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## Buddhism and Ethics.\*

BUDDHISTS, and sympathetic writers on Buddhism, claim for the Dhamma of the Buddha that it is in line with the modern scientific standpoint. Its adherents, they say, need never fear that their faith having its basis in dogma, science its basis in hypothesis, they will ever find themselves called upon to choose between their religious faith and their scientific belief. Buddhism, they aver, would never have, with the Roman Church to impose, or, with other sections of the Christian world, to recommend, an Index Expurgatorius of books, in which science is shown to clash with revelation and established creed. It is even claimed that Buddhism is "the *only* religion which is *a priori* not in contradiction with the discoveries of science."†

Let us inquire into the justice of this claim, staying but a moment to lift out of the path two objections. "Just," the claim may well be, it might be said, if the name "religion" be denied to Buddhism as it is to science. Buddhism is only a body of moral doctrine. But it really makes no difference to the validity of the claim if one or more of the fundamental features in all other so-called religions be not found in the Dhamma. It should not be forgotten that, after all—to quote a Japanese Buddhist‡—"when a system or teaching becomes the principle or guidance of life to a person, that system or teaching *is the one and only religion to him.*" And Buddhism has long been this to millions. We need not argue about words in the face of facts.

Again, the justice of the claim is not wiped out by all the

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\* An address delivered to the Buddhist Society of Great Britain and Ireland, London, March 11th, 1908, condensed for this journal.

† P. Dahlke, *Buddhist Essays*; Narasu, *Essence of Buddhism*; Nietzsche, *Antichrist*; W. S. Lilly, *The Message of Buddhism in Many Mansions*.

‡ Rev. K. Uchida, *What is Religion? 'Buddhism a Religion?'*

myth and fairylore interpenetrating and bedraping the records of the founding and diffusion of Buddhism. In Fielding Hall's words: "If every supernatural occurrence were wiped out of the chronicles of the faith, Buddhism would . . . remain exactly where it is."\* The essential tenets would remain intact. And the myths were never imposed by authority as dogmas.

Calling Buddhism, then, what we will, and discounting the trappings in which love and superstition ever deck out the profoundly impressive things of life, we must still find that the claim advanced as to Buddhism and Science is very bold and far-reaching. Here is a doctrine that takes us back as far as the days of the very beginnings of Hellenic Science. For this doctrine it is claimed that it might have served, not to check or to ignore the discoveries of Copernicus and Bruno, Galileo and Newton, Darwin and Spencer, but to stimulate and inspire them. Not a guide that they might have adhered to from convention only, or appealed to now and again to reconcile the lay world with their discoveries and conclusions, but an oracle that would have spurred them on in their quest of Truth, saying: "Toil on! Think and fear not! Seek and proclaim! You are building my palace of Truth; my benison is on you!"

Well, it is one thing to talk about achievements of modern science and advance of modern thought, and another thing to claim *for this age in general* that it is imbued with the scientific spirit, or that the views and conduct of the average man or woman are governed thereby. This state of things is but in its infancy. But it is born, and is growing. Hence any movement of thought will have, more and more, to cope with the scientific spirit, and will stand or fall largely by its sanction. And hence all who call themselves Buddhists, or who are interested in spreading a knowledge of Buddhist doctrine or, at least, of the spirit of that doctrine, should look into this claim that is made for it. Those, again, whose interest lies in tracing the growth of human ideas, can in no wise feel indifferent to the real extent to which the ancient mind of India anticipated a standpoint

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\* *The Soul of a People.*

slowly and painfully won to by the intellect of Europe. In this inquiry there is one point of comparison to which I should like to direct your attention to-day.

If we look at what is commonly called science in a superficial way, heeding more the matter than the method, we seem, except in one respect, to be landed at the Antipodes of Buddhist thought. Like Socrates as compared with the Pre-Socratic thinkers, Buddhism views the universe through man, studying external nature only in so far as his ethical purpose and ideal were thereby advanced, and not as in itself of profound interest and ultimate utility. Even the remarkable efforts of Buddhism in psychological analysis were apparently made solely for an ethical purpose.

