

The Vow of Dharmakara

by

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Editor's note: The following is a more recent version and translation of the essay, approved by the Estate of Frithjof Schuon. Besides appearing in Studies as "Dharmakara's Vow," this essay has also appeared in the books Logic and Transcendence (World Wisdom, 2009) and Treasures of Buddhism (World Wisdom, 1993) by Frithjof Schuon.

The notion of myth usually evokes a picture of traditional stories replete with a wealth of symbolism and more or less devoid of historical foundation; in defining myth, however, one should not lay too much stress on this supposed lack of a historical basis, for the function of myth is such that once it has been properly understood the question of historicity ceases to have any practical importance. What guarantees the spiritual function of a sacred story is its symbolism and traditional character: in the case of stories belonging to the *Mahāyāna*, it is the Buddha who ensures the reality and thus the efficacy of the story; if he does not absolutely guarantee the historical truth of the facts, at least he guarantees the certainty of their spiritual truth, which takes precedence over historicity,¹ as well as their salvific power, which is the very reason for the myth's existence. In saying this we in no way mean to cast doubt on the earthly existence of the *Bodhisattva* Dharmakara; our object is simply to stress the fact that the story in question is above all else a manifestation of the principle of the saving coincidence of Mercy and faith, a manifestation brought about by the *Buddha* Sakyamuni; and we would assert that by offering this story Sakyamuni was in truth speaking about and offering an aspect of himself: as a personification of the total *Logos* he was able to endow his own power of Mercy with the name Amitabha, "Infinite Light", and to describe the mystery of the coincidence we have mentioned by means of the story of Dharmakara and his Vow. But Sakyamuni's transfer of his power to a previous *Buddha* does not conflict with the possibility of historical fact; in his capacity as "absolute Buddha" or *Adi-Buddha*, Sakyamuni has the power not only to define and actualize himself by means of a story-symbol but also to connect himself concretely and salvifically to the work of a *Buddha* who preceded him historically and who represented more particularly the aspect of Mercy.

¹ If this were not the case, it would be impossible to explain why the four Gospels can contradict one another on certain details or why the early Christians were not troubled by this fact, or how it is that the visions of the saints can differ. This same principle of the primacy of spiritual reality explains—with all the more reason—the existence of "mythical" differences between religions.

In the cosmic sector of Islam—and not outside it—the Arabian Prophet wields a similar power in relation to the Semitic Prophets who preceded him. In much the same way, in his quality of *Logos-Essence* or *Logos-Synthesis*, Sakyamuni is able to actualize the illuminative or salvific powers of other *Buddhas*, who are considered in this case from the point of view of their differing qualities and not their common essence; whether we are then speaking of different *Buddhas* or different qualities of the only *Buddha* becomes for all practical purposes no more than a matter of perspective or even dialectic.

We have not cited an example from Islam because it is the only one possible but because in this case the analogy is especially direct; in Christianity the use of the Psalms provides an example of the same order: Christ, “Son of David”, projects himself as it were into this preceding Revelation and makes it his own, and as a result the Psalter has become something like an authentic song of Christ, who was moreover prophetically sensed by David, for the relationship is reversible. In this case, however, the analogy with Buddhism is less direct because the emphasis remains focused on Christ, whereas in Buddhism it is laid upon Amitabha, that is, on the predecessor; nonetheless, in order to have access to the grace offered by Amitabha, it is necessary to take refuge in the historical Buddha and submit to his Law and enter his Community.²

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On the very threshold of *Nirvāna*, the *Bodhisattva* Dharmakara made a Vow not to enter therein unless—once he had become *Buddha*, that is, “Enlightened”—he could offer a Paradise of Purity to all those who pronounced his Name, henceforth understood to be nirvanic or divine, with an unmixed faith and with the conviction of being unable to save themselves by their own merits. Having become *Buddha* under the name of Amitabha, the celestial personage keeps his word: through his Name he saves multitudes of believers, and the *Buddha* Sakyamuni shares in this work by bringing it to the knowledge of the men of this world or cycle.

