

## **Review of *Systems of Buddhistic Thought***

by **Yamakami Sogen**

research scholar of the Sotoshiu Daigak of Tokyo  
and Reader to the University of Calcutta. 3/13/55

To review a book on the merit of its own teachings is an unusual one. And within this framework it is possible to accept both the praise and criticism that will be offered. For we have here what to the reader is one of the most brilliant minds ever produced in Japan, a man who seems to be able to think clearly in Japanese, English and Sanskrit to say no more. What is further remarkable is that the writer, O Sogen-san, if I may call him that, has given us a book arranged almost in the form of a dream or a climb up a tremendous mountain and made the goal, not the particular school of Buddhism in which he seems to have been initiated (Soto-zen) but rather the Avatamsaka.

Avatamsaka teachings offers a marvelous dialectic in which there are four grades of (a) affirmation, (b) negation, (c) synthesis of affirmation and negation, and (d) negation of this synthesis. In this regard the remarks should be made. First the Hegelian dialectic could not hold against its own negation, and there is no way in which to synthesize the affirmation and negation of itself. Second, not only does the four-fold dialectic uphold itself, as we may be able to see, but it is in complete harmony with the dialectic of Jewish mysticism revolving around the sacred name of God (Jod-he-vau-he). This latter can be affirmed by a study of the Initiatory Tarot such as presented by Arthur Waite, or more particularly by a deeper study of Kabbalistic Mysticism, which study is no doubt continuing in Israel. But Kabbalistic Mysticism is very definitely based upon teachings originally received from the Hindus (Cushim, Midianim (Mitanni)).

This marvelous dialectic makes it possible to review this book first from the standpoint of affirmation, of broad Mahayanism second, from the contrary viewpoint upholding criticisms which would be offered by a follower of Hindu philosophy in general, or the author's version in particular. The synthesis will then be given more or less along the lines of Aurobindo's teachings, but there is also counter-synthesis showing that there is room of a different type of synthesis and this comes out in Chapter X, the conclusion.

I do not know whether I found this book so readable because of the author's style or because of long preparation especially by being familiar with the writings of the Buddha, and to less extent others. At that it makes me want to disagree, let me say, with Stcherbatski and those who seem to get lost in profundities.

In trying to read this book as a Buddhist I have been so carried along that even to add "yes" or "me, too," seems insufficient. After a suitable introduction one is taken into the study of "Karma-Phenomenology" and then to the great schools of Buddhistic philosophy, in turns "The Sarvastivadvadins" Chap. III, "The Satyasiddhi School" Chap. IV, "The Madhyamika School" Chap. V, "Alya-Phenomenology," Chap VI, "Bhutatahata-Phenomenology," Chap. VII, "The Tien-Tai School," Chap. VIII, "The Avatamsaka School," Chap IX, and the "Conclusion" which will be handled later.

O Sogen-san both explains and defends each of the precepts and principles offered, with a firm disregard for consistency, from the ordinary scheme of things. But this consistency is based on the assumption of an ego principle. On page 20 of the introduction he states: "Buddhism formulates the great principle of sarvam-anatmam i.e., All that is, is without an Ego." And, toward the end of the

book, in presenting Chi-che-ta-shih's practical application of the teachings of Buddha, they are made fourfold, viz.:

- "(1) The Sudden,
- (2) The Gradual,
- (3) The Secret, and
- (4) The Indeterminate." (p.272)

There is a great need to understand and not only understand but apply the great logics: (a) of Buddhism, (b) of Illumination. These may be the same or identical or both the same and identical or neither the same nor identical, but they are certainly not in opposition. They can only touch realms of reality, transfinity, infinity and the indefinite, but not the finite definite. Therefore all thinking of the Aristotelian, Hegelian or Millian variety are totally in-apropos. Thus there is a magnificent consistency on a marvelously high level.

