The Buddha and the savage Elephant
Gilbert James
The Night of the White Lily

long fury at the crowd of people, and all the disciples fled, terrified, except Ānanda, who remained close to his Master. But Gotama spoke soothing words to the savage beast, who stood still at the sound of his voice, and, becoming completely tamed, followed the Buddha like a dog to the house where he was going. We hear of other instances in which the goodness and holiness of the Buddha gave him power to subdue even the wild beasts. The taming of the elephant is the scene of several carvings on the old Indian monuments.

Not long after these events many of the disloyal monks who had followed Devadatta, repented, and, confessing their sin, returned to the Buddha, who received them back into the Order without a word of reproach. Perhaps King Ajātasattu was beginning to distrust his friend Devadatta, for we hear of his paying a visit to the Buddha, who was staying in a mango grove belonging to Jīvaka the physician.

It was the night of the October full moon—the sacred Night of the White Water-lily.¹ The moon had risen full as the sun, and swam in the heavens like a ball of liquid fire, and the earth, filled with brightness, seemed as though

¹ Translated in Rhys Davids' *Dialogues of the Buddha*, i. 65 f.
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strewn with jewels of Paradise. Ajātasattu, moved by the beauty of that October night, went out with all his ministers and stood on the terrace of the palace, in the radiance of the moon. "How beautiful is this night!" exclaimed the King, "how lovely and how peaceful is this moonlight night! In what way can we celebrate it?" "Sire," said one, "you have all that heart can wish, let us deck the city with flowers, and make a festival, and let your Majesty be glad and rejoice." Another suggested a raid on one of the neighbouring tribes, that the night might be celebrated by a victory. And some of the other ministers proposed paying a visit to one or other of the holy men who happened to be staying near. But the King remained silent. Then he turned to Jīvaka the physician. "You have said nothing, Jīvaka," he said. "Sire," replied Jīvaka, "the Buddha is staying in my mango grove, he is above all men in goodness and wisdom, a teacher and guide to mankind. Let your Majesty go to see him, and it may be that he will bring peace to your heart."

Perhaps it was the beauty of that moonlit night that softened the heart of the King and
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inclined him toward the Buddha, for he said: "Go, Jīvaka, bid them get ready the elephants, and we will visit the Blessed One." Then the great state elephant, a mighty tusker, adorned with trappings covered with gold and precious stones, was brought before the palace. Attendants carrying blazing torches surrounded the King, and in front of him rode the five hundred ladies of the court, each mounted on an elephant. In the silver radiance of that Eastern night the royal procession set forth and came to the mango grove of Jīvaka the physician. No sound was heard from the great company of disciples who were with the Buddha, and for a moment Ajātasattu feared that he had been led into an ambush. Full of anxiety he turned to Jīvaka. "You are not deceiving me," he asked, "and betraying me to my enemies? How is it that from so great an assembly there is no noise, not even the sound of a cough or a sneeze?" "Have no fear, O King," Jīvaka replied, "I am not deceiving you; see, the lamp is burning in the great hall." Then the King alighted from his elephant and entered the monastery on foot; seeing a great multitude of people, he could not, at first, distinguish the Buddha,
and asked Jīvaka to point him out. "The Blessed One, O King, is leaning against the middle pillar, with his face toward the East—sitting among his disciples as in the middle of a calm and placid lake." And indeed the King must have felt the spell of that quiet scene, for he exclaimed: "Would that my son might enjoy such peace as now breathes over this assembly!"

Then Ajātasattu bowed himself reverently before the Buddha, and begged permission to question him on various matters about which his mind was in doubt. "Ask, O King, any questions you like," said the Blessed One.

"There are," proceeded the King, "many professions which men follow, such as those of elephant-tamers, horsemen, archers, swordsmen, chariot-drivers, weavers, cooks, washermen, basket-makers, barbers, clerks, and many others. The men following all these professions have their reward, for they make a living and are able to enjoy comfort and support their parents and children. Now is there, in this world, any reward for the man who becomes a monk—who renounces home and kindred, wealth, and all the comforts and pleasures of life?" The King said that, he
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had put the same question to several Brahmins and Hindu philosophers, but none of them had been able to give him a satisfactory answer.

