

## CHAPTER 4: AVALOKITEŚVARA-PADMAPĀṆI

### 4.1 – Avalokiteśvara or the salvific sunbeam

As we have already seen, in proportion to the total number of reliefs and the frequency of the various subjects, the figure of Avalokiteśvara-Padmapāṇi (“the lotus bearer”) occupies a position of absolute predominance. At a rough estimate half the reliefs portray the isolated figures of this bodhisattva, and yet this calculation excludes occurrences within groups of divinities, where the figure is often the main subject of the composition.

The most recurrent iconographic type depicts the bodhisattva sitting on a high throne in *ardhaparyāṅkāśana*, in pensive attitude.<sup>130</sup> In comparison with the early Gandharan model, where both gesture and implied mood are evoked with greater naturalism, the pose has become rigidly set in conventional lines in the rock sculpture; the figure is erect and the rapt concentration expressed in Gandharan art with a slight bend in the bust and marked inclination of the head is simply indicated with the index finger of the right hand pointing towards the brow on one side. Between these two diverging ways of representing the same iconographic convention there must have been a process of idealisation and abstraction. Intermediate stages in this process are indeed witnessed by some late “Gandharan” works such as the already mentioned pensive Siddhārtha from Mes Aynak (see Chap. 3.4), works that mark the transition towards a stiff vertical figure.

Far less frequent than the “pensive” version is the iconographic type showing the standing bodhisattva, a subject usually reserved for the stelae. In this case Padmapāṇi is in *varadamudrā* and, as usual, holds his long-stemmed lotus flower in the left hand. This may be an almost faithful adaptation of the model developed for the seated figures, but it might also have taken inspiration from images more common in Indian regions, where the lotus stalk rises from the ground with sinuous curves and inflorescence.<sup>131</sup> The latter iconographic version is probably to be taken as an emphasis laid on the idea of the germination of spiritual life from the world of matter. Particularly suggestive of such a meaning is stela S137 (II: Fig. 138; GS 17), where the lotus stalk seems to raise from a vase of elongated shape.

As has been mentioned, the overwhelming numerical predominance of the Avalokiteśvara-Padmapāṇi figure led Tucci to conjecture that during the period when rock sculpture burgeoned in Swat the bodhisattva was seen as a protecting divinity or even a patron deity of the region (Tucci 1958: 332):<sup>132</sup> It is indeed a likely supposition, but there are a few considerations to be added, partly suggested by the personality of the bodhisattva itself and partly prompted by the context.

In its austere simplicity the bodhisattva iconography – somewhat repetitive and uniform in the rock reliefs – clearly sums up those characteristics that the religious culture of the time held to be the most significant. In it the observer must have grasped immediately, even though with varying degrees of interpretation, the essence of the divinity’s nature and role. A fundamental characteristic of Avalokiteśvara, always evoked by the numerous forms he assumes, is that of Mahākāruṇika<sup>133</sup> – the personification of that Buddhist sentiment of universal compassion (*karuṇā*) expressed in a virtually infinite range of relationships with living beings, since the variety

<sup>130</sup> For a detailed description of this *āsana* see Chap. 3.3-4.

<sup>131</sup> For a brief, partial overview of Indian examples I refer the reader to Divakaran (1989).

<sup>132</sup> In his report the author also recalls the miraculous image and the temple of Avalokiteśvara on the right bank of the river mentioned by Xuanzang (Beal 1958 [1884]: II, 172), which he unsuccessfully tried to locate during his survey (Tucci 1958: 323).

<sup>133</sup> The term is used here in the sense of “Great Compassionate Lord”, an epithet often designating Avalokiteśvara and Siddhārtha himself in the texts, and not according to a derived use indicating with this term, in the iconographic ambit, the figure portrayed in pensive posture; the inappropriateness of this meaning has, moreover, already been pointed out by Harle (1979: 128, fn. 3) and Quagliotti (1989: 338).

of needs they show is indeed limitless. It follows that Avalokiteśvara is not only an extremely popular divinity, but also subject to a multiplication of functions whose task is to release the faithful from the bonds of need, so that he might rise above the contingent. Thus it might be said that compassionate succour, even when applied to the meanest of needs, is not qualitatively subject to differentiation since it will always represent a possibility of release that, freeing the heart and mind of the constraint (whatever it may be), opens the way to a higher goal. Avalokiteśvara is, therefore, no mere helper, but can rightly, and at all levels, be considered a positive guide for all beings. This constant value in the various functions of Avalokiteśvara derives from the very essence of his character, modelled on the theme of solar radiance. The development of this conception found ample ground not only in the specific Buddhist context but also in the vaster domain of psychological myth, expression of that Indic religious and philosophical substratum upon which Buddhism is grafted.