But if we turn from the objects, or subject-matter of science, and regard it as a method, and the scientific spirit as an attitude, we see we are at once brought up against the working of the mind, and, in the history of that working, may possibly find a bond, and a justification for the claim set forth above.

Now science, whether occupied with analysis or history, is reasoned, systematised knowledge; and things reasoned about or systematised, are, so far, things explained. Scientific explanation, to quote our text books, consists in so harmonising fact with fact, or fact with law, or law with law, that we may see both to be cases of one uniform law of Causation. Science is explaining in terms of causation. In other words, every thing, every observed unit of experience, every phenomenon is, in science, regarded as classified or classifiable, with reference to some other thing, unit or phenomenon, or group of phenomena, not identical with it, but *essential to its presence*. Calling the former thing, unit, or phenomenon, Y, and the latter, X, science says that (1) every Y has its X, and that (2) when to a Y is assigned its X, Y is causally, *i.e.* properly, explained.

In reminding you of this, I would also ask you to recollect that the foregoing scientific position is the modern, possibly not the final, stage in the evolution of the history of the

causal idea. It is not only a modern scientific dictum that the Causal Law covers the whole of experience—that *every* Y has its X. It belongs also to modern thought, to the last two centuries, that all idea of the Cause being, in itself and as such, a generative Power, a Maker, an irruptive Agent, is abandoned, and the Cause is reduced to an invariable, necessary, phenomenal antecedent, or group of antecedents. This is hardly yet recognised by the popular mind, and language will for long, perhaps always, perpetuate the older view, even in the case of impersonal forces, let alone that of personal agency. I mean that we shall go on saying the earth attracts the falling apple, as if the earth were honey and the apple a bee. Much more shall we continue to see generative power in house-building, child-bearing, and book-writing. Nevertheless, even as the Indian belief saw in the throes of parturition the blasts of the winds of Karma, so will the popular mind come to discern, in the personal cause, that *seems* so intrinsically generative and self-directing, the effect and outcome of a long stream of antecedent causes, governed by a universal law. For science anyway, at this time of day, all happening of any sort whatever, comes under the law of Causation: that every event is the result or sequel of some previous event or events, without which it could not have taken place, and which, being present, it must take place.

Now, I am not here concerned to compare this modern statement with such definitions of Causal Law as Europe inherited from the teaching of Aristotle. My task is to compare it with a doctrine that anticipated by some two hundred years anything that “the Master of those who know” could have himself enunciated. And it cannot but startle the self-complacency of the Occidental mind to see in the following formula, repeatedly put in the mouth of the Buddha by the compilers of the older parts of the Canon, so striking an anticipation of the Causal Law:—“That being thus, this comes-to-be. From the coming-to-be of that, this arises. That being absent, this does not come to be. From the cessation of that, this ceases. Such, bhikkhus, is the doctrine of happening by way of cause, and to this

the well-taught Aryan student thoroughly attends.”—  
(*Majjhima*, ii. 32; *Samyutta*, ii. 64, 65, etc.)

In this naïf, jejune schema of cause and effect there is no reading of our own consciousness of power or will to produce, to effect, into the antecedent. There is only the invariable necessary sequence given in our modern formula of causation, coupled with a converse statement well known to our modern logic of Induction. And this extraordinary prototype of the scientific method of our day does not occur as a momentary flash of insight in Buddhist doctrine; nor is it a hole-and-corner tenet. The view of causation which it sums up, permeates the whole of the Dhamma, as something that is grasped and felt as *the* central Truth. To see by way of the Causal Law is called the supreme condition of seeing aright—of, “by right insight, seeing things as they really have become.” It is the Causal Law that gives its central importance to the doctrine of the Chain, or Twelve (sometimes ten, or fewer) Bases, of Dependent Genesis. It is inquiry by way of causation that is set out in the central doctrine called the Four Aryan Truths. It is insight into a Causal Order, obtaining in the moral universe as surely as among the phenomena of the external world, that sweeps away the mists from the vision of the prevailing Bodhisat, and gains for him the supreme enlightenment of a Buddha. Gone for him are the great superhuman powers and agencies and providences, intervening at will in human destinies to bring joy or sorrow, success or failure, like Pallas and Hera before Troy. Ill, Pain, Sorrow in the world is simply the inevitable effect of natural causes. And Man himself, through knowledge and elimination of those causes can himself make Ill and Sorrow cease to be!

