

WHY I AM A BUDDHIST

BY

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GERMAN BUDDHIST

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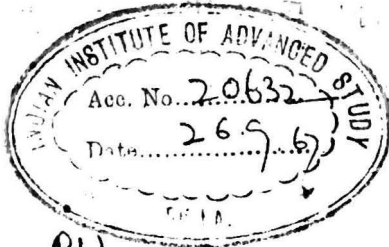
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1. The Buddha made no claim to be a superior being or to have got a revelation from such a one. Therefore everybody can go his way and follow his message, without being compelled to believe things which are unintelligible or inconsistent with the laws of nature. The Buddha did not hide himself behind transcendental mysteries but was encouragingly human, sincere and straightforward.

2. The Buddha did not promise heavenly pleasures and rewards to his followers nor did he promise salvation to those who had blind faith in him. To him religion was not a bargain but a way to enlightenment. He did not want followers with blind faith but *thinking* followers.

3. He had the courage—this is unique in the history of religion—to invite criticism and to submit his own teaching to the reason of his

followers, thus cultivating self-respect as the foundation of spiritual growth and freedom.

4. Because the Buddha cultivated self-respect he could teach respect towards others, *i.e.*, tolerance.

Buddhism was tolerant from its very beginning not on account of weakness or indifference, but on account of its inherent principle of spiritual freedom. One can say that there are two kinds of tolerance: a negative one, based either on weakness or on mental laziness (saying "alright, let them go, I cannot help it" and looking down upon the others as sinners and heathens) and a positive one, based on insight into the nature of human psyche and born by the wish to understand others.

5. The Buddha's teaching and its morality do not stop short with Man but include all living beings. This is a point that strongly appeals to every cultured mind. Let me quote a few words of the modern German philosopher, Prof. Hans Driesch, as an example: "Buddhism seems to me the most philosophical of all religions.—I can also say that some of my metaphysical convictions are in contact with

Buddhist ideas. Specially with regard to the idea of the unity of all living beings : All life is one, and all animals and plants are essentially the same as Man, only in a different form. Therefore the moral feeling should not find its limitation in Man but include all creatures.

Buddhism and Christianity have many similarities, and there is no reason for mutual enmity, but the idea of the unity of all living beings comes more into appearance in Buddhism.

Let us hope that Buddhist wisdom may come to us Westerners. How much do not the best of us wish to get rid of the restlessness of life. We need rest and concentration. That is in short : We need Buddhism.

6. The universality of the Dhamma holds good not only with regard to morality and ethics but includes the laws of nature. There is no such thing as a spiritual extra law or a privilege of a certain class of beings, neither is there room for the despotism or the 'mercy' of a Creator. The dhamma is the cosmic order, which is applicable to Man as well as to the universe, thus linking up the individual with the whole.

7. The universal attitude of Buddhism prevents dogmatism and narrow-mindedness.

There is no absolute moral code, which divides the world into 'good' and 'bad' or which tells you what you must do and what you are not allowed to do. Buddhist morality is based on freedom, *i.e.*, on individual development. It is therefore relative. In fact there cannot be any morality nor any ethical principle if there is compulsion or determination from an agent outside ourselves. Therefore the idea of a Creator and ruler of this world takes away the very foundation of morality and ethics; for how can we be made responsible for our faults if we have been created with them or in such a weak form that we cannot resist the evil.

8. Understanding the law of moral relativity the Buddhist will never look down upon others as 'sinners'. There is no such thing as 'sin' in Buddhism, and there is nobody essentially 'bad'. There is only more or less ignorance. Everybody acts according to his stage of development. What appears good to the one may be bad for the other. The higher an individual is developed the greater are—not his privileges but—his duties, (but the duties may be felt then as privileges). Therefore the Buddhist will not judge others but limit himself to the fulfilment of his

own duties, he will demand more from himself than from others. He will rather try to understand others than to force upon them his own moral ideas.

9. As the idea of sin is foreign to the Buddhist, he does not believe in eternal condemnation. Hell and heaven are within us and the possibility of salvation is open to all living beings.

10. Buddhism does not feed its followers with phantastic hopes for a paradise in another world, but points out a liberation which can be attained in this world and of which a foretaste can be experienced by meditation.

11. The Buddhist system of meditation, which is based on the most profound knowledge of psychology, does not only show the Aim but is a practical way to its realisation.

12. The idea of Karma combines justice and self determination. It gives a deeper meaning to the life of the individual, linking it up with past and future existences. It is the foundation of human dignity which saves Man from the nightmare of the arbitrariness of an external power.

13. Buddhism, unlike other religions, has nothing to fear from science. Quite on the

contrary, Buddhism encourages the spirit of research, without being afraid of results, because it is solely bent on truth—the strongest weapon which will conquer the world after the dogmas have gone.

These were the main points which appealed to me when I approached Buddhism and I think most of them appeal to every unprejudiced mind. But in order to get a fair picture of the situation we must also see the difficulties which a Non-Buddhist with modern Western education has to face.