The solar connotation of Avalokiteśvara is a corollary of his spiritual origin itself; son of Amitābha, or in other words emanation of the supreme, infinite source of life and light, he is to the Buddha as the sunbeam is to the star that emanates it.<sup>134</sup> He is the gaze of the sun looking down, the luminous channel that reveals it to creatures and pours its vital force upon them. In this respect Buddhism clearly, albeit implicitly, evidences ideas that find explicit formulation in the *Upaniṣad*. The active, dynamic aspect of the sunbeam is repeatedly stressed in the Upanishadic myths, although in this case the sun is attributed with a two-fold nature, propitious and ominous, since it is simultaneously giver of life and death. In fact, the sunbeam is considered a thread that passes through a hole in the heavenly vault to penetrate down; thus it is also a cord, a link that unites and connects the parts of the entire manifest cosmos by identifying them and revealing them to perception. At the same time, however, precisely because it has the power to single out, the sunbeam proves a deceptive revealer since, by binding the living being to the psychic error which is the fragmentary reality of the manifold, it leads to death. The fabric of sunbeams which enwraps the universe like a mantle hides from sight the opening that the sun-disc creates in the heavenly vault, beyond which is the *Puruṣa*, the world of *brahman*, where the dualism opposing the One to the All is finally annihilated. Only the gaze of the moribund man who has shaken off the fetters of *saṃsāra* is permitted to behold the sun-disc no longer obscured by rays (M. Falk 1986: 80). In the sun-disc's opening as access to supreme liberation we find an analogy with the *brahmarandhra*, through which the *ātman* is freed.

According to Upanishadic speculation, it is in this ascending process that the propitious nature of the sunbeam is activated since, although it obscures consciousness with its very light, it is also the channel already traced out in descent, leading back to the night-time sun or, in other words, the transcendent light of the pre-cosmic night. Indeed, the vital, overpowering force the sun emanates with its ray reverberates in a subtle physiology, like energy circulating through the venules of the heart. This latent energy, not subjected to the control of consciousness, is the *prāṇa*, life-breath descending from the supreme source, which retains the faculty to return to it.

Thus *prāṇa* represents *ātman* in the potential state, whose actual form is reawakened by a cognitive intuition that corrects the route, identifying among the infinite misleading directions of the micro-macrocosmic rays the one that leads to liberation. According to the psycho-physiology of the *Upaniṣad* the heart veins number one hundred and one, but only one of them runs upwards – the *suṣumṇā*, which opens into the *brahmarandhra* (M. Falk 1986: 81, 184). Only whosoever proceeds upwards by this way reaches immortality, as the other veins lead to exits on all sides (*Chāndogya-Upaniṣad*, VIII, 1, 6). By setting his consciousness in control over the vital functions the wise man sees the entire system of microcosm and macrocosm transfigured and arrives beyond death, in the still peace of the One; he achieves the salvific direction of the soul – not that which leads to individuation and multiplicity, and so to death, but that which leads to the very source, and thus to immortality. In Upanishadic speculation the *prāṇa* is personified by Indra, or better Indra-*prāṇa*, with the guidance of whom

<sup>134</sup> The solar connotation of Avalokiteśvara and his relationship with the Buddha is, I believe, a conceptual idea that only with later codification could have crystallised in the spiritual descent from Amitābha. Moreover, the latter is himself a hypostasis of the solar, luminous nature of the Buddha, in accordance with a functionalist attitude typical of Indian thought.

it is possible to reconstitute the unity of the microcosm and macrocosm deep in the heart, which thus sees the *brahmaloka* blossom in its own inner recess (Falk 1986: 113 ff.).

#### 4.2 – The Grace and the Self

A conception very similar to the Upanishadic Indra-*prāṇa* finds an undeniable place, in the Buddhist environment, in the figure of Avalokiteśvara, who appears to take on particular depth precisely by virtue of this psychological sun-myth dimension.<sup>135</sup> Not only does his compassionate, salvific nature recall the propitious quality of the sunbeam, but in particular a significant analogy can be seen between Avalokiteśvara and the concept of *prāṇa* personified by Indra. This is evidenced by distinct iconographic affinities between these two characters, which seem to be deliberately underlined in Gandharan art, as if to point up that they are no mere chance.

Fairly eloquent evidence in this respect emerges from the reliefs depicting a divine pentad, with a central seated Buddha flanked by two standing bodhisattvas – Avalokiteśvara and Maitreya, like the Buddha shown frontally – and in the background, usually in three-quarter portrayal and in an attitude of obsequy, Indra and Brahmā. In the pattern of the scene the two Vedic divinities constitute a necessary but subordinate presence. Nevertheless, what seems above all to represent an intentional point of reference is the almost perfect correspondence shown by the respective iconographic characteristics between Avalokiteśvara and Indra and between Maitreya and Brahmā. This suggests a conscious will to underline a sort of hand-over of the insignia,<sup>136</sup> and thus also of the functions, from one order of thought to another, one seen as superseding the other, although they are recognised as having less than perfect affinity.<sup>137</sup>

The soteriological action of Avalokiteśvara, manifested through the *karuṇā*, or infinite compassion, adjusts to the scale of the creatures it is applied to in forms that they can readily recognise and understand but, in the psycho-dynamic sphere, it consists of a donation of grace able to transfigure empirical consciousness, raising it above and beyond the world of the senses.

