

## THE FISH IN BRAHMANISM AND BUDDHISM.

BY THE EDITOR.

IN India the most important story which refers to the fish as an emblem of the highest god, as a saviour of mankind who safely conducts his chosen ones over the ocean of death, is a myth told in the Mahabharata, Book III, page 187 ff. In different editions there are different versions, but they all agree in their main points.

According to Professor Richard Pischel,<sup>1</sup> the oldest version is recorded in the Satapalhbrahmana I, 8, 1-10 where the legend reads as follows:

"One morning when Manu was given water to wash his hands he found in it a little fish that spoke to him as follows: 'Take care of me and I will save thee.' 'From what wilt thou save me?' asked Manu. The fish replied, 'A deluge will drown all creatures and I will save thee from it.' Manu asked 'How shall I take care of thee?' The fish answered, 'So long as we are small many dangers threaten us. One fish swallows another. First keep me in a pitcher and when I am too large for it dig a ditch and put me in that. When I am too large for the ditch take me to the ocean where I shall be beyond all danger.' Quickly the fish grew into a *jhasa*, which is the greatest among the fish. 'In such and such a year' said the fish, 'the flood will come. Then build a ship and call on me. When the floods rise enter into the ship and I will save thee.' When the fish was grown Manu brought him down to the sea and in the year indicated he constructed a ship and then called on the fish. When the floods came he entered the ship. Then the fish swam up to the ship and Manu fastened the ship's rope to his horn. After a while they arrived upon the Northern Mountains, and the fish said: 'I have saved thee. Now tie thy ship to a tree so that while thou art on the mountain the water can not cut thee off. Come down from the mountain when the water falls.' Manu did as he was bidden, and

<sup>1</sup> *Der Ursprung des christlichen Fischsymbols* (Berlin, 1905).

this place on the Northern Mountains is even to-day called 'the Descent of Manu.' The floods destroyed all creatures and Manu alone survived."

The story further continues that Manu prayed and fasted, anxious to procure posterity. He performed the cooking offering and from the offering which he made of melted butter, sour milk, curds and cheese thrown into the water there originated after a year a woman called Ida, and her foot-prints were melted butter. Both Mitra and Varuna desired that Ida should consider herself as their daughter, but she refused. Coming to Manu she delivered herself to him to be his daughter and called herself "Prayer." By her Manu begot the human race. Thus he became the father of mankind and the originator of the first religious sacrifice.

In the Mahabharata (§ 186), the same story is told.<sup>2</sup> Manu acquires merit by hard penance. He then saves a little fish who appears on the banks of the river and calls for protection. The fish grows rapidly and has to be placed in deeper water until finally he lives in the ocean. Then he foretells the deluge and advises that a ship be built. On leaving Manu he says: "This must thou do. Fare thee well, I depart. Without me thou canst not cross the great floods. Of these my words thou must have no doubt." Manu builds the ship and when the flood comes he enters with the seven *rishis* (sages). He thinks of the fish who at once makes his appearance and Manu ties the rope to his horn. Then the ship is towed for many years through the floods and at last reaches the highest mountain of the Himalayas, which therefore even to-day bears the name Naubandhana, "the Tying of the Ship."

When the fish leaves the seven *rishis* he makes this solemn utterance: "I am Brahma the Creator; there is none greater than I. Through me as a fish have ye been delivered from this danger. Through Manu all beings, demons and men, all the worlds, both the living and the dead, shall be created. By his hard penance Manu through my grace will acquire the knowledge to create all creatures, and he will not err." Having thus spoken the fish disappeared in a twinkling and Manu created the world.

In another version (quoted by Pischel) the divinity of the fish is recognized by Manu as soon as he acquires his tremendous size. Then Manu addressed him with fear and trembling: "Thou art some God, or perhaps even Vasudeva (the Good Lord). How could

<sup>2</sup> We follow the translation of Pratap Chandra Ray, Calcutta, Bharata Press, 1889.



FISH INCARNATION OF VISHNU.

