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THE LOTUS
OF THE WONDERFUL LAW

OR

THE LOTUS GOSPEL

SADDHARMA PUNDARĪKA SŪTRA

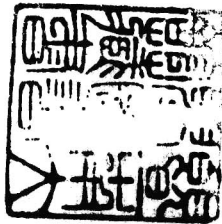
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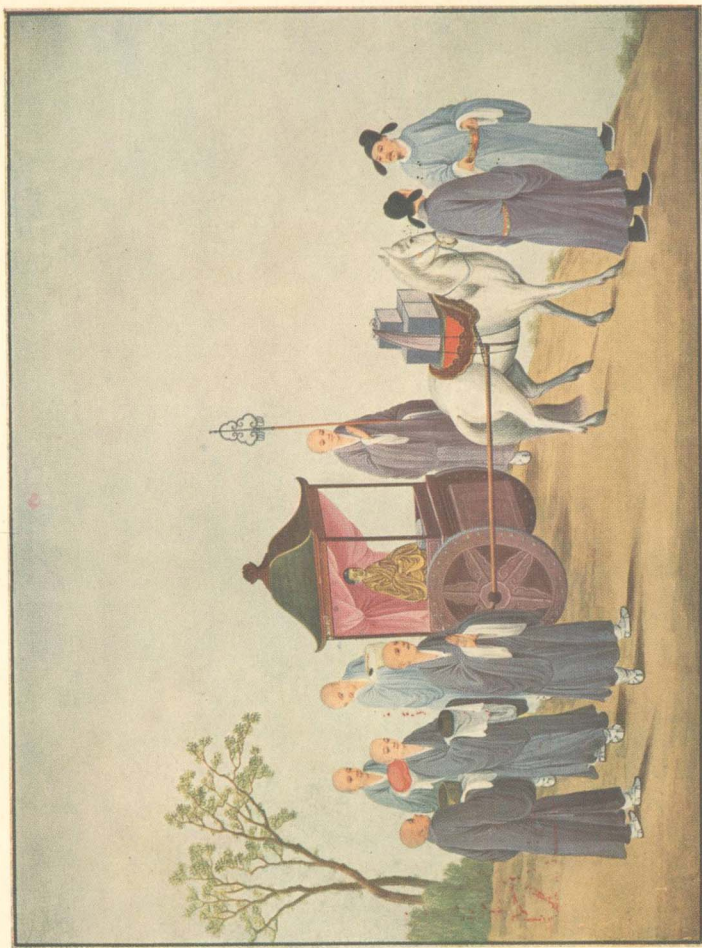
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THE RETURN OF THE CHINESE ENVOYS SENT TO INDIA ABOUT A.D. 63
who brought back to their emperor an image of the Buddha, and copies of the scriptures

PREFACE

THE Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful, or Mystic, Law is the most important religious book of the Far East. It has been described as "The Gospel of Half Asia". Dr. Timothy Richard twenty years ago translated a brief summary of its teaching, as also the profounder Sastra which he termed "The Awakening of Faith". These he published under the title of *The New Testament of Higher Buddhism*. He says: "though Buddhism has twelve different sects, yet I found the Lotus Scripture on the lecterns of every Buddhist temple I visited. It is also the chief Scripture in the Tiendai School of Buddhism in China, and is therefore the chief source of consolation to the many millions of Buddhists in the Far East." Quite recently Dr. Kenneth J. Saunders in his *The Gospel for Asia* has expressed the opinion that the three most influential religious books in the world are The Gospel of St. John, The Bhagavadgita, and The Lotus Sutra, and that what the Gospel of St. John is to the Christian and the Bhagavadgita to the Hindu, such is The Lotus to the Buddhist in the Far East. He goes farther and sees closer resemblances between the three books than others may see, at least in their ideals. When Dr. Richard published his synopsis of the Sutra under the title given above, the late Hon. Mrs. E. A. Gordon annotated it throughout with references to our New Testament with varying degrees of approximation.

Whatever view may be held of the intrinsic value of the work by Western readers, there is no doubt of its appreciation in the Far East, and it is perfectly justifiable to consider it as one of the greatest and most formative books of the world. Its influence from Tibet to Japan, from Mongolia to Cochin China has been greater than that of any other single book. For the ordinary Western reader it is much too long, as all that is said in prose is repeated in verse. There is, in consequence, repetition wearisome to the reader of many books. Undoubtedly the method of the author and of his period was useful for driving home truth to the sluggish mind, or to the mind free from other attractive entanglements. It is a method beloved of the unlettered. In order, therefore, that the Western reader may not miss the essential meaning I have omitted the repetitions and much unnecessary detail, while making it my aim to portray the message of the book as nearly as possible in its own way.

As a living book it is no longer read in Sanskrit, but only in the languages of the Far East. It is therefore their tone that I have sought to express in this abbreviated version.

