth is renewed, full of the freshness and vigor of youth, from the bosom of the sea. . . . An epoch of innocence and moral purity succeeds one of trickery, violence, and iniquity" (E. Tonnelat, *La Religion des Germains*, in *Mana*, II, pp. 380-81). One might cite many other examples, but none attains the intoxicating grandeur of the Indian vision of a universe eternally submitted to destruction and re-creation.

similar to his own, differing only “according to their lineage, the tree under which they attained Enlightenment, the number of their listeners and the conditions of life during the ages in which they appeared.”<sup>24</sup> Each one has pursued, during the course of successive births, a long career as a Bodhisattva, before becoming a Buddha. They have been destined to become Buddhas owing to a resolution, which they took at the beginning of their career, based on an enormous accumulation of suitable natural tendencies. Each was the recipient of a prediction from one of his predecessors, indicating the necessity to be born during one of his existences at a period when the earth would benefit by the presence and teaching of a Buddha.

Our historic Buddha Sakyamuni was neither the first nor the last Buddha. Humanity is assured of the coming of Maitreya, the Consoler, who at present lives, awaiting his hour, in the same heaven in which resided the one who 2,580 years ago was reborn as Sakyamuni. Maitreya will be reborn when the world, in a period of evolution, will recognize that human life is to last for eighty thousand years. His career will be similar to that of the Buddha Sakyamuni, but the doctrine that Maitreya will preach will last much longer than that of Sakyamuni—one hundred and eighty thousand years instead of five thousand years.

Now the question arises: since the Law of Impermanence is inescapable, since the Doctrine is inexorably submissive to it, what is the advantage of efforts made by man to prevent or retard the fatal collapse after the five-thousand-year period?

Referring to the sermon of King Lüt'ai, and having regard to the correct and clear manner in which he expounds the orthodox Buddhist point of view of his time, one realizes that there was no question for him of contradicting the Law of Impermanence. His exhortations were intended to persuade his subjects to profit as much as possible by their good fortune in coming to this earth at a time when the Buddhist Doctrine was still known and practiced here. He considered that knowledge of the Sacred Writings would disappear soon after him: ninety-nine years after his establishment of a reliquary and the planting of a sacred fig tree. But the observance of the precepts and moral virtues still had a thousand years of life before the process of the deterioration of the external signs began to take place. Thus, during a period of a little more than a thousand years, humanity still had the opportunity and possibility of practicing those

24. L. Renou and J. Filliozat, *op. cit.*, p. 538.

virtues, the observance of which entitled the faithful to be reborn during the epoch of Maitreya the Consoler, which was a necessary preliminary to entering upon the Path of Nirvana.

The renaissance of the Doctrine which will attain its culmination in the awakening of Maitreya to omniscience, will be prepared and favored by the discovery which humanity will make during the period of the evolution of the traces left by the epoch of his predecessor Sakyamuni. It must be understood that here reference is not made to bodily relics, as these would be completely destroyed by fire in the five-thousandth year of the Buddhist Era, but to images, and notably to votive tablets representing a famous statue, as well as to the Great Miracle by which Sakyamuni confounded the heretics who contradicted him and converted a vast assembly to his Doctrine.

In the course of my study of these tablets, of which thousands have been discovered hidden in the interior of stupas or piled up in grottoes, I asked myself if those responsible for these depots "had not a long-term propaganda in view, as the end was due to come only after many thousand years." And since the majority<sup>25</sup> of these tablets have a formula inscribed upon them, often referred to as "The Buddhist Credo," the recital of which had brought about the conversion of the two great disciples, Sariputra and Mahamaudgalyayana, I added "when the allotted time has passed, the religion will fall into oblivion; the sacred stamps carrying the image of the Master, and with a short formula summing up his Doctrine, would without doubt in the minds of pious persons serve to edify those who discover these tablets in the caves or the ruins of the stupas, thereby contributing to the resurrection of the Doctrine."