The idea of salvation connatural in man is rooted in the speculative substratum of yoga, common to Buddhism and Upanishadic culture. In the process of transition from a potential to actual condition, it admits the intervention of a saviour-god, although subordinating it to a psychic attitude oriented towards the granting of grace. This “grace” can be conceptualised as a flash of intuition kindled by the saviour-god that brings about the ascensional inversion in the profoundest inner self. Despite the lines and codified interpretations imposed by the rationalist schools, the idea of a seed of Buddhahood inherent in human nature, like the related idea of *ātman/brahman*, is a deeply rooted concept. Indeed, certain directions taken by iconography could not be explained otherwise than in the light of this inspirational concept. Above all, certain iconographic adaptations of the lotus flower seem to allude to this theme, as visual paraphrases of the traditional symbolic formulation, where the lotus represents the mystical receptacle of the Buddha and of the Doctrine.

<sup>135</sup> In the domain of Buddhist iconography further analogies with this line of thought can be traced out. A case in point is the bodhisattva image dated to the third year of Kaniška from Mathurā; for a penetrating analysis of this specific subject see Verardi (1985).

<sup>136</sup> The handing over of the insignia is therefore symmetric, being also sanctioned for the couple Brahmā - Maitreya, between whom iconographic and conceptual analogies are to be found as much as between Indra and Avalokiteśvara. On this aspect see Chap. 5.

<sup>137</sup> The epiphanic scenes of Gandhāra, and in particular the various triads and pentads or subjects similar to that of the famous stela of Mohammad Nari, long interpreted as late and summary versions of the “Miracle of Śrāvastī”, actually constitute – as scholars today unanimously agree – extremely complex iconographic themes (whose meaning is not confined to the contents discussed here) which still serve to show how far we are from a full understanding of the art of Gandhāra. These scenes are the subject of a study in Filigenzi (2012a), Rhi (1991) (unpublished PhD dissertation), Rhi 2003, 2008, but individual examples or groups of examples have been analysed by various scholars; for a comprehensive review of the related themes and contributions on the subject, see Zwalf 1996.

In fact, like the lotus “born in the water, come to full growth in the water, rises to surface and stands unspotted by the water, even so, brethren, the Tathāgata [having been born in the world] having come to full growth in the world, passing beyond the world, abides unspotted by the world” (*Samyutta Nikāya*, III, 140).<sup>138</sup> However, beside this conventional similitude the iconography has subtler meanings to express in the lotus flower, as in the case of Butkara I, where certain reliefs portray the small figure of a naked child or adult in monastic habit within a full-blown lotus corolla (Taddei 1969). In these reliefs the iconography appears to translate the idea of the *tathāgatagarbha* or, in other words, the immanence of Enlightenment concealed within, i.e. the seed of Buddhahood awaiting reawakening (*ibidem*). This inner recess of the self is in Buddhism, as also in Upanishadic thought, the lotus of the heart – that space both physical and mystical where the micro-macrocosmic transfiguration takes place.

In Buddhism the saviour-god who guides men to the reawakening of consciousness finds personification in Avalokiteśvara. This function of the bodhisattva, constituting probably from the very beginnings the essential feature of his nature, takes on over time increasingly well-defined and specific configuration, possibly also thanks to the influence of the Yogācāra doctrine and, to some extent, also of Pāśupata Shivaism (Divakaran 1989: 168), which accentuates the role of yogic speculation within Buddhism. The iconographic type of the pensive Padmapāṇi, so often recurring in the rock sculpture of Swat, is indeed the outcome of a long process of formation. The Gandharan model – to be seen as the initial prototype – changes under the influence of new concepts, not only aesthetic but also philosophical, deriving largely from India.

The caves of western India offer an extensive picture of the evolution of the bodhisattva cult and iconography. The earliest caves (Ajanta 17, 16, 1) present an iconographic type still close to the models of Gandhāra and Mathurā, in the form of a bodhisattva in princely robes, playing the role of an attendant on the Buddha, with *cāmara* and a short-stemmed lotus flower. Soon, and by the sixth century definitively, the princely type gives way to an ascetic version of the bodhisattva, portrayed with attributes such as *kamaṇḍalu*, *akṣamālā*, *jaṭāmukuta*, the antelope pelt over the shoulder,<sup>139</sup> and the long *paridhāna* (Divakaran 1989: 162-163). The long-stemmed lotus, originally associated only with Avalokiteśvara as “Saviour from perils”, becomes a definitive attribute (*ibidem*), while the bodhisattva is depicted with increasing frequency as an independent figure, which points to development in his cult.

Thus it is India that seems to remodel the bodhisattva image, endowing it with iconographic and stylistic characteristics aptly interpreting an ideal. The decline of the artistic centres of the North-West must certainly have helped ease in the new models, which may perhaps in part be credited for the creative flair once again marking the north-western regions between the seventh and eighth centuries. The pensive Padmapāṇi in the rock reliefs of Swat (and the coeval bronzes produced in the area) is thus the outcome of a conceptual and aesthetic renewal that transformed the massive bodhisattva-prince into a more austere, ascetic figure, the solidity of the volumes being softened with the graceful smoothness of the lines – aesthetic features that convey a yogic ideal of spiritual beauty, of power subjected to the perfect control of the mind. The attribute peculiar to Avalokiteśvara-Padmapāṇi had by this time definitively become a striking long-stemmed lotus flower with opened corolla, seen frontally or in profile at the same level as the bodhisattva’s face as if to establish some sort of contact or cause-effect link. The iconography now seems to underline the significance of the attribute with yet stronger emphasis (which quite justifies the epithet of “Padmapāṇi”), possibly in response to a more marked functional specialisation of the bodhisattva.

