

Maitreya-Christ

Maitreya is the Sanskrit name (Pali: Metteyya) of the "future Buddha" mentioned in some of the earliest Buddhist scriptures, such as the *Suttapiṭaka* (the second basket of the Pāli canon: see therein division 5, book 14 [*Buddhavaṃsa*], chapter 28 [*Cakkavatti Sihanāda Sutta*]). It is thus one of the oldest motifs of Theravada Buddhism and epitomises the religious motif of Parousia within Buddhist history. Maitreya is usually considered to be the next awakened teacher of the Buddhist dharma after the last one, Siddhārtha Gautama, and thus figured prominently in major strands of Buddhism. He became an important motif in Buddhist iconography (with the 71-meter stone statue near Leshan, Southwest China, as the largest exemplar), and had a particularly strong bearing on Tibetan Buddhism, where he plays an important role till this day. Yet, according to the *Cakkavatti Sihanāda Sutta*, his arrival is not to be expected all too soon: he will return hundreds of thousands of generations after Siddhārtha Gautama (namely, when humans "will come to live 80,000 years": Davids 1965, 72f), and the Buddhist dharma will be completely forgotten upon his return. Even though there have been a few Buddhist claimants over the past centuries, Maitreya is usually considered to reside in an other- or outer-worldly sphere (Sanskrit *Tuṣita*), where he may also be contacted through advanced meditation.

Against this backdrop, Maitreya's reception and significance in Western esotericism is quite astonishing. Over the last century, more than a dozen Western esotericists either claimed to embody Buddha Maitreya or had this status attributed to them by others. From a Buddhist perspective, this is not a trivial claim. Being Maitreya not only means to have permanently realised one's "Buddha-nature", obliterated one's individual karma, perfected a range of extraordinary abilities (such as the spiritual *indriyas* ["faculties"], the *brahmavihāras* ["immeasurables"], as well as a range of *siddhis* ["powers"]), and to be able to incarnate or vanish into *nirvāṇa* at will. More importantly, being Maitreya

means being the direct successor of the last Buddha Siddhārtha Gautama, thus bearing an immense global and historical significance.

Maybe due to the grandeur of this claim, it has attracted and fascinated Western esotericists since the late nineteenth century. Unsurprisingly, it was Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (see →Theosophy) who – inspired by Alfred P. Sinnett's *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883) – popularised Maitreya in *The Secret Doctrine*, where she claims that "Maitreya is the secret name of the *Fifth* Buddha, and the *Kalki* Avatar of the Brahmins — the last Messiah who will come at the 'culmination of the Great Cycle'" (Blavatsky 1888, 384). Mixing Buddhist and Hindu concepts, Blavatsky refers to the Buddhist equivalent of the concept of →aeons (Sanskrit *kalpas*). Without referring to Maitreya, Blavatsky also announced the appearance of a "new torch-bearer of truth" in *The Key to Theosophy* (Blavatsky 1905, 195). Yet, Maitreya remained marginal in Blavatsky's thought, and it was the so-called second generation of Theosophists, foremost Charles Leadbeater and Annie Besant, who turned him into a crucial figure. By equating Maitreya with Christ, they created, as it were, an esoteric amalgamation of *one* world teacher, combining both past and future, East and West. Alice Bailey would later add Muhammad al-Mahdī, the twelfth and last Imam in Twelver Shia, to this list, thus suggesting that Buddha, Christ and Al-Mahdī were essentially the same person – and that the appearance of this outstanding person was imminent.

In 1909, Charles Leadbeater – after some alleged long-term telepathic training in clairvoyance and astral consciousness by an "ascended master" named Chohan Kuthumi (Leadbeater 1930, ch. 9) – identified a 13-year-old Indian boy named Jiddu Krishnamurti, who was the son of Annie Besant's scribe and groundskeeper, as the incarnation of the world teacher (several other candidates did not make it). Besant and Leadbeater acquired custody for Krishnamurti in 1910 and began to raise him according to Theosophical doctrines. In 1911, Besant founded the Order of the Star in the East, which purpose was to prepare and support the work of the "new torch-bearer of truth". Interestingly, Krishnamurti was introduced as the re-incarnation of Christ to Western branches of the Theosophical Society, whereas he was called Maitreya in front of Adyar

Theosophists (Leadbeater 2007, 250f). The equation of Maitreya and Christ may first have been for purely strategic reasons.

