

COLONEL OLCOTT AND HIS BUDDHIST CATECHISM AN APPRECIATION

One hundred years ago, in 1908, a little book was published in Madras. This was not the first time it had been brought out; here in fact was the forty-second edition, albeit with a new editor, the celebrated Annie Besant. This edition also had 'some small corrections', arranged by its author. He had not seen it through the press, having 'left the body', in Mrs Besant's words, the previous year. The book was 'The Buddhist Catechism' and the author was Col. Henry Steel Olcott, a man to whom modern Buddhism owes an incalculable debt.

I THE MAN

He was an unlikely benefactor. Born in New Jersey in 1832, he may well not even have heard of Buddhism in the first two decades of his life, so little known was it at that time in the western world. But the north-eastern corner of the U.S.A. was no longer an exclusively puritan region. New ideas were at work and strong personalities were giving them social form. An open-minded person could not be immune to these influences. Young Olcott might have entered the rarefied sphere of the Transcendentalists, or joined some utopian community, or gone west with the Mormons to found a new society. Instead he travelled to Ceylon and became a Buddhist, and spent the latter part of his life in a quite heroic struggle to save and revitalize the Dharma.

The event that changed his life and Buddhist history was the religious encounter known as the Panadura Controversy, a public disputation between Christians and Buddhists in 1873 that attracted not only local but international interest, and was recorded in a report later read by Olcott. A few words about the background to the event may throw some light on its importance.

At that time the country known today as Sri Lanka was governed by the British, who had followed the Dutch and the Portuguese in the colonial succession. Hostile as these powers had been to each other they were of one mind – Catholics, Calvinists, Anglicans – in their hostility to the Dharma. Christian administrators held all the positions of power, while missionaries took control of education, which they turned into a potent weapon in their evangelizing war. (This is hardly too strong a term; there were some very violent attacks on Buddhists going peacefully about their observances.)

Against these forces the Ceylonese Sangha, under-educated and demoralized, was all but helpless. The predators with their energy and organization, their wealth and their influence in high places, seemed certain of victory. But it was not to be. Oppression generated resistance, which centred on the person of a remarkable bhikkhu named Megetuwatte Gunananda. His services drew crowds to the Kotahena Temple in Colombo, and so inspirational was his preaching that the missionaries took alarm; so much so that they challenged him to meet their champions in public debate. The coastal town of Panadura near the capital was the venue and, as said above, the event excited national and international interest. Journalists from near and far attended, and Gunananda was adjudged to have had the better of the disputation. His victory marked the beginning of the revival of Buddhism in the Land of the Lion.

By then, 1873, Olcott, just turned forty, had been married thirteen years to a wife who had borne him four children, two of whom had died in infancy. He already had several high-powered careers behind him. By the age of twenty-three he was famed as an agriculturist for his work at a model farm in his home state. The University of Athens offered him the Chair of Agriculture, but he declined and went into journalism as agricultural editor of the New York Tribune. Upon the outbreak of the Civil War he, a fervent abolitionist, joined the colors and saw action in the north-eastern sector. Within a few days of the war's end President Lincoln was assassinated and Olcott was appointed with two others to investigate the conspiracy. After this came a highly successful period as a lawyer in the fields of insurance, customs and revenue. Then he was put in charge of a commission to uncover fraud, graft and corruption in the War and Navy Departments, a task lasting three years and accomplished to high praise from his masters in government.

Clearly a man of such capacity and dynamism might have had a significant future in politics had he set his sights in that direction. Instead, his life began to take a very different course when he was asked to write about séances taking place in a house in Vermont. It was there that he met another interested visitor, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky. He was impressed by her psychic powers, and presently, through his own investigations, he became a believer in the validity of spiritualism. In 1875 they and a few others of like mind founded the Theosophical Society in New York, with Olcott as President and the author of *Isis Unveiled* as corresponding secretary. And soon they were in correspondence with Megetuwatte Gunananda, whose ideas and endeavors so impressed them that in 1880 they set out for Ceylon, where their fame preceded them and they were received with enthusiasm by the Buddhist community. On May 21 amid scenes of great popular rejoicing they knelt before the High Priest at Galle and took the Refuges, the *Tisarana*.

