

ARTICLE VI.

MILL'S USE OF BUDDHISM.

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As is well known, Mr. Mill used Buddhism to prove that mankind can perfectly well do without belief in a heaven or a future life. His essay on the Utility of Religion closes in the following words :

“ The Buddhist religion counts probably at this day a greater number of votaries than either the Christian or the Mahomedan. The Buddhist creed recognizes many modes of punishment in a future life, or rather lives, by the transmigration of the soul into new bodies of men or animals. But the blessing of Heaven which it proposes as a reward, to be earned by perseverance in the highest order of virtuous life, is annihilation ; the cessation, at least, of all conscious or separate existence. It is impossible to mistake, in this religion, the work of legislators and moralists endeavoring to supply supernatural motives for the conduct which they were anxious to encourage ; and they could find nothing more transcendent to hold out as the capital prize to be won by the mightiest efforts of labor and self-denial, than what we are so often told is the terrible idea of annihilation. Surely this is a proof that the idea is not really or naturally terrible ; that not philosophers only, but the common order of mankind, can easily reconcile themselves to it, and even consider it as a good ; and that it is no unnatural part of the idea of a happy life, that life itself be laid down, after the best that it can give has been fully enjoyed through a long lapse of time, when all its pleasures, even those of benevolence, are familiar, and nothing untasted and unknown is left to stimulate curiosity and keep up the desire of prolonged existence. It seems to me not only possible but probable, that in a higher, and, above all, a happier condition of human life, not annihilation but immortality may be the burdensome idea ; and that human nature, though pleased with the present, and by no means impatient to quit it, would find comfort, and not sadness, in the thought that it is not chained through eternity to a conscious existence which it cannot be assured that it will always wish to preserve.”

One of the first impressions which this passage makes on the reader is that Mr. Mill claimed to know a good deal about Buddhism. According to him this religion

recognizes a "soul" in man; a "transmigration of the soul into new bodies"; a "future life"; a "Heaven"; the "supernatural." It is "the work of legislators and moralists"; and its "capital prize" (Nirvâna) is "annihilation; the cessation at least of all conscious or separate existence"; and this being true of a "religion which counts a greater number of votaries" than any other, the inference is that even "the common order of mankind can easily reconcile themselves to it [annihilation] and even consider it as a good."

In the more than ten years that have elapsed since the publication of this essay, remarkable progress has been made in our knowledge of Buddhist literature and of the thought and life of Buddhist peoples, and we may properly ask, How do Mr. Mill's description of Buddhism and his argument based thereupon appear when viewed in this new light? Does this latter and more scientific observation confirm the accuracy of his statements? Does a wider induction bring new strength to his argument?

In considering these questions it may be remarked, that recent investigation gives greatly increased importance to the well-known division of Buddhism into two great schools, the *Hinayâna*, or "Little Vehicle," and the *Mahâyâna*, or "Great Vehicle." The former is the name given at a later date to that form of Buddhism which began during the lifetime of Gautama (in the fifth century B. C.), flourished first in Middle and Southern India (where, however, it is no longer known), and was carried thence to Ceylon, Burmah, and Siam, where it still exists. The number of its adherents at the present day is probably less than 20,000,000.¹ The latter, the product of an intense Gnostic spirit, arose in Northern India about the beginning of the Christian era, and spread thence northward and eastward. It is the prevalent form of Buddhism

¹ Rhys Davids' "Buddhism," page 4. On the authority of Dr. Edkins (the Nirvâna of the Northern Buddhists, J. R. A. Society), I class Anam with the countries in which the other school of Buddhism prevails, and so change slightly Mr. Davids' figures.

in Nepal, Thibet, China, Mongolia, Mantchuria, Corea, Cochin China, and Japan; and its followers have been estimated (doubtless too highly) at 480,000,000.

Both these schools bear the name of Buddhism, and to a considerable extent follow the same systems of metaphysics and ethics, and use the same terminology. In many of their principal features, however, they not only differ from, but are diametrically opposed to, each other. This fact cannot too constantly be kept in mind, as all our attempts to know what the teaching of Gautama really was will be fruitless if we allow our opinions to be affected by the later Buddhism of the North. And it is obvious that the presence of any particular doctrine in the original teaching of Gautama—as embodied in the old *Pali Sûtras*, or in the beliefs of the Buddhists of Ceylon or Burmah in modern times—by no means proves that that doctrine has commended itself to a large proportion of the race; for the *Sûtras* of the Little Vehicle have practically no religious authority to the hundreds of millions of Buddhists in the North.

This observation is especially true as regards Gautama's doctrine of the Future. What he taught concerning it is one thing; what the comparatively few modern Buddhists of the South believe may be another; what the four hundred and eighty million Northern Buddhists hold may be still quite different.

