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Buddha and his religion

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"Buddha and his Religion."

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Introd. Among the various religious developments of the world, the Religion of Buddha has ever held an important place. For about 24 centuries it has been current in history. From the time that it was first promulgated, it has ever claimed the attention and admiration of ^{the} Eastern world, and today devout millions bow in adoration before its founder. No other religion has had such a large number of devoted adherents, none ever spread so rapidly and none ever held a firmer grasp upon its followers. This religion is certainly well worth our attention and study. It is the product of a great personality in history, a current in the realm of thought far-reaching in its influence. Mr. Beal, who from personal knowledge is qualified to speak, characterizes it, and that too from the Christian standpoint, as "one of the most wonderful movements of the human mind."

in its search after Spiritual Truth."

There is indeed much that is dark and uncertain embodied in its present form. Myths and legends have become so blended and interwoven with its history that it is often next to impossible to separate the fact from the myth. It is therefore very difficult to penetrate the spirit and genius of a religion so remote, ^{and} in many respects, radically opposed to our own, to get at the motives that prompted its founder and to interpret the doctrines that he propounded.

In this brief paper on the religion of Buddha, I shall endeavor to notice its characteristic features and to present them fairly and impartially, with a due sense of appreciation for its excellencies as well as a critical rigor for its faults.

Let us in the first place consider

I The Life of this great Religious Teacher.

Buddha, also called Gautama and Sakya

Muni, was born in the 6th century B.C. at Kapilavastu in the northern part of India. His father, the King of Kapilavastu, belonged to the family of Sakyas and the clan of Saktanias. Endowed with a superior mind and surpassing beauty, he, as a boy, soon proved to be the superior of his comrades and even surpassed his masters in physical and mental feats. From early childhood he was melancholy and depressed in spirits and often retired by himself into solitude, where he would sit, wrapped in silent meditation. The king and his courtiers entertained the gravest fears on his behalf. In the hope that he might be diverted from this tendency to solitude and meditation he was married to the beautiful Gopa. But this inner longing of Buddha's soul was not to be satisfied in such a manner and he continued as before to meditate upon the grave

verities and unanswered questions of existence and death, which haunted him night and day. "What is life?" he was wont to ask. "It is like an echo, a dream, the lightning that flashes for a moment and is gone, none can tell whence it came or whither it goes. But there must be a substance somewhere, wherein is duration and rest. And if I could know and attain that, I would bring light to man, if myself were free, I could deliver the world."

One day, as the prince and a large retinue were riding through the eastern gate of the city in quest of pleasure, they met an aged man, broken and decrepid, tottering upon his staff, hardly able to walk. "Who is this man?" he asked of his coachman, "He is small and weak his flesh and blood are dried up, his muscles stick to his skin, his body is wasted away,

he trembles at every step. Is there some peculiar condition of his family, or is it the common lot of all created things?" "Sir," replied the coachman, "that man is broken down by old age, all his senses are enfeebled, suffering has destroyed his strength, he is despised by his relations and is abandoned like a dead tree in the forest. But this is not peculiar to his family. In every creature youth is overcome by old age. Your father, your mother, all your kindred and friends shall come to the same state, there is no other end for living beings." Deeply moved in his inner being, the prince resolved to abandon a life of ease and pleasure. Another day he met a poor sick man, dying in destitution. Again he encountered a weeping company, bearing a corpse upon a bier. These scenes filled his soul with the deepest sadness.

Finally he met a poor mendicant. He questioned his coachman, who answered: "This man has renounced all pleasures, all desires and leads a life of severe austerity. He tries to conquer himself. He has become a devotee. Without passion, without envy he goes about seeking alms." "Well said," replied the prince. "The life of a devotee has always been praised by the wise. It shall be my refuge and the refuge of other creatures; it will lead us to a real life, to happiness and immortality." He had made a firm resolve. Nothing - the palace, kingdom, honor and glory, - nothing should henceforth alter his determination. He was resolved to abandon all, even his wife, and to lead a life of solitude and austerity. Soon after his midnight escape from the city and his retirement into the forest, he sought and was kindly received by the Brahmins

