

The Wisdom of the Indians

By Richard Garnett

Everybody knows that in the reign of the Emperor Elagabalus Rome was visited by an embassy from India; whose members, on their way from the East, had held that memorable interview with the illustrious (though heretical) Christian philosopher Bardesanes which enabled him to formulate his doctrine of Fate, borrowed from the Indian theory of Karma, and therefore, until lately, grievously misunderstood by his commentators.

It may not, however, be equally notorious that the ambassadors returned by sea as far as Berytus, and upon landing there were hospitably entertained by the sage Euphronius, the head of the philosophical faculty of that University.

Euphronius naturally inquired what circumstance in Rome had appeared to his visitors most worthy of remark.

“The extreme evil of the Emperor’s Karma,” said they.

Euphronius requested further explanation.

“Karma,” explained their interpreter, “is that congeries of circumstances which has necessitated the birth of each individual, and of whose good or evil he is the incarnation. Every act must needs be attended by consequences, and as these are usually of too far-reaching a character to be exhausted in the life of the doer of the action, they cannot but engender another person by whom they are to be borne. This truth is popularly expressed by the doctrine of transmigration, according to which individuals, as the character of their deeds may determine, are re-born as pigs or peacocks, beggars or princes. But this is a loose and unscientific way of speaking, for in fact it is not the individual that is re-born, but the character; which, even as the silkworm clothes itself with silk and the caddis-worm with mud and small shingle, creates for itself a new personality, congruous with its own nature. We are therefore led to reflect what a prodigious multitude of sins someone must have committed ere the Roman world could be afflicted with such an Emperor as Elagabalus.”

“What have ye found so exceedingly reprehensible in the Emperor’s conduct?” demanded Euphronius.

“To speak only,” said the Indians, “of such of his doings as may fitly be recited to modest ears, we find him declaring war against Nature, and delighting in nothing that is not the contrary of what Heaven meant it to be. We see him bathing in perfumes, sailing ships in wine, feeding horses on grapes and lions on parrots, peppering fish with pearls, wearing gems on the soles of his feet, strewing his floor with gold-dust, paving the public streets with precious marbles, driving teams of stags, scorning to eat fish by the seaside, deploring his lot that he has never yet been able to dine on a phoenix. Enormous must have been the folly and wickedness which has incarnated itself in such a sovereign, and should his reign be prolonged, discouraging is the prospect for the morals of the next generation.”

“According to you, then,” said Euphronius, “the fates of men are not spun for them by Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos, but by their predecessors?”

“So it is,” said they, “always remembering that man can rid himself of his Karma by philosophic meditation, combined with religious austerities, and that if all walked in this path, existence with all its evils would come to an end. Insomuch that the most bloodthirsty conqueror

that ever devastated the earth hath not destroyed one thousandth part as many existences as the Lord Buddha.”

“These are abstruse matters,” said Euphronius, “and I lament that your stay in Berytus will not be long enough to instruct me adequately therein.”

“Accompany us to India,” said they, “and thou shalt receive instruction at the fountain head.”

“I am old and feeble,” apologised Euphronius, “and adjusted by long habit to my present environment. Nevertheless I will propound the enterprise to my pupils, only somewhat repressing their ardour, lest the volunteers should be inconveniently numerous.”

When, however, the proposition was made not a soul responded; though Euphronius reproached his disciples severely, and desired them to compare their want of spirit with his own thirst for knowledge, which, when he was a young man, had taken him as far as Alexandria to hear a celebrated rhetorician. In the evening, however, two disciples came to him together, and professed their readiness to undertake the expedition, if promised a reward commensurate with its danger and difficulty.

“Ye would learn the secret of my celebrated dilemma,” said he, “which no sophist can elude? ’Tis much; ’tis immoderate; ’tis enormous; nevertheless, bring the wisdom of India to Berytus, and the knowledge of the stratagem shall be yours.”

“No Master,” they said, “it is not thy dilemma of which we are enamoured. It is thy daughter.”

A vehement altercation ensued, but at length the old philosopher, who at the bottom of his heart was much readier to part with his daughter than his dilemma, was induced to promise her to whichever of the pupils should bring home the most satisfactory exposition of Indian metaphysics: provided always that during their absence he should not have been compelled to bestow her hand as the price of a quibble even more subtle than his own: but this he believed to be impossible.

