### THE TEACHING OF THE BUDDHA From *Hinduism and Buddhism, An Historical Sketch*, Vol. 1

### By Sir Charles Elliot When the Buddha preached his first sermon to the five monks at Benares the topics he selected were the following. First comes an introduction about avoiding extremes of either self-indulgence or self-mortification. This was specially appropriate to his hearers who were ascetics and disposed to over-rate the value of austerities. Next he defines the middle way or eightfold path. Then he enunciates the four truths of the nature of suffering, its origin, its cessation, and the method of bringing about that cessation. This method is no other than the eightfold path. Then his hearers understood that whatever has a beginning must have an end. This knowledge is described as the pure and spotless Eye of Truth. The Buddha then formally admitted them as the first members of the Sangha. He then explained to them that there is no such thing as self. We are not told that they received any further instruction before they were sent forth to be teachers and missionaries: they were, it would seem, sufficiently equipped. When the Buddha instructs his sixth convert, Yasa, the introduction is slightly different, doubtless because he was a layman. It treats of "almsgiving, of moral duties, of heaven, of the evil, vanity and sinfulness of desires, of the blessings which come from abandoning desires." Then when his catechumen's mind was prepared, he preached to him "the chief doctrine of the Buddhas, namely suffering, its cause, its cessation and the Path." And when Yasa understood this he obtained the Eye of Truth. It is clear, therefore, that the Buddha regarded practice as the foundation of his system. He wished to create a temper and a habit of life. Mere acquiescence in dogma, such as a Christian creed, is not sufficient as a basis of religion and test of membership. It is only in the second stage that he enunciates the four great theorems of his system (of which one, the Path, is a matter of practice rather than doctrine) and only later still that he expounds conceptions which are logically fundamental, such as his view of personality. "Just as the great ocean has only one taste, the taste of salt, so has this doctrine and discipline only one taste, the taste of emancipation." This practical aim has affected the form given to much of the Buddha's teaching, for instance the theory of the Skandhas and the chain of causation. When examined at leisure by a student of to-day, the dogmas seem formulated with imperfect logic and the results trite and obvious. But such doctrines as that evil must have a cause which can be discovered and removed by natural methods: that a bad unhappy mind can be turned into a good, happy mind by suppressing evil thoughts and cultivating good thoughts, are not commonplaces even now, if they receive a practical application, and in 500 B.C. they were not commonplaces in any sense. And yet no one can read Buddhist books or associate with Buddhist monks without feeling that the intellectual element is preponderant, not the emotional. The ultimate cause of suffering is ignorance. The Buddha has won the truth by understanding the universe. Conversion is usually described by some such phrase as acquiring the Eye of Truth, rather than by words expressing belief or devotion. The major part of the ideal life, set forth in a recurring passage of the Dîgha Nikâya, consists in the creation of intellectual states, and though the Buddha disavowed all speculative philosophy his discourses are full, if not of metaphysics, at least of psychology. And this knowledge is essential. It is not sufficient to affirm one's belief in it; it must be assimilated and taken into the life of every true Buddhist. All cannot do this: most of the unconverted are blinded by lust and passion, but some are incapacitated by want of mental power. They must practise virtue and in a happier birth their minds will be enlarged. The reader who has perused the previous chapters will have some idea of the tone and subject matter of the Buddha's preaching. We will now examine his doctrine as a system and will begin with the theory of existence, premising that it disclaims all idea of doing more than analyze our experience. With speculations or assertions as to the origin, significance and purpose of the Universe, the Buddha has nothing to do. Such questions do not affect his scheme of salvation. What views—if any—he may have held or implied about them we shall gather as we go on. But it is dangerous to formulate what he did not formulate himself, and not always easy to understand what he did formulate. For his words, though often plain and striking, are, like the utterances of other great teachers, apt to provoke discordant explanations. They meet our thoughts half way, but no interpretation exhausts their meaning. When we read into them the ideas of modern philosophy and combine them into a system logical and plausible after the standard of this age, we often feel that the result is an anachronism: but if we treat them as ancient simple discourses by one who wished to make men live an austere and moral life, we still find that there are uncomfortably profound sayings which will not harmonize with this theory. The Buddha's aversion to speculation did not prevent him from insisting on the importance of a correct knowledge of our mental constitution, the chain of causation and other abstruse matters; nor does it really take the form of neglecting metaphysics: rather of defining them in a manner so authoritative as to imply a reserve of unimparted knowledge. Again and again questions about the fundamental mysteries of existence are put to him and he will not give an answer. It would not conduce to knowledge, peace, or freedom from passion, we are told, and, therefore, the Lord has not declared it. Therefore: not, it would seem, because he did not know, but because the discussion was not profitable. And the modern investigator, who is not so submissive as the Buddha's disciples, asks why not? Can it be that the teacher knew of things transcendental not to be formulated in words? Once he compared the truths he had taught his disciples to a bunch of leaves which he held in his hand and the other truths which he knew but had not taught to the leaves of the whole forest in which they were walking. And the story of the blind men and the elephant seems to hint that Buddhas, those rare beings who are not blind, can see the constitution of the universe. May we then in chance phrases get a glimpse of ideas which he would not develop? It may be