

Introduction

I. THE HYMN OF ASIA

Man has long dreamed of solving the riddle of his own existence and achieving personal freedom.

This has been the great hope of man through the millennia of his histories – both East and West.

Now at last, in the 1046 lines of the poem *Hymn of Asia*, is the statement that this hope has been achieved – You can be free.

This moving hymn was written for a Buddhist Convention in about 1955 or '56, coincident with the celebrations in the Buddhist world of the 2,500th year of the Buddhist era.

Later, typed copies of this magnificent work, many in altered versions, were widely circulated from hand to hand in various countries of the world.

The public demand for its publication grew enormous.

Then in late 1973 its author directed its publication and subsequently personally supervised the collaboration of a talented artist, designer and calligrapher in the final preparation of the book.

Thus here we have a beautiful edition which presents the fully correct original text of the poem, one surely destined to become a major document of Man's spiritual history.

Hymn of Asia concerns the fulfillment of a prophecy made 2,500 years ago by Siddhartha Gautama, better known as Buddha, the founder of the religion known in the West as Buddhism.

This prophecy can best be understood in context of Buddha's life and work.

II. THE LIFE AND WORK OF BUDDHA

The two key concepts of Buddhism are contained in the words *Buddha* and *Bodhi*, each derived from the root *Budh*, meaning both to wake up and to know.

Thus, a Buddha is one who is Enlightened or Awakened. Bodhi means enlightenment or, alternately, one who has attained intellectual and ethical perfection by human means.

Siddhartha Gautama was the first in recorded history to attain such a state. And because he also pointed the way to others to attain it he started a religion which changed the history of the world.

Buddha's final words before he passed from this world sum up his lifelong teaching:

Decay is inherent in all compound things, but the truth will remain forever.
Work out your salvation with diligence.

Here was the epochal statement that, *in one lifetime*, one could strive to achieve a state of spiritual freedom from the endless cycle of death and rebirth and achieve spiritual independence of the flesh.

„Supernatural agencies“ were not involved. The entire reliance was placed upon the individual’s own impulse to redeem himself.

By rousing himself, by earnestness... the wise man may make for himself an island which no flood can overwhelm. Senseless and foolish folk fall into sloth. The wise man guards earnestness as his best treasure.¹

Buddha’s own life (563-483 B.C.) provides the greatest example of his own teaching.

Siddhartha Gautama’s birthplace was at Lumbini, now a part of Nepal on the northeast border of India. A rich nobleman, surrounded by opulence and destined to become a ruler, at the age of 29 the Buddha-to-be resolved to leave his privileged life to seek The Greater Life.

First he studied the inherited knowledge of his day under the greatest available teachers. He then retired to the forest and excelled even his fellow ascetics in endurance – nearly to the point of death.

Realizing that self-deprivation was enervating and „mind-clouding“ he sat down beneath a fig tree. From that spot he resolved not to rise until he had at last pierced the veil of illusion and achieved Enlightenment.

As the earliest scriptures of Buddhism state:

Sitting under a poplar-fig tree, he began to meditate methodically, and with his spiritual eye pierced layer after layer of the nature of existence. He remembered his previous existences, saw through the law of rebirth as a consequence of deeds and realized: This is suffering, this is its origin, this is its termination and this is the way to its termination. He gained the insight: Unshakable is my liberation (from suffering); this is the last birth, there is (for me) no more re-existence.

He was 35 when he reached Bodhi. Thereafter he spent his remaining lifetime expounding his message and organizing and laying down the rules for the swelling congregation of monks who wished to devote themselves full-time to the Teaching.

III. THE INFLUENCE OF BUDDHISM

The message of Buddha reached far beyond the compass of his original followers in northeast India.

Wherever it traveled its teaching of love and hope transformed, practically overnight, the existing barbarisms based upon the morality of force and violence.

Within 1,500 years after the death of its founder, Buddhism had civilized most of Asia. For example, the golden ages of Chinese, Tibetan and Japanese history were Buddhist civilizations.

¹ From the *Dhammapada*, *The Way of Truth*, a work traditionally scribed to Buddha.

Buddhism became the dominant religion of Asia and, in terms of numbers of adherents, the most widely held religion on the planet.

