

The Contribution of Buddhism to World Culture

by

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The Contribution of Buddhism to World Culture

For twenty-five centuries has the Message of the Deer Park at Benares influenced the destinies of humanity. There is ample evidence to show that the teaching of the Buddha has been something like a leaven to the mental life of mankind from the Siberian snowlands to the verdant sunny isles of the Indian sea, and from the Land of the Rising Sun to fog-bound Britain. It is not improbable that Buddhism penetrated even to the old South American civilizations in the early centuries of our era.¹ Further, it should be remembered that the two most ancient living civilizations, the Indian and the Chinese, and three of the greatest of the religions of today, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism, have been altered and improved by the infiltration of Buddhist ideas. In the light of these facts one can well imagine how colossal must be the Buddhist contribution to the fund of human culture.

“It is my deliberate opinion,” says Mahatma Gandhi, “that the essential part of the teachings of the Buddha now forms an integral part of Hinduism. It is impossible for Hindu India today to retrace her steps and go behind the great reformation that Gautama effected in Hinduism. By his immense sacrifice, by his great renunciation, and by the immaculate purity of his life, he left an indelible impress upon Hinduism, and Hinduism owes an eternal debt of gratitude to that great teacher.”²

The Buddha's doctrine, as Manmatha Nath Shastri puts it, is “the glory of India and Indians.”³ Without it, Indian culture would be a maimed thing. And the Land of the Purple Fruit, Jambudvipa, would for the world lose most of its sanctity and interest, if the Blessed One, the Buddha, had not walked in the Middle Country, Madhyadesa, as he did for forty-five years enfolding all within the aura of his compassion, and blazing the path of true renunciation. Realizing the significance of that ministry of the Master, C. V. Raman said, “In the vicinity of Benares, there exists a path which is for me the most sacred place in India. This path was one day travelled over by the Prince Siddhartha, after he had gotten rid of all his worldly possessions in order to go through the world and proclaim The Annunciation of Love.”⁴

Again, it is the Master of Merciful Wisdom, and his love-gift of liberation for all that breathes, that grip the imagination of Edwin Arnold at Benares, the citadel of modern Hinduism, steeped though he is in the knowledge of the *Gīta* and in Vedic lore: “... it is not Hinduism which—to my mind at least—chiefly consecrates Benares. The divine memory of the founder of Buddhism broods over all the country hereabouts; and just as the walls and buildings of ‘Kasi’ are full of old Buddhist stones carved with symbols and legends of his gentle faith, so is the land north and south famous with the passage of his feet, and so are the religious and social thoughts and ways of all this Hindu people stamped with the impress of his doctrines. Modern Brahmanism is really Buddhism in a Shastri's robe and sacred thread. Shunkuracharya and his priests expelled the brethren of the yellow robe from India, but the spirit of Sakya-Muni's teaching remained unbanished, just as ‘Greece, overcome, conquered her conqueror.’”⁵

¹ Lillie, Arthur, *Buddha and Buddhism*, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1900, pp. 205–208.

² Desai, Mahadev and S. Ganesan, eds, with Gandhiji in Ceylon, Madras, 1928, p. 56.

³ Shastri, Manmatha Nath, *Buddha: His Life, His Teachings, His Order: Together with The History Of The Buddhism*, Society for the Resuscitation of Indian Literature, Calcutta, 1910, p.ii

⁴ *The Bosat*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 1942, Vajirarama, Colombo, p. 8

⁵ Arnold, Edwin, *India Revisited*, Second Edition, London, 1891, p. 223

It is impossible to overrate the importance of the work done by Buddhism for India, or, for that matter, for the world. They say that Buddhism has ceased to exist just in the country where it sprang up. Nothing, however, is more untrue,⁶ according to D. R. Bhandarkar.

Many revealing statements of the above-mentioned sort could be cited from the writings both of Indians and non-Indians of note to support the contention that India is inwardly Buddhist, whatever its outer religious labels be. And labels are unimportant where a teaching like Buddhism is concerned. To the Buddha and his followers names do not matter much: "What's in a name?..."

The main thing in Buddhism is its germinal power which, penetrating silently, unhurriedly, imperceptibly into the womb of the spirit, produces the embryo of the compassionate view, the vision of life as something in urgent need of salvation from the perils that beset it. And with the development of that wisdom-view and its birth as a complete idea, is brought home to the real thinker the urgency too of a rational, practical and sane method of deliverance from all dissatisfactions, first through ameliorative action gradually, and, in the end, through the irrevocable renunciation of the self and all that it implies.

