

(editor's note: This paper was transcribed from a handwritten cursive copy with various difficulties. For a perfect rendition, the reader might wish to consult the original, itself a copy, in the volume entitled *Literary Club Papers I*, 1885 – 1886 Oct 3, '85 to May 29, '86) The original is very badly faded.

Budget. Hooper Editor. March 27, 1886

Gotama Buddha

We're all familiar with the simple and sacred story of the star that suddenly appeared to the Syrian shepherds, and which was the herald and harbinger of a child who, born in a stable, founded a spiritual kingdom which reaches from earth to heaven and the authority of whose officers is so firmly established as that of any terrestrial monarch on the globe. Five centuries however before the advent of the child that frightened Herod and set him slaughtering the innocents, another child was born still farther east, not in a stable, but in the palace of a prince which may yet become a star as attractive to the races of the west as the meteor of Bethlehem was to the wise men of the East. I allude to Gotama Buddha who is to Asia what the founder of Christianity is to Europe and America. It has been said that all religions came from the East which is a tribute, either to its superior imagination or wisdom. George Sand, in one of her sketches contrasts the image making power of the Orient with the Occident, very much to the advantage of the former. As an instance of muscular strength we tell the story of a soldier who took a silver coin between his finger and his thumb, and then bent it like a piece of lead or tin; but the eastern giant takes the coin and flattens it out between his fingertips, and smooths away the inscription, as though it were a piece of beeswax. It may be owing to this tropical character of the imagination of the Eastern races, that we are indebted to them for all the religions of the world, our own Mormonism being but a wretched caricature of Mohammedanism.

As may be expected, if the imagination of Gotama enabled him to invent, to conceive a new religion, the fantasy of his followers, apostles, disciples and fellow-countrymen have woven around his youth and manhood, the usual scaffolding of wonder, miracle, and supernatural power. This is not so surprising as another fact, viz. that Buddhism, although an extinct religion as claimed by Monier Williams, without head or hierarchy, has yet more believers than Christianity. If the thing be possible Buddhism is the religion of atheism, it is without a creator, denies the immortality of the soul, and teaches that the desire of future personal happiness is a delusion and a sin.

When Gotama Buddha was born, he found his race divided into classes as distinct from each other, and the boundaries of which were as impassable as the species horse from the species dog, or the bird from the fish. There were his pupils the princes, the nobles, and what we would call serfs; and the Brahmans or priests were the highest. This trait is not peculiar to the Hindus; it belongs to the whole human race, that the expounders of the religion should alone be sacred. They represent the unknowable; and the unknowable is always in the majority; –Gotama Buddha was the son of a chief or Raja, had married, and had a son when like another Hamlet he could have exclaimed:

I have of late, (but wherefore I know not,) lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises; and indeed, it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory; this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestic roof fretted with golden fire, why, it appears no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours. What a piece of work is man, How noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving, how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension, how like a god, the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals. And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? --

and the same problem that perplexed Pythagoras in Greece, Confucius in China, Zoroaster in Persia, troubled the daily peace of Gotama. Each one was asking "Whence are we? What is this world? What is the meaning of life?" A cold wave of reason had passed over Asia, and the highest intellects had felt the chill. The Brahman priests had plenty of answers for these questions. They possessed religious philosophies more mysterious than Boehm's musings, more subtle and with a longer concatenation of words than Hegel succeeded in drawing out of himself, and what is better, as full of the Deity as Spinoza's dogmas, and with an insight into the human mind as keen as that displayed by Kant. The solution was to be found in self mortification, in asceticism, in the abjuration of the world, and what was more difficult still, in the renunciation of the desire to live.

He withdrew into the almost impenetrable jungles, and gave himself up to a course of the severest penance, until he became but in an emaciated shadow of his former self. He piled vigil upon vigil, penance of penance, mortification upon mortification, while the admiring Brahmans applauded in the looks of adoration and reverence, and the fame of the new martyr spread abroad like the sound of a great bell hung in the canopy of the skies. And yet Gotama confessed to himself that the mental calm and satisfaction for which

he was fighting and struggling came not; but like Christian in Pilgrims Progress, the burden of his sins and discontent increased rather than diminished. The thoughts of his home, of the beautiful wife, and the beloved son, broke in upon his pauses with keen and stronger force, until in despair and the horror of his disciples, who fled from him in dismay, he apparently gave up the fight, and returned to his daily food rather like a laborer preparing for the next day's toil than like an ascetic who is starving the desire to live. He wandered to the brink of the river, where a village maiden brought him food, and he sat down and meditated beneath the shade of the Ficus Religiosa, the famous Bo tree, which is to Buddhism what the cross is to Christianity. And it may be noted in passing that these two religions differ from each other in their essence as wide as in their symbols. One has neither grief nor joy, neither the passion of love or hate, but simply the serenity of a summer's cloudless sky, of the unfathomable peace of a lake hid beneath a gigantic cave. The other a symbol of suffering, tears and human injustice, while the shedding of innocent blood runs like a red vein through the white marble of its precepts and practices.

