The Ancient Legends of Buddhism

A Storehouse of Oriental Stories and Morality Opened in a Translation of One of the Canonical Books of the Buddhist Sacred Scriptures

By Joseph Edgar Chamberlin

THE thirty volumes of that truly monumental work, the Harvard Oriental Series, printed at the cost of the late Henry Clarke Warren, edited by Charles Rockwell Lanman, professor of Sanskrit in the university, and founded by these two gentlemen in concurrence, are now completed by the publication (the Harvard University Press) of Volumes 28, 29 and 30. These three volumes consist of the "Buddhist Legends," parts I, II and III, and are a translation from the original Pali, by Eugene Watson Burlingame, of the Dhamma-Pada, or Way of Righteousness—one of the canonical books of the Buddhist sacred scriptures.

In the original, the Dhamma-Pada consists of an elaborate commentary, mostly anecdotical, upon the sayings of Buddha, and is attributed to Buddaghosa, the most eminent of the Buddist scholastics, though Mr. Burlingame proves quite conclusively that Buddaghosa could not have written it, and its authorship is consequently unknown. It is in reality an anthology of 423 sayings of Buddha, exhaustively and often humorously explained or illustrated by the commentator, and invariably in the Oriental manner of parable, or anecdote. In fact it is a vast compilation of stories, each story or set of stories (very frequently one anecdote involving another), revolving around each saying or stanza of the Master. It is, as the translator informs us in his introduction, a huge collection of legends and folk-tales.

The work, as it lies before us, is the outcome of long labor during uncommonly troublous times on the part of the editor of the series, Professor Lanman. The manuscript was handed to him only a few weeks before the beginning of our war with Germany. It was held up at the bindery six months or more by a strike, and the expenses of the volumes have been enough almost to bankrupt the publication fund. It is a work which has brought distinction to Harvard University through the honors awarded to Professor Lanman, the most notable of which is doubtless his elevation to the Academy of Inscriptions and Belles-Lettres, which is one of the five constituent academies of the Institute of France.

The work of translation of the Buddhist Legends implies an immense and most unusual amount of erudition. Mr. Burlingame is a lecturer at Yale on Pali, the ancient literary language of India, in which the canonical books of Buddhism are written. He has performed his work in a manner which should greatly endear him to all future readers, for he has put his Pali into modern English. He has translated with picturesqueness and humor—a great merit, for very many of these sacred tales are exceedingly humorous, and an arid version would have spoiled them.

He has preceded the stories themselves by an account of the legendary life of Buddha, by an analysis of the Buddhist literature, and by an entertaining summary of the stories themselves—these introductory pages constituting in themselves a most enlightening record, sure to be of interest and value to any student of Oriental lore. Mr. Burlingame give us, for an example, an instructive review of the striking parallels between the story of Buddha and the story of Christ, and the remarkable correspondences between the Buddhist and the Christian scriptures.

Buddha was born 583 years before Christ and died in 483 B. C. At his birth, so these unequivocally pre-Christian writings disclose, the angels rejoiced and sang. The aged seer Asita asked them, "Why doth the company of angels rejoice?" They replied, "He that shall become Buddha is born in the village of the Sakiyas for the welfare and happiness of mankind; therefore we are joyful and exceeding glad." Asita is the Simeon of the New Testament; his story is quite fatihfully repeated in the gospels. In the introduction to the Jataka is the story of the miraculous feeding of the 500 (here 5000). There is the story of Buddha walking on the sea; of the conversion of the robbers; and of the temptations by the evil one. These parallels are accounted for on the ground that the Christian evangelists, more particularly the gentile evangelist St. Luke, who was a physician at Antioch, the terminus of the Chinese silk trade, must have been familiar with the Eastern legends—were influenced by the account of the life of Buddha.