Refuges? Olcott was not happy with that term. His preferred rendering of '*sarana*' is 'guide', as he explains in a footnote to Q.149 of the Catechism, quoting a Pali scholar who makes not only an etymological but an existential case for the preference: '*Refuge*, in the sense of a *fleeing back to a place of shelter*, is quite foreign to true Buddhism, which insists on every man working out his own emancipation.' Such an argument could hardly fail to win the approbation of a compatriot of Walt Whitman and Theodore Roosevelt: it might well be a summation of the latter's 'Strenuous Life' in spiritual terms, an American vision graced by a Buddhist light.

Anyway, Guides or Refuges, Olcott and Madame Blavatsky took the Tisarana. Later their paths would diverge somewhat, as she tried to deal with some injurious accusations, but for the time being they were comrades in arms in both Ceylon and India, where, at Adyar, the Theosophical Society had set up its headquarters.

The following year, 1881, the *Buddhist Catechism* appeared.

Soon after, Olcott was involved in an escapade brimming with American resourcefulness. Some Catholic priests were proclaiming the virtues of a well near the old capital, Kandy, a great centre of Buddhist devotion. People with all sorts of afflictions went there in the hope of healing. Olcott saw it as another device to win Buddhists from their ancient faith. His answer was a positive one: to set himself up as a 'magnetic healer'. His success went beyond his wildest dreams, if 'dreams' be the right word, for the endless procession of the afflicted came to occupy all his waking hours. He treated some six thousand people in 1882-3, and was thoroughly worn out at the end. But he had prevented the well at Kandy from becoming Ceylon's version of Lourdes and a weapon in the struggle for souls. He attributed his success in part to Mesmerism. In the Catechism there are more references to the *Dhammapada* than to any other text. Its opening lines announce that mind is the origin, the sustainer and even the substance of reality. Although neither a mystic nor a metaphysician, Olcott would seem to have been in accord with this view.

But the mind has to be trained, and that means education, and in Ceylon education had become almost entirely a Christian preserve. Olcott set out to change this, and founded a number of schools and colleges, Ananda, Maliyadeva, Mahinda, among others, where children could be taught according to Buddhist principles and in a congenial atmosphere. In India he started the Harijan Free Schools for outcasts.

In India too he led the campaign to bring the place of the Buddha's Enlightenment into Buddhist keeping. The Maha Bodhi Temple at Bodhi Gaya was the property of the British government of India, but was under

Hindu control, and this was exercised by an individual, the Mahant, who was not only neglectful of the site but violently intolerant of anyone who seemed to question his position and his rights. The struggle to establish Buddhist rights in this holy place was long and tortuous and Olcott did not live to see the end of it. His disciple, the Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933) kept the campaign going, until a compromise was finally achieved, with both Hindus and Buddhists sharing responsibility for the site.

Olcott was more successful with the government of Ceylon, prevailing upon it to have Wesak, the celebration of the Buddha's Enlightenment, made a public holiday. This was in 1885, only five years after his arrival on the island.

There was a great deal of travelling as he grew older, most notably to Japan, where also, following the Meiji social revolution, Buddhism had known some very hard times. It was centuries since the two great Schools of Buddhism, the Northern and the Southern, had been in contact. Olcott and his party landed at Kobe, where the Chief Priests of the seven major sects welcomed them. Then they were taken to the city's Tendai temple, above which floated the supra-sectarian standard which Olcott had helped devise, its colors representing the *Buddharansi*, the rays emitted by the Tathagata's body. This marked the beginning of an exhausting but successful tour. When he returned to Ceylon a number of Japanese priests accompanied him, with the object of studying the Theravada and the Pali language. The first step in Buddhist ecumenism had been taken.

The second was the acceptance by Buddhist leaders, North and South, of fourteen 'Fundamental Buddhistic Beliefs' drawn up by Olcott as 'a common platform' agreeable to all followers of the Dharma. Presently these Beliefs became an appendix to the Catechism.

Some years before this, Olcott had resigned his Presidency of the Theosophical Society, nominating Annie Besant as his successor. Neo-Brahmanism now began to dominate its councils. It is said that the ageing Olcott, himself an honorary Brahman, was reluctant to see the way things were tending in a movement he had helped to found.

One of the major problems of the Theosophical Society was the division between its occultists and its practical people. So-called Mahatmas, spiritual Masters dwelling high in the Himalayas, were believed to guide the Society's leaders. Madame Blavatsky claimed to be in direct contact with them, up to her death in 1891.

