

CHAPTER 11

BUDDHISM

INTRODUCTION

Of all the world's religions, Buddhism is arguably the most misunderstood in Western society. This is the direct result of the work of nineteenth century European writers who embraced Buddhism as an alternative to Christianity. Most of these people were agnostics, although some were nominally Christian or Unitarian. The most successful promoter of Buddhism in the nineteenth century was Sir Edwin Arnold (1832–1904) whose poem *The Light of Asia* (1879) became an instant best seller in Britain and America before being translated into numerous other languages.

Arnold, an editor with the influential British newspaper *The Daily Telegraph*, began his career as a political liberal before becoming increasingly conservative through his wholehearted support for imperialism and the extension of the British Empire. A well-respected poet in his own right, Arnold remained a liberal Christian, strongly influenced by his second wife, Fanny Maria Adelaide Channing, the daughter of the transcendentalist Unitarian minister William Henry Channing (1810–1884) and great niece of the famous American Unitarian preacher William Ellery Channing (1780–1842).

The Light of Asia, Arnold's most famous work, purports to be a retelling of the life of the Buddha based on original texts. Actually, though it draws upon several early English translations of Buddhist scriptures, it was explicitly written as a testimony to the power of religious liberalism. Arnold drew most heavily on Samuel Beal's *Abhinishkramana Sutra* (1875), supplementing that with Robert Spence Hardy's (1803–1868) *A Manual of Buddhism* (1854) and Max Müller's (1823–1900) *Dhammapada* (1870).

Proud of his literary skills, Arnold unashamedly adapted Buddhism and Buddhist texts to what he saw as the interests of his readers. Therefore, he had no hesitation in removing what he considered tedious passages, expanding on interesting ideas or stories, adding dramatic scenes, and removing what he considered unscientific, such as miracle stories. Only those



Photo 11.1 Sir Edwin Arnold, the author of *The Light of Asia* (1879).

elements of the original which could be readily interpreted within a modern mechanistic worldview entered his fascinating yet deeply flawed text.

Nevertheless, the book was a stunning success, leading to tours of Eastern lands and instant acclaim by respected members of indigenous Buddhist groups. Local politicians, who appreciated the recognition he gave to their traditions in terms of increasing Western interest in Eastern religions, accorded him great respect. In these ways Arnold was a forerunner of modern multicultural thinking and a pioneer in East-West dialogue. But in

terms of accurately conveying Buddhist thought to the West, he actually set things on a very distorted path.

It is little wonder that almost a hundred years after the publication of his work, the great twentieth-century Buddhist scholar and practicing Buddhist Edward Conze (1904–1979) could lament that people inspired by Arnold had purged “Buddhism of the doctrine of ‘not-self’ and of monasticism,” arguing instead that “some gospel of ‘The Man’ is the original gospel of Buddhism.” Then Conze pointed out that “H. J. Jennings, in cold blood, removes all references to reincarnation from the Scriptures, and thereby claims to have restored their original meaning. Dr. P. Dahlke, again, ignores all the magic and mythology with which traditional Buddhism is replete . . .”¹ Such writers, and there are many, simply followed in Arnold’s footsteps, taking what they found acceptable and ignoring anything that challenged their essentially agnostic outlook.

Anyone wanting to understand Buddhism has to go beyond such clearly ethnocentric concerns by transcending their own time and place and attempting to understand through empathy and the suspension of prejudice. Like Conze, whose book *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development* is a classic, we must do our best to see Buddhism as it is seen by Buddhists and not as we would like the religion to be.

