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BUDDHISM AS WORLD RELIGION



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BY

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**MAHA BODHI SOCIETY,
Dharmapala Road,
Sarnath, Banaras.**

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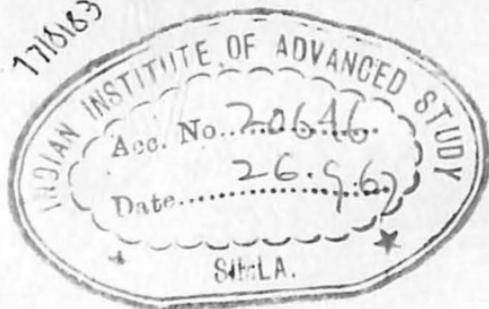


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Published by Bhikkhu M. Sangharatana Secretary,
Maha Bodhi Society, Sarnath, Banaras.

Printed by M. D. Gupta,
at the Time Table Press, Banaras.

11/15/63



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294.3
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In honour of the revered memory of
Sri Devamitta Dharmapala.
Founder of the Maha Bodhi Society,
and
Mrs. MARY FOSTER
this pamphlet is dedicated and offered on
the anniversary of their Birthday,
in the hope that it may
help in some small
way to
further the cause of Buddhism,
to which the Anagarika
Dharmapala devoted
his life.

*Sabbapāpassa akaraṇaṃ kusalassa upasampadā
Sacittapariyodapanam etaṃ Buddhāna sāsauāṃ.*

Abstention from all evil, fulfilment of all good:
purification of one's thought--this is the Doctrine of the
Buddhas.

Dhammapada. (Buddhavaggo. 183)

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambuddhassa

BUDDHISM AS WORLD-RELIGION



There are many indications of an awakening interest in Buddha Dhamma, as a system of ethics and a philosophy in keeping with modern thought, and suitable for present day needs. Outside Buddhist countries, this awareness is showing itself in various movements for the study and propagation of Lord Buddha's teaching, and more and more thinking people are turning towards it for a solution of the many problems that perplex them.

To understand the diverse factors at work in the world to-day, to obtain a clear picture of the involved pattern that life has taken, is no simple task. Often the issues confronting the individual are so obscure that the distinction between right and wrong action is far from obvious. It requires a disciplined mind, with a firm anchorage in the unchanging verities, as distinct from local and contemporary fashions of thought, to move with certainty and freedom between the conflicting currents, within and without. A certain clearly-defined attitude to life is essential, and it must be one that is founded equally upon reason and goodwill.

The present era is one of transition and upheaval; but this is true also of every era that has preceded it. Like everything else, values change, and to seek for any constancy throughout history is to seek in vain. The sole difference lies in our increased capacity to bring about world-wide tragedy out of such upheaval. The prevailing mood is one of disillusion, scepticism and mistrust of everything except that which can be seen and handled. It is materialism without the background of even a materialist philosophy, and its cause lies in the failure of religion to keep pace with independent thought in the more educationally advanced nations of the world.

Rationalism alone is only sufficient for the small minority who are capable for ordering their lives on an ethical basis, as did Confucius, without enquiry into the rationale of morality. For there is a point beyond which reason alone will not carry us. As Pascal has said, "The final stage of reason is to know that there are an infinity of things that transcend it." Nevertheless, reason must not be out-regarded: to abandon reason is to embark upon an unexplored ocean whose further shore is not Truth but the fantasies of mental derangement. This is the danger that besets the followers of Bhakti cults, leading them into extravagancies of conduct and belief that are repugnant to commonsense.

It is time that we, who believe Lord Buddha's middle way of Enlightenment to contain the remedy for this century's ills, asked ourselves on what we base our claim for Buddhism as universal religion, and, having examined that claim in a spirit of impartiality, proclaimed its message with a fearless spirit. What exactly does Buddhism offer that other religions lack? That is the question that must be answered.

The value of a religion shows itself nowhere more clearly than in the collective life of those who profess it. Religion can be the most active power for good within that life, or it can be a mere formalised convention. In the first degree it acts as a unifying element, in the second it tends to split the community. For many years past, religion in the west, with the possible exception of the catholic countries, been degenerating into the latter classification. Catholic countries have remained an exception to this simply because they have contained a greater proportion of illiterates, people who have been cut off from the advancing thought around them, and have been hedged in by priestly dogmas and mental of being told what they may and may not believe. This system has preserved unity of a sort, but there are very few people outside the Papal Jurisdiction who would agree that it is a desirable form of unity, or who would willingly submit to its mental inhibitions except as a last resort from the abyss of intellectual despair. The most important of all the much talked-of freedoms is the freedom to use the intellect to its utmost capacity. Without that every thing else is but a travesty of freedom.

