BUDDHISM AS I SEE IT

by

NEVILLE GUNARATNE

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PREFACE

BUDDHISM AS I SEE IT was written five years ago, when the author was spending a short holiday in up-country after a prolonged illness. It was not meant to be a text book on Buddhism, but a precise treatment of some of the fundamental teachings from an unbiassed point of view. It was not possible to write a fuller and more comprehensive book free from errors within a short period of barely a month. However the script which remained unprinted hitherto was recast here and there following the advice of Dr. W. S. Karunaratne (Lecturer in Pali and Buddhist Civilisation, University of Ceylon) and hurriedly sent to the printers. Should a second impression follow the author hopes to revise and enlarge the present book.

A deep debt of gratitude and sincere thanks must be expressed to the learned Doctor for having kindly consented to write a Foreword.

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FOREWORD

The problems that confront the individual and society cannot be solved by an outer change of their institutional framework. A change of institution, however revolutionary it may be, can only yield very limited results of lasting benefit to humanity. An abiding solution to our problems can be found only by a revolutionary change in the psychology of the individual. A psychological revolution alone results in thorough-going catharsis of our misdirected thoughts and untutored passions. All our struggles are ultimately emotional in their origin for human behaviour, both individual and social, is generally impelled by likes and dislikes. Our self-deception, consciously or unconsciously makes us hide the nakedness of our prejudices and impulses in the fashionable garb of an intellectual ideology. The minds and hearts of peoples therefore become the fields of their manifold battles. If this be so then it follows that the defences of peace have to be necessarily built only within the heads and hearts of our own selves.

In this context Buddhism is refreshingly relevant to our time and clime. The philosophy of Buddhism seeks to understand the nature of the world of our experience. The religion of the Buddha seeks to CHANGE that nature. Hence Buddhism offers us not only a complete and valid weltanschauung but also a dynamic way of life leading to final perfection.

It is this philosophy and religion which Mr. Gunaratne has attempted to expound within the pages of his little book. If this essay can induce its readers to think for themselves and examine themselves it shall have achieved its basic purpose.

W. S. KARUNARATNE,
3rd April, 1962.

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1.

LIFE AND TEACHINGS

A Civilising Force

Nations of the world are built on different cultures traditions and patterns of behaviour which are largely cast in the mould of religious teachings they have inherited from the past. This is true of nations both Eastern and Western. For instance the Mosaic teachings of prehistoric age played a significant role in determining the pattern of life of the early Jews and Hebrews, and still later with the growth of industrial progress it shaped as Christianity the entire civilisation of a Western world. A far more significant spiritual force was the religion of Buddhism which kindled about two thousand five hundred years ago a torch of culture and civilisation in our Eastern countries under the benign influence of a mighty figure—Siddhattha Gotama, or the *Buddha* as he is popularly known.

The term Buddha, or Gotama is not new to us any more than it is to history. In the history of religion that name is quite familiar as one connected with the most remarkable revolution of human thought, a revolution whose results is felt even today after a lapse of two milleniums, in the lives of a major part of mankind. One may ask, could the real strength of a religion be tested by the number of adherents it commands? True, it is the quality of results achieved by a religion rather than numerical figures that determines its greatness. But

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this great man and his religion has had such a tremendous influence on a large number of people that it is most appropriate to speak of Buddhism as one of the greatest—if not the greatest, civilising forces in history.

As every other great man that enriched the Indian soil, the Buddha too, was a product of his age, of that is to say, the numerous social and religio-philosophical factors of the day. But unlike in others there was in the Buddha a dynamism, a 'mysterious soul-stirring power' and an originality of thought and action that vitalised the people and stimulated them in the pursuit of progress—national and cultural, spiritual and material. So when other great men disappeared from the Indian scene leaving behind them a handful of followers they were gradually forgotten with the lapse of time as there was hardly any novelty in what they taught that would impress them for ever on the memory of posterity, whilst the Buddha left a legacy, a doctrine both novel and yet rooted deeply in the traditions of Indian thought whose indelible impress on the minds of generations could be effaced neither by the lapse of time, nor by the vicissitudes of circumstance. It was a doctrine rich in abstruse metaphysics that satisfies the inquiring minds of intellectuals; it was also a simple ethic and morality suited to the immature minds of the multitudes. It was a religion and philosophy, a doctrine of scientific analysis of man and his experience and a solution to the intricate riddle of human existence.

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As a religion of mind and spirit and as a civilising factor in history Buddhism is unique because it has been the only religion that has successfully harmonised the two vital aspects of the individual—the religious aspirations on the one hand, and the desire for worldly progress on the other. That is why it has fitted into every age and clime, serving both as an instrument of social progress and as a spiritual force. In this twentieth century of atomic energy it could equally be a living force even as it was so in the pre-scientific age of the 5th and 6th centuries B.C. This adaptability to conditions of time and place has enabled Buddhism in the course of its evolution, to absorb whatever cultural and other elements of civilised life it came into contact with, and develop in course of time a mighty culture of its own—a reservoir of unlimited energy and wisdom whose waters, like those of the Ganges where it originated still nourish many a fertile land in the Eastern world and many others in distant Europe. It is the history and message of that benign religion that is unfolded briefly in the following pages as it appears to the unprejudiced mind of a free thinker.

Quest for Truth

As we turn over the pages of Buddhist history and literature the personality of the Buddha stands out prominently before our eyes, like a great sentinel over Himilayan peaks but, garbed in a simple attire of wisdom and virtue. To the critical student he appears not in the mythical and fabulous figure of an eighty feet high sage surrounded by hosts of deities and spirits such as popular Buddhist religion

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has painted him today, but as a simple ascetic of magnetic personality—as a social reformer discoursing to the multitudes in India who, even as they do today, presented an appalling picture of poverty and want. The needs of the then Indians, unlike those of the present day were, however, comparatively fewer, as the discoveries of modern science had not complicated their mode of life; and so they were able to live amidst a certain amount of political and economic freedom united into different tribes or states (such as those in ancient Greece) each of which was ruled over by a chieftain chosen by the people themselves. One such state was that of the Sākyas of Kapilavatthu ruled over by king Suddhodana and queen Māya to whom was born Prince Siddhattha. The event took place, according to the calculations of chronologists and historians in the year 563 B.C.

Siddhattha was nurtured in the lap of luxury like other princes of the day. And in his 29th year a son was born to him through his wife, the beautiful princess Yasodhara. But unlike the other princes Siddhattha was awakened to life's realities at an early age by the sight of a sick man, an old man, a corpse and a recluse. Realising that sickness, old age and death were the common lot of every mortal Siddhattha wondered if there be any solution to these perpetual ills. He saw no delight in the enjoyment of sensual pleasures when he too, like those whom he saw during his rounds in the city, was doomed to such perpetual ills of existence. Thus he resolved to find a release from sickness, old age, and death however difficult the quest may

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be. That very night when everyone else in the palace was asleep Siddhattha stole out of it and casting only a last lingering look at his newly born son left for the solitudes. There he donned the garb of an ascetic such as the one he saw in the city and sat under the feet of teachers to learn the mystery of life.

Now historians describe this period as the most significant one in India's intellectual history; it was a period seething with religious and intellectual fervour. Like Siddhattha there were many other youths who, disgusted with the sight of suffering in life, left their homes and wandered in jungles in search of truth and Happiness. Some subjected their body to severe torture thinking that weakening of the body would lead to strengthening of mind and intellect. Others mortified the intellect by intense speculation and meditation without the exercise of mental and moral culture. And both fell into extremes from which recovery was impossible.

It was in such an atmosphere shrouded in religious and philosophical enthusiasm that Siddhattha sought to carry out his life-long mission of finding a solution to the intricate riddle of existence. For six long years he made a superhuman effort subjecting his body to severe torture like others until he grew feeble, emaciated, and finally collapsed. Then he abandoned self-mortification as fruitless in the realisation of Truth. After regaining normal health by taking food again he now sat beneath a peepal tree and devoted himself to the task of mental and moral purification making the

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following resolution: "Let the nerves of my body wither, or flesh and blood run dry, but never shall I rise from this seat until I have gained perfect wisdom".

With a detached mind unstained by passion he penetrated into the riddle of life and like a flash of lightening realisation came to him. As he penetrated deeper, the mysteries of life unveiled themselves one by one before his mind. He saw existence in its true perspective as a mass of sorrow; he saw the cause that created this sorrow; he himself eliminated these causes and attained the Deathless, the Birthless. In other words he became a *Buddha.*

From this brief survey of Siddhattha's early carreer one thing stands out—unlike teachers of revealed religion he had no need to make fantastic claims of a supernatural origin. For the *Enlightenment* that came to him was merely an awakening, like the discovery of most scientific truths, into the realities of life and the universe. We know, the modern radio receiver, the automatic traffic signal and the famous law of gravity were the results not of prolonged research but of flashes of intuitive perception. When Newton saw the apple fall his mind was matured enough to grasp suddenly the universal law operating behind the event. Similarly by previous preparation of mind which is believed to have extended over incalculable periods of time in past lives the Buddha had developed receptability to Truth which dawned suddenly with little effort in this last life.

