

THE COMPENDIUM OF PHILOSOPHY.*

Since first in Ceylon, now some thirty to forty years ago, the eminent scholar who is now generally recognised as the foremost occidental authority on Theravāda Buddhism and its sacred language, Māgadhī, realised the immense value of the great Pāli literature and decided to devote his life to making that literature and its contents known to the western world, one formidable obstacle has always stood in the way of an adequate interpretation of the third of the three Piṭakas, the Abhidhamma, the philosophical, metaphysical and psychological section of that literature, in which what we may term the subtler and deeper aspects of Buddhist teaching are enshrined. That difficulty has lain in the absence of a *nexus*, of a thought-path for the world-mind, as the Buddhist psychologist might express it,—in the lack of a human mind gifted with the power of interpretation, born in a Buddhist land and bred in the traditional Buddhist teaching, which at the same time should possess a sufficient acquaintance with western modes of thought and with western philosophic language to be able to render in our modern values this deeper treasure of the Buddha's lore.

This difficulty was absent in the case of the two other Piṭakas, the Vinaya and the Sutta, the Monastic Rule, and those Dialogues of the Master in which the poetry and ethics of the religion are set forth; the interpretation of these, for the most part, demanding only a full acquaintance with the language, a knowledge which the Pāli Text Society's great work has now made accessible to all conversant with the English tongue. But no grasp of the Māgadhī language, how great so ever, could take the place, for the western student studying in an occidental library, of that traditional exegesis of the profound Abhidhamma which is still living and current in the monasteries of Buddhist lands; any more

* *Compendium of Philosophy, being a translation now made for the first time from the original Pali of the Abhidhammattha-Sangaha, with introductory Essay and Notes, By Shwe Zan Aung, B. A., revised and edited by Mrs. Rhys Davids, M. A. Published for the Pali Text Society by Henry Froude, London, 1910. On sale in Burma at the British Burma Press, Rangoon, price Rs. 5.*

than a non-Christian scholar could deduce the subtler theological theses of the Catholic Church from a perusal of the Testament in Greek.

So it followed that whilst of the five books of the Vinaya two have been already translated into English, and the whole five have been edited in Roman text; whilst of the Sutta the whole Long Collection has appeared in translation, and the Medium Collection (already translated into German) is now in course of preparation for the press, and several other English translations have appeared in *Sacred Books of the East* and elsewhere; for many years no attempt was made to render any work of the Abhidhamma into English or any western tongue. The honour of being the first to enter this great field of work belongs to Mrs. Rhys Davids, who, some few years ago, produced the shortest of the Abhidhamma treatises in English garb. (*Buddhist Psychology*, by C. A. F. Rhys Davids, M. A.)

All occidental students of Buddhism will well remember with what gratitude and admiration of the Authoress' abilities that first induction into the mysteries of the Abhidhamma was received; the clarity and profundity of the Introductory Essay, and the new light the whole work cast upon their views of the deeper Buddhist teaching. But valuable and indeed indispensable to the student as that work has now become, it dealt admittedly with but a portion of the Abhidhamma philosophy; standing, indeed, as it did, alone, most of us found far more enlightenment in the admirable Introduction than in closest study of the translated text. Of the whole great Abhidhamma literature, this was but the shortest Treatise; well-nigh indecipherable as it stood alone. What was needed was a preliminary introduction to the whole philosophy; a single work which should contain at least the fundamental details of all that is expounded in the Abhidhamma; and this need was one which, for the reason earlier mentioned, no occidental scholar, of however wide an erudition, could, lacking access to the traditional exegesis of the living religion, ever hope yet to supply.