Mnesitheus and Rufus accordingly travelled with the embassy to India, and arrived in safety at the metropolis of Palimbothra. They had wisely devoted themselves meanwhile to learning the language, and were now able to converse with some fluency.

On reaching their destination they were placed under the superintendence of competent instructors, who were commissioned to initiate them into the canon of Buddhist scriptures, comprising, to mention only a few of the principal, the Lalitavistara, the Dhammapada, the Kuddhaphatha, the Palinokkha, the Uragavagga, the Kulavagga, the Mahavagga, the Atthakavagga, and the Upasampadakkammavaca. These works, composed in dead languages, and written in strange and unknown characters, were further provided with commentaries more voluminous and inexplicable than the text.

“Heavens,” exclaimed Mnesitheus and Rufus, “can the life of a man suffice to study all this?”

“Assuredly not,” replied the Indians. “The diligent student will resume his investigations in a subsequent stage of existence, and, if endowed with eminent faculties, may hope to attain the end he proposes to himself at the fifteenth transmigration.”

“The end we propose to ourselves,” said the Greeks, “is to marry our master’s daughter. Will the fair Euphronia also have undergone fifteen transmigrations, and will her charms have continued unimpaired?”

“It is difficult to pronounce,” said they, “for should the maiden, through the exercise of virtue, have merited to be born as a white elephant, her transmigrations must in the order of nature be but few; whereas should she have unfortunately become and remained a rat, a frog, or other short-lived animal, they cannot but be exceedingly numerous.”

“The prospect of wedding a frog at the end of fifteen transmigrations,” said the youths, “doth not in any respect commend itself to us. Are there no means by which the course of study may be accelerated?”

“Undoubtedly,” said the Indians, “by the practice of religious austerities.”

“Of what nature are these?” inquired the young men. “The intrepid disciple,” said the sages, “may chain himself to a tree, and gaze upon the sun until he is deprived of the faculty of vision. He may drive an iron bar through his cheeks and tongue, thus preventing all misuse of the gift of speech. It is open to him to bury himself in the earth up to his waist, relying for his maintenance on the alms of pious donors. He may recline upon a couch studded with spikes, until from the induration of his skin he shall have merited the title of a rhinoceros among sages. As, however, these latter practices interfere with locomotion, and thus prevent his close attendance on his spiritual guide, it is rather recommended to him to elevate his arms above his head, and retain them in that position until, by the withering of the sinews, it is impossible for him to bring them down again.”

“In that case,” cried Rufus, “farewell philosophy! farewell Euphronia!”

There is reason to believe that Mnesitheus would have made exactly the same observation if Rufus had not been beforehand with him. The spirit of contradiction and the affectation of superiority, however, led him to reproach his rival with pusillanimity, and he went so far that at length he found himself committed to undergo the ordeal: merely stipulating that, in consideration of his being a foreigner, he should be permitted to elevate the right arm only.

The king of the country most graciously came to his assistance by causing him to be fastened to a tree, with his uplifted arm secured by iron bands above his head, a fan being put in his other hand to protect him against the molestations of gnats and mosquitoes. By this means, and with the assistance of the monks who continually recited and expounded the Buddhist scriptures in his ears, some time even before his arm had stiffened for ever, the doctrine of the misery of existence had become perfectly clear to him.

Released from his captivity, he hastened back to Europe to claim the guerdon of his sufferings. History is silent respecting his adventures until his arrival at Berytus, where the strange wild-looking man with the uplifted arm found himself the centre of a turbulent and mischievous rabble. As he seemed about to suffer severe ill-usage, a personage of dignified and portly appearance hastened up, and with his staff showered blows to right and left upon the rioters.

“Scoundrels,” he exclaimed, “finely have ye profited by my precepts, thus to misuse an innocent stranger! But I will no longer dwell among such barbarians. I will remove my school to Tarsus!”

The mob dispersed. The victim and his deliverer stood face to face.

“Mnesitheus!”

