

## BUDDHA AND HUMANITY<sup>1</sup>

by

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The international importance of Buddha has been expressed succinctly by the English writer and historian, Mr. H. G. Wells, who declared around about 1920 that the six greatest men in history were Buddha, Socrates, Alexander or Aristotle, Asoka, Roger Bacon and Abraham Lincoln. Buddha certainly has been one of the greatest and most significant thought-leaders in human history. His appearance was not an isolated event in the history of man's endeavour to rise above his bare material existence, to probe into the nature of the Ultimate Reality behind life and to find a proper attitude towards his fellow beings and towards all living creatures.

Humanity, after it had evolved into proper man, *Homo sapiens*, from anthropoid apes, made its slow and steady upward progress along the path of group life to civilisation. The first hundreds of thousands of years were taken up by man's efforts to rise above his material surroundings. He passed through the various stages in his cultural advancement, first by learning the use of fire and then by acquiring greater control over his hands and inventing tools and weapons. He passed through the eolithic, the palaeolithic and neolithic stages, and evolved with what became one of the fundamentals of human advancement, organised society. The notions of primitive man which were born primarily of fear for the world around him and for the unseen forces which seemed to operate here, gradually helped him on. As he achieved greater control of his environment, man began to evolve an intelligent attitude of enquiry and of imagination towards life and being. In the earlier periods of human history when civilisation in the true sense of the term became well-established, with organised communities building

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1. From a paper read at the Buddha Jayanti Symposium in New Delhi, November 1956.

up cities and states and evolving organised and codified religion, the guesses towards truth went on developing and gathering greater momentum.

After civilisation had made considerable advances, man was freed from immediate want. He had ample time at his disposal because his economic life was better-arranged. During a period between 3,000 and 6,000 years ago, humanity in the more important civilised areas entered into fruitful speculations about life and the world around it and about the mystery that was behind life. It is rather remarkable that in spite of different environments the greatest thought-leaders of humanity, about a thousand years before Christ, came to formulate certain ideas which were in basic agreement, no matter how widely separated the race or people or country. The best attempts of thinkers and wise men of the centuries and millennia before 1000 B.C. seemed to have been subjected gradually to the fire of both intellectualism and a growing spirit of humanism, combined with that of an enlightened imagination. As a result we have, during the first thousand years before Christ, and particularly during the first half of this period, the evolution and general acceptance of certain ideas with regard to the nature of man and the unseen world. We have also an acceptance of man's duty in life, which forms the basis of most human concepts and attitudes, speculations and behaviour today. Most of the great religions which are now active in the world, either directly in their old forms or indirectly in a new form, originated during this millennium. This has been described by some historians and thinkers as the Axial Period or the Axial Millennium in the history of present-day man. The apex was certainly reached by the middle of the first millennium B.C.; and in this apex, or crest of the wave, we find a number of great thought-leaders of humanity, including the Buddha himself.

We take a very sober view about the antiquity of Indian Vedic Culture, which seems to have assumed something like its final form just at the beginning of this Axial Period. The antiquity

of the advent of the Vedic Aryans in India, according to this estimate of time, does not appear to be anterior to 1500 B.C.; and the highest spiritual development of this period started towards its close when in India a new people was being born from the fusion of the Aryan invaders from the Northwest with the civilised pre-Aryan inhabitants of the country. Out of this interracial contact, conflict and final co-operation and inevitable fusion, arose a new people and a new culture with a newly sublimated ideology which form the basis of the present-day Indian people and Indian culture. Prior to this, certain intuitive guesses at Truth, the existence of a Unity or Unique Principle behind this universe, were formulated with conviction and with *éclat* by the Egyptian Pharaoh Amen-Hotep (Amenophis) IV, who conceived of the existence of the One God whom he saw in the disc of the Sun and who was invoked by the name of *Aton*. This was one of the most important events in the thought-world of man of which we have actual historical evidence dating from the 14th century B.C. Of all the great persons who made an advance towards the development of a Unitary Conception of Life and Existence, Amen-Hotep was one of the earliest and most preeminent. About Amen-Hotep we note that he represents a comingling of races in his personality—he was an Egyptian Hamite, but he had the blood of Indo-European-speaking peoples in his veins.