That is the view and that the method of deliverance, which the early messengers of Buddhism stood for and preached wherever they went. In this, they merely imitated the Buddha himself, who never sought to swell his ranks but to change men's hearts. We see the method of propagation as conceived by the Buddha carried out on a stupendous scale by Asoka, the pattern for all good rulers of mankind. His "conquests of righteousness in all quarters," *Dharmavijaya*, were conceived in the spirit of the broadest toleration worthy of a real follower of the Master of Compassion and carried out with full consideration for other beliefs and convictions. The people who came under the influence of the non-violent armies of Asoka's missions appear to have retained a good part of their old beliefs and ways of thought while absorbing the new teaching. The new teaching had been presented to them largely as something complementary to their earlier religious ideas, as something which was to make their lives fuller and their spiritual treasury more abundant with goods of lasting value.

This tradition, coming down from the Buddha and strengthened by the work of Asokan teachers, became settled in all Buddhist missionary activity. No decriing of other sects and no kind of coercion or compulsion has ever existed in Buddhism as they have in the missionary activities of other religions. That is how Buddhism was able to sink deep into a great variety of cultures the civilized world over, gently, without setting up useless resistances. Thus, it is said, were the conquests by the Law of Piety made "by His Sacred Majesty (Dharmasoka) both in his own dominions and all the neighbouring realms as far as Syria hundreds of leagues away where the Greek (*Yona*) King named Antiochos dwells, and north of that Antiochos, too, where dwell the four kings severally named Ptolemy, Antiogonos, Magas, and Alexander; and in the south the (realms of the) Cholas and Pandyas, as far as Tāmrapārni, likewise, and here, too, in the King's dominions, among the Greeks, and Kambojas, the Nabhapantis of Nabhaka; among the Bhojas, and Pitinikas, among the Andhras and Pulindas ... "⁷

Buddhism was the first missionary religion of the world, both in point of time and in the excellence of its methods and results. And it is only now, more than two thousand years since the example was set, that Christianity and Islam have understood the importance of Buddhist principles of propagation of the truth, and that too, not fully, for still the fullest spirit of tolerance is not in these religions.

⁶ *The Bosat*, Wesak, 1940, Vajirarama, Colombo, p. 95

⁷ MacPhail, James M., *Asoka*, The Association Press, Calcutta, 1910, p. 74

By the reasonableness of its ethic, its simple and direct teaching of kindliness, sympathy and strenuous exertion to make the lives of all happy and free from suffering, Buddhism is a teaching that is easy of grasp, both by peasant and by pundit. Thus, it has become a part of the world's heritage of good. "The type of consciousness," S.M. Melamed says, "that is summed up in the term Buddhism is as alive and effective today as ever. There are still millions of people in the East and in the West, who, though formally not adherents of Buddhism, still have a Buddhist outlook upon life. While this type of consciousness may express itself today in a different form than it did in the past, it yet remains a steady force in the spiritual life of man ... Even if Buddhism, as an organized religion, with all its votaries, monks and temples should disappear, the Buddhist consciousness would still remain a steady force in man's spiritual history. It will live as long as man will be overwhelmed by the phenomena of pain and suffering."⁸

The ways in which this spiritual force has expressed itself in the manifold activity of society constitute the Buddhist contribution to world-culture.

Just as Buddhism is the first great missionary religion in recorded history, so, too, is it the first great monastic religion of the world. All monasticism, Indian and Western, gets its inspiration from the Buddhists. W.M. Flinders Petrie supposed that "from some source—perhaps the Buddhist Mission of Asoka—the ascetic life of recluses was established in the Ptolemaic times, and monks of the Serapeum illustrated an ideal to man which had been as yet unknown in the West. This system of monasticism continued until Pachomios, monk of Serapis in Upper Egypt, became the first Christian monk in the reign of Constantine. Quickly initiated in Syria, Asia Minor, Gaul and other provinces, as well as in Italy itself, the system passed into a fundamental position in mediaeval Christianity, and the reverence of mankind for fifteen hundred (*sic*) bestowed an Egyptian institution."⁹ There is no doubt that the Essenes and the Therapeutae were the forerunners of Catholic monasticism, and these were clearly followers of Buddhist monastic practices. "The most subtle thinker of the modern English Church, the late Dean Mansel, boldly maintained that the philosophy and rites of the Therapeutae of Alexandria were due to Buddhist missionaries who visited Egypt within two generations of the time of Alexander the Great. In this, he has been supported by philosophers of the calibre of Schelling and Schopenhauer, and the great Sanskrit authority, Lassen. Renan, in his work *Les Langues Semitiques*, also sees traces of this propagandism in Palestine before the Christian era. Hilgenfeld, Mutter, Bohlen, King, all admit the Buddhist influence,"¹⁰ writes Arthur Lillie.