A religion, to fit the modern outlook, must be one that does not depend upon restriction of thought to maintain its hold on the minds and hearts of its followers. In Europe, religion has suffered the utmost stretching of its doctrines in a vain attempt to keep abreast of increasing knowledge. Bit by bit the old concepts have been discarded, until christianity has been stripped of nearly everything that was once thought essential to it, including most of the ideas that people were once ruthlessly condemned to the stake for daring to question. Thus religion has been found wanting, and the great mass of people, besides that much-abused class known as the intelligentsia, have become indifferent to all the religious formulæ foisted upon them in their defenceless childhood.

Despite this, the need for religion in some form remains. So strong is it that people are frequently driven to it by their own intense inner craving, regardless of the fact in doing so they are forced to accept dogmas that their intelligence rejects. This in turn gives rise to further internal conflict, which the individual has to resolve as best he can. There are then two alternatives open to him: one is to strengthen himself to do without religion altogether, which often results in a drying-up of the finer emotions and idealisms; the other is to stifle the criticism of the mind, and thereby commit intellectual suicide. The position for such a person is indeed an unhappy one. He is unable to reconcile his spiritual needs with the dictates of reason, and he falls victim to mental anarchy. It is not surprising that this state reflects itself to his life and action and on a broader scale projects itself into the society of which he and his kind form the majority.

Such is the state of thing in Europe to-day. Religion has become synonymous with all that is reactionary and opposed to the rational faculty in man. But the scientific outlook has become too firmly established to give way. There can be no return to a mediæval religious dominance. What, then, is to take its place? Philosophy, in the restricted sense in which it is understood in the West, as having its beginning and end in the Greek schools and their Germanic derivatives is looked upon as a matter of academic interest only. It is not thought of as having any applicability to life as it has

to be lived. The tendency to regard all such speculations as mere archaic survivals is an unfortunate one, since it transfers to a purely materialistic sphere all those activities of the mind that have served to elevate man, the "thinking freed", from a state of spiritual serfdom. The scientific approach is in itself a healthy one, in that it takes nothing for granted. It does not strive to make out a case to fit some preconceived theory, but ventures boldly upon unknown seas in quest of a truth it dimly feels to lie some where beyond the farthest horizon. What is needed in the world to-day is a religion or philosophy which will provide chart and compass for the spiritual voyage; one that will serve as a basis for conduct, yet not attempt to restrict the adventurous mind of man within the prison walls of superstition and mythology. The need can be filled in all its requisites by a proper understanding of Buddha-Dhamma, because Lord Buddha fostered the spirit of enquiry in the minds of His disciples by His frequent exhortations to accept nothing on authority, even His own, but to seek inwardly along the lines He prescribed, and to test every proposition by the principles of rationalism or right thinking.

Lord Buddha preached a doctrine of liberation, and it is notable that ideal of perfection He laid down is one that teaches self-reliance above all else. The Noble Eightfold path of Right Understanding, Right Mindedness, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Recollectedness and Right Concentration is a sublime proclamation of man's freedom to work out his own destiny by means of his Karma, independent of the whims of a capricious god. From the time when He laid down the first principles of His Doctrine in the Anatta Lakkhana sermon at Holy Isipatana, to the last exhortation delivered to His disciples before His Parinibbana, 'Be unto yourselves a refuge; seek no external refuge. All compound things are impermanent. Strive with earnestness,' the emphasis was always upon self-culture. He elevated man to the highest pinnacle of self-responsibility, thereby investing him with the dignity of complete liberty to work out his own Karmic weal or woe. The Eightfold Path, together with the Five precepts of a layman, to abstain from taking

life: to abstain from theft; to abstain from unlawful sexuality : to abstain from harsh and untruthful speech, and to abstain from mind destroying intoxicants and drugs, presents a pattern of living that for simplicity and completeness surpasses all others. He taught the path to the destruction of suffering, and it followed of necessity that to refrain from the infliction of suffering on any living thing was the highest virtue.

"All tremble before the rod; all fear death. Putting oneself in the place of another, one should neither strike nor slay."

Dhammapada.

Universal appreciation of this truth alone would free the world from the nightmare oppression of war. In his "Soul of a people," H. Fielding Hall says:

"There can never be a war of Buddhism. No ravished country has ever borne witness to the prowess of followers of Buddha : no murdered men have poured out their blood on their hearth-stones, killed in His name : no ruined women have cursed His name to high heaven. He and His faith are clean of the stain of blood. He was the preacher of the Great Peace, of love, of charity, of compassion, and so clear His Teaching that it can never be misunderstood."