In ancient India, the sages or poets who were the composers of the Vedic hymns during the period beginning from 1500 B.C. onwards, representing primarily the Indo-European tradition of thought but evidently profoundly influenced, even at that early period, first by the various Asianic and Assyrio-Babylonian and then by the Dravidian and other pre-Aryan Indian approaches towards life, arrived fairly early at a conception of a Spirit which permeates the Universe and which manifests itself in various forms which man could conceive. The two of the wisest men in ancient India who appear to have flourished during the 10th century B.C. and who were evidently historical persons, were Vyasa Dvaipayana, who, according to the ancient Hindu tradition, was the compiler

of the Vedas, and Krishna Vasudeva. They represent in themselves, physically, intellectually and spiritually, the racial and cultural fusion which was at work in ancient India, bringing about the birth of the "Indian Man," as a composite Being, who absorbed in himself the various and totally distinct racial elements of Aryan and Dravidian, Mongoloid and Austro-Asiatic. The ideas regarding the existence of a Pervading Spirit, *Brahman* or *Ātman*,<sup>2</sup> were being established by these and other thinkers in India when the Axial Period began. In India the characteristic conceptions<sup>3</sup> of the Ultimate Reality were arrived at in this way.

The conception of the *Tao* (ancient Chinese *Dhau*) or 'the Way,' which was something almost identical with the Indian conception of *Rita* (*Rta*),<sup>4</sup> originated among the Chinese in the oldest period of the formation of their civilisation, during the first half of the second millennium B.C. The Chinese looked upon this *Tao* as the ultimate source of existence as well as the moving and guiding force of life. The *Tao* manifested itself in various forms, primarily as *Yang* and *Yin* (or *Purusha* and *Prakṛti*, as the Indians would say), in the material world, and also as *Teh* or Righteousness (*i.e.*, *Dharma*) in relations among living creatures. The Chinese people and Chinese thinkers, including Confucius and his followers, as well as other philosophers like Mo-Tzu and others, and including of course the great Lao-Tzu, took for granted the presence of *Tao* as the great Basis or Background of all Existence.

Similarly, in the Western World the Jews developed their idea of *Yahweh* on the basis of the Egyptian conceptions of the

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2. Also expressed in a Moral Law, which operated in the universe, as *Rita* (*Rta*) and *Dharma* or 'the Order' and 'Virtue' which held things together in their essential character and which also acted as the inner moral force.

3. Such as we find in diverse forms in the Upanishads, in Buddhism, both Hinayana and Mahayana, and in Jainism.

4. This word also, in all likelihood, meant 'way' in its original sense in the oldest Sanskrit, having come from the root *ri* (*r*) 'to go.' The equivalent of this word in the Old Iranian Speeches, *e.g.*, the Avestan *Asha* and Old Persian *Arta*, was also a word of similar deep import in the world-consciousness of the Iranian Aryans.

Unity of Godhead, as, for example, that which was formulated by Amenophis. The Indo-Europeans who established themselves in Greece were influenced by their Eastern neighbours, the Hamitic Peoples of Egypt and the Semites of the Near East. They had also their own native conception of a Sky-Father, *Zeus Pater* (corresponding to the Vedic *Dyaus Pitar*), and also of a supreme Intellect or Mind (*Nous*) working in the universe. The ancient Greeks also thought that the direction of the universe was through a Divine Law which they called *Diké*.<sup>5</sup> At the beginning of the Axial Period these ideas were becoming crystallised among thinkers all over the then civilised world, from China through India and Iran and the Semitic world into Egypt and Greece. They formed the basis of all subsequent speculation among mankind on the subject. These ideas became also the mainspring of all human intuition and experience in the matter of the nature of the Ultimate Reality.

During the first half of the Axial Period, quite a new note appears. After the all-embracing idea of the *Tao* or *Rita*, *Aton* or *Yahveh* or *Zeus-Pater*, of *Brahman* and *Dharma*, and of *Nous* and *Diké*, had become established, to bring to man a sense of steadiness in his *Weltanschauung*, certain new formulations about the duty of man toward his fellow beings, and also, in some cases, toward all living creatures, were introduced. Before the Axial Period, the Ultimate Reality, as conceived in the various mutually explanatory or complimentary forms, was something like a blind dynamic force with a certain inescapable inevitability about it. It was not generally regarded as being vitally connected with rational human behaviour. At any rate, in the earlier stages of the dawning of the Idea of a Great Underlying Force in Existence, it was conceived of as only a Force or Natural Order and nothing else, which carried everything in its course or operation. Man had to placate this force by magical rites of sacrifice and ritual, and by observance of certain rules of conduct which had more materialistic than moral significance. During the Axial Period the humanising and

