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Gautama the Buddha

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GAUTAMA THE BUDDHA[1]

DURING a sojourn of eighteen years in Western lands, it has been a wonder to me how little an understanding of Buddhism there is even among learned people. Hundreds of books dealing with Buddhism exist in the chief European languages —texts and translations, essays and manuals; and yet to a Buddhist born in Buddhist traditions, how little do they give the spirit of Buddhism! In spite of the learned writings of western savants, so erudite and so painstaking, to a Buddhist there is but one book which describes his faith as he feels it, and that book is a poem and not a learned professor's masterpiece of research and learning. It is to Edwin Arnold's poem, *The Light of Asia*, that the Buddhist turns as the only book in a western tongue which fittingly describes the Buddhism that he knows, not that of dry sacred scriptures in a dead language, but the real living Buddhism of to-day. Why does a Buddhist turn away impatiently from the magnificent erudition

[1] First published in Italian in 1908, in the philosophical Quarterly *Coenobium*, published in Lugano, Switzerland.

of Germany, England and France, and turn to the work of a poet?

The reason is very simple and yet so very difficult for a scholar to understand. To the learned professor of the West, Buddhism is a system of philosophy, a religion, a morality, a splendid intellectualism; to the Buddhist in a Buddhist land, Buddhism is the Buddha! How is it possible to describe the influence of His personality among us, how it is that that affects our lives and not philosophical doctrines? None but those born in the East can even dimly realise how the personality of Gautama the Buddha has stamped itself on the imagination of the people, with what awe, reverence, love and gratitude, men and women regard Him, whose constant assertion was that He was a man, and what all men could become. Imagination has played round His personality with hymns of praise and adoration, trying to realize the sublimity and tenderness of His character.

Hundreds of names try to express the deep emotion. He is the King of Righteousness, the Master, the Blessed One, the Lord of the World, the Teacher of Gods and men; daily they speak of Him in Ceylon and Burma as the Omniscient Lord. Yet they believe that He was a man, like all men, and not one to be worshipped as divine in ways that He did not share with His fellow-men. The greater the wonder, then, at this devotion to a man.

How can one, not a Buddhist, however learned he be, get to the heart of Buddhism without feeling the love and gratitude and reverence which those in Buddhist lands have to the great Master? Can a Hindu be said to understand what is the love of Christ that made the saints and martyrs, inspired the art of the Renaissance and the builders of the cathedrals of Europe, by a mere perusal of the Gospels? Can he get to the spirit, with none to guide him, by merely reading the letter? Can he be said to understand the Christ, if to him the Christ is a mere philosopher and theorist, like a Hegel or a Kant?

It is because Edwin Arnold imagines himself a Buddhist and with his poetic fancy enters into a Buddhist atmosphere, that in his poem the Buddha is the central figure, and so his work is to the Buddhist a satisfactory exposition of Buddhism. Go to Ceylon, that centre of Buddhism, or to Burma, and watch what the religion is. Be present at a temple on a full-moon day and observe what takes place.

Each full-moon day is a festival, and from morn till night the temple life is busy. With the early dawn come the pious men and women who that day dedicate themselves to devotion and meditation. They are dressed in white, and all ornaments and jewels, the vanities of the world, have been left at home. To them a yellow-robed monk repeats in Pāli the simple vows which every

Buddhist makes—not to kill, not to take by fraud what belongs to another, not to commit adultery, not to lie, and not to take intoxicants. They repeat the vows after the monk, but the whole ceremony begins with "Reverence to the Master, the Blessed One, the Omniscient Lord." Three times this is said, and then follows, thrice repeated, "I take my refuge in the Buddha, in His Truth, and in His Saints."

It is always with the thought of the Master that every ceremony begins. Then they take fresh flowers and go into the holy of holies, where is the image of the Master. The image is often cross-legged in the attitude of ecstasy, or standing up in the attitude of benediction, or reclining on the right side as was His custom when meditating; but always the eyes are bent down on the pious devotee. To one side of the image of Gautama, and standing always, is the image of the next Buddha to come, the Bodhisattva Maitreya, but already in anticipation of His next appearance, called by the people the Buddha Maitreya. The image of Gautama is brown, for He was a Hindu; this image is white, according to tradition. In His own good time He will come, when the world is ready for Him, once again to do what all Buddhas have ever done, to dispel ignorance and proclaim the eternal truths.