<sup>138</sup> A very close similitude can be seen in *Chāndogya-Upaniṣad*, IV, 14.3: “My Boy, they have only expounded the Regions; I am going to expound to thee that to the knower of which evil does not cling, just as no water clings to the lotus leaf”.

<sup>139</sup> In Swat the antelope pelt does not appear in the rock reliefs but is frequent in the coeval bronze sculpture. On the latter see the two examples attributed by Pal to Kashmir, but far more probably coming from Swat (Pal 1975: nos. 45 and 46a,b). This iconographic device (common to both Buddhist and Hindu iconography and especially connected with Śiva) represents the visual translation of the ascetic nature of the divine figure. It traces back its origin to the black antelope worn by the initiated Brahmans, which, in the Brahmanical literature, symbolises the sacrifice (Oldenberg 1988: 285, fn. 293; Hildebeitel 1989: 171; Kaelber 1989: 118 ff.; Kramrisch 1994: 337-340).

As an attribute of Avalokiteśvara-Padmapāṇi the lotus evidently has a significance connected with the idea of the saviour-god, dispenser of grace. In fact it symbolises the reawakening of supersensitive awareness, the world of the Buddha opening in the heart of creatures which resonates to his grace as a flower opens to the sunbeam. While Gandhāra appears to show the idea in a transitional state (Avalokiteśvara often bears short-stemmed flowers in bud or in a reclined position, as potential destinies awaiting fulfilment),<sup>140</sup> the rock reliefs audaciously show the promise in its full consummation. In these various attitudes of the iconography, however, we again find the link with the similitude set out in the texts when, after Enlightenment, the Buddha is spurred on by Brahmā to share his experience with the other creatures. Then, turning his gaze on the world, he sees it no longer as a turbulent ocean shaken by passions, but as a lake of lotuses, some still submerged, others already on the surface, and yet others fully emerged. The Buddha then understands that consciousnesses await Dharma and will be able to receive it like lotus flowers opening to it (*Dīgha Nikāya*, II, p. 38; *Majjhima Nikāya*, I, p. 169; *Samyutta Nikāya*, I, p. 138).

The paired heart-lotus symbol reproduces for Buddhists, too, the ancient idea of *hṛdayākāśa*, the space in the heart that contains, or is identical to, infinite space. Thus in the *Amitāyur-dhyāna-sūtra* the process of dhyanic intuition of the Buddha Amitāyus opens with the interior visualisation of the lotus. On this throne, prepared by the meditator, the Tathāgata is realised in the psyche (cf. M. Falk 1986: 471-472); and this throne is the heart, virtually containing within itself the Buddha. As the lotus is symbolic of the cosmic waters from which lightening is released, so the human heart is the dwelling of Dharma, which, clouded over by the restless flow of contingent consciousness, reawakens in the flash of ecstasy and, like the lotus, re-emerges totally from this flow in the static omni-consciousness of the *bodhi*.

### 4.3 – The iconographic transposition

The mythical symbolism with which the texts express this psychic *dynamis* is alluded to in an invention of figurative art which we might conventionally – and just in relation with the specific geographical area in question – define as “late-Buddhist”. It consists of a small Buddha in *dhyānāsana*, seated on the opened corolla of Avalokiteśvara’s lotus, whose long stem alludes here quite clearly to the image of consciousness rising above the restless waters of the sensible world. This idea appears in relief C16 (II: Figs. 16a,b; GS 16), in the valley of Dangram/Garasa.

To judge by the central position and larger dimensions, the main personage in the relief is precisely the pensive Padmapāṇi with the theophorous lotus; to the right is a figure in *dhyānāsana* (a bodhisattva?) on a throne borne by three animal figures, probably lions; to the left is a bodhisattva in reverse *ardhaparyāṅkāśana*, whose attribute cannot be made out. A particular feature of this relief is in fact the prominence given to the theophorous lotus, showing the corolla in an incongruous frontal view, together with the brilliance of the enthroned Buddha emphasised by the flaming nimbus.

It may well be that this relief appears unique simply because the other – albeit rare – examples have not been conserved; moreover, that this subject is no extemporaneous improvisation is borne out by its recurrence

<sup>140</sup> Many of these examples are collected in Miyaji (1985a; 1985b) and Filigenzi (2012a); however, I shall mention some examples published in more readily accessible works, such as Grünwedel, Gibson and Burgess (1901: pl. 147, to the right); Foucher (1905-1951: II, figs. 410 and 428); Pal (1975: no. 93); Taddei (1969: fig. 17, to the right); Brough (1982: 69, to the right; Fussman 1987: fig. 4); Kurita (1988-1990: I, fig. 411, to the left); exceptions to this practice are represented by the bodhisattva to the left in Ingholt 1957: fig. 257; Kurita 1988-1990: I, fig. 396; and, again, the bodhisattva to the left in pl. XIX, n. 99, in the catalogue of Sotheby Parke Bernet & Co. (1974), where the lotus displays a long stem. Note that in Gandhāra the same iconographic convention may apply to different figures, evidently due to the association with a spirit, situation or function rather than one specific personage. See, for example, the relief published and discussed by Quagliotti (1989: pl. VIIa), where Siddhārtha, in the meditation leading to the Great Renunciation, is shown in pensive posture with a reclining lotus flower in his left hand; it was the context that evidently made clear which specific character the iconographic model was applied to.

