

Is the Buddhist an Atheist?

by Remsen Whitehouse

Reprinted from "Lucifer"
Reprinted from "Theosophical Siftings" Volume 5

The Theosophical Publishing Society, England

[Page 16] THE very general interest evinced at the present moment by Western students in the religious system of Buddhism, although it may prove to be no deeper than an insatiable craving for new ideals, can, nevertheless, hardly fail to leave some enduring mark on contemporaneous thought. Unfortunately the vulgarization of a most complicated system of philosophy has caused serious misapprehensions, affecting important tenets of the doctrine, to become current. The allegation most constantly levelled against the creed is that it is a doctrine of pure pessimism and absolute Atheism — "that ferocious system that leaves nothing above us to excite awe, nor around us to awaken tenderness."

But is Buddhism really Atheistic ?

To begin with, what is the popular definition of this much-abused word (Atheism)? We find Worcester rendering it "the denial or disbelief of a God"; while Webster amplifies it to "the disbelief or denial of the existence of a God, or Supreme intelligent Being". The theist may pronounce such a "disbelief" as constituting an irrefutable proof of atheism, holding, as he will, that theism inculcates the existence of a conscious God governing the universe by his will power. The lexicographer's definition is applicable, however, only to the materialist, who rejects any spiritual hypothesis whatever and relies wholly on matter for the formation and preservation of Cosmos. Now Buddhism, although it certainly denies the existence of an anthropomorphic and personal God, yet does not reject spirituality as an attribute of the Primordial Essence. On the contrary, a Divine Intelligence is acknowledged, but at the same time is not held to have any direct control over individual destiny, which is entirely subject to the laws of Cause and Effect, or to use a technical term, to the "Karma" (balance of merit and demerit) of the individual monad which follows and controls the state, condition or form of his re-births.

Does this denial of a personal God necessarily constitute Atheism ? It is hardly fair to assume that it does; for the rejection of a personal God need not imply the denial of any God at all.

"The horror inspired by this name (Atheist) is strikingly shown in [Page 17] the way it is repudiated by the adherents of Pantheism, who reject a personal God and substitute the idealized principle of order that pervades the universe. It is hardly to be denied, however, that the idea associated with the word God has hitherto involved personality as its very essence; and except for the purpose of avoiding odium, there could be little propriety in retaining the word when the notion is so completely altered". Pantheism and Atheism are consequently hereby pronounced practically synonymous. But are they really so? Certainly not to the Buddhist who energetically refutes the charge of Atheism, although he avows himself, in a measure, a Pantheist.

Fleming's analysis is crushing in its comprehensive dogmatism and would seem to leave no loophole of escape for the hunted Pantheist. "Pantheism", says he, "when explained to mean the absorption of the infinite in the finite, of God in nature, is Atheism: and the doctrine of Spinoza has been so regarded by many. When explained to mean the absorption of nature in God, of the finite in the infinite, it amounts to an exaggeration of Atheism".

Before condemning Spinoza as an Atheist, however, I would quote Mr. Saltus' terse but comprehensive explanation of the doctrine of the great Jew thinker. He taught, says that writer, "that there is but one substance, and in this substance all things live, move and have their being. It is at once Cause and Effect; it is God". But the term thus used has nothing in common with the theistic idea of a Creator, who, having fashioned the world, "sits aloft and sees it go". On the contrary God and the universe were, to Spinoza, one and identical; they were correlatives; the existence of the one made that of the other a logical necessity. To him the primordial entity, the "*fons et origo rerum*" was God; but God was Nature, and Nature, Substance. Goethe also agrees with the Pantheist, that to "discuss God apart from Nature is both difficult and dangerous. It is as though we separated the soul from the body". And he goes on to add that "we know the soul only through the medium of the body, and God only through Nature. Hence the absurdity of accusing of absurdity those who philosophically unite the world with God". This is Pantheism, but it is not Atheism. It is not the "denial or disbelief of a God".

From such a union of God and Nature (in the widest cosmographical sense) sprang the "Divine Principle" of the Esoteric Buddhists: that which is "neither entity nor non-entity, but Abstract Entity, which is *no* entity, liable to be described by either words or attributes".