The fact that early Buddhism and modern Science express belief in a universal law of Causation in terms so similar, leads inevitably to the further inquiry, as to how far there is historical evidence that the evolution of this belief among early Buddhists was parallel to the corresponding evolution in Europe. The lack of continuity and of chronological certainty in the literatures of ancient India greatly hinder and complicate such an inquiry. But there

does survive a body of Brahmanical literature, an accretion of various dates, known as the Sixty Upanishads of the Veda, in which a form of Pantheism called Âtmanism or Vedântism is set forth, with mainly archaic views on what we term First, Final, and Occasional Cause. And we have the Pali Canon of the Buddhists, coinciding, it is thought, in date, with the middle period of these sixty books, and repudiating this Âtmanism, whether macrocosmically or microcosmically conceived.

To what extent Buddhism, as a lay, anti-Brahmanic anti-sacerdotal movement, originated the rejection of Âtmanism, or carried on a wider and older tradition of rejection, it is not possible to say. But the fact that the founders of Buddhism did, in leaving the world for the religious life, take up this Protestant position on the one hand, and on the other make a law of natural causation their chief doctrine, suggests at all events a profound psychological crisis. That it did not become a political crisis would be due to the absence, in India, of political and ecclesiastical sanctions of belief.

If we look into the older Upanishads, we find not only no curiosity with respect to natural law or causation, but also no grip of the great omnipresent fact of Pain, or Ill, at all. The very words for "Ill" hardly ever occur. So that they made herein no appeal to minds on whom the inexorableness of Law and the heritage of Suffering were pressing with heavy hand. And when there is any question of origin, or cause, it is the Âtman, or World-Soul, presiding or immanent, who creates Man, who feels, thinks, speaks, works in, for and by Man, and who is "Bliss, Unalterable, Immortal, World-Guardian, World-Lord—This that is My Âtman!"

There could be nothing very tragic in such an outlook on life, basking in the sunshine of so splendid an optimism. Picture then one brought face to face with the opposed view of things, with the cruelty and misery and ignorance also omnipresent, with the relentlessness of fate and the Dark behind and before. "Lapsed Christians," to quote Mr. Lilly's term, know what it is to feel the world one "vast

orphanage." They have grown up in a tradition based on the passionate Godism of Hebrew psalmists, fed by the poetry of universal Fatherhood uttered by later Greek and Stoic aspiration, and quickened into a vital function of religious life by Jesus. In part, too, they have known, though not in its full power, the more natural, more tender and, in truth, more venerable religion, of The Mother. And then, some day they have awaked to find themselves in a Fatherless, a Motherless world; and for them "there was darkness over all the earth till the ninth hour"!

But in the case of such Buddhists as may have been lapsed *Âtmanists*, the crisis must have been even worse. In a Paternal Theism, the Father is not only not identified with the creature or child, but is a Being so remote as to need divine or human intermediaries to bring him within touch of his children. The Pan-Theist after the Indian sort loses, with his faith, his Oversoul, his own Soul, his All; First Cause, Final Cause, Occasional Cause. To uphold, in the presence of such a ruin, an invariable, necessary, causal sequence as the natural order of things, and on this to maintain spiritual balance and serenity, and to vibrate the while with a mother's yearning for the salvation of his fellowmen, was a notable attainment. I can give you no one instance of the passage of a Buddhist's mind rejecting *Âtmanism*. In the Buddha legend itself, it was the mystery of life and death behind the careless masque of worldly pleasures that drove the great Sage out into solitude. But, I repeat, we have the two literatures with their contrasted religious standpoints, one of them sternly rejecting the other, and thus betraying at least a partial consciousness of all that the opposed view held out to its adherents.\* So that we cannot be wholly in the dark as to the philosophical or religious environment in which this ancient belief in a natural law of causation was evolved.