The flowers are laid on the altar, and in ancient Pāli the devotees repeat the praise and adoration of the Buddha, "perfect in knowledge, who has come

the good journey that led to the Buddhahood, the Teacher of Gods and men, who has done that which was to be done, who has crossed to the other shore (Nirvana)"; of His Doctrine, the Truth, the Dhamma, "inviting all comers, to be understood by the wise for themselves"; of His Saints of the Yellow Robe, the ancient "Brotherhood of the Noble Ones," who have entered "the Path".

In the evening the temple is lit with thousands of tiny lights; crowds, dressed in white or in their best of gorgeous silks, gather now to hear the sermon, to reverence the Master, "to take refuge" in Him, to take the vows, to offer flowers and burn incense, all moving with eagerness in the tropical moonlight hardly less bright than the white they wear. Then at the appointed time, to the beating of drums, comes the monk, with his escort of devout attendants, to give the discourse. Following immemorial tradition, he begins chanting musically in sonorous Pāli, "Reverence to the Master, the Blessed One, the Omniscient Lord." After him the people repeat this, and "the three Refuges" and the five vows.

It is of the life of the Master the yellow-robed monk tells the people, how at such a place and under such circumstances He did this or said that; how in the valley of the Ganges 2,600 years ago the Master, a man, and not a God, lived a perfect life of compassion, loving His fellow-men as a mother loves her only child, and showed the way to truth

and freedom from sorrow. How can anyone think he is competent to talk about Buddhism without *feeling* all this? He may write much and learnedly about Buddhism as a philosopher, but unless he feels in his heart what the Buddha was, his Buddhism is of the West, and not of the East, where yet broods the spirit of the great Teacher.

In the sixth century before Christ, India was already old. Men talked even then of their ancient philosophers. Reincarnation had been for centuries a fact of the normal consciousness of the Hindu. Karma, the law of "Action," was as the air he breathed, that none questioned nor dreamed of questioning.

Philosophy was the one essential of life. The priestly Brahman, the warrior Kshattriya, the merchant Vaishya, all had for centuries taken part in philosophical speculations. Nor were women backward in contributing their share to the one and all-absorbing topic. Maitreyī discusses philosophical problems with her husband, the sage Yājnavalkya; Gārgī, too, takes part in many a philosophical tournament, though vanquished in the end. Many a woman, like Gārgī, travelled about India, with her particular phase of the then 'New Thought," and drew many disciples round her.

Children also assert their rights to be heard, and courteously their elders listen to them, for, it may be, the child is an ancient philosopher come back to life. Nachiketas, a boy—than whom none more famous

in India—because "faith entered him," visits King Yama, the ruler of the spirits of the dead, and questions the King of Death about what he alone could tell, what lay behind all births and deaths, the final end of evolution for the soul.[1] "Young Kavi, the son of Angiras, taught his relatives who were old enough to be his fathers, and, as he excelled them in sacred knowledge, he called them 'Little Sons'. They, moved with resentment, asked the Gods concerning that matter, and the Gods, having assembled, answered, 'The child has addressed you properly. For a man destitute of sacred knowledge is indeed a child, and he who teaches him the Veda is his father; for the sages have always said 'child' to an ignorant man, and 'father' to a teacher of the sacred science.'"[2]

Every village and hamlet had its lecture hall, where travelling philosophers were made welcome and entertained, and much all revelled in the keen disputations. All who had any new theory to propound, men and women, old or young, were equally honoured, for on this platform they were equal as seekers of the Truth.

Many of the philosophical schools had nicknames which have come down to us; there were "the hair-splitters," "the eel-wrigglers," "the eternalists, semi-eternalists, extensionists, fortuitous-originationists," "the wanderers," "the Friends," and so

[1] Katha Upanishad.