The book is written partly as a symphony and partly as a divine comedy. You are actually uplifted, almost, if it were possible to the plane of realization either experienced by the sages being discussed, or where O Sogen-san would place them in a sort of cosmic hierarchy (vide the Borobudur temple or the evolutionary grading of East Mahayanists.)

Although the Hinayana schools and even more so the great Nagarjuna and Vasubhandu are excellently explained and defended, it is only when one comes to the presentation of "Suchness" and the further full development of Nagarjuna that you are quite uplifted. Asvaghosha and the Tien-Tai and Avatamsaka Schools are given almost as pure poetry, yet their explanations are about as fine and lucid as I have ever encountered.

There is, however, one inconsistency here and it carries over into the critical view which comes next—e.g. why the Chinese Tien-Tai and then the Sanskrit Avatamsaka? Or perhaps this is not an inconsistency. However, almost everywhere there is a footnote of Japanese equivalent. And all of these points should be borne in mind when the following and assumedly critical-antagonistic examination is presented.

On page 16 of the introduction is a sub-heading. "All that is, is without Self." Nevertheless the principal attack is made on the preposition that the word atman means personal Ego (idem). From this point on there is a criticism of psychological values associated with atman, jiva, pudgala, etc. verbalized to apply to the word "atman," including the remark "We must not therefore be hard on the Vedantin Sankara." (id.) This opens up the door for an immediate counter attack.

The Hindu philosopher will say: "Our people had for centuries been building up profound philosophies. Some of these were merely logical, some were deeply speculative, some were profound being based upon actual samadhic experiences at one or more levels. We had tried to build up suitable vocabularies to fit these philosophies, psychologies and experiences. Because Buddha (whom we consider as one of us) in the Teviggā Sutta had certain remarks to make of a few Hindus the whole classical tradition is thrown aside. It is both thrown aside fully and unequivocally and at the same time it is not always entirely thrown aside, so that when Buddhist philosophers criticized "Hinduism" we are always too sure what they are aiming at."

“We should like to refer our good friend O Sogen-san to Ananda Coomaraswamy. We should also like him to advise, if he can, what the Buddha would have said to such Swamis as Ramakrishna, Aurobindo and Ram Das if they told him that by Vedic practices they had reached very high if not supreme levels. Would he have repeated Teviggā Sutta to them?”

Turning to page 18 we read: “But while emphatically maintaining the doctrine of anatman, Buddha and his disciples never attempted in their teachings and preachings to deny the provisional existence of what is called the spiritual Ego.” Just what is meant by “empirical Ego” and what is the Sanskrit equivalent? And how does this jibe with the remarks further down on the same page where a question is made from Nagarjuna’s commentary on the Prajnaparamita sutra: “The Tathagata sometimes taught that the atman exists and at other times he taught that the atman does not exist.” What is one to conclude here?

There is, of course, a logical conclusion and this conclusion is in harmony with the basic prepositions of the Tien-Tai and Avatamsaka schools: that the Buddha was both speaking at different levels because of the level of understanding of his audiences and because he himself may have been functioning at different stages of consciousness. But if this is true of the Buddha it is equally true of many Hindu munis and sages and to level at broad criticism at all schools of Hindu philosophy and also to attempt at the same time to defend all schools of Buddhist philosophy is nothing more or less but sectarian propaganda no matter how profound or otherwise worthy the author is.

On page 21 the author states: “To return to atman. Buddhist philosophy has always expressed a most emphatic denial of the existences of an ever-lasting individual soul. Instead of referring to earlier Buddhist writings on the subject, which are too numerous to mention, I shall quote an interesting extract, from a well known work of Dogen Zenji, one of the founders of the Dhyana school of Japan.” The writer then goes on to give a fine Zen explanation with its identification of Nirvana and Samsara. But it is to be challenged thus:

- a. Is the identification of Nirvana and Samsara accepted by all Buddhists?
- b. If you apply a logic of finitude how can you uphold it?
- c. If you apply a logic of infinitude how does this differ from Samkara’s identification of atman and Brahman?
- d. And, in the samadhi of uttermost liberation how can you make such distinctions (see commentary on “Conclusion” below.)