The original is in the Indian Museum Collection and comes from Garhwa in the district of Allahabad. It is mentioned in the *Arch. Sur. Rep. of India*, III, p. 57, and in the *N.-W. Provinces List*, p. 136.

any one else grow thus? Whose body could develop to 20 million *yajannas*? Thou art made manifest in the shape of a fish. Thou overawest me, oh Keshava, (Hairy One),<sup>3</sup> Lord of the World, Home of the World, homage be to thee! Thus addressed, the holy Janardana<sup>4</sup> in the shape of a fish replies: "Well indeed, oh guiltless one, hast thou recognized the truth." Thereupon the story continues as in the versions previously told.

मत्स्यावतार



From Moor.



From Picart.

#### VISHNU'S FISH INCARNATION.

In the *Naradapancharata*, IV, 3, 57, the fish is called Vishnu and is spoken of as "the god in the shape of a fish, endowed with a great horn, who holds the ship containing the seat of the world, who playfully crossed through the ocean, the author of the four Vedas."

Professor Pischel also refers to a sculpture (p. 15) of a large black slate standing erect in the soil near the temple Mummura of

<sup>3</sup> Epithet of Vishnu and Krishna, presumably with reference to the halo of light with which their heads are surrounded.

<sup>4</sup> Literally "the harasser of men," an epithet also of Krishna, which we may assume has the significance of an avenger, he who punishes, he who sends visitations.



Chinnamastika Devi in the Tavjha Mahalla of Lalitapattana where Vishnu is represented as a fish. The place is the present Patan which lies one and one half miles East of Katmandu, the capital of Nepal.

In close connection with the reverence of the ancient Hindu people for a fish as a symbol of the Good Lord, stands the belief in Vishnu's first avatar in the shape of a fish. Vishnu, the second person of the Hindu trinity, corresponding to the Christian God the Son, is the divinity of successive incarnations and first appears as a fish. In former centuries Vishnu was pictured simply as a horned fish without any indication of a human body, but since the fourteenth century the god in his first avatar is pictured as a fish whose upper part is a human body, or as a man emerging from a fish's jaw.

Sometimes Vishnu is represented as a fish holding in one hand the Vedas. In other pictures he is four-armed, holding in one hand a wheel, in another a disk, in the third a club and in the fourth a lotus flower, but none of these pictures which are common now all over India find any justification in the ancient literature on the subject, where, with the exception of Hemadri, Vishnu's first avatar is simply spoken of as being in the shape of a fish. Hemadri (in *Chaturvargachintamin* I, 327) says that for votive offerings Vishnu should be represented as a fish with two arms holding in one a shell, in the other a club.

In a religious ceremony performed on the 12th day of the month Margashiras, the first month of the Indian year, Vishnu is represented in the shape of a golden fish. Four priests officiate, representing the four Vedas, viz., the Rig Veda, the Sama Veda, the Yajur Veda and the Atharva Veda. Four golden pitchers of water are put up decorated with garlands and filled with sesame seed to represent the four oceans. In the middle stands an ornamental bench draped in cloth and a bowl filled with water in which the golden fish that symbolizes Vishnu is placed, and he is addressed as follows: "As thou, O god in the shape of a fish, has saved the Vedas hidden in the nether world so save also me, oh Hairy One (Keshava)!" The four pitchers are then presented to the four priests and the golden fish is given to the teacher of the man who performs the ceremony.

Nepal is now a Buddhist country, but it has preserved the traditional reverence for the fish as an avatar of Vishnu, by transferring it upon Buddha, the Lord of Compassion. There we find one of the oldest representations of Vishnu which shows him in the form of

a fish. It is preserved<sup>5</sup> in the middle of a little pond near Katmandu, which was called Buddha Nilkarth, i. e., the submerged Shiva, situated in Nepal which country for some time was zealously de-

宮 蟲 蝎 1	宮 瓶 寶 2	宮 魚 雙 3
		
宮 量 秤 4	宮 弓 5	宮 蠍 摩 6
		

SIX MANSIONS OF THE CHINESE ZODIAC.

voted to Vishnuism. A little brook, called Budramati, flows out of the pond and in the middle of it lies an image of Vishnu. Near the southern gate of Katmandu stands a temple of Vishnu where the

<sup>5</sup> As we learn from Pischel, (*loc. cit.*, pp. 15-16).

god is worshiped under the name Mina-Narayana, "Vishnu as a fish," a designation which the Buddhists have transferred upon Avalokiteshvara, the "Lord of Compassion" (literally, the looking-down Lord) who in common parlance is known under the name Matsyendranatha, "the Lord as prince of fishes."

