Introduction

Ah! Blessed Lord! Oh, High Deliverer!
Forgive this feeble script, which doth thee wrong.
Measuring with little wit thy lofty Love.
Ah! Lover! Brother! Guide! Lamp of the Law!
I take my refuge in thy name and thee!
I take my refuge in thy Law of Good!
I take my refuge in thy Order! OM!
The Dew is on the Lotus! — Rise, Great Sun!
And lift my leaf and mix me with the wave.
Om mani padme hum, the Sunrise comes!
The Dewdrop slips into the shining Sea!

With these words, Edwin Arnold concluded his *The Light of Asia*, a blank-verse life of the Buddha in eight books. Without doubt, it was one of the most popular long Victorian poems. First published in 1879, it went through at least a hundred editions in England and America. It was translated into numerous foreign languages, and in 1884 *Trübner’s Record* announced that it was to be published in Bengali and Sanskrit.¹ Christopher Clausen remarks that, ‘Largely on the strength of it, the hitherto obscure Arnold achieved fame, a knighthood and an ultimately disappointed expectation of the laureateship.’²

As a result of its popularity, there was an enormous upsurge in awareness of, and interest in, Buddhism in late Victorian England, along with which went a polarization in attitudes towards it. Christmas Humphreys was later to write, ‘It is little exaggeration to say of this great work that it obtained for the Dhamma a hearing which half a century of scholarship could never have obtained …’³
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George Cobbold, an Anglican clergyman, described *The Light of Asia* in 1894 as the book which ‘probably more than any other work of the day has been the means of drawing the attention of English-speaking people to Buddhism …’; but this itself drew a protest from this surprisingly liberal Anglican: ‘Men and women have risen from perusal of the *Light of Asia* [sic] with a sense of damage done to their Christian faith, and with a feeling … that in Gautama Buddha they have been confronted with a formidable rival to Jesus Christ.’

This combination of attraction to *The Light of Asia* and a Christian rejection of its subject was powerfully expressed in a meeting of the Victoria Institute towards the end of the century. The address was given by the Reverend Richard Collins, from 1854 to 1878 a missionary in India and Ceylon. He drew a distinction between Arnold’s Buddha and the historical Buddha, and claimed that the Buddha of *The Light of Asia* ‘is no more a picture of the genuine and real Buddha, than Alfred Tennyson’s King Arthur is a picture of the actual King Arthur …’ Such sentiments were expressed much more forcibly in the subsequent discussion. W. H. Robinson applauded the style, talent, and construction of the book. But he went on to declaim, ‘I say Sir Edwin Arnold’s book is one of the most mischievous, and is chargeable with having given currency to the opinion among shallow, or uninformed thinkers, that the Buddha was at least as great a man as He whom Christians adore, and his religion in some respects preferable to Christianity.’

Mr Robert Moncrieff, a visitor to the Institute, was moved to exclaim even more harshly:

having read *The Light of Asia* very soon after it was published, I said, ‘how can that be Light which has produced darkness of the grossest kind?’ … Sirs and ladies, I venture to ask you if any people on the face of the earth seem to be more utterly indifferent to the shedding of blood and to human suffering than the followers of Buddhism. At the same time, with all this wretched, horrible disregard for human suffering and human life, they show the greatest care for animal life … These contradictions are parts of the darkness proceeding out of *The Light of Asia*, which we are asked to accept in preference to *The Light of the World* (applause).”

The polarity exemplified by the reaction to Arnold’s poem was part of a much more general polarity about Buddhism that was embedded in mid and late Victorian culture. It was a polarity stimulated by *The Light of Asia*. But it had been present in Victorian
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England, at least among the educated middle and upper classes, since the 1850s. Indeed, it was precisely this polarity, or rather the positive side of it, that had made possible such a literary creation as The Light of Asia and guaranteed its success. In the Victorian fascination with Buddhism, Arnold found a ready market for his work. Buddhism had been culturally potent and surprisingly pervasive for some twenty years before the appearance of his work; and it remained so for some twenty years after.