“Call me Rufinianus,” corrected the latter; “for such is the appellation which I have felt it due to myself to assume, since the enhancement of my dignity by becoming Euphronius’s successor and son-in-law.”

“Son-in-law! Am I to lose the reward of my incredible sufferings?”

“Thou forgettest,” said Rufinianus, “that Euphronia’s hand was not promised as the reward of any austerities, but as the meed of the intelligent, that is, the most acceptable, account of the Indian philosophy, which in the opinion of the late eminent Euphronius, has been delivered by me. But come to my chamber, and let me minister to thy necessities.”

These having been duly attended to, Rufinianus demanded Mnesitheus’s history, and then proceeded to narrate his own.

“On my journey homeward,” said he, “I reflected seriously on the probable purpose of our master in sending us forth, and saw reason to suspect that I had hitherto misapprehended it. For I could not remember that he had ever admitted that he could have anything to learn from other philosophers, or that he had ever exhibited the least interest in philosophic dogmas, excepting his own. The system of the Indians, I thought, must be either inferior to that of Euphronius, or superior. If the former, he will not want it: if the latter, he will want it much less. I therefore concluded that our mission was partly a concession to public opinion, partly to enable him to say that his name was known, and his teaching proclaimed on the very banks of the Ganges. I formed my plan accordingly, and disregarding certain indications that I was neither expected nor wanted, presented myself before Euphronius with a gladsome countenance, slightly overcast by sorrow on account of thee, whom I affirmed to have been devoured by a tiger.

“ ‘Well,’ said Euphronius in a disdainful tone, ‘and what about this vaunted wisdom of the Indians?’

“ ‘The wisdom of the Indians,’ I replied, ‘is entirely borrowed from Pythagoras.’

“ ‘Did I not tell you so?’ Euphronius appealed to his disciples.

“ ‘Invariably,’ they replied.

“ ‘As if a barbarian could teach a Greek!’ said he.

“ ‘It is much if he is able to learn from one,’ said they.

“ ‘Pythagoras, then,’ said Euphronius, addressing me, ‘did not resort to India to be instructed by the Gymnosophists?’

“ ‘On the contrary,’ I answered, ‘he went there to teach them, and the little knowledge of divine matters they possess is entirely derived from him. His mission is recorded in a barbarous poem called the Ramayana, wherein he is figuratively represented as allying himself with monkeys. He is worshipped all over the country under the appellations of Siva, Kamadeva, Kali, Gautama Buddha, and others too numerous to mention.’

“When I further proceeded to explain that a temple had been erected to Euphronius himself on the banks of the Ganges, and that a festival, called Durga Pooja, or the Feast of Reason, had been instituted in his honour his good humour knew no bounds, and he granted me his daughter’s hand without difficulty. He died a few years ago, bequeathing me his celebrated dilemma, and I am now head of his school and founder of the Rufinianian philosophy. I am also the author of some admired works, especially a life of Pythagoras and a manual of Indian philosophy and religion. I hope for thy own sake thou wilt forbear to contradict me: for no one will believe thee. I trust also that thou wilt speedily overcome thy disappointment with respect to Euphronia. I do most honestly and truthfully assure thee that for a one-armed man like thee to marry her would be most inexpedient, inasmuch as the defence of one’s beard from her, when she is in a state of excitement, requires the full use of both hands, and of the feet also. But come with me to her chamber, and I will present thee to her. She is always taunting me with my inferiority to thee in personal attractions, and I promise myself much innocent amusement from her discomfiture when she finds thee as gaunt as a wolf and as black as a cinder. Only, as I have represented thee to have been devoured by a tiger, thou wilt kindly say that I saved thy life, but concealed the circumstance out of modesty.”

“I have learned in the Indian schools,” said Mnesitheus, “not to lie for the benefit of others. I will not see Euphronia; I would not disturb her ideal of me, nor mine of her. Farewell. May the Rufinianian sect flourish! and may thy works on Pythagoras and India instruct posterity to the tenth generation! I return to Palimbothra, where I am held in honour on the self-same account

that here renders me ridiculous. It shall be my study to enlighten the natives respecting their obligations to Pythagoras, whose name I did not happen to hear while I abode among them.”