In Indian mythology Agni was once betrayed by a fish when he hid himself from the gods in the waters. So Agni cursed all fishes,



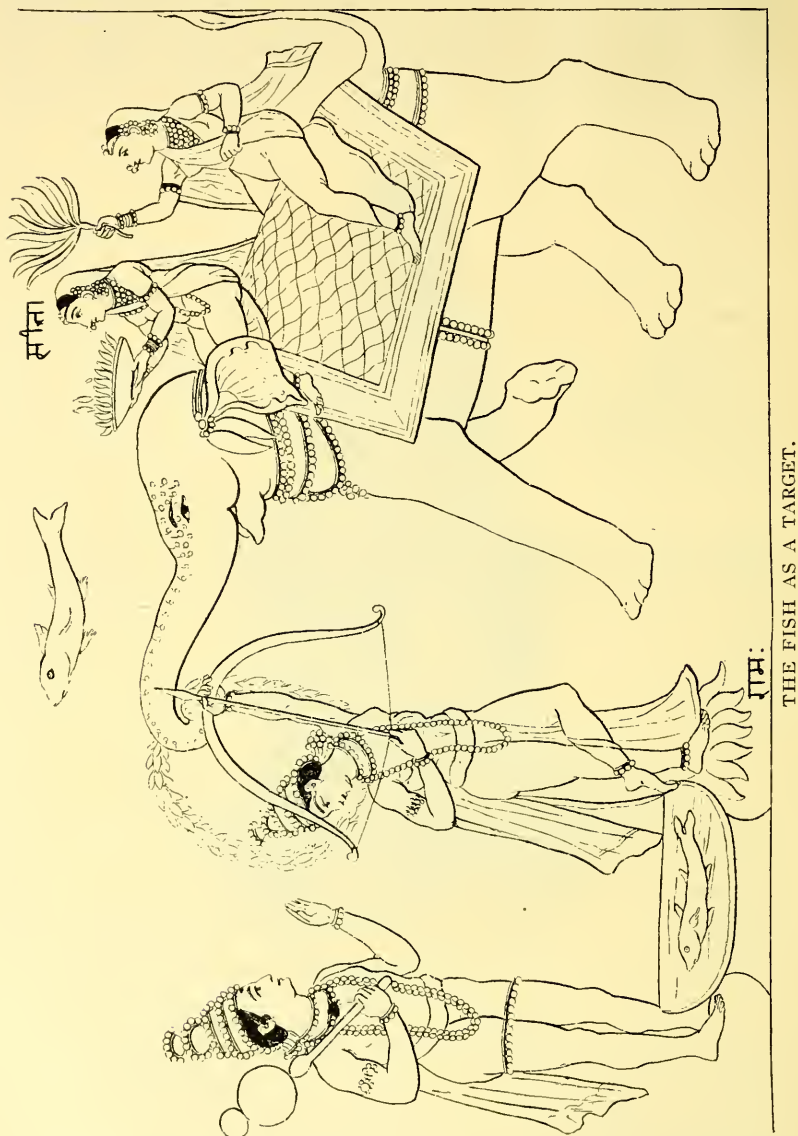
STATUE OF KWAN YON.

With two dragons on the pedestal.

condemning them to be killed by cunning devices. In the Jatakas we read that the path of the fish in the water is as difficult to trace as the character of woman. And the same simile is used with the opposite application for the pious in Brahman literature, where it is said: "As the traces of the birds in the air and of fishes in the water are invisible, so is also the path of him who knows Brahma and of the pious man when he dies," which means that his trace is

no longer found in this world, for he passes into Nirvana or becomes one with Brahma.

