

Buddhism ^{and} the Cultural
Unity of Asia.

The epoch of the VI and V-th centuries B.C. was a remarkable ^{period} time in the history of human thought, an epoch which produced Gautama, the Buddha in India, Heraclitus, the Ephesian (c. 535-475 B.C.), who has given one of the best definitions of dialectivism, ^{in Greece,} and Lao-tzu (V B.C.), the immortal philosopher of ancient China (according to the accepted view among Chinese scholars, Lao-tzu was an elder contemporary of Confucius (551-479 B.C.)). Recent Chinese and Western research places him in the latter part of the fourth century B.C. The first view seems to be the correct one), to mention only the names of three giants whose teachings ^{have been no doubt} had an unmistakable affinity of thought. Buddhism ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ ^{out} in its spread through the Asian continent, exercised a double attraction - the tremendous impact of its philosophic thought, and its panhuman appeal. Buddhism, if properly interpreted, shows a remarkable kinship with modern thought. In the sphere of pure philosophic thought - the affirmation of the unity of Consciousness and Matter (expressed in ^{the formula} the ~~xxxx~~ nāma-rūpa), or Energy and Matter, (in the sphere of social ethics - service to humanity as a whole, and the uplift of multitudes. This panhuman attitude of Buddhism reinforced by ^a ~~inf~~ sublime philosophy, has for centuries inspired the philosophy, art and literature of Asian countries. Far from being retrograde, ⁱⁿ its influence, ^{Buddhism} ~~it~~ fostered everywhere a new upsurge of creativeness and brought the peoples of Asia face to face with the choicest product of the Indian Mind. Wherever ^{he} ~~he~~ went, the Buddha first addressed himself to the people, strove to reach the common man outside of a rigid social system. Buddhism thus became a mighty social movement of emancipation. It is a well-known fact that Buddha and his disciples used only popular dialects as vehicles for their teaching. This was an accepted practice calculated to make the teaching accessible to the masses. This panhuman appeal was one of the main reasons which helped Buddhism to spread among

far and wide among neighbouring countries and among the foreign invaders who came from the North-West, and made India their home. Buddhism thus helped the country of its origin to assimilate the invader, and thus solved a problem which could not be easily solved in a society ruled by a rigid caste system. The conversion of these foreigners, Iranians, Greeks and Central Asian Turks to Buddhism, made possible the rapid spread of Buddhism throughout Central Asia towards the Far East. There was a time when the whole of the Central Asian belt, from the Caspian Sea to the Pacific, was predominantly Buddhist. Recent excavations of Soviet scholars on the territory of ^{in Soviet Central Asia} in ancient Khwarezm, in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, have brought to light numerous vestiges of a Buddhist Past - remarkable frescoes, stucco images and ruins of temples. And as if echoing these archaeological discoveries, comes the news of the momentous discovery of a large ensemble of Buddhist cave temples in South-Eastern Kansu in Western China, decorated with remarkable frescoes said to surpass in excellence the famous Tun-huang cave temples in Western Kansu on the very fringe of the Taklamakan desert. On its victorious march Buddhism not only conquered deserts, it also knew how to master the Sea. The strength of the Indian Commercial shipping in the early Middle Ages helped the spread of Buddhism by the sea route to South-East Asia and Indonesia, the Suvarnadvipa of the early Medieval epoch which was considered a great centre of Buddhist learning. Here also the pan-human approach of Buddhism helped Indian Culture to spread and created a cultural bond which is still active and vigorous notwithstanding changed conditions. Since the seventh century A.D. a new wave of Buddhist influence spread towards the North, across the Himalayan mountain barrier, this time activated by the Muslim inroads into Northern India which forced Buddhists to flee towards the border country. This wave was powerful enough

Buddhism spread to these widely known waves: through Central Asia to China and eventually to Japan. by the sea route to SE Asia and across the Himalayas.



A teaching which transcended racial and geographical borders of India, could not but exercise a powerful influence and attraction on adjacent countries. Fate willed that the spread of Buddhism in India coincided with two political events of the first magnitude - the formation of the Mauryan Empire followed by that of the Kushan Empire which included large tracts of Central Asia. These events in the political life of Ancient India helped to propagate the message of Buddha beyond the borders of India, towards the Mediterranean basin in the West and towards the Pacific in the East. This interplay of cultural and political events is fittingly symbolized by the famous Aśoka Pillar which since 1947 became the official crest of Independent India. ~~It is not an exaggeration to say that during the first millennium B.C. Buddhism succeeded in creating a cultural unity which permitted a free flow of ideas~~

to convert the whole of Tibet by the IX-th and X-th centuries A.D. and its impetus was not lost when Tibetan Buddhism spread towards Mongolia in the XVI-th century, ^{in place of} supplanting an earlier spread through the Uighurs, (a Turkish people who had the distinction of having been the enlightener of several Central Asian peoples,) and brought about a remarkable literary renaissance ^{as} in the XVII-XVIII centuries during which period the classical form of the Mongol language was finalized ~~XXXXXXXX~~ embodying many peculiarities of Sanskrit and Tibetan.

It is not an exaggeration to say that during the first millenium A.D., Buddhism succeeded in creating a cultural unity which permitted a free flow of ideas and generated a remarkable growth of art and literature which gave India her unique position in the history of Asian Culture. This unity of outlook made it possible for the famous Chinese Buddhist scholar and pilgrim Hsuan-tsang to visit India in the VII-th century A.D. and wherever he went on his long track across the Central Asian deserts, in the riverine oases of ^{the Tarim Basin} Turkestan and in the camps of Central Asian Turkish chieftains, he found understanding and an eagerness to help him in his quest. This remarkable development was made possible by Buddhism. In our World of strife and conflict it is wise to remember the great unifying influence exercised by the teaching of Gautama, the Buddha. In ^{the} our days of the awakening of the multitudes striving to achieve their shining goal of cultural and social betterment, it is fitting to recall Gautama, the Buddha, the first known ganapati, or leader of multitudes whose flaming message was addressed to the masses of the people who strove to uplift them and to remove the social and mental barriers by instilling in them a fearless yearning for freedom of thought, ^{especiallt and Russia and France} In many foreign countries Buddhist studies became a traditional field of Indology. Most of the Russian Indologists of the preceding generation - Minaev, Oldenburg and that ^{F.} mahā-pandita Stecherbatsky, were Buddhist scholars. In the Soviet period we find Obermiller, Stecherbatsky's pupil, very active
 affirming knowledge and condemning blind faith.

in the field of Buddhist Philosophy. Closer cultural contacts between Indian and the Soviet Union will no doubt revive this traditional interest of Russian

Indology. In France the preeminence of Buddhist research throughout the XIX and early XX centuries persists and works of a very high order have recently been published.

In India there are signs of a new revival of interest towards Buddhism and the foundation of several Research Institutes dedicated to the study of Buddhism sustains hope of a new ^{as} renaissance of Buddhist studies.

The foundation of Cultural unity built up by Buddhism enables modern India to play a ^{outstanding} ~~decisive~~ role in the noble fight for Peace and understanding among nations, a legacy to which the Indian people remains true.