in two examples in the bronze production that can, on the basis of chronology and provenance, be taken as roughly parallel to the rock reliefs. One of the sculptures (in *Oriental Art*, 18, 4, 1972: S97, p. 222) repeats the iconographic type of the pensive Padmapāṇi. The bodhisattva sits on a wicker lattice stool, at the base of which are two lotus flowers. One of them supports the left foot of the figure; on the back of the object a slot and tenon indicate that a nimbus was originally present. Marked abrasion, especially on the upper part, has eliminated many details but by the form and analogy with other works the “effaced, unrecognisable object” on the lotus held by the bodhisattva can definitely be identified as a small Buddha in *dhyānāsana*. The second sculpture (von Schroeder 1981: 9D, 90-91; Pal 1978, no. 70, p. 117) shows a standing Padmapāṇi on a moulded plinth upon which an inscription in *brāhmī* reads “This is the pious gift of Saṃghadāsa”. Here, too, the image of a Buddha in *dhyānāsana* surrounded by a flaming nimbus appears on the lotus held by the bodhisattva.<sup>141</sup>

Another version of the same idea, different but equally telling in its succinct transposition to rock, is attested in two very similar reliefs, one in the valley of Jambil (C29; II: Fig. 30), the other in the valley of Ugaḍ (C96; II: Fig. 96; GS 14). The main subject is the pensive Padmapāṇi with minor figures at the sides. In both cases the figure to the left portrays a small Buddha in *dhyānāsana*. While the image of the latter also appears on the opposite side in C29, in C96 we find on the opposite side to the Buddha, and in smaller scale, a bodhisattva seated in reverse *ardhaparyāṅkāsa*. Thus the Buddha appearing to the left in the two reliefs seems to be a fixed feature, while the figure on the right may vary. Despite the singularly scant statistical evidence we are encouraged to draw conclusions by the fact that the two reliefs possess a further important common feature in the slightly concave form of the rock face that bears them. In fact, this seems to be deliberately emphasised by the depth of the figured field following and accentuating the natural curvature of the surface. The result is that the small Buddha image and the corolla of Padmapāṇi’s lotus lie at about the same level, on a slightly converging line. This device might be said to render with the greatest possible realism the idea of the reflection of the Buddha in Padmapāṇi’s lotus, just as a mirror captures and transmits the image or beam issuing from a source of light.<sup>142</sup>

Thus we find encapsulated in the lotus of Avalokiteśvara-Padmapāṇi a salvific function operating as transfiguring grace, opening up the inner self to dhyanic intuition. Such is evidently the sense of those images showing the bodhisattva in the act of opening an actual lotus flower (see Pal 1975: 206-208, nos. 79-80). This significance appears particularly evident in the iconographic version of the bodhisattva as “Saviour from perils”, embodying concepts expressed in the hymn to Avalokiteśvara contained in Chapter XXIV of the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka-sūtra*,<sup>143</sup> where we find the fully opened lotus form recurring frequently. Subsequently it was adopted in figurative convention as a permanent, characteristic sign of this divinity. In turn, the opened lotus renders the metaphorical significance of the scenes of danger more manifest, each alluding to a mental obstacle barring the way to the salvation: wrong vision (marauders), pride (lions), longing (prison), ignorance (elephants), desire (drowning), wrath (fire), envy (snake), doubt (demons or diseases) (cf. Huntington 1981: 55, fn. 29). While the metaphor was perfectly clear to the initiates, it overlies the literal sense as a sort of normal axiom of faith recognised by the entire Buddhist community.<sup>144</sup>

<sup>141</sup> For comparison in Indic areas a similar subject can be seen at Aurangabad 2 (Divakaran 1989: fig. 4); here Avalokiteśvara is shown standing on a lotus, to the right of the door opening into the chapel; the bodhisattva, with tall *jaṭā*, long *paridhāna*, antelope pelt over his left shoulder, holds a string in his right hand which hangs down, while the left hand, beside the shoulder, delicately supports the lotus stem, just below the corolla, on which appears a small Buddha in *dhyānāsana*. A minor figure (*nāga*?) clutches in both hands the lower part of the lotus stem, which rises from the ground; above, a small flying figure holds a garland out to the bodhisattva.

<sup>142</sup> In a particularly explicit way, we find here at work the expedient which Chap. 1 deals with at length: namely, harmonious adaptation between the rock surface and figurative representation, the intention evidently being to suggest the illusion of *svayambhū*, or self-procreation.

<sup>143</sup> The hymn was evidently held to possess extraordinary propitiatory value, to the extent that in China it was on various occasions set out independently under the title *Sūtra of Guanyin*. Moreover, it constituted a direct source for iconography, which drew from it, besides the image of the bodhisattva as “Saviour from perils”, also the Ekādaśamukha Avalokiteśvara, where the eleven heads and innumerable hands express his omnipresent watchfulness (see *Sérinde*: 357 ff.).

<sup>144</sup> Evidence for this is offered by the Chinese pilgrim Faxian, who looks to the protection of the bodhisattva in moments of danger (Legge n.d.: 112-113).

