

## WU TAO TZE'S NIRVÂNA PICTURE.

THE BUDDHA'S NIRVÂNA, A SACRED BUDDHIST PICTURE BY WU TAO TZE.

BY THE EDITOR.

THE photogravure of the Buddha's Nirvâna forming the frontispiece to the present *Open Court* is a reproduction of a Japanese hand-finished, colored art-print,—a reproduction of an ancient Chinese painting, the original of which is ascribed to Wu Tao Tze 吳道子, a famous artist who flourished under the Tang dynasty which ruled China from 620 to 905 of the Christian era.

Wu Tao Tze is the most famous painter of Eastern Asia. His name denotes the beginning of painting as an art, and though he himself is historical, the story of his life is full of legend and other fanciful traditions. Like other great men, he did not die but simply disappeared from sight, an Elijah among the painters. We are told that the Emperor of China had ordered a picture to decorate a room in the imperial palace. The old master spent months in finishing it, and when the Emperor was summoned to see the painting, which represented garden scenes with palatial summer houses, he was overwhelmed with the beauty of the landscape, saying: "I wish, I could possess a pleasure-park like that, and walk in its paths." Whereupon Wu Tao Tze invited his sovereign patron to inspect the scenery. He opened a door, painted in the front of the picture, entered and disappeared from sight. It was as though the canvas had swallowed him. The door closed behind the artist, and before the Emperor and the other spectators could recover from the surprise, the painting disappeared and left a mere blank canvas.

A Japanese legend claims that Wu Tao's painting was carried by Buddhist missionaries to Japan, where it has been frequently reproduced to serve as a wall pendant in Buddhist temples, and the

Anagárika Dharmapála received a copy of it as a present when on his return from the World's Parliament of Religions in 1893 he visited Japan for the first time.<sup>1</sup> The wall pendants in temples representing the Nirvâna are as a rule of a large size, covering a great part of the wall, but the Anagárika's copy is not more than  $7 \times 11$  inches and is a marvellous sample of an artistic hand-finished print, executed in the most dainty colors and gold, and recommends itself for reproduction as being typical in all its essential features, while claiming to be orthodox.

Rarely is there a Buddhist temple or even a private house among the Buddhists of Eastern Asia in which a picture of the Buddha's Nirvâna is missing, and Wu Tao Tze's picture is in its way classical, being characteristic of a whole class of religious paintings, invented for the purpose of giving to Buddhist believers comfort in death and an assurance of a blissful beyond.

The pictures consist of eight groups. The title of the whole appears at the top, and reads as follows: "Eight | scenes | of Nir- | vâna | pictures | in the orthodox way | represented."<sup>2</sup>

The order of the pictures begins in the lower left-hand corner, where the Buddha is seated on a throne, and receives his last meal from Chunda, the smith. Mâra, the Evil One, stands by and rejoices at the idea of the imminent death of the Tathâgata.<sup>3</sup> The inscription reads: "The World | Honored One | receiving | Chunda's | food | offering."<sup>4</sup>

Next in order is the middle group on the left-hand side, where the inscription reads: "The Tathâgata | ascending | into space | as witnessed by | a great | multitude."

It represents a legend which is not mentioned in any of the Buddhist writings accessible to us. If it does not refer either to the Buddha's farewell address to his disciples, or to the transfiguration scene,<sup>5</sup> it may illustrate a legend similar to the Christian story of

<sup>1</sup>The donor is a prominent Japanese priest, but unfortunately Mr. Dharmapála does not remember his name,—a circumstance which is easily explained when we consider how difficult it is for a foreigner to catch the sounds of the names of a strange people, let alone to remember them.

<sup>2</sup>Translated verbatim and in the order of the original. The words are separated by lines to indicate the significance of each Chinese word. The term *Nirvâna* takes two Chinese characters.

<sup>3</sup>Tathâgata is a common designation of the Buddha, and is commonly explained as "The Perfect One."

<sup>4</sup>There are two words beside which are uniformly added to all inscriptions. The last character means place and the last but one is the sign of the genitive, indicating that here is the place devoted to the above-mentioned subject.

<sup>5</sup>Both are mentioned in the Mahâ-Parinibbâna Suttanta the former in II., 27-35, and the latter in IV., 42-52. (See *Sacred Books of the East*, Vol. XI., pages 35-39, and pages 79-82; *Gospel of Buddha*, chapters 93 and 95, especially verses 14-25.) Concerning the transfiguration, we read in

Christ's ascension, as told in Matthew xxviii. 58 ff., and acts iii. 21 ff.

