



AMITABHA, A STORY OF BUDDHIST THEOLOGY

PAUL CARUS

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A STORY OF BUDDHIST THEOLOGY

**BY
PAUL CARUS**

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pleased with the prayers and sacrifices of the pious who express their faith in worship."

"When I was young," replied Aṅgavaghosha, "I was a Brahman myself; I believed in Brahma the Supreme Being, the Creator of and Lord over all the worlds that exist. I know there is much that is good in the Brahman faith, and I did not abandon it because I deemed it bad or injurious. I abandoned it, because the doctrine of the Tathâgata was superior, all-comprehensive; and more profound, for it explains the problems of existence, its whence and whither, and is more helpful. The doctrine of the Tathâgata is practical and not in the air as are the theories and speculations of the Brahmans. You seek a union with Brahma, and what is he? We may dispute his existence and no one can refute us. He is an idea, a metaphysical assumption, and his mansion is everywhere and nowhere. Thus the Tathâgata says that those who believe in Brahma are like a man who should make a staircase where four roads meet, to mount up high into a mansion which he can neither see nor know how it is, where it is, what it is built of, nor whether it exists at all. The priests claim the authority of the Vedas, and the Vedas are based upon the authority of the authors who wrote them, and these authors rely on the authority of Brahma. They are like a string of blind men clinging to one another and leading the blind,¹⁹ and their method of salvation consists in adoration, worship, and prayer." It is a doctrine for children, and though the words of their theory are high-sounding they are not the truth but a mere shadow of the truth; and in this sense the Tathâgata compared them to the monkey at the lake who tries to catch the moon in the water, mistaking the reflection for the reality."

"But would not all your arguments," replied the Brahman, "if I were to grant them, apply with the same force to Amitâbha? What is the difference whether we say Brahma or Amitâbha? Both are names for the Absolute."

"There would be no difference in the names if we understood the same by both. Brahma, the Absolute, is generally interpreted to mean Being in general, but Amitâbha is Enlightenment. We do not hanker after existence, but we worship truth, goodness, and purity.

¹⁹ The simile of the blind leader of the blind occurs in the same connection in the *Tevijja Sutta*, 15.

"By Amitâbha we understand the eternal, infinite light, i.e., the spiritual light of comprehension, and this light is a reality. No one doubts that there is a norm of truth and a standard of right and wrong. That is Amitâbha. We may not yet know all about Amitâbha; our wisdom is limited; our goodness is not perfect. But we ground ourselves upon that which we do know, while you Brahmans start with speculations, seeking a union with the Absolute, which is a vague idea, something unknown and unknowable. Amitâbha is certainly not a limited self-consciousness, but an infinite principle, an omnipresent law, an eternal norm, higher than any individual, but the depth of this norm is unfathomable, its application universal and infinite; its bountiful use immeasurable.

"We know something but not all about Amitâbha. He is the Dharmakâya, the embodiment of the good law. He is the Nirmanakâya, the aspiration to reach bodhi in the transformations of the evolution of life. He is the Sambhogakâya, the bliss of good deeds.²⁰ The philosophers, scientists, poets, of the future, the thinkers and dreamers of mankind, will find in Amitâbha a wonderful source of inspiration which can never be exhausted. The Tathâgata's religion is not mere metaphysics, his philosophy is not mere mythology. He allows metaphysics and mythology their spheres, but urges the practical issues of life. Thus his religion comprises all without becoming vague."

Said the Brahman: "How can so many contradictory things be united in one?"

And Açvaghosha replied: "My venerable teacher, the saintly sage Parsva, once told me the parable of the elephant which explains the relation of the truth to the sundry doctrines held by the several sects and schools, priests and philosophers, prophets and preachers. The Brahman said that he had never heard the story, and expressed his desire to hear it.

²⁰ For the details of Açvaghosha's doctrine of the triple aspect of the highest truth (so similar to the Christian trinity) as the Kâya (i.e., body or personality) of (1) the good law, (2) transformation, (3) bliss, see T. Suzuki's translation of Açvaghosha's Discourse on the Awakening of Faith, Chicago, 1900, pp. 99-101.

THE PARABLE OF THE ELEPHANT

Açvaghosha saw that every eye was intent upon him, and so he told the story of the white Elephant. He said:

"There was a noble and mighty elephant, an elephant white in color, with a strong trunk and long tusks, trained by a good master, and willing and serviceable in all the work that elephants are put to. And this noble and mighty elephant being led by his guide, the good master who had trained him, came to the land of the blind. And it was noised about in the land of the blind that the noble and mighty elephant, the king of all beasts, the wisest of all animals, the strongest and yet the meekest and kindest of creatures, had made his appearance in their country.

So the wise men and teachers of the blind came to the place where the elephant was and every one began to investigate his shape and figure and form. And when the elephant was gone they met and discussed the problem of the noble and mighty beast, and there were some who said he was like a great thick snake; others said he was like a snake of medium size. The former had felt the trunk, the latter the tail.