The theme of Avalokiteśvara as “Saviour from perils” was of very frequent occurrence in the rock temples of western India and later in extra-Indian areas but virtually unknown in north-west India, only one example having so far come to light in the production of Swat (Miyaji 2000). However, the scant favour for the subject found in the rock sculpture of Swat is hardly surprising if we consider the general tone, with little taste for didactic illustration. The ubiquitous power of Avalokiteśvara is only hinted at, suggested more by the multiplication of images than by details of iconography, although the eight-armed figure depicted on a stela from Swat is probably to be interpreted as Avalokiteśvara (S124; II: Fig. 109). Indeed, this is one of the very few examples in the rock sculpture repertoire where the idea of divine power is represented with morphological abnormality.<sup>145</sup> Identification remains hypothetical given the difficulty in interpreting the attributes and the split face and headdress, leaving no chance of detecting the possible presence of the Amitābha effigy.

The haloed figure is seated in *padmāsana* on a tall throne, soles of the feet in evidence. The two front hands are in *dhyanimudrā*, while the remaining six, beginning with the lower left hand and proceeding clockwise, are presented thus: 1) in *varadamudrā* with *akṣamālā* (some beads of which can still be discerned, especially above, to the right); 2) sideways, with open palm, probably in an unusual version of *abhayamudrā*; 3) with *triśūla* (?); 4) with lotus (?); 5) with a vertical rod, termination uncertain (*tridaṇḍi?* *gajasuṇḍa?* arrow?); 6) with an object held downwards, possibly a *kamaṇḍalu*. This is probably a sculpture that was never completed, as is suggested by a certain roughness about the whole work and, above all, a short curved line in relief (to the left, in the space between the two upper hands), which in this form makes no proper sense. One is led to think that it may possibly be a segment of a bordered nimbus, followed through neither below nor on the opposite side, or, more probably, a failed or initial attempt at representing a bow, that in this case would have had a symmetric and logic counterpart in an arrow in the opposite hand (attribute no. 5).

Actually, identification of this subject with Avalokiteśvara is supported only by two inductive criteria, namely the existence of another iconographic version of an eight-armed Avalokiteśvara in the rock art repertoire (Miyaji 2000) and summary compatibility of the attributes with the known forms of the bodhisattva. For example, a certain affinity can be seen with the figure of Sugatisandarśana Lokeśvara, which according to the texts was in possession of six arms with the following attributes: *abhaya-* and *varadamudrā*, *akṣamālā*, *kamaṇḍalu*, *tridaṇḍi* and *padma* (cf. Pal 1975: 144, no. 50). Nor is the *triśūla* attribute unusual for other forms illustrated by both the texts and the iconography (cf. Foucher 1905: 29 ff.; de Mallmann 1952); the *gajasuṇḍa* also appears among the attributes of Trailokyavaśāṅkara-Lokeśvara, associated by the *sādhana* with Uḍḍiyāna (Foucher 1905: 36-37). However, some discrepancy between the normative texts and the iconography is quite natural, not only because we possess only partial collections of both but also because perfect matching probably was never obtained. Moreover, it may be noted that the spirit behind the iconography of the Swat rock reliefs shows equal distance both from the illustrative tones of certain genre themes (such as the “eight dangers”, to take a relevant example) and from the complicated symbolism of Vajrayāna pedagogy, while at the same time drawing upon them for the essential characteristics of its own repertoire.

#### 4.4 – The push and the obstacle: the Tantric way to salvation

The dogma of transfiguring grace granted by Avalokiteśvara, though constituting the elementary semantic unity of the bodhisattva’s iconography, only rarely takes on the form of conventional illustrative themes, as demonstrated by the one case of the “Saviour from perils”; however, the rock sculpture offers an alternative transposition of the theme, the origin of which can be traced back to the field of Tantric doctrines. The soteriological meaning of the overcoming of danger thanks to the help of Avalokiteśvara translates into technical terms in Tantric Buddhism, which provides for a series of rituals aiming at removing obstacles. Such obstacles are clearly of interior nature: doubts and fears that cloud over the mind, disturbing meditation and lead-

<sup>145</sup> The eight-armed figure seems to be unknown in India, while a number of examples are to be found in Xinjiang (see Miyaji 2000).

ing the mind astray. The rituals therefore aim at the acquisition of control over Vināyaka, the personification of dulled consciousness succumbing to the deception of the senses, but also of that dark area of the psyche where uncontrollable drives lurk. This is the unknown or ungovernable part of the mind that turns against the self those fears and weaknesses symbolised by the variegated ranks of evil demons that have in Vināyaka their leader.

