

A REMARKABLE BUDDHA STATUE

By Peter D. Ouspensky

There is a Buddhist temple in Sri Lanka which enshrines a statue of the Buddha with sapphire eyes. The face of this Buddha image has an extraordinary expression of understanding. "To understand this face," says Ouspensky, "is to understand Buddhism. There is no need to read large volumes on Buddhism, or to walk with professors who study Eastern religions or with learned bhikshus. One must come here, stand before the Buddha and let the gaze of those blue eyes penetrate one's soul and one will understand what Buddhism is."

That, in a nutshell, sums up the wonderful quality of this statue. I shall not write a word more lest it diminishes the curiosity and detracts the interest of the reader. I have just opened a little window for you to peep through and a quick glimpse into the mind of a Russian mystic as he enjoys the long walks by the seashore, the exotic beauty and the tropical charm that was and still is Green Ceylon.

Peter D. Ouspensky (1878 – 1947) was also a philosopher and author whose works, for instance, his 'Tertium Organium', influenced by his mysticism, touch mainly on the fourth and higher dimensions. This article is an extract from his Book – 'A New Model Of The Universe' – which was first published in 1914.

- Ed.

A lace-work of coconut palms along the sandy shores of the ocean. Fishermen's hamlets amidst the green. Lagoons, lakes, paddyfields. Panoramas of valley and mountain landscapes. The sharp pointed Adam's Peak. Ruins of ancient cities. Gigantic statues of Buddha under green branches of trees from which monkeys stare down at you. White Buddhist temples amongst flowers and foliage. Monks in yellow robes. Sinhalese with tortoise shell combs in their hair, wearing close-fitting white skirts reaching to the ground. Laughing black-eyed girls in light carts drawn by quick-trotting bullocks. Huge trees thickly covered with scarlet blossoms. The broad leaves of banana trees. Again palms. Rose-red earth – and sun, sun, sun. That is Ceylon – Green Ceylon.

I stayed at a hotel outside Colombo on the seashore, from where I made a number of excursions – going south to Galle, to the Buddhist monasteries north to the toy town of Kandy, where stands the holy Temple of the Tooth, its white stones covered with green moss – and further to the ruins of Anuradhapura, a

city which long before the birth of Christ had a population of two million, and which was destroyed during the invasion of the Tamils at the beginning of our era. It has long been overrun and swallowed up by the green jungle through which now, for nearly fifteen miles, stretch streets and squares over-grown with grass and bushes, foundations and the half-demolished walls of houses, temples, monasteries, palaces, reservoirs and tanks, fragments of broken statues, gigantic dagobas, bell-shaped brick buildings and so on.

On returning to my hotel after one of these excursions, I stayed indoors for a few days, trying to write down my impressions, above all, my conversations with the Buddhist monks who had been explaining the teaching of the Buddha. These conversations had left me with a strange feeling of dissatisfaction. I could not give up the thought that in Buddhism many things existed on which we were not able to come to an understanding and which I should define by the words “miraculous” or “magical” – that is to say precisely what Buddhists deny in Buddhism.

Buddhism appeared to me in two aspects simultaneously. On the one hand I saw it as a religion full of light, full of softness and warmth, of all religions the furthest removed from what may be called “paganism”, a religion which even in its extreme church-forms never blessed the sword, never employed compulsion, in any form whatever; a religion which one might embrace while remaining in one’s former religion. All this on the one hand. On the other hand a strange philosophy which tries to deny that which constitutes the essence and principal content of every religion – the idea of the miraculous.

The bright side of Buddhism I felt immediately on entering any Buddhist temple, especially in the southern part of Ceylon. Buddhist temples are little green nooks resembling the hermitages in Russian monasteries. A white stone enclosure and within it a few small, white buildings and a little belfry. Everything is always very clean and there is much verdure besides the many shadows, sun-flecks and flowers. A traditional dagoba, a broad bell-shaped building with a surmounting spire, standing over buried treasure or relics. Beneath the trees a semi-circle of carved stone altars, and on them flowers brought by pilgrims, and in the evening the lights of oil-lamps; and the inevitable sacred Bo-tree, which in appearance resembles the elm. And pervading all is the sense of quietude and serenity that carries you away from the clamour and contradictions of life.

But as soon as you seek to come nearer to Buddhism, you immediately encounter a whole series of formal obstacles and evasions. “Concerning this we must not speak; about this Lord Buddha has forbidden even to think; this we have not at all, never have had and never can have.” Buddhism teaches only how one can liberate oneself from suffering. And liberation from suffering is

possible only by overcoming in oneself the desire for life, the desire for pleasure, all desires in general. In this is the beginning and the end of Buddhism; there is no mysticism, no hidden knowledge, no ideas about the miraculous, no future except the possibility of liberation from suffering – and annihilation.