"I will ask you a question," said the Buddha. "Suppose that one of your servants should renounce the world, shave his hair and beard, put on the yellow robes, and live in solitude, content with the bare necessaries of life—how would you treat that man? would you force him to return to his duties?" "Nay," answered the King, "we should treat him with reverence, rise from our seat in his presence and bid him be seated, prepare him a dwelling-place, provide him with food, robes, and medicines, and all that he might require."

"Then," said the Buddha, "have you not shown that there is, in this world, a reward for him who leads the higher life?" The King agreed. "This is but the first reward," the Buddha explained, and he went on to show that there are other and higher rewards for him who casts off the burden of earthly passions and earthly ties. Free as the air is his life who has ceased to care for wealth and all those things over which men worry and fret themselves. Unburdened by possessions, like a bird on the wing he can go whithersoever it
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pleases him, wanting nothing but just sufficient food to support life, and clothing to cover him. His resting-place is in some quiet spot—a breezy hill-side, a shady grove, or mountain glen. Thus the monk learns contentment. Having trained himself in virtue, he lives at peace with all men, full of kindness and compassion toward every living creature. Like a king who has overcome all his enemies, has he subdued his passions, banishing worry and fretfulness, hatred, ill-nature and indolence. With a mind intent on the things which alone are worth possessing, he becomes serene and calm. And happiness arising within him fills his whole being, as the springs of the earth may fill a deep pool with clear cool water, though no stream flows into it, and no rains fall.”

Thus did the Buddha convince King Ajātasattu that there is a reward, even in this world, for him who renounces all to lead the higher life. The King’s heart was touched as he pondered over the Buddha’s words. “Excellently has the Blessed One spoken!” he exclaimed, “as a man who brings a lamp into the darkness that the things which are hidden may become visible; even so hast thou shown me the Truth, O Blessed One! Hence-
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forth will I put my trust in the Buddha, the Doctrine, and the Brotherhood. I have fallen into sin, O my Lord, for I sinned grievously in putting to death my father, that good and just man. May the Blessed One accept my confession!"

"Truly you have sinned, O King," replied the Buddha, "but, because you have recognized your sin, and acknowledged it, we accept your confession. For he who rightly sees and confesses his sin will in time learn self-control."

The night was far advanced and the moon sinking toward the horizon when the King took his leave and departed. When he was gone the Buddha spoke to the disciples. The King, he told them, had been deeply moved, and if he had not borne a heavy sin on his conscience would have been converted. But the eye of the soul when blinded by sin is unable to behold the Truth.
CHAPTER XIV: The Buddha's Last Journey

Many years had passed since the Buddha began his ministry. He was now old and infirm, but he still travelled from village to village, teaching the people and sympathizing with their sorrows. When the rainy season came on he retired to one or other of the garden monasteries, where the disciples would gather round their Master for counsel and instruction. One of Gotama’s favourite resorts was the Jeta Garden near Sāvatthi, and here he passed the forty-fourth Lent since his Enlightenment. This was the last season which the Buddha spent in that pleasant retreat. From Sāvatthi he travelled to Rājagaha, a long and weary journey, and took up his abode on the hill called the Vulture’s Peak.

1 Now King Ajātasattu was about to declare war on the Vajjians, the tribes inhabiting the country north of the Ganges, where the famous city of Vesāli stood. Doubtful as to his chances of success, the King determined to consult the Buddha, so he sent his Prime

1 Translated in Rhys Davids' Dialogues of the Buddha, ii. 78 f.
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Minister to the Vulture's Peak. When the Prime Minister had saluted the Buddha and made inquiries after his health, he delivered the King's message. The King, he said, had resolved to attack the Vajjians; would he overcome his enemies and destroy them utterly? The Buddha replied that so long as the Vajjians remained united among themselves, true to their established customs and the precepts he had once laid down for them—so long as they honoured their elders and holy men, and paid respect to their shrines, an invader would have no power to overcome them.

When the Prime Minister had taken his departure the Buddha summoned all the brethren and spoke to them of the importance of unity and right conduct. So long, he said, as the brethren continued to assemble together in perfect concord, respected their elders and obeyed the rules of the Order, adding nothing nor taking away anything of that already laid down; so long as they walked in the paths of righteousness, keeping themselves free from worldly concerns, and avoiding idle talk and gossip, the religion of the Buddha would not decline but prosper.