Much important information about this part of Tantric doctrine is to be found in the Chinese literature of the seventh and eighth centuries, based on the teachings and texts translated by illustrious masters such as Vajrabodhi, Bodhiruci, Ratnacinta, Śubhakarasiṃha, and Amoghavajra. Here we find an occasionally contradictory attitude towards Vināyaka, or Gaṇeśa, the god with the elephant head, mostly considered in totally negative terms but in some cases subject to radical conversion that renders him a benevolent ally of the observant (Lancaster 1991: *passim*).<sup>146</sup> Correlated in the texts with Gaṇeśa/Vināyaka, personification of the negative forces standing in the way of progress towards *bodhi*, we often find Avalokiteśvara intervening as a positive counterpart in the process of identifying and removing obstacles. Externalised in the form of evil creatures and ritual acts of pacification, this is actually a psycho-dynamic process, and the fundamental identity between performer and the object to exorcise is reflected precisely in this Avalokiteśvara/Gaṇeśa pairing, where the latter is explicitly indicated as the emanation of the former (Wilkinson 1991: 236).<sup>147</sup>

In rituals focusing on Vināyaka, identification and removal of the obstacle may involve ceremonies performed on the effigy of Avalokiteśvara and then repeated on the image of Vināyaka, such as anointing the image of the former 108 times, and then again 108 times for the image of the latter; thus Vināyaka is pacified and the obstacle removed (Lancaster 1991: 284). It may be Avalokiteśvara himself who performs the rite, the act taking on the tones of a cosmic event: when Avalokiteśvara utters the *mantra* the earth shakes, a rain of flowers falls from the sky, the frozen underworld grows warm, the burning underworld cools down, and a light shines out as far as the Akaniṣṭha heaven. The army of Māra as well as Vināyaka and his ranks are defeated and the mournful cries of the demons are covered over by the melodious voices of the chanting verses of the *sūtra* (*ibid.*: 283). This particular description evocatively illustrates the power of Avalokiteśvara over the negative forces that produce obstacles in the way to Enlightenment – a power that can evidently be transmitted to the observant in performance of the ritual.

A summary but precise description of this particular function of the bodhisattva can be found in relief C98 (II: Figs. 98a,b,c,d,e); apart from the destructive work of the natural processes of deterioration, the relief is badly damaged in the upper part, hewn away by a clean cut which has completely defaced the bodhisattva. The relief shows a pensive Padmapāṇi, head surrounded by a flaming nimbus, seated on a throne supported by two squatting lions viewed frontally (II: Fig. 98b). To the left, below, a small four-armed Gaṇeśa figure is portrayed (II: Fig. 98c; GS 40), also seated in *ardhaparyāṅkāśana*. Its back left hand holds a vertical object – a stick or inverted axe – while the front left hand is held at belly level, just below the trunk which curves to the right (the hand probably bore a bowl of sweetmeats which the god dipped into with his trunk). The back right hand holds an object that has much the shape of a horseradish as represented in Indian sculptures of the Pāla period (cf. Nava 1988: figure opposite p. 33; Pal 1995: fig. 8) or even a broken tusk, although a short trident cannot

<sup>146</sup> In this wavering – possibly emerging all the more evidently given the difficulty to adapt it to the Chinese spirit – is reflected the Indian conception of the ambiguous nature of Gaṇeśa, to a large extent modelled on the practice of problematic taming of the elephant and its unpredictable behaviour. However, the analogous reference to the pacification of the elephant achieved by Śākyamuni offers also to extra-Indian Buddhist circles the elements of a metaphor on the possibility of “inversion”, with which the god-elephant of an adverse faith may readily be associated.

<sup>147</sup> This particular concept probably reflects a fundamental principle of Tantrism, which states that, while it may be impossible to subtract anything from human nature or add anything to it, all its components are subject to conversion. Conquering evil consists of the positive inversion of negative drives; since, however, that which is unknown cannot be defeated, self-probing must be taken to its extreme limit, so as to bring into perception and materialise the darkest, most hidden components. Thus, arousing the army of negative forces slumbering in the deepest reaches of the self is a dangerous but inevitable trial the initiate must overcome.





Fig. 33 – Mane-tangai, Dir: The Avalokiteśvara/Gaṇeśa coupling (after Ashraf Khan 1994: fig. 10)

be excluded (cf. Bhattacharya 1995: fig. 2; Shetti 1995: fig. 1), and the front right hand is in *varadamudrā*.<sup>148</sup> Above, at the sides of the bodhisattva's nimbus, are two small flying *gandharvas* or *vidyādhara*s (the one to the right probably female), right arm lifted up, left hand on the abdomen (II: Figs. 98d,e; GS 43). Every feature of the scene alludes to a victorious event – the leonine throne of the bodhisattva, the subordinate position of Gaṇeśa, the presence of the *gandharva* or *vidyādhara* figures.<sup>149</sup>

<sup>148</sup> The Avalokiteśvara/Gaṇeśa coupling is to be found – with very similar characteristics – in a relief at Mane-tangai, in Dir (Ashraf Khan 1994: figs. 10-12; Filigenzi 2000: figs. 12-13; here, Fig. 33). Here, as well, to the left of a pensive Padmapāṇi image is portrayed a smaller figure of Gaṇeśa, seated in a sort of *padmāsana* (*sattvāsana*?), with four arms; only the attribute of the back right hand, an axe, can clearly be identified. Given the precarious state of conservation of the relief – the right side is missing while a great split defaces the upper left side – we can make no hypotheses on the possible presence of flying figures originally appearing at the sides of the bodhisattva, as in the Qal'a relief. On the presence of Gaṇeśa in another context, but again in the chronological ambit of the Swat rock reliefs, see Chap. 7.3.