But as I heard all this I was inwardly convinced that it was not so, and that in Buddhism there were many things to which perhaps I could not give a name, but which were definitely connected with the very name of the Buddha, *i.e.*, “The Enlightened One”; and that precisely the idea of “illumination” or “enlightenment”, and assuredly not the arid and materialistic theories of liberation from suffering, constituted the principal essence of Buddhism.

This contradiction which I felt strongly, would not allow me to write; it prevented me from formulating my impressions even to myself; it made me dispute mentally with the Buddhists with whom I had talked; it made me contradict them, argue with them, wish to compel them to recognize and talk of something of which they did not wish to speak.

Consequently my work went badly for several days. I tried to write in the morning but seeing that nothing came of it, I used to go for a stroll along the seashore or take a train to the town.

Once on a Sunday morning, when our usually half-empty and sleepy hotel was filled with people from the town, I went out early. This time I did not go by the sea, but strolled along the road which led from the shore inland, through green meadows, past clumps of trees and now and again one or two huts.

The path along which I went led out on to the main road running south from Colombo. I remembered that somewhere about here must be a Buddhist temple to which I had not yet been, and I asked an old Sinhalese, who was selling green-coconuts in a little stall by the side of the road, where the temple was. Some other people came along and by their united efforts they somehow managed to understand what I wanted, and told me that the temple was on this road towards Colombo and that a small path on the right would lead to it.

After going some distance I found, at last among the trees, the path of which they had told me and which led to the temple. Soon I caught sight of the enclosure and gates. I was met by the gate-keeper, a very talkative Sinhalese with a thick beard and an inevitable comb in his hair. First he took me into the new shrine, where some modern and quite uninteresting statues of the Buddha and his disciples stood in a row. Then we looked at the vihara where the monks live and where there is a school for children and a hall for preaching; then the dagoba, on the spire of which is set a large moonstone which is shown to tourists and, so far as I could understand, was considered the most remarkable

object in the whole temple; then a huge spreading and apparently very ancient Bo-tree, which by its age showed the antiquity of the temple. Under this tree there was deep shade into which obviously the sun never penetrated, for the stone altars which stood in it were covered with fine green moss.

There were some extraordinarily picturesque spots among the buildings and trees; and I remembered that I had seen photographs of them before.

Finally we went to look at the old shrine. It was undoubtedly a very ancient building, long, one-storied, columned, with a verandah. As is always the case with these shrines, the walls inside were covered with bright painting representing various episodes from the life of Prince Gautama and from other incarnations of the Buddha. In the second room, the guide told me, was a very ancient statue of the Buddha **with sapphire eyes**. Statues of the Buddha are either standing, sitting or reclining. This was a reclining Buddha. When we entered the second room of the shrine it was quite dark, as the light from the door through which we came could not reach it. I struck a match and saw behind the latticed glass frame running the whole length of the wall a huge statue lying on its side with one hand under its head, and the strange gaze of eyes which were not looking at me and yet appeared to see me.

The gate-keeper opened another door and in the faint light that penetrated to where I was standing the face of the Buddha appeared before me. It was about a yard in length, painted yellow, with strongly marked dark lines round the nostrils, mouth and eyebrows – and with great blue eyes.

“Those eyes were real sapphires”, my guide told me. “Nobody knows when this statue was made; but it is certainly more than a thousand years old.”

“Will not the frame open?” I asked my guide.

“It does not open”, he replied, “It has not been opened for sixty years.”

He went on talking but I was not listening. The gaze of those great blue eyes attracted me.

A second or two passed and I understood that I was in the presence of a miracle.

The guide quietly went out behind me and sat on the steps of the verandah, and I was left alone with the Buddha.

The face of the Buddha was quite alive; he was not looking straight at me, and yet he saw me. At first I felt nothing but wonder. I had not expected and could not have expected anything like it. But very soon wonder and all other feelings and thoughts disappeared in new and strange sensations. The Buddha **saw** me, saw me in that which I could not see myself, all that was hidden in the most secret recesses of my soul. And under his gaze, which, as it were, passed me

by, I began to see all this myself. Everything that was small, superfluous, uneasy and troubled came to the surface and displayed itself under this glance. The face of the Buddha was quite calm but not expressionless, and full of deep thought and feeling. He was lying here deep in thought and I had come, opened the doors and stood before him, and now he was involuntarily judging me. But there was no blame or reproach in his glance. His look was extraordinarily serious, calm, and full of understanding. But when I attempted to ask myself what the face of the Buddha expressed, I realised that there could be no answer. His face was neither cold nor indifferent. On the other hand it would be quite wrong to say that it expressed warmth, sympathy or compassion. All this would be too small to ascribe to him. At the same time it would be also wrong to say that the face of the Buddha expressed unearthly grandeur or divine wisdom. No, it was a human face, yet at the same time a face which men do not happen to have. I felt that the words I could command would be wrong if applied to the expression of this face. I can only say that here was **understanding**.

