

Title

THE LIGHT OF ASIA
Or
The Great Renunciation
(Mahabhinishkramana)

**Being the life and teaching of Gautama,
Prince of India and Founder of Buddhism
(As told in verse by an Indian Buddhist).**

By
Edwin Arnold

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About this eBook

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THE LIGHT OF ASIA; or THE GREAT RENUNCIATION (Mahabhinishkramana)

Preface

In the following Poem I have sought, by the medium of an imaginary Buddhist votary, to depict the life and character and indicate the philosophy of that noble hero and reformer, Prince Gautama of India, the founder of Buddhism.

A generation ago little or nothing was known in Europe of this great faith of Asia, which had nevertheless existed during twenty-four centuries, and at this day surpasses, in the number of its followers and the area of its prevalence, any other form of creed. Four hundred and seventy millions of our race live and die in the tenets of Gautama; and the spiritual dominions of this ancient teacher extend, at the present time, from Nepal and Ceylon over the whole Eastern Peninsula to China, Japan, Thibet, Central Asia, Siberia, and even Swedish Lapland. India itself might fairly be included in this magnificent empire of belief, for though the profession of Buddhism has for the most part passed away from the land of its birth, the mark of Gautama's sublime teaching is stamped ineffaceably upon modern Brahmanism, and the most characteristic habits and convictions of the Hindus are clearly due to the benign influence of Buddha's precepts. More than a third of mankind, therefore, owe their moral and

religious ideas to this illustrious prince, whose personality, though imperfectly revealed in the existing sources of information, cannot but appear the highest, gentlest, holiest, and most beneficent, with one exception, in the history of Thought. Discordant in frequent particulars, and sorely overlaid by corruptions, inventions, and misconceptions, the Buddhistical books yet agree in the one point of recording nothing - no single act or word - which mars the perfect purity and tenderness of this Indian teacher, who united the truest princely qualities with the intellect of a sage and the passionate devotion of a martyr. Even M. Barthelemy St. Hilaire, totally misjudging, as he does, many points of Buddhism, is well cited by Professor Max Muller as saying of Prince Siddartha, "Sa vie n'a point de tache. Son constant heroisme egale sa conviction ; et si la theorie qu'il preconise est fausse, les exemples personnels qu'il donne sont irreprochables. Il est le modele acheve de toutes les vertus qu'il preche; son abnegation, sa charite, son inalterable douceur ne se demettent point un seul instant. . . . Il prepare silencieusement sa doctrine par six annees de retraite et de meditation; il la propage par la seule puissance de la parole et de la persuasion pendant plus d'un demi-siecle, et quand il meurt entre les bras de ses disciples, c'est avec la serenite d'un sage qui a pratique le bien toute sa vie, et qui est assure d'avoir trouve le vrai." To Gautama has consequently been given this stupendous conquest of humanity; and - though he discountenanced ritual, and declared himself, even when on the threshold of Nirvana, to be only what all other men might become - the love and gratitude of Asia, disobeying his mandate, have given him fervent worship. Forests of flowers are daily laid upon his stainless shrines, and countless millions of lips daily repeat the formula, "I take refuge in Buddha!"

The Buddha of this poem - if, as need not be doubted, he really existed - was born on the borders of Nepaul, about 620 B.C., and died about 543 B.C. at Kusinagara in Oudh. In point of age, therefore, most other creeds are youthful compared with this venerable religion, which has in it the eternity of a universal hope, the immortality of a boundless love, an indestructible element of faith in final good, and the proudest assertion ever made of human freedom. The extravagances which disfigure the record and practice of Buddhism are to be referred to that inevitable degradation which priesthoods always inflict upon great idea committed to their charge. The power and sublimity of Gautama's original doctrines should be estimated by their influence, not by their interpreters; nor by that innocent but lazy and ceremonious church which has arisen on the foundations of the Buddhistic Brotherhood or "Sangha."

