

Buddha

AND HIS MESSAGE

Swami Vivekananda



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SWAMI VIVEKANANDA



Advaita Ashrama

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE TO THE FIRST EDITION

The publication of this book has been long overdue. It has at last seen the light of day owing mainly to the initiative of Swami Gahananandaji, Vice-President of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission. We are grateful to him for his sustained interest which has enabled us to bring out this volume in a short time.

The present book is a compilation of the recorded lectures and statements of Swami Vivekananda on Buddha and Buddhism. Swamiji's interest in Buddha and his message began quite early in his youth. It is recorded in his biography that some time before he met his Master, Sri Ramakrishna, he had a vision of Buddha which left a lasting impression upon him. During the last illness of his Master, he left for Bodh Gaya with two of his fellow disciples and spent a few days meditating under the Bodhi-tree. After the passing away of Sri Ramakrishna, when the disciples formed the first monastery at Baranagore, Buddhism was a favourite topic of study and meditation for the young monks. Swami Vivekananda in particular was full of the spirit of Buddha.

Swamiji's attitude towards Buddha was not of the nature of intellectual understanding, like that of a modern scholar. He rather felt a deep emotional and spiritual kinship with Buddha. In fact, none among the founders of world religions attracted and influenced Swamiji more than Buddha. The life of Buddha, especially his renunciation, boundless compassion, fearless quest for Truth and utter independence provided tremendous inspiration for Swamiji. It is clear that Swamiji saw his own self-image in Buddha. That was perhaps what he meant when he said, 'Buddha is my *Ishta*'. Furthermore, Swamiji saw in Buddha the perfect embodiment of India's ancient wisdom and virtues, and so he repeatedly presented Buddha to western audiences as the shining example of India's spiritual ideal.

Next to the personality of Buddha what fascinated Swami Vivekananda most was the way Buddhism spread over the major part of the civilized world. With his vast knowledge of history and keen insight, Swamiji could identify the historical forces that brought about this phenomenon. And he never lost an opportunity to point out how different was the way some of the other religions spread in the world.

Out of the many lectures on Buddha and Buddhism that Swami Vivekananda delivered in the

West, only two have come down to us more or less in their entirety. Fragments or reports of another six or seven lectures are given in *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*. These lectures, with certain portions omitted for the sake of clarity and harmony, constitute the First Part of the present book. The omitted portions have been indicated by dots in the body of the book.

Apart from the lectures he delivered specifically on Buddha or Buddhism, Swamiji also referred to these topics in very many of his other lectures and writings. These scattered observations have been brought together in the Second Part of the present book.

From the lectures and statements in this book the reader can gain a fairly comprehensive idea of the unique personality of Buddha, his enlightening message and the historical development of Buddhism. But more than that, what this book provides is a fascinating picture of the illumined mind of a great modern prophet. No one can read this book without being struck by the power, range, depth and beauty of Swami Vivekananda's thoughts.

Buddha Purnima

16 May 1992

Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati, Himalayas

PUBLISHER

PUBLISHER'S NOTE TO THE SECOND EDITION

The present book *Buddha and His Message*, as it was pointed out in the Publisher's Note to the first edition, is a selective, handy compilation of Swami Vivekananda's appreciative views on Buddha and His Message. Those who like to make an in-depth study of Swami Vivekananda's more comprehensive views on Buddha, His message and Buddhism are advised to consult *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Vol. I to Vol. IX) published by Advaita Ashrama.

Kolkata
February 28, 2003

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निन्दसि यज्ञविधेरहह श्रुतिजातं
सदयहृदय दर्शितपशुघातम् ।
केशव धृतबुद्धशरीर
जय जगदीश हरे ॥

You with your heart full of compassion condemned that part of the Vedas which deals with the sacrifices ordaining the slaughter of animals. O you Keśava, who assumed the body of the Buddha, victory to you, Hari, the Lord of the world.

—*Gītagovinda*, I, 9

सम्बुद्धा बोधिसत्त्वाश्च [त्वत्तः] पारमितागुणाः ।
सम्भवन्ति सदा नाथ बोधिचित्त नमोऽस्तु ते ॥

From you, O Lord, there ever rise into existence
Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, who possess as their good
qualities the great perfections, O Thought of
Enlightenment, Hail to thee!

—*Prajñopāya-viniścaya-siddhi*, III, 11

Part I

**From Lectures Delivered by
Swami Vivekananda
on Buddha and Buddhism**



BUDDHA'S MESSAGE TO THE WORLD*

Buddhism is historically the most important religion—historically, not philosophically—because it was the most tremendous religious movement that the world ever saw, the most gigantic spiritual wave ever to burst upon human society. There is no civilization on which its effect has not been felt in some way or other.

The followers of Buddha were most enthusiastic and very missionary in spirit. They were the first among the adherents of various religions not to remain content with the limited sphere of their Mother Church. They spread far and wide. They travelled east and west, north and south. They reached into darkest Tibet; they went into Persia, Asia Minor; they went into Russia, Poland, and many other countries of the Western world. They went into China, Korea, Japan; they went into Burma, Siam, the East Indies, and beyond. When Alexander the Great, through his military conquests, brought the Mediterranean world in contact with India, the wisdom

* Delivered in San Francisco, on March 18, 1900.

of India at once found a channel through which to spread over vast portions of Asia and Europe. Buddhist priests went out teaching among the different nations; and as they taught, superstition and priestcraft began to vanish like mist before the sun.

To understand this movement properly you should know what conditions prevailed in India at the time Buddha came, just as to understand Christianity you have to grasp the state of Jewish society at the time of Christ. It is necessary that you have an idea of Indian society six hundred years before the birth of Christ, by which time Indian civilization had already completed its growth.

When you study the civilization of India, you find that it has died and revived several times; this is its peculiarity. Most races rise once and then decline for ever. There are two kinds of people; those who grow continually and those whose growth comes to an end. The peaceful nations, India and China, fall down, yet rise again; but the others, once they go down, do not come up—they die. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall enjoy the earth.

At the time Buddha was born, India was in need of a great spiritual leader, a prophet. There was already a most powerful body of priests. You will understand the situation better if you remember the history of the Jews—how they had two types of religious

leaders, priests and prophets, the priests keeping the people in ignorance and grinding superstitions into their minds. The methods of worship the priests prescribed were only a means by which they could dominate the people. All through the Old Testament, you find the prophets challenging the superstitions of the priests. The outcome of this fight was the triumph of the prophets and the defeat of the priests.

Priests believe that there is a God, but that this God can be approached and known only through them. People can enter the Holy of Holies only with the permission of the priests. You must pay them, worship them, place everything in their hands. Throughout the history of the world, this priestly tendency has cropped up again and again—this tremendous thirst for power, this tiger-like thirst, seems a part of human nature. The priests dominate you, lay down a thousand rules for you. They describe simple truths in roundabout ways. They tell you stories to support their own superior position. If you want to thrive in this life or go to heaven after death, you have to pass through their hands. You have to perform all kinds of ceremonies and rituals. All this has made life so complicated and has so confused the brain that if I give you plain words, you will go home unsatisfied. You have become thoroughly befuddled. The less you understand, the better you

feel! The prophets have been giving warnings against the priests and their superstitions and machinations; but the vast mass of people have not yet learnt to heed these warnings—education is yet to come to them.

Men must have education. They speak of democracy, of the equality of all men, these days. But how will a man know he is equal with all? He must have a strong brain, a clear mind free of nonsensical ideas; he must pierce through the mass of superstitions encrusting his mind to the pure truth that is in his inmost Self. Then he will know that all perfections, all powers are already within himself, that these have not to be given him by others. When he realizes this, he becomes free that moment, he achieves equality. He also realizes that every one else is equally as perfect as he, and he does not have to exercise any power, physical, mental or moral, over his brother men. He abandons the idea that there was ever any man who was lower than himself. Then he can talk of equality; not until then.

...The priests in India, the Brahmins, possessed great intellectual and psychic powers. It was they who began the spiritual development of India, and they accomplished wonderful things. But the time came when the free spirit of development that had at first actuated the Brahmins disappeared. They began to

arrogate powers and privileges to themselves. If a Brahmin killed a man, he would not be punished. The Brahmin, by his very birth, is the lord of the universe! Even the most wicked Brahmin must be worshipped!