The value of genuine monasticism and of all true asceticism for the welfare of the world is great indeed. The fundamental attributes of a good monk: self-restraint, chastity, humility, self-effacement and renunciation are things that society cannot do without, and these qualities are best developed in the calm atmosphere of the monastery. The Buddhist monastic life is asceticism without self-torture and is everywhere definitely seen as the product of a progressive state of society alone. In the monastic life a man ceases to be an irritation to his fellowmen through any kind of struggle and competition with them for privilege, preferment, profit or fame, and bends his energies to the accomplishment of weal for all.

⁸ Melamed, S. M., Spinoza and Buddha, Visions of a Dead God, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1933, pp. 1-2

⁹ Flinders Petrie, W.M., Personal Religion in Egypt before Christianity, Harper & Bros., London, 1909, pp. 92-3

¹⁰ Lillie, Arthur, Buddhism in Christendom, or Jesus, the Essene, Kegan Paul, Trench & Company, London, 1887, p. 7

Buddhism has influenced Christianity and other Western teachings in many ways, not only through the spreading abroad of the idea of monasticism. The Pythagoreans, the Neo-Platonists and the Gnostics were all indebted both to Jainism and to Buddhism. Buddhist ideas flowed freely into these teachings, and only those who want deliberately to shut their eyes to the facts can doubt or hesitate concerning the Eastern influence on the Western mind which had falsified the idea that East is East and West is West, more than twenty centuries before Kipling was born.

Buddhism penetrated westwards early. Just a century after the Buddha, his name occurs in a Persian Scripture, the Fravadin Yasht (16).

Clement of Alexandria knew about the Jains and the Buddhists, the *samaṇas*, recluses, and the *brāhmaṇas*, *brahmins*, and actually mentions the name of the Buddha: "There are two sects of these Indian philosophers—one called the Sramanai and the other the Brachmanai. Connected with the Sramanai are the philosophers called the Hylobioi who neither live in cities nor even in houses. They clothe themselves with the bark of trees, and subsist upon acorns, and drink water by lifting it to their mouth with their hands. They neither marry nor beget children, like those ascetics of our own day called the Enkratetai. Among the Indians are those philosophers also who follow the precepts of Boutta whom they honour as a god on account of his extraordinary sanctity."¹¹

Buddhism affected Plotinian teaching profoundly, though Dr. Inge is not willing to accept it. "It is well-known," says Dean Inge, "that Alexandria was at this time (the period of Plotinus 204–270 A.D.) not only a great intellectual centre, but the place where above all others, East and West rubbed shoulders. The wisdom of Asia was undoubtedly in high repute about this time. Philostratus expresses the highest veneration for the learning of the Indians. Plotinus himself accompanied the Roman army to Persia in the hope of gathering wisdom... It is, therefore, natural that many scholars have looked for oriental influence in Neo-Platonism, and have represented it as a fusion of European and Asiatic philosophy. But, though the influence of the East upon the West was undoubtedly great during the decline of the Western Empire, it is not necessary to derive any Neo-Platonic doctrines from a non-European source. Neo-Platonism is a legitimate development of Greek thought, and of Plato's own speculations.

"In some ways it might even be said that Plato is more Oriental than Plotinus. It is another question whether Neo-Platonism was influenced in any way by the Jewish Alexandrian school, which is known to us through the writings of Philo. The resemblances between the Essenes and the Neo-Pythagoreans, and between Philo and Plotinus, are so striking that many have thought it impossible to deny a direct dependence. But it is more probable that the Greek and the Jewish Alexandrian schools developed side by side under parallel influences. Philo does not seem to have been much read by the educated pagans, who had strong prejudices against the Jews."¹² Against this view there are specialists on things Indian of the past who believe in the Greeks' and other Westerners' debt to Buddhist, Jain and other Indian thought.