In 1869, for example, Max Müller not without a hint of irony remarked, ‘Now it has been the peculiar fate of the religion of Buddha, that among all the so-called false or heathenish religions, it almost alone has been praised by all and everybody for its elevated, pure, and humanizing character. One hardly trusts one’s eyes on seeing Catholic and Protestant missionaries vie with each other in their praises of the Buddha; …’ In 1890, the anonymous author of a review of several major works on Buddhism foreshadowed, albeit a little prematurely, the waning of enthusiasm for it. But he did nevertheless give a clear picture of the impact it had made on the Victorian imagination:

The enthusiasm for Buddhism, which has been aroused of late years among us, has probably passed its highest point. A few years ago the magazines were full of it; and every young lady, who made any pretensions to the higher culture, was prepared to admire ‘such a beautiful religion and so like Christianity’ … The daring reformer, who stood up alone against a dominant caste to proclaim the brotherhood and equality of man; the isolated thinker, who struck out a whole system of philosophy and morals, independent of or opposed to all that had preceded it; his heroic career of self-sacrifice and life laid down for his friends; – that vast literature pervaded by love and purity, rich in proverb and parable, moving in such high regions of philosophy; – that world-wide community, in whose romantic monasteries, under rock-temple and leaf-hut, through all those silent centuries men rapt above the world had lived the calm life of meditation; – all these are seen now, by any one who cares to know the truth, in forms more commonplace, less original, less complete.  

The slightly tongue-in-cheek tone of this passage does signify, as its author claims, the passing of the high point of enthusiasm for Buddhism; it is a tone rarely heard in the literature prior to this time. But in spite of this, it indicates vividly those heroic qualities of the Buddha, and the romantic ambience of Buddhism, that attracted so many Victorians.
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Even at this time, however, many of its detractors remained vehement. The London Quarterly Review for 1888–9 harshly asserted that ‘European admirers of Buddhism are as great an anachronism as an adherent of Egyptian or Chaldean astronomers.’\(^{10}\) Monier Monier-Williams, one of the least sympathetic of Oriental scholars to Buddhism, in an address given to the World’s Missionary Conference in London, declared somewhat disingenuously that, ‘It is one of the strange phenomena of the present day, that even educated persons are apt to fall into raptures over the doctrines of Buddhism attracted by the bright gems which its admirers cull out of its moral code and display ostentatiously while keeping out of sight all the dark spots of that code, all its trivialities, and omitting to mention precepts, which, indeed, no Christian could soil his lips by uttering.’\(^{11}\)

It is this hitherto virtually neglected aspect of Victorian culture that this work intends to examine.\(^{12}\) In the first place, I want to argue that there was an imaginative creation of Buddhism in the first half of the nineteenth century, and that the Western creation of Buddhism progressively enabled certain aspects of Eastern cultures to be defined, delimited, and classified. In the second place, I want to analyse the discourse about Buddhism that was created and sustained by the reification of the term ‘Buddhism’, and which, in its turn, defined the nature and content of this entity. I hope to show the way in which ‘Buddhism’ was created, and discourse about it determined, by the Victorian culture in which it emerged as an object of discourse.

In so doing, something of the history of Buddhist studies in the West, and especially in Great Britain, will be thrown into relief. But two qualifications need to be made. First, this work does not pretend, either in terms of its content or its method, to be a history of Buddhist scholarship. Buddhist scholarship is important in the context of this work only in so far as it contributed to the creation and maintenance of Buddhism and a discourse about it. Second, part of the purpose of this book is to demonstrate as precisely as possible the way in which the scholarly analysis of Buddhism was influenced by the object it created, and the discourse that defined that object. Buddhist scholarship was not only the cause but also the effect of that which it brought into being – Buddhism.

An important point of method is connected with the above. How are we to determine from the enormous amount of scholarly material
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which was produced those parts of it which contributed to the development of a discourse about Buddhism? In effect, I determined to restrict the scholarly material I wished to consult to that which was cited, reviewed, or quoted in the serious but more popular literature about Buddhism. On the one hand, this may have resulted in my ignoring some works which, with our historical hindsight, are of importance in the history of Western scholarship on Buddhism. On the other hand, as will become apparent, this decision enabled me to examine a large number of texts which, however unlikely they would be to be included in a contemporary history of Buddhist scholarship, were seen by their contemporaries as significant contributions. On the same principle, I have generally consulted American, German, or French sources only where they have been similarly cited, reviewed, or quoted.

A further point of method: I proceed from the assumption that Victorian discourse about Buddhism is part of a broader discourse about the Orient such as has been brought to light by Edward Said in his book Orientalism. Discourse about Buddhism did have a different flavour to that which Said discerned by virtue of his concentration upon Islam and the Middle East. But I, like Said, am concerned with the internal logic, the structure of views about Buddhism apart from the question of how Buddhism ‘really’ was. That is to say, I am not concerned with the extent to which Victorian interpretations of Buddhism correctly or incorrectly perceived, selected, reflected on, and interpreted the congeries of texts, persons, events, and phenomena in various cultures that it classified as Buddhist. My concern is rather with how these were presented by the West, in the West, and primarily for the West. Said’s words are as relevant for Buddhism as for the Orient of which it was seen as forming a substantial part:

