

## COMPENDIUM OF PHILOSOPHY.\*

It was natural that the translation of the *Compendium of Philosophy*, practically the first attempt to present a Buddhist philosophical work to English readers, should have been loudly acclaimed in Buddhist circles, and a eulogistic notice announcing the achievement appeared in the last number of this Journal. But probably the general public will be pleased to have an account of the book in which it is not looked upon from the point of view of religious partisanship, and in which the value of its contents is discussed and not assumed.

We hear much at present (though not in Burma certainly) of the message of Buddhism for the modern mind and its tenability by thinking men. Now is an occasion for testing these claims and making up our minds whether we have here put into our hands the clue of the labyrinth, or have only stumbled on another mare's nest.

In criticizing a work like this,—a translation of a compendium of a philosophical system—at least three different enquiries are called for: (1) into the value of the book as a scientific or literary work, (2) into the value of the doctrines it epitomises and: (3) into the amount of the success which the translator has attained in presenting the work in English.

To begin with the first of the three problems, we may ask, what value this work has over and above being a com-

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\* 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.

pendium. As a compendium it may be both concise and exhaustive; only those whose knowledge of the Abhidhamma is profound can tell us. But we hear that for probably eight centuries it has served as a primer of psychology and philosophy in Ceylon and Burma! Unfortunate students who have had to get it up! It may be safely said that no worse primer was ever employed in any school or university. The doctrines which it epitomises may be reasoned arguments and move from point to point in systematic fashion. But of such a movement of thought there is no trace in the *Compendium*. Intellectually the Buddhist philosophy has been eviscerated in this work. In fact there is no flesh left on the frame at all; we have only a skeleton remaining. The book is not, in any sense, an *outline*, in which the doctrine moves from one salient point to another, omitting side-issues and perhaps the details of even fundamental investigations. We have only list after list, with the items carefully numbered, of real or imaginary mental functions, which have not received a definition such as would satisfy one even at the threshold of science. Mrs. Rhys Davids admits that "the curt dry method of the *Compendium*" is "not calculated to attract." That is a very mild criticism; a study of it as a primer is calculated to discourage the proper exercise of thought and to overload the memory with masses of detail. The existence of such a work suggests to us that study in the Buddhist schools was "cramming" of the most pernicious kind. The fact that it was prized so highly explains the dead weight of tradition which reformers have to remove before they can persuade the East to adopt sane educational methods.

To come to our second question, we should point out that the reader who finds a doctrine presented in a congested and repulsive form will naturally be prejudiced against the doctrine itself. It would have been more to the purpose if U Shwe Zan Aung had started with the work he is now said to be translating, if, as we have still to learn, it, the *Kathavatthu*, really does contain solid argument and luminous exposition. But the translator has to some extent compensated for the unattractive form of his text by pre-facing to it an introductory essay in which he has expanded his article on "The Processes of thought," which originally appeared in *Buddhism*. This gives us an idea of the main psychological and metaphysical doctrines of Buddhism together with some hints of arguments by which a modern Buddhist would defend them.

It should be noted by the way that logical doctrine is notably absent from this work. In fact early Buddhism

seems to have been innocent of both a theoretical and a practical knowledge of logic, if we may judge by the fact that such writers as Nāgasena (quoted on p. 50) seem to accept as proof argument by analogy, which already at the beginning of the history of western logic was seen to be highly fallacious.

To come to the chief Buddhist doctrines, let us consider the question of Personal Identity, on which some light is thrown in the introductory essay. The Buddhist denial of Personal Identity seems to rest on a thorough-going confusion between a logical contrary and contradictory. Because at any moment the mind is different from what it was the moment before, *it cannot be the same mind*. This is the assumption underlying all the arguments here presented. Take the most ingenious of all:—"If the subject be self-same, it should always regard an admittedly changing object as different at different times. . . . But the fact that we can regard a changing object as identical at different times. . . . shows that the subject cannot possibly remain the identical self for any two consecutive moments. . . ." That is to say, the subject must have changed along with the object if the change in the latter has escaped it. But much less than this is needed to prove change in the self and change is not necessarily obnoxious to identity. If western philosophy has established anything it has shown that an identity with-in difference is possible. If it were the question of absolute or permanent identity that were raised, the finite self might have to fight a much harder battle in order to be recognized as real. But the problems and the triumphs of Buddhism have a far away sound, and suggest the brandishing of intellectual swords in the age of Parmenides.