But while the priests were flourishing, there existed also the poet-prophets called Sannyasins. All Hindus, whatever their castes may be, must, for the sake of attaining spirituality, give up their work and prepare for death. No more is the world to be of any interest to them. They must go out and become Sannyasins. The Sannyasins have nothing to do with the two thousand ceremonies that the priests have invented: Pronounce certain words—ten syllables, twenty syllables, and so on—all these things are nonsense.

So these poet-prophets of ancient India repudiated the ways of the priest and declared the pure truth. They tried to break the power of the priests, and they succeeded a little. But in two generations their disciples went back to the superstitious, roundabout ways of the priests—became priests themselves: 'You can get truth only through us!' Truth became crystallized again, and again prophets came to break the encrustations and free the truth, and so it went on. Yes, there must be all the time the man, the prophet, or else humanity will die.

You wonder why there have to be all these roundabout methods of the priests. Why can you not come directly to the truth? Are you ashamed of God's truth that you have to hide it behind all kinds of intricate ceremonies and formulas? Are you ashamed of God that you cannot confess His truth before the world? Do you call that being religious and spiritual? The priests are the only people fit for the truth! The masses are not fit for it! It must be diluted! Water it down a little!

Take the Sermon on the Mount and the Gita—they are simplicity itself. Even the streetwalker can understand them. How grand! In them you find the truth clearly and simply revealed. But no, the priests would not accept that truth can be found so directly. They speak of two thousand heavens and two thousand hells. If people follow their prescriptions, they will go to heaven! If they do not obey the rules, they will go to hell!

But the people shall learn the truth. Some are afraid that if the full truth is given to all, it will hurt them. They should not be given the unqualified truth—so they say. But the world is not much better off by compromising truth. What worse can it be than it is already? Bring truth out! If it is real, it will do good. When people protest and propose other methods, they only make apologies for witchcraft.

India was full of it in Buddha's day. There were the masses of people, and they were debarred from all knowledge. If just a word of the Vedas entered the ears of a man, terrible punishment was visited upon him. The priests had made a secret of the Vedas—the Vedas that contained the spiritual truths discovered by the ancient Hindus!

At last one man could bear it no more. He had the brain, the power, and the heart—a heart as infinite as the broad sky. He felt how the masses were being led by the priests and how the priests were glorying in their power, and he wanted to do something about it. He did not want any power over any one, and he wanted to break the mental and spiritual bonds of men. His heart was large. The heart, many around us may have, and we also want to help others. But we do not have the brain; we do not know the ways and means by which help can be given. But this man had the brain to discover the means of breaking the bondages of souls. He learnt why men suffer, and he found the way out of suffering. He was a man of accomplishment, he worked everything out; he taught one and all without distinction and made them realize the peace of enlightenment. This was the man Buddha.

You know from Arnold's poem, *The Light of Asia*, how Buddha was born a prince and how the misery

of the world struck him deeply; how, although brought up and living in the lap of luxury, he could not find comfort in his personal happiness and security; how he renounced the world, leaving his princess and new-born son behind; how he wandered searching for truth from teacher to teacher; and how he at last attained to enlightenment. You know about his long mission, his disciples, his organizations. You all know these things.

Buddha was the triumph in the struggle that had been going on between the priests and the prophets in India. One thing can be said for these Indian priests—they were not and never are intolerant of religion; they never have persecuted religion. Any man was allowed to preach against them. Theirs is such a religion; they never molested any one for his religious views. But they suffered from the peculiar weaknesses of all priests: they also sought power, they also promulgated rules and regulations and made religion unnecessarily complicated, and thereby undermined the strength of those who followed their religion.

Buddha cut through all these excrescences. He preached the most tremendous truths. He taught the very gist of the philosophy of the Vedas to one and all without distinction, he taught it to the world at large, because one of his great messages was the

equality of man. Men are all equal. No concession there to anybody! Buddha was the great preacher of equality. Every man and woman has the same right to attain spirituality—that was his teaching. The difference between the priests and the other castes he abolished. Even the lowest were entitled to the highest attainments; he opened the door of Nirvana to one and all. His teaching was bold even for India. No amount of preaching can ever shock the Indian soul, but it was hard for India to swallow Buddha's doctrine. How much harder it must be for you!

His doctrine was this: Why is there misery in our life? Because we are selfish. We desire things for ourselves—that is why there is misery. What is the way out? The giving up of the self. The self does not exist; the phenomenal world, all this that we perceive, is all that exists. There is nothing called soul underlying the cycle of life and death. There is the stream of thought, one thought following another in succession, each thought coming into existence and becoming non-existent at the same moment, that is all; there is no thinker of the thought, no soul. The body is changing all the time; so is mind, consciousness. The self therefore is a delusion. All selfishness comes of holding on to the self, to this illusory self. If we know the truth that there is no self, then we will be happy and make others happy.

This was what Buddha taught. And he did not merely talk; he was ready to give up his own life for the world. He said, 'If sacrificing an animal is good, sacrificing a man is better', and he offered himself as a sacrifice. He said, 'This animal sacrifice is another superstition. God and soul are the two big superstitions. God is only a superstition invented by the priests. If there is a God, as these Brahmins preach, why is there so much misery in the world? He is just like me, a slave to the law of causation. If he is not bound by the law of causation, then why does he create? Such a God is not at all satisfactory. There is the ruler in heaven that rules the universe according to his sweet will and leaves us all here to die in misery—he never has the goodness to look at us for a moment. Our whole life is continuous suffering; but this is not sufficient punishment—after death we must go to places where we have other punishments. Yet we continually perform all kinds of rites and ceremonies to please this creator of the world!'

Buddha said, 'These ceremonials are all wrong. There is but one ideal in the world. Destroy all delusions; what is true will remain. As soon as the clouds are gone, the sun will shine'. How to kill the self? Become perfectly unselfish, ready to give up your life even for an ant. Work not for any superstition, not to please any God, not to get any reward,

but because you are seeking your own release by killing your self. Worship and prayer and all that, these are all nonsense. You all say, 'I thank God'—but where does He live? You do not know, and yet you are all going crazy about God.

Hindus can give up everything except their God. To deny God is to cut off the very ground from under the feet of devotion. Devotion and God the Hindus must cling to. They can never relinquish these. And here, in the teaching of Buddha, are no God and no soul; simply work. What for? Not for the self, for the self is a delusion. We shall be ourselves when this delusion has vanished. Very few are there in the world that can rise to that height and work for work's sake.

Yet the religion of Buddha spread fast. It was because of the marvellous love which, for the first time in the history of humanity, overflowed a large heart and devoted itself to the service not only of all men but of all living things—a love which did not care for anything except to find a way of release from suffering for all beings.

Man was loving God and had forgotten all about his brother man. The man who in the name of God can give up his very life, can also turn around and kill his brother man in the name of God. That was the state of the world. They would sacrifice the son for the glory of God, would rob nations for the glory

of God, would kill thousands of beings for the glory of God, would drench the earth with blood for the glory of God. This was the first time they turned to the other God—man. It is man that is to be loved. It was the first wave of intense love for all men—the first wave of true unadulterated wisdom—that, starting from India, gradually inundated country after country, north, south, east, west.

This teacher wanted to make truth shine as truth. No softening, no compromise, no pandering to the priests, the powerful, the kings. No bowing before superstitious traditions, however hoary; no respect for forms and books just because they came down from the distant past. He rejected all scriptures, all forms of religious practice. Even the very language, Sanskrit, in which religion had been traditionally taught in India, he rejected, so that his followers would not have any chance to imbibe the superstitions which were associated with it.

There is another way of looking at the truth we have been discussing: the Hindu way. We claim that Buddha's great doctrine of selflessness can be better understood if it is looked at in our way. In the Upanishads there is already the great doctrine of the Atman and the Brahman. The Atman, Self, is the same as Brahman, the Lord. This Self is all that is; It is the only reality. Maya, delusion, makes us see It as

different. There is one Self, not many. That one Self shines in various forms. Man is man's brother because all men are one. A man is not only my brother, say the Vedas, he is myself. Hurting any part of the universe, I only hurt myself. I am the universe. It is a delusion that I think I am Mr. So-and-so—that is the delusion.

