



The Buddhist Catechism Henry S. Olcott (1908)

White American Henry Olcott was reared as a Presbyterian in the northeastern states, but as an adult he became interested in spiritualism and co-founded the Theosophical Society. His search for occult wisdom led him to relocate to British-ruled India and Sri Lanka (then called Ceylon). In Sri Lanka, he took the five precepts of Buddhism, thereby becoming one of the first Westerners to be formally initiated into that religion, although his identification with Buddhism was embedded in his commitment to Theosophy. As a writer and a promoter of Buddhist educational institutions, Olcott contributed prominently to a late 19th-century Buddhist revival that occurred in Sri Lanka in reaction to British colonialism. Further, Olcott promoted cooperation among Buddhists from different Asian nations and different Buddhist traditions.

In 1881, Olcott published an English-language Buddhist catechism. The catechism aimed to popularize among Asian Buddhists Olcott's understanding of Buddhism as a philosophy compatible with modern enlightenment; in so doing, the catechism represented Buddhism in terms potentially attractive to Westerners with liberal religious or social views. Within Olcott's lifetime, the catechism went through over 40 editions and was translated into over 20 languages. These selections come from the last edition he worked on before his death in 1907.

[“What was the Buddha to us?”]

- Q. Do Buddhists consider the Buddha as one who by his own virtue can save us from the consequence of our individual sins?
- A. Not at all. Man must emancipate himself. Until he does that, he will continue being born over and over and over again—the victim of ignorance, the slave of unquenched passions.
- Q. What, then, was the Buddha to us and all other beings?
- A. An all-seeing, all-wise Counselor; one who discovered the safe path and pointed it out; one who showed the cause of, and the only cure for, human suffering. In pointing to the road, in showing us how to escape dangers, he became our Guide. He is to us like one leading a blind man across a narrow bridge over a swift and deep stream and so saving his life.

[“The essence of Buddhism”]

- Q. If we were to try to represent the whole spirit of the Buddha's doctrine by one word, which word should we choose?
- A. Justice.
- Q. Why?
- A. Because it teaches that every man gets, under the operations of unerring KARMA, exactly that reward or punishment which he has deserved, no more and no less. No good deed or bad deed, however trifling and however secretly committed, escapes the evenly balanced scales of Karma.

Q. What is Karma?

A. A causation operating on the moral as well as on the physical and other planes. Buddhists say there is no miracle in human affairs: what a man sows, that he must and will reap.

Q. What other good words have been used to express the essence of Buddhism?

A. Self-culture and universal love.

Q. What doctrine ennobles Buddhism and gives it its exalted place among the world's religions?

A. That of *Miṭṭa* or *Maitreya*—compassionate kindness. [...]

[*“Contrasts between Buddhism and religions”*]

Q. What striking contrasts are there between Buddhism and what may be properly called “religions”?^a

A. Among others, these: It teaches the highest goodness without a creating God; a continuity of line without adhering to the superstitious and selfish doctrine of an eternal, metaphysical soul-substance that goes out of the body; a happiness without an objective heaven; a method of salvation without a vicarious Savior; redemption by oneself as the Redeemer and without rites, prayers, penances, priest, or intercessory saints; and a *summum bonum*, i.e., Nirvāna, attainable in this life and in this world by leading a pure, unselfish life of wisdom and of compassion to all beings. [...]

Q. Does Buddhism declare that non-believers in Buddha will of necessity be damned for their unbelief?

A. No; by good deeds they may enjoy a limited term of happiness before being drawn into rebirth by their unexhausted *tanhā*. To escape rebirth, one *must* tread the Noble Eightfold Path.

[*“The status of woman”*]

Q. What is the spiritual status of woman among Buddhists?

A. According to our religion, they are on a footing of perfect equality with men. “Woman,” says the Buddha in the *Chullavedalla Sutta*, “may attain the highest path of holiness that is open to man—Arhatship.”

Q. What does a modern critic say about the effect of Buddhism on woman?

^a At the beginning of the catechism, Olcott had written: “The word ‘religion’ is most inappropriate to apply to Buddhism, which is not a religion but a moral philosophy [...] The Sinhalese Buddhists have never yet had any conception of what Europeans imply in the etymological construction of the Latin root of this term. In their creed, there is no such thing as a ‘binding’ in the Christian sense—a submission to, or merging of self in, a Divine Being.” Nevertheless, Olcott explained, he would refer to Buddhism as a religion “under protest [...], for the convenience of the ordinary reader” (p. 1 n. 1).

- A. That it “has done more for the happiness and enfranchisement of woman than any other creed” (Sir Lepel Griffin).^b [...]

[“*The spread of Buddhism*”]

- Q. As regards the number of its followers, how does Buddhism at this date compare with the other chief religions?

- A. The followers of the Buddha Dharma outnumber those of every other religion.

- Q. What is the estimated number?

- A. About five hundred millions (5,000 lakhs or 500 crores): this is five-thirteenths, or not quite half, of the estimated population of the globe.

- Q. Have many battles been fought and many countries conquered—has much human blood been spilt—to spread the Buddha Dharma?

- A. History does not record one of those cruelties and crimes as having been committed to propagate our religion. So far as we know, it has not caused the spilling of a drop of blood. [...]

- Q. What, then, is the secret of its wonderful spread?

- A. It can be nothing else than its intrinsic excellence: its self-evident basis of truth, its sublime moral teaching, and its sufficiency for all human needs. [...It is] a religion of noble tolerance, of universal brotherhood, of righteousness and justice. It has no taint of selfishness, sectarianism, or intolerance. [...]

[“*Taking hold upon the western mind*”]

- Q. Are there signs that the Buddha Dharma is growing in favor in non-Buddhistic countries?

- A. There are. Translations of our more valuable books are appearing; many articles in reviews, magazines, and newspapers are being published; and excellent original treatises by distinguished writers are coming from the press. Moreover, Buddhist and non-Buddhist lecturers are publicly discoursing on Buddhism to large audiences in western countries. The Shin Shu sect of Japanese Buddhists have actually opened missions at Honolulu, San Francisco, Sacramento, and other American places.

- Q. What two leading ideas of ours are chiefly taking hold upon the western mind?

- A. Those of Karma and Reincarnation. The rapidity of their acceptance is very surprising.

^b An Englishman who worked in south Asia in the 1860s-1880s as part of the British empire’s civil service. Olcott slightly misquotes Griffin, who wrote “women,” not “woman.”

Lepel Griffin, “The Burman and His Creed,” *Fortnightly Review*, November 1890, 667, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.31210006579393>

Q. What is believed to be the explanation of this?

A. Their appeals to the natural instinct of justice and their evident reasonableness.

Source: Henry S. Olcott, *The Buddhist Catechism*, 42nd ed. (Colombo, Sri Lanka: Publications Division, Ministry of Cultural Affairs, [1908]), 37-38, 41-42, 49-50, 67, 70, 75, <https://archive.org/details/abuddhistcatechi0000olcouoft>. Free eBook from the Internet Archive.

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