

THE FUTURE POSSIBILITIES OF BUDDHISM

BY DALJIT SINGH SADHARIA

THESE are many reasons for thinking that Buddhism may become a religion of the future and be the most potent single influence in serving the religious and spiritual needs of mankind. It is, as we all know, not a new thing, but a long, well and firmly established, and still an advancing religion. It is the faith of the majority of the world's population, and one third of the human race lives and dies in the tenets of Gautama. It has moulded the religious and social institutions, sentiments, and usages of the people of Asia and has leavened their literature and laws. Nor is its influence confined within the borders of its former conquests, but it extends to all parts of the civilized world. During the last sixty years it has come to exercise an increasingly powerful influence and has become a strong rival of Christianity. Poets and philosophers alike have been attracted by the doctrines of the Buddha. The words Sar, Samsar and Nirvana have become current expressions of many a modern poet, not only in their descriptions of scenes relating to the world in which we live, but also in their pictures of salvation from this world of error, guilt, suffering, and death. The soul-stirring poetry of Richard Wagner is largely influenced by the ground thoughts of Buddhism, and the philosophical system of the great German thinker, Schopenhauer, is based and rests on the pessimistic side of Buddhistic thought. Atheistic and agnostic philosophers of all countries and climes who are united by their common philosophical ties, have found in Buddhism a source of consolation and their ally to oppose the revealed or supernatural religion. Huxley, Hartmann, Feuerbach, Emerson, Paul Carus, and a host of others have imbibed more or less of its sublime doctrines and have interpreted them in the light of their own philosophies. It has captivated the minds of Fausboll, Max Muller, Lilly,

Lillie, Annie Besant, Edwin Arnold and others, and has found in them their strongest sympathizers. The Religion of Humanity of Auguste Comte with its exclusion of overruling and creating deity is philosophical Buddhism, pure and simple, adapted to modern civilization. The rise of modern Buddhism is one of the most remarkable phenomena in the religious evolution of humanity, and its present renaissance is fraught with serious consequences.

The first and the most important reason which promises to make Buddhism the religion of the future is the personality of its noble Founder. The purity of life, the nobility of character, truthfulness, and gentleness of the Buddha, have left an indelible impress on the ages and have made him an immortal of history. His winning nature, burning love for humanity, sacrifice of princely leisure and comfort to find out a way of salvation, have carried his feeble voice echoing through the long halls of time and have endeared him to the hearts of millions. It is even more striking when one contrasts his character with the other religious teachers of mankind. The Buddha, unlike the founders of other religions, does not claim to have received any divine inspiration or to be a messenger from God. He does not look upon himself as in any way divine or invested with miraculous and supernatural powers. He does not pretend to stand on a higher religious pedestal than the rest of his fellow-beings and does not arrogate to himself superiority over others. He does not enjoin upon his followers to regard him as in any way a superior being and to worship his name. He does not fetter mankind with miracles, revelations, or any decrees of his own. He breathes no revenge for the disobedient and no forgiveness for the penitent. He is above all jealousy and demands no allegiance. He is not a creator governing his rebellious subjects but a physician who diagnoses the disease of humanity and prescribes the cure. Those who do not follow his regime have nothing more to suffer in addition but only from the effect of disease itself. He is a teacher who shows us how to extricate ourselves from the evils of this world and how to attain an everlasting peace and bliss.

The second great reason which will guarantee the future of Buddhism is undoubtedly its relation and attitude towards science. Its teachings are not in conflict with modern science. The great truths of modern investigations that man has no knowledge of the Absolute and Supreme Being, that soul is a bundle of sensations and ideas; and that the universe is ruled by an irrefragable and

immutable law of causation, were long ago taught by the Buddha. Buddhism is above all a cosmocentric religion. It does not conceive the universe as the theatre or scene of human drama, but the great drama itself, outside of which there is no action, no life, no being. Here is striking resemblance between Buddhism and modern science. For science is atheistic in exactly the same sense as is Buddhism. Neither of them postulate the existence of a personal Divine Creator and Providence and do not concern themselves with problems which cannot be brought within the domain of demonstrable philosophy. Both centre their attention, in positivist fashion, on the phenomenal world, the world that is verifiable in human experience and has an obvious and direct bearing on human actions and human weal and woe. Twenty-five centuries ago the Buddha rejected and despised the theory which ascribed to God the attributes of mercy, justice, goodness and the like. He could not persuade himself to believe that a merciful and well-intentioned divine Providence tolerates the prevalence of sin, misery, poverty, and numerous other evils. Nor could he indulge in the monstrous absurdity that an all-powerful Deity has not enough power to counteract the evil tendencies of the evil-doer. Like science, he dispensed with all such transcendental problems and justly contended that it is utterly futile to speak of the nature of the "absolute" since our mind is limited and seriously circumscribed by its operations. It cannot even know the real constitution of a particle of dust floating in space before our eyes, and it is a sheer act of irrationality on our part to found our principles of conduct on an unknown God. This positive atheism of Buddhism which has long been regarded by theologians as its chief defect is its greatest glory and a strong recommendation in the eyes of many a scientific thinker.

The third great reason which will make Buddhism the religion of the future is its doctrine of reason. The follower of the Buddha is not fettered by any infallible authority, any inspired book which cannot err or the decrees of church councils, to accept the findings of modern science and philosophy. He is asked to follow only one guide, the guide of his reason, no matter where it may lead. The fundamental principle is, which it first inculcates regarding all higher intellectual problems, that nothing should be accepted as truth unless put to the crucial test of investigation and unrelenting scrutiny. Reason is exalted over faith, traditions, authority and the like, and it is this modern note which will make it acceptable to the majority

of the race. In all the great religions of the world reason is relegated to the background, if not actually despised, and faith is made the cornerstone of religion. Buddhism on the other hand gives prominence to reason and grapples with the problems of life, not by the aid of blind faith and mere speculative reasoning, but on the strength of objective experience and inductive processes of investigation.