Rising from Enlightenment the Buddha reflected on the knowledge he had gained by such strenuous

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effort of mind and body and the more he did the greater grew his reluctance to return to the world of men; for how could men enmeshed in the worldly net of craving and desire understand the deep wisdom or Truth designed to end that very process of craving and desire? After much reflection, however, he resolved to reveal it to the erring world that even a few 'with little dust in their eyes' might perceive the Truth.

In no time his disciples grew in number and summoning sixty of them who were the first to have attained Truth in the world, he bade them go forth and preach the *dhamma* to the world. "Go ye Oh monks" said he, "And wander forth for the good of the many, the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the good for the happiness and for the welfare of gods and men. Go not alone but by twos. Preach ye the *Dhamma* which is lovely in the beginning, lovely in the middle, lovely in the end, in the spirit and in the letter; proclaim the consumate life of holiness perfect and pure". (Mahāvagga: Vinaya Pitaka)

This was the first missionary movement recorded in ancient history perhaps with the exception of that organised by Jesus Christ five centuries later. (St. Matthew. 28. 19). We are told that these monks had no permanent abode, owned no permanent property save the yellow robe they wore, and depended solely on the alms they begged from door to door. They knew no colour caste or other social barriers that divide man and man. But they possessed the highest wisdom and the most invaluable treasures a human being could

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own. Thus setting a noble example of *plain living and high thinking* to his disciples the Buddha himself wondered in a different direction. He walked on foot preaching the doctrine to the poor and to the rich alike making no distinction whatsoever between 'high' or 'low'. And among his followers were men and women of all walks of life—kings, millionaires, merchants, courtesans, and paupers etc. Himself a prince of no mean birth he protested against the social barriers that divided the then society and proclaimed the equality of men. Thus for forty five years he revolutionised India by introducing a new sense of values and ideals both in human thought and in society and at the ripe age of eighty passed away from the world in the year 483 B.C.

After Enlightenment

From Enlightenment to the final passing away or the *Parinirvāna* it was a scene of intense religious and social activity, a lifetime devoted to the welfare of people. The nature of his Enlightenment and the significance of his lofty teaching is clear from the paeon of joy uttered by him soon after Enlightenment.

Through many a birth in samsara, wandered I,
Seeking but not finding the builder of this house.
Sorrowful is repeated birth.
Oh house builder! Thou art seen. Thou shalt build no house again.
All thy rafters are broken, thy ridge pole is shattered.
To dissolution (Nibbāna) goes my mind.
The end of craving have I attained.

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For seven weeks after enlightenment the Buddha is said to have lived in ecstatic joy partaking no food but merely thriving on the bliss that comes after emancipation (*vimuttisukha*) from the bonds of samsāra (existence). The end of these seven weeks witnessed the beginning of his forty five years of ministry. The first sermon known as *Dhamma-cakkappavattana sutta* (setting of the Wheel of Law) was delivered at Benares (at the Deer Park, Isipatana) to the five ascetics, his erstwhile friends as truthseekers. In this sutta he outlines the essence and core of his entire teaching: the *ekāyanamagga* (only way) free from the extremes of self mortification and self indulgence, both of which are condemned as 'base, vulgar, and profitless'. This Middle Way (*majjhima Patipadā*) consists, of a systematic process of mind culture resting on eight virtues: Right Understanding, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, Right Concentration. They lead to restraint of mind, body and speech, to the stilling of passions, of lust (*rāga*) hatred (*dosa*). And to such a mind comes higher wisdom of the Four Aryan Truths. Namely, Sorrow, its Cause or craving, its Cure, and the Way leading to the cure of all sorrow.

The most significant event that took place during this time was the sending of sixty missionaries (who were the first arahats or saints excluding the Buddha). And except for the lay converts made, like King Bimbisara or the merchants Tapassu and Bhalluka, the religion did not witness any remarkable growth or expansion. According to the

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commentary (Buddhavansa) Buddha is said to have spent the first twenty years as follows:

First year at Benares where the first sermon was delivered. Second to fourth years were spent at Rajagaha at the Veluvana (bamboo Grove) offered by King Bimbisara. Fifth year was spent at Vesali and the significant event of the year was the establishment of the order of nuns. During the sixth year he lived in Mankula Hill and performed "Twin Miracles" to convert the heretics. The seventh year is of utmost importance as the ABHIDHAMMA was expounded for the first time during this year. He is said to have visited the Tāvatimsa Heaven where his mother was reborn as a Deva, and expounded the ABHIDHAMMA teachings, whilst giving a summary of it to Sāriputta daily. The eighth year was spent at Bhesakala Forest, in Bhagga District. The ninth year was spent at Kosambi. Here Māgandiya harboured a grudge against Buddha for what he uttered when her father proposed to give her to him in marriage. The tenth year was spent in retirement in Pārileyyaka forest as a protest against the disobedient monks who refused to come to a settlement of their dispute. The eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth years were spent at Ekanāla, (Brahmin village) Veranjā, and Cāliya Rock respectively. The fourteenth year was spent at Sāvatthi, in Jetavanārāma. During the fifteenth year Buddha's father Suddhodana died. He spent the retreat this year at his native place Kapilavatthu. During the sixteenth year he converted Ālavaka in the city of

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Ālavaka. The seventeenth and eighteenth years were spent at Rājagaha and Cāliya Rock, whilst the last two years were spent at Rājagaha. The remaining twenty five years were spent in Sāvatthi (jetavanārāma) built by Anāthapindika, and at Pubbārāma built by Visāka.

No teacher of the day was so selfless and energetic and mindful of the weal of others. There never was a day he did not make a convert or deviated from the daily routine. His day was divided into five sessions and in each session he was actively engaged in following a specific course of activity. In the (1) Forenoon Session he used to survey the world with his divine eye, and if he perceives any individual who needs his assistance he would go all the way to him and preach the dhamma. It was usual for the virtuous to come to Buddha, whilst the latter always went on foot to evil doers. He would then go round for alms sometimes with monks and after the midday meal, would give a discourse befitting the occasion and needs of the audience. (2) Afternoon Session: After the noon meal he takes the seat in the monastery and gives discourses and objects of meditation to monks. (3) The First Watch, which extends from six to ten p.m. is reserved for monks who wish to have their doubts cleared. (4) The Middle Watch extending from ten p.m. to two a.m. is reserved for devas or invisible celestial beings who approach the Buddha to question him on the dhamma. (5) The Last Watch, the early hours from two to six, is divided into four parts. In the first part he would walk up and down (Cankamana) as a sort of mild physical exercise.

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During the second part (3-4) he sleeps mindfully lying to the right side. Throughout the third part (4-5) he attains to the Fruit of Arahatship and enjoys the bliss of Nibbana. During the last hour (5-6) he attains to the Ecstacy of Great Compassion (*Mahākarunā Samāpatti*) and surveys the world with the divine eye.

These forty five years of his ministry marks a profound revival of values and ideals in Indian history. It was a slow but steady process of social and religious revolution which unfortunately lasted till only the death of its founder as Brahmin supremacy once again gained ascendancy.

What did the Buddha Teach?

The question is often asked—What did the Buddha teach? In the absence of any written records by the Buddha himself or by his immediate disciples how could we determine what exactly the Buddha taught during those forty five years of his ministry?

The present day *Tipitaka* or the Pali Canon, it is generally believed by Buddhists, contains the teachings of the Master in pristine form. However, this belief deserves careful examination in view of the centuries of distance that separated the passing away of the Buddha and the compilation of those texts; further the relation of Pali language (in which the Tipitaka is written) with the language supposed to have been used by the Buddha as the medium of his discourses raises the question of its authenticity which will be discussed later. It would suffice here to mention that at least the most essential utterances of the Buddha must have undoubted-

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ly found their way into the Canon we possess today, and, from these, therefore, it would not be difficult, for us to form an idea of the teaching he actually proclaimed.

The *Tipitaka* or Pali Canon is divided into three main sections: (1) *Vinaya* which gives a detailed account of the numerous rules and regulations enacted for the guidance of monastic life. (2) *Sutta* which contains the simple moral and ethical discourses delivered by Buddha on various occasions, and (3) *Abhidhamma* which is an exposition of metaphysics and philosophy.

These three sections or *pitakas* collectively constitute the whole of present day Buddhism in a theoretical sense and together with the commentaries written thereon by subsequent scholars, they form a voluminous literature in extent eleven times the size of the Bible. From an historical point of view too this literature is of immense value as throwing much light on the social, religious, and economic conditions of not merely the Indians but of the Eastern peoples in general.