This great desideratum has now most happily and efficiently been supplied in the *Compendium of Philosophy*, by Maung Shwe Zan Aung, B. A., edited and revised by the learned authoress of the *Buddhist Psychology*, lately published by the Pāli Text Society; a work, the appearance of which constitutes an epoch in the history of modern Buddhist scholarship and study, no less by the fact that it inaugurates the above-indicated essential combination of Eastern Buddhist with Western scholar, than by its own

immense integral value. Here for the first time in the history of modern research into the ancient Buddhist lore, we have a work produced by a Buddhist scholar, working in a Buddhist land with all the immense advantage which a life-long training, the actual religion, and free access to the living tradition of the monasteries confer; himself also a deep student of the western philosophical systems; and his work is rendered, if possible, of still greater value, by the revision and collaboration of one who may justly be admitted to be the foremost living occidental authority on the subject.

It is most appropriate, also, that this inauguration of a system every lover of Buddhism will hope to see more widely extended should first see light in Burma, and that in a work concerned with the Abhidhamma. For in Burma we find Buddhism at its purest, its Order the object of the well-merited reverence and devotion of a people, well-nigh every son of which has himself experienced the monastic life; and, of the three lands still faithful to the pure and original religion propounded by The Buddha, Burma has for many centuries been distinguished for an especial devotion to and learning in this very subject of the Abhidhamma. Even now, monks from Ceylon and Siam come yearly in numbers to study Abhidhamma under learned Burmese Theras; and its profound metaphysics often form the subject of the keenest discussion even by the laity, at the Uposatha-day reunions in every monastery rest-house.

It is in Burma, also, that the original of the work now under discussion, the Abhidhammattha-Saṅgaha (Burmese Thingyo), has for long held front place as a convenient introduction to the study of the Buddhist philosophy and psychology. Its Māgadhi title, *A Compendium of the Essence of the Abhidhamma*, itself summarises its contents and conveys its value to this end; and, as we learn from the most interesting Preface contributed by Mrs. Rhys Davids, this very work had already been recommended to the attention of occidental students of Buddhism in a benedictory letter sent by the late Sri Saddhānanda Thera of Ceylon to the then new-born Pāli Text Society on the occasion of the first appearance of that Society's Journal in 1882.

And yet, for lack of knowledge of all the associations every phrase and word, almost, of this intensely-compressed manual conveys to the Buddhist trained from birth, the mere translation of the Saṅgaha itself would have been but of little service to the western student, now grappling for the first time with the study of the Abhidhamma. Well understanding how this result must necessarily follow, despite even the many elucidatory paragraphs added by the

Editor to well-nigh every page of the Text, the Author has added immensely to the value of his work by a general exposition of the whole groundwork of the Buddhist Philosophy, contained in an "Introductory Essay" occupying 76 pages of the "Compendium." Originating in a suggestion by the Editor that the Author should prefix to his work a revised and enlarged reproduction of his remarkable article on *The Processes of Thought in Buddhism*, he has made very much more of it, valuable though that article was. The essay, as it now stands, is an admirably methodical, concise and lucid exposition of Buddhist philosophy, from the standpoint of the Vithis or Mental Paths involved; forming just such an introduction to the whole Abhidhamma view-point as every Buddhist student in the west has for so long a time sought for in vain. Now for the first time, thanks to Maung Shwe Zan Aung, the occidental student who knows no Pāli is enabled in thought to enter the sealed Palace of the Mind; to watch, from the mental altitude of the world's greatest Teacher, the processes of the generation, duration and cessation of each several class of mental functioning; whilst the student of philosophy in general is here inducted into the final and greatest product of generations immemorial of Indo-Aryan philosophic thought, achieved under conditions as favourable for success in this direction as the past wonderful century has been for the development of material science.

Of special importance is the exposition of the Buddhist theory of Paccaya-satti, the causal linkage whereby memory is carried on. The Buddhist, like the western follower of Hume, sees in the man who hears the last word of a sentence a being in a sense or to an extent different from him who heard the first; but the defect in this connection of the Humean system, which, logically pushed to its conclusion, would land us in the absurdity that memory of the whole sentence is impossible, is cured by the profound and elaborate laws of relationship treated of in the Paṭṭhāna, concisely summed up in our Essay in the explanation how each mental state, in act of expiring, passes on the whole energy which constituted it to its successor; just as, on the larger field of conscious life, the whole great complex of mental functionings we call a man passes its specialised energy at death over to the new being,—"*Neither he, nor yet other than he,*"—whom in fact that very energy itself creates, and is.