I have put my poem into a Buddhist's mouth, because, to appreciate the spirit of Asiatic thoughts, they should be regarded from the Oriental point of view; and neither the miracles which consecrate this record, nor the philosophy which it embodies, could have been otherwise so naturally reproduced. The doctrine of Transmigration, for instance - startling to modern minds - was established and thoroughly accepted by the Hindus of Buddha's time; that period when Jerusalem was being taken by Nebuchadnezzar, when Nineveh was falling to the Medes, and Marseilles was founded by the Phocaeans. The exposition here offered of so antique a system is of necessity incomplete, and - in obedience to the laws of poetic art - passes rapidly by many matters philosophically most important, as well as over the long ministry of Gautama. But my purpose has been obtained if any just conception be here conveyed of the lofty character of this noble prince, and of the general purport of his doctrines. As to these there has arisen prodigious controversy among the erudite, who will be aware that I have taken the imperfect Buddhistic citations much as they stand in Spence Hardy's work, and have also modified more than one passage in the received narratives. The views, however, here indicated of "Nirvana," "Dharma," "Karma," and the other chief features of Buddhism, are at least the fruits of considerable study, and also of a firm conviction that a

third of mankind would never have been brought to believe in blank abstractions, or in Nothingness as the issue and crown of Being.

Finally, in reverence to the illustrious Promulgator of this "Light of Asia," and in homage to the many eminent scholars who have devoted noble labors to his memory, for which both repose and ability are wanting to me, I beg that the shortcomings of my too-hurried study may be forgiven. It has been composed in the brief intervals of days without leisure, but is inspired by an abiding desire to aid in the better mutual knowledge of East and West. The time may come, I hope, when this book and my "Indian Song of Songs" will preserve the memory of one who loved India and the Indian peoples.

EDWIN ARNOLD, C.S.I.

Book the First

The Scripture of the Saviour of the World,
Lord Buddha - Prince Siddártha styled on earth -
In Earth and Heavens and Hells Incomparable,
All-honored, Wisest, Best, most Pitiful;
The Teacher of Nirvana and the Law.

Thus came he to be born again for men.

Below the highest sphere four Regents sit
Who rule our world, and under them are zones
Nearer, but high, where saintliest spirits dead
Wait thrice ten thousand years, then Eve again;
And on Lord Buddha, waiting in that sky,
Came for our sakes the five sure signs of birth
So that the Devas knew the signs, and said
"Buddha will go again to help the World."
"Yea!" spake He, "now I go to help the World
This last of many times; for birth and death
End hence for me and those who learn my Law.
I will go down among the Sâkyas,
Under the southward snows of Himalay,
Where pious people live and a just King."

That night the wife of King Suddhâdana,
Maya the Queen, asleep beside her Lord,
Dreamed a strange dream; dreamed that a star from heaven -
Splendid, six-rayed, in color rosy-pearl,
Whereof the token was an Elephant
Six-tusked and whiter than Vahuka's milk -
Shot through the void and, shining into her,
Entered her womb upon the right. Awaked,
Bliss beyond mortal mother's filled her breast,

And over half the earth a lovely light
Forewent the morn. The strong hills shook; the waves
Sank lulled; all flowers that blow by day came forth
As 'twere high noon; down to the farthest hells
Passed the Queen's joy, as when warm sunshine thrills
Wood-glooms to gold, and into all the deeps
A tender whisper pierced. "Oh ye," it said,
"The dead that are to live, the live who die,
Uprise, and hear, and hope! Buddha is come!"
Whereat in Limbos numberless much peace
Spread, and the world's heart throbbbed, and a wind blew
With unknown freshness over lands and seas.
And when the morning dawned, and this was told,
The grey dream-readers said "The dream is good!
The Crab is in conjunction with the Sun
The Queen shall bear a boy, a holy child
Of wondrous wisdom, profiting all flesh,
Who shall deliver men from ignorance,
Or rule the world, if he will deign to rule."

In this wise was the holy Buddha born.

