

THE QUEST OF HISTORIC SAKYA-MUNI IN WESTERN SCHOLARSHIP

After nearly a century of Western scholarship the quest of the historic Śākyamuni still goes on and controversy is still vigorous. Of no historic figure are so many divergent views held and defended. Nor is Eastern thought less at variance. Buddhists themselves hold many different views about their Master. "The diamond-throne of the original enlightenment" says Okakura Kakuzo "is now hard indeed to discover, surrounded as it is by the labyrinths of gigantic pillars and elaborate porticoes which successive architects have erected, as each added his portion to the edifice of faith."¹ That is true as well as beautiful. And it is not only because of the elaboration of Buddhism by later Sects that it is hard to find the Founder: it is because those who claim to be nearest to him are themselves widely divided in their attitude towards him. Not only is there the wide gulf between the "Mahāyāna" and "Hinayāna": in the Pali Canon itself there are several stages of Buddhology which await critical evaluation, and until we have some clear evidence as to what was central in the Founder's person and mission the whole question remains in confusion. *Was* the house of Buddhism a "House of Faith"? To Mrs Rhys Davids and to many a modern Neo-Buddhist it was a house of scientific thought; and the Buddha is revealed sitting upon a diamond-throne of dialectic. "Surely a notable milestone in the history of human ideas," says Mrs Rhys Davids (in commenting upon the Buddhist formula of causation, "that being present this becomes; that being absent this does not become,") "that a man reckoned for ages by thousands as the Light not of Asia only but of the

¹ *The Ideals of the East*, p. 60.

World, and the Saviour from sin and misery should call this little formula his Norm or Gospel, or at least one aspect of that Gospel.”¹ This view, which clearly is only one phase of Mrs Rhys Davids’ interpretation, has been lately attacked by Dr Berriedale Keith, who maintains that “given the psychological conditions of the time, it would have been a miracle had the Buddha been capable of the rationalism imputed to him.....It was the age of the growth of the great gods, Śiva and Vishnu, in their various forms, and the Buddha’s success was due to the fact that he either had claims to divinity or his followers attributed it to him, and won general acceptance for the view. It is conceivable that divinity was thrust upon him against his will, but every ground of probability supports the plain evidence of the texts that he himself had claims which necessarily conferred upon him a place as high as the greatest of gods.”² These two positions may be said to express the extremes of Western scholarship in its attempt to discover the historic Śākyamuni. For one he is Rationalist, for the other Deity. The one emphasises faith as essential to his disciples, the other reason.

Their views are not new, but they are here more emphatically stated than has been usual, and the issue is definitely joined. It is long since Kern insisted that Buddhism “is professedly no rationalistic system but a super-human law founded upon the decree of an omniscient and infallible Master.”³ And recently L. de la Vallée Poussin has argued that “Buddhism, which does appeal to reason and which will later reason freely, places intuition, Jñāna, above all. It is in ecstasy that one sees things truly.”⁴

The confusion of thought in which Western scholarship

¹ *Buddhism*, p. 89.

² *Buddhist Philosophy*, p. 29.

³ *Indian Buddhism*, p. 50.

⁴ *Nirvana*, p. 15.

finds itself may be partially explained by the statement of Hermann Oldenberg, who said nearly fifty years ago: "The Indian mind was wanting in that simplicity, which can believe without knowing, as well as in that bold clearness which seeks to know without believing, and therefore the Indian had to frame a doctrine, a religion and a philosophy combined, and therefore, perhaps, if it must be said, neither the one nor the other, Buddhism."¹

Buddhism is, in fact, a Middle Path in this as in everything else. Not only is it a Middle Path between the way of the world and the way of the ascetic, it is also a Middle Path between the way of the rationalist and the way of the man of faith; and in placing the emphasis most truly we shall probably do well to follow the clue given us by S enart—a view held by Śāṅkara and familiar to Indian thought—that Śākyamuni was essentially an early Mystic, who because he himself realised the ineffable experience of the conquest of Tañh a spoke with authority to the conscience and heart of man; and because he was also, a thinker seeking to explain this great experience appeared as an ethical teacher, when he explained it as the cessation of Tañh a, and as a religious and a philosophical teacher when he went on to the further interpretation that it means also Nirodha or escape from Saṁs ara. Himself more interested in the experience of Nirv ana than in the explanation, he was yet an Indian teacher seeking to lead others to Moksha. If they were to share his great experience he had necessarily to use the categories of Indian thought and to set forth Nirv ana as freedom from Saṁs ara.

Many Western writers have trembled on the verge of this interpretation. Most of them have fallen back upon the conclusion that here was an early Socrates, or an early Hume, or some more ethical Upanishadic thinker. There

¹ *Buddha*, E. T. p. 6.

is truth in these positions; what makes them false is that inveterate tendency of the "either, or." With one recent Indian statement, that of Dr B. Barua, that Buddha was essentially a philosopher, some may be found to agree, but Dr Barua himself¹ goes on to quote that very vital passage in which the Teacher says "There are things profound, hard to realise, hard to understand, yet tranquillising, sweet, not to be grasped by logical reason, subtle, intelligible only by the wise. It is for these things that the Buddha must be rightly praised. Here then is a key passage: it is not for his morality or moral teaching, not for his use of logical reason, not for his philosophical achievement that the Founder is to be praised, it is for that apprehension of mystical truth which is the Buddhist equivalent of the *Neti* of the *Upanishads*, an expression" "from which words turn back"—and which idealists of the Mahāyāna—recognising it as the essence of Buddhism—call Śūnyatā—the Void, the Void, the Ineffable.