To make this more complicated, from the Hindu point of view, the writer adds (p.23) “But while condemning, as rank heresy, the theories of a Universal Creator and of an individual soul, Buddhism not only acknowledge the permanence of the noumenal ego, but actually enjoins its adherents to train themselves in such a manner as to be able to attain union with the Great Soul of the Universe, the technical term for which is Mahatman” (!) Well, then, my friends, from this point on just what are you fighting samkara about. Vocabularies?

If we look into the index of this work we find neither the word “karuna” nor the English “compassion.” To carry on even the most lucid explanations of terms, to appeal to the mind in the highest sense, etc. is a limitation. We are not dealing with intellectual philosophy here; we are trying to verbalize the highest doctrines and the processes of illumination. And it becomes nonsense to write “Nirvana and Samsara are identical” if one starts to exclude all kinds of terms and personali-

ties from both nirvana and samsara **but not from one's own mind**. Unconsciously the author is picturing both nirvana and samsara as epiphenomena, no matter what he says or claims.

Chapter II deals with "Karma-Phenomenology." The explanation is practical but as more than practical. The Pali words are explained, but the author runs back and forth into Sanskrit. The point that a Hindu observer must make here is that the Sanskrit terms are not original; they were not coined by any historical Gautama Siddhartha — who may even have been a non-Aryan, and they had definite and definitive meanings before the year 700 B.C.

On page 69 the writer says, and says correctly, "These Four Noble Truths are nothing else but the cardinal articles of Indian medical science applied to spiritual healing, exactly as they are in the Yoga Philosophy." But during this chapter he jumps back and forth historically, linguistically and doctrinally. This goes very well with those who wish to be sectarian Buddhists, but hardly well with those who feel they can find spiritual deliverance within any of the Indian systems, in particular the Yoga and Vedanta schools.

On page 72 the author takes the six divisions: hell, preta, tiryak-yoni, human, asura and deva as if absolute terms. This leaves no room for evolution and relativism. Many Buddhist philosophers come out strongly to show that "the religion" offers free scope for evolution and relativity in a quasi-Western sense and at the same time, elsewhere, they present formula which would exclude both of these possibilities. Actually this comes from an internal confusion:

- a. Unsystematic acceptance and/or rejection of Indian traditions, terminology, etc. without careful examination.
- b. Loss of sight of the goal which is emancipation from dukha.

No causal explanation explains emancipation. No causal explanations themselves completely explain karma. And finally, no such causal explanations leave any room for this ultimate Mahayanistic schools which are certainly based on the experience of emancipation, and no more on mental than on physical sub-Bodhisattvic activities. The author fails to see that he must be operating on one or more of the levels he is explaining, or else he is merely giving a picture and not a map of Buddhadharma.

Chapter III deals with "The Sarvastivavadins." Right here the Hindu apologist raises the question concerned with the eternal bickering that has been going on between the two branches of Dharma-transmutation: "You people make great arguments for Pali and offer the Theravadin teachings and then turn right around and use our language, which you reject, to support your claims that the Tipitaka is valid and the Vedas must be regarded as unimportant."

On page 122 an atomic doctrine is presented which has been borrowed completely from the main traditions of Hindu teachings without giving due credence to its origin. We find in this the parallel in the West of trying to present Christianity while discarding all sorts of Jewish traditions, most of which, incidentally have been discarded by the synagogue. But those borrowings, acceptances and discardings only show the activity of the manushic level.

More should be said on this point but on page but on page 125 we come to the most interesting sub-title in the book: "**Sankaracarya's Criticism of the Sarvastivavadins.**" I am not going into details here but wish to bring out two points as illustrative of verbal operations at the wrong levels, or

of trying to build up syllogisms and philosophies by using an eclectic instead of a synthetic method. The eclectic unconsciously assumes as omniscience. The terms mystical, sub-conscious, dream, objective, realistic, etc. may all be used by a psychologist, but they are not of the same level. Too many philosophers treat them as such. No mathematician would build up a system by writing a treatise with such elements and sub-elements as: Triangle, pi, 37, second integral, parallels at infinity, etc. They are all valid mathematical terms but their fields of operation are quite different.