Queen Maya stood at noon, her days fulfilled,
Under a Palsa in the Palace-grounds,
A stately trunk, straight as a temple-shaft,
With crown of glossy leaves and fragrant blooms;
And, knowing the time come - for all things knew -
The conscious tree bent down its boughs to make
A bower about Queen Maya's majesty,
And Earth put forth a thousand sudden flowers
To spread a couch, while, ready for the bath,
The rock hard by gave out a limpid stream
Of crystal flow. So brought she forth her child
Pangless - he having on his perfect form
The marks, thirty and two, of blessed birth;
Of which the great news to the Palace came.
But when they brought the painted palanquin
To fetch him home, the bearers of the poles
Were the four Regents of the Earth, come down
From Mount Sumeru - they who write men's deeds
On brazen plates - the Angel of the East,
Whose hosts are clad in silver robes, and bear
Targets of pearl: the Angel of the South,
Whose horsemen, the Kumbhandas, ride blue steeds,
With sapphire shields: the Angel of the West,
By Nâgas followed, riding steeds blood-red,
With coral shields: the Angel of the North,
Environed by his Yakshas, all in gold,
On yellow horses, bearing shields of gold.

These, with their pomp invisible, came down
And took the poles, in caste and outward garb
Like bearers, yet most mighty gods; and gods
Walked free with men that day, though men knew not:
For Heaven was filled with gladness for Earth's sake,
Knowing Lord Buddha thus was come again.

But King Suddhōdana wist not of this;
The portents troubled, till his dream-readers
Augured a Prince of earthly dominance,
A Chakravartīn, such as rise to rule
Once in each thousand years; seven gifts he has -
The Chakra-ratna, disc divine; the gem;
The horse, the Aswa-ratna, that proud steed
Which tramps the clouds; a snow-white elephant,
The Hasti-ratna, born to bear his King;
The crafty Minister, the General
Unconquered, and the wife of peerless grace,
The Istrī-ratna, lovelier than the Dawn.
For which gifts looking with this wondrous boy,
The King gave order that his town should keep
High festival; therefore the ways were swept,
Rose-odors sprinkled in the street, the trees
Were hung with lamps and flags, while merry crowds
Gaped on the sword-players and posturers,
The jugglers, charmers, swingers, rope-walkers,
The nautch-girls in their spangled skirts and bells
That chime light laughter round their restless feet;
The masquers wrapped in skins of bear and deer.
The tiger-tamers, wrestlers, quail-fighters,
Beaters of drum and twanglers of the wire,
Who made the people happy by command.
Moreover from afar came merchant-men,
Bringing, on tidings of this birth, rich gifts
In golden trays; goat-shawls, and nard and jade,
Turkises, "evening-sky" tint, woven webs -
So fine twelve folds bide not a modest face -
Waist-cloths sewn thick with pearls, and sandal-wood;
Homage from tribute cities; so they called
Their Prince Savārthasiddh, "All-Prospering,"
Briefer, Siddārtha.

'Mongst the strangers came
A grey-haired saint, Asita, one whose ears,
Long closed to earthly things, caught heavenly sounds,
And heard at prayer beneath his peepul-tree
The Devas singing songs at Buddha's birth.
Wondrous in lore he was by age and fasts;
Him, drawing nigh, seeming so reverend,

The King saluted and Queen Maya made
To lay her babe before such holy feet;
But when he saw the Prince the old man cried
"Ah, Queen, not so!" and thereupon he touched
Eight times the dust, laid his waste visage there,
Saying, "O Babe! I worship! Thou art He!
I see the rosy light, the foot-sole marks,
The soft curled tendril of the Swastika,
The sacred primal signs thirty and two,
The eighty lesser tokens. Thou art Buddh,
And thou wilt preach the Law and save all flesh
Who learn the Law, though I shall never hear,
Dying too soon, who lately longed to die;
Howbeit I have seen Thee. Know, O King!
This is that Blossom on our human tree
Which opens once in many myriad years -
But opened, fills the world with Wisdom's scent
And Love's dropped honey; from thy royal root
A Heavenly Lotus springs: Ah, happy House!
Yet not all-happy, for a sword must pierce
Thy bowels for this boy - whilst thou, sweet Queen!
Dear to all gods and men for this great birth,
Henceforth art grown too sacred for more woe,
And life is woe, therefore in seven days
Painless thou shalt attain the close of pain."

Which fell: for on the seventh evening
Queen Maya smiling slept, and waked no more,
Passing content to Trâyastrinshas-Heaven,
Where countless Devas worship her and wait
Attendant on that radiant Motherhead.
But for the Babe they found a foster-nurse,
Princess Mahâprajâpati - her breast
Nourished with noble milk the lips of Him
Whose lips comfort the Worlds.

