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From Nihilism to Realism: Joseph Edkins' Interpretation of Buddhist Nirvana and Death

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Abstract

In the nineteenth century, the emergence of Western Buddhist studies generated sustained debate over nirvana, one of the central doctrines of Buddhism. The British Protestant missionary Joseph Edkins actively participated in this intellectual discussion and developed a distinctive interpretation of the concept. Early in his writings, Edkins largely followed the prevailing tendency in European scholarship to interpret nirvana through a philosophical framework that equated it with nihilism. However, through extensive engagement with Chinese Buddhist texts and direct interactions with Chinese Buddhists, he gradually revised this view. Approaching the issue from the perspectives of common sense and religion, Edkins argued that nirvana, as understood in Chinese Buddhism, retained a form of practical realism rather than complete annihilation. Although he ultimately rejected the idea that nirvana could provide genuine salvation, Edkins discerned the Western Heaven (Pure Land) within his own construction of a Buddhist theory of death and interpreted it as a potential preparation for Christianity. By situating Northern Buddhism within a broader biblical narrative, he sought to reconcile tensions between nirvana and other Buddhist conceptions of the afterlife, as well as the wider doctrinal tensions between Buddhism and Christianity. As an intermediary in Sino-Western intellectual exchange, Edkins' creative interpretation of nirvana not only reflects the imprint of Western intellectual traditions but also illuminates the complex negotiations between Christianity and Buddhism, and between faith and reason, in the nineteenth-century construction of Buddhist knowledge.

Keywords: Joseph Edkins; nirvana; Western Buddhist studies; Chinese Buddhism

1. Introduction

In 1880, the British Orientalist T. W. Rhys Davids published in *The Academy* a review of Joseph Edkins' newly released *Chinese Buddhism*. His disappointment with the work was evident, especially regarding Edkins' understanding of nirvana. Davids (1880, p. 232) criticized Edkins' claims about "Buddha (or anyone else) entering, at death, into Nirvana" as completely inconsistent with early Buddhist doctrine and observed that the author seemed unaware of this contradiction and offered no explanation. For this reason, Davids questioned whether such expressions even appeared in Chinese Buddhist literature and doubted the reliability of the sources Edkins cited. Given Davids' position as one of the founders of Western Buddhist studies, his critique almost fully discredited Edkins' scholarly competence in the field. However, Edkins did not remain silent. In the preface to the second edition of his book, he responded directly, not only pointing out the errors and biases in Davids' research but also challenging Pāli scholars for undervaluing Northern Buddhism and emphasizing the trustworthiness of the Chinese Buddhist canons.

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This brief episode raises a further question of whether nirvana can be understood in connection with death. Some scholars, including T. W. Rhys Davids, firmly denied any such association. Indeed, modern readers consulting almost any introductory text on Buddhism are unlikely to encounter interpretations of nirvana as death. Nevertheless, the absence of such interpretations in current texts should not lead us to overlook the historical fact that certain Buddhists and scholars, at various times, perceived nirvana as a form of death, nor the possibility that such interpretations persist in some modern contexts. Rather than hastily dismissing a potential connection, it is prudent to investigate the reasons behind these interpretations and to examine their intellectual and cultural implications. When considered within the nineteenth-century European context in which Buddhism began to attract sustained scholarly attention, the question of whether nirvana was equivalent to death was one that Western scholars of that period could scarcely avoid. Fundamentally, this issue addressed the very nature of Buddhist nirvana. As a core doctrine of Buddhism, nirvana remained the subject of ongoing debate throughout the nineteenth century. Everett (1882, p. 421) described it as one of "the most important controversies" within the Buddhist system, while Franklin (2008, p. 177) referred to it as "the most sustained and contentious debate" about Buddhism. Joseph Edkins, though little known to contemporary scholarship, was an important participant in this long-standing discussion.

To better understand Edkins' interpretation of nirvana, it is essential to consider his life and academic background. Edkins was a pioneering missionary and scholar specializing in Chinese Buddhism. He was born into a British Congregational family and received a solid education at both the University of London and Coward College. Sent to China by the London Missionary Society in 1848, Edkins demonstrated remarkable linguistic talent and developed a strong interest in religious studies during his time there. He possessed proficiency not only in Latin and French, but also in Mandarin, the Shanghai dialect, Mongolian, Manchu, Sanskrit, and several other languages. Edkins' contributions to philology have already garnered scholarly recognition, whereas his research in religious studies, carried out almost simultaneously, has largely remained neglected. In fact, his philological and religious pursuits were closely intertwined and appeared to share a common goal. Edkins continued his engagement with religious studies throughout his later years. Among his writings on religion, his research on Buddhism stands out as particularly significant. He was one of the earliest Western scholars to conduct a systematic study of Chinese Buddhism, and his works influenced several prominent Western scholars, including Samuel Beal, Henri Cordier, and Holmes Welch.

Regarding the concept of nirvana, Edkins' understanding exemplifies the cultural encounter and intellectual exchange between Chinese Buddhism and Western thought. His interpretation not only reflects the influence and formative impact of nineteenth-century European intellectual currents on his reading of Buddhism but was also shaped by his ongoing interactions with Chinese Buddhists during his time in China. Following the footsteps of contemporary philosophers and Orientalists, Edkins' discussion moves beyond a purely metaphysical framework towards a more realistic and religious one, through which he develops a distinctive view of Buddhist nirvana and articulates an evolving Buddhist theory of death. Focusing on the relationship between nirvana and death, this paper aims to examine Edkins' comprehension of and contribution to the study of nirvana and Buddhist views of death in China.

2. Philosophical Abstraction and the Eastern Phantom

2.1. Nirvana Interpreted as Nihilism in Early Nineteenth-Century Europe

In the nineteenth-century European context, the association between nirvana and death can be traced back to one of the earliest impressions formed by European intellec-

tuals: specifically, its interpretation as a form of nihilism. When the term nirvana was first introduced to European discourse, it was rendered in several ways across European languages. According to Nirvana (2025), the earliest recorded use of the word in English appeared in 1801 in *Asiatick Researches*. In *A Dictionary, Sanscrit and English*, Horace Hayman Wilson provided one of the earliest systematic and comprehensive accounts of the term based on Sanskrit sources. Wilson (1819, p. 473) noted that nirvana denoted not only "eternal happiness" and "emancipation from matter and reunion with the deity," but also "setting," "cessation," "repose," and "vanity". This multiplicity of meanings and synonymous expressions surrounding nirvana greatly complicates European efforts to define and interpret the concept, helping to create the conditions for two radically divergent interpretations of nirvana in Europe: "nihilism" and "eternalism".

Before Buddhist Sanskrit literature was extensively transmitted to Europe, Henry Thomas Colebrooke, mainly through accounts written by Buddhist opponents, had already discerned that Buddhists tended to employ the term nirvana to express their ideal state of being. Relying primarily on philological analysis rather than Buddhist sources, Colebrooke (1858) explained that the term derived from the root "vā" combined with the negative prefix "nir". He observed that three adjective meanings of nirvana were generally accepted among the contemporary scholars: (1) "extinct, as a fire which is gone out;" (2) "set, as a luminary which has gone down;" and (3) "defunct, as a saint who has passed away". However, Colebrooke himself did not adopt these interpretations. Interpreting "vā" instead as "to blow as the wind," he argued that, when combined with the negative prefix, the term signified a state that was "calm and unruffled". From this etymology, he further inferred meanings such as "unmixed tranquil happiness" and "perfect apathy" (p. 258). Colebrooke was among the earliest European scholars to assert explicitly that Buddhist nirvana did not signify annihilation. Yet, his reasoning proved insufficiently persuasive and was later cited in ways that could be taken to support nihilistic views of nirvana.

By the time Edkins engaged in debates on Buddhist nirvana, European scholarship was already deeply entangled in a metaphysical quagmire surrounding this topic, giving rise to anxieties over what would later be called "the cult of nothingness." Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel played an important role in establishing the association between nirvana and nothingness. In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, Hegel (1988, p. 253) described nirvana as the highest form of negation, stating that

> "One must immerse oneself in this nothing, in the eternal tranquility of the nothing generally, in the substantial in which all determinations cease, where there is no virtue or intelligence, where all movement annuls itself. All characteristics of both natural life and spiritual life have vanished."