The value, efficacy, strength, apparent veracity of a written statement about the Orient … relies very little, and cannot instrumentally depend on the Orient as such. On the contrary, the written statement is a presence to the reader by virtue of its having excluded, displaced, made supererogatory any such real thing as ‘the Orient’ … that Orientalism makes sense at all depends more on the West than on the Orient, and this sense is directly indebted to various Western techniques of representation that make the Orient visible, clear, ‘there’ in discourse about it.13

Central to my argument, then, is the presupposition that the construction and interpretation of Buddhism reveals much about
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nineteenth-century concerns and can be read as an important sign of crucial socio-cultural aspects of the Victorian period. Victorian interpretations of Buddhism, whether of its founder, its doctrines, its ethics, its social practices, or its truth and value, in constructing Buddhism, reveal the world in which such constructing took place. Consequently, in the chapters which follow, discourse about Buddhism has been examined not only with a view to discerning the way in which the image of an alien religiosity was constructed, but also with the aim of demonstrating the way in which the discourse thus constructed illuminates the broad socio-cultural context in which it was created. Discourse about Buddhism provides, as we shall see, a mirror in which was reflected an image not only of the Orient, but of the Victorian world also.
1

The discovery of Buddhism

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Buddhism was ‘discovered’ in the West during the first half of the nineteenth century. It was at this time that the term ‘Buddha’ (‘Buddoo’, ‘Bouddha’, ‘Boudhou’, etc.) began to gain currency in the English- and French-speaking worlds, and that the term ‘Buddhism’ first made its appearance in English in the scholarly journals which appeared, in part at least, as a consequence of the developing imperial interests of both England and France in the Orient.¹

This is not, of course, to deny that, as is now well known, there had been periodic encounters between the West and what we now understand as Buddhism. Pieces of information had filtered through to the early Christian world. From A.D. 1000, a version of the life of the Buddha in the form of the legend of Barlaam and Josaphat influenced the Western Christian ascetic ideal. And from the thirteenth to the eighteenth centuries there had been a succession of contacts: William van Ruysbroeck, Marco Polo, John of Monte Corvino, Dominican, Jesuit, Capuchin, and Franciscan missionaries to Japan, China, and Tibet, had all encountered Buddhism and reported their findings to a curious West.²

But for the greater part of the nineteenth century, these early encounters made little impact on the understanding of Buddhism in the West. The various reports of travellers, missionaries, diplomats, and so on, with a few notable exceptions, did not form a significant part of, or play an important role in, the network of texts about Buddhism that began to develop at the end of the
eighteenth century. Certainly, they are seldom cited. Moreover, the possibility of these various discrete and unconnected references to Buddhism forming part of the emerging discourse about Buddhism was only there after the middle of the nineteenth century when ‘Buddhism’ had been constructed. Only then was it possible to see such encounters, in historical retrospect, as the earliest contacts of the West with Buddhism; and only then was it possible to classify them within discourse about Buddhism. Until that time they remained in Western consciousness merely as disparate accounts of the encounter of the West with indistinct aspects of the Orient – but not of the Buddhist Orient.

A crucial part of the process of the formation of Buddhism was the recognition that there were various culturally diffuse religious phenomena which had apparent relationships with each other. As early as 1693, Simon de la Loubère, an envoy of Louis XIV on the third French mission to Siam, surmised that the religion of Siam had come from Ceylon, for the Siamese ‘averrr for truth, that the Religion of the Siameses [sic] came from those quarters because that they have read in a Baïte Book, that Sommona-Codom whom the Siameses adore, was the Son of a King of the Island of Ceylon’.\(^1\) Further, on information gained from the Chinese, he also hazarded the opinion that the Chinese ‘bonzees’ gained their doctrine from Thailand. After a number of etymological comparisons between the languages of Japan, China, and Siam, he concluded:

I find therefore some reason to believe, that the Chinese having received the Doctrine of the Metempsychosis from some Siamese Talapoin, they have taken the general name of the Profession, for the proper Name of the Author of the Doctrine: and this is so much the more plausible, as it is certain that the Chinese do also call their Bonzees by the name of Che-kia [Sákya] as the Siameses do call their Talapoins Tchaou-cou. ‘Tis therefore impossible to assert, from the testimony of the Chinese, that there was an Indian named Che-Kia, Author of the Opinion of the Metempsychosis, a Thousand years before Jesus Christ: seeing that the Chinese who have received this Opinion since the Death of Christ, and perhaps much later than they alleged, are forced to confess, that they have nothing related concerning this Che-Kia, but upon the Faith of the Indians; who speak not one word thereof, not thinking that there was any first Author of their Opinions.\(^4\)