Of special interest, also, is the width and as it were elasticity of the system of mental functioning here set forth. The Abhidhamma books, for instance, do not usually speak of what we now term "reasoning processes." But, as the

Author well points out, we may perfectly well, under the Buddhist system, classify that manner of mental functioning as Takka-vithi, and so on with any other mode of classifying or regarding thought-processes that we may choose to select. Whatever the *matter* of the processes may be their *manner* has by the Abhidhamma been immutably defined; hence follows the incomparably wide range of the Buddhist psychology; which could find a place, and further yet an explanation of the mode of functioning, for even mental processes so far unknown.

Most valuable, also, is the exposition of the Mental Paths involved in states of consciousness other than the normal, whether the dim phantasy of dreams, or the intensely active and vivid higher mental states known to the practical Buddhist as the Jhānas,—a term for which we have no true equivalent in English, since either “trance” or “ecstasy” fail altogether to convey their utter actuality. The whole Essay, in short, is teeming with facts and views the most significant and valuable; and the mere condensation in such small compass of so much knowledge, of so many side-lights on many an obscure process of the mind, by itself constitutes a literary feat of no mean order.

The Editor has, with characteristic acumen and appreciation of their high value, considerably augmented the usefulness of the work before us by the inclusion, in an Appendix of some 60 pp., of a number of notes written by the Author in the course of the correspondence which the work involved. Here, once more, we have Buddhist psychology as the born and instructed Buddhist student sees it; and many an occidental Buddhist student will find in these important notes much matter for deep study as well as great enlightenment. Where so much is of deepest interest, it is difficult to discriminate; but we may perhaps indicate the very able exposition by our Author of that profoundest crux of Buddhist philosophy, the Paticca-samuppāda, the Cycle of Causation, as by far the most lucid treatment we have yet encountered of a problem which has attracted so many western minds. Here, in a long note elucidated by aid of a diagram of the Buddhist “Wheel of Life” we find an exposition, at once clear and profound, of this problem:—a problem, be it remembered, which must ever hold a foremost place in Buddhist metaphysics, seeing that it was just the insight into the nature and existence of this Causal Cycle that immediately preceded the attainment of the Supreme Enlightenment. That the whole marvellous Buddhist system of philosophy and ethics is rigidly founded on Causation has long been known to every student, but here we learn, for the first time

with such simplicity and clarity, the *manner* of the Causal Linkage: we have set forth, in terms that every mind can grasp, the formula which covers the process of *all* Becoming, whether it be that of a universe, the passing-over of the doing of a single being, or even the genesis, evolution and involution of a single thought.

To sum up, we may fairly say that in this remarkable work Maung Shwe Zan Aung and his able Editor have laid the world of thought under an obligation of gratitude that no mere expressions of commendation can adequately repay. Alike his great religion, his native land, and the Rangoon College, the Alma Mater at whose hands he gained his initiation into that western learning which alone has enabled him thus to bridge the gulf between the Buddhist philosophy and the modern thought, may well be proud of this first child of theirs capable of rendering to mankind so great a service. "*Truth, verily, is Immortal Speech*" the Master told us; and greatest of all services is his who makes Truth known. The value of this epoch-making work lies in its able presentation of one great aspect,—and that the profoundest,—of the Truth the Buddha found and taught; and its influence will without a doubt extend far beyond the now narrow, if widening confines of the body of occidental students of Buddhism; will extend in course of time to the whole body of western philosophic thought. For the present, the work is one which no would-be Buddhist student can afford to be without, affording as it does an insight at once profound and clear into the deeper workings of that Mind which, as the old Buddhist stanza tells us, is "*Maker and Origin of all that is.*" *

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