Of the fifth and sixth centuries B.C., Rapson states that "at no period in early history, probably, were the means of communication by land more open or the conditions more favourable for the interchange of ideas between India and the West."¹³

¹¹ McCrindle, J.W., trans and ed., *Ancient India As Described By Megasthenes and Arrian*, Thacker, Spink, Calcutta and Bombay, 1877, pp. 104–5

¹² Inge, William R., "Neo-Platonism," in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings, Clark, Edinburgh, 1908–1926.

¹³ Rapson, E.J. ed., *Ancient India, The Cambridge History of India, Volume 1*, Cambridge, 1922, pp. 87–88

“This may account,” according to Rawlinson, “for the influence of Indian ideas upon the development of Greek philosophy.”¹⁴

“It is not too much,” says R. Garbe, “to assume that the curious Greek (Pythagoras) who was a contemporary of the Buddha, and, it may be, of Zoroaster, too, would have acquired a more or less exact knowledge of the East, in that intellectual age of fermentation, through the medium of Persia. It must be remembered in this connection that the Asiatic Greeks, at the time when Pythagoras still dwelt in his Ionian home, were under the single sway of Cyrus, the founder of the Persian Empire.”¹⁵

“Herodotus, like Plato and others, attributes all wisdom to Egyptian sources ... The Greeks were deeply impressed by the great antiquity of Egyptian civilization, its lofty temples, and its closely guarded religious mysteries ... Unfortunately, it is extremely doubtful whether the Egyptians did actually believe in transmigration ... It is more likely that Pythagoras was influenced by India (re transmigration) than by Egypt. Almost all the theories—religious, philosophical and mathematical—taught by the Pythagoreans were known in India in the sixth century B.C., and Pythagoreans, like the Jains and the Buddhists, refrained from the destruction of life ...”¹⁶

“Alexandria in the first century A.D. was the second city in the Empire. In the height of her glory, she must have resembled Venice in the full tide of her prosperity. The mercantile shipping of half the ancient world tied up at her quaysides, and scholars from the four quarters of the earth met and disputed in the Museum and made use of the vast stores of literature in her great libraries. The Alexandrians were essentially cosmopolitan. They had none of the contempt for the 'barbarians' of the old Greek states, and a large proportion of the population, like the Athenians, 'spent their life in nothing else, but either to tell or hear some new thing.' A Buddhist monk from Barygaza would receive the same attentive hearing as did St. Paul at the hands of the Areopagus, and the medium was Hellenistic Greek, *lingua franca* from the Levant to the Indus. The *Milindapañhā* mentions Alexandria as one of the places to which Indian merchants regularly resorted, and Dio Chrysostom, lecturing to an Alexandrian audience in the reign of Trajan, says: 'I see among you, not only Greeks and Italians, Syrians, Libyans, and Cilicians, and men who dwell more remotely, Ethiopians and Arabs, but also Bactrians, Scythians, Persians, and some of the Indians, who are among the spectators, and are always residing there.'”¹⁷

“Indian philosophy was acquiring a growing reputation in the Hellenistic schools of Asia Minor and Egypt.”¹⁸

Apollonius of Tyana had visited India and conversed with Buddhists and Brahmans on a great many things and had, with those ideas got from India, changed the outlook of the Neo-Pythagoreans. Bardesanes is said to have learned many things from the Indians. He was a Gnostic teacher. He knew much about monastic life in Buddhism.

Plotinus was a fellow-student of Origen, the saintly scholar in the school of Ammonius Saccas. Of Origen, it is said that he possessed “a mind characteristic of supreme genius, the mind which anticipates the richest thought of today. He was blameless in life, unrivalled in knowledge, a pioneer in every department of study, the teacher of all that was best in the

¹⁴ Rawlinson, H.G., “India in European Literature and Thought,” in *The Legacy of India*, by G. T. Garratt, The Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1937, p. 4

¹⁵ Ibid, note (Probably from *The Philosophy of Ancient India*, by Richard Garbe, The Open Court Publishing Company, Chicago 1897)

Rawlinson, op. cit., p. 5

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¹⁷ Ibid, p. 17

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 18

Eastern Church." It was this Origen whose teaching on the "pre-existence of souls" was anathematized at the Second Council at Constantinople, in 533 A.D. Origen believed that rebirth was "determined by its (the soul's) previous merits and demerits" (*De Principili*). He must have known what Buddhist tenets were on this subject, and Plotinus, his friend, could not have been ignorant of those tenets either. In fact, it was his great desire to know what Brahmanism and Buddhism were, stimulated perhaps by what he had already learned of them in Alexandria, that made him go with Gordian's expedition to Persia in 242 A.D.