The more you approach your real Self, the more this delusion vanishes. The more all differences and divisions disappear, the more you realize all as the one Divinity. God exists; but He is not the man sitting upon a cloud. He is pure Spirit. Where does He reside? Nearer to you than your very self. He is the Soul. How can you perceive God as separate and different from yourself? When you think of Him as some one separate from yourself, you do not know Him. He is you yourself. That was the doctrine of the prophets of India.

It is selfishness that you think that you see Mr. So-and-so and that all the world is different from you. You believe you are different from me. You do not take any thought of me. You go home and have your dinner and sleep. If I die, you still eat, drink, and are merry. But you cannot really be happy when the rest of the world is suffering. We are all one. It is the delusion of separateness that is the root of misery. Nothing exists but the Self; there is nothing else.

Buddha's idea is that there is no God, only man himself. He repudiated the mentality which underlies the prevalent ideas of God. He found it made men weak and superstitious. If you pray to God to give you everything, who is it, then, that goes out and works? God comes to those who work hard. God helps them that help themselves. An opposite idea of God weakens our nerves, softens our muscles, makes us dependent. Everything independent is happy; everything dependent is miserable. Man has infinite power within himself, and he can realize it—he can realize himself as the one infinite Self. It can be done; but you do not believe it. You pray to God and keep your powder dry all the time.

Buddha taught the opposite. Do not let men weep. Let them have none of this praying and all that. God is not keeping shop. With every breath you are praying in God. I am talking; that is a prayer. You are listening; that is a prayer. Is there ever any movement of yours, mental or physical, in which you do not participate in the infinite Divine Energy? It is all a constant prayer. If you call only a set of words prayer, you make prayer superficial. Such prayers are not much good; they can scarcely bear any fruit.

Is prayer a magic formula, by repeating which, even if you do not work hard, you gain miraculous results? No. All have to work hard; all have to reach

the depths of that infinite Energy. Behind the poor, behind the rich, there is the same infinite Energy. It is not that one man works hard, and another by repeating a few words achieves results. This universe is a constant prayer. If you take prayer in this sense, I am with you. Words are not necessary. Better is silent prayer.

The vast majority of people do not understand the meaning of this doctrine. In India any compromise regarding the Self means that we have given power into the hands of the priests and have forgotten the great teachings of the prophets. Buddha knew this; so he brushed aside all the priestly doctrines and practices and made man stand on his own feet. It was necessary for him to go against the accustomed ways of the people; he had to bring about revolutionary changes. As a result this sacrificial religion passed away from India for ever, and was never revived....

The life of Buddha has an especial appeal. All my life I have been very fond of Buddha. ...I have more veneration for that character than for any other—that boldness, that fearlessness, and that tremendous love! He was born for the good of men. Others may seek God, others may seek truth for themselves; he did not even care to know truth for himself. He sought truth because people were in

misery. How to help them, that was his only concern. Throughout his life he never had a thought for himself. How can we ignorant, selfish, narrow-minded human beings ever understand the greatness of this man?

And consider his marvellous brain! No emotionalism. That giant brain never was superstitious. Believe not because an old manuscript has been produced, because it has been handed down to you from your forefathers, because your friends want you to—but think for yourself; search truth for yourself; realize it yourself. Then if you find it beneficial to one and many, give it to people. Soft-brained men, weak-minded, chicken-hearted cannot find the truth. One has to be free, and as broad as the sky. One has to have a mind that is crystal clear; only then can truth shine in it. We are so full of superstitions! Even in your country where you think you are highly educated, how full of narrownesses and superstitions you are! Just think, with all your claims to civilization in this country, on one occasion I was refused a chair to sit on, because I was a Hindu.

Six hundred years before the birth of Christ, at the time when Buddha lived, the people of India must have had wonderful education. Extremely free-minded they must have been. Great masses followed him. Kings gave up their thrones; queens gave up

their thrones. People were able to appreciate and embrace his teaching, so revolutionary, so different from what they had been taught by the priests through the ages! But their minds have been unusually free and broad.

And consider his death. If he was great in life, he was also great in death. He ate food offered to him by a member of a race similar to your American Indians. Hindus do not touch them, because they eat everything indiscriminately. He told his disciples, 'Do not eat this food, but I cannot refuse it. Go to the man and tell him he has done me one of the greatest services of my life—he has released me from the body.' An old man came and sat near him—he had walked miles and miles to see the Master—and Buddha taught him. When he found a disciple weeping, he reproved him, saying, 'What is this? Is this the result of all my teaching? Let there be no false bondage, no dependence on me, no false glorification of this passing personality. The Buddha is not a person; he is a realization. Work out your own salvation.'

Even when dying, he would not claim any distinction for himself. I worship him for that. What you call Buddhas and Christs are only the names of certain states of realization. Of all the teachers of the world, he was the one who taught us most to be self-reliant, who freed us not only from the bondages of

our false selves but from dependence on the invisible being or beings called God or gods. He invited every one to enter into that state of freedom which he called Nirvana. All must attain to it one day; and that attainment is the complete fulfilment of man.

—*The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 1991, Vol. VIII, pp. 92-105 [Hereafter referred to as *The Complete Works*].

BUDDHISTIC INDIA*

Almost all of you, perhaps, have read Edwin Arnold's poem on the life of Buddha, and some of you, perhaps, have gone into the subject with more scholarly interest, as in English, French and German, there is quite a lot of Buddhistic literature. Buddhism itself is the most interesting of subjects, for it is the first historical outburst of a world religion. There have been great religions before Buddhism arose, in India and elsewhere, but, more or less, they are confined within their own races. The ancient Hindus or ancient Jews or ancient Persians, every one of them had a great religion, but these religions were more or less racial. With Buddhism first begins that peculiar phenomenon of religion boldly starting out to conquer the world. Apart from its doctrines and the truths it taught and the message it had to give, we stand face to face with one of the tremendous cataclysms of the world. Within a few centuries of its birth, the barefooted, shaven-headed missionaries of

* Delivered at the Shakespeare Club, Pasadena, California, on February 2, 1900.

Buddha had spread over all the then known civilized world, and they penetrated even further—from Lapland on the one side to the Philippine Islands on the other. They had spread widely within a few centuries of Buddha's birth; and in India itself, the religion of Buddha had at one time nearly swallowed up two-thirds of the population.

The whole of India was never Buddhistic. It stood outside. Buddhism had the same fate as Christianity had with the Jews; the majority of the Jews stood aloof. So the old Indian religion lived on. But the comparison stops here. Christianity, though it could not get within its fold all the Jewish race, itself took the country. Where the old religion existed—the religion of the Jews—that was conquered by Christianity in a very short time and the old religion was dispersed, and so the religion of the Jews lives a sporadic life in different parts of the world. But in India this gigantic child was absorbed, in the long run, by the mother that gave it birth, and today the very name of Buddha is almost unknown all over India. *You* know more about Buddhism than ninety-nine percent of the Indians. At best, they of India only know the name—'Oh, he was a great prophet, a great Incarnation of God'—and there it ends. The island of Ceylon remains to Buddha, and in some parts of the Himalayan country, there are some Buddhists yet.

Beyond that there are none. But [Buddhism] has spread over all the rest of Asia.

Still, it has the largest number of followers of any religion, and it has indirectly modified the teachings of all the other religions. A good deal of Buddhism entered into Asia Minor. It was a constant fight at one time whether the Buddhists would prevail or the later sects of Christians. The [Gnostics] and the other sects of early Christians were more or less Buddhistic in their tendencies, and all these got fused up in that wonderful city of Alexandria, and out of the fusion under Roman law came Christianity. Buddhism in its political and social aspect is even more interesting than its [doctrines] and dogmas; and as the first outburst of the tremendous world-conquering power of religion, it is very interesting also.