As is well known, Rudolf Steiner considered the installation of Krishnamurti as Maitreya-Christ to be more or less absurd and hence (on top of various other reasons) separated from the Theosophical Society in 1912 by founding the →Anthroposophical Society (see Steiner 1987, 10f, and further Tillet 1986, Vol I, 506-53). Even though Besant and Leadbeater did their best to shield Krishnamurti from mundane influences, he became more and more frustrated with the Theosophical Society from his early twenties onwards, due to what he perceived as its dogmatism and authoritarianism. In 1929, Krishnamurti finally separated from his mentors and the Theosophical Society at large. He also rejected his role as Maitreya-Christ. The Order of the Star in the East, which, at that time, encompassed some 45,000 members – mostly Theosophists (see Taylor 1992, 328) – was resolved in the same year. Krishnamurti remained an important spiritual teacher in his own right until his death in 1986.

Theosophists were disappointed by Krishnamurti's resignation, but continued to believe in the imminent arrival of the future world teacher Maitreya-Christ – who was from now on usually considered a single person, both Maitreya and Christ. Alice Bailey was arguably the most prominent theosophical author who continued to proclaim his return. In her book *The Reappearance of the Christ* (1947), which was allegedly channelled by the ascended master Djwal Khul, she claimed that "Christ might come in Person and walk among men as He did before. This has not yet taken place but plans are being laid which will enable Him to do so" (Bailey 1947, 19). In a letter to her followers written in 1946, she suggests some time after the year 2025 for Maitreya-Christ's return – a date that, at the time of writing, still figures prominently among some contemporary esotericists (such as 2025initiative.org and whentheshoulawakens.org).

In the early 1950s, Bailey's works were read by →Benjamin Creme. From the mid-1970s until his death in 2016, Creme has been the most important prophet of Maitreya-Christ's return (see, e.g., Creme 2007). Creme publicly announced several dates for Maitreya's

public appearance and from the early 1980s onwards his organisation →Share International published a monthly journal where signs and appearances were collected. Share international is still active and continues to proclaim Maitreya-Christ's return.

Inspired by but independent of this theosophical trajectory, a range of other twentieth-century esotericists sympathised with the idea of Maitreya-Christ's appearance, or pondered the possibility that they might actually *be* this outstanding figure. Of course, the "new age" narrative was deemed more attractive when equipped with an outstanding spearhead – and Maitreya-Christ was a natural candidate. For instance, L. Ron Hubbard, the founder of →Scientology, revolved around one central question in his poem, *The Hymn of Asia* (publ. 1974, written around 1956): "Am I Metteyya?" (Hubbard 1976, 8). According to the editor's Introduction (probably written by Hubbard himself), Buddhist sources such as the *Cakkavatti Sihanāda Sutta* indicate that Maitreya will (1) have golden or red hair, (2) reappear some 2,500 years after Gautama, i.e. roughly around 1950 CE, and that he will (3) reappear in the West. Even though none of these claims are correct, Hubbard comes to the startling conclusion that "Even your own prophecies | Centuries Old | Said I would appear | In the Western World. | I appeared" (idem, 16).

In a similar vein, →Samuel Aun Weor, the founder of Universal Gnosticism, identified with Maitreya-Christ and signed some of his books, such as *The Message of Aquarius* (1960), with "Samuel Aun Weor, Maitreya Buddha, Kalki Avatar of the new Age of Aquarius" (Weor 1960, 7). Gilbert Bourdin, the founder of "aumism" (today also called "l'Association du Vajra triomphant"), built, in 1981, the hitherto largest – 22-metres high – Western Maitreya statue in his newly-founded city Mandarom Shambhasalem, which is located near Castellane in the French Alps. Yet, his own, significantly larger statue (33 metres) was blown up shortly after his death by the local police in 2001, due to claims of a missing building permit. Another prominent esotericist claiming the title is →Claude Vorilhon, also known as Raël, the founder of the UFO religion →Raëlism. Raël publicly uses the name "Rael-Maitreya", for instance on his Facebook page (facebook.com/rael.maitreya), but also in various book publications (see, e.g., Vorilhon 2003). Raël is convinced that the extra-terrestrial Elohim, who created humanity and

have been responsible for its destiny ever since, support his claim. Raël styles himself as their final prophet, following Buddha, Jesus and some forty other religious figures of the past (see Vorilhon 2006).