so, but the quest is temerarious. "What I have revealed hold as revealed, and what I have not revealed, hold as not revealed." The gracious but authoritative figure of the Master gives no further reply when we endeavour to restate his teaching in some completer form which admits of comparison with the ancient and modern philosophies of Europe. The best introduction to his theory of existence is perhaps the instruction given to the five monks after his first sermon. The body is not the self, he says, for if it were, it would not be subject to disease and we should be able to say, let my body be or not be such and such. As the denial of the existence of the self or ego (Attâ in Pali, Âtman in Sanskrit) is one of the fundamental and original tenets of Gotama, we must remember that this self whose existence is denied is something not subject to decay, and possessing perfect free will with power to exercise it. The Brahmanic Âtman is such a self but it is found nowhere in the world of our experience. For the body or form is not the self, neither is sensation or feeling (vedanâ) for they are not free and eternal. Neither is perception (saññâ) the self. Neither, the Buddha goes on to say, are the Sankhâras the self, and for the same reason. Here we find ourselves sailing on the high seas of dogmatic terminology and must investigate the meaning of this important and untranslateable word. It is equivalent to the Sanskrit saṃskâra, which is akin to the word Sanskrit itself, and means compounding, making anything artificial and elaborate. It may be literally translated as synthesis or confection, and is often used in the general sense of phenomena since all phenomena are compound. Occasionally we hear of three Sankhâras, body or deed, word and thought. But in later literature the Sankhâras become a category with fifty-two divisions and these are mostly mental or at least subjective states. The list opens with contact (phasso) and then follow sensation, perception, thought, reflection, memory and a series of dispositions or states such as attention, effort, joy, torpor, stupidity, fear, doubt, lightness of body or mind, pity, envy, worry, pride. As European thought does not class all these items under one heading or, in other words, has no idea equivalent to Sankhâra, it is not surprising that no adequate rendering has been found, especially as Buddhism regards everything as mere becoming, not fixed existence, and hence does not distinguish sharply between a process and a result—between the act of preparing and a preparation. Conformations, confections, syntheses, co-efficients, tendencies, potentialities have all been used as equivalents but I propose to use the Pali word as a rule. In some passages the word phenomena is an adequate literary equivalent, if it is remembered that phenomena are not thought of apart from a perceiving subject: in others some word like predispositions or tendencies is a more luminous rendering, because the Sankhâras are the potentialities for good and evil action existing in the mind as a result of Karma. The Buddha has now enumerated four categories which are not the self. The fifth and last is Viññâṇa, frequently rendered by consciousness. But this word is unsuitable in so far as it suggests in English some unified and continuous mental state. Viññâṇa sometimes corresponds to thought and sometimes is hardly distinguished from perception, for it means awareness of what is pleasant or painful, sweet or sour and so on. But the Pitakas continually insist that it is not a unity and that its varieties come into being only when they receive proper nourishment or, as we should say, an adequate stimulus. Thus visual consciousness depends on the sight and on visible objects, auditory consciousness on the hearing and on sounds. Viññâṇa is divided into eighty-nine classes according as it is good, bad or indifferent, but none of these classes, nor all of them together, can be called the self. These five groups—body, feeling, perception, the sankhâras, thought—are generally known as the Skandhas signifying in Sanskrit collections or aggregates. The classification adopted is not completely logical, for feeling and perception are both included in the Sankhâras and also counted separately. But the object of the Buddha was not so much to analyze the physical and mental constitution of a human being as to show that this constitution contains no element which can be justly called self or soul. For this reason all possible states of mind are catalogued, sometimes under more than one head. They are none of them the self and no self, ego, or soul in the sense defined above is discernible, only aggregates of states and properties which come together and fall apart again. When we investigate ourselves we find nothing but psychical states: we do not find a psyche. The mind is even less permanent than the body, for the body may last a hundred years or so "but that which is called mind, thought or consciousness, day and night keeps perishing as one thing and springing up as another." So in the Saṃyutta-Nikâya, Mara the Tempter asks the nun Vajirâ by whom this being, that is the human body, is made. Her answer is "Here is a mere heap of sankhâras: there is no 'being.' As when various parts are united, the word 'chariot' is used (to describe the whole), so when the skandhas are present, the word 'being' is commonly used. But it is suffering only that comes into existence and passes away." And Buddhaghosa says: "Misery only doth exist, none miserable; No doer is there, naught but the deed is found; Nirvana is, but not the man that seeks it; The path exists but not the traveller on it." Thus the Buddha and his disciples rejected such ideas as soul, being and personality. But their language does not always conform to this ideal of negative precision, for the vocabulary of Pali (and still more of English) is inadequate for the task of discussing what form conduct and belief should take unless such words are used. Also the Attâ (Âtman), which the Buddha denies, means more than is implied by our words self and personality. The word commonly used to signify an individual is puggalo. Thus in one sutta the Buddha preaches of the burden, the bearer of the burden, taking it up and laying it down. The burden is the five skandhas and the bearer is the individual or puggalo. This, if pressed, implies that there is a personality apart from the skandhas which has to bear them. But probably it should not be pressed and we should regard the utterance as merely a popular sermon using language which is, strictly speaking, metaphorical.