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The Symbol Maitreya

The symbol Maitreya—the name of the future Enlightened One said to have been predicted by Gautama the Buddha—is a symbol of historical significance in many Asian cultures, and a living symbol for certain persons and groups in contemporary Asia and the West. Since the prediction said little of what Maitreya's characteristics would be—beyond great knowledge, wisdom, and friendliness—users of his name were free to differ widely in their interpretation. Perhaps this journal, *Maitreya*, will explore the many facets of interpretation of this important symbol.

In this short note I wish merely to indicate how the Maitreya symbol entered into my own thought and writing. I became aware of the name (in its Pali form of *Metteyya*) over forty-five years ago, when I was about twenty-one. I have before me the note I then made of the conversation ascribed to Gautama and Ananda in the Pali Canon. The passage quoted reads as follows:

"I am not the first Buddha who came upon earth, neither shall I be the last. In due time another Buddha will arise in the world, a Supremely Enlightened One, endowed with wisdom, knowing the universe, an incomparable leader of men. He will reveal to mankind the eternal truths which I have taught" Ananda said: "He will be known as *Metteyya* which means: He whose name is kindness"

At that time I knew nothing more about the uses of the term Maitreya or the various interpretations made on the name. And while I read, as a graduate student, works in Hinayana Buddhism and in Indian philosophy generally (my teacher in these areas was Walter E. Clark, then at the University of Chicago and later at Harvard), I was by no means attracted only to Buddhist thought; indeed, my ideas during those years were even more strongly influenced by Nietzsche, John Dewey, and George H. Mead. In those student years in Chicago I also had talks with Tagore and Nicholas Roerich. Tagore, especially in *Gitanjali*, greatly strengthened my appreciation of the attitude of receptivity. Roerich's paintings, exhibited at the Art Institute, made a deep impression upon me, and his use of Maitreya imagery undoubtedly strengthened the appeal that term had for me. His books were not then published, so it was only later that I came to know his views and his Central Asian experiences with Maitreyan lore. The music of Scriabin was also a major experience, music which sounded a Promethean call to men combined with remarkable lyrical sensitivity and meditative inwardness. I also sought out in those years Raymond Jonson because of his painting *Winter* which I saw at the Art Institute; Jonson and his paintings have been ever since a source of unfailing inspiration. My problem was to reconcile the attraction which these radically different persons and traditions had for me.

I gradually came to distinguish three major human attitudes which can be taken toward persons and nature: detachment, receptivity (which I first called dependence), and dominance. A person may hold himself in check, seeking self-control in self-containment; or he may let himself go in easy responsiveness to persons and nature; or he may seek to control persons and things other than himself. I came to believe that various paths of life, as advocated by various persons and traditions, were different stresses upon, and combinations of, these three basic attitudes. In my book *Path of Life* (Harper and Row, 1942) I studied seven of the major possibilities: the Buddhist, the Christian, the Dionysian, the Apollonian, the Promethean, the Mohammedan, and the seventh, regarded as equally strong in detachment, receptivity, and dominance, I called the Maitreyan path of life. Thus, for reasons I

cannot now fully reconstruct, the Maitreya encountered years before, came to life again, now to embody the ideas of my mature thought.

It is understandable that some persons might well regard my use of the term Maitreya with suspicion. For I had in fact used the name much as Nietzsche used the name of Zoroaster - I had used it to embrace a possible image of man and society which I felt appropriate to modern East and West. But whatever may be thought of the wisdom and propriety of this usage, the ideas and attitude which it embodied seem to me of great vitality and importance.

Since *Paths of Life* is not in print at this moment, I quote passages from chapter seven of this work:

It is unwise to be dogmatic at this period of history in characterizing the dominant attitude of the Maitreyan. Nevertheless there are grounds for believing that this attitude is suggested, if not exhausted, in the ideal of generalized detached-attachment. For it would seem as though as attachment to all phases of the self would require at the same time an attitude of detachment to any particular phase of the self in order to prevent it from usurping the active expression of other phases. The resulting attitude would involve both detachment and attachment, generalized to embrace each phase of the self and extended to the whole self to the universe, and to the attitude of detached-attachment itself.

Maitreya is a distinct god even though his visage reveals - to the Maitreyan -something of the features of the other gods. If he is something of the Enlightened One, the Lover, the Reveler, the Destroyer, the Maker, and the Conserver, he is none of these alone and completely. If the resulting attitude is complex and subtle, must this not be the case if it is to express the subtlety and complexity of the developed human self?

Because of this complexity, the Maitreyan life is necessarily intense and variegated; its balance can only be a dynamic balance requiring continual flexibility in its maintenance; the range of its attachment requires completion by the nonpossessiveness inherent in detachment. Such a life finds its appropriate expression in the cardinal Maitreyan virtue: Maitreyan friendliness. For to be a friend requires abandonment and restraint, sympathy and severity, frankness and flexibility, challenge and considerateness, giving and withholding: The Maitreyan life is as difficult, as complex, and as vital as the finest friendship.