Droit (2003, p. 65) argued that Hegel's comprehension of nirvana heavily relied on reports from Jesuit missionaries and their intellectual successors. Recent studies have further revealed that the association between Buddhism and nothingness dates back to the sixteenth century, when Jesuit missionaries first encountered Buddhism in Japan. There, the missionaries observed that certain Zen Buddhists denied the existence of the soul after death, which they interpreted as a teaching that all things arose from and ultimately returned to nothingness (Ruiz de Medina 1990, p. 214). Thus, App (2012, p. 27) pointed out that "even at this earliest stage the specter of nihilism and atheism raised its head." In the writings of early Catholic missionaries, the Buddhist cult of nothingness provoked both alarm and reflection among European readers. From the seventeenth to the eighteenth century, through the combined efforts of Catholic missionaries and secular philosophers, Buddhism was gradually constructed as a component of pan-Asian religion or Oriental philosophy within a biblical framework (for more detailed information, see App (2012)). These earlier explorations exerted a lasting influence on the development of Western Buddhist

studies in the nineteenth century. However, Hegel's understanding of Buddhism was not based solely on these early missionary accounts.[1] He was also acquainted with the most recent works of Orientalists such as Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat and Colebrooke. Strictly speaking, Hegel's interpretation of nirvana was not entirely inconsistent with contemporary Buddhist scholarship. For example, Colebrooke's (1858, pp. 258–59) explanation of nirvana as "perfect apathy" or a state akin to "eternal sleep" could, to some extent, still support Hegel's philosophical portrayal of Buddhism as a form of metaphysical nihilism.

Another reader of Colebrooke's works, Burnouf (2010) explicitly refuted that Colebrooke's views of nirvana could be applied to all Buddhist schools. Drawing upon Buddhist sources, he concluded that nirvana could broadly be understood as "liberation" or "salvation," elaborating that, "nirvana is for the theists the absorption of individual life into God and for the atheists the absorption of this individual life into nothingness" (pp. 68–69, 535). Burnouf's theological categorization of nirvana largely served the European intellectual need to contextualize Buddhism within a familiar Western framework. In other words, Buddhism, an alien system of knowledge from the East, was rendered comprehensible to the European mind only when presented in recognizable forms, such as a religion analogous to Christianity or a philosophy of nihilism. Consequently, Burnouf's interpretation of Buddhism soon attracted wide attention within Western academia, extending from Europe to Asian mission fields. Readers of *Introduction* à *l'histoire du Buddhisme indien* found this fundamental work persuasive in shaping their own theories.[2] Although Burnouf appeared to allow the possibility of understanding nirvana as either eternity or annihilation, he was clearly inclined towards the latter. As Burnouf (2010) observed, Shakyamuni defined nirvana nowhere, mentioned no God, and spoke little of matter. This suggested to Burnouf that the ultimate hope for escape from the cycle of transmigration was to enter nirvana, and that, "the definitive sign of this annihilation was death" (pp. 180, 477). Such a perspective continued to reinforce the association between Buddhist nirvana and philosophical nihilism.

Following Burnouf, Jules Barthélemy Saint-Hilaire conducted a metaphysical inquiry into the nature of nirvana and concluded that it was logically identical with nihilism. Barthélemy Saint-Hilaire (1895) highlighted that not only had Burnouf repeatedly mentioned that Buddhist nirvana signified the annihilation of both material elements and thinking principles, but also many other authoritative scholars in the field, including Colebrooke, held a similar view. Therefore, Saint-Hilaire had strong confidence in contemporary Western Buddhist studies, believing that the field had reached a mature stage that even future discoveries would be unable to overturn. More importantly, he was convinced that the metaphysical framework of Buddhism itself inevitably led to nihilism. He simplified Buddhist metaphysics to two fundamental doctrines: transmigration and nirvana, claiming that Buddhism extended the scope of transmigration to all beings, from inert matter to the Bodhisattva, and that liberation therefore could only be achieved through complete annihilation (pp. 17, 131–32, 140, 144). In Saint-Hilaire's view, Buddhism did not invent nihilism *ex nihilo* but rather carried the doctrines of the Sāṃkhya school to their logical conclusion, pushing the idea of the soul's liberation to its ultimate consequences. As Welbon (1968, p. 74) commented, Saint-Hilaire seemed to suggest that Buddhist nihilism was "the natural, the logical, the inevitable final step in the development of Indian philosophy and religion." This assertion constituted the most powerful aspect of Saint-Hilaire's arguments for Buddhist nihilism: nihilism was not merely a possible interpretation of nirvana, but its necessary metaphysical outcome. Thus, despite enduring controversies over his interpretation, Saint-Hilaire steadfastly maintained that nirvana was equivalent to annihilation.

2.2. Edkin's Early Interpretation of Nirvana as Nihilism

Building upon nineteenth-century European scholarship, Joseph Edkins largely followed earlier metaphysical readings of the concept, continuing the tendency to approach nirvana as a subject of philosophical inquiry. Edkins (1859) described Buddhism as "a philosophy gone mad" and viewed the Buddhist path to nirvana as an impossible "remedial scheme." He argued that nirvana was unattainable and could never offer true redemption to Buddhists, for he saw it as "nothing but a philosophical abstraction, the boundary beyond which speculative thought found itself unable to pass." More specifically, he understood nirvana as an eternal state of unconscious existence in which all human antitheses, such as the distinctions between person and state, thought and being, life and death, and good and evil, disappeared into the absolute unity (pp. 123, 131, 182–83, 190). For Hegel, "nirvana" and "God," insofar as they were conceived as devoid of indeterminacy, were identical with nothingness (Hegel 1988, pp. 255–56). However, Orientalist scholars such as Saint-Hilaire or Edkins did not conceive of nirvana in this dialectical sense. One of their central goals in their engagement with Buddhism was to draw a sharp distinction between the two, setting nirvana, or nothingness, in direct opposition to God. Both scholars clearly recognized that Buddhist scriptures offered no explicit definition of nirvana but rather sought to elucidate its meaning through a series of exclusions of what it was not. They reasoned that when this process of negation was carried to its logical extreme, all human attributes would be eliminated from nirvana. Fully aware that Buddhism lacked a deity corresponding to the Christian God, they therefore concluded that nirvana emptied of all determinations could be understood only as absolute nothingness. Hence, like Saint-Hilaire, Edkins was firmly convinced that, from a metaphysical perspective, nirvana was necessary identical to nothingness or annihilation.

At an early stage of his Buddhist studies, Edkins already showed a strong interest in substantiating the findings of Western scholarship through an examination of Chinese Buddhist sources. His translation and analysis of *Yi shulujia lun*[3] (壹输卢迦论), a Chinese translation of Nāgārjuna's *Ekaślokaśāstra*, are a typical example. In this work, Edkins (1858, p. 122) sought to test the views on Buddhism proposed by European scholars such as Colebrooke, Burnouf, and Victor Cousin against the evidence of Chinese Buddhist translations, and to demonstrate that while Buddhism correctly regarded all things as impermanent, it erred in understanding them as unreal. He drew attention to the close relationship among the concepts of "emptiness," "nirvana," and the "*wuwei fa*." The *Yi shulujia lun* divides all dharmāḥ in the world into two categories: "*youwei fa*" (有为法, saṃskṛta-dharma) and "*wuwei fa*" (无为法, asaṃskṛta-dharma). The former are impermanent, as they arise and perish in dependence on causes and conditions, while the latter are permanent, for causes and conditions do not produce them and thus neither arise nor cease. Edkins rendered the "*youwei fa*" as "actual things" or "actuality," signifying real existences, whereas the "*wuwei fa*" was translated as "non-actual" or "non-real," denoting what lacked true existence or reality. Since both "nirvana" and "emptiness" belong to the category of "*wuwei fa*," Edkins' translation of this term, to a certain extent, reflects his broader understanding of the Buddhist notion of nirvana.

In the first layer of his philosophical understanding of nirvana, Edkins regarded it as unreal or illusory, incapable of being apprehended by either the senses or the mind. In the *Yi shulujia lun*, the term "ware," referring to a concrete object such as a jar or vessel, is classified under "*youwei fa*," while "nirvana" belongs to "*wuwei fa*." These two kinds of dharmāḥ are set in opposition to each other and are understood to possess entirely different characteristics. Influenced by the tradition of British empiricism, Edkins (1866, p. 25b) maintained that whatever was commonly seen and heard by all was real rather than illusory. The ware, being perceptible, tangible, and recognizable within human experience,

could thus be regarded as a truly existent entity. By contrast, nirvana, which belongs to the opposite category, was imperceptible to the senses and therefore devoid of empirical reality. For Edkins, nirvana was a concept constructed by the human mind. If Buddhists were inwardly conscious of nirvana, it might still be regarded as real, comparable to a thought that arose and vanished within the mind, of which one's consciousness can be aware (Edkins 1866, p. 25b). However, Edkins observed that certain Buddhists emphasized that nirvana was "*wu zuo wu zheng*" (无作无证, no action and no attainment), signifying it is neither produced by deliberate activity nor confirmed through personal realization. This, in his view, implied that even the mind could not fully perceive whether nirvana had been attained, and accordingly Edkins could hardly consider nirvana to be real. In this way, Edkins reinterpreted Buddhist categories through a Western philosophical lens, accidentally inverting their original meanings. The ware was reassigned to the domain of truth and reality, while nirvana was reclassified to that of illusion and insubstantial being. Consequently, he obscured the Buddhist understanding in which nirvana is regarded as true and eternal and the ware as illusory and impermanent. Edkins' translation, therefore, reveals less about the doctrinal essence of Buddhism than about the epistemological limits imposed by his own nihilist metaphysical presuppositions.