When Gotama had stayed some time on the
Vulture's Peak, he left Rājagaha with a large company of disciples and travelled northward, visiting many villages on his way. Coming to the river Ganges, he crossed it at a point where King Ajātasattu was building a strong fortress as a defence against the Vajjians. In years to come a great city was to occupy this site—Pātaliputta, the new capital of Magadha. At the present day the city of Patna stands near the spot where the Buddha crossed the Ganges for the last time.

Having visited Vesāli the Buddha spent the following rainy season in a village near-by. Here he was attacked by sickness, and for some time suffered great pain and weakness, but he bore these ills without complaint. Ānanda, who tended him, was overcome with grief, fearing that his Master would die. One day, when he was getting better, and was sitting on a folded mat outside the monastery, Ānanda came and sat near his Master, and told him of the misery he had gone through when he feared he might lose him. "Thy Master," said the Buddha, "has reached four-score years, his body is bent and infirm, and just as an old, worn-out cart, which is bound up with cords, can with difficulty be kept going, so is it only
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with care and trouble that this body continues to exist. I am old, Ānanda, my journey is nearly ended, but sorrow not, and let the Truth be your refuge.”

The Buddha, knowing that his life must soon draw to a close, told Ānanda to summon all the disciples who were in the neighbourhood of Vesāli. When they had met together he earnestly enjoined them to spread the truths of pure religion for the good and happiness of mankind. When the rainy season was over, the Buddha set forth to visit the villages round about, and as he left Vesāli he turned and gazed long at the city, for he knew that he looked on it for the last time. Passing from village to village in a north-westerly direction, the Buddha came to a place called Pāvā, where he stayed in a mango grove belonging to Chunda, a worker of metals. When Chunda heard that the Blessed One was staying in his mango grove he invited him and all his disciples to come to his house on the following day. In the early morning Chunda made all ready for the feast, and provided sweet cakes and rice and mushrooms. Then he went to the mango grove to bid his guests come, for the meal was ready. It was the 169
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custom in Eastern lands for the householder to collect his guests when the feast was prepared. We read in the Bible of the king who "sent forth his servants to call them that were bidden to the marriage feast." As Buddhist monks eat only one meal a day, which must be taken between sunrise and noon, those wishing to show them hospitality invite them to a morning meal. The Buddha, having robed himself, took his bowl and went with his disciples to the house of Chunda the metal worker. When all had been served, Chunda took a seat at the Master’s feet to listen to his words.

Now that same day Gotama was attacked by sickness; toward evening, however, he was able to start on his way to Kusinārā, a small town lying south of Pāvā. But his footsteps were weary, and he was often obliged to rest by the way, for the end of life's journey was nearly reached. Once, when he was resting under a tree near a stream, he asked Ānanda to fetch him some water, for he was thirsty. But Ānanda, knowing that a caravan of five hundred bullock carts had just crossed the ford above, feared the water would be foul and muddy. The Buddha repeated his request
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a second, and again a third time, so Ānanda went down to the brook. To his surprise the water was clear as crystal. "How great is the power of the Master!" he exclaimed, thinking that a miracle had been performed. He filled a bowl with clear cool water and carried it to the Buddha, who drank and was much revived. The next halt was made on the banks of a beautiful river, and the Buddha and his disciples went down to the water to bathe. During the heat of the day they rested in a mango grove on the farther shore.

Thus by slow and painful stages the Buddha continued his journey until he came to Kusinārā, a little mud-built town in the midst of the jungle. Near-by was a grove of sala-trees, and here Ānanda prepared a couch for his Master. Between two twin sala-trees—so called because they were of exactly equal size—the Buddha laid him down to rest, with his head to the north. All at once the two sala-trees beneath which he lay burst into bloom, and the blossoms fell in a shower over his body, while sounds of heavenly music floated in the sky in honour of the Blessed One.