Without plunging into the bewildering maze of the transcendentalism of the esoteric brotherhood, which is entirely beyond the scope of [Page 18] the present paper, we can affirm, on general principles, that Buddhism, like Schopenhauer's philosophy, teaches that *Will* is the fundamental Supreme Power, whose vivifying essence pervades all cosmos, reaching in an endless circuit from the most minute inorganic atom to man. But, unlike Schopenhauer, it does *not* deny that this Will is the outcome of a Supreme Intelligence: it merely professes such knowledge as beyond the pale of physical conception.

Of course the above must be understood as the briefest synopsis of a most complicated hypothesis; and I hesitate to affirm that the occult sages of Lhasa or Khatmandhu would endorse such an interpretation "verbatim"; or without much amplification and exhaustive analytical distinction. But it is sufficient for the object of this paper; and I know I shall secure the suffrages of the mass of their co-religionists of the "Lesser Vehicle" when I state that these latter, far from being "materialistic-atheists", if I may borrow the phrase, *do* acknowledge a Supreme Essence; so absolutely and immeasurably above mundane intellect, however, as to be utterly beyond mortal conceivability, and consequently prudently let, by their exoteric doctrine, severely alone.

It is perhaps unnecessary to state that the preceding remarks have little or no application to Chinese or Japanese Buddhism, for the religion of those countries is so hopelessly distorted by the interweaving of Confucianism, Taoism and Shintoism, as to present but little interest to the student of the pure doctrine. I would add for the information of those who are not familiar with the technical terms of our subject, that by the "Greater Vehicle" the esoteric philosophy of Thibet and Nepaul is referred to; the "Lesser Vehicle" embracing Burmah, Siam and Ceylon. This last country also, lays claim to the purest and most ancient

form of the Buddha's exoteric teachings.

By these the Buddhist is taught to work out his own ultimate salvation (or shall we not rather say *evolution*?) following the path of the most excellent Law, discovered and laid down for his guidance by Gautama Buddha. I use the term "*ultimate salvation*" advisedly, for it should be clearly understood that no Buddhist expects to attain Nirvana on escaping from his present existence. On the contrary, he realizes, as Mr. Sinnett expresses it, "the manifest irrationality in the commonplace notion that man's existence is divided into a material beginning, lasting sixty or seventy years, and a spiritual remainder lasting for ever". The life just passed through, the spiritual quiescence upon which he then enters, and the subsequent maze of alternating material and spiritual phases through which he must pass (their number depending on the spiritual level he has attained), are merely links. [Page 19] in the great chain of spiritual and material evolution which will ultimately lead him, purified and etherealized, to Nirvana — that condition which is *not* annihilation, but a "sublime state of conscious rest in omniscience"; in very truth that peace of mind, "which passeth all understanding."

Concerning such refinement of subtilty as the permanence of Nirvana we need not concern ourselves. Still, paradoxical as it may seem even the duration of this theoretically "eternal" bliss may be computed; and as there can be no such thing as Perpetuity, there may *dawn* a tomorrow, millions of years hence, when the spiritual monad must again start forth on an evolutionary round; but on an immeasurably higher plane. Such is the atheology of Buddhism.

Although it touches our subject but indirectly, even this rapid sketch would be incomplete without a glance at what is meant by the Buddhist denial of the immortality of the soul. This denial it will be seen is more apparent than real.

In the Theosophist's Buddhist Catechism, by Colonel Olcott, a work which may safely be taken as authoritative on questions affecting the *exoteric* belief as it has been endorsed by the High Priest of the Southern Buddhists, and recommended by him for use in the Sinhalese schools, we read that "soul" (as understood in popular phraseology) is considered "a word used by the ignorant to express a false idea". "The denial of 'soul', by Buddha, points to the prevalent delusive belief in an independent transmissible personality; an entity that could move from birth to birth unchanged, or go to a place or state where, as such perfect entity, it could eternally enjoy or suffer. But this 'I am I' consciousness is, as regards permanency, logically impossible, since its elementary constituents constantly change, and 'I' of one birth differs from the 'I' of every other birth."