This nihilist tendency in Edkins' interpretation of nirvana becomes even more evident in the second layer of his philosophical understanding, where he regarded it as a form of non-reality or non-being. He maintained that nirvana was the doctrine originally taught by the Buddha, whose account offered the most direct and authoritative explanation of its meaning. In his earliest Chinese work, *Shijiao zhengmiu* (释教正谬, *The Correction of Buddhist Errors*), Edkins (1866, pp. 4b, 13a) articulated that the Buddha died at the age of seventy-nine under the twin śāla trees, and that his disciples believed that he had entered nirvana; moreover, he asserted that what the Tathāgata himself spoke of was nothing but nirvana, and that this doctrine regarded death as entering nirvana. These statements suggest that Edkins regarded nirvana and death as equivalent, interpreting Buddhists as glorifying death through the term "nirvana." Thus, for Edkins, Buddhist nirvana at least implies the annihilation of material existence.

Strictly speaking, although the disappearance of the physical body does not definitively prove that nirvana is the same as absolute annihilation, Edkins nevertheless interpreted the Buddhist phrase "*niepan wei le*" (涅槃为乐, nirvana is bliss), as signifying a negation of life itself. This interpretation became a central basis for his criticism of Buddhism as a nihilistic doctrine. As Droit (2003, p. 22) observed, one of the forms of nihilism identified by nineteenth-century European scholars involved an active refusal of life, grounded in the belief that all existence was merely lures of suffering, and that the sole task of reason was to find a means to end it. Like many other European scholars of his time, Edkins considered it natural and inevitable that Buddhism led its followers to reject life and incline toward self-destruction, for it regarded human existence as a sea of suffering. In his refutation of nirvana, he emphasized the preciousness of human life, arguing those who destroyed their own lives to enter nirvana were like one casting away a priceless treasure (Edkins 1866, p. 7b). From his writings, it can be inferred that although Edkins accepted nirvana as liberation from the cycle of birth and death, he implied that such liberation could be achieved only through death. Hence, the pursuit of nirvana resulted in a rejection of life and an embrace of death, which Edkins regarded as a deadly mistake made by the very founder of Buddhism. In contrast to Christianity, which he believed found bliss in life, Edkins (1866, p. 24a) criticized the Buddha for taking no delight in life and seeking happiness in extinction, and thus concluded that nirvana offered no genuine meaning or value for human existence.

At this stage, it becomes apparent that Edkins' early interpretation of nirvana remained largely consistent with the view that it equated to nihilism within philosophical discourse. His understanding of nirvana as non-actual or non-real further reinforced this position. However, one may inquire whether an examination of nirvana from alternative perspectives must invariably lead to the conclusion of annihilation. In this respect, Edkins himself appeared not to have reached a settled understanding during his early investigations into Chinese Buddhist literature. In the outline of Chapter Eleven in *The Religious Condition of Chinese People*, he explicitly asserted, "The nirvana corresponds to our doctrine of immortality, and yet amounts to annihilation" (Edkins 1859, p. vii). Paradoxically, however, the detailed exposition beneath this heading stands in evident contradiction to the outline itself. Although Edkins continued to emphasize that nirvana was primarily a philosophical concept, he simultaneously clarified, "The consciousness of existence is entirely lost in the Nirvana, and yet it is not annihilation" (Edkins 1859, p. 206). If such a conspicuous inconsistency were merely a careless lapse in composition, it should have been amended in the revised edition of 1878. Nonetheless, both the chapter outline and the text remain unaltered. While the precise cause of this contradiction can no longer be ascertained, one point is clear: Edkins' most fundamental definition of Buddhist nirvana equated it with death. The ambivalence in his writings suggests that he remained uncertain whether Buddhists themselves truly deny the continued existence of consciousness or of the soul after death. This uncertainty, in turn, allows for his novel discovery of the relationship between "nirvana" and "death".

3. Doctrine of Death and a Realistic Perspective

3.1. Edkins' Turn to a "Realistic" Interpretation of Nirvana

After more than thirty years in China, Edkins developed a more mature and increasingly independent understanding of Buddhism, gradually distancing himself from prevailing European scholarship. Within this context, he appeared to have formulated a new approach to the interpretation of Buddhist nirvana. In the process of composing Chapter Four of *Chinese Buddhism*, he discerned a more positive dimension of the doctrine of nirvana in Chinese Buddhist literature. Edkins gradually came to realize that, at least in the context of Chinese Buddhism, the metaphysical interpretation of nirvana was no longer of primary importance. Rather than serving chiefly as an abstract philosophical problem, nirvana increasingly appeared to function within a realistic and religious framework. In 1881, in his essay "The Nirvana of the Northern Buddhists," he further elaborated this revised interpretative approach to the study of Buddhist nirvana. He noted,

> "In the use of terms we must allow a certain freedom to the Buddhist logician. Then let us judge of the doctrines they teach, in a perfectly fair and reasonable manner, taking phrases in the sense assigned to them by the Buddhist. But we need not be deterred by his airy metaphysics from the exercise of common sense in judging of the true meaning of the term Nirvana, and of the dogma that the world is unreal. A little actuality, a little realism introduced into the discussion of the true meaning of the Nirvana, and of the dogma of the non-reality of all things, will help us greatly. To understand Buddhism as a religion having popular power, we must remember that the world is real after all, and must also allow ourselves to regard death as the Nirvana. The world must still be to us visible, tangible and audible". (Edkins 1881, pp. 65–66)

Edkins advocated a realistic approach to the study and evaluation of key Buddhist terminology and doctrines. His notion of "realism" can be interpreted in three interrelated ways. First, he maintained that Western scholars should not study Buddhism apart from its own intellectual and cultural context. As early as thirty-seven years earlier, Burnouf (2010,

p. 69) had already asserted that, "it is from the use that Buddhists have made of this term, it is from the definitions they have given to it, that we must demand the explanation of these great problems." This methodological insight was subsequently recognized and widely adopted by Buddhist scholars. Yet, the Buddhist context emphasized by Edkins in this essay extends beyond the historical development of Buddhist thought and its textual articulations. It also includes the living understanding of Buddhism held by its believers throughout Asia in their everyday religious practice. Second, "common sense" can serve as a reliable guide in forming sound judgments about the Buddhist system of thought. Edkins believed that human beings universally share certain faculties, such as a shared psychological basis, the capacity for judgment, and spiritual aspirations, among which common sense occupied an important place. Thus, although Western scholars ought to approach Buddhism within its own context, the universality of common sense enables even non-Buddhists to comprehend Buddhist doctrines to a considerable extent. Third, within the sphere of everyday experience, Buddhism is recognized as a living religion of profound influence rather than an abstruse philosophical system. To interpret Buddhism from a realistic perspective, therefore, means to adhere to the understanding held by the majority of Buddhists. In Edkins' view, for most believers, Buddhism was inseparable from human life, in which the world was apprehended as tangibly real and nirvana was virtually indistinguishable from death.