According to Max Muller, the school of Plotinus paid a great deal of attention to Eastern religions. Plotinus' idea was to revive the old religion of the Roman Empire with the addition of what appealed to him in the inspired teachings of the world. That is why, perhaps, the Buddhist-Upanishadic thought in Neo-Platonism is sometimes expressed in a strange way, though their significance is easy enough to grasp for the Buddhist. Neo-Platonism is a mosaic of Eastern and Western ideas. It is not something monolithic like Buddhism.

The closeness of Plotinian thought to the idealism of the Mahāyāna is seen in the following extract from a letter of Plotinus:

"External objects present us only with appearances. Concerning them, therefore, we may be said to possess opinion rather than knowledge. The distinctions in the actual world of appearance are of import only to ordinary and practical men. Our question lies with the ideal reality that exists behind appearance. How does the mind perceive these ideas? Are they without us, and is reason, like sensation, occupied with objects external to itself? What certainty could we then have, what assurance, that our perception was infallible? The object perceived would be something different from the mind perceiving it. We should then have an image instead of reality. It would be monstrous to believe for a moment that the mind was unable to perceive ideal truth exactly as it is, and that we had no certainty and real knowledge concerning the world of intelligence. It follows, therefore, that this region of truth is not to be investigated as a thing outward to us and so only imperfectly known. It is within us. Here the objects we contemplate and that which contemplates are identical—both are thought. The subject cannot surely know an object different from itself. The world of ideas lies within our intelligence. Truth, therefore, is not the agreement of our apprehension of an external object with the object itself. It is the agreement of mind with itself. Consciousness is the sole basis of certainty. The mind is its own witness. Reason sees in itself that which is above itself as its source; and that which is below itself as still itself once more."¹⁹

The divisions of knowledge which Plotinus makes are interesting to the Buddhist. The first is opinion, the second science, and the third illumination: The first is explained as that which is gained by means of the senses. It is perception (*pratyaksa*); the second refers to inference (*anumāna*); and the third, insight (*avabodha*). Reason has to be subordinated to the last knowledge mentioned here. It is the absolute or final knowledge founded on the identity of mind-that-knows and the object perceived. He also speaks of evolution (*saṃvātṭana*) and involution (*vivātṭana*). How can we know the Infinite? Not by the reasoning process. Reason's business is to distinguish and define. Only by a faculty superior to reason can one apprehend the Infinite.

That can be done by entering into a state in which one is no more in a finite state. That state is the state of ecstasy (*jhāna*) or full absorption. By entering that state one becomes free of finite anxieties. Ecstasy is not a frequent occurrence even in Plotinus' case. There are different ways to

¹⁹ Plotinus, *Letters to Flaccus*, quoted in *Tertium Organum: The Third Canon of Thought, a Key to the Enigmas of the World*, by P. D. Ouspensky, translated from the Russian by Nicholas Bessaraboff and Claude Bragdon, Manas Press, Rochester, New York, 1920

ecstasy. They are: the love of beauty which exalts the poet; devotion to just one thing; the assent of science to the philosophical thinker; and, lastly, love and contemplation or prayer by which a devout soul in its moral purity tends towards perfection. The soul neither comes into being nor perishes; "nothing that possesses real being can ever perish." But souls that have lived wrongly will be reincarnated in the bodies of lower animals. The mystical ascent appears as "a progressive stripping off of everything alien to the purest nature of the soul" which cannot enter into the holy of holies while any trace of worldliness clings to it. It is called "a flight of the alone to the alone."

Plotinus gives many descriptions of the mystical trance, but he thinks that the trance is really ineffable. The vision of the One is an exceedingly rare happening. It is to be earned only by intense contemplation and unceasing self-discipline.

The ethical scheme is threefold: purification, enlightenment and unification. Good citizenship is the prelude to the course. In this system, as in Buddhism and a few other Indian systems, there is neither mediator nor redeemer.