The West either believes in the reality of the ego or in the reality of matter and the non-existence of the ego. In other words, the Westerner in general is either inclined to be a spiritualist or to be a materialist. Those who believe in the immortality of the ego cannot agree with the Anatta-idea of Buddhism, and those who agree with the Anatta-doctrine cannot conceive the idea of rebirth because to them the denial of an ego-entity means materialism. But Buddhism is neither materialism nor spiritualism: it is something quite different, quite unique—it does not believe in an ego-entity and yet it does not reject the *eternal* in Man. In

order to understand what this means we have to throw over board our old conceptions and labels and to start thinking anew.

The Buddha never said 'there is no soul' but only 'there is no eternal, *unchangeable* soul.'

Most people, when, using the word soul, simply mean the spiritual qualities of Man. If they hear of a doctrine of soullessness they will only take it for a form of materialism, and most of the religiousminded people will not even care to know anything about such a teaching. Soullessness is almost identical with dullness.

But Buddhism in reality teaches a lot about soul, Greek "psyche", in fact psychology is the characteristic of Buddhism. What the Buddha denied was a certain "Atman"—theory which taught that there is an unchangeable ego-substance, wandering from body to body until it is completely freed from the circle of existences. This theory made religion, an entirely egoistic affair, as everybody was only concerned with his personal salvation, and moreover it was philosophically untenable.

Thus when the Buddha spoke about "anatta" he did so with regard to a definite philosophical term of his time and not with regard to a popu-

lar expression such as "soul" which he himself used at certain occasions. And furthermore we have to keep in mind that the Vedas, resp. the Vedānta, were not a homogenous system of philosophy but a collection of various philosophical and religious ideas and that therefore the term Atman was used in different ways, even in literature and among orthodox Brahmanical scholars.

The "Mandukya-Upanishād says: "Atman is Brahman, this Atman has four padas", which suggests that, in the language of the Athanasian creed, none is greater or less than another, however different the modes may be.

Now since Brahman is—without quibble—the One and All, besides which (as we must say in English) Naught is,—though it is really the naught as well—Atman when "unqualified", is clearly *not only the Self but also the Not-self and likewise the relation between them*, as also the condition before Self and Not-self (to use the habitual antinomy) have separated. And *Self is really applicable to one of the "qualified" modes or padas.*" (Wallace).

But if we use the term "Self" indiscriminately for Atman and "Not-self" or "Soulless-

ness' for Anatman, then we confuse the whole problem, doing injustice to both : to Buddhism as well as Vedantism. We cannot compare the paramattha-vacana of one doctrine with the voharavacana of another doctrine, nor can we use the terminology of the one system to explain the other. If this is already the case between historically so closely connected systems as Buddhism and Hinduism, how much more must it be the case between Eastern and Western ideology.

“The main difficulty in understanding the old systems of philosophy lies in the very vague meanings which we attach to the fundamental words Ego, Soul, etc. which make the majority of translations almost useless for philosophical purposes.”

“All Dharmas are anatman”—in this connection anatman is “not-self” only in the “Tat tvam asi sense” of Atman, self. Hence though it is true to say that Sattvā, Atman, Jiva, Pudgala, are interchangeable, they are not at all identical, and are only interchangeable as being the different hypostasis of Sat on the different planes. So it is very extravagant of

words and also very misleading to assume that soul, ego self, individual, living being, conscious agent, are interchangeable terms, applicable to any and all of the four. With the possible exception of ego and self in some modern philosophical systems, they all convey far too diffuse a meaning, *being applicable to the santana of cause and effect while the sat, and mutatis mutandis the others, is the one infinitesimal point of equilibrium at each moment in the santana.*"† (Wallace).

These problems are not merely of a scholarly interest, but the future of Buddhism depends on their correct interpretation. They are in fact not only Buddhist problems but problems of the modern world. And just because Buddhism is able to solve these problems, I dare to say that Buddhism is *the* most modern religion. Probably some of my readers will think, I should have said, Buddhism *has* solved these problems already—I quite agree that it has done so—but it is my opinion that the faculty of solving problems means more than a solution completed in the past. What we need nowadays are not ready-made solutions—the world after

† Santana—continuity.

all is full of them, and there is no lack of revelations of truth—but we need the spirit of liberal and unconditioned investigation, which enables us to rediscover the truth by ourselves. Truth in itself is of no value, as long as we have not experienced it ourselves.

Among all the great founders of religion it is the Buddha alone—as I said in the beginning—who encouraged this spirit of investigation in his followers and warned them not to accept his teaching with blind faith. Therefore it is no exaggeration if I say that Buddhism is the only world religion than can be called modern or let us better say timeless, which means applicable to all times and to all circumstances on account of its inherent principle of actuality.

If I say this, I am not predicting that the whole world will turn to Buddhism. This is as impossible as to expect all the people of the world to become mathematicians because this science is timeless and therefore always “modern”. But just as mathematics will remain a constant factor in the intellectual life of Man thus Buddhism will become inseparable from the spiritual progress of humanity.

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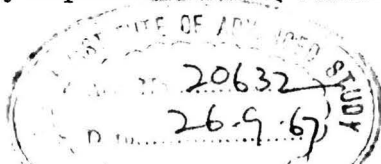
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