In his late-nineteenth-century Buddhist writings, Edkins repeatedly characterized nirvana as a euphemism for death. This view appears to reflect not a novel insight, but rather an adherence to the interpretation long established by Burnouf and other European scholars. It was precisely this apparent misconception that provoked Davids' sharp criticism at the beginning of his review of *Chinese Buddhism*. In fact, two years before the publication of Edkins' book, Davids (1973, p. 14) had already offered a detailed exposition of the doctrine of nirvana in his first monograph, *Buddhism*, pointing out that one of the most common misunderstandings among European scholars was the assumption that "Gautama attained nirvana when he died." Davids (1973, p. 115; 1877, p. 267) rejected this notion, arguing that the true antithesis of nirvana was not "existence," but the three fires of "lust," "hatred," and "delusion," and therefore, the essence of nirvana lay in the extinguishing of these fires through the modification of character, leading to a state of peace, goodness, and wisdom. According to Davids (1877, p. 264), the European tendency to equate nirvana with death stemmed from a confusion between the concepts of "nirvana" and "parinirvāṇa", as well as from a deeply rooted presupposition that the ultimate bliss of religious life must be realized only after death. His critique incisively exposes the origins of this misconception. However, Edkins' case differs in an important respect from that of European scholars. His understanding of nirvana was also shaped by the profound influence of Chinese Buddhism, including the contexts in which the term appeared, was translated, and was interpreted in Chinese Buddhist literature. Edkins was particularly interested in two Chinese Buddhist canons, *Fozu tongji*[4] (佛祖统纪, *Comprehensive History of the Buddhas and Patriarchs*) and *Da boniepan jing*[5] (大般涅槃经, *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*), in which the term parinirvāṇa is often abbreviated simply as nirvana. In other words, in Chinese Buddhist literature, the term nirvana has a broader semantic scope than parinirvāṇa and includes it among its meanings. As a result, it is not surprising that nirvana is understood as death in the Chinese context, and that Edkins failed to appreciate the distinction between nirvana and parinirvāṇa fully. Despite the semantic shifts that occurred as the term nirvana traveled across cultural contexts, its association with death should not be dismissed as a mere misunderstanding. Rather, it reveals deeper interpretive possibilities embedded in the concept itself. The linkage between nirvana and death carries a more profound existential and humanistic resonance. In this respect, Edkins seemed dimly aware

of the humanistic concern implicit in the idea of manifesting nirvana through death. At the later stage of Edkins' study, his new understanding of nirvana placed less emphasis on its association with annihilation. Instead, he conceived nirvana as a key that opened toward reality and connected with life itself.

3.2. Reasons Behind Edkins' Realistic Interpretation of Nirvana

Edkins set aside the metaphysical discussion of nirvana and instead appealed to "common sense" in interpreting the practical meaning of Buddhist teachings. This shift in interpretive perspective has largely escaped the attention of modern scholarship and was not explicitly recognized even by his contemporaries. Yet this overlooked dimension of Edkins' thought is of considerable significance, for it not only offers a distinctive perspective on Buddhism but also reveals the internal complexity of missionary intellectual frameworks. Edkins' approach was likely shaped by the influence of the Scottish School of Common Sense philosophy. With the development of British empiricism, a radical form of skepticism emerged. George Berkeley denied the existence of material substance, and David Hume went even further, rejecting the existence of spiritual substance as well. To respond to this crisis, Reid (1997, p. 33) argued that philosophy should rest upon "the Principles of Common Sense," by which he meant those self-evident truths that human beings naturally accept in everyday life without the need for proof. Reid (2002, pp. 470–71) enumerated several such first principles: for instance, he affirmed "the existence of everything of which I am conscious," and maintained that "the thoughts of which I am conscious, are the thoughts of a being which I call myself, my mind, my person." These principles were intended to restore the reliability of the empirical world and to reestablish harmony between common sense and philosophy.

Reid's philosophy gained wide popularity throughout the nineteenth century, and Edkins was probably the earliest scholar to introduce the Scottish School of Common Sense, as represented by Reid, to China. In the fifth volume of *Xixue lüeshu* (西学略述, *A Brief Introduction to Western Knowledge*). Edkins devoted barely ten pages to outlining the history of Western philosophy from ancient Greece to his own day. Within this highly compressed narrative, an entire page is allocated to the rise and development of Scottish philosophy and to its subsequent influence in France, suggesting the particular importance he attributed to this tradition. Edkins (1898, p. 5a) especially emphasized that Reid had overthrown earlier doctrines, which held that "all forms are illusions, like bubbles." In his view, the Buddhist position scarcely differed from these refuted theories. Indeed, Buddhism appeared to be in an even more precarious situation, because as he noted, "philosophy scepticism in the West has been confined to the safer regions of speculation, without being brought as Buddhism has tried to bring it, to a practical form" (Edkins 1893a, p. 141). According to Reid (1997, pp. 215–16), when a person deviated from common sense and fell into what he called "metaphysical lunacy," the manifestations of this condition differed from those of ordinary illness in that they occurred intermittently: "it is apt to seize the patient in solitary and speculative moments; but when he enters into society, Common Sense recovers her authority." Thus, although Edkins considered the crisis of skepticism within Buddhism more severe, he nevertheless maintained that Buddhism must include an element consistent with the principles of common sense. Since most ordinary Buddhists understood their faith not as an abstract philosophy but as a practical religion, Edkins accordingly turned to the religious dimension of Buddhist teachings as the most plausible sphere in which to assess their legitimacy within lived experience.

In his religious interpretation of Buddhism, Edkins was profoundly influenced by Friedrich Max Müller. Unlike earlier scholars whose interest in nirvana was primarily philosophical, he approached Buddhism from a religious standpoint, emphasizing its

moral and devotional aspirations rather than its metaphysical speculations. Müller (1869) conceived of religion as a bridge connecting the "finite" with the "infinite," expressing the human longing for something "eternal and self-dependent". From this perspective, Buddhism appeared to him as a kind of trap-bridge, "hurling man into the abyss at the very moment when one he thought had arrived at the stronghold of the Eternal" (p. 11). Although Müller acknowledged that Buddhism, when interpreted on the metaphysical level, might seem to lead toward annihilation, he found it difficult to believe that the Buddha, who understood human nature so deeply, would have opposed Brahmanism with a doctrine of complete annihilation, or that the vast multitude of Buddhists could have devoted themselves to the pursuit of absolute nothingness. Such a view conflicted with his understanding of both the Buddha and the nature of religion. Consequently, he sought an alternative interpretation, attempting to detach the discussion of nirvana from the realm of metaphysics and to reconstruct it within the sphere of religious experience.

Initially, Müller questioned the importance of metaphysics within the Buddhist system of thought. Müller (1881, p. 207) contended that the historical expansion of Buddhism throughout India and its neighboring regions was due not to its metaphysical doctrines, but to its social and moral discipline. Therefore, metaphysical nihilism was of little consequence, as it neither appealed to the general populace nor exerted any lasting influence upon Buddhists. In the next stage of his reasoning, he explored the possibility of distinguishing between the personal teaching of the Buddha and the subsequent Buddhist tradition. Müller (1869, p. 9) ventured to suggest that those ideas least compatible with later orthodox Buddhism might, in fact, reflect the Buddha's original doctrine. By removing the metaphysical elements that gave rise to nihilistic interpretations, he sought to reconcile the Buddha's personal teaching with the form of Buddhism embraced by the masses. In doing so, the Buddhist system assumed a more coherent form, allowing Buddhism to be appreciated from his perspective. Although Müller was reluctant to identify Buddhism with nihilism, he did not entirely deny the possibility that the Buddha might have taught certain metaphysical doctrines later ascribed to him. Yet, since the majority of Buddhists were incapable of grasping such speculative ideas, metaphysics could never occupy the center of popular religion but would remain the preserve of a small circle of disciples (Müller 1881, p. 213). Ultimately, Müller (1869) concluded that the nihilistic conception of nirvana was a philosophical construct, a "myth of nothingness," fabricated through a process of relentless negation and abstraction, stripping away everything that was not nirvana. He therefore favored the popular understanding of nirvana, which he believed more faithfully reflecting the true spirit of the Buddha and his disciples. This popular conception could be divided into two forms: an intellectual interpretation, which conceived nirvana as a state in which the soul had extinguished all desire, remained indifferent to pleasure and pain, good and evil, and returned to its own nature, freed from the bondage of transmigration; and a more popular interpretation, which understood nirvana in terms akin to a Mohammedan paradise or blissful Elysian fields (pp. 14–15).

Edkins' understanding of both religion and Buddhism reflects the influence of Müller's ideas, which can be identified at two interrelated levels. Methodologically, he distinguished between the philosophical and religious dimensions of Buddhism, emphasizing the latter while questioning the significance of the former, and incorporating the popular religious dimension as an essential part of the Buddhist system. Conceptually, Edkins concretized the universal human longing for the eternal as "immortality." This desire was not only internal to individual Buddhists but also collectively became a driving force in the development of Buddhist doctrinal dimensions, which will be discussed in the next section. However, Edkins' interpretation is not entirely identical with that of Müller, and they differ slightly in their views on the relationship between primitive Buddhism and pop-

ular Buddhism. Müller believed that the widespread diffusion of Buddhism owed much to the continuity between Gautama's original teaching and its later popular adaptations. By contrast, Edkins maintained that Shakyamuni's teaching was, at its core, a metaphysical philosophy. From his perspective, it was only later generations of Buddhists, driven by an innate longing for "immortality," who gradually transformed the "nihilistic" Buddhism of the founder into the "realistic" religion of the masses. This interpretation also closely aligns with the philosophy of Reid (1997, p. 21), who argued that if philosophy sought to overturn the principles of common sense, it would perish amid their ruins. In other words, if philosophy is found to flourish, it must rest upon the principles of common sense. Nineteenth-century European scholars were already aware that Buddhism had more adherents than any other religion. This fact suggested that, over the course of its long historical evolution, Buddhism must have returned to the sphere of common sense. When Edkins sought to trace signs of this return, he turned his attention to a universal theme—"death"—shared by religious thinkers across cultures. Each tradition, Edkins (1881, p. 59) observed, endowed death with its own distinctive meaning. The Buddha and his disciples were no exception. Like all human beings, they faced the decay of the mortal body and experienced the process of dying. Thus, Edkins adopted a realistic approach in examining the death of the Buddhist founder within the Chinese Buddhist tradition.