The Pisces of the zodiac have been represented as two fishes



THE FISH AS A TARGET.

ever since the time of ancient Babylonia. They are still so pictured in modern atlases of the starry heavens and appear in the same shape in both the old Indian and Chinese calendars. It will be difficult



or perhaps impossible to say why the fish has been doubled in this connection, because the reason of this duplication dates back to a prehistoric age.

The two fishes have become a good omen in ancient India and are not infrequently found on monuments and as a design for heraldic devices. An inscription of King Suridara Pandyadeva I<sup>6</sup> in the temple of Vishnu (Ranganatha) in Sriranga, in the district of Trichinopolis, Dekkan, shows on either side the image of a fish. Professor Pischel mentions two fishes on the bases of columns in a Brahman temple at Ghumli,<sup>7</sup> and also among other symbols at the gate of a Jaina cave in Junagadh. The same authority tells of two fishes facing a swastika on a Jain votive tablet from Matura, and says that two also may be seen on a Chinese statue of Kwan Yon or, as she is called in India, Avalokiteshvara, though in the latter case they are apparently dragons, not as Pischel says "fishes."<sup>8</sup> A field with two fishes was the coat of arms of the Pandya kings as can be seen from their frequent appearance on Pandya coins.<sup>9</sup>

The fish is used as a good omen and as such it is represented on illustrations as a target. An illustration of this kind is here reproduced from the *Hindu Pantheon* (page 52). Moor explains the scene as a shooting-match in which Rama contends for Sita's hand but Pischel suggests the explanation is doubtful because this incident is not mentioned in any version of the Rama legend. He thinks that the illustration refers not to Rama but possibly to Arjuna (Pischel, page 20).

Buddha is reported to have been incarnated three times as a fish. According to Jataka 75, he was once king of the fishes, and happened to be born at a time when a long drought threatened the life of all his fellow fish. Not only the fields dried up but also ponds and lakes. The fish were stuck in the mud and were being devoured by crows and other birds when the king of the fishes came to the rescue. He rose out of the mud, opened his eyes and by vowing that he had never eaten other fish, not even the smallest one, and had never done any harm to any living creature, he compelled the god Indra to pour down rain from heaven.

In Jataka 114, Buddha as the fish Mitacinti saved two of his

<sup>6</sup> He ascended the throne 1251. Cf. Hultzsch, *El. VI*, p. 306, No. 11; *A List of Inscriptions of So. India* (Calcutta, 1904) p. 144. Note 5.

<sup>7</sup> See Bühler *El. II*, 312; *Burgess Archeological Survey of Western India*, II, Plate XLIII, No. 9 and 17.

<sup>8</sup> See illustration on page 349.

<sup>9</sup> Taylor, *A Catalogue raisonné* (Madras, 1857-1862, III, 54; Hultzsch *El. III*, p. 8; Rapson, *Indian Coins* (Strasburg, 1898) 124 & 126. Table V, 10 & 13.

companions from the net of fishes, and in Jataka 236, he rescued the fish from the hypocrite crane, who sat down on the shore of the pond and by his pretended pity acquired the confidence of the fish.

None of these tales are of special importance but all of them confirm the traditional reverence in which the fish is held, so that even the Buddhists do not hesitate to have the Buddha himself incarnated as a fish who by his virtues saves his fellow fishes from perdition.