Westward its influence was just as important. Spreading along the heavily trafficked trade routes between the East and West, its ideas moved into the Near East in the first century B.C. The Christian message of love, its statement „The truth shall set you free“, represented the words of Buddha filtered through some 500 years and across thousands of miles.

Siddhartha Gautama's work even set the precedent for an applied religious philosophy which finally re-blossomed in the West some 2,000 years later.

IV. THE PROPHECY OF METTEYA

But Siddhartha Gautama did not regard himself as an end point. He looked upon his work as incomplete and prophesized that at a later time a successor would arise to complete his work.

The most specific wording of this prediction in Buddhist literature states that 2,500 years after Buddha a red-haired or golden-haired man would arise in the West to complete the job Buddha began.

In Buddhist literature his name is known as Metteya (or Metteyya with two y's) in Pali², or Maitreya in Sanskrit.³

Metta is the Pali word for love. Thus the name could mean „One whose name is kindness“. A more fluent translation of Metteya in English would be „friend“.

The legend of Metteya forms an important part of the Buddhist Mature.

There are two descriptions of Metteya in the Pali Canon, the earliest Buddhist scriptures. These references are found in a portion of the Canon known as the Digha Nikaya which represent the memorized sermons of Buddha, faithfully passed down orally from generation to generation and finally transcribed in the first century B.C.

When new Buddhist writings began to be composed just before and after the Christian era once again we hear of Maitreya (or Metteya). These mainly consisted of legendary accounts of the birthplace and history of the new Buddha-to-be.

Some 600 to 700 years later, at a time when Buddhism was decaying internally through rampant ritualism and superstition, a reformer from Southern India wrote a Pali poem entitled „Anagata Vamsa“. In this poem the author describes in detail the coming of Metteya who will revitalize the Truth Buddha promulgated and usher in a new golden age for the entire known world.

Various other descriptions of Metteya frequently recur in Buddhist literature.

Statues of Metteya can be found throughout Buddhist lands where he often goes by local names. Buddhists universally believe in his advent and that, according to the legend, he shall appear in the West.

² Pali - the language of Buddha and Pali Canon (the earliest written scriptures of Buddhism).

³ Sanskrit - the classical language of Indian literature.

It would be instructive to look at some examples of this great prophecy which has at one time or another inspired the greater portion of Mankind.

In one passage in the Digha Nikaya wherein Buddha has been describing a world decline he states:

At that period, brethren, there will arise in the World an Exalted one named Metteya, Arahant,⁴ Fully Awakened, abounding in wisdom and goodness, happy, with knowledge of the worlds, unsurpassed as a guide to mortals, willing to be led, a teacher for gods and men, an Exalted One, a Buddha, even as I am now. He, by himself, will thoroughly know and see, as it were face to face, this universe, with its worlds of the spirits, its Brahmas,⁵ and its Maras,⁶ and its worlds of recluses and Brahmins,⁷ of princes and peoples, even as I now, by myself, thoroughly know and see them. The truth (the Norm) lovely in its origin, lovely in its progress, lovely in its consummation, will he proclaim, both in spirit and in the letter, the higher life will he make known, in all its fullness and in all its purity, even as I do now. He will be accompanied by a congregation of some thousands of brethren, even as I am now accompanied by a congregation of some hundreds of brethren.

Later, as Buddha prepared for his death, the following prophecy was among his last words:

And Ananda,⁸ suppressing his tears, said to the Blessed One: 'Who shall teach us when thou art gone?'

And the Blessed One replied: 'I am not the first Buddha who came upon earth, nor shall I be the last. I came to teach you the truth, and I have founded on earth the kingdom of truth. Gautama Siddhartha will die, but Buddha will live, for Buddha is the truth, and the truth cannot die. He who believes in the truth and lives it, is my disciple, and I shall teach him. The truth will be propagated, and the kingdom of truth will increase for about five hundred years. Then for a while the clouds of error will darken the light, and in due time another Buddha will arise, and he will reveal to you the self-same eternal truth which I have taught you.'

Ananda said: 'How shall we know him?'