Buddha presented the three jewels, Buddha, dharma, and sangha. Now it can be asked, if a Buddha-transmission includes dharma and sangha; does a dharma-transmission include Buddha and sangha; does a sangha-transmission include Buddha and dharma? The Sankaracharyan would say, it is quite obvious from an examination of the Theravadin schools, which have historically, no matter what they claim, best presented the sangha-transmission only, cannot give us lists of illuminated souls who have been effective in the world-history. The dharma-transmission gives us types of spiritual experience which are realized and emphasized in the development of Mahayana, and those we shall accept. But what about the Buddha-transmission?

The Sankaracharyan would further add: "Could you apply your Tevigga teaching to Ramakrishna? To Aurobindo? Even to Ram das? My friends, if instead of analyzing so much, which analyses prove beyond question you have not reached illumination and deliverance, you would lack, lacking you would see. The Vedanta transmission is one in which the analogues of Buddha, dharma and sangha which you uphold are all handed down together. **"In these days this is demonstrated objectively in the personality of the late Maharshi.** This ought to raise us above all arguments."

"Second, my friends, the Taittiriya Upanishad offers us five levels of anna, manas, prana, vijñana and ananda. If you are going to keep on your manushic glasses you can translate vijñana anyway you wish, quite out of keeping of its original intension of course, and prove anything. If you are actually illuminated you can use each of these levels to get pictures of other levels, but we are either back with the six blind man and the elephant or we shall have a transmission which proves that Buddha was an incarnation of Vishnu and not the great separatist you have tried to make him to be."

Now we shall not carry this point further. We must not overlook the author's zeal, even though he has a tendency to take and lay down constantly and inconsistently doctrine and quotations from all kinds of Patriarchs. And from the integral point of view his magnificent presentation of Asvaghosha and Suchness more than redeem him from short-comings. So with the Tien-Tai and Avatamsaka.

All the way through, excepting his criticisms of Samkara, which perhaps over-irritated the reviewer, the author seems to have had some conception of his goal. This goal, offered in chapter X, gives one the foundations for a sane and noble Integrative Teaching. Nowhere is the Yoga philosophy opposed; it is the Vedanta and lesser schools that have been the butts.

Chapter X begins on page 301:

"I have already explained, in outline, the philosophical or theoretical side of Buddhism in my previous lectures; but Buddhism in itself is not a philosophical system, although it is the most rational and intellectual religion in the world. It seeks to establish on a firm foundation the deepest instincts of our spiritual life and to formulate a doctrine which may lead its followers to Nirvana, the highest aim of human existence. According to it, the possession of a calm and resigned spirit in our

every day struggle for existence is an important factor, and this spirit may only be attained by the realization of a religious life.

“We must not, however, suppose that the religious life or the attainment of Deva, Allah or God can be consummated by forsaking the world, where we are doomed to struggle for existence. We must be able to find paradise here, because God, according to the proclamation of the Buddha, is immanent in the universe, and not transcendent. Or more properly speaking, ‘God in us and we in God’ must be the fundamental doctrine upon which should rest the entire fabric of every religion, be it Hinduism or Islamism, Christianity or Buddhism.”

As this is the aim in the life of the reviewer, whatsoever our agreements (which means whether we like it or not, we assumed the existence of an ego), and whatsoever our disagreements (which has the same assumption), we finally move into each other. We are now over the manushic level. We are, however, despite our good friend O Sogen-san’s wonderful efforts, at the vijnanic plateau, though striving upward. We are now at the range of Aurobindo’s Overmind. We wish to go higher. We feel the harmony after our efforts at both sonant and dissonant thematic development. We invite the whole world to join with us; we have accepted the universe as it is.