There is nothing to prove that the teaching of Plato was founded on a system of meditation practice or *yoga* for the penetration of actuality. But Plotinus was out and out a yogi and is nearer to Buddhism than to Platonism in the higher stages of his doctrine. To ascribe the *yogic* portion of Plotinus' system, as Dr. Inge does, to the innate dualities of Platonism would require a good deal of text-torture. Neoplatonism is clearly an eclecticism; many non-Platonic elements are in it, and, among those elements, Buddhism is not negligible.²⁰

The resemblances between the life of the Buddha and that of Christ have been pointed out to be too close to be casual and appear, on the other hand, to be remarkably striking, thinks H. S. Gour. Among the items he gives, the following are of importance: miraculous conception and virgin birth; Asita and Simeon; the temptation of *Māra* and the temptation of the devil; the widow's mite and the story of the poor maid, told in Aṣvaghosa's *Sutrālaṅkāra*; the Samaritan woman and Ānanda at the well; the man born blind and the blind man in the Lotus of the Good Law; the transfiguration and the effulgence that emanated from the Master's body twice during his lifetime; and the miracle of the loaves and fishes and the story in Jātaka No. 79.²¹

There is no dearth of passages in the New Testament which resemble parts of the Pāli Canon. One cannot read the Sermon on the Mount without feeling that it is an abridged version of parts of the *Dhammapada*. That is, as regards orthodox Catholic and Protestant Christian scriptures. But the position of Gnostic Christian writings is one of still closer affinity to the scriptures and traditions of Buddhism.

When we leave the domain of religion proper and pass on to the territories of art and architecture, history, drama, ethics, philosophy and social organization traceable to Buddhist influences, we find that the Order of Monks which the Buddha established was something new to India and the world. "The Buddha created a new race of men, a race of moral heroes, a race of salvation-workers, a race of Buddhas,"²² writes Manmatha Nath Shastri. By this, the Buddha gave to the world a new conception of building up society on the basis of renunciation. "It appears," says Oldenberg, "from the very beginning to have been a society governed by law."²³ There, however, was nothing coercive at the back of the law which governed the Order. It was a society that kept its laws voluntarily and which held together in friendliness for the one purpose

²⁰ Cf. "Neoplatonism" in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* and *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and "Plotinus" in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*

²¹ Gour, Sir Hari Singh, *The Spirit of Buddhism*, Luzac & Co., London, 1929, p. 435f

²² Shastri, Manmatha Nath, op. cit., p. 236

²³ Ibid, quotation

of equipping itself for the realization of the highest good of all. That Order indeed was a power when it functioned peacefully. The power was not the property of any single person but of the body taken together. It was a great republic. The voice of the Order was a voice that got obeyed without compulsion. As a civilizing force, Buddhism has tamed the wild races and refined the tamed. The great epochs of Buddhist history, from the days of Rājagaha to that of Lhasa, have been fruitful in a lasting way.

The great architectural monuments in the form of Dagobas and monasteries and shrines, though now mostly in ruins, have still a message to the world of what can be done by men with very limited resources if only they become steady of purpose.

The beautiful statues and sculptures, the paintings and decorations that have come to us from the past, whether they be Indian, Indonesian, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Tibetan or Mongolian, are largely witnesses of the achievements of a fortunate cycle of Buddhist history. One of those favoured periods when culture got an upward urge so far as the Buddhists were concerned, was in "the early Middle Ages, about the 7th century of our era," writes Grousset. Darkness brooded over our Western civilization which as yet guessed nothing of the approaching Romance dawn, and even extended to Byzantium where the great 'Macedonian' basileus had not yet arisen. But away in the Far East, India and China were living with an intense political, intellectual, religious and artistic life. Buddhism, in bringing them into contact with one another, had created a vast current of humanism, from Ceylon to the furthest isles of the Japanese archipelago. The withering of Islam, the decline of Neo-Confucianism, and the retrogression of Hinduism, which were, unfortunately, close at hand, had not yet made themselves felt. After a thousand years of meditation, Buddhist mysticism had attained to undreamed of psychic states, and Indian aesthetics had received a fresh impression from them. In China which was hospitable to new ideas and ready for innovations, Chinese force allowed itself to be softened by this gentle influence. The human spirit lived there a privileged hour, worthy of Athens or Alexandria. It was the time of the Chinese epic in Central Asia, and of the great pilgrimages to the Holy Land of the Ganges, the time of Mahāyanist idealism and the plastic art of the Gupta dynasty."²⁴

The achievements in the field of learning belong to the Buddhists, through the establishment of first-class universities—at Taxilā (Takasilā in Pali), an old educational centre; at Nālandā, where at one time there were 10,000 students of philosophy and medicine; at Vikramasīlā; at Odantapuri and at Buddha Gayā.