[2] Manu, II, 151—153.

on without number. There is hardly a phase of modern philosophic thought—whether of Bruno, Kant, Nietsche, or any other philosopher you like to mention—hardly a phase of scepticism and agnosticism, that does not find its prototype in those far off days in India.

Yet all was not well in India at this time, the sixth century B.C. A restlessness was everywhere manifest in the world of thought. Orthodoxy held rigidly bound in incredibly wearisome ritual alike priest, warrior and merchant. Slowly the priestly Brahman was asserting his right, as the intermediary between Gods and men, to be higher than the other two "twice-born" castes; and many a Brahman, having little sanctity but much caste, exercised ruthlessly his priestly power to oppress those beneath him. A rigid ecclesiasticism held men bound in caste duties and ceremonial, and originality and individual initiative had little chance under the all-powerful routine. It seemed, too, as though the sages of old had canvassed all mysteries, human and divine, and nothing more remained to be said; and yet there was still something lacking. Philosophy after philosophy was studied, and yet there was felt the need for something, though none knew what. It was the period of travail of the soul of the nation, and the general conditions were not unlike what is found in Western lands in the twentieth century now.

Restless as were men's minds, there was something that was almost more noticeable still. Pitiable in many ways was the condition of the non-Aryan members of the nations, the millions who were not "twice-born" like the priest, warrior and merchant. Philosophy and the higher aspects of religion were not for the low-caste millions of men and women. The Veda could not be heard by them, nor were they taught "the Secret," that the human soul was the Divine Soul of the Universe. They could come merely to the outskirts of the sacred knowledge, the priceless possession of the Aryan Hindus. The Vedas would be polluted were they to be known by a low-caste man, a Shudra ; and as to those without any caste at all, the Pariahs, they were thought of as no part of the Hindu community at all. Hence terrible threats of reprisal against any such who should dare to put himself on an equality with the twice-born. The ears of a Shudra who listens intentionally when the Veda is being recited are to be filled with molten lead ; his tongue is to be cut out if he recite it ; his body is to be split in twain if he preserve it in his memory.[1] If he assume a position equal to that of twice-born men, in sitting, in lying down, in conversation or on the road, he is to undergo corporal punishment.[2]

[1] Quoted in Vedānta Sūtras, I. 2, 39, by both Shankarāchārya and Rāmānujāchārya as valid.

[2] Manu, and other Law Texts.

Such were the threats which held in spiritual and social subjection the men of dark colour. For as non-Aryans, who had not been Aryanised by intermarriage or by religious ceremony, they were "without caste," without Varna or colour. The three higher castes, originally light-complexioned, invaders from beyond the Himalayas, blood-brothers to the Greeks and Gauls, had gradually become browned by the Indian sun; but still they were lighter than the conquered, and called themselves "the coloured people"; and the non-Aryan conquered people, dark, almost black, were "without colour," without any Varna or caste at all.

True, a Shudra or an outcaste who chose to resign the world and dedicate himself to the life of an ascetic philosopher, became thereby a member of that chosen band of Sannyasis where all were equal and above all castes whatsoever. King and priest would honour such an one for what he was, forgetting what he was born. But the multitudes of the ordinary men and women, who were neither priests nor warriors nor merchants, whatever their abilities and qualifications might be, were rigidly barred from coming into direct touch with those higher speculations and discussions which relieved the monotony of the routine of daily duty. Yet, as events later showed, these millions of the "once-born" were true Hindus after all, for whom it was more practical to die, knowing God, than live without knowing Him.

The work which Gautama Buddha did has been called a reformation of Hinduism. Yet there were many others before Him who led the way. Rebellion against the domination of the priestly caste, heterodoxy and heresies of all kinds, existed before, and were tolerated as all somehow a part of Hinduism after all. But it was once again the personality of the Buddha that crystallised the aspirations for freedom of centuries, and gave them the broad platform of a Universal Faith. His reformation has its two aspects, social and religious.