The fourth great reason which will make Buddhism the religion of the future is its spirit of tolerance. In this it stands alone among all the great religions of the world. Never and no where, where established has it persecuted or maltreated the followers of other religions whose beliefs were fundamentally opposed to its own. Its history has never been marred by bloodshed, and the followers of the Buddha have never fallen into the dismal abyss of intolerance. No wars have been waged for its propagation, and no inquisition has been founded to secure uniformity in faith or to stamp out heresy. Intellectual conviction is the cornerstone of Buddhism as faith is the foundation of other religions. Freedom of thought has prevailed and prevails in all the Buddhist countries, and no savage persecution of human intellect and knowledge has ever been recorded. Those who criticize or reject the authority and teachings of the Tirpitkas are not branded as heretics and their writings are not consigned to the flames, but are respected and well listened to. The follower of the Buddha is absolutely free to reject what he cannot reconcile with his reason, and in so doing he is proving a good Buddhist. The Tirpitkas do not occupy the same position in Buddhism as the Bible in Christianity, the Koran in Islam, and the Vedas in Hinduism. They are good books containing profound moral and spiritual truths and serve as guides through the dark waters of life. But they are by no means repositories of revealed knowledge, and it is not binding on the Buddhist to follow them blindly at the expense of reason. If they happen to come in conflict with the findings of modern scholarship and contain historical inaccuracies, the Buddhist is free to relegate them to the realm of myths and legends. They are simply symbols expressing some profound religious truths and their rejection or elimination would not affect the teachings of the Buddha a jot or tittle.

Buddhism is a system of vast magnitude. It embraces so many philosophical conceptions and touches so many problems of life, that it would not be the least exaggeration to describe it as the store-

house of many philosophies and religions. It embodies in its giant structure grand and peculiar views of physical science, a highly developed abstract metaphysics, a fanciful mysticism, and sublime idealism, and the most advanced system of rational ethics. It is equally fitted to meet the demands of the most ignorant and the most cultured and can satisfy the longings of human intellect as well as of the heart. This is one of the secrets of its remarkable power of adaptation to the changing conditions of the times and its ability to conform to the intellectual standards of the present age.

The whole Buddhist system, moreover, is combined and worked up in such a manner, that the essentials of Buddha's teaching can be reduced to a simple and intelligible formula that makes it easy for the simple-minded layman to grasp and understand. Its doctrine of Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path can be intelligently followed even by the most ignorant, and yet it is full of such philosophic depth and metaphysical complications as to provide food for years of meditation to the metaphysician, the poet, and the mystic. The Buddhist doctrines of Karma, of knowledge, are of such as only the trained metaphysician can ever hope to grasp in their entirety, and volumes might be written to clarify their meaning. Buddhism is the only religion that can satisfy spiritual and intellectual cravings of mankind and can withstand the merciless logic of modern science.

The fifth great reason which will make Buddhism the religion of the future is its sublime optimism. This comes something like a shock to those who are taught to believe by some superficial scholars that Buddhism regards this life as a necessary evil and is a system of dire pessimism. This is a mistake, and those who regard it a gospel of passivity and identify it with pessimism, betray a colossal ignorance of Gautama's ethics and philosophy. It is true that it recognizes the preponderance of evil, but it does not say that there is no hope for redemption from care and suffering and that evil is invincible. It shows us the way how to grapple manfully against the contending forces and enables us to extricate ourselves from vulgar error and to share the serene peace of impersonal vision. The goal of Nirvana is not a negative but a positive ideal. It is life itself made glorious by self-conquest and exalted by boundless love and wisdom. Onwards, and ever onwards, and subject to his dominion an ever increasing moral and spiritual energy, is the fundamental fact of the life of the Buddhist. He does not resign himself, like the followers of other religions, to the quiescent fatalism of inex-

plicable predestination but believes in the rational exploitation of the universe. He has unbounded confidence in his own abilities and does not depend for his salvation on priests, sacrifices, ceremonies, divine grace and the like. "It is nothing", the Buddhist says, "but the attainment of 'Budhi', that ideal state of moral and spiritual perfection which lies entirely within human reach and which can be reached by human means. The gospel of inaction and pessimism bears the same relation to Buddhism as fire does to water. It is a religion of action, dynamic energy, and the highest type of optimism that has ever been revealed to mankind. It is one of the most distinguishing features which wholly separates it from all other religions and is its great glory in our profoundly self-assertive age.

These are some of the most important reasons which embolden one to prophesy a glorious future for Buddhism. Religions based on blind faith are perishing before the inexorable advance of scientific knowledge and are slowly losing their hold on the popular mind. A brand of superstition is being placed upon beliefs which a hundred years ago had exacted the absolute and unquestioned assent of their votaries. They were good when men needed to be taught as children and are anachronisms in this age of enlightenment and progress. But the excellent Law of the Buddha is confined to no age and is not subject to space and time. His doctrine of Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path is as true today as when he first taught it, and ever will be true. That religion only which has overcome the primitive notions of revelations, personal eternality of the soul, of atonement by blood, of punishments and rewards, creation out of nothing or dust by a God magician, deserves or is likely to become the religion of mankind.