

# AMITĀBHA.

A STORY OF BUDDHIST METAPHYSICS.

BY THE EDITOR.

THE ORDINATION.

SOON after the time of Açoka, the great Buddhist emperor of the third century before Christ, India became the theater of protracted invasions and wars. Vigorous tribes from the North conquered the region of the upper Panjab and founded several states, among which the Kingdom of Gandhâra became most powerful. Despoliations, epidemics, and famines visited the valley of the Ganges, but all these tribulations passed over the religious institutions without doing them any harm. Kings lost their crowns and the wealthy their riches, but the monks chanted their hymns in the selfsame way. Thus the storm breaks down mighty trees, but only bends the yielding reed.

By the virtues, especially the equanimity and thoughtfulness, of the Buddhist priests, the conquerors in their turn were spiritually conquered by the conquered, and they embraced the religion of enlightenment. They recognised the four noble truths taught by the Tathâgata: (1) the prevalence of suffering which is always in evidence in this world; (2) the origin of suffering as rising from the desire of selfishness; (3) the possibility of emancipation from suffering by abandoning all selfish clinging; and (4) the way of salvation from suffering by the noble eightfold path of moral conduct, consisting in right comprehension, right aspiration, right speech, right conduct, right living, right endeavor, right discipline, and the attainment of right bliss.

When the kingdom of Gandhâra had been established, commerce and trade began to thrive more than ever, while the vihâras, or Buddhist monasteries, continued to be the home of religious

exercises, offering an asylum to those who sought retirement from the turmoil of the world for the sake of finding peace of soul.

It was in one of these vihâras in the mountains near Purusha-putra, the present Peshawur, that Charaka, a descendant of the Northern invaders, had decided to join the brotherhood. He was as yet little acquainted with the spirit and purpose of the institution; but, being very serious and devoutly religious, the youth had decided, for the sake of attaining perfect enlightenment, to give up everything dear to him, his parents, his home, his brilliant prospect of a promising future, and the love that was secretly budding in his heart.

The vihâra which Charaka entered was excavated in the solid rock of an idyllic gorge. A streamlet gurgled by, affording to the hermits abundance of fresh water, and the monks could easily sustain their lives by the gifts of the villagers who lived near by, to which they added the harvest of fruit and vegetables which grew near their cave dwellings. In the midst of their small cells was a large chaitya, a hall or church, in which they assembled for daily services, for sermons, meditations, and other pious exercises.

The chaitya, like the cells, was hewn out of the living rock; a row of massive columns on either side divided the hall into a central nave and two aisles.

The ornaments that covered the faces of the rocky walls, though the product of home talent, being made by the untrained hands of monk artists, did not altogether lack a certain refinement and loftiness. The pictures exhibited scenes from the life of Buddha, his birth, his deeds, his miracles, illustrations of his parables, his sermons, and his final entry into Nirvâna.

A procession of monks, preceded by a leader who swung a censer, filed in through the large portal of the chaitya. Two by two they moved along the aisles and reverentially circumambulated the dagoba, at the end of the nave in the absciss of the Hall, just in the place where idol worshippers would erect an altar to their gods. It was in imitation of a tumulus destined to receive some relic of the revered teacher, and the genius of the architect had artfully designed the construction of the cave so that the rays of the sun fell upon the dagoba and surrounded its mysterious presence with a halo of light.

The monks intoned a solemn chant, and its long-drawn cadences filled the hall with a spirit of sanctity, impressing the hearers as though Buddha himself had descended on its notes from his

blissful rest in Nirvâna to instruct, to convert, and to gladden his faithful disciples.

The monks chanted a hymn, of which the novice could catch some of the lines as they were sung ; and these were the words that rung in his ears :

“In the mountain hall we are taking our seats.  
In solitude calming the mind ;  
Still are our souls and in silence prepared  
By degrees the truth to find.”

When they had circumambulated the dagoba, they halted in front of it where the novice now discovered an image of the Buddha in the attitude of teaching, and the monks spoke in chorus :

“I am anxious to lead a life of purity to the end of my earthly career when my life will return to the precious trinity of the Buddha, the truth, and the brotherhood.”