with whom and their adherents the forests were filled. But he soon discovered that they too could not give him that desired peace of soul which he was seeking. To the learned Brahmans at Vaisali and Rajagriha he said: "Friends, this road leads not to indifference towards the objects of this world, leads not to conquest, serenity, perfect wisdom, leads not to Nirvana." He left them and withdrew into the forests of Urubilva, where he for years practiced the severest austerities. After enduring tests and conflicts of the most formidable nature, he finally discovered the way that leads to Nirvana, which he describes as follows. "The way of the sacrifice of the senses, which shows the path of deliverance, leads to the possession of universal knowledge, the way of renunciation and clear judgment, softening old age and death; calm without anxiety, free from all fear and

bringing to the honor of Nirvana." Here he became as he claimed Buddha, the Enlightened, fully conscious, perfectly emancipated and free. Having himself attained to a knowledge of this way, he soon felt impelled to commend it to others! The first to hear his message were five of his former companions. They soon accepted his doctrine and gladly welcomed him as their teacher and the guide of the world. In company with these he then proceeded to Benares, the centre of Brahmanical worship. His preaching was earnest and startling and all classes gathered to hear him. After gaining quite a number of disciples he left Benares and journeyed from place to place, preaching his doctrine to all classes alike without exception and sending forth his disciples in all directions.

His was a very busy life, devoted to the

needs and interests of his followers, constantly striving to relieve them of their misery and to lead them to a life of happiness and immortality. Finally after 45 years of relentless toil and self denial, his zeal never abating, his courage never failing, his time to die came as it comes to all men and he died expounding the doctrine he has so fervently loved and faithfully lived. Let us first ^{consider} briefly,

□ The Doctrine of this great Religious Teacher.

○ The Sutras or discourses, which were put to record sometime after Gautama's death, present his beliefs clearly enough to give us a sufficiently accurate view of his doctrines. During his youth Brahminism was the prevailing religion in the land of his birth. Life according to it was a perpetual change, a dream, an illusion, existence, a road of births, no end to them, no limitations, transmigration of the soul forever. Gautama was born into such

beliefs and they certainly made a deep impression upon his mind. But he was not entirely satisfied with the tenets of the Brahmans. He rose to a much higher conception of the religious life than theirs. He saw the sorrow and misery of life more intensely than any before him. Life to him was but a flash in the air with the long eternity of silent death before and behind it. He at first believed in the virtue of asceticism, but he soon also discovered that as vanity, when considered as a means of acquiring merit and power over outward things. He was convinced that he must go farther in his selfrenunciation. "Lost in deep meditation," as Pressensé says, "he descended every step in the ladder of existence till he reached the point where it is lost in the darkness of the absolute void."

"To him the supreme deliverance seemed to be the conviction that nothing has reality;

that gods, men, all things in heaven and earth are but a vain show, the foam upon the waves. Henceforward, in order to attain to salvation, existence must be regarded as a fatal illusion; nay more, the very consciousness that it is so must be lost in the utter vacuum of absolute annihilation." (Pessensé p 230)

The four sublime rarities which stand at the beginning of his doctrine, are these:—

- 1 There is pain, sorrow in the world.
- 2 This comes of desires, of lack and of sin.
- 3 This sorrow and pain may cease by Nirvana.
- 4 There is a way that leads to the cessation of sorrow. This way is an eightfold path, the eight steps of which are (1) right belief (2) right feelings (3) right language (4) right actions (5) right means of livelihood (6) right endeavor (7) right remembrance (8) right meditation or as it has been briefly summed up, "To abstain from all sin."

to practice constantly all virtue and hold perfect mastery of our's self - This was the incultation of the Anrakurd." Gautama claims to have seen these truths under the tree at Bodhivaude. They so thrilled and enraptured his soul that he felt that he was now free and truly alive. Gautama's ethical teachings were noble and exalted and were the true secret of his power and influence. There are eight great commandments which he enforced upon all.

1. One should not destroy life.
2. One should not take that which is not given.
3. One should not tell lies.
4. One should not become a drinker of intoxicating liquors.
5. One should refrain from unlawful sexual intercourse, an ignoble thing
6. One should not eat unreasonable food at night

7 One should not wear garlands nor use perfumes.

8 One should sleep on a mat spread on the ground.

There again there are six virtues, which he enjoined upon all men which will put them on the road leading to Nirvana. These are charity, purity, patience, courage, contemplation and knowledge. If these are put into practice, "one quits the dark shores of existence where is ignorance". Gautama laid special stress upon humility. "Live, oh saints," he says "hiding your good deeds and showing your sins". He strictly forbade his disciples to speak evil in any wise or to use any gross or frivolous word. Peace and harmony, sobriety and integrity should be their highest aim in life.