When th' eighth year passed
The careful King bethought to teach his son
All that a Prince should learn, for still he shunned
The too vast presage of those miracles,
The glories and the sufferings of a Buddh.
So, in full council of his Ministers,
"Who is the wisest man, great sirs," he asked,
"To teach my Prince that which a Prince should know?"
Whereto gave answer each with instant voice
"King! Viswamitra is the wisest one,
The furthest seen in Scriptures, and the best
In learning, and the manual arts, and all."
Thus Viswamitra came and heard commands;

And, on a day found fortunate, the Prince
Took up his slate of ox-red sandal-wood,
All-beautified by gems around the rim,
And Sprinkled smooth with dust of emery,
These took he, and his writing-stick, and stood
With eyes bent down before the Sage, who said,
"Child, write this Scripture," speaking slow the verse
"Gâyatrî" named, which only High-born hear: -

*Om, tatsaviturvarenyam
Bhargo devasya dhîmahî
Dhiyo yo na prachodayât.*

"Acharya, I write," meekly replied
The Prince, and quickly on the dust he drew -
Not in one script, but many characters -
The sacred verse; Nagri and Dakshin, Nî,
Mangal, Parusha, Yava, Tirthi, Uk,
Darad, Sikhyani, Mana, Madhyachar,
The pictured writings and the speech of signs,
Tokens of cave-men and the sea-peoples,
Of those who worship snakes beneath the earth,
And those who flame adore and the sun's orb,
The Magians and the dwellers on the mounds;
Of all the nations all strange scripts he traced
One after other with his writing-stick,
Reading the master's verse in every tongue;
And Viswamitra said, "It is enough,
Let us to numbers.

After me repeat
Your numeration till we reach the Lakh,
One, two, three, four, to ten, and then by tens
To hundreds, thousands." After him the child
Named digits, decads, centuries; nor paused,
The round lakh reached, but softly murmured on
"Then comes the kôti, nahut, ninnahut,
Khamba, viskhamba, abab, attata,
To kumuds, gundhikas, and utpalas,
By pundarîkas unto padumas,
Which last is how you count the utmost grains
Of Hastagiri ground to finest dust;
But beyond that a numeration is,
The Kâtha, used to count the stars of night;
The Kôti-Kâtha, for the ocean drops;
Ingga, the calculus of circulars;
Sarvanikchepa, by the which you deal
With all the sands of Gunga, till we come
To Antah-Kalpas, where the unit is

The sands of ten crore Gungas. If one seeks
More comprehensive scale, th' arithmic mounts
By the Asankya, which is the tale
Of all the drops that in ten thousand years
Would fall on all the worlds by daily rain;
Thence unto Maha Kalpas, by the which
The Gods compute their future and their past."

"'Tis good," the Sage rejoined, "Most noble Prince,
If these thou know'st, needs it that I should teach
The mensuration of the lineal?"
Humbly the boy replied, "Acharya!"
"Be pleased to hear me. Paramânu ten
A parasukshma make; ten of those build
The trasarene, and seven trasarenes
One mote's-length floating in the beam, seven motes
The whisker-point of mouse, and ten of these
One likhya; likhyas ten a yuka, ten
Yukas a heart of barley, which is held
Seven times a wasp-waist; so unto the grain
Of mung and mustard and the barley-corn,
Whereof ten give the finger-joint, twelve joints
The span, wherefrom we reach the cubit, staff,
Bow-length, lance-length; while twenty lengths of lance
Metre what is named a 'breath,' which is to say
Such space as man may stride with lungs once filled,
Whereof a gow is forty, four times that
A yôjana; and, Master! if it please,
I shall recite how many sun-motes lie
From end to end within a yôjana."
Thereat, with instant skill, the little Prince
Pronounced the total of the atoms true.
But Viswamitra heard it on his face
Prostrate before the boy; "For thou," he cried,
Art Teacher of thy teachers - thou, not I,
Art Guru. Oh, I worship thee, sweet Prince!
That comest to my school only to show
Thou knowest all without the books, and know'st
Fair reverence besides."