Simultaneously I began to feel the strange effect which the Buddha's face produced on me. All the gloom that rose from the depths of my soul seemed to clear up. It was as if the Buddha's face communicated its calm to me. Everything that up to now had troubled me and appeared so serious and important now became so small, insignificant and unworthy of notice, that I only wondered how it could ever have affected me. And I felt that no matter how agitated, troubled, irritated and torn with contradictory thought and feelings a man might be when he came here, would go away calm, quiet, enlightened, **understanding**.

I remembered my work, remembered the conversations with the Buddhists, remembered how I had failed to make clear to myself certain things relating to Buddhism. And I nearly laughed: so utterly useless had it all been. All Buddhism was in this face, in this gaze. And suddenly I seemed to understand certain things the Buddha had forbidden men to speak of, things above human reason and above human words. Was it not right? Here I saw this face and felt it, and yet I was not able to say what it expressed. If nevertheless I tried to put it into words that would be even worse, because it would be a lie. In this perhaps lay the explanation of the Buddha's prohibition. And the Buddha had said also that he had imparted the whole of the teaching, and that no secret doctrine existed. Might this not mean that the secret was hidden not in secret words, but in words known to all, but not understood by men? Was it not possible that this Buddha was the solution of the mystery, the key to it? The whole statue was here before me, there was nothing secret or hidden in it; but even so, could I say that I saw it? And would others see it and understand it even to the extent that I did? Why was it unknown? It must be that people fail to notice it, just as they fail to see the truth hidden in the Buddha's words about liberation from suffering.

I looked at those deep blue eyes and felt that though my thoughts were near the truth they were not yet the truth, because the truth is rich and more varied than anything that can possibly be expressed in thoughts or words. At the same time I felt that this face really contained the whole of Buddhism. No books are necessary, no philosophical discourse – in the Buddha's glance is everything. One need only come here and be moved by this glance.

I went out of the shrine with the intention of returning on the following day and trying to photograph the Buddha. But for this purpose it would be necessary to open the frame. The gate-keeper to whom I spoke about the frame told me again that it could not be opened. However, I left with the hope of managing it somehow on the following day.

On the way back to the hotel I wondered how it could have happened that this Buddha was so little known. I was quite sure that it was not mentioned in any of the books on Ceylon which I had. And so it proved. In Cave's large **Book of Ceylon** there was actually a picture of this temple – the inner court with the little stone stairway leading to the belfry and the old shrine in which the Buddha is and even with the same gate-keeper who took me round. But not one word about the statue. And this seemed all the more strange because, apart from the mystical significance of this Buddha and its value as a work of art, it was certainly one of the largest Buddhas I have seen in Ceylon. And, moreover, it had sapphire eyes. How it had been overlooked or forgotten I could not imagine. The cause is of course to be found in the intensely "barbarian" character of the Western crowd which penetrates into the East and its deep contempt for all that does not serve the immediate purposes of profit or entertainment. At some time or other the Buddha was probably seen and described by somebody, but afterwards it was forgotten. The Sinhalese certainly know of the Buddha with the Sapphire Eyes, but for them it just **exists**, in the same way that the sea or the mountain exists.

Next day I went again to the temple.

I went fearing that on this occasion I should neither see nor feel what I had experienced the day before, that the Buddha with the Sapphire Eyes would suddenly prove to be just an ordinary stone statue with a painted face. But my fears were not confirmed. The Buddha's gaze was exactly the same, penetrating my soul, illuminating everything in it and, as it were, putting everything in order.

A day or two later I was in the temple again, and the gate-keeper now met me as an old acquaintance. And again the face of the Buddha communicated something to me that I could neither understand nor express. I intended to try and find out something about the history of the Buddha with the Sapphire Eyes. But it happened that almost immediately I had to leave for India. Then the war

began, and the face of the Buddha remained far from me across the gulf of men's madness.

One thing is certain. This Buddha is quite an exceptional work of art. I do not know of any work in Christian art which stands on the same level as the Buddha with the Sapphire Eyes, that is to say, I know of no work which expresses in itself so completely the idea of Christianity as the face of this Buddha expresses the idea of Buddhism. To understand this face is to understand Buddhism.

There is no need to read large volumes on Buddhism, or to walk with professors who study Eastern religions or with learned **bhikshus**. One must come here, stand before the Buddha and let the gaze of those blue eyes penetrate one's soul and one will understand what Buddhism is.

Often when I think of the Buddha I remember another face, the face of the Sphinx and the gaze of those eyes which do not see you. These are two quite different faces. Yet they have something in common, both of them speak of another life, of another consciousness, which is higher than man's consciousness. Therefore we have no words to describe them. When, by whom, or for what purpose these faces were created we do not know, but they speak to us of a real existence, of another life, and of the existence of men who know something of that life and can transmit it to us by the magic of art.