It is necessary to recall here that with the despatch of those earliest missionaries soon after Enlightenment the Buddha laid the foundation for an organised religion although it was not his intention to found such a one. For the Truth he proclaimed was intangible and a matter of personal experience or realisation. But no Truth would be of any use if it is not communicated to others or propagated in society, which is possible through some form of external organisation. Thus when the nucleus of early sangha that carried the torch of

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Truth to distant lands grew in number, there arose the need for more and more organised life, for codifying laws and rules to govern that life. The result was the emergence of *vinaya*, and one of its texts the *Pātimokkha* contains, as an objective study of it would reveal, the most authentic record of the growth and expansion of the Order.

This band of early social reformers travelled all over India unmindful of their own comfort and happiness and devoted their life to the weal of others. And what did they preach? Not abstruse philosophy or higher truths that are unintelligible to the masses but simple injunctions of morality and ethics that would help ordinary men and women to regulate their economic and social life. This was the simple language through which the Buddha spoke while conveying the inexpressible higher truth of religion to illiterate folk. And when they advanced spiritually by such mental and moral training truth came to them even as it did to Buddha and his earliest disciples.

It is remarkable that Buddha like Socrates who was his contemporary in Greece adopted the dialectical method of teaching the ordinary people. He was prepared to place himself first in the same position of the interlocutor, and by using the latter's own terminology and argumentation brought him gradually to the portals of Truth.

Sometimes a whole sermon was delivered to a single person when the latter was matured enough in intelligence to grasp the truth, whilst others were profited by it. In most cases the Buddha sought to deliver sermons befitting the intellectual or moral

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capacity of the hearers and sometimes showed by example in his own life what he taught by precept. On one occasion the Buddha visited a brahmin of a heretical order and the latter abused him in obscene language. The Buddha patiently listened and responded with only a silence. When the brahmin exhausted all he could say the Buddha said, "Now Brahmin, if a guest who visits you refuses all the delicious food you offer him what will you do with the food?—'Why sir, I will consume them myself' "Now Brahman" said the Buddha, "I have visited your home and you have offered me harsh language, but I will not accept them". The Brahman understood him and felt ashamed for being rude to such a distinguished visitor. And after listening to a sermon he became a convert. When Ālavaka the criminal burst forth in a fit of anger and shouted 'Be out' Buddha obeyed politely and when Ālavaka's anger was calmed down by the humble response he was instructed in the dhamma and converted. Numerous such beautiful stories abound in the suttas which give us an insight into the nature of his lofty character, his immense capacity for understanding and dealing with people, and the simple but the most effective method of social and ethical reform achieved by him during those unadvanced times when modern media of propaganda and communication were yet unborn.

The Buddha admitted that economic and material progress was a prerequisite for spiritual advancement. Once we are told he refused to preach the *dhamma* to a hungry peasant until food was served to him. The commentaries on Dhamma-

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pada and Jātaka contain numerous instances of his attempt to admonish kings on the principles of good government and jurisprudence. Poverty and ignorance were held to be the primary causes of crime. The Anguttara Nikāya gives his numerous admonitions regarding the proper accumulation and use of wealth. Even the principles and laws leading to success in worldly pursuits are clearly outlined in the *Sutta pitaka*, sometimes with minute detail. Of particular importance in the context of a modern world are the various civic duties and other mutual obligations as described in the *Sigālovāda sutta*. The reciprocal duties between man and man, from the youngest member of the family to the ruler who governs his subjects are enunciated here. *Pañca Sila* or the Five Precepts constituted the simple code of ethics or morality to be followed by every new convert to religion. Unlike the ten commandments in Christianity these were simple rules of morality to be voluntarily followed by one irrespective of any external compulsion or any binding authority. Considered from an ethical point of view these may seem commonplace as they are known in every age by intelligent men. But the tragedy of it is the world forgets them and fails to act upon them in everyday life. The ardent zeal or self-sacrificing love of a great man, or a social revolution is necessary to inject these into the vitals of a generation. Then only will morality become an actuality and significance in the practical lives of people. Such a great man was Buddha whose self-sacrificing zeal combined with his magnetic personality aroused the Indians from their dogmatic slumbers and inspired them

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in building a better India rich in wisdom and happiness alike.

The Philosophy of Suffering

A sense of philosophic seriousness overcomes us when we pass on from the simple practical teachings of morality to the higher truths of suffering on which Buddhist ethics is built. This truth of suffering is indeed, the corner stone of Buddha's entire system; but for this teaching Buddhism would have no significance as a religion or philosophy. "One thing only do I teach" said the Buddha, "Suffering and the ending of suffering."

And so things that have no relation to, or practical bearing on, this ending of suffering were shelved aside as profitless. It was the attitude of the scientist or physician who is uninterested in knowledge outside his specific sphere. And yet if the commentators are to be believed, Buddha was omniscient (*sabbaññu*); his knowledge embraced knowledge of everything, including that of the physical world which is the field of inquiry of scientists. With the devotion tinged with blind credulity of a simple votary sometimes, the Buddhist commentator describes the Buddha in all imaginable forms. He is said to have known about the distant countries unknown to the then world he lived in, of cosmology and astrology and even of atomic energy in the modern sense of the term. His supernatural powers and knowledge were astounding; at the moment of birth he walked seven steps causing the earth to tremble by his lion roar, whilst some of the qualities and characteristics displayed during his childhood seem to

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belie his assertion that he was merely a human being with extraordinary wisdom (*acchariyamanussa*) Perhaps these statements of his early life are unimportant and one should not take them with the same seriousness that one would, his teachings.

His supernatural or psychic knowledge was limitless; he was able to remember past lives as far back as many aeons, and could perceive the future too of a similar period. He could read the thoughts of others with perfect accuracy and was able to perform miracles such as walking through space, or sending flames of fire through nostrills. Whatever truth there may be in some of these apparently exaggerated powers and knowledges attributed to him there is no doubt that he possessed extraordinary wisdom and was able to wield tremendous influence over others through sheer force of his magnetism. Moreover, taking into account the assertion that preparation for Buddhahood extended over innumerable lives in the past one can reasonably believe that his efforts were undoubtedly rewarded in this last life with a knowledge the highest of human beings could ever attain.

Once while the Buddha was walking through a forest he took a handful of leaves and declared that what he had taught was comparable only to that handful of leaves, whilst the knowledge he had not disclosed was like the leaves of the entire forest. "And why have I not taught them?" asked he, "because brethren it does not lead to the subduing of passion, to cessation of suffering, to Nirvāna".

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The picture is clear. Buddha's ultimate object was to lay bare the profound, universal truth of suffering which is so deep-rooted in existence. Mankind was sick, sick with the perpetual ills of birth, disease, decay, and death. And like a true physician it was his business to diagnose these sicknesses and prescribe a remedy before the patient would die.

What then is suffering? Is it the mental and physical pain that we undergo in day to day life? Is it the worries and disappointments, the troubles and failures that we meet with often and anon in life's journey? This type of pain is of course included in suffering but in its widest sense it has a fuller connotation and deeper significance. Real suffering which envelopes all life without exception would involve a true conviction or intuition of the impermanent and therefore unsatisfactory nature of personality in whatever form. In this context not merely death but even birth as the necessary precondition of life's ills, is suffering. Because nature, dead or living, is under the dominance of this all pervading inexorable law of impermanence no true happiness could be derived either mental or physical. Whatever pleasures of sense men hanker after as joyous are shortlived and *ipso facto* a prelude to pain. To satisfy the petty desires and wants, is to add fuel to fire; it only helps the flame of life to burn with more vigour; it sets the process of life turn endlessly through repeated birth which is fraught with sorrow.

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Confirmed by Science

This is supposed to be the age of science; and there is no sphere of human life where the impact of science is not felt. In our day to day lives, in politics and education, nay in the very economies of nations the influence exerted by science is so great that it has almost transformed all our ideals and beliefs. We are apt to regard science as the final truth itself. Whatever that has the approval of science is universally acclaimed as true, whilst that which conflicts with science is rejected as untrue.

Whether science deserves this veneration of our age or not, there is one thing that is remarkably true in the scientific temper, that arrests our attention here, namely—its approach to reality which is a striking parallel to that of the Buddha. This scientific spirit of enquiry was outlined by Buddha in his admonition to *Kālāmas* which may be described, from a moderner's point of view, as the *magna charta* of human freedom.

> "Do not accept things on mere hearsay or because they are handed down from tradition, or because they are founded on authority or sacred scriptures....Do not accept even my very word out of reverence for me. But whatever after your own reflection and reasoning and personal experience appear to be conducive to the weal and happiness of yourself and that of others, that accept as truth and abide in it".