It is, in other words, as a Yogi who grasps things by intuition that Śākyamuni claims originality, and yet if we are to accept the passage in *Majjhima Nikāya* II. 19, he calls himself a Vibhajjavādin, that is an Analyst, rather than an Ekamsavādin or Synthetist. This also may be true. For the Mystic may also have in him something of the rationalist, and if he is to communicate his experience he must seek at any rate to make it intelligible to others. The age was not as Dr Keith allows himself to argue "a barbarous age"; it was one of mystical seers like those of the *Upanishads*, and of a vigorous dialectic like that of the sixty-two schools mentioned in Buddhist texts. Some, at any rate, of these were philosophers and some were rationalists. Dr Keith is the last scholar one would expect to ignore such rationalism as that of the Sāṅkhya. The

¹ *Prolegomena to a History of Buddhist Philosophy* quoting *Dialogues of the Buddha* II. 33, 36,

view that Śākyamuni was an early Yogi has been well stated by Sēnart, who in 1889 said emphatically, "Buddhism is not a philosophic sect; it is a system of Yoga."¹ And who in 1900² worked out this view, and showed that we have in the four Dhyānas of Buddhism (a central doctrine and practice common to Northern and Southern Buddhism and therefore very old) an even older Indian practice, which is of the essence of Yoga. The famous Buddhist practice of Brahma-Vihāra carries in its very name the proof of its origin, and Patanjali in his *Yoga-Sūtras* uses the very words of the Pali texts a proof that he looked upon these practices of Mettam-Benevolence, Karuṇā-Compassion, Muditā-Sympathy, and Upekhā-Balance or Detachment, as common property not distinctively Buddhist, but belonging to Yoga as such.

The four stages again by which the Buddha analyses the disease of the world and lays down the essential treatment known as the "Four Noble Truths" of Buddhism, are the old stages of medical diagnosis which we find coming up again in the *Yoga Sūtras*, and as the technique of meditation leading to ecstasy is the same, so are the powers of Iddhi to which they lead.

More may be said on this subject, but here it may suffice to note that in the great works of art of the Andhra and Gupta periods exemplified in the solitary Buddha in the jungles of Anuradhapura and in the even more deserted Deer Park at Sarnath, the artists have left to us the clear proof that here is in fact a Yogi, seated with eyes closed regulating his breath, with head and trunk in one line, and with hands folded in meditation. Here in fact is Samādhi, which is the crown and goal of the Eightfold Noble Path. This Path, though it begins with right views, is in fact a Path for the Mystic, and ends in right ecstasy.

¹ *Revue des Deux Mondes*.

² See "Bouddhisme et Yoga." *Revue d'Histoire des Religions*, 1900, Volume II, p. 345.

And as these old masterpieces of Buddhist art may be looked upon as strong rocks amidst the shifting sands of the Texts and the surging waves of the Schools, so when we look at the modern practice of the Buddhist Monk, whether in Ceylon with its strange meditation upon skeletons, or in some Zen temple in Japan, or in the Ch'an schools of China and Korea, we find that the living heart of Buddhism, amidst much that is dead and corrupt, is this practice. It is this and this alone which keeps alive the old faith, which because it is essentially Yoga, is able to attach to itself to almost any outward observances. Yoga is in fact, as Pousin has said, a technique "in itself strange to all morals as to all religions and philosophic theory, but from this technique there can be separated out, and to it there can be added, morals, theology and devotion."¹

At the core then of early Buddhism was the Solitary, the great Seer, the Yogi Śākyamuni, surrounded by a small group of others who had caught his spirit, and entered into some of these difficult practices. At the circumference were all sorts of lay-people, to whom he could not communicate even an idea of such things. For them he had a different teaching, a different technique, and to them he offered a different goal. "Whatsoever householder desires to be reborn in a heaven let him attach himself to me with faith and devotion," says the *Majjhima Nikāya*, "but whatsoever Monk would realise Nirvāna let him tread the noble Eight-fold Path"; for the way of the Mystic is a difficult and elusive way, open only to those who have the original spiritual genius to tread it, and who are prepared to give their whole time and attention to its pursuit. The layman may attain Nirvāna; it is very unlikely that he will ever attempt it. That his interpretation of this profound experience of Nirvāna is what it is, due to the fact that Śākyamuni was an Indian of the Sixth Century before

³ *Nirvana*, p. 12.

Christ, and could only explain it in terms of current thought; that he was a great original thinker is evidenced by the fact that he had the courage to interpret it ethically rather than metaphysically, and to urge upon men that what mattered was the moral emancipation rather than the monistic interpretation. And even to the laity like Sigālo, whom we find worshipping the gods of the four quarters, he insists that the true worship of the gods is righteous living; to honour Mother and Father, to treat one's household aright, that is to pay due respect to the gods. To the specialist to meditate upon the great virtues or graces of Kindness, Compassion and Sympathy, this is the true Mysticism; and it will lead on to that Upekā, or Yoga, which is Balance, Harmony or Poise. The world is out of joint because men are following false views, and obsessed with false pursuits. This is the meaning of Dukkā, and over against it Śākyamuni holds out the alluring vision of that Yoga-Calm, Śānti, Peace, which he has himself experienced. This and this alone is Sukham-Joy. From the ordinary Yogi this great one differs in that his experience was profound and ethical—and that he established the practice on a rational basis. From the texts of the *Upanishads* he differed in bringing into daily life some of the glamour of the Ineffable.

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