Then the chanting began again :

“Vast as the sea our heart shall be,  
And full of compassion and love.  
High shall soar for ever more  
Our thought like a mountain dove.  
We anxiously yearn from the master to learn,  
Who found the path of salvation.  
We follow the lead of Him who did read  
The problem of origination.”<sup>1</sup>

A venerable old monk who performed the duties of abbot now stepped forth and asked the assembled brethren whether any one had a communication to make that deserved the attention of the assemblage, and after the question had been repeated three times Subhûti, one of the older monks, said :

“There is a young man with us who, having left the world, stayed with me some time for the sake of instruction and discipline. He is here and desires to be admitted to the brotherhood.”

The abbot replied : “Let him come forward.”

It was Charaka ; and when he stepped into the midst of the brethren, the abbot viewed his tall figure with a kindly, searching glance and asked : “What is your name and what your desire?”

Charaka knelt down and said with clasped hands : “My name is Charaka. I entreat the Brotherhood for initiation. May the Brotherhood receive me and raise me up to their height of spiritual perfection. Have compassion on me, reverend sirs, and grant my request.”

<sup>1</sup>Cf. “Buddhist Chants and Processions,” *Journal of the Buddhist Text Society of India*, Vol. III., Part II.

The abbot then asked the supplicant a series of questions as prescribed in the regulations of the brotherhood: whether he was free from contagious disease, whether he was a human being, a man, and of age, whether his own master and not a slave nor in the king's service; whether unencumbered with debts and whose disciple he was.

When all the questions had been answered satisfactorily, the abbot submitted the case to the brotherhood, saying: "Reverend sirs, the Brotherhood may hear me. This man Charaka, a disciple of the venerable Subhûti, desires to receive the ordination.<sup>1</sup> He is free from all obstacles to ordination. He has an alms-bowl and a yellow robe, and entreats the Brotherhood for ordination, with the reverend brother Subhûti as his teacher. Let those among the venerable brethren who are in favor of granting the ordination be silent. Let those who are opposed to it step forth and speak."

These words were three times repeated, and as there was no dissenting voice, the abbot declared with solemnity: "The Brotherhood indicates by its silence that it grants to Charaka the ordination, with the reverend brother Subhûti as his teacher."

Having completed the ceremony and having recited the rules of the order including the four great prohibitions, viz., that an ordained monk must abstain from carnal indulgence, from theft of any kind, from killing even the meanest creature, and from boasts of miraculous powers, the abbot requested the novice to pronounce the refuge formula, which Charaka repeated three times in a clear and ringing voice. Then the congregation again intoned a chant, and, having circumambulated the dagoba, left the assembly hall, marching in solemn procession along the aisles, each brother thereupon betaking himself to his cell.

#### THE NOVICE.

Charaka the novice lived with his brethren in peace, and his senior, the venerable Subhûti, was proud of his learned disciple, for he was patient, docile, modest, earnest, and intelligent, and proved all these good qualities by an abnormally rapid progress. He learned the Sutras perfectly and soon knew them better than his teacher. He had a sonorous voice and it was a pleasure to hear him recite the sacred formulas or chant the verses proclaiming the glorious doctrine of the Blessed One. To all appearances the Brotherhood had made a wise acquisition; but if the venerable

<sup>1</sup>In Pâli, Pabbajjâ.

Subhūti could have looked into the heart of Charaka he would have beheld a different state of things, for the soul of the novice was full of impatience, dissatisfaction, and excitement. Life was so different from what he had expected and his dearest hopes found no fulfilment.

Charaka had learned many beautiful sentiments from the mouth of his teacher : some of them fascinated him by the melodious intonation of their rhythm, some by the philosophical depth of their meaning, some by their truth and lofty morality. How delighted was he with the lines :

“ Earnestness is the path of Immortality,  
Thoughtlessness the path of death.  
Those who are in earnest do not die,  
Those who are thoughtless, are as though they were dead.”

How powerfully was he affected by the following stanza :

“ Let a man overcome anger by love,  
Let him overcome evil by good.  
Let him overcome the greedy by liberality,  
And the liar by Truth ”<sup>1</sup>

But sometimes he was startled and had difficulty in understanding the sense. He wanted peace, not tranquilisation ; he wanted Nirvāna, its bliss, and its fulness, not extinction. And yet sometimes it seemed as if the absolute obliteration of his activity were expected of him :

“ Only if like a broken gong  
Thou utterest no sound :  
Then hast thou reached Nirvāna,  
And the end of strife hast found.”