And that man was born—the great man Buddha. Most of you know about him, his life. And in spite of all the miracles and stories that generally get fastened upon any great man, in the first place, he is one of the most historical prophets of the world. Two are very historical: one, the most ancient, Buddha, and the other, Mohammed, because both friends and foes are agreed about them. So we are perfectly sure that there were such persons. As for the other persons, we have only to take for granted what the disciples say—nothing more.... We do not know so clearly

about many of the prophets; but as to this man, because both friends and foes write of him, we are sure that there was such a historical personage. And if we analyse through all the fables and reports of miracles and stories that generally are heaped upon a great man in this world, we will find an inside core; and all through the account of that man, he never did a thing for himself—never! How do you know that? Because, you see, when fables are fastened upon a man, the fables must be tinged with that man's general character. Not one fable tried to impute any vice or any immorality to the man. Even his enemies have favourable accounts.

When Buddha was born, he was so pure that whosoever looked at his face from a distance immediately gave up the ceremonial religion and became a monk and became saved. So the gods held a meeting. They said, 'We are undone.' Because most of the gods live upon the ceremonials. These sacrifices go to the gods and these sacrifices were all gone. The gods were dying of hunger and [the reason for] it was that their power was gone. So the gods said: 'We must, anyhow, put this man down. He is too pure for our life.' And then the gods came and said: 'Sir, we come to ask you something. We want to make a great sacrifice and we mean to make a huge fire, and we have been seeking all over the world for a pure

spot to light the fire on and could not find it and now we have found it. If you will lie down, on your breast we will make the huge fire.' 'Granted,' he says, 'go on.' And the gods built the fire high upon the breast of Buddha, and they thought he was dead, and he was not. And then they went about and said, 'We are undone.' And all the gods began to strike him. No good. They could not kill him. From underneath, the voice comes: 'Why [are you] making all these vain attempts?' 'Whoever looks upon you becomes purified and is saved, and nobody is going to worship us.' 'Then, your attempt is vain, because purity can never be killed.' This fable was written by his enemies, and yet throughout the fable the only blame that attaches to Buddha is that he was so great a teacher of purity.

About his doctrines, some of you know a little. It is his doctrines that appeal to many modern thinkers whom you call agnostics. He was a great preacher of the brotherhood of mankind: 'Aryan or non-Aryan, caste or no caste, and sects or no sects, every one has the same right to God and to religion and to freedom. Come in all of you.' But as to other things, he was very agnostic. 'Be practical.' There came to him one day five young men, Brahmin born, quarrelling upon a question. They came to him to ask him the way to truth. And one said: 'My people

teach this, and this is the way to truth.' The other said: 'I have been taught this, and this is the only way to truth.' 'Which is the right way, sir?' 'Well, you say your people taught this is truth and is the way to God?' 'Yes.' 'But did you see God?' 'No, sir.' 'Your father?' 'No, sir.' 'Your grandfather?' 'No, sir.' 'None of them saw God?' 'No.' 'Well, and your teachers—neither [any] of them saw God?' 'No.' And he asked the same to the others. They all declared that none had seen God. 'Well,' said Buddha, 'in a certain village came a young man weeping and howling and crying: "Oh, I love her so! Oh my, I love her so!" And then the villagers came; and the only thing he said was he loved her so. "Who is she that you love?" "I do not know." "Where does she live?" "I do not know"—but he loved her so. "How does she look?" "That I do not know; but oh, I love her so."' Then asked Buddha: 'Young man, what would you call this young man?' 'Why, sir, he was a fool!' And they all declared: 'Why, sir, that young man was certainly a fool, to be crying and all that about a woman, to say he loved her so much and he never saw her or knew that she existed or anything?' 'Are you not the same? You say that this God your father or your grandfather never saw, and now you are quarrelling upon a thing which neither you nor your ancestors ever knew, and you are trying to cut each

other's throats about it.' Then the young men asked: 'What are we to do?' 'Now, tell me: did your father ever teach that God is ever angry?' 'No, sir.' 'Did your father ever teach that God is evil?' 'No, sir; he is always pure.' 'Well, now, if you are pure and good and all that, do you not think that you will have more chance to come near to that God than by discussing all this and trying to cut each other's throats? Therefore, say I: be pure and be good; be pure and love everyone.' And that was [all].

You see that non-killing of animals and charity towards animals was an already existing doctrine when he was born; but it was new with him—the breaking down of caste, that tremendous movement. And the other thing that was new: he took forty of his disciples and sent them all over the world, saying, 'Go ye; mix with all races and nations and preach the excellent gospel for the good of all, for the benefit of all.' And, of course, he was not molested by the Hindus. He died at a ripe old age. All his life he was a most stern man: he never yielded to weakness. I do not believe many of his doctrines; of course, I do not. I believe that the Vedantism of the old Hindus is much more thoughtful, is a grander philosophy of life. I like his method of work, but what I like [most] in that man is that, among all the prophets of mankind, here was a man who never had any cobwebs in his

brain, and [who was] sane and strong. When kingdoms were at his feet, he was still the same man, maintaining 'I am a man amongst men.'

Why, the Hindus, they are dying to worship somebody. You will find, if you live long enough, I will be worshipped by our people. If you go there to teach them something, before you die you will be worshipped. Always trying to worship somebody. And living in that race, the world-honoured Buddha, he died always declaring that he was but man. None of his adulators could draw from him one remark that he was anything different from any other man.

Those last dying words of his always thrilled through my heart. He was old, he was suffering, he was near his death, and then came the despised outcaste—he lives on carrion, dead animals; the Hindus would not allow them to come into cities—one of these invited him to a dinner and he came with his disciples, and the poor Chanda, he wanted to treat this great teacher according to what he thought would be best; so he had a lot of pig's flesh and a lot of rice for him, and Buddha looked at that. The disciples were all [hesitating], and the Master said: 'Well, do not eat, you will be hurt.' But he quietly sat down and ate. The teacher of equality must eat the [outcaste] Chanda's dinner, even the pig's flesh. He sat down and ate it.

He was already dying. He found death coming on, and he asked, 'Spread for me something under this tree, for I think the end is near.' And he was there under the tree, and he laid himself down; he could not sit up any more. And the first thing he did, he said: 'Go to that Chanda and tell him that he has been one of my greatest benefactors; for his meal, I am going to Nirvana.' And then several men came to be instructed, and a disciple said, 'Do not go near now, the Master is passing away'. And as soon as he heard it, the Lord said, 'Let them come in'. And somebody else came and the disciples would not [let them enter]. Again they came, and then the dying Lord said: 'And O, thou Ananda, I am passing away. Weep not for me. Think not for me. I am gone. Work out diligently your own salvation. Each one of you is just what I am. I am nothing but one of you. What I am today is what I made myself. Do you struggle and make yourselves what I am...'

These are the memorable words of Buddha: 'Believe not because an old book is produced as an authority. Believe not because your father said [you should] believe the same. Believe not because other people like you believe it. Test everything, try everything, and then believe it, and if you find it for the good of many, give it to all.' And with these words, the Master passed away.

See the sanity of the man. No gods, no angels, no demons—nobody. Nothing of the kind. Stern, sane, every brain-cell perfect and complete, even at the moment of death. No delusion. I do not agree with many of his doctrines. You may not. But in my opinion—oh, if I had only one drop of that strength! The sanest philosopher the world ever saw. Its best and its sanest teacher. And never that man bent before even the power of the tyrannical Brahmins. Never that man bent. Direct and everywhere the same: weeping with the miserable, helping the miserable, singing with the singing, strong with the strong, and everywhere the same sane and able man.

...You know he denied that there was any soul in man—that is, in the Hindu sense of the word. Now, we Hindus all believe that there is something permanent in man, which is unchangeable and which is living through all eternity. And that in man we call Atman, which is without beginning and without end. And [we believe] that there is something permanent in nature [and that we call Brahman, which is also without beginning and without end]. He denied both of these. He said there is no proof of anything permanent. It is all a mere mass of change; a mass of thought in a continuous change is what you call a mind...The torch is leading the procession. The circle is a delusion. [Or take the example of a river.] It is a

continuous river passing on; every moment a fresh mass of water passing on. So is this life; so is all body, so is all mind.