These distinctions, it is plain, cannot be ignored by those who would make from Buddhism so wide an inference as that "the common order of mankind can easily reconcile themselves" to the idea of annihilation, "and even consider it as a good." Let us therefore take them up in order.

I. THE TEACHINGS OF GAUTAMA.

Our best authorities here are doubtless the translators of the *Pali Sûtras*, *The Sacred Books of the East*,—T. W. R. Davids, late of the Ceylon Civil Service, and Dr. Hermann Oldenberg, of Berlin University. Mr. Davids was

among the first to emphasize the fact that *Buddhism does not recognize the existence of a soul in man*; that therefore *Gautama did not teach the transmigration of the soul*; and that *Nirvâna is not the extinction of the soul*, as, in the words of this author, "it has often been supposed to be by writers ignorant of the first principles of Buddhism."¹

He says further, that if we use the word "transmigration" at all when speaking of Buddhism we ought to say "transmigration of character"; but that it would be more accurate to drop the word altogether and speak of the "doctrine of Karma," because Gautama taught that "after the death of any being, whether human or not, there survived nothing at all but that being's " Karma; the result that is of its mental and bodily actions. This is the only connection between two individuals in the chain of existence; there is no continuing consciousness, no passage of a soul, or of an I in any sense, from one to the other.

Again he says, "Gautama in his description of Nirvâna was expressing no opinion at all, one way or the other, as to existence after death, but was proclaiming a salvation from the sorrows of life which was to be reached here on earth in a changed state of mind."²

Dr. Oldenberg speaks much in the same way. "We are," he says, "accustomed to realize our inner life, as a comprehensible factor, only when we are allowed to refer its changing ingredients, every individual feeling, every distinct act of the will, to one and an ever identical ego, but this mode of thinking is fundamentally opposed to Buddhism. Here as everywhere it condemns that fixity which we are prone to give to the current of incidents that come and go, by conceiving a substance to or in which they might happen. A seeing, a hearing, a conceiving, above all a suffering, takes place; but an existence which may be regarded as the seer, the hearer, the sufferer, is not recognized in Buddhist teaching."³

¹ Hibbert Lectures for 1881, p. 91 ff.

² Hibbert Lectures, p. 253.

³ Buddha; His Life, His Doctrine, His Order, p. 253.

Indeed, belief in personality is a temptation of the Evil One. "What meanest thou, Mâra (Tempter), that there is a person? False is thy teaching. This is only a heap of changeful conformations; here there is not a person."¹

Again, "If we are to indicate the precise point at which the goal is reached for the Buddhist, we must not look to the entry of the dying Perfect One into the range of the everlasting—be this everlasting being or everlasting nothing—but to that moment of his earthly life when he has attained the status of sinlessness and painlessness; this is the true Nirvâna. Entry into nothingness for nothingness' sake is not at all the object of aspiration which has been set before the Buddhist. The goal to which he pressed was, we must constantly repeat this, solely deliverance from the sorrowful world of origination and decease. In the religious life, in the tone which prevailed in the ancient Buddhist order, the thought of annihilation had no influence."²

Such, if we may accept the verdict of the latest and best scholarship, was the teaching of Gautama. Annihilation is *not* a "blessing of Heaven"; it is *not* "the capital prize to be won by the mightiest labor and self-denial." On the contrary, we are distinctly assured that "entry into nothingness for nothingness' sake is not at all the object of aspiration which has been set before the Buddhist." "In the ancient Buddhist order the thought of annihilation had no influence." Nirvâna refers to "a moment of earthly life." So far, therefore, as the teaching of Gautama is concerned, a more complete denial of the statements upon which Mr. Mill bases his arguments is hardly possible.

We cannot forget, however, that Gautama's partial denial of the existence of the ego, logically leads to annihilation for all beings including himself; that as he taught that "sorrow and death pertain to every state of being," so

¹ Oldenberg, *Buddha*, p. 258.

² *Ibid.*, p. 265.

Nirvâna, deliverance from that sorrow, although referring to a changed state of mind to be reached here on earth, and therefore by no means making annihilation the goal of mightiest endeavor, does practically trend in that direction; and that at the most Gautama gave no single ray of hope to man's instinctive longing for immortality, but deliberately and persistently shirked the direct, definite, and pressing questions of his disciples on the subject of the future existence of the saint. "Orthodox teaching in the ancient order of Buddhists inculcated expressly on its converts to forego the knowledge of the being or non-being of the perfected saint."¹ Were they content with this? Some passages in even the earlier literature indicate that they were not.² The same inference as to the tenets of earlier Buddhists may be made from the position of modern Buddhists to be discussed under the two following heads:

II. THE VIEWS OF MODERN BUDDHISTS OF THE SOUTH.

A few extracts from well-known writers will suffice us upon this point.