3.3. Edkins' Realistic Interpretation of the Death of the Buddha

Reid's philosophy of common sense and Müller's conception of religion provide Edkins with a theoretical foundation for understanding the relationship between the Buddhist doctrine of nirvana and the realities of human life. Edkins (1881, p. 65) argued that "The doctrine of nirvana is very much connected in the life of Buddha with the phenomena and experiences of death," which "has not been sufficiently kept in view by European students of the Buddhist teaching on the nirvana." He reminded his readers that Buddhists, like Europeans, lived in the same real and ever-changing world, thereby descending from metaphysical contemplation back to the sensory domain of ordinary life from time to time (Edkins 1893a, p. 47). Although nirvana was one of the most abstract notions in Buddhist philosophy, when it was interpreted as death, it became a powerful indication of the metaphysically inclined Buddhist's return to the human condition. In the momentous event of the Buddha's manifestation of parinirvāṇa or nirvana, Edkins discerned a decisive return of Buddhist doctrine from metaphysical abstraction to the concrete fact of Shakyamuni's death. In this sense, the founder of Buddhism was brought back to the principles of common sense, grounding his teaching in the reality of the human world rather than metaphysical extremes. This is precisely what makes the doctrine of nirvana the most fascinating to him.

By examining the accounts of the Buddha's death, Edkins found in Chinese Buddhist literature what he regarded as convincing evidence that the doctrine of nirvana had returned to the sphere of lived religious reality within popular Buddhism. Edkins (1893a) first learned from *Fozu tongji* that the Buddha expounded the doctrine of nirvana in response to a specific pedagogical situation and with a distinctly practical purpose. According to the work, the doctrine of nirvana was revealed during the final stage of the Buddha's life. After the first four periods of his teaching had been delivered, there remained those who were unable to fully comprehend his message. The Buddha therefore disclosed the true nature of Buddha-hood, to "correct the faults of negligent and misguided monks and others," and to guide them toward realizing what was "really permanent," so that they might enter nirvana (p. 47). In Edkins' reading, the emergence of the nirvana doctrine was thus not merely the logical outcome of Indian philosophical development, but also

reflected the Buddha's ultimate religious strategy to lead his disciples toward the highest spiritual goal.

Then, Edkins observed that Chinese Buddhists provided vivid descriptions of the entire sequence of events surrounding the Buddha's death. For instance, a passage of *Fozu tongji* implied that while the Buddha sought spiritual joy and despised material possessions, he nonetheless gave detailed instructions for his own funeral rites:

> "Like that of the wheel kings. The body should be wrapped in fine white haircloth, and coated with a pulp of odoriferous dust. The inner coffin should be of gold, the outer of dust. When the body of the king is placed in it, it should be sprinkled with melted butter and burned with fragrant wood". (Edkins 1893a, p. 54)

Edkins also appeared deeply impressed by the depiction of the disciples' grief for Buddha's death. He noted:

> "The assembly that gathered to witness the death of Buddha was so deeply moved, it is said, with grief, that all raised their hands and struck their breasts. They wept loudly and bitterly. Their limbs and finger joints all quivered with emotion. They could not contain themselves. All the minute pores of their bodies gave forth blood, which was sprinkled on the ground". (Edkins 1881, p. 66)

These meticulous depictions of material detail and emotional intensity lend the narrative a distinctly realistic quality, a technique more commonly associated with realist literature. Had Edkins read T. W. Rhys Davids' translation of the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, he would have recognize that the Buddha's death also reflected certain authentic Indian funerary customs (Davids 1881a, p. xli). Yet what struck Edkins most was not the anthropological accuracy of these scenes, but their departure from the abstract metaphysics he typically associated with Buddhism. Elsewhere, he often criticized Buddhism for its indifference toward the material world and human emotion. Here, however, he encountered a profoundly realist moment in which Shakyamuni arranged his own burial as any mortal would, and his disciples grieved as mortals do. In Edkins's view, this episode revealed that the Buddha's manifestation of nirvana should be understood not merely as a biological event of death, but as a personal experience of death that he consciously confronted and assumed. By accepting his biological death, the Buddha endowed it with a deeper meaning, suggesting that a return to lived reality was already embedded at the very heart of the Buddhist tradition. The Buddha's manifestation of nirvana thus marks the moment when the sensory and emotional dimensions of human existence regained their legitimate place. This return to empirical experience demonstrates Buddhism's reconciliation with the principles of common sense and human realities.

Moreover, Edkins believed that the accounts of Buddha's posthumous manifestations and miraculous performances offered further evidence that Buddhism returned to a realistic orientation. Edkins (1881) argued that only a realistic view could give rise to such narratives, which in a certain sense implied the continued consciousness or efficacy of the Buddha after death. Edkins acknowledged that his interpretation was inspired by Müller's view that Buddhism as a religion must seek the Eternal either above humanity or within it. Like ordinary people everywhere, he suggested, Buddhists could not accept complete annihilation after death. The realistic tendency of their faith, therefore, led them to regard the Buddha as "a mighty living power" (pp. 68–69). Within the Buddhist context, the yearning for the Infinite or the Eternal was expressed either through the concept of Buddhist nature within human beings or through the idea of a powerful divinity transcending humankind. In Edkins' view, these expressions were essentially equivalent, both representing what he called "immortality."

Chinese Buddhist writings on nirvana provide a crucial support for Edkins' realistic interpretation of Chinese Buddhism. Figures such as Shi Zhipan (释志磐, c. 1220–c. 1275), the author of *Fozu tongji*, narrated the Buddha's manifestation of nirvana in a manner that not only grounded the doctrine in a historical and practical context, but also, as Edkins (1893a, p. 47) observed, rested the truth of philosophy "on the reality of visible things." Consequently, on the one hand, Chinese Buddhists regarded the Buddha's manifestation of nirvana as a real death, believing only the Dharma, rather than the Buddha's life, could endure forever. On the other hand, they also maintained that the Buddha did not entirely vanish after death, but continued to play a role as a savior, offering protection and blessings to the faithful. In fact, the diversity of interpretations surrounding nirvana in Chinese Buddhist literature thus stems from differing conceptions of "death" itself. Edkins sought to reconcile these seemingly contradictory understandings of nirvana, namely, as both annihilation and continued presence, by restoring the doctrine to the sphere of living religious experience. As he remarked, "among the multitude, realism triumphs over metaphysical opinion" (Edkins 1881, p. 69). Yet the complexity of the Buddhist doctrine of nirvana does not merely lie in the plurality of its interpretations. Edkins was further aware that it stood in subtle tension with other Buddhist teachings. The association between "death" and "nirvana" therefore also provides him a broader horizon for investigating the doctrine of nirvana as well as Buddhist views on death more generally.

4. Doctrine of Nirvana and Buddhist Views of Death

4.1. The Hidden "Immortality" in the Doctrine of Nirvana

In fact, nirvana, as one of the central doctrines of Buddhism, long remained an enigma for nineteenth-century European scholars, owing to its conceptual ambiguity and its tension with other Buddhist teachings. If Buddhism were truly a mature and coherent system of thought, its doctrines should, in their view, maintain unity and logical consistency. However, the striking differences among Buddhist schools across Asia make it difficult for many to perceive these traditions as part of a single philosophical or religious system. Consequently, the concept of "pure Buddhism" or "authentic Buddhism" emerged as a conceptual construct intended to impose coherence upon this diversity and render it intelligible. Burnouf was the first European scholar to present this idea. On the one hand, he sought to resolve the conflicting interpretations of nirvana through the lens of Western theology. On the other hand, he carefully limited his interpretation of the doctrine to what he regarded as "primitive Buddhism." By contrast, Barthélemy Saint-Hilaire (1895, p. 13) took a far more radical stance, openly declaring that Buddhism was "a perfectly consistent one", while ignoring all meanings of nirvana except that of annihilation. Building upon these earlier efforts, Rhys Davids expanded the discussion of nirvana to include the Southern Buddhist tradition. However, he maintained that later forms of Buddhism, particularly the Northern traditions, could no longer be regarded as genuinely Buddhist, for "the fundamental doctrines have been overshadowed and destroyed" (Davids 1881b, p. 192).