...We Hindus never understood it [his doctrine]. But I can understand the motive behind that. Oh, the gigantic motive! The Master says that selfishness is the great curse of the world; that we are selfish and that therein is the curse. There should be no motive for selfishness. You are [like a river] passing [on]—a continuous phenomenon. Have no God; have no soul; stand on your feet and do good for good's sake—neither for fear of punishment nor for [the sake of] going anywhere. Stand sane and motiveless. The motive is: I want to do good, it is good to do good.... And I warm to think of this tremendous giant. We cannot approach that strength. The world never saw [anything] compared to that strength. And I have not yet seen any other strength like that. We are all born cowards. If we can save ourselves [we care about nothing else]. Inside is the tremendous fear, the tremendous motive, all the time. Our own selfishness makes us the most arrant cowards; our own selfishness is the great cause of fear and cowardice. And there he stood: 'Do good because it is good; ask no more questions; that is enough. A man made to do good by a fable, a story, a superstition—he will be doing evil as soon as the opportunity comes. That

man alone is good who does good for good's sake, and that is the character of the man.'

'And what remains of man?' was asked of the Master. 'Everything—everything. But what is in the man? Not the body not the soul, but character. And that is left for all ages. All that have passed and died, they have left for us their characters, eternal possessions for the rest of humanity; and these characters are working—working all through.' What of Buddha? What of Jesus of Nazareth? The world is full of their characters. Tremendous doctrine!...

And then, what he did. His method of work: organization. The idea that you have today of church is his character. He left the church. He organized these monks and made them into a body. Even the voting by ballot is there five hundred and sixty years before Christ. Minute organization. The church was left and became a tremendous power, and did great missionary work in India and outside India. Then came, three hundred years after, two hundred years before Christ, the great emperor Asoka, as he has been called by your Western historians, the divinest of monarchs, and that man became entirely converted to the ideas of Buddha, and he was the greatest emperor of the world at that time. His grandfather was a contemporary of Alexander, and since Alexander's time, India had become more intimately

connected with Greece... Every day in Central Asia some inscription or other is being found. India had forgotten all about Buddha and Asoka and everyone. But there were pillars, obelisks, columns, with ancient letters which nobody could read. Some of the old Mogul emperors declared they would give millions for anybody to read those; but nobody could. Within the last thirty years those have been read; they are all written in Pali.

[The first inscription describes] the terror and the misery of war; and [how] he became converted to religion. Then said he: 'Henceforth let none of my descendants think of acquiring glory by conquering other races. If they want glory, let them help other races; let them send teachers of sciences and teachers of religion. A glory won by the sword is no glory at all.' And next you find how he is sending missionaries even to Alexandria.... You wonder that you find all over that part of the country sects rising immediately, called Theraputae, Essenes, and all those—extreme vegetarians, and so on. Now this great Emperor Asoka built hospitals for men and for animals. The inscriptions show they are ordering hospitals, building hospitals for men and for animals. That is to say, when an animal gets old, if I am poor and cannot keep it any longer, I do not shoot it down for mercy. These hospitals were maintained by public charity....

Thus Buddhism was and did become a great political power in India. Gradually it also fell to pieces—after all, this tremendous missionary enterprise. But to their credit it must be said, they never took up the sword to preach religion. Excepting the Buddhistic religion, there is not one religion in the world which could make one step without bloodshed—not one which could get a hundred thousand converts just by brain power alone....

There have been three things in Buddhism: the Buddha himself, his law, his church. At first it was so simple. When the Master died, before his death, they said: 'What shall we do with you?' 'Nothing.' 'What monuments shall we make over you?' He said: 'Just make a little heap if you want, or just do not do anything.' By and by, there arose huge temples and all the paraphernalia. The use of images was unknown before then. I say they were the first to use images. There are images of Buddha and all the saints, sitting about and praying.

All this paraphernalia went on multiplying with this organization. Then these monasteries became rich. The real cause of the downfall is here. Monasticism is all very good for a few; but when you preach it in such a fashion that every man or woman who has a mind immediately gives up social life, when you find over the whole of India monasteries, some containing

a hundred thousand monks, sometimes twenty thousand monks in one building—huge, gigantic buildings, these monasteries, scattered all over India and, of course, centres of learning, and all that—who were left to procreate progeny, to continue the race? Only the weaklings. All the strong and vigorous minds went out. And then came national decay by the sheer loss of vigour...

—*The Complete Works*, 1991, Vol. III, pp. 511-34.

BUDDHISM, THE FULFILMENT OF HINDUISM*

...The religion of the Hindus is divided into two parts: the ceremonial and the spiritual. The spiritual portion is specially studied by the monks.

In that there is no caste. A man from the highest caste and a man from the lowest may become a monk in India, and the two castes become equal. In religion there is no caste; caste is simply a social institution. Shaky Muni himself was a monk, and it was his glory that he had the large-heartedness to bring out the truths from the hidden Vedas and throw them broadcast all over the world. He was the first being in the world who brought missionarizing into practice—nay, he was the first to conceive the idea of proselytizing.

The great glory of the Master lay in his wonderful sympathy for everybody, especially for the ignorant and the poor. Some of his disciples were Brahmins. When Buddha was teaching, Sanskrit was no more the spoken language in India. It was then only in the

* Address at the World Parliament of Religions on September 26, 1893.

books of the learned. Some of Buddha's Brahmin disciples wanted to translate his teachings into Sanskrit, but he distinctly told them, 'I am for the poor, for the people; let me speak in the tongue of the people.' And so to this day the great bulk of his teachings are in the vernacular of that day in India.

Whatever may be the position of philosophy, whatever may be the position of metaphysics, so long as there is such a thing as death in the world, so long as there is such a thing as weakness in the human heart, so long as there is a cry going out of the heart of man in his very weakness, there shall be faith in God.

On the philosophic side the disciples of the Great Master dashed themselves against the eternal rocks of the Vedas and could not crush them, and on the other side they took away from the nation that eternal God to which every one, man or woman, clings so fondly. And the result was that Buddhism had to die a natural death in India....

But at the same time, Brahminism lost something—that reforming zeal, that wonderful sympathy and charity for everybody, that wonderful leaven which Buddhism had brought to the masses and which had rendered Indian society so great that a Greek historian who wrote about India of that time was led to say that no Hindu was known to tell an

untruth and no Hindu woman was known to be unchaste.

Hinduism cannot live without Buddhism, nor Buddhism without Hinduism. Then realize what the separation has shown to us, that the Buddhists cannot stand without the brain and philosophy of the Brahmins, nor the Brahmin without the heart of the Buddhist. This separation between the Buddhists and the Brahmins is the cause of the downfall of India. That is why India is populated by three hundred millions of beggars, and that is why India has been the slave of conquerors for the last thousand years. Let us then join the wonderful intellect of the Brahmins with the heart, the noble soul, the wonderful humanizing power of the Great Master.

—*The Complete Works*, 1991, Vol. I, pp. 21-23.

BUDDHISM, THE RELIGION OF THE LIGHT OF ASIA*

Vivekananda reviewed at length the early religions of India. He told of the great slaughter of animals on the altar of sacrifice; of Buddha's birth and life; of his puzzling questions to himself over the causes of creation and the reasons for existence; of the earnest struggle of Buddha to find the solution of creation and life; of the final result.

Buddha, he said, stood head and shoulders above all other men. He was one, he said, [of] whom his friends or enemies could never say that he drew a breath or ate a crumb of bread but for the good of all.

'He never preached transmigration of the soul,' said Vivekananda, 'except he believed one soul was to its successor like the wave of the ocean that grew and died away, leaving naught to the succeeding wave but its force. He never preached that there was a God, nor did he deny there was a God.

"Why should we be good?" his disciples asked of him.

* Delivered in Detroit on March 19, 1894. Reported in *Detroit Tribune*.

“Because” he said, “you inherited good. Let you in your turn leave some heritage of good to your successors. Let us all help the onward march of accumulated goodness, for goodness’ sake.”

‘He was the first prophet. He never abused any one or arrogated anything to himself. He believed in our working out our own salvation in religion.

