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ON A FEW OF THE CHIEF CONTRASTS BETWEEN THE
ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES OF BUDDHISM AND OF
CHRISTIANITY, BY SIR M. MONIER-WILLIAMS, K.C.I.E.

“It is one of the strange phenomena of the present day, that even educated persons are apt to fall into raptures over the doctrines of Buddhism, attracted by the bright gems which its admirers cull out of its moral code, and display ostentatiously, while keeping out of sight all the dark spots of that code, all its triviality and all those precepts which no Christian could soil his lips by uttering. It has even been asserted that much of the teaching in the Sermon on the Mount is based on previously current moral precepts, which Buddhism was the first to introduce to the world, 500 years before Christ. But this is not all. The admirers of Buddhism maintain that the Buddha was not a mere teacher of morality, but of many other great truths. He has been justly called, say they, ‘the Light of Asia,’ though they condescendingly admit that Christianity, as a later development, is more adapted to become the religion of the world.

NOTE.—Those who have observed the progress of modern thought in regard to Neo-Buddhism will appreciate the insertion of the above remarks as a sequel to the Address: they were delivered at a public Conference this year, and have been revised for the Institute by the author. Another distinguished Member of the Institute writes:—“It has always seemed to me that the important point to keep in view as to Neo-Buddhism is that the sentiment in Arnold’s *Light of Asia* is utterly false; that the conceptions there are borrowed from Christianity; that Buddhism has not merely failed in practice, but is essentially the bare hollow emptiness that Sir M. Monier-Williams describes, and offers nothing but metaphysics and superstition; that, in fact, as to the first Schopenhauer is a better leader for those who wish Nihilism, and that the whole of Esoteric Buddhism is a fraud.”—Ed

“Let us, then, inquire for a moment what claim Gautama Buddha has to this title, ‘the Light of Asia.’

“Now, in the first place, those who give him this name forget that his doctrines only spread over Eastern Asia, and that Mohammed has as much right as Buddha to be called ‘the Light of Asia.’ But was the Buddha, in any true sense, a Light to any part of the world? It is certainly true that the main idea implied by Buddhism is intellectual enlightenment. Buddhism, before all things, means enlightenment of mind, resulting from intense self-concentration, from intense abstract meditation, combined with the exercise of a man’s own reasoning faculties and intuitions. It was only after such a course of meditation that the so-called Light of Knowledge burst upon the man Gautama. It was only then that he became Buddha, the Enlightened One. We read in the *Lalita Vistara* that, at the supreme moment of this enlightenment, actual flames of light issued from the crown of the Buddha’s head. Of what nature, then, was this so-called Light of Knowledge that radiated from the Buddha? Was it the knowledge of his own deep depravity of heart, or of the origin of sin? No; the Buddha’s light was in this respect profound darkness. He confessed himself a downright Agnostic. The origin of the first evil act was to him an inexplicable mystery. Was it, then, a knowledge of the goodness, justice, and holiness of an Omnipotent Creator? Was it a knowledge of the Fatherhood of God? No; the Buddha’s light was in these respects also absolute darkness. Here, too, he acknowledged himself a thorough Agnostic. He knew nothing of the existence of any Supreme Being—of any Being higher than himself. What, then, was the light that broke upon the Buddha? What was this enlightenment which has been so much written about and extolled? All that he claimed to have discovered was the Origin of suffering and the remedy of suffering. All the light of knowledge to which he attained came to this: that suffering arises from indulging desires; that suffering is inseparable from life; that all life is suffering; and that suffering is to be got rid of by the suppression of desires, and by the extinction of personal existence. You see here the first great contrast. When the Buddha said to his converts, ‘Come, follow me,’ he bade them expect to get rid of suffering; he told them to stamp out suffering by stamping out desires. When the Christ said to His disciples, ‘Come, follow me,’ He bade them expect suffering; He told them to glory in their sufferings, to rejoice in their sufferings, nay, to

expect the perfection of their characters through suffering. It is certainly noteworthy that both Christianity and Buddhism agree in asserting that all creation travaileth in pain, in bodily suffering, in tribulation. But mark the vast, the vital distinction in the teaching of each. The one taught men to aim at the glorification of the suffering body, the other at its utter annihilation. What says our Bible? We Christians, it says, are members of Christ's Body, of His flesh and of His Bones, of that Divine Body, which was a suffering body, a cross-bearing body, and is now a glorified body, an ever-living, life-giving body. A Buddhist, on the other hand, repudiates, as a simple impossibility, all idea of being a member of the Buddha's body. How could a Buddhist be a member of a body which was burnt, which was dissolved, which became extinct at the moment when the Buddha's whole personality became extinguished also? But, say the admirers of Buddhism, at least you will admit that the Buddha told men to get rid of sin, and to aim at sanctity of life? Nothing of the kind. The Buddha had no idea of sin, as an offence against God, no idea of true holiness. What he said was, Get rid of the demerit of evil actions and accumulate merit by good actions. This storing up of merit—like capital at a bank—is one of those inveterate propensities of human nature from which Christianity alone has delivered men.