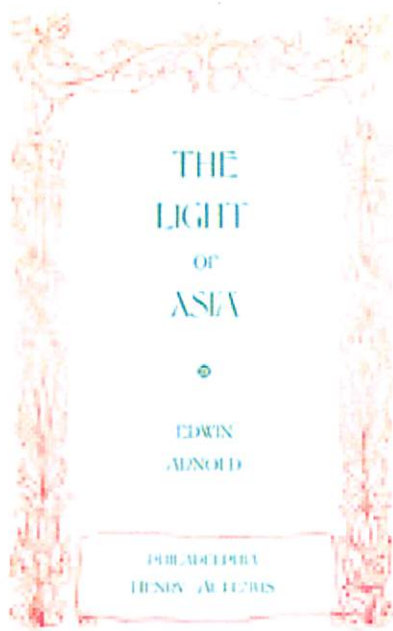


Photo 11.2 This book more than any other popularized Buddhism in the West. In many ways, it misled readers who had no other information about Buddhism, because it presented a highly selective version of Buddhism closer to rationalism than the living religion.

THE BUDDHIST STORY

Buddhism traces its origins back to a teacher known as the Buddha. According to tradition this was a man named Siddhartha Gautama who lived sometime in the fifth and sixth centuries BC, probably between 563 and 483. Thus, he was 80 when he died. Tradition says that he was a prince in the northern Indian kingdom of Shakyas, which most modern scholars believe lay in the borderland of modern Nepal and India. His father is said to have been a ruler of the Shakya clan, which probably means he was a local chief

1. Edward Conze, *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development* (1951; Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1957), 27.

of some sort. Nevertheless, in most traditional stories he is a great king who was immensely rich.

The caste into which the Buddha was born was the *kshatriya* or warrior caste, and the town, according to tradition, was Kapilavastu, about 150 miles north of Benares, on the Nepalese border.

As might be expected, the birth of the Buddha is surrounded by numerous stories and legends, some very old, others more recent. A relatively late one, from around the seventh century AD, claims his mother was a virgin and his birth a virgin birth very similar to that attributed to Jesus Christ by Christian tradition. This story is thought by many scholars to be part of a Buddhist apologetic developed in reaction to Christianity.

More popular, and significantly older, is the story of the Buddha's mother's dream, in which, as she lay on a bed, a white elephant appeared, circled her several times, and then miraculously entered her womb through her side. Startled by the dream, she called upon various wise men, soothsayers, and prophetic figures, for an interpretation. White elephants are very rare in India, and within the Hindu tradition are regarded as sacred; therefore, the diviners agreed, the dream pointed to some great event. It must mean the child about to be born would become either a great warrior, who would establish a vast kingdom, or a great religious leader, whose wisdom would impress the entire world.



Another legend tells how, ten lunar months after the Buddha's mother conceived, she visited her parents, who lived in a small town near her palace. As she passed through Lumbini, a beautiful deer park the king kept for recreation and hunting deer, the beautiful queen went into labor and gave birth to a wonderful son. These events are held by tradition to have occurred at a place called Rummindei, in modern Nepal. Centuries later this spot became a center of Buddhist pilgrimage, and, following his conversion, the great Indian king Ashoka (299–237 BC) erected a monument on the spot where the Buddha was said to have been born.

Photo 11.4 The giant Buddha statue on the Likir temple in Ladakh, India.

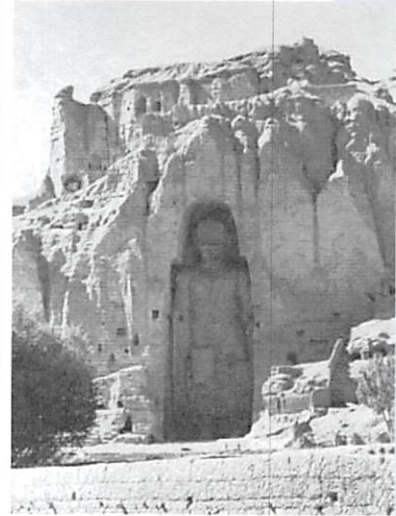


Photo 11.3 A photograph of one of the two massive Bamiyan Buddhas created in 554 and 557 by Afghan Buddhists. They were destroyed by the Taliban in 2001 because they considered them pagan idols.