“I can’t tell you,” he said, on his deathbed, “nor any one. Depend not on any one. Work out your own religion [salvation].”

‘He protested against the inequality of man and man, or of man and beast. All life was equal, he preached. He was the first man to uphold the doctrine of prohibition in liquors. “Be good and do good”, he said. “If there is a God, you have Him by being good. If there is no God, being good is good. He is to be blamed for all he suffers. He is to be praised for all his good.”

‘He was the first who brought the missionaries into existence. He came as a saviour to the down-trodden millions of India. They could not understand his philosophy, but they saw the man and his teachings, and they followed him.’

In conclusion Vivekananda said that Buddhism was the foundation of the Christian religion; that the Catholic Church came from Buddhism.

—*The Complete Works*, 1992, Vol. VII, pp. 429-30.

BUDDHA, THE GREATEST KARMA YOGIN*

In every religion we find one type of self-devotion particularly developed. The type of working without a motive is most highly developed in Buddhism. Do not mistake Buddhism and Brahminism. In this country you are very apt to do so. Buddhism is one of our sects. It was founded by a great man called Gautama, who became disgusted at the eternal metaphysical discussions of his day, and the cumbrous rituals, and more especially with the caste system. Some people say that we are born to a certain state, and therefore we are superior to others who are not thus born. He was also against the tremendous priestcraft. He preached a religion in which there was no motive power, and was perfectly agnostic about metaphysics or theories about God. He was often asked if there was a God, and he answered, he did not know. When asked about right conduct, he would reply, 'Do good and be good.' There came five Brahmins, who asked him to settle their discussion.

* Delivered in Detroit.

One said, 'Sir, my book says that God is such, and that this is the way to come to God.' Another said, 'That is wrong, for my book says such and such, and this is the way to come to God'; and so the others. He listened calmly to all of them, and then asked them one by one, 'Does any one of your books say that God becomes angry, that He ever injures anyone, that He is impure?' 'No, Sir, they all teach that God is pure and good.' 'Then, my friends, why do you not become pure and good first, that you may know what God is?'

...I want a good deal of metaphysics, for myself. I entirely differ in many respects, but, because I differ, is that any reason why I should not see the beauty of the man? He was the only man who was bereft of all motive power. There were other great men who all said they were the Incarnations of God Himself, and that those who would believe in them would go to heaven. But what did Buddha say with his dying breath? 'None can help you; help yourself; work out your own salvation.' He said about himself, 'Buddha is the name of infinite knowledge, infinite as the sky; I, Gautama, have reached that state; you will all reach that too if you struggle for it.' Bereft of all motive power, he did not want to go to heaven, did not want money; he gave up his throne and everything else and went about begging his bread through the streets

of India, preaching for the good of men and animals with a heart as wide as the ocean.

He was the only man who was ever ready to give up his life for animals to stop a sacrifice. He once said to a king, 'If the sacrifice of a lamb helps you to go heaven, sacrificing a man will help you better; so sacrifice me.' The king was astonished. And yet this man was without any motive power. He stands as the perfection of the active type, and the very height to which he attained shows that through the power of work we can also attain to the highest spirituality.

To many the path becomes easier if they believe in God. But the life of Buddha shows that even a man who does not believe in God, has no metaphysics, belongs to no sect, and does not go to any church, or temple, and is a confessed materialist, even he can attain to the highest. We have no right to judge him. I wish I had one infinitesimal part of Buddha's heart. Buddha may or may not have believed in God; that does not matter to me. He reached the same state of perfection to which others come by Bhakti—love of God—Yoga or Jnana. Perfection does not come from belief or faith. Talk does not count for anything. Parrots can do that. Perfection comes through the disinterested performance of action.

—*The Complete Works*, 1989, Vol. IV, pp. 135-37.

THE RELIGION OF BUDDHA*

The Lyceum Theatre was crowded to the doors last night at the second meeting of the series conducted by the Vrooman Brothers on 'Dynamic Religion'. Swami Vivekananda, of India, made the principal address. He spoke on the Buddhist religion, and told of the evils which existed among the people of India, at the time of the birth of Buddha. The social inequalities in India, he said, were at that period a thousand times greater than anywhere else in the world. 'Six hundred years before Christ,' he continued, 'the priesthood of India exercised great influence over the minds of the people, and between the upper and nether millstone of intellectuality and learning the people were ground. Buddhism, which is the religion of more than two-third of the human family, was not founded as an entirely new religion, but rather as a reformation which carried off the corruption of the times. Buddha seems to have been the only prophet who did everything for others and absolutely nothing for himself. He gave up his home and all the enjoyments of life to spend his days in

* Reported in *Baltimore American*, October 22, 1894.

search of the medicine for the terrible disease of human misery. In an age when men and priests were discussing the essence of the deity, he discovered what people had overlooked, that misery existed. The cause of evil is our desire to be superior to others and our selfishness. The moment that the world becomes unselfish all evil will vanish. So long as society tries to cure evil by laws and institutions, evil will not be cured. The world has tried this method ineffectually for thousands of years. Force against force never cures, and the only cure for evil is unselfishness. We need to teach people to obey the laws rather than to make more laws. Buddhism was the first missionary religion of the world but it was one of the teachings of Buddhism not to antagonize any other religion. Sects weaken their power for good by making war on each other.

—*The Complete Works*, 1991, Vol. II, pp. 496-97.

TRUE BUDDHISM*

Swami Vivekananda, being presented by Dr. Janes, the president of the Ethical Association, under whose auspices these lectures are given, said in part: 'The Hindoo occupies a unique position towards Buddhism. Like Christ, who antagonized the Jews, Buddha antagonized the prevailing religion of India; but while Christ was rejected by his countrymen, Buddha was accepted as God Incarnate. He denounced the priestcraft at the very doors of their temples, yet today he is worshipped by them.

...Buddha never fought true castes, for they are nothing but the congregation of those of a particular natural tendency, and they are always valuable. But Buddha fought the degenerated castes with their hereditary privileges, and spoke to the Brahmins: 'True Brahmins are not greedy, nor criminal nor angry—are you such? If not, do not mimic the genuine, real men. Caste is a state, not an iron-bound class, and every one who knows and loves God is a true Brahmin.' And with regard to the sacrifices, he said: 'Where do the Vedas say that sacrifices make us pure?

* Report in *Brooklyn Standard Union*, February 4, 1895.

They may please, perhaps, the angels, but they make us no better. Hence, let off these mummeries—love God and strive to be perfect.’

...‘Every one of Buddha’s teachings is founded in the Vedantas. He was one of those monks who wanted to bring out the truths, hidden in those books and in the forest monasteries. I do not believe that the world is ready for them even now; it still wants those lower religions, which teach of a personal God. Because of this, the original Buddhism could not hold the popular mind until it took up the modifications, which were reflected back from Thibet and the Tartars. Original Buddhism was not at all nihilistic. It was but an attempt to combat caste and priestcraft; it was the first in the world to stand as champion of the dumb animals, the first to break down the caste, standing between man and man.’

Swami Vivekananda concluded his lecture with the presentation of a few pictures from the life of Buddha, the ‘great one, who never thought a thought and never performed a deed except for the good of others; who had the greatest intellect and heart, taking in all mankind and all the animals, all embracing, ready to give up his life for the highest angels as well as for the lowest worm.’ He first showed how Buddha, for the purpose of saving a herd of sheep, intended for a king’s sacrifice, had thrown himself

upon the altar, and thus accomplished his purpose. He next pictured how the great prophet had parted from his wife and baby at the cry of suffering mankind, and how, lastly, after his teachings had been universally accepted in India, he accepted the invitation of a despised Pariah, who dined him on swine's flesh, from the effects of which he died.

—*The Complete Works*, 1991, Vol. II, pp. 507-10.

BUDDHISM AND VEDANTA

The Vedanta philosophy is the foundation of Buddhism and everything else in India; but what we call the Advaita philosophy of the modern school has a great many conclusions of the Buddhists. Of course, the Hindus will not admit that—that is the orthodox Hindus, because to them the Buddhists are heretics. But there is a conscious attempt to stretch out the whole doctrine to include the heretics also.