Only the other day I met an intelligent Sikh from the Punjab, and asked him about his religion. He replied, 'I believe in One God, and I repeat my prayers, called Jap-jee, every morning and evening. These prayers occupy six pages of print, but I can get through them in little more than ten minutes.' He seemed to pride himself on this rapid recitation as a work of increased merit. I said, 'What else does your religion require of you?' He replied, 'I have made one pilgrimage to a sacred well near Amritsar; eighty-five steps lead down to it. I descended and bathed in the sacred pool. Then I ascended one step and repeated my Jap-jee in about ten minutes. Then I descended again to the pool and bathed again, and ascended to the second step and repeated my prayers a second time. Then I descended a third time, and ascended to the third step, and repeated my Jap-jee a third time; and so on for the whole eighty-five steps. It took me exactly fourteen hours, from 5 p.m. one evening to 7 a.m. next morning.' I asked, 'What good did you expect to get by going through this task?' He replied, 'I hope I have laid up a great store of merit, which will last me for a long time.' This, let me

tell you, is a genuine Hindu idea. It is of the very essence of Brahmanism and Hinduism. It is equally a Mohammedan idea. It is even more a Buddhist idea. Buddhism recognises the terrible consequences of evil actions, but provides no remedy except the accumulation of merit by good actions as a counterpoise. The Buddha never claimed to be a deliverer from sin. He never pretended to set any one free from the bondage of sinful acts and sinful habits. He never professed to provide any remedy for the leprosy of sin, any medicine for a dying sinner. On the contrary, by his doctrine of Karma he bound a man hand and foot to the consequences of his own acts with chains of adamant. He said, in effect, to every one of his disciples, 'You are in slavery to a tyrant of your own setting up; your own deeds, words, and thoughts in the present and former states of being are your own avengers through a countless series of existences. If you have been a murderer, a thief, a liar, impure, a drunkard, you must pay the penalty in your next birth; either in one of the hells, or as an unclean animal, or as an evil spirit, or as a demon. You cannot escape, and I am powerless to set you free.' 'Not in the heavens' (says the Dhamma-pada), 'not in the midst of the sea, not if thou hidest thyself in the clefts of the mountains, wilt thou find a place where thou canst escape the force of thine own evil actions.' Contrast the first sermon of Christ, 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He hath sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound.' Yes, in Christ alone there is deliverance from the bondage of former transgressions, from the prison-house of former sins; a total cancelling of the past, a complete blotting out of the handwriting, that is against us; the opening of a clear course for every man to start afresh; the free gift of pardon and of life to every criminal, to every sinner—even the most heinous.

But here, again, I seem to hear some admirers of Buddhism say:—'We admit the force of these contrasts, but surely you will allow that in the law of Buddha we find precepts which tell us not to love the world, not to love money, not to show enmity towards our enemies, not to do unrighteous acts, not to commit impurities, to overcome evil by good, and to do to others as we would be done by?' Yes, I admit all this; nay, I admit even more. I allow that some Buddhist precepts go beyond corresponding Christian injunctions; for the laws of Buddha prohibit all killing, even of animals for food. They demand total abstinence from stimulating drinks, disallowing even moderation in their use. They bid all

who aim at the highest perfection abandon the world, and lead a life of celibacy and monkhood. In fine, they enjoin total abstinence, because they dare not trust human beings to be temperate. How, indeed, could they trust them, when they promise no help, no Divine grace, no restraining power? The glory of Christianity is, that having freely given that power to man, it trusts him to make use of the gift. It seems to speak to him thus: 'Thy Creator has endowed thee with freedom of choice, and therefore respects thy liberty of action. He imposes on thee no rule of total abstinence in regard to natural desires; He simply bids thee keep them within bounds, so that thy self-control and thy moderation may be known unto all men. He places thee in the world amid trials and temptations, and says to thee, 'My grace is sufficient for thee, and by its aid thou mayest overcome them all.'

