

# DISCOVERED BUDDHISM

By Mr. John Walters

As the foreign correspondent of a large newspaper, I had wandered much about the world. I had heard and seen many wonders on every continent. The time had come when few things surprised or excited me anymore. Then one day - in 1957 - I made in Bangkok a tremendous discovery. The discovery was Buddhism, a religion and philosophy that hitherto I had patronized with a cold, detached interest. I had in several countries gazed at Buddhism as at a museum piece, quaintly beautiful but quite ineffective. The picturesque Mahayana ritual of Japan and Korea had charmed me and absurdly reminded me of Gilbert and Sullivan. Even in Communist China I had marveled at the survival of the Buddhist "superstition". In Hankow, I remember, priests of the great temple told me of a widespread revival of Buddhism in China - "But of a more intellectual kind". I had smiled in doubt. Then in Thailand and Burma - centres of Theravada Buddhism - I had in past years had long talks with gentle English-speaking members of the Buddhist Order. Indeed, in Burma I had stayed in one of its Meditation Centres, only to write flippantly about it in my newspaper. Mine was an attitude common among Westerners - Britons and Americans in particular - who travel in Asia. This is an attitude of superiority in the presence of the unusual and inability to appreciate the higher qualities in the unfamiliar. We see nothing quaint in the Anglican minister in his white surplice, in the Roman Catholic priest making his ritualistic movement at the Altar. But in Asia we look upon the Buddhist monks in their yellow robes, and the lay folk making offering in the temples as children who never grow up. We Europeans and Americans of conventional Christian background will suspect nothing wildly exaggerated in New Testament stories of miracle and magic, and in creeds that to natural law are unreasonable and invalid. Yet when we are told the story and teachings of the Buddha we smile in our grown-ups ways as if listening to a children's fairy tale. Western philosophy we will take seriously, but we look upon Eastern philosophy as something obsolete or, at least, a little absurd. I was like that during my first travels in Asia. Dominating my brain were the almost hereditary beliefs in the overwhelming superiority of Christianity, of Western thought and even of Western ethics. I kept the bits and pieces of knowledge that I had collected about Buddhism in a small corner of my mind, just as curios and other knick-knacks are put behind glass in a drawing-room cabinet. Frequently I had stared at aspects of Buddhism and turned them over in my mind. But I never discovered what Buddhism really is until that day in Bangkok in 1957. And how

its truth and grandeur dawned upon me so suddenly and so fully, I shall never be able to explain.

My friend who took me to NAKHON PATHON had a long talk with me on Buddhism. He suggested that most Christians failed to face the reality of suffering. They made silly excuses about it. It might sound paradoxical, but Buddhists were happier than Christian because Buddhist realized how real suffering was. Moreover they had a practical method of overcoming it without prayers and sacrifices to a divinity who possibly didn't even exist.

We Buddhists are people without a God," added my friend. "We venerate the Buddha but we don't say prayers to him. We know that no force outside ourselves can help us. There are no "Merciful Arms. We must be our own salvation. And you will in your honesty admit that our godless people are far happier than yours, with their professed belief in divine goodness and mercy".

Alas, I had to nod my head in agreement. I know Thailand and also Burma. I had close trustworthy friends in Ceylon. In all three countries pure Buddhism of the Theravada school is the religion of the people. They are infinitely happier than the masses of Great Britain and America. Our material possessions are so big compared with those of these three Asian races. We cherish a belief in divine love and protection for mankind, whereas they are taught only the merciless law of cause and effect. Yet they sparkle with and irrepressible gaiety. Their spirit is gallant and high-hearted. He who has never known the close friendship of a Thai or Burmese had never exercised his own maximum capacity for laughter and fun.

He then talked about the happiness of the Buddha . . . "the man you call defeatist and pessimist".

He said "The Buddha preached the reality of sorrow, but he was never "a Man of Sorrows" to those who knew him. He passed through a Garden of Gethsemene, but it led to happiness because inside he found the secret of deliverance from suffering. "Happy I seek my rest," he would repeat. "Happy I rise; happy I pass the day, escaped from the snare of evil." As for his philosophy he described it as "Lovely in its origin, lovely in its progress, lovely in its consummation." The Buddha had a delicious sense of humour too. Many were his jokes and sallies. But then he was a man and repudiated any suggestion of divinity. In our scriptures the dark clouds of existence are recognized. But because we understand them, joy shines through. One of our most beloved sacred books, the Dhammapada, say, "We who call nothing our own are statement with happiness. We beam like the

radiant gods.” After returning to my hotel my friend said good-bye. Then I went to my bedroom and pondered.

I knew some Europeans became Buddhists but I had always regarded them as sadly misled. I knew of the Buddhist Society in London, and Les Amis Du Bouddhisme in Paris. However I could not imagine Buddhism spontaneously flourishing in a European setting. In the West its practice seemed rather a pose. Of course I was aware that in Asia hundreds of millions of people followed religions that were wholly or partly Buddhist. However, in my incredible blindness I had never seriously asked “Why?” and tried to seek an answer. The amazing fact was that I had observed Buddhism in Asia at short range without ever wondering whether it might be applied to my own vexed problems. But my approach had been as a cold amateur student in Comparative Religion.

Then on my trip to Nakorn Pathom with my friend something happened in my subconscious mind to stimulate the conscious. To this day I cannot explain the sudden mental awakening, the sudden awareness of the grandeur and majesty of the Buddhist way of life and point of view; nor am I able to explain why the Buddha, whose philosophy I had read long ago without feeling stirred, now seemed to demand my close interest.

So that evening in Bangkok, I started to think more deeply than ever before on the Buddha and his teachings. Mentally I fought against leaving Christianity for them. I was awake all night, and very early morning, when human vitality is at its lowest, I was filled with sadness that I was turning thus from the faith of my fathers to that of oriental peoples with whom I had little in common. I tried to think out plans of escape from the sudden enormous attractiveness (to myself) of the Asian creed that philosopher Alfred North Whitehead had blandly dismissed as “a religion of escapism”. This Buddhism, despite the compelling magnetism, was so coldly intellectual compared with Christianity. In Buddhism there was little to cling to except the statements labeled “Noble Truths”. In Christianity one could always cling to the Cross. Buddhism knew no personal God, no forgiveness of sins, no immortal soul. Yet I was, willy-nilly, being pulled towards it. With the coming of daylight my fears and misgivings vanished. The prospect of my intellectual adventure glowed like the standing Buddha at Nakorn Pathom.

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