II THE BOOK

II.1

One thinks of a catechism as a peculiarly Christian medium of instruction. The original Greek word contains the root of our word ‘echo’, and much of the Buddhist revival in Ceylon did indeed echo the practices of Christianity, from Sunday schools even to carol singing, so far had such practices become the norm of religious expression in the land. There was nothing unusual then in the appearance of a Buddhist Catechism in 1881; what seems extraordinary now is how soon Olcott’s little book saw the light, just over a year after his advent and formal conversion. It is not only a manual of popular instruction but a statement of one man’s faith.

A word on this subject may not be out of place here. — It is common nowadays to hear people describe themselves as ‘practicing Buddhists’. Less frequently does one hear anyone say ‘I’m a believing Buddhist’. Belief may be implied in the other phrase but it is not affirmed. It may even not be there, or only in some dilute or syncretic form. I remember a western monk in a Tibetan establishment who said ‘I’m a practicing Buddhist but a believing Christian.’ He had just finished an exercise involving a hundred thousand prostrations, invocations and visualizations, and so was entitled to be treated as a fully realized member of his sect, and before all that he had of course taken the Refuges (or Guidances) to become a Buddhist. Yet he was declaredly a Buddhist without belief.

The Catcher in the Rye was one of the most admired novels of the post-war period. Its adolescent hero became a voice for a generation of unsettled young men. Among his observations was, that Catholics always make a point of telling you in conversation that they are Catholics. The greatest of the theological virtues may be charity, but the first is faith, without which one is not a Catholic, or any other sort of Christian. Similarly the Bismillah of Islam is a proclamation of faith in Allah and his Rasul Muhammad. The turban of the Sikh and the Jewish yarmulka are themselves statements of faith. Buddhism is neither insistent nor demonstrative in this regard, and that is how one would wish it to be. The belief and not any outward sign is what matters. Olcott makes ‘Right Belief’ the first *anga* of the Eightfold Path, rather than the more usual ‘RightView’. It is a bold alternative, but there is much to be said for it.

Christian faith is described as ‘a supernatural gift bestowed on us by God for our salvation’. Buddhist faith is not based on any idea of God and so must be a different thing. It arises within an individual who has a need

which the Dharma answers. Through the operation of intellect or emotion the answer will be discerned. The need may be personal or preterpersonal, it may be hard and practical or it may be vague and cosmic, though none the less real for that. Being a universal system, not only in the sense of having a world-wide mission but with a central idea which one may conjecture to be valid for any dimension containing sentient beings, Buddhism should have an answer to any human need.

This central idea is *dukkha*. It covers every possible form of distress, from birth to death, from mild unease to extreme pain of body or mind. Where there is life there is *dukkha*, but of course also the hope of release from it in nirvana, the sphere beyond all natural dimensions as well as the entrapping heavens of theology.

My copy of the Catechism from 1908 is divided into five sections with the appendix containing the Fourteen Propositions of agreement. The sections are devoted to the Three Jewels (Buddha, Dharma, Sangha), the Rise and Spread of Buddhism, and Buddhism and Science. That on the Dharma is the longest, with 149 questions and answers; that on the Sangha the shortest, with 23.

The first question is: ‘*Of what religion are you?*’ and straightaway, even before the answer, the reader is referred by asterisk to a footnote. This is one of those books whose notes are loaded with information which cannot be accommodated in the text. Here, in the first note, it is claimed that ‘the word “religion” is most inappropriate to Buddhism, which is not a religion but a moral philosophy.’ And Answer no.3 then tells us that Buddhism ‘is not the best name for this teaching’; it is only a western term; best is ‘Bauddha Dharma’. The word ‘*agama*’ meaning ‘approach’, is also considered to be good, and is the one most favored in Ceylon; and there are others. ‘Under protest’ Olcott will continue to employ ‘the most familiar word...for the convenience of the ordinary reader.’

The biography of the Buddha contains some data which many westerners will not know. Answer no.8 tells that he was born under the constellation Visaa on a Tuesday in May, in the year 2478 of the present *Kaliyuga*; he retired to the jungle in 2506, attained Enlightenment seven years later and ‘passing out of the round of rebirths entered Parinirvana in the year 2558, aged eighty years.’ This is in accordance with ‘the Sinhalese Scriptures’. Olcott’s reference to ‘a Tuesday in May’ notwithstanding, these dates, not of the Christian but the Hindu calendar, remind the modern reader how alien and exotic Buddhism must have seemed to Europeans and Americans a hundred years ago.