5. From the primitive Indo-European root *dik* meaning 'to direct' which occurs in Sanskrit as *dīs*.

rationalising of this Ultimate Reality made it imperative for man to have a moral attitude towards life in general. The Vedic Aryans, for instance, and similarly the early Jews, the early Greeks, the early Chinese and other early peoples performed their sacrifices to the Gods by making offerings of animals, of food and drink, of raiment and precious objects, and by observing certain taboos. But it was a person like Krishna who learnt from his teacher Ghora Angirasa that the moral life of truth, of self-restraint, of abstention from taking others' property, and of charity embodied the real sacrifice which pleased the Supreme Spirit. So with the Jews their great early prophets like Isaiah insisted upon their leading a serious moral life. They were not free, however, from the accepted or current ritualistic background, at least for a long time. In China, Lao-Tzu brought in the need for detachment from life with a firm anchoring on the *Tao*. With him non-interference in the affairs of others and persistence in concentrating within oneself formed the ideal moral life. Confucius, on the other hand, thought that one first had to become established in the right life, by modelling his conduct on the teachings and examples of the ancient seers and sages, by trying to rectify the ills of society to the best of his ability, and by teaching mankind to live rationally and in a spirit of universal friendship.

In Greece the earlier philosophers were occupied both with the fundamentals of the universe, which they sought to explain with their limited knowledge, and with the moral law which guided the universe. Their teachings came together in those of Socrates and Plato, who espoused faith in the Unseen Reality as the guide and exemplar of the World and Humanity. In China during the 5th century B.C. Mo-Tzo preached universal love as the basis of the relationship between man and man. The sages of the Upanishads of India were more occupied with the understanding of the nature of the Ultimate Reality and of Man's relationship with it than with anything else. They were followed by heterodox non-Vedic thinkers like Nemintha

or Arishtanemi (a contemporary and cousin of Vasudeva Krishna), Parsvanatha, Mahavira, and Buddha, who accepted some of the main ideologies of the later Vedic Age, such as those in the Upanishads. At the same time they were actuated by a new ideal, that of clarifying and establishing the relationship between man and the universe, particularly the universe of living creatures. The Upanishad seers wanted man to approach his brother man through the way of the Common Divinity that was in all men. In Greece, in China, and in the new school of non-Vedic thought-leaders in India, man was supposed to be interested in his brother man in a direct way, as a man and as nothing else, without any reference to any transcendent or super-human background.

In Buddha we find, perhaps for the first time in the history of humanity, that all-embracing love for man which was to be the mainspring of human behaviour and which was to form one of the pivots of his aspiration for self-realisation. The secret of Buddha's appeal, the great success of this appeal to Humanity has lain here. Buddha, of course, was in the first instance an Indian sage, and he inherited the accumulated wisdom of his forbears. His teaching has come to us in two distinct streams or traditions, the *Hīnayāna* and the *Mahāyāna*. The former tradition, so far, has been looked upon as representing the main trend of Buddha's thought and teaching, whereas the latter has been considered as showing a later development of some of his ideas and new modifications along quite different lines from what he taught. The more we investigate this matter, the more we broaden our minds with the actual teachings of Buddha the better do we see that in some basic matters they were probably different from what these two conflicting schools declare them to have been. The emphasis of *Hīnayāna* has been towards a basically agnostic approach to the Ultimate Reality. In the *Hīnayāna*, this Ultimate Reality is not a personal god or divinity, or a Supreme Spirit. It is a state, the state of *Nirvāna*, which is not negative and nihilistic but

positive and full of bliss. The *Mahāyāna* takes a different point of view, beginning with the assumption of the existence of an Ultimate Reality, a Cosmic Buddha Spirit, as fundamental in life and being. We know that whenever a religion or a creed becomes well-organised within a Church, it develops, through a succession of teachers, an orthodox philosophy that becomes more and more rigid and hidebound with each generation. Buddhism in its various schools was equally exposed to that sort of thing, just like Christianity and Islam and the various sects of Hinduism.