We know that, in the course of centuries, Buddhism fell from the great position it attained in India, and gave place again to the Vedântism of the Brahmins and the Theisms of other cults. The terminology of causation became frequent

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\* *Âtmanism* was to some extent an esoteric phase of Brahmanism.



in works of Indian metaphysics; but it was only in Buddhism that the law of causation itself had been exalted into a religious tenet. Amongst ourselves Christianity, owing, it may be, largely to its Paternal Theism as opposed to Ātmanism, has been able to exist side by side with that science which has so often felt the persecuting hand of its ecclesiastical organisations, and to be accepted, side by side with the conclusions of science, in one and the same mind. We have agreed with Hooker that "the wise and learned, among the very heathen themselves, have all acknowledged some First Cause . . . as an Agent which . . . observeth, in working, a most exact order or law." And so we acquiesce, on six days of the week, as to our plans, our professional work, our legal procedure, our physical remedies, our thinking, and our play, in the great induction, that whatever happens is the natural consequence of an invariable necessary group of antecedents called cause. While on the seventh day, our happiness and sorrow, our health and ill, our success and failure are referred to the great Personal Agent, and we say: "God distributeth sorrows in his anger . . . For God is a righteous Judge and God is angry every day."

This truce or reconciliation between the concepts of science and religion would, in Buddhism, seem a needless and anomalous compromise. Amongst ourselves it is a source of alarm only to intolerant zeal and officious orthodoxy. To the more tolerant it is a ground for confidence and hope that, in the future, a re-created "New Theology" and a spiritualised science may embrace each other in widened and harmonious concepts. But the truce has been won after long struggles, and at a cost to human intellect and to the discoveries by the intellect which we shall never know. We cannot yet say that a creed, which in the days of its despotic power, ruthlessly stemmed the free advance of knowledge, will escape being haled before the bar of humanity to render account for doctrines that could be used to suppress that advance. Does it not appear, anyway, a wondrous irony of history when we see Science setting out, some 2,400 years ago, on her long upward climb

equally well under, say, Demokritus in the West and Buddha in the East, and reflect how in India, where she had full freedom to advance, the creed that would have mothered her in all affection, was undermined by other creeds, and finally swept away in blood and rapine, while in Europe, where the barbarian was either repelled or absorbed, the creed that survived should have long proved so cruel a step-mother? Whither might not the Science of Europe and America have by now attained, had the Doctors of the Church seen eye to eye with Gotama the Buddha in the great Law of Causation!

Such thoughts belong to the might-have-beens of history's conjectures. It is with the May-Be's that this young Society is concerned. And the particular May-Be that we hope, if I judge rightly, to assist in converting into a Will-Be, is that set forth just ninety years ago by Schopenhauer: "I reckon that, in this century, the influence of Sanskrit literature"—he included Buddhist thought then known only through Sanskrit—"will sink even deeper than did that of the renascence of Greek literature in the fifteenth century."\* This conjecture was two generations later expanded and emphasised by your president,† and the formation of this Society is one symptom among others that that influence has begun to work. If we took shape in response to a growing demand for a better acquaintance with the ancient Buddhist doctrine, we shall in time help to strengthen that demand, and hasten forward that crisis, or that gradual leavening of thought, wherein Schopenhauer's surmise will have appeared to have been a true prophecy. Great upheavals and re-creations of religious and philosophic thought come not with the mushroom growth of a night, but from a slow insidious "fermenting in the same minds" of "different and even antagonistic systems of thought."‡ And it is likely there will be no vital renascence of religious thought until the very essentials of Christian doctrine, in

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\* *World as Will and Idea*, Preface.