The life-story follows the popular tradition: royal birth, luxurious palaces, marriage at sixteen to the beautiful Yasodhara, fatherhood, and then

the experiences which opened his eyes to the sadder facts of life, and caused him to seek an answer to the dukkha of the world. It is essentially the story told by Sir Edwin Arnold in *The Light of Asia*, that romantic narrative based on sources much later than the events they purport to describe.

Religions generally speaking have individual founders, and these – usually, though not invariably, men – have a unique place in the lives of their followers. They are believed to have a special relationship with a Supreme Being, so much so that they are deemed incapable of saying or doing wrong, even as the god is.

Buddhism in this respect is different. First, there is no claim to a divine relationship or divine inspiration. Gautama claimed to be reopening an ancient path trodden by sages of old but overgrown and lost in later times. The rediscovered message, the Dharma, is described as a beautiful thing – beautiful in its beginning, its middle and its end; beautiful but not unquestionable. Elsewhere I described Buddhism as a critical faith. Neither the Buddha nor his message is to be placed beyond the scope of criticism. Some people find the Great Renunciation hard to take — the abandonment of wife and child for whatever reason and in whatever cultural context just seems wrong to them. Olcott does not shirk the issue. He asks (Q.28) if it was not selfishness that made him do it? No, comes the answer, ‘it was boundless love for all beings that made him devote himself to their good’; and no man, he says, in this present world-period sacrificed so much for our sake, and ‘this is why Buddhists love him and good Buddhists try to be like him’. (Q & A 31). The old soldier strikes a note almost of *bhakti* here which is quite touching.

Believers in all faiths have a natural tendency to read things into the lives of their founders. In this case one may interpret the Going Forth into Homelessness as an affirmation of the significance of the individual over the family and the tribe. In the Christian west we are taught that the family is the fundamental social unit, but the Buddha’s story makes us focus on the individual. Among us, individualism has come to be associated with a cluster of dubious qualities, of which greed and, in a western sense, self-seeking, are well to the fore.

There have been two great movements in western society, arguably beginning with the trial of Socrates: the gradual affirmation of the individual and the ever-increasing power of the state. Sometimes there is co-operation between individual and state, as at the present time, when both are threatened by reactionary terrorism. But even now there is tension, as the state intrudes ever more into private lives, and individuals organize, thanks to the internet, in ways unknown before. There is much pious deploring of the supposed increase or intensification of individualism as if it must be ever a bad thing. It has become a synonym in some minds for secularism,

and ‘the secular society’ is claimed to be the matrix of so much of what is wrong with the world, although secularism has been in some measure a response to religious intolerance. It is not necessarily anti-religious, any more than traditional humanism was. Without its watchfulness, some religious institutions, presently benign, might revert to their historical character and make the world once again unsafe for individuals with a liberal philosophy. Similarly, individualism has a mission as it combats the conformity to which an increasingly control-minded state aspires and works, though it will only be a salutary mission if those discharging it are characterized by decent moral qualities.

II.2

One of the charms of Olcott’s Catechism is that it is a sort of dialog, one in which not the teacher but the student puts the questions. The section on Dharma is the best of the five, both comprehensive and economical. The cause of human misery? – Ignorance. The remedy? – To dispel ignorance and become wise, not passing our lives in the pursuit of worthless objects, neglecting what is in reality most valuable. And that is?

The lines answering this question go to the heart of Olcott’s understanding of Buddhism: ‘To know the whole secret of man’s existence and destiny, so that we may estimate at no more than their actual value this life and its relations; and so that we may live in a way to ensure the greatest happiness and the least suffering for our fellowmen and ourselves.’

The Catechism being a small book with an ‘unpretending aim’, it is easy to let its Q’s and A’s slip by as if one were watching the flow of a brook with its ripples and dimples and glints of light. But that answer is not one to be measured by small-scale similes. ‘To know the whole secret of man’s existence and destiny....’ This is grand enough to test the faith of any believer, certainly of any brought up in the sceptical west. But Olcott’s time was as sceptical as ours, an age of science perhaps even more confident than ours, for then science was all promise, and had not yet been associated with mustard gas and Zyklon-B, to say nothing of the atomic bomb and its successors. Olcott was as impressed by its achievements and its possibilities as any man or woman of his time; even so, ‘the whole secret’ was not to be found there. ‘The light that can dispel this ignorance of ours and remove all sorrows’ he proclaims as nought other than knowledge of the Four Noble Truths, a formula with which we are so familiar that it is now more likely to be encountered as a cliché’ rather than a revelation.