To the credit of the Buddhists, too, stand gigantic works of irrigation, tanks like the Kalāveva, and Minneriya of Ceylon, the building of arterial roads, the erection of rest-houses, and the putting under cultivation of large areas below the tanks— noteworthy acts of merit done on the "weal and happiness of all principle" of Buddhism.

The part which Buddhists played in the development of art in the India of historical times was of basic importance for the growth of Indian and Eastern spirituality. Grunwedel writes, "The art of ancient India has always been a purely religious one; its architecture, as well as the sculpture which has always been intimately connected therewith, was never employed for secular purposes. It owed its origin to the growth of a religion which has been called, in Europe, Buddhism from the honorary title of its founder, the Buddha, the Enlightened One."²⁵

The Buddhists were the first historians of India. The history of one's religion, if rightly studied, can be a great help in steadying one's confidence in the Teaching and in oneself. It can

²⁴ Grousset, Rene, *In The Footsteps of the Buddha*, translated from the French by Mariette Leon, George Routledge & Sons, Ltd., London, 1932, p. ix

²⁵ Grunwedel, Albert, *Buddhist Art in India*, Translated from German by A.C. Gibson; Revised and Enlarged by James Burgess, Bernard Quaritch, London, 1901, p. 1

also stimulate endeavour on vigorous lines for one's own and others' welfare. Further, history is nothing but the actual occurrence of change in a tangible form, in the lives of individuals, races and nations. The *Arahat* leaders of the early Buddhist Sangha realized these facts and led the way in recording the incidents connected with the rise and spread of the Buddha's doctrine. This early lead given in the *Tripitaka* was zealously taken up by the later commentators and scholars in almost every Buddhist country, and there are many books now of the history of the religion. The writing of secular history too received an impulse through this Buddhist custom of recording things, and people became history-minded.

The oldest writing of the historical period in India now extant is the inscription on the *Piprāva* vase containing relics of the Master, which were enshrined by the Master's relatives in a relic mound. The inscription runs thus:

Sukitibhatinaṃ sabhaginiṅkanaṃ saputadalanāṃ iyaṃ salilanidhane Budhase bhagavate sakiyanaṃ.

“This container of relics of the Blessed One, the Buddha of the Sakyas, (is the gift) of the brothers, Sukiti, jointly with their sisters, children and wives.”

The first royal renunciation of war in the annals of mankind is that of the Emperor Asoka, the follower of the Buddha. The first great capital cities of India in historical times were Rājagaha, Pātaliputta, Purusāpura, all connected closely with Buddhism.

Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Loyang, Chang'an, Nara, Lhasa and other centres of Buddhist culture in the past are enough evidence to show the vitality of the Buddhist spirit at its best. There is every reason to believe that the idea of impermanence which has become the cornerstone of the fabric of modern scientific thought got its greatest affirmation and became widely current as a philosophic principle through the emphasis laid on it by the Buddhists. And in India, at least, the Buddhists were the first to read history as the confirmation of the Law of Transience and to value history as a means of passing on to the future the gains of the past, a factor so very necessary to keep up a high and noble tradition like the Buddhas. History, in the first sense, is just the arising and passing away of phenomena in actual practice; in the second sense, a record of the changes.

How things arise and how they pass away constitutes the kernel of all history. Though the idea of impermanence was already there in India and the West, it was the Buddha who brought out its full meaning through the formulation of the hidden truth of *Anattā*, connected with the Law of Transience. By that discovery of his, he made the very fact of the fleetingness of life the basis for becoming better.

The Buddha laid hold of the fact of the fluxional nature of all things—the essence of history—and on the crest of that active conception of life as movement, passed on the waves of changing phenomena to the changeless Nibbāna. He went across the waves of suffering to the sorrowless.

Here, the Buddha is truly like a great physician, for he, like a doctor who makes people proof against a disease by the inoculation of a serum of the very kind of germs that cause that disease, introduces into the minds of those who wish to be suffering-free, the very concept of suffering, prepared in the form of the *kammaṭṭhāna*, the subject of meditation, and lets it work there till they become immune to suffering once and for all.