Another story tells how a great Hindu sage called Asita recognized the significance of the child. By various means of divination, he predicted that the boy would become a



Photo 11.5 The column of King Ashoka the Great in Nepal, erected around 250 BC, which, according to tradition, marks the location of Lumbini, where the Buddha was born. Although today this is a World Heritage Site, the photograph above, taken in the late nineteenth century, reminds us that after the decline of Buddhist civilization in India, Buddhism was neglected for many centuries.

great teacher. Other Hindu priests who attended the queen after her son's birth are said to have made similar prophecies. All agreed that if the child remained with his father, he would be a great king, but that if he wandered away from home and mingled with religious teachers, he would become a great sage.

Horrified by these predictions, his father determined to entertain his son and ensure that he was attached to this world. He occupied the boy constantly and lavished gifts upon him, so that all he experienced was enjoyable. The legends tell how he was entertained by over forty thousand beautiful dancing girls, had numerous palaces, and was continually surrounded by friends.

Yet Siddhartha's life was not easy. His mother died seven days after his birth, and he was raised by his aunt. Buddhist texts tell many stories of wonderful and miraculous happenings that accompanied his childhood, rather like those told of the child Jesus by the apocryphal Gospels. For example, one story tells how one day Siddhartha's nurse briefly wandered away and returned to find the child practicing yoga and sitting in the lotus position, legs crossed.

All of these traditions agree that around age sixteen Siddhartha was married to the beautiful Yasodhara, his cousin and the daughter of a local chief or king. Whatever her rank, she was subsequently called a queen. Siddhartha's bride bore him at least one son, significantly named Rahula, indicating that he was given or held by Rahula, a demon thought to have devoured the moon. Although there were probably other children, none are mentioned in traditional accounts of

Siddhartha's life. All we are told is that during this period he lived in great luxury, verging on decadence, and that, rather like Sleeping Beauty in Western fairy tales, he was systematically shielded from everyday life and anything that might lead him to leave home or associate with the wrong kind of religious person. His father went to great lengths to protect his son from unwelcome influences and train him to fulfill his role as a ruler.

Then, about age thirty, a series of experiences dramatically changed Siddhartha's life. Depending on which tradition one uses—and there are several early ones—four encounters shook the young prince's complacency and dramatically changed his way of life. As the story goes, one day he was out riding, when he encountered, in quick succession, a

young child full of energy and joy, an old, decrepit man in great pain, a very sick younger man, clearly near death, and finally a funeral procession carrying a decaying corpse. Seeing the passage from life to death in a very short time made the young prince question his existence, ask about the purpose of life, and vow to find life's true meaning.

After brooding over the significance of these encounters, Siddhartha made the momentous decision to leave his home, abandon his family, and search for spiritual truth. To Western readers, this act of abandonment sounds callous and self-centered. It must be remembered, however, that Hindu tradition expected men over the age of sixty to renounce family and friends, and that by that age they had children who were considered adults and able to take over the family responsibilities of their fathers.

This act of wrenching himself free from his family and normal social commitments is known as Siddhartha's "Great Renunciation." It began a period of wandering that the tradition tells us lasted around six years, during which Siddhartha is said to have visited numerous sages and holy men who practiced various forms of meditation and arduous spiritual exercises. Yet none provided him with the knowledge or satisfaction he sought. Siddhartha tried solitude, studied philosophy, and became an ascetic, eating only six grains of rice a day. He also experimented with drinking alcohol to excess. But none of these things brought him closer to his goal.

Then one day, at the end of his tether, as he sat under a fig tree, he struggled with Mara, a supernatural being of godlike proportions who was thought to lead humans astray by blinding them to the illusory nature of this world. In the struggle, he faced severe temptations. First, he received news that his father's kingdom had been conquered and his relatives were prisoners of an evil king. But this vision did not affect his resolve. Whatever happened to his family was not his concern; his goal was to discover the truth of existence. In a second vision, or temptation, three voluptuous women tried to seduce him. Again Siddhartha was unmoved. He had renounced the joys of sex. Finally, a host of demons savagely attacked him, firing arrows, throwing spears, and launching stones at him from a slingshot. None of these missiles harmed him, because he was so detached from the world that, as soon as they entered the emanating fields of concentration surrounding him, they turned to rose petals and gently fluttered to the ground. Recognizing that all of these temptations were illusory, Siddhartha placed his fingers on the ground, and an enormous roar, like a thousand lions, echoed throughout the night.