Deep is his love for mankind and sacred he holds its future— but the vision of the votary of Maitreya is not bounded by mankind nor is his dwelling in the future. The salvation he seeks is a quality to be imparted to life while living. It is a quality of life - akin to good sportsmanship - the deepest concrete expression which the West has given to the attitude of detached-attachment. The sportsman plays the game for the play itself; he plays to win if possible, but he can meet defeat; he plays vigorously and he deals a strong blow, but his action is friendly and he has the delight of a spectator to his own sport. In the cosmic game man is but a player. The Maitreyan has regained the vast Indian vision of Nitya Lila—the sport of the gods. He has joined in the sport. He mixes freely in the divine play, knowing that the game outlives him as it outlives the gods he and the universe together engender. His eyes are clear for the exuberant tumult of the Great Festival, and his ears have heard the drumbeats of the Days and Nights of Brahma. At home everywhere, needing no home anywhere; mixed with all and hovering over all; aware of the dawns which follow midnights, and the midnights which gather the harvest sown in the dawns and ripened in the days—such are the sources of his solemnity, his agony, his peace, his vision, his abandonment, his activity, and his joy.

The person who finds the figure of Maitreya expressive of himself, or of the self he chooses to be, or at least of the preferred type in whose hands he wishes to see the instruments of social control, has as his first duty and privilege the task of living—wherever he be - in the light of his ideal. Whether he be a thinker, or artist, or statesman, or churchman, or employ or laborer, or student, or teacher, his activities are needed if the ideal is to assume the stamp of actuality. His ideal should give him the release, the courage, the incentive for the arduous labors and the unique joy to which the ideal is a lure.

Where, if anywhere, shall the Maitreyan ideal find social habitation? I should like to believe that the United States will assume this historic task. Certain it is that this hope is not fantastic, even if it be mistaken. There is deep frustration here, much uncertainty, blocked energies, superficiality piled high, aimless objectivity, hidden fears, wide disillusionment. The Promethean falters; the Apollonians who seek for control have become frantic; the Mohammedans peep in at the window. If possessiveness is, as Thomas Wolfe insisted, the root evil which blocks a creative future, it is also true that this evil has deep roots—and the drastic social changes which are necessary will meet strong resistance. And yet, this is not the whole story. Powerful energies seek liberation, there is respect both for individual differences and for the common needs which must be commonly met, sufficient chaos and flexibility exist to break the forming mold, the sciences and the arts move with expectant vitality; there is a tradition of religious tolerance; imperfectly functioning political forms yet permit of pervasive changes in the social structure. The old symbols are not adequate to express or to direct what is in fact taking place. Perhaps the attitude of Maitreism can unlock this frustration, conquer this fear, direct this energy? Perhaps this is yet to be what we have so proudly claimed a New World, and not the last grave of the dying West? Perhaps the shadow of Maitreya which we now discern is but an omen for the sound of his feet on these shores as he strides to encircle the earth?

Whatever be the course of the immediate or the remote future, the Maitreyan's task is clear. His hope as to the future is grounded in his view of human nature and his outlook on human history. He feels that he is the inheritor of the deepest traditions of the Orient and the Occident, merging the Buddhistic and Dionysian traditions of the former with the Christianized Promethean spirit of the latter. He recognizes that none of the special religions is any longer able to be the sole vehicle for the image of the new man which is forming. He believes that this new image will be embodied in a new religious spirit which will supplement, though not necessarily for all persons supplant, the existing religions. He thinks it important to fix this image of Maitreyan man and to form the attitude of generalized detached-attachment for this image and attitude give direction into the future - and only an image and attitude give such direction. Ancient prediction believed that five thousand years would elapse between the death of Gautama Buddha and the birth of Maitreya, the next Enlightened One. Ancient mythology taught that a Buddha went through many reincarnations in the course of his development preceding his birth. For the Maitreyan these predictions and legends need not be given more than a symbolic character: ideals take time to work themselves out and the efforts of many lives are needed that they may take on the stamp of actuality.

Life is lived in the present, and the future issues only out of a present. One lives now in the light of ideals held for the future; otherwise, future and present alike are betrayed. The Maitreyan believes with the former Buddha that salvation is a state of living to be obtained in this life by one's own efforts; he replaces the vague and misleading doctrine of the extinction of desire by the generalized doctrine of detached-attachment, and he extends this attitude to the whole self to other selves, to the whole cosmos, and to the attitude of detached-attachment itself. To feel oneself the carrier of oriental and occidental heritages into a new future; to link one's muscles to the material for one's will; to banish the clouds from the mind; to cherish diversity; to

merge with awed delight in the great universe-play; to relinquish the possessive grip on the self, and on other selves and other things with the alertness, the receptivity, the warmth, the challenge of a friend: this defines the Maitreya's nirvana, attained here, in this life, now, whatever be his future or man's future or the future sport of the ample universe.

In my journey to Asia in 1949 and 1950 I made some study of The Maitreya idea and tradition in Indian, Chinese, and Japanese culture. Especially memorable were the Maitreya statues in the Lama Cathedral Yung-Ho-Kung in Peking; the place at Sarnath in India where Gautama is reputed to have met Maitreya; the remarkable statue of Maitreya (discovered in Ramnagar) in the Indian Museum in Calcutta; and the discussion with Daisetz Suzuki on the place of Maitreya (Miroku) in Japanese Buddhism.

Recently (in 1968) my friend the painter Raymond Jonson did for me a design, *Maitreya Symbol II*, which I hope to use in an unpublished book of philosophic poetry, *Cycles*.

Charles Morris, "The Symbol Maitreya," *Maitreya* 1, 1970, pp. 4-6.