The Vedanta has no quarrel with Buddhism. The idea of the Vedanta is to harmonize all....

Buddhism does not want to have anything except phenomena. In phenomena alone is desire. It is desire that is creating all this. Modern Vedantists do not hold this at all. We say there is something which has become the will. Will is a manufactured something, a compound, not a 'simple'. There cannot be any will without an external object. We see that the very position that will created this universe is impossible. How could it? Have you ever known will without external stimulus? Desire cannot arise without stimulus, or in modern philosophic language, of nerve stimulus. Will is a sort of reaction of the brain, what the Sankhya

philosophers call *Buddhi*. This reaction must be preceded by action, and action presupposes an external universe. When there is no external universe, naturally there will be no will; and yet, according to your theory, it is will that created the universe. Who creates the will? Will is coexistent with the universe. Will is one phenomenon caused by the same impulse which created the universe. But philosophy must not stop there. Will is entirely personal; therefore we cannot go with Schopenhauer at all. Will is a compound—a mixture of the internal and the external. Suppose a man were born without any senses, he would have no will at all. Will requires something from outside, and the brain will get some energy from inside; therefore will is a compound, as much a compound as the wall or anything else. We do not agree with the will-theory of these German philosophers at all. Will itself is phenomenal and cannot be the Absolute. It is one of the many projections. There is something which is not will, but is manifesting itself as will. That I can understand.

But that will is manifesting itself as everything else, I do not understand, seeing that we cannot have any conception of will, as separate from the universe. When that something which is freedom becomes will, it is caused by time, space, and causation. Take Kant's

analysis. Will is within time, space, and causation. Then how can it be the Absolute? One cannot will without willing in time.

If we can stop all thought, then we know that we are beyond thought. We come to this by negation. When every phenomenon has been negated, whatever remains, that is It. That cannot be expressed, cannot be manifested, because the manifestation will be, again, will.

—*The Complete Works*, 1989, Vol. V, pp. 279-81.

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Part II

**Extracts from Other Lectures of
Swami Vivekananda
on Buddha**

यस्स जितं नावजीयति, जितमस्स नो याति कोचि लोके।
तं बुद्धमनन्तगोचरं अपदं केन पदेन नेस्सथ ॥

Whose conquest cannot be overthrown,
Whose conquest nobody equals in the world,
Whose realm is infinite,
Whose place you cannot locate—
By what steps can you show the way of that Buddha?

—*Dhammapada*, v. 179.

**EXTRACTS FROM OTHER
LECTURES OF
SWAMI VIVEKANANDA**

ON BUDDHA

The gigantic will which Buddha and Jesus threw over the world, whence did it come? Whence came this accumulation of power? It must have been there through ages and ages, continually growing bigger and bigger, until it burst on society in a Buddha or a Jesus, even rolling down to the present day.

—*The Complete Works*, 1991, Vol. I, p. 30.

Have you not seen even a most bigoted Christian, when he reads Edwin Arnold's *Light of Asia*, stand in reverence of Buddha, who preached no God, preached nothing but self-sacrifice?

—*Ibid.*, p. 86.

Let me tell you in conclusion a few words about one man who actually carried this teaching of Karma-Yoga into practice. That man is Buddha. He is the one man who ever carried this into perfect practice. All the prophets of the world, except Buddha, had

external motives to move them to unselfish action. The prophets of the world, with this single exception, may be divided into two sets, one set holding that they are incarnations of God come down on earth, and the other holding that they are only messengers from God; and both draw their impetus for work from outside, expect reward from outside, however highly spiritual may be the language they use. But Buddha is the only prophet who said, 'I do not care to know your various theories about God. What is the use of discussing all the subtle doctrines about the soul? Do good and be good. And this will take you to freedom and to whatever truth there is.' He was, in the conduct of his life, absolutely without personal motives; and what man worked more than he? Show me in history one character who has soared so high above all. The whole human race has produced but one such character, such high philosophy, such wide sympathy. This great philosopher, preaching the highest philosophy, yet had the deepest sympathy for the lowest of animals, and never put forth any claims for himself. He is the ideal Karma-Yogi, acting entirely without motive, and the history of humanity shows him to have been the greatest man ever born; beyond compare the greatest combination of heart and brain that ever existed, the greatest soul-power that has ever been manifested. He is the first great reformer the

world has seen. He was the first who dared to say, 'Believe not because some old manuscripts are produced, believe not because it is your national belief, because you have been made to believe it from your childhood; but reason it all out, and after you have analysed it, then, if you find that it will do good to one and all, believe it, live up to it, and help others to live up to it.' He works best who works without any motive, neither for money nor for fame, nor for anything else; and when a man can do that, he will be a Buddha, and out of him will come the power to work in such a manner as will transform the world. This man represents the very highest ideal of Karma-Yoga.

—Ibid., pp. 116-18.

Buddha taught five hundred years before Christ, and his words were full of blessings: never a curse came from his lips, nor from his life;...

—Ibid., p. 328.

It was the great Buddha, who never cared for the dualist gods, and who has been called an atheist and materialist, who yet was ready to give up his body for a poor goat. That Man set in motion the highest moral ideas any nation can have. Whenever there is a moral code it is a ray of light from that Man.

—Ibid., 1991, Vol. II, p. 143.

It reminds me of a celebrated song in the *Lalita Vistara*, the biography of Buddha. Buddha was born, says the book, as the saviour of mankind, but he forgot himself in the luxuries of his palace. Some angels came and sang a song to rouse him. And the burden of the whole song is that we are floating down the river of life which is continually changing with no stop and no rest. So are our lives, going on and on without knowing any rest....

—*Ibid.*, p. 92.

I am the servant of the servants of the servants of Buddha. Who was there ever like him? —the Lord—who never performed one action for himself—with a heart that embraced the whole world! So full of pity that he—prince and monk—would give his life to save a little goat! So loving that he sacrificed himself to the hunger of a tigress! —to the hospitality of a pariah and blessed him! And he came into my room when I was a boy, and I fell at his feet! For I knew it was the Lord Himself!

—*Ibid.*, Vol. VIII, p. 278.

The Lord Buddha is my *Ishta*—my God. He preached no theory about Godhead—he was himself God, I fully believe it.

—*Ibid.*, Vol. VI, p. 227.

I would like to see moral men like Gautama Buddha, who did not believe in a Personal God or a personal soul, never asked about them, but was a perfect agnostic, and yet was ready to lay down his life for anyone, and worked all his life for the good of all, and thought only of the good of all. Well has it been said by his biographer, in describing his birth, that he was born for the good of the many, as a blessing to the many. He did not go to the forest to meditate for his own salvation; he felt that the world was burning, and that he must find a way out. 'Why is there so much misery in the world?'—was the one question that dominated his whole life. Do you think we are so moral as the Buddha?

—*Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 352.

Listen to Buddha's message—a tremendous message. It has a place in our heart. Says Buddha, 'Root out selfishness, and everything that makes you selfish. Have neither wife, child, nor family. Be not of the world; become perfectly unselfish.'

—*Ibid.*, Vol. IV, p. 131.

The Lord once more came to you as Buddha and taught you how to feel, how to sympathize with the poor, the miserable, the sinner, but you heard Him not. Your priests invented the horrible story that the

Lord was here for deluding demons with false doctrines!...

—Ibid., 1989, Vol. V, p. 14.

Buddha came to whip us into practice. Be good, destroy the passions. Then you will know for yourself whether Dvaita or Advaita philosophy is true—whether there is one or there are more than one.

—Ibid., 1991, Vol. VI, p. 116.

...The phase of Buddhism which declares 'Everything for others', and which you find spread throughout Tibet, has greatly struck modern Europe. ...What Buddha did was to break wide open the gates of that very religion which was confined in the Upanishads to a particular caste. What special greatness does his theory of Nirvana confer on him? His greatness lies in his unrivalled sympathy. The high orders of Samadhi etc., that lend gravity to his religion, are almost all there in the Vedas; what are absent there are his intellect and heart, which have never since been paralleled throughout the history of the world.

—Ibid., p. 225.

