

# THE SACRED BOOKS AND EARLY LITERATURE OF THE EAST

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## VOLUME X INDIA AND BUDDHISM

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# SACRED BOOKS AND EARLY LITERATURE OF **BUDDHISM**

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## INTRODUCTION

### THE MOST WIDE-SPREAD ARYAN TEACHING IN THE WORLD

**F**OR our Western world the Buddhist faith and the Buddhist literature hold a more living interest than any other of the books or teachings of the Far East. In the first place, Buddhism, both in its doctrines and in its history, bears a striking resemblance to Christianity. Second, Buddhism even to-day has more believers than any other religion in the world; it is the accepted faith of four hundred million people, one-fourth of the population of the earth. Third, it has had a remarkable and romantic career; it has been called the great exiled religion, for, despite the many millions of its supporters, it is practically abandoned in India, the land of its origin. At one time it was accepted by almost all of India's teeming millions; then it was completely trodden under foot, its shrines fell into ruin and were as wholly forgotten as though they had never existed. Even to-day, the few Buddhist devotees found in India are pilgrims who have journeyed there under the shelter of Britain's Christian protection. So while Buddhism has claimed the faith and satisfied the hearts of all the other peoples of the Far East, it has been rejected by the race who first felt its high inspiration.

We touch here on a fourth and perhaps even deeper source of interest in the faith. It is of Aryan origin, the chief religion that has sprung wholly from the Aryan mind and

been spread abroad by Aryan teachers. Almost all the peoples of our Western world to-day are of Aryan stock. Note therefore this striking contrast, which is one of the most impressive oddities of our tangled universe. All the modern European and American Aryans have abandoned their ancient Aryan faith, whether of Odin, of Jupiter, or of older gods, and have accepted Christianity, which is of Semitic origin. Yet scarce a Semite in all the world now holds with us to this Semitic teaching. On the other hand, Buddhism, the richest, broadest, and most lasting of the religions of Aryan origin, has now scarcely an Aryan believer anywhere. It has become the faith of the hundred millions of Turanians, or non-Semitic and non-Aryan races of the East.

Shall we seek a more specific knowledge of this ancient and wide-spread Aryan teaching? It originated about five hundred years before Christ, being taught by an Indian prince named Siddhartha. He was a truly wondrous teacher, whose followers have since worshiped him through all the ages without for one moment confusing him with God or regarding him as anything different from a man, a soul, a spirit like themselves. For this teacher Siddhartha the Buddhists have many names. Most commonly they speak of him by his religious title as Buddha, which means "The Awakened One." That is, he is the sage, the seer, who has shaken off all the benumbing influences of the senses, has escaped the daze and bewilderment of human passions, has pierced the confusing mists of life and thought, and has thus seen and understood the very heart of the universe. From that center of serene and perfect understanding Buddha is supposed to have looked out over all space, and all time, and comprehended every smallest thing within the boundless reach of his perfected vision. But note that in thus becoming Buddha or the Awakened One, Prince Siddhartha did not cease to be a man. Indeed, Buddhism teaches that there had been other "awakenings" before that of Siddhartha, and that there will be other Buddhas yet to come. This might almost be taken as the essence, the central thought, of the Aryan religious teaching. It founds its confidence on man,

is profoundly assertive of human possibilities and power; man is everything; he can achieve everything; he can learn to grasp the universe; he can rise above it. Each feeble, groveling soul among us can himself become Buddha, the all-powerful, the all-knowing.

It has been pointed out by our Western thinkers that in such a system there is very little use for God; there is perhaps no room for him. Hence Buddhism has been frequently accused of being a form of atheism. Its believers deny this; they are willing to accept any number of deities. Only their thought centers not on gods, but on man, on man's progress rising or falling through many transmigrations of body, but always capable of attaining superiority to and thus escape from the "wheel of life." Man, the immaterial spirit, may rise above both the material and the immaterial world, and thereby reach "Nirvana."

What is this Nirvana, this goal toward which man's struggle aims? With our Western fondness for exact wordings, we have insisted on defining it as "nothingness," since in Nirvana the spirit ceases wholly to act or feel, that is to suffer or enjoy, or to think, or even to believe. That is, it absolutely escapes or abandons every human idea or mode of consciousness. Yet you will find no Buddhist philosopher agreeing therefore to view Nirvana as extinction. It is indeed to him the opposite of existence, of being; but may not that opposite be beyond and above existence, rather than beneath? The Buddhist simply does not know the meaning of Nirvana, and does not believe either you or himself capable of phrasing it in human speech.