From sunrise to sunset the great Indian Reformer meditated over his failure, and discussed the question with himself: should he return to the ephemeral pleasures and illusions of life, or stay and conquer these earthly desires. When night came, – so the story goes, – the religious side of his nature conquered, and in an instant he became Buddha the enlightened one. From that moment a new era dawned for the human race, a new world was opened, a higher elevation was won, and the jungle of circumstances that clog and hem the footsteps of mortals was cut through, and new paths of light were suddenly opened to the perplexed wanderers of the earth. The voice of the people may be the voice of God, but it is always of a local deity – only genius, only the world poet, philosopher and world moralist are the duly accredited voices of the Supreme Ruler of the worlds; and their inspiration is the infallible sign or symbol of their divine mission.

It is remarkable that two of his earliest converts were women and it is a grateful thought that if a woman in Judaism is the symbol of weakness, in Buddhism she is the discoverer of holiness and the pure medium of salvation.

Probably no mortal has ever lived whose memory, example, and teachings have had such an influence upon the races of men that surrounded and followed him as Gotama Buddha. Buddhism, as may be expected, developed into a sacerdotal system like Roman Catholicism with its bells, rosaries, images, holy water, shaven priests, virgin and child, and even its pope. And

yet Gotama Buddha had no heaven to offer them, or hell to frighten or punish disbelievers with; nay, more, it was a religion without a creating and permanent God. He proclaimed a salvation without any help from God or gods. – Nor did he attempt to solve, or to account for the origin of man and the world; on the contrary he taught that it was an utterly unprofitable enquiry. Man and his world were here; that was sufficient. There was no heaven for idle or any other kind of saint. In short, heaven with its gods and angels, Earth with its races of mortals, and hell with its demons like the plant or the cloud, should change and pass away forever. No thing above the skies or beneath the earth, god, demon or man, but was subject to the same law of cause and effect, as the grass, or the rocks. The soul is not immortal, and the belief in the perpetual existence of the soul or self, it is a delusion and a heresy; so is the desire for individual personal happiness. The physical body was like the foam on the sea, and one's thoughts but the mirage of a desert. The three great heresies were the belief in an immortal self or soul, the external existence of a Creator or God, and the permanent perennial existence of anything. Even the Buddha's own divine doctrine should in the course of time perish and pass away, and darkness and ignorance should rule the human race, until another Buddha came and he, Gotama was the 25th in the regal line of enlightened ones. He was probably the first one that announced the laws of heredity, transmission: your deeds were inherited by your successors.

If you reap sorrow or pain it is because in some past existence you have sown folly or sin, and your re-birth upon this Earth, life after life, will continue until the error is expiated. Your grief or joy of today is the flower of yesterday's act or thought. No power of god or man can destroy the fruit of a man's deeds; he and he alone must work out the consequences to the bitter end. The confessional has as much to do with the remission or forgiveness of sin as the weather cock has with increasing or diminishing the velocity of the wind. As one generation dies it produces the heir bearing all the consequences of vice and virtue of its ancestors and carries the lengthened chain. The end is attained only by and through purity of the individual. The Buddha does not long for perpetual happiness for the perpetual enjoyment of a state in which fire, raiment, splendid jewels, and thrones of radiant light form important factors but simply for Nirvana where his consciousness ceases to feel and record vain desires and his virtue works out its office in decreasing the mystery of human life. This is the mystery of Buddhism.

Most religions teach us to expect personal happiness either here or beyond

the grave. –Only the Buddhist says “Drop this petty foolish longing for personal happiness. There is nothing permanent or eternal. Everything, you with the rest, becomes, and then passes away leaving only the aggregate result of deeds. Be pure then and kind, not lazy in thought. Shake off your delusions, and enter resolutely upon that passive virtue which alone leads to the city of Nirvana, where all passion and desires cease forever. Twenty three hundred years ago on the banks of the Ganges, this doctrine, simple as it seems, was dear to many hearts. Thousands were tempted to cross this beautiful bridge which it has been said has on one side of its keystone the necessity of justice, and on the other the law of causality. The bridge that leads to Nirvana, the sinless, painless, restful state. The noble path of Buddhism is the loveliest flower ever put forth by the barren tree of Metaphysical Enquiry: the flower that yielded the nectar Nirvana. Its Proverbs are as wise as Solomon's, and as true today as three thousand years ago. They retain their original beauty and purity as today's rainbow is as fresh and color as that which arched the deluge. Here are a few: “hatred ceases not by hatred, but by love.” “Like rain through an old thatched hut, so passion breaks in upon the untrained mind.” “The wise man dwells upon the earth like the bee which takes the nectar from the flower, injures it not, and flies away.” “Foster no desire for this world or the next. Free from all attachments, homeless. To utter true speech, constructive, free from harshness.” “Find no fault with other beings, weak or strong. A man does not become a saint by his family, or platted hair, or raiment of goat skin.” “Without knowledge no meditation, without meditation, no knowledge.” “Do not identify yourself with your body or soul.” “Long is the night to him who is awake; long is a mile to him who is tired; long is life to the foolish who do not know the true law.”