We must take note of Buddha's Indian heritage in his attitude towards the world. In his Indian heritage, there was a compelling sense of sorrow and suffering in this world; there was the idea that philosophical speculation and quest were to have as their final aim and object the removal of this sorrow and suffering. In this quest for a permanence beyond life there was to be absolute honesty and freedom of purpose. Complete intellectual freedom was fully guaranteed in ancient India in this matter; and in the ancient Indian tradition, speculation about the nature of human personality and its connection with the Ultimate Reality went hand in hand with a most refreshing detachment from ideas that had anything of the nature of a hidebound theology or organised religion with its vested interests. Certain explanations of life and being were sought in various ways, and some of these were very widely accepted, though they were not insisted upon as cardinal doctrines or dogmas. These, for example, were the ideas of *Karma* and of *Samsāra*—of *Karma* or Action which formed the basis of the human personality and of man's moving about in this world, and of *Samsāra* which was a notion of human personality or soul passing through a cycle of existences in a number of "incarnations." The path of liberation was regarded as being through knowledge primarily, but a new factor, namely, that of good deeds, came into existence fairly early. Blind adherence to sacrifice and ritual were gradually restricted. Although they were not completely eschewed, in philosophical



thought they were generally relegated to secondary, unimportant places. We have mentioned before how Krishna, following his teacher Ghora Āngirasa, looked upon austerity or self-discipline, charity, simplicity, non-injury and speaking the truth as the culmination of sacrifice (*Chāndogya Upanishad*, III, 17, 5/6). In the *Gītā*, in which unquestionably a considerable amount of the teachings of the historical Krishna Vasudeva lies embedded, we have a similar emphasis on the moral life. Religious sacrifice and ritual are not wholly eschewed; they are commended if they are performed in a spirit of sincere faith. Religious ritual of all types, both Aryan and non-Aryan, have evidently been recommended by Krishna Vasudeva as being conductive to man's spiritual uplift. The idea of *Ahiṃsā* or Non-injury to any being was gaining ground among Indians, and this ranged itself against the purely Aryan or Indo-European rite of the fire-sacrifice, in which the animal was killed in a very inhuman way and its flesh and fat were burnt in the sacrificial fire so as to reach the Gods, who gave riches, progeny and power in exchange. Buddha spoke in very plain terms against this sacrifice, which in his view was perfectly useless; and so also was the view of the Jainas. As a matter of fact, Krishna also, according to the later traditions regarding his life and his teachings, was against Vedic sacrifices. Buddha further used some of the Upanishadic or Vedantic terms in connexion with the ascent of man to a higher life and experience. The word *Nirvāṇa* is a common Buddhist heritage with the Brahmans and the Jainas, and *Nirvāṇa* is something which is not capable of being described in words, but which is revealed in the Pali canon as a positive state and not a negative one (*Nibbāṇam parammuṃ sukhaṃ*). The highest position to which a man could attain in his progress towards obtaining *Bōdhi* or Supreme Wisdom in order to become transformed into a Buddha, and so to be liberated from the shackles of *Karma* and *Samsāra*, is described in the Pali canon as *Brahma-Vihāra*. This is an expression which should be taken in the ordinary sense in which it would be employed by the Sages of the Upanishads and Philosophers of Brahmanism in general. There

is no special interpretation given to this common expression in the Buddhist tradition. *Brahma-Vihāra*, or 'Dwelling in the Brahman,' or 'Rejoicing in the Brahman,' is a position which can be attained through the practice of these great virtues, namely *Upekṣā*, or 'non-cognisance of evil or suffering inflicted by others, *Mṛdutā*, or 'mildness or gentleness'<sup>6</sup> *Karuṇā*, or 'Pity and Love for all living creatures,' and *Maitrī*, or 'active friendliness,' that is, doing good actively as against merely negative *Ahimsā*.

This brings in what was pre-eminently Buddha's special contribution to Indian thought and philosophy, a sense of an All-embracing Love and Active Charity for all living creatures. The Vedantic sage was capable of attaining this position through the realisation of the idea that the *Brahman*, of which he was a part, was the Whole which embraced everything, and it was through *Brahman* that he was to feel at one with everything. But in our ordinary human existence, where we can only by taking up a detached view come to realise our basic unity with the Spirit or Force which is the hidden Ultimate Reality, we must at the same time practise active love and charity in our cooperate life. There was in this a new note in human relations.