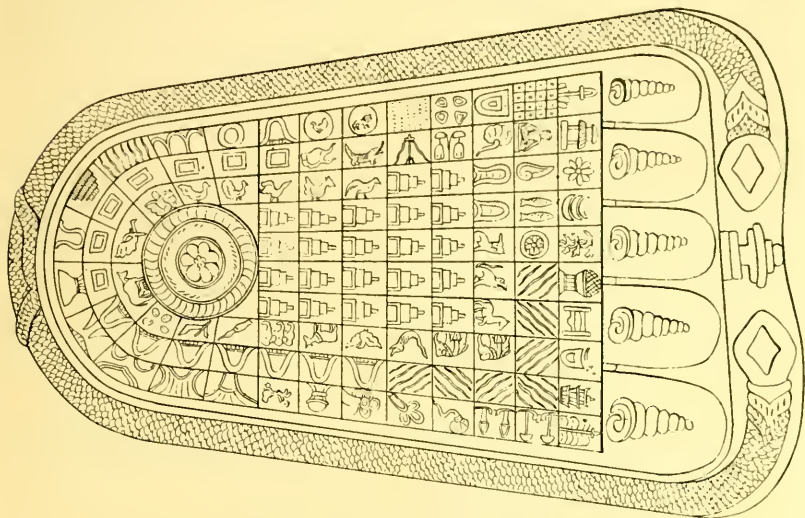
CRYSTAL BOWL FOUND IN BUDDHA'S TOMB.

The miraculous power of the rohita fish is well characterized in the Buddhist story<sup>10</sup> of King Padmaka, a pious and just ruler whose subjects suffered from an epidemic of jaundice. The physicians declared that the only medicine that could be of avail was the flesh of a rohita fish, but in spite of all search no rohita could be found. Then the king decided to sacrifice himself for the salvation of his people. He mounted the highest pinnacle of his palace and made a vow to be reborn in his next life as a rohita fish. Then

<sup>10</sup> Related in the Avadana Jataka.

he threw himself down. According to the earnestness of his desire he was reborn in the sand of the river as a big rohita fish. When the news became known the people came and cutting off the flesh of the fish cured themselves of their disease. Having saved them from perdition, he made his identity known and they praised the miraculous power of the Buddha.

The fish has also been used in India for funerary purposes and the most ancient instance of it has been excavated from the tomb of Buddha himself.<sup>11</sup> It is a beautiful crystal bowl, the lid of which has on its top a fish which serves as a handle. This crystal bowl stood by the side of the urn containing the sacred ashes and bears



FOOTPRINT OF THE BUDDHA.

From Coleman's *Mythology of the Hindus*, p. 204.

the dedication of the Shakyas, brothers and sisters with their women and children. The lid is ornamented with gilt stars and was surrounded with little urns, and a box containing offerings of various kinds, ornaments of gold and silver, gems, crystals, stars, flowers and statuettes, birds and elephants, pieces of leafgold bearing the picture of a lion, and other symbols. The fish on top of the lid can here only have served as a protective symbol, a kind of charm destined to ward off all harm from the relics in the crystal box.

The emblem of two fishes as a good omen is also found on various Buddhist monuments, especially on the footprints of the Buddha, where the dolphin as well as the two fishes appears among

<sup>11</sup> See the article "Buddhist Relics" in *The Open Court*, XXIV, 31.

many other symbols. Here we also find chakras or wheels, tiaras, bowls of the Buddhist priests in which they receive their provisions, a fan used by the priests in place of an umbrella, the palace in the form of a square and supposed to be seven stories in height, the royal standard, trumpets to announce the arrival of kings, the stone couch of Buddha, flags, ensigns, the royal palanquin, a salver, the large fan of kings, Mt. Meru, the seven great rivers, the six mansions or heavens of the celestial abode, the four great divisions of the world, the great sea, the two thousand smaller divisions surrounding the four great ones, two golden fishes which swim the ocean between Mt. Meru and the four divisions, etc. etc.<sup>12</sup>

Although the Buddhist monks do not eat meat or fish, the dinner gong in monasteries in China as well as Japan is usually made in the shape of a fish. For the same purpose wooden drums are also used, and they too are carved in the shape of a fish. Thus the fish is commonly considered a sacred symbol, but the meaning of it has been lost and Buddhist philosophers when asked to explain the significance of the fish have given various explanations which, however, are nothing but ingenious afterthoughts. The custom must be very ancient for we find a fantastic legend adduced as an explanation of it in the Vibhasha Shastra, one of the Abhidharmas reported to have been compiled under King Kanishka, of the third Buddhist council which was convened in the first century of the Christian era.