Yet Charaka said to himself : “ It is only the boisterous noise that must be suppressed, not work ; only evil intention, not life itself ; the weeds, not the wheat.” For it is said :

“ If anything is to be done, let a man do it,  
Let him attack it vigorously.”

Not life, but error and vice, must be attacked. Not existence is evil, but vanity, anger, and sloth :

“ As the fields are damaged by weeds,  
So the vain are ruined by conceit.  
As a house is consumed by fire,  
So the wrathful burn with passion.  
As iron is eaten by rust,  
So the lazy are destroyed by ignorance.”

<sup>1</sup> Dhammapada, 21 and 223.

What ambition was beaming in the eyes of Charaka! The venerable Subhûti thought, there is but one danger for this noble novice: it is this, that the brethren may discover his brightness and spoil him by flattery. Instead of freeing himself from the fetters of the world, he may be entangled in the meshes of a spiritual vanity, which, being more subtle, is more perilous than the lust of the world and of its possessions. Then he recited to Charaka the lines:

“There is no path through the air.  
A man is not sanctified by rituals.  
The world delights in vanity,  
But from vanity the Tathâgatas are free.”<sup>1</sup>

Charaka knew that there were fools among men considered saints, who claimed to walk through the air. He was not credulous, but when told that to attempt the performance of supernatural deeds was vanity, his ambition revolted against the idea of setting limits to human invention. Man might find paths through the air as well as over the water; and he submitted to the sentiment only because he regarded it as a form of discipline by which he would learn to rise higher. So he suppressed his ambition, thinking that if he only abode his time he would find himself richly rewarded by the acquisition of spiritual powers which would be a blessing forever, an imperishable treasure that could not be lost by the accidents of life and would not share the doom of compounds which in due time must be dissolved again. He was yearning for life, not for death, for a fulness of melody and a wealth of harmony, not for the stillness of the broken gong. He had seen the world and he knew life in all its phases. He disdained loud noise and coarse enjoyments but he had not left his home and wandered into homelessness to find the silence of the tomb. A chill came over him, and he shrank from the ideal of sainthood as though it were the path to mental suicide. “No, no!” he groaned, “I am not made to be a monk. Either I am too sinful for a holy life, or the holiness of the cloister is not the path of salvation.”

#### THE GOD PROBLEM.

Buddhism had gained ascendancy in India without exterminating the more ancient creeds, and there were many devoutly religious people who had only a vague notion of the contrast in which it stood to other forms of faith.

The spiritual atmosphere in which Charaka had grown up con-

<sup>1</sup> Dhammapada, 254.

sisted of a mixture of all the thoughts, influences, and opinions then entertained in India; but while the northern gods that had been worshipped by the ancestors of the invaders in their former homes had faded from the mental vision of the present generation, the ancient deities of India had not gained full recognition. Vishnu, Shiva, and Indra appeared to them as the patrons of conquered races and were therefore deemed of inferior power. Among the better educated Hindu people philosophical ideas were spreading and Brahma was revered as the Supreme Being, the Great, the Omnipotent, the Omnipresent, as the All-Consciousness and All-Perfection, the Creator, the Fashioner, the Ruler of the Universe, and the All-Father of all beings. With this God-idea of an all-embracing personal deity Charaka had become familiar almost from childhood and he was greatly astonished not to hear a word about God, the Lord, or Brahma, in his religious instructions.

Buddha was spoken of as the teacher of gods and men; he was worshipped with a reverence which was peculiar to him; but the belief in the ancient gods was not disturbed. Their existence was neither denied nor affirmed.

So long as he was unacquainted with his new surroundings, Charaka did not dare to ask questions, but when he began to know his kind-hearted elder Subhûti and some others of the monks, he grew more assured, and one day while several brothers were seated at the portico of the assembly hall, he ventured to inquire as to the doctrine concerning God.