We have seen earlier that *Enlightenment* itself was a product of the scientific temper of trial and error. As Siddhattha, Buddha wandered from one

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teacher to another examining and imbibing the truths they have discovered and abandoning them when further truths were forthcoming. He was not ready to accept a view merely on the authority of another but asked why it was so and by personal observation and experiment carried on in mental sphere discovered the final Truth himself.

Thus the teachings he proclaimed to the world should indeed bear the stamp of science. They are not dogmas or vague assumptions based on hypothetical or unscientific premises but are deductions drawn from prepositions which are self-evident and true. But unlike scientific prepositions which rest merely on experimental observation or *a priori* reasoning, the truths of Buddhism are the result of a deeper faculty of intuitional experience. Whilst scientists are concerned with only the familiar world as it appears to our gross senses or intellect Buddha probed deeper to discover the world *per se* the world as it is, independent of sense experience, which is faulty.

What is the first proposition of Buddha's supreme science or Philosophy? It is the truth of change (*anicca*), that everything is in a state of flux. From this follows the next proposition that things are devoid of a *substance* or *ego* (*atta*), that the so called personality lacks any soul or any other abiding entity that is erroneously held to be the experience of joy or misery. For that which changes must necessarily be impermanent; and to seek permanent joy or happiness in such a state of flux and emptiness called personality is indeed, the greatest folly. Suffering is thus the necessary corrollary or the

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conclusion to be drawn from the fact of change. Expressed syllogistically:

Happiness is permanence
Life is impermanent
Therefore, life is, not happiness (is suffering)

The fact of change should not be mistaken for self evident truth like the Cartesian *ego* even though self-evidence is there in some measure. The *ergo* which Descartes posits as the first premise of his syllogism is a dogmatic assumption and the deduction drawn from it is a self contradiction. But the basic proposition of the above Buddhist syllogism is, in addition to being a self evident fact a universal truth, founded on the solid rock of intuition, — a truth already accepted by modern science as an indisputable fact.

According to the Buddhist truth of change everything is reducible to mere forces of vibration or energy. This is true of the so called mental (*nāma*) as well as bodily (*rūpa*) factors that compose personality; and the external world too consisting of apparently solid objects in space and time is reducible to ultimate constituents or elements whose only reality is change. For instance an object of perception, a table let us say, is really a lump of matter consisting of innumerable atoms all infinitesimal, and in a state of rapid movement or succession which appear hard and immovable to the naked eye, owing to the tremendous velocity with which those atoms change. Like a ball of fire when whirled round rapidly creates in us the illusion of a circle so

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the rapidity of movement of matter composing sense objects creates in the mind the illusion of permanence.

Surprisingly enough, this same truth propounded by Buddha two hundred centuries ago is rediscovered by modern physicists who have shown us that what appears as solid matter is composed of infinitesimal electrons and protons which change at tremendous speed causing matter to change from one form into another without an imperceivable break. These ultimate forms of matter resolve themselves into mere forces of energy characterised as 'immaterial'.

Our physical organism, according to biology is composed of minute cells which decay constantly and are replaced by new ones produced by the body itself. So rapid is this process of decay and renewal that in every seven years the entire organism undergoes complete change. A boy of seven years may thus be viewed as an entirely new being from the infant he was seven years ago. In this ever-decaying and ever renewing personality biology perceives no abiding principle or entity.

Same is the verdict of psychology; mind is a mere process, says the modern psychologist in agreement with Buddha, a rapid succession of feelings, perceptions, volitions etc. which are held together not by any unifying principle of substance but by the inherent laws of association. To speak of an agent behind mental activity is nonsense; mere states exist which appear and disappear instantaneously. The truth is that "Thoughts

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themselves are the thinkers" says William James that eminent psychologist of world repute.

The Beginning and End

Just as the microscopic world the macrocosmic universe too contains nothing that is perdurable, eternal or unchanging. This was first proclaimed by Buddhist commentators who have taught us of ten thousand world systems, and then in medieval Europe by men like Kepler, Galileo and Copernicus whose findings have shattered the traditional belief in a static universe. Since then man's knowledge of astronomical space has extended and it is believed today that there are millions of universes all in a state of perpetual commotion. The duration of each planet in a universe is determined by the original impulse that set it in motion and with the ceasing of this impulse the planet reaches dissolution. Our earth too is such a planet whose past evolution extends over billions of years. Like every other planet it will one day approach its end with its mighty cultures and civilisations and leave not a rack behind. Origination (*uppāda*) evolution (*ṭhiti*) and dissolution (*bhanga*) these are the three spokes of the ever rolling wheel of change and flux.

But naturally the question arises—who provides the impulse for the incessant movement of the planetary systems? Who sets this perpetual wheel of growth and decay turn? It is the law of Causality.

Everything has a cause and so has the earth. It was formed astronomists would say, milleniums ago out of the nebula thrown off by a huge planet in space. And the initial impulse it received out of

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this accident has caused it to rotate ceaselessly until one day it will explode itself when the heat generated by its own movement grows unbearably hot, or when another planet in space collides with it by accident. And out of the remains of this catastrophe will appear another planet which through billions of years will go on evolving and developing probably those conditions necessary for the growth of civilised life and finally reach a similar end to repeat the process over and over again. Such is the course of the mysterious universe whose beginning or end is unthinkable.

But man is a curious animal. He has an innate tendency to probe into the beginning of a beginningless past and the end of an endless future, which may be characterised as an infirmity incurable. The history of philosophy and religion is the story of relentless wars waged by thinkers and religious teachers to resolve this final problem; but have they succeeded in discovering the real solution?

Moggallana, a chief disciple of Buddha was able to fly round the earth within the snap of a finger by means of his psychic powers. And one day, we are told, he darted into space overcome by inquisitiveness and travelled across it with inconceivable rapidity to discover the end of the universe. For several days he flew in vain and was on the verge of collapse when the Buddha came to his rescue. There were others like Sāti and Mālunkyaputta who urged the Buddha to provide answers to their questions on the ultimate but his only reply was—"Without beginning or without end is this universe (samsāra); unthinkable is the origin or

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end of beings who fare through craving and desire since time immemorial". And he would reiterate with the loving kindness of a father that warns his disobedient children, "The leading of the good life does not depend on views that the world is eternal, or not eternal. Although there is the view that the world is eternal and not eternal, there is birth, there is ageing, there is dying, there are grief, lamentation, sorrow, and despair; I lay down the destroying of these here and now.... Therefore understand as not taught what is not taught by me; understand as taught what is taught by me....And what is taught by me? That this is ill, this is the arising of ill, this is the stopping of ill, this is the course leading to the stopping of ill. And why is this taught by me? This Mālunkyaputta, is connected with the goal....this conduces to dispassion, to tranquillity, to super-knowledge, to awakening, to Nirvāna" (Majjhima Nikāya 426). That was the verdict of the Buddha. The nature of beings, the nature of the world, and the nature of Buddha are alike unthinkable (*acintya*). This is also the verdict of modern science, whose centuries of laborious research has failed to unravel today even a facet of that vast Reality.

Engulfed within such a raging sea of suffering man's first and foremost job is to seek an escape from it, and not to fritter away his precious time and energy in unprofitable speculation about a first cause. Because knowledge of the world will be of no avail in resolving that greatest enigma of suffering in life.

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The Solution

That same law of causality operating in the scientific world governs also the mental and moral sphere of beings. We have seen earlier that according to Buddhism reality consists of an uninterrupted flow of elements, mental and physical. These are not however blind forces of energy as the materialists would advocate, for behind them is the vital force or impulse of *kamma* (action) generated by beings themselves. If scientific materialism were true then man would be a machine even as the universe is, for neither is governed by any intelligent (thiestic religion) or moral (Buddhism) principle. On this view human action is mechanical, not willed or actuated by any purpose. They are mere responses to external stimulii. What is termed thinking is a similar chemical process taking place in the brain. Consequently there is no *freewill* in man who is determined.

In contrast the teaching of *kamma* which admits of freewill and moral responsibility holds that actions in so far as they are willed, produce consequences good or bad as the case may be. Actions rooted in good volitions such as love and truthfulness tend to produce by the inherent nature of the law of causality, good reactions; whilst unwholesome actions (*akusala*) motivated by evil propensities such as lust and hatred produce evil results correspondingly. We are thus in every moment of our existence an outcome of the past when viewed from the perspective of past action. We have reaped what we have sown. But when viewed from the perspective of present life we are not determined,

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nor are we victims of irrecoverable fate. The reason is we possess a freewill by means of which we are able to reorient our thoughts and actions in whatever direction we please; we could · either succumb to evil and degrade ourselves or pursue the good life and advance spiritually. None is a sinner to be condemned eternally for, everyone however depraved has the chance of rising above evil circumstances by counteracting evil with good.