Was all this the actual teaching of Prince Siddhartha, the Buddha? We do not know; because his words were not written down during his life, and we can not be sure how much of modern Buddhism is a development grown beyond its earliest teacher. What we know of Siddhartha, or rather what the Buddhist books tell us of him, is briefly this. He was a prince of the Gotama race; from which fact he is more commonly called by his tribal name, Gotama. He was surrounded in youth by all the luxury of princehood; but like

the imaginary prince in Dr. Johnson's celebrated tale of Kasselas, so, too, Gotama looked beyond his own pleasures and saw the miseries of humanity. He resolved to devote himself to seeking the cause and the remedy for all this bitter grief and hideous suffering. Fleeing from his life of ease, he spent years in solitude and austerity and deep meditation. Thus at last he freed himself from all human weakness and attained his Buddhahood.

Legend tells that all the evil influences and evil spirits of the world strove to thwart Gotama's final effort to pierce to the very center of all knowledge. His concentration of thought was a mighty battle, which is told with all the metaphors of strife. He won his victory of meditation while seated under a sacred tree, called the bo-tree; and this tree has ever since been an object of worship to the Buddhists. Sprouts sprung from it, or from its descendant bo-trees, are still preserved and honored.

Having attained his Buddhahood, Gotama went forth to save his followers from the heavy "wheel of life," by teaching them his wisdom. Everywhere they listened and accepted. Spirits as well as men hung upon his words rejoicing, and he converted thousands upon thousands. His death came after more than forty years of teaching; and then his followers gathered in a great council to formulate and exactly define what they should continue to announce as Buddha's doctrine.

All of this story depends on later evidence. The Buddhist teaching was handed down only by word of mouth for centuries. Then some two hundred years after Gotama's death there was in India a powerful king or emperor, Asoka (about 267—233 B.C.). Asoka is said to have ruled all India, to have been at first opposed to Buddhism, but to have finally accepted it and facilitated its spread, not by force, but by sending out many teachers, so that all India adopted the faith. Thus Asoka did for Buddhism what the Emperor Constantine did for Christianity — made it the State religion of a vast empire.

With this event, we come upon the earliest literature of

Buddhism. Asoka proclaimed edicts favoring the religion, and he had these edicts carved on rock-faced cliffs or on State pillars set up throughout his domains. Several of these ancient inscriptions with their long-forgotten commands have been recently rediscovered, empty echoes of an imperial power once as absolute as it seemed eternal. Their translation opens our volume.

Even in Asoka's time, however, there seems to have been no Buddhist books. He called another council to determine anew the exact doctrines of the faith; and perhaps all our present Buddhist Scriptures were then agreed on orally. That is, they had been previously known, and the "canon" was now fixed or made unchangeable; no more teachings were to be accepted as sacred. But we have reason to believe that none of these accepted doctrines or books was ever written down until almost two centuries after Asoka.

The first setback to Indian Buddhism occurred about the beginning of the Christian era, when there was a schism, the church separating into the Lesser Vehicle, or conservative faith, and the Greater Vehicle, or newer teaching, which looked beyond the actual words of Gotama. This Greater Vehicle seems to have contained more, or at least emphasized more, of the spiritual side of the religion. So that many Christians have thought that this later Buddhism learned and borrowed much from Christianity. Positive proof of such borrowing is no longer to be had, but the similarity of the two faiths is marked. They narrate several similar incidents; and the doctrines of Buddha parallel those of early Christianity on at least two important points. Buddhism teaches that, to attain a higher state beyond this, man must deliberately and firmly turn away from the pleasures and sensations of this world, and it insists on kindness toward every living thing. A Buddhist monk will not even kill an insect that annoys him, but will gently remove it from his person. This universal kindness differs from the Christian teaching of universal love only by its lack of warmth. Love is too intense a feeling to accompany the Buddhist doctrine of the suppression of human passions.

It was the missionaries of the Greater Vehicle, or more modern Buddhism, who spread their teachings through China in the early centuries of the Christian era. In India the faith declined slowly. For many centuries it existed side by side with Brahmanism. The two faiths both were tolerant, and indeed they had so much in common that a believer might well accept both. But gradually the more sensuous character of Brahmanism drew the mass of the people away from the stern, ascetic Buddhism. Then came the Mohammedan conquest of India, and Mohammedan fanaticism completely crushed the last remnants of the fading Buddhism in its birthland. To-day it still holds some place in the hill countries north of Hindustan, and in Ceylon to the southward. From Ceylon it spread to all Indo-China in about the sixth century A.D., and a little later it spread from China to Japan. It probably spread northward at an even earlier date, from India into Tibet and Turkestan and Mongolia.