Life is taken seriously in a Buddhist monastery and the tone of conversation is always religious and considerate. Nevertheless there were never missing among the brethren men of a lighter temper, who saw the humor of things, who could smile and smiling point out the comical features of life so as to make their fellow brethren smile too, for real laughter was seldom, or never, heard in the precincts of the cloister. We find frequent traces of this humor in the wall paintings as well as the legends of saints, part of which are preserved even to-day. Now when Charaka spoke of God one of the brethren, Kevaddha by name, a healthy looking man of medium size and of a radiant face, drew near and asked, "What god do you mean,—Indra, the thunderer, the soma-intoxicated braggart-hero and ruler of the second heaven, whom the people call Sakra or Vâsava—or do you mean Shiva, the powerful and terrible One, decked with a necklace of skulls, the god full of awe and majesty? Perhaps you mean Vishnu, in any of his avatars, as a fish or a wild boar, or a white horse?"

Charaka shook his head, and Kevaddha continued: "May be you mean Krishna, the avatar of love, he who danced with all the shepherdesses at once, finding an appropriate incarnation in their favorite swains, while each girl imagined that she alone held the god in her arms?"

"My question refers to no one of the gods," replied the novice, "but to God," and the emphasis with which he marked the difference showed that he felt not like joking on a problem which was of grave importance to him.

"Ah, I see!" exclaimed Kevaddha. His lip curled with sarcasm and there was a twinkle of triumph in his eye, for the topic under discussion reminded him of a contest which he had had with a Brahman priest in which his antagonist had been completely worsted by his superior skill in pointing out the weak side of the proposition and holding it up to ridicule. "Ah, I see!" he exclaimed, "you do not mean any one of the several gods, but God in general. You are like the man who sent his servant to market to buy fruit and when the latter returned with bananas, mangoes, grapes, and an assortment of other fruit, he upbraided him, saying: 'I do not want bananas, nor mangoes, nor grapes, nor pears, nor prunes, nor apples, nor pomegranates, I want fruit! Fruit I want—fruit pure and undefiled, not a particular fruit, but fruit in general.'"

Said Charaka: "Are you a wrangler, famous in the art of dialectics and you know not the difference between God and gods? I love God but I hate the gods!"

"Is it possible," cried Kevaddha with a sarcastic chuckle, "you hate the gods and you love God? Can you hate all the single men, monks and laymen, traders, warriors, kings, noblemen, Brahmans, Kshatryas, and Çudras, and love man in general? How is it that you can hate the gods and love God? Does not the general include the particular?"

"Be so good, reverend sir," answered the novice, who began to chafe under the attacks of the brisk monk. "to understand what I mean. The world in which we live is a world of order, and we know that there are laws to which we must submit. When I speak of God I mean him who made us, the Omnipotent Creator of the Universe, the Father of all Beings, the Standard of all Perfection, the Eternal Law of Life."

"Well, well," replied Kevaddha, who though boisterous was at the bottom of his heart good-natured. "I do not mean to offend. I try to drive a truth home to you in the guise of fun. The



truth is serious, though my mode of expression may be humorous. I understand now that you are devoted to the great All-God, Brahma as the Brahmans call him, the Lord, Creator and Ruler of the Universe. But did you ever consider two things, first that such an All-God conceived as a being that has name and form is the product of our own imagination as much as are all the other deities of the people; and secondly, if Brahma were as real as you are and as I am, he would be of no avail? Every one must find the path of salvation himself, and Brahma's wisdom is not your wisdom. Nor can Brahma who resides in the Brahma heaven teach you anything."

Charaka did not conceal his dissatisfaction with Kevaddha's notion of God and said: "The mere idea that there is a God gives me strength. He may be directly unapproachable or may surround us as the air or as the ether which penetrates our body. He may be different from what we surmise him to be; but he must exist as the cause of all that is good, and wise, and true, and beautiful. How shall I, in my endeavors to seek the truth, succeed if there be no eternal standard of truth?"

"Yes, I know," replied Kevaddha with undisguised condescension; "It will help a youth who pursues an ideal to think of it as a being, as a god, as the great god, as the greatest god of all. Children need toys and the immature need gods. Your case reminds me of a story which was told me when I in my younger years went out not unlike you in search of truth."

"Tell us the story!" exclaimed one of the younger brethren, and Kevaddha said: "If I were sure not to hurt the feelings of our young friend, the novice, I should be glad to tell the story. But seeing that he is a worshipper of Brahma, I had better let the matter drop!"

