

PREFACE

It is a rather long time since I wrote this study, and to be confronted with it once again certainly involves some feelings of disappointment about the way in which, twenty years ago, I tried to formulate my ideas and arguments. If I had to deal with the same topic now, I believe I would write another book. For this reason, I have refrained from making essential alterations in the original text, which has been so carefully translated into English by Dr. Needham. It was given its form at a certain moment, it should keep its same composition now, however much I should prefer to change some parts of the text and to add better and more convincing examples which I have at my disposal now. Nevertheless, I venture to hope that this study may contribute a little to the furtherance of the understanding of Indian art in general, and of later Buddhist iconography in particular, and that it may be of some help to him who sets himself to the task of compiling a comprehensive Buddhist iconographical handbook, while trying at the same time to get at its most fundamental sources. There is a special satisfaction in this approach, for it discerns the essential elements in the construction of this enormous pantheon, testifying to spiritual activity of the human mind which is hardly to be equalled. This may teach us to be humble, but at the same time to be thankful for the possibility of learning to understand the manifestations of the human intellect in cultures outside our own. It may help to bring about that period in which — to quote the words of the famous orientalist Sylvain Lévi — “man by his better insight will have lost the right of improper judgment”.¹ May this study contribute a little to promote the advent of such a period!

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¹ Sylvain Lévi, *Les Études Orientales, leurs leçons, leurs résultats*. Paris 1937, p. 93.