Whereas these well-known esotericists seem to have adopted the title Maitreya-Christ mostly for strategic reasons, numerous contemporary esotericists either believe themselves to be Maitreya or have adherents who deem them so. One example is the Iranian Muhammad Hussein who, since the early 1980s, has run a small "Mission of Maitreya, Eternal Divine Path" in Albuquerque, New Mexico, along with a website (maitreya.org) and a youtube-channel ([youtube.com/user/MissionOfMaitreya](https://www.youtube.com/user/MissionOfMaitreya)). Another is the US former trucker, Ronald Lloyd Spencer, who has referred to himself as "Buddha Maitreya the Christ" since 1996 and runs a small retreat centre in Northern California entitled "Buddha Maitreya Shambala Monastery" (shambhalalifeextendingwellnesscenter.com) as well as a youtube-channel ([youtube.com/user/MaitreyaSangha](https://www.youtube.com/user/MaitreyaSangha)). Even though the pattern is similar, these two claimants differ widely. If we believe the autobiographical report on Muhammad Hussein's website, he "discovered" his identity as Maitreya through intense religious experiences and revelations between the mid-1970s and early 80s, a gradual development which culminated in his prophetic 772-page text *THOT. The Holiest of the Holiest: The Last Testament* (first ed. 1982). In contrast, Lloyd Spencer's autobiographical account simply claims that he is "God on Earth known as the Planetary Logos, who has many previous auspicious lives and incarnations that include Krishna, Gautama Buddha, Jesus The Christ, Babaji and several incarnations [...] within Tibetan Buddhism including the Tibetan Yogi Saint Milarepa, Padmasambhava, Atisha, Je Tsong Khapa and Dorje Shugden" (Spencer 2018a). He goes on to provide a large number of Tibetan certificates that would attest this claim (Spencer 2018b). Whereas Hussein offers nothing but wisdom and speech, Spencer also sells healing tools called "etheric weavers", "meditation vajras", or "metatron pyramids", which purpose are "to receive Buddha Maitreya the Christ's transmission of the Soul. His blessing dissolves past karma, helps people to heal and experience the love and connection through their etheric field (mind, body, emotions) to the Lord who is always present in every life and at every death" (Spencer 2018c).

What began as the blurred theosophical reception of a traditional Buddhist motif in the late nineteenth century advanced to a popular idiom in esoteric discourses of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Numerous esotericists either sympathised with the idea of the imminent resurgence of the world saviour Maitreya-Christ, or claimed to embody this figure themselves, either for strategic reasons or out of sincere belief. However, the inflationary use of the title in contemporary esotericism poses a problem to both claimants and believers: obviously, there can only be one Maitreya-Christ. This problem may become virulent when two claimants encounter each other. For instance, in the early 1980s Benjamin Creme refused Muhammad Hussein's request to acknowledge him as the Maitreya, whose appearance Creme had long announced, thus provoking Hussein's scorn (Hussein 2018). Lloyd Spencer has only recently been accused of being a drug addict, fraud, and rapist by a "Buddhist Tribunal on Human Rights", which had investigated his case for "spiritual fraud" and "false Buddhism" (International Buddhist Ethics Committee & Buddhist Tribunal on Human Rights 2018). As it turns out, the tribunal itself is part of a private vendetta by yet another Maitreya claimant, an unidentified bearded man and self-proclaimed "Master Maitreya Samyaksambuddha" who runs the so-called "Maitriyana Buddhist University" via a California-based website that offers distance learning courses in Buddhist therapy (Maitriyana Buddhist University 2018). Competition is high, encounters are rare, and validation is impossible: Maitreya-Christ is a fascinating test case of religious creativity in contemporary esotericism.