This is quite different from the picture of *kamma* painted by present day Buddhism which identifies *kamma* with fate and teaches that it is futile to improve conditions in life. Many a Buddhist today regards *kamma* as inflexible; this has tended to letharginess and arrested the progress of men socially too. Did Buddha ever teach his followers to brood over their lot and make life more miserable? On the contrary he has urged them to understand *kamma* as a stimulus for action, and fight evil with courage and enthusiasm. "warriors, Warriors are we called.. for we fight for lofty wisdom and sublime virtue".

From the viewpoint of Buddhist psychology *kamma* is the psychic principle in man that sets the wheel of life (samsāra) turn endlessly. In the deeper layers of human mind known to modern psychologists as the 'subconscious' (*bhavanga* in Buddhistic terminology) are stored, together with the inherited characteristics of the individual those vital impulses of *kamma* or the sansaric dispositions accumulated by the individual in past lives. These are not impressed like the ideas are in Locke's *tabula rasa* but are mere forces of energy whose function

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cannot be understood apart from the physical organism in which they are expressed. Just as the force of electricity manifests itself in a bulb, so *kamma* requires always a physical organism to express itself. It is the life-force, the *elan vital* of Bergson, which actuated by life itself (craving) actuates it from within. At physical death this kammic force gravitates to another body in the womb of a mother and starts life anew. Thus the death of one person at one place signifies the birth of another elsewhere; and as long as kammic force thus generated lasts, the individual must reappear in the world now as a human being, next as a god or animal as the nature of *kamma* (action) may be.

Since repeated birth in the worlds of sense is fraught with sorrow the final solution lies in the termination of this process by completely eradicating the intimate relation between *mind-matter* (*nāmarūpa*) to use the physicist's term. For even birth as the highest of gods i.e. Brahma (which some scholars compare with the ultimate goal of thiestic religion) brings no eternal peace because he too has his day and may be cast into the lower realms of human beings or other abodes of misery, when the force of his good *kamma* is exhausted. But permanent happiness is sure to be there when craving is totally destroyed, for then the motive power that generates fresh action leading to repeated birth in the worlds of empiric existence would be annihilated.

Is this the annihilation taught by materialists? Arguing logically one is tempted to ask—what remains when the whole of personality is thus ended?

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The Buddha provides the answer. "Monks! there is an Unborn, Unoriginated, Uncreated, Unformed,—were there not so there would be no escape from the born, the originated, the created and the formed". (Udāna) According to this statement, Nibbāna is a positive state of bliss (*Nibbānam paramam sukham*) even though it is frequently described in negative terms such as *ajāta* (birthless) and *amata* (deathless).

Buddha repeatedly warned his followers not to view Nirvāna which is a supramundane truth, in terms of concepts. Our thinking cannot, by reason of the fact that it is limited to intellect, penetrate that which, lies beyond unless we sharpen our faculty of intuition which is the source of higher experience. Deductive logic and reasoning give us knowledge of a world projected by our own minds. But the world *as it is* must for ever remain a closed book to human experience.

We know however that science is beginning to explore the hidden mysteries of religious experience and the results already achieved in those realms of research—clairvoyance, clairaudience, are profoundly significant. Perhaps in time to come science may discover through instruments what Buddha saw through his faculty of intuition (*patibhānacitta*).

The True Buddha

The reader would have noticed perhaps while going through the above pages there is something of the profundity of a world-negating philosopher combined with the lustre and practicability of a

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world affirming science in the religion of the Buddha. This characteristic feature running through every line and passage in Buddhist literature was in a sense the outcome of an effort on the part of its Founder to resolve the perpetual conflict between human reason and faith, science and religion, which was dominant in his day.

The India that emerged out of the conquests of Aryans was one of the simple and this-worldly man whose main concern was pursuit of pleasure. To such an India pursuit of philosophy and higher religion was new; but a philosophical India emerged when intellect grew, when the priestly or brahmin class asserted its supremacy over the illiterate masses, which gradually paved way for a new conflict between sentiment and reason, religion and philosophy. Just as in Europe this conflict persisted through centuries assuming varied forms in the social, religious and philosophical life. Though not as acute as in Europe, in India this led to a disrupted social order by the time Buddha appeared. Between the two camps of speculative philosophers (*sassatavādins*) and the empiricists or materialists (*ucchedavādins*) many doughty battles were fought with disastrous consequences on social and moral life. Religion was in danger; but speculative philosophy was equally futile and failed to serve as an adequate means of Truth. At such a critical time a reconciliation of this conflict was greatly felt and it was Buddha who fulfilled this need by steering clear of a middle course. He sided with the rationalists in affirming the speculative function of reason but rejected speculative philosophy itself. Phi-

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losophy would be useless if it is divorced from practical life and human relationships. It was his purpose, therefore, to bring down philosophy from the gloomy skies to earth and urge philosophers to deal with the affairs of men instead of wrangling over meaningless 'concepts' and ideas. *Faith guided by reason, and reason warmed by sentiment*— was his simple reply which he enshrined beautifully in his religio-philosophical system.

To view Buddha as a divinely inspired being (as in Mahayāna) or as a metaphysician or social reformer would be equally wrong. Whilst it is true that all pragmatic, positivistic, naturalistic, and other philosophical tendencies are implied in his teaching it would be equally fallacious to group his system into this or that 'ism' because he was, like Kant a destroyer of all philosophy (*diṭṭhi*); and the melancholy of a pessimist too, was never the characteristic of Buddha as Schopenhauer thinks, even though he made repeated emphasis on suffering in life. The true Buddha is unique, but all-pervading, austere and yet humble; he is aloof of the world and yet one with it, like the lotus that stands aloof of, and untouched by, the muddy water in which it was born and grown.

This intellectual withdrawal from the world, exclusively characteristic of Buddha, finds a re-echo in modern philosophy—in Santayana who asked, "What is the part of wisdom?" and answered—"To dream with one eye open; to be detached from the world without being hostile to it; to welcome fugitive beauties and pity fugitive

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sufferings without forgetting for a moment how fugitive they are".

And it was in his own life, above everything else, that this philosophic wisdom found highest expression. Never did Buddha give way to outbursts of sentiment during his long ministry of forty-five years. No single incident is recorded in Buddhist literature that belies such a statement. It was an exclusive trait of Buddha unheard of in Jesus or Prophet Mohammed. His extreme patience and sobriety of mind which tamed fierce criminals like Angulimāla or Ālavaka, the humility and meekness which curbed the pride of brahmins and householders like Māgandiya or Cincimānavikā, and the firmness with which he handled disobedient men and monks as those in Kosambi etc. are surely the traits of a rare character groomed in practical wisdom and highest philosophic calmness. His was a character that had reached utmost perfection, one that is unique and without the slightest flaw or frailty whatsoever.

Future of Buddhism

But, this world-renouncing Truth he proclaimed to mankind after years of strenuous struggle—has it any significance in the context of a modern world advanced in science and technique?

Buddha himself admitted that his religion too, like everything else in the world will fall into decay in distant future when the minds of men will no longer be able to fathom the depth and significance of his truths. And one is prone to ask—has that prophecy come true already? Do we have arahats in

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modern world who have at least sensed the Truth? Do we have men of intellectual maturity who have translated into life the wisdom contained in the noble truth of suffering and its cure?

The world today born out of the discoveries of science has built a civilisation whose character and purpose is radically opposed to the lofty objective proclaimed by the Buddha. With its stupendous machines and gadgets to feed man's lust and vanity the modern world, has progressed on a path of craving and passion contrary to that of dispassion trailed by the Buddha. It has been a triumph of craving of the human heart over detachment, the triumph of matter over mind. And day by day, newer discoveries fatten man's physique and head by providing him with excessive luxury and leisure only to starve his soul. Science is carrying the world further and further away from its goal. The world has not only missed the rhythm and beauty of Buddha's note, it has failed to measure the depth and significance too.

Perhaps there will be no more Buddhas in India; and his teaching of compassion and love, dispassion and understanding, proclaimed after years of strenuous effort, will be forgotten and may disappear into thin air when man intoxicated by the wine and meat of this world, completely loses the vision of the other and digs his own grave by his own hands. But the subtlety of Buddha's wisdom and the fragrance of his sublime message will remain for ever like the smell that lingers in a room from which flowers have been taken away.