Turn now to the Buddhist literature. The Buddhist Scriptures consist of three collections called the Three Baskets, or Ti-pitaka. These were originally, no doubt, written in India; but since the faith perished in India we have been compelled to seek the Ti-pitaka in other lands. The most complete and probably the oldest versions of these Buddhist Scriptures have been found in Ceylon. They are in the Pali tongue, a dialect which was once the common speech of northern India as opposed to the learned Sanskrit in which the Vedas, or holy books of Brahmanism, were composed. Thus it may be that Buddha deliberately chose to proclaim his teaching in the common tongue, to aid the unlearned rather than the learned, to reach the masses rather than the brahmin priests. Versions of several of the Buddhist books, however, exist also in Sanskrit, in Burmese, in Chinese, and in other languages; and our scholars are still studying and comparing the many differing forms of the faith. Among the Ti-pitaka only one section, or Basket, has much interest for the outside world, as the other two are later collections, consisting either of mere priestly rules and ceremonials or of abstract metaphysical speculations. The first Pitaka, on the contrary,

contains a most remarkable mass of historical anecdotes about Buddha and his disciples, their teachings and their parables. These are called the Suttas, or Sacred Sayings. They would cover perhaps as many pages as our Bible, but they are much more diverse in character. Moreover, some of them are held by Buddhists in far higher honor than others, so that it is easy to guide our readers to the more valued ones. We give here what seem to be the oldest Suttas, those which open the very old collection known as the Sutta Nipata. The Nipata has been called the Rig-Veda of the Buddhists, that is, the work in which the formation of their doctrines may be studied. With these we give also the celebrated Sutta which is honored as containing the concentrated essence of the early Buddhist doctrines, and which is known as the Foundation of the Kingdom of Righteousness.

Our volume then presents the most honored of all the historical Suttas, the Book of the Great Decease. This is, so far as we know, the earliest account of Gotama's life, or rather of his death. Thus it holds, for Buddhism, somewhat the place of our Gospels. No other part of the Buddhist Scriptures is received by its devotees with quite such reverence as this Book of the Great Decease. It unquestionably deserves to be classed among the great books of the world, and no man should assume that he understands Buddhism, or even that he understands Asia, until he has read this gently wise and simple account of the passing of the great sage, of the man who had risen to be almost a god, or at least was believed to hold the power of a god over the things of the world which he was leaving. There are indeed what we would call "miracles" described in the Great Decease, but these are little more than metaphors. They are but the husk, the shell to enclose the kernel of Buddha's teaching.

Later Buddhist writings dwelt, perhaps unfortunately, far more on the miraculous side of Buddha's career. The sage becomes lost in the magician; the love, in the power. In order that the reader may follow the development of the Buddhist faith we give, after the Great Decease, the most celebrated later accounts of Buddha's life. These could not

much change the story of his death — that had been fixed by the Great Decease; but they revel in the marvels of his early life and of his victorious struggle toward Buddhahood. They will show us, too, the development of the new religion outside of India. So we give these opening chapters first from the celebrated Chinese "Life of Buddha" which was translated into Chinese about A.D. 400 from the work of the famous Buddhist missionary Asvaghosha. Then we give the accepted Burmese "life," which is of still later though uncertain date, and in which the man Gotama has become wholly lost amid the truly Asiatic maze of fantasy. Then follows the brief but very noteworthy song which Buddhist tradition has established as being the old and eternally recurring "birth song" which each Buddha chants in celebration at the moment of his enlightenment.

Any account of Buddhist literature or Buddhist thought would be hopelessly incomplete if it did not also include something of the Jatakas, or birth-tales, to which the next section of our volume is devoted. These are included among the Suttas as being sacred teachings, yet they are really beast-fables. Just such stories had been told in India long before Buddhism arose, yet in the increasingly fantastic spirit of the new faith they were at some time, perhaps even as early as King Asoka's day, accepted as being holy. They were associated with Buddha through the doctrine of transmigration, and were represented as being tales told by him of his previous "births" in the lower forms of life. Hence they are called "birth-tales."

Having thus presented the life of Buddha from every side, we turn next to the later doctrines of Buddhism, its finally accepted preaching. This we find at its richest and clearest in the best known of all the later Suttas, the celebrated Dhammapada, which is here given in full. The name comes from *dhamma*, which means "law." So the book is the Great Law of Buddhism. We then close our volume with some quotations from the other most noted later Suttas.