Further there were some who claimed that his figure was like that of a high column, others declared he was large and bulky like a big barrel, still others maintained he was smooth and hard but tapering. Some of the blind had taken hold of one of the legs, others had reached the main body, and still others had touched the tusks. Every one proposed his view and they disputed and controverted, and wrangled, and litigated, and bickered, and quarreled, and called each other names, and each one imprecated all the others, and each one denounced all the others, and they abused and scolded, and they anathematised and excommunicated, and finally every one of them swore that every one else was a liar and was cursed on account of his heresies.

These blind men, every one of them honest in his contentions, being sure of having the truth and relying upon his own experience, formed schools and sects and factions and behaved in exactly the same way as you see the

priests of the different creeds behave. But the master of the noble, mighty elephant knows them all, he knows that every one of them has a parcel of the truth, that every one is right in his way, but wrong in taking his parcel to be the whole truth.

"Not one of these sectarians observed the fact that the elephant was perfectly white and a marvel to see, for all of them were purblind. Yet I would not say that they were either dishonest or hypocrites. They had investigated the truth to the best of their ability.

"The master of the elephant is the Tathâgata, the Enlightened One, the Buddha. He has brought the white elephant representing the truth, the noble and mighty elephant, symbolising strength and wisdom and devotion, into the land of the blind, and he who listens to the Tathâgata will understand all the schools, and all the sects and all the factions that are in possession of parcels of the truth. His doctrine is all-comprehensive, and he who takes refuge in Him will cease to bicker, and to contend, and to quarrel."²¹

When Açvaghosha had finished the parable of the noble and mighty elephant, the two kings returned from the summer palace carrying with them in a solemn procession the slain tiger, and close behind on a white charger decked with garlands and gay ribbons, rode the hero of the day, one of the generals from the South, whose dart had struck the tiger with fatal precision and death-dealing power.

"Behold the hero of the day!" said Charaka. "And had the conspiracy not miscarried the same man might now be an assassin and a miscreant."

"There is a lesson in it!" replied Açvaghosha, "existence is not desirable for its own sake. That which gives worth to life is the purpose to which it is devoted.

"Our aim is not to live, but whether we die or live, to avoid wrong doing and to let right and justice and loving kindness prevail. Says the Tathâgata:

²¹ The *Udâna*, VI.

"Commit no wrong, but good deeds do,
And let thy heart be pure.
All Buddhas teach this doctrine true
Which will for aye endure."²²

²² *Dhammapada*, 183

THE DOUBLE WEDDING

Charaka found by degrees and not without difficulties his mental equilibrium, which his friend Kanishka seemed to possess naturally. He unburdened his heart to the saintly old man and arrived at the conviction that he was not made for a monk and that his duties of life according to his disposition lay in other fields.

In the meantime King Kanishka had sent a messenger to Matura his chancellor and vicegerent at Gandhâra, to bring Princess Kamalavatî to Benares.

Princess Kamalavatî arrived, and when her betrothal to Charaka was announced the happy events of our story reached their climax. Açvaghosha solemnised the nuptials of both couples, Kanishka with Bhadraçrî, and Charaka with Kamalavatî; and he read to them from the Dhammapada the famous stanza:

"Sweet in the world is fatherhood,
And motherhood is sweet;
But sweeter is the thought of good,
If nobly our heart beat.

"Sweeter, a life to old age spent
In truth and purity;
Sweeter, to reach enlightenment
And keep from evil free."²³

When the marriage ceremony was over a feast was spread at the royal palace, and King Kanishka declared that he had a great respect for priests, but did not favor the idea that his friend, the physician royal, should resign his calling of wizard (as he was wont to call him) for the sake of becoming a monk. While there were plenty of good and honest men to wear the yellow robe, there was scarcely one man among a million who could perform miracles and save human lives, as Charaka had done.

²³ *Dhammapada*, 332-333.

Charaka denied that he was a wizard. His art was no magic but consisted simply in observation and experiment, and it was nature whose forces he had learned to guide; but for all that he accomplished things which astounded the world. They were better than the miracles of magicians, for they were more useful and of enduring benefit to mankind.

When his friends praised him, he replied: "My science is a beginning only and what I accomplish is the work of a tyro. The Tathâgata has preached the religion of enlightenment, he set the wheel rolling; it is now our duty to follow up his thought, to spread enlightenment, and to increase it. Amitâbha is infinite, and thus the possibilities of invention are inexhaustible. The wondrous things which man is able to do, and which he will do in the ages to come, can at present only be surmised by the wisest sages.

"But greater than the greatest feats of invention will be the application of the Lord Buddha's maxim of loving-kindness in all fields of human intercourse, in family life, in politics, in labor and social affairs, in our dealings with friends and foes, with animals, and even with the degenerate and criminal. The enlightenment of our souls is most important. Therefore we praise the Tathâgata above all other things.

"Bright shineth the sun in his splendor by day
And bright the moon's radiance by night,
Bright shineth the hero in battle array,
And the sage in his thought shineth bright.
But by day and by night, none so glorious so bright
As Lord Buddha, the source of all spiritual light."