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CULTURAL HISTORY

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2.
CULTURAL HISTORY

Authenticity of the Canon

No account of Buddhism will be complete without a discussion of its cultural and religious history which is linked up with the question of the authenticity of Buddhist texts or the Canon, because all our knowledge of Buddhism and its years of development is gleaned from this source. To, the Buddhist the Pali Canon (*Tipitaka*) is, what the Bible is to the Christian, or the Kuran, to the Mohammedan. But none has led to such controversy as the *Tipitaka* mainly owing to, its ecclesiastical character. It is argued by critics that the *Tipitika* must have undergone material changes during its formation through centuries as the books of the *Tipitaka* were handed down through oral tradition until about the first century A.D., and that oral transmission cannot be as accurate a means as written records. Secondly the different canons of the numerous schools of Buddhism show marked differences both with regard to subject matter and, form, whilst each school is confident that its own canon is the most authentic, and representative of the true word of the master. How could one sift the truth from this welter of conflicting views? Let us trace briefly the history and background of the *Tipitaka* in order to understand how far it is authentic.

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Formative Years

The Pali Canon (*Tipitaka*) of the Theravada school (i.e. of the Buddhism flourishing in southern countries like Ceylon, Burma, Siam, etc.) is said to be the Canon approved and sanctioned by orthodox monks of the Third Council held during Asoka's reign, in the year 247 B.C. or 236 years after the demise of the Buddha. This is the general belief throughout the Buddhist world today. The historicity of such a council has, however, been questioned by many scholars and rejected on various grounds.

The *Tipitaka* is not the work of a single author or of one age; it was the product of several centuries. After the passing away of the Buddha memories of speeches and dialogues delivered by him during life-time, were kept alive by elders and at the councils held from time to time these scattered teachings were collected and grouped into sections (*nikāya*) according to the nature of subject matter. Later when the materials grew they were classified into *pitakas* as we find them today. This is the view upheld by the chronicles of this island, the *Dīpawansa* and the *Mahāwansa*.

That the Canon was from earliest times handed down orally is proved by the frequent use of the term *Bahussuta* when referring to a learned man. Writing as a pursuit was not widely cultivated during the days of the Buddha even though the art of writing was not unknown. Perhaps the reason may have been the scarcity of writing materials during the time. But that writing was used for keeping records is proved from history. It is pro-

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bable therefore that no books were written during the lifetime of the Buddha, and as the term *bahus-suta* implies (one who has heard much) learning was chiefly acquired through hearing.

The Three Councils

Immediately after the death of the Buddha the orthodox monks assembled at Rajagaha to decide on the authentic teachings of the Master. The main cause of convening this assembly has been described as the 'objectionable' behaviour of Subhadda, a disciple who, it is said rejoiced at the death of the Master as the monks could now have their own way and could live as they like, without being bound by rules of vinaya imposed on them by the Lord. The orthodox elders who naturally disliked the old order perish, saw in this revolutionary monk the seeds of disaster and disruption of sangha. And the first Council (*sangāyanā*) was held immediately to purge sangha of its revolutionary and destructive elements. But the progressive minded monks who approved of Subhadda's conduct saw in this incident of Subhadda only the emergence of democratic spirit of sangha; and they decided, therefore, to keep away from the Council of orthodox monks. Buddha was the greatest exponent of human liberty and has he not permitted even a relaxation of vinaya if the sangha deems it necessary? Thus arguing these revolutionary monks insisted on a certain amount of laxity in vinaya and freedom of conduct. But the orthodox monks could not be convinced.

According to Cullavagga and Mahāvansa accounts, *dhamma* and *vinaya* were rehearsed at this

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First Council. The rehearsal of dhamma (*suttas*) was entrusted to Ānanda, Buddha's personal attendant, and the vinaya was recited by Upali who was acclaimed as the chief exponent of the subject by Buddha himself. It is significant that in some texts no mention of *abhidhamma* is made presumably because it was not in existence then in the form we have it today. The Sarvastivāda account of the Council adds that in additon to *dhamma* and *vinaya* the *mātrikas* were recited. Now *mātrikas* are those aphorisms on which the present abhidhamma is founded. If the abhidhamma was not actually recited in this First Council then it is credible that abhidhamma is a later development of the mātrikas contained in the *Sutta pitaka* as some scholars suggest.

The teaching so rehearsed by the elders of the Council was transmitted through oral tradition and the monks who formed links in this tradition have been identified today. Upāli who was the chief exponent of *Vinaya* was succeeded by Dāsaka, Sonaka, Siggava and then Moggaliputta who presided over the Third Council held during Asoka. Then follow in succession Mahinda, the famous missionary who brought Buddhism to Ceylon and his pupils—Ittiya, Uttiya, Sambala, Bhaddasāla, and Ariṭṭha who was the first in the Sinhalese tradition. The last in the tradition was Siva, probably the president of the Fourth Council held in Ceylon during the reign of Valagamba (at Aluvihare).

The second and third councils (held under Kālāsoka and Dharmāsoka, 100 years and 236 years after Buddha respectively) have raised much

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controversy as historical incidents. The reason is the fusion of the two kings Kālāsoka and Dharmāsoka into one according to the tradition of Northern Buddhists. Husien Tsiang who mentions only Dharmāsoka puts him 100 years after the Buddha and Vasumitra carries the confusion too far by saying that after 100 years of Buddha's death under Asoka in Pātaliputra the first schism of the Mahāsānghikas took place at the council. But it is an historical fact beyond dispute that Dharmāsoka of Pātaliputra ascended the throne about 214 years after Buddha. With regard to the causes that led to the holding of these councils and their venue there is more agreement between Northern and Theravada accounts. The chronological errors are, however, of little importance in our ascertaining the authenticity of the Canon, and that these two councils did take place, in spite of the assertion of certain scholars to the contrary, is I believe a trustworhty statement.

Thus the Mahāvansa account that the second council was held 100 years after the Buddha during the reign of Kālāsoka may be regarded as historically true. It was at this Council that the progressive monks seceded and formed a canon of their own, which was to develop later into the Mahāyāna school.

At the third Council held during Asoka the Canon was finally fixed as we find it today, and how far it differed from, or agreed with, the reduction of the First Council none can say. But that the *abhidhamma pitaka* had grown in size and importance is evidently clear from the inclusion into

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it of seven books, out of which one,—*Kathāvatthu*, was composed by Moggaliputta the president of the Council and incorporated into the Canon as a text.

It was this Canon rehearsed and sanctioned by the Third Council that Mahinda and his fellow missionaries brought to Ceylon and on which Mahinda himself is said to have written commentaries in the language of the island, (*dīpabhāsa*) the Sinhalese. And for nearly five centuries this Canon was transmitted orally until it was commited to writing during the time of Valagamba, as the Mahāvansa says, which probably is an exaggeration. The Canon was no doubt transmitted orally until this time but to say that the Canon did not exist in book form prior to the Aluvihare Council is incredible. Mahinda is said to have brought not only the Pali Canon but its commentaries as well. Now, the nature of subject matter of these commentaries preclude the possibility of their being handed down orally. Perhaps what happened at Aluvihare Council was that the Canon was merely rehearsed and the commentaries thereon were systematised and rewritten. Still later when Buddhaghosha arrived here in the fifth century these commentaries were translated from Sinhalese into Pali and the former were consequently superseded by his works and fell into disuse.

Such is the history and nature of the Canon and its materials as revealed by the most authentic records we possess today. Obviously it was the product of accumulations of various materials drawn from different sources through many centuries. And it is probable as some critics point out,

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that numerous utterances which cannot be directly attributed to the Buddha were added by the disciples at the councils. This is openly acknowledged in certain texts where it is said that some suttas have been included by disciples like Sāriputta and Mahākaccāyana. But that these disciples were impregnated with the spirit of the Master there is no question. Most of them we are told, were arahats who had realised the Truth like the Master himself. Secondly we cannot ignore the fact that the Canon was formed immediately after, or within two centuries of, Buddha's death. And it is unlikely that interpolations and distortions crept in so soon when memories of the Master's teaching were still fresh in the minds of the disciples. The repetitions so common in the Canon were probably included in order to assist the reciters in memorising the sometimes long and archaically composed passages.

The commentaries, however, contain passages which appear contrary to the original teachings of Buddha. But even here it would be unfair to question the good intentions of those disciples and carry our scepticism too far. Since these commentaries were the products of later centuries whatever interpolations therein must be viewed not as deliberate distortions designed to misguide the devotees, but as the natural and inevitable outcome of centuries of development. Thus the Pali Canon would give us a true record of the Buddhaword if it is read with searching and critical eyes—a truer record than the Dialogues of Plato would give us of his master, Socrates.