Which reverence
Lord Buddha kept to all his schoolmasters,
Albeit beyond their learning taught; in speech
Right gentle, yet so wise; princely of mien,
Yet softly-mannered; modest, deferent,
And tender-hearted, though of fearless blood;
No bolder horseman in the youthful band
E'er rode in gay chase of the shy gazelles;
No keener driver of the chariot

In mimic contest scoured the Palace-courts;
Yet in mid-play the boy would oftentimes pause,
Letting the deer pass free; would oftentimes yield
His half-won race because the laboring steeds
Fetched painful breath; or if his princely mates
Saddened to lose, or if some wistful dream
Swept o'er his thoughts. And ever with the years
Waxed this compassionateness of our Lord,
Even as a great tree grows from two soft leaves
To spread its shade afar; but hardly yet
Knew the young child of sorrow, pain, or tears,
Save as strange names for things not felt by kings,
Nor ever to be felt. But it befell
In the Royal garden on a day of spring,
A flock of wild swans passed, voyaging north
To their nest-places on Himâla's breast.
Calling in love-notes down their snowy line
The bright birds flew, by fond love piloted;
And Devadatta, cousin of the Prince,
Pointed his bow, and loosed a wilful shaft
Which found the wide wing of the foremost swan
Broad-spread to glide upon the free blue road,
So that it fell, the bitter arrow fixed,
Bright scarlet blood-gouts staining the pure plumes.
Which seeing, Prince Siddârtha took the bird
Tenderly up, rested it in his lap -
Sitting with knees crossed, as Lord Buddha sits -
And, soothing with a touch the wild thing's fright,
Composed its ruffled vans, calmed its quick heart,
Cared it into peace with light kind palms
As soft as plantain-leaves an hour unrolled;
And while the left hand held, the right hand drew
The cruel steel forth from the wound and laid
Cool leaves and healing honey on the smart.
Yet all so little knew the boy of pain
That curiously into his wrist he pressed
The arrow's barb, and winced to feel it sting,
And turned with tears to soothe his bird again.

Then some one came who said, "My Prince hath shot
A swan, which fell among the roses here,
He bids me pray you send it. Will you send?"
"Nay," quoth Siddârtha, "if the bird were dead
To send it to the slayer might be well,
But the swan lives; my cousin hath but killed
The god-like speed which throbbled in this white Wing."
And Devadatta answered, "The wild thing,
Living or dead, is his who fetched it down;
'Twas no man's in the clouds, but fall'n 'tis mine,

Give me my prize, fair Cousin." Then our Lord
Laid the swan's neck beside his own smooth cheek
And gravely spake, "Say no! the bird is mine,
The first of myriad things which shall be mine
By right of mercy and love's lordliness.
For now I know, by what within me stirs,
That I shall teach compassion unto men
And be a speechless world's interpreter,
Abating this accursed flood of woe,
Not man's alone; but, if the Prince disputes,
Let him submit this matter to the wise
And we will wait the word." So was it done;
In full divan the business had debate,
And many thought this thing and many that,
Till there arose an unknown priest who said,
"If life be aught, the savior of a life
Owns more the living thing than he can own
Who sought to slay - the slayer spoils and wastes
The cherisher sustains, give him the bird:"
Which judgment all found just; but when the King
Sought out the sage for honor, he was gone;
And some one saw a hooded snake glide forth, -
The gods come oftentimes thus! So our Lord Buddh
Began his works of mercy.

Yet not more
Knew he as yet of grief than that one bird's,
Which, being healed, went joyous to its kind.
But on another day the King said, "Come,
Sweet son! and see the pleasure of the spring,
And how the fruitful earth is wooed to yield
Its riches to the reaper; how my realm -
Which shall be thine when the pile flames for me -
Feeds all its mouths and keeps the King's chest filled.
Fair is the season with new leaves, bright blooms,
Green grass, and cries of plough-time." So they rode
Into a land of wells and gardens, where,
All up and down the rich red loam, the steers
Strained their strong shoulders in the creaking yoke
Dragging the ploughs; the fat soil rose and rolled
In smooth dark waves back from the plough; who drove
Planted both feet upon the leaping share
To make the furrow deep; among the palms
The tinkle of the rippling water rang,
And where it ran the glad earth 'broidered it
With balsams and the spears of lemon-grass.
Elsewhere were sowers who went forth to sow;
And all the jungle laughed with nesting-songs,
And all the thickets rustled with small life