This parallelism, of course, does not prevent the two religions from being independent lines of thought. The unending, unfailing, dominating theme of the Buddhist legends is quite lacking in the Christian Scriptures. It is the beginningless round of existences. Scarce a story in this whole vast collection fails to turn on reincarnation. A tale of not more than ten lines' length may be carried on in two existences. The reincarnated father returns to meet his son, or the reincarnated son presents himself in another form to his father; and so on. The mission of Buddha on the earth is to deliver mankind from the round of existences. On this subject, here is a fine example of Oriental hyperbole—of the holy "tall talk" of Buddhist writers—from these legends:

"The ancestors of a man are more numerous than all the blades of grass and sticks and branches and leaves in India; more numerous than all the particles of dust that compose the earth. The tears shed, the mother's milk drunk by a man in his previous states of existence are more abundant than all the water contained in the four great oceans. How long is a cycle of time? Longer than it would take a range of mountains a league in length, a league in breadth, a league in height, of solid rock, without a cleft, without a crack, to waste and wear away, were it to be wiped once a century with a silken cloth; longer than it would take a heap of mustard-seed of the same dimensions to disappear were a single seed to be removed once a century. Of cycles of time as long as this there have elapsed many hundreds of cycles, many thousands of cycles, many hundreds of thousands of cycles. Indeed, it is impossible to count them in terms of cycles or hundreds of cycles or thousands of cycles or hundred thousand of cycles. For example, were each of four centenarians to call to mind a hundred thousand cycles of time every day of his life, all four would die or ever they could count them all. The cycles of time that have elapsed are more numerous than all the sands that lie between the source and the mouth of the Ganges. The bones left by a single individual in his passage from birth to birth during a single cycle of time would form a pile so huge that were all the mountains of Vepulla-range to be gathered up and piled in a heap, that heap of mountains would appear as naught beside it. The head of every man has been cut off so many times in his previous states of existence, either as a human being or as an animal, as to cause him to shed blood more abundant than all the water contained in the four great oceans. For so long a time as this, concludes the Buddha, you have endured suffering, you have endured agony, you have endured calamity. In view of this, you have every reason to feel disgust and aversion for all existing things and to free yourselves from them."

This characteristic of prodigious exaggeration runs through most of the stories. Persons who have made an exhibition of simple faith in Buddha die and immediately enter into another state of existence as gods or goddesses, three-quarters of a league in height, always with a retinue of one thousand nymphs. Buddha, entering a certain city, is greeted not only by all the inhabitants of the city, who are ninety millions in number, but by all the people of the surrounding district, numbering also ninety millions!

Of humor, there is great store in these legends. It is often of a delicate and mocking nature. There is a fine touch in the story of Kassapa, the Elder, a rather rude old anchorite whose peculiar holiness had aroused the interest of a certain goddess. The goddess comes down, in Kassapa's absence from his cave, to sweep the cavern out and perform other menial offices. But one day Kassapa comes in when the radiant goddess, shining in blinding glory, is sweeping out his cave. "Depart hence," he says, superbly; "you do not know your place!" And the goddess is compelled to accept the reproof and fade away.

There is delicate humor in the story of Elder Laludayi, the Monk Who Always Said the Wrong Thing When he had a prayer to repeat on rising, he recited, "Now I lay me down to sleep." If he was asked to recite an appropriate passage at a wedding, he quoted something from the burial service. And he never knew that he was doing it wrong. Asked to account for this peculiarity of Laludayi's, the Teacher reveals the fact that in his last previous existence Laludayi was a Brahman in Benares, an agriculturist, who was very stupid, and who, having been invited to court, was coached by his thrifty son in the repetition of a verse in which he was to ask the king for a gift of an ox. He is to say, "I had two oxen, mighty king, with which I plowed my field; but one of the two is dead; pray give me another, Warrior-Prince." But instead of this, Laludayi ends up: "Pray take my other, Warrior-Prince!" The king, surprised, investigates, and, being assured, makes the Brahman a present of sixteen oxen. But the capacity for "mix-ups" comes out in Laludayi's next incarnation. This is the Oriental manner of accounting for people's queer ways and tricks—these always come down to us from a previous state of existence.

