

CORRESPONDENCE.

The following letter appears in the *Academy* for Feb. 4th :

1. THE PRODIGAL SON IN ITS BUDDHIST SHAPE.

*Sunnyfield, Clapham Park,
Jan. 25, 1893.*

“J. P. K.” asks (*Academy*, Dec. 17) whether the right of a son to a partition of his father’s property, and the doctrine of successive births, may not have been brought to the West by the Buddhist missions. It seems still more “interesting to consider” whether the New Testament parables supposed to contain these references may not themselves have a similar origin.

In the Buddhist parable (*Saddharma Pundarika*, ch. iv. Burnouf’s translation, pp. 63–75), which is generally regarded as parallel to that of the Prodigal (Luke xv.), there are details which recall likewise the story of the rich man and Lazarus in the next chapter of the same evangelist. The son stolen in early youth from his father’s house drags out a miserable existence in a distant part of the country. His body covered with sores, he begs from door to door. His poverty is ascribed to no special vice or prodigality, it being implied that his grovelling inclinations keep him in this wretched state—the type of unconverted humanity. The father, having long searched for his son in vain and given him up for lost, has meanwhile become immensely rich. He is seated in state at the gate

(compare Luke xvi. 20) of his palace, when the wretched beggar chances to go by, and as he shrinks back abashed, is recognized. The rich man does not, however, yet reveal himself, but sends to engage his son, at a double wage, for the only work for which he seems fitted, the cleansing of the place where the refuse is thrown out. The father, coming in disguise to where his son is engaged at his lowly employment, at first affects to chide him as an unprofitable servant, but presently, overcome by paternal tenderness, reveals himself, clasping the poor outcast to his heart (comp. Luke xv. 20 and xvi. 22). "So men, inclined to vice though they may be, are yet the children of the Tathagata, heirs to the priceless treasure of his Gnosis, which, when he has disciplined them, he confers upon them" (comp. Heb. xii. 6).

There is a striking parallelism also between the parable (in the same treatise, ch. v.) of the man born blind and the contents of the ninth chapter of the Fourth Gospel, the identical question being proposed—"Are sins committed in a former life the cause of his calamity?" A great physician, having prepared healing herbs, one of which he chews to a pulp, restores the blind man's sight. As the Pharisees dispute with his Gospel analogue, so the Rishis are here introduced rebuking and exhorting him to strive after the true spiritual sight, the bodily sight being nothing. So, "blind from birth through their great ignorance, beings are doomed to transmigration, not understanding the wheel of production of causes and effects, they enter on the path of sorrow. And so the Tathagata, the great physician, all wise, all merciful, is born into a world afflicted with ignorance." Whether derived from this or not, the corresponding Gospel narrative was, no doubt, like it originally meant to be understood symbolically.

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