

INTRODUCTION

THE Pali literature of Burma owes its existence to the Pali literature of India. It is many years since the latter was first explored by the great scholars and pioneers—Fausböll, Lassen, Rhys Davids, Trenckner, Childers, Oldenberg—whose reward has been a gain to Oriental learning vast enough to content even them. With time a part of the material discovered has been brought within the reach of students by critical editing. Buddhistic literature is immense in quantity and bewildering in varied interest, and it was never more difficult than now to avoid being too much of the specialist. But the student of Buddhism who limits himself to one language or looks for solution of all questions in one literature risks slipping into an orthodoxy of his own. A sounder principle has long guided Buddhist studies; modern research has gone forth, like Aśoka's missionaries, to Further India, China, Japan, Tibet, Siam, and French Indo-China, armed with patience as they were with conviction, as resolutely determined to learn as they were to teach.

There is need nowadays to seek further in Burma, or rather, need to be better acquainted with what has already been found there. Among the countries in which the ideas and traditions of Buddhism are inseparably bound up with the Pali canon Burma possesses a special interest which we hardly feel in the case of Ceylon, for Burma shows how the leaven of Indian thought worked in a race and idiom having none of the close relationship with India which we recognize in all that is most characteristic of the literature of Ceylon. We may say that the essentially Indian genius, the psychological subtleties, and high thoughts of Buddhism have forced the Burmese language to grow, deepen, and expand continually. When Burmese was at last raised (in or about the fourteenth century) to the level of a literary language, it was by the addition of a great body of Indian words necessary to express ideas beyond the scope of that picturesque vernacular. Being

an agglutinative language, Burmese lacks the force, terseness, and delicacy that Pali owes to its nominal and verbal inflections and its power of forming elaborate compounds. Thus before the translating period, authors of Burmese race had studied Pali and learned to use it; ever since the twelfth century it has been a tradition of Burmese scholars to produce literary work in Pali, and it is with this work only that we are now concerned.

A survey of the Pali literature of Burma is not quite a new undertaking. In the year 1879 a report on the subject was drawn up for the Government of India by Dr. Emil Forchhammer, Professor of Pali at Rangoon, who had begun a thorough search for manuscripts in monasteries and private collections, and whose premature death cruelly cut short a work full of promise. This and other reports of Forchhammer, on the archæological remains of Arakan and Burma, are Government publications; and his studies of Buddhist law (published by Sir John Jardine with his own valuable Notes, 1882-3, and in the *Jardine Prize Essay*) are now extremely rare books, and the stores of knowledge they contain are not available at every moment. And we ought also to profit by the labours of that brilliant and far-seeing scholar Minayeff, to whom we owe the discovery and publication (to mention only one work) of the *Gandhavamsa* ('Book History'), written in Burma, a short but interesting account of the earlier Pali literature of Ceylon and Burma. The *Gandhavamsa* is unfortunately very sparing of details, and gives us little information as to the period of the works it enumerates, but its help is most useful in settling some questions of authorship and place. Minayeff, who used this book for his *Nouvelles Recherches sur le Bouddhisme*, does not offer any conclusion as to its date, but from comparison with the *Sāsanavamsa* and a still more modern Burmese work, the *Piṭakatthamain*¹ (1906), it appears to be a seventeenth century production.

For both the early and modern periods (from the twelfth to

¹ I have to thank Professor Barnett for bringing to my notice this useful Burmese bibliography of Buddhist works.