We reproduce here from a Buddhist picture book published in Japan two pictures, one of a fish-gong, the other a fish-drum, as used to-day in Buddhist monasteries. The inscription over the drum is an abbreviated account of the Vibhasha Shastra, which in Mr. Teitaro Suzuki's translation reads as follows:

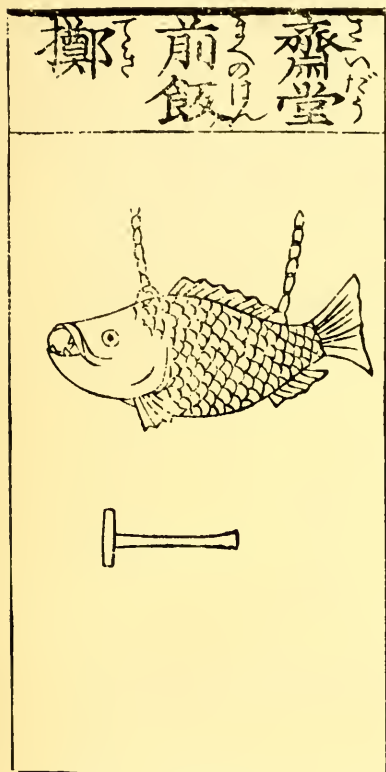
"There was once a Buddhist monk in ancient India who neglected to study the Dharma. On this account he was reborn as a big fish, and on his back there grew a huge tree, which was extremely annoying to him. One day his former teacher passed him by on a boat, and the monk-fish who attributed the cause of his suffering to the wilful indifference of his teacher tried to wreak vengeance on him by raising a tempest. Being asked by his teacher why he did so the fish replied, 'You neglected to instruct me in the Dharma in my former existence, and for that reason I have to endure this unspeakable torture.' But the teacher explained how unreasonable the monk was, saying that the neglect was not the teacher's but the

<sup>12</sup> For further explanation see Coleman's *Mythology of the Hindus*, pages 208-212.

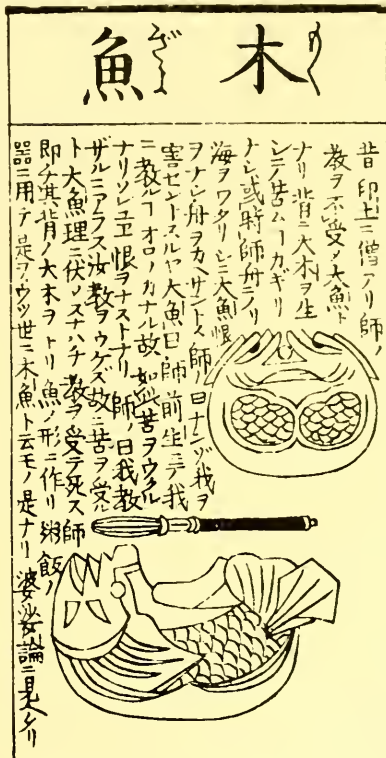


disciple's. When the monk-fish saw his fault he submitted to his teacher's instructions and died. The latter felled the huge tree that had grown on the back of the fish and made of it a large gong, which was used to call the monks together at meal time."

This story invented in explanation of the use of the fish as a gong is undoubtedly very old. It is assuredly not indigenous in China but has been imported by Buddhist missionaries from India.



FISH GONG.



