

Review of *Japanese Buddhism*

by **Sir Walter Scott Charles Eliot**

With Special Remarks on Zen

This is such a fine work that one must apologize for criticizing certain portions of it. It is many years since I have read Eliot's *Hinduism and Buddhism*, which I did not like. There is a tribute to the author in the forefront of the book, for this was to become the grand attribution of Eliot to world literature. It is obvious that during the course of years he became more international in his outlook, and had become both objective and equal-minded to a degree which has only been too rare.

In a sense this was the first good book on Japanese Buddhism to be given to the Western world. Other books will be reviewed shortly and compared to it. The approach is very much the same as that of E. G. Browne in his *Literary History of Persia*. There is a passing to and fro between historical events, doctrinal developments and sect and church organization. Much is repeated, as if the readers needed this repetition to keep salient points in mind.

It differs considerably from many other works in that less attention is paid to metaphysical and doctrinal eccentricities and more to the human reactions to these things. Sects, which were important in the past, or which are studied by Japanese in general, as essentials to Buddhist theory are passed over rather quickly. Movements which have, or have had, millions of adherents, are given more attention. Much more is said of Honen, Shinran and Nichiren than of the great sages who introduced Chinese and Indian transmissions.

The finest thing that can be said of this book is that it holds the reader's interest. It holds it without encumbering the mind with multilingual verbiage and traditional complexities. One gets a sense of the wholeness of Japan, and to a less extent of Japanese Buddhism.

The author repeats—and to a Christian these repetitions seem to be almost ad nauseam—arguments that Buddhism did not derive from Christianity. It seems incredible that a few Nestorian monks, who did not convert too many Asiatics, should have any profound influence over those whom they did not convert. And even less so are those surmises that Manicheism had any influence on any kind of Buddhism. Yet those statements have been made and I myself have read tomes which have attempted to prove that the **Lotus Gospel**, the Bodhisattva principle and World saviorship came because of contact with Christianity.

Just enough history is introduced so one gets the idea of a moving pageant. Eliot seems to have gone over Murdock, cut out unessentials and speculations, and given us a series of almost spicy dramas to carry us along. Errors of fact, judgment and opinion seem to be few and unimportant. Sir Charles has become very sympathetic and almost ashamed that he was not a Lafcadio Hearn.

There is one point with which I must cross swords with the writer, for the development of my projected theme ("The wheel of Life") depends to a great extent on it.

"Tradition is unanimous in reporting that Bodhidharma attached little importance to the scriptures and held that knowledge of the truth is obtained by sudden enlightenment, well-known by its Japanese name of Satori. This disdain of scripture is very un-Indian and a well-known legend which is often cited to justify that it appears to be a Chinese invention and cannot be traced to any Sanskrit or Pali source. It related that Sakyamuni, wishing to explain to his disciples the essence of his doc-

trine, said nothing but held up before them a bunch of flowers. None of them understood what he meant except Kasyapa who looked at him and smiled, also in silence. This story is considered typical of the right way to impart instruction, not by explanation or reference to books but by a sort of telepath, and the biographies of Zen saints contain countless instances of how some trivial and apparently irrelevant action of a master brought sudden illumination and peace to his pupil.”

It is at this point that the intellectual and the initiate part company. To begin with Sir Charles, who has written on Hinduism, seems to be unaware of the word **muni** and what it signifies. Part of this is due to the confusion between Vedic literature and real Indian spiritual transmission. I do not wish to go into any detailed commentary here on **Tevigga Sutta**. I shall quote one passage:

“The true Samana, he who is seeking the way to the Brahma World, lets his mind pervade all quarters of the world with thoughts of Love; first one quarter than the second quarter, then the third quarter and so the fourth quarter. And thus the whole wide world, above, below, around, and everywhere, does he continue to pervade with thoughts of love, far-reaching, beyond measure, all-embracing.” (p. 71. *A Buddhist Bible*)¹

The teaching of Upanishads present a doctrine of five bodies, i.e. Anna-, Prana-, Mano-, Vijnana-, Ananda-, or food, breath, mind, overmind and love bodies (corresponding to some extent to Raksha, Asura, Manasha, Pitra or Sramana and Deva). These are not parallel functions, but each **transcends** the previous and we cannot express the higher in terms of the lower. But the Buddha does not present just a love or Deva outlook, but an all pervading one, covering the four quarters. And a love-outlook **is not a verbal one**.

In the next place there have been at least three racial civilization types in India, two of which are non-Aryan and not-verbal: (a) The Mon-Khmer which reaches its highest development in Cambodia, and (b) The Dravidian which was certain very high in pre-Vedic times (Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa), and which shows evidences of cultural development even down to the present day. Travelers who visit Tamil-land note many differences between it and Hindustan (properly so-called.)

Finally, I wonder if Sir Charles has any idea as to how the great Mahayana Sutras were written. Whether they be short like Maha-Prajna-Paramita-Hridaya or long like Lankavatara or Avatamsaka or between; what brought about the creative ability that resulted in such marvelous literary works, each a unit of itself? I refer especially to the discussion Suzuki has given to the word **Sagathakam** in his *Studies in the Lankavatara Sutra*.

All of these point, are implied by the word Hridaya.

¹Some slight evidence here of not perfect editing.