Consequently, a notable phenomenon emerged in nineteenth-century Western Buddhist studies. Scholars devoted to the study of what they regarded as Primitive or Southern Buddhism could easily exclude from their inquiries any doctrines or schools that, in their eyes, failed to meet the standard of "true Buddhism". However, those who studied Northern Buddhism could not so readily dismiss the religion's Indian origins. They instead strove to interpret and reconcile the apparent contradictions within the Buddhist system itself. Among these latter scholars, Eitel (1884, p. 88) explicitly rejected the assumption of a single, universal form of Buddhism, arguing that if scholars studying nirvana recognized the multiplicity of Buddhist traditions and expressions, many meaningless disputes could

have been avoided. Within this broader intellectual context, Edkins sought to demonstrate that Chinese Buddhism not only preserved the essential tenets of the original faith but also developed in distinctive ways, setting it apart from other Buddhist traditions. To him, the divergences between Chinese Buddhism and other traditions were not deviations but the inevitable results of Buddhist historical transformation. Accordingly, his interpretation of nirvana aimed to reconcile its internal tensions, both between the doctrine of nirvana and other Buddhist teachings, and between Chinese Buddhism and other Buddhist schools.

To pursue this objective, Edkins conducted a comparative investigation of Buddhist beliefs in ten countries and regions across Asia,[6] exploring how local Buddhists actually understood nirvana and death. He argued that both Southern and Northern Buddhists had faithfully preserved key elements of Shakyamuni's teachings by interpreting nirvana as a blissful state beyond this life, an "immortal hope" that they continued to seek (Edkins 1881, p. 59). Although he offered no systematic justification for this interpretation, his position appeared to have been influenced by the writings of Müller and more directly Eitel. Drawing inspiration from Müller, Eitel (1870, 1904) agreed with his interpretation of nirvana as "a state of conscious liberty and happiness." Yet he found Müller's understanding restricted to the Southern tradition and sought to expand it by analyzing Chinese Buddhist interpretations of nirvana. In Chinese sources, Eitel distinguished two key concepts: "se shen" (色身, rūpa-kāya) and "fa shen" (法身, dharma-kāya), maintaining that at the moment of the Buddha's parinirvāṇa, the Buddha emphasized to his disciples that while his rūpa-kāya would perish, his dharma-kāya would remain forever (pp. 1–3, 109). For Eitel, this distinction not only revealed a continuity between Chinese Buddhism and the doctrines of Primitive and Southern Buddhism but also indicated that nirvana did not signify total annihilation. Rather, it was comparable to the Christian conception of physical death with the persistence of the soul. Such a Christianized interpretation provided Edkins with a doctrinal basis for linking "fa shen" to "the spiritual body," allowing him to argue that Buddhist understandings of nirvana still preserved an "immortal hope." Edkins (1893a, p. 417) therefore praised Eitel's interpretation as revealing an essential aspect of Buddhist doctrine: "the expectation of immortality asserting itself in Buddhism, despite the overwhelming influence of a metaphysical system adverse alike to the belief in God and to that in immortality."

Edkins adopted Eitel's view almost without hesitation, yet he failed to recognize an underlying inconsistency in his own opinions. On the one hand, he asserted that all Buddhists preserved the hope of immortality, but on the other hand, he accused the Southern Buddhists of indulging in the idea of annihilation. This is not the first time that Edkins has exposed a self-contradiction in his understanding of nirvana. For him, the doctrine of nirvana resembles an unbalanced scale, with "nihilism" on one side and "God" on the other. Most of the time, the weight of "nihilism" tips the scale, yet "God" is never entirely removed from the equation. Thus, even when Edkins spoke of nirvana as "complete annihilation," what he meant was never absolute nothingness at the empirical level. His use of the term was highly subjective and purposive, depending on the issue under discussion and the conclusion he sought to reach. When he emphasized that Southern Buddhists expressed a belief in immortality, it reflected his own theological conviction in God; when he accused them of indulging in nihilism, it served his attempt to construct an evolutionary account of the Chinese Buddhist view of death.

4.2. Edkins' Construction of a Buddhist Theory of Death

In his earlier stage of Buddhist studies, Edkins had already sketched the basic framework of a Buddhist theory of death, which he called "future states". In his later writings, he further supplemented and refined this theory. According to Edkins, Buddhism included

three main phases of understanding concerning the posthumous condition, which he observed primarily among Chinese Buddhists.

The first phase of the future state was the doctrine of the transmigration of souls. Edkins argued that the Indian doctrine of metempsychosis formed the groundwork of Buddhism, as it provided greater scope for moral gradation in rewards and punishments. Under this conception, every living being was subject to the consequences of its past actions, which in turn determined the circumstances of its future rebirth. All forms of existence, whether in heaven or in hell, were not eternal. Within the Chinese Buddhist interpretation of this doctrine, Edkins observed that Yama, an Indian god who presided over judgment after death, governed the destinies of lower beings, which reflected a universal expectation of a final reckoning. Edkins also realized that Yama's authority was limited. When an individual, through wisdom and virtue, escaped the endless cycle of birth and death and entered a realm of pure thought governed by a Buddha, he attained liberation from impermanence and suffering, achieving a state of serenity and peace. According to Edkins, this constituted the second phase of the future state. Compared with transmigration, nirvana represented a higher condition in which the soul triumphed over matter. It was regarded by the various schools of Indian philosophy and religion as their ultimate goal. In this state, however, Edkins argued that the authority of a supreme ruler or judge completely disappeared and even ceased to exist. Thus, he concluded that the doctrine of nirvana was inevitably associated with atheism, which he regarded as the prime error of Buddhist teachings. Although nirvana was theoretically the ultimate ideal of the faith, Edkins found that, for most Chinese Buddhists, it offered little appeal and seemed beyond their reach, because the doctrine was too abstruse and difficult to grasp. The attainment of nirvana required innumerable cycles of rebirth. In contrast, the third phase of the future state, the "Western Heaven," was far more popular throughout China and other Northern Buddhist regions. Unlike nirvana, it was conceived as an attractive realm ruled by Amitābha, filled with scenic beauty and sensual delights. In Edkins' view, this paradise was much easier for Buddhists to attain. By simply reciting "Namo Amitābha," adherents were promised that their souls would dwell in this blissful land after death. Edkins further pointed out that the doctrine of the Western Heaven was unique to Northern Buddhism and unknown in the regions influenced by the Southern tradition (Edkins 1884, pp. 147–51).

Drawing upon these observations, Edkins arranged the three posthumous beliefs in chronological sequence, from transmigration, then to nirvana, and finally to the Western Paradise, thus outlining the historical evolution of Buddhist conceptions of death from India to China. From his perspective, each succeeding doctrine arose as both a negation and a development of the one preceding it. Although all three continued to be accepted by Chinese Buddhists to varying degrees, their practical significance differed considerably in both scope and influence.

In Edkins's view, the doctrines of transmigration and nirvana constituted the fundamental principles accepted by all Buddhists, but their respective influence differed markedly between the Southern and Northern traditions. Influenced by Saint-Hilaire, he closely associated these two doctrines, regarding nirvana as the logical outcome of transmigration. Since Buddhists had adopted the Indian conception of metempsychosis, in which life and death were viewed as forms of suffering, they naturally placed their ideal state beyond the endless cycle of life. From this perspective, the stronger a Buddhist's belief in transmigration, the more deeply he would be affected by the ideal of nirvana. To determine whether Buddhists truly believed in transmigration, Edkins (1881) employed a practical criterion: whether they abstained from animal flesh. He observed that lay Buddhists in China and Japan paid little attention to the doctrine of metempsychosis. Animal flesh was a common part of their daily diet, and they consumed it as freely and unhesi-

tatingly as Europeans did. This practice suggested to him that most Northern Buddhists did not sincerely believe that humans might be reborn as animals after death. In contrast, Buddhists in Ceylon, Burma, and Siam treated the doctrine of transmigration as a cardinal tenet of their faith, embedding it deeply in public moral education (pp. 61–62). The comparison therefore led him to conclude that the doctrines of transmigration and nirvana exerted far greater influence on Southern Buddhists than on their Northern counterparts.