Charaka answered: "I am not a worshipper of Brahma, unless you understand by Brahma the First Cause of the All, the ultimate reason of existence, the Supreme Being, the Perceiver of all things, the Controller, the Lord, the Maker, the Fashioner, the Chief, the Victor, the Ruler, the Father of all beings who ever have been and are to be! If your story be instructive I am anxious to hear it myself, even though it should criticise my belief."

#### KEVADDHA'S STORY.

"There was a priest in Benares, a man of Brahmin caste, learned in all the wisdom of the Vedas, not of the common type of

priests but an honest searcher after truth. He longed for peace of heart, and was anxious to reach Nirvâna; yet he could not understand how it was possible in the flesh to attain perfect tranquillity, for life is restless and in none of the four states of aggregation can that calmness be found which is the condition of the blissful state. So, this priest thought by himself: 'Before I can make any progress, I must solve the question, "Where do the four states of aggregation: the solid state, the watery state, the fiery state, and the state of air, utterly cease?"'

"Having prepared his mind, the priest entered into a trance in which the path to the gods became revealed to him, and he drew near to where the four great kings of the gods were. And having drawn near, he addressed the four great kings as follows: 'My friends, where do the four states of aggregation: the solid state, the watery state, the fiery state, and the state of air, utterly cease?' When he had thus spoken, the four great kings answered and said: 'We gods, O priest, do not know where the four states of aggregation utterly cease. However, O priest, there are the gods of the higher heavens, who are more glorious and more excellent than we. They would know where the four states of aggregation utterly cease.'

"When the four great kings had thus spoken, the priest visited the gods of the higher heavens and approached their ruler, Ishvara. He propounded the same question and received the same answer. Ishvara, the Lord, advised the priest to go to Yâma. 'He is powerful and has charge over the souls of the dead. He is apt to be versed in problems that are profound and recondite and abstruse and occult. Go to Yâma; he may know where the four states of aggregation utterly cease.'

"The priest acted upon Ishvara's advice, and went to Yâma, but the result was the same. Yâma sent the priest to the satisfied gods, whose chief ruler is the Great Satisfied One. 'They are the gods who are pleased with whatever is. They are the gods of serenity and contentment. If there is any one who can answer your question, they will be able to tell you where the four states of aggregation utterly cease.'

"The priest went to the heaven of the satisfied gods, but here too he was disappointed. Their ruler, the Great Satisfied One, said: 'I, O priest, do not know where these four states of aggregation, the solid state, the watery state, the fiery state, and the state of air, utterly cease. However, O priest, there are the gods of the retinue of Brahma, who are more glorious and more excellent than

I. They would know where these four states of aggregation utterly cease.'

"Then, this same priest entered again upon a state of trance, in which his thoughts found the way to the Brahma world. There the priest drew near to where the gods of the retinue of Brahma were, and having drawn near, he spake to the gods of the retinue of Brahma as follows: 'My friends, where do these four states of aggregation, the solid state, the watery state, the fiery state, and the state of air, utterly cease?'

"When he had thus spoken, the gods of the retinue of Brahma answering spake as follows: 'We, O priest, cannot answer your question. However, there is Brahma, the great Brahma, the First Cause of the All, the Supreme Being, the All-Perfection, the All-Perceiving One, the Controller, the Lord of All, the Creator, the Fashioner, the Chief, the Victor, the Ruler, the All-Father, he who is more glorious, more excellent, than all celestial beings, he will know where the four states of aggregation, the solid state, the watery state, the fiery state, and the state of air, do utterly cease.'

"Said the priest: 'But where, my friends, is the great Brahma at the present moment?' And the gods answered: 'We do not know, O priest, where the great Brahma is, or in what direction the great Brahma can be found. But inasmuch, O priest, as he is omnipresent, you will see signs and notice a radiance and the appearance of an effulgence, and then Brahma will appear. This is the previous sign of the appearance of Brahma, that a radiance is noticed, or an effulgence appears.'

"The priest, having invoked Brahma's appearance with due reverence and according to the rules of the Vedas, in a short time Brahma appeared. Then the priest drew near to where Brahma was, and having drawn near, he spake to Brahma as follows: 'My friend, where do the four states of aggregation, the solid state, the watery state, the fiery state, and the state of air, utterly cease?'