the nineteenth centuries) we find great help in the *Sāsana-vam̐sa*,¹ which, happily, observes the good traditions of Burmese chronicles and eases for chronology.² It enables us at least to sketch in outline a connected story, while but for this record we could only enumerate works of doubtful date and mention authors without knowing what period in the growth of their country and Order had brought them forth. The *Sāsana-vam̐sa*, though a very mine of interest as compared with the arid little *Gandhava-vam̐sa*, has its limitations. It is confused, rambling, and prejudiced. The author, a high ecclesiastic of Min-dôn-min's reign, belonged by all his convictions and traditions to the *Sihala-saṅgha*, an important school or sect having, as the name shows, a close connexion with the fraternity in Ceylon. As for the other communities, whose spiritual forefathers refused to look on the *Mahāvihāra*, that famous monastery of the old commentators, as the very centre and hearth of orthodoxy, they interest him only moderately. He will sometimes dismiss one of their authors with the driest, curtest mention of the man and his book, while he will delight us with details and anecdotes of more orthodox writers. It would be interesting to have the picture filled in for us by a biographer influenced by the old Talaing tradition, the tradition, that is, of Lower Burma. For this school, known as the *Mrammasaṅgha* (fraternity of Burma), maintained that there was no need to have recourse to Ceylon for teachers in the unbroken 'line of descent' from the ancient missionaries. This question, almost impossible to settle with certainty, after the vicissitudes that the Buddhist *Sam̐gha* had seen in both countries, divided the Order in Burma with a sharp line of

¹ This text (edited for the Pali Text Society in 1897 by the present writer) has supplied much material for the following chapters. Other sources have been used to verify or correct where it has been possible. The whole of the *Sāsana-vam̐sa*'s literary information, as far as it concerns Burma, is given in the course of the present work.

² I have thought it best to adopt throughout this essay the chronology of my two principal Burmese authorities, *Paññāsāmi* and the author of the *Pitakatthamain*. But I must remind the reader that their (traditional) starting-point, the *Nirvāṇa* of the Buddha, is no longer placed by scholars at 544 B.C. but some sixty years later. See article by Dr. Fleet, *JRAS.*, April, 1909, *The Origin of the Buddhavarsha*.

partisanship. Therefore we must beware of considering the Sāsanavaṃsa a complete record of monastic work. Nevertheless the author's own point of view is instructive, and we have no right to say that he does not try to be impartial. And if we follow only his guidance in our choice of the books to explore we must arrive at some knowledge of what is, after all, of the most interest in such researches; we can see the intellectual development of Burma through Buddhism and the adaptation of the non-Indian mind to Indian culture, with the conception of science and the standard of literary art evolved in that adapting process.

We cannot, of course, do justice to these questions in a short sketch. The effect of Indian Buddhism on Burmese life and literature has many manifestations. We can instance some as widely apart as codified law and religious art. In the remote past we find both Brahmanic and Buddhistic sources of Burmese written law. And the religious art of the country is by no means without its problems (for example, the extent of Mahāyāna or 'Northern' influence), which those who are masters of this subject are gradually solving for us.¹ So the subject spreads in its fascinating complexity, if we will let it, far beyond our simpler theme; but it must suffice for this essay to follow (if with less serene confidence) the way marked out by the devout and simple scholars of Burma, who have left us a literature derived entirely from the Pali canon and representing almost invariably the Hīnayāna² traditions of Buddhist belief.

Beginning with the study of the language consecrated in Ceylon as the instrument of the highest teaching, then commenting and composing in Pali and at last interpreting that teaching in their native tongue, the Burmese monks have left us a complete revelation of their mind. Neither the sculpture, painting, legends, plays, customs, nor law-codes of the Burmese,

¹ See p. vii.

² This Buddhist phrase, 'the lesser vehicle,' may be employed as a convenient term for the tradition as observed in the southern countries early won to Buddhism, a tradition more sober in its legend and somewhat more austere and practical in its morality than the Mahāyāna (or school of the 'greater vehicle').

significant as they are, could serve to show us what their religious literature alone unfolds—their manner of grappling with an abstract subject.

Buddhism, as any other Indian system would have done, gave them a large opportunity. They did their best with it. But Buddhist theories demanded an effort of abstraction doubly severe for learners whose first lesson in philosophy was learned with those theories.¹ In India, where certain of the Upaniṣads belonged to a yet earlier phase of thought than the doctrines of Gotama, men's minds were prepared for Buddhist conceptions. A philosophical language was already formed in which the teacher or the disputant could lead his hearers step by step in an idiom they knew to conclusions not unfamiliar to their minds. But in Burma the grammar of the Buddhist texts first had to be studied, and when the great legend of the Founder was learned and the code of the Order had grown familiar, there was still a new world to conquer, a new science to master. After the Sutta and Vinaya there was the Abhidhamma to interpret. Here perhaps we shall find the Pali compositions of Burmese authors less interesting than their translations into Burmese.