His metaphysical conception of man is, to say the least, very complicated and devoid of all moral unity.

Following Rhys Davids in his Buddhism p. 90, "Man consists of an assemblage of different properties or qualities, the principal ones of which are these: Material qualities, sensations, abstract ideas, tendencies of mind and mental powers." The first group, material qualities are like a mass of foam that gradually forms and then vanishes. The second group, the sensations, are like a bubble dancing on the face of the water. The third group, the ideas, are like the uncertain mirage that appears in the sunshine. The fourth group, the mental and moral predispositions, are like the plantain stalk without firmness or solidity. And the last group, the thoughts are like a spectre and magical illusion. It is repeatedly and distinctly laid down in the Pitakas that none of these Skandhas or divisions of the qualities

of sentient beings is the soul." (Rhys Davids Buddhism, p. 93). The body and these divisions of which man is composed are constantly changing, there is no stable or abiding principle, no central self, no soul whatever. One who believes in man's individuality and ^{the} existence of the soul is stigmatized as a heretic. This doctrine of the non-existence of the soul is one of the clearly expressed tenets of Buddhism, one of its distinctive features.

Another feature to which Gautama so tenaciously held is Transmigration. He could offer no other explanation for the difference in the degree of happiness and suffering of different individuals. One who is greatly afflicted in this life must have committed some wrong in a previous existence to merit this affliction and one who is particularly blessed in any respect

must have done good in a previous life. This doctrine of Transmigration can not be absolutely disproved and it affords an explanation sufficiently accurate to those who can believe it, for many otherwise inexplicable mysteries. It is difficult to explain how this doctrine originated, but be this as it may, Buddhism held to it tenaciously as the only moral cause for the seeming inequalities in the lives of men.

But how account for this transmigration since Buddhism denied the existence of the soul. It must somewhere find a connection, a bridge spanning these different existences. This Gautama found in his Doctrine of the Karma; one of the four acknowledged mysteries of Buddhism. "This is the doctrine that (as soon as a sentient being (man, animal or angel) dies, a new being

is produced in a more or less painful and material state of existence according to the Karma, the desert or merit of the being who died. The Karma of the previous set of Skaudhas, or sentient being, thus determines the locality, nature and future of the new set of Skaudhas of the new sentient being." *Phys Davids' p 101.*

According to this doctrine the force or influence of one's deeds can not be destroyed, it must go on to work out their desert to the end either for good or evil. The result or end thus worked out manifests itself in the life of a new sentient being. As one generation inherits the consequences of the vices and virtues of ^{the one preceding it, each individual falls heir to} all his predecessors! He takes up the struggle of life where it was left in a previous existence. But he is rarely conscious, only in a few cases where one has risen above the possibility of pain and pleasure, of who or

what those preceding him were and what his successors will be. When the true Buddhist saint dies he ceases to be a conscious being, but his "Karma", his merit lives on until it reaches its full desert. Buddhism declares that the hope for happiness and a better world hereafter is vain. Man as a conscious being is nothing but a delusion. That he is thus deluded is due to ignorance. It entreats man to abandon all hope for happiness and immortality. There is nothing eternal. The universe is constantly involved in change and is passing away. And so also everything of the individual and his life must perish; the accumulated effect of his deeds, words and thoughts alone remain. Therefore man should shake off all delusions and enter the path that turns away from this restless life and leads to Nirvana.

This leads us to consider the question: What is Nirvana, which is the last goal, the summum bonum of Buddhist Doctrine? Etymologically it signifies extinction. It is represented as being neither limited nor unlimited; neither present nor past nor future; neither being nor nonbeing. What can that be, that has neither existence nor non-existence? Buddhists themselves can not tell us exactly what it is. The president of the 3rd council is said to have taught, that Nirvana is something incomprehensible and inexpressible and that no one who has not already entered Nirvana could have an adequate conception of the same. Those are said to be in the enjoyment of Nirvana who have become entirely free from evil desire and well trained in the teachings of Gautama. Their Karma is extinct. The succession of