This is especially good and appropriate in this age of corrupt politicians and fashionable follies. “If a traveler does not meet with one who is his better, or his equal, let him firmly keep to his solitary journey; there is no companionship with a fool.” “If a fool be associated with a wise man all his life he will perceive the truth as little as a spoon perceives the taste of soup.” “No one can purify another.”

In the allegory of the mustard seed is a gem of poetry and world-wisdom. It will bear repeating.

“A girl, whose marriage with a wealthy young man was brought about in “true fairy-tale” fashion, had a beautiful boy which died when able to run alone. The mother clasped the dead boy to her bosom and went from house

to house, asking for medicine for it. A Buddhist mendicant, thinking “she does not understand” said to her, “I have nothing, but Buddha can give you medicine.” She went to go to Gotama, and kneeling said: “Lord, do you know any medicine which will be good for my child?” “Yes,” replied the Great Teacher; as it was the custom for the patients to supply the doctor with the required herbs, she asked what kind she should bring. “I want some mustard seed,” he said and when the poor girl eagerly promised to bring some of so common a drug, he added: “but you must get it from some house where no son, or husband, or a parent or slave has died.” “Very good” she replied, and went to ask for it, still carrying her dead child with her. The people said: “here is mustard seed, take it;” but when she inquired, “In my friend's house has any son died, or husband, or parent, or slave?” They answered: “Lady, the living are few but the dead are many.” In other houses, one said “I have lost a son.” Another “we have lost our parents,” another, “I have lost my slave.” At last not being able to find a single house where no one had died, her mind began to clear, and summoning up her resolution she left the dead body of her child in a forest and returning to the Buddha, fell at his feet. “Have you the mustard seed?” “My Lord,” she replied, “the people tell me that the living are few, but the dead are many.”

And then he taught her the impermanency the perishableness of all things, her doubts were cleared away, and accepting her lot she became a disciple and entered into the First Path.”

The appeal to reflection, to meditation is more on a level with the teaching of philosophy than the constant lashing of emotions indulged in and cultivated by several branches of the Christian Religion. I do not know how it may appear to others but to me Camp-meeting and the Indian war dance have strong points of resemblance. There were the same bodily contortions, quivering lips, wild flashing eyes, shouts, groans, and a prevalence of demoniac animal fury, which only finished when the participants sank exhausted on the ground, of course this does not prevail at all camp meetings, nor, for that matter, at all war dances. In both however there is the same appeal to irritation and excitement of the two most ungovernable and deepest passions in the human heart; love and hate. If they are not in fact the negative and positive poles of the one thing: self. So far as the methods are concerned, the method of meditation and reason, and the method of hysterical passion: —they are opposed as happiness and despair. In one, the storm arises, and the winds beat the waters until its white caps bursts into spray and vanish in heavy thunder clouds, moving over the earth as a threatening whirlwind of despair; in the other, the mental lake is so calm, so

silent, so serene, that the foreign impurities sink to the bottom, and the whole becomes as pellucid and as pure as the blue vault of a summer's sky.

There are many obscure dogmas in Buddhism. The old mythology of the Hindu priests pressed heavily upon the conscience of Gotama Buddha, with its infinity of gods, demons, and worlds. There was Indra, Agni, and Yama. He left the gods in their palaces, the demons in Hell; but he took away all their sovereign rights; they should perish and pass away like ordinary mortals. Buddha was only a title. He, Gotama, was the 25th of the series. After the death of each his doctrines flourish, then decay, and wickedness and ignorance rule again. He also foretold that five thousand years after his own discovery of truths under the Bo-tree, his religion would decay and be forgotten until a new Buddha should arise. What a prophecy. Religion rising upon religion, like strata upon strata, and fauna upon fauna; each one higher, nobler, truer.

The usual legends surround the birth of Gotama: that he was sinless, that he descended from Heaven, that he was born of a Virgin, that at his birth the earth trembled, the stars danced, the blind were restored to sight, the deaf heard, and wise men came to see the new wonder. He also performed miracles, and went to heaven to teach wisdom to his dead mother. More curious than these legends is the fact, according to Max Mueller, that Gotama Buddha has been made a Catholic saint under the title of St. Josephat, and is worshiped by the church on the 27th of November. And on the other hand, he has a place in the *Infernal Dictionary*, a French lexicon relating to Devils: where he appears as the man, or rather the hair in the moon.