As a social reformer He was the greatest "socialist" that ever could be, but different from the socialists of to-day in that He levelled *up* and not down. He, too, proclaimed an equality and a fraternity, but the standard of equality was not the lowest to which all could descend, but the highest to which all must ascend. His standard was the "Brāhmana," the upright man of the highest caste, the "gentleman" of those days, noble in conduct, wise and serene. Up to the time of the Buddha, to be considered a Brahman one had to be born into the highest caste; it was Gautama who proclaimed that every man, even of the lowest caste, or more despised still, of no caste at all, could become a Brahman, by living the perfect life which every man born in the highest caste ought to live. To be a Brahman was a matter of conduct, of an education of the heart, of the training of the character; it was not a matter of caste at all. All were

Brahmans " who live a holy life, who live an upright life, who live in the way of wisdom, who live a life fulfilling their duties ". " He who is tolerant with the intolerant, mild with the fault-finders, free from passion among the passionate, him I call indeed a Brahman. I do not call a man a Brahman because of his origin or of his mother. He may be called 'Sir'; he may be wealthy; but the poor who is free from evil qualities, him I call indeed a Brahman." [1] Again and again he outlines the conduct of the true Brahman. " As a mother, even at the risk of her own life, protects her son, her only son, so let him cultivate good-will without measure among all beings. Let him cultivate good-will without measure toward the whole world, above, below, around, unstinted, unmixed with any feeling of differing or opposing interests. Let a man remain steadfastly in this state of mind all the while he is awake, whether he be standing, sitting or lying down. This state of heart is the best in the world."[2] " And he lets his mind pervade one quarter of the world with thoughts of love, and so the second, and so the third, and so the fourth. And thus the whole wide world, above, below, around and everywhere, does he continue to pervade with heart of love, far reaching, grown great and beyond measure."[3]

[1] Vāsettha Sutta.

[2] Mettā Sutta, trans. by Rhys Davids.

[3] Mahā Sudassana Sutta, trans. by Rhys Davids.

With such an ideal open to all, Gautama Buddha proclaimed a Socialism that appealed to the highest in men and not to their lower material interests. Caste still exists in India to-day, and even in Buddhist lands; primitive ethnological instincts gained the day, and caste was stronger than the Buddha Himself. But the ideal which He proclaimed of the true Brahman is still the light for nearly a third of the human race.

The religious reformation that Gautama Buddha brought about was not novel to the thinkers of His day. Many of His ideas others had proclaimed before Him. But the way He enunciated them, the commanding and tender personality that men saw in Him—these were new. He proclaimed nothing new, but He enabled each hearer to see the same old facts for himself from a new dimension. He taught men to put aside speculation and philosophical discussion, to aim first at an inner change of heart by a perfect life of harmlessness and compassion, to make perfectly calm the stormy sea of man's nature with its surging desires for pleasure or gain, so that when stilled it could reflect like a mirror the deep intuitions within them. Thus could a man be independent of priests and intercessors; thus alone could a man be a light unto himself and tread "the Path". "Be ye lamps unto yourselves. Be ye a refuge to yourselves. Betake yourselves to no external refuge. Hold fast to the Truth as a lamp. Hold fast as a refuge to the

Truth. Look not for refuge to any one besides yourselves."[1]

How the perfect life is to be lived is explained over and over again. First come the "Four Efforts," (1) To do no fresh evil; (2) To get rid of evil done; (3) To produce goodness not previously existing; (4) To increase goodness already existing. Ten are the meritorious acts which the devotee must perform: (1) Charity; (2) Observing the precepts; (3) Meditation; (4) Giving an opportunity to others to partake in one's good actions; (5) Taking delight in the meritorious acts done by another; (6) Attending upon others; (7) Honouring those worthy of honour; (8) Explaining the doctrine; (9) Listening to explanations of the doctrine; (10) Going for refuge to the "Three Treasures"—the Buddha, the Truth, and the Saints. The meditations are five, on love, pity, joy, impurity and serenity.

Thus living he enters "the Path" and comes to liberation—Nirvana. Is Nirvana the cessation of all desires, the ending of existence, annihilation of being? But the books say we can know about Nirvana in three ways; first, by personal experience (pachchakka siddhi); second, indirectly, at second hand, by reasoning and analysis (anumeyya siddhi); and similarly, third, by faith in the statements of those *who have experienced* it (saddheyya siddhi). Faith in the statements of those who have been "annihilated."