Then Mara attacked him with the final temptation. He appealed to reason, arguing that nobody would ever understand the truths the Buddha had discovered. Surely all of his efforts to attain enlightenment were a waste of time and no one would take any notice of his teachings. Given the perversity of mankind, why not simply wash one's hands of the cares of the

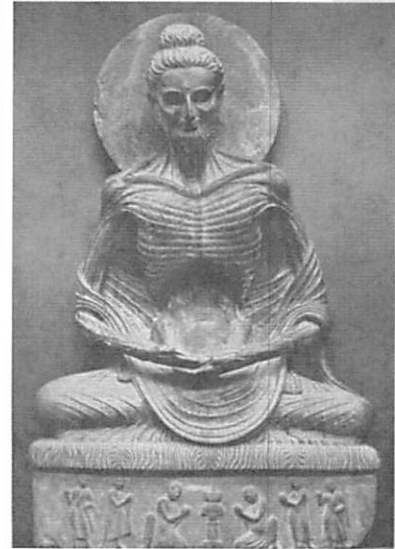


Photo 11.6 This ancient statue of the Buddha from Lahore, created in the second or third century AD for use in a monastery, reminds the onlooker of the transience of life and the imminence of death.



Photo 11.7 A modern representation of the Buddha on the altar of the Buddhist Center in Möhra, Thüringen, Germany. Ironically, this small town is the ancestral home of the Luther family and was visited several times by the Protestant Reformer Martin Luther (1483–1546), whose uncle lived there. Luthers still live in the neighborhood today. Möhra is a short distance from Eisenach, where Luther translated the Bible into German.

world and enjoy oneself? To this the Buddha replied that someone was bound to recognize his truth, making everything worthwhile. At that, the tempting visions ceased and Mara fled, never to return, leaving the young prince alone under the night sky. Following these events and his victory over Mara, the bodhi tree under which he sat came to full bloom, and red blossoms fell to the ground surrounding him.

During that long and terrifying night, Siddhartha gained ever deeper levels of consciousness, seeing visions of his past lives and gaining an understanding of the essence of all things. Now he had resolved all his questions, found answers to the puzzle of existence, and gained true understanding. Life, he rec-

ognized, means suffering. All life is full of suffering. Suffering is the essence of all things in this earthly existence. Now he knew that the only solution to the anguish of life comes not from a severe asceticism, nor profligate Tantric hedonism, which involves the use of magic and sexual rituals, but only from embracing what he came to call the middle way.

Traditional Buddhists believe that, following the enlightenment of the Buddha, the heavens shook, stars deviated from their course, and the whole cosmos was deeply affected. Blossoms became fruits, fruits ripened on trees, and the sky shone with unseen glory. A pivotal event in human history had taken place.

Following his enlightenment, the Buddha spent five or six weeks meditating on the truths he had discovered, considering how best to communicate them to others and wondering whether his truth was the truth for him alone. Eventually, he decided to share his newly discovered truth and, to that end, began making disciples. Humans, he came to believe, are like lotus plants. Some lotuses float on water, others float beneath its surface, and others fluctuate between the two; some people are capable of seeing the truth and obtaining it for themselves, others will never see the truth and never be enlightened, and still others fluctuate between the truth and error and need someone who can save them from themselves. Therefore, he concluded, most humans need someone to show them the way, even though they themselves must walk the path.

Since all the Buddha's Hindu teachers were dead when he attained enlightenment, he could not share his joy with them. But many of his former companions, with whom he had sought spiritual truth by visiting numerous masters, were alive and still seeking truth. Therefore, he decided to seek them out and proclaim his good news to them. Eventually, the Buddha encountered a group of his former companions on the road to Benares, also known