Edkins attributed this regional difference largely to climate. When nineteenth-century European scholars discussed Asian peoples and their social institutions, Montesquieu's views on climate were naturally recalled. In his *De l'Esprit des lois*, de Montesquieu and de Secondat (1989) remarked that the tropical climates of India and Siam induced physical weakness and mental indolence, inclining their inhabitants toward stillness and passivity, and thus toward viewing absolute nothingness as the highest pursuit. Despite the lack of distinction among the climates of East Asian countries, he compared the lawgivers of India and China, arguing that the former, exemplified by the Buddha, accommodated human weakness and led people into passivity, while the latter sought to overcome it through practical systems of religion, philosophy, and laws (p. 236). This climatic theory continued to exert wide influence on nineteenth-century European thought, and both Hegel and Burnouf expressed similar views. Edkins (1881) also argued that Buddhists in Ceylon, Burma, and Siam, living in tropical regions, possessed weaker appetites than those in temperate zones. Less drawn to sensual pleasure, and marked by a "listlessness of nature," they were therefore "more readily content with annihilation." By contrast, those in the temperate northern climates were more vigorous and energetic, and thus, as Edkins remarked, "the effort of the Northern Buddhists to attain a Paradise where a certain conscious existence is enjoyed, need not surprise us" (p. 62). For Montesquieu and Edkins, climate shaped not only inhabitants' temperament, morality, will, and social institutions but also religious inclinations. However, both thinkers discerned a distinctive resistance to nihilism in the Chinese character. Montesquieu attributed this to China's "practical" legislation, while Edkins interpreted it as the "realistic" spirit of the Chinese mind. In this sense, their insights, though expressed differently, share a common intellectual ground.

The theory of climatic influence, which Edkins adopted from earlier scholars, provided a partial theoretical basis for his explanation of the divergent Buddhist conceptions of death. Beyond such general reasoning, his understanding of Chinese Buddhist views on death was also deeply shaped by his direct conversations with Chinese monks. In "The Nirvana of the Northern Buddhists," Edkins (1881) recounted an interview with a fifty-five-year-old monk in Peking. The monk told him that their monastery had once been home to "a very unworldly ascetic old man," who was so extraordinary that he could confidently affirm his own entrance into the state of nirvana. However, as to ordinary monks, the monk thought that "they will have to go through the long purifying process of the metempsychosis first." Edkins further asked whether they believed in the literal truth of transmigration and whether the faithful could behold Shakyamuni after death. To both questions, the monk replied affirmatively (p. 77). In *Religion in China*, Edkins also recorded another conversation with a group of ordinary monks, which also shed light on how Chinese Buddhists conceived of death and the afterlife.

> "One of them was asked if he expected soon to escape from the metempsychosis and enter the Nirvana. He replied, 'Living in this poor temple, how could I? To attain that happiness, I must dwell on a hill and meditate in solitude on the law of Buddha.' 'Why,' he was again asked, 'do you not make trial of that mode of life?' 'I have not,' he answered, 'the root.' He meant the intellectual germ or innate power or moral capacity from which the Buddhist mental development could proceed. His interrogator inquired of him further, 'If you do not reach the

> Nirvana, how far on the path towards it do you hope to arrive?' 'I can only hope,' said he, 'to become man again'". (Edkins 1884, p. 135)

From these conversations, Edkins came to a profound realization of the difficulties and powerlessness that ordinary Buddhists faced in their pursuit of nirvana. The humble responses of the latter monk, in particular, impressed upon him that most Buddhist priests did not truly believe that their practice of the Dharma would guarantee entry into the blissful state they envisioned. As the monk mentioned above, the "root" or the intellect of humans was various. In Chinese Buddhism, the roots are divided into superior, average, and inferior. Only a very few, endowed with exceptional intellectual talent, can hope to attain nirvana, while the vast majority of Buddhists are destined to undergo innumerable cycles of birth and death, enduring long ages of waiting before any possibility of final deliverance. If even the monastic community finds the supreme goal of Buddhism nearly unattainable, the prospect for the laity entangled in worldly affairs is even more remote. Edkins (1881) thus concluded that only a handful of individuals, gifted by nature and trained in metaphysical reasoning, could genuinely aspire to nirvana. As he put it, "This form of the hope of immortality becomes useless as a stimulus to virtue on any large scale, nor does it afford any adequate satisfaction to the human soul in its longings after higher life and knowledge" (pp. 62–63). In this view, despite its central place in Buddhist teaching, nirvana had largely ceased to function as a meaningful moral or social ideal. Consequently, in Edkins' account, the rise of a new doctrine of the afterlife is not a mere historical accident but an inevitable outcome of Buddhism's attempt to sustain itself and answer the emotional demands of ordinary believers.

The doctrine of Western Heaven far better satisfied the spiritual and emotional needs of its adherents. Edkins illustrated this with an example. Edkins (1884) once observed a Buddhist temple where, at a fixed time, groups of women and children gathered in a room to chant the name of Amitābha. Through two or three days of continuous prayer, they sought a better rebirth, or even direct admission into the Western Heaven (p. 136). As a posthumous goal, the Western Heaven demands neither profound philosophical insight nor advanced spiritual discipline. It requires only sincere faith and simple repetition of the sacred name, which promises a blissful reward in the afterlife. Such a tangible and accessible vision of death offers believers a more attainable objective and thus resonates more deeply with popular religious sentiment than the abstract ideal of nirvana. Edkins (1881, p. 62) further argued that the doctrine of the Western Heaven embodied widespread popular conception of the afterlife, which was "an approximation to the idea of a single abode of joy for the good, and a single abode of punishment for the wicked." In his interpretation, the supreme posthumous goal of Buddhism, which shifted from nirvana to the Western Heaven, was both the inevitable result of Buddhism's adaptation to practical life and a providential preparation for the eventual reception of Christian teaching.

It is worth noting that, in Edkins' construction, the Western Heaven was not solely an intrinsically Buddhist doctrine but rather the product of multiple external influences. This point becomes clear in his discussion of Yunqi zhuhong (云栖袾宏), a famous Chinese Buddhist in the Late Ming dynasty, who attempted to reconcile the tension between the teachings of Nirvana and Western Heaven in his *Commentary on the Amitābha Sūtra* (阿弥陀经疏钞). Edkins (1893a, p. 198) considered that the interpretation of Yunqi zhuhong was merely "figurative," intended to restore the reputation of the Pure Land school, which had greatly declined because it had almost given up the traditional ideal of nirvana and instead pursued a concrete heaven. From this perspective, nirvana represented a metaphysical heaven designed by a small circle of Buddhist philosophers, while the Western Heaven emerged as a popular vision of the afterlife shaped by the religious consciousness of the masses. These two conceptions of heaven were destined for divergent outcomes.

Edkins (1893a, p. 198) argued that the former bordered on being "suicidal" to a large extent. The latter tendency, however, suggested a movement that brought the faith closer to a Christian conceptual framework. Edkins (1881, p. 61) claimed that once Buddhists embraced the idea of the Western Heaven, they no longer placed much hope in the colder, more abstruse ideal of nirvana. In this sense, although Northern Buddhists did not entirely abandon nirvana, its influence has already been heavily shadowed by that of the Western Heaven.

In addition to the influences of climate and psychology of the masses, Edkins identified two further extrinsic factors that contributed to the emergence and popularity of the Western Heaven. One was the influence of Persian mythology and religion on Indian culture. Building upon Samuel Beal's thought that the concept of the "Pure Land" or "Happy land" originated from the Persian worship (Beal 1884, p. 129), Edkins (1893b, p. 117) went on to argue that the *Avesta*, the sacred scripture of Zoroastrianism, permeated the thought of Northern Buddhists. In his account, Northern Buddhists absorbed Persian ideas of "a supreme god" and "a future life of happiness," and through reflection and meditation, they eventually transformed these ideas into the concept of the Western Heaven (Edkins 1893a, p. xii). This explanation did more than identify a possible historical source for Pure Land belief. It placed the Western Heaven within a nineteenth-century genealogy of religions, in which Zoroastrianism was often linked to Babylonian culture, and Babylon was imagined, in the Christian historical thought, as the cradle of all religions and civilizations. Therefore, through this genealogy, Edkins traced the origins of the Buddhist notion of the Western Heaven to what he regarded as a divinely inspired Babylonian heritage.