The first Noble Truth is dukkha: ‘the miseries of evolutionary existence resulting in births and deaths, life after life’, as Olcott phrases it. Evolutionary or not, existence does appear to be so structured as to ensure

some degree of suffering for every sentient being. ‘We are born in others’ pain/And perish in our own’, and between birth and death it is rarely if ever roses all the way. Why life is so structured is a question beyond the ambitions of science, which, we are assured, operates within the limits of when, where and how, leaving ‘why’ modestly alone. Myth, legend and religion separately or together offer answers with varying degrees of convincing insight, and all the time the moving walkway of the structure is conveying us towards death. Most of the time we hardly notice it, any more than we feel the earth in motion, so many and so beguiling are the distractions we have set up all around. But every so often something proves stronger than any distraction — sickness, the loss of a loved one, consciousness of ageing, wars, crimes, natural disasters, the list is long — and we unwillingly catch sight of the First Noble Truth, denoting the condition that prevails not only in human existence but through all the realms of sentience, and not only on this abused planet but wherever there may be life throughout the universe. A truly universal truth then. A truth also that might well leave us in despair were we not assured that this suffering may have an end, that the structural inimicality of the human and animal condition may be transcended by living a certain kind of life. (Animals are said to exist in a non-moral sphere, *adharmā*, driven by instinct and appetite; an unpromising condition were it not for the continuity assumed between their state and the human, man being, as I put it elsewhere, the soteric form in nature, the form which can rise above instinct and appetite.)

If our natural condition is not to be transcended, then we have to consider the proposition that we are here essentially for the reproduction and nurture of a new generation, and count for little or nothing in ourselves. But that at any rate would be a fulfilled sort of nothing, in contrast to the failed sort of nothing in those who do not reproduce. Yet the ideal of early Buddhism was the unmarried bhikkhu and bhikkhuni, who went from home into homelessness, that is, from a natural existence into the way of transcendence, abandoning what was conventionally supposed to make sense of the world and of man’s place in it: the family and its future. The justification of this anomalous adventure is given in a verse which Olcott understands as summing up the Buddha’s ‘whole doctrine:

*To cease from all evil actions,
To generate all that is good,
To cleanse one’s mind.*

One does not have to be a bhikkhu or bhikkhuni, indeed one does not have to be a Buddhist, to apply this counsel to one’s life. The *Pancasila*, or Five Precepts, spell out the first line in detail: to refrain from destroying life, from theft, from sexual malpractice, from lying, from abuse of drink or drugs. As these refrains are observed one will come to have a better idea of

what is good, while the practice of meditation will help to cleanse the mind, or, as others have translated the line, to purify the heart.

So, now that we have ‘the whole doctrine’ in one verse, is there one word ‘to represent the whole spirit of the Buddha’s doctrine’? There is, says Olcott: ‘Justice’.

With this word we come right to the centre of it all. Justice is the heartbeat of the Buddhist universe, the moral dimension of what would otherwise be but a machine, however wonderful its age, its size and its various motions. Justice is believed to be effected through the moral agency known as karma, intentional activity having moral consequences for the actors, in the same life or another.

Punabbhava: the Pali word for which we have a number of rough equivalents – metempsychosis, palingenesis, rebirth, reincarnation. Western Buddhists are understandably inclined to play down the idea as lacking evidence. It would seem to be acceptable among the people at large, who have the good sense not to exclude it from the possibilities of continued living; and every so often we are reminded of what some scientist or philosopher from Plato onward said in its favour. But actual instances are rare and do not always survive investigation. Rudolf Steiner compiled several volumes of ‘karmic connexions’ in the lives of famous figures, but they come from his scryings in the ‘Akashic Record’ and cannot (as yet?) be subjected to scientific scrutiny. Renaissance figures may have reincarnated in the nineteenth century, Cathars in the twentieth, but the sceptic can brush such claims aside and demand ‘hard facts’. It is not easy to supply them. And yet every now and then a child will say something it could not have learned in its present life, or do something suggestive of experience well beyond its years, as if still in contact with something anterior to the present life, and then the sceptic has no explanation.