Bernd-Christian OTTO

References

- Bailey, Alice. 1947. *The Reappearance of the Christ*. Lucis Trust.
- Blavatsky, Helena P. 1888. *The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy. Vol. I: Cosmogogenesis*. London: The Theosophical Publishing Company.
- Blavatsky, Helena P. 1905 (reprint 1893). *The Key to Theosophy*. London: The Theosophical Publishing Company.
- Creme, Benjamin. 2007 (1980). *The Reappearance of the Christ and the Masters of Wisdom*. London: Share International Foundation.
- Davids, Thomas W. R. (ed.). 1965. *Dialogues of the Buddha: translated from the Pali of the Dīgha Nikāya by T.W. Rhys Davids. Part III*, London: Luzac & Company Ltd.
- Hubbard, L. Ron. 1976. *The Hymn of Asia*. Available online at: https://stss.nl/stss-materials/English/Books/EN_BO_Hymn_of_Asia.pdf (Accessed 29-April-2018).
- Hussein, Muhammad. 2013. *THOT. The Holiest of the Holiest: The Last Testament*. Self-published. URL: http://www.maitreya.org/FILES/THOTH/THOTH_Edition10.pdf (Accessed 18-May-2018).

- Hussein, Muhammad. 2018. "No other...". URL: <http://www.maitreya.org/english/Newsbrief/2011/6-November-December/Maitreya/No-Other.htm> (Accessed 18-May-2018).
- International Buddhist Ethics Committee & Buddhist Tribunal on Human Rights. 2018. "Case: Ronald Lloyd Spencer". URL: <https://buddhistcourt.gov.net/2016/12/23/case-ronald-lloyd-spencer/> (Accessed 18-May-2018).
- Kent, Stephen A. 1996. "Scientology's Relationship with Eastern Religious Traditions". *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, Vol. 11/1. URL: <https://www.cs.cmu.edu/~dst/Library/Shelf/kent/eastern.html> (Accessed 25-April-2018).
- Krishnamurti, Jiddu. 1929. "Truth is a pathless land". URL: <http://www.jkrishnamurti.org/about-krishnamurti/dissolution-speech.php> (Accessed 27-April-2018).
- Leadbeater, Charles W. 1930. *How Theosophy Came to Me*. Adyar, India: *The Theosophical Publishing Company*. URL: <http://www.singaporelodge.org/htctm.htm#9G> (Accessed 27-April-2018).
- Leadbeater, Charles W. 2007 (reprint 1925). *The Masters and the Path*. New York: Cosimo Classics.
- Maitriyana Buddhist University. 2018. "Governing Council". URL: <https://maitriyana.com/2016/08/30/board-of-administration/> (Accessed 18-May-2018).
- Taylor, Anne. 1992. *Annie Besant: A Biography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tillet, Gregory J. 1986. *Charles Webster Leadbeater 1854-1934: A Biographical Study*. Sydney: Department of Religious Studies (PhD thesis).
- Spencer, Ronald Lloyd. 2018a. "Who is Buddha Maitreya the Christ?". URL: http://www.buddhamaitreya.org/Buddha_Maitreya/About-Buddha-Maitreya-The-Christ/ (Accessed 18-May-2018).
- Spencer, Ronald Lloyd. 2018b. "Recognitions of Buddha Maitreya the Christ". URL: http://www.buddhamaitreya.org/Buddha_Maitreya/Recognitions/ (Accessed 18-May-2018).
- Spencer, Ronald Lloyd. 2018c. "Major Incarnations of Buddha Maitreya". URL: http://www.buddhamaitreya.org/Buddha_Maitreya/Incarnations/ (Accessed 18-May-2018).
- Steiner, Rudolf. 1987. *Die gesunde Entwicklung des Menschenwesens Eine Einführung in die anthroposophische Pädagogik und Didaktik*. Dornach, Schweiz: Rudolf Steiner Verlag.
- Vorilhon, Claude (Raël). 2003. *The Maitreya: Extracts from his Teachings*. International Raelian Movement.
- Vorilhon, Claude (Raël). 2006. *Intelligent Design. Message from the Designers*. International Raelian Movement.
- Weor, Samael Aun. 1960. *The Message of Aquarius*. URL: http://sawzone.org/docs_eng/Message_Of_Aquarius.pdf (Accessed 28-April-2018).