"So clear is His Teaching that it can never be misunderstood" There is the stark and inescapable fact Lord Buddha taught without reservation and without ambiguity. But it should not be imagined because of this that Buddhism is a creed of passive acceptance of evils, or of escape from the responsibilities of living. Far from it. In the Ten Paramitas or Supreme perfections of Buddhism we are presented with a virile and positive doctrine with which to confront and overcome the forces of evil. The Ten Paramitas are : Charity, Virtue, Renunciation, Wisdom, Energy, Forbearance, Truthfulness, Resolute Determination, Loving Compassion and Equanimity. Many are the tales of courage and resourcefulness given in the Buddhist scriptures to illustrate these qualities. The Buddha realised them all in Himself, and by their means arrived through His own effort at the goal of His striving. As Bodhisatta

He shared His merit with all sentient creatures; as Buddha He revealed, for the good of all, the path by which He had arrived.

Avoiding all extremes, Buddha Dhamma represents the middle Way of sanity and self-mastery. It demands nothing in the way of conduct that is contrary to good sense or derimental to physical and mental health. The body is important in that it is the vehicle of the mind, and the mind is the instrument of liberation. The mind alone defiles or purifies itself, and it must function healthily as the first essential to progress.

It is sometimes asserted, often by those whose knowledge should give them better understanding, that Buddhism is pessimistic. This presumably arises from its insistence upon Dukkha, Suffering, as an essential constituent of being. But surely no one would take so one-sided a view of existence as to deny the inevitability of suffering? Without recognising the existence of suffering in the world, all religions would be superfluous—life would need no antidote. By their very nature they seek to give a haven from the suffering that surrounds and threatens every living creature. Buddhism could only be justly accused of a pessimistic attitude if it taught that there is no way out of the net of suffering. But there is a way out, and Buddhism sets it forth clearly, as being available to everyone. Why then is Buddhism accused of being pessimistic? Christianity teaches its followers to regard themselves as miserable sinners, “born to sorrow as the sparks fly upward,” and so helpless in the face of their sinfulness and misery that they can only be saved by a vicarious atonement, and not in any way by their own efforts. Surely this view is infinitely more pessimistic, especially for those millions who happen to have been born outside the pale of the Christian “elect,” than the Buddhist creed of universal hope. It would indeed be difficult to find any religion, except the early paganism of Greece, which disregarded the reality of suffering. Suffering is all about us, and the creed of everything being for the best, in the best of all possible worlds” may have been satisfactory to an eighteenth-century Pangloss, but can hardly be said to commend itself to a thoughtful man. Yet because of this, are

all those who refuse to subscribe to the facile optimism of "God's in his heaven, all's well with the world" to be condemned as pessimists? There is no special virtue in being unable to face facts.

All existence is a process of change and becoming. Empty phenomena continually unfold themselves before our eyes. A true understanding of their nature, as being transitory and without essence, relieves the mind of craving and thus of the suffering that arises from it. Just as we can realise a solid object as being composed of atoms and electrons, moving in space, because modern physics tells us it is so, although we cannot see them, and further, can understand that in the final analysis there is no substance in the atoms and electrons, but only currents of pure energy, so it is possible to realise motivation without a motivator, objectivity without an object. Once this is grasped, the Buddhist doctrine of *Paicca Samuppaca*, or Dependent Origination, becomes clear. There is then no need to postulate an outside source of motivation, or any permanent substratum behind or within the procession of events. There is no need to imagine a creator or a soul. Such ideas are seen to be inconsistent with the logic of causation and in the illumination of this knowledge the conflict between science and religion comes to an end.

Buddhism is not revealed religion. It is the first example of the purely scientific approach as applied to questions of the ultimate nature of existence. The Vedas contained the seeds of the method, but they also had a tendency to make unjustifiable statements about the nature of god and the soul, and other matters that only exist in the realm of assumption. It was left to Lord Buddha to carry the system of scientific analysis to its logical conclusion without recourse to dogmatism. Amongst the religions of all ages this stands out as a unique phenomenon. The mind of Lord Buddha is the sole example of an absolutely timeless one, transcending His age and environment in a way that none other has done before or since. Hearing His voice across the centuries, mystic and rationalist alike recognise a kindred mind—the thoughts of an Elder Brother of mankind, who speaks direct to them, with a mess-

age for their own problems, delivered in the accents of authentic truth.

