

ASHVAJIT'S STANZA AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE.

BY THE EDITOR.

THERE is a story related in the Mahāvaggo (sections 23-24)¹ about the conversion of Shâriputra and Maudgalyâyana,² two Brahmans who led a religious life as wandering ascetics, both bent on attaining enlightenment and reaching Nirvâna. And it happened one day that Shâriputra saw in the streets a young ascetic going from door to door begging for alms. He kept his eyes modestly to the ground and showed such a dignified deportment that Shâriputra thought to himself: "Truly, this monk is a saint. He is walking on the right path. I will ask him in whose name he has retired from the world and what doctrine he professes."

The young ascetic's name was Ashvajit, and on being asked as to his faith and the doctrine of his master, he said: "I am a disciple of the Buddha, the Blessed One, the Sage of the Shakyas, but being a novice, I cannot explain the details, I can only tell the substance of the doctrine."

Said Shâriputra: "Tell me, O venerable monk, the substance. It is the substance I want."

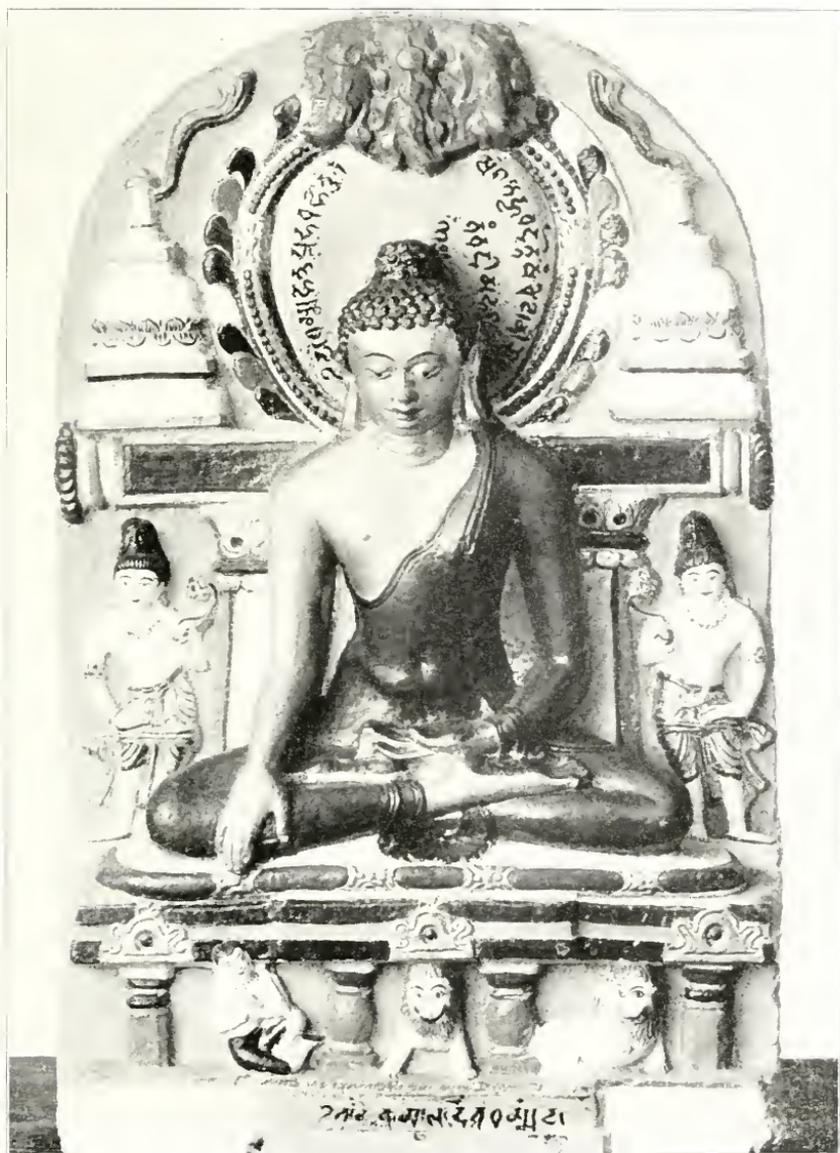
And Ashvajit recited the stanza:

"The Buddha has the causes told
Of all the things that spring from causes.
And further the great sage has told
How finally all passion pauses."

"Ye dhamma hetuppabhava.
Tesam hetum Tathagato
Aha; Tesanca nirodho.
Evamvadi mahasamano."

¹ *Sacred Books of the East*, Vol. XIII, pp. 144-151. Compare also the Chinese translation of the Buddhacharita, the *Fo-Sho-Hing-Tsan-King* IV, 17 (*S. B. E.*, XIX, pp. 193 ff.) and other sacred books of the Buddhists.