The Blessed One said: 'The Buddha that will come after me will be known as Maitreya, which means 'he whose name is kindness.' (From the Book of the Great Decease)

The idea that Metteya will arrive when Man's fortunes are at a low ebb is prevalent in the legend. For example, here is a description of his advent from Chinese Buddhist sources:

⁴ Arahant - variation of Arhat, one who has attained spiritual perfection.

⁵ Brahmas - plural of Brahma, from Hindu terminology, a term signifying the personified creative aspect of a spiritual absolute.

⁶ Maras - plural of Mara, literally death; the personification of evil.

⁷ Brahmins - members of the Indian priest caste.

⁸ Ananda - Buddha's cousin and his chief aide.

The first period began with Sakyamuni⁹ Buddha and ended five hundred years after his death. It is called 'Cheng-fa', here translated as the first model period. The second period lasts from the end of Cheng-fa for another five hundred years and is called 'Hsiang-fa', the period in which pictures must be used. In this period men must work their way to the truth through pictures and books. From the end of the second period and lasting for a further two thousand years comes 'Mo-fa', the final period. Then sin and need are increased to such a degree that Buddhism itself goes to pieces. At this point, Maitreya appears with his Millennial kingdom. A new cycle of life begins, with hope and redemption for all living things. Thus one cycle follows another until all living things are redeemed.

In 'Mi-lo-Hsia-sheng Ching', the Chinese scripture describing Metteya's descent into the world, we find how he is solemnly appointed by Gautama Buddha to come as the great renewer at the time when the power of evil is at its height and all living things seem to be going to ruin under sin and punishment.

And in Tibetan Buddhist materials, echoing earlier Buddhist Indian sources, this startling prophecy is made:

When he shall be seen in the West, seated in the Western fashion, his hair like flames about his noble head, discoursing, then shall the inhabitants of the Three Worlds¹⁰ rejoice, knowing that the emancipation of all sentient beings is imminent. Then it shall be called the age of the blessed because it will become commonplace to achieve Emancipation in one life-time.

Professor Nicholas Roerich (1874-1947), Russian painter and archaeologist, spent five years exploring in the Himalayas. In his *Altai-Himalaya*, a five year record of his expedition (now out of print) he related widespread prophecies throughout the East concerning Metteya.

Professor Roerich states in *Altai-Himalaya*, „It is told in the prophecies how the new era shall manifest itself.“

He relates some of these prophecies as follows:

1. First will begin an unprecedented war of all nations.
2. Then shall the Teachers appear and in all corners of the world shall be heard the true teaching.
3. To this word of truth shall the people be drawn but those who are filled with darkness and ignorance shall set obstacles... even those who by accident help the Teachings of (this spiritual king of the world) will receive in return a hundred fold.

⁹ Sakyamuni - Buddha's full name was originally Siddhartha Gautama of the Sakyas. Siddhartha was his given name; Gautama his surname and Sakya the name of the clan to which his family belonged. After he attained Buddha-hood his disciples sometimes called him Sakyamuni, "silent sage (muni) of the Sakya clan."

¹⁰ Three Worlds - three worlds of Tibetan Scriptures: Body: The physical world pertaining to the body and its operations and life. Speech: The 'world' of Communication between entities and things. Mind: One's own world, the world of one's own Creation.

4. And one can already perceive unusual people. Already they (the teachers) open the gates of knowledge, and ripened fruits are falling from the trees.

And finally:

5. Those who accept Him (the Messiah) shall rejoice. And those who deny Him shall tremble... And the warriors (teachers) shall march under the banner of Maitreya.

V. SUMMARY OF THE METTEYA LEGEND

Thus, we find these are the most salient details of the Metteya legend.

1. He shall appear in the West.
2. He shall appear at a time when religion shall be waning, when the world is imperiled and convulsed in turmoil.
3. He will have golden hair or red hair.
4. He will complete the work of Gautama Buddha and bring in a new golden age of man by making possible the attainment of spiritual freedom by all beings.
5. Although the date of his advent is variously forecast, the nearest date places it 2,500 years after Gautama Buddha – or roughly 1950 (the date of Gautama's own life being somewhat of an estimate itself).

In one form or another the prophecy of Metteya has been the principal hope that the East has preserved and bequeathed to the world.

The Editors