This absence of limitations of period and locality is the prime necessity in a religion which claims to have a universal application. Without it no creed can survive the onslaughts of criticism. The doctrines of Buddha Dhamma stand to-day, as unaffected by the march of time and the expansion of knowledge as when they were first enunciated. No matter to what lengths increased scientific knowledge can extend man's mental horizon, within the frame work of the Dhamma there is room for the acceptance and assimilation of further discovery. It does not rely for its appeal upon the limited concepts of primitive mind's nor for its power upon the negation of thought. Sakya Muni taught the doctrine of compassion and right living as truth capable of demonstration here and now. He taught the necessity for dispassion, and made its meaning clear to the point where all who had within them the capacity for understanding had to acknowledge it. In propounding the unique Anatta Doctrine, Lord Buddha at once placed His teaching on a higher level than that of any other. Where all religions have had to depend for their moral force on the imagined dictates of a self-conceived deity, a dogma open to every form of critical attack, Buddhism alone asserts the validity of moral values in the universe on a basis of cause and effect, and in so doing gives them a power and reality that no theology has succeeded in maintaining.

Revealed religions depend greatly upon their miraculous element : by that they stand or fall. But although the miraculous element is present in Buddhism also, its philosophy and ethics are in no way dependent upon the miraculous. Even stripped of every shred of the so-called miraculous, the Dhamma would still remain a complete cosmic doctrinal system in its own light. Science to-day is far from denying the possibility of miracles, as it once did, but the view of most scientific minds is that what are known as miracles are but manifestations of laws as yet unknown. Lord Buddha Himself expounded this view : to Him miracles were not in themselves to be regarded as demonstrations of truth, but showed only a mastery of little-known powers

that may be developed by the Yogin, whatever his views. There were no proof that their possessor was an enlightened being. This being so, He not only taught His followers to be wary in the exercise of any miraculous powers they might acquire, but also warned others not to be unduly impressed by such exhibitions. Thus, whereas other religions exploit their miraculous element to the greatest possible extent, with the intention of convincing the masses, Buddhism, treats all such things as of very minor importance. What matters all in Buddhism is the release from Samsara, and the method by which it is to be attained. Even morality is only significant in that it is an essential means to that end; yet this very reason the inculcation of morality is stronger in Buddhism than in any other faith. Buddhism recognises no escape from the consequences of evil-doing, save exertion in the sphere of good, whereas the Christian imagines he can bargain with his deity for the remission of sins, and the Muslim is persuaded that faith alone is sufficient to save him.

The psychological system of Buddhism is one more instance of its many points of contact with modern thought. Its conclusions are tending to be confirmed more and more. Strikingly as scientific investigation into the machinery of consciousness progresses. Psychoanalysis has not discovered any permanent element or unchanging principle in human consciousness. The Ego, on which the theory of personality and individual survival was based, is found to be non-existent. All that can be traced is a succession of mental states, a continuum formed progressions supervening upon, and conditioned by, one another, and subject to modification by all kinds of internal and external influences. As in physics, the static concept has given way to the dynamic, and the process is a parallel one. Nowhere is there evidence of any permanent reality behind the phenomena, or any change other than that existing in the nature of change from one state to another. In view of this it is inevitable that the Buddhist interpretation of causality must prevail? It is the only one that satisfactorily fits the facts as we know them. At the same time it provides the much-needed incentive towards well-directed effort and universal good-will without which civilisation must perish.

It has been rightly said that Buddhism of all religions is the farthest removed from paganism; in other words, it contains the civilised qualities in a more marked degree than any other. Compassion and self-control are the insignia of the civilised man; absence of greed, and knowledge of the true nature of impermanent things are what distinguish him from the savage. All faiths to some extent teach these truths, but in Buddhism alone is to be found their complete fulfilment.

The highest doctrine cannot be realised by all at the same time, but through elimination of the obstacles of ignorance attachment to self it may be attained ultimately by everyone. In this sense Buddhism knows neither distinctions nor superiorities. Only according a man's attainments is his worth measured by Buddhist, and all living creatures, since they possess the potentialities of Buddhahood are sacred to the followers of the Dhamma.

This is the message of hope that Buddhism offers the world, and the Buddhist asks nothing more than that the Doctrine should be given a hearing and judged impartially in the light of the highest standards of human thought. We offer it to the world in the sacred name of our Lord Buddha, the Compassionate. May the world listen and learn.

HOLY SIPITANA
Aug-Sept. 2494

