ASHVAJIT’S STANZA AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE.

BY THE EDITOR.

THERE is a story related in the Mahāvaggo (sections 23-24) about the conversion of Shāriputra and Maudgalyāyana, two Brahmans who led a religious life as wandering ascetics, both bent on attaining enlightenment and reaching Nirvāna. And it happened one day that Shāriputra 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 Shāriputra 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 Shakya, but being a novice, I cannot explain the details, I can only tell the substance of the doctrine.”

Said Shāriputra: “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; Tesana nirodho.
Evamvadi mahasamano.”


2 Upatissa is commonly called after his mother, Shari, the son of Shari or Shāriputra (Pāli, Sāriputta), and Kolita, after his family, Maudgalyāyana (Pāli, Moggallāna).
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, Shāriputra 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 Nirvāna which heretofore has remained hidden to me.”

Shāriputra went to Maudgalyāyana 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 Shāriputra and Maudgalyāyana 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 ASHVJIT’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 Shāriputra. 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 Shāriputra, concerning origination and cessation, to understand that it is merely another statement of the truth that all compounds will be dissolved again.

The traditional Brahanism 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 Vēdas 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 irrefrangible.

The doctrine of Buddha must have appeared bold and iconoclastic to the pious Brahmans, who placed their trust in the special revelation of the Vēdas, 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 Shariputra 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 Messias, 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."