But the strongest and most startling piece of Buddhistic humor is the story from the Kevaddha Sutta with which the translator illustrates the Buddhist unbelief in a Supreme Being: for according to Buddha the things of this world, and of heaven as well, possess the three characteristics of impermanence, suffering, unreality. God is but a figment of the imagination. In the story referred to is related the journey of a monk to the World of Brahma to obtain an answer to a great question of life and death which troubled him. The monk first put his question to the gods of the retinue of the Four Great Kings. They replied, "Neither do we know. But there are Four Great Kings who are more powerful and mighty than we. They might know." The monk next put his question to the Four Great Kings. They referred him to the Thirty-three Gods. They referred him to their king, Sakka. The monk, after visiting six heavens in vain, finally went to the seventh heaven, the highest of all, the World of Brahma. And having put his question to the gods of the retinue of Brahma, he received the following reply: "Neither do we know. But there is Brahma, Great Brahma, the Supreme Being, the Invincible, the All-Seeing, the Subduer, the Lord, the Maker, the Creator, the Ancient of Days, the Conqueror, the Ruler, the Father of all that are and are to be." So the monk waited for the glory of Brahma to appear, and then put his question. Brahma replied, "I am Brahma, Great Brahma, the Supreme Being, the Invincible, the All-Seeing, the Subduer, the Lord, the Maker, the Creator, the Ancient of Days, the Conqueror, the Ruler, the father of all that are and are to be." Said the monk, "I did not ask you this question. I asked you that other." Then Brahma took the monk by the arm, led him aside, and said to him, "Monk, the gods of my retinue imagine that there is nothing I do not know, nothing I do not see. Therefore I did not give you a direct answer to your question in their presence. But, monk, neither do I know the answer to your question. Go to the Buddha, and whatever answer he gives you, that you may safely believe."

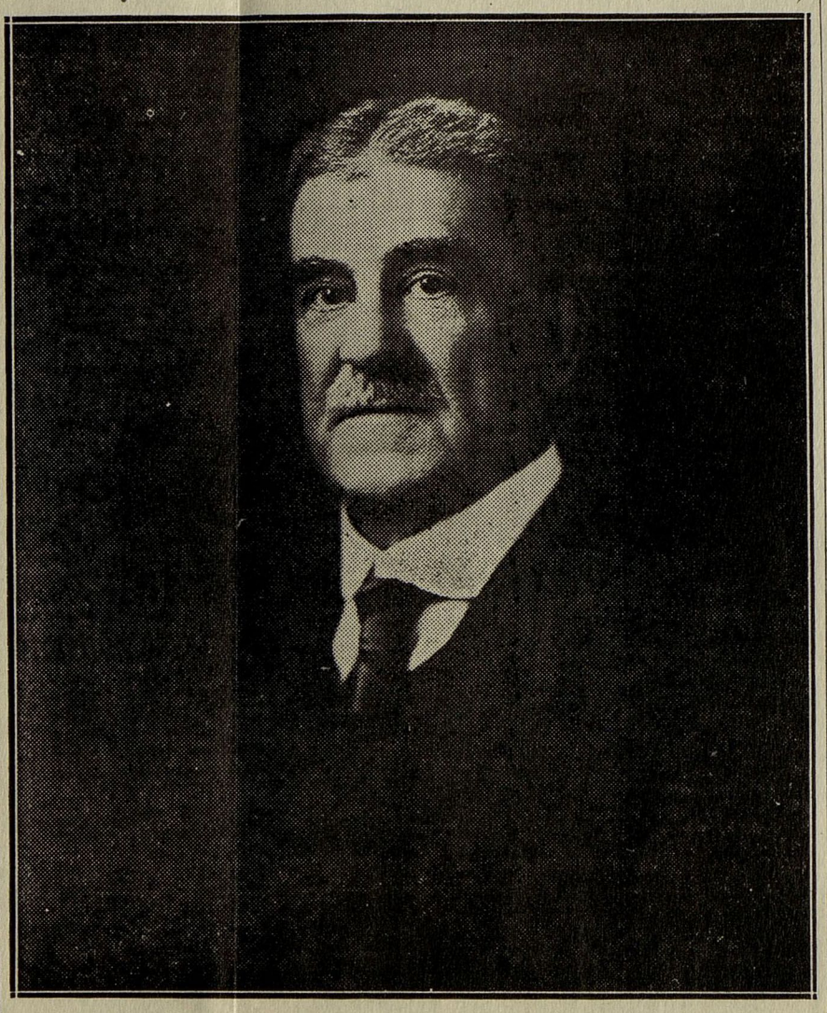
Though there are evidently certain borrowings in the Christian Scriptures from these Buddhist stories, and though Christ, like Buddha, taught in parables, we may be heartily glad that evidently, the Buddhist scriptures had been expurgated before they came to Christian use. The sexual motive is extremely prevalent in these legends. But not only has St. Anthony one prototype here—he has several prototypes. But in each case the anchorite is saved not by his own resolution, but by the miraculous intervention of the Buddha. It is impossible to go far without the intrusion of the element of humor, and sometimes the humor is too grim for Occidental taste. But this one will do: Four deities quarrel over the possession of a celestial nymph, and refer their dispute to Sakka, the king of the gods. The moment Sakka sees the nymph he desires her for himself. So he says to the four deities, "What manner of thoughts have arisen within you since you saw the nymph?" The first replies that his thoughts have been as restless as a battle drum; the second, that his thoughts have run wild like a mountain torrent; the third, that his eyes have popped out of his head like a crab; the fourth, that his thoughts have been as restless as the banners on a shrine. Says Sakka, "Friends, I see that your thoughts are all on fire. My decision is that I will take her for myself."