The central group which now follows is the main part of the picture. It represents the Buddha dying under the sala trees of the garden of the Mallas. His disciples are in despair; they weep, they throw themselves upon the ground, and beat their breasts. Their grief is shared by the whole animate creation and also by the gods who descend from the heavens and mourn over the death of the Tathâgata, the Perfect One. Mâra, the Evil One, alone grieves not. He is full of triumphant joy. The artist deemed it unnecessary to give an explanation of this scene.

The fourth group is the picture in the lower right-hand corner. The legends which are preserved in Chinese translations only, and have not as yet become accessible to Western readers unfamiliar with Chinese literature, contain the report that Buddha's mother descended from heaven to lament over the death of her son.<sup>1</sup> At her approach the body of the Tathâgata was again animated with life, through the mysterious power of the Buddha, and the Buddha arose from the coffin, folding his hands as a token of filial affection, preaching the glorious doctrine to his mother. The inscription reads: "The World | Honored One | before | his mother | seated | preaches | the Dharma."

The Chinese version of the Mahaparinirvana-Sutra contains the story that, before the arrival of Kâshyapa, the coffin refused to move, and the Mallas were unable to lift it. The inscription reads: "The Mal | las<sup>2</sup> | [trying] to move | the coffin | without | [being able] to lift it."

A Buddhist legend tells that Buddha wanted Kâshyapa to be recognised as his main disciple after his death, in token of which wish the body of the Tathâgata showed its feet when Kâshyapa approached the coffin. We must remember that the foot-prints of a man are regarded as the trace of his life's activity.<sup>3</sup> The inscription

the Buddha scriptures, "There are two occasions on which a Tathâgata's appearance becomes clear and exceeding bright. In the night, Ananda, in which a Tathâgata attains to the supreme and perfect insight, and in the night in which he passes finally away in that utter passing away which leaves nothing whatever of his earthly existence to remain."

<sup>1</sup> I owe my knowledge of this subject as well as others of the same kind to the oral information of Mr. Teitaro Suzuki, a Japanese Buddhist, the translator of *Acvaghosha's Discourse on the Awakening of Faith in the Mahâyâna*.

<sup>2</sup> *Mallas*, which forms two characters in Chinese, literally translated means "strong men," a coincidence which the artist utilises by painting the Mallas as wrestlers.

<sup>3</sup> The footprint of Jesus which he made when appearing on the Via Appia to St. Peter, who addressed him with the famous question, *Quo vadis?* is still preserved in a chapel at Rome. Footprints of Buddha, of Odhin's horse, and of divinities of all kinds are well known in the folklore of Asia and Europe.

of this sixth group which appears on the top of the picture reads :  
 "The Tathâgata | for the sake of | Kâ | shyapa | makes visible |  
 both | feet."

The Mallas had in vain exhausted their strength, in trying to remove the coffin through the south gate, but now since the arrival of Kâshyapa, it lifted itself up without the assistance of any mortal, passed through the north gate and placed itself upon the funeral pyre. The inscription of this, the seventh, group in the series of pictures (which is on the right-hand side, at the top) reads :  
 "The sacred | coffin | spontaneously | lifting itself up | to reach |  
 Ku | shi | nagara<sup>1</sup> | castle.

The eighth and last picture appears on the left-hand side at the top, and shows the distribution of the relics, to which much importance is attached by Buddhist priests. When the Buddha's body was burned there remained, beside the main bones, nothing but little drops that oozed out, many of which were as large as grains of rice.<sup>2</sup> The urn containing these relics stands on the altar and shines with a flamboyant light of transcendent glory. The inscription reads : "Dro | na | the B | rah | man | dividing | the  
 relics."

The sun which appears high in the upper region of the picture, at the left hand, is the Nirvâna, the all-illuminating spotless disc.

The picture is very different from the religious art productions we Western people are accustomed to. Christians have the pictures of Christ's crucifixion, burial, and resurrection, and in Roman Catholic countries crucifixes are a marked feature of the landscape. In spite of all differences, however, in both the dogmatic conception and the national manner of artistic production, there is a decided kinship of spirit, indicating the sameness of the problem of death, by which mankind is confronted everywhere and also an undeniable similarity of the religious sentiment that animates the solutions in which different people have found comfort.

<sup>1</sup> *Kushinagara* consists of three Chinese characters. The Indian village is here represented as a Chinese castle or lordly mansion.

<sup>2</sup> For details see the communication of the Rev. Seelakkhandha, a Buddhist High Priest of Ceylon, in *The Open Court*, Vol. XI., No. 2, pp. 123-125.