...There is nothing to know about in this world therefore, if there be anything beyond this relative existence—what the Lord Buddha has designated as

Prajnapara—the transcendental—if such there be, I want that alone. Whether happiness attends it or grief, I do not care. What a lofty idea! How grand!...

—*Ibid.*, p. 227.

...Only one kind of work I understand, and that is doing good to others; all else is doing evil. I therefore prostrate myself before the Lord Buddha...

—*Ibid.*, p. 310.

In the Buddha Incarnation the Lord says that the root of the Adhibhautika misery or, misery arising from other terrestrial beings, is the formation of *classes* (*Jati*); in other words, every form of class-distinction, whether based on birth, or acquirements, or wealth is at the bottom of this misery.

—*Ibid.*, p. 327.

My belief, however, is that it was since the time of Buddha that the monastic vow was preached more thoroughly all over India, and renunciation, the giving up of sense-enjoyment, was recognized as the highest aim of religious life.... Never was a great man of such renunciation born in this world as Buddha.

—*Ibid.*, p. 507.

...The monastic institution was there, but the generality of people did not recognize it as the goal of life; there was no such staunch spirit for it, there was no such firmness in spiritual discrimination. So even when Buddha betook himself to so many Yogis and Sadhus, nowhere did he acquire the peace he wanted. And then to realize the Highest he fell back on his own exertions, and seated on a spot with the famous words, इहासने शुष्यतु मे शरीरम्—'Let my body wither away on this seat' etc. rose from it only after becoming the Buddha, the Illumined One.... Really speaking, the institution of Sannyasa originated with Buddha; it was he who breathed life into the dead bones of this institution.

—Ibid., pp. 507-08.

...If we accept history only as authority, we have to admit that in the midst of the profound darkness of the ancient times, Buddha only shines forth as a figure radiant with the light of knowledge.

—Ibid., p. 509.

...Buddha was more brave and sincere than any teacher. He said: 'Believe no book; the Vedas are all humbug. If they agree with me, so much the better for the books. I am the greatest book; sacrifice and prayer are useless.' Buddha was the first human being

to give to the world a complete system of morality. He was good for good's sake, he loved for love's sake.

—Ibid., 1992, Vol. VII, pp. 40-41.

Buddha never bowed down to anything—neither Veda, nor caste, nor priest, nor custom. He fearlessly reasoned so far as reason could take him. Such a fearless search for truth and such love for every living thing the world has never seen. Buddha was the Washington of the religious world; he conquered a throne only to give it to the world, as Washington did to the American people. He sought nothing for himself.

—Ibid., p. 59.

But look at Buddha's heart! —Ever ready to give his own life to save the life of even a kid—what to speak of बहुजनहिताय बहुजनसुखाय—'For the welfare of the many, for the happiness of the many'! See, what a large heartedness—what a compassion!

—Ibid., p. 118.

Buddha preached *renunciation*. India heard, and yet in six centuries she reached her greatest height.

—Ibid., 1989, Vol. V, p. 228.

...But consider how much good to the world and its beings...how many monasteries and schools and colleges, how many public hospitals and veterinary refuges were established, how developed architecture became... [in the name of Buddha!] What was there in this country before Buddha's advent? Only a number of religious principles recorded on bundles of palm leaves—and those too known only to a few. It was Lord Buddha who brought them down to the practical field and showed how to apply them in the everyday life of the people. In a sense, *he* was the living embodiment of true Vedanta.

—*Ibid.*, 1992, Vol. VII, pp. 118-19.

...Buddha brought the Vedanta to light, gave it to the people and saved India.

—*Ibid.*, 1991, Vol. II, p. 139.

When Buddha, who is with us a saint, was asked by one of his followers: 'Does God exist?' He replied: 'God, when have I spoken to you about God? This I tell you, be good and do good.'

—*Ibid.*, p. 287.

...But Buddha would have been worshipped as God in his own lifetime, all over Asia, for a moment's compromise. And his reply was only: 'Buddhahood

is an achievement, not a person!' Verily was He the only man in the world who was ever quite sane, the only sane man ever born!

—*Ibid.*, Vol. VIII, pp. 271-72.

ON BUDDHISM

Now this Buddhism went as the first missionary religion to the world, penetrated the whole of the civilized world as it existed at that time, and never was a drop of blood shed for that religion. We read how in China the Buddhist missionaries were persecuted, and thousands were massacred by two or three successive emperors, but after that, fortune favoured the Buddhists, and one of the emperors offered to take vengeance on the persecutors, but the missionaries refused.

—*Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 349.

...No march of armies has been used to preach this religion. In Buddhism, one of the most missionary religions of the world, we find inscriptions remaining of the great Emperor Asoka—recording how missionaries were sent to Alexandria, to Antioch, to Persia, to China, and to various other countries of the then civilized world.

—*Ibid.*, pp. 390-91.

Buddhism.... broke the chains of the masses. All castes and creeds alike became equal in a minute.

—*Ibid.*, p. 455.

The great point of contrast between Buddhism and Hinduism lies in the fact that Buddhism said, 'Realize all this as illusion', while Hinduism said, 'Realize that within the illusion is the Real.'

—Ibid., Vol. VIII, p. 273.

Buddhism proves nothing about the Absolute Entity. In a stream the water is changing; we have no right to call the stream *one*. Buddhists deny the *one*, and say, it is *many*. We say it is *one* and deny the *many*. What they call Karma is what we call the soul. According to Buddhism, man is a series of waves. Every wave dies, but somehow the first wave causes the second. That the second wave is identical with the first is illusion. To get rid of illusion good Karma is necessary. Buddhists do not postulate anything beyond the world.... Buddhism accepts that there is misery, and sufficient it is that we can get rid of this Duhkha [misery]; whether we get Sukha [happiness] or not, we do not know.

—Ibid., Vol. VI, p. 119.

But the aim of Buddhism was reform of the Vedic religion by standing against ceremonials requiring offerings of animals, against hereditary caste and exclusive priesthood, and against belief in permanent souls. It never attempted to destroy that religion, or

overturn the social order. It introduced a vigorous method by organizing a class of Sannyasins into a strong monastic brotherhood, and the Brahmavadinis into a body of nuns—by introducing images of saints in the place of altar-fires.

—Ibid., p. 161.

The Buddhist reformation and its chief field of activity were also in the same eastern region; and when the Maurya kings, forced possibly by the bar sinister on their escutcheon, patronized and led the new movement, the new priest power joined hands with the political power of the empire of Pataliputra. The popularity of Buddhism and its fresh vigour made the Maurya kings the greatest emperors that India ever had. The power of the Maurya sovereigns made Buddhism that worldwide religion that we see even today.

—Ibid., p. 162.

In the religious communities, among Sannyasins in the Buddhist monasteries, we have ample evidence to show that self-government was fully developed.

—Ibid., 1989, Vol. IV, p. 442.

With the deluge which swept the land at the advent of Buddhism, the priestly power fell into decay

and the royal power was in the ascendant. Buddhist priests are renouncers of the world, living in monasteries as homeless ascetics, unconcerned with secular affairs.... The state of being a Buddha is superior to the heavenly positions of many a Brahma or an Indra,... And to this Buddhahood, every man has the privilege to attain; it is open to all even in this life.

—Ibid., p. 443.

Buddhism, one of the most philosophical religions in the world, spread all through the populace, the common people of India. What a wonderful culture there must have been among the Aryans twenty-five hundred years ago, to be able to grasp ideas!

—Ibid., 1992, Vol. VII, p. 39.

In course of time, under the regime of Emperor Asoka, his son Mahinda and his daughter Sanghamitta, who had taken the vow of Sannyasa, came to the Island of Ceylon as religious missionaries.... Soon the Ceylonese grew very staunch Buddhists, and built a great city in the centre of the island and called it Anuradhapuram. The sight of the remains of this city strikes one dumb even today—huge *stupas*, and dilapidated stone building extending for miles and miles are standing to this day; ...Shaven headed monks and nuns, with the begging bowl in hand and

clothed in yellow robes, spread all over Ceylon. In places colossal temples were reared containing huge figures of Buddha in meditation, of Buddha preaching the Law, and of Buddha in a reclining posture—entering into Nirvana.

—Ibid., p. 336.