To us, at least, the work of Gotama Buddha, was the work of a man, not of a god. I am well aware of the tendency to canonize and deify the possessors of great benevolence, virtue, and charity and in the church it has its *raison d'être* in its special claim to Divine and supernatural power. But yet, human nature can no more spare its Saints than it can its ports. The self-sacrifice, purity, and charity of a Gotama and St. Paul belongs as much to the human character as the mountain peaks are to the earth. If we are to be charged with the depths of sin, we shall claim credit for the heights of holiness. The so-called saints belong here to our animal kingdom, men among men they are not statistics hanging before us like icicles from the roof of the cavern. Is Judas, Nero, Herod, the abyss of human vice? Then Gotama Buddha and St. Paul are the Mont Blanc of human perfection in virtue.

There are more reasons than one why we can not spare these sublime founders of religion. Each land has its generals, rulers, law-givers, poets, and philosophers, but what is a statesman guiding a single nation, or a conquering general with an army of ten millions by the side of that yellow robed moralist and reformer of India who today has seven hundred million followers, and whose aim was to find a haven of rest for the whole human race? His prophetic vision must have cleft the long centuries of time, and the wide intervals of space, and have caught a glimpse of the modern Babel of commerce with its frenzy of political warfare, and the unceasing roar of its commerce, and projected as its counter-poise to the demon whirl not the worship of an unknown God, but the attainment of the one imperishable good, Nirvana, within the reach of every mortal. With half the zeal with which the mercantile adventurer attempts to satisfy his unquenchable thirst for wealth and personal happiness which even in success only adds to rather than diminishes the pain and misery of the world; if he but follow the noble path of Gotama Buddha, he can be freed from the tarantula of desire, and be at peace with himself and the world. In this path he must tread alone; no sacrifice of others will aid him, nor will their prayers stir a heart in his favor.

Well it may be doubtful if the doctrines, maxims, and teachings of Gotama can properly be called a religion, in our sense of the term, we can certainly say of it that the spirit of his system is fresher, and more in accordance with the advanced ideas of science, and ethics, than many other religions. Science, so at least it appears, finds nothing either physically, mentally, or morally superior in the so-called favored race; nay, more it reverses the well-known order of production by man by tracing him down to the lower animals; it notes the hereditary transmission of qualities; it can not differentiate the mind from the soul; it has no reliable record of angel, devil, or existence after life; it smiles at the credentials of the Pope's infallibility; it knows that life is full of pain, and that in this world misery to happiness is as five to one; and the germ of all this may be found in Gotama's teachings. And he added one thing more which science will not deny, that each human being must work out its own salvation that there is no propitiation of fate, no royal road to bliss.

There is a growing tendency to separate morality from the supernatural, from that which transcends human experience, and the faculties upon which we rely for guidance in health, safety, and prosperity. We want a firmer basis for our actions and our hopes than something which cannot be even described; and if described, cannot be conceived or understood. Our actual knowledge or cognition is limited to human experience, and had its origin in

human observation or thought; whether the inventor be Newton, Plato, or Gotama. To such as feel the truth of this, revealed religion is not only an unknown, but in unknowable territory. And for such limited minds the maxims of Gotama are new and priceless stores of practical advice and help.

To earn a harmless livelihood, to think and speak kindly, to hurt no one, to desire that all human pain and misery should cease, to speak the truth, to live justly and charitably are in the Portic, as the French say, of the human individual, while to love his deadly enemy, to believe in Hell and Heaven, and in the cruel sacrifice of innocence for vice, and in the supernatural process for water and bread are words without meaning, and far beyond the reach of his understanding, or his desires. To such, be he agnostic or atheist, the words of Gotama have meaning and hope; and the Noble path of the Buddha can be recommended as a Manual of daily, nay hourly practice. In short, the religion of Gotama reminds one of a fixed star, a sun more resplendent in the vast canopy of space than our own daily orb of light, and yet so distant that it takes thousands of years for its beams to reach us, and so cloudy is our environment, so dull our senses, that only when “the gaudy and babbling, and remorseful day has crept into the sea” does the pale, silent light strike us with awe in its purity and beauty.

The story is told of a traveler, who, when exploring the ancient tombs of Egypt took from the cold, dry hand of an embalmed mummy the bulb of a plant which had lain in its air-tight tomb for many centuries, and that the traveler carried the antique root to England, planted it in fresh loam, watered it, and that in time it burst into flower as though the Egyptian gardener had only taken it from its mother earth a few days instead of a thousand years ago. So perhaps will it fare with early Buddhism. Our Oriental Scholars have taken from the dead hand of Gotama Buddha the bulb or root of his beautiful doctrines, and have planted it in the soil of modern civilization and we too may see this beautiful flower bloom, and inhale the perfume of its calmness and serenity.

Henry Hooper