Of lizard, bee, beetle, and creeping things
Pleased at the spring-time. In the mango-sprays
The sun-birds flashed; alone at his green forge
Toiled the loud coppersmith; bee-eaters hawked
Chasing the purple butterflies; beneath,
Striped squirrels raced, the mynas perked and picked,
The nine brown sisters chattered in the thorn,
The pied fish-tiger hung above the pool,
The egrets stalked among the buffaloes,
The kites sailed circles in the golden air;
About the painted temple peacocks flew,
The blue doves cooed from every well, far off
The village drums beat for some marriage-feast;
All things spoke peace and plenty, and the Prince
Saw and rejoiced. But, looking deep, he saw
The thorns which grow upon this rose of life:
How the swart peasant sweated for his wage,
Toiling for leave to live; and how he urged
The great-eyed oxen through the flaming hours,
Goading their velvet flanks: then marked he, too,
How lizard fed on ant, and snake on him,
And kite on both; and how the fish-hawk robbed
The fish-tiger of that which it had seized;
The shrike chasing the bulbul, which did chase
The jewelled butterflies: till everywhere
Each slew a slayer and in turn was slain,
Life living upon death. So the fair show
Veiled one vast, savage, grim conspiracy
Of mutual murder, from the worm to man,
Who himself kills his fellow; seeing which -
The hungry ploughman and his laboring kine,
Their dewlaps blistered with the bitter yoke,
The rage to live which makes all living strife -
The Prince Siddârtha sighed. "Is this," he said,
"That happy earth they brought me forth to see?
How salt with sweat the peasant's bread! how hard
The oxen's service! in the brake how fierce
The war of weak and strong! i' th' air what plots!
No refuge e'en in water. Go aside
A space, and let me muse on what ye show."
So saying, the good Lord Buddha seated him
Under a jambu-tree, with ankles crossed -
As holy statues sit - and first began
To meditate this deep disease of life,
What its far source and whence its remedy.
So vast a pity filled him, such wide love
For living things, such passion to heal pain,
That by their stress his princely spirit passed
To ecstasy, and, purged from mortal taint

Of sense and self, the boy attained thereat
Dhyâna, first step of "the path."

There flew
High overhead that hour five holy ones,
Whose free wings faltered as they passed the tree.
"What power superior draws us from our flight?"
They asked, for spirits feel all force divine,
And know the sacred presence of the pure.
Then, looking downward, they beheld the Buddh
Crowned with a rose-hued aureole, intent
On thoughts to save; while from the grove a voice
Cried, "Rishis! this is He shall help the world,
Descend and worship." So the Bright Ones came
And sang a song of praise, folding their wings,
Then journeyed on, taking good news to Gods.

But certain from the King seeking the Prince
Found him still musing, though the noon was past,
And the sun hastened to the western hills:
Yet, while all shadows moved, the jambu-tree's
Stayed in one quarter, overspreading him,
Lest the sloped rays should strike that sacred head;
And he who saw this sight heard a voice say,
Amid the blossoms of the rose-apple,
"Let be the King's son! till the shadow goes
Forth from his heart my shadow will not shift."

Book the Second

Now, when our Lord was come to eighteen years,
The King commanded that there should be built
Three stately houses, one of hewn square beams
With cedar lining, warm for winter days;
One of veined marbles, cool for summer heat;
And one of burned bricks, with blue tiles bedecked,
Pleasant at seed-time, when the champaks bud -
Subha, Suramma, Ramma, were their names.
Delicious gardens round about them bloomed,
Streams wandered wild and musky thickets stretched,
With many a bright pavilion and fair lawn
In midst of which Siddârtha strayed at will,
Some new delight provided every hour;
And happy hours he knew, for life was rich,
With youthful blood at quickest; yet still came
The shadows of his meditation back,
As the lake's silver dulls with driving clouds.