In this sacred story there is first a confrontation between the *Bodhisattva* Dharmakara and *Nirvāna*; what follows is their fusion in the person of the *Buddha* Amitabha. It may be asked with good reason what sense it makes to suppose that this Vow could exert a kind of pressure on nirvanic Reality: “If you do not grant me what I demand”—this is essentially what Dharmakara says to infinite Reality and supreme Bliss—“I refuse to enter You”; what is the significance of this refusal as a matter of principle and of the pressure it implies? For it is metaphysically obvious that there is no common measure between man and the Absolute: the Absolute is able to determine all things, whereas man has no power over the Absolute. This is self-evident, but it does not prevent there being a sense in which the relative itself is included in the Principle—for “everything is *Ātmā*”—such that the relative appears as a kind of internal dimension of all-inclusive Absoluteness; this response is insufficient, however, apart from a further argument, which in fact results from the preceding one: *Nirvāna* includes—on the basis of what has just

² This constitutes the “Triple Refuge”—*Buddha*, *Dharma*, and *Sangha*—by means of which one becomes a Buddhist.

been said—a pole or mode that we could describe as “feminine” or “receptive”, a pole corresponding to the divine *Prakriti* or primordial Substance, which is here envisaged according to the Buddhist perspective of Emptiness and Enlightenment. When things are viewed from this angle—that is, on the basis of the “relative absoluteness” of manifestation and in light of the “femininity” of the already relative pole of the divine Principle—one is prepared to grasp the meaning of the Vow.

There is a well-known Far-Eastern symbol suggesting the reciprocity in question in a particularly effective manner: this is the *Yin-Yang* diagram, which shows first a white field and a black field and then a black spot in the white field and a white spot in the black field. Applying this symbol here we may say that *Nirvāna* comprises a sector of relativity that is open to the cosmos whereas the *Bodhisattva* possesses an element of absoluteness that integrates him in a certain respect in the absolute and metacosmic nature of *Nirvāna*.³ By virtue of its relativity, *Nirvāna-Prakriti*—without which there could be no possible contact between Heaven and earth—“desires” man; to speak of the attractive power of Heaven is to imply the dimension of relativity it comprises; now this dimension is none other than Goodness, and without a world there is no Mercy. Man, who as such is relative, looks toward the Absolute; but in its relative aspect *Nirvāna* does not want to absorb relative man; instead it desires him because of his mystery of absoluteness; in other words it desires the *Bodhisattva* in order to give birth to the *Buddha*.

This reciprocity, where the higher desires the lower by virtue of an element of inferiority and the lower determines the higher by virtue of an element of superiority, enables us to understand either directly or indirectly why “joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance” and also why “the Heavens resound with his glory” when a *jīvan-mukta* leaves this world; the saying that a *brāhmana* commands the *devas* and other paradoxes of this kind have a similar meaning. Finally, the *Buddha* Amitabha would not descend with his two archangelic *Bodhisattvas* and all his celestial court if his chosen one did not contain a nirvanic and metacosmic element that the cosmos-facing *Nirvāna* might “desire”.⁴ This extrinsic *Nirvāna*, which attracts and creates Mercy, is “Virgin” and “Mother” or even—as the Song of Solomon expresses it—“Sister” and “Spouse”: it radiates and absorbs simultaneously, both enlightening and desiring. Insofar as Heaven becomes *Prakriti* in turning toward the cosmos, the cosmos becomes *Purusha* in its relation to Heaven,⁵ not of course by virtue of the cosmos itself but because of the divine *Purusha*, with which the

³ This is the “secret” (*sirr*) of the heart in the language of Sufis. If blasphemies against the “Father” and the “Son” can be forgiven but not those uttered against the “Holy Spirit”, this is because the Spirit alone is concretely present in the soul inasmuch as it inspires us; hence a wrong done to the Spirit cannot be due to ignorance or error. It may also be pointed out that the prostration of the Angels before Adam, which is related in the Koran, is not unconnected with the mystery of the element of absoluteness in the Heart-Intellect.

⁴ This global mystery has led to many ill-sounding assertions, the most common of which is the claim that “God could not exist without man”; this statement is not without its profound meaning, of course, but the drawbacks of such a formulation greatly exceed its advantages.

⁵ *Purusha* and *Prakriti*: the active and passive poles of Being.

cosmos is identified through Grace and *Gnosis*. The feminine Divinity, who loves the masculine God, also loves the reflected image of that God in the cosmos and seeks to deliver this image by appropriating it to herself, hence absorbing it and rendering it divine.

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At first sight the Vow of the *Bodhisattva* Dharmakara, the fulfillment of which falls to the *Buddha* Amitabha, appears to be a very special and unusual favor, strangely remote in character; in fact it signifies nothing other than the divine Principle of universal attraction, hence of Mercy. In other words, if “remembrance of Amitabha” gives access to the “Pure Land”, this is because the Name of this *Buddha*, which is a Name of the one *Buddha*,⁶ is truly the vehicle of nirvanic Power.