[1] Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta.

Can one truly believe that millions of men and women, of normal affections and aspirations, go before the image of Buddha, lay flowers before Him, saying, "I take my refuge in Thee," and believe that He taught the highest aim of existence was annihilation? When at a preaching in a temple, the monk in his discourse mentions merely the word Nirvana, and the audience send up a rapt and ecstatic shout of "Sādhu! Sādhu!" (Amen! Amen!) —can it be they feel Nirvana is annihilation?

What, then, is Nirvana? What did the Buddha Himself say? First, that none could know it at first hand who did not *live* the perfect life. It was not a mere question of intellectual grasp; you might speculate about it, but you could not know it, without living the life. There are experiences possible to the human soul that no intellect will ever analyse without proving their impossibility. And yet they *are*. How can one not steeped in the Upanishads, who does not feel what Plato meant by his noumenal World of Ideas, see anything but a negation of existence in Nirvana? Any life that is superpersonal, beyond the understanding of our senses, beyond our limited individuality, at once becomes unreal or a vague unindividual diluted unconscious existence.

Thus speak the Upanishads about the one source of existence, Brahman.

"There shines not sun, nor moon and stars, nor do these lightnings shine, much less this fire. When He

shines forth, all things shine after Him; by His shining shines all here below." "Nor inwards conscious, nor outwards conscious, not conscious yet both ways; nor yet ingathered as to consciousness, nor even conscious nor yet unconscious; what none can see, nor grasp nor comprehend, void of distinctive mark, unthinkable, past definition, naught but self-consciousness alone, that ends all going out, peaceful, benign, and secondless—this men think of as Fourth [1]; He is the Self, 'tis He who must be known.[2]

Surely all this seems abstraction, mere negation. But not so to the Hindu mind, which is trying to cognise something beyond the limitations of time, space and causality. The intense reality of That, its influence on daily life, is seen in many a verse like this: "Alone within this universe He comes and goes; 'tis He who is the fire, the water He pervadeth. Him and Him only knowing, one crosseth over death; no other path at all is there to go."

It is the same thing that is taught to Socrates. It is through Beauty and purified love that the That is to be realised. Thus Plato in the Symposium:

"For he who hath thus far had intelligence of love, and hath beheld all fair things in order and aright,—he drawing near to the end of things lovable shall behold a Being marvellously fair; for whose sake in truth it is that all the previous labours have been undergone: One

[1] The "fourth state" is Nirvana; the other three being Jagrat, "waking" (physical and astral); Svapna, "sleep," the mental plane, the heavenly world; Sushupti, "deep sleep," the plane of Buddhi.

[2] Māndūkya Upanishad, trans. by Mead and Chatterji.

who is from everlasting, and neither is born nor perisheth, nor can wax nor wane, nor hath change or turning or alteration of foul or fair; nor can that beauty be imagined after the fashion of face or hands or bodily parts and members, nor in any form of speech or knowledge, nor in dwelling in aught but itself; neither in beast nor man nor earth nor heaven nor any other creature; but Beauty only and alone and separate and eternal, which, albeit all other fair things partake thereof and grow and perish, itself without change or increase or diminution endures for everlasting."

And finally thus Gautama Buddha speaks of Nirvana, the "fourth" state of consciousness of Hinduism. In Udānam, VIII, 2-3, is an extremely philosophic definition which is as follows :

"There is, O Brethren, that abode, where there is indeed no earth nor water nor air; nor the world of the Infinity-of-Space, nor the world of the Infinity-of-Intelligence, nor the world of No-Thing-Whatsoever, nor the world of Neither-Cognition-nor-Non-Cognition; nor this World, nor the world yonder, and neither the sun nor the moon. That I call, O Brethren, neither coming nor going nor standing, nor birth nor death. Without foundation, without origination, beyond thought is That. The destruction of sorrow verily is That.