It would be interesting to fathom the real reasons for the Buddhist insistence upon the unreality of the self, when the practical outcome of its religious teaching is (apart from all theorising qualifications of the statement) that *you* \* are born first as one individual and then as another, that the Buddha—the self-same Gautama—had one existence after another and *could remember* an earlier in a later existence. In fact Buddhism does allow a continued existence which could—in point of being continued—satisfy those who desire a future life, though it is an existence about which modern science and philosophy are alike sceptical. It seems to me that the theoretical impermanence of the ego according to Buddhism was a doctrine invented for ethical purposes. Gautama taught that every action in this life counted, and had its

\* The qualification which Buddhism makes is expressed by saying—"It is not you, but it is not another" that is reborn.

effect on a future existence. But, if the self has a permanent core of identity apart from its experience in this life, perhaps that will dominate its future existence and the effect of present misdeeds will count but little. I suggest that the Buddha denied the core of identity in order to force on men the necessity of anxious thought about their mode of life, to prevent their "trusting to luck" and refusing to think of morality.

Of the complicated Buddhist doctrine of causation it is sufficient here to say that nothing in the treatise before us tends to suggest an identity between the doctrine of Karma and the law of universal causation of modern physical science. The latter is a conception framed for a material system and contemplating only manifestations of energy localized in space and continuous in time. The former concerns the linking together of life with life and follows out the chain of connections into regions where modern physical science and philosophy alike refuse to follow. One glance at the Buddhist cosmogony shows us that the conception of the sensible universe as a system of interacting impersonal forces had never presented itself to the thinkers of India. There is no searching enquiry into the interaction of mind and matter, and most of the cosmogony is grossly animistic. Scholastic Christianity with its hosts of angels is much less non-scientific.

Among matters of greater detail we may consider the Buddhist doctrine of the psychology of cognition. An act of apprehension by perception, according to this, consists of seventeen "thought moments." But each "thought moment" lasts for a time less than the billionth of a second! Buddhists thus claim to have something like a mental microscope by which the functions of the *life continuum* are shown to have a sort of molecular structure consisting of a series of time molecules of extreme minuteness. What experience is this doctrine based upon? Buddhists offer us nothing but certain alleged supranormal experiences of certain individuals, into which the scientist who uses his senses and his intellect only cannot enter. The doctrine is thus not science in the sense of being founded on a "shareable" experience and derived from that by logical reasoning. There is nothing to distinguish it from any other wild phantasy.

The analysis of the complete act of cognition with its seventeen moments into various stages among which the moments are distributed seems at first sight to be psychologically promising. But though much is made by the translator and editor of the stage of *Javānā* with its seven

moments, there is nothing to show that this (as alleged) corresponds to what western psychology calls apperception. If it corresponds to any fact of experience it seems (as the very illustration given would show) to answer, not to a moment or series of moments in perception, but to an *element* in the perceptive act, viz. the pleasure in the object apprehended. Here we seem to come across a fundamental mistake in the Buddhist analysis—the attempt to identify coexistent elements, isolated merely by abstraction, with independent moments in the perceptual process.

The defect noticed in the treatment of the above topic reappears continually throughout the psychology generally. There is an attempt at the outset at something like a genuine psychological analysis, but very shortly some fatal error of procedure is made, some distorting conception introduced; the analysis ceases to yield results, and the rest of the account is a cloud of inventions, fantastic and yet mechanical. The mechanical nature of the thought is indicated by the extraordinary prominence given to number in Buddhist philosophy. Every class of object, quality, mode, and what not is numbered. There are "fifty-five classes of consciousness functioning in apperception," "eleven classes of consciousness in the retentive function," &c., &c. There is apparently a child-like belief that to have counted things is to have explained them. What is the explanation of this state of things? Only a historian of insight will ever make it clear to us. But certain things seem evident. Thus it seems to be a fact that there was a genuine curiosity in early India prior to 500 B. C., about the facts of nature and of mind alike, a curiosity comparable to that which was so widespread in Greece at the same time. But it seems no less clear that Indian philosophy never had either its Socrates, its Plato, or its Aristotle, and had made no progress in scientific method, in principles of criticism, before it was captured by a great ethical and religious movement and diverted to ends not purely disinterested and intellectual. The result has been the production of a scholasticism quite as monstrous as anything with which mediæval Christianity may be charged.

Finally a few words as to the translator and essayist's share in the publication. It is delightful to find English so flexible and idiomatic penned by a native of this province, and U Shwe Zan Aung has to be congratulated on his achievement. As to the correctness of the translations of the Pali technical terms the present critic is not competent to decide. The translator has a very extensive equipment of western philosophical terms at his disposal with

which he attempts to explain the Pāli nomenclature. One thing may be said, however, viz., that, as in the case of Javāṇā mentioned above, we must suspect from time to time a tendency to force an identity between Buddhist and western ideas and to read into the vague phraseology of the Compendium a meaning which is not really to be found in it, the meaning of notions of the west, purified and rendered precise by centuries of the most vigorous and unsparing criticism.

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