existence is at an end. They are free from all longings after immortality and no new yearnings or desires arise within them. The consciousness of their own personality is gone, it is extinguished like a flame that has gone out. Nirvana according to the general definition is the total annihilation of all pain and sorrow and of all the attributes of existence. "It is the extinction of that selfish, grasping condition of mind and heart, which would otherwise, according to the general mystery of Karma be the cause of a new individual existence. It is freedom from the imperfections of finite being, as some claim, but that is only a result of and not Nirvana itself. I should rather agree with Max Muller, Rhys Davids and others in saying Nirvana is not entire annihilation or extinction. It is rather

a certain indefinite something of which the human mind is scarcely able to conceive - an ecstatic state of dreamless sleep, an unconscious swoon from which there is no awakening. In the 3rd place let us consider

II The Effects of the Doctrine of this great Religious Teacher. Wherever this new faith was preached it met with great success. Even before the death of Gautama it must have gained great prevalence. The number of conversions to the new faith in the beginning must have been few, but year by year it was increased until it became quite generally spread over the country before he died. The preaching, which was accompanied by an earnest and devoted life, was sure to win adherents. Buddha's proclamation of the equality of all, entertaining no distinctions whatever of blood and caste, must have been

very revolutionizing in a country which for centuries had been burdened so grievously with the oppression of caste. His devotedness to the cause, his intense consecration and love for his fellowmen, his model life, inculcating all the virtues he taught, deeply touched and stirred the hearts of all. A spirit was soon manifested to carry this new faith to all nations and extensive missionary enterprises into foreign countries were undertaken. We read of missionaries crossing over at an early date into Cashmere, Thibet, China, Ceylon and Farther India. In the fifth century of our era it was carried from China into Corea and in the sixth to Japan. First where it was transplanted into these foreign countries did it achieve its greatest successes. In fact, after having been elevated to the religion of the State by King Asoka and having

met with various fortunes, being favored at times and then persecuted by reigning monarchs, it finally in about the eleventh or twelfth century of our era was expelled from the land of its birth by its bitter and jealous rival, the Brahmamical power.

The influence of Buddhism has not only been confined to the east, but in a manner has also been exerted upon the western world. That intercourse between the east and west, which soon sprang up after the conquests of Alexander, lasted for centuries. While India profited greatly in the way of material civilization, she in exchange gave many advanced ideas upon the great problems of human existence. The philosophers of the Alexandrian, Platonic and Neo Platonic Schools received much of their stimulus from the east. Their philosophies are strongly tinged with Oriental mysticism. They are the speculation

of the east in a western mould.

Buddhism in its later developments has greatly degenerated from the exalted place it once held. It has sunk into gross idolatry and abominable paganism. Soon after Gautama's death low and debasing sensualism usurped the place of the many lofty and ennobling precepts he had inculcated. His followers soon worshipped the form and person of their master and made the very Nirvana low and sensual, in which according to the teaching of their master all carnality and desire should cease. The order of mendicants which Gautama himself instituted and which he intended should realize not the superiority there is in learning or wealth, but in piety and holiness, soon began to acquire great wealth and worldly influence. Instead of being a great moral influence and leading lives of low and holiness, they

soon began to grasp the reins of power and worldly authority. Nothing could be more foreign to the original design of this order of mendicants than the wealthy, arrogant and powerful monasteries of modern Buddhism.

But, although Buddhism in later times has in many respects become so degraded, there nevertheless are certain lofty elements so deeply impressed that they have never been set aside. It to this day has retained its gentleness of character and reverence for life, which characterized it from the beginning. They made no conquests by the sword, but only by persuasion, relying wholly upon the moral element. It suffered wrongs and great violence at the hands of the Brahmins, but it never resorted to hostile measures. Thus again it greatly encouraged material property in the countries in

which it held controlling power. Under its influence hospitals were erected, monasteries endowed, roads built, agriculture promoted etc. In the way of civilizing barbarous hordes and savage nations, it has contributed very much. The Burmese and Siamese have been raised under its influence from a savage to a comparatively civilized state of society and among the Mongolians murder and robbery has yielded to brotherly love. It is a fact attested by many that the natural moralities are better maintained, chastity better observed and crime less in countries under Buddhistic influence than in any other countries of the east. The sick, aged and helpless are provided for, the family ties are held sacred. The condition of woman has been greatly elevated and her rights to a certain extent acknowledged. In Birma,

Ceylon and Siam polygamy is forbidden. In Siam slavery has been abolished and equal rights and liberties proclaimed. Entire religious freedom has been granted to all and even Christian churches protected against heathen interference.