So far I have said nothing about the 2,500th anniversary which is now being celebrated by the Buddhist world. The reason is that I have been unable to find any ancient text attributing importance to this date. Up to the end of the eighteenth century, at any rate, only the successive decline of the religion from millennium to millennium and its definite disappearance at the end of five thousand years were mentioned. The *Pathamasambodhi*, which is the classic life of the Buddha in Siam and Cambodia, and the date of which is uncertain, as well as the *Sangitivamsa*, which is a history of the conferences, written in Bangkok at the end of the eighteenth century,<sup>26</sup> repeat what has been observed before. In 1833, Sangermano, in his book

25. "Tablettes votives bouddhiques du Siam," *Etudes asiatiques de l'Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient*, 1925, I, pp. 150-51.

26. *Supra*, note 17.

on Burma,<sup>27</sup> quoted the view of a celebrated "talapoin," the tutor of King Hsin-byu-shin, who mentioned the prophecy of the Buddha, fixing the duration of his Doctrine on earth at five thousand years.

It seems that it was only at the end of the last century or the commencement of the present one that people began to pay some attention to the decadence after 2,500 years, and to speculate upon this subject. Indeed, it is a remarkable date, since it marks exactly the middle of the period of five thousand years, traditionally assigned by the Buddha as the duration of his teaching.

But, on the one hand, it was easy to prove that if the disappearance of the degrees of saintliness was an established fact for a long time, the disappearance of the canonic Scriptures did not take place in the year 1456 of our era, as King Lüt'ai had predicted and that the observance of the precepts was in no way in danger. On the other hand, the penetration of western thought in the world did not tend, in the minds of educated people, to make it admissible that the relics should be reassembled by air transport for their final conflagration. This objection applied both in religious and lay circles. Lastly, so far from being present at the decline of their religion, Buddhists could, on the contrary, note its penetration among various backward minorities as well as the upsurge of Buddhist studies and the diffusion of their Scriptures in Europe and America. At the same time, while importance was attached to the 2,500th anniversary of Parinirvana, as marking the middle of the duration of the religion according to very old traditions, yet there arose a certain skepticism regarding the value of these traditions. This attitude of mind is reflected in a typical manner by the decision taken at the beginning of the present century by the King of Siam. Formerly, it was the custom of the Siamese priests to begin their sermons with a reference to the exact number of years, months, and days that had passed since Parinirvana and to the number of years, months, and days still to run before the predicted ending of the five thousand years.

King Chulalongkorn, considering that this continual reference to the danger that menaced religion was irksome, and after having consulted the Supreme Head of the clergy, who was himself critical of this announcement of the disappearance of the Doctrine, simply suppressed any reference to the years to come, retaining only a mention of the time that had passed since Parinirvana.<sup>28</sup>

27. *Description of the Burmese Empire*, p. 80.

28. Kenneth E. Wells, *Thai Buddhism*, Bangkok, 1939, pp. 50-51.

If educated Buddhists no longer believe in the progressive decline of their religion and its final disappearance at a predetermined date, they have nevertheless inherited, from the time when this belief was current, the idea that this anniversary marks the exact middle of the traditional five thousand years and ascribe a certain importance to it. Impermanence is an idea planted so deeply in the mind of Buddhists that its disappearance at some future date is not unacceptable to them. As I said earlier, one of my Ceylonese informers did not deny that at some future date the religion will disappear.

In view of the pace at which the world moves now, who can predict what will happen in 2,500 years' time? That is, after all, a short time compared with the incalculable periods of the Hindu cosmology, with our geological periods, and with the light years of astronomy. And yet, to take two dates from our own history, what great changes have taken place in the 2,500 years since Parinirvana, or, if I may refer to events more familiar to us, the capture of Babylon by Cyrus and the Age of Pisistratus!

Turning to the present, the 2,500th anniversary practically coincides with the achievement of political independence by countries that had formerly been colonies and whose national religion is Buddhism. These are grounds for exceptional celebration.