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Spread of Religion

We saw earlier that Buddhist religion arose as a simple ethical movement in the fifth century B.C. Perhaps during the lifetime of Buddha it did not spread beyond the mainland except to Ceylon, which tradition says, was blessed by the three visits of Buddha himself (*Mahāvansa*). According to information gathered from pitakas it was known all over India within the first decade or two—from Gandhara and Kamboja in the extreme north to countries of the south, and from Magadha its original home to Ujjain in the West. But it was two centuries later i.e. after the Third Council, that Buddhism met with extraordinary success as a world religion under the patronage of Asoka, whose reign is described by Wells as one of the brightest interludes in the troubled history of mankind. This Constantine of the East imbued by the lofty ideals of Buddhist religion abandoned his pervious career as a territorial conqueror and pursued the nobler conquest through virtue (*dharmavijaya*); and by reconciling statecraft with the benign principles of Buddhism he showed to the world what a tremendous force religion could be as a movement of social, ethical, and even political reform. To disseminate the sublime teachings of that unique religion which transformed his entire career, Asoka sent missionaries to all the countries of the then known world and it was the mission to Ceylon that became the most fruitful one of all.

Later Buddhism was banished from the land of its birth when the Moslems conquered India in the 13th century A.D. and the sparks of religion carried

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to distant lands kindled a variety of culture and civilisation. Whilst in other countries the essential teachings of Buddhist religion were absorbed by native cultures and traditional cults and creeds, in Ceylon it is said to have remained intact; and even today after a lapse of two milleniums Ceylon is famed as having preserved in its pristine form, the word of the Buddha. We shall, therefore, confine our discussion to a brief survey of the history of Buddhism in Ceylon and its cultural contributions.

There is not a shadow of doubt about Mahinda's mission to Ceylon as an historical fact, for it is specifically mentioned in Asoka's own edicts. Apart from the Mahavansa account of it further proof is now made available by excavations at Sanchi. Here it is mentioned in inscriptions on plates that Asoka sent Mahinda to the island of Ceylon. The famous rock of Mihintale situated eight miles to the north of Anuradhapura city marks the meeting place of this missionary and the contemporary king Devanampiyatissa to whom the first sermon was delivered. Like other sacred spots in the island it has assumed a profundity and sacredness today; and devotees in their thousands flock to this huge rock every year to pay their homage to the greatest saint of the island.

Growth of Culture

This official, introduction of Buddhism to Ceylon was the transplanting here, not merely of a new faith, but a sublime culture as well which, for two hundred centuries enriched the island in many ways—socially, culturally, and politically and helped the production of a voluminous literature

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that drew to this island scholars from every part of the world. It is the history and expansion of that culture that is enshrined in the Pali chronicle, Mahāvansa.

By the time Mahinda arrived here the country enjoyed a certain amount of peace and prosperity; and by the earlier infiltration of Indian culture the soil was already prepared for the acceptance of a religion suited to the character of its peoples. Hence we find Mahinda given a warm reception by the natives whose zeal and enthusiasm helped the new culture to take firm root and grow rapidly. In no time the country became the scene of intense religious and spiritual activity. Men and women from all walks of life entered the order. To cater to the growing need for knowledge temples and centres of learning sprang up everywhere which, in addition to the imparting of knowledge produced literatures of immense value.

State Patronage

The kings were equally zealous in the study and propagation of religion; it was their munificence that enabled the simple teachings to grow into a mighty culture and national faith. The Mahavansa gives interesting accounts of the devotion and deep respect with which the new religion was fostered by the Sinhalese dynasty of kings—from Devānampiyatissa to Mahasen, and these sound sometimes like fairy tales. King Tissa who arrived late at Mihintale to listen to a sermon delivered by Buddharakkhita Thera, stood outside the preaching hall like a commoner lest the audience may be disturbed by his unexpected entrance. With wrapt

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attention he followed every syllable of the sermon which lasted the whole night. In the morning he was identified and after a discussion with the preacher he offered the throne to the Doctrine (*dhamma*). His predecessor Gāmini assumed the role of a preacher himself and delivered a sermon to monks of the Brazen Palace. Others like Parākramabāhu III, Matvala Sen, Kassapa V, and Aggabodhi I, were scholars and great patrons of art and some of their literary productions rank as works of great merit. It is but surprising to think how they devoted themselves to the pursuit of literary and cultural activity amidst the multifarious duties of state.

Together with the advancement of learning and culture the country made remarkable progress socially and economically too. To cater to the needs of a growing population the kings devoted the resources of the island to its economic development. To facilitate and encourage agricultural projects tanks were built in their hundreds, the kind of which is never recorded in the history of another nation. Experts today who examine the ruins of these works marvel at the engineering skill and industrial talent possessed by the Sinhalese during that period remote from science and technology.

The country was self-sufficient, and even exported its staple food rice to foreign lands. In industries too no little progress was made. For the village which was the unit of the social fabric founded on a co-operative basis supplied all its wants within its own guilds. It is surprising that the teachings of a religion described by some as 'passive' and 'cold' or highly intellectual, should have thus incited a

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people into action, and helped the achievement of unlimited worldly progress. With regard to morals too the lives of early Sinhalese were equally exemplary for, a religion that treasured nobility of character above everything else must have exerted a profound influence on their spiritual life. It is said that a maiden bedecked with valuable ornaments from head to foot was able to walk alone unmolested by any, from one corner of the island to its other. It was the basic code of Buddhist ethics—the Five Precepts (*pañca sīla*) that also served as the basis of their culture. Crime and other social evils that characterise present day society were never heard of; drink though not unknown at the time was however not consumed on such a large scale as today. Historians like Robert Knox and Paul E. Peiris have paid glowing tributes to the ancient Sinhalese for their sober and amicable ways and attributed it to none other than temperance.

But this peace of mind which the early Sinhalese enjoyed in their little island home was shattered from time to time, and the cultural edifice which they patiently built through centuries of labour was continually raked to the earth by the periodical invasions of foreigners. The earliest of such invasions took place in the first century B.C. when Elāra with a band of Tamils siezed the Sinhalese throne, and then followed the ceaseless struggle of the Sinhalese and the Tamils for political supremacy which laid waste a great part of the island, and ruined its economic treasures and cultural progress. Nevertheless for the loss caused by these

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foreigners, they brought also a certain amount of civilising influence which enriched our island in some measure.

Inspired by the teaching of *kamma* which taught them to overcome evil with good, and violence with non-violence, the Sinhalese ever remained a peaceful people contended with their lot. Never in history did they invade other lands and plunder foreign property or seek territorial expansion by power of arms. But when the foreigners ruthlessly destroyed their religious treasures which they protected at life's cost, their rage knew no bounds. Gāmini's historic battle against the Tamils was, as the Mahāvansa says, led by arahats who are supposed to be perfect embodiments of *mettā* and *karunā*. Gajabāhu (Elephant-armed) seething with anger against the Cholian invasion made during his predecessors time invaded that country with a large army and brought back as revenge twelve thousand prisoners. Many other kings like Valagamba, Parakramabahu, Vijayabahu etc, spared no pains to repair the loss caused by foreigners and resorted to the power of arms. It was their intense love for religion and devotion to truth that kindled in their minds patriotic qualities of courage and pride in addition to the sober qualities of the heart.

The influence of the clergy was quite obvious even in the political life of the country. Most often it was on the decision of the sangha that the rightful heir to the throne was chosen when there were many claimants. And the rulers thus chosen looked upon the monks as advisers in matters of state administration, and in turn extended state patro-

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nage to religion where necessary. But this also had an unfortunate result on religion, for, when a rival claimant to the throne triumphed he left no stone unturned to avenge the clergy who opposed him.

Such an incident occurred during the reign of Mahasen who, unfortunately accepted heresy at the repeated request of his friend Sanghamitta, one of the leaders of Abhayagiri fraternity. The latter succeeded in poisoning the king's heart against the Mahāvihara monks and urged him to destroy them. The king accordingly ordered that whosoever feeds the monks of the Mahāvihara shall be fined. The people obeyed the royal decree. The orthodox monks were persuaded to accept the heresy by the king but they declined to do so. On the fourth day of the royal declaration the Mahāvihara monks nearly starved to death assembled together and made the bold decision unanimously: "Even though we starve to death we cannot concede that heresy is true doctrine. Should we do so many others would follow us and the guilt would be upon us. Let our lives and our asceticism be imperilled we persist in refusing to adopt the vaitulya doctrines". Thus resolving they left their monasteries and journeyed to the other parts of the island whilst the valuable literature they left behind were siezed by heretical monks and reduced to ashes. The incident reveals no doubt how self-sacrificing and courageous the orthodox monks were in preserving the purity of their religion. It is amidst such storms and stress of life that the monks of Buddhist religion saved for posterity the sparks of that mighty culture which lay smouldering in their monasteries for two hundred centuries.

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Decline

Comparing the present with the past—Do those lofty ideals of Buddhist religion that inspired us in the past still influence us in our private and social life, in our art, literature and politics? Are the teachings of Buddhism still a living force in this country?