"When he had thus spoken, the great Brahma opened his mouth and spake as follows: 'I, O priest, am Brahma, the great Brahma, the Supreme Being, the All-Perfection, the All-Perceiving One, the Controller, the Lord of All, the Creator, the Fashioner, the Chief, the Victor, the Ruler, the All-Father.'

"A second time the priest asked his question, and the great Brahma gave him the same answer, saying: 'I, O priest, am Brahma, the great Brahma, the Supreme Being, the All-Perfection; and he did not cease until he had enumerated all the titles applied to him.'

“Having patiently listened to Brahma, the priest repeated his question a third time, and added: ‘I am not asking you, my friend, Are you Brahma, the great Brahma, the Supreme Being, the All-Perfection, the All-Perceiver, the All-Father, and whatever titles and accomplishments you may have in addition; but this, my friend, is what I ask you: ‘Where do the four states of aggregation, the solid state, the watery state, the fiery state, and the state of air, utterly cease?’

“The great Brahma remained unmoved, and answered a third time, saying: ‘I, O priest, am Brahma, the great Brahma, the Supreme Being, the All-Perfection, the All-Perceiver,’ enumerating again all the titles applied to him.

“Now the priest rose and said: ‘Are you truly a living being, or an automaton, that you can do nothing but repeat a string of words.’

“And now the great Brahma rose from his seat and approached the priest, and leading him aside to a place where he could not be overheard by any of the gods, spake to him as follows: ‘The gods of my suite and all the worshippers of the world that honor me with sacrifice and adoration, believe that Brahma sees all things, knows all things, has penetrated all things; therefore, O priest, I answered you as I did in the presence of the gods. But I will tell you, O priest, in confidence, that I do not know where the four states of aggregation, the solid state, the watery state, the fiery state, and the state of air, utterly cease. It was a mistake, O priest, that you left the earth where the Blessed One resides, and came up to the heaven in quest of an answer which cannot be given you here. Turn back, O priest, and having drawn near to the Blessed One, the Enlightened Buddha, ask him your question, and as the Blessed One shall explain it to you, so believe.’

“Thereupon, the priest, as quickly as a strong man might stretch out his bent arm, disappeared from the Brahma heaven and appeared before the Blessed One; and he greeted the Blessed One and sat down respectfully at one side, and spake to the Blessed One as follows: ‘Reverend Sir, where do the four states of aggregation, the solid state, the watery state, the fiery state, and the state of air, utterly cease?’

“When he had thus spoken the Blessed One answered as follows: ‘Once upon a time, O priest, some sea-faring traders had a land-sighting bird when they sailed out into the sea; and when the ship was in mid-ocean they set free that land-sighting bird. This bird flies in an easterly direction, in a southerly direction, in a

westerly direction, and in a northerly direction, and to the intermediate quarters, and if it sees land anywhere it flies thither, but if it does not see land it returns to the ship. In exactly this way, O priest, when you had searched as far as the Buddha world and had found no answer to your question you returned to the place whence you came. The question, O priest, ought never to have been put thus: "Where do these four states of aggregation cease?" The question ought to be as follows:

"Oh! Where can water, where can wind,  
Where fire and earth no footing find?  
Where disappear all mine and thine,  
Good, bad, long, short, and coarse and fine,  
And where do name and form both cease  
To find in nothingness release?"

The answer, however, is this:

"'Tis in the realm of radiance bright,  
Invisible, eternal light,  
And infinite, a state of mind,  
There water, earth, and fire, and wind,  
And elements of any kind,  
Will nevermore a footing find;  
There disappear all mine and thine,  
Good, bad, long, short, and coarse, and fine,  
There too will name and form both cease,  
To find in nothingness release."

"Then the priest understood that the world of matter is restless and remains restless, but peace of heart is a condition of mind which must be acquired by self-discipline, by wisdom, by devotion. The gods cannot help; nor even can Brahma himself, the Great Brahma, the Supreme Being, the Lord and Creator. Sacrifice is useless and prayer and worship are of no avail. But if we desire to attain the highest state of bliss, which is Nirvâna, we must follow the Blessed One, the Teacher of gods and men; and like him we must by our own effort, become lamps unto ourselves and resolutely walk upon the noble eightfold path."

[TO BE CONTINUED.]