As the Buddha lay in the sala grove, calm and self-possessed, he spoke long with Ānanda
about the Order and the rules to be observed by the brethren when he should no longer be there to guide them. At the close of the discourse Ānanda was overcome with sorrow. He saw that his Master was dying, and he went away by himself and shed bitter tears, so unbearable was the thought that his beloved Master was about to leave him. The Buddha noticed Ānanda’s absence. "Where is Ānanda?" he asked, and he sent one of the brethren to call him. "Do not grieve, Ānanda," said the Buddha, when his disciple was seated near him, "it must always be thus, the time of parting with those we love must come, sooner or later; for it is in the nature of everything that is born into the world that it must also die. How could it be otherwise? For a long time you have been very near me, Ānanda; by many acts of kindness and a love which has never varied you have done well. Cease not to strive, and you too shall before long attain the Peace of Nirvana." Then the Buddha spoke to the assembled brethren of his cousin’s kindness and thoughtfulness and his many good qualities. Presently he sent Ānanda into the town to tell the people of Kusinārā that the Buddha lay, near to death,
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in the grove of sala-trees. The nobles of Kusinārā were assembled in the council hall, and Ānanda went in and told them that before morning dawned the Blessed One would pass away. When the people heard the news they could not contain their grief—many flung themselves weeping on the ground, the women dishevelled their hair, uttering loud lamentations, and all gave way to their sorrow, overcome with the thought that the Light of the World would vanish away. And during the first watch of the night the men of Kusinārā, each with his family and his household, came to visit the dying Buddha, to do him reverence.

There was a young Brahmin philosopher called Subhadda, staying in Kusinārā. Having doubts concerning his faith, he greatly desired to speak with the Buddha, and came for this purpose to the sala grove. But Ānanda refused to disturb his Master. "Trouble him not," he said, "he is weary." Gotama, hearing voices, asked who was there, and had the Brahmin admitted. So Subhadda came into the Buddha's presence, and, having courteously saluted him, questioned him on the doctrines of the great Hindu philosophers, asking which of these understood the Truth. But the great

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Teacher bid him let be these learned discussions; true religion must teach, before all else, the practice of virtue; only in the earnest endeavour after right-doing, in the steps of the Noble Eightfold Path, can Peace be found. As Subhadda listened to the Buddha’s words, all doubt left his mind, and he was converted. “Like one,” he said, “who shows the path to him who has gone astray, or brings a lamp to lighten our darkness, even so hast thou shown me the Truth, O Blessed One!” The young Brahmin begged to be accepted as a disciple, and Ānanda, taking him aside, received him into the Order. He poured water on his head, shaved his hair and beard, and put the yellow robes on him. Then Subhadda repeated the ‘Three Refuges’: “I go for refuge to the Buddha, I go for refuge to the Truth, I go for refuge to the Brotherhood” ; and returning to his Master, took his seat beside him. Subhadda was the last man whom the Buddha converted.

When the Buddha had again spoken with Ānanda, he asked whether, of all the disciples present, there were any who had doubts about his teaching, inviting those who might wish to make inquiries to speak freely. But all
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the brethren were silent. The Buddha put the same question a second, and again a third time, but there was not one of all those present who had any doubt or misgiving.

The night wore on as the disciples watched beside their dying Master in the quiet sala grove. And in the third watch of the night the Buddha passed away.

With solemn ceremony, and such honours as they would have bestowed on the body of the greatest king, did the people of Kusinārā reverence the remains of the Blessed One. The nobles, followed by all the people, walked in procession to the sala grove, bearing garlands of flowers, perfumes and sweet spices, harps and flutes and other musical instruments. Over the place where the Buddha lay they made a canopy on which were hung wreaths of lotus flowers, and until the close of day the people honoured the remains with hymns and music and religious rites.

When all was ready for the burning of the body, eight chieftains of Kusinārā carried the Blessed One through the midst of the city, entering by the northern gate and passing out through the eastern gate to the place where
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the funeral pile had been prepared. The procession moved slowly, for the narrow streets were crowded with people, who strewed the way with flowers and sweetly scented spices. When the body had been consumed by fire and all the ceremonies duly performed, the ashes were placed in the council hall. To guard the sacred spot the warriors of Kusinārā made a rampart with their bows, and planted their spears crosswise, like a lattice work. And without the council hall was a line of elephants, another of horsemen, and another of chariots. For seven days the people paid honours to the relics with garlands of flowers, with music, and solemn dances.

When it became known that the Buddha had died in Kusinārā, Ajātasattu, King of Magadha, sent to beg for a portion of the ashes, for he wished to build a cairn or monument over them and hold a yearly festival in the Buddha’s honour. The people of Vesāli made the same request.

Likewise the Sakyas of Kapilavatthu.