The advent of Christianity to Japan has had its usual influence in arousing a moribund religion from lethargy, a lethargy which is inherent in Buddhism. A somewhat similar revival with a similar cause is occurring in China. In consequence, a fresh interest has arisen in Buddhist literature and not least in The Lotus. For this reason in 1921 I wrote to China for a copy of the Chinese text. Though the pages are less peppered

with Sanskrit transliterations and Buddhist terms than other Buddhist classics, the work still presents serious difficulty to the Chinese reader and not less so to the Western student. It was therefore my purpose to translate the text for the use of the Western student.

The books had scarcely arrived in Oxford when one of those curious coincidences occurred, which the devout ascribe to external intervention, be it by the Buddha, as my visitor thought, or by some other Spiritual Power. An unusual type of visitor called on me. His name was Bunno Kato. It transpired that he was a Japanese leader of the Nichiren School of Buddhism. Most modestly he preferred of me an earnest request, that I would help him in translating into English The Lotus scripture. It is the great text of his School as also of certain other Schools of Buddhism. He knew the lengthy text by heart, and was intimately acquainted with the voluminous commentaries written on the work. The Chinese text common to Japan and China is the Kumarajiva version made in A.D. 406. It was with pleasure that we began our work on it together. A more faithful, or intelligent devotee of the work could not have been found. After nearly four years of application the English translation was finished in 1925. My final revision was completed at Harbin in Manchuria, while waiting for the Trans-Siberian train to bring me home after a visit to China, where I had gone as a member of Lord Willingdon's Commission. I was anxious to send the final corrections to Mr. Kato via

China, for any papers carried through Russia were suspect and liable to confiscation, as I proved on my way through.

The translation of the whole work is still in manuscript, along with Mr. Kato's extensive introduction. It will form too large a book to appeal to any but students of the subject. I am therefore taking this method of making the work better known to the general reader of the Western world.

Too long has this literary masterpiece been buried in translations, unavoidably cumbrous and inspirationally innocuous. Hence this endeavour to reveal the contour of the most powerful spiritual drama known in the Far East.

W. E. S.

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Acknowledgement for permission to use the above illustrations is gratefully made to the British Museum and Dr. Lionel Giles for Nos. 1, 9, and 12; to Lady Hosie for No. 2, and to the Bodleian Library for the other illustrations, which are taken from the eighteenth-century woodcuts of the

釋迦如來應化事蹟, *Shih-chia Ju-lai Ying-hua Shih-chi*, or *Scenes from the Life of the Buddha*.

INTRODUCTION

Historical

BY whom was this classic given? Devout Buddhists in the Far East say it contains the very words of Sakyamuni, the Buddha, his final teaching spoken towards the end of his days on the Vulture Peak in Nepal. Equally devout Buddhists in Ceylon, Burma, and Siam declare that it was entirely unknown in the ancient Canon, that it contradicts the essential teaching of the Buddha, and that it is the invention of a much later age. Thus we see Buddhism separated into its two great divisions, and it is over the works, of which The Lotus is the most representative type, that the division of Hinayana and Mahayana arises. These two terms were invented by the Mahayanists, who form the "Northern" School of Buddhism, that is the Far Eastern School now found in China, Japan, Korea, Mongolia, Tibet. The Hinayanists are the "Southern", or Orthodox, School of Ceylon, Burma, Siam. Hinayana means Small wain, or vehicle; Mahayana, Large wain, or vehicle. By the Northern Buddhist, Hinayana is charged with conveying only the few to Nirvana, that is, those seeking salvation by the arduous way of works. Mahayana, on the other hand, professes to open the way for the many, indeed finally for all. Consequently Mahayanism is another term for Universalism, or Catholicism.

In Mahayana, salvation is attained not by laborious

effort, but simply by faith in the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. The great Bodhisattvas in particular are objects of faith and invocation. They are not historical beings but idealizations. Accredited with a vow not to enter into the final bliss of Buddhahood until all creatures are saved, they instantly respond to all who call upon them. Their salvation is not to a Nirvana of individual extinction or annihilation, but to heavens of joy and blessedness. Such happiness is infinite, to which all will finally attain. Those who claim it now by faith and invocation will escape the perils and pains of reincarnation. Those who delay their belief will continue to suffer until they cry for salvation, as they ultimately will cry.

Here lies the contrast, the difference, between the one School and the other—a difference at least as fundamental as between Roman and Reformed Christianity. But Roman and Reformed virtually make appeal to the same Book, or collection of books, the Bible. Not so is it with Hinayana and Mahayana, for they appeal to two differing sets of textual authorities. Hinayanists claim, with a measure of justice, that their texts are the only ancient and valid canons, and that these alone contain the real teaching of their Founder. Mahayanists, it is true, claim all those texts equally with their rivals, but declare that they were only the Buddha's preparatory teaching, suited to the immature degree of his disciples' immediate development. They insist that their Mahayana texts were his developed doctrine, given towards the end of his ministry, when his disciples were mature

enough to understand his spiritual interpretation of the universe and of universal truth. They say that his attitude, during the period of Hinayana texts, was similar to the attitude of the schoolmaster, who leads on his pupils according to their ability through the preparatory stages, but when they are sufficiently grounded reveals to them the higher learning. Consequently they claim that the Buddha only in the later stages of his life and before his departure, made the full revelation. This perfect revelation, they assert, is only to be found in the Mahayana texts; it is a revelation of the "All-Truth" which his disciples had been trained by easy stages finally to apprehend in its fullness.