In my essay on Borges, a thinker who had trouble with the idea of karma, I used the expression ‘the mercy of oblivion’. It seems to me that one of the saving graces of the human condition is that we generally do *not* remember anything other than the past of one life. One past is painful enough for one life; any more would surely be intolerable.

Rebirth is one of the products of karma, the agency of cosmic justice, which is central of the Buddhist conception of things. Human justice is always imperfect, dealing less than equitably with some groups or individuals, and leaving others entirely outside its sphere of operation. In certain parts of the world the unborn are not considered legally human and local systems of justice not apply to them. But cosmic justice allows of no exceptions. A life untimely terminated is a life deprived of its rights and its destiny, and in the Buddhist system such deprivation cannot be final; there

must be another opportunity to live, otherwise there is the triumph of dukkha in such lives.

Some religions have the idea of ensoulment, which is believed to occur at conception or after a certain number of days. The latter belief would seem to entail that the preanimate foetus may be treated as so much not yet properly human matter. As a Buddhist one believes that life begins not at any such moment — ensoulment does not go well anyway with the doctrine of *anatta* — but is continuous with an earlier life. It is not a question of ensoulment but of enfleshment, the pre-existent entity taking form through the agency of a man and a woman normally.

One cannot leave this subject without remarking on that most curious aspect of modern, and no doubt post-modern thinking: how people absolutely opposed to the death penalty for criminals can yet approve of it for the unborn, even when recognisably human and, in the jargon, ‘viable’. By an unselfconscious misuse of an honourable term their position is called ‘liberal’, and their attitude is praised as a sign of enlightenment.

In ancient as in modern India the child who survived the perils of gestation was born into a caste. Olcott has only three entries on this subject, but they go some way towards making sense of Ambedkar’s decision, decades later, to lead his outcaste people into Buddhism when he broke with the Hindu system. Christianity and Islam, he believed, had compromised with the caste-system, but somehow Buddhism had stayed true to the message of its Founder: ‘By deeds one becomes an outcaste, by deeds one becomes a brahman’ – not by birth. Olcott gives the story of the pariah Prakriti and Ananda, who asked her for a drink of water; and when she said it would contaminate him, coming from her hand, he replied, ‘I ask not for caste but for water.’ She gave him the water. ‘The Buddha blessed her for it.’

II.3

The last three sections of the Catechism are short, with fewer questions together than the section on the Dharma. Their subjects are the Sangha, the Rise and Spread of Buddhism, and finally, Buddhism and Science.

Not the least of Olcott’s problems in Ceylon was due to the inertia of the Sangha. In one of his prefaces to the Catechism, he remarks that he has ‘not been able, during an intimate intercourse of twenty-two years to arouse their zeal I only consented to write the Buddhist Catechism after I had found that no bhikkhu would undertake it.’ In the event, this was probably a good thing. Translated in the course of twenty years into as many languages, it might have lacked something of its international appeal had it come from

the hand of a bhikkhu, however learned, and reflected only that narrow, bounded life, however dutifully lived.

The section on the Sangha opens with the difference between the bhikkhu and the priests of other religions, who 'claim to be intercessors between men and God, to help to obtain pardon of sins; the Buddhist Bhikkhus do not acknowledge or expect anything from a divine power.' It closes with observations on 'the higher consciousness' which may be reached through meditation, and on the use made of this faculty by the ideal bhikkhu, the Buddha himself, who could read the secrets of people's hearts and speak to them according to their needs.

In between, there is a summary of material from the Vinaya on the training and duties of the bhikkhu. Reading it I found myself reflecting on the idea of the middle way in a non-Buddhist society. Traditionally the Middle Way has to do with the avoidance of the extremes of indulgence and asceticism as practiced in ancient India, when the Buddha was seeking *sambodhi*. Here in the West today, paradoxically, the Sangha, the model of moderation in Buddhist lands, may be seen as itself forming an extreme, with the great mass of the non-Buddhist population forming the other, and the lay Buddhist community representing the middle way. This is not to say that the Sangha is an unnecessary, much less an unwelcome presence in the West, but to suggest that the future of the Dharma here may rest with the lay rather than the ordained believer.

