

**THE SACRED BOOKS OF
THE BUDDHISTS
COMPARED WITH HISTORY
AND MODERN SCIENCE**

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The Sacred Books of the Buddhists Compared with History and Modern Science by R. Spence Hardy

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BY

R. SPENCE HARDY, HON. MEM. ROYAL AS. SOC.

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1863.

IN consequence of an extension of my original design, I have had to alter the title I had at first intended to adopt. By the Sacred books I mean the Text of the Pitakas, and the Commentaries on them compiled by Buddhaghóso.

I am only a visitor in Ceylon, and have had to write this Essay under some disadvantages, as my library is in England; but my friends have been kind in lending me the books I have required. I have received from the Rev. John Scott, of Galle, several valuable suggestions. I have been aided, in all that relates to translation from Pali, by the Rev. David de Silva, of Colpetty, to whom I am greatly indebted; and by my Pundit, Don Johannes Panditatilaka, of Kóggala, whose knowledge and understanding of the Pitakas is extensive.

I have had principally in view throughout the work, the instruction of the natives of Ceylon who understand the English language, an increasingly numerous and respectable class. This will account for the insertion of some things, and the omission of others, that would have been presented in a different form if I had written for European readers.

I know too well the human heart, to suppose that I shall make an immediate impression upon the Buddhism of the land: but I shall scatter seeds of truth, that by the blessing of God will not be long dormant, but spring up, and at no distant day yield a harvest that will gladden the soul of the reaper.

R. SPENCE HARDY.

Wesleyan Mission House, Colombo,

September 1, 1863.



B U D D H I S M

“NOT HISTORICALLY TRUE.”

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THE phrase, “not historically true,” I need hardly say, is taken from the volumes recently published by the bishop of Natal. These works are, at present, causing much excitement in Ceylon, as well as in other places. It is an old mode of argument that the bishop uses, which has been tried against the Scriptures in instances without number; but, in every instance, it has signally failed to produce the effect that was intended; and, in many cases, the truth has been more firmly and triumphantly established, through the investigations that have arisen in consequence. It is the maxim of the age in which we live, not to take any assertion for granted merely because it is so said by some one else; but, to ask for the ground on which we are called upon to believe it. Formerly, a statement was made, and if it had authority for its repetition, and was confirmed by antiquity, it was received, and believed in, without further search; arguments arose from it, theories were founded on it, and conclusions were drawn from it, that no one disputed. But it was seen, when the world had become more enlightened, and was about to leave the deep ruts of other ages, that this was not the right way in which the search for truth is to be conducted; for if the statement itself is wrong, all the results supposed to flow from it are thereby vitiated. We are now taught in this way: Begin at the beginning; be sure that you

are not deceived in your first proposition; then proceed cautiously, having a reason for every step you take, and for every conclusion to which you come; and thus proceeding, all fearlessly, you will attain, in the end, to absolute verity, and will be able to maintain, against all comers, the position on which you take your stand. It is the use of experiment, commencing, not as formerly from some conjectural basis, but with some simple and certain truth, that has led to the scientific discoveries of modern times, by which the condition of the world has been changed to so great an extent. It is authority that is now asked for in all departments of science; not the authority of names, but that of tried and substantiated facts. To test the averments of history there is the application of the same rule, and no event is now relied upon as certain, unless we have the evidence required to verify its claim to our regard.*

I have no fear that the bishop's books will help the cause of Buddhism, though the advocates of that system regard them with a reverence that an Englishman can scarcely understand; as, with all his respect for the author of a good book, he never worships the book itself, as the people here are taught to do, in reference to their sacred bana. But the name of the bishop will be made use of by the enemies of revelation; as it will be inferred, and so far not unfairly, that if one of the royal standard-bearers becomes a rebel, the king's cause must be in peril. I am not about to prove the falsity of his conclusions. There are books in plenty that have done this already, accessible to those who understand the language in

* I leave out, for the present, all reference to supernatural revelation. When any one claims to speak or act in the name of God, I have then to ask, What are the proofs he can give me that he has received the commission of God? And if I have to receive these proofs on the testimony of another, I have further to ask, Has the recorder had the opportunity of knowing the certainty of the statements he makes? Is he a faithful recorder; may I rely upon his word without the fear of being led astray? And have the facts that he records come down to me as he wrote them, without corruption or alteration?

which I now write. The time may come when it will be necessary to transfer the arguments of some of these works into Singhalese; and if so, the members of the church in Ceylon will be ready to do their duty. But that time has not come yet. I am convinced, meanwhile, that in reference to the religions of India, there is an advantage to be gained from the publication of these books, and the interest they have excited, which the advocates of the truth would do wrong to overlook. The method that bishop Colenso employs, unsuccessfully, in his attack upon the Pentateuch of Moses; we may employ, successfully, in exposing the "unhistorical" character of the Pitaka of Buddha.