The distinction between the pseudonymous "soul" and this subtle "individuality" consists in the psychological "personality" transmitted by the *tanha* (=unsatisfied desire for existence) at the moment of dissolution, to the "character" of the re-birth. We learn from the same source, that, "the successive appearances upon one or many earths, or 'descents into generation', of the '*tanhaically*' coherent parts of a certain being, are a succession of personalities. In each birth the personality differs from that of the previous or next succeeding birth. Karma, the '*deus ex machina*', masks (or, shall we say, reflects?) itself now in the personality of a sage, again as an artisan, and so on through the string of births. But though personalities ever shift, the one line of life along which they are strung like beads, runs unbroken; it is [Page 20] ever *that particular line*, never any other. It is, therefore, individual; an individual vital undulation, which began in Nirvana, or the subjective side of nature, as the light or heat undulation through ether

began at its dynamic source; is careering through the objective side of Nature, under the impulse of Karma and the creative direction of *Tanha*; and tends, through many cyclic changes back to Nirvana. However incomplete in detail the foregoing may be, it is nevertheless sufficient in as far as it goes for the object we have at present in view — a cursory examination of three of the fundamental principles of Buddhist philosophy.

Am I wrong in supposing that the unprejudiced mind will readily agree that the creed which inculcates such lofty conceptions of Man's destiny is not that of the atheist— "idealized pantheism" though it may be?

GOLDEN WORDS

THERE is a faculty of the human mind, which is superior to all which is born or begotten. Through it we are enabled to attain union with the superior intelligences, of being transported beyond the scenes and arrangements of this world, and of partaking the higher life and peculiar powers of the heavenly ones. By this faculty we are made free from the dominations of Fate (*Karma*), and are made, so to speak, the arbiters of our own destinies. For, when the most excellent parts of us become filled with energy, and the soul is elevated to natures loftier than itself, it becomes separated from those conditions which keep it under the dominion of the present every-day life of the world, exchanges the present for another life, and abandons the conventional habits belonging to the external order of things, to give and mingle itself with that order which pertains to higher life.

JAMBLICHUS

WE BEGIN WITH INSTINCT: THE END IS OMNISCIENCE

It is as a direct beholding; what Schelling denominates a realization of the identity of subject and object called Deity; so that transported out of himself, so to speak, he thinks divine thoughts, views all things from their highest point of view, and, to use an expression of Emerson "becomes recipient of the Soul of the World". —

PROF. ALEXANDER WILDER.

A STRANGE MESMERIC PHENOMENON

IN Astrachan, on the Caspian Sea, there was, during our stay there, an apothecary named Ossey (probably his sons are still there). He suffered terribly from toothache whether neuralgic or otherwise, I do not know. Probably the former, because the extraction of several teeth on that side did not relieve him. Somebody told him that there lived in the town an old retired soldier who "talked away" [This is the literal translation of the popular and mystic term "Zagovarivayt", in Russia. For the good men and women in

towns and villages who play at local medicine-men (and the people *will* have no others) literally "talk away", by means of some strange words which no one understands but themselves, and by breathing on the water, all kinds of diseases and ailments most effectively] most effectually the toothache. Ossey found out the soldier- wizard, who *did* talk away his pain in a few minutes, so that it never returned.

Some time after, the apothecary happened to meet the soldier, and asked him whether his pain was ever likely to return; to which the soldier replied as follows: "This depends on which of us survives the other. If you die before me, then the toothache will never return; but if I die before you, the pain will return immediately, and more violent than ever".

For nine years Ossey had no pain, and the remembrance of his suffering even had vanished from his thoughts, when, in the tenth year, his neuralgia returned with redoubled violence. He rushed off in search of his soldier-healer, but could nowhere find him, and learnt a few days later that the soldier had died; and thus his forewarning had proved correct.

It seems to me that this "talking away" is just another kind of mesmeric healing. My arm pains me more and more, even interfering with my writing, as the fingers are becoming stiff. For me there is no more doubt that my rheumatism returned in Odessa, on the very day on which Evette died in Paris.

Ossey' s story is interesting as a corroboration of my own case.

N. A. FADEEFF