Although actuated by the idea of the necessity to go into the fundamentals of existence, Buddha's great doctrine was that we were to probe into the exact Nature of Things which resulted from the continuous rotation of Cause and Effect. It was only through a knowledge of this fundamental character of things that one could bring about cessation of the undesirable chain of Cause and Effect. Buddha also accepted the position that, in order to get away from this world with its inherent sufferings and sorrows, it was necessary to abjure the flesh. But the extreme forms of asceticism that some of the religious sects of ancient India, both among the Brahmans and the Jains, practised, were rejected by Buddha, and he advocated a Middle Path seeking to harmonise between

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6. The Pali reading is *Muditā*, which means 'an attitude of gracious joy or pleasure at everything.'

asceticism and ordinary worldly existence. 'The fact remains that Buddha in his spirit was so obsessed with the idea of the impermanance and unhappiness in this life, and of its not possessing an individual soul as a permanent entity in existence, that he inculcated actively the doctrine of abjuring the world. He was too much of an ancient Indian *Sannyāsin*, of a Renouncer of the Worldly Life,' to think well of the life of a householder; and the ideal of the man who gave up the world and the flesh even to the extent of abandoning his wife and family, appears to have received special support from Buddha. The Brahmanical idea was in that sense more mundane and more realistic, and perhaps also more rational; it divided the life of man into a reasonable scheme of the four *Āśramas* or 'stages': that of the student, preparing for life; that of the householder, fulfilling his duties to his ancestors by marrying and raising a family, to the sages by preserving the ancient knowledge and extending it, and to God by prayer and service and religious ritual; that of the person retired from the affairs of the world which belong to a householder, abandoning mundane activities and living a life of meditation and prayer and service; and finally, that of the *Sannyāsin* or the person who has placed everything on God and has started to travel all by himself the last span of life to meet his God, virtually abjuring everything in the world. This aspect of Buddha's spiritual and social attitude led to an abnormal development of monasticism in Buddhism, which of course had its beneficent as well as its undesirable aspects.

Be all this as it may, Buddha is credited with this great Spirit of Love for everybody. He has been made to say that just as a mother preserves her single child even at the cost of her own life, so also should men have a mind full of infinite love towards all living creatures. The great Pity of Buddha for Humanity has been beautifully expressed in this poetical passage:

My children,

The Enlightened One, because He saw Mankind drowning in the  
Great Sea of Birth, Death and Sorrow, and longed to save  
them.

For this He was moved to pity.

Because He saw the men of the world straying in false paths, and none to guide them,

For this He was moved to pity.

Because He saw that they lay wallowing in the mire of the Five Lusts, in dissolute abandonment,

For this He was moved to pity.

Because He saw them still fettered to their wealth, their wives and their children, knowing not how to cast them aside,

For this He was moved to pity.

Because He saw them doing evil with hand, heart and tongue, and many times receiving the bitter fruits of sin, yet ever yielding to their desires,

For this He was moved to pity.

Because He saw that they slaked the thirst of the Five Lusts as it were with brackish water,

For this He was moved to pity.

Because He saw that though they longed for happiness, they made for themselves no *karma* of happiness; and though they hated pain, yet willingly made for themselves a *karma* of pain; and though they coveted the joys of Heaven, would not follow His commandments on earth,

For this He was moved to pity.

Because He saw them afraid of birth, old age and death, yet still pursuing the works that lead to birth, old age and death,

For this He was moved to pity.

Because He saw them consumed by the fires of pain and sorrow, yet knowing not where to seek the still water of *Samadhi*,

For this He was moved to pity.

Because He saw them living in a time of wars, killing and wounding one another; and knew that for the riotous hatred that had flourished in their hearts they were doomed to pay an endless retribution,

For this He was moved to pity.

Because many born at the time of His incarnation had heard Him preach the Holy Law, yet could not receive it,

For this He was moved to pity.

Because some had great riches that they could not bear to give away,

For this He was moved to pity.

Because He saw the men of the world ploughing their field, sowing the seed, trafficking, huckstering, buying and selling: and at the end winning nothing but bitterness,

For this He was moved to pity.<sup>7</sup>

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7. From the *Upāsaka-Śīla Sūtra*, Ch. III. Translated into the English by Arthur Waley.