In all the lands where the Buddha had been known and loved, the people wished to honour him and keep his memory fresh in their minds. There were, in all, eight messengers who came
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to Kusinārā to beg for a share of the ashes. At first the nobles of Kusinārā refused to part with the relics, for the Blessed One had died in their land, and they considered that his remains should rest there. A heated discussion might have arisen had not a Brahmin, who was a believer, addressed the people and pointed out how wrong it would be if strife should arise over the remains of the greatest of mankind, who had always taught peace and forbearance. In the end the relics were divided into eight portions, and over these were built eight cairns, in different parts of the country. These monuments were usually in the form of a solid dome, in which there was a small treasure chamber to contain the relics. The ruins of some of the ancient cairns have been discovered and excavated; they must have been of immense size, as, for instance, that built by the Buddha's own countrymen, the Sakyas, which is said to have been as large as the dome of St Paul's Cathedral.

Such monuments are seen in all Buddhist countries—in Ceylon they are called Dāgabas, in other places Topes, or Stupas. They are raised to keep alive the memory of holy men, and do not necessarily contain relics. The
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people bring offerings of flowers to these shrines, staying a while to meditate, and, "at the thought, 'This is the Dāgaba of that Blessed One, the Buddha,' the hearts of many are made calm and happy."
CHAPTER XV: The Spread of the Faith

We have seen how the great reformer, Gotama the Buddha, purified the religious beliefs of his native land, and put before his countrymen a higher ideal than was ever realized by mankind before the age of Christianity. To look upon the whole world—upon every living being in it—with feelings of love and sympathy, to overcome even hatred with love, to follow virtue for its own sake, looking for no reward beyond the inward peace and tranquillity of the heart—this is what the Buddha expected of his followers. It seems a great deal to expect of human nature; yet this religion which demands so much, and appears to promise so little, has attracted many followers. For Buddhism prevails over a large part of the continent of Asia—in Ceylon, Burma, Siam, Japan, China, Tibet, and other places, there are five hundred millions of men and women who profess the faith of the Buddha. So far have its conquests extended; yet Buddhism is perhaps the only religion which has never made use of the sword as a means of spreading its doctrines.
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When a religion is professed by widely different races of mankind—differing in their ideas and ways of thinking—it is impossible that its practice should be exactly the same in the various countries in which it has taken root. And, as the Christianity of Rome differs from that of a sect like the Quakers, so does the Buddhism of Tibet, with its elaborate rites and ceremonies, differ from the simpler form of the Faith, as practised in Ceylon and Burma. You may think, perhaps, that Buddhism still flourishes in India, the land of its birth, but this is not so. Although the Faith grew and spread on Indian soil during several centuries, in the end Brahminism regained its influence over the people, and at the present time the Buddha's doctrines are almost unknown in the land where he lived and taught for so many years. But though the Buddhist religion is no longer professed by the people of India, its influence is not dead. The Buddha's teaching still survives in principles of love and kindness toward all creatures and in many of the charitable societies of modern Hinduism.

After the Buddha's death, which took place in the year 480 B.C., the small Indian states,
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of which we have heard in our story, passed through various changes. In the course of many wars and disturbances the Kingdom of Magadha gradually enlarged its boundaries, annexing most of the surrounding states. The capital of Magadha, formerly Rajagaha, was now Pātaliputta, a great and splendid city, standing on the site of the present town of Patna. The ruins of Pātaliputta have been traced, but, as they lie buried at a depth of nearly twenty feet below the modern town, they are difficult to excavate. Magadha took a leading place among the Indian states, and at the time of the invasion of India by Alexander the Great, in 327 B.C., it was a large and powerful kingdom.

On the death of Alexander his great empire was split up into separate kingdoms, of which there were several in the north-west of India. But within a year of Alexander’s death the people in these conquered provinces revolted. Their leader was a young man named Chanda-gutta, who was related to the royal family of Magadha. He had once been a robber chief, and must have had great abilities, for he succeeded in freeing his countrymen and driving the Greek invaders out of India. When a
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revolution broke out at Pātaliputta, Chandagutta headed the rebels, who proved victorious; the King was dethroned and put to death with all the members of his family, and Chandagutta was proclaimed king of Magadha. He reigned for twenty-four years, and was a capable, though in some ways a harsh, ruler. Chandagutta greatly enlarged his dominions by conquest, and, having for the first time in history brought the greater part of the Indian peninsula under the same rule, he may be called the first Emperor of India. He was succeeded by his son, Bindusāra, who reigned for twenty-eight years, but of whom very little is known.