"There is, O Brethren, that which is unborn, unmanifested, uncreate and unconditioned. Unless, O Brethren, it were not unborn, unmanifested, uncreate and unconditioned, there could not be cognised in this world the coming forth of what is born, manifested, create and conditioned. And inasmuch as there exists what is unborn, unmanifested, uncreate and unconditioned, therefore is cognised the coming forth of what is born, manifested, created and conditioned."

One of the most brilliant of modern historians of Philosophy, Prof. Harald Höffding of Copenhagen,

thus truly describes a Buddhist's conception of Nirvana.

"Nirvana is not a state of pure nothingness. It is a form of existence of which none of the qualities presented in the constant flux of experience can be predicated, and which, therefore, appears as nothingness to us in comparison with the states with which existence has familiarized us. It is deliverance from all needs and sorrows, from hate and passion, from birth and death. It is only to be attained by the highest possible concentration of thought and will. In the mystical concept of God [of the German mystics] as well as in the Buddhist conception of Nirvana, it is precisely the inexhaustible positivity which bursts through every conceptual form and makes every determination an impossibility." [1]

Whatever Nirvana is, one thing can be predicated of it—it is not annihilation. When a monk, after a long discourse on spiritual matters, gives in the end the traditional benediction, "May you all attain Nirvana," and people say in response "Amen, Amen," they certainly have no conception of Nirvana as nothingness and cessation of being. In the words of a Buddhist saint, "Great King, Nirvana *is*."

In the article in *Coenobium*, July-August, 1907, dealing with Buddhism, some remarks are made about its relation to Theosophy, calling the latter Neo-Buddhism. How far Buddhism is Theosophy may be seen from the fact that certain fundamental ideas of Theosophy are looked upon and denounced as heretical by the Buddhists of Ceylon. If the

[1] *Philosophy of Religion*, Sect. 43, and Note 37.

impression in Europe is that Theosophy is Neo-Buddhism, the impression distinctly in Buddhist lands is that it is Neo-Christianity!

The truer statement is that Theosophy has much in common with the ideas of the early Buddhists, as it has much in common with the ideas and beliefs of every religion in the earliest period of its life. Just as Christians are suspicious of Theosophy because of the idea of Reincarnation, so similarly orthodox Buddhists dislike Theosophy for its theism and its doctrine of the Logos. Similarly, too, there is strenuous opposition on the part of the orthodox Brahmans in India to the Theosophists, because Theosophy proclaims a common origin of all religions, and will not admit that any one religion has all the truth.

The broadening of the standpoint of truly religious men is inevitable, and the study of Theosophy is merely the outer symbol of an inner fact in the present life of civilised people. All sincere and earnest men, all impartial seekers of truth all over the world, are brought closer together by the dissemination of knowledge, possible now by means of printing and travel. As Science has made a common platform on which meet scientists of all nations, and such a platform was bound to be from the moment a great unifying ideal like Science appeared before the minds of investigators, so is there coming about slowly a new platform on which are meeting together the more spiritual minded in

all religions. Whether we call this platform a Philosophy of Religion, Neo-Christianity, Neo-Buddhism, or Theosophy, matters little. It is the fact which is important, and that fact none who observe the signs of the times can gainsay.

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Issued Monthly

1. Emotion, Intellect and Spirituality. Annie Besant
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43. The Inner Purpose of the Theosophical Society.
Annie Besant
44. Indian Students and Politics.
G. S. Arundale, M.A., LL.B.
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46. On Moods. Annie Besant
47. Buddhism Dr. F. Otto Schrader
48. Spirituality and Psychism.
Gyanendranath Chakravarti
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C. Jinarajadasa
51. The Age of Shri Sankaracharya.
Pandit N. Bhashyacharya
52. Culture of Concentration. William Q. Judge
53. East and West and The Destinies of Nations.
Annie Besant
54. The Ritual Unity of Roman Catholicism and Hinduism. C. Jinarajadasa
55. An Epitome of Aryan Morals.
56. Modern Science and the Higher Self. Annie Besant
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58. Places of Pilgrimage in India. T. Subba Rao
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Annie Besant
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67. Beauty in the Light of Theosophy. Anna Kamensky
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