<sup>149</sup> The *gandharvas* (or *vidyādhara*s?) portrayed in this relief are to be taken as a significant presence since their appearances in the context of rock sculpture are indeed rare. Apart from the complex relief C30 in the Jambil valley, in the Arabkhan-china area (II: Figs. 31a-e), where a pair of flying figures is shown at the Buddha's sides, the subject recurs in relief C89 (II: Figs. 89a,b). The relief shows a recurrent iconographic scheme, with a pensive Padmapāṇi accompanied by a standing bodhisattva figure of smaller proportions to the right (II: Fig. 89b; GS 29). Exceptionally, this relief includes, to the left, a small flying figure of now indistinct outlines, displaying elements in the upper part by no means easy to interpret. The vertical element that the figurine seems to hold in the left hand calls to mind a sword, i.e. the *nandana*, the prodigious weapon that Brahmanical texts attribute to the *vidyādhara* (Przyluski 1923: 310), although this would be more congruous in the right hand. The *gandharvas* are often cited in the texts or portrayed in Buddhist iconography with a role associated with their mythical ancient origins, meticulously examined by M. Falk (1986: *passim*). As a primordial being, once dwelling on the summit of the heavenly vault, the *gandharva* knows “the immortal names”; ousted from his original seat by Indra, he dwells in the intermediate sphere and pronounces in the womb the name by which the individual is generated. Having fallen from the indistinct

#### 4.5 – God of the path: the iconographic synthesis of the rock sculptures

However, if we exclude these few examples where reference to specific functions or doctrines is made explicit, the Avalokiteśvara-Padmapāṇi iconography displayed by the rock reliefs is schematic and repetitive. It thus conforms with the general features which constitute the predominant characteristic of this art context: concision, evocative power, and pursuit of a universal language, resulting in an intelligent ambiguity in the message offered to the eyes of a variegated range of often occasional passers-by. Thus, for the Great Helper, the bodhisattva who frees the path of obstacles and offers guidance to a higher goal, the Swat rock reliefs present a summation of his compassionate power, making of him a true “God of the Path”. The reiterated presence of the figure along the routes leading to the sacred areas makes him a ubiquitous fellow traveller,<sup>150</sup> ever ready to guide the steps or give succour, as at Jare (C107; II: Fig. 108; GS 12), where we have seen an image of him protecting the river ford from a particularly impetuous current.

With this reassuringly vast connotation, spanning from spiritual metaphor to benevolent involvement with material needs, the universal sense of salvific compassion appears fully accomplished. In some cases the message may become more sophisticated while, however, retaining the typical language of this peculiar art form, essential and evocative. Such is the case of one of the finest examples – a sculpture situated in the Arabut area, carved on an isolated rock of somewhat rounded shape (C48; II: Figs. 48a,b,c). The rock rises in an open space on a slight slope, the inclination of the ground being followed and accentuated by the stratification lines of the rock. On this surface, naturally marked as it is with ascending lines, are sculpted in relief two almost identical pensive Padmapāṇi figures aligned diagonally, in harmony with the stratification lines of the rock. The figure to the left, set in the higher position, is of slightly larger dimensions. The sculpture only has real sense when viewed with this perspective of vertical progression, suggested by nature and emphasised with what is, after all, a very simple stratagem: a figure duplicating and growing larger, suggesting the idea of ascent. And this is not just any figure, but the bodhisattva of compassion, the pathway to divinity and guide of beings towards salvation.

The salvific guide function expressed in a variety of ways on both the psychical and spiritual levels is an aspect which the iconography describes, especially at its origins, with symbolic attributes that have lost the force of evidence to our eyes, as in the case of Gandhāra. However, we gain some idea of just how manifest it must have been in the religious culture of the time from the fortune enjoyed also (and above all) in extra-Indian territory by certain iconographic representations of rhetorical figures illustrating the function in the texts, one of the most explicit and, indeed, moving being the bodhisattva with banner showing the way to the souls of the departed (*Sérinde*: nos. 241, 242, 250). This sublime investiture, conferred by common piety upon the great bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, is yet another of those infinite rivulets along which branches out the all-seeing compassion that relieves pain, assuages need, and enlightens the mind to kindle the spark of Dharma in the heart.

Universe to the World of individuation, he nevertheless still holds out for the individual the potential capacity to reconstruct his own integrity. Similarly, he himself longs to be reunited with the hypercosmos, the resplendent place of his origins. His voice is that of the Lover, and the object of his desire, the splendid *apsaras*, lends himself – strikingly in the *Dīgha Nikāya* (II, 267) – to similitude with the *bodhi*, the supreme Wisdom, when the song of the *gandharva* echoes the approach of Gautama’s Enlightenment. The *gandharva* thus becomes in a way symbolic of the mystical marriage of the Enlightened One with the *prajñā*, a concept that moreover finds a very substantial place in Tantric Buddhism (cf. M. Falk 1986: 60 ff.; 398 ff.). The power of the word pronounced by the *gandharva* relates him to another flying entity: the *vidyādhara*, the personified “magic formula” (see Przyluski 1923), perhaps the very subject of this specific iconography

<sup>150</sup> This meaning takes on a special meaning in the specific context of the rock sculpture of Swat, which, as has repeatedly been underscored, is closely connected with the paths of the ancient sacred topography. The ubiquitous presence of Padmapāṇi might have also served the explicit purpose of re-establishing the prominent position of Swat in the network of Buddhist pilgrimage roads.