² Upatissa is commonly called after his mother, Shari, the son of Shari or Shâriputra (Pâli, Sâriputta), and Kolita, after his family, Maudgalyâyana (Pâli, Moggallâna).



ASHVAJIT'S STANZA INSCRIBED UPON A BUDDHA STATUE.

[This statue was discovered in the Mahabodhi temple at Buddha Gaya near the Diamond Seat, the place where the Bodhi tree stood under which the Buddha attained to enlightenment. When the temple was repaired by the British government, the statue was given to the Anagarika Dharmapala, who carried it (in spite of its not inconsiderable weight) with him on his journey round the world and had it exhibited at the World's Religious Parliament of Chicago in 1893.]

Having heard this stanza, Shâriputra obtained the pure and spotless eye of truth and said: "Now I see clearly, whatsoever is subject to origination is also subject to cessation. If this be the doctrine I have reached the state to enter Nirvâna which heretofore has remained hidden to me."

Shâriputra went to Maudgalyâyana and told him, and both said: "We will go to the Blessed One, that He, the Blessed One, may be our teacher."

When the Buddha saw Shâriputra and Maudgalyâyana coming from afar, he said to his disciples: "These two monks are a highly auspicious pair," and they became (not unlike the Christian James and John whom Jesus called Boanerges) the most energetic followers among his disciples.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ASHVAJIT'S STANZA.

The stanza recited by Ashvajit has become famous throughout the Buddhist world and is inscribed under many Buddha statues, and also in rock inscriptions, but its meaning cannot be as clear to Western people as it was to Shâriputra. How can a simple statement as to the efficiency of causation have so great a significance?

Obviously we have to consider the stanza in the light of the doctrine quoted in connection therewith by Shâriputra, concerning origination and cessation, to understand that it is merely another statement of the truth that all compounds will be dissolved again.

The traditional Brahmanism at the time of Buddha taught that the law of causation can be broken; it advised its followers to set their trust in the saving power of sacrifice; it recommended sacred ceremonies, or sacraments, and especially prayers, and accepted the Vêdas as a divine revelation. Ashvajit's stanza denies all hope for salvation by any other means except such as are effected through the normal course of causation. It repudiates miracles of supernatural interference by unreservedly recognising the law of cause and effect as irrefragable.

The doctrine of Buddha must have appeared bold and iconoclastic to the pious Brahmans, who placed their trust in the special revelation of the Vêdas, who believed in the expiation of sin by the blood of sacrifice, and expected divine help by the magic charm of prayer. Their faith rested upon the assumption of some divine or extra-natural power that would overcome, or break, or upset the law of causation. Buddha teaches to give up all faith in the supernatural existence and the miraculous. He teaches that the origin and the end of all things depends upon causation.

The formulation of the essence of Buddhism in Ashvajit's stanza will scarcely appeal to those who are not initiated into the significance of these sentences, for the negative side of the rigidity of causation which teaches us that in the world of Samsâra everything springs from causes and will according to the law of cause and effect come to rest again, has its positive side and implies that we must seek for the permanent somewhere else; and it implies further that the law of causation holds good also for those who will energetically work out their own salvation.

Ashvajit's stanza suggests the four truths; viz., that this world of materiality (in which all things originate by being compounded, and cease to exist by being dissolved) is subject to disease and pain, to old age, decay, and death; but if causation holds good, we can, by a thorough surrender of all attachment, emancipate ourselves from the evils of life and thereby attain the freedom of Nirvâna.

The law of causation is a curse only for wrong-doing; it is a blessing for good deeds. It does not only teach that birth leads to death, but also that the abandonment of clinging involves the cessation of passion, of sin, of wrong-doing.

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Some details in the story of the conversion of Maudgalyâyana and his cousin Shâriputra resemble the calling of Andrew and Peter as related in the first chapter of the Gospel according to St. John (35 to 42), which reads as follows:

"Again the next day after John stood, and two of his disciples; and looking upon Jesus as he walked, he saith, Behold the Lamb of God! And the two disciples heard him speak, and they followed Jesus. Then Jesus turned, and saw them following, and saith unto them, What seek ye? They said unto him, Rabbi, (which is to say, being interpreted, Master,) where dwellest thou? He saith unto them, Come and see. They came and saw where he dwelt, and abode with him that day: for it was about the tenth hour. One of the two which heard John speak, and followed him, was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first findeth his own brother Simon, and saith unto him, We have found the Messiah, which is, being interpreted, the Christ. And he brought him to Jesus. And when Jesus beheld him, he said, Thou art Simon the son of Jona: thou shalt be called Cephas, which is by interpretation, A stone."