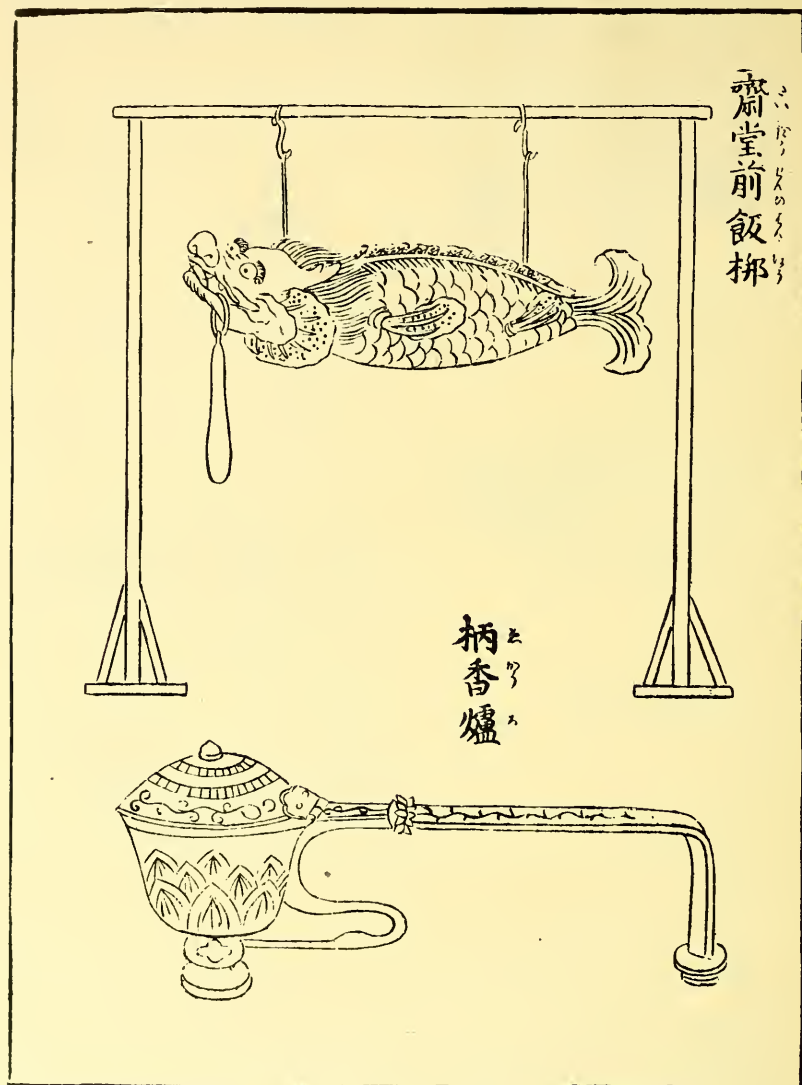
FISH DRUM.

The inscriptions read "Dining Hall, Front, Meal Gong" and "Wooden iFsh."

The source dates back to a pre-Christian age, and is obviously not the true reason why fish gongs are used for dinner bells, but, as is frequently the case in similar instances, was a mere afterthought to explain an ancient established custom.

Another reason given for always making these gongs in monasteries in the shape of a fish is attributed to a Chinese priest, the Master Wu Pien, who is reported to have said: "The fish never shuts his eyes by day or by night, and thus those who become converted

and lead a new life abandon all sleep and are bound to reach the path of perfection in constant watchfulness by day and by night."



FISH SHAPED GONG.

Both explanations prove that the original significance of the fish must have been lost when these reasons were invented. Wu Pien's argument is simply the pious contemplation of a thinker who knows

that the fish is regarded with religious awe and tries to offer a reason that would satisfy his own curiosity and that of other people.

The custom of the fish-gong as well as the stories about it must therefore be regarded as evidence of the significance of the fish in the religious circles of a pre-Buddhist age. It was retained by sheer habit as is the case with other customs such as the tonsure which is pre-Buddhist and pre-Christian and continues in both religions although it has lost its significance.



CHINESE REPRESENTATION OF BUDDHA AS A FISHERMAN.

Christians are called "the little fish" and Christ is represented as a fisherman, while he promises his apostles that they shall be "fishers of men." It is a remarkable coincidence that in the Mahayana scriptures Buddha too is spoken of as a fisherman who catches fish, drawing them out of the ocean of Samsara into the light of salvation. This explains the strange fact that there are Buddhist pictures and figures which represent Buddha with rod and hook in the attitude of fishing—a highly un-Buddhistic action.