A Chinese friend of mine, who is himself a very ardent lover of Buddhism and an erudite student of the faith in his country, has expressed his appreciation of the Buddhist heritage in China in these terms:

“(1) India has taught us to embrace the idea of absolute freedom—that fundamental Freedom of Mind which enables us to shake off the fetters of past tradition and habit—that spiritual freedom which casts off the enslaving forces of material existence, not merely negative freedom (*i.e.*, ridding ourselves of oppression and slavery), but the emancipation of the individual from his own self.

“(2) India has taught us the idea of Absolute Love—pure love towards all being—eliminating impatience, disgust and emulation—and a deep pity and sympathy for the foolish, the wicked, the simple—absolute love which recognises the inseparability of all beings—‘the oneness of myself and all things.’

“Absolute Freedom through Wisdom,  
Absolute Love through Pity.”

These last two short lines give us the appeal of Buddha.

Buddhism became a great force as the faith spread on all sides. The Merciful One, as Buddha aptly came to be described, united mankind through two ways, a perfectly free mind in the quest for the Ideal, and an unrestrained love and charity for all living beings. Buddha gave a great charter for all languages to flourish when he declared that he was in favour of men all over the world learning his teachings in their own languages. This at once gave a great impetus throughout Asia, which, as its parts came in touch with Buddhism, developed a literature in undeveloped languages and made them instruments for the transmission of higher human thought. The finer susceptibilities of the human mind were everywhere developed through the coming of Buddhism. Art flourished in its various forms, and Faith found a most beautiful and poignant expression through Art. There was appreciation of Nature, in a way which was undreamt

of before, through the Buddhist spirit of meditation. Humanity became harmonised everywhere, and many cruel and barbarous rites which were practised tended to be eliminated by the gentle spirit of Buddhism. It was the spirit of Buddha himself speaking as a great humanitarian when he condemned the cruelty which accompanied the Aryan slaughter of animals in the Vedic sacrifices. This move, perhaps for the first time in the history of man, to prevent cruelty to lower animals was appreciated in India itself. Although some of Buddha's philosophy was not approved by the Brahmans, nevertheless the idea of non-injury to all living creatures has been adopted as a part of the Indian Attitude to Life. Buddha condemned animal sacrifices, even though they were to be found in the Vedas. His merciful heart was moved by the sight of the slaughter of animals—so sang the Vaishnava poet Jayadeva in the 12th century in India. Vegetarianism spread with Buddhism, at least among monks and nuns and serious lay devotees in all the Buddhist countries. Buddhism everywhere enabled men to become more profound in their thoughts and more gentle in their ways.

The theory that a final liberation is in store for all living creatures gave occasion for *Mahāyāna* Buddhism to develop its most remarkable conception of the Helper and Saviour, the *Bōdhisattva*. There is, we note, from the inscriptions of Asoka the beginning of this idea in the Buddhism. This has given rise in China and in the areas inspired by Chinese Buddhism to the gentle and beautiful figure of the Goddess of Mercy, Kuan-Yin (or Kwannon, as she is called in Japan), which is a transformation of the Bodhisattva of Mercy, *Avalōkitēśvars* (or *Avalōkita-svara*), one of the most beautiful figures of the Divinity created by man.

In China the spread of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism with its conception of the *Ādi-Buddha*, the Eternal Buddha Spirit which embodies the universe, was a sort of link which brought together the ancient philosophies of the *Tao* and *Teh*, of the Way and Virtue in China, and of *Brahman* and *Rita*, or *Dharma*, in India. It seems

to me that the progress of Buddhism throughout the vast land of China, among one of the most gifted peoples in the world, has something to do with this basic background which was mentioned here in the beginning. Buddha appeared as a sort of fulfiller of a desire of the nations for a Love of All Life that vivifies and beautifies life. For if Humanity through its earlier sages and seers had first come to formulate a conception of a great Spirit or Force which is working through the universe as something unique, but manifesting itself to the perspective of human beings in different forms and bearing various names and epithets, it was a sage and a saint like Buddha who brought to Humanity the message of a Universal Love based on the attitude of a free enquiry into the nature of things and of the Ultimate Reality.