The Sanskrit commentaries composed in India on Buddhist texts are enlightening in proportion as the student is familiar with all Indian philosophies and can point out parallels and contrasts; the Pali commentaries of Burma naturally only lead us back to the Siṅhalese and Indian models they faithfully copy. When we leave Pali and come to Burmese interpretations of Abhidhamma texts we feel that we follow our commentators in a (to us) somewhat dark adventure; but yet the effort of these authors in their own vernacular is interesting as an effort to do more than recite the consecrated words of their ancient masters. Here is the key to the sense really given by the Burmese to Indian abstractions, the key not to be found where they use the exotic and traditional Pali form.

¹ A friend has suggested to me a comparison between these studies in Burma and the gradual mastery by Bede and Alfred and their followers in England of the philosophy of Paul and John. It was not until Wyclif's time, six centuries after Bede, that these abstract questions were discussed in English.

By it we have access to some curious treasure, rewarding the search of the scholar familiar with the Burmese tongue, provided he be a Palist and (be it said without impiety) endowed with two of the Buddhist 'perfections'—the power to spend himself and be very patient. Knowledge of the Pali commentaries of Burma is the natural beginning of this attractive enterprise, but by no means the end.

The commentaries, though the most important part, are not the whole of the Pali literature. The technicalities of Indian grammar have attracted Burmese authors from an early period. The work of the famous Kaccāyana is all but canonical among them, and the procession of his followers and commentators stretches through eight centuries of literary history. The qualities of mind innate in the quick-witted Burmese race were lent to the service of the Word so religiously respected. The Pali scriptures had not been a hundred years in Upper Burma before a grammar—the *Saddanīti*—was composed in Pali that called forth the wondering admiration of the scholars of Ceylon, though Ceylon was certainly the forerunner and model of Burma in exegesis.

Again, the practical side of monastic life was a subject well within the scope of the Palists of Burma. We have very numerous examples of work in this field, from the time of their first controversy on Ordination in Narapati's reign (A.D. 1167–1204) till the present day.

In the secular domain the Pali language has been employed (as we should expect) where solemnity was called for or the sense of an antique tradition was needed to support authority; for instance, some important law-codes exist, and others probably existed, in Pali versions. Pali is also the language chosen for the collections of maxims known as the 'Nīti' literature, and for various chronicles (we can instance the *Rājavaṃsa*, *Sāsanavaṃsa*, and *Gandhavaṃsa*).

Finally we come to the very limited province of Pali verse in Burma. Here and there among our authors we catch a glimpse of scholars who have a touch of the poet in them and some of the poet's ambition. We do not know that they ever approached the favourite theme of the poets of all ages.

If they did, the chronicles have passed it over in silence. A love story sometimes forms part of an edifying narrative from Pali sources ; but the love lyric is the undisputed realm of the poets of the vernacular. Jātakas and other moral legends were the material usually chosen for the Palist to work upon. Sometimes the beauties of a city or the glory of the reigning king were extolled with all the author's resources of prosody and imagery. But scholarship in Burma has not produced poets worthy to rank with those of Ceylon.

The following pages are but a sketch, and perhaps a sketch without colour. Our purpose is not to describe again the outward aspect of the temple, the monastery, and the village, very vividly presented to Western readers by learned and sympathetic writers from Bishop Bigandet onwards. So many Europeans have come under the charm of Burma—of the Burmese people, their life and religion—that there is no need to do more than recall to readers the names of the writers¹ who have made that charm a familiar thing to us. We have chosen for our study the less well-known subject of the Pali books of Burma. The authors were the ancestors and masters of the monks of to-day, through whom we know those old-time scholars and can still see, as it were, a far-off picture of their lives, their schools, and their work.

¹ See the Bibliographies, p. vii.