Dr. Eitel, whose Sanskrit-Chinese vocabulary of Buddhist terms gives evidence of his careful study of the subject, writes as follows: "This annihilation theory has nowhere in any Buddhist country met with popular acceptance"; and he makes specific mention of Ceylon, Burmah, and Siam.³ Spence Hardy, after more than a quarter of a century's study of Buddhism as it exists in Ceylon, declares: "The belief in a soul is, perhaps, general among the Singhalese, though so contrary to the doctrine of Buddha. The divinity that stirs within all men speaks with too loud a voice for them not to know that the no-soul doctrine is wrong."⁴ Mr. Arthur Lillie, on page 125

¹ Oldenberg, *Buddha*, p. 276.

² Cf. passages from the *Dhammapada* by Prof. Max Muller's *Science and Religion*, p. 181 ff.

³ *Three Lectures*, p. 81.

⁴ *Legends and Theories of the Buddhists*, p. 220.

of his Buddha and Early Buddhism, adds his less valuable testimony to the same effect: "All the Singhalese Buddhists when questioned by the Dutch governor affirmed that they believed in such a permanent blissful abode. 'There is a place of happiness, called Nirvânapura, where there is neither misery or death, but they enjoy happiness forever and ever.' " Mr. Alabaster (who certainly cannot be accused of having a Christian bias) writes of Siamese Buddhists as follows: "The ordinary Siamese never troubles himself about Nirvâna; he does not mention it. He believes that virtue will be rewarded by going to heaven, and he talks of heaven, and not of Nirvâna." Bishop Bigandet, our authority on Burmese Buddhism, may also be quoted. After stating that the principles of Buddhism "if considered in the light of purely theoretical notions" "lead to the dark, cold, and horrifying abyss of annihilation," he says: "If examined from a practical point of view, that is to say, taking into account the opinions of the masses of Buddhists, the difficulty may be considered as resolved too, but in an opposite direction." "

III. THE VIEWS OF NORTHERN BUDDHISTS.

Dr. Eitel's words already quoted, "this annihilation theory has nowhere in any Buddhist country met with popular acceptance," apply with especial force here. "The Paradise in the West" is "the Nirvâna of the common people."

Dr. Edkins, who with Dr. Eitel ranks as our best authority on Chinese Buddhism, writes as follows: "The doctrine of the Nirvâna is much too abstruse to be popular. It does not come sufficiently near to popular wants to be the object of an ordinary man's ambition. *Those who constitute the mass of Buddha's worshippers cannot enter into the idea of Nirvâna.*" "So there was imagined a heaven of charming sights and sounds which is promised as a

¹ The Wheel of the Law, p. xxxviii.

² The Legend of Gautama, vol. ii. p. 73; note.

³ Three Lectures, p. 97.

reward to the faithful Buddhist." "This Paradise in the West is the favorite article in the creed of the Buddhists of China and all the north parts of the vast region over which that religion has spread." Again, "The Nirvâna was devised by metaphysicians, the result of a logical necessity; and the expectation of it and the striving after it are very much limited to metaphysical logicians!"¹

While no such careful study of the Buddhism of Japan has yet been made, it is safe to say that Dr. Edkins' words may be unhesitatingly applied to it. The most popular books describe the felicities of the saints in the world to come. Immortality is the burden of the preacher, and he meets the objections of the sceptic against the reality of the Unseen with arguments often used by the Christian preacher. The few sects which give prominence to Nirvâna are dead or dying; the only really flourishing sects are those which promise a future of positive enjoyment in the Paradise of the West. As I write this, I turn to a Buddhist friend who has made me a friendly call, and inquire what proportion of Japanese Buddhists at the present day seek and hope to enter Nirvâna? The reply is "None." Another in reply to the same question said, "One out of many thousands." A third priest (now a Christian) declares that no one hopes for it; but the more learned look upon Nirvâna in the sense of annihilation, *as the inevitable*. But to the popular mind the term has the meaning given it by a prominent Buddhist² who describes his co-religionists as seeking "to escape from the miserable world and to enter into Paradise *in the next life*," "to be re-born into Paradise (Nirvâna)."

We have thus gone over the entire field of Buddhism, and so far from finding among its votaries proof that annihilation may be agreeable "to the common order of mankind," we have the most complete and satisfactory evi-

¹ Religion in China, p. 150.

² The Nirvâna of the Northern Buddhists, J. R. A. S.

³ Mr. Akamatsu of Kioto.

dence of its rejection by them. Multitudes who accept the words of Gautama upon other subjects as the highest wisdom, have been and are unwilling to accept the idea of annihilation, or even to forego all knowledge of the future, and have persistently projected their hopes beyond the limits of the present life. From the millions of Ceylon, Burmah, and Siam in the South; from the many more millions of Thibet, China, Japan, and other countries in the North,—the Voice of Humanity, speaking in many languages, declares Mr. Mills' argument to be utterly without foundation, and that "this pleasing hope, this longing after immortality," is one of the ineradicable instincts of the human soul.