The other factor considered was the Chinese conception of the immortality of the soul. Edkins (1893b) asserted that early religious beliefs in China were fundamentally monotheistic and divinely inspired through the repeated introduction of Western knowledge over the course of history. He particularly pointed out that the idea of the soul's immortality had long been embedded in ancestor worship and other ritual practices (pp. 61–62, 118). In this sense, Edkins tried to explain why Northern Buddhism, represented by Chinese Buddhism, readily embraced the doctrine of the Western Heaven. By contrast, Southern Buddhism, being far less influenced by Western thought, failed to develop a comparable conception of heaven. These explanations reflected a broader assumption widely shared among European scholars of the seventeenth and eighteenth century: that all religions and human civilizations had a common origin. In fact, Edkins inherited this intellectual project and sought to extend it ambitiously, with his research in religion and philology playing an important role in this endeavor. Because his interpretation is grounded in a Christian teleology that seeks traces of divine revelation within Chinese Buddhism, his framework effectively denies Buddhism any religious autonomy in the formation of its own doctrine of paradise. Within Edkins' theoretical construction of Buddhist conceptions of death, the highest posthumous state derivable from Buddhist doctrinal logic remained nirvana. However, at the same time, the Western Heaven stood in inherent, irreconcilable tension with it. He therefore attributed the emergence of the Western Heaven primarily to external influences, particularly to the cultural and religious legacy of Babylonia. In doing so, Edkins ultimately placed Buddhism within the grand Christian narrative of world history and divine revelation.

5. Conclusions

Edkins' interpretation of nirvana rests upon one of the most persistent conceptions in Western Buddhist studies: that the doctrine of nirvana corresponds to a form of death associated with the monastic ideal. This interpretation, which originated long before the nineteenth century, can be traced to both the critiques of Buddhism by rival Indian philosoph-

ical schools and early European Orientalist writings. Edkins' understanding of nirvana largely inherits the perspectives and methodologies of European philosophers and Orientalists, who tended to construct Buddhism as a philosophical system rather than a religion. By applying Western philosophical categories such as "reality" versus "non-reality" and "truth" versus "falsehood," Edkins also concluded that, at a metaphysical level, nirvana was a nihilistic concept. The influence of this interpretative framework proved so enduring that it continues to shape his analysis and judgement across his studies of Buddhism.

However, after engaging more extensively Chinese Buddhism, Edkins came to realize that in regions influenced by Northern Buddhism, the metaphysical dimension of nirvana was far less emphasized than he had anticipated. Particularly within Chinese Buddhism, nirvana appeared to assume a distinctly "realistic" character. This shift in his understanding arose not only from the distinctive features of Chinese Buddhist texts as products of translation, but also from his exposure to Thomas Reid's philosophy of Common Sense and Max Müller's comparative study of religion. From the standpoint of common sense and popular religion, Edkins argued that the event of the Buddha's parinirvana, or the manifestation of Buddha's nirvana, revealed the impossibility for Buddhists to transcend the conditions of actual existence. They remained bound to confront the universal reality of death. In this sense, regardless of whether nirvana signifies literal death, the masses tend to interpret it as such; and regardless of whether consciousness persists after the Buddha's death, the faithful often continue to venerate him as an eternal divinity. Edkins' emphasis on this realistic dimension reveals an interpretive tension in his thought: while nirvana signified extinction on a metaphysical level, it nevertheless preserved within the sphere of popular religion a latent hope for immortality. Hence, by equating nirvana with death, his interpretation leads to two divergent conclusions. Philosophically, it implies a form of metaphysical nihilism; religiously, its meaning depends on how Buddhists conceived of death, either as total annihilation or as the persistence of a spiritual essence. Edkins ultimately preferred the latter view, though the redemption promised by nirvana as merely a philosophical trap toward to metaphysical heaven.

It was precisely because Edkins recognized the exceedingly limited probability of achieving salvation through nirvana that he inferred this condition gave rise to the development of the doctrine of the Western Heaven. Confronted with differing views on death within Buddhism, Edkins proposed an evolving theory of Buddhist eschatology: the cycle of transmigration as the initial stage, followed by nirvana as a higher state, and ultimately the Western Heaven, analogous to that of Christianity. This theoretical framework rested on a key assumption: the universal human longing for immortality, which drives continuous pursuit. From this perspective, later doctrines both challenged and extended earlier teachings, suggesting a model of progressive religious development. Through this framework, Edkins could not only to reconcile the diversity of Buddhist conceptions of death but also to explain variations across world religions. However, not all "development" carried a totally positive connotation. Within Buddhist conceptions of death, the cost of such development was the loss of doctrinal autonomy. Edkins largely attributed the evolution of the Western Heaven to external influences, notably Persian and Babylonian thought. This explanation suggests that Edkins' realistic turn from Buddhism as philosophy to Buddhism as religion did not fully escape the limitations of the Western conceptual framework. Although the Western Heaven represented, for him, a central expression of Buddhism's concrete religious hope, he denied it an internal Buddhist genealogy and reinterpreted it as a derivative trace of a more primordial revelation within a Christian teleological narrative.

As Droit (2003, p. 11) aptly observed, the Buddhist studies of nineteenth-century European scholars were, in essence, reflections of themselves, for they projected onto Asia their own fears and confusions. Edkins' examination of Buddhism also reflects his own

intellectual and spiritual concerns as a nineteenth-century European missionary. In his interpretation, the tension between the doctrines of nirvana and the Western Heaven symbolizes, at a deeper level, the continuing conflict between "reason" and "faith." As a devout Christian, Edkins (1893b) firmly believed that "reason is never so strong as faith" and therefore argued that nirvana, as a form of hope, could never rival belief in the soul's continued existence. The historical development of Buddhist understandings of death serves as an implicit testimony to the spiritual vitality of the modern West, showing that even the hair-splitting logic of the nirvana teaching could not shake the religious expectation of life beyond death. By analogy, he concluded that "in Europe at present, the materialistic philosophy now prevailing will not succeed and cannot succeed in eradicating from mankind their deep-seated belief in the soul's immortality"(pp. 117–18). Edkins' study of Buddhism is not merely an attempt to understand an Eastern religion, but also a mirror reflecting the nineteenth-century Christian endeavor to reaffirm its own theological confidence amid the challenges of modernity. His interpretation of nirvana and Buddhist conceptions of death, though shaped by the Western intellectual and missionary frameworks of his age, reveals how Western thinkers engaged with Buddhism to reconcile diverse religious traditions and to negotiate the crises and transformations within their own culture.

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Notes

1 For resources on Hegel's understanding of Buddhism, see (Hulin 1979, pp. 122–24; Hegel 1988, pp. 503–26).

2 Burnouf's studies of Buddhism had a profound influence on many prominent thinkers of his time. His readership included major figures across Europe and beyond, from French intellectuals such as Ernest Renan (1823–1892), Victor Cousin (1792–1867), and Jules Barthélemy Saint-Hilaire (1805–1895); to German philosophers and artists like Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling (1775–1854), Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), Wilhelm Richard Wagner (1813–1883), and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900); and further to British scholars such as Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900) and T. W. Rhys Davids (1843–1922), as well as missionaries active in Asia, including Spence Hardy (1803–1868) and Samuel Wells Williams (1812–1884). The following discussion will show that some of Edkins' interpretations of Buddhist nirvana can be seen as extensions and developments of Burnouf's ideas.

3 In the Chinese Buddhist tradition, the *Yi shulujia lun* is generally regarded as a thirty-two-syllable verse composed by Nāgārjuna, intended to concisely expound the permanence and equality of the dharma. "Shulujia" is a transliteration of the Sanskrit term śloka, a standard metrical form in ancient Indian poetry, consisting of two lines of sixteen syllables each (thirty-two syllables in total).

4 The *Fozu tongji*, a Buddhist historical work compiled by the Tiantai monk Shi Zhipan in 1269, occupies a prominent position in the history of Chinese Buddhism. It was the first text to adopt a historiographical framework modeled on Sima Qian's *Shiji*, reflecting a distinctive Chinese Buddhist classificatory system of Buddha's teachings (panjiao) and an historical perspective on the development of Chinese Buddhist sects. Joseph Edkins appears to have been the first Western scholar to recognize the significance of this work. Moreover, the historical sections of Edkins' *Chinese Buddhism* largely consist of excerpts and translations from the *Fozu tongji*.

5 The *Da boniepan jing* is one of the most important and influential texts of Mahāyāna Buddhism, presenting the Buddha's final teachings before his passing and expounding the ultimate meaning of nirvana. The classificatory system of the *Fozu tongji* was

deeply influenced by this sūtra, establishing the Fifth Period, known as the Lotus-nirvana Period. The Northern version of the work was first partially translated into English by Samuel Beal and included in *A Catena of Buddhist Scriptures from the Chinese* (Beal 1871), whereas the Southern version was translated into English by T. W. Rhys Davids and published in *Buddhist Suttas* (Davids 1881a).

[6] The ten Buddhist countries and regions referred to by Edkins include Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Nepal, Tibet, Mongolia, China, Korea, Japan, Vietnam, Siam (Thailand), and Burma (Myanmar).

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