Popular education has reached a good degree of development. According to Bastien there are schools taught by monks in all towns and villages, affording the means of acquiring an elementary knowledge, so that it is rare to find persons who can neither read nor write. Such are some of the wholesome effects of Gautama's teachings. Surely Buddhism has had an elevating and ennobling influence upon the vast populations of the Orient.

IV Buddhism has often been compared with Christianity and many have claimed for it equality if not superiority. Some indeed have been rash enough to assert

that many of the Christian doctrines are but borrowings from Buddhism. But there has not as yet been found a proof that they are historically connected. The more we learn of the true nature of Buddhism, the more clearly is it shown that these resemblances are either of a post-Christian date, or are only of a very superficial character. The fact is becoming more and more apparent that its fundamental conceptions are not only different from, but in radical contradiction to those of Christianity. In the first place Gautama deliberately dismissed and condemned as vague speculation the fundamental tenet of Christian Theism, viz - the idea of a personal God as the primary cause of all things, claiming that it was not only useless, but hostile to righteousness of life. Again he deliberately condemned the idea of the soul as the

centre of the individual life of man, asserting that such an idea was injurious to character or ^{to} any growth in virtue. Then again he deliberately condemned the Christian conception of the soul's eternal salvation, declaring the desire after eternal life and a blessed immortality beyond the grave to be a vain and empty delusion, sure to lead to eternal disappointment. It is certainly needless to compare such principles with those of Christian Theology. The contrast is too apparent. Rhye Davids says: "Would it be possible to formulate any system, which should be in more absolute and categorical contradiction to all the fundamental tenets of Christian belief?"

It is true the ethical system of Gautama is of a high and exalted order and has many points of affinity with that of Christianity. In comparing the ideal character as set forth in the Gospel

and that of Buddhism we find many resemblances. Many of these, it is true, are in such elemental matters as truthfulness, chastity and honesty; there are some, however, which penetrate more deeply and touch upon the real religious life of Christianity. Buddhism for instance lays stress upon such vital ethical matters as selfrenunciation, faith, humility and love. But when we critically examine Gautama's teachings upon these matters, we discover that they are not identical with Christian teachings. The latter are always more exalted. But when we turn aside from these and look to those principles which are specially characteristic of Christianity, we find that they are not only absent in Buddhism, but even radically contradicted by it. One has well said, "In it we have an ethical system, but no lawgiver; a world without a Creator;

a salvation without eternal life, and a sense of evil, but no conception of pardon, atonement, reconciliation or redemption." The Christian's heart is animated by a lively hope, which looks forward to a deliverance from the power of sin and evil. He is conscious of the pardon of his sins and of his reconciliation with the Father. Buddhism, on the other hand, teaches that there is no God, no hope either for future redemption from sin and evil for the world or a conscious final and eternal state of bliss and holiness for the individual. The Buddhist worships Buddha as the best and wisest of mortals, the Christian however worships and trusts in Christ, the God Man, who is at the same time the Son of God and the Son of Man, the link that binds man to his Maker. His soul is moved to an unspeakable

love and to a degree of adoration never attainable in Buddhism. Through the atoning death of Christ, life and immortality were brought to light, Buddha, ^{however} knew nothing of a redemption from sin and a life of immortality. Thus upon all the important tenets of the Christian faith we see not only divergence on the part of Buddhism, but absolute contradiction. From this brief and limited comparison it is apparent that both of these religions can not have been revealed from God, for they stand in the most open and unqualified contradiction to each other upon those tenets which are most essential to religion. If one is right, the other is wrong, if one is light, the other is darkness. If the fundamental doctrines of Christianity are true, those of Buddhism must be false.

For apologetic purposes no other religion can serve us a better purpose in

comparison with Christianity than Buddhism, for with all its admitted excellencies as compared with all other ethnic religions, it is still a fact that the contrast between them is inexpressibly great. And by thus comparing Christianity with Buddhism and with all other religions, it not only does not lose its lofty preeminence which it at present holds, but is sure, the more carefully that comparison is made, to stand out in that preeminence more boldly and sublimely.

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