The detached mind will not easily be beguiled into acceptance of the Mahayanist's special pleading. Mahayanists have not a shred of real evidence to show that the Buddha ever delivered any of the addresses attributed by them to him. All the weight of evidence is indeed against them. Whatever evidence there is rather supports the Hinayanists' claim to Apostolic Succession. Though these may not possess documentary evidence of the Buddha's actual sermons, at least the Sutras of Southern Buddhism may be considered as in the direct line of his teaching. As to the Mahayana Sutras, the unprejudiced cannot doubt that they are the invention of a later period, and that Mahayanism is a shoot grafted on to the original stock of the Buddhist Bodhi-tree. Whence, where and when this scion was grafted is still unknown. There are able scholars who assert that there is no

need to look abroad for Mahayana ideas, because their embryo can be discovered in the orthodox scriptures. But there seems more justification for supposing the new scion to be of external origin, grafted on to Buddhism, perhaps in Northern India, perhaps still farther north in Central Asia. Whatever its origin this scion, grafted into the old tree, produced fruit of a different quality, more attractive to the eye and the taste; it was this off-shoot that struck in the north and east of Asia. The original stock grew older, died in its native soil, and was only saved by a branch which had been transplanted away from its native hills with their wintry snows to the southern sun, where it survives.

We may say, then, that The Lotus never had any direct connexion with Sakyamuni. It was the brilliant concept of a later age. The author, whose name and place of origin are unknown, was one of the world's greatest Apocalyptists. He was gifted with a rare imagination, and with remarkable dramatic powers which appeal to an imaginative and florid race. He was endowed with talents of detail and repetition that, while tedious and often puerile to our sated taste, were of prime value in capturing the attention of his readers and in impressing his story on a leisurely people. His brilliant drama of spiritual things has outshone his name, while unconsciously he has been one of the chief instruments in dividing Buddhism. The inspiration that was to weld a fracture already yawning split it permanently in two. The two segments remain apart. The Southern Buddhists

of Burma, Ceylon, Siam guard the treasure of the earthly Buddha's law, as they now guard the coffin supposed to contain his earthly remains so recently recovered. The Northern or Far Eastern Buddhists guard the treasure of an Eternal Buddha, of whom the earthly Buddha was but a temporal manifestation. Thus does Mahayana, or the universal chariot of salvation, compare itself with the Southern Hinayana, or the small chariot of laborious "works", which saves the few. In reality Mahayanism is, as the Southern Buddhists believe, a betrayal of Sakyamuni Buddha, in the interests of doctrines he never taught and which are a reversal of his principles, as recorded by his disciples.

As to the author, not only is his name unknown, but even the region of his origin is equally obscure. Presumably the writer composed the work in Sanskrit and in Northern India; it may, however, have been composed farther north in Central Asia. Though its date or period is not discovered, it seems to have been both a product, and perhaps a producer, of the reaction against the formalism which had fallen upon ascetic Buddhism.

Was it the offspring of ideas which had already hailed the dawn of spiritual liberation across Western Asia? That is a question to which as yet there is no sufficient answer. Whatever the answer may be we now know that Buddhism, at the beginning of the Christian era, was a potent religious force across Central Asia, that its missionaries had already reached Western China and that, during the first century of

our era, the religion, in a form clearly not of the Mahayana order, was welcomed at the Imperial Chinese Court. The Scythian ruler of Northern India, Kanishka, gave it his ardent support during that century, as the ruler Aśoka had done centuries earlier. That the Buddhism of Kanishka's period differed from the original cult is probable, but we do not yet know in what respect.

It must not be assumed that the new doctrines of salvation, which found their expression in the tractate "The Uprising (Awakening) of Faith" and in "The Lotus Sutra", were necessarily created by these works. It is more likely that those doctrines only found their ultimate expression in these works. Nor can we assume that they were known before Christian influence was felt in the lands of the new Buddhism. Though by no means convinced, or concerned, that Christian influence had anything to do with the creation of the new cult, yet I cannot ignore the fact that the first assured appearance in China of The Lotus was towards the end of the third century A.D. The Christian Church in India, whose foundation is attributed to the Apostle Thomas, may or may not have existed. That is perhaps a matter of minor importance to our subject in comparison with an influence of recognized potency, namely, the interchange of ideas which spread east and west along the remarkable trading corridor that stretched from Northern China to the Mediterranean. Graeco-Bactrian art is an instance of such propagation. Whether this uprising of the human spirit was a natural protest against