Olcott's summary of the training and duties of the Sangha says nothing about Buddhist nuns. The Order of bhikkhunis had long before died out in Ceylon. They do figure, however, in the following section, 'The Rise and Spread of Buddhism'. We learn there that Queen Anula invited the ordained daughter of Asoka the Great 'to come and establish the Bhikkhuni branch of the Order', and in due course the queen and many other women entered it

In passing, one observes that Asoka is a hero to the Colonel. 'He was the most powerful monarch in Indian history, as warrior and statesman; but his noblest characteristics were his love of truth and justice, tolerance of religious differences, equity of government, kindness to the sick, to the poor, and to animals. His name is revered from Siberia to Ceylon.' Olcott gives an impressive list of the great king's achievements, the first of which is that 'he drove out bad bhikkhus, and encouraged good ones.' Its primacy is suggestive. Olcott charges the decline of Buddhism in India to the influence of bad bhikkhus, and to the Sangha's becoming 'rich, lazy and sensual'. However, he does end this section on a positive note, observing how the Dharma is growing in favour in western countries, especially 'the two leading ideas of ours... Karma and Re-incarnation ... because of their appeals to the natural instinct of justice, and their evident reasonableness.'

One might expect the two leading ideas to be prominent in the last section of the Catechism, 'Buddhism and Science'. Rejecting the notion that Buddhism is a revealed religion, and affirming some compatibilities between Buddhism and contemporary science, Olcott describes the Dharma as 'a pure moral philosophy, a system of ethics and transcendental metaphysics' rather than 'a chart of science'. This position, with the *Kalama* and the *Sigalovada Suttas* cited in support, would seem to be an eminently reasonable one.

Olcott's lifetime was a period of major scientific theorizing, discovery and invention, yet, surprisingly, he pays it virtually no heed, although with his background and intellectual breadth we may assume that he was au courant with contemporary developments. The reason is probably that Ceylon and most of the Oriental countries, apart from Japan, were not yet aware of or affected by what was being thought and done in Europe and America. The Catechism was meant primarily for the Buddhists of Ceylon, and any such references would have been unhelpful. It ends with questions and answers about the Buddha's radiance and its six colors (on which the international Buddhist flag was based); the auras in people, animals and natural objects; the psychic capacities of arahants; and finally the devas in their three degrees, who, whatever their powers, are not to be feared by anyone 'who is pure and compassionate in heart and of a courageous mind.'

III CONCLUSION

Olcott died in 1907, of a heart condition, in Adyar, where the headquarters of the now troubled Theosophical Society had been set up so many years before.

He had lived through a tremendous period in the history of his own country, what with the great westward migrations, the Civil War, the corrupt Gilded Age; and through the consolidating period of British Imperialism in Queen Victoria's later years. The Catechism, first published in 1881, sometimes strikes a note that reminds us of that time with its high if not always achieved ideals. The answer to Q 173 says that 'the essence of Buddhism' may be expressed in the words 'Self-culture and universal love'. In them we hear not only the voice of Henry Steel Olcott but also the voice of Matthew Arnold, and behind that the voice of Goethe, self-culturist supreme, and 'the great physician of our iron age'. It is not necessarily the way a modern Buddhist would express the essence of the Dharma; the first

part would seem to fall foul of the doctrine of anatta, as generally understood. But if the paradox of a selfless self-culture be not too much of a contradiction the phrase is admissible; and certainly the second part is beyond dispute.

In his native land, even in his native state of New Jersey, Olcott would seem to be virtually unknown. Likewise among western Buddhists, although he was one of the very first western Buddhists and one of the most influential ever. Perhaps the eclipse of the Theravadin influence in the West by Japanese and Tibetan forms of Dharma has something to do with his obscurity, even though it was Olcott who brought the Theravada and the Mahayana together in an ecumenical movement, inspiring them to look outward when they were inclined, for understandable historical reasons, to be introverted and provincial.

No doubt Olcott had his faults, but as with truly great men and women, they were the shadows cast by great qualities. We shall look in vain for such a life as his in the long history of Buddhism. Talents, achievements, responsibilities, all these in abundance before the encounter with the Dharma; thereafter, in the second part of his life, tireless organization, travel and campaigning; championing of the disadvantaged; stimulation of the dispirited and the lazy; inspiration of the young; resociation of long-sundered traditions; and not least the little book which contains so much that is essential for an understanding of Buddhism.