The great Indian Empire, founded by Chandagutta, was now inherited by his grandson, Asoka, who ascended the throne in the year 273 B.C. Like his father and grandfather, Asoka was brought up in the faith of the Brahmins. He proved himself a wise and just ruler, and during his reign of forty years did much for the welfare of his vast dominions.

In the thirteenth year of his reign Asoka made war on Kalinga, a kingdom bordering upon the Bay of Bengal. There was a great deal of fighting and bloodshed before Kalinga was subdued. Those slain in battle numbered
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ea hundred thousand, while many more were carried away captive or died of disease. In the end Asoka’s army was victorious, and Kalinga became a province of the Indian Empire.

When we read the lives of the great conquerors whose names have become famous in history—Alexander, Napoleon, and others—we see how success increased their thirst for conquest. Regardless of the misery that follows the track of an invading army, they continued to plan fresh campaigns, always longing for more lands to subdue.

Far other was the effect of conquest on the Indian King. Asoka was stricken to the heart by the thought of the misery he had caused in Kalinga, and the results of his remorse were far-reaching. How is it that we know so much of the thoughts of this Indian King, who lived more than two thousand years ago? When Asoka issued his edicts, or proclamations, he ordered them to be cut on rocks and stone pillars. Throughout the length and breadth of India these ancient monuments are found, engraved with the words of the great Emperor Asoka.

Some of the inscriptions are on tall, graceful
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pillars, often beautifully decorated with carvings of flowers and animals; some are cut on rocks and caves, in wild, deserted spots, overspread by a tangled network of jungle. For a long time no one understood these records, for they are written in a forgotten language. By degrees, however, after careful and patient study, scholars learnt to read them. Thus it comes about that, at the present day, the actual words of Asoka can be traced and their meaning understood. How strange it seems that these rock-cut letters should be able to tell us the thoughts that were in the King’s mind so many centuries ago!

One of the most interesting of the edicts was published four years after the conquest of Kalinga, and we learn of the “deep sorrow and regret” felt by “His Sacred Majesty” for the misery he had caused by the war. In the words of the King, “One hundred and fifty thousand persons were carried away captive, one hundred thousand were slain, and many times that number perished.” Asoka goes on to tell us of the remorse he felt for having conquered Kalinga, “because the conquest of a country previously unconquered involves the slaughter, death, and carrying
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away captive of the people.” He regrets that there should be holy men and other innocent persons who, as a result of the war, have suffered misfortune and hardship. But the most important announcement of this edict is that “Directly after the annexation of Kalinga, began His Sacred Majesty’s zealous protection of the Law of Piety, his love of that Law, and his giving instruction in that Law.” The ‘Law of Piety’ to which the King refers is the Doctrine of the Buddha. This, then, was the result of Asoka’s remorse—he adopted the Faith which seeks, not to kill, but to spare life, which aims at bringing happiness to all living creatures. His sorrow for having been the cause of suffering to innocent people was not an empty, passing regret, for, from the day that he embraced the Faith of the Buddha, Asoka did all in his power to promote the happiness and welfare of his people. “All men are my children,” says Asoka, “and just as I desire for my children that they may enjoy every kind of prosperity and happiness in both this world and the next, so also I desire the same for all men.” In speaking of the unsubdued tribes on the borders of the empire, Asoka desires that they should not be afraid.
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of him, that they should trust him, and should receive from him happiness, not sorrow. Was not this King, who conquered himself, far greater than those rulers who conquered nations and kingdoms, and left behind them the remembrance of untold sorrow and misery?

For two and a half years after his conversion Asoka was a lay disciple; then he entered the Order, and from that time fulfilled the double duties of monk and ruler of a vast empire. He worked hard for the good of his people, and in many ways improved their condition. Roads and bridges were made, wells were dug, and trees planted. Rest-houses were built along all the high roads, and arrangements made for the comfort of travellers. Hospitals, both for men and animals, were established in all parts of the empire. Perhaps you may not know that Buddhists were the first people to build hospitals, and to give special attention to the care of the sick. To this day there are animal hospitals in several places in India—memorials of the Buddhists' kindness to animals.

