CHAPTER VI

IS THE BODHISATTVA A SKEPTIC?

On the Trichotomy of ‘Indicative’, ‘Recollective’, and ‘Collective’ Signs

Semiotics is a young science. With all its happy anticipations in the past, it is only now entering the period of primary accumulation and the search for its proper subject-matter. The utmost openness of interest combined with particular attention to separate facts which might reveal the privileged fields of the semiotic experience seems to be the best strategy for such a period.

Oriental cultures, with their exceptionally high semiosis both naturally preserved and artificially maintained, are rightly reputed as one of these ‘privileged fields’. But what is even more important for semiotics at the present stage of its development, there one can find not only a cornucopia of facts, but also a powerful and unique source of the original semiotic ideas. This is particularly true about many basic works of Hindu and Buddhist philosophical literature. Thus, for example, the famous Lankavatara Sūtra [1] is literally bristling with subtle and well-developed conceptions of immediate connection and obvious importance for the theory of signs.

And yet, any Western scientist who would seriously try to glean from these sources something new in the theoretical sense runs into certain difficulties of a methodological kind. Although it is always important for any knowledge, for any theoretical idea, to see it divided into the object of cognition and the method of its production, in the case of the ‘counter-knowledge’ coming from an alien culture of theorizing it becomes simply mandatory. In other words, what we need is not only the idea of semiotic significance but also some notion of its usage in the alien universe of semiotical discourse (the reader may call this need ‘meta-pragmatics’).

Some definite steps in this direction were taken in recent Soviet semiotic literature [2]. But the main question, namely, what are the starting conditions of semiotic theorizing and why in principle they can differ, remains unanswered. This essay is partly intended to find the answer.

Perhaps it should be explained first why its immediate subject is philosophical skepticism in comparative perspective. The matter is that
the skeptical state of mind seems to be the only genuine pre-condition of semiogenesis. Indeed, significations which are used to confer certainty, for example, logical and mathematical symbols, are not perceived by themselves as 'signs' in the proper semiotic sense. The same is true about commands received in their significance and without reflection; to wit, when the subject of command does not conjecture, "This is a sign for me to act", but simply acts. Only in the state of doubt do we use signs as 'signs': either to ascertain something as 'this' (indicative signs) or to confirm its reappearance (recollective signs). Broadly speaking, these two types of sign exhaust the class of situations which in the Western philosophical tradition are described as characteristic of the 'skeptical' state of mind.

The problem added by trans-cultural consideration is that we simply cannot be sure about the inner meaning of doubt for the philosophizing subject of an alien culture of discourse, i.e. not only do we not know in what particular kind of doubt he is but also whether he is in the state of doubt at all. To prove this a non-trivial problem, it will be shown in this paper that in the Buddhist semiotics we meet with a third type of signs, called here 'collective and futurizable', which means that they are not signs at all until the subject is incorporated into a certain universe of discourse where he realizes them as signs. In other words, first of all, these signs are impossible for separately standing and individually doubting subjects, and second, they have a strange 'inviting' quality, to enter and perceive them as signs ('signs-for-the-future'). Of course, this holds true also for the Western semiotician who might ever conceive the idea of being introduced to the Buddhist semiotical theory. So, in anticipation of an obvious methodological result, the reader is invited to settle down to some technicalities of the Buddhist philosophy.

From the objective side, our problem will certainly appear as a question as to whether Buddhism is any kind of skepticism, in the Western sense of the word. Or, to present the same in the inner and more dynamic perspective, Is the Bodhisattva ('the-Buddha-to-be') a Skeptic?

Many Buddhologists (for example, D. Suzuki [3], E. Conze [4]) see Western Skepticism as an outlook philosophically close to Buddhism, and only a few decisively disagree (in particular, H. van Zeyst, who calls the Buddha 'Agnostic' [5]). The competence of this judgment of approximate convergence can be judged not by separate thematic parallels but by considering the main features of Buddhism and Western