† Rhys Davids, *Hibbert Lectures*, 1881; also in *American Lectures*, 1896.

‡ Rhys Davids, *American Lectures*, VI.

its Catholic, Greek, and Protestant manifestations, have been thrown into the mental crucible together with some such tremendous difference in likeness, some such contrast under similarity, as is offered by the ancient Dhamma, in the nature and history of which there is growing up so notable an interest.

In that growing interest what, think you, is the future in Buddhist doctrine likely to act as the most powerful solvent, in that crucible of thought and feeling, of the religious accretions in the European mind? Who can say? This Society can but do its best in making the ancient doctrine and the history of it fairly known with "an open hand, keeping nothing back,"\* nor seeking to substitute any old mythological lamp for other old mythological lamps. The most honest method of doing so is to concentrate our energies in putting into the book market, not so much the thought of modern Buddhists on Buddhism, as translations of those most ancient records of the Dhamma, which were sanctioned by the organised adherents of the Dhamma. Different tenets in that doctrine must perforce appeal with varying force to creative minds of to-day, and there is a danger that the personal equation of an individual writer's particular religious experience, may magnify here and dwarf there, or indeed introduce alien matter—valuable it may be in itself—but violating historical truth.

That prominent feature in ascetic teaching, so strange and repellant to natural instincts—the repudiation of the craving for physical life and the joy in it—is involved in the Buddhist doctrines of Dukkha and Anicca. And it is this feature which, in one notable recent book, is put forward as the great antithesis which shall join issue with the doctrine of immortality, born of this hunger for life and the joy of life, shared in by all other creeds. The book written by a German Buddhist, and translated by a Scottish Buddhist—I refer to P. Dahlke's *Essays*, translated by Bhikkhu Silacara, is written with power and insight, and is bound to make an impression. And the antithesis between the dogma of Immortality, as supreme compensation, of

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\* Cf. *Buddhist Suttas*, by Rhys Davids, "Sacred Books of the East," XI., p. 36.

other religions, and the refusal of the Buddha to discuss the question of existence behind the Veil in terms of life as we know it here\*—and we have no other terms—is no doubt the most unique feature of ancient Buddhism. But this great dividing line is too simple an idea to convey all the truth.

Depreciation of life, because life involves evil, and therefore pain, is the starting-point of all ascetic doctrines—of Christianity as of Buddhism. *So far*, therefore, there is no impressive antithesis. And no honest view of things can well avoid taking as its starting-point, its *pou stô*, the bed-rock of what we may call the “orphanage” conviction, that “man is born to sorrow as the sparks fly upward.” The really impressive antithesis comes *in the next step*; and it lies not so much between Christianity and Buddhism, as between merely ascetic doctrine and the greater growth of the human mind. Life, on the one hand, conceived as irremediably evil, but brief, and the gateway to the Supreme Compensations; life, on the other hand, conceived as holding possibilities of melioration indefinitely great, realisable in different degrees, by different individuals, at different times, but at all times calling for, and inspiring the finest, highest effort of human capacity to forward that realisation. And the question remains: What form of religion forwards or hinders the one belief or the other? For as the Fates stood weaving the Must-Be of natural law behind Zeus or Wotan, so will the Time-spirit of the Now and the near future stand over against the doctrines and the formulas of all the creeds to which man has here and there surrendered his own judgment, and will judge between them.

Life as we know it is made better, less evil, by knowledge and love, by science and justice. Through their great common fraternal heart, Buddhism and Christianity may walk “hand in hand”—may “look into each other’s eyes and not be afraid.”† What will be the verdict of the human intelligence on the attitude of each of them towards the concepts and the task of science?

C. A. F. RHYS DAVIDS.

\* I do not, of course, refer to re-birth, earthly, heavenly, or infernal, which the Buddha accepted, but to the Parinirvana of one who had conquered re-birth.

† *Dreams*, by O. Schreiner, p. 84.