Asoka did a great deal for the bodily welfare of his people, but the best gift he could make them was, he thought, instruction in the
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Buddha’s doctrine. So he sent teachers into all parts of the Empire, for Buddhism had not, as yet, spread over the whole of the Indian Peninsula. Laws were made to insure the keeping of the Buddha’s precepts, especially with regard to the kind treatment of animals. Beasts were no longer to be slaughtered for sacrifice, and it was forbidden to kill certain kinds of birds and animals which were of no use for food. The Royal Hunt was abolished, and the King, instead of going on hunting expeditions, as he had been used to do before his conversion, made pilgrimages to the sacred places of the Buddhists. Twice he visited the birthplace of the Buddha, where he erected a pillar with the inscription, “Here was the Holy One born.” Asoka made pilgrimages to the scenes of the chief events in the Buddha’s life—the sacred Bo-tree beneath which Gotama obtained wisdom, the Jeta Monastery where so much of his teaching was given, and the sala grove at Kusinārā, where the Buddha passed away. Many monasteries and stupas were erected by Asoka, and near the sacred Bo-tree he built a beautiful temple whose remains can still be traced.

Though Asoka was so attached to the faith
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he had adopted, he always showed a tolerant spirit toward those who professed different beliefs. One of his edicts on the subject of toleration begins thus: “His Sacred and Gracious Majesty does reverence to men of all sects.” In accordance with the Buddha’s teaching Asoka valued right conduct above forms and ceremonies; that a man should act up to his beliefs was, he thought, the thing of chief importance.

During Asoka’s reign a great church council was held at Pātaliputta. At this council the Buddhist Scriptures were recited, and the Doctrine clearly laid down, for there had been heresies and divisions in the Buddhist Church as in all other religious communities. This was the third council held by the elders of the Church since the Buddha’s death.

Not content with having established the Faith in his own dominions, Asoka now set forward a scheme for spreading the Buddha’s teaching in foreign lands. Think of the vast size of such an undertaking in days when the means of travelling were so different from those of our own time! Missionaries were dispatched to the Himalayan region and the border lands to the north-west of the Empire,
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with the result that, in time, the Faith penetrated into Tibet, China, Mongolia, Korea, and Japan, in which places it still flourishes. Missions were also sent into Western Asia, Eastern Europe, and even to Northern Africa. To the island of Ceylon, Asoka sent his son (or, as some say, his younger brother) Mahinda, who had joined the Order of Monks twelve years before. Mahinda landed in Ceylon with a band of monks, and was well received by the King, who, before long, became a convert to Buddhism, many of his subjects following his example. The capital of Ceylon was, in those days, Anurādhapura, and there the King built a great monastery and a magnificent dāgaba, which is still to be seen.

Mahinda passed the remainder of his life in Ceylon. Not far from Anurādhapura is a beautiful hill, standing high above the surrounding plains; on the western slope of this hill a little chamber has been hollowed out of the rock; this quiet retreat, far removed from the din of the great city, was Mahinda’s study. Here, also, he died, after a long life spent in labouring for the good of others.

You will remember that, when the Buddha first learned the wisdom which enabled him to
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become a teacher of mankind, he was seated, meditating, under a peepul-tree on the borders of the Uruvela jungle. This tree, since called the Bo-tree, or Tree of Wisdom, was looked upon with great veneration, for was it not beneath its branches that the Buddha entered into the Great Peace! It was natural that the new converts in Ceylon should wish to plant a cutting of the sacred tree, and they sent to King Asoka to beg for a branch. The King's daughter, who had entered the Order, came to Ceylon with a band of nuns, and brought the precious cutting with her. It was planted at Anurâdhapura, where it grew and flourished, and there it is still to be seen—the oldest historical tree in the world. The monks who live in one of the old monasteries still carefully tend the tree, now over two thousand years old, which they treasure as a memorial of their beloved Master. There is now little to be seen of the once magnificent city of Anurâdhapura, for most of it lies buried beneath a network of jungle.

Though Buddhism may differ in many ways from our own creed, we cannot but reverence a Faith which has been the guiding light of so many of our fellow-men. Like Asoka, let
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us honour those, of whatever sect, who follow the truth which has been given them.

A man who was seeking the Truth once went to the Buddha and asked him: "Where, in the midst of this troubled river of life, encompassed by death and decay, can I find an island—a refuge from the evil of the world?"

There is an island, the Buddha told him, where death has no power—Nirvana, the everlasting Peace. And since those words were spoken many myriads of men and women have steered their course for that 'other shore,' secure in the Buddha's promise that there they shall find Peace!
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