The severe and searching scrutiny to which the records and religions of all nations have had to submit,—as well with regard to their most minute particulars as to their great and essential principles—has torn from history some of its pleasantest pages; and many an error has been thereby exposed, that was previously thought to be a truth of God. But the process by which the enquiry is carried on, is of so sure a character, that however much, in some instances, we may regret the consequences of its application, we are obliged to submit to its unimpeachable decisions. That my meaning may be the better understood, I will give an illustrative instance of the manner in which the rule is applied to the history of ancient states. The example I present is that of Rome. With what zest does the schoolboy devour, when he reads, perhaps by stealth, the legend of the birth of Romulus and Remus! How the daughter of king Numitor, Rhea Silva, one of the vestal virgins, had two sons, and was put to death for violating her vow of chastity; how the children were exposed on a raft, by which they were carried down the Tiber, until the frail vessel in which they lay, grounded near a fig-tree, in one of the shallows that afterwards became famous as the forum; how a she-wolf there found and suckled them, afterwards assisted in the reverent care she took of her charge by a woodpecker, until they were discovered by a shepherd, who carried them home, and brought them up as his own

children; and how they afterwards learnt the dignity of their descent, were acknowledged as the grandchildren of Numitor, and founded Rome. The fig-tree was in existence, as well as the shepherd's hut, in historic times; the story of the she-wolf was presented, both by the painter and the sculptor, in works of art wrought with the most exquisite skill; and festivals were celebrated to keep in remembrance the wonderful events, the divine interpositions, connected with the founding of "the eternal city." But the whole has been proved by the unsparing critic to be a mere legend, without any real authority; and it has now to be set aside as "unhistorical." The story can be traced back, in this form, only to a certain distance in the ancient chronicles of the city. It is then told in ways that contradict each other in important particulars, and it has to struggle with other legends, almost equally rich in poetry but equally destitute of foundation in truth. And at an earlier period still, there is the burning of the city, in which its archives are lost, and beyond all is uncertainty and confusion. "The claims of reason," we are told by Niebuhr, in reference to the subject before us, must be asserted, and we are "to take nothing as historical which cannot be historical."

To show more clearly still the manner in which these conclusions are arrived at, I will apply the same process to one of the earliest of the Singhalese legends, in itself not without interest, and in some respects resembling the story I have just repeated from the traditions of Rome. About the middle of the third century after the death of Buddha, Ceylon was divided into several petty states, and among the rest was that of Kalyáni (Calány), of which Tissa was king. His wife was beautiful; his brother, Uttiya, was a libertine; and there was evil committed in the royal household. But the king having heard of the wrong that was done, sent secretly for a Rodia, and spoke to him thus: "I will call together my retinue, including my younger brother, and I will say to thee, in their presence, Is there any one of lower caste than thou art? and the reply thou must make is, The king's younger brother is a meaner man than I am." This was accordingly done; and the prince, thus put to shame, fled to Udagampala, but he contrived

to send a letter to the queen, by a messenger disguised as a priest, who was to enter the palace with the rest of the priests when they went to receive the usual alms. The letter was filled with the common topics of a guilty lover, but it had no name, nor was the place mentioned whence it came. The queen was accustomed to assist at the giving of alms, and as she was looking towards the messenger, he took the opportunity to let the epistle fall on the ground. Its fall, however, caused a rustling noise, which attracting the notice of the king, he took it up, and on reading it saw that his queen was unfaithful to her exalted position. Uttiya had been the pupil of the high priest of Kalyáni, and their hand-writing was alike. The king charged the high priest with having written the letter; listened to no protestations of his innocence; and commanded him to be put to death by being cast into a caldron of boiling oil. For seven days the attempt was made to heat the oil, but it still remained cold; yet as the priest, when a herdsman in a former age, had acted contrary to the precept, by drowning a fly that fell into some milk he was boiling, though he escaped the death appointed by the king, he was turned into a heap of ashes. The queen was thrown into the river, and the messenger was cut in pieces. But to punish the king for this act of impiety towards an innocent priest, the déwas who protect Ceylon caused the sea to encroach on the land, and much damage was done to the country. To appease their wrath, as it was supposed that the country could be saved in no other way, the king resolved to sacrifice his virgin daughter. Placing her in a golden vessel, on which was inscribed the word "râjadhítâti," which signified that she was a royal maiden, the vessel was committed to the waves of the sea. But the flood still raged, until 100,000 towns, 970 fisher villages, and 470 villages inhabited by divers for pearls, had been submerged.* As the king, from the back of his elephant, was watching the

* The same legend informs us that in a former age, the citadel of Râwanâ, 25 palaces, and 400,000 streets, were swallowed up by the sea. This was on account of the impiety of the giant king. The submerged land was between Tuticoreen and Manaar, and the island of