Yet there are in the collection stories of rare beauty and sweetness. "Kisa Gotami Seeks Mustard Seed to Cure Her Dead Child" is famous, and justly so. Kisa Gotami had never seen death before. Therefore when her little son died, and they came to remove the body for the burning, she forbade them to do so, and taking the body on her hip, she went from house to house, saying: "Know ye aught that will cure my child?" But people said: "Woman, thou art stark mad; there is no medicine for thy dead child." So they scorned her, but a wise man, being pitiful, sent her to the Teacher, none other than Buddha. "Venerable Sir," said Kisa Gotami to him, is it true, as men say, that thou dost know that wherewith to cure my child?" And he said, "Yea—a pinch of white mustard seed." "In whose house shall I get it, Venerable Sir?" she asked. "In whose house," he answered, "nor son, nor daughter, nor any other hath yet died." So Kisa Gotami placed her dead child on her hip and started once more, seeking a house in which no one had died. But she found none. At nightfall, after many applications, she said to herself: "Ah! 'tis a heavy task I took upon myself; I thought 'twas I alone had lost a child, but in every village, the dead are more in number than the living." She took the child to a forest, laid him down, and went to the teacher. Said he: "Did'st thou get the single pinch of mustard seed?" "Nay," she said, "that I did not, Venerable Sir; in every village the dead are more in number than the living." Then said the Teacher: "Vainly did'st thou imagine that thou alone hadst lost a child. All living beings are subject to an unchanging law, and it is this: the Prince of Death, like to a raging torrent, sweeps away into the sea of ruin all living beings; still are their longings unfulfilled."

It would be vain to attempt even a comprehensive selection of these Buddhist Legends. They are an inexhaustible storehouse of curious and occasionally romantic material, which has already, to some extent, been drawn upon by Sir Edwin Arnold and other poetic adaptors of Oriental literature.

The last volume, being the final volume of the whole Harvard Oriental Series, contains a tribute by Professor Charles R. Lanman to Henry Clarke Warren, co-founder with him, of the series. Warren was born in Boston Nov. 18, 1854, and died in Cambridge Jan. 3, 1899. By an accident in childhood he was made a spinal invalid for life, suffering much. He consoled himself with Oriental language studies, and made a name for himself in this field and in Oriental philosophy. He was Professor Lanman's pupil in Sanskrit. Taking up the study of Pali, he compiled and translated much Buddhistic literature, acquiring the power of reading the strange palm-leaf manuscript books from which these legends are translated. Many papers of his on the subject were published, and he projected a translation of the works of Buddhaghosa. A large part (over two hundred pages) of his "Buddhism" was included by President Eliot in the "Harvard Classics." He lived but a little more than two years after the appearance of this, his "Buddhism."

The work he founded and made possible lives after him, thanks to the learning, the industry and the untiring zeal of Professor Lanman and his coadjutors in this Harvard Oriental Series.



Professor Charles R. Lanman

An Original Pali Text

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