India, the birthplace of Buddhism, and yet a country where the religion has lost its hold on the masses, nevertheless pays tribute to the spiritual value of its doctrine which springs from her own beliefs and is so much in harmony with her ideal of non-violence, this year celebrates the Buddha-jyanti on a national scale. On February 5, Prime Minister Nehru handed over to the Mahabodhi Society of India, in the presence of the heads of diplomatic missions from Nepal, Ceylon, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, China, and Japan, the relics of the disciples of the Buddha which had been discovered at Sanchi in 1851 and placed in the British Museum in 1887. They are in three little caskets which are copies of the original ones in the British Museum and were given by the Museum authorities to Mrs. Pandit.

It was on May 23rd that the foundation stone was laid in New Delhi of a national commemorative building of which the subject and plan have been thrown open to international competition. According to the directive, the building must be simple, austere, noble, inspiring, impregnated with the spirit of modern India, and conforming to the dignity of the Buddha. In addition, the Government of India has planned the publication of various works such as *Two Thousand Five Hundred Years of the Buddha; Buddhist*

## Notes and Discussion

*Scripture*; a popular edition of the *Edicts of the Emperor Asoka*, in Hindi and in English, as well as the publication of *Canonic Texts* in the Devanagari script.

In Ceylon, the preparation for celebrating this anniversary began on October 12, 1952, with a meeting of the Lanka Bauddha Mandalaya Council, whose task it is to make the necessary arrangements. These include an *International Encyclopedia of Buddhism* with contributions from Buddhists throughout the world.

In Burma, on November 1, 1951, Parliament passed a unanimous resolution presented by the Minister of Home and Religious Affairs of which the text is as follows:

“Not finding satisfaction in the measures so far taken by the peoples and governments of the world, for the solution of the problems that confront humanity, a solution consisting in furthering the material well-being of man in his present existence by the improvement of his conditions and standard of life, and moreover fully conscious of the fact that such measures would bring only a partial solution to these problems, this Parliament records its firm conviction that it is necessary to make provision for, and to bring into being, measures for the spiritual and moral well-being of mankind, in a manner to eliminate these problems and to help man to overcome desire, hatred, and folly, which are the root-causes of the violence, the destruction, and the conflagrations which are ruining the world.”

In order to implement this resolution a council was convoked at Rangoon to revise the texts of the *Tripitaka* with the aid of religious and lay scholars from Ceylon, Cambodia, Thailand, and even India, Pakistan, and Nepal. This council, which began its labors during the full moon in May, 1954, was expected to have completed these labors on May 24, 1956. Their program included an edition of the Pali texts in the Burmese language, in Devanagari, and in Latin, not to mention the translations into Burmese, Hindi, and English.

And so once again, as was the case on the eve of the five-hundredth anniversary, when for the first time the doctrines were written down in Pali, and on the eve of the one-thousandth anniversary, when the great Commentaries were written, so also the celebration of the 2,500th anniversary of Parinirvana is again marked by great scholarly activities.

But on this occasion, it is no longer a question of preventing a premature disappearance of knowledge of the Scriptures. For, thanks to the art of printing and the other means of diffusion which man today has at



his command, the preservation of the Canon is assured all over the globe for a period far longer than ancient man could have thought possible, unless of course humanity is destroyed by thermonuclear suicide. If I have insisted in recalling somewhat in detail their pessimistic views about the future of their beliefs, it has been with the purpose of throwing light on the flourishing condition of Buddhism in the world after 2,500 years of its existence. It is true that Buddhism has practically disappeared from its country of origin, India, where it is scarcely represented except by the archeological remains of its ancient prosperity. On the other hand, Buddhism has made conquests or fundamentally influenced large areas of east and southeast Asia. Moreover, it has commanded attention in Europe as well as in America as one of the great universal religions whose dynamism it would be wrong to underestimate. In India itself, where it was rejected, Buddhism begins to be recognized once again for the part it played in the teaching of Sakyamuni, which occupies such a prominent place in Indian thought.