There is a tendency on the part of many today to escape from reality by attributing the decline of Buddhist religion in this country to the three hundred years of Western rule. It is partly true that the Western rule was responsible for weakening Buddhist influence in this country but there were presumably other factors more significant that were working slowly and steadily to undermine religion. One such factor was the disunity among the sangha itself. We have seen above how during the reign of king Mahasen lack of unity in sangha led to one of the most unfortunate events and wrought incalculable loss to religion. It is no wonder that when a people become divided destructive influences set in, and such people become easy victims to external aggression. This is true of nations and races more so of religions and monastic institutions.

Perhaps due to the vicious influences of a commercial and intensely materialistic society, Buddhist religion today seems to have shed its original lustre, its pristineness and sanctity. Secular influences have made inroads into its precincts in spite of the fact that it has not entirely ceased to be a source of inspiration to the votary.

It is sad to note that Buddhism is no longer an essential or indispensable part of the modern social

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organism; its services are no longer essential for the exercise of political authority or other social activities. The services of the sangha are confined to mere preaching and performance of spiritual duties among villagers; in the higher social level or political sphere sangha have ceased to be a source of significance because their ancient mode of life and traditions are out of tune with the needs of a commercial and scientifically advancing world. The educational and other social services institutions are no longer in the hands of Buddhist monks; they are owned and managed by non-Buddhist bodies. Thus there are no objectives that inspire Buddhist monks and stimulate them into action. In a society which has relegated them to the background monks have become lethargic and in such circumstances it is no wonder if corruptions have made their way into the order. These are, however, unhappy signs of a decaying religion whose hold on the nation seem to be gradually loosening and if it does loosen completely like the stem of a withered leaf from its stalk, the country may be plunged into darkness.

Whether Buddhism is becoming outdated in a scientifically advancing world or not, the fact that the life of the present day sangha is becoming day by day out of tune with modern society is abundantly clear.

In the past Buddhist clergy occupied a prominent place in the country because their services were indispensable for the smooth functioning of the then rural society. The monastery was not merely the spiritual centre that disseminated religious

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knowledge but the educational institution as well which catered to the needs of the villager in day to day life. Whilst the ruler patronised, the monks of the village fostered arts and culture. The village dancing troupe and its artists and physicians, its astrologers and craftsmen, all received their training and education within the walls of the monastery. As a result the intimacy between the clergy and laity was strengthened. This intimacy was loosened with the infiltration of foreign influences. And since the clergy too failed to adapt themselves to changes in society introduced by such infiltration they naturally became relegated to the background. The new system of education and political authority weakened their power at a time when corruptions within had already set the order on the road to decline. Eventually the culture and traditions which they protected were superseded by the new one imported from the West.

Today the Buddhist clergy has ceased to be a vital force in society; they are still bound by ancient rules of *vinaya* which have little significance today, while the world moves on rapidly. The path of detachment and dispassion they are pledged to follow in the long run, seem to conflict with the path of the new world of socio-economic changes; either they should cast aside those ancient mode of conduct or adapt themselves to new changes in society, in order to avert natural death.

Of course the code of *vinaya* cannot be set aside as entirely unimportant as it forms an indispensable part of religion from an ecclesiastical point of view. But should the rules of vinaya be adhered to blindly

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and mechanistically without due regard to their true significance or real value?

The *vinaya* was a code laid in conformity to the needs of a society that flourished two thousand years ago. Buddha knew that if his order was to survive conformity to existing social convention, and custom was essential; that was the cement which held the structure of religion from crumbling.

"Whatever the learned in the world, agree upon as 'It is not' I, too monks, say of that, 'It is not'. Whatever the learned in the world agree upon as 'It is' I, too, monks, say of that, 'It is'. . . ."

This respect for social convention was however confined to, and limited by, his ethical objective. When Devadatta requested Buddha to permit monks to partake of flesh Buddha refused because he saw danger in giving monks such unbridled liberty. But when monks and lay disciples urged for laxity of conduct such as will not harm the good life (*brahmacariya*) Buddha unhesitating gave his permission.

The monks were at first advised to stitch their robes out of rags cast in cemeteries and their possessions were to be very few; later at the request of laymen who wished to offer new robes to monks, the Master had to modify the earlier rule. When more robes were offered monks used to throw them here and there, and the need arose for the appointment of a particular monk who was entrusted with the task of accepting the robes offered by laymen. Still later another monk had to be appointed for distributing the accepted robes among sangha as

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the latter used to quarrel among themselves while distributing robes.

When a monk from Avanti remarked that some of the rules laid down in Madhyadesa were difficult to be observed in his own country owing to differences of climate and public opinion Buddha permitted a relaxation of those rules in lands out of Madhyadesa. The uposatha ceremony (fortnightly gathering of monks) was directly modelled on the ceremony of uposatha vogue among brahmins of the day. The destruction of plant life was forbidden because monks at the time were reproached by followers of Jaina sect who believed that plant life is identical with human life and that destruction of it was a sinful act. These apparently trivial matters were important as far as the perpetuation of monastic life was concerned; it was a question of adaptation and survival or stagnation and death.

The *vinaya* was thus a gradual growth necessitated by the complexities introduced into the order when the clergy grew in number; it is not a rigid code inflexible, like that of the ancient Stoics. And we know that Buddha granted permission to Ānanda at his death bed, to abrogate when necessary the minor rule of vinaya, with the consent of sangha. This question was debated on at the First Council but since the monks could not unanimously agree as to what specifically these minor rules are, they decided to follow the original code without making any alteration whatsoever. It will be clear therefore, the strict observance of rules without due regard to their significance is not what the Master expected of his disciples.

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Buddhism as a higher religion cannot be modified to suit the needs of changing times and society; the essence of teaching, the 'esoteric' truths cannot be changed without thereby causing damage to original purity. But that the external form of religion —the church, clergy, ritual and ceremony should be in harmony with the varying conditions and requirements of society is, a necessity. For without such change and adaptation the roots that sustain a religion in society will inevitably decay.

Whither are We Faring?

In the long perspective of world's history we see how nations and empires rose to heights of power and supremacy and faded away into oblivion leaving not a rack behind. One wonders considering the trend of world events today if similar catastrophes are ahead of our nations and civlisations.

A plant cannot survive unless its roots delve deep into the soil. Similarly individuals and nations must have their roots in something deeper than mere social convention or worldly progress. That deeper basis was provided in the past by the cultural mould in which nations were cast and consequently the rise and fall of nations depended on the strength and weakness of their respective cultural foundations.

Buddhist culture and religion were the stout roots that sustained the Eastern countries from time immemorial; for centuries as we saw earlier, that culture was protected from the cupidity of vandals, and from the ravages of time.

But today a new enemy has reared its head in the guise of scientific materialism which threatens all religions, and consequently the plants that grew

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on those roots of Buddhist culture are apparently withering for want of sunlight and air, although the roots are there as fresh and lively as they were in the past.

To a war-ridden modern world Buddha's lofty message—the cultivation of right approach which leads to right understanding, offers a sure remedy. The approach of narrow-mindedness of nations has already fostered mutual suspicion and fear, and darkened the international horizon. This state of things cannot be altered by science or philosophy because the approach of neither is adequate as real solutions. The remedy offered by Buddhism is based on a correct diagnosis of the case; Buddhism points out that selfishness (craving) as the basic reality of existence—is at the root of all evil—individual, national, and international. And only by destroying this cause or craving will the effect disappear totally. Where total destruction is not possible the suppression of it even to a considerable degree leads to the peace and happiness men yearn for.

If the Buddha's teaching that material progress is only a means and never an end is recognised by nations they will surely try to secure material resources only in proportion to the needs of their people instead of accumulating these in abundance at the expense of others which leads to mutual war and competition.

Marx believed in the supremacy of matter, and therefore, of the need for socio-economic reform. But Buddha would say with Nicholas Roerich that real peace comes by *stilling the roar of the heart* instead of by external reform; all reform must

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proceed from within not from without. The rampant pessimism among nations, the unrests and conflicts that characterise modern social and private life, in spite of the amenities of luxurious living introduced by scientific discoveries, is proof enough of the truth of above statement.

"Monks", said the Buddha, "When the ruler of a country is just and good, the ministers become just and good,; when the ministers are just and good, the higher officials become just and good; when the higher officials are just and good, the rank and file become just and good; when the rank and file become just and good, the people become just and good".

To a war-ridden world shrouded in ignorance and misery the philosophy and religion of the Buddha has a deep significance—whether the world will accept it or reject it. Buddhism can foster mutual love and goodwill and thereby bring about the peace and understanding the world so sorely needs today.

Many seem to think that the problems of the world are merely economic, but very few perceive the moral and spiritual unrest lurking beneath these problems. It is no doubt futile to teach religion to a starving man; he must be fed clothed and housed above everything else. But that alone is not the final solution, and in the long run it is the moral and spiritual progress of man that counts. In this afternoon of our civilisation mankind will have to decide on how best to achieve that balance between material and spiritual progress or else 'the afternoon may be followed by evening and then by the shades of night'.

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