And, believe me, the great contrast between the moral precepts of Buddhism and Christianity is not so much in the letter of the precepts as in the motive power brought to bear in their application. Buddhism says: Be righteous by yourselves, and through yourselves, and for the final getting rid of all suffering, of all individuality, of all life in yourselves. Christianity says: Be righteous through a power implanted in you from above; through the power of a life-giving principle, freely given to you, and always abiding in you.' The Buddha said, to his followers:—'Take nothing from me, trust to no one but yourselves.' Christ said, and says to us still:—'Take all from Me; take this free gift; put on this spotless robe; eat this bread of life; drink this living water.' He who receives a priceless gift is not likely to insult the Giver of it. He who accepts a snow-white robe is not likely willingly to soil it by impure acts. He who tastes life-giving bread is not likely to relish husks. He who draws deep draughts at a living well is not likely to prefer the polluted water of a stagnant pool. If any one, therefore, insists on placing the Buddhist and Christian moral codes on the same level, let him ask himself one plain question: Who would be the more likely to lead a godly, righteous, and sober life—a life of moderation and temperance—a life of holiness and happiness; the man who has learnt his morality from the extinct Buddha, or the man who draws his morality and his holiness from the living, the eternal, the life-giving Christ?

Still, I seem to hear some one say, 'We grant all this, we admit the truth of what you have stated; nevertheless, for all that, you must allow that Buddhism conferred a great benefit on India by

setting free its teeming population, before entangled in the meshes of ceremonial observances and Brahmanical priestcraft.' Yes, I admit this ; nay, I admit even more than this. I admit that Buddhism conferred many other benefits on the millions inhabiting the most populous part of Asia. It promoted progress up to a certain point ; it preached purity in thought, word, and deed (though only for the accumulation of merit) ; it proclaimed the brotherhood of humanity ; it avowed sympathy with social liberty and freedom ; it gave back much independence to women ; it inculcated universal benevolence, extending even to animals ; and, from its declaration that a man's future depended on his present acts and conditions, it did good service for a time in preventing stagnation, promoting activity, and elevating the character of humanity.

But if, after making all these concessions, I am told that, on my own showing, Buddhism was a kind of introduction to Christianity, or that Christianity is a kind of development of Buddhism, I must ask you to bear with me a little longer while I point out certain other contrasts, which ought to make it clear to every reasonable man how vast, how profound, how impassable is the gulf separating the true religion from a mere system of morality, founded on a form of pessimistic philosophy. And, first of all, let us note that Christ was God-sent, whereas Buddha was self-sent. Christ was with His Father from everlasting, and was in the fulness of time sent by Him into the world to be born of a pure virgin, in the likeness and fashion of men. Buddha, on the contrary, by a force derived from his own acts, passed through innumerable bodies of gods, demi-gods, demons, men, and animals, until he reached one out of numerous supposed heavens, and thence by his own will descended upon earth, to enter the side of his mother, in the form of a white elephant. Then Christ came down from heaven to be born on earth in a poor and humble station, to be reared in a cottage, to be trained to toilsome labour as a working man. Buddha came down to be born on earth in a rich and princely family ; to be brought up amid luxurious surroundings, and finally to go forth as a mendicant, begging his own food and doing nothing for his own support. Then, again, Christ as He grew up, showed no signs of earthly majesty in His external form, whereas the Buddha is described as marked with certain mystic symbols of universal monarchy on his feet and on his hands, and taller and more stately in frame and figure than ordinary human beings. Then, when each entered on his ministry as a teacher, Christ was despised and

rejected by kings and princes, and followed by poor and ignorant fishermen, by common people, publicans, and sinners ; Buddha was honoured by kings and princes, and followed by rich men and learned disciples. Then Christ had all the treasures of knowledge hidden in Himself, and made known to His disciples that He was Himself the Way and the Truth, Himself their Wisdom, Righteousness, Sanctification, and Redemption ; Buddha declared that all enlightenment and wisdom were to be attained by his disciples, not through him, but through themselves and their own intuitions, and that, too, only after long and painful discipline in countless successive bodily existences. Then, when we come to compare the death of each, the contrast reaches its climax, for Christ was put to death violently by wicked men and died in agony an atoning death, suffering for the sins of the world at the age of thirty-three, leaving behind in Jerusalem about one hundred and twenty disciples after a short ministry of three years ; whereas Buddha died peacefully among his friends, suffering from an attack of indigestion at the age of eighty, leaving behind many thousands of disciples after forty-five years of teaching and preaching. And what happened after the death of each ? Christ the Holy One saw no corruption, but rose again in His present glorified body, and is alive for evermore. Nay, has life in Himself ever-flowing in life-giving streams towards His people. The Buddha is dead and gone for ever ; his body, according to the testimony of his own disciples, was burnt, more than 400 years before the Advent of Christ, and its ashes distributed everywhere as relics. Even according to the Buddha's own declaration he now lives only in the doctrine which he left behind him for the guidance of his followers. And here again in regard to the doctrine left behind by each, a vast distinction is to be noted. For the doctrine delivered by Christ to His disciples is to spread by degrees everywhere until it prevails eternally. Whereas the doctrine left by Buddha, though it advanced rapidly by leaps and bounds, is, according to his own admission, to fade away by degrees, till at the end of 5,000 years it has disappeared altogether from the earth, and another Buddha must descend to restore it.