Loubère’s opinions on the Siamese origin of Chinese Buddhism and his dismissal of its Indian origin had little influence in the early nineteenth-century creation of Buddhism. But his general description
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of the religion of Sommona-codom was to do so, through the agency of William Chambers. In the first volume of *Asiatick Researches* in 1788, he drew together the information in Loubère and in Robert Knox’s *An Historical Relation of Ceylon*, the first edition of which was published in 1681. ‘From Knox’s history of Ceylon’, he wrote, ‘it appears, that the impression here spoken of is upon the hill called … Adam’s Peak. And that the natives believe it to be the foot-step of their great idol Buddha. Between the worship of whom, as described by Knox, and that of Sommona-codom, as related by M. de la Loubère, there is a striking resemblance in many particulars …’" Chambers’s identification is reflected in an article in 1801 by M. Joinville on the people of Ceylon. ‘It has been justly observed’, he remarked, ‘that the SAMONOCODUM of the people of Siam, is the same as the BOUDHOU of the Singalese.’ And Captain Mahony, in his account of Ceylon in the same year, observed that ‘GAUTEMEH BHOODDA is acknowledged by the Singhala, to be the same holy character termed by the Siamese, SOMMONOKODOM, and BOOTISAT.’" Even so, such connexions often remained unrecognized. Thus, for example, in *The English Encyclopaedia* of 1802, we read only of BUDUN, one of the Ceylonese gods, who is fabled to have arrived at supremacy, after successive transmigrations from the lowest state of an insect, through the various species of living animals. There are 3 deities of this name, each of whom is said to reign till a bird shall have removed a hill of sand, half a mile high, and six miles round, by carrying off a single grain once in 1,000 years." And this entry is repeated in the *Encyclopaedia Perthesii* in 1807, in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in 1810, 1817, and as late as 1854, in the *Pantologia* in 1813, and in the *London Encyclopaedia* in 1829. As late as 1833, Charles Gutzlaff, the Protestant missionary to China, could still wonder whether Sommona Kodom, whom he knows as the founder of Buddhism in Laos, Cambodia, and Siam, ‘was a disciple of Budha himself …’" Still, although there was uncertainty at the popular level, at the scholarly level, the links were clearer. In 1697, the Jesuit Louis le Comte declared that ‘all the Indies have been poisoned with his pernicious doctrine’. And he identified the Buddhists of Siam with those of Tartary, Japan, and China." A century later, the Abbé Grosier drew on his recollections: ‘The priests attached to the
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worship of Fo are called Talapoins by the Siamese, Lamas by the Tartars, Ho-chang in China, and Bonzes in Japan. And Michael Symes in his account of an embassy to the Kingdom of Ava in 1795 reported that ‘The Cingaleze in Ceylon are Boodhists of the purest source, and the Birmans acknowledge to have originally received their religion from that island. It was brought say the Rhahaans, first from Zehoo (Ceylon) to Arracan, and thence was introduced into Ava, and probably into China; for the Birmans assert with confidence that the Chinese are Boodhists.’ From his experience of the Burmese context, at the turn of the century, Father Sangermano of the Catholic mission at Rangoon observed:

... all the nations comprised in the Burmese Empire, the Peguans, the Aracanes, the Sciam, etc., join in the adoration of Godama, and the observance of his laws. And not only here, but likewise in the kingdom of Siam this is the established religion. Godama is besides adored in China under the name of Fô, and in Thibet under that of Buttà. His worship also prevails in many places along the coast of Coromandel, and particularly in the island of Ceylon, which is the principal seat of the Talapoins. And statements of this sort were to continue to appear periodically throughout the first two decades of the nineteenth century.

Generally, around the 1820s, this congeries of religious phenomena throughout Asia is being classified as the religion of Buddha or Buddhism. William Ward, a Baptist missionary in India, inquired whether ‘the religion of Booddhû, now spread over the Burman empire, Siam, Ceylon, Japan, Cochin-China, and the greater part of China itself, be not in reality the ancient religion of India, and the bramhinical [sic] superstition the invention of later times ...’ According to James Mill, ‘The religion of Buddha is now found to prevail over the greater part of the East; in Ceylon, in the farther peninsula, in Thibet, in China, and even as far as Japan.’ John Davy in 1820 in his account of Ceylon went as far as to claim that Buddhism was more widely extended than any other religion: ‘It appears’, he wrote, ‘to be the religion of the whole of Tartary, of China, of Japan, and their dependencies, and of all the countries between China and the Bur rampooter.’

There were however no clear conceptions of the historical connexions between the Buddhism of these various countries. Lieutenant-Colonel William Francklin of the East India Company