Like the Himālayas, say our books, is the Buddha; like the medicinal plants growing on the mountain slopes is the Dharma; and like the people treated with those medicinal plants and cured is the Ariya Sangha, the Order of the Saints.

Before the rise of Buddhism, Indian medical knowledge consisted largely in treatment with the charms and spells of the *Atharvaveda*. That was the first period of Indian medicine. With Jīvaka Komārabhacca, the greatest physician at the time of the Buddha, and the Master's own

doctor who had a reputation as a specialist for children's diseases too, was ushered in the historical period of Indian medicine. He had studied at Taxilā for seven years.

“Very great improvement in medicine and surgery took place in the Buddhist period in India, because the religion of the Buddha insists on the alleviation of suffering as an important item of Buddhistic faith, and, hence, hospitals for the treatment of men and beasts alike were built in almost all the monasteries (universities) of Buddhistic India. Inscriptions engraved on rocks, pillars, etc. describe prescriptions for the treatment of diseases.”²⁶

The oldest and best medical treatise of India, the *Caraka Saṃhitā*, was the work of the Buddhist physician of King Kaniṣka. The *Suśruta* which we have today is not the work of the Hindu physician, but his work recast by the famous Buddhist patriarch, Nāgārjuna, founder of the Madhyamika Philosophy. Of the *Caraka Saṃhitā* P. C. Ray says, “On reading the *Caraka*, one often feels as if it embodied the deliberations of an international congress of medical experts held in the Himālayan regions.”²⁷ Of the three *Ṛsis* of Indian medicine, two are Buddhist—Caraka and Vāgbhata. The high state of development reached by Indian medical science of today seems to date, in the main, from the Buddhist times, according to J. Jolly.

On the philosophical side, Buddhists have produced great names like Nāgārjuna, Aśaṅga, Dinnāga, and Dharmakīrti. In the Far East, too, there were many sound scholars like Tientai and Kukai, who arose under the care of Buddhist institutions.

To the Buddhists, modern democracy owes its parliamentary procedure. Says the Marquess of Zetland, “It may come as a surprise to many to learn that in the Assemblies of the Buddhists in India two thousand years and more ago are to be found the rudiments of our own parliamentary practice of the present day.”²⁸

There were many advances made in the forms of local government. These can be seen by a study of the ancient inscriptions, especially, of Ceylon.

Without exceeding the space allotted to the writer, he cannot even lightly mention the achievements of the Buddhists in the field of literature, drama and philosophy, on which the Buddhists clearly left their seal. Buddhism has influenced in these matters not only the ancient but the modern world too. The number of works in the west into which the Buddhist spirit has entered is very large.

And then there is the record of the monks and nuns of the Buddhist Sangha who travelled to distant lands braving all dangers, for the purpose of spreading the sweet peace-giving message of the Buddha and died far from their homelands, happy in the consciousness that they had done their bit. Their lives and endeavours were pure and perfect. Theirs was one of the best contributions to the world's culture. Even the thought of those wonderful servants of the world can rouse in us the resolve to do as they did; to live, think and work “for the gain of the many, for the welfare of the many, in compassion for the world.”

²⁶ Ray, P.C., in *The Cultural Heritage of India*, The Ramakrishna Mission, Calcutta, 1937, Vol. III, p. 445

²⁷ Ibid, p. 444

²⁸ Rawlinson, op. cit., Introduction

About the Author

Ven. Soma Thera (1898–1960), lay-name Victor E. P. Pulle, was born in Colombo and was raised as a Sinhalese Catholic. Having converted to Buddhism in his teenage years, he became an active Buddhist missionary and author. In 1934 he and his close friend G. S. Prelis, later Kheminda Thera, went to Japan and, with the help of a Japanese scholar called N. R. M Ehara, translated the Chinese translation of the *Vimuttimaggā* into English, which was published as the *Path of Freedom*. In 1936 the friends left Japan and went to Burma where they became Buddhist monks in Moulmein under the meditation teacher Jetavana Sayādaw. The next year they returned to Sri Lanka. During WW II he and Kheminda stayed at the Island Hermitage. Despite suffering from frequent asthma attacks participated in missions to India and Germany and continued with writing and translating. One of the fruits of his work was the English translation of the commentary of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta published by the BPS under the title *The Way of Mindfulness*.