Then that other Buddha must be followed by countless succeeding Buddhas in succeeding ages, whereas there is only one Christ, who can have no successor, for He is still alive and for ever present with His people. 'Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world.' Then observe that, although the Buddha's doctrine was ultimately written down by his disciples in certain collections

of books, in the same manner as the doctrine of Christ, yet that a gulf of difference,—a fundamental difference of character,—separates the Sacred Books of each, the Bible of the Christian and the Bible of the Buddhist. The Christian's Bible claims to be a supernatural Revelation, yet it attaches no mystical talismanic virtue to the mere sound of its words. On the other hand the characteristic of the Buddhist Bible is that it utterly repudiates all claim to be a supernatural revelation; yet the very sound of its words is believed to possess a meritorious efficacy, capable of elevating any one who hears it to heavenly abodes in future existences. In illustration I may advert to a legend current in Ceylon, that once on a time 500 bats lived in a cave where two monks daily recited the Buddha's law (the recitation being called 'Bana'). These bats gained such merit by simply hearing the sound of the words that when they died they were all re-born as men and ultimately as gods.

But, again. I am sure to hear the admirers of Buddhism say,—Is it not the case that the doctrine of Buddha, like the doctrine of Christ, has self-sacrifice as its key-note? Well, be it so. I admit that the Buddha taught a kind of self-sacrifice. I admit that it is recorded of the Buddha himself that on one occasion he plucked out his own eyes, and that on another he cut off his own head, and that on a third he cut his own body to pieces, to redeem a dove from a hawk. But note the vast distinction between the self-sacrifice taught by the two systems. Christianity demands the suppression of selfishness. Buddhism demands the suppression of self, with the one object of extinguishing all consciousness of self. In the one the true self is elevated and intensified. In the other the true self is annihilated by the practice of a false form of non-selfishness, which has for its final object the annihilation of the Ego, the utter extinction of the illusion of *personal* individuality.

Then note other contrasts. According to the Christian Bible, regulate and sanctify the heart's desires and affections. According to the Buddhist, suppress and utterly destroy them if you wish for true sanctification. Christianity teaches that, in the highest form of life, *love* is intensified. Buddhism teaches that, in the highest state of existence, all love is extinguished. According to Christianity, go and earn your own bread, support yourself and your family. Marriage, it says, is honourable and undefiled, and married life is a field on which holiness may grow and be developed. Nay, more. Christ Himself honoured a wedding with his presence,

and took up little children in His arms and blessed them. Buddhism, on the other hand, says, Avoid married life ; shun it as if it were a burning pit of live coals ; or, having entered on it, abandon wife, children, and home, and go about as celibate monks, engaging in nothing but in meditation and recitation of the Buddha's Law,—that is, if you aim at the highest degree of sanctification. And then comes the important contrast, that no Christian trusts to his own works as the sole meritorious cause of salvation, but is taught to say, I have no merit of my own, and when I have done all I am an unprofitable servant. Whereas Buddhism, on the contrary, teaches that every man must trust to his own merits only. Fitly do the rags worn by its monks symbolise the miserable patchwork of its own self-righteousness. Not that Christianity ignores the necessity for good works ; on the contrary, no other system insists on a lofty morality so strongly, but only as a thank-offering—only as the outcome and evidence of faith,—never as the meritorious instrument of salvation.

Lastly, I must advert again to the most important and essential of all the distinctions which separate Christianity from Buddhism. Christianity regards personal life as the most precious, the most sacred of all possessions, and God himself as the highest example of intense personality, the great 'I am that I am,' and teaches us that we are to thirst for a continuance of personal life as a gift for Him ; nay, more, that we are to thirst for the living God Himself and for conformity to His likeness ; while Buddhism sets forth as the highest of all aims the utter extinction of personal identity—the utter annihilation of the Ego—of all existence in any form whatever, and proclaims, as the only true creed, the ultimate resolution of everything into nothing, of every entity into pure non-entity. What shall I do to inherit eternal life ? says the Christian. What shall I do to inherit eternal extinction of life ? says the Buddhist. It seems a mere absurdity to have to ask, in concluding this address, Whom shall we choose as our guide, our hope, our salvation—'the Light of Asia,' or 'the Light of the world' ? the Buddha, or the Christ ? It seems mere mockery to put this final question to rational and thoughtful men in the nineteenth century :—Which book shall we clasp to our hearts in the hour of death—the book that tells us of the extinct man Buddha, or the Bible that reveals to us the living Christ, the Redeemer of the World ?