The guarantee that this is so resides in the fact that this Name has been uttered by the historical *Avatāra*, and here we return to a principle already mentioned above: the fact of Revelation guarantees both the truth and the effectiveness of a means of salvation. Thus, if the Name of God is “holy”, it is not because it is a word referring to God but because it has been revealed by God Himself and thereby conveys something of the divine Power, and in principle even all of the Power that the meaning of the Name suggests: the name *Allāh*, revealed at the origin of the Arabic language and confirmed by the Koranic Revelation, contains no limitation, whereas the Names of Mercy convey mercy precisely but not the terrible aspects. Whether one is concerned with Islam or Buddhism—or any other cosmic sector—to say that the saving Name is a divine gift, and that it really saves, means first that it contains the divine Absoluteness, which is exclusive; second—and more directly—that it contains the divine Infinitude, which is inclusive; and this Infinitude in turn reveals yet a third aspect, which the Name most directly conveys and transmits: Mercy, which attracts.

It is said that the Name *Amitābha* contains both the Savior and the saved: for the saved has no power of his own since even his faith in Amitabha is conferred upon him by this Name; it is enough for us to hear this Name and when hearing it to continue pronouncing it and when pronouncing it—or hearing it—to avoid closing ourselves to the faith it contains and communicates to us. This is not said to absolve us from effort—without effort no life and *a fortiori* no spiritual Way is possible—but in order to convince us that no merit belongs to us in our own right and that we should not compromise our self-abandonment to the “Other” by any accentuation of our ego. In Christian language we would say that it is necessary to put Christ in place of our spirit and the Virgin in place of our soul.

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The salvific quality of the Name *Amitābha* is a result of its holiness: to say that the Name is holy means—as we have seen—that it has been revealed and that it thereby proves its divinity with regard to both origin and substance, and therefore also its qualities of Absoluteness, Infinitude, and Mercy. Now

⁶ Whence the almost “henotheist” absoluteness attributed to Amitabha by his own adepts.

the holiness of the celestial gift requires an initial sanctification of man, which reflects this holiness in a certain manner, and this sanctification takes the form of a ritual consecration and a spiritual vow.

Purity of intention—which the vow expresses and confirms—embraces the fundamental virtues of the soul; it clearly prevents the spiritual means from being employed for a purpose below the level of its content, such as the pursuit of extraordinary powers, the wish to be famous and admired, or the secret satisfaction of a sense of superiority; purity of intention also prevents this means from being used for purposes of experiment or for the sake of tangible results or other profanations of this kind. This is precisely what the vow is intended to avoid, and this follows very clearly from the Islamic promise—made to the Prophet Muhammad by his Companions and mentioned several times in the Koran—to “fight in offering their goods and their lives” (*bi-amwālihim wa-anfūsihim*),⁷ which amounts to saying that there is no spiritual path properly so called without a consecration and a vow.

The need for this vow throws light on what we have called—without the least intention of insinuating doubt—the “myth” of the *Buddha* Amitabha, for it is not hard to see that the earthly or human vow is basically an answer to a celestial or divine vow: if man must commit himself to Heaven, it is because Heaven has committed itself through Revelation to man; one promise must respond to the other. The pure intention implied by every spiritual vow contains two essential components, one strictly human and the other purely spiritual, and they are far from excluding each another: in the first place the aim of the Way is the salvation of the soul, in whatever manner we understand it; but for any one capable of grasping it the goal is also simply “What is”: Truth in itself or the omnipresent reality of the nirvanic Principle.⁸

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It is profoundly significant that the Buddha—in the *Amitāyur Dhyāna-Sūtra*—told the story of Dharmakara-Amitabha to a woman in distress, the queen Vaidehi, for this indicates that the celestial gift is offered to pure receptivity and presupposes a consciousness of our samsaric distress; it is also

⁷ It will be noticed that the first term concerns attachment to the world and the second attachment to the ego: it is necessary to give oneself to God with all one “possesses” and all one “is”. In Amidism the human response to the celestial Gift is the “Triple Attitude”: “sincere intention”, “perfect faith”, and the “wish to be born in the Pure Land”, which is a cosmic anticipation of *Nirvāna* or its liberating projection.

⁸ It is in this sense that Saint Bernard could say, “I love because I love”, and not “because I wish to be saved”; obviously there is no incompatibility here, for the two attitudes are situated on different planes. The superior attitude is not unconnected with the theophany of the Burning Bush: “I am that I am.” In the Evangelical counsels, the vow of “poverty” refers to separation from the world, that of “obedience” to separation from the ego, that of “chastity” to the choice of heavenly Beatitude alone. Obedience (*perinde ac si cadaver essent*) is founded on Christ’s invitation, “Follow me”, which proves that the vow implies something very different from a merely moral discipline: Christ, who must be followed, is in practice “inwardness” for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven, which is “within you”, as well as “emptiness” for God: *vacare Deo*; when combined, these two attitudes are the equivalent of “chastity”.

significant that he allowed Vaidehi to behold the various Paradises of the *Buddhas* and that it is she who chose the Paradise of Amitabha over all the others, thus collaborating in her own manner in the subsequent Revelation. According to the traditional interpretation, Vaidehi represents the spiritual pilgrimage of man, and this is regarded as leading into the Way of Amitabha since the perspective of the Pure Land *sūtras* is Amidist; Vaidehi's vision of other "*Buddha-Lands*" and her choice of the "Land" of Amitabha symbolize in this perspective the very process of Enlightenment or the degrees of the spiritual life.

There have been differences of opinion as to whether queen Vaidehi, as co-revealer of the *Amitāyus-sūtra*,⁹ was a *Bodhisattva* or an ordinary mortal and whether the doctrine of the "Pure Land" is addressed to superior men or the common run of people; each opinion can be justified by some passage in the sacred Texts. We would say that Vaidehi was a *Bodhisattva*, who was destined to personify ordinary mortals in all the distress of their samsaric exile, and that the Pure Land *sūtras* are addressed at one and the same time to "pneumatics" and simple "psychics"—in the language of *gnosis*—for one does not exclude the other: extremes meet, and wisdom and holy childlikeness are joined.¹⁰

We are in the presence here of the whole mystery of simplicity: nirvanic Emptiness is simple, and so is childhood; between the two extremes—if so schematic a treatment can be applied to the incommensurable—lies all the complexity of universal possibilities, whether good or evil, including the complexity of human arguments. Simplicity is neither ignorance nor platitude: the decisive factors of our spiritual destiny are discernment between the Real and the illusory and permanent union with the Real; wisdom is simple to the extent that its expressions converge upon What alone is, and it has the gift of simplifying; but for this very reason it also includes all the sanctifying riches that human souls—which are so diverse—may need in their pilgrimage toward the Immutable.

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Absoluteness or exclusive Reality, Infinity or inclusive Reality, Goodness or liberating Substance, Revelation or constraining Manifestation: all the Doctrine is to be found in these words. If in our daily experience we are confronted by things that are real at their own level—if "such and such" realities actually exist in the world—this is because before all else there is Reality "as such", which is not the world but by which the world comes to be. And if the world exists, it is because Reality as such, or the Absolute, includes Infinity or All-possibility, from which the world is a consequence and of which it is a content.

If the world is the world, it is because it is not God: unable to be either Absoluteness or Infinity, it is relative and finite, whence the presence of evil, which by its privative nature proves *a contrario* that the

⁹ *Amitāyus*, "Eternal Life", is an aspect or complement of *Amitābha*, "Infinite Light".

¹⁰ Were this not so, it would be impossible to explain how minds like Shan Tao, Honen, and Shinran could have chosen the Path of "Pure Land" and made themselves its champions.

cosmic Substance, and therefore and *a fortiori* the divine Nature, is essentially Goodness. And if there is necessarily both good and evil in the world and if the good by definition manifests the divine Qualities and therefore Goodness, it is necessary for Goodness also to manifest itself as such, and it does this through Revelation; and once it exists it compels assent, for man cannot but choose the good. In and through Revelation, man returns to saving Goodness; to the Infinite that includes all; to the Absolute, which is What it is and which alone is.

From the viewpoint of *Māyā* the Absolute appears as a kind of contraction, which is intrinsically impossible since no limiting determination can apply to it; one may therefore say—to speak as simply as possible—that Absoluteness in the sense of an extrinsically contractive Reality necessarily contains a compensating aspect possessing an expansive nature, and this is Infinity. Now Infinity, which includes all, requires an apparently negative dimension, which is creative Manifestation, and this is positive insofar as it expresses the Absolute, though it is nonetheless privative because of the relativity of its nature and productions. Creative Manifestation in turn requires salvific Manifestations, which are the Prophets and Revelations; and these Manifestations demonstrate a new *Hypostasis*: the essential Goodness of divine or nirvanic Reality. Infinity flowing from Absoluteness; creative Manifestation flowing from Infinity; saving Manifestation likewise flowing from Infinity, though also—and by this very fact—flowing from the essential Goodness inherent in the Infinite: it is with liberating Mercy, which leads back to the Absolute, that the circle of divine Deployment closes. The Universe is like a Revelation of the divine Nature or like